



Historic Bakersfield and Kern County, California
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Lions at the Jail, 1915

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By Gilbert Gia
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In 1915 a flatcar arrived in Bakersfield carrying two enormous lion statues destined to be the finishing touches on the new Kern County jail at 800 Truxtun Avenue at Q Street.



Some months earlier, in June 1914, the Kern County Board of Supervisors and its Chairman Henry A. Jastro accepted the \$97,476 bid of FG Caldwell & Son to build a new three-story

jail, but when the lions arrived in December, building costs had already ballooned to \$160,000 (about \$2.6M today), and the jail's unofficial name had become Jastro's Folly.¹ In spite of the ongoing criticisms of costs, the imposing lion statues were enthroned on either side of the jail's main stairs.²

For supervising architect Orville L. Clark, the jail was his most ambitious project to date.³ The project also had a personal import to Clark because he soon proposed marriage to Lucy Dee Brown. In later years Lucy joked that they got married on jail money.⁴

The lions might have been manufactured by *Gladding, McBean*, a Lincoln, California factory that made practical and ornamental terra cotta products for the building trades.⁵ In 1910-20, *Gladding, McBean* advertised in Bakersfield city directories.

Kern County historian Joe Brooks recalled talking to a carpenter named Leonard Moon who worked on the jail during its

1 In Aug 1913 the *Los Angeles Times* reported the cost of construction at \$150,000. Kern County already had on hand \$125,000 from the sale of the old courthouse to the City of Bakersfield, and supervisors had the balance of \$25,000 in the general fund and were waiting approval of the electorate to use it in construction of the new jail (*Los Angeles Times*, Aug 14, 1913). The \$97,276 figure came from the *Morning Echo*, May 12, 1914, p. 8 (ref thanks to John Edward Powell).

2 Completion date for Caldwell & Son was Dec 13, 1915 (Kern County Hall of Records, Misc Recorded Documents, Book 0017 (0352-4). "Sheriff Boone Newell plans to move into the county jail on Sunday" (*Bakersfield Californian*, Feb 14, 1916. That citation was noted in *Bakersfield Californian*, Feb 14, 1936 in a column entitled "Twenty Years Ago".

3 Orville L. Clark, 1884 - 1940

4 Lucy Dee (Brown) Clark, 5 Jan 1890, MO – 25 Oct 1980, Kern Co, CA. The comment "got married on jail money" probably referred to setting up house because Kern County property records show the Clarks were married prior to April 1914. (Both references thanks to John Edward Powell)

5 Lincoln, CA is about 25-mi NE of Sacramento. For a history of the company see http://www.gladdingmcbean.com/terra_cotta/aboutus3.html. See also Huell Howser, *California's Gold*, Episode #412.

construction.⁶ Moon told him the lions came from an Italian firm in San Francisco.

The most likely answer is the lions were made in Los Angeles. Orville Lee Clark's daughter Mary Elizabeth Clark Lee said, "I think my father told me the lions came from the Pomona Tile and Ceramic Works of Los Angeles." Lee might have meant to say *Ramona*, or she did say *Ramona*, and the author transcribed the name as *Pomona* in error.⁷ She continued, "My father said he rejected the first pair of lions the company sent.⁸ Those lions went to the Lion Farm, an attraction out east of Los Angeles.⁹ My father accepted the second shipment that was sent."¹⁰

For the next 47-years the lions were attractive toys for little boys to climb on, including the author. For those adults who entered the building the lions were thoughtful reminders of the power of government.

6 Author's interview with Joe Brooks, 2004, 2010

7 In 1911 Temescal Clay Products Co. of Los Angeles bought 140-acres of clay deposits at Temescal valley in Riverside county and erected a 180x300-foot manufacturing building which included terra cotta products (*Los Angeles Times*, Mar 7, 1911). Refined clay was also shipped to Corona for manufacturing needs (*Los Angeles Times*, Jan 1, 1916). In 1913 Ramona Tile Works at 52nd and Alameda Streets was a new factory of the Wade Encaustic Tile and Pottery Co. Ramona Tile manufactured all kinds of glazed tiles for interior and exterior decorative purpose. (*Los Angeles Times*, Dec 21, 1913).

8 The observation was repeated in a Sep 30, 2003 telephone conversation between the author and Mrs. Elwood Champness, daughter-in-law of Sheriff Ed Champness.

9 In 1914 David Horsely was issued a permit to build an amusement structure at 1913 So Main Street in Los Angeles, (*Los Angeles Times*, Dec 27, 1914, VI2. Horsely's *Bostock's Jungle*, zoo, and lion exhibit at Bostock's Arena was mentioned in the *Los Angeles Times* on May 30, 1915, III1 and on Jun 8, 1915, II6. Some animals were trained for movie work. See *Los Angeles Times*, Aug 16, 1915, III4.

10 Mary Elizabeth Clark Lee, 1918-2008. Quotes are from author's interview with Mary Elizabeth Clark Lee in 2003.



Old Kern County Courthouse, above, became Bakersfield City Hall

The earthquake of 1952 didn't damage the the lions, but the building itself was compromised. Sheriff Tom Kelly moved heavier filing cabinets to the basement, shifted office space, and moved some departments to the old court house at Truxtun and Chester Avenues. In the next few years a new jail and civic center were built.

As demolition day finally approached, the jail had been systematically stripped of light fixtures, doors, hinges, locks, any such items that brought cash.¹¹ The 12-foot by 5-1/2-foot pair of lions for some time had been in storage at a county yard on Golden State Avenue, but they hadn't gone unnoticed. An early, first bid came from Nanawale Estates of Bakersfield that offered \$100 for the pair. The county rejected Nanawale's

¹¹ Lynn Hay Rudy wrote in *Grandad: Hugh Blodget in Early Bakersfield* (privately printed, 1999) that the county profited well in the sale of marble from demolition of the jail.

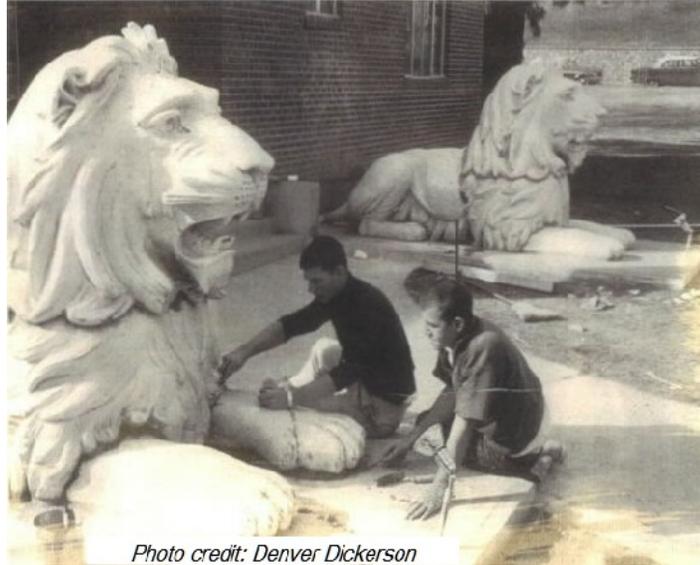
letter. When bidding officially started in October 1962, the lions were on the auction list with desks, sinks, prison bars, and miscellaneous whatnot. Maude Wonacott of Tehachapi opened the bid on the lions at \$86, but the gavel finally came down on a offer of \$175. City Manager Leland Gunn announced that a fraternity at the University of Nevada at Reno had won the lions.¹²

Local bidders might have been successful if Clyde Biglieri, a Sigma Alpha Epsilon alumnus from UNR, hadn't been in Bakersfield on business. SAE's fraternal symbol was the lion, and Biglieri thought this pair of lions would make a nice addition to the Reno house. He called SAE Rowell Smith from the University of Washington, and Smith and others agreed to pony-up with Biglieri on the lions.¹³ Biglieri and Smith made arrangements to move the lions to Reno.

When the truck arrived in November, the Bakersfield City Manger clicked his tongue and muttered that moving them to Nevada might be risky. He was right. When the lions arrived in Reno they were in pieces, and those pieces wound up on SAE's back porch.

¹² *Bakersfield Californian*, Oct 31, 1962

¹³ Oct 3, 2003 email to author from John Edward Powell



Lions at SAE house, 1963. Left to right: SAE Denver Dickerson, SAE Jerry Rossi

Twenty-two year old Denver Dickerson first saw the lions from the window of his room.¹⁴ "They were lying there in a pile, broken. When I went out and examined them I could tell that a master craftsman made them. Each piece was honeycombed where the artist had used his wire in places to remove unneeded clay and where he had left clay for those areas that needed support. Over the time I worked on them I gained a great respect for the artist."

"My house knew I had building experience, and the guys wanted me to do it, so it fell to me to fix the lions. I started by epoxying together a few pieces. That worked. Then we decided

¹⁴ Sep-Oct, 2003 telephone conversations between the author and Denver Dickerson, alumni president of Sigma Alpha Epsilon Fraternity (Reno Chapter), member of the Nevada Inventors Association, and Reno real estate broker.

they'd fit in front of the house, so I dug two 18-inch trenches and brought in rebar. We used well-drilling tools and yards of concrete and mortar, both to fill the foundations and to fill the inside of the statues. With all that weight nobody could say that they weren't going to be part of SAE."

"Over the years they've been a great source of interest, and rival fraternities have damaged them. I've made Fiberglass prosthesis for the whiskers, and once I had to fix some teeth that were knocked out. The weather, too, is hard on them. In the winter they crack from freezing and thawing. I've done epoxy work over the years."

"We use the fraternity's novitiates to refurbish the lions. I get a crew of two or three new guys, fix them up with goggles and rubber gloves, and it takes us about four days to strip, repair and paint them. They have a few nicks now, but they've also taken on a nice glassy finish, and they're still handsome. It has been a matter of pride to me to maintain them."¹⁵

¹⁵ Letter from Denver Dickerson to the author, February 2010.



Since 1963 the statues have guarded Sigma Alpha Epsilon at 835 Evans Street. Considering the way the lions were installed they won't be going anywhere soon. About 1998 there an effort in Bakersfield to make copies of the lions and place them at Central Park, but during the next few years the recession put a lid on most historical project.

Who owns the statues now? Some time ago Clyde Biglieri and others formed a legal corporation to control the rights to reproduce the lions, and Denver Dickerson in turn bought the rights and molds from them. Dickerson is waiting. He tells me he wouldn't want the lions to go anywhere but to Bakersfield.

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