

Colonel Thomas Baker and Founding of Bakersfield

(By NAOMI E. BAIN)

On March 11, 1871, the first Bakersfield club was formed. That summer the California Cotton Growers Association was organized with Julius Chester as president. It purchased from Livermore & Chester 10,000 acres of land (at \$5 per acre) and planned to plant 1000 acres to cotton the following spring. The sale included:

"The townsite of Bakersfield, 16 houses, a large brick store and warehouse, the motive power and privileges of the Kern Island and Irrigation Company's canal, the new flour mill, the merchandising and transportation business of Livermore & Chester and an improved farm of 1000 acres with tools, teams, etc."

The company began an advertising campaign to play up the sources and assets of the county in order to bring in the people, but the rash expenditure of moneys exceeded the income and soon it was necessary to appoint a new manager to sell the lands and holdings for whatever price could be paid and straighten out affairs with as little loss as possible. Eventually the holdings were sold to Haggin & Carr.

The summer of 1871 brought many new developments to Baker's little village. Although the state Legislature had not been able to make it the county seat, the promoters of the town were still hopeful. Sports had become a matter of public interest. The residents of Havilah were quietly pulling up stakes and moving down from the hills. A church, a town hall with lodge rooms for Masons and Odd Fellows, and regular stage routes running through Bakersfield had been begun. Meanwhile the Southern Pacific Railroad had recognized the fact that if it would ruin Bakersfield, it must begin now before the population became too settled and could ruin the railroad. Surveyors began to lay out the plans for the railroad, north of the town, and missing the main portion of it. The citizens of the town realized this, but became only the more resigned to live where they had first settled. And this loyalty to established concerns has persisted; for although on January 4, 1872, J. S. Brittain arrived in Bakersfield "to found a Democratic paper"—the Southern Californian," it was not long before that newspaper was forced to bankruptcy and later consolidated with the "Bakersfield Weekly Courier," the official paper of Kern county.

In June the "Courier" numbered among its front page advertisements, those of three saloons and a brewery. The latter was located "near Colonel Baker's new mill" and was operated by the Colonel's son-in-law, H. A. Jastro.

On July 6, 1872, the first definite announcement of a \$20,000 structure to be called the Beate hotel was made in the "Weekly Courier." The well-known architect McKeadney was to present his plan for a super-modern building to the board of trustees of the hotel at its next meeting.

He had, it was reported, considered everything from air currents and breezes to water pipes which were to furnish every part of the three-story building with plenty of air and water. The second floor was to be divided into suites of rooms for families and was to give every comfort offered by a first-class hotel.

In the country surrounding the village site people were, even in those early days, recognizing the potentialities of the oil lands and were also putting to use the rich loamy soil and harvesting from it nearly every variety of semi-tropical fruit, cotton, tobacco and hops. Two grain crops could be harvested each year where irrigation by the use of the many canals and ditches was practical. Wheat sown in December ripened in May and could be followed by a crop of corn. Colonel Baker's grist mill made these crops practical, but two drawbacks remained: The lack of transportation of crops and the costliness of lumber. The only saw mill was 30 miles away in the mountains. This circumstance entailed another difficulty, for the plains to the north and west in summer were very dry and hot; the winds from the Mojave Desert blew directly over them and carried the thick yellow dust and heat into the treeless valley. Fence materials were too expensive for these poor settlers to buy, and without such protection, young trees could not grow. In winter the winds blew as mercilessly and constantly as in summer except that they brought with them not a comforting furnace blast from the desert but a marrow-chilling cold from the snowy mountain passes.

The soil, however, was too rich and the climate too adaptable to discourage either agriculture or malaria, and Bakersfield became known in Los Angeles for the latter more than the former. After acclimating oneself, a reporter states, one's health is good. During the first 20 months after the cemetery had been opened only 16 people had been buried and none of the deaths had been due to an unhealthful climate.

With all, the settlers spoke of the climate as mild, a good place for cotton and sesame, horses, cattle, sheep. The animals could be raised cheaply, for fodder was abundant and no barns were needed.

(Continued Tomorrow)