

Colonel Thomas Baker and Founding of Bakersfield

(By NAOMI E. BAIN)

This was not the end of Mother Nature's generosity toward the enterprising Baker, for during the year 1864 came the worst drought since California had been occupied by the Americans. Stock died from lack of food and water. Those animals which survived were disposed of in flocks at 12½ cents a head, and many were mercifully killed and their hides saved. Meanwhile Baker was completing his work at Buena Vista lake and had moved his family to Visalia while he did further reclamation work north of Tulare lake.

When his work was completed, the surveyor general and another engineer came to see if the lands were properly reclaimed. By that time, the drought had dried the once swampy overflow land far better than anything Baker could do. The engineers reported the land to be even dryer than necessary and thoroughly reclaimed. While there was some delay in making out the patent, Governor Frederick F. Low finally signed it on November 11, 1867. The patent conveyed to Baker a total of 87,120 acres of land in Kern and Fresno counties, about one-fourth the total reclaimed.

CHAPTER IV ELLEN BAKER

A BIOGRAPHY of Colonel Baker would be incomplete without a brief sketch of the life and character of the plucky little woman 27 years his junior who became his second wife when she was 20 years old. This energetic pioneer woman was not daunted by the privations and discomforts of the early days in California, for through her interest in the welfare of others of the community and her own private interests she was able to bear her hardships courageously.

Ellen Alverson was born in Ann Arbor, Mich., on December 21, 1837, the daughter of Doctor Labon and Charlotte (Graves) Alverson. Doctor Alverson was at that time noted as a private physician and surgeon and as a lecturer in the medical school of the University of Michigan at Ann Arbor. The legend is told that in Doctor Alverson's family there was an ancestor who was heir to the throne of Holland, but who lost his right to the succession by a younger brother's usurping the throne and placing a bounty on the head of the elder. The rightful heir was thus forced to leave the country and come to America where he settled in New York and died shortly before the younger brother. A son of the rightful heir then started back to Holland with what evidence the family had of his identity and his right to the inheritance in hopes of gaining a property settlement. He was murdered at Niagara Falls, and there the story ends. Other notable relatives of Ellen Alverson were Chief Justice Matthews of the United States Supreme Court, and

William Wordsworth, the poet, both of whom were cousins.

Ellen's early life was spent in Michigan where she married, at the age of 15, a Mr. Whalen. As a bride she came westward overland by ox team via the route of the Donner party. Mrs. Whalen gave birth to one child, a daughter named Mary Emmaline (Mrs. H. A. Jastro). Not long after the birth of this child Mrs. Whalen was widowed, and in 1857 she married Colonel Baker; it was in 1863 that she showed her courage and devotion to him when she accompanied him to the present site of Bakersfield. There she aided him greatly in establishing that city.

The story is told that when Colonel Baker first contemplated his move to "Kern Island," he hesitated to take his young wife and family to that wild country until he had first prepared a home for them. Mrs. Baker heard of this scheme and quoted to her husband Ruth's answer to Naomi in the Bible story:

"For whither thou goest, I will go; and where thou lodgest, I will lodge; thy people shall be my people, and thy God my God: Where thou diest, will I die, and there will I be buried; the Lord do so to me and more also if ought but death part thee and me."

And then she added with an emphatic tone: "If you are going into that God-forsaken country full of Indians, bandits and heaven only knows what else, I am going with you." And she went.

The Bakers were the first settlers of Kern Island to cross Kern river at the foot of China Grade. There was a cable ferry at this point which was used by the soldiers stationed at Fort Tejon and at Camp Babbitt in Visalia.

When the family arrived, relates the son, Thomas, "The ferry boat was on the south bank of the river. My father crossed the river in a cottonwood canoe and brought the ferry boat across and we ferried the river."

The family, consisting of Colonel and Mrs. Baker, their daughters, May and Nellie, and son, Thomas, had left Visalia on September 7, 1863; they arrived in Kern Island on September 10, 1863. It was at this time that the colonel surveyed his possessions and remarked to his wife: "Here, at last, I have found my resting place, and here I expect to lay my bones."

Sometime previous to 1861 Christian Bohna had taken a squatter's right to 160 acres of land, a part of which is now the very heart of Bakersfield. In 1862, when Mr. Baker first investigated the possibilities of reclamation in Kern Island, he was so favorably impressed by the outlook that he offered Mr. Bohna \$200 for his rights and then moved his family into Bohna's cabin in the fall of 1863. The cabin was situated close to the present intersection of Nineteenth street at N street. It was constructed by Mr. Bohna of logs on end set in trenches and filled in. The roof was thatched with tules.

(Continued Tomorrow)