

Colonel Thomas Baker and Founding of Bakersfield

(By NAOMI E. BAIN)

CHAPTER V COLONEL BAKER'S FIELD

AFTER the reclamation work had been successfully completed, Baker moved his family back to the island and began plans for a new home. Because there was no saw mill in the vicinity and no practical way of transporting great amounts of materials from Visalia, the house was to be made like the others in the settlement, of adobe with a brush, tule and dirt roof. This was really quite a practical arrangement because of the protection from the sun given by the thick walls and roof. It was not objectionable in winter as long as the rains were light enough so that the roof did not become thoroughly saturated before the sun could dry it again. The necessary poles were to be brought down from the mountains by floating them down the river as far as the east bend of the slough—approximately where the Kern River Mills now stand. Since the banks there were quite steep and muddy, it was necessary that the Indians employed for the services of Colonel Baker carry the logs on their backs across the stream and clear a trail through a dense thicket of willow trees between the slough and the settlement.

Mexicans were employed to make the adobes and the construction of the house was soon under way. Since there were no shingles for the roof, beams were laid across the top and covered with brush and tules. A thick layer of earth was laid on top of this, a huge fireplace was installed and the home was ready for its occupants. These included, besides the family, anyone wishing a night's lodging while traveling through the valley or until a home could be provided if they were new settlers.

Colonel Baker had brought with him to his new home a small mill to grind grain and corn for the chickens and stock, but it also served well for grinding human food. When the supply of flour was gone, he ground corn which he sifted, using the fine meal for bread and the coarser grains for hominy. Such was not irregular either, for white

flour sold at \$10 a sack and was very scarce.

When coffee gave out, sweet potatoes were sliced and dried in the oven. Boiling water poured over them made a fair substitute for coffee if sweetened with honey. Mrs. Baker often leached salt from the earth to cure pork and made soap from grease and alkali. But wild game was plentiful and easy to bag so the settlers were happy with their meager lots.

Others began to come and freight loads of lumber and provisions made regular trips along the Butterfield stage route between Los Angeles, San Francisco and Sacramento. Baker's settlement became a regular stopping place for all travelers through the valley.

The colonel fenced off a field and planted to alfalfa 10 acres just east of where the courthouse now stands. This was the first alfalfa in Kern county. Then he made a garden patch, and with the help of the Indians, he raised corn, beans and potatoes. Thomas A. Baker recalls that some of the corn stalks grew to be 22 feet high and an ear of corn shelled an even quart.

Until 1868 and the drought, the wild grass that grew between the settlement and the hills was so plentiful that the settlers raked it up and hauled it to their ranches to feed their animals. Colonel Baker stacked 50 tons of this each year for his stock and that of his guests.

Travelers going from San Francisco or Sacramento to Los Angeles would take advantage of the Bakers' hospitality by stopping over in "Colonel Baker's Field," the only place on the road besides Visalia where they could get food for their animals and themselves. Colonel and Mrs. Baker kept open house in true southern style, and it was not long before they had acquired a reputation for feeding and lodging the travelers and their stock. "They welcomed every traveler by day or by night, gave him and his family meals and fed his animals without money or a price being asked or given and found pleasure in doing so."

(Continued Tomorrow)