

Colonel Thomas Baker and Founding of Bakersfield

(By NAOMI E. BAIN)

The Colonel befriended not only the weary traveler who feared to sleep in the open because of some prowling outlaw band, but also the local man who because of his very permanence in the community was prey to the Mason and Henry gang, feared because of their reputation as a desperado band. Thomas A. Baker, son of the Colonel, tells an exciting tale of such an occurrence just after the family had moved into its new home. It was shortly before the termination of the Civil War, and the Mason and Henry band of bushwhackers was murdering and robbing many people in this part of the country. "My father was a Democrat," says Baker, "but he did not believe in the depredation committed by this gang of desperadoes." Mr. Skyles, another leader in the community, was an ardent union man and lived about ½ mile west of Reeder Hill, which was occupied then by some Indians. Since the Mason and Henry gang wanted to kill Mr. Skyles, but was afraid of him, they came one evening to Colonel Baker's home. "Six of this gang came to our house to see if they could persuade my father to induce Mr. Skyles out into the open so they could kill him," recalls Tom Baker, an eyewitness. "My father refused to do so."

When peaceful persuasion failed, they tried more desperate means; and the six men drew their pistols and threatened to kill the Colonel if he insisted upon shielding his fellow settler from such treachery. He stepped out of the house to protect his family, and his son recollects watching his father in continued gesticulations and refusals. At length the angry men either changed their minds or became disgusted, for they sheathed their shooting irons and left. The Colonel then went over the Skyles' house and warned his neighbor of the danger, but neither was bothered again.

Tales are also current of times when Colonel Baker gave food to a hungry traveler and his family while he wondered how long his own store would hold out. Never was a hungry man or weary man turned away from the Colonel's door, and seldom did his guests take undue advantage of the hospitality extended them. Such was their respect for the Colonel.

CHAPTER VI

KERN BECOMES A COUNTY

A RIVER running through a gold laden canyon into valley of golden grain and rich green grazing

land joined the San Joaquin and eventually reached the Pacific ocean. In the mountains the tributary was a madly rushing torrent, dashing itself against huge granite boulders, cutting its way deeper and deeper into the granite walls of the majestic canyon. In the valley it spread lazily through swampy lands and joined the larger river in a muddy flow until Colonel Baker came and placed a head gate on its swampy arms and directed the waters for irrigating purposes. This now useful river had been named Kern because beside its banks had been buried Lieutenant Kern of Captain Fremont's forces.

When the state was organized, this area was still unsettled. It became a part of Mariposa county. Later Los Angeles and Tulare counties occupied this area.

In 1855 a bill was introduced in the state assembly providing for the creation of Kern county out of the southern portion of Tulare county. This bill was amended to call the new county "Buena Vista" after a lake in that district. The bill was passed by the Legislature and received the governor's approval, but no more could be done until a majority of the voters of the proposed district had signed petitions for the formation of the new county and an election could be called to elect county officers.

With this much encouragement, it seems peculiar that the county remained officially unorganized through more than a decade when the mining and agricultural industries were making such rapid progress and two communities with the impetus of Havilah and Bakersfield were growing so promisingly. Perhaps it was this very progress which may have interested the citizens so thoroughly that they thought naught of political matters.

At any rate in 1866 the residents of Havilah began to circulate and sign petitions for the organization of a county named Kern. Other leading men in the proposed county took up the cause and furthered it. Among these promoters of the new county was Colonel Baker, who worked quite actively in the "island" or valley district. Asbury Harpinding, of Havilah, however, carried the petition to the state Legislature at the time that he left Kern county to make his home in San Francisco. On April 2, 1866, the counties of Inyo and Kern were legally created although the latter had for some time been referred to by its residents as Kern county.

(Continued Monday)