

# Colonel Thomas Baker and Founding of Bakersfield

(By NAOMI E. BAIN)

## CHAPTER VII BAKERSFIELD

LIFE in the new county apparently went on in the usual manner for the next few months. But in the December 22 issue of the local newspaper appeared a notice that a petition had been circulated and extensively signed asking the establishment of a mail route between Havilah and Kern River Island.

Before the beginning of the Civil War mail for the settlers of Kern Island had been addressed to the fort and delivered via the stage. With the removal of the garrison from Fort Tejon and the discontinuance of the Butterfield stage line from San Francisco to Los Angeles, the settlers' mail was addressed to Visalia and brought in by any traveler whom the Visalia postmaster might hear was heading in the general direction of the "Island." Often mail was lost or it traveled a round-about journey before reaching its destination. The lack of letters was equaled only by a lack of outside newspapers in isolating the county from the rest of the world. Often the mail arrived in a badly torn and soiled condition after its long journey and much handling. Thomas A. Baker recalls that at the time of Lincoln's assassination, they had received no mail for six weeks and knew nothing of the national sorrow. Then one day a Mexican swam his horse across the river and told them "that the President had been killed." Everyone supposed, naturally enough, that he meant the president of Mexico until some friends in Visalia sent a bundle of newspapers with the news.

Consequently such an innovation as a regular mail route was to be highly appreciated by the settlers. But it was several years more before the route was actually established.

In the eventful year 1866 Colonel Baker began to survey the site of the proposed city of Bakersfield. Now Baker was the official surveyor, and with his foresight and optimism he put his early learnings in surveying together with what he had gleaned from his observations in other cities. Propheying that due to its geographic situation, the town would probably be the most important in the San Joaquin valley south of Stockton, the colonel mapped the town with streets 82½ feet wide and avenues 115 feet wide. In other cities he had observed that 66 feet had been the width of the streets and that even in those days of the horse and carriage, this was too narrow for comfort. From the land which was his, Baker saved only 80 acres for the Baker homestead. The rest was to be given to the city.

Julius Chester, another pioneer, saw great possibilities in this little town of 600 people. With his brother, George B. Chester, he established a store on the corner where now stands the Southern Hotel.

The building was a wooden shack

about twenty feet square stocked with a "complete assortment of goods suited to the demands of the settlement." The street running north and south past his store was named Chester avenue after Mr. Chester.

For some time previous to the actual surveying of the site the general opinion of the people had been that a new town was necessary. The mining town of Havilah, although the county seat, was too isolated for convenience. The location of the proposed settlement was, however, a matter for debate among the settlers, for some favored one site and some another. The final choice was made by General Palmer, the head of a survey party, who had been in the valley for several months surveying for the railroad route through the mountains. Whether it was accidental that the site should coincide so perfectly with the home and property of Colonel Baker is a moot point. It can only be ascertained that General Palmer, when appealed to for his opinion, argued that the Baker site "stood at the gateway of the irrigation projects then being worked out and that railroads when they came through the mountains would naturally gravitate toward this spot and that no matter where else a town might be artificially cultivated, the population would eventually for natural causes reach out and center itself in the proposed site.

Whatever the objections to the location may have been, judging from later events and the success of the city, the proponents of the site eventually chosen could hardly have been wrong.

While the Colonel planned the city and others wrangled over the desirability of the chosen spot only to have Baker's original choice win out, another controversy threatened to bring havoc to the new city. This was the Southern Pacific Railroad dispute; Colonel Baker led the other settlers in an active opposition to that transcontinental system. But why should a man in Colonel Baker's position fight a force which was to mean as much to the city as a branch of that railroad—an innovation which would make the shipping of cattle, sheep, and large quantities of farm products a paying one and make mining and agriculture prosperous and Kern county essential to the rest of the world? Why should the promoter of a young town oppose anything which would bring him settlers, news of the outside world, and eventual fame? The basis for the dispute lay in a land quarrel. The railroad demanded that a strip of land two blocks wide on each side of the track be given them by the city for building their right-of-way. The city, on the other hand, insisted that one block on each side was the limit to which they would subsidize the project.

(Continued Tomorrow)