

Colonel Thomas Baker and Founding of Bakersfield

(By NAOMI E. BAIN)

The Southern Pacific threatened that unless the townspeople met the railroad's terms, Bakersfield would be left out of the line of track entirely and the road built north of town and at some great distance from the business center. The threatening note in the demands of the large company only aroused the indignation and stubbornness of those self-sufficient pioneers.

Colonel Baker began a campaign and on April 27, 1867, Havilah's weekly paper announced:

"Colonel Thomas Baker of Kern River Island will deliver a lecture at Bella Union Hotel on Currency and Railroads. Colonel Baker's age and experience him entitle his opinion to great weight, and we hope there will be a general turnout. There will be no charge for admission."

Both factions held tenaciously to their opinions for seven years, each stubbornly feeling that the other would eventually give in. Finally the railroad built its track north of the town and established a station at Sumner with the threat that Bakersfield would be absorbed into the more prosperous railroad settlement. Whatever the sentiments of the Sumner residents may have been, they did not survive to be related as have those of the Bakersfield inhabitants who considered the rival settlement socially and morally obscure. Sumner was renamed Kern City and finally East Bakersfield. Colonel Baker did not live to know that the railroad was eventually built.

The summer of the year 1867 passed uneventfully. The local news sheet records none of Colonel Baker's activities, so there apparently was little out of the ordinary happening. Havilah was feeling the competition as Colonel Baker was selling his land for a little more than a dollar an acre. Life was a prosperous business. The landholders were planning roads about the country, harvesting their crops, looking forward to a plentiful winter.

For five years the winters had been dry. A mild rain in that country was not dangerous, for it was generally of short duration, and fine, dry, sunny days followed to clear the rivers and dry the fields and the

adobe huts of the settlers as well as to allow ample time for any necessary repair work. Then that year the rain came in torrents. The fall of 1867 brought continued downpours. Through the mud and thatch roofs of the adobe houses oozed the thick black rain mud. Tiny streams trickled from the hanging bits of tule ends and landed black as ink upon the umbrellas hung over tables and beds. Then came a long siege of rain that early December. Days passed; the people huddled in their houses hoping that each dawn would bring sunshine. For Christmas the settlers had planned a celebration at the Tibbet ranch. The women had been preparing the food for it for days. The guests were invited to "come early and stay late." All was in readiness, and cupboards were stocked. Then just two days before the celebration the rain stopped strangely, and the river went almost wholly dry. The people in the village of Bakersfield knew naught of what had happened in the mountains where now are the lakes of the upper Kern river. There a series of successive landslides had filled the river bed with rocks and earth and a forest of huge pines.

Today's beautiful lakes are only remnants of the tremendous reservoirs made by the damming of the river. Whole sections of wooded and rocky mountain slopes had washed into the river canyon. But such a temporary thing as mud and a few rocks could not be expected to hold permanently those raging, churning waters or to let them loose gradually. And then like a burst and continuous roll of thunder, the water broke loose and came roaring and crashing down the rocky gorges with the shrieking and scraping of thousands of trees. Morgan states that some of these trees were 60 and 100 feet in length, and up to 3 or 4 feet in diameter. They tumbled end over end in the narrower parts of the canyon and rolled and swirled with the current where space allowed. For three days the river flowed a mile in width past Kernville. From the banks it looked "as though a man could walk on logs dryshod from one side to the other."

(Continued Tomorrow)