

Colonel Thomas Baker and Founding of Bakersfield

(By NAOMI E. BAIN)

Bakersfield that Christmas Eve lay directly in line for the flood even worse than the one of 1862-1863, because this time it was more than high water in a muddy swamp. With the water were floating trees, tumbling granite boulders and all the velocity that could come with the two-day damming in the high mountains; and it came roaring at the little town. But Bakersfield had been wisely built on flat, level country that opened fan-wise, west and south of the townsite. Since the previous flood, settlers had been building their homes mainly on the higher knolls of ground.

So it was that Christmas eve in 1867 that the people were awakened by the loud crashing noise and later the lapping of water and the thud of rocks and timber around their doorsteps. Those adobe homes nearest the river or in low areas soon melted into the flood, and residents who had perched themselves on the higher pieces of furniture were forced to evacuate before the roofs caved in. Many reached such places of safety as well rooted trees and awaited rescue parties made up of their more fortunate neighbors who set out in boats to find the flood victims. Within a few hours all had been rescued, and the stoical pioneers gathered in their neighbors' homes to dry their clothes, make plans for new homes and forget their losses.

The cupboards containing the little pig to be roasted, the turkeys, cakes, pie and other elements to be brought to the Tibbet's Christmas dinner had floated off in the night and been buffeted about in the flood. By morning the cupboards lay in pieces and the water-soaked dinner was scattered over many acres. Morgan relates that the pig "was rescued and regarnished," the party held at the appointed hour, and the many water-soaked guests assembled to share the slightly moistened viands while the neighbors related their experiences of the night.

Although many animals and fowls were drowned and many homes

washed away, a hearty welcome was given the homeless at the Baker adobe which, though not overflowed, was drizzly and wet from the long rains. In it gathered many of the homeless after the feast at Tibbets and in it they were cozy about its great fireplace. In each of the homes of the more fortunate there were at least a dozen guests until the ground had dried and rebuilding the settlement became possible.

And then the colonel conceived an idea which, he thought, would vastly facilitate the rebuilding project. From Panorama Heights to Bellevue and the Barnes Settlement, a distance of about 10 miles, lay a strip of land a mile wide strewn with live trees left lying there upon the ground when the water receded. Colonel Baker being a practical and frugal man at once built a saw mill to cut these trees into building lumber. After ruining several 6-foot saws the colonel gave up the job. Thickly imbedded in the logs were sand and broken pieces of rock, some of the latter being as large as a man's hand. Sawing such logs was impossible so the enterprise was abandoned. The logs, however, had to be disposed of and the frugal settlers then conceived the idea of using them as whole logs to build fences and to heat their homes.

The flood was only a temporary setback to the new town, and in the spring the Colonel began two new enterprises. The first was a grist mill. E. F. Beale, who had owned a set of granite burrs, had used them temporarily in a grist mill of his own at the Tejon Ranch. This had failed because the Indians at the reservation refused to raise the wheat, and Beale had given the burrs to Colonel Baker, who set up a grist mill for the use of the local farmers who wished to grind their wheat and corn. No charge was made by Baker for the use of the burrs during the many years that the mill existed.

(Continued Tomorrow)