



Historic Bakersfield & Kern County, California
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Fabulous Barker Springs

Kern River, 1890-93

By Gilbert Gia
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On Sundays in May 1891, Papa Newman made the 10-mile round trip from Arlington Hotel at 19th and Chester¹ to

"Fabulous Barker Springs:"²



Where was Barker Springs? The earthquakes of 1952 dried up most hot springs on the Kern River, and newspapers did not always identify Barker Springs as in the same location.³ In 1930 Maurice V. Samuels, Barker's lawyer in 1900,⁴ recalled that his employer drilled a 500-ft water well in the vicinity of Kern County Park on the Barker ranch. Samuels also said Barker drilled a well 1400-feet deep at different location,⁵ and it was unsuccessful.⁶

Research indicates that Barker did not routinely drill wells, which suggests that the deep-well Samuels mentioned was the same one

¹ Bakersfield, California

² Daily Californian, May 30 1891. In July 1891, A.O. Thoms built a bedroom at the springs for his use on summer evenings. (Bakersfield Californian, Jul 18, 1941 referencing the July 1891 Daily Californian). Barker might have operated the springs as the hobby of a well-to-do man who enjoyed company.

³ Kern County, California

⁴ Daily Californian, Feb 5, 1900

⁵ Bakersfield Californian, Sep 6, 1930

⁶ Ibid.

Barker drilled in 1901, which was his unsuccessful oil well at the east end of today's Hart Park. The well issued hot water, and in 1926 it was identified as Barker Springs.⁷

Other historic sites on the river above Hart Park are by their geography related to Barker Springs: Kern River County Club (1921); Boy Scouts of America Reservation (1935); and Kern Country Golf Course (1944). In the more distant past, in 1776, Padre Francisco Garces found a Native American settlement at the mouth of Kern Canyon; Solomon Jewett raised sheep there on the Rio Bravo Ranch in 1861; and on New Year's Eve 1867 a massive flood of Kern Canyon rerouted the Kern River.

By 1874 the Jewetts were living closer to Bakersfield, and Henry and Louis Pierce owned the Rio Bravo Ranch.⁸ John Barker comes into this story because about that time the Pierces hired Barker as their ranch manager.⁹ He and his family moved into the Jewett ranch house, "about three miles from the mouth of Kern River

⁷ "The women [*Women's Club*] accepted a resolution that the county park at Barker Springs on the Kern river be furnished with a bathtub and small plunge." (Bakersfield Californian, May 11, 1926); "Barbecue. Barker Springs, Kern River Park, Sunday, Jul 11. Admission 50c. Chavez Rio., manager" (Bakersfield Californian, Jul 9, 1926). These citations are contemporary with civic improvements at Kern River Park (Hart Park).

⁸ George Gilbert Lynch, *Rio Bravo Ranch* (unpublished manuscript)

⁹ By this time Barker had already lived a long, eventful life. See www.archive.org/stream/historyofkerncou00morg/historyofkerncou00morg. The Pierces' ranch was known as Barker Ranch for its manager, Capt. John Barker. In 1879 when Water Engineer James D. Schuyler visited the ranch, manager John Barker agreed to monitor and record the Kern River's flow. In 1885, when Pierce filed a patent on nearby land, a corroborating witness to Pierce's preemptive claim was John Barker, identified again as ranch manager.

canyon...upon a high bluff overlooking Kern river."¹⁰

All of the old-timers well know John Barker's place, about ten miles northeast of Bakersfield and only a few miles from the mouth of Kern River canyon, but there are very many matters of interest connected with it, which people in general do not know. His residence, which is about three miles from the mouth of Kern River canyon, is located upon a high bluff overlooking Kern river. It is a hospitable home as many of us well know.

Above: Barker's place about three miles from the canyon¹¹

there are immense bodies of gypsum.

But the most interesting features of the entire property are what are known as Barker's springs and the engineering work by which a great many acres of land have recently been brought under irrigation.

The springs are located 3 1/2 miles down the river from Mr. Barker's residence, and are already noted for the qualities of the water, an analysis of which by Professor E. W. Hilgard is as follows:

Sodium and potassium sulphates ..	22.9
Sodium chloride	1.097
Carbonate of soda	22.52
Calcium and magnesium carbonates and sulphates	5.55
Silica	5.21
Grains in one gallon of water	157.24
Free sulphuretted hydrogen	3.73
Free carbonic acid	2.10
Cubic inches per gallon of water	5.83

Above: The springs, 3-1/2 miles down the river¹²

¹⁰ Daily Californian, Aug 8, 1892

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

The spring in which the well was sunk is about 100 feet from the river. In boring the well a flow of water was struck at 26 feet in depth and at 53 feet, where the boring stopped, the artesian water rises four feet above the surface. Shells were brought up from the bottom of the well.

A comfortable one story cottage has been erected at the springs, containing bedrooms, bathrooms and a furnace for heating the sulphur water to any desired temperature. These springs will eventually become the most noted place of resort in the county.

The property comprises 2000 acres taking in a fertile and level strip of land fronting for 3½ miles on the south bank of the river and 1200 acres of it are now under irrigation by means of remarkably clever engineering work devised by Mr. Barker himself.

The water is taken out of the river near the Rio Bravo house in a ditch twelve feet wide upon the bottom, at the head of a big fall, and follows along the river bank under bluff after bluff for over two miles. It is a bold piece of work and when entirely completed there will be five miles of main canal and two miles of irrigating ditches.

“The spring in which the well was sunk...”¹³

Barker acquired property. In 1874 he filed a patent on land near the Pierces but almost immediately sold it to the Pierces. Within this decade, however, Barker either owned or acquired control over a patchwork of neighboring properties totaling about 2,000-acres, most of which were along the south bank of the river below Kern Canyon.¹⁴

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Kern County Gazette, Aug 3, 1878. The holdings started about six miles up river from Bakersfield. An 1885 state map identifies canals across the river from today's soccer field. One is labeled “Pierce and Barker Ditch” and another the “Barker and Wilson Ditch”.

As a Pierce employee, Barker had started in sheep production, but the succession of dry years starting in 1875 and ending in 1880¹⁵ drove most sheep ranchers out of business. Barker was one of them. During the late-1870s he focused on cattle, field crops, and canal building.

Barker's plans extended beyond his ranch. In August 1878 the Kern County Board of Supervisors as water commissioners granted a canal franchise to Barker, Craig, and Louis Pierce to construct a ditch 30-feet wide and four-feet deep with head-waters at Kern Canyon,¹⁶ and a few days later the Gazette reported that "certain gentlemen" were planning to build a canal starting at Kern River Canyon.¹⁷ The paper also noted that a survey by "Messrs. Barker and Botsford," indicated that a \$50,000 canal would irrigate 30,000 acres on the plains south of Sumner.¹⁸

W.H. Souther completed the Kern Island Canal in 1874-1875, the Kern County Land Company finished its 25-mile Calloway Canal in 1878, and by 1880 at least 14 canals were in operation around

¹⁵ During this period, Barker drove his bands into Kern Canyon for grass. The price for California wool was driven-down by the Australian wool market.

¹⁶ The Board of Water Commissioners registered their action of Aug 9, 1878 in the Daily Californian, Apr 11, 1891. (The author thanks Shirley McFadzen of Kern County Genealogical Society for this citation.)

¹⁷ Kern County Gazette, Aug 31, 1878

¹⁸ Ibid. The settlement of Sumner (later Kern City) was about two miles east of Bakersfield. Sometime before July 1891 Barker sold his rights to 30,000-in of water for \$25,000 to Geo. C. Doherty and investors who planned to supply Sumner with water and create three storage reservoirs in the foothills east of Sumner: "One near Wade, one near Gant's place in sec 6-30-29 and one in the vicinity of Maschmeyer's in section 26-30-29." In 1891 Barker said he obtained his water rights in 1878. (Daily Californian, Jul 25, 1891). Those reservoirs were never created.

Bakersfield. During the mid-1870s Barker begin building a canal.



View east from the east side of Foss-Kern Golf Course. On the opposite side of the river are the Pierces' fields. Barker's canal (not visible in this image) is tucked under the hillside below. Photo: Gilbert Gia (2005)

In 1879, assistant State engineer James D. Schuyler visited the Barker Ranch. He noted that Barker was in the process of building a canal and had plans to erect a water wheel to irrigate his higher fields.¹⁹ One of those fields is under today's Lake Ming, but Barker's land also included today's soccer park east of Hart Park.

The river's twisting, narrow path made Barker's canal construction slow and arduous.²⁰ The canal's final length is not known today, but

¹⁹ His canal, or ditch, started at a fall near the Barker Ranch house (former Jewett house). During canal construction in 1878, Barker found fossil remains. (Southern Californian and Kern County Weekly Courier, Aug 9, 1878, from the Daily Californian, Apr 11, 1891); see also Barker water wheel and crop references in Nov 27, 1880, Pacific Rural Press.

²⁰ Barker's canal-building went on for years, and his residence at Barker Springs would have allowed him to more easily supervise canal construction. In 1962 Jean Pierre Hallet proposed a different use of the area between Hart Park and Lake Ming: Congoland USA. (Bakersfield Californian, Mar 31, 1962)

in 1892 Barker had completed two miles, with three miles unfinished.²¹ It irrigated two open areas, or glades: One between today's Foss-Kern Golf Course and California Living Museum (CALM), and the other between CALM and Hart Park.²² C Although newspaper accounts of the time said his canal irrigated about 1,200 acres, just a few traces of it exist today.²³



The author in Barker's ditch east of Foss-Kern Golf Course and below the old Boy Scout lodge (see map). Photo credit: George Gilbert Lynch (2005)

²¹ Daily Californian, Aug 8, 1892. Barker was still at work on his canal. The terrain required blasting and hand shovel-work. By then, the eight-ft-wide canal was four miles long. "...This enterprise which was conceived several years ago has been built little by little until this season..." (Daily Californian, May 23, 1892)

²² "The Rio Bravo ranch covers the uppermost of these open spaces reaching clear to the mouth of the canyon. A few miles further down the river there comes another glade or valley now known as Barker's springs and for the purpose [of] irrigating this open spot John Barker has just completed a canal." (Daily Californian, May 23, 1892). CALM is on a mesa that separates the glades.

²³ The figure must have included the Pierce holdings. By 1881 Pierce had already invested \$10,000 in canal work, and in Sep 1884, four miles were finished. Barker did more than build a canal and engage in farming. When the first edition of the Morning Echo appeared in 1886, he was the editor. [Some say Kern Co Echo of 1884]

Barker first visited this section of the river about 1864, and he settled in Kern County in 1874; by the late-1880s he was well-acquainted with the mineral springs along Kern River. An unusual one was located " 3-1/2 miles down the river from Mr. Barker's residence."²⁴ The spring flowed warm water and bubbled methane.²⁵

About 1890, probably not much earlier, Barker drilled into the spring, collected the gas, and used it as domestic fuel.²⁶ Wrote the Daily Californian in 1892, "A comfortable one-story cottage has been erected at the springs containing bedrooms, bathrooms and a furnace for heater the sulphur water to any desired temperature. These springs will eventually become the most noted place of resort in the country."²⁷ In fact, Barker's Springs soon became a recreational destination.

²⁴ Daily Californian, Aug 8, 1892. Barker's residence, the old Jewett house on Barker Ranch (Rio Bravo Ranch).

²⁵ Daily Californian, Aug 8, 1892; Weekly Californian, Aug 13, 1892 (a reprint of the Aug 8 article)

²⁶ "...He has drilled a well fifty-three feet deep, right in the spring, and over the pipe he has placed a gasometer 3-feet in diameter and 8 feet high, in which the escaping natural gas is caught and used with entire success for lighting the buildings at the springs. The flame is a brilliant yellow and makes a splendid light." (*The Barker Springs, The Coming Resort for People of Kern*, Daily Californian, Aug 8, 1892. According to Maurice V. Samuels, "Barker laid a small-dimensioned pipe to his ranch home kitchen and burned the natural fuel. He was the first to do this." (*Playwright on Visit Here Spins Old Oilfield Yarns*, Bakersfield Californian, Sep 6, 1930)

²⁷ Daily Californian, Aug 8, 1892

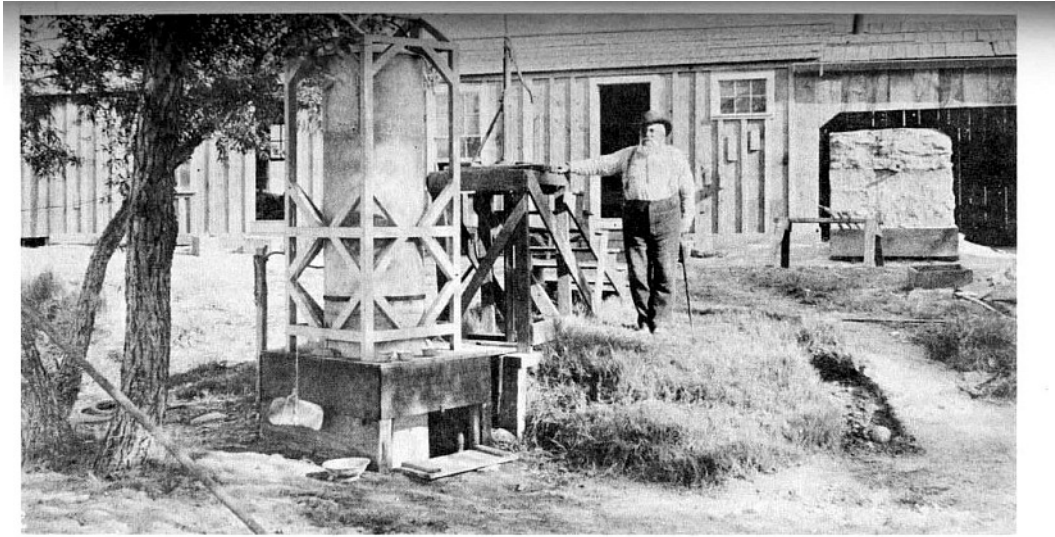
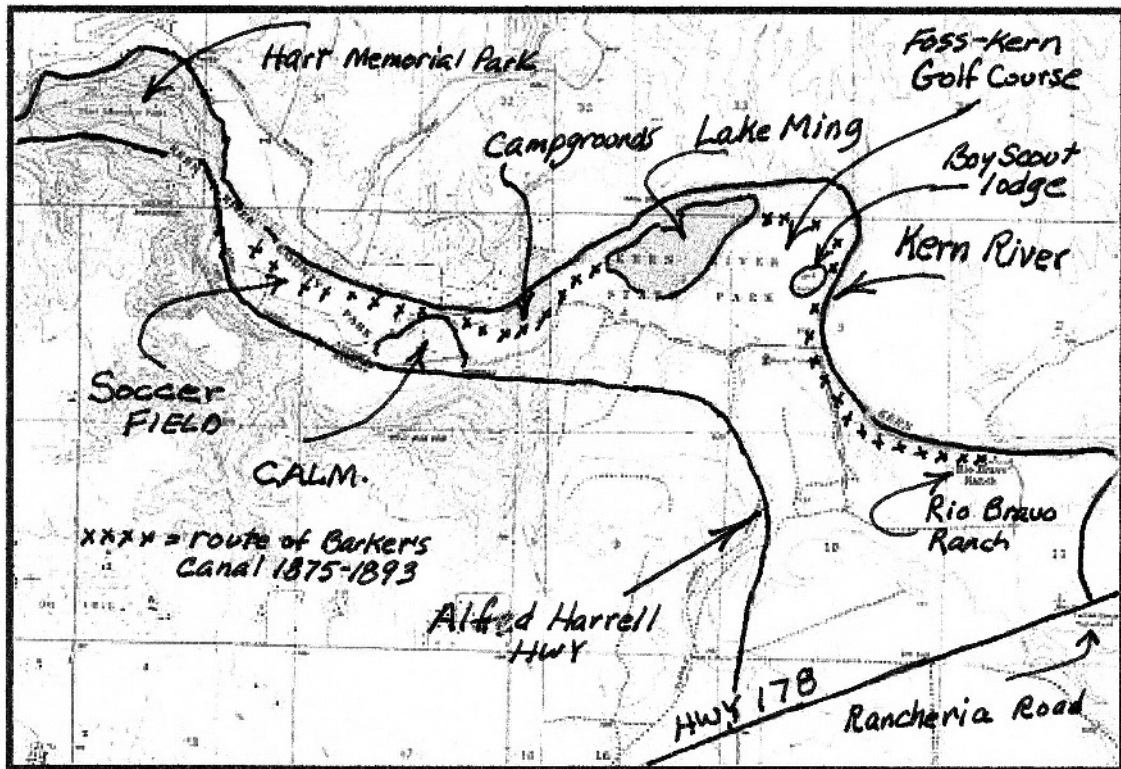


Photo courtesy Mrs. Emma (Barker) Harris
 John Barker and the gas well he developed on Kern River in 1890. This is thought to be the first use made of Kern River gas

Above: Barker and his Gas-o-meter, 1890



The Barker Springs house was probably between the Soccer Field and CALM
 (Map: Gilbert Gia)

Barker offered hot-water soaking tubs and river rafts to visitors,²⁸ and the 61 year-old from Bristol, England recited Milton, Poe, and Scott and entertained his guests with recollections of early Kern and

²⁸ On the Fourth of July 1891 river parties were surrounded by "swarms of festive grasshoppers." (Daily Californian, Jul 7, 1891)

Tulare Counties. Barker had become an historical icon.

In 1893 a flood of the Kern River ruined Barker's canals and fields and submerged Bakersfield streets. The local disaster came at a time when the national economy was in a depression. Barker Springs faded from the news, and the mid-1890s were probably a low point in Barker's fortunes.²⁹

No land titles show that Barker owned his property in Kern County, but a Kern County Land Company map from 1895 outlines several parcels above and below today's Hart Park labeled Barker, or Pierce, or Barker and Pierce. Also, a newspaper account said Barker had riparian rights, which suggests that he also owned the property next to the river.³⁰ His ownership of the land, however, was proven by the sale in 1913 of Barker's property between Hart Park and Kern Canyon.³¹

Shortly after discovery of oil on the Kern River, Barker drilled on his hillside property at the east end of today's Hart Park.³² In July, 1900 the hole had passed through 18-1/2 feet of rock and seven feet of black shale before re-entering hard rock.³³ Mineral water poured from the wellhead and drilling continued. In mid-August, Barker's

²⁹ In Feb 1895, Barker's daughter Lottie applied for a patent on 160-acres just east of today's soccer park (NE-1/4, Sec 4, T29S-R29E). In 1896, a property that Barker had acquired from Miller and Lux went into foreclosure.

³⁰ Daily Californian, Aug 8, 1892

³¹ It is possible that Barker once owned the land that is now Foss-Kern Golf Course, but in 1896 the Pierce brothers definitely owned it. In 1908, during the period of Kern River oil field speculation, Pierce sold mineral rights to the Puritan Land Company of Cumberland, Maine. In 1918 Bakersfield businessman Louis V. Olcese bought that property from Pierce.

³² Sec 5, T29S-R29E

³³ Daily Californian, Jul 9, 1900

tool bail jammed at 1,000-feet, and he abandoned the hole.³⁴ Water flowed down the hillside for the next 28 years. In 1921 the country bought most of what we know as Hart Park and in 1928 built a hillside reservoir below the failed well. The mineral water was diverted into the “lake”.³⁵

John Barker was almost 70 years-old in 1901, when average life expectancy was 50. He was overweight, walked with difficulty, and probably had diabetes. A photograph of him from the time shows an uncomfortably large man in a one-horse shay.

In December, Barker leased his melon-growing property (at today's soccer park) to the Sweet brothers and moved to Kern City³⁶ to live with his daughters Lottie and Emma. In 1903 he moved again, this time a few miles farther west to Bakersfield. During that decade Barker was often at Los Angeles to see medical specialists.

John Barker died of kidney failure on Sunday May 30, 1909 at St. Clair Hospital in Bakersfield. His funeral was elaborate, and the pallbearers eminent: Paul Galtes, Henry A. Jastro and Walter James of the Kern County Land Company, John M. Jameson, Judge Jackson W. Mahon, A.M. Minner, Louis V. Olcese, and Simon P. Wible.³⁷

³⁴ “The well at Barker Ranch (Sec 5, T29S-R29E) is ruined.” (Daily Californian, Aug 15, 1900, from Lynn Hay Rudy database); Hart Park is in Sec 5, T29S-R29E.

³⁵ Built in 1928 as a boating and recreational pond but also for irrigation. (Bakersfield Californian, Oct 16, 1928; Nov 16, 1928); The Barker ranch adjoined [was part of?] the future site of Hart Park. (Bakersfield Californian, Sep 14, 1920). Park visitors today can find Barker’s failed oil well. Its metal cover is about half-way up the mowed, grassy slope at the east end of the park.

³⁶ East Bakersfield

³⁷ Bakersfield Californian, May 31, 1909



Capt. John Barker

Barker's wife had died in 1883,³⁸ and in the mid-1880s his only son died on the Rio Bravo Ranch. Barker's heirs were his daughters, Nellie, Lottie, and Emma. In 1886 Nellie married Bakersfield dentist J. F. Bonham, and two weeks after Barker died, Lottie married accountant Alonzo D. Whittemore. In 1911 Emma married attorney Daniel Harris, and he probably helped speedup the Barker probate.

In 1913 Nellie, Lottie, Emma, and their husbands signed an agreement with a Miss Anna T. Harrington. A provision said Miss Harrington had 90 days to buy 495-acres³⁹ of the Barker estate "where it debouches from the canyon" or sell it "to anyone she later designates." Within days, Miss Harrington paid the estate \$40,000.⁴⁰

³⁸ Mary Alma Weaver. (San Joaquin Vignettes: The Reminiscences of Captain John Barker. Edited by W. H. Boyd. Kern County Historical Society, (1970). pg vii

³⁹ Sec 2 and Sec 5, T29S-R29E

⁴⁰ About \$800,000 in 2010 dollars. The name Barker Springs was used generically for the property on either side of Barker's hot spring house.

BARKER RANCH TO BE CONVERTED INTO A UNIQUE COUNTRY CLUB

**Plans Are Under Way
to Turn the Property
Into a Delightful
Pleasure Resort.**

According to plans now being considered in connection with the Barker Ranch since that property passed from the Barker estate to Miss Anna Harrington, it is proposed to convert the broad acres, so beautifully situated along the bank of the river, into a pleasure ground or country club where the members may spend their leisure hours during either the summer or the winter.

The land lies just at the point where the river leaves the mountains and in the summer months the climate is cool and invigorating. In the winter, with snow lying low on the moun-

tains the practice of casing off the water was not followed. For thirteen years hot sulphur water, carrying large quantities of gas, has been flowing in a large stream from the well, and any one having a curiosity to see water on fire has but to touch a lighted match to the product of the sulphur well as it comes from the pipe.

Nucleus of Club House.

On the property is a large stone and concrete house that was begun by the late Captain Barker; it is unfinished, but has a foundation sufficiently strong to carry several stories, and with out great expense this could be converted into a fine building of the Mission style. It is the intention to have golf links and tennis courts; the contour of the country is ideal for golf. The property runs to the center of the river and embraces three to four miles of river front. A large swimming pool will be established on the river's edge and there will also be hot sulphur water bathing.

To Plant Immediately.

Shade trees, shrubs, vines and roses will be planted immediately; the old

Daily California, March 8, 1913

Since the time Bakersfield was founded, the nearby mountains have offered an escape from summer heat, but in 1913 a resort closer to town was appealing: The Californian envisioned Barker Springs as a successful country club, and it wrote,

Being but thirty minutes ride from Bakersfield, the property is easy of access by automobile, motorcycle, old family Dobbin, or bicycle ... One might make the run out and dine at the club, take a fresh water swim or hot sulfur bath, play at golf or tennis, and either return to town or spend the night at the outing place.⁴¹

⁴¹ Bakersfield Californian, Mar 8, 1913. Dobbin means horse.

The paper speculated that the sturdy foundation of Capt. Barker's unfinished stone and concrete house might support a second floor:

And with but slight expense this could be converted into a fine building of the Mission style. ... It is the intention to have golf links and tennis courts, and the contour of the country is ideal for golf. A large swimming pool will be established on the river's edge and there will also be hot sulfur water bathing.⁴²

The older buildings would be torn down and shade trees and shrubs planted immediately,⁴³ but seven years then followed without mention of the country club. In 1921 Bakersfield businessmen did build a country club. It was near Barker Springs, but the attraction was not mineral water or a venerable old man. It was golf.⁴⁴

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⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ As late as 1922, soaking tubs might still have been present at Barker Springs: "A party of Rosedale folks motored to Barker Springs Sunday for an outing and to enjoy the sulphur [*sic*] baths." (Bakersfield Californian, May 16, 1922); An escaped convict was arrested at Barker Springs in 1924. (Los Angeles Times, Dec 30, 1924, "Exclusive Dispatch" from Bakersfield, Dec 29, 1924); In 1933 the Labor Council gave a barbecue at "Barker Springs on the Kern river [*sic*]" (Bakersfield Californian, May 26, 1933)

⁴⁴ See Gilbert Gia's *Kern River Country Club, 1921-1935* and *History of Kern County Boy Scouting* at www.gilbertgia.com and www.scrib.com.