



Historic Bakersfield & Kern County, California
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Chinese Parents and the School Boycott of 1910

v2

by Gilbert P. Gia

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In July 1910 as Boudreau & McKinnon completed work on the new Hawthorne School at 24th and P,¹ D.W. Nelson the newly-appointed school superintendent created a special class at Hawthorne for Chinese pupils not performing at grade level.² Forty Chinese pupils were enrolled for September 1910, which was about two percent of the grammar-school population,³ but the single-digit number gave no hint to the backlash Nelson received from the Chinese community.

¹ Morning Echo, Jul 30, 1910. The boundaries of Hawthorne's district were 19th to 34th and Chester to Union (Morning Echo, Sep 7, 1910).

² About 1,750 elementary pupils were enrolled at Bakersfield's six schools in 1910: Emerson School [at Truxtun & K] 239; Lowell [10th & H] 366; Bryant [20th & H] 239; Washington [Baker & Nile] 489; Lincoln [Beale & Eureka] 138; and Hawthorne [23rd & P] 108, (Morning Echo Sep 13, 1910).

³ The population of Chinese in Bakersfield peaked about 1910. In the school census that year no other racial group was listed as a subcategory.



Hawthorne School, 1910. The streets had been recently freshly oiled.

Prior to opening of school the board published the names of teachers,⁴ and on that list was a respected Bryant School teacher named Harriet F. Buss who also had taught Sunday school at First Congregational Mission Church School in Chinatown. Buss was assigned to Hawthorne School to teach the newly created "Oriental Class."

Determined to resist segregation of their children, Chinese parents met on Sunday at the temple at 20th and K and decided to boycott the city schools.⁵ On Monday morning the Bakersfield Californian interviewed businessman Sing Lee⁶ who pointed out that in previous years Chinese pupils had been in every class at Bryant School, and their language learning was rapid. Parents, said Lee, worried because Chinese-only classrooms failed to adequately teach English to their

⁴ Bakersfield Californian, Sep 6, 1910

⁵ Bakersfield Californian, Sep 13, 1910. The boycott was almost total. On Monday, few children were in Miss Buss's classroom (Bakersfield Californian, Sep 13, 1910).

⁶ Lee Hong Sing was the oldest, and wealthiest Chinese settler in Bakersfield. He died in 1922, reportedly at the age of 107. "No man was more respected by thousands of townfolk. His purse was always open at the request of charity; he raised a family of girls who have proved to be a credit in the schools where they attended; he was honest although he ran a lottery game. Few men, and I make no exceptions, from the courthouse to the poorhouse, who have not at some time in Sing Lee's life marked a ticket to try their luck. --'Doc' Wilson." (Bakersfield Californian Jul 14, 1922)

children. In 1886 a church from San Francisco opened a religious mission and school in Bakersfield at 23rd and L, but because the class was made up of so few English speakers, no one learned English.⁷

The Californian commented on the boycott,

"It is argued by the influential Chinese residents that the segregation of the Oriental students will tend to curtail their education in that children will not be so easily able to acquire a good knowledge of the English language. The board on the other hand, feels that the Chinese children will be benefited in a larger degree if given instruction in a school, where they are in the charge of a special teacher. Miss Harriet Buss, in charge of the Oriental school, has taken special pains this summer to study the Chinese schoolwork in San Francisco and is well fitted to give the proper instruction."⁸

Sing Lee told the reporter that parents would not give up what they valued most in the public schools, which was exposure to English-speaking pupils. Wrote the Californian, "That the teacher of the Oriental school will have more time to devote to the instruction of the Chinese children is not recognized." The paper also criticized Lee for failing to see the wisdom of segregation, for failing "to 'sabe' how all the grades can be said to be in one room and allow the teacher ample time to look after the interests of each child."⁹

Later, the reporter asked a small Chinese boy standing nearby if he knew anything about what was going on. The boy replied that he

⁷ Bakersfield Californian Sep 13, 1910

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

heard that no Chinese children would go to school that week, but he thought that maybe next week they would go.¹⁰

Who spoke for the Chinese community? Sing Lee started in business at Taft, but by 1910 he owned a successful laundry in Bakersfield. His 5-ft 11-in stature, wealth, and gravitas made him a leader, but the school board would also heard from Toy Din and Jung Sam Yick, men who were nearly as prominent and well known as Lee in the English-speaking community. Toy had immigrated from China in 1875, settled in San Francisco, moved to Montana, and in 1896 moved to Bakersfield to open a grocery store. Jung Sam Yick, 31, was a labor contractor for the Kern County Land Company, but in 1910 he owned and operated a grocery store on 18th Street. Chinese residents were especially indebted to Jung because he was personally responsible for bringing many of their countrymen to Bakersfield.¹¹

The climate of Bakersfield schools had changed since 1896 when the town bragged about its pupil diversity. After Perry, Oklahoma, experienced racial violence when Black students were excluded from that city's public schools, the Californian invited Perrites see how well Bakersfield schools worked:

“There are in our public schools, side-by-side, students of American, English, Irish, Scotch, Swedish, French, Italian, Portuguese, Spanish, German, Greek, Colored, Chinese and Japanese descent, and various intermingled races, yet all live in peace and harmony. While there are occasional scraps

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ The Chinese of Kern County, 1857-1960, William Harland Boyd. Kern County Historical Society, Bakersfield, CA (2002)

that are bound to occur in the best regulated schools, they are never on national or color lines. The example of Bakersfield in this regard is respectfully held up to the rest of the world in general, and Oklahoma in particular."¹²

The reality was probably less rosy for Asians and particularly less rosy for Chinese who had endured three tumultuous decades of discrimination in California. In 1860 the state legislature barred all Asians from public schools, and from the 1870s on, Chinese were regularly blamed for most of the country's economic ills. Politicians running for re-election worked that inflammatory rhetoric, but those who knew Chinese as individual people did not. In a speech delivered before the National Labor Convention of August 6, 1870, Gen. Edward F. Beale of Kern County said,

"I have known the Chinese intimately as wealthy tenants, and employed them as a working people, and have found them admirable as both. They are, as a rule, a most valuable class of immigrants, and certainly the most industrious and quiet operatives. As to their not coming except as servile laborers, that is absurd. They will come just as other emigrants come, if you will let them, and with this difference, that our other immigration brings us nothing with which we are not already acquainted, whereas they bring with them to us and for our profit, a thousand new and valuable ideas."¹³

The boycott of Hawthorne School lasted was short lived. During the days surrounding that period, three items of local news probably

¹² Bakersfield Californian, Jan 15, 1896

¹³ Kern Co Weekly Courier, Jan 21, 1871. p. 3

contributed to its failure. Early Sunday morning on September 6th shots awoke residents of Chinatown. When the Morning Echo came out the next day it concluded that Tong warfare from San Francisco had arrived in town. The newspaper chastised local Chinese for not giving police "the slightest information." The second event came on September 10th when Ah Fong, a porter at the Monte Carlo Club, was caught pilfering from the club's open safe. The third incident was September 13th when immigration officers from Los Angeles arrested 25 "Celestials" in Bakersfield who were unable to prove they were legal residents.

In an open letter to the community, secretary of the school board C. C. Brower outlined the city's position which included this: "Some of our Chinese fellow townsmen seem to think that our schools are intended primarily for their benefit." Brower stated that an extra burden was placed on teachers in the lower grades who had pupils who could not speak English.¹⁴ "In fact," wrote Bower, "one of our teachers has informed me that she practically has to form a separate class of the children within her own class, and to give them separate instructions."¹⁵ The secretary underlined the fact that in larger cities where there were many children deficient in English, they were assigned to separate schools "under specially qualified teachers using scientific methods of instruction."¹⁶

Legality behind the board's decision, Brower continued, was a state law that authorized separate schools, such as Hawthorne, and that when they were so established, non-English-proficient children had to

¹⁴ Bakersfield Californian, Sep 13, 1910

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid.

attend them. Additionally, the Board selected a special teacher to teach the children. "Miss Buss, besides her experience more or less in teaching the Chinese, spent part of her vacation in visiting the Oriental schools of San Francisco, acquiring valuable information thereby, and returned thoroughly imbued with the enthusiasm over her appointed work. The school is in existence, and will be maintained, and the law provides for the rest."

Bower then accused the Chinese of caring little for the welfare of the larger Bakersfield community. "It remains to be seen whether our Chinese fellow townsmen are amenable to the same laws with which our American people cheerfully comply. Viewing the subject in the proper light, our American parents have so far as known offered no objection to the necessary changes, and we presume them to be quite as deeply interested in the subject as are the Chinese."¹⁷

The Morning Echo appended its own evaluation, which had nothing to do with non-English-proficiency. "An ultimatum has been issued by the Board of Education to the effect that the school law requires that all Oriental children in any city shall attend one school, and it is likely that unless the local Celestials comply with the law, they may come in conflict with the state authorities. [Furthermore] under the supervision of Miss Harriet Buss, they would obtain perhaps better education in the exclusive class of their own than when attending another school in a large class of American boys and girls."

The Chinese community faced a social phalanx: California's school law, an implacable board of education, two local editors, recent negative

¹⁷ Ibid.

newspaper stories, and 50-years of hard history. There is no record of the board meeting of September 17th when Toy Din, Lee Hong Sing, and Jung Sam Yick spoke, but the Morning Echo reported afterward that the three men came away "fully convinced." Wrote the Echo, "President Blodget and other members of the Board and Superintendent Nelson went into the matter very fully and were successful in convincing Toy and his associates that the action of the board had been for the interests of the Chinese." The next day, 24 Chinese children enrolled at Hawthorne School.

In June 1911 the Echo printed the names of 127 eighth graders who had passed the high school entrance exam. Among the predominantly Anglo-Saxon names were Silvery Carrillo, Isabella Claudino, Frank DeSoto, and John and Frank Pacheco, but the roll showed no Asian children advancing to Ninth Grade. In 1917, however, a Chinese name was in the list of graduates from Kern County Union High School. It was Henry J. Toy.¹⁸

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Hawthorne School was demolished after the earthquake of 1952. Today the site is covered by a freeway ramp at 23rd and O.



¹⁸ 1917 Oracle (yearbook of Kern Co Union High School)