



Historic Bakersfield and Kern County, California
www.gilbertgia.com

Seeking Spirits in Canyon Country, 1845-2011

From Bakersfield to Caliente via Kern Canyon, 2011

ver 3

by Gilbert P. Gia

Copyright © Gilbert P. Gia, Bakersfield, California, 2011
This work is free to public school teachers for use in their classrooms.
Other contact ggiaggia@gmail.com

In the mid-1970s country singer Merle Haggard built a house where the Kern River emerges from Kern Canyon, but the recorded history of this location goes back at least 125 more years when the Jewett brothers raised sheep here and John Barker and the Pierce brothers farmed the land. Down river in 1891, Barker opened a hot springs resort,¹ but evidence of all those past endeavors is nearly gone, as are Haggard's orchards and his fish ponds of only a few decades ago. But up the canyon we can still see history.

¹ See Gilbert P. Gia, *Fabulous Barker Springs on the Kern River, 1890-93*, www.gilbertgia.com



Merle Haggard's former house

The hydroelectric operation humming at the mouth of the canyon isn't the first one built there. In 1897 the Kern County Land Company installed a power plant to supply its farming operations south of Bakersfield, but failing flumes and variable waterflow disrupted electrical production. In 1907, miners completed a 8400-ft water supply tunnel in the granite mountain side above the river.² During construction in 1906, Lindsay B. Hicks was buried alive for ten days. After he was rescued he made a nation-wide lecture tour of a few months, until the public got tired of his story.³ Hicks' name faded, but water still flows through the tunnel.

The highway narrows worrisomely here at the canyon's entrance, but decades past, this road was much more challenging, and as far back as 1876 a Bakersfield newspaper warned about the perilous passage of Kern River gorge.⁴ Part of this road was improved in the mid-1890s but a much better road circumvented this route. In 1909 Deputy Coroner W.A. McGinn and undertaker A.H. Dixon might not

² See George Gilbert Lynch, "Bakersfield's Hydroelectric Plant," *Historic Kern Quarterly*, Fall 2005, v 55, no 3

³ See http://www.scvresources.com/highways/sr_178/highway_178_tour.htm for history and historic photos of Kern Canyon road. The bed of mining track used in the tunneling project is sometimes visible half-way up the hillside.

⁴ *Southern Californian & Kern Co Courier*, Sep 21, 1876, p 2, col 2

have agreed. They were driving the county hearse on their return to Bakersfield on Democrat Hot Springs Road when they lost control of the vehicle. It slipped on the mountainside spilling the morgue basket with body onto the rocks below.⁵

In 1923 the canyon road was a segment of the Lincoln National Highway that had opened that summer between Walker's Pass and Bakersfield, and the canyon became an even more popular holiday destination. As late as July 4, 1941, 5,000 visitors picnicked in the canyon.

The beauty of the canyon is still obvious. Trees strain to open yet wider fractures in car-size boulders, palms and Peruvian peppers line the river, and tumbling white water crashes over silver-gray granite. The canyon's danger might also be part of the attraction. Above the canyon-road loom granite monoliths hinting of odd occurrences; a boulder that crashed through the windshield of a moving car, a helicopter that settled down next to a moving truck.

At the second powerhouse (completed in 1921) the road narrows again, and experienced drivers and foolish ones, too, push from behind to encourage us to speed up. At the next turnout my wife and I turn out and allow them to pass, but we catch up with them at the

⁵ Bakersfield Californian, Jul 13, 1909, p 1

road-work man who has stopped the traffic.

A bit farther along we turn into the Upper Richbar Campground and bring out our folding chairs. Above the tall sycamores we watch soaring hawks and under the trees two inquisitive squirrels.



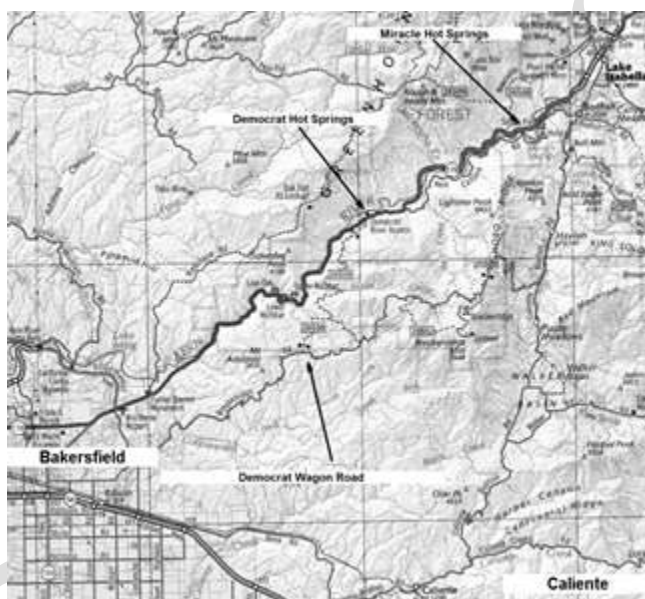
Kern River Canyon

Leaving Richbar we negotiate 15 minutes of hairpin turns until the road widens dramatically. If we do not turn here we will pass over a modern concrete bridge and will be on the freeway opened in the 1970s. That route bypasses hundreds of hairpin turns on the old road, but we skip the freeway and turn onto Kern Canyon Road.

Traffic disappears and the canyon walls recede. We gain altitude. A mile farther is the US Forest Service building and a sign announcing Mill Creek Trail. We hiked up the hill here a few years ago. The path was steep for the first 50-yards then leveled-off onto a broad meadow. Soon the trail became steep, and an hour later, at the top,

we found mortars pierced into a granite monolith, vestiges of Indigious Americans. But today we do not stop to climb Mill Creek Trail. We putter along at 20 mph enjoying the purple lupines and the white candle flowers of the California buckeye.⁶ Ahead of us we hope to find four hot springs.

Democrat Hot Springs



Democrat Wagon Road from Bakersfield

In 1927 Kern Canyon Road was not yet completed. Bakersfield travelers to Yosemite Valley followed the road to Edison, from there to Cottonwood, and nearby took the Democrate Wagon Road up Mt. Breckenridge and down to Democrat Hot Springs. In June, 1927, the road from the hot springs to Isabella lacked eight miles of being

⁶ In fall, buckeye fruit (poisonous) look and feel like hard figs.

completed.⁷



Democrat Hot Springs from a post card

In early days Guests arrived at Democrat Hot Springs by stage via Democrat Wagon Road. By 1906 Democrat boasted a hotel, swimming tank, soaking tubs, and tent cabins.

⁷ Bakersfield Californian, Jun 20, 1927

The Democrat Hot Springs automobile stage left the Arlington hotel this morning at 7:30 o'clock. There are several belated vacationists stopping at the mountain resort who are expected back on the return stage.

Mrs. J. R. Taylor, of Fellows, and

Bakersfield Californian, November 20, 1913

Forty miles from Bakersfield, high among the cool pine trees and on the banks of the snow-fed Kern River, is Democrat Hot Springs.

Motorists
motorists find the most picturesque in America—a tour of endless cliffs and gorgeous scenery.

The Springs
are noted for their efficacy in the treatment of rheumatism, stomach, kidney, liver and bladder troubles.

Big game, fishing and aquatic sports have made these springs famous—and unique.

The Hotel
Rates in the hotel or for tent cottages are very reasonable. Parties indulged if desired. Stage runs Monday, Wednesday and Friday, returning following days.

M. A. LINDBERG
Proprietor,
Arlington Hotel
Bakersfield—California

Bakersfield Californian, July 20, 1916

But we arrive by way of the canyon road, and our odometer tells us it is only 12 miles back to Haggard's house at the mouth of the canyon. In the early 1970s these springs were closed to the public, but owners today will accept family gatherings and business meetings.⁸

⁸ www.DemocratHotSprings.com

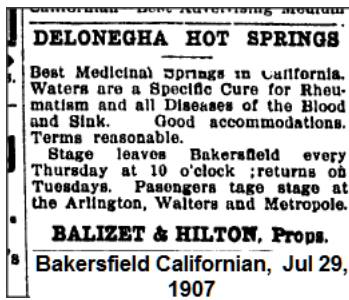


Democrat Hot Springs today

Delonegha Hot Springs

Delonegha is also private property, but unlike Democrat it's never open to the public.⁹ Coils of barbed wire and chain-link fence stretch down to the river's edge, and we see no trespassing signs spray-painted on nearby rocks. In the 1890s Delonegha's boarding house welcomed stages that were two days on the road from Bakersfield, but when Democrat and Hobo hot springs became more easily accessible. Delongegha's use fell off.

⁹ GPS 35.5574-118.6117



In 1931 Peter J. Forthhoffer stole a brand new car in Bakersfield and disappeared. Three years later the dismantled car was found in a cave near Delonegha hot springs. Sheriff Ed Champness learned that Forthhoffer had demonstrated his mechanical aptitude in 1919 when he escaped from the Kern County jail by picking a lock with a fork.¹⁰

Remington Hot Springs



¹⁰ *Bakersfield Californian*, Jun 16, 1937, p 9. The cave was probably Greenhorn Cave across the river from Delonegha. (J. C. Jenkins, Ruby Johnson Jenkins. *Exploring the Southern Sierra, West Side, Volume 2*, 1995)

Remington is mostly unknown even to locals. Look for a wide dirt turnout many truns ahead about where the highway starts down the mountain. A trail on your right leads up Breckenridge Mountain to Remington Ridge while the trail on the left is 300-feet of switchbacks to the hot spring on the river. Except for some arranged rocks, Remington is undeveloped.

At the Borrell Road turn-off, next to Borrell power plant, we could easily return to the freeway. At this location in 1904, Henry E. Huntington's hydro-electric plant, powered by water delivered by flume from above Kernville, energized the Los Angeles Red Line.

Musing momentarily on Huntington's wealth and influence, we ignore this turn-off and continue on the old road to a barbed-wire



fence



Jenny at Remington (author's family album)

and sign announcing "No Admittance." Glancing down we see sections of Huntington's old flume. No stopping here. Two miles



Simeon at Remington 1998, Robert Parks©

further along is Miracle Hot Springs.





Miracle Hot Springs



Miracle is 42-miles from Bakersfield. The statistic is clear, but the name demands further clarification. Over the last 120 years it's been known by four names: Compressor Hot Springs, Clear Creek Hot Springs, and in 1901, Hobo Hot Springs. In 1947, Hobo became Miracle Hot Springs.

The hotel, built in 1927, burned to the gorund in 1975. In 1979 Mike

Brilhante, a Hollywood sound engineer, leased the cabins and grocery store from the US Forest Service. He installed campsites and RV hookups, brought in trailers, and fashioned concrete soaking tubs, which were money-makers at \$2.50 an hour.¹¹ Miracle also became a clothing-optional spring,¹² but by 1986 the property was not paying for itself, even more so in winter, and Brilhante had ongoing loans and operating fees to a half-dozen agencies. Facing expenses of \$3,000 a month he gave up the lease.¹³

Charges that the water was unclean were unfounded, said Brilhante. The Kern County Health department checked the pump monthly, and it always passed. He recalled, "*After I left, the Forest Service didn't want anybody else in there, and they bulldozed everything, but they couldn't break my concrete tubs. They got a Reserve Marine demolition group up there, and they blew them up.*"¹⁴

Evidence of man's impact on Miracle is mostly gone, but you can sample the 119 degree water if you enter via Hobo Campground, which is 200-yards up-river. Be midful that the Forest Service doesn't allow changes at Miracle. Pack out whatever you bring in.

¹¹ Author's 2010 telephone conversation with Brilhante.

¹² Public nude bathing is allowed in California if inoffensive to the public.

¹³ Telephone conversation with this author.

¹⁴ Ibid.



Looking up the road toward Easy Street

Bodfish and Lake Isabella is eight miles ahead. Along the way we start to notice homes, the first since Haggard's place. We're glad to have completed the old canyon road that my uncle and his family drove every weekend before they permanently moved up here from Bakersfield. The road now opens up into Hot Springs Valley, which in 1953 lost about half its size when Lake Isabella was filled.

It's a straight shot north from Bodfish to Lake Isabella,¹⁵ but it's been a long time since I saw Easy Street where my grandfather Ezio Gia and my uncle Paul and aunt Marie used to live. Nono moved to Bodfish in the early 1960s and set up a trailer on the hill. He told me that the winters and summers and mountains here were like the old country, like Collegnago in Tuscany in 1912. A couple of years back I

¹⁵ The site of the former settlement of Isabella is submerged under Lake Isabella.

saw old country myself, and I understood what he meant.



About two minutes up Bodfish road Nono put up his own street sign, which I thought was a very hopeful name. I think he also told me that Easy Street was easier for people to say than Ezio Street.

We drive up the dirt road and I am surprised to see that my uncle's house is no longer here. A few yards farther is a lone chimney surrounded by grass that pokes through ashes. I already knew that Nono's trailer had burned. He set it on fire when he saw men in black hats looking at him through the windows. Today, almost everything I knew on Easy Street is gone except for the colossal view.



View north from Easy Street toward Isabella Dam

Leaving all that behind we arrive at a large shopping center at new Isabella and eat lunch at Don Pericos, an inexpensive, well-lighted restaurant with clean restrooms, friendly service and good Mexican food. For a time we forget that nearby Isabella Dam is holding back more water than a person can understand. Submerged behind the dam is old Isabella and about four miles farther north is old Kernville, which is also under water. In recent memory, trees from under the lake poked their naked branches into the air.

A few hundred yards south-east of the restaurant was Scovern Hot Springs, established in 1897. It passed through several ownerships and by WWII had fallen into disuse. The buildings were unoccupied in 1971 when it burned to the ground. Only the old-timers around here can point out where Scovern once stood.



Old Kernville, about 1948 is now under Lake Isabella.

The Road to Havilah



After tacos we drive back to Bodfish, navigate the steep grade to Havilah, and are treated to spectacular views behind us of Bodfish,

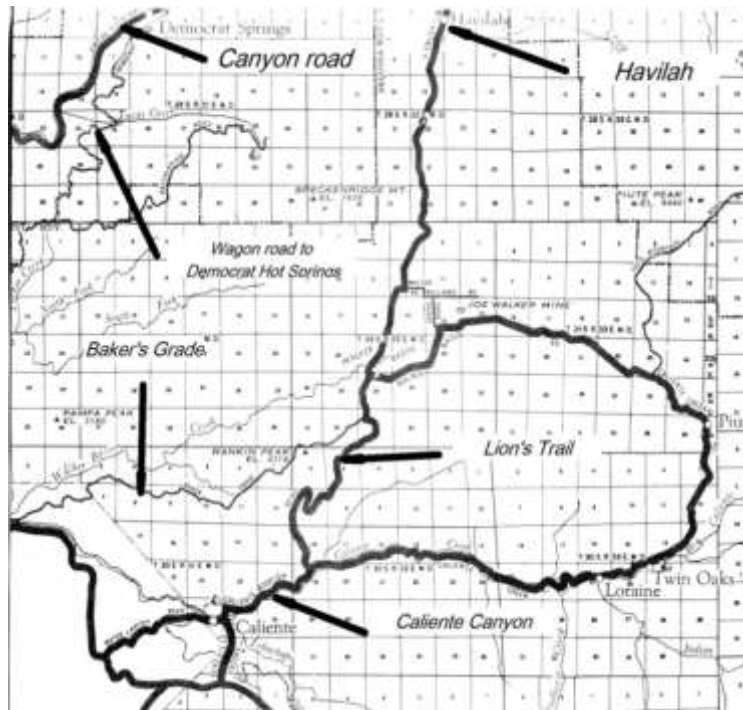
Lake Isabella and the dam. Before 1923. Bodfish-Havilah-Walker's Basin road was a preferred route to Bakersfield, but now it's serene. We descend through changes in color -- scrub brush, gray granite, tan rock, ocher earth. We watch for Havilah. It's a blink on the road. Col. Thomas Baker sold farm produce at this once busy town, and the trade was so important that he build a road from Caliente wash at today's Bena to Walker's Basin. Completed in 1867, Turnpike Road was declared an excellent route, and it kept that distinction through the early 1900s.¹⁶ Havilah was the county seat from 1866 to 1874 when it lost that distinction to Bakersfield. Havilah commerce slowed, although in 1877 the Stretch Mine cleasred \$30,000 a week by today's standards, and even by 1897 Havilah was important to the mining communities. That year gold miner Frank Potts drove his wagon down to the Caliente train station to meet his future wife, Hattie Hellifaich, who was a Brooklyn mail-order bride who was glad to be there.¹⁷

Havilah's brewery, saloons, hotels, and blacksmith shops are all gone today leaving two quiet farm houses and a shuttered museum that was once a school house. We stop to relax in the shade, commune

¹⁶ *Havilah Weekly Courier*, May 16, 1868, p 3, c 1. *Visalia Delta*, May 18, 1891. See also, *Inside Historic Kern* [Kern County Historical Society, 1982] pg 71-72, citing "Baker's Grade," *Historic Kern*, Quarterly of the Kern Co Historical Society, Sep 1958.

¹⁷ *Los Angeles Times*, Nov 25, 1897, p 3

with the birds, and the buzzing flies, and listen to the deep quiet. We wonder if Mr. and Mrs. Potts' children went to school here, played in Clear Creek behind the school, and chased the ancestors of these blue jays.



We return to the car but soon slow down for a nursing calf and mother indifferently occupying the white line. Under a nearby tree three of her sisters consider us with sleepy eyes and then return to their grass.

The road ascends easily to Piute Springs where a cluster of red and yellow flags and a real estate shack announce a housing development behind the low hill. Now the road descends to Walker's

Basin, an eight or nine-mile bowl that's about as long as it is wide. White settlers arrived here after 1845, and during the Civil War, Union soldiers passed back and forth between Fort Tejon and Fort Independence near today's Bishop.

Piute Mountain School is close but is invisible from the road. The half-dozen teaching staff serve 120 pupils who come in from the 250-square-mile Piute School District. In 1984 the firm of Biggar, Frapwell, Ghezzi and Cartnal built the school into a hillside and designed it with a solar array and periscope ventilation system that captures the earth's constant 58-degree temperature.

The road divides. The sign on the right reads *To Bakersfield-Caliente*. Heavy-footed drivers who take the Lions Trail arrive at Caliente in under 30 minutes, but that road has a 7.5% grade and an elevation change of 3,400-feet. For recreational drivers who have time it's a scenic route.

Today the weather is nice and we have time, but we decide on the longer, flatter route to Caliente by way of Twin Oaks and Loraine. We pass bucolic ranches and skirt around abruptly-rising hills and tranquil mountains. The peaceful setting was probably not as quiet between 1860 and 1940 when gold, tungsten, and uranium mines were worked here.

The next sign says Cowboy Memorial and Library.¹⁸ Last year the founder Paul de Fonville told us he owned "perhaps the largest collection of branding irons in the world." He didn't show us all of them that day, but we did see a dozen old saddles and what seemed like thousands of photos, several dozen spurs, numerous hackamores, harnesses, holsters, and ropes, a naughty-Nellie boot jack, and a pizzle whip.¹⁹ If you visit here allow at least two hours.



Amalie Mine near Twin Oaks, flickr.com/photos/matthigh/2766412893

A Foothill High School bus from Bakersfield passes us, but aside from the yellow bus we see only two other vehicles until we reach Twin Oaks General Store, which in the 1880s was a school house. Last year when we stopped there its inside decor reflected the building's heritage, and smoking in school was encouraged.

¹⁸ <http://www.cowboymemorial.org/>

¹⁹ Whip made from a bull's penis



Farther on is Loraine, earlier called Paris. In the 1870s its blacksmith shop, saloon, and hotel did business with gold miners who worked the Zenda, Bright Star, and Barbarossa miners. But Loraine is no more. In the 1930s, miner owners had to to sell gold to Uncle Sam, and the government's price per ounce wasn't enough to hire help and pay for electricity.²⁰

The road follows along Caliente Creek into Caliente Canyon. Its steep, rocky walls and changing views make this a Kern Canyon in miniature. We see piles of tailings from past mining. Nearby the oak, ash, hackberry, and wild fig trees grow from the cliffs, and there tucked away in a side wash is an abandoned house made of river cobbles and a bit father a shack with its foundation missing from flash flooding.

By now Piute Springs is 40 minutes behind us and just ahead the

²⁰ Eugene Burmeister, *The Golden Years*, Arvin Tiller, Arvin, Calif, 1959, p 24

canyon opens up to Caliente. In 1951 a three-room school was built on a hill, but at last count the school had four students. Other activity at Caliente: Rankin Ranch at Walker's Basin picks up its mail here.



Caliente Hotel 1918-1950

Caliente was first called Allen Camp after stock raiser Gabriel Allen, and in the 1860s it was a focus on supply wagons, gold shipments and cattle drives.²¹ When the Southern Pacific set up here in 1874, Allen Camp became Caliente, and from here some 500 whites and 3,000 Chinese dug 18 tunnels and laid 20 miles of track up the mountain to Tehachapi.²² The railroad payroll was \$2,000,000 a

21 A Caliente-Walker's Basin toll road was constructed in 1875. The company bankrupt when the SP stopped investing in Caliente. (*Courier-Californian*, Feb 14, 1878)

22 For many this was their last job. During construction of the school, workmen found evidence of a Chinese cemetery. Mike Engle, "1875, Caliente's Big Year," *Desert Magazine* (Palm Desert, CA), Dec 1969, p 10-2). Burmeister wrote, "...[M]ore than 300 Chinese laborers ... were buried on the mesa to the east of town until their bodies were shipped to China some years later." (*The Golden Years*)

month by today's reckoning, and during rail-building Caliente was a menagerie of tents, saloons, hotels, gambling dens, and brothels. In 1909 the town was obliterated by the explosion of 1-1/2 tons of blasting powder stored at the train depot. Caliente Hotel and P.J. O'Meara's general store were obliterated, and moments later the town caught fire.²³

Trains on this segment of the line had very different operational needs. Steam engines preparing to ascend the grade took on water at Caliente and at several other stops to the summit. Trains at Tehachapi cooled their wheels before starting the descent to the San Joaquin Valley. In 1952 an earthquake collapsed several tunnels and closed this part of the line for nearly a month. Today, Caliente gets about two trains an hour.

We cross the tracks and head up hill to Freeway 58, but at Bealville an train blocks the road. The historical marker here doesn't mention that Bealville was the northerly tip of Gen. Edward Fitzgerald Beale's Tejon Ranch or that he ceded several thousand acres to the Southern Pacific so they could build the tracks to Tehachapi.

Beale gave a lot, but when the line was finished he could ship steers

²³ *Morning Echo* [Bakersfield], Jun 16, 1909, p 1, c1-2. The Edison Co had been storing the explosives for work on a new power station north of Kernville.

to meat-packing houses in the east, and in 1876, the same year the rail line opened between Bakersfield and Los Angeles, President US Grant appointed Beale ambassador to Austria-Hungary. General Beale displayed ability for the assignment, but he didn't stay. He liked ranching better.

The train is still stopped. We start the car and tail behind a pickup truck that's left the queue and is bumping along next to the tracks on an access road. It passes over a railroad tunnel and loops back to the road on the other side. Minutes later we are at Freeway 58, merging quickly, and return to the world of 80 miles per hour.

< o >