



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

Union Avenue Plunge

1916-93

Bakersfield's Swimming Destination

By Gilbert Gia

Copyright © Gilbert Gia, Bakersfield, California, 2010
This paper is free to educators for classroom use.
Commercial users contact ggiaggia@gmail.com

In May 1916, Union Avenue Plunge opened as the largest outdoor concrete swimming pool in the West.¹ The story of how it started begins with John E. Roberts² who came to California in 1895 to work for the

1 *Bakersfield Californian*, Jul 17, 1916. Bakersfield's first commercial plunge was the Crystal Baths built on Nineteenth St in 1910.

2 born 1871 in Ripley, Indiana

Southern Pacific. In 1903 he was a locomotive engineer, and in 1912 Roberts bought 40 acres in the Kern County Dales south of Brundage Lane.

Within a year Roberts contracted with San Joaquin Light & Power for electrical service. He installed groundwater pumps for alfalfa,³ but farming was not the only reason Roberts bought here. In 1912 surveying parties were setting stakes for the new Los Angeles-Bakersfield road, and that road became Union Avenue near Bakersfield.⁴ In 1915 it opened for traffic.

In March 1916 Roberts was putting the finishing touches on a 100 by 281-ft concrete reservoir within yards of State Highway 99. Below-grade, the swimming tank sloped from four to 12-ft⁵ and was filled with a 10-HP motor pulling from a 145-ft-well.⁶

3 Wallace M. Morgan, *History of Kern Co*, (1914). Kern Co Hall of Records, 0037-0369, Oct 2, 1912. T30S, R28 E, Sec 6, Lots 33, 34 and Agreements recorded Mar 24, 1913 and Aug 18, 1915

4 *Morning Echo*, Aug 9, 1912, 1: 5

5 Mechanical Engineer Don Suverkrop calculated that Roberts' pool held about 1.7M gal..

6 The pool's dimensions surpassed those of the Sutro Baths of San Francisco.

When the tank was full, water continued to flow into it while at the other end it flowed out to irrigate Roberts' alfalfa field. Earthen berms made the pool's water level four feet above grade, although there are no images to proof that. The tank might have had concrete decks or surrounding, wood planking. Both are likely.

Already in place in March were electric lights, two high dives, several springboards, and a spectator platform. Swimming suits were on order, the business office was ready, and 95 dressing rooms were nearly completed. Around the plunge were hundreds of newly-planted trees and a park on the east and south sides. *The Californian* predicted that the new plunge would become one of the more popular recreational destinations of the county.⁷ That happened.

⁷ Ibid.

Its grand opening was noon Sunday, May 14, 1916 and was punctuated by swimming races with prizes totaling \$1.50.⁸ Concessionaire M. Deabill dispensed ices, ice cream, soft drinks, and tobacco, and he probably sold everything ⁹ because at 11 pm when Roberts closed the plunge, nearly 1,000 people had stopped by, and between four and five hundred had tried the swimming tank. On Monday, Roberts closed the tank for cleaning.¹⁰

From 1916 to summer 1922, Union Avenue Plunge hosted a patchwork of attractions. The first was Dorothy Hart, a swimmer from Sydney, Australia, who five months earlier had had been a member of a down-under swim club. Miss Hart, now a Bakersfield secretary, was regular at Roberts' pool in the late afternoons. In July 1916, 200 visitors showed up to watch her swim.¹¹

8 Rowen Hall, an athlete and civic-minded business man employed at the National Bank of Bakersfield, collected applications for the races: "Res 1915 18th St, Telephone 1716" (*Bakersfield Californian*, May 9, 1916).

9 *Morning Echo*, May 11, 1916

10 *Bakersfield Californian*, May 15, 1916

11 *Bakersfield Californian*, Jul 13, 1916

From early morning until 10 pm the pool was elbow-to-elbow swimmers, and the nearest parking spaces were far down the road. The *Californian* said the pool was "...the mecca this season for those who are seeking relief from the hot weather,"¹² but getting cool was not the only reason to come. Swimming parties enjoyed the pool, and instructor Rowen Hall obtained "splendid results from his swimming class of ten small boys."¹³ Several thousand swimmers used the plunge without injury and the *Californian* wrote, "The management has taken every precaution to prevent accidents."¹⁴

That winter Roberts enlarged the bath house to accommodate 300 and installed an immense fountain at the upper end of the pool. Band concerts and aquatic sports were features of the 1917 swimming season.¹⁵ Opening day had races for men, boys,

12 *Bakersfield Californian*, Jul 17, 1916

13 Ibid.

14 Ibid.

15 *Bakersfield Californian*, May 12, 1917

ladies, and girls, and there was diving and "fancy swimming."

The Bakersfield Band played.¹⁶



Bakersfield Californian, July 2, 1917¹⁷



Bakersfield Californian, July 11, 1918

¹⁶ *Morning Echo*, May 13, 1917

¹⁷ Unless otherwise indicated, all images following are from the Bakersfield Californian.

In summer 1922 Roberts hired C.U. Butterfield, physical education instructor with City Schools, to supervise and manage the plunge. Butterfield expanded the events calendar to include competitive diving and water polo, and he added water carnivals.¹⁸

In mid-July 1922 a fire broke out in the refreshment stand, caught the dressing rooms on fire, and in spite of all efforts burned steadily and fiercely through the noontime hour. No fire fighting equipment was on hand so all that could be done was try to keep the blaze away from a huge haystack adjacent to a pool building. Fortunately, winds from the south wafted the heat over the vast plunge. Roberts' nearby farm house was spared, but not Roberts. When the fire spread to the office, Roberts rushed in to retrieve a supply of change and was painfully burned. Roberts was "in the clutches of a racking cough" as N.C. House rushed him to Dr. G.C. Sabichi in Bakersfield."¹⁹

¹⁸ *Bakersfield Californian*, Jun 5, 21, 1922

¹⁹ *Bakersfield Californian*, Jul 18, 1922

Guard rails on the south side had melted from the intense heat and had been twisted by falling timbers. Roberts' wood building was ashes.²⁰ The pool was closed for the rest of the season.

The newspaper account was dramatic but misleading. The pool itself was unscathed. On July 26, 1922, just a week after the fire, Bakersfield Masons hosted a watermelon feed and swim at Union Avenue Plunge.²¹

In winter 1923 Roberts said he planned to rebuild and add a water-heating system,²² but exactly when that happened is unclear. In summer 1924, lifesaving demonstrations were held, but the buildings were probably not rebuilt until 1925.²³

20 Ibid.

21 BC. Jul 27, 1922

22 *Bakersfield Californian*, Feb 15, 1923

23 *Bakersfield Californian*, Jul 20, 1925. Roberts was issued a county building permit for the Union Avenue swimming pool. He added a dance hall.



1926-1934. Building, right, was the first dance hall.

The plunge attracted swimmers from as far away as Delano. Ralph Forquera attended Delano High School from 1921 to 1925, and during his Junior and Senior year he and his cousin Buddy Estrada and George Aimes rode their bicycles to Union Avenue Plunge. Leaving Delano at 6 am they arrived at the plunge about 9 or 10, swam all day and enjoyed the ten-foot spring board. They peddled back to Delano and were home by 6.²⁴

²⁴ This author's 1967-1990 interviews with Ralph Forquera

In the 1920s the news about Union Avenue Plunge was mostly social: swimming parties, wiener roasts, and watermelon feeds. But in late 1926, big-money investors became interested in the area. That December, Gulf Oil Company drilled a wildcat well west of the pool.²⁵

Roberts was paid oil royalties, but the money was not enough for him to give up his pool business. In summer 1929 the Ninth Annual Miss Bakersfield Pageant was held at the Nile Theatre, and on Sunday afternoon in July, semi-finalists were at Roberts' dance hall for the bathing suit event."²⁶ Beauty enthusiasts, 2,000 of them, shouldered-in to see golden-haired, blue-eyed Jeanette Patterson crowned Miss Bakersfield 1929.²⁷

On the Fourth of July 1931 nearly as many visitors watched in disbelief as Capt. Bob Reaves, the human torch, climbed the plunge's 65-foot tower and paused to consider the inferno of

²⁵ *Bakersfield Californian*, Dec 18, 1926

²⁶ *Bakersfield Californian*, Jun 28, 1929. The *Californian* termed it "pageant of pulchritude."

²⁷ *Bakersfield Californian*, Jul 2, 1929

burning gasoline on the water below. Reaves drenched himself in gasoline, struck a match, and burst into flames. He dove. Anxious moments later Reaves emerged and swam through the lake of flames.²⁸

Reaves repeated that feat on the night of July 9th when Bakersfield Pyramid No. 11, Ancient Egyptian Order of Sciots²⁹ had a watermelon party at the plunge. Capt. Reaves' dives didn't seem to have hurt him because John Roberts hired him the rest of the season to give free swimming lessons.³⁰

Union Avenue Plunge is credited for bringing competitive swimming to Bakersfield. In summer 1932 Bakersfield Swimming Club started swimming and diving meets at Union Avenue Plunge. Swimmers and sponsors were Tom Eddy for Leidy's Market, Miss Irene Heberle for Malcolm Brock's

28 Bakersfield Californian, Jul 6, 1931

29 The Order of Sciots was a Masonic social group with the slogan Boost One Another: "Our neighbor's assistance and cooperation in your business affairs; The strong grip of a friend to help you over the rough places in life; A kind word spoken in your behalf or your defense; A watchful care over your brethren in their journey through life; And a full measure of innocent amusement."

30 *Bakersfield Californian*, Jul 6, 1931

Department Store, Billie O'Brien for Harry Coffee Store, Miss Peggy Fyfe for Abe Reigler [sic],³¹ James Moon for Penney's Department Store, Loren Martin for Nile Theater, Harry Lemucchi for Lemucchi Grocery, and Leonard Shrot for Kern County Bottling Works.³²

Joe Brooks, a long-time Bakersfield resident,³³ remembered the Union Avenue Plunge of 1932:

"The fellow who had it was Roberts. There were men's and ladies' dressing rooms, and you got a key. When Dad and I swam there, they had slots.³⁴ I think there was an artisan well at the east end. It was like ice water.³⁵ Cotton fields were across the street. Rev. Patrick of the Episcopal Church was our neighbor. He took the neighbors' kids swimming at Union."³⁶

31 Abe Riegler owned a high-grade clothing store at 1316 19th St. He died in 1933.

32 *Bakersfield Californian*, Jun 6, 1932

33 Joe Brooks, 1922-2010

34 Slot machines for gambling

35 Brooks probably referred to the fountain that Roberts installed in the pool.

36 Nov 4, 2003, interview with the author

In the mid-Thirties public swimming pools brought thoughts of polio, and many families by-passed plunges and swam in canals and the Kern River instead. In June, 1934 the State and Kern County sanitation departments tested the water at Union Avenue Plunge and declared it "healthful." To assuage public fears, Roberts posted the official report that a "constant stream of fresh, deep well-water" ran in and out of the pool.³⁷



³⁷ *Bakersfield Californian*, Jun 15, 1934. In summer 1935, the city closed its public swimming pools owing to incidents of poliomyelitis and directed the city engineer to upgrade city plunges for recirculation and chemical treatment of pool water. (*Bakersfield Californian*, Jul 9, 1935)



Union Avenue Plunge Diving images, 1938. Courtesy Don Suverkrop

In the above photos, are advertising billboards, Roberts' fountain platform, and perimeter coping that separated the pool from a splash trough.

By 1935 John E. Roberts was in his mid-sixties, probably well-off financially, and tired of working. Early that year he leased the plunge to sports promoters Buck Buchanan and Lloyd E.

Nance,³⁸ and he retired to San Clemente, California.³⁹ The newspaper interviewed Buchanan and found out that he and Nance planned to improve the big pool and facilities that summer and bring in entertainment and dancing.



Bakersfield Californian, March 26, 1935

Local architect Charles H. Biggar was brought in to design an enclosed, year-around dance pavilion. The plunge was still an important part of the business, and the new management

38 *Bakersfield Californian*, Mar 26, 1935. In 1927 oil exploration started near the plunge. Initial shows of oil and gas were found, there was some production, but that was followed by a blowout and collapse. A successful well was brought in in 1941. (Bill Rintoul "Kern Oilfields," *Bakersfield Californian*, Apr 28, 1974. p 31)

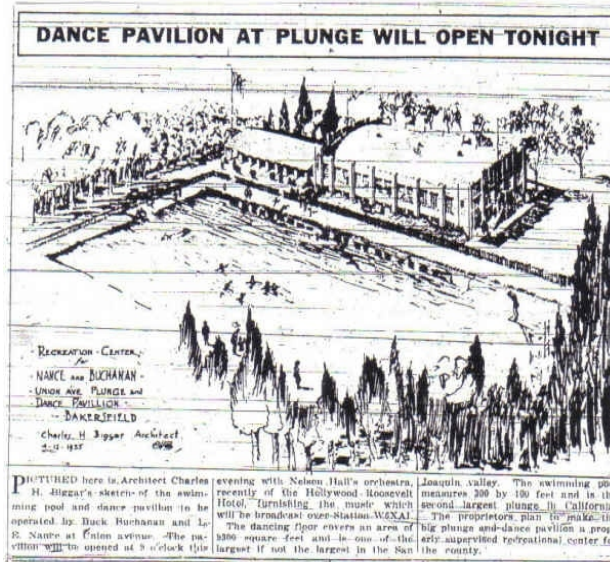
39 Buchanan was a Taft building contractor who promoted boxing, wrestling, and other sporting events. Lloyd Nance was a businessman and director of the Stockdale Golf and County Club.

assured the public " ... Clean water will be run into the plunge without cessation, and all health precautions prescribed under law will be met with careful compliance."⁴⁰



Bakersfield Californian, May 17, 1935

40 *Bakersfield Californian*, Apr 13, 1935



**Bakersfield Californian, May 18, 1935.
Smaller building by flag was the original dance hall.**

At 9 pm on May 18, 1935 "Kern county's greatest pleasure resort, formerly the Union Avenue Plunge" opened to the music of Nelson Hall's Broadcasting Orchestra direct from the Hollywood Roosevelt Hotel. Stay-at-homes tuned in on local station W6XAI.⁴¹ The *Californian* said Buchanan's 9,300 square-foot dance floor was the largest in the San Joaquin Valley,⁴²

41 Pioneer Mercantile Co owned W6XAI that began broadcasting in Bakersfield in 1934. It later assumed the call letters KPMC. The company also owned television station W6XAH that operated in 1932 and 1933. (www.kcmuseum.org)

42 Actual words: "...The largest, if not the largest"

and the paper repeated the well-known fact that the 100 by 300-ft plunge was the second largest swimming pool in California.⁴³

Exactly which partner made the decisions was probably a sore point, and that was suggested by Carlyle Nelson who worked at the pavilion in the Thirties: "I played at the Union Avenue dance floor. I recall when they first opened it one of the musicians worked there for fun and got into problems with the union. The place was operated by a golf pro [Nance], and he wasn't doing very well. He had a band up from LA for a short run. It was big and appealing, but didn't do too well."⁴⁴

⁴³ *Bakersfield Californian*, May 18, 1935. The largest plunge was Fleishacker Pool, opened in May, 1925, at San Francisco. It was a salt-water pool, not a fresh-water one as was Roberts' plunge.

⁴⁴ This author's Oct 2003 interview with Carlyle Nelson (1910- 2006). Carlyle Nelson, *Somewhat The Way It Was* (self published, 1987), Los Angeles Public Library; Beale Memorial Library, Bakersfield, CA

SWIM
UNION AVENUE PLUNGE

The finest water in the state—8-inch stream of 100% pure well water running in and out continuously. The water is tested every day.

ADULTS, 25c CHILDREN, 15c

FREE SWIMMING CLASSES
 Adults, Thursday, 10 to 11 a. m. Children, Tuesday, 10 to 11 a. m.
Private Instruction by Appointment. Phone 1961

Big Free Water Carnival Tomorrow Night at 8 o'Clock
 Instructive Exhibition of Red Cross Life Saving Method by Mr. Newmeyer, Local Red Cross Examiner.

DON'T MISS IT!

Watch for Announcement of Bathing Beauty Contest!
 One and One-Half Miles South on Golden State Highway
"BUCK" BUCHANAN and LLOYD NANCE, Proprietors

Bakersfield Californian, June 17, 1935

Events after that were successful and suggest that promotions were firmly in the hands of the experienced showman, Buck Buchanan. In August 1935, he booked a toad-racing contest.

The Californian wrote,

"100 HORNED TOADS WILL BE ON 'TRACK' FOR BIG DERBY: New flat-track records for all distances up to 10 yards are expected Thursday night when the Veterans of Foreign Wars stage their big Horned Toad Derby at Union Avenue Plunge. The record set by Pronged-Horn Joe at

Imperial Valley in 1934 [is] considered safe, although a witness alleged it was set on a hot-rock track.”⁴⁵

As contrived as horned-toad racing was, Buchanan's aquatic shows were legitimate sport, and the public knew that. In December 1935 *Californian* writer Jim Day started his column by congratulating Buchanan for the histrionic wrestling promotions at his Bakersfield Arena but ended by sincerely thanking Buchanan and Nance for reviving amateur swimming in Kern County.⁴⁶

Buchanan's Los Angeles musicians and ballroom dancers wore out the \$8,000 dance floor.⁴⁷ In 1936 the *Californian* wrote, “The new floor, which has been laid over the one used last year, is now being waxed and polished.”⁴⁸ A few weeks later Les Hite and his orchestra arrived from the Cotton Club in Los

⁴⁵ *Bakersfield Californian*, Aug 5, 1935

⁴⁶ *Bakersfield Californian*, Dec 21, 1935

⁴⁷ *Bakersfield Californian*, Sep 10, 1936

⁴⁸ *Bakersfield Californian*, Apr 15, 1936. The new floor was “exceptionally fine hardwood.” (Sep 10, 1936)

Angeles,⁴⁹ and after that show, many other well-known bands came to town to play at the pavilion. ⁵⁰

In September, Bill Fleck and his orchestra closed-out the swimming season,⁵¹ but the new pavilion then under construction meant dance season was all year. Just before Thanksgiving, Eddie Barefield and his "15 Colored Kings of Swing" were expected to play the pavilion. Buchanan planned for record attendance and boosted Barefield's group as "one of the finest colored bands ever on the road in California."⁵²

In March, 1937, 54 year-old Lewis Rogers "Buck" Buchanan died of pneumonia at a Bakersfield hospital. He had begun his public career as a sports promoter at Taft where he operated the B&B Poolroom, Blaisdell Opera House, and Buck Buchanan's

49 *Bakersfield Californian*, Apr 15, 1936

50 *Bakersfield Californian*, Sep 10, 1936

51 *Bakersfield Californian*, Sep 10, 1936

52 *Bakersfield Californian*, Nov 14, 1936. In the 1920s Emanuel Eddie Barefield (1909 -1991) played and arranged for band leaders Lester Young and Art Tatum. By the 1930s he had studied clarinet at the Chicago Conservatory, won fame as saxophone soloist with Cab Calloway, and played for Fletcher Henderson and Duke Ellington -*continued next page-* (www.blackiowa.org/exhibits/moments/barefield.html)

Pavilion that was a dance hall hosting roller-skating, prize fighting, and wrestling. In 1930 Buchanan moved his family to Bakersfield, acquired an interest in the Bakersfield Arena at 19th and V streets, and became Bakersfield's leading impresario of boxing, wrestling, and sport spectacles.⁵³

The day after his death, Jim Day wrote,

“The fight racket as we know it today is not exactly an elevating profession. There are good men in it, but there are also crooks, gyp specialists, tinhorn gamblers, fixers, divers and the just plain scum. Among such men, good, bad, and indifferent, Buck Buchanan stood out as a square shooter – that's what the boys in a game called him. Buck stood by his word, and he gave the boys a break, often taking it on the chin himself to do so. He was good to his friends and pretty tolerant with a few that try to use him

⁵³ *Bakersfield Californian*, Mar 15, 16, 1937. Buchanan probably became a partner in the Bakersfield Arena with the manager, Jimmy Murray. Murray organized and promoted public sporting events from the late-Teens through the early Thirties.

ill. He always had something more substantial than a smile for the underdog."⁵⁴

In 1939 Buchanan Amusement Company, Inc. sold its assets to Roberts, including the bar, mirrors, and other improvements and gave back to Roberts the lease of March 14, 1935.⁵⁵ A day after that transfer Roberts wrote the *Californian*, "I have taken over property known as Union Avenue Plunge and Dance Pavilion. On and after this date I will not be responsible for bills contracted by anyone other than myself. (signed) J.E. Roberts." Roberts then put up the plunge for lease or sale.



Bakersfield Californian, October 25, 1939

54 *Bakersfield Californian*, Mar 16, 1937. Soon after that, Mrs. Buchanan hired Steve Strelch to manage the Bakersfield Arena.

55 Kern Co Hall of Records, Deed 0900-0248, Oct 23, 1939

Under the new manager the plunge was open only for special events.⁵⁶ In summer 1941 Roberts tried to sell the plunge to either the City of Bakersfield or to the County of Kern,⁵⁷ but Mayor Alfred Siemon and County Supervisor Charles W. Wimmer decided that the public swimming pools were adequate for the community and for the thousands of military personnel in training around Bakersfield.⁵⁸ In July, Charles Webster (whose father was John Roberts' agent) disagreed and said he would open the plunge to the general public.⁵⁹

Four months later the United States was at war. In summer 1942 tire shortages and gas rationing kept Bakersfield families closer to home, and to meet the war emergency, Bakersfield's recreation commission expanded its neighborhood parks program. Pools at Beale, Jefferson, and Central got additional

56 Ned Charlton. *Bakersfield Californian*, Jul 23, 1940. In July 1940 swimming instructor Ted Combs supervised a Red Cross benefit there. (*Bakersfield Californian*, Jul 9, 23, 1940)

57 *Bakersfield Californian*, Jun 14, 1941

58 *Bakersfield Californian*, Jun 23, 1941. Several months later, Charles B. Webster again offered the county a lease on the plunge. (*Bakersfield Californian*, Apr 16, 1942)

59 *Bakersfield Californian*, Jul 10, 1941

funding, and in June the city hired lifeguards: JB Haralson,⁶⁰ Melvin Cyr, Jack Frost, Don Shoup, Don Robesky, Dick Tiegner,⁶¹ Henry Uthenwoldt, Herbert Bayless, Pete Fagen, and Frank Stanton.⁶²

In summer 1943 many of the lifeguards had gone into military service, and the manpower shortage caused a change in hiring.⁶³ Bakersfield High and Junior College women's PE instructors Miss Frances Williams and Miss Margo Crane were hired as city lifeguards.⁶⁴

60 James B. "Cap" Haralson (1901-67) was the first athlete at UCLA to earn varsity letters in football, basketball, baseball, and track & field. For 20 years he was athletic director for Kern County Union High School/Bakersfield High School, where he led the Drillers to two California State Championships. Haralson served Bakersfield for 42 years as teacher, coach, and administrator, both at BHS and in the larger community.

61 Probably a misspelling of Tigner. Richard O. Tigner was a commerce instructor at Bakersfield High School. He was in the Army Air Force in 1944.

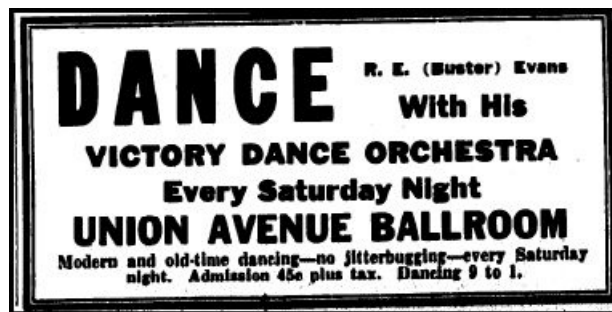
62 *Bakersfield Californian*, Jun 6, 1942

63 During WWII Bakersfield was short of workers, and the shortage did not relent until late 1945. Robert W. Evans of the local War Manpower Commission.....
.....reported in August that the number of available jobs in Kern County had declined from a week's high of 2,500 to 2,000. (*Bakersfield Californian*, Aug 24, 1945)

64 *Bakersfield Californian*, Apr 29, 1943. Jeff Wiltse in his *Contested Waters: A Social History of Swimming Pools in America* (U of N. Carolina Press, Chapel Hill, 2007) describes shifts in social relationships in the East influenced by the

In 1943, Jim Day wrote (in his column Pipefuls),

“Restriction of car usage this summer will probably make a minor revolution in sports ... Sandlot baseball will probably get a great impetus – I mean the kind played in the neighborhood or near the neighborhood. Tennis courts and swimming pools will get increased use, and there will be something of a rediscovery of the home ... I saw a mailman on Terrace Way this week delivering his mail from a bike ... He was doing a good job of it and appeared efficient and speedy.”⁶⁵



Bakersfield Californian, March 27, 1943

public's use of swimming pools.

⁶⁵ *Bakersfield Californian*, Apr 4, 1943. The ellipses points are part of the column.

Bakersfield drivers lacked gas, and plunges couldn't find qualified lifeguards. The Union Avenue Plunge closed,⁶⁶ but popularity of the pavilion grew stronger. In early 1943 managers Otto H. Shilling and R.E. "Buster" Evans applied for a beer license,⁶⁷ which might have improved business. On Saturday, January 11, 1943, about 400 patrons glided and bumped in the first of a series of weekly dances at Union Avenue Pavilion. That night the six-piece Victory Dance Orchestra played until 1:00 am.⁶⁸

In spring 1944 Roberts again offered the plunge and acreage for sale:

"Union avenue acreage; 47 acres facing 99 Highway, fine land, close in, will make excellent subdivision. Present income from rentals and oil royalties pays good interest on purchase price. This property known as 'Union Avenue

66 *Bakersfield Californian*, Jul 9, 1945. In this issue the caption under a picture of the plunge said it had not been used for several years.

67 *Bakersfield Californian*, Jan 6, 1943

68 *Bakersfield Californian*, Jan 12, 1943

***Plunge' and 'Dance Hall.' Charles B. Webster, 1511
Eighteenth street.*"⁶⁹**

**A year went by before Roberts found a buyer. In July 1945
"Pan Gan and Pan Song"⁷⁰ of Bakersfield bought Roberts' land
and entertainment center for \$65,000. Lily Pon Vink recalled,**

**"During WWII when my uncle was in the Army, our father
bought the pool and the land using my uncle's name, and
in late 1947 my dad got ownership of property from him. I
remember a piano at the ballroom, an old baby grand from
an outdoor band."⁷¹**

**On a Saturday night in July 1945, just weeks after the Pons
bought the facility from John Roberts, 700 dancers had
crowded-in at the pavilion. An hour after closing time a fire
swept through the building. Over the next several hours the**

⁶⁹ *Bakersfield Californian*, Apr 10, 1944

⁷⁰ *Bakersfield Californian*, Jun 28, 1945. The newspaper spelled the buyers' names "Pan Gan and Pan Song." The sale of the land, Sec 6, T30S, R28E, was recorded at the KC Hall of Records as Deed 1264-0186, Jun 28, 1945 and excluded certain mineral rights.

⁷¹ Dec 9, 2004 telephone conversation with the author

radio dispatcher at Central Fire Station received dozens of calls about a big fire, some drivers having seen the red glow from as far away as the Grapevine. Working together, Bakersfield's four fire stations had extinguished the flames by 7 am, but lost were the ballroom, plunge, adjoining buildings, pump house, nearby storage sheds, and a garden belonging to Harold Wong.⁷²

Construction materials were unavailable during the war, but after V-J Day conditions had improved, and in March 1947 "Mr. Pn-Can" of 717 Baker Street was issued a permit to construct a swimming pool and bathhouse at Belle Terrace and Highway 99 to replace the structures destroyed by the fire of 1945. The newspaper reported the swimming pool would cost \$11,000 and approval of the project "was based on strong civic support."⁷³

⁷² *Bakersfield Californian*, Jul 9, 1945. The paper wrote, "Pon Gan is owner of the ballroom building, which was operated by R.T. Evans."

⁷³ *Bakersfield Californian*, Mar 28, 1947. The equivalent cost in 2010 dollars is \$90,000. This amount indicates that the construction was a refurbishing of the burned structure instead of the construction of an entirely new one.

Lily Pon Vink recalled:

"Mrs. Smith loaned my dad money to reconstruct the pool. We finished it to the top of the dressing rooms where the office was. The dance floor was all concrete, and the plan was to cover it."⁷⁴



Bakersfield Californian, July 24, 1947

74 Included in the expansion was a drive-in cafe. (*Bakersfield Californian*, Jul 24, 1947)

“We had moonlight swims and band music.”⁷⁵ Unlike Hart Park, our new pool had a sand filter. It was between the office and snack bar, and it held a lot of sand. There was also a chlorinating system. We drained the pool twice a month from a bottom drain that ran under Belle Terrace to a nearby canal. After my brothers and I grew up and left home, my dad managed the pool and laundry by himself.”⁷⁶

The plunge was in use into the early 1970s. Craig Cribbs recalled working there.

“I was on the South High swim team, and in June 1970 near the end of my senior year, my friend Jim Hughes called and asked if I wanted to work as a lifeguard at Union Avenue Plunge. Turns out the Pons had trouble keeping lifeguards because guys would work there for a

75 Bunkey Valdez was there: “After the war I played at the Union Plunge dance floor. Some of the big bands played there, like Harry James and Isham Jones [1894-1956]. I played with the Al Kern Band. Al played the vibes. We were bringing in big crowds.” (Jun 3, 2003 telephone conversation with the author)

76 The family owned Silver Lake Laundry at 407 Baker St.

couple of seasons and then move on. When I worked there, the lifeguards were all from my school. Sometimes just two or three of us were on duty, but other times five or six of us were around the pool. I made \$1.50 or \$2.50 an hour. It was a great job.”⁷⁷

“After customers paid their tickets they went either left or right to the men's or women's lockers and restrooms. The building was concrete and new-looking. The locker area was spacious, too, because above it was the old dance floor. After customers suited up, they had to walk through a foot bath that was so big nobody could avoid it. After that, they climbed the stairs to the pool.”⁷⁸

“The concrete deck was maybe 12 feet wide, and around it there was a chain link fence. Seems to me that the deck must have been a good six or seven feet above the street. A big water slide was on the shallow end, and a 20-foot

⁷⁷ This author's Aug 2010 interview with Craig Cribbs

⁷⁸ Ibid.

diving tower on the other. The Pons had a 10-foot spring board and some one-meter boards. Our lifeguard towers were on the sides, and there was one in the middle of the pool.”⁷⁹

“That plunge was always crowded. I rescued two people, but besides that I never had any serious problems. There was a rule that if somebody went up the tower they had to jump off – no climbing back down. A couple of times we had people slip off when they were trying to climb down, so we did have to help the ones who freaked-out on top the tower. Another thing, that tower was right next to the 3-meter board, and that was important to us lifeguards because there was always somebody who'd try to jump off the tower and hit the springboard. We had to throw out a couple of people for doing that.”⁸⁰

79 Ibid.

80 Ibid.

“Southeast of the pool, right up next to it, was the dance floor. I couldn't see in it when I lifeguarded because it was blocked off. One time we snuck up an old dilapidated wooden stairs in the ticket area. That dance floor was roofed and huge. Pretty dusty, though, and abandoned-looking.”⁸¹

“I remember Lily Pon and her brother Ed. They worked at the plunge for their father, and Lily also ran the snack bar and gave us our pay checks at the end of the week. She was the most beautiful woman and very nice to us. At the end of the season the Pons let us have an after-hours party at the plunge at no charge, and they let us invite as many friends as we wanted. I think all of South High showed up. We had a blast.”⁸²

By the early-1970s the area's water table had dropped. Lily Pon Vink recalled,

81 Ibid.

82 Ibid.

“Then my father had to make it deeper, and for that we needed more capital, but there was just not enough for that and the construction and the remodeling. This pool was also a lot of time and effort for my dad. We shut it down and sold off the land over by the existing housing.”

83

The plunge also suffered from social changes; air conditioning, television, and back-yard swimming pools reduced ticket sales. An oil well near the plunge, called Pon #1, had been producing 100 barrels a day since September 1968. In March 1974 the lessee, L.W. Babcock, was servicing it, and when he pulled a stringer, the well blew. Gas caught fire, and the well burned for 19 hours. When Babcock went back in to drill, he captured a gas flow producing 1.5M cu-ft a day.⁸⁴ The Pons drained the pool and left the plunge business.

83 Last mention of swimming at Union Avenue Plunge was a Jul 10, 1974 ad seeking Red Cross certified life guards.

84 *Bakersfield Californian*, Sep 25, 1974

What good is an abandoned swimming pool? About 1975 Ken Lindsay of Huntington Beach saw it as a moneymaker, and in 1977 he opened Skateboard World that occupied 6-1/2-acres and cost him \$2M.⁸⁵ The skateboard park had a gunite track, snack bar, pinball arcade, discotheque, and a retail outlet for equipment and accessories.⁸⁶



Bakersfield Californian, September 16, 1977

⁸⁵ *Bakersfield Californian*, Sep 4, 1977.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.* Lindsay's skate park was the second in the area. Roy O'Bar opened the first one on Sep 10, 1974 at 3401 Wilson Rd.

Lily Pon Vink: "We rented it to a business for skateboards, roller hockey, and miniature car racing until the early 1990s when we had it demolished as a liability."

Recalling the final years of Union Avenue Plunge, Ray Pruitt said, "Somebody filled in part of the pool and shaped it for skate ramps. That lasted a couple of years, then the place was vacant. In 1993 or 1994 I was with the Bakersfield Police Department and patrolled out there. Drugs were common along Union, and my partner and I used the plunge's old out-buildings to observe the drug dealing. Sometimes we had to roust-out transients who had gotten into the shacks. But you asked me about the plunge. By that time the owners had completely filled it in. Not even the skate ramps were left." ⁸⁷

< 0 >

87 Author's Jun 12, 2003 interview with Ray Pruitt, Public Information Officer for the KC Sheriff's Office