



Gilbert Gia's Historic Bakersfield and Kern County  
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By Gilbert Gia  
Academic version 4  
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In 1944 the Boy Scouts sold their 160-acre reservation east of Bakersfield. The story of how the Scouts acquired it and why they sold it starts with the Boys' Brigade in England and ends in the middle of an empty basketball court by the Kern River.

In 1912 when Scouting first came to Kern County,<sup>1</sup> it was much like the English Boys' Brigade. In 1902 when Lt-General Robert Baden-Powell (rhymes with *Maiden-Powell*) returned to England from the Second Boer War he might have been surprised when he discovered that the Boys' Brigade had adopted his army survival and stalking handbook. Baden-Powell's interest was turned to scouting, and in 1907 he founded his own group called Boy Scouts.

As Europe armed for war, the Boys' Brigade added a martial component to its goals of patriotism, religious education, and "Christian manliness." As for Baden-Powell, he rewrote his survival handbook, retitled it *Scouting for Boys*, colored its pages with the patriotic sentiments of the Boys' Brigade, but left out religious training.

The Baden-Powell uniform was a mix of village policeman and colonial soldier, and rankings followed those of the British army. By 1910 Baden-Powell's Scout program had become so successful it attracted the attention of King Edward VII. Edward's command was that Baden-Powell promote Boy Scouting to the world.

While in New York, Baden-Powell met Chicago publisher William D. Boyce who'd learned about Baden-Powell Boy Scouts from his friends in the British YMCA.<sup>2</sup> A month later Boyce incorporated an all-new group

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<sup>1</sup> *Bakersfield Californian*, Apr 3, 1912. On Apr 4, 1912 the *Morning Echo* wrote, "At Maricopa, Rev. Thomas E. Watt has been instrumental in holding together a company of the young scouts and much good has resulted there from." This suggests that the first Boy Scout troop in Kern County was organized at Maricopa.

<sup>2</sup> Young Men's Christian Association

called *Boy Scouts of America* (BSA), but it was not unique to America that already had many varieties of scouting programs.

William Boyce went to YMCA director Edgar M. Robinson to learn YMCA's successful organizational methods. The result was that the two groups joined forces, and the outcome rocketed BSA to national prominence. Two years later almost all scouting groups in America had merged with Boy Scouts of America.<sup>3</sup>

About 1908 Captain Alvin E. Morgan of Company G, California National Guard, Bakersfield, organized Cadet Company A, a National Guard auxiliary for boys. The *Morning Echo* wrote, "Night after night he drilled the youngsters until he had a company of juvenile guardsman of which he would be justly proud."<sup>4</sup> Cadet Company A set the stage for the arrival of Boy Scouting to Kern County.



In April 1912 Capt. Morgan and 50 boys met at Armory Hall<sup>5</sup> and formed Bakersfield's first BSA troop.<sup>6</sup> In May, Lee Scott of the Oil Well Supply Company and Rev. Morgan of the Methodist Episcopal Church formed a Taft BSA troop. Their first Scoutmasters were W.C. Dorris and Taftian Scotty Houston who'd been in scouting in England. The *Daily Midway Driller* explained that the purpose of the new group was to teach

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<sup>3</sup> One notable exception was the *American Boy Scouts* sponsored by publisher William Randolph Hearst. But in 1912 Boy Scouts of America had 300,000 members nation-wide. (*Bakersfield Californian*, May 2, 1912)

<sup>4</sup> *Morning Echo*, Feb 21, 1913

<sup>5</sup> 20th and H Streets

<sup>6</sup> *Bakersfield Californian*, Apr 6, 1912; *Morning Echo*, Apr 13, 1912. Company A continued to meet in Armory Hall; see also *Bakersfield Californian*, Apr 13, 1912.

Westside youth to be helpful, strong, self-reliant, and resourceful, and help them learn about outdoor life. The *Driller* emphasized that Boy Scouts of America was not a military group, however it added, "Although the boys learn military virtues of patriotism and loyalty, they learn by their drills the value of united action." That said, the *Driller* continued, "A scout is skilled in first aid to the injured ... He can tie a knot that will hold, climb trees, swim, distinguish poisonous plants, and handle a boat. A scout never uses alcoholic liquors and avoids tobacco. He never swears. Leaders of the movement believe that with such training American boys will, as men, be leaders in progress, peace and all things right and good." <sup>7</sup> And Scouts served their communities. Charles Dumble recalled that his troop delivered messages during Bakersfield's floods, and in 1922 they cut brush at the new Kern River Park east of town.<sup>8</sup>

San Diego Historical Society



<sup>7</sup> Daily Midway Driller, May 19, 1913

<sup>8</sup> Charles Dumble 2002 interview with the author.

As Europe prepared for war, America remained neutral, and American parents favored a non-military BSA. But martial vestiges of the Boys' Brigade were still there. In 1914 BSA eliminated military drill, and by 1919-1920 a scout in uniform could longer be mistaken for a soldier.

In March 1914 Roland E. Dye formed Bakersfield Troop 1.<sup>9</sup> The boys met at Armory Hall, but in a few years Scouting became so popular that finding meeting space was a challenge. In fall 1919 Dye's troop met at First Baptist Church,<sup>10</sup> and in the early 1920s when Troop 7 was formed, it met at Chesbro Methodist Church in East Bakersfield. By then 12 Bakersfield grammar schools were sponsoring active troops, and Bakersfield and East Bakersfield had almost the same number of Boy Scouts.<sup>11</sup> In 1922, 13-year-old Dumble's troop met variously at Franklin School, Knights of Pythias Hall, the Episcopal Church Hall at 17th and Eye, and Scoutmaster Harold Owens' garage at 17th and L.<sup>12</sup>

Sponsorships provided meeting places, but sponsorship was sometimes a two-way street. In the late-1920s, Ed Richardson operated a gas station on Baker Street and was also Scoutmaster of Troop 5. Their sponsor was the East Bakersfield Methodist Church. When the congregation sold its building and bought a lot on Beale Avenue for a new church, Richardson's scouts dug the new basement by hand.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Bakersfield Californian, Mar 8, 1934. Bakersfield Troop 1 founded March 16, 1914 under request of Women's Relief Corp and Leslie Robinson.

<sup>10</sup> Bakersfield Californian, Oct 1, 1919, p 5

<sup>11</sup> Charles Dumble 2002 interview with the author. Dumble was County Surveyor in 1950

<sup>12</sup> Interview with the author, Oct 11, 2003

<sup>13</sup> Interview with the author, Mar 2002



Retired welder Kenneth Kramer was in scouting in 1926: "When I was 12 or 13, I was in Troop 1. We used go down to the park to meet, and later we met in the basement of the Eagles Hall across from Bill McNamara's station downtown. The Boy Scouts had a camp out beyond Niles Street, and to get there we had to go to the end of Niles and then drive down an old road. They had swimming there."<sup>14</sup> Kramer might have been referring to today's Hart Park area because in a December 5, 1927 story, the *Bakersfield Californian* wrote that Boy Scouts petitioned the Kern County Board of Supervisors for permission to build a cabin on an island in Kern River Park.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Interview with the author

<sup>15</sup> That year predated the creation of the park's lake as it is know today. Kramer might have been remembering an island in the park's hillside reservoir that was dug in 1927-1928.

The memories of men in their 80s and 90s show that Boy Scouting in Bakersfield's was racially segregated. The *Californian* wrote in 1936, "A unit of colored boys, Troop 47, is being backed by the Joy Makers Club."<sup>16</sup> Ken Kramer recalled that Scoutmaster Don Hart started a Japanese troop, and Judge Delbert Wong said that in the 1920s he joined a Chinese-American troop.<sup>17</sup> In Delano in 1924, 12-year-old Ralph Forquera attended his first Boy Scout meeting at the First Methodist Church. Forquera's parents were Chilean-Mexican. He recalled, "I was pretty dark-skinned when I was little. I was Catholic, and Masons sponsored the troop. I could tell by the way the kids acted that they didn't want me around. I told my Dad, and he said, 'To hell with them.' Then he told them all off. I joined a troop on the westside, and there wasn't any prejudice there."<sup>18</sup>

Many recalled a developed scout camp on south side of the Kern River below the bluffs near town. In January 1920 Scout Executive Director Roland E. Dye honored Henry A. Jastro, Chairman of the Kern County Board of Supervisors, for his recent help in establishing the week-end scout camp near the foot of China Grade.<sup>19</sup> From 1920s to the 1950s, BSA enjoyed generous individual philanthropy and municipal and corporate support. In November 1929, long-time Kern County resident and investor Celsus Brower bequeathed \$1,000 to the Scout Council, which is today about \$10,000.

Charles Dumble said that in 1922 the scouts at China Grade Camp slept in a screened shelter. In the years after its dedication, the camp was steadily improved; in 1925 it acquired a concrete pump house. In 1927 Standard Oil mechanic Harold Owens was the scoutmaster of Gus Balasis' troop. Balasis recalled that each troop had a designated area, but before long, even with careful planning, the China Grade camp became too small. "One summer," said Balasis, "all the troops from the whole County Council met there. We slept out on the ground."<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Apr 29, 1936

<sup>17</sup> *Chinese to Kern County*

<sup>18</sup> Interview with the author, 1986

<sup>19</sup> *Bakersfield Californian*, Jan 10, 1920, p 4

<sup>20</sup> Interview with the author 2005



Boy Scouts, Troop 37, Downtown Bakersfield, CA, 1927.  
(photo: Southern Sierra Council)

Bunkey Valdez joined Boy Scouts about 1931. He, too, remembered the camp west of Gordon's Ferry Bridge. Said Valdez, "There was an old fellow we called Uncle Bill who had a cabin not too far east of the bridge. He was very receptive to us kids and let us fish around his place."<sup>21</sup>

In 1933 Kern County's population was 84,000, and 1,000 boys were in BSA. Some members of J. Bruce Payne's executive board, Kern Scout Council, drove to Bakersfield for meetings from as far away as Randsburg.<sup>22</sup>

By the 1930s, businessmen who once had been Boy Scouts themselves were now in the new wave of benefactors. In 1934 and 1935 contributions from philanthropists and labor from the transients' camp at Kern County fairgrounds made possible large banquets at China Grade Camp.<sup>23</sup> Officiating at the grand opening on March 8, 1935 were Louis L. McDonald, National Director of BSA; Kern Country Supervisor Roy

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<sup>21</sup> Interview with the author 2005. Uncle Bill might have lived there for some time because in 1935, 81-year-old Frank C. Tibbitts wrote that a man named William Jackson Smith once had a cabin below China Grade on the Kern River and that he welcomed visitors. (*Keene Courier*)

<sup>22</sup> In 1930 Attorney T.N. Harvey was re-elected president of Kern County Boy Scout Council. It had jurisdiction over all of Kern and portions of San Bernardino and Los Angeles counties. Also unanimously reelected were J.J. Wilt, S.E. Dillon, Ben Slater, and Ernest E. Wagner (all of Bakersfield); Harry Hopkins of Taft, and W.S. Allen of Delano. (*Los Angeles Times*, Jan 18, 1930)

<sup>23</sup> *Bakersfield Californian*, Feb 19, 1935, pg: 7; Feb 21, 1935, pg 11.

Wollomes; and Bakersfield Police Chief Robert Powers. In addition to a new clubhouse, the Council had built a 60-foot dining room, a conference room, and a large storage room. The buildings were big enough to seat 100 boys at a time. The old swimming pool outside was clean, and hundreds of new shrubs and young trees had been planted around the new buildings. The camp had an on-site caretaker. <sup>24</sup>

A fire in late 1935 at the Camp foretold BSA's acquisition of an enormous property further up the river. The inventory of items lost indicates the Camp's growth: a piano, tables, chairs, kitchenware, beds, and a dozen tents. <sup>25</sup> A few days after the fire the *Californian* wrote, "In the meanwhile, the Kern River Country Club's house will be used for important Scout events through the courtesy of the Kern River Country Club officers."<sup>26</sup> After that, purchase of the new reservation moved along quickly.

In 1935 Boy Scouts of America had 1,000,000 members nationally, and Kern County had 1,100 Scouts.<sup>27</sup> When Kern Council hosted a western regional state jamboree for Senior Scouts in December, the event was held at the spacious Kern River County Club. Also in December, J.B. Payne and board members Walter Buass, E.A. Murdock, and Lawrence Weill met with Kern River Holdings, Inc. and discussed buying the Kern River County Club. In early February 1936, Kern Council announced a fund-drive. So much money came in from private and corporate donors that by May BSA owned the property.<sup>28</sup>

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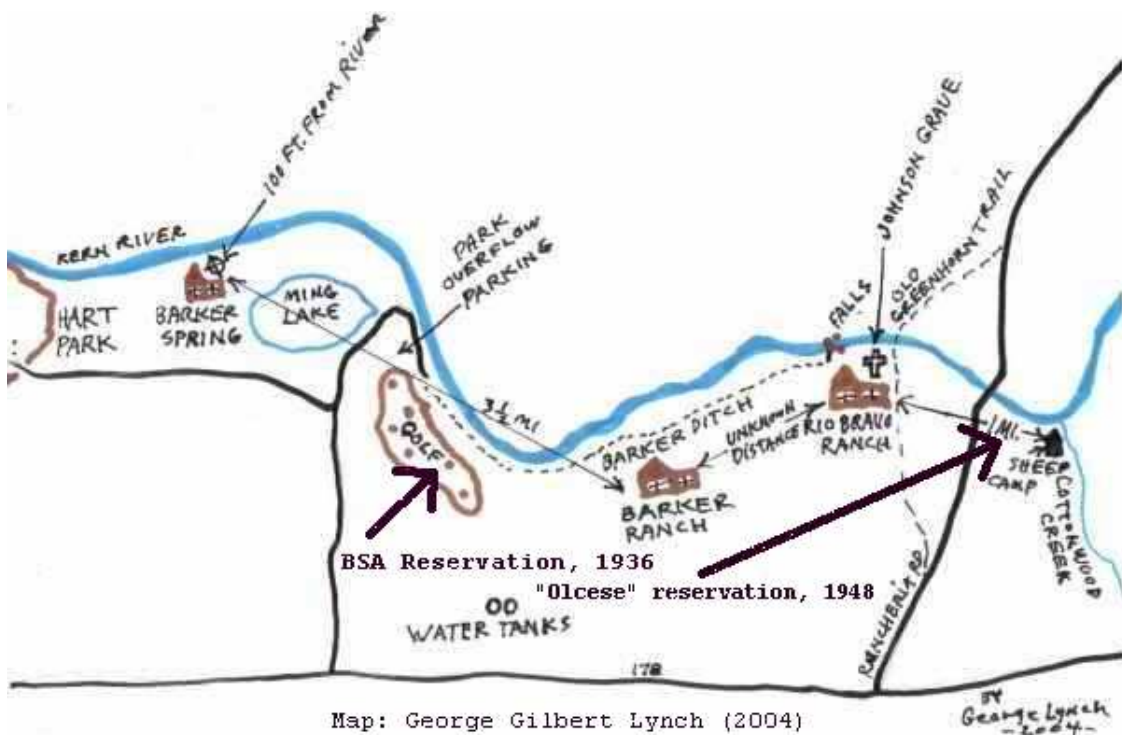
<sup>24</sup> *Bakersfield Californian*, March 8, 1935, pg 15; March 11, 1935, pg 9

<sup>25</sup> *Bakersfield California*, Nov 1, 1935

<sup>26</sup> *Bakersfield Californian*, Jan 31, 1936, pg: 9; Feb 7, 1936, pg: 9

<sup>27</sup> *Bakersfield Californian*, Oct 2, 1935, pg 7

<sup>28</sup> Kern County Hall of Records, May 8, 1936, Deed 0596-0311. "Kern River Holdings, C.F. Harper, Pres., Jas. S. Goodwin, Sec."



Map: George Gilbert Lynch (2004)  
 (Arrows above: BSA Reservation and Olcese "reservation")

A couple of days before the transfer, A.C. Dimon speaking for Kern River Holdings presented BSA the deed to the 168-acres, 25 of them wooded, a nine-hole golf course, several outbuildings, and a commodious lodge with hardwood floors and impressive fireplace. The lodge also had a kitchen, library, hospital room, game room, dormitory, and rooms for a caretaker. The sale price was not public, but, according to the *Californian*, "approximately twenty-five businessmen and organizations of Kern County and Trona" made the deal possible.<sup>29</sup> Two weeks after the sale, Standard Oil held its annual family barbecue at the new reservation.<sup>30</sup>

<sup>29</sup> *Bakersfield Californian*, May 14, 1936, pg: 13; Author's interview with Hugh Sill: "We gave away the property."

<sup>30</sup> Charles Dumble recalled that after the Council abandoned the old China Grade Camp it became a sand and dredging operation. But other developed recreational areas were further east on Kern River. Until around 1940 Associated Oil maintained a nine-hole golf course and picnic grounds seven-tenths of a mile east of Gordon's Ferry on Round Mountain Road. Near Historic Marker No. 290, which commemorates the discovery of oil in 1899, the road swings south, and then northeast before heading downhill. Associated Oil's picnic grounds were there at the bottom of the hill next to the river. A second recreational area was Shell Park that was further east on Round Mountain Road. From the

On Sunday, May 31, 1936, the new reservation was dedicated. Featured speaker was ex-President of the United States Herbert Hoover, who had started his day at an early luncheon with 365 guests at the luxurious Hotel El Tejon. A.C. Dimon, manager of the Bank of America and vice-president of Bakersfield Scout Council, thanked all who made acquisition of the camp possible, and he recognized the three men who'd spearheaded the transaction, W.F. Buass, E.A. Murdock, and Lawrence Weill (below).



Lawrence Weill (photo: Dennis Foster)

Afterward, the Presidential motorcade made its way east on Nile Street to Kern Canyon Highway. Before reaching the canyon, the cars turned north and down hill to the river, where 3,000 spectators were waiting on the grassy slopes by the lodge.

As the Stars and Stripes whipped in the breeze, *Californian* publisher Alfred Harrell introduced President Hoover and his son Allan, who was a member of the Bakersfield BSA Executive Counsel. President Hoover extolled the great gift made possible by Bakersfield's business community and acknowledged Kern County's long history of community service, which the 62-year-old said was "stimulating to the very ideals of American lives." The words were high-minded, but they did not pay

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county park, Shell Park was northeast across the river from the old Hart Park water wheel. Trees there concealed the private Park from the opposite bank.

the bills: Kern Council had already leased the golf course to Ned Chariton, and he opened it to the public on the day of the event.

During the Great Depression the reservation never paid its way. By 1940 the golf course had fallen into disuse and was a financial burden to the Council. The Scouts leased it to the County for \$150 a month and also included an open-option to buy the entire grounds. The county brought in Mariano "Babe" Lazane who spruced up the course and managed it for the next 12 months.<sup>31</sup> In August 1944 the county exercised its buy option and acquired the Boy Scout reservation.

Proceeds from the sale allowed the Southern Sierra Council to buy a council office. Del Yantis, council executive for 12 years, recalled that in 1964 when he first started with the council, its President was Dutch Schmeider, and Richard Hacke was an executive. They told Yantis that about 1952 the council bought a surplus Government building and moved it onto a lot that the council had bought at 2417 M Street.<sup>32</sup> Today, Southern Sierra Council uses the same building, although it has been much modified.

BSA used another campsite higher up Kern River. Dean VanZant recalled that between 1945 and 1947 there were BSA camp grounds at Rancheria Road by the Kern River. He was then at Bakersfield College in Edwin M. Hemmerling's surveying class. VanZant said that Hemmerling set up frequent field trips for the Engineering Club, and one of those excursions was near Kern Canyon where the road drops down a steep grade. "Our surveying class laid out a grove of trees there as practice grids," said VanZant.<sup>33</sup> Another man who recalled the camp was Retired Deputy Sheriff Dan Ahl: "It was 1947 or 1948. We called it Buzz Beach then. The Scouts used it, but it wasn't an official Boy Scout property, and there weren't any buildings there at all. I remember Indian grinding rocks, but it's all orchards today."<sup>34</sup>

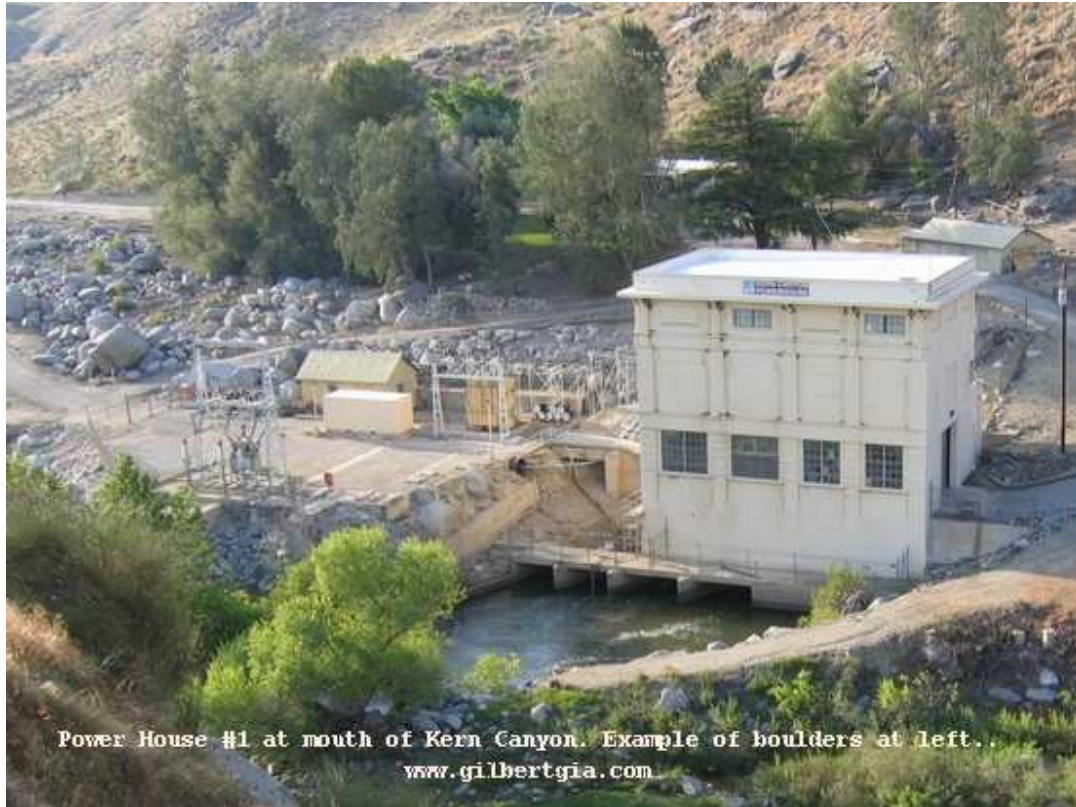
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<sup>31</sup> Lazane served in WWII. In 1952 he was golf pro at Bakersfield County Club.

<sup>32</sup> Interview with the author, 2004

<sup>33</sup> Interview with the author, 2005

<sup>34</sup> Interview with the author, 2003



The presence of orange groves suggest that the area had always been a smooth plain, but Del Yantis remembered several hundred car-size granite boulders that were once spread across the field.<sup>35</sup> Yantis: "We called it the Olcese reservation. In the summer the camp was too hot, and it didn't get comfortable until school started in September. When Merle Haggard's house went in nearby, about 1974, it spelled the beginning-of-the-end for the Olcese camp. Haggard's caretaker was afraid the Scouts would damage the property or bother his fish ponds when we hiked past them to the canyon. We stopped using the camp shortly after that."<sup>36</sup>

After BSA sold the 168-acre reservation, the old lodge became a source of County income. Civil engineer Don Suverkrop remembered 1946 when he rented the building for a veterans club party.<sup>37</sup> About this time

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<sup>35</sup> The monoliths were deposited on the field during the massive flooding of the Kern River on Christmas Day, 1861. The author also recalls the giant boulders. Some were ten feet high. Yantis guessed they were used as fill during construction of the nearby Nickel hydroelectric plant in the 1980s.

<sup>36</sup> Interview with the author, 2003

<sup>37</sup> Interview with the author, 2006.

the County hired Bert Sides and his wife as on-site caretakers. They lived in the attached apartment.

On the afternoon of July 4, 1947 the lodge's electrical system overloaded. Groundsman Herbert Brown noticed smoke and rushed to concession operator Fred Pierce, but Pierce's telephone was out of order. so he drove to the nearest phone. That was at Kern River Park, two miles away, at the house of the Park's superintendent. Within minutes the golf course lodge was blazing. Workers saved the nearby pump and field houses, but the lodge house with its spacious dance floor, billiard room, locker room, kitchen, and attached apartment burned to the ground. A newspaper photo of the ruins shows only a chimney and bathtub standing. Park Superintendent Percy C. Branson estimated the county's losses between \$20,000 and \$25,000.<sup>38</sup> Melted in the intense blaze was a bronze plaque set into the fireplace mantel in 1936 and inscribed with the Scout Oath.

Some of the old lodge is still visible. On the picnic grounds behind Kern River Golf Course is a basketball court with a peculiar shape. If you stand on it you are in the middle of what was once the grand lodge.<sup>39</sup> --gg

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<sup>38</sup> *Bakersfield Californian*, Jul 7, 1947,p 1, col 6

<sup>39</sup> Author's 2006 visit with Don Suverkrop at the picnic grounds