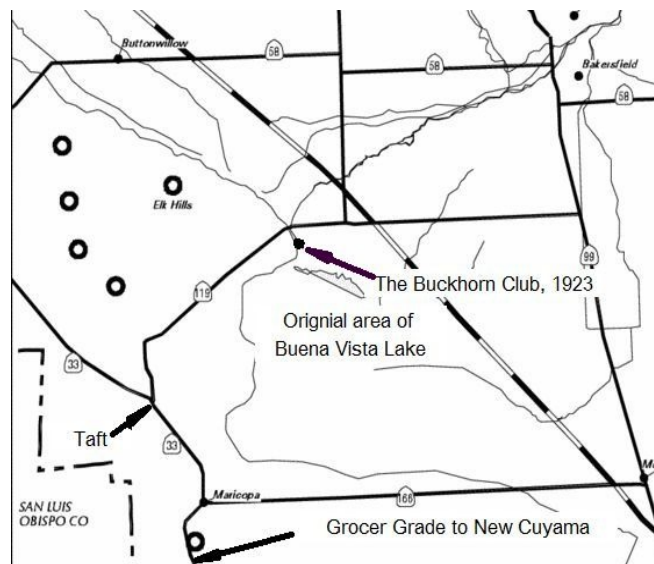




Raid On The Buckhorn Club, 1923

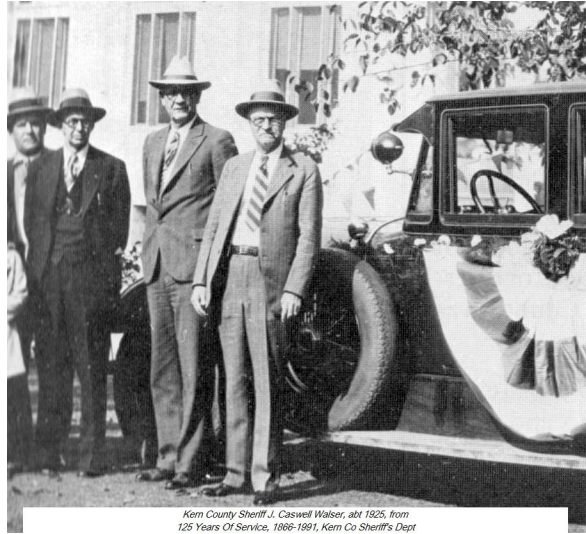
by Gilbert Gia
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Buckhorn bars have been watering places in Kern County for more than 80 years, and there's been several of them. Today the pine-paneled Buckhorn Bar and Restaurant is up Grocer Grade at New Cuyama, but there was also a Buckhorn in the 1950s south of Bakersfield near Union and Chester, and there was another one in the 1930s just north of Maricopa, about where 33 turns going out to Taft. That one had ice-cream-parlor chairs, and walls covered with oil tools and antlers.¹



¹ Author's interview with Charlie McCarty, West Kern Oil Museum, Taft, CA. March 2004, and author's interview with Millie Munding, May 2004.

During Prohibition, Oscar T. Buck ran a Buckhorn Club on Taft Highway between Elk Hills and Buena Vista Lake. Despite the liquor laws, by 1923 Buck was doing excellent business ... excellent even though Sheriff Cas Walsler knew it was a speakeasy.



Kern County Sheriff J. Caswell Walsler, abt 1925, from
125 Years Of Service, 1886-1991, Kern Co Sheriff's Dept
Sheriff Cas Walsler, right

Month after month Walsler had obtained warrants to raid the fashionable Buckhorn, but Buck's patrons, mostly wealthy westsiders and well-healed Bakersfield people, repeatedly tipped him off. ² Walsler and Undersheriff Charlie Smith decided to try a different tack. ³

National liquor laws hadn't helped the sheriff. Judges in Kern County expected Walsler to show liquid evidence in court, which meant that moments into a raid an officer had to snatch several bottles before anybody could smash them. Another challenge to a making a successful arrest on the Buckhorn was the lay of

² At this time the Westside had entered a boom in drilling. *Los Angeles Times*, Jun 17, 1923

³ *Bakersfield Californian*, Jun 30, 1923, p 6, c 1

the land. The club stood all by itself on a treeless, mostly flat plain, which made it easy for Buck's men to spot cars on Taft Highway several minutes before they got to the Buckhorn. Walser couldn't come in behind the club because Buena Vista Lake was there. Then there there was the matter of the club's floodlights, fenced yard, and its pack of dogs.



View of Elk Hills on Taft Highway

For several weeks, undercover officers had been asking around, and each time they came back with a few more important details-- one of which was the automatic trap-door in the floor behind the Buckhorn bar. It was just big enough for a small man to fit through, but that wasn't its purpose. If the club was raided, the barkeep could spring the trap open and sweep the bottles down into the rocky basement 14-feet below.

Detectives also learned that the club had few customers on Fridays at noon when half the watchmen were off duty, and the rest were eating lunch. Would they notice two unmarked sedans pull into the parking lot?

At midday on June 29, 1923, two undercover officers who'd become "regulars" entered the Buckhorn's anteroom and waited as an attendant locked the big door behind them. A peephole slid open in a second door, and the men were buzzed through. They took off their hats, loosened their ties, strolled to the bar, and ordered whiskeys.

Jarvis set up two glasses but as he started to pour, the first deputy grabbed for the bottle and his partner raced to open the outside doors. The barkeep didn't miss a move. In seconds he'd sprung the trap and dumped everything into the basement. By the time officers rushed in, the counter was bare.

The only real evidence was a small glass of whiskey, but the situation improved some after a deputy was lowered through the trapdoor and retrieved a single, unbroken bottle of booze. It might be enough to take Buck and Jarvis to court, but even if the district attorney got a prosecution, just one bottle wouldn't cost the owner much pain. Walser kept looking.

As deputies searched inside, he sent one of his men out back to tie up the dogs. Turning the corner the officer glanced over at the back door and noticed an area of freshly-turned dirt. A little poking revealed a wooden box, and that lead to

the discovery of more boxes. Inside each one were jugs of brandy, a total of 110-gallons of moonshine. After that, quite some time passed before Buckhorn customers tasted any more liquor.⁴

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⁴ Charlie McCardy recalled a Buckhorn on Highway 119. He said it was near Valley Acres and was on the "old road" to today's golf course. That places the building about where the Buckhorn was in 1923. In 2004 the author looked at a vacant restaurant at 28323 Taft Highway, where Hwy 33 makes its turn, but the place didn't seem to have a basement.