



Historic Bakersfield and Kern County, California
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RAILROADING IN KERN COUNTY, 1882

By Gilbert Gia
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When Col. Baker laid out Bakersfield streets in the late 1860s, the settlement patiently awaited a Valley railroad. Citizen's Avenue became Railroad Avenue,¹ a mercantile store was renamed Railroad Store, and a little engine appeared in the masthead of the *Kern County Weekly Courier*. But in fall 1874 hopes for a stop vanished when the Southern Pacific built a train station at Sumner, east of Bakersfield. Shortly after June 1876, Kern County goods also flowed south after completion of the Tehachapi Loop and the 1-1/3-mile Newhall tunnel.

Not well recognized today was one cost of the new prosperity, a cost paid by the blood of railroading families. Bakersfield newspapers noted such deaths, but in 1882 the *Kern Weekly Record* gave particulars about a gruesome, early-morning train accident at Caliente. About 1:30 AM on July 17 as an engine was jockeying boxcars into position, Conductor William A. Menchin held his lantern, and found his way through the darkness to nine, sided boxcars. He signaled his engine to reverse direction, and then turned his attention to a loose coupling between two of the cars.

Events of next few minutes were a tragic confluence of geography, darkness, error, and incompetence. Behind Bill Menchin, a brakeman named J. S. Spencer carelessly released the brakes on two of the cars, and because the track was on an incline, the cars slowly began to roll. Menchin was pinned between couplings and

¹ More than 25 years passed before Railroad Avenue was given another name --Truxtun Avenue.

crushed at groin level.² The crew put him on a fast engine for Sumner, but he died before arrival.

That afternoon a Kern County Coroner's jury brought charges of criminal carelessness against brakeman Spencer and swore out a warrant for his arrest. Menchin's wife and two children mourned him; his friends at Sumner remembered him as a man of excellent character; and his death became another statistic in Southern Pacific's ledger.



First Train At Raymond Ave. Station, Pasadena, Los Angeles and Pasadena Ry. 1887.

Presented by MR. B. M. PRESCOTT, Los Angeles

1887. Doheny Memorial Library, Los Angeles, CA 90089-0189

(representative engine of the time)

Although mention of death and mayhem were common, a story the month before was on the lighter side. An editor of the *San Luis Obispo Tribune* learned that rival Bakersfield newspapers had carried conflicting accounts about a mammoth, locomotive and its maiden-pull up "Tehachipa Mountain." The engine was a 12-wheeler with 20 x 30-in cylinders built by the Cooke Manufacturing Company of Patterson, New Jersey, and designed for hard pulls on the Tehachapi Grade. The *San Luis Obispo Tribune* remarked dryly that the *Daily Californian* said the engine failed its test, while the *Kern County Record* claimed it was a success. Concluded the *Tribune*, "Somebody

² Briefly mentioned in the Jul 18, 1882 *Los Angeles Times*

lies." The *Californian* spun that story to make it appear the *Kern County Record* was incompetent.

On July 15 the *Record* fired back with an interview with Engineer C. Knotts who had driven the locomotive the day of the test. The huge engine designed to do the work of two 10-wheelers had departed Sumner with 14 loaded cars, and at Pampa (Bena today) Knotts took on water. At Caliente at the foot of Tehachapi grade the big engine lost power, and Knotts was astonished by a show of foam and bubbles in the boiler. The crew detached three cars, and the train eventually reached Tehachapi summit.



www3.familyoldphotos.com/photo/california/7739/brooks-family-1902

(early water tower)

The power loss was puzzling, but the test also revealed serious shortcomings in the SP track, and at the time of the interview, crews were strengthening culverts and weak road beds for the next test. Meanwhile, Knotts found out that Chinese field hands at Pampa were known to have used the railroad's water tanks for washing clothes. How that second test turned out wasn't reported, and in the weeks that followed, there were no more foaming boilers.

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