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Our Little SP House In Bakersfield

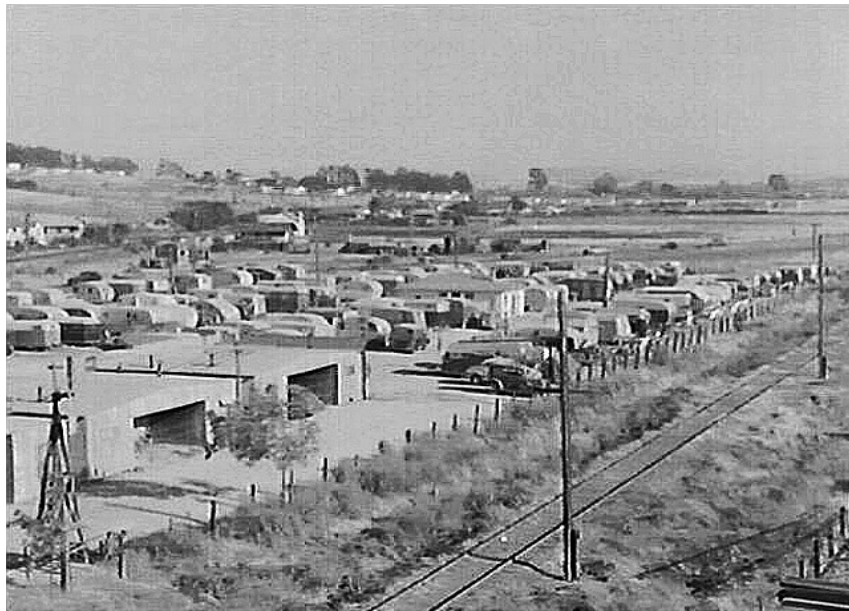
1945-1946

by Frank Kent Rodgers, with Gilbert Gia

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During WWII my father worked for the Consolidated-Vultee Aircraft Company in Fort Worth, Texas, where he helped to build B-24 Liberator Bombers. Knowing that his job would be abolished when the war ended, and evidently being tired of Texas, he put my mother and sister and me into a 1936 Chevrolet and headed westward to see if he might find a job in the shipyards in Oakland, California.

We had some adventures along the way, including seeing dive bombers dropping live bombs into the Mojave Desert and sending clouds of dust and pieces of cacti into the air. This was the occasion for my uttering my first complete sentence, which was "Go down, drop bombs!" My father had an uncle who lived in Bakersfield, so we stopped there. I don't remember it, of course, but my parents told me that on the way out of town, they stopped at a gas station on the traffic circle and got coffee at a little café next door to the gas station. While we were sitting there, the news came over the radio that the Japanese were asking for peace terms.



Richmond, CA, 1944 Oakland Museum of CA, <http://content.cdlib.org>

Representative of emergency housing during WWII

We drove on to Oakland, where my parents spent the night in abject terror barring the door of the motel room against drunken revelers who wanted to come in and party. We left at dawn, and we returned to Bakersfield, where we stopped at the same café as before. We were sitting there when the news came over the radio that the Japanese had surrendered, and the war was over. There was a flurry of horn honking and cheering.

My father shortly found work as a machinist for the Southern Pacific in Bakersfield, and there we stayed. Housing was hard to find, but the Southern Pacific provided rental housing on their property. That is where my family lived for a couple of years after our arrival in Bakersfield. We had the house on Kentucky Street nearest to the railroad tracks, and the sound of trains rolling past was one of my earliest memories. I don't recall that the noise ever bothered any of us or prevented us from sleeping, although my parents may have felt differently.



Author and tricycle, SP rental housing, Bakersfield, abt 1945

The flat-topped, probably prefabricated, rental houses started where Williams Street crossed the tracks and extended down to the ice house by the canal. The houses had grass lawns and flowers, and I never imagined that anyone lived in a nicer place than I did. There were lots of kids to play with, so what did I care?

Things that I remember learning while living there are that bees sting, electric sockets shock, and some people are friendly but others are not. Our next door neighbors were Cherokees

from Oklahoma, Jim and Gladys Goins. They had a son named Bill and a daughter named Ada Bell. Ada's middle name was the surname of her grandmother, who was not a Cherokee but an Anglo who had a very fair complexion, much fairer than my own olive complexion tanned by the Bakersfield sun. Jim was a very kind, hard working man who was loved by his family and liked by everyone.

When he wasn't working as a section hand, he loved to hunt and fish. Happily my father enjoyed the same things, and although Jim was perhaps twenty years older than my dad, they soon began to go fishing almost every weekend and take me along. I was a bouncy, noisy kid, so it says a lot about Jim's patience that he not only tolerated me but taught me to fish and probably taught my father a few things as well. One windy day, we were fishing in the Friant-Kern Canal, and my straw, cowboy hat blew off and into the canal. Jim did an easy cast with his fishing rod and hooked the hat and reeled it in for me. I was amazed and thought that he was a wizard.

Gladys Goins was a round, motherly woman who accepted my boisterous behavior just as graciously as her husband did. She was an excellent cook, and whenever she worked in the kitchen, I followed her about in anticipation of getting something tasty to eat. If she baked a cake, I got to lick the wooden spoon that she used to whip the cake mix in preparation for baking it. Once I stuck my face so close to the bowl that she accidentally splashed the mix into my face. She was apologetic and reached for a towel to clean my face, but I used my fingers to shove the mix into my mouth and swallow it before she could wipe it off. Then I asked her to do it again, which she thought was extremely funny.

We were fortunate to have such a loving family next door, since some of the other residents weren't friendly at. One of them was a huge man who lived across from us and one door down. He had a reputation for drinking and fighting with the other men at the SP. I had been warned to stay away from him, but being between two and three years old, I forgot. I don't remember any of the events that followed my trespass onto his

lawn, but evidently he spanked me very hard, and he and my father had a fist fight.



Rodgers and parents abt 1945

Doubtless this that was why my parents moved away, first to Roseville, a neighborhood in Sacramento, and finally back to Bakersfield, where my father bought land on Hill Street and built the little house that we lived in until my freshman year in high school. Leaving the Southern Pacific rental housing didn't end our friendship with the Goins family, though. After my mother became a licensed vocational nurse in 1952, she insisted that I stay with "Mama Goins" during the evenings when she and my father were at work. Many times I went with Jim after school to hunt rabbits, which Gladys cooked for our

dinner. Sometimes dinner was bread and gravy, which I loved. On Sunday evenings, I attended services with them, even though our families belonged to different churches.

After I went away to college and work in another town, my mother frequently wrote that Mrs. Goins had asked about me. My parents and Jim Goins lie buried not twenty-five feet apart in the Hillcrest Memorial Park Cemetery on Niles Street near Morning Drive. Perhaps Gladys moved back to Oklahoma. I wish I knew.

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