



Gilbert Gia's Historic Bakersfield and Kern County

KCUHS Dorms

(ver 5)

By Gilbert Gia

Copyright © Gilbert Gia, 2004, Bakersfield CA

Charley Harding and Lida and Philo Jewett moved to Oakland in 1879 to attend high school. It wasn't until 1893 that Bakersfield and Kern County had a high school, but even then classes were still out of reach for many who lived distant from Bakersfield. In 1900 William C. Wirth, a Weldon farmer and saloon owner, obtained housing in Bakersfield for his son Henry by buying the Clark lodging house nearby the school.¹

Families with high schoolers sometimes moved to Bakersfield. P.S. Pogson did that in 1901 when he resigned as Tejon Ranch manager so his children could go to school in Bakersfield. Kern County High was the only high school until 1910, but even after that, many students from remote areas had to move to Bakersfield to attend school.

Rose Stockton Logan (Class of 1933) said her parents moved to Bakersfield from the mountains each fall when school started.² Francis Tracy's experience was more than she expected. She wrote, "Our oldest boys, Cecil and Darrel, had entered high school. I moved to town to supervise and help the children."³ That first night my plan went out the window. They came home in a rush, one at a time, all needing to go back for some specific reasons. They were to attend meetings or some other affairs. The result was we all ate in the kitchen standing up."⁴

Homeowners who lived nearby rented spare bedrooms to out-of-town pupils, and teachers also found rooms in private homes. In 1910 Dwight M.

¹ *Daily Californian*, Sep 22, 1900 [Email to the author from Lynn Hay Rudy. (Lynn Hay Rudy. *Old Bakersfield: Sites & Landmarks, 1875-1915*. 2000. Privately printed. Lynn Hay Rudy, 22750 Hwy, I, Jenner CA 95450-9730)

² Interview with the author

³ Mid-1920s

⁴ Tracy, Fannie C. and Glendon J. Rodgers. *The Tracy Saga*. Cardon Press. Merchants Printing and Lithography Co., Bakersfield, CA. 1962

Griffith and Frank B. Gainer lived at Stark's boarding house on California Avenue. When the campus expanded across F Street, the school acquired two existing buildings. One was a two-story frame on the northwest corner of California and G Streets, and the other, just north, was a two-story brick called the Dennon Apartments.⁵ Into the early 1950s the Dennon provided school offices, housing for teachers, and a dormitory for male students. Priscilla Spencer Flickinger (Class of 1926) remembered students living at the Dennon.⁶

Private housing around the school was common through the early 1950s. Catherine Giovannetti's home was near the school in the mid-1940s, and she recalled neighbors who had big Victorian houses and rented rooms to students who "came from all over."⁷ Joe Brooks attended KC in 1927 and lived at home. He said his parents rented a spare room to two high schoolers from out of town.⁸

In 1915, five-hundred pupils attended Kern County High School, and there was a student-housing shortage. The *Bakersfield Californian* made an appeal to the community: "High School Superintendent Chenoweth has an application from a country girl of a hardworking family saying she wishes to secure board and room with some family in return for what help she can be outside of school hours. He also has an offer from an excellent family who will give some young man a home while he attends school if he will do their chores."⁹

Similar arrangements continued over the years. Said Beverly Mergenthaler (Class of 1940), "Many girls couldn't afford to stay in the dorm. In exchange for room and board, I stayed in a private home for a while and worked for the family. I took care of their three kids and got five dollars a month."¹⁰

In 1915, KCHS first experimented with dorm housing when it opened a two-story home as a dormitory at 2504 M Street on the school's new twenty-seven-acre farm.¹¹ Nineteen male students took turns with the housekeeping and

⁵ Present site of the Bakersfield High School student activity center

⁶ Interview with the author

⁷ Interview with the author

⁸ Interview with the author

⁹ Sep 11, 1915, p 1. (Lawrence E. Chenoweth)

¹⁰ Interview with the author

¹¹ *Bakersfield Californian*, Oct 30, 1915

worked three hours a day at the farm.¹² In return they received room and board "and all the privileges of a home."



Ranch Home at School Farm Laboratory where boys live while enrolled in "week-end" courses in practical instruction in farm work.

The high school started bus transportation in 1917. In 1919 Superintendent of Schools Chenoweth noted that some eighty-seven buses were in use. By the mid-1920s the fleet traveled more miles every day than any other school bus system in the country. There were daily round trips to Frazier Park and Lebec, but home-to-school daily, round-trip service was not practical for students living more distant.¹³

From the earliest years of the high school, male and female students from out of town lived with relatives, and some high school males lived in rooming houses. Single, young females could not do that. In 1918 KCUHS opened a dormitory for girls.¹⁴

¹² By 1920 a change in educational goals and a growing Bakersfield population caused the school farm to be relocated to Stine Rd. Today the footprint of the M Street dorm is somewhere on a County parking lot near the northeast corner of 25th and M St.

¹³ In 1919 the most direct route between Bakersfield and Kernville was via Walker Basin and Caliente. The first practical Kern Canyon road for automobile use was not completed until 1925. Daily commutes from Glennville were also impractical.

¹⁴ "School year 1918-1919, first mention of Girls' Dormitory"(J.S. Wallace KCUHS note-card file, Bakersfield High School history archive); Unsupervised, independent living for high school males brought problems. "Us kids of high school age, why, we went in the saloons and anywhere... I used to go in the side door of the Arlington...clustered in the four blocks that cornered on [19th and Chester] there must have been a dozen saloons... Slot machines were everywhere. And they had rooms upstairs that were really, well, houses of

In 1919, dormitory matron Mrs. John Brower invited parents, teachers, and "those interested" to visit and inspect the new high school dormitory at 924 C Street. It was, wrote the newspaper, "an experiment for Bakersfield, but one that is providing a successful method of solving the problem of caring for girls whose parents do not live in the city. The girls who make their home at the dormitory will give a short program with readings and musical numbers, after which the girls of Miss Lida Seimon's domestic class will serve delicious refreshments made by their own hands."¹⁵ Since the street car passes directly by the dormitory, it will enable everyone to attend."¹⁶

"This High School has provided for its girls who are not able to live at home while attending school;" wrote the 1919 KCUHS yearbook. "It furnishes them free of charge a beautiful, handsomely furnished home, a place where any mother would be glad to know her daughter was staying. The school board, realizing the crying need of a suitable place for out-of-town girls to stay, rented the spacious house of Blodgett ¹⁷, already furnished. The Board pays for the rent, the light, the heat and water. The only expense each girl has to pay is her proportion of the grocery bill. All the work is done by the girls themselves, each having a share, so that it is very little trouble for anyone. There are no inflexible, iron-clad rules. The girls have the responsibility of conducting themselves, and they have done it in a way that has made rules unnecessary. Mrs. Brower, teacher at KCUHS is the matron, and also adviser, friend and companion of the girls. One of [the girls] went to Sacramento with Mr. and Mrs. Brower when the bill legalizing high school dormitories came up, to tell Governor Stevens and the legislators what a success our dormitory has been."¹⁸

prostitution -- whorehouses. (*Earl Warren's Bakersfield*, pg 27. Interview with Omar Calvins, born 1889.)

¹⁵ Siemon was then cooking instructor.

¹⁶ *Bakersfield Californian*, Jan 14, 1919. Street car lines did not pass along C street or D (Oleander Dr) then, but by this date the street car company was also operating buses.

¹⁷ In a 2003 email to the author, Lynn Hay Rudy wrote, "I think there was a Louis Blodgett in town. Otherwise, the only ones [Blodgett] were 'ours', spelled with one 't'. Hugh [Blodgett] had been on the city school board from 1899 to 1915, mostly as president. By 1919 he was a widower who had lost his "fortune," had sold his house at 925 Oleander to Geo. Haberfelde, and was getting ready to leave for the Bay Area. The best pieces of furniture were saved, but the house might still have been well enough furnished. It was close to the high school; the Blodgetts had often had young people as boarders, and the upstairs had three bedrooms and a bathroom. Not long after this, the house was moved a block west, to C St., so Haberfelde could build his mansion."

¹⁸ 1919 Oracle

In 1919, the 924 C Street dorm was about one-and-one-half blocks southwest of today's Griffith's Stadium, but it did not operate there for long.¹⁹ The 1922 Polk city directory shows a Lida Siemon "in chg of K.C. High School Dormitory" at 1207 C Street,²⁰ and the 1923 directory shows Lida Siemon "tchr in chg High School Dormitory" at 2200 California Avenue. Bakersfield maps show that the two address were probably the same house. This suggests that at least by 1922 a girls' dormitory was at 2210 California Avenue on the northwest corner of California and C Streets. It was in service until 1955.²¹

In July 1925 Principal H.A. Spindt was accepting student applications for girls' and boys' dormitories. Spindt explained that since the girls rotated weekly "KP" duty, their monthly charge was sixteen dollars per girl, but the boys' cost was higher because their house had a cook and housekeeper. Twelve girls then occupied the girl's dorm, and seventeen boys the boys' dorm. Spindt expected more to apply for the 1925-1926 school year.²²

Charles Dumble (Class of 1924) recalled that the two dorms were adjacent to one another on California Avenue and just west of Griffith Stadium.²³ A page from the 1926 Oracle described a house that had been recently converted to the boys' dorm. According to the story, ten months earlier it was "a run-down house with grease besmeared walls, dust laden and well worn grass rugs upon a splintered and unpainted floor; walls and windows bare, plaster cracked, furniture dilapidated, and a lawn long-since fallen victim to the deadly mats of puncture vines and other weeds. ...Spring cots the worst for wear and punctured, bumpy mattresses to match...scattered hither and yon in the various sand-laden sleeping quarters.

"Floors once dry and bare have been treated to a goodly coat of paint. Neatly laundered curtains are now draped in a pleasing manner where the shrunken, wrinkled hanging of yesterday held sway." ²⁴ The next year President Bill Bouchey, Secretary Jack Reina, and House Sergeant Ray Courtney, among

¹⁹ C Street was not listed in the 1917 Polk city directory. The directories of 1918 and 1919 list C Street but no house numbers in the 900s. The 1920 directory shows Mrs. Florence Goodall at 924 C Street.

²⁰ It is possible that the girls' dorm was established on California Ave in 1921 because the 1921 Polk directory lists the home of Lida Siemon, "tchr. H.S.", at 1207 G Street. The street name could have been an error in the directory listing.

²¹ Today the section of B St that was west of the Stadium is a small parking lot. About 1938, traffic islands in the middle of California Ave were removed.

²² *Bakersfield Californian*, Jul 6, 1925

²³ The 1926 Polk directory lists the boys dorm at 2230 California Ave and the girls' dorm at 2200 California Avenue. The bus barns were nearby.

²⁴ 1926 Oracle.

others, enjoyed the rejuvenated building.²⁵ The reference "ten month have passed" suggests that the first KCUHS boys' dorm opened at 2230 California Ave sometime in Winter 1925.

Dumble remembered dorm students from Walker Basin, Inyokern and Ridgecrest. Other alumni recalled that the dormies arrived on Sundays from Tehachapi, Mojave, Randsburg, Johannesburg, Boron, and Trona. The Kern Canyon route brought in students from Weldon, Kernville, Bodfish, and the PG&E's canyon power station. On Fridays after school, the students went home.



Girls' Dormitory shown at northwest corner of California Avenue and C Streets. Building at lower left corner might have been the former boys' dorm. [Until about 1938, C Street jogged at the girls' dorm. The gas station with flag, in lower right corner, is at the southeast corner of California and C Streets.

²⁵ Leo B. Hart first taught at Bakersfield College in 1925. He was assigned as a monitor at the boys' dorm. (J.S. Wallace, *Recollections of a High School District 1893-1968*, p 99]



Page from 1926 Oracle (KCUHS yearbook)

What was dorm living like? Edith Likely (Class of 1925) wrote, "All through the night, no voice or step disturbed the repose of the inmates of that large frame building known as the girls dormitory ...from the kitchen issues the tantalizing odor of fresh fried waffles and the girls are soon seated around the breakfast table, partaking of a hearty repast." Edith Likely went on to describe the house cleaning and she concluded, "At last when the work is finished we girls amuse ourselves for the rest of the day over the washtub or iron, or in shopping if we happen to have received our monthly allowances that week."²⁶

In 1926 Miss Lida Siemon was head of the school's domestic science department and was director of the girls' dorm. She'd started at KCHS in 1914 and probably with Mrs. Brower was instrumental in the organization of the first dorm.²⁷

²⁶ *Blue and White*, May 22, 1924

²⁷ When Ludden Hall was built in 1923 it contained a five-room, "practice" bungalow inside.

One challenge was to reduce home-sickness. In 1931, teachers Helen Blumer and Joan Morgan supervised "a Halloween party of dancing and cards." Present that evening were Donald Hart, Lido Sandrini, Bob Hewitt, Dan Weitz, Helen Stringham, Dorothy Lovell, and Stanley and Jack Powers.²⁸ Marge Gillette (Class of 1937) recalled that one Halloween night, dorm boys put up a ladder behind the girls' dorm.²⁹ But that was probably wishful thinking because, said Gillette, most girls followed the rules. Except, as Alice Rankin remembered, for the occasional duck out the back door to Dewar's for ice cream.³⁰

It's not clear when KCUHS began providing weekly transportation service for students from the more remote area of Kern County. In the late 1930s Oscar Blackwood who attended Bakersfield Junior College drove a KCUHS bus to Glennville on Saturdays and overnighted with a family there.³¹ Sundays forenoon he transported students down the mountain to KCUHS. Blackwood, and many other drivers, made similar runs between Bakersfield and Kernville.³²

In an interview with the author, Beverly Mergenthaler Blackwood recalled, "We were just fourteen years old in 1938. When we were freshmen we had to pay to stay in the dorms. Mrs. Keester was dorm mother for the boys' dorm, too, and she ran it by herself. She was always a lady. Since we lived at the dorm, we went back there [to the boys' dorm] for lunch where she always had something ready for us. We helped with dishes and cooked. There were strict rules. Two nights a month we could go out, but we had to be back by ten o'clock. We couldn't go to Fox Theater because of this.

"The dorm was just like a home. There were no bedrooms down stairs except for Mrs. Keester's. There was one large bedroom upstairs that five shared, and four other bedrooms that two or more shared. The large one was reserved for the Freshmen. There was a cottage in the yard off the girls' dorm, which was usually reserved for the Junior College girls, as they were supposed to be more responsible, and for the most part, they usually were. I was one of the lucky few high school girls who got to stay in the cottage during my Junior year in high school. Only sneaked out once!

"Sometimes we had a party, but it was hard to enter into the school dances or football games on the weekend because we went home on Friday night.

²⁸ *Blue and White*

²⁹ Interview with the author

³⁰ Interview with the author

³¹ In 1916 a change in State law allowed Kern County High School to administratively separate itself from the Office of the Kern County Superintendent of Schools. The word "Union" was then inserted in the school's name even though the school occupied only one campus.

³² By 1948, twenty-nine bus drivers were Bakersfield College students.

If we stayed the weekend we had to stay at a friend's house. We came back to Bakersfield on Sunday afternoon. The dorms were nice but I wished we could have done more social things in town."

By 1943 the girls' dorm was still about the same as it was in earlier years. Wrote the *Blue and White* in 1943, "With fifteen young high school girls, the girls' dorm remains one big, happy family, with Mrs. Wilda Boushey as house-mother. There are now twelve high school girls all junior and seniors and three JC girls, living at the dormitory. The majority hail from Kernville. Dinner is served at six o'clock, and good, vitamin-plus meals are given. There are usually three girls to a room, and it is kept clean and neat by the occupants. Even with all the rules the girls enjoy themselves and have lots of fun."³³



The girls' dorm hosted dinners for the boys' dorm, but by 1946 boys took regular meals at the girls' dorm. Beverly Mergenthaler noted the differences between the sexes, "We knew most of them. They had the same

restrictions we had but were a lot more aggressive. They'd devise ways to get out of the dorms at night."

The number of girls at the dorm varied over the years. In September 1926, seventeen girls elected Aileen White, Margaret Dennison and Juanita Beedlove as their officers. At the start of the school year the group had ambitious plans for social events, but plans never materialized. By May, only Alice Arp, Thelma Ammons, Mable Kerwin, and Aileen Welch were at the dorm.³⁴

About 1925, the high school boys' dorm was in a two-story Victorian frame house just south of the Dennon Apartments at the northwest corner of California and G Streets. The boys' dorm closed about 1943, reopened in 1946, and in 1950 was probably closed again. By then it was no longer listed in the Bakersfield telephone book.

Junior College students also roomed at the boys' dorm, and it wasn't until after WWII that they had a separate dorm. William Dolan was a KCUHS in the mid-1930s, and he recalled JC students Nick Rilcoff, Charlie and Dick Bailey, and a man named Fred from Long Beach. They lived at the boys' dorm.³⁵ Ed Simonson who later became President of Bakersfield College lived at the dorm from 1938 until the start of WWII. Said Simonson, "In 1946 when I came back from the war the boys' dorm was still there. About that time Bakersfield College started its own dorm. There was a private home we rented across to the south of California Avenue that we used for a while. We also used Earl Sergeant's house. His wife Esther operated it as a dorm."³⁶

Dormies might have felt that they were "hicks from the sticks," as Blackwood phrased it, but Bakersfield was equally in awe of them. Shirley Jackson who lived in Bakersfield and attended KCUHS in the late 1930s knew dormies Elizabeth Weisman from Kern Valley and Caroline Pasco and Fay Smith.³⁷ At the beginning of the term, Fay Smith rode her horse to town from Glennville and kept it at Mission Stables. Bunkey Valdez [Class of 1936] said, "I remember those dorm kids in 1934 who were from the Kern River Valley. Other friends of mine were the Burlandos and the Seliz from Cummings Valley. One of the Burlando girls was something. She was into rodeo and could throw bulls."³⁸

³³ *Blue and White*, Sep 23, 1943. Rose Robinson (Class of 1945) said, "If you misbehaved at the JC Cottage you had to go back to the dorms." (Interview with the author)

³⁴ 1927 Oracle [KCUHS yearbook]

³⁵ Interview with the author

³⁶ Interview with the author

³⁷ Interview with the author

³⁸ Interview with the author

Byrom Ellis (Class of 1938) was from Bodfish, and he stayed at the dorm. He remembered there was a bell to get up, a bell to eat, and a bell to go to bed. For thirty dollars a month Ellis got three meals a day, an iron cot, and some interesting experiences.³⁹ Said Ellis, "I started at the dorm when I was a Freshman in 1934. One afternoon I was coming back from town, and five or six upperclassmen backed me up behind a palm tree and said, 'Get your ass out here. We're going to paddle you.' I said, 'Try it. I'll get you one-by-one when you're by yourselves.' Well, they turned off and left.

"Another time eleven of us Freshmen that had come down from Kernville, well, they put our beds out on the dorm's upstairs porch. It was cold as hell that winter. That first year some of the upperclassmen would come out there and turn our beds over. So one day we all got together and decided to whip those bastards. Every night after supper we had to clean up the dishes, and then everybody walked over to the basement of the JC where the study hall was. Everybody had to go whether you needed to study or not. After awhile we went outside and waited in the dark. When the bell rang those guys came out and we drove it to them.

"I lived there at the dorm one year. The next year Bruce Landry from Bodfish and I got a room with the Brooks family, and we had our food from a lady that had a boarding house."

At times, both dorms had housekeepers, but a teacher or JC students always lived at the dorms to keep order. In 1927 Miss Lida Siemon and Miss Robin Rapp were supervisors, and in charge at the boys' dorm were junior college students Irwin, Anderson, and Parker. William Dolan recalled a young teacher who lived at the boys' dorm in 1931. "He was a single man by the name of J. Wesley McDaniel, who was a psychologist who helped with advising. I am sure he was shopping around because living at the dorm was certainly no life for a married man. By 1935 he had gotten married and moved on."⁴⁰

In 1946-1947 Ray Scott and his wife Marian, both teachers from Oregon, lived at the boys' dorm. Another teacher had a room upstairs. One of the last dorm supervisors was E. Ben Evans, the school librarian.⁴¹

A fondly-remembered housekeeper was white-haired, vivacious Mrs. Bouchey, or "Mom", whose full name was probably Wilda M. Boucher. Wrote Beverly Blackwood, "The dorm mother at the boys' dorm was Mother Bouchey who later came to the girls' dorm and was well-loved by both the boys and

³⁹ Interview with the author.

⁴⁰ Interview with the author

⁴¹ Dolan interview with the author

girls."⁴² Mother Bouchey retired in 1941. Her eighteen years of service overlapped with that of Mrs. Francis G. Keester and Mrs. Lee Smith, both of whom served in the dorms in the late 1930s and early 1940s.

After WWII some of those who lived in the KCUHS did not attend high school there. Lynn Hay Rudy (Class of 1951) recalled, "Several Kernville kids spent their school evenings at the KC boarding house [dorms] and days were bused over to East Bakersfield High for school, poor dears. I only remember the four Ray kids. Stan in my class, Fred, and two girls, whose father was in charge of the Kernville fish hatchery, I think. I know they were rather 'outsiders' and it was probably hard on their social life, knowing how cliquish high schoolers are."⁴³

In 1947 a fifteen year-old girl arrived in Bakersfield from Dallas, Texas, and enrolled at KCUHS as a Senior. In an email to the author she explained, "I had been made a ward-of-the-court and was placed at the dorm with the agreement that I could live there if I did not cost the County anything. I lived there one year. The dorm was closed weekends so I had to room with other people on Friday and Saturday nights. On the weekend I bused tables at a diner café called the Betty Lee Tea Room on Truxtun. I had roommates who were in the same situation as myself, that is, we had no family and had been placed in the Dorm by the court."⁴⁴

Kernville High School opened in 1941, Burroughs High opened at Ridgecrest in 1945, and Desert High opened at Edwards in 1951. The need for dorms at Bakersfield High School was fading. The boys' dorm closed around 1949 and girls' dorm closed in 1956.

Just west of Griffith Stadium today is a grassy playing field. Just when the girls' dorm was demolished is an unanswered question. The boys' dorm was moved to the southeast corner of Brundage and Union, but today it too is gone.

Memories persist. Yvonne Loustalot Liner (Class of 1938) recalled, "My first husband attended JC and was staying at the dorm. We used to sit out in front and study in his car. When WWII started he went into the service and was killed. In the mid 1950s I was working at an office on Brundage, and I looked out the window and saw the boys' dorm being pulled down the street. In my purse I had my husband's little pocket knife and his key to the boys'

⁴² Letter to the author

⁴³ Email to the author

⁴⁴ The woman still lives in Bakersfield. She added, "I've come a long, long way since then, and I prefer you don't use my name." No other interviewees mentioned wards-of-the-court.

dorm. At that moment I remember thinking, 'I have the key to that building.'"⁴⁵

⁴⁵ Interview with the author