



1923 Raid on the Buckhorn Club

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by Gilbert P. Gia

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Buckhorn clubs have been watering places in Kern County, California, for more than 80 years, and there were many of them.¹ In the 1930s a Buckhorn cafe was on the north side of Maricopa about where Highway 33 heads to Taft.² That Buckhorn had ice-cream-parlor chairs, and its walls were decorated with antlers and oilfield tools.³ In 1937 Jack Ellis was the proprietor of a Buckhorn Bar in Taft.⁴

¹ In 1907 Buck Horn Station was 45 miles south of Bakersfield on the Tejon Pass (Bakersfield Californian, Aug 9, 1907). That station, probably located between Lebec and Gorman, might have taken its name from the company that operated Fortuna Wells, which was an oil drilling operation in Hopper Canon about two miles north of Buck Horn Station. Fortuna Wells was owned by the Buckhorn Transportation Co of Los Angeles, A. Smith, president (*Producing Wells of California*, California State Mining Bureau, Bulletin 19. San Francisco, November, 1900).

² At the intersection of California and Kern St.

³ In 1980 it was a top-notch restaurant. Larry Peahl said it burned in 1981 and was replaced by a new building (Email to the author from Larry Peahl, Jun 13, 2011).

⁴ Bakersfield Californian, Jul 13, 1937

In 1945 the Buckhorn Club In Taft in was a card room at 4th and North streets.⁵ That location has an interesting story as told by Taft historian Pete Gianopulos: "When Charlie Hudson got out of the service where he became the most decorated bombardier in the 8th Air Force flying out of England during WWII, he was met at the city limits, and a parade of cars drove him around the city to welcome him back to Taft. He had gone to the Taft Union High School. Before the war he had been a butcher in the meat market for O. E. Hall in a grocery store in the 500 block of Center Street. After they had driven him around the city they stopped on the west side of the 200 block of 4th Street. They got out of their cars on the sidewalk in front of the restaurant at the corner of 4th and North Street -- the location of the Savoy Hotel [229 Fourth Street]. At that moment, Hall presented Hudson with the keys to the restaurant and told Hudson they were giving him that restaurant and bar. That was where Hudson got this start. He eventually had the Cuyama Buckhorn and a Buckhorn in Ventura. He also had a Buckhorn in Bakersfield, I believe."⁶

⁵ Bakersfield Californian, Oct 2, 1945. The Buckhorn ad is from the Taft Oildorado pamphlet of 1947, compliments Larry Peahl.

⁶ Emails to the author from Pete Gianopulos, Jun 13 and 14, 2011

Gianopulos added that Hudson later opened the Buckhorn Annex at 205 N 10th Street which had been a Standard Oil Company hospital. After Hudson closed the Annex it became the Taft Elks Club. The building is now O.T. Cook House and Saloon.



O.T. Cookhouse and Saloon, formerly the Buckhorn Annex

As early as 1931 a Buckhorn Ranch was on the Carissa Plains past Grocer Grade above Maricopa.⁷ In the early 1950s 33 miles southwest of Taft on Highway 166 in the Cuyama Valley the Buckhorn was a pine-paneled bar and restaurant that had a dance floor, motel rooms, and a swimming pool.⁸ It went out of business about three years ago.⁹

⁷ Bakersfield Californian, Jul 30, 1931

⁸ Bakersfield Californian, Apr 25, 1953. This Buckhorn was in business in 1949, according to Larry Peahl (Jun 13, 2011 email to the author). The swimming pool once occupied the adjacent, grassy picnic area.

⁹ Duncan Farms bought the property.

In 1953 Stan and Eddie Coffee purchased what was called the Buckhorn Annex on the Taft-Bakersfield Highway near Six Mile Station.¹⁰ In the 1950s a Buckhorn bar was near the intersection of Union and Chester avenues south of Bakersfield. And finally, in 1976 a Buckhorn Bar was at 1019 34th Street in Bakersfield.¹¹

This story is from the Twenties when Oscar T. Buck operated the Buckhorn Club on Taft Highway between Elk Hills and Buena Vista Lake. But OT Buck's history on the Westside goes back earlier. In 1910 he owned Buck's Cafe in Maricopa,¹² and by 1914 he ran a saloon there.¹³ Buck was probably still a restaurateur in 1918 when Taft celebrated the dedication of the the first building ever erected in the United States for the exclusive use of the Red

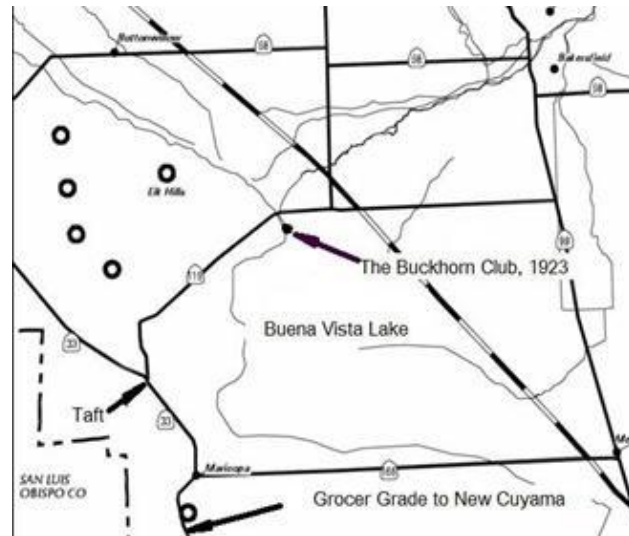
¹⁰ Bakersfield Californian, Oct 12, 1953. Email to the author from Pete Gianopulos Jun 13, 2011: "The six mile station was a restaurant on the Taft-Bakersfield Highway, also know as "Coffee's Corner" because the highway took a sharp right angle turn just beyond the restaurant toward the Buena Vista Golf Course and went around the east side of the Elk Hills. That was before that highway was built to go over the Elk Hills." Author's note: That places Coffee's Corner in the near vicinity of the 1923 Buckhorn Club.

¹¹ Bakersfield Californian, Jun 28, 1976

¹² Email to the author from Larry Peahl, Jun 13, 2011

¹³ Buck was a resident of Maricopa in 1915 on the day that he escaped from his burning automobile while traveling to Taft (Bakersfield Californian, Sep 30, 1915).

Cross. At that event “O. T. Buck of Maricopa was in charge of the big pit in which the meat was roasted.”¹⁴

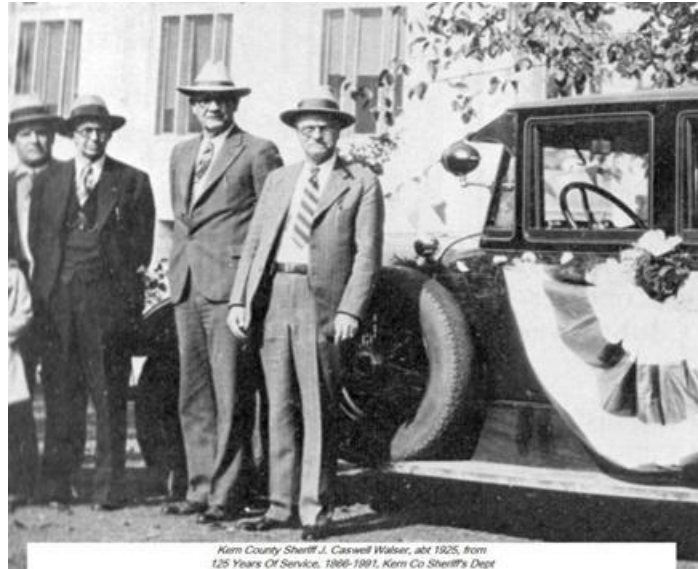


Buckhorn Club, center



View of Elk Hills from Taft Highway in the vicinity of the 1923 Buckhorn

¹⁴ *Taft Daily Midway Driller*, Jul 3, 1950, from Edith Dane “Kernland Tales.” Transcribed and edited by Larry Peahl, 2006. Dane’s columns were published in the *Taft Daily Midway Driller* from 1949 to 1956. Kern County Library, McGuire Local History Room



Sheriff Cas Walser at right

In October, 1922, Kern County Sheriff DB Newell ordered Buck's club closed under authority of the Red Light Abatement Act, and "the alleged owner" OT Buck was taken into custody.¹⁵ Despite Prohibition and morality laws, in 1923 Buck continued to enjoy an excellent business at the Buckhorn even though the new Kern County Sheriff, Cas Walser, knew the private roadhouse was a speakeasy.¹⁶

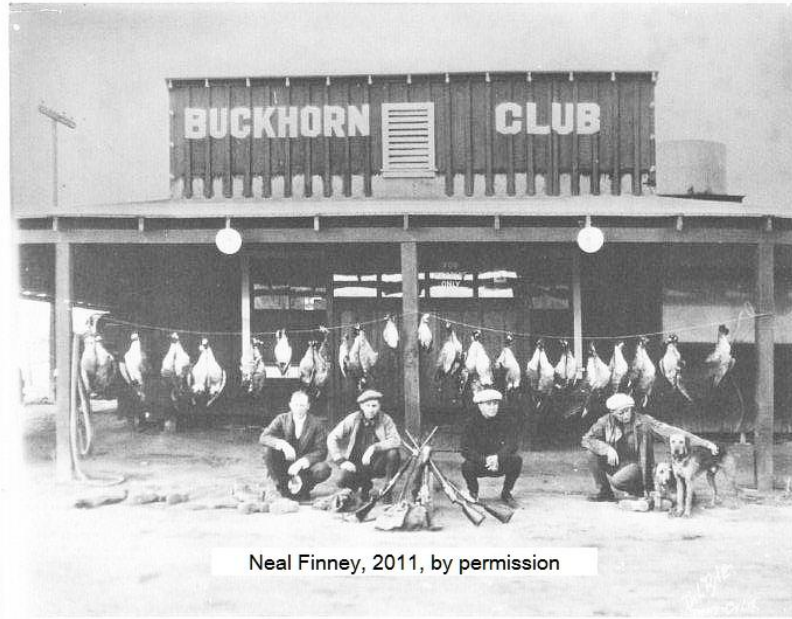
¹⁵ Bakersfield Californian, Oct 25, 1922

¹⁶ In 2004 Taft resident Charlie McCarty told the author about a Buckhorn club which in the 1920s was at Highway 119 and the old road that today leads to today's Buena Vista Golf Course. That site is about six miles from Taft and might have been the location of the Buckhorn Club in 1923.

Month after month Walser had obtained warrants to raid the Buckhorn, but OT Buck's patrons, mostly wealthy Westsiders and well-healed Bakersfield people, regularly tipped-off the owner.¹⁷ Laws surrounding Prohibition hadn't helped Walser, either. Kern County's judges required that Walser produce liquid evidence in court, which meant that during a raid deputies had to capture at least one bottle of liquor.

The lay of the land around the Buckhorn was another challenge. The club stood on a treeless, flat plain which allowed Buck's employees to see cars coming on Taft Highway for several minutes before they reached the club. What about a raid from behind the building? That approach was over the marshy, uneven Buena Vista Lake bottom, and it would have been slow going. Then there was the matter of the Buckhorn's floodlighted, fenced yard and Buck's pack of dogs.

¹⁷ OT Buck benefited from the drilling boom on Kern County's Westside.



Neal Finney, 2011, by permission

“The man on the far right with the two Airedale dogs is my grandfather OT Buck. The man next to him is Jasper Simpson and next to Jasper is Fran Krugh.”¹⁸

Walser and Undersheriff Charlie Smith decided on a different tack. For several weeks, undercover officers visited Taft to find out more about the club, and each time they returned with new details, one of which was that in the floor of the saloon, behind the bar, was an automatic trap-door. If the club was raided, the barkeep could spring the trap door and drop the incriminating goods into the rocky basement.

Detectives also learned that at noon time on Fridays the club had only a few customers. More important, half of Buck’s

¹⁸

Email to the author from Neal Finney, Jun 10, 2011

watchmen would be off duty then, and the others would be having lunch. Would any of them pay much attention to a couple of cars that quietly pulled into the parking lot?

At noon hour on Friday, June 29, 1923, two undercover officers who had become regulars at the Buckhorn opened the front door and entered the anteroom. As the outside door closed behind them, a peephole slid open in a second door, and moments later the deputies were buzzed through to the bar. They removed their hats, loosened their ties, and ordered whiskeys.

Barkeep Jarvis smiled and set up two glasses. Seconds later the scene speeded up: The first deputy grabbed for the bottle, his partner raced for the door, and Jarvis sprung the trap door. When back-up officers rushed in only a small glass with a splash of whiskey was on the bar, and Jarvis's liquor bottles lay broken in pieces in the basement 14 feet below.

In the hope of finding more substantial evidence a deputy was lowered through the trapdoor. He did retrieve one unbroken

bottle, which might have be enough to bring charges against Buck, but even if the district attorney won the prosecution, one bottle of booze wouldn't cost OT Buck much pain.

Sheriff Walser arrived and told a deputy to go out back and tie up the barking dogs. That officer noticed a freshly-turned patch of dirt , and a little judicious poking revealed the top of a wooden box. That lead to the discovery of several other boxes, each of which contained jugs of brandy. In the end, Walser had 110 gallons of evidence.¹⁹ After that it was some time before Buckhorn customers tasted liquor. But it really wasn't that long. Sometime during that intervening period OT Buck probably invested in property San Louis Obispo County.²⁰

On May 7, 1926, Bakersfield Californian subscribers saw front page stories about the grand opening of Hotel El Tejon, the parade of 1,115 school children at the Kern County Grammar School Olympiad, and the arrest of Mrs. CC Dyerlan, proprietor

¹⁹ *Bakersfield Californian*, Jun 30, 1923, p 6, c 1

²⁰ OT Buck once owned what today is known as F.McLintock Saloon at San Louis Obispo, California (Telephone conversation between the author and OT Buck's grandson Neal Finney, Jun 11, 2011). By 1926 OT Buck might have sold the Buckhorn. That year it was again in trouble with the law for violation of the national prohibition law. OT Buck's name did not appear in reports about the trial in Fresno Federal court (*Bakersfield Californian*, April 28, 1926).

of the Buckhorn Club on the Taft-Bakersfield Highway. She was charged with serving liquor to a 13 year-old girl. The story was a long one. The Californian wrote of the Buckhorn,

“Unprepossing by daylight, as it stands forth near a bend in the Taft highway, the Buckhorn Club has figured more conspicuously in the news of Kern county than any other single building. For years it has been the target of raiding officers slipping forth into the night from the district attorney’s headquarters and the sheriff’s office. It was near the Buckhorn club that Robert Sears was murdered by Charles Britt. ... Officers claim that almost every foot of land within 200 yards of the Buckhorn Club has been dug up at some time or another by raiding parties searching for booze. The club itself, with its unpretentious exterior, has been equipped with strange and ingenious trap doors and safety devices calculated to frustrate the attempts of the wily prohibition sleuths.”²¹

In court, Federal investigator Nicely swore that he saw Mrs. Dyerlan give liquor to the 13 year-old. He also swore that the

²¹ Bakersfield Californian, May 27, 1926. Headline image is from the May 27 article.

girl was nude and in the presence of Buckhorn customers. His testimony “evoked gasps in the courtroom.” After that the Bakersfield Californian never mentioned the Buckhorn Club on Taft Highway again.

Five Thousand Witness Annual County School Olympiad
LIQUOR SERVED TO NUDE GIRL AT BUCKHORN

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