



Historic Bakersfield & Kern County, California
www.gilbertgia.com

An Aquatic School Bus for Barnes School, 1917

By Gilbert P. Gia
Copyright © 2013, Gilbert P. Gia, Bakersfield, California
This work is free to publicly-supported schools and libraries.
Others email ggiaggia@gmail.com for permissions.

When the Barnes School District was organized in 1913 near Lost Hills, who would have guessed that a boat was in its future? The backstory about the aquatic school bus starts in the early 1870s when Miller & Lux farmed near today's Buttonwillow and took water from the great slough that once connected now-vanished Kern Lake to Buena Vista and Tulare Lakes.

Then in the mid-1870s Millionaire James B. Haggin and partners bought land, constructed canals, and drew irrigation water from the Kern River.¹ As agriculture flourished, water became a valuable resource. In 1876 Miller & Lux constructed two large canals, the East

¹ Margaret Aseman Cooper Zonlight, *Land, Water and Settlement in Kern County, California, 1850-1890*. Arno Press, New York Times Co, NY, 1979, p 38. It was the author's M.A. thesis *Management of Public Lands in the United States* presented at the University of California in 1954.

Side Canal, which extended three miles north of today's Buena Vista Recreation Area,² and a parallel canal, the Kern Valley Water Company Canal, which paralleled the first canal but extended north about 25 miles.³ Some months later Miller & Lux built levees to divert Kern River water into their canals, but the new levees also blocked water from reaching Haggin's lands.⁴

The two rivals entered into a lawsuit in 1880, which, for the most part, was settled in 1888 by the U.S. Supreme Court.⁵ In accordance with the judgment, in 1889 James Haggin and Miller & Lux jointly built a catch basin, called the Buena Vista Lake Reservoir, and set about improving Miller & Lux's two canals. Once all was finished, water was periodically delivered to Miller & Lux farmland between Buttonwillow and Lost Hills.⁶

² Sometime after 1914 East Side Canal was extended farther north. Today's maps show a Westside Canal west of Kern Valley Water Co Canal, which today is indicated as Main Drain Ditch.

³ Pacific Reporter, v.10, Mar 25-Jun 3, 1886, West Publishing Co., St. Paul, 1886 [Google Books]. Both canals started in Sec 14, T30S, R24E. In 1892 an East Side Canal was completed east of Bakersfield along today's Edison Highway.

⁴ Pacific Reporter, v.10, Mar 25-Jun 3, 1886, West Publishing Co., St. Paul, 1886 [Google Books].

⁵ *"The Miller-Haggin Agreement was signed on July 28, 1888, and which bears the signatures of thirty-one corporations and fifty-eight individuals owning water rights at the time on Kern river, practically divided the waters of the stream between Miller & Lux and Haggin and the different canal companies that were represented by them."* [Zonlight, op. cit., p 331]. The immediate effect of the agreement was to advance the price of land around Bakersfield. [Wallace Melvin Morgan. History of Kern County, California. Historic Record Company, Los Angeles, California, 1914., p 96] See also:

www.bakersfieldcity.us/cityservices/water/pdfs/kern_river_purchase_booklet.pdf

⁶ Morgan, op. cit., p 88. *"The agreement provides that the parties of the first part, represented by Miller, shall have one-third of all the waters of the river during the months of March, April,*



Levee at Buena Vista Lake, 2007

In September 1911, the level of Buena Vista Lake Reservoir was above normal, but in 1912 and 1913 it was low, inflow was almost non-existent,⁷ and the outflow to Miller & Lux property was only a small percentage of what it had been in former years.⁸ The 15 feet-deep, 250-foot-wide Kern Valley Water Company Canal was mostly dry.

Agricultural was on hold then, but Kern County's economy had boomed back in 1910 when light-grade crude was discovered at Lost Hills, and it boomed again in 1911 and 1912 when more was discovered at Belridge.

With those discoveries, Texas oilmen like George Coker and his

May, June, July, and August of each year, and that the parties of the second part, represented by Haggin, shall have all the remainder." Morgan, op. cit., p 99. River water was measured at First Point of Measurement north of Gordon's Ferry Bridge at Kern Canyon. The parties cooperated on the legal distribution of water. [Bakersfield Californian, Oct 15, 1908]

⁷ Historically, two-thirds of Buena Vista Lake Reservoir water was lost to evaporation. [Water Resources of Kern River and Adjacent Streams and their Utilization, 1920. Bulletin No. 9, Table 26, State of California, Department of Engineering, Sacramento, California 1921]

⁸ Water Resources of Kern River and Adjacent Streams and their Utilization, 1920. Bulletin No. 9, Table 26, State of California, Department of Engineering, Sacramento, California 1921

family settled next to ranchers like Warren Barnes, his wife Mary and their half-dozen or so kids,⁹ and homes went up on the west side (the oil side) of the dry canal. Rain returned in January 1913,¹⁰ but the Kern Valley Water Company Canal remained dry for many more months.

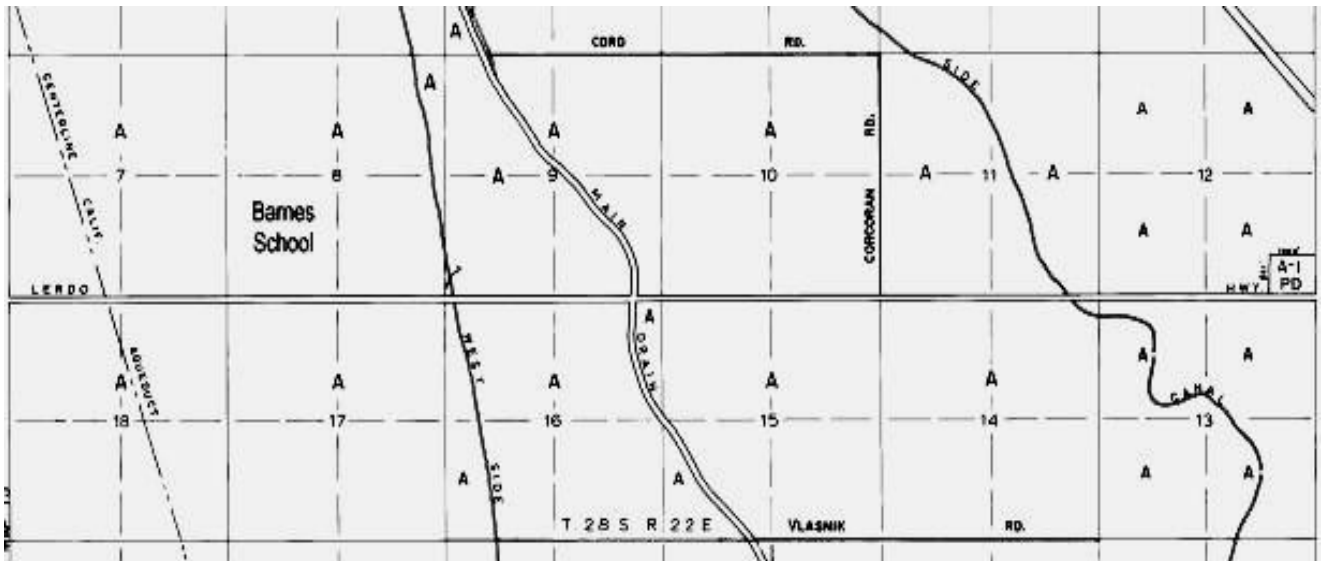


Image above: Kern Valley Water Company Canal is labeled Main Drain Canal. On the right is East Side Canal, and on the left is West Side Canal. The later did not exist here until after 1925.

⁹ George Coker, from Texas, was a Head Well Puller for General Petroleum. In the 1920 US Census Mr. and Mrs. Coker had seven children. In the 1920 US Census Warren Barnes was a farmer in Township 18, Supervisor's District 6, with his wife, Mary, and their eight children, ages two months to 12 years. Those enumerated on the same census sheet were farmers, farm laborers, and employees of the Belridge Oil Company and the Carmel Cattle Company.

¹⁰ Bakersfield Californian, Jan 16, 1913

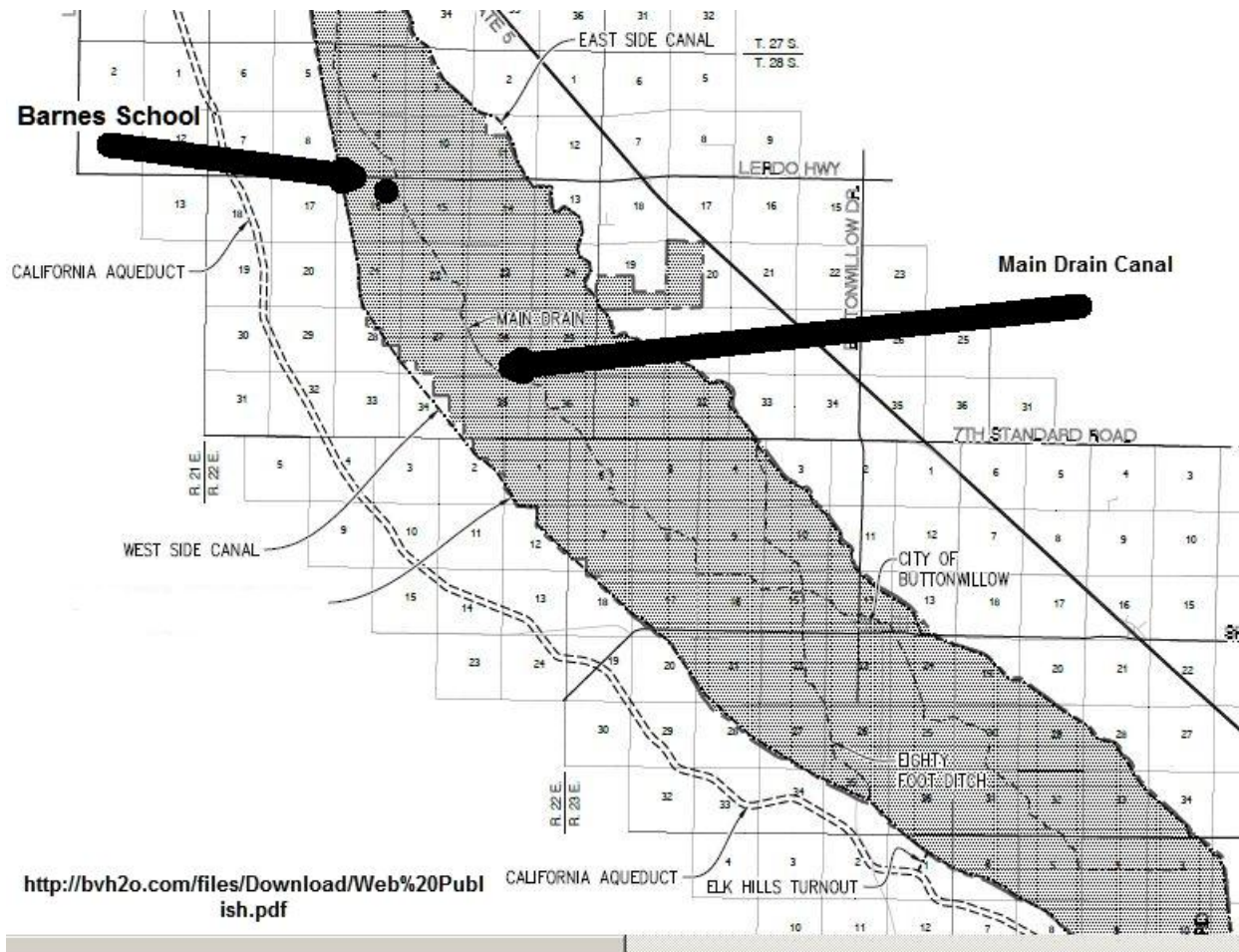


Image above: Buttonwillow lower right.
Main Drain Canal terminates at weir near Tupman.

In 1913 Mr. and Mrs. Barnes opened their home as a school for 40 pupils. In short time, voters of newly-organized Barnes School District approved the sale of bonds¹¹ and retained architect Thomas B. Wiseman to draw up plans for a schoolhouse. Inside of three months a new road was put in, and contractors Yancey & Rodgers were building a \$3,780 schoolhouse on three acres in the SW-1/4 of Sec 8, T 28-R 22,

¹¹ Morning Echo, May 6, 1914. Five bonds in \$1,000 denominations were sold at 6%. The legal announcement in the Echo was signed by board members B.F. Dorwin, Warren Barnes, and Frank Banducci.

which is about nine miles south of the town of Lost Hills.¹²

A newspaper wrote in October 1913, "Lost Hills is showing evidence of rapid growth by the fact that three school houses have been opened in the district within the past year. The \$10,000 School house at the town site, the special school at the Universal Lease,¹³ and the \$5,000 Barnes school¹⁴ that is now nearing completion and will be dedicated on the 4th of October by a big barbecue that will be given at noon and at six o'clock at night."¹⁵

That celebration didn't happen, but on October 21 the newspaper reported, "It is expected that the building will be finished by Saturday night, and as soon thereafter the paint dries it will be occupied. The school yard, which includes three acres, is being fenced, and a well is to be sunk shortly.¹⁶ Classes are now being held in the Barnes residence, the score of children in attendance being taught by Miss Teresa Dormeyer. An entertainment is to be held there Saturday night for the benefit of the school."¹⁷

¹² Morning Echo, Sep 4, 1914. Morning Echo, Sep 26, 1914

¹³ Belridge School District was formed from territory in the Semitropic, Buttonwillow, and Wildwood school districts. [Jerry Kirkland, School District Origins in Kern County, California. <http://kern.org/wp-files/kern.org/2010/08/District-Origins-in-Kern-County-A.pdf>]. In local newspapers, *school house* was written as two words.

¹⁴ Barnes School District was organized under the laws of the State of California on Nov 4, 1913. Its assessed valuation in 1914 was \$221,225. [Bakersfield Californian, Jun 24, 1915]

¹⁵ Morning Echo, Oct 17, 1914

¹⁶ A Dr. Darwin was drilling the well. [Morning Echo, Sep 26, 1914]

¹⁷ Morning Echo, Oct 21, 1914

Financial matters were probably uneven in the Barnes School District. Just three months after school opened, the board asked voters to approve an additional \$1,500 in bonds to buy supplies and re-bore the school's 150-foot-deep water well.¹⁸ Then in March 1915 the Bakersfield Machine Company sued Barnes School District for payment on a pump and engine for the school grounds.¹⁹

That month the district hosted a benefit ball at Belridge Oil Field Hall, the proceeds of which would go for the purchase of playground equipment. The event was entirely home-grown: Gentlemen who bought box lunches were entitled to eat with the women who prepared them. The expected success of that arrangement was not reported, but the Morning Echo advised, "Saturday evening, March 27, until midnight only. Good music, fine moonlight, everybody welcome. Come help the boys and girls by your presence."²⁰

Barnes school faced the same challenge as did other remote school districts, and that was attracting and keeping teachers. Rural schools at the turn of the century suffered from revolving-door, suitcase-teacher-syndrome. Two-thirds of the teachers hired came with no classroom experience, and low salaries and remote locations

¹⁸ Bakersfield California, Jan 22, 1915

¹⁹ Bakersfield Californian, Mar 5, 1915. The cost of the pump and engine was \$249.71, equivalent today to about \$6,000.

²⁰ Morning Echo, Mar 24, 1915

contributed to the problem of retention. But rural areas usually lacked acceptable housing; a palliative was the teacherage, a district-owned house for the teacher. The communities that had a teacherage attracted more teacher applicants, retained them more often, and could offset the cost of building by paying lower salaries.²¹ Between 1915 and 1921, 15 state legislatures approved teacherages, but other states, including California, said no.²² Kern County, however, was an exception in the state. ²³

In 1915 the board of Barnes School District voted to hold a \$2,000 bond election for a teacherage.²⁴ The Morning Echo wrote, "Conditions which have made it difficult for the teachers to secure board and room in their districts have inspired the school trustees to make the arrangements known as teacherages, which, by the way, is one of the products of the modern school system."²⁵ Voters approved the bond, and the Kern County Board of Supervisors authorized the county clerk to deposit checks of the buyer, which was the Security Trust Company,

²¹ C.W. Thomason, *Sunset Magazine*, March 1915. v. 34, pp 554 - 555. [Referenced in Patricia A. Carter, *Everybody's paid but the teacher. The teaching profession and the women's movement.* Teachers College Press, 2002, ISBN: 0807742066.]

²² Carter, op. cit., p 74

²³ In 1919 County Superintendent of Schools Lawrence E. Chenoweth noted that 15 teacherages had been built on the Westside and had "solved many vexing problems of securing teachers in the oil fields." [E.R. Harrington. *A history of the organization and administration of kern county schools*, doctoral dissertation. USC, 1963. p 194]

²⁴ *Morning Echo*, Apr 9, 1915. Bonds were sold in denominations of \$500 at 6%. [Bakersfield Californian, Jun 24, 1915]

²⁵ *Morning Echo*, Sep 28, 1915

to the county treasury for Barnes's teacherage.²⁶

Work moved quickly. Trustees Frank Banducci, Mrs. Warren Barnes, and Mr. Booker inspected and accepted the work of contractor Pike and helpers Jones and Shnepp of Lost Hills, which was, namely, the three-room teacherage, a stable, a shed, a corral, and screening for the schoolhouse windows.²⁷ This teacherage became the fifth in Kern County after those built in Olig, Petroleum, Tejon and Panama school districts.²⁸ It was finished in September before school opened.

Two years earlier, Lost Hills School District passed a \$10,000 school bond election and celebrated with games of tug-of war, baseball, a Wild West Show, a barbeque, and a dance. That community's party established a precedent for Barnes School, which held a dance/fundraiser to celebrate completion of its teacherage.²⁹

It was very much a community event. "The school is very grateful to Mr. And Mrs. Brown of Belridge for a generous loan of their records to help out the meager supply as yet owned by the school and thus making possible a sufficient variety of music for the dance. Special mention is due also to Mr. and Mrs. Warren Barnes, whose whole

²⁶ Bakersfield Californian, Sep 20, 1915. The school tax was \$.45 per \$100 of taxable property in Barnes School District.

²⁷ Shnepp, as spelled, was probably Schnepf

²⁸ Morning Echo, Sep 28, 1915

²⁹ Kirkland, op. cit.

hearted efforts and loyalty can always be depended on, and whose untiring efforts made possible the up-to-date district school as it now stands. Also, Mr. and Mrs. Coker and son Fred and daughter Mae. Mr. Coker brought his entire band of dredger workers, who cheerfully lent their financial aid though scarcely any of them danced.³⁰ Mrs. Coker spent an entire day frying chicken and preparing other delicacies to feed these hungry men, knowing as she did there would not be lunches and ladies enough to go around. This district hopes to have such a social evening once a month throughout the school year, the funds to be used to finish paying for the Victrola, buying tools for the manual training class and a permanent supply of dishes for future social occasions, etc. The public interest is cordially invited and their support in brightening up the gray of the desert solicited."³¹

One day after the dance a Mr. Pike and a Mr. Jones of Lost Hills donated a dollar apiece, "not wishing to be out of a good thing and not having been present at the dance. Likewise, Frank Banducci, who was not present, sent another dollar. Those later donations were promptly invested in three new records, a record brush, and a new supply of needles."³²

³⁰ Dredgers were probably canal workers.

³¹ Morning Echo, Sep 28, 1915

³² Ibid.

In April 1916, 36 year-old Theresa Dormeyer³³ arranged an evening's entertainment at the schoolhouse to help pay down the outstanding debt on the Victrola. The program started with calisthenics, shadow pictures, and music from the Victrola and continued with recitations, declamations, plays, and tableaux by Barnes's pupils and parents: "The Rainbow Fairies" by Rose Banducci, "The Way of a Boy" by Maxwell Coker, "Bunny Leiedal" by Georgie Coker, "He Wouldn't And He Would" by Annie Barnes, "Dolly's Pocket" by Alice Barnes, "For My Country" by Grant Barnes, and "Reminding the Men" by Evileen Barnes. Next were declamations by Louie Banducci, William Coker, Mack Coker, Fred Coker, Mr. George Coker, Mrs. Mamie Coker, and a reading of "The Burial March of Dundee and the Bear Story" by Miss Dormeyer.³⁴

There were awards of library diplomas "to those who have read six good books during the school year of 1915-1916." Three plays were next: "Aunty Puzzled" with Mae Coker and Evileen Barnes, "An entirely

³³ Morning Echo, Apr 16, 1916. The 1910 US Census of Havilah, California shows that teacher "Theresa Dormeyer," 30 years of age and single, had emigrated from Germany in 1889. She boarded at Havilah with William and Jessie Waters and their son Stanly, 8. The Apr 16, 1916 Morning Echo said Miss Dormeyer had given her collection of old photographs of Havilah to the Kern County Superintendent of Schools Office. "*One picture of the main street is so natural, and so similar to views given in the movies, that one expects any moment to see a band of wild outlaws come dashing up pursued by the doughty hero.*" Kern County school historian Jerry Kirkland found Dormeyer's name shown in a 1911 school directory as a teacher at Weldon, Californian.

³⁴ Morning Echo, Apr 22, 1916

Different Matter” with Fred Coker and William Coker, and “In Want of a Servant” with Mr. George Coker, Mrs. Mamie Coker, Mae Coker, Grant Barnes, Mrs. Warren Barnes, and Miss Dormeyer. The entertainment ended, then came ice cream, cake, coffee, music and dancing. “Dance all night,” said the program, “if you wish to, and all this for fifty cents. Ice cream, ten cents, cake five, and coffee five. And after that? *You dance, dance, dance, And prance, prance, prance. The ice cream keeps you cool, cool, cool. The coffee keeps you warm, warm, warm, And the cake keeps you sweet, sweet, sweet. The while you keep time with your feet, feet, feet. You’re coming? Why of course you’re coming. Who’d miss so much for so little?”*³⁵

A month later trustees Mamie Coker, Warren Barnes, Mary Barnes, Fred Baumann, and Alonzo G. Darwin asked voters to approve an \$800 school bond to pay for water pipe and a windmill.³⁶

How that vote came out is not known today, but in January 1917 water became a challenge in a different way when water of Buena Vista Lake Reservoir was turned into the the Kern Valley Canal. It prevented many children living on the west side of the canal from attending school. In a previous year when the 250-ft-wide canal was running

³⁵ Ibid. In a Mar 3, 2013 email to Gilbert Gia, school historian Jerry Kirkland noted that historic class lists from rural Kern County schools often indicated that schools were made up of children from only three or four families.

³⁶ Morning Echo, May 25, 1916

bank full, about 15 children had to go out of their way for many miles to attend Buttonwillow School, which then was about an hour south of Barnes School. From time to time attendance at Barnes School was reduced to only a few children.

PLATE III—Continued.

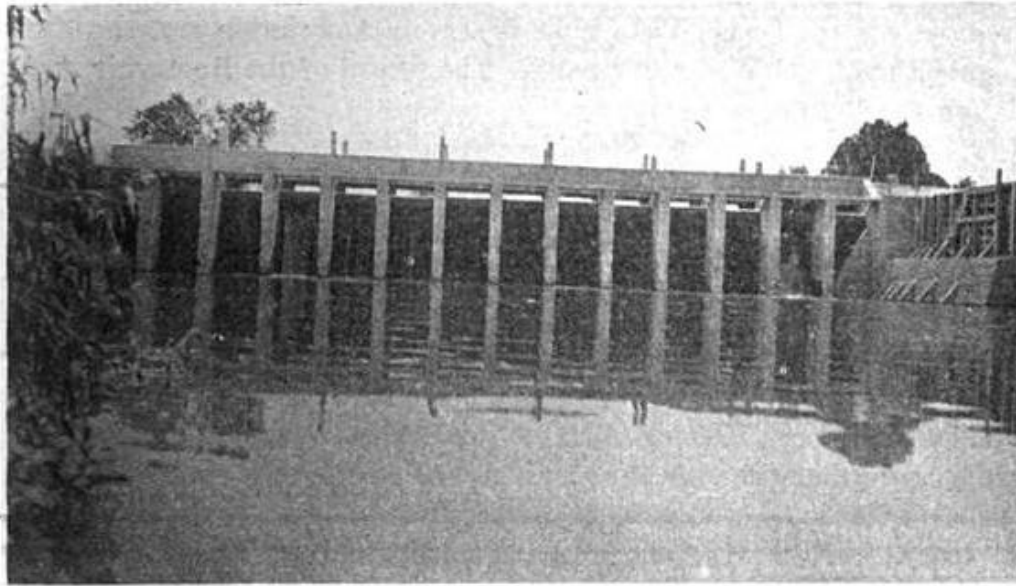
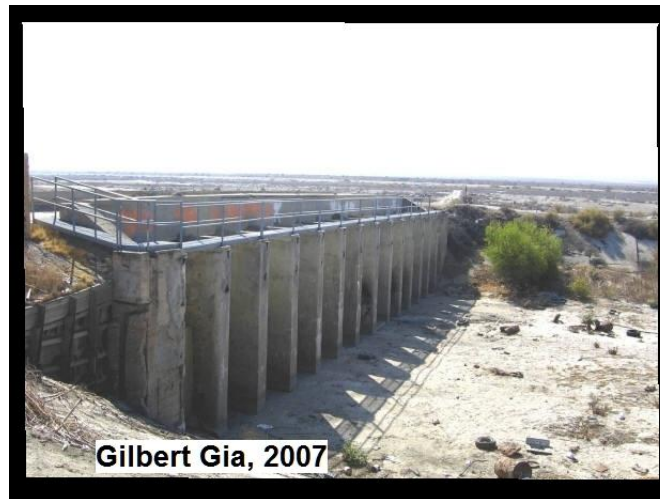


Fig. C. Concrete weir in outlet canal from Buena Vista Lake Reservoir.

Weir above was built about 1889 to ration Buena Vista Lake Reservoir water that was allocated for Kern Valley Water Company Canal. Photo about 1920.³⁷

³⁷ Water Resources of Kern River and Adjacent Streams and their Utilization, 1920. Bulletin No. 9, State of California, Department of Engineering, Sacramento, California 1921



Same weir, near Tupman.

Width of the canal at this point was probably the same as it was near Barnes School

In 1917 Barnes parents asked Miller & Lux to build a bridge over the canal, but instead the company provided a boat. Parents next petitioned the county for a bridge, but that request didn't materialize either.³⁸ The school was not in newspapers for the next six years.

In May 1923 a newspaper reported that teacher Nellie E. Perkins and students Edna and Carolina Torigiani made "19 dresses, 7 aprons, and 3 handkerchiefs," and each child at the school had finished a "holder." It wrote, "Instruction in sewing has been given for one hour every Friday afternoon, but the enthusiastic little seamstresses have often gone to school at an early hour to sew. The sewing machine was loaned by Mrs. Lola Cox. Edna and Carolina have equipped all their

³⁸ Bakersfield Californian, Jan 24, 1917. Morning Echo, Feb 23, 1917. A Kern County Free Library was established at Barnes School on Sept 23, 1917. In 1921 it had 173 books, four magazine subscriptions, and 16 cardholders. The school district and library received mail at Lost Hills Post Office. [News Notes of California Libraries, v 17, N 1, Jan 1922. Google Books]

sisters with dresses and they are teaching their elder, married sister the art. Mrs. Lennice Eyraud, county supervisor of schools, states that all of the dresses are well finished and two of them were dainty Easter frocks.”³⁹



Image probably from 1917-18⁴⁰

Getting to school had been hit or miss for far too many pupils, and in 1923 change finally came. A Bakersfield newspaper wrote, “At the present time the Barnes school is closed,” but it also noted that the county board of supervisors would not take definite action to close the school until it studied a petition.⁴¹ In fact there were two petitions. Buttonwillow School District had petitioned for approval to annex

³⁹ Bakersfield Californian, May 8, 1923

⁴⁰ Kristiane Skjerve Evans, Educational Survey of Kern County, California, “Submitted in partial satisfaction of the prerequisites for the degree of Master of Arts in Education in the Graduate Division of the University of California, May, 1918” [McGuire Local History Room, Beale Library, Bakersfield, Calif.]

⁴¹ Bakersfield Californian, Nov 3, 1923

Barnes School District because the majority of its pupils were attending Buttonwillow School. Barnes School District petitioned for a compromise. Yes, the canal was a dangerous barrier for children who had to cross, but would the district be permitted to pay \$2,000 annually to the Buttonwillow district for education their children until the school could again be opened?⁴² The board's answer was to merge the Barnes and Buttonwillow School Districts,⁴³ which forever shuttered the doors of nine year-old Barnes School.⁴⁴

< 0 >

⁴² Bakersfield Californian, Dec 26, 1923

⁴³ Morning Echo, Dec 30, 1923

⁴⁴ Pupils from Barnes School might have attended Burnt School built in 1923 on Corn Camp Road northwest of Buttonwillow. [Kirkland, op. cit.]