



Historic Bakersfield & Kern County, California

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The Schoolhouse Christmas of 1869

By Gilbert P. Gia

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"The people of this place," wrote the Kern County Weekly Courier on December 29th, ***"were not behind in the matter of Christmas festivities when an impromptu dance came off at a private residence on the evening of the 23rd."*** It continued, *"The next evening amusements commenced in earnest when the pupils of Bakersfield's public school assembled at the school house with their parents and friends. ¹ A handsome Christmas tree was displayed on the platform, bearing upon its branches every kind of toys and other presents from the inexhaustible supply of Santa Claus. These were distributed by A. R. Jackson to the several recipients, with much merriment and general good feeling."* ²



Bakersfield's first schoolhouse probably looked like

this image from http://glover320.blogspot.com/2009_05_01_archive.html

¹ The building was then known as Kern Island School.

² Col. Andrew R. Jackson did not stay long as teacher. In 1870 trustees of Swamp Land District No. 111 (which included Julius Chester, Col. Thomas Baker, and San Francisco investor H.P. Livermore) hired Jackson to engineer the construction of Kern Island Canal. He and the recently-formed Kern Island Irrigating Canal Company employed Chinese labor from San Francisco to create the canal starting at the Kern River below Panorama Bluffs and continuing south past the east side of Bakersfield. Jackson was busy with its construction in January 1871. (William Harland Boyd. *Lower Kern River County, 1850-1950: Wilderness to Empire*. Bakersfield, California, Kern County Historical Society, 1997, p 3. Lynn Hay Rudy. *Old Bakersfield: Sites and Landmarks, 1875-1915*. Jenner, California, 2000)

*"Next in order was a dance in which the 'children of a larger growth' took a prominent part. A sumptuous and elegant lunch was spread out during the evening and was partaken of with much gusto by all. Between the dances several songs were sung with good effect. It was 2 o'clock A.M. before the festival was brought to a close."*³

*"The attendance was larger than we had expected to find, and what was better than all else, was the genial flow of generous feeling which enters the heart to warm and make one feel that there are sunny spots in this life after all."*⁴



Harper's Weekly, January 2, 1869

*"On behalf of the pupils, Mr. Jackson gave hearty thanks to the numerous friends who so liberally contributed to the festivities. He trusted it would not be invidious to personally thank the Bachelor Committee for their labor, their music, and their untiring and successful efforts to make the entertainment for the night."*⁵

³ Col. Andrew R. Jackson did not stay long as the teacher. In 1870 trustees of Swamp Land District No. 111 (which included Julius Chester, Col. Thomas Baker, and San Francisco investor H.P. Livermore) hired Jackson to engineer the construction of Kern Island Canal. He and the recently-formed Kern Island Irrigating Canal Company employed Chinese labor from San Francisco to create the canal starting at the Kern River below Panorama Bluffs and continuing it south past the east side of Bakersfield. Jackson was busy with its construction in January 1871. (William Harland Boyd. *Lower Kern River County, 1850-1950: Wilderness to Empire*. Bakersfield, California, Kern County Historical Society, 1997, p 3. Lynn Hay Rudy. *Old Bakersfield: Sites and Landmarks, 1875-1915*. Jenner, California, 2000)

⁴ Kern County Weekly Courier, Dec 29, 1869

⁵ Ibid.

On the night of the schoolhouse festivities, Col. Baker's house almost burned down. Someone had left a lighted candle on a trunk next to the most southerly bedroom window, and when the people at home were retiring to sleep a gust of wind blew a bedroom curtain into the flame. The burning mass caught the bedspread afire, but the conflagration was soon discovered and extinguished.⁶ Perhaps that near tragedy was another reason why the newspaper concluded its story about the schoolhouse with the words *"Altogether it was a Merry Christmas, and we cannot better conclude than by saying, 'Many returns of the same!'"*⁷

Bakersfield youth were again mentioned on February 4, 1870 when the Courier wrote, *"On Friday evening the Bakersfield Specimens of 'Young America' joined heartily in the pleasures of a dance at the house of Col. Baker. There were grown people enough in attendance to keep 'Young America' within bounds – the latter courteously giving the elder ones an occasional opportunity to participate in the dance. We are decidedly in favor of allowing all young people – that is, those between the ages of five and forty-five – the advantages of innocent pleasures at home: they tend to keep them out of bad company and to render them at ease in society; besides, an occasional reunion at a private house, where all undue restraints are dispensed with, tends to create and keep up a good neighborly feeling in the community."*⁸

A week before that dance, A.R. Jackson and his assistant Miss Callie Gilbert had reopened the schoolhouse, which the newspaper described as "a credit to the public spirit of the people,"⁹ and it was a credit in another way, too. The editor of the Courier recalled, *"It was a great pleasure to me to preach in this building, which, by the way, was built for both school and church purposes. It was well-filled morning and evening by a very orderly congregation ..."*¹⁰

The 40x60-ft, brick schoolhouse/church, built in spring 1869, was well lighted and quite properly ventilated for its 40 to 50 pupils. It also boasted a flat, painted ceiling and green shades, but by this date the building needed work for the comfort and convenience of teachers and pupils.¹¹ But school improvements in 1870 depended on individual contributions, not taxation, and for that the newspaper also asked the support from *"those who have no children to educate."*¹²

Community funding arrived in the form of a benefit dance organized by Col. Thomas Baker, Richard Hudnut, and F.A. Tracey [sic] and held that April.¹³ Tickets were two dollars apiece and available at Cohn & Jacoby's and Livermore & Chester's stores and

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Kern County Weekly Courier, Feb 8, 1870

⁹ Kern County Weekly Courier, Mar 29, 1870

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Kern County Weekly Courier, Feb 15, 1870, p 3; Kern County Weekly Courier, Mar 22, 1870.

The brick used for the school/church was probably fired-adobe block, which was the material used when the 60x30-ft Livermore and Chester store was under construction in summer 1870. (Kern County Weekly Courier, Jul 4, 1870, p 3

¹³ Fernand A. Tracy

at Tungate's Saloon.¹⁴ The Courier wrote, "*The ladies of the neighborhood will furnish all refreshments required, and a spacious hall, having been tendered for the occasion, free of charge, it only remains for the dancers to pay the fiddlers. In that case the entire proceeds of the tickets sold will be appropriated to the fund for school house repairs.*"¹⁵

(Postscript: Someday I will look for the outcome of that fundraiser, but given the great affection Bakersfield held for its school, I'm sure the dance was a success. —Gilbert Gia)

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¹⁴ Kern County Weekly Courier, Mar 22, 1870. Today's equivalent value is about \$35.

¹⁵ Mar 29, 1870. The spacious hall, called as Norton's new building, was used for many public events for the next two or three years, but little else is presently known about it or Norton himself. A Thomas Norton, age 31, registered to vote on Oct 15, 1866 in Kern County, Calif, and a Norton in Kern County was in mining and timber businesses in the late 1860s and early 1870s. In the late 1890s a Thomas Norton, MD, constructed commercial buildings in San Luis Obispo, Calif. [See *One Hundred Years Ago, 1897*, a compilation of articles from the San Luis Obispo Morning Tribune created by Wilmar N. Tognazzini, 2160 San Bernardo Creek Rd, Morro Bay, Calif. 93442-2405. <http://wntog.tripod.com/97.html>]