



Historic Bakersfield & Kern County, California
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Ancient Tree at the Padre Hotel

by Gilbert P. Gia

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The Padre Hotel was only in its planning stages in June 1927, but other construction was underway in Bakersfield at the Hotel El Tejon's new annex in downtown at Truxtun and K, and other workmen were busy at 17th and Chester just next door to the El Tejon. There, the men were finishing-up a brick facade on Haberfelde's five-story office building.¹

Two months earlier, stockholders of the Padre Hotel Corporation had elected a board of directors that had determined that the Padre could be built and ready for the 1928 tourist season. But months passed before ground was broken, and some of that delay had to do with an enormous tree that Judge Ben Brundage originally planted next to his house in December 1874.²

¹ Bakersfield Californian, Jun 3, July 22, 1927

² Bakersfield Californian, Jun 22, 1927. The directors were Ben H. Sill, W.E. Drury, L.V. Olcese, H.J. Brandt, Herbert H. Schisler, Arthur S. Crites, and J.L. McMahan.



US Post Office, left, Padre Hotel, and at right the Padre Parking Garage

But first some background about the Padre. Los Angeles architectural firm John M. Cooper designed the eight-story, 196-room Padre and incorporated features gleaned from other buildings. One was the Padre's lobby, called Peacock Alley, which drew its inspiration from the lobby of the Los Angeles Biltmore. Cooper's design also provided for an additional four floors in the event they were someday wanted.³ The additional cost for a more massive foundation to support that future weight seemed to have merit in 1927 when the economy of Bakersfield promising. Los Angeles and San Diego hotel managers Ray S. Cummings and Ira S. Pierce thought so, too, and they had already signed a 20-year lease on the Padre, which was still nothing more than paper plans.⁴

³ Bakersfield Californian, Jun 28, 1927. The additional floors were never built.

⁴ Bakersfield Californian, Jun 22, 1927

The Padre Hotel Corporation hired John M. Cooper Co. of Los Angeles as general contractor, and excavation work for the basement and foundations went to Clyde Hartman of Bakersfield. Both would use local labor.⁵

The Padre was eventually built on Judge Benjamin Brundage's estate, and at the time that the Padre Corporation was formed, Brundage's old house still stood at the northwest corner of 18th and H.⁶ The new hotel, at an estimated cost of \$600,000, would become the largest, and tallest, building in Bakersfield, and investors projected that it would raise property values around F, G, and H streets and establish the area as a new business district.⁷

Unexpected problems arose that caused the chief engineer to modify the plans,⁸ and one of those modifications probably had to do with an "ancient tree," on the property, which were the exact words used by Bakersfield Californian, which observed,

"Early in the planning of the hotel it had been hoped that the giant Brundage eucalyptus tree on the Eighteenth street side of the hotel site might be saved both as a landmark and to provide an artistic natural shelter for the hotel front, but this was found impractical, however. Limbs on the north side of the tree would have to be removed, adding to the tree's off-balance noticeable by the distinct lean to the south across Eighteenth street.

⁵ Bakersfield Californian, Jul 13, 1927

⁶ The hotel shared frontage on 18th with the US Post Office, built in 1924 with Federal funds stemming from the work of US Representative Sylvester Clark Smith of Bakersfield. The post office was built on the Benjamin L. Brundage estate. Brundage (died in 1911) also owned a 175-acre ranch on South Union avenue, from which the street name Brundage Lane derives. (Morgan, Wallace Melvin. History of Kern County, California. Los Angeles, CA: Historic Record Company, 1914.)

⁷ Bakersfield Californian, Jun 22, 1927

⁸ Ibid.

The engineer feared that the tree might not be strong enough to stand the sudden change in balance, and it was feared also that roots eventually might cave in the cement walls that will line the hotel's 14-foot deep basement excavation."⁹

The chief engineer had reason for concern. The Padre's basement would house a banquet hall and ballroom, storage for eight, street-level shops, and the hotel's ventilating and heating systems.¹⁰



"Tilly the Toiler" probably looked like this 1927 model

The old home was razed in June, and work on the hotel began in earnest.¹¹ On July 15, 1927 the ancient tree was cut down, and a day later Clyde Hatman's "Tillie the Toiler" heavy-duty caterpillar with a "wicked clamshell scoop" was being driven to the site to excavate for the hotel's basement and

⁹ Bakersfield Californian, Jul 15, 1927

¹⁰ Bakersfield Californian, Jul 13, 1927

¹¹ Bakersfield Californian, Jun 28, 1927

foundations. As Tillie clanked onto the property the great Brundage tree was being sawed up, loaded, and hauled away.¹²

S. Ward Woody worked on construction of the hotel's foundation, and he recalled that the water table was almost at ground level: "You couldn't even ---well, you could just stick a spade in the ground, and you'd get water. During construction of the Padre Hotel, they had to keep pumps going there continuously to be able to put the cement footings in there, for the water not to wash it out."¹³

Pumping solved the problem, the basement and foundations were completed, and in the second week of August 1927 the hotel's first-floor slab was poured. The Padre's grand opening of April 12, 1928 was a notable Bakersfield event, and the hotel was an immediate success.

In retrospect, the enormous Brundage tree was not especially old, but it had enjoyed a deep, 53-year drink.

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¹² Bakersfield Californian, Jul 16, 1927

¹³ S. Ward Woody, "Family Life and Ranching," Pioneer Memory Days Transcripts. Interviews with Sixteen Older Residents of Kern County. Recorded at Pioneer Village Museum in Bakersfield during October and November 1977 by Employees of the US Bureau of Land Management." Typed in 1986 for the Library of California State College, Bakersfield, from "transcripts loaned by a member of the Kern County Historical Society."