



Gilbert Gia's Historic Bakersfield and Kern County

Community in Time of Epidemic (ver 2)

By Gilbert Gia
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In spring 1918, a killing influenza broke out at Camp Funston, Kansas, and spread rapidly across the country. About half the country became sick, but for inexplicable reasons the deaths were mostly among young adults. The worst month was October when 195,000 Americans died of the virus.

The Great Pandemic came to California in the last days of September 1918 at the towns of Belvedere and San Gabriel in Los Angeles County. The next week more than 500 cases were reported. By the beginning of November there were more than 115,000 cases and hundreds of deaths across the California.¹

At the settlement of Pond, a few miles southwest of Delano, Dr. John A. Copeland was overwhelmed by the number of families struck down by the flu. In one household there, Librado Ollivares, his wife Teresa, and two of their five young children were desperately sick. Their salvation came in the form of a young male nurse from Letterman Hospital in San Francisco who moved in with them and for the next three weeks fed and cared for the family.²

In January 1919 the infection rate was high in Bakersfield, but new infections were not announced until the end of the month when Kern County Health Officer, Samuel C. Long, MD, made his report. Local hospitals were busy. Two cases were at Mercy, three at San Joaquin, seven at Kern County Hospital, and ten at Victory Sanitarium. Reese's Hospital at 19th and Union Avenue was full, and the Eagles banquet hall had been converted to care for those sick from the flu. Schools absences closed classes, and the *Bakersfield Californian* cautioned

¹ www.pandemicflu.gov/general/greatpandemic.html

² The author's mother-in-law was one of the children. She did not remember the man's name but was sure she would have died if it were not for his help.

readers to remain calm and avoid crowds.³



Bakersfield's population was then 18,000, and the town was more deeply connected and interdependent than today. Neighbors delivered soup to sick neighbors, and help in many other ways came both small and large. This story from the February 1, 1919 *Californian* is about one of those kindnesses.

Mrs. Seiko Kinoshita was a pregnant, young mother of three small boys. In fall 1918 she was stricken with influenza, and the Red Cross cared for her at their emergency hospital in the Kern County High School gym. Although Mrs. Kinoshita recovered from the flu, she died about a day or two after she gave birth. The five-pound baby girl faced a hard struggle for existence.

Red Cross made an appeal for someone to care for the infant, and among the many who came forward was Mrs. Kate Bush of 2415 M Street. Living in the Bush home were her husband Ralph, a barber; Addie, their seventeen year-old daughter; Katherine who was Kate's aged mother; Antonette, a boarder who worked for Dr. Goodstone; and Bert and Bernice Davis.

³ *Bakersfield Californian*, Jan 29, 1919. The new swimming plunge at KCUHS, the high school in Bakersfield, had not been opened because of the epidemic. (*Bakersfield Californian*, Jan 25, 1919)

Careful nurturing by Kate Bush brought about a quick gain in the infant's health and strength, and, wrote the *Californian*, "The little child has grown into a vigorous specimen of Japanese babyhood. At the age of three months she smiles and coos at her foster-mother and seems to take a great deal of interest in the big world around her."

"Because her Japanese name is hard to say, and because she resembles nothing so much as a rosebud, her foster parents call her Rosie, and so does her own father. Mr. Kinoshita will take the baby and her three little brothers back to Japan next month, place them in the care of his sister, and then return to the United States."

"Mrs. Bush and the other members of her household have become very much attached to the baby and are loath to see her go. The child's father is more than grateful to Mrs. Bush for her generous care of the baby and feels that the little one owes her life to her foster mother. Mr. Kinoshita had Rosie's picture taken with Mrs. Bush so that he may give it to little Rosie when she grows up."