

Looking Back At Historic Kern

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A History of Tupman, California

By Jerald M. Kirkland

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Tupman, a small community on the eastern fringe of the Elk Hills in Kern County, was a child of the Standard Oil Company, born along with the discovery of oil in the Elk Hills almost a hundred years ago.

Telling its story proved to be more difficult than anticipated simply because Tupman has virtually no recorded history from which to draw. It was neither a town nor a city and thus had no governing body to assume the responsibility for keeping and maintaining records. It was large enough at one time to have been designated a town (loosely defined as being larger than a village and smaller than a city) but too small to consider incorporating. Included in this history are details of Tupman's origins which are well documented, and a few newspaper accounts of community events that provide us with a glimpse of life in Tupman during more prosperous times.

Also included are the invaluable remembrances of Orbin Yates, a resident of Tupman since 1950. Mr. Yates offers a description of Tupman in more prosperous times, times when there were thriving businesses on Emmons Street – grocery stores, service stations, boarding houses, even an active mine! He has thoughts, too, on why Tupman failed to thrive.

A Black Gold Bonanza

A number of Westside towns – among them Maricopa, Taft, Fellows and McKittrick – grew out of the oil boom of the early 1900s. Thousands of hopefuls poured into the area, some thinking to get rich, others just looking for work. Within a matter of months, these little settlements were transformed into vibrant communities with hotels, saloons, churches, general stores and schools. Some even had opera houses, race tracks, newspapers, train stations and much more, including bawdy houses. More than anything else, the railroads that ran through each of these towns represented new-found prosperity. Trains provided relatively fast and comfortable transportation between stops and, more importantly, were the means by which a seemingly endless flow of oil was carried to market.

The notion that the production of “black gold” would continue forever proved to be a myth, of course; the wells continued to flow but there was a steady decline in the amount of oil being produced. By the time the 1930s arrived, many wells had quit producing and were abandoned; others were producing so little that it did not pay to keep them on the pump and they were shut in. With both production and prosperity on a downward spiral, oilfield work became harder and harder to come by, money became scarce and businesses were forced to close their doors. And with fewer and fewer passengers to transport and considerably less oil to ship, there was little need for rail service. Tracks were taken up and depots abandoned. At that point, townspeople, having little reason to remain, began to drift away,

leaving in their wake communities that today are little more than ghost towns, Taft being the sole exception.

It was a rags-to-riches and back-to-rags story that would be repeated in towns and communities all along the Westside. For some, such as Reward and Browngold, nothing remains to suggest that they ever existed.

Standard Oil, Elk Hills and the School Section

In 1909, with the Westside oil boom still in its infancy, Standard Oil purchased a section of land some fifteen miles east of McKittrick. Part of a federal land grant, the official designation of the property was Section 36, T30S, R24E. Records indicate that Standard had no immediate plans to drill there, that it was for speculation only. The land grant agreement stipulated that funds generated by the sale or lease of Section 36 of each township were intended to aid in the development of the school systems. For that reason, the property acquired by Standard Oil was often referred to as the "school section".

Note: The following point of interest was taken from *Public Schools and the Original Federal Land Grant Programs*, a background paper from the Center of Educational Policy (April 2011): "From the late 18th century through the middle of the 20th century, the federal government granted control of millions of acres of federal land to each state as it entered the Union. These lands were given in trust, with the stipulation that proceeds from their sale or lease be used to support various public institutions – most notably public elementary and secondary schools and universities. The policy of land grants for public education continued to be endorsed in federal laws spanning from the Jefferson Administration through the Eisenhower Administration. Even today, in states that still hold the original land grants, funds for the support

of education come from a range of land uses, including agriculture, sales of oil and gas reserves, and commercial development.”

In 1912, fearing loss of a domestic source of fuel for the U.S. Navy, President William Howard Taft issued an executive order creating Naval Petroleum Reserve No. 1 at Elk Hills. Although the 38,000-acre reserve included the “school section”, the government did not challenge Standard Oil’s ownership.

Because it usually involves luck and hard work in equal proportions, there is considerable truth in the old adage that oil is where you find it, and while scientific advances in recent decades have improved the odds, searching for oil in the early part of the 20th Century was highly speculative. The events in the years following the drilling of the discovery well in Elk Hills prove the point.

By 1918, some 20 companies had drilled 35 wells in the unproven Elk Hills area, finding only small amounts of oil and gas. In December of that year, Standard Oil began drilling a well on their school section. The first well was designated Hays #1 and was completed early in 1919. Flowing at a rate of just over 250 barrels per day, Hays #1 was considered only a modest discovery but it nonetheless drew a lot of attention and Standard Oil moved immediately to develop the field. The fourth well drilled produced natural gas at a world record rate but little oil. Then, in February of 1920, the completion of Tupman #1 changed everything. Drilled to a depth of 2,828 feet, it began flowing at a rate of 3,000 to 3,500 barrels a day, a rate that soon increased to 6,000 barrels a day.

The company was not prepared to deal with such volume. The December, 1920 issue of the *Standard Oil Bulletin* offered this description: “When it began to flow, there was nothing in the barren area except the one rig – no storage facilities and no pipelines. Some 150 workers hastily built temporary

sumps to contain the oil and two 500 barrel tanks were brought in from Taft. A pipeline from Taft to Bakersfield was under construction at the time and fortunately was only two and a half miles from the well. Within 48 hours, the two storage tanks had been set up, the pipeline completed and pumps installed.”

That oil, moving from the well directly to the refinery in Bakersfield, heralded the opening of the huge Elk Hills field. At the end of one year, Tupman No.1 had produced over 1.3 million barrels of oil and was still flowing at a rate of 1,500 to 2,000 barrels per day. Eighteen other wells had been drilled on this same lease and, collectively, these wells produced about 40,000 barrels per day.

By late 1920 three hundred men were at work on the Elk Hills lease and, because the area was so isolated, Standard began searching for a way to provide housing for them and their families. Two oil camps - which were really small towns - were established on the Elk Hills lease - one called Hays-Carmen and the other known as the Tupman Camp. In addition to the company offices, each camp included cottages for families, bunkhouses for single men, a recreation hall, a one-room schoolhouse and a stable that housed five tractors along with 75 horses and mules. The cookhouses served as many as 900 meals each day.

In 1921, as the number of employees continued to increase, Standard Oil purchased a half section of land just east of their Elk Hills lease from Hamer I. Tupman. The company's express purpose was to develop the 320-acre parcel as a townsite.

Hamer I. Tupman

Hamer Tupman was a prominent member of the Bakersfield business community. In addition to the 320 acre parcel that he sold to Standard Oil, Tupman retained an interest in several other oil leases near Elk Hills.

He and his wife had been members of a party of Kentucky colonists who came to California in 1892 with plans to settle in the Fresno area. After visiting with some friends in Rosedale, however, they decided to make their home there. Once settled, Tupman began working as a water clerk for the Kern County Land Company but left there in 1898 to take over as head of the Kern County Abstract Company. He remained in that position until 1923, at which time he sold the business to Title Insurance and Trust Company.

**Well Known Business Man
Will Be Candidate in
Fifth (Bakersfield)
District.**

Mr. Morris P. Flickinger, well known business man and member of the Bakersfield city board of education, yesterday announced his candidacy for the office of Supervisor from the Fifth (Bakersfield) district. The office is now filled by Mr. H. I. Tupman, also of Bakersfield. The Fifth district includes all of West Bakersfield.

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Bakersfield Morning Echo, Apr 25, 1920

In 1918, Tupman built a large home on D Street (later called Oleander Avenue) a block north of Chester Lane, an area favored by the well-to-do at the time. Always active in community affairs, he served two terms as a county supervisor and, in 1928, was appointed to the board of the Kern

County Levee District which had been formed by the board of supervisors to monitor construction and maintenance of levees along the Kern River

After retiring from public service, Tupman devoted several years to raising cattle. He died in 1952.

Tupman, Standard Oil's Company Town

While the Tupman townsite would not be officially opened for development until January 31, 1925, a few businesses began operating there two or three years prior to that date. It was an ill-fated move for some. The *Morning Echo* of July 25, 1922, reported that a fire destroyed a store, a restaurant and the dance hall in Tupman. With no means for controlling the flames, the buildings were completely destroyed, the loss estimated at between \$10,000 and \$15,000.

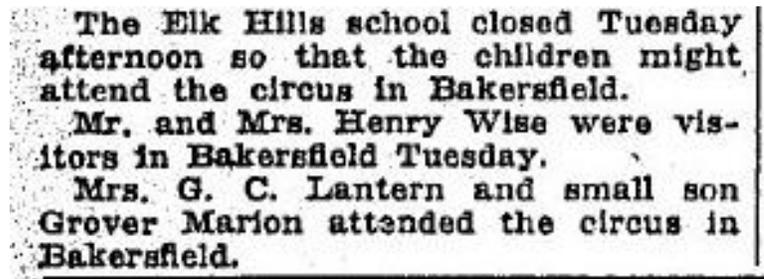
Two and a half years later, a large ad in the *Morning Echo*, dated February 1, 1925, offered lots for sale and named Thomas McManus as the developer and realtor of the Tupman properties. The ad called Tupman the "City of Necessity" and went on to state that it was "destined to be the most thriving oil town in the west." Seventeen lots were sold before they were even on the market, and 25 new homes were completed and ready for occupancy within a month of the opening. Accounts vary, but if the ad was accurate, Tupman had a store, a post office and an apartment house with a butcher shop, ice house, pool hall and drugstore soon to be added

community, Tupman didn't have elected officials, a police force or fire department, relying instead on services provided by county agencies. Another distinction that may be drawn is that in all communities of this nature, which are not officially recognized, property boundaries may be called into question and ultimately are resolved by Census officials who, in turn, rely on information from local residents and neighboring officials.

Following are some newspaper accounts of activities in Tupman in the early years of its existence. It is obvious that there were many events within a very active social circle. Unless otherwise noted, these articles were taken from the Taft Midway Driller.

- April 16, 1925: Mrs. E. E. Bradford entertained friends at an Easter picnic. Edward Bolerjack from the Pan American lease was present. Other guests included: Mrs. Grover Tarwater, Misses Mildred and Dorothy Tarwater, Mrs. Boron, Misses Vera and Margaret Boron, Mrs. De Lilles and Mrs. Fred Hayes.

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The Elk Hills school closed Tuesday afternoon so that the children might attend the circus in Bakersfield. Mr. and Mrs. Henry Wise were visitors in Bakersfield Tuesday. Mrs. G. C. Lantern and small son Grover Marion attended the circus in Bakersfield.

Bakersfield Californian, April 16, 1925

- October 1, 1927: The Tupman Harmony Circle is planning a box social on the 12th at the Tupman Hall. Public invited.

Year's Work Ended by Tupman School

TUPMAN, June 9.—The grammar school closed its year's work with an entertainment on Thursday evening. This was the first commencement exercises held in the new building and the large auditorium was filled with parents and friends. The program was an exceedingly good one and much credit is due the teachers who directed it. Mr. Walton, vice-principal of the Taft High school, delivered an interesting and instructive address; later presenting 14 graduates with their diplomas.

The ladies of the P. T. A. made and presented old-fashioned bouquets to the girl graduates and lapel flowers to the boys.

Wednesday evening the P. T. A. gave a banquet honoring the graduates. Mrs. Haley was toastmistress.

Appreciation of the community is extended to the P. T. A. for its courtesy to the graduates and to all others who donated their time and services.

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Bakersfield Californian, June 9, 1928

- Bakersfield Californian, July 31, 1929: The first telephones have been installed connecting Tupman for the first time to the outside world. The line from Taft to Tupman is operated by the Kern Mutual Telephone. A toll station has been established at the mercantile store in Tupman and the 200 residents may now communicate with Westside communities for a small toll rate.
- May 7, 1938: The Tupman Baptist Church, J.D. Page, Pastor, Sunday School at 10 a.m. supervised by Mrs. Earl McFarland. Preaching services every first and third Sundays. BYPU (youth organization) meeting at 7p.m. Leader - Juanita McFarland.

A Visit With Orbin Yates

While most of Tupman's buildings have suffered considerable deterioration - many having been boarded up and/or abandoned - a number of old timers continue to reside there. One is Orbin Yates. Mr. Yates's family moved to Tupman in 1950 when he was ten and with the exception of three years working in Southeast Asia, has called Tupman his home since that time. Mr. Yates is by trade a millwright and he contracted his services to the oil companies.

As a youngster, Mr. Yates recalls there being two large boarding houses sitting next to each other on Emmons Blvd., Tupman's main north/south thoroughfare. One was on the site presently occupied by the post office, the other very close by. Next to the boarding houses was Duke's service station, then Poston's Market. Further down was a Standard Oil service station and an auto repair shop. On the opposite side of Emmons Blvd. was the U.S. Post Office building, also home to a small branch library. At one time there were two churches in Tupman, a Pentecostal Church of God and a Baptist Church. The Baptist building remains but is boarded up. In the 1960s, a popular hangout was a beer bar called the Tup Hut.

Mr. Yates also recalls that a mine was operated on the north end of town. While he is uncertain as to the nature of the material being removed from the mine, he clearly recalls a mineshaft, a conveyer belt that moved ore to the surface, and a derrick at the mine entrance. The mine, long abandoned, has been filled in and all but forgotten.

Mr. Yates estimates that, at its peak, there were some 300 souls living in Tupman. The residential lots were long and narrow, 35' X 140', and the houses had fewer than a thousand square feet of living space. He thinks that today about 35% of current residents are retired, 35% are employed, most

of them in the oilfields, and the remainder are on welfare. Drugs have been a problem but less now than a few years back.

While there were no doubt other contributing factors, Mr. Yates feels that the community's businesses suffered when the state opted to move the Tule Elk Preserve. For many years the visitor's entrance was right in Tupman and the preserve property was almost a contiguous part of the community. It was moved sometime in the 1970s to its current location which is some miles distant.



Tule Elk. Tupman in distance

The Elk Hills School

The Elk Hills School District was formed in February of 1921 to accommodate children of the workers on the Elk Hills lease. The district's first school was located on the Standard Oil Main Lease. Catherine Labarthe, who started school there in 1922, described the school as "a ready cut' 3-room house that had to be put together by company carpenters using a set of plans."¹ She went on to describe the building as having two large classrooms plus a

¹ Compiled by Mary McCarthy from a brief district history written by Mrs. Catherine Labarthe. Oct 2, 1980

smaller room that served as a kitchen. The kitchen had a 2-burner hot plate, sink, a cupboard and a hot water heater.

Average daily attendance that first year was 31 students.

A \$25,000 bond issue was passed in May of 1921, and those funds were used "for the purchase of school lots, the purchase or building of more school buildings, insuring same, furniture for new buildings and the improvement of school properties."²

By 1927 the district's ADA had grown to 93 students and there was need for a larger facility.³ In July of that year the district advertised for bids by contractors for "the erection and completion of a school building and garage." The new facility was located on knoll above town. It was built at a cost of \$56,000 and was designed to adjoin "the old wood-frame building." It consisted of four large classrooms, an auditorium seating 250 students and a garage for eight cars and two buses.⁴ By the next year, ADA had risen to 120 students.

² Kern County approved the town plots for Tupman on Aug 27, 1923.

³ Bakersfield Californian, Jul 8, 1927. Elk Hills School had 115 students and three teachers.

⁴ Bakersfield Californian, Jul 30, 1927. Architect Charles E. Butner designed the school in Spanish architectural style.

TUPMAN TO RUSH CITY BEAUTIFUL GARDEN PROJECT

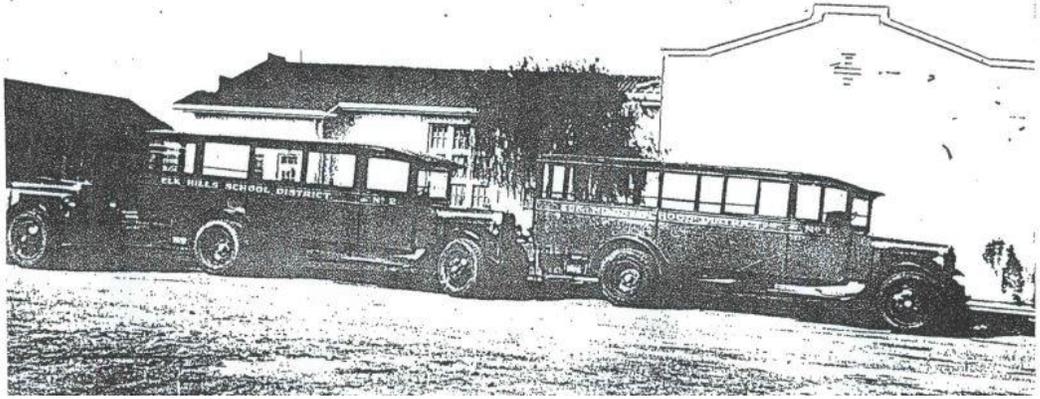
Continuing its program to make Tupman one of the most beautiful cities in the West Side oil fields, the Tupman Chamber of Commerce will hold the second of its series of garden and lawn meetings Monday night in the Elk Hills school house.

Harry Holmes, instructor in the agricultural department of the Bakersfield high school, will address the residents of Tupman on gardening and landscaping. The meeting will be called to order at 7:30 p. m. by A. F. Haley, president of the chamber of commerce.

With a view to making Tupman a city of beautiful homes, gardens and trees, a group of representative citizens held their first meeting February 16 and organized the Tupman Chamber of Commerce. A. F. Haley was elected president, Mrs. Olive Bivins was selected for the chair of vice-president and Mrs. May McCormick was made secretary. Henry Wise, J. S. Brown, F. N. Scott, Henry Dole and C. H. Traweck were elected members of the board of directors.

This spring, the little oil community will sponsor a garden contest, backed by the Bakersfield Garden Club, and Alfred Harrell of Bakersfield has offered a \$25 prize to the owner of the most beautiful garden in Tupman.

Bakersfield Californian, February 26, 1927



Elk Hills School, 1929-1930. Elk Hills School District Archive

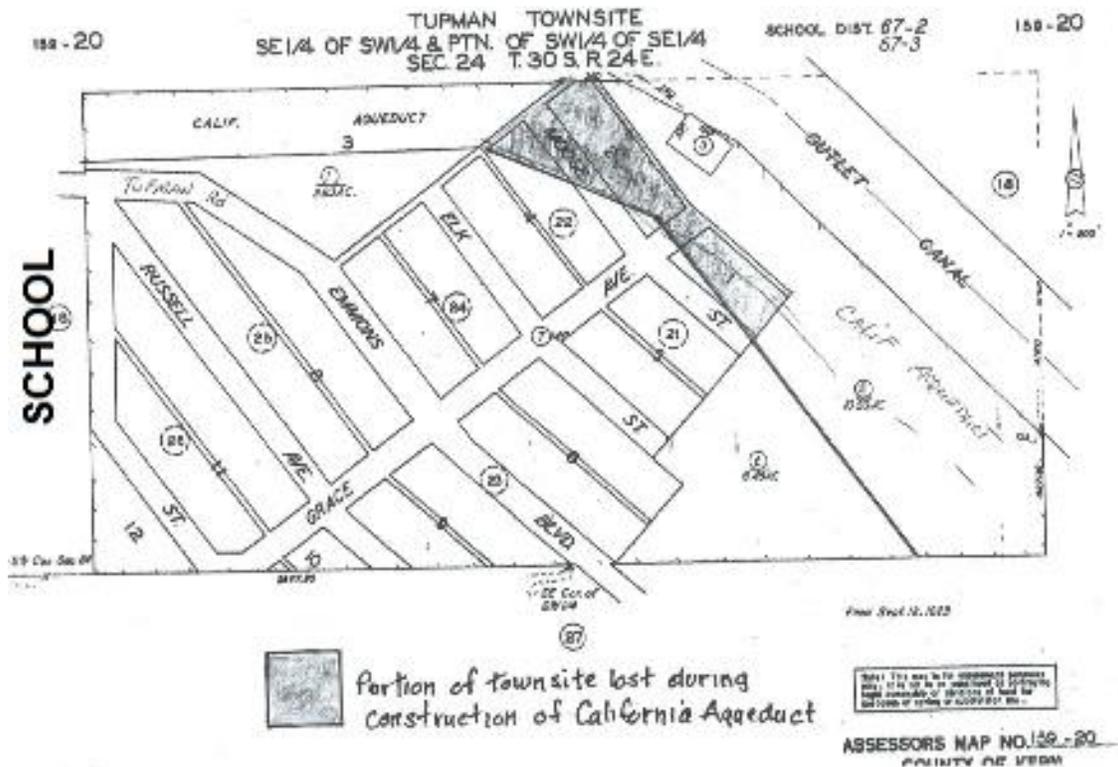
DAILY AFFAIRS

TUPMAN, June 17.—The teachers of the Elk Hills Grammar school have left on their vacations to various places. Miss Shannan Broeder will tour the United States with friends. Mrs. Beatrice Cregier will spend the summer in a summer school at San Francisco. Mr. C. E. Lindblom will attend summer school at Stanford at Palo Alto. Mr. and Mrs. John Ross and son, Jimmie, motored to Corvallis, Ore., to attend a summer school. Juanita McFarland accompanied them. Miss Dorothy Maddern will attend summer school.

Bakersfield Californian, June 8, 1938

This school building remained in use until 1952 when it was damaged by that year's major earthquake and deemed no longer safe for occupancy. In 1953, voters approved a \$550,000 bond issue, and a new school was built and opened in 1954. That building is still in use today.

District enrollment peaked at 176 students in 1956. A steady decline followed. By 1961 the ADA had fallen to 115 students. In 1968, after the homes on two of Tupman's streets were leveled to allow for construction of the California Aquaduct, ADA was just over 100 students.



Annotation: Jerald M. Kirkland

Orbin Yates was elected and served one term on the school board of the Elk Hills School District. He is certain that the five cottages with the red tile roofs were built early on as residences for teachers.



View from Tupman Road of Spanish-revival teacherages. Image: Gilbert P. Gia



View from school parking lot. Aqueduct behind. Image: Gilbert P. Gia

The cottages were designed by architect Ira W. Hoover.

Notice of building completion was posted July 22, 1936, Kern County Hall of Records.

Research compliments of architectural historian John Edward Powell.



Elk Hills School, left. At right, Tupman. Google Maps

There is no doubt a correlation between the Elk Hills School's enrollment and the population of Tupman with both showing a steady decline beginning in the early 1960s. In 1970, ADA was down to 90 students. In 1975, it was down to 75 students. By 1980, it had fallen to just 54 students. Average daily attendance shot up to 109 in 1992 but by 1997 had fallen again to just 63.

In recent years the Elk Hills District has increased enrollment by taking out-of-district students through interdistrict transfers and via the "District of Choice" program. Enrollment at the end of the school year in 2013 was 199 students. Of those, 135 were "School of Choice", 21 were on interdistrict transfers and just 43 were from within district boundaries.

Tupman Today

Tupman prospered and seemed to have the best of all worlds when the Richfield Oil Company (later to be called the Atlantic-Richfield Oil Company,

or ARCO, and now a part of British Petroleum) began drilling operations in 1938 on their North Coles Levee lease immediately to the east of Tupman. That offered more employment opportunities for workers living in Tupman since North Coles Levee would eventually develop into a major oil field.

3 Big Headlines From Tupman Is Quota for Year

By **BLANCHE GAMBY**

TUPMAN in size is a small town but it has experienced a busy year with the rich Elk Hills oil district on one side and productive farms on the other. According to population Tupman has one of the richest school districts in the United States and citizens here are proud of the school records during the past year.



Three times has news broken here focusing the eyes of newspaper readers in many cities on this little community during 1938. On May 1 a cloudburst washed out roads and bridges but chief interest was drawn by the fact that hail fell to a depth of 4 inches on nearby oil leases.

Immediately after drowning of young and popular Julian Achatz on June 23 a controversy broke out in the press on the authenticity of reports that there were alligators in the slough near here. Arguments raged for weeks.

The third headline event was the discovery of a new oil field near here by the Richfield Oil Company on November 27. The new year is expected to bring an oil boom to Tupman.

Blanche Gamby

Bakersfield Californian, January 2, 1939

Sandwiched between two giant oil producers, it seemed that Tupman would enjoy prosperity well into the future, but, in fact, Tupman was destined to follow the same path to oblivion - albeit a few years later - as did Maricopa, Fellows and McKittrick. Unlike those towns, however, Tupman's decline was not related to a fall off of production in the Elk Hills field. Most likely it was related to the cessation of drilling operations. Tupman residents who worked in Elk Hills began working there when drilling operations were at their peak, the most active period in the development of any oilfield. But drilling operations were all but ended by 1950 and most producing wells were shut in as the Navy opted to keep the oil reserves stored underground. Wells were tested on a regular basis and production was limited to oil produced during testing. These conditions prevailed until the mid-1970s when many wells were put back on line.

The 2000 census recorded Tupman's population at 227 living in 66 households. Median income at that time was \$27,000 per year per household. By 2010, the census population had dropped to 161 in 55 households. At that time there were 73 housing units of which 34 were owner occupied, 21 were rentals, the remaining 18 unoccupied.

It seems today there is nothing to prevent Tupman's slow but steady decline and eventual return to dust. There are no businesses, not even a convenience store. Many of the houses have been abandoned and many of those still occupied are in poor repair. There are no curbs and gutters and the streets are in need of repair. It does not bode well for

the future of any community when the nicest looking, most modern building in town is the post office.

Jerry Kirkland is a retired school administrator and has written extensively on the history of Kern County school districts. A student of history and long-time Civil War buff, he has devoted the last 15 years to researching and writing about people and events from Kern's past.

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