



## **Bakersfield and the Liberty Bells**

**By Gilbert P. Gia**

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On the Fourth of July 1976 at 2 pm several hundred citizens waited patiently in 90 degree heat at Chester and Truxtun to witness the first ring of the new, one-ton Liberty Bell. The peal was expected to carry ten miles, but after twenty-five tries by the Liberty Bell Foundation, the bell swung quietly on its pedestal.<sup>1</sup> The \$12,000 replica was made by Whitechappel Foundry, London, which was the same company that cast America's Liberty Bell of two centuries ago, and shouldn't it have worked? Apparently lost was the fact that the original Whitechappel bell had been melted down and recast three times here in America before it became the famous Liberty Bell we know today. Another fact lost in history was that America's Liberty Bell had been in Bakersfield many years earlier.

The Liberty Bell made its first trip out of Philadelphia in 1885 when it was sent to the World Industrial and Cotton Centennial in New Orleans. Its second trip was in 1893 when it went to the Chicago World's Fair, and two years later it was in Atlanta for the Cotton State and International Exposition. That time it made forty stops along the way, and in 1903, on its way to Charlestown, Massachusetts, it made forty-nine stops. In 1915 it was in Bakersfield.

By then the Bell was a recognized symbol of freedom, and its journey in 1915 was to bolster national pride. Europe was already at war, that January US Congress established the Coast Guard, that May the Germans torpedoed the Lusitania, and in July the US Marines occupied Haiti. Although America was still a neutral nation, nobody knew how long neutrality would last.

The Bell went out on a months-long, stop-by-stop journey with a destination of the

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<sup>1</sup> Bakersfield Californian, July 5, 1976, p1

Panama-Pacific International Exposition in San Diego.<sup>2</sup> Americas in every town along the way were eager to show their patriotism, and those stops were spirited. Joseph Gaffney who accompanied the Bell from Philadelphia was overwhelmed by the public turnout he saw everywhere. He later asserted that if Uncle Sam needed fifty million loyal Americans to fight on short notice, all he had to do was send out the Liberty Bell. In that respect, Bakersfield, as it turned out, excelled the nation.



San Diego, 1915

On September 14, 1915 Bakersfield learned that America's "dearest emblem of liberty" would depart San Francisco sometime in early November, make stops in Fresno, Dinuba, and Porterville, and continue on to Bakersfield.<sup>3</sup> On November 4th the Bell and its guard of honor departed San Francisco.

Bakersfield got a heads-up on November 9th that in two days the Liberty Bell Train would be at Southern Pacific Depot, and the city council, expecting a massive crowd to descend on East Bakersfield, ordered Baker Street closed for the day.<sup>4</sup> As the clock ticked down, lodges laid out plans for a red-white-and-blue parade. The Lady Maccabees organized a banquet for the Knights of Maccabees prior to their march to the Bell, decorating started on the SP depot, and bands practiced patriotic strains in preparation for a courthouse park concert.<sup>5</sup> The Sacramento National Guard telegraphed Captain Lucien Beer of Company L that it was okay for his men and the men of Troop A to march in the downtown parade.

It assembled in front of the Elks Club on Chester Avenue. Company L was in full-dress

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<sup>2</sup> BACA, Jul 16, 1915, "Liberty Bell Is Due At Capital This Afternoon" (Sacramento, Jul 16)

<sup>3</sup> Bakersfield Californian, Sep 14, 1915, "Liberty Bell for Bako on Nov 11"

<sup>4</sup> Bakersfield Californian, Nov 9, 1915. Bakersfield Californian, Nov 10, 1915

<sup>5</sup> In 1915 a park was at the southeast corner of Truxtun and Chester.

uniform as were the mounted soldiers of Troop A, and the Knights of Columbus were in full regalia, each man carrying a small Liberty Bell in one hand and an American flag in the other. Nearby were members of the Woman's Club, the Women's Relief Corps with their beribboned automobiles, veterans of Hurlbut Post (Grand Army of the Republic), and a long line of private autos.

In the early afternoon families showed up with their children. The Elks had announced earlier that parents of children ages six to twelve could drop off their children at the Elks' hall for transportation and could "find them there again when the autos bring them back."

About noon the train approached Bakersfield, and as it entered town Father Holden tolled the bells of St. Francis Church. The Boys' Band of East Bakersfield started playing, and a thousand children climbed on trucks decorated with bunting and flags, all supplied by Willow Furniture, King Lumber, Hochheimer & Company, and the Kern County Land Company. Assisting in transportation were private automobiles of H.R. Peacock, Fred Gunther, Roy White, and Alphonse Weill.

The railroad crossing at Baker and Sumner was closed to traffic, but no automobile could possibly have made its way through the crowd packed around the flag-and-bunting decorated Liberty Bell flatcar. One speech was delivered Superintendent of Schools Lawrence Chenoweth, who spoke on "The significance and meaning of the Liberty Bell". With speech-making over, children channeled along guide ropes toward the flatcar, climbed the platform, and one-by-one passed by the Liberty Bell.

Late that evening, at 11:15 pm, the Liberty Bell Train departed for its three-day sojourn in San Diego. There, twelve thousand schoolchildren saw the Bell, but on the 14th in Los Angeles, seventy thousand people saw it. Bakersfield's turnout was no match to those imposing figures, but for a town of sixteen thousand, Bakersfield's show of patriotism was magnificent.

US Senator Boies Penrose who accompanied the Bell on its entire trip was in San Diego when he said, "America is the melting pot for all nations. I am glad to notice how quickly the foreigners become Americans and how quickly they acquire our spirit and our patriotism. I am not one of those who believe that if immigration to the United States is not stopped that we will be destroyed from the inside. Those who come to us are glad to stay. They become Americans. Why, on our trip down the state of California, I was told that at 2:00 am 15,000 residents of a certain town were at the station to catch a glimpse of the Liberty Bell. They had waited patiently for

several hours."<sup>6</sup>

Back in Bakersfield, on July 4, 1976, the bell's dedication wasn't going so well. As the bicentennial committee struggled to ring it, a naturalized American citizen, the Rev. Nicholas Milator of St George's Greek Orthodox Church, stepped forward and asked if he could help. Within the next few moments the words of Senator Penrose from 1915 again rang true -- "how quickly they acquire our spirit and our patriotism." Rev. Nicholas Milator tugged the rope just twice, and the bell responded with a satisfying peal. When asked the secret he explained, "I did it like we did for church in Greece."

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<sup>6</sup> <https://sandieghistory.org/archives/amero/balboapark/bp1915b/> accessed Sep 2018