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A History of Boy Scouting in Kern County 1905-1952

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In 1944 Kern County Boy Scouts sold their 160-acre reservation on the Kern River east of Bakersfield. The story of how the Scouts got it and why they sold it starts with the Boys' Brigade in England and ends in the middle of an empty basketball court on the Kern River.

In 1912 when Scouting first came to Kern County it looked much like the Boys' Brigade of England.¹ In 1902 when Lt-General Robert Baden-Powell (rhymes with *Maiden-Powell*) returned to his country from the Second Boer War he was surprised to discover that an outdoor, youth group called the Boys' Brigade had adopted his British Army survival and stalking handbook. Baden-Powell's interests turned to scouting, and in 1907 he founded his own group called the Boy Scouts.

As Europe prepared for war, components of patriotism, religious education, and "Christian manliness" became goals of the Boys' Brigade. Baden-Powell rewrote his survival handbook for his Boy Scouts and retitled it *Scouting for Boys*. The pages reflected patriotic sentiments but left out religious overtones of the Boys' Brigade.

¹ *Bakersfield Californian*, Apr 3, 1912. On Apr 4, 1912 the *Morning Echo* wrote, "At Maricopa, Rev. Thomas E. Watt has been instrumental in holding together a company of the young scouts and much good has resulted there from." This suggests that the first Boy Scout troop in Kern County was organized at Maricopa.

The Baden-Powell scout uniform mixed the appearance of village policeman and colonial soldier. The grades and rankings followed those of the British Army. By 1910 Baden-Powell's Boy Scouts was so successful that it attracted the attention of King Edward VII. Edward commanded Baden-Powell to promote Boy Scouting to the world.

While Lt-General Baden-Powell was in New York he met Chicago publisher William D. Boyce who had heard about Baden-Powell Boy Scouts from his friends in the British YMCA.² A month later Boyce incorporated an all-new scouting group which he called *Boy Scouts of America (BSA)*, although by then there were many other flavors of scouting in this country. Boyce's search for organizational talent led him to director of the YMCA Edgar M. Robinson. The two joined forces, the BSA rocketed to national prominence, and within two years most of the many, various scouting groups had merged with Boy Scouts of America.³

About 1908 Captain Alvin E. Morgan of Company G, California National Guard, Bakersfield, organized Cadet Company A, a National Guard auxiliary for boys. The *Morning Echo* wrote, "Night after night he drilled the youngsters until he had a company of juvenile guardsman of which he would be justly proud."⁴ Cadet Company A set the stage for the arrival of Boy Scouting to Kern County.



² Young Men's Christian Association

³ A notable exception was the *American Boy Scouts* sponsored by publisher William Randolph Hearst. In 1912 Boy Scouts of America counted 300,000 members nation-wide. (*Bakersfield Californian*, May 2, 1912)

⁴ *Morning Echo*, Feb 21, 1913

In April 1912 Capt. Morgan and 50 boys met at Armory Hall⁵ and formed Bakersfield's first BSA troop.⁶ In May, Lee Scott of Oil Well Supply Company and Rev. Morgan of the Methodist Episcopal Church formed a Taft BSA troop. The first scoutmasters were W.C. Doris and a Taftian named Scotty Houston who had been a scout in England. The *Daily Midway Driller* explained that the purpose of the new group was to teach Westside youth to be helpful, strong, self-reliant, and resourceful, and to help them learn about outdoor life. The newspaper stressed that Boy Scouts of America was not a military group; however it did say that "although the boys learn military virtues of patriotism and loyalty, they learn by their drills the value of united action." That disposed of, the *Driller* added, "A scout is skilled in first aid to the injured... He can tie a knot that will hold, climb trees, swim, distinguish poisonous plants, and handle a boat. A scout never uses alcoholic liquors and avoids tobacco. He never swears. Leaders of the movement believe that with such training American boys will, as men, be leaders in progress, peace and all things right and good."⁷ And, too, Scouts served their communities. Charles Dumble of Bakersfield recalled that his troop delivered messages during Bakersfield's floods and that in 1922 they cut brush at the new Kern River Park east of town.⁸



⁵ 20th and H Streets

⁶ *Bakersfield Californian*, Apr 6, 1912; *Morning Echo*, Apr 13, 1912. Company A continued to meet at Armory Hall. See also *Bakersfield Californian*, Apr 13, 1912.

⁷ *Daily Midway Driller*, May 19, 1913

⁸ Charles Dumble interview with the author, 2002

Europe prepared for war, America remained neutral, and American parents preferred a non-military BSA. But the martial vestiges of the Boys' Brigade were still present. By 1914 BSA eliminated military drill, and by 1919-20 a boy scout in uniform could longer be mistaken for a soldier.

In March 1914 Roland E. Dye formed Bakersfield Troop 1.⁹ It met at Armory Hall, but in a few short years scouting was so popular that finding a place to meet was challenging. In fall 1919 Dye's boys met at First Baptist Church,¹⁰ and in the early 1920s, when Troop 7 was formed, it met at Chesbro Methodist Church in East Bakersfield. By then 12 Bakersfield grammar schools sponsored scout troops. In 1922, 13-year-old Charles Dumble's troop met variously at Franklin School, Knights of Pythias Hall, the Episcopal Church Hall at 17th and Eye, and Scoutmaster Harold Owens' garage at 17th and L.¹¹ The balance of scouts between Bakersfield and East Bakersfield was then nearly equal.¹²

Sponsors provided meeting places, but sponsorship was a two-way street. In the late-1920s, Ed Richardson operated a gas station on Baker Street, and he was also Scoutmaster of Troop 5. Sponsor was East Bakersfield Methodist Church. When the congregation sold its building and bought a lot on Beale Avenue for a new church, Richardson's scouts dug the basement by hand.¹³

⁹ Bakersfield Californian, Mar 8, 1934. Bakersfield Troop 1 was founded March 16, 1914 by request of Leslie Robinson and Women's Relief Corp.

¹⁰ Bakersfield Californian, Oct 1, 1919, p 5

¹¹ Charles Dumble interview with the author, Oct 11, 2003. Dumble was Kern County Surveyor in 1950.

¹² Charles Dumble interview with the author, 2002

¹³ Ed Richardson interview with the author, Mar 2002



Retired welder Kenneth Kramer was a scout in 1926: "When I was 12 or 13, I was in Troop 1. We used go down to the park to meet, and later we met in the basement of the Eagles Hall across from Bill McNamara's station downtown. The Boy Scouts had a camp out beyond Niles Street, and to get there we had to go to the end of Niles and then drive down an old road. They had swimming there."¹⁴ Kramer might have remembered today's Hart Park because in a December 5, 1927 story, the *Bakersfield Californian* reported that the Boy Scouts petitioned the Kern County Board of Supervisors for permission to build a cabin on an island in Kern River Park.¹⁵

Memories of men in their 80s and 90s show that Boy Scouting in Bakersfield was racially segregated. The *Californian* wrote in 1936, "A unit of colored boys, Troop 47, is being backed by the Joy Makers Club."¹⁶ Ken Kramer recalled that Scoutmaster Don Hart started a Japanese troop, and Judge Delbert Wong recalled that in the 1920s he joined a Chinese-American troop.¹⁷ In Delano, in 1924, 12-year-old Ralph Forquera attended his first Boy Scout meeting at the First Methodist Church. Forquera's parents were Chilean-Mexican, and he recalled, "I was pretty dark-skinned when I was little. I was Catholic, and Masons sponsored the troop. I could

¹⁴ Kenneth Kramer interview with the author, Oct 10, 2003

¹⁵ That year predated the creation of the park lake as it is today. Kramer might have been remembering an island in the park's hillside reservoir that was dug in 1927-1928. See *One-Hundred Years at Old Hart Park, 1890-1990* at <http://www.gilbertgia.com/articlePages/community1.html>

¹⁶ *Bakersfield Californian*, Apr 29, 1936

¹⁷ Boyd, William Harland, *The Chinese of Kern County, 1857-1960*. Kern County Historical Society, Bakersfield, California, 2002

tell by the way the kids acted that they didn't want me around. I told my Dad, and he said, 'To hell with them.' Then he told them all off. I joined a troop on the westside, and there wasn't any prejudice there." ¹⁸

Many recalled a scout camp on south side of the Kern River below the bluffs north of Bakersfield. In January 1920 Scout Executive Director Roland E. Dye honored Henry A. Jastro, Chairman of the Kern County Board of Supervisors, for his help in establishing the week-end scout camp near the foot of China Grade.¹⁹ From the 1920s to the 1950s BSA enjoyed such generous, individual philanthropy and municipal-corporate support. In November 1929 long-time Kern County resident and investor Celsus Brower bequeathed \$1,000 to the Scout Council.²⁰

Charles Dumble said that in 1922 the scouts at China Grade Camp bunked in a screened shelter. As years passed, the camp was steadily improved, and in 1925 a concrete pump house was installed. In 1927 Gus Balasis' scoutmaster was Standard Oil mechanic Harold Owens. Balasis recalled that Owners assigned each troop a designated area, but even with careful planning the China Grade camp became too small. "One summer," said Balasis, "all the troops from the whole County Council met there. We slept out on the ground."²¹



Musician Bunkey Valdez joined Boy Scouts here about 1931. He also remembered the camp west of Gordon's Ferry Bridge. Said Valdez, "There

¹⁸ Ralph Forquera interview with the author, 1986

¹⁹ *Bakersfield Californian*, Jan 10, 1920, p 4

²⁰ Equivalent to about \$12,000 in 2012

²¹ Charles Dumble interview with the author 2005

was an old fellow we called Uncle Bill who had a cabin not too far east of the bridge. He was very receptive to us kids and let us fish around his place."²²

In 1933 Kern County's population was 84,000, and 1,000 boys were in BSA. Some Kern Scout Council on J. Bruce Payne's executive board came to Bakersfield for meetings from as far away as Randsburg.²³

By the 1930s businessmen who had been Boy Scouts themselves were now benefactors. In 1934 and 1935 contributions to the transients' camp at Kern County fairgrounds also made possible large banquets for the Boy Scouts at China Grade Camp.²⁴ Officiating at a grand opening there on March 8, 1935 were National Director of BSA Louis L. McDonald, Kern Country Supervisor Roy Woollomes, and Bakersfield Police Chief Robert Powers. In addition to the new clubhouse, the Council had built a 60-foot dining room, conference room, and large storage room. One building accommodated 100 boys at a sitting. The old swimming pool outside had been refurbished, and hundreds of new shrubs and young trees were set out around the grounds. The camp had an on-site caretaker.²⁵

The camp burned in late 1935. An inventory of the losses suggests how much the camp had grown: a piano, tables, chairs, kitchenware, beds, and a dozen tents.²⁶ The loss was tragic, but the Scouts would soon inherit an enormous property further up river.

A few days after the fire the *Californian* wrote, "In the meanwhile, the Kern River Country Club's house will be used for important Scout events through the courtesy of the Kern River Country Club officers."²⁷

²² Bunkey Valdez interview with the author 2005 Uncle Bill might have lived there for some time because in 1935, 81-year-old Frank C. Tibbitts wrote that a man named William Jackson Smith once had a cabin below China Grade on the Kern River and welcomed visitors. (*Keene Courier*, serial holding of Beale Memorial Library, Bakersfield, California)

²³ In 1930 Attorney T.N. Harvey was re-elected president of Kern County Boy Scout Council that held jurisdiction over all of Kern and portions of San Bernardino and Los Angeles counties. Also reelected were J.J. Wilt, S.E. Dillon, Ben Slater, Ernest E. Wagner (all of Bakersfield,) Harry Hopkins of Taft, and W.S. Allen of Delano. (*Los Angeles Times*, Jan 18, 1930)

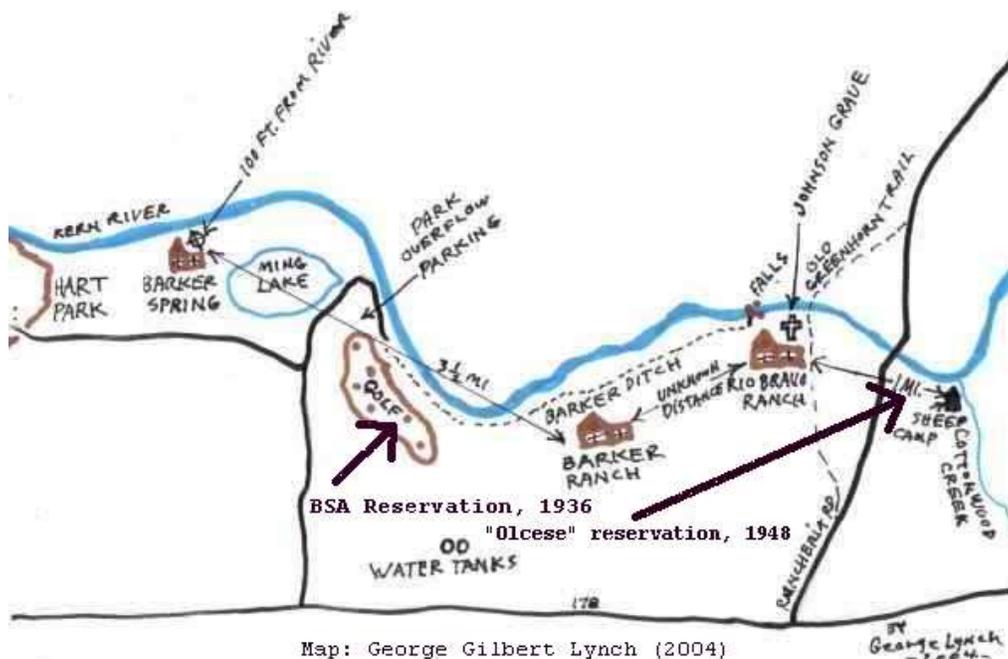
²⁴ *Bakersfield Californian*, Feb 19, 1935, pg: 7; Feb 21, 1935, pg 11.

²⁵ *Bakersfield Californian*, March 8, 1935, pg 15; March 11, 1935, pg 9

²⁶ *Bakersfield California*, Nov 1, 1935

²⁷ *Bakersfield Californian*, Jan 31, 1936, pg: 9; Feb 7, 1936, pg: 9. See also *Fabulous Barker Springs, 1890-98* at <http://www.gilbertgia.com/articlePages/business1.html>. See also *Kern*

In 1935 Boy Scouts of America boasted 1,000,000 members nationally. Kern County by then had 1,100 Scouts.²⁸ When Kern Council hosted a Senior Scouts western-regional, state jamboree in December, the event was held at spacious Kern River County Club. Also that month, J.B. Payne and board members Walter Buass, E.A. Murdock, and Lawrence Weill met in conference with Kern River Holdings, Inc. to discuss buying Kern River County Club. In early February 1936, Kern Council announced a fund-drive, and so much money came in from private and corporate donors that by May BSA owned the property.²⁹



Dark arrows above point to BSA Reservation and the Olcese property.

Days before the official, property transfer, A.C. Dimon speaking for Kern River Holdings presented BSA the deed to 168-acres, 25 of them wooded, the nine-hole golf course, several outbuildings, and the commodious lodge with hardwood floors and impressive fireplace. The lodge building also housed a kitchen, library, hospital room, game room, dormitory, and apartment for a caretaker. The sale price was not made public, but according to the *Californian* "approximately twenty-five

River Country Club, 1921-35 at <http://www.gilbertgia.com/articlePages/sports1.html>

²⁸ *Bakersfield Californian*, Oct 2, 1935, pg 7

²⁹ Kern County Hall of Records, May 8, 1936, Deed 0596-0311. "Kern River Holdings, C.F. Harper, Pres., Jas. S. Goodwin, Sec."

businessmen and organizations of Kern County and Trona" made the deal possible.³⁰ Two weeks after the transfer Standard Oil held its annual family barbecue at the new BSA reservation.³¹

The new reservation was dedicated Sunday, May 31, 1936. Featured speaker was ex-President of the United States Herbert Hoover. He had started his day at an early luncheon with 365 guests at Hotel El Tejon.³² A.C. Dimon, manager of the Bank of America and vice-president of Bakersfield Scout Council, thanked all who made the buy possible, and he recognized three who had spearheaded the transaction: W.F. Buass, E.A. Murdock, and Lawrence Weill.



Lawrence Weill

Afterward the luncheon the Presidential motorcade made its way east on Niles Street to Kern Canyon Highway. The cars turned-off north and

³⁰ *Bakersfield Californian*, May 14, 1936, pg: 13; Author's interview with Hugh Sill. Said Sill, "We gave away the property."

³¹ Charles Dumble recalled that after the Council abandoned the old China Grade Camp it became sand and dredging operation. Other developed recreational areas still existed further east on Kern River. Until around 1940, Associated Oil maintained a nine-hole golf course and picnic grounds seven-tenths of a mile east of Gordon's Ferry on Round Mountain Road. Directions: Near Historic Marker No. 290 commemorating the discovery of oil in 1899, the road swings south and then northeast before heading downhill. The picnic grounds were there at the bottom of the hill next to the river. A second recreational area was Shell Park further east on Round Mountain Road and northeast across the river from Hart Park water wheel. Trees there concealed the private Park from onlookers at the park.

³² The site of El Tejon Hotel is now occupied by Bank of America Building at NE corner of Chester and Truxtun Avenues.

followed the road down to the river where 3,000 spectators waited on the grassy slopes by the lodge.

The Stars and Stripes whipped in the breeze as *Californian* publisher Alfred Harrell introduced President Hoover and his son Allan, who was on the Bakersfield BSA Executive Counsel. The President extolled the great gift made possible by Bakersfield's business community and acknowledged Kern County's long history of community service, which the 62-year-old said was "stimulating to the very ideals of American lives."

Hoover's words were high-minded, but they could not pay the bills. Kern Council had looked at the cost of ownership and had already leased the golf course to Ned Chariton, who had opened it to the public on the day of the event.

The reservation never paid its way. By 1940 the golf course had fallen into disuse and had become a financial burden to the BSA council. The Scouts then leased it to the County of Kern at \$150 a month and through-in an open option to buy the entire grounds. Instead of buying immediately, the county brought in Mariano "Babe" Lazane to spruce-up the course and manage it for the next 12 months.³³ In August 1944 the county exercised the option and bought the Boy Scout's reservation.

Proceeds from the sale allowed the Southern Sierra Council to buy a council office in town. Del Yantis, a council executive for 12 years, recalled that in 1964 when he first started with the council, the President was Dutch Schmeider, and Richard Hacke was one of the executives. 2417 M Street.³⁴ Today, Southern Sierra Council uses that same building, although it is much modified.

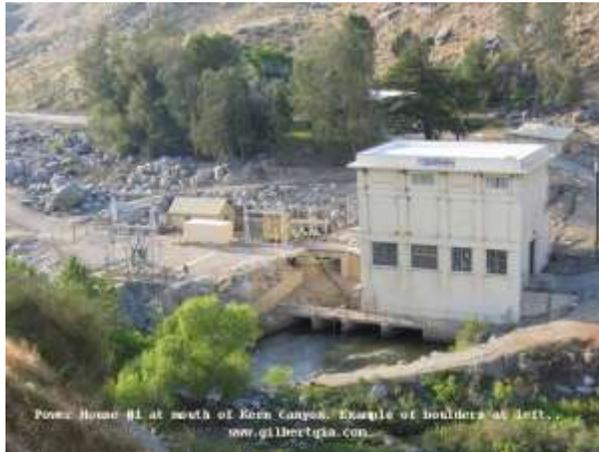
BSA once used another campsite higher up Kern River toward the canyon. Dean VanZant recalled that between 1945 and 1947 BSA had a camp ground at Rancheria Road on the Kern River. He then was a student at Bakersfield College in Edwin M. Hemmerling's surveying class. VanZant said that Hemmerling scheduled frequent field trips for the Engineering Club, and one of those excursions was on Rancheria Road where it drops down a

³³ Lazane served in WWII. In 1952 he was golf pro at Bakersfield County Club.

³⁴ Del Yantis interview with the author, 2004

steep grade to the river. "Our surveying class laid out a grove of trees there as practice grids, "said VanZant.³⁵

Another who recalled that camp was Retired Deputy Sheriff Dan Ahl. "It was 1947 or 1948. We called it Buzz Beach then. The Scouts used it, but it wasn't an official Boy Scout property, and there weren't any buildings there at all. I remember Indian grinding rocks, but it's all orchards today."³⁶



The presence of orange groves there today suggest that the area had always been a smooth plain, but Del Yantis remembered several hundred car-size granite boulders that once spread across the camping site.³⁷ Said Yantis, "We called it the Olcese reservation. In the summer the camp was too hot, and it didn't get comfortable until school started in September. When Merle Haggard's house went in nearby, about 1974, it spelled the beginning-of-the-end for the Olcese camp. Haggard's caretaker was afraid the Scouts would damage the property or bother his fish ponds when we hiked past them to the canyon. We stopped using the camp shortly after that."³⁸

After BSA sold its 168-acre reservation in 1944 the old lodge house became a rental for the County. President of Creative Engineering Don Suverkrop remembered 1946 when he rented the building for a veterans'

³⁵ Dean VanZant interview with the author, 2005

³⁶ Dan Ahl interview with the author, 2003

³⁷ The monoliths were strewn across the field in the massive flood of Kern River on Christmas Day, 1861. This author also recalls the giant boulders. Some were ten feet tall. Yantis guessed they were used for fill during construction of the nearby Nickel hydroelectric plant in the 1980s.

³⁸ Del Yantis interview with the author, 2003

club party.³⁹ By that time the county had already hired Bert Sides and his wife as on-site caretakers, and they lived in the old lodge's attached apartment.

On the afternoon of July 4, 1947 the electrical system overloaded. Groundsman Herbert Brown noticed smoke and rushed to concession operator Fred Pierce, but Pierce's telephone was out of order. He drove to the nearest phone, which was two miles away at Kern River Park at the Park superintendent's house, but within minutes the lodge was blazing. Workers saved the nearby pump and field houses from the fire, but the lodge with its spacious dance floor, billiard room, locker room, kitchen, and attached apartment burned to the ground. A newspaper photo of the ruins shows only a chimney and bathtub standing. Park Superintendent Percy C. Branson estimated the county's loss between \$20,000 and \$25,000.⁴⁰ Melted in the intense blaze was the bronze plaque inscribed with the Scout Oath, which had been set into the fireplace mantel in 1936.

A small part of the lodge is visible today. On the Park Overflow Parking picnic grounds (shown on attached map) and surrounded by lawn is a concrete basketball court that even to the casual observer looks immediately non-standard. Take the narrow sidewalk leading to the middle of the concrete court. You are now standing on all that remains of the old lodge.⁴¹

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³⁹ Don Suverkrop interview with the author, 2006

⁴⁰ *Bakersfield Californian*, Jul 7, 1947, p 1, col 6

⁴¹ Author's 2006 visit with Don Suverkrop at the picnic grounds