



Historic Bakersfield & Kern County, California

www.gilbertgia.com

Bakersfield's Packed Schools

1940-1960

By Gilbert P. Gia

Copyright © 2013, Gilbert P. Gia, Bakersfield, California

This work is free to publicly-supported schools and libraries.
Others email ggiaggia@gmail.com for permissions.

The 1952 summer of earthquakes challenged Kern County schools, but double-session classes were nothing new to the Bakersfield City School District. In December 1945 the board approved morning and afternoon classes of "double sessions" (in quotes) for the lower grades at Mt Vernon and Union Avenue Schools.¹ Eight months later BCSD abandoned Franklin School because the State Department of Public Works had declared it "hazardous in the event of earthquake-occurrence or fire."² After Kern County Counsel Norbert Baumgarten advised BCSD that "members of the school board might well be personally liable for injuries that may result after being forewarned of its unsafe condition," they ordered Franklin School closed and its 375 pupils transferred to another school.³ Double sessions ensued.

Between 1944 and 1947, district enrollment increased by 1,600 students, and by 1950 an additional 1,850 were expected.⁴ In fall 1947 virtually every school in town faced double sessions. City school superintendent John L. Compton advised the public that within 18 months BCSD would need 163 more classrooms. He called for construction of eight new schools, including six new classrooms for Longfellow and ten for Mt. Vernon.⁵ Obviously, the projects would take time. In June 1947, 24 teachers resigned from the district, eight had not decided, but 34 had agreed to return. Compton needed 71 more teachers.⁶ At the conclusion of the 1947-48 school year most schools were in double session, and the number

had doubled from a year earlier. Mt. Vernon and Longfellow still carried the heaviest load.⁷

Bakersfield's lack of classroom space mirrored the condition of the country. Construction during WWII had been curtailed owing to material and labor shortages, although educational surveys taken before the war had warned of declining school space.⁸ Nationally, about 2,000,000 children reached school age during the years of WWII, but for 1948-49, 3,000,000 were expected to enroll.⁹ The birth rate in California alone had trebled since 1940.¹⁰

Bakersfield educator Miss Flossie Mills, who had spent more than 30 years in schools, encouraged a yes vote on Bakersfield's \$1,965,000 school bond election of 1950. In a send-home letter to parents, Miss Mills wrote, "Buildings don't just grow bigger like you do. They stay just the same size. I'm just wondering what you'll do when you are ready for junior high school. You can't just go crowding in until the walls bulge out and the roof cave in, can you? ... You can't put up big buildings in a day. Besides that, you can't build them without money, so we've got to have that, too." The Californian in noting her message wrote, "That's about as plain and as direct and sensible as you can put it. The time to build them is now, and the way to do this is to vote yes on the school bonds in the election of March 28, when the city school district is asking your support to fulfill the educational obligations due to children here."¹¹

The bond issue passed by a margin of 8 to 1, and it and the one that had been approved in 1947, amounted to \$4,465,000 for the construction of two junior highs and seven elementary schools.¹² For the first time in 10 years the school building-program was expected to overtake enrollment, and in September 1952 BCSD expected to celebrate the complete elimination of double-session classes.¹³ The new schools were profoundly needed, but who could have known just how important they would soon become.¹⁴

The earthquakes of July 21 and August 22, 1952 damaged 17 of Kern County's school districts and ruined many Bakersfield schools.¹⁵ Thousands of square feet of floor space were declared unsafe and unusable,¹⁶ and almost all was classrooms, auditoriums, offices, and storage rooms in schools built before the Field Act of 1933.¹⁷ Rebuilding costs were estimated between \$3,500,000 and \$5,000,000.¹⁸ Emerson, Lincoln, Fremont, Williams, and Washington Schools faced the wrecking ball.¹⁹ Were it not for recently-built schools and classroom additions of just a few years earlier, BCSD would have had 118 classrooms for 15,193 pupils --128 pupils per room.²⁰

Also unsafe were several old buildings on the Kern County Union High School and Bakersfield Junior College campuses crowded together on California Avenue. Unlike them,

however, the elementary school district had choices about where to move students. Entire K-6 and junior high schools -- materials, staff and pupils -- were transferred to other schools. Instead of the expectation of eliminating crowded schools, the largest number of pupils in the history of the Bakersfield City School District went on double session, about 3,700.²¹ Family schedules were disrupted, staff assignments were changed, equipment was removed from damaged buildings and stored, supply orders and allocation of books and equipment were adjusted and bus schedules rearranged.²² Despite the many challenges, parents and staff were understanding and cooperative, and Compton extolled them. His message was appreciative, hopeful, and uplifting:

"The spirit of cooperation and helpfulness has been a source of encouragement and deep appreciation on the part of the Board of Education and the administrative staff. Nothing can be said that is too complimentary concerning the manner in which pupils and staff members alike except in the temporary program which had to be set up in order to house all pupils. A master plan for reconstruction has been formulated and is already underway."²³

"The most difficult part of any planning program is to secure the funds by which the plan can be carried out. The present loan capacity of the district is approximately \$1,500,000. The amount of losses is estimated to be between \$4,500,000 and \$5,000,000. It will not be possible for the district to finance its immediate needs without taking advantage of the state school building a program, which permits the borrowing of state funds to be repaid over 30 or 40 years. Before state funds are made available it is necessary by law for the local district to be bonded to capacity. Both the matter of the bonding and capacity and the question of borrowing funds from the state must be approved by the voters in the district by a two-thirds majority vote."²⁴

"Defeatism has never prevailed in this city or county. The people of this area have a long history of solving their problems in a positive and determined fashion. The future offers no easy road to recovery. We are not discouraged. Instead we are confident that with the understanding and support of the citizens of the community we can succeed in rebuilding our schools. The Bakersfield City School District wants to be a part of that program which will change the tragedy of the past into the achievements of the future."²⁵

The election of January 28, 1953 offered two measures to repair, expand and build

new schools, but to pass, each required a two-thirds majority. The Bakersfield City School District measure specified two funding sources: A state loan of \$4,438,000 and a \$2,431,000 bond. The Kern County Union High School and Junior College District measure proposed a \$17,000,000 bond.

The Californian, historically a champion of education, wrote, "The record of the city school board and the high school trustees for soundness and wisdom is excellent and in this matter it will be seen that their decision is the best under the difficult circumstances. They seek to meet the inevitable problem with the best methods that can be devised. It will be to the benefit of the children of today and of future generations and to the benefit of the entire community if the voters approve the proposals..."²⁶ In a newspaper article on the 26th, H.E. Woodworth, board president of the high school and junior college district and member of the board since 1938, added that enrollment was expected to jump from the present 9,314 regular-day students to more than 16,000 in ten years.²⁷

On January 29, 1954 complete, but unofficial returns showed that voters had approved both the elementary school bond (11,640 to 995) and the state loan (11,211 to 1,138.) The Kern County Union High School and Junior College District's \$17,000,000 bond measure passed 16,181 to 2,028.²⁸ Building started in earnest.

In summer 1954 Superintendent Compton announced a mass reshuffling of youngsters in October and November when Fremont, Baker, McKinley, William Penn, Emerson, Roosevelt, Munsey, and Peter Pan School would be ready for students.²⁹

The schools filled, but John Compton, who came to BCSD in 1929 as a young teacher from Taft, still faced classroom crowding.³⁰ He had been raised on a rural Ohio farm in a Quaker family and attended a one-room school house but had no nostalgic illusions about the past. A sympathetic listener in touch with the people, he understood the practical limits of school bureaucracy. Just a year after the new schools opened he attended a PTA meeting at Pioneer Drive School -- built in 1948-49. Originally designed for 600, Pioneer Drive by 1955 had 1,280 children, 10 substandard rooms, 13 double sessions.³¹ Compton stood before the PTA and delivered a painfully succinct truth. "There is no hope for any construction during the school year. The problem goes before the Board of Education in December or January to see how the situation can best be met."³²

In 1957 ever-increasing enrollment forced about 3,000 children into double-sessions, a condition that had seemed eliminated just a few years before. Once again John L. Compton stumped for bond money.³³ In 1962 following 23 years service as superintendent he retired and allowed he no longer would be a slave to deadlines.³⁴



< O >

¹ Bakersfield Californian, Dec 5, 1945

² Bakersfield Californian, July 26, 1946

³ Ibid. After considering the use of tents for classrooms, the district assigned Franklin pupils to double sessions at William Penn School (Bakersfield Californian, Aug 15, 1946). Franklin and Hawthorne Schools were initially ineligible for state construction funds owing to their undersized campuses.

⁴ Bakersfield Californian, Jun 13, 1947

⁵ Ibid. Bakersfield Californian, Jun 13, 1947

⁶ Ibid. As teachers left, others stepped in. See Gilbert Gia, *Bakersfield City Schools' Male Teachers, 1933-2012*, www.gilbertgia.com

⁷ Bakersfield Californian, Dec 31, 1952

⁸ Bakersfield Californian, Jul 8, 1948

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Bakersfield Californian, Jul 1, 1949

¹¹ Bakersfield Californian, Mar 24, 1950

¹² Bakersfield Californian, Mar 29, Dec 31, 1952. Substantial money was also set aside for classrooms at older schools. The average building cost of \$9.35 per square foot was significantly lower than the state average. Local construction funds were augmented by \$250M in bonds approved statewide in Nov 1949 (Bakersfield Californian, Oct 12, 1950).

¹³ Bakersfield Californian, Dec 31, 1952

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Bakersfield Californian, Aug 15, 1952

¹⁶ Bakersfield Californian, Dec 31, 1952

¹⁷ Bakersfield Californian, Aug 18, 1952. The Field Act banned unreinforced masonry construction and required new school buildings be designed to withstand lateral forces equal to at least 3% of building mass. In 1939 the Garrison Act applied Field Act Standards to existing school buildings (Wikipedia). For a history of early Bakersfield schools see Gilbert Gia, *Bakersfield Schools, 1863-1910, Society and Politics* at www.gilbertgia.com.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Bakersfield Californian, Aug 14, 1953

²⁰ Bakersfield Californian, Aug 14, Dec 31, 1952. County wide, 17 school districts had earthquake damage of \$9M (Bakersfield Californian, Aug 18, 1952).

²¹ Bakersfield Californian, Aug 14, Dec 31, 1952

²² Bakersfield Californian, Dec 31, 1952

²³ Bakersfield Californian, Dec 31, 1952

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Bakersfield Californian, Jan 3, 1953

²⁷ Bakersfield Californian, Jan 26, 1953. "Regular day" did not include night classes and community education.

²⁸ Bakersfield Californian, Jan 28, 1953. Some of the \$17M built Bakersfield Junior College on Panorama Drive.

²⁹ Bakersfield Californian, Aug 13, 1954. Peter Pan, operated at 530 4th St, was relocated to its new building at 601 4th. Temporary buildings were installed at some schools. Hawthorne School campus was part of an exchange with the Kern County Land Company for a new, BCSD campus at 38th and Jewett Avenue (Bakersfield Californian, Jul 3, 1954).

³⁰ Bakersfield Californian, Jan 31, 1963

³¹ Bakersfield Californian, Feb 20, 1948

³² Bakersfield Californian, Oct 17, 1955

³³ "Schools Hit Record Enrollment, Pupils in Crowded Classes," Bakersfield Californian, Oct 4, 1957. Double sessions appear to have faded after 1960.

³⁴ Bakersfield Californian, Jan 31, 1963