



WHAT HAPPENED TO BAKERSFIELD'S OLD CHINESE CEMETERY?

By Gilbert Gia

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For 60 years segregation of Chinese in Bakersfield was nearly complete,¹ and it continued even into death. Some authors say that in the 1870s a Chinese cemetery was near today's Terrace Way,² but that burying place was not exclusively Chinese.³ This paper traces the

¹ *Southern Californian*, Aug 27, 1874: When Chinese tried to built on Chester Ave the paper wrote, "We cannot be persuaded that they are desirable to have as close neighbors." Historians have thoroughly documented the segregation of Chinese in California.

² William Hoy, "The Chinese In Bakersfield," *Historic Kern*, Journal of the Kern County Historical Society, May 1950, (This was part of a two-page, transcribed radio script. In *The Chinese Laundryman* by Paul Chan Pang Siu, Siu describes one of Hoy's stories as an "unpublished radio talk, San Francisco, September 16, 1940"; "The Chinese in Bakersfield," is a 1974 term paper by Diane Ogden. In it, Ogden alluded to a term paper from 1930 entitled "Chinese Graveyard." In 1974, Ogden was a Bakersfield College student of Kern County historian William Harland Boyd.

³ Joe Doctor wrote in *Shotguns on Sunday* that in 1903 fugitive James McKinney hid his guns "on the west side of the cemetery beneath the brush where 'L' runs out to the south." The extension of "L" Street is two or three blocks east of the old cemetery grounds. This raises the possibility that the boundaries of old city cemetery extended further west than other sources indicate.

history of that old city cemetery and explains why it has been replaced by streets and houses.

Racial discrimination grew in the mid-1870, and with it White dissatisfaction with city cemetery. About 1873, a private cemetery group bought 10 acres south of town, but after two years it was still undeveloped.⁴

Annoyance over the city cemetery continued: "The present burial place is entirely unsuited to the purpose; besides it is private property, and liable to be disturbed at any time."⁵ In 1888 a paper wrote, "Bakersfield and Sumner should be ashamed. The Bakersfield burying place is a high, barren, dry, forbidding knoll of ground, the elevated position of which can never be irrigated in the midst of low surrounding." ⁶

But in 1877 Kern County bought from attorney Phillip Colby 40-acres a few miles northeast of city cemetery. On the grounds the county built a "pest house" (quarantine hospital) and a county farm.⁷ The Colby land contained an old, disorganized cemetery. ⁸ In February 1878, the Country

⁴ Buena Vista Cemetery Association had been recently established on Solomon Jewett's low-lying land in Sec 12 near a JB Haggin farm just south of what is now Brundage Ln.

⁵ *Southern Californian*, Dec 30, 1875

⁶ *Kern County Gazette*, Jan 5, 1878

⁷ Feb 14, 1877; *The Bakersfield Californian* of Oct 24, 1907 shows that the Pest House was in use.

⁸ This is within present Union Cemetery. The old burying place that was near Terrace Way was probably in use during Col. Thomas A. Baker's lifetime. However, in 1872 he was buried on high ground he had selected himself at what is now Union Cemetery. Baker had observed the destructive effects of Kern River floods of 1862-3 and 1867-8.

graded space, probably near by, for 7,500 grave sites and named the new burying place Union Cemetery.⁹ During this time the old city cemetery became known as China cemetery.¹⁰

Jacob Niederaur, Union Cemetery's first sexton, struggled to improve the property, but county funding was frugal, and for the next 16 years the cemetery was an eyesore. In 1904 the county turned over control of Union to a new corporation. Its bylaws stipulated that no Indians [Native Americans] or Chinese could be buried there.¹¹ After that, Bakersfield Chinese used the old cemetery almost exclusively.

The Terrace Way cemetery was a barren field with a modest hillock on its northern side. A few eucalyptus trees surrounded grounds that gradually descended south to an entrance gate on what is now Terrace Way. In the 1930s there were two masonry burners,¹² one with a pyramidal roof,¹³ and the grounds had only a few grave markers. The

⁹ *Kern County Gazette*, Feb 9, 1878 and Apr 13, 1878, "A Visit to the Cemetery"; *Kern County Californian*, Jan 16, 1886, p 2, Board of Supervisors meeting of Jan 8, 1886. Board ordered that "a fund be hereby established to be known as the Union cemetery fund.."

¹⁰ *Ledger of Minutes*, Grand Army of the Republic, Hulbert Post, [archived at the Kern County Museum]: "12-6-1889, resolved for post to pay for removal of the remains of three ex-soldiers buried in the Chinese cemetery to the GAR Plot at Union Cemetery: Henry C. Loomis, d 1874, Joseph R. Clavert, d 1887, John Cannon, d 1888, [Cannon's remains had been buried in Potters Field at the old city or now, Chinese cemetery.]

¹¹ According to a listing of burials, that prohibition appears to have been rescinded by the early 1930s. (William Harland Boyd, *Chinese of Kern County, 1857-1960*, an Oral History, 2002, pp 240-5)

¹² In Author's 2002 interview with funeral director Ray Mish, he said he first saw the grounds in 1947 and it was "a good three blocks square."

¹³ Hoy, op cit.

burners were used during funerals for ceremonial presentations of joss sticks, food, and drink and at Chinese Memorial Day (*Ch'ing Ming*) and Hungry Ghosts Day, also known as All Souls' Day (*Ch'ung-Yang Chieh*).¹⁴

The exact boundaries of old city cemetery are not known today. An early map of J.B. Haggin land did not indicate a cemetery in this area.¹⁵ In 1935 Luigi and Rosa Bertolucci farmed 2-1/2 acres off Cloverdale Street near Hughes Lane. About 100 yards southeast was the old cemetery.¹⁶ This suggests that the northern boundary of the cemetery was Bite and Cloverdale Streets.¹⁷

Ownership of the cemetery property goes back to 1870 when the US Congress granted the Southern Pacific Railroad every alternate section of public land on either side of the Company's proposed rail line through the San Joaquin Valley. By 1874-1875 the SP opened rail traffic between San Francisco and Los Angeles, and then had to divest itself of some of the Government land. In 1883 the SP sold 640 acres which included the old cemetery in Lots 13 and 14.¹⁸ The new

¹⁴ Ibid

¹⁵ Sec 1, T30S, R27E drawn May 3, 1889

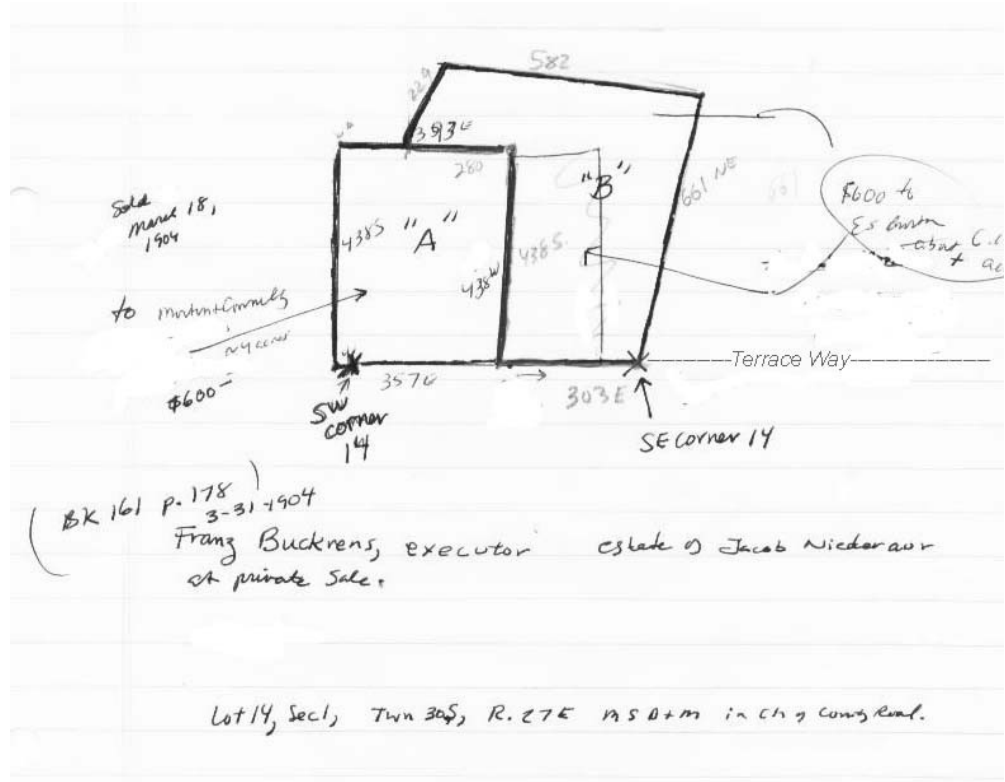
¹⁶ Author's 2002 interview with Julia Bertolucci Fanucchi

¹⁷ Cloverdale St was removed in 1964 during construction of Fwy 58.

¹⁸ Haggin acquired much property in Kern County via the use of straw buyers. Lots 13 and 14 appear on Kern County map "Sec1, T30S, R27E, MDB&M as shown on sales map #1 of Lands of JB Haggin filed May 3, 1889 in recorders office." An annotation on it in a later year: "Reset cemetery corner according to map filed in RSI, R+G, March 19, 1904." The date corresponds to the probate of the Jacob Niederaur estate.

owner was James B. Haggin.¹⁹ In December 1892, Haggin sold Lots 13 and 14 to the Kern County Land Company. In May 1896 the Land Company sold the 20 acre of Lots 13 and 14 to Jacob Niederaur.

Niederaur died in 1903, and in 1904 his executor, Franz Buckreus, sold ten acres: Six in Lot 14 to E.S. Burton, and four acres to Dr. A.S. Morton of Kern County and his partner W.B. Connelly of Solano County.



Above: Author's sketch of cemetery made from microfilm at Kern County Hall of Records.

¹⁹ Gary Gadeke, Regional Vice President and County Manager of First American Title Company in Bakersfield, traced subsequent ownership. Land transaction mentioned next in this paper come from Mr. Gadeke's title search.

Morton and Connelly paid \$600, which included "one house in cemetery" and 42 items of funeral materials from the Niederaur estate.²⁰

Many Chinese burials at the old cemetery had been with the assistance of the Chinese Six Companies, a San Francisco-based, West Coast organization, that helped members in all matters of life and death.²¹

The Six Companies also provided for the exhumation of remains for return to China. In 1880 a representative of the Six Companies was inspecting graves along the Pacific Coast for disinterment and shipment. In November he was at Bakersfield "Chinese burying grounds" assembling bones and identifying grave tokens²² Less generally-known is that White families also disinterred the remains of love-ones from Bakersfield burying grounds and removed them to new Union Cemetery.²³

²⁰ Recorded, KC Hall of Records, Mar 19, 1904. Although part of the Cemetery might have been in Lot 13, there is little doubt that the grounds occupied all of Lot 14. This cemetery land would have been of marginal economic use to the KC Land Company.

²¹ William Hoy, *Chinese Six Companies, A Short, General Historical Resume Of Its Origin, Function ...*, 1942. UC Bancroft Lib.

²² *Kern County Gazette*, Nov 20, 1880; Hoy, op cited, reported that disinterments were done about every ten years.

²³ *Ledger of Minutes*, op cit: "1-17-1890, Niederaur given contract to remove remains when he has time; 4-18-1890, Niederaur presented bill of \$30 for removal of remains; US Gov headstones placed on graves."; L.J. Stark died January 23, 1894. Union Cemetery records show that his remains had been "Removed from China Cemetery." According to Dianne Ogden, other remains taken to Union from the "China Cemetery" were those of William Howell, Jon Vearner, Ed Tibbet, Myra Hulsi, D. Callahan, and "many, many more," wrote Ogden

As the population of Chinese in Bakersfield diminished, there was less need for services from the Six Companies. By 1907, White morticians were providing disinterment of Chinese remains. One was A.S. Morton, who supervised the boxing of bones for shipment to China.²⁴ Although disinterments had begun at a very early date, a reporter was unaware of that and wrote the removals underway "could have been the first time that remains were sent to China."²⁵ Removals continued. Tan Mou had died in 1896 and was buried in "the local Chinese cemetery." In 1913 his remains were removed to China.²⁶

In 1908, Morton and Connelly sold the old cemetery to F.S. Dixon of San Diego. The same year marked the death of Choo Li, "the father of Old Chinatown." The 74-year old had lived in Bakersfield for 36 years, and he had arranged for Dixon & Sons to ship his body to China. "Two white horses draped in netting and the wheeler draped in black" delivered the remains to his ceremonial grave before returning Choo Li to Dixon & Sons.²⁷

In 1936 A.H. Dixon sold the cemetery to J.C. Flickinger-Frank Digier Chapel, Inc.²⁸ By this time,

²⁴ *Morning [Bakersfield] Echo*, Sep 13, 1907. This citation does not say if Morton was supervising Whites or he was supervising Chinese.

²⁵ Ibid.

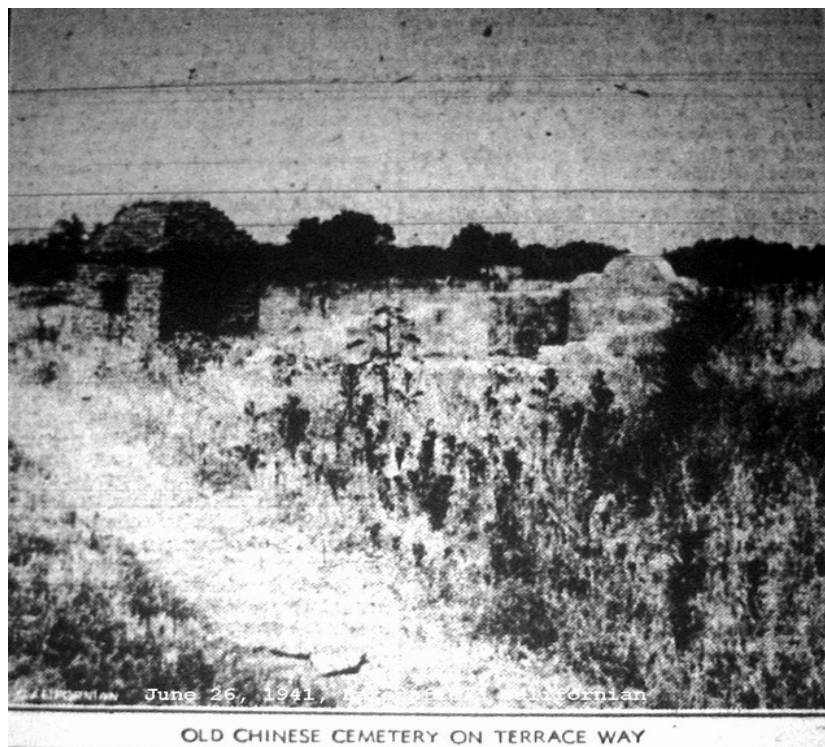
²⁶ *Morning Echo*, Aug 14, 1913

²⁷ *Morning Echo*, Aug 2, 1908. Held for two months before shipped to Hong Kong

²⁸ Pronounced dee-ZHAY

neighbors who lived near the cemetery saw but few funerals and only occasional use of the ceremonial burner on the southwest side of the lot.

In May 1939 Flickinger-Digier sold a portion of Lot 14 to L.H. Houchin. In 1946 Flickinger sold out to Digier. To the casual observer, the cemetery by then had become an abandoned, weed-filled field with a modest hillock and path where children rode their bicycles.



Above: Old Chinese Cemetery, burner at left.
June 26, 1941, *Bakersfield Californian*)

After WWII the neighborhood became desirable real estate. Nearby were the Houchin estate, the Tognini estate, and a few smaller homes built in earlier years. In the mid-

1950s, investor Randall Presley relied on a State law to subdivide the cemetery, install streets, and sell residential lots. Over several months he and partners arranged a series of land transactions to bring the old cemetery under one title: In March 1956 Houchin sold back to Digier the property that Houchin had brought from him in 1939. In April, Digier sold the cemetery title to C.D. Holden, a petroleum engineer and trucking firm owner who was a partner in Investments Limited with Randall Presley. Up to this point these land transactions were speculative because investors next had to secure approval of the Chinese community to move the graves.

Holden told the Chinese Benevolent Association, *Chung Wah*, that he had bought the cemetery site for its topsoil, and he needed their cooperation to move it. He made them an offer.

Chung Wah could have told him No, but he did own the property, and there were significant reasons to cooperate. By the late 1950s relatively Chinese lived in Bakersfield, and even fewer knew of ancestors buried at the old cemetery. Another point was about pride and face. The cemetery had suffered vandalism over the years²⁹, and *Chung*

²⁹ Author's 2002 interview of Ray Mish. See also Jun 3, 1975 *Bakersfield Californian* interview with Bill Lee. The old Bakersfield cemetery was known by various names. In a *Morning Echo* obituary of Feb 22, 1918, Wong Dong, merchant and 40-plus-yr resident of Bakersfield, was buried at "Old City Cemetery," but in 1932 Ng Ping You was buried at "Chinese

Wah did not have resources to protect and maintain the grounds.³⁰ Some members objected to removal of remains, but Holden offered them more, and practical voices prevailed.³¹ An agreement was concluded, and Holden's attorney petitioned Judge Lambert for a land-use change, from cemetery to residential.



Above: Chinese Memorial lot, East 6th and Tulare Streets

The agreement provided for the removal of remains to a lot at East 6th and Tulare Streets next to Union Cemetery and adjacent to the Jewish Cemetery. *Chung Wah* supervised the removal of 300 remains.³² Association members involved in the task included Mrs. Sing Lum, Earl Wong, Bill Lee, C.

Cemetery." That was among the last of the burials there.

³⁰ Rumors that gold coins and jewelry were buried with the dead resulted in desecration of graves.

³¹ In author's 2002 conversation with former Investments Limited attorney Jere N. Sullivan, Sr., he said, "They were glad to cooperate."

³² The remains of 43 persons were positively identified. The names of 85 others thought to be buried at the old cemetery could be matched to the remains found. (Boyd, op cit, pp 238-9)

Choy, Jack Chow Wong, and D.L. Joe.³³ Jack Chow Wong, 77, inscribed names in a book, and Gregory Lim designed a plaque in poetic, antique Chinese verse for the new resting place.³⁴ Architect Allan Choy designed the pagoda-like structure at the East 6th Street memorial.³⁵

On July 16, 1956, Holden sold the old-cemetery property to Investments Limited, Inc; the old knoll was leveled;³⁶ in August 1956 Vernon T. Hiller surveyed it for public streets; and on October 1, 1956 the Kern County Planning Commission approved Presley's tract map for 11 new residential lots arranged around Ramona Court.³⁷ They sold quickly.

When septic tanks and swimming pools were put in along the street, small fragments of bone and fabric turned up, but nothing especially alarming.³⁸ A few hundred yards east on Oleander Drive and across the street from the Tognini estate, industrialist Jerry Sudarsky was also building a

³³ *Bakersfield Californian*, Aug 25, 1956

³⁴ The plaque recognized the hardships faced by Chinese immigrants, expressed the reason for disturbing the remains, expressed regret, and thanked those of the non-Chinese community who helped Chinese immigrants in early years. A part of the plaques reads, "It happened that a Westerner by the name of Horton [*sic*, Holden] was willing to change the use of his land so that the early residents of Chinese descent would have peace." (Boyd, *op cit*, p 237)

³⁵ Author's 2002 conversation with Allan Choy. The monument was erected by the Bakersfield Chinese Consolidated Benevolent Association, June, 1958. (Boyd, *op cited*, p 237)

³⁶ Leveling should have revealed evidence of human remains. No newspaper reports of that were found.

³⁷ Ramona Ct was renamed Brookhaven Dr.

³⁸ Author's 2002 conversation with Mildred Kulstad Gieg. Tract map shows a cemetery marker in the NE corner of Lot 7.

house. Evidence of human remains was uncovered there, but no publicity came from that, either.³⁹ In January 1957 pediatric dentist Hugo Kulstad bought Lot 7 on Ramona Court and began construction of a home.⁴⁰

The old cemetery was forgotten, except perhaps for an incident in June 1975 when Cheryl Biter who lived in the Benton Park neighborhood about a mile south-south-west of the old cemetery uncovered a Chinese grave marker in her back yard.⁴¹ As late as 1914, Yen Ming, the father of Mary Sue Ming, farmed at Chester and Brundage near the old cemetery.⁴² Mary Ming was a past president of the Kern County Historical Society, and in an 1976 interview she said her father's farm extended for at least a mile south of present-day Freeway 58. Chinese burials were obviously not confined to the cemetery.

Decades passed. In July 1993, headlines in the *Bakersfield Californian* announced "Chinese bodies Removed and taken to New Graves." About a month earlier, a septic tank was being relocated on Lot 7, and a backhoe revealed a strata of coffins. Excavation at the Kulstad's property stopped for a month. Timothy Yin, chairman of the Chinese

³⁹ Author's interview with Jerry and Milly Sudarsky, 2008

⁴⁰ Tract 1917 is a subdivision of Lots 13 and 14. Modern-day Lot 7 is in Tract 1917. Author's 2002 conversation with Mildred Kulstad Gieg [pronounced *GEE*].

⁴¹ *Bakersfield Californian* Aug 5, 1976, D10

⁴² *Bakersfield Californian*, Jul 31, 1993

American Association, and four other Chinese organizations supervised a second-round of removals, and since then the old cemetery has been quiet.

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