

A BRIEF HISTORY OF BAKER, CALIFORNIA continued.....

In what is now the Baker area a siding was constructed and like all sidings it had a name. It was called Berry Siding. Berry Siding was most likely named after a prospector living in the area at the time named John Berry. Berry's name existed on the census records as late as 1910. Berry was simply a railroad siding taking advantage of the firm, flat ground between Soda and Silver dry lakes. The only road reaching the area was a faint dirt road leading to other dirt paths meandering across the desert.

The T & T reached the Beatty area in 1907 and began transporting materials that same year. One of the principal investors in the rail line was an Englishman named Sir Richard Baker. The rail line was difficult to maintain and suffered constant damage from Summer thunderstorms and Winter rains, but it survived marginally. In 1913 "Borax" Smith began having financial difficulties and his shares of the Pacific Coast Borax Company were sold on the London Stock Exchange. What had begun as an American company was now British owned and Sir Richard Baker took over operations of the Company.

At some uncertain date someone decided to rename, Berry, that forlorn T & T railroad siding between two dry lakes in the Mojave Desert, Baker, in honor of Sir Richard Baker, and of this date the name remains. There was no town here at the time. The only nearby settlement was called Silver Lake, and it was alongside the T & T tracks about 10 miles north of the Baker Siding. At Silver Lake the dirt road leading northeast from the Barstow area followed a portion of the Old Spanish Trail and crossed the railroad at Silver Lake. Silver Lake gained it's own post office in 1907 and began serving the surrounding mines. It was a busy place. It is marked today by a couple of Salt Cedars and a dirt road crossing the dry lake bed.

In 1910 Charles Brown who became acquainted with R. J. "Dad" Fairbanks in Greenwater, a mining venture near Death Valley, married Stella Fairbanks, daughter of "Dad" and Celesta Fairbanks. All of these folks were destined to have a profound influence on the development of the little railroad siding now called Baker.

In 1913 the highest temperature (134 degrees) ever recorded in the United States, and at that time in the world, was reached in nearby Death Valley. In time, Willis Herron, owner of the Bun Boy Restaurant, would construct "The Worlds Tallest Thermometer", at 134 feet in height, to commemorate that record.

On August 30th, 1916, Robert Williams, a section foreman for the T & T Railroad filed a homestead claim on a quarter section of land in the Baker siding area. Today that property would extend approximately ½ mile north and ½ mile west from the AM PM on the corner of Baker Boulevard and Highway 127.

Sometime prior to 1925 the County of San Bernardino constructed a one lane dirt road which passed through Baker. Old maps of the time show a dotted line running through this area denoting the line as the "proposed Arrowhead Trail". The Arrowhead Trail

reflected a need to connect the towns of Los Angeles, Las Vegas and Salt Lake City. In Utah the road was called Zion Park Highway.

In 1925 Charles Brown, residing in Shoshone, California, 60 miles north of Baker in Inyo County became frustrated with the lack of attention the Death Valley area was getting. What money Inyo County had was always spent in the populated Owens Valley. He decided to run for a seat as a County Supervisor. One of his friends told him he had about as much chance of winning that race as a wax mouse would have racing an asbestos cat through Hell.

Brown was elected and on January 1st, 1925 took his seat as one of the County Supervisors. Brown was responsible for building the first passable road from the Inyo County line just north of Baker, 71 miles into Furnace Creek. The age of tourism into Death Valley was beginning and Baker was the gateway. Charles Brown would continue his political career being elected to the Senate, then re-elected numerous times becoming the Senior Senator.

When the government first began flying mail in 1918, planes didn't fly cross country at night. The mail would be transferred to trains at night. By 1926 the government recognized the need to continue the mail flights through the night and they laid out a number of airways with emergency airfields and beacons which the pilots could follow. One of those airways passed through the Baker area and was called CAM 4 which stood for Contract Air Mail route 4. One of the emergency airfields, on the LA to Salt Lake route, was constructed on Silver Lake about 8 miles north of Baker. The contract flyer was Western Air Express.

In 1927 "Death Valley Jack" Nickerson was operating a business on the corner of what is today Baker Boulevard and Highway 127, about where the Mad Greek restaurant is located. He sold his business to E. B. Failing. At the same time, work crews were busy paving Death Valley Road (Highway 127) from Baker to Death Valley Junction. The road generally followed the route of the Tonopah and Tidewater Railroad

"Dad" Fairbanks (Photo by Patsy Clark) and his son in law Charles Brown were operating several ventures in Shoshone, the town they founded, but "Dad" knew of the new Arrowhead Trail which was passing through the Baker area. "Dad" at seventy years of age still had his prospecting spirit and decided to try his luck in Baker. Charles and Stella Brown would stay in Shoshone, Inyo County so he could tend to his political duties and run the business.

"Dad" bought 160 acres of land in Baker, possibly from Robert Williams but it is also reported he bought it from Robert Hovely another section foreman for the T & T. "Dad" constructed his "Baker Service Station" alongside the existing road. Unfortunately a couple of years later when the final path of the road was constructed it missed his business by a quarter mile or more. Dad disassembled his building and moved it up to the new highway intersection which luckily he owned a portion of. It was a great cross roads on the new highway. The road to Death Valley ran north and the road to the

Kelso and Cima areas ran south. The often re-modeled and re-constructed Fairbanks structure remains today on the northwest corner of Baker Boulevard and Highway 127.

In October of 1929 the Stock Market collapsed plunging everyone into The Great Depression. However Baker was spared some of the worst effects because of the Hoover dam. To assist in the construction of the dam a power line was being built to carry electricity from the San Bernardino area to the dam. A portion of that line ran directly through Baker. "Dad" Fairbanks had his service station, café and cabins on one corner of Death Valley Road, E. B. Failing had his station and café on the other corner. They catered to the work crews constructing the power line and the traffic moving between Los Angeles and the Hoover Dam. The businesses ran 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. Additionally several mines, including gold mines, were active in the surrounding area. During the height of this activity and the height of Prohibition, E. B. Failing went to Los Angeles and had a brand new bar constructed then he had it installed in his business. Liquor was available by the drink or by the bottle and was a nice compliment to the slot machines. Prohibition just never quite made it to Baker. Maybe it was too far out.

In 1931 Highway 91 was constructed through Baker and it was paved. Today it is Baker Boulevard.

In 1932 "Death Valley Jack" Nickerson, one of the original businessmen in Baker, passed away and was buried at the Silver Lake Cemetery.

On October 9, 1936 the Hoover line, billed as the world's first "extra high voltage" power line was energized and began carrying electricity from Hoover Dam, now called Boulder Dam, to Los Angeles. This line is still in service and can be seen one mile north of Baker Boulevard on Highway 127. It is now dwarfed by much larger transmission lines.

In 1938 persistent Winter rains produced record snowfall which began to melt causing the Mojave River to flood. Much of Baker was under water and the bridge across the Mojave was heavily damaged. The bridge crossing the river today between the Chevron Station and the Denny's Restaurant was completed the following year and has been in continuous use ever since. Sanctioned outboard motor boat races were held on Silver Lake in 1938 and 1939, drawing large crowds.

Shortly after the United States entered World War II a large pilot training base was constructed on Silver Lake just north of Baker. Old photographs show numerous airplanes and structures in the area. The most notable remains, a concrete swimming pool, can be seen about 8 miles north of town alongside Highway 127. Once again Baker was busy with men and equipment.

The flood of 1938 caused a huge operating loss for the T & T Railroad. The railroad was shut down in 1940 and at the beginning of the war the rails were removed and shipped over seas to aid in the war effort. The last deaths attributed to the railroad occurred on the west edge of Baker when an automobile traveling west on what is now Baker Boulevard slammed into the train which was being used to remove the rails. Both

occupants of the car were killed. The railroad grade can still be seen between the Boulevard and Interstate 15 on the west edge of town and the scene of the accident can still be pinpointed.

On February 14th, 1942, Charles Fairbanks Brown, son of Senator Charles Brown and Stella Fairbanks Brown, married Mary Elizabeth Corkhill.

On October 3rd, 1943 at the age of 86 years "Dad" Fairbanks passed away and his holdings in Baker passed to his grandson, Charles F. Brown. Soon the business would be know as Brown's Market and it continued to prosper.

In 1944 Curtis Howe Springer, known as "Doc" Springer arrived at Soda Springs with his wife and young family. He promptly renamed Soda Springs "Zzyzx" wanting it to be the last word in the English Dictionary. In time "Doc" Springer would construct a number of beautiful buildings and a lake on the site. He was an advocate of healthy living and healthy foods and was known World wide for his religious broadcasts. "Doc" Springer bought ingredients, mixed and packaged them and shipped the out. His mail volume caused the class of the Post Office in Baker to be up-graded.

In the early 1940's the first school opened in Baker with grades K thru 8. Highschool students attended school in Barstow and generally roomed there through the week, returning to Baker on weekends.

Phil Lisle, grandson of "Dad" Fairbanks, would always check the Goldstone Bar in Barstow for a ride back to Baker. Death Valley Scotty liked to frequent the bar on Friday on his way back to the desert, and he instructed Phil to come and get him out of the bar if he was there and drive him to Baker. Scotty would stay overnight in Baker then continue on to Death Valley the next day. Phil's mother didn't like Death Valley Scotty, and called him an "unsightly old drunk." Scotty also wasn't popular with "Blackie" Maher, a conductor on the T & T Railroad. "Blackie" referred to Scotty as "The big wind from Death Valley."

In 1952 Joseph Plank retired to Baker after a long career in law enforcement. When the Justice Court was opened he was elected to a 6 year term and began to earn his title as a tough Judge, always charging the maximum fine. He was so notorious Readers Digest did an article on him calling him "The Beast of Baker." At first the Court was in an old wooden building near the present day Shell Station, but in 1966 a new courthouse was constructed. Later, after the Justice Courts were closed, the building reverted to the Baker C.S.D. which continues to use it as an office today.

In 1956 The Baker Community Services District was formed. The original Board of Directors consisted of Charles F. Brown, son of Senator Charles Brown, J.O. Failing, son of E.B. Failing, Chet Huffman, who Huffman Park is named after, Ted Reetz who owned the Baker Hardware Store until he passed away in the mid 1990's and De Earl Howard who became distinguished as the first Director to die in office. They opened their first meeting with a bank balance of \$199.39. After they paid the bills they had a balance of \$51.46.

The more modern history of the Baker Community Services District can be found under [ABOUT BAKER](#)

STORY BY [LE HAYES](#) BAKER COMMUNITY SERVICES DISTRICT MANAGER.

FOR MORE INFORMATION ON THE HISTORY OF BAKER AND THE MOJAVE DESERT LE's Book "PILGRIMS IN THE DESERT" IS AVAILABLE ONLINE, AT THE BAKER COMMUNITY SERVICES DISTRICT OFFICE IN BAKER, MOJAVE RIVER VALLEY MUSEUM IN BARSTOW CA, AND MOJAVE NATIONAL PRESERVE VISITOR'S CENTER AT KELSO DEPOT. GET MORE INFO AT [LEHAYES.COM](#)

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