



VISION *from* THE PAST

Bakersfield has a rich heritage that goes back 8000 years to the Yokuts Indians. With plentiful lakes and rivers to draw them, they became the first settlers in the San Joaquin Valley. When gold was discovered in 1849, it changed forever the face of California. The “Rush” was on, attracting adventurous and optimistic pioneers from the east who brought a unique cultural diversity to the area.

Along with the gold seekers came a statesman from Iowa, Colonel Thomas Baker. The colonel was an extraordinary man with an extraordinary vision who deserves special mention in the establishment of the city of Bakersfield. An extremely intelligent, kind and levelheaded man with a sterling character, Col. Baker initially settled in northern California, then Stockton, and the Fresno areas where he served in the state legislature. Later he became one of the founders of Visalia, the county seat.

In 1863 Col. Baker, purchased 31,000 acres of swamp land along the Kern River (in the present area of Bakersfield) and set about recovering the swamps and settling the area. With foresight he predicted the coming of railroads as well as the oil industry to the area, recognized the tremendous possibilities of the locality and made it his permanent home.

He dedicated his remaining years to the development of his new home and surrounding area. He was extravagant in his generosity and in his aid to those who would locate here. He judiciously began giving away his purchased acreage to those he felt would make proper use of the land, in establishing homesites or businesses. In fact, so generous was he that in the end he had given away all but eighty acres of his land, which is now the heart of the city.

Soon after coming here, Colonel Baker planted fields of alfalfa, corn, potatoes and other crops near the Kern river. Generous to a fault, he allowed worn and weary travelers from Fresno to Los Angeles to camp there and help themselves to his crops. “Help yourselves but don’t waste anything” he told them. Traveling immigrants would say, “If we can only make Baker’s field by night we shall be sure of getting food and a place to camp.” Hence the name of the town – *Bakersfield*. The saying and the character of the Colonel became well known.

One final noteworthy accomplishment: Col. Baker was a civil engineer as well as a lawyer. He founded the city and designed the layout of its wide and beautiful streets. In contrast to other cities, whose streets were only sixty-six feet wide (and too narrow in his opinion), the Colonel provided for streets eighty-two feet in width, which became just one of the notable distinguishing features of the great city of Bakersfield.

The colonel’s legacy of kindness and generosity has survived in the city named after him, even to today. Colonel Baker would be proud of what his city has accomplished and who the people of Bakersfield are...just good people with big hearts.