By 1890 Capt. John Barker had settled on several hundred acres of river-bottom land about seven miles upriver of Bakersfield. Barker died in 1909, and in 1915 his son-in-law Daniel Harris offered the property to the county for $30,000. The price squelched the deal. In 1920 the county had a second chance to buy the land, this time from Herman T. Miller and T.B. Wiseman. The Bakersfield Californian objected the barren location and the twisting road, and the paper pointed out there were camping spots nearer to town. Besides wrote the paper, this "hot bend of the river" was no way to spend $20,000. The Californian called for a public referendum,¹ but the Bakersfield Morning Echo, its rival, said the Barker property would make a fine center for health and recreation,

¹ Bakersfield Californian, Nov 9, 1921
although the Echo admitted the road was bad.²

In 1921 civic and fraternal voices, the American Legion and the Caledonia Masonic Lodge of Bakersfield in particular, convinced the Kern County Board of Supervisors to buy the property for a county park. On November 7, 1921, Kern County paid $20,673.66 for 338 acres of the old Baker Ranch, a price equivalent to about $250,000 today.³

The community donated time and energy to the new park, but it was only one of many sites for leisure and recreation started here in the mid-1920s: Theaters, tennis courts, plunges, night baseball and football (selling 2000 tickets), high-speed roads to scenic areas, new and improved golf courses, and parks on the West Side, in Bakersfield, and others along the Kern River.⁴

Dated February 1929, this early park image shows the hillside reservoir, left, and bathhouses and barn, right.

---

² Morning Echo, Sep 14, 1920
³ Supervisors were James B. McFarland, James I. Wagy, Harry C. Rambo, Stanley Abel, and Ira M. Williams. John Oliver Hart was elected to the board in 1923.
⁴ Los Angeles Times, Dec 8, 1930. Associated Oil had a picnic ground and nine-hole golf course on the north side of Kern River and east of Gordon's Ferry in the direction of Kern River Park. The Associated grounds were last used about 1939-40. (Author's interview, Dean VanZant, Oct 28, 2003)
The Bakersfield Woman's Club petitioned the Board of Supervisors in 1926 to improve a medicinal mineral spring that had been flowing down the park’s hillside since the turn of the century. There was an historical precedent for their interest in the spring. Since the founding of Bakersfield, families had ventured into Kern Canyon for medicinal waters of several hot springs. From 1876 on, Bakersfield newspapers advertised the larger ones: Dahlonega Health Resort, Democrat Hot Springs and Hobo Hot Springs.\(^5\) An opportunity to ease rheumatism only 30 minutes from Bakersfield would be a community benefit.

But notable changes to Kern River Park did not start until after 1927 when Kern County Supervisor John Oliver Hart was named chair of the Park Committee and Park Superintendent.\(^6\) Among his earlier acts was to improve access from Bakersfield. Supervisors J.O. Hart and J.B. McFarland ordered the grading of an old trail from China Grade to the park and the same work on a road east of the park to Kern Canyon Highway.\(^7\)

Horticulturist Charles N. Potter was soon hired.\(^8\) He and Hart established a nursery and tree-planting program, and in 1927 while

---

5 Hobo was renamed Miracle in 1947.
6 Hart took the job in 1927.
8 The author's cousin said that one of Potter's daughters stored the Potter photo collection of the park.
Kern County Hospital at 19th near Oak was being decommissioned, several of the buildings were removed to the new park for employee housing.\(^9\) Flood irrigation was established for new trees,\(^10\) and after electrical power was brought to the park, bids went out for installation of underground irrigation lines and concrete standpipes.\(^11\)

In preparation for a picnic in spring 1928, the American Legion constructed tables, a large barbecue pit, and a speaker's platform.\(^12\)

By this time a health spa near the mineral spring made the waters available to the public. The 240-gal per minute spring, gushing since the turn of the century, still drained into the river, but it now also supplied a fountain by the road and six cabins, or “curative bathhouses,”\(^13\) on the hillside.\(^14\) In July 1928 a reporter counted 850 picnickers and campers at the park.\(^15\)

---

9 Bakersfield Californian, Jun 21, 1930
10 The May 3, 1936 Bakersfield Californian named these species: Cork oak, live oak, camphor, magnolia, red cedar, Atlantic cedar, Monterey cypress, pine arborvitae, bottle tree, California laurel, Cedrus deodora, Sequoiadendron sempervirens, acacia, locust, Arizona cypress, silver maple, catalpa, poplar sycamore, walnut, ash, and elm.
11 Bakersfield Californian, Apr 2, 1928. Some standpipes were 20-feet tall. A few are still present. A 12,000 gallon tank installed on the hillside for sprinkler irrigation. Hart had made the motion to bring power to the park, construct pipelines, and establish concessions in 1929. (Bakersfield Californian, Jul 10, 1947)
12 Bakersfield Californian, Apr 2, 1928
13 Ibid
14 According to the Jun 21, 1930 Bakersfield Californian, the well "... came in in 1904 when wildcatters were drilling 800 feet for oil. The well now flows into an artificial lake, 300 by 700 feet in size, brilliantly lighted and equipped with 20 boats." Earthquakes of the 1952-53 stopped the well's flow.
15 Bakersfield Californian, Jul 9, 1928. See also Bakersfield Californian, Aug 12, 1929
The park's grand opening (it had several) was held April 22, 1928 on Pleasure Island, a grassy, level sward below the bathhouses. The name Pleasure Island is misleading because today this section of the park is not an island, but in 1928 the river and two sloughs made it an island of sorts. The park had dirt roads then, and much open sky, and the grand opening of April must have raised dust because weeks later the county oiled the roads.

Months passed before the nursery's saplings were ready to plant, but they were less important to the public than the new swimming pool that Hart promised for the summer of 1928. Bidding didn't open until June, but by that time supervisors said they didn't expect a plunge to be completed until September. The statement might have been somewhat disingenuous. County supervisors preferred a deliberate, frugal policy of spending, and although Hart lobbied hard for the

16 Ibid. Hart made the motion to build the plunge.
plunge, in October the supervisors scotched the idea in favor of expanding the existing hillside reservoir. If enlarged to 100 x 600-ft it would accommodate swimming and boating and provide additional storage for irrigation.

In early November 1928 trucks and power shovels expanded the hillside lake, as it was called then. Soil deposited along the main park road created an eight-by-six-hundred-ft dike. The south side of the reservoir abutted the natural inclination of the hill, so no earth-moving was needed there. Workmen also carved-out a small island in the middle of the excavation. Hart and Potter then brought in two truckloads of cut lumber to build a safety barrier to keep young swimmers from the deep end. The rest of the material was used to make tables and benches for a viewing area.

Water for the pool came from (1) the flowing mineral-spring, (2) a new 363-ft well, and (3) from the river. An electric pump delivering 1,200 gallons a minute would pump Kern River water to the reservoir and also to a tank higher on the hillside. Hart boasted, "A clean sandy bottom will be provided for swimming, and conditions will be ideal. Before I get through I intend to make the park one of the county's finest amusement centers."
As the Twenties drew to an end about $40,000 in county funds had been spent on the park, and the money had climbed in step with public enthusiasm. In 1929 the park had a restaurant, but Hart was ever ready to install something new. At one stage he and the Lions Club decided that the county's historical collection kept at the Chamber of Commerce Building on North Chester would look better in a county museum at Kern River Park. \(^{21}\) Supervisors did not jump at that suggestion, but they were still committed to park growth. In 1929 the county acquired additional property nearby, and that increased the park to 363-acres. \(^{22}\)

![Image of the park in 1929, probably on Pleasure Island](image)

Not all public enthusiasm was welcome. Reports had come in that in late night hours and very early morning hours, nude, mixed-sex bathing parties had been seen in the reservoir. Hart warned, "You

---

\(^{21}\) Bakersfield Californian, Mar 6, 1929. In 1928 the Chamber of Commerce moved into its new building on Chester Avenue just north of Garces Circle. Their building later became the home of the Kern County Museum.

\(^{22}\) Bakersfield Californian, Dec 22, 1934, p 7
can't quote me too strongly on this matter, I am going to have three
deputy sheriffs on the lookout at the Kern River park, and if anyone,
man or woman, is caught bathing in the lake at that time of the day or
night without a bathing suit, he or she will be arrested. I don't care
who these mixed couples are. I have given instructions they will be
taken immediately and locked up in the county jail to await the due
course of the law." Hart had labored to create a beautiful park, a
privilege extended to everyone, but he was prepared to protect it
against criticism."²³

In 1930 Hart turned his attention to building a wildlife park on Goat
Island near the west end of the park. Moreover, a bridge would be
needed for automobile traffic. Said Hart, "Around the outer fence of
the zoo I could build a driveway giving the public an opportunity to go
around the island and inspect the animals."²⁴ That future bridge and
road around Goat Island shows on early maps, but a zoo there never

²³ Bakersfield Californian, May 4, 1929
²⁴ Bakersfield Californian, Feb 2, 1930. See also Howard Gilkey’s 1930 park
map, Kern County library, McGuire Local History Room
materialized. Instead, Hart started his zoo on the park's main grounds.

Leslie Arnold, Commissioner of the Department of Fish and Game, donated the first animal, a one year-old, pure-white doe. Hart and the Bakersfield Californian used the little doe to promote the park: The Californian said it would publish the letter of the school child submitting the best name. The winning name was John Doe, but John Doe turned out to be female, although there is no evidence that the name was changed to Jane Doe. Another deer was donated, as well as a brown bear named Julia, which Buck Jones trailered in from Portland, Oregon. The county built a pen for donated elk, and with a go-ahead from the state commissioner of fish and game, four additional elk were trailered in from the William Tracy Ranch at Buttonwillow. An eagle was donated, and then the public swamped Hart with non-native animals. Although three more deer came in, they

25 A series of destructive floods in the Thirties erased Goat Island.
26 Bakersfield Californian, Apr 26, 1928
27 Bakersfield Californian, May 24, 1929
arrived with guinea hens, peafowl, and a monkey donated by park concessionaire, Roland F. Hall.\textsuperscript{28}

Back in 1914 when T.N. Herbert’s family vacationed in Florida, his daughter was presented with a 10-in, four month-old alligator. By 1922 her father no longer wanted the reptile, and he gave it to an employee club of the San Joaquin Light and Power Co. In 1928 the alligator had grown to 4-ft and was too dangerous for the club so they gave it to the park. Hart’s proviso to the club was they had to built a pool and brick cage for the then 14 year-old alligator.\textsuperscript{29} The fully-stocked zoo, the alligator, and the bison brought in the public.\textsuperscript{30} In March 1929 somewhere between one and two thousand visitors were showing up on spring weekends.

In the late 1920s the park received gold and silver Chinese pheasants from a bird farm at Chino, but the birds were not easily contained. Escapes were so common that signs appeared forbidding shooting near the park’s boundaries.\textsuperscript{31} By the early 1960s the county was still in the business of raising birds. The pens were then between the buffalo stockade and the river, but they were probably original ones from the late 1920s.

\textsuperscript{28} Hall also operated the boat concession. Today’s party of peafowl at the park probably originated with that donation.\textsuperscript{29} Bakersfield Californian, Oct 12, 1928, May 24, 1929\textsuperscript{30} The Jun 21, 1930 Bakersfield Californian said C.N. Potter would soon transform the alligator pond into “a water garden of hyacinths.”\textsuperscript{31} Bakersfield Californian, Jul 3, 1948
One-time park caretakers Lorraine Smock and her husband Stan recalled that after WWII the caretakers who took their places were Perry and Barbara Denton who occupied the adobe house by the park’s machine shop. They, too, cared for the pheasants, chuckers and quail. Stan Smock added that after the Dentons left, Bud Squire took the job. 

Ostriches were once a big attraction. In the late Twenties, Mrs. William Tracy was reducing her ostrich herd and gave five birds to the park. They adapted well and might have flourished if they had not been surrounded by such a crush of people and cars. One Sunday in 1927 two little girls found an ostrich egg in the grass, and later on in their daddy’s Ford they peered over the front seat as he idled along a park road behind one of the big birds. 

In May 1929 Game Warden Leslie Arnold donated three eagles and two ducks, veterinarian J. E. VanZant donated two African geese, and the Tracy family donated two Kern County elk. Loose animals became so numerous that road signs were installed giving animals the right-of-way. In 1934 when the park’s new 31-acre lagoon was filled, the Kern County Fish and Game Association stocked it with 35,000 bass, catfish, and bluegill. 

32 Author's interview, Stan and Lorraine Smock  
33 Author's interview, Millie Gia Munding  
34 Bakersfield Californian, Mar 8, 1934
In summer 1929, Kern County's economy was healthy, the US stock market had not yet gone into free fall, and at Kern River Park one weekend in July, 2,100 visitors crowded in. Supervisors recognized the need for a master-plan of park growth and invited 39 year-old landscape architect Howard K. Gilkey to Bakersfield.35 Gilkey had started his career as an assistant in horticultural design at the 1915 Panama-Pacific International Exhibition, and by 1929 he was a well-regarded landscape designer. Gilkey's initial talk with supervisors was not recorded, but the probably told them the same as he told a newspaper reporter in 1930: “The cost [of the park] may be spread over a term of years and cause no burden to the taxpayer.” 36 Had Gilkey come to Bakersfield months later, the county might not have hired him; before the stock market crashed, Gilkey and Kern County had a binding contract.

While Gilkey surveyed the property and drew up his plans, he spoke to a reporter and said, “We are living in an unstable word and planning for an uncertain future.”37 Nevertheless, the Depression did not keep Gilkey from drawing up plans that were detailed, comprehensive, and forward-thinking. Gilkey: “The administration center of the park will be found almost exactly in the middle of the flatter portion of the site. Here will be the main field house, a lesser children’s enter, a museum, and terminating a mall leading from the central plaza will be a

35 Bakersfield Californian, Oct 21, 1929
36 Bakersfield Californian, Feb 4, 1930
37 Ibid
boathouse. All the buildings are to comprise a simply-unified architectural composition having certain elements in common, notably roofs of hand-made tile, walls of rough plaster, whitewashed, and logs hand-hewn for beams and piers.”

He planned for a restaurant, medicinal baths and open air swimming with a pool for children. In September the board accepted the drawings and specifications.

In 1930 Hart carved a dug-out canoe from a white sugar pine log that he brought down from Greenhorn Mountain. When launched into the

---

38 Ibid. The Apr 30, 1920 Bakersfield Californian said the museum was still a part of the park planning.
hillside reservoir the Pioneer became the park’s first amusement ride.

39 Hart added other attractions, which attracted more cars to the park, which caused civic leaders to call for more growth. Wrote Leo G. Pauly, Chairman of the Bank of America,

"State engineers and the Board of Supervisors visualize a playground park extending from the Fair Grounds on North Chester Avenue to the park eight miles upriver. The natural beauty and advantages it possesses along with the fine soil which with proper development will make it in time a close rival to the great Golden Gate Park. The main park of 345 acres is now planted with over 6,000 trees and shrubs, donations from the state, local organizations and individuals. There have also been donated a number of rare birds and animals. The beginnings of that will someday be an interesting zoo. Now it has a lake of about three acres or more with water five-feet deep and fed by a flowing sulfur water well and by water pumped from the river. It has a fleet of row-boats, which were donations from enthusiasts and are free for using."40

Hart had served as county supervisor for 16 years, and in 1930 he stood for re-reelection on his record of Kern River Park development.

39 Bakersfield Californian, Jun 31, 1930
40 Bakersfield Californian, Aug 6, 1930. On May 4, 1929 the Californian named those enthusiasts: King Lumber Company, American Legion, K&W Furniture Co, and Bakersfield Sandstone Brick. Forty-one organizations planted trees wrote the June 21, 1930 Bakersfield Californian.
The Californian enumerated the accomplishments: A developed mineral spring, groves of memorial trees, a hillside lake, buffaloes, ostriches, and a zoo. In January 1930 Hart said, "It is my ambition now to finish the work I have started at the county park. I believe this work will be of value to every person in the county, and it is my sincere hope that I shall be allowed to finish it."41 Hart might have given special emphasis to the word "hope" because the nation’s economy was in tail spin, and county spending was in decline. Visitor count dwindled; park concessions closed. Undismayed, Hart continued tapping the community for support.

The projects payed by county taxes from 1921 to 1930 were insignificant compared to the government make-work programs of the Depression that were never equaled since. By 1935 the State Emergency Relief Administration had spent about $250,000 on Kern

41 Bakersfield Californian, Jan 27, 1930
river Park, or the equivalent of about $3.6M today.\textsuperscript{42}

Sometime in 1931 County Deputy Surveyor R.E. White designed a 1700s-style Italian waterwheel for the park, and in 1932-33 WPA and SERA workers carried out the design. \textsuperscript{43} Logs from nearby mountains were hand-hewed at the site, and 20,728 brass screws were used in place of nails to assemble the wheel. The No. 1 heart redwood selected for the wheel’s paddles was saturated with linseed oil every day for six weeks. The waterproofed wheel, as installed, was 5-ft wide and 21-ft tall. Carpenters building it earned $1.75 a day, but they put in so many free man-hours, the project was competed in five weeks.\textsuperscript{44}

The proposed 35-acre lake was the most massive of the park’s projects. Planning in summer 1930 secured river-water rights from both Miller & Lux and the Kern County Land Company, and construction followed in 1934. The lake in its final configuration was only 16-acres, but the water rights were never scaled back. \textsuperscript{45}

\textsuperscript{42} Bakersfield Californian, Dec 22, 1934
\textsuperscript{43} Bakersfield County, Proud of Kern County, 1933, 1966, vol 1 (KCL, bound, McGuire Local History room). Bakersfield Californian, Aug 15, 1942, Bakersfield Californian. Funding and labor from SERA (California State Emergency Relief Act), CWA (Civil Works Administration), and WPA (Works Project Administration) created almost all park projects of the 1930s.
\textsuperscript{44} Down Memory Lane, Hopson Mortuary (Bakersfield, CA). Bakersfield Californian, 1946. The pamphlet is a holding of the Beale Memorial Library, Bakersfield, CA.
\textsuperscript{45} Bakersfield Californian, Jun 31, 1930. Minutes of the Clerk of the Board, Jul 17, 1932. The minutes define the future lake in Sec 36, T28S, R28E. The excess water allotment for the park meant plentiful irrigation forever.
Local laborer using wheelbarrows, picks and shovels were paid a dollar a day\textsuperscript{46} to hand-dig the lake and its 212-ft supply channel. The men also constructed an eight-ft, arched masonry, culvert; a reinforced concrete, 30-ft spillway; and a masonry arched road bridge, all of which remain today.\textsuperscript{47}

\textsuperscript{46} Bakersfield Californian, Jul 10, 1947
\textsuperscript{47} Extent in 2009
Road bridge, west end of lake. Water returns to river at this point.

Built, too, were five timber bridges “of various design” to connect the “mainland to the island.” West of the giant lake, workers built a 200 x 400-ft parking lot and a 100 x 400-ft lily pond. The pond is still here today. At mid-point of the 1930s, 188,000 man-hours had been invested in park development. The last major Depression-era structure was the west entrance gateway, built in 1941.

Lake dug by hand, 1933

48 Bakersfield Californian, Dec 22, 1934. After Hart, park development continued under County Supervisor J. A. Hinman and H. D. Pope, the supervising engineer of county projects under the State Emergency Relief Administration.
49 Bakersfield Californian, Jan 1, 1941.
Where was the island with five bridges? Goat Island was too small, and Pleasure Island was too far east of the man-made lake. A report about the waterwheel answers the question with the words that it was “...installed in the channel between the mainland and the island.” and shows that the original, five timber bridges passed over the waterway that turned the waterwheel. The description also shows that today’s wooden bridge near the waterwheel is the last of the five wooden bridges erected in 1932-33.

The waterwheel's power output was 38-HP at seven revolutions per minute. A series of step-up gears drove a mechanical water pump at 1,400 RPM to lift water to the hillside reservoir. Electric generation was also possible, but just how long it was in use is not known. The floods of 1936 and 1937 damaged the wheel and its water channel, and the flow of water was reduced. It is likely that after 1938 the wheel was no longer used to pump water. While Lake Isabella Dam was under construction in 1950 the waterwheel again suffered flood damage.

50 Bakersfield Californian, Dec 22, 1934.
Frank Stramler recalled, "When I started there in 1959 as park superintendent the mill [waterwheel] was in pretty good shape. It was originally built to be operational, to pump water up to the reservoir and to the tanks on the hill. But about once a year we had to bring in our crane, drag lines, and big cat and push the sediment up out of the canal. The wheel house still had the belt or chain drive to generate current, but the water flow was never enough to produce much power. The wheel stopped making electricity while I was there. It still turned though, and it was still an aesthetic feature of the park. We had to turn the paddle wheel to get it to soak-up water because
the bottom paddles would get water logged from standing still in the water so long. It was unbalanced and wouldn’t turn. We had to spray it with the sprinklers to try to keep the top paddles from drying out.”

The wheel might have stopped moving from the normal force of water before 1959. Nancy Twisselman, who became interested in preserving the wheel around 2001, learned that an electric water pump inside the wheel house was used to pump water up to the paddles to make the wheel turn.51

In January 2011 the 78 year-old waterwheel's timbers were sagging and splintered and on the verge of collapsing. A wag suggested that the only thing supporting the waterwheel was termites holding hands. It was a humorous exaggeration, but there is little doubt that the waterwheel is past the point of preservation. Resurrection, however, is possible. Cultural preservationist interested in replicating the waterwheel will find R.E. White's working drawings at the county's engineering office at M and Golden State avenue.

51 Author's interview, Nancy Twisselman, Jun 26, 2003
Gus and Pearl Balasis owned Pearl’s Cash Grocery at 17th and O streets in Bakersfield, but by 1934 the economy had gotten so bad that customers could not pay their charge accounts. The Balasis family went out of business. Daughter Irene recalled, "First we moved in with my grandparents. The after a few months my dad's friend Percy Branson who was the manager of Kern River Park told him about a job at the park."\(^{52}\)

Irene's brother Gus explained, "In 1935 when I was about 10 years-old we moved into a house trailer there. I remember my dad started working at the park with Lloyd Snyder who had the bicycle shop in

---

52 Author's interview, Gus Balasis and Irene Balasis Restituto, Mar 2003
town. Lloyd was bringing bikes to the park and renting them out."
Before much longer, Balasis, Snyder, and Branson were running the
park’s bicycle and food concessions.

Gus: "After we moved, we put up a lunch stand at the east end of the
lake, and later-on another stand on the west end where the boat docks
are. In 1935 we moved the stand at the east end of the lake up on the
hill where they were building the new swimming pool. My mother
served the work crews full lunches, 25 cents a plate."

In May 1935, 5,000 visitors attended the Annual Celebration of the
Dedication of the People's Playground. The souvenir program showed
upgrades to the park and identified Cecil Hess as manager of the new
zoo then under construction across the road from the new swimming
pool.
Irene said that in 1936 the park had several live-in employees. "Superintendent Branson and his assistant Merle Stoops each had their own houses down from the swimming pool and just east of that drinking-fountain building made out of river-rock. The park caretaker Joe Claudino and his wife Bobbie and their three kids, Joe Jr, Margie and Dorothy, lived in a smaller, wood-frame house. Our little trailer was off the beaten path down by the river past the mill and next to where the park police building is today.\textsuperscript{53} The trailer had a breezeway that connected to a tent with a wooden floor."

Irene loved the quiet, beautiful park. On the bluff behind the plunge she and her brother dug for shark teeth, and from an old sheep herder named Pete, who lived in a shack behind the park, they bought warm milk and cheese. Irene recalled, "My mom had to get water from the river to wash our clothes, and the Branson's had the only phone in the park. When I knocked on their back door to ask to use it, I always wanted to see inside their whole house."

Frank Stramler was park superintendent in 1959, and he and his family lived at the superintendent's house. "I think the house might have been a chicken-dinner place once. The living room was big, 20x40 ft, and it had a big fireplace in the middle of the long wall. It had cloakrooms on either side of this big room, and all along the walls..."

\textsuperscript{53} This suggests that the park police buildings were constructed after 1936.
were light fixtures that would have been for booths. Percy Branson lived at that house before me. Another house that was nearby was for the assistant superintendent, and there was also another house for a foreman, It was to the northeast by the main shop that was next to the river. Charlie Salazar lived there. Later on, my house and most of the others burned down."

The Stramler’s house had been a diner. The park’s first concessionaire, Rowen F. Hall, opened it as the Hen House on June 14, 1929. The rustic building with a dance floor and large fireplace was open from 5 pm until midnight, and could accommodate 50 customers at a time for fried chicken and steak dinners.

Cobblestone river rock tower, center. Water-filter house, left. Abt 1930

54 Author's interview, Frank Stramler, Nov 2003
55 “'Hen House' Opens at Kern River Park” Bakersfield Californian, Jun 13, 1929
The Kern River flooded in 1936. Gus recalled, "It started rising, and then they got a tractor and pulled our trailer house across the little bridge to higher ground. But they couldn’t move our tent house."
Irene said, "My brother and I had button-boxes full of shark teeth that we’d collected. After the water went down, we went back to our tent and saw that we’d lost all of our collection. Most of the other things that were in the tent were gone, too."

In summers, Irene’s cousin Connie Basbis worked at the Balasis’ food concession stands. Connie remembered the surroundings, "When
I was out there in the late 1930s, the only things going on were the food stand, the plunge, little zoo, and the bikes." But by the end of the Thirties the economy was on the mend, and the Balasis were making some money.

In the mid-1930s the zoo had a fox, badgers, several deer, elk, and two or three buffalo in a stockade near the game-bird cages. Gus's memory of the monkeys: "King was a sweet one, but the spider monkey, Jim, would try to bite you." King and Jim were spider or chino monkeys, Jimmy and Baby were baboons. The zoo had mandarin and golden ring-neck pheasants, peacocks, two owls (Punch and Judy), some roughneck and fantail pigeons, one black gander, guinea hens, and the ostriches. In 1936 more bison were brought in from Montana.

Gus: "Across from the shops in 1936 there was a big pen that had maybe two or three bison. The board fence was strong, but when the bison got worked up they rammed the enclosure. It was pretty exciting." Darrell Francis, also remembered the large animals. "Northwest of the old waterwheel and across from the shops was a large animal area with elk. At times, one bull elk in particular was mean and dangerous. He was in rut and the cows were in heat. Nobody ever got hurt from the bull, but they did wind up shooting him. It was

---

56 Author's interview, Connie Basbis Pappas, Aug, 2003
a shame because that animal wasn't doing anything but being an elk."

Second Largest Swimming Pool in California

The oil booms of 1900-20 made possible Kern County's to claim to the lowest tax rates and most magnificent court house in the state. In 1927 the Board of Supervisors discussed building a concrete swimming pool for the park. Although money was no worry, ever practical heads prevailed, and instead of authorizing a plunge, supervisors decided to expand the park's mud-bottomed reservoir on the hillside. Supervisor Hart, ever the optimist, suggested they write the State for more information about swimming pools. Construction on a concrete plunge did start several years later, but Hart never lived to see it. He died in 1934.

In February 1935 Kern County and the State Emergency Relief Act improved the park's underground irrigation system and started work on a modern concrete swimming plunge just east of the old, mud reservoir. Recalling work on the plunge, Gus Balasis said, "They built a wall on the east side of the reservoir that became a sort of island between it and the new pool." A straight embankment separated the

57 Author's interview, Darrell Francis, 2003. In 2003 Francis was a guide for Tejon Ranch.
58 John Oliver Hart died June 16, 1934.
59 Author's interview, Gus Balasis, 2003.
new plunge from the old reservoir, and once a week, plunge water was emptied into it.

The new plunge occupied the east part of the reservoir, abt 1936. (Photo cracked)

By today's standards he new plunge was odd-shaped: One-inch deep on the east end near the bath house, and about 12-feet deep next to the diving boards on the northwest side of the plunge. Employees remembered the pool's bottom as funnel-shaped. River water entered on the shallow or east end and exited on the deep end by the one-meter and three-meter diving boards.

Fifteen months after pool construction started, the Kern County Farm Bureau held its first annual picnic at Kern River Park. In May 1936 the Californian wrote, "The greatest attraction at the picnic this year probably will be the immense swimming pool at the Kern River Park.

This pool is of concrete construction and covers an area of about an

60 The May 4, 1936 Bakersfield Californian said the pool went from 10 ft to 18 in, covered two acres, and was built "with an assistance of WPA and SRA labor."
acre and a quarter. The upper end of the pool was chained off for use of children, and the deep water end was for adults and good swimmers."\(^6^1\)

The next day 12,000 visitors turned out for the "Second Annual Celebration of the Opening of the People's Playground." The Californian noted, "An actual count showed 2,065 persons enjoyed the cool waters of the big new plunge, one of the largest in California..."\(^6^2\)

Gus Balasis recalled that the first lifeguards were Leroy Finley, Ernie Combs, Jack Jordan, and Art Brinner. Balasis added, "They hired me as a junior lifeguard, junior because I wasn't old enough to qualify for the regular lifeguard position."

Kern River Park Plunge, abt 1940. Red Top is below lifeguard tower.

During pool construction, SERA built an adobe building on the east side

\(^6^1\) Bakersfield Californian, May 16, 1936
\(^6^2\) Bakersfield Californian, May 17, 1936

www.gilbertgia.com p 30 of 62
of the plunge. Dale Hopwood remembered it. "Those changing rooms were mostly without roofs, but most of the women's locker rooms were covered." Gus Balasis: "After swimmers left the changing rooms, they had to walk through a foot bath to get to the pool. We called it sheep dip."

A children’s day camp was at the park in the 1940s. Blanche Molinaro Actis recalled, "Bob Blanton picked up us kids at Jastro Park and drove the city recreation bus to Hart Park. We did crafts and swam for the day. When I stepped out of the pool's bathhouse to go into the water, I had to walk across a ten-foot concrete ramp, and I remember it was very hot on my bare feet. There was some more hot concrete apron on the side that faced the hill, but not so much on the side near the main road."

Swimmers said a metal water toy called the Red Top floated between the shallow and deep ends and was fitted with a steering wheel that swimmers used to make the Red Top spin. A lifeguard tower was next to it in the middle of the plunge, and around the edges of the pool were four other towers.

Dick Brown and Ronald "Doc" Lockyer lifeguarded there in 1945 and 1946. Their friend Dean VanZant recalled helping them treat the

---

63 Author's interview, Dale Hopwood, 2006
64 Author's interview, Blanche Actis, 2003
65 Brown became pool manager in 1954.
pool: After closing they loaded lime sacks into a row boat, and as one rowed, the other dusted lime powder into the pool. Said VanZant, "In the morning, it was hard to tell if the lime was effective. The pool was huge. I remember that Brown claimed it held a little more than 3,000,000 gallons."66

In 1947 Darrell Francis became pool manager, and for the next seven summers he also lifeguarded with Cal Druey, Owen Nelson and Gary Morris. Francis described cleaning the plunge. "The deep end was next to the barrier that separated the pool from the reservoir. We'd pull out sections from that wall and let the water spill into the reservoir. That took care of the top five feet of water. After that we opened a wheel-

66 Author's interview, Dean VanZant, 2004.
driven valve underneath the wall, and the rest of the water drained off into the boat lake down the hill on the other side of the road. We started draining on Sunday afternoon and tried to get the water level down pretty far by dark. Then we came back on Monday morning about 4:30 or 5:00 AM to clean the walls and bottom."  

Federal and State Depression-era work projects did not compete with private business for workers, and perhaps for that reason the finished plunge had cleaning problems. SERA hired unskilled labor, and possibly eager but unskilled foremen, too, because the walls and floor when completed were rough concrete. Francis explained, "They didn’t build the pool like they’re built today with a series of coats. We had to use four fire hoses powered by water from the holding tank up on the hillside. Those hoses had so much pressure that it was a strain for one man to hold on. We literally blew the moss and algae off the sides of the pool."

The City of Bakersfield operated three sanitary, chlorinated park pools by 1938, but the untreated Kern River Park plunge built in 1936 remained a health and safety hazard for many years. Its water originated in mountain snow packs, but by the time it reached Kern River Park plunge it was far from pristine, and after a week of public use it had a burden of algae and mud, and a distinct off-odor. Even

67 Darrell Francis interview
after cleaning, the pool produced surprises – such as live crawdads.

Francis: "The intake pipe just had a hardware-cloth screen to keep the larger tree branches out of the pool, so plenty of things passed through --fish, frogs, even snakes." The public told jokes about the water, but it did not keep everyone away. In summer 1948, somewhere between 40,000 and 50,000 visitors a week came to the park. That level of patronage is probably why the county spent $35,000 on improvements to the big pool, but none for a chlorinating system."68

In summer 1953 four life guards and hundreds of swimmers were at Hart Park plunge when an 11 year-old Bakersfield boy, who could not swim, jumped into eight feet of water.69 Several minutes passed before his body was noticed. Roxana Francis was present. She recalled, "It was impossible to see more than six inches below the surface, and the water was at least six feet deep there where that boy went in."70 Darrell Francis recalled, "Every year I was manager I had to make a report on the pool and what it needed. I always told them it was unsafe, that the water clarity was really bad. It was a major safety problem because you couldn't always see the bottom by the end of the week." In fact, the drowning was the second in eight years.71

---

68 Bakersfield Californian, Jul 3, 1948
69 Another account attributed the death to horseplay.
70 Author's interview, Roxana Francis, 2003.
71 Bakersfield Californian, Aug 3, 1953. The earlier death was not a drowning. On Jul 4, 1945 a 20 year-old veteran, who only weeks earlier had been released from a Navy hospital, slipped while diving and hit his head on the plunge coping. A few hours later he died in a hospital of cerebral hemorrhage. (Bakersfield Californian, Jul 6, 1945)
In summer 1954, 18 year-old Joan Potter became the pool's first female lifeguard. She worked with four other lifeguards. All were needed. Said Cal Druey, "Some weekends in 1956 we had 1,000 people in the plunge. There were many times that somebody would panic that their child had drowned in the pool only to find out later that the kid was in the restroom." "The water was usually murky, and it was up to the lifeguards to keeps swimmers in view. One summer there were two guys who had been jumping into the pool with tubes. One of them got into trouble and went down. I dove in and tried to get

72 Bakersfield Californian, Jun 25, 1954
73 Author's interview, Cal Druey, 2003
under him to bring him up. The problem was that his buddy jumped in
to help him, and then his buddy lost his tube and went under, too.
Turned out neither one of them could swim. I was 180 pounds, and
each of them was about 150, but I was a strong swimmer. I got my
hand around one of them, and I got the other one by the hair. I started
to put them to the edge, but they both got hold of me, and I went
under. I was in trouble. I would’ve drowned with both of them if a 14
year-old girl hadn’t thrown us a buoy with a rope and pulled us in."

Roxana Francis had an amusing story about a man who complained to
a lifeguard that he’d lost his false teeth in the plunge. "They dove in to
look for his plate, but it didn’t do much good because the water was so
bad. They told him to come back Monday when the pool was drained.
Sure enough when he showed up, the teeth were in a half-inch of
water right about where he thought they’d be. He climbed down the
ladder, picked them up, and put them back in this mouth." Doris
Hopwood Dunham recalled the pool in 1960 when she lifeguarded
there and shook her head, "The water was really something. At the
northeast corner “fresh” river water boiled up out of pipe, and because
it was cleaner than the rest of the pool a lot of people liked to sit by it.
By Wednesday the lifeguards stayed out of the water as much as they
could.”74

74 Author's interview, Doris Hopwood Dunham, Jan 2011

www.gilbertgia.com p 36 of 62
In 1955-56 Kern County Parks and Recreation added an aeration tower and a chlorinating system for the park's drinking water system, but whether or not there was chlorine for the pool is not clear. It did get a new floor safe for the office.

When Cal Druey was manager, between 1956 and 1959, most life guards were East Bakersfield High students. Included were Doris Hopwood, Dale Hopwood, Bob Jellison, Fred Perry, Norman Davis and Bobby and David Brown. Dale Hopwood said, "The plunge was 210 by 330-ft.\(^\text{75}\) Water came in from the northeast corner and drained into the overflow side at the west end of the pool. There the water spilled over into the reservoir. At least one-third of the pool, mostly along the south edge, was less than two feet deep. To the west it went from 3-feet to 12-ft deep. I think some water was going into it all the time, but you couldn't notice it. I know that they ran water in and out of it at night."\(^\text{76}\) After the enormous pool opened, it became obvious that unfiltered river water would be a problem.

Hopwood continued, "The water was pretty murky by the end of the week, and by Sunday it was really icky. They started draining it on Sunday afternoon, and some of us came back on Monday to do the dirty job of hosing off the rough walls. Sections of the wall had different colors because the cement had been mixed by hand and the

\(^\text{75}\) Surface area of about 1.6 acres
\(^\text{76}\) Author's interview, Dale Hopwood, 2003

www.gilbertgia.com p 37 of 62
proportion of cement to sand was different from batch to batch. Later on, after the pool was filled, we poured in 50-gallon drums of HTH chlorine to try to sanitize the pool, but the water was never right."

Frank Stramler, Superintendent of Parks from 1959 to 1968, said improvements to the plunge would have cost the county about $30,000, and supervisors didn't want the expense. Stramler said somebody complained that the plunge was not properly chlorinated, and sometime after 1961 the county closed it to swimming.77

There was still life in the old plunge. In 1969-70 Bakersfield businessman John Barber bought a 2,000-lb, seven year-old hippo from a Ronnie Hochleutner of Los Angeles who had hoped to make some money as a hippo handler, but the animal's feed bill ruined Ronnie's dreams. Barber donated his hippo to the Bakersfield Zoo Society, they talked with the county, and Frank Stramler arranged to put Sam the Hippo on display at the old Hart Park plunge.78 Sam did not stay long. By December he had a new pen and pool at Metro Park north of the Kern County Museum.79 Later, Sam went to Larson's Dairy to live with the cows.80

In the early 1980s the county tried to make something useful out of

77 Author's interview, Frank Stramler, 2003.
78 Bakersfield Californian, Nov 7, 1969
79 Bakersfield Californian, Dec 2, 1969
80 Author's interview, Kathy Munding McCollister, 2002
the plunge. Stramler said, "We put in Water World, which was a water theme park. From the top of a big waterside, kids splashed down into a small tank of treated water next to the unused swimming pool. Paul Woollomes rented-out bumper boats, but Water World didn't pay for itself." In 1992 the pool was demolished, filled in, and an equipment yard was built on top of it.

![Boat concession, 1949. Photo credit: Dale Schwamborn](image)

Two, major annual events started at the park just before WWII: The Sheriff's Posse Barbecue and the Kern County Fish and Game Barbecue. The Sheriff's barbecue of August 25, 1940 attracted 21,000 people, the greatest number ever to visit the park in a single day.
Sheriff John E. Loustalot sold 11,000 barbecue tickets, and the thousands who did not buy tickets came to see Hollywood actors Buck Jones and Clark Gable. The weekend included skeet shooting, equestrian shows, dancing, a beauty contest, and boat races. Gus Balasis said the Sheriff’s Posse, the North Kern Riders, the Kern County Rangers, and Las Rancherias descended in single file from the bluff above the plunge.

Gus: "About 1940 my father bought the bike concession from Snyder. I remember going down to Los Angeles with Dad to buy more bicycles from the Shelby Bicycle Company. One of their girl models was popular because a movie star named Shirley Temple had one. Dad also had Red Devil acrobatic bikes and Igo scooters for rent. The Igo didn't have a seat or a chain or pedals. The frame flexed when you stood on it. The back wheel was a little off center, so you'd push off to get it going and then jump on. With that eccentric axle in the back you could catch a bouncing rhythm and make the Igo pick up speed."

Mr. Balasis had problems with the bike rental. "Once in a while my dad had to go out and round up his bikes. If a bike had a flat or broke down, some people would just leave it lying somewhere by the side of the road. We found our bikes all the way out in East Bakersfield." The bikes were just the beginning. About 1940 Balasis brought amusement rides to the park. Said Connie Bilbis Papas, "My uncle
bought a wooden merry-go-round from the East and put it together one piece at a time." Gus: " After that my father hired a company to design a wooden roller coaster, and he also put in a Ferris wheel. Later, he bought a much bigger roller coaster made out of metal, and after that we had the kiddy rides, the little train, a tilt-a-wheel, and the electric bumper cars." Bumper cars were a special night-time, park attraction with their "zit-zit" of arcing current and smell of burned metal as the electrified pole of each car sparked on the metal ceiling, the flashes of blue light light-up the drivers as they crashed their cars into one another.

Mrs. Ruth Ramirez and friends, bike rentals, 1950

Photo credits: Arnold Ramirez
In winter, Gus helped his father refurbish the rides, but war started, gasoline was rationed, fewer visitors came to the park, and young Balasis joined the Navy. His father kept the rides going. One summer, 10 year-old Blanche Molinaro was convinced that old Mr. Balasis was everywhere at the same time. "When I was a kid, he cooked hamburgers, sold tickets and operated all the rides. Sometimes if you wanted to ride the Ferris Wheel or the merry-Go-Round, you had to wait until he finished driving the little train around the loop."\(^{81}\) When Gus returned from the war his father was in poor health and was talking about selling the concessions.

Paul Woollomes served with the 376th Engineering Battalion that supplied fuel for General Patton's tanks. Said Woollomes, "I came back in 1946, and my dad told me that Percy Branson wanted to see me."\(^{82}\) Branson told me that Gus Balasis had 1/3 interest in the concessions.

---

\(^{81}\) Author's interview, Blanche Molinaro Actis, 2002

\(^{82}\) Paul Woollomes' father was Roy Woollomes, Kern County Supervisor.
and that he, Branson, had 2/3 interest. Branson said his financial interest in the concessions was at odds with his county job. I bought half of his 2/3rds interest, and that's how I got to be a partner with them. Later on I bought them both out."Woollomes operated the concessions for the next 60 years.

In 1946 when Stan and Lorraine Smock were park caretakers, the park's grassy lawns were irrigated by flooding. One of Stan's jobs was to prevent the flooded basins from washing out. Water in a ground-squirrel hole meant an earthen bank might give away like a collapsing dam. "We never tried to poison those squirrels," said Stan, "but we had to keep a sharp eye out for their burrowing." He was also the park's night watchman, and his first night on the job was a scare. Recalling that experience Stan said, "The park closed at 10 and it was dark out there. I kept hearing people crying Help! Help! It didn't take me very long to figure out where the cries were coming from. Those peacocks called Help! all that night."

83 Author's interview with Paul Woollomes, Feb 2003
The park had been crowded before the war, but afterward, attendance doubled. On an average summer Sunday in 1947 the park hosted somewhat more than 20,000 people. Kern County families grateful for peace after a long and painful war, and also grateful to drive their cars again, delighted in the park’s amenities – the plunge, sulfur baths, boating, fishing, concessions, rides for children, and park fireplaces with free firewood – and the public had not forgotten who made the park possible. Efforts to change the park’s name were rewarded in summer 1947 when the Kern County Board of Supervisors renamed it John O. Hart Memorial Park. Before the final vote, State Senator Jess R. Dorsey stood and formally requested the change, but credit for the successful effort goes to the community. Said Bakersfield City Councilman Gus Vercammen, “We thought a lot of Johnnie Hart over here.”

The park once again accepted animals for the zoo. A bear was among the first, followed by a mountain lion that Bill Lachenmaier of Shafter roped in Arizona. The new zoo attracted the public, but it alone could not have been the only reason for the astonishing increase in visitors. In summer 1948 between 40,000 and 50,000 people a week came to Hart Park, a number four times greater than before the war.

84 Bakersfield Californian, Jul 10, 1947
85 Dorsey probably addressed the board in mid-July. (Bakersfield Californian, Jul 10, 1947)
86 Bakersfield Californian, Jul 17, 1947
Besides fishing, swimming, picnicking, and mechanical rides, the park also had animals to ride. Paul Woollomes recalled the Lena Webb Riding Academy at the east entrance to the park, the rented horses and donkeys stabled in the red barn at the top of Hill Road, and in it the milk cow belonging to Mr. and Mrs. Luther Brown, who were park caretakers. Woollomes said, "I had a horse up there, too, a Morgan gelding that was too much for my sister, so I took him. I used to ride him up Kern Canyon and into the mountains when I went hunting."

The county had no food budget for zoo animals. The feed was hit and miss, but not surprisingly, the monkeys got most of theirs from park visitors. The troop must have eaten well because Darrell Francis remembered that their population grew. "Around 1950 there were plenty of monkeys, maybe three or four kinds, but the cage arrangement wasn't well thought out. Standing on top of the diving board at the plunge we could look across the road and see the zoo down below. They'd put the lion's cage right up next to the monkey's, and those monkeys were always reaching across and pulling the old lion's tail, so there was sometimes a lot of noise over there." Francis paused a moment.

"The lion finally got fed up with it, and caught the monkey's arm, and

87 Author's interview, Nancy Twisselman, Jun 26, 2003. She said equestrian enthusiast John Hoffstader restored the barn.
well...he bit it off. We took the little fellow to Sterns Veterinarian hospital where Walter Richard anesthetized the animal, sewed him up, and kept him there for a few days. When Walter brought the monkey back, they just put him in the same cage. That money never learned anything from the experience. He started pulling the lion's tail again, with his one good arm, and the lion got him again. We named the poor little fellow our two-legged, two-strikes monkey. After that they moved the cages. Didn’t want to take any more chances.”

Paul Woollomes recalled the 1930s when park concessionaire Wesley F. Waldon bought a park train from "somebody up north" and installed it at Kern River Park. In 1940, park manager Percy Branson and Gus Balasis partnered with Waldon in the train concession. Balasis' son Gus described his father’s part. "My dad had two jobs before the war. He was a working partner in the park concessions, and he had a job as a mechanic for the Southern Pacific Railroad. I remember he got a couple of his friends from the SP shop to help him lay the train's half mile track. And I watched them install a Crosley car motor in an engine that wasn't running."

In summer 1940, engine #999 left the little train station on its maiden run pulling two cars. That day the railroad carried several hundred passengers, and within weeks that concession was well on its way of

---

88 Darrell Francis email to the author. The park's only first aid station was at the plunge. (Author's interview, Dale Hopwood, Jan 2011)
meeting Wes Waldon’s annual goal of 100,000 tickets. Waldon soon became "Kern River Railroad's President and Mechanical Superintendent." In November, a Peggy Wofford took #999 out for its last run of the season, and Waldon summed up the train’s success. In five months of operation he’d collected $2,150, or 43,000 five-cent tickets from which the Kern County tax collector was entitled to $340.

Waldon started the train’s 1942 season in April, and by the second week he had sold 1,760 tickets. If April had been normal, he probably could have sold more, but five months before that, America had gone to war, and park use was falling off. In 1946 Paul Woollomes learned that Wes Walden had bought California Hot Springs and was planning to move the little train up there. Woollomes said, “The County Board of Supervisors wanted to find a way to keep the train at the park. My dad [Roy Woollomes] was on the Board of Supervisors, and he suggested I look into the train as an investment. I did, and I bought Branson's share in the train. That's why it stayed at the park.”

Lorraine Smock recalled the train’s half-mile route: "The station was east of the water-wheel and across the street from the merry-go-round. The track went over a bridge and past an adobe house that's now used as the police building. The little train made a loop out along the river, and it got so close to the edge we thought we’d fall in. The

---

89 Bakersfield Californian, Nov 9, 1940
90 Bakersfield Californian, Apr 7, 1942

www.gilbertgia.com p 47 of 62
tunnel came next, really a wooden shed with doors open at both ends where Gus Balasis stored the engine at night. After the tunnel, the train made a little turn and pulled back into the station."

Others remember that route, too, but few knew anything about the cabs themselves except Gus Balasis who recalled that one of them was a steam engine. Train buffs suggest the cab above was a Cagney. Experts Don Micheletti and Keith Taylor explained that about 1910 the Wagner Company had the misfortune to sell a few cabs whose steam engines exploded. A few made it back into service sporting new exterior tin and retrofitted gasoline engines. Until the late 1920s Cagney produced those eight-wheeler park trains, but Herschell was another builder, and there were hundreds of smaller companies that made a few park trains. Some cabs were home-built. In 1936 two teenagers at Frazier Park built a streamlined, six-ton, 17-passenger
park train and took it on exhibition.\textsuperscript{91}

Woollomes: "In late 1946 Wes Waldon had two of the little locomotives, but one was stored in the barn on the hill. Wes and I worked one over and rejuvenated it. The other had a worn-out Austin gasoline engine. I was able to line up an Austin car, and its engine fit fine in the train's frame. The next year when another engine went out, I put a small Crosley in it, and a little bit later I changed the transmission to a fluid drive automatic."\textsuperscript{92} Based on Woollomes' and Balasis' recollections, one of the cabs had a worn-out factory steamer, but by 1950 Woollomes was running both cabs on gas.

Park visitors knew little about the engines and thought less about the tracks, but to Woollomes that information was important in keeping the train going. Sometimes he traveled into the Kern mountains to find mining-car rails for repairs. Today none of the park's track remains, even the road-bed has vanished, but in a picnic area just west of park headquarters there are barbecue-grill bars that look very much like remnants of the Hart Park Railroad.\textsuperscript{93}

\textsuperscript{91} Bakersfield Californian, May 11, 1936, staff writer Beth Dye. One builder was Walter Osborn, Jr., son of Bakersfield City Attorney Walter Osborn. Young Walter became a Kern County Superior Court judge.
\textsuperscript{92} The first Crosley was produced in 1938 with a 13.5 HP engine.
\textsuperscript{93} The barbecue-grill is made from 16-lb track that is 5/8-inches high and 3/4-inches wide at the top (42 mm x 34 mm). The term "16-lb track" means 16-lbs per three-ft section. Thanks to George Gilbert Lynch for finding that track.
Woollomes thought the gauge of the track was about 12-1/2 inches, which means 12-1/2 inches between the rails. Ed Kelley at www.discoverlivesteam.com commented, "By 1960, 16-inch gauge was pretty common, and 18-inch gauge was mainly found among smaller manufacturers or in home-builds. I'd say there's a substantial chance that this Hart Park mystery train was a homebuilt. But the McGarigle Machine Shop did turn out several 12-5/8-inch gauge locomotives that were sold under the Cagney and Armitage-Herschell name, as did the International Miniature Railway Company of Elgin, Illinois prior to 1910."  

During WWII, Paul Woollomes helped lay 900 miles of gas pipeline for General Patton's advancing Third Army in Europe, but in 1946, after...
Woollomes bought the Hart Park railroad, he broke his ribs driving it. Woollomes shared some train stories. "Oh, I had experiences with that train. The engine pulled two cars, and since each car seated 12 people, there was some weight back there. Sometimes we'd pull out of the station and discover that kids had put grease or butter on the track--and then the engine would just sit there and the wheels would spin. We had to ask the passengers to get off and help us push the train past the greased track."

Other juvenile shenanigans were dangerous. One May afternoon someone in a picnicking group of eighth graders dragged a tree limb across the track. The train derailed. Woollomes reflected, "Well, yes, we had to watch out for everything. For one thing if we had some open seats when we left the station, I had to watch out for kids jumping on. That meant I had to drive and look behind me at the same time. One time as I turned my head back to the front and saw we were heading right into a big rock somebody'd rolled onto the track. I don't know how many people it took to put it there because one kid couldn't have done it by himself. Just seconds before the train hit, I ducked down and braced myself against the car behind me. The little engine jumped right up in the air. It didn't even derail, but that car I was holding on to bounced up and cracked my ribs."

Some bona fide accidents did happen. A Taft store owner named Earl
Gifford and his friends were injured when a little car broke its axle and undercarriage and overturned. Waldon trucked the car to Bakersfield, and three days later it was back in service. On a Sunday afternoon in March 1946 an engine pulling two cars was zipping around a curve when its axle broke, the rear coach overturned, and it spilled its human occupants, most of whom were children. Mrs. Dana Horton was slightly injured and her six year-old daughter Linda broke her foot.⁹⁵

The railroad “tunnel” was another source of trouble. Said Woollomes, "The tunnel was a shed that was open at both ends for the train to go through. In the morning we'd swing the doors up on their hinges from the bottom and hook them open. Well, I knew that some kids had been sneaking around and letting the doors down, but I was pretty careful to watch out--except for this one time when someone let it down and I didn't know it. I came around the curve and had just enough time to warn the passengers and duck my head. We crashed through the door. I was lucky. The driver's seat was low enough that I was able to get my body under the engine's cowling before we hit. Thank goodness nobody was hurt."

"I'd drive the train myself Monday through Friday, but Saturdays and Sundays we were so busy I had to hire more help. A county man came

---

⁹⁵Bakersfield Californian, Mar 22, 1946
in on his days off, and I also had another driver, an old fellow who lived downtown, who showed up for work dressed up in a railroad hat and overalls. We ran the two trains for six or seven hours a day, maybe more.”

"The Fourth of July and Easter were the biggest. One week I sold 7,000 tickets. We'd load up one train with passengers, and by the time we pulled out of the station the other train would pull in. Usually this took a little coordinating. Right next to the tunnel was some extra track, really a little jog, or siding. When we saw that the other train wasn’t quite loaded, we’d wait or slow down at the siding until they got filled up."

His numbers seem accurate. In the Thirties and Forties the Fish and Game Barbecue and Sheriff’s Barbecue attracted hordes of humanity. When Woollomes' train tickets sold for 14 cents for children and 24 cents for adults, his weekly, summer gross was equal to about $4,000 a week today.

Woollomes expanded his offerings of park rides. In 1956 and 1957 he installed a circular track for a kiddy-car ride operated by a hand-crank. He also had little boats for rent, and a small roller coaster, but the number of visitors had peaked. In the next decade Woollomes started selling off his rides.
Public use in the 1970s was but a small fraction of what it once was after the war. Woollomes said, "One of the engines, the old steam one in the barn, I sold to the husband of a woman who worked for me. He hauled it to East Bakersfield and was going to redo it, but then he died. The last time I saw the engine his boys had taken it apart, and it was all over their back yard. I asked her if she wanted to sell it, but she told me there was no way, and she didn’t care to talk about it."

The other cab was in good condition. Woollomes: "A man from north of here talked to me quite a bit about it, and then he made me a good offer on the engine and all the cars. He loaded them on a U-Haul© truck and trailer, and they were gone." What remained of the Kern River Railroad was the shed, station, track, and roadbed. Woollomes hired two men for $1,000 to pull everything down, pile it up, and haul it away.

One Hour Historic Tour on the Hillside

At the west portal the road passes between eight palm trees. Stop and look for a water seep, a puddle on the hill side of the road, just a few feet inside the park grounds. After the earthquake of 1952 the park’s mineral spring went dry. The county drilled for water
here. If you put your finger in the seep, don’t taste the water. It’s oily.

West portal, built in 1941, was the last WPA project in the park.

Follow the hillside road into the park. Presently on the right is a thicket behind an 8-ft tall, dirt embankment. Several years before the park’s big plunge was built, this berm held back a reservoir once used for irrigation, boating and swimming.

Moving the John Hart stone. 1937
Eight-tenths mile farther on is Hill street and just beyond it see the John O. Hart Memorial, a six-foot, water-worn volcanic rock “marked and hollowed by the eroding forces of nature.” 96 Hart spotted the peculiar-shaped rock in Kern Canyon and thought it would make an interesting monument for the park. But the stone was not moved until 1937, three years after Hart’s death. Y.B Stokes, one-time road foreman for the late supervisor, mentioned the story about the stone to Gus Vercammen, a member of the East Bakersfield Progressive Club, and Vercammen secured approval from the Board of Supervisors to place the stone in the park. The Progressive Club, Percy Branson, and Sam Myers of the State Division of Highways went to Jack Shields, a local, heavy-equipment operator, and Shields moved the 4.5-ton monolith to the park. On September 6, 1937 the Hart family were honored guests at the unveiling of the stone. Hart's eulogy was delivered by Paul C. Newell, editor of the Shafter Press. 97

Dedication of the Hart Memorial, 1937
Newspaper text incorrectly identifies the date as 1947.

96 Bakersfield Californian, Jan 10, 1930
97 This account appeared in the Bakersfield Californian, July 17, 1947
Southeast of the Hart Memorial are two, rock pillars topped with what appear to be beach balls. But the spheres are concrete, and the pillars' stonework is petrified wood that was collected by SERA workers on the Mojave Desert in 1935. Ascend the path between the pillars to the top where bleachers for spectator once stood. The plunge was demolished about 1992, and its concrete decking and a 10-foot, masonry mineral water fountain by the road was bulldozed into the hole. What once was a plunge is today the equipment yard ahead of you, but its cyclone fence conveys a feeling for the plunge's grand size. An adobe building, once at the east end of the plunge, housed lockers and changing rooms. An equipment building is there today.

The plunge at Hart Park was billed as The Second Largest Swimming Pool in California, but that description could have been grander. William Whiteley, a lifeguard for ten years at San Francisco's Fleishacker Pool, described his pool as a giant capital letter T. Its longer dimension was 100 x 1,000-ft and the shorter 40 x 150-ft, which suggests that the surface area of Fleishacker was 2-1/2 acres. Because it was filled with salt water and Kern River Park Plunge was not, our plunge might have been called The Largest Fresh Water Plunge in California.

Return to the pillars. On your left is what looks like an eight-ft high,
concrete incinerator. In fact it is one of several gravity standpipes once used for park irrigation. Some are more than 20-ft tall, and all have valves at their bases. When a valve was opened, water from the hillside reservoir rose in the standpipes to the level of water in the reservoir and the process of flood irrigation started, and it continued until the value was closed. Those stand pipes are no longer used, but they remain as reminders of an earlier technology.99

Across the road is a round, river rock tower. The drinking faucets inside once spouted pungent sulfur water from the spring on the hillside every hour of the day and night. The SERA masons who built this tower in 1935 were the highest paid blue collar workers at the park. They earned $48 a month.100

On the road across from the tower was a masonry drinking fountain that also flowed warm mineral water day and night. Visitors carrying

99 According to Frank Stramler one of tanks on the hillside today was part of the sulfur-water drinking system. The second tank was later installed to supplement a second-generation irrigation system.  
100 Author's discussion with George Gilbert Lynch. His father worked on that project.
jugs stopped here to collect the medicinal waters. The hillside spring also supplied water to five wooden bathhouses, also on the hillside. In 1936 Neveill A. Whitsett, a masseur of 24 years experience, filled the bathtubs with pungent egg-water for his customers.¹⁰¹

The well supplying the bath houses was about half way up the side of the grassy hill where the well's 6-ft diameter, cement curb protrudes from the grass. The steel plate that caps it covers John Barker's attempt to find oil here about 1900. Instead of oil, Barker punched into an aquifer at 1,300 feet, his bit stuck, and water poured down to the river at 55 gallons per minute. In the 1920s the stream was diverted into the hillside reservoir, and later to the drinking fountains and the bathhouses.¹⁰²

Street curbing next to the old plunge's parking lot is stamped "WPA 1941." Those are proud marks. The Works Progress Administration

¹⁰¹ Bakersfield Californian, May 4, 1936. A heater boosted the temperature of the water. The bath houses were removed in the 1950s.
and other government work projects supplied jobs and respect for local families, and the work the men did made the park what it is today.

Walk west along the road above the equipment yard. Every 15 years or so the county removes brush from the former reservoir and swimming hole, but today it is more likely you will see a tangle of growth and the cautious eyes of feral cats who live upon the kindness of sympathetic friends.

Ahead on the left is a stone monument marked "Aerie." Between 1928 and 1940 community groups planted groves of trees and boasted of their organizations' benevolence by attaching bronze markers to granite boulders. A few stones still carry the badges, but most of the plaques are gone, victims of 70 years of vandalism, an ongoing problem since the park's grand opening in 1929. The oak and bottle trees here were well-chosen and hold on despite neglect.
Farther along are memories of what might have been. In 1939 the Kern County Employees Association appealed to the Board of Supervisors to start work on landscape architect Howard Gilkey's public amphitheater, but that approval never came. Another Gilkey memory is a three-stage waterfall that would have started at the top of the hill. Dante's Cascade had support from Societa di Mutuo Soccorso of Kern County, but Depression realities dried up what might have been a most impressive waterfall.\( ^{103} \)

Not a memory at all is a block of concrete out of view next to the hillside. Inscribed only "JROUAM," there is no other information; the monument is missing its top.\( ^{104} \) In the 1930s the Junior Order of the United American Mechanics had more than a million members nationally, but today the anti-immigration, super-patriot JROUAM is almost forgotten in Kern County.

Visitors once crowded the park, treasured it, and supported it most enthusiastically. Today, some say rowdy elements took over the park in the late 1950s, but others say its demise was brought about by bigger paychecks or by television or by Disneyland or by Magic Mountain. The reasons were surely many. Connie Bilbis Pappas

---

104 In 2009 the author was told that the monument's top had been found, possibly near its position on the hill.
answered best: "It was a peaceful place, the train was slow, and the merry-go-round was beautiful, but we grew up and moved away."

OWNERSHIP OF COPYRIGHT AND COPYRIGHT LICENSE:

ONE HUNDRED YEARS AT OLD HART PARK

Gilbert P. Gia grants you a royalty-free, revocable license, to view this copyrighted work on a computer or mobile device via a web browser, copy and store it to a computer, and print pages for your own personal and non-commercial use. Your may also use the work as an educational tool in public school classrooms.

Gilbert P. Gia does not grant you any other rights in relation to this copyright. In other words, all other rights are reserved. That means you must not adapt, edit, change, transform, publish, republish, distribute, redistribute, broadcast, rebroadcast or show or play in public this copyrighted work or its images in any form or media without Gilbert P. Gia's prior written permission.

You may request permission to use this copyrighted work by contacting the author at ggiaggia@gmail.com

If Gilbert P. Gia discovers that you have used this copyrighted work in contravention of the license above, Gilbert P. Gia may bring legal proceedings against you seeking monetary damages and an injunction to stop you from using the work. You could also be ordered to pay legal costs.

Should you become aware of any use of this copyrighted work in contravention of the license above, please report this by email to ggiaggia@gmail.com.

Should you become aware of any material in this work that you believe infringes your or any other person's copyright, please report this by email to ggiaggia@gmail.com.

This copyright document was adopted from FreeNetLaw.com at http://www.freenetlaw.com/index.php

< O >