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Clarion Review ★★☆☆☆ HISTORY

Did You Say "Bakers Field?"

Eugene F. Cassady
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Bakersfield is located at the southern end of the San Joaquin Valley in Kern County, California. About halfway between Fresno and Los Angeles, it has grown rapidly since it was founded in 1869. In *Did You Say "Baker's Field?"*, Eugene F. Cassady offers a brief look at the formation of this city, from the time when the land masses first shifted to form its geographic location, to the prehistoric natives who once occupied the territory, and through the arrival of modern civilization. Cassady states in his introduction that he is not trying to present a complete or formal history. Rather, he is offering his own perspective of the city as a proud native.

The book is just fifty-four pages and covers a long stretch of history. The author has chosen to focus primarily on the ethnicity of different immigrants to Bakersfield, as well as on the industry that helped the city thrive. He writes about the Americans who first settled there when the territory still belonged to Mexico, and of the Irish and Chinese that followed shortly thereafter. He also mentions the French, Basque, and Italians that found their way to Bakersfield. Cassady is clearly very proud of Bakersfield's cultural diversity, but the language he uses to describe these various peoples may offend some readers. For example, he writes of the laborers who built railroads: "There was a great need for manpower to be pick and shovel workers and gandy dancers. Who else was more available than immigrants?—the Irish, fresh from the potato famine, the immigrant Chinese, many of whom were fresh from a war where England seized Hong Kong. Many immigrant Swedes, Scots etc., were used, but the Micks and the coolies usually got all of the hard labor jobs."

Cassady states that the economic development of Bakersfield started with the railroad. The gold rush brought many to the area but, ultimately, it was oil and agriculture that proved to be the sustaining forms of commerce. Petroleum was abundant in the area and a new strain of cotton called Alcala was developed in the 1920's specifically for the sandy soil that made up the San Joaquin Valley. According to the author, this variety proved to be one of the most valuable cotton fibers in the wold.

There is always value in individual recollections when it comes to understanding the history of a place. That value, however, is generally in anecdotes and personal stories that can illuminate history the way facts never can. Unfortunately, Cassady relies on impersonal history and does not back up any of his statements with references to research, so the facts he presents leave the reader unsure.

CATHERINE THURESON (June 27, 2011)

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