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## **Traver California**

The town of Traver is probably now best known for the Bravo Farms tourist stop on Highway 99. But that is a far cry from the Traver of yesteryear, when Traver was a real wild west boom town, complete with shootings in the street and drunken brawls. But Traver was not the product of a rush to extract gold or silver, nor was it a logging town. It was a boom town just waiting for people to add one ingredient.....water.

It all began in 1882 when a civil engineer by the name of P.Y. Baker and former State Senator Thomas Fowler started what would be known as the 76 Land and Water Company. Their idea was to divert the flow of the Kings River into a canal, and send that water to the thousands of acres of farmland just waiting to be cultivated into a rich agricultural bonanza. Financing was secured to option 130,000 acres of land, and the company built the 76 canal into the area, delivering water by 1884. They also built a huge network of canals and ditches in the area, serving not just the lands of the 76 company, but the lands of other farmers as well.

The company quickly advertised in newspapers throughout the west and midwest that Traver would be "A Golden Opportunity for homeseeker or speculator." They claimed that business and residential lots would be "almost given away." "A chance of a lifetime!" "A town with a brilliant future." "This will soon become the garden spot of the world." The town would be named for Charles Traver, one of the board of directors of the company, and a 240 acre townsite was surveyed and plotted.

And so, when the day came for the lots and land to be sold at auction, April 8, 1884 special trains brought in prospective buyers by the droves. The Southern Pacific Railroad was only just building the Traver depot, and it was only half completed at this point, but it was the center of the town! Well, it was the only building in town at that point, but no matter, the times were exciting!!!

The first saloon was set up by one Harry Burke, an enterprising man who stood two wooden barrels on end, topped them with a board, and set out rot gut whiskey for sale, making him the very first merchant in the brilliant new town. Harry's business thrived for two days straight as people bought land hand over fist, \$65,000 in property sales in those first two days.

And what does every new town need? Carpenters, Farm workers, warehousemen, and all manner of laborer, and we needed them yesterday! Workers flooded to the area, the town was booming. Within a few weeks the town boasted two livery stables, three newspapers, a drugstore, two lumberyards, two hotels, two barbershops, an implement store, a hardware store, a post office, a Chinatown, a bawdy red light district, and 14 saloons!!!

At this point, a boxcar was being used to house any miscreant who dared soil the reputation of Traver by committing a crime. But, this was only temporary as fine new jail was soon built, along with an \$8000 school house, a machine shop, a flour mill, and four churches. Add to this houses, orchards, vineyards, and wheat and alfalfa fields and by the end of the first year Traver was booming with a population of over 400 people!

The country was going through a wheat boom at the time, and Traver would become the biggest wheat producing area in the entire country. The next two years would be "good rain years" and the canal would be full of precious water. Wheat farmers and blacksmiths invented new machinery to make the growing and harvesting of wheat more economical and more profitable. The country was just getting started with steam powered track laying tractors, and they were put to good use here providing motive power for seed spreaders, cultivators, gang plows, and the new fangled giant wheat harvesting combines, making this the first area in the country to mechanize wheat farming. Three wheat warehouses were built along the SP tracks.

During harvest season, the grain would be harvested, stacked in the field, and then loaded onto large freight wagons for the trip to the warehouse. At the warehouse, there were three lines of wagons waiting to get in at each warehouse, and each line of wagons would be longer than a mile, taking sometimes three days to get to the front of the line. Official

records indicate that 32 million pounds of wheat were shipped out in 1886, followed by the same amount in 1887. 3000 boxcars were required in 1886 to haul all this wheat out of the Traver. And still at the end of the season 15,000 pounds of wheat was left sitting in the warehouses because there weren't enough boxcars to haul it all out. It was at one of these warehouses that soon to be accused train robber Chris Evans, a worker in the warehouse, met and befriended always accused train and bank robber Grat Dalton, another worker in the warehouse.

The town seemed to attract bad men. At the time, Bodie had been described the worst town, but as Bodie's fortunes began to sink, and Traver's fortunes appeared to be on the rise, the Bad Men from Bodie descended on Traver. Professional gamblers, con men, prostitutes, and outlaws found the pickings good, for a while. The town was wild and exciting. The saloons roared with business. Money flowed from farmers, workers, teamsters, ranch hands, mule skinnners, and everyone else who was partaking of the boom. After a day of drinking, drunken crowds would often spill into the streets in the evenings.

However, all good things must come to an end, and in the fall of 1887 the first of several devastating fires broke out the Semoriles Hotel. The town immediately tried to rebuild. But a worse disaster was on the horizon. The huge jump in farming had required huge amounts of water. The huge amount of water in turn caused the alkali in the soil to come to the surface. Crops soon began dying and the gardens and trees in town soon died. The farmers tried everything that they could think of, but soon the alkali killed nearly everything. And the alkali ate the brick foundations of some of the buildings, making them unsafe.

To make matters worse, in 1888, the Southern Pacific built another rail line down the east side of the valley, creating the towns of Reedley and Dinuba. The people of Traver literally moved the town to these towns, sometimes picking up buildings and moving them. By the mid 1890's the Traver depot was closed. It too would soon be moved and used as a large barn. The Alta Irrigation Company bought the 76 Land and Water Company and took control of the 76 canal and all the other canals and ditches, and then moved their headquarters to Dinuba. By 1929 Traver was ghost town with hardly any buildings still standing.

However, after WWII, more modern farming methods allowed farmers to effectively deal with the alkali problem, and farming became big business again. People came back, and the new town grew up again on the site of the old town. The 76 canal is still there, the pioneer cemetery is still there, but nothing else of the old Traver remains. The population in 2010 was 713, and the population in 2020 was 735, so it is clear that a population boom is underway again!