

Wilson Island Stories of the Early 1900s The Frank Bradford Home at 630 E. Home Avenue

*Creator of a baking empire
serving the Central San Joaquin Valley*

In 1886, Frank Dennison Bradford moved to Los Angeles at the age of 18 from his native Ohio and four years later, on October 15, 1890, married Margaret Parlin. He had landed his first job as an auditor for a paint company but would soon move on to the grocery and baking business which would sustain his entrepreneurial interests for the next fifty years.

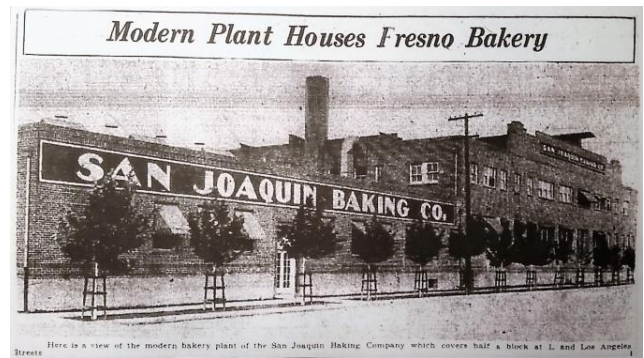
By 1907 he and his brother Charles started a baking business in Los Angeles in connection with their grocery store. Seeing more profit in baking, they soon dropped the grocery store to focus exclusively on baking. But Frank was intrigued by the business potential in the Central San Joaquin Valley and the fact that it was in the heartland of resources for his bread. Baking bread was as good for the farmers as it was for the Bradfords. In 1913, with World War I looming on the horizon, he sold his interest in the Los Angeles operation to move north.

He and Margaret first moved to Porterville where he operated an orange grove for a short time, long enough to scout around for a central location to set up a baking operation that could supply the entire San Joaquin Valley. He chose Fresno.

In 1915, he opened a small plant with two ovens for wholesale production at San Benito and P Streets in downtown Fresno. In the early days all loaves were hand wrapped and the delivery trucks made the rounds on two sales routes in the Fresno area. Within a few years he moved the operation to a bigger building (130x200 feet) at the corner of L and Los Angeles Streets, still there in 2019, though no longer a bakery.



Old San Joaquin Baking Co building location,
corner of L and Los Angeles Streets, August 2018.



San Joaquin Baking Co, corner of L and Los Angeles Streets. The Fresno Bee, The Fresno Republican, 23 Sept 1935.

The new bakery boasted eleven gas-heated ovens, and automated wrapping machines that produced 500 loaves per hour or 40,000 loaves a day. There were now sixteen sales routes covered by twenty white trucks traveling throughout Fresno, Madera, Kings, Tulare, and Merced counties. Raisin bread production used five tons of raisins a month. The company employed 26 bakers, 16 route salesmen, 2 sales supervisors, 1 sales manager, 4 garage men, 2 engineers, 3 office workers, and 24 miscellaneous workers.

By 1928, San Joaquin Baking Company was well known for a variety of breads including raisin bread, whole wheat, Life O'Wheat, rye, cracked wheat, graham, and their signature "Dutch toast." The company was also known for creating "Youth bread" noted for having been developed by a university chemist to enhance the diet with important vitamins and minerals. They also advertised a "corrective diet formula for constipation" in their new Honey Krushed Wheat Bread, full of roughage and the natural benefits of honey instead of sugar. Eaten for ten days it was said to cure constipation.



San Joaquin Baking Company delivery truck in Porterville, Calif.
with "Dutch toast bread" featured above the cab
OAC Porterville Collection, Porterville Public Library, pva0257

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Three years earlier, in 1925, Bradford had expanded his business with the purchase of a plant in Modesto at an investment cost of \$132,000 (equivalent to almost \$2 million in 2019). Some years later he would purchase the Holsum Baking Company in Visalia in an effort to expand his territory south. At its peak, Bradford's company supplied bread to the entire Central San Joaquin Valley, from Sacramento in the north, to Tehachapi in the south, and from the eastern to western foothills of the mountains surrounding the valley. Well known in the Fresno community, he was the President of the Fresno County Chamber of Commerce in 1926.

At the time Frank and Margaret moved to Fresno and were looking for a suitable neighborhood to raise a family, they chose the new, upscale Wilson Island. They had their choice of lots on Home Avenue as nothing had been built yet on the south side of the street. Their single lot was right in the middle of the block with nothing but dirt in either direction. Frank hired notable architects Shorb and Meade in 1919 to design the home at an estimated construction cost of \$9,000 (or \$131,000 in 2019). As World War I came to a close, and the Wilson Island building boom began, theirs was the first house on that block. At each corner of the house in front they planted Bay trees that grew taller than two-stories.



630 E. Home Avenue, original façade, 1963

The vacant lot next door to the east was too inviting to ignore. Rather than stare at bare dirt, they planted a large rose garden. When the land owner told them that they couldn't do that, Frank was undeterred. In response he bought that lot too. He and Margaret added a covered camellia garden in the back corner of the second lot, and an outdoor barbeque. Over the years the grounds have been the location for numerous weddings and other events.

It was a neighborhood where many of the men in Fresno's commercial community were also building homes. While Frank was focused on expanding his baking operation, Margaret joined other Wilson Island wives, among them Mrs. William Eilert (Mae) and Mrs. Claude Thompson (Helen Price Thompson) both just around the corner on Carmen Avenue. On Fridays, their card club gathered at one of the homes on Echo Avenue, and they routinely attended neighborhood social events.



In front of the garage at 630 E. Home Avenue, Margaret Bradford with her son-in-law Lawrence Gleason and her three grandchildren (L-R: William, Frank Bradford, and Margaret Gleason)

He and Margaret would remain in the house where they raised three children for thirty-three years until 1952 when first Margaret then Frank passed away. Their son Arthur, President and Manager of the Fresno baking plant since his father's retirement on January 1, 1951 at the age of 83, oversaw the sale and eventual dissolution of the company. Within a two year period all outstanding stock in the San Joaquin Baking Company was sold to Kilpatrick's in San Francisco and Kilpatrick's Marvel Bakery in Oakland. By 1954, the San Joaquin Baking Company was dissolved and everything was owned by Campbell Taggart Associated Bakeries, Inc., a national company. At the time of its dissolution, the net annual sales of Bradford's company had reached \$5.3 million (equivalent to over \$50 million in 2019), and the assets were valued at \$3 million (about \$29 million in 2019).

Subsequent owners of the house over the next thirty years were Raymond and Wilda Yearout, followed by John and Bernice Woolf. The Bradfords, Yearouts, and Woolfs all knew each other so as the house passed from one family to the next it was without the intervention of a realtor, a common occurrence in the Wilson Island. Each family left their mark on the home.

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Raymond and Wilda Yearout moved into Fresno from their ranch in Cantua Creek, southwest of Fresno, where Wilda had been the post mistress. They brought with them a small marble fireplace rescued from a nearby ranch house that was falling down. They had to expand the first-floor room at the southeast corner of the house on Home to install it which required re-routing the driveway to curve around that corner. No longer a straight shot to the garage in back, drivers now had to pay close attention to avoid hitting the corner. That curved driveway is still there today.

The Bradford's two concentric circles of roses remained there for over forty years until the mid-1960s, when the Woolfs converted the rose garden to a lawn as a private playground for their young boys. They had moved from Huron (southeast of Fresno) into Fresno for the schools. Soon after they moved into the drab house with grey-green stucco and darker grey-green trim in June 1963, they decided to spruce it up a bit. They replaced the original small portico over the front door supported by stubby columns with a colonial style façade. The brighter tan and white colors they chose are still the colors of the house today. They also added a used brick patio and a swimming pool.



630 E. Home Avenue after modifications in 1960s. 2018

Frank Bradford could have chosen any place in the Central Valley to start his baking company. With his sights set on building a regional wholesale baking distribution center, the logical choice was to locate in the hub of agricultural activity where wheat, raisins, and other raw materials he needed were readily available. And they could have chosen any place in Fresno to build their home. With street cars connecting the emerging northern residential areas to the commercial districts downtown, the new location for Fresno High soon under construction at McKinley and Echo, and the opportunity to move in next to

familiar business colleagues, the Wilson Island was an attractive option for the Bradfords.

Today the Wilson Island is one of four registered historic districts in Fresno, with seventy-eight contributing homes. The Bradford residence is one of the larger homes situated on a double lot in the center of the block. It remains a stately contributor surrounded by mature trees and landscaping.



San Joaquin Baking Co ad,
Modesto News-Herald, 1928

Sources include public building records, newspaper articles of the period, and Federal Trade Commission Decision Docket 7938. Complaint, June 14, 1960, Decision, Apr. 7, 1967. Anecdotal information was provided through interviews with homeowners and descendants of the original Bradford family.

Prepared by Jeannine Raymond, Ph.D.
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