



Joe Bailey, left, with Alpaugh firefighters. Bailey moved to Alpaugh in 1960, and he and his wife raised their children there. Photo by Teresa Douglass

Joe Bailey lived in historic black township of Allensworth

By Teresa Douglass

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Not too many people can say they lived at Colonel Allensworth State Historic Park before the state took it over, but **Joe Bailey** can.

Although the family home has since been razed, he still enjoys walking around the grounds and remembering the small town where he and his wife raised their children and he began his 50 years of service as a volunteer firefighter.

Bailey, 76, recently retired from the Tulare County Fire Department. At his retirement dinner, 145 guests, including 30 of his children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren as well as dignitaries from Pixley and Tulare County, celebrated his 50 years of service.

He cried during his recognition dinner when the International Association of Black Firefighters honored him with a medal of honor and pronounced Jan. 12 as "**Joe Bailey** Day."

Bailey began his 50 years as a paid-call firefighter in the small town of Allensworth where he lived with his family from the 1960s until the state bought up the town in 1974 to make it into Col. Allensworth State Historic Park.

He moved to Allensworth to get out of the city, Pasadena, and to be near his in-laws, he said. The Bailey children used to walk past their house along an alkali path surrounded by tumble weeds on their way to school.

"I didn't know about the Colonel until I moved out there," he said.

Colonel Allen Allensworth and four others established a town that was founded, financed and governed by African Americans 30 miles north of Bakersfield and one mile south of Alpaugh in the Southern San Joaquin Valley. Allensworth was an escaped slave who had joined the Union Army and later served as an Army chaplain.

Built on self-reliance and free from discrimination, the town thrived until the water table dropped, the railroad built a spur to neighboring Alpaugh and the Colonel was killed in a motorcycle accident in 1914.

Colonel Allensworth State Historic Park is located just west of Highway 43 and south of Alpaugh. It now comprises more than 1,000 acres.

Bailey estimates that less than 100 people lived in Allensworth during the 10 years his family lived there. At that time, most families were African American, he said. There were a few Mexican families and some Filipino families.

The tight-knit community was reminiscent of the fictional town of Mayberry in "The Andy Griffith Show," he said.

"We were all pretty close," he said.

Call to service

There was no fire station in Allensworth, but whenever the fire truck in Alpaugh went out on a call, he responded in his own car. Later, Bailey purchased an old open-cab, water pumper fire truck for \$1 from the state and kept it at his house in Allensworth when it was not in use.

For about 9 years, he worked seasonally for the Department of Forestry. During this time, he earned the designation of engineer. One season he operated a bulldozer.

After volunteering as a firefighter for two years in Allensworth, he said he felt brave enough to become a reserve officer with the Tulare County Sheriff's Department. To this day, he carries his reserve officer identification card that expired in 1996 in his wallet.

"I still carry it," Bailey said. "It's part of me."

He served in the Sheriff's Department in his spare time. He transported prisoners, arrested drunks and broke up fights, armed with a .38 pistol he bought for himself.

People in Allensworth would come to his house with any little problem, he said. Some had tickets they wanted to settle, others had problems at home and sometimes a son or daughter didn't return home from school.

"I was kind of like Barney Fife, but I didn't put a bullet in my shirt," he said.

If a drunk was trying to get behind the wheel, Bailey went to talk to him.

"I didn't like to take anyone to jail," he said, "like Andy and Barney."

If someone gave him a hard time, he doubled up with an officer to make an arrest.

Now in retirement, he volunteers for the Tulare County Sheriff's Volunteers in Patrol program.

"I couldn't let it all go," he said.

Fond memories

Four of his five children attended the historic two-room school house in Allensworth. On a recent visit to the park, Bailey's daughter, Jackie Crossley, 49, of Visalia, sat down at one of the desks, now preserved circa 1908 to 1918, the period of growth for the all-black township.

The Bailey children's former teacher, George Finely, still serves as a docent at the park, said Steve Ptomey, park supervisor.

He said Allensworth was in decline when the state took over in 1974 and was full of squatters.

"It was a pretty dangerous place," he said.

However, Bailey recalls fond memories of living in what is now a state historic park and was sorry to leave. He said he was happy to leave Pasadena and raise his family in Allensworth.

"There was nothing out here to get in trouble with. Everyone in this community knew everybody," he said. "The kids were always within shouting distance."

He bought his two-bedroom house for \$800 in the 1960s. He said he almost lost the house trying to make \$50-a-month mortgage payments.

The house had running water in the kitchen but no bathroom or outhouse, Crossley said. She remembers being bathed in a wash tub, the water boiled on a butane cook stove. The tub was big enough for one small child at a time. The adults had to stand up to bathe. A wood stove in the center of the living room provided heat for the small house.

The five children slept in the two bedrooms and Bailey and his wife slept in the living room.

"It seemed like a big house to me," Crossley said.

At the time, Bailey made his living doing field work, mostly chopping cotton for Gilkey Farms. For two years, he drove the school bus for Allensworth School and his own children rode along.

"We had to be good on the bus," Crossley said.

Bailey's wife worked as a teacher's aid at the school.

"We had a pretty good eye on the kids," Bailey said.

There were no grocery stores in Allensworth, but one resident sold candy and Banquet Fried chicken out of her house. The Baileys went to Alpaugh to buy groceries. Crossley remembers one time her mother drove a tractor all the way to Alpaugh for groceries.

"I was right there with her," she said.

The family home is now a vacant lot of mostly alkali and some grass.

When the state bought them out, Bailey was paid \$30,000, enough to pay off bills and put \$15,000 back into real estate, a requirement of the settlement, he said. Their oldest daughter, Rita, had asthma as a child and her medical bills were high.

Hard times

For a couple of years, the family moved to a big farmhouse nearby before he separated from his wife, Alma Jo. She moved to Tulare with the children and he moved to Pixley. Soon he began volunteering at the Pixley fire station.

He fell on hard times and lost his house in Pixley. Then he went to work for a trucking company in Delano hauling grapes throughout California and also to Blythe during the watermelon season.

As a big-rig driver, he volunteered with the fire department on the side. He carried a pager and would cover for area fire stations when those firefighters went out on a call. Eventually, he started staying at the Pixley fire station on a permanent basis after he quit truck driving in 2007, about a year after the Tulare County Fire Department was created to replace the California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection in Tulare County.

"I made me a bunk and kept me a space there," Bailey said.

He was partial to one of the fire trucks at the Pixley fire station. Affectionately called "Baby," he said he didn't like for anyone else to drive it but himself. He was the one who kept it clean and tended to its maintenance.

"This was my pride and joy," he said.

Bailey was always available to move equipment and cover the station, said Lt. Mark Johnson, who worked with Bailey during 2012.

"Joe's a fixture here," he said. "We're really going to miss him."

Bailey groomed firefighters and helped them with their careers, Johnson said.

"He never had a day off," he said. "He took care of the lawns and pulled his weight."

When school children arrived at the Pixley fire station for a field trip, the children called Bailey Papa Joe.

Many of them had seen him on emergency medical calls in their own homes.

"I've been to their house one way or another," Bailey said. "They recognize me and they think whatever is wrong with mom or dad or sis is going to be taken care of."

After 50 years as a paid-call firefighter and engineer, he's familiar with most people in town.

"I used to be able to hear an address," he said, "and I could tell them what color the house was."

Prejudice

As an African-American man of 76 years, Bailey recalls one blatant act of discrimination as a young man in uniform.

Before he was married and moved to Allensworth, Bailey served in the Army National Guard. He traveled on a bus across country to Fort Knox, Ken., for some advanced training.

The bus stopped in Tyler, Texas, and everyone got off to eat.

He took his tray of food and walked up to the cashier to pay. She told him he couldn't pay there, he recalled.

"Where do I pay?" he asked her.

She pointed to a sign that read "Whites only." She instructed him to go out the front door and come in the back door to pay her. When he returned, she barely turned around and took his money.

"I sat on a little stool and watched the others eat," he said.

Bailey said when he first meets a person he can tell within a few minutes if that person is prejudiced.

"If you act like you don't want to talk to me, I lose interest and go about my business," he said. "I don't let it stop me from doing what I set out to do."

He might have to walk on the other side of the street, he said, to avoid a bully.

"I would find a way to not push the issue," he said. "It wouldn't take much to settle it."

He can see prejudice in a person's expression.

"They blow up a little bit," he said. "I recognize it."

He said he always wanted to be a police officer, a firefighter or a truck driver in that order. But he didn't move up in firefighting or law enforcement.

"I liked the time off," he said. "If I didn't want to work at night as a volunteer, I didn't have to."

As for retirement, Bailey said he is bored already.

"I'm looking for something to do," he said.

He said he would like to see the Grand Canyon and may purchase a good used RV to get there before it gets too hot.

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