

Inyo Mountains - Cerro Gordo Mine

adapted from June 2012 article by "Dusty Road"

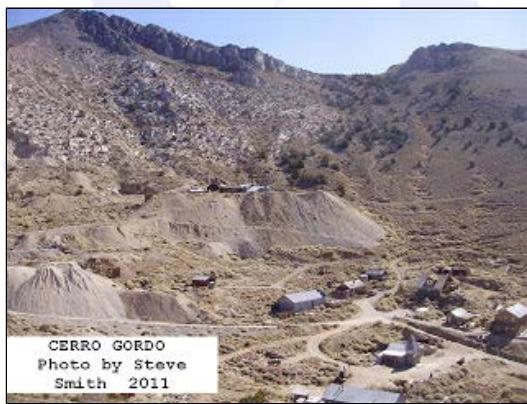
This 2012 article by Dusty Road is no longer available on the internet.

Any citizen of the United States can take title to public domain (federal) land in the form of a mining claim for gold, silver, copper or lead by following a few simple steps: 1) set posts at the boundary corners of the claim; 2) place a copy of the claim notice on the site; and 3) record the claim notice form with the county and with the U.S. Bureau of Land Management.

The claimant can then proceed to drill, dig, blast, and hoist material from shafts, tunnels, drifts and winzes within the confines of the claim. And when such ore is on the surface, the claimant can transport, pulverize, screen, sort, shake, smelt, wash and separate out valuable minerals for sale on the open market.

This is the way it has been in California since the 1870s. For decades, gold and silver discoveries sprouted in desert mountain ranges all across the southern region. Prospectors arrived at new camps unbent in their belief that here at last they will find the next big strike. Within a very short time, every acre in every direction will be staked and the aspect of a settlement will emerge. Such an event occurred in the 1870s on Cerro Gordo Peak located in the Inyo Mountains.

Sometimes the local courts were called upon to settle boundary disputes not only on the surface of the claim but also on the claim's reach underground. Silver and gold ledges and veins dip and spread in all directions crossing in such manner that only an experienced mining engineer could give credible testimony as to who owned what.



Mortimer Belshaw proved to be a capable silver miner who had learned his trade in Sinaloa, Mexico. By the time he arrived at the mining camp of Cerro Gordo, silver production was showing great promise. Belshaw could see opportunities and became excited about the prospect of building a state-of-the-art blast furnace perched on Buena Vista Peak overlooking the growing settlement.

Belshaw's partner Victor Beaudry, a local merchant, had been acquiring valuable mining properties over a number of years. He did so by simply giving credit to local mine operators for their purchases. These men were often unable to pay their bills and would settle their account by giving shares of stock in their mine to Beaudry. His bits of mining stock added up to sizable interests in a number of good silver producers including the Union Mine.

The Belshaw-Beaudry partnership prospered as the two acquired more mining properties and their furnaces hissed and belched forth silver ingots in such quantity that the steep and narrow road to the valley became over crowded with silver loaded wagons leaving and other wagons arriving laden with fuel for the lusty furnaces.

Their competition came from owners of the adjacent San Felipe mine, the ore from which was processed at the Owens Lake Silver-Lead Company at Swansea located at the edge of Owens Lake. This proximity of the two claims gave rise to disagreement over extent of the underlying ore bodies. Belshaw complained that access to the San Felipe ore cut through his claim.

When owners of the San Felipe defaulted on their mortgage, the sheriff took possession of the mine and placed the property up for auction. To no ones surprise, the Belshaw-Beaudry partnership was the only bidder with ready cash to cover the loan. By law, the owners would have six months from the date of the sale to pay off the debt and redeem their property.

From this point, the story plays like a bad western. Just days before the end of the six month redemption period, the owners were able to raise over four thousand dollars in gold coin from investors in San Francisco. A man named M.A. Wheeler left San Francisco in a frantic dash by train and stage to arrive at the sheriff's office in Independence within hours of the deadline. The sheriff was conveniently out of town on that day and his deputy refused to accept the money. He was told by a local attorney that he could not sign for the gold.

Wheeler stood in the doorway of the sheriff's office watching the deputy ride out of town leaving the pile of gold coins sitting on the sheriff's desk. A passing citizen, puzzled by the deputy's abrupt departure, agreed to sign a paper on which he verified that the gold had been delivered to the Sheriff's Office before the deadline.



G. M. Fisher, part owner and manager of Owens Lake Silver-Lead Company, checked with the county and found that the recording date for the San Felipe claim predated the Union claim by a few months. He was sure that at trial the original owners would regain title to not only the San Felipe but the Union mine as well. Based on these findings, Fisher bought a controlling interest from the original owners of the San Felipe mine and filed suit in the Inyo County court.

The law suit to determine ownership of the richest silver mines in California convened during the month of January 1873, and lasted for nine days. The plaintiff, G.M. Fisher, sought return of the San Felipe property and surrender of the Union mine plus damages. The defendants, sought retention of both properties.

The judge ruled that the redemption money (gold) had reached the Sheriff Office before the deadline and ownership of the San Felipe claims thereby reverted to the original owners.

After days of testimony by mining experts on both sides and arguments by both attorneys, the jury was left to decide whether or not the underlying ore bodies were connected. If the ore bodies were connected then the San Felipe, because of a prior claim date, would take possession of both the Union and San Felipe properties.



Finally, the judge decided that the only sure way to find out would be to remove rock and gravel along the common claim line down to the ore body and see if they were indeed connected. This led to a confrontation instigated by Belshaw between the miners from the Union and men sent by the judge to do the digging. The matter was settled when Belshaw was found in contempt of the judge's order and fined.

The men sent by the judge's order to do the digging, reported back to the court that, after removing rock and gravel along the common claim line down to the two ore bodies they did find that indeed the two were connected. The jury took less than three hours to find for the plaintiff. Fisher and the other remaining owners of the San Felipe had won the case and one million dollar in damages. The losers, Belshaw and Beaudry, immediately demanded a retrial.

A "stay of execution" was issued by the court pending outcome of an appeal to the State Supreme Court for a new trial. This allowed the Union to continue processing ore for the next three years while the case inched its way through the halls of Sacramento.

During that period, Belshaw expanded his operations doubling the labor force and enlarging capacity of his furnaces to such a degree that by the time the Supreme Court remanded a retrial, most of the silver deposits throughout the range had been exhausted.

In 1876, the bitter struggle between the two mining camps came to a close when G.M. Fisher joined with Belshaw and Beaudry to consolidate their holdings and form a new company. There would now be no cause for a retrial.



A year later a fire at the Union Mine signaled the beginning of the end for Cerro Gordo. Belshaw had moved to San Francisco and miners and town folk began migrating to new discoveries leaving behind boarded up stores and vacant buildings.

The Owens Lake Company closed operations after a flood that same year buried the mill and furnaces in rubble that had poured down from the adjacent canyon.



The town had had its share of fights and gun play. On November 6, 1873, the local newspaper, The Independent, reported that, "two men fell dead at Maggie Moore's house having been shot". The editor went on to suggest that, "perhaps a little judicious hanging and a strong jail might be needed in Cerro Gordo to restrain its inhabitants from reaching too quickly for the weapon at their side".

Over a nine year period, mule-drawn wagons creaked and rumbled along a two-hundred mile road that extended from Cerro Gordo to the main streets of Los Angeles. This unbelievable parade of silver arriving and merchandise returning to the mines and camps brought unexpected prosperity to the sleepy pueblo. Belshaw's decision to ship by way of Los Angeles rather than from a rival connection offered by Bakersfield was indeed fortunate.

The old road up to the town from Owens Lake is maintained but steep and quite narrow in places. The town has a resident care taker and some of the buildings have been or are in the process of restoration.

This ghost town is well worth a visit. The road connects with Hwy 136 near Keeler. Check Google Earth for the location of Cerro Gordo at (36 32.267; 117 45.720).