

THE FALL OF CERRO GORDO

by Remi Nadeau

Beginning in 1875, a series of setbacks had plagued the silver mines. Early in April of that year, three weeks before the bullion trade had been shifted from Los Angeles to the Southern Pacific railhead at Caliente, Victor Beaudry's furnace at Cerro Gordo had shut down for an indefinite period. The Union mine had yielded no ore for two months past, and word soon spread that the great body of galena that had upheld the camp for years was exhausted. Although Belshaw's furnace continued to run on ore from the Union dump, the Cerro Gordo Freighting Company reduced its schedule to one team every other day. The Cerro Gordo stage, reflecting the paralysis on Buena Vista Peak, abandoned its daily trips for a tri-weekly service from Independence and Lone Pine.

But the camp's troubles had only begun. F. P. F. Temple's Cerro Gordo Water Company received a deadly blow when its bountiful source, Miller Springs, suddenly dried up early in August. Overnight the once familiar pack burros reappeared after an almost two-year absence, and the camp returned to its thirsty days with resignation. Within a month Belshaw and Beaudry were piping in a few thousand gallons daily from another spring to bolster the camp, but without its regular supply Cerro Gordo was bathless and dirty once more.

In December word reached Inyo that the long contest between the bullion kings and the San Felipe group was being settled by negotiations in San Francisco. Such a move had been expected since lawyer Pat Reddy had secured a new trial before the California Supreme Court. The Union Consolidated Mining Company of Cerro Gordo was created on January 13, 1876, holding title to both the Belshaw and Beaudry smelters and the Union, San Felipe, Santa Maria, and the rest of Buena Vista's galena mines. Belshaw and his partners took two-thirds control, while the San Felipe faction, headed by Galen M. Fisher, acquired the minor share.

The end of the weary struggle was celebrated on January 1, 1876, with a grand ball in Lola Travis's abandoned dance hall. The occasion was marked by an outbreak of violence in the approved style of Cerro Gordo's boom years. During the festivities an American shot a Mexican with whom he had been quarreling and was pursued by a mob of the victim's countrymen. Wounded by a volley of shots, he barricaded himself in a nearby saloon while the crowd surrounded the building. At length another American, Loyal Merritt, gained admittance and arrested him in spite of entreaties by other citizens who sought to protect the man from the mob. While Merritt was escorting him across the street to the office of Justice John R. Hughes, the excited Mexicans closed in and killed their quarry with a shot through the head.

At the inquest next day someone testified that Merritt had boasted of receiving money from the Mexicans for his part in the affair. Justice Hughes was obliged to level his well-known shotgun to prevent the Americans from shooting the offender on the spot. Merritt was banished from town, arrested in Darwin as an accessory to the murder by the mob, and sent to prison after a trial at Independence. Though the episode had reawakened bitter feeling between Americans and Mexicans at Cerro Gordo, the return of prosperity had been inaugurated with a proper salute of gunfire.

Beginning in January 1876, Belshaw and Beaudry made hasty preparations for a return to full-scale output. A force of miners was returned to the Union mine, and Beaudry's furnace was fired up early in February for the first time in ten months. The old schedule of two mule teams a day was revived, and the Lone Pine stage resumed its daily trips up the Yellow Grade. Evidently, thought eye-winking Cerro Gordans, the shutdown of Beaudry's furnace and the story that the Union was exhausted had been a well-calculated ruse. Coupled with

the threat of a new trial before the state Supreme Court, it had been enough to make the San Felipe group seek a peace.

But Cerro Gordo's revival was to be short-lived. The Union mine, its interior excavated in great vacant chambers at every level, was in fact yielding the last of its treasure. In December 1876, Belshaw's furnace shut down for the last time, though Beaudry's continued to produce an average of 120 pigs a day for three more years. A new Union shaft was sunk in quest of fresh deposits, but by the middle of 1877 it had reached a depth of 900 feet without striking ore.

Yet the firm had still more troubles in store. On the night of August 14, 1877, the town was aroused to find the new Union building and the entire hoisting works wrapped in flames. The miners on the night shift, unable to pass through the fire at the mouth of the shaft, escaped into San Lucas Canyon through a connection with the Omega Tunnel. A platform of timbers and earth hastily constructed near the 200-foot level saved the lower timbering, but more than \$40,000 worth of mining equipment was destroyed.

By October the damage had been repaired, but the Union's compounded setbacks had finally proved too much. At the next directors' meeting in San Francisco, Belshaw reported an indebtedness of \$110,000, and Beaudry resigned his position on the board. Galena ore had grown so scarce that a refining works was erected to melt the bullion bars and extract the lead content to be used over and over in the reduction process in Beaudry's smelter. Profits had been further trimmed by the falling prices of lead and silver.

In March 1878 miners' wages were reduced to three dollars a day, and fully half the boys departed for more virile camps. The last stagecoach rolled down the Yellow Grade in April, and the town was thereafter served only by a pony mail. The Union mine was abandoned late in October 1879, and on the evening of November 20 the boys of Cerro Gordo congregated around Beaudry's works for what they called the "funeral." The blast was shut off, and the furnace exhaled steam for the final time. Next day one of Remi Nadeau's mule teams hauled its last load down the Yellow Grade. Some 280 bars of base bullion from the smelter and a 420-pound mass of pure silver from the refinery rumbled downward to the long-familiar jingling of team bells. Cerro Gordo, with a last gasp, had died after fourteen years of lusty existence. Estimates of the day placed her total output between \$13,000,000 and \$20,000,000. But without counting the production of the Swansea works at Owens Lake, Cerro Gordo's actual yield between 1865 and 1879 was probably closer to \$7,500,000.

In the spring of 1882 the *Bessie Brady*, the stout little steamer that had hauled most of Cerro Gordo's bullion across Owens Lake, was destroyed by fire. Even the lake itself has since vanished, for the Los Angeles aqueduct now taps Owens River a few miles to the north.

Mortimer W. Belshaw, who had lifted Cerro Gordo into prominence and guided it through its palmiest days, left Inyo in 1877 for his home in Antioch near San Francisco Bay. There he built the town's first waterworks, and opened the Empire coal mine in the foothills of nearby Mount Diablo. His partner, Victor Beaudry, returned to Los Angeles and joined his brother Prudent in real estate ventures.

Cerro Gordo's fall in the late 1870s was accompanied by the collapse of Inyo's other camps. In Surprise Canyon the Wyoming and Hemlock silver veins were exhausted by the spring of 1876, and Panamint's great twenty-stamp mill and furnace were shut down on the last of May. The shafts were sunk deeper in a search for new ore, but a year later, with the miners working below 600 feet, no important discoveries had been made. Senators Jones and Stewart abandoned the quest, closed the mines, and discharged the Surprise Valley company's employees on May 8, 1877.

Part of Panamint's red brick furnace still stands, though the chambers are caving in and the square chimneys are crumbling. Along the canyon floor many a rock wall remains as a monument to a once-hopeful silver seeker.

Having reached its peak with five furnaces and more than a thousand inhabitants in 1876, Darwin received its first setback when Pat Reddy's Defiance furnace shut down temporarily in August of that year. In 1877 Colonel Sherman Stevens built two adobe kilns near the west shore of Owens Lake to provide charcoal for Darwin furnaces. Transporting it across the lake was a second steamer, the Mollie Stevens, named for his daughter.

But already Darwin's glory was fading; an exodus began which rose to a stampede when Bodie and Mammoth City beckoned in 1878. Darwin's light would not flicker out, however, without a labor dispute which turned into a general shooting match by all hands. In the late 1940's the Anaconda Copper Company revived mining on Mount Ophir, and Darwin provided two-thirds of California's lead output. But the Defiance smelter, with its scattered and rusted machinery, remains the one recognizable landmark of the old town.

Nearby, the mountaintop town of Lookout reached its peak in 1877. In May a triweekly stage began serving it over the Argus Range from Darwin. By the end of spring Remi Nadeau had built a better road up Panamint Valley from the foot of the Slate Range grade to the Modoc and Minnietta mines. And by July he was hauling charcoal to the hungry Modoc furnaces on another road across Panamint Valley from the ten new charcoal kilns in Wildrose Canyon. But by the end of the seventies production was fading, and Lookout joined Darwin as a camp that had seen its palmiest days.

Despite the rapidly dwindling bullion trade, the long jerk-line teams of Remi Nadeau continued to haul Inyo freight. By 1880 they had grown in length to twenty and twenty-two mules. But the Carson and Colorado narrow gauge, approaching from the north, loomed as a final threat. By the end of 1881 the rails reached Belleville, Nevada, thereby diverting the Inyo freight northward to the Central Pacific. The last of Nadeau's teams departed in January 1882 for the flourishing camp of Tombstone, Arizona. There Nadeau sold the outfit which had dominated Inyo transportation since 1868. Returning to Los Angeles, he began building a new hotel at the corner of First and Spring streets. First four-story building in the city, The Nadeau was opened in 1883 and remained the reigning hostelry of Southern California until the turn of the century.

Meanwhile, by 1883 the Carson & Colorado narrow gauge had reached its terminus at Keeler on Owens Lake, bringing reduced freight rates to the mines of Inyo. During the middle 1880s, Cerro Gordo and Darwin enjoyed a feeble revival while furnace slag and inferior ores were shipped northward by rail to Nevada. Again, beginning in 1911, Louis D. Gordon brought new life to Buena Vista Peak with the discovery that Cerro Gordo's silver-lead ores contained valuable zinc elements. Resuming extensive mining operations, he built a bucket tramway from the Union dump down the side of the Inyo Range to deposit the ores in the freight cars at Keeler on Owens Lake. For several years he made Cerro Gordo once again the leading silver camp of California.

Today the traveler who leaves Highway 190 at Keeler and urges his car up eight steep miles will find the remnants of the camp which provided the principal trade of Los Angeles in the early seventies. Buildings and works of a more recent period dominate the scene, though the old American Hotel - recognizable as the only twostory structure in town - still stands. Up the street are two or three more buildings which must have housed saloons or general stores in the camp's heyday. Part of the square chimney of Beaudry's smelter remains at the lower edge of town, while over the divide at the head of San Lucas Canyon stands the furnace of Galen M. Fisher's Owens Lake Company, its shale chimney built for convenience up the face of the slope. But of -

Belshaw's furnace there is no more trace than of the silver trade which supported El Pueblo's early growth, founded Santa Monica, and created a railroad that kept the Southern Pacific out of Cajon Pass.



Around 1882 when the railroad came to the high desert of California and the silver boom of Cerro Gordo and Panamint had passed its hayday of record bullion production Remi Nadeau sold his mule teams and built Los Angeles' first four-story building, and the first with an elevator, at First and Spring Streets. The "Nadeau" was Los Angeles' leading hotel through the 1890s.

(Security First National Bank Photo)

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