

Cornelia Gordon Remembers Her Life With Louis D. Gordon

By Doug Gordon

March is Women's History Month. Although the mining towns like Cerro Gordo were primarily men, there are women that stand out in it's history. Thanks to the late Doug Gordon, we now know the history of his grandmother Cornelia Gordon.

Cornelia Comes To Cerro Gordo:

Cornelia Gordon was visiting friends in Los Angeles when word came that her husband, Louis, had obtained the lease on an old worked out silver-lead mine in Inyo County, known as Cerro Gordo. The trek from Los Angeles to Keeler at the base of the mountain would be an arduous one, but paled in comparison to the 23 per cent winding incline up the Yellow Grade Road, where no automobiles had ever gone.

Cornelia's friends told her she was foolish to follow her husband with their nine month old baby, up to the remnants of the old silver boomtown. The nearest real town with a doctor was Lone Pine, nearly 20 miles away, and the only means of transportation back and forth would be horse and buckboard or carriage. Cornelia had known from the early days of their marriage that she and Louis would call the God forsaken mining camps their home. The primitive tent camp of Gold Circle in Midas, Nevada, had well rehearsed the Gordon's for what lay ahead of them in the California Inyo Mountains, as had time spent in mining areas of Nevada, Utah, and Mexico, where Louis also had interests.



The little Gordon family was packed and ready to head across the vast Mojave Desert from Los Angeles when Louis learned he would be detained by business. Cornelia had already prepared the baby's formula for 24 hours, and couldn't wait, so she boarded the narrow-gauge train, just she and her infant son. Between the thriving Los Angeles metropolis and the mines, there was one overnight stop. The only accommodations available were a boxcar. Cornelia settled in for the night, until her son's hungry cries woke her at five o'clock in the morning. As she fed him, she gazed out the little window of the boxcar to the unforgettable beauty of the sun rising over the desert.

Before ascending into the mountains where the Cerro Gordo mines were located, Cornelia arrived in Keeler at the shore of Owens Lake. With her nine-month old baby in her arms, she boarded some sort of wagon which would take her up the infamous Yellow Grade Road. In the seat behind her, another person sat, holding an umbrella for shade. Somewhere along the precipitous eight-mile journey, they would stop to make a fire to warm the baby's bottle for feeding time.

Nearly at the top of the mountain peak, Cornelia and party arrived at the Cerro Gordo mines. As they stepped out of the wagon, they turned to the view of Keeler down below. Cornelia described the view of the "dry soda lake turned the most heavenly blue...blue as sapphire" with Mount Whitney towering in the distance.

A sad looking cabin was provided for the Gordons to live in until a more comfortable house could be built. The little place was so dirty Cornelia had to get miners to scrub the walls and take up horrible matting on the floor. Old green carpeting, brought in from Los Angeles, was put down on the floor, and a nice table was provided to sit and have meals, soon making the place quite homey indeed. Behind the

cabin there was a bathroom, with a galvanized zinc tub. Water was heated and brought in from elsewhere, since there were no pipes. When Louis finally arrived on the mountain, he was quite surprised to see his wife, son, and the accompanying nursemaid quite content in their humble quarters.

Not long after settling in, Cornelia learned that there was no milk to be had in Cerro Gordo. She took a piece of paper and wrote out her grocery list, including the much needed baby's milk, and placed it in the bucket full of ore that would travel down to Keeler via tramway. Unfortunately, when the bucket came back up with supplies, the milk was sour. This prompted Cornelia to visit Mrs. Bo, the only other woman on the hill. Mrs. Bo informed her that she fed her baby malted milk, but the little Gordon baby didn't take well to the malted milk. While thumbing through a magazine, however, Cornelia soon found an ad for Imperial Granham, a powdered formula that just required the addition of water to be complete. A note was placed once again on an ore bucket which eventually came back up with the Imperial Granham resolving the dilemma once and for all.

Cornelia often found herself starved for adult companionship. "L" as she called her husband, would be gone all day, then take off again after a 5 p.m. dinner and go back down in the mines for the evenings. She longed for good conversations or book reading together, but there was never time for it. With no house keeping facilities in her little cabin, she did manage to cook for the baby, get breakfast and a light lunch, then a fine dinner would often be had at the house of one of the wives of the other miners, relieving her loneliness.

Wind was ongoing, and often very blustery. When a stockholder came to visit the Gordons one day, Cornelia watched as he got to the little porch in front of the house, and hurried to greet him. Just as she swung open the door, a blast of wind blew the man's beautiful white hair off of his head, revealing his bald head. The incident must not have bothered him much, as soon afterwards he sent Cornelia a horse, and her life changed.

Astride Prince, perhaps with her young son in tow, and a friend from Lone Pine with her, Cornelia could enjoy the beauty of the old mining town. The trails were scary at first, narrow, off camber, and rocky, with drop offs looking down as much as 5,000 feet below in places. The reward of wildflowers and pine scents as one descended into the mountain trails away from the barren terrain of the mine itself, was well worth the effort, however, and soon Cornelia conquered her fear of horse and height.

Once Cornelia's son was old enough to walk. She was delighted to take him on walks along the surrounding trails, instead of riding. At one point they were greeted with a beautiful sight - a curly horned mountain sheep. Along the way, they enjoyed more wildflowers, and snacked on pine nuts. Douglas Gordon would be too young to remember these nature walks, but his mother would treasure them forever.

Part 1

Sometime in the 1970's a tape recorder was handed to the first Mrs. Louis D. Gordon. With the help of a nurse on duty at the retirement home Cornelia now called her place of residence, she managed to "tame" the thing, and began to speak into it, giving us insight to a more personal side of the man and the life he and his family lived:

"In 1906, I was married in Plainfield, New Jersey, to a man who was born in Austin, Nevada, and very interested in mining and geology."

“He went to school in San Francisco, and then had two years at the Annapolis Naval Academy, but left before graduation, as he was anxious to get back to the West.

We met in Point Pleasant, New Jersey, and became engaged. I had to wait two years to be married, because he had staked a claim and he had to get back out west. However, we finally got married, and bought a house in Salt Lake and after about a year and a half we went to the first mining camp which was Gold Circle in Midas, Nevada.”

“The camp was really just a camp; there were no houses except two stores down in the village which had false fronts where they sold meat and groceries and some yard goods and then there was a hotel with a false front and the back of it, I imagine, was a tent because you could hear everything so clearly that was being said in the room next to you.”

“The first night we went to Gold Circle there were two drunks in the room next to us and they were using obscene language and my husband spoke to them and said,

‘If you don’t stop talking like that, I have my wife here, I will throw you downstairs.’

Well, they didn’t stop and so he threw them downstairs. That was my first dramatic experience.”

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Part 2

From Gold Circle, the Gordons settled in Salt Lake City, Utah. Their first trip together from Salt Lake was to Mexico, “as there was a mine to be unwatered” and “L” was requested to come and look at it.

Cornelia was not allowed to go to the mine; she had to stay in a little hotel in Agua Caliente, since there were no feminine accommodations up in the mountains.

This was during rainy season, the room was cold and the sheets on the bed were damp. Hotel staff would build a fire for her and pull the sheets off so they could dry before she slept on them, without worry of getting pneumonia.

Toilet facilities were discovered by way of flashlight down the hall, and described as a “3-holer, Chic Sale”* with resident cockroaches.

After five or six days alone, Louis had completed his tasks at the mine and Cornelia was finally rescued.

From Agua Caliente, the Gordons headed by train to Mexico City. Following a mishap with a hand car, four workmen and an overturned rail car complete with pandemonium, but no wounded, they settled in a comfortable hotel. Each afternoon around 5 o’clock they watched open carriages on the very narrow streets passing others going in the opposite direction.

The Gordon's noted beautifully dressed women wearing mantillas and a great deal of face powder, smiling and bowing to each other. Though the streets barely had room for the harrowing passage, it was obvious the American couple were witnessing a very important Mexican rite.

Louis and Cornelia enjoyed their sightseeing in Mexico and then returned to Salt Lake City until their next trip to Round Mountain.

“Round Mountain, Nevada is in Nye County, 60 miles from Tonopah and on the desert...” an elderly Cornelia speaks into the tape recorder once again.

“We drove the first trip we made and the mine is on the sunny side of the mountain and has a stamp mill where the very high grade ore is treated and an office building with quarters on top for family, which in later years when I came out and took the children we occupied. The ore is very rich and very high grade, and was made into gold bullion at the stamp mill and then taken to Tonopah and shipped by train to a smelter... The water for the placer came from a canyon up in the Black Mountains - Jet Canyon - and the mine was both placer and lode.”

“...Mining engineers from all different parts of the country would often come out to the mine because it was a very unusual development, both placer and lode, and very high-grade ore. So there were many interesting contacts with people, and life was far from dull.

Sometimes there were dances on a Saturday night and the Indians would come. We had a man to play the piano and a violinist, and it was real old fashioned country goings-on.

I danced with the Indians and it was a little tricky because they were not too careful about their person, and the weather was hot, but anyway, it was something to do and a little different.”



Photo of Indians at Round Mountain Nevada...L.D. Gordon archives

Around 1911, Cornelia Gordon was visiting friends in Los Angeles when word came that her husband, Louis, had obtained the lease on an old worked out silver lead mine in Inyo County, known as Cerro Gordo.

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The little Gordon family was packed and ready to head across the vast Mojave Desert from Los Angeles when Louis learned he would be detained by business.

Cornelia and son boarded the train alone to Mojave, laid over a night in a boxcar there, then on to Keeler. From Keeler she boarded a wagon which would take her up the infamous Yellow Grade Road.

In the seat behind her, another person sat, holding an umbrella for shade. Somewhere along the precipitous eight mile journey, they would stop to make a fire to warm the baby's bottle for feeding time.

Nearly at the top of the mountain peak, Cornelia and party arrived at the Cerro Gordo Mines. As they stepped out of the wagon, they turned to the view of Keeler down below. Cornelia described the view of the "dry soda lake turned the most heavenly blue... blue as sapphire" with Mount Whitney towering in the distance.

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When Louis finally arrived on the mountain, he was quite surprised to see his wife, son, and the accompanying nursemaid content in their humble quarters.

Cornelia recalled, “We had one Christmas up at the mine...and it was very pretty with snow all around... The wind was always very bad and very blustery.”



A snow storm knocks down tram towers and buries Cerro Gordo under a white blanket.
(Photo L.D. Gordon Collection)

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The Gordons lived on the mountain on and off from 1911 to 1920. Louis was more often than not, busy tending to the business of the Cerro Gordo Mines Co., or off the mountain at one of his other holdings.

Cornelia and son learned to entertain themselves when they could, astride horse or hiking on the mountain, enjoying the beautiful backcountry scenery and the wildflowers as weather permitted.

Eventually, a suitable home was built for the family to take the place of the primitive cabin they originally lived in.

It had as many modern conveniences for the time period as could be expected on an isolated mountain top.

The ore tramway often provided communication to the outside world when modern means failed or just plain weren't in existence.

Cornelia would put her grocery list on a bucket headed down the mountain, and it would come back with her requests, including baby formula.

Cornelia had known from the early days of her marriage that she and Louis would call the God forsaken mining camps their home. The primitive tent camp of Gold Circle had well rehearsed the Gordons for what lay ahead of them in California's Inyo Mountains, as well as times yet to come in other mining areas of Nevada, Utah, and Mexico, where Louis also had interests.

Three children and a divorce several years later would send Louis and Cornelia in separate directions. But Cornelia fondly remembered the tales of their early years together.