

Cornelia Comes To Cerro Gordo

By Cecile Page Vargo

“We tend not to choose the unknown, which might be a shock or a disappointment or simply a little unknown with all its disappointments and surprises that is the most enriching.” Anne Lindberg

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 9 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 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 was 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 Gordon's 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 full of 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 5:00 pm 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 Gordon's 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 delightful 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.

Cornelia spent time off and on at the Cerro Gordo over the years her husband was in charge of things. For the most part, she probably spent the milder summer months on the mountain. However, there was one Christmas when the Gordon's couldn't get away. The weather was cold and snowy, yet sunny, with crisp and clear blue skies. The only thing that was missing was the tree. The miners went out and cut a little pine tree so the Gordon's could have a Christmas tree. Cornelia decorated it with decorations both homemade and bought, and the holiday was complete.

Decades after the Gordon family left the Cerro Gordo Mines, Cornelia recorded these experiences and many others on a new fandangled tape recorder given to her by a granddaughter. Somehow she managed to "tame" the thing, with the help of a nurse at the retirement home where she was living.

Future generations of Gordon's and ghost town explorers can now enjoy the memories of a nearly forgotten time. Although, she never mentioned it, the little cabin was not the only home Cornelia and

her family lived in. Eventually, a large two story wooden shingle house with all the comforts of the day, was built, and remains standing as the most prominent building other than the American Hotel up at Cerro Gordo today. The Louis D. Gordon House, circa 1916, was restored by Jody Stewart and Mike Patterson and served as their home as well.



Picture shows Cornelia with her son and her nursemaid above Cerro Gordo probably out looking for wildflowers.