

Cerro Gordo Mine and Surrounding Mine Areas

Cerro Gordo was, in its heyday, the “Comstock Lode” of California's eastern Sierra. Its great silver, lead, and zinc deposits were found on the western slopes of Cerro Gordo and Buena Vista Peaks, at the southern end of the Inyo Mountains. The story of its productive years, when silver-lead ingots were stacked around camp like firewood, and of its colorful residents who were then vying for the lucrative business of supplying the mines on the hill, is a fascinating chapter of early mining history in the western states.

The Early Years

The actual date and circumstances surrounding the discovery of silver in the Inyo Mountains east of Owens Lake are obscure. The deposits of rich ore were recorded as being discovered in 1865 by Pablo Flores and several unnamed Mexican companions. Although the date may be uncertain, mines bearing Spanish names from the earliest days provide evidence of Mexican discovery.

Situated near the summit of Buena Vista Peak at an elevation of 8,500 feet, the isolated mining outpost became known as Cerro Gordo, meaning *Fat Hill* in Spanish, the reference meaning that it was fat with silver. The principal mines at this time were the San Lucas, San Ygnacio, San Francisco, and San Felipe. Within four years, the number of mining claims would increase to over seven hundred.

During this initial period, claims were worked on a small scale for immediate results. Surface discoveries were developed by irregular trenches and open pits which followed the natural course of the veins with no apparent plan in mind. This was commonly referred to as "coyote mining", because of the similarity in appearance to the diggings of that animal.

The early miners processed their ore in crude adobe and stone ovens called *vasos*. These primitive furnaces directed the heat from the open-hearth interior across the ore and reflected it downward to the low floor, rather than heating from directly below. The ore was thus "roasted" until the silver melted and was extracted.

Cerro Gordo's ore was of such high quality that even the *vasos* extracted a larger amount of silver than was expected. Although word of their success attracted a few American prospectors, little effort was directed toward underground development of the deposits. The miners on this mountain had no capital except for their own labor with which to develop their mines. Other obstacles also restricted Cerro Gordo's growth, these being mainly the ruggedness of the terrain, scarcity of water on the mountain, and the location remote from any settlement with a large population for provisions and supplies.

Unlike other boom towns of its day, Cerro Gordo did not come into being overnight. To the contrary, the mining camp high in the Inyos seemed almost reluctant to become California's greatest silver producer. The first real efforts to develop any of the claims were made on the San Lucas mine in 1866 by José Ochoa, who was extracting about 1½ tons of ore every 12 hours. The silver ore was then transported in sacks by pack animals to the Silver Sprout Mill a few miles west of Fort Independence. It was probably these shipments of silver ore, yielding \$300 per ton, that first attracted the

attention of Victor Beaudry, a successful merchant at Fort Independence. A former "49er", Beaudry was well acquainted with mining both gold and silver.

Impressed with the quality of the ore from the San Lucas mine, Beaudry was convinced that Cerro Gordo was not just another run-of-the-mill mining venture. Despite the lack of excitement usually generated around a new mining camp on the threshold of a possible boom, Beaudry opened a general store at Cerro Gordo in 1866. He began to acquire mining properties by foreclosing on overdue accounts. Judgments against those mine owners in default of their debts gave Beaudry interests in the San Lucas, Union, San Felipe, and several other mining prospects. His newly acquired interest in the Union Mine would later involve him in a partnership with a man who would soon transform Cerro Gordo from an obscure mining camp to a roaring silver producer. This man was Mortimer Belshaw.

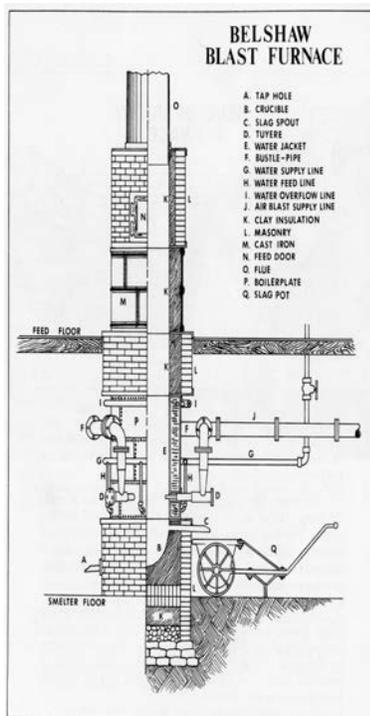


MORTIMER BELSHAW transformed Cerro Gordo from an obscure mining camp to a roaring silver city.

The Productive Boom Years

Leaving his family in San Francisco behind, Belshaw arrived at Cerro Gordo in April, 1868. He was impressed with the rich silver quartz veins, and amazed that the eager miners were discarding any ore worth less than \$200 per ton. However, it was the deposits of galena (silver-lead ore) that

Belshaw sought, as he knew that this held the key to Cerro Gordo's riches. Belshaw knew how essential lead was in the smelting of silver ore. He concluded that whoever built a smelter and controlled the galena deposits would also control all of Cerro Gordo's silver ores, and the riches that the mountain could bring. Belshaw brought the first wagon load of silver to Los Angeles in June, 1868 (which population then was around 5,200). A wagon load of silver bullion was hard to ignore, and word of Cerro Gordo's riches soon began to spread. From there, the silver was shipped by steamboat to San Francisco where Belshaw had financial connections.



Author's illustration of the Belshaw blast furnace was taken from verbal descriptions given in state mineralogist reports and methods of furnace construction common to the period.

Having access to the capital necessary to carry out his plans, Belshaw set out to control the flow of silver from Cerro Gordo. The first obstacle to overcome was the rugged terrain up from the Owens Valley. Before heavy mining and smelting equipment could be shipped to the town, a road would have to be located and graded in the steep and treacherous

Inyo Mountains. Under Belshaw's supervision, a road was completed by July, 1868. Taking its name from the yellow rock formations along the way, the "Yellow Grade" road carried all traffic up to and down from the mountain. Belshaw, ever the entrepreneur, built a gate in the canyon narrows, and began collecting tolls on everything that entered or departed Cerro Gordo.

Prior to Belshaw's arrival, all ore smelting was done in the primitive vasos, or the newer reverberatory furnaces, which were an improvement over the vasos. Belshaw, with other operatives, invented the blast furnace, which from then on was used not only at Cerro Gordo, but as the news spread of this highly efficient furnace, at many established mining camps in the new mining areas. During this period of mining development, the enterprising Belshaw conducted mining examinations and carried out metallurgical experimentation which resulted in successful smelting on a commercial scale. The year 1868 was to be a great transition period for Cerro Gordo, and was to be followed by over 7 years of unequalled prosperity.

Regular shipments of silver bullion began arriving in Los Angeles in December of 1868. Each ingot was 18 inches long, weighed around 85 pounds, and depending on silver content, was worth around \$35 (\$625 in 2019 dollars). For the first time, Cerro Gordo was being hailed as another "Comstock Lode". Across the network of burro trails came a constant parade of pack animals bringing wood, charcoal, food, clothing, hardware, the much needed water (which went for \$0.10 per gallon, or almost \$2 per gallon in 2019 dollars), and other supplies to the townspeople and the furnaces. The scarcity of water on and around the mountain would plague the miners, the mine owners including Belshaw, and the blast furnaces throughout the early life of Cerro Gordo until it became pumped from the mine depths by steam engine. In the high lonesome desert, water is the primary essential without which little business can be done.



Part of 18,000 bullion bars backed on Owens Lake shores awaiting the wagon roads to dry.

As well, for human mining activities, fuel was the other essential which, at the beginning of the Cerro Gordo mining boom, was readily available. But, as time marched onward, the local pinyon pine forest clear cutting resulted in scarcities of fuel wood, and of suppliers having to travel ever farther in search of viable wood. In the peak of its boom years, wood resources changed to supplying charcoal to the smelter furnaces, as charcoal was a lighter and more

condensed source of fuel. All the pinyon trees in the Inyos were clear cut and slashed in those boom years. At Cerro Gordo's boom peak, the forests of trees across the Owens Valley, high up in the Sierra Mountains were subject

to such cutting in the pursuit of smelting the wealth of silver for the mine owners. Environmental awareness was nowhere in the vocabulary of the capitalist business owners at this time. It was all about reaping the mineral bounty there and then. Evidence of the forest damage can still be seen today, 150 years later, in the Inyo as well as the Sierra Mountains.

Cerro Gordo, and the resulting trade north and south from the Owens Valley brought instant prosperity to Los Angeles (a small town then), and by the end of 1869, 340 tons of silver bullion had passed through the young city. Cerro Gordo's silver ingots became a common sight in the City, and were proudly displayed at most hotels and banks, and many businesses along Main and Spring Streets in downtown Los Angeles. Many Los Angelenos could describe, in some detail, the goings-on and affairs at the distant mines way up at Cerro Gordo. Indeed, some had investment money in favor of silver discoveries. As well, many "city prospectors" found easy pickings selling trumped up grubstakes for a remote place known as Cerro Gordo. Many a bogus prospect was hawked to unsuspecting city people with a few dollars to spare, as Cerro Gordo mine tunnels, shafts, and stopes were being sold for so many dollars per foot regardless of silver ore content. Such hucksters were also miners in a sense, except that they spared their backs and didn't get their hands dirty. They mined the wallets of both the wise and the foolish. In the boom times, anything is possible, and such was the financial impact of the largest silver strike in California's history. As is the case with all natural mining endeavors in history, the boom does not come without the inevitably ensuing bust. The boom was a moment in history that never came before, and would never come again.

The Eventual Decline Years

As is the case with just about every mineral mine that ever was, Cerro Gordo's silver lodes became less and less cost effective to mine, and mining activity declined. It is an on-again off-again story. Lead mining became profitable during World War One. But the war ended, and mining declined yet again. Later, newer mining technologies made it somewhat profitable to re-work the old ore dumps to extract the silver that the earlier prospectors had discarded. By August, 1921, a mill was operating again. However Cerro Gordo Mines was showing a total deficit of \$414,500 (\$6.3 million in 2019 dollars) at the end of 1922. The Great Depression was lurking just around the corner, and that eventually drove Cerro Gordo Mines into bankruptcy. By 1933, due to economics and the scarcity of new silver deposits, no important silver ore discoveries have since been made.

The boom and bust of Cerro Gordo lives on in history today, with a relatively easy drive up the "Yellow Grade", an 11-mile graded dirt road maintained by Inyo county to the town. The road is subject to the whims of Mother Nature, as She can unleash sporadic flash floods which can wash out

the narrower canyon stretches of dirt road. If you go to the Mountain, do check road conditions before you travel, and please respect that Cerro Gordo is private property. There is a resident caretaker who will want you to check in, and if the caretaker is amenable and the weather is fair, you just might experience a very interesting tour of this fascinating ghost town and its history. The caretaker will appreciate a small donation of money, and a gift of fresh drinking water will also be greatly appreciated.



Cerro Gordo Mine employees lining up to cash their paychecks at the Wells Fargo Express office in Keeler. The Palace Saloon was conveniently located next door (photo not dated).

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