

Mortimer Belshaw Biography

Mortimer Belshaw was born in 1830 on a farm in central New York. His great grandparents were immigrants from, County Antrim, Ireland to New Haven Connecticut. Belshaw himself worked his way through school as a teacher, and then in a watch and jewelry shop, eventually receiving a bachelor's degree from Geneva College.

In 1852 while working as a toll clerk on the Erie Canal, Belshaw heard the call of gold. He quickly boarded a steamship via the Isthmus of Panama to San Francisco, arriving there just before turning twenty-two years of age. Within three years he was running a watch and jewelry shop in Fiddletown, and miners were selling their gold dust to him. He became the local Wells Fargo Express Agent.

In 1858 Belshaw returned to his home in New York to romance his sweetheart Jenny Oxner. Jenny came back to California with him as his wife.

Mortimer Belshaw was a man of medium and husky frame. As he gained riches, he gained weight, eventually reaching 250 pounds, the true sign of success in the Victorian age. His face was clean-shaven, except for thick muttontop side whiskers.

Few Argonauts came to California with the college education that Belshaw had. He was quick to learn, and quick to succeed at mining. He was known to work patiently and long toward a single goal, and he was considered an individualist making bold steps while those around him faltered.

Sinaloa, Mexico attracted Belshaw in 1862, and he took off for the mines there. When he arrived back in California in 1864 he was well versed in silver ore mining.

Mortimer and Jenny were living in comfort on Jackson Street, in San Francisco in 1864. The word was out of the silver strike in the Inyo Mountains. Belshaw bid his wife and two sons goodbye, and boarded the stage for Owens River. His traveling companion was Abner B. Elder, a native of western Ohio and a Civil War veteran. Elder had joined in partnership with Belshaw. He too was a graduate of the Mexican silver mines.

April 1868 Belshaw and Elder arrived at Cerro Gordo. Swarms of Mexican miners were hard at work, digging into the side of Buena Vista Peak. These silver seekers worked the quartz mines carelessly tossing away any ore worth less than \$200 a ton. Each man worked alone, staking out their own piece of the hill, certain there was no master lode, only many separate ledges. Supposedly a big rope was fastened to a convenient tree in camp ready to hang anyone who dared to talk of just one ledge of ore.

Silver mine owner aided L.A. boom

MOJAVE — Belshaw Street in Mojave gets its name from Owens Valley mine owner Mortimer W. Belshaw, whose silver ore contributed to Los Angeles' first 19th century boom and who once was robbed of a silver watch, \$20 in gold and his boots during a stage holdup by famed outlaw Tiburcio Vasquez.

To the south of Belshaw Street is Cerro Gordo Street, named for the location of Belshaw's silver mine and smelter on a mountainside east of Owens Lake, and to the north is Nadeau Street, named for freight company owner Remi Nadeau, whose mule teams hauled Cerro Gordo silver through the Antelope Valley to Los Angeles.

A New Yorker and one of the few college-educated "argonauts" who came to California after the 1848 discovery of gold, Belshaw operated Cerro Gordo's Union mine with partners from 1868 to 1876, and after a legal battle stayed on as a director in a new company for the mine's last three years.

After Mojave's founding in 1876 with the arrival of Southern Pacific Railroad's tracks, Belshaw, partner Victor Beaudry and Nadeau operated a freight-hauling business headquartered there.

In 1874 alone, Cerro Gordo mines sent 5,290 tons of silver to Los Angeles, where Nadeau's mules loaded up with supplies for Cerro Gordo and provided a new market for Southern California farmers' grain.

When Belshaw arrived in Cerro Gordo in 1868, three years after the silver deposits' discovery by Mexican miners, he was 38 and already familiar with silver smelting through two years at mines in Sinaloa, Mexico, according to a 1948 book by Remi A. Nadeau, the freighter's great-great-grandson.

Belshaw had been a teacher, attended Geneva College, learned jewelry-making and collected tolls on the Erie Canal before sailing to California in 1852.

He worked as a carpenter, then opened a jewelry store in the min-

ing settlement of Fiddletown and also worked as an agent for Wells Fargo, according to his biography in "The History of Contra Costa County, California."

In Cerro Gordo, Belshaw acquired part ownership in the Union Mine, which contained the lead ore needed for smelting all the silver in the area; hauled in smelter machinery; built a toll road to reach the 8,300-foot-elevation settlement, and installed a pipeline to bring in water from a spring.

"Belshaw was not a man to leave a stone unturned," Remi A. Nadeau wrote in "Ghost Towns and Mining Camps of California," a copy of which is in the collection of longtime Antelope Valley resident Chris Spicher.

In Cerro Gordo, Belshaw also invented a water-jacket furnace that heated the silver ore more uniformly and produced silver more efficiently and quickly.

In 1873, Belshaw and Beaudry formed a partnership with the first Remi Nadeau to improve the freight system for hauling their silver, of which tens of thousands of ingots had stacked up at the smelter and at Owens Lake.

Into the new Cerro Gordo Freighting Company, the mine owners invested \$150,000, which Nadeau used to set up 12 stations from Owens Valley across the Antelope Valley and down Soledad Canyon to Los Angeles.

At places like Barrel Springs south of Palmdale, Willow Springs west of Rosamond, and Forks of the Road north of Mojave, the stations were a day's haul apart — 13 to 20 miles.

In February 1874, returning from San Francisco, Belshaw arrived by stagecoach at the Coyote Holes station — beside present-day



BELSHAW

Highway 14 north of Red Rock Canyon — only to find the station had been taken over by Vasquez and fellow outlaw Clodovio Chavez.

"At the sight of Vasquez and Chavez each covering the road with a cocked Henry rifle, Belshaw's usual coolness deserted him," Nadeau wrote. Belshaw told the stage driver not to try to flee.

After Vasquez and Chavez left with the stage horses, Belshaw had freight mules hitched to the stagecoach and continued north to Owens Valley to report the robbery. Vasquez and Chavez escaped.

By 1874, Belshaw and Beaudry had lost a lawsuit over the Union Mine with the owners of another Cerro Gordo mine who claimed prevailing rights to the same silver vein the Union was mining.

But Belshaw had obtained a stay of proceedings, appealed to the state Supreme Court and stepped up production — installing a steam hoist, rebuilding the smelters and hiring miners' pay and hiring more of them — before he had to give up the Union mine.

In 1876, after a second trial, a compromise gave Belshaw and his partners two-thirds control of the Cerro Gordo mines and smelters, and their opponent one-third, Remi A. Nadeau wrote.

By then, though, the Union's ore deposit was almost mined out. A new shaft dug by 1877 found no ore. In August 1877, a fire destroyed the mine building and hoist works. The mine shut down in 1879.

Belshaw left Cerro Gordo in 1877 for his home in the San Francisco Bay area, where his wife and son had been living.

In Antioch, he built the town's first water system and opened the Empire Coal Mines in the foothills of Mount Diablo.

His biography in the Contra Costa County history says he and his coal mine partners were also involved in building docks and a railroad.

Belshaw was an investor in the Kennedy Mining & Milling Company, near Jackson in Amador County and was president of the Gwin Mine Development Company of Calaveras County.

After an illness of six months he died at the home of his son in Antioch on April 28, 1898.

The woodframe, one-story house in which Belshaw is said to have lived still exists in the Cerro Gordo ghost town, and is open to visitors, as is the town's 141-year-old American Hotel.

Compiled by Managing Editor Charles F. Bostwick.