

Shot Gun Kate & The Battle For Burgess

By Cecil Page Vargo

Part 1

She peered through the window of Lottie Dearborn's Lone Pine boarding house as a group of men saddled up their horses and hollered out at the sight of a familiar face. "Beveridge Ross Spear, you'd better not be taking Warren and that gang of his to Burgess. He's taking that paid gang of loafers up there armed with guns. Warren plans to take the mine away from me. I know what I'm talking about. I've got to beat them to the mine."

Beveridge looked intently at her and simply replied, "This is my livelihood, Mrs. Wells. I never heard such a tale. They made the arrangement and I must keep my word. I'm sorry, Mrs. Wells, I must be on time."

She ran out to saddle her own bald-faced sorrel and took off in a gallop. The loud splash made when she reached the irrigation canal behind Mt. Whitney station (on the Carson & Colorado R.R.) startled the nine men and their horses. "Good morning, Mr. Spear," she said politely, and continued on.

High on the southern slope of New York Butte near the Long John Mine, Kate sat astride her horse and watched as the nine men on their horses entered the canyon three miles below. The Long John Mine was hers now, and she was determined to keep it. The Long John was a big producer with mules regularly sent down the mountain carrying three sacks of 80-pound bags of gold ore, each worth \$2,800. The ore was panned without crushing and came in sizes of kernels of corn or wheat that contained nearly an ounce and a half of gold.

But his actions said otherwise as he grabbed her sorrel's bridle and tried to turn him in the other direction back down the gulch. Kate maintained her horse and spun back around, in a struggle with Warren who insisted the horse go down to clear the way for them to continue on. Kate and horse managed to hold ground through it all. She grabbed her revolver and shoved it down at Warren. Warren instinctively caught her wrist and pushed the gun up and away with one hand; the other hand still forcing Kate's horse down the gulch.

"Don't shoot, Kate! Don't shoot!" a third man shouted as he jumped out from behind a boulder, a rifle in his hand. This was Kate's brother, Archie Taylor. Archie dropped his own rifle and plunged his body into Warren. A fourth man, Kate's son, Virgil Robinson, jumped out from another rock leveling his rifle. Virgil didn't shoot, but the seven men who had accompanied Warren and Beveridge up the mountain grabbed their six shooters, aimed and fired.

The group of nine horses and twelve people had grown to include several spectators, all standing in a hundred foot circle in the bottom of the narrow gulch. Among them a miner named Charley Bago was shot in the upper right arm just as he ran towards shelter behind a tent. Albert Sianz was struck on the hobnail sole of his right shoe. Slim Wilson fell behind a rock. Beveridge Spear charged down the gulch on his horse. Meanwhile at the Long John mine, a quarter mile up the gulch, a heavy guard and more gun play greeted the original nine horseman and sent them into retreat down the mountain to Lone Pine.

Part 2

Kate eventually returned to Lone Pine with Ben Redfield acting as her bodyguard. Charges were filed against Warren and his group. The following day she and Ben returned to the mine. As the two of them reached a blind spot in the narrows the voice of Kate's ex-husband Fat could be heard shouting, "Caught yah with my wife!" and Redfield found himself at the end of a shotgun barrel.

“Don’t shoot!” yelled Kate, as she ran her horse between the two men. Redfield rolled over the side of his horse for protection. Fat Wells fired one shot, missing Kate, but sending her horse to its death on the trail with a loud brawl. Kate mounted Redfield’s horse and scurried back to Lone Pine to file attempted murder charges against Fat.

The two-week long trial, wrought with contention, bitterness and several near fights, was presided over by Justice of the Peace A.M. Bonner. Lawyer Peter Forbes got into a scuffle with a bystander not involved with the original shootings at the Long John. “I’d punch your nose if you didn’t wear glasses,” W. K. Miller Jr. announced. In return, Forbes threw his glasses from his face and on to the floor. “They’re off!” he answered. Forbes leaned forward to the tune of Judge Bonner’s gavel pounding for order. Miller backed off, “I wouldn’t fight an old man.” In his Irish accent, Forbes simply replied, “Ah, young mohn...you do have a bit of sense.”

Fat Wilson’s lawyer, Warren, advised his attorneys in his attempted murder trial. Nobody was injured and Kate J. Wells maintained her title to the Long John mine.

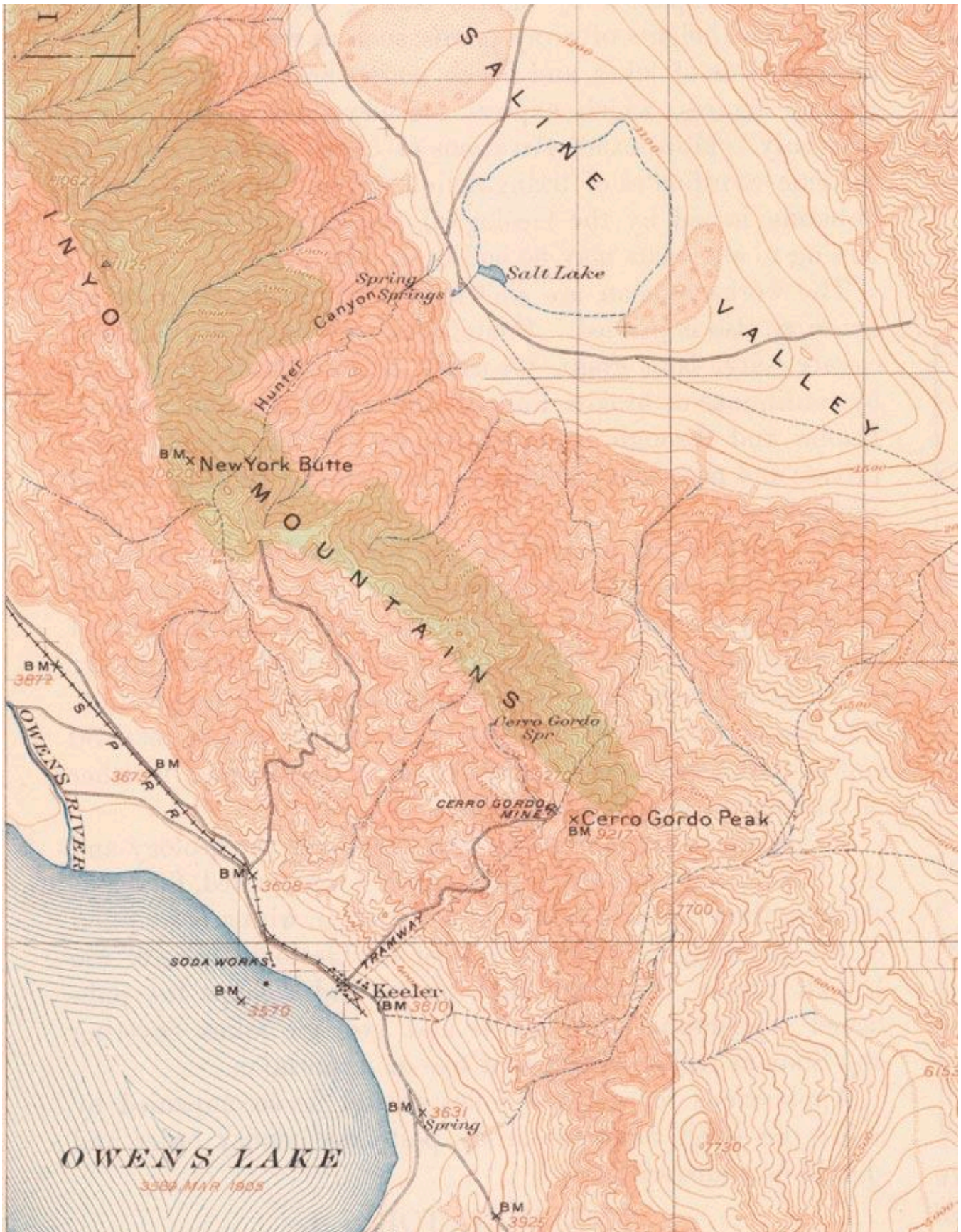
Kate Wells earned the nickname, Shotgun Kate, for her defiant ride to the mountain ahead of the men who were after her. Shotgun Kate was never forgotten as the woman who saved her mining claim at the Battle of Burgess.

Shotgun Kate followed mule packers, Carmen and Henry Olivas for two years as they hauled her high grade ore down the rugged road to the Lone Pine railway station. Kate carried her shotgun to ward off hijacking bandits.

Kate J. Wells herself, was packed over the Inyo crest to the salt tram station and loaded on the salt tram to Swansea. Kate and a miner named Smalley had been loading timber at the mine, when a mule whirled around with logs on his back, caught her on the side of the head and broke her neck. The year was 1918.

All that's left today at the Burgess Mine is an adopt a cabin (maintained by users) and magnificent views of Owens and Saline Valleys.





Portion of USGS 1913 Ballarat topographic map showing the area where the Battle Of Burgess occurred.