Louis D. Gordon & the Great Zinc Era

By Cecil Page Vargo

By 1910 carbonate zinc ores at Cerro Gordo proved to have a commercial value. Louis D. Gordon and Associates obtained the Four Metals Company lease at this time, and they began extracting zinc in the Union Mine by 1911. Title to the property went to Louis D. Gordon in 1914 when the Four Metals Company went under. At this time, the mines were reorganized and the Cerro Gordo Mines Company incorporated on July 14, 1914. Capital stock amounted to $1,000,000. With Louis D. Gordon as both vice president and general manager, Cerro Gordo's great zinc era was under way.

The old tramway was replaced by a Leschen aerial tramway. At 29,560 feet, this tramway was capable of moving 16-20 tons per hour. Twenty tons of zinc ore shipped daily from the tramway terminus at the railroad in Keeler to the United States Smelting and Refining Company in Utah where it was processed. Net earnings for the company from September 1915 to February 1916 were $40,260.

Around 1915, large shipments of slag from old smelter dumps began. Between 1916 and 1919 nearly 33,000 tons of smelter slag was recovered. The slag dumps of the Belshaw, Beaudry and Owens Lake Company smelters were almost entirely removed during this time.

At the 900 foot level of the Jefferson chimney and dike of the Union Mine, new deposits of silver ore were discovered. 8,022 tons of lead and 750,844 ounces of silver was produced between 1911 and 1919.

Electricity came to Cerro Gordo in January of 1916, replacing the steam power that operated the hoist in the Belshaw shaft and the tramway machinery. A Joshua Hendy 100 horse power electric hoist, an Imperial Type 10 Ingersoll-Rand compressor, and a 150 horse power constant speed motor were put in. In case of power failure, the old steam plant was still maintained.

Although Cerro Gordo was booming once again, the success was not as great as it was during the days when Mortimer Belshaw and Victor Beaudry reigned in the 1870's. The Cerro Gordo Mines Company, and others constantly searched for new ore locations.

July, 2014, marked the centennial of the founding of Cerro Gordo Mines Company under Louis D. Gordon and the mining town's rebirth as a major zinc producer. We are forever grateful to the late Doug Gordon, L. D. Gordon's grandson, for making his grandfather's

Part 1

Louis D. Gordon came to the faded mining town of Cerro Gordo in 1911 to find the Union Mine little more than an abandoned pile of burned out ruble. His mine surveys uncovered reasonable amounts of silver and galena. A closer look at the zinc that had been tossed aside during the great Belshaw and Beaudry silver and lead years told him where the next fortune would come from.

By July 14, 1914, Cerro Gordo was a boomtown once again. Gordon took title to the property as the Four Metals Company went under and reorganized the mines. The Cerro Gordo Mines Company was officially incorporated July 14, 1914, with Gordon as both vice president and general manager. Cerro Gordo's great zinc era was well under way.

L. D. GORDON
MANAGER

J. C. CLIMO
SUPERINTENDENT

J. WILSON RENO
PURCHASING AGENT

CERRO GORDO MINES COMPANY
PURCHASING DEPARTMENT
FIRST NATIONAL BANK BLDG.
SAN FRANCISCO, CAL.

Order No._____

Part 2

Louis D. Gordon replaced the old Montgomery tramway with a Leschen and Sons wire-rope aerial tramway. At 29,500 feeet, this tramway was capable of moving 16-19 tons per hour. Twenty tons of zinc ore shipped daily from the tramway terminus at the railroad in Keeler to the United States Smelting and Refining Company in Utah, where it was processed. Net earnings for the company from September 1915 to February 1916, were $40,260.

The force of gravity pulled the loaded ore buckets down the hill and the empty buckets back up. A large brake with three brake bands housed at Cerro Gordo controlled the speed.

The tram had special buckets that could be switched on or off the cable at either end of the line for various services. One barrel like bucket carried heavy grease and oil. Another built with a chain and ratchet, carried the heavier pieces of equipment from the rail head.

Like its predecessor, the Leschen tram was known to have a few brave passengers that ventured to travel up the 5.5 miles from Keeler to Cerro Gordo in empty buckets. The first two miles of line progressed from tower to tower as straight as an arrow.

At the first ridge the tramway was away and across the sky, clanking along over 800 feet above the canyon in some places. The company had no problem with passengers on the ore buckets so long as they carried a canteen of water in case the cable stopped and they were stranded in the hot dry desert sun.

Around 1915 large shipments of slag from the old smelter dumps began. Between 1916 and 1919 nearly 33,000 tons of smelter slag was recovered. The slag dumps of the Belshaw, Beaudry, and Owens Lake Company smelters were almost entirely removed during this time period.

Photos L.D.Gordon Archives:

L. D. Gordon pushes off a loaded ore bucket

A wooden barrel hangs on a tram carrier
near the terminus at Cerro Gordo

A similar carrier is used to transport
bundled goods at the
Keeler end of the tramway

The Leschen tram's terminus at the
Southern Pacific rails in Keeler with the old
Four Metals Smelter can bee seen in the distance.

Part 3

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At the 900 foot level of the Jefferson chimney and dike in the Union Mine new deposits of ore were discovered and 8,022 tons of lead and 750,000 ounces of silver were produced between 1911 and 1919.

Electricity via the Southern Sierras Power Company arrived to Cerro Gordo in January of 1916, replacing the steam power that operated the hoist in the Belshaw shaft and the tramway machinery.

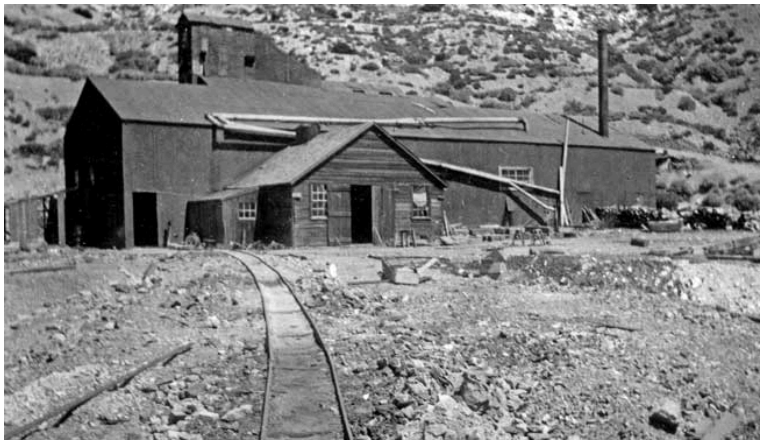
A Joshua Hendy 100 horsepower electric hoist, an Ingersoll-Rand Imperial Type 10 compressor, and a 150 horse power constant speed motor were installed. In case of power failure, the old Westinghouse Church and Kerr steam plant was still maintained.

Although Cerro Gordo was thriving once again, the success was not as great as it was during the glory days of Mortimer Belshaw and Victor Beaudry. The Cerro Gordo Mines Company and others constantly searched for new ore locations.

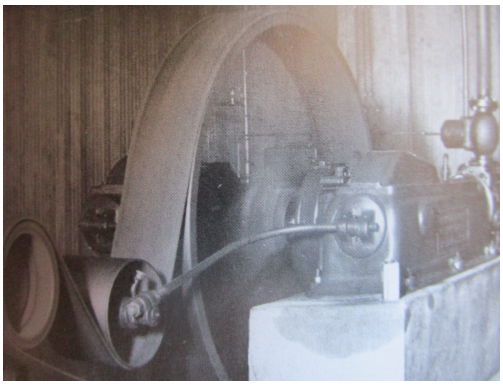
Over $6,000,000 of ore was shipped off the mountain from 1914-1918, making Cerro Gordo the largest producer of lead and second largest producer of zinc in California. The boom of the zinc era could be heard in the East by big money men who definitely liked what they saw.

By the close of World War I, Gordon was squeezed out by others who wanted to gain control of his operations. He eventually gave up the fight and allowed the American Smelting and Refining Company to gain control of Cerro Gordo Mines.

One hundred years later, the house that Gordon commissioned for his wife and son to live in during his reign on the hill, still stands, as does the bunk house where his workers slept. Scattered amongst wooden buildings from the bustling late 1860's and 70's, a few tin buildings remain as testament to the zinc era. Remnants of the tramway struggle to survive at the base of the tailings. Beyond the tailings, hidden from the town view, the recently restored Union Mine Hoist House gleams in the sun. The wind whistling through the dusty streets of the old camp now gone to the ghosts whispers the sounds of a bygone time. A caretaker and a hand full of volunteers struggle to keep the buildings and histories alive for a new millennium.

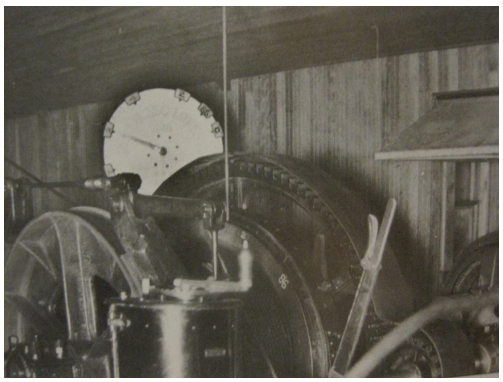


Tracks lead from the hoist house which houses the Belshaw shaft that extends 900 feet into the ground. The original structure was built during the silver and lead mining days of the 1870's as seen in this picture, before the Gordon expansion.



The air compressor manufactured by Intgersoll-Rand in operation around 1915 Compressor pumped air to power rock drills small hoists, and pumps underground. Because they discharged only air and some oil, pneumatic equipment was favored for underground work. The compressor provided air at high volumes and relative low pressures. Ventilation in the mines was handled by natural drafting and supplemented by fans and duct work.

A worker poses next to an electrical switch panel inside the hoist house. This panel operated at 440 volts AC and controlled equipment above and below the mine.



The hoist operator services the hoist's electric motor. The depth gauge reads "Cerro Gordo Mines 1915." The hoist operator was a highly responsible position, as the hoist lifted and lowered men and equipment in an elevator in the mine. A hoist accident or failure would shut down production and sometimes inure or kill miners.