

The Irish Harlot Of Cerro Gordo

By The Friends of Cerro Gordo

Part 1 - The Fenian

The bad girls of the thriving 1870's silver mining town of Cerro Gordo primarily worked for Lola Travis or Maggie Moore at the Palace of Pleasure or the Waterfall at opposite ends of town, but a few chose to set up shop on their own and sell their wares to lonely men searching for companionship and carnal knowledge. May Merritt, a blue eyed Irish lass, was one of these women. She called herself "The Fenian", after fraternal organizations dedicated to the establishment of an independent Irish Republic in her homeland known as the Irish Republican Brotherhood.

May Merritt was known as a big hearted woman who was noted for charitable acts to those in sickness and financial distress; but it was her penchant for whiskey and her voracious temper that earned her celebratory fame in Lone Pine and Los Angeles, as well as Cerro Gordo. Her name frequently appeared in newspaper headlines. During the election year of 1872, during the absence of the Inyo Independent newspaper's editor, Merritt's status rose to new levels, when the printer's devil took liberties and declared at the top of the editorial page: "FOR VICE PRESIDENT, THE FENIAN OF LONE PINE."

The Fenian travelled with a big black dog, perhaps to stand by her side and offer extra protection when her drinking and her fists got her into trouble. In Los Angeles on a visit, she beat up a man for calling her an Irish bitch, broke an Italian boy's harp when he refused to honor her request to play an Irish song for her, and subsequently landed in jail. Merritt was not to be held captive for long, however, and managed to escape from jail. She was allowed to leave town with the promise she would never return.

Dance halls were lively places in Cerro Gordo, where fights were common occurrences. One night Dr. Hugh K. McClelland decided to pay a visit to one, where he usually only went when someone was shot or cut-up. This particular night he was fascinated by a fiery Mexican girl. A young man equally enamored by her more than lively stunts on the dance floor stood beside the doctor and asked him if he knew the girl's name. As soon as McClelland replied "The Horned Toad", she drew a stiletto ready to plunge into him.

Photo by Robert C.. Likes shows what we believe to be the cribs of Lola's Palace of Pleasure and her Dance Hall above. The remains of two of the cribs struggle to survive today. The building above is long gone.

Part II - Jail Time

The Fenian travelled with a big black dog, perhaps to stand by her side and offer extra protection when her drinking and her fists got her into trouble. In Los Angeles on a visit, she beat up a man for calling her an Irish bitch, broke an Italian boy's harp when he refused to honor her request to play an Irish song for her, and subsequently landed in jail. Merritt was not to be held captive for long, however, and managed to escape from jail. She was allowed to leave town with the promise she would never return.

The quick thinking Fenian was nearby and grabbed her wrist, thwarting the attempt at harm. A Mexican friend of the Horned Toad darted out with a knife in his hand, and the doctor prepared for the

inevitable, when a shot rang out from the revolver of a prominent Cerro Gordo mining man by the name of George Snow, killing the Mexican and saving the doctor's life. Turmoil broke out as the hall filled with more shots, and gunpowder smoke as the lights dimmed.

Commotion and pandemonium seemed to follow May Merritt. One star lit night she was overly loaded with whiskey as she strolled along the steep hillside paths of one of Cerro Gordo's cabin lined streets with roofs terraced close to each other. Her foot slipped in the rocky soil and she fell through the roof of one shack full of ten or twelve Chinese men playing a game of tan. She landed on the center of the table where they were playing and all hell broke lose. One frightened man hurried out the exit and fell over an embankment breaking his leg.

In September of 1872, the Inyo Independent reported that May Merritt was lying very low in Lone Pine with small prospects of recovery after attempting suicide by poison. She apparently survived to create more headlines, eventually dying ten years later in the then faded silver town. Her burial service was recorded as an impressive one, conducted by Hon. S. D. Woods. The cemetery on the mountaintop still sits overlooking town, but all graves are lost to time, weather and vandals in modern centuries. It is unknown if The Fenian's was among them, but her stories remain as testament to the rough and tumble life of the Irish harlot of Cerro Gordo

Most of the graves in Cerro Gordo's cemetery have been lost to time, weathering and vandalism. Burial records were destroyed in a fire at the Inyo County Courthouse. The Fenian may be among the more than 300 people believed buried in the hillside cemetery above the ghost town. Picture of grave marker remnants as it looks today.

Part 3 - Turmoil in the Dance Hall

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This image taken in the late 1960's or early 1970's shows a building (upper right) that may have been one of Cerro Gordo's dance halls. The building below it in the center of the photo may have housed prostitutes' "cribs." Robert C. Likes collection

Part 4 - Drunk Walk

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Photo: The graves in the cemetery have succumbed to vandalism and the elements over time. Records were kept in the Inyo County courthouse in Independence, but destroyed by a fire long ago.