

# **The Women of Cerro Gordo**

by Friends of Cerro Gordo

## **Part 1 - An Abstract Look at the Women of Cerro Gordo**

The population of the little silver mining camp of Cerro Gordo, in the Inyo Mountains towering above Owens Lake was predominately men in the early days as these places were prone to be. But there were needs to be met, and women the likes of Lola Travis, and Maggie Moore, soon traversed up the steep and winding dirt road to set up shop and sell their wares. Lola's Palace of Pleasure and Madame Maggie's Waterfall helped to quench the thirst of the lonely miners in more ways than one. Mud Hen, Horned Toad, Featherlegs, and the Fenian were just a few of the girls that worked at these places where fun, frolic, and fights helped earn the Fat Hill its place in Inyo County headlines as a "man for breakfast" kind of town.

## **Part 2 – Keeping House in Cerro Gordo**

A few of the men brought the women in their lives to camp with them. By 1870 the Inyo County Federal Census for Cerro Gordo Township No. 5 shows that out of 471 recorded residents, the total female population was 58, ranging in age from two to 56 years. Out of thirty six women age 18 and over, twenty two were Mexican, twelve were white. Fifteen females of Hispanic/Indian descent were under the age of 17, and of white descent there were nine. All women age 18 and over listed their occupation as "keeping house", the politically correct term of the day for a domestic engineer, or housewife.

Five households on the census were obviously run by females with no adult males of the same last name listed near theirs. Of those households where adult males were obviously present, be they father, grandfather, uncle, brother, or son, 19 of the males listed their occupation as miners. There were two households listed with males working as farmers, one as farming agent, one mining superintendent, one mining agent, one furnace manager, one assayer, two teamsters, two mule packers, one hotel keeper and one butcher.

One lone female, Anna Payson, age 11, recorded her occupation as "keeping house" just as the women nearly twice her age and more. Next to her name on the list, 48 year old Lewis Payson, more than likely her father or grandfather, recorded his name, listing his occupation as a teamster.

## **Part 3 – Transient Populations**

Both male and female populations in mining camps and towns were traditionally transient, moving from one place to another depending on how much ore was being pulled out and how much money was to be made from it. A look at the census in neighboring Owens Valley communities show that some of the familiar names from Cerro Gordo had listed their residency there instead of on the mountain. For modern travelers complaining about the difficulty to get to the ghost of this silver camp, in their cushy sports utility vehicles, this may be hard to imagine. However it was quite common for even the teenagers of the day to hop on a freight or brewery wagon and head into Lone Pine for a celebration, as is evident from stories told by Mrs. J. S. Gorman, in her tales recorded in 1930's editions of Inyo Newspapers

While it's doubtful mining mogul Mortimer Belshaw commuted on a day to day basis from his recorded residence, in the 1870 census of Bishop Creek Township No. 4, it certainly is conceivable that he would spend a few days here and there depending on where his business took him. As a side note, it's interesting that Mr. Belshaw's wife and children are not listed on the census with him. However, on the mountain, a relative, John Belshaw and his wife Lizzie retained residence, John's occupation listed as mining superintendent, and Lizzie of course, as "keeping house" like the rest of the female population of Cerro Gordo.

#### **Part 4 – The Silver Queen of Cerro Gordo**

The woman known as Simons was also called the Silver Queen of Cerro Gordo. She traveled through barren Death Valley with her two sons and daughter inside the empty water barrels of the freight wagon that she drove herself. She was on her way to meet her first husband, Mr. Ryan, a miner who had set out ahead of her with a train of burros on the way to Cerro Gordo. In her later years, Father John Crowley met up with her at the Estelle mine, where she lived with her daughter Marie and a man named Henry in an isolated cabin at 8,000 feet near Cerro Gordo. The padre of the desert described her as a woman who had proved her ability to shoot straight and her willingness to sit up all night with a rifle across her knees to defend the water springs and mines that she owned.

Fortunately for Cerro Gordo's zinc magnate, Louis D. Gordon, Simons only resorted to sending him a court order that read simply:

You sir, turn over 50 gallons of water per day to this poor woman and make it snappy."

In response, Mr. Gordon sent a telegram to his superintendent, J. C. Climo, that read:

March 9, 1907 - Restraining order is as Marby states. Furnish specified amount of water tomorrow and Sunday and wire me fully exact condition Saturday night and injury done to us by furnishing specified amount of water. Use Bedford McNeil Code.

#### **Part 5 – Three Lone Women on the Mountaintop**

It was the fourth year of their marriage, and Walter and Mary Scheld were living in Bishop, California, wondering where their next pay check would be coming from. The newspaper arrived with an ad for blacksmiths up at the Cerro Gordo Mines. It was pretty isolated on the Cerro Gordo mountaintop, and Walter, better known as Bud, probably hesitated at first. Mary looked at him and encouraged, "It'll only cost you two cents to find out about the job - two cents postage." This was January of 1926.

The job was easy for Bud. All he had to do was sharpen the drills that the miners were using to break through the hard rock. He'd sharpen those drills until there were no more to sharpen that day, then he'd find some place to take a nap. Meantime, his wife, Mary, did the best she could living in a three room house on the mountain with her husband.

The mountain was long past the heydays of men like Mortimer Belshaw & Victor Beaudry. Even the Gordon zinc era was playing out. Approximately 20 miners remained trying to pull out what they could and make it worth their while. In addition to the miners there were only two women besides Mary. The superintendent's wife ran the kitchen in the old American Hotel, which struggled to survive.

To help pass time and make a little pocket money at the same time, Mary helped her in the kitchen and in the dining room. A third woman, whom Mary would recall sixty years later as Mrs. Wheatley, “didn’t do anything but have a baby.”

The population wasn’t roaring in Cerro Gordo, but modern convenience had arrived. Coal was used to heat and cook. Electricity provided lights and radio. Everyone hung on edge as they listened to the Dempsey-Tunney fight and placed bets on it. Wasn’t much else to do in those days--the dance halls of Lola Travis and Maggie Moore were long gone. Even the big pool hall in front of the tiny Scheld residence was pretty much left to the ghosts, with the tables standing minus their felt tops.

Water was always a luxury in the high desert climate of Cerro Gordo, even during more modern times. During the Scheld’s 19-month stay, they were fortunate to get water piped from the spring around the hill in town, then brought indoors by bucket. Indoor plumbing was nonexistent of course. Women were known for using too much water, so Mary, and the other two women probably felt lucky, yet guilty to be allowed on the mountain.

Food and other supplies came from the hamlet of Keeler on the shores of Owens Lake far below town. When Mary needed something, she would just write her shopping list on a piece of paper and put it on one of the ore tram buckets. The next day everything that she needed would arrive on the mountain the way the note had gone down.

During the summer, Mary’s sister would come up and stay with her. When they got bored, they would head into Lone Pine to watch a movie. After one movie day, a storm hit and it was raining so hard they couldn’t get back up the dirt road to the mines.



In August of 1927 the owners of the banks in the Owens Valley, The Watterson brothers, were put in jail when their books were examined and came up short. The banks and the Cerro Gordo Mines were closed down. Bud, out of a job once again, headed back to Bishop with his wife, Mary. They moved to Merced within a month.

Sixty years later, the Inyo Register interviewed Mary Scheld and her sister Freda Tockey. Mary was 83 years old and happy to reminisce about her time as one of the three women on the mountaintop. “At one time there were thousands of people living there,” Mary replied. “I wasn’t very history minded when I was there. I was trying to get ahead.”

“There was no place to spend the money you made,” Freda Tockey told her sister, “except for Lone Pine.”

Mary and Freda are just of the few of the women of Cerro Gordo who left their mark on the town.

## Part 6 – Beyond the Zinc Era

In 1948 a woman named Barbara got in her brand new Chevrolet still heated from a fight with her assistant director husband. Barbara was a script girl for RKO movie studios, but had roots in the Owens Valley. She found herself headed up to Lee Flat, just over the saddle from the faded ghost of the Cerro Gordo Mines, on the Death Valley side of the Inyos. It was very dark and very remote, and she wasn't sure where she was. She waited until morning and found a ramshackle cow camp. Rough and tumble Wally Willson opened the door when she knocked, and they fell in love immediately. Barbara divorced her Hollywood husband and moved into the cow camp with Wally.

In 1949, he was approached by the last corporate owners of the Cerro Gordo mines. Wally and Barbara found themselves caretakers, and eventually owners, when mine owner W. C. Riggs had to declare bankruptcy. Wally eventually died and Barbara married Fred Coman. When he died eight years later, she married Jack Smith.

Keeping up an abandoned mining camp is difficult financially at best. By 1973 Barbara and Jack were in need of money. Jack remembered his niece Jody who was doing a little work in Hollywood on some projects like the old Password game show. Jody drove up the steep and winding Yellow Grade road to Cerro Gordo. She was in her fancy sports car, wearing high heels and fancy clothes. Uncle Jack gave her a tour, and she soon found herself saying that she would be glad to become a part owner of Cerro Gordo.

By 1984, Barbara Smith had been off of the mountain for about four years. The ghost town of Cerro Gordo was in a terrible state of disrepair. Jody remembered her roots in the Inyo County, and going to school in Big Pine High School. She realized that this little mining town was her opportunity to give back to the county that had given her a good start on life. Jody Stewart moved on the mountain. Together with Mike Patterson, whom she later married, they restored what buildings they could and opened the town up for visitors day and overnight.

Jody talks to Cerro Gordo visitors

Jody died in December 2001, leaving Mike Patterson alone on the mountain. Jody's spirit, and that of all the other women of Cerro Gordo continues on in the life of the many modern women who volunteer their blood, sweat, and tears, and the stories of the pioneers that came before them so their daughters, and their sons can glimpse into a time nearly forgotten.

### **Lola Travis**

Before setting up her house of ill repute in Cerro Gordo, Lola Travis had settled in Lone Pine with her three children and her brother. She bought property on the corner of Water and Main Street and built a saloon. This was in 1868. She kept half of the property for two years, then sold the other half to a French merchant named Charles Meysan. Meysan was a respectable family man whom she had met in the gold camp of Columbia. He served as county and school supervisor. His general store stood next to Lola's saloon, and the two maintained a good business relationship during Lola's time in Lone Pine. In the early 1880's, Lola sold the saloon, which operated as Richards Saloon for several years before it was eventually torn down. Lola's saloon is long gone and a craft store. The Meysan store is occupied by La Florista's flower shop. This photograph shows the Meysan store at the right, and Lola's former saloon at the left...taken in 1886. Dick Richards



operated the saloon after Lola sold it, and stands in front of it. Charles Meysan is at the far right on the porch of his general store. Thanks to Robin Flinchum and the Eastern California Museum for information and picture.

In the year 1837 or 1838 Delores ‘Lola’ Treviso was born in Chihuahua, Mexico. In an effort to escape extreme poverty, at age 13, Lola traveled to the Sonora, California mining camps with her two small brothers – Florentino, age 4 and Martin, age 3. She placed the boys in the care of a young mother at one of the boarding houses and took her first job in a Fandango Hall. She married a man named Granillo in 1850 and had three children. However, Granillo died when the children were very young.

In 1867 Lola moved her family to Inyo County. Florentino took up prospecting in the Cerro Gordo region. Lola purchased property in Lone Pine at the corner of Water and Main Streets, just south of the Meysan Store, and established a saloon. She also bought a lot with a small house for her family, away from the main street. Another daughter, fathered by George Snow, was born. Though never married, Lola and George had a business deal. He bought property in Cerro Gordo at the upper end of the town near the entrance to the big mine. It was on this property that Lola established her own Fandango Hall.

There were other Hispanic business women in Cerro Gordo at this same time. Petra Romero operated a brothel called Waterfall’s. Mary Morales operated a saloon across the street from both Lola’s and Petra’s brothels and Brigida Mojardin owned a restaurant next to Morales’ saloon.

Lola became quite wealthy. In 1871 she purchased the Cerro Gordo property and the building from Snow for \$50 in gold. She personally traveled to Independence to register the sale at the courthouse. She also purchased mules for \$450 and had their brands registered with county. Every year Lola traveled to Independence to pay her taxes.

By 1873 her widowed mother and younger siblings arrived from Chihuahua swelling the family in already tight living quarters. Lola was harsh and short tempered with her family to the point of violence with any transgressions of her rules. She was also determined that all her children would have an education.

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She continued to expand her business in 1874 when she purchased a lot in Panamint City and opened a brothel. As Panamint City began to fade in 1875, Lola purchased a lot in Darwin for \$150.

There was a tremendous fire in Cerro Gordo in 1880. It started in the Waterfall’s and rapidly spread up the street torching every building in its path including Lola’s Fandango Hall. Her domain



disappeared along with her wealth. She remained in Lone Pine and in April of 1880 Lola, at age 44, married Refugio Moreno, age 23. Two years later, Pablita age 14, was the only child remaining at home. Lola decided that the girl was old enough to be on her own. She sold her house and saloon in Lone Pine, left her useless husband and moved to Mojave, then a booming railroad town.

It was in Mojave in 1884 that Lola met Thomas Cronin, age 31, and a supervisor with the Southern Pacific Railroad. In August of that same year Mojave burned to the ground. Lola again relocated, this time to Tehachapi where she once again met up with Thomas Cronin. Lola and Thomas were married in 1890. Thomas tolerated her temper and occasional wrath. As well, he offered Lola something she never could achieve on her own - respectability. They moved from the ranch in Cummings Valley in 1911 to a house on Fremont Street in Bakersfield.

On November 13, 1912, Lola died at age 75. Thomas lived until 1917. They are both buried at the Union Cemetery in Bakersfield.

### **Emma Louise Duval Spear**

Though her family name was transcribed wrong in the 1870 Cerro Gordo census, it's obvious that three year old Emma "Duvel", is Emma Louise Duval Spear. Her father, Charles, moved his family to a high point projected into an Inyo canyon known as Duval Springs northwest of Cerro Gordo when the great Lone Pine earthquake of 1872 hit. They stayed there for several days while the tremors continued on.

Emma and her siblings would put their ears to the ground and listen to a grumbling Mother Nature. On the solid rock mountain they, and the communities that made up Cerro Gordo, were spared the devastation of sandy soiled Owens Valley. Short biographies of Emma Duval, report that her father Charles was responsible for bringing water into the thirsty mining camp that was now boasting a population of over 3,800. The Duval's retained a home in Lone Pine, apparently, but spent a great deal of time at the springs, as well, so it was natural that they would head up there for safety after the worst of the earthquake was over.



Little Emma grew up to be a fine Christian woman, so active within the church down in Lone Pine, she was known as a home missionary. Two years after the earthquake, still a young child, she met Reuben Cook Spear. By 1888 she was his wife. "Reub", was noted for his mine dealings between Owens Valley and Bullfrog, Nevada. He and his brothers also had interests in the nearly fading camp of Cerro Gordo, as it rose again during the Louis D. Gordon Zinc era.