

Cerro Gordon Mining in the 1900s

by Friends of Cerro Gordo

Part 1

From the mid to late 1800's, Cerro Gordo was a lively silver boom town, controlled by a savvy French Canadian merchant named Victor Beaudry, & Mortimer Belshaw, a well educated son of Irish emigrants who just happened to have a background in both engineering and silver mining. Evidence of their reign over the old Fat Hill which sits in the shadow of Cerro Gordo Peak, is apparent everywhere you go when you visit the privately owned ghost town today. As you come up the Yellow Grade Road, the stone chimney remains of Beaudry's smelter, the restored 1871 American Hotel, the tin general store/museum, the red wood painted Mortimer Belshaw House and worn wooden remnants of the assayer's office next to Lola's Palace of Pleasure, as well as assorted other tin and wooden buildings, stand as testament to these two bullion kings.

Set back from the main street, but prominent nonetheless, the large two story wooden shingled house lovingly restored by the late Jody Stewart & her husband Mike Patterson, stands. At first glance, this home, looks out of place, until one realizes that it was the home of Louis D. Gordon, who was primarily responsible for the zinc boom in the early 1900's. The broken down "tramway to nowhere" that stands in the distance amongst the piles of rock tailings, also serves to remind us of this resurgence of mining in Cerro Gordo. Above the tailings, hidden from the main view of town, the Union Mine hoist house shows evidence of both eras.

Great Western Ore & Reduction Company

The Great Western Ore and Reduction Company took over the mines as the silver on the hill played out. In 1906, local teamsters were contracted to freight low grade silver ore from the dumps to the smelter which was being built at Keeler. Sixty head of animals came up and down the Yellow Grade Road from Keeler to Cerro Gordo regularly. Pat Clinton was in charge of the mines.

A steam traction engine was built in the spring of 1906, making it's first successful trip to Cerro Gordo in June of that same year. A month later the three-wheeled engine was hauling four wagons of ore a day down from the old Fat Hill. Unfortunately, the ore wagons pulled by the engine could not carry the heavy loads at the increased speeds, and the steam traction engine was soon put out of commission.

Throughout the summer, wagons of ore continued to be delivered to the smelter in Keeler. By September 22, 1906, the Inyo Independent announced, "The Great Western Ore and Reduction Company blew in their smelter last Tuesday and everything is working smoothly and bids fair to be a great success. This will mean a great deal to the mining industry of Cerro Gordo district. Owners of small mines can now get out their ore. This community will rejoice in the abundant success of this smelter company."

Transporting ore from Cerro Gordo to the smelter in Keeler proved to be costly and ineffective, however. A good team took four hours to make the round trip up and down the mountain. When the steam traction engine was operating, the time was cut down to two hours, but the flow of ore was not sufficient to support the smelter operation. As more teams and wagons were added to increase the volume, costs increased as well. Profits were marginal. By the summer of 1907 the Great Western Ore and Reduction Company was playing out.

In August of 1907, the manager of the Great Western Company, with the help of a German Scientist, found high grade zinc ore in the old underground workings of the Union Mine, and in new areas as well. Attempts to market the zinc failed when the company lost \$800 shipping small amounts by rail to Salt Lake City.

Part 2

Four Metals Company Smelter & Tramway

By the fall of 1907, the Four Metals Company acquired the Great Western Ore and Reduction Company's holdings in Cerro Gordo and Keeler. A 200 ton smelter was erected east of Keeler. The first aerial tramway to Cerro Gordo was built as well, connecting the smelter to the mines with a capacity of 50 tons a day. Although the tramway had many breakdowns, it was a great improvement over both the wagons and the steam traction engine for ore transportation.

Surveying for the tramway actually began in 1908. That June four railroad cars arrived at Keeler with lumber for the tramway. One hundred men were employed to build the tram, which actually began service in the spring of 1909. The Four Metals Company Smelter had already been put into operation a few months before in December of 1908.

Three work shifts took place each day to operate the Four Metals Company Smelter, with 20 men working each shift. One hundred and twenty tons of silver ore was processed every 24 hours. This ore was extracted from new discoveries made by the previous mine owners below the 900 foot level of the Union Mine.

Below the 1000 foot level of the Union Mine, the Four Metals Company general manager, E. McGrath, reported uncovering high grade ore in 1909. By September, all ore bins at the smelter were full, and 250 tons of ore had to be dumped on the ground. One thousand tons of high grade ore from the Union dump was transported by the aerial tramway from Cerro Gordo. By October 15, 1909, the Inyo Independent reported that the Four Metals Company shipped 12 carloads of bullion and expected to have 6 more carloads ready to ship before closing.

In 1910, as new deposits of ore continued to be worked, the Four Metals Company reached the 1,100 foot level in the spring. The ore body was not as great as they had earlier believed, and the company began experiencing financial problems.

The picture below is from the Louis D. Gordon era and taken at the Keeler terminal. In the distance you can faintly see the Four Metals Smelter. The remains of the smelter can be seen as you begin the dirt road to Cerro Gordo today, and is worth a stop to explore.

Part 3

Louis D. Gordon & the Great Zinc Era

That same year of 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.

Part 4

The Last of the Silver

In 1905 the Troeger Brothers purchased the most southern mine on the mountain, The Morning Star Claim. Silver prices were at its worst during this time, and the Morning Star was acquired for all of \$50. The Estelle Mining Company bought the Morning Star two years later. It was active on and off but had no record of production until 1920. Two tunnels, one 200 feet above the other, exposed silver ore 4,600 feet south of Cerro Gordo. The upper tunnel extended 1,670 feet into the mountain. Three fissures of ore were developed, one of which contained higher gold content than expected. Ore shipments were valued at \$107,145.

In Keeler Canyon, 1.5 miles southwest of Cerro Gordo and 1,078 feet below the 1,100 level Belshaw shaft, was the lowest level of mining. The Estelle tunnel was driven 8,100 feet here, through nearly half of the upper Inyo Mountain Range. This was done to explore the continuation of the Morning Star Vein and to look for the downward extension of the Jefferson Chimney, as well as other Union Mine channels of ore. The Estelle was started in 1908, and reached its present length in 1923. 7,676 feet from the portal, the Estelle tunnel cut through a vein of silver. Drifts were driven over 300 feet to follow the vein. Upper level workings connected to the Estelle by a 800 foot raise. At 600 feet above the Estelle, another 2,200 foot tunnel was driven northwest toward the Union Mine. Apparently, the tunnel never found the ore bodies, nor did it reach the Union Mine workings. Following 15 years of digging through 10,300 feet of rock, the Estelle produced 2,700 tons of silver ore at a value of \$80,000.

The railroad rates restricted shipping low-grade silver ore from Cerro Gordo. Several areas of small quartz fissures could supply ore for milling, and the old mine dumps & the fills of the old stopes of the bonanza period contained large quantities of second class ore. Floatation tests on these ores suggested

that recovery could be made by treating the lead carbonate ore with a sulphidizing treatment before flotation. Therefore a small mill was constructed with a capacity of 50 tons of ore per day. This was placed adjacent to the ore bins of the lower terminal of the tramway. By August of 1921 the mill was producing 590 tons of "shipping ore" and 273 tons of concentrate by 1922. As 1922 came to a close, the Cerro Gordo Mines had a deficit of \$414,448, and by January of 1923 the mill was closed. In February, the mine property and mill were leased to the Natural Soda Products Company in Keeler and reported treating silver ore on through 1924.

1920-1949

During the 1920's limestone was mined through the Union tunnel. 80 tons of limestone a day went from the tramway to bunkers at Keeler where it was then loaded on railroad cars and sent to the Natural Soda Products Plant just a few miles south. The limestone helped to pay the bills, but it was the silver lead ore of the La Despreciada claim of 1925 kept Cerro Gordo from completely going under during this time.

In June 1929, when the Cerro Gordo Mines was under lease to the American Smelting and Refining Company, new silver deposits were being produced. Between 1929 and 1933 10,000 tons of ore was shipped to the Selby Smelting and Lead Company. This ore averaged 41 percent lead and 29 ounces of silver ton, and had a gross value of \$305,630. This was the last of the important silver ore discoveries at Cerro Gordo.

From 1933 on various companies leased from the Cerro Gordo Mines, exploring the Union mine. No important ore shipments were made, except for 1,432 tons of zinc ore by the Estelle Mines Corporation between 1933 & 1936. In 1944, the Goldfields of South Africa leased the property, to find small fissures of galena at the 900 foot level, but large ore deposits were not located and the search was discontinued.

In 1949, W. C. Riggs and Associates bought the Cerro Gordo Mines. They had leased the mines the three previous years. 44 patented claims that covered an area of 550 acres, including the ruins of the abandoned town of Cerro Gordo, and an estimating underground workings of 30 miles, were included in the sale. Drillings of 1,170 feet of core between the 200 and 550 foot levels of the Union mine proved to be unsuccessful, and the mines closed one last time.

At the bottom of the Yellow Grade Road, just to the east, the remains of the Four Metals Company Smelter still stand today. One can climb over the rock and brick walls, stand in arches, and peer through openings of the furnaces to view the town of Keeler, Owens Dry Lake and the Sierra Nevada in the distance, while pondering the great processes, that it took to smelt the ore.