

# Letter 10

May 9 - 11, 1878  
CERRO GORDO, CALIFORNIA



Dear Carrie,

I did it! I went out this morning with one of the freighters hauling a load of supplies for Mr. Meysan to Cerro Gordo. He had to be talked into it, as he tried to impress upon me what a very rough ride it would be and that the town is far less than comfortable. But he finally relented, trusting explicitly his skilled freighter. Mr. Johns is a tall lean man about thirty years of age, whose wife just had a little boy after three girls. Whenever children are mentioned, a grin flashes across his face, exposing yellow teeth only a shade lighter than his blond brush of a mustache.

When I first told Mrs. K where I was going, she thought I was making a joke. But as soon as she saw my face in response to her bark of laughter, she became absolutely dour. What followed was a lecture on the proper behavior for a young woman of my circumstance, emphasizing that it did not include "hieing off to a mining camp on top of a mountain!"

When she saw that argument had no power to sway me, she then tried to describe the long harrowing Yellow Grade. However, never having actually been up this road herself, she could go into little detail. Using this fact, I persuaded her that the difficulty of its travel may have been exaggerated in the telling. Finally relenting, she sighed loudly and threw up her hands in resignation. (Not that I was asking her permission, although she seemed to think so.)

Before starting out this morning, Mr. Meysan instructed Mr. Johns to be sure I spent the night at the American House Hotel in a private room and not the dormitory. He twice reminded Mr. Johns to start back early enough the next day to be home before dark.

We headed out in the very early hours in the smaller of Mr. Meysan's wagons, but nevertheless carrying many barrels and sacks of provisions for two reclusive prospectors working a small claim a short way down from the town proper.

300 lbs. flour	2 doz. Boxes matches
100 lbs. bacon	20 lbs. dried fruit
2 gal. vinegar	10 lbs. rice
50 lbs. sugar	15 lbs. soap
40 lbs. beans	3 lbs. pepper
2 gal. pickles	6 lbs. tea
70 lbs. dried beef	4 lbs. cream of tarter
20 lbs. salt	2 lbs. soda

It was still cool when we started out, but as the sun rose so did the temperature. We passed Ferguson's Landing on the edge of the lake and headed toward the Inyo Mountains. Barren in the extreme, they are yet very striking in their shadings of blue, pink, tan and white.

We soon crossed the long expanse of the Turner Bridge over the Owens River as it flowed rapidly beneath us toward the lake. Just the other side, a wild burro grazed near the road, a common sight in that area. When it barred its teeth and brayed at us, we responded with laughter that silenced the beast. In that moment of levity, with the ten strong mules easily pulling the wagon forward, I ridiculed the idea that this trip was too strenuous for me.

Climbing slowly and steadily as we approached the hills, we covered just over three miles every hour, gradually veering to our right around the northeast portion of the lake. The Inyo Mountains were now very close to us on our left, with the ever-present blue waters of Owens Lake spreading toward the Sierra on our right.

We arrived in Swansea a few hours later, changing there to a fresh team of mules. Between the small rock station and our destination at the top of the mountain was a rutted winding road rising steeply up the mountain before disappearing into its rocky folds. It occurred to me then that maybe those who had described it had after all not been exaggerating its dangers.

Turning nervously toward my familiar Sierra for comfort, its large and ever-dominating presence seemed far away across the choppy waters of the lake. The briny breeze assailed my senses as I noted a few white-caps pocking its surface, and I wondered what it would be like to ride the Bessie Brady as it carries ore to freighters on the far shore at Cartago. Before this specially adapted craft, it took up to five days for the wagons to transport the heavy bullion around the lake.

In September of last year, mining practically came to a stop when a fire destroyed Col. Stevens' flume on the west shore, used to bring timber down from the Sierra. The fire also incinerated 64,000 feet of cut timber coming to the mines as fuel. And this only a month after the Union works burned, consuming the supports down to the 200 foot level in the Belshaw shaft. Such misfortune has contributed to the steady decline in the mines.



Col. Sherman Stevens' charcoal kilns on the western shore of Owens Lake.  
(Photo courtesy of Rich McCutchan)

The route up to Cerro Gordo started out an easy climb out of Swansea. But a few miles up the road into the yellow hills, our mules were straining against the breast straps of their harnesses. When not casting an anxious eye over the steep road ahead, I caught an occasional glimpse of the mountain's crest against a dark blue sky--and wished I could will myself there.

We slowly inched closer, traveling upwards through narrow passes between boulder piles and along the edges of roads gouged out of the earth and rock walls. Eventually I dared take my eyes from the steep and twisting road before us. To our left, thousands of feet below at the start of our climb was Owens Lake, so far away it was only a wide glistening depression in the desert floor. Many times the wagon bounced hard in deep ruts formed when the mud from winter snows dried and cracked beneath the baking heat of summer.

Mr. Johns suddenly dropped down onto the back of a big gray horse immediately in front of the wagon as we approached an especially sharp curve to the left. My heart constricted as the mules veered off the road onto a wide verge and headed straight for the steep drop-off! Just as I started to cry out and look for a place to jump,

the lead mules turned abruptly near the edge. Looking at Mr. Johns, I found him incredibly sanguine about the whole thing.

Then I realized that during such a maneuver, if the mules stay on the road, the wagon cannot. They walk around the curve through a wide clearing, allowing the wagon to follow the main curve of the road. Maybe I should have paid more attention in school to my math courses instead of admiring the boys, as then I might have realized sooner the principle of this. After that, I stilled my beating heart and decided to trust Mr. Johns.

The two animals in front of the wagon were both large horses, Mr. Johns riding the left one while directing the mules. He referred to this horse as "the wheeler", I assume because the others wheel around it as they make their turn. It was all performed as an intricate ballet with mules stepping over the chains that held them together just at the right time, and all of them performing their part perfectly. It was not the only time I was to watch this superb demonstration before we arrived, so sharp were many of the curves in the road.



Yellow Grade Road from Owens Valley to Cerro Gordo.  
(Photo courtesy of Ray DeLea)

Shortly before we reached the point where people used to pay a toll, the road was especially steep and I held onto the seat with all my strength. But only for a moment did I question my decision to make this trip.

Thankfully, we traveled a road deserted of any wheel traffic near us, with only two pack trains of mules and a few riders on horseback passing us as they headed down the hill. So Mr. Johns allowed us a few moments rest at a wide place in the road with the view to the south. From this upper portion of the grade, I had hoped to search the far regions south of Owens Lake toward the Coso Range to see something of the towns of Darwin, Ballarat, Skidoo, or Panament Springs. But other than more of the desert hills such as we were in, I only saw a small forest of Joshua trees scattered among creosote and saltbrush scrub. Dry hills tightly rolled together blocked anything of interest beyond our immediate position.



When a couple of miles from the town, a hard thumping echo reached our ears, Mr. Johns identifying it as the stamp mills where the ore is crushed. Once closer to the source of this repetitive jarring assault, the thump was joined by a sharp jarring dang. At first I instinctively recoiled and tensed, but the rhythm quickly became only a familiar background accompaniment to the ringing of the mules' hooves on the exposed rocks of the road.

We spent only a half hour unloading supplies for the reclusive miners at their diggings below the town. They offered only a grunted "Thanks" and a quick payment of coins. After helping Mr. Johns repack to balance the load, we headed up the mountain once again.



American Hotel  
(Photo courtesy of Ray DeLea)

Late in the afternoon we passed by the old toll gate at the narrows and shortly thereafter entered the famous Cerro Gordo mining camp. Everyone says the Union production is considerably slowed down, but large numbers of people moved about the hills and gullies with great purpose, whether on horseback, tugging on loaded mules, or on foot dodging the iron wheels of heavy wagons.

The town occupies a large saddle in a high mountain pass just at the base of Cerro Gordo and Buena Vista Peaks. On our right was the two story American Hotel with its narrow upstairs balcony over the front, surrounded by smaller wood, brick and stone buildings. The road before us that continued up the hill toward the

crest was edged with such buildings, along with a few canvas tents for the newly arrived.

"Be sure you're sparing with the water," Mr. Johns cautioned me, hollering above the din. "I'll be gone until morning, taking care of some things. So you stay dose to the hotel, okay?"

After assuring him I would be fine, I asked, "Poker?"

He grinned and said, "Whist!"

"Well, good luck."

And I was on my own in Cerro Gordo. Around me was barren desolation and dirt, and I am not sure which choked me most. There was within sight not one tree or large bush to lend even the illusion of shade, or block the ceaseless wind that unaccountably would drop to dead calm then suddenly charge up again to whip my skirts about my legs.

The sharp clang of the pounding stamps bounced off the canyon walls, adding their omnipresent racket to that of protesting mules and horses, freighters shouting and cracking whips, gun fire exploding from the far edges of the town, cur dogs barking and nipping at heels both human and animal, and several men screaming threats at each other not far from the hotel. Consequently, everyone on the streets talked just this side of a shout.

Most of the high life that once filled the streets and saloons has moved north to new excitements, so it was hard to stand there on the porch of the hotel and picture it as it had been a couple of years before, with 2,000 residents and 100 stamps crushing rock. It must have produced a lot of ore to support that much activity! But it

was also difficult to imagine the increased noise level such prosperity would have created, as that which was enveloping me at the moment was most disturbing!

The hillsides give evidence of many years of labor--shaft openings framed with worn timbers in need of replacing, piles of cast off tailings outside excavations, old abandoned equipment already weathering to rust in the harsh climate scattered among dry brush, and weeds growing unchecked up the sides of buildings.

The steep road through town leads eventually to the white rock of the sculpted Inyo crest, the substantial bulk of Cerro Gordo Peak the highest point in view. As though waiting to slide into the town, massive dumps of tailings slope down from a huge flat plateau carved out on the side of the mountain, the site of the famous Union Mine. Hovering just below in its shadow are the Santa Maria and Buena Vista runnels.

By the way, "tailings" are the crushed ore left over after milling, considered not quite valuable enough to warrant the work and expense it would take to reclaim it. These piles of tailings are scattered over the hillsides like ant colonies gone amuck, miniature landslides outside hundreds of large and small mines.

(May 11)

Home at last! And so very glad I had one night's dinner and rest at Cerro Gordo, even though it was very noisy in the American Hotel. But I had no idea then just how much energy would be needed the following day.

That night as darkness descended, I stood on the balcony of the hotel and watched the dry desolation disappear into a panorama of subtle grace. On the valley floor far below, the lingering silver shine of Owens Lake stretched between the dark silhouette of two near hills framing the approach to the town. Beyond the lake, the sky above the Sierra dissolved into an orange glow, casting that range into the role of a long black saw with its jagged teeth exposed.



Mortimer Belshaw's house in Cerro Gordo  
(Photo courtesy of Ray DeLea)

Small black bats danced across this orange glow, sucking up mosquitoes and other winged insects around me so efficiently that I was not bothered by even one bite. Darkness descended at last, seeming to intensify the music from the saloons and the laughter from the dining room below. The grubby aspect of the shacks on the hills disappeared and was replaced by the twinkle of lamp-light in their windows--and mirrored above in the millions of bright stars.

It sounded like a fun time on the floor beneath my tiny room, nestled between the front of the hotel and the large dormitory sleeping quarters. But I knew better than to go down there at night, as it would be stretching the bounds of propriety to the bursting point. My being in Cerro Gordo with no real purpose was already doing that, although I assured everyone that I had business to conduct on behalf of Mr. Meysan.

So that is what I did during an early breakfast with the owner of the hotel. He even paid half of what was owed, which I knew would make Mr. Meysan happy, being more than he expected. In exchange for giving me this payment, I listened to his tale of woe regarding the failing mines and the high cost of water that had to be hauled to the hill.

The meeting over, and still very early, I walked through the town while waiting for Mr. Johns to emerge and hitch up the team, hoping he was not too hung-over from the night before. The morning air felt more like a fall day than summer, but at least the previous evening's gusty winds were gone. I walked up the hill from the hotel, feeling the challenge of the extreme altitude and the steep incline of the road.

Light was glowing from the front room in Mr. Belshaw's house as I passed. The porch overhang, held up by strong posts, protected a pile of wood stacked and ready for the stove. It is a snug house of generous proportions compared with those scattered throughout the camp, having a large oval of glass set into the whitewashed front door. Unfortunately, the glass was covered on the inside by a lace curtain so the interior was obscured from my curious gaze.

Continuing my walk up the steep well-worn trail at the back of the town, I crested a hill and expected to be at the very top, able to peer down upon the other side to Death Valley. But there were only more hills and gullies to be navigated. Knowing it must be getting close to the time when Mr. Johns would be looking for me, I turned back toward the hotel.



Mortimer Belshaw

(Photo courtesy of Bob Likes)

My mind wandered idly as I made my way back down the steep rocky trail, occasionally stopping to catch my breath while looking up at mountains millions of years old. There were unusual smells in the air that morning among the pungent aroma of blooming yellow bushes and gray sage.

It was an eerie unusual scent carried on the wind from the huge piles of rock pulled from the earth to be crushed in search of ore; the smell of an ancient tomb, and secrets brought to the surface that were never intended to be shared. And yet here were hundreds of men hauling long-hidden wealth from the earth that has been its shroud for eons of time. For a brief fanciful moment, I saw the mine openings and dozens of trails slashed across the mountain as giant wounds upon something once alive and at peace, now silently withstanding the agony of this onslaught to its dignity.

This odd mood abruptly evaporated as I stepped around a group of rough dirty men, then a string of burdened mules and several heavily loaded wagons passing each other on the main road. I tried to ignore the noise and dust, but found it impossible.

Stopping again to catch my breath, I fell into conversation with a man who told me that if I had walked higher, I would have come to the Belshaw smelter on a flat spot only 150 feet wide. From that advantage he said one can see down to a valley spreading far to the east. He described an incredible terrain of rocky hills and deep canyons, miles of flat hard earth baked by temperatures hotter than anywhere else in the country, giant sand mounds that emerge with new contours from the breath of violent sand storms, and miles of oddly shaped vegetation. This is the feared Death Valley, named back in the '40's by pioneers who had barely survived their struggle to cross it. Imagining the scene, I felt a shudder run through me, but was nevertheless disappointed to be denied the view.

When I returned to the hotel, Mr. Johns was waiting for me on the porch, his greeting anxious and tense. As he took off his hat and hurried up to me, I felt immediately contrite and prepared to apologize for my tardiness. But he cut off my explanations.

"Miss Emily, a friend of mine here is in a really bad way," he blurted out. "Do you think you could take a look at him? Mr. Meysan said you used to help your doc where you come from."



"I wasn't his nurse," I clarified with a wail of anxiety. "I just helped with this and that. Mostly I just watched."

"But you must have learned something from that. Doc McClelland isn't here now and my friend is in desperate need."

He wiped his forehead with the back of his hand and licked at the blond straw of his mustache. "Mac's in really bad shape."

"Why don't we just take him back to town with us?" I suggested, desperately searching for an alternative.

"He's been refusing to leave the hill. Now, I don't think there's time to spare for that."

Mr. Meysan obviously had not been listening too carefully when I told him about helping your Cousin Ollie in his practice. However, figuring I most likely had more medical knowledge than any of these men, I decided to look at the man. Apprehension tightened my chest.



We entered a small grime-caked shack not far away, the only covering over the windows that of large worn out shirts of various hues. A weak miserable fire smoldered in a small black sheet iron stove. Mr. Johns informed me that the miner, Mr. MacDonald, had sustained a large gash in his forearm during a knife fight. Approaching the bearded man lying on a wooden platform covered only with a thin mat of straw, my first look at his sweaty white face told me he was in great pain. Removing the dirty bandage, I found the gash horribly infected, with redness and swelling surrounding an area of blackened ooze. And it was reeking a very disagreeable odor. Gangrene had set in.

It took all my will not to back away in horror. But when the poor man looked up at me with such terrible fear in his feverish eyes, I determined to save him if I could.

It occurred to me to wonder if the four men standing around him had simply not known what to do, or had not cared enough to give him any attention. My glance at them must have spoken volumes, because one of the more perceptive of them said, "We've done our best. We poured some whiskey on it."

God save the world from well-intentioned fools! Trying hard to suppress my irritation, I told him, "I suggest you start putting down his throat whatever whiskey you have left."

Turning to Mr. Johns, I made rapid requests. "I need a basin of hot water and strong soap, and a very sharp small knife. Build up the fire in the stove and get the tip of a poker as hot as you can. And I'll need cloths as clean as you can find. Maybe a recently laundered sheet from the hotel."

They all set to work to fulfill my requests, grateful I think to have something productive to do. Mr. MacDonald willingly gulped down the whiskey put to his lips, eager as he was to drown the pain. We all reassured him, each in our own way, but I was very thankful he had no idea how scared I was!

By the time the men had fulfilled their errands, the patient was as drunk as a bottle of cheap whiskey could get him without permanently putting him to sleep. The men stood around looking at me expectantly. I could delay no longer.

"Hold him down so he can't move," I ordered.

While Mr. Johns and the others put their weight on the terrified miner's legs and shoulders, I cut away as much of the putrid dead flesh as I could. Ignoring Mr. MacDonald's gasps and groans, I swabbed the wound with soap and water and then dried it as best I could with clean cloths, all the while breathing as shallowly as possible in the fetid air. Finally, gritting my teeth so hard my jaw ached, I forced myself to cauterize the wound, applying the glowing hot iron to the gaping raw flesh. To harden my heart to the man's screams, I kept repeating to myself that it was his own stupid drunken fault for getting into a knife fight. To everyone's relief, he quickly passed out. Consequences can be rough.

Before wrapping the wound in clean strips of sheeting, I dabbed the edges of the wound with whiskey. The men around me, now a little paler than before, murmured their approval and seemed reassured by the gesture.

"Load him in the wagon before he can wake up and argue," Mr. Johns told the men. "I'm taking him to the doctor in Lone Pine."

As I stood beside the wagon waiting to leave, my knees suddenly became weak and my brow clammy with dampness. To overcome this sense of aftershock, I occupied my thoughts with the image of Frank Eastman, wondering if he would really call upon me.

After arranging their friend in the back of the wagon on a tarp, the man's friends approached me hesitantly. Each one removed his hat, shook my hand and gave me a shy smile or respectful nod before walking quietly toward the saloon. Grinning without comment, Mr. Johns helped me up onto the thinly padded seat of the wagon.

The journey back to town was uneventful, although just as difficult to ride comfortably. But we moved faster this time, not only because it was downhill but we had an almost empty wagon. When Mr. MacDonald regained his senses, he started to bellow about leaving the hill, but he was too weak to make much of a fuss. Part of the time I sat with him, shielding his face from the sun and giving him sips of water.

After traveling eight hours to get home by dark, we left Mr. MacDonald with the doctor. Weary and dirty in the extreme, I nevertheless would not trade the experience for anything. And if Frank does call on me, what a grand adventure I will have to relate to him!



Mount Whitney from Lone Pine Webcam  
(Photo courtesy of Mt. Whitney Hikers Association)