

Cerro Gordo, California

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ALMOST AT THE very foot of towering Mount Whitney lies Owens Valley. Now mostly a blazing white expanse of salt deposits, the valley was once filled by a large lake, also called Owens. As the High Sierra borders the valley's western side, so does the Inyo range fringe the other border. Perched 9,000 feet high in the eastern barrier is the ghost town of Cerro Gordo, the "Fat Hill" of Mexican miners.



For a couple of years after good deposits of lead and silver had been discovered at the lofty site, too much "manana" caused nothing much to happen. Then Mortimer Belshaw took over and the camp boomed. Belshaw had a good engineering background and knew how to get heavy machinery to the location, even though block and tackle were necessary to hoist it up there.

At the same time a "road" was built, a narrow, twisting trail, made up of sudden switchbacks climbing 5,000 feet in less than eight miles. As long mule trains hauled supplies up and ore down, trips were prearranged so that one would not meet another. In later years an aerial tramway was built to the mines to transport ore in large buckets along cables which hung like spider webs between crags.

By the end of 1868 Belshaw was shipping silver-lead bars at a fantastic rate. The bars were shaped like long loaves of bread, each weighing 85 pounds. After arrival at the bottom of the grades, the bars were unloaded and transported to Cartago aboard the Bessie Brady, one of two stern-wheelers plying Owens Lake. There they were loaded on wagons for the trip across the Mojave desert and over the Tehachapis to San Pedro. Last stage was the ocean voyage to San Francisco where in a specially designed and built refinery, silver was separated from lead and sent to the mint. Lead went to shot-towers.

Cerro Gordo was famed for more than her silver. The red-light "section" infiltrated every part of town. The most imposing bordello was grandly titled "Waterfall, Gilded House of Pleasure." It still stands -- the two story structure left of upper center in the photo. Only a little more circumspect was the American Hotel, also still standing, and seen at the lower right, with the portico in front. The hotel offered only one bath and a placard on the wall exhorted patrons to be sparing with water. This was understandable since that precious

commodity had to be hauled up the grade from artesian wells in the valley. For drinking water, a small spring in the mountains provided amply as the population consumed little of the stuff.

The two best years for Cerro Gordo were 1874 and 1875. In 1874 alone, the camp shipped some \$2,000,000 in silver-lead bullion. At the end of 1875 the treasure showed signs of giving out. In December of 1876 Belshaw shut down part of his operations and shortly after, when a bad fire destroyed essential buildings, got out entirely.

Several companies have since transfused new life into the camp; some succeeding in reviving it for several years. It was one of these which, in 1915, built the tram to expedite shipment of ore and bullion down the grade. But the raw material simply wasn't there any more -- or at least in its former abundance. When the camp finally died, it stayed dead.

Cerro Gordo is a true ghost with only a caretaker and his wife living there. The unimproved road is negotiable by experienced mountain drivers, but is definitely not a boulevard for the timid.