

# Growing Up on the Old “Fat Hill”

by Friends of Cerro Gordo

## Part 1 - A Stroll Through Town

In The Story of Cerro Gordo, by Mrs. J. S. Gorman, better known as young Lulu Wapplehorst, the first bride of Cerro Gordo, we are given a rare glimpse into what life was like growing up on the old Fat Hill. As we walk through town, through the eyes of Mrs. Gorman, we are reminded of the cabins on the outskirts of town that not only housed miners, but in some cases, their families as well. While there were cabins that were well built with two or three rooms, proper doors and windows, apparently others were put together in such haste that they really didn't look much different in the 1870's than they do in the present day. Mrs. Gorman describes the latter as sagging and dipping at their corners and creaking horribly with the almost constantly howling wind. Old sacks and pieces of flattened out tin served as windowpanes instead of glass. Pity the poor family that had to live under these circumstances!

In addition to the cabins, the blacksmith shops stood on the fringe of town. Imagine the loud clanking, ringing, banging, as the great freight wagons, stagecoaches and others were repaired, and the horses and mules that drove these vehicles were shoed. Also imagine the flying dust as these various modes of transportation found their way through town. Proceeding further into town, small eateries, boarding houses, saloons and dance halls, doctors and lawyers offices would have appeared.



Only a few restored buildings and remnants of others remain on the mountain today. At one time main street was full of restaurants both plain and fancy and there were two double storied hotels breaking the otherwise barren skyline. The buildings were so many and so close, that they actually elbowed each other. Late in the afternoons, the men came from the mines and smelters in such groves,

that the young Lulu Lewis could barely force her way along the streets. Except for dinnertime, the miners would surge in and out of the saloons and dance halls. The flare of the Beaudry and Belshaw furnaces lit the town as the men gathered in groups on the street late into the night.

## Part 2 – The Jingle of the Freight Wagons

Although Remi Nadeau's freight contract had expired long before Lulu's wedding took place, his wagons must have been the most fantastic spectacle that ever came up and down the mountain - the chain of three blue painted wagons, the long string of 14-20 mules, and the jingle of the lead bells they wore. The muleskinner sat a top one of the wheelers, shouting and cursing as he popped the blacksnake whip, and the mules snorted, coughed, and whinnied, as their hooves thundered along the dirt streets. The lead "schooners" each had wheels five feet high and six inches wide. The wooden hulls of each wagon were tall and narrow, and carried the necessary water barrels on each of their sides. The freight capacity of each wagon was ten tons, but most loads ran a bit less than that. Heading out of town, when the mining was at it's best, they would have carried 170 silver ingots that weighed 87 pounds each.



### Part 3 – Victor Beaudry

Pablo Flores and other Mexican miners were the first to come to Cerro Gordo and mine the rich high grade silver ore, but Victor Beaudry and Mortimer Belshaw were the men who acquired the mining properties and controlled the town as it boomed. Beaudry, was a French Canadian merchant who had moved up the mountain from the city of Independence in Owens Valley. In 1866 he opened the first general store in the mining camp and collected mining claims in lieu of overdue accounts. Not only was his store the largest, he owned the smelter, and many of the most important mines. Belshaw joined him in partnership of the Union Mine in April of 1868. He processed ore in the Mexican furnaces, then brought the first wagon load of silver into the sleepy pueblo of Los Angeles. Belshaw was responsible for the Yellow Grade road from Owens Lake to Cerro Gordo, and he then built his own smelters to process ore in larger volumes than Beaudry. It was Victor Beaudry, however, that Mrs. J. S. Gorman reminisced about. Mr. Beaudry had originally arrived in Inyo County with the cavalry, at the same time as Lulu's mother's family. Apparently they became very good friends over the years, for Lulu's mother saw fit to loan him three thousand dollars so he could start his first store and hotel in Independence. That money helped to turn Victor Beaudry into a man worth over two million dollars, mainly, because of his interests in Cerro Gordo.

Young Lulu, and her sister Sarah, knew that Mr. Beaudry was an influential man in Cerro Gordo, and a great friend of their mother, but they didn't care for him much themselves. He watched as they rushed to pick blossoms from one of the desert plants in the area. Afterwards they came to him with blistered hands and tears in their eyes from their first contact with a cactus. It wasn't enough that he had failed to warn them of the disaster before it happened, he also chided them as he replied, "The only way to teach children is through experience."



Note: In the later years of his life, Robert C. Likes, the author of *From This Mountain Cerro Gordo*, painted this portrait of Victor Beaudry using an original photo that he received months after his book was published.

### Part 4 – Goodhearted Citizens

Victor Beaudry may have been severe with youngsters, but the majority of pioneer men and women had good hearts and were kind and generous to children and to families who had met up with misfortune. One Cerro Gordo Springs family found themselves the recipients of this good heartedness

when their father decided to abandon them when they were the most in need. Supplies were running short so he went to town for supplies but found the saloon instead. One of the water packers discovered mother and three children weak and ill from lack of food. For three days, they managed to survive on a pudding of cornstarch and water. The good packer put the family on his gentler pack animals and brought them in to the town of Cerro Gordo. There, the women in town fed and cared for them. Unfortunately, as they were recovering from their experience, a flash flood roared past the spring and tore their cabin from its foundation. Everything the family owned went down a canyon on the mountainside. Their clothes washed down the mountain to the shores of Owens Lake, by Keeler. The citizens of Cerro Gordo rose to the occasion. The men built several rooms for the family to live in, while the women combined forces with the mother to make clothes for the family. The stores in town donated supplies, and soon the mother was running her own restaurant so she could make a living in spite of her forgetful drunken husband.



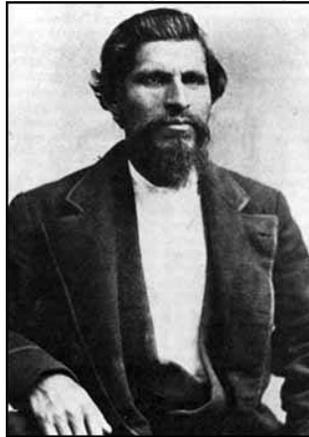
The photograph above is from the L.D. Gordon zinc era archives, and not the earlier Belshaw/Beaudry era that this story was taken from . . . but it shows the ruggedness of the country and primitive conditions of a camp in the background with a water wagon and mules in the foreground.

## Part 5 – Bandito Searching Parties

The stagecoaches coming back and forth from Cerro Gordo to Los Angeles were occasionally met up by the great bandits of the day. Tribucio Vasquez stopped one stage, robbed the passengers of all jewelry and money, then tied them to Joshua trees. He shied the horses from the stage, and drove away with the Wells Fargo box. In Cerro Gordo, as it became more and more apparent the stage was not coming, everyone began talking of Vasquez. Upon confirmation of their fears, the men rushed through the streets with rifles and pistols. They climbed on horses, burros and mules if they had them and others took off on foot. The women were terrified that the bandit would come in to town and find all their men folk gone. They scurried to hide all valuables in flour bins, baking powder cans, mattresses, and other places they could not be found. The women did such a good job of hiding things in their excitement, that they couldn't even find their valuables themselves!

Lulu's brothers, George, John, and Albert decided that they needed to do their part in the search for Vasquez, as well. The oldest boy, George, took it upon himself to arm every boy in town with sling shots, pocket knives and pieces of pipe. Worried that they would perish of hunger on their way to rescue the great bandit searching party, they broke into the hotel pantries, which the Chinese cooks had abandoned in all of the town frenzy. As the cooks stood out on the streets gossiping, their long pigtailed flying in the breeze, the Lewis boys stole all the cookies, pies, and cakes they had baked. Five year old Albert Lewis was enlisted to carry the supplies. His short little legs and arms could barely manage everything he was loaded up with and he was soon seen running back to camp crying. Most of the

supplies he had been in charge of had been lost along the way. As night began to fall, the boys of Cerro Gordo hurried sheepishly back to town, fearful of the punishment they would soon receive for raiding the pantries. Soon the adult male population of Cerro Gordo drifted back into town, as well, tired from their fruitless search. Tribucio Vasquez had once again managed a clean getaway.



Pictured above Tribucio Vasquez

## Part 6 – The Final Chapter

### Dancing In Cartago

Sometime before her wedding in the American Hotel, Lulu and six of her girl friends received invitations to a dance at Cartago, several miles down from the mountain at the shores of Owens Lake. The girls and their chaperones, whom were noted to be "the nicest of the young men of Cerro Gordo," climbed upon an ore wagon and sat on top of the silver and lead bullions. When they reached the landing at Keeler they were taken to a bunk-house and dining room that had been thoroughly scrubbed by water from Owens Lake. Supper was served to the teens and to the teamsters drivers who had driven the ore wagons. Although it's not recorded what the girls and their beaux wore, the teamsters showed up in new overalls, bright bandanas, and newly shined boots.

The wait at the wharf was celebrated with singing, reciting, and listening to violin and guitar music. As the evening wore on to 9:00, it became apparent that they were not going to get to the dance at Cartago at all. The steamboat, Bessie Brady was to have come pick them up, but something happened preventing it from crossing Owens Lake. Everyone decided to head back to the dining room and dance there instead. It was a night of "good music, good company, and moonlight on silver water."

### Life to the Utmost

Should you be fortunate enough to wander up the Yellow Grade road today, remember not only the mines, the men who owned them and toiled in them, but remember, also, the families that followed them there as well. As Mrs. J. S. Gorman summed up for us, "people enjoyed life to the utmost, but when the end came and the plumes of smoke poured no longer from the smelters; they packed their household goods and left to seek new homes without lamenting-for they were pioneers-trained to take the bitter with the sweet."

## Bibliography

Thanks to a rare late 1990's edition of a little paper called "The Cerro Gordo Bugle of Freedom," which I came across during a stay on the old Fat Hill, I was familiarized with Mrs. J. S. Gorman and her wonderful "The Story of Cerro Gordo." It originally appeared as a continuing series in the Inyo Independent of 1930. My friend Robin Flinchum brought the story to life for me even more when she came across the rest of it searching through old newspaper archives. With a little bit of embellishment from Remi Nadeau's books "The City Makers" and "The Silver Seekers," I was able to put the bigger picture together for this story and give us a glimpse into what life was like during Cerro Gordo's heyday.

## The Great Hat Party

Mining towns never overlooked an excuse for a celebration, and Cerro Gordo certainly enjoyed it's share. When Mortimer Belshaw and his brothers received word that they had won a legal battle over their mines, a holiday was declared. As everyone gathered around a great bonfire in front of the American Hotel, the bullion kings stood on the balcony and made great speeches. The miners cheered them on. Suddenly someone tossed their hat and threw into the blaze, and soon others were following suit. Bareheaded, the men all trouped across the street to Victor Beaudry's General Store, where everyone, including Beaudry, raided shelves for more hats. They paraded around, dancing and drinking to the health of Cerro Gordo and to the Belshaw's, wearing silk stove pipe hats, huge Stetsons, and even women and children's sunbonnets. A free dance and supper was given that night, and merrymaking continued through to the next morning. Young Lulu remembered witnessing the scene, and declared in her later years that not a drunken man was amongst them "either on the street or at the dance."

