

The Fat Cat From Fat Hill Gets Skinned

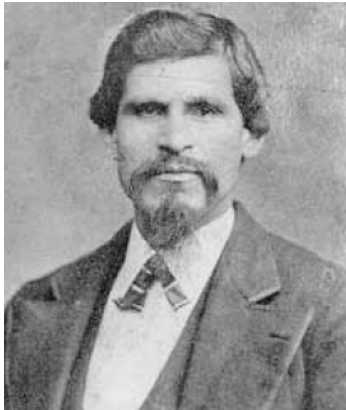
Tiburcio Vasquez and the Coyote Hole Stage Station Robbery

By Bryon Harrington

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I'm sure Tiburcio Vasquez smiled when he recognized the man sitting on the stagecoach beside the driver. It was late in the day on February 25, 1874. Vasquez, the notorious California bandito who had been robbing and terrorizing the citizens of the Golden State for many years, had stopped the Concord coach as it drove into the Coyote Hole stage stop.

The driver attempted to put the whip to the horses, but Mortimer Belshaw, seeing that there were three bandits – one with a Henry rifle – advised the driver to stop the coach and to follow the bandit's orders. Although they probably had never met, the two men knew instantly who the other was: Belshaw knew that this could be only Tiburcio Vasquez, the California bandit who had been robbing and pillaging helpless travelers, lonely stage stations, isolated ranches, stores and even small towns for years all over central and southern California.



Tiburcio Vaasquez



Mortimer Belshaw



Stacks of silver ingots

Stories of Vasquez and his gang's daring escapades were well known throughout the state and there was no doubt that this man with a smile on his face was the infamous robber. Vasquez, on the other hand, had a little less to go on, but it wasn't too hard to tell that the man he was looking at was Mortimer Belshaw, what with his well-groomed, neatly cut hair, and his clean-shaven face save for the long-trimmed mutton chops on both his cheeks. Dressed in a well-tailored frock coat, white shirt and tie, Vasquez knew that it must be Belshaw riding on the stage from Owens Valley to Los Angeles.

Belshaw was well-known as "the silver bullion king" One of the principal owners of the bustling Cerro Gordo mining town located east of Lone Pine, California, high up in the steep, rugged Inyo Mountains at an altitude of 8,500 feet. In 1874 Cerro Gordo (meaning Fat Hill in Spanish because of the rich silver and lead deposits located there) was as wild and roaring a mining camp as the West had ever seen. Like Bodie or the Comstock Lode, Cerro Gordo had its share of violence and bloodshed. With over three thousand miners working in the mines digging miles of tunnels into the crumbling ore bodies, accidents and cave-ins were common.

The miners vented steam by drinking and gambling in the numerous saloons and brothels. One day, a doctor rode up to the mine figuring that it would be a good place to hang out his shingle. He got himself a room in one of the hotels and set about to getting some sleep after the long and tiresome ride up the mountain. But as he was about to find out, sleep in Cerro Gordo was as hard to find as a tabby cat in China town. Drunken

miners, lubricated with whiskey, settled fights with pistols – gunshots were heard coming from the many saloons at all hours day and night.

The hapless doctor packed up and was gone by first light abandoning the town to its own demise.

Catching Belshaw on the stage to Los Angeles was very fortunate indeed as Vasquez knew that the mine owner should be carrying a large stuffed billfold along with a few of them 83-pound silver and lead ingots that were commonly shipped to Los Angeles by stagecoach and freight wagons. Here he had the “Fat Cat from Fat Hill” as Belshaw was sometimes called.

With his lieutenant, Clodoveo Chavez, standing guard with the Henry rifle, Vasquez ordered the passengers out of the coach and told Belshaw and the driver to get off too. He lined them up and went through their pockets, finding five dollars and some mining stock on one man. In another man’s pockets, he found forty dollars in gold coins and a spy glass. Vasquez must have been dismayed to find that Belshaw was only carrying twenty dollars in his pockets and a silver watch. He pocketed the watch and told Belshaw that if he ever caught him riding on the stage again that it would be the death of him if he wasn’t carrying at least a thousand dollars!

The bandits rifled through the coach and found that the Wells Fargo strong box only had a set of law books in it. The books and the mining stock certificates were scattered to the wind and the bandits ordered the men behind the house and they were tied up and left with the others who had been at the station when the bandits arrived. The three bandits mounted up and rode south toward the low, rocky hills today known as Robbers Roost; the next day the ashes from a recent campfire were discovered but the bandits

were long gone. Two days later they robbed another stagecoach two miles south of the Ravenna stage stop, tying up the passengers and riding off with three hundred dollars in loot.

Vasquez and Chavez continued to pull off a number of other robberies in the area, but time was running out for the bold banditos. The governor of California, Newton Booth raised the reward on Vasquez’s head to \$8,000 alive or \$6,000 dead and he commissioned Alameda County Sheriff Harry Morse to raise a force and hunt down the elusive outlaws.

A few months later, Vasquez was spotted at the ranch of a friend near Los Angeles and the Los Angeles County Sheriff, William Rowland, deployed a posse to the ranch and in a short gun battle, Vasquez was wounded and taken into custody. His lieutenant, Chavez, was not at the ranch when Vasquez was taken and disappeared probably into the nearby San Gabriel Mountains. Vasquez was put on a steamer and taken to San



Top: American Hotel in Cerro Gordo
Bottom: Cerro Gordo silver ingot

Francisco to await extradition to San Jose where he would await his trial. While in the San Francisco jail, the sheriff was besieged by reporters and citizens who all wanted to talk to or just get a glimpse of the bandit, whose arrest had made front-page news all the way to Paris.



Mortimer Belshaw, who happened to be in town, asked the sheriff if he could speak with the prisoner. Vasquez smiled once again as he looked up and recognized Belshaw standing at the window of his jail cell. Belshaw wanted to know if Vasquez still had his watch and that he would be glad to pay for it if he would sell it back to him. Tiburcio Vasquez was pleased to find that the Fat Cat from Fat Hill remembered those halcyon days, but told the mining capitalist that he did not have it. Perhaps if he could locate Chavez, he might have it.

Vasquez was put on board a train the next day. He was to be tried in San Jose for the murders of three men who were killed during the Tres Pinos robbery in 1873. Even though Vasquez was never proven to be the one who pulled the trigger, he was sentenced to death for the killings and on March 19, 1875, Vasquez was dropped from the gallows ending once and for all the career of one of the Old West's most daring and spirited outlaws. When asked if he had any last words, Tiburcio simply said "Pronto". His lieutenant, Chavez, swore to get even with the gringos and vowed to get more men and to ride a bloody trail to avenge the death of his captain.



After committing several more brazen robberies, Chavez was forced to ride south to the safety of the Mexican border where he planned his next robbery, the attack on the small town of Campo, California, located just on the American side of the border. But before he initiated the raid, he rode to Arizona where he was recognized by a childhood friend, who, knowing about the \$2000 reward on his head, set him up and Chavez was killed trying to make an escape.



Top: Cerro Gordo

Middle: Inside of the American Hotel

Bottom: View of the Sierra Nevada

His gang back in Tecate, Mexico, upon learning about his demise, took it upon themselves to make the Campo raid,

but it all went horribly wrong and five of the six bandits who showed up in Campo that day were killed, not only ending the rein of the Californios banditos, but also ending the era of the proud and boisterous outlaws who once rode high in the

saddle, across the mountains and valleys, deserts and canyons of the great state of California.

Today you can still visit some of the places mentioned in this story. Coyote Hole Stage Stop no longer exists. Today the site is near Freeman Junction on highway 14, about seven miles south of highway 395. Robbers Roost can be seen roughly two miles to the southwest from there. The Cerro Gordo mine still exists as a ghost town 20 miles east of Lone Pine. It is considered to be one of the best authentic ghost towns in California still in existence.

Take highway 136 east to Keeler, turn left on the Cerro Gordo road. This road climbs over 5,000 feet in seven and a half miles. A good four-wheel drive vehicle is best. Vehicles with low ground clearance are not recommended. Call ahead for weather and road conditions before you go. Mine site tours can be arranged for a small donation. There is also a mining museum on site, full of mining equipment, artifacts and tools. Visitors can stay in town, walk around, take tours and photographs and soak in the history and beauty of this old silver mining town.

Good sources of additional information about the exploits of Tiburcio Vasquez are a pair of books by noted California historians, “California Desperadoes,” by William B. Secrest, and “Bandito,” by John Boessenecker. Both are fine accounts of the Californios banditos era. And for the Western historical novel buff, this author’s “Campo: The Forgotten Gunfight” follows the bandits on the bloody trail to their fateful final raid on December 4, 1875, in Campo, California.

