When Lead Was Mined at the Cerro Gordo

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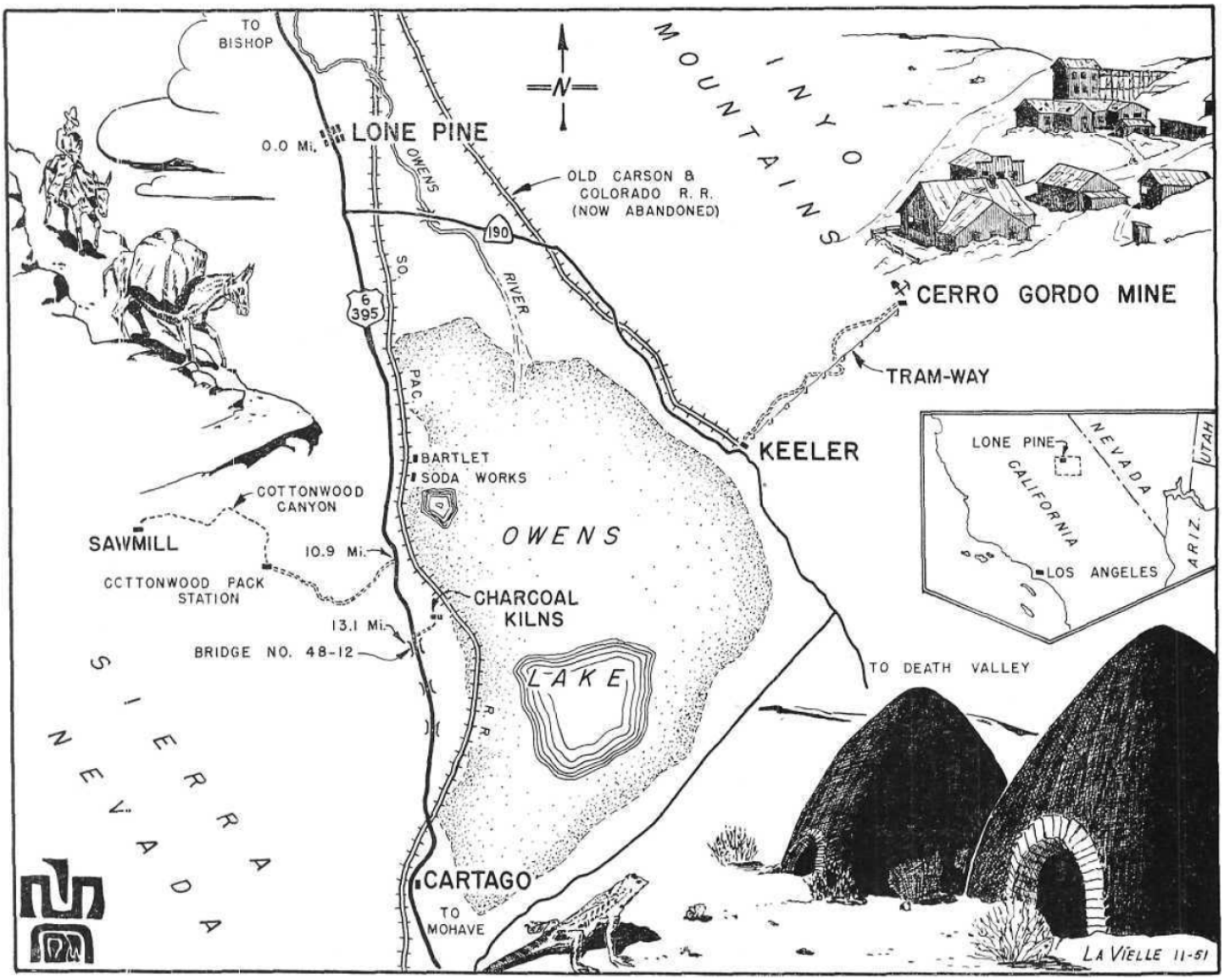
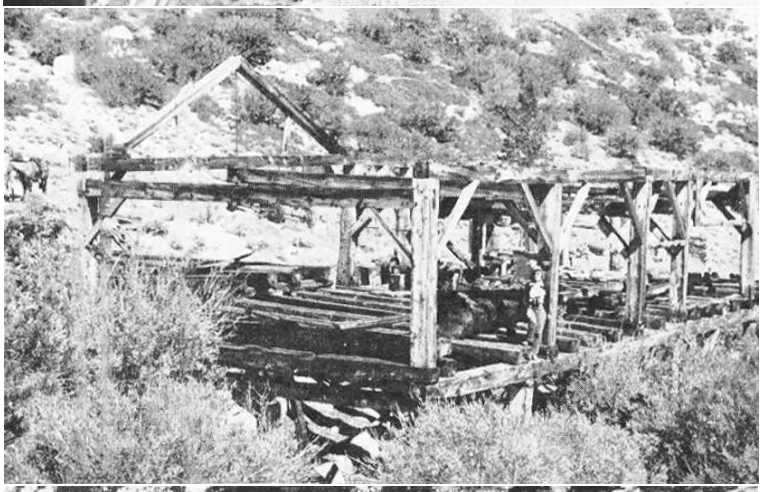


Rich galena ore was found nearly a century ago high up in the Inyo Mountains of California. But before it could be milled and transported to market the mining men of that day had to overcome tremendous obstacles. Here is the story of how those obstacles were met -- and overcome.

IN MARCH last year Neva and I followed the steep trail which zigzags up the rugged west slope of California's Inyo Mountains to the ghost of what was once the fabulous lead mine of Cerro Gordo.

Our interest in the Cerro Gordo had been aroused during a previous trip into that region when we saw at Keeler the lower terminus of' the old tramway which once brought the rich ore from the mine down the side of the mountain.

The road to Cerro Gordo is a hard one for man and car. There were two grades which almost stopped the car, even in low gear. There was an eighth of a mile where the one-way trail is poised precariously along the top of a sheer cliff.



Top: These adobe kilns were built to make charcoal for the old Cerro Gordo mine.

Center: All that remains of the saw mill from which came Cerro Gordo's lumber and charcoal.

Bottom: Neva Lawbaugh rests on the tongue of one of the ancient logging wagons high up in Horseshoe

And when finally we reached the mine we learned that our quest for the complete story of Cerro Gordo had only begun. Before the story was all recorded in our note books we had searched Owens Lake for rotting steamboats, the shore lines for charcoal kilns -- and then a 6,000-foot climb to search out an old sawmill high in the mountain range which rims Owens Valley.

The mine is on the western slope near the summit of the Inyo Range. The “fat hill” -- Cerro Gordo, in Spanish -- is a distinctive landmark just to the north of the mine. A Mexican, Pablo Flores, and two companions first discovered the rich outcrops in the 1860's. The ore occurred as lenticular masses of massive cerussite, 5 or 6 feet across, in the limestone. These masses were concentrically banded and usually contained a small core of unaltered galena. To smelt this rich ore, Flores employed *vesos*, which were crude rock furnaces. As in the case of all bonanza strikes, word leaked out and soon the Mexicans had company and before long were shunted aside. The rush was on. Claims were staked, bought and sold, and blood was spilled. Almost overnight, Cerro Gordo boasted a population of 700 and within a few years had climbed to over 2000! Buildings mushroomed, despite the high cost of lumber. Gambling and dance hall girls provided the lusty night life portrayed in western movies.

Today, only a few buildings are clustered on the steep slopes. We pulled our over-worked car to a halt in front of the building which formerly served as a recreation room for the miners. Most of the furnishings are gone, but the overhead wires, with counter heads for snooker pool arc still there. The caretaker greeted us hospitably and gave us water for the car and coffee for our own refreshment.

We learned that the present owners of the mine employ a crew of 12 in an effort to locate an elusive rich vein. Sons of the owners, Steven Wasserman and Christopher Reynolds, were the two unfortunate lads who later in the year lost their lives trying to scale the treacherous cast face of Mt. Whitney. Our host told us of handmade digging tools,

relics of another day, which had been found in the 27 miles of underground tunnels and slopes. Some of the levels go down to 900 feet. We saw an old candle end of sheep's tallow which had come from a ledge far below the surface.

The building which houses the mine end of the tramway is still standing. This spectacular ore conveyor was built in 1911 by Louis D. Gordon who found large deposits of zinc which earlier miners had ignored in their quest for silver. The tram is about six miles long and is said to have cost $250,000. It is operated by gravity, with ore buckets hanging from steel cables. As the loaded buckets dropped down to Keeler, the empties were drawn back up to the mine. A huge brake wheel is at the mine terminal of the tramway.

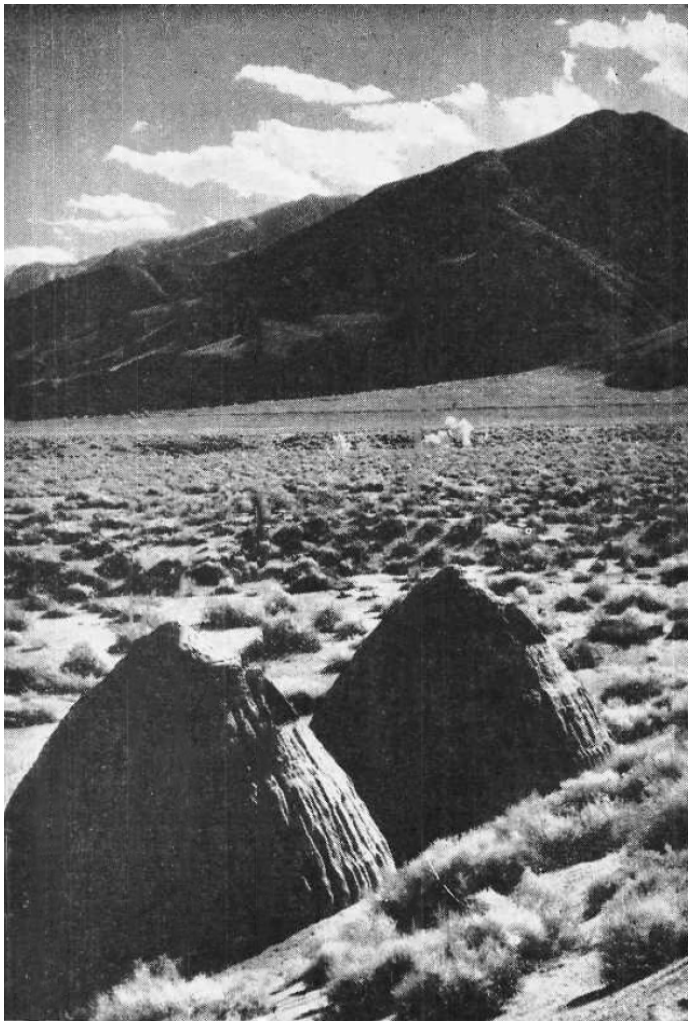
The steep slopes around the mine are dotted with little leveled plots where houses once stood. Foundation rocks, old iron bedsteads and scraps of weathered wood are all that remain. For more than an hour we walked the indistinct old streets and footpaths of Cerro Gordo. A mile distant, at the old Chinese cemetery, we recalled the China Stope incident. A Chinese crew was working below the 200 foot level, when a cave-in buried a number of them alive. They had neglected to timber-up properly.

There are structures still standing at the mine which ante-date the Gordon era. A tall chimney affair built of native stone attracted our attention. Upon examination, it proved to be a smelter. Our host told us that it was one of those built by M. W. Belshaw who was one of the first white men to move in after the discovery by the Mexicans. A silver smelter required charcoal in those days and lots of it. Neva and I had seen where many buildings had stood but didn't give much thought to the wood from which they had been constructed. Now here was a place which had consumed prodigious amounts of charcoal. Charcoal must be reduced from wood in special ovens or kilns. Where did the old miners get their wood, their lumber? In all the Inyos there is nothing larger than scrub growth, for they are a desert mountain range. The caretaker could not answer the question, but told us of some old timers at Keeler and Cartago who might know the answer.

The eight-mile drive back to Keeler was in sharp contrast to the difficult struggle up the grade. Twilight was approaching. The dry bed of Owens Lake seemed to cover the whole valley floor. At one place, where the tram soars high above the road, we paused to watch a bighorn sheep. He was high on the ridge next to the out-stretched stanchions which bold the tram cables. I focused the field glasses on him and he was watching us. After a minute, he casually turned and dropped from sight beyond the ridge. We camped on a bench above Keeler and enjoyed to the fullest a cool, quiet desert night and gazed at at least a million more stars than we ever see when at home in Los Angeles.

The next day was full of surprises. In running down the origin of the timber which had been used for charcoal production and lumber we talked to several of the older residents of Keeler. The first woman we questioned wasn't sure about the timber but was eager to tell us about the steamboats! There actually were steamboats which sailed the coffee-colored water of Owens Lake's nearly saturated solution of salt and alkali! Belshaw's outfit which operated the Union Mine at Cerro Gordo was producing so many 80-pound bullion bars, shaped like loaves of bread, that they began to pile up. To speed their shipment, the Bessie Brady and the Mollie Stevens were built to haul the bullion from Keeler across the lake to Cartago. The steamers were shallow draft, clam-shell bottom, ferry-type boats. They lugged tons daily and still the stacks of silver mounted. Late-comers, beset by the shortage of living quarters resided for a time in hutches made by stacking the ingots as walls and covering over the top with canvas or boards. On return trips the boats carried equipment, charcoal and lumber from the west shore of Owens Lake.

The old east shore landing which the steamers used is about half a mile north of Keeler. We searched all the day for evidence of old hulls, boilers, anything which might prove the story. One old-timer led us to a spot on the north shore where the Bessie had grounded after a hard blow on the lake. We found nothing but drifted sand, a horned toad, two leopard lizards and lots of creosote bushes. Another informant, William Isbester, recalls that when he first visited Keeler, the Bessie Brady was a burned out hulk, still at the old wharf. This old ship was launched in 1872, was 85 feet long, 16 feet in beam and powered by a 20-horsepower engine. Her cost was reputed to be $10,000. Records show that Belshaw also was in the steamer business for he launched the Mollie Stevens in 1877. Her engine was supposed to have come from the U.S.S. Pensacola. Since our search, a Lone Pine lad found one of the old anchors. It was hand-forged, about five feet long and weighed 400 pounds.



Further excavation is planned for the recovery of other parts of the old steamer. This digging may be done with enthusiasm for one of the boats was reported to have sunk with a load of bullion aboard.

The next day on the west shore of the lake we found the old bee-hive shaped charcoal kilns. The enterprising Belshaw also built the kilns. F ire brick was hauled in and laid. The exterior was covered with adobe, which during the ensuing years has eroded away. There are two or them, each about 20 feet high and 20 feet in diameter. We discovered them after some difficulty, for their adobe finish came from the very ground upon which they stand. A perfect camouflage. As I stooped to go inside one of the kilns, a gridiron-laded lizard darted from its sunning position in the entrance-way.

While sitting on the slope of the ridge behind the kilns we saw a most curious thing. Neva was first aware of it and quietly motioned to me. Two gridiron-tailed lizards were moving back and forth towards each other in a graceful circling motion. It must have been a sort of courtship, for they continued the odd dance for some time, back and forth with a weird rhythm. They scampered swiftly lo cover when a red-tailed hawk swooped low overhead.

The cord wood which went into the kilns, and the lumber used for construction came from high up in Cottonwood Canyon. A sawmill was built at the east end of' Horseshoe Meadows at the 10,000 foot level. Beams as large as 4 x 12 inches and cord wood of varying sizes were cut and dropped into a flume for the rip-roaring ride to the edge of Owens Lake, 14 miles away.

Dusk found us al Leo Rogers' pack station in Cottonwood Canyon. Water flows down the canyon until it is lost in the desert sands. We camped by the little stream that night, after arranging for two horses for the morrow's climb. The raucous cries of blue-jays awakened us. By the time we had breakfast and cleaned up camp, Leo was there with the horses. The climb from the pack station to the mill is about 6,000 feet. Along the way we saw remnants of' the old flume. It was a V-shaped trough, with sides about two feet high.

I had expected to find some timber at the mill site. Actually, the logging was done three miles further up the canyon. A stream which flowed down the canyon had been dammed and a 30-inch pipe from the headstock under a 20-foot pressure head furnished power to drive the large circular saw. One of the old logging wagons stood near the mill -- a ponderous affair with thick, cross-cut sections of logs for wheels.

Our story was now complete. We had explored the desert floor and the mountain rims to verify the facts about a highly productive mining venture of nearly a century ago. The Cerro Gordo is said to have produced millions in lead and silver and zinc -- but back of that fortune were stalwart men who overcame tremendous obstacles to mine and market the ores which nature had created there.

View down the Yellow Grade Road on the way to Cerro Gordo. Photo courtesy of Ray DeLea 2016