

# Cerro Gordo

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Cerro Gordo perches high atop Buena Vista Peak like an eagle's aerie. From these heights, the algae living off the soda in the far-off lakebed below glows red, and as the wind moves carelessly through the deserted buildings which once formed the heart of a boisterous wide-open town, loose boards rattle and tin sheds shake as though in murmured reminiscence with one another.

But the town was not always this still. In 1869, a population of some 1,500 worked the 700 claims located within a single square mile of the town and in a few years, the population had jumped to 3,000. These were years when the name of Cerro Gordo was known throughout the West as Fat Hill because the mountain was "fat" with silver.



The area was discovered by Captain John Fremont's exploration party in 1834, and it was he who named Owens Valley for a member of the expedition, Richard Owens. The first miner generally associated with the Inyo Mountains was Pablo Flores who, with other Mexican prospectors, worked there as early as 1862. Still it wasn't until 1867 that the town began to attract outside interest, after one of these earlier miners visited Virginia City and displayed great chunks of rich silver ore. A trickle of miners began moving into the area in earnest search of their fortunes, and they were joined by an ever-deepening tide of others as word of the riches to be found in Cerro Gordo spread through outlying communities.

Victor Beaudry, a French Canadian, was there to meet them. In 1866, he opened the first store as a result of an abiding conviction that the ore of Cerro Gordo ultimately would be acclaimed as the finest to be found in any mining camp. Through a propensity for attaching overdue accounts, he acquired various mining properties in the area as well as two ore furnaces and several prime building lots. Soon, he had parlayed his method into interests in the Union and San Felipe Mines, in addition to other, less prominent claims in the district.

If Beaudry's methods were calculating, they were soon overshadowed by the cleverness of another citizen, Mortimer Belshaw, who arrived in town in 1868. While Belshaw was impressed with the quality of the ore being taken from the mines, he was quick to realize a more important fact. The true wealth of Cerro Gordo would be built on the available deposits of galena, an ore of silver and lead. With this in mind, he soon became a part owner in the Union Mine, which happened to harbor the greatest untapped deposit of galena in Inyo County. Of course, he never considered stopping there. With the eye of businessmen of every era, he looked around and determined that certain things would be needed if the town were to prosper.

His first move was to direct the grading of the Yellow Grade road up the side of the mountain. This allowed free movement to and from the growing town, and his gatehouse located halfway up the mountain allowed him to collect tolls from every arrival and departure. In 1868, he brought the first wagon load of silver into Los Angeles where it was shipped on to San Francisco. (Naturally, Belshaw had not overlooked the fact that several financial connections in that northern city would be of great value to his growing fortune.)

In 1870, he saw yet another method for developing the town and increasing his personal wealth from the additional mining interests and tolls which would result. One of the biggest problems had long been a lack of water in the arid countryside, and burro pack trains which moved between the nearby springs and the camp were too slow to meet the growing demand. So, Belshaw installed a pipeline from Cerro Gordo Springs and

pumped the water into storage tanks on the mountain top. From there, with the help of gravity, the precious liquid flowed directly into the town and the water problem was solved. Suddenly, Cerro Gordo citizens were able to enjoy a water supply of 1,300 gallons per day.

Of course, it must be said that what were financially sound business practices for Beaudry and Belshaw were also of benefit to the town. Although it didn't happen overnight as in some other mining camps, Cerro Gordo soon was able to call itself a thriving city. In the late 1860s and early 1870s, it boasted a large number of shops and offices, an ice plant, 12 saloons and two whorehouses. The latter were owned by Lola Travis and Maggie Moore and it was seldom that a night went by without the sound of gunshots from the cribs or the bars. The citizens of Cerro Gordo tended to be hot-tempered and arguments were, as often as not, settled with guns.



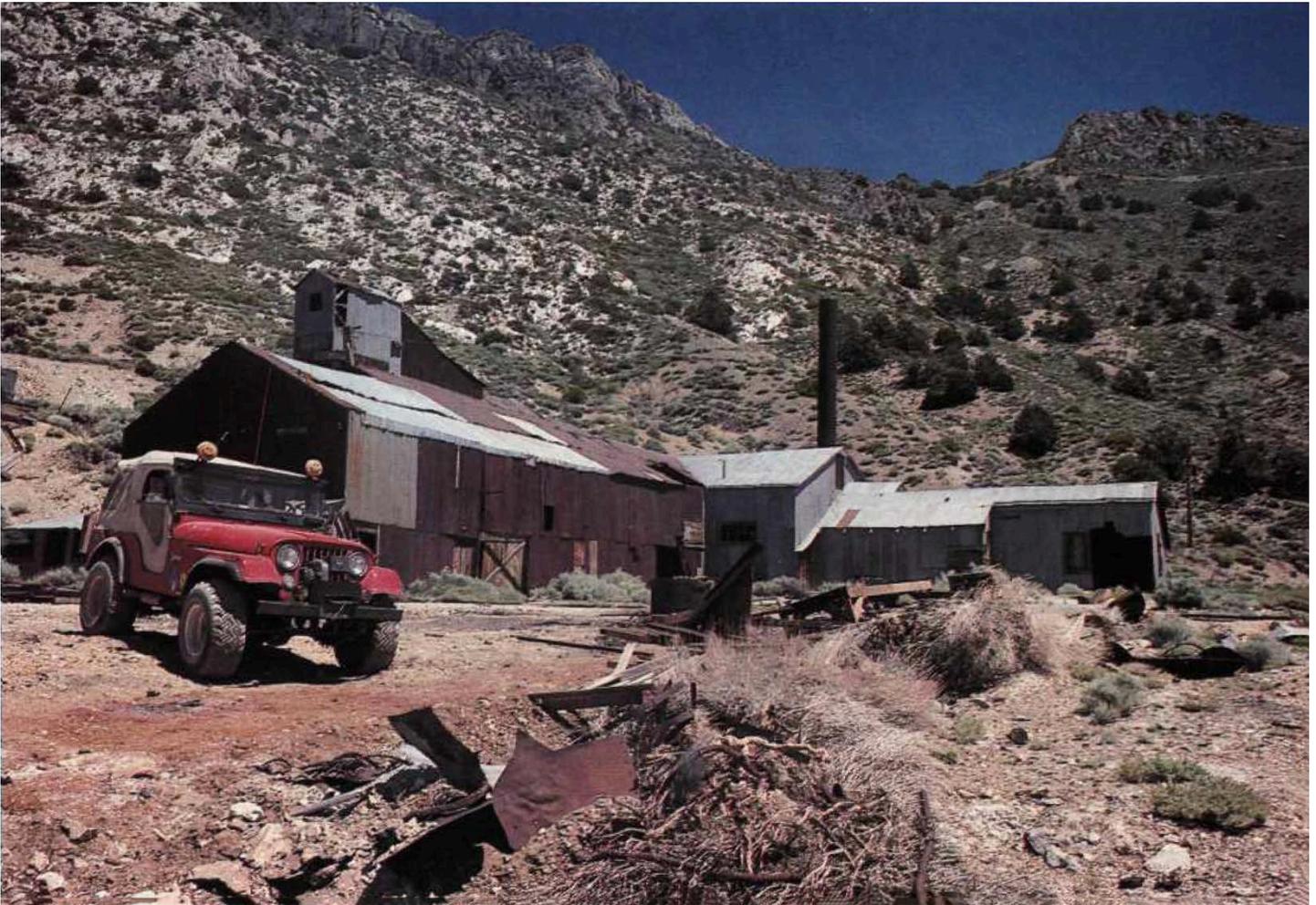
*You and your family can stay in Mortimer Belshaw's house for a reasonable \$3 per person, but do bring your own water.  
Photo by the author.*

As the town grew, the Yellow Grade became even busier as mule-driven freight wagons hauled ore down the mountain on the first leg of the trip to Los Angeles, and then returned with such staples as baled hay, foodstuffs and beer. In addition, two competing stage lines arrived and departed daily via the treacherous Yellow Grade which is still in use today.

Throughout Cerro Gordo's peak years, smelters turned out huge quantities of silver-lead bars, each weighing approximately 85 pounds. During the Civil War, the town's silver output was a major source of income for the Union Army, and contributed \$27,000,000 in silver and lead prior to 1876. By that year, however, the ore had been nearly depleted.

In 1877 a holocaust destroyed the Union Mine, forcing Belshaw to shut down his furnace forever. The miners who had watched innumerable sunrises over the mountains began leaving for new horizons in Bodie and

Darwin. In October 1879, the final ore wagon trundled down the Yellow Grade and the last mine was abandoned. The boom had ended.



*The Union Mine proved out to hold one of the richest deposits in the annals of mining history. Photo by Dennis Millard.*

A resurgence of interest in Cerro Gordo's mining possibilities came in 1911 with the discovery of zinc in the Union Mine. The company of L.D. Gordon & Associates acquired a lease which allowed them to remove zinc from the mine and, in 1914, the company purchased the property. In the next four years before it ended, the workings at the bottom of the mine had been extended to the 1,100 foot level, 34 miles of underground tunnels had been built and over \$3,000,000 in zinc had been shipped via an overhead cable tram which extended down the mountain to Keeler. But by 1915 this boom, too, had expired.

Today, Cerro Gordo is one of the best-preserved ghost towns in the West. It is reached by leaving U.S. 395 at Olancha (south of Lone Pine) and driving east on 5-190 about 15 miles to the junction of S-136. Here, you will turn north and drive almost to the town of Keeler, a distance of about six miles. Just before reaching the town, you will note a small sign by the side of the road directing you to the Cerro Gordo mines. It is important to note that the Yellow Grade is extremely steep and can cause your engine to overheat. Also, the grade is difficult in snowy or rainy weather. In just eight miles, you will climb from the desert floor to the town of Cerro Gordo which perches on its site at 8,600 feet. Once at your destination, however, you will be pleased you went to the trouble of climbing the mountain as there is something there for everyone.

Rockhounds, for example, will discover there are over 40 different minerals to be found, while photographers generally are thrilled with the century-old buildings and the 100-mile vistas spreading out in every direction. History students will find plenty to research and four-wheel-drive buffs soon discover the trails are perfect for a drive into yesteryear.

As you come into town, you'll pass the American Hotel where the original stove covers in the shadows of the kitchen and rusty bedsprings litter the floor of the upstairs dormitories. Behind the hotel on the side of the hill are three shacks, all that remains of a once-thriving Chinatown. To the left of the hotel is the ice house where meat once hung in refrigerated plenty. Drive on by and park in the area set aside for automobiles below the home of Barbara and Jack Smith. After paying \$1.00 per person and signing the register, you'll be told: "Look around and enjoy yourself. Just be careful and, please, don't shoot any guns in the area."

Before hurrying off to your explorations, ask to see Barbara's paintings. After many years spent in the whirl of Hollywood, she married Jack and, together, they acquired the town of Cerro Gordo. Now, she spends much of her time painting the sights of her beloved mining camp and answering the questions of any person interested in the history of the town.

In addition to calling at the American Hotel, you'll want to visit the red-light district (the Waterfall Gilded House of Pleasure once owned by Lola Travis is still standing), the Union Mine hoist works and mill, and the various miner's houses. With very few exceptions, everything - including the interiors of mine shafts, if you're so inclined - is open to you.

At night, you can pitch a tent beneath the stars or, if you want to taste the real flavor of history, you can stay in Mortimer Belshaw's house (\$3 per person) or in the hotel or bunkhouse (\$2 per person in either building). All camping spots are dry, however, so you'll want to bring plenty of water with you.

A trip to Cerro Gordo is a drive into the past. For the most part, time stopped here one hundred years ago, but you can make it live again. All you need to do is allow your imagination to run free, open your heart, and listen for the whispers of those who used to be.