

# THE BULLION KINGS

by Remi Nadeau

Out of the dust along Sixth Street on June 19, 1868, rolled several light wagons groaning with a cargo that gleamed in the sun. Mortimer W. Belshaw, expert mining man, was bringing the first shipment of bullion through Los Angeles from Cerro Gordo, a new silver camp two hundred miles northward in the "Owens River Country." A few weeks earlier Belshaw had arrived there to find scores of Mexicans mining silver and lead ores, smelting them in crude rock ovens, and producing the kind of glistening bars he was now bringing through El Pueblo.

As early as 1865 Mexican prospectors headed by Pablo Flores had discovered galena deposits at what they called Cerro Gordo, the Spanish equivalent of "Fat Hill." But the new development was not really exploited until May 1867, when a Mexican prospector from Owens Valley rode into Virginia City, Nevada, with tales of Cerro Gordo's riches. Known as a man of reticent nature, he astounded the bustling mining capital with his shouts of laughter and his eager display of silver quartz ore samples. After a careful assaying their value became known on the streets, and Virginia City echoed with the news. Silver quartz veins, far richer than the original galena deposits, had been discovered at Cerro Gordo!

Soon the strike was known in every mining center on the Coast. When the word reached San Francisco, Mortimer W. Belshaw was one of the first to move. Reaching Inyo County in April 1868, he found Cerro Gordo situated two miles above sea level at the crest of the Inyo Range, where a swarm of enthusiastic miners were digging into the side of Buena Vista Peak. -



Mortimer W. Belshaw arrived at Cerro Gordo in 1868 and almost overnight won control of its mines. With Victor caudry he ruled Cerro Gordo through its stormiest decade, 1868-77.

The new quartz mines were so rich, Belshaw found, that the impatient silver seekers were throwing away as useless any ore worth less than two hundred dollars per ton. But Belshaw was attracted by the older galena ledges, for their forty to eighty per cent lead content was essential in smelting the silver quartz ores; he knew that the man who built a smelting works would control Cerro Gordo. While others were buying the famed silver mines, Belshaw announced that he sought only galena deposits, as "the lead veins could control the working of the silver ores."

It was not long before Belshaw realized that the Union mine, located on the slope above Cerro Gordo, tapped the biggest lode of galena on "the Hill." One of its Mexican owners, Joaquin Almada, proved an easy target for his glib tongue, and on May 6 he acquired a third interest in the mine. The price was a one-fifth share in a smelting furnace that as yet existed only in Belshaw's fancy. Having closed this masterful transaction, he extracted several tons of galena ore, had it smelted into silver-lead pigs in the nearby Mexican *vaso* furnaces, and headed with them for Los Angeles.

Weeks later, when Belshaw's procession rolled through the pueblo, its citizens looked with awe on the owner of those glistening bars of bullion. They found Belshaw a man of medium height and husky frame, whose suntanned cheeks revealed a lifetime of mining and prospecting. Born of Irish parents in central New York, he had joined the California gold rush in 1852 at the age of twenty-two. He was one of the few Argonauts with a college education, and his tremendous capacity for learning and

knowing helped to make him also one of the few to succeed at mining. Although a man of quick and positive movements, he could work long and hard toward a single goal. For years he labored to save a modest fortune, then made a hasty trip eastward to bring Jane Oxner, a home-town sweetheart, back to California as his bride.

More than anything else Belshaw was an individualist, a man who made bold steps while those around him faltered. In 1862 he left California, hurried to the mines of Sinaloa, Mexico, and returned two years later a master in the working of silver ores. Later, when word had reached him of the Inyo strike, he had left his family in San Francisco and headed for Owens River to test his new silver knowledge.

With him now in the streets of Los Angeles was his partner, Abner B. Elder, a native of western Ohio, a veteran of the Civil War, and another graduate of the silver mines of Mexico. Together they were now bound for San Francisco, where they hoped to raise capital to exploit the riches they had found at Cerro Gordo. From Los Angeles they headed their silver-laden wagons southward for San Pedro Harbor, where they boarded the side-wheel steamer, *Orizaba*.

Angelenos watched their passing and took new interest in the "Owens River Country." Silver mines were not new to Californians, who had seen the largest mining town in the nation develop at Virginia City, had seen its silver output give renewed vigor to their own state at a time when the gold placers were failing. All California, from store clerks to bank executives, seemed absorbed in the fluctuation of Comstock mining securities, or ready to answer the call of every new silver strike in Nevada. Even experienced prospectors, aware that Mexico's mines had been producing silver for three hundred years, assumed that a great silver belt existed between them and the newly discovered Comstock. Throughout the 1860s they had combed the desert, over-looking valuable gold croppings in their feverish search for silver. When Cerro Gordo appeared as another link in the traditional belt, Los Angeles contributed its share of rainbow hunters who were off for Owens River. Belshaw and his caravan had arrived at a timely moment, bringing solid proof of Cerro Gordo's wealth.



When he arrived in San Francisco, Belshaw made his way to 420 Front Street where, if he knew his man, the necessary funds would be forthcoming. Egbert Judson, president of the California Paper Company, had come to San Francisco in 1852, a gold-struck Englishman just past his thirties. Generous but shrewd, absorbed already in mining ventures throughout the Mother Lode, he now listened with interest to Belshaw's tale and agreed to finance his enterprise. Together they formed the Union Mining Company, with A. B. Elder as a lesser partner. Without delay Belshaw and Elder returned to Owens Valley to commence operations.

Belshaw's first problem was to bring in heavy machinery for his furnace. Throughout July he and Elder were grading a wagon road up the rugged eight-mile ascent from Owens Lake. The route was so winding that Cerro Gordans joked of having to be drunk to drive it, and so steep that motorists who visit the ghost town today find their engines boiling halfway to the top. In the narrowest passage Belshaw and Elder set up their toll gate and began collecting a dollar for every two-horse wagon entering Cerro Gordo, and a quarter for each horse and rider. Their control of the silver treasure had already begun.

Strange-looking machinery was soon swaying up the tortuous grade by jerk-line mule team for Belshaw's furnace, whose red brick foundation was taking shape above camp near the Union mine. Belshaw had planned a smelter to produce four tons of bullion per day, an unheard-of output by the lead-smelting process. Such an unwieldy ore charge could not be uniformly heated by existing means, and Belshaw found he must break new trail in furnace technique. At length he invented the "Belshaw water jacket" - a great boilerlike cylinder,

double-walled with scalding water surging between, and lined on the inside with a new fire-resisting clay found only a hundred yards below camp.

In September 1868 Belshaw fired up his blast furnace, charged his mammoth water jacket with ore and charcoal, and began producing silver-lead "base" bullion at a faster rate than the United States had ever known. Working under A. B. Elder as chief smelter, the furnacemen kept the fire roaring round the clock for months at a time. Under the withering heat the ores melted and the heavier lead and silver elements settled to the bottom to be tapped and run off into molds. The capacity soon rose to 120 bars a day, each one eighteen inches long, shaped like a loaf of bread, and marked with the name "Union." Their weight averaged eighty-five pounds, their value from twenty to thirty-five dollars.

Belshaw began regular shipments on December 1, 1868, sending his bullion to San Francisco by a roundabout wagon and boat trip through Los Angeles. Freighters with eight-mule teams loaded at Cerro Gordo for sixty dollars per ton, lurching down Belshaw's toll road with brake blocks burning, wallowing across the sandy Mojave, doubling trips over rugged San Fernando Pass with half loads, and rolling into San Pedro from three weeks to a month later. Under consignment by the John J. Tomlinson forwarding house, the metal was transferred to the steamer *Orizaba*, which carried fifteen tons per trip and unloaded its cargo three days later at the San Francisco wharves. Here it was delivered to the smelting works of Thomas H. Selby, one of San Francisco's earliest hardware merchants. Since 1865 he had operated a shot tower with lead brought from Europe; he now built a refinery to extract the lead from Cerro Gordo's base bullion and delivered the silver content to the local United States mint. What surplus metal his works could not handle he bought and shipped via Cape Horn to the smelters of Swansea, Wales.



Under the energy of W. Belshaw, Cerro Gordo was bursting with activity by the end of 1868. By an increase in miners' wages to attract new labor, Belshaw had made Cerro Gordo a "four-dollar camp," traditional mark of a full-fledged silver town. During the fall its population had jumped from two hundred to seven hundred, and by the spring of '69, as one resident reported, "roads are being constructed, town lots staked off, buildings going up, shafts sunk," and Belshaw's furnace "turning out the bullion faster than it can be carried away."

The camp's main street was filled with grizzled sourdoughs and fast-talking promoters, merchants and vagabonds, men who had turned up at every new camp from Coloma to Austin. Here in the rude street on Buena Vista Mountain they were hailing old comrades, clasping the hands of arriving rainbow hunters.

Cerro Gordo's rise as a roaring silver camp brought red-painted stagecoaches to her streets by July 1870. A weekly four-horse line began carrying passengers down the tortuous "Yellow Grade," around the lake, and through the adobe village of Lone Pine. Its terminus was Independence, county seat of Inyo, which was connected by stage with the Central Pacific Railroad in Nevada. Traffic was so heavy that a year later Owens Valley was served by a semi-weekly stage from Nevada, a tri-weekly from San Francisco via Walker Pass, and a weekly from Los Angeles across the Mojave Desert through Willow Springs and Little Lake. Between the valley and Cerro Gordo two competing stages were carrying full loads every day.

Greatest traffic into camp, however, was the brigade of pack burros constantly parading down the slopes along switchback trails, bringing ore and charcoal to Belshaw's smelter, or water from nearby springs to supply restaurants, stables, and the steam engine that fanned the furnace. Over the divide on the east slope of the Inyo Range the black pits of the charcoal burners scarred the earth. The wind-swept summits, denuded of trees,

resembled great pincushions where the pinon stumps remained. Farther down the canyons stretched the burro trails in search of Digger pines and junipers for the mine timbers and furnace coal.

Deep within Buena Vista's bowels an army of miners toiled by candlelight with pick and blasting powder, working in shifts to extract the ore twenty-four hours a day. By tubs and pulleys they hoisted the precious rock to the heads of shafts, or trundled it to the mouths of tunnels by iron carts running on miniature rails.

Dominating the entire system was Belshaw's furnace. By day its smoke clouds darkened the sky and filled the street with black cinders; by night its vermilion flame cast a glow over the town and lighted the miners across the divide at the changing of the shifts.

By 1870 sturdy frame buildings, with canopy-covered porches or high false fronts, were taking the place of rock-and-canvas shacks along the main street. Several general stores, saloons, restaurants, blacksmith and other shops, doctors', lawyers', and assayers' offices were erected, and more were rising as fast as lumber and shingles could arrive by mule team from sawmills at Big Pine and Bishop Creek. Other cabins and shops were springing up in the nearby "suburbs" of Belmont, on the east side of Buena Vista Peak, and Lower Town, on the Yellow Grade a mile below Cerro Gordo. On either side of town the mountainsides were dotted with the rock or board shanties of the miners, some of them "half house and half gopher holes," roofed with canvas and stuck to the slopes with rough adobe. Scattered among them were the ovenlike Mexican furnaces, and the ore diggings that pocked the hillside till it looked like a prairie-dog town.

Centers of activity, of course, were the polished bars and green felt tables of Cerro Gordo's several saloons. All were well patronized, but it was in the Cosmopolitan, with its two billiard tables hauled up the grade by straining mule teams, that the laughter was loudest and the smoke hung heaviest. Behind its swinging doors political caucuses and miners' meetings were held, prospecting expeditions made up, and the latest silver strike celebrated.

But too often the merrymaking was cut to silence by the crack of a revolver, for Cerro Gordo was a "wide-open camp" with only a semblance of law. Its wealth and vitality drew the outcasts of Nevada's toughest towns, who settled their differences by the pistol and forced other citizens to wear arms for protection. Even the red-shirted miners and heavy-booted teamsters, when inflamed with "Forty-rod" whisky, resorted too readily to the weapon at their sides. For the Inyo Independent, the weekly newspaper published in Owens Valley, the frequent affrays on the Hill were an inexhaustible source of news. Shootings became so commonplace in Cerro Gordo's streets that a fledgling doctor, arriving in March 1871, left town the same night without his baggage. Buttonholing the first man he met down the Yellow Grade, he willingly poured forth his story.

"My friend, I came here to buy a stock of drugs and practice medicine, but damn me if I want an interest in a shooting gallery!"

It was the combination of wine and women, however, that made Cerro Gordo's two dance halls the principal scenes of gunplay. Every night the boys gathered at the houses of Lola Travis and Maggie Moore, situated at opposite ends of town, where dance floors vibrated to the stomp of hobnailed boots and the jig time of the harp and fiddle. They had become such a lawless influence by the fall of 1871 that the more civic-minded citizens of Cerro Gordo were seeking a means of attracting the boys away from the dance halls. The honest miner, thought these reformers, must be induced to give up those revelous nights with the painted girls at Lola Travis's and Maggie Moore's. The quick time of the harp and fiddle must be abandoned for more cultural, highminded pursuits.

In consequence the Cerro Gordo Social Union, a literary and debating club, was founded early in November 1871. The largest - indeed the only - hall in town was taken over for the meetings, and the novelty of the pastime captured the camp's exuberant heart. Week after week the boys flocked to the debates, the girls found their floors deserted, and the club's founders congratulated themselves on their uplifting efforts.

Enthusiasm swelled when a full house listened one night to a heated political wrangle. The champion orator of the camp was holding the boys in silence with his eloquent phrases - "vile machinations," "secret intrigues," "crawling reptiles" - when abruptly he stopped to take a breath. In that moment the seductive strains of the harp and violin drifted in the windows from Lola's place, reviving memories of former festive evenings.

Without ceremony, as though under a spell, the boys rose simultaneously and made for the door. Up to Lola's hall they tramped, while the breathless speaker stared at empty benches. Only the club's faithful secretary, suffering from a lame foot, remained in his place. A cruel blow, one which it could not survive, had been dealt the Cerro Gordo Social Union. Hilarity returned to the dance halls, and the camp grew more turbulent than ever.



Beginning in September 1870, Cerro Gordo's bullion output was increased to nine tons per day, when a new smelter, modeled after Belshaw's, was fired up at the lower end of town. Its owner was Victor Beaudry, a French Canadian and a forty-niner, a man of short stature and long mustache, whose natty, well-tailored suits made him a "dandy" in the midst of Cerro Gordo's uncouth miners. He had been a merchant in San Francisco and Nicaragua, a gold miner at the San Gabriel placers near Los Angeles, and a sutler with the First U. S. Infantry regiment during the Civil War.

After Fort Independence was established in Owens Valley to settle its Indian troubles, Beaudry's old friendship with officers of the garrison brought him to Independence to open a store in 1865. He started another at Cerro Gordo the following year, and in accordance with the callous business customs of the day, began extending liberal credit to local Mexicans and acquiring valuable mining property through attachments on the unpaid debts. By May 1868, when Belshaw and Elder were buying a share in the Union, he owned a half interest in the same mine. In mid-August he fired up his own furnace; though of smaller capacity, it was producing base bullion a month earlier than Belshaw's.

But rather than create a costly rivalry, the Frenchman and the Irishman joined hands to monopolize Cerro Gordo's ore-smelting business. By the time Beaudry had erected his enlarged furnace two years later, Belshaw had bought out both A. B. Elder and Joaquin Almada, the Mexican who held a fifth interest in his smelter. Together the two "bullion kings" settled down to share Cerro Gordo's riches with no one save their San Francisco partner, Egbert Judson.

But already Belshaw and Beaudry had found their silver-lead bars piling up around the smelters while the wagons lagged farther behind the output. They needed a responsible freighter to haul the bullion on contract. Probably as early as December of '68 Remi Nadeau, owner of a string of ten-mule teams, agreed to deliver Cerro Gordo's output to San Pedro Harbor.

Like Beaudry, Nadeau was a French Canadian, chunky and heavy-bearded, with a quickness of speech and an inexhaustible physical energy. Born fifty years before near the city of Quebec, Canada, he had emigrated first to New Hampshire, then to Minnesota, and in 1861 reached Los Angeles, driving an ox team. Victor's brother, Prudent Beaudry, had lent him the six hundred dollars with which he founded his teaming business.

After building up a stock of wagons and mules in the commerce of Northern California, Nadeau returned to Los Angeles in 1866 and opened competition with Phineas Banning in the Salt Lake and Kern River trade. Rivalry was so bitter that when Nadeau's wife and family arrived by steamer at San Pedro in 1867 he met them with a hired boat rather than have them carried shoreward by Banning's lighter.

With characteristic vigor Nadeau entered the Cerro Gordo trade. His teams were already falling behind production, however, when Beaudry's improved furnace started in 1870. He increased his outlay to thirty-two teams, most of them with twelve mules and two wagons, and agreed to haul an unheard-of 130 tons a month. But the figure was still only half the capacity of the furnaces, and Belshaw and Beaudry found their camp frustrated by isolation. They had made themselves masters of Cerro Gordo, the bullion kings of Southern California, but the bars of lead and silver were piling up on the mountainside instead of at the refinery in San Francisco.



A twenty-two mule team hauls hay to early mining regions of Jojave Desert. On desolate a stretch show here, mules pulled their own water wagons. Rigs piled this high were apt to be blown over in windstorms.

It was little wonder, however, that Nadeau's teams had trouble over the two-hundred-mile road to Los Angeles. Starting with the eight-mile descent down the toll road from Cerro Gordo, wheels were chained in place and several spans of mules were tied behind out of harm's way in case the wagons lurched out of control. The teams reached Owens Lake near what is now Keeler and followed its shore line to the adobe village of Lone Pine. They then rolled southward, between the Sierras and the lake, whose sparkling waters at that time stretched twenty miles to the southern end of Owens Valley. Along its shores the teamsters could bathe and wash their clothes in the lathery brine, provided a supply of pure rinse water was handy. Two days' drive below the lake took the caravans past Haiwee Meadows Station to the rock-walled outpost at Little Lake, another alkaline body originally designated "Little Owens Lake." Dropping into the Mojave Desert, they traveled to the west of the modern highway in order to camp near the streams of water in Sand and Grapevine canyons. At the board-and-shingle stations at Indian Wells and Coyote Holes the teamsters watered and fed their mules.

Leaving the shadow of the gray Sierras, they toiled onward for the spring at Red Rock Canyon, where the sandstone cliffs were washed with bright red and white contrasts and sculptured by wind and rain into the weird figures of a giant toadstool or a huge wax-dripped candle, or the finely chiseled walls of a Gothic cathedral. But through this canyon the teams were doubled in strings of twenty mules while the wagon wheels sank to the hubs and the brake blocks dragged the sand. Southward lay a three-day, thirty-eight-mile stretch of waterless, sand-rutted road, always the most dreaded portion of the trip. But at the end stood Willow Springs, an adobe tavern

eleven miles east of the present Rosamond, where the Cerro Gordo teamsters met about their campfires and broke the stillness of the desert nights with their boisterous songs.

Then on they pushed through forests of spiny Joshua trees, and in springtime among fields of orange poppies and purple lupine, frightening beards of antelope that bounded gracefully across the desert. After twenty-eight miles the mules dipped their heads in the pond at Barrel Springs. At their backs stood the conquered Mojave, before them the brush-covered Soledad Pass.

Along the dry river bed of Soledad Canyon, marked only by a sleepy, one-saloon mining camp, wheels crunched through deep sand that closed over the rims and half buried the turning spokes. At length, swinging southward opposite the mouth of San Francisquito Canyon, the teams pulled up to the stage stop and tavern at Lyon's Station.

Here the teamsters, traveling in twos and fours, unhitched one set of wagons and doubled their teams for the grueling climb over San Fernando or Fremont Pass. Upward they lurched, the chock blocks dragging after each right hind wheel, ready to hold the wagon when the mules lost momentum and stopped for a breath. Over this grade the stage passengers got out and walked - and sometimes pushed. At the summit a deep cut had been carved in the late 1850s for the Butterfield stages; by 1870 the traffic was so heavy that a sprinkling cart was employed to patrol the narrow slit and dampen the dust.

Down the south slope creaked the wagons, rolling into San Fernando Valley and stopping at Lopez Station, now under water near the dam of the San Fernando Reservoir. Across the barren valley they crawled, stopping at the Eight Mile House, a station near the summit of Cahuenga Pass, and swinging into Los Angeles along Sixth Street. Then with lead bells jingling, wood and leather creaking, blacksnake popping, mule skinner shouting and cursing, mules snorting and coughing, Nadeau's teams turned up Spring Street and raised dust through the business district. At the Commercial Street platform of the railroad depot they unloaded their cargoes, repairing then to Los Angeles Street's wholesale houses to be loaded with return merchandise. Bales of hay, casks of wine, sacks of potatoes - everything from a frying pan to a crate of live chickens - headed for Owens Valley behind Nadeau's teams.



Indeed, the simultaneous arrival of the land boom and the Inyo trade had brought a sudden prosperity to Los Angeles. The farmers swarming into Southern California found a ready-made market for their surplus produce in the high-sided wagons bound for the silver mines of Inyo. Los Angeles was in the best position to supply that region with life's necessities. Most important item, however, was the feed bill for the 500-odd freight mules which hauled the silver bullion. Remi Nadeau and the other teamsters were buying Los Angeles County's entire surplus feed crop, thus establishing barley as one of its staple products. No longer were Los Angeles farmers saddled with the hauling charges and middlemen's fees that characterized export to the San Francisco market.

By 1870 silver bullion was a common sight in El Pueblo. Specimens of Cerro Gordo silver ore and bars of base metal were displayed at the Bella Union Hotel, in the News office, in the local bank, at blacksmith shops and jewelry stores up and down Main and Spring streets. Like Sacramento in '49, Los Angeles was now a bustling mining center. Scarcely a citizen but could give detailed information on matters in far-off Cerro Gordo. The camp's fame, in fact, had inspired an army of prospectors to comb the local Soledad and San Gabriel mountains, making El Pueblo their base of operations. On its street corners "quartz talk" could be heard

any time of day, and rumors were frequent of rich strikes somewhere on the horizon. Bearded miners circulated about town, talking mysteriously of fabulous ledges, their pockets bulging with rock samples.

Almost every day long trains of Cerro Gordo mule teams, containing up to twenty wagons and \$50,000 worth of silver and lead, swung through Spring and Main Streets between Sixth and Commercial, raising dust in the summer and splashing mud in the winter. Only some 340 tons of bullion passed through Los Angeles in the year and a half between Belshaw's first shipment and the end of 1869, but more than 700 tons rolled southward during 1870. "Silver coming, and goods being sent as return freight," observed the Los Angeles Star, "seem to be at present the order of the day." Though Belshaw himself would have laughed at the idea, he was taking his place with the men who were making a city of El Pueblo.

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by Remi Nadeau

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Nadeau wagon train – American Potash & Chemical Co.