

# THE FIGHT FOR CERRO GORDO

by Remi Nadeau

While the towns of central and Southern California were grappling for the silver trade, a more tumultuous fight was being waged for the source of wealth itself. Cerro Gordo silver had long been controlled by Mortimer W. Belshaw. The quick-witted Irishman had made certain of that by purchasing the biggest galena mine in camp to supply the needed lead for his furnace. He and his mine partner, Victor Beaudry, owned two of the three large ore furnaces on "the Hill." He also collected tolls on the only road entering Cerro Gordo and operated the only pipe system bringing water to the thirsty town.

Since 1869, however, the Owens Lake Silver-Lead Company had been steadily invading his domain. The Eastern concern had begun the encroachment by building a rival furnace on the lake shore at Swansea, then by entering the silver ore market and boosting the prices. Beginning in 1871, it made heavy purchases in Cerro Gordo mines and offered a direct threat to Belshaw's rule.

At the same time Belshaw was strengthening his position by acquiring other galena mines and buying up the remaining shares in his Union, the real bonanza of the Hill. He believed that the Union was the only galena lode on Buena Vista Peak, and meant to show eventually that all other mines were adjuncts of his prior claim. The advance of the Owens Lake company of Swansea only made Belshaw redouble his efforts to drive out all opposition on "Bullion Hill."



This latter-day photo shows Cerro Gordo nestled against Buena Vista Peak. Historic Union Mine is at left, later Union workings in center. Two-story building at lower right is American Hotel, built in 1871.

His first move was to obstruct the Swansea company's ability to supply itself with ore. He left his toll road in utter neglect, while each rain carved ruts and piled boulders until the Owens Lake ore wagons could travel down the "Yellow Grade" only half loaded, and at caterpillar speed. This not only doubled tolls and hauling costs but threatened to cause a shortage of ore at the furnace. John Simpson, half owner of the tunnel through which the Swansea company extracted its ore, soon became exasperated enough to challenge Belshaw's control of the Yellow Grade.

Simpson was a short, pipe-smoking Britisher, blue-eyed, sandy-haired, and scornful of anything American. He was schooled in the mines of the Mother Lode, and though irritable and demanding, was recognized as an able mine superintendent. Having arrived in Cerro Gordo a month before Belshaw, Simpson had crossed swords more than once with the bullion kings over the control of Buena Vista Peak.

On the night of August 3, 1871, the stanch Briton opened the dispute with Belshaw. Riding down the tortuous canyon, he drew to a halt at the tollhouse a mile arid a half below camp. According to custom, the keeper demanded the twenty -five -cent toll, but Simpson firmly refused to pay arid, spurring his horse through the gateway, rode on down the Yellow Grade. The keeper then rushed up to Cerro Gordo for a deputy to hunt down the offender. Simpson was arrested at Lone Pine and taken back to camp.

His purpose, of course, was to bring the situation before the courts, and he now vociferously demanded trial by jury. Ninety men were examined before an impartial panel was selected, and after a stormy two-day session it handed down a verdict of "not guilty." The factious Englishman had spent considerably more in lawyers' fees than the two bits in question, but he had brought the contest to the attention of the county.

At their next meeting the Inyo supervisors reduced Belshaw's toll rates to correspond to the poor condition of the road, and the citizens around Owens Lake began subscribing for a new road to be built by the Swansea company along a route surveyed by Simpson. Early in September the road builders tackled the slopes of the Inyo Range with picks arid shovels, carving the road which, except for its present starting point at Keeler, is still used today. Near Cerro Gordo they left the rainwashed Belshaw road and cut around the north side of the canyon. But within a mile the rugged ground forced the roadbed back into the narrow ravine, back over Belshaw's route, through two shadowy defiles around which a burro path could not be graded. When wagons began passing over the new road, surveyed and graded four-fifths of the way to Cerro Gordo by the Owens Lake contractors, Belshaw continued to collect his tolls. "Nobody can cut around him," the *Inyo Independent* claimed in describing the situation, "nor can opposition ore buyers afford to haul over his road."



Forly-niner lad, Pleasant A. Chalfant later settled in Owens Valley and founded pioneer newspaper, the *Inyo Independent*, in 1870 His editorials condemned the law.

With this latest development in the toll-road dispute, the *Independent's* editor, Pleasant A. Chalfant, joined the Swansea company in fighting Belshaw and his methods. "When an exclusive franchise falls into the hands of a man whose soul is not above a five cent piece," Chalfant began, "then the public may expect to be choked until that five cent piece is forthcoming." Belshaw had refused eight thousands dollars for the road, Chalfant pointed out, but for tax purposes declares its value not over one thousand dollars.

"We earnestly recommend that the county take it at that price for the public benefit. " Belshaw would never improve it, concluded the editor, "as long as he thinks he can thereby prevent any other individual or company from getting a foothold in what he conceives to be his especial domain - at the mines of Cerro Gordo."

When the county supervisors met at Independence in August 1872, petitions signed by almost every taxpayer in Owens Valley were presented. They asked the board "to buy this toll road and make it a free one, or if that cannot be done, to reduce the tolls to the minimum allowed by law." Their lawyer maintained that Belshaw had "worked too hard for several years in collecting tolls on his mountain trail and not enough in trying to make it good enough for wagons, and consequently he ought to be made to take a rest."

"If it had not been for the owner of that trail," retorted Pat Reddy, Belshaw's quick-witted attorney, "practically there would have been no Cerro Gordo, or need of any road at all."

With pugnacious John Simpson on the board as the member from Cerro Gordo, it was not surprising that the three supervisors favored the Owens Valley petitioners. Within a few days they reduced Belshaw's toll rate

again to half the original charge. But before they could bring themselves to appropriate the road entirely, John Simpson resigned his post and left Inyo for a temporary mining assignment in the Mother Lode. The boys on the Hill, indicating where their own sympathies lay in the contest, thereupon almost unanimously elected a new supervisor - Mortimer W. Belshaw.

That quite definitely ended the fight for the gateway to Cerro Gordo.



But the Swansea company was not the only faction opposing Belshaw's reign. Since 1870 the owners of the San Felipe mine had disputed his claim to what he called the Union lode, and thus prevented him from perfecting his dominion over the whole Hill. Their original claim was a silver-quartz lode, situated near the Union shaft on the slope above town. In February 1870, they also purchased a tunnel from John Simpson and began extending it through to their silver vein.

Within a few weeks, however, Belshaw noticed galena ore on the dump of the San Felipe company's tunnel, a yield which could only come from his own Union lode. Ignoring the "No Admission" sign over the entrance, he stormed into the black depths and ordered the San Felipe miners away from his vein. Belshaw's outburst was heeded for a few days, but soon galena rock once more appeared on the dump. He now waited for a chance to intercept one of the owners.

In April he saw Gustave Wiss, a German doctor who owned the principal interest in the mine, at the mouth of the tunnel, showing the San Felipe holdings to a prospective buyer. Belshaw abruptly charged down from his furnace and met the two on the ore dump by the tunnel entrance. Standing on the disputed galena, he asked Wiss why he did not work his own mine rather than "forcibly going into another man's mine."

"If that is the Union mine it could be proved legally," snapped the German. He claimed it as the San Felipe. To Belshaw the assertion was preposterous. The Union was a galena deposit, containing both silver and lead, while the San Felipe was a pure silver-quartz vein.



Here is a day's output of 300 silver-lead bars from a Cerro Gordo smelter. Ingots weighed 87 pounds and were worth \$335 each. When bars accumulated, miners built cabins of them.

"This is your San Felipe mine, and this is my Union mine," he roared, pointing up the Hill as he spoke. "You have forty or fifty feet to run into your tunnel before you strike the San Felipe mine; you are now taking ore out of this, the Union mine."

Time would tell, retorted Wiss, whether or not the vein belonged to him. Meanwhile, if Belshaw meant business, he could sue.

"I could sue a beggar and catch a louse," quipped Belshaw.

Here is a day's output of 300 silver-lead bars from a Cerro Gordo smelter. Ingots weighed 87 pounds and were worth \$335 each. When bars accumulated, miners built cabins of them.

He stalked away with the warning that they could never haul that ore from the dump, "nor have any of the profits or benefits

of it." Wiss knew well that Belshaw made no empty threat. Let a San Felipe crew load a single wagon with that ore and a body of Belshaw's Union miners would descend on his dump to oppose them.

But soon Belshaw was taking steps to seize the San Felipe and remove all doubt of his title to the largest silver-lead deposit in California. His partner, Victor Beaudry, a businessman as resolute as Belshaw, acquired the mortgage to the San Felipe tunnel and foreclosed in February 1871. He and Belshaw took immediate possession and hauled the galena ore to their smelters.

The actual San Felipe mine - as distinct from the tunnel - was still owned by Wiss and the others, but they had almost ruined themselves running the tunnel through ore which they could not market. To satisfy two judgments against the San Felipe for back wages, the sheriff of Inyo took over the mine and sold it at auction in the spring of 1871. Belshaw and Beaudry were on hand with the needed cash.

Now, if the San Felipe company did not redeem its property by paying off the judgments in six months, the deed to the mine would be turned over to the bullion kings and the San Felipe would lose all claim to the great bonanza of the Hill. It was not until early November, a month before the December 5 deadline, that the San Felipe moved to reclaim its property. The directors held a meeting in San Francisco and sent M. Allison Wheeler to Inyo with instructions to pay off the judgments. A forty-niner from New York, Wheeler had turned up at every big strike from the Comstock to Mexico, earning a wide reputation as an expert mining engineer. He had been the interested party who accompanied Wiss when Belshaw upbraided him at the tunnel mouth - an occurrence which had not deterred Wheeler from buying a share in the San Felipe.

Armed with a bag of more than four thousand dollars in gold coins, he now left San Francisco in frantic haste. On November 29, after a four-hundred-mile train-and-stage ride, he stepped into the sheriff's office at Independence with six days to spare. Sheriff A. B. Elder, Belshaw's former partner, was out of town; his undersheriff sat behind the desk absorbed in local matters.

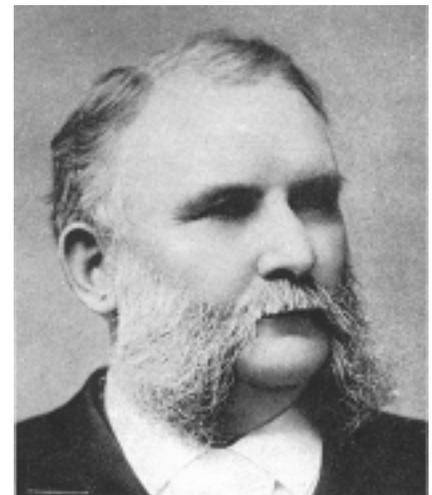
"I came up on behalf of the San Felipe Mining Company of San Francisco," began Wheeler, "to redeem the property that has been sold under execution."

The officer looked up in surprise, slowly absorbing the situation. The ownership of the San Felipe, and perhaps of the Union and the whole Hill, was about to be secured. He replied that he was ready to take a trip to Lone Pine and asked if the transaction could be deferred a couple of days. No, answered Wheeler, remembering that December 5 deadline, the business must be concluded here and now. Taking the bag of gold from his pocket, he counted out the required amount and demanded a receipt.

"While you are writing your receipt," agreed the undersheriff, "I will go and see to my horse."

He stepped across the street, and Wheeler knew he was scurrying for the office of Pat Reddy, Belshaw's shrewd attorney. When he returned Wheeler presented the receipt.

"I will not sign that now," answered the officer. Wheeler was dumfounded. Apparently they meant to deny his redemption.



Pat Reddy, who lost an arm in a Nevada fracas before coming to Owens Valley, was M. W. Belshaw's wily lawyer. Brother Ned Reddy shot first in gun fights at Cerro Gordo and Lone Pine.

"You have got the money," he cried, " and I must have a receipt."

"Counsel ordered me not to sign it now."

In desperation Wheeler stepped to the door, called in a local citizen, and, taking his name, bade him bear witness that he had offered the money to the undersheriff. But Wheeler knew it was a doubtful assurance of redemption, one that would probably wilt before Pat Reddy's glib tongue in an Inyo courtroom. In a moment the undersheriff had swung into the saddle and resolutely ridden out of town toward Lone Pine, leaving the San Felipe money in his office. M. Allison Wheeler watched him go in silent wrath, knew he would not return before December 5, and realized now that, in Inyo County, Belshaw's word was law.

From the time the deed to the San Felipe was delivered into their hands, Belshaw and Beaudry considered their hold on "the Hill" supreme. In July 1872, they sent a notice to the Owens Lake Silver-Lead Company at Swansea: No more ores could be taken from its Omega Tunnel, as they were the property of the Union Mining Company.

At this time the Swansea company had just finished perfecting a title of its own. A few days before it had bought the Santa Maria mine, last claim to the only body of galena left outside the Belshaw-Beaudry interests. For several months its ores, extracted through this Omega Tunnel, had been supplying the smelter at Owens Lake with the needed lead flux.

Therefore, when Belshaw's edict reached Galen M. Fisher, Pacific Coast manager of the Owens Lake company, he came hurrying to Inyo from his office in San Francisco. Son of a New England sea captain, California Argonaut of the late 1850s, Galen Fisher was not the man to bow before Belshaw's mandates. Storming up the grade to Cerro Gordo, Fisher went to Victor Beaudry's office and demanded the meaning of the notice. Beaudry replied that the Santa Maria lode was part of the Union claim, and gave Fisher to understand that he and Belshaw now considered that they "owned the whole Hill." The Union, he explained, is "an older title than the Santa Maria by ten days." When Fisher accosted Belshaw he received the same answer: The Swansea workings were "a portion of the Union mine . . . "

The infuriated Owens Lake manager had not expected that the entire mountain would be claimed by the bullion kings, but neither had he any intention of seeing the Swansea furnace shut down for want of lead. If the Union title was older than the Santa Maria, he would secure a title older than either - the San Felipe. Ordering his furnace superintendent to continue using Santa Maria ores, he returned to San Francisco and bought a half interest in the San Felipe Company from Gustave Wiss and M. Allison Wheeler, promising in return to finance legal proceedings for the recovery of their mine. He would contest that farcical refusal of Wheeler's redemption and retrieve the San Felipe from Belshaw's hands. That done, he meant to prove that the San Felipe, an older claim than the Union, actually gave him ownership of the whole Hill. The fight for Cerro Gordo silver was approaching a showdown.

Fisher promptly sent a counternotice to Belshaw and Beaudry, demanding surrender of the Union mine. When the order was ignored, he brought legal action. In January 1873, Fisher filed suit against the bullion kings for more than a million dollars in rents, profits, and damages, and the recovery of the San Felipe tunnel and mine, which he claimed included the great Union bonanza. Owens Valley waited through the spring while the contending factions squared off for a vicious battle in the courts. When John Simpson, who bore scars of an earlier fight with the rulers of the Hill, heard of the suit he gave bitter warning to the San Felipe group: "They will beat you at the trial and then kick you out of town."

On July 10, 1873 the "Big Suit" opened in Independence with fast-talking Pat Reddy heading Belshaw's defense counsel. The first question, a ruling to be decided by the judge, was whether Wheeler had made a valid redemption of the San Felipe mortgage. Although Pat Reddy claimed that Wheeler had shown no authority and had therefore been rebuffed by the undersheriff, Fisher's lawyers called in local witnesses to the transaction and secured a ruling that Wheeler had actually redeemed the property.

Ownership of the San Felipe was now restored to its original hands, and the question remained whether it included the Union lode. This decision was up to the jury, and with a million dollars and the Union mine hanging the balance, excitement was intense throughout Inyo. To the Owens Lake Silver-Lead Company of Swansea, of which Galen M. Fisher was manager, it meant a final battle in the struggle for Buena Vista's wealth.

Belshaw and Beaudry, of course, claimed that the San Felipe was a silver-quartz vein, having no connection with the Union galena deposit. Just before adjournment on the fifteenth, however, Fisher's lawyers obtained a court order allowing them to enter the ground between the San Felipe and Union shafts, strip the surface debris from the outcrop, and show that the galena vein extended between the two mines.

With time running short before the trial closed, the order was dispatched that night by pony rider to the San Felipe agent in Cerro Gordo, forty miles southward. Next morning a crew of men moved with picks and shovels to the slope north of camp. They found an armed body of Union miners holding the ground. It was evident that Belshaw, too, had sent a message from Independence. The San Felipe crowd was told it could not trespass on Belshaw's ground without a fight, order or no order.

Down to Independence galloped the San Felipe agent. Drawing up that night at the courthouse, he outlined the situation to the trial judge. The worthy magistrate then called in Belshaw for contempt of court in resisting his order, and admonished him against further interference. Back to Cerro Gordo rode the agent, and next day - the morning of July 17 - the San Felipe men began to strip the surface between the two shafts while the whole camp came up the Hill to watch.

Meanwhile Pat Reddy and the Union lawyers were making headway in the courtroom. A Mexican prospector named Bentura Beltran testified that he had originally located the San Felipe as a silver-quartz vein and later discovered and claimed the nearby Union lead vein. His statement was supported by the first mining recorder for the district, who swore that, when recorded, the San Felipe was not a galena vein but a silver-quartz lode. Unless those San Felipe miners uncovered a lead vein connection between the two mines, it appeared that Belshaw and Beaudry would win the battle.

Final examinations and defense plea occupied the day of the eighteenth, and except for the closing plea of the plaintiffs scheduled for next morning, the trial was over. Still the San Felipe miners had not appeared from Cerro Gordo, though word passed through Independence that they had proved a galena connection between the two shafts. That night, while the jury was confined in the courthouse, a group of Belshaw's men stationed themselves before the door to prevent the San Felipe faction from entering and presenting the latest evidence.

The San Felipe miners had, in fact, uncovered a continuous lead belt from their mine northward to within sixteen feet of the Union shaft, beyond which they dared not dig for fear of tumbling rocks into the mine to the danger of the men below. When court opened on the nineteenth, M. Allison Wheeler and several miners were present and ready to testify to the lead connection. Belshaw's lawyers, however, were quick to remind the judge that all testimony had been closed the previous day. He was forced to refuse the evidence, but one of Fisher's attorneys, in his final plea, referred to the miners' testimony that had been denied. This vein connection, he

pointed out, fixed the ownership of the galena bonanza with the San Felipe claim, an older title than the Union by six months.



Independence became the county seat of Inyo in 1866 and looked like this seven years later. Beyond Harris and Rhine store is roof of courthouse - scene of sat. over Union Mine.

Mort Belshaw, suddenly rising from his chair, bellowed his defiance. He declared it untrue that the miners had established the connection, and claimed that he had witnesses ready to deny it. When the courtroom had quieted down, the judge reproved the San Felipe lawyer for alluding to the subject and bade him continue.

At 11:30 A. M. the jury retired for a three-hour deliberation. In mid-afternoon

they filed back to their places and announced the verdict - "for plaintiffs." Belshaw's lawyers then objected that it was not a proper verdict. The judge patiently read the charge, by which the Union mine and a million dollars would be forfeited to the plaintiffs, and the foreman assented that such was the jury's decision. A demand was then made that the group be polled. Accordingly each juror, rising in his place, declared the verdict to be his own. There was no question whatsoever that the San Felipe faction had just won the biggest silver-lead mine in California.

The, people of Inyo, their sympathies with the bullion kings who had built Cerro Gordo, thought the decision an appalling injustice. Chalfant of the *Independent*, siding now with Belshaw, declared his pioneer endeavors had "done more to benefit this county than all other primary enterprises combined."

But Belshaw and Beaudry had not abandoned the fight. In a few weeks Pat Reddy got a "stay of proceedings" order which suspended the execution of the verdict pending his efforts to secure a new trial. Both the San Felipe and Union mines remained in the hands of the bullion kings while the issue dragged through the courts. The fight for Cerro Gordo, source of the Los Angeles silver trade, was not yet finished.

Meanwhile Belshaw and Beaudry were stepping up production to drain the mountain's wealth before they could be forced to give up the Union mine. They had already installed a steam hoisting works at the shaft head and attracted more miners with increased wages of five dollars per day. Now they rebuilt their furnaces to double the bullion capacity, and Cerro Gordo fairly rocked and rumbled to the heavy beat of industry.

Belshaw's lusty furnaces, in fact, had been outstripping their fuel supply since the early part of 1873. In every direction the pinons that had once dotted the slopes and canyons had been cut to the ground to provide Cerro Gordo with stoking fuel and mine timbers. But Colonel Sherman Stevens, a tall, gray-bearded New Yorker and pioneer settler of Inyo, had a new scheme. A sawmill and flume in Cottonwood Canyon, high in the Sierra on the west side of Owens Lake, was his answer to the shortage. In January 1873, he secured a \$25,000 loan from the Owens Lake company at Swansea, with the agreement that he would always transport its fuel at twenty-five cents a cord less than he charged Belshaw and Beaudry.

Immediately Stevens set about building a trail to the head of Cottonwood Canyon in the heart of the Sierra timber. Powered by a steam turbine, his sawmill was finished in June and began turning out the lumber needed to construct the long flume down the canyon. Twelve-foot V-shaped sections were boxed together at the mill and sent sliding down the finished portion of the flume to be attached to the end by the carpenters. By early November the flume reached the Los Angeles bullion road, and soon the logs, after hurtling down the slide, were loaded into wagons and hauled three miles to Stevens's wharf on Owens Lake. From there the steamer *Bessie Brady* relayed them to the mule teams which carried them on up the Yellow Grade. At last, owing to the enterprise of Sherman Stevens, Belshaw's furnaces had access to an inexhaustible supply of charcoal.

But at the same time Belshaw and Beaudry encountered an even greater obstacle: the water shortage which had long hampered the expansion of Cerro Gordo. In the summer months, when they could not operate by snow water, the two furnaces ran only intermittently from a lack of water for their steam boilers. Brought into camp by pack burros from springs several miles away, the price of the liquid ranged from five to seven cents a gallon wholesale, ten to fifteen cents retail. Teamsters Paid out seven dollars for enough to quench the thirst of a twelve-mule team. As for the town itself, where black cinders from the great chimneys settled like spilled pepper oil tablecloths and floors, such a dearth of water scarcely made for cleanliness. Spendthrifts sent their shirts to the laundry as often as once a week but seldom bought enough water to take a bath. The doughty miners took their whisky, straight and washed their faces every Sunday.

Since 1870 a pipe line owned by Belshaw had brought all additional 1300 gallons per day into Cerro Gordo, but frequent freezing spells kept them out of order much of the time. By '73 a hundred pack burros were bringing 6000 gallons to town every day, but still the supply could scarcely begin to meet the camp's needs.

Yet only tell miles north of town, in a canyon sloping eastward into Saline Valley, Miller Springs gushed from the rocks with an estimated 120,000 gallons a day. Such a source could provide Cerro Gordo with a literal flood of water. But in order to serve the camp the flow must first be pumped 1800 feet to the crest of the Inyo Range and then conveyed through eleven and one-half miles of heavy pipes into town. Nevertheless, convinced that the project was feasible, a Cerro Gordo mine owner named Stephen Boushey went to Los Angeles early in 1873 and enlisted the financial support of F. P. F. Temple, president of that town's leading bank. Together they organized the Cerro Gordo Water and Mining Company, with a capital stock of \$200,000. Temple, always anxious to sponsor enterprises that would benefit Los Angeles, took a generous slice of the stock and induced his banking partner, William Workman, to buy more.

Throughout July, the upbound freight teams were so loaded with water pipes and machinery that the ordinary freight for Cerro Gordo accumulated in great piles at the Los Angeles railroad depot. Soon a crew of men were digging a trench along the mountainsides, burying the pipes to prevent their freezing in winter weather. In the first trials the pipes burst and had to be replaced by stronger sets. Then winter storms delayed work until the spring of 1874. But by the second week in May the work was completed and Cerro Gordo was overwhelmed with 90,000 gallons a day, at four cents a gallon at the tanks, five cents retail, delivered anywhere in town.

All at once these parched miners found themselves flooded with water. They could bathe in it, wallow in it, spray each other with it in the streets. The mules at the corrals, the burros on the mountainside need no longer bray for water. No more was it considered disloyal to take a bath. Washtubs and soap suddenly leaped into demand, and the boys in their enthusiasm began sending two shirts a week to the laundry. Best of all, the furnaces could maintain full production throughout the summer months, and the bullion king's could extract Cerro Gordo's riches at capacity speed.

Belshaw now found his camp entirely freed of the limiting influences that had dogged his efforts for years. Conquest of the wood and water shortages had come at the same time the Cerro Gordo Freighting Company's efficient hauling-schedules were clearing the accumulated bullion. With mines, furnaces, and mule teams all operating to the utmost, Cerro Gordo in 1874 sent 5290 tons of ingots to Los Angeles - almost equaling the total shipment for the two previous years.

Altogether, Cerro Gordo produced \$2,000,000 for the bullion kings in 1874 alone. Though his opponents apparently held the high cards in the grim game they were playing, Belshaw was in fact reaching into the earth and making off with the stakes. Always sociable and hearty in spite of his callous business methods, Belshaw now found himself entertaining more often at his hillside house, making more frequent trips "below" to see his wife in San Francisco. In spite of the San Felipe lawsuit still hanging over their heads, he and Beaudry felt confident enough to join the Los Angeles city-makers in projecting a railroad across the desert to haul Cerro Gordo's expanding output.

As for the camp itself, the surge of production was bringing new buildings to her streets, new population to her hillsides. The Union Hotel was erected to compete with the two-story American House which John Simpson had erected in 1871, and the thousand persons who had previously remained on Buena Vista's slopes only during winter snows now found full employment the year round.

But matching the heavier flow of silver down the Yellow Grade was a new stream of gold coins across Cerro Gordo's counters, a fact which inevitably brought a return of the lawless element. Shootings became so frequent that scarcely a month passed without another affray. Though the situation held little interest for Belshaw and Beaudry, their enterprise had in fact spawned a wild town which lived by the revolver. As the *Inyo Independent* commented, "A good calaboose or a little judicious hanging is much needed upon Cerro Gordo hill."

One of the bloodiest outbursts occurred one night early in February 1873, when two Americans were desperately wounded in Maggie Moore's dance hall at the lower end of town. A few minutes later shots ran out from the camp's upper end, and a Mexican was carried out of Lola Travis's house with a ball in his stomach. Guns barked again the next night, and two antagonists fell wounded in air exchange of shots. "Cerro Gordo is a prolific source of the 'mail for breakfast' order of items," observed the *Independent*.

When the grand jury convened in March, County judge John A. Hannah, dean of the Inyo bench, reviewed the unpunished reign of crime in Cerro Gordo. He launched a bitter tirade against "these lawless ruffians who with murder in their hearts and the implements of death strapped upon their persons, congregate in public places, ever ready to discharge their death-dealing weapons upon the unoffending and unarmed citizens."

Following this outburst a trucelike quiet settled over the front for a few months. But by mid-October the *Independent* was again laconically remarking: "Our local shooting item for the current week reaches us from Cerro Gordo," and then detailing another fatal affray. On November 6, at Maggie Moore's house, two men fell dead before another burst of gunfire. "This makes five men shot, four killed outright, in this county in as many weeks," observed the newspaper. When word came of another affray in Cerro Gordo in the middle of the month, editor P. A. Chalfant had to change the score to seven men in seven weeks. "Pistols continue to crack and good men go down before them," moaned Chalfant in an editorial, "as though neither law nor society valued men's lives any more than those of so many wild animals."

Still the revolver persisted in ruling "Bullion Hill," and releases on self-defense remained the prevailing custom. Editor Pleasant A. Chalfant and Judge John A. Hannah no longer wasted words of condemnation and

reform. The citizens of Inyo had come to regard Cerro Gordo's lawlessness as a necessary accompaniment to prosperity.

Yet neither Cerro Gordo's violence nor its production boom was being shared by the rival town of Swansea. The Owens Lake Silver-Lead Company was so heavily involved in mine purchases and lawsuits in its race with the bullion kings that solution of the wood and Water shortages gave it small comfort. For months the income of Galen Fisher's company had been cut off by the collapse of the Bakersfield freighters, leaving it in financial straits by the end of 1873. Some of its Eastern stockholders foreclosed a \$98,000 mortgage, and early in March 1874 the last pigs were run out and the furnace allowed to cool for the final time. Late in July a summer cloudburst struck the Inyo Range and buried Swansea, furnace and all, with several feet of sand and debris. The very elements themselves had written the finale to the weary contest between the Owens Lake company and the bullion kings.

Belshaw's enemies still had a formidable weapon in the San Felipe mine and their suit against his Union mine. But even here lawyer Pat Reddy was making headway in seeking a new trial before the state Supreme Court. In May 1875 he succeeded, and dispatched the news to Inyo: "We have won in the San Felipe."

While this simply meant another round in the battle, Cerro Gordo erupted in celebration. Belshaw ordered a general holiday, and while the boys gathered around a great bonfire blazing in front of the American Hotel, the bullion kings made speeches from the balcony.

At a high point in the excitement someone threw his hat in the flames. Belshaw and the others followed the example, and someone suggested that they raid Beaudry's store for new hats. The hilarious miners, Beaudry among them, tramped across the street and descended on his shelves. When they burst out of his store they were wearing hats too big or too small, and many rough miners were topped with high stovepipes. The last to ransack the counters came out wearing gingham sunbonnets and paraded around the fire. Then the bullion kings threw a free dance and supper, and Cerro Gordo did not rest till daybreak.

But Los Angeles, having benefitted most from Cerro Gordo's silver, was unaffected by the battle which had raged oil Buena Vista Peak. It continued to enjoy the Owens River commerce, which by 1874 had grown to a total monthly traffic of 700 tons, and piled up an annual freight bill of more than \$700,000. About half of this income the Cerro Gordo Freighting Company was spending over Los Angeles counters at the rate of almost a thousand dollars per day. Together with the cost of air estimated 3400 tons of grain, merchandise, and machinery that flowed northward to Inyo during 1874, the whole made up a substantial portion of El Pueblo's annual \$5,000,000 wholesale business. Some 2500 tons of barley and 3000 tons of hay, constituting respectively 27 percent and 40 percent of Los Angeles County's yield, were consumed annually by the Cerro Gordo teams. The combined volume of approximately 8900 tons comprising the Inyo trade of 1874 was practically half as large as the 18,000 tons Los Angeles exported through San Pedro the same year. Almost one-third of that San Pedro export, too, was Cerro Gordo bullion.

"The value, direct and indirect, of the 'Owens River trade' . . . as furnishing a market for surplus products," stated the Los Angeles *Star*, "is almost beyond computation."

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by Remi Nadeau

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