

THE JINGLE OF MULE TEAMS

by Remi Nadeau

“**T**o this city, the Owens River trade is invaluable," declared the News. "What Los Angeles is, is mainly due to it. It is the silver cord that binds our present existence. Should it be uncomfortably severed, we would inevitably collapse."

Until the Southern Pacific Railroad could be built, Los Angeles would continue to rely on the Inyo silver traffic for its principal commerce. By the early seventies, indeed, the business life of Los Angeles was dominated by the long bullion teams from Cerro Gordo, which rumbled through the streets with two hundred tons of silver and lead every month.

Cerro Gordo's output reached 2246 tons in 1871 constituting almost one fourth of the total exports through San Pedro, and greater by far than the next largest item, 785 tons of wool. At the same time some two thousand tons of local barley, nearly all the marketed surplus, was consumed by the Cerro Gordo freight mules. According to the News, the principal Owens River freighter, Remi Nadeau, "has given employment to more men, and purchased more produce, and introduced more trade to Los Angeles than any other five men in this city."

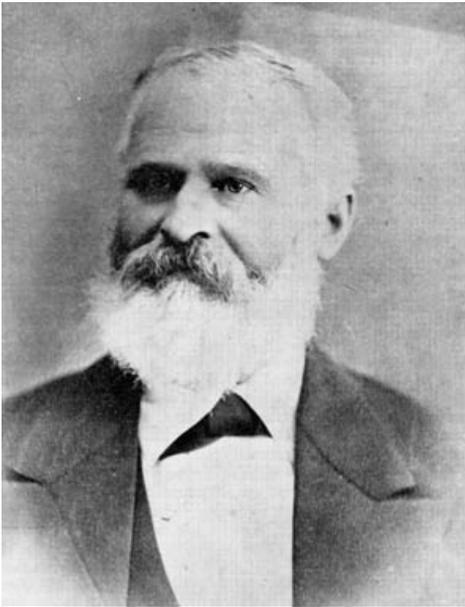
To a town whose population was little more than five thousand in the census of 1870, the mines of Inyo provided a market which supported almost every local industry. Wine and brandy, fruit and nuts, potatoes and corn rolled northward in the high-sided Cerro Gordo freight wagons.

In order to secure this trade against competing towns, the Los Angeles News began advocating erection of a smelting and refining works, while the *Star* urged a railroad to Owens Valley. In 1870, in fact, Phineas Banning had projected a narrow gauge from Wilmington to Arizona, with a branch to Owens River, but the rails were never laid. Two years later an Inyo enterpriser tried to secure a franchise for a Los Angeles - Cerro Gordo line, but the legislature refused to grant it - at the instigation, the press maintained, of the Southern Pacific.

Although other California towns - notably Visalia and Santa Barbara - had tried for years to divert the Inyo trade, Los Angeles had managed to retain it by low freight rates and timely road repairs. The real struggle for the prize did not begin until 1871 when San Buenaventura (now Ventura) conceived the scheme of turning the trade down the Santa Clara Valley to the new port of Hueneme. Behind the project was Thomas A. Scott, the eastern railroad magnate and new president of the Texas Pacific Railroad, who owned the Hueneme land. Superintending the improvements was his resident overseer, Thomas R. Bard, a pioneer settler and leading Ventura enterpriser. A member of the County Board of Supervisors, Bard secured an appropriation for repairs on the old wagon road up the Santa Clara Valley to join the Cerro Gordo bullion trail near the present town of Saugus. Quickly the *Ventura Signal* supported the plan by explaining that the route would avoid the backbreaking San Fernando grade, bring the bullion to tidewater a hundred miles nearer San Francisco, and chop five days off the round trip.

In May the eager Venturans began work on a deep water wharf to accommodate coastal steamers and were soon improving the wagon road. Ventura's merchants and farmers, anxious to reap the rich trade of Inyo, began holding meetings, raising subscriptions, and forming committees. When their activities reached an advanced stage they approached freighter Remi Nadeau on the change of route.

But the energetic Frenchman, whose wagons hauled most of the Cerro Gordo freight, was less enthusiastic over the Ventura plan; he flatly refused to deflect the trade from Los Angeles. "If it continues to this city," pointed out the Los Angeles News, "we shall be indebted to him for it."



Remi Nadeau, arriving by ox team in 1861, was Southern California's leading freighter 1869-82. "Nadeau's teams" were familiar on desert roads from Los Angeles to Nevada and Arizona.

It soon developed, however, that Nadeau was no longer the controlling agent. His contract was to expire on December 1, 1871, and when furnaceman M. W. Belshaw had insisted on reducing the freight rate for bullion, Nadeau had refused his terms. The contract was left open for a rival freighter, and if the Venturans could win him over to their route, they might still snatch the Inyo trade from Los Angeles.

Belshaw's contract was quickly taken up by James Brady, superintendent of a smelter on Owens Lake, who accepted Belshaw's figure on the total freight charge, planning to make up the difference by forcing a reduction in steamer rates. Tall and dignified, brown-haired and heavy-bearded, Brady had the jolly humor of an Irishman and the calculated strategy of a coyote. He had come to Inyo with his family in '69 to superintend the Owens Lake Silver-Lead Company, an Eastern concern attracted by Cerro Gordo's riches. Three miles north of the present Keeler he founded the town of Swansea and soon had in operation a furnace fed by the ores of Cerro Gordo.

Together with the Swansea hauling contract, which he had refused the Los Angeles teamsters, he now controlled the entire bullion shipment of Owens Valley. To the discomfiture of Los Angeles, he was about to play a shrewd game with their silver trade. When a delegation from Ventura came to see him in July, offering to carry his bullion to San Francisco for one dollar and a half per ton less than the Los Angeles steamer rate, Brady found the cards all falling in his favor.

Late in August he arrived in Ventura and, making sure that word reached the Los Angeles newspapers, rode up the Santa Clara Valley to inspect the new road. At the same time the people of Ventura, taking heart at Brady's interest, were completing their system for handling the bullion traffic. Hueneme's new wharf had already been completed twelve hundred feet into the ocean, standing in eighteen feet of water at high tide. The coastal steamer *Kalorama*, which stood ready to haul the expected silver cargo, tested the pier by running alongside and discharging a load of lumber.

The Ventura *Signal* soon announced that a contract had been let to grade through the *barranca* ravines along the Santa Clara road and that the route was nearly ready for Brady's wagons. Turning to the Santa Clara farmers, the editor asked for work on the road "here cash subscriptions could not be offered. "Let two or three, or more neighbors join together and grade down the nearest barranca and put it in good shape for a ten-mule team."

In the face of these eager preparations and Brady's calculated publicity, Los Angeles was awakening from its slumber. Counter-measures to keep the trade were called for by John G. Downey, and other builders of the city, while the Los Angeles *News* gave sharp warning: "If our city is shorn of the prosperity derived from its present trade monopoly, it will have only the shortsightedness of its own citizens to thank for the disastrous result."

Accordingly, the city was prepared to negotiate when James Brady arrived late in September; with only two months remaining before his hauling contract became effective, he was ready to see what proposition for reduced freights the Angelenos might offer. Meeting with John G. Downey and thirty prominent businessmen at the Bella Union Hotel, he told them he would withdraw the Owens River trade unless a reduction was made in forwarding rates from the Los Angeles depot to San Francisco.

The following day the city-makers moved into action. A committee was sent to approach the transportation companies on rate reductions, but received a stern refusal from the steamship officials. The managers of the San Pedro railroad, however, offered hope by request-in- further time. Brady was then asked for a week's delay, but he insisted on a definite reply in four days. Questioned on a specific rate, Brady answered that if Los Angeles would meet Ventura's offer of \$4.00 a ton, the wagons would continue to roll over San Fernando Pass.

Next day Ventura wired Brady a counteroffer - \$3.50 per ton, then \$3.25. Promptly Los Angeles took Brady up on his \$4.00 proposition. Standing the entire reduction was the San Pedro railroad, whose board of directors included John G. Downey, B. D. Wilson, and Phineas Banning. It was not a paying figure, but the sacrifice was necessary if Los Angeles were to keep its life-giving trade. The Venturans sent Brady a frantic wire asking what inducements he required but soon learned that he had signed a new contract with the San Pedro railroad. The first fight for Inyo silver was over.

The *Ventura Signal*, reflecting the shattered hopes its readers, thought Brady had trifled with their efforts toward silver dominion. As for Los Angeles, the paper predicted, "the people there will perhaps soon learn that they have shouldered a load that they can not stand up under, however willing." Certainly, with both wagon and rail freights reduced to a minimum, the Los Angeles city-builders were making a heavy sacrifice to retain the Cerro Gordo trade.

Satisfied with the new bullion freight rates he had secured by his little poker game, James Brady returned to Owens Lake and fired up his Swansea furnace. But in a few days Inyo County was astounded by a \$30-per ton raise on up-freight charges, levied by the Los Angeles forwarders who handled the shipment of merchandise northward to Owens Valley. With all his cunning maneuvers Brady had overlooked this one detail. By this outrageous markup in rates for northbound barley and machinery, El Pueblo could easily make up for its concession on the down-freight bullion charges. James Brady, Owens Valley, and Ventura County soon realized they had been neatly dealt a grinning joker.

"Our energetic neighbors of Los Angeles were too much for us all," moaned the *Ventura Signal*, "even for your long-headed, shrewd, calculating Brady."

But though Brady had been outsmarted by the Los Angeles city-makers, he was ingenious enough to conceive a new means of saving expenses on the long wagon haul between Cerro Gordo and the southern coast. Through the spring, of 1872 a stanch little steamboat took shape near the dock at Swansea, designed by Brady to haul Cerro Gordo silver across Owens Lake and cut three days out of the bullion trip. Eighty-five feet long, sixteen wide, resembling a ferryboat in appearance, Brady's craft was launched at Swansea on June 27, 1872. With her four-foot propeller churning up a foaming wake, she steamed across Owens Lake loaded with seven hundred bars of bullion. At Cartago, the new transshipping point at the southwest corner of the lake, her cargo was unloaded, to be carried southward to Los Angeles by mule team.

On the morning of Independence Day the population of southern Owens Valley congregated at Ferguson's Landing, five miles south of Lone Pine. Amid a hail of cheers the little daughter of James Brady stepped

forward, broke a bottle of wine on the bow of the stubby steamboat, and spoke her own name, "*Bessie Brady*." A steamer excursion to Cartago and a dance at Lone Pine completed the christening of the Bessie Brady, the second commercial lake steamer west of the Mississippi and the first west of Salt Lake. Chugging across Owens Lake with seventy tons of bullion per day, she soon transferred the pile of accumulated ingots from Swansea to Cartago. From here the jingling mule were able to deliver the bullion in Los Angeles with only a two weeks' haul.

Early in 1872 a new threat to the silver trade loomed in the San Joaquin Valley, where the Southern Pacific was preparing to extend its railhead southward from Merced. Unless Los Angeles could contrive to keep the trade, as the *News* warned, the Cerro Gordo freight wagons would soon swing over Tehachapi Pass to the railhead in San Joaquin Valley.

"When the day arrives that it will be cheaper for the Owens River ores to be shipped over the shorter route overland . . . Los Angeles will find itself totally deprived of the trade. Let it once lose this trade, its recovery will be beyond hope."

By the summer of 1872 the coming of the iron horse had fired the southern end of the central valley with sudden activity. The people of Bakersfield, a village of rough wooden stores and six hundred citizens, set about repairing the wagon road over Tehachapi Pass and improving the nearby crossing of Kern River. "We hear the subject of freighting to Owens River discussed, more or less," observed Bakersfield's Kern County *Courier*, "by nearly every one owning a team."

Standing ready to lead the Bakersfield freighters was one of the town's pioneer settlers, Julius Chester. A Connecticut Yankee who had come to California in 1854, Chester was the owner of a large mercantile and livery business and the leading citizen of Bakersfield. As freight agent for the Southern Pacific's new terminus at Tipton, fifty miles north of Bakersfield, he secured a favorable forwarding rate for Inyo bullion and in October journeyed to Cerro Gordo to negotiate with Belshaw and Beaudry for the next year's freight contract.

To his good fortune those gentlemen were disgusted with James Brady's hauling arrangements. Several thousand silver-lead bars were lying idle at the smelters, and now the independent Los Angeles freighters were threatening to withdraw their teams unless the furnace operators abandoned the contract system. Julius Chester returned to Bakersfield with the Cerro Gordo contract, formed the Kern and Inyo Forwarding Company, and began operating teams between Owens Valley and the Tipton railhead. This new route, as Chester knew, was as yet no shorter than the Los Angeles trail. But he was banking on the expectation that the Southern Pacific would reach Bakersfield within a few weeks and thus shorten the wagon route to make it profitable.

By October the farmers near Bakersfield were preparing to switch their crops from wheat to barley. Farm families, some of them from Los Angeles County, were beginning to settle virgin land on the Tehachapi summit. Bakersfield suddenly experienced a building boom as new frame houses and stores rose along the rutted streets.

Although some of the Los Angeles teamsters continued to handle what traffic remained between the pueblo and Owens River, the principal freighters from Southern California abandoned the road. William Osborne, subcontractor for James Brady, quit the teaming business entirely and ran successfully for the Los Angeles city council. Anticipating the change of route, Remi Nadeau had already contracted to haul the output of the flourishing borax camp of Columbus, Nevada. Thirty-four of Nadeau's teams, each now equipped with two wagons and fourteen mules, left Los Angeles on November 18, 1872 to haul on the route between Columbus

and Wadsworth on the Central Pacific Railroad. The city-makers having rescued the vital Inyo trade from Ventura's grasp, had relaxed their vigil long enough for Bakersfield to make off with the prize.

No sooner had the silver-laden wagons departed than El Pueblo's business, already crippled by a crash in the wool market a few months before, sank farther toward depression. Money became scarce, building construction was abandoned, carpenters and mechanics were laid off, and the sign "To Let" appeared on Los Angeles doors for the first time in years. The only market left open to Los Angeles producers now was San Francisco, and the necessary freight charges and forwarding commissions robbed them of the same profits they once enjoyed through the Inyo trade.

"Our people have lost by their supineness," groaned the Los Angeles *Star* in January 1873, "the sources of wealth which could have been maintained for years through the Owens River trade. During the time when our streets were filled with these teams, prosperity smiled upon our community and 'everything was lovely'; but that time has passed."

Chester and the Bakersfield freighters, however, were beset with a host of obstacles as they took control of the trade. The winter rains of 1872-73 played havoc with the crude trails, forcing the teams to fight slowly through bogs and around slippery turns. One bullion wagon coming down the precipitous Yellow Grade from Cerro Gordo suddenly broke its brake bar, rolled into several mules, and hurtled off the road into the canyon below. Another, bucking a severe rainstorm along the bullion trail below Owens Lake, was picked up by the raging wind and rolled over and over through the sagebrush.

The Kern and Inyo Forwarding Company was also being hampered by the Bakersfield merchants, who were demanding exorbitant prices for the barley and hay with which the teams were fed. Overwhelmed with difficulties, Chester had allowed twelve thousand bars of bullion to accumulate at Cartago by the beginning of 1873, with half as many more piled up at Cerro Gordo and Swansea.

By February, the furnace operators were growing desperate and Cerro Gordo was falling into stagnation. The furnaces were "running light" and the night shifts were withdrawn from the mines. With wood choppers, coal burners, miners, and burro packers thrown out of work, times on Buena Vista Peak became so dull that the daily stage trips from Owens Valley were reduced to a tri-weekly service, with a pony express bringing in the U.S. mails on alternate days. By March 15 the situation had reached such a pass that the Inyo *Independent* commented dryly: "Those bullion contractors will have to stir their boots pretty lively soon, or there will be a dearth of circulating medium observable in this section."

To add to Chester's misfortunes the epizootic, a fatal horse contagion, struck Kern and Inyo counties in the middle of March. So dreaded was the disease that when several Los Angeles teamsters, crawling across the Mojave with Owens Valley freight, heard of the epidemic they immediately unhooked their mules and lumbered southward back to El Pueblo, leaving their wagons and merchandise along the desert road. Trading over Tehachapi Pass was paralyzed, and Chester's Kern and Inyo Forwarding Company suspended operations. By the end of March, with seventeen thousand bars at Cartago alone, ox teams were put on the bullion trail to ease the stagnation. For the next two weeks the streets of Bakersfield and Los Angeles echoed to the bawling of plodding cattle and the "gee-haw!" of the bullwhacker. But fortunately the plague subsided early in April, and the first of Chester's mule teams left Bakersfield once more for Owens River.

At the same time, after several months of bridge and aqueduct construction, the Southern Pacific resumed tracklaying south from Tipton. A portable warehouse, which moved with the advancing tracks to facilitate

bullion delivery, was put into service by Chester's freighting company. Only by this shortening of the wagon route could he hope to fulfill his contract and turn ruin into profit.

But after the track had moved southward twenty-four miles in two months, Chester found the Southern Pacific blandly erecting a new railhead terminus halfway between Tipton and the Kern crossing. This new "town" of Delano, two days' wagon haul from wood, water, or habitation, struck the final blow to his tottering concern.

Plainly Julius Chester and the people of Bakersfield had reached in vain for the silver wand that had touched Los Angeles with such magic growth. If the railroad would not cross Kern River for an indefinite period, the Kern and Inyo Forwarding Company must discontinue operations. In seven months Chester's teamsters had moved between 600 and 1000 tons of bullion, but had allowed 1200 more to accumulate in Owens Valley. By the middle of May 30,000 ingots lay piled like cordwood at Cartago and Cerro Gordo, while the three furnaces turned out 300 more per day.

At Swansea and Cartago the local miners had piled the pigs into brick walls, stretched canvas over the tops, and were living in the silver-studded shanties. The stranger traveling along Owens Lake found himself in an unbelievable silver-lined fairyland where precious metals were used for building materials. But to furnacemen Mortimer Belshaw and Victor Beaudry, this evidence of Chester's collapse meant disaster unless something could be done to market those ingots and reap more capital to continue operations.

At this juncture word reached them that Remi Nadeau was driving down Owens Valley with several freight teams from Nevada. The Columbus borax marshes could not be worked during the summer months, and freighting along the alkali trail to the Central Pacific had fallen to a trickle. Recalling the regularity of Nadeau's teams, Belshaw and Beaudry rode down the Yellow Grade and hailed him near Owens Lake. There, squatting in the sand while the mules stomped and wheezed behind them, they told their troubles to the white-bearded Frenchman. He agreed to return to the Inyo trade, on condition that they would join him in forming a freighting company and would put up \$150,000 to build a line of stations along the bullion trail. Only with these improvements, Nadeau maintained, could he promise to clear those mountainous piles and move all the bullion they could produce.

Belshaw and Beaudry, aware that the continued operation of their smelting combine depended upon the movement of the bullion, promptly accepted Nadeau's terms. They joined him in forming the Cerro Gordo Freighting Company and cancelled Julius Chester's contract for his failure to fulfill its provisions. The San Joaquin route was abandoned. Chester had not only proved it impracticable, but the Bakersfield merchants had cut their own throats by demanding excessive prices for their feed.

Immediately Nadeau transferred the rest of his forty teams from Nevada to Owens Valley, loaded the wagons with bullion, and started them rolling for Los Angeles. On the night of June 6, 1873, El Pueblo heard the old familiar jingle of team bells and clank of swing chains as the vanguard of Nadeau's teams rumbled up Sixth Street, heavily loaded with Cerro Gordo silver. The Los Angeles press hailed their coming as the end of the slump that had checked the tide of the boom.

"We shall now have a revival of the considerable trade which these teams formerly created in Los Angeles," announced the *Star*, and welcomed Nadeau with a poem in his honor, written in French. "It will give a wonderful impetus to trade here, and times will be lively again and money plenty," agreed the *Express*. "Let our merchants set their houses in order, and replenish their stocks, and prepare for the 'good time coming.'"

"In Bakersfield the *Courier*, bemoaning the loss of the traffic, put the blame on "the practice of extortion upon the teamsters" through high feed prices. "They do things differently in Los Angeles. There they are guided by broad considerations of policy looking to grand results, and all attempt at petty gains . . . is frowned down."

As for the mining country, the Inyo *Independent* hailed Nadeau's return as "a perfect guarantee that hereafter we will not have immense piles of bullion bars lying in useless idleness awaiting shipment." Full employment returned to Buena Vista Peak as the mines and furnaces swung into twenty-four-hour production, and on June 23 the Cerro Gordo stage resumed its daily trips.



But suddenly, just as Los Angeles found its vital silver trade returning, a final threat developed. The San Pedro railroad, now owned by the Southern Pacific, raised its bullion rates to the old figure, and Ventura renewed its efforts to divert the traffic.

Quickly the city-makers rose to the emergency. Something had to be done by El Pueblo's businessmen for, as John G. Downey warned, if they lost the Cerro Gordo trade through a high railroad tariff, "their commerce and the arm of their farmers and producers would be paralyzed."

Accordingly, Judge Robert M. Widney, recently prominent in the railroad subsidy contest, visited all the local merchants to secure their signatures on a notice for a general meeting. On the night of July 31, 1873, the city-builders assembled in Widney's courtroom, elected John G. Downey to the chair, and set about to form the Los Angeles Chamber of Commerce.

By banding together in a recognized body, Downey told them, they could wield strong pressures, even build a competing railroad, in order to bring fares down and keep the silver traffic. "We built the present railroad," he thundered, "and if it raises the rate of freight to the general detriment, we can build another railroad. We don't know our own strength."

Moreover, as Downey and other speakers agreed, the time had come for the city to publicize itself abroad; Los Angeles should be as well known throughout the nation as Santa Barbara and San Diego. A Chamber of Commerce, initially called a "Board of Trade," was organized, and the merchants brought to a close what the *Express* labeled "the most important meeting concerning the actual interests and prosperity of Los Angeles, which ever assembled . . ."

Their anxiety over the Cerro Gordo commerce was soon put to rest, for Remi Nadeau began regular shipments in spite of the Southern Pacific markup and soon joined the Board of Trade himself. But the emergency served to bring the city-makers together into a forceful organization. They met again August 9, adopted a constitution, elected officers, signed up eighty-six members, and changed the name to "Chamber of Commerce." First president of the Chamber was Solomon Lazard, a Los Angeles merchant since 1852 and a former city councilman. Joining him in pressing the interests of the city were ten other directors including John G. Downey and Robert M. Widney.



With furious exertion Nadeau set about perfecting his freight system. Between Cerro Gordo and Los Angeles a dozen stations were set up at thirteen to twenty mile intervals - a day's haul apart. Where the existing stations were not well spaced, Nadeau built his own at the nearest source of water.

The first was built at Cerro Gordo Landing, on the eastern shore of Owens Lake, at the foot of the Yellow Grade. From here the Bessie Brady, newly acquired by the freighting company, carried the bullion across the waters to the wharf at Cartago. Southward from there the company established stations at Rose Springs, Nine Mile Canyon, Coyote Holes, and spanned the rest of the Mojave Desert with outposts at Red Rock Canyon, Forks-of-the-Road, Willow Springs, Cow Holes, and Barrel Springs. The grueling haul through Soledad Canyon was eased by stops at Mill Station and Mud Springs, while Lopez Station brought the teams to San Fernando Valley. Abandoning the grade of the Cahuenga Pass, Nadeau switched the last lap of the route by cutting a road across San Fernando Valley through the thick cactus and brush jungle of Tujunga Pass, across the Los Angeles River east of the pueblo, and into her traffic along Aliso Street. This was the first thoroughfare through the hitherto impenetrable wilderness that separated the Santa Monica and San Gabriel Mountains. At his headquarters in Los Angeles, Nadeau took over most of the block bounded by Fort (now Broadway), Hill, Fourth, and Fifth streets for his barns, corrals, stables, and blacksmith and repair shops.

On August 9 the Los Angeles *Mirror* reported the system in regular operation. "The prospect for a rapid expansion of this city and its commerce was never more flattering than at present. Nadeau's teams are now arriving and departing as of old. By September the entire line of eighty teams was on the road, each with fourteen mules and three mammoth wagons. The lead "schooners" were equipped with wheels five feet high and six inches wide; all three were huge wooden hulls, built high and narrow, with a fat water barrel on both sides.



This outfit - eighteen mules and three wagons - was one of a hundred operated by freighter Remi Nadeau to Cerro Gordo and other mining towns in the 1870s. Bells on collars of lead pair warn last traffic around blind bends. Mrs. Jack Gunn.

Each set of three wagons had a freight capacity of ten tons, although the average load ran somewhat less. The standard cargo of 170 silver-lead ingots, each weighing eighty-seven pounds, barely covered the floors of the wagons; the frequent up-loads of baled hay, however, towered so high that the wagons were sometimes blown over in a severe windstorm.

Two pairs of teams operated on each lap between stations, one pair heading northward for Owens Valley and the other plodding southward for Los Angeles. They passed each other during the day, and their wagons were hauled onward next day by the teams operating over the route to the next station. Thus two teams would

head southward with bullion one day, to be unhitched and fed at one of the stations. Next morning they would trade wagons with the teams that had arrived from the south and head back northward over the same route with a load of merchandise. While the wagons rolled through from Cartago to Los Angeles, the teamsters and mules plodded back and forth between the same stations day in and day out. In this manner between forty-eight and fifty-two teams did the actual bullion hauling, while the rest supplied the stations with barley and hay for the animals. The system, unique in Western freighting, was operated on an almost hourly schedule like a stagecoach line.

The dust raised by the teams was so intolerable that over many stretches of alkali waste the teamsters rode with neckerchiefs pulled over their faces, and made frequent stops to swab the eyes and nostrils of the mules. Driving second team in the pair was particularly odious because of the cloud of dust stirred by the lead outfit. The custom became general that when a lead muleskinner allowed his animals to bog down in mud or sand so as to require the other team to pull them out, he must give up his lead position and eat dust till his partner became mired and needed help.

Indeed, it was to provide added spans of mule power in case of trouble that the great teams traveled in pairs. Over San Fernando Pass, for example, the fourteen-mule teams were doubled for several miles to the summit, so that a continuous line of twenty-eight animals tramped up the grade to the crack of the blacksnake and the oaths of the driver. In this way the teamsters would haul one set of wagons to the top, then unhitch the mules and return for the other set. The Yellow Grade from Owens Lake to Cerro Gordo was a steeper climb than San Fernando Pass, but the wagons were generally half loaded with return merchandise, and the teams could usually reach the camp without doubling.

But the steepness of the Yellow Grade made the downward haul the most perilous task in the entire route. At any moment the bullion-laden "mountain clippers" might lurch forward out of control, ramming into the mules and dragging them over the cliff. One of Nadeau's teamsters soon invented a "double brake" which clamped the wheels like a vise to hold back the wagons. In addition several wheels were chained in place, and iron "shoes" fastened to the rims like skis to provide added friction against the road.

The first two animals in front of the lead wagon were called the "wheelers" - usually heavy draft horses who could support the tongue and take the shocks of the vehicle. The rest were mules, who could stand more hardships and were more easily managed in the long harness than the high-strung horses. Next pair ahead of the wheel horses were the "swings," or "pointers," who were hitched to a heavy chain extending beyond the end of the tongue. In front of these plodded the "sixes," then the "eights," the "tens," the "twelves," all pullin, the wagons by means of that long "swing chain" which hung about a foot from the ground.

At the head of the team stepped the "leaders," each wearing a bow of jingling bells arched over the collar; by this means fast-moving vehicles were warned of the approach of the two-mile-an-hour bullion teams around a blind bend. On turning such a corner the inside swing mule, and sometimes one of the sixes as well, had to jump over the chain and pull at counter angles with his partner to keep the wagon from going straight up to the point of turning,

Riding the near wheeler, the mule skinner controlled his team with a blacksnake whip and a jerk-line rope running from the lead wagon's brake handle through harness rings to the near leader's halter. A jerk on that line meant a right turn, a steady pull meant a left. With each outfit rode a "swamper," the driver's assistant. During the day's travel he usually handled the brake on the rear wagon; in camp he helped to hitch and unhitch the mules and make repairs on wagons and harness.

Remi Nadeau himself, when he was not buying feed or securing merchandise contracts, was riding up and down the road to eliminate bottlenecks and keep the silver flowing southward. Once a month he traveled from station to station in a buggy weighted with gold coins, paying each mule skinner forty-five dollars in addition to his board. But at other times, when the vigorous freightman made a business trip to Owens Valley, he galloped on horseback and mounted a fresh animal at each station.

Through his dynamic drive the teams began to catch up with the furnaces by late fall of 1873. Belshaw and Beaudry shut down their smelters and allowed the teams to gain at a faster rate while they installed larger equipment. Their daily output was increased to an average of two hundred bars per smelter, so that by the beginning of 1874 the wagons were rocking down the Yellow Grade with four hundred pigs - eighteen tons - every day, twice the output of three years before.

Gradually the great piles of ingots at Owens Lake were dwindling, and the shanties made of silver-lead bricks tumbled before the steady advance of the freight mules. In the middle of August the last ingots were cleared and the teams were ready to carry on at the pace set by the smelters. Within a year the Cerro Gordo Freighting Company had hauled away that monumental 1200-ton bullion accumulation and marketed the 500-ton-per-month furnace output as well.

El Pueblo's city-makers found their silver prize greater than ever, a bountiful treasure worthy of their struggles. By setting low forwarding rates for bullion they had secured it against the designs of Ventura, and by maintaining fair prices on mule-team provender they had retrieved it from Bakersfield. Now more than ever the trade they had won was enriching Los Angeles, prolonging its land boom, sustaining it until rail connection could be achieved. "It is the rich trade of the mining regions about us," declared the *Express*, "and none more so than Lone Pine, Independence, Swansea and Cerro Gordo, that has encouraged the building of our elegant brick blocks, and furnished tenants for our numerous stores and dwellings."

Nowhere was Los Angeles County's growth more keenly felt, however, than in the towns which had failed to gain the Owens River prize. "That region is heavily indebted to Inyo county for its prosperity," commented the Visalia Delta, "having long enjoyed a lucrative trade therewith." Feed for the Cerro Gordo teams, observed the Bakersfield Southern Californian, "has been the great traffic of Los Angeles, and has perhaps done more to build up that city and develop the county than any other one enterprise." Los Angeles was trying to hold the trade against competing towns, declared the Santa Barbara Index, so as to "enrich herself in the future as by it she has enriched herself in the past."

Text excerpt from "*City – Makers, The Story of Southern California's First Boom, 1868-76*"
by Remi Nadeau

Picture credits: Remi Nadeau – Marguerite M. Nadeau
Nadeau wagon train – Mrs. Jack Gunn