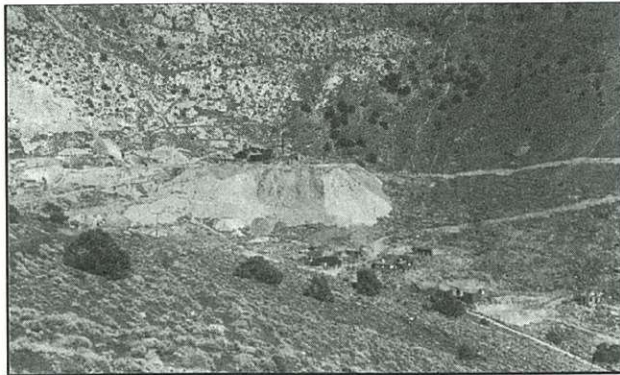


CERRO GORDO, A SEARCH FOR WATER

by Steve Rush

From its lofty perch near 8,000 feet, the old silver boom town of Cerro Gordo, California, contemplates the long view across the Owens Valley towards the eastern wall of the Sierra Nevada Mountains.. Situated just below a high saddle in the Inyo Mountains, the town and its owners, Jody Stewart and Mike Patterson, first became familiar to me in 1986, with introductions being made for both through George Copenhaver. George is a world class hard rock mining geologist and a true friend who I have shared many a campfire with. We've also made many a "dead soldier" out of live bottles around those fires, but that's another story entirely.

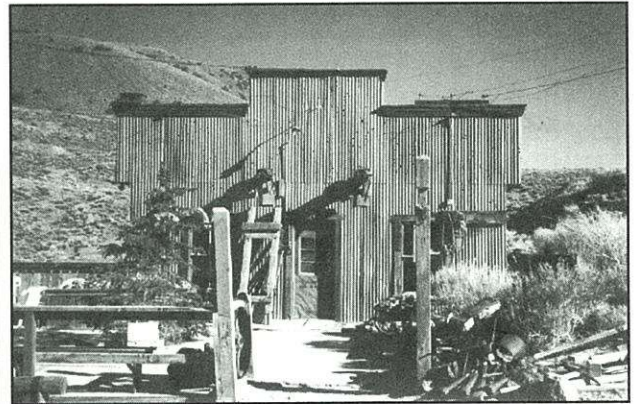


A far shot of the Cerro Gordo Mine buildings, with a portion of Cerro Gordo shown below. The tailing pile is indicative of over 37 miles worth of "the underground".

Mike and Jody have lived among the Cerro Gordo ghosts since the summer of 1985. The town prior to this wasn't in the best of shape with many of the original buildings and artifacts having been hauled down the hill to Lone Pine and points beyond. A tremendous amount of history had been scattered across the desert before their arrival.

They immediately began a series of historical restoration projects, notably on the 1871 American Hotel, the 1880's bunkhouse, the 1890's general store (just crammed with stuff from the past...) the 1908 Gordon House

where Mike and Jody now reside, the list goes on. Assistance has come to them through friends and historical organizations, but what you see today is mostly of their own doing. Mike refers to it as their "histo-reclamy" period. To wander about the town today is as close as it gets to touching the past.



The General Store, circa 1980's. Stuffed to the gills with Cerro Gordo artifacts.

And anyone can touch the past here, the town site is alive once more with modern pioneers who come to stay for one day or several. The Bunkhouse sleeps up to fourteen comfortably, with other buildings such as the American Hotel and the Belshaw House containing numerous furnished rooms. I've seen the town with more than fifty people moving about at various tasks or just relaxing with the view.

The culinary delights provided by Jody for her hungry minions would fill up pages of any restaurant reviewers accolades. And it isn't just plain good food either. It's gourmet style every time I've eaten here. To spend time here, working or otherwise, and enjoy the company and hospitality of Mike and Jody is almost as special as a mining artifact collectors show. Real close, anyway.

The mining district of Cerro Gordo, meaning "fat hill" in Spanish, goes back to the mid 1860's with rich outcrops of silver ore

being discovered by adventuring Mexicans . The ore found during this period was roasted in rough furnaces called “vasos”. Remnants of vasos and even some of the slag can still be found here. The town of Cerro Gordo itself dates to about 1866, when an enterprising French Canadian named Victor Beaudry opened a store around the mines being developed by others. As was often the case in young towns of the last century, it was the store owners who usually were the cagey ones to come out ahead of the miners, and Cerro Gordo was no exception with Beaudry.

According to historical accounts of the times, Beaudry foreclosed on two of the richest silver mines on the hill through a settlement of past due accounts for goods sold to the mine owners. One of these mines, the Union, was in later years developed into the Cerro Gordo mine, by far California’s richest silver mine. In 1868, Mortimer Belshaw arrived in Cerro Gordo fresh from the silver mines in Sinaloa, Mexico, with driving ambition and the knowledge of smelting silver ore. A partnership between Beaudry and Belshaw developed and the town of Cerro Gordo was on its way into history as a camp soon to be known as a wide open town where fortunes, and lives, could be won and lost in a day.

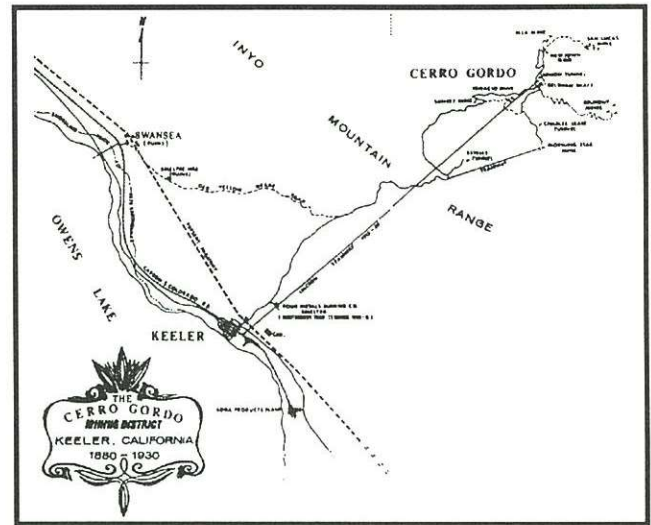
With a standing population around 2,000 and a population at its peak around 4800, the mining camp smelted silver ore and shipped bullion to the then small town of Los Angeles. It is no small fact the silver from Cerro Gordo financed the initial building of this city to its present day destiny.

With that very quick tour through a bit of this regions history, you’re now brought up to recent times. Notably April 17, 1997.

This day found Dan Quigley, Roger Peterson, Perry Sheffield, and myself on a slow dusty ascent to the town site. Our visit was to begin a search for a resource almost as valuable as the minerals men once sought here - water. Roger is a fellow Coloradan who was in California on business and was able to

pick up the three of us at the Ontario Airport about a three hour drive south of Cerro Gordo. Our descent into the Belshaw Shaft of the Cerro Gordo Mine was to be by rope, with Perry along as our expert in this field. Perry was later to say that the flight in from Denver was more frightening than any drop down a cliff face, or a mine shaft.

The “Yellow Grade” is an arduous climb from the Owens Valley floor to Cerro Gordo. It was a tough route for an eight up ore wagon laden with supplies, a tough route for today’s modern vehicles, and a very tough climb for an old Marmon heavy truck with 1200 gallons of water. Mike Patterson has been driving up and down from The Hill for several years now hauling water from the old mill site of Swansea to Cerro Gordos water tanks. Down, up, and back is a long twelve hour day.

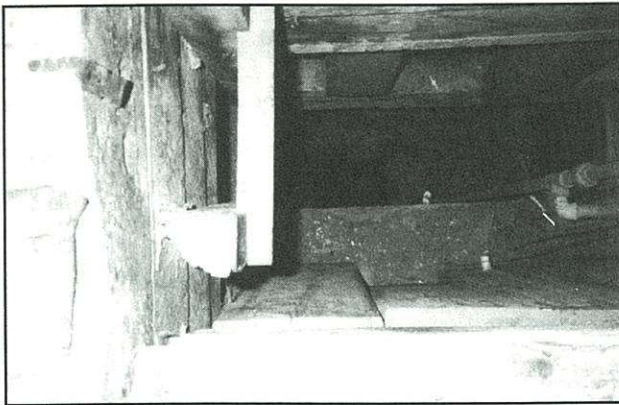


Our search for water was to make life at the present day townsite a bit easier for Mike and Jody. Why? Essentially, three motives. One, the world needs more people who will caretake our history the way these two have, two, life really is what you put back in, and three, well, the Cerro Gordo mine has never been open to modern eyes searching for artifacts.

Within Professional Paper Number 408 on the Cerro Gordo Mining District, reference is made to a cistern of sorts which was constructed in a drift off the 700 level. The

original intent was to contain nuisance water seeping into the mine here, with water as scarce then as now a pump had been placed here to pipe water up and out to the town. The pump is circa 1930's vintage, and hadn't seen use for about fifty years.

Exploration by mining companies during the period from 1965 to 1975 had rumored the water was still there. This trip we would confirm or deny for Mike and Jody that water was indeed there in useful quantities, and that it could somehow be brought to daylight.

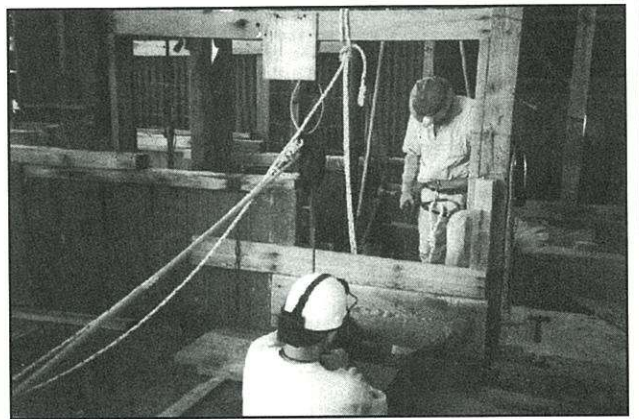


Belshaw shaft collar with view of the 900' ladder. A very deep hole indeed.

Two ways remain today to access the Cerro Gordo Mine. Both involve a decent down the 900 foot deep Belshaw Shaft; one by manway on a square nail constructed ladder and one by the old safety cage worked by the 100 year old Joshua Hendy hoist works. The hoist last saw use when put into dicey operation for a few days worth of exploration in 1984, so this left the manway.

Greetings exchanged and equipment unloaded, we opened the manway door and prepared our decline. Somehow, it was chosen that I should go first. I guess it made sense, since Perry was our expert in rope technology who was to belay, Roger "has kids", and Dan... well, Dan's about 6' 7". Besides, it was pointed out, I have no children am somewhat proportioned to the miners stature of the last century, and only act as vice president for my company (and we all know how expendable

they are). So away into the void I descended, well roped in from above.



Belshaw Shaft Collar

Dan Quigley on belay in foreground with Steve Rush peering down the 900' manway acting as "radioman" for Roger Peterson down the hole.

A quick perception on what a 900' shaft really is. Next time you're in a large city, crane your neck to size up the average tall building. Most of them are at least fifty stories or better in height, double that distance and you will be looking at something about one hundred feet shy of nine hundred feet.

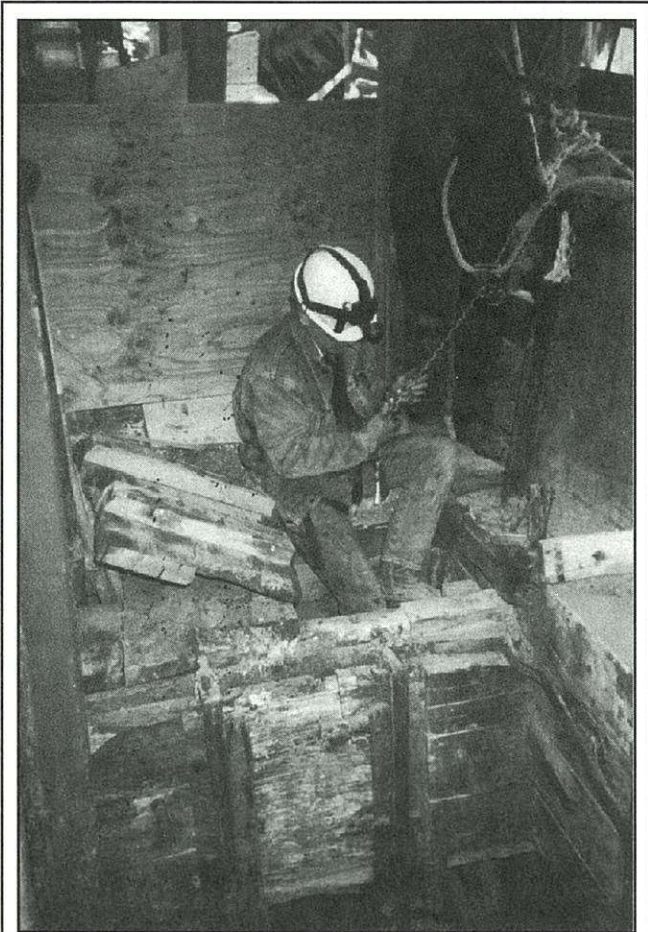
It's a far piece, up or down.

Several levels exit into the mine from the Belshaw. Read as a distance below the collar, they are the 86 level, 200 level, 400 level, 500 level, 550 sublevel, 700 level, and the 900 level. The manway ladder is continuous (except where rungs are missing...) the entire way with no landings. At the 86, the first hangup on this adventure proved to be a rock about two feet in diameter which had fallen and become lodged between the shaft wall and the cribbing separating the cage way from the ladder.

Down was no longer an option, so I crabbed my way over to the 86 station across the shaft cribbing. The black abyss yawned far below my heels. I felt a bit like Luke Skywalker in one of the Star Wars shots where he is outside the Empires ship, endless space below. Only this scene didn't pay as much.

Dragging a ladder stored in the drift

back across the shaft at least allowed the possible opportunity to remove the rock, with help from above (including Roger or Dan).



Roger Peterson preparing to descend into the Cerro Gordo Mine.

Observing that I had so far survived and was successfully climbing back up to the collar, Dan and Roger were in harness to descend in their turn by the time I arrived at the top. This evening, the Tommyknockers appeared to be taking a break.

It is important not to drop heavy items such as rocks down a shaft lest they destroy sections of ladder or cribbing, so it took some time and effort for the Dynamic Duo to carefully inch the rock up and onto the ladder then across into the 86. Did I mention how important ropes are here? Don't try this at home. Better yet, don't try this at all. Better to read about it from the relative safety of your arm chair close to the floor.

After a meticulous hour or so, rock safely ensconced into the 86, Dan and Roger resurfaced for water and to stand on something solid again. My turn in the hole, I made my way into the darkness. Past the 86, into new territory. Two days and thirty feet later I observed another problem. The rung in my hand, that I had so confidently placed my weight on, was broken in the middle. Another underground lesson, always keep your feet tight in against the inside of the ladder sides which keeps your weight distributed off the center so that if a rung is broken in the middle, you won't know it until you're eyeballing it at face height.

One hundred sixteen feet down, five hundred eighty four to go. This way was going to be a long night with several days attached if we were going to depend on the ladder to get us to the 700. The next few rungs were also shattered, and in a number of places the side pieces were split.

Back up to the collar with this disappointing news, it was greeted with a scowl by Roger. For those of us who know Roger well, this scowl usually means his bulldog determination to never say never is surfacing, at times with irritation towards whatever it is that made him scowl. This was one of those times.

Harnessed up like a farm mule and well roped to Perry, Roger lowered himself to "see what's down there myself". Down past the 120 mark, (hell, this isn't so bad, came his radioed message) then all the way to the 150 (uh oh, rungs gone altogether here..) then to the 200. At the 200 station, the tunnel entrance has been closed with lagging nailed from the tunnel side. Through space between the planks, you can peer into the mystery of miles worth of workings we never did get to.

It is also where the manway cribbing squeezes in like a wooden vise. It's tight in a few places above as well, places where you have to twist and contort yourself to get past. Roger radioed he was coming back to the surface.

A two hundred foot climb on a poor ladder is somewhat strenuous and time consuming. When Roger finally got his breath back (his scowl gone by this time, replaced by a kind of apoplectic look) he replayed how he got wedged into the manway for a short time, unable to move up or down.

His gyrations of how he was able to come up were met with hoots of laughter from us. Roger, however, was not yet able to see the humor in it and started to scowl again.

One thing was certain, we would not be getting to the 700 by ladder. This left only the Joshua Hendy hoist. By flashlight we eyed the cage, cable and hoist works. Dan smacked the old iron lightly with his rock hammer, producing a low heavy ring.

Back in conversation with Mike and Jody, we passed on the news that the manway was not safe as a mine access. The information back at us - a fellow I had spoken with earlier regarding the Belshaw Shaft was coming down from Gardnerville, Nevada, in the morning. Dave Pruett was the mining engineer with the mechanical knowledge to revamp the hoist into working condition. Dave was the one to run it in the early 80's and if it was to facilitate access to the mine depths, Dave was the one who could do it again.

Lightened in spirit and step (also somewhat relieved we wouldn't have a 700 foot ladder to face again) we retired to the 1880's refurbished bunkhouse. Tomorrow, we would either become involved in a historical undertaking or we would call it deep enough and go down the hill talking to ourselves. ✕

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2. The Album, Times and Tales of Inyo-Mono Dec. 1987 Issue, Chalfant Press, Inc., Bishop, California
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Down In The Mine Again

(Apologies to Masfield)

I must go down in the mine again, to
the granite, and the dark

And sharp steel, and a straight stull
if the hanging wall is sagging,

And all I ask is a leyner, and strings
to sight a mark,

And a full pail for the lunch hour,
and a twelve-inch lagging.

I must go down in the mine again for
the call of the seamy gangue

Is a sharp call and a clear call like the
pull-bob's signal clang,

And all I ask is a partner who is brisk
and chipper,

And a good boss and a motorman,
and a hard-boiled nipper.

I must go down in the mine again,
I'll trade my coat of tan

For the friendly ways and the busy
days in the life of a mining man,

Till my bits are checked and my tools
stacked and my drill dismounted,

And all I ask is a quick hoist when
the last shot's counted.

-J.B.

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