CERRO GORDO

Cerro Gordo of sixty years ago. The boom town that sprang up overnight, hummed with energy and excitement, and then as suddenly collapsed---to become merely a memory among pioneers and a scar of crumbling ruins on the hillside.

Let's "cut back" as they say in the movies to the year Seventy Three. It is late afternoon and the town sprawls untidily over the hillside and spills down into the surrounding gulches; for space is at a premium and haste the most pressing need of that distant time.

On the fringe of the town are the cabins of the miners and their families. Some of these cabins are sturdily built and boast of two or three rooms, good doors, and neatly set in windows. Others are so hastily thrown together that they sag and dip at their corners and creak horribly when the wind sweeps through the draws; while sacking and pieces of flattened out tin serve as window panes.

Here too, on the outskirts, are the clanking blacksmith-shops, each presided over by a huge blacksmith and his helper, always busy at their task of repairing the passenger stages; mending the heavy wagons and their cumbersome trailers; and shoeing the scores of mules and horses that drew these same coaches and wagons over the steep, rough Cerro Gordo road.

More than once on our memory inspection of that town

of long ago, we should have been forced to stand aside as the long teams of sweating animals and the heavily loaded wagons lumbered past, accompanied by the sound of jingling chains and creaking axles and the muffled shouts of the dust-covered, black-bearded "mule-skinner" as he was called, who sitting astride one of the wheelers, kept his long string in order with a single jerk-line and the sound of his voice.

As we approach nearer to the center of the town, cabins become rarer, and small restaurants and lodging houses, saloons and dance halls, doctors' and lawyers' offices take their places. But among all the buildings that went to make up the business center of that day, we shall look for two, in vain. For somehow, in its hurry, Cerro Gordo never got around to building a school-house or a church.

But now, we are in the heart of the town itself. Here the restaurants are bigger and more pretentious. Here stands the two, two-story hotels, lordly and imposing by reason of their superior height and size. Here space is so limited that the buildings fairly elbow each other and from the hilltop above appear as though the smelters had cast them forth as a new kind of slag. And here, if it were a little later in the afternoon, when the miners were coming from their shifts in the mines and smelters, we should have difficulty in forcing our way along, so crowded would be the street. And this crowd, except for the interval of dinner, would keep surging in and out of the saloons and dance halls and gathering in groups on the street, until late at night.

But, no matter how late the men of Cerro Gordo stayed up, they were always lighted to bed by the flare of the two furnaces, the Beaudrey and the Belshaw, named after their owners. Working day and night, and running to utmost capacity, the two giants ground up hundreds of tons of ore between their huge iron jaws, dumped out the refuse as slag on the hillside, where it lay, a black stain against the gray of the hill; and refined and smelted and moulded the metal left into the heavy, uniform bars of bullion that were the life blood of the town

Now that you know what the town looks like, shall we have some "close-ups" to again use a movie expression, of some of the people of that day.

Mr. Beaudrey should come first. He owned the smelter, the biggest store, the most teams and wagons, and had more interests in more different mines and concerns than anyone else in Cerro Gordo. I knew him well, for he came to Inyo with the cavalry from Wilmington, at the same time as my mother did with her family. And he and mother became such good friends that when he wanted to start a store and hotel in Independence, he went to my mother to borrow the money--three thousand dollars. I mention this rather intimate item, to illustrate how rapidly fortunes were made in that day by the combination of shrewdness and luck. For when Mr. Beaudrey, several years later, sold out his interests in Cerro Gordo

and other parts of Inyo county and retired, he was worth over a million dollars.

But though Mr. Beaudrey was such an influential man and such a good friend of my mother, I did not like him, nor did my sister, Sarah. For when we, as youngsters, not knowing anything about desert plants, rushed out in great glee to pick some beautiful blooms, Mr. Beaudrey let us go to disaster without saying a single word. And when we returned with blistered hands and weeping eyes from our first contact with a cactus, he made us dislike him even more by saying, "There is only one way to teach children and that is by Experience."

Mr. Beaudrey, however, was almost alone in his severity, for most pioneer men and women were very kind and generous to children and to those that had met misfortune. And the good people of Cerro Gordo were no exception to the rule, as you shall shortly see.

A very nice family, consisting of a father, mother, and three children lived at Cerro Gordo springs. Supplies ran short and the father went into town to replenish them. He started to drink heavily and forgot all about his waiting wife and children. At that time, water was hauled twice a week from the spring to town by pack trains. One of the packers, on arriving at the spring found the deserted family weak and ill from lack of food. They had lived for three days on a package of cornstarch, the contents of which the mother had mixed with water and made into a sort of pudding.

After hurriedly loading up with water, the packer put the mother and the children on the gentler of his pack animals and

brought them back with him to Cerro Gordo, where they were fed and cared for by the women of the town. And now comes the happy and curious sequel to the story. While the mother and children were recovering from their most unpleasant experience, a terrific cloudburst swept down past the spring, tearing their cabin from its foundation and sweeping it, and all their belongings down a canyon in the mountain side. Later some of their clothes were found in Keeler, carried as far as the shores of the lake by the force of the water. So thus fortune which had seemed to frown on them, really saved their lives by bringing them to Cerro Gordo, and it continued to smile. For the men of the town with willing hands built them several rooms: the women helped the mother make clothes for the family; the stores were most generous with supplies; and soon the mother was able to start an eating house, which afforded them all an ample living.

Vasquez has held up the stage! He has robbed the passengers of all their jewelry and money. He has had them tied to tall prickly cactus trees. He has had their boots yanked off to make them doubly helpless. He has caused the h horses to be freed from the stage and driven away. He has taken the Wells Fargo box, a small mint in itself, from the guards. He has swept off his wide brimmed hat and murmured gracious words of farewell in Spanish with a mocking elegance that left the helpless captives foaming with rage. And he and his gang are away on fleet horses

that scoffed at pursuit.

These were the startling items that caused Cerro Gordo to fairly seethe with excitement late one afternoon. Groups of people had been anxiously awaiting the stage, many hours late, for it was feared that Vasquez was in Inyo. And when confirmation of their fears came---the town almost erupted. Men rushed through the streets, arming themselves with rifles and pistols; and climbing on horses, burros, mules, anything they could ride, were away; and those unable to secure a steed, struck out on foot. The women, frantic with the thought that the bandit might double back and find the camp deserted; ran about with white faces, hiding their valuabled in flour bins, in baking powder cans, in mattresses, anywhere, everywhere, and then forgetting a few minutes later, in their excitement, where they had hidden them--went off into fresh fits of hysteria.

And right in the midst of it all, my three young brothers decided the searching men needed help and organized a rescue party. George, the oldest of the three, armed the boys of the town with sling shots, pocket knives, and pieces of pipe. And so they wouldn't perish of hunger on their way, they stole into the hotel pantries--left vacant by the demoralized Chinese cooks, who were out on the street with their long pig-tails flying, gabbling wildly--and secured heavy provisions, in the way of cookies, pies and cakes. My youngest brother, Albert, aged five, was taken along to carry the supplies. His little short legs and his pipestem arms soon gave out, and he

returned to camp crying and minus most of the supplies, which he had dropped. The rest of the boys came sheepishly back as darkness fell, fearing punishment for the raided pantries. But outside of dirty looks from the suspicious Chinese cooks, no attention was paid to them; as everyone waited impatiently for news of the capture of the bandits. But their waiting was in vain. One by one, through the long night and all during the next day, the men drifted into camp from a fruitless search. Vasquez, as usual, had made a clean, swift getaway!

The next excitement was caused by a letter to T. Belshaw, brother of C. J. Belshaw, telling that the law suit between the Union Mine owners and the Ignash, had been decided in favor of the Union, the principal owners of which were the Belshaw brothers. To celebrate the end of this suit--which was over some very rich ground that the Ignash claimed, and the Union had been working--a holiday was given, and Cerro Gordo proceeded to celebrate in its usual royal manner.

A bon-fire was kindled in front of the American Hotel and when it was flaming brightly, the prominent men of the town started to make speeches, encouraged by the noise and cheers and laughter of the miners. At the height of the merry-making, all solemnly threw their hats into the blaze and trooped across to the Beaudrey store to be outfitted with new ones. A few minutes later, they swaggered back, a very funny sight! Some wore the most elaborate of silk,

"stove-pipe" hats; some, huge Stetsons that fell over their eyes; some had children's hats, gay with wide ribbons, held atop their heads by elastics; and some, the last to get to the store, had to content themselves with flaring sun-bonnets.

In their motley head-gear, they danced around and around the fire, drinking to the health of the town and to the Belshaws. That night there was a big dance and supper given free to the town by the mine owners, and all made merry until daybreak. And, in justice to the citizens of that day, I wish to state that I did not see a drunken man, either on the street or at the dance.

Next, in point of importance to me, was an invitation to attend a dance in Cartago. Six of us girls, with our chaperons, and the nicest of the young men of Cerro Gordo, left the town on an ore-wagon, drawn by mules; and sat on, I can't say, how many tons of silver and lead bullion. Reaching the landing on the Keeler side of the lake, we were shown into a bunk-house and dining-room, scoured clean by a liberal application of water from the lake, and were served with a fine supper. The teamsters, who had driven the wagons, shared the supper; and were attired in new overalls and bright bandanna kerchiefs, and even their boots had been freshly blackened; but anyone familiar with Keeler soil, knows they didn't stay black long.

We waited at the wharf until nine o'clock, singing and

reciting and listening to music played by a violinist from Lone Pine and one of the best guitar players I have ever heard, who had drifted in from the outside world. Finally we gave up all thoughts of the dance at Cartago as something had happened to the Bessie Brady, the boat, which prevented it from crossing. Back to the scoured dining-room we went and had our dance there. Today I look back on that night as one of the happiest times of my life. Good music, good company, and moonlight on silver water. What mattered rough floors as we danced merrily over them? But what our mothers said the next day when they saw our best shoes scuffed to bits is quite another story.

And now comes a date, August 25, 1875. A date to be recalled in Cerro Gordo as the wedding of the first white girl; and a date to be remembered by me as one of the most important of my life--for I was that girl.

For days my friends had searched the hillsides and had decorated the hotel with native flowers and mountain shrubbery until it was a bower. I can see myself standing before the green background, so small, so young, so frightened, in my white dotted Swiss dress, my big blue ribbon sash, and my flowing veil, which was held on my short blonde curls by a narrow ribbon of the same hue as the sash, while soft music played in the distance and I promised to love, honor, and obey.

After the ceremony we danced until daybreak to the beautiful music of the two musicians I described above. Then we started down the hillside. The stage-coach was bright and resplendent with paint and white ribbon bows, the bridal party were gay in their new dresses and suits, the six horses were spirited, and away we tore. Halfway down the grade, the harness parted, whether as a result of an accident or a planned prank, we never knew; but we were left, sitting in grandeur in a stalled coach, while the horses galloped back up the grade.

A brewery wagon, belonging to the Louie Munsinger Brewery, came along with a load of empty beer kegs. We scrambled into the wagon. The Judge of Inyo county settled himself on a keg, the bridesmaids followed suit, some notables from Cerro Gordo made themselves comfortable on other kegs, and the bride and groom followed their examples. And swaying and jolting, giggling and slipping, we were away once more.

At Swansey there was a tasty lunch waiting for us; at Lone Pine there was a big reception awaiting us. The solemnity of which was rather destroyed by the loud guffaws which greeted our entrance on a beer wagon. At Lone Pine we secured another coach, and with spirits made the gayer by what had happened, away we went to Independence. There we had time only to refreshen ourselves before attending the biggest wedding ball and supper that was ever given in that community.

There were officers and soldiers, for I was a soldier's

daughter; there were farmers and their wives; there were merchants and lawyers; there was the most delicious of suppers; there were two hundred and fifty guests to drink the health of the bride in sparkling champagne; and there was the very young bride, who felt as though she were floating on air, so happy and excited was she.

Now it is time for a "fade out". But there is one thought that I would leave with you. The people of that day, enjoyed life to the utmost; but when the end came, and the plumes of smoke poured no longer from the smelters; they packed up their household goods and left to seek new homes, without lamenting--for they were pioneers--trained to take the bitter with the sweet.