

Snow Ride to Cerro Gordo

By Don Lemaster

My camping partner Gus was a little worried. His 15-year-old son Larry had never ridden in the mountains on his trail bike and here I was getting ready to lead this novice rider on a path that would take us from 3600 feet to over 9000 feet in less than eight miles. To tell the truth, I was a bit worried myself. I could see a blanket of snow on the top half of the mountain above and was kind of wishing I'd picked a more hospitable spot to break in a new rider.

Our goal was the ghost town of Cerro Gordo (Fat Hill), perched astride the windswept and barren 9217-foot peak for which the town was named. I'd never been there myself and, with the thought that all the travel books warned about the poor condition of the steep road to the old mines, I wasn't at all relaxed as we started out on the gravel road to the top. "We" included Ron "Pete" Peterson, Gus' boy Larry, my own 14-year-old Larry and myself. We looked like a Yamaha commercial. All four of us had two-strokes from the ol' piano maker across the sea. Quite a change for me. It took many years before I'd give up my four-stroke dinosaur to ride a ring-ding.

If you've read any of my stuff you'll know I'm a history nut. I'm getting too old and fat to race anymore (don't mend as well either), so I look up likely places to explore by trail bike instead. Luckily I've got a kid that's nuts about motorcycle riding. He doesn't really get into Dad's thing about the olden days, but if the old man wants an excuse to go for a ride, Larry is right there with him.

We brought our bikes from Los Angeles to the base of Cerro Gordo Mountain in style. Pete has a converted

U.S. Mail van that we call the "Heavy Chevy." It's well equipped for camping, but it groans on the grades pulling four motorcycles on a trailer and all our other gear. We got to the little town of Keeler, on the east shore of Owens Lake bed (the Heavy Chevy was wheezing a little), on a Friday afternoon in February. The weather was great and we set up camp at the foot of the grade leading to Cerro Gordo.

The two Larrys broke their record unloading the bikes and donning their riding gear. They spent the waning hours of daylight exploring the roads near the bottom of the mountain. When the boys rode back to camp they proudly told us about finding an old stone building just up the hill and east of the tiny settlement at Keeler. This old structure, we later found out, was a smelter at the end of the tramway which once carried silver ore down from the mountain. Pete and I decided to look the place over after we'd ridden to the peak.

We camped out that night with snow-capped Cerro Gordo rising to the east and Mt. Whitney, the tallest mountain in California, to the west. It used to be the highest mountain in the United States until Alaska, with its great big peaks, became a state. The weather was just brisk enough to make the sleeping bag feel darn good.

Dawn came and the two "tigers," Larry and Larry, were kicking their bikes

This smelter, built of native stone, was found by the Larrys at the lower end of the abandoned aerial tram that once brought silver ore from the mountain top.





over to get a little warm-up riding in before climbing the mountain. Didn't even have to force them into it. Seems like they were having a heck of a good time just being in the saddle and riding around to see what the country had to offer.

Later, I led our troupe up the winding mountain road, bound for the snows above. The two Larrys were behind me and Pete were riding drag to pick up strays. The pace was leisurely, the air brisk and the road tilted constantly skyward.

The canyon got so narrow that I could see where it was possible for M.W. Belshaw, one of the original owners of the Cerro Gordo mine, to erect a toll gate and charge for passage up or down the

mountain in the heyday of the mines. There just isn't any other way up the mountain to the town. Every other route is straight up! Belshaw had access to Cerro Gordo monopolized.

As we climbed higher and higher we saw broken down towers to our right. These towers were made of huge timbers and had steel cables strung between them. The fallen wood structures were spaced at intervals from the old smelter until they disappeared out of sight up the mountain. My guidebook told me that these towers, supporting a tramway, had been built about 1915 to carry ore down

We looked like a Yamaha commercial. All four of us on two-strokes from the ol' piano maker.

the west side of the Inyo Mountains to the shore of Owens Lake. The venture proved too costly however and the tramway went out of business. Pete found an old pocket watch which was dated 1903 near one of these towers.

The higher we got, the better and more vast the view was. We could see for fifty miles, from the snow-topped Sierra Nevadas and Mt. Whitney, to Owens Lake and the entire Owens Valley.

Before long we were riding through patches of snow. It wasn't too cold, in fact, the bright sun and the clear air were very pleasant. I kept watching the boys over my shoulder but they didn't need help. They were doing fine and grinning from ear to ear. I called several halts to take pictures. We didn't realize how



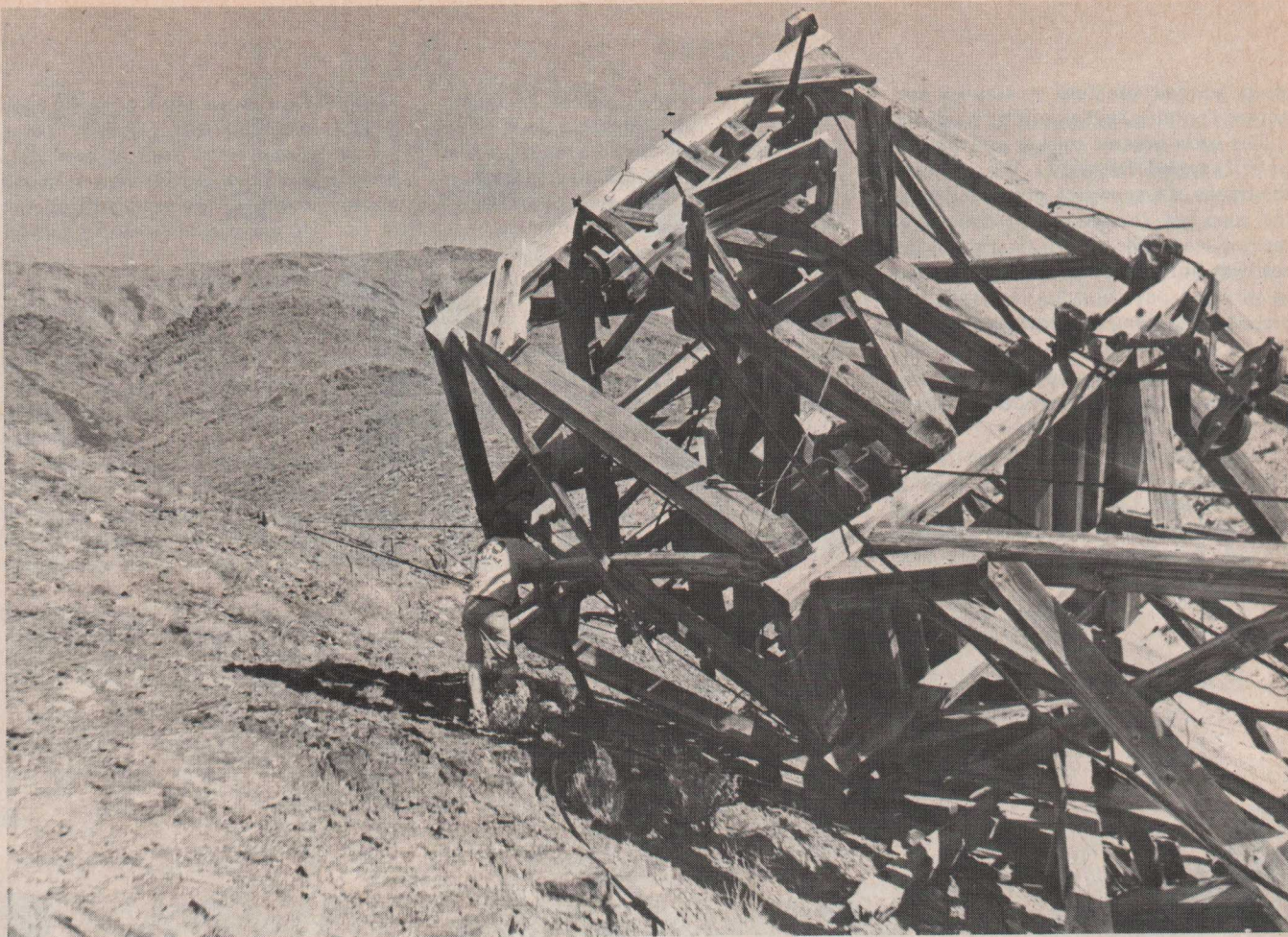
steep the road was until we stopped and parked the bikes in the slanting roadway.

The snow became thicker and thicker until it covered the ground. We could see the tracks of a snowplow preceding us as the road got steeper. Small rivulets of melting ice trickled down the ruts of the roadway but they presented no problem as we used our throttles smoothly and picked a line along the center of the ruts.

Pete and the two Larrys examine the chimney from Victor Beaudry's once-busy smelter.

The Cerro Gordo road offers a spectacular view of Owens Lake, Mt. Whitney and the snowy Sierra Nevada mountains.





Pete found a pocket watch dated 1903 while looking over this toppled tramway tower.

This precipitous road was called the "Yellow Grade" in its heyday. Wagoners jockeying their silver-laden wagons down the mountain had to chain their wheels in the locked position and were forced to drag a heavy log behind them to maintain control of their rigs on the steep slopes. Our trail bikes were fine, but can you imagine how little traction the steel-rimmed wagon wheels had under these same circumstances?

We passed some miners' shacks in the canyon and every now and then we even came to a fairly level spot. When we topped out at 9000 feet we rode right into the center of what has been described as "Los Angeles' Comstock;" Cerro Gordo.

To our left, as we entered the ghost town, was the chimney of Victor Beaudry's smelter. Beaudry was a storekeeper in Cerro Gordo who became the profitable partner of M.W. Belshaw about 1868. The two controlled the town throughout its richest days. How rich were the richest days? Well, when you figure that about \$17,000,000 came from the nearby area and \$15,000,000 of that was from the Belshaw-operated holdings, I'd say that was RICH!

Some of the buildings there were erected by latter-day fortune hunters, but

the town never boomed again after Belshaw closed down for good in October, 1879. Many of the original structures are still standing though, weathering away in the winds along the high mountain top. One of the best preserved edifices is the American Hotel, a two-story travelers haven built in 1871. On the day we were there three feet of snow surrounded all the buildings.

I saw smoke coming from the chimney of an old house up the canted street from the American Hotel. I approached the house and was met by Jack Smith, the middle-aged caretaker of the Cerro Gordo ghost town. Mr. Smith was very friendly, but he and his wife were recovering from an illness and he wasn't able to conduct us on his usual guided tour, which comes complete with a narrated history of the town (only costs a buck). He said Spring or October were the best times to look over the town, if the snow was gone.

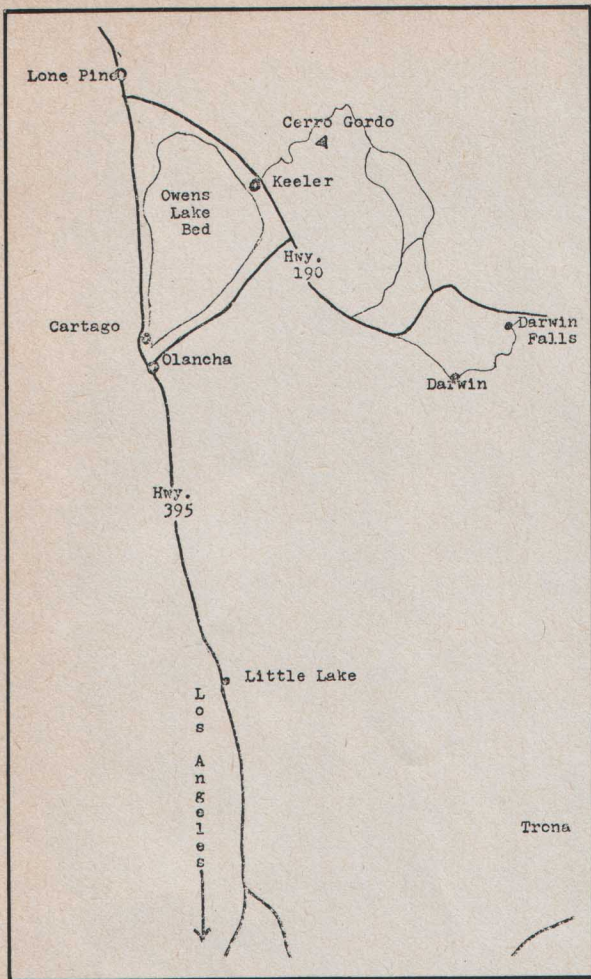
My map showed a road leading around the top of Cerro Gordo peak and then south to the former mining mecca of Darwin. Mr. Smith told me to forget that route for now as he pointed his arm across a small valley smothered in snow. "The road's under all that son. You'd better wait 'til thawin' time before you try to get to Darwin from here." Not having snowmobiles, we decided he was

right.

We were still able to stomp around in the white stuff and peer in the windows of the historical buildings. Some had been saloons, others stores and there were also quarters for the dance hall girls. On the hillsides around the town were the remnants of rough dugouts that many miners once called home.

A great deal of money passed through Cerro Gordo, not just in the form of the silver-lead taken from the ground, but in the vast fortunes made by men whose business it was to supply the 4000 persons living on the sides of Fat Hill. Supplying the Owens Valley mines was one of the most important factors in the rapid growth of the small pueblo called Los Angeles. Incidentally, it took three weeks for a wagon to travel each way between Los Angeles and Cerro Gordo. And we complain now when it takes us three hours to travel the same route!

We snapped some pictures and decided to head back, so that Gus wouldn't worry about his son surviving his first trail trip. The sun was bright on the snow and the temperature just right as we ambled back down the "Yellow Grade." We stopped and looked over some of the toppled towers of the aerial tram. The huge 12 x 12-inch timbers lay like gigantic broken erector sets in a line from Keeler on the lake to the top of Fat



The American Hotel rising behind Larry Lemaster was built at Cerro Gordo in 1871.

Hill. Miles and miles of steel cable tie the forlorn looking jumbles of wood together, a sign of another attempt to get rich on the bounty of Cerro Gordo. Too late though. The \$17,000,000 had been pried from the bowels of the mountain and the town's chance at being L.A.'s Comstock was gone. Still, a lot of silver remains in the earth there, but contemporary operating costs make it unprofitable to mine.

As I had figured, Gus was a little restless, waiting for our return. But, when he saw how enthused and happy the boys were about the trip he was visibly relieved. Both Larrys had a bite to eat and jumped in the saddle again for even more riding.

Pete and I rode along the route of the tram towers and looked the operation over carefully. It's amazing, considering the tools available around the turn of the century, how these massive pylons could be build up the side of the desert mountains.

At the lower terminus of the tram we looked over the remains of the smelter. It was built of local stone and it wasn't hard to imagine the silver ingots that were once stacked there. According to Remi Nadeau in *Ghost Towns and Mining Camps of California*, 30,000 silver ingots were piled up in the Owens Valley in 1873. They were so numerous that

passing miners were building them into temporary cabins. So many ingots in fact, that it took Nadeau's great-great-grandfather a few months using eighty teams of sixteen mules and three wagons each to catch up to the furnace output for the first time. That's a lot of silver!

Back at camp we pored over the maps and planned our Spring trip up and around the mountain and down the canyon road to Darwin. Besides the numerous mine dumps to explore in Darwin, the guide books say to visit Darwin Falls which has a fern grotto and a pool fed from a spring right out of the side of the stark desert mountains.

In any event, we'd had a great time and had only seen half the sights of Cerro Gordo. Come Spring, we're going to see the ghost town when it's free of snow and we can take advantage of Mr. Smith's tour, then its around the back side of lofty Cerro Gordo peak and down San Lucas Canyon to Darwin with its old mines and Darwin Falls. Maybe we'll see you there!

