

The Early History of the Resting Springs Mining District

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If we were mathematicians, we might devise a simple formula by which to judge mining districts: ore production is inversely proportional to the flamboyance of the district. Consider the Bagdad-Chase mines, near Ludlow. Here was a humble camp: no stock sales, no liquor sales, clean frame cottages, no more than 80 workers — a real no-nonsense operation. Yet in less than a decade, the Bagdad-Chase mines produced about \$4.5-million in gold and copper. The Resting Springs district, east of Death Valley, near the present town of Tecopa, was another case of humble mining. After all, its chief product was lead.

DEVELOPMENT OF THE RESTING SPRINGS MINING DISTRICT

In the spring of 1875, the brothers William D. and Robert D. Brown, whose recent discoveries of silver ore were giving rise to the town of Darwin, west of Death Valley, were looking for fresh challenges. They found them in the form of rich but difficult-to-work lead and silver ore in the hills near Resting Springs, on the old Spanish Trail. The brothers then organized a mining district, originally called Brown's Treasure, later called Resting Springs.¹

Several months later, in August, the brothers and several San Francisco capitalists, including George Hearst, incorporated the Balance Consolidated Mining Company. Then the Browns laid out a townsite at a trickle of water named Willow Creek, six miles southeast of Resting Springs. Thirty-five miles away, in Nevada, they installed a sawmill in the Charleston Mountains, where abundant white pine timber was available. At Resting Springs, the brothers established a ranch. By March, 1876, the ranch was providing "quite a crop" of potatoes and other vegetables; meanwhile, the Browns were putting in an orchard.²

Although the claims were indeed rich in silver and lead, Hearst lost interest. But onto the scene came Jonas D. Osborne, a mining superintendent from Eureka, Nevada, a major silver-lead district. He began buying out Robert Brown in early 1876 and decided to build an experimental smelter.³

Brown, meanwhile, was eagerly promoting the district. He put "some magnificent specimens," assaying up to \$900 a ton in silver, on display at a San Bernardino hotel, where they attracted "a large number of citizens." Brown had some of the richest ore milled at Ivanpah, a silver camp southeast of Resting Springs. In December, he began freighting out tools, provisions, and materials to build Osborne's smelter. Resting Springs would soon "be one of the most lively camps on the desert," the San Bernardino *Times* predicted.⁴

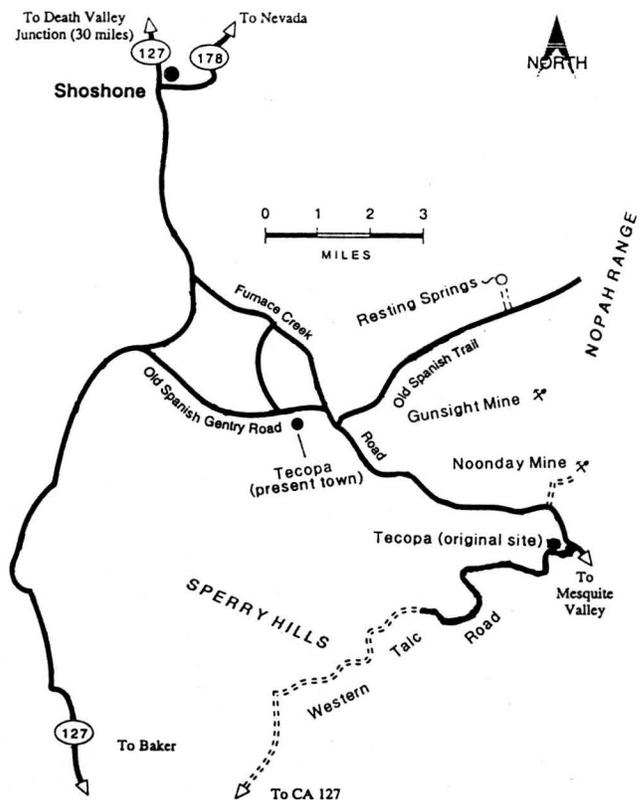
The freight traffic through Colton, the nearest railroad station for desert-bound teams, became immense. In one case, 15 wagons, "nearly as big as schooners," were loaded at the forwarding and commission house of A.D. Hathaway. Rebuking the San Bernardino *Times*, the Colton *Semi-Tropic* asserted that if the "penny-a-line scribbler for that milk-sop sheet will come down here for a week and prop his eyes open [] he will see more rustle, vim, go and business in this lively burg than he can see over in the fossil city in thirty days."⁵

By the spring of 1877, Osborne had decided that the ores could be profitably worked in quantity with a larger smelter. He found investors in Los Angeles; they incorporated the Los Angeles Mining and Smelting Company in May. Osborne arranged to buy out the rest of Brown's properties and some other claims for the Los Angeles company; in return, he would receive half its stock and be made superintendent. Two of the claims were the Gunsight and Noonday, which would turn out to become the district's leading mines.⁶

At first, Osborne's efforts looked promising. Ten miners had sunk the Gunsight's shaft to 385 feet by January, 1878. The smelter, meanwhile, was fired up; employing 30 men, it turned out 67 bars of bullion during its first night.⁷

The smelter became a demanding operation — too demanding. It required as many as 44 men to provide fuel, ore, and repairs. And a chronic shortage of water made the furnace overheat, crack the cooling jackets, and shut down in a burst of steam. Then, too, as the Gunsight went deeper, the ore changed from easy-to-smelt galena (lead sulfide) to

RESTING SPRINGS MINING DISTRICT



After Gail Borden, *The Rockhound's Guide to California*.

Figure 1. The Resting Springs mining district.

refractory lead carbonate.⁸

For the next few years, the Resting Springs district fell into a fitful slumber, occasionally awakened by the introduction of some piece of milling machinery or mining method. In the fall of 1878, Osborne bought a costly, unproven rotary crusher called the Davis pulverizer, which he installed at Resting Springs. The machine soon failed. After the company refused to make the final payment, the manufacturer briefly attached its properties. Now debt ridden, the company reluctantly began to levy heavy assessments.⁹

Osborne then thought of another solution. He ordered a conventional 10-stamp mill, which started up in the heat of August. The manufacturer was allowed to work the Gunsight to pay for the mill. But the plant recovered only half of the values in the ore. When the company took over the mill in the fall, Osborne ran it only intermittently.¹⁰

As a last resort, Osborne decided that the best way to cut costs would be to drive a 1,000-foot tunnel from the base of the hill into the lower ore bodies of the Gunsight.

But Osborne knew that driving the tunnel would take a long time and require even more heavy assessments. Discouraged, Osborne sold most of his stock and resigned in early 1880.¹¹

The company replaced Osborne in May with Caesar Luckhardt, a prominent superintendent from San Francisco. But Luckhardt left after only three months.

Finally, foreman Everett Smith completed the tunnel, in February, 1881. With experience at Virginia City and Bodie, Smith had brought in some revenue by running the mill on some high-grade ore.¹²

THE CAMP

A camp grew up at Willow Creek after Osborne bought the Brownsville townsite in September, 1876, renamed it Tecopa, after a local Paiute leader, and, in early 1877, began selling lots for \$50 to \$75. About 400 persons were living in the district by then, 200 of them working for Osborne. Since the district lacked an abundance of grass and a store, hay, barley, lumber, and provisions were very expensive. A post office was established in late May, with Henry Schaefer, a merchant, as the first postmaster. A few weeks later, a stage began bringing in passengers and express from San Bernardino.¹³

Once a "tenantless solitude," one correspondent predicted in October, Tecopa "will be transformed into a lively mining town. with all the usual concomitants of such." By August, 1878, the "concomitants" included three saloons, three stores, a boarding house, a livery stable, and various adobes, shacks, and tents. A daily pony mail and a semimonthly stage helped break the isolation.¹⁴

One question, however, had been nagging residents and county officials from the beginning: Which county was Tecopa in? San Bernardino and Inyo counties finally sent out joint surveying expeditions in April and May of 1878. The result: Tecopa stood about 300 yards inside

Inyo County. Designated deputy assessor, the Inyo County surveyor collected \$400 in poll, road, and hospital taxes.¹⁵

In one way, the survey didn't matter, for Tecopa didn't last much longer. When Osborne moved his milling operations to Resting Springs, he laid out a townsite there and, in January, 1879, hired "every man possible" to excavate the foundations for offices and the mill (the pulverizer). Though freezing weather delayed the making of adobe bricks, a camp was rapidly built in January and February: adobe houses, saloons, and stores; a spacious house for Osborne and his wife; and a large hotel made of cut stone. Freight contractor Remi Nadeau and postmaster Schaefer each owned a store.¹⁶

Although Schaefer still kept his shop in Tecopa open, the camp was nearly deserted by mid-February. Visiting the district in July, William Welch, the sheriff of Inyo County, considered Tecopa a costly mistake since "it costs five cents a pound freight from San Bernardino here. . . ."

Resting Springs, Welch found, was "quite a nice little place of some thirty white population and double that number of aborigines. . . ." The camp was smaller than Tecopa, comprising only one store (probably Schaefer's), a blacksmith shop, a "gin mill or two," several houses and miners shanties, and the Osbornes' "superior dwelling," which stood near a small, clear stream. Nearby were two reservoirs, one of them used for bathing.¹⁷

The Davis pulverizer, however, had turned out to be a "most expensive bilk." On a visit made in July, Welch noticed that it was being torn out. But a 10-stamp mill was being put up to take its place.

Although the pulverizer and other ore-processing plants worked only intermittently, the camp managed to survive, if not thrive. Throughout 1879 and 1880, the Los Angeles company kept about 40 men at work, sinking shafts, driving tunnels, or taking out ore. From time to time, a few bars of bullion would be sent out through Colton. "This camp has not been worth speaking about for the past three months," H.P. Gregory, the justice of the peace, complained in June, 1880, although the arrival of Caesar Luckhardt as mining superintendent had "galvanized" the camp into action. ". . . It has been a long, dry spell between drinks for me, but I will stick to it a while longer. . . ."¹⁸

Although Luckhardt left after three months, he did put a little life into Resting Springs. In October, the Gunsight was being worked night and day while a tunnel to tap the lode was being pushed toward completion. The company, meanwhile, was putting up a spacious bunkhouse, and Schaefer and his brother were building a store. R.S. Bartholomew, who kept the boardinghouse, had just finished a hotel for travelers.¹⁹

Since the Gunsight's ore was averaging about \$80 a ton (whenever it was milled), the Los Angeles company seemed committed to making its mines pay. But others besides Gregory remained skeptical. A party of miners from Bodie arrived in camp in January, 1881, just as the company laid off its miners. Although Resting Springs was "a pretty little town," business was dull. They moved on to Tecopa, which stood "entirely



Figure 2. View east at Gunsight mine and Tecopa Consolidated Mining Company. Calif. Div. Mines and Geology collection, CA Mining Bureau Report 15, 1917.

deserted, the old smelting works partially dismantled, looking forlorn and melancholy, surrounded by its crumbling adobe associates. . . .”

The party camped in what used to be the blacksmith shop.

. . . Never did I experience such complete solitude. There stood the silent houses, gazing at each other across the lonely street, while the impudent croak of the bull-frogs at the reed-grown spring, or the occasional sound of a cricket, was all that disturbed the deathlike silence. The very stars seemed more dim as they looked down upon this general desolation. Morning only served to intensify the deadness, and we left Tecopa without a single regret. . . .”²⁰

The company probably kept a small crew at work in the tunnel, for it was completed a few weeks later, in February, and the mill was started up. If the Gunsight “goes steadily ahead the camp will come out all right,” an Inyo County editor concluded. “Affairs have moved so steadily, however, that the patience of many has been worn out. . . .”²¹

SOCIAL CONDITIONS

Nature as much as man affected the living conditions in the district. The camps, after all, were remote: 140 miles by road from Mojave and about 180 to 200 miles from San Bernardino. The fastest round-trip between Independence, in Inyo County, and Resting Springs took 22 days. On one trip, Welch, the Inyo County sheriff, met no people or travelers at all.²²

The isolation only intensified the oppressive weather. On a trip in April, 1880, bitter, chilling winds made travel and sleep almost impossible for photographer W.A. Vale. “I bet there was a peck [of sand] in the Stage that drifted in Since *Morning*,” he wrote in a diary. When Luckhardt, the superintendent, departed in August, the mercury “played such frolicsome little pranks as rising to 116° in the shade. . . .” Several months later, the pony rider again became crazed and lost the mail.²³

They were lucky. Many travelers were no doubt aware of the heart-rending tragedy that had befallen stable owner W. R. Cornman in September, 1877. After having registered voters at Tecopa, Cornman became lost while returning to San Bernardino. Dying of thirst and starvation, Cornman lay down under a bush and shot himself in the head. “. . . How dreadful must have been his suffering and how sombre his thoughts. . . . How poignant his anguish when thoughts of his amiable and beloved wife. . . grew fainter and fainter,” one editor remarked.²⁴

The mining operations posed even greater perils. Miner Clarence Neyberg was severely injured, perhaps fatally, when his drill struck an unexploded charge of dynamite in June, 1879. Neyberg’s left hand was “frightfully shattered,” his left eye destroyed, his left leg broken. He was taken to San Bernardino, where a doctor rode all night from Los Angeles. But it was “rather questionable if he survives his many injuries,” the *Semi-Tropic* reported.²⁵

The camps could also be violent. In a gambling quarrel in late 1879, a young man from Los Angeles was shot in the leg. Fortunately, the wound wasn’t serious. But in April, 1881, miner John Williams, alias Chloride Jack, killed Patrick McGraw at Resting Springs. Williams was fingered in San Bernardino two months later, after he was arrested for drunkenness.²⁶

The presence of women, meanwhile, could excite the

The Ruins of old Tecopa, about 1910

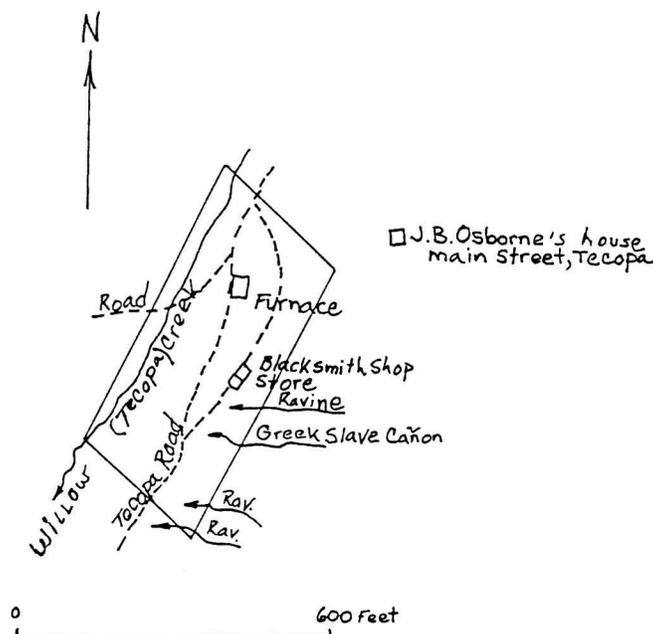


Figure 3. Sketch map of the ruins of Old Tecopa, about 1910.

passions of men. Vale, the photographer, prim and proper, was appalled when he saw white men, whom he disparaged as “Things,” playing cards, bathing, and even drinking with Indian women. He wished to be delivered from that class of humanity, “if it is proper to class them as Such,” he wrote. Vale left town that same day.²⁷

Though Vale was taken aback, the men could be a romantic lot. Billy Boreham, who had run the smelter, married May Taft in early 1880. “. . . The boys gave Billy and his bride a rousing reception on their arrival here,” a correspondent in Ivanpah reported. “Music, chat and singing filled up the hours. . . .” Later that year, Gregory, the justice of the peace, brought together Jacob Lewis, of Resting Springs, and Ellen Seers, of adjacent Lincoln County, Nevada.²⁸



Figure 4. Old Tecopa smelter ruins, south of Noonday mine; Kingston Range distant. Calif. Div. Mines and Geology collection, CA Mining Bureau Report 15, 1917.

THE DECLINE

After the completion of the tunnel and the start-up of the mill in February, 1881, the company continued to run into lead carbonate ore. Although richer in silver than galena, carbonates proved to be more expensive to process. By now, many had given up on the camp. The post office closed in late May. After the stockholders refused to pay another large assessment, the Los Angeles Mining and Milling Company shut down its operations in July.²⁹

Although Osborne kept his hand in other mining ventures, Resting Springs remained his main interest. The ore, after all, was of proven value, but it just cost too much to process and haul it. He bought back the property in early 1883. Backed by Harry Drew, a San Bernardino banker, Osborne invented a huge steam tractor as a means of reducing the cost of freighting. He still kept the Resting Springs operation in readiness: the Gunsight, the 10-stamp mill, mining implements, "and other valuable property," which he valued at \$150,000 or more in 1894. Several years later, when Osborne was about 70, he had his tractor haul a load of Gunsight ore to Daggett, on the Santa Fe Railroad, and another load to Manvel, the railhead of the California Eastern Railway. But the tractor cost more to operate than the ore was worth.³⁰

After the Tonopah & Tidewater Railroad was built within a few miles of Resting Springs in 1906, Osborne and the heirs of Harry Drew sold the property for \$350,000. (Osborne died in 1913; he was 81). Under a series of owners and manager, the mines were successfully worked until 1928. By then, they had produced nearly \$4-million in lead-silver ore.³¹

NOTES

1. Richard Lingenfelter, *Death Valley & The Amargosa: A Land of Illusion* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986), p. 137. This book contains the best history of the district.
2. Lingenfelter, p. 137; San Bernardino *Weekly Times*, Nov. 6, 1875; March 25 and May 27, 1876.
3. Lingenfelter, p. 137; *Weekly Times*, Oct. 7, 1876.
4. *Weekly Times*, May 27, June 17, and Dec. 17, 1876.
5. Colton *Semi-Tropic*, May 12, 1877.
6. *Inyo Independent* (Independence), June 23, 1877; Lingenfelter, pp. 138-139.
7. *Semi-Tropic*, Oct. 27 and Nov. 24, 1877; *Weekly Times*, Feb. 2, 1878.
8. Lingenfelter, p. 139; *Weekly Times*, March 9, May 25, and Aug. 24, 1878.
9. Lingenfelter, pp. 139-140; *Weekly Times*, Jan. 11 and Feb. 22, 1879; *Inyo Independent*, July 5 and Aug. 9, 1879.
10. Lingenfelter, p. 140; *Weekly Times*, July 26 and Aug. 16, 1879; *Inyo Independent*, Aug. 9 and Nov. 8, 1879; Feb. 19, 1881.
11. Lingenfelter, pp. 140-141; San Bernardino *Daily Times*, Nov. 25, 1879; *Inyo Independent*, Feb. 14, 1880.
12. Lingenfelter, p. 141; *Inyo Independent*, June 19, Aug. 7, Oct. 30, and Nov. 6, 1880, and Feb. 19, 1881.
13. Lingenfelter, p. 137; *Weekly Times*, March 25 and Oct. 7, 1876; San Bernardino *Weekly Argus*, Feb. 14, 1877; Lewis Garrett, "Postal History of San Bernardino County," San Bernardino County Museum Association *Quarterly*, Fall, 1992 (v. 39), p. 64; *Semi-Tropic*, June 9, 1877.
14. *Semi-Tropic*, Oct. 27, 1877; *Weekly Times*, Aug. 24, 1878.
15. *Semi-Tropic*, Nov. 10, 1877; *Inyo Independent*, April 20 and June 1, 1878.
16. *Weekly Times*, Jan. 11, Feb. 22, 1879; Lingenfelter, p. 140.
17. *Weekly Times*, Feb. 22, 1879; *Inyo Independent*, Aug. 9, 1879.
18. *Inyo Independent*, July 5, Aug. 9 and Nov. 8, 1879; June 19, 1880, and Feb. 19, 1881; *Weekly Times*, July 26 and Aug. 16, 1879; *Daily Times*, Nov. 25, 1879.
19. *Inyo Independent*, Aug. 14, 1880; San Bernardino *Index*, Nov. 15, 1880.
20. *Inyo Independent*, Feb. 19, 1881; *Bodie Daily Free Press*, Feb. 9, 1881.
21. *Inyo Independent*, Nov. 6, 1880, and Feb. 19, 1881.
22. *Weekly Times*, Aug. 24, 1878; *Inyo Independent*, Nov. 8, Aug. 9 and Nov. 8, 1879, and Oct. 30, 1880.
23. William A. Vale, "Log Of Trip To Ivanpah & Resting Springs," April, 1880 (typewritten copy), pp. 8-10, in California Room, San Bernardino Public Library; *Inyo Independent*, Oct. 30, 1880.
24. *Semi-Tropic*, Sept. 1 and 15, 1877.
25. *Semi-Tropic*, June 21, 1879.
26. *Daily Times*, Nov. 25, 1879; *Index*, June 24, 1881.
27. Vale, "Log Of Trip To Ivanpah & Resting Springs," p. 8.
28. *Semi-Tropic*, March 30, 1880; *Inyo Independent*, Oct. 30, 1880.
29. Lingenfelter, p. 142; Garrett, "Postal History of San Bernardino County," p. 64; *Inyo Independent*, Feb. 19, 1881.
30. Lingenfelter, pp. 142 and 355-356; Jonas Osborne vs. Mabel Osborne (April 20, 1894), case #5409, Superior Court, San Bernardino County.
31. David Myrick, *Railroads of Nevada and Eastern California* (Berkeley: Howell-North Books, 1963), v. 2, pp. 583-597; Barstow *Printer*, May 2, 1913. Myrick's two-volume work remains the most comprehensive history of the desert railroads in Nevada and California, including the Tecopa Railroad.