

The History of Early Mining in the El Paso Mountains

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PART I: THE PROMOTIONAL BOOM (1863-1866)

The discovery of rich and often massive deposits of silver ore during the late 1850s led to a flurry of strikes east of the Sierra Nevada a few years later. Several discoveries resulted in well-founded booms at Virginia City and Aurora. Other strikes, especially those in the Owens Valley and the Coso Range, tended to be more promotional than mineral.

The first excitement in the El Paso Mountains was one of these promotional flurries. There, near trails leading from Los Angeles to the Owens Valley, mouth-watering pockets of high-grade ore were found during the early 1860s: silver sulphides, argentiferous galena, even native silver. The *Los Angeles News*, *Visalia Delta*, *Mining & Scientific Press*, and *Alta California*, in particular, began spreading the word.

The scene of the strikes, however, was especially bleak, as C.W. Tappan, a persevering promoter, conceded in April, 1863: "... Not a bush or tree is in sight larger than the musquit [mesquite] by our camp. All is barren, the mountains appearing like cones of ashes, sharp and precipitous. Not a drop of water is anywhere to be found," except at six widely scattered springs.

Despite the bleakness, the region offered several advantages for prospecting. Two well-traveled trails skirted the hills. Abundant timber was available 25 miles away, in the Sierra Nevada. Mesquite grew very lush in some places — up to 8 feet high — and "greasewood" (creosote) was considered "an excellent fuel." Best of all, abundant water could be obtained at several waterholes: Mesquite Springs (near the later site of Goler); Grape Vine Springs, 8 miles from Mesquite; and "a fine spring" on the side of Laurel Hill, 15 miles from Mesquite.

For a brief, shining moment, the future of the district looked promising. Tappan made the first sale of mining property at his "office" (a tent) in late May, 1863. Several weeks later, a 1,100-pound lot of silver ore, from the Ophir Mine, yielded \$1,150 a ton.

Yet the El Paso mines remained fairly isolated. Many miners weren't even sure of which county the district was in. The nearest important post office was at Los Angeles, 147 miles south. Newcomers would have to depend on the stumps, papers, and envelopes that they had brought with them; return mail (brought by a friend) was said to take one or two months. Fortunately, Russell Sackett, a former justice of the peace, began running his Slate Range Express through the El Paso Mountains in July, 1863; he carried mail, packages, and newspapers. Sackett offered to take passengers back to Los Angeles for \$10 each and carry freight for 10¢ a pound.

The excitement might have ended that summer, for the pockets of ore were too small to justify further development. By late June, both the American and Mexican laborers had become "disgusted with the excessive labor under the burning sun, at climbing from five to eight miles to their work every morning, and the small pay." A month later, it was so hot — 108° F — that outdoor work had ceased; most men remained idle, awaiting the arrival of tools and more workers.

The harsh conditions — and a dubious future — didn't matter. The business of selling mining stocks, boosted by frequent news reports, was flourishing, especially in Los Angeles. The mine owners, "instead of gassing to get stock up, are working to get metal out, which strikes us as being sensible," the *Delta* commented in late July.

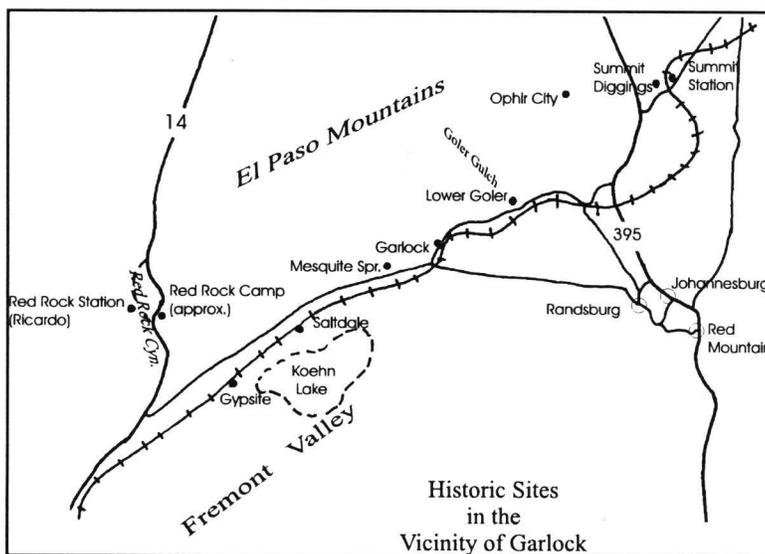
Apparently, Laurel Hill was the center of the limited amount of activity. There, near the Ophir Mine, stood Ophir City, consisting of

six camps pitched in a one-acre square on a slope; above the camps flowed "a fine spring." The first — and perhaps the only — board house went up in August.

A few companies, meanwhile, continued to drive tunnels. The tunnel of the Yarbrough Company had reached 150 feet by mid-August, when a miner was seriously injured in another tunnel. He soon recovered.

Although Tappan would remain in the district for another year, the bubble soon burst. An intermittent war between intruding settlers and various Indian tribes had driven many miners out of eastern California. After wobbling for a while, the market for mining stocks collapsed in early 1864. Even then, prices remained high: 10¢ a pound for feed, and \$100 a ton for hay in May.

A few assays still showed fabulously rich ore during the summer of 1864, and some tunnels and shafts were still being excavated. "We have had all the 'ups and downs' of prospectors — have been here in



the sunshine and in the storm, have passed through all the vicissitudes of persons searching for the Eldorado in the form of Quartz Lodes," one correspondent wrote to the *Delta* in late July. "Sometimes we have felt *amazingly* rich, other times have almost come to the conclusion to surrender the ship, but fortunately stuck to it with the tenacity of a Shylock, and are now, we hope, or soon will be, in a condition to reap some of the fruits of our labors. . ."

But the mines never revived. In July, 1866, another correspondent lamented, "there is not a single soul, at this time, in the district. . . yet the time will come, and that soon, when these hills will teem with busy miners."

PART II: THE MINING BOOM (1892-1897)

Red Rock Mining District

After the bust of the 1860s, the El Paso Mountains hardly seemed like an inviting region for mining. The heat, for one thing, could be insufferable. To the writer Mary Austin, Red Rock was "all desertness, affording no pasture and scarcely a rill of water." Walled in by huge colonnades of reddish sandstone and conglomerate, Red Rock

Canyon lay about 25 miles north of Mojave, on a well-traveled stage road to the Owens Valley.

Major deposits of gold dust and nuggets were found in Red Rock Canyon and Goler Gulch in late 1892 and early 1893. In Red Rock, the gold field lay in Iron Canyon, a northeast-running ravine that branched off the main canyon, several miles from its mouth. At first, the strikes aroused little interest.

But several months later, one of the worst depressions in American history swept in from the East. Banks failed; men and women lost their jobs; and the prices of goods, crops, and metals fell — except for gold.

Near the end of 1893, the gold fields suddenly seemed inviting. Reporters from Los Angeles, San Francisco, and Bakersfield rushed in. In early December, a Lancaster man saw “whole sacks of gold nuggets so rich and shining that they made his eyes water and grow dim. . . .” The sight of a large nugget put on display in Bakersfield was “enough to set the blood of any man tingling. . . .” As Christmas approached, Red Rock supported “a mining camp of no mean dimensions.”

Despite the depression, however, Red Rock was no place for a poor man. “Enthusiastic young men who have no knowledge of the discomforts of travel and life on the desert should give the new camps a wide berth, unless they are prepared to undergo without a murmur all sorts of hardships,” the Bakersfield *Daily Californian* warned in late December. The *Los Angeles Times*, meanwhile, warned about the many unscrupulous speculators who “all rush off and locate from three to forty claims apiece, and then sit around waiting to sell to some greenhorn.”

Enough snow and rain fell in January, 1894, to nearly halt mining. Two miners used a trickle from melting snow to operate a rocker. But operations at Bonanza Gulch shut down for the winter. Several miners soon began stripping the gold-bearing gravel to bedrock and drying it in the sun.

The district did manage to generate some publicity when it sent 2,840 pounds of auriferous gravel to a fair in the East. The Black & Sullivan firm furnished and sacked the gravel. The owner of the Mojave-Keeler stage line hauled the gravel to Mojave without charge. And a manufacturer of dry-washers donated one of his devices.

Several camps grew up in the district, but the main settlement was **Red Rock camp**, the site of an early stage station, where Red Rock and Iron canyons joined. Founded in late 1893, Red Rock consisted of 20 tents scattered along both sides of the main gulch in December, when about 35 men were living there. Two stores, selling supplies at “very reasonable prices,” were doing business there by late January, 1894. Then the initial excitement quieted down. By early March, Red Rock contained a store, a saloon, and from eight to 10 tents.

Nearly two miles to the north, at a well once used by a freighting company, stood **Miller’s (Red Rock) Station**. A store and saloon were in business there in March, 1894.

At the **Black & Sullivan camp**, the mine owners, in early January, 1894, were preparing to build a barn for their stock and sell hay hauled from Tehachapi. They also generously supplied drinking water. By early March, when the mine operators had 10 men at work, the camp embraced a store and saloon and at least 15 tents.

Two miles northeast of Miller’s station, meanwhile, **Bonanza Gulch** contained half a dozen tents. A Los Angeles firm bought up many of the claims that spring and brought in a pumping plant, a steam engine, and pipe to sluice or hydraulic-mine the placers, but the venture soon failed.

About 12 miles northeast of Red Rock stood **Black Hills**, a dry camp. Black Hills flourished after the other places declined. By late May, 1894, Black Hills was considered “the liveliest camp of all. . . . There is more real mining life and excitement at this camp than at all of the others put together. . . .”, one correspondent boasted. About 10 or 12 men were mining there in June, getting a “fair return.”

It could hardly be surprising that the camps were fading away. As early as February, 1894, the miners had voted down a proposal to

prohibit a person from staking out an indefinite number of claims. “. . . Times were exciting and talk ran high, but there was no blood shed.” The output of gold soon started to slip, and traffic began to fall. By late May, the first excitement was waning, a correspondent for the *Californian* observed, “and the eager ones who rushed in with a hurry and ran all over the country, have most of them rushed out again, leaving behind as their only remembrance a liberal assortment of corner posts, stone monuments and location notices. . . .” Only 40 men remained by late June.

Even so, enough people remained in the El Paso Mountains to induce the Kern County supervisors to form voting precincts at Red Rock and Goler in early September.

The discovery of gold in the Rand Mountains set off small revivals throughout the El Paso Mountains in 1896. When Thomas Jagers, a Denver capitalist, found a nugget worth over \$500 in June, he rushed into Mojave and put it on display in a drugstore. The “wildest excitement prevailed. The nugget . . . caused staid men to lose their heads. Business men closed their places, hitched up their teams and left for the mines, and by 1 o’clock not a horse or vehicle was to be had. At one time it was feared that the employees of the Southern Pacific and Santa Fe would catch the infection and abandon their posts.”

Goler Mining District

Goler, the second important district in the mountains, experienced a rocky start. Several miners were working there in October, 1893, but few claims were paying; some men were making just enough to buy “only grub,” one correspondent complained. “. . . It might be well to stay away entirely.”

But the prospects soon changed. J.S. Reed, the namesake of a rich gully, found a 56-ounce nugget in Goler Gulch in early November. Fifty miners were working there by early December, and many others were on the way, by burro and team. The prices were moderate — 35¢ for meals — as were wages: \$2.50 a day and board for good miners. By the end of the month, Reed and Benson gulches alone had yielded up \$30,000 in dust and nuggets.

But Goler no longer had any room for newcomers. “The whole country for miles around is covered with location notices,” a correspondent for the San Francisco *Chronicle* lamented in late December. “Corner and center monuments and the like are as plenty as greasewood bushes, or almost so. Every one who has been upon the ground, after recording it for himself, seems to have built a lot of monuments in memory of his wife’s relations, and in this wise the whole country has been gobbled up. . . .” At a meeting, the miners voted to limit prospectors to one claim each.

Some rain and snow in early January, 1894, dampened the excitement. A few enterprising miners dug beneath the damp topsoil to continue dry-washing. The recorder of the district even sank a 100-foot shaft. A Los Angeles man took out \$1,000 in a single week, and several rich nuggets were found in February.

Most of the travel to the mines was over by late May, but small-scale mining went on. At **lower Goler camp**, near the mouth of Goler Canyon, an estimated two dozen or more Mexican and American miners were running dry-washers and rockers. Lower Goler was a section of deep gravel, in which several shafts, one of them 174 feet deep, had been sunk. Two miles north, over a rough and rocky road, stood **upper Goler camp**, near Benson and Reed gulches, the richest sections. A varying number of miners, perhaps 25, were working there in late May or early June. Several months later, in early September, the Kern County supervisors created voting precincts at Red Rock and Goler. The Goler precinct apparent included Summit and the newly organized Rand Mining District.

The feverish activity in the Rand district a few years later renewed interest in Goler. Only 15 men were working the placers in late July, 1896. They were doing fairly well — except for a miner who had fallen

down a 40-foot shaft; although severely bruised, he suffered no broken bones or internal injuries. Other miners were more fortunate, finding a nugget worth \$654 in August.

Another mineral, meanwhile, was attracting attention: water. To prepare for a mill at Randsburg, the owners of the Yellow Aster Mine surveyed a pipeline from Goler to the mine during the early summer. After a crew began sinking a shaft in early August, a family from Garlock opened a boardinghouse at the site. A derrick for a hoist was also set up, but it collapsed while a worker was descending the shaft in a bucket; the worker was jerked 30 feet into the air and landed with near-fatal force. The machinery for a pumping plant arrived in late August; by then, water was entering the shaft faster than it could be bailed dry.

Summit Mining District

Summit was the third important district in the El Paso Mountains. The placers there were apparently discovered in early or mid-1893, near a station owned by the San Bernardino Borax Mining Company. At the station, teams, travelers, and miners could obtain free water.

Summit turned out to be a somewhat poorer district than Red Rock or Goler, but it still remained attractive. By December, while some miners were making \$20 a day, two men from San Bernardino had taken out \$17,000 in gold in five months. Several months later, in February, 1894, T.R. Davis, the owner of a Tehachapi hotel, opened a store at the mines. And by April, 200 "permanent residents" were operating 60 dry-washers there.

The most persistent group of miners seemed to be the Van Slyke brothers. After cleaning up \$1,000 in five days, they cleaned up again: by jumping the Trix Mine. In April, a jury found one brother and four others guilty of claim-jumping. The jury recommended mercy, however, and each of them was sentenced to a \$10 fine or 10 days in jail.

The excitement nearly died out, but the ex-jumpers found a bonanza in late June; the camp enjoyed "a new lease on life." This boom, too, failed to last.

Still, Summit was a legitimate district. Nuggets worth from \$3 to \$20 were found during the late spring and summer of 1896. Shown at Garlock, the nuggets were said to be as plentiful as marbles. Again,

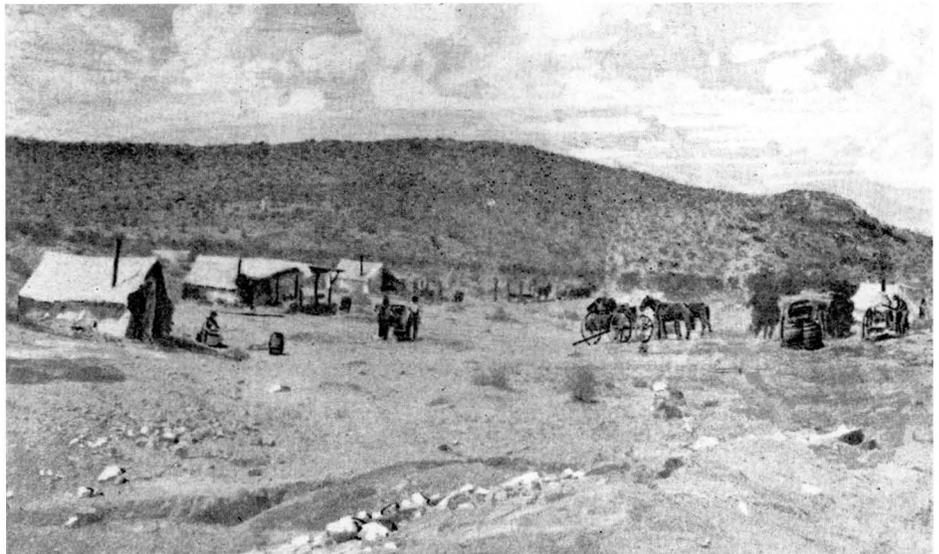


Fig. 1. Summit Camp, early 1893(?). Harold W. Fairbanks, State Mineralogist, Rep 12 (1894). Larry Vredenburg collection.

Summit was destined to "become a lively camp." About 15 or 20 miners were working there in early August.

Summit experienced its largest — and last — boom in May, 1897, when 300 men were dry-washing, "all making wages." Also being worked were several lodes, one of them yielding \$25 a ton. A mill manufacturer from San Francisco was sinking a well, preparing to put up a 5-stamp mill (probably never built).

Kane (Koehn) Springs

For travelers and miners in the El Paso Mountains, especially the Goler district, Kane Springs served as an important supply center. The nearest town was Mojave, 26 miles away.

Charles Koehn, a native of Germany, was keeping a ranch at the waterhole, "a somewhat brackish spring," where a post office, named Koehn, was established in September, 1893. Two stores were doing business at the spring by early December.

Koehn's ranch, however, resembled a one-man town. Besides running the post office and his ranch, Koehn kept a bar, delivered letters in the mines (for 25¢ each), provided free water to travelers, and kept a store. He sold hay (for 1½¢ a pound), grain (\$1.50 a sack), meat (8¢ to 11¢ a pound), and other provisions. He also made the rounds of



Fig. 2. Dry placer diggings, south side of Summit Diggings, December 1909. F.L. Hess, U.S. Geological Survey, courtesy Larry Vredenburg.

the camps, selling supplies out of a wagon.

Koehn was considered "very much of an accommodation in general." His prices were "reasonable." And, wrote a correspondent for the Los Angeles *Herald*, Koehn "has not the gall so common among settlers on the desert to charge travelers for water."

Despite the decline of the placers, **Koehn Springs**, as it came to be called, remained a "favorite halting place" during the rush to the Rand Mining District. Austin Young, a member of the same Masonic lodge (in Tehachapi) as Eugene Garlock, was managing Koehn's various enterprises in May, 1896. The store, post office, and bar were housed in a stone building; the walls, which were several feet thick, were "warranted to keep out the desert heat." Nearby, a large meadow contained a pond, wells, and springs. ". . . It is a veritable oasis in the desert . . ."

Meanwhile, to process ore from the Rand district, Koehn and a partner, O.B. Stanton, sank a well and had a 5-stamp mill built. The mill started up in late June; a clean-up a month later yielded \$1,000.

As an oasis, the ranch thrived. One correspondent came across 72 mules and horses one day in February, 1897. But the mill had shut down. It had proved no more efficient than the mills at nearby Garlock. Two veteran mill operators from the Slate Range soon bought 2,000 tons of tailings from Koehn and Stanton, installed a small cyanide plant, and, in July, began turning out bullion: \$2,000 worth in one shipment made in November.

By then, mine operators in the Rand district were sinking their own wells and putting up their own mills. Railroad service to Johannesburg began a few months later. The post office at Koehn Springs was discontinued in January, 1899, although Koehn maintained his ranch for 30 more years.

The stations of the San Bernardino Borax Mining Company

Kane Springs and Cow Wells were not the only oases on the way to the discoveries in the Goler, Summit, and Rand mining districts. Several stations used by the San Bernardino Borax Mining Company also served as important supply points.

The brothers John and Dennis Searles, the founders of the company, began extracting borax from the dry bed of Borax (Searles) Lake in 1872. The loads were huge — up to 30,000 pounds in 1894 — and the teams were long: 20 mules.

By 1894, when E.M. Skillings had replaced Dennis Searles as a partner, the company was maintaining five stations: **Forks**, 6 miles from Mojave; **Mesquite**, 23 miles from Forks; **Summit**, 21 miles farther; **Salt Canyon**, 17 miles; and the home station, 9 miles, at Borax Lake. Forks, Summit, and the home stations were supplied with good water piped from springs in the nearby mountains; water had to be hauled to Mesquite and Salt Canyon in 500-gallon carts. At each station, a stable, "so firmly bolted together as to defy all ordinary blasts," could accommodate 40 animals.

In fact, the stations were "conducted with military precision and order," a correspondent for the *Californian* explained. ". . . It is no slight task to set out across the desert with one team of twenty mules, one driver, one assistant called a 'swamper' and 15 tons of freight . . ."

Apparently, Searles and Skillings had abandoned Mesquite station by May, 1896. Nearby Koehn Springs was well prepared to handle even large teams. A Los Angeles firm was running a 5-stamp mill at Mesquite in early June.

Besides the Rand district, major mines were being developed in the Panamint Range, where a supply center named Ballarat had been laid out. "There is a constant stream of travel through this place, headed for the mining camps to the eastward," the Mojave correspondent for the *Californian* reported had reported in May. "Every train brings passengers bound thither, while teams come in every day, all headed in the same direction. . . ." So much traffic was heading to the camps that Kern County officials surveyed an improved road to the Rand district in December; the survey ran from Warren's station, near

Mojave, followed the borax road as far as Garlock, and then made a jog up the Rand Mountains to Randsburg. The road had been so well maintained that the county estimated the cost of improvements at only a few hundred dollars, to the delight of one correspondent in January, 1897. ". . . This is certainly a cheap investment for the county and a very necessary one."

Summit station, near the Summit placer mines, was probably the best developed. Excellent water was being piped 4½ miles from the mountains. Growing near the stables were a lush vineyard with delicious grapes; an orchard with healthy apricot, peach, pear, plum, and fig trees; and a thriving garden protected by a rabbit-proof fence.

John Searles and Skillings started up their borax works again in February, 1894, when two Lancaster men opened a store at Mesquite Springs. A hotel owner from Tehachapi, meanwhile, opened a store in the Summit district.

Apparently, Searles and Skillings reorganized their string of stations. The first station, Forks, had come to be known as **Six-Mile House** by May, 1896, when it comprised a barn and water tank. A correspondent for the *Californian* praised Searles "for the vast amount of money spent by him in building the road, erecting stations and piping water from the mountains. . ."

Sixteen-Mile House was a new station for the borax company. ". . . Here 'refreshment for man and beast' can be obtained, besides all manner of what may be called 'spiritual consolation.'" Cinco, an aqueduct camp and highway stop, was built near Sixteen-Mile House; both sites are now only memories.

Law and order

During the first true mining boom in the El Paso Mountains, in 1893 and 1894, the forces of law were fairly remote. Originally, the court district (or "township") centered in Tehachapi covered the desert districts of Kern County. Rural townships then were entitled to two justices of the peace and two constables. Their pay came out of fees or fines in civil and criminal cases (besides a certain prestige derived from the positions).

This type of thinly-spread judicial organization seemed adequate at first. About the only criminal matter then was the claim-jumping case of Van Slyke and four other defendants in April, 1894. Visiting several months later, a mining engineer called the diggings "the most peaceable ever known; none of the usual adjuncts of mining camps, without which some people cannot imagine them, are to be found; no saloons (with the exception of Red Rock), no gambling, no deaths by violence, no lawless element and no Chinamen — as peaceable a community and as hard working a lot of men as can be found anywhere." During the past three years of mining, a correspondent for the *Californian* boasted in early June, 1896, not one violent death, either in an accident or in a crime, had taken place. ". . . This record cannot be beaten where any like number of men are gathered together under similar conditions."

This near-Edenic state of affairs began to change a few weeks later, when "a considerable fracas" broke out at Charles Koehn's store and bar. He went to Bakersfield to swear out a warrant for battery.

Trouble was also beginning to plague Garlock. The residents there (and at Randsburg) tended to band together to keep order, for "the proverbial tough character so frequent in early-day mining camps when he appears in this vicinity has to behave himself or leave. . . ." According to local lore, early in the history of Garlock, a ruffian who had beaten up "old man Harkins in a shameful manner without provocation was promptly waited upon and told to take his departure — which he did in a hurry," one resident reported.

When a bartender in Garlock hammered one bald man over the head with an ice pick in August, 1896, a crude type of law enforcement followed. The owner of the saloon fired the bartender at once, and then one of the "mill boys" gave him a thrashing. That night, the ex-barkeeper "walked to Mojave a prettily used up man."

By then, serious violence — sometimes a killing a week — was breaking out at Randsburg. To keep order in the desert, the county supervisors created a court district, Township 10, centered at Mojave.

But Mojave was too far away. In response to several petitions, the board of supervisors created Township 11, serving the El Paso Mountains and the Rand district, in December, 1896. The board also voted to have a jail built at Randsburg. Justice courts were organized at Randsburg and Garlock in January, 1897.

As the population of the township increased (to an estimated 800 by early May), so did the crime. At the Summit mines in early April, two prospectors, “accompanied by a jug of whisky,” started quarreling. One of them beat his partner severely and then went on to Randsburg, where he told of the fight. Then a traveler reported the victim as dead. The prospector was jailed and charged with murder. A party went out to bring in the body, “which they soon met covered with gore and all bloody red, walking along the road toward camp. . . .” The murder charge was reduced to battery.

Worse was to come several weeks later in the Goler district, where three brothers — Ben, John, and William Higgins — were working the placers. Apparently, Ben had long held a grudge against John. When they began feuding one morning, William put an end to the fight. But that afternoon, Ben came up to their claim, threw John a rifle, told him to defend himself, and immediately shot him in the neck. William rushed to John’s side, then heard a report and saw Ben fall backward.

The county coroner rushed from Bakersfield and held an inquest. But by the time William arrived in Mojave, the bodies had started to decompose. And without coffins, the railroad refused to ship the bodies. Reluctantly, William had his brothers buried in Mojave “just as they were found,” a correspondent lamented. “It was a sad and horrible sight and the living brother has the sympathy of all the people.”

At Garlock in early May, a man named W. Bull, who had rented a horse from D.B. Newell in March but failed to return it, was brought before the justice of the peace on a charge of grand larceny. The judge held a preliminary hearing and sent Bull’s case to the superior court, setting his bail at \$250.

Adults weren’t the only malefactors. John Hawthorne, 16, who was mining with his father at Goler, entered a cabin a few weeks later and took \$85 in cash and gold dust from the pants pockets of a miner. Apparently, the father found the loot hidden under the grub box of their tent, and the boy confessed. He was taken before the judge in Garlock.

Epilogue

After mining declined during the 1890s, Rudolf Hagen, a prospector, bought the area around Red Rock station, where he kept a store, stable, feed yard, and perhaps a saloon. A post office, named after Hagen’s son Ricardo, was established there in January, 1898, although the voting precinct was abolished in 1902. In 1907, Hagen tried to build a water project to hydraulic-mine the old placers and irrigate the Fremont Valley. Hagen probably failed to get financing, but Los Angeles soon built a branch railroad up the canyon to haul in materials for the construction of its aqueduct to the Owens Valley. After the completion of the aqueduct, the railroad was torn up and the post office was discontinued (December, 1917).

But some of Hagen’s ideas turned out to be sound. He put in a store, cafe, and gasoline pumps near the site of the mining camp (next to the present highway) and developed an extensive farm below the colonnaded cliffs of today’s state park. The highway was paved about 1930, when Hagen retired in Bakersfield.

Like Hagen, Charles Koehn remained in the area. He energetically operated a variety of small mines and ran cattle in the El Paso Mountains. Koehn’s long career ended after he was convicted of attempted murder in September, 1928, and sentenced to prison.

The nearby Goler placers, meanwhile, were being worked on and

off with some success. During the early 1930s, the Goler Canyon Mining Company and other concerns put in wells, pumps, and gravel-washing machinery. Several hundred men, women, and children lived at several camps there; a building was even put up for a school and church. But no permanent settlement developed.

Like Red Rock, Summit station became an important supply stop. During the rush to Ballarat, the Teagles, a family of Randsburg merchants, bought the property and renamed it **Garden Station**, where they ran a store and telephone station. A post office, named **Searles**, was established in August, 1898. The Southern Pacific Railroad built its Owens Valley branch past the place about 1908. Crews surveying a route for the Trona Railway later made Garden Station their base camp. The construction of the railroad, starting in late 1913, apparently made the station obsolete, for the post office was discontinued in July, 1914.

SOURCES

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Gypsite: A Humble Product from a Humble Camp

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Several products of the desert were too humble to attract much attention. Gypsite, a mixture of gypsum and clay, was one of those products. The purest grades could be turned into plaster, and lower grades were valued by farmers as a soil amendment.

Charles Koehn, who had figured prominently in the mining boom in the El Paso Mountains during the 1890s, found an unusually large and pure deposit of gypsite on the dry bed of Koehn Lake in late 1909. The discovery was made while the Southern Pacific Railroad was building a branch from Mojave to the Owens Valley.

Even though gypsite was selling for only \$10 a ton, the California Crown Plaster & Gypsite Company, of Los Angeles, began leasing Koehn's claim and put up buildings and a calcining (roasting) plant near Kane (Cane) Springs in early 1911. Twenty men worked at the mill. A post office served the milling camp from June, 1911, to March, 1912.

The demand nearly overwhelmed the plant. Running the mill day and night during the summer of 1912, a mere 12 men produced 30 tons of plaster a day.

Reorganized as the California Gypsum Hollow Tile Company during mid-1913, Crown Plaster enlarged and modernized the operation. The company built a 3-mile narrow-gauge railroad on the lake bed, where tests had revealed a 14-foot deposit layer of very pure gypsite. At the mill, the gypsite was dried out in three huge oil-fired kettles, mixed with fiber and retarder to give it firmness, and pulverized to make plaster of "very good quality." Expecting to soon double its force, the company also put up a depot, a hotel, houses, and a post office (which never reopened).

For reasons that are not clear, the operation failed. Koehn, who held a mortgage on the mill, took it over in early 1915 and threatened to ship out gypsite himself if the plant were not redeemed. But the company never returned.

The deposit was worked from time to time by various companies. In late 1926, for example, the Consolidated Clay Company, of San Francisco, installed a huge dryer on Koehn's property; it cost \$20,000. Consolidated planned to put up a mill, to cost \$40,000, to grind the abundant clay found there. The company planned to grind 80 tons a day for shipment to Los Angeles, where the clay would be sold to oil refineries. The mill would also process gypsite. The operation employed 23 men, which was expected to increase to 50 when a second mill was built. As ambitious as this project was, it probably went no further.

In any case, Koehn soon lost control of his claim. He was accused of trying to kill a Bakersfield judge with a bomb and found guilty in September, 1928. George Abel, meanwhile, bought his gypsite property. Making frequent sales trips to orchard owners — one order totaled 1,500 tons — Abel successfully ran a small operation for several years. After Abel died during the early 1930s, other operators continued small-scale mining well into the 1950s.

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The History of Saltdale

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Introduction

Koehn Lake is a geologic anomaly: a "moist" playa, in which shallow ground water rises to the surface by capillary action, carrying with it salt, which is deposited in the center of the desert playa lake. This readily available source of salt, close to transportation and to major markets in Los Angeles and the San Joaquin Valley, was also the site of one of the longest running deceptions in the Mojave Desert.

The Saline Placer Act of January 31, 1901 placed a limit of one mining claim for saline minerals per locator. To thwart the intent of this Act, the salt producers on Koehn Lake employed the services of numerous individuals or "dummy locators" to locate mining claims, thereby acquiring large blocks of mining claims. It began in the period between 1909 and 1913 when sixty saline placer claims were located and leased to Thomas Thorkildsen and Thomas H. Rosenberger for a period of forty years. By having individuals locate these claims, and subsequently lease them, Thorkildsen was able to tie up sufficient ground to begin salt production. Thorkildsen during this period began developing borate deposits near Lang in Los Angeles County, at Stauffer in Ventura County, and near Daggett, giving William "Borax" Smith a fright that his borax monopoly was less than secure.

The claim staking by Thorkildsen and Rosenberger did not go unchallenged by feisty Charles Koehn, founding father of the settlement of Kane (or Koehn) Springs. Koehn, who had previously located claims on the lake bed, challenged the claim jumpers in January, 1912, in a "lively" gun battle on the dry lake. Swift justice was meted out in Randsburg, the Randsburg *Miner* reporting on February 10, 1912, that in the case of *People vs. T. H. Rosenberger and ten others*, the defendants were found guilty of forcible entry and detainer, and Rosenberger was fined \$50. Nearly a year later, a happy ending to the dispute was reported by the *Miner*; Koehn sold his claims to Thorkildsen, who in turn sold them to the Diamond Salt Company of Los Angeles. More than likely the Diamond Salt Company actually leased the property.

While the chain of ownership for the *claims* located on Koehn Lake is detailed in government investigations in between 1945 and 1971, the corporate relationship in the early years is confused. The Consolidated Salt Company was incorporated February 11, 1913. It forfeited its charter November, 1913, but the company's interests were not transferred until 1933. In addition, the Randsburg *Miner* continued to report as late as 1915 that the Diamond Salt Company was actively working the deposit.

Early Operations

The Consolidated Salt Company constructed a crushing and screening plant and laid a baby-gauge railroad track onto the playa, from where a gasoline-powered locomotive hauled the salt to the crusher. Consolidated began shipping in 1914 – 240 tons or more a week by October. The output that year totaled 20,000 tons. In January, 1915, the company was shipping about twelve cars of salt weekly.

Business boomed. Employing 30 men, Consolidated was turning out about 720 tons a week by June, 1915. The crew was increased to

65 in April, 1916, while a 4-story mill was under construction. A long-awaited post office was finally established that September. But a chronic problem – the inability of the Southern Pacific to supply enough cars – was delaying shipments by five months.

Consolidated ran an extensive operation. Except during rainy winters, the company pumped well water onto the lake floor. The brine thus produced was then pumped through a 1± mile ditch into several pond-like "vats" – the largest covering 43 acres – where the brine was allowed to evaporate. After two or three months, a 6-inch layer of very pure salt would form. At "harvest" time, a circular saw mounted on a portable platform cut the layer into cakes. The cakes were then cleaned by hand, loaded into small cars running on a temporary track, and hauled by a gasoline-fueled locomotive to the mill. There, the cakes were ground, sized in screens, sacked, and shipped to Los Angeles.

Newcomers to Koehn Lake

In activities which harkened back to the claim staking by Thorkildsen and Rosenberger's crews in 1912, T. Y. DeFoor and Philo H. Crisp located a block of one-hundred eleven mining claims on Koehn Lake between 1916 and 1918. In order to locate this large block of claims "dummy-locators" were paid 5,000 shares of stock with a par value of \$1 per share for signing their names as locators. After DeFoor located a claim on the ground, he gave Crisp, an old time prospector in the Garlock area that knew all the section corners in the vicinity, the location notice and a deed with the name of the grantee blank. At the same time, another associate, Paul Greenmore, a resident of Bakersfield, was rounding up the "dummy-locators" described as "just a bunch of widows none of whom could write a check for \$50." Greenmore received \$2.50 for each signed location notice. Each of the 111 claims was 20 acres, and each claim was "located" by a different individual. These claims were then deeded to the Fremont Salt Company.



Fig. 1. Mill at Saltdale, February 1955. William Ver Planck, Calif. Division of Mines, courtesy Larry Bredenburg.

With location of these claims, a second producer, the Fremont Salt Company, incorporated December 7, 1916 and built a plant on the east side of the playa in 1917. In 1919, when the Southern Sierras Power Company brought in electricity, the companies produced altogether 17,000 tons.

By then, the operations were becoming somewhat erratic. Enough families were living at the plants to induce the Kern County supervisors to organize the Saltdale School District in February, 1920. But Consolidated was employing only six men, and few pupils showed up at school; in fact, no schoolhouse was built. Even so, the companies managed to produce 22,000 tons. The camps probably remained small, for the school district was absorbed by Garlock's in August, 1921. The output of salt declined somewhat, to about 18,900 tons in 1923.

The year 1922 also saw the transfer of claims held by Thomas Thorkildsen and Thomas H. Rosenberger to the Consolidated Salt Company.

Although Consolidated's operation was being kept in good condition — “as neat as a lady's kitchen” — only six men were working in the mill in July, 1924, besides a handful running the pumping plant and train. A shortage of water and power was holding down production to about 6 to 10 tons a day. Apparently, the school was moved from Garlock to the plant about then. Alas, the building was little more than a shack, and the institution was one of the poorest in the county, suffering from a high rate of absences. Although H.C. Topp, “the rustling superintendent” for Consolidated, called 1925 the best season so far, the companies finished the year with 6,900 tons, their lowest total output.

Slowly, the operations began to recover. The total output reached nearly 15,000 tons during the 1927 season. Even so, the companies were facing another dry year.

Coming onto the scene was Henry Fenton, the owner of the Western Salt Company, based in San Diego. Western Salt had acquired part ownership of the Long Beach Salt Company, which in turn bought out Fremont on November 5, 1927. The Long Beach Salt Company had operated salt ponds and a salt works in the marshes opposite Terminal Island between Wilmington and Long Beach. The salt operations were gradually displaced after discovery of oil.

Long Beach Salt dismantled the Fremont Company's plant and

concentrated operations at Consolidated's plant. By then, the camp's “business district” probably included no more than a company store, the post office, the school, and a service station along the Cantil-Randsburg road.

The school, too, began to enjoy better days. Under the guidance of its teacher, Mrs. Ruby Rogers, and H.C. Topp, who also served as the district's clerk, the school began to set records for its high attendance rate. The building was repaired, repainted, and enlarged in late 1927, enough to make it “very attractive and well lighted.”

Like many camps then, Saltdale was composed of two groups: managers, skilled workers, and their families, who tended to be Anglo Protestants, and common laborers and their families, who were usually Latino Catholics. The Protestants had their own group, the Ladies' Aid Society, which held weekly meetings, often at Cantil. For the Catholics, many of whom worked at other camps, the center of religious life was St. Mary's Church, in Randsburg.

It was the job of many schools, including Saltdale's, to bring the groups together. To carry out the work of “Americanization,” Latino children were encouraged to participate in play activities that demanded “the use of the English language and the finer points of good sportsmanship and cooperation.” At a Christmas party held in 1929, the pupils put on a well-received play, after which cake and sandwiches “and some delicious enchiladas made by our Spanish American ladies” were served. Another teacher, Mrs. Caroline Larson, began teaching a night course in English (“Americanization”) for Latinos and a Spanish course for Anglos during the fall of 1930. She “deserves a great deal of credit,” one correspondent commented.

Although the work at the mill was hot and hard, the residents could enjoy an abundance of humble pastimes during the late 1920s and early 1930s. The Ladies' Aid Society often held parties, bazaars, and fund-raising events. The mill workers put on dances that attracted people from all over Fremont Valley. The schools at Cantil and Saltdale together went on picnics, held Christmas parties, and put on field days. During August, 1928, Mrs. A. Soto invited several friends to “a splendid enchilada dinner” in honor of her husband's birthday; a week later, two Latino youths spent Labor Day “swimming in the 20 per cent brine-solution ditch, and claimed that they liked it. Felipe Hernandez made an eager second for the impromptu swimming party.”



Fig. 2. Harvesting salt at Saltdale, April 1953. William Ver Planck, Calif. Division of Mines and Geology, courtesy Larry Vredenburgh.

Despite these simple pleasures, Saltdale could suffer from its isolation. Crime was easy to commit since the closest justice of the peace, constable, and jail was in Randsburg, 16 miles away. The company store was robbed of several games one night in March, 1928. Topp “feels sure it was strangers and we feel sure no one around here would commit a felony,” one correspondent explained. And rather than go to the nearest hospital, at Red Mountain, some mothers gave birth at home. But this practice could lead to complications: during the same week that a boy was born to one family, in December, 1931, the infant daughter of another family died.

It must have been difficult for Saltdale to weather the Depression. A proposal was made in September, 1931, to consolidate the school districts at Saltdale and Cantil. The construction of a modern campus, the paper in Randsburg predicted, was probably “the best improvement that could be suggested.” (The merger had to wait 20 years.)

Even though depressed, Saltdale and other camps still had to be serviced. To handle the

shipments of salt, gypsite, and pumice, the Southern Pacific built a modern loading platform at Saltdale in late 1931, and the county graded 10 miles of the Cantil-Randsburg road, which was now oiled. And to increase the flow of brine, Long Beach Salt blasted a 1.7-mile ditch in the mud of the lake. The company, in fact, enjoyed enough good years of production to keep its parent, Western Salt, prosperous through the Depression.

Two important transactions occurred in 1933. On June 3, all the leaseholds held by the Consolidated Salt were transferred to the Long Beach Salt Company. Then in July, 36 association placer claims were filed by the Long Beach Salt Company on Koehn Lake, allegedly for placer gold. The location of these claims continued the legacy of deceptively located claims on Koehn Lake, for with the passage of the Mineral Leasing Act of 1920, salt was no longer a mineral which could be acquired with mining claims.

Where the 1930s were prosperous, the 1940s were another matter. An increased amount of gypsum in the salt limited its sale to farms and factories. The rainfall, meanwhile, dwindled, finally drying up for a few years after January, 1947. Attempts to run the plant on salt shipped from San Diego turned out to be impractical. Only three workers remained in 1949. The post office closed in June, 1950. The school district was dissolved in July, 1951, the same year that Fenton died. The Saltdale operation, a family member recalled, was "one of the few salt ventures that did not support his good judgment."

The mill, however, was kept intact and modernized during the 1950s. It remained a highly mechanized, round-the-clock operation that required only a handful of workers.

The claims from which the salt operations at Saltdale had germinated were known to the United States. An extensive investigation was begun in 1945 by geologists and engineers with the General Land Office (case SF-62514), but apparently died with the creation of the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) in 1946. The case was reopened in 1956 when the president of the Long Beach Salt Company filed a protest with the agency when another company filed a Sodium Prospecting Permit Application under the provisions of the 1920 Mineral Leasing Act. By 1960 the renewed investigation died as well.

The beginning of the end started with a September 3, 1968 letter from D. Livengood, president of the West Coast Salt and Milling Company of Bakersfield. Livengood's letter to Secretary of Interior Udall, Congressman Robert Mathias, and the Bureau of Land Management shook the agency into activity. Livengood was steamed that Long Beach Salt Company was able to undercut his product, for which he paid royalties to the United States from operations on Searles Lake. Earlier investigations focused on the manner in which Consolidated Salt, and Fremont had acquired the claims. The complaint that was filed July 23, 1973, charged that there was insufficient gold on the 36 claims located in 1933 to constitute a valuable mineral discovery. Even though salt was a valuable mineral which had been produced since 1913, production had moved off of the pre-1920 (Mineral Leasing Act) claims to the claims filed in 1933. Incredibly, in a civil case decided July 9, 1972, the court determined that the terms of the Saline Placer Act of 1901 had not been violated in the location of the pre-1920 mining claims. However, the fate of the 36 claims from which Long Beach Salt Company was producing salt was decided by the United States Interior Board of Land Appeals (IBLA) on December 2, 1975, when they declared them null and void.

At the time of the IBLA's decision, only four workers remained – and none of them lived at Saltdale. The plant probably shut down soon afterward. Amid the rubble of buildings, the corrugated-iron shell of the mill still stood in May, 1980. The wind banged the doors eerily in the glow of the setting sun. A year and a half later, even this remnant of mining was gone.

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Henry Fenton's life, including his operations at Saltdale, are described by Laura Fenton in *Henry Fenton, typical American*, San Diego(?): 1953(?).

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Garlock: The History of a Milling Town

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If a mine needs anything above all, it needs a mill. And that mill needs water.

So it was with great foresight that Eugene Garlock, the owner of a mine near Tehachapi, saw an opportunity in the discovery of rich and large deposits of gold ore in the Rand Mountains, northeast of Mojave. The Yellow Aster claim, discovered in April, 1895, turned out to be the most important mine.

But the Rand Mining District lacked a supply of readily available water. In the beginning, all of it had to be hauled from Goler and Cow Wells, about a dozen miles up a sandy road from the floor of Fremont Valley. There, in the deep gravels lying below Cow Wells, were heavily mineralized but abundant quantities of the "precious fluid."

Garlock moved an 8-stamp mill from the Tehachapi area to Cow Wells, perhaps in late 1895 or early 1896. As the pioneer mill operator, Garlock readily found customers.

The nucleus of a settlement began to form around Cow Wells during early 1896. A post office, named after Garlock, was established in April. Mrs. I.M. Kelly managed the office and corresponded for the Bakersfield *Daily Californian*; her husband, John, owned the camp's feed yard. (He would be elected sheriff several years later.) Mrs. Archie Martin's boardinghouse was praised for its neat table and excellent food. ". . . One does not look for such creature comforts as she furnishes away out here on the desert." Four stage lines, meanwhile, were running through Garlock, bound for Randsburg. Since Garlock was receiving mail and newspapers daily, the residents "will not be deprived of the comforts of civilization though living remote from the railroad . . ." In fact, another correspondent noted, in early June, "everything man and beast requires can be obtained here."

Despite the heat of summer, the traffic to Randsburg and elsewhere was so heavy that it reminded one correspondent of "the old days of prosperity . . . The boom has come again and come to stay . . ." Five saloons were doing business at Garlock by early July. A telephone line was soon extended from nearby Koehn Springs, another milling camp, to Garlock, where messages could be relayed to Randsburg over a telegraph line. In August, a Porterville man put up a 2-stamp mill and Eugene Garlock installed another engine at his mill. That fall, the Visalia Mining and Milling Company began work on a 5-stamp mill.

Although the Kern County supervisors had established voting precincts (Red Rock and Goler) at the desert mines in 1894, the camps remained almost out of reach of local government. The supervisors finally organized a judicial township for the Randsburg-Garlock area, in late 1896 or early 1897. The township was served by two justices of the peace and two constables. Then, after San Bernardino County began pushing a road toward the Rand district, the Kern County supervisors hastily had a road surveyed from Warren's Station, near Mojave, to Garlock and Randsburg, much to the delight of one correspondent in the early 1890s: "By this route one feels as if he had hardly left civilization . . . No wonder one is agreeably surprised after making a trip by the short route of Buzzards, Bones and Beer from San Berdoo!"

Meanwhile, by January, when the Visalia mill started up, Garlock was "building like magic." The business district, where lots were selling for only a few hundred dollars, now embraced three general stores, one drugstore, one physician (Dr. William Wright, who worked out of his house), one assay office, four lumberyards, four livery yards, two butcher shops, three boardinghouses, two barber shops, two restaurants, five saloons, the post office (served by a daily mail delivery from Mojave), and a recently opened office of Wells, Fargo & Company. Several businesses went by such colorful names as Cheney's Thirst Emporium, the Desert House, and the Big Barn, where the stages would change teams.

Garlock was also the home of several dozen children (51 by May). Money was collected and a lot set aside for a school. In response to a petition signed by 21 parents, the county supervisors organized the Garlock School District (and one at Randsburg) in early February.

By then, Garlock was developing an enviable range of institutions. A newly organized fire-protection association — reported to be the first in the desert — ordered a dozen fire extinguishers and a dozen leather buckets. A justice of the peace was at work, holding a preliminary hearing for a grand-larceny suspect. And a weekly newspaper, the *Garlock News*, was founded. Published by Charles F. Schmidt, Jr., and H. H. Schmidt, the *News* contained four 11x16-inch pages and cost \$2 a year.



Fig. 1. Garlock, 1897-98? (n.d.). Kern County Museum, courtesy Larry Vredenburg.

Town life

Strangely, a townsite wasn't laid out until June, 1897. But what a townsite! Offering the comforts of civilization were two well-managed hostleries, one owned by A.J. and Sarah Doty, the other by Zeke T. Lillard and his wife.

Doty's Hall, which also served as the stage station, was the most important place in town. Doty's was Garlock's only two-story building and, despite persistent sandblasting by the wind, stood for a certain elegance. Inside were 10 bedrooms and a parlor, lobby, large dining room, and kitchen. Outside stood an ornate street lantern, one of four along the main street.

The cuisine was another matter. Although fresh meat arrived three times a week from a local slaughterhouse, the lack of refrigeration forced Doty's to serve mostly canned or dried food.

Lillard's, in contrast, was famed for its food. Zeke Lillard and his family had emigrated from Los Angeles, hoping to make a quick fortune in the gold fields. But Mrs. Lillard instead built up an outdoor kitchen into a bakery and then the hotel. Working almost round the clock, she would bake pies and bread for 100 lunches before getting breakfast ready. Mrs. Lillard might also have to prepare as many as 300 meals a day for her regular boarders: miners and mill workers. Her two daughters helped out by waiting on tables.

Zeke Lillard, in contrast, tended to drift away from the front desk to the sitting room or porch, smoking a cigar or talking about mining. And whenever hot weather arrived, the Lillards' son, Frank, would visit the tall jar of chocolate-covered cream candies on the front desk. "It was a drippy, sticky mess, but wonderful. I got to eat the whole batch, right down to the liquid chocolate on the bottom."

At the other end of Main Street stood the Garlock School, a building of simple dignity. Inside were two rows of home-made desks, one row for the boys, the other for the girls. Between the desks stood a cast-iron stove. Near the door was a dipper and galvanized pail for water. At the front of the room was the teacher's desk, platform, and blackboard. During the boom, the school was well attended (reaching a peak of 20 in 1898) and served as a dance hall on Saturday nights, a church on Sundays, and a meeting place for the literary society.

Like the school, Dr. Wright's house was improvised to serve a variety of needs. A simple frame structure, the house contained only

about 400 square feet, but the back room and lean-to were used as living quarters, bedrooms, a kitchen, and a laundry; the front room served as an office (where Dr. Wright also pulled teeth), drugstore, and assembly room for miners. About 1900, half of the front room was partitioned off for use as the post office.

Two businesses were especially popular, although in different ways. Attached to one saloon were a few cribs and a gambling den. To fend off critics, mainly prohibitionists, the saloon owners organized their own peace-keeping force: the Wirecutters' Association. The other force for cleanliness — literally — was Juan Basarto, a shy young man who ran a hand laundry; he charged a standard 25 cents for jobs of any size.

Juan Basarto was typical of many of Garlock's residents: unpretentious and generous. "It was a friendly little settlement where people helped each other in common need and hardship," recalled Bessie McGinn, one of the daughters of Jim McGinn, a merchant. For example, when an impoverished miner named Becker painfully shuffled in with a strangulated hernia, Dr. Wright summoned a doctor from Randsburg and together operated on Becker on the kitchen table. Afterward, Mrs. Wright cared for Becker until he was able to return home to Los Angeles. Mrs. Wright "was always helping someone who was down on his luck," her son, Sherman, remembered.

Happily, day-to-day life was rarely so grim. The residents could look forward to a variety of homespun activities: the daily arrival of the stage, dances in the school, music, meetings of the literary society, baseball games, Sunday sermons preached by Dr. Wright, and Independence Day festivities, at which Dr. Wright would deliver the oration.

Signs of decline

Although Garlock was prospering, some signs of weakness began to appear. The losses of precious metals during milling became so great that a cyanide plant had to be installed at one mill in May, 1897. Mine owners in the Rand district, in the meantime, were sinking their own wells: at dry Cuddeback Lake, east of Randsburg, and near the St. Elmo Mine, southeast of Johannesburg.

But as long as the Rand district continued to yield rich and abundant ore, life at Garlock went on as usual. Despite the press of



Fig. 2. Yellow Aster Mine's pumping plant, Goler, 1909. *F.L. Hess, U.S. Geological Survey, Denver; courtesy Larry Vredenburg.*

business, for example, the mills had to shut down in anticipation of the Independence Day festivities in 1897. As before, the “boys” went on a binge, first at Randsburg on July 3 and then at Garlock on July 5, and then took another day to recover. The Garlock Mill had to wait until the morning of July 7 to resume operations. “. . . Now everything is again serene, and the music of the stamps is heard from ‘early morn till dewy eve.’”

A more respectable pastime — and the most popular — was baseball. In its first game, the Garlock team beat Randsburg, 11 to 5. But in “the event of the season” in September, the Tehachapi team came from behind and beat Garlock, 4 to 1.

By October, Garlock supported six mills, running day and night almost entirely on large shipments of ore from the Rand district. But appearances could be deceiving. Each of the largest two mills ran only 10 stamps; one mill was equipped with a roller, a cheap but inefficient crushing device. Only one mill was powered by a gasoline engine; the others were equipped with steam engines, which voraciously burned huge stacks of hot-burning creosote (“greasewood”). Two cyanide plants, meanwhile, were processing the tailings.

Garlock continued to lose its monopoly of mills and wells throughout the fall and winter. Small mills were already operating at Mesquite Springs, Koehn Springs, Cuddeback Lake, and Johannesburg, where a 10-stamp mill started up in early December. Eastern investors, in the meantime, were pushing the construction of a 29-mile rail line — the Randsburg Railway — from Kramer, a station on the Santa Fe Railroad, to Johannesburg. They planned to ship ore from the Rand to a 50-stamp mill under construction at Barstow. The prospects for business looked good: in March, 1898, one mine, employing 120 men, was shipping from 30 to 50 tons of high-grade ore a day to Garlock’s mills.

The final years

For Garlock, the beginning of the end came in June, 1898, when the mill at Barstow started up. The Yellow Aster soon began shipping its ore to Barstow and closed all but one of the mills at Garlock. Since the Yellow Aster already had a pipeline running from its wells at Goler, it built a 30-stamp at Randsburg; the mill started up in February, 1899. Only 50 people were living in Garlock — and 34 in its environs — by the spring of 1900. When the Yellow Aster built a second, 100-stamp mill — the largest in the state — in 1901, the last families left Garlock. School enrollment fell from 19 that spring to three or four in May, 1903, when the school district was dissolved.

The Wright family left that year. As son Sherman recalled, the Wrights “abandoned the house and gave Juan [Basarto] our horse and buggy, together with an old four wheeler wagon in exchange for driving us to Mojave. There we took the train for Oakland. I never knew how my father got together enough money for the train fare. He was at heart a promoter, quite resourceful, and always managed somehow.” The post office closed in March, 1904. Only Juan Basarto remained. And soon, even he was gone.

The revival

Garlock began to reawaken several years later. The construction of a railroad line from Mojave to the Owens Valley from 1907 through 1910 brought a section crew and station to the townsite. A slaughterhouse still operated there. Then, in 1914, Sarah (Granny) Slocum bought up much of the townsite and opened a boardinghouse, which her customers dubbed the “Hotel de puke.” She scrapped the mills during World War I.

After the war, J.D. Voss and other operators reopened several nearby gold and silver claims. A small settlement grew up at the townsite. In response to a petition signed by 13 parents, the county supervisors re-established the Garlock School District in January, 1920; Garlock annexed the short-lived Saltdale School District several months later. About then, John D. Norton opened a general store,

where the post office was re-established in October, 1923.

A flurry of small-scale mining continued for several years. After shipping out some ore to a smelter in early 1925, in fact, Voss was feeling “very much encouraged.”

The revival soon faded away. Norton moved to Cantil and opened a store. Garlock lost its post office in June, 1926. The school was moved to nearby Saltdale a few years later.

The onslaught of the Depression, ironically, led to an increased interest in gold mining. A cyanide plant was built at Garlock in 1931. Major placer-mining operations, employing hundreds of men, also were resumed in the Goler district. But Garlock never revived as a town.

SOURCES

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Thorough day-to-day coverage can be found in the Bakersfield *Daily Californian* and the *Mining & Scientific Press* (San Francisco) for 1896 and 1897; occasional articles can be found in the San Bernardino *Times-Index*.

The actions of the county government can be traced in the Bakersfield *Daily Californian*, especially January, 1897; the minutes of the Kern County board of supervisors (microfilm), 1896 and 1897, in the office of the clerk of the board, Bakersfield; “Annual Report of the Condition of Public [Common] Schools in the County of Kern,” 1898-99, 1899-1900, 1900-01, and 1901-02, in the California State Archives, Sacramento; and “School Districts: Formation Change of Boundaries: Garlock,” file 19-14, also in the office of the clerk of the board.

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