

An overview of the history of mining in the vicinity of Oro Grande, California

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Early discoveries

Although the site of Oro Grande lay on the most important route through the Mojave Desert, it was decades before travelers, prospectors and miners would be alerted to the precious metals laying just off their trail.

The earliest mining in the vicinity of Oro Grande began in 1854 with the discovery of gold in Bear Valley, in the San Bernardino Mountains, by John Brown. Although mining continued in a small way, it was William Holcomb's May 4, 1860 discovery of gold in the valley that bears his name which created a stampede. Within a year nearly 1,500 people resided in Holcomb Valley. However the rich placer gold was quickly exhausted and most drifted on. Soon after Holcomb's discovery, John Cushenbury found silver ore just to the north of Cushenbury Springs. Three years later John G. Nichols, former mayor of Los Angeles constructed the road up Johnson Grade to serve his Moranga silver mine located east of Baldwin Lake.

In the early 1870s copper was discovered in the nearby Ord Mountains, and to keep order at the new mines, a meeting was held at Camp Cady on January 11, 1871, for the purpose of establishing the Ord Mountain Mining District. Less than a year later, on April 25, 1872, at Brown's Ranch (the present site of Hesperia), the McKinzie Mining District was established. This mining district encompassed much of the Ord Mountains as well as Oro Grande and Victorville; however there is no indication those present were aware of the minerals in the hills just 10 miles down the Mojave River.

Captain Aaron G. Lane had established a ranch on the Mojave River near what later was to become Oro Grande by 1862. In the 1860s Lane found a gold-rich "float rock," and for years had prospected the hills east of his place looking for the source. Finally in January 1873 he found it — and christened the site of his discovery Silver Mountain. Yet Lane turned his energy to a more reliable source of income than mining. Several newspaper articles in 1873 and 1874 relate that Lane was supervising construction of the new Panamint Road.

Soledad Mining Company

Beginning in the summer of 1879 a there was a rush of sorts to the "Mohave River Mines" — the site of Lane's 1873 discovery. In September 1879, R. A. Maddox left some specimen rock at a newspaper office in Santa Ana. Two weeks later a correspondent wrote back providing a glowing account of the rich ore, noting, "I put a piece in the fire and when it was at a red heat I poured water on it and immediately the surface was covered with splotches of

fine silver. I have no doubt it would assay \$300 per ton." He also noted that there were two companies and 30 men at work. One of these companies was the Soledad Mining Company. The Colton *Semi-Tropic* of June 12 1880 published a short account of the mines here. In this article the area was identified as the Cottonwood District. The Blue Jacket mine on Gold Hill had most of the superlatives heaped on it. Here gold assaying \$125 to \$4,000 per ton was found. All of these samples were reported to be free milling and the company predicted that "this mineral hill is to become one of the greatest mining localities in California, especially because of having the advantage of the heavily wooded river flowing at the base of the mountain."

By July 1880 the Red Mountain Gold and Silver Mining District had been formed encompassing six square miles, whose western border was about 6 miles east of Lane's Ranch, placing the Oro Grande Mines right on the western border.

In order to continue providing capital to explore and develop the mines, in September 1880 the Soledad Mining Company levied an assessment of two cents per share on its outstanding stock. This company, which owned the Oro Grande, Garfield and Buena Vista mines, was busy mining and constructing a two and a half mile long ditch to take water from the Mojave River to supply power to a stamp mill which was being erected. The company was headed by James Noel and consisted of men from Los Angeles and Pasadena. No more is heard about the Soledad Mining Company. However, late in 1880 the property was sold to the Oro Grande Company headed by Col. H. H. Markham of Pasadena, and Dr. O. H. Congar of Los Angeles.

Oro Grande Company

During the first four months of 1881 the town of Oro Grande began to take shape around the Oro Grande company's facilities along the Mojave River. A post office was established January 18, 1881, Ed T. Johnson ran the general store, there was a hotel managed by a Mrs. Wilson, there were two butcher shops, a lodging house, and several houses. The company's holdings consisted of an office, assay office and the mill, which was operational by the last week of April. In the April 1881 election, 91 people in the Oro Grande precinct voted. By this time the area was no longer referred to as the Mojave Mining District.

The Oro Grande Company employed 30 men and contracted with J. B. Burkhart of San Bernardino to haul ore to the mill. Despite the usual hype fed to the newspapers, it was clear as early as May that there were problems at the mill. The San Bernardino *Index* reported that the mill was shut down for a week to install amalgamation plates. These

plates were normally installed at nearly all mills of the day. It is unusual that the mill was not constructed with them in place. In June the mill was shut down for first time to recover gold amalgam from the plates. This first "clean up," as it is referred to, yielded 8 pounds of amalgam. In a clean up, the mill was shut down and the amalgam of mercury and gold or silver is scraped from large copper plates. This was done regularly and fresh mercury was spread on the copper plates to recover the native gold or silver contained in the ore. In July, the company admitted that the ore contained little native gold; most of it was combined with pyrite. Pyrite does not combine with mercury and as a result the gold values were lost in the tailings. A trickle of bullion continued to keep investors on the hook, but it was estimated the tailings contained \$40 to \$250 per ton. Surprisingly the mine was active through November.

This mill, despite the advantage of free water power, simply could not recover gold from the ore. Meanwhile events some 40 miles down the Mojave River were to resuscitate the dead mill at Oro Grande.

Nearly simultaneous with these events, north of the present site of Barstow, Robert W. Waterman and John L. Porter had begun developing George Lee's "mercury" mine which they found actually contained silver. A camp was quickly established, and the mill began producing silver by November 1881. News of the silver strike spread fast and soon the hills swarmed with prospectors. On April 6, 1881 about five miles to the east, the Silver King Mine was discovered in the mountain above what was to become Calico. The mine, often known simply as the King, not only was nearly the first mine discovered at Calico, it proved to be the richest. The owners of the King mine decided to haul their ore 40 miles up river to the idle Oro Grande mill, rather than build a mill closer to the mines. The Oro Grande mill began operating March 1, 1882 on ore from the King mine.

Remi Nadeau, who was well known for hauling bars of silver bullion from Cerro Gordo and the Modoc mines in Inyo County, was contracted to haul King ore to the Oro Grande mill. Sixteen to eighteen teams were constantly on the road and moved some 20 to 30 tons per day. On return trips, bars of bullion were bound to the railroad at Daggett for shipment to the San Francisco area for final refining. Nadeau reportedly was paid \$90 per ton to haul ore to the mill. If this figure is accurate, the ore must have been indeed rich to have paid this high price of transportation, the cost of milling and have still yielded a profit. The 100th bar was carefully packed up and sent to Milwaukee, home to most of the major investors.

On June 1, 1882, the *Mining and Scientific Press* reported that the King mine was sold to the Oro Grande Company for \$300,000 with a \$100,000 cash down payment. In December 1882 the new company constructed an impressive ore chute and bin that loomed above Calico. In early 1884 the Oro Grande Company (the second with that name) purchased the King Mine and Oriental Company's mine and mill near Daggett. After enlarging the Daggett mill to 15 stamps, the ore wagons to Oro Grande ceased. In January 1884 it was reported that there was a 40 day stock pile at the Oro Grande mill. After that, milling was done at Daggett on ore from the King mine. During the period of time the Oro Grande mill was running on King ore it regularly produced something on the order of \$50,000 per

month in silver.

In March 1887 a 60, stamp mill was erected along-side the existing mill at Daggett. In late 1888 the company constructed a railroad to the mill which cut the cost of transportation from \$2.50 by mule team to seven cents by rail.

At Oro Grande in November 1885 it was reported that the mill was leased to a Denver Company, but nothing more is known.

Silver Mountain Mining District

A short time later the area around the town of Oro Grande again underwent another transformation. During late 1887 or early 1888, silver-lead ore was discovered in the Shadow Mountains, a range of hills about ten miles northwest of Oro Grande. This led to another rush to the area. Small mine camps soon sprang up. The silver discoveries prompted the area to be rechristened the Silver Mountain Mining District, harkening back to Lane's 1873 discovery. (Present maps show a peak in the Shadow Mountains northwest of Oro Grande as Silver Peak, while the mountain east of Oro Grande is Silver Mountain).

East of Oro Grande, the mines which were formerly active remained quiet. However, the Sidewinder Mine, about 10 miles east of Oro Grande, and the Carbonate, less than a mile to the east, were discovered during the late 1880s. At the Sidewinder, mining was diligent during the late 1880s, and a 10 stamp water-powered mill was erected at Victor. A small smelter was erected at Oro Grande in 1891, and ran for a short time on ore from the Sidewinder.

The Carbonate mine located adjacent to the Victor Lime Company's quarry attracted most of the interest in the district during the early 1890's. Iron-stained outcrops drew the attention of a man named Collins who worked at the limestone quarry. The first indications were that the rock contained silver and lead, but it was gold that stole the show. When the shaft reached 180 feet a small knob of quartz-calcite rock containing flakes of free gold was discovered. The knob widened to a vein several inches wide, literally shot through with sheets of gold. The ore was broken-down on canvas and every ounce was sacked on the spot. One report claimed that this pocket yielded \$80,000 in three hours.

Limestone

Even though gold and silver were attracting all the headlines, it was limestone that paid the bills. The limestone quarries at Oro Grande were opened around 1887, and soon two kilns were producing lime for cement. However, the timing for beginning these operations suffered with the collapse of the Southern California real estate boom of the '80s. By 1890 the quarry was already 250 feet long, 100 feet wide and 60 feet high. At the turn of the century some 8 small quarries were active above Oro Grande. At least one produced limestone for refining sugar beets. In 1915 limestone mining for the manufacture of cement was joined by the California Portland Cement operations north of Victorville, and in the mid 1950s in the Lucerne Valley by Kaiser, and the Victorville Limerock quarry.

Beginning around 1890 at the St. John quarry, granite was mined for building stone, curbing and street paving stones.

Gold

Over the last 100 years or so there have been numerous gold and silver mines discovered in the area and mills and smelters constructed and abandoned. The Ozark mine, north of Oro Grande, was active at the turn of the century, and a mill was established. The old Oro Grande gold mine was reactivated by the Western States Mining Company in the 1920s. Perhaps the last gold rush in the Mojave Desert occurred about 20 miles northeast of Oro Grande, in the Kramer Hills in 1926.

Other mines located within the San Bernardino Mountains were linked with Victorville by more convenient transportation than through San Bernardino, including the Rose, Blackhawk and Gold Mountain mines. Their combined production amounted to around \$2 million in gold.

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