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California ghost town with bloody past suffers new calamity

By Louis Sahagun, Staff Writer, June 21, 2020, 5 AM, KEELER, Calif.



Brent Underwood stands amid the ashes of the American Hotel on Wednesday, two days after a fire in the Inyo Mountains ghost town of Cerro Gordo burned down the hotel, icehouse and onetime home of notorious killer Billy Crapo. (Brian van der Brug / Los Angeles Times)

Underwood surveyed the damage to this 19th century mining town perched 8,500 feet above the Owens Valley floor.

The marketer and his partners bought the Cerro Gordo ghost town for \$1.4 million in 2018 with the goal of transforming it into a remote tourist attraction. Visitors would enjoy gourmet meals, hikes to scowling mine shafts and overnight stays in a rickety bunkhouse and hotel.

But that dream suffered a fiery setback this week. Underwood said he was awakened at 3 a.m. Monday by the stuff of nightmares: furious winds driving flames that were leaping like demons and scorching unpredictable paths up slopes peppered with historic mining structures. Then came the explosions of propane tanks as flames engulfed the hotel.

In a cruel irony, Underwood said, “The American Hotel opened on June 15, 1871, and it burned to the ground 149 years to the day later on June 15, 2020.”

Asked Friday about the cause of the blaze, the Lone Pine Fire Department said only that the fire was still under investigation.

There is no running water in Cerro Gordo’s weathered collection of old mining equipment, junked cars and 22 structures, some of them with walls insulated with newspapers. “All I could do was call 911,” Underwood said. “And then, with help from a caretaker, I used buckets to desperately fling water from storage tanks onto the flames.”



The site of the Cerro Gordo fire is shown Wednesday, two days after the American Hotel, an icehouse and the home of notorious killer Billy Crapo burned. (Brian van der Brug / Los Angeles Times)

After firefighters put out the last embers, three historic treasures had been reduced to ashes: an icehouse, a residence and the hotel.

“We may never know exactly what started this fire,” Underwood said from a balcony overlooking the charred ruins. “Fire officials told me that it could have been a thousand different things in these old buildings.”



A weather vane that sat atop the American Hotel in Cerro Gordo is now among the remnants of the building. (Brian van der Brug / Los Angeles Times)

Then, the lanky 32-year-old suggested the cause might be paranormal. “The caretaker here told me that he and another person saw a shadowy apparition moving in the hotel kitchen at 4 p.m. the previous day.”

Strange occurrences and ghostly apparitions are part of the myth and allure that Brent and his partners are banking on, in part, to create a wilderness hideaway like no other for urbanites aching to escape the clatter and routine of city life.

Their supporters include Terri Geissinger, a historian of the West. “Cerro Gordo is a nugget in time that needs to be preserved,” she said. “But maintaining a ghost town is only for the roughest and toughest of people. That’s because you’re going to get frustrated, beat up and kicked in the gut.”



An old stove that sat inside the American Hotel in Cerro Gordo is now among the remnants of the building. (Brian van der Brug / Los Angeles Times)

“You can’t do it with just money,” she added. “It takes a heart of steel.”

Located on roughly 400 acres in the Inyo Mountains, Cerro Gordo was not designed for comfort.

In its heyday, there was a murder a week in Cerro Gordo, an extraordinarily violent community of about 500 people. Silver miners slept on cots surrounded by sandbags stacked 4 feet high to protect themselves from errant bullets. In the late 1800s, an estimated 30 miners who had immigrated from China were buried in a mine shaft.

The house that was destroyed by fire on Monday once belonged to a man named William Crapo, who gunned down a postmaster as he walked along the dirt road skirting the American Hotel.

A fundraiser organized by the nonprofit Friends of Cerro Gordo has already collected more than \$17,000 that will be used to rebuild the hotel to current building and safety codes.

“The loss of the American Hotel is incalculable,” said Roger Vargo, president of Friends of Cerro Gordo, “due to its historic value to the growth of Los Angeles and much of the Old West.”

“Only a week ago,” he added, “it commanded the center of town on a mountain with views of Owens Valley and the eastern Sierra Nevada to the west and Death Valley to the east.”

A year ago, the hotel and other Cerro Gordo structures were explored in an episode of the TV show Ghost Adventures that focused on two children who died after being trapped in a steamer trunk.

Underwood’s commitment to the Cerro Gordo restoration project has been tested mightily in recent months.



Brett Underwood stands at the headframe of the Union Mine in Cerro Gordo on Thursday. The 32-year-old marketer and partners bought the ghost town for \$1.4 million in 2018 to transform it into a remote tourist attraction. (Brian van der Brug / Los Angeles Times)

The mean comments on social media platforms started the moment Cerro Gordo was sold. Underwood was vilified as a trust-funder who took over the mining town as some sort of hobby.

“That hurt a little bit,” said Underwood, the son of schoolteachers who was born and raised in Tampa, Fla.



Brett Underwood displays a check from 1926 in Cerro Gordo ghost town on Wednesday. (Brian van der Brug / Los Angeles Times)

Shortly after he decided to wait out the coronavirus lockdown in Cerro Gordo, the area was buried in 5 feet of snow.

“There was no way in or out for several weeks,” he said. (The only way to get to the mining town is via a 7½-mile steep, gravel road.) “After the snow melted, I was hospitalized with a bad case of appendicitis.”

Judging from historical records, the original residents of Cerro Gordo may not have been sympathetic.



Vintage chemical jars and crucibles on a shelf at the Cerro Gordo ghost town in the Inyo Mountains on Wednesday, June 17, 2020 in Cerro Gordo, Calif. (Brian van der Brug / Los Angeles Times)

The town’s name translates from Spanish into “Fat Hill,” and 150 years ago it was the home of silver miners who shipped their diggings off to the small pueblo of Los Angeles by 20-mule team or by steamboats that navigated the once-full Owens Lake.

Life was short and hard in the area, which produced 4.5 million ounces of silver before declining precious-metal prices sunk the local economy, save for a zinc revival from 1911 to 1919.

Today, only a small fraction of the town’s original 500 structures still stand. They include a general store, an assayer’s office, the well-preserved mining operation up on a hill and the remains of a brothel once known as Lola’s Palace of Pleasure.

The outdoor plumbing consists of unheated and unlighted Old West outhouses. The ground bristles with artifacts: rusty pocket watches, iron tools, shattered window glass and whiskey bottles.

“The fire was heartbreaking, because I have a deep emotional attachment to this place,” Underwood said. “But we’re not giving up.”

“Truth be told,” he added, “we’ve got big plans for little Cerro Gordo.”



The Yellow Road winds up the Inyo Mountains to the town Cerro Gordo where a Monday morning fire burned down the hotel, icehouse and home of the notorious killer Billy Crapo, photographed on Wednesday, June 17, 2020 in Cerro Gordo, Calif. (Brian van der Brug / Los Angeles Times)