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**THE HISTORY OF EARLY MINING
IN THE EL PASO MOUNTAINS**

By Alan Hensher

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 led to 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 stamps, 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 reached 150 feet by mid-August, when a miner was seriously injured in another tunnel (but 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.

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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, 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.

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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 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 $4\frac{1}{2}$ 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. They began feuding one morning, but 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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