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GARLOCK: The History of a Milling Town

By Alan Hensher

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 early 1897: "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.

**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 hostelries, 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 in particular 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¢ 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 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: the 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:**

The best source on Garlock is Paul Hubbard's history and compilation of reminiscences: Garlock Memories, Ridgecrest: Hubbard Printing, 1960. Two histories of the Rand Mining District contain important information on Garlock: Marcia R. Wynn, Desert Bonanza, Culver City: M.W. Samelson, 1949, and Roberta Starry, Gold Gamble, China Lake: Maturango Museum, 1974.

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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