



# FRIENDS OF THE EASTERN CALIFORNIA MUSEUM

*Preserving Inyo County's Past for the Future*

P.O. Box 33 • Independence, CA 93526

## NEWSLETTER

**Summer 2020**

### **UPDATES: WHAT'S NEW**

The rapidly evolving Covid-19 pandemic conditions have made it impossible to predict whether or not the Museum is open. Please call the Museum at 760-878-0258 for current information.

Until the Covid-19 situation is stabilized, FECM will not be hosting any in-person events.

In the past quarter, FECM volunteers have been busy with numerous projects. The Cottonwood Charcoal Kilns preservation has been completed. Our next step in this project is to set up an informational kiosk so visitors at the Kilns site will be able to get a good sense of the site's importance.

In addition, graphic displays for the Museum's Rock Garden have been completed. Completion of the Rock Garden is on hold during the Covid-19 pandemic.

Finally, we have received a generous gift from the Schlinger Family Foundation, restricted to Eastern California Conservation Education. The Board of Trustees is currently looking at several projects for this donation, including those related to the Kilns and the Rock Garden.

The rest of this newsletter is devoted to the Cottonwood Charcoal Kilns. Preservation of this monument is of major importance, and, for contributions to this effort, sincerest thanks go to the Los Angeles County Department of Water and Power, County of Inyo (in particular, its Public Works Department and Supervisor Matt Kingsley), a critically important anonymous donor, Pagenkopp Ventures, past and present Board of Trustees for their planning and execution efforts, community volunteers, and you, the members of FECM, whose contributions provide core support of this and all FECM activities.

We look forward to staying in touch. In future issues of the newsletter, we will be featuring a new column titled "Eastern California Stories," highlighting materials in the Museum, as well as articles of interest.

## Update on FECM's Efforts to Protect and Interpret the Cottonwood Charcoal Kilns

By Lynn Johnson © 2020

In the Fall/Winter 2017-2018 edition of the FECM newsletter, we reported on FECM's efforts to protect the Cottonwood Charcoal Kilns, which were designated California Historical Landmark No. 537 in 1955.

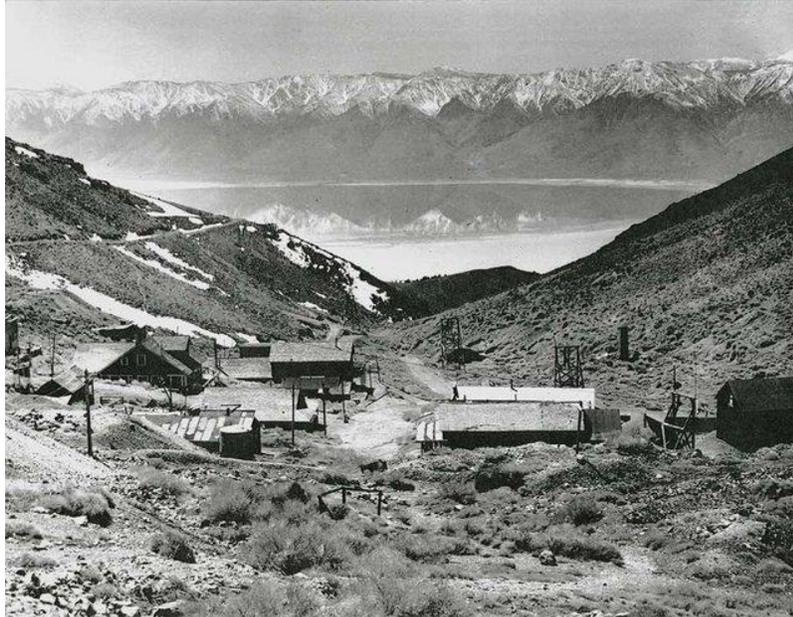
The two adobe brick kilns were built by Col. Sherman Stevens near the mouth of Cottonwood Creek on the west shore of Owens Lake in 1877. The kilns produced charcoal to fuel smelters that processed silver-lead ore from the Cerro Gordo mines in the Inyo Mountains east of Owens Lake, as well as from the Darwin Mining District south of the lake. In 2017, FECM partnered with the County of Inyo, the Los Angeles Department of Water and Power, and a generous anonymous donor to protect the charcoal kilns, which were deteriorating due to vandalism and the ravages of time. We are pleased to announce that construction of a protective shelter over the kilns was completed by Pagenkopp Ventures, a local contractor, in May 2020.



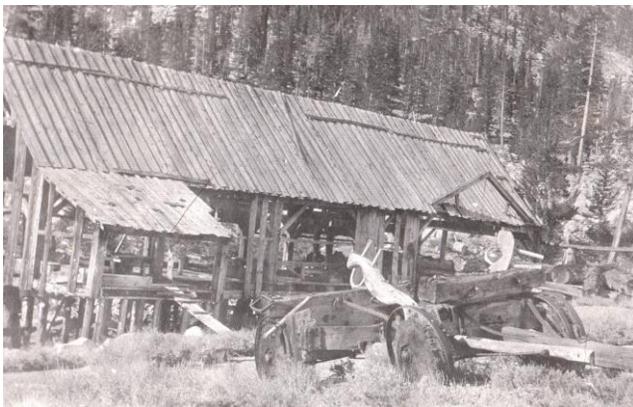
*The protective shelter over the kilns was completed by local contractor Pagenkopp Ventures in May 2020*

Col. Stevens was born in New York around 1812. He joined the California Gold Rush in 1851 and, after making numerous business trips back east, settled in the Owens Valley in about 1865. In 1867, he acquired a mine at Cerro Gordo, the new silver-lead camp in the Inyo Mountains; however, like many other entrepreneurs in the American West, his success was not in mining, but rather in providing supplies to the mines.

Cerro Gordo was booming in the early 1870s, primarily due to the efforts of Victor Beaudry and Mortimer W. Belshaw, the principal mine and smelter owners. By this time, most of the pinyon and juniper trees in the vicinity of Cerro Gordo had been cut for mine timbers and for wood used to produce charcoal to fuel the smelters; thus a new source was needed to keep the production of bullion flowing. Woodcutters began cutting trees along Cottonwood and Ash creeks, both of which flowed into Owens Lake from the Sierra Nevada, many miles west of Cerro Gordo. Cut logs, as well as charcoal produced in shallow pit ovens, were rafted across the lake in scows towed by flatboats to the east shore of Owens Lake.



*View of Owens Lake from Cerro Gordo. The steamers Bessie Brady and Mollie Stevens carried logs, milled lumber, cordwood, and charcoal from Cottonwood Landing on the western shore in the distance and bullion from Cerro Gordo on the return trip. From Cottonwood Landing the bullion was carried south to Los Angeles by Remi Nadeau's mule teams. Photo courtesy Laws Museum.*



*The Cottonwood sawmill built by Col. Sherman Stevens in 1873. The mill was powered by a steam turbine and was equipped with a main saw, an edger, and a cross-cut. Note the ox yoke sitting on the wagon used to haul logs to the sawmill. Photo from the Harris Collection courtesy County of Inyo, Eastern California Museum.*

Col. Stevens looked to what seemed to be an almost inexhaustible supply of wood in the High Sierra and, after securing a \$25,000 loan from the Owens Lake Silver-Lead Company, built a trail up Cottonwood Creek into the heart of the timber country. In 1873, Stevens and his sons, Sherman V. and Augustus C., constructed a steam powered sawmill near the upper reaches of Cottonwood Creek. Cut logs were hauled to the sawmill on carts pulled by ox teams. Stevens also built a 13-mile-long wooden flume to transport lumber and logs down to the Bullion Trail; this wagon road to Los Angeles was used by Remi Nadeau's Cerro Gordo Freighting Company to transport ingots of silver-lead bullion from the mines in Inyo County to the sleepy pueblo of Los Angeles and mining machinery and other supplies to the Owens Valley on the return trip. Stevens also built a wharf at the mouth of Cottonwood Creek, where Owens Lake, formerly the third largest lake in California, was 50 feet deep. Mule teams were used to haul lumber and logs sent down the flume from the sawmill to Stevens' wharf at Cottonwood Landing, three miles east of the Bullion Trail. From the landing, the Bessie Brady, the second commercial steamer west of the Mississippi River and the first west of Salt Lake, hauled barges loaded with cords of wood across the lake to the wharf near the foot of the Yellow Grade Road to Cerro Gordo. From there, the wood was hauled the final eight miles up the steep road by mule teams.



*The 13-mile-long, v-shaped wooden flume, which the extended from the Cottonwood sawmill in the High Sierra down to the Bullion Trail in the Owens Valley, was completed in November 1873. After the first four miles of the flume were completed, 12-foot sections were boxed together at the mill and sent down the water-filled flume to be attached at the end by carpenters hired by Col. Stevens. Temporary sidings were built so the workers could ride down the flume with each section. Photo by Emil Brutkrutz taken around 1908 courtesy County of Inyo, Eastern California Museum.*

In 1874, miners discovered silver in the Darwin Hills south of Owens Lake, and the new mining camp of Darwin was born. Hundreds of woodcutters and charcoal burners worked the pinyon forests 10 to 14 miles south in the Coso Range. Charcoal, also produced here in shallow pit ovens, was transported on the backs of burros, as well as in wagons pulled by mules, to the smelters at Darwin. By 1876, the pinyon in the Coso Range was nearly exhausted. In April of that year, Col. Sherman Stevens reorganized as the Inyo Lumber and Coal Company. With his partner, J.B. Bond, and \$500,000 in capital stock, the flume from the Cottonwood sawmill was extended from the Bullion Trail to Cottonwood Landing. In January 1877, Stevens began construction of two adobe brick charcoal kilns near the landing. A 32-foot tugboat built in San Francisco was transported by railroad to Mojave, and then hauled to Owens Lake by Remi Nadeau's mule teams. Christened the Mollie Stevens after Stevens' daughter, the tugboat began towing scows loaded with charcoal produced in the adobe brick kilns to the landing on the east side of Owens Lake. From here, the charcoal was transported by Nadeau's teams to Cerro Gordo and Darwin. On the return trip across the lake, the Mollie Stevens transported ingots of silver-lead bullion which were then carried south to Los Angeles by the Cerro Gordo Freighting Company.

In September 1877, a fire destroyed part of Stevens' flume, as well as a large stockpile of logs and lumber. The output of silver and lead from Cerro Gordo and Darwin faltered that same year and the demand for charcoal all but disappeared. Miners left for new strikes at Mammoth City and Bodie in 1877, and Stevens' short-lived empire collapsed. Stevens left Inyo County in 1883 to conduct mining operations elsewhere, but later returned to Lone Pine where he passed away in 1887.

The Mollie Stevens gave up her engine to the Bessie Brady and then sat idle by the wharf at Cottonwood Landing until the alkaline waters of Owens Lake destroyed her hull. The Bessie Brady continued to carry cargo across the lake until 1882 when she was destroyed by fire at the landing on the east side of the lake. The roof on Stevens' sawmill eventually fell in, but otherwise the sawmill stood intact for many decades. In the 1960s, the sawmill and what remained of the flume were destroyed in a forest fire. Although the Cottonwood Charcoal Kilns, all that remains of Stevens' timber and transportation empire, have deteriorated since they were designated a historical landmark, they are finally protected.



*Pagenkopp Ventures crew building the roof on the protective shelter over the kilns*

The FECM Board of Trustees extends its thanks to members of the Friends of the Eastern California Museum, local volunteers, our anonymous donor, the County of Inyo, the Los Angeles Department of Water and Power, and Pagenkopp Ventures for their joint effort to preserve and protect the Cottonwood Charcoal Kilns.

If you would like to join the effort to preserve and interpret the Cottonwood Charcoal Kilns, please use the donation form included in this newsletter or visit the FECM website at fecm.org.

If you missed the Fall/Winter 2017-2018 edition of the FECM newsletter, it is posted on our website.

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FECM is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization



## Join the Friends of the Eastern California Museum

The Friends of the Eastern California Museum work to promote, preserve and protect the important collections and memories that make up Inyo County's only regional museum. The Friends raise funds and contribute time and work to help maintain and improve the Museum's buildings and grounds. We support special exhibits and arrange for speakers, field trips, and programs that inform and entertain Inyo County residents and visitors who come from far and near. We have partnered with the Carson and Colorado group to display and promote the restored Slim Princess steam engine. We also provide funds to maintain the Museum's collections and enhance its permanent exhibits. Every March we hold our Annual Meeting, with a potluck dinner, silent auction and guest speaker. We invite you to join with us to support the Museum. FECM is an all-volunteer 501(c)(3) nonprofit. Members receive a newsletter, email invitations to special events, programs and field trips, and a 10% discount at the Museum Bookstore

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