

I Bought a

GHOST

A man with a beard and sunglasses, wearing a blue button-down shirt and dark pants, sits on a wooden bench in a desert landscape. A large shovel leans against the bench. The background features a rocky hillside with sparse vegetation and a small building in the distance.

Brent Underwood
owns Cerro Gordo,
a mining town from
the 1800s in the high
desert of Southern
California.

TOWN

A photograph of an abandoned wooden building, possibly a mine or a small town structure, situated in a desert landscape. The building is made of dark wood and has a steep roof. It is surrounded by dry, rocky ground and sparse vegetation. In the background, there are mountains under a clear blue sky. The word "TOWN" is overlaid in large, white, serif capital letters at the top of the image.

This
abandoned
California
mining
village
once had
400 buildings.
Now I'm
restoring
the 20
that remain.

By Brent Underwood,
as told to Clint Carter



IN 2018, BRENT UNDERWOOD SUBMITTED A WINNING \$1.4 million bid on a network of dried-up silver mines in Southern California. The property includes 336 acres of high-desert terrain and the remains of a mining boomtown called Cerro Gordo, or "Fat Hill."

After COVID-19 hit, Underwood moved from his home in Austin, Texas, to live at Cerro Gordo full-time. Now he's the sole inhabitant of a genuine Wild West artifact.

The day we closed on Cerro Gordo, my partner and I met the caretaker to receive the most preposterous key chain I've ever seen. There must have been 40 keys hanging off. It happened to be Friday the 13th and my partner's birthday, so after signing the papers, we retreated to Cerro Gordo to celebrate.

The plan back then was basically the same as it is now: We want to turn the old mining town into an offbeat hospitality destination and artist retreat. Things just haven't run as smoothly as we'd hoped.

Originally we talked about soft-launching a few cabins on Airbnb by Halloween 2019, but logistical challenges, a catastrophic fire, and a national pandemic have continued to push that date back. Now here we are in 2022, still not open for overnight guests, and for the past two years, I've lived at Cerro Gordo alone.

Don't get me wrong, the town is humming. Volunteers show up frequently to help me restore the old buildings, and brave

travelers drive in over nearly eight miles of steep, rough gravel for self-guided tours. But it's a lot of work to put in without any serious income.

This isn't how I imagined my life, but I'm not complaining. Despite the challenges, I've never been happier. I feel a real connection to the town's Wild West history: Miners started settling Cerro Gordo in the 1800s, and Butch Cassidy is said to have spent time here hiding out from the law. I have a view of Mt. Whitney on one side and Death Valley on the other, and every day I explore abandoned mines and hunt for artifacts left behind by the men who worked here.

The more time I spend at Cerro Gordo, the more I fall in love, and now when I leave to stock up on groceries or gather supplies, I immediately want to come back. But it's hard work bringing a ghost town back to life. Here are a few things I've learned along the way.

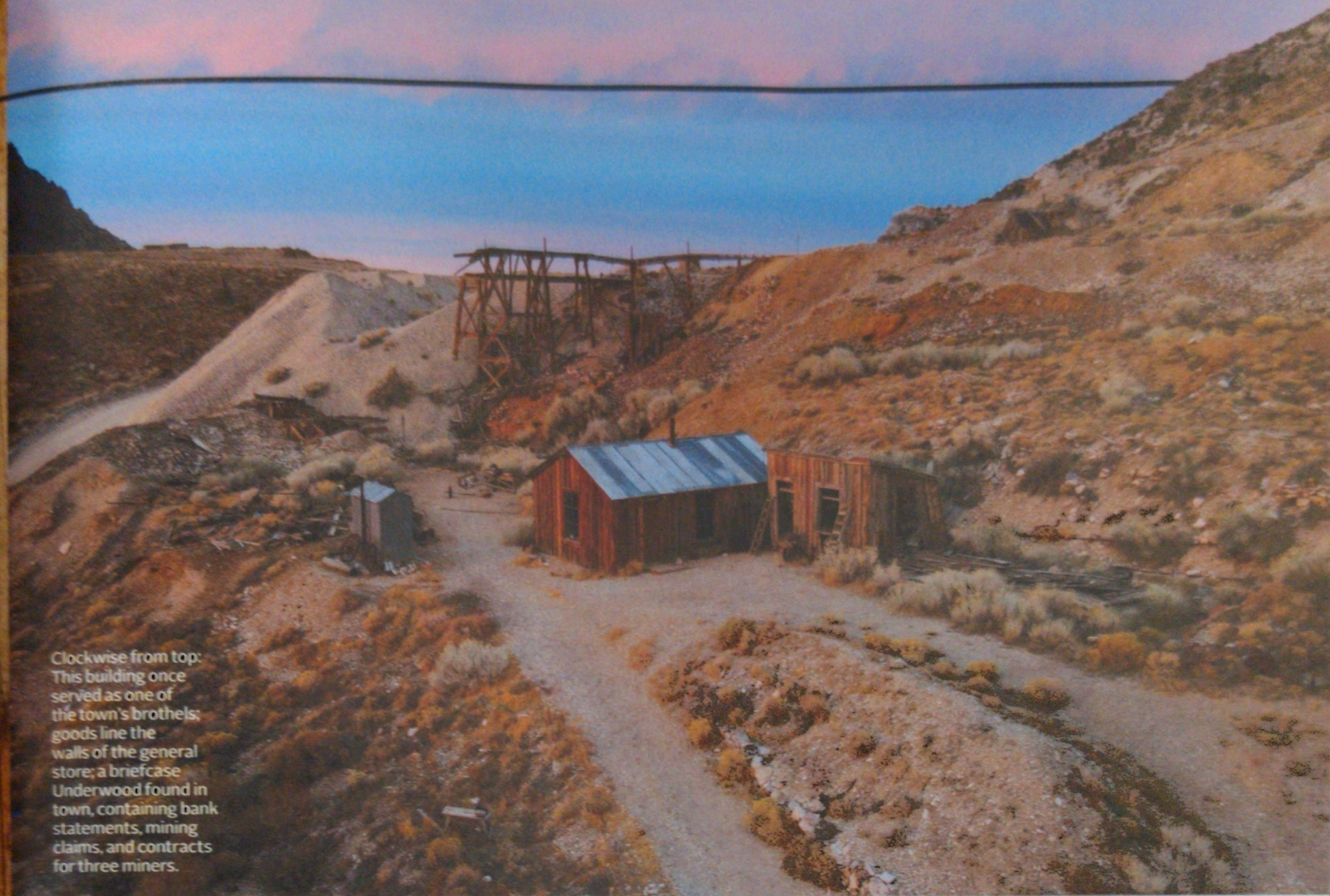
LIFE WITHOUT WATER IS PRETTY MUCH TORTURE.

CERRO GORDO DRIED UP YEARS AGO WHEN Los Angeles redirected its water supply and drained Owens Lake, which used to sit just below the town. The initiative was part of the aqueduct program that inspired the movie *Chinatown*, and I had to truck water up the gravel road in limited amounts.

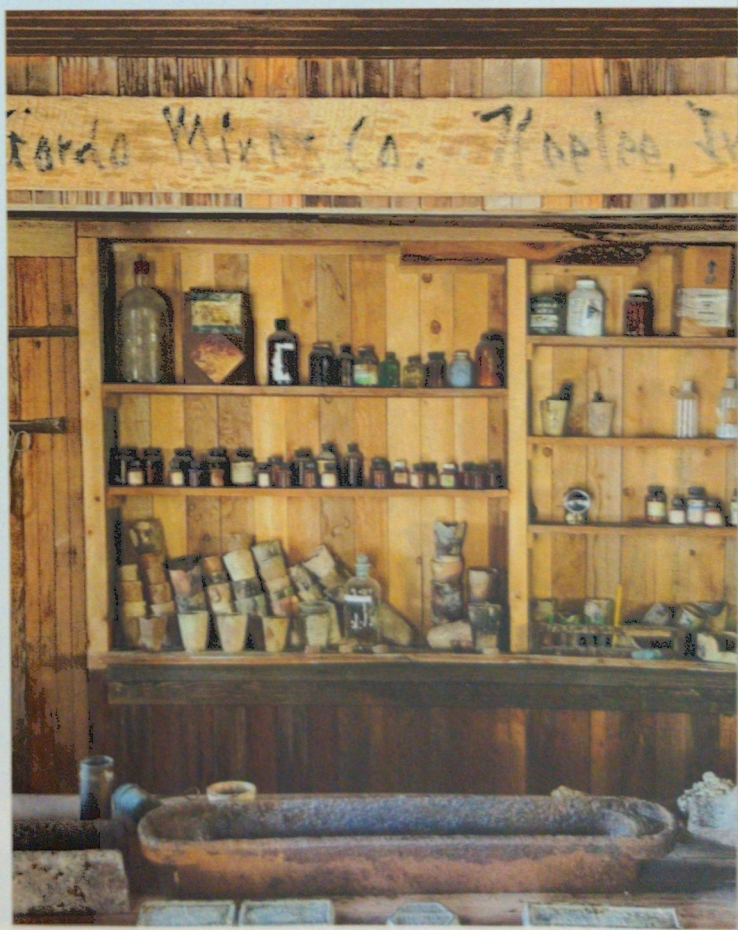
You can imagine life without running faucets, but living it every day is another story. With no plumbing, I used an outhouse and washed my hands in a bowl. To shower, I warmed a rubber bag of water in the sun and then let it dribble down on me from above. I longed for a sink, a washing machine, and a garden hose.

I'd heard stories about water leaking into one of the mines. Legend had it that there was a sump 700 feet underground, with an old pump that stopped working. The problem was, the lift to go down and inspect the situation is 150 years old, and almost everybody I spoke to told me it was too dangerous to use. Especially since there was no guarantee that water was still there.

But time wore me down, and I had to find out. So I put together a team with an electrician, a lift operator, and a Cerro Gordo old-timer who'd been down the shaft years ago. As the hoist started dropping us, the guy looked at me and said,



Clockwise from top:
This building once
served as one of
the town's brothels;
goods line the
walls of the general
store; a briefcase
Underwood found in
town, containing bank
statements, mining
claims, and contracts
for three miners.



HOW TO BUY YOUR OWN UNIQUE PROPERTY

Looking for your own Cerro Gordo? Start here.

LET PEOPLE KNOW YOU'RE LOOKING

A report from the analytics company GeoTab counts more than 3,800 ghost towns still standing in America. But they don't usually receive much attention when they hit the market, says Underwood. Weird property news generally travels fastest by word of mouth.

Before he discovered Cerro Gordo, for instance, Underwood told people he was looking for a challenging hospitality project.

One day, out of the blue, a friend texted him the listing along with a note: "lol, this might be up your alley." The friend was correct.

GO ALL IN

After contacting the broker, Underwood discovered that a hundred or so people had already expressed interest.

So he entered a bid he couldn't afford: \$1.4 million, all cash. It was 50% over asking price, and he committed to closing the deal in seven days.

"The problem was I didn't have even 10% of \$1.4 million," he says. "And no bank is going to lend money on a ghost town with no running water and no foreseeable way to generate revenue."

The seller accepted the offer, and Underwood wired over a nonrefundable \$50,000 deposit. Then he and his partner, Jon Bier, called everyone in their networks to raise money. They managed to hit the goal only through the help of a short-term hard-money loan that

came in after 4 p.m. on their scheduled closing day. If the property's that special, that's the kind of commitment you'll probably need.

THINK BEYOND THE WILD WEST

Underwood wasn't looking specifically for an abandoned mining town. He just wanted something with a rich history, and if you take that approach, you'll find more inventory. "Somebody just texted me a Craigslist listing for an old library in Vermont

that has 50,000 books from the 1700s onward," says Underwood. "It has nine rooms, and it's potentially haunted."

That, he says, is the kind of property with value beyond its rickety structure. "People aren't interested in Cerro Gordo because of the old buildings," he says. They're interested because it was the largest mining town in California, and it's the source of so much mystery and lore. "If I were looking for another property, I would find one like that."



Cerro Gordo has a number of cabins where miners would stay while they worked.



"Brent, you got to figure that every time you go down is your last." The lift cable could break. The walls could cave in around us. I was terrified. It took nearly an hour for the rickety old lift to drop us 700 feet.

But when we arrived, we found it. The water was there. We swapped out the old chemical pump for a new one, and I now have running water into my personal cabin. The flow won't be strong enough for guests, so I'll still have to truck water in for overnight stays. And the pump still occasionally loses prime. I've had to drop back down the shaft about a dozen times to fix it.

But when the pump's working, I can use it to fill a holding tank that helps with cleaning and projects like mixing concrete. Finding that water was probably the most exciting day I've had here in three years.



FIRE IS A CONSTANT THREAT.

IN ITS HEYDAY, CERRO GORDO HAD 400 WOODEN buildings. Today it has just 20, and most of that loss is likely due to fire from lightning strikes or shoddy electricity.

In the summer of 2020, as we got close to opening a couple of the cabins for guests, I woke up to find the American Hotel, the crown jewel of Cerro Gordo, engulfed in flames. It was the result of too many amateur electricians tinkering with wiring over the years. Something sparked, and the old wood caught like kindling.

We were lucky it happened while nobody was

sleeping in it, but we were devastated at the loss of our most prized building. We had to delay opening further to clean the mess and implement fire safety in the existing buildings.

A couple hundred years from now, I hope people think about the fire of 2020 as just another chapter in Cerro Gordo history. With our new plan, we're rebuilding the American Hotel as authentically as possible. We're replicating the interior and using 100-year-old period wood on the facade. But this time we'll have a sprinkler system. We'll have six rooms, and everything will be up to modern code.



EVEN GHOST TOWNS HAVE WI-FI.

ONE OF THE NEARBY MOUNTAINS HAS A CELL tower, so I'm able to pick up spotty internet service using an AT&T hotspot. It's not enough to stream anything, but I can work my day job remotely—I'm a partner at a creative marketing firm. And I'm able to share Cerro Gordo with the world.

A couple years ago, after a friend kept asking how it was to



Left: Cerro Gordo in the late 1800s. Right: Underwood stands near some of the town's remaining 20 buildings. Most of the others have been lost to fires.

live here, I posted a few YouTube videos. My first one now has more than 8 million views, and it caught the attention of some other big creators.

That's allowed me to help build some attention around the mining town, which will help when I eventually have the hotel open. FaZe Clan, which are like the Yankees of e-sports, came out and shot some video. And Sam and Colby, these paranormal guys, came out looking for treasure. One of them recommended that I start posting my daily mine adventures on TikTok. I followed the advice, and within a month I had a million followers. Now that number is over 3 million.



LOCAL PRIDE IS A VITAL RESOURCE.

LONE PINE IS ABOUT 25 MILES AWAY FROM Cerro Gordo, and farther on up Highway 395, you come across Independence and Bishop. Some of the locals in those towns really want to see Cerro Gordo succeed. They grew up hiking the property and visiting the old buildings, so they understand the potential.

After the fire, some of those locals saw me struggling out here alone, and they just started showing up. Some volunteered time, and others offered equipment. The guy who owns the local tow shop lent me his Bobcat, and we had an architect do building plans for free. Once we started making progress, more people offered to help. A guy from Utah showed up to truck in concrete. It's incredibly inspiring, and we're making a tre-

mendous amount of progress. We poured the 81 feet of footers and hauled in 4,000 cinder blocks for the basement. Soon we'll begin framing, and with luck we'll be open for business in November.



THERE'S ALWAYS MORE TO DISCOVER.

THERE WAS A TIME WHEN I THOUGHT I'D BEEN to every mine on the property, but then I came across a 1960s report from the United States Geological Survey. It estimated there were 30 miles of mines at Cerro Gordo. I've only seen about 20 percent of that, so I figure I have about 24 miles of mines left to discover.

You'd think mines would be easy to find, but they're not. One day the old-timer who helped me fix the water pump asked, "You ever been to San Lucas?"

I hadn't, and for good reason. Years ago, it turns out, he purposely hid the trail that leads the way. After showing me his first secret mine, he showed me five or six others that I never would have found on my own.


That was a big breakthrough. But most of the time, I find


mines with slow, patient searching. I start by scanning mountainsides from across the valley. I look for tailing piles, which are the mounds of rock deposited outside the portal, or entrance. When I find a pile, I pinpoint a nearby landmark that looks like a good spot to start my hike in, and then I head for that spot.

Often I arrive to find that the portal's collapsed. It's frustrating when you walk an hour to a mine, only to learn you can't enter. But as I've grown more comfortable with mine exploration, I've started to occasionally dig out the entrances.

There are some mines where you can march right in, and others where you dig a hole and then squeeze yourself through.

But every mine is different. Take the Omega Tunnel. For that one, I spent two weeks digging with a loader and then blasted it with dynamite. But I still couldn't get in. So I spent another month or so excavating, and when I finally gained entrance, I discovered it was collapsed 200 yards in.

To go deeper, I'll need to start digging again. And I'm sure I will eventually, but there's a lot of other work to do around here. Nothing's ever easy, but that's what I signed up for. And it will all be worth it as soon as I'm able to share this town with more people. 



Underwood has found lots of old mining artifacts in his explorations, including dynamite, liquor bottles, Levis, and carbide tins.