

SHE was the first steamship to operate west of the Great Salt Lake, the second west of the Mississippi. She carried nearly \$20 million in bullion across the eastern California desert in the silver trade of the 1870s, making Los Angeles the commercial center of Southern California. She has been described as a barge and as a ferry, but there are no photographs or reliable drawings of the ship in existence. Until recently no one has known what the *Bessie Brady* looked like.

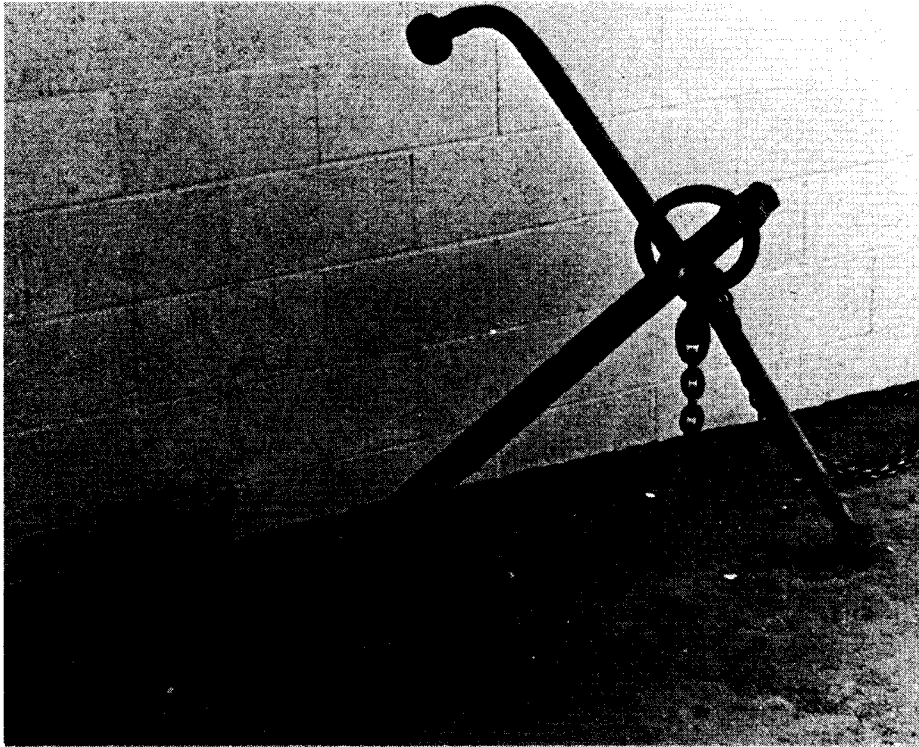
In the spring of 1972 Ralph Iven Simonds, once California's leading criminologist, turned his talents toward a solution of the mystery of *Bessie Brady*. Dur-

ing a visit to the Eastern California Museum in Independence, Simonds viewed a painting of the *Bessie Brady* on display there. "No! That's not what it was like at all," he remarked after examining the artist's rendition. Several months later Simonds returned to the museum. He had gathered the available information about the ship, had it data-processed, and from the results constructed a detailed model which he presented to the museum.

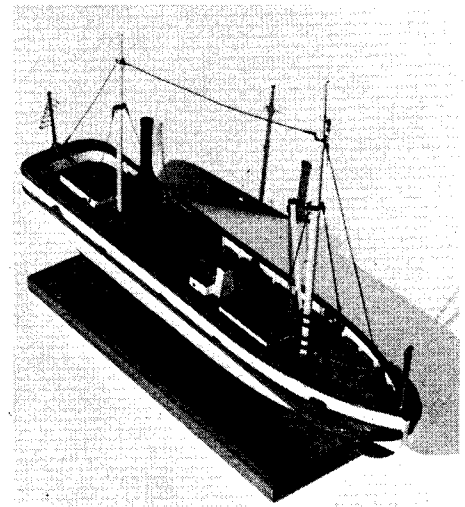
While some doubt still remains as to the appearance of the *Bessie Brady*, there is little doubt about the little ship's importance. In the late 1860s rich galena and silver-quartz deposits were discov-

ered high in the Inyo Mountains northeast of Owens Lake and southeast of the adobe village of Lone Pine. The area where some of the most productive silver mines in California were established was appropriately named "Cerro Gordo" (Fat Hill) by its Mexican discoverers. By 1870, with two smelting furnaces at Cerro Gordo and one at Swansea, a newly founded settlement on the shore of Owens Lake about ten miles below the mines, production was up to nine tons of silver-lead bullion per day.

Transportation of the precious metal from the smelters to the refinery in San Francisco became a major problem. The bullion, in the form of 85-pound ingots,



Left: This anchor, on display at the Eastern California Museum, is believed to be from the *Bessie Brady*. Below: Model of the transport ship as envisioned by Ralph Simonds.



BY GARY RICHARDSON

Photos Courtesy Author

THE BESSIE BRADY

was loaded aboard wagons pulled by teams of ten to fourteen mules. Thence, brake-blocks burning, the teams inched the wagons down the steep and winding Yellow Grade (so-called from the colored rock) to Swansea. From there the teams headed toward Lone Pine and then, rounding twenty-mile-long Owens Lake, continued on over sandy desert roads toward Los Angeles, more than 200 miles to the south. A single layer of ingots made up the payload while the rest of the high-sided wagons were piled high with hay and grain for the teams.

After a sweltering trek across the northwestern corner of the Mojave Desert, the wagons were double-teamed for the ascent over San Fernando Pass and arrived in Los Angeles some three to four weeks after leaving the Owens Valley. There the ingots were transferred to railroad cars for shipment to the port at San Pedro and then on by steamer to Thomas Selby's mill in San Francisco where the silver content was removed and sold to the United States Mint. It is an interesting sidelight that Selby occasionally shipped surplus bullion that his works could not handle to the refineries in Swansea, Wales, the town

after which Swansea, California, was named.

The mule teams were moving about 130 tons of Cerro Gordo bullion to Los Angeles each month while the smelters produced twice that much. The ingots began to pile up at both the head and foot of the Yellow Grade. The stock-piled ingots were so plentiful that they were used as bricks in the construction of temporary shacks for mine and furnace workers! If Cerro Gordo's riches were to be realized, the bullion had to be kept moving.

IN 1871 James Brady, recently appointed superintendent of the Owens Lake Silver-Lead Company which operated the Swansea smelter, accepted the freighting contract for the Cerro Gordo bullion. Brady, an Eastern "gentleman," had built upon his arrival in 1869 a respectable adobe home for his family, complete with a wine cellar which he kept stocked with hogsheads of Bass' ale, bitter beer, and fine wines. He maintained a "carriage and four"—a covered surrey and a span of fine, black horses—and a coachman to drive and care for them. Even during the hottest days of summer

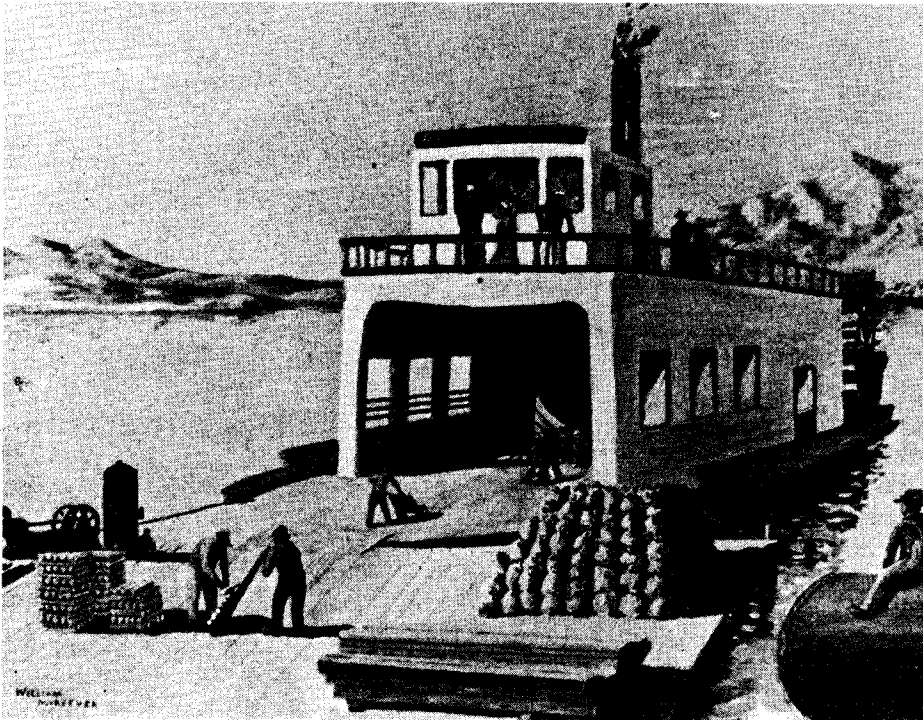
he never appeared away from home without a coat and tie.

Thus, when Brady conceived the idea of building a steamboat to transport Cerro Gordo bullion across the Owens Lake, local rumor had it that Jim Brady was building himself a yacht. Brady's "yacht" began to take shape in early 1872 near the mouth of the Owens River. He hired William Tiernan, a man with a very good reputation as a ship's carpenter, to do the building.

Early on March 26, 1872 the strongest earthquake in California history struck, with its center near Lone Pine. It took Tiernan two weeks to repair the damages to the newly laid keel.

By mid-June Tiernan had decked over the hull, and the ship was floated to the dock at Swansea to be outfitted. A single-cylinder, oscillating-type steam engine was built in San Francisco and freighted via the Donner Pass and then 200 miles south along the Sierra Nevada to Swansea. Rated at twenty horsepower, the engine had a ten-inch stroke and ten-inch bore and connected directly to the shaft which drove a fifty-four-inch propeller. A 120 horsepower stationary type boiler was shipped from Virginia City, where it had been used in mining the now depleted Comstock Lode. Originally built to operate at 125 pounds per square inch of steam pressure, the boiler's capacity was reduced to 85 pounds due to the elimination of much of the insulating brick when it was mounted a bit aft of midship on Brady's boat.

1950 painting based upon old-timers' descriptions of the Bessie Brady. The artist, William McKeever of Darwin, California, donated it to the Eastern California Museum where it is on display.



ON June 29, 1872 the *Inyo Independent* carried an announcement inviting its readers to a christening celebration and cruise on Owens Lake on the Fourth of July.

What greeted the 130 or so Independence Day revelers on their arrival was something on the order of the "ship that Jack built." With the bow of a clipper ship, the midship of a freighter, the stern of a tugboat, and a deck resembling that of a riverboat, Brady's craft must have raised a few eyebrows, even in mining country. She was eighty-five feet from stem to stern, with a sixteen-foot beam. She was "hog lined" by two masts, to the forward of which was attached a loading boom and wench.

After the party disembarked at Ferguson's Landing, where they were joined by the curious from Lone Pine, Brady's daughter stepped forth and, speaking her name, "Bessie Brady," cracked a bottle of her father's finest across the ship's bow. A "very fluid

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BULLION SHIP

the mines to the lake or from the lake to the sea as he was at moving them across the lake. During 1872 the piles of silver-lead bars continued to grow at the smelters and at Cartago. At year's end Brady lost the freighting contract, but the *Bessie Brady's* Owens Lake run remained an integral part of the Owens Valley to Los Angeles trade route.

In addition to carrying bullion south, on her return she carried merchandise and machinery to Ferguson's Landing for delivery to Lone Pine, Independence, and other settlements to the north and to Swansea for shipment up the Yellow Grade to Cerro Gordo, by 1874 a booming town of 2,000. The stubby steamboat also transported lumber and charcoal across the lake. During the early days of Cerro Gordo an ample supply of wood for timbering the mineshafts and firing the boilers and furnaces was obtained from the surrounding slopes. However, this nearby source was soon depleted and lumber had to be brought from as far away as Los Angeles.

In 1873 Colonel Sherman Stevens set up a sawmill at the head of Cottonwood

This advertisement appeared in the *Inyo Independent* on June 29, 1872 to announce the maiden voyage of the *Bessie Brady*.



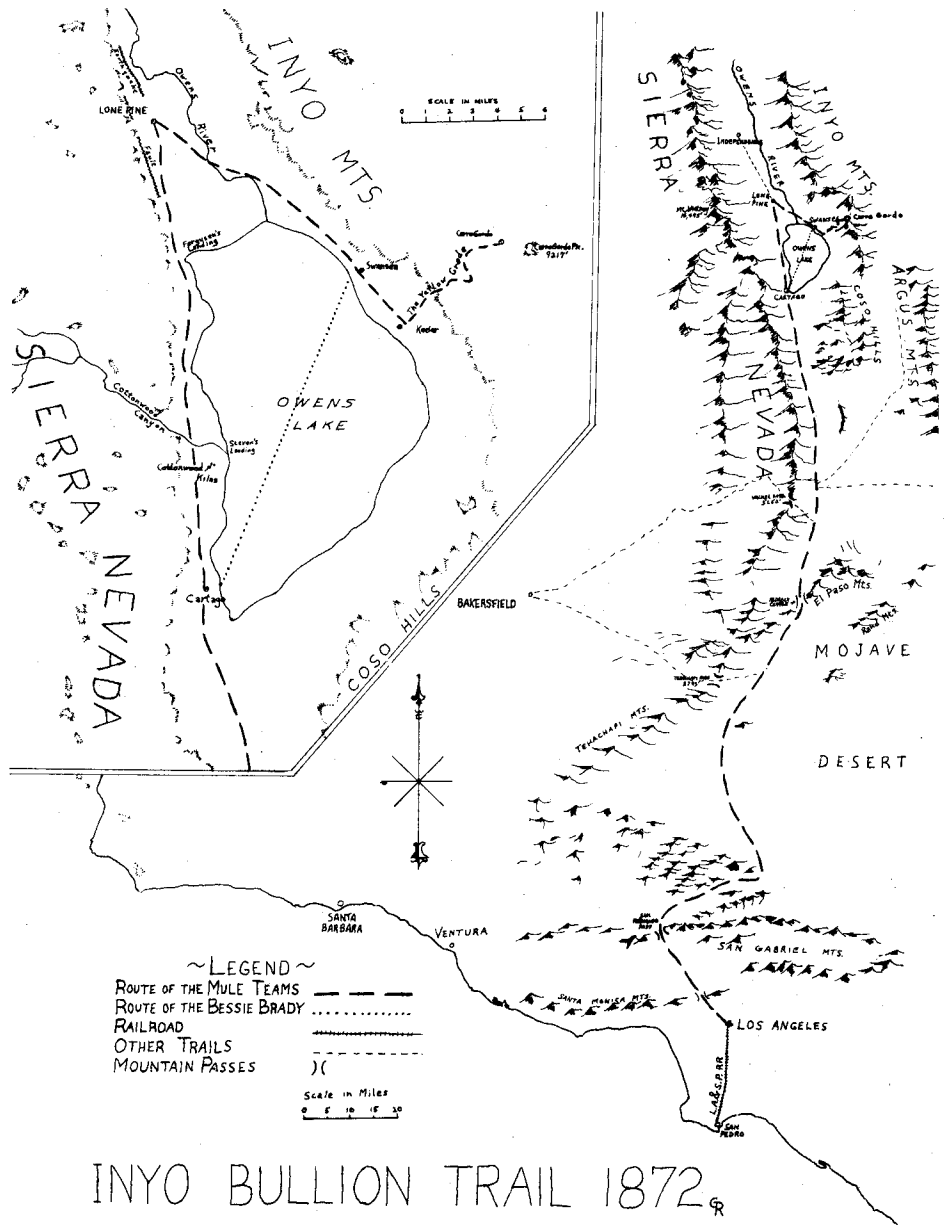
FOURTH OF JULY CELEBRATION AND EXCURSION!

THERE WILL BE AN EXCURSION ON OWENS Lake on the approaching Fourth of July, when will be carried out as closely as possible the following

PROGRAMME:

The Steamer will leave Swansea at 8 1/2 o'clock A. M. to accommodate citizens of Swansea and Cerro Gordo etc. she will then proceed to Ferguson's Landing, at the north end of the Lake, where she will be christened. After this ceremony she will take a trip to the

Southern Extremity of the Lake,
Where there is a delightful spot for a picnic.



Bessie Brady Bullion Ship

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party" ensued as the *Bessie Brady* headed toward what was to become the southern terminal of her silver run, Cartago.

Loaded with 700 bars, the *Bessie Brady* could carry across the lake in three hours the bullion it took four teams three days to haul around it. Round-trip freight time between Swansea and Cartago was cut by six to eight days, and the mule teams previously used for that run could be added to the Cartago-Los Angeles route. It was not long before Brady had moved all of the bullion stockpiled at Swansea to Cartago.

Unfortunately, however, Brady was not as good at moving the ingots from

INYO BULLION TRAIL 1872

Gold!

Canyon in the Sierra Nevada west of Owens Lake. A flume shot the milled logs down the canyon to within three miles of the shore. Thence they were loaded aboard wagons and transported to the lake's edge where some were converted to charcoal for the smelters in Sherman's beehive kilns while others were placed aboard the *Bessie Brady* for shipment up the Yellow Grade.

By providing fast and efficient service at the northern end of the bullion trail, the *Bessie Brady* proved invaluable in the commerce which sustained the burgeoning town of Los Angeles. A fledgling

pueblo of 5,000 in 1870, largely due to the Inyo trade, Los Angeles had more than doubled in population by 1874. In that year Cerro Gordo bullion made up almost one-third of the total exports through the port at San Pedro. In addition, an estimated 3,400 tons of grain, merchandise, and machinery carried northward to the Owens Valley comprised a sizable part of Los Angeles' \$5 million wholesale business. Los Angeles merchants sold almost \$1,000 a day in supplies to the freight teams alone.

In the late 1870s silver production at Cerro Gordo began to taper off. By 1877,

with the price of silver declining and the once rich deposits bottoming out, only one smelter remained in operation. The *Bessie Brady* made only occasional trips across the lake.

On November 21, 1879 the last load of silver was hauled down the Yellow Grade. The *Bessie Brady* was beached at the north end of the lake somewhere near the mouth of Owens River, where she had been built.

She enjoyed a brief but tragic resurrection in 1882. Captain Julius M. Keeler, an agent for Eastern mining interests, came to the Owens Valley in 1879. Foreseeing the completion of the narrow-gauge Carson & Colorado Railroad, traversing the Owens Valley from the north and terminating at the Owens Lake, Keeler bought a number of abandoned properties. Along them were the Cerro Gordo mines and the *Bessie Brady*. Keeler laid out a town of forty-two blocks (which now bears his name) at the foot of the Yellow Grade and built a wharf on the lake.

Early in 1882 he had the steamship floated off the beach to the new wharf to be repaired and outfitted. She was given a more powerful engine, a more efficient boiler, and a new coat of paint. It was her last coat of paint that spelled her doom. Late on the afternoon of May 11, spontaneous combustion of the paint, oil and oakum aboard caused the *Bessie Brady* to burst into flame. Thus, the career of the "yacht" which James Brady had built for \$10,000 a decade before came to an end.

The *Bessie Brady* as she might have appeared on Owens Lake a hundred years ago.

