Review


The foundation, development, and final destruction of a mining community to make way for a huge open-pit operation is a poignant story, repeated many times throughout the industrialized world. The labor demands of industry helped populate isolated regions, particularly ore-rich provinces. Where they were miners, there were families, and associated trades and services. Different types of communities developed to service these mine sites. Santa Rita in south western New Mexico, USA, was a copper mine that emerged from contested and humble origins in the early 1800s to become a major company town, owned and managed by some of the biggest mining corporations in the USA, including Kennecott (1933–1986) and Phelps Dodge (1986–2007). This is the focus of Christopher Huggard’s and Terrence Humble’s *Santa Rita Del Cobre*, a collaboration between the visiting academic (Huggard) and the local historian and collector (Humble).

The book’s major themes include the conflict between Native Americans and European peoples; the complex negotiations between Mexican and Anglo interests; the imposition of control in the company town period and its contestation by the labor movement. After a period of legal and operational uncertainty in the late nineteenth century, the focus shifts to corporate mining and later big labor in the twentieth century.

Chapter 1 covers the period from the arrival of Spanish explorers and entrepreneurs in the 1600s, the beginning of Mexican independence in 1821, as well as the arrival of North Americans into New Mexico in the 1830s. That the copper mine produced so much copper-bearing ore in this isolated, harsh environment, is a remarkable achievement of the early superintendents and mine workers. The Apache people sought an independent homeland, a proposal which had some US support, but ultimately this was quashed in favor of economic interests based on mining and control of railway routes.
After New Mexico became a part of the USA in 1849, complicated ownership issues ensued. The mine eventually returned to production though the Mexican influence continued on both the mining methods and the mining workforce. These borderland areas were nothing if not porous. By the early 1860s, the mine was an important copper-producing field in the US, second only to the rich Michigan copper field.

By the early twentieth century the frontier mining period was over. A railroad link to Santa Rita had been achieved by 1898, and nearby Silver City and Hurley had industrialized. By 1920 Santa Rita had a population of 3,565, of whom 33% were Mexican born. The Chino Copper Company formed in 1909 and instituted a company town from 1910, taking over the commercial stores and building housing, the same year that the era of open-pit mining began.

A further theme of the book is the power of mining to re-order and re-configure the landscape not only through open-pit mining but also through extensive railway and road transport networks, control over the water supply, and the use of the water precipitation as a method to extract copper from stockpiled ore. The company's power extended to social relations as well as it successfully introduced a company town and managed dissent at least until 1942 when a National Labor Relations Board ruling and the Supreme Court decision forced recognition of the local union.

The section on the crews, locomotives, and blasting techniques reads too much like a list of useful information rather than a sustained argument, but the final chapter sees a strong return to form as the authors elaborate on the dimensions of the company's power through strategies such as selective policing, control of the town curfew, use of special constables, a powerful company store, and the provision of education. They also cover the widespread investment in new technologies and production techniques, and after 1942 the rise of a labor movement. Chicano workers and activists were emboldened by World War II; their experiences in the US military and in wider society encouraged a more assertive approach to labor negotiations. The extent of this labor mobilization was such that by the 1950s and 60s there was a strong bridge between Anglo and Chicano, pioneered by legendary local Anglo activist, Clinton Jencks, (known locally as "El Palomino"), and also carried on by key Chicano leaders such as Albert Muñoz and Juan Chacón. Many of the ethnic and racial divisions in local society were transcended, at least for a time, by labor mobilization.

There are over 120 photographs in the book, representing a powerful visual record of the environmental transformation theme, yet the authors say very little about the photographic collection; its
production, selection, and conservation. Many photos were clearly company public relations shots, designed to evince a certain awe for the machinery and the company's undertaking. Mining companies employed commercial photographers to make both a record of day-to-day operations and to provide material for newsletters and market reports. The use of family snapshots may have balanced the corporate feel of the photographs. There is no denying the power of this source to evoke Santa Rita's past, but the photographic record needs to be approached with caution.

The core of Santa Rita, where the town once stood until 1970, is now the center of a large open-pit operation such that former locals now say they were "born in space." *Santa Rita Del Cobre* is a fine portrait of a mining community, a book that will become a cornerstone for locals who wish to recall their lost town, and others who wish to study its history. There is much here for business, labor, and social historians. The book left this reader wanting to read more titles from the "Mining the American West Series" published by the University of Colorado Press, which says a lot about its strength and the passion that underpins it.

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