

Mexican Mining Heritage

The Real Del Monte Site

Mining is present throughout Mexican history. From the early colonial period to the present, thousands of mines were discovered and worked; for centuries Mexico ranked first in the world in silver production. Around the mines arose settlements. Some of the richest veins sustained important and opulent cities like Guanajuato, Taxco, or Zacatecas, which later developed other economic activities that permitted their subsistence after mining declined. However, most mining towns did not survive; a common fate of settlements associated with a hazardous industry. In spite of the importance of mining, few sites retain the atmosphere of this activity. We can see the traces of the historical development of mining in just a few of them. One of these sites is Real del Monte.

Real del Monte is located in the State of Hidalgo, 100 kilometers north from Mexico City. The site belongs to an ancient and rich mineral region in the Pachuca mountain range. The discovery of silver deposits in 1552 gave rise to four settlements: Real de Tlaililpa (later Pachuca), Real del Monte, Atotonilco el Chico, and Real de Arriba.¹ Very soon the richness of the veins differentiated these four places. In 1554, in Pachuca was discovered a new method of silver reduction, called the “patio” process,² which made possible the extension of the works. At the beginning, Pachuca took the lead in silver production followed by Real del Monte, while the history of the two other places was more unstable and less successful.

The mining history of Real del Monte goes back for centuries. Some archeological findings demonstrate that natives carried out works at a superficial level before the conquest of Mexico.³ But the shape of the town began with the exploitation of mines in the 16th century, this original urban organization was the basis of the later evolution. Mining activity was the main structure upon which it developed, up to now.

The way the town is laid out is clearly associated with the silver mining industry. Real del Monte developed around the mine in an irregular fashion. Mining gave the town its character and this is the basis for reconstructing the social, political and architectural history of the town. Real del

Monte has become a national historical monument due to its centennial mining buildings. We have to point out that it is part of a wider region formed by the mines and reduction establishments.

The history of Real del Monte in the 17th century is practically unknown because of the scarcity of sources. Some authors state that, like in other regions, the silver production declined as a result of the Indian demographic catastrophe, the lack of capital, and technological problems related to the depth of mines. Based on new information, other scholars consider that decline was not absolute. They propose that there were periods of bonanza followed by periods of depression, but that does not mean that production was completely paralyzed. This seems to be the probable situation, since in 1697 when the Italian traveler Gemeli Carreri visited Real del Monte he found flourishing mines and a town of adobe houses with a population of 12,000 inhabitants.⁴ But already by this time, it was clear that the main problem for the exploitation of the mines was drainage; to solve it required considerable investment, nonexistent at that time.

Real del Monte boomed in the second half of the 18th century. It was caused by the construction of a tunnel intended for the drainage of the mines. José Alejandro Bustamante y Bustillo started the work in 1739,⁵ but after two years he could not afford the expenses so he formed a company with Manuel Romero de Terreros, a wealthy merchant. By 1750 when Bustamante died, the tunnel was not finished, so his partner continued the task. The tunnel was completed in 1762. For the next 20 years, Romero de Terreros obtained a profit of 10 million pesos. To this success contributed other factors: the ability of Romero in using his political links to concentrate mining property and the simultaneous development of other activities to support mining. Romero de Terreros concentrated in his hands not only mines, but also ownership of the main refining establishments (*haciendas de beneficio*) and agricultural estates. This contributed to the formation of an agro-mining complex that left its imprint on the landscape.

Before we refer to the structures left from this period, we would like to emphasize that since then the presence of a big company prevailed in local mining. Mining and refining were concentrated in

a few hands. In 1824, the English Company of the Adventurers of Real del Monte bought most of Romero's properties. From this period, Real del Monte was exploited by monopolistic enterprises: between 1824-1849 by a British Company and from 1849 to 1906 by Mexican entrepreneurs. In 1906, the company was bought by American capital and in 1947 became a government-owned enterprise.

The tendency to concentrate different activities related to mining was continued by the English owners and then in 1849 by its Mexican successors, the *Compañía Aviadora de Minas de Real del Monte y Pachuca*. In 1906 the United States Mining and Refining Company acquired the holdings of the Mexican company and controlled regional mining until 1947, when the Mexican government took the activity into its hands. In 1990, it was sold to private entrepreneurs.⁶

We stated that the construction of the tunnel was the main work in the 18th century and it helped with the exploration of new rich veins that led to the boom. Nevertheless, the drainage problem was not entirely solved. In 1776, some years after the completion of the tunnel, the visitor Antonio de Ulloa pointed out that it was higher than the depth the mines had reached, so it was necessary to raise up the water to this level for drainage. It was clear that another tunnel to drain the deepest mines was needed,⁷ but this task would be carried out a century later.

While the technical problems increased, the quality of the ores diminished and so the boom came to its end. By 1801 in Real del Monte, most of the works were abandoned. Some years later, the war of Independence worsened the situation. Both royal and independent armies collected funds in mining regions which discouraged investments. In 1819, the works were completely paralyzed and the town depopulated.

After the war of Independence, the new Constitution of 1824 allowed foreigners to invest in mines. Most of the mines in the region and other properties of Romero de Terreros went into the hands of the British Company of the Adventurers of Real del Monte. The English never experienced a boom, but they introduced important changes that transformed the view and display of the town and its surroundings.

The different companies inherited invaluable evidence of their workings in the area, unfortunately many of them have not survived. The 19th-century mining operations are more evident and it is very likely that they concealed some of the previous workings during the 1820s and the 1830s. A major restoration of the area was carried out by the British Company. The introduction of the steam engine and new methods of ore reduction were

reflected in many of the buildings which are very well kept up to the present day.

With the establishment of this company, considerable social changes came along. The company brought specialized labor. By the middle of the 19th century, a community of about 300 British subjects were living there forming the largest British community ever found in Mexico.

Financial problems and the want of rich ores led the British to bankruptcy. In 1849, its property was sold to a group of Mexican entrepreneurs. The new company continued some of the works in Real del Monte. One of the most important was the construction of the tunnel named *Aviadero*, the entrance of which can be seen today.

Because of the lack of workers, the new Mexican company signed a contract with the local government to assign prisoners for the work on the mines. In 1850, a prison was established near the Terreros' shaft and it survived until the middle of the 1870s.⁸

The Mexican company also exploited the nearby Pachuca mines, where it struck a bonanza.⁹ Attracted by this fact, many people abandoned Real del Monte, mining was reduced, and one thousand workers were dismissed. In 1864, the works were completely stopped.

In the early 1870s, mining in all areas experienced a deep crisis. The Company faced serious problems as result of increasing expenses and the fall of the international price of silver. The owners decided to lower salaries and dismiss workers in order to continue mining. This decision provoked a memorable strike that began in Real del Monte in 1872. The movement extended to all the region and lasted several years.¹⁰

At the end of the 19th century, the mine of *Dificultad* experienced a bonanza that encouraged new investments. A big steam engine was placed in this mine. It can still be admired today.

In this period, several technical improvements were also introduced, such as electricity, dynamite, compressed air drills, and railways inside the mines.¹¹ Other changes took place in the town. In 1871 was inaugurated the telegraph and some years later was built the *Hidalgo Theater*. In 1905, the streets were illuminated with electric lights and the path to the *Hiloché* wood was paved with stones.

Nevertheless, the Mexican entrepreneurs could not afford the increasing costs of production, the unfavorable conditions of the market, the introduction of the gold standard, and the competition of better enterprises. The Mexican company was sold in 1906 to the United States Mining and Refining Company. The new owners introduced modern methods of extracting and refining silver



The Dolores Mine and its surroundings. Photo by Victor Ortiz.

ores and in addition, they started the production of lead and zinc mining.¹²

World War I and the Mexican Revolution affected the mining activities in the region. Production fell, national and imported commodities were scarce, internal trade was reduced, and workers left. In spite of all these inconveniences, in Real del Monte attempts were made to maintain silver production by introducing the flotation process.

In this decade, the United States Mining and Refining Company bought a portion of the Hiloche works in order to open the shaft of La Purísima and to install a grinding mill. In return, the company built the Santa Rosalía dam for the inhabitants of Real del Monte.

Among the principal mines exploited by the American company, we can mention the Purísima, Dificultad, Santa Inés, Cabrera and La Rica. All of them keep their shafts open today and are communicated. In 1928, began construction of a tunnel of 6 kilometers intended to connect the La Rica mine with the one of San Juan Pachuca, and through it the ores were to be transported to the refining hacienda Loreto. The new refining hacienda of Loreto was inaugurated in 1930; it had electric locomotives that pull 20-ton wagons. From that time, the new Loreto plant concentrated all the refining works of the company. For this reason, the Guerrero hacienda was abandoned, but its surviving remains provide an idea of the works that were carried out there.¹³

Besides the American Company, other companies exploited the mines in the 1920s. Amongst them, we can mention the Santa Margarita, San José S.A., Peral del Oro, San José Doradores, Manzano, and Rosario Viejo.¹⁴

With the depression of 1929-1932, many mines were closed. This provoked unemployment and discontent. To face the problem, the government supported the creation of mining cooperatives of workers in this area.¹⁵

At this point, we would like to remark on the strength and fighting spirit of the mining workers of this area. They were protagonists of many movements beginning with the first worker strike in Mexican history. The leading role of the Real del Monte workers can be seen still in the 1930s when the National Union of Mining Industry Workers was constituted and they held some of the main positions.¹⁶

In the 1940s, the Mexican government began a new policy of direct participation in the mining industry. For this purpose, there were created enterprises with national capital. In 1947, the government bought the Real del Monte Company. The administration of the Mexican government lasted 43 years. By the end of the 1980s, a new economic policy was introduced and the government decided to sell to private companies almost all of the state enterprises. In 1990, the Real del Monte Company went into private hands. Nevertheless, most of the characteristic of the mining district and the traces of its history still remain.

The town of Real del Monte has become a national historical monument due to its centennial mining buildings. We still have structures, houses, reduction haciendas, and even social sites which have survived through the centuries. From colonial times, we were able to find remains of the very first mines exploited like the Dolores, the Acosta, the Santa Maria, and the San Miguel Regla Reduction Haciendas. The National Institute of Anthropology and History initiated a project a few years ago to declare Real del Monte a national historical site. Then, the Subdirección de Zonas y Monumentos Históricas of the National Coordination of Historical Sites carried out a survey of the monuments existing in the area and recommended its conservation and restoration. With this purpose, specialists prepared maps and an official declaration. In this project, the architects Miguel Angel Gálvez, Alfredo Hernández A. and Erasmo Cordero also assisted. Local authorities supported these actions.¹⁷

The town maintains the 16th-century's urban plan and it developed around this original settlement. In the documents of the preservation project, the authors point out that the plan of the city, the organization of the architectural urban space, and even the materials and construction system used in the town, reflect the mining activity. They add that the characteristics of the city's construction and the interrelationship between space and urban structure as they exist now are invaluable evidence for the social, political and artistic history. These elements stimulated the decision to protect, restore and maintain Real del Monte under the federal law on the protection of monuments and archeological and artistic sites, which grants protection to the

area in order to consolidate the national cultural patrimony of the country.

Summarizing, the National Institute declared 31 blocks and 71 buildings built between the 16th and 19th centuries within the central area of the town as the main area to protect. They represent various aspects of life in different historical periods.

Historical site declaration corresponds only to the main urban area of Real del Monte: the buildings and streets of the mining town. Structures dedicated to the working of the mines were not included. However, in the town exist some mines and the remains of one reduction hacienda; these include the mine Dolores, mine La Rica, mine Purísima, mine Dificultad, mine Acosta, mine Escobar, and the embankment of the reduction hacienda Guerrero. The Dolores and Acosta mines were like fortresses, solid walls protected and isolated them. These structures can be seen now.

In this complex of historical monuments stand out the cemeteries which are also a very important source for social history. Besides an English cemetery, there are three Mexican cemeteries in Real del Monte. Unlike the British, these cemeteries, also built during the 19th century, are located just outside the mines. Near Dolores, the most important mine during colonial and British period, is the cemetery of the Virgin Mary. Close to Dificultad mine is the St. Felipe cemetery and down the hill near Purísima mine lies the St. Agustín cemetery.

Besides the efforts of the National Institute of Anthropology and History, in 1995 the Universidad Autónoma Metropolitana and other local cultural and public institutions carried out a project of restoration of the buildings and a project to catalog the historical monuments in the Real del Monte municipality. The progress of these projects have not been published.

Real del Monte stands as a living heritage of the Mexican silver mining history. The town and the neighboring Pachuca, el Chico, and the area of reduction haciendas in Huasca—all in the state of Hidalgo—constitute one of the three most important Mexican mining regions. We are convinced that the preservation and protection not only of Real del Monte, but also these two other regions is an urgent need in order to lay the foundations of a better knowledge of our mining past.

Notes

- ¹ *Minas de Pachuca*, Vargas Rea, 1954, p.55.
- ² This method, based in mercury, made possible the amplification of the works not only in this region but all over New Spain, because it demonstrated its use-

fulness for most ores until the end of the 19th century.

- ³ Almaraz, Ramón, *Memoria de los trabajos ejecutados por la Comisión Científica de Pachuca en el año 1864*, México, Imprenta de J.M. Andrade y F. escalante, 1865, pp. 142-143.
- ⁴ Carreri, Gemelli, *Viaje a la Nueva España*, México, UNAM, 1976, p. 89; Gerhard, Peter, *Geografía histórica de la Nueva España. 1519-1821*, México, UNAM, 1986, p.127.
- ⁵ See a detailed analysis in: Ramos, Agustín. "La herencia de los Bustamante o el verdadero fundador del Monte de Piedad y genio genuino de la Veta Vizcaína" in: *Minería colonial latinoamericana*. México, INAH, 1992, pp. 69-78.
- ⁶ Herrera-Canales, Iné y Rina Ortiz-Peralta, "La minería de Hidalgo de la Colonia al siglo XIX" in: *Recuento histórica bibliográfico de la minería en la región central de México*, Morelia, Universidad Michoacana de San Nicolás de Hidalgo, 1994, p. 25-27; 31-42.
- ⁷ Solano, Francisco. *Antonio de Ulloa y la Nueva España*, México, UNAM, 1979, p. 84.
- ⁸ Velasco, Cuauhtémoc. "¿Corrección o exterminio? El presidio de Real del Monte, 1850-1874," *Historias*, n.º.
- ⁹ Herrera-Canales, Inés, "Empresa minera y región en México, La compañía de Minas de Real del Monte y pachuca, 1824-1906," *Siglo XIX*, Año IV, N.º 8, jul-dec 1989, p. 108.
- ¹⁰ Flores, Eduardo. *Conflictos de trabajo en una empresa minera, Real del Monte y Pachuca, 1872-1877*, México, INAH, 1991.
- ¹¹ Herrera and Ortiz, Op. cit., p. 36-38.
- ¹² *Ibid.*, p. 41-42.
- ¹³ Galindo, Jesús, *El distrito minero de Pachuca-Real del Monte*, s.p. i, p. 37.
- ¹⁴ Castanedo, José. "Los distritos mineros de Pachuca, Real del Monte y El Chico forman la región más productora de plata en el mundo," *Boletín minero*, XXIII, jan-jun 1927, p. 413.
- ¹⁵ Sariego, Juan Luis. et. al. *El estado y la minería mexicana. Política, trabajo y sociedad en el siglo XX*, México, Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1988, p. 212; 153-154.
- ¹⁶ Besserer, Federico, et. al. *El sindicalismo minero en México 1900-1952*, México, ERA, 1983, p. 30.
- ¹⁷ *Proyecto de Zona de Monumentos históricos del Mineral del Monte en el estado de Hidalgo*, México, Subdirección de Monumentos Históricos de la Coordinación de Monumentos Históricos del INAH. Coordinación y dirección de los arquitectos Miguel Angel Gálvez G, Alfredo Hernández Angeles y Erasmo Cordero Hernández, 1993.

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