

Real del Monte The Rooftop of Mexico

Belem Oviedo Gámez*

Real del Monte, mines
and magueys, the hardest oak that
holds up the skies, conifers that stop cirrus clouds
and mist. The gallows frame and chimneys of La Rica, Dificultad, Dolores,
Acosta, Purísima... Inhabitants of Real del Monte live on
the rooftop of Mexico, on the mountains' flowing
mane. That is why the hamlet of Real is spread
out and the vein tastes of ground stone.

Eugenio Martín Torres



Unless otherwise specified, photos by Luis A. Aguilar



The signs of mining in Real del Monte cannot be hidden; they are the lifeblood of one of the few mining districts in Mexico that has practically never stopped working since colonial times, furnishing us with gold and silver, and with an entire cultural and industrial heritage.¹

If you're not careful, Real del Monte is the kind of place that will captivate you. If you know how to see through the eyes of your soul, it will charm you and instill respect and a desire to know a little more about that world "down below" so manifest in the town's features. On its old lanes, the houses still have their roofs made of shingles or with the tops of the cyanide kegs used in working the mine. Old houses that

If you're not careful,
Real del Monte is the kind
of place that will captivate you.
It will charm you and instill respect
and a desire to know more
about that world "down
below" so manifest in
the town's features.

hide a history, a legend, someone always willing to share his/her stories, his life in the mine, in the cantina with his buddies, the buddies united by the courage it takes to face death every day and the complicity of sharing a single love, a love that, like the love of Real, you never forget: the mine.

The visitor is welcomed to one end of Real del Monte by the old gallows

frame (the metal frame that holds up the shaft elevator) of the Providencia Mine, a faithful reflection of early twentieth-century mining technology. On the other end, the El Hiloche forest opens its arms inviting us in.² For years its oaks and firs have provided shade and fed the imagination of families organizing their fiestas under their boughs, artists who have painted their centuries' old magnificence, photographers who have captured the moment and immortalized the El Hiloche sheltering the mist. Miners like Don Manuel García, who ran fruitlessly after a fairy to get him to show him where the treasure was, the treasure that years later, "some workers building the highway" would find.

In the heart of El Hiloche is one of the oldest mines, the Purísima Concepción, two of whose old steam boilers are still in use. Continuing on the same highway, we come to another mine, San José La Rica, where the ore from

* Director of the Mining Historical Archive and Museum and president of the Mexican Committee for the Preservation of the Industrial Heritage.

Real del Monte is concentrated to be sent through a seven-kilometer tunnel to the city of Pachuca, where it is worked. Then, all we have to do is go past a curve in the road and we come to a town covered in red roofs, some of them gable roofs. In the distance is the English Cemetery, the last resting place of those English miners and their descendents who in the nineteenth century founded today's mining company. At that time, the company was appropriately named the Company of Gentlemen Adventurers in the Mines of Real del Monte.³ Only a group of adventurers, as they called themselves, could have dared to dream and trust in the greatness of Mexican mines and the superiority of their own technology.

Downtown Real del Monte now boasts an old-fashioned cantina and barbershop, recently inaugurated after the town's remodeling. In the very center of the town is the Sanctuary of Our Lord of Zelontla, the patron saint of miners, who every January "visits" Our Lady of the Rosary in her parish: Our Lord of Zelontla is carried to her parish where he remains for a day, and the next day,

the virgin, carried by the parishioners, walks him halfway home to finally say good-bye until the following year.

THE COUNT AND THE TOWN'S INHABITANTS

Mining began in this town that the pre-Hispanic peoples called Maghotsi in 1528 with the arrival of the Spaniards in the general mining area of Pachuca and Real del Monte.

Colonial life in the region was marked by two things. First, Pachuca was the place where the patio or amalgamation system of silver refining developed by Bartolomé de Medina was perfected in 1555. Second, the wealth of the Real del Monte mines would be enough to win its owner, Don Pedro Romero de Terreros, the title of Count of Regla. Real del Monte miners and some of its women would have to face this man, considered at the time one of the world's richest men, to defend the "*partido*" payment system (a variation of a piecework system used after the men fulfilled a daily quota)

and to protest against abuses by his overseers.⁴ This marked a precedent in labor organization and was the preamble to strikes in Mexico. To his credit, we must recall that Don Pedro, together with his partner José Alejandro Bustamante y Bustillo, built the Moran adit, the first great drainage tunnel in New Spain, which still exists today, and also founded the Monte de Piedad, Mexico's national pawnshop.

Don Pedro and his successors maintained control of mining in the area until Mexican independence in the early nineteenth century, when the third Count of Regla sold his holdings to a group of English businessmen.

THE ADVENTURERS OF REAL DEL MONTE

In 1824, a group of miners from Cornwall went to London to set up the Company of Gentlemen Adventurers in the Mines of Real del Monte and immediately organized an expedition to Mexico. Administrators, engineers and skilled workers crossed the Atlantic with valu-





The English left indelible traces of themselves behind: the English Cemetery, lying solemnly on the hillside, and a solid technological infrastructure that would turn their successors into the country's second-largest silver producers.

able cargo, their modern steam-run machines, to begin what would be one of England's great adventures—and failures—in Mexico. The crossing was only the first of the problems they would face during their 25 years at the head of the company. First, the workers came down with yellow fever on their arrival at the port of Veracruz; then, the transfer of the machinery to Real del Monte would take almost a year. They were then disappointed to see that their pumps were insufficient to clear the water out of the deepest levels of the

mine where they had hoped to find veins as rich as those from colonial times. Lastly, communications with the majority stockholders in London were very slow and relations with the Mexican government were very bad.

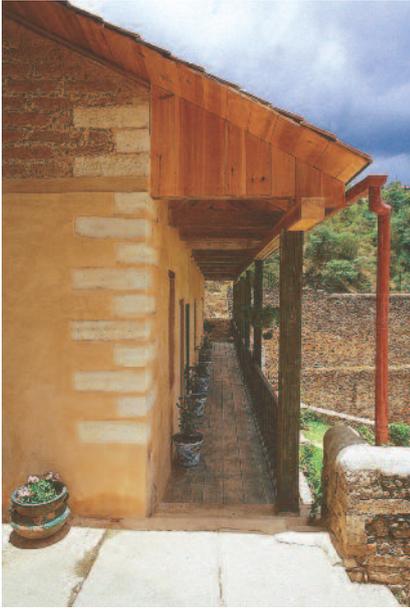
One of the English miners, probably a technician, who came with the first group wrote in his diary,

June 10... At noon we made our solemn and triumphal entry into Real del Monte, or into the place where Real del Monte once existed, and where it will 'ere long raise its head again. I say once existed because it has now the air of a village sacked by a horde of Cossacks, or something yet more desolate. The *tempus edax* of the poets has here used his scythe with inexorable cruelty. The roofs are perforated and falling in, the walls crumbling down, and in short, the whole village converted into a mass of ruins. The two or three habitations which are thought the best are scarcely habitable. We may, therefore, bid good-bye to comforts. The cause of this decay is obvious enough. This district



has no resources when the mines are not worked.⁵

In 1849, despite the fact that the local inhabitants had welcomed them with the ringing of church bells, as the diary attests to, and rejoicing in the church to pray for the success of the enterprise, the English sold their shares in the mine to a group of Mexican investors, at a loss of Mex\$5 million. The Mexican investors founded the Sociedad Aviadora de las Minas de Real del Monte y Pachuca, which lasted from 1849 to 1906, and used a system of loans to eventually monopolize production in the Real del Monte, Pachuca, Mineral de El Chico and Mineral de La Reforma Mines.⁶ The English left indelible traces of themselves behind: the English Cemetery, lying solemnly on the hillside; a solid technological infrastructure that would turn their successors into the country's second-largest silver producers; the pasty, the typical food of Cornish miners, that, adapted to Mexican cuisine, has become the obligatory dish of all visitors



Marco Antonio Hernández Badillo

to “The Rooftop of Mexico,” sold on practically every street corner.

The United States Smelting, Refining and Mining Company that ran the Real del Monte mines from 1906 to 1947, substituted the cyanide process for the old amalgamation process of refining the ore. This was just one of the technological innovations that made Real del Monte and Pachuca the world’s biggest silver producer in the 1930s.

THE SYMBOLS OF REAL DEL MONTE

On the way to the English Cemetery is the Dolores Mine, one of the region’s oldest.⁷ It was in this place that the first Count of Regla hid in 1766 while fleeing from the workers defending the “*partido*” pay system.⁸

Following the highway down, we come to the Acosta Mine, where we find the remains of three different centuries’ architectural styles: the outer walls and the aqueduct from the colonial period; the machinery shed built by the Mexican

owners in 1857 in the Cornish style to house the Williams’ Perran Foundry Co. steam engines; and the shed for the hoist, an enormous metal gallows frame and the bins where the ore was stored, built by the U.S. company after 1906. This mine is currently being remodeled to include a museum.

The Acosta Mine’s horizontal entrance tunnel leads to level 160 of the La Dificultad Mine. Both have become the symbol of the inhabitants of Real del Monte, the *realeños*. When Acosta is operating as a museum, the plan is to sign an agreement with the Real del Monte and Pachuca Company to allow visitors to go into it by way of the Dificultad Mine’s shaft.

La Dificultad is located at one of the entrances to Real del Monte, on the Pachuca-Huejutla highway, making it a “must” for visitors.⁹ The mine has a Mexican-style machine shed which has been the pride of the town since its inauguration in 1890 when the most powerful steam engine in Mexico was installed there: a Woolf 580-horse-power rotary steam engine and a fixed 80-

At the Acosta Mine we find the remains of three architectural styles: the outer walls and the aqueduct from the colonial period; the machinery shed in the Cornish style constructed in 1857; and the shed for the hoist, built after 1906.

horse-power hoist. A newspaper of the day considered it “a true milestone in the history of Mexican mining.”¹⁰ The governor of the state, the director of the Real del Monte Company and “notables from Pachuca, Real del Monte and even Mexico City...were all invited, who, together with an immense multitude of our working class filled the vast La Dificultad building.”¹¹

Unfortunately, the steam engine was dismantled and sold as scrap in 1987. The machine shed has been preserved, however, as has the steam hoist, the shed for

the electric hoist used during the first half of the twentieth century that still functions, as well as a dwelling and the large gallery in which the Mining Historical Archive and Museum (AHMM) non-governmental organization proposes to coordinate with the Real del Monte and Pachuca Company to set up a permanent exhibit about the history of the mine.

The rock used for the foundations of the La Dificultad machine shed were originally from a chapel in the San Felipe Cemetery located right next to the mine, according to AHMM documents.



The Acosta Mine
Site Museum will be
open to the public at the
end of this year. The museum
will be a starting point for
a cultural tourism corridor
based on the recovery
and conservation of the
region's industrial
heritage.



In the cemetery, like everywhere in Real del Monte, we find clear vestiges of mining, in the graves of those who were buried thanks to the efforts of the mutual aid societies or the gravestone of a miner made of the rock that crushed him in the mine. This is an example of the kind of humor that survives in the stories and poetry of former miners or in the contests of double entendres about the mines that can last for hours on end.

Across from La Dificultad Mine and close to the San Felipe Cemetery, the local inhabitants have put a mural commemorating those who organized “the

first workers strike in Latin America” in 1766, the miners of Real del Monte.

THE MUSEUMS

The AHMM is currently working to set up a labor medical museum in what was the Miners Hospital. The museum, slated to open in 2001, will include a room on the history of Real del Monte, a library, an oral history archive and rooms for workshops.

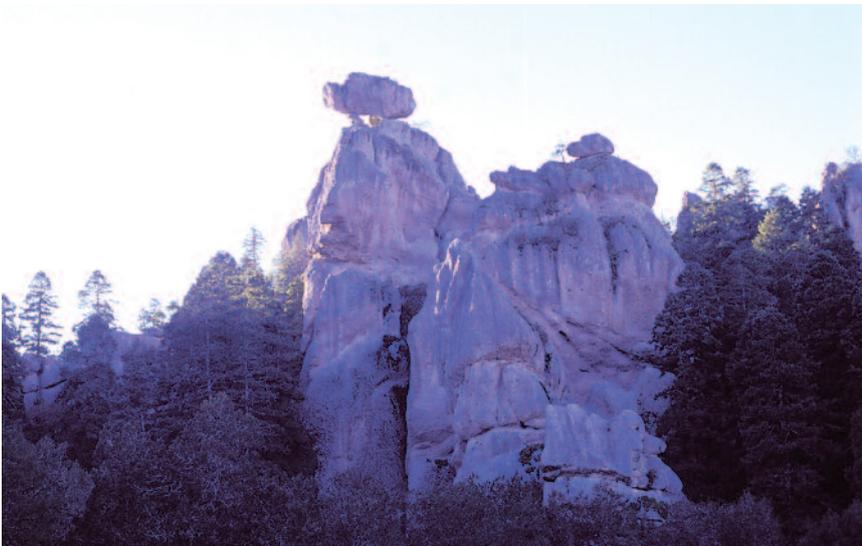
Another museum that will serve as a well deserved homage to those who

built the town with their work is the Acosta Mine Site Museum. This project, coordinated by the AHMM since 1998, will be open to the public at the end of this year. In addition to being the first of its kind in Mexico, the museum will be a starting point for a cultural tourism corridor based on the recovery and conservation of the region's industrial heritage.

Real del Monte, “The Rooftop of Mexico,” tastes and smells like the mine that shares with us the life it holds in its depths, reminding us how much it has



An old truck used for transporting the ore at the Acosta Mine.



Peñas Cargadas, an ideal place for mountain climbing, just 5 kilometers from Real's downtown.

given us and how we tend to forget that the town is really the mine, no matter how worn out her veins might be. The mine can continue to give us life, fill hearts and surprise both us and those from outside when the mist creeps into its streets and children run through El Hiloche. Soon, when children and adults alike go down into the Acosta Mine, they will get a tiny taste of what the lives of their fathers, their grandfathers, their ancestors, their town, were like. They will know that Real del Monte is a mine that openly and without false

modesty offers itself so that its people can go on, learning and living from it, always proud.

“The Rooftop of Mexico” is not there only for local residents, but for all lovers of mining, landscape, nature and life; for those who want to see it, learn from it and fall in love with a marvelous mining town: Real del Monte.¹² **MM**

NOTES

¹ The government of the state of Hidalgo remodeled the downtown area of Real del Monte in

1997 and the nongovernmental group Mining Historical Archive and Museum (AHMM) has been working for 13 years to restore and conserve the industrial heritage of the Real del Monte-Pachuca area.

² The government of the state of Hidalgo declared this forest a protected ecological reserve in 1998. One hundred years before, the neighboring El Chico forest, excellent for mountain climbing, was made a national park.

³ For more information about the company, see R.W. Randall, *Real del Monte: una empresa minera británica en México* (Mexico City: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1977).

⁴ Some historians consider this movement the first workers' strike in Latin America. The AHMM and Mexico's National Archive have preserved documentation about it, including a list of participants.

⁵ One of the first Detachment sent by the Real del Monte company, *Journal Descriptive of the Route from New York to Real del Monte by way of Tampico* (Biblioteca Juan Barrón: AHMM, photocopy).

⁶ See Rocío Ruiz de la Barrera, “La empresa de minas de Real del Monte (1849-1906)” (Ph.D. diss., Colegio de México, 1995); Inés Herrera Canales, “Empresa minera y regional en México. La compañía de Minas de Real del Monte y Pachuca (1824-1906),” *Siglo XIX: Revista de Historia* (July-December 1989) (Nuevo León Autonomous University), pp. 103-124.

⁷ Five kilometers further along this same road, though within the same municipality, is Peñas Cargadas an ideal place for mountain climbing that caught the interest of travelers and artists in the nineteenth century.

⁸ The general guide to the Historical Archive of the Real del Monte and Pachuca Company includes a bibliography on this topic.

⁹ Belem Oviedo Gámez, “La ritualización de la tecnología. La Mina Dificultad: ejemplo de tecnología minera 1886-1890,” *Un recorrido por archivos y bibliotecas privados*, vol. 3 (Mexico City, AMABPAC/Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1999), pp. 119-128.

¹⁰ *El Heraldito*, *Diario Católico* (Mexico City) 16 January 1890.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² For those who want to learn more about the history and mining culture of Real del Monte, the historical archive (1556-1967) and library are open to the public at Calle Mina 110, Colonia Centro, Pachuca, Hidalgo. Telephone and fax: (7) 715-09-76. E-mail: ahmm@prodigy.net.mx

Ministry of Tourism of the state of Hidalgo