

A History
of the
Chisos Mining Company: 1902 - 1942

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Commercial quicksilver production began in the Big Bend of Texas in the late 1800's, and when the new century dawned, a boom was in the making. Recovery of this rare liquid metal brought a measure of civilization to one of America's last frontiers, yielded considerable wealth to a few mine owners, and became an important factor in the work quicksilver market. From the outset, this industrial empire came under the spell of Howard E. Perry, a Chicago industrialist whose Chisos Mining Company became the leading producer in the Terlingua Quicksilver District. This dissertation focuses on the man, the company, and the influence he wielded.

How Perry acquired his Big Bend property remains one of the region's best kept secrets. In 1901, following a year-long legal battle with earlier claimants, he received suspect title to property that became the richest in the district. Perry incorporated the Chisos Mining Company in May, 1903, and reported the first recovery later that year. The first two decades of the twentieth century were halcyon years for Perry and his company. As other mines in the district closed or suspended operations, the Chisos produced steadily, posting national records during World War I. [The value of quicksilver stems from its multitudinous uses for which no satisfactory substitutes have been found. In addition to chemical and pharmaceutical uses, its application

as a priming device to detonate gunpowder makes adequate reserves during periods of armed conflict a national priority.]

The exact worth of the Chisos production remains a matter of conjecture as few reports were filed, and even members of the United States Geologic Survey were forbidden entrance to the underground workings. In 1915, however, the company was credited with 4,177 flasks [a flask contained seventy-five pounds of quicksilver] and of the 6,306 flasks reported for the district in the following year, the Chisos claimed the major portion. Ordnance demands forced the 1916 market to a high of more than \$300 per flask, stabilized at \$125.89, and held at over \$100 for the remaining war years.¹ A company employee claimed "Perry's mine averaged profits of \$2,000 a day for a while, yielding more than \$1,250,000 in quicksilver in its best year."² A 1917 government report, however vaild, credited Texas with \$1,136,508 in quicksilver production,³ largely Chisos recovery, and in 1934, University of Texas geologists estimated the three-decade Chisos recovery at \$12,000,000.⁴ Chisos production declined during the late 1930's and on October 1, 1942, the company was insolvent.

From a local perspective, Perry's venture at Terlingua appears as an experience unique to that remote area of Texas. That Terlingua's economic base was quicksilver mining in a state where mining is rare, re-emphasizes this assumption. When this experience is examined in a national and international context, an entirely different picture emerges. Instead of being unique,

the four-decade history of the Chisos Mining Company falls conveniently into three categories of historical experience and gives the Chisos story broad social, cultural, political, and economic overtones.

First, Perry's investment in the Big Bend quicksilver properties is analogous to the total late nineteenth-century pattern of foreign investment established by United States and European entrepreneurs (British investment in Western cattle, land, and mining, and United States investment in Mexican mining ventures are comparable studies); second, an analogy exists between the Terlingua experience and Eastern investments in the American West during this same period; and third, Perry who dominated the quicksilver district, was a traditional nineteenth-century entrepreneurial type whose ideological roots grew deep in the speculative soil of post-Civil War America.

Both United States and European foreign investment patterns represent attempts of conservative business to enter an unfamiliar environment seeking high-yield investments. Although Chicago and Terlingua are within the continental limits of the United States, in 1903 the geographical, social, political, and ethnic differences between the two areas were analogous to many other areas where international business investments were consummated. Profits--when there were profits--resulted frequently from abundance, rather than sound business practices, and in many cases depended on a large domestic labor force--cheap, primitive,

and largely untrained--supervised by skilled management representing a different cultural and ethnic society.

An adequate supply of itinerant Mexican labor multiplied greatly Perry's economic and political strength at Terlingua. Of the six states producing quicksilver, Texas ranked lowest in wages paid employees; miners who were paid \$2 per day in Texas could receive \$6 for the same skill in Washington. The Indian roustabout in the Arizona mines who received \$3 per day, ranked ahead of the Mexican at Terlingua who received only \$1.25. The minimal wages paid the Mexicans represented an increase paid for comparable skills south of the Rio Grande. And even if personal liberties were surrendered for Chisos employment, they found a better life at Terlingua. Exploitation was effected without reprisals; the reasons lay deep in Mexican history and culture. The approximate two percent who made decision, issued orders, and enjoyed affluence at Terlingua, had a close corollary in Mexico. The heritage of those who crossed the Rio Grande to work for Perry were steeped in a history of mass submission that continued north of the international boundary. If Perry is condemned for exploitation, the exploited came begging for the opportunity.

The remoteness of the Big Bend region--scarcity and isolation form a concurrent theme--enabled Perry to subscribe to the postulates of an era of unfettered economic practices and apply them to quicksilver recovery at Terlingua. Although Perry was

neither a Gould or a Vanderbilt--Gould had been dead ten years when Perry incorporated the Chisos Mining Company--his views, responses, statements, and decisions reflect the philosophy of that post-Appomattox entrepreneurial class. Through the economic strength of his company he wielded vast control in the Big Bend. During the Mexican political instability in the World War I era, Perry, through careful political exercise, succeeded in moving government troops to Terlingua to protect his mine over the strenuous objections of the military. Local schools, law and order, commercial distribution (he ousted peddlers and forbade postal employees to deliver mail order catalogues), and politics were all administered for the benefit of the Chisos Mining Company. Of all areas of involvement--except, of course, economic--nothing gave Perry greater concern than politics, both county and state, and he played the game with great dexterity. Through lobby strength he helped stave off two legislative attempts to tax quicksilver and with various means of voter manipulation, a sympathetic commissioners court held Chisos taxes to a minimum.

Perry brought to the Big Bend an eighteenth century Federalist political concept articulated in a late nineteenth century Republican vernacular, which believed that "as the wealth of the commercial and manufacturing classes increase, in the same degree ought their political power to increase."⁵ And while this Federalist power-property logic may have lost currency in more enlightened environments, the seeds of political and economic

serfdom still flourished along the banks of Terlingua Creek. An unenlightened and ill-informed electorate, dependent on a one-company economy for a livelihood, transferred the power of the ballot to the economic interest of the Chisos Mining Company.

For Perry, like many of his predecessors, principles of morality were frequently expressed in legal terminology; the courts, not the man, decided on matters of right and wrong. What was legally permissible was morally acceptable within the context of the late nineteenth-century market place. When sued for undermining an adjacent quicksilver property, Perry never denied the allegation, but when required by the court to pay damages he laughingly disclaimed any inconvenience as the illicit rewards had been generous. "After all," he said, "I paid them with their own money."⁶

Perry's control of the community was limited to the economic life-span of the Chisos Mining Company, and when that ended, the social, political, and educational processes reverted to the people, while cattle and tourism helped fill the economic vacuum. Little permanency accrued to the region from Perry's four-decade sojourn in the Big Bend of Texas. That was a legacy of the age of free unbridled enterprise.

FOOINOIES

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4. The University of Texas Bulletin, No. 3401, II. (Austin: University of Texas, 1934), pp. 529-530.
5. G. S. Hillard, Memorial Correspondence of Jeremiah Mason, (Cambridge: Yale University Press, 1873), pp. 359-360.
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