Art Gómez

If the Walls Could Speak

Mariscal Mine HAER Documentation

View of Mariscal Mine.

It is rare that a National Park Service central office employee has the opportunity to follow-up on a recommendation offered to a park nearly 14 years ago. In 1997, that very opportunity arose when the Historic American Engineering Record (HAER) invited me to serve as project historian for a 12-week documentation project at the Mariscal Mine in Big Bend National Park, Texas.

Located on Mariscal Mountain just north of the Rio Grande in the southernmost periphery of Big Bend National Park, Mariscal Mine—also known variously as the Lindsey Mine, the Ellie Mine, and the Vivianna Mining Company—is the best preserved ensemble of abandoned historic mineworks in the United States that represents the mercury mining industry. Virtually eclipsed by the post-World War II oil and gas industry, mercury, or "quicksilver," production dominated the mineral extraction economy of west Texas for more than a half century. With its earliest recovery in 1896, the combined districts of Terlingua, Maravillas, and Mariscal assured west Texas that it remain second only to California as the nation's preeminent producer of the liquid metal until the industry's decline in the 1960s.

My first brush with this marvelous resource came in the summer of 1984 when, as a temporary employee of the former Southwest Regional Office in Santa Fe, I included the Mariscal Mine in the Historic Resource Study that was drafted for Big Bend National Park. As part of my charge to offer management recommendations to the park superintendent and the unit's cultural resource management staff, I included suggestions that the park consider HAER documentation of the mine and its appurtenant buildings and structures.

In 1985, I terminated my position with the National Park Service upon completion of the Big Bend Historic Resource Study, only to return to Santa Fe five years later as Survey Historian after a brief stint as park historian at San Antonio Missions. To my dismay, I learned that Big Bend had been unable to initiate HAER documentation for the Mariscal Mine because of the projected expense. Little did I know that the dogged persistence of HAER Chief Eric DeLony, coupled with the more recent pledge of current superintendent, José Cisneros, to maximize protection of cultural as well as natural resources in Big Bend National Park, marshaled the long-awaited documentation of Mariscal Mine to completion in the summer of 1997.

In November 1990, Eric DeLony and nationally renowned metallurgist Noel W. Kirshenbaum visited the mine site with then Superintendent Jim Carrico, where they first discussed the possibility of a future HAER project in the park.

In early 1991, Jim Carrico's mantle of authority passed to Rob Arnberger, but the specter of impending reorganization throughout the National Park Service precluded further substantive discussions about the proposed HAER project. In the interim, the Mariscal Mine did not go unattended. Indeed, in March 1994, an interdisciplinary team of mining experts from the Mining and Minerals Branch, Land Resources Division in Denver and the Minerals/Oil and Gas Program in Santa Fe met in Big Bend to design a plan for the closure of numerous mine openings at the site. The project included a thorough site survey by geologist John E. Burghardt, in partnership with Santa Fe environmental specialist Linda Dansby and archeologist Charles Haecker, which produced an informative report, *Archeological Investigations: Mariscal Mine and Rio Grande Village Mine Portal Closures* (Haecker 1994), published by the Santa Fe's Intermountain Cultural Resources Center.

With the appointment of Superintendent José Cisneros in August 1994, discussions with Eric DeLony and HAER staff about the financial feasibility of a documentation project for the Mariscal Mine resumed in earnest. In early 1997, Cisneros announced funding for the $40,000-plus project, clearing the way to select a team to begin the field survey in May of that year. In keeping with HAER tradition, DeLony's office meticulously organized the project team that was to be assigned to Big Bend National Park. He first enlisted the services of Santa Fe mining historian Bob Spude to coordinate the project.

Next, DeLony recruited three experienced architects, Andrew Johnson from the University of Califomia-Berkeley, who supervised the field survey team, which consisted of architectural candidate Chris Brown from the University of Washington, and ICOMOS member, José Peral López, a licensed architect from Seville, Spain. In an incredible twist of fate—14 years after my proposed recommendation to the park—Eric DeLony and Bob Spude invited me to serve as project historian to round out the team. Vital to the success of the project were two park staff: Chief Ranger Vidal Davila, who in 1982 was the first park employee to list the abandoned mineworks on the List of Classified Structures and Park Archaeologist Tom Alex, arguably the most experienced cultural resource specialist in Big Bend National Park. Finally, DeLony invited Don Hardesty, historical archeologist from the University of Nevada-Reno and an authority on early mining communities, to join the team as a consultant.

The team assembled in Big Bend in mid-May 1997 for its first on-site inspection. After more than two hours travel along the heavily-rutted Old River Road, we viewed the abandoned mineworks silhouetted against the harsh Chihuahuan desert. Today, literally only a shell of the mining operation remains to evidence nearly a half-century of social and economic activity on Mariscal Mountain. Located on the westernmost end of the site are the remains of the mining community that once housed an estimated 40-50 Mexican nationals. Rudimentary shelters stand in contrast to more traditionally built frame and masonry housing, all widely dispersed across the broad plain below the mine.

As we progressed slowly uphill, we observed fragments of ceramic tile that once shaped and connected the now hollowed-out limestone furnaces used during the earliest phase of the mining operation. Immediately overlooking the so-called Ellis retorts are an ensemble of structures that best represent the Mariscal Mine at its zenith. Most striking is the partially collapsed Scott furnace, unmistakably identified by thousands of mercury-soaked bricks that riddle the area immediately around the once massive structure. Equally imposing are three sentinel-like condensers whose sun-baked flagstone and concrete walls can be seen for miles when approaching the site. Behind this skeletal framework lay fragments of decayed timber and twisted metal, which suggest the labyrinth of wooden trusses and steel rails that once formed the ore delivery system to and from the mine located above. Near the pinnacle of the mountain stands the wreckage of the Vivianna Mine. Most impressive is the rust-covered fire box once used to fuel the rotary kiln. Also clearly detectable are the metal anchor bolts upon which operators fixed the main hoist in order to raise and lower the now heavily oxidized ore buckets, one of which lies nearby, dilapidated from years of disuse.

Documentary research on the structure presented some unusual problems. Only three photographs depicting the mine in actual operation are known to exist. This obviously presented the architects with difficulty in rendering a visual representation of the mineworks at the height of its operation. Fortunately, we knew that William Burcham, designer and superintendent of the Mariscal Mine, and Carl Schuette, his operations foreman, had years of experience both designing and constructing similar structures in the Terlingua District. In light of the limited number of photographs of the Mariscal Mine, the HAER team relied upon an abundance of historic photographs of contemporary mercury mines that were active in the Big Bend region. The architects compared these images against the measured physical remains at the Mariscal Mine, which they had accumulated during a two-week on-site inspection. Thus, during the course of the summer, a combined team effort produced the architectural renderings and historical narrative that met HAER's professional documentation standards. Upon reflection, my involvement in the Mariscal Mine project was both personally and professionally rewarding. My advice to other National Park Service historians, who have not engaged in a HABS/HAER endeavor, is by all means, do so. It is challenging, but gratifying work. However, I must further caution that you not wait fourteen years as I did to enjoy the experience.

HAER team at Mariscal, Big Bend National Park. Art Gómez stands at left.

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Photos by R. Spude.