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# The New History Comes to Town

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ELIZABETH JAMESON

An incongruous event at the 1990 annual conference of the Western History Association prefigured this special issue of the *New Mexico Historical Review*. The breakfast meeting of the Mining History Association was inadvertently scheduled in the same room with the American Society of Environmental History. Both groups tried to conduct their separate business amidst uneasy mutterings about "strange bedfellows." Nonetheless, forced to negotiate common terrain, the historians of an environmentally destructive industry broke bread, appropriately enough, with those who chronicle the devastation.

The historical connections that were accidentally established in 1990 are consciously addressed by this issue's authors. Using the methods and conceptual frameworks of social and environmental histories, they connect the topics of mining technologies and economics, managerial organization, labor, environment and safety, and state policy. They leave behind the lone prospectors, the gold and silver, the bawdy boom towns of western lore, and take us instead to less romantic places that produced the copper, molybdenum, uranium, and coal required for twentieth-century industries.

If the theme of older Turnerian histories was individualism, one common theme of these articles is interdependence. Another commonality is the new methods and analytic tools the authors employ, and the ways they combine the topics of their histories. This intellectual boundary-crossing produces interesting interpretations.<sup>1</sup>

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Christopher Huggard connects the often-separate subjects of environmental activism, industrial labor relations, copper smelting, and politics. The contradictory requirements of western economies and the people they support are inescapable in negotiating clean air policies among mining corporations, local communities, organized labor, and the state. The competing demands of tourism and mining, environmental protection and corporate profits created particularly difficult choices for labor, caught between the imperatives of jobs and safety.

Yvette Huginnie uses the tools of postmodern literary criticism to question the images of engineers as the expert heroes of industrial mining. The same attention to voice and context clarifies positions of power in the industrial workplace. Examining the self-presentations of engineers, middle managers, foremen and shift bosses, Huginnie locates their different claims to authority in the relationships of class and race they negotiated. Viewed in this way, industrial mining and industrial society are not the triumphant products of technocratic expertise, but a more contested set of relationships with more ambiguous meanings and rewards for all the participants. A simpler narrative of industrial progress becomes a more complex tale of contested claims to industrial control. Textual criticism becomes a tool to describe how skill and race were mobilized in the racially stratified class systems of the mining Southwest.

In a very different analysis, Kevin Fernlund's history of uranium prospecting on the Colorado Plateau links the seemingly disparate perspectives of Cold War international relations and popular culture. Together these help us understand why the virtues of rugged frontier individualism were projected onto 1950s uranium prospectors. Fernlund explores both the Old West and the New through the fascination of Cold War Americans with the fictional figures of Hollywood westerns. The image of uranium prospectors as heroes on the front lines of anti-communism provides a framework to analyze the mythic figures of nineteenth-century frontiers as well. Pioneer heroes provided the "right stuff" for the triumph of Manifest Destiny; their twentieth-century counterparts turned the Cold War nuclear standoff into one more showdown at the OK Corral. Connecting the mythic West of popular culture with international conflicts makes the exceptional characters of tall tales more than entertaining folk heroes. They become ideological vehicles in nineteenth-century expansion and twentieth-century anti-communism.

Fernlund argues that the state cemented the power of scientific authorities as it guarded the development of the atom bomb. The outcomes of technical power yielded ambiguous consequences, however, for a region that bore the environmental costs of nuclear development, and the uncertain economies of military industries.

Together these articles offer intriguing frameworks for locating mining history in larger contexts. We see their connections vividly in Arthur Gomez's photographic essay. Photographs, like oral histories and textual analysis, augment our sources for subjects with few written records, including the environment itself. We see in photographs like the Kelly Miners' Band the reality of racial and ethnic stratification in the western mining workforce. We can see equally vividly measures that were taken, and that were not, to protect the health and safety of the mining workforce.

The apparent remoteness of the West, and the racist hierarchies of its workforce, helped outsiders ignore the environmental and human costs of industrial mining and Cold War defense. In the nineteenth-century West, miners explained their dangers with a common saying, "Men are cheaper than timber." For twentieth-century mining, the cost-benefit equations of environmental protection and worker safety also encode relationships of race, class, dependency, and power.

These are common themes in new western histories. Mining historians were among the first to forsake the mythic rugged individual of the American frontier, and to focus instead on the urban West, on labor conflicts, and on the economic dependence of western industries on eastern capital. They were less quick to emphasize the role of the state in securing the territory, financing the railroads, and providing the strike intervention which supported corporate mining.<sup>2</sup> In the historiographic climate after World War II, the often-violent strikes that punctuated the nineteenth-century West were cast as exceptions to the presumed moderation of "mainstream" labor. The socialist endorsements of the Western Federation of Miners (WFM), the principal union in western hardrock mining, became the aberrant policies of a few frontier hotheads. Before the social movements and new social histories of the 1960s, few historians examined the western mining workforce, its international roots in Cornwall, Ireland, China, and Mexico, or how racial antagonisms were constructed and manipulated throughout the industry. Historians have just begun to examine who the unions organized and who they excluded in the complex racial ethnic hierarchies of regional mining economies.<sup>3</sup>

While Cold War historians debated what made western labor different, a new chapter in that history was enacted. The International Union of Mine Mill and Smelter Workers (the renamed WFM), which Huggard mentions, was expelled, along with other allegedly Communist-dominated unions, from the Congress of Industrial Organizations which it had helped found. Embattled throughout the 1950s as it defended its leaders against red-baiting and its local unions from raids by outside unions, Mine-Mill had little choice but to merge in 1966 with the larger and more politically moderate United Steelworkers of America.

Huggard takes earlier conflicts between labor and management to a new stage with their joint advocacy of profits and jobs over environmental regulation. These shifts in the public stances of management and labor become even clearer when they are linked to the Cold War contexts which promoted the charges against left-wing unions. When union activists like Juan Chacon, leader of the famed "Salt of the Earth" strike, emphasized job protection in the environmental battles of the 1970s, they still acted as workers protecting their jobs, not as spokespersons for corporate profits. The parameters for their choices were constructed in a long history that extended from the social divisions Hugginnee so clearly delineates, through the union red-baiting and the economic instabilities of the Cold War West.

There is considerable continuity between these histories of twentieth-century western mining, and the older environmental legacies written in the tailing ponds, slag heaps, chlorine waste and cyanide sludge of abandoned mines and mills. The pulls of local communities trying to salvage local economies, and the inevitable depletion of finite ores, are larger historic contexts for environmental debates. There are fascinating questions in the connected topics of state policies, the social relations of industrial capitalism, and the risks extractive industries bring to human safety and western ecosystems. Taken out of their isolated contexts, we can more clearly explore the historical agency of western miners and managers, and the local and individual meanings of state mining policies. These are leads worth pursuing in new histories yet to come.

### Postscript

Since 1990 the Western History Association has carefully separated the Mining Historians and the Environmental Historians, who meet each year at the same time in different rooms. Maybe we had it right the first time.

### NOTES

1. For reinterpretations of Turnerian frameworks that paved the way for this issue's attention to the twentieth-century West, see Earl Pomeroy, "Toward a Reorientation of Western History: Continuity and Environment," *Mississippi Valley Historical Review* 41 (1955): 579-600; Gerald D. Nash, *The American West in the Twentieth Century: A Short History of an Urban Oasis* (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1973); and Patricia Nelson Limerick, *The Legacy of Conquest: The Unbroken Past of the American West* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1987).

2. See for instance Duane Smith, *Rocky Mountain Mining Camps: The Urban Frontier* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1967); Vernon H. Jensen, *Heritage of Conflict: Labor Relations in the Nonferrous Metals Industry Up to 1930*

(Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1950); Melvyn Dubofsky, "The Origins of Western Working Class Radicalism, 1890-1905," *Labor History* 7 (1966), 131-54. For an analysis of the role of the state in the "Colorado Labor Wars" of 1903-04, see George G. Suggs, Jr., *Colorado's War on Militant Unionism: James H. Peabody and the Western Federation of Miners* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1990).

3. For the Western Federation of Miners' socialist endorsements, see *Official Proceedings of the Ninth Annual Convention, Western Federation of Miners* (Pueblo, Colorado: Pueblo Courier Press, 1901), 10; *Official Proceedings of the Tenth Annual Convention, Western Federation of Miners* (Denver: Colorado Chronicle, 1902), 94-96; *Official Proceedings of the Eleventh Annual Convention, Western Federation of Miners* (Denver, Colorado: Western Newspaper Union, 1903), 209-10; *Official Proceedings of the Twelfth Annual Convention, Western Federation of Miners* (Denver, Colorado: Western Newspaper Union, 1904), 258. For interpretations of western mining exceptionalism and the 1950s debate about the radicalism of western mining strikes, see Selig Perlman and Philip Taft, *History of Labor in the United States, 1896-1932*, 4 vols., (New York: MacMillan Company, 1935), 4:173; Jenson, *Heritage of Conflict*; Louis Filler, *The Muckrakers: Crusaders for American Liberalism* (Yellow Springs, Ohio: The Antioch Press, 1950), 217-18; Clark Kerr and Abraham Siegel, "The Interindustry Propensity to Strike: An International Comparison," in *Industrial Conflict*, Arthur Kornhauser, Robert Dubin, and Arthur M. Ross, eds. (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1954), 189-212. Subsequent scholarship that explained labor radicalism as the product of industrial social relationships include Dubofsky, "Origins"; Melvyn Dubofsky, *We Shall Be All: A History of the Industrial Workers of the World* (New York: Quadrangle/The New York Times Book Company, 1969), 35; Richard E. Lingensfelter, *The Hardrock Miners: A History of the Mining Labor Movement in the American West, 1863-1893* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1974); John H. M. Laslett, *Labor and the Left: A Study of Socialist and Radical Influences in the American Labor Movement, 1881-1924* (New York: Basic Books, 1970), 241-86. Notable works that explore ethnic relations are Ralph Mann, *After the Gold Rush: Society in Grass Valley and Nevada City, California; 1849-1870* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1982); David M. Emmons, *The Butte Irish: Class and Ethnicity in an American Mining Town, 1875-1925* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1989); Gunther Peck, "Padrones and Protest: 'Old' Radicals and 'New' Immigrants in Bingham, Utah, 1905-1912," *Western Historical Quarterly* 24 (1993), 157-78; and Andrea Yvette Huginnie, "'Strikitos': Race, Class and Work in the Arizona Copper Industry, 1870-1920" (Ph.D. diss., Yale University, 1991).

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