

Chapter 1. Ghosts of the Ghost Towns.



Avguadalupe las herrerias : facebook wall.

I was sceptical when, on one of my first visits to the Sierra Almagrera, I was told that thousands of people used to work in the mountains. The main reason for my doubts was the apparent absence of any significant mining town or even mining village. The miners' quarters at El Arteal were relatively modern, and in any case could never have accommodated the sort of numbers that I was hearing about. With the exception of Las Herrerías, with its few workers' cottages, the settlements bordering the foothills showed no evidence of a previous population expansion and subsequent decline. As I became more familiar with the history of the mining activity in the Sierra Almagrera, I no longer doubted the numbers of people involved. However, it still didn't explain the lack of any kind of 'mining community' or even shanty towns at the foot of the barrancos. Even more puzzling was the lack of reference to any mining activity in the street names. In my early days, the streets in Las Herrerías had very few signs, at least now it has a place named after Santa Barbara, the patron saint of miners. This in itself is a mystery, since, unlike other parts of Spain, where there were numerous processions and fiestas in her honour, the miners in this area had no particular devotion to her in the 19th century. The Las Herrerías celebrations were a 20th century event, largely influenced by mine workers from other areas and countries. The place where this lack of mining community was most striking was Los Lobos, the gateway to the famous Barranco Jaroso. Here, the only evidence of a massive population explosion and urban expansion was the coming of the Brits in the 1980's, buying into the speculative urbanizations that sprung up overnight like mushrooms. Apart from filling the cemeteries with their broken bodies and financing the palatial houses in Cuevas and Vera, how was it that these thousands of souls left so little mark on the surrounding landscape? Who were they, where did they come from, and, more intriguingly, where did they live?

The first wave consisted of men from the Sierra de Gádor or the Alpujarras, relatively experienced in mining, having worked lead, either on their own land or on others, while at the same time working their smallholdings when necessary. I suspect that these men from the Alpujarras came and worked as groups or teams, in much the same way as lead and tin miners did in 19th century Britain, although possibly in a less formal manner.

Next came local men with no experience but attracted by paid work as more concessions were granted. As the fame of the Sierra Almagrera spread, men came from far and wide. As well as agricultural workers, no doubt the mines also attracted drifters, petty criminals, runaways and political opponents of the successive regimes which plagued Spain during the 19th Century, in the same way as they were attracted to the Linares mines. As with any boom, with labour in short supply, questions weren't asked, and anyone and everyone was taken on. With no mechanisation, man power had to suffice, even if it was an unskilled, disorganized workforce.

The magnetism of the mines very quickly had a serious impact on agriculture in the whole, wider area. While some of the more local agricultural workers, and indeed those from further afield, simply absented themselves to return home for planting and harvesting, work that the women and children could not do alone, landowners found it almost impossible to find labour for such tasks. The economy of supply and demand came into play, the wages of agricultural workers rose, gaining parity with those of unskilled mine workers. Many of the mine owners were also landowners, and so had no desire to see their labour costs rising, both on the land, and, in the mines. The solution was to formalise the peasant-miner's practice of working the land when necessary, by shutting down mining operations several times a year. This was not to give the men a holiday, it simply freed up a labour force for the landowners' needs. A certain degree of plurality of employment existed in many parts of Europe during the 19th century in areas where subsistence farming couldn't provide for the needs of a family, but tended to die out as mining became more industrialized and required a more skilled workforce. Its normalization in the Sierra Almagrera however, gave rise to a workforce comprising mainly of, what many foreign mining experts of the time disparagingly described as, 'miners who would always be peasants'. Indeed, when the mines were paralysed in the 1880's, those miners who came from the Alpujarras migrated to Cartagena, to work in the la Unión mines, but the rest of the work force mostly returned to their rural poverty until things improved. As a province, Andalucía would see this seasonal migratory pattern in one form or another until well into the 20th century.

So where did those early miners lay their heads in the Sierra Almagrera? Wherever they could find shelter from the rain, with room to lie down was the short answer. Caves and make-shift shelters served as lodgings for the pioneers. For those from the Alpujarras, the conditions were better than they were used to, as in winter, the Almagrera is nowhere near as cold as the Sierra Nevada.

In 1867 Simonin, in 'La Vie Souterraine' ('Life Underground'), wrote this of the miners of the Almagrera and the Alpujarras;

"A wide pair of cloth breeches ending at the knee; a belt fastened round the waist, in which tobacco, knife and money are put; a handkerchief folded round the head by way of a hat; together with a shirt-constitute all the accoutrement of the miner. Sandals made of esparto, and the cloak, la manta, a covering of many bright colours: at once a cloak, a blanket and a bed at need. A good miner of Almería lives and dies in his manta, and transmits it to his descendants.

The dwellings of these mountaineers are on a par with their dress, and consist of a bad cabin built of stones and mud. Here and there some culinary utensils of iron or copper, the water bottle or alcarazza of porous clay for keeping the water cool and baskets made of esparto or wicker. The fireplace is in the middle of the floor; the bed nowhere: they lie on the ground, anywhere, rolled in the woollen manta."



The Common Room of the Alpujarras Miner. Simonin.

Looking at Rodrigo's photographs of the mining installations in the Barranco Jaroso one could easily mistake them for a village, or even a town. However, Rodrigo, helpfully, numbered and labelled each building, indicating that good accommodation was provided for the mines' administrators and those charged with essential tasks. In addition, these more profitable mines built dormitories which were no better and no worse than anywhere else in Europe. A shelf for possessions and a mattress filled with whatever could be found by way of brushwood.

The operatives of the Jaroso pumping station were housed in the two story building to the left of the picture.

Rodrigo.



However, even with bunks and hot-bedding, the barrack block of the individual mines could not have housed all of the men on the payroll. For those who worked in smaller, less profitable mines, possibly on the floor of any mine building where there was room to lie down had to suffice. Some workers would have found lodgings in the nearby villages, walking every day to and from their mine. Eventually, most mines had some form of bunk house, but there were considerable differences between them. The smaller ones had pretty primitive buildings and bleak surroundings, while others were quite homely. As can be seen from the picture, the mine La Ibería had quite a pleasant garden.



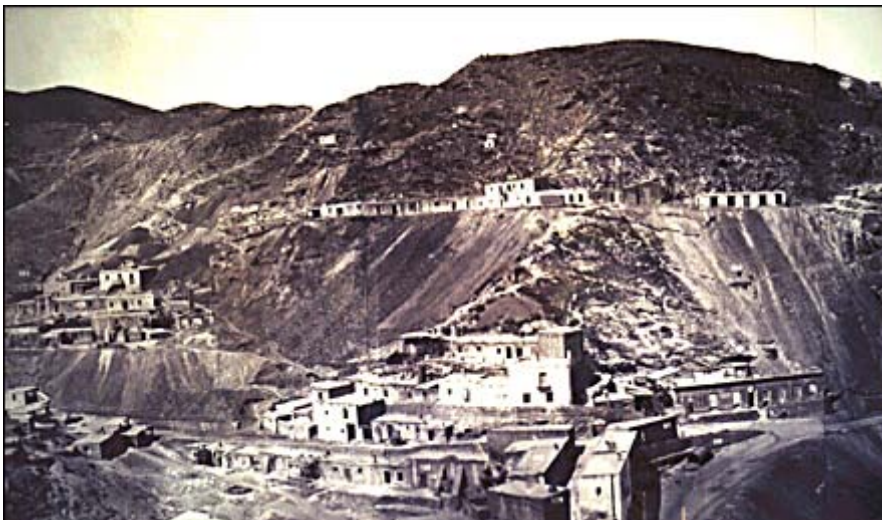
The pleasant garden at the La Ibería mine.

Left, as it was then. Rodrigo.



*Right, La Ibería today.
Author's photo.*

In the Barranco Jaroso, at the area known as the Plaza, situated in the heart of the 'Minas Ricas' there was a chapel and a hospital, and on Saturdays, a very small market selling basic necessities, was held in the area where the watercourse was culverted. This may have given giving the area a 'village' feel, but it was never a mining town like la Unión, or any of the other mining towns in Andalucía.



*The mine Esperanza Circa 1875,
and Purísima Concepción on
the left. Rodrigo.*

Purísima Concepción as it is today.
Author's photo.



The plaza below Purísima Concepción.
Author's photo.

The other area where one could believe there had once been a village is at the site of the pumping station built by the Compañía de Águilas, at San Juan, in the Barranco del Francés. This is often referred to as the 'lost village' because it is easy to imagine it as such. However, the only accommodation here was a house for the Director, and what looks like a row of houses, which served as a canteen and living quarters for the station operatives for the 13 months that the plant was in service

San Juan today.
Author's photo.





All that remains of the canteen and living quarters.

Author's photo.

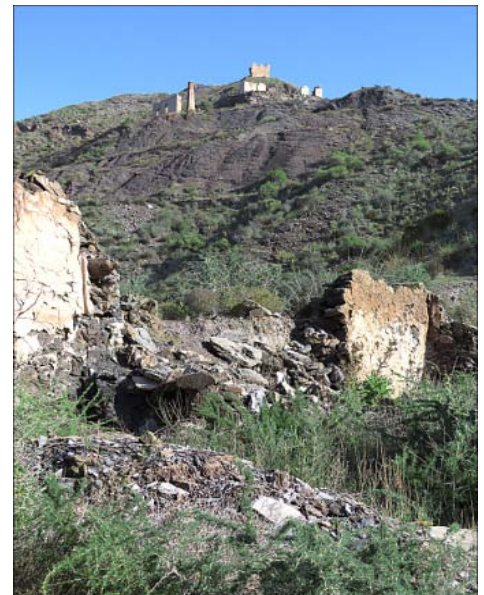
The arrival of foreign companies, like the Compañía de Águilas, saw the building of quite palatial headquarters such as la Casa del Águilas in the Barranco Jaroso and la Casa Dos Mundos, at the head of the Barranco del Francés. Such places were for the, mainly foreign, directors and engineers, and not for the common miner.

Ventas, or what we would think of as ale houses, started to appear in the Sierra. These basic buildings served as meeting places for men from neighbouring mines, where rough wine could be bought, and the fat chewed. Some of these, like the ruins of the one pictured, started life as mine kitchens, built in the early days to provide food for the men. Later, food was provided by outside contractors and so the kitchens became redundant.



The ruins of a venta in the Barranco del Francés.

Author's photos.





The Venta (the single story white building, bottom left) in the Barranco del Francés in Rodrigo's photograph.

Hugh James Rose, in his book 'Untrodden Spain and her Black Country', describes ventas in the mining area of Linares in the 1870's, and it is probably safe to assume that those in and around the Sierra Almagrera were very similar.

"The venta is one small dark room, with a heavy curtain across the door, within which stands a barrel of white and a barrel of red Val-de-Peñas. A few tiny shelves in one corner of the venta are studded with bottles of various colours; the white fluid (aguardiente blanco) predominates; then comes mentha, or mint spirit; apio, or liqueur of celery, and probably a rough kind of plum-brandy and cherry-brandy. The wine is sold in a vaso, or tumbler, the half tumbler being called 'caño de vino', the full, 'ration' in vulgar Spanish. On the road to mines from any town, the ventas are little windowless, chairless, one roomed stone shanties, and, the wine is vilely adulterated as a rule."



A Venta in the 1870's.

On all of the roads and tracks leading to the Sierra Almagrera were stalls selling liquor. Known as ventorillos, or small ventas, they were often no more than a trestle table, with a bucket of water in which to swill the glasses serving, in this case, a Jumilla rather than a Val-de-Peñas wine. A characteristic of these ventas was the split-cane awning, sheltering them from the sun. They looked very similar to the modern day beach chiringuitos. The bar/restaurant El Perejil started life as a ventorillo, and the village El Largo was know as Ventorillo el Largo until very recently.

The story goes that the cortijada, or hamlet, of Los Lobos got its name from a venta run by a couple of particularly wolfish looking gentlemen. Until I actually started on my research, I rather took that with a pinch of salt. Now, I find it perfectly credible.

On the face of it then, el Arteal seems to have been the only nucleus that could be called a mining village, and then only in its post civil war era. Plans of el Arteal prior to that time show the usual foreign countries' set up of good housing for the director and engineers, in this case villas, but nothing for the workers. However, in those days, el Arteal was primarily a pumping station with little mining and processing being carried out. Neither was it remote, being at the foot of the mountain and close to the settlements of Villaricos, Palomares, Las Herrerías and La Muleria, the workers could get to it relatively easily.



The engineers' villas at el Arteal. Un Siglo de Historia Minera. Bolea

The innovations and technologies, as well as some aspects of life at el Arteal were covered in Volume 1, but since then I have come to understand a little more about its post Civil War history. I knew that there was very little mining expertise left locally as there were only a handful of mines still operational at this time, and, that migration and emigration had led to severe depopulation of both towns and villages. The population of Cuevas in 1910 was more than 26,000, but in 1940 it was little more than 10,000. I also knew that Franco wanted a mining industry free from foreign ownership, but what I had never thought about were the socio-political factors that were in play at el Arteal.

MASA, the company set up to exploit the remaining reserves, first had to up-grade the machinery for the pumping station, and then drive the Santa Barbara tunnel from el Arteal through the Sierra to the mine Guzman. There are varying accounts of what accommodation was provided for those undertaking these tasks. One source speaks of there being lodgings for 96 single workers and 7 houses for married ones, while another cites the building of a barrack block for 150 workers. The houses for families might well have been the old engineers' villas, the house with the towers in the garden, the houses to the right, and the one on the left, of the entrance to the Casualidad adit, and the gate house. For the first four or five years the workforce held steady at around 200. Between 1949 and 1951 it rose sharply to 600 as work on the tunnel and the processing plant progressed. A further single workers' block to house 200 single employees and the 200 unit complex for married workers were constructed between 1951 and 1953 by which time 907 people were on the payroll. Figures show that a mere 0.05% of the workforce were administrative or technical personnel. By 1954 the workforce was at its peak with 1,200 employees on the books.



*Single workers block.
Minas De Almagrera, S A Sánchez Picón*



*Aerial view of married quarters.
Tres Casos de Poblados Obreros M A Sebastián*

In some ways this was a model village. The bath houses for the underground workers were palatial. The barrack block was light and airy, well furnished and equipped, and meals in the canteen were subsidised. The three bedroomed apartments for married personnel each had showers and indoor sanitation, water came out of taps and coal was provided for the kitchen ranges. There was a school, medical care, a social club, a cinema, freshly baked bread, a co-op shop, a regular supply of fresh produce brought to the door, and more besides. All very orderly, all very contained, and more to the point, all very controlled. A colony, rather than a village, created artificially and, with the exception of Las Herrerías, having few links to the surrounding area.

What of those who worked there? A few were local, from nearby cottages and villages, who could leave the land, but the majority had to be recruited. This is where there was a problem. For those of us lucky enough to have not experienced the aftermath of a civil war, it is difficult to fully understand the impact of it on every aspect of industry, business and even daily, family life. Those on the 'wrong' side of the conflict could not be employed directly, nor could subcontractors employ them. This rather reduced the pool of available labour, even though unemployment was high. Skilled, experienced underground workers were in short supply since they were already employed in other mining areas, and had no desire to up sticks and move to this impoverished area. In the end a rather mixed bag of people came in their place. German, British, and other foreign nationals were amongst them, swelling the ranks of those deemed desirable, all hoping for a better life. In some ways it was a better life, and many remember it fondly. However it was very short lived and, by 1959, only 40 people were on the payroll tasked with dismantling the plant and machinery.

A stencilled frieze in one of the apartments. Pride was taken by someone who lived here for that short time.

Tres casos de poblado obrero. M A Sebastián



So why did el Arteal earn the sobriquet Korea? This was a question that I couldn't answer until I started examining life at el Arteal more closely. Amidst the rural poverty of the area this Utopia appeared, almost overnight. Homes with indoor toilets, running water, a coal allowance, more than one bedroom, a regular income, and, unbelievably, an 8 hour day, so what was the problem? Well, even the local people who managed to get work there were excluded from these benefits, apart from the short, paid day, so the idea that the haves and have-nots would co-exist in absolute harmony was wishful thinking. So too was the hope that el Arteal's multi-nationalism would be entirely harmonious. Some conflict was inevitable, but definitely not on the scale of the Korean war, waged between 1950 and 1953, but the disharmony was sufficient for the locals to refer to the place as Corea. (So, unsurprisingly, a dispute concerning a well in a local village some years later saw that area referred to as Vietnam.)

The other thing that I puzzled over was the presence of the Guardia Civil at el Arteal. I hadn't appreciated that the Guardia was omnipresent at this time, again because of having no experience of a repressive regime. A Spanish gentleman described the situation to me in this way;
"Once the war was over, the Franco regime carried out a very strong repression, a true "ideological cleansing" that involved the extermination of any political party or union that opposed the totalitarian character of the regime. These workers were neither union nor politically organized. For ideological control there were ecclesiastical parish organizations. On the other hand, a series of socio-sanitary

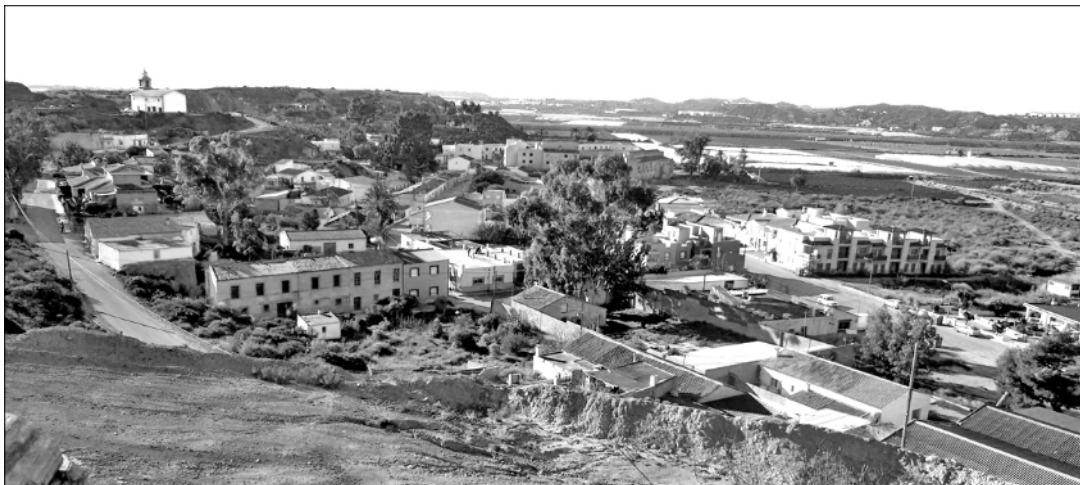
measures (social security) and labour (8-hour shift) were beginning to be applied, they were provided with housing, etc., together with the existence of the Civil Guard as a repressive force if necessary.” It would appear that, during this time, the Church had as much influence on the lives of the people here as it did on those in the Republic of Ireland.



El Padre de Higinio Robles Campos a member of the Guardia, who patrolled el Arteal.

Collection: The Robles Campos Family.

I posed the question as to whether or not the Guardia were stationed at el Arteal. They were, but only when operations ceased. They occupied the first block, next to the electricity substation, and protected the place from looters until MASA had cleared the site. During the heyday of el Arteal, the Guardia were stationed in Las Herrerías, in a building next to the old hospital.



Las Herrerías in 1915 & 2015. The Guardia were stationed in the building with the belvedere (top picture).

Sierra Almagrera y Herrerías. Bolea

I was surprised to learn that relations between the Guardia and the villagers were very cordial. There may have been a certain degree of like-mindedness about the ‘luxuries’ enjoyed at el Arteal, but the main reason seems to have been that they integrated into village life. They were stationed there for a long time, their children played with the village children, they married local girls and, I think, were probably decent, ordinary guys. They are certainly remembered with respect and affection by many of the older inhabitants of Las Herrerías.

Once the Guardia left el Arteal, thieves came in the night, as it were. The comprehensive destruction of the kitchens and bathrooms was not to deter squatters, as I had supposed, but was the result of the theft of all the pipework. A sign that mining in the area had ceased is the fact that some window and door frames are still intact. The accommodation block at the San Juan pumping station in the Barranco del Francés hasn’t a stick of wood remaining, timber for the mine workings being in such short supply. Visiting the married quarters today, it is almost impossible to believe that, in 2004, they were declared part of the Real Estate Heritage of Andalusia. Soon, even this evidence of a mining village will have disappeared, probably hidden beneath greenhouses.

Just when I thought that el Arteal had been the only mining village, I discovered how wrong I had been. Many years ago, I had heard that hundreds of people lived in a village along the coast where the remains of the chapel were. The site referred to was the headquarters of the Basque company, the Argentífera de Almagrera. Like the Compañía de Águilas, they built a palatial residence for the top echelon, the ruins of which are still standing, and, on the same site, they built the electrical generating station to power their modern technical innovations. This would hardly qualify as being a mining town or village, so I dismissed the story as misinformation. I have since discovered that, like so much that one hears about this area, it was misplaced information rather than misinformation.

I have Pedro Perales Larios to thank for giving me the truth about a long lost settlement, a village, situated on the coast, associated with the Argentífera, but at the Cala de las Conchas.

This was their gateway to the sea, here steamers were loaded with ore, transported from the other side of the Sierra Almagrera, initially by aero-cable and then later by rail and inclined plane, to be shipped to Bilbao for processing. The traces and ruins of the various parts of this transport system are there for all to see, and are documented in Volume 2, Chapter 3, The Men from Bilbao. However, what I had failed to see, and still struggle to make out, are the remains of a barrida, a settlement, a village, a town almost.

Pedro’s Facebook post concerned the details of a 2001 Bill of Sale for the “urban core in a ruinous state, called the Old Embarcadero de Calas Conchas”. Following the sale, the ruins of the cortijo on the site were renovated. The document listed, in rather a haphazard fashion, the 90 structures that had stood along the 21 streets on the site in the 1920’s.



The ruins of the cortijo in the 1980’s

J.M.Parra

The reformed property today.



Listed were all of the buildings that one would expect from an ore processing and loading site, the warehouses and stores, the forge, metal workers' and parts shop; the stables, smithy, and harness maker. The canteens, guard room, fire station, landing station, weighbridge and the all important wages office were all there. Then there was a list of casas, not necessarily all houses in the sense that we know them. Those of the masons, bricklayers, sawyers, carpenters, machinists, machine operators, winch-man, foremen and engineers, the look-out, the boatman, the muleteer, the labourer and the coal-man. Given the isolation of this site, only reached via a tortuous overland path or, more easily, by sea, the coast road not yet having been built, all these dwellings aren't surprising. But the document lists so much more besides; the butcher, the baker, the shoemaker, the potter, the hairdresser even. The hospital, the infirmary, the doctor, the nurse and the pharmacist; the church and the priest are all mentioned, as are two hardware shops and four other unspecified shops. As well as all of the surface workers, miners and other underground workers also lived here. Miners' accommodation seems to have been in buildings of various sizes, from single occupancy to a row or block of eight units. In all 33 units are listed.

There seems to have been a two-tiered level of provision, one for the common worker and the other for those in the higher echelons. As well as canteens there were dining rooms, there was a boarding house, and stabling for saddle horses. A tasca and a fonda are both mentioned. Tasca translates as a venta, while fonda translates as an inn. Interestingly, there is no mention of a brothel, unless it is lost in translation. So was it a true mining village? Did families live there, or was it just for workers? I don't know the answer, but if an urban nucleus of this magnitude can leave so little trace, I can no longer be so certain that there weren't others somewhere that I have yet to hear about.

*Where are the remains of 21 streets and 90 buildings?
What happened to bring about such total obliteration?*

