

A Brief History of Potrerillos

Anita Dutton's 8th Grade Graduation Speech at the Foreign School, July 2, 1969.

More than 700 years ago, Indians mined copper in Northern Chile. They fashioned the copper with stone hammers and then melted it in crude adobe furnaces. They blew through long canes to enliven the fires. With the copper they made bells for their llamas, knitting needles and necklaces. When the Spanish arrived in search of gold, they were unimpressed with this metal and did not seek to wrest it from the Indians.

It is recorded that Don Felipe Tapia made the earliest claims in the Agua Dulce mining district in 1894. Two years later, Don Eduardo Tellez made several attempts to organize the Compañia Minera de Potrerillos. The area was called Potrerillos which means "Little Fields". The name referred to solitary pieces of grass and bush which grew nearby. Shortly after, William Braden who was called "Father of the Andes", became interested in the mines. He found a camp of rich copper and organized a thorough exploration and decided the area was worth developing. In 1916 Mr. Braden interested the Anaconda Company in the area. The Andes Copper Mining Company was incorporated by Anaconda as a subsidiary and Anaconda took over the Braden options. The Potrerillos mine marked the Company's entry into the Republic of Chile.

One of their first tasks was to build wharves and warehouses at the seaport of Barquito. By 1918 this work was completed. The next step was to equip the property; in 1916 a railroad was built connecting the mines of Potrerillos with the seaport of Chañaral. One hundred twenty-four miles of pipeline were installed to supply potable water. 89.6 miles of electric transmission lines were put up.

A town site at Potrerillos was established. It included 237 dwellings. The American School was built in 1919 and a wing was added in 1927. In the 1920's, the Hospital, the Gerencia, the Church, the Pulperia and the smelter were built. Mules, horses, track-cars and steam engines were the main means of transportation. A few years later 800 homes were added to the town. At that time, the houses were all gray.

William Wraith, as Vice-President in charge of Operations, played a vital role in developing the area. More than \$45,000,000 was spent in equipping the property before the first ton of blister copper was produced. By the end of 1924 all was ready for operations to begin in full swing. Because of an overburden of waste, open pit mining could not be practiced. The ore body was mined by block caving. At the outset, both oxide and sulphide ores were mined. The average copper content over the years has been 1.50%. The oxide ores became exhausted leaving only sulphide, and over the years the production began to decrease. In 1949 the production really went down and the end of the Potrerillos mine was in sight within the next decade.

After much exploration a replacement 15 miles away was found. The site was called Indio Muerto. It not only insured the company a future supply of copper in the area, but it saved Potrerillos from extinction. It was decided that the ores would continue to be processed here. There is evidence of old Indian encampments and burial grounds nearby. Early Chilean prospectors were attracted to the area by green copper stained outcrops. The district had been abandoned for many years. "Indio Muerto" meaning dead Indian was considered to be an inappropriate name for the new village with a bright future, so the name was changed to El Salvador - "The Saviour".

During the past month, officials of the Anaconda Company and the Chilean government have been discussing the future of the Anaconda properties in Chile. Last week, President Frei announced to the nation that Chile will purchase a 51% interest in the properties. After a three year period Chile hopes to begin acquiring complete ownership of Chuquicamata, El Salvador and Potrerillos.