

# The Mining Camps at Cookes Peak

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The Cookes Range is located northeast of Deming in Luna County, New Mexico. It is dominated by a single large peak, known as Cookes Peak (Figure 1). This peak is named after General Cooke, who led the Mormon Battalion during the Mexican American War, and rises 8,408 feet above sea level (Luna County Historical Society 1978:1). The range is a geologic mix of igneous, metamorphic, and sedimentary rock.

Precious minerals in the Cookes Range include copper, fluorite, lead, gold, silver, and zinc. Tectonic activity and erosion has resulted in an ore body at or near the present day ground surface. Hence, mineral deposits are easily detectable and exploitable. Mines in the Cookes Range have been the most productive in Luna County, with more than \$4 million in lead, zinc, copper, silver, and gold recovered (McLemore et al. 2001).

Precious minerals were discovered in the Cookes Range in 1876 by rancher and prospector Edward G. Orr (Couchman 1990:226). The range

and surrounding area was collectively known as the Cookes Peak Mining District by 1890 (Boyer et al. 1997:10). This district was divided into multiple sub-districts and included three major mining camps: Cooks Town, Hadley Town, and Jose Town.

The largest of the three camps was Cooks Town (Figure 2; Couchman 1990). Located in the northeast corner of the Cookes Range, the camp flourished between about 1882 and 1927. Cooks Town may have contained as many as 30 permanent structures in addition to hundreds of



**Figure 1.** Cookes Peak, Luna County, New Mexico.



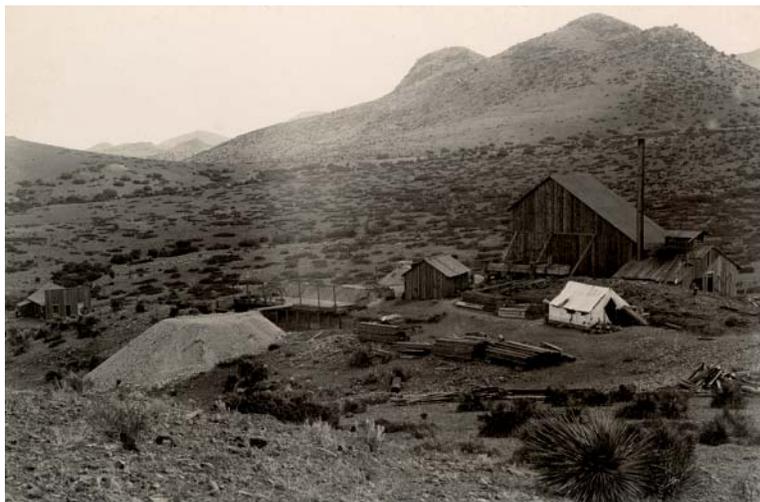
**Figure 2.** Cooks Town, ca. 1890. Courtesy of the Deming-Luna Mimbres Museum.

tents which typically characterize mining camps in the west. These structures comprised of numerous commercial business, including a reported 16 saloons. Interestingly, the camp possessed a schoolhouse, but no church.

Hadley Town was named after Walter C. Hadley, a miner and prospector which helped found nearby Lake Valley (see Ackerly and Stuedli 2005). It was the earliest of mining camps, located just north of Fort Cummings. Hadley was occupied from ca. 1880 to 1929 (McLemore et al. 2001:60). The community was centered on the Graphic

Mine (Figure 3), one of the most productive silver and lead mines in the Cooke Range (*Deming Headlight* October 11, 1897). The camp included a post office, five saloons, two “female” places, and a general store.

The exact founding of Jose Town remains unclear. The camp was originally named Rafael and only named Jose in 1902 after the name Alma was already taken (Couchman 1990). Very little about the camp is known other than it consisted of a “few old shacks,” one of which served as post office for about 3 years (1902-1905). However, the camp



**Figure 3.** The Graphic Mine, 1889. Courtesy of MNM Photo Archives, Neg. No. 058583.



**Figure 4.** Shaft into the Gladys Mine.

included many prosperous mines, such as Gladys owned by the Faywood Lead Company (Figure 4). Based upon the mining operations at these claims, most historians date the camp between ca. 1880 and 1937.

Over twenty tons of ore a day were removed from the Cookes Peak Mining District in 1898 (Sherman and Sherman 1975:56). While operations in the district were widespread, mines were typically speculative and small-scale. The majority of mines were relatively shallow, less than twelve feet in depth, and there was only limited use of cribbing (wood supports) and rail systems (Figure 5) (Barbour et al. 2014). Moreover, the layout of both the mines and camps demonstrates a lack of formal planning, made apparent by the small number of legally patented mining claims.

Longtime resident, Mertie McDaniel Moore (*Deming Headlight* October 31, 1968), the daughter of Upton McDaniel and half-sister of

Riley George (Figure 6), described the mining in the following way:

[...] there were as many as 1,000 men working in the mines at one time. Most of the workers before the turn of the century were from a tribe of Indians in Mexico. These Indians were employed mostly as ore carriers. A bag with a 50 pound capacity was held on their backs by a strap across their forehead. Carrying this load in such an awkward way, the men would walk through the tunnels and up the primitive ladders at the mine entrance, deposit their burden, and go back for another load. A few years later tracks were laid through the mine and one man could push a car containing 200 pounds of ore.



**Figure 5.** Ore cart rail in Jose Town.



**Figure 6.** McDaniel Family. Courtesy of the Deming-Luna Mimbres Museum.

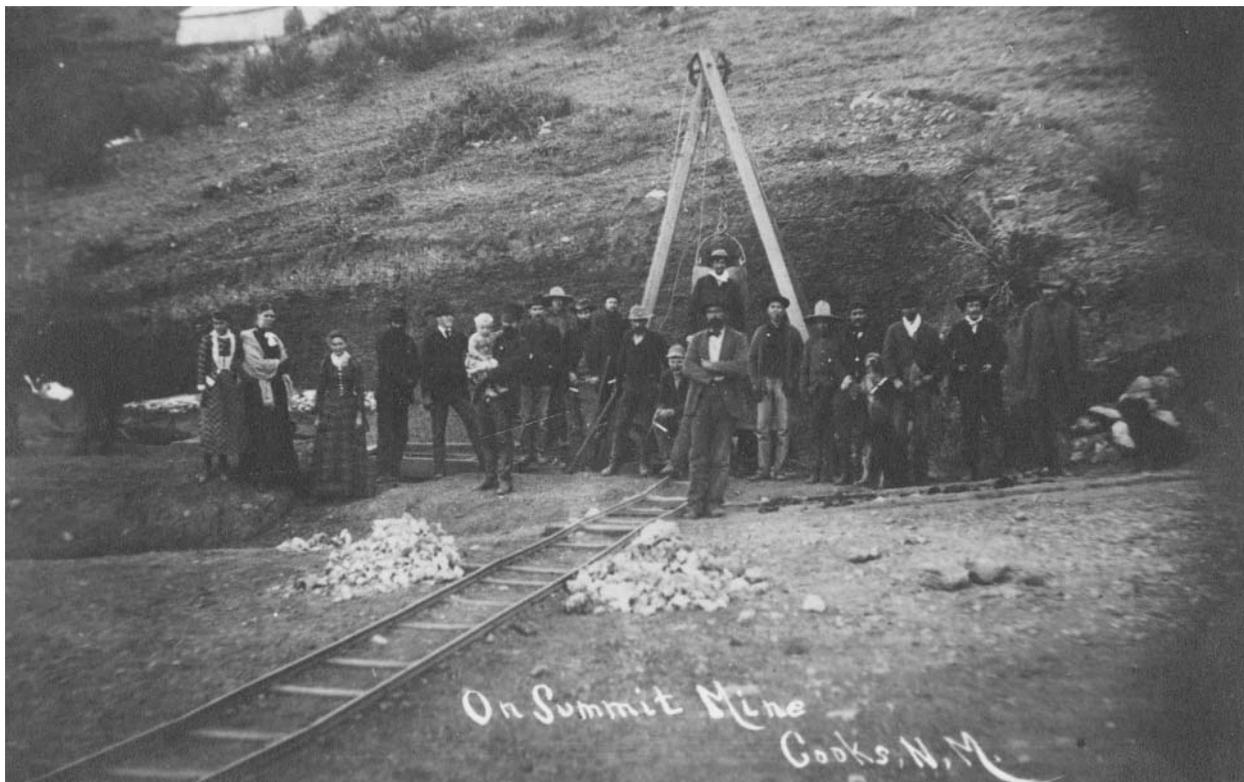
Miner owners operating in the Cookes Peak Mining District can be identified through the limited number of homestead and mining claim patents filed. Prominent mine owners included Eleazon Orr, Upton McDaniel, Riley George, Charles Poe, Edwin Hyatt, and A. P. Taylor (Barbour et al. 2014). Most of these men had no formal background in mining. McDaniel initially served as the post master at nearby Fort Cummings (Couchman 1990:212); George controlled the only drinkable spring at the north end of the range (Luna County Historical Society 1978:88-89); Poe owned the Cooks Town general store (Couchman 1990:236); and Hyatt was a rancher (Luna County Historical Society 1978).

The population at the camps appears to have fluctuated quite heavily, based upon the season and the price of silver. Unfortunately, the 1880 U.S. Census does not document those living in the Cookes Peak Mining District and the 1890 U.S. Census was lost to a warehouse fire. The loss of this latter census

is most unfortunate, as this would have provided numbers at the height of mining operations.

The 1900 U.S. Census records 343 people living at Cooks Town (Figure 7). This sizeable population was in fact larger than that which was recorded for the more well-known town of Lake Valley (see Ackerly and Stuedli 2005). Over half of the population listed for Cooks Town in the census were either born in Mexico or born in the United States to Mexican Nationals, not native born New Mexican Hispanics. The most common surnames were Rodrigues(z), Gardia, Delgado, Jaso, and Guttirez (Gutierrez). Hence, while the mine owners were primarily Anglo, the mining camps of the Cookes Peak Mining District were largely Mexican in their ethnic composition (Barbour et al. 2014).

By all accounts life within these camps was particularly brutal (Varney 1987:114). While there were seven brothels and as many as twenty-five saloons, there were no churches and only a single



**Figure 7.** Miners outside the Summit Mine. Note the hoisting mechanism and ore cart track, post-1881. Courtesy of the NM State Archives Neg. No. 62627.

source of drinkable water. Cattle rustling was common, as was claim jumping. Disputes were settled without the aid of law enforcement, often with violent and horrific consequences. Blizzards could occur in winter and dust storms were not uncommon in the summer months. Making matters worse, there is circumstantial evidence that many of residents suffered from the effects of lead poisoning.

The decline of the Cookes Peak Mining District was slow. As the ore bodies were played out and the price of silver declined, families began to move into nearby Deming (Figure 8). Major mining operations in the range ceased by 1943, but limited gold and silver prospecting continues to this day (Barbour et al. 2014).

Private land was consolidated into the hands of a few ranching families. Ranching in the Cookes

Range had existed before, and continued to exist after, the mining boom. However, ranching changed from sheep, goats, and cattle to simply cattle by the mid-twentieth century. This was due in large part to a late season blizzard in April 1905 that killed many of the already sheered goats and sheep grazing in the range (*Deming Graphic* April 7, 1905).

Today, the archaeological remnants of Cooks Town, Hadley Town, and Jose Town, as well as the thousands of mines which once operated in the Cookes Peak Mining District, are still visible upon the landscape (see Barbour et al. 2014). However, visitation to the range is strongly discouraged. Much of the land remains privately owned and the abandoned mines are extremely dangerous (Figure 9). Be that as it may, the landscape of the Cookes Range remains an important piece of history to Luna County.



**Figure 8.** Ruins of the Rodgers Family house outside Cooks Town.



**Figure 9.** Open mine in the Cookes Range.

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