

Bisbee, Arizona

by Philip Varney

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Bisbee was the acknowledged "Queen of Camps." With a peak population of 35,000 and a mining life of almost a century, Bisbee attained permanence rare among mining towns. Despite fires, floods, labor troubles, and mine shutdowns and rebirths, Bisbee endured. Now, even though the mines have closed, the people of Bisbee scorn the idea that their jewel in the canyon is a "ghost town." In 1875 a prospector named Hugh Jones is supposed to have come to the Mule Mountains looking for silver, but he gave up when he only found "copper stains." Two years later, U.S. Army scout John Dunn saw the promise in those stains and staked a claim. Since his military obligations precluded his pursuing the veins, he grubstaked George Warren, a prospector. Warren apparently shared the information with cronies, so when Dunn finally was able to visit his claims he was dismayed to find miners already working the area, including Warren, who had staked his own claim rather than working Dunn's. The place was already known as the Warren District. Disgusted, Dunn reportedly sold his one stake for \$4,000 and left the area.

The man who cheated John Dunn received a kind of justice, however. George Warren later bet his claim on a foot race and lost. That claim was to become known as the Copper Queen, which produced hundreds of millions of dollars' worth of copper ore.

The town that formed near the mines was named Bisbee in honor of San Francisco judge DeWitt Bisbee, an investor who never saw the camp. It was a dangerous place in its early days, with Apache raids still a possibility. As a result, school children had "Indian drills." When they heard the whistle blow two shorts, a long, and a short, they were to scurry to the safety of mine shafts.

By 1878 copper was paying off so well that it was profitable to freight the ore to Benson and send it by rail all the way to Pennsylvania for smelting. Since profits would increase substantially by shipping a finished product, smelting operations began by the next year. Within a few years, the once-forested Mule Mountains were denuded for firewood and the polluting fumes of smelters choked the canyons and gulches where the town developed. Citizens saw dollars in the sulfurous clouds, however, so few complained. Those who could afford it built their homes amidst the cleaner air on the hills above town.

Metallurgist and mining engineer James Douglas had seen some Bisbee ore in a Pennsylvania smelter. In 1881 Douglas came to Bisbee on behalf of Phelps Dodge, a company that had invested in Morenci mines earlier that year. Phelps Dodge bought into the Copper Queen Mining Company, one of Bisbee's two largest operations. James Douglas became the architect of a mining venture that turned Bisbee from a copper camp into one of the great mining towns of the world.

In 1885 the Copper Queen and its main competition merged into the Copper Queen Consolidated Mining Company, a Phelps Dodge subsidiary. Bisbee reaped the gains of organized management. Copper Queen Consolidated built a company store and a library and enjoyed prosperity that rivaled nearby Tombstone. No one could predict that Tombstone had only one year of affluence left.

Even though Copper Queen Consolidated exerted considerable influence over the community, Bisbee was not destined to become a "company town." It expanded in every direction with little regard for

overall planning. Homes were built in tiers on hillsides so steep that one man's yard was even with his neighbor's roof. It was said that any chewer with talent could sit on his porch and spit tobacco juice into his neighbor's chimney.

While the company was erecting edifices of propriety in the town's main canyon, a less respectable element was constructing saloons and brothels in an adjoining area that became famous as Brewery Gulch.

In 1889, a railroad was constructed from Bisbee around the southwestern end of the Mule Mountains to an existing line at Fairbank, further reducing the cost of getting smelted copper to market.

In 1901, the only serious rival to the Copper Queen arrived when the Calumet and Arizona Company opened several mines in the Warren District, including the highly successful Irish Mag (supposedly named by a grateful patron of a prostitute with that moniker). Two towns, Lowell and Jiggerville, grew near the new mines.

Also in 1901, Copper Queen Consolidated extended a company-owned railroad, the El Paso and Southwestern, 25 miles to Douglas, where a smelter was built. A year later, the Calumet and Arizona also erected a smelter there, thus ending the choking pollution that had engulfed Bisbee. As it became a far more pleasant place to live and work, Bisbee became known by the sobriquet "Little San Francisco."

Like the City by the Bay, Bisbee had its disasters. A year after the 1906 San Francisco Earthquake, a fire roared across Chihuahua Hill, destroying residences and many businesses along Brewery Gulch. A year later, another conflagration wiped out buildings of Bisbee's upper Main Street and dozens of homes. Many structures had to be dynamited to create a firebreak. The estimated loss was \$500,000.

Because the denuded hills above the town could not absorb rainfall as they once had, Bisbee also suffered repeatedly from flooding. In addition to natural disasters, a series of typhoid epidemics swept through town.

Nevertheless, Bisbee prospered. In addition to copper, the town became the shipping center for surrounding cattle ranches and the financial center for American-owned mines at Cananea and Nacozari in Sonora, Mexico.

In 1907, Calumet and Arizona Mining and Copper Queen Consolidated joined forces to create the Warren Company. Its task was to build Warren, a company town for the expanding mining populace. The central feature of Warren was the Vista, a six-block-long greenbelt with exclusive homes lining the park and lesser ones extending in either direction. At the apex of the Vista, with a commanding view of the area, stood the elegant Douglas mansion.

Warren had the city planning that Bisbee lacked, with water from the mine irrigating dozens of trees planted near its residences, company offices, stores, schools, and baseball park.

The Warren-Bisbee Railway began operating in 1908. Known simply as "the streetcar," it connected Warren, Lowell, and Bisbee for a 10-cent fare and took about a half-hour. With it, the three towns were linked in a tangible, cosmopolitan way.

Bisbee's fortunes took an important turn in 1917. Phelps Dodge, now operating under its own name, bought the Calumet and Arizona shares in the Warren Company and emerged as the dominant power in Bisbee. In addition, Phelps Dodge opened the Sacramento Pit, its first attempt at open-pit mining. That process was to add almost 60 years to Bisbee's mining life.

The third event of 1917 was not as positive. With World War I raging, Bisbee miners went on strike, led by the Industrial Workers of the World (also called the "Wobblies"). The I.W.W. was accused of subversive, even Communist, leanings and deemed by some as un-American. Bisbee law officers, aided by 1,500 sympathizers, rounded up 1,200 strikers and "outside agitators," herding them into cattle cars. The train unceremoniously deposited them in the New Mexico desert to fend for themselves. A subsequent commission from Washington D.C. deplored the so-called Bisbee Deportation but could not find any specific law that had been broken.

Between World War I and the Great Depression the Sacramento Pit kept Bisbee going, but the pit closed in 1931. That year Phelps Dodge acquired the failing Calumet and Arizona Mining Company, thereby becoming the undisputed leader in the Warren District. Underground mining kept Bisbee hanging on through the Depression until World War II rekindled the demand for copper. Bisbee's fortunes improved as prices rose.

In 1951, Phelps Dodge opened the remarkable Lavender Pit, named not for the lavender-colored hues of its walls but for Mine Manager Harrison Lavender. A mammoth undertaking for its day, the new pit extended southeast from the Sacramento Pit and required the realignment of U.S. Route 80 (now State Route 80). It also obliterated small communities and made Lowell into a business district whose main street led to a chasm.

The Lavender Pit also had an adverse effect on Warren. When the company town was created, it was far removed from the mines. But the incredible volume of dump space needed for the pit brought the mine to Warren's doorstep. The Douglas home lost its imposing presence at the top of the Vista. Instead, the mansion was dwarfed by Leaching Dump No. 7, which still looms behind the imposing residence like a grotesque sand pile for the world's most spoiled kid.

Eventually the Lavender Pit also played out, closing with the night shift of December 14, 1974. The Copper Queen Mine, the underground wonder that George Warren lost on a bet almost a century before, ceased operations six months later. Bisbee had produced more than 8 billion pounds of copper worth about \$2 billion. In the process, the mines had also yielded 3.9 million pounds of lead, 3.8 million pounds of zinc, 2.7 million ounces of gold, and more than 1 million ounces of silver. By 1975 Bisbee was just another place that had joined the long list of former mining camps on their way to obscurity.

Or so it might have seemed. Bisbee, which could easily have become a derelict, has rebounded, not retired. After the closing of the mines, Phelps Dodge relocated many of its workers to other operations. The town retained the county seat, and some lifelong residents chose to stay. They were joined by

retirees who found comparatively inexpensive housing in a lovely location and by young artists, photographers, and crafts makers who began small businesses. The result is a sometimes-uneasy blend of the old and the new, the conservative and the progressive. The overall effect is positive, however, since everyone shares the goal of keeping Bisbee alive. The population, which initially dropped from 35,000 to 5,500, has increased to about 8,500. Real estate prices have climbed significantly in the last decade. Bisbee is back.

Start a visit to Bisbee at the scenic turnout on State Route 80 overlooking the town. The original Dunn claim is on the hill behind the turnout. Glorious Bisbee spreads out below.

The first stop is the Bisbee Mining and Historical Museum, located in the 1897 headquarters of the Copper Queen Consolidated Mining Company. The museum gives an excellent historical overview of the Warren District with displays, memorabilia, and even a simulated mine tunnel.

Available at the museum are three informative brochures describing enjoyable walking tours of Main Street, Brewery Gulch, and School Hill. Each gives clear directions, pointing out historic buildings and providing insiders' anecdotes about Bisbee.

Those who prefer to wander should be certain to see the library-post office, Copper Queen Hotel, Pythian Castle, Muheim Block, and Muheim Heritage House (a restored museum piece). Numerous other residences, churches, and commercial buildings showcase period architecture.

The underground Queen Mine tour, which starts across the highway from downtown Bisbee, is one of the most informative mine tours in the West. Visitors wear yellow slickers and miners' hard hats (complete with lamps) as they straddle the seats of a narrow-gauge personnel carrier into the mine that registers a constant temperature of 47 degrees. The guides know what they're talking about. As former miners, they give the experience an air of authenticity few others could. Phelps Dodge leases the mine to Bisbee for \$1 a year, but visitors get the real bargain.

The most ghostly remains are at Lowell at the southeastern lip of the Lavender Pit. The Lowell Theater, an old service station, and other buildings dating from about 1904 sit by themselves, bypassed by the realigned highway and isolated by the pit. Southeast of Lowell is the Hub, a large traffic circle with "spokes" heading off to various locations. Just before the spoke that returns to Bisbee a side road leads to Evergreen Cemetery, a fascinating testament to the diversity of those who came in search of opportunity: Italians, Hispanics, Serbs, Welsh, Irish, and Cornish, among others. Many of the graves were moved to Lowell from the old Bisbee Cemetery, which was located in Brewery Gulch at the present site of the City Park before being closed in 1915.

Warren has many homes of widely varied architectural styles along the Vista and near the Douglas mansion. Several of the better-preserved homes are now bed and breakfast establishments. At the south end of town is the antiquated ball park, looking as if Ty Cobb, Babe Ruth, and countless others might occasionally sneak into this "field of dreams."

Bisbee, however, remains the prime attraction. Its oddities are its charm. A garage is built over drainage ditch. A stairway seems to lead nowhere, until unexpectedly a large residential area comes into view.

Everyone has a post office box - a mailman would never survive home delivery. The customized fire truck has an extra-short turning radius to make the required hairpin turns. The old four-story high school is on a hill so steep that each floor has a ground-level door. Perhaps Bisbee was "Queen of the Copper Camps," but it will always have the appeal of "Little San Francisco."