

Museum of Occupational Medicine *Nicolás Lavala Cultural Center*

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Ca. 1905.

AHMM archives

The old mining town of Real del Monte is nestled in the Pachuca Mountains, at an altitude of 2,760 meters, only eight kilometers from the capital of the state of Hidalgo. During a large part of the year, it is covered by fog banks and clouds chased there by Gulf winds after a long crossing through the Sierra Madre Oriental mountain range, seeking refuge among the trees of El Hiloche Forest. All this accentuates its air of mystery and beauty, like in the stories of fairies and elves that the English brought to the region in the nineteenth century.

Among the town's sights are the most emblematic places from its past: the Dificultad, Dolores, La Rica and Acosta Mines, the English cemetery and the old Min-

ers' Hospital. They all emerge from the sinuous bends of the mountain, caressed by clouds and the multi-colored sky, as though demanding their proper place in history.

This landscape, stretching to the folds in the mountain range, is constantly changed by the comings and goings of its inhabitants and the adjustments made to accommodate the mines. It catches the eye of everyone who sees it because of the majesty of its steam age, nineteenth-century engine houses and its imposing pulley-topped mining gibbets or towers, built in the early twentieth century with the advent of electricity.

Though from the very start, mining earned its place as one of the world's riskiest occupations, the advent of electrical machines and the intensive use of dynamite wrought a great change in the way people worked. The speed and power they provided increased the possibilities of fatal accidents for the miners. In addition, most people were not prepared to work under the new conditions because they did not have the requisite knowledge and skills.

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Unless otherwise specified, photos by Mauricio Degollado.

Putting a drill on the front of their helmets to fit in explosives created health hazards for the miners because they breathed in the dust when preparing the holes, in the long run causing the terrible disease, silicosis, which eventually killed them. It took several years and medical studies to prove that silicosis was an occupational disease, forcing the mining companies to accept it and look for a way to decrease the amount of dust created during drilling.



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Little is known about the medical care miners used to receive. We know that in the early twentieth century, small clinics dealt with emergencies and injuries. It was not until 1907 that the U.S. company finally built a hospital in the area around the Real del Monte Mine in response to the urgent demand for good care for the workers. At that time, people hung big signs around the main mines that can still be seen in El Álamo, Dolores and Purísima: they read, “Thanks for getting out alive” and “Safety First”. Throughout the twentieth century, signs were hung up to prevent accidents inside the mines, graphically illustrating how they happen and pointing to workers’ carelessness and lack of security measures during the work day. Some of them are very dramatic, like the ones about

the death of a miner or the amputation of a limb. Some try to use humor, like the one with a picture of a goat covered in bandages with a subtitle that says, “Don’t be like this silly goat.” These signs, that used to be hung in the mines’ safety departments, are now valuable testimony to the difficult working conditions and lack of safety equipment that predominated here in the first decades of the twentieth century. A representative selection of these signs is exhibited in the old Miners’ Hospital, now turned site museum, the Occupational Medicine Museum, the only one of its kind. It also holds a collection of equipment, instruments, furniture and medications that were part of the hospital, most of them since it opened. It was preserved because it treated miners right up until 1985.

Walking through this cultural center and visiting the Occupational Medicine Museum is an experience that traps us somehow. Our senses are insufficient to under-



stand and feel life fighting to overcome death; the prayers of women for their children, their fathers, their husbands, their partners after an accident; the desperation, the impotence and the wishes of those who were waiting for their brother, the “bro”, “to make it,” “to come back to the mine,” “to not go blind, please,” or “to walk”. These are the unwritten stories; they don’t appear on the little cards on the museum walls, but they are there, between the walls of the hospitalization wards, in the old chapel, in the rehabilitation room, in the hallways. But the other side of the story is also there: the sighs of joy, the thanks given to Our Lady of Guadalupe and the Lord of Zelontla, patron saint of miners, for the “miracle of bringing him back to life”; the joy of a fellow

miner, of a close friend who sees himself reborn in the other who “had a close call”; the laughter of the children who, not very aware of what was going on within the hospital walls, not knowing yet about this eternal struggle between life and death, played there, running through the hospital gardens, looked at their reflections in the central fountain or amused themselves watching the chickens, the hens and maybe a sheep or two in the corrals at the bottom of the garden, kept close by because the animals were used to feed the patients and hospital staff.



Surely more than one rested a while in the shade of the trees shaped into eagles by the efforts and imagination of the old gardener.

Whoever sharpens his senses will almost be able to hear the cries of the newborn, the joy of the mother and the pride of the father, because before the miner’s union clinics were built, medical care was provided here for workers and their families. The children not only played in its gardens: they were also born there. Women not only cried out in pain, but also from happiness; men suffered their own pain and that of their wives in delivery, and smiled and wept with joy over their newborn son or daughter, a fellow miner who left on his own two feet, able to return to the mine, to the *pulque* saloon, to his home with his family.

Today, the old hospital is recovering so it can share its history, its spaces, its memories, stories and anecdotes about the people who went there and were given care after an accident or when ill. Like the miners reborn after a serious accident, the hospital is reborn after years of abandonment, to share its history with anyone who visits.

A VISIT TO THE MUSEUM¹

Before the hospital closed in 1985, it had the following areas and services: reception, pharmacy, x-ray room; a ward; an examining room; a nurses’ station; recovery, treatment and rehabilitation rooms; an operating room with its equipment and scrub room; four bathrooms, one with a shower and tub; an ironing room for bed linens; a laundry; and a mortuary chapel. All of this was in the building that now holds the Occupational Medicine Museum.

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The pharmacy installed and equipped in November 1907 boasts an interesting array of medication and nineteenth-century medical therapy equipment for preparing medications, capsules and formulas: flame tree flowers, senna and *ipecacuana* are just a few examples of what they have preserved, as well as mortars and flasks and a collection of the “modern medicine” of the burgeoning twentieth century.

Leaving the pharmacy, we come to the radiology room, with its 1930s General Electric equipment, an example of the cutting-edge technology the hospital had. By its looks, it probably was moved from room to room to take x-rays, making it unnecessary to move the patients, which was very practical.



The pharmacy.

Marco Antonio Hernández

chloroform, a metal delivery table, a surgical table built of metal and glass that could also be used as a delivery table, a metal ear-nose-and-throat chair, oxygen tanks, a propulsion apparatus that could be useful in thoracic operations and emergency lights.

In the equipment and scrub room, early antiseptic techniques were used to disinfect and sterilize the equipment, instruments and clothing worn by the surgeon and his assistants. The room also has a refrigerator, one sterilizer for syringes and another for clothing, three Duallan boxes, an apparatus for liquid sterilization and two water sterilizers, in addition to other equipment.

Although the museum visit ends here, it is a good idea to see the House of the Head Nurse, today an exhibition room for different artistic shows, the Archive of the Word, and rooms where visual arts and history workshops are given. In the building that used to hold the area of external medicine, today there is a large multi-purpose room available for cultural and social events. **MM**

Continuing with our tour, we come to the ward, which has kept its original furnishings and ambience: beds, screens, spittoons, commodes, urinals, tables, chairs, intravenous drip dispensers, oxygen tanks. The room contains illustrations of dissected male and female bodies, showing the wonderful, mysterious human body. Given the importance of diseases like tuberculosis, whooping cough and silicosis, this area includes a section dedicated especially to the lungs, x-rays and a doctor's office.

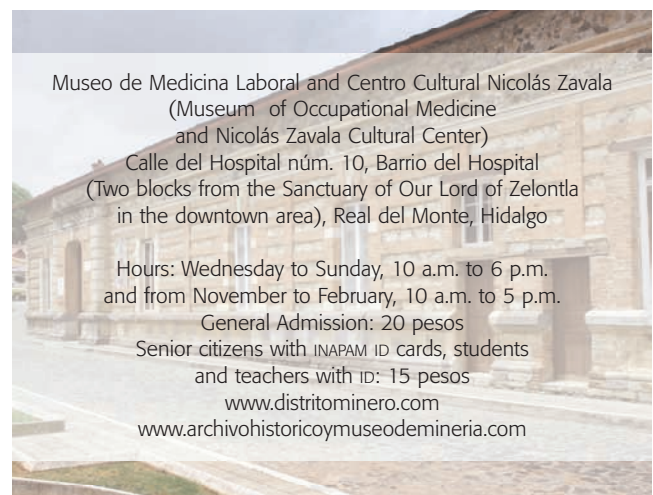
In the treatment room, where the miners went when they had had an accident, there are special tables for cleaning wounds and even for bathing the miner if necessary, to follow the rules for sterilization, because we have to remember that many of the accidents happened in the mine, where conditions were not very hygienic and the miners' work did not let them keep clean.

In addition to the pharmacy, the other rooms with big collections are the rehabilitation and operating rooms. In rehabilitation, there are different kinds of rods, from those that were used to transfer the injured, made of wire, to those designed by Brown Bohler, that were installed in the patient's bed and in corsets to support the spine. There are also different instruments like those for orthopedic surgery, including a set of portable equipment designed by Dr. Albin Lambotte (1866-1955).

The operating room preserves the early-twentieth-century instruments, which are over 101 years old: forceps and aseptic bulb syringes. It has a complete set of anesthesia equipment, including vials of pure ether and

NOTES

¹ All information is taken from the catalogue *Centro Cultural Nicolás Zavala/Museo de Medicina Laboral* (Mexico City: Archivo Histórico y Museo de Minería, A.C. [AHMM, A.C.], 2005).



Museo de Medicina Laboral and Centro Cultural Nicolás Zavala
(Museum of Occupational Medicine
and Nicolás Zavala Cultural Center)

Calle del Hospital núm. 10, Barrio del Hospital
(Two blocks from the Sanctuary of Our Lord of Zelontla
in the downtown area), Real del Monte, Hidalgo

Hours: Wednesday to Sunday, 10 a.m. to 6 p.m.
and from November to February, 10 a.m. to 5 p.m.

General Admission: 20 pesos
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and teachers with ID: 15 pesos

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