

## HARD ROCK BOYS

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*By Ann Japenga*

HARD ROCK MINERS and jackhammer drilling contests seem rather remote from life here in fashionable Palm Springs. Until recently, my only acquaintance with the miners' world came from a Cowboy Junkies' song: "On the line boys, on the line boys/Drill your holes and stand in line ..."

Then I went to a talk by Bureau of Land Management archaeologist Wanda Raschkow and found out thousands of drillers, blasters and muckers swarmed the Coachella Valley in the 1930S. In particular, hard rock boys ruled the bars, card rooms and brothels of Fargo Street in Indio. On Saturday nights the men would go down to The Jackhammer and view the floor show (balloon dancers, a Mr. Ed-type horse) then wind up the evening brawling with the guys from the railroad.

At closing time, the miners staggered home to tent camps plopped down in rocky arroyos in Berdoo, Fargo and other canyons. Some 35,000 men in all came to the desert to build the Colorado River Aqueduct, a project of the Metropolitan Water District. Some were Stanford and Cornell graduates who flocked here during the Depression and camped out as long as a year to secure the coveted aqueduct jobs. (The jobs were only granted to residents who had lived in the area for one year.)

To bring Colorado River water to Los Angeles and Orange counties, the men gouged an underground river out of 242 miles of desert wilderness, and blasted 92 miles of tunnels from Parker Dam to Lake Mathews near Riverside. Because the whole thing is buried and you can't see it from the highway, the grand enterprise under our feet is often forgotten.

"The most amazing thing is nobody knows this is out there," says Raschkow.

When the aqueduct was completed in 1939, Fargo Street and other boom towns closed up and most of the workers drifted off to other jobs. Joseph Chiriaco, a surveyor on the aqueduct, settled at what is now Chiriaco Summit on 1-10 east of Indio. His children still run the gas station and cafe there and can tell you stories about their dad's days on the project - salty beans, rattlesnakes and no air conditioning.

Along with The Chiriaco Travel Center, the miners left behind other scattered reminders of their presence here. On her journeys along the route of the aqueduct Raschkow has found a lid from a can of carbide (used for lanterns), shards of Wallace china from the mess halls, 1930s mayo jars, and MWD surveyors' markers. She puzzled over the mysterious mounds of rocks and sand along Dillon Road and out near Cabazon, until she realized they had been piled there when the 16-foot diameter tunnels were dug.

In fact, Dillon Road itself was built for the aqueduct construction. Other super-sized mementoes of the project are the 18-mile tunnel through the Little San Bernardino mountains near Indio and the legendary 13-mile tunnel through Mt. San Jacinto. This was the toughest challenge of the whole project due to flooding in the tunnel. Some say the dousings were the work of the mountain's wrathful spirit, Tahquitz.

Now that I know we've had miners among us, I can imagine the jackhammers pounding and the boisterous shouting of orders - Drill! Bolt! Blast! Muck! - when I venture out near Desert Center, Eagle Mountain, Whitewater or Mt. San Jacinto.

*NOTE: The aqueduct is private property and is patrolled by MWD security. If you want to admire this monument to the hard rock boys of the Coachella Valley, please do so from a distance.*