

THEN, THERE WERE MINES

PEARLS FROM PERALES



Margaret Davies

2021

Why “Pearls from Perales”?

I first met Señor Pedro Perales Larios, the gentleman after whom this collection is named, by chance in 2016.

Through the interconnectivity of social media we met again, albeit virtually, in 2020.

Pearls from Perales brings some of Pedro’s old Facebook posts to non-Spanish speakers, as we both strive to revive and keep alive the fast disappearing and almost forgotten aspects of local history and folklore.

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The Tale of the Peruana Mule.



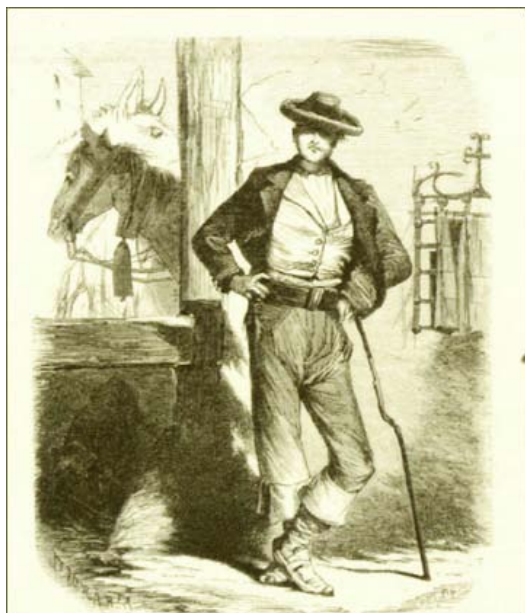
“Darme pan”, literally, “give me bread”, was a real, heartfelt cry here until relatively recently. Actual starvation did stalk the streets of towns like Garrucha, and hunger, for all but the wealthy, was a day to day reality. The black humour in the tale of the Peruana Mule was perpetuated and passed down in the expression ‘hungry as the Peruana mule’.



The path to the Peruana.

Author's photo.

The story is set at the mine La Peruana, sheltered by the pine trees which clothe the side of the Barranco Chico la Torre. A suitably picturesque spot for such a tale. In those days, winches were operated by men to a certain depth, and then by mule as the depth of the shaft increased. Mules were highly valued commodities, and were well looked after. They worked shorter shifts than their human co-workers and had much better accommodation and rations. Their working life though was shorter, four years working on a deep shaft winch, a few years longer at a lesser depth, and this despite the care given to them by their dedicated carer.



And so it came to pass Estaban, for that was the muleman's name, was looking forward to a few days of adequate food and other home comforts, like water to wash in, and a change of clothes. He had worked every day for the last three months and couldn't wait for 'The Break', that blessed time, when work in the mines came to a halt for a couple of weeks. The mule was also probably ready for a rest as he too had worked continuously, walking first one way round, to lower the empty containers down the shaft, and then back the other way, to raise the full, heavy ones up again. Round and round, plod plod, heave and haul, the days sliding into weeks, and the weeks into months.

Meet Estaban.

Villa de Arbeteta



The mule.

Keith Levit

The mule's shaft.

Author's photo.



The vigilante. *Ferranruiz.net*

For the mule though, the break was to be a stay-cation, not a vacation, he was to be looked after by one of the few people who did not enjoy a few days away from the mountain and the mine, the vigilantes. Every mine had at least one of these vigilantes, or guards, who were charged with preventing the theft of the valuable ore from the above ground bunkers, as well as from underground. Not that they ventured underground, especially during The Break, it was far too dangerous to wander around underground alone. There was always the chance that you might meet up with some 'macutereros, miners who used this time to fill a macuto, or rucksack, with ore to sell on the black market. Like rabbits, these men could pop down one hole and appear up another, travelling along the warren of galleries, from one mine to another. It would need a bag full of ferrets to flush them out, not a night watchman who, in any case, preferred to take a backhander for looking the other way, while ore was pilfered from above ground.

Unfortunately for poor Estaban, the watchman became ill and couldn't look after the mine nor the mule. So, like Cinderella, Estaban was denied the chance to go to the ball, or in this case, the Cuevas Festival and should stay behind to guard the mine and the mule. Not wishing to cry in the cinders, nor await a visit from the Fairy Godmother, Estaban considered his options. Should he stay, or should he go?

Cuevas festival was the highlight of the year, he had just been paid, he needed a break and after all, the mule was sensible enough to be left unattended for a few hours. So Estaban, being a thoughtful man, put the mule in the shade of its stable, saw to it that there was plenty for it to eat and drink and set off to join in the fun.

But, in the way of these things, it wasn't just the mule that had plenty to eat and drink. Estaban had a fine time, meeting friends and drinking, carousing and drinking, drinking and drinking. Sobering up on the third day, he recalled that he had left the mule unattended for more than the few hours that he had promised it, and so he set off to resume his duties.



Cuevas Festival.

Col. Enrique Garcia Paniagua. Relatos Fotográficos de Almería. Bolea.

But what of the mule, abandoned and imprisoned in the stable, by now bereft of hay and short of water? Being a wise mule, he had no intention of starving to death, so he started by nibbling the pegs of the empty tool rack which was hanging on the wall. The second course was a handful of almond tree staves destined to be tool handles, while dessert was the head frame of the locked door. They all bore his teeth marks. Time passed and still no Estaban and therefore no sweet hay. The mule then turned his hunger to the water tub, the staves took his fancy, but the hoops, being made of iron, were not to his liking, so he left those intact. By now, he had got the hang of this new diet and so the next day he started on the roof, gnawing and chomping on the cross beams which supported it, oblivious to the danger that he was putting himself in. And just as the weakened beams started to sag on the now much weakened mule, and with the whole stable about to collapse, Estaban arrived to save the day and the mule. Although probably not his job.

The stable diet.

Dreamstime

The ordeal of the poor beast soon became the watchword for real hunger, and the phrase 'hungrier than the Peruana mule' passed into the local lexicography.

Is it a true story? It's certainly a credible story, the setting, the characters, the foibles of both man and beast, its happy ending and its longevity give it more than a ring of truth.

I like to believe it and will think of it every time that I pass the Peruana on my way to the 'lost village' of San Juan.



More About the Railway.



Road/Rail Integration?



bp.blogspot.com

The second chapter of Volume Two of **Then, There Were Mines** was devoted to the long serving railway that ran between el Arteal and Villaricos, via las Rozas. I did as much research as I could at the time, but being non-Spanish speaking I was unable to converse with anyone still alive that remembered it in operation. Thanks to a Facebook post by Pedro Perales Larios I have, albeit at second hand, the benefit of the wisdom of the elders.

José Alarcón Latorre, now in his 90's, recalls being a 'driver' of one of the trains. Using his own mule hitched to five tipper wagons, he transported iron ore down to Villaricos. His wagons were loaded from a mineral yard situated on the Villaricos to las Herrerías road, near to where it crosses the Rambla de Muleria, and the ore came from the mine Los Tres Pacos in the Sierra Almagro and was brought to the deposit by trucks.



The quarry is on the left on the road towards Villaricos.

Well! This seemed to go against everything that I had written about the railway. A flurry of e-mails ensued questioning the whys and wherefores thrown up by this account. Finally, the picture became clearer.

Although MASA was responsible for the loading pier at Villaricos, by the early 1950's they had ceased to use it. Instead, their material, possibly with the exception of any iron ore from las Rozas, was taken by road to Cartagena and shipped from there. A probable explanation being that the conveyor system of the loading pier was unsuitable for the product of the el Arteal froth floatation process, which consisted of fine sized particles.

No doubt due to insufficient production, the aero-cable which linked the Los Tres Pacos mine with its loading pier at Cala de las Picotas was no longer operational in the 1950's. It made perfect sense therefore to use the Villaricos facilities, especially as it was iron ore that they were transporting. What made no sense was the presence of a roadside mineral yard, and the need for José and his mule. Why on earth wasn't the ore taken by truck over the final couple of kilometres instead of being tipped at the old quarry on the Las Herrerías road? It wasn't as if there was a lack of capacity for the ore in Villaricos as MASA weren't using the yards there.



Rails i ferradures blogspot

As with most puzzles, the answer is the obvious. The Villaricos installations were designed and built around the Decauville rail system. The infrastructure was not suitable for the use of heavy goods vehicles, so the simple solution was to maintain the status quo, a mule, five wagons and a narrow gauge railway.

In earlier times, a single mule was expected to haul six wagons, five ordinary and one brake. Perhaps José's mule was of small stature and only capable of pulling five. Maybe José was just being kind to his mule. Possibly the norm by this time was one mule to five wagons, giving work to additional mules and their drivers. Who knows?

The Fuming Flower Bed.



Author's photo.

When walking down Villaricos high-street, I have often had to wait for a gap in the traffic before stepping off the pavement to avoid the massive raised flower bed which blocks the way. The first time that this occurred I did think that it was a stupid place to put such a large flower bed, especially as the flowers looked more like weeds to my untutored eye. After that, I just didn't really notice it, concentrating instead on negotiating the high kerb and avoiding the dog dirt. I really should have given the flower bed more than a casual glance, especially since I like to think that I know a thing or two about the industrial heritage of Villaricos.



The offending flower bed.

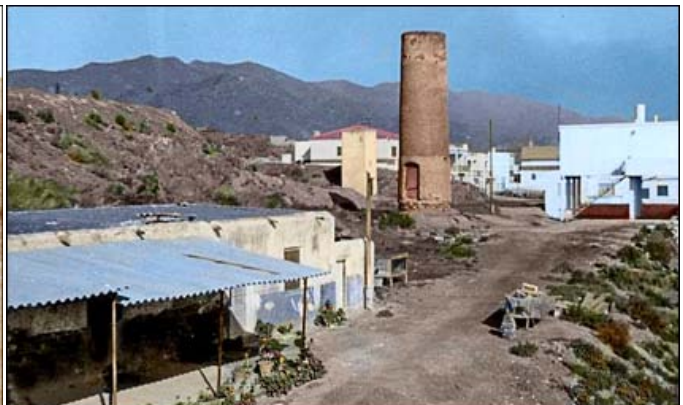
Author's photo.

Pedro Perales Larios's post was such an eye-opener. My 'flower bed' was the base of the chimney shown in these two photographs. Taken from Villaricos, *Treinta Siglos de Historia* by Antonio Llaguno Rojas, the photograph on the left shows the chimney on the right, the old electricity generating station in the centre, and the transformer for the loading pier on the left.



Cala Verde in 1945, with the chimney on the right.

Col. I.M. Carrillo Ascensi.



The chimney seen from Calle Central.

Taken from José Guerrero's Facebook wall.

The right-hand picture, probably taken in the 1960's, was shot from Calle Central, probably from next to the Central (power station) itself. The 'flower bed' can be readily identified as the lower section of the chimney from the image.

The building in the foreground is still standing, the traces of the corrugated iron porch still showing. Seen from the main road, it is the scruffy, utilitarian building next to the wall of the old mineral deposit.



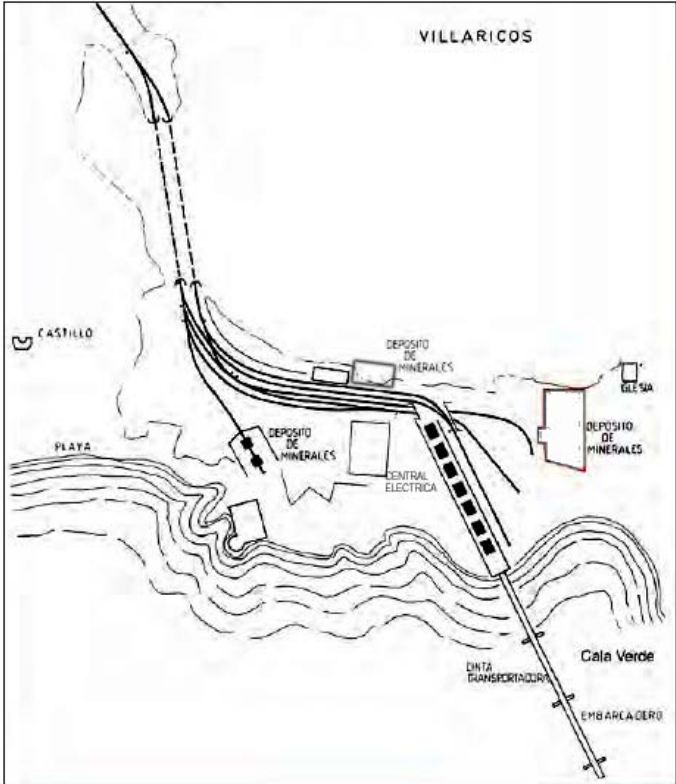
Still standing! View of the rear and front of the house (above left & right). Author's photos.

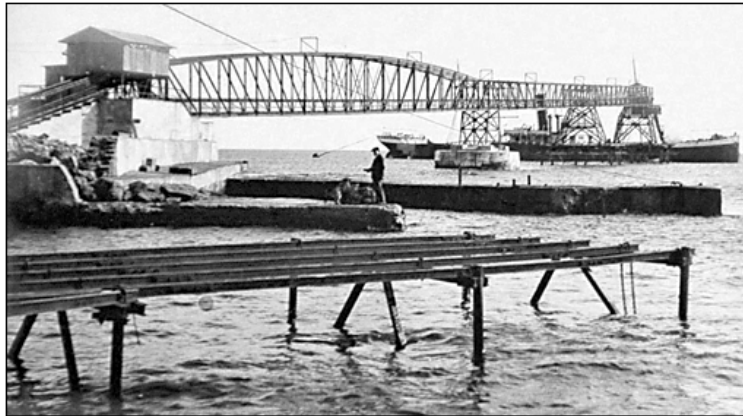
The google screen shot offers a clue as to the chimney's purpose. The straight road is Calle las Torvas, leading down to where the mineral loading pier stretched out to sea. The road was built over the underground section of the loading pier, the mineral hoppers were to the side, and emptied onto the underground conveyor belt. The chimney served to ventilate the conveyor belt tunnel and its machinery. The tunnel had problems with water seeping in, probably from the land behind, rather than from the sea, so the chimney also ventilated the pump used to keep the area dry. According to Pedro Perales Larios's venerable informant, water still seeps in and floods the tunnel which is buried under the tarmac of Calle las Torvas.



Google screen shot of the area.

Picturing the Pier.





The loading pier in operation. mtiblog.

There are many photographs, like the one above, showing the loading pier stretching out to sea, standing on its iconic piers, and of the box-like transfer station where the ore, brought up from below on the first conveyor belt, was passed on to the second belt and carried out to the waiting ship.

What I had never seen was any picture showing the huge hoppers that fed the underground belt. Pedro Perales Larios's post, Las Tovas del Cargadero, brought them to life for me. Taken after operations had ceased, these two photographs of the seven hoppers, each capable of holding 60,000 cubic metres of mineral surprised me. I had never imagined them as one continuous bank with internal compartments, but rather as seven separate structures. Neither had I realised just how much material has been laid over the conveyor belt tunnel to bring it up to the current road level.



Two views of the hoppers. Pedro Jiménez Morata.

Pedro's post revived the childhood memories of many Villaricos residents. Several spoke of being forbidden to play anywhere near the hoppers, but in the way of children throughout the ages, such admonishments were ignored. Like them, it would have been my stamping ground too, chucking pebbles into the hoppers and trying to find a way into the flooded tunnel along with the rest of the gang!

More recently one gentleman remembers a collapse, in the Paseo Maritime, near to where the mirador is today, probably caused by subsidence of the conveyor tunnel. It required many truck loads of in-fill to rectify it.

Another gentleman, recounts that land on the left hand side of Calle las Torvas was sold for development. However, when construction started, it was found that the foundations were above the hopper mouth, and the cost of making good the area proved to be prohibitive.

I had puzzled over the name of the street, the Spanish for hoppers is tolvas, while torvas translates as grim. Pedro explained that ‘r’ and ‘l’ in a word are often substituted for each other by the locals. The sign gives the local pronunciation for hoppers and I assume that this use of local pronunciations of place names accounts for the various discrepancies found in Spanish cartographic publications.



Calle las Torvas as it is today.

Author's photo.