

“Chal chee wee te. A great chasm or excavation, basin shaped, with projecting crags and precipices. 200 feet deep - 300 wide - an enormous excavation into the solid rock and a pile of debris equally enormous. Trees growing in the bottom and at the sides, 20 feet high pines & very old. The rocks have caved in. A cave or shelter cut into the crags where Indians even now lodge.”

Thus on August 29, 1857 did William P. Blake enter into his notebook his impression of the great pit in the Cerrillos Hills the Indians called Chal chee wee te. Blake's is the earliest description we have of Cerro Chalchihuitl, the largest of the early turquoise mines in America.

The early Europeans in New Mexico brought with them a disdain for the Turkey-stone; turquoise. It was a trifle, a mere bauble, and they mocked the Indian people for holding it in such high esteem. The Europeans wanted gold.

But turquoise has power. One of its many uses is as prophylaxis against witches. You wear a piece to protect yourself from the *mal de ojo*. You conceal a piece at the entrance to your house to keep out witches. In New Mexico today any proper house is protected against evil by the turquoise trim on its doors and windows.

The use of turquoise in the American Southwest is less than 2,000 years old. The few early turquoise artifacts – worked stone – date from around 300 A.D. Then, with the florescence of the Chaco culture around 900 A.D., turquoise suddenly abounds. At Pueblo Bonito, one of the largest of the Chacoan centers, a quarter-million pieces of worked turquoise have been cataloged. And molecular analysis has linked some of those pieces directly to the Chalchihuitl deposits.

Chalchihuitl is a word from the Nahuatl language meaning “precious green stone.” The term is used throughout the Americas for jade, emerald and turquoise, and all New Mexico Puebloan languages employ some form of the word. The importance of turquoise to the Indians, in contrast to its insignificance in European eyes, has given us several places in New Mexico called “chalchihuitl” but none except for some very recent ones carry the name “turquesa.”

Rapid population growth after 1300 in the Galisteo Basin resulted in many very large pueblos. One of the largest of these was Ya'atze, situated two and a half miles east of Cerro Chalchihuitl. Ya'atze is Keres for “corn-ville,” and was later known by the Spanish as San Marcos. For 400 years the people of Ya'atze were the keepers of Cerrillos turquoise.

The Spanish, who came to stay in 1598, were accompanied by many *indios amigos*; Tlascaltecan Indians. Those same Mexican Indians are probably responsible for the presence in New Mexico of the word “chalchihuitl”. The early Tlascalcan village of Analco, around the San Miguel church in Santa Fe, was likely located there for easy access to the turquoise in the Cerrillos Hills.

All of the great pueblos of the Galisteo Basin were abandoned after the Pueblo Revolt of 1680, and the last good veins at Cerro Chalchihuitl were mined out at about that time too. For the next two hundred years turquoise was obtained at the lesser deposits in the Cerrillos Hills, by picking through the old dumps, or by trading with distant suppliers.

This situation was disrupted in 1879 when over a thousand “Colorado miners” descended in a mining frenzy upon the Cerrillos Hills. But for all of the gold, silver, lead, zinc, iron, and manganese they found – real and imagined – none of the immigrant miners was much interested in turquoise.

Enter Major D.C. Hyde. Major Hyde, a wealthy New Yorker, appeared in late summer 1879 at the peak of the Cerrillos mining boom, with secret information that turquoise was an indicator of gold. He was certain that the old Indian turquoise diggings that everyone had been avoiding were actually full of great riches, and he proceeded to buy them from incredulous dealers. Confident of great returns, Hyde spent lavishly. He hired many workmen and set them to work driving shafts and tunnels into Cerro Chalchihuitl as well as other old diggings. He sold shares in his fanciful Turquoise Gold & Silver Mining Company of Los Cerrillos. He had a brochure printed that invited railroad passengers to come visit his ancient underground excavations. Was this New Mexico’s first tourist trap? Then, in October of 1880, his funds nearly exhausted, Hyde made a trip to the east coast to raise more money. He was never again seen in New Mexico.

The great western pit of Cerro Chalchihuitl that so impressed William Blake is one of the largest and best preserved examples of early Native American mining in America. It remains today largely unmodified, save for the folly of the misguided Major Hyde.

Cerro Chalchihuitl is a featured landmark at the Mirador of the Cerrillos Hills State Park and may be clearly seen from that location. The Cerro itself is on private land and is not open to the public. However, negotiations continue for the purchase of the Chalchihuitl parcel, and it is expected that in the not too distant future it will become part of the Cerrillos Hills State Park.

Based on the article by William Baxter that appeared in the Santa Fe Monthly, March 2011.