

Cerrillos Hills Turquoise

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by Mark Balzek

Historically, the Cerrillos Hills (Santa Fe County...) are one of the most interesting mining areas in New Mexico. The mining activities of the district date from prehistoric times long before the advent of the Spanish conquistadors. From the point of view of history and past production the turquoise deposits of the Cerrillos Hills are the most important in the U.S. Indeed, the Cerrillos district is the site of the most extensive prehistoric mining operations known on the American continent.

About twenty miles south-southwest of Santa Fe, the Cerrillos Hills form a prominent landmark. Roughly circular in outline, the hills consist of six principal peaks with several smaller, rounded hills; the whole occupying perhaps a dozen square miles. The taller peaks reach an altitude of approximately seven thousand feet, about thirteen hundred feet above the bed of the Galisteo River four miles to the south. The aspect of the hills is generally typical of the high southwestern plateaus with scrub pinon, cedar, and juniper together with cacti and shore grasses forming the bulk of the vegetation. The scrub timber varies from sparse to locally quite dense. One wonders if the timber was once larger and more plentiful before the advent of the American miner with his thirst for mine timber and fuel.

Almost in the center of the Cerrillos Hills is a low, round-topped mountain, Mount Chalchihuitl, a romantic name no doubt attached to the mountain by the Spaniards or perhaps even by the still later arriving Americans. The ancient mine of Chalchihuitl is a vast open pit. It seems almost incredible that such a mass of rock could have been removed by a primitive people, without the aid of modern mining appliances. Turquoise is believed to have been mined here for untold years before the arrival of the first Europeans in the area. The history of this mine is clouded in the mist of antiquity and fact can no longer be sorted from romantic rumor. It is said that the Indians formerly considered the Cerrillos Hills as neutral ground and that men from many tribes came, in peace, to mine the beautiful turquoise, considered by the Indians to be pieces of the blue fallen sky.

There are no reliable estimates of the production from Chalchihuitl but probably it is not large in terms of actual value. The turquoise occurs in thin seams scattered through the country rock and with the crude mining methods used by the early Indians, the total production could not have been large. During the late years of the past century and the early years of the present one a considerable amount of work has been done by American miners. There has been no work in many years; however, as the dumps and floor of the pit are overgrown with juniper of a height of ten feet and more and these trees grow slowly in this land of little rain.

The Chalchihuitl area covers about twenty acres and diligent search will still reveal small turquoise-filled seams in the white, altered rock which has been classified as an altered phase of monzonite porphyry. It is interesting to note that every site that has been mined in modern times, as with all the New Mexico deposits, had been previously worked by the ancient Indians.