Mining has been a subtle yet perennial dynamic in the history of New Mexico. From prehistoric times to the present, mining activities and related events have shaped the regional culture and economy. Out of romantic venture or economic necessity, the search for mineral wealth in the Southwest has attracted all ethnic groups, including Indians, Spaniards, Mexicans, and Americans. Their continuous efforts eventually turned New Mexico, one of the oldest settled regions in the United States, into a leading mineral-producing state. In the last hundred years, in particular, the diversified mining industry has placed the state in an elite role in national development.

As early as the tenth century A.D., the Mogollones engaged in primitive mining activities. After gathering native copper (nearly pure) at the surface, the Indians heated the malleable red metal to cast personal ornaments. Such products were traded as far north as the Bering Sea and as far south as the Caribbean. But these prehistoric peoples placed limited value on copper extraction and, therefore, did not develop the technology needed to mine on a large scale. Rather the Indians focused their attention on turquoise acquisition. The quarrying of the brilliant, blue stones became the predominant mining enterprise of the natives throughout the prehistoric period. The production of these precious stones has continued for thousands of years. Turquoise jewelry crafted today symbolizes the ancient and modern importance of native culture and its antiquities, and continues to represent the long-lasting impact of Indian mining on southwestern society.

New Mexico's mineral wealth lured the Spanish to the region in the mid-sixteenth century. Medieval tales of great riches enticed the early conquistadores to explore treasures of gold on New Spain's far northern frontier. In 1540, Francisco Vasquez de Coronado, for example, led an expedition across the Southwest in search of the gold-en Seven Cities of Cibola. Although the Spaniards found no gold or silver, they did discover a new country, resulting in the European colonization of the Rio Grande Valley by 1700. During the next two centuries, the colonizers, too busy establishing a ranch culture in the area, had little time to explore and extract minerals. They dug up only a few scraps of precious metals. The Spanish first began systematic mining in 1800 when an Apache man showed the copper deposits at Santa Rita to a Spanish officer, Captain Juan Carrasco, in return for better treatment. Within a year mule trains began shipping copper for coinage to Chihuahua and Mexico City. This activity distinguished the
Santa Rita mine as the first copper mine in North America as well as the longest-lived. It still produces today. In the end, the Spanish relinquished control of the mines when Mexico won its independence in 1821.

A series of major mineral discoveries rejuvenated the mining industry in New Mexico in the mid-nineteenth century. In 1828, the discovery of placer gold in the Ortiz Mountains, south of Santa Fe, brought the first gold rush into what would become the American West, fully twenty years before the Forty-Niners invaded California. As many as three thousand miners descended on the placer sites in northern New Mexico. During the next four decades, prospectors staked out numerous placer and quartz sites in the region. Yet, just as this northern province began to reveal its hidden mineral treasures, the young Republic of Mexico lost her northern territories in 1848 to the United States. New Mexico now became an American territory with the potential for mining diversity. In addition to gold, lead ores were found in the Organ Mountains in 1849 and silver near Magdalena in 1863. Many factors, however, blocked full-scale mining through the 1870s. Limited capital and mining knowledge, primitive technology, and Indian resistance all, in fact, worked against New Mexico's miners.

The railroad also initiated a silver boom in New Mexico. Mills and smelters at Silver City and Georgetown served as the regional centers for processing "that damned blue stuff" which proved to be so profitable. By 1890, high coal and silver production transformed New Mexico into one of the most prolific mining regions in the American West.

With the dawning of the twentieth century, New Mexico's maturing mining industry redirected its energies from precious to base metals extraction. The discovery of high-grade zinc ores in the districts of Grant and Catron counties, for example, immediately distinguished the territory as a crucial contributor to the nation's zinc output. But copper proved to be the most important base metal in New Mexico. By 1909, the Chino Copper Company of Grant County revived New Mexico's somnolent copper industry. Introducing new open-pit techniques, the company mined low-grade ores on a large scale and then processed the "pay dirt" with the new flotation method of milling. Since the beginning of commercial production in 1912, New Mexico has ranked in the top three of the nation's copper-producing states. Because of its versatile utility and global market, copper redefined New Mexico's economic and strategic role in the nation.

Over the next two decades, the minerals industry diversified in New Mexico, bringing into the industrial fold petroleum, natural gas, molybdenum, and potash production. By the mid-1920s, the state began to produce crude oil and natural gas. A few years later, molybdenum and potash were mined as well. Not surprisingly, New Mexico soon became one of the nation's leading oil-producing states, and ranked first in potash production. In 1948, as the Cold War unfolded and the atomic age demanded a new kind of fuel, New Mexico immediately supplied the bulk of the nation's uranium. Initially, in fact, the state was the top producer of the radioactive mineral.

During the second half of this century, the mining industry of New Mexico entered a new era as fuels replaced metals as the principle mining products. Although copper still held a crucial spot, petroleum and natural gas claimed the dominant position; their values alone were greater
than all other minerals combined. The completion of interstate gas pipelines in the 1950s enabled New Mexico to export its natural gas as far away as California, Oregon, Washington, and Idaho. In 1980, sales of energy commodities, including oil, gas, coal, and uranium, were valued at $5 billion. With expectations for continued high production, after the turn of the century, New Mexico remains atop the list of energy-producing states in the nation. In 1992, for instance, the state ranked fourth in natural gas production, sixth in uranium, seventh in oil, and thirteenth in coal.

As a land of mineral plenty, New Mexico has been the longest-standing and the most diversified mining region in the United States. At times, the state has led in production of important mineral resources, such as uranium and potash. The industry has delivered the mineral goods that the nation's demands have called for since the late nineteenth century. As the statistics will reveal, however, New Mexico's output in the last hundred years has surpassed all previous production. Modern technology and huge capital investments (both private and governmental) combined to determine this twentieth century upward trend in exploration and extraction. The production and employment data that accompany this brief perusal of New Mexico mining history demonstrate the continued importance of mining in the state and the rest of the American Southwest.

Liping Zhu is an instructor of history at the University of New Mexico. He recently completed his dissertation, "The Chinese on the Rocky Mountain Mining Frontier: The Boise Basin, Idaho, 1863-1910."

### NEW MEXICO

**Annual Mineral Production(A)**

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*estimated
## NEW MEXICO

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<td>1992</td>
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<td>1,240,000</td>
<td>56</td>
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*estimated
The Historical Statistics of the New Mexico Mining Industry

NEW MEXICO MINE Employment and Safety

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Total Population</th>
<th>Mine Workers</th>
<th>Coal Mine Accidents (by decade)</th>
<th>Total Fatal Accidents (by decade)</th>
<th>Value of Products (except oil and natural gas)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
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<tr>
<td>1850</td>
<td>61,547</td>
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<tr>
<td>1860</td>
<td>93,516</td>
<td>857</td>
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<td>91,874</td>
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<td>160,282</td>
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<td>360,350</td>
<td>7,607</td>
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<td>$31,850,263</td>
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<td>423,317</td>
<td>7,008</td>
<td>121*</td>
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<td>$55,559,166</td>
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<tr>
<td>1940</td>
<td>531,818</td>
<td>8,831</td>
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<td>1,515,069</td>
<td>15,559</td>
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<td>$1,097,550,000</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*between 1930 and 1932 only coal mine accident figures are available  **upto1988

REFERENCES CITED

Jones, Fayette A. New Mexico, Mines, and Minerals. Santa Fe, 1904.