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LOW RAILS IN LOWER CALIFORNIA

PART THREE

by Richard V. Dodge

THE SLIM GAUGE DU BOLEO RAILROAD

Great smelters from little boleos grow!

As early as the year 1700, the mineral possibilities of the area around the present Pueblo of Santa Rosalia, Southern Territory, Baja California, were recognized when some diggings were worked for copper by the Jesuit Padres.

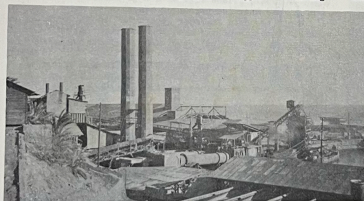
But it was not until one day in 1886 when a rancher, named Rosas Villavicencio, who lived at Santa Agueda, eight and one-half miles above Santa Rosalia, was walking through a water-washed bed of gravel in one of the arroyos or canyons and picked up some balls of ore which turned out to be high-grade copper bearing

properly develop their holdings. It was agreed to combine the concessions to form joint enterprises. In 1884 and 1885, French capitalists, including Rothschild, Miraband and De Wendel interests, bought out a number of the cooperative holdings and the great Compagnie du Boleo was formed. The corresponding Spanish name was Compañía del Boleo, S. A. The corporation for a time controlled some 2,000 square miles of the surrounding country.

The Boleo Company made radical changes, introduced modern methods, and spent immense sums of money in the construction of extensive plants to process lower grade ores profitably. It became one of the world's great copper producers.

The arroyo and the playa of Santa Rosalia were selected as the locations for the smelters, electric power plant, warehouses, shops, housing, schools, a church, notable because its structural steel frame and stamped metal wall plates were prefabricated in Belgium, stores and other essentials of a mining community. An industrial railroad was established with branches to three principal mine holdings: El Providencia, El Purgatorio, and Santa Marta. Fresh water had to be piped down from springs in Santa Agueda.

Santa Rosalia is situated on the Gulf of California, latitude approximately 27 degrees, 20 minutes north and longitude 112 degrees, 17 minutes west. It is 459 miles by airplane line below Tijuana or about 630 miles, not including the bounces, by wagon road. The climate is mild in winter but is extremely hot, 87 degrees average, in the summer. A mining camp about ten miles inland is named El Infierno, just plain hell. Most of the surrounding terrain is desert. The annual



The ex-Boleo smelter at Santa Rosalia, Baja California, as seen from the upper track level. Smoke is from locomotive number 7. 2-6-58 (Richard Dodge picture)

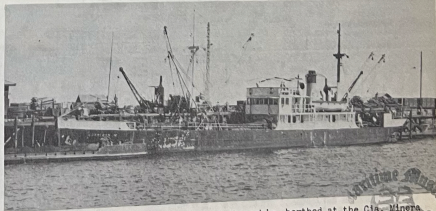
"boleos." Boleo is the Mexican word for ball. These were in the form of carbonates or oxychlorides.

Sample boleos were taken to Guaymas, Sonora, for analysis, and immediately some merchants undertook explorations, and mining operations employing the most primitive operations were begun. Yaqui Indians were brought in and worked the mines, carrying the rock out in leather bags called "tanates."

Since the ore itself had to be shipped away for processing, only the highest grade deposits, 20 to 25% copper, could be utilized.

In 1872, some of the better grades were exported to Europe, creating quite a furore.

The independent miners continued their working but could not



"S. S. Korrigan IV," a company-owned steamship, berthed at the Cia. Minera Santa Rosalia docks at Santa Rosalia, B. Cfa., 2-4-58. (Richard Dodge)

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