Revisiting the Past and Reconciling with Collective History

In 1917, over one thousand Arizona miners—on strike for better wages and safer working conditions—were violently rounded up by their armed neighbors, herded onto cattle cars, and deposited 180 miles away in the New Mexican desert. Most of the workers expelled from Bisbee were immigrants. This event came to be known as the Bisbee deportation, and was discussed only in hushed tones during the following century.

*Bisbee ‘17* documents Bisbee locals as they plan a centennial commemoration. They stage dramatic scenes from 1917, culminating in a large-scale recreation of the deportation itself on its 100th anniversary. These scenes are based on historical research but also convey the actors’ interpretations of their characters’ motivations, underscoring the complexity of collective historical memory. The reenactment raises difficult questions about contemporary issues of immigration, labor rights, corporate power and state-backed violence with haunting scenes created by people who are reckoning with history in real time.
At the turn of the 20th century, Arizona’s Cochise County embodied the shifting national and social boundaries of the American West. When the U.S. acquired the territory from Mexico in 1853, its inhabitants included Anglo-American settlers, Chiricahua and Western Apaches, and Mexicans who were offered U.S. citizenship after their homes became American soil. Although citizenship conferred the racial status of “white” under federal law, historians including Katherine Benton-Cohen have shown how the privileges and immunities of whiteness remained elusive for many residents of Mexican origin. Anglo-American settlers contested the definition of citizenship as they drove indigenous families off of the land and encountered their new neighbors: immigrants from Mexico and Europe who were arriving to work in the mining industry.

World War I increased the demand for copper, and in the 1910s mining cities like Bisbee were booming. The extractive industries led to a vibrant union movement in the southwest, and when Arizona became a state in 1912 it ratified one of the most labor-friendly constitutions in the nation’s history. However, this Progressivism developed in tension with racist nationalism. Bisbee was known as a “white man’s camp”: local laws excluded Chinese immigrants and restricted Mexican workers to jobs that were more menial and lower paid. With discriminatory labor practices, the mining companies capitalized on nationalism and racism to disrupt solidarity between U.S.-born workers and their immigrant counterparts.

If the mining companies feared cooperation between U.S.-born and immigrant workers, it was because interracial organized labor was gaining power nationwide. The International Workers of the World (IWW), also known as the Wobblies, were a radical union that organized workers of all races and nationalities, including more than six thousand Mexican, European and Anglo-American workers in Arizona by 1917. Many of these IWW members worked at the Copper Queen Mine in Bisbee, which was owned by the Phelps-Dodge Corporation.

In early 1917, the Wobblies came to Bisbee and mobilized workers at the Copper Queen mine. They brought several demands to the bargaining table: improved safety practices, pay increases, an end to unfair wage deductions such as water and light charges, and a decrease in the racialized wage gap between Anglo-American workers and the predominantly Mexican “surface workers.” The mining companies refused to negotiate with the union. Citing the war effort, the mine owners denounced the workers’ demands as unpatriotic and claimed that the vocally anti-war IWW was an “outlaw organization.”

In late June 1917 the union voted to strike. By some scholars’ estimates, 90 percent of the mining workers went on strike; a large portion of these strikers were Mexican immigrants. A U.S. Deputy Marshal called it “the most peaceful, orderly strike I ever saw.” Although all the workers were men, women and families joined the picket lines in solidarity.
Three weeks after the strike began, an anti-union vigilante group called the Citizens’ Protective League met with Cochise County Sheriff Harry Wheeler and hatched a plan to defeat the workers. A rumor was circulating that the strike was planted by a conspiracy between pro-German sympathizers and Mexicans to sabotage the country’s production of copper and undermine the war effort. Sheriff Wheeler appointed 2,200 citizens—nearly all white men—as armed deputies to round up the striking workers.

The event that became known as the Bisbee deportation began just before dawn on July 12, 1917. Wheeler’s deputies picked up guns and scattered across Bisbee, busting in doors and arresting men in their homes. One worker was killed while attempting to defend his home against invasion. The deputies marched the deportees at gunpoint through the town and assembled them on a baseball field, where a crowd of family members and onlookers gathered. After herding the workers into 23 boxcars owned by the Phelps Dodge Company, they drove 180 miles into the desert and left them in the desert near Hermanas, New Mexico. In total, an estimated 1,200 strikers and their suspected sympathizers were expelled from Bisbee. Approximately 90 percent of the deportees were immigrants, hailing from at least 34 countries.

The deportees were taken in by the U.S. army camp in the border town of Columbus, NM. Although the fate of these men was once unknown, almost none of them returned to Bisbee. According to one deportee, the threat of persecution would make life “unendurable for them in Bisbee.” Six months after the deportation, Bisbee’s directory claimed that “no foreign labor is employed in the mines”; one scholar found just six percent of the identified deportees in a city directory months after the deportation. Following the deportation, the immigrant population of Bisbee was dramatically reduced, and the growing labor movement was crushed in mining cities across Arizona.

Sheriff Wheeler had carried out a sweeping anti-union purge, and the event made national headlines. Following a public outcry, President Woodrow Wilson appointed a federal commission to conduct an investigation into the incident. The commission found that “those who planned and directed [the deportation]...purposely abstained from consulting about their plans either with the United States attorney in Arizona or the law officers of the state or county”; their report concluded that the deportation was “wholly illegal” and “without justification, either in fact or in law.”¹ The New Republic described it as a “brutal resort to the spirit of mob violence.” However, the commission could not identify any federal laws that were violated. They ultimately recommended the creation of new laws to protect striking workers, but the perpetrators of the Bisbee deportation never faced legal consequences.

Sources:


¹ “The President’s Commission at Bisbee,” 140.


**Bisbee in the 21st Century**

**2007**
Freeport McMoran buys Phelps-Dodge Corporation

**2010**
Arizona passes SB 1070, which requires non-Americans over 18 years old to carry proper documentation with them at all times.

**2012**
In Arizona v. U.S., the U.S. Supreme Court struck down most provisions of SB 1070.

**2016**
Donald Trump, who ran partially on the promise to increase border security and prevent immigration from Latin America, is elected President.

**2017**
On July 12, 2017, the Bisbee community marks the 100th anniversary of the “Bisbee deportation” for the documentary *Bisbee '17*.

**2018**
In an interview with NPR, director Greene said that “when we first started talking about reenactment, people were worried about trivializing it. And that's partly because when we started making the film in October of 2016, no one suspected at the time how relevant and scary it would be to be recreating this in July of 2017.”
While watching the clips from *Bisbee '17*, take notes by responding to the following questions:

**Clip 1: The Ray Brothers**

1. What is the Ray family’s connection to the Bisbee Deportation? What roles did their ancestors play in the events?

2. What are the opinions of Mrs. Ray and her sons on the historical events? (Write down quotes that illustrate her opinions.)

3. Do the Ray brothers share their mother’s opinions about the Deportation? (Write down quotes that illustrate their perspectives.)
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<th>Defenses of the mining company’s actions:</th>
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What are the arguments for and against the mining company’s actions before and during the Bisbee Deportation?
Discuss the film and article with your group by responding to the following questions:

1. What are the conflicting narratives of the Bisbee Deportation shown in the film?

2. How was the story of the Bisbee Deportation passed down to the contemporary Bisbee community? How did this process contribute to the conflicting historical narratives? What factors have influenced the historical narratives that individual Bisbee residents have adopted?

3. How does the process of collaborative reenactment reflect the challenges inherent to historical research and writing?

4. The film’s historical advisor, Georgetown University Professor Katherine Benton-Cohen, asked, “As professional historians...what do we owe the people and places we study?” Consider how power imbalances shape the relationship between scholars and the communities they study. How do you think historians should enlist a community's current residents as collaborators in the researching and telling of history? Are there limits to how much local stakeholders should have a say in how their history should be told? Are historians unbiased? Does the answer change if we know that Benton-Cohen’s grandfather was born in Cochise County shortly before the Deportation? Why or why not?
While watching the film, record scenes and quotes that show how the Bisbee Deportation reenactment affected community members:
Work with your group to respond to the following questions:

What factors influenced the Bisbee community’s historical memory before and after the reenactment of the deportation?

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Compare/contrast the roles that evidence and emotion play in shaping historical memory? What examples can you point to that support your position?

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