

Mining Folklore

Patricia Music

In the New Mexican Hispanic tradition, *duendes* are ghosts of children who can inhabit mines. They play mischievous pranks, sometimes tossing pebbles around. Generally they're thought to be good luck, and a mine with a *duende* is blessed.

Tommyknockers, brought to New Mexico by the Cornish miners, signal danger by knocking on the walls. A miner who hears a tommyknocker will immediately look around to see if he's been careless or a dangerous situation has developed.

Occasionally, miners are warned by the ghost of Bonnie Coone, who died during the Alaska gold rush. He and his partner had found a paying claim, but his greedy comrade killed him by causing a cave-in. When a miner sees Bonnie Coone, he must immediately search for

the reason the spirit came to warn. But if he's smiling or whistling, no danger exists. He's just visiting.

Priests regularly came to bless the mines, and shrines were often constructed underground. Hispanic Catholic mining families in southwestern New Mexico celebrated Holy Cross Day, May 3rd. Miners didn't work on this day. They walked in procession through the mine, carrying a handmade cross and lighting off gunpowder along the way. At the bottom of the mine, they lit candles and prayed for safety. Then they brought the cross back out of the mine, and women joined in a procession to the home where the cross would be installed. A fiesta followed.

Mining is a very hazardous occupation, so it is not surprising that miners occasionally receive a little help from supernatural sources.

Patricia Music, who has an M.A. in American Studies, lives in Silver City, New Mexico, and began work on mining folklore several years ago when she married a working miner.

Richard Manning separates larger rocks on a grizzly (sorter), at the Challenge mill and smelter near Mogollon, New Mexico. Photo by Patricia Music

