



Juan José Gradillo (ca. 1830–unknown)

Tohono O’odham Discoverer of the Vekol Silver Mine

2019 Inductee from Mining's Past

Before the earliest European miners explored the Southwest in the sixteenth century, Native Americans had been collecting minerals and rocks in the region for thousands of years. Puebloan peoples worked deposits in the Santa Fe area more than a thousand years ago, mining turquoise and galena from quarries and underground workings, and early European miners at Morenci found wooden ladders and stone hammers in ancient stopes. Around Tucson and Phoenix, the O’odham and their Hohokam ancestors collected brightly colored pigments and local stone for a variety of utilitarian and spiritual purposes. In the late nineteenth century, O’odham traditional knowledge of mineral resources led to the discovery of one of the richest silver lodes in Arizona Territory: the Vekol mine.

Juan José Gradillo was the Tohono O’odham man who discovered the Vekol silver mine in 1879. The mine is in the Vekol Mountains, about 30 miles southwest of modern Casa Grande, on land that is now part of the Tohono O’odham Nation. The exact circumstances of the discovery are uncertain, but Gradillo alone seems to have discovered the lode that came to be known as Vekol, Tohono O’odham for “grandmother.” Shortly after his discovery, Juan José shared the news with former Army captain and federal Indian agent John D. Walker. Gradillo, Walker, and another man,

Peter R. Brady, soon staked out the rich silver cropping, and in February 1880 the three men together filed a claim on it. It was one of the few times in Arizona history where Native Americans and Anglo-Americans jointly filed a mining claim. Later in 1880, Juan José sold his interest in the mine to his two partners and settled down on his homestead near Florence, not far from the farm of Captain Walker. Within a year, the Vekol had become one of the largest producers of silver in Arizona Territory, and a substantial town had grown up around the mine. The mine remained a top silver producer through the 1880s and was worked to lesser degrees until 1894, the year Captain Walker died.

Because of the strong prejudice of most nineteenth-century Anglo-Americans against the Tohono O'odham, Gradillo was given little credit for his discovery of the Vekol. But his contributions as a pioneer miner of Arizona are worthy of remembering and honoring. Long after Gradillo's death, the partnership between the mining industry and the O'odham continued with the development of the Cyprus Tohono mine on the Tohono O'odham Nation, in the shadow of the Vekol Mountains. The Tohono O'odham and other Native Americans continue to contribute to the American mining industry today.