

Herbert Hoover and the Burma Mines

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Well before he became the thirty-first president of the United States, Herbert Hoover had a lengthy career as a mining engineer. By the time he abandoned mining engineering during the First World War, Hoover was one of the world's leading mining engineers although by that point one could argue that his role had less to do with mining engineering per se and far more to do with mining finance. (Thus one of the last mining activities in which Hoover engaged was to facilitate the financing that led to the creation of Anglo-American Corporation.) Hoover was based in London for the last decade of his mining career and the companies with which he was associated spanned the globe. One of the least well-known – despite its relative success – was the Burma Mines, situated at Bawdwin in what were then known as the Northern Shan States, Burma, some one hundred kilometres from the Chinese border. Originally the site of Chinese silver mining, the Bawdwin mines -- or rather the immense slag heaps that marked the site of the mines – came to the attention of the British in the late nineteenth century. In the early 1900s Hoover and other mining engineers inspected the mines and realized that new smelting methods meant that the slag heaps at the mines were themselves extremely valuable. In addition, they assumed – as it turned out, correctly – that modern mining technology might well enable a continued successful career for the mines themselves. Consequently Hoover and his colleagues successfully floated the Burma Mines Railway and Smelting Company on the London market in early 1906. The purpose of this paper is to describe the formation and early career of the company, and to make the argument that it is illustrative of trends that would characterize the mining industry for much of the twentieth century.