

THE DAWSON STORY
by Donald G. Secrest

Note. The following article appeared in a Taos newspaper in the summer of 1950. The edition has long since been exhausted, but because of the interest expressed in "The Dawson Story", it is here reproduced in full.

Much has been written recently about the passing of our neighbor town, Dawson, and almost all of it by someone who has obtained his information by superficial inquiry, or from a short visit to Dawson for the purpose of describing things as they now are. Nowhere have we seen anything by a Dawson, resident, or former resident, who has seen the rise and decline of this ill-fated town. Not that those articles which have appeared lately are erroneous, or misleading, but to really appreciate just what northern New Mexico is losing, one should know something about Dawson as it once was, as well as to see only its demise.

Early in the century, Phelps Dodge Corporation found it necessary to have an unfailing supply of coke for its large copper smelters in Arizona. Since Colfax County coal contained the properties essential in making coke, the corporation purchased the holdings of the late J. B. Dawson—about 50,000 acres, and opened the first Dawson mine. A railroad was constructed from Tucumcari, in fact all the way from El Paso: The El Paso & Northeastern, later renamed the El Paso & Southwestern—now a branch of Southern Pacific, This was direct transportation from the mine to the smelters and also furnished an almost unlimited supply of fuel for the Southern Pacific and Rock Island Railways. These markets for coal and coke, then, brought about the rapid development of the property—the birth of a "coal city" almost in the center of this large area, and a tonnage of from 65 million tons to 75 million tons of coal. The Corporation, primarily a copper producer and fabricator, was now relieved of the long haul and almost prohibitive cost of essential smelter fuel, coke, required prior to this purchase.

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Almost everyone thinks of a "coal camp" as a collection of shacks built helter-skelter about a mine mouth, surrounded by large piles of slack and ashes, covered with soot and smoke; nothing attractive or pleasant, or more from the resident center of the town. In that period beginning just before the World War I, a large number of modern residences were constructed of different design. Sidewalks and shade trees were added, sanitary sewers built, a large new store building put up, a bank opened. Dawson then took its place among the important and larger towns in this section of the State.

Aside from the form of its government, which was under control of the owning company, Dawson was much like any other thriving small city. The fact that it once passed the County Seat in population was a source of much satisfaction to many Dawson-ites, but rather a touchy question when mentioned in the presence of Raton friends, however, such a condition lasted only a short time, as Raton, with its more permanent future assured, continued to grow. Since everything in Dawson—and we mean everything—was owned by Phelps Dodge, and residents were there only because of employment by this Corporation, or in some concession, it is easy to understand that there was never any very poor or very rich among its inhabitants. Charity as well as crime was almost unknown in Dawson.

To this observer, the most interesting thing about the town, seen from a long range, now, was its cosmopolitan makeup. Many European nationalities made up the population—Italian, Slav (in its many groups), Greek, English, including Welsh and Scotch, Mexican, and few French and even German, with some Japanese and a Chinaman or two and "us Americans" from practically every corner of the United States—such a collection in a rather isolated canyon, made for an interesting, if unorthodox, New Mexico town.

The Mercantile department built a large three-story brick building in the "plaza" in 1914. Strictly modern for that date, with fully equipped bakery, ice-plant (turning out 5000 pounds of ice each twenty-four hours), with hardware, furniture, ready-made clothing, shoes and of course groceries and meats, this store with three branches in 1919 employed more than sixty men and women. Although prices were probably a little higher than elsewhere one must remember that a journey to Raton, 35 miles away, was quite a trip, considering the roads and automobiles of that day.

An institution that has passed in recent years is the "Miners Boarding House". Scores of young unmarried immigrants, as well as scores of married men who had left their families in "the old country" lived in these boarding houses, of which Dawson had a dozen or more. The "Boarding Boss" was usually a Greek or Italian, and of course his boarders were about 100 percent of his nationality. These groups amused themselves during idle days and holidays and Sundays by playing their native games, and treating visitors and friends with dishes and foods peculiar to their native land.

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The Dawson schools developed in the period 1910-1925 from two, three or four-room frame buildings to a large brick and stone High School, and a modern grade school buildings "down town". At one time there were more than forty teachers in the "system". Athletic and Music Departments were especially outstanding. The record of Dawson High School in football and basketball will not soon be forgotten. Never a "big team", but for many years in the top bracket. Interest by the townspeople in these school teams was amazing. The Dawson coach once lamented the fact that there was no turf of the football field. In a short time men women and children were out with hoes, rakes, and shovels and by the next year a fine grassed field was ready for the opening game. Never did a house in the town stay open for business during a game- to have done so would have meant a boycott of the owners.

At the peak of its production activity, Dawson maintained a modern hospital with a staff of five doctors and a full corps of nurses, with twenty-four hour service. A complete laboratory, surgery, x-ray apparatus, a half dozen Private rooms, and two large wards, a nurses' home and employees' quarters were maintained for many years. Near the hospital was the Dispensary, which not only housed the doctors' office but two dental offices and the actual dispensary handled by a registered pharmacist. Perhaps a little like "socialized" medicine that we hear much of these days, but every employee paid into the company monthly a small fee, and this entitled the workers' family to all medicine and treatment except for major injuries or illnesses, not the result of employment.

Three day switch crews and two night crews handled the continuous line of railway cars which snaked down to the main line from the mines and coke ovens. In fact, so many railroad men and their families lived in Dawson at one time that a section of the town was set apart for them, known as "Railroad Row".

One day in 1913 the president of the Corporation, Dr. James Douglas, dropped into town in his special car for one of his frequent "inspection tours". The leader of the local band, an Italian baker, and his fifty or more band members with their instruments, met the train. When the good old doctor stopped off his car, he was welcomed with a concert in his honor. The Band boys,, though had no uniforms. Just as the President was leaving next day, he called the resident General Manager over to his car, had him present the band-master, and ordered fifty five uniforms for the boys, the bill to be sent to his own office.

The Bank of Dawson was chartered by the State in 1914, having been operated as a private bank in connection with the company's cashier for several years previous as the E. P. 7 N. E. Company. At the time of the voluntary liquidation of the bank in 1931, it had over \$800,000.00 in deposits, 75% of which were savings. Miners had little use for checking accounts. Most transactions were with cash.

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Dawson also had its tragedy; two of the worst mine explosions in the history of the industry in the United States. One on October 22nd, 1913, which took the lives of 265 miners, and two rescue men. The other in February, 1923, when 125 miners were almost instantly killed. The former disaster was generally accepted to have been caused by the disobedience of a miner of both company regulations and State Laws,--the latter, a "dust explosion", no doubt resulted in the installation of safety measures and devices which had been neglected before that time. Both these unfortunate affairs cost hundreds of thousands of dollars, and changed a small plot over in a quiet valley near town to a field of crossed, "row on row".

Dawson had the oldest golf club in the state, in terms of continuous existence. Soccer flourished there during the days when many Welsh and Scotch resided in the town. A modern swimming pool was installed by the Company. Bowling alleys and pool and billiards were operated by a Company employee. The Amusement Hall, after vaudeville days, became a picture theatre with daily shows. A Lodge Room occupied by Masons, Alianza Hispana-- a Croatian Society, an Italian Lodge and Eastern Star. A Men's Social Club, also operated for more than twenty years. A spacious Catholic Church with resident priests, and the usual laymen's organizations held forth for many years. A Protestant "Union Chapel", the gift of Dr. Douglas, a Presbyterian was among the first public buildings erected in the town, dedicated and for many years administered by an Episcopal Minister, and for the last 20 years or more by a Presbyterian, the religious side of the populace was never neglected.

We have heard much of the abuses of the worker eliminated by the advent of the "Union". It is true that many companies took advantage of this lack of organization and followed many unfair practices, we agree that much improvement as to working conditions, wages, etc., resulted by organization, but we also feel that the pendulum had swung too far in the opposite direction and that those who complained strongest against the employer, are now responsible in a great degree for their present status. It is not, however, the purpose of this article to discuss the "labor and management" problem.

We can only feel sorry for these who have spent the greater part of their lives in one community, who are familiar with only one type of work, and who are now forced to seek new homes, and if possible, new jobs--the victims of the short-sightedness of a very small minority.

Dawson, an important town, doing business in our neighborhood, is gone, but those of us who experienced the rise and decline of this unusual city, can only look back with a great deal of pleasure to the friendships formed there, and say--"Dawson, adios".';