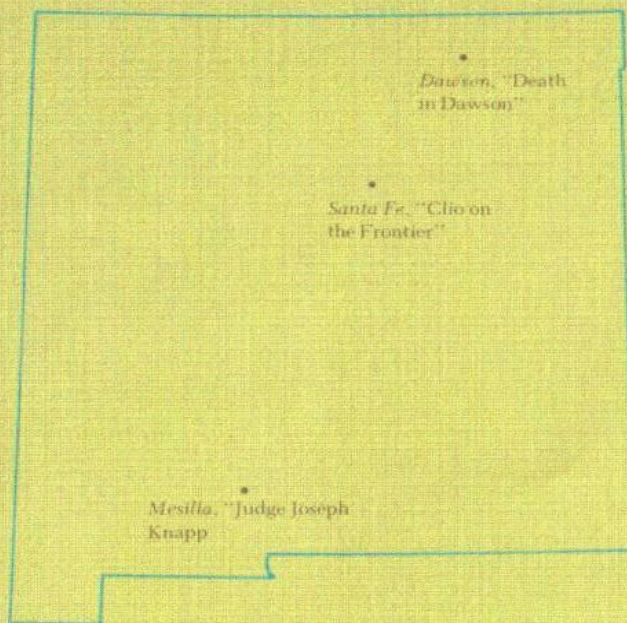


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A DEATH IN DAWSON:
THE DEMISE OF A SOUTHWESTERN
COMPANY TOWN

RICHARD MELZER

THE MINERS OF DAWSON, NEW MEXICO, knew many deaths in the short, tragic history of their coal camp. Three workers were killed in a mine fire on September 4, 1903, just sixteen months after the first carload of coal had passed over Dawson's original tippie. A decade later, on October 23, 1913, 265 men were lost in one of the worst mine explosions in American history. In an ironic coincidence, a third explosion took the lives of another 120 miners exactly ten years later. These three disasters stamped Dawson as the "most tragedy ridden camp" in New Mexico.¹ Still others were lost in epidemics, like the great flu epidemic of 1918, and in violent crimes, like the infamous Walter Byers murder of 1910.² Some were also killed in combat overseas; two Dawsonites lost their lives in the First World War, and several died on the Bataan Death March and in World War II.³

But the death in Dawson that affected the greatest number of lives had nothing to do with explosions, murders, diseases, or wars. The death that affected the greatest number of lives had to do with the demise of the company town in 1950.

The closing was hardly an unusual occurrence in the post-World War II era. According to the *Christian Science Monitor*, the coal company town was an "old blight on the American scene" that was quickly disappearing by the spring of 1950. The *Monitor* explained that these towns had been built at the turn of the century because coal operators could not attract workers to isolated coal regions without offering housing of some kind. Unfortunately, the housing provided was often less than satisfactory. Company towns were, in fact, described as no better than slums

with poor heating, terrible sanitation, and few paved roads. By the 1940s, however, the miners could afford to buy homes and cars and thus could drive to work from farther distances. In 1950 the National Coal Association reported that four out of every five miners in the country had either purchased homes or were now renting from private landlords rather than from their employers. With the coal companies withdrawing from real estate business, "whole towns were taken over by individual occupants," and few company camps remained in the coal regions of Indiana, Illinois, western Kentucky, Missouri, and Kansas.⁴

Dawson's demise, therefore, was not unusual. But did the same factors cause its closing that had contributed to the closing of other coal camps in the east? Was Dawson a typically run-down camp that fell victim to the modernizing forces at work in the United States, or was this town different from those the *Monitor* described? In short, were the causes for Dawson's demise unique or extraordinary in the postwar era?

These questions take on a far greater significance because while many historians have considered the growth and development of western towns, few have considered the cause and effect of urban *decay* in large towns like Dawson. Important studies, from Richard C. Wade's *The Urban Frontier* to Duane A. Smith's more recent *Rocky Mountain Mining Camps*, focus largely on the forces and individuals who promoted and facilitated the rise of Western towns.⁵ With few exceptions, the forces and individuals involved in the decline of many frontier communities have either been forgotten or brushed over lightly with a wide brush, as in the case of James B. Allen's *Company Town in the American West*.⁶ If "the urban Southwest is perhaps the most neglected area of historical study," as Bradford Luckingham suggests,⁷ then the decline of major towns in this region is the most unexplored aspect of an already-neglected field. The history of Dawson's demise will, therefore, provide new detail in a small corner of a large canvas that has yet to be filled in and seriously analyzed by American historians.

Dawson began to die as early as the mid-1920s. The coal camp had served as the major supplier of coking fuel for the Phelps

Dodge copper smelting plants of Arizona during most of its first twenty-five years of existence. Given this enormous task, Dawson became the largest town in the Southwest that a single industry supported. However, the coke burning furnaces of Arizona had been replaced by oil burning reverberatory furnaces by 1926. The coke produced in Dawson was no longer needed. With the camp's 446 beehive ovens shut down in November 1926, the number of Phelps Dodge employees began to decrease rapidly. An entire section of town, known as Loretta, was abandoned as 211 workers, or 19.2 percent of the total work force, were laid off during the next two years.⁸ So many were, in fact, laid off in this period that the miners joked that if the superintendent died and found six pallbearers at his funeral, he'd fire two of them.⁹ When the Rock Island Railroad converted to oil-burning locomotives in 1928 the camp lost another major customer.¹⁰

Faced with a rapidly declining coal market, Phelps Dodge reacted by introducing new mechanical loading devices to replace hand loading methods in the mines and to cut down on the cost of labor. More men were laid off as the company reported to its stockholders that production from mechanical operations equaled 61,360 tons, or as much as 7.3 percent of the total coal mined in 1928. Pleased with these results, the company made plans to introduce additional labor-saving machinery in the following year.¹¹

These and other plans were largely shelved, however, in 1929 when Dawson and the nation suddenly faced the most devastating economic crash in American history. Coal production plummeted nearly 72 percent during the next four years in Dawson. Five mines were closed, and, of the 878 employees in camp in 1928, only 300 remained in 1932.¹² Single workers were the first to be laid off, but not even married men could expect to work more than two or three days a week in these hard times.¹³ Many husbands relied on credit from the company store to get by while others enlarged their yard gardens, shot game in the wilderness, or sought temporary work on nearby farms. Some men wandered as far away as California and Wyoming to find employment during the worst periods of the depression.¹⁴

The young seemed particularly hard hit in the 1930s. Unable to go directly into the mines from high school, as most had done in

TABLE I
Annual Coal Production, Employment, & Population

Year	Tons of Coal Produced	Number of Employees	Total Population
1902	97,840		600
1903	371,744		
1904	380,664	600	
1905	508,008		2000
1906	663,292		
1907	435,822		4000
1908	846,474		
1909	1,096,111		
1910	1,381,457		3119*
1911	1,148,471		
1912	1,383,562		5000
1913	1,322,813		
1914	1,355,938		5000
1915	1,265,674		5000
1916	1,439,904		5000
1917	1,406,079	2000	6000
1918	1,339,292	1693	
1919	893,585		
1920	1,114,330		4045*
1921	724,509		
1922	1,056,933		
1923	997,637	1548	6000
1924	898,031	1357	
1925	825,886	1071	
1926	990,312	1089	4500
1927	975,294	1023	5000
1928	842,166	878	
1929	710,524	593	
1930	389,344	461	
1931	306,044	431	
1932	248,236	300	2000
1933	204,184	307	
1934	258,497	329	
1935	256,788	323	
1936	267,118	316	
1937	271,178	333	2500
1938	225,068	326	
1939	217,235	306	
1940	234,843	328	1800
1941	298,614	374	2000
1942	282,922	390	
1943	320,970	349	
1944	374,630	315	
1945	373,636	301	
1946	350,133	306	1470
1947	394,672	327	
1948	357,114	334	
1949	280,323	258	
1950	66,265		1200

*represents registered voting population only

Sources: M. P. Scanlon to the author, Douglas, Arizona, October 26, 1978. Scanlon is presently a vice president in the Phelps Dodge Corporation. Phelps Dodge, Annual Reports, 1910-50; New Mexico State Mine Inspector's Annual Reports, 1913-50; *Dawson News*, 1921-29; *New Mexico State Business Director & Economic Handbook*, 1918-47.

the past, young males searched for temporary odd jobs, went off to Civilian Conservation camps, or waited for a chance to work in town.¹⁵ In the words of one destitute youth, the date of his graduation was the "blackest day of my life" because he suddenly realized that he had no job in Dawson; he was forced to wait two long years before a job finally opened up for him in camp.¹⁶ Others left, never to return as Dawson gradually lost its youth and showed further signs of aging.

The onset of World War II quickened this aging process. Ironically, the war revitalized the coal industry and saved the nation from the depths of the Great Depression, but practically robbed small towns like Dawson of their remaining youth. Many boys entered the military from Dawson; some even left to enlist before their graduation from high school. As many as eight young soldiers, or 21 percent of the graduating class, had their parents accept their diplomas for them on graduation day in 1943. Old-timers estimate that by 1944, 6 percent of the town's population had enlisted or had been drafted into the armed services.¹⁷

Faced with this loss, but eager to exploit the wartime demand for coal,¹⁸ Phelps Dodge employed older men with little or no experience in the mines. According to one observer, the company was willing to "hire a shepherd or anyone else who came along" to overcome the acute labor shortage.¹⁹ Indeed, one is struck by the advanced age of most of those pictured in a 1942 photograph of mine workers in Dawson.²⁰ With little time for training these older men, the possibility of a major accident in the mines increased enormously. Miraculously, none occurred.²¹ Many town residents, in fact, recall that except for the absence of the camp's young men, it was very hard to tell that a war was going on.²² The mines were operated seven days a week, the local hospital remained well-stocked with medical supplies, and even sugar and meat were said to be plentiful.²³ Despite wartime rationing, Dawson enjoyed a privileged status as part of a vital war industry; only silk stockings remained in short supply throughout the war.²⁴ An occasional blackout drill, a federal raid to confiscate guns and radio transmitters owned by Italians, and a bitterly criticized sixty-seven day nation-wide coal strike sometimes forced the

miners to face events in the outside world, but few residents remembered these incidents once the war had ended and the boys had safely returned to camp in 1945.²⁵

World War II, therefore, gave Dawson a short reprieve after years of decline in the Great Depression. War production climbed from 234,843 tons of coal mined in 1940 to 374,630 tons mined in 1944 as Dawson experienced an Indian summer of economic prosperity.²⁶ The future suddenly looked bright for the small camp. However, four disturbing trends stymied even this limited progress.

First, while 373,630 tons of coal represented a fourteen-year high in Dawson's coal production, it also represented a significant decline in production compared to the average annual production of even the earliest years in Dawson's development. In other words, the camp was revitalized during the war, but only to a small degree and hardly at all compared to its more prosperous past. In fact, Dawson's highest wartime production equaled only 55 percent of the camp's average yearly production from 1902 to 1950.²⁷

Next, it is noteworthy that while production slowly declined, total camp employees first declined and then leveled off in the 1940s. The company's earlier plan to introduce laborsaving and cost-reducing machinery was reintroduced in this period and was largely responsible for this new employment trend. The number of employees in Dawson averaged 364 in the first five years of the Great Depression but dropped to 305 in the first five years after World War II.²⁸

Given this situation, few young men found jobs in Dawson when they returned home from overseas.²⁹ Few were interested in any case. Dawson's GIs had seen other parts of the world and had learned of new opportunities outside the confines of their hometown. Many had developed self-confidence and valuable skills in the military; few now believed the old adage, once a miner, always a miner.³⁰ The youth drain that began during the Great Depression and World War II worsened in the post-war era.

In a third alarming trend, signs of Dawson's dying were apparent to even the most casual observers. Deserted buildings were

conspicuous in every section of town. The town pool was abandoned, and the number of organized social activities were drastically reduced after 1945. Those who remained at work slowly migrated downtown so that while different ethnic groups had previously lived in different sections of the camp, they began to mix in a single area after the war.³¹ Dawson's maintenance crew now spent most of its time repairing mining equipment rather than working on the upkeep of company buildings and miners' homes.³² Foreseeing the end, some small businessmen who leased their facilities from the company began to move on to greener pastures in Albuquerque and Raton.³³ Predictably, school enrollment also dwindled; Dawson High's commencement program listed forty-five graduates in 1939, but only twenty graduates received their diplomas in 1950.³⁴ Of those interviewed, 66 percent claim that the "handwriting was on the wall" in the post-war era.³⁵ The remaining 34 percent deceived themselves into believing that the paving of the main road into camp and the existence of thirty-five million tons of unmined coal in the surrounding hills proved that Dawson would survive, if only as a small town.³⁶ Few of these people knew that the results of a Phelps Dodge drilling operation "undertaken to locate additional coal reserves minable at a competitive cost" had proven to be "disappointing."³⁷ Few of the 34 percent realized that Dawson was doomed.

The fourth and final disturbing trend of this period involved labor-management relations. Phelps Dodge had resisted the United Mine Workers' attempts to organize the people of Dawson since the earliest days of the camp's history. Labor organizers were either kept out of town and blacklisted if they were outsiders or "kicked down the canyon" if they were local employees.³⁸ Old-timers recall that the men could not even mention the unions for fear of losing their jobs in the mines. Conditions hardly improved in the 1920s when Phelps Dodge attempted to pacify its employees with an overtly benevolent system of welfare capitalism.³⁹ Despite this new policy, the company still resorted to coercive, violent methods whenever labor organizers challenged its authority in Dawson. As late as 1933, a radical labor leader named Martha

Roberts had to be hurried from house to house in the dark of night to evade the camp marshal and his men.⁴⁰

Not even the passage of Section 7a of the National Industrial Recovery Act changed conditions in Dawson at first. This law, which Congress passed in 1933, guaranteed labor's right to unionize, bargain collectively, and obtain better working conditions. Encouraged by the new federal legislation, camp miners soon attempted to organize a UMW local under the leadership of Pee Wee Gallegos (the president), Tony Montoya, Sylver Lorenzo, and a miner who is simply remembered as Raúl.⁴¹ Not permitted to congregate in camp, these men and their followers were forced to meet five miles south of town at the Colfax Pavilion.⁴² Angered by this inconvenience and the company's refusal to deal with his local, President Gallegos showed up for work one morning and threw the water from his lunch bucket in a symbolic gesture that signaled the beginning of a wildcat strike. Many men followed their leader out of Dawson's mines.⁴³

Phelps Dodge reacted to this labor activity by firing Gallegos and cutting off the electricity to his house until he was forced to leave town.⁴⁴ The company also countered the UMW local by attempting to organize its union with representatives from each of the major ethnic groups in town. Recognized as a sham by the miners, this company union was discredited and abandoned within months after its creation.⁴⁵

Phelps Dodge nevertheless learned from these mistakes. Still unwilling to recognize a union and sign a formal contract, the company finally recognized the need to meet with local leaders and avoid antagonizing the men directly. Union members were now allowed to gather in the downtown gymnasium free of charge. Union leaders were not overtly discriminated against, and, in a dramatic turnabout, a mine foreman approved union membership when approached on the subject by a perplexed miner in 1934.⁴⁶ Gilbert Davis, the general superintendent, began to parley with local leaders, and, while little was accomplished at their meetings, labor-management relations remained peaceful, and wages remained at the same level as those paid at mines under UMW contracts. Issues involving checkweighmen, deadwork, retirement plans, old-age pensions, union recognition, and the checking off of

union dues went unresolved and caused at least one strike a year, but these strikes were usually short and seldom violent.⁴⁷ National sympathy strikes were similarly uneventful in Dawson.⁴⁸

This situation nevertheless changed in 1943. Beginning on May 1, the miners of Dawson joined a nationwide coal strike in support of the closed shop, higher wages, and the checking off of union dues. Negotiations dragged on for more than two months, despite the wartime emergency and despite the fact that many soldiers from Dawson thought the walkout represented a stab in the nation's back during some of the most difficult days of World War II. Exasperated by the labor stalemate, the federal government seized control of the mines on two occasions in 1943.⁴⁹

The conflict was finally settled in November, but its length and the interference of outside agencies seemed to accentuate the need for more direct relations with the local union. As a result, Dawson's new superintendent, G. O. Arnold, asked local leaders for a year to get settled in camp before he would sign a UMW contract. Arnold was as good as his word. A formal contract was signed in 1945, and Dawson became a closed shop for the first time in its forty-three-year history.⁵⁰ The miners thereafter won several new benefits, including a crucial retirement plan and portal to portal pay. Phelps Dodge, however, grew increasingly dissatisfied with its new labor contract. The company insisted that the price of new union benefits served only to drive up the cost of mining coal and made the fuel even less competitive with more modern sources of energy on the market. A company official claimed that the union was receiving a larger percentage of the profits than the company in the late 1940s.⁵¹ In the words of a second official, "the coal miner priced himself right out of business."⁵²

Phelps Dodge also grew less satisfied with its new contract because, while the frequency of strikes based on local issues had decreased drastically, the frequency of national strikes had not. The company complained that despite its formal contract with UMW President John L. Lewis, it never knew when it could expect a strike, no less when it could expect to deliver coal to its customers. Lewis was denounced as an arbitrary, selfish dictator.⁵³ Befuddled by Lewis and his seemingly irrational behavior, Phelps Dodge reported to its stockholders that a 21.5 percent

decline in coal production from 1948 to 1949 resulted from operators being "adversely affected by five separate and partial strikes, with a loss of thirty-five working days" in the latter year. The company's annual report of 1949 went on to explain that Dawson's last major customer, the Southern Pacific Railroad, had indicated that

in view of high coal prices and its inability to assure itself of a steady supply of coal due to labor conditions in the coal industry, it plans shortly to substitute diesel and oil-burning engines for coal-burning locomotives on its Rio Grande division.⁵⁴

Southern Pacific's last twenty-five coal-burning locomotives were to be abandoned as the railroad turned to diesel fuel for its remaining 1475 engines.⁵⁵ The uncertainty of labor walkouts was finally eliminated for the Southern Pacific Railroad because, in the words of a Raton newsman, workers could picket a coal mine, but "you can't picket [an oil or] gas line."⁵⁶ Having lost its last major customer, Phelps Dodge announced to its stockholders in late 1949 that it "planned to shut the Dawson property down permanently at some time in 1950" because "earnings from this property have been relatively insignificant . . . in recent years."⁵⁷

Official word of Dawson's closing was posted on various bulletin boards around town at high noon on February 25, 1950. The announcement came in a letter from Superintendent Arnold to UMW President Lewis. Arnold notified Lewis that the company's most recent labor contract would be terminated when school let out, and the mines were to be closed in late April.⁵⁸ Despite the explanation given to Phelps Dodge stockholders in 1949, Arnold chose to make his official announcement at the height of yet another coal strike in Dawson.⁵⁹ This walkout lasted four weeks, involving 600 miners in Colfax County and 370,000 miners nationwide.⁶⁰ Put simply by a man who had mined in Dawson for thirty-three years, the union "had gone out on strike once too often."⁶¹ This final walkout represented the proverbial straw that broke the camel's back; few could dispute President Harry Truman's appraisal that the coal business was "a sick industry" with little hope for recovery in 1950.⁶²

Even those who had recognized Dawson's decline were "shocked" and "amazed" when they learned of the camp's scheduled closing.⁶³ As one woman put it, there were only two times in her life when it seemed like the world was coming to an end: when Franklin D. Roosevelt died in 1945 and when Dawson died in 1950.⁶⁴ Some miners resented the company's sudden announcement, while others accepted it as one more tragedy in a profession where tragedies were expected and somehow tolerated by their survivors.⁶⁵

But few were prepared for the end. Most of those who remained in 1950 had spent the better part of their lives in Dawson and most of their working days in the mines.⁶⁶ They had not planned for other careers or for homes in other towns. "We didn't think about a rainy day," explained one resident, "until the day after the flood."⁶⁷ Some did not even have the money to leave Dawson after the February strike that eliminated their scarce savings.⁶⁸ To make matters worse, the miners' credit at the company store was cut off, and their outstanding debts to the store were deducted from their last paychecks, leaving them with less money for moving expenses.⁶⁹ Transfers to other branches of the company were rare,⁷⁰ and no one received much aid from the local union. The miners had hoped that some of the local union fund of \$3,000 might be used in this emergency, but a union official explained that the money could be used only for pensions, for hospitalization, or for the international labor organization.⁷¹ The state welfare director meanwhile told the miners that they were eligible for relief only if they qualified for old-age assistance or met the stringent requirements for direct aid.⁷² Unemployment checks were available for a few weeks, and some veterans could still draw on their bonus checks from World War II,⁷³ but, as an Albuquerque reporter wrote, the men knew that "their fate had thrust them into a sudden no man's land for which there [was] no Red Cross or ready relief."⁷⁴ Disappointed that not even Washington could help them, the miners complained that although the United States could invest millions of dollars in the Marshall Plan to save war-torn Europe, no federal funds could be spared to save their hometown.⁷⁵

But this hardly meant that the people of Dawson gave up their

town and their jobs without a fight. Several local men attempted to rescue the camp with new plans for Dawson and its remaining inhabitants. It was suggested, for example, that Dawson might become a manufacturing center or a source of labor for a proposed dam and irrigation project on the Vermejo River.⁷⁶ President Truman vetoed the latter project, however, and not even appeals to Senators Dennis Chavez and Clinton P. Anderson could save it in time to help Dawson.⁷⁷ Undaunted, Fritz Koehling and other town leaders attempted to lease the property from Phelps Dodge and mine the coal on their own, but the company rejected this ambitious undertaking before it ever got off the ground.⁷⁸ No one seemed to have sufficient political or economic clout to institute workable plans for the moribund town.

What, then, did the citizens of Dawson do to survive their crisis? Some transferred to nearby coal camps like Koehler, while others found employment rather easily because they were trained in marketable trades, like teaching or barbering.⁷⁹ Still others were fortunate enough to have athletic sons who were recruited, with the promise of a job for their dads, by towns including Tucumcari, Clayton, Springer, and Albuquerque.⁸⁰ Those without the assets of athletic sons or valuable skills were far less fortunate in their search for new jobs and homes. Young Fred Marcelli, for example, spent a month and a half in Albuquerque, but could find temporary jobs lasting only from two to three days each. With no experience outside the mines, Marcelli explained the main problem in finding a new career: "When I go to ask for work they ask if I've had experience. I haven't so they don't hire me, but how am I going to get experience driving semi-trailers if they won't let me drive semi-trailers?"⁸¹ Faced with this dilemma, no more than 25 percent of the 200 union members in Dawson had found work by the late spring of 1950.⁸²

Housing was almost as difficult to find. Elbert Rivera explained that he had searched for a new home for months in Albuquerque, Santa Fe, and Raton without success.⁸³ Housing was, in fact, so scarce that some Dawsonites purchased their previously rented homes for \$50 to \$400 and went to the added expense of having the structures moved out of town on trucks.⁸⁴ Of the 450 dwellings

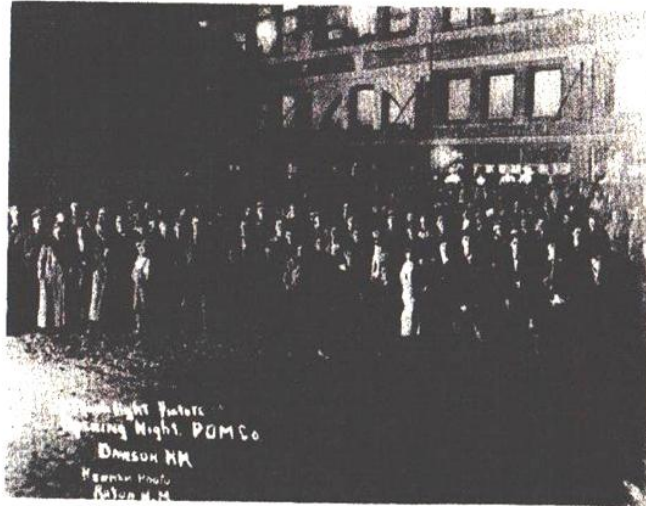
in camp in 1950, only twelve remained standing the following October as outsiders joined former residents in buying up whole blocks of houses.⁸⁶ Given the hardships encountered in finding homes and jobs far from isolated Dawson, few ventured out of town before April 1950. The exodus from town began very slowly.⁸⁶

However, before the miners left Dawson a corps of newsmen came to witness the large camp's closing and to interview the displaced miners. Surprisingly, the newsmen did not find what they had expected to see in Dawson. Rather than anger and distress, most outsiders found resignation but also some signs of hope among the people. Indeed, once the initial shock of the February 25 decree had worn off, the miners seemed to have almost good-naturedly accepted their fate. One reporter found the population of about 1200 to be "undismayed" by the situation, although the people were found to "talk about it constantly."⁸⁷ James B. Barber of the *Raton Range* reported that the residents tended "to accept their fate lightly" and, when asked about their future plans, gave "a resigned shrug or a skeptical grin."⁸⁸ Most seemed more concerned about the prospects of another championship season for Dawson's high school basketball team. Having already won the district title in two major sports during 1949,⁸⁹ town residents hoped to defeat Roy's previously unbeaten basketball team and close Dawson in a flame of glory. Scoring a famous upset, Dawson dramatically beat Roy when Lee Martinez sank two foul shots in the final ten seconds of the game.⁹⁰ The victory undoubtedly bolstered morale just when the proud residents of Dawson needed it most.⁹¹

While the people in town contemplated their futures, proposed bold plans to save their camp, and won district basketball championships, their neighbors in Colfax County wondered how Dawson's demise would affect the post-war economy of northern New Mexico. The *Range* reported that the loss of a company with an annual payroll of more than \$500,000 was bound to effect Raton's retail trade and represent "a tremendous blow" to the county's economy.⁹² County farmers, for example, would suffer because Phelps Dodge had purchased much of the food sold in Dawson's company store from local suppliers.⁹³ Moreover, with Phelps



Above: Birds-eye View, Dawson, N.M. Courtesy Raton Public Library. Below: Opening Night, Phelps Dodge Mercantile Co. Courtesy Museum of New Mexico, Santa Fe.



Dodge and the Southern Pacific Railroad (which operated the railroad spur into Dawson) paying the "staggering sum" of \$1,722,842 in county taxes each year, valuable public revenues would be suddenly lost to Colfax County. Approximately 8 percent of the county's income would immediately vanish.⁹⁴ Thought of in even larger terms, as James Barber argued, Dawson's closing left only one major coal-producing camp in all of New Mexico—a dangerous situation if a third world war suddenly broke out and coal was again needed in abundance as it had been during the first two world wars. This possibility seemed ominously real in 1950 at the outset of the Korean conflict.⁹⁵ Summarizing these points in July 1950, Barber accused Phelps Dodge of "acting hastily" in shutting down Dawson. According to this reporter, "the Dawson fiasco has left a lot of sour tastes for Phelps Dodge in this part of the country."⁹⁶

But no amount of criticism could stay the executioner. Dawson was about to die. The mines were finally closed on April 28, 1950. Photographers snapped pictures as Fred Bergamo dumped the last coal car at the tippie at 3 p.m. Food and drinks were purchased from what was left of the tippie crew's funeral wreath fund, and these refreshments were served in an atmosphere described as "considerably more like a party than a funeral" as the miners reportedly celebrated their last shift in camp with all "the desperate gaiety of a wake."⁹⁷ Within hours, crates of furniture appeared at the depot, and a reporter watched as "a battered truck, piled high with household goods, bumped its way out of town."⁹⁸ No time remained for procrastination; within a month the company would cut off the electricity and water to the houses still occupied in camp.⁹⁹ Accurately described as the "castoffs of progress," the miners and their families scattered in all directions in search of new lives and new careers for themselves.¹⁰⁰

Meanwhile, Phelps Dodge began to dismantle Dawson and sell its most valuable goods in what was called "one of the greatest sales in the history of the Southwest." The list of things for sale read "like a mail-order catalog and then some."¹⁰¹ Office equipment, hospital items, mining machinery, bathroom fixtures, and sundry other goods were salvaged and moved out of town in three

train-loads and countless truck-loads each week.¹⁰² Coordinated by the National Iron & Metal Company of Phoenix, Arizona, sections of the company store were even salvaged for building material in Raton and Trinidad. Dawson's entire coal washer was dismantled, moved, and reassembled in the coal fields of Harlan, Kentucky.¹⁰³ Only the Catholic Church was not sold, although the diocese of Santa Fe moved the church's elaborate organ and furnishings to other parishes in the area.¹⁰⁴ By the fall of 1951, Dawson had been reduced to grazing land. "Who would have thought," asked James Barber, "that you could erase a town of Dawson's size and vitality in sixteen short months?"¹⁰⁵ Old residents often drove by to mourn their quickly disappearing town.¹⁰⁶

Dawson's demise was, therefore, quite different from the death of the coal camps the *Christian Science Monitor* described in 1950. Dawson had never been a "blight on the American scene," and, while modern technology and economic problems contributed to Dawson's decline, they were not the only reasons for the town's passing. The railroads' conversion to diesel fuel and the subsequent closing of the railroad market for coal may well have been the main reasons for the camp's closing, but the miners' union and a steady "youth drain" from camp were also largely responsible for Dawson's demise. As James B. Allen put it, "economic necessity dictated the origin of the company town, and economic considerations [were] largely responsible for its disappearance."¹⁰⁷ However, other forces involving escalating union demands, the company's frustration with labor strikes, and the "pull" of larger urban centers cannot be ignored in the case of Dawson.¹⁰⁸ Unfortunately, company records that may have clarified the reasons for the camp's decline were eliminated in 1950 along with the rest of the town. Rejecting an offer to house these records in the historical archives at the University of New Mexico, Phelps Dodge officials wantonly destroyed the valuable documents in a conflagration that burned daily for more than two months.¹⁰⁹ The voices of Dawson's written past were silenced forever.

But while the camp was very different from other coal camps in the east, it was hardly different from other coal camps in New

Mexico. The history of Dawson's demise was, in fact, played out in many parts of the state either shortly before or soon after World War II. Places such as Van Houten (1903-49), Sugarite (1912-41), Gardiner (1911-39), Brilliant (1917-53), and Madrid (1893-1954) experienced similar deaths from kindred factors.¹¹⁰ "Tossed about by gigantic forces" beyond their control,¹¹¹ the residents of these towns were similarly abandoned by their unions, their government, and their employers. Only new vocational training, the need for additional labor in towns like Albuquerque, and the general prosperity of the 1950s helped the former residents of these towns survive their personal traumas. The wonder, therefore, was not that Dawson's demise was particularly unique in New Mexico. The wonder was that, given Dawson's long decline and complex problems, the town had survived as long as it did over a life that spanned nearly half a century of New Mexico history.

NOTES

1. Alice Bullock, "Mines Were Dawson's Life and Its Death," *Santa Fe New Mexican*, December 30, 1973. Known for their superstitions, several miners went so far as to leave Dawson in 1933 after the mining disasters of 1903, 1913, and 1923. These disasters are described in F. Stanley, *The Dawson Tragedies* (Pep, Tex.: Author, 1964).

2. On the flu epidemic of 1918, see the *Raton Range*, October 18 and 29, November 1, 12, and 22, 1918; interviews, Fred Montoya, Cedar Crest, N.M., September 2, 1979; K. Stadler, Albuquerque, N.M., July 29, 1979; Mrs. Elmo L. Hubbard, Albuquerque, July 14, 1979; Dr. William Saul, Albuquerque, October 21, 1978; Ted Shelton, Ute Park, N.M., September 2, 1978; Francisco Garcia, Soda Pocket Park, N.M., September 3, 1978; Hannah McCarvey, Albuquerque, June 3, 1978. On the Byers murder case, see Shelton interview and the *Raton Range*, April 19, 1910.

3. *Raton Range*, December 6, 1918, and May 27, 1919; Sam Smallo interview, Soda Pocket Park, September 3, 1978.

4. *Christian Science Monitor*, April 18, 1950.

5. Richard C. Wade, *The Urban Frontier: Pioneer Life in Early Pittsburgh, Cincinnati, Lexington, Louisville, and St. Louis* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1964); Duane A. Smith, *Rocky Mountain Mining Camps: The Urban Frontier* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1967); Oliver Knight, "Toward an Understanding of the Western Town," *Western Historical Quarterly* 4 (January 1973): 27-42; J. Christopher Schnell and Patrick E. McLear, "Why the Cities Grew: A Historiographical Essay on Western Urban Growth, 1850-80,"

Bulletin of the Missouri Historical Society 27 (April 1972): 162-73; and Robert H. Sholly, "Alamogordo, New Mexico: A Case Study in the Dynamics of Western Town Growth" (Master's thesis, University of Texas at El Paso, 1971).

6. James B. Allen, *The Company Town in the American West* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1966), pp. 140-45.

7. Bradford Luckingham, "The City in the Westward Movement: A Bibliographical Note," *Western Historical Quarterly* 5 (July 1974): 304.

8. Shelton interview; Paul K. Carson, "A History of Dawson" (Unpublished manuscript, June 7, 1940, enclosed in M.P. Scanlon to the author, Douglas, Ariz., October 26, 1978), p. 11. Carson's manuscript was based on company records and on interviews with John O'Brien, J. Q. Welch, G. L. Bradford, Enrique Mares, and Henry Peppin. Also see J. R. Kastler to author, Raton, N.M., August 30, 1978, and Steve Winston, "Little But Memories Remain of Dawson," *Albuquerque Journal*, April 15, 1979.

9. Stadler interview.

10. Phelps Dodge, *Annual Report*, 1928, pp. 5, 13.

11. Phelps Dodge, *Annual Report*, 1928, p. 13. According to I.W.W. leader and historian Fred Thompson, such mechanization was designed to counter union activity by helping to reduce the work force in towns like Dawson. Fred Thompson, speech delivered at the University of New Mexico, Albuquerque, November 28, 1979.

12. Phelps Dodge, *Annual Report*, 1931.

13. Interviews, Mr. and Mrs. Chester Pool, Albuquerque, May 11, 1978; Joe Chioni, Soda Pocket Park, September 3, 1978; Leroy Brennan, Albuquerque, August 25, 1978; Shelton; Celso Chavez, Santa Fe, N.M., July 8, 1979.

14. Interviews, Fred Marcelli, Albuquerque, January 22, 1979; Brennan; Sylvester Lorenzo, Denver, Colo., November 18, 1978; Garcia; Mrs. Fred Marcelli, Albuquerque, December 18, 1978; Montoya; Robert Lucero, Albuquerque, July 26, 1978; Peter Neil, Albuquerque, August 17, 1978; Andrew Lozano, Albuquerque, August 19, 1978.

15. Interviews, Lorenzo; Orazio Primavera, Albuquerque, December 3, 1978; Bill Whitley, Albuquerque, September 23, 1978; Lucero; F. Marcelli.

16. Whitley interview.

17. *Raton Range*, May 19, 1943; interviews, Gene Scanlon, Albuquerque, July 24, 1978; Smallo; Brennan; F. Marcelli.

18. Phelps Dodge, *Annual Report*, 1943, p. 8. Also see Marian Douds to the author, Denver, August 16, 1978.

19. Donald Gibbs interview, Albuquerque, October 25, 1978.

20. *Raton Range*, March 20, 1979.

21. Gibbs interview.

22. Interviews, Mrs. Dwight Myers, Albuquerque, May 3, 1978; Gibbs.

23. Interviews, Brennan; Pat Rainwater, Albuquerque, May 5, 1979; Gibbs; Joseph Sluga, Albuquerque, May 12, 1979.

24. Interviews, Sluga; Fred Covert, Albuquerque, July 9, 1978.

25. Primavera interview; Virginia Davis Wiehenson to the author, Denver,

July 14, 1978; Sylver Lorenzo to the author, Lakewood, Colo., August 6, 1978.

26. *Raton Range*, March 1, 9, 1950.
27. M. P. Scanlon to the author, Douglas, October 26, 1978.
28. Interviews, José Marcos Garcia, Soda Pocket Park, September 2, 1979; Chavez.
29. Lucero interview.
30. Interviews, Rainwater; Shelton; Lorenzo.
31. Interviews, Sarah Miller, Albuquerque, November 11, 1978; Lucero.
32. Sluga interview.
33. Luis Vitale, for example, moved his barber shop from Dawson to Albuquerque in 1949. Mrs. Marcelli interview.
34. Dawson High School Commencement Programs, May 25, 1939, and May 11, 1950.
35. Interviews, Rainwater; Primavera; Whitley; Covert; Mrs. Hubbard; Fred Bergamo, Soda Pocket Park, September 3, 1978.
36. Interviews, Sluga; Miller. A company official reported in 1936 that "there are still abundant coal veins undeveloped enough to run . . . for fifty or a hundred years or more" in Dawson. J. F. McClary quoted in the WPA Filed on Dawson, June 20, 1936, Museum of New Mexico Library, Santa Fe.
37. Phelps Dodge, *Annual Report*, 1949, p. 12.
38. Lorenzo interview.
39. See the author's "Welfare Capitalism in a New Mexico Mining Camp: Dawson, 1920-29," in Robert Kern's forthcoming edited volume on labor in New Mexico, and W. D. Brennan, "Handling Labor Problems at the Stag Canon Dawson Branch of the Phelps Dodge Corporation," *The Mining Congress Journal* 15 (July 1929): 548-50.
40. Lorenzo interview.
41. Interviews, Garcia; F. Marcelli.
42. Interviews, Montoya; Garcia; Lorenzo.
43. Interviews, Garcia; Lorenzo; Lorenzo to the author, Lakewood, August 6, 1978.
44. Interviews, Garcia; Lorenzo.
45. Lorenzo to the author, Lakewood, July 25 and August 6, 1978; Lorenzo interview. Other company unions, organized for a similar purpose, were also discredited in many regions of the country and the state in 1933. See I. Bernstein, *The Lean Years: A History of the American Worker, 1920-33* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1972), and the author's *Madrid Revisited: Life & Labor in a New Mexico Mining Camp in the Years of the Great Depression* (Santa Fe: Lightning Tree Press, 1976), pp. 22-23.
46. Interviews, F. Marcelli; Garcia; Lorenzo; Lozano; Primavera.
47. Interviews, Lorenzo; Nancy Chiappetti, Soda Pocket Park, September 3, 1978.
48. Interviews, Lozano; Nino Roselli, Soda Pocket Park, September 3, 1978; Lorenzo; McGarvey; Scanlon; Lucero; Chavez; Joe Scanlon, Soda Pocket Park, September 3, 1978. J. R. Kastler to the author, Raton, N.M., February 9, 1979;

Lorenzo to the author, Lakewood, July 25, 1978. Only scabs were treated roughly in camp. Interviews, Roselli; Lorenzo; Smallo.

49. Phelps Dodge, *Annual Report*, 1943, p. 8; Lorenzo to the author, Lakewood, August 6, 1978.

50. Lorenzo interview.

51. Chavez interview.

52. Shelton interview.

53. Shelton interview.

54. Phelps Dodge, *Annual Report*, 1949, p. 12.

55. *Albuquerque Journal*, May 21, 1950.

56. *Raton Range*, March 2, 1950; *Carlsbad Current Argus*, n.d., box 45, folder 5, Erna Fergusson Papers, Special Collections Department, University of New Mexico Library, Albuquerque (UNM-SC).

57. Phelps Dodge, *Annual Report*, 1949, p. 12.

58. *Raton Range*, February 25, 1950.

59. It is noteworthy that of those interviewed, company men generally pointed to union demands as the major cause for Dawson's decline, while union men spoke of the use of modern fuels as the main reason for the camp's demise. Those without strong loyalties to either the company or the union took the more balanced view that both factors were responsible for the closing.

60. *Raton Range*, March 6, 1950.

61. Roselli interview.

62. *Raton Range*, March 6, 1950; *Carlsbad Current Argus*, Fergusson Papers, UNM-SC.

63. *Raton Range*, September 2, 1975; Hannah McGarvey, Oral History Collection, Raton Public Library, 1974; interviews, Miller; David Cordova, Albuquerque, March 15, 1979.

64. José Marcos Garcia, "Top o' the Day," *Raton Range*, August 22, 1978.

65. Interviews, Jerry Scanlon, Albuquerque, July 24, 1978; Neil; Chavez; *Albuquerque Journal*, May 21, 1950.

66. Mary Ann Rivera, for example, came to Dawson in 1925 with two daughters. When she left in 1950, Mrs. Rivera had two granddaughters the same age as her daughters had been when she arrived in camp. *Raton Range*, September 2, 1975; *Carlsbad Current Argus*, Fergusson Papers, UNM-SC.

67. Lucero interview.

68. *Raton Range*, April 29, 1950; *Albuquerque Journal*, May 21, 1950; *Santa Fe Register*, February 9, 1951.

69. Interviews, Roselli; Bergamo.

70. Those offered transfers included Celso Chavez, J. F. McClary, Mary Scanlon, and Ted Shelton. Shelton interview.

71. *Albuquerque Journal*, May 21, 1950.

72. *Albuquerque Journal*, May 21, 1950.

73. *Albuquerque Journal*, May 21, 1950; F. Marcelli interview.

74. *Albuquerque Journal*, May 21, 1950.

75. *Albuquerque Journal*, May 21, 1950; *Santa Fe Register*, February 9, 1951.

76. *Tucumcari Daily News*, April 12, 1950; *Albuquerque Tribune*, April 12, 1950.

77. *Albuquerque Tribune*, April 12, 1950; *Gallup Independent*, May 2, 1950.

78. Interviews, F. Marcelli; Chavez; *Albuquerque Tribune*, April 12, 1950. The *Raton Range* criticized Phelps Dodge for the company's refusal "to lease the mine to a local syndicate even on a basis where the corporation couldn't possibly lose money." *Raton Range*, July 27, 1950.

79. *Denver Post*, June 17, 1951; interviews, Garcia; F. Marcelli; L. Archangeli, Soda Pocket Park, September 3, 1978; Mrs. Marcelli; Miller. Coach Ed Cleven, for example, left Dawson to become the head football coach at New Mexico Highlands University. *The Miners' Pick* [Dawson High School's student newspaper], May 5, 1950.

80. *The Miners' Pick*, May 5, 1950; *Raton Range*, April 12, 1950; *Albuquerque Tribune*, April 12, 1950.

81. *Albuquerque Tribune*, April 12, 1950; F. Marcelli interview. Marcelli was later hired by the Albuquerque Fire Department where he rose through the ranks to become district chief.

82. *Albuquerque Journal*, May 21, 1950.

83. *Albuquerque Tribune*, April 12, 1950; Mrs. Marcelli interview.

84. *Albuquerque Tribune*, April 12, 1950; *Raton Range*, July 27 and October 22, 1950; interviews, F. Marcelli; Chavez; Brennan; G. Scanlon; Pool; Alberta McClary, Albuquerque, May 3, 1978.

85. *Albuquerque Journal*, August 23, 1950; *Denver Post*, June 27, 1950.

86. *Raton Range*, March 25, 1950.

87. *Albuquerque Tribune*, April 12, 1950.

88. *Raton Range*, April 12 and 29, 1950.

89. Chavez interview; *Clovis News-Journal*, April 13, 1950, and *Raton Range*, April 12, 1950.

90. Interview, Ruth Shelton, Soda Pocket Park, September 3, 1978; *Raton Range*, February 27, 1950.

91. Many doubted "whether there is another town of Dawson's size in the country that packs so much hospitality, congeniality, and sportsmanship." *Santa Fe Register*, November 28, 1947. Also see Donald G. Secrest, "The Dawson Story," *New Mexico Sun Trails* 5 (December 1952): 81.

92. *Raton Range*, February 25, 1950; Lorenzo interview.

93. As early as 1910, the *Raton Range* found that "it is the policy of the management to buy everything in the county that can be obtained for the requirements of the stores, and in supplying the mines." *Raton Range*, December 2, 1910.

94. *Raton Range*, March 1, 1950.

95. *Raton Range*, February 25, March 9, and July 27, 1950.

96. *Raton Range*, July 27, 1950. Observers in Carlsbad pointed to Dawson's

demise as a warning to other New Mexico communities that were over dependent on a single industry for their survival and revenues. *Carlsbad Current Argus*, Fergusson Papers, UNM-SC.

97. *Raton Range*, April 29, 1950.

98. *Raton Range*, April 29, 1950.

99. *Albuquerque Journal*, May 21, 1950. Only the homes of those employed in the wrecking and moving crews were supplied with electricity and water.

100. *Albuquerque Journal*, May 21, 1950.

101. *Denver Post*, June 27, 1950.

102. *Raton Range*, October 6, 1951.

103. Shelton interview; *New Mexico Magazine* 42 (January 1964): 35; *Clovis News-Journal*, July 14, 1950.

104. *Albuquerque Journal*, August 23, 1950.

105. *Raton Range*, October 6, 1951.

106. *Denver Post*, June 27, 1950.

107. Allen, *Company Town*, p. 140.

108. John D. Hicks refers to this "youth drain" and its role as a safety-valve for the "ambitious and discontented town-and-country youth" of the nation in his "The Significance of the Small Town in American History," in *Reflections of Western Historians*, ed. John Alexander Carroll (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1969), p. 165.

109. Chavez interview.

110. Kastler to the author, Raton, August 30, 1978; also see the author's *Madrid Revisited*, pp. 40-42.

111. *Albuquerque Journal*, May 21, 1950.