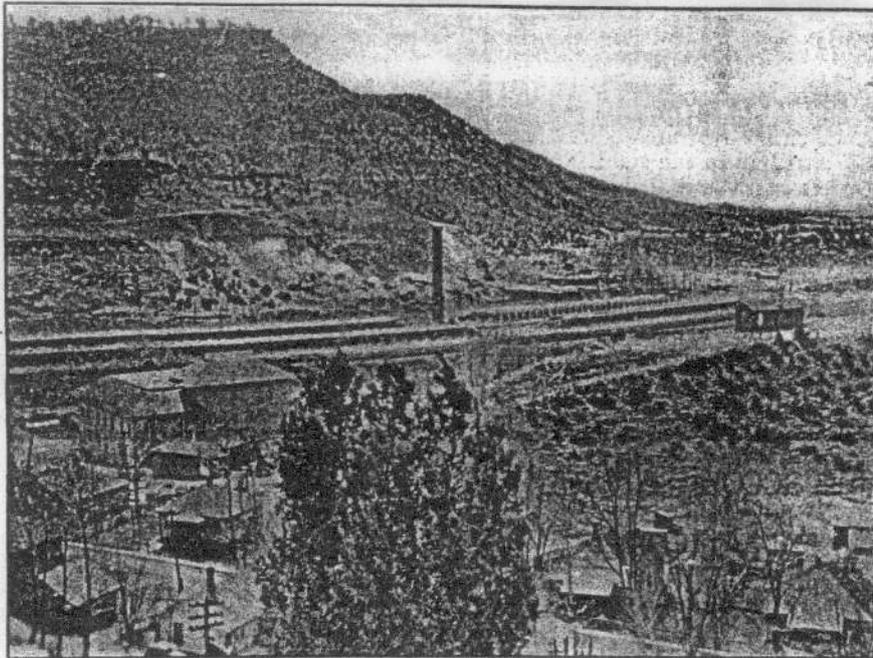


# Home Again to DAWSON

By Fred Becchetti



**T**he place where you were born isn't there anymore. That's what they told me. You can't even get to the place. The road's shot. And even if you got there, you can't get in. There's a fence around the place and a gate that says "No Trespassing."

Dawson is off-limits and you have to get permission from the owners to go anywhere near it.

That's what they told me, and they

convinced me; so I crossed Dawson off the itinerary of my "nostalgia trip" out West.

The trip had been a long time in the making. More than fifty years while I was in other parts of the world.

So there I was in May 1988 in a rental car among the mountains of my birth and boyhood. I had "come home again." To that corner of the planet where the Raton Pass joins Colorado and New Mexico. To the Rockies under dazzling blue skies and awesome billowing white clouds.

**M**y ten-day visit was almost at an end. It had centered on Raton and Trinidad, where I had grown up during the Depression. In both towns, I walked in the footsteps of a supremely carefree boyhood spent in and around the cars of the Santa Fe Railroad, on the banks of an untamed river, on dusty playgrounds and, above all, on the slopes of the surrounding mountains. It was a time when adults let kids go about their way. There were no baseball or football little leagues; everything was pick-up during the correct season. Nobody worried about kids, and adults didn't concern themselves about being like their kids.

In my wanderings I came upon a classmate or two for talk and reminiscences. I sat on a bench to trade stories with old timers like myself on how used to be in Raton and Trinidad. Generally, I purged myself of that desire that all of us seem to have to return to their beginnings in search of an explanation of why life

turned out the way it has.

June 1, 1988. With Raton and Trinidad behind me, I'm on the highway to Cimarron to see the Palisades, to Eagle Nest for a visit with a cousin and finally to Albuquerque to catch a flight back to Washington, D.C. for my last year in the Foreign Service before retiring in March 1989. The "coming home again" has placed the scenes and events of my boyhood in their proper perspective. My suitcase is filled with snapshots which I will show my wife but whose meaning only I can interpret. She'll smile and understand. The past is finally behind me.

**T**hen I see the sign. A neat official New Mexico Highway Department road sign: "Dawson, 5 mi." and a wide paved road off to the right. No locked gate in sight!

A road sign to a place you can't even find on a map! Maybe they've taken down the gate. Even if I can't get in, I'll be able to take a couple of pictures of the area. Better than

nothing. After all, I haven't been there for sixty years. I left here before my sixth birthday 1930 and have never been back. I'll probably never have another chance to see the place.

Expecting to be stopped at any moment, I back up and turn onto the road to Dawson. So intimidated by the stories I have heard, I catch myself looking upward for a helicopter to swoop down and turn me back.

The only thing in sight is a short Santa Fe freight train chugging in the direction of Dawson. We are the only things moving against the broad landscape of the Vermejo River valley. I wave to the engineer as we run parallel to each other up the river. Faithful to tradition, he waves back. I read his gesture carefully to be sure that he isn't waving me away from Dawson.

After beating the train to two crossings, I pull up to a locked gate -- the locked gate that people have been telling me about. I imagine the engineer saying, "I tried to tell you back there that you can't get in, but you didn't get my message."

An official hexagonal red sign at the locked gate says "STOP." A board nailed to the stop sign warns "NO TRESPASSING."

Frustrated after the excitement of the five miles from the highway to the scene of my infancy and pre-school childhood, I get out of the car and read the small notice tacked to one of the gate posts.

The notice promises "prosecution to the fullest extent of the law" of anybody caught on the other side of the fence hunting, fishing or "doing anything whatsoever." Heavy stuff!

A law-abiding citizen, I obey red traffic lights at three-thirty in the morning with no cars in sight. I have never torn the tag off a mattress or from the bottom of a sofa or easy chair. So I back off from the gate. I'll take a few pictures and head back for the highway.

But there's another sign. A crudely lettered "Dawson Cemetery" with an arrow indicating a narrow dirt road to the right and over a knoll.

Sounds interesting. I turn on to the road with a generous

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thought for the people with the foresight to keep the cemetery outside the fence to permit visits by relatives and friends.

Respectfully, I drive up to the cemetery, where a gate hangs precariously from its post. I am still expecting someone to appear and question my presence in Dawson. Nobody shows up. I get out of the car and close the door quietly. The cemetery imposes respect.

Some fresh tire tracks and new bouquets of bright colored plastic flowers in the cemetery give evidence of Memorial Day visits two days ago.

**S**ilence. Total silence. I stand still. Awestruck by being in the presence of many of those who lived in the Dawson which brought me onto this planet and cared for me from 1924 to 1930.

Then I feel the breeze. It rustles gently through the tall golden grass among the graves and shakes the furry branches of the scrub cedars bunched around the iron fence of the cemetery.

A locust whirs in the bushes and a young bird trills its song clear as a silver bell on the mountain air. Underfoot I can still sense the rumble of the freight train, already out of sight up the canyon.

High above thin feathery clouds an airliner thunders on its way to Albuquerque, leaving a thin white plume across the sky.

Alone and immobilized by

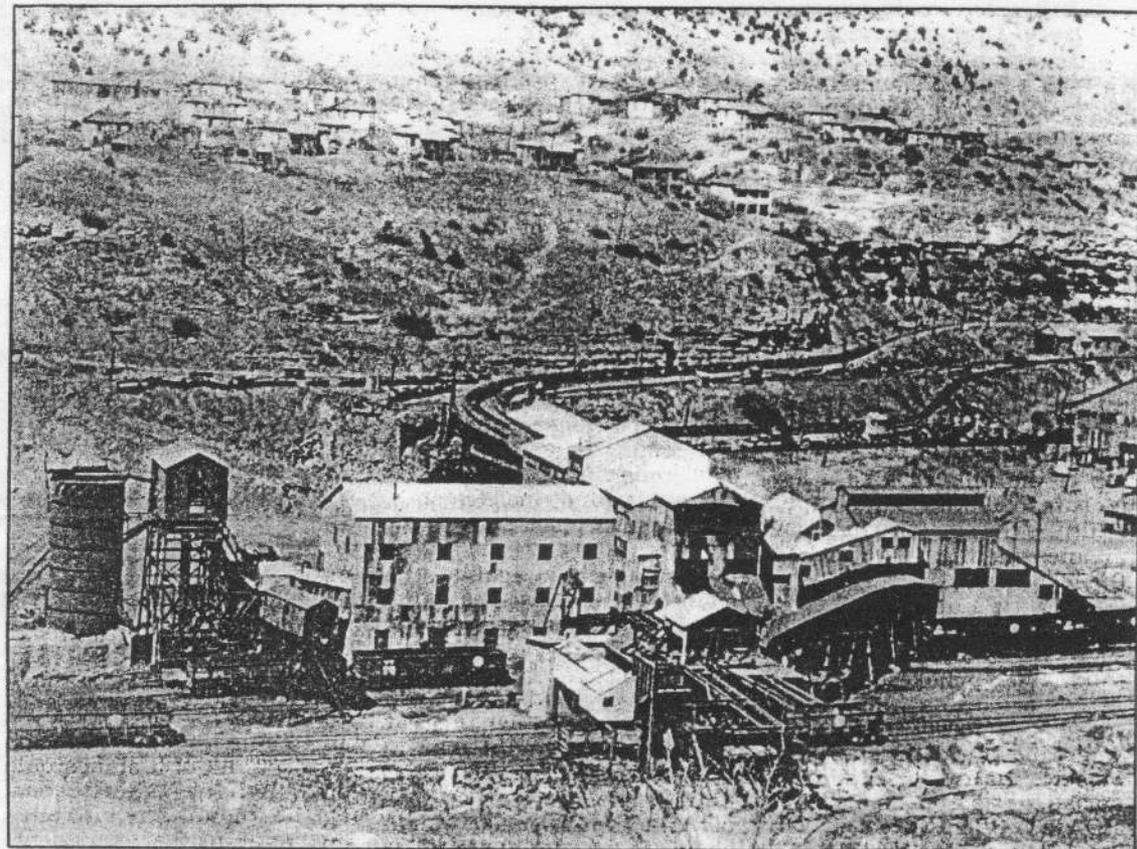


Photo courtesy of Ethel Parker

*Company houses overlooked coal preparation plant.*

the solitude, I search the craggy mountains for something -- anything -- familiar. Could that be the mountain I climbed with my dad when I was five?

To the left I see the faint outline of a road leading away from the cemetery over a hill in the direction of Dawson. I remember that we had once attended a funeral in my dad's

Dodge. Is that the road we had come on? Is this the cemetery? Who had died? Why did they bring me along?

Yes, it must be the funeral road from Dawson. A deep ditch instead of a fence lays out the boundaries of Dawson at that point, cutting across the funeral road so that a vehicle cannot be driven across. There

is no gate, no fence, no signs, no legal notice -- no reason why I can't leap across the ditch, walk up that small hill and get a better view of the place where I was born in 1924. I've come a long way for this. Nobody would have the heart to turn me away.

A long step across the ditch. I look around warily. The

## About the Author

Fred Becchetti is a U.S. Foreign Service Officer with the United States Information Agency.

He is presently assigned to USIA's Foreign Press Center in Washington, D.C., where he works with foreign correspondents assigned by their news organizations to cover events in the U.S. Bilingual in Spanish and English, with a smattering of Portuguese, he specializes in assisting journalists from Latin America, the Caribbean, Spain and Portugal. He often works with journalists from other countries on special assignments, such as the recent political conventions in Atlanta and New Orleans.

Becchetti and his wife Vivienne live in Fairfax, Virginia, about an hour's commuting distance from the Foreign Press Center. Three of his sons live nearby; a fourth son lives in the San Francisco area; and a daughter has just moved with her



**BECCHETTI**

husband and family to the Tampa, Florida area.

Becchetti is due to retire in 1989 from USIA after 27 years of diplomatic service, mostly in the cultural exchange field, in Latin America -- specifically, Honduras, Venezuela, Panama, Mexico, Chile and the Dominican Republic.

He entered the U.S. Foreign Service in 1962 after having taught Spanish at high school and university levels for eleven years.

After three years and 35 bombing missions over Europe with the Eighth Airforce in World War II, Becchetti earned a bachelor's and a master's degree at the University of Missouri and did some advance graduate study in Spanish-American literature at the University of New Mexico before becoming a teacher.

Becchetti has confirmed that he will attend the September 4 Dawson Reunion. He also plans to be at the Labor Day Rodeo in Trinidad, where he attended grades 6-9 after having left Dawson and having studied in the Raton Public Schools under Miss Thompson (1st. Grade), Miss Walsh (2nd.), Miss Campbell (3rd.), Miss Shuler (4th.) and Miss Kecker (5th.) -- all of whom he remembers with great fondness and appreciation.

helicopter would appear from over that mountain there, where they have been observing my every movement through powerful binoculars, just waiting for me to take a false step and cross the line into their property.

There are hoofprints on the funeral road. They might arrest me on horseback!

One wary step in front of the other, and within a few minutes I find myself at the top of the hill, slightly winded by the exertion and flushed by the excitement.

This is as far as I will go -- the top of the hill. I'll take a few pictures of the landscape, return to the cemetery for a few minutes and then drive back to the highway.

**T**hen I see the top of a tall brick smokestack standing in stark, silent dignity against the blue of the sky. I look closely, halfway expecting smoke to rise from its mouth.

Off to the right I see a smooth mountain of blue-black slag. I immediately wonder if my dad and his work companions helped create that mountain.

My funeral road veers off toward the slag mountain and then swings left presumably to the center of what was Dawson. I wonder what slag feels like. I have never touched a piece of slag, that I can remember.

With all caution to the winds and my guilt feelings about trespassing cast aside, I set out on the funeral road, lengthening my step with every minute. The hoofprints give me confidence that the road will lead me to something of great interest beyond the slag and the smokestack.

Still expecting to encounter a guard of some sort, I rehearse the speech I will give: "This is where I was born. I haven't been here for more than sixty years. Since I was five. All I want is some pictures and to look around a little. Here's my I.D. I'll be out of Dawson in a few minutes." Who can resist such a plea?

At the foot of the slag mountain I pick up a lump. It's as ugly and uninspiring as I expected. Did this lump of slag play a part in the life of my dad?

There is no beauty in the lump itself. The beauty lies in the thought of the men who produced the flat shadow of a

mountain of slag over the years.

The beauty lies in the strength of those men and of the women who shared their dangerous, grueling life -- most of them in a new land far from the place where they were born.

The beauty is in the power these men had gained over fire, primitive tools and machinery to scratch the shiny black wealth out of the veins of the mountains.

The beauty of the slag lies in the hope with which these men and women came to this rugged land willing to work hard and dangerously for a better life for themselves and, more important, for their children.

The beauty is in each man's test of strength against the mountains, against the darkness of the tunnels, against the elements and even against other men.

Oh! What grand fights there were in Dawson! What great contests of strength! Like in 1928 when my dad and George Starkovich shoveled two tons of coal over a three-foot wall in about ten minutes to determine who was the fastest man with a shovel in the nine mines of Dawson. (My dad came in second by just a few seconds to win a \$5.00 prize, \$3.00 in merchandise at the Phelps Dodge Mercantile Company department store and possession of the shovel he used in the contest.)

The beauty of that featureless heap of slag lies in the realization of what those simple men and women bequeathed to their sons and daughters. Most of whom can look back on a good education and a life far removed from the propped-up tunnels in which their fathers, brothers, and uncles worked -- and died.

Cautiously, I put the lump of slag in my pocket. It will become part of the collection of stones I keep in my office which have no value except for their meaning to me.

**B**eyond the slag heap I can see the full length of the Dawson coke ovens leading up to two towering brick smokestacks which have survived the years through some miracle.

How these ovens must have glowed at night! How great the clouds of smoke billowing up from the smokestacks and over the mountains! The men who

worked the ovens must have had skins like leather. Every raindrop a sharp sputter of steam on the glowing bricks; every snowflake in the winter, a gentle hiss before melting into nothingness.

All of the ovens are cool now. No roar of flame. No thundering clouds of curling smoke or great puffs of heat producing the fuel for the smelters of the Phelps Dodge copper empire.

Just hundreds of collapsed ovens lying in the sun. Ants and beetles scurrying among the fallen bricks. It is like a scene from ancient Egypt. The ovens could be the stalls for the sacred horses of the Pharaohs or maybe the storage tanks for water brought from the Nile. The smokestacks, the observatories for the official astronomers of Egypt.

Preserved for some unknown reason, the coke ovens and the noble smokestacks look like an etching from an old history textbook. All of it stands quiet beneath the sky in the shadows of the mountains, in silent testimony to the monumental labor of the men who violated those mountains and tore out their insides to fill tens of thousands of railroad cars with fuel for a growing nation.

Farther on, I find what seems to be the main road in what was Dawson. I walk past rusting machinery of extraordinary complexity and in among a group of dilapidated buildings shaded by giant cottonwood trees. I stop and listen for movement inside the buildings. I'm tempted to shout "Hello." Nobody appears.

Nothing moves except the golden grass and the green leaves of the cottonwoods in the cool breeze sweeping across the sterile plain where 9,000 people once lived.

There had been a large department store. My first school had been there some place: Anna Cooke was my first teacher -- in kindergarten. The high school had been up on a hill. My first cry to the world was heard in a hospital that functioned there. My brother, sister and several cousins were also born there.

Our home in Number Seven Camp with a garage for my dad's Dodge had been there. And right nearby, there had been a hill of red ants where I first learned that Mother Nature is not all sweetness and pretty flowers. The square

fence pole where I laid a gash on my four-year old forehead was on the street where we lived. I have the scar of it to this day.

Downtown there was a theater, the opera house, where I saw my first movie. A man kissed a woman on the big screen to my utter disgust. And there was an orchard, a dark and mysterious place of many shifting shadows, with a path on which I followed my mom and dad, staying very close to them. Alongside the road leading past Number Seven Camp there was a muddy irrigation ditch, with a small footbridge leading in to the path through the orchard.

Past the cottonwoods and the cluster of buildings I stop to survey the desolation that was Dawson, the home of strong men and women for almost a half a century.

I try to reconstruct the town in my mind's eye, always searching for visual hints -- a mark in the mountain, the special shape of a peak; then I hear the soft splash of water above the murmur of the breeze through the cottonwoods and the dry grass.

The sound of running water erases sixty years in a flash of recognition. I step over piles of upturned earth and rubble and find myself on the banks of the irrigation ditch of my childhood!

It is still here! Flowing happily! It isn't so deep as I remember it when my mom would warn me from its edge with her story of how a boy "just like me" had drowned in the ditch just the other day, so "don't go near the water," but it's the same irrigation ditch, even though it may be in another location.

The ditch is the only real link I can recognize with the Dawson of my childhood. I pick up a twig and launch it on the shallow current, watching it bounce and twist its way downstream and over a spillway with some of the same excitement I must have felt when I did the same thing down by the orchard sixty years ago when my mother wasn't watching.

**T**here is no need to continue walking deeper into the basin that was Dawson. There is nothing showing all the way to

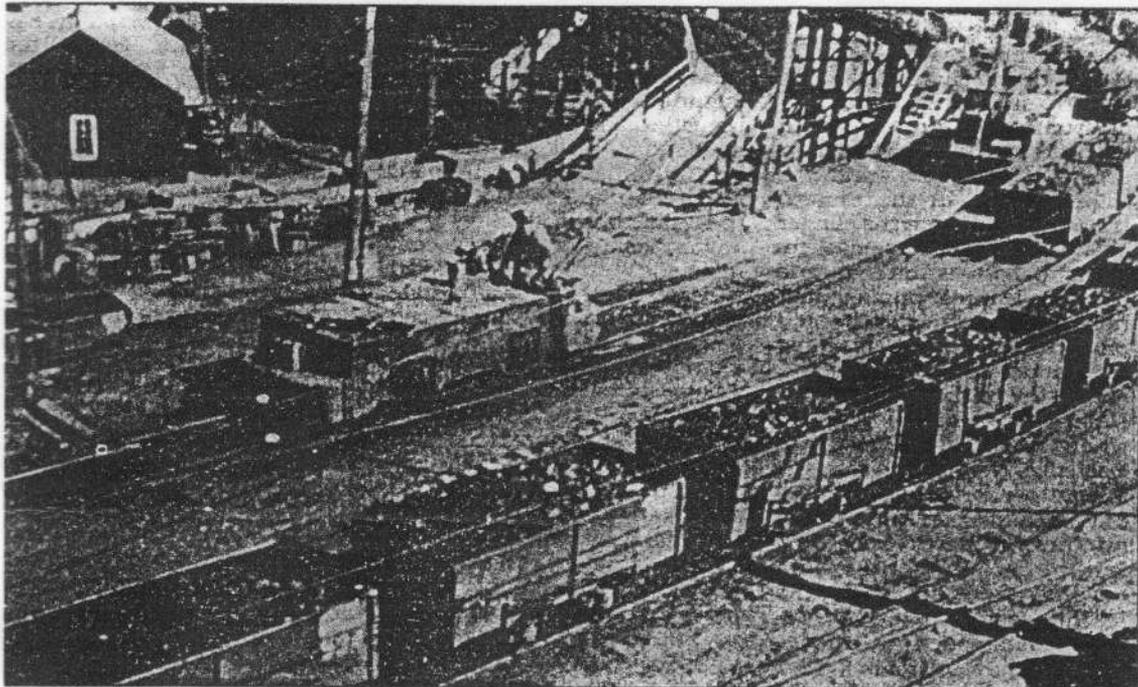


Photo courtesy of Ethel Parker

### *A worker in the loading yard.*

the far cut in the mountains where the freight train disappeared.

Emptiness. A moonscape softened somewhat by a growth of stubby green weeds and a small grove of cottonwoods along the banks of the Vermejo River running through the ravaged land.

Before returning to the cemetery, I search the sides of the mountains through binoculars, hoping to establish another link with the world I knew sixty years ago. Nothing stirs. Nothing looks familiar. I turn up the power of my senses to extend my memory beyond what my eyes have told me.

My ears pick up the soft babble of the water in the irrigation ditch again. I pass a small bush on the edge of the ditch. It looks like a wild cherry tree; it has the same bark as a cherry tree. And it's in bloom; hanging white blossoms.

My nose senses a fragrance long forgotten, and I have forged another link with my Dawson. I gather one of the blossoms and hold it close. Yes, I've known that scent before! Then I nibble a leaf for its taste. I've done that before, too! I know from my ears, my nose, my tongue and my eyes that I have been there before.

My senses reach deep into my being to a childhood moment in which life was one grand series of discoveries. I touch the

bark of the tree to heighten the sensation and stretch even further my "remembrance of things past."

Before leaving, I cast my memory out onto the empty plain of Dawson, searching for episodes in my child's life that have kept Dawson alive in my imagination for six decades.

Oh! To see the swinging bridge to my grandpa's house in Loreto which I crossed on shaky legs, trying not to look down as my dad had told me! How many times have I dreamed of that bridge, deepening and darkening the chasm with each succeeding dream. Its two thin cables and unsteady network of boards and wire still flap crazily in the winds of my memory.

In school I can remember how interesting it was to read Longfellow's "Village Blacksmith." I read it in the framework of a day my dad took me to the mine "to see where daddy works." He introduced me to the soot-covered, sweaty blacksmith who let me hold the heavy hammer he was using, laughing when I could barely lift it. Pounding on glowing iron, he raised magnificent cascades of sparks, leaving me wide-eyed from the glory of fire, shaking me with the great ringing of steel on raw steel and filling me with wonder at the power of water to transform a fiery blade into cold blue

metal with a sharp hiss and a small puff of steam.

On that same trip to the mine I saw a most ingenious machine, which, like the hand of a giant, took cars loaded with coal, flipped them upside-down, shook them empty into a railroad car below, turned them rightside-up and shoved them back into the mine.

My dad and the other miners were nonchalant about the amazing machine. They had seen it thousands of times. But to me, this was raw power -- the work of the gods. Just imagine! A full car flipped in one grinding motion, dumping in a second the coal that strong men like my dad had put into the car shovelful by shovelful deep down in the dimly lighted tunnels, sweating and grunting from the back-breaking effort!

There were wonderfully tall boarding houses in Dawson, with broad porches. The boarders would grab you and set you down to eat with them -- heaping dishes of pasta covered with thick red sauces and small juicy pigeon breasts or rabbit. Magnificent slices of warm bread with butter dripping down over the crust. Strong spicy salami and thick slabs of light yellow cheese. Always with red wine in small half glasses, which I would drink to great laughter around the table at Frank's boy drinking wine.

One night we went to a party at a boarding house. Lots of

loud talk. Music and dancing.

But the thing I remember most is the men dancing with a broom which they would hand from man to man as the music played in a ritual which I would understand much later as a version of dance tag. The party ended in a splendid fight which reached its climax when one man fell out a window and through a cellar door in a cloud of coal dust, to the intense enjoyment of the party, which broke up soon afterward.

There were train tracks up a hill, where we had moved in about 1929.

Once they parked a large yellow boxcar filled with grapes on that track. My dad, my grandpa and some of my uncles unloaded the boxcar, and we received an occasional bunch of purple grapes as we watched. The men filled an entire room of our house with grapes. Open the door, and all you could see were the ends of the crates, each of them with a picture of a beautiful bunch of grapes dripping with dew and an exotic woman with dark eyes and shiny hair, with rows of grape vines in the background running all the way to the horizon.

The crates were packed into the room so tightly that even with our small hands we could not sneak grapes out. Mysteriously, the grapes disappeared within a few days. We could not understand how anybody could eat so many grapes so fast. Years later I would understand what had happened to the grapes.

The breeze sweeps gently across the mounds of earth where giant shovels and bulldozers tore up the land and demolished the buildings. Only the water of the irrigation ditch, the seeds of the cottonwoods, the cherry-like bushes and broken bricks have survived. There is no sense in looking for anything else.

With one last look I turn to walk along the ditch toward the gate and the cemetery, where my rental car is parked. The gurgle of the waters and the scent of the blossoms and grasses on the banks of the ditch stir in me indescribable emotions -- mostly pleasurable, none of them sad. There is no reason for regrets. Dawson lived out its life usefully, and the Dawson I knew had been a gloriously happy place.

**B**ack at the cemetery, still very much alone in the deep silence of the canyon, I arch for links with Dawson the epitaphs and names on iron tombstones, apologizing openly for walking on the ashes. I find no direct links, unless it is in the names of the men, women and children buried there -- most of them of Italian origin like mine, some of them Spanish like half of the blood coursing through my veins.

Nothing is more eloquent on the significance of Dawson than the rows of iron crosses that mark the death of the 263 men in the October 22, 1913 explosion deep in the deadly darkness of Mine Number Two. I read their names on the crosses one by one and you realize that they are names of pioneers. Not pioneers in the popular sense of men and women moving westward in covered wagons through Indian country. These were pioneers in the real sense of men and women taking up the challenge of a new land and wringing out wealth to create a civilized community where nothing but a raw, raw land had existed before.

The names speak proudly of young, intelligent, impatient men and women so disillusioned with their life in their lands that they were willing to yank up their ancestral roots, leave family and

friends, cross the seas, endure the indignities heaped on them by petty immigration officials, learn a new language and a new culture, suffer intolerance and discrimination and create a new life for themselves in an unknown part of the world.

Even today, in the eastern United States, myths linger about New Mexico. Its image for many people is one of arid deserts, leaping pumas, marauding Indians, spitting gila monsters, deadly scorpions, venomous rattlesnakes and gun-toting cowboys.

At the turn of the century, when Dawson came into existence, New Mexico was still a territory. Even the United States hadn't taken the region in! Travel to New Mexico from Europe at that time was certainly the equivalent of the fearful voyage of Columbus, with sailors expecting any day to be attacked by fire-breathing denizens of the sea or to be blown by powerful winds over the edge of the world into darkness.

The names in the cemetery tell us of men and women of great courage. In the prime of their strength and beauty, thousands of them boarded ships, their possessions bundled around them on deck, to go to America.

They drag their bundles through Ellis Island, staying between iron guideposts like so many cattle, eyes wide with wonder and hope, mixed with a little fear. Babies are born even

there. New Americans! Citizens before their parents!

From there to the mills of New England, the great factories, the sweat shops in the cities, the steel plants, the railroads and mines in Pennsylvania, Ohio, Michigan, Illinois. Muscle for an industrial giant in the making.

Word comes of a new coal mine out West in a place called New Mexico. It isn't even a state yet. A mammoth mine! Good money! Good housing! Some chance for advancement in a new operation.

Bundle up the possessions again. A few more kids this time. Two thousand miles by train to a railroad junction called Tucumcari and from there to Dawson. And into the bowels of the mountains for the Dawson Fuel Company, where by day they scratch millions of tons of coal to the surface and by night sleep in tents -- in a coal camp which would become a thriving town of 9,000 people.

Walk along the rows of iron crosses and read the names of some of those pioneers who went into the wilderness, descended into the pits, wrestled chunks of coal into the light and died to make the American nation stronger and to guarantee a better future for their children. No grand epic poems have ever been written about them, and there are no ballads sung about their deeds, but they were pioneers opening up a new land in the face of injury and death.

Some of the names on the iron crosses are Torres, Lawson, Petsias, Scopelitis, Arias, Chiboukias, Arvas, Marez, Redlich, Mazzoli, Braveri, Biaggi, Ciccarelli, Meloni, Barrango, Santi, Nava, Amargiotakis, Cachulakis, Gelas Kis, Perez, Subart, Loggi, Carleso, Bello, Montanez, Ropunds, Arillo, Butte, Lori, Kriner, Ladurin, Brogioni, Tassi, Gabrielli, Tomai, Negrete, Morgan, Biondi, Martinelli, Silvio, Pastore, Kiefer, Velasco, Castrianakis, Tunney, Adrianakis, Wilmoth, Maglis, Pland, Kinter, Huerna, Duran, Martinez, Romero, Mandato, Candido, Hicks, Wright, Davis, Miklavcic, Lupakis, Jan, Lopez, Stark, Montoya, Bright, Foglia, Luccini, Zaccayinno, Balbastrocc, Gareto, Curoroni, Chavez, Rifosco, Dellaga, Johnson, Merlotti, Fideli, Tumen, Janos, Giatto, Zamboni, Tollero, Messini, Boggio, Paperi, Demichelli, Dalzotto, Angela, Di Paolo, Garcia, Rojo, Matti, Giganti, Cecconi, Marinucci, Anastasakis, Pearce, Sena, Reyes, McCutcheon, Saturno, Serrano, Razzi, Simoncini, Armeda, Bianchi, Aguilar, McNeish, Gasparac, Pinedo, Gallegos, Rodriguez, Litchford, Davies -- all of them pioneers in the strictest sense of the word.

The breeze whispers their names as it glides across the tall golden grass that shields their graves from the sun.

There are many iron crosses without names. They tell their own special story. They tell of miners alone in Dawson, without anybody to identify them in death. They tell of a mining operation so intent on wresting the mineral riches from the earth that the names of men and their location in the mines were not even on record. The company's inventory of its machinery was probably much more complete. You couldn't replace machinery as easily as men. A sign of the times.

Read the names on the crosses and see in your mind the huddle of women, children and friends around the opening to Mine Number Two on the day of the explosion and the days following. Tears mixed with coal dust! Despair! Hundred of widows in a twinkling. The company would help them relocate. But what of their lives after that? It was the twelfth greatest mining disaster in modern history, rating Dawson



Range photo by David Mullings

crosses mark graves of 1913 disaster victims.



Photo courtesy of Ethel Parker

**A residential street during Dawson's heyday.**

a tragic entry in the "World Almanac."

**A**s I leave the cemetery and Dawson I see two magpies darting among the cedars. Two more links with the Dawson I knew. I wonder if they sit on the iron railing in the early evening and chatter to the Dawson dead the way they used to in our homes sixty years ago. Knowing magpies, it wouldn't surprise me.

Back at the highway, it occurs to me that the sign "Dawson 5 mi." points not to a real town, but to a place of the spirit. A place that thrived on the hope that the men and women had for the future, a future we enjoy because of their dreams, their muscle, their intelligence and - their guts!

**EPILOGUE**

**B**ack in Albuquerque I had a free day before my flight. It occurred to me that the University of New Mexico Library might have some information on Dawson.

Sure enough, I found two rolls of microfilm of the "Dawson News," the newspaper published by the Phelps Dodge Welfare Department from 1920 to 1929. All Dawsonites should read those newspapers to get a feel for the times, for the events and for the people who made up the Dawson community. (At the Library, ask for Microfilm AN2, D38.) As one would expect, the news is mostly about the

people above-ground in the offices -- their trips to Raton, visitors to their homes, birthday parties, weddings. Names like those on the iron crosses are seldom mentioned, especially during the first years.

No, I did not find a reference to my own birth. The "News" missed the "Vital Statistics" for March 1924. I did find items on the birth of a close cousin, however; on a potato race won by a girl, Ann Komadino, who would appear in my life as my English teacher in my sophomore year of high school in Albuquerque; on a 50-yard dash for boys under ten which one of my uncles won; and to my surprise, a full account of the coal-shoveling contest at the Dawson Community Day celebration of 1928 in which

my dad won second place to George Starkovich.

A classified ad in the "News" which captured the spirit of the times was: "Wanted. A boy with horse and harness to sell ice cream cones. Will pay commission and rent for the horse. Chance for an industrious boy to make money during vacation." Needless to say, this ad recalled to mind the very early experience of waiting for the ice cream wagon in Number Seven Camp.

Of great interest was the 1924 issue of the "Dawson News," which furnished an interesting illustrated supplement on coal mining, with a focus on the coal fields of New Mexico and Dawson. According to the supplement the Dawson mines were then producing one-third of all the coal mined in New Mexico.

The supplement goes on to say that the Dawson mine in its first year of operation in 1901 produced 300 tons of coal. Eight years later in 1909, it produced one million tons and averaged that amount annually until it was shut down.

It began as a tent camp, but by 1924 it was the largest town in the Southwest supported by a single industry, with 5,000 people. Eventually it would grow to 9,000 population -- a large town in New Mexico, even by 1988 standards.

The supplement is remarkably informative about the operation of the Dawson mines, especially for a person like me who has never lived as an adult in a mining community. I learned, for instance, that Dawson coal came in four varieties or sizes and that they

had names, like olives: "Dawson Fancy Lump" (the largest chunks of coal), "Dawson Fancy Egg," "Dawson Fancy Nut" and "Dawson Fancy Pea."

The illustrations of the microfilmed supplement are blurred, but they still give an interesting picture of the digging, preparation and hauling of coal in 1924. I learned, for example, that the machine which flipped entire cars filled with coal before my very eyes as a child was a "rotary dump" and the place where my dad took me to see this wonderful machine was a "tipple."

As I read the supplement I understood better many of the terms I had heard in conversations as I was growing up: "loaders," "scrapers," "the fire boss," "a mantrip," "firing a shot," "fire damp," "mudtiting," "a mine room," "the picking tables."

There are also photographs of the main business district of Dawson in 1924: a residential street; the hospital and dispensary; Dawson High School; an elementary school; tennis courts; a playground; a baseball or athletic field; the community swimming pool; No. 2 green of the golf course; the gymnasium; and the Dawson Opera House -- all of which become quite impressive in view of the rolling mounds of nothingness you see there today.

There were two books in the University of New Mexico Library with references to Dawson. George P. Hammond in his "Rediscovery of New Mexico" (University of New Mexico Press, 1966) writes: "Dawson was not a coal camp. It was a city. Over 6,000 people resided there. It was the banner coal producer, the mammoth mineral deposit -- the fuel source for an area one-sixth the size of the United States."

Tom Hilton, in his "Nevermore Cimarron Nevermore" (Western Heritage Press, Ft. Worth 1970), entitles Chapter XI "The Tragedy of Dawson." Hilton's focus is on the three explosions that rocked the community: September 14, 1903, when a fire broke out in Mine Number One, with no loss of life; October 22, 1913, when a "great wave of orange-red flame pursued by a grey black cloud of debris burst from the portal" of Mine Number Two killing 263 men, sealing some of them inside the

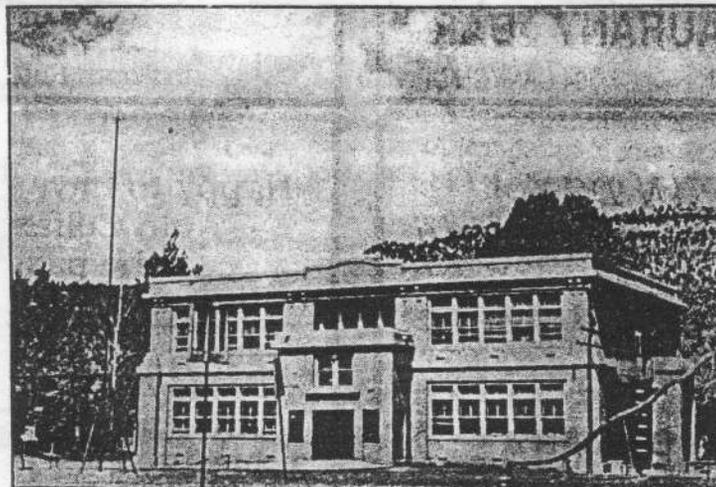


Photo courtesy of Ethel Parker

**Dawson's Central School.**

ountain forever; and February 8, 1923, when an afternoon explosion wiped out the lives of 20 miners. With such an emphasis, Dawson becomes a tragedy, and perhaps it remains so for many people besides those who lost their lives to the exploding coal dust. However, Dawson is like a star in the memory of most people. It flourished during a riot when America was on the rise. Dawson was very much a part of that excitement. There were cars to buy. You could buy a Ford for \$295 and if you wanted a starter and rims you could take off, it would cost another \$85. You could see motion picture at the opera house -- the very latest that Hollywood had to offer. Lindbergh had flown solo across the Atlantic. Amos and Andy were on the radio. The Katzenjammer Kids, Mutt and Jeff, Maggie and Jiggs and Arney Google were in the funny papers. Raton was just a few hours away, that is if you didn't have a flat or get stuck. Dawson High School's football team was a powerhouse in the state. And on the Fourth of July you could go to Cimarron, play

in the river in the shade of the Palisades and join your parents hunting for mushrooms and dandelions in the meadows. Boys wore overalls; girls, pretty dresses. It was an uncomplicated time. Almost every home had a garage and its own grease pit for working under the car. And nobody locked doors.

One can brood about the conditions under which the men of Dawson worked and perhaps damn the steamship lines. The railroads and the coal company itself for having enticed them into a life of long hours, uninspiring tasks, low pay and godawful danger; but these were men who for the most part had traveled across an ocean and a continent to challenge the mountains of Dawson. Their hope and dreams for the future made it all worthwhile. Some lost the challenge before they could create a future, but they knew what mining was and "what will be, will be." The rest of them went on to become a part of the future of the new land, for good or for bad. Their children and grandchildren are testimony to their faith in the

future.

In the July 4, 1988, issue of "Newsweek," Garrison Keillor speaks of the people who come to America from other lands. He calls them "heroes, all of them -- at least they're my heroes, especially the new immigrants, especially the refugees. Everyone makes fun of New York cabdrivers who can't speak English: they're heroes.

**To give up your country is the hardest thing a person can do; to leave the old familiar places and ship out over the edge of the**

world to America and learn everything over again different that you learned as a child, learn the new language that you will never be so smart in or funny in as in your true language. It takes years to start to feel semi-normal. And yet people still come....They are heroes who make an adventure on our behalf....and if we knew their stories, we could not keep back the tears."

A century ago, people like that came to America. Some of them came to Dawson. They, too, were heroes!

## Save a place at the picnic

A reunion of Dawsonites will be held on Sunday, September 4, 1988, under the cottonwoods just beyond the gate, which will be open from 9 a.m. to 6 p.m. that day. I plan to be there.

Save me a place near the irrigation ditch, where the water can tell me stories of Dawson. Somebody please be prepared to show me where I lived in Number Seven Camp. It would be good to know where the orchard was. Maybe somebody can tell me where we moved in 1929 just before leaving Dawson for Raton for good.

Let's hope that somebody plays the accordion at the reunion. Dawson accordions have many stories to tell, too.

Finally, it would be good to have the two magpies at the picnic. They could tell us of a happier time in Dawson.

It will be nice to get home again!

-- Fred Becchetti

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