

- **Some history of Dawson, New Mexico, southwest United States**

In 1869, John Barkley Dawson bought 20,000 acres of the Maxwell Land Grant for \$3,700. He homesteaded about 5 miles upstream from Colfax on the Vermejo River. In 1895, coal was found on his property, though the first coal mine didn't open until 1901. The *Dawson Fuel Company* worked the mine using a railroad spur that was built from Tucumcari to Dawson. In 1906 *Phelps Dodge Corporation* bought the property and began to mine coal to sell to railroads and to use to smelt copper ore dug from their Arizona mines.

Dawson grew into a company town in New Mexico, southwest United States, of about 9,000 people. Immigrants arrived from Italy, Poland, Germany, Greece, the Balkans, the British Isles, Finland, Sweden and Mexico. The company built modern homes, a community swimming pool, an opera house, a golf course, two churches, a hospital and a hotel. The Phelps Dodge Mercantile Department store sold almost everything--food, clothing, hardware, shoes, furniture, drugs, jewelry, baked goods and ice from its own plant.

Children attended either the Central Elementary School in downtown Dawson or the Douglas Elementary School on Capitan Hill. The Douglas building also housed the Dawson High School whose teams won many state championships.

But Dawson's existence was marred by two mine tragedies--one in 1913 and another in 1923. The explosion in Mine No. 2 on October 22, 1913 shook the homes in Dawson two miles away. The death toll reached 263 despite the frantic efforts of rescue teams--it became one of the worst mining disasters in the United States. Another disaster took the lives of 120 miners on February 8, 1923. After both disasters, Phelps Dodge offered to relocate the families of dead miners and offered them compensation.

After the clean up, Dawson continued to thrive, with sons following their fathers into the mines. But after World War II natural gas and diesel fuel took the market away from coal. The mines were closed in April, 1950. Phelps Dodge subsequently sold almost the entire town to a salvage company.

Over the next dozens of years, ranchers operating Phelps Dodge's "Diamond D" ranch occupied the few dwellings remaining. Today, 2003, the old cemetery with many markers with death dates of 1913 and 1923 is well kept by Phelps Dodge and local volunteers.

New Mexico Wanderings

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