

Dawson Days; Residents reunite at coal camp site; Biannual reunion expected to bring hundreds back to former town

By Todd Wildermuth, Editor

Source: Raton Range; Raton, NM; Aug 28, 2012

“There never was a town like this before and there will never be again.”

— *Dawsonite Ted Shelton*



Dawson miners work underground during the 1920s. The coal-mining community had a population of as many as 2,000 during its heyday. *Photo courtesy Raton Museum*

The coal mines at Dawson shut down 62 years ago, but this weekend many memories will be mined as former residents and their relatives return to the Colfax County site for the biannual reunion.

A total of 663 people attended the last Dawson Reunion — held every other year on Labor Day weekend. Earlier reunions have attracted 1,000 people or more.

The Dawson Reunion has been held since 1954. The old Dawson town site is about 30 miles west of Raton and five miles north of U.S. 64, where only a small sign points to the road leading to the cemetery that holds many former residents of Dawson, a thriving town of several thousand people at its peak in the late 1920s and early 1930s.

Today, the Dawson site is on land owned by the Florida-based Colfax Land and Cattle Company, which allows the area to be opened for the Dawson Reunion as long as everyone who ventures onto the property signs a waiver of liability.

Dawson was founded in 1901 when rancher John Barkley Dawson sold his coal-rich land to the

Dawson Fuel Company. The mines were productive, and by 1905 the town had a population of close to 2,000.

In 1906, the mines were purchased by the Phelps Dodge Corporation. The company built homes for the miners, and numerous other facilities, including a hospital, department store, swimming pool, movie theater and golf course. Dawson coal operations had 10 mines.

On Oct. 22, 1913, Dawson suffered its first major disaster. Stag Canyon Mine No. 2 was shaken by an explosion that was felt two miles away. The explosion killed 263 miners. Two rescuers died during the rescue effort. It was later determined that the explosion was caused by a dynamite charge — set off as part of regular operations — that ignited coal dust in the mine.

Nearly 10 years later, on Feb. 8, 1923, Stag Canyon Mine No. 1 suffered an explosion. A mine car derailed, sparking coal dust to ignite. A total of 123 men were killed, many of them children of the men who died in 1913.

In early 1950, with railroads using less coal as they converted to diesel power, the Phelps Dodge Corporation closed Dawson and put the town's facilities up for sale.

Dawson's abandoned cemetery was placed on the National Register of Historic Places in April 1992.

Italy's connection to Dawson — many of the town's residents came from that country — has been remembered during past Dawson Reunions.

In 2008, the reunion featured the arrival of a commemorative bell — cast in Agnone, Italy — celebrating the history of the Molise Region of Italy. The bell was brought by Giuliano Colajanni, the grandson of Teridano diTella, an Italian immigrant from the Molise Region who was a carpenter and furniture maker in Dawson from about 1900 until his death in 1944.

In 2006, officials from the Italian government came to the Dawson site to present a plaque that remembers and honors the large number of Italian immigrants who died in the pair of mine explosions.

The reunion events are not just for those with family connections to Dawson, but are open to the public. The main event, Sunday's picnic at the site, is set for 9 a.m. to 6 p.m. A social will be held Saturday from 7 to 9 p.m. in Raton at the Elks Lodge at 300 S. Second St. In addition, the Raton Museum has a photo exhibit, along with a few other artifacts, about Dawson that is on display. The downtown museum, which will be open every day of the reunion, welcomes Dawson-related contributions for the exhibit. Anyone who would like to share an item, can go by the museum at 108 S. Second St., or call 445-8979.

A cleanup day is planned at the Dawson site for Friday at 8 a.m. to get it ready for Sunday's picnic. Volunteers can simply show up or obtain more information from John Gabriele at 447-0778.

According to the latest newsletter of the Dawson, New Mexico Association, 32 former Dawson residents have died since the last reunion.

Dawson history and reunion information is found at the Dawson, New Mexico Association website at www.chuckspeed.com/Dawson_Association.