

# Dawson Family Roots: Immigrant's life: Coal camp, a farm at Des Moines, final stop in Raton

By Fred Becchetti  
Special to The Raton Range

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*Editor's note: This Sunday, hundreds of former Dawsonites and their descendants will converge on the site of the former coal-mining town between Raton and Cimarron. The bi-annual Dawson Reunion has been held since 1954. The following is excerpts from a longer article that was researched and written by the grandson of a Dawson miner who came from Italy to America in 1895 and arrived in Dawson in 1911. The author has attended the Dawson Reunions since 1988 and plans to be there again this year.*



Miners in Dawson sort through coal at the "lump-picking table" in May 1921.  
*Courtesy photo*

"Dominic!" That became his name in America, but his real name was Domenico.

Domenico Becchetti.

It was a name given to him by his father Francesco Becchetti and his mother Maria Romaldi at his birth in the farming town of Fabriano, Italy, on May 12, 1872.

Fabriano is on the east coast of central Italy in the province of Ancona, in the region called the Marche, about 100 miles northeast of Rome.

Domenico grew up in a large family of seven children.

Children were the workers on the family farm.



This painting of the town of Dawson was done by Fred Becchetti.  
*Courtesy Raton Museum*

As an adult, Domenico served his country in the Italian army. He was honorably discharged in 1894. Meanwhile, American industrial companies were recruiting in Europe.

In October 1895, Domenico was contacted in Fabriano by the Menominee Mining Company of Upper Michigan, U.S.A. He received a labor contract and prepaid tickets for transporting himself to Iron Mountain, Mich., to work in the iron mines.

By the end of October, he had said "Arrivederci" to his 17-year-old sweetheart Appolonia Bianchi, telling her that he would send for her to join him in America as soon as he had saved enough money to pay her passage.

Domenico worked in the mines and lived as a lonely bachelor in the Italian community of his new American home for three years before he wrote his sweetheart, telling her in a letter to come to

Iron Mountain.

On October 20, 1900, Domenico, having lived in the United States for the required five years, became an American citizen. He and Appolonia had also married and started a family.

After a visit to Italy, the family returned to America. Apparently, Domenico had contracted with Phelps Dodge Mining Company before he left Iron Mountain or even while he was in Italy on the visit, because the ship's passenger manifest listed the family's destination as "Dawson, New Mexico."

The railroad took them into the New Mexico Territory. In Raton, they took the spur line through Colfax and on to Dawson.

Domenico probably knew nothing about Dawson, except that some of his friends had left Iron Mountain and found Dawson a good place to work. He probably thought that nothing could be worse than digging iron in the frigid mines of upper Michigan and that mining coal simply had to be easier than mining iron. And no place on earth could be as cold as upper Michigan, even though he would discover that Dawson in the winter could get pretty cold and miserable.

On arrival in Dawson, the family settled in the company-owned Loreto Camp, a community of about a hundred identical houses, each with its own outhouse, just north of "downtown" Dawson.

There was a dirt road leading from Loreto to the main town of Dawson with all its conveniences and the center of coke processing and shipping. Dawson, in 1911, when Domenico's family arrived, was well on its way to becoming "the largest community in the Southwest supported by one industry."

Domenico, age 39, went to work in the mines immediately, and it is quite possible that he took his son Francesco into the mines to work with him. Francesco was 11, and there were no child labor laws to prevent his working and earning a salary for the family, which would be within the traditions of Italian families of the time.

The mining was different from Iron Mountain, but the danger was always there, with the possibility of injury or death at every turn in the dark tunnels. The added danger in the Dawson coal mines was the formation of pockets of gas in the tunnels.

On Oct. 22, 1913, two years after Domenico's arrival in Dawson, a gas explosion in Mine No. 2 killed 263 men, creating dozens of widows and many fatherless children. This is still listed in the World Almanac as the third worst mining disaster in the United States.

In about 1915, Domenico quit the mines and moved his family a few miles north of Dawson to Des Moines to try farming on land that he acquired under the Homestead Act.

The farming experience turned out to be a failure and a double tragedy for Domenico. After having joined Domenico in Iron Mountain and working at his side in two mining camps while raising three children and doing the heavy work on the Des Moines farm, Appolonia contracted an illness which the doctors in Denver could not cure. She died in Denver on April 29, 1917, at the age of 40. She was buried on the farm in Des Moines.

On Nov. 14 of that same year, his youngest son Agostino, or Santino, at the age of 16, died on the farm of "blood poisoning from a rusty nail or a barbed wire scratch." He was buried in Raton.

There are no documents, and there are very few stories passed down about what occurred in Des Moines. Thus the history of Domenico Becchetti and his family becomes hazy after the death of Appolonia and Santino in 1917.

Apparently, Domenico abandoned the Des Moines farm in 1918. He and Francesco returned to the Dawson mines.

By 1924, Domenico had been back in Dawson working the mines for about six years. His son Francesco was married and living in Number Seven Camp with his young bride Dolores. His daughter Fiorenza was living with her husband Joe Gherardi in nearby Loreto.

Although Domenico, Francesco and Gherardi were working in the mines, through good fortune they missed being killed in the Feb. 8, 1923, gas explosion which ripped through one of the mines and left 120 miners dead and their families with only token assistance from the mining company for their relocation.

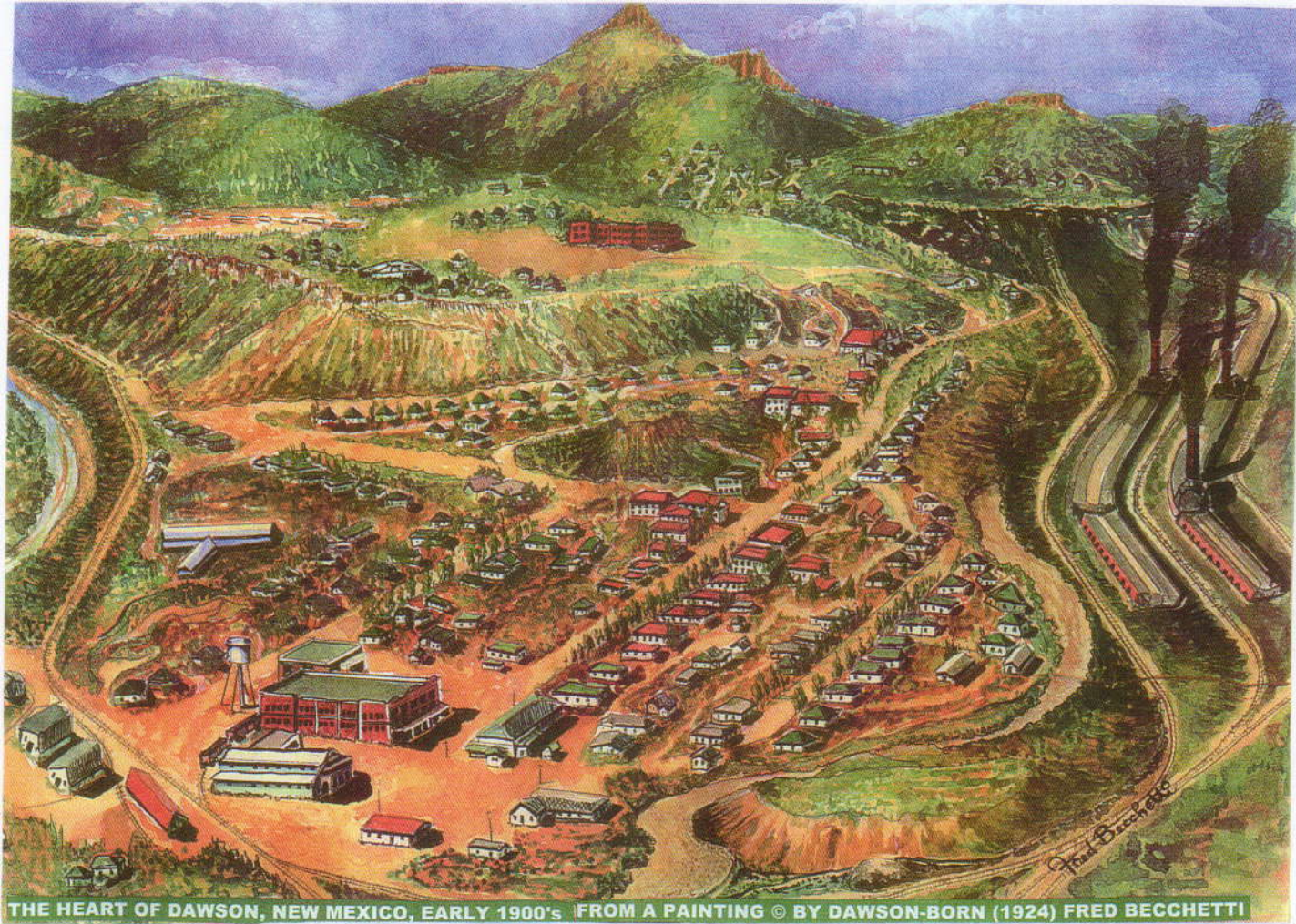
After seven years of living alone, Domenico married the 43-year-old widow Beatrice Persiconi Manfredi in 1925.

In 1928, the couple and their infant son, Albert, along with his half-brothers and sisters, and Domenico's parents, moved to Raton, about 26 miles away. Domenico at 56 was still vigorous, but he could no longer do the hard work required of him in the mines. Besides, the railroads had gone to diesel and the copper refineries to natural gas, so Phelps Dodge Company was cutting back. Domenico, along with many others, left Dawson to seek a more stable existence.

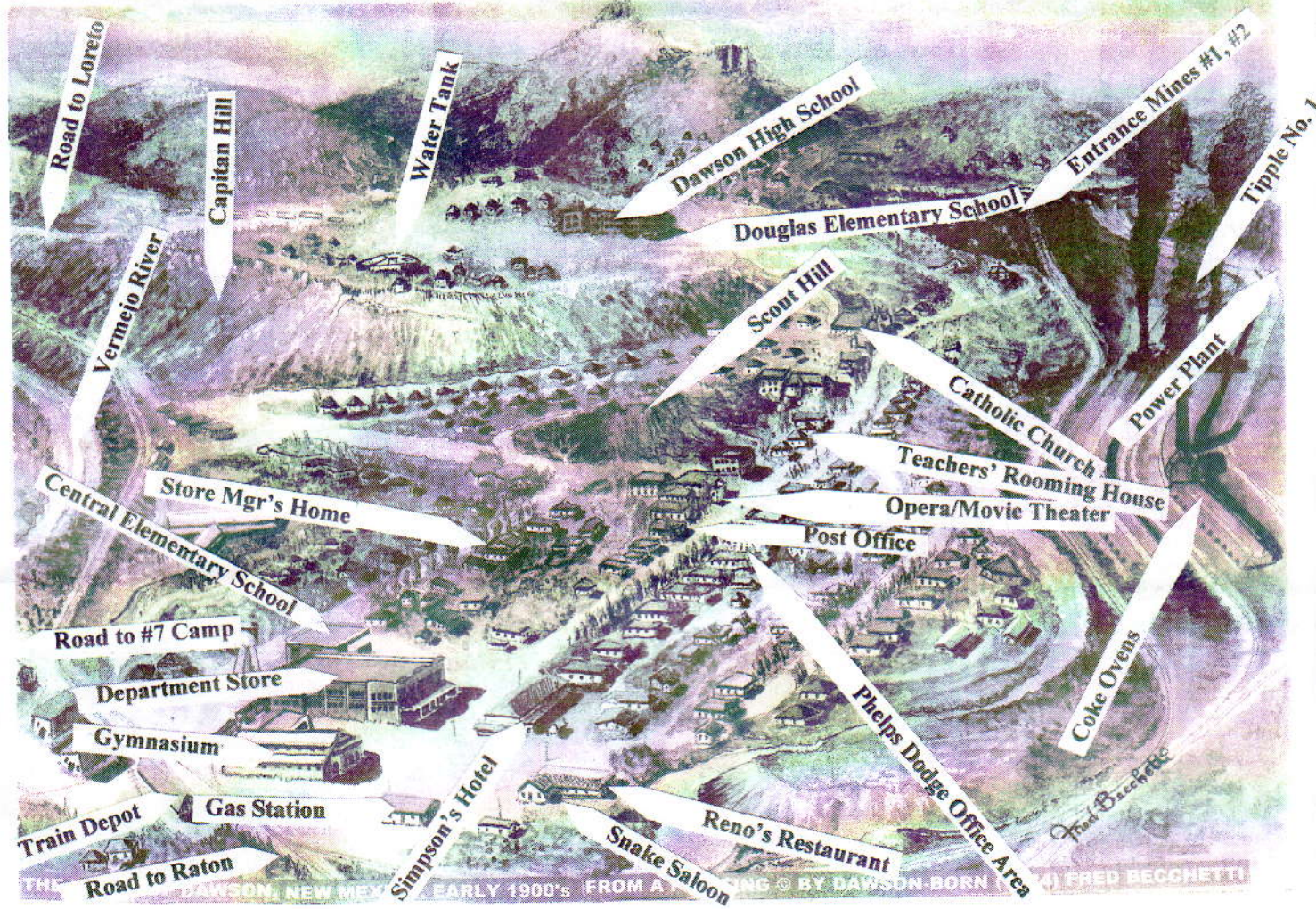
The Dawson mines would continue to produce coal for another 22 years, until the last coal car was dumped on April 28, 1950, and the town of Dawson with all its production facilities and social infrastructure was abandoned, demolished and finally leveled, leaving only a grove of trees where Dawsonites and their descendants meet every other Labor Day for a reunion picnic to honor Dawson.

In Raton, Domenico's marriage to Beatrice lasted unfortunately only until 1930, when they separated. As a result, Albert was raised by his mother Beatrice across the railroad tracks in the Stringtown section of Raton. Domenico lived in a large brick house on First Street just off downtown Raton.

Domenico died Jan. 6, 1965, at the age of 93 in Raton. He is buried in the Catholic Cemetery by the side of his loyal son Francesco.



THE HEART OF DAWSON, NEW MEXICO, EARLY 1900's FROM A PAINTING © BY DAWSON-BORN (1924) FRED BECCHETTI



Road to Loreto

Capitan Hill

Water Tank

Dawson High School

Entrance Mines #1, #2

Tipple No. 1

Douglas Elementary School

Vermejo River

Scout Hill

Power Plant

Catholic Church

Store Mgr's Home

Teachers' Rooming House  
Opera/Movie Theater

Central Elementary School

Post Office

Road to #7 Camp

Department Store

Gymnasium

Phelps Dodge Office Area

Coke Ovens

Train Depot

Gas Station

Simpson's Hotel

Snake Saloon

Reno's Restaurant

Road to Raton

# OUR HEROES OF DAWSON

(Some Words in Their Honor)

By Fred Becchetti, Born March 31, 1924, In No. Seven Camp of Dawson

Grandson of Domenico Becchetti and Appolonia Bianchi, both from Fabriano, Italy.  
Son of Frank Becchetti and Dolores Velasquez.  
Nephew of Joe Gherardi and Fiora Becchetti.  
Nephew of Albert Becchetti, the Gifted Son of Domenico.  
Grandson of Emilio Velasquez and Gregoria Gonzalez.  
Nephew of Jess, Albert, Eddie, Tom and Margaret Velasquez.



Dawson Miners

Photo from Toby Smith's "Coal Town," which everybody interested in Dawson should read.

*ALL OF THESE WONDERFUL PEOPLE LIVED AND WORKED  
IN DAWSON AND SHOWERED FREDDIE, HIS SISTER LENA  
AND HIS BROTHER ERNIE WITH LOVE AND KINDNESS.*

*For the fourteenth time since 1980  
we meet today beneath these trees  
to embrace our friends and family  
and remember our beginnings.*

*Those of us born in Dawson,  
now surrounded by our children  
and our children's children,  
are like a gentle heart  
beating deep with love  
for that place of our birth,  
which has now vanished,  
but still drifts free  
on the misty clouds of dreams  
and joyful memories.*

*We are all bound together  
by our love for one another  
by our love for those  
who came here before us.*

*The threads of love and memory  
bind us to our parents  
to our relatives  
to all our friends  
and to all their comrades  
working and dying  
in the deep danger  
of the winding tunnels —  
black, dark, dusty, deadly.*

*They came by sea and rail  
from every corner of the world  
to this wild, untouched land,  
speaking their own language,  
singing their own songs,  
dancing their own steps,  
with only one religion —  
the religion of hard work.*

*With pick and shovel and sweat,  
they carved from the mountains  
a place of joy in hard work,  
a place of simple pleasures,  
a place of children's laughter  
a place of hope for the future.*

*And today, under these sheltering trees,  
it is a quiet place of the spirit.*

*With strong and gnarled hands,  
they took up the challenge  
of an untamed land  
and built a world of hope  
for their children — for us.*

*They were heroes, all of them!  
The men!  
The women at their side!  
Their children!*

*Our heroes!  
Everyone of them!*

—Fred Becchetti  
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