

Dawson, NM Coal Town Memories

By

Esta Murrell Adams

My father , John (Jack) Murrell, was born June 28, 1889 in Wingate, a small town in the north of England. He left England in September 1910 from Liverpool on the R.M.S. Coronica, for the United States, arriving at Ellis Island , September 28, 1910.

In June of 1912, we know he was working at Carthage, the first coal mine worked in New Mexico (1860) and from there moved on to Dawson. After the 1913 explosion, he sailed for Australia, worked there for a while then moved on to New Zealand. While in this area he toured many countries and as children entertained us with stories of the Great Wall of China, the busy port of Hong Kong, the divers on the Island of Bora Bora, the strange animals of Tasmania as well of stories of India and Belgium, where his Grandfather and Uncle worked as Contract Lunnelle Shaft Sinkers. In 1915, he joined a group of young men sailing for San Francisco to take in the World's Fair, interested in an exhibit in Dentistry, the gold crown. From there, he worked a short time in the state of Washington for the Black Diamond Coal co, then moved on to Illinois, where he met the beautiful Marie Amelia Wenneborg. They were soon engaged, but before they could marry, the United States entered World War I and, although Dad was not a citizen, he was drafted on September 15, 1917. They managed, however, after about three tries, to meet in Indianapolis, Indiana and were married February 14, 1918. Dad was to be shipped overseas and had already boarded the ship, when he was taken back off the ship under sealed orders and returned to Head Quarters. His superiors had discovered that Durham County England, where Dad was born and raised, was known for their expertise raising Homing pigeons! The Signal Corp could certainly use his experience, and yes, he did have Homing Pigeons as a young man.



Left to right: John (Jack) Murrell and Marie Wenneborg

Dad was discharged December 4, 1918. His brother, Tom, joined him and they owned and operated a mine in Talula in 1926. By this time Dad had two children, Otto James and Pamela and was expecting again--they had an idea it was twins. He had also received his United States Citizenship in 1920. Due to a new law, and the Lessor's refusal to comply, they had to shut down their business. A brief stay in Kentucky followed, and then Tom and Dad headed for Dawson to join their brother, Jim.

My father was one of the rescue workers in the 1913 explosion at Dawson. He was one of the Helmet Men, those men who searched for the living or dead, and bring the bodies out of the mine in the dangerous part of the mine that could have exploded again at any time, or was filled with poisonous gases that could kill you immediately. They brought out 263 bodies. This was a horrendous experience for a young man of twenty four--one of the things that hurt the most was facing the group of relatives at the mouth of the mine. They would literally grab a hold of the workers, cling to them, crying for information of father, sons, husbands and brothers, and sometimes all of these in the same family. Sometimes the older ladies could not speak a word of English, but only cry out the names. Dad would always tell them, "we have not reached that section yet", but he knew they were all dead. Dad's brother Jim was also one of the rescue workers, but he was in a safe part of the mine. His wife and children were in route to join him in Dawson, and at the train station in Kansas City heard the news shouted by the paper carriers, that all of the men had been killed. Uncle Jim managed to have them paged, telling them he and Jack were alive.

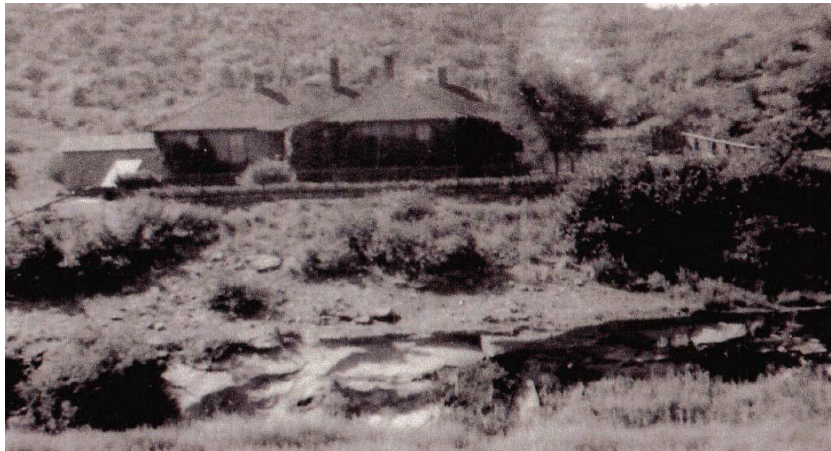
Phelps Dodge recommended the Helmet men for the Carnegie Award for Bravery, but waited until the 1923 explosion to submit their recommendations. The time limit had expired for the 1913 rescuers. As children, Dad took us to the cemetery and showed us all the rows of white crosses and pointed out the men he had known.

In 1928, Mother's brother drove us to Dawson to join Dad. It was quite an experience for Mother who grew up in a farming area in Illinois, with deep fertile soil. Across the plains she would see great herds of cattle, but wondered "what do they eat?" It looked to her like only sand and cactus in the fields. We were soon settled, and Dad was quite excited about the coming Community Day Celebration, and told Mother he was confident his team would win first prize in First Aid Contest--and they did! Dad was awarded a Waltham 10 carat gold watch with a 2 1/2 dollar Indian Head gold coin attached. The inscription on the back of the watch is, "John Murrell First Prize First Aid Contest Dawson N.M 1928". I am sure everyone on the team received the same watch, inscribed with their name. Below, is a picture of the team. Dad is the second man, right to left. We still have the watch.



When we moved, our parents did not ship all of their furniture and Mother's piano was left in Illinois. A German priest, Father Gustav Gollbach, was kind enough to let Mother play the huge pipe organ for her own amusement—we were Protestant, and she would play, all classical music for hours. The church was below the school, which was on a hill above town, but when school dismissed, as soon as we were out of the door, we could hear the beautiful organ music and we knew Mother was in the church. We rushed down the mountain, and tiptoed as quiet as possible into the church. It fascinated my twin and I. We thought it was the most awesome place with the beautiful statues. Father Gollbach was a very talented artist, and promised to teach Ella and me to paint as well as to speak German. About a month into our German lessons, he told us he would not teach us German anymore, but French. He told us he would always love Germany as his country, but wanted nothing to do with the present government, and thought by teaching us German, someone would think he was for the Nazi party and Hitler. We really didn't understand it all until 1941.

At our home in Dawson, we had huge very ornate stove in the living room called a German heater, all chrome with scrolled fenders. I have seen a few of these, but none as big as ours. It was a gorgeous stove. In the kitchen Mother had a coal stove, cream and black with all the latest attachments. It also heated the hot water for our bathroom. Mother was a very talented decorator, so we always had a very pretty home inside. Dad was one of the officials and Phelps Dodge paid very well. He did not care what she spent on our home.



What I remember most about the Dawson School were the wonderful operettas. No expense was spared on the sets or costumes. I remember a Dutch operetta in particular, we danced in real wooden shoes. The Manual Training boys built a huge windmill on stage that really turned. Mary Sanchez was a very small girl but she could really belt out a song, and always got the lead. Mr. Chapman sometimes performed at the beginning, singing Old Man River, his deep voice booming. The minstrel shows came too, and local girls were selected for the choir, which always included my sister, Pam. In one, they sang "Dixie Blackbirds Steppin' High" and they could really dance.

The school often put on a masquerade party, and every one coveted first prize. Mother had a real idea for Pam's costume. She was a tall girl, but a very lovely one and considered quite beautiful. Mother got a huge floppy hat, big enough to cover her hair which was pinned up. In the band of her hat, she stuck

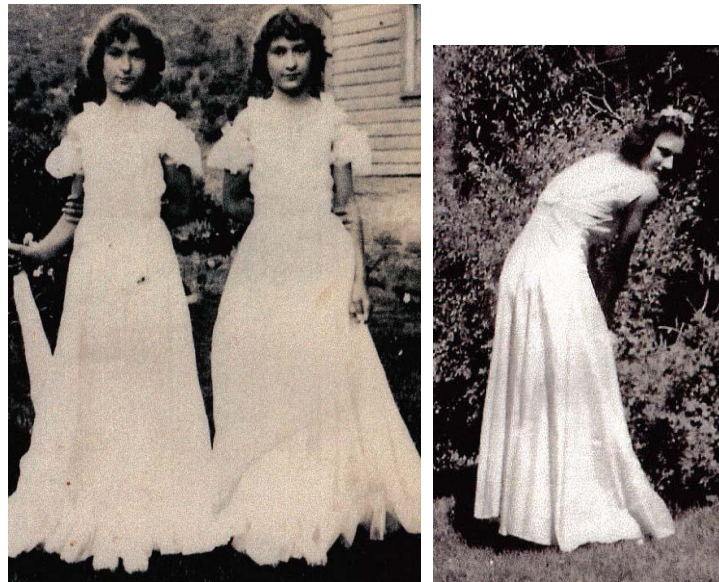
various items: a cigar butt, a tooth brush, a comb, etc.. On the belt of the tattered and patched pants, she hung by strings various items including a half eaten can of beans. The soles of her shoes were tied on. The part of her skin showing under the mask was covered with makeup, making it look old and beaten by the sun. Oh, she made a grand tramp. As she entered the school, Mr. Poole, the coach, thinking her one of his athletes, gave her a playful side kick in the seat of the pants and pushed her into the group of boys. She never said a word, just slouched there like a guy.

After she was awarded First prize, she slipped off her mask. Mr. Poole was the most astonished, horrified, and apologetic man, but we all just laughed about it. Dawson was fun.

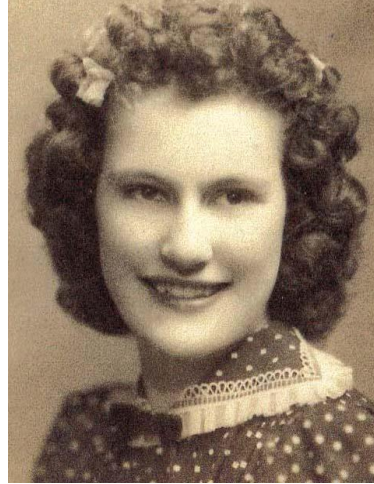
One of the most tragic memories I have of Dawson, were the Dust storms, bringing with them the dreaded Dust Pneumonia. This was a time before penicillin or sulfa drug, so many families lost children. There was nothing anyone could do, but watch their child die. I remember only one young man that survived, Joe Sanchez. Yes, there was never a town like Dawson, it was unique. There was no crime, unemployment or filth, the town was kept pristine. No little children in rags 'barefoot or hungry, Phelps Dodge Mercantile took care of that, you simply had an overdraft that you paid when you worked again. No slum areas or homeless people. Camelot? Well, perhaps.

A Dawsonite, Esta Murell Adams

August 2012



Left to right: Twins, Ella and Esta (7th grade); Pam Murrell (in prom dress)



From left to right: daughters, Ella, Esta, and Pam Murrell



Son, Otto Murrell