



Nearly everyone now living who once called the coal-mining town of Dawson home seems to remember it with fondness. Founded in 1902 in Colfax County 7,500 feet up in the Sangre de Cristo Mountains west of Raton, it was entirely a company town.

But the huge, four-story, brick building that housed Phelps-Dodge's big mercantile establishment never fit the category of the infamous company store immortalized by Tennessee Ernie Ford. It was more a paternal establishment that catered to the needs of the workmen at a reasonable price, with liberal charge accounts, than a store that gouged its customers and kept them in perpetual debt.

I know, for I was the company druggist in Dawson for several years.

I do not have the distinction of having been one of the "old-timers" in Dawson, but when my wife Lena and I arrived in 1937, the town still had its early-day atmosphere. Progress did try to invade us in 1940, when an agent of

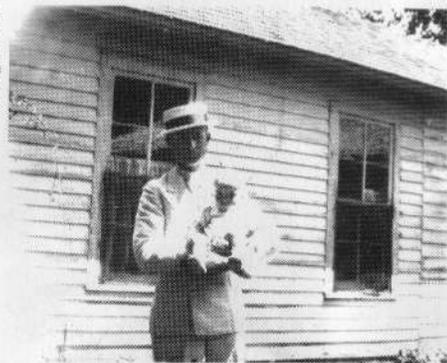
Dawson

A Personal Recollection



by Dewey Tidwell

Dewey Tidwell



Top — Inside the Phelps-Dodge Mercantile at Dawson about 1910, where the author, here holding his baby son, began work in 1937.

a propane gas company tried to interest the company and miners in using propane for heating and cooking. He left town in a hurry, barely escaping a beating, for the miners were in no mood to have coal replaced with gas. Of course, the automobile had put in its appearance many years before, and every household had some sort of gasoline conveyance. But the horse, buggy, and wagon had not been eliminated entirely. In season, a horse-drawn wagon from the company ranch peddled fresh vegetables daily to each home.

Dawson was a complete community with the big company store, bank, churches, hotel, theater, golf course, barbershop, saloon, and just about every necessity. In fact, the town stood out as a model community. Its school system always paid teachers more than other towns in the state, and the high school football, basketball, and baseball teams were a thorn in the side of other New Mexico towns, especially Raton, its arch rival.

Dawson's theater still had its stage decorations that had so often furnished backdrops for the likes of Eddie Foy and other early-day actors. Although motion pictures had been added in 1937 — and first-run pictures were always shown — traveling troupes still occasionally performed on its stage.

The great depression of the thirties was in full sway when Lena and

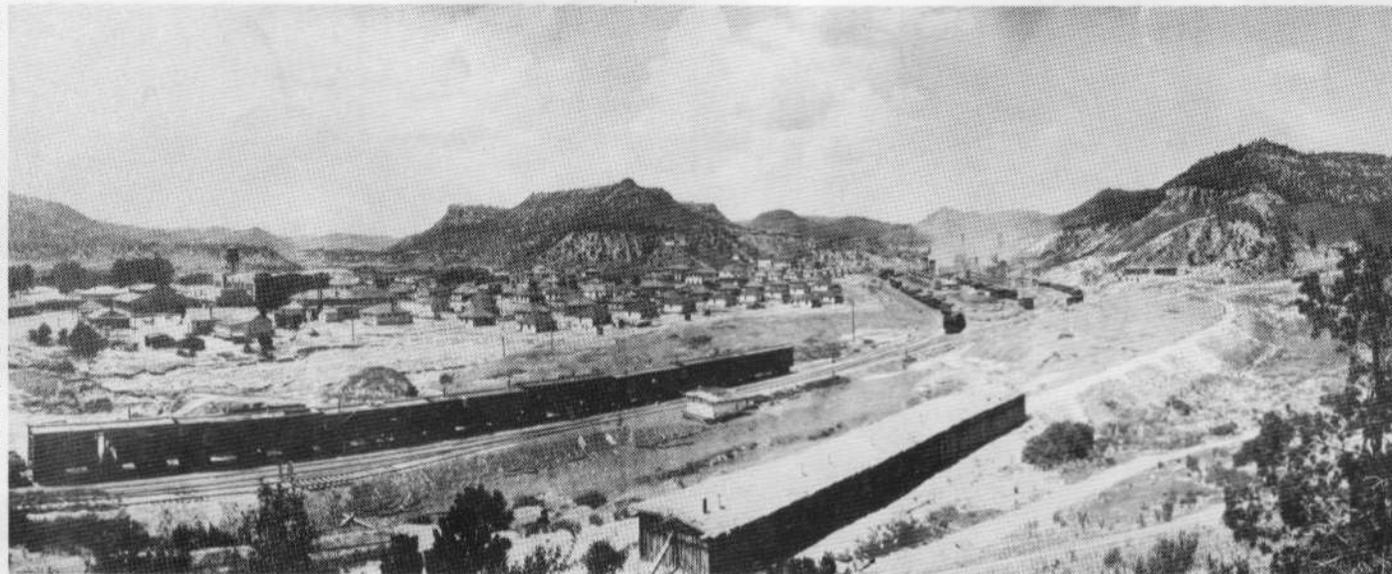
Chandler of the California newspaper interests.

Being a druggist in Dawson furnished me with many unique experiences, such as the fact that the entire store personnel, including Andrew Keddie, the Scottish manager, were a hard-drinking lot. They could drink the barrel dry, as the saying went, at the Snake across the street, privately oper-

line were lost completely when a large glass of Canadian Club whiskey mixed with a little soda water and a chunk or two of ice was presented to me by Keddie. "By dom," said he in his Scotch brogue, "we will soon see how this Tidwell can drink liquor. Drink up boys, the night is young!"

Dawson about 1912.

Museum of New Mexico Photo Archives/Thomas Fitzsimmons



I arrived in Dawson. The country was still plagued by the terrible dust storms, and jobs were extremely hard to find. All of those problems made us doubly thankful when the company offered me the job as druggist. Having never worked in such a large store, or lived in a company town, the big PD Mercantile, as it was commonly known, with its grocery, meat, dry goods, ladies' ready-to-wear, men's wearing apparel, shoe department, bakery, hardware department, and undertaking department, along with the drug department, flabbergasted me.

The full basement consisted of an ice plant and storage rooms and stock rooms for various departments. When I was ushered into one of the ice storage vaults I was amazed at the elk, deer, bear, turkey, and beef carcasses hanging from the rafters, not to mention fresh trout frozen in ice. The wild game and trout came from the nearby Vermejo Park Private Game Preserve, and the beef came from the company cattle ranch. At that time, the Park belonged to Harry

ated under a franchise agreement with the company, and Dawson's only saloon. When a new employee joined the Mercantile, it was traditional to initiate him, so to speak, at the Snake to determine his drinking ability.

One Saturday afternoon, shortly after I had gone to work for the company, Keddie informed me that all department heads were to meet him at the Snake promptly after the store closed at 6:00. I knew what that meant, and I dreaded it, for I never was known to be a man who could hold his liquor. But my job depended on my attending the shindig, as some of the older employees warned me at closing time, so I waded the deep snow across the street and presented myself at the little anteroom of the saloon's regular barroom that was always reserved for Keddie and his parties.

A big, pot-bellied, castiron coal stove stood in one corner of the little room, getting red hot as it stood in a sawdust-filled enclosure. The red warmth of the stove was inviting, for it was bitter cold outside, but my thoughts along that

That glass looked like it was gallon-size. With a whoop and loud guffaw, most of the others' glasses were tilted and liquor began to flow down their gullets. One sip of my drink told me that it was potent. I sat down by the red-hot stove and began to sip ever so lightly. The boss soon noticed that tactic and bellowed, "Tidwell, drink up, there's more where that came from." I took a big swallow as Keddie and my fellow employees watched me, and when I had lowered the contents of the glass a bit, Keddie promptly refilled it. Holy Moses! I knew if I drank much more I wouldn't be able to crawl home, much less walk. Something had to be done and done quickly.

Being next to the big monkey-stove sitting in sawdust gave me an idea. Every time I caught the boss looking elsewhere, I deftly dumped a big portion of the liquor in my glass into the sawdust. The other fellows were already "lit up," singing barbershop ballads and not paying any attention to me. The boss refilled my glass a number of times and remarked, "By dom, who

said Tidwell couldn't drink liquor." I managed to weather the storm, but I imagine I poured more than a pint of whiskey into the sawdust. After that I was in.

Dawson's population was made up of many nationalities. The company's employment office in New York hired immigrants from European countries who were looking for jobs. The men hired were sent to the Dawson coal mines and to the company's copper mines in Arizona. Among the Dawson men were Welshmen (Cousin Jacks), Irish, Poles, Slavs, Italians, Spaniards, Mexicans, Greeks, Dutch, and Scandinavians, plus Negroes, and people from Oklahoma, Texas, and Arkansas. This conglomerate seldom produced any racial incidents except when some of the Texans and Oklahomans objected to the presence of the Negroes and Mexicans.

Those with Southern leanings kept their prejudices to themselves or soon got their walking papers, for Phelps-Dodge did not tolerate racial discrimination in Dawson.

Down through the years, especially the early ones, some disastrous explosions in Dawson killed many men. Hardly a family in Dawson in 1937 had escaped losing at least one loved one in a mine explosion. Some of them had lost several, but being philosophical people, they bore their grief for their dead, and the men continued to work in the mines. Most of them were very religious and sought solace in that belief. Knowing that any of them might be the next victim, they lived their lives with much piety, although some of them drank a little too much now and then.

When the occasion arose, the Dawson miners were not adverse to some grand-scale celebrating, and although the mines were only working two or three days a week then, the men seemed to get together enough change to engage

in a card game at the Snake occasionally. The game called for two players and one referee with a case of beer as the spoils. The winner and the referee drank the contents of the case, and the game resumed — usually lasting all night, yet no one ever got drunk.

I soon learned that the Italian miners preferred long, thin, black cigars, which they smoked when

which also involved Billy the Kid. The manager of the meat department was Dad, a Scotsman who personally knew some of the participants in that bloody war. Dad's sympathies happened to lie with the Billy-the-Kid group, and that often brought him into physical combat with Henry.

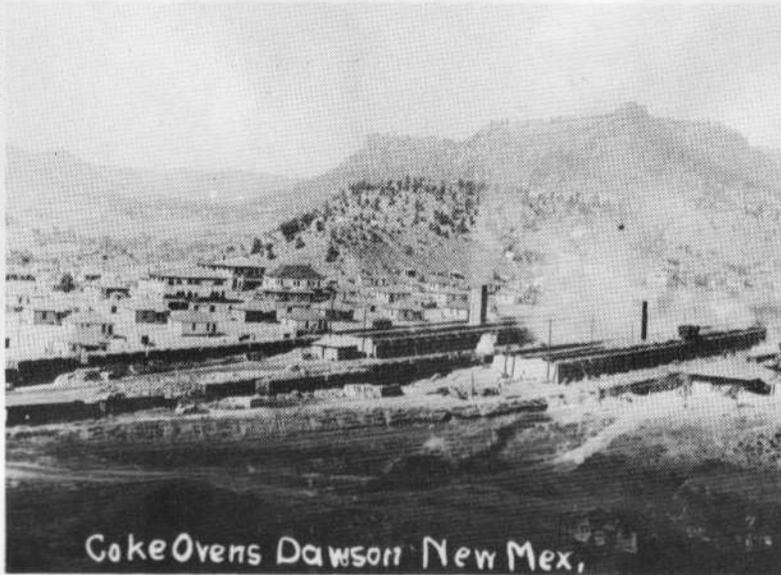
It was a rule to lock the store for one hour at noon while the employees went to lunch, and often several people were back at the store front a few minutes before re-opening time. Henry and Dad always seemed to be there ahead of time, and invariably they got into an argument about the Lincoln County War that led to fisticuffs if Andrew Keddie did not arrive in time to stop it. They would shove and push and cuss each other, and occasionally one or the other would get in a lick with a fist while the

onlookers took it all in in glee. If Keddie arrived after the ruckus had started, he would bristle like a bulldog and grab each combatant by the nearest arm and fling them apart, all the while giving them a tongue lashing in his Scottish accent. I can still hear him yelling, "By dom, I'm gonna firrrre you hathens one of these days if you don't stop this brawlin'." But he never did.

Around the turn of the century, Dawson's location made it ideal for outlaws on the dodge to appear at the company store occasionally for supplies. Nearby Turkey Canyon was a hideout for the Blackjack Ketchum gang in the nineties when they were actively robbing trains in northern New Mexico, and from that vantage point they slipped into Cimarron when in need of supplies. But after Phelps-Dodge opened the mines at Dawson and built a town there, the outlaw gangs transferred their affections to the Dawson company store. Moonshining and bootlegging flourished in that area dur-

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Dewey Tidwell



Coke Ovens Dawson New Mex.

they were outside the mines and chewed when they were inside. Being a cigar smoker, I could hardly wait to sample one of the Italian cigars. The first puff convinced me that it was a man's cigar and that I didn't qualify — my head felt like it was leaving my body.

The Greeks in Dawson were a very quiet lot, although not unfriendly, and most of the time when the miners were loafing around in the store, the Greeks spent their time reading the periodicals I sold. Some of them were very scholarly, and among them were some good artists and sculptors.

Names such as Gringo, Wop, Dago, Spic, Kraut, Limey, and Mick were bantered back and forth without any hostility from those the nickname referred to, but say Okie, Arkie, or Texan and there was usually some trouble.

Among the store personnel was Henry, the manager of the grocery department, whose father had been allied with the Murphy-Dolan faction in the Lincoln County War,

ing prohibition days, and the Dawson store sold many pounds of sugar and hops.

The ladies' ready-to-wear department in the company store won fame in the 1910s, 1920s, and 1930s for the fashion shows put on every year on the stage of the Dawson theater. The very latest in women's wearing apparel was displayed, and people from Denver, Kansas City, Albuquerque, and El Paso attended. Fur coats topped the list. Fur coat dealers from all over the nation vied with each other for the privilege of showing their wares at the fashion shows. Needless to say, the shows always proved to be financially successful.

When the president of Phelps-Dodge and the board of directors and some stockholders made their annual inspection of the company property in Dawson, both the store management and the corporation management outdid themselves in entertaining the dignitaries. A number of the people from New York who came with the company officers were typical Eastern greenhorns and very vulnerable to Western pranks.

A group of Taos Indian dancers were always engaged to entertain the visitors, and once our boss decided to add a little "wild" flavor to the Indian entertainment. All of the Taos Indians could speak English, and many were graduates of Carlisle Indian School, but our boss asked them to put on a sham Indian attack during the big banquet of elk, deer, bear, and turkey that was prepared for the visitors.

About the time the guests were down to their desserts, a few of the dancers slipped out and put on war paint and costumes and charged the banquet hall from several directions yelling bloody murder. The Easterners had no time to try to escape before the Indians were among them swinging tomahawks and big knives and threatening them with extinction. Just as a few of the guests were about to faint, the warriors ceased their attack and quickly left the hall. It took some time for the boss to convince

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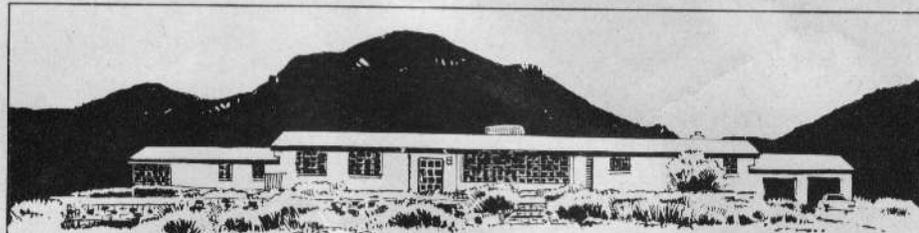
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the visitors that it was all a joke and that the Taos Indians were their friends. Soon peace was restored for most of them, but a few left Dawson vowing to never return to "this wild place."

The store put on an annual celebration about May every year with big sales and bargains offered in all departments, and everyone eagerly looked forward to the event. Many of the customers stocked up on groceries and clothing for months to come. Hardware items were not overlooked, and my drug department did a big business in cosmetics and sundries.

A few days before the big sale, Keddie always held a meeting of department heads and gave us instructions. A big spread of baked ham, roasts, pickles, bread and pies from the store bakery, soda pop, and coffee was put out in my drug department stock room for the benefit of the store personnel who ate their lunch there that day instead of going home. The big "no no" was spiking the coffee or soda pop with liquor. Keddie was always emphatic in issuing that order. That rule was observed until the eating got underway, when someone always managed to produce a bottle and liberally lace the beverages. Soon everyone was in a more jovial mood than usual, and the boss drank his share and enjoyed it. He made no mention of the ban on liquor until the following year when he again went through his ritual of banning liquor from the lunch room.

Like many another coal-mining town, Dawson succumbed to diesel fuel — the market for coal diminished, and in 1950, Phelps-Dodge disbanded the town. The company gave people the opportunity to buy their houses and have them moved, and many a house in Raton, Maxwell, Cimarron, and Springer today used to stand in Dawson. Dawson lasted long enough that many of its population spent their whole lives there. To see it literally taken apart caused much anguish.

Today almost nothing is left. The site is not open to visitors.

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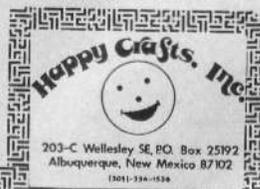
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