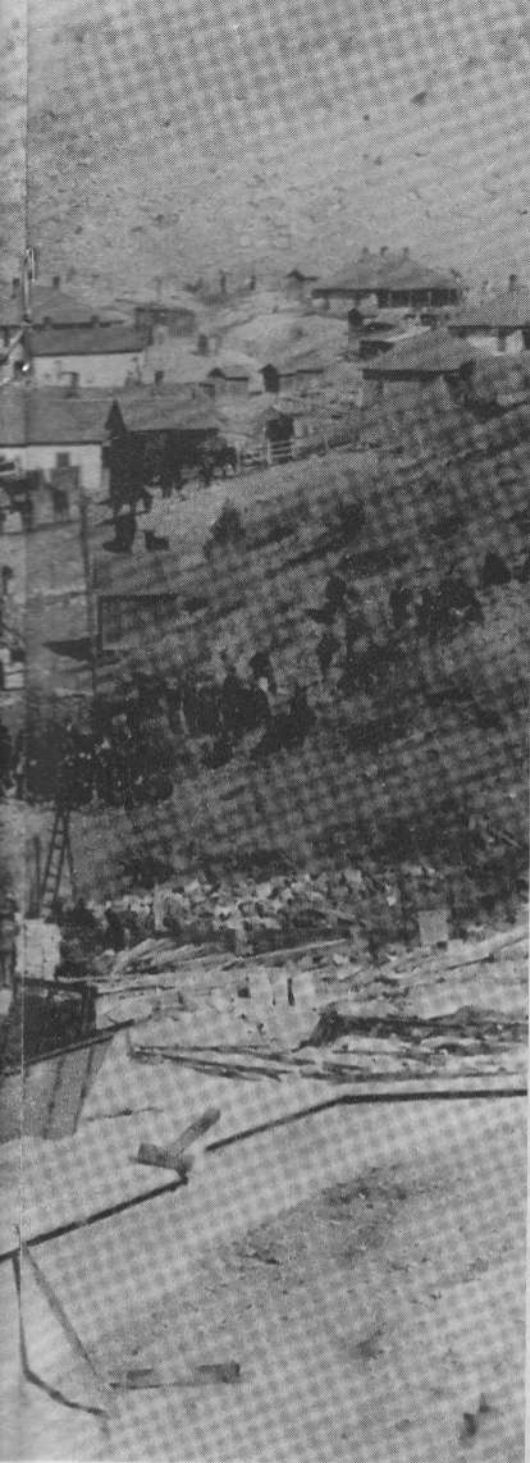


Dawsonites, mostly women and children, line up outside Mine No. 1 in 1923 awaiting, and dreading, news from the rescue crew.

# Disaster by the Decade



By JESS PRICE  
and  
E. A. SCHOLER

"DAWSON IS the name of the town . . . [it] lies in the beautiful Vermejo Valley, which is irrigated by the crystal waters of the Vermejo River. On either hand are seen orchards, which in spring fill the air with the fragrance of their blossoms and in fall are laden with luscious fruits, while the prevailing gentle winds come down the canyon pregnant with the perfume of the pines which adorn the eroded canyons and the table-topped sandstone hills upon all sides. Deer and wild turkey are to be found within 5 miles of the town, and mountain trout disport in the waters of the Vermejo River which runs alongside the town."

That idyllic description might have been accurate when it was written in 1903, but the town it depicts was to see more tragedy in the form of violent death than any other community in the Rocky Mountain West. Unlike many boom-and-bust towns in the turn-of-the-century West, death didn't come from the barrel of a gun in Dawson, New Mexico. It belched from the bowels of a mine.

Ironically, the description of Dawson as a western paradise came from the pen of a United States mine inspector who a few short months later would have to investigate the first of a trio of major mine explosions which plagued the town at ten-year intervals and left nearly 400 men dead in their wake.

Dawson began producing coal in 1901 with a few miners scratching coal from the rich seams which underlie most of northeastern New Mexico. It soon grew into the largest coal-mining town in the Territory of New Mexico. Three mines were in operation in Stag Canyon in 1903. Each mine, the inspector reported, was in good condition, "no dust, no gas; mine well-timbered."

Then on September 14, 1903, the first tragedy struck. A fire broke out in Mine No. 1. It was believed to have started when a curtain in the mine was accidentally ignited. Quickly the flames, fed by coal dust, swept through the tunnels. Most of the miners were able to get out

before the fire trapped them. But three did not. Just as the rescue crew was nearing them, another fierce explosion wracked the mine, driving the rescuers back and burning many of them seriously. The three men still in the mine had no chance. It was several days before the raging fire could be controlled and their bodies brought out.

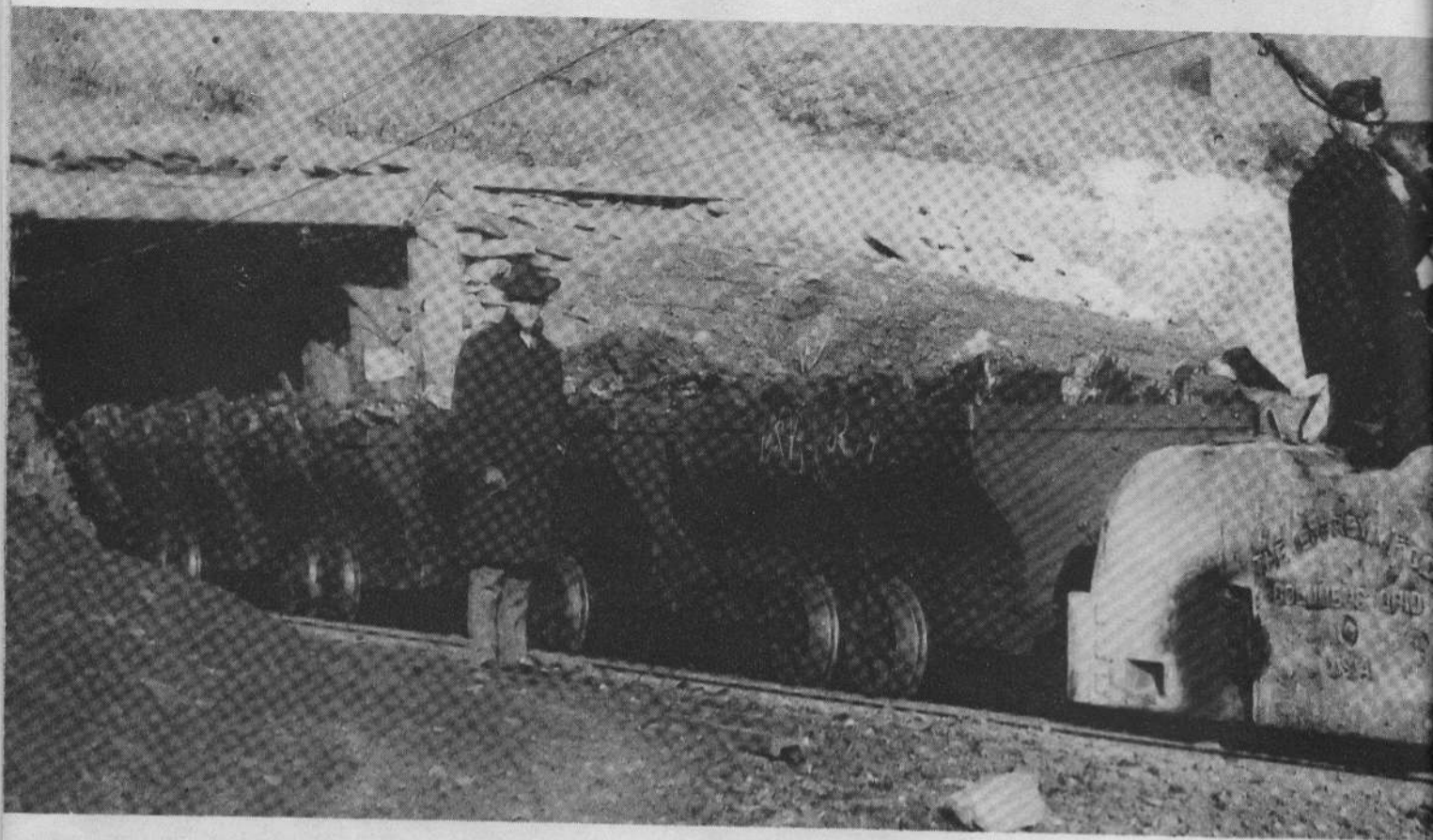
THE RISK of accidental death, even in the best of mines (and the Dawson mines were among the best), was always a threat. From time to time death claimed an individual miner in the Dawson mines. But 10 years went by in relative quiet and safety. Then—doomsday.

It was clear with a bit of a nip in the air, that winesharp day, October 22, 1913. A full shift of 284 miners was ripping coal from two and one-half mile deep seams in Stag Canyon Mine 2, judged one of the safest mines in America. Just the day before, State Mine Inspector R. H. Beddow, a hardliner on safety regulations, had completed a tour of the property. He had not found it wanting. Phelps-Dodge prided itself on maintaining its Dawson mines in top condition, installing all the latest safety devices.

At 3:10 p.m. there was a sound that people in Dawson said reverberated like a high-powered rifle shot, followed by a prolonged, muffled roar. The ground vibrated as if in the throes of an earthquake. A blast of flame spewed out of the mine mouth for more than 100 feet. Dense smoke billowed into the air. The impossible had happened. One of the safest mines in the United States had exploded into a rock-filled shambles. Dawson had written a new page in the history of Western tragedies.

The mine siren screamed disaster, a chilling, heartstopping wail. Men in other mines dropped their tools and came running. Others, on the off-shift, left whatever they were doing to answer the fearful call.

The women too, came to the mine. They began to form long, mournful lines waiting for news, each hoping that her



This Jeffrey electric mine motor was photographed at Dawson, circa 1903-1905. Sparks from a similar locomotive's jumping the track set off the blast which killed 120 miners in 1923.

man would be spared. The prayers of a few were answered. Within minutes of the blast, 15 men stumbled from the shaft. The *Raton Range* reported them to be "stupified and dazed, and some not knowing what had happened nor how they got out. Later a few were found by rescue crews alive within the mine and resuscitated."

Mine officials reacted swiftly, organizing rescue efforts by crews from the Stag Canyon Mine and calling in men from other mines in Colfax County and in nearby Colorado. Seventeen striking miners near Trinidad called a truce and sped to the rescue.

"Helmet men"—rescue workers equipped with gas masks and other safety apparatus—began to probe the shaft. Only then did the enormity of the disaster become apparent. Hundreds of tons of rock, timbers and other debris clogged the high line and the air shaft. Deadly gas poisoned the air in the stopes, claiming the lives of two of the first rescuers to enter the mine. According to newspaper accounts, James Lurdi and William Polsa were killed by after damp—noxious gases caused by the explosion—when "in a frenzy of terror at the fall of dust and coal which threatened to envelop them, they strip-

ped off their safety equipment, started to run, and died instantly." Actually they had used up the oxygen in their masks and were trying to breathe directly from their air tanks.

AT FIRST there was hope, at least officially. F. C. Searle, division agent for the Dawson Fuel Sales Company in El Paso, issued a statement several hours after the explosion after he had talked by telephone with mine officials in Dawson. Searle told the newspapers that there was still hope that the trapped miners would be found alive.

Searle's optimism was unfounded. Rescuers found all escape routes, including the air shaft, completely blocked. Within less than 24 hours, Dawson knew the worst had happened. By Thursday afternoon, October 23, 22 men had been rescued, six bodies recovered.

The tragedy had not yet played itself out. At 1:30 that afternoon fire broke out, roaring through the chambers blasted by the explosion. The flames beat back the rescuers. The immediate threat of fire had to be dealt with before the grim, wrenching, life-threatening job of clearing the tunnels could be carried out.

The *Santa Fe New Mexican* reported:

"Clearly, the hopefulness that pervaded the camp immediately following the explosion and throughout the night had given way when daylight came."

The newspaper told its readers of hundreds of women and children, "sleepless since yesterday," lined up as close to the mine entrance as they were permitted to be, "waiting, most of them in silence, the discovery of their husbands, sons, or sweethearts, dead or alive."

Organization of the rescue effort did not end with the crews at the mine. A special train left El Paso Thursday morning carrying a company of surgeons and nurses and hospital supplies. Tragically, they would be little needed. Still another company of specialists was assembled—undertakers. Upwards of a dozen of them came from several communities. Stacks of black coffins were lined up, awaiting the dead.

What caused the explosion? That was the subject of intense speculation in Dawson and among mine officials and government bureaus. Most blamed methane gas. But just hours before when Beddow had checked Stag Canyon there was no trace of methane. By Friday, Beddow was back at the scene, trying to find out what happened.

Expressions of sympathy and offers  
True West



Courtesy the Museum of New Mexico

to help poured in. By now the whole world knew that the Dawson tragedy was the fourth worst in the United States' mining history in loss of life and the worst in terms of property damage. Since many of the miners were Europeans—Italians, Greeks, Slavs, Austrians, Scotsmen—overseas cables buzzed with inquiries from relatives. Italian and Austro-Hungarian consuls came quickly to Dawson to look after the interests of their compatriots.

BY FRIDAY, two days after the explosion, bodies were being recovered almost hourly. Many were mangled beyond recognition. On Friday afternoon the *Range* reported, "More than a day has passed, and yet the people on whom the dreadful blow has fallen do not understand. They cannot as a body grasp the horror in its fullness and are quiet, stunned. Only now and then is heard the keen wail of a stricken woman as a body at the pit mouth is identified. General and violent mourning, so common under similar circumstances, is entirely absent.

"Heads to the wall, a silent, fast-lengthening line of mercifully sheeted figures, stretched on the floor of the summer commissary, testified to the

May 1985

truth that is so hard to comprehend. Last night there were 27 of them. Today there will be many more."

While some women waited and prayed, others organized an around-the-clock hot coffee and food line in one of the mine outbuildings for rescue workers.

By Monday, October 27, the magnitude of the tragedy was defined. Two hundred sixty-one men were dead in the mine. The two helmet men who died in the rescue attempt brought the total to 263. There were 23 survivors, many of them injured. Nearly as many men had died in Mine No. 2 as were killed on the ill-fated—but more highly publicized—Little Bighorn battlefield.

From time to time, as the bodies began to crowd the commissary, mass funeral services were held, one for Catholics, one for Protestants. One writer described the services as "Mercifully brief." Most of the dead were buried in the Dawson cemetery, crosses to mark their graves provided by the mining company. For not a few families, the anguish of the graveside ceremonies was intensified by the nagging fear that they were mourning the wrong body. So many bodies were badly mutilated that no one could be sure of their identities.

While Dawson grieved, its people never lost their pride. Offers of aid came from many sources, including one for \$1,000 for immediate relief work from the Red Cross proffered through New Mexico Governor William C. McDonald.

But that offer and others like it were politely declined. As the *Reporter* observed, "... Dawson has but the invariable answer: 'We can take care of ourselves'..."

By early November, the last body had been recovered from its coal tomb and Mine Inspector Beddow had found the cause of the blast. It was coal dust, he said, ignited by an overcharged shot fired by a miner connecting his shooting wire with the trolley-wire, "which is against company rules and in violation of the state mining laws." Methane gas played no part in the explosion, Beddow reported.

LITTLE BY LITTLE, Dawson returned to normal. With the advent of World War I and increasing demand for coal, the northeastern New Mexico mining camp continued to grow, reaching a population near 6,000. The memory of that terrible October day faded with each passing year—faded, that is, until a decade later.

Thursday, February 8, 1923 was clear but cold in the mountains and mesas of northeastern New Mexico. Harmon Black, barely 15, was a ninth grader at Dawson High School. It was about 2:30, that time in the afternoon when it is hardest to pay attention to the teacher. Harmon was thinking about several things, including his Denver *Post* delivery route which he would ride his bicycle over again that evening. His reverie was abruptly ended by a huge



Photo from the New Mexico State Archives

Dawson, New Mexico, as seen from No. 1 hill.



Photo from the Lizzie Scarafiatti collection, Tucson, AZ

The opening to Mine No. 1 is shown as it appeared after the 1923 explosion.

blast that bounded through the valley, shaking the two-story high school building, breaking some windows, rattling the others furiously. Mine No. 1, more than a mile away and up Stag Canyon had blown like an eruption of hell itself.

"We all knew immediately what had happened," Harmon recalls. "Without any announcement or anyone asking permission, school emptied out."

A retired oil company executive now living in Albuquerque, New Mexico, the 75-year old Black's memory of the disaster remains vivid. He was lucky, he knew, for his father worked above ground at the washery. But many of his schoolmates had fathers and brothers working in the mine.

It was 1913 all over again. The blast spewed dust, smoke and flame out of the mouth of Mine No. 1. The entrance to the mine was marked by huge concrete portals. The explosion ripped them to shreds, hurling across the canyon masonry chunks weighing as much as half a ton. A metal tool house stood about 100 feet away from the mine entrance. The force of the explosion stripped it of much of its roof and siding.

A terse telegram from mine manager W. D. Brennan gave the world official

notification of the disaster. State Mine Inspector W. W. Risdon reported to New Mexico Governor James F. Hinkle that at 3:20 p.m., February 8, he received in Albuquerque this wire: "Number one mine exploded at two thirty. No details. W.D. Brennan." Risdon got on a train to Dawson as soon as he could, arriving there at 5:30 a.m., February 9, to begin his investigation.

Again the lines of praying, crying, fearful women formed outside the mine. Again the squad of undertakers came rushing in. This time there was little hope. On the morning of the tragedy 140 men checked into Mine No. 1. During the day, Risdon discovered, 18 left the mine before the explosion. When the blast occurred, 122 men were in the deep tunnels. The explosion was so vast mine officials feared no one lived through it. In fact, only two men made it to safety.

Because the ventilation system was quickly restored, rescue workers could move freely about, without carrying along their own oxygen supply. The rescuers worked feverishly to clear the debris from the mine to reach the entombed miners.

"My father never came home that first night," Black says. "But my mother was not too worried. She knew he was working with the rescue crews."

Black's mother did not stand idly by. She and other women of the camp worked around the clock also, making coffee and hot lunches for the rescue workers. The Raton Range reported that the women, working in the big Phelps-Dodge company store, had made and served more than 4,000 sandwiches between Thursday afternoon when the explosion occurred and the following Sunday.

For young Black it was a busy time also. Many, perhaps most, of Dawson's residents were foreign-born, some aliens, some naturalized citizens. They were from Greece, Italy, Australia, England, Scotland, Ireland and the Balkan states that now comprise Yugoslavia. There were even some Japanese miners. Many of those who were Americans by birth had families in other states and cities. As soon as the news of the catastrophe reached the outside world, telegrams from frantic relatives flooded the mining camp. The company brought in a battery of telegraph operators who set up their sending and receiving equipment at the railroad depot. Day and night the clatter of their keys sounded at the station.

Because of his Denver *Post* delivery route, Harmon Black knew the camp well. He was quickly hired to deliver

telegrams. From dawn to dark for three and one-half days he pedaled from the depot to homes throughout the camp.

Every night the teenager would give his earnings to his mother to save for him. During the nearly four days of relaying telegraphed messages Black earned "something like \$135 in payment for message delivery and about \$150 in tips. I remember it clearly because I made more money in those few days than my father earned all month."

Meanwhile, the rescue crews were finding what they expected—catastrophic death and destruction. Two bodies were found just inside the entrance to the mine. Others were entombed deeper down the shafts. About 1,200 feet in from the mine mouth they found a twisted jumble of machinery, coal cars, smashed timbers and rock. It was soon obvious, as a coroner's jury was informed, that the main explosion occurred there, its force blasting both outward to the entrance and back along the main tunnel.

As the mangled bodies were brought out, it became apparent that most had

died quickly, with no chance for escape. The majority of the bodies were removed during the first week, but it was not until February 20, 12 days after the explosion, that the final body, that of Pete Kapick, was recovered. Death had claimed 120 more Dawson men.

As quickly as possible the dead were laid to rest with simple ceremonies by the Catholic priest and Protestant ministers. Since the nearest Russian Orthodox priest was at Pueblo, Colorado, there was not time for him to make the trip before the burials. For the dead of that faith, services were conducted by the Montenegrin Society of Van Houten, New Mexico, and the Slovenska Podporna Jednota of Raton, New Mexico.

The Rev. Samuel Magill, a Presbyterian minister who had officiated at many of the funerals ten years earlier, had the unhappy task of conducting services for both Albert E. English and his twenty-nine-year-old son, Albert, Jr.

THE TRAGEDY left more than 100

children fatherless and widowed more than half that many women.

Coal dust, the investigation showed, again was responsible. Coal dust and an accident. Because coal dust is highly flammable, the mines had a sprinkler system to keep the tunnels dampened against fire and explosion. But a cold snap a few nights before had frozen and burst the main water line. For at least five days there had been little or no sprinkling in Mine No. 1. Added to that, the huge fans which fed the model ventilating system drove so much air through the workings that what moisture was in the air quickly evaporated. New Mexico's aridity made this aspect of coal mining much more critical than it was in more humid climates.

With the stage thus set, an electric locomotive was pulling a string of 34 loaded cars out of the mine when several cars near the head of the line jumped the track. According to Risdon's testimony at the inquest: "Several cars left the rail and knocked out three sets of timbers. The cars being off the track would

The brave men who formed the search and rescue crew are shown in full gear as they pose for a group photo circa 1923.

Courtesy the Museum of Albuquerque



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create a cloud of fine dust. The dust from the fallen timbers added to the quantity of dust already in the air. The fallen timbers knocked the feed wire down on the iron cars or rail causing an arc of intense heat sufficient to ignite the mixture of dust and air. The feed wire is a cable made up of many strands of fine wire. Several of these small wires were burned in two. The explosion started at this point on the main entry..."

Because the dust-covered mine roadways were dry, the explosion and fire raced unchecked through the stopes, spreading death and destruction. Risdon's final report bore down heavily on the need to control coal dust in New Mexico mines.

**THE SCOPE** of the 1913 and 1923 disasters is illuminated in these statistics. In 1913 mining accidents of all types in the United States killed 2,785 persons. Nearly 10 percent died at Dawson alone that year. Ten years later the nation-wide toll was 2,462. Dawson contributed 5 percent.

Despite the tragedies that stalked them, the people of Dawson remained proud. They took care of themselves. One of Harmon Black's keenest memories was that, "we discovered that Dawson was a close community. People came together to help one another. Those who had lost family members were flooded with food and clothing and whatever they needed. It didn't matter what nationality you were. Everyone was everyone's brother those days."

Metal crosses donated by Phelps-Dodge Company mark the graves of miners lost in Dawson mine disasters in the Dawson cemetery.



Today there is no Dawson on the verdant Vermejo. It died when coal was no longer needed by a society floating on oil. All that remains is a skeletal smokestack, stone sidewalks going nowhere... and the crosses, row upon row of the white metal markers, the last sorrowful reminders of the miners of Stag Canyon.

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