

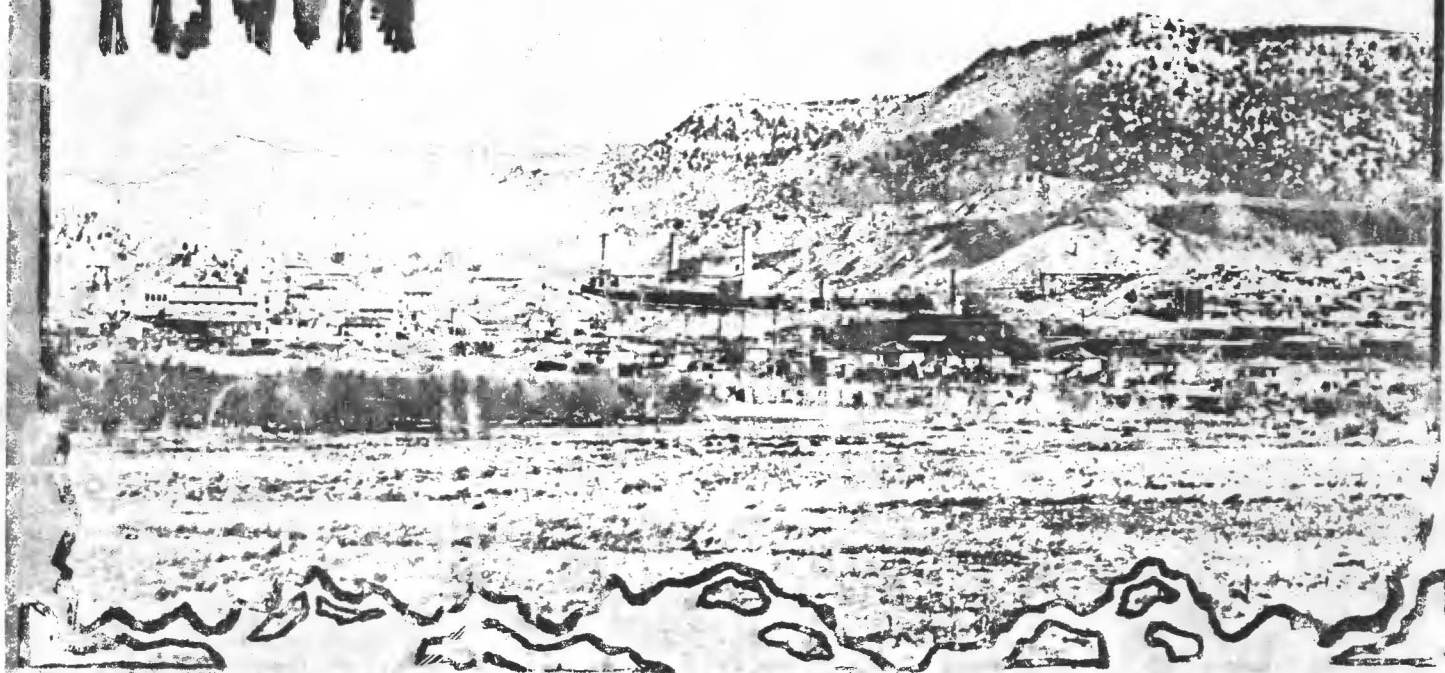
# EVERY SINGLE SOUL LEFT TOWN

NM Mine File No. 477

N.M. Bureau of Mines  
& Mineral Resources  
Socorro, N.M. 87801 File Data

Confidential

Open *Courtesy Pat Scanlon*



STORY BY MURRAY HANSON

**EVERYONE KNOWS** about the ancient ship **FLYING DUTCHMAN**, condemned to sail the seas until the Day of Judgement with no living soul aboard. Did you know that, on day and right here in the United States there is a town that echoes the same theme, living in the past without a living soul on board?

As a boy I lived with an aunt and uncle in Dawson, New Mexico. The whole town belonged to the Phelps Dodge Corporation. Everyone there worked in the coal mines or was otherwise dependent on them. In its day Dawson was located 33 miles southwest of Raton, at an elevation above 7,000 feet.

Dawson was a wonderful place for a boy to grow up in. The mine portals, the coke ovens, the huge tipples and coal washhouses created an aura of medieval mystery that set our

imaginations wandering. Huge slag piles with narrow-gauge railways on top lured us to slide down them on sheets of tin or wood, or on shovels, raising a beautiful cloud of black dust behind. It didn't ALL go behind. Whenever I got home Aunt Betsy hosed me down to bare boy in the backyard before letting me in the house for a bath.

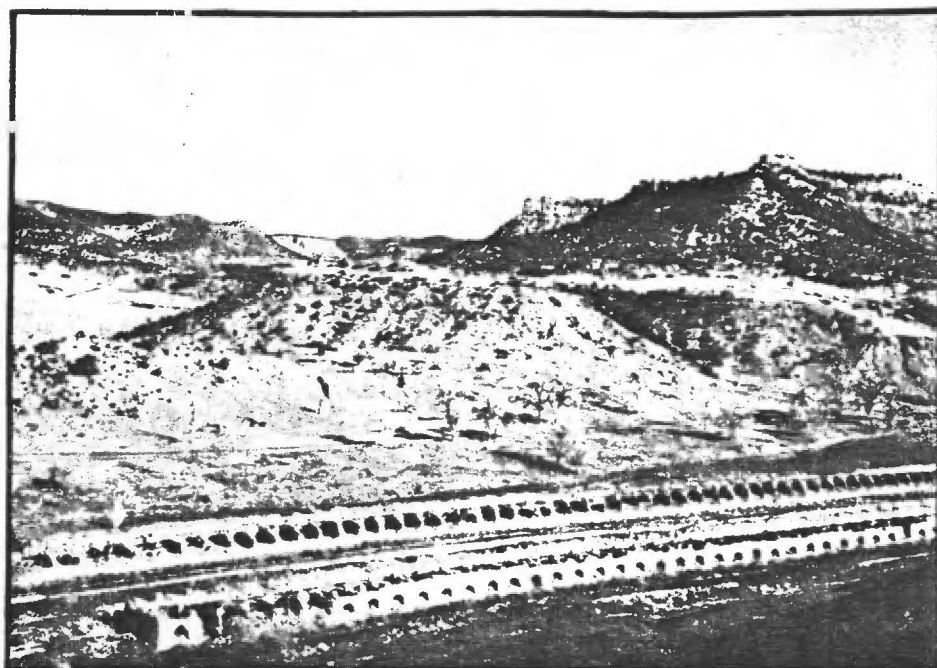
**We rode horseback, went fishing and climbed mountains, especially El Capitan rising directly above Dawson. We even did some real rock climbing. One day George Robert and I decided to climb a large balance rock that perched near our favorite fishing hole. We threw a rope over it and hauled ourselves up -- nearly 30 feet -- and had our lunch on top. We named it "Old Van Bremmer" for the creek that it overlooked. We felt like heroes. But after**

**skinning our knees, barking our shins and swallowing gravel all the way down from the top, we vowed never to try THAT again.**

Each school day I trudged up Main Street past the Opera House and the coke ovens to the Catholic Cathedral, where Father Joseph taught me the 3 R's, some Spanish, and respect for the faiths and beliefs of others. He showed me the value of honesty, and of hard work, and how to shoot an air rifle, too. Not a Catholic myself, I loved that man.

Later Uncle Murray took me to hunt prairie dogs and ducks with a real shotgun. On one trip we scooted out on the ice of a lake near Colfax and hid under bedsheets to fool the ducks. I managed to hit one, but he splashed into open water instead of on the ice. When I tried to pole him in there was a fearsome crackling sound, and there I was, borrowed gun and all

## Only Small Concrete Rubble Stands Among The Cactus And The Prairie Shrubs As A Quiet Memorial To The Vanished Coal Boom Town That Was Dawson, New Mexico.



(◀) Dawson, New Mexico, 1921. This is a view looking north into the coal boom town. (NOTE the slag pile to the right rear.) Photo courtesy of Alberta McClarg.

(▲) Site of Dawson, NM, since more than 2000 buildings were removed or destroyed. (▲) West to the town in the far midforeground; El Capitan mountain (on the right) and Capitan Hill (at the center) loom over a desert that was a town. Demolished coke ovens stand in the foreground. Photos courtesy of Phelps Dodge Corp.

in the icy water.

I couldn't get back onto the ice by myself, so one of the men had to help me. I've never forgotten that. He made me dive down 6 feet in that icy water to retrieve his gun, and THEN he hauled me out onto the firm ice.

**STILL A SCHOOL BOY, I** left Dawson in 1927. A few years later Uncle Murray retired, he and Aunt Betsy moved to Alamogordo, and I had no more reason to go back to Dawson. But I never forgot it. I began to hear stories about closing down the mines, one by one. Then I read that Dawson Coal was out of business. Soon after World War II, I heard that Dawson was even out of existence. I had to see THAT for myself.

In 1967 I had a chance. While moving from Cape Canaveral to California my wife Margot and I drove to Raton, and then to Dawson to see what had happened. Heaven must have put a special blessing on our expedition: in Raton we found an elderly gentleman who had lived all his life in Dawson, had known my Uncle Murry and Aunt Betsy well, and

remembered me as a small boy there, 50 years before! Guy Moore took us home with him to see some Dawson memorabilia, and then to find our old Dawson house, now used in Raton as a church parish house.

My, how it had diminished! In my memory, in Dawson the house had seemed a rather large place for a small boy to live in. But in reality my grown-up eyes now saw only a TINY, mine-town sized house. That started a train of thought going in my mind that hasn't left me to this day.

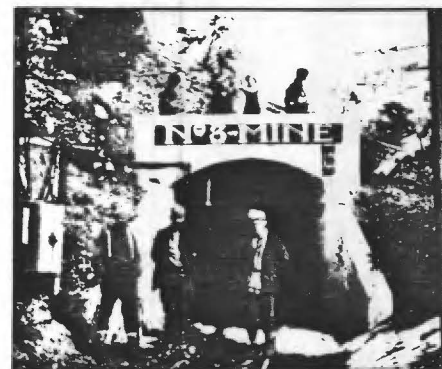
When we made ready to drive on over to Dawson, Margot and I discovered that we were to have a guide. Guy Moore INSISTED on going along; for him we had become an excuse to return once again to the scene of HIS own past.

Guy leaped into his car with a shouted "Follow me", and off we went. He was hard to keep up with, driving about one mile an hour for each of his 86 years. Out across the flatlands of northeastern New Mexico we raced, past Hoxie Junction and the turn-off to Koehler, on toward Cimarron, with those unique buttes, mesas and promontories pacing us to

our right all the way. At Saltpeter Peak we turned north into the mountains and it all began to come back to me with a rush. I caught sight of "Old Van Bremmer" off in the distance, and then we crossed the river and there was Dawson itself.

**B**UT IT WAS EMPTY! Absolutely vacant! There wasn't a single building left standing -- Dawson had been wiped off the map. The whole town -- some 8,000 souls and their entire habitat -- had vanished. Guy Moore got into our car, and as we drove toward what had been Dawson he told us what had happened. When the last mine closed down all the remaining miners had moved away, looking for work. Phelps Dodge decided to use the land for grazing cattle, to get a lower tax rate. The tax people were agreeable, but ruled that every structure of any industrial or commercial value must be removed. So the Company had 2,000-odd buildings to get rid of. The houses were sold and carted away, the large buildings demolished. So we drove that day into a town that had literally ceased to exist, physically.

Just as we passed the site of the old railroad station on the outskirts I was carried back instantly through the years. Next to the station had been a large open area. One time a traveling carnival set up its tents, merry-go-round and other concessions there. One night when Aunt Betsy and I were riding the ferris wheel the town fire whistle went off, the power failed and our swinging car came to a dead stop at top dead center. We had a grandstand view as the pumpers took off right below us, and of the fire burning in the tippie at No. 8. Always thereafter it was an exquisite event for an 8-year-old to talk about, to anyone who would listen.



No. 3 Mine--Dawson, NM. This mine exploded in 1913 with a loss of 263 lives.

Photo courtesy of J.T. Shelton

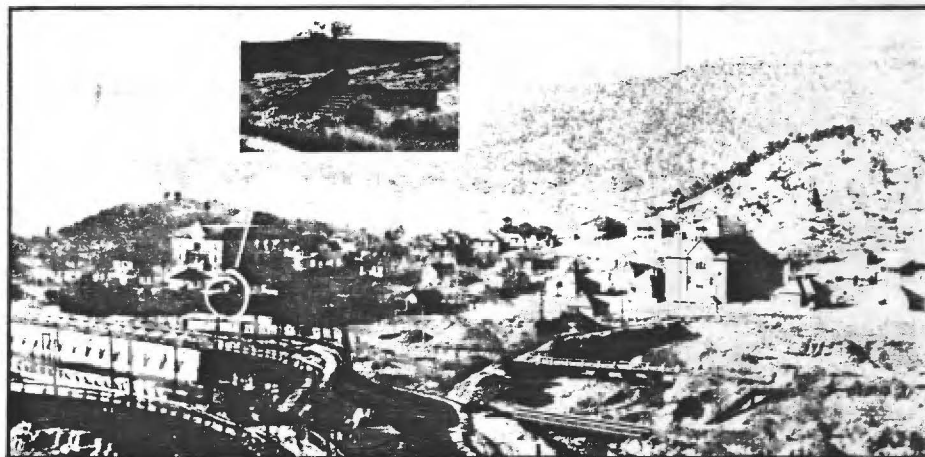


Wind, sun, rain, snow and hail had eroded away the blacktop on Main Street, and weeds grew in its place. But the concrete gutters and curbs were still there -- left and right -- pointing the way. We drove right into and through the ex-town, as I visualized where the houses and stores that I remembered had been. As though my mind dwelled only on inferno, my next clear-cut recollection was as we passed the rubble of the old tailor shop: I vividly recalled the night the shop burned down, fetching Uncle Murray out in his nightshirt in a race against the flames to rescue a suit he'd sent to be cleaned. By that time the whole town was there, laughing and cheering this early-day streaker.

Across the street I recognized the remains of the foundation of our old house. Then onward we went, past the remnants of Uncle Murray's office building, the hospital, the morgue, the Opera House and the cathedral where Father Joseph had awakened my quest for knowledge.

**As we drove along the high peak of El Capitan loomed over all. It looked somewhat less majestic now, but as I gazed at it I relived the many times I had climbed up to survey my own private realm of boyhood fantasy in the distance.**

**I**T WAS A strange feeling to be there in the midst of what had been a sizeable, active community, now so completely gone, to feel the ghosts of childhood crowding in all around. And I noticed a curious thing about Guy Moore. As he reminisced he began truly to live again in the past, to hallucinate, and part of it was that he was now talking to me as though I were my uncle of the same name, his contemporary and his friend, but long since passed away. I was not mistaken: for a brief interval, in his mind I had taken on for Guy the



Dawson, NM, 1921. Catholic Cathedral (circled) steps remain today (Inset). Opera House (left mid-ground) is the other large building shown. Photo courtesy of Phelps Dodge Corp.

character of Uncle Murray, and together they were back again in Dawson. In MY mind's eye I relived my childhood of 50 years before, there. But Guy Moore looked down a much longer corridor of time, back through 80 years or more. And in this ghost of a town, now vanished, each of us was seeing only just what he wanted to see, out of his own past, unspoiled by reality.

**We had finally to turn our backs and drive away -- subdued and silent, each immersed for a moment in private dreams. I had one final look at "Old Van Bremmer" off in the distance, and then Dawson was gone.**

What a fulfilling and benign interlude Providence had vouchsafed to me! Seeing in Raton the small actual size of our old Dawson home taught me how time and the mind's immodesty can distort memory. But then I saw Dawson itself, divested as it were of all things prosaic. And I beheld it enfolded in the warmth of another man's memories even longer than my own. In my mind that day I peopled Dawson just as I pleased; I embodied it with things human right out of my own private nostalgia -- undiminished, untarnished, unchanged. For me, Dawson will always live, EXACTLY as I remember it from a happy childhood.

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The  
Author  
Murray  
Hanson  
in 1978

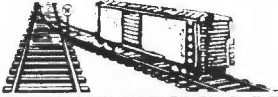


The author, Murray Hanson, is a graduate of Annapolis and has done advanced work in the engineering sciences, in public speaking and in business administration at George Washington University, Northwestern University, Del Mar College, the University of Pennsylvania and Chapman College. For 3 years he was a professor and chairman of a science department at Rice University.

After a career as a Naval officer and Naval aviator, Mr. Hanson was for 15 years an electronic engineering manager and director, in both the U.S. and the European space programs, including 4 years with Project Apollo.

Now a writer and political analyst, Mr. Hanson lives with his wife Margot in Rancho Santa Fe, California and at Poipu Beach, Hawaii. Murray and Margot Sneed Hanson occasionally collaborate in their writings.

For further details consult Who's Who.

  
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