

ESPEE *Trainline*

The Dawson Branch

by Gary O. Ostlund
choochoogoo@msn.com

“All residents of Dawson will be expected to vacate their premises on or before June 30, 1950.” So stated the notice in the window of the Company Store on March 31, 1950. The Phelps Dodge Corporation was closing the mine after fifty years. Thus began the demise of the Dawson Railroad, a 132-mile branch of the Southern Pacific.

The Dawson saga began when construction began at French, with forces building in both directions. In November 1902, a 19-mile stretch was in operation under a timetable between Dawson and French. Bickering over rights of way delayed construction but the branch ultimately joined the ESPEE at Tukumcari.

Operations began in 1903. The lines earliest days were under the ownership of the El Paso & Northeastern Railroad System. The El Paso & Southwestern Railroad Company absorbed the EP&NW in 1905. The EP&SW grew to over 1200 miles stretching from NE New Mexico to Southern Arizona.

Dawson was founded in 1867 when two brothers J. Barkley Dawson and L. S. Dawson settled on the Vermejo River. About 30 years later, rich coal deposits were discovered with a mine officially opening on Dawson's ranch in 1899. Phelps-Dodge Corporation purchased the property in 1906. The land was originally part of the former Maxwell Land Grant. (Maxwell Land Grant is story in and of itself; media mogul Ted Turner now owns the entire area surrounding Dawson for miles).

After World War I, a sharp drop in the price of copper led to curtailment of many mines and a drop in railroad traffic. The domino effect led to the purchase of the EP&SW by the Southern Pacific Company on October 31, 1924 for \$64 Million, payable in cash, stocks and bonds.

Dawson coal was good coking coal. Long rows of coke oven, called beehives, lined the hillside barely out of town. Trainloads of coke traveled down the line to Tukumcari where the Rock Island line hauled them to Santa Rosa. The ESPEE delivered the product to the smelter in Douglas, Arizona.

In modern times the interchange between the Rock Island line and the Espee was in Tukumcari. The Rock actually built to Santa Rosa, linking up with the EP&NE. The last spike was driven on February 1, 1902. Delays by the Rock in delivering the Dawson coke to the Espee in Santa Rosa led to threats of a new line to the mines. The Dawson, El Paso & Southwestern Railroad was incorporated to build from Roy to Corona via Las Vegas to form a shorter route under one management. The Rock caved in and entered into a lease agreement for these 60 miles in May 1907.

Sales of coal, up to a million tons annually in the 1920s faced stiff competition after World War II from oil and natural gas. The last chunk of coal left Dawson on April 28, 1950. Abandonment of the Dawson Branch occurred with the 18 miles from French to Dawson going in 1952, and the remaining 114-miles ten years later.

Dawson was a typical *Company Town*. The three story mercantile, hotel, Opera/movie Theater, restaurant, the schools, power plant, the Snake Saloon, all company owned. Apparently only the Post Office and the train depot were not company owned.

No mining town is without its disasters. Dawson was no exception. On October 22, 1913 an explosion that was felt two miles away in the town proper shook Stag Canyon Mine #2. Relief teams rushed in from surrounding communities, but of the 286 men who arrived to work in the Stag Canyon mine that morning, only 23 survived. Two rescuers died during the rescue effort. It was determined that the explosion was caused by a dynamite charge igniting coal dust in the mine – a flagrant violation of mining safety laws.

Despite this disaster, Dawson continued as a successful mining town. Then, on February 8, 1923, Stag Canyon Mine #1 suffered an explosion. A mine cart jumped its tracks and ignited coal dust in the mine. 123 men were killed in this explosion, many of them children of the men who died in 1913.

The sounds of mining and trains in the Vermejo River valley were part of the lives of up to 9,000 residents during its heyday. Families were generally large. Typical was the Felix V. and Bonnie M. Martinez. They raised 12 children, some of who return with their children and grandchildren regularly to the bi-annual Dawson Reunion Picnic on Labor Day. A bronze plaque in the cemetery is dedicated to the parents, by the children, all listed by name. At the bottom is “Dawsonites Always.”

Rail facilities included an eight-stall roundhouse with turntable, coaling, sand and water supplies. The rail complex was at the entrance to the town, with the town cemetery on the hillside nearby. Yarding was minimal, in that the product was all the same, going to the same destination, with few exceptions. Ed Hughbanks was a 40-year enginemen shuttling cars from mine, building trains for dispatch. He regularly parked the steam engine, with fire banked across the street from his house, as his wife Carrie prepared lunch. The fireman was on his own, according to grandson John Antczak.

The town’s hotel, the Simpson, was built and operated by a Laura Rork, with the help of sons Frank and Clifford. Ms Rork is the Great – Great Grandmother of long time Raton resident and Dawson Cemetery board member Vivian Andrews.

But, some abandoned railroads are revived. In August 1955 Kaiser Steel Corporation acquired 200+ thousand areas of coal land and rights on another third of a million acres in the Sangre de Cristo Mountains 36 miles northwest of Raton, NM.

Thus 12 years later in 1965 work began the York Canyon line of the Atcheson, Topeka and Santa Fe from French, NM, where the Dawson line cross the ATSF mainline. The Santa Fe laid rail on the old Dawson Railway right of way for the first 18 miles to Dawson, and graded new line up the steep Vermejo River valley to York Canyon, a total of 37 miles of new rail. They laid 131 pound welded rail, a fine roadbed that remains to this day. Unit coal trains for a 2164 mile round trip to Kaiser/Fontana, California started to roll on September 28, 1967. By the early 80s the blast furnaces at Fontana were shut down and the trains that fed the complex were history.

From the overpass on Interstate 25 within sight of the junction at French, one can see a “red board” facing and ghostly traffic coming down from the mines. Is there a future for the line? Does that red signal know something we don’t?? By the looks of the right of way, trains could be dispatched post haste.

Bibliography:

New Mexico Railroads, a Historical Survey, by David F. Myrick
Ghost Towns of the West, by Lambert Florin
The Warbonnet, 2Q/2004 SFRH&MS
Answers.com
Wikipedia
Personal Interviews/2006 Reunion