

# Blood and Coal

## 1913

In the time of wheat pennies and buffalo nickels, there were horse-drawn wagons of necessity. Pocket watches, telephones, and gramophones required winding. Mailing a postcard required a single cent postage stamp. Woodrow Wilson took office as the 28<sup>th</sup> President of the United States. Ford speedometers peaked at 50 miles per hour. Death Valley soared to an all time record of 134 degrees Fahrenheit. It was a year marked by natural disasters caused by rain and flooding in Ohio and Indiana. It was a year of great tragedy for the mining industry; the beginning of the Colorado Coal Strike that culminated in the Ludlow Massacre the following year. A time of utter greed on coal profit and little regard to coal miners. Locomotives, household fireplaces, steam plants, and industries burned coal for fuel and energy to run water, electricity, and heating.

Coal fueled the nation.

Where coal was, **blood** was never far.

### *Dawson, New Mexico*

The town of Dawson is synonymous with coal mining. The mines were operating by 1899. J.B. Dawson sold the mines to the Dawson Fuel Company in 1901. They in turn sold it to Phelps Dodge Corporation in 1906. In 1950, the mines closed, the town dismantled for steel and scrap, leaving only the ghost town that exists today and a cemetery filled with white iron crosses spanning the distance of 3 football fields.

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On September 14, 1903 a curtain accidentally ignited, sending flames through the tunnel of mine no. 1 operated by the Dawson Fuel Co., resulting in 3 deaths, “by the grace of God, 500 men survived.”

On Wednesday, October 22, 1913, at 3:10 p.m., an explosion occurred in mine no. 2 operated by the Stag Canon Coal Co. The tragic loss of 261 men + 2 rescue workers made this the 2<sup>nd</sup> largest mining disaster in US History.

On Thursday, February 8, 1923, at 2:30 p.m., a mine car derailed and sparked an explosion in mine no. 2 operated by the Stag Canon Coal Co. resulting in the deaths of 123 men.

In addition to these major accidents, there were numerous other casualties caused by injuries sustained inside the mine. Miners also suffered medical ailments inherent to mining, such as black lung. They were also at risk of contracting often life-threatening maladies like typhoid, tuberculosis, and influenza.

## *1910 - 1915*

By the year 1910, Dawson was considered a model among mining towns. The owner, Phelps Dodge Corp., had undertaken considerable care in its construction to insure the design would attract miners and their families. The town was equipped with a hospital, schools, swimming pool, gymnasium, golf course, baseball team, and cattle ranch. They were successful in this marketing strategy and as a result they had an abundance of workers. The town was thriving and growing, much like the families that lived there. Many farming families of the time had a dozen children, and mining families tended to have a half dozen or so.

The collective journey to Dawson had a common thread: Opportunity.

Conditions for miners in Colorado were worsening in the time leading up to the Ludlow Massacre. As a result, Dawson saw an influx of miners previously employed by the Colorado Fuel & Iron Company. One of these miners was my great-great-grandfather, Tim Tinsley.

Mr. Tinsley had worked the coalfields in Illinois and come to Colorado in 1890. He was the 2<sup>nd</sup> Superintendent at The Rockvale Colliery in Brookside, Colorado. From there he moved to Canon City, Salida, Tobasco, and Crested Butte before settling a few years at Marion Spring Gulch in Garfield county. As he moved he left behind family and friends buried at the local cemeteries, including his wife and four of their seven children. In 1905, he remarried and had three more children plus four young step-children. As a testament to the failings of the mining industries and the effect it had on workers, Mr. Tinsley opted to quit mining altogether. In 1909 he bought a cattle ranch in Silt, Colorado. Ranching did not suit him, and within a year he had taken to doing the only thing he knew how: Coal Mining. He and one of his son-in-laws had opened a mine on the ranch property. It was a small operation and not very lucrative. Before long he contacted Joe Smith, the Superintendent at Stag Canon Coal Co. in Dawson, New Mexico. Mr. Smith offered him a Foreman position overseeing the mines and Mr. Tinsley accepted.

The Tinsley clan moved to Dawson on May 10, 1910 and arrived to find a close-knit community of multi-diverse immigrants. The decision seemed happy at first, but did not take long to sour.

On the first of the year 1913, Joe Smith resigned and Bill McDermott took over as General Superintendent. He was making quite a record for himself increasing the tonnage output of the mines as he went back and took out all the easy coal that Joe Smith had left. Joe Smith had always kept up new development work and insisted on lots of sprinkling in the danger spots. McDermott stopped all that and was out to cut costs and increase output. As mine foreman, Mr. Tinsley was responsible for overseeing mine safety, but he could not override the decisions of the superintendent. It is important to note that the miners were not paid hourly, but rather by tonnage output. Each miner was comparable to a business unto himself: he had men under him who helped to tag his payload from the time it was extracted to the time it was weighed and credited to him. The method consequently led to competitiveness on every level from the miners to the motormen. Likewise the organization structure for inspecting mines changed. Prior to 1912, federal official assigned to the territory were responsible for inspecting New Mexico mines. The ex-territorial inspector for Dawson, NM was Joe E. Sheridan, a highly respected geologist. In 1912 legislation established the office of the State Mine Inspector. The State Mine Inspector was Rees H. Beddow. Ironically, Mr. Beddow inspected the mine two days prior to the explosion and found it to be in good working condition.

On the day of the explosion, Wednesday, October 22, 1913 there had been a man hurt on the highline side of No. 2 mine. Mr. Tinsley was on his way to the mouth of the man-way at about 1 p.m. when he looked back and saw McDermott riding up on his horse, so he stopped to talk to him. McDermott suggested that Mr. Tinsley go into No. 1 mine as he wanted to see Frank Stafford, the pit boss about the accident. So Mr. Tinsley went into No. 1 mine instead. At 3:10 p.m. No. 2 mine exploded. William Smock notified Mr. Tinsley on the phone in No. 1 mine. He arrived to find a pillar of black smoke rolling across the sky. The blast that shot several hundred feet into the air and shook the ground for miles was devastating to witness. Miraculously a few men staggered out after blindly finding their way out amid noxious fumes.

The thought that there could be more survivors drew an instant panic and a rescue team formed immediately. Mr. Tinsley led the initial team and was the first man to set foot in the No. 2 side after the explosion. His eldest step-son, Harold Breen, also entered with the first party. They had a conglomeration of lights, and water, but though they did not find any survivors or bodies as far as they went. The inside was badly torn up and they were stymied by debris that had to be cleared. Mr. Tinsley sent his step-son to the surface to put up temporary lights that they could bring into the mine for better lighting and continued working. His team ran into black damp, a noxious gas, at 11 o'clock and retreated to the surface, dizzy and nauseous. Further efforts would require gas masks and oxygen tanks. Any entry now was highly risky due to the instability of the mine caused by the explosion. The rescue teams were in constant danger of fire that was not yet under control and falling rocks, some of which blocked the tunnels completely and had to be removed in order to secure a passage.

Outside, a roll call was made to tally those unaccounted for. Tom O'Brien, the general manager worked tirelessly to summon help and assistance from neighboring states in the form of rescue teams, doctors, nurses, and ultimately undertakers, coffins, grave diggers, and burial markers. Mr. O'Brien worked nearly thirty-six hours until he could no longer stand with his eyes open. Mr. Tinsley made several trips into the mine over the next 3 weeks, initially sleeping two or three hours at a time before setting off again. With each day, more help arrived but the rescue team progressed into a recovery unit. Of the 284 men who were absent from the roll-call, 23 survived and 261 were confirmed dead. As if this were not enough, 2 rescue workers were killed, much to the chagrin of Mr. Tinsley who specifically ordered these particular men to stay with the unit. Instead, they insisted on going deeper into the mine beyond the area being secured. A few hours later they were discovered with empty oxygen cylinders and one had been struck by falling rock in his attempt to escape.

By Saturday the body count was staggering. Hope had turned to despair as women and children cried. The bodies, most of which were scarcely identifiable, were taken to a temporary morgue in the blacksmith shop where they had three undertakers. Later they were taken to any empty storeroom downtown, and then to the gymnasium building where coffins were stacked with tags marking the deceased name, and sadly the occasional "Unknown." Many of the burials took place at night without the public knowing, others were marked by brief interments as requests for the dead poured in from around the nation. Some of the interred were dug up and shipped by rail to family plots. The procession of brief ceremonies marked by prolonged grief was due to the refusal to show identified remains to the families. Many wondered if it was really their loved one inside the charcoal black coffins. The blacksmith could not keep up with the engravings on the white iron crosses sent in as burial markers and there was some confusion over this as well. As the month moved in to November and the air cooled, one of the grave diggers succumbed to heat exhaustion and had to be carried away to rest.

As time passed and the inspector studied the cause of the explosion he found only one reason that fitted the evidence. The explosion was due to a miner, most likely deceased, who set off an explosive in room 27 just off the 9<sup>th</sup> west entry in No. 2 mine. Such an action was against the policies and procedures. Firing explosives was only to be done while miners were outside the mine. It was the responsibility of shot-firers to set up charges at the end of the day and fire the explosives after the mine was evacuated. Then the next morning miners entered and inspected for unsettled dust and ceiling support so sprinkling and support beams could be installed in the danger spots. After securing the area, miners worked to extract the loose coal. While it is safe to say that the direct cause of the explosion was due to human error, the catalyst for the explosion is more complex. The corporate strategy and that of management was to increase profit by increasing production, this is evident through financial trend analysis of the parent company and Stag Canon Coal Co. Further, the compensation method motivated miners to increase personal tonnage. While it is not difficult to see how and why this effected the miners it is appalling to realize that at least one of them was willing to jeopardize the lives of so many in order to achieve personal gain.

Mr. Beddow was a qualified and intelligent man who despite any criticism received for his inspection two days prior, made a diligent study of the cause. Upon his determination, he issued his findings together with several recommendations. Management acted on all of his recommendations and implemented policies designed for safety. One of these procedures made it necessary for explosives to be handled in a sort of dual custody nature and eliminated the miner from the procedure altogether.

In my opinion, it is probable that the overcharged shot was not an isolated event, but something management was aware of before the explosion, if not after the Inspector's report. The superintendent was inside the mine at least 2 hours before the charge was detonated, if there had been a conspiracy to keep that illegal activity hidden there surely would have been some lookout for management and word would have gotten back to the person setting up the dynamite.



Tim Tinsley, Mr. Hutchings, Arthur Rogers, Frank Weitzel, Wm. Smock



The Rescue Team