

MONTE HILL: Little Serbia in New Mexico

by Mela Vuicich

Entrance of Van Houten, New Mexico, 1940.

Come with me to New Mexico and let me share with you some of my childhood memories of our little canyon — Van Houten — where many Serbs from Montenegro, Serbia, Bosnia, Herzegovinia, Lika and other European countries came in the 1900's.

Van Houten was one of several coal camps situated near the northern boundary of New Mexico, fifteen miles south of Raton which marks the entrance into the state of the famous scenic highway, America's oldest road. From the summit of the pass, the early adventurer saw below the beautiful mountains, mesas and rolling prairies bordered in the far distance by blue mountains.

The easy grade to the pass invited the railroad; the mountain fastness, the trapper; the great open plains, the stockman; and the ore-ribbed hills, the miner.

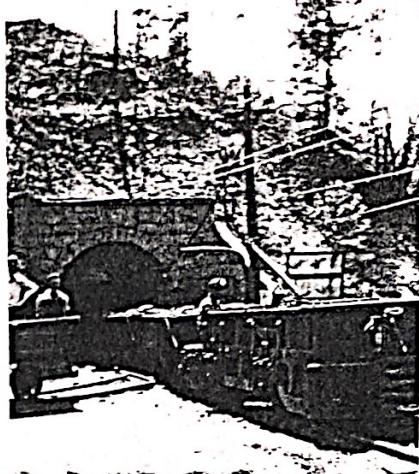
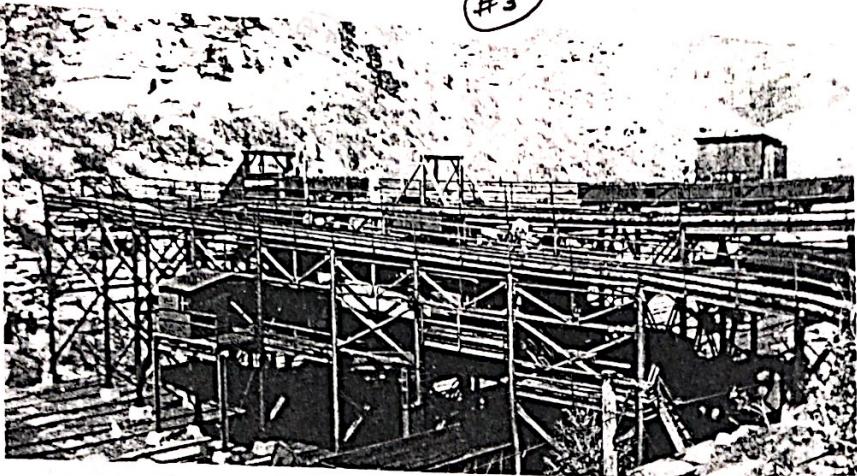
The Serbs along with the Greeks, Bulgarians, Russians, Italians, Irishmen and Spaniards became engaged in mining coal, an industry which was very foreign to most of them and especially to the Serbs. Since little or no English was spoken, there was little communication among these varied nationalities, and very soon

they paired off into their own groups. The Greeks moved to one part of the camp and called their section Greek-town. The Italians did likewise and named their section Cunico Town as there were several families by that name. The Serbs clustered into one area, and their area was known as Monte Hill from "Montenegrins." Each group was more comfortable among its own people. The Serbs spoke in their native tongue. They exchanged news that they received from their relatives in the Old Country. They talked about the difficult jobs they had in the coal mines and about the poor living conditions in the camp. There were only a few men with families, and some of the single men lived with them. Other single men formed small groups to cut down on living expenses for their bachelor quarters.

Not knowing the English language or the customs or the laws, the Serbs in New Mexico met up with the same kind of difficulties and struggles that the Serbs in other parts of the country experienced. None-the-less they were able to maintain their culture and enjoy their get-togethers. They observed the religious holidays — St. John the Baptist in January, St. Petka (Venerated Mother) in October, and

St. Nicholas in December. In their spare time they played dominoes and cards. Occasionally all members of the families joined in a game called *Prsten* (ring) comparable to the game "Button, Button, who has the button?" They also enjoyed singing folk songs.

Christmas and Easter were celebrated by the Serbian Orthodox calendar. Christmas especially was always a gay festivity in New Mexico just as in other parts of the country. Geography makes no difference — a Serb is a Serb no matter where he lives. Each of the families roasted a lamb on a spit. Several days before Christmas the men searched the hills for a *razanj* (spit), and they brought the needed firewood. Then on *Badnyi Dan* (Christmas Eve) the lamb was roasted. The women provided food for a picnic lunch, and there was great festivity. On Christmas morning before the sun rose, a young boy visited a designated home to cut the lamb's head off and to wish the family good health and much happiness. Customarily he put some money in the jaws of the lamb's head. This young boy was called our *polaznik*. The family whose home he visited had a gift for him. Then it was open house in all the Serb households, and it was customary to taste all the



Above: tipple where coal was prepared for shipping.
Left: guslar Matt Mitroic, Jan. 7, 1940.
Right: entrance to coal mine.

We had no Orthodox church anywhere in New Mexico. The nearest one was in Pueblo, Colorado, one hundred fifty miles from Van Houten. Father Grishan was a wonderful man who came all the way from Pueblo for baptisms, weddings and funerals. Very few people had cars, and there were hardly any in Van Houten. It was a long journey for him travelling either by railroad or bus.

We children grew up in very poor living conditions — that is there were no facilities of any kind. Our water supply was very limited; we bought it from the company officials at twenty-five cents a barrel. We used every drop of rain for laundry and baths.

When we started school we did not know a word of English. There were no parent-teacher contacts either because our parents and teachers could not communicate with one another. For Christmas the schools always put on a program, and the parents all attended mostly to see their children perform, but also got a glimpse of the teachers at that time.

As we children began learning English, our parents felt that we should know more than we did. We were expected to know how to read and write letters, interpret news-

paper articles and order items from catalogues among other things. We had only one store in Van Houten where we purchased our food. Since the prices for clothing were prohibitive, we had to depend on getting our clothes through a mail order catalogue. We children had to know how to place orders to Montgomery Ward, the only place from which we ever ordered.

Our parents often felt that children in the Old Country in comparable grades were more advanced than we were. There was a great deal of pressure on us to study. Our uncle, our *striko*, was the father-figure in our home since our father died when we were very small children. *Striko* was always very concerned about our progress in school. I shall never forget how embarrassed I was when he asked me to figure the cost of a certain number of bales of hay. After struggling with the figures for a while and realizing I was licked, I told him we had not yet studied how to figure hay. Imagine, if you can, what his remarks were!

It was during the Great Depression years that we were in high school. The nearest one was fifteen miles from our home, and we road a bus along unpaved roads. Often times during the winter months or a rainy season travel was very difficult, and

goodies on the table. It was a pretty well-known fact among residents of Van Houten that *nobody* celebrated Christmas like the Serbs, and sometimes curious, but uninvited, outsiders had to be turned away.

Easter was also celebrated in high fashion. All of the women dyed many eggs. Everybody sought a strong egg and, after testing it on his or her teeth, joined in a game to see who had the strongest one by cracking eggs with each other. At the end of the day the beautifully colored eggs were all cracked, but they were still useful for eating and for salads. And, oh, how glad everyone was when Lent was over! Most everybody observed Lent on Good Friday — that was an absolute must.



Above: Serbs gathering for Bozic, 1940. Bulaich, Chagenovich, Dabovich, Perovich, Simovich, Vuicich and Yaksich families.



became the Superintendent of Raton High School, and John Perovich the President of the State University in Albuquerque.

My work for the state of New Mexico, first as Director of Colfax County and later Sante Fe County, gave me an opportunity to be of assistance to those who needed it. In Raton I was able to help my Serb friends fill out applications for jobs, apply for ration books during World War II, and obtain birth certificates and naturalization papers. I took advantage of every opportunity to help them and enjoyed it.

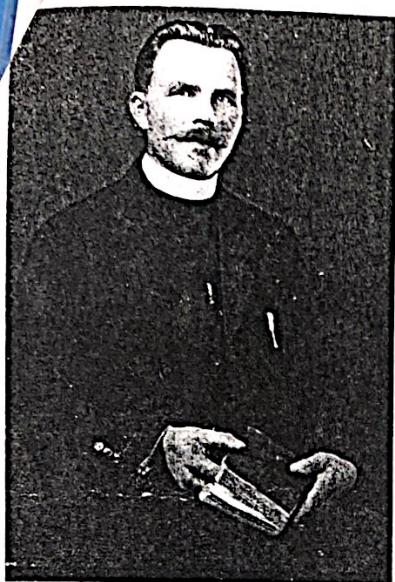
In Santa Fe there were no Serbs. Once when the state held a conference of employees from all over the state, the chairman asked a few employees about the kind of help they were getting in their training sessions with their supervisors. A co-worker of mine responded favorably about the kind of help she was getting from me, but added, "I also learned a great deal about Yugoslavia." Everyone

we were not able to get home until after dark. Since we did not have money to buy our lunches, we took a sandwich from home — of course, there were no hot lunches in any of the schools. Through the goodness of a Croatian woman, the owner of a hamburger stand, my good friend the late Zorka Perovich and I worked for her in exchange for our lunches.

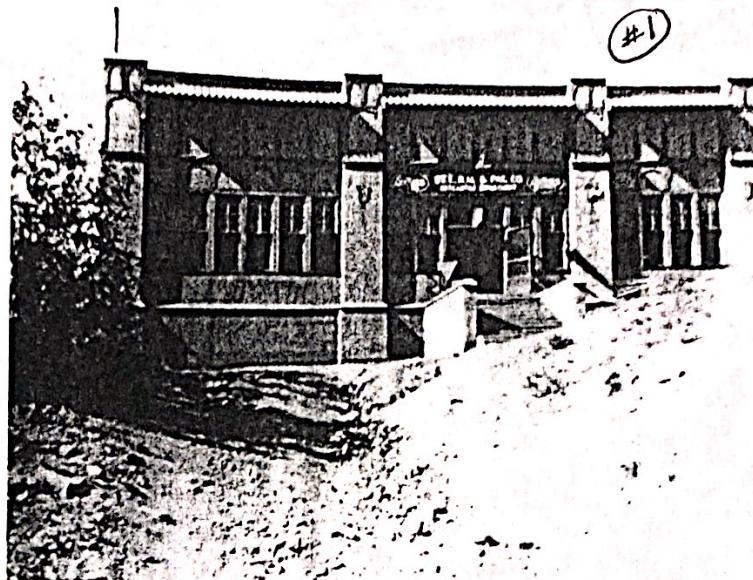
Zorka's mother and my mother were also very good friends. Mrs. Perovich ran a boarding house so her funds were not so limited as my

mother's. The two women worked out an arrangement whereby Mrs. Perovich bought all the materials for dresses, and my mother, a fine seamstress, made them. Both Zorka and I were well dressed for all school events.

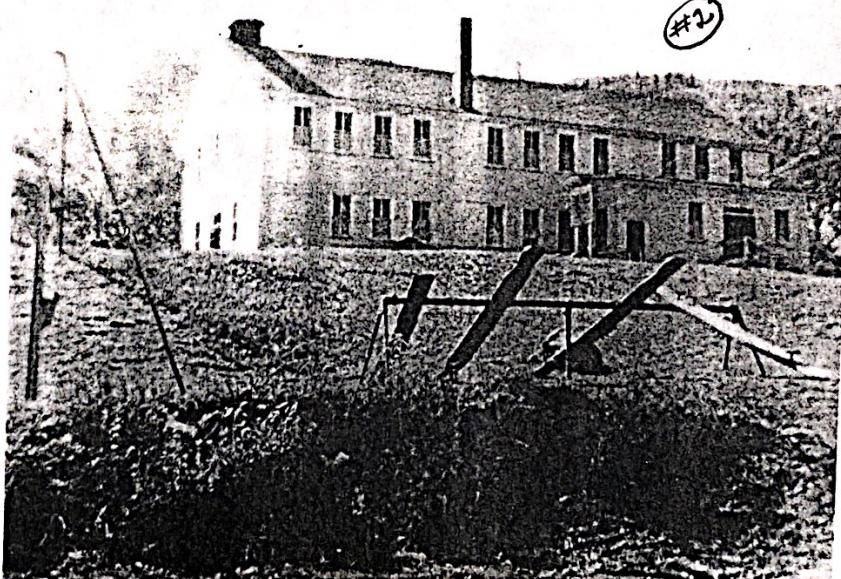
All the children of the Serbian families did well in school, and with the exception of one or two, all were awarded their diplomas. Some went on to further education. Most got jobs as accountants, office managers, stenographers, electricians, teachers and social workers. John Krivokapich



Above: our beloved Father Grishan.
Right top: Van Houten's company store
where residents were expected to trade.
Right bottom: Van Houten's school.



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laughed. I have always been proud of my heritage.

As the years went by mining coal slackened, and sometimes the men only worked one or two days a week. Everyday the miners and their families waited for the five o'clock whistle which would tell them whether there would be work the next day. If it blew once, that meant there would be work. If it blew twice, there would not be. Those were indeed tense moments.

The wages the men were receiving were very meager, hardly enough to support their families. When the opportunity came, they organized and became members of the United Mine Workers of America with John L. Lewis at the helm in Washington. Working conditions greatly improved. As a result, the miners and their families received many fringe benefits. Unfortunately the mines closed during the Second World War, and everyone had to move away from the dying camp. There were many sad goodbyes.

Some of the miners and their families moved to California to seek employment in the shipyards; others scattered throughout the state of New Mexico where there was work. Some

were eligible to retire. In later years many became ill as a result of their years underground in the mines. Their lung trouble qualified them for Black Lung Benefits.

We followed the whereabouts of the Serbs who left our little canyon. Few of the families moved to San Pedro, California. A few moved to Albuquerque; some are still in Raton. Ours is the only family in Santa Fe. We miss hearing our language spoken, and we miss the get-togethers. But we still have the memories.

In looking back at my memories, I would say that in spite of the many

handicaps and hardships, we lived a pretty good life. We were far from rich in material things, but there was love all around us. We always had approval and encouragement from our parents and teachers. But it was the women, our good and loyal Serbian mothers, who gave us the guidance and showed us the way. Bless each and every one of them.

And so I close with poet Amelia Welby's words:

"As dew to the blossom, and bud to the bee,
As scent to the rose, are those memories to me." ●