

Van Houten Tour

Murder Stories Included on Page 5

Driver Instruction

1. Park at the Van Houten Mine Sign.
2. Drive through to the Club house (stop ~100 yards before the first standing house)
3. After club-house inspection, drive to the second standing house and park. After tipple and mule barn inspection, drive up the hill to the mine entrance.

Summary Of Procedure:

1. Van Houten Mine Sign
 2. Baseball diamond,
 3. Post office
 4. Cultural division
- Greek Town
Cunico Town (Murder Story 1)
Coon Town
5. Park @ & inspect Club House
 6. First standing house
 7. Negro Canyon
 8. High Five & Company Store
 9. Park @ Sled Hill and Second standing house
Walk down canyon to the tipple and the mule barn.
 10. Power House
 11. Tipple
 12. Mule Barn (Murder Story 2)
Walk back to sled hill
 13. Monty Hill
 14. Drive to mine entrance No. 5
 15. Walk to Staff Rock

Summary of Information: (basic information on each landmark)

1. Ghost Town Sign: Van Houten was a coal mining camp active from 1902 to 1954.
2. Baseball Diamond: Baseball was an important part of life for Van Houten residents. Every Sunday a baseball game was played against other nearby towns, and a picnic and dance followed. The team was the Van Houten Swastikas (pre-WW2).
3. Post Office: The post office was established in 1902 as Willow Post Office, it was changed to Van Houten in honor of Jan Van Houten, who saved the town from economic collapse.
4. Cultural division: the town was composed mostly of immigrants. A majority of them were German and Austrian. Due to language and cultural barriers, the differing nationalities split into their own separate areas to avoid conflict. Cunico Town was the Italians. The rest are rather obvious. MURDER STORY 1
5. Soup Bone: Soup Bone was a boarding house operated by a Montenegrin woman.
6. Club House: The clubhouse was opened in 1920. Church services were conducted by a pastor from Raton. Movies were shown on Wednesdays and Mondays. Dances were conducted here and facilitated by a 22-member big band. Point out Sunshine Hill, behind the clubhouse, which got its name because that's where the sun would hit first in the mornings.
7. Standing House: This is one of two houses left standing in Van Houten. After the closing of the mine, the land was purchased by Kaiser Steel Company, who demolished most of the buildings in the 1960's for tax reasons.
8. Negro canyon: they will laugh. Racial division did exist. Negro canyon wasn't relegated to just blacks; that was Coon Town. Negro Canyon got its name because of the coal they found there. George Yaksich's (former resident) family lived in Negro Canyon.
9. High Five: this is where some of the elite families lived. Most of the people who lived there were members of the band.
The Company Store: This is where the residents could exchange their SCRIP for goods.
10. Walking to tipple: Good time for filler information
11. Powerhouse: Van Houten ran on Steam and coal-fired electricity. The had large electric motors.
12. Tipple: The tipple is where the motors brought the coal to be sorted and loaded onto train cars, courtesy of the Sante Fe railroad.
13. Mule Barn: The mules were treated like royalty. They hauled coal from the inside of the mines to the outside, where electric motors delivered to the tipple. MURDER STORY 2
14. Monty Hill: Monty Hill is where most of the Montenegrins and Serbs lived. Most of those people and many of the Greeks were Orthodox Christians. They had no Orthodox priest out here, but a priest took the train and the bus from **Colorado Springs** for weddings, funerals, and baptisms.

15. Mine Entrance No. 5: NO BEARS OR WOMEN ALLOWED IN THE MINE. Mine entrance number five is one of five entrances. Mine entrance No. 5 did not feed into the tipple, but instead had its own tipple that supplied the powerhouse with coal for the camp.
16. Staff Rock: the real treat.

Detailed Information/Script:

1. Van Houten Mine Sign: Van Houten was a coal mining town active from 1902 to 1954. It was a collection of various ethnicities and peoples. It was truly representative of the American melting pot. Despite the almost complete composition of immigrants, patriotism ran high in the camp. In the First World War, Van Houten was, per capita, one of the highest contributors to the war bond campaigns. Even the German and Austrian residents were true American Patriots in both world wars.
2. Baseball Field: Baseball was a major part of Van Houten life. The town had its own team, The Van Houten Swastikas, (the swastika was a good luck charm comparable to a four-leaf clover prior to the Second World War). Van Houten played against neighboring coal towns on Sundays, and the game was followed by a picnic and a dance.
3. Post Office: The post office was established in 1902 as Willow Post Office, the name was changed a few years later to Van Houten, in honor of Jan van Houten, the man who bought the mining operation and saved the town from going dry.
4. Cultural Division (Greek town sign): Due to language barriers, the various nationalities represented in Van Houten could not communicate efficiently with one another, and, although the different peoples got along well, they lived separately, each nationality choosing to reside with their own. Here we can see Greek town, and on the right is Cunico Town, where the Italians lived. MURDER STORY 1. They called it Cunico town because there were many families there by that name. Off to your left is Coon Town, the African-American sector of Van Houten.
5. Soup Bone: Soup Bone was a boarding house owned by a Montenegrin woman. It was one of two boarding houses in Van Houten (the other was behind the doctor's office).
6. Club House: GIVE DISCLAIMER TO WATCH FOR RATTLESNAKES. The clubhouse was opened in 1920. The opening was a great celebration that was attended by all residents. The clubhouse was where church was conducted, and where dances were held. Van Houten had a 22-member Big Band. Here, movies were shown on Mondays and Wednesdays. In addition to the band, the clubhouse could furnish music with a player piano, and a gramophone. The Club House was supposedly decorated marvelously with incredible paintings of some of America's presidents, as well as historic figures and scenes. Up above and behind the clubhouse is Sunshine Hill, where there were more

houses. It was so named because that was the first place that the sun would hit in the morning.

7. Standing House: This is one of two houses that still stand in Van Houten. As you can see, it is a simple arrangement. In the 1960's, after the camp had closed, most of the buildings were bulldozed. They were bulldozed because Kaiser Steel Company bought the land, and the buildings were going to be taxed. (Belonged to Helen Roupas)
8. Negro Canyon: off to the right is Negro Canyon. This is something that the campers will discover for themselves. They will laugh and joke. Negro Canyon was not relegated to the black families. It got its name when they found large chunks of coal that reminded them of the head of a black person. The family of George Yaksich, a former resident, lived in Negro Canyon.
9. High Five: The high five is where the elite families lived. Most of these people were members of the band. The women who lived here were excellent gardeners and had roses imported for Europe to fit their taste.
Company Store: The company store is where the miners could buy food and essential items. The miners at Van Houten were not paid with cash, they were paid in Scrip. Scrip could only be used at the company store, and only scrip could be used at the company store. Van Houten also had a bar, bakery, a restaurant, and a billiard house. At these locations, USD could be used. If a miner could not afford his purchase, he could take an advance on his salary. It was easy to go into debt with the Company store; taking out loans to buy means of living could often mean grueling hours of work to repay the store. Metaphorically, the miners owed their soul to the company store.
10. Park at bottom of sled hill: RATTLESNAKE DISCLAIMER!!!!!!
11. Powerhouse: This is the powerhouse (the mitochondria of Van Houten). Here, coal burning engines created steam and electricity, which powered the town. Van Houten used battery powered train carts in addition to mules to pull coal from the entrance of the mines to the tippie.
12. Tippie: this is where coal was brought, sorted, and loaded into train cars. The A.T. & SF railroad hauled the coal off to be sold and processed.
13. The Mule Barn: The mules were like royalty to the miners. The electric motors were experimental and could not access all of the mines, and so the mules hauled most of the coal from the inside of the mines to the entrance to the tipples. MURDER STORY 2.
14. Mine Entrance: This is mine entrance number 5. Van Houten had five entrances, called 1, 2, 4, 5, & 6. Three was skipped because of superstition. It should also be noted that there was once a sign here that read, "NO BEARS OR WOMEN ALLOWED IN THE MINE". The women portion of the sign was for superstition, the bear portion was common sense. Here is the tag shed. Every day, before the miners went underground, they took a tag with a number on it. When they resurfaced, they put their tags back in the shed. If someone's tag was not returned, they were probably missing or dead inside the mine. Van Houten had its share of accidents. There were several fatalities in the mines. There were no recorded gas explosions or coal dust explosions in these mines like there were in the mines of other nearby coal towns.
15. Staff Rock: normal procedure.

Murder Stories And More:

Murder Story 1: Cunico Town Story: In 1915, an Italian man arrived in town. He had only been in the country a few weeks. On his second day in Van Houten, the newcomer got into a fight with several of the Italians already living in Cunico Town. Men fought with fists and knives until one of the men produced a shotgun and obliterated the newcomer. The killer claimed that his motive was “Old Time Feuds” from the old land and then he and two compadres took off into the hills and were not found. [Some say they could be out there to this very day...]

Murder Story 2: Mule Barn Story: Because of the importance of the mules to the mining operation, there was always somebody in the mule barn to watch over the animals. In January of 1904, a 21 year old boy named Louis Martinez was sleeping in the stable. He was awakened by a large man grabbing his throat. Louis fought back desperately; he was able to bite one of the man's hands. He felt around him and grabbed hold of an iron bar that he swung at his assailant. His attacker, however, wrenched it from his hands and, in turn, produced a pocketknife with which he cut the boy's throat. The attacker looted the boy's pockets, yielding 43 dollars in cash. He then took a pair of shoes and left. The next morning, someone entered the mule barn to find Louis Martinez with his throat cut, but still alive and able to communicate. Louis related the story of his attack and shortly a miner named George Jackson was apprehended. The man had in his possession 43 dollars cash, a pair of shoes that did not fit him, a bite mark on his hand, and blood on his clothes. George Jackson was sentenced to second degree murder. Louis Martinez, however, did not survive his injuries. He died five days later in Miner's Hospital in Raton. [Some folks claim that when the conditions are just right, Louis can be seen and heard in the Mule barn, still looking after the animals...]

Fun Story: As I mentioned, Van Houten was intensely patriotic despite having an almost complete composition of immigrants, with a large portion being Germans and Austrians. At the

outbreak of the First World War, a German-Russian resident named Constantinus Koch was overheard in a private conversation saying that he ‘Wished the Germans success in the present conflict’. The young men in the town reacted by making the man to carry the American flag around while shouting “To Hell with the Kaiser!!!”. He promised to suppress such statements in the future and suspicion faded.

Mine Death Story: In the early days, the coal was mined by drilling holes into the rock face with a hammer and metal stake. The miners would drill several holes in one wall, these holes were packed with dynamite, and every stick of dynamite was connected to the same fuse. On September 19, 1910, Cruz Martinez had drilled his holes, and the shot firer had filled the holes with dynamite, connected the fuses, and detonated the explosives. The next day, Cruz Martinez went in to resume work; he grabbed his pickaxe and swung at the wall. He did not hit the wall, however. What he hit was a stick of dynamite that had not detonated. Kaboom.

Funny Tidbit: Many of the residents were not citizens when they arrived. Former resident George Yaksich recalls being with several residents when they appeared before a district judge to answer questions to get their citizenship papers. He recalls three funny incidents in these interviews:

1: One old Slavic man was asked: “If the President of the United States dies, who gets the job?”. The man says, “Repeat the question”. The judge says “If the president of the United States dies, who gets the job?”. The Slavic man responds, “Oh, the undertaker!!”.... “Oh Oh, the Second Hand President, the living president!”.

2: They asked another Yugoslav, “What is it that flies over the nations capital every day?” The man says, “Oh, Pigeons.”

3: They asked an Italian, “Have you got any family here?”. He says, “Yes I got two kids”. They asked, “Are you married?”. To which he says, “No, I don’t like women, honest to God.” They ask, “Well how can you have children if you don’t have a wife?”. He responds, “My neighbor woman’s got-a two kids and I’m the father”. The people were too afraid to lie because the were afraid of getting sent back, so they told everything.

He also recalls that when the big burly miners would get their little American flag and their papers, they would often break down in tears of joy.