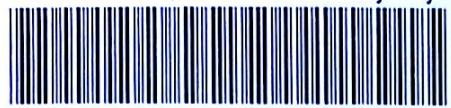


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The Van Houten

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Story

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The Van Houten, New Mexico Story

by

F. Stanley



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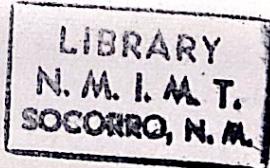
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The Van Houten, New Mexico Story

By F. Stanley

IT WAS NOT ALWAYS KNOWN as Van Houten, to begin with. The original name was The Willow Coal Mine Camp. Because Jan Van Houten was to save the camp from folding up, the name was changed to honor him. It was one of the oldest coal camps in Colfax county, just a wee bit older than Dawson, although not officially so recognized. The Maxwell Land Grant Company already knew of coal in this seam by 1900. Real progress was made with the formation of the Rocky Mountain & St. Louis Railway & Coal Company. By 1903 the camp was firmly established. If you want to see what is left of the once famous camp, take Highway 85 either up from Springer or down from Raton. If you come from Raton, drive south past the old landmarks of Clifton House, Hebron, Otero. About sixteen miles south of Raton turn right on the spur road and stay on it a couple of miles. It will take you into Van Houten. Technically, you will be in Section 34 and 35 Township 30 North, Range 22 East. It's a lovely spot and well worth seeing.

Van Houten was no doubt the major Rocky Mountain Company camp in this area although Koehler and possibly Brilliant would dispute this. Jan Van Houten, for whom the camp was named, was the son of S. Van Houten of Holland, president of the Maxwell Land Grant Company. Jan took care of the company's cattle ranch and made Maxwell City his home. In time he became a trustee of the company and vice president under Frank Springer. Later he became president. He managed the coal properties of the com-

pany since 1901. He meantime met a widow, Mrs. May Wiegand, a native of Kansas but schooled in Baltimore. They were married in Las Vegas, New Mexico. She was named president of the Board of Regents at Miners Hospital, Raton, when it opened on November 6, 1906. He built a beautiful home in Raton which was later bought by Dr. Donavan, who moved to California and sold it to Charles DiLisio, Jr. When the latter bought it, it was already stripped of its artistic European fireplace and other works of art. The big community house in Van Houten had re-prints of many works of art. It was quite a place during the old days.

By 1906 there were two hundred and seventy-nine miners working underground; twenty men working outside the mine. Five boys were employed in the mine; four outside. The majority of the employees were Italians, Austrians and Germans. Although Van Houten was possessed of a fine ball team, a sports program and other activities, now and then violence erupted. The RATON RANGE for January 28, 1904, informed its readers: "Late last Saturday night Louis Martinez, a young man who has charge of the stable of the Raton Coal & Coke Company at Van Houten, and who was sleeping in the stable, was rudely awakened by some burly individual who had a grip on his throat. Louis made a struggle to free himself and in doing so got hold of the man's head, which from the hair he discovered was a negro. He continued to struggle and got hold of one of the negro's hands with his teeth, biting out a piece of the flesh. Finally freeing himself for an instant, he picked up from the floor near at hand an iron shoe shank, but as he did so the negro wrenched it from his hand and dealt him several blows over the head with the instrument. Then he drew from his pocket a knife with which he cut the boy's throat. No doubt believing his victim dead, the would-be murderer found the trousers of the unconscious boy, which were hanging upon a nail in the room, and took from the pockets forty-three dollars in cash. He then helped himself to whatever articles of value which he could carry away, and disappeared. Early Sunday morning Martinez was found by

some friend lying on the floor of the room in the stable where he had been sleeping, in a most awful condition, though conscious and able to articulate. He told the story of his encounter with the negro and immediately the entire camp was aroused and in a short time George Jackson, a negro miner, was arrested, and everything pointing to the fact that he was the would-be murderer. He had blood on his clothes, and also had in his possession a pair of shoes which Martinez identified as his. He also had an injured hand which it is thought was caused by Martinez's teeth. The arrested man was brought to Raton and placed in charge of Sheriff Littrell. Martinez is not expected to survive his injuries . . . "

Nor did he. He died on January 28th. The son of Juan Manuel Martinez of Raton, he was but twenty-one years of age. The jury deliberated for four hours and Jackson was convicted of second degree murder. Just about five weeks prior to this Van Houten and all the coal camps were harassed by strikes. The Blossburg mine completely closed down. Only eighteen men reported for work at Van Houten. No one could put their finger on the cause since the United Mine Workers gave no reason for calling the strike. Most of the men went to Raton to live in quarters sponsored by the Union. Jan Van Houten hired guards to protect the property. Convinced that the men would not return to work, he sent to Chicago for fifty experienced miners. At the end of the year he had one hundred and forty-five men at work. The strikers waylaid many of these and threatened them. In some instances there was bloodshed. It was also suspected that much of the underground machinery had been tampered with. Toward the end of June, 1904, Judge W. J. Mills issued an injunction against a number of the strike-breakers. The strike was not over until some time in October. About eight months later Frank Springer, Charles Springer, Jan Van Houten and several others formed the famous St. Louis, Rocky Mountain & Pacific Company. Although the change of hands little effected the employees, it did bring about an expansion that was to last a number of years until the company was no longer able to cope with

the inroads of progress, automation, oil as fuel for the Santa Fe engines. These were the factors that killed the town of Van Houten. In between many things happened. Life went on as usual. Van Houten did not experience the terrible tragedies of Dawson except the final tragedy of its own demise.

It is interesting to note that the postoffice was established on December 2, 1902, with the name Willow, New Mexico, and William Pratt as postmaster. Later the name was changed and E. P. McGuire succeeded Pratt as postmaster. Rumor developed that The Rocky Mountain Company was selling out to the Santa Fe, later it was said that the Swastica Company was buying up the railroad into Van Houten because there was a slack in the coal market. Officials denied this. Mrs. M. M. Foster, who had conducted the Wagonmound Hotel, bought the Van Houten Hotel and operated it successfully. The Van Houten school was also successfully conducted and in time Tillie Schwarhheim became principal, Mrs. Claude Thompson taught the grammar grades and Ellen Benfer taught the primary grades.

"A killing took place last night at the Van Houten camp in which an Italian miner by the name of Roso Sphenola, a new arrival in camp, was shot through the breast by a shotgun in the hands of Philip Paliaroni. The murder was preceded by a violent quarrel between a number of the Italian miners in which several of the participants received stab wounds. According to the best information in the hands of the officers at the present time, the murdered man arrived just the day before from the old country and the trouble is supposed to date back to an old time feud. The murderer immediately made his escape, with two compadres, who are now at large in the hills and are being sought for by Sheriff Hixenbaugh and a large posse of deputies. At this hour no trace of the fugitives has been found. The Van Houten mines, including the main tipple and No. 5 mine (the latter including commercial coal for retail trade) during October of the past year ran twenty-seven days; during November, thirty days, and every day during December." (o.c. January 10, 1915).

"Mrs. Clyde Long entertained Thursday afternoon in honor of her mother, Mrs. F. T. Schwachheim, who is visiting with her this week. Fred Agee, manager of the dry goods department of the company store, left for a few weeks visit to his old home in Georgia. Dr. J. T. Bills is at present the company doctor stationed at Van Houten. J. Jones moved from Koehler to take charge of the new bakery at Van Houten. Some residents of Van Houten are J. M. Honeyfield, Joseph Patterson, Fred Finnicum, William Chittick, Ernest Brunelli, Oval Anderson, Sherman Dull." (o.c. August 27, 1915). Ernest Brunelli was the store keeper at Van Houten. This store was known as the Blossburg Mercantile Company. He had a daughter named Lucy who was born in Colorado on April 1, 1905. She attended school in Canon City, Colorado. She took sick and came home. She was in Van Houten but two weeks when she died on December 22, 1918. She was buried in Raton. McGuire also served as deputy sheriff in Van Houten. He was called upon to arrest Austin Kinny (also spelled Kenney) age sixty, for the murder of Smith Capers. Kinny was sentenced to hang. The New Mexico Mine Inspector had this to say for Van Houten in his 1910 report:

"The Van Houten mine is on a branch of the A.T. & S.F. Railroad, which connects with the main line at Hebron, New Mexico, and with the St. Louis, Rocky Mountain & Pacific Railway at Preston, New Mexico. The mine comprises five openings, known as Nos. 1, 2, 4, 5 and 6. The coal from all except No. 5 is dumped over the same tipple. No. 5 has a separate tipple about one and a fourth miles from the others. This mine is on the Raton seam, here 4 to 15 feet thick and dipping 1½ percent northwest. Length of main entry No. 1 mine, pit mouth to face, 2,850 feet; length of longest lateral entries from main entry No. 1 mine, first and second left entries, 3,400 feet each; other entries have attained lengths of 1,000 to 1,500 feet. Length of main entry No. 2 mine, 900 feet; length of two longest entries from main entry to face, 3,100 feet. Length of main entry No. 4 Mine, 5,100 feet; fifth and sixth right entries are 2,700 feet in length, with several other comparatively

long entries. Length of main entry No. 5 mine, 1,200 feet; third and fourth right entries, 1,500 feet each, with several other long entries. Length of main entry No. 6 mine, 900 feet; third and fourth right entries, 1,800 feet. The plant is operated by steam and electricity; boiler capacity, 700 horsepower; two steam engines, combined capacity 550 horsepower. Electric machinery: One Jeffery generator, 150 kilowatts; two Card generators, 150 kilowatts each; total capacity, 400 kilowatts; pressure 500 volts; current 700 amperes. The loaded mine cars are gathered by mules and hauled from the mine partings to the tipple by four 15-ton Westinghouse motors and one 10-ton Morgan-Gardner motor, which have a total haulage capacity of 4,000 tons a day. The mines are ventilated by three exhaust fans — one Clifford, 13½ feet in diameter by 7 feet wide; one Guibal fan, 20 feet in diameter by six feet wide, and one of home construction; 6 feet in diameter by 2 feet wide. The mines are operated 22 days during the fiscal year; total output, 659,324 tons; amount used in operating the mine, 3,775 tons; amount of unwashed slack and coal shipped to the coke ovens at Gardiner, New Mexico, 101,320 (tons); net product of coal shipped to market, 552,974 tons; average price per ton at the mine, \$1.17; total value of coal shipped to market, \$646,979.58. Increase of gross production over preceding fiscal year, 184,321.21 tons. In addition to the coal sold, 45,079 tons of coke was produced, having a value of \$2.99 per ton at the ovens; total value, \$266,077.11, or a total value of coal and coke produced, \$913,056.69. In the earlier part of the year 254,575 pounds of black powder were used; later the use of black powder was prohibited and 23,825 pounds of monobel were used. An average of 324 miners, 99 company men, and 6 boys were employed underground, and 34 men and 3 boys outside; a total of 446 persons employed immediately in operation of the mines. Practically all nationalities except Chinese were represented. The coal is sold in Arizona, Texas, Kansas, Colorado, Oklahoma, New Mexico and Mexico. The following railroads also draw on these mines for fuel supplies: Atchison, Topeka & Santa Fe; the Colorado & Southern; the El Paso & Southwestern;

the Chicago, Rock Island & Pacific; and the St. Louis, Rocky Mountain & Pacific. Inspections were made at the Van Houten mines on October 15, October 16, November 19 of 1909 and on May 20 and February 17 of 1910. I investigated the conditions at the place where Fred Tori was killed in No. 4 pillar, between rooms 54 and 55. Found he had his place well timbered and extra timbers lying in room near at hand. Found he had gone to his place late in the morning and began mining under a big piece of over-hanging coal, weighing about 1,800 pounds, which was loose, without sounding it. The piece of coal should have been pulled down, as it was loosened by previous shot, and his accidental death was the result of his own carelessness . . . " (o.c.)

The pattern was pretty much the same during those years until World War I. Numerous boys left the mines to enlist. There was Alex Kovacevich, Max Valdez, John Joseph, Leopoldo Valdez, Melos Raecevich, Teofilo Montano, Manuel Garcia, Tomas Regoni, Joseph Franco, Clarence D. Taylor, Nicolas Gallegos, Arturo Robles, Melquiades Sainz, Louis Marsisco, George Slagakis, Joe Grubae, Evan Cristoff, George M. Dennis, George Themakis, Atilio Sena and Bill Chittick. Just in the midst of the party that was the send-off for Bill, the electric power failed and the town had to resort to lanterns for light. Frank Nacas, Anton Bulaz, William Carson, George Conklarakis, Ruperto Gallegos, Lamont A. Hubbard, Mike Pejtatel, Thomas Regoni, Ramon Salazar, Atalino Sena, Yuille Stewart, D. Taylor, Mike Zuganachian were among others who enlisted during the war. Dr. L. A. Hubbard was the camp doctor during World War I. Savo Tresjonin had a small scratch on his hand. He paid no attention to it and continued his work in the mine. Soon he realized that there was a serious infection and went to the Miner's Hospital in Raton. It was too late. A few days later he was dead. He was buried in Raton on January 14, 1918. During this time George Penny, employed at the Blossburg Mercantile Store in Van Houten, became the father of a ten pound boy. Birth and death, a daily occurrence — the beginning and end of things.

Van Houten also had its dances. Many times when Sugarite or Yankee or Dawson gave a dance Van Houten would put off its dance and attend these. This also helped bring crowds from these camps to Van Houten on Saturday nights and Sundays. A picnic and dance always followed a ball game on Sunday. Fellows like Alex Brown, Lige Harvey, Frank Necas and Carlos Necas usually took in the dances at Sugarite and Yankee. Ernest Brunnelli often took his family and motored to Gardiner to visit his wife's mother who lived there. Shortly after the birth of his boy, George Penney resigned as clerk in the mercantile store. Caeser Childs of Koehler replaced him. Other boys joining up to win the war were Gabriel Ribera, Louis Xavier, Joe Vinachi, Jim M. Papas, Mike Rokers, Pete Papas, Angelo Papas, Maches Zanis, Antonio Lopez, Vedon Kovacavich, Alex Kavicick and Kosta Dalierich.

It was the rule during those war months to sew for the Red Cross, entertain for the purpose of raising funds for the needs of the boys "over there." There were also drives for Liberty Bonds. The "jitters" were in evidence against anyone with a German name. "Pro-German expressions are not tolerated in the Van Houten camp by the young men who had constituted themselves as a vigilance committee for the suppression of disloyal talk. On Tuesday afternoon Constantinus Koch, a Russian-German employed in the mines, was taken through the camp, carrying the American flag, and told to shout "To Hell with the Kaiser." He was then released on promise to suppress his statements in the future. Koch was accused of having said in a conversation with his fellow workers that he wished the Germans success in the present conflict. Patriotism runs high at the mining camp, in spite of the fact that a large percentage of the population is foreign-born. This camp is one the heaviest community subscribers to the Liberty Loan and has raised twenty-one thousand dollars. It has also raised three hundred and seventy dollars for the Red Cross." (oc. April 12, 1918).

"The dance given for the benefit of the band was attended by a large number of people from Koehler, Dawson

and Raton. Refreshments were served during the intermission. The proceeds from the dance were contributed to the fund for the support of the big band organized. The Van Houten Band recently organized is one of the largest in this section of the country. There are now twenty-two members practicing regularly under the leadership of A. R. Rolland and the entire organization meets twice a week and is getting in fine shape. The members are A. A. Rolland, instructor; A. P. French, William Chittick, Joe Cuseico, Joe Vansins, August Lexa, Lige Harvey, Tilman Daly, Tony Lexa, Russell Daly, John Chiode, Frank Rody, Pete Bono, Allen Stewart, Louis Marsino, F. Ferri, A. Amondoli, J. McGee, Enrico Verzotti, Coligano Mario, Louis Ghenis and Dr. L. A. Hubbard." (o.c.). Of course, a number of the boys broke up the wonderful gathering by enlisting in the service. James McGee and Oral Anderson enlisted in the navy. Tony Pesevento, John Nodghero, Pat Chavez, C. D. Taylor, Rafael Tassi and A. Sena joined the army.

"The family of Newton Davis arrived last week from Dewar, Oklahoma, to make their future home here. He is employed in the mines. The picture show Friday night was well attended. After the show the crowd remained to enjoy the club dance. Mrs. Elmer Connelly, wife of the stable boss, was rushed to the hospital for appendicitis operation. Joe Marger was injured in the mines last week but is doing nicely. Mrs. William Chittick visited in Raton. The boys are giving a dance for the Red Cross next week. There will be a picture show Wednesday night. The name of the movie is 'Honor Thy Name.' The stars are Frank Kennan, Louise Glarum and Charles Roy." (o.c. November 20, 1917).

Others at Van Houten were the Bonanelli family, Earl Cliff family, the Joe Comba family and the Plunketts. Margaret Bonanelli married into the Plunkett family. Joe Comba, Jr., married the Plunkett daughter. William Plunkett, Jr., married the Sweet girl. After the mines closed down Margaret Plunkett took care of the culinary department in the Donavan Hospital at Raton. Later she opened the cafe at the Honeyfield Hotel in Raton, then Margaret's Cafe on Second Street near St. Patrick's Church. Joe and Mary

Jane Comba built a cute little home in Raton near the Bonanelli family and the Plunkett family in back of the school on North First St. and found employment in Raton. Many of the miners of Van Houten found employment in Raton, Albuquerque, Santa Fe and Trinidad when the mines closed down shortly after World War II. Ministers and priests came in from Raton to Van Houten to conduct services. These services were conducted in the spacious hall. The stage is usually the sanctuary. It was pretty hard to keep one's mind on what he was doing because of all those wonderful etchings and prints of the masters along the walls. Whatever became of them is a mystery. I often thought I'd like to come in with a truck some day and take them along. Don't know where I'd put them. Just a thought. Horses heads, Napoleon, Lincoln, Washington and so many other wonderful prints.

"Koehler and Van Houten, two of the largest camps operated by the St. Louis, Rocky Mountain & Pacific Company in this district, claims with excellent right the honor of the first two places in the nation's honor roll of communities subscribing the greatest amount per capita to the Third Liberty Loan in the campaign concluded Saturday. These two camps, with a total working population of slightly more than a thousand men, subscribed a total of \$225,000. Koehler raised \$114,000, while its rival camp raised \$111,000. The former camp employs at the mines, coke ovens, stores and other working places, five hundred and sixty men, while Van Houten employs four hundred and forty-seven." (o.c. May 10, 1918).

"A concert was given by the band last Sunday night at the home of A. M. Oberli. A large number of friends attended the wedding of Velo Chagenovich and Helen Oberli. An address on Red Cross activities was given by Mrs. Marie French (wife of the camp superintendent), after which Mr. Oberli, Mr. Chagenovich and Archie Bularch donated \$42.15 as a fund to be turned over to the Red Cross. L. S. Wilson of Raton gave the address for Flag Day exercises. A. P. French, superintendent of Van Houten, gave a wonderful address." (o.c.)

"The poet has truly said: 'Into each life some rain must fall,' but the ladies of the Childrens Rights Club of Van Houten have decided to make as much sunshine come into each life as is possible, and in every possible way make use of the beautiful club rooms which the St. Louis, Rocky Mountain & Pacific Company has so generously placed at their disposal, and their last effort was a complete surprise party. First they planned a twin shower for Mrs. John Engle and her sister, Mrs. Jensen. They are twin sisters. Great secrecy was observed, and the date of February 12 as one of the great events and a good time to celebrate, was chosen. As a 'blind' Mrs. Allan P. French called a special 'Red Cross' meeting for that date. The fine bright day attracted a full attendance at the club house, bearing dainty gifts and good things to eat. Fortunately the sisters did not appear until the room had been nicely arranged, with the fine new player piano and the graphaphone in the ladies' parlor, where beautiful effects had been produced by the use of potted plants on pedestals, tables and window ledges. In due time the sisters appeared and were showered with many dainty and useful gifts. Everyone enjoyed the surprise, especially the recipients. The time was passed in playing games, interspersed with several musical numbers furnished by Mrs. Vacine, Mrs. J. S. French, Mrs. Shane and Mrs. Bernard. The long table which had been prepared was drawn out and the ladies were seated and served with a delicious two-course lunch. But the ladies of Van Houten do nothing by halves, and had still another surprise in store. The word had leaked out that our worthy camp marshal, Mr. M. E. Bernard, and his estimable wife had celebrated Lincoln's birthday thirty-five years ago by getting married. So it was decided to give them a surprise party also by having the husbands and children of all the ladies come in and enjoy supper. This, too, was kept a secret from Mr. and Mrs. Bernard, who had thoroughly enjoyed the first surprise party. At about five o'clock, Mr. Bernard called at the club house, thinking to walk home with his wife, when he was informed that his wife was not ready, but that he should go home, dress, and put on his best looks and come

back and help celebrate his wedding anniversary. Then it began to dawn on Mr. Bernard that more than one surprise could be worked on the same day. It was also the eighth anniversary of Mr. and Mrs. Glenn Martin, which made the occasion a double anniversary surprise party. About six p.m. the men began to gather, and a half hour later a veritable banquet had been spread and the guests seated, when in a few well-chosen words Mrs. C. A. Bernard presented to Mr. and Mrs. E. Bernard and to Mr. and Mrs. Martin, in behalf of the club ladies, a beautiful blooming plant each. Forty-five or fifty guests were served at the table, and after enjoying the bountiful repast, all betook themselves to the theatre for a good picture show. Too much cannot be said for our town marshal, M. E. Bernard, for the many touches of home he has put here and there in our club house, especially in the ladies' room . . . " (o.c. February 27, 1920).

Meantime, work advanced on the new amusement hall which opened on May 16, 1920. Three thousand people attended the opening. The Van Houten baseball team at this time was known as the Swasticas. This was really to honor the Swastica Coal Company. Naturally the swastica signs disappeared in World War II. The reason is obvious. Even the big, beautiful hotel in Raton, the lordly Swastica, had its name changed to the Yucca. Of course there was a ball game on the eventful day of the opening of the new amusement hall. The batteries for Van Houten were Day and Kane. "Archie" (as he was called) French, mine superintendent, planned a fine celebration for all visitors. Andy Miyamo, cook at the W. J. Menzie boarding house, was helpful. Dr. L. A. Hubbard transferred from Van Houten to Sugarite. Movies were shown in the new amusement hall on Mondays and Wednesdays. Just as in Dawson, so in Van Houten, baseball was part of the life line of the camp.

"The Van Houten Swasticas won a seven inning game with the Springer baseball team Sunday at Van Houten by a score of ten to five in a game which began and ended in a snow storm. The feature of the game was the hitting of Alt Kerr, Van Houten catcher, who poled out three hits out of five times at bat. The initial performance of Ed Chittick,

Van Houten's young pitcher, demonstrated his ability as a comer on the slab. A big dance will be given at the new Houten community house tomorrow, June 7, for the benefit of the Van Houten baseball team." (o.c. June 6, 1919). The following week Van Houten played its arch rival, Dawson, and lost 6 to 5. Fritz Koehling, the Dawson catcher, hit the winning run.

"A fitting climax to three crowded days of Federation activities for visiting delegates and for many of the local club women and their families was the mid-day luncheon and entertainment given at the community club house at Van Houten Thursday under the hospitable administration of the ladies of that camp. An ideal day combined with perfect arrangements through to completion without a single disappointment, made the closing function of this successful and enjoyable gathering of Federation delegates at Raton an event never to be forgotten. The one hundred and twenty-five delegates met at the Elks Club in Raton and were taken in seven cars for the half-hour's drive of nineteen miles to Van Houten. Expressions of delight and admiration were spontaneous on first beholding the very handsome community house, just recently completed, with its stuccoed walls and artistic exterior finishing. In the hall there was prominently displayed the flag with its two gold stars and its forty-two blue stars. During the enjoyment of the appetizing spread the ladies of the camp rendered several program numbers. Mrs. Gregg, chairman of the child welfare work for the community, gave a welcoming address. Mrs. James French and Miss Susan Stewart rendered pleasing vocal solos; Mrs. Kintsel and Mrs. Chittick gave several piano numbers. These were members from the Van Houten Club: Mesdames Kintsel, Gregg, Chittick, Engle, Amelico, Bennett, Honeyfield, De Amici, Taylor, Marsh, J. T. French, A. P. French, Stevens, Vansina, Brown, Kew, Plunkett, Christon, Daily, Lee, Carr, Miss Emma Bernard, Leah Bergen, Vera Kershner, Miss Lewis and Florence Selfa." (o.c.) One of the gold stars was for William Anderson killed at the front. Laura Manby was once a teacher at Van Houten in the early days. The residents of the camp

were quite content and loved the place. It was surrounded by hills, a natural setting, and away from the turmoil of traffic. The population of Van Houten in 1920 was six hundred and eleven. The NEW MEXICO GUIDE book in all three of its editions omits mention of Van Houten; the second and third editions which added maps, failed to indicate the place ever existed even by name. This may be of no importance to the public in general, but it is something cherished by former employees of the St. Louis, Rocky Mountain & Pacific Company as well as all the descendants of the people who worked the mines and lived in the community. Although a town of the past, it must not be scratched out of the history books. It was home to many; it played a role — a minor one, no doubt — but a role nevertheless in making history as far as New Mexico is concerned from the turn of the century to shortly after World War II. There wasn't a person who was not sad when told the mine was closing. They wore a purple heart that day.

With the pile-up of railroad strikes and coal-miners strikes the outlook was grim for Van Houten. With each strike at the coal mines, railroad explored the possibility of converting from coal to fuel. Not that the change would not have eventually been brought about, but it would have taken a longer time and thus given the miners a chance to re-habilitate as far as employment was concerned. President J. Van Houten struck an ominous note when he reported to the stockholders in 1938: "Unless present conditions of additional taxation, Government controlled coal prices, increased competition with oil and gas, and business recession, one cannot venture any prediction as to future earnings. The Atchison, Topeka & Santa Fe Railway Company, the company's largest purchaser of fuel for locomotive purposes, is gradually extending the use of oil where coal was formerly used. As long as oil production is abundant and prices comparatively low, there is no denying the fact that the use of oil on locomotives presents material advantages over the use of coal. To what extent this will further affect the sale of coal may only be surmised. Possibly control of oil and gas by Government agencies, the same as

is now done with coal, may to some extent definitely determine the district in which the use of coal should economically predominate." (ANNUAL REPORT, 1937).

"It is impossible to predict the future of the company's operations, but, with the low prices of oil and gas continuing, the use of coal by the railways and other purchasers is definitely on the decline. Coal produced by the company during the year was 386,903 tons, a decrease compared with 1937 of 158,876 tons. Unless there should be a substantial improvement in general business, adding to railway traffic, a further decline in the volume of production during the next year is to be expected. However, it is proper to state that should the recently announced attitude of the Administration in Washington prove to be a fixed policy favorable to a nation-wide economic recovery, the business of your company undoubtedly would increase in volume and provide a greater margin of profit. On the other hand, if a further decline in business should occur, measures will be taken by your management to efficiently adjust economical production to market conditions. Apparently in addition to the business which may be obtained from the railroads, coal to utilities, industries and domestic consumers is all that can be successfully marketed, and the company will continue to furnish its best possible product for these purposes. The company suffered a real loss in the death of Mr. Erskine Hewitt, who has served as a member of the Board of Directors since the company was organized. His sound judgment and wise counsel will be greatly missed."

(o.c. 1938).

Naturally all the miners living in Van Houten were expected to burn coal both for cooking and winter warmth if they lived at the camp. Many did prefer to live in Van Houten because the rent was very reasonable. The mine was closed but a short time, but the need for coal during the war years caused it to be re-opened. Although each year saw fewer consumers of coal and more of oil the company continued to hang on. The twenty-four day coal strike in 1948 did not help matters. The miners were now earning more pay than they ever did. Inside employees were mak-

ing \$92.10 per week; outside employees received \$83.51 per week. The men were allowed six and a half hours actual working time; one and a half hours travel time to and from Raton to work and a half hour for lunch. If a miner put in twelve months work he received an additional one hundred dollars as vacation pay. Despite these increases, the charges for rents, fuel and medical services remained the same. Then came the inevitable:

"This difference (deficit) is largely due to drastic reduction in our market for coal. Our two largest customers have practically ceased to purchase any coal from this company — the A.T. & S.F. Railway Company and the Colorado Fuel & Iron Corporation. The Santa Fe is totally dieselized as far as motive power is concerned and the C.F. & I. Corporation are now receiving from their own mines sufficient coal for their peak operations. Production of coal during the year 1954 was 57,457 tons, against 1953 production of shipments of domestic coal to nearby towns. We have been unsuccessful in securing any government contracts of consequence. We have tried to interest the authorities in shipment of coal to Japan and miscellaneous export destinations but all of no avail. The coal is, they claim, unsatisfactory for their particular uses.

"The Brilliant mine was closed July 29, 1953, and the equipment and buildings were sold for scrap except for a few small remaining items which are not yet disposed of and the values of which are more or less problematical, indicating practically no further realization. The investment at Brilliant was probably near a million dollars at one time; and for what was left at Brilliant at date of closing, plus valuable steel tipple and tipple equipment at Sugarite and some valuable property at Van Houten, the company received thirty-five thousand dollars.

"Van Houten was closed February 2, 1954. Van Houten remained open until February 2, 1954, for the production of coal for shipment to the power plant at Dawson, New Mexico, a plant which had been sold to the R E A for local distribution of power and light. This plant was discontinued, as the new plant at Algodones, New Mexico, is suf-

ficient to cover a very large territory through the State of New Mexico. It was installed to take the place of the local operation." (o.c. 1954).

"The St. Louis, Rocky Mountain & Pacific Company today announced the closing, effective at midnight, Friday, of the coal mine at Van Houten. The notice was posted by the company on the bulletin board of the mine: 'Due to curtailment of coal orders and conditions adversely affecting coal sales, the Van Houten mine will cease operations effective at midnight May 27.'

"The Van Houten mine employs about one hundred men. It is probably the oldest mine in the Rocky Mountain system, and at one time was the company's major coal producer. Closing of the Van Houten mine was the second blow in less than a month to the economy of Raton and Colfax county. A few weeks ago the Rocky Mountain company closed down operations at Brilliant, which employed two hundred men. The reasons for closing the latter were the same as for closing Van Houten.

"An official of the Rocky Mountain Company, discussing the latest mine shut down, said the demand for coal is falling off as the demand for the products made by coal power is shrinking. 'We are finding it rather difficult in shifting from a sellers' market to a buyers' market, the spokesman said. Recent price cutting by producers of fuel oil and gas has played havoc with the coal market all over the nation, he said. The 'whole idea' of the shutting down of mines at Brilliant and Van Houten is to cut production facilities back to the production capacity of Koehler. It is hoped by the company to get production at Koehler back three or four days a week.

"The Van Houten mine, named for the late J. Van Houten (E. Springer had replaced him as president of the company. Springer lived at Cimarron. His father had been active in the company also. Edward Thomas Springer, in effect the last head of the Van Houten camp, was born in New Mexico on May 15, 1885, of Frank Springer and Josephine Bishop Springer. When he was four years of age he was taken with the family to California where it was ex-

pected to make a permanent change, but within ten years the Springers were back in New Mexico. Edward attended school in Massachusetts and later the University of Iowa, which he gave up in favor of Harvard. He served overseas in World War I and became a captain. He married Marie Mitchel Webster of Cimarron on October 28, 1938. Through his father and uncle he had interests in the Rocky Mountain Company, the Maxwell Land Grant, the Continental Tie & Lumber Company and some ranch land. He had a wonderful home in Cimarron where live such fine people as Frank Alpers, Mary Lail and other old timers of merit. He was well known to the Lamberts. Springer recently returned to California, but maintained his interests in New Mexico. Joe Kastler of Raton succeeded Springer in maintaining the interests of the Rocky Mountain Company and when this company, as well as the Maxwell Land Grant Company, sold out their holdings Frank Gumm was placed in charge. The Gumm's were of old pioneering stock and were well known in Catskill, Raton, Springer, Colfax, Trinidad and Colmor. Frank Gumm still maintains a large ranch in Colfax County.) founder and long time president of the Rocky Mountain Company, was opened for production in 1903, and was taken over by the newly-formed Rocky Mountain Company in 1905. (It would be a project for some M A or Ph. D. student to trace the history of the Rocky Mountain Company. Actually Van Houten was not the founder. If anyone, it was his father and the Springer Brothers, Charles and Frank. The company more or less "evolved" as a subsidiary of the Maxwell Land Grant Company looking for new ways to please its stockholders. The people in Holland were tiring of negotiations with the American side of the large Grant and tired of losing money. Projects had been tried like the Vermejo ditch, the tremendous Hebron ditch, the Eagle Nest, the latter being mostly the responsibility of the Springers. The last engineer and business man sent over from Holland was Van Lint, who had hoped some day to compile a huge history of the Maxwell Land Grant. With the final sale of huge tracts in the Ute Park district and elsewhere, there was no longer any need for his services in

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Raton so he moved to California. He was a conscientious worker and had the interests of his company at heart. When the Land Grant office and the Rocky Mountain companies vacated the offices on First Street the documents, papers and letters in the files of these companies were taken to the basement of the bank on Park Avenue and stored there under the custodianship of Frank Gumm. There is no doubt that the serious student will find much here to serve him should he attempt the study of the Rocky Mountain Company and the business aspect of the Maxwell Land Grant. This is the more interesting because it includes many famous names in New Mexico history such as the Springers, Elkins, Miguel Otero, Curry, Thompson, Van Houten, Ed Springer, Frank Gumm, Joe Kastler, Van Lint, T. Benton and a host of others. Although several books have appeared pertaining to the Grant, none has been published pertaining to the Rocky Mountain Company. It was through the generosity of Frank Gumm that we were able to examine the Rocky Mountain ANNUAL REPORTS in order to prepare this booklet for the student and lover of New Mexico history. Even Twitchell, seemingly the "standard" for all New Mexico students, fails to give any more than a passing nod to Van Houten and the company responsible for its being as well as its demise. Bancroft has nothing simply because his history was written before the town sprung into being. Coan, who wrote after both Twitchell and Bancroft, mentions the name twice in his three volumes. Ellis Arthur Davis, who edited the bulky two-volume HISTORICAL ENCYCLOPEDIA OF NEW MEXICO after World War II, was totally unaware that Van Houten existed, as was the Commission that set up the first edition of the NEW MEXICO GUIDE BOOK. Nor do B. Read nor Jones mention the Rocky Mountain Company. Perhaps it is because only now is New Mexico awakening to the impact of the Rocky Mountain Company and the Maxwell Land Grant on its history from 1870 to 1956. Van Houten has produced 'millions and millions' of tons of coal, according to the company. At one time, it was the company's major producer, and put

out from two thousand to twenty-five thousand tons of coal per day.

"The mine has been rumored to have been about 'worked out' for several years. Company officials, however, said there is still some coal left at Van Houten. The mine will be left on a 'stand-by' basis, as is Brilliant, in case of an increase in the demand for coal, the company said. Van Houten was closed once before, for a year, in 1940 and 1941, but was re-opened when coal demand increased during the war. Most of the men working in Van Houten live in Raton. There are only eight or ten houses left in the camp where once lived several thousand persons." (RATON RANGE, May 26, 1949).

Thus the story endeth. Nobody took up the company on the "stand-by" basis and Van Houten never was re-opened. They say more and more by-products of coal are being discovered. Perhaps this may warrant a re-opening, but meantime all we can say is Quien sabe? It's a good old New Mexican expression that comes in handy here.

Forthcoming Booklets

- Lincoln, New Mexico
- Carisbrook, New Mexico
- Apache, New Mexico
- The Dawson Tragedies
- Hermosa, New Mexico
- Farley, New Mexico
- Galisteo, New Mexico
- Lamy, New Mexico
- Glorieta, New Mexico
- Johnson Mesa, New Mexico
- Gardiner, New Mexico



