

# Van Houten Notes

The Raton Coal and Fuel Company, the original developers, called their operations the Willow Mines, after Willow Canyon, until 1904-1905, when the mines were renamed for the company President, Mr. Jan Van Houten. In 1907-1908 the St. Louis Rocky Mountain and Pacific Company took control of the mines. Together, the two companies developed one of the most modern and up-to-date coal-gaining areas in the United States.

By 1903 the camp was firmly established.

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. 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. 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.

## TELL MURDER STORY

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.

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.

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. In the clubhouse there was a pool hall, domino room, barber shop, bar, auditorium, meeting room. And when modernized, they closed all of the seven houses down, they made a gymnasium and played basketball.

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.

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.

GET OUT FOR MULE BARN

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 was 21 years old.

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 Pueblo for weddings, funerals, and baptisms. Christmas was always a joyous occasion in Van Houten. Each of the Serbian family roasted a lamb on a spit, but several days before men would search the hills for a razanj(spit). Then they brought the needed firewood. On Christmas Eve, the lamb was roasted. Now Christmas morning, before the sun rose, a young boy would travel to a designated house to cut the lamb's head off and wish the family good health and much happiness. Customarily the boy put money in the jaw of the lamb's mouth. This young boy was called the polaznik. The family

whose home he'd visited had a gift for him as well. Then, with the ritual finished, it was open house to in all the serb households, and it was customary to taste all the 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.

The population of Van Houten in 1920 was six hundred and eleven. At its peak Van Houten's population reached around 2,000 people.

The Van Houten baseball team at this time was known as the Swastikas. This was really to honor the Swastika Coal Company. Naturally the swastika signs disappeared in World War II. The reason is obvious. Even the big, beautiful hotel in Raton, the lordly Swastika, had its name changed to the Yucca.

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.

A 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 mine closed May of 1954, putting roughly a hundred men out of work.

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. His tag did not return to the shed.

