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DAWSON COMMUNITY HONORS PAST WHILE LOOKING TO FUTURE

Uniontown, PA – Like many communities in southwestern Pennsylvania, the fortunes of Dawson have risen and fallen with the coal and coke industry, and the railroads. But residents of the small hamlet, tucked along the Youghiogheny River about five miles from Connellsville, take pride in their town and look to the future while honoring the past.

That past began more than 150 years ago, when according to local historian Roy Hess, the booming coal and coke industry helped a group of farm plots grow into an “industrial hub where it has been said, ‘A millionaire lived on every corner.’”

Hess, a lifelong resident of Dawson, chronicled the town’s history at its 150th anniversary for the publication “Connellsville Crossroads,” and of course, made mention of the town’s most well-known family: the Cochrans.

James Cochran and son Philip owned nearby coal mines, as well as the Jimtown and Clarissa coke works. The family poured some of its success into their hometown, building managers’ homes, a fairgrounds, and the famous Cochran House. The two-and-a-half story frame Queen Anne home was built in 1890 and features multiple porches and turrets. Situated on the corner of Main and Railroad streets, it still looks over Dawson today.

Perhaps even more well-known than James Cochran was his daughter-in-law, Sarah B. Cochran, who grew up a farmer’s daughter before marrying Philip Cochran in 1879. The couple had one child, James Philip Cochran.

Unlike many men of the day, Philip Cochran encouraged his wife’s interest in the family business, and upon his death in 1899 – just five years after his father – Sarah found herself in charge of the Cochran coal and coke business. Their son later passed away as well, leaving all of Sarah’s focus on her faith and the business. Though the business thrived and her fortune grew, meaning Sarah’s options were limitless, she opted to remain in the area, building the Philip G. Cochran Memorial United Methodist Church in Dawson, as well as her 35-room mansion, Linden Hall, outside the town.

Both structures are on the National Register of Historic Places, and the limestone church, with its stained glass windows, on Griscom Street, is another must-see spot in Dawson Borough. But even the less grand homes and businesses were built with care and pride in the town, Hess said, as homes were framed with locally cut lumber and street foundations were made of sandstone and locally fired brick. The Cochrans fed the borough’s municipal water system via a well on their farm.

Hess said in its heyday, Dawson boasted an opera house, theaters, two hotels, and more – rarities for a town of its size.

With the decline of the coal and coke industry, and subsequently, the railroad, Dawson and other towns in the region felt the economic impact. Businesses closed, but pride remained. A need to honor the town and region's past drove a few citizens to form the Greater Tri-Town Area Historical Society, which has been headquartered in Dawson since its inception. The historical society also serves Vanderbilt and Dickerson Run, as well as Lower Tyrone, Franklin and Dunbar townships.

"The historical society is very active with the area's military history," Hess said. "We built a Vietnam/Korean War monument in 2013 – unusual for a small town. In 2024, TTAHS dedicated a military room with hundreds of Tri-Town vets' pictures."

The town, currently led by Mayor Sandy Newell, also preserves its link to agriculture with its annual grange fair, and Hess said though less than 400 people remain in Dawson, residents continue to be proud of their community and their homes.

"Individual pride in home ownership has kept Dawson a well-kept residential area. Some residents have lived here for generations, while many residents work elsewhere," he said.

Hess is a third-generation resident of Dawson, and there was no question it was where he wanted to raise his family. And when looking at places to build a new home, well, the Hesses decided to remain in a familiar location.

"In 2011, we built a new home in Dawson. We looked at several areas before we built," Hess said. "We built here because we felt safer here than any of the other areas. That is the truth. Dawson has been a good place for three generations of my family to grow up."

To learn more about Dawson and the Greater Tri-Town Area Historical Society, visit their Facebook page at www.facebook.com/p/The-Greater-Tri-Town-Area-Historical-Society-100067183923533.

To learn more about Fayette County, visit www.fayettecountypa.org.

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