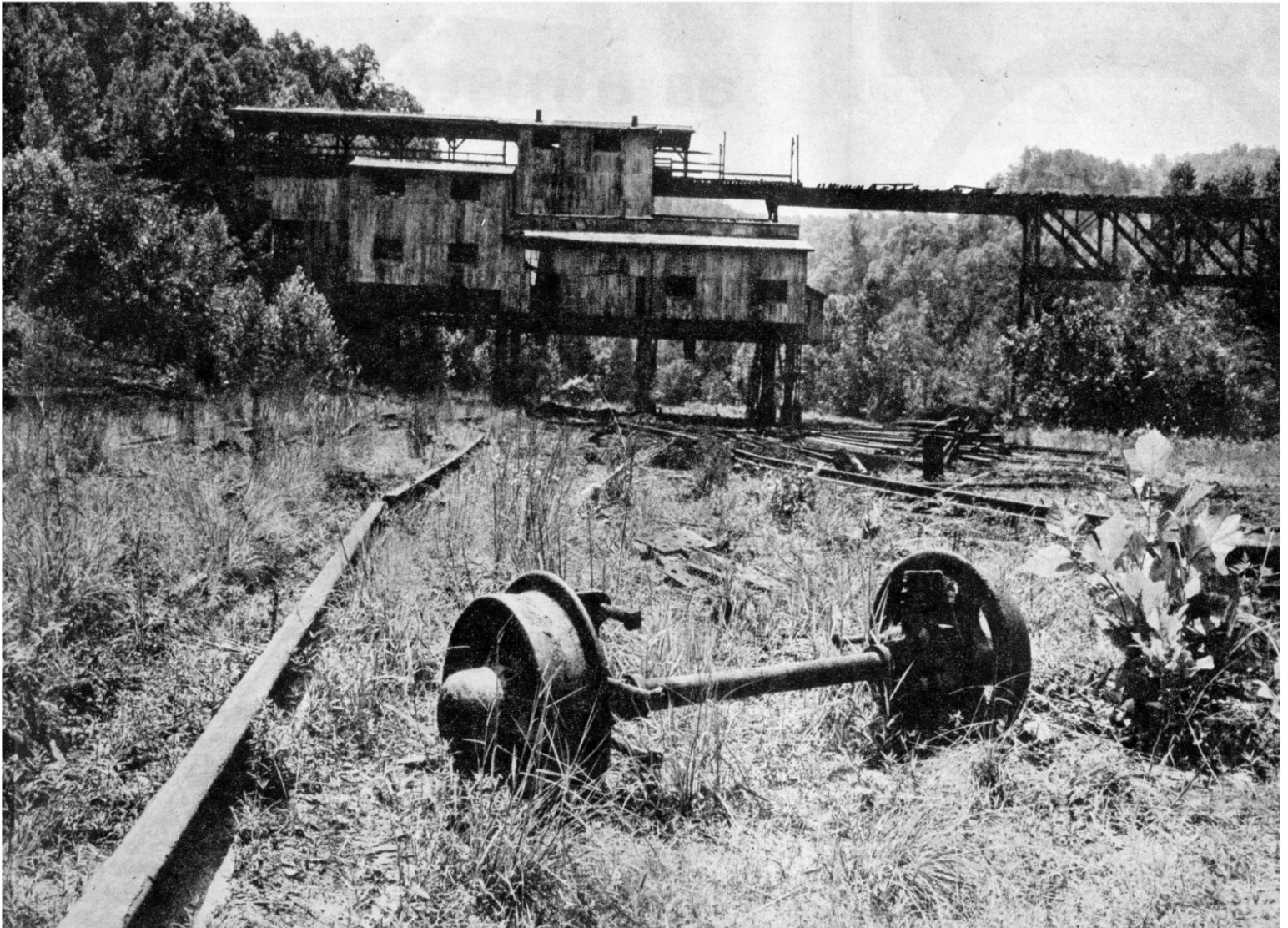


National Park Service  
U.S. Department of the Interior



Big South Fork National River and Recreation Area  
Oneida, Tennessee

# A Guide to the Blue Heron Community





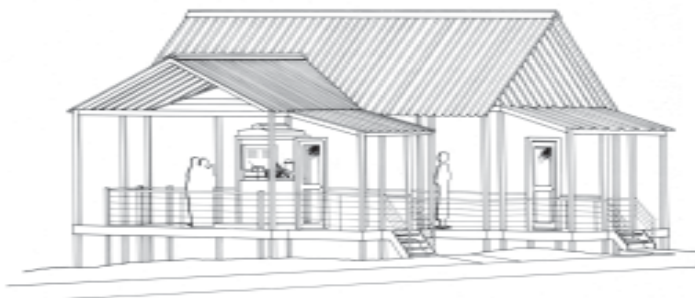
## How do you Interpret a Ghost Town?

The old mining town of Blue Heron poses an interesting question: How do you interpret a ghost town? A good question, because at Blue Heron there is no complete written record.

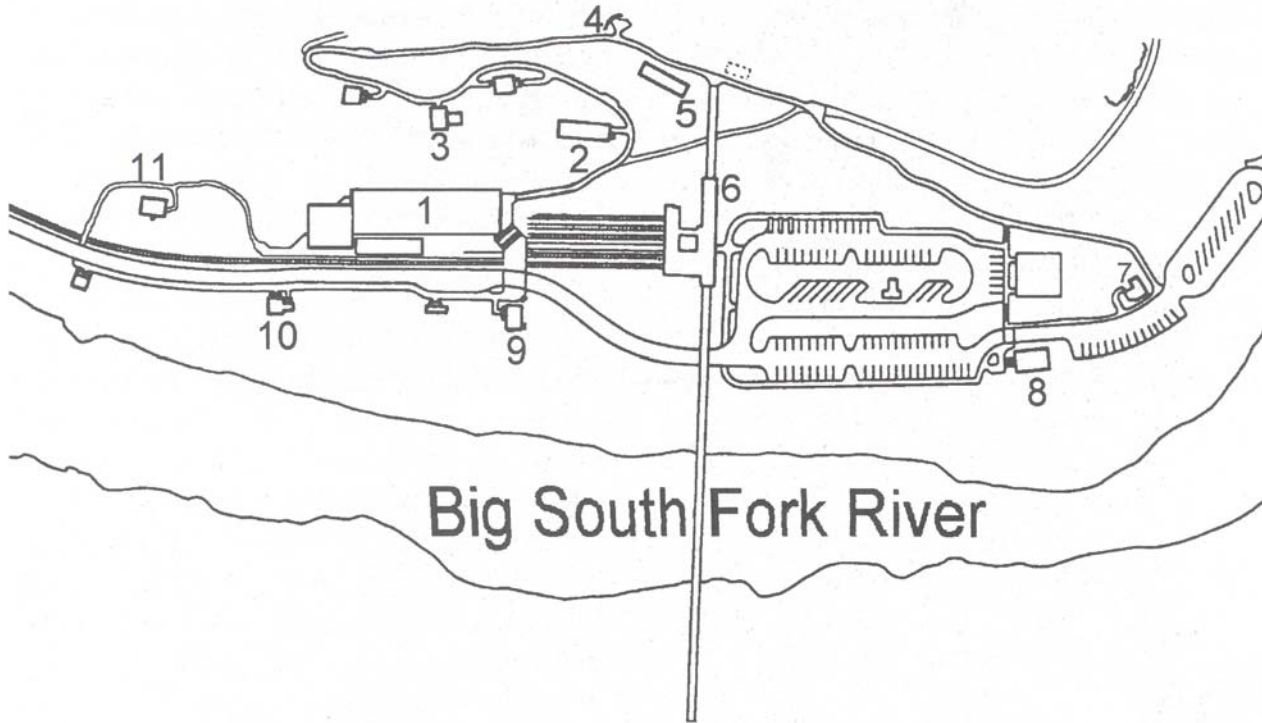
Blue Heron, or Mine 18, is an abandoned coal mining town. It was a part of the Stearns Coal and Lumber Company's past operation in what today is the Big South Fork National River and Recreation Area, a unit of the National Park Service. Most of what we know about life at Blue Heron, and the other Stearns coal towns, has been handed down through oral history. Blue Heron mine operated from 1937 until December 1962, when it closed. During that time, hundreds of people lived and worked in the isolated community on the banks of the Big South Fork River. Their story is the focus of this interpretive tour of the Blue Heron Community.

When the Stearns Coal and Lumber Company abandoned Blue Heron in 1962, the buildings were either removed or lapsed into decay. There were no original buildings standing when the town was "re-created" as an interpretive center in the 1980s. Consequently, the town was restored in an "open-air" museum format, and new structures were constructed on the approximate site of several of the original buildings. These new structures are open, metal shells of buildings, and are referred to as "ghost structures." Each ghost structure has an audio-tape station with recorded recollections of some of the people of Mine 18.

The key to your experiencing Blue Heron is to see the town as it's residents saw it. As you walk around this re-created town, listen to the words of the people of Blue Heron. They tell the story of their lives in this isolated mining community better than anyone.



# Map of Blue Heron



- |    |                   |     |                        |
|----|-------------------|-----|------------------------|
| 1. | Train Depot       | 7.  | School House           |
| 2. | Bath House        | 8.  | Church                 |
| 3. | Residences        | 9.  | Company Store          |
| 4. | Mine Entrance     | 10. | Residences             |
| 5. | The Shop          | 11. | Superintendent's House |
| 6. | Tipple and Bridge |     |                        |



This booklet is designed to be a general guide to some of the buildings at Blue Heron. While this guide offers a suggested route, visitors are free to roam the town and visit the ghost structures in any order. The Blue Heron community is a self-guided, open-air museum.

The Blue Heron interpretive trail does involve some uphill walking. Take your time on the paved walkways, and watch your footing on the steps of the buildings.



Rail yard at Blue Heron Mine where the depot now stands

Today the train depot serves as a landing platform for arriving visitors aboard the Big South Fork Scenic Railway, a modern excursion rail which travels the original K&T Railroad line. Restrooms, a gift shop, and a park ranger office are located at the new depot. The area of the current depot was a marshalling yard for coal cars (called “gons”, short for gondola).

A recommended place to begin your tour of the Blue Heron Mining Community is the new train depot. Here you’ll find a model of the town at its heyday in the 1950s, along with a model of the coal tipple and bridge. Interpretive panels tell the story of the Stearns Company’s timber and mining operations, and the development of the company railroad, the Kentucky and Tennessee Railroad, the K&T.

Before you leave the depot, listen to the audio exhibit and meet the people who will share their life at Blue Heron with you today.

## 2. The Bath House



In work as dirty as coal mining, a bath house was a special attraction for the miners. Here the men could unwind and clean up after a hard shift in the mines. The water for the bath house was stored in a tank above the building and heated. This gravity-fed hot water supply provided a welcome respite from the rigors of a long day in the mines and meant that coal dust would not be carried home.

The bath house was one of the few luxuries afforded the miners and many of them enjoyed this respite from the dark time in the mines. They held a “wildcat strike” for several days in order to get the company to agree to build the structure. They later found out that their pay was deducted for the time “out on strike.”

In the bath house the miners could leave their personal belongings in wire baskets suspended by pulley ropes in the ceiling. They could lock their baskets and retrieve them at the end of the shift.



Bath house entrance in the late 1960's



Typical miner's bath house

### 3. Residences



The next three ghost structures were used as residences by several families. Today these structures are used as interpretive stations with specific themes of life at Blue Heron. The first structure you will see on the left has the theme of “Moving”. Many of the miners moved around within the town, or moved to different coal camps over the course of a career. Consequently they lived in many different housing arrangements. As you listen to the miners and read the panels, you can get an idea of the transitory lifestyle of many of the miners and their families. This residence also served as the first mine superintendent’s house.

The second ghost structure’s theme is “Courtship, Marriage, and Family”. In an isolated coal town like Blue Heron, young men and women met each other, fell in love, married, and had children within that community. Domestic married life in a transitory environment like a coal town produced its own set of challenges. Listen to the words of the miners and their families as they describe how they experience romance, marriage, and children at Blue Heron.

The third structure’s theme is “Entertainment”. In an isolated and transitory community like Blue Heron, with limited radio and almost no television reception people had to be resourceful. For entertainment, the residents participated in activities such as baseball, fishing, hunting,

swimming and swinging from ropes into the Big South Fork River. The church and gospel music provided a special activity for some residents. Many residents of Blue Heron and the surrounding coal towns looked forward every summer for the Fourth of July celebration in Stearns, or the K&T Railroad picnic at Bell Farm. Listen to the words of the residents of Blue Heron and try to imagine what you would have done for entertainment in a coal town such as Blue Heron.



The Wright children swimming in the Big South Fork River

## 4. Mine Entrance



This is one of the original slope mine entrances at Mine 18, or Blue Heron. There were many more mine entrances in the area. The entrance, with its reconstructed façade and interpretive exhibits, shows miners at work in the passageways depicting three separate phases of coal mining. Listen to the miners as they describe their life in the mine tunnels, where it was “dark as a dungeon, damp as the dew”, as singer Merle Travis described coal mining.

The coal cars and locomotive near the entrance to the mine are original to the site and once hauled coal and miners here at Blue Heron. The miners called the locomotive the “motor”, and the cars “trams”. This electric tram system extended for miles along the east and west sides of the Big South Fork River, allowing tram delivery of coal from the various mine locations at Blue Heron. This rail system hauled the raw coal from the mines to the coal tipple, where it was separated and processed for market. At the entrance to the mine is an automated coal loader (called a “Joy Loader”) which loaded raw coal into the tram cars. There are interpretive exhibits near the entrance to the mine which describe the mining technology used.



Rail tracks leading into Mine 18

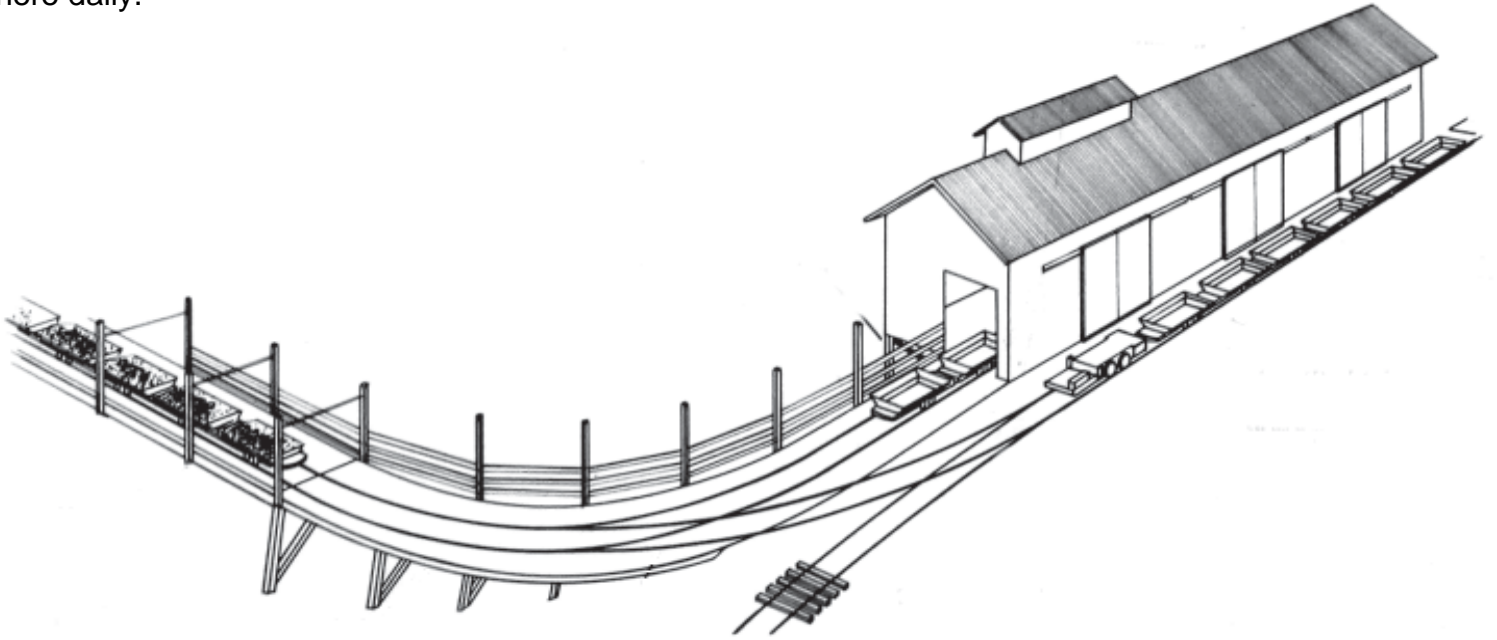


Cutting machine operating in mine

## 5. The Shop



The repair shop was located on the spur off the main tram rail leading from the mines to the coal tipple. Rails allowed tram cars and engines to be driven into this shop for repair work. In a fully mechanized operation such as that at Blue Heron, many items of machinery were repaired here daily.





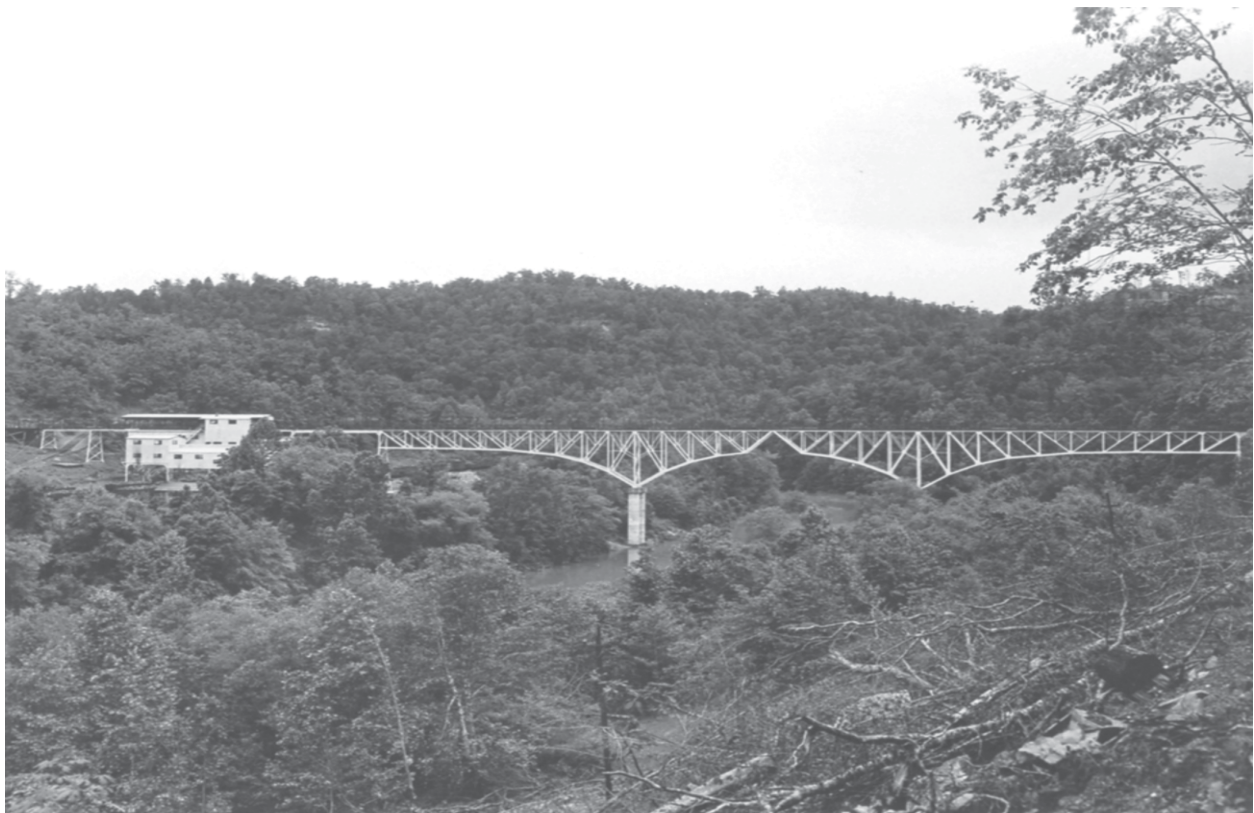
## 6. Tipple and Bridge



This dynamic structure and bridge were the heart of the Blue Heron operation. This \$250,000 structure was considered state-of-the-art when completed in the late 1930s. Here, raw coal from Mine 18, and other Stearns Company mines, was dropped into the 120 ton hopper and sorted and separated into marketable sizes (e.g., nut, block, egg). The separated coal was then loaded by chutes into waiting coal cars, or gons, underneath the tipple. From here, the processed coal was transported by standard gauge railroad along the K&T line to Stearns, where it was transferred to the main Southern Railroad line for delivery to various coal markets such as Cincinnati, Ohio, and Chattanooga, Tennessee.

It is hard to imagine the intense noise and bustle of the coal tipple in those bygone years at Blue Heron. Today the operation is silent, but in the 1940s and 1950s there was an almost constant bedlam of activity as tram cars rolled up with their tons of raw coal. The mechanical clanging of the tipple, the noise of railroad cars, and the ever-present coal dust, produced a dynamic industrial environment.

You are welcome to walk across the tipple bridge. Located within the sheltered portion of the tipple are two maps showing the extent of the mining which occurred in this area. Proceed out over the Big South Fork of the Cumberland River and observe the area from a bird's eye view.



## 7. School House



Welcome to the Blue Heron schoolhouse. This was a one-room school which taught grades 1-8. While the Stearns Company built the school to provide education to students at Blue Heron, youngsters from outside the coal town also were allowed to attend. Later, the school became a part of the McCreary County school system, with the Stearns Company providing part of the funding. The teachers who taught here had to be flexible and resourceful, with wide differences in ages and grades of the attending students.

As you listen to some of the former students and read the interpretive panel try and imagine yourself, or your children, attending a remote one room school such as this in the 1940s and 1950s.



Clifford Wilson by school house



Etta and Nancy Slaven in front of school house

## 8. Church



An integral part of the Blue Heron community was the church. In a remote town such as this, many people benefited from the spiritual and social activities of the church. The people of Blue Heron personally funded the construction of the church from their own pockets, along with donations from organizations. The church was the scene of many important events in people's lives such as baptisms, weddings, and funerals. Here, the local "Blue Heron Quartet" performed gospel music presentations.

On Wednesday nights and Sundays the ringing of the bell of the Blue Heron church (a bell from a Southern Railroad engine) signaled a quiet respite from the din and roar of the industrial activity of the coal town. The church was a place of repose for a hard working people.



Standing on the front steps of the Blue Heron Church

## 9. Company Store



Most coal companies developed a retail store operation where employees and their families could acquire dry goods. This store also served as the community post office.

Here, the miners could “draw scrip”, a form of credit drawn against their pay for their labor and use the paper and metal “money” to purchase goods. Some limited food services were available at the store also.

The store at Blue Heron was part of a system of company stores operated by the Stearns Company. Larger stores were located at the company headquarters in Stearns.

The store was an integral part of life at Blue Heron. In an isolated community such as this, the store provided goods and services to the inhabitants and provided a communication link with the outside world through the post office.



First store manager Bill Pryor and his wife



Front of the Company Store at Mine 18

## 10. Residences



The next three ghost structures served as residences for some of the personnel at the Blue Heron mine. The first structure served as the timekeeper's house. As you listen to the "Impressions and Attitudes", note how some of the commentators liked the mining town, while others did not.

The next residence has the interpretive theme of "Women's Life". The audio-tape here has recollections of the life of some of the women at Blue Heron.

The last residence on the street has the theme of "Nature's Bounty". As you will hear, many of the town's residents cared about both the natural surroundings of the area and the recreational activities such as hunting and fishing that were available.



## 11. Superintendent's House

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This structure served as the residence of the last two mine superintendents. Lemmie Wright and Cack Slaven both resided here during their tenures as superintendent. The superintendent was responsible for the management and administration of the coal company operation. The

superintendent also allocated the scarce housing resources at Blue Heron. Listen to both the miners and Lemmie Wright talk about the demanding duties of life at Blue Heron as the mine superintendent.

