



FAR FROM ANYWHERE

A New Home

To attract workers and their families to their mines, mining companies constructed houses, boarding houses, stores, hospitals, and schools. These settlements were called company towns.

Company Houses

Some companies built rows and rows of houses that all looked the same. Others designed many types of homes to make their towns look interesting. Miners rented houses from the companies at cheap rates. Some were small and shabby with rattling windows. Other houses were roomy and well-built with brick chimneys. The Cleveland-Cliffs Iron Company built houses with electricity and running water in its town of Gwinn around 1907.

Boarding Houses

Unmarried miners without families did not usually rent houses. Mining companies built boardinghouses for them. Some families operated boarding houses. The people who stayed there are called boarders. They paid the house manager or owners and got hot meals and a bed. Sometimes a miner shared his bed with another boarder who worked the opposite shift at the mine. If the boardinghouse offered laundry services, miners could get their clothes cleaned. Most boardinghouses provided a room where boarders played cards or just sat and visited with each other.

Women and children often operated the boardinghouses. The house managers assigned chores to their children and hired other women to help clean, cook and serve food, and wash clothes and bedding. Five-year-old Ruth Reippenen's mother ran a boardinghouse for the Wakefield Iron Company in 1912. Ruth's job was to wake the miners by walking past their rooms ringing a bell two times a day, once for each shift.

Company Town

Women who didn't work in boardinghouses worked in mining towns as servants, dressmakers, milliners, cooks, teachers, and nurses. Other families in a mining town opened bakeries, laundries, butcher shops, general stores, and other businesses.

Before families came, company stores were the only stores available to miners. Companies often paid miners with special money called scrip, that they could spend only at the company store.

By the mid-1800s, towns across the iron ranges had many houses and stores. Almost all mining companies hired doctors to help the employees. Some towns even had hospitals. Company towns survived into the late 1930s. By then, labor unions were convincing miners that they did not need the company to take care of them anymore. By the 1940s, company towns were becoming less common. Today, no company towns exist in Michigan.