



**Michigan
Technological
University**

Michigan Technological University
Digital Commons @ Michigan Tech

Retrospection & Respect: The 1913-1914
Mining/Labor Strike Symposium of 2014

Complete Schedule of Events

Apr 12th, 10:10 AM - 10:30 AM

Company Houses Along the Picket Line

Erik Nordberg

Michigan Technological University, enordberg@mihumanities.org

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.mtu.edu/copperstrikesymposium>

Nordberg, Erik, "Company Houses Along the Picket Line" (2014). *Retrospection & Respect: The 1913-1914 Mining/Labor Strike Symposium of 2014*. 4.
<https://digitalcommons.mtu.edu/copperstrikesymposium/Schedule/Saturday/4>

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.mtu.edu/copperstrikesymposium>

Company Houses Along the Picket Line: A Photographic Essay on the Michigan Copper Strike of 1913

Erik Nordberg*

The provision of company-constructed housing in mining districts has drawn a wide range of inquiry. Mining historians, community planners, architectural historians, and academics interested in the immigrant experience have identified miners' housing as intriguing examples of corporate paternalism, social planning, vernacular adaptation and ethnic segregation.¹ Most agree, however, that although it represents one of the most common forms of corporate welfare, and is often built of necessity by an industry that historically operates along undeveloped frontiers, mining company housing remains one of the most poorly studied features of mining towns.² Michigan's Copper Country retains many examples of such housing and recent research has shown that the Michigan copper mining companies championed the use of housing as a non-wage employment benefit.³ This paper will investigate the role played by company-constructed housing in the Western Federation of Miners' 1913 strike in the Michigan copper district, its impact on the strike's conclusion, and its other effects beyond the Lake Superior region.

Michigan's historic copper district is centered on the Keweenaw Peninsula, a narrow strip of land jutting into Lake Superior. The region's massive deposits of native copper first attracted the attention of commercial mining in the early 1840s. The great distance from eastern markets provided many initial challenges, but the rich veins of pure copper and the

completion of a navigable link to the lower lakes in 1855 encouraged millions of investment dollars to flow into the region. Early fissure deposits gave way to larger disseminated ore bodies and by the 1860s annual production had soared to 12 million pounds of refined copper, making Lake Copper a significant source of the strategic metal during the American Civil War. The district surpassed the 100 million pound annual production rate by the late 1880s, but lower-cost Montana mines usurped Michigan's role as the nation's leading copper producer. Michigan copper companies continued to grow and dividends from the Quincy, Copper Range, and the mighty Calumet and Hecla Mining Company rose as well (C&H declared a single, annual dividend of \$10 million in 1900). Cities like Calumet, Hancock, and Houghton developed characteristic urban qualities and many industrial mine locations along the Lake Superior copper range were accompanied by company housing, boarding houses, and planned community spaces. The last of the native copper mines closed in the late 1960s, with total production well over ten billion pounds of refined copper.⁴

The Michigan copper district was largely untouched by organized labor for more than 75 years.⁵ The region's most significant instance of labor unrest began on July 23, 1913, when Keweenaw copper miners put down their tools and began a strike that was to last until April 1914. The men were organized by the Western Federation of Miners (WFM), whose success in organizing metal miners dated to the creation of its first local in Butte, Montana, in May 1892. Although the WFM had developed an early radical reputation through violent strikes in Colorado and Idaho, it had assumed a more conservative stance by the turn of the century. Under the leadership of Charles Moyer, the union set out to organize

*Erik Nordberg is University Archivist at the Michigan Technological University Archives and Copper Country Historical Collections in Houghton, Michigan. His research interests center on historical copper mining in Michigan's Keweenaw Peninsula and its many links to the development of mining districts elsewhere in the Lake Superior region and the American West.

midwestern mining camps, hoping to increase the union's strength and eliminate sources of nonunion labor tapped by western operators during strikes.⁶ In the balance lay the fate of approximately 15,000 Michigan copper miners, and an additional 20,000 miners in Lake Superior iron mines. The Michigan workers presented five demands to mine operators: an eight-hour day, a minimum wage, removal of the one-man drill, a grievance system, and recognition of the WFM as their bargaining agent.⁷

At the outset of the strike, several state and federal agencies hurried attempts to arbitrate the dispute. Governor Woodbridge Ferris sent National Guard troops into the region within 24 hours of the beginning of the strike. Ferris also opened communications with mine operators, particularly Calumet and Hecla's superintendent and general manager James MacNaughton, to seek any opportunity for resolution. The Michigan mining companies were adamant, however, that they would not recognize the WFM. Ferris sent Wayne County circuit court judge, Alfred J. Murphy, to Calumet in early August. Murphy's report of August 25, 1913, made it clear the dispute was likely to endure for some time to come. Although he believed the strikers had many reasonable grievances, it was clear the mine operators were in no mood to negotiate. The greatest fear of the WFM's Denver executive was the likelihood that the strike would continue through one of Michigan's notoriously heavy winters.⁸

The Western Federation turned to the federal government for assistance. The U. S. Department of Labor had only recently been established. Federal legislation for the department empowered its secretary to mediate strikes and appoint commissioners of conciliation. Secretary of Labor William B. Wilson appointed John Moffitt of the Bureau of Immigration to work on the Michigan copper strike, and Moffitt sent agent Walter B. Palmer to the Keweenaw to investigate conditions.⁹ In search of establishing baseline statistical data, Palmer issued a 110-item questionnaire to the mine operators. Included were questions covering the entire gamut of the companies' operations: everything from underground working conditions and production statistics to wage tiers and grievance procedures. From his findings, Palmer compiled a report, *Michigan Copper District Strike*, that was initially issued on November 24, 1913, and

later reprinted as a report to the U. S. Senate.¹⁰

The report was invaluable in providing context for Michigan working conditions. Michigan wages were indeed lower than those in other districts, but Palmer's report also revealed the extensive corporate welfare available to Lake Superior copper miners. Michigan mining companies were providing their workers with many public services: public baths, libraries, and schools were usually constructed at mine owners' expense, and many were open at no charge to the public. Other public institutions, such as churches, National Guard armories, and YMCA buildings, were built on land donated (or sold under-market) by the mining companies. Medical programs and company hospitals had been a staple of Michigan mining practice for decades, but Palmer's report also documented aid funds and pension programs implemented to assist disabled workers, widows of individuals killed on the job, and miners too old to continue in their jobs. The Keweenaw had few company-controlled stores and several strong independent cooperative stores kept prices relatively low.¹¹

Michigan Copper District Strike also provided detailed documentation of the wide range of company housing available to workers. Palmer's questionnaires even requested mine operators to provide photographs of company-owned dwellings. Palmer counted more than 3,000 company dwellings occupied by mine workers in the Michigan copper district. The houses ranged from older, two-roomed log cabins, to six- and seven-room frame homes arranged in neat rows near each mine location. None of the mines required workers to live in company housing, but most made the provision of housing a popular perquisite of employment. Companies kept monthly rents to a district average of one dollar per room (a practice that continued into the 1960s). Considering the company's average construction cost of \$1,000 per dwelling, it is unlikely that mine owners expected a quick return on investment.¹² Yet, companies clearly gained other benefits through this system of affordable housing. Palmer himself inferred that low rents were designed to retain stable workers and offset low salaries:

The very low rent is an advantage to the employees that are married, and one reason of the companies for making the rents low is to hold

the married men. They consider married men to be more reliable than single men, more apt to work regularly, and not so apt to leave the employment of the company to work for another mining company, or to seek employment outside the district. However, single men claim that married men are to some extent compensated for low wages by the low rent, but that low rents are of no benefit to the single men and really is one cause of keeping wages low.¹³

In addition to low rents, companies provided free garbage collection (some twice a week), cleaned privies, and delivered coal at below local cost. Families were encouraged to rent vacant rooms to boarders (providing stability to the large number of single men in the district) and many companies allowed pasturage of livestock and planting of gardens on company property. Most companies also provided "ground rents" for individuals to construct their own homes on company property or "farm leases" to develop larger seasonal farms. Rents for such property were kept at an average of five dollars per month.

Company houses in the Michigan district varied in size and age, but most agreed that they were, on the whole, of superior quality to other mining districts. Lots were spacious at an average of 50 feet by 100 feet, and some measured as large as 125 feet by 150 feet. The oldest of the dwellings were simple log houses built earlier in the district's development, some as early as the 1850s. Palmer noted, however, that "the rent of these cabins is less even than the rent of the frame houses, and for that reason are in demand by mine workers who wish to economize as closely as possible."¹⁴ Frame dwellings constructed by Michigan companies covered the full gamut of American vernacular architecture. Simple four-room saltbox houses were popular near many mining locations — other companies preferred to reduce costs by constructing double houses. Calumet and Hecla was the leader in corporate residential construction and management. With more than 700 homes along the copper range, C&H had developed an eclectic mix of company housing at its many mining locations, including front-gabled, side-gabled, gambrel, saltbox, and a wide range of double houses and larger homes for mine captains, surface bosses, and white collar

workers. Many of these homes were acquired along with the mineral rights and mining equipment of smaller competitors. By 1913, C&H controlled more than a dozen properties including the Ahmeek, Allouez, Centennial, Isle Royale, La Salle, North and South Kearsarge, Osceola, Superior and Tamarack mines.

Company largesse was not endless, however, and inexpensive company rentals were not without significant liability to striking workers. Palmer reported that the leases most employees signed stipulated that the tenant had "no right to possession beyond 15 days after he has quit the employment of the company or been discharged," and that "for any cause or reason whatsoever the company may, after 15 days notice, put the tenant out of the house." In the case of ground rents, companies restricted leases to five-year renewable terms. If a homeowner should "cease to be an employee of the company by discharge or otherwise," he was given 90 days to physically remove his house from company property. If the house was not removed, "it shall fully vest in and become the property of the company." Although Palmer found such practices "drastic," he was more disconcerted by the 1,100 houses built on land leased through such arrangements at Calumet and Hecla mine locations.¹⁵

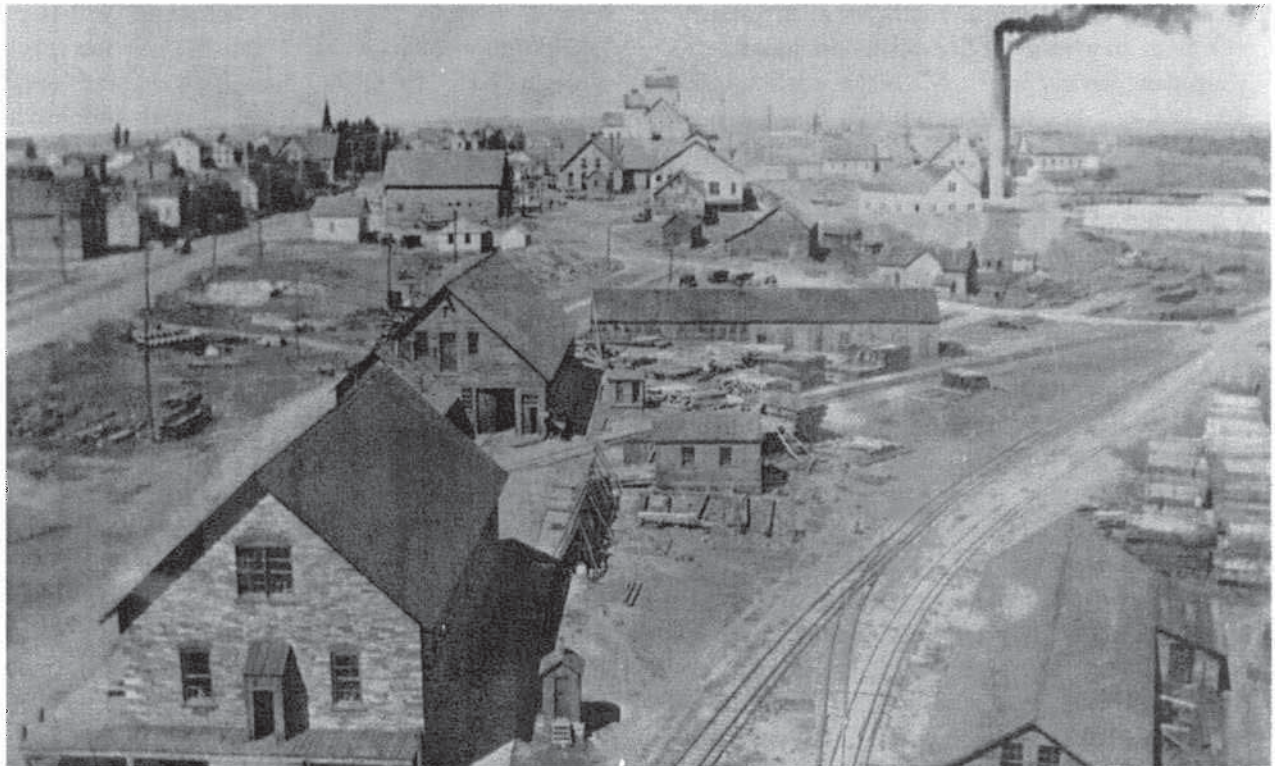
During the early months of the strike, mine operators declared they would not evict striking miners from company dwellings. Early in September, however, several mining companies began to serve eviction notices to non-working tenants of its houses. The evictions were temporarily suspended by the Houghton County Circuit Court, but the ongoing threat of evictions provided constant pressure to workers and union leaders.¹⁶ By February 1914, WFM leaders began to question the union's ability to provide financial support to the Michigan miners in the event of a general eviction notice. The likelihood that as many as 4,000 families could be affected by such evictions was one of many factors WFM executives faced when deciding to discontinue the strike on Easter Sunday, April 12, 1914.¹⁷

The union also failed to appreciate another more significant consequence of the Michigan copper companies' system of corporate welfare. Western Federation locals were initially enthusiastic about supporting their underpaid Michigan brethren. Assessments

for a Michigan Defense Fund began as early as July 1913 and more than \$700,000 was raised by allied labor unions. Palmer's report was circulated widely and both labor and management referred to it regularly in the ensuing months. A group of Michigan mine managers and local businessmen, dubbing themselves the Copper Country Commercial Club, published their own *Strike Investigation*, a rehashed account of the data gathered by Palmer which included many of the company housing photographs.¹⁸ As details of the conditions existing in Michigan began to circulate, many union members began to question their need to send money. By mid-December 1913, members of the Butte local "were fast becoming undeceived concerning the merits of the strike in the Copper Country" and the men were becoming angry with WFM officials for "so long pulling the wool over their eyes in regard to the conditions in Michigan."¹⁹ Wages in Montana were higher, but Butte miners were suffering higher living

costs, including monthly rents as high as \$27. Anaconda was also unwilling to provide land for miners to construct their own homes.²⁰ Resentment with the union had produced significant dissent within Butte Local No. 1; the debate over Michigan assessments further heightened tensions. Within two months of the WFM defeat in Michigan, the Butte local severed its affiliation with the national executive, ending more than 30 years of WFM control in the Butte copper district.

It is difficult precisely to gauge the role company-provided housing took in delayed arrival of labor unionism to the Michigan copper district, what role it took in the failure of the 1913- 1914 strike, and its significance in issues leading to the rebellion in Butte in June 1914. It seems likely, however, that few observers — union or non-union — could easily ignore the images of seemingly comfortable urbanity captured in the photographic images collected during Palmer's 1913 investigation.



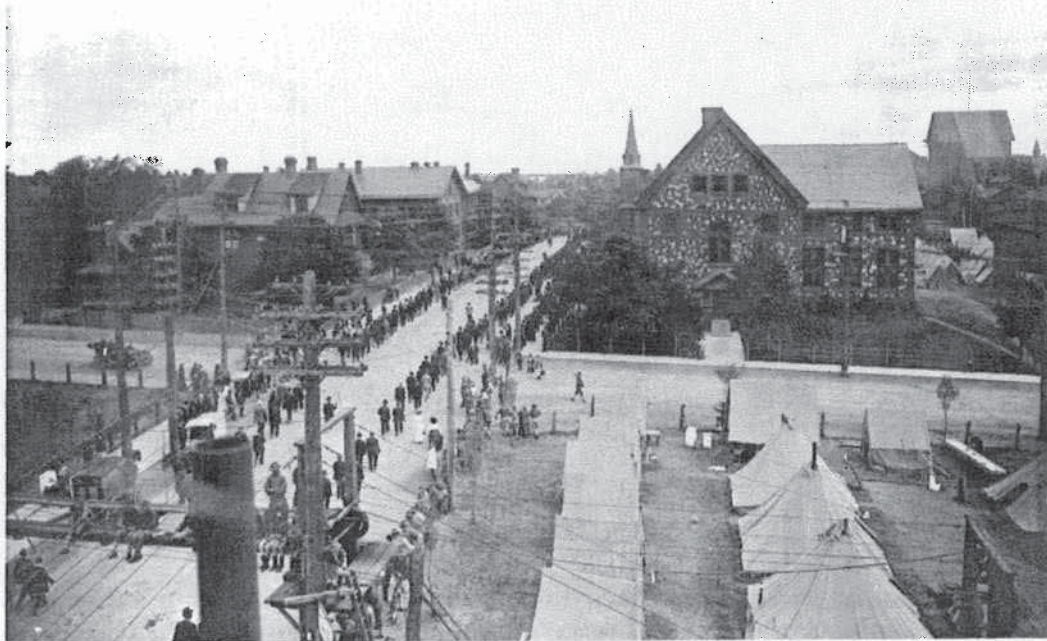
Mine site of the Quincy Mining Company, ca. 1910. Quincy declared individual dividends in all but two years between 1862 and 1920, garnering it the nickname, "Old Reliable." Over the course of century -long operation, Quincy produced more than 1.5 billion pounds of refined copper and declared \$30 million in shareholder dividends. Photograph courtesy of the Michigan Technological University Archives and Copper Country Historical Collections, neg. 03347, donor Nik Eilertsen.



Urbanized area near Calumet, Michigan. By 1913, the Calumet & Hecla Mining Company was the region's leading producer of copper, producing more than 75 million pounds of refined copper annually. Depletion of the Calumet Conglomerate lode, the company's original rich ore body, forced the company to buy up smaller competitors in the region. At the time of the strike, Calumet & Hecla operated more than a dozen properties along the Keweenaw Peninsula and employed 4,200 men. C&H was also the region's largest landlord with more than 700 company-owned houses scattered around the district. *Photograph courtesy of the Michigan Technological University Archives and Copper Country Historical Collections, neg. 03626, donor Barbara Williams.*



Strikers assembled outside the offices of Local 203 of the Western Federation of Miners in Calumet, Michigan. The 1913 -1914 strike centered on wages and working conditions, particularly the introduction of the one-man drill. *Photograph courtesy of the Michigan Technological University Archives and Copper Country Historical Collections, neg. 00835b.*



Strikers' parade along Red Jacket Road, Calumet. Calumet & Hecla Mining Company headquarters and company president's residence to the left, Calumet Public Library (funded through C&H) in the center. Note National Guard tents in foreground and troops stationed on hoisting pulley stand lower left. *Photograph courtesy of the Michigan Technological University Archives and Copper Country Historical Collections, neg. 02255.*



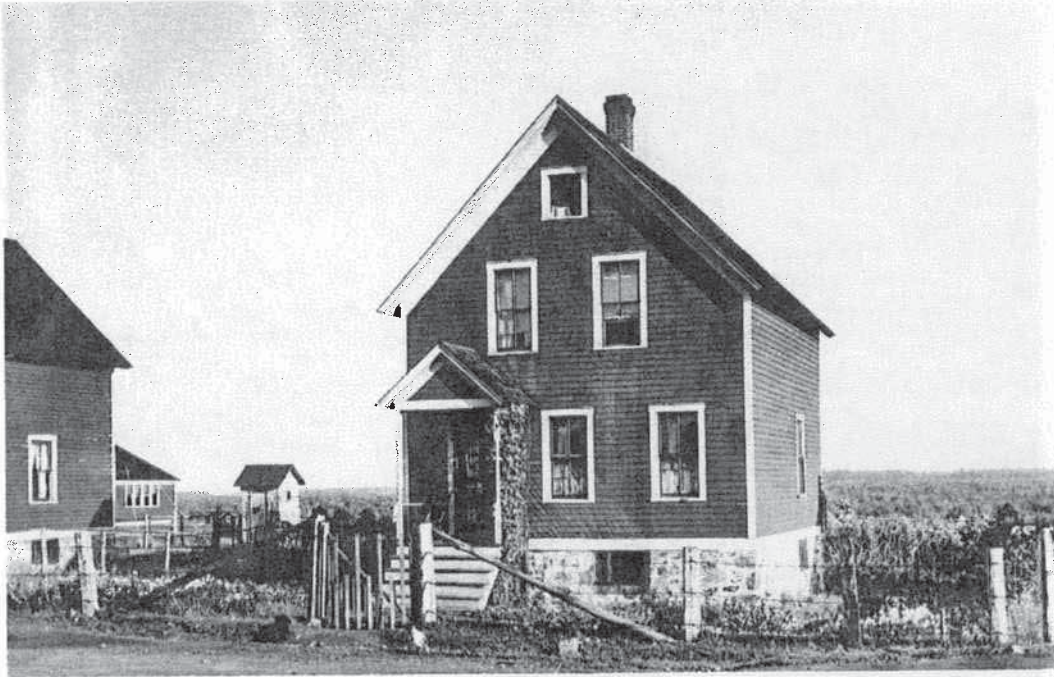
Strikers' make their way past an armed guardsman on their way to the headquarters of the Calumet & Hecla Mining Company. Women and children were actively involved in marches and protests. Placard bears warning from Michigan copper strikers to Governor Woodbridge Ferris, "Ferris will hear from 18,000 on election day." *Photograph courtesy of the Michigan Technological University Archives and Copper Country Historical Collections, neg. 02254.*



Michigan National Guard troops encamped near the Calumet & Hecla mines. The Calumet & Hecla Mining Company designed and constructed the National Guard Armory, shown at the left, within blocks of its administrative headquarters and the heart of its central industrial corridor. *Photograph courtesy of the Michigan Technological University Archives and Copper Country Historical Collections, neg. 005450 donor Fred Zint.*



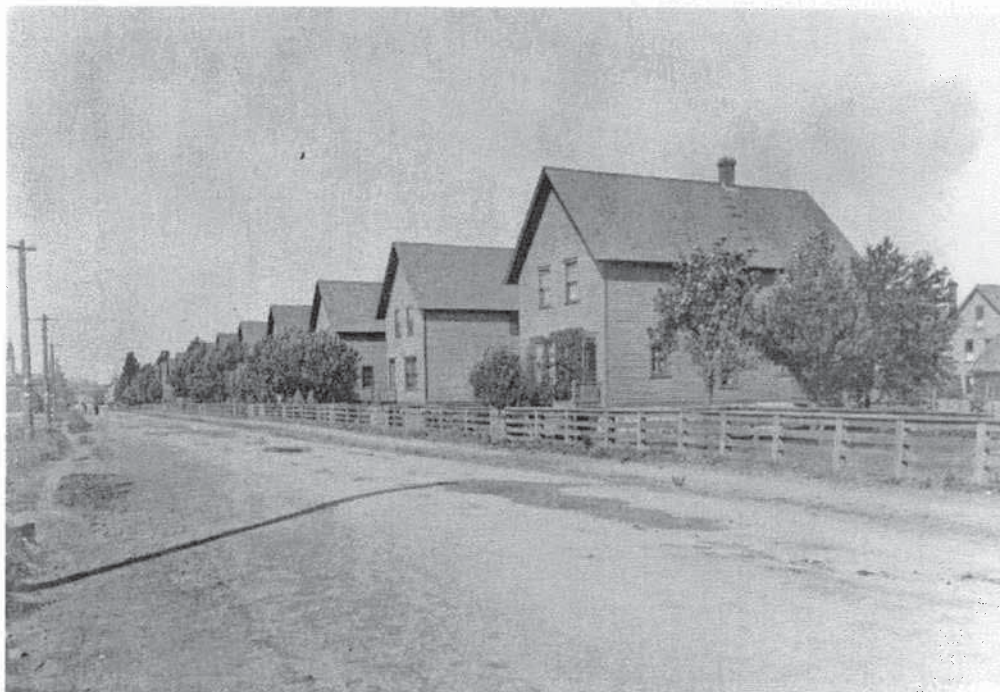
Simple log dwellings in use at the Ahmeek mine during the 1913 strike. Log homes of this style measured roughly 28 feet by 14 feet, with two rooms on the lower level and two small bedrooms beneath the rafters. Extra space was created with the addition of an attached shed, turning the houses into salt box structures. Some of these were built as early as the 1860s, and although few log dwellings had electricity or indoor plumbing, they were preferred by many workers for their lower monthly rental charge. Photograph taken by the Ahmeek Mining Company in response to the Palmer questionnaire. *Photograph courtesy of the Michigan Technological University Archives and Copper Country Historical Collections, neg. 05674.*



Typical seven-room dwelling constructed by the Calumet & Hecla Mining Company near the turn of the century. Buildings of this style included a basement, living room, kitchen, dining room, and four second-floor bedrooms. This photograph was taken at C&H's Superior Mine for inclusion in their report to Palmer. It is labeled as being the home of a blacksmith helper. *Photograph courtesy of the Michigan Technological University Archives and Copper Country Historical Collections, neg. 05762.*



Middle Street, Ahmeek location in August 1913. Rental of these seven-room dwellings included a fenced yard, detached privy, and a small barn. Photograph taken by the Ahmeek Mining Company in response to the Palmer questionnaire. *Photograph courtesy of the Michigan Technological University Archives and Copper Country Historical Collections, neg. 05673.*



Photograph submitted to Palmer of houses owned by the Calumet & Hecla Mining Company. Renters of C&H company homes enjoyed many special services, including free garbage removal, cleaning of privies, and pasturage for a cow, as well as subsidized coal and electricity, and use of the company bathhouse and library. *Photograph courtesy of the Michigan Technological University Archives and Copper Country Historical Collections, neg. 05676.*



Examples of older homes at the Tamarack location. As corporate consolidations occurred in the early decades of the twentieth century, companies such as Calumet & Hecla found themselves saddled with maintenance of houses constructed by other companies much earlier in the district's history. Annual budgets for maintenance often matched revenue from rents, reflecting most companies' realization that housing was not a direct profit-generating endeavor. Photograph taken by the Tamarack Mining Company in response to the Palmer questionnaire. *Photograph courtesy of the Michigan Technological University Archives and Copper Country Historical Collections, neg. 05675.*



Company houses at the Mesnard location of the Quincy Mining Company. Quincy built houses to several simple plans, such as these seven-room, T-shaped houses, but also turned to standardized designs from Sears, Roebuck and Company. Similar houses were constructed at Quincy's milling facility and this plan was also used by the Rhode Island Mining Company, which shared many of Quincy's major shareholders. Photograph taken by the Quincy Mining Company at Palmer's request. Photograph courtesy of the Michigan Technological University Archives and Copper Country Historical Collections, neg. 05528.



Row of company houses at the Osceola property. Photograph taken for Palmer questionnaire. Photograph courtesy of the Michigan Technological University Archives and Copper Country Historical Collections, neg. 05677.



Salt box design in use at the Ahmeek mine. Some of these log-frame homes may have been moved to Ahmeek from another mining location. Several dozen of these homes are still inhabited at the location today. Photograph taken by the Ahmeek Mining Company in response to the Palmer questionnaire. *Photograph courtesy of the Michigan Technological University Archives and Copper Country Historical Collections, neg. 05671.*



Calumet and Hecla attempted to provide some variety in the house designs they utilized. These houses, using a gambrel roof design to maximize useable second floor space, were constructed adjacent to standard-gabled houses. Significant advantages in construction cost could be realized, however, by building multiple copies of a single design simultaneously along a single block. These construction patterns created a stylistic checkerboard of house types in the residential blocks surrounding the region's major mines. *Photograph courtesy of the Michigan Technological University Archives and Copper Country Historical Collections, neg. 05678.*



The number two shaft location of the Isle Royale Mining Company, near Houghton. Photograph submitted to Palmer by the company in August of 1913. *Photograph courtesy of the Michigan Technological University Archives and Copper Country Historical Collections, neg. 05669.*



Children posing beside company houses at the Osceola Mine. Photograph taken by the Osceola Consolidated Mining Company at Palmer's request. *Photograph courtesy of the Michigan Technological University Archives and Copper Country Historical Collections, neg. 05670.*

NOTES

Acknowledgements

This piece originated as a shorter, simpler text designed to merely explain and accompany the publication of company housing photographs which were recently uncovered in the collections of the Michigan Tech Archives. With the assistance of Chris Huggard, the text was enlarged to provide broader coverage of the 1913 WFM strike in Michigan and the role which housing played in its outcome. Additional content and editorial review was provided by Kim Hoagland and Jane Nordberg.

1. See Richard Francaviglia, *Hard Places: Reading the Landscape of America's Historic Mining Districts* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1991) for a good overview of housing in American mining districts. Other investigations of company model towns and housing include John S. Gardner, ed. *The Company Town: Architecture and Society in the Early Industrial Age* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992); Matt Bray and Ashley Tomson, eds. *At The End of the Shift: Mines and Single-Industry Towns in Northern Ontario* (Toronto: Dundurn Press Limited, 1992); Eileen Goltz, "The Economics of Housing in a Company Town," in *Municipal Development in Northeastern Ontario: Copper Cliff and Sudbury*, edited by Mary Ann Beavis (Occasional Paper 26, Institute of Urban Studies, University of Winnipeg, 1991).
2. Francaviglia, *Hard Places*: 43.
3. See Sarah McNear, "Quincy Mining Company: Housing and Community Services, ca. 1860-1931," Historic American Engineering Record report, Library of Congress, 1978; Arnold Alanen, "The Planning of Company Communities in the Lake Superior Mining Region" (*APA Journal*, July 1979); Lillian Trettin, "Give Them Comfortable Quarters: Tied Housing and Homeownership in the Lake Superior Copper District," in *Michigan: Explorations in its Social History* ed. Francis Blouin (Ann Arbor: Historical Society of Michigan, 1987); Larry Lankton, "Homes on the Range," in *Cradle to Grave: Life, Work and Death at the Lake Superior Copper Mines* (New York, Oxford University Press, 1991); Arnold Alanen, et al, *Remnants of Corporate Paternalism: Company Housing and Landscapes at Calumet, Michigan* (Calumet, Michigan: Keweenaw National Historical Park, 1997); Nancy Fisher, *Quincy Mining Company Housing, 1840s-1920s* (unpublished master's thesis, Michigan Technological University, 1997).
4. For general history, development of mining, and economic history of the Keweenaw copper district, see Lankton, *Cradle to Grave* (1991); William Gates, Michigan Copper and Boston Dollars: An Economic History of the Michigan Copper Mining Industry (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1951); and B.S. Butler and W.S. Burbank, *Copper Deposits of Michigan* (United States Geological Survey Professional Paper 144, 1929).
5. Lankton, *Cradle to Grave*: 199.
6. Arthur Thurner, *Rebels on the Range: The Michigan Copper Miners' Strike of 1913-1914* (Lake Linden, Michigan: John H. Forster Press, 1984): 28.
7. Arthur Thurner, "The Western Federation of Miners in Two Copper Camps: The Impact of the Michigan Copper Miners' Strike on Butte's Local No. 1," *Montana: The Magazine of Western History* (Spring 1983): 30-45.
8. Thurner, *Rebels on the Range*: 41.
9. Thurner, *Rebels on the Range*: 60.
10. Walter Palmer, *Michigan Copper District Strike* (United States Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics, 1913). Palmer's original letter of transmittal is dated November 24, 1913, but the full report was issued as Senate Document 381 in January 1914. Subsequently issued February 7, 1914 as DOL Bulletin 139, Conciliation and Arbitration Series 3. All subsequent statistical figures are taken from this report unless otherwise noted.
11. Palmer, Michigan Copper District Strike: 124-128. Situation with stores is from Palmer, *Michigan Copper District Strike*: 123; Lankton, *Cradle to Grave*: 165-166.
12. Most mining companies took a more direct cost recovery approach to constructing housing. Eileen Goltz, writing about the nickel mining district of Sudbury, Ontario, suggests that companies there expected to realize a profit on company housing, with a return on capital investment of 11 percent. Lankton notes that Michigan copper mining companies reported only a 5 to 6 percent return on investment and that this did not include tax or maintenance costs. Figures suggest that Calumet and Hecla generally set its annual maintenance budget to equal the amount it received as rent. See Goltz, "Economics of Housing in a Company Town": 7; Lankton, *Cradle to Grave*: 158.
13. Palmer, *Michigan Copper District Strike*: 114.
14. Palmer, *Michigan Copper District Strike*: 116.
15. Palmer, *Michigan Copper District Strike*: 118-119.
16. Thurner, *Rebels on the Range*: 220, 228-229.
17. Thurner, *Rebels on the Range*: 229.
18. Copper Country Commercial Club, *Strike Investigation* (Chicago: M.A. Donohue & Co., 1913).
19. *Calumet News* as quoted in Thurner, "The WFM in Two Copper Camps": 42.
20. Thurner, "The WFM in Two Copper Camps": 43.