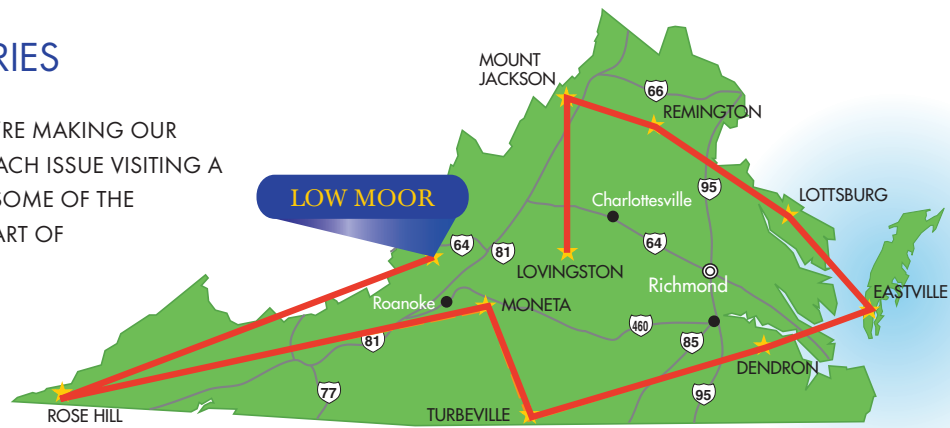


## DOWN HOME SERIES

AGAIN IN THE YEAR 2009, WE'RE MAKING OUR WAY AROUND THE REGION, EACH ISSUE VISITING A SMALL TOWN AND MEETING SOME OF THE FOLKS WHO MAKE UP THE HEART OF ELECTRIC CO-OP COUNTRY. ON THIS TENTH AND FINAL STOP, WE'LL BE ...



## DOWN HOME IN

# Low Moor

Story and photos by Deborah R. Huso, Contributing Writer

Once a thriving company town, Low Moor is easy to miss these days.

Located between the larger communities of Clifton Forge and Covington along I-64 in Allegheny County, Low Moor today seems a sleepy community on the surface, with quiet residential streets where the employee houses of the former Low Moor Iron Company still stand in neat rows.

But even as the town holds onto its quiet rural roots, it is also a community on the move. "I am often amazed at the number of talented people who live here," says **Louise Belmont**, the owner of The Company Store

and Iron Company Restaurant on Church Street. She says living in Low Moor is, in some ways, like stepping back into the 1950s.

But it's a progressive 1950s. Today Low Moor is home to the newly constructed Allegheny Highlands YMCA, which has 3,500 members and an Olympic-sized indoor swimming pool; the headquarters of Bacova Guild; Allegheny Regional Hospital; and the Allegheny County Governmental Complex. Those who thought Low Moor would likely die with closure of the Iron Company in

1926 could not have foreseen the lucky chances this community would have in the coming century.

**Shelly Dudley**, Allegheny County planner and zoning administrator and local Low Moor historian, says Low Moor might have died on the vine with the end of the iron industry in western Virginia, but the location of old Route 60, once the major thoroughfare through the area, saved the town in many ways.

"Then, with so many things coming to the area, like the hospital and Bacova Guild, people started moving into the community," she adds. In some ways, Low Moor is experiencing a new boom.

### IRON HISTORY

Low Moor owes its existence to a 19th-century boom — the growth of the iron industry in western Virginia. Low Moor is, in every respect, a company town. It was formed in 1872 with establishment of the Low Moor Iron Company, which produced pig iron using its own locally mined coal, limestone, and iron ore in the production process. At its height, the Low Moor Iron Company employed 1,600 people.

Those workers lived in company housing, shopped at the company store using scrip that was issued as part of their wages, worshipped at a company-built church, and attended the company Amuzu Theater.



On the peaceful streets of this quiet mountain community, the employee houses of the former Low Moor Iron Company still stand in neat rows.



## AT A GLANCE ...

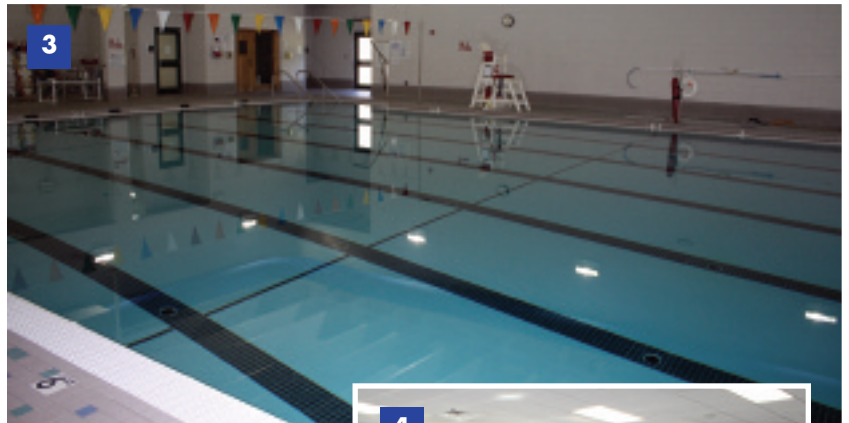
POPULATION: 367

LAND AREA: .8 square miles

FOUNDED: 1872

ELEVATION: 1,122 ft.

**FACTOID:** Low Moor was reportedly the first producer of pig iron in Virginia, and the Low Moor Iron Company, which ceased operations in 1926, had the last operating iron furnaces in Allegheny County and among the last in the southern United States.



**1 & 2.** The Company Store and Iron Company Restaurant is one of a surprising number of dining options in Low Moor.



**3 & 4.** Low Moor is home to the new Allegheny Highlands YMCA, which has 3,500 members.  
**5.** Oakland Grove Presbyterian Church was built circa 1845 using locally produced bricks from the nearby Haynes Plantation. The bricks were carried to the site in saddlebags.

Low Moor became one of the biggest producers of pig iron in Virginia, sending its iron to steel plants in Ohio, Indiana, Michigan, and Illinois. The company's success, however, depended to a large degree on the cooperation of the C & O Railroad. The relationship between the C & O and the Low Moor Iron Company was a rocky one, with the railroad often failing to provide the reliable service the

company required. Transportation troubles combined with new competition from iron mines near the Great Lakes ultimately led to the company's liquidation in 1926.

Low Moor survived the end of the iron industry in Allegheny County, however, and the community as a whole has developed a renewed interest in history. **David Kleppinger**, executive director of the

Allegheny Highlands Economic Development Corporation, hopes to see Allegheny County save some of the last remaining iron furnaces and incorporate them into a community park adjacent to the Allegheny Regional Hospital.

"We'd like to use the park as a point for celebrating the area's rich industrial history and to show the area wants and supports industry," he says. The furnaces are the only



## IF YOU GO...

The **Alleghany Highlands Chamber of Commerce** on Main Street in Covington is a good place to get an introduction to Alleghany County, including attractions and points of interest in the Low Moor area. Open Monday through Friday, 9 a.m. to 5 p.m., the Chamber of Commerce has brochures and maps on the surrounding area.

Alleghany County is rich with railroad history, and there are a number of railroad-related

attractions only a few miles from Low Moor.

Among them is the **Covington C & O Depot** on Maple Avenue in Covington, which houses the offices of the Alleghany County Historical Society and has exhibits and information on local history, including the mining history of Low Moor. Just east of Low Moor in Clifton Forge is the **C & O Railway Heritage Center**, which features an 1895 freight depot, restored cabooses and a dining car, and large-scale locomotive models.

Despite its small size, Low Moor has a surprising array of dining options, including **The Company Store & Iron Company Restaurant**, which is located on Church Street, as well as **The Cat and Owl Steak and Seafood House** at Exit 21 off I-64 in Low Moor. 24-hour dining is available at the newly opened **Penny's Diner** right next door to the **Oak Tree Inn**, which offers overnight accommodations for the engineers and conductors of CSX Railroad.

Low Moor is located in the center of a beautiful mountainous region that is home to a variety of recreational opportunities, including fishing, boating, and camping at **Lake Moomaw** in the **George Washington National Forest** as

well as at **Douthat State Park**. With the Jackson River flowing through Alleghany County, there are many opportunities for kayaking, canoeing, and fishing, and if you don't have your own gear, local outfitters like **Riders Up!** in Clifton Forge provide boat rentals and guided river trips.

Just a few miles northwest of Low Moor on Route 220 is a famous local landmark – the lovely cascade of **Falling Spring Falls**, a 200-foot waterfall, and just

west of town is the only single-span covered bridge in the United States that is four feet higher at its center than at either end with no middle support. Known as **Humpback Bridge**, it was built in 1857 over Dunlap Creek with a design meant to protect it from destruction by flood. Today the bridge is listed on the National Register of Historic Places and is also a Virginia Historic Landmark.

### FOR MORE INFORMATION:

#### Alleghany Highlands Chamber of Commerce

241 W. Main St.  
Covington, VA 24426  
1-888-430-5786  
[www.ahchamber.com](http://www.ahchamber.com)

#### C & O Railway Heritage Center

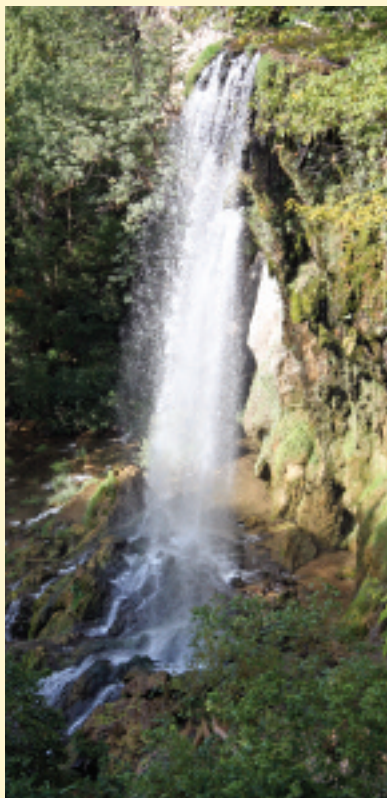
705 E. Main St.  
Clifton Forge, VA 24422  
540-862-2210  
[www.candoheritage.org](http://www.candoheritage.org)

#### Douthat State Park

14239 Douthat State Park Road  
Millboro, VA 24460  
540-862-8100  
[www.dcr.virginia.gov/state\\_parks/dou.shtml](http://www.dcr.virginia.gov/state_parks/dou.shtml)

#### George Washington National Forest

Rt. 2, Box 30  
Hot Springs, VA 24445  
540-839-2521  
[www.fs.fed.us/r8/gwj/warmsprings](http://www.fs.fed.us/r8/gwj/warmsprings)



Falling Springs Falls, a well-known local landmark, is located just a few miles northwest of Low Moor.

physical remnant of the iron company's history. Today, I-64 covers the ground the old coke ovens once occupied.

Dudley, who is herself a resident of Low Moor, is one of the chief preservers of its history. She has accumulated pages and pages of local history in a collection of three-ring binders, noting that her interest in the subject began when she was a small child and her mother told her the old cement pillars in their backyard were remnants of the railroad that once came through town.

"The railroad is the only thing that has remained constant here," Dudley says. "Everything else is changing."

### PROGRESS AND PRESERVATION

Change can be a good thing, however. When the county decided to locate a landfill across the road from the historic Oakland Grove Presbyterian Church situated on Old Route 60 between Selma and Low Moor, it spawned efforts to preserve the c.1845 structure. The church was built using locally produced bricks from the nearby Haynes plantation. The bricks were all carried to the site in saddlebags. Originally called "The Church by the Springs," it was a non-denominational gathering place for the faithful in the mid-1900s. The historic cemetery contains the graves of 12 Confederate soldiers as well as slave graves. The oldest grave dates to 1819.

"A lot of people got interested in preserving the church because they were surprised the county located a landfill so close to it," says **Margaret Carter**, a former member of the Oakland Grove Church. She remembers attending services here as a child when she was the youngest of 12 children and her mother taught Sunday school. The church has not held regular services since the 1960s, but an annual homecoming service is held here each September.

"There are only a handful of Oakland members still living," says **Frank Webb**, an elder at the Low Moor Presbyterian Church (which is responsible for Oakland's maintenance). "The homecoming is really a service for the whole community."

Kentucky native **Louise Belmont**, who moved to Low Moor in 2004, is glad for the local interest in historic preservation and has made her own efforts to keep the town's heritage alive with her restoration of The Company Store, which she has turned into a full-service restaurant. Also known now as the Iron Company Restaurant, The Company Store was once the commissary for the Low Moor Iron Company and con-

tinued to serve as a general store even once the iron company was gone. "I thought it was a beautiful building that needed to be fixed, and it's a local landmark," says Belmont.

Belmont still keeps in touch with the Averill family that operated the store for many decades following the iron company's departure. Among them is 102-year-old **Alpha Averill**, known to locals as "Granny" Averill. She worked in the store for more than 40 years up until she was 100 years old. She waited on customers, figured their bills for many years without the aid of a calculator or cash register, and even played the piano for anyone who cared to listen. "I never took music lessons," the sprightly Averill says. "I learned to play on my aunt's organ." She attributes her longevity to a lifetime of hard work. "This place is all I've known my whole life," she says of Low Moor.

### A TOWN OF MANY FACES

Low Moor's dedication to past and future is evident everywhere and is foremost in the minds of many of its residents, including **Steve Bennett**, owner of Bennett Logging and Lumber and Union Church Millworks in Low Moor. Bennett, who grew up on Alleghany County's last remaining working dairy farm, has been in business in the county for more than 20 years and also serves as chairman of the Alleghany County Board of Supervisors. Bennett says he never really considered leaving the Low Moor area. "This is my home," he says. "I love the personality of the mountain land."

As a businessman, he also appreciates the strong work ethic of area residents. "They're not afraid to get their hands dirty," he says, approvingly. In addition to his logging operations and sawmill, Bennett also runs a successful millworks company that specializes in high-end custom flooring. "We specialize in things you can't get anywhere else," he points out. "We'll make black walnut plank flooring 12 inches wide if you want."

The strong work ethic of the local people is one among many reasons why Bacova Guild moved here in 1996. **David Woods**, general manager at Bacova Guild, says it was the first company to locate in Low Moor's Commerce Center. Today the guild employs 190 people.

For such a small community, employment opportunities are many. Even The Company Store employs some 18 people. Louise Belmont is grateful for the help and for the more than 100 customers who come through the store every day. She says she wouldn't live anywhere else. "I like the people," she says, "and I like that it's a place where you feel like you can make a difference." ■



**1.** Alpha "Granny" Averill (L), whose family operated The Company Store in Low Moor for decades, with its current owner, Louise Belmont. **2.** Steve Bennett of Bennett Logging and Lumber and Union Church Millworks loves the "personality of the mountain land" and has never really considered leaving. **3.** Margaret Carter, a former member of Low Moor's historic Oakland Grove Presbyterian Church, and Frank Webb, an elder at Low Moor Presbyterian Church, which is responsible for Oakland's maintenance. **4.** A local history buff, Alleghany County Planner and Zoning Administrator Shelly Dudley has had an interest in the community's heritage since she was a small child.