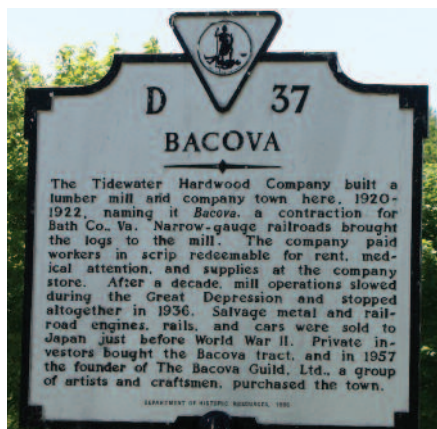




Bacova Church



'I feel at peace here. I don't like to see any development in a place like this. You can't market peace. It comes from the people.'

— Shirley Matheny

Evolving Bacova

Once a thriving company town, then the center of a booming decorative-arts guild, Bacova may be a bit quieter these days ... but that's the draw.

Walking around the tiny village of Bacova, nestled in the Allegheny Mountains of Bath County, around midday is a bit like traipsing through a lived-in ghost town — most of its residents are either working elsewhere or maintain well-tended second homes here.

Once a company town, Bacova still has no streetlights and no stop signs. Cottage-style houses align one right after the other around the curved roads.

Fleecy white clouds etched against a deep blue sky form a picture-postcard backdrop for the Bacova Post Office.

Visitors are greeted by a petite blonde woman with a wide grin. "Hi there, what can I do for you?"

Shirley Matheny has lived in this area most of her life, though not in Bacova proper. For a couple of years, she drove an 18-wheeler hauling lumber up and down the East Coast. "I've seen a lot of places, believe me, and I wouldn't live anywhere else," she says.

She looks out over the mountains, opens her arms, and says, "I feel at peace here. I don't like to see any development in a place like this. You can't market peace. It comes from the people."

THE LITTLE TOWN A COMPANY BUILT

Matheny points out the town's historic marker, beaming with pride. "Have you seen the sign?" she asks. "It explains all about the history here. I grew up around here and never knew any of that history until I took this job about a year ago. It's kind of sad that folks sometimes don't know their own history. I think it's important that we don't lose it."

The home of the country's largest lumber company in the 1920s, Bacova is full of history. Tidewater Lumber made it a thriving company town for nearly two decades.

"At first, Tidewater Lumber built 12 houses for people to come, work and live. My family was a part of the original



The Tiny Village of Bacova



(Clockwise, from upper left) A row of houses along a Bacova road. Another view of a Bacova house. David Powell working in the yard of his historic home. The Powells' home, which used to be the commissary for Tidewater Lumber, then the plant for the Bacova Guild.

group,” says Mary Lynn Riner, a local resident and character actress who’s appeared in movies like *Nell* with Jodie Foster.

Her family, which settled in Bacova in the 1920s, is so much a part of the quaint town that a lane is named after it, and Riner can’t imagine living anywhere else.

“This is where my people are,” she says. “Bacova was a real company town. You didn’t get paid in money necessarily. You didn’t need it because the company owned your house, and you just went to the commissary to get what you needed.

“It was a prosperous little town,” Riner continues, “until right after World War II when things were very difficult. Many families just couldn’t make it. We did okay. But after the mill folded, the town was pretty much left to deteriorate.”

Riner’s father had gone to college after serving in World War II and landed a job at the neighboring Homestead Resort as an engineer, eventually starting a local service station from which the family made a good living. But many families did not fare so well.

People left Bacova to find work. The community fell into disrepair.

More than a decade later, a northern industrialist came to the rescue. As Riner describes it, “Malcolm Hirsh came in, bought the town and refurbished it.”

‘This is where
my people are,’
says Riner.



Mary Lynn Riner has lived in the area her whole life.

BACOVA AND THE GUILD

In 1957, New Jersey native Malcolm Hirsh bought — yes, bought — Bacova to keep it from bankruptcy. He was president of a land-development company in New Jersey as well as the director of his father’s company, Lock Joint Pipe Company.

Hirsh was familiar with the area, having spent a lot of time as a boy on his father’s Bath County horse farm nearby. For a few years in Bacova, he focused on improvements like fixing the roofs of the houses, painting them and replacing broken windows, hoping to attract industry. When those plans didn’t work, he decided to start his own company — what later became known as the Bacova Guild.

In 1965, Hirsh, along with newly transplanted North Carolina artist Grace Gilmore, formed the Bacova Guild. Hirsh’s industrial experience and Gilmore’s artistic talent meshed into colorful fiberglass products that became the hallmark of the Bacova Guild and have since garnered quite a following, though the guild moved to Low Moor in 1996.

Gilmore had been experimenting with silk screening and fiberglass with her wildlife drawings. She and Hirsh came up with what the product line would be — always using her designs — and she trained the first 12 employees to help produce merchandise such as wastebaskets, trays, mailboxes and similar items. The company was incorporated in 1972, with Hirsh as its president. By 1974, the Bacova Guild had 28 employees, 24 of whom were working on production. By 1996, it had 600 employees.

“The Bacova Guild prospered,” Riner tells me. Her home is evidence of this. In the next room, an afghan is folded over the couch, and a Bacova card table sits piled with crafty items, like yarn, lace, boxes of craft paints and fabric. She adds, “The old commissary was turned into a production facility where they made the mailboxes and so on. Of course, now, the plant is in Low Moor.”

David Powell is another Bacova historian of sorts. He’s digging a ditch to plant some shrubs in the backyard of the biggest house in the neighborhood; a house, as it turns out, that has lived several lives. Once the company-town commissary, where Tidewater Lumber workers purchased goods, it later morphed into a manufacturing plant for the original Bacova Guild products, including folk-style painted mailboxes, card tables and ice buckets.

Powell, who owns this large house with his wife, Jeanette, definitely agrees on the importance of keeping Bacova’s history alive, given he’s living in one of the most historic buildings in the neighborhood.

“I do have a sense of being a part of history living in this house,” he says, gesturing to the residence he and his wife are renovating. “But it’s a huge project. At first we were going to make it into apartments, but it just got too complicated. It’s complicated enough as a home.”

Powell, now retired, lived in Bacova in a different house when the Bacova Guild was formed in 1965, and he’s known several of the artists who worked for the company over the years.



“Many of them have gone on to have extremely successful careers. One is a sculptor and has galleries all over the world,” he says.

“People collect Bacova products now,” Powell says, as we walk through one of the homes being renovated in the community. He points to a Bacova ice bucket sporting a red fox, which sits on a table in one of the original 42 Bacova “company” houses. The house is being remodeled with a nod toward its history — original doors, floors and some fixtures remain.

Bacova residents run the gamut of retirees, vacation homeowners, young families and single parents. “We’ve got quite a community here. We’d like to attract even more folks who love this place as much as we do,” says Powell.

Driving around the neighborhood in his golf cart, he says each of the original

company cottages has a name. “Some people who live here don’t realize it,” he remarks. “It’s just something we’ve almost lost somehow in time. They don’t know their houses actually have a name, but we’re starting to fix that by educating them. We’ve done a lot of research.”

Powell gestures toward a mailbox. “Some of the residents know the names and actually have Bacova mailboxes, even though mail doesn’t get delivered here,” he explains. “We all have post office boxes. But the mailboxes are nice and add a special, authentic touch, don’t they?”

With the success of the Bacova Guild came growth. The company outgrew the little town.

Two private investors, Pat Haynes and Ben Johns, purchased Bacova Guild in 1981, and it has grown from a small cottage-like industry to a booming gift company. Few of the town residents actually work for the company, which was later purchased by Burlington Industries in 1995.

But the town itself still stands, as if forgotten by time. ■

IF YOU GO ...

A new walking-driving tour of Bacova is now available. For information, contact discoverbath.com. Otherwise, you can find information flyers at local tourism outlets, the Gazebo, all the service stations, and the Chamber of Commerce. While you’re visiting, take a dip in the Jefferson Pools in nearby Warm Springs. The pools are located in two historic natural-spring bathhouses — one for women and one for men. The Gentlemen’s Pool House is the oldest spa structure in the United States.

The Bacova Guild no longer makes the fiberglass mailboxes, card tables, trays and plant pots, but another local company is keeping the tradition alive. Bluegrass Woods is located in the neighboring village of Millboro. They make mailboxes, ice buckets and an assortment of fiberglass products formerly made at the Bacova Guild. For more information, call 800-474-2414 or visit online at www.bluegrasswoods.com.



Original Bacova Mailbox

Hidden Valley Recreation Area nearby, a part of the George Washington and Jefferson National Forests, offers vast fields of wildflowers that attract countless butterflies, birds and other wildlife. Drawing visitors for hundreds of years, the valley is a historic Civil War site with a mansion on-site where part of the film *Somersby* was shot in 1993. Stocked with trout, the Jackson River flows through the valley, and it’s a popular fishing, hiking and biking spot. For more information, call (540) 839-2521 or visit online at www.fs.usda.gov/gwj. ■