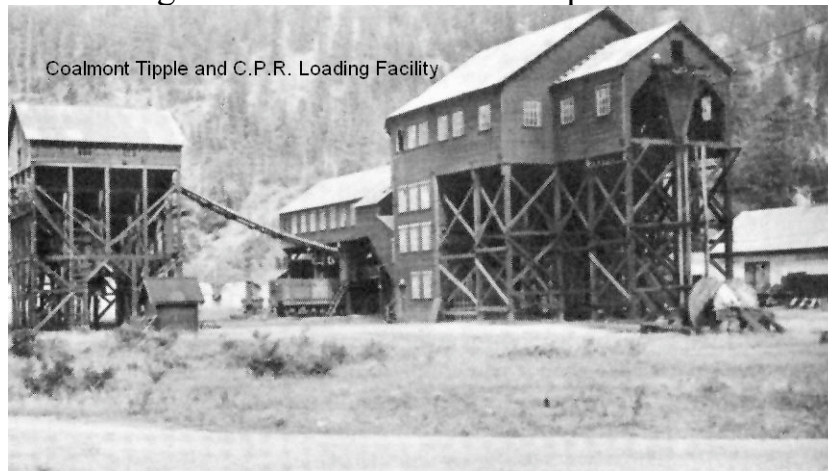


Aug. 2005

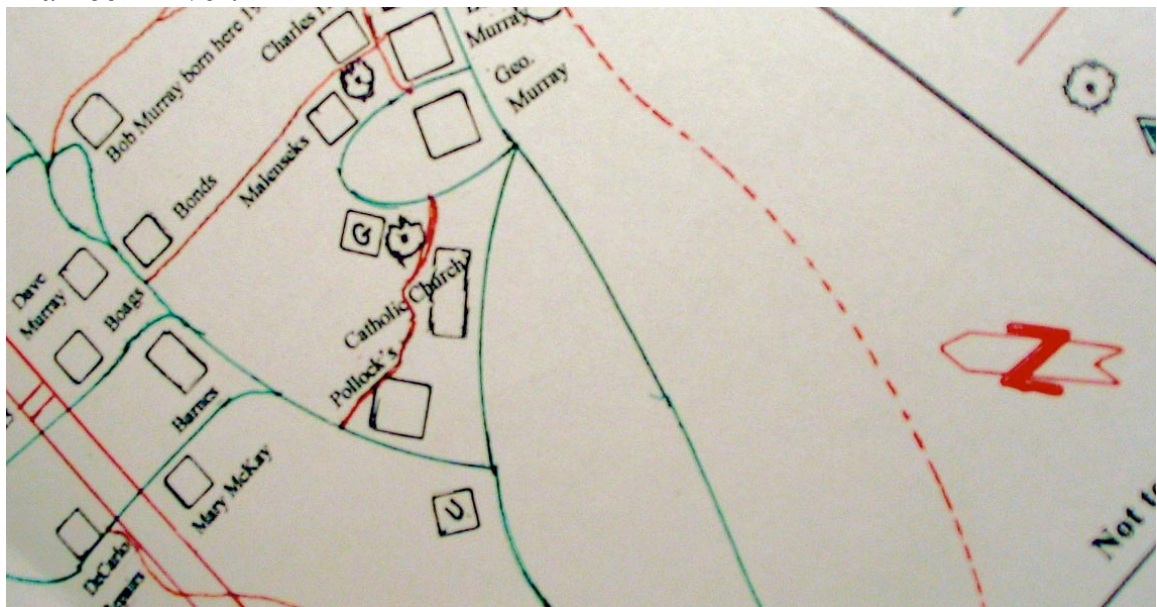
## THE MAP OF BLAKEBURN B. C.

A young writer is researching my hometown with the aim of writing a book. He knows nothing of the layout of the town itself, what he needs is a map to aid in his research.

Yes, I can draw a map showing how the coal mining camp townsite of my birth was laid out in 1940 when the town died. It will show the building locations and who lived in them as remembered by a ten year old boy. The narrow roads, steep pathways, aerial tramline to the C.P.R. rail head at Coalmont and the narrow gauge railway to the mines will all be designated and marked in their place.

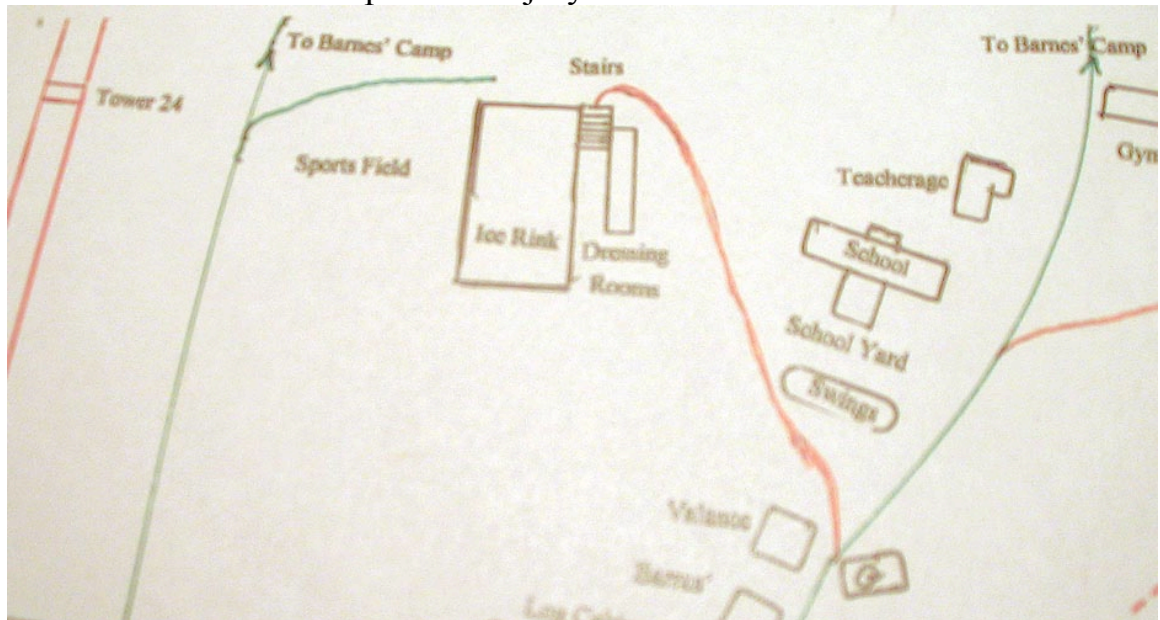


There are a host of items that the map will not reveal. The happy times, sad times and every day life of the people who inhabited this small company town will not show. The structures and buildings of the village clung to the Southern slope of Lodestone Mountain. This was located above the Granite Creek Valley that was thriving at the turn of the century with the gold camp of Granite City at its confluence with the Smilikameen River.

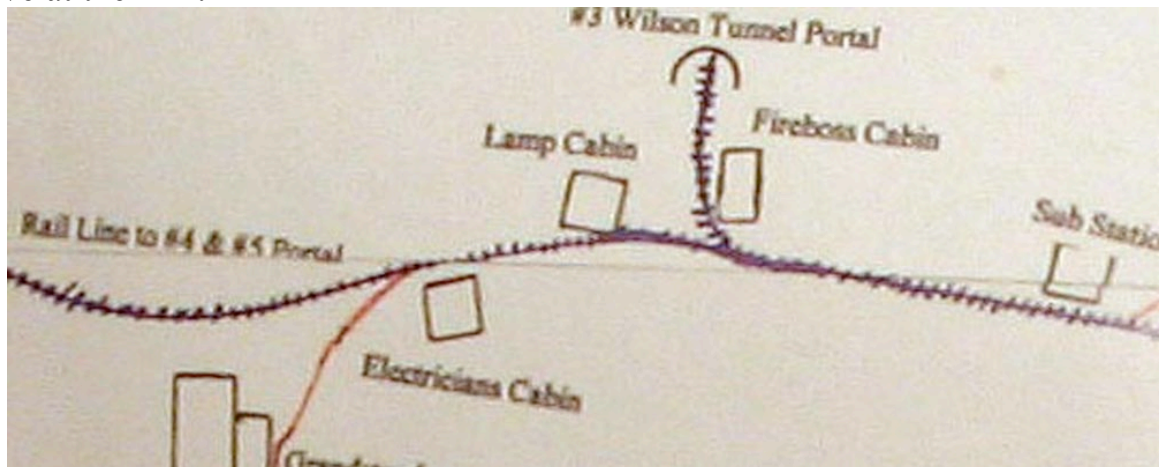




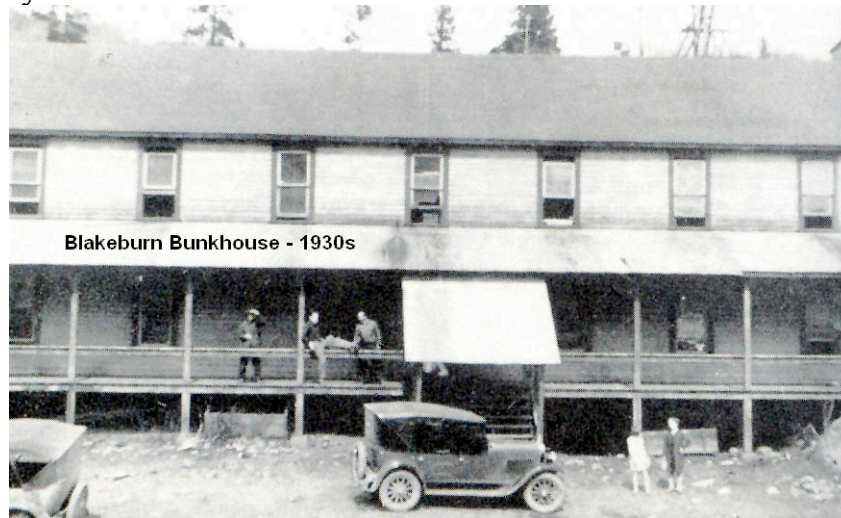
The squeal of the trams as they passed the towers would be quite different on a warm summer evening in comparison to a below zero winter day. The tramline was kept busy both ways in the winter months when deep snow would close the truck road to Coalmont. It would supply the transportation for company store goods and mine supplies. It also tells nothing of the many “riding the empties” junkets that the local teenagers subjected it to on some of the remote sections of it’s almost four mile length. Fortunately there was never a serious or reportable injury.



The sports field and ice rink location shown on the upper portion of the map, near the schools, conveys nothing of the exuberant atmosphere that was prevalent at the many local and intertown soccer and ice hockey matches. The especially hilarious and full of good-natured fun that was displayed at the annual “Scrubs and Dubs” hockey match still lives on in my memory. The coal-mining fathers (Dubs) in dresses, lipstick and rouge would be faced by a determined squad of ( Scrubs) teenage girls from the town. Few inhabitants missed this annual spectacle in spite of the difficulty of the taxing uphill hike to arrive at the rink.

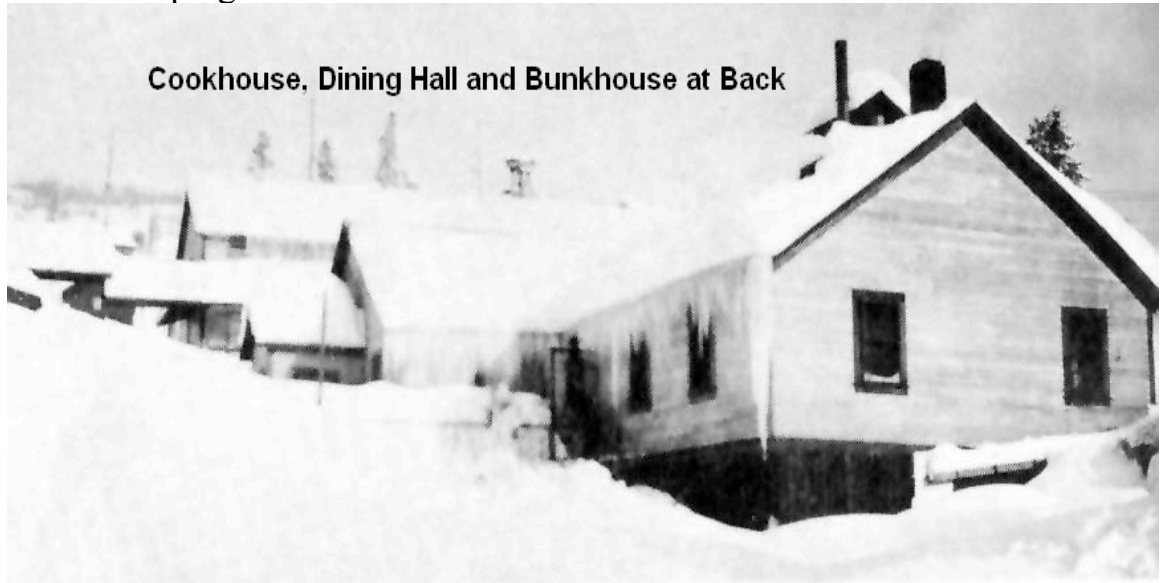


The mundane cross hatched line indicating the route of the narrow gauge rail line to #4 and #5 mines gives no indication of the anguish and devastation felt by the entire town, especially the families that suffered the loss of a family member in the horrific mine explosion of 1930. A raging summer lightning storm was in progress in the early summer evening of August 13<sup>th</sup> – “Black Wednesday” as it came to be known. Two violent explosions ripped through the mile deep workings of # 4 coal seam. There were forty-six men underground; working the afternoon shift at the time. The trip attendant, John Pochello was just walking back in the portal when the explosion stunned him temporarily but survival instincts allowed him to escape to fresh air outside the portal. The forty-five other miners were not so fortunate. Those not buried in caved tunnels died from the lack of oxygen and the generation of “ after damp” or carbon dioxide. Heroic efforts by all the men in the camp including teams that arrived from other mining towns in the area was not successful as access to the mine’s deep areas was not possible due to the caved and fully blocked roadways. The subsequent investigation and report of the Minister of Mines attached no blame for this disaster and did not ascertain what ignited the explosion. The town and #4 mine eventually recovered and coal production resumed for another ten years.



The main bunkhouse shown in the centre kept it’s many secrets about the men that made it their home and the married men who attended the sometimes fairly rich poker games held on occasion. All the members of our family, Dad excepted, experienced a fun time. Mom had just bought a new fangled Electrolux Vacuum Cleaner and with springtime arriving she decided to put it to the test. Cleaning of all the floors with the new machine was the order of the day. With the vacuum running Mom lifted the corner of the old oilcloth on the floor in the master bedroom, the blast of exhaust air at the rear of the vacuum filled the air with Canadian Currency bills of all denominations. Dad’s hiding place for his poker stake had been exposed. I think he got all the money back after a good laugh and some kidding from his older daughters.

The map does not indicate the two metal plates affixed to the top of the bunkhouse steps. One was flat on the porch and the other was wrapped on the upright post. A non-lethal electric current was applied to the plates to dissuade the local dogs from using this area as a marker. Once experiencing this mild shock, no canine was ever observed to return for a “second helping”.



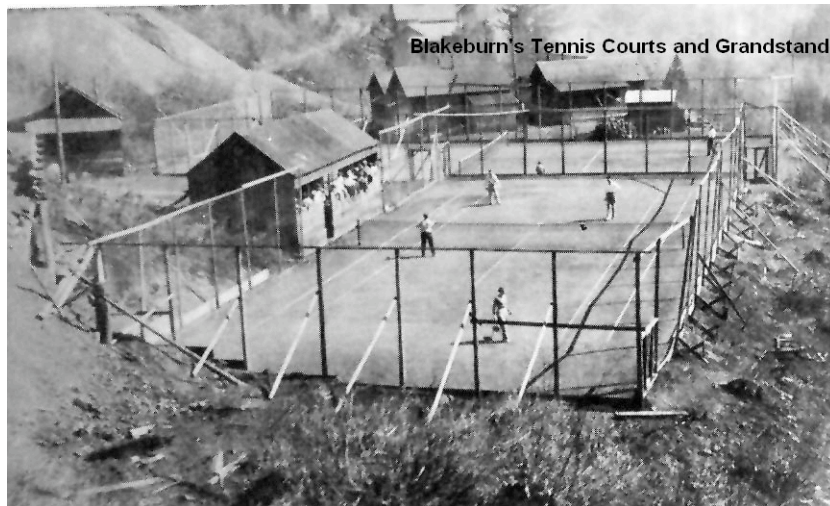
Opposite the bunkhouse across the road, the large cookhouse and dining hall remain silent and divulge nothing of the many entertaining times of all sorts that it harboured in earlier days. Christmas time meant there would be a concert put on by the students, ably coached by their teachers and there would be the appearance of a portly white whiskered gentleman wearing a red suit who dispensed gifts to all present – compliments of Coalmont Collieries. Plays were often staged by various groups in town and were usually attended and appreciated by a full house. Dances were held on a regular basis with music being supplied by talented miners. Joe Delprato, an accomplished violinist would arrive from his gold claim on Granite Creek on these occasions.

The stellar event of the year was the January recognition of Scotland’s Poet Robbie Burns. Gerry Brown the hotelier from Coalmont was the president of the Caledonian Club and usually was the master of ceremonies for “Burns Nicht”. As usual at all large affairs, the dining tables were stacked in an anteroom off the hall with the upper table upside down. This created perfect sided cribs in which the babies and toddlers were nestled for the evening. As a rule no one stayed home on these evenings, every one came to be entertained or be an entertainer, then dance or sleep the night away depending on age. Still very much alive in my memory are the sweet harmonizing teenage voices of my three sisters and their cousin singing an arrangement of “Whispering Hope”. Unfortunately this took place at a time when home recordings were not even thought of and alas, those voices will never be heard again.

The George and Bob Murray Homes are shown in the area below the schools and known laughingly as “Shaugnessy Heights”. This is where the following escapade commenced about 11: 00 P.M. New Year arrived and my Dad had an injured leg that would prevent him from joining in the first footing custom of Hogmanay. First, my dad was six foot three and my Uncle George had to jump to reach five foot five. They decided that Dad would be piggy backed by uncle to the Scottish homes on the map. Picture them trying to get through the deep snow and my dads legs dragging in the drifts where it was wind piled. We had many good-natured reports about the appearance of this unmatched duo at some of the homes visited and many good laughs after the New Year arrived.

The narrow gauge rail line to #4 and #5 mines witnessed a Sunday afternoon adventure by a group of youngsters that no one reported, not even any of the miscreants. The electrician’s rail car that was used to service the trolley wire was discovered beside the track in the Barnes timber yard at the foot of #5 mine incline. We decided to wrestle it onto the rails and save a walk back to town. We found too late that the line had a substantial downhill run upon entering town. We all managed to bail out of the car at the lamp cabin just before it came to an upsetting halt when it hit the rail frog block.

The same rail line also carried my Dad and I on many idle day trips out to #4 portal. He drove the electric locomotive with me by his side. Lunches would be eaten in the fireboss’s cabin and we would go separate ways. Dad would enter the mine to do the checks that were required and I entertained myself with walks to the timber yard or rambles in the surrounding woods.



The tennis courts appear just below the rail line at the extreme left or West side of the map. They give no indication of the excitement generated by the often-large crowd of spectators that followed the stats of the local players in their weekly tournaments. The grandstand would be bulging with townsfolk – adults and children – out enjoying a warm summer evening and perhaps swatting at the odd early summer mosquito.

The two paths that appear on the lower section give no inkling of the wonderful brook fishing to be had at their end at Blakeburn Creek. Many happy hours were spent by the town's young and older sets in tempting the rainbow trout into their creel. This path was also the first leg of the hike into the headwaters of Granite Creek and Stan's cabin. Father and son teams fishing and hunting in the Stan's cabin area spent many weekends.



The location of the Barnes family store and gas pumps is shown in the centre opposite the company store. It doesn't tell you that it arrived in the late 1930s and much to the delight of the town's youngsters; it sold ice cream cones. Nickels were often scrounged from card playing fathers just around the corner at the bunkhouse for this treat.

The main road out of town passed between the bunkhouse and cookhouse, past the company store and horse barns and thence onto the Coalmont truck road. This was the route our family travelled for the final time in midsummer of 1940 when we left for Vancouver. Economics and markets of the time doomed the mines to closure and Blakeburn was turned back to Mother Nature and the ghosts of the past.

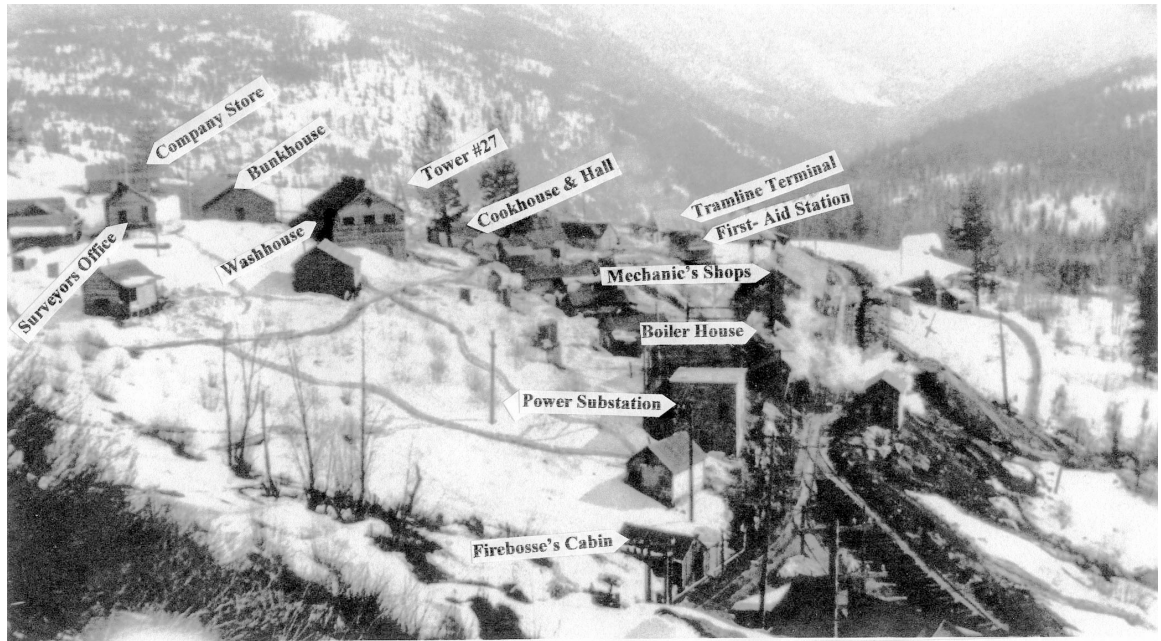
So this 75-year-old ageing relic has come to the end of amateur map drawing and reminiscing on its content. I will send a copy of the map to the young writer and researcher in the hope that it will assist him in bringing back to life this forgotten area of British Columbia.

To the reader of this narrative, my hope is that it conveys an idea of the flavour and vitality of this mining town and its inhabitants that thrived and prospered in the first half of the twentieth century.

Robert D. Murray,  
Merritt B.C.

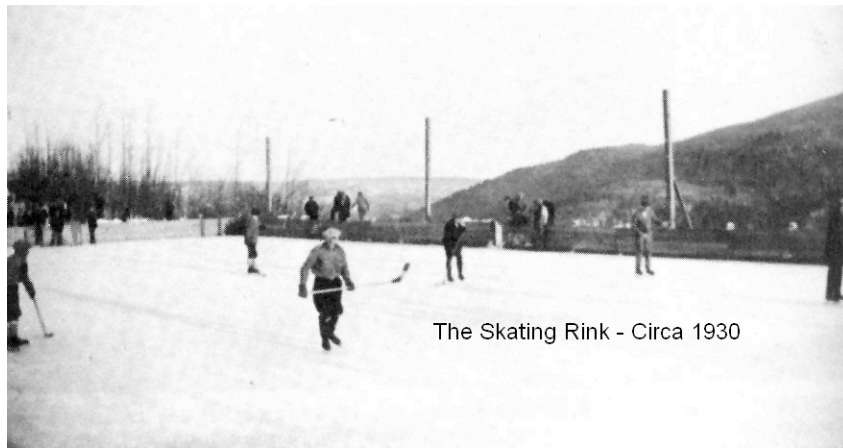
August 2005

BLAKEBURN AS IT APPEARED IN 1926



Blakeburn 1926 – Picture Taken From Above Wilson Portal

THE BLAKEBURN ICE RINK



The Skating Rink - Circa 1930