Kennecott Mines National Historic Landmark

Self Guided Walking Tour

Welcome to Kennecott

The Kennecott mill camp and mines are an extraordinary relic from America’s past. These impressive standing structures and artifacts tell stories of Alaskan exploration, westward expansion, technological modernization, World War I, expansion of multinational corporations, and the death of monopolies. More intimately, Kennecott provides insight into the lives of the people who took on the challenge of living and working here.

Why Here?

Kennecott Valley on the surface seems rugged and remote, but to the people who took on the challenge of living and working here, it was no surprise when the Bonanza Mine was discovered in 1900. Prospectors flooding into the area in the wake of the ‘98 Gold Rush knew there was copper as well as gold in these mountains, so it was no surprise when the Bonanza Mine was discovered in 1900. Prospectors Clarence Warner and “Tarantula” Jack Smith looked up Bonanza Ridge and saw what appeared to be green pastures, a mountainside stained with the emerald hues of copper ore.

Generations of Athnua people collected native copper found in the Wrangell Mountains, working it into art, utensils and arrowheads. Prospectors flooding into the area in the wake of the ‘98 Gold Rush knew there was copper as well as gold in these mountains, so it was no surprise when the Bonanza Mine was discovered in 1900. Prospectors Clarence Warner and “Tarantula” Jack Smith looked up Bonanza Ridge and saw what appeared to be green pastures, a mountainside stained with the emerald hues of copper ore.

Developing the rich ore body would require tremendous effort, ingenuity, and money. During the early 1900’s, one could not find bigger financial backers than the Havemeyer, Guggenheim, and J.P. Morgan families. With a young east coast mining engineer named Stephen Birch managing, the three families formed the Alaska Syndicate, which quickly gained a monopoly over the area’s mining operation. When copper from Kennecott reached the world’s markets, the Syndicate became profitable, the group reorganized as the Kennecott Copper Corporation, which still operates other mines around the world today.

The Corporation supplied the world with copper for electrification, utilities, industrial development, and munitions for the World War I effort. Kennecott Copper Corporation managed all aspects of their operation with creativity, skill, and at times a heavy hand.

Kennecott’s Story

Kennecott, established in 1900, expanded in stages until the mid-20’s. As mining increased, camp needs grew. Waste rock from the ore, called tailings, helped level the land for building on the valley's steep hillsides. By 1938, there were more than 100 buildings in camp. But with a limited supply of ore and dropping prices, Kennecott closed that year after producing 200-300 million dollars worth of copper and silver. After closing, the camp endured many different eras: private mining, resort development, tourism, and homesteading. Now the area's rich history is celebrated as Kennecott Mines National Historic Landmark and has been part of the National Park Service system since 1998. We encourage you to explore with a sense of discovery!

Things to do in Kennecott

*Walk through the town & explore open park buildings & exhibits* Hike to the historic mines or the Root Glacier *Camp at Jumbo Creek* Walk the historic wagon road to McCarthy
Explore Safely

Kennecott is a former industrial site and has many hazards. Respect closures. Be aware of your surroundings and stay alert for quickly changing weather and the presence of wildlife, such as bears. Be aware that portions of the Kennecott Mines National Historic Landmark are private property, please confine your exploration to public lands. Do not disturb or remove artifacts from the site.
Exploring Kennecott

Kennecott & Root Glaciers

The 27-mile long Kennecott Glacier begins on the flanks of Mt. Blackburn (16,371 ft.), Rime, Atma, and Parka Peaks. Wondering why you don’t see blue ice? The glacier’s ice is covered by rocks and dirt, called a moraine. The surface moraine comes from erosion of surrounding valley rock and not from the scattering of mine tailings onto the glacier. To hike to the Root Glacier, you can take a bus to the end of the mine road or take a shuttle service for about $20. The hike is available via the Root Glacier Trail.

Dairy Barn

Think about this—except for ore and water, Kennecott’s workers had to bring in everything from the outside in order to survive. To relieve the cost of shipping in all food for the camp, a simple barn held a few cows which supplied fresh milk. Local families raised chickens for eggs, and community and private gardens were planted around the mill site.

Recreation Hall

The Kennecott Copper Corporation valued a happy and safe workforce. They developed wholesome activities in the Recreation Hall, such as movie night, dances, and Christmas parties. Outdoor recreation happened on the company ice rink, baseball field, handball, and tennis courts. When the miners and mill workers wanted to experience a less wholesome type of recreation, they traveled five miles down the hill to McCarthy, where women, dance halls and saloons replaced tennis and movies.

Old School and New School

Imagine attending class next to a towering glacier and an extremely loud copper mill. It was certainly a unique learning environment, but education in Kennecott was different in another way as well; students included both young children and adults. In the evenings the corporation taught English and citizenship classes. By 1920, the night school had 126 adult students from 23 countries, while the youngest children’s school class had only 20.

East and West Bunkhouses

Kennecott was generally a community of transient men. Some worked for just three months in order to pay off their train fare; others stayed several years. Men lived two to a room and paid around 1.25 a day for room and board. There were several bunkhouses scattered throughout the mill and mine sites. Kennecott hosted multinational crews including workers from traditional mining backgrounds such as Norwegians, Swedes, and Irish workers. Japanese cooks provided meals and other camp services. Single women who worked in camp lived separately on the third floor of the Staff House, called “No Man’s Land”.

Refrigeration Plant

Why would a community with a glacier in their backyard need a refrigerator? They didn’t. However the innovative corporation always experimented and took advantage of the latest technology and materials they had available, in this case the cooling ability of compressed ammonia. As you enter the building, check out the compressor, the access to the railway that helped to move food supplies in and out of the building, and the still-hanging meat hooks.

General Store and U.S. Post Office

This building connected the remote residents of Kennecott to the outside world. Families could purchase just about anything that could be found in the “lower 48.” If the store didn’t have it, an order could be placed through popular catalogs. However, they would have to be prepared to wait a month or more for a special order to arrive.

Sawmill Ruin

This was one of the first buildings to be constructed on the mill site. During 1910, the sawmill was busy processing local wood as a 40-man work crew built the camp and mine infrastructure. The gravity concentrator mill, rockers, tables, and these structures were all framed before the site was connected to the outside world by the Copper River & Northwestern Railway in 1911.

Depot, Trestle, and Rails

To be profitable, the operation needed railway transportation to the coast so ore could be shipped to be processed in Tacoma, Washington. The Copper River & Northwestern Railway, nicknamed “Can’t Run and Never Will,” was built between 1907 and 1911. At 196 miles long, with 30 miles of bridges and trestles, it took 6,000 men, and $23 million to build. Within days of completion, the first trainload of ore, worth $250,000, rolled to Cordova. Kennecott’s future success was insured, and the large eastern financial investment justified.

National Creek

To operate a mill and camp without a reliable supply of water is impossible. Dams upstream on National Creek and Bonanza Creek were able to supply most of the camp’s water needs for ore processing, fire suppression, and drinking water. In the winter when creek levels were low, it was said Kennecott could “wear out” water by reused it over and over again. At other times, the same water floods damaged buildings. As recently as October 2006, floodwaters washed through the Eye Office and destroyed the Alaska Richmond Company ice rink, baseball field, and the what is called “No Man’s Land”.

General Management Office (GMO)

The GMO was the hub of corporate activity throughout mining operations. In 1915 Kennecott’s ore was processed in a privately traded company with its most productive years to follow. The corporation structured its operations and enhanced town life by adding several services, such as the General Store and Recreational Hall. However, these niceties were not enough to keep the entire workforce happy. In 1917, the workers went on strike. With hard tactics by the corporation, the strike was busted 45 days later, and the workers signed a pledge not to join a union.

Hospital

In 1915 Kennecott also added a hospital. The hospital not only treated the miners and mill workers, but also became a mecca for medical care in the surrounding community. It housed Alaska’s first X-ray machine. A dentist would visit the remote outpost once a month for check-ups and other work. Each patient had to pay eight cents a day to cover medical expenses. Today, that sounds like a bargain!

Concentration Mill

Shipping ore to Tacoma was expensive and required the copper ore to be concentrated for maximal profitability. The most economical process for rich ore was gravity concentration, but ore and waste rock were delivered to the Mill from the five remote mine sites via tramway at a rate of up to 1,200 tons of ore per day. Once in the Mill, ore went through a series of crushers and sorters using gravity and water to move the rock from one process to the next. Once waste was removed, ore was loaded into burlap bags and stacked on open rail cars and shipped to the coast. Construction of the Mill evolved over 20 years as new mining processes were developed. Over time, deteriorating ore quality demanded different processing techniques, continual equipment modifications, and additions to the mill structure, resulting in the current unusual roof line and jumbled appearance of the iconic red building.

Leaching and Flotation Plant

Gravity concentration is only efficient for high grade ore. To process lower grade ore, new techniques were needed. E. Tappan Stannard was hired to develop an industrial scale leaching and concentration process. Large tanks were filled with gravel-sized pieces of low grade copper and an ammonia solution. The ammonia dissolved the copper in the ore. The copper-rich solution was then transferred to other tanks known as evaporators. These tanks were heated until the ammonia evaporated. The ammonia was recycled, leaving behind a very concentrated residue, which was then bagged and shipped to the smelter. Over 25-30% of Kennecott’s ore was processed through leaching and concentration, increasing the profitability of the site.

Machine Shop

To keep Kennecott operating efficiently required skilled, creativity and self- sufficiency. The men kept the machines functioning and the machines kept the mines and mine productive. Equipment in need of repair traveled from the north side of the Mill building on a narrow-gauge service tram and crossed the main railway via a drawbridge to the Machine Shop. Remnants of the drawbridge support are still standing just north of the Mill building.

Power Plant

Kennecott required power to support both the mill town and the mine. To generate electricity, we traveled several miles up the mountain. The Power Plant, characterized by the four towering smokestacks, was constructed in three stages between 1911 and 1924. Disaster struck in August 1924 when the Plant burned down, but it was quickly rebuilt and in operation again by October 1924. The Plant used two diesel generators, a Westinghouse steam turbine, and a Pelton water wheel to pump water and steam heat. Steam and electricity traveled to outlying buildings and homes through “utilidors”. The warm utilidors were built under worker workshops, which kept them free of snow and ice in the winter.

Cottages and Silk Stocking Row

Only 10% of Kennecott’s population lived in cottages with their families. Middle and upper management level employees paid about 25% of their income to the company to live in these small homes with their wives and children. Cottage position, plumbing, room size, and building colors all reflected access to wealth. The higher up the chain, the higher the utilidor.

Be Inspired

Take nothing from Kennecott but inspiration for your soul, questions for your mind, and photographs for your memories.