



The Kennecott Story

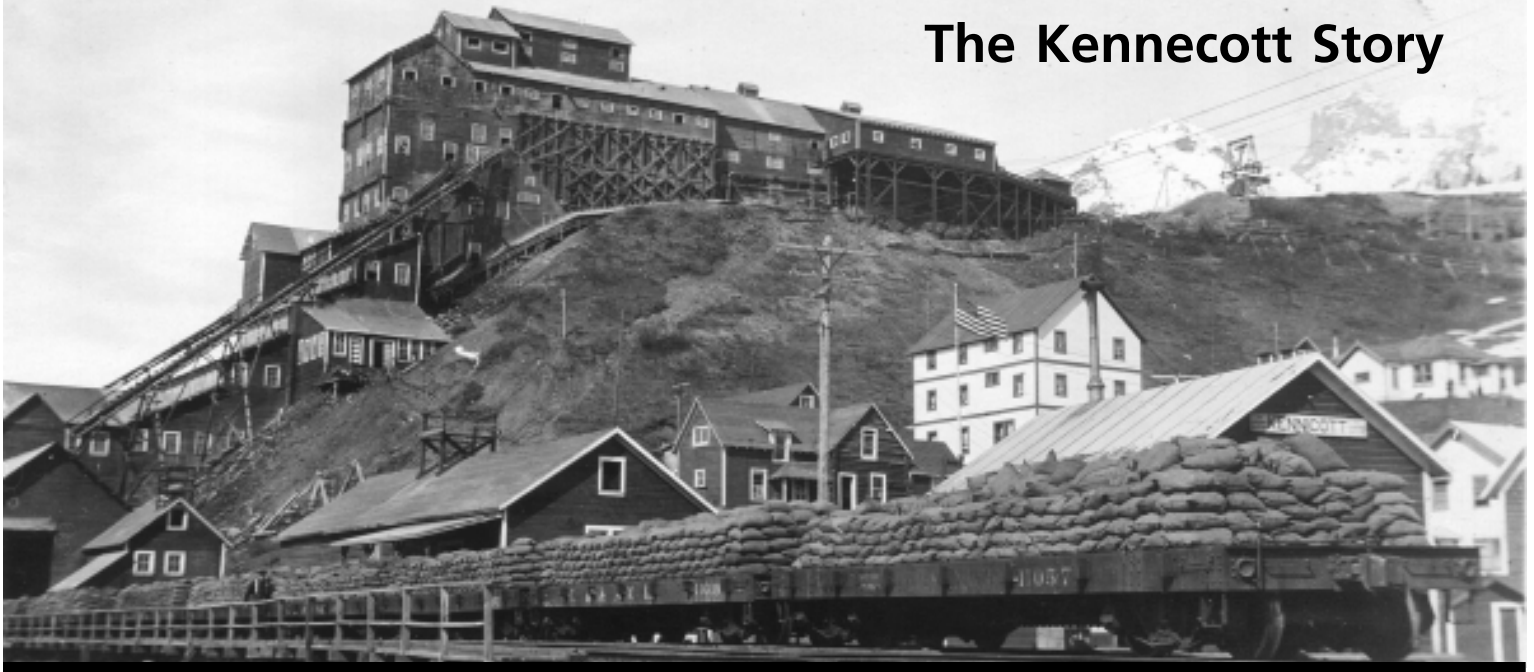


Photo courtesy of G. Bleakley, Copper Center, Alaska

The Kennecott mines and mill town tell a story of discovery, perseverance and ingenuity at a time when America was hungry for copper to build railroads, electrify cities and supply munitions to the WWI effort. Kennecott helped meet America's copper challenge and in the process transformed itself from this tiny mountain mining enclave into a large transnational minerals corporation.

*"Mr. Birch, I've got a mountain of copper up there. There's so much of the stuff sticking out of the ground that it looks like a green sheep pasture in Ireland when the sun is shining at its best."
~ prospector Jack Smith to Stephen Birch, 1900*

In the summer of 1900, prospectors Clarence Warner and "Tarantula" Jack Smith were exploring the east edge of the Kennecott Glacier. As they drew closer to the limestone-greenstone contact, along which US Geological Survey geologist Oscar Rohn had predicted copper would be found, they were amazed by the magnificent green cliffs of exposed copper. Samples from their discovery, the "Bonanza Mine Outcrop," revealed up to 70% pure chalcocite, one of the richest copper deposits ever found.

Mining engineer Stephen Birch, in Alaska to look for investment opportunities for the wealthy Havemayer family, began buying up shares of the Bonanza claim. However, without a way to transport the copper to market, it was worthless. Some said building a railroad from the coast, across mountains, powerful rivers and moving glaciers would be impossible. Others offered a glimmer of hope. The Havemayers collaborated with J.P. Morgan and the Guggenheim family, forming the Alaska Syndicate, to build a railroad and develop the mines. In the fall of 1907 the Alaska Syndicate hired Michael J. Heney, builder of the White Pass & Yukon Railroad. For the next four years his crews worked relentlessly, building rail bed and bridges through difficult terrain at temperatures down to 40 degrees below zero. At the same time, Stephen Birch was in Kennecott

developing the mining claims. By hauling an entire steamship, piece by piece, over the mountains from Valdez to be reassembled on the Copper River, he was able to bring equipment in by dog sled, horse and steamship to begin mining ore even before the railroad was finished. The first train left Kennecott in 1911 just ten days after the railroad was completed, filled with \$250,000 worth of copper.

Kennecott was a place of long hours and hard, dangerous work. At the height of operation, about six hundred men worked in the mines and mill town. Paying salaries higher than those found in the lower-48, Kennecott was able to attract men willing to live and work in this remote Alaskan mining camp. Miners often worked seven days a week, coming down only for the rare holiday or to leave Kennecott. Mill workers and miners came to Kennecott only to work, living in bunkhouses with little time off, often sending money home to their families around the world. Despite the dangers and grueling work, the Kennecott workers mined and concentrated at least \$200 million worth of ore.

Reaping profits fueled by America's high demand for copper, Kennecott Copper Corporation invested in mines in Chile and the lower-48. By the time the Kennecott mines closed in 1938 the corporation had grown into one of the largest minerals companies in the world, due to the perseverance and ingenuity of its founders, investors and workers.

Social Life

While Kennecott was primarily a place of work, ensuring a thriving community social life was good for the company's profit margin, leading to stronger employee retention and lower training and transportation costs. To the people who lived in Kennecott, it was home. They talk of their "Kennecott family" and tell stories of a strong community making its own traditions and entertainment. In many ways Kennecott's isolation contributed to the strength of the community, rewriting societal rules to value inclusiveness and mutual support. Yet, there is also evidence that Kennecott's isolation was not strong enough to keep out greater American struggles such as racial and ethnic discrimination. Nevertheless, Kennecott left an indelible mark on the hearts and minds of those who called it home.



Kennecott Kids at the ice rink.

Movies and Dances!

Movie and dance nights in the Recreation Hall were a time of relaxation and social gathering. Held frequently, these social gatherings provided a welcome respite from the grueling work day and long, dark nights of winter. Kennecott residents remember them fondly.



Band performing for a 1937 Ball.

"We had a movie twice a week, Sundays and Wednesdays. And I got to take the tickets, if you took tickets, you got in free, otherwise you had to pay 10 cents. This was fine when I was a little girl, but when I came back up there and was 17 and one of the young men asked me to go to the show with him. The ticket salesman, said, "Oh, is Mildred with you, well she always pays 10 cents." I was so embarrassed, I was grown up you know... the adult fare was 35 cents." ~Mildred Erickson Reis, Kennecott Kid, 1916-1927

"They had the community dances down in the community hall a lot. In fact, it was almost every Saturday. Everybody came and the children came and danced and then afterwards they had coffee and cake. I can always remember all those delicious cakes that the women brought." ~Inger Jensen Ricci, Kennecott Kid & Employee, 1915-1938

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Christmas Eve Children's Program

Christmas was a time of community and family celebration. Christmas Day was one of only two days a year that the mines and mill closed down and all employees were off. The celebration began Christmas Eve, with the annual children's Christmas program in the Recreation Hall. Many Kennecott Kids have shared their memories of the festivities:

"Well the stage was only put up at Christmas time, for the school children's program, and every child in school had a part in it. And I was shy and it scared me to death. I always had a part in a play and they always had me sing. So I had to get up there on the stage all alone and sing. I would look out at my father, he always had a twinkle in his eye..." ~Mildred Erickson Reis, Kennecott Kid, 1916-1927

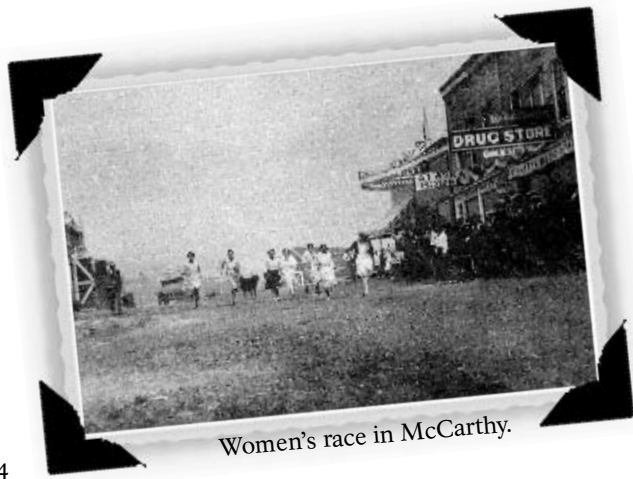
"...Christmas program. There'd be a tree. And Santa Claus would come. And every kid... we all got wonderful gifts. An' I did the highland fling, I remember, on the stage. Ahh!" ~Patty Hussey Berg, Kennecott Kid, 1928-1931



Recreation Hall decorated for Christmas.

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4th of July Celebration

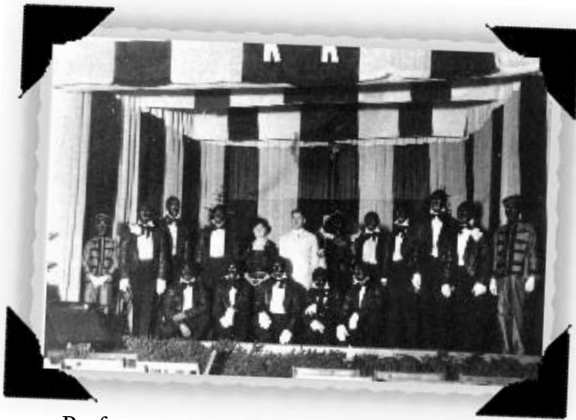


Women's race in McCarthy.

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The annual 4th of July festivities in McCarthy represented a rare day of McCarthy-Kennecott joint celebration. One of only two days a year that Kennecott closed, everyone, from miners to mill workers, managers to children, headed down the hill for a visit to McCarthy. Contest, including separate races for men, women, and children, were held in downtown McCarthy. With the Kennecott Copper Corporation sponsoring a \$200 prize, the annual baseball game between Kennecott and McCarthy was so important that the McCarthy team is known to have imported a pitcher from the lower-48. Filled with ice cream, a day of fun, and for some, McCarthy's famous prohibition moonshine, Kennecott employees headed back up the hill for another six months of work until the mines shut down for Christmas Day.

Societal Struggles in Kennecott



Performers in Blackface in the Recreation Hall.

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Kennecott was not isolated from the struggles of the greater American society. A Klu Klux Klan (KKK) minstrel show was even advertised and hosted in the Recreation Hall in 1921. The nation's second KKK was established in 1915 and promoted the idea that the nation's economic struggles were the fault of African Americans, Jews and this country's growing wave of immigrants. The Klan's membership included both Republicans and Democrats, and its influence spread throughout the United States. Kennecott may not have had any African American employees at the time. The steamship line refused passage to African Americans, clearly limiting their access to Alaska as a whole. Kennecott did, however, employ a large number of immigrants in the mines. One can imagine the message that an event associated with the ideals of the KKK sent to them.

"...we noticed especially there was quite a difference between staff people and non-staff people. We felt that way... I understand there was (also) a little bit of discrimination whether you're Danish or Norwegian. Whether you're Danish or Norwegian, Norwegian or Swedish. We felt that there was..." ~Yvonne Konnerup Lahti, Kennecott Kid, 1925 -1931

George Flowers

Many families sought to take short vacations away from Kennecott to explore the surrounding countryside. Visiting George Flowers became a favorite for many of them. A man with a tenacious spirit, he became a lifelong friend of the Kennecott Kids, who still tell stories of his guitar playing and fishing lessons. A share-cropper turned gold-rusher from the American South, Mr. Flowers arrived in Seattle only to be denied passage to Alaska on the steamship because he was black. Not one to be deterred, he walked to Alaska, arriving long after the gold rush had ended. By the mid-twenties, he settled at Long Lake where he fished, trapped and may have worked as track-walker for the railroad. After the mines closed he corresponded with former Kennecott Kids who sent him the rare care package of Alaskan necessities.

"...we went to Long Lake and lived in a little cabin and fished in the (creek). [George Flowers] cooked fish like no one else. He put it all in the frying pan and cooked it and then turned it all over like it was one big fish cake. It was marvelous, you could eat the whole thing." ~Deborah Vickery House, Kennecott Kid, 1918-1931



George Flowers and Kennecott friends.

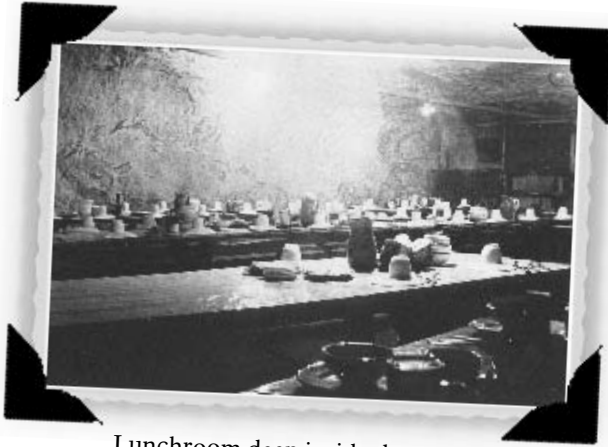
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Their Work:

In Their Own Words...

"...essentially those [miners] lived without seeing the outside air from the first of November to... the end of March. ...and it was cold. From their \$4.00 [or] \$5.00 a day, they worked their eight hours and then the company deducted something like \$30.00 a month for board and room. ..they were essentially captives of the company."

~William Douglass, Kennecott Kid, 1915-1929



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Lunchroom deep inside the Bonanza Mine.

"Then I had the good fortune to take a job riding line on the aerial tramways... Well, that was riding up and down the line watching for problems that developed in the towers and the saddles and cables. And keeping all of the gear on the line greased. It was a mean job in the winter and [a] beautiful job in the summer."

~Nels Konnerup, Kennecott Kid, 1925 -1931 & Employee, 1934- 1937

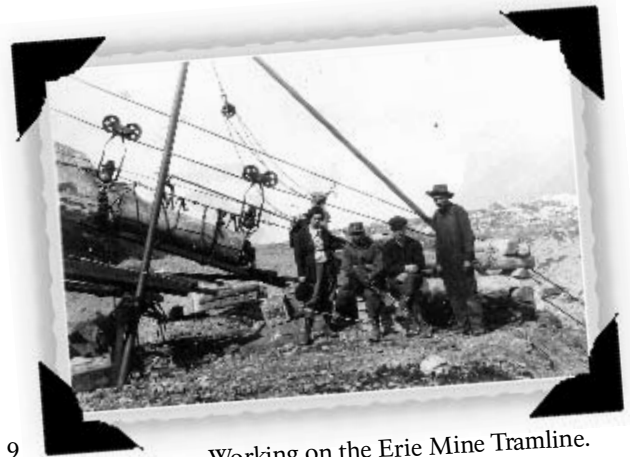


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Working on the Bonanza tramline.

"There were miners that got what we called 'miner's consumption' [silicosis] from time to time and [they'd] ship them down to Arizona. Very often they'd have to take a collection for the fare."

~Nels Konnerup, Kennecott Kid, 1925 -1931 & Employee, 1934- 1937

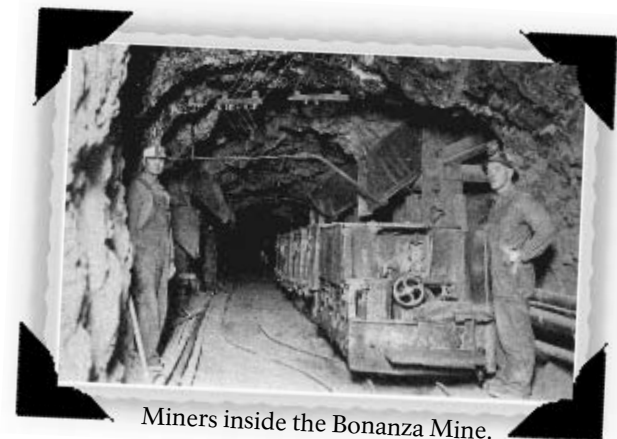


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Working on the Erie Mine Tramline.

"I worked at the top of the mill building, yeah. We had ore buckets come one every 52 seconds and there were about 750 pounds of ore in each bucket and you caught it as it came in and practically ran over to the grizzly and you dumped it down the grizzly. When it was wet, the grizzly had a big mallet there-I don't know, the thing must have weighed about eight hundred pounds- you had to pound the bucket about three or four times because the ore was being held in there towards the bottom. Then you took [the bucket] over and put it back on the a cable and send it out, [then] you had to run back and by then another bucket was there. So you did that all day long."

~George Sullivan, bucket chaser, 1925-1937



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Miners inside the Bonanza Mine.

"Very good place at the mill here. They treated us wonderfully well. But the people in the mine didn't get down here as easy and in the winter they were all penned up there. They would come out of the mine and stayed at the bunkhouse, it was almost like being in prison.... I know that every spring, why, there would be 50 or 60 of them that quit."

~James Beans, SR, Leaching Plant shift boss, 1925-1927

Our Work:

Stabilizing a Landmark...

In June of 1998, the National Park Service (NPS) acquired many of the significant buildings and lands of the Kennecott Mines National Historic Landmark and began the effort to stabilize and restore the buildings. Through a lengthy public planning process, the future of each building was determined. Some buildings were found to be in ruin, too far degraded to be stabilized or restored. Others, such as the mill, power plant and machine shop, are being stabilized, receiving new roofs, foundations and other structural stability work. Once they are stabilized, additional opportunities will be provided for visitors to enter these buildings to explore the places where the Kennecott employees worked. A few buildings, such as the store and post office, which will become a visitor center, will be restored.



Working on the general manager's office.

Protecting the Past



Artifact survey at one of the portals to the Motherlode Mine.

NPS Archeologists and historians are working hard to protect the artifacts and historic stories of Kennecott. Many of Kennecott's buildings, such as the bunkhouses up at the mines, will eventually fall to the ground. These buildings are being thoroughly documented, photographed and described. Several of the fragile artifacts have been curated for display in Kennecott's future visitor center. Archeologists are also working closely with the stabilization crew to ensure that the historic value of Kennecott is protected. Historians are reconstructing Kennecott's story, by exploring buildings, studying historic documents and interviewing former residents. With the buildings, artifacts and stories, generations of visitors will be able to experience Kennecott and its remarkable story.

Current Project

Store and Post Office

Kennecott's general store and post office was once an active hub of life in the mill town. Today the National Park Service is working to stabilize and restore the building for use as a visitor center. All of the historic artifacts that remained in the building have been cataloged and curated for future display. The building is receiving a new roof, foundation and other structural work. It will be retrofitted with water and electricity. When it opens as a visitor center it will be a place to explore the stories of Kennecott and its surrounding landscape through exhibits featuring artifacts and historic photographs.

Completed Project

Recreation Hall

Together the National Park Service and a local non-profit, Friends of Kennecott have restored, documented and researched the history of the Recreation Hall. National Park Service crews repaired the foundation, replaced the roof, repainted the building and constructed new outhouses. Friends of Kennecott purchased historic-style benches and chairs, production equipment for theatrical events and helped pay for rewiring of the building and other restoration efforts. National Park Service historians and the McCarthy-Kennecott Museum have recorded countless stories former Kennecott Kids have told regarding their experiences in the building. Today the Recreation Hall hosts educational and community events and is available for private rental.

Future Visitor Center!



Work beginning on the Store and Post Office.



Restoring the Recreation Hall.

Kennecott or Kennicott?

The mining company was named after the Kennicott Glacier. However, it was spelled as Kennecott, with an “e,” resulting in spelling debates that continue today. Stephen Birch, the company’s founder, was even known to have spelled the town as Kennycott, with a “y.”



Kennecott train depot.

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Artifacts: The Legacy of Life

Artifacts are a testament to lives lived and lost, hopes realized and shattered and the rich heritage of our nation.

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



Historic photo of the Bonanza Mine.

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Removal of artifacts from public land is prohibited.

Photographic Credits:

1, 2, 3, 5, 7, 9, 10 Kennecott Kids Collection, NPS
4 Candy Waugaman Collection, Fairbanks
6, 8 & 13 McCarthy-Kennicott Museum
11 Historical Collection, Wrangell-St. Elias NP/P
12 G. Bleakley Collection, Copper Center

Explore Kennecott...

Visitors to Kennecott can explore this historic town, the mining and milling operation and the lives of the men, women and children who lived here. You are invited to explore the streets and the outside of the buildings, join a park ranger for a history talk, view the Kennecott History Film or explore the insides of the Mill and Power Plant with a commercial tour. Rangers are available in the Kennecott Visitor Center to help you plan your visit.

But Be Careful!

Many of the historic buildings in Kennecott are in a state of collapse and disrepair. Since 1999 the National Park Service has been working to improve safety at the mill site through architectural stabilization and lead paint mitigation. At this time many of the doors to the buildings are locked. Feel free to explore the outside of the buildings, but remain aware of hazards that still exist.

Watch under foot for sharp or loose objects such as glass, metal scraps or nails.

Do not attempt to walk on decks or stairs attached to the buildings. Many of these areas are unstable.

Lead is present in the paint on the buildings and in paint chips scattered throughout the site.

Abandoned explosives may be present and in unstable condition at the mine sites. Never handle dynamite blasting caps, or any potentially explosive products. Please notify the National Park Service if you see signs of such explosives.

Due to the multiple hazards, please keep a close eye on children.

Final Reflections from Kennecott:

“Copper Mining is generally safer than coal mining and things like that but my impression from sixty or seventy years looking back, I can’t imagine how they could get people to do what they did. A man would come here and work for ten or fifteen years for a net of \$80 per month and live under those circumstances.”

~Nels Konnerup, Kennecott Kid, 1925 -1931 & employee, 1934- 1937

What a really tremendous place to bring up a family! Surrounded by nature and love, we children were doubly blessed. The simplicity, the freedom, and the peace of such an existence is beyond imagination. To live in Kennecott a lifetime would be paradise! But all good things cannot remain static, they must change, and so it is that all the wonderful memories remain and the hard times are forever forgotten.

~Inger Jensen Ricci, Kennecott Kid & secretary, 1918 -1938

Kennecott Ice skaters



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