

# **In the Shadow of Kennecott: The Forgotten Mining Camps of the Wrangell Mountain Region**

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International publicity regarding the Klondike gold discovery lured thousands of stampedeers to the north. Many headed for the Yukon River through ports in Southeastern Alaska, but some entered through Valdez, choosing to try their luck in the Copper Basin. Most came for gold, but some were more interested in copper.



**Figure 1: Most early prospectors reached the Copper Basin by man-hauling their supplies over the Valdez Glacier. Photo courtesy Candy Waugaman, Fairbanks**

Copper prospectors first examined the Kotsina River, where Doc Billum, an Ahtna Indian who lived nearby, had reported finding a large deposit. Others explored the Kuskulana.

Searching for the origin of the copper float reported a year earlier by USGS geologist Oscar Rohn, Jack Smith and Clarence Warner examined the Kennicott Valley in July 1900. Legend maintains that the pair was resting near National Creek when they spotted a large green "sheep pasture" on the hillside far above. Scrambling up to the spot, they found a fabulously rich copper deposit, which they accurately named the "bonanza."

A well-connected young businessman named Stephen Birch soon purchased a controlling interest in the claims and established the Alaska Copper and Coal Company in order to develop them. After gaining the financial backing of the Guggenheim brothers and J. P. Morgan, Birch reorganized as the Kennecott Mines Company, the predecessor of the Kennecott Copper Corporation.

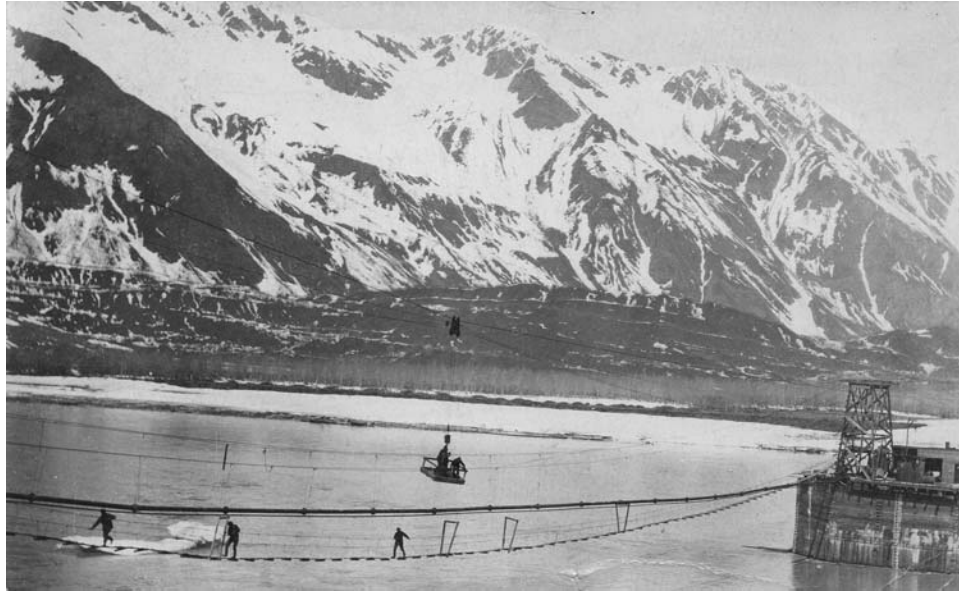


**Figure 2: Prospectors who wished to ascend the Copper River had to pull their boats by hand.  
Photo courtesy Washington State Historical Society, Tacoma.**



**Figure 3: Copper prospectors staked Elliot Creek fairly early. This group dates from about 1906.  
Photo courtesy Anchorage Museum of History and Art, Anchorage**

Pack horses and sleds transported the materials initially required to equip the mill site, but the company recognized that it would need a railroad to move its ore. One would have to be built.

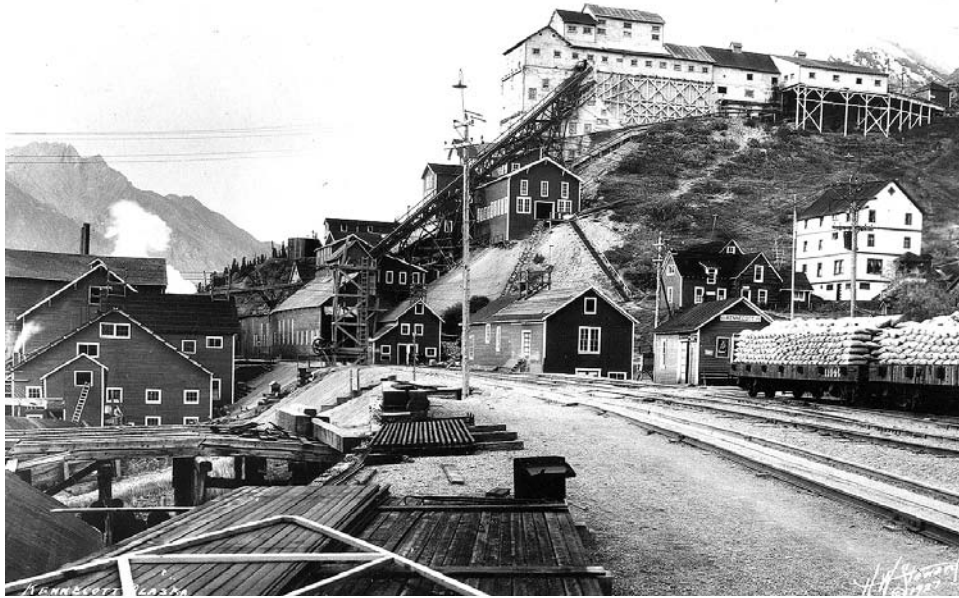


**Figure 4: The Copper River and Northwestern Railway crossed the Copper River three times. This photo shows construction of the second crossing—the so-called Million Dollar Bridge—in 1909.**  
Photo from author's collection.



**Figure 5: Laying track east of Chitina in 1910**  
Photo from author's collection

High prices during the First World War spurred production, and Kennecott's mines and mill operated around the clock. Output, however, slowed during the 1920s as copper prices declined and high-grade sources were depleted.



**Figure 6: The Kennecott Mill Town reached its zenith in the late 1920s. This shot dates from 1927. Photo from author's collection.**

Things grew worse in the 1930s. Copper prices fell to five cents a pound in 1931, and although Kennecott dropped its expensive leaching process, it still lost \$2 million. The destruction of the bridge over the Copper River caused additional problems in 1932. The company suspended local operations, but reopened in 1935. That recovery, however, was only temporary and it shut down permanently in 1938.

During its 30-year stay in the Wrangells, Kennecott recovered more than 4.5 million tons of ore. When smelted, this yielded nearly 600,000 tons of copper and 9,000,000 ounces of silver--and, most importantly, a net profit of around 100 million dollars!

Predictably, Kennecott's success inspired further regional exploration, and much occurred in the Kotsina Basin. Cap Austin Lathrop's California-Alaska Mining Company held important claims near the mouth of the Kluvesna River, while the Hubbard-Elliott Company controlled virtually all of Elliott Creek, one of the Kotsina's lower tributaries.

The completion of the Copper River and Northwestern Railway in 1911 encouraged companies to develop other nearby copper prospects. Coppertown, also located in the Kotsina drainage, was one of the more elaborate operations. It served as headquarters for Benjamin Millard's Galena Bay Mining Company, which worked the Mullen claim for much of the decade.

Despite widespread efforts, few non-Kennecott-controlled properties ever produced much copper. Of these, the Mother Lode Mine, situated on the east side of Bonanza Ridge, was certainly the most successful. Three others produced smaller amounts. These included the Green Butte Mine, on McCarthy Creek southeast of the Mother Lode; the Alaska-Chitina Copper Company's Westover property at the head of one of Dan Creek's eastern tributaries; and the Alaska Copper Corporation's operation on Nugget Creek, a northern tributary of the Kuskulana River.



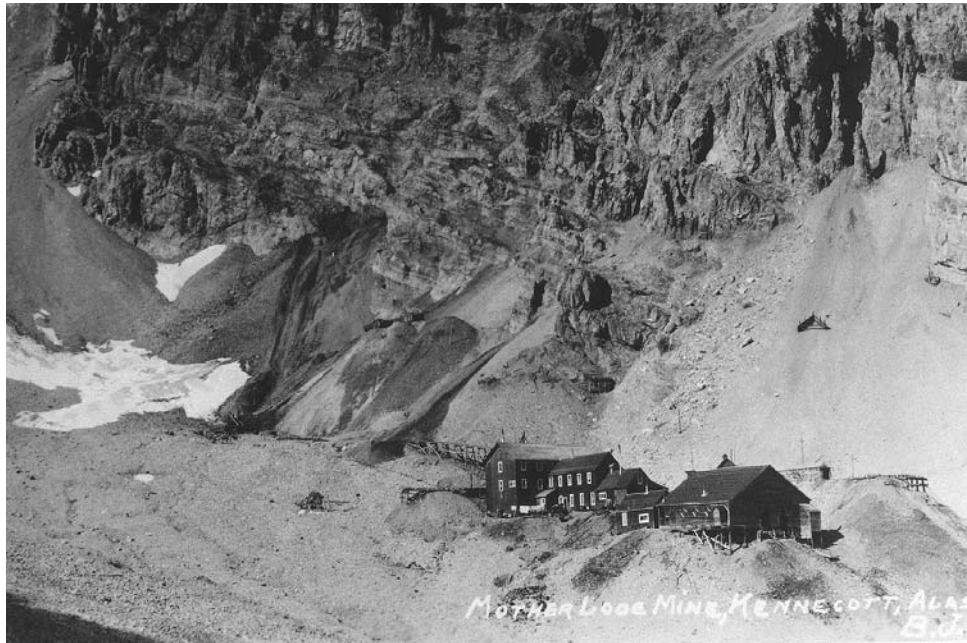
**Figure 7: Looking down the Green Butte's aerial tram to the main camp, c. 1928.**

**Photo courtesy Special Collections Division,  
University of Washington Libraries, Seattle**

Ole Berg's North Midas Copper Company established a fairly sophisticated operation on another tributary of the Kuskulana, but while this property was originally staked as a copper prospect, its high gold content really drove its development. Improvements there included an aerial tramway and a 25-ton-per-day mill.

A few companies continued operating through the teens, but the decline in copper prices following World War One forced many to end production. The North Midas, for example, was temporarily closed, and the Mother Lode was incorporated into Kennecott.

After 1931, Kennecott controlled virtually all regional copper development. Work, however, eventually slowed there as well, and in 1938 the company closed its mine and abandoned its railway. While some local exploration continued through the 1970s, the Wrangell's never produced any additional copper.



**Figure 8: Mother Lode Mine was located across Bonanza Ridge from Kennecott.  
Photo from author's collection**



**Figure 9: The Westover Mine was situated in a glacial  
cirque at the head of Boulder Creek, a tributary of Dan Creek.  
Photo courtesy Milnor Roberts Collection,  
University of Washington Libraries, Seattle.**

Prospectors first entered the Nizina Basin early in the Klondike rush, with one group detecting gold traces on Dan Creek in 1899. Although those initial finds were too small to justify development, Clarence Warner and Dan Kain staked much of the drainage in 1901.



**Figure 10: Placer miners, like these on Dan Creek in 1916, often used pressurized water to move overburden off the bedrock.**  
Special Collections Division,  
University of Washington Libraries, Seattle

Further discoveries quickly followed. In 1902 outfits headed by Frank Kernan, Charles Koppus, and M. T. Rowland explored many nearby streams, including Chititu Creek. Reports of those finds soon reached Valdez, generating considerable excitement and even a brief stampede.

After the initial enthusiasm waned, miners found that most of the claims in the district were unprofitable for an individual to work. As a result, by 1912 two outfits had consolidated the most productive holdings: the Nizina Mining Company, managed by George Esterly, held Chititu Creek, and the Dan Creek Mining Company, managed by Howard Birch, the younger brother of Stephen Birch, controlled Dan Creek.

Both locations yielded large quantities of gold during the teens and twenties, but, beginning in the late 1930s, their production drastically declined. The closure of the Copper River and Northwestern Railway in 1938 and war-time restrictions on mining, hurt them even further. Some mining, however, continues at Dan Creek.



**Figure 11: Miners built several large camps on Chititu Creek.  
Photo courtesy Crary Collection,  
Anchorage Museum of History and Art, Anchorage**

Prospectors reached the upper Bremner River relatively early, with Guy Banta, Pete Monahan, and Angus Gillis locating the district's first placer deposits on Golconda Creek in 1901.

From 1902 until 1910 most of the mining occurred just below Standard Creek, about four miles from the head of Golconda. Miners initially employed "boomer" dams to remove the overburden and shoveled the remaining gravel directly into their sluice boxes.

As in the case of the Nizina district, a few miners soon consolidated most of the claims. In 1911 the Golconda Mining Company optioned the property, but never recovered much gold.

From 1913 until 1926, miners largely ignored the district, but in 1927 the Ramer brothers located a promising lode above Golconda Creek and began a concentrated effort to develop it. Their Bremner Gold Mining Company equipped the site in 1934 and 1935, constructing a camp and installing two tramways, a hydroelectric plant, and a fifty-ton Marcy mill.

Asa Baldwin began developing the nearby Yellow Band Group in 1936 and acquired the Ramers' property the following year. He spent the rest of the decade trying to ready his extensive holdings for production. Although he clearly planned to continue, the onset of World War Two delayed his efforts and then his premature death ended them altogether. Baldwin's company never resumed operations.





**Figure 12: Early placer miners used self-emptying "boomer" dams, like this one in the Bremner district, to remove overburden.**  
Fred Moffit Collection, U.S. Geological Survey Photo Library, Denver



**Figure 13: Asa Baldwin's Yellowband Mining Camp in the Bremner District, c. 1938.**  
Photo courtesy Sylvia Baldwin, Kailua, Hawaii

N. P. Nelson, Billy James, and Matilda Wales made the Chisana district's first placer discovery near the mouth of Bonanza Creek in May 1913, but it was the find made by James and Wales a few days later and a couple of miles upstream that really put the place on the map. Reports of their strike generated tremendous excitement and precipitated Alaska's last great gold rush.



**Figure 14: Billy James and Matilda Wales at camp on Little Eldorado Creek, 1913.**

**Photo courtesy Fred Best Collection,  
Alaska State Library and Archives, Juneau**

In the beginning at least, a small area was indeed pretty rich. That July a four-man crew using hand-mining methods on Little Eldorado no. 1 recovered nearly 200 ounces in just two days. During the 1914 season, that single claim yielded about 3,250 ounces--around \$52,000 worth of \$16 gold or, figured at today's prices of around \$650 an ounce, more than two million dollars.

As the most productive mining areas in the Chisana district were all above treeline, its main camps developed down below. The first, called Bonanza City, was founded at the mouth of Bonanza Creek, but timber there was soon exhausted and the miners were forced to look for a better spot. That fall they established a second town site, soon called Chisana City, on a wooded bar near the mouth of Chathenda Creek.

The district's first cold weather provoked an exodus of stampeders, with some bartering their outfits to finance their passage home. Although mining activity dwindled, Chisana City continued to grow. By the middle of October, nearly all town site lots had been staked and the village contained about two hundred cabins.



**Figure 15: Bonanza City, c. 1914**  
Photo courtesy Lewis Stanley Collection,  
Alaska State Library and Archives, Juneau



**Figure 16: Chisana City, 1914.**  
Photo from author's collection

At the beginning of the 1914 season, Fletcher Hamshaw leased the district's most productive properties and established a camp on Bonanza Creek at the mouth of Little Eldorado. Concentrating his efforts nearby, he engaged a crew which at times approached a hundred men.

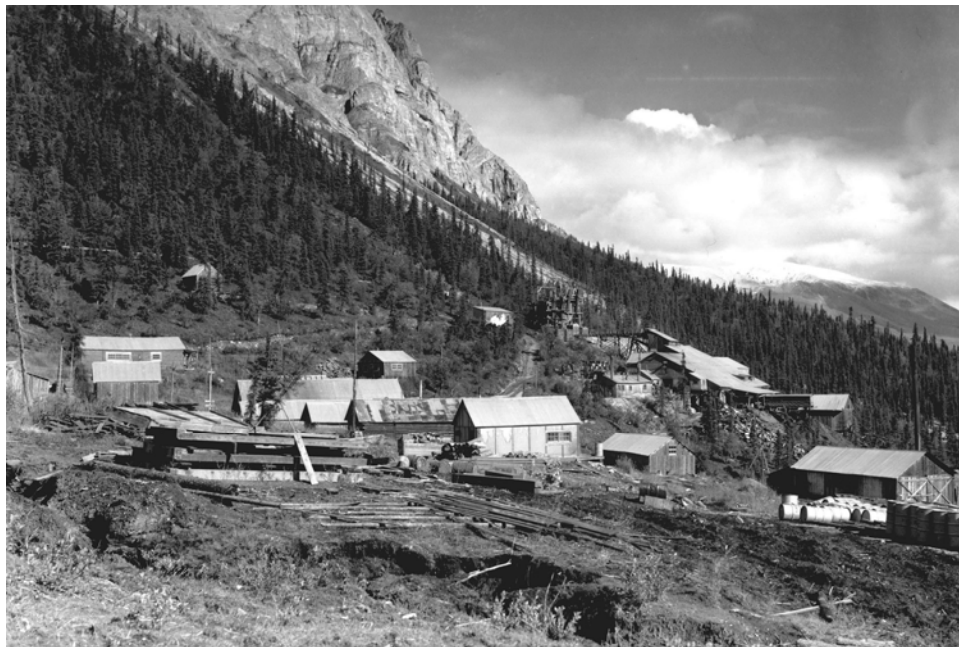
By the early 1920s, even the most profitable claims were nearly exhausted. No significant recovery occurred until 1934, when the construction of a road linking the Richardson Highway and the nearby Nabesna River greatly facilitated local transportation. Although technological advances encouraged exploration, the federal government's nearly 70 percent increase in the price of gold was even more significant, creating substantial incentives to mine.

As the 1930s ended, the Chisana district's production again began to fall. That accelerated in 1942, when America's War Production Board closed most of the nation's gold mines. Many companies fought the order, and the government eventually allowed some to operate, but most Chisana operations closed. The majority of its miners were now simply too old to work their claims without the help of younger labor.

Mining resumed in 1945, though on a far smaller scale. It continues today.

As was the case in the Bremner, miners reached the Nabesna region relatively early. One group led by K. J. Fjeld discovered a quartz-gold lode on Jacksina Creek near the head of the Nabesna River in 1899. Unfortunately, as remote lodes were then virtually impossible to develop, Fjeld ignored the find and continued searching for placer deposits.

Following construction of the Valdez-Eagle Trail at the beginning of the century, Fjeld returned to the region, staking both gold and copper claims. In 1905 he formed the Royal Gold Mining Company in order to develop the property. The firm continued its effort for several seasons, but suspended operations about 1914 and allowed its claims to lapse.



**Figure 17: Nabesna Mill Site, 1938.**  
Photo courtesy T. W. Ranta Collection,  
U.S. Geological Survey Photographic Collection, Denver

While prospecting in the Nabesna district continued, particularly around Orange Hill, no one had much success until Carl Whitham began re-examining White Mountain in the early 1920s. Convinced that the Royal Development Company had abandoned its efforts prematurely, Whitham prospected nearby and in 1925 located a rich new exposure.

Whitham spent the early 1930s developing his property, installing a tram, crusher, ball mill, and classifiers. By 1936 his mill, which was run by Phil Holdsworth (who later served as the state of Alaska's first commissioner of natural resources) was processing around 25 tons per day .

The Nabesna Mine was extremely productive between 1934 and 1938, but output slowed later that decade, and World War Two ended it altogether. Although relatively short-lived, it was still a very profitable venture, yielding nearly \$2 million worth of \$35-an-ounce gold--more gold, in fact, than was produced during the entire life of the Chisana district!

Attempts to extract local minerals brought lasting change to the Copper Basin. While relatively few ventures were financially successful, even the more marginal efforts radically changed local life. Such development expanded the economy by creating the region's first genuine opportunities for wage labor.

Mining permanently altered the area's demography as well. Expanding opportunities soon attracted additional people. Copper Center, Chitina, McCarthy, Kennecott, Nabesna, and Chisana were all established by or for miners.

Although most local sites are long abandoned, mining continues in several locations. Here, a few persistent miners continue their predecessor's quest--ever searching for that one rich strike.