A Visitor's Guide to

McCarthy & Kennicott

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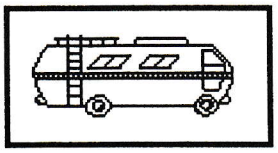
THE McCARTHY ROAD

Beginning at the Copper River and ending at the Kennicott River, the McCarthy Road spans approximately 58 miles. For the most part, it follows the roadbed of the **Copper River and Northwestern Railway** which was constructed between 1908 and 1911. For 27 years the 196 mile railway carried copper from the historic Kennicott mining area to the coast at Cordova. The last train pulled into Cordova on November 11, 1938. What is now called the McCarthy Road is a portion of that momentous construction project!



The rails and ties were eventually removed for salvage. Culverts were set in place and the road graded in the 1960's. Even though the road has been slowly upgraded since then, it is **still a dirt road, narrow in places, and requires caution - especially around curves.** Be sure to include a reliable spare tire for your vehicle. The facilities along the road are minimal, and old railroad spikes are known to surface on occasion.

If you would like to try fishing, stop at the following lakes: Strelna Lake - Mile 10 - has Silver Salmon, Kokanee and Rainbow Trout. Silver Lake - Mile 11 - has Rainbow Trout. Sculpin Lake - Mile 12 - has Rainbow Trout, Silver Salmon, and Kokanee.

One of the major attractions - or "distractions" to some - is the Kuskulana River bridge at Mile 16. Built in 1911 it spans a 283 ft. gorge on the **Kuskulana River**. The approximately 600 ft. steel bridge received major improvements in 1988. New decking and metal guard rails were added.

Another major historic attraction is found at Mile 28. To the north of the road, you will see what is left of a railroad trestle. Near the base of the old trestle, is a small, modern bridge built in 1990 that spans the **Gilahina River.**

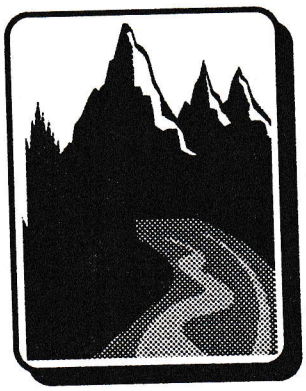
At Mile 58 you will find for your convenience, two parking areas. One offers vault toilets and trash barrels.

Please respect the privately owned land along the McCarthy Road.

Whether you choose to fly or drive, our desire is for your visit to be a pleasant one. We hope you will discover a part of history that should never be forgotten!

Creeks and Rivers

There are two entirely different kinds of streams flowing in the McCarthy-Kennicott area. McCarthy Creek and the Kennicott River represent one type; they draw much of their water from melting glacier ice and carry a large load of silt and glacial rock flour as suspended sediment. The other type consists of the clearwater streams originating from springs. Examples of these are Clear Creek, National Creek, Bonanza Creek and Jumbo Creek. These latter streams run clear the year around except during unusually heavy rains or the peak of spring snowmelt.



The glacial streams, like many in Alaska, are subject to erratic floods. Snow and ice melt peaks in July and turns such streams into raging torrents. The Kennicott River in addition is subjected to the annual outburst flood from glacier-dammed Hidden Creek Lake located along the west margin of the Kennicott Glacier ten miles upstream from the terminus. This outburst flood usually occurs sometime in July, resulting in exceptionally high water that at times can inundate the lower parking areas at the roadhead and cut off access to the trams. McCarthy Creek, because it traverses the unstable landscape of a long valley downstream from its glacier, often carries a large load of non-glacial sediment.. The head of McCarthy Creek valley is a convergence zone for precipitation that can generate destructive floods during periods of heavy rain.

Campers along both streams should make allowances for sudden and unpredictable rises in water level. The silt- laden waters are poorly suited for drinking, though they can be used in an emergency when collected in a container and given a chance for the coarser sediment to settle out.

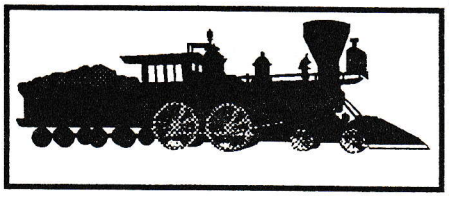
Owing to local geology, the clearwater streams carry "hard" water with a substantial dissolved mineral content that precipitates readily as scale in the bottom of teakettles. In fact, nearly all of the nearby clearwater streams cross private property and are regularly used by residents for domestic water supplies. For the benefit of all, please avoid camping near or polluting these streams. Some critical areas are posted against camping to help minimize contamination.

In the Beginning...

A brief history of the McCarthy & Kennicott area

The year was 1900. Jack Smith and Clarence Warner, two prospectors, spotted a large green spot on the mountainside between the Kennicott Glacier and McCarthy Creek. What looked like a patch of green grass turned out to be one of the richest deposits of copper ore ever found!

Stephen Birch, a young mining engineer looking for Alaskan claims in 1901, was approached by Smith to make an inspection of his findings. Eventually, Birch got the backing of men such as the Guggenheim brothers and J.P. Morgan who bought the existing claims. In 1906 Kennecott Mines Company was formed, which later became Kennecott Copper Corporation. (The mining company was supposed to take the name of the glacier which was named after Robert Kennicott, an early Alaskan explorer, but the company name was misspelled. The town and glacier are spelled Kennicott but the mines and company are spelled Kennecott.)



The next hurdle was to transport the copper ore from the mines to the coastal town of Cordova, where it would be shipped to Tacoma, Washington, by the Alaska Steamship Company for smelting. Michael J. Heney, a master railroad builder, was called upon to oversee the construction of the Copper River Northwestern Railway. Construction began the Spring of 1908 at Cordova and stretched 196 miles to the Kennecott mines.

The CR & NW, though jokingly called "Can't Run and Never Will," did run; in fact, it transported approximately 200 million dollars worth of copper ore.

The town of Kennicott began to grow quickly until there were 300 people in the mill camp with 200 - 300 miners up in the mines about 3 miles away. A hospital, a store, grade school, dental office, dairy, and bunkhouses were built along with other buildings needed for the mines' operations. A recreation hall was provided which served the residents with a variety of entertainment. There were town dances, Christmas festivities, winter basketball games, picture shows, an ice-skating rink, ball field, and a tennis court to name a few! Kennicott was a company town with a reputation as being very proper and containing strict conduct rules.

Meanwhile, down the hill about 5 miles another town was being born. McCarthy, which was originally called Shushana Junction but later renamed, was also growing into quite a miners' and railroaders' town. Restaurants, pool halls, hotels, saloons, two newspapers, a dress shop, a photography shop, garage and auto repair shop, shoe shop, hardware store, and others sprung up. They provided services to more than 800 people in the area.

Because the Kennecott Copper Corporation couldn't compete with the falling prices of copper, they officially closed down the mines in 1938. Train service was also discontinued. November of the same year the last train left Kennicott for Cordova taking most of the remaining people.

A few years later the Company did an amazing thing! They voluntarily gave the CR & NW right-of-way to the federal government in 1941. It was given for the purpose of creating a public highway -- a gift to the people of Alaska.

Today, Kennicott and McCarthy are privately owned. They are surrounded by the Wrangell-St. Elias National Park and Preserve which was established in 1980. The area has about 35 year-round residents with more arriving for the summer tourist season.

Are Glaciers Privileged?

A visitor arriving at the banks of the Kennicott River finds a peculiar piece of landscape immediately upstream. Jumbled piles of rocks, sand, boulders and gravel are heaped everywhere as though they had been deposited by enormous earth-moving machines. This is the terminus (lower end) of the Kennicott Glacier. The rock piles are not really rock all the way through, but rather are ice hummocks mantled by a surface layer of debris ranging in size from fine silts and sands to boulders the size of a small house. Here at the terminus, the finer materials typically lie up to about a foot thick over the ice. On some of the steep faces of the hummocks the debris may be less than an inch thick and dark ice can sometimes be discerned underneath. The debris-covered ice of the lower glacier is a treacherous surface for walking. The rocks are loose and slick ice can easily by exposed by an unwary footstep.

If this is a glacier, where is the bare ice? There is plenty of it further upstream where the Kennicott Glacier originates on the flanks of Mt. Blackburn and other surrounding peaks. At higher altitudes, some of each winter's snow accumulation survives summer melt and piles up century after century to form glacier ice. Under the influence of gravity, this ice flows down the mountainsides, where various stream coalesce to form the long valley tongue of the glacier. Moving glaciers collect rocks. Some are scoured from the glacier bed and walls, generating finer sand, silt and rock flour in the process. Some are dumped on the surface by rockslides and snow avalanches. Coalescing ice streams produce a lot of erosion at their junctures, the resulting rocks being carried along the main glacier as stripes of surface debris separated by "streets" of clear ice. These stripes are called medial moraines.

At lower altitudes, the winter snow entirely melts away each year, exposing the glacier ice to heat from sun, wind and rain.

Some of the ice carried down from higher altitudes thus is lost each year. The farther down the glacier one gets, the more rock debris accumulates on the surface. Finally, in the lowermost reaches of the glacier, the entire surface is covered with such debris and the underlying ice is no longer visible. This mantle of debris is called a surface moraine. Because the mantle is uneven and summer heat seeps unevenly through to the ice, this kind of a moraine forms an unstable surface which soon develops a chaotic texture of hollows and hummocks. A visitor approaching this glacier on foot, at the terminus or along the margin while strolling from McCarthy to Kennicott, sees only the end-producet, a chaotic, rock- covered surface. A flightseer can see the whole process lain out from start to finish. A short climb up the mountainside above Kennicott gives a good overview of the lower glacier and the evolving surface moraine.

The lower Kennicott Glacier has been thinning for many years. This means that the flow of ice down the valley has been inadequate to replace that lost to melt. Within the last decate, the lowermost couple of miles of the glacier have thinned to the point where there is insufficient pressure at the glacier bed to sustain sliding. This part of the glacier has come completely to rest. The ice now simply sits there and slowly continues to melt underneath its mantle of rocks.

First-time visitors to this area sometimes interpret the rock piles of the surface moraine as left-over debris dumped by the Kennicott mines, expressing dismay at the effects of mining on the landscape. Once they learn that this is all the work of the glacier, the dismay vanishes. Glaciers, it seems, are indeed privileged to revise landscapes on a scale that makes mining activities appear puny in comparison!

How to use the trams

The Kennicott River trams were constructed in 1983 by local residents, with financial help from the state of Alaska. Please use extreme caution, and if you see any problems please report them to the museum, one of the lodges, or the shuttle bus driver.

It is **far** easier to sit in the tram car and have someone pull from either end than it is to sit in the car and propel yourself. If waiting passengers pull you across, return the favor by helping pull the next passengers.

Don't pull too fast or ram the car against the tram platforms. Slow down as the car approaches a platform and let the passengers signal a stop.

If you want to use a tram and the car is standing idle on the opposite side, pull on the **upper** rope to bring it across to you.

Brackets on the outside of the tram cars, originally installed to transport sheets of plywood, are a good place to hang rucksacks and bicycles. Tie on the odds and ends of gear with safety straps and hold on to small kids!

Please don't overload the trams. They are not designed to carry heavy weights. ATV's and motorcycles are strictly prohibited, for experience has shown they cause the most damage.

Area Weather

Month	Maximum	Minimum
January	33	-46
February	48	-41
March	46	-20
April	54	-7
May	67	15
June	82	26
July	84	37
August	72	25
September	61	6
October	52	-15
November	33	-23
December	36	-33

All data 1992

The ***McCarthy/Kennicott*** area enjoys some of the nicest weather in the state of Alaska, being shielded by the *Wrangell* mountains to the north and the *Chugach* range to the south. To be sure, winter temperatures can be quite extreme, but normally the cold weather is accompanied by calm dry air.

If your visit is in the summer months, be prepared for **warm sunny days and sometimes chilly nights.** (What night there is in the summer!) It is not uncommon for temperatures to fall below freezing sometime during every month.