# THE

**THE FEW RESIDENTS OF KENNICOTT AND McCARTHY, ALASKA, LIVE IN RELATIVE SOLITUDE AT THE END OF THE McCARTHY ROAD.**

road into the historic copper mining towns of Kennicott and McCarthy, which happen to lie in the center of Wrangell-St. Elias National Park, starts routinely enough at the confluence of the Chitina and Copper rivers, about 180 miles east of Anchorage. The road exits the community of Chitina (pronounced "Chit-na"), charges across the Copper River on a steel and concrete bridge, then rears up and paws the ground. A cluster of cautionary signs warn, "Bridge out," "Drive at Your Own Risk," and "Watch out for Loose Spikes."

The road follows the Chitina River to the east, hobbling over the abandoned road bed of the Copper River & Northwestern Railway. Sixty-two miles and three spine-wrenching hours later, the road fetches up at the Kennicott River, deep in the rawboned wilds of Alaska. Across the two arms of the river, and the island that separates them, lies McCarthy and, five miles farther along, the barn-red ghost town of Kennicott. Together, they account for 40 registered voters, but in winter the population drops to about 11 souls.

From 1911 until 1938, when the mines shut down (dwindling ore reserves outdistanced by a vast copper strike in Chile), CR&NW locomotives freighted more than $200 million worth of copper across the Kennicott River and out to the port of Cordova. The railroad and subsequent bridges long since washed out; you now cross the Kennicott by pulling yourself hand-over-hand above the water in a two-person, open cable tram. You walk the few feet across the island and repeat the process on the second tram.

Over the river you find McCarthy—less a town than a collection of cabins and the occasional wooden storefront laid out in streetwise fashion under tall poplar trees. In mining days, McCarthy supported several hundred people and a boisterous social life for the miners who lived and worked in the company

# END OF THE

**BY SARAH EPPENBACH**

KIM HEACOX/ALLSTOCK

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BONANZA RIDGE RISES BEHIND THE OLD COPPER MILL (LEFT); CROSSING THE RIVER BY TRAM (ABOVE).

# MINE

town up the hill. Now the citizenry consists of a few painters, photographers, glaciologists, teachers, pilots and dog-mushers who prize ther solitude and sense of place. There's a small museum, a sometime-store, and Ma Johnson's Hotel, dating from 1916, which offers five small, plain, rough-sided rooms and a bath down the hall. The McCarthy Lodge across the street—another period piece with moose racks over the windows and a saloon inside—serves as the focal point of the community.

Gary and Betty Hickling own McCarthy Lodge, Ma Johnson's and the bunkhouse next door. Gary was working construction on the North Slope when he saw an ad for the business. He sent $100 to hold the place and the whole family went to look. "You don't know what you're getting into," advised Betty's Italian mother—correctly assessing the likelihood of operating a profitable business in a place whose access depends upon bush plane and funky cable car. But then she happened to leaf through an old issue of *National Geographic.* It featured Alaska, with a photograph of Kennicott, and also her native city of Trieste, with a photograph of the castle in which she was married. "Do it!" she instructed. "It's a good omen."

The Hicklings mortgaged their Wasilla home to buy a backhoe and sold their Camaro to buy fuel for what turned into a family business. Betty's mother took over the kitchen (great lasagne)—the lodge averages 30 dinners a night in July. One brother, Frank, mans the Anchorage telephone and comes out every other week with perishables. Another brother, John, runs a string of horses for rides along the old, sun-dappled wagon road to Kennicott or up to Bonanza Ridge, and three-day pack trips into the country around McCarthy Creek.

"Gary was sick of going to the Slope," explains Betty, in a game attempt to rationalize the decision to buy the lodge. "We started with nothing. Three years,

and we're breaking even. In five years we should be doing OK."

BREAKING EVEN in a place like McCarthy—with no reasonable public access, much less public water, power, sewer or telephone—takes up a powerful amount of time. Gary Hickling spends two days a week bringing in supplies from Anchorage. He leaves McCarthy after the bar closes at 1 or 2 A.M., drives all night, catches a couple of hours' sleep, and does the shopping. Then he turns around, stops for another couple hours, and arrives back at the river about the time the staff comes on in the morning. He figures every load of freight requires six man-hours to move it across the river.

Bob and Babbie Jacobs' company, St. Elias Alpine Guides, runs backpacking trips into Chitistone Canyon and other corners of Wrangell-St. Elias National Park, as well as guided treks through Kennicott and onto the nearby Root Glacier. They trammed 95 loads last summer, including 200 pounds of M&Ms. Gary Green and Kelly Bay of McCarthy Air haul 4,000 gallons of fuel every year to drive the Cessna 180 and SuperCab they use to drop off hunters and backpackers and fly sightseers around the park. In late fall, after the tourists leave and before snow makes the McCarthy Road impassable, a tanker truck delivers the fuel to storage tanks at the edge of the river. After freeze-up, the two men and their wives smooth a road over the ice, pump the fuel into 55-gallon drums, sled the drums to the airstrip by snowmachine, and transfer the fuel into more storage tanks. The whole business takes about three weeks.

MCCARTHY IS LESS A TOWN THAN A COLLECTION OF CABINS AND OCCASIONAL WOODEN STOREFRONTS.

The absence of regular communication precludes anything resembling normal business practices. The mail, for instance, comes on Wednesdays. Radio-telephone service costs an arm and a leg. If you need to get word to someone in Kennicott or McCarthy, you're better off sending a Clatter, which is to say, you call a message into KCAM radio in Glennallen. The station reads the message on "Caribou Clatters," the Bush telegraph, airing at 7:20 A.M., 12:20 P.M., 5:20 P.M. and 9:10 P.M. daily.

RICH KIRKWOOD, WHO owns and operates the 12-room Kennicott Glacier Lodge on the edge of the former mining and milling complex, uses the supply and communications problems as an elaborate excuse to fly. He parks his Cessna 180 at the McCarthy airstrip. When supplies get low, he flies to Chitina, where he keeps a van, and makes a grocery run into Anchorage. He flies the goods back to McCarthy in two or three runs—ample time to study the gaunt faces of the brash, young mountains, the coursing glaciers, the tangled skeins of the Chitina River, and the Dall sheep and mountain goats that graze in close proximity. The back of his T-shirt says, "Alaska is What America Was."

Kirkwood, who bears a decided resemblance to Steve McQueen, came from Illinois with a degree in mechanical engineering and traveled around Alaska looking for a spot that fit his image of the place. He looked at property in Chitina and found himself drawn to the end of the McCarthy Road. During that winter of 1975, the temperature in McCarthy bottomed out at 59 below zero. "There were lots of new experiences," Kirkwood says. "Subsistence is quite boring. If all you've got to say at the end of the winter is 'I survived,' I'm not very impressed." But he learned that he wanted to live in Alaska.

A year later, the Great Kennicott Land Co., a limited partnership of about a dozen people who had acquired the real estate holdings of the Kennecott Copper Corp. (spelled differently from the place, due to a long-ago error), sold some of the buildings. Kirkwood bought two of the small houses. Another of the properties, originally a five-plex to house staff families, opened the following year as Kennicott Glacier Lodge. When the owners reorganized, Kirkwood bought a one-eighth share in the business.

NOBODY IN MCCARTHY or Kennicott likes to talk very much about what happened in 1983. Early in the morning of March 1, mail day, a computer programmer-turned-Kennicott-drop-out named Louis Hastings knocked on the door of the cabin belonging to Christopher Richards, with whom he had spent the previous evening amicably playing board games. When Richards motioned him inside and reached for the coffee pot, Hastings drew a handgun and grazed him in the head. Richards escaped to a neighbor's cabin, but before the sun set on the anguishing day, Hastings had murdered six people. Two days after the killings, someone discovered he had also set fire to Kennicott Glacier Lodge. All that was left was a black hole in the snow.

For the residents of McCarthy and Kennicott, the loss was far greater than good friends and neighbors gone, because Hastings killed their illusions. Not even the end of the McCarthy Road, evidently, was far enough to escape the dark side of humanity.

"When the Hastings thing happened this community closed up like a flower," Kirkwood recalls. "Everybody just retreated into their shells. People were numb. There was nothing happening, no businesses ... that wasn't the vision that I held for this place."

Kirkwood came down from his job on the North Slope and started over with a new corporation. He spent three years creating a marketing plan, then went to every bank in Alaska about financing to rebuild, without success. "Finally I just said, 'To hell with it, let's go do it,'" he says. "The worst call was, you just continue to work on the Slope for five years." Two months before opening day, June 15, 1987, they were still taping the Sheetrock. His parents flew in from Phoenix and stained the doors and trim.

From the new red-and-white lodge, built to meld into the rest of Kennicott, you follow the railroad tracks into the heart of the mill camp, where 300 employees once lived and worked. The wooden structures stand empty and mute: hospital building (one of the best in Alaska in its day), store, machine shop, power plant, workers' bunkhouses, managers' homes on "Silk-stocking Road." The 14-story concentration mill dwarfs them all, cascading in tiers toward the gravel-covered tongue of Kennicott Glacier and the bare-ribbed mountains beyond. Weathered and tired, the buildings bend to the land. Their angular skeletons form bold sculptures against the deep blue Kennicott sky.

Betty Hickling believes Kennicott to be haunted. "I never walk around that city and not feel there's someone there," she says. "It feels like a positive presence, but it feels like something that needs to be filled in."

INCREASINGLY, SUMMER visitors fill the emptiness around Kennicott. Four years ago, Alaska Heritage Tours began offering packaged trips from Anchorage. The tourists travel the McCarthy Road by 10-passenger van, tram the river, and stay at Kennicott Glacier Lodge. Alaska Sightseeing Tours also brings in groups.

Every year, too, the national park (established in 1980 by the Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act) attracts more hikers, backpackers, and wildlife viewers. With 13.2 million acres (the size of six Yellowstones), four mountain ranges, nine peaks over 14,000 feet, and all of Alaska's big-game species, the nation's largest and wildest park won't stay quiet for long. Hunters tend to enter the park by the northern route, the Nabesna

MCCARTHY FROM THE AIR (LEFT); MCCARTHY LODGE (BELOW) SERVES AS THE COMMUNITY'S FOCAL POINT.

GEORGE HERBEN

Road. Most recreational users fly in or drive to McCarthy.

Within the next few years, the National Park Service will likely take over the remaining holdings of the Great Kennicott Land Co. as well. If the sale goes through—contingent upon the cost of hazardous-waste removal (e.g., from the ammonia-leaching plant and asbestos insulation) and a Congressional appropriation—the Park Service intends to preserve and manage Kennicott as a ghost town and visitor destination.

Kennicott and McCarthy residents, not all of whom appreciated waking up one morning to find themselves in the middle of a national park, ponder the ramifications of these developments. Rich Kirkwood thinks the Park Service presence in Kennicott would be a positive step, and not simply as a means of preserving the rapidly deteriorating buildings. "We've been dealt a hand by the federal government that puts us in the center of the largest national park in the country," he says. "Maybe that's a raw deal by some people's standards, but I feel it's a heck of an opportunity... what I would like to see here is a small community. If we could support 25-50 people, I think that would be ideal. We've had a lot of good people who have come here, who have ended up having to leave because they couldn't make a living."

But how to capitalize on the opportunity without losing the very essence of the place? So far, the road and trams act as a brake, discouraging the sort of large-scale tourist facilities that line the approach to Denali National Park. What happens when the crush of Denali's summer visitor load—20 times the number at Wrangell-St. Elias—spills out of the Alaska Range and into the Wrangell Mountains? Suppose the Park Service takes over the road? "At least if it's a state road, you can call up your legislator and yell at him," says Betty Hickling. "If it's a federal road, who are you going to call, the president?"

"The question is, what the heck do we do?" asks Ben Shaine, founder of a nonprofit educational and research organization that operates out of the old hardware store in McCarthy. "You've got 30,000 acres of non-federal land in the middle of the largest national park in the country; you've got a viable, permanent community of residents; you've got a state-owned road right in the middle... So you've got an enormously difficult, complex, long-term challenge."

This summer Shaine's Wrangell Mountains Center will bring in Joseph Sax, a Berkeley law professor (author of *Mountains without Handrails: Reflections on the National Parks*) specializing in policy questions regarding communities locked within national park boundaries. His mission will be to help the two communities and the Park Service find a path through the minefield of critical issues, beginning with the matter of access.

"The access defines a whole series of qualities," says Shaine. "It's a powerful landscape, to scientists and poets both.

KIM HEACOX/ALLSTOCK

You can feel the power that's inherent in the landscape, because of the way the community is constructed, socially and physically. You are separated from the culture from which you come. And the pivotal point, the symbol of that separation, is the Kennicott crossing—the trams." ▲▲

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*For additional information write: Wrangell-St. Elias National Park and Preserve (907-822-5234), P.O. Box 29, Glennallen, AK 99588; McCarthy Lodge/Ma Johnson Hotel (907-376-1154), P.O. Box 870393, Wasilla, AK 99687; Kennicott Glacier Lodge (907-258-2350), P.O. Box 103940, Anchorage, AK 99510; St. Elias Alpine Guide (907-277-6867), P.O. Box 111241, Anchorage, AK 99511; Alaska Heritage Tours (907-696-8687), P.O. Box 210691, Anchorage, AK 99521; Alaska Sightseeing Tours (800-426-7702), 4th & Battery Bldg., Suite 700, Seattle, WA 98121.*