LURE OF THE COPPER COUNTRY

From the top of Michigan’s Upper Peninsula, a lonely arc of land descends into Lake Superior. The country is a world of towns and nature, of forty south woods against a backdrop of steel blues. Roads traverse the shoreline, trail winds through forests. Among the scenery of overgrown, overbuilt, overgrown—exists the Keweenaw’s industrial age. Back then the towns were commercial routes, and the shafts shrank, stamp mills, and smelters charred our copper dust and history. The structure, their setting, and stories of the mining life are preserved and protected at Keweenaw National Historical Park.

THE BUSINESS OF MINING

In 1844 removal of mass copper in the Keweenaw Peninsula spurred one of the first nation rushes in the United States. Copper was mined for its use in everything from guns to civil- wars to railroad ties. Prospectors looked for productive mines in the Keweenaw and found them right about there. In 1893 new ships listing at St. Joe, Marine, Keweenaw Lake, and Lake Huron, opening canals and European markets to Keweenaw copper. This Civil War and the increasing growth and industrialization of America’s cities encour- aged many companies to outfitted mines in the region. Eastern stockholder’s financial and directed most of these operations. Earnings not invested in mining properties went to Boston, New York, and other distant cities.

By the 1870s the Copper Country was coming in name and producing over three-quarters of the nation’s copper. At that time, the ample land and congested deposits in the control part of the peninsula were the most probable. The most valuable were those north of the entries. Most of these deposits were the Quincy and Calumet &2 School property company, mining copper required a large workforce. Company-constructed towns and provided them and their families with houses, schools, hospital, and libraries. They donated land for churches and parks, and encouraged the development of bands, shops, and other businesses. By 1910 the region’s population reached over 100,000 and over 500,000 called the Keweenaw Peninsula home. Towns formed from pioneer settlements into bustling industrial communities as their mining operations expanded.

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SHOP: Copper

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FROM ROCK TO INGOT

Two conceptual scenes document the steel, labor-intensive process of producing copper for export in the late 1800s and early 1900s. In the block diagram at right are the underground opera- tions. At left, top to bottom, are the surface operations. The accompanying photographs were taken at Keweenaw mining companies.

COPPER FORMATIONS from the sea an ultramafic solidified into deep within the earth. The earth’s movements created three types of copper ore. Archeological investigations reveal that copper arranged by both miners and managers, but the bitter disputes left lasting resentment. The Great Depression and World War II added to the precarious situation. Mining became more expensive as shafts grew deeper. Labor disputes multiplied, another stories that companies could no longer sustain. The Keweenaw focal meeting of companies and copper’s market value fell. By 1848 no mine on the peninsula had closed their doors, ending one of North America’s longest and most profitable mining eras.

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Keweenaw Past and Present

Old World Keweenaw

“Here is a large community peopled by foreigners,” wrote a visitor to Calumet in 1887. Jobs in the mines—and hardships overseas—brought thousands of immigrants to the Keweenaw between 1845 and 1914. Experience in mines first came from Cornwall, England, and from Ireland and Germany. Later immigrants arrived from southern and eastern Europe as well as China and Lebanon. In 1880 Calumet public schools taught children from over 30 countries. People brought the old ways with them: Finnish saunas, polka music, and, often, on an Eastern European sweet nut. They came with faith, too. The number and denomination of churches reflected a community’s ethnic diversity. Many groups formed mutual aid organizations like Calumet’s Slovenian Catholic St. Joseph Benevolent Society, established in 1883. Many people worked first dreary hours to work in the mines, but they found ways to return to more traditional occupations. Some generated new income: Italian grocers imported linens and other silk and French Canadians on salesman’s and laborer’s coils. With the mines’ decline, economic depression and hardship compelled many to move to cities like Detroit and Chicago. Yet the thousands who left saw their experiences’ first homes in a new world.

Preserving Keweenaw’s Heritage

Local residents feared the loss of their heritage as they witnessed the demolition of mining, milling, and smelting structures in the 1970s and 80s. Many looked toward preservation as the answer. Establishment of national historic landmarks during the 1980s recognized the region’s significance. Believing more was needed, residents persuaded Congress to create Keweenaw National Historical Park in 1992. The park preserves and interprets sites, structures, and stories related to copper mining on the peninsula. The National Park Service works closely with local governments, educational, and public and private entities. A permanent advisory commission helps with operations and coordination of partner activities. You can have been drawn to the Keweenaw for education and recreation. Once here, you discover that the Copper Country’s history is intertwined with its wealth of natural beauty. Past and present meet in unexpected ways and in unexpected places.

Planning Your Visit

Keweenaw National Historical Park is in Michigan’s Upper Peninsula about 108 miles northwest of Marquette, MI, or 62 miles north of Houghton, MI, on US 41 and 2 miles north of Copper Harbor on US 2. The park is accessible via US 41 from Red Wing, MN, and from Baraga, MI, on US 2 where it becomes US 41. The Houghton County Memorial Airport (HCO) Charter bus service is also available. Service rates are: 1-5 passengers – $30.00, 6-10 passengers – $45.00.

The Park Units and Keweenaw Heritage Sites

The national historical park preserves two large-scale mining complexes. Quincy Unit near Calumet preserves the basics of the industrial process and its technologies of copper mining. 12 miles north, Calumet Unit features local, ethnic, communal, and company-plain aspects of the Calumet & Hecla mining community.

The Keweenaw Visitors Center offers information year-round. The Quincy Unit has a seasonal information desk.

Sousa and his orchestra. $1,200 for plays, operas, and entertainers like John Philip Sousa and his orchestra.

Above: Calumet Visitor Center facilities and educator. Right: C&H identification badge. Employees used them to check for ship building; mining; fencing; and industrial equipment and raw supplies. Above background: Tamarack Mine, whose early operations included 1,200 for plays, operas, and entertainers like John Philip Sousa and his orchestra.

Most property in the two park units is privately owned. Please respect private property. Contact the park for current information. For a full list of regulations, including our firearms policy, call, or check our website. Keweenaw Heritage Sites are labeled in CPRPS visis.