

Using community and museum collections to interpret industrial history

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Keweenaw National Historical Park was established in 1992 to commemorate the heritage of copper mining in Michigan's Keweenaw Peninsula and to work with numerous cooperating sites to tell stories of the mines, machinery, and people who were connected to one of the country's first and richest mineral rushes. The park is in the center of the Keweenaw, a small peninsula that extends about 80 miles into Lake Superior from Michigan's Upper Peninsula. The two park units, Quincy and Calumet, encompass historic industrial, commercial, and residential structures and landscapes situated along the Copper Range, a belt of copper-bearing rock that forms the spine of the peninsula.

This paper focuses on a unique opportunity to use significant one-of-a-kind resources to interpret the copper mining industry in the Keweenaw Peninsula. The industrial landscape in the Keweenaw is scattered with remnants of the past, hinting at a golden era long passed. The area has changed little to the outside eye, but is undergoing transformation as local preservation groups join efforts with the National Park Service (NPS) to revitalize the area through preservation of historic structures, landscapes, and material culture artifacts used to interpret industrial history.

Setting

The Keweenaw Peninsula is a rugged piece of land that is surrounded by Lake Superior on three sides. Winter can last seven months, with lake-effect snow accumulating up to 300 inches. One had to be hardy to survive here, especially in earlier times when limited transportation and communication during the winter months cut people off from the rest of the world.

The first people to mine copper in the Keweenaw Peninsula were Native Americans who collected surface copper and worked mass copper with hammer stones. Euro-American mining began on a significant scale following the Treaty of La Pointe in 1842, when the Ojibwa peoples ceded their lands in the western Upper Peninsula to the USA. Wealthy capitalists from the East Coast invested in speculative ventures that proved fruitful for some, and the rush to the "Copper Country" began in earnest. A period of development followed and, by the 1870s, mining companies up and down the Keweenaw were flourishing. Copper mining reached peak production between 1870 and 1910. Calumet & Hecla Mining Company (C&H), located in the village of Calumet, was the most successful company and the largest U.S. producer of copper during the 1870s. Quincy Mining Company, situated on Quincy Hill, was not as large as C&H, but was active in deep shaft mining from 1856 to 1931.

These companies had to rely on their own ingenuity and resourcefulness to be successful in such a remote location. Engineers and designers were obliged to develop innovative mining and processing equipment to support mine operations that sought native copper more than a mile beneath the surface.

One can only imagine the grandeur of Calumet during its heyday in the early 1900s when streets were crowded with people from all over the world. This remote mining town was transformed into a thriving economic center with shops, streetcars, movie theaters, an opera house, and electric lights. As many as 32 different immi-

grant groups came to the Keweenaw to work the mines and provide various support services. Their distinctive languages, religions, customs, and habits transformed communities and resulted in a hugely diverse ethnic polyglot of people. Mining companies sought to control this diverse work force through paternalistic programs and service, including company-built housing and company-financed religious, medical, educational, and community facilities.

A bitter, year-long miners' strike in 1913-1914, and the high production costs associated with hard-rock mining, marked the beginning of a long decline. Readily available copper from open-pit mines in Butte, Montana, and Bisbee, Arizona, out-competed the Copper Country mines. In 1945, operations shifted focus from mining to copper reclamation by recycling nineteenth-century tailings until the last mining company closed its doors in 1969. Mine closings had a dramatic effect on the local population: in the township of Calumet, numbers diminished from 40,000 in 1910 to 7,000 today.

The area's population had begun to decline after 1910 when company operations began to modernize and miners were laid off in great numbers. When the mines closed, more people left the area, leaving behind an abandoned infrastructure that was not well suited for other uses. Economic decline was so pronounced that re-development was out of the question. Businesses closed their doors, and others that had been situated in Calumet moved south to the nearby larger towns of Houghton and Hancock. Today, although Calumet and the neighboring village of Laurium only hint at their former prosperity, there are plenty of elderly folks who stayed in the area who remember what it was like during the heyday. After three decades of decline, populations are on the rise in the Keweenaw Peninsula. The area is attracting preservationists who are purchasing abandoned historic structures for adaptive use. Development is also finding its way onto the Keweenaw, and once-abandoned mining towns are slowly being discovered.

Living laboratory

There are amazing quantities of families who have lived in this area for three and four generations. It is not uncommon to meet people who are living in the homes they were born in. A large number of elderly folks commute to warmer climes during the winter, yet they always return in the spring. Local people take pride in their heritage and the part they played in making their own history. In this sense, local residents are just as significant a resource as the material culture artifacts, structures, and historic landscapes they live among. The park has begun an active oral history program to preserve the history and stories surrounding hard-rock copper mining as it is remembered and told by community members, C&H employees, and their families.

There is an urgent need to capture information provided by the last two remaining generations that worked and lived in this area when copper mining flourished. Many interviewees are between the ages of 70 and 90 and the memories and stories they tell place local history in context and provide invaluable information to the community and researchers. Oral history information is also instrumental to park resource management goals, including interpretation, historical research, resource protection, preservation, and the rehabilitation of cultural landscapes and historic structures.

In addition to the people who comprise this living laboratory, there is a haunting industrial landscape all along the Keweenaw. Vestiges of a great mining era are present in the ruins of mine hoists and shaft houses, smokestacks, a large abandoned smelter complex, stamp mills, steam generating plants, and a reclamation dredge, in addition to structures that accommodated blacksmith shops, pattern shops, foundries, machine shops, and warehouses. Many historic structures are in various stages of deterioration, while local companies and businesses are adaptively using others of sound construction. Another component of the industrial landscape are large waste

piles of poor rock, slag, and stamp sand scattered throughout the peninsula.

Calumet & Hecla library

Keweenaw National Historical Park recently made a decision to purchase five historic buildings in an effort to preserve the industrial core areas of the park in the Calumet and Quincy units. All the structures retain architectural and historical integrity. Two of these structures contain furnishings from the time they were occupied by their original owners. The C&H library (built in 1898) was a gift from the company to the diverse immigrant mining community. It contained three floors of stacks full of multilingual books, periodicals, and children's books, and two large reading rooms. The basement level was dedicated to public baths. The structure survives as an example of corporate paternalism practiced by C&H in their efforts to secure worker loyalty.

The C&H library building ceased to function as a library in 1944, when C&H managers and technical staff occupied the building until the company closed in 1968. Since then successor firms have occupied the building, and, remarkably, have left the historic fabric intact. Over a period of 30 years, a number of furnishings and archival materials were removed from the building; however, enough still remains to successfully interpret the structure as a functioning library and public space. Some of the historic furnishings and artifacts remaining in the library today are large drafting tables, layout tables with built-in flat files, a light table, library tables and chairs, roll-top desks, and a walk-in safe full of records, paintings, and geological specimens.

Quincy Mine office building

The park has also purchased the Quincy Mine office building (constructed 1895-1897) located in the Quincy unit of the park on Quincy Hill. The 5,000+-sq-ft structure, built of cut, coursed red sandstone, was the main office building for the Quincy Mining Company, and served as its employee pay house. Unlike the C&H library, only the ground floor has been occupied since the mining company closed in 1969. Currently the building is home to the George Wright Society offices as well as those of the Isle Royale Natural History Association.

The second floor and attic have been left dormant since 1969. Even today, though many furnishings have been sold, and people have sorted through and removed items they perceived as having value, the second floor and attic still retain an incredible amount of material culture artifacts and records. Some of these include a blue-print machine, a photography lab, layout tables, drafting tables, a tracing table, bookkeeping desks, chairs, drafting tools and office equipment, two walk-in safes, boxes of records, blueprints, maps, framed prints, and artwork. All these materials were left in place when the company closed its operations, almost as if the workers simply walked away and never returned. The park could create a historically furnished mining office using these artifacts with little effort since most of the furnishings are still in the building. Records associated with the Quincy mine office (apart from those that have been retained in the building) are located at Michigan Technological University's archives in Houghton. These records provide the historical background for placing the artifact collections in context and open the door for developing educational programming about corporate management of a Gilded Age workforce.

A salvage project is currently underway to sort through the contents of the second floor and attic, to separate thirty years of debris from the artifacts, assess their condition of the artifacts, and document and catalog them into the park's collection. All artifacts must eventually be temporarily removed from the building while it undergoes exterior and interior stabilization.

Pattern storage warehouse

Another example of objects being left in place when a mining company closed is

the collection of C&H foundry patterns currently stored in a pattern storage warehouse located in a National Historic Landmark District in Calumet. C&H produced patterns from 1907 to 1968, accumulating an inventory of over 35,000. This one-of-a-kind resource representing mining industrial processes is severely threatened due to poor storage conditions. The wooden patterns were used to make molds from which industrial castings were produced. They range in size from a few inches square to ten feet in length, weighing up to 500 lbs. The pattern storage warehouse (built ca. 1885) has an internal roof drain that is failing. Water damage is a contributing factor for the collapse of a three-story internal shelving system that holds the patterns. Numerous patterns have water damage in the form of rot and mold, some patterns are split or broken, and many support the full weight of other patterns on the collapsed shelving. We believe there are over 10,000 patterns in the building; however, collapsed and rotting shelving prevent safe access and an accurate assessment of quantity and condition.

The significance of this collection is measured by its comprehensiveness, its condition, and its ability to contribute to the education of the public. The patterns are numbered and fully documented with design drawings located in the archives at Michigan Technological University and at the National Museum of American History at the Smithsonian Institution. Opportunities for using the patterns for interpretation have not been fully explored. The sheer quantity is a powerful statement about the scope of C&H operations. Individually, they are handcrafted works of art that retain the ability to explain many facets of mining technology, including power production, mineral extraction, ore reduction, preparation for shipment, maintenance, and replacement of equipment.

A project is underway to salvage the patterns from their present location. This involves renting heavy equipment to remove the patterns safely, constructing temporary shelving to house them, and employing a team of professionals to remove them so that their condition may be assessed before they are documented, catalogued, surface-cleaned, and stored appropriately. The C&H industrial pattern collection is unique in the USA in that it is one of the only remaining comprehensive collections of patterns specifically produced for a mining complex.

Preservation assistance and collaboration

This paper outlines a few of the opportunities that exist within park boundaries to develop educational and interpretive programming using material culture artifacts still located in their historic contexts. These opportunities will only be realized, however, through collaboration with local communities and park cooperating sites. This park is uniquely tied to a number of related state, regional, local, village, and township sites that all have one common goal—to educate the public about copper mining and life in the Keweenaw Peninsula. The park is a newcomer to the mix, having been established in 1992, although lack of funds the first five years meant there was no staff to develop programs. It is only recently that the park staff has expanded to an extent where we are able to collaborate more effectively, and also to provide more preservation and museum management services to the public and the cooperating sites.

At times, the glacial pace of federal planning, compliance, and budget processes frustrates local communities because they want to see results from the park after eight years of existence. The park is in an interesting position, representing the federal government within communities that were historically managed by corporate entities. We are in fact the most well-funded institution in the area, and this leads to perceptions that we are the only ones that can financially back a project, or save a collection or a structure. Federal dollars do get spread among community groups and cooperating sites; however, as park operations grow, competition for funds between our own projects and those of our partners becomes an issue. We need to develop criteria for funding community and partner projects, and coordinate these efforts

with NPS projects to maximize limited resources. We also need to communicate, using press releases and a park newsletter, the kinds of preservation programs and projects we are working on and have programmed for the future. It is clear that our identity and what we do mean different things to different groups within the communities. It is in our best interest to clarify to the public exactly the kinds of services we can provide.

Building relationships and establishing rapport requires a strategy and a calculated pace. One of our strategies focuses on preservation outreach through a series of programs open to the public on the care of collections. Our goal is to engage the local community and cooperating sites about the value of their own collections, and to demonstrate the kind of information, resource networking, and professional assistance we can provide. Another strategy is to hold regular meetings with the park cooperating sites to convey our program goals and any new developments or projects we are involved in. This is also an opportunity to see what the individual sites are doing and what needs they may have for training and collaboration. It is also critical that we visit each of our cooperating sites during their limited open seasons to gain a better understanding of the issues or preservation dilemmas they contend with on a daily basis. We need to share resources and expertise to achieve common goals. It will take time, but building strong relationships with park partners is critical to the success of using local historic resources to promote research and interpretive programming.

Summary

Interpretive programs have yet to be developed at Keweenaw National Historical Park, but we hope to hire a chief of interpretation during the next fiscal year. Our task is to lay the groundwork, not only by identifying collections, but also by developing rapport with members of the community and with park cooperating sites. Resources have been identified in the recorded memories people share, in the artifacts scattered throughout the industrial landscape, and in historic structures and the artifacts they contained—as well as in the minds and hearts of the residents who are proud of their history and want to share it. The Keweenaw Peninsula is fertile ground for using community and museum collections to interpret industrial history.