In the crisp chill of the Rocky Mountain dawn, the community of Bankhead roves to another working day. At the mine entrance, outside the lamp house, a hundred miners line up waiting to be issued their safety lamps before entering the mine.

As the sun nudges higher, the bustle of the town catches up with the pace of activity underground. Around the mine buildings and trade shops the air fills with noise, smoke, coal dust and the reek of hot tar.

Set apart from the industrial area, on a pleasant south-facing bench, the streets of the residential area are equally busy – shops open, children are hurried off to school, and wives set about the business of the day. Coal is king, and Bankhead is bigger and busier than the neighbouring tourist town of Banff.

Columbian ground squirrels have taken up residence among the ruins.
Boom Town

The Canadian Pacific Railway, eager for a cheap, reliable fuel supply between the Prairies and the Pacific, established the Bankhead Mine in 1903. Bankhead started strong. The market swallowed up everything the mine could produce and by 1905 the operation was in full swing. Around the mine the town grew quickly, stores, school and community facilities, and about 300 men worked underground and another 150 laboured above-ground. Coal production reached nearly 200,000 tons a year.

Up Against the Mountain

Even in the good times, mining Cascade Mountain presented a formidable challenge. The seams pitched steeply, following the folds and faults of Cascade's deformed layers of rocks. Mining here was literally an uphill battle. It involved driving tunnels into the mountain at successively higher levels to gain access to the seams. Main tunnels stretched for 50 km. With tunnels for ventilation and transportation, more than 280 km had to be excavated, making operations extremely slow and expensive.

Bankhead's coal was also brittle. As soon as it was exposed to the air, it began to crumble. Nearly half of it was classified as "dust." Combined with pitch imported from Pennsylvania, and compressed into briquettes, it made excellent heating fuel - but for use in locomotive engines, the briquettes had to be mixed with softer coal from other mines in Alberta. When the market for coal became unstable in the 1920s the high costs became more difficult to justify.

Defeat

Bankhead also suffered from the problem that beset the entire industry during this period - labour relations. Miners everywhere were striving for safer and better working conditions and higher pay. At Bankhead several strikes resulted in higher wages, making it even harder for the mine to pay its way.

In April 1922, the workers went on strike again in a labour action that involved much of the coal production in North America. All underground operations were shut down at Bankhead and by June the mine entrance had been sealed. The following year the power house and briquette plant closed. The strike was the last straw and the Bankhead Mine never reopened.

When the National Parks Act became law in 1930 it ruled out any future mining or logging in the parks. But the past remains our heritage.

Conservation and Heritage

In the early years, the park superintendent had welcomed the prosperity Bankhead brought and even considered the trim little town one of Banff National Park's tourist attractions. But although the closing of the mine was dictated by economy, it coincided with growing awareness of the value of the national parks in preserving parts of the Canadian wilderness.

Rediscover Bankhead

- Bankhead Interpretive Trail takes you through the heart of industrial Bankhead. You'll find signs along the way, exhibits in the old transformer building, and an old mine train.
- Upper Bankhead. There's little left to remind you that this was once the residential and social hub of the community. It is now a pleasant picnic and day-use area.
- C-level Cirque Trail (named for the upper-most level of the mine workings) starts at the Upper Bankhead parking lot. The 3.9 km trail climbs past fenced-in ventilation shafts and the skeleton of an old mine building, with superb views of Lake Minnewanka along the way. It is fairly steep so allow 1 1/2 hours to get to the cirque.

If you don't want to keep this brochure as a souvenir of your visit, please return it to the dispenser at the trailhead. This helps us reduce our costs. Thank you.