

Bankhead


Banff National Park

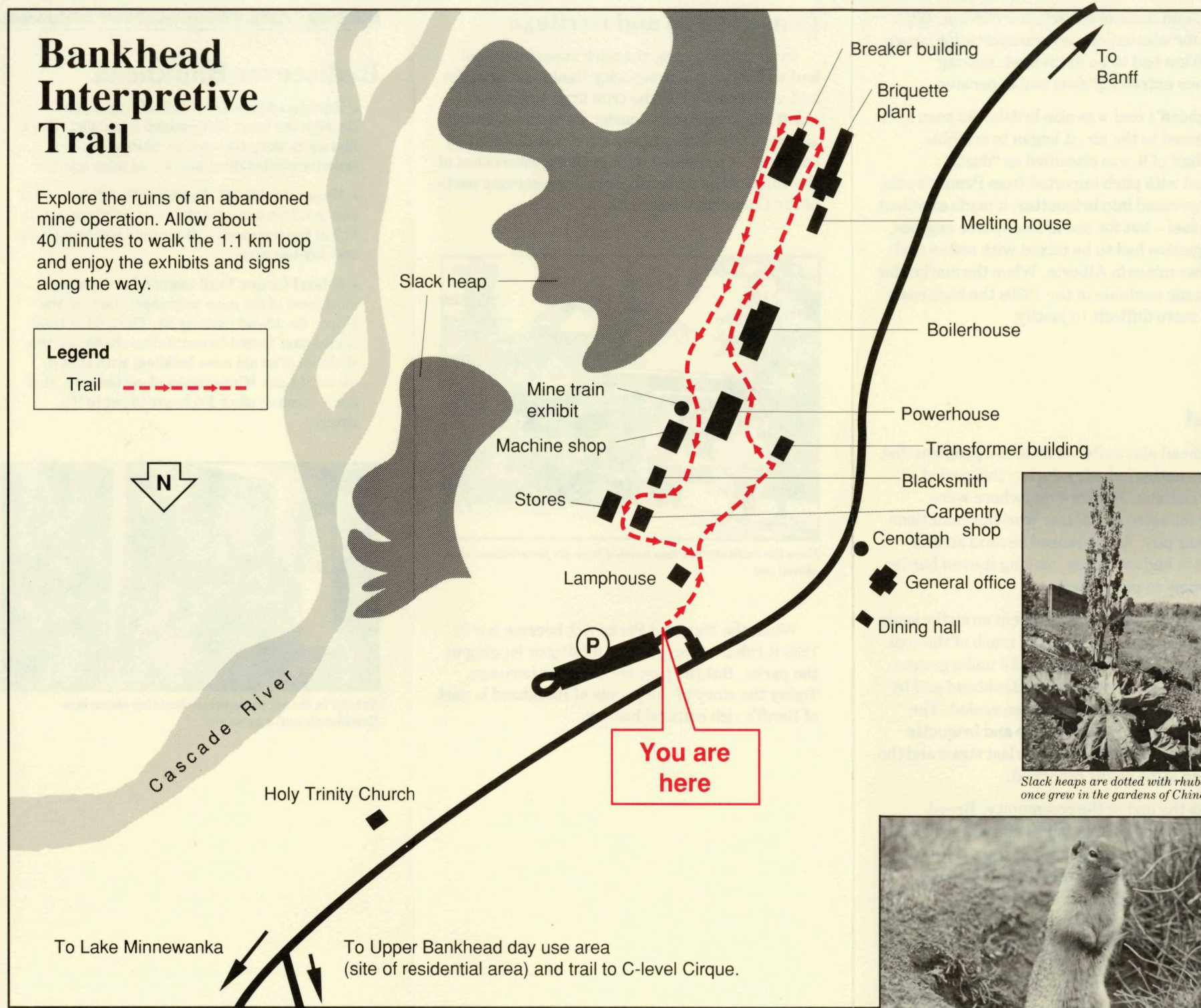


Bankhead Interpretive Trail

Explore the ruins of an abandoned mine operation. Allow about 40 minutes to walk the 1.1 km loop and enjoy the exhibits and signs along the way.

Legend

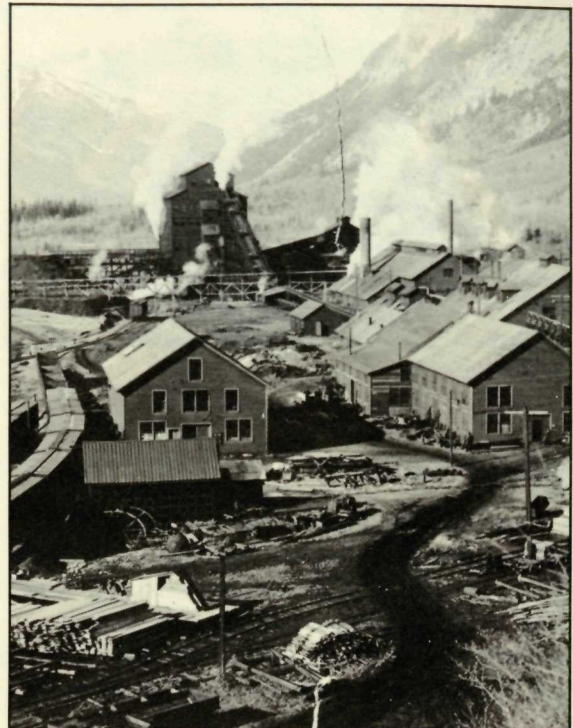
Trail 



Slack heaps are dotted with rhubarb that once grew in the gardens of Chinese workers



Columbian ground squirrels have taken up residence among the ruins



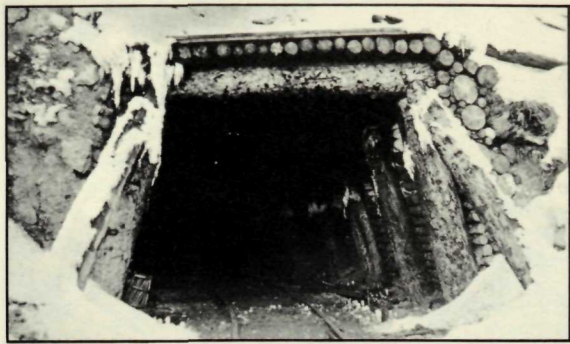
Industrial Bankhead in the boom years

Bankhead Morning, 1911

In the crisp chill of the Rocky Mountain dawn, the community of Bankhead rouses 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.



Mine entrance

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, dotted with mine buildings and trade shops, stores, school and community facilities, and about a hundred private homes. It was a forward-looking, thoroughly modern community. Bankhead's power plant produced all the electricity needed for mine and town, and enough to supply the town of Banff as well.

At the peak of Bankhead's prosperity, nearly 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 coal was there, and the deposits were rich – but 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 55 km. With tunnels for ventilation and transportation, more than 320 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.

It was the end of the community. Bread-winners sought work in mines elsewhere or left mining entirely to make a fresh start. Over the next few years, under orders from the park administration, almost everything was demolished, dismantled or relocated. Many of the homes and public buildings were moved to Banff or Canmore.

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.



Even the train station was hoisted from its foundations and moved out

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. Today the story of the people of Bankhead is part of Banff's rich cultural history.

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 uppermost 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 1½ hours to get to the cirque.



Exhibit in the old transformer building shows how Bankhead's coal was mined

Interviews with former Bankheaders and a wonderful collection of old photographs have been used to reconstruct what it was like to live and work in Bankhead. You may be interested in:

- **An Edu-Kit** for use by teachers and other group leaders. Includes a 20-minute film (16mm or VHS video format). Call (403)-762-3324, or write: Chief Park Interpreter, Banff National Park, Box 900, Banff, Alberta T0L 0C0.

- **Bankhead – The Twenty Year Town** by Ben Gadd. This attractive book, illustrated with black and white photographs, is published by the Canadian Parks Service in cooperation with the Coal Association of Canada. The book is available from The Coal Association of Canada, Suite 502, 205 9th Avenue S.E., Calgary, T2G 0R3. (Price \$9.95, plus \$3 for postage and handling.) Also available in bookstores in the Banff area.

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.

Produced with contribution funding from the Coal Association of Canada.
Aussi disponible en Français.

Historical photographs: Glenbow Museum (Calgary), Whyte Museum of the Canadian Rockies (Banff)

Published by authority of
The Minister of the Environment
© Minister of Supply and
Services Canada 1988
QS-W231-000-EE-A1

Canada