Lecture #1: Ghost Towns, Ghost Lands: In Search of Environmental History

Suggested Readings:

William Cronon, "Kennecott Journey: The Paths Out of Town," in Cronon, ed., *Under an Open Sky*, 1992.
Grady Clay, *Real Places : An Unconventional Guide to America's Generic Landscape*, 1994.
Stephen Harrison, et al, eds., *Patterned Ground: Entanglements of Nature and Culture*, 2004.
Douglas Cazaux Sackman, *A Companion to American Environmental History*, 2010.

Outline:

I. Defining Our Subject

this lecture is intended as a possible version of the "place paper" assignment that is the capstone of the course
we'll be asking you to pick a place you know well and care about and "read the landscape" to interpret its past
one important strategy for doing this is investigating the record of your place's past by discovering old documents that reveal what it looked like in former times: photographs, maps, newspaper clippings, diaries, memories
in a future lecture, we'll talk explicitly about strategies for finding such documents
but it's equally important in environmental history actually to look at the place you're studying to try to discover the traces of its past that still exist in the landscape you observe around you today
in today's lecture, I'll do this with a remote Alaskan ghost town
along the way, I'll offer a series of questions that can lead to unexpected insights not just about an Alaskan ghost town, but about any place or landscape that an environmental historian might try to study

II. The Ghost Town in Question: Kennecott

located in midst of Wrangell-St. Elias National Park, at the end of a 63 mile gravel road which was once a RR
in 1900, prospectors discovered above Kennicott Glacier one of world's richest lodes of copper ore: 70% pure
Stephen Birch, mining engineer, formed Alaskan Syndicate with $10 million of Guggenheim and Morgan capital from New York City, dug mines, erected mill town, and constructed railroad from Cordova on s. coast
1st copper shipment reached Tacoma, WA, in 1911, mine produced $200-$300 million of ore over 27 years
then: collapsed. mineral began to give out, copper prices collapsed in depression of 1930s, mines closed in 1938; Kennecott Copper Co. would outlive its namesake to become world's largest copper producer

III. The Meaning of Place: Asking the Questions Environmental Historians Ask

environmental history integrates 3 perspectives on past: ecology of people as organisms sharing universe with other organisms; political economy of people as social beings reshaping nature and each other to produce collective life; and cultural values of people as self-reflective beings trying to find meaning of lives in world
questions begin with environment: catalog of features that help define place: climate, soil, vegetation, etc.
danger of catalogs is apparent disconnectedness: task of environmental history is to find connections
how to connect people to their environment: one starting point is to ask what they eat: each article of food follows complicated pathways from ecosystem to dinner table to waste; not just physical but spiritual
Ahtna people who inhabited region before Kennecott existed: no boundary between people and animals, powerful spiritual connections, gift-giving relations crucial to success or failure of hunt: luck and bad luck
another place-defining question: how does place <u>cycle</u>, across hours of day, seasons of year? when is food abundant, when scarce, and how do people accommodate themselves to these cycles? effects on travel?
key choice of each human community: live upon the country (using local resources) or import from Outside: cf. Ahtna natives with Lt. Henry Allen's Army exploring party into Kennecott area: local vs. imported food
trade ties people in different parts of world to ecosystems in which they do not live: distant ecological effects
such linkages form new "paths out of town," and become powerful causal forces for environmental change
in Alaska, one consequence was destruction of fur-bearing mammals for fur trade; another was copper mining
at Kennecott, Lt. Allen brought new cultural conceptions of what copper meant: electricity, not decoration
along with ideas: introduction of new species, as when mining families at Kennecott planted alien garden crops
for Kennecott copper to be mined, it had first to be owned: systems of property ownership partitioned the landscape, turned parts of it into commodities, and made them available to be owned and sold: capital
because owners new mining company could conceive of land as capital, and because their own livelihoods did not depend on local resources, they could exploit land much more than Ahtna had done: use up copper
at Kennecott, human population that depended almost entirely on local landscape was invaded by human population that depended on local landscape almost not at all: converting copper to cash, massive effects
note also the subtler, more intimate effects on local landscape of mine: complex geography of class and gender
mines on hillsides above town, in bunkrooms whose residents were almost entirely working-class and male
Kennecott, called "Camp," dominated by middle-class managers and their families, subtle hierarchy of houses
McCarthy, the private town farther down the valley, sold entertainment and services to miners

IV. The Search for Meanings

contrast the images of two young girls gathering berries: for Swedish dessert, for Ahtna food, dye, medicine
Kennecott would not have existed without natural mineral, but its history hardly determined by nature: copper could not be exploited without discovery of electricity, growth of urban markets, rise of mining technology
never before could such a place have happened: complex spatial, historical, cultural linkages made it possible
it is now remote "wilderness," much sought after by backpackers & ice climbers, and that too is part of its story: conceiving the land as "wilderness" is as much a product of this history as are abandoned mines
environmental history looks at places and ideas, people and natural systems, and asks: what is their story?