

Where Was Park City and the Billings Smelter? — Part 1

by Paul Harden and Dr. Peggy Hardman

Once upon a time ... west of Socorro, there was the **Billings Smelter** and **Park City**. Just about every Socorroan knows that. But, where – exactly? And, many of us have probably explored the black slag heaps from the smelter at one time or another. But, where was the smelter – exactly? Or, Park City – exactly?

SCHS Board member Dr. Peggy Hardman wondered the same. After all, she lives in Dr. Robert Weber's former home on Evergreen Drive, built by the manager of the Billings Smelter in 1882. Joining forces with Paul Harden, the two gathered historic photos, old maps, and plenty of field work, to locate and document the location of the Park City locale.

Billings Smelter

Gustav Billings, a German immigrant, arrived in Socorro in 1882 and purchased the Kelly Mine for \$40,000 (about \$1 million today). Seeing the need for a local smelter, Billings began the construction of his smelter west of Socorro. It began processing silver and lead ores from the Kelly Mine by the end of 1883.

At first, ore was shipped from Kelly to Socorro by a fleet of ore wagons and mule teams – a huge operation in itself. By early 1884, Billings convinced the AT&SF to build a spur line past his smelter and to the mines at Kelly. By January 1885, the Magdalena branch line was completed, shipping ores to Socorro.

With the railroad bringing Kelly ore to the smelter, and delivering finished products to market, the

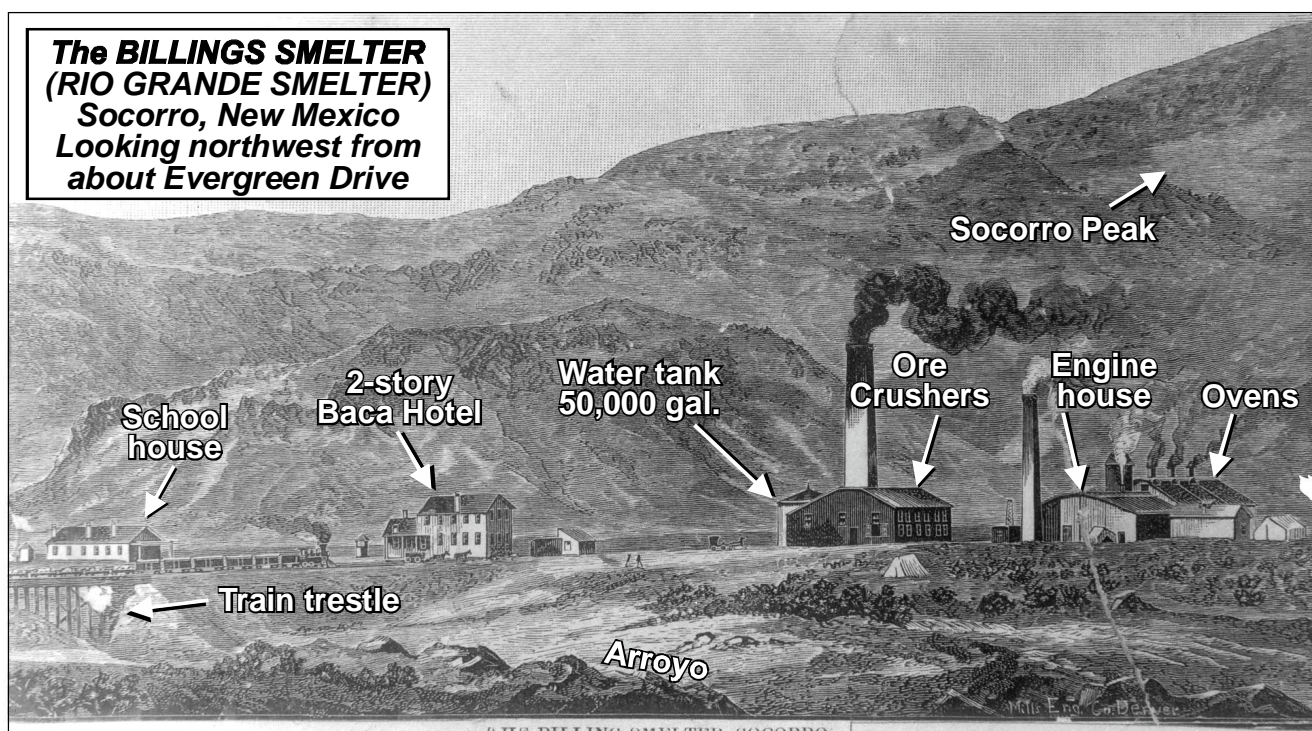
Billings Smelter became the largest smelter in New Mexico and quite profitable. Billings enjoyed this monopoly until 1887, when the Asarco Smelter in El Paso was built, though scarcely hurt his bottom line.

Park City

Around the smelter grew a town called Park City. By the late 1880s, the population was about 400 persons – miners, smelter workers, merchants, and their families. The small town included the two-story Baca Hotel, Park City Mercantile Store, and even a school house. Of course, miners and smelter workers (maybe even a school teacher or two) got thirsty, so the Park City Saloon, Palace Saloon, and the Smelter Saloon rounded out the town.

An early woodcut of Park City and the smelter (below), probably about 1884, only shows the two-story Baca Hotel and a few other structures. Photos taken by 1886–88 show a much more developed town with a business main street and several blocks of houses. Most buildings were wood structures, though the school house was a substantial single-story brick building.

By 1890, western ores became depleted. This forced many smelters to import ore from Mexico with a \$30 per ton tariff, causing profits to plunge. With the Billings Smelter still processing local ores from Kelly, not subject to the import tariffs, Billings' profits remained healthy and Socorro's boom years continued.

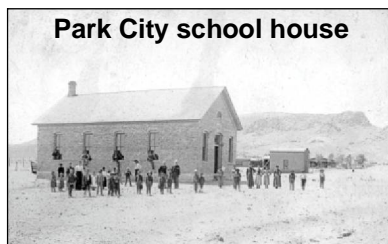


An old woodcut of the Billings Smelter, circa 1884-1885. Park City is scarcely developed compared to known photos circa 1888-1892. One of the images used by Peggy and Paul in locating the site.

Park City, circa. 1888
SCHS/Joseph Smith photo



In spite of record profits, the Billings Smelter suffered a devastating loss in 1890 when Gustav Billings died, at only 49 years of age, while on a trip to Germany. The



Park City school house

cause of death is not known. Control of the enterprise transferred to his wife, Henriette, who lived in Cincinnati, Ohio. For the next three years, the company remained profitable under Henriette and the local management and engineers. The name "Rio Grande Smelter" emerged during this era.

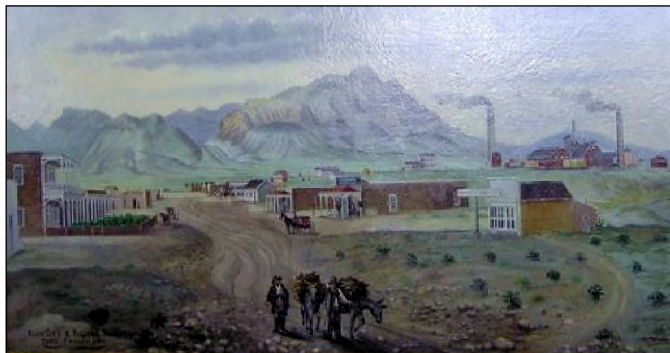
In 1893, the Sherman Silver Purchase Act was repealed. The price of silver plunged from around a dollar to 65 cents per ounce. At this price, there was simply no profit to be made. Silver mines and smelters closed across the country.

The Rio Grande Smelter held on until mid-1894, when it shut down its ovens and sent the workers home. The hope was the price of silver would quickly recover and the mines and smelters would soon reopen. This did not happen.

The closing of the Rio Grande Smelter was devastating for both Socorro and Park City. Billings' enterprises started Socorro's "boom years" – and now it had ended it. In the 11 years of operation, the smelter produced over \$15 million. Much of this money bolstered Socorro's economy through local employment, purchasing equipment and supplies, and business for the railroad. Overnight, the wealth that fueled Socorro's boom years had vanished.

Over the next few years, about 1,000 of Socorro's 2,600 residents moved on to greener pastures; Park City's population of 400 shrunk to only ten. The Rio Grande Smelter, and Park City, stood as an abandoned ghost town on the west side of Socorro for years.

Henriette Billings sold the Rio Grande Smelter to Asarco Enterprises in 1899, which brought hope to Socorro the plant would soon run again. However, Asarco had no intentions to reopen the smelter.



Painting of Park City by famous French artist Leon Trouset, September 1886. The original (and rare) painting is in the Socorro Public Library.

Instead, they removed the equipment and machinery to improve their smelter in El Paso, then later, razed most of the buildings. The once great Billings Smelter was all but history.

In 1904, Henriette also sold the Kelly Mine to the Tri-Bullion Smelting Co. of Chicago, which continued to operate the mine for many years for lead and zinc.

Shortly thereafter, much of abandoned Park City was dismantled by local people. How many buildings and homes in Socorro have her bricks, wood and windows? What remained was harvested in the 1930s Great Depression for fire wood.

By the 1960s, virtually nothing was left except foundations of the old smelter and piles of slag. In 1990, the area was declared an environmental hazard and a superfund site; much of the site was covered and capped in 1991, eradicating the few lasting remnants. Only a few piles of slag remain as a reminder (but some other goodies if you look close enough).

Mapping the Site

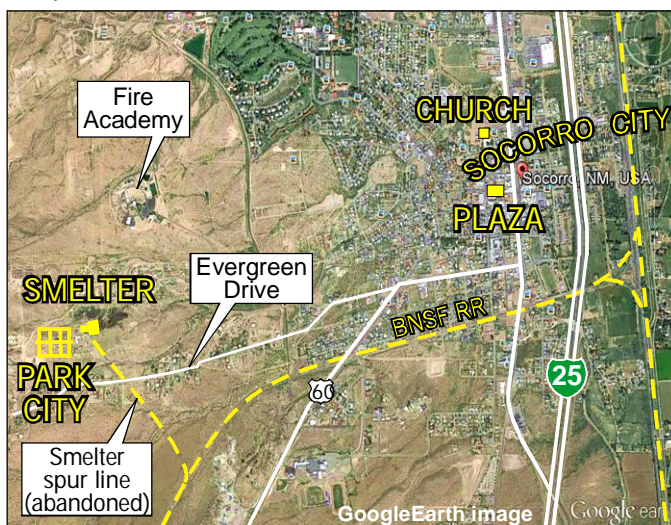
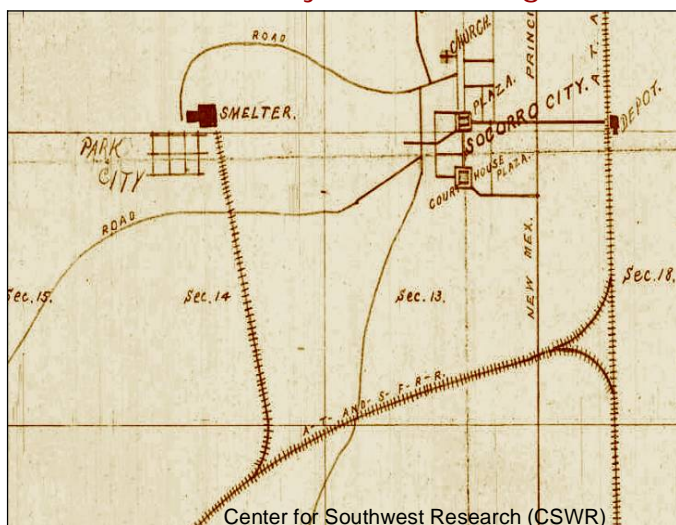
Paul and Peggy first used the 1886 Socorro Pueblo Grant map that shows the smelter, Park City and



Photo: Peggy Hardman

Some of the remaining slag piles east of the smelter.

Where Was Park City and the Billings Smelter? (con't)



A portion of the 1886 “Socorro Pueblo Grant” map (left), showing major landmarks, the smelter, and Park City, is imposed on a present day GoogleEarth image of Socorro (right) for general alignment of Park City.

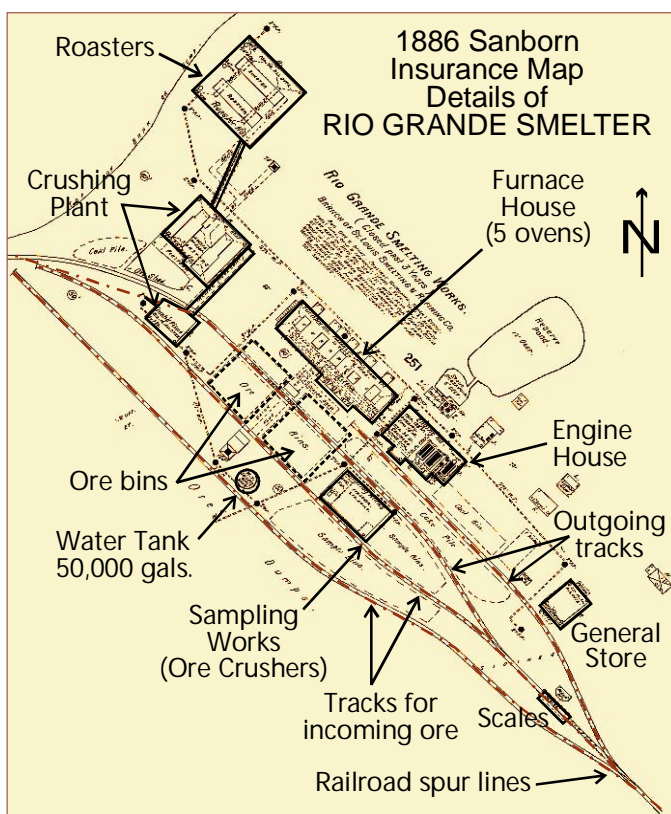
other features. Of interest is the old abandoned railroad spur line to the smelter, which is still easily seen on present day GoogleEarth images. (Map and image above). We easily found the old spur line on the ground, following it to the slag piles and smelter locale.

Next we used the 1886 Sanborn Insurance maps, which gives surprising detail of the smelter layout and buildings (map on right). With the old railroad grade identified, we were able to begin locating the major buildings just to the west of the slag piles. Several houses, belonging to two generations of the Armijo families, adjoins the site. It appears the western most railroad siding passes through their property. With permission, we gained access to this portion of the smelter site. The Armijos also explained railroad ties have been found buried on their property along with other artifacts. It appears the water tank was located in the corner of the northern most house.

We found several railroad spikes along the rail beds, though none with dates or foundry identification.

By now, we had a pretty good picture in our minds where the major smelter buildings were once located, though very little signs of remaining foundations. However, as we approached the location of the presumed location of the Foundry House and ovens, we found a large area of broken red bricks, seemingly verifying the area of the ovens. Historic photos show most of the building were wooden structures, though the ovens were obviously built of fire brick. We now had several locations confirmed of the smelter structures.

West of the bricks (oven area), two pieces of light rail were found. This was used for the 2-foot rail system for moving ore cars to the ovens and the molten lead to the molds.



South of the ovens, several piles of unidentified rusty metal parts and pieces of possible cement foundation piers were found, though nothing to positively identify the Engine House except the general locale within 20 feet.

Some photos of the smelter locale as they exist today are shown on the following page.

Part 2 of this article in the next newsletters continues with the discoveries of the Billings Smelter – and finding Park City, with additional photographs.

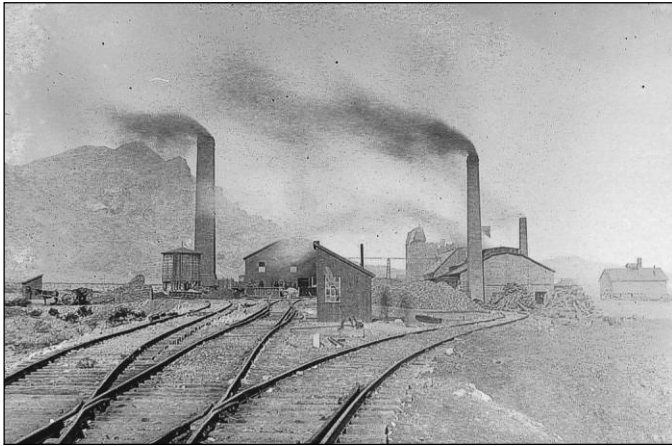


Photo: SCHS photo archives

Historic photo, looking north, of railroad tracks entering the Billings Smelter. Left tracks delivered ore from the Kelly Mine to be crushed and right tracks delivered finished iron ignots to market.



Photo: Paul Harden

About where photo on left was taken, Peggy shows one of the several railroad spikes found along the old railroad grade. Behind Peggy, the fence line runs down the center of the rail bed leading to the ore bins.



Photo: Paul Harden

Railroad Right of Way (ROW) to the Billings Smelter is still very visible from Evergreen Drive, looking north.



Photo: Paul Harden

Looking south from smelter site towards Evergreen Drive along the old railroad spur ROW. The arroyo cut, just past the fence, is where the trestle was located.

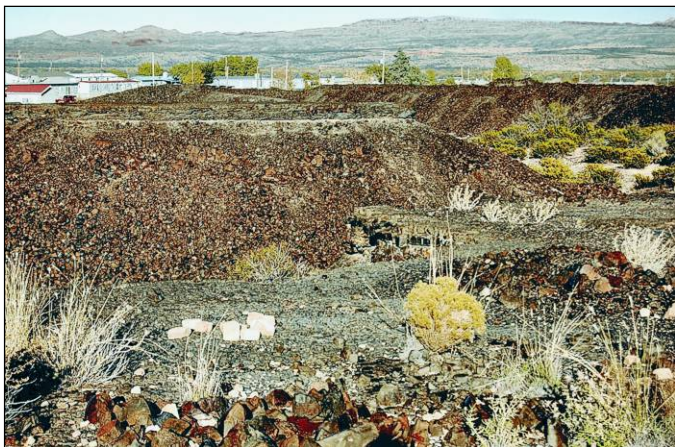


Photo: Peggy Hardman

Looking east at some of the slag piles from about the location of the Furnace house (ovens).

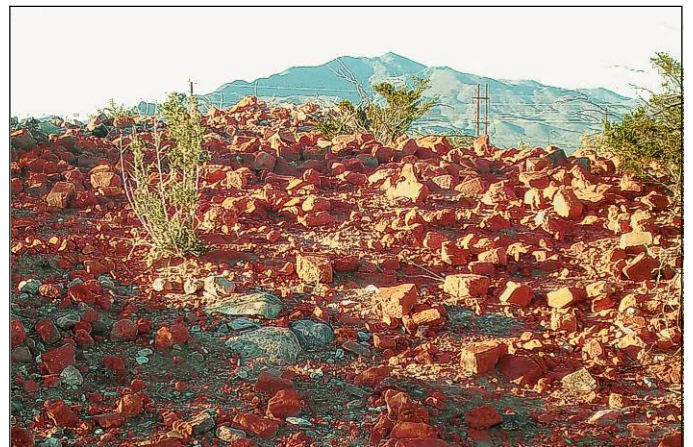


Photo: Peggy Hardman

A closer look at the brick pile through Peggy's lens. Most bricks are broken, a sign the ovens were razed, rather than crumbling on their own.

Where Was Park City and the Billings Smelter? — Part 2

by Paul Harden and Dr. Peggy Hardman

A general historical survey was conducted by the authors of the site of the old Billings Smelter and Park City. In spite of being abandoned for about 100 years, and much of the site covered and capped by a Superfund cleanup project in 1991, much of the smelter complex can still be located.

Part I Summary

Gustav Billings purchased the Kelly Mine and built his famous smelter west of Socorro 1882-1883. Profits made by area mines and the smelter was largely responsible for Socorro's "boom years." Hundreds of people were employed in the mines and at the smelter, spending large sums of money in Socorro County's businesses. Times were good. In 1885, the Santa Fe Railroad built the spur line to Magdalena to more easily and economically haul the Kelly ores to Socorro. Billing's Smelter expanded and profited even more due to the railroad.

The town of Park City grew just a stone's throw from the smelter to house the families of the workers, and with it, hotels, restaurants, mercantile stores, a school for the children, and of course, your choice of saloons.

Though Gustav Billings died prematurely in 1890, the business remained profitable under the ownership of his wife, Henriette, and local managers.

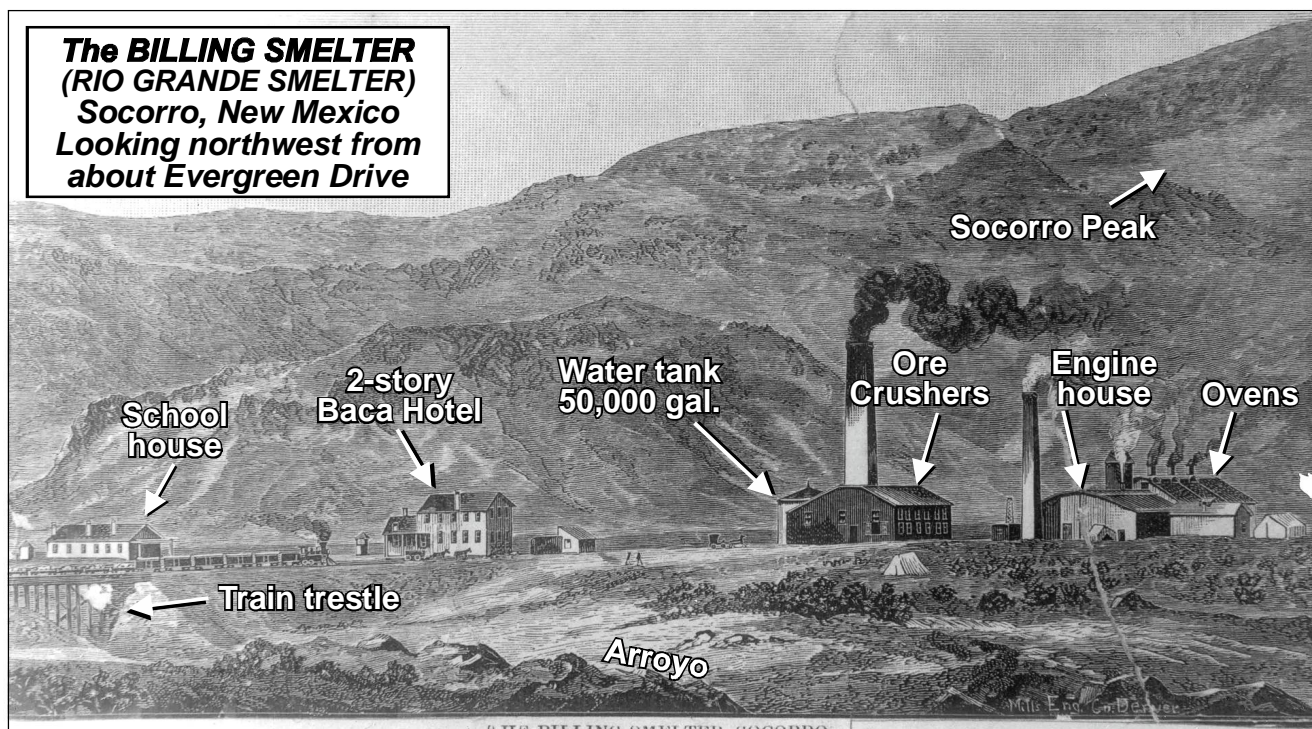
The year 1893 was the kiss of death for mining

throughout the west when silver was devalued, closing thousands of mines and smelters. In spite of this, Billing's Smelter, also known as the Rio Grande Smelter, continued to operate until 1894, when the furnaces finally went cold. The boom years were over; the industry that brought wealth and employment to Socorro were gone, and 2/3rd of the population moved on to greener pastures. Asarco Enterprises purchased the smelter in 1899, moving all the machinery to their smelters in El Paso, ending any hope of a renaissance.

Park City, and the smelter, stood on the west side of Socorro for years as an abandoned ghost town. The site was pilfered over the years until little remained. In 1991, the smelter site was declared a Super Fund site, with much of the site and slag piles covered and capped. Today, little remains of the site. The local sentiment is nothing is now left. However, Peggy and Paul proved evidence of its existence is still there if you look hard enough and in the right places.

Finding the Smelter

Photos in the SCHS collection, Sanborn Insurance and other old maps, and other items, were compared to current GoogleEarth images in an attempt to locate the smelter and Park City today. On the GoogleEarth images, the first feature that stood out was the old railroad grade to the smelter. A ground



An old woodcut of the Billings Smelter, circa 1884-1885. Park City is scarcely developed compared to known photos circa 1888-1892. One of the images used by Peggy and Paul in locating the site.

Where Was Park City and the Billings Smelter? (con't)

survey shows the old grade is still quite evident yet today. It exists north of Evergreen drive and stops where a trestle spanning an arroyo once stood.

The old grade continues north of the arroyo, skimming the back fence of the homes owned by the Armijo families, to the smelter site. It appears the 50,000 gallon water tank once stood in the northeast corner of the Armijo's backyard.

Much of what was found was described and accompanied by photos in Part I of this article. This included identifying the location of the Engine House, the furnaces, and the Crushing Plant. Additional photos are included at the end of this article.

Finding Park City

Finding Park City was a little more challenging as there is simply nothing left. The area has been leveled and the land owner was not available for permission to "snoop around." Still, we found several indicators.

Historic images of the smelter site show the location of Park City to be very near and slightly southwest of the smelter. Sanborn Insurance maps

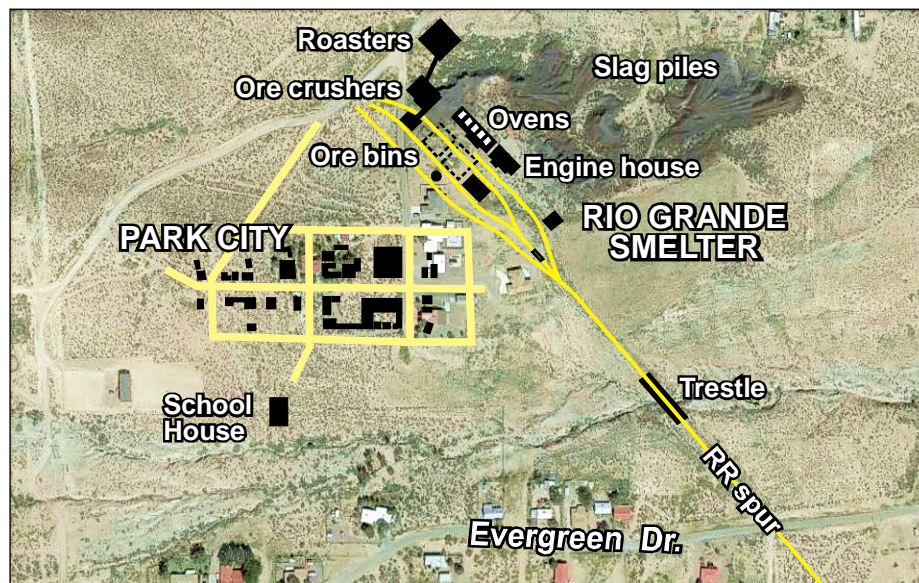
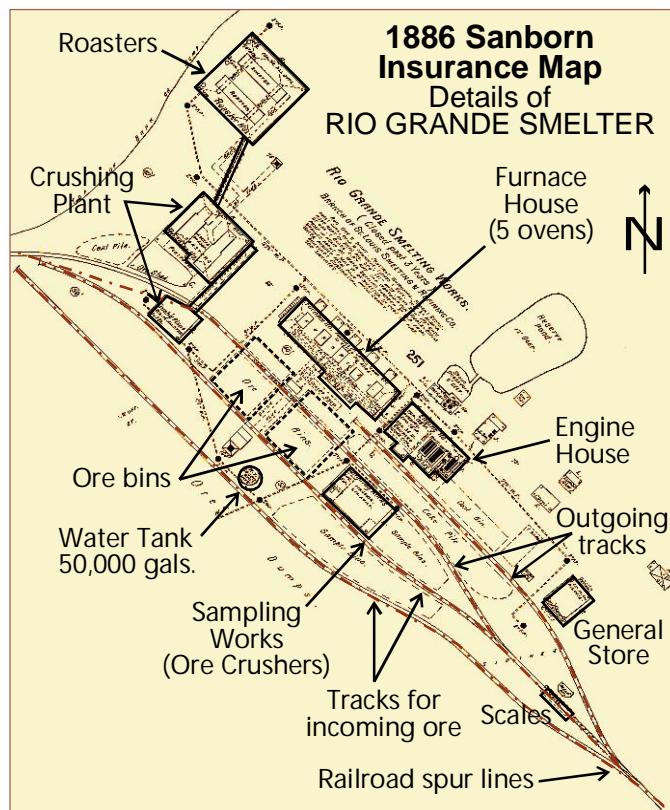
documents many of the buildings and the street layout, forming an area of six square blocks. This street pattern is vaguely visible on GoogleEarth. Park City's main street was called Calhoun Ave.

Images also show the brick school house to be nearly due west of the railroad trestle over the arroyo. Linear ground disturbance and some old cement pieces in the area are likely remains of the school-house, but nothing else was found.

There are two generations of Armijo's now living on the east end of Park City. The elder Armijo says their property has been in the family since his father owned it in the Park City days. He has paid taxes on the property since to keep it in the family. About the time of the Super

Fund cleanup in 1991, he decided to build a home on the site as a retirement home. A few years later, two of his sons also built homes on the property. When clearing the property to build the homes, they all have stories of finding railroad track, ties, iron molds, and the trucks to an ore car.

By the 1920s, Park City had been abandoned and Socorro in hard times for a generation. People in Socorro began to pilfer the homes and businesses in



The final product. Major structures of the smelter and Park City, from the Sanborn Insurance maps, are imposed on a present day GoogleEarth image based on the surface survey of Paul and Peggy. It clearly shows where the famous Billings Smelter, Park City, and railroad once stood.

Park City for furnishings, building materials, and anything else that could be salvaged – even tearing off the roofs just for firewood. A few old timers in Socorro state that after the 1929 flood destroyed San Marcial, many of those families moved to Socorro. With no jobs or money, some built homes by dismantling the homes in Park City.

Most elder Socorroans recall that there just wasn't much left of Park City by World War II, though some walls of the buildings, ore cars and rusty machinery from the smelter were still scattered about the ruins and slag piles. This was certainly the case when Paul Harden first visited the site in 1977. These items were all removed or buried during the Super Fund cleanup in 1991.



Photo: Peggy Hardman

A view from the smelter site to the southwest overlooking the Park City townsite. DicaPerl plant is in distance; the houses mark the location of the east side of Park City. Between fence and houses is the abandoned railroad right of way.

Today, there is nothing left of Park City except the faint outlines of a few foundations and what may be the remnants of a couple of the streets, including the main business street, Calhoun Avenue.

It's hard to believe a town could just vanish with few, if any, remaining traces. Once they have served their purpose and left abandoned, nature and man seems to level such towns fairly quickly. Today's ghost towns of Kelly, Puertocito, Riley (Santa Rita), and others are evidence of once flourishing towns

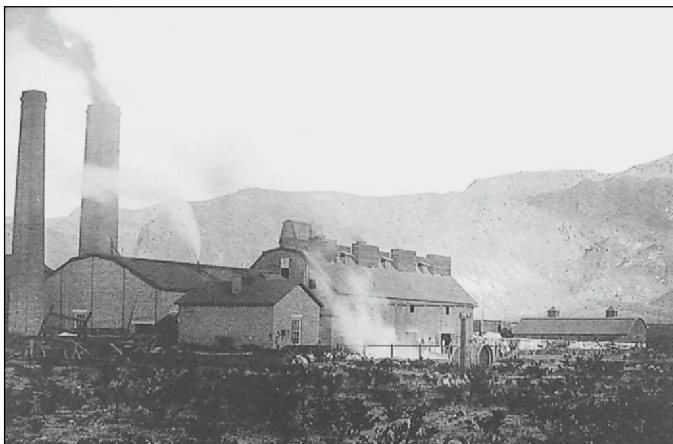


Photo: SCHS/Joseph Smith

Billings Smelter circa. 1888, with Engine House on left and Furnace House with the brick ovens in center.

that today contain but a scant reminder of its former glory. Of the 2,500 people and dozens of businesses that once made the mining town of Kelly, the old church and remnants of a few buildings are that remain. Today, Park City contains even less.

Fortunately, there still remains a few hints of the once flourishing Billings Smelter, even if just a few piles of razed bricks and slag piles.

Much of Socorro's late territorial history is the result of the mining boom years. And, that prosperity revolved heavily around the Billing's Smelter and Park City. It is a shame that what contributed to so much of Socorro's history is now gone.

For more information on the history of the Billings Smelter, we recommend Robert Eveleth's well researched article entitled, "Gustav Billing, the Kelly Mine, and the Great Smelter at Park City, Socorro County, New Mexico." It is available on the New Mexico Tech website at:

<https://nmgs.nmt.edu/publications/guidebooks/34/>

then, scroll down the page to find the article listed under "Papers."



Photo: Paul Harden

Piles of bricks where the Furnace house (ovens) once stood. Looking north.



Photo: Peggy Hardman

Looking east at some of the slag piles from about the location of the Furnace house (ovens).

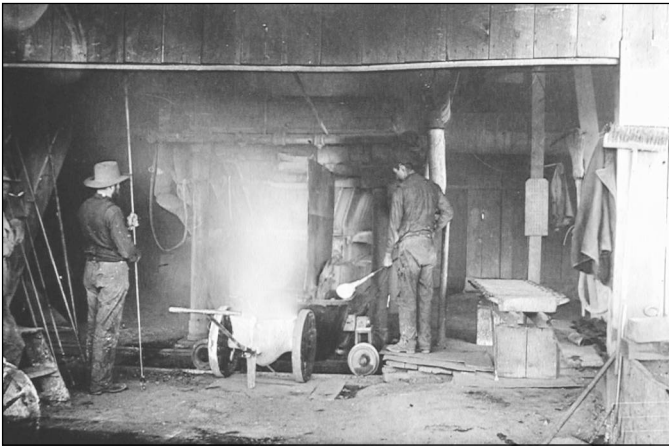


Photo: SCHS photo archives
Inside view of molten lead being poured from one of the smelter furnaces. The ladle cars of molten lead moved oven-to-oven on a light rail system.

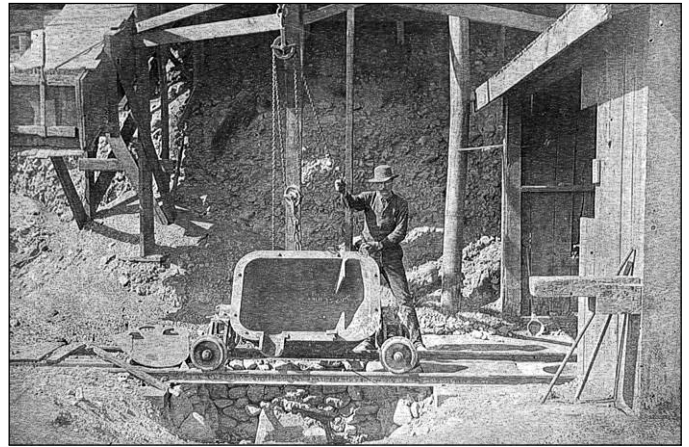


Photo: SCHS photo archives
A 2-ft. light rail system also carried crushed ores to the ovens, and molten lead to be poured into the molds, as shown here.



Photo: Paul Harden
Paul finds a piece of the light rail near the location of the ore bins and water tank.



Photo: Peggy Hardman
Peggy finds another piece of light rail near the location of the Furnace House ovens.



Photo: Peggy Hardman
Unidentified metal debris near the location of the Engine House. The Engine House contained electric generators, air compressors, water pumps, and other machinery to support the operation.



Photo: Peggy Hardman
A closer look at the brick pile through Peggy's lens. Most bricks are broken, a sign the ovens were razed, rather than crumbling on their own.