Arizona History
AZT Passage 5-Santa Rita Mountains
by Preston Sands

Southeastern Arizona is the traditional homeland of the Chiricahua Apache, and numerous stories from non-natives attest to the dangers trespassers faced while crossing their land. The Santa Rita Mountains region, with its excellent grazing land and mineral resources, was particularly enticing to newly arriving settlers. As a result, violent conflict between settlers and Apaches was a frequent occurrence in this area.

In 1857, not long after the Gadsden Purchase of southern Arizona from Mexico, the U.S. Army constructed Fort Buchanan along Sonoita Creek, a few miles southeast of today's Arizona Trail route. Fort Buchanan was established to protect area settlers from Apache attacks, and to serve as a base of operations against warring Apache groups. With the outbreak of the Civil War, many troops throughout the west, including those at Fort Buchanan, were called to fight out east. Fort Buchanan was ordered to be abandoned and burned, lest it should fall into Confederate hands. With no military presence for their protection, many settlers left the area.

Following the Civil War, a new fort, Camp Crittenden, was established a short distance from the site of old Fort Buchanan. Camp Crittenden served as an important military base during the time when legendary Apache chief Cochise and his Chiricahua Apache followers were fighting against their invaders. Arizona military leader General Crook decreed that Camp Crittenden should be abandoned in 1872, but stationed a Cavalry troop there for another year to protect area residents.

John Ward was a rancher in the Fort Buchanan area whose half-Apache stepson was kidnapped one day in 1861 during an Apache raid on his ranch. Ward begged the soldiers at Fort Buchanan to find his son, so Lieutenant George Bascom led a Cavalry troop in search of the boy. Bascom ran into Cochise in Apache Pass, and accused Cochise of having kidnapped John Ward's son. Cochise had nothing to do with the kidnapping, and offered to try and find those who were responsible. Bascom in turn took Cochise and some of his family members into custody. Cochise soon escaped, and took a few hostages of his own to barter with Bascom. An agreement could not be reached, and both sets of hostages were subsequently killed. Cochise then declared war, and a bloody conflict that would rage for over a decade began. Bascom's colossal blunder became known as "The Bascom Affair," and greatly affected the destiny of the Apache people.

Placer gold was discovered in the eastern foothills of the Santa Rita Mountains in 1874, and miners began to flood into the area. Before long the Greaterville Mining District was created, and a town known as Greaterville began to grow. Typical of Western mining towns, Greaterville could be a rowdy place. Local rancher Ed Vail recalled a story involving some of his ranch hands being denied entrance to a dance in Greaterville one night due to them being drunk. One of the ranch hands dropped bullets down the chimney into the fire below. The exploding shells sent dance attendees running, and the evening came to an abrupt end.

Placer gold is found in gravel and sand deposits as a result of ancient running water washing it out of solid rock. The methods of extracting placer gold usually involved the use of pans, sluices, rockers, or "long toms," which required large amounts of water, which the Santa Rita Mountains do not have. Water was hauled in to Greaterville by pack animals at first, but eventually a series of dams and pipelines in the surrounding area funneled water into the mining areas. As the 19th century drew to a close, diminishing placer gold along with a lack of water caused Greaterville's decline.

Discovered during the same gold rush that gave rise to Greaterville, the Kentucky Mine produced significant amounts of gold for over a decade. A small settlement known as Kentucky Camp supported the mining operation, but it was abandoned along with the Kentucky Mine when gold deposits waned in 1886. During the first few years of the 20th century, a new trio of investors stepped in and formed the Santa Rita Water and Mining Company to reopen the old gold placers. The mine developers built a ditch, a tunnel, and pipelines to channel water northward from Casa Blanca and Gardner Canyons into Boston Gulch, where the new mining operation was set to take place. Kentucky Camp was to become the company's headquarters. Their plan was to fire high pressure jets of water into the earth in an effort to wash gold loose from the surrounding sediment, a method known as hydraulic mining. The operation never materialized however, as two of the three investors died within a short time, and the company's assets were sold. Kentucky Camp would operate as a ranch for the next 80 years, until the U.S. Forest Service came into possession of the property. Today, the old Kentucky Camp cabin, located along the route of this passage, can be rented from the Forest Service for overnight lodging.

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