

Arizona History
AZT Passage 6-Las Colinas
by Preston Sands

This passage begins in a historic mining area known as Rosemont. Rancher William McCleary and partner L.J. Rose began to develop a copper mining and smelting operation in the early 1890's from the mining claims they had assembled in the hills west of today's Arizona Trail. In addition to their mining venture, McCleary and Rose founded a mining camp known as Rosemont, in Barrel Canyon. McCleary and Rose soon sold their holdings to new owners, who formed the Rosemont Copper Company. The new owners successfully mined copper from their mining claims and produced nearly pure copper from their smelter. The Rosemont Copper Company closed its mines for good in 1903, and Rosemont gradually became a ghost town. A new mine on the Rosemont scene was developed in 1915, and a new mining company created the town of New Rosemont a couple miles away from old Rosemont. This new mine, the Narragansett, was worked off and on until 1961. In the ensuing years, extensive drilling uncovered a large underground copper deposit below the Rosemont area. A number of different mining companies have tried to develop an open pit copper mine at Rosemont over the years, through land exchanges, purchase of water rights, obtainment of permits, and a federal judge's decision in 2019 that halted plans for a new mine.

A few miles northwest of the Rosemont area is the ghost town of Helvetia, named for an early miner's Swiss homeland. By 1899, a group of investors had bought up 27 mining claims, formed the Helvetia Copper Company, and constructed a short narrow gauge railroad to haul ore from its mines to its smelter. A town of around 500 residents grew up around the Helvetia smelter. The operation was a success until a major drop in the price of copper saw the mines close in 1911, causing residents to move elsewhere. Helvetia became a ghost town by the 1920's and only a few crumbling adobe walls remain.

This area of the Santa Rita Mountains was once inhabited by the Hohokam people. One of the Southwest's most advanced and successful prehistoric cultures, the Hohokam farmed the desert regions of central and southern Arizona for over a thousand years before leaving the area around the year 1400. The Hohokam are well known for their pit-house villages and elaborate irrigation canals. The incorporation of ball courts at a number of their sites is thought by some to indicate possible contact with Puebloans and other cultures throughout Mexico. The entirety of the Santa Rita Mountains has been designated as a Traditional Cultural Property by the Tohono O'odham, the tribe with cultural ties to the Hohokam. It is known as Ce:wi Du'ag ("Long Mountain") in the Tohono O'odham language.

The last few miles of this passage offer a good view of the Empire Mountains to the east. The Empire Mountains take their name from one of Arizona's largest ranches, the historic

Empire Ranch, founded by Walter Vail and Herbert Hislip in 1876. Vail wanted to build an “empire” of a ranch, and started out by purchasing a 160-acre ranch owned by Edward Fish. Eventually, the Empire Ranch grew to a massive 100,000 acres. When the Southern Pacific Railroad approached the Empire Ranch in 1880, the owners granted them a right of way across the ranch, as it was too big to go around.

Nestled in the Empire Mountains is a ghost town with an unusual name: Total Wreck. When John Dillon, an employee of Walter Vail at the Empire Ranch, discovered silver in 1881, he named his mine “Total Wreck,” as the rock ledge that he had made his discovery on was just that, in his opinion. Within two years, the population of Total Wreck had grown to 200, with several saloons, stores, and hotels. The great Apache leader Geronimo was said to have killed six Mexican woodcutters near here, in 1883.

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