

**Arizona History**  
**AZT Passage 8-Rincon Valley**  
**by Preston Sands**

The southern end of this passage enters a true desert oasis as it crosses the perennial flowing waters of Cienega Creek beneath a canopy of cottonwood and willow trees. This is the Cienega Creek Natural Preserve, dedicated to the protection and health of this unique riparian habitat. Archaeological evidence shows signs of human visitation to this unique area for thousands of years, and grinding holes (*metates*) can be found in the bedrock.

The Arizona Trail passes the site of the old Cienega Creek station on the Butterfield Overland Mail route when it crosses Cienega Creek. The station was constructed out of adobe in 1858 by William Buckley and Silas St. John, and included living quarters for the station attendant, as well as a corral for the company's horses. Apaches attacked and burned the station a number of times during the 1860's and 1870's, after other stage companies began using it following the end of the Butterfield line. Shotgun Smith and three others were attacked at the station in 1867, and Smith used his shotgun to defend himself. When the fight was over, Smith's three companions and eight Apaches lay dead. Three years later, two men were tortured and killed here by Apaches, and the old station burned again.

In 1877, the first train to enter Arizona crossed the Colorado River bridge and steamed into Yuma. Constructed by the "Big Four," the same men who had built the western portion of the first transcontinental railroad across America during the 1860's, the Southern Pacific Railroad was to be a transcontinental railroad along a southern route. With a strong desire to cash in on potential business at Tucson and Tombstone, tracklayers pushed quickly, reaching Tucson in early 1880, and the New Mexico border later that year. The Cienega Creek area proved challenging for the Southern Pacific Railroad, as additional locomotives were needed to pull heavy trains over the pass, and the track was subject to washouts. The Big Four's rival in the first transcontinental railroad race, the Union Pacific Railroad, absorbed the Southern Pacific Railroad in 1996, and Union Pacific trains now rumble across Cienega Creek.

The Arizona Trail twice crosses railroad tracks in the Cienega Creek area. These two sets of separated tracks were once two individual, competing railroads. During the 1880's, Phelps Dodge and Company's Copper Queen Mine in Bisbee was producing a fortune in copper, but was also spending a fortune in hauling their finished copper by wagon to the nearest railroad. Dr. James Douglas, one of the owners of Phelps Dodge, believed that a railroad would solve the company's transportation problem. Phelps Dodge constructed the Arizona and South Eastern Railroad in 1888 between the New Mexico and Arizona Railroad tracks near Tombstone and the Copper Queen Mine in Bisbee. A disagreement over shipping rates with the New Mexico and Arizona Railroad soon determined the future of Phelps Dodge's railroad. Wanting to control shipping costs by not having to use other railroads, Phelps Dodge embarked on a massive railroad building project that would last over twenty years. The company reorganized their railroad as the El Paso and Southwestern, and built tracks east to El Paso and west to Tucson, among other places. This new railroad empire with over

1,000 miles of track was successful for a number of years, but an economic downturn led to the leasing and eventual purchase of the railroad by the Southern Pacific in 1961. The Southern Pacific Railroad removed most of the old El Paso and Southwestern's track, but did keep a portion of their old route through the Cienega Creek area, and trains still operate over this section of track today.

As darkness fell on the high, lonely desert at Cienega Creek one summer night in 1887, a Southern Pacific passenger train suddenly slammed on its brakes. A barricade had been constructed in the middle of the tracks, and the locomotive, unable to stop in time, derailed and turned over on the slope below. Gunfire pierced the night and the Doc Smart Gang stepped out of the darkness. The gang had robbed the same train at the same spot several months earlier, and had been foiled by Charlie Smith, a clever Wells Fargo agent who had hidden the contents of the safe inside a stove. Charlie was guarding the safe aboard the express car once again, and the robbers ordered him to open the door. Charlie refused, so the robbers dynamited their way in. At gunpoint, Charlie was warned not to try his stove trick again, and the Doc Smart Gang soon made off with \$3,000 from the safe. A sheriff's posse was soon formed, and the gang's trail led to a cave in the foothills of the Rincon Mountains that they had been using as a hideout. The gang escaped to El Paso while the search for them continued. Today, the cave system where the gang had taken refuge is known as Colossal Cave, and the Arizona Trail passes right by it.

Colossal Cave itself was "discovered" by rancher Solomon Lick in 1879, but the cave had been known to native peoples of the area for many generations. Solomon soon began promoting tours, and early visitors explored the cave by carbide lamps. The Civilian Conservation Corps, a Depression-era public works program for young men, worked at Colossal Cave for two years, building picnic areas, administration buildings, and adding lighting and walkways inside the cave to make it more accessible to the public. The cave is located in a block of Escabrosa Limestone, a southern Arizona rock formation well known for its caves. Colossal Cave continues to be a popular local tourist attraction, and is worth a side trip while hiking the Arizona Trail.

## References

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