

Arizona History
AZT Passage 11-Santa Catalina Mountains
by Preston Sands

The southern end of this passage is located near the Gordon Hirabayashi Campground. Shortly after the United States entered World War II, the federal government began requiring Japanese-American citizens to report to internment camps throughout the country. Gordon Hirabayashi, a university student at the time, challenged the constitutionality of this action, and turned himself in to the F.B.I. in protest. Hirabayashi took his case to the U.S. Supreme Court, which ultimately ruled against him, sentencing him to a three-month prison sentence. Hirabayashi requested to serve his time in Tucson, but was told the government would not pay for his journey west. After hitch-hiking across the United States to Tucson, Hirabayashi served his sentence at the Mount Lemmon Prison Camp. His conviction was overturned in 1987. In 1999, Dr. Hirabayashi attended Coronado National Forest's dedication of the Gordon Hirabayashi Recreation Site, located near the site of the old prison camp.

The Mount Lemmon Prison Camp itself owed its existence to an ambitious highway project. In the 1920's, Tucson residents, looking for a shorter way to the top of the Santa Catalina Mountains, began calling for a new highway to be built to the summit. Local newspaper editor Frank Hitchcock led the push for the new highway, and came up with the idea of using prison inmates to build it. Two temporary prison camps, one at the top and the other at the bottom of the mountain were used before a permanent one was constructed along the route of the new highway. The new Mount Lemmon highway was completed in 1951, while the prison camp lingered on until the 1970's before it was finally dismantled.

Around the midpoint of this passage the Box Camp Trail descends the mountainside to the north. This old trail was constructed in around 1897 as part of an access route to the cool Catalina high country for Tucson residents. Trail builder Frank Weber, a homesteader who lived near the summit of the Santa Catalina Mountains, capitalized on his home's location as a summer retreat for Tucsonans.

Near the Box Camp Trail junction, a major canyon appears to the south. This cliff-walled gorge is the upper end of Sabino Canyon, one of the most beautiful spots in the Santa Catalina Mountains. In 1901, a University of Arizona professor came up with an idea to harness the waters of Sabino Canyon. Professor Woodward and investors formed the Great Western Power Company and proposed a plan to provide Tucson with water and electricity by constructing a large concrete dam about a mile downstream of today's Arizona Trail route. A fight over water rights and an extreme drought caused the demise of the Great Western Power Company and its dam project. The Tucson Chamber of Commerce revived the dam idea in 1933 as a way to bring tourist dollars to a Depression ravaged local economy. This time the plan called for a large lake surrounded by cabins that would cater to fishing and boating enthusiasts. While the dam and lake were never built, the other portion of the project was completed. This portion included a road alongside Sabino Creek, complete with picnic areas. The Sabino Creek road and its picnic sites remain popular to this day, as a part of the Sabino Canyon Recreation Area.

Romero Pass, the northern terminus of this passage, was named for Francisco Romero, an early rancher who lived along Romero Creek. Around 1865, Francisco and his wife Victoriana built their home next to an ancient Hohokam pueblo ruin atop a mesa, and ran a small herd of cattle. The Romeros did not linger long in this area, however, due to frequent attacks on their ranch by Apaches. Francisco was said to have had a number of scars from Apache arrows and lances from his time in the Santa Catalina Mountains.

The Santa Catalina Mountains are among the most important ranges to the Tohono O'odham who have lived in the Sonoran Desert for thousands of years. They call it Babad Do'ag, or Frog Mountain in the O'odham language.

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