

Arizona History
AZT Passage 12-Oracle Ridge
by Preston Sands

Passage 12 of the Arizona Trail begins as an arduous climb from Romero Pass into the heart of the Santa Catalina Mountains' high country, known as the Wilderness of Rock. It is here that the trail crosses Lemmon Creek. Both Lemmon Creek and Mount Lemmon itself, which towers above the Wilderness of Rock, take their names from botanist Sara Lemmon. In the early 1880's, husband and wife botanists John and Sara Lemmon wanted to explore the upper reaches of the Santa Catalina Mountains. Unable to reach their destination from the south, they hired an Oracle area miner named Emerson Stratton to guide them to the top from the north. The three were successful in their quest, and the high point of the mountain was named for Sara.

When the Arizona Trail arrives in the upper reaches of Sabino Creek, it soon comes to the mountain village of Summerhaven. In 1882 Frank Webber homesteaded this scenic and isolated valley, with the stated intention of logging. Webber was more interested in promoting his homestead as a summer retreat for heat-weary Tucsonans, however. Around 1897, Webber built a horse trail southward from his homestead, down the mountainside, and into Sabino Canyon, which empties onto the desert north of Tucson. Tucson residents now had a relatively easy way to reach the cool pine country of the Santa Catalina Mountains. As time went on, Webber's homestead grew into the summer cabin retreat of Summerhaven.

A mile west of Summerhaven is the southernmost ski area in the contiguous United States: Ski Valley. As an outgrowth of the Sahuaro Ski Club in the 1940's, Ski Valley began operations by leasing land from the Forest Service and installing a rope tow for skiers. Today, it includes two chair lifts, a number of runs, and a restaurant.

The Arizona Trail leaves the Summerhaven area along the route of the old Mount Lemmon Road, also known as the Mount Lemmon Control Road. At the beginning of the 20th century, mine owners on Oracle Ridge as well as area residents looking for an easier way to access the cool, high country of the Santa Catalina Mountains, petitioned the government to construct a road to the summit of the range. With local mine owners supporting the project, the road to the summit of the Santa Catalinas and the little village of Summerhaven was completed in 1920. This steep and winding mountain road was too narrow in places to allow cars to pass, which resulted in a rigidly controlled time schedule for motorists. The road was open to uphill traffic for several hours, and then the direction would reverse to allow downhill traffic. This historic road can still be traveled today, but a modern, paved highway directly from Tucson rendered this piece of engineering obsolete.

One of the Arizona's many lost mine legends is "The Mine with the Iron Door." According to this legend, somewhere in the Santa Catalina Mountains lies a lost Spanish gold mine, whose entrance was sealed with a door made of iron. This legend has been the subject of books and Hollywood films since it first came to light in Arizona's territorial days. Other

local legends talk of a lost city and a lost Jesuit mission located somewhere in the Santa Catalina Mountains.

Located just off of the Arizona Trail on a spur of Oracle Ridge is Marble Peak. The area around Marble Peak was the scene of much prospecting activity during the late 1800's and early 1900's. Numerous mines were discovered and opened during this time, including the Santa Catarina Copper Company, the Stratton, the Copper Hill, and the Oracle Ridge Mines. These mining ventures gave rise to the small mining communities of Catalina Camp, Apache Camp, and Congdon Camp, among others. While all of them have long since become ghost towns, evidence of the lure of mineral wealth can still be seen today in the form of collapsed mine tunnels and old mine dumps.

As the Arizona Trail begins its descent from Oracle Ridge, it passes the old Highjinks Ranch. The story of the Highjinks Ranch is tied to Oracle's best known figure, William "Buffalo Bill" Cody. Cody, whose famous "Wild West Show" had captured the attention of many Americans during the late 19th century, became interested in the potential of Oracle mines through his friend Daniel Dyer. Cody and Dyer purchased the Campo Bonito Mine and formed the Campo Bonito Mining and Milling Company to develop it. This mining venture produced some tungsten and scheelite ore, but fraud on the part of the mine manager and a few employees bankrupted Cody and Dyer. During the time of his involvement in the area, Cody built a home at his High Jinx Mine, just north of the Campo Bonito mining camp. After his passing in 1917, Cody's heirs built the High Jinks Ranch at his old home site. This historic site along the Arizona Trail is still occupied, and is operated as a bed and breakfast. A few foundations and long silent mine tunnels mark the site of Campo Bonito a short distance to the south.

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