

Arizona History
AZT Passage 13-Oracle
by Preston Sands

The Oracle Passage of the Arizona Trail begins near the American Flag Ranch, south of the town of Oracle. In 1878, prospector Isaac Laurin and a partner discovered silver and lead in the foothills of the Santa Catalina Mountains, and staked the American Flag Mine. Their discovery brought other prospectors into the area, and more mines were located. Laurin sold his interest in the American Flag Mine to developers and used the proceeds to construct an adobe home and the American Flag Ranch nearby. Laurin's ranch house was the location of the area's first post office, which served the area's miners and ranchers. Laurin's ranch house still stands today, and is believed to be Arizona's oldest intact post office building. The historic Acadia Ranch nearby housed the Oracle Post Office during the 1880's, and this rustic ranch house is now home to the Oracle Historical Society museum.

Nestled among the rolling, high desert hills that make up the northern slope of the rugged Santa Catalina Mountains, the historic community of Oracle takes its name from one man's journey halfway across the globe. In 1877, Albert Weldon, a prospector by trade, embarked on an ocean voyage around the southern tip of South America, bound for the gold country of California. The story goes that his ship mistakenly arrived in Sonora, Mexico, so Weldon began prospecting in Arizona instead. Weldon and his partner Alexander McKay soon located a gold mine and named it Oracle, after the ship he had sailed aboard. News of their discovery drew others, and many other promising mines were located. McKay built the first home in the new community that grew up nearby, which was appropriately named Oracle.

The growing town of Oracle was an attractive destination for many, including miners, ranchers, and entrepreneurs, all looking to make use of the area's natural resources. Oracle's cooler climate and higher elevation drew Tucson residents looking to escape the summer heat, as well as those afflicted with tuberculosis, looking to recuperate. Later, dude ranches began to attract the Hollywood crowd, and a few prominent, early western movie stars paid the little town a visit.

Had the owners of the Arizona Narrow Gauge Railroad succeeded in their plans, Oracle would have been a stop along a new interstate railroad connecting Tucson, Globe and New Mexico. In 1886, the railroad's construction crews began hastily grading a roadbed north from Tucson along the western margin of the Santa Catalina Mountains. A total of only ten miles of track were laid before the railroad faltered, due to lack of adequate funding. After a failed reorganization, the railroad was dismantled, and its equipment sold off. Oracle would always remain a town without a railroad.

Bill Neal was one of Oracle's most enterprising early residents. Bill and his wife Ann operated a stage coach line, a ranch, and their Mountain View Hotel for many years. The Mountain View Hotel was marketed as a summer retreat, and saw a number of high profile visitors during its heyday. Bill Neal's old friend William "Buffalo Bill" Cody was a frequent visitor.

The middle of this passage crosses Oracle State Park. In her will, Oracle ranch owner Lucille Kannally donated her 4,000-acre Kannally Ranch to the Defenders of Wildlife organization in 1976, on the condition that it forever be preserved as a wildlife refuge. Ten years later, the ranch property was given to the Arizona State Parks Board, whom, in keeping with Lucille Kannally's wishes, developed it into Oracle State Park. This new state park was to serve as an environmental education center as well as a wildlife preserve. The State Parks Board developed the park in a way that would minimize human impact on the site.

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