

Arizona History
AZT Passage 16-Gila River Canyons
by Preston Sands

This passage begins near the old town of Kelvin. Kelvin, also known as Ray Junction, owes its existence to the Ray Mine, one of Arizona's great copper producers. Located a few miles up Mineral Creek from the Gila River, the Ray Mine, named for its discoverer's sister, began around 1880, in an area that was the scene of extensive prospecting and mining at the time. The mine supported the nearby twin mining towns of Ray and Sonora. The mine finally became successful after it was purchased by a British firm in 1898, which constructed a processing mill and company town along the Gila River, naming it Kelvin, in honor of British physicist William Thompson Kelvin. Underground mining ended in 1948, and the mine grew into a massive open pit operation, that still produces copper today, served by the Copper Basin Railroad. Copper ore is hauled by rail from the mine at Ray to the smelter in the nearby town of Hayden. The towns of Ray and Sonora lie buried under a massive amount of mine tailings, and many of the mine workers reside nearby in the town of Kearny.

The railroad that parallels this passage along the Gila River is currently known as the Copper Basin Railway. Originally constructed as the Phoenix and Eastern Railroad between 1902 and 1904 with the intention of connecting with the Southern Pacific Railroad at Benson, the tracks only made it as far as Winkelman. Tracks were extended further up the Gila River to the copper mining town of Christmas in 1911, serving that area by rail until the early 1960's. In the early 1950's the San Manuel Arizona Railroad was constructed from the end of track at Winkelman, up the San Pedro River to the booming mining town of San Manuel.

Across the river from where the Arizona Trail leaves the Gila River corridor behind is the site of Cochran. Nearby are the old Cochran Coke Ovens. Resembling stone beehives, these ovens turned locally cut mesquite wood into "coke," a charcoal-like fuel that burns exceptionally hot. In the early 1880's the Pinal Consolidated Company built a road to haul ore from its mines down to the Gila River, where it built a silver smelter. Coke from the coke ovens powered the smelter, which produced nearly two million pounds of silver bullion during its first six months. Two small mining camps, Butte and Cochran, sprang up nearby to serve the smelting operation. When the price of silver dropped during the late 1880's, the smelter shut down, and Butte and Cochran began to fade into history. In the early 1900's a dam on the Gila River was proposed, a couple of miles downstream of Cochran, but it was never constructed.

The rugged, mountainous terrain north of the Gila River is the ancestral homeland of the Pinal band of the Western Apache. For many years during the middle of the 19th century, the Pinal Apache successfully kept the encroaching American miners and settlers from establishing a foothold in this beautiful region. Today, the Pinal Mountains are still an important acorn harvesting site for the San Carlos Apache Tribe.

Near the north end of this passage, in Martinez Canyon, are the Silver Bell and the Columbia mines, owned by the Pinal Consolidated Company. These mines, along with the Martinez Mine and many others in the area, produced a fortune in silver and lead during their lifetimes.

References

Barnes, W. C. (1988). *Arizona place names*. Tucson, AZ: The University of Arizona Press.
Lauer, C. (2005). *The arizona trail in history*. Unpublished manuscript.

Massey, P., Wilson, J., & Titus, A. (2008). *Backcountry adventures arizona*. Castle Rock, CO: Adler Publishing Company, Inc.

Myrick, D. (1975). *Railroads of arizona volume 1: the southern roads*. Berkeley, CA: Howell-North Books.

Myrick, D. (1980). *Railroads of arizona volume 2: phoenix and the central roads*. Berkeley, CA: Howell-North Books.

Perry, R. (1991). *Western apache heritage: people of the mountain corridor*. Austin, TX: University of Texas Press.

San Felice, J. (2006). *When silver was king: arizona's famous 1880's silver king mine*. Mesa, AZ: Millsite Canyon Publishing.

United States Geological Survey. (1900). *Arizona florence quadrangle*. Retrieved from: <http://www.lib.utexas.edu/maps/topo/arizona/pclmaps-topo-az-florence-1900.jpg>

Unknown author. (2010). Copper Basin Railway. *Pinal County*. Retrieved from: <http://www.pinalcountyz.gov/ed/Lists/News/DispFormA.aspx?List=8a5ca9b-3b6d-40ff-a7c0-7210223f01ae&ID=3>