

Arizona History
AZT PASSAGE 21-Pine Mountain
by Preston Sands

North of Four Peaks, the Arizona Trail follows the route of the El Oso Road along the crest of the Mazatzal Mountains for 10 miles. During the early 1940's, two tungsten mines were developed in this area, the El Oso Mine and the Jolene Mine. Initially, the tungsten ore was hauled out by pack animals, but mine owners constructed the El Oso Road up the eastern slope of the Mazatzal Mountains in 1953 to make transport easier. The El Oso and Jolene mines faded into history as the 1950's came to a close. Both mines can be reached via a short detour from the AZT.

A long history of cattle ranching is evident in the place names surrounding the AZT on this passage. The AZT skims the edge of Edwards Park, an isolated, high mountain valley, where Charles Edwards ranched during the late 19th century. Crabtree Butte and Crabtree Spring, along the Boulder Creek section of passage 21, take their names from the Crabtree family. James Crabtree, along with his sons Ivy and Dove, lived and ranched in the Sunflower area for many years, in addition to operating a pack train over the old "Reno Road," bringing supplies to early Tonto Basin residents.

Near the end of Passage 21, the Arizona Trail enters the Sunflower area. In October 1867, soldiers from Fort McDowell, near the present town of Fountain Hills, began constructing a wagon road known as the Reno Road northeast into the Mazatzal Mountains. The route followed Sycamore Creek up to the Sunflower area, where a temporary camp and stockade, known as Camp O'Connell, was established. Camp O'Connell was the scene of misunderstandings and failed negotiations between the Cavalry, Tonto Apache chief Delchay, Yavapai chief Ash-cav-o-til and their followers during this time, resulting in tense, and at times violent, relations.

From Camp O'Connell, the wagon road turned east, crested the Mazatzal Mountains at Reno Pass, and descended Reno Canyon to the site of another temporary fort near Reno Creek in Tonto Basin, at the eastern foot of Mount Ord. From there, the road continued up Tonto Creek to a location known as Green Valley (the future site of the town of Payson), where the permanent Camp Reno would be built. After ten months of hard work and numerous bloody conflicts between Cavalry soldiers, Yavapais and Apaches, the wagon road was completed to Green Valley. Due to lack of manpower though, the Army abandoned its plan to build Camp Reno in Green Valley, and declared the temporary camp on Reno Creek to be the new Camp Reno. The army constructed barracks, officer's quarters, a bakery, and other structures, mostly out of adobe. Camp Reno served as a base for army expeditions into the surrounding areas, and as a meeting place for the soldiers and the local Apache people. By 1870, however, the Army considered Camp Reno a failure, and abandoned it that spring. The Camp's isolated location and chronic shortage of soldiers had proven too expensive and difficult for the Army to operate. Only earthen mounds consisting of dissolved adobe remain.

During the 1930's, the Civilian Conservation Corps began building the first highway through the Mazatzal Mountains. Known as the "Bush Highway," this winding dirt road roughly followed the route of the old Reno Road as far as Sunflower, before veering north up Sycamore Creek. The Bush Highway was ultimately replaced by the current "Beeline Highway" (Highway 87) in the late 1950's. Both of these highways passed by the "Sunflower Store", a gathering spot for locals and travelers alike, consisting of a small café, store, and towing service that existed for nearly a half century.

References

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