

Arizona History
AZT PASSAGE 22-Saddle Mountain
by Preston Sands

Along the southern end of AZT Passage 22, the massive, rounded dome of Mount Ord dominates the eastern skyline. At 7,128 feet in elevation, Mount Ord is isolated from the other high peaks of the Mazatzal Mountains, and is a prominent feature when viewed from any direction.

In the mid 1880's, during the height of the conflict between the U.S. Army and legendary Apache warrior Geronimo, Mount Ord's summit was the site of a heliograph signaling station, where messages were received and broadcast using reflected sunlight. The Army used these tripod mounted "heliograph" mirrors to quickly communicate over long distances, using a series of mountaintop sites, spread across central and southeastern Arizona.

In 1933, during the height of the Great Depression, the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) established Sunflower Camp F-25-A at Cane Spring, on the north side of Mount Ord. In addition to constructing the Bush Highway (precursor to Highway 87) through the Mazatzal Mountains, the CCC also constructed the "Mount Ord Truck Trail" to the summit of Mount Ord, where they erected a steel fire tower and a cabin for the U.S. Forest Service. The fire tower was replaced in 1983, but the original cabin remains. The original fire tower is now on display at the Rim Country Museum in Payson.

As the AZT approaches the isolated peak of Saddle Mountain, it enters a historic and rather unusual mining area. Mercury ore, in the form of a red mineral known as cinnabar, was discovered on the West Fork of Sycamore Creek below the AZT in 1911 by prospector E.H. Bowman. A flurry of prospecting activity followed as other miners flooded into the area, resulting in the location of scores of mining claims in the Sycamore and nearby Slate Creek areas by 1926. A number of mercury claims were purchased and further developed by the Arizona Quicksilver Corporation. This new mining company constructed camps for its workers and elaborate mercury processing mills along Sycamore and Slate Creeks, in addition to building new roads into the area. Despite the promising outlook, mercury mining continued only sporadically during the following decades, and finally came to an end during the 1960's.

Highway construction in the 1970's obliterated the mining camp on Slate Creek, known as Goswick Camp, and the processing mill there was removed. Wildfire destroyed the Sunflower Mine's processing mill on Sycamore Creek in 2012. Only a large rotary furnace tube remains at the mill site. Other evidence of historic mining lies scattered throughout the upper Sycamore Creek area and along the AZT in the form of collapsed mining tunnels, overgrown mine trails, and occasional old cabin foundations.

References

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