

Arizona History

AZT Passage 23-Mazatzal Divide

by Preston Sands

The 23rd passage of the Arizona Trail follows the Mazatzal Divide Trail along the crest of the rugged Mazatzal Mountains, past a number of connecting trails used by ranchers in years past, who left their mark upon this area in the form of old line cabins and colorful place names. As a wild, rugged and largely inaccessible area, the northern Mazatzal Mountains were an ideal location for moonshiners during Prohibition, who produced what was known locally as “Payson Dew.”

The Mazatzal Wilderness is one of Arizona’s oldest and largest wilderness areas. Designated in 1938 as the Mazatzal Primitive Area, this wild expanse became the Mazatzal Wilderness two years later. In 1984, the Wilderness was expanded to its present size.

Traveling northbound, the first major canyon this section traverses is Deer Creek. David Gowan, a Scottish immigrant, miner, and rancher, chose to make his home late in life within this deep incision through the heart of the Mazatzal Mountains. Gowan, the “discoverer” of Tonto Natural Bridge near Payson, moved into the upper reaches of Deer Creek sometime around 1916. Living in a crude log cabin among the fruit trees and vegetable garden he had constructed, Gowan supported himself by working a couple of mining claims nearby, and selling the ore he obtained.

After a decade in the mountains, Gowan passed away in 1926, and was buried where he was found, in the lower reaches of Deer Creek, where his grave can still be seen. “Gowan Camp”, as it was known, became known as “Windsor Camp” soon after. Today the site of David Gowan’s mountain home has been reclaimed by the forest. Only a few rock foundations remain at the site.

An imposing, thousand-foot cliff wall forms the western façade of the Mazatzal’s highest Peak, Mazatzal Peak. During the Geronimo campaign of the mid 1880s, the U.S. Army operated a sun-reflecting “heliograph” station atop Mazatzal Peak, rapidly relaying messages between other heliograph stations on distant mountaintops. These messages contained information on the movements of Apache warriors, which the Army attempted to use for the purpose of capturing them.

Despite a large ancestral human population in the surrounding area, few dwelling sites are located within the Mazatzals. Evidence of the Hohokam and or the Salado has been found in the form of artifact scatters and surface pueblos in the valleys and foothills to the east of the Mazatzals. As is the case in much of the Southwest, these ancient cultures migrated away from the area during the 14th century.

Settlers in the historic era largely avoided the Mazatzal Mountains as well. One of the few exceptions is the ghost town of Mazatzal City. Located on the banks of the East Verde River on the northern fringe of the Mazatzal Mountains, this short lived farming village was founded by Mormon settlers in 1878, traveling south from northern Arizona. While some residents lingered on, Apache attacks along the East Verde River in the early 1880s caused most Mazatzal City residents to move north to the town of Pine or elsewhere. City Creek, near the north end of this passage, is thought to have been named for Mazatzal City.

During June of 2004, lightning ignited a massive wildfire that consumed most of the northern Mazatzal Mountains. Named the Willow Fire for its point of origin at Willow Spring on the west side of the range, this monster wildfire consumed nearly 120,000 acres and threatened several towns before it was finally brought under control. Much of the northern Mazatzal Mountains' coniferous forest was decimated by the Willow Fire.

Near the northern end of this passage is "The Park," below towering North Peak, the northernmost peak of the Mazatzal Mountains. The Park is located at the headwaters of Wet Bottom Creek, which was originally named Wet Ass Creek, for an incident where a cowboy was thrown from his horse, landing bottom first in creek water. The Mazatzal Mountains and surrounding hills have a long history of ranching by colorful cowboy characters, dating back to the 1870s.

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