

Arizona History

AZT Passage 34-San Francisco Peaks

by Preston Sands

The San Francisco Peaks dominate the skyline in much of northern Arizona, and figure prominently in the cultural beliefs of 13 different Native peoples of the Southwest. The Hopi know the peaks as *Nuva'tukya'ovi*, and they are the sacred dwelling place of the *Katsinam*, or Kachina spirits. To the Navajo, the name for these sacred peaks is *Dook'o'oshíid*, and they form the western boundary of *Diné'tah*, their homeland. Spanish missionaries to the Hopi villages in the 17th century were said to have given the name "San Francisco" to these peaks, in honor of Saint Francis of Assisi.

Once a cone shaped mountain nearly 16,000 feet high, the enormous volcano that created the San Francisco Peaks collapsed and was glaciated at some point in the geologic past, forming the jagged crown of alpine peaks seen today. The highest of these, 12,633-foot Humphreys Peak, is the highest point in Arizona, and was named for Civil War General Andrew Atkinson Humphreys. The summit of the San Francisco Peaks is the only tundra habitat in Arizona, and evidence of past glaciation in the form of *cirques*, or horseshoe shaped valleys, can be readily seen in the topography of the "Inner Basin." When the city of Flagstaff was looking for new water sources for its growing population in the 1890's, it turned to the numerous springs located within the Inner Basin of the Peaks to meet its water needs.

The south end of the San Francisco Peaks passage starts out on the remnant of one man's dream: the Weatherford Trail. Flagstaff hotel owner and entrepreneur John Weatherford dreamed of building a road to the top of the San Francisco Peaks after a horseback ride to the summit in 1895. Weatherford was aware of the successful toll road to the top of Pike's Peak in Colorado, and figured that a similar toll road to the top of the San Francisco Peaks would attract tourists. Weatherford made a proposal to the U.S. Forest Service and was granted a 50-year operating permit in 1916. The plan called for a large hotel above tree line between Agassiz and Fremont Peaks. The San Francisco Mountain Boulevard company made limited progress selling shares of its stock but was able to raise enough money to begin construction in 1920. Hampered by inadequate funding, winter snows and torrential monsoons, the road builders progressed slowly up the south slope of the peaks into the Inner Basin, negotiating steep terrain and avalanche paths along the way. Weatherford's road was only a mile from the summit of Humphreys Peak when the 1929 stock market crash permanently ended the project. Weatherford passed away a few years later, and the Forest Service took possession of the road. The creation of the Kachina Peaks Wilderness in 1978 put an end to four-wheel drive vehicles using Weatherford's old road, and provided the San Francisco Peaks with federal protection. Today, the old road is now the Weatherford Trail, perhaps one of Arizona's most beautiful and unique hiking trails. A side hike to the summit of Humphreys Peak on this or the Humphreys Summit Trail is a highlight of the Arizona Trail experience.

The Arizona Trail crosses the base of the San Francisco Peaks along the fringe of a large clearing known as Fort Valley. In 1881, John W. Young was awarded a contract to perform

grading and provide railroad ties to the advancing Atlantic and Pacific Railroad. John, son of Mormon Church president Brigham Young, needed a way to provide jobs and income for Mormon settlers east of Flagstaff. These settlers built a stockade out of oversized railroad ties near Leroux Spring to provide housing and protection for their railroad workers. The stockade was named "Fort Moroni" and used for a few years before being sold to a local rancher. The old fort was torn down in 1920.

On the western slope of the Peaks is Arizona's oldest downhill ski area: Arizona Snowbowl. Opening in 1938 under a permit from the U.S. Forest Service, Arizona Snowbowl began operations with only a two-person rope tow to take skiers uphill, powered by an automobile engine. The operation has greatly expanded in the ensuing years, and now includes multiple lodges and ski lifts.

Due west of Arizona Snowbowl is a large clearing in the forest known as Hart Prairie. Sheep herder Frank Hart had his ranch headquarters here during the 1880's and 1890's. Frank's ranch was a stop along the stagecoach route between Flagstaff and the Grand Canyon during the 1890's. The property is now managed by The Nature Conservancy.

Just north of the San Francisco Peaks, the Arizona Trail passes near the large grassy valley of Kendrick Park, named for Major H.L. Kendrick, who acted as an escort for the 1853 Sitgreaves Expedition that explored northern Arizona. The high peak west of the park is also named for Kendrick.

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