

Arizona History
AZT Passage 35-Babbitt Ranch
by Preston Sands

This passage takes its name from the 700,000-acre CO Bar Ranch, one of Arizona's oldest and largest cattle ranches owned by Babbitt Ranches. Its beginnings date back to 1886, when four brothers – David, William, George and Charles Babbitt – sold their grocery store in Cincinnati, Ohio to move out West. Hoping to build a successful ranching operation, the four brothers had selected northern Arizona as their new home. The Babbitt brothers stepped off of an Atlantic and Pacific Railroad train in Flagstaff in early 1886, and took up residence there while searching for a suitable ranching opportunity. Within a few months, the Babbitt brothers had purchased a herd of 1,200 cattle, branded them with their new “CO Bar” brand, which represented the initials of their hometown of Cincinnati, Ohio, and started running their cattle in the Flagstaff area. Over the years, the Babbitts acquired more land and bought up small ranching operations that came up for sale, eventually building the empire they had dreamed of. The Babbitt brothers began to branch out into other fields shortly after their arrival in Arizona, including a chain of hardware stores, trading posts, farms, and a sheep ranch. The Babbitt brothers and their descendants became involved in local and state politics as the decades passed, with perhaps the most noteworthy example being Bruce Babbitt. Bruce Babbitt was a two-term governor of Arizona, a former U.S. Secretary of the Interior, and a one-time presidential contender. Today, the Babbitt family continues to reside in northern Arizona, and is still involved in the Babbitt brothers' original pursuit of ranching.

The Babbitt Ranch Passage begins near the historic Cedar Ranch, which was used as a winter-season ranch headquarters, and was one of the first properties owned by the Babbitts. From this starting point, the Arizona Trail heads north across open plains, leaving the forests behind for a while. Before the Babbitts became the leading ranchers in this area, this was the domain of the Arizona Cattle Company. John W. Young, a son of Mormon church president Brigham Young, along with the help of Eastern financiers, created the Arizona Cattle Company in the early 1880's. With a large financial backing, Young's ranching outfit soon became the largest in Arizona. Young had established his ranch at the old Mormon stockade known as Fort Moroni, in Fort Valley, northwest of Flagstaff, and ran the company's herds throughout the greater Flagstaff area. When Arizona authorities began to pursue polygamy charges against him, Young abandoned his ranching empire and left the area in 1885. With the demise of the Arizona Cattle Company, the Babbitts took over their old range.

As the trail passes near Tub Ranch, one can look east across the grasslands at cone-shaped SP Mountain. Also known as SP Crater, this 1,000-foot-high volcano is geologically recent, having erupted roughly 70,000 years ago. Early ranchers in the area believed that the dark rock of SP Crater's lava flow resembled an overflowing commode pot emptying out upon the landscape. Mapmakers later shortened the ranchers' name of Shit Pot Mountain to SP Mountain.

After crossing the high plains and shallow canyons of the Babbitt Ranch country, this passage comes to an end near the site of the Moqui Stage Station. The Moqui Stage Station was a stop along the Grand Canyon Stage Coach Line that operated between Flagstaff and the Grand Canyon in the 1890's. Horses would be exchanged at this and the other two stage stops located along the stage coach route. While the stage coaches are long gone, the old well that served the stage station stills stands and the ruins of the stage stop cabin are located nearby.

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