As the Arizona Trail crosses the East Verde River, it begins a steady ascent toward the highlands of northern Arizona, leaving the southern Arizona deserts behind. The high desert, juniper woodland traversed on this segment remains largely the same as it was during the time that the Yavapai and Apache were the only people that called this wild and scenic area home. One of the unique signs of the historic presence of the Yavapai and Apache people in this area include their petroglyphs of figures on horseback, which date them to after the arrival of the Spanish, who introduced horses to North America.

Today, the course of the East Verde River, where this passage begins, is quiet and peaceful. During the 1870's, however, U.S. Army Cavalry patrols from Camp Verde would often travel up the East Verde River on their way to Tonto Basin, while scouting for hostile Apaches and Yavapais. A number of violent conflicts occurred between these factions in the greater Tonto Basin area during this time. In February of 1875, soldiers were escorting a group of Apache and Yavapai people on a forced relocation march from the Verde Valley to the desolate San Carlos Reservation in eastern Arizona, after political pressure had eliminated their Verde Valley reservation. A couple of miles upstream of where the Arizona Trail crosses the East Verde, a riot broke out between the Apaches and the Yavapais, who were suffering from hunger and fatigue. The soldiers attempted to quell the riot by firing their rifles into the melee. When the smoke had cleared, many Apaches and Yavapais lay dead. Their bodies were left lying on the ground, and were later discovered by Mormons who came to settle at the site of Mazatzal City.

Leaving the East Verde River bottom behind, the trail begins a long, stair-step like climb up a series of mesas toward the Mogollon Rim. After the initial 800-foot ascent, the trail levels out for a couple of miles on Polles Mesa. Napoleon Bonaparte Chilson or "Poley" was one of the earliest ranchers in the area. Poley started the NB Ranch in 1881, two miles upstream of the Arizona Trail crossing, and ran his cattle on Polles Mesa and the surrounding area. Poley was involved in some of the earliest organized rodeos in America, conducted in the nearby town of Payson.

As the trail climbs higher, one can look to the southeast across the East Verde River drainage to the rounded hills on the far side of Cypress Thicket. These hills were the scene of a small-scale gold rush in the late 1870’s and early 1880’s as prospectors discovered dozens of potentially promising mines. A settlement known as Marysville grew nearby, but soon emptied out as the mining boom proved to be short lived. As Marysville died, a new town was born nearby in Green Valley. Originally known as Union Park or Green Valley, the little town was renamed Payson by its inhabitants, in honor of the elected official who had helped them secure a post office. Payson soon became the main supply and meeting point for the numerous ranches in the area.

The town of Pine, near the end of this passage, dates to the late 1870’s, when Mormon settlers began to arrive in the area. Attracted by a beautiful pine filled valley, fertile land
and the waters of Pine Creek, Mormon settlers began to congregate here, establishing farms, ranches, sawmills and a gristmill. A town soon began to form, and the population grew to around 100 by 1882. Within a few years, Pine was the largest town in the area, aided in part by newly arriving settlers who had left the settlement of Mazatzal City a few miles to the south. Mail arrived by pack train beginning in the early 1880’s with the establishment of the Mail Trail between Fort Verde, Strawberry, Pine, Payson, and Globe. The Mail Trail was an important link with the rest of Arizona for this isolated area during its operation from 1884 to 1914, and the Arizona Trail crosses its old route in this area.

Three miles south of Pine on Pine Creek is one of Arizona’s unique natural wonders: Tonto Natural Bridge. A 200-foot-tall “bridge” of water-deposited travertine rock with a tunnel beneath it, worn through by Pine Creek, Tonto Natural Bridge was an important campsite for Apaches who passed through the area. David Gowan, a Scottish immigrant, prospector by trade and an early settler in the area, claimed to have discovered Tonto Natural Bridge in 1877. Gowan homesteaded the bridge site, planted an orchard, and gave tours of the natural wonder below his home. The Apaches had not forgotten their historic campsite however, resulting in Gowan taking refuge in a cave inside the bridge tunnel for several days in one instance. Gowan eventually sold his claim to his nephew, and the property exchanged hands over the next century, but every owner promoted the bridge as a tourist attraction. The Arizona State Parks Board purchased the property in 1990, renovated the facilities, and opened the site as Tonto Natural Bridge State Park a short time later.

Less than a mile beyond the Pine Creek crossing, the Arizona Trail comes to the asphalt ribbon of State Highway 87. Highway 87 descends the Mogollon Rim and travels south to Strawberry, Pine, and Payson, largely following a route planned for the Arizona Central Railroad in the 1890’s. The completion of Highway 87 to the area in 1958 ended the isolation that this area had known for most of its recorded existence.

After crossing State Highway 87, this passage comes to an end at the Pine Trailhead, at the foot of the majestic Mogollon Rim. Named for the early 18th century Spanish governor of New Mexico, Juan Ignacio Flores Mogollon, the cliffs of the Mogollon Rim mark the southern edge of the Colorado Plateau, and separate central Arizona from northern Arizona.

References


