Arizona History
AZT Passage 26-Highline
by Preston Sands

The Highline Passage of the Arizona Trail skirts a large extension of the Mogollon Rim, known as Milk Ranch Point. Milk Ranch Point derives its name from an early dairy ranch in the vicinity that supplied milk to railroad crews building the Atlantic & Pacific Railroad across northern Arizona in the early 1880's.

The Highline Trail itself, which the Arizona Trail follows for much of this passage, dates to 1870, and was used as a connector route between homesteads and ranches located along the base of the Mogollon Rim.

Finding only disappointment in a mining venture near Payson upon their arrival in the area in 1881, William Craig and his friend Paul Vogel settled on Webber Creek in 1883. Here Craig and Vogel started the Spade Ranch, a cattle operation and successful orchard. In the 1950’s, the Spade Ranch was purchased by the Boy Scouts of America, became known as Camp Geronimo, and continues to be operated as a Scout camp.

The key to long term economic prosperity for many frontier mining towns was access to affordable transportation. In frontier Arizona, this meant a railroad. In the early 1880’s, mining engineer Colonel James Eddy proposed to build the Arizona Mineral Belt Railroad from Flagstaff south to the booming, yet isolated mining town of Globe, in central Arizona. Lumber from Flagstaff logging companies would find a new market in Globe, and mine owners there would save money and gladly pay a railroad to haul their metals to distant markets. Eddy, however, faced two big obstacles: funding, and the rugged escarpment of the Mogollon Rim. By the summer of 1883, Eddy had secured enough funding to begin blasting a railroad tunnel through the top of the Mogollon Rim near the headwaters of the East Verde River. Eddy’s crew managed to complete about 100 feet of the projected 3,100-foot-long tunnel before funds ran dry and work stopped.

Undeterred, Colonel Eddy returned to his project in early 1887 with more funding, and even grander plans of extending the railroad to Phoenix, Tucson and Mexico. By October, Eddy’s track crews had completed 35 miles of track, reaching the south side of Mormon Lake, when funds ran out again.

The chief financier of the project, the Atlantic & Pacific Railroad, disputed its contract with Eddy and refused to pay. Colonel Eddy was forced to sell his railroad at auction in 1888, and it was purchased by Dennis Riordan to be used as a logging railroad by his Arizona Lumber Company, and renamed the Central Arizona Railroad. Riordan shared Eddy’s dream of extending the railroad to Globe and Phoenix, and surveyed a new descent route off of the Mogollon Rim near the town of Strawberry. Riordan’s grand railroad plan, like Eddy’s, never bore fruit. The historic railroad tunnel can be reached via a short side trip on the Railroad Tunnel Trail #390.
References


