In 1881, mining engineer Colonel James Eddy proposed to build a railroad from Flagstaff south to the booming yet isolated mining town of Globe, in central Arizona. Eddy’s plan was for his railroad to haul lumber from Flagstaff logging companies down to a waiting market in Globe, and then haul copper and silver from Globe’s mines on the return trip north. Financial problems plagued Eddy and his grand railroad project, known as the Arizona Mineral Belt Railroad, from the start. By the end of 1887, Eddy had managed to blast a partial railroad tunnel through the Mogollon Rim north of Payson, and had nearly 35 miles of track in place between Flagstaff and Mormon Lake. At this point, Eddy’s chief financer of the Arizona Mineral Belt Railroad, the Atlantic & Pacific Railroad, backed out, and Eddy was faced with financial ruin.

The Arizona Mineral Belt Railroad was subsequently sold at auction to Flagstaff businessman Denis Riordan, who reorganized it as 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. However, Riordan’s grand railroad vision, like Eddy’s, was never realized. The Riordan brothers, owners of the Arizona Lumber Company, instead used their new railroad to haul lumber from their logging operations in the Flagstaff area forests to their sawmill. Numerous tracks were constructed south of Flagstaff, accessing Munds Park, the rim of Oak Creek, the slopes of Mormon Mountain, and Anderson Mesa above Lake Mary. Over the years the railroad changed hands and changed names a few times, until it was ultimately removed by its final owner, Southwest Forest Industries, in 1967. One of the railroad’s faithful steam locomotives remains on display near downtown Flagstaff. The Mormon Lake segment of the Arizona Trail follows the route of this old railroad for a number of miles in the Mormon Lake area.

As its name suggests, the Mormon Lake area was the scene of Mormon activity during the late 1870’s. In 1876, Mormon colonists under the direction of Lot Smith built a sawmill a few miles south of the marshy valley that came to be known as Mormon Lake, using a steam engine that had been transported from Lee’s Ferry on the Colorado River near the Utah border. The sawmill site, which later included a tannery, was known as Millville. Along the western shore of the lake, Mormons began a successful dairy farm in 1878, near the site of Dairy Spring. Each of these industries supplied the needs of the Mormon settlements along the Little Colorado River to the northeast. Today, the Arizona Trail passes near Dairy Spring Campground, named for the old Mormon Dairy.

The northern end of this passage travels near lower Lake Mary, nestled in a long, open valley among the sprawling ponderosa pine forest. Flagstaff businessman and Arizona Lumber Company supervisor Timothy Riordan was involved in the construction of a dam to capture the waters of Walnut Creek in 1905, to serve as an additional source of water for the growing city of Flagstaff. Riordan named the resulting lake in honor of his daughter,
Mary. The Riordan family legacy lives on in Flagstaff; enshrined in the rustic Riordan Mansion, a 13,000-square-foot log home that is a part of the Arizona State Park system.

References


