The Mount Elden Passage begins by entering a tunnel that crosses under Interstate Highway 40 and the tracks of the Burlington Northern Santa Fe Railroad. During the 1850’s, a government surveying expedition crossed this part of Arizona, looking for possible transcontinental railroad routes, to connect isolated California with the more populated eastern United States. A decade later, America’s first transcontinental railroad would be constructed several hundred miles to the north across Utah. Northern Arizona would receive a transcontinental railroad of its own in the early 1880’s, with the arrival of the Atlantic and Pacific Railroad, which was a division of the Atchison Topeka and Santa Fe Railroad.

Track laying crews of the Atlantic and Pacific Railroad crossed the New Mexico border into Arizona at the dawn of the 1880’s, following the 35th parallel survey route westward toward California. With the arrival of the railroad in northern Arizona, American settlers began to pour in, giving rise to ranching and logging operations that would prove to be the mainstay of the Flagstaff area’s economy. The railroad was of great importance to this region, and it served as its main connection with the outside world until the age of the automobile. Today, the Atlantic and Pacific Railroad is the Burlington Northern Santa Fe Railroad, or BNSF. The BNSF track across northern Arizona is still an important transportation route, and large trains are a frequent sight for the next couple of miles as the Arizona Trail remains close to the railroad.

The Arizona Trail crosses a pleasant meadow between two small mountains as it leaves the highway and the railroad behind. These mountains, along with most of the other hills and peaks in this area are volcanic in origin, a part of the San Francisco volcanic complex. Geologists have speculated that a “hot spot” or magma plume may have been responsible for the large number of volcanic episodes between Flagstaff and Williams, some thirty miles to the west. Ten miles to the north one can see the barren, rust colored slopes of Sunset Crater, Arizona’s newest volcano. The Sinagua people, who were indigenous residents of the Flagstaff area, surely witnessed this fiery cinder cone volcano coming to life when it began erupting in the year 1064. Lava erupting from Sunset Crater occasionally came into contact with Sinagua agriculture, creating corn cob impressions in the freshly cooled volcanic rock. The Sinagua collected some of these corn cob “fossils,” which have been recovered from local Sinagua dwelling sites.

The Arizona Trail crosses under U.S. Highway 89 near Elden Pueblo, a significant Sinagua cultural site that is open to the public. Elden Pueblo was occupied for roughly 200 years after its construction by the Sinagua around the year 1070, and is thought to have been a regional trading center, a theory lent credence by trade items discovered during excavations. This large pueblo consisted of nearly 70 rooms, as well as pit houses, and a large community room. The Hopi have long considered the site sacred, and many Hopi believe they are the descendants of the Sinagua. Elden Pueblo is located less than a quarter-mile from the Arizona Trail route, below the towering, dome like mass of Mount Elden.
Centuries after the Sinagua left their impressive architectural creations behind, the Civilian Conservation Corps were brought in to stabilize a couple of the Sinagua’s best known sites. A public works program created by President Roosevelt to provide young men with jobs during the Great Depression, the Civilian Conservation Corps established Mt. Elden Camp in 1938, which was located at the base of its namesake mountain. The workers from Mt. Elden Camp performed construction projects and prehistoric dwelling preservation at nearby Walnut Canyon, Wupatki, and Sunset Crater National Monuments. The camp was closed in 1942, after America’s entry into World War II, but their work remains on display for visitors.

Passage 32 comes to an end in a broad, pine covered valley between Mount Elden and the San Francisco Peaks, known as Schultz Pass. C.H. Schultz was one of Flagstaff’s earliest sheep men, having arrived in the 1880’s, and ran his sheep herds in the area that now bears his name. Schultz helped found the Arizona Sheep Breeders and Wool Growers Association in 1886, and later became a Coconino County Supervisor.

For a short time Schultz Pass was the northern terminus of the Greenlaw Lumber Company’s logging railroad. Ed and Charles Greenlaw were Canadian loggers who had worked their way west across the United States, arriving in Flagstaff in 1882. The Greenlaws opened their own sawmill near the foot of Mount Elden, and began building a railroad in 1907 to supply it with logs from the Flagstaff forests.

References


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