Arizona History
AZT Passage 33-Flagstaff Urban Route
by Preston Sands

During the 1850’s several military surveying expeditions passed through northern Arizona, and took note of the expansive pine forests, grazing lands and ample water below the San Francisco Peaks. The 35th parallel that these expeditions followed would become an important east to west travel route in Arizona’s future. Lieutenant Edward Beale and his caravan of camels passed through this area in the late 1850’s, constructing a crude wagon road that other adventurous souls would soon follow.

It was 1876 when a railroad survey party from Boston arrived in the valley that is now Flagstaff. A small settlement began to grow at the base of Mars Hill, and F.F. McMillan became the first homebuilder. When it became known that the Atlantic and Pacific Railroad would lay tracks through this valley on its way west from New Mexico, ranchers, loggers, and other entrepreneurs began to move to the growing settlement. Early residents had celebrated Independence Day by raising a flag atop a pole carved from one of the area's countless ponderosa pines, and this flagpole had become a town icon. The settlers appropriately chose the name Flagstaff for their new town. By the time the railroad arrived on August 1, 1882, Flagstaff had become a rowdy boomtown of false-front buildings, log cabins, and tents, complete with eighteen saloons for its 200 residents. When the railroad constructed its depot on the valley floor, the town moved slightly east to that location, partially motivated by a disastrous fire that had consumed the old town site.

Part of the draw to early Flagstaff was its great supply of timber from the world’s largest ponderosa pine forest, and its well-watered high country grassland, ideal for ranchers. Early arrivals had come to cut railroad crossties for the Atlantic and Pacific, while others began cattle ranches to feed the railroad crews. Edward Ayer built the first permanent sawmill in the area, and the success of his Ayer Lumber Company was the foundation for the Flagstaff logging industry. Successful ranchers such as the Babbitt brothers, early arrivals from Ohio, encouraged others. Both the logging and the ranching industries quickly grew to form the economic backbone of early Flagstaff. By the early 1890’s, Flagstaff’s population had grown to over 1500. In 1894, Flagstaff incorporated, partly to increase its water supply by building a pipeline from springs on the San Francisco Peaks.

Northern Arizona’s first institution of higher learning began classes in 1899 as the Northern Arizona Normal School. The college’s first president had traveled the area in an attempt to find enough students to begin classes. With only one professor and one building, 23 students enrolled in the first class. Four women made up the first graduating class in 1901, graduating with lifetime teaching certificates. Over the years the college changed names a few times, but finally received university status in 1966. Today, Northern Arizona University regularly has an average of nearly 30,000 students enrolled. In recognition of Flagstaff’s logging history, the university’s mascot is Louie the Lumberjack.

Astronomer Percival Lowell founded Lowell Observatory in 1894 atop what came to be known as Mars Hill, overlooking Flagstaff. Lowell had a 24-inch diameter refracting
telescope custom made for him in Massachusetts, which was then hauled to Flagstaff by train. Lowell and his successors made a number of important discoveries at the observatory, including Pluto and the rings of Uranus. Lowell passed away in 1916, and was buried in a mausoleum at the observatory. The observatory he founded continues to operate at several sites in the area, including one along the Mormon Lake passage of the Arizona Trail.

Tourism is a large part of the economic foundation of modern Flagstaff, due to its proximity to many outstanding outdoor recreation sites, including numerous trails, lakes, peaks, National Monuments, and Grand Canyon National Park.

References


