Passage 42 of the Arizona Trail follows the course of Orderville Canyon for roughly half of its length, along the northern slopes of the Kaibab Plateau. Historically, this region was known as Buckskin Mountain. Orderville Canyon was named for the little town of Orderville, just north of the Utah border, where residents engaged in a Mormon communism program known as the United Order, during the 1870’s and 1880’s. The Orderville commune was said to have purchased the grazing rights for this region of Buckskin Mountain in 1877, from Tuahgants, a member of the Shivwits band of the Southern Paiutes, in exchange for a rifle and ammunition. At this time, the Orderville ranchers began to graze large numbers of sheep and cattle here.

Just beyond the midway point of this passage, the Arizona Trail enters Summit Valley. Before the Orderville residents had brought their herds to graze in Summit Valley, a well-known pariah and infamous Western character by the name of John Doyle Lee had been grazing his cattle here. Lee primarily resided to the east, at the far side of the Vermilion Cliffs, where he ran a ferry service across the Colorado River, at what came to be known as “Lee’s Ferry.” Lee and his wives had been sent to operate this important river crossing by Mormon leader Brigham Young in 1870, and then promptly excommunicated from the Mormon Church. The isolated location of this river crossing was definitely advantageous to Lee, as he was wanted by federal authorities for his role in the 1857 Mountain Meadows Massacre, where roughly 120 men, women and children from a wagon train had been murdered. Lee had been made the scapegoat for this horrific crime. Lee lived at and operated the ferry for several years before being arrested, tried and convicted for the Mountain Meadows Massacre. Ironically, Lee was executed in Mountain Meadows itself in 1877, while sitting blindfolded atop his awaiting coffin. Lee had chosen a firing squad as his method of death, rather than beheading, a symbolic gesture to Mormon hierarchy that he believed he had not committed any grievous sins. The ferry service he had founded continued under new ownership, but was rendered obsolete in 1929 with the completion of the Navajo Bridge across the Colorado River, a few miles upstream of Lee’s Ferry. Today, Lee’s Ferry serves as the main launching point for Colorado River rafting trips through the Grand Canyon.

The Vermilion Cliffs, a high escarpment that runs from Lee’s Ferry to the Utah border, are the location of a number of old uranium mines and uranium mining claims. Uranium ore deposits are common on the Arizona Strip and in other parts of northern Arizona. Immediately following World War II, a uranium boom occurred in the United States, as a result of the Cold War with the Soviet Union and the subsequent “arms race.” The demand for uranium was great as the United States built an arsenal of nuclear weapons, and prospectors fanned out across the West with Geiger counters in search of the radioactive material.

References


