

Loose in the Foothills

by Bob Ring

TIME TRAVEL THROUGH THE HISTORY OF THE CATALINA FOOTHILLS AND THE TANQUE VERDE VALLEY

This is the first part of a five-part series on the history of the Catalina Foothills and the Tanque Verde Valley: Part I: Formation and Early History, Part II: Exploration and Initial Settlement, Part III: Access to Natural Recreation Areas, Part IV: Development of the Catalina Foothills, Part V: Development of the Tanque Verde Valley.

Part I: Formation and Early History

Imagine that you are in a time machine, sitting in La Encantada shopping mall's parking lot, right in front of AJ's. You look out to see the beautiful Santa Catalina Mountains. Now you push a button and travel back in time twelve million years. Surprise, the Santa Catalina Mountains don't exist!

Formative Years *12 Million Years Ago*

At this point in time you see only a range of small hills. Over the next seven million years or so, as your time machine steadily moves forward in time, the western North American continent stretches and the earth's crust cracks and breaks into huge blocks, bordered by deep faults. Some of the blocks rise and become mountains; others sink, forming valleys. Then comes the artistic part. Over millions of years, wind and streams from melting ice and rainwater erode the landscape. As you remember from the present time, what results are the mostly granite Santa Catalina Mountains covering 200 square miles with a peak altitude of 9,157 feet above sea level. Sabino Creek flows south out of the mountains. The Tanque Verde Valley lies in the northeastern corner of the Tucson basin at about 2,400 feet elevation, with two streams, Tanque Verde Creek and Agua Caliente Creek, flowing westward out of the mountains to the east.

About 11,000 years ago, near the end of the last ice age, you might spot your first human beings, hunter-gathers from the Clovis culture, hunting ice-age mammoths. As the ice recedes, you notice large bison, deer and other animals.

For the next 10,000 years you observe climate changes that alternate between wet and dry, causing the Sonoran desert and Santa Catalina Mountain forests to retreat and advance correspondingly. Finally, the familiar forested Santa Catalina Mountains and lush high-desert Tanque Verde Valley are spread out before you – one of the most ecologically diverse regions in the U.S.

Native Americans *AD 500*

From about AD 500 to 1450, you watch Hohokam farmers and traders living in villages along the Santa Cruz River in the distance to the southwest. The Hohokam have summer camps in the foothills and mountain canyons to escape the desert high temperatures and to access water

in dry periods when the Santa Cruz River flow is interrupted. Over a relatively short period of time, the Hohokam disappear, to be replaced by the Tohono O'odm and Pima, also desert peoples and riverside farmers. In the early 1600s you will begin to see Apaches, nomadic people who use the Santa Catalinas for hunting and camping. They also collect acorn and piñon nuts and raise small crops of beans, squash, and corn. In a few years, the Apache will also use the mountains as a base to raid enemies to the south.

Spanish and Mexican Influence *AD 1500*

From your time machine vantage point, in the 1500s you might see the first Europeans to visit Arizona. In 1540, barely 20 years after Spanish conqueror Hernando Cortez overthrows the Aztec empire and claims Mexico for Spain, Francisco Vázquez de Coronado passes through the lower San Pedro River Valley, 40 miles east of Tucson, heading north in search of the rumored Seven Cities of Gold. In the 1690s you see Father Eusebio Kino visiting the Native American villages along the Santa Cruz River, establishing missions, and beginning the spread of Spanish influence and culture in Arizona. History speculates that Father Kino is the first European to take official note of the Santa Catalina Mountains, supposedly naming them the Santa Caterinas, after either his sister or a desert village of the same name.

You can't see it, but in 1736 there is a big silver discovery, just south of the present border with Mexico. This "Planchas de Plata" strike attracts thousands of Spaniards. After the silver is exhausted, some of these prospectors drift north along the Santa Cruz River, looking for gold or silver in Arizona. Others establish ranches or farms along the Santa Cruz. Their numbers increase rapidly.

You watch the Apache leaving the sanctuaries of their mountain camps to raid the settlements along the Santa Cruz River. In 1775 you see Tucson established as a Spanish presidio, or fort, to protect settlers from the warlike Apache. The Old Pueblo is born.

You see the Mexican flag raised over Tucson in 1821 when Mexico achieves its independence from Spain. Little else changes for 20 years. You do notice that mountain men and trappers from the United States are beginning to explore the mountains, foothills and streams around Tucson.

American Tucson *AD 1849*

Increased activity in Tucson catches your attention in 1849 as wagon trains from the eastern U.S. begin to travel west through southern Arizona on their way to the California Gold Rush. A few years later in 1854, with the Gadsden Purchase, the U.S. buys southern Arizona from Mexico to secure lands for a transcontinental railroad.

You notice that the Civil War, starting in 1861, pretty much brings business to a halt in Tucson. In 1862 Confederate troops occupy Tucson for a couple of months. In 1863 the U.S. Congress approves organization of the Territory of Arizona; Tucson is now officially part of the U.S. You recall that Arizona statehood will not come until 1912.

After the Civil War, Tucson becomes a “destination city” for easterners looking for new lands and opportunities. Tucson begins the transition from a Mexican village to an American city. Stagecoaches transport people and mail around southern Arizona, and connect Tucson with the rest of the country. You watch as Tucson grows rapidly with frontier Americans, and becomes a center for mining and ranching.

Next time: Exploration and Initial Settlement

(Sources: Odie B. Faulk: Arizona, A Short History; David Wentworth Lazaroff: Sabino Canyon, The Life of a Southwestern Oasis; C.L. Sonnichsen: Tucson, The Life and Times of an American City; John P. Wilson: Islands in the Desert, A History of the Uplands of Southeastern Arizona.)



*Store Director Keith Reynolds stands in front of his AJ's Fine Foods establishment at La Encantada Shopping Center to wish you good luck on your time travel adventure.
(Photo courtesy of Bob Ring)*