

# Loose in the Foothills

by Bob Ring

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

*Let's continue our time travel journey through the history of the Catalina Foothills and the Tanque Verde Valley. Last time we covered Exploration and Initial Settlement.*

### **Part III: Access to Natural Recreation Areas**

#### **Sabino Canyon AD 1885**

By the 1880s Tucsonans are taking to the high country for picnics and to escape the hot weather in the summer. You see lean-to's, campsites, and log cabins begin to appear in the Santa Catalina Mountains. Summer colonies on Mount Lemmon will be evident by 1918 and you will certainly notice the start of the development of Mount Lemmon's Summerhaven community in the 1920s. But lack of a road up Mount Lemmon from the Tucson side, will greatly limit the number of visitors.

While exciting mountain recreation resources are being discovered, another resource, water for Tucson's increasing population, begins to become an issue. Already pumping water from the underground aquifer and the Santa Cruz River in the 1880s, Tucsonans wonder about Sabino Creek, flowing out of the Santa Catalina Mountains through Sabino Canyon, as a possible future source of water. Many schemes are proposed, including damming Sabino Creek near the mouth of the canyon.

Before any action is taken on this matter, you notice that in 1887 an earthquake centered in northern Mexico, shakes southern Arizona. You watch huge boulders tumbling down Sabino Canyon's walls into the creek below.

Seemingly forgetting this earthquake that so violently affects Sabino Canyon, in 1901 a U. of A. professor proposes a huge dam in the canyon to create a large reservoir. The dam is to be more than three miles upstream from the mouth of the canyon, a mile beyond the end of the present road. You see workers start exploratory development. However, much-less-than-predicted water flow rates in Sabino Creek cause this project to collapse in the early 1910s.

The big-dam idea is resurrected during the 1930s depression-era government relief program to turn Sabino Canyon into a recreation area. Having found potable water and electricity sources elsewhere, Tucsonans' objective this time is to attract tourists for boating, fishing, and lake-side camping. It turns out that no government funds are forthcoming for the dam/lake project so effort concentrates in Lower Sabino Canyon. From 1933 to 1940 you will see work on a road running 3.8 miles into the Canyon – crisscrossing Sabino Creek, nine bridges, campgrounds, and picnic areas. You will notice the small dam built in Lower Sabino Canyon, with a small lake behind for swimming and fishing – enormously popular with Tucson citizens.

### **Catalina Highway** *AD 1933*

Also in 1933 you see the start of construction of the Catalina Highway to Mount Lemmon. This project is also funded by the federal government. The roadway is officially designated the General Hitchcock Highway after Postmaster General Frank Harris Hitchcock, who is primarily responsible for getting the project organized and kicked off.

You see that the early work on the highway is accomplished by prison workers housed in a federal prison camp located at the base of the Santa Catalina Mountains. The road extends north from E. Tanque Verde Road in the Tanque Verde Valley, traverses a winding route up the Catalinas through Summerhaven, intersects near the summit with the dirt road that comes up the north slope of the Santa Catalinas from Oracle, and ends near the top of Mount Lemmon. You will see the twenty-eight mile highway completed in 1950, truly opening up the Santa Catalina Mountains to visitors from Tucson.

The road rises from about 3,000 feet above sea level to approximately 9,100 feet. The scenic drive leaves the saguaro cacti, mesquite trees, and cholla plants of the Sonoran Desert, passes through stands of oak, juniper, and piñon pine, enters pine forests at about 7,000 feet, and then fir and aspen forests on the cooler north-facing slopes above 8,000 feet.

Mount Lemmon Ski Valley will open in 1970 as the southernmost ski resort in the continental U.S.

In 2003 you will watch with horror as the Aspen fire burns for a month on Mount Lemmon, searing 84,750 acres of land, and destroying 340 homes and businesses of the town of Summerhaven.

### **Forest Service Actions** *AD 1933*

While traveling back to the present in your time machine, you've noticed the U.S acting to preserve and improve access to some of the Tucson area's important natural resources. In 1908 the newly created U.S. Forest Service designated the Coronado National Forest that is made up of several elements in southeastern Arizona, including the Santa Catalina Mountains (and Sabino Canyon), the eastern edge of the Tanque Verde Valley, and the Rincon Mountains. In 1933 beautiful stands of saguaro cacti are preserved in the Saguaro National Monument, east and west of Tucson. Both areas will be designated as Saguaro National Park in 1994.

The eastern saguaro monument area defines the southeastern boundary of the Tanque Verde Valley. The federal government attempts to include the privately-owned Jane Wentworth homestead within the monument, but efforts fail, apparently because of the lack of funds during the Great Depression. So this one-square-mile "notch," at the extreme northwest boundary of the monument, is not included.

The Forest Service will construct a road into Lower Bear Canyon in 1960 and build a visitor center for Sabino and Bear Canyons in 1963. A narrated-journey shuttlebus service will begin in 1978 in Sabino Canyon. Also in 1978 the Forest Service will establish the Pusch Ridge Wilderness Area on the southern slope of the Santa Catalinas to provide additional protection for our forests, wildlife, and the natural environment.

**Next time: Development of the Catalina Foothills**

*(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; the Arizona Historical Society.)*

*If you have comments on this article or additions to suggest, please e-mail me at the address below.*



*The entrance to spectacular Sabino Canyon is hidden at the center of this landscape.  
(Photo courtesy of Bob Ring)*