

Film History Along The Apache Trail

by Tom Kollenborn (c) 2000

Since the early days of nitrate film, producers and directors have looked at the spectacular scenery around the Superstition Wilderness Area as an ideal background for filming. It is difficult to trace the first motion picture shot in the area. It appears the first recorded moving pictures taken in this area were shot at Roosevelt Dam during its construction with an Edison Motion Picture Camera.

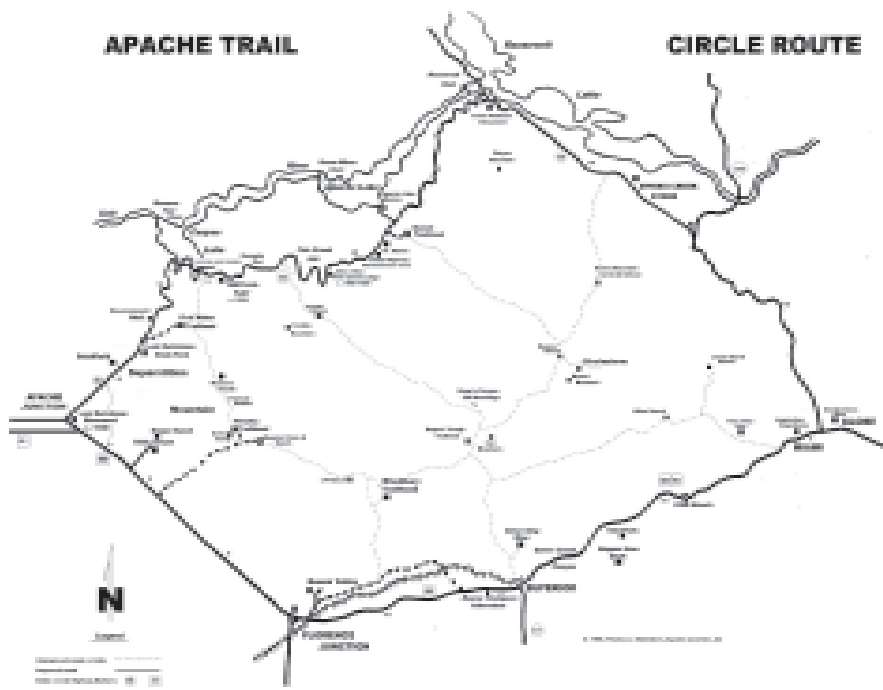
John Dored, Southern Pacific Railroad's motion picture operator, filmed the first commercial motion picture film for the Southern Pacific in the area. This film was shot on November 18, 1910. Dored shot 850 feet of film during his stay in the area and his subjects included Roosevelt Dam, Box Canyon, Salt River, Roosevelt Lake, the Tonto Cliff Dwellings and the Mesa-Roosevelt Road. Dored's motion picture work in the area was not only unique for the period, it was creative in the new emerging film industry.

The era between 1910-1920 saw several motion pictures being filmed along the Mesa-Roosevelt Road because of the spectacular scenery. The Southern Pacific Railroad possessed a franchise on the Apache Trail that prohibited any competition against their company. The railroad controlled the transportation franchise on the Apache Trail and Southern Pacific films were shown around the nation in auditoriums to promote the Sunset Limited route through Arizona.

The Mesa-Roosevelt Road helped the Southern Pacific to compete with the Atkinson, Topeka and Santa Fe Railroad for a share of the tourism trade. The marketing of the Mesa-Roosevelt Road, Roosevelt Dam and Roosevelt Lake became essential. The Southern Pacific took the promotion one step further and included the Apaches. Shortly after doing this in 1915, a clever Southern Pacific marketing and sales agent named E. E. Watson promoted changing the name of the Mesa-Roosevelt Road to the Apache Trail. This name change was far more appealing to the growing tourist industry and it was much easier to use on advertising material. It was the Southern Pacific's promotion of the Apache Trail that undoubtedly got the attention of the fledgling film industry in southern California.

Today we still refer to the Mesa-Roosevelt haul road (SR 88) as the Apache Trail. Thousands of tourists travel the Apache Trail annually and are amazed at its spectacular scenery and primitive condition. Tonto National Forest calls the Apache Trail a scenic byway and the State of Arizona calls it a Historic Road.

Most Arizona residents think the road is both scenic and historic.



Along the Apache Trail, circa 1906. Photo courtesy of SRP



Stagecoach at Government Wells on the Apache Trail, 1905. Photo courtesy of SRP.



Apache Trail historic marker near Lost Dutchman State Park, 1987.



Week's Station on the Apache Trail, circa 1906. Photo courtesy of SRP.