

APACHE JUNCTION: A SHORT HISTORY

by Tom Kollenborn (c) 1994-2002

Apache Junction as we know it today didn't exist when the first prospectors searched for gold near the base of Superstition Mountain in the late 1860's. The United States Army called the Superstition Mountains the Sierra de Supersticiones and was still pursuing hostile Apaches in the mountain's interior.

Peace came to the Apacheria in 1886, when the infamous Apache War Chief Geronimo surrendered to the United States Army at Skeleton Canyon near the Mexican-U.S. border. Shortly after Geronimo's surrender prospectors and cattlemen poured into the mountains and deserts of central Arizona Territory in great numbers. The cattlemen were looking for grazing lands and the prospectors were searching for gold and silver. Most were looking for a better opportunity in life.

Gold from the Superstition Mountain area was first mentioned in 1864, however no samples were produced until 1879 when two Mexican prospectors were attacked by Apaches. One of the prospectors survived and returned to Phoenix and reported finding gold west of Superstition Mountain. The attack on these two Mexican prospectors may have been the source of the legendary Peralta Massacre in the Superstition Mountains. These brothers were named Peralta.

Prospectors worked small gold outcrops in and around Goldfield Wash (Weeks Wash) as early as 1880. The Lucky Boy claim was staked in 1881. William A. Kimball staked out the Boulder-Buckhorn in 1886. Then a rich deposit of gold ore was discovered at the Black Queen claim in November of 1892, but the richest discovery all wasn't made until April 14, 1893. The richest gold deposit of all was located when a massive flood occurred after a sudden down pour along Goldfield Wash. This discovery became known as the Mammoth Mine. The Mammoth Mine produced more than three million dollars worth of gold bullion between 1893-1897. Gold was valued at \$20.80 an ounce at the time. This was equal to about 12,000 pounds of gold bullion.

Goldfield boomed and died within a five-year period like many other mining boomtowns of the era. This mining camp, located beneath the towering facade of Superstition Mountain, introduced the first church, school, hotel, saloon, liver stable, stage line, mercantile store, butcher shop, restaurant and barber shop to the area. The pounding of a twenty stamp gold mill created a towering cloud of dust visible for miles. The dust and sounds of the stamp mill soon ebbed when the gold vein disappeared and the desert once again became silent.

The area near the base of Superstition Mountain had returned to desert again by 1900. However, that wouldn't last for long. It was the Newland Arid Lands Act of 1903 that brought life back to the area. The construction of the Tonto Wagon Road, and a telephone line from Mesa to the Tonto Dam site changed the region forever. The Tonto Wagon road opened a very remote area to development. These construction projects produced hundreds of jobs shortly after the turn of the century. Workers from all over the nation came to work on the Tonto Wagon Road and the great Tonto Dam, later named Theodore Roosevelt Dam. This was a fabulous economic boom that is still felt today.

The Mesa-Roosevelt Road (Tonto Wagon Road) provided the shortest means of travel for a wagon or an automobile loaded with goods from the copper capitol of the world (Globe-Miami) to Phoenix, the capitol of Arizona. The road was renamed the Apache Trail by E. E. Watson. He was a public relations man for the Southern Pacific Railroad's concession on the Apache Trail.

Governor George P. Hunt, Arizona's first governor after statehood, envisioned a shorter highway route between the Globe-Miami area to Phoenix via Superior. Hunt had arrived in Globe in 1879, and was the community's most adamant spokesperson. Hunt wanted to develop a shorter transportation link between these two important economic centers rather than over the rugged and undependable Apache Trail. Hunt's vision came true on May 13, 1921, when the first cars made a run over the Globe-Superior-Phoenix Highway, now today as U.S. Highway 60. The highway didn't open to two-way traffic until April 29, 1922.

Soon after Hunt's vision came true, another visionary arrived at the foot of Superstition Mountain where the new highway and the Apache Trail intersected. This man was George Cleveland Curtis.

George Cleveland Curtis was a traveling salesman from Logan, Utah who had a dream and little money. It wasn't easy for Curtis, his wife Aurora and their three young daughters to make a living on undeveloped desert land west of Superstition Mountain. Curtis and his family settled down to living in a tent at first, selling water and making sandwiches for travelers who came through the junction area.

The junction of the Apache Trail and the Globe-Phoenix Highway was still being called Youngsberg Junction after Phoenix's ex-mayor George U. Young. Young owned and operated the Mammoth Mine at Youngsberg, four miles northeast of the Youngsberg Junction.

George Curtis started his business on August 21, 1922. The realignment of the Mesa-Goldfield section of the Apache Trail was completed on May 17, 1922, and this realignment finally and officially formed the junction we know today.

Curtis was offended by Young naming the mine and the old junction after himself. Curtis started an immediate campaign to change the name of Youngsberg Junction to Apache Junction. He was adamant about the change because he did not think the name "Youngsberg Junction" had any character, color or charm. Curtis was enthralled with the stories about the infamous Apache warriors that supposedly lived in the Superstition Mountains.

George and Aurora Curtis believed so strongly in their convictions about their business in the desert twenty miles east of Mesa that they filed a homestead on the parcel of land, NE ¼, Sec. 20, T1N, R8E, on February 23, 1923.

Curtis made a deal with the Don's of Arizona, once known as the Phoenix Don's Club, to build a monument dedicated to Jacob Waltz and legend of the Lost Dutchman Mine. This monument was completed on February 25, 1938, and re-dedicated in 1988 with more than five-hundred dignitaries attending from around Arizona. This monument served as the icon of this community for more than fifty years. Apache Junction is one of those communities that grew up around a monument. Today the old monument takes a somewhat secondary position to the focal point of the community after serving in this setting for more than fifty years.

The community struggled with incorporation for three decades, before becoming incorporated in November of 1978. Since incorporation many changes have occurred, most for the betterment of the community. This small rural community setting in the shadows of Superstition Mountain has become a rapidly growing urban city. No longer is open space a significant trademark of the community. There are continued efforts to save and maintain some of this open space enjoyed by so many for almost six decades.

All of us who love Apache Junction, its beauty, charm, uniqueness, its special place in our hearts and its heritage owe a debt of gratitude to George and Aurora Curtis, the founders of this community's namesake and location. After all, this community might have been Youngsberg Junction on the Youngsberg Highway or Trail.



The Apache Junction Inn, circa 1929.



Goldfield, 1895



Gold mill at the Mammoth Mine, circa 1895