

Etched on the hills and arroyos... HISTORY STALKS THE STONEMAN ROAD

BY ELDON BOWMAN

You would hardly call the Stoneman Road more than a path today—about eight feet wide, hugging the hills and arroyos as if it were etched upon them. Driving toward Sedona from Interstate Route 17 via State 179, you cross it at a brushy flat known as the Beaverhead, once the only reliable water source between the Verde River and Stoneman Lake. State 279 also intersects the road a few miles northwest of Camp Verde.

Martha Summerhayes, a young Army wife, remembered her journey over Stoneman Road with her officer husband, Jack, and new baby in 1875. Carved out in 1867, it was Arizona's second major wagon road, built after Beale's Road which traversed the northern part of the territory. Mrs. Summerhayes' recollections, published under the title *Vanished Arizona*, were realistic reflections of frontier life, including wagon travel—sometimes pleasant, but, more often, frightening, rough, and eternally dusty.

So it was on the Stoneman Road. Shaken, thrown about, bruised by the jolting of the Army ambulance in which she rode, she realized her baby's hair was being rubbed off his head by the friction of the blanket wrapped around him; in desperation she bound him up in an Apache papoose basket. "He did not cry very much," she remembered, "but the dust made him thirsty. I could give him no nourishment without stopping the entire train of wagons, on account of the constant pitching of the ambulance; delay was not advisable...."

As the party left Stoneman Lake traveling southwest toward Camp Verde, Martha

was advised to ride one of the cavalrymen's horses, but decided to stay with the wagon, and got the ride of her life:

Little by little we gave up hope of reaching Verde that day. At four o'clock, we crossed the "divide," and clattered down a road so near the edge of a precipice that I was frightened beyond everything; my senses nearly left me. Down and around, this way and that, near the edge, then back again, swaying, swerving, pitching, the gravel clattering over the precipice, the six mules trotting their fastest, we reached the bottom and the driver pulled up his team. "Beaver Springs!" said he, impressively, loosening up the brakes.

As Jack lifted me out of the ambulance, I said: "Why didn't you tell me?" pointing back to the steep road. "Oh," said he, "I thought it was better for you not to know; people get scared about such things, when they know about them beforehand."

"But," I remarked, "such a break-neck pace!" Then to the driver, "Smith, how could you drive down that place at such a rate and frighten me so?"

"Had to, ma'am, or we'd a'gone over the edge."

The Stoneman Road saw a good deal of traffic, mostly—in the 1860s—military parties and gold seekers. In the 1870s, after General George Crook subdued the Apaches and put many of them to farming in the Verde Valley, it carried an increasing number of civilian travelers.

The road was built as a communications and supply route between the goldfields on Lynx and Granite creeks, the territorial capital of Prescott, the Army posts of Fort Whipple and Camp Verde, the Verde farming settlements, and points east along Beale's Road.

Prescott's importance grew rapidly; Fort Whipple became the headquarters of the Military Department of Arizona; the Verde pioneers prospered; and the Stoneman Road connected them all, as best it could, with the outside world.

The road was none too gentle on its travelers and never won a high place in anyone's affections. But roads in Arizona were hard to come by; any road at all could be counted a traveler's luxury in such country in those times. Even the

coming of the Atlantic and Pacific Railway (now the Santa Fe), in the early 1880s, did little to alleviate the tiresome travel on such byways. Camp Verde people relied on this old route, or parts of it, until the 1930s brought the bulldozer and improved highways.

It is ironic that this road is named after an Army officer whose association with Arizona was very brief. General George Stoneman succeeded General Thomas Devin as the military commander in Arizona in 1869. His district was vast, covering both Arizona and southern California. Little wonder that in the two short years he served here, he used the road only once. It was during this time that John H. Marion, editor of the Prescott *Miner*, named the road for General Stoneman.

His successor, George Crook, arrived in central Arizona by way of the Stoneman Road—and the area flanking the Verde and its Oak Creek tributary was never the same. The Apaches eventually were settled on a reservation close by, and the roads and trails thereabout took on primarily civilian traffic, interspersed with sheep and cattle drives. The road, though always rocky and dusty and never in repair, continued to serve. As the years passed, parts of it were obliterated by modern highways. Other portions slipped gently into quiet disuse, gradually covered by junipers.

Time goes on, as Martha Summerhayes observed years later. "Railroads and automobiles have annihilated distance, the Army life of those years is past and gone, and Arizona, as we knew it, has vanished from the face of the earth."

Much of it, no doubt. Yet traces of the road, and the past, remain. I found part of it not long ago. There, on a forgotten section of road where the Apaches had laid an ambush, I picked up a brass button from a soldier's uniform, perhaps scraped off his blouse as he lay under a wagon firing through the brush at his unseen enemy. ■

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Selected Reading

Vanished Arizona, by Martha Summerhayes. The Rio Grande Press, Inc. Glorieta, New Mexico, 1976.