

## NEW MEXICO & ARIZONA RAILROAD

**BACKGROUND AND HISTORY:** The United States of America and Mexico engaged in an armed conflict between 1846 and 1848. The U.S. was pursuing a policy of “Manifest Destiny” with the intent of expanding its territory west to the Pacific Ocean. The Mexican Government was attempting to maintain control of the land that it had inherited from Spain after its war of independence. After the signing of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo on 2 February 1848, the border between the U.S. and Mexico in what was to become Arizona (the Territory of Arizona was not established until 24 February 1863) was established as the Gila River. The 30 December 1853 Gadsden Purchase Treaty (Final approval 8 June 1854) was negotiated with the intent of further defining the southern border and providing a better route for a southern railway.

Settlers soon began to move into the area generating a need for better transportation. In 1865, the Southern Pacific Railroad was founded to construct a railroad from New Orleans to Los Angeles. By 1880, the railroad had advanced west from El Paso and had connected Wilcox, Benson and Tucson with the east. Concurrently, mining camps and cattle ranches were being established in what is now Santa Cruz County and generating a need for rail transportation. This need led to the construction of the New Mexico & Arizona Railroad in 1882 that connected Nogales, Sonora to Benson and the main line of the Southern Pacific Railroad. It also connected to a Mexican Railroad that ran between Guaymas on the Gulf of California and Nogales.

The railroad became a major player in the development of the area. Ranchers used it to ship as many as 3000 head of cattle a day back to markets in the east. The mining industry used it to ship ore to the smelters. The mining towns of Mowry, Harshaw, Washington Camp and Duquesne thrived after the coming of the railroad. Also, the villages of Sonoita, Elgin and Patagonia came into being after the arrival of the railroad. Rollin Rice Richardson founded the town of Patagonia in 1896 and had originally named it “Rollin”. However, in 1899 when the town petitioned for a post office, it was renamed Patagonia. The railway served as a rapid way of moving from one area to another. Military officers made use of it during the final campaign against Geronimo in 1886. Lt. John Bigelow, Jr., in the book “*On the Bloody Trail of Geronimo*” details several instances where he used the railroad to rapidly move his troops and all their horses and gear. This allowed the men and their horses to arrive at their destination fresh and ready to go.

Maintenance of the railroad between Patagonia and Calabasas was a continuing problem because of periodic flooding of Sonoita Creek. The completion of the Tucson & Nogales Railroad in 1909-1910 that joined the New Mexico & Arizona Line at Calabasas made that segment of the line less important. When a flood washed out the tracks in Flux Canyon (just west of Patagonia) in 1929, the segment of the line between Patagonia and Calabasas was abandoned. The segment from Fairbank to Patagonia continued in operation until 1962 when it too was abandoned. The closure of the Flux Mine and the shipment of the last ore in 1960 was the deciding factor..

**ROUTE OF THE RAILROAD:** The New Mexico and Arizona Railroad started in Benson where it interfaced with the Southern Pacific Railroad. From Benson it headed south to Fairbank and then west toward what are now the communities of Huachuca City, Elgin, Sonoita and Patagonia. Evidence of the route through Patagonia exists in the form of the train station that has been converted into the Patagonia Town Hall and the Town Park, which was formerly the Station Grounds. Going west from Patagonia, evidence of the route can be found in the Patagonia-Sonoita Creek Preserve that is operated by the Nature Conservancy and who uses portions of the old train bed as hiking trails. Going west from the Nature Conservancy Preserve, the train bed generally follows the Sonoita Creek through the Patagonia Lake State Park/Sonoita Creek State Natural Area to the Santa Cruz River at the old town of Calabasas. The portion of the railway bed that is located within the Sonoita Creek State Natural Area and the Nature Conservancy Preserve is very much in evidence as are the remains of bridge abutments, culverts and trestle supports. From Calabasas, the roadbed followed the Santa Cruz River South to Nogales where it connected to the Mexican Railroad from Guaymas. Remnants of the old railroad are shown in the following pictures.



Wood Supports for Railroad Trestle  
Photo by T. Johnson



Wood Supports for Railroad Trestle  
Photo by T. Johnson



Concrete Culvert through Railroad Bed  
Photo by T. Johnson



Rails Remaining from Track Removal  
Photo by T. Johnson





Railroad Roadbed through Canyon  
Photo by T. Johnson



Former Patagonia Train Station  
Photo by T. Johnson

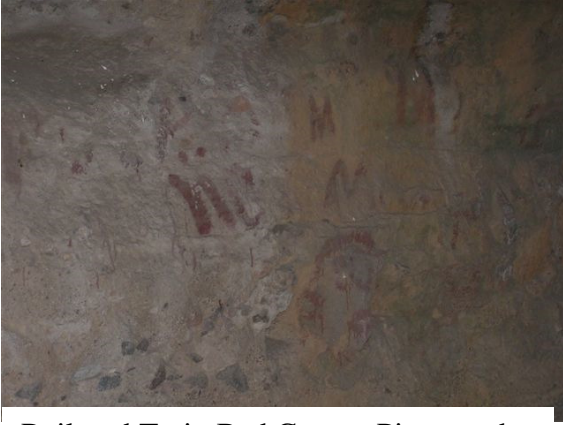
There are numerous scenic attractions along the old railroad route. When following the old railroad bed east from Calabasas, there is an overhang in the canyon wall on the left side a short distance before the junction with Fresno Canyon. There are a few pictographs that still remain visible on the walls. Also, if you take a short diversion up Fresno Canyon to a point where the canyon narrows considerably and is partially blocked by a huge boulder, there is a large ledge up high on the canyon wall on the right side. The ledge is relatively difficult to reach but if you are successful in climbing up to the ledge you will find a number of pictographs on the wall. Photos of some of the pictographs are shown below.



Fresno Canyon Pictograph  
Photo by Wayne Moshier



Fresno Canyon Pictograph  
Photo by Wayne Moshier



Railroad Train Bed Cavern Pictograph  
Photo by T. Johnson

An interesting fact concerning the New Mexico & Arizona Railroad is that the railroad scenes from four movies were filmed along the railway in Elgin. These movies were Red River (1948), Oklahoma (1955), Gunfight at the OK Corral (1957) and 3:10 to Yuma (1957).

Article prepared by T. Johnson in February 2011 and updated in August 2017 from data obtained from various web sites.

Additional Material: GVHC Library File 92