

McGEE SETTLEMENT / McGEE RANCH

The McGee Settlement is a small community located in the foothills of the eastern slopes of the Sierrita Mountains and is accessed via Mission and McGee Roads. It is essentially a closed community since only descendants of the three original founders are permitted to establish homes there. The settlements founders were the families of James Riley McGee, George Harris and David Lively. J. R. McGee had 17 children each of whom had a life estate and the right to a home site. N. E McGee, a son of J. R. was the first child born in the settlement and 3 generations have followed. All five of his children plus almost all of their 43 grandchildren live at the settlement. In 2001 there were about 300 people living in about 80 homes in the hamlet. There were more McGees than Harrises living in the settlement at that time but only one Lively family still remained. Figure 1 shows the settlement from a hill looking east toward the mines. There is a community church (non-denominational) and in the 1940s there was a school. Now all students attend the Sahaurita schools. Contrary to a common misconception, the settlement is not a Morman Community.



Figure 1, McGee Settlement

The current size of the Ranch is 30 sections (about 19,200 acres). The original size of the ranch was larger but a portion was sold to the Duval Sierrita Corporation in 1960 when the Duval Mine was developed. The mine has gone through a series of owners. The Duval Mine was sold to the Cyprus Mine Company in 1986, then to Phelps Dodge in 1999 and subsequently sold again in 2007 to the Freeport McMoRan Company.

HISTORY:

The McGee Settlement (a.k.a. the McGee Ranch) was founded by about 18 members of the James Riley McGee, George Harris and David Lively families. The McGee family was from Texas and the Harris family was from Pennsylvania. Depending on the source, the McGee and Harris families first became acquainted in Salt Lake City or Grant County New Mexico. In any case, JR McGee and George Harris were both working at the Carlisle Mine, New Mexico in 1882 when they became acquainted. In addition to working at the mine, they also worked as haulers. The two families decided to team up and subsequently moved on to Arizona, first to Greaterville to work the mines in that area and then in 1895 to the area that is now Lakewood (Kingsley Ranch). While living there, the two families decided to travel the Camino del Diablo (Devil's Highway) to California and try their luck there.

While traveling down the west side of the Sierrita Mountains they had gotten as far Chigger Hill (Lobo Peak) when a wheel broke on one of their wagons. This caused the group to stop and set up camp while the wheel was taken to Tucson for repair. During its long absence the families took up gold mining and were joined by David Lively and his family. Gold mining did not yield a livelihood but cheese from the milk of wild cows and honey from beehives they found were traded in Nogales for needed staples. It was some time before the repaired wheel was returned and by then the three families had become attached to the area and decided to stay. By one account, the women refused to leave. For about the next three years the three families lived on the western slopes of the Sierrita Mountains. In 1898 they came upon an abandoned Ranch on the east side of the Sierrita Mountains and decided to relocate there because of its closer proximity to potential work areas. The ranch had been owned by an Englishman who had planted figs and grapes but had probably abandoned it because of a lack of water. The three families quickly established themselves in what was to become the McGee Settlement.

Construction, hauling and ranching became the major occupations. Their first major project was the construction of Twin Buttes Road for the Twin Buttes Mine. They hauled ore in 1903 from Helvetia to Vail via a RR spur which was added to Southern Pacific. Between 1910 and 1913, the families had an option to purchase the Canoa Ranch. During this period the families moved down to Canoa ranch and the Settlement was maintained for grazing. During this time a horse and buggy service that ran from the Canoa Railway Station to Madera Canyon was a sideline catering to the summertime vacation trade. By 1913, unable to make the payments on Canoa ranch, the families moved back to the Settlement and Canoa was then purchased by L. H. Manning. During these difficult years the family operated communally, pooling their resources.

Conditions at the Settlement gradually improved. Electrical service became available in 1952 and telephone service finally arrived in 1962. Water has been a continual problem since the establishment of the settlement. All farming had been stopped by 1950 because of the lack of water. In 1969, the settlement founded the Shiloh Water Company as a family cooperative to provide water to the residences. Before that, residents kept their water in barrels and hauled it as needed.

The Sierrita Mining and Ranching Company was formed in 1943. The company holds numerous mining claims including the Glove Mine although there is no current (2019) mining activity. In addition to mining and ranching, the company has been involved in numerous construction projects around the area. Some of the projects that GVR hikers might be familiar with are the Mount Hopkins Road, most of the observatories buildings on Mount Hopkins and the boat ramps at Parker Canyon Lake. It seems like most high altitude construction projects around southern Arizona have involved the company.



Figure 2. West Star Cabin

The GVR Hiking Club has an excellent relationship with the Mc Gee and Harris families and conducts several hikes in the Sierrita Mountains that use the Settlement as a trailhead. A few of these hikes visit a cabin located high in the Sierritas that is no longer occupied by residents of the Settlement. This name of this structure is the West Star Cabin and it was built in 1912. Figure 2 is a photo of that cabin that was taken in 2015.

Material has been collected and edited by Margaret Bieber, Russ Hartley, Bob Lund and Lillian Monson. The article was updated by T. Johnson in 2019. Photos by T. Johnson

Bibliography:

“McGee Settlement-first Outpost,” a newspaper article by Pamela Kahn

An address by Lynn Harris to Hiking Club leaders 1-16-02 summarized by Lillian Monson

A 23 November 2002 phone conversation between Lynn Harris & L. Monson.

Recommended reading: *Ranch Schoolteacher*, by Eulalia Bourne who taught in a one room school in the Sierrita area for 8 years in the 1940's. She also wrote *Woman in Levis: 9 Months Make A Year*.