



Show Low Bluff: The Story

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Chapter 1: Discovering a Rich History

When you get to Show Low Bluff, walk out to the edge of the bluff itself. Scan the forest from east to west. Gaze down on Show Low Creek in one of the prettiest meadows in eastern Arizona. And take a look at the thin soil beneath your feet. You may not know it, but you're looking at history.

The history of this bluff, the meadow, the city of Show Low and the White Mountains is as rich as any part of the western United States. It starts with ancient people who etched petroglyphs into the nearby malapai basalt formations. It includes Spanish conquistadors and Franciscan friars, mountain men and surveyors, soldiers and homesteaders, ranchers and outlaws.

They all had one thing in common. They came here in pursuit of their dreams. It didn't matter if it was gold or animal skins, men's souls or wallets, or the land itself—they all believed there was a better life to be found here at the gateway to the White Mountains.

Throughout all of its colorful history, there's something that's never changed about this place. It's always been a great spot to live and raise a family, to fish and hunt, and talk to your neighbors.

And it started thousands of years ago.



Chapter 2: Settling the Bluff in Ancient Times

Nobody knows exactly when the so-called “ancient ones” first discovered the green meadow and meandering creek at the foot of the bluff. Scientists believe the earliest people arrived here around 22,000 years ago. They were nomadic hunters, and no doubt they found plenty of elk, deer and other animals down by the creek and in the nearby forest. Their weapon of choice was a spear, and they had a special word for the hunter who threw it—he was called an “atlatl.”

Time went by and these wandering natives started settling down. First they lived in caves but eventually they built underground dwellings—pithouses. They wove finely coiled baskets, which is why historians call them Basketmakers. And they were the only inhabitants of the region until the Pueblo people appeared.

The Pueblo, ancestors of present-day Apache and Navajo, moved west from the area that is now Texas. They found a rich land of forests, grassy fields and mountain-fed streams. These newcomers raised crops and made pottery. They lived in dwellings above ground and in cliffs. Archaeologists speculate they created a village where a bluff of black rock rose nearby, where a creek blessed them with water year-round. It was a place to build a community and raise families—the place that people know today as Show Low.



Chapter 3: Seeking Gold and Souls

Journey back in time for a moment and imagine you're one of the Pueblo people who lived here at the bluff about 500 years ago. Your family has called this land home for generations. Then one day a band of oddly outfitted men come passing through on a trek in the nearby forest. These strangers wear metal hats and they're looking for a place they call El Dorado.

That was in 1540, when Francisco Vásquez de Coronado led the first Spanish mission of exploration through the mountains and high plains of eastern Arizona. Searching for one of the Seven Cities of Cíbola. Hunting for gold. Historians believe they came within a few miles of this little meadow and bluff. Failing to find the golden city, they turned south and went back to the land we call Mexico.

Some 40 years later another Spanish explorer came through on the same quest. Like Coronado, Antonio de Espéjo and his men returned to Mexico empty-handed. But those first Europeans reported their encounters with the native people during their expeditions. Word spread and another group of Europeans set out to prospect here. But their interest wasn't in gold—they wanted souls.

The first Franciscan priests arrived in the 17th century, and many more followed. The Pueblo tolerated the missionaries at first, but in 1680 they rebelled. The Pueblo Uprising drove the Europeans out until Padre Francisco Garcés showed up in a fateful year: 1776—the same year American colonists declared their independence thousands of miles to the east.

But in all that time, over the course of more than 200 years, the Spanish essentially failed in their pursuits. They never found gold. Never converted enough souls to make an impact. And they never settled the frontier. So northeastern Arizona remained the province of native tribes, mostly unaffected by European interlopers.



Chapter 4: Claiming for Country, Scouting for Territory

By 1820 the United States of America had 25 states, three territories and a claim on the northwest.

Meantime, Mexico was a decade into its war of independence from Spain. Four years later it won and created Nuevo Mexico—an enormous area that included all or most of what are now Arizona, California, Colorado, Nevada, New Mexico, Texas, Utah and Wyoming. So this peaceful and beautiful corner of the world became a part of a new nation. Curiously, the Mexicans didn't seem very interested in exploring this land.

The next group to follow their dreams came west from the United States, not north from Mexico. And they didn't come for gold or souls. They wanted furs.

They were mountain men, fur trappers—legendary figures named Kit Carson, Ewing Young, Bill Williams, James Ohio Pattie and Geran St. Vrain. Some of these pelt hunters probably set their traps along the Little Colorado River and the streams running out of the White Mountains. For a while, St. Vrain had a clerk by the name of Corydon E. Cooley—a man who would become the founding father of Show Low.

The Mexican-American War broke out in 1846. It had little direct impact on eastern Arizona, but two military expeditions ventured through this frontier. Colonel Stephen W. Kearney led one party along the Gila River. More important was the famous Mormon Battalion. Among its ranks were men who would later settle in the Show Low area.

The war ended in February 1848. The bluff, the meadow and its creek became the territory of the United States.

Unlike the Mexican government before them, the land's new owners in Washington had no idea what lay west of the Rio Grande, and they wanted to find out. So they dispatched exploratory missions to the new territory. One of the most important was under the command of Captain Lorenzo Sitgreaves of the U.S. Topographical Engineers. He led a party to study northern and eastern Arizona. The troop followed the same general route Padre Francisco Garcés had traveled back in 1776.

Other government expeditions that passed through the region included a surveying party to map potential routes for a transcontinental railroad and one that used camels as pack animals. The idea was hatched by a lieutenant in the Topographical Engineers who built the first wagon road across northern Arizona. Ned Beale thought camels could last longer than horses in Arizona's parched



landscape. They did but none of the men wanted to be out there with them—and their foul breath. The humped beasts were turned loose. Needless to say, you don't see many camels roaming the American West these days.



Chapter 5: Proclaiming Permanence: C.E. Cooley

He served as a clerk for the legendary mountain man Geran St. Vrain. He worked as an army quartermaster at Fort McLain, New Mexico. He scouted for Gen. George Crook during the Apache Wars in frontier Arizona. C.E. Cooley wore many different hats in his life and he's remembered for many different things. But perhaps most of all, he's remembered as the man who founded Show Low.

Just 22 years old when he left his Virginia home in 1850, Cooley went searching for adventure in the New Mexico Territory. He enlisted in the Union Army in 1861 and served as a First Lieutenant in the Second New Mexico Voluntary Infantry. But he was more interested in adventure. And gold.

So with the Civil War over, he journeyed westward again. This time in search of the fabled Doc Thorn Mine. The precious ore was said to be hidden in the White Mountains of the Arizona Territory. In the company of two other prospectors, Cooley set off from Zuni, New Mexico, forded the Little Colorado River and ventured into the forested country along the Mogollon Rim.

The location of the mythical mine eluded the three fortune hunters. But Cooley did discover something of rare value—a stretch of land he called “the finest timbered and watered country I have ever seen.” Of course, he didn't know it at the time, but he was standing on ground that would one day become home to a new town. A town he would help found and name.

The Army wanted to build a fort in the area. With the help and consent of the Apache chiefs Eskininla and Eskiltesela, Camp Ord was established on May 6, 1870 on the White River, south of here. It would become Fort Apache. To C.E. Cooley, the new military outpost represented an opportunity.

He found a piece of land a few miles from the fort that would be perfect for farming. He staked a spread, raised corn and other vegetables, and supplied the troops with fresh crops. But he couldn't quite stop being an explorer. So he worked as a guide for the troops and surveyed military roads—possibly even one that can still be seen today in a couple spots at Show Low Bluff.

He found an even better site for a farm, this one in a valley and near a creek. But there was a problem. A fellow named Marion Clark had a claim on the land. So C.E. Cooley, the mountain man-soldier-pro prospector-farmer-turned-businessman decided there was only one way to get a piece of that land. He and Clark became partners. And for the first time in more than 500 years, since the Pueblo had left their homes, a new and permanent settlement was established on this special place.



Chapter 6: Naming a Ranch and City

The Cooley-Clark ranch was the only white settlement for miles around. So it became a stopover for travelers. One visitor wrote his impression of the place as “one of the best ranches in Arizona. It is located in the midst of a beautiful pine forest. The grazing is superb and extensive, and their stock are fat the year through. The hearty welcome they give to strangers and travelers makes one feel at home.”

Needless to say, it wasn't much by today's standards. The wife of Lt. Summerhayes of Fort Apache wrote that the ranch house “had spaces for windows, covered with this unbleached muslin, glass windows being then too great a luxury in that remote place.” She noted there were “some partitions inside the ranch, but no doors; and, of course, no floors except adobe.”

Cooley and Clark worked the ranch together until 1876, when they decided the spread just wasn't big enough for both of them. They agreed to dissolve the partnership. But instead of splitting the land between them, they played a card game called “seven-up” to determine who would keep it and who would move on.

Unlike most games, the low card wins in seven-up. So as the last hand was dealt, Cooley needed just one low card to win.

“If you can show low, you take the ranch,” Clark said, according to legend.

“Show low it is!” said Cooley. He played a deuce of clubs and won the ranch. And named a future city in the process.



Chapter 7: Homesteading on Cornmeal and Sweat

A small number of pioneer families were homesteading the area by the 1870s. They were Mormon families called by Brigham Young to establish settlements in the region. Many started by settling along the Little Colorado, but the river proved unpredictable and flooded their farms. So they pushed farther south.

The first pioneer families to settle the land that today is Show Low were headed by David E. Adams and Alfred Cluff. In early 1876, the two families made their way toward the forest to the south. Their expedition led them to Cooley's ranch. They knew they'd come across something special—a great place to raise families and make a living off the land. So in the spring of 1877, Adams and Cluff struck a deal to rent land from Cooley.

Corn flourished in the fields. Cattle fattened on the grass. Furniture was cut from soft pine. Word spread that this was a great place to settle. By the winter of 1879-80, the growing settlement was placed under the jurisdiction of Apache County. The Mormon pioneers established a ward here, built a school and started a Young Men's Mutual Improvement Association.

It may have been a good life but it wasn't necessarily easy. Ephraim McNeil's family arrived here one winter, bringing almost nothing with them from their former home in Utah. They endured the winter in a small tent and slept in their wagon bed. Spring finally came. They planted corn seed. "We had no potatoes," Mrs. McNeil wrote in her diary, "just corn, and when it got so we could eat it, we had it three times a day, until it got too hard to eat."

The Van Hansens arrived in the fall of 1880. They built a one-room lean-to behind an obliging neighbor's house and moved wagon boxes into the shack for furniture. They lived mostly on cornbread, "made of cornmeal, salt and water, unleavened." Despite the hardships, through the perseverance of these pioneering families, a fledgling community was taking shape.



Chapter 8: Living in Peace among the Apache

Congress had established the Arizona Territory in 1863 as part of an effort to bring order to the region. White settlers had been moving onto lands of the different nations of Apache, which include the Chiricahua, Mescalero, Jicarrilla, Lipan and Kiowa-Apache. It caused trouble in many places but not here.

In this part of the young territory, the Western Apache, pioneer families and U.S. Army got along rather peacefully. They lived close to each other, settled land disputes amiably and traded with each other. One settler, Mrs. Ephraim McNeil, even sewed skirts for Apache women.

Panic went through the area in 1881 when word spread that Geronimo, the Chiricahua Apache chief, was on his way north toward the White Mountains and the little settlement of pioneers. Gen. George Crook signed up about 50 Western Apache scouts to help find Geronimo—a campaign that eventually took 5,000 soldiers and 500 scouts. As it turned out, Crook's men helped keep part of the White Mountains for the Apache.

Understandably, the homesteaders were anxious when they heard Geronimo was on the way. Up at Cooley's ranch, they erected a fortress to defend themselves. Canvas tops were removed from covered wagons to make a roof over the fort, and blankets were hung inside to set up rooms for each family.

The women kept homes as well as they could while the men stood guard at nights and snuck out to tend their farms during the days. Geronimo never came. The threat came to an end, the pioneers went back to raising their families, and eventually a reservation was established for the Apache in the beautiful White Mountains.



Chapter 9: Ranching, Rustling and Chinese Cooking

The Atlantic and Pacific Railroad came through north of here in the early 1880s. And though the rails ran through Holbrook, they were close enough to change life for the pioneering settlers in the White Mountains. One effect was to turn ranching from a family affair into an industrial-scale enterprise.

The grazing lands in this area were some of the best in the West. The grass was knee high and rain fell almost every evening in the summer. Cattle ranchers from Texas had discovered this lush country earlier and had driven some herds through here. But now, with the arrival of the railroad, New York bankers realized there was a lot of money to be made with thousands of head of cattle getting fat on the high plains of eastern Arizona. The Wabash Cattle Co. was one of these, but the biggest and most famous—and most infamous, as some tell it—was the Hash Knife Outfit.

The Aztec Land and Cattle Co. bought 1 million acres from the Atlantic and Pacific Railroad in northern Arizona at 50 cents an acre in 1884. In turn, the banker behind the deal bought the enormous but drought-stricken Hash Knife herd from its Texas ranching operation. Nearly 32,000 cattle were driven north from Texas and shipped by rail to the new ranch in Arizona. Texas cowboys came with the herd. Several of these men were the stuff of western movies—fugitives from the law and gunslingers with names like Poker Bill, Ace of Diamonds and Loco Tom Lucky.

So began a struggle between pioneer cattle ranches and sheepherders, who worked small tracts of land, and the mammoth Hash Knife Outfit. Along with the range war came rustling—or “throwing a wide loop,” as it was known at the time. Horse and cattle rustlers ran rampant. Small ranchers threw wide loops around Hash Knife cattle and vice versa. But a combination of rustling and hard winters cut down the Hash Knife’s herd. By 1895 the business was deep in the red and selling out.

The smaller ranchers finally won the struggle. One of the most prominent in Show Low was a wealthy businessman who moved here from New Mexico. Henry Huning had earned his fortune as a supplier for the Army’s outposts. He arrived in 1881 and invested in a half-share of C.E. Cooley’s ranch. As partners, the two men made the ranch one of the best spreads in the territory. It was stocked with Hereford cattle from England and Percheron stallions.

Around 1888, Huning bought out Cooley. According to a territorial judge of the time, Huning “had built a long, low rambling house and filled it with every comfort one could think of finding on a cow ranch. He had a well-stocked wine cellar and a cold storage plant, and kept the best Chinese cook I ever knew.”



But the times were changing. The warriors, prospectors and ranchers of the 19th century gave way to a new rolling tide of history, the 20th century. And it turned out to be a mostly peaceful time—tame in comparison with what had come before.