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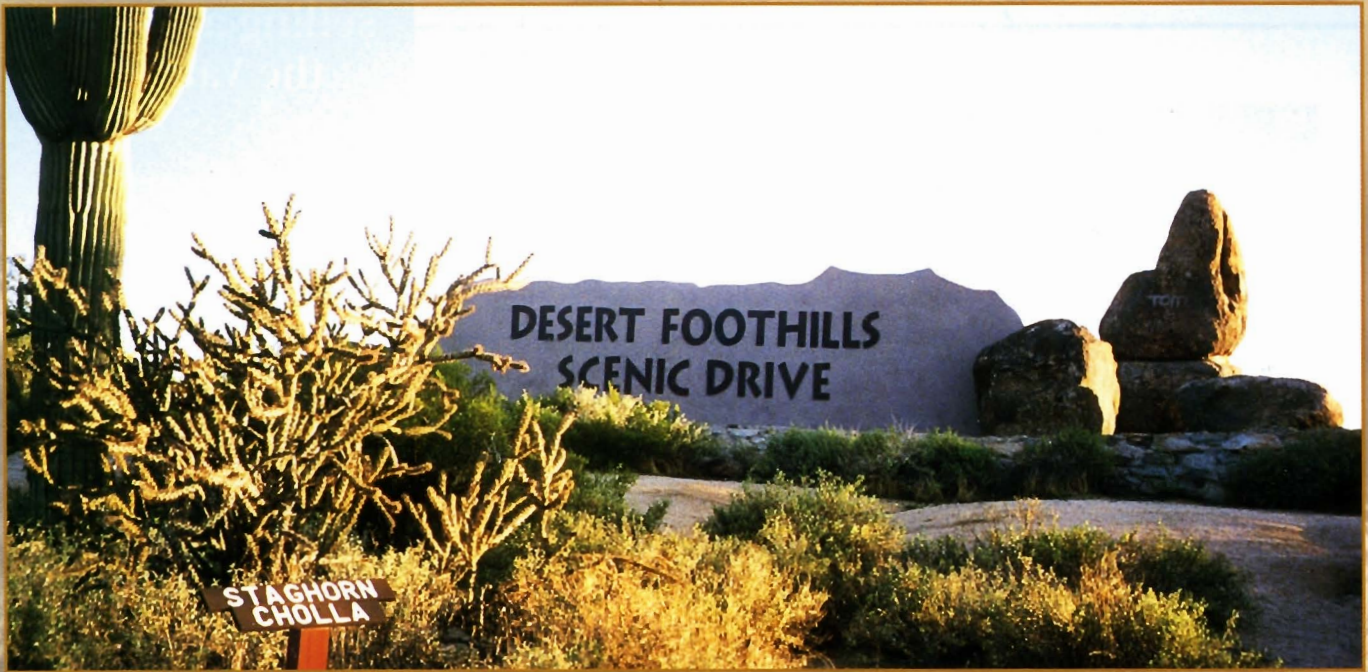
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CHAPARRAL PINES

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DISCOVERING THE Desert Foothills SCENIC DRIVE

written by

Les Conklin

equipped with the old treasure map and a book on southwestern plants, I am eager to begin an unusual search in a place of unrivaled natural beauty known as the Desert Foothills. A special place where the desert gradually rises to the mountains, creating slightly cooler temperatures and a lush landscape dotted with saguaros, palo verde, mesquite and chollas. A landscape where the fertile desert floor covers the forgotten footprints of Apaches, prospectors and pioneers.

The Desert Foothills Scenic Drive has helped many modern settlers and visitors learn the names of plants that are peculiar to the area. Twelve years ago, as new residents, my wife and I visited the small plant markers along the drive examining the plants and memorizing their strange names. Now, I am excited about spending a morning amidst the saguaros and palo verdes prospecting for the original markers and plant sites, many of which are missing or in need of repair.



STAGHORN CHOLLA

In 1963, enthusiastic residents from the tiny community of Cave Creek used the old map to create the drive along the northern portions of Scottsdale and Cave Creek Roads. Fred Griffin, one of the drive's founders explained, "Gladys Nisbet, a local botanist, picked the plants and drew the map so the rest of us would know what signs to make and where to put them. On Scottsdale Road she identified more than twenty species of trees, shrubs and cacti on each side of the road. Volunteer strawbosses acted as laid-back foremen, while plant parents placed white rocks around each plant and posted a small redwood sign bearing the plant's name in front of each site where it could be seen by motorists.

For more than three decades the signs did their job of drawing attention to the variety of exotic plants found in the Desert Foothills. Our recent return visit to the drive reveals younger vegetation hiding some plant sites, several plants have died and some signs and white rocks are missing. The drive needs attention!

The Desert Foothills Scenic Drive was Corky Cockburn's brainchild. It took three phone calls to track her down so I could hear her story. "It was a moonlit evening in 1963. My husband and I and another couple were making the lonely, quiet drive home

through the tall saguaros and thickets of jumping cholla. We spoke of our fear that the roadside would become lined with gas stations and stores. Creating the drive was our way of preserving the desert along the northern parts of Scottsdale and Cave Creek Roads, and it has worked to this day!"

Corky continued her story. "The Cave Creek Improvement Association got almost everyone in the Cave Creek-Carefree area involved in building the drive. The local lumber yard provided material at cost. Students painted. Businessmen routed, sawed, constructed and installed the signs. Others cleaned the plants and the area around them."

My decision to revisit the drive and begin the task of restoring it to its former glory coincided with the return of my sons, Bob and Geoff, both at home for a holiday. They eagerly asked to join the hunt.

Our jumping off point is the drive entry sign on the east side of Scottsdale Road about two miles north of Rawhide, the recreated 1880s town.

We pull to the side of the road to examine the sign. The brown paint is weathered and the white paint is peeling off the letters, but we can read the proclamation routed into the wrinkled wood by drive founder, the late Les Rhuart, "Desert Foothills Scenic Drive — The Most Beautiful Desert in the World." As the three of us take in the



HEDGEHOG

view of the McDowell Mountains rising gently to the east, and the rugged terrain of the Tonto National Forest to the north, we agree that the vintage sign still speaks the truth.

The drive once cut through an expanse of wild, unsettled land that separated Carefree and Cave Creek from the expanding cities of Phoenix



PINNACLE PEAK THROUGH AN OCOTILLA

and Scottsdale to the south. Scottsdale Road was quiet and lightly traveled. Now a busy highway it provides easy access to golf courses, resorts, restaurants, shopping malls and new residential developments scattered about the foothills. Tour buses frequently stop along the drive allowing visitors to stretch and take photographs of the towering saguaros.

Peering closely at the native vegetation, a loud tapping noise captures our attention. We watch as a Gila woodpecker begins tunneling a home in a forty foot tall saguaro just a few feet away. There are saguaros, which only grow in parts of Arizona and Sonora, Mexico, all along the drive. During cool May nights the tip of every saguaro branch is covered with wax-white flowers. In June, these gentle giants bear purple fruit.

Leaving the wooden sign, Bob and Geoff and I walk north a short distance to a small cleared area on the east side of Scottsdale Road. Two weeks before this adventure, Jo Walker, who as president of the Cave Creek Improvement Association shepherded the drive's upkeep for many years, had sent the map to me with a note. "Back in the sixties, Maricopa County had jurisdiction over the land along the drive. Vince Thelander, a Cave Creek resident and member of the County Planning Commission, worked successfully to have the drive designated as a scenic corridor with setbacks to

protect the plants next to the roads. They cleared the area and erected the large cement sign with black metal letters — Desert Foothills Scenic Drive. There were three redwood picnic tables there for a long time." The tables are gone and the sign is rusted. It had been the site of tourists using the rusted sign as a backdrop for photographs that led me to approach Scottsdale city manager, Dick Bowers, with the idea of restoring the drive. Dick's answer was unambiguous. "The city will help in every way it can."

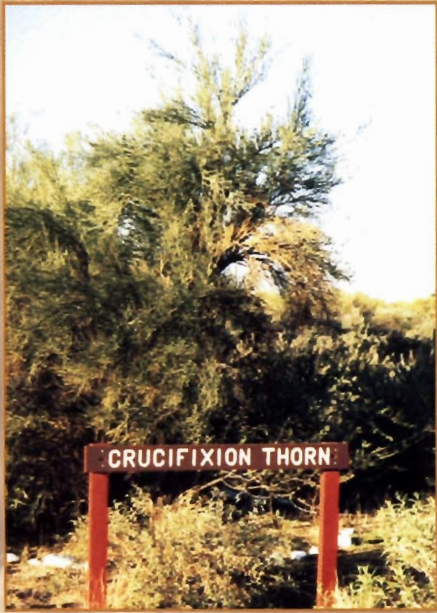
Back in the car, we head north, starting our discovery tour in earnest. We cannot see the sign for the ironwood that is supposed to be on the east side of the road, so we turn around, backtrack, park and begin walking north searching the desert for the evidence of the ironwood site. "Here it is!", Bob shouts. Our first find of the day. The circle of white rocks is spattered with dirt and camouflaged by new plant growth. The sign, neatly lettered — Ironwood — is laying next to the rocks.

The ironwood is still there — after thirty long years. Ironwoods are tough trees, even harder than their name suggests. Ironwood is so hard that it has proven almost useless to desert dwellers; few could find tools strong enough to work on it. In the spring, ironwoods soften their image when half-inch blossoms form in little purple bouquets.

Looking toward the east, Pinnacle Peak serves as a direction post pointing to popular Scottsdale eateries Pinnacle Peak Patio, Riata Pass Steakhouse and Greasewood Flat, where Geoff entertains as a country and western singer. Troon North, the world-class golf course is up that way, too. From our vantage point near the ironwood, Pinnacle Peak resembles the head of a cottontail rabbit. Cottontails and jackrabbits were abundant when the Hohokam people arrived about 300 A.D. and still scamper in the desert along the drive.

The Hohokam migrated here from the vicinity of the Salt River to the southwest. They tended crops beside the many springs that flowed in the region. In 1988 the Pinnacle Peak Land Company asked Arizona State University's Anthropology Department to conduct an archeological survey of a Hohokam site on the land company's property just south of Pinnacle Peak. Eighteen pit houses were unearthed. The Hohokam inhabited many sites in the Desert Foothills, but after spending some eight hundred years in the region, they moved on, abandoning the foothills to the rabbits and coyotes. We decide to move on and return to the car.

Carefully scanning both sides of the road, we look for the original signs, plants, or white rocks. "There's the ocotillo," says Geoff with a tinge of excitement in his



PRICKLY PEAR



FOOTHILLS OCOTILLA

voice. We pull up next to the site for a quick inspection. Excellent! The site needs to be trimmed and the sign painted, but the ocotillo is flourishing.

The ocotillo, which in the spring has flaming orange flowers on top of each long slender stem, is known by many names: monkey tail, candlewood, Jacob's staff. Ocotillo means coachman's whip in Spanish. Many plants found along the drive, chuparosa, jojoba, cholla or saguaro are known by Spanish names, but the Spanish never came to central Arizona. They labeled the area as despoblado, meaning desolate wilderness on their maps and bypassed the region. They would have re-labeled their maps had they seen the Desert Foothills — especially when the palo verde trees bloom in May.

Palo verdes thrive all along the drive. Their name means green stick in Spanish. Every part of the tree is green — the trunks, limbs, twigs, even the thorns. When the palo verdes bloom in May, this part of Scottsdale Road is ablaze with pale yellow.

We cannot find the hackberry that the treasure map indicates is near the intersection of Scottsdale and Dynamite Roads. After five minutes of looking in the desert near the road, we call off the search. The terrain here is thick with creosotes and saguaros, and I make a note to consider using a large creosote as a substitute for the missing hackberry.

We continue to move north, alternately driving and walking, retracing our path, crossing and re-crossing the

road, searching for lost signs and missing plants. When my memory fails, we refer to the trusty plant book to identify plants. At Dixeletta Road, we pause to log our findings. A perplexed Harris hawk watches our seemingly erratic behavior from atop a nearby telephone pole.

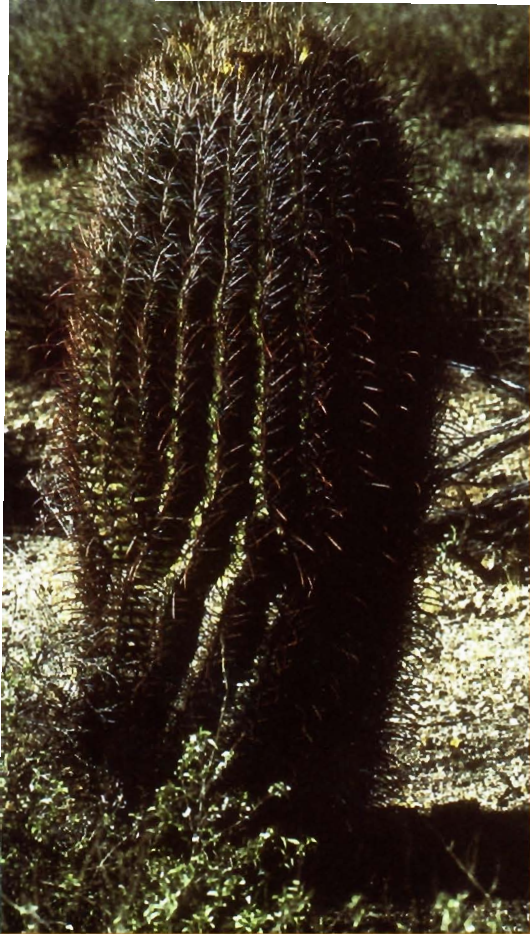
Reading the book reminds me that each plant has a story to tell. The succulent barrel cactus quenches the thirst of parched prospectors. Catclaw is disliked by today's riders and hikers because its strong thorns tear at both clothing and skin, but catclaw seeds were widely used as food by the Indians. Another food source was prickly pear which provided fruit for the Hohokam and later for the nomadic Apaches. Many desert dwellers still harvest the fruit to make distinctive jams and jellies.

Tonto and Yavapai Apaches moved into the desert foothills of the McDowell Mountains during the 1400s. The Apaches spent their summer and fall months moving slowly through these foothills gathering roots, stems, leaves and fruits. The fierce Apaches prevented others from enjoying the area until the army's all-out campaign to subdue them in

1872-73.

Looking north from Lone Mountain Road, we see the familiar sight of Black Mountain looming 4,000 feet above the desert floor. Imagine a concerned Tonto Apache watching from a perch high on the mountain as Colonel George Stoneman and a small escort follow the ancient Indian trail that ran from the Verde River to the north of Pinnacle Peak, north of Black Mountain to the east bank of present day Cave Creek. Soldiers had scouted the trail before but never with wagons. This was different! Stoneman's 1870 expedition led to the construction of a wagon road through the Cave Creek area and the first settlement in the foothills in 1873.

North of Lone Mountain Road we encounter large forests of staghorn cholla, teddy bear cholla and chain fruit cholla. I'm sure Stoneman's soldiers learned to tread carefully to avoid the



BARREL CACTUS

painful consequences of the cholla's renowned jumping ability. Bob and I inspect the nest of a cactus wren, encased by a chain fruit cholla. The cactus wren, Arizona's state bird, likes to nest in chollas — the long, saber-like needles discourage even the hungriest of predators.

As we get closer to Black Mountain, we see the remains of an old wagon road winding up the east side of the mountain. When the Apaches lost control of the area the prospectors swarmed in and filed claims. Gold Hill, Elizabeth, Lion, Golden Star, Wire Gold, Mormon Girl and other mines sprang up in the desert foothills. The twisting road before us was part of the Mormon Girl Mine. The Taylor family worked the mine during the 1890s, but sold it after their secret hoard of pure gold buttons was stolen.

After the prospectors came the settlers, cattle ranchers and sheep herders. Nearly every movie or novel depicting the Old West mentions



CHAIN FRUIT

mesquite, and rightly so. The pioneers used these trees for the construction of primitive dwellings, fuel, furniture and utensils. When barbed wire came along, mesquite was perfect for fence posts.

Ahead, I can see the golden rock mass of the Boulders marking the border of Scottsdale and Carefree. Tom Darlington and K.T. Palmer bought a 400-acre goat ranch in 1955 for \$44,000, and set in motion the forces that would create the town of Carefree with its laid-back street names of Ho and Hum Roads and Easy Street. In 1956 Scottsdale Road was extended through the desert and connected to Cave Creek. By 1963, the wild desert had been breached by two paved roads — Scottsdale Road and Cave Creek Road. Cave Creek residents watched, like the Apache on Black Mountain, as change approached from the south, and they created the drive to preserve scenic corridors in the desert.

After a little more than two hours, my sons and I reach our journey's end, the intersection of Carefree Highway and Scottsdale Road. We sit down in the shadow of Black Mountain and absorb the scenery that is enjoyed by visitors

to the nearby Boulders Resort and el Pedregal. As the crow flies, we have traveled five miles, but I suspect we have covered twice that distance. Bob sums up our notes. "You will need twenty new signs: ironwood, greythorn, jojoba... seven other signs can be repaired, and fifteen substitute plants need to be located. Not that bad!"

A restoration program ensued aided and abetted by such organizations as Del Webb, Centex Homes, the Greater Pinnacle Peak Homeowners Association, Foothills Drive Homeowners Coalition and the City of Scottsdale. Local citizens, councilmen and members of the original drive team lent their support to the collective effort. The Tourism Development Commission has also become an active partner in improving the drive.

Today, the Hohokams, Apaches, soldiers, prospectors and pioneers are gone, but the plants remain. The old map helped my family and me rediscover the beauty of the Desert Foothills Scenic Drive and linked us to the diverse people who once walked this incredible landscape.

Editors note: Les Conklin served as the project's restoration chairman.

Editor's comment: According to our own Robert Rinehart the name Desert Foothills originated within the pages of the Carefree Enterprise, in 1964, when he and his late wife were the owners and publishers of that magazine.

