

COURTLAND ARIZONA

an
Historical
Overview



Glenn Snow
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GSnow@GleesonArizona.com

Cover photograph: Courtland Post Office, courtesy of the Arizona Historical Foundation.

Courtland, Arizona stands as an example of a typical southwest mining boom town. From a material standpoint, it owed its existence to copper, railroads, and technology. From a human standpoint, it equally owed its existence to greed, opportunity, optimism, determination, naiveté, stubbornness, publicity, tall tales, resourcefulness, and outright lies.

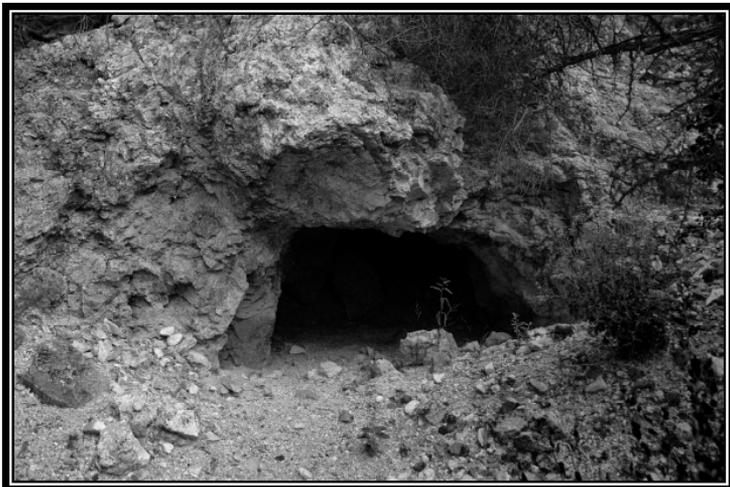
The town of Courtland was named after Courtland Young, one of two brothers who owned the Great Western Copper Mining Company. The Young brothers, lumber magnates from Clinton Iowa, came into possession of a half-sector of land along the southern edge of the Dragoon Mountains in far southeastern Arizona. Courtland Young rarely came to Arizona, largely contenting himself with running the lumber business in Iowa. His brother William was the driving force behind their new mining enterprise out in far-flung Arizona Territory (Arizona became a state on Valentine's Day in 1912). In 1908, a rich vein of copper ore was discovered between the Sulphur Springs Valley and the old turquoise mines once jealously protected by the Chiricahua Apache tribe. Copper mining required great machinery and resources unavailable to the lowly individual prospector or miner, and so the Great Western Copper Mining Company was created to take advantage of this opportunity. Within months, three other large mining companies also staked out claims in the vicinity. At the time, copper was in great demand, as the inventions of Edison and others drove many towns and cities to get "electrified".

Within months, all the land within walking distance was bought up, in large parcels, and was being divided into residential and mining areas. A Mormon entrepreneur named James McFate (or J.N. McFate, as the common style for men was to identify themselves by their initials instead of their first names) had brokered a deal where he sub-divided a large tract of land adjacent to the big mines, into small lots which were sold for homes to mine workers and businesses to support them. It became known as the McFate townsite, and was the first housing site in the area, apart from tents thrown up on unused land. McFate was an unabashed booster, which served his real-estate business quite well. He had previously been the manager of a bottling company in Morenci, another copper mining town to the north. When word of a rich

copper strike reached him, he left the bottling plant and came down to the southern Dragoons to get a jump-start on any competition in what he judged would be a real-estate boom. He was right about the boom. He also got out of the real-estate business before it went bust just a few years later. McFate apparently had excellent business instincts.

In the meantime, the Leadville Mining Company, the Calumet and Arizona Mining Company and other concerns had also staked out or negotiated mining rights to just about every square foot of land in the district. Since the Young brothers were the largest landowners, William decided to name the new town after his brother. The town of Courtland, Arizona was born in early 1909.

In February of 1909, the first issue of the Courtland Arizonan, a weekly newspaper, was published. Its owner and editor, John V. VanEaton, began an enterprise which was almost single-handedly responsible for the widespread reputation of Courtland and the attraction of thousands of residents. Readers of the Arizonan found extensive and unreserved praise for the town and its prospects for the future. Ads on every page extolled the limitless potential of this mining town, and small blurbs filled most every white space with dripping enthusiasm for everything about Courtland. VanEaton soon joined McFate and others in trying his hand at real estate, but he'd been so busy starting up the newspaper that he'd missed the real early-bird opportunities for wealth.



Scores of mine shafts were started, some by big companies and some by individual miners hoping to get lucky and strike it rich. The area is pockmarked with them, attesting to the optimism and sometimes the naiveté of recent arrivals. The miners lived in makeshift homes, often hardly more than tents, and worked long and arduous hours in the mines, following the veins of rich copper ore. Miners were mostly single men, or men living away from their families. The women of Courtland were largely shopkeepers, or the wives of shopkeepers, along with teachers, craftswomen, and operators of boarding houses and restaurants.

By the middle of 1910, there were nearly 2000 residents in Courtland, along with miles of water mains, telegraph lines, two rival telephone exchanges, stores, butchers, a lumber yard, an ice-cream parlor, an automobile dealership, and a movie theater. Most every service was available in Courtland, from barbers to assayers, from saddle repair to machinists. Visitors to the tenderloin district, on the north of Courtland, had other services available to them as well.

The law was represented in Courtland almost completely by one man, John Henry Bright. John came from Texas where his family had considerable dealings in oil. He was married to Pearl Allen, and moved with her to join with her family in Arizona in 1908. He became a deputy Sheriff of Cochise County and the constable (local jail-keeper) of Courtland that same year. His brother-in-law Wesley Cates held the same position just down the road in Gleeson. Until 1909 there was no real jail in Courtland. Instead, an abandoned mine shaft was fitted with a heavy oak door, which was padlocked closed. In June of 1909, an enterprising though not too sharp prisoner decided to burn his way out through the oak door. Unfortunately there was more smoke than damage, and he nearly suffocated. Sheriff Bright rescued him and the town finished building a proper jail. It was completed in June and was nicknamed "The Bright Hotel" by the locals. It housed mostly drunks and thieves during its tenure, with the exception of one murderer, a woman who killed her boyfriend in a fit of jealousy in the tenderloin district. John Bright was the one and only constable in the town's brief history, though others were given territorial jurisdiction as the town declined.

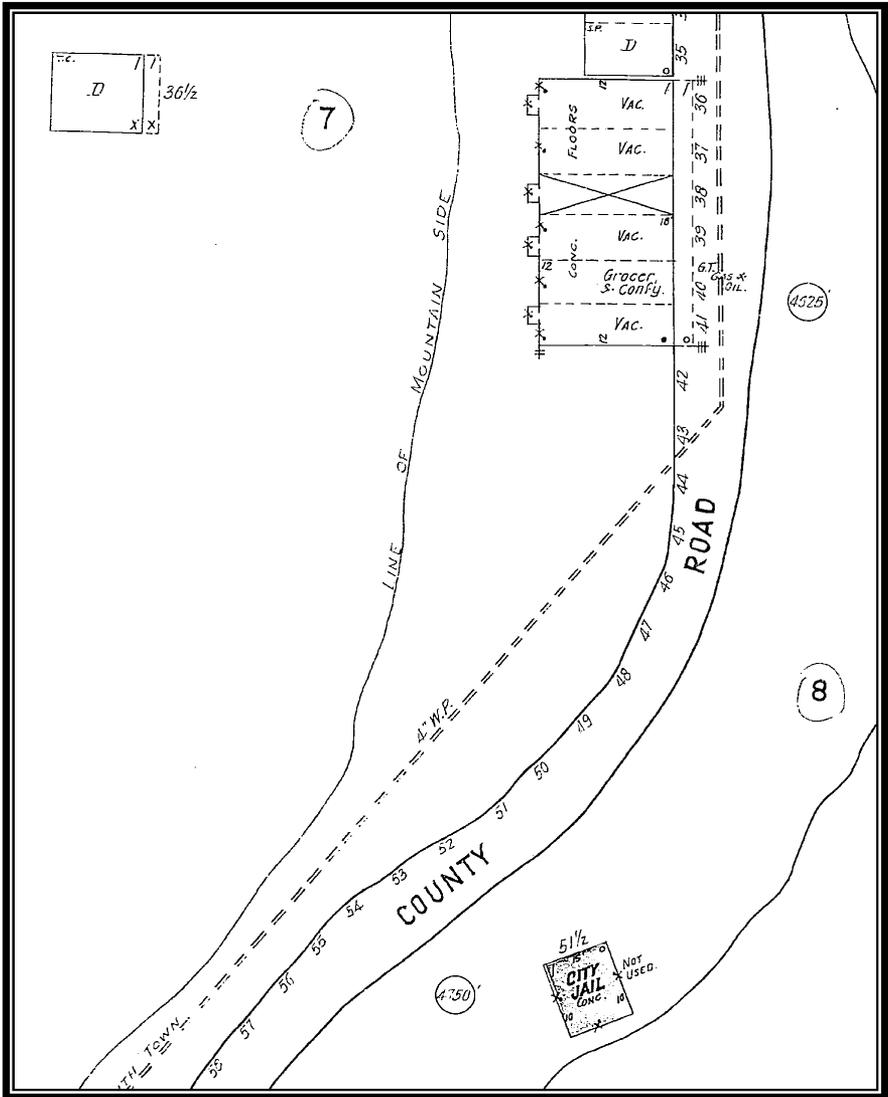
If copper was the mare who gave birth to Courtland, the railroad was the sire. Two railroad empires competed mightily for the chance to come into Courtland: the Southern Pacific (known as the S.P. or “Espee” to the locals); and the El Paso and Southwestern (known as the EP&SW). In fact, Courtland became a major battleground for those two railroad companies. The EP&SW was playing David to the S.P.’s Goliath. The EP&SW built a line up from Douglas while the Espee built south from their main line in the town of Cochise. Due largely to some labor issues, the EP&SW won the race into town, and in fact almost circled the entire town of Courtland with its tracks. It had two spurs, one coming in on the south side of town and traveling right up through the homes of the Great Western townsite. The other coming up the gully between central and north Courtland and circling around the mountain to a spot just above the end of the southern spur. The effect was like a finger and thumb encompassing the whole town. The Espee had to settle for a terminal on the far south side of Courtland. This spur then continued around the mountains and into Gleeson. The mining ore was all hauled by the EP&SW, while the Southern Pacific focused on freight and passengers, taking advantage of its trans-continental connection in Cochise.

Courtland’s ore was rich with copper, but it was not deep. By 1911, several of the major mines had played out. At some time in the geologic past, a block of copper-rich rock was shifted into the Courtland area, but that block ended about 300 feet below the surface. The Germania mine (primary mine of the Calumet and Arizona company) was dug down to 500 feet, but no copper was found below the 300 foot level. Flooding groundwater caused them to abandon everything below 300 feet, and when the price of copper dropped in 1913, all work on the Germania ceased. Other mines stopped working as well, and except for a few lone holdouts trying to scratch out a living, all mining ceased by the end of 1913. With the closing of the mines, much of the remaining population migrated elsewhere. Courtland’s heyday had lasted only four years. It remained as a center for the surrounding farms and ranches, and the railroads made it viable supply town for a while, but eventually, the population of Courtland just bled out.

Farms and cattle ranches bordered Courtland on the east, and became Courtland's primary customers, at least for a time. It was the railroad which allowed this to continue. The Southern Pacific eventually bought out the EP&SW system in late 1924, ending that rivalry in a typically American fashion. The trains stopped running to Courtland in the spring of 1933, and the tracks were picked up by New Years Day of 1934. The farms and ranches simply switched to trucks for the delivery of their supplies, over increasingly paved roads. Cattle were driven to Willcox and loaded onto trains there until the end of World War II. Small farms, most of which had begun under the Homestead Act of 1863, were gradually abandoned or merged together to create larger farms, which continue to operate in the Sulphur Springs Valley. Ground water could be had in sufficient quantity to supply the agriculture, but it was pumped from several hundred feet below the surface. Until the electrification of the area in the 1950's and '60's, that was a difficult and expensive task.

The history of Courtland is brief but instructive. It illustrates the rivalry of big railroads and big mining, as well as small hopes and small enterprises. It was the birthplace of several companies as well as the birthplace of William Rumford, the first African-American elected to any public office in northern California. It was a mostly peaceful town, with only one murder in its history, although several shoot-outs occurred on its streets and in nearby arroyos. Its meager ruins encompass the passing of a century and a way of life. Its trails, roads and borders mark the passing of the baton from the railroads of the 19th century to the roadways of the 20th century; from small homestead farms to larger and corporate farms; from the Old West to the New West.

Courtland, Arizona



Portion of a 1927 map of downtown (center) Courtland, showing the jail, a 4-inch water main, and mostly-empty stores on the west side of Ghost Town Trail.