

Early Years of the Santa Rita Experimental Range and Florida Station

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On April 11, 1902, President Theodore Roosevelt issued a proclamation creating the Santa Rita Forest Reserve, the first major withdrawal of public lands in southern Arizona. Despite the name, the Santa Rita Forest Reserve included much more than the forested hillsides of the Santa Rita Mountains. Well over half of the 592 square miles set aside were made up of the expanse of “slope” lands between the mountains and Tucson, some 40 miles to the north; less than 15 percent of the Forest Reserve was “timbered land.”

The inclusion of these lower desert grasslands and desert scrub areas was not an accident. Robert H. Forbes, the Director of the University of Arizona’s Agricultural Experiment Station, and colleague David Griffiths of the US Department of Agriculture’s Bureau of Plant Industry had laid plans to launch a study of the rangelands south of Tucson. They sought to investigate how the productivity of the severely degraded grazing lands could be recovered. Their plans were well enough known in Washington that the Forest Reserve was laid out to encompass their proposed study area. The northernmost end of the Reserve included four square miles near Wilmot Station on the Southern Pacific Railroad that already had been set aside as a range experiment area by presidential proclamation in 1900.

Soon after the Forest Reserve was created, the Bureau and the Experiment Station, likely represented by Griffiths and Forbes respectively, drafted an agreement for “cooperative range investigations.” Central to the proposition was the selection of a suitable area that the Bureau would have fenced. Early in 1903, Tucsonan Mark Walker surveyed a 49-square mile area designated by Griffiths and a contract for fencing was awarded to local rancher/miner William McCleary who had a camp near the mouth of what is now known as Florida Canyon (at that time it was McCleary’s or Stone Cabin Canyon). By the end of May the enclosure fence was nearly complete and Griffiths instructed local ranchers to come for a roundup to claim their stock. Though it had no official designation at the time, this 49-square mile enclosure became the core of what is now the Santa Rita Experimental Range.

Fence-builder McCleary secured an appointment as the on-site custodian and designated representative of the Bureau and the Station, charged with maintaining fences, keeping weather observations, and reporting on activities in and around the reserve. McCleary’s ranch served as the de facto field headquarters for the range reserve. The initial range reserve was laid out to

exclude established and functioning ranches at the foot of the mountains on the south and east, and the mining town of Helvetia, in the hills to the east. As the enclosure was completed, the Bureau sought to develop cooperative agreements with local ranchers, establishing pastures adjacent to the enclosure, where regulated grazing was permitted. Within a few years, cooperative agreements were established with four local ranchers: McCleary, Charles Proctor, Feliz Ruelas, and William MacBeath. Although participants have changed, of course, the tradition of cooperative grazing has continued to the present.

While grazing was nominally excluded from the large enclosure, it was not untouched land. When conditions were right, local ranchers, with the permission of the Bureau or Forbes, would cut hay within the enclosure. Seed planting experiments were also conducted. In addition, cattle occasionally made their way into the enclosure, often with the apparent assistance of their owners.

In 1905, administration of the Forest Reserves passed from the Department of the Interior to the Department of Agriculture and the newly created Forest Service. However, the Bureau of Plant Industry continued to oversee the range reserve and its experimental program. The range enclosure was still within the Santa Rita Forest Reserve, but the Forest Supervisor had little direct involvement with the range reserve program. The Forest Reserve was renamed the Santa Rita National Forest in 1907, and became part of the Coronado National Forest in 1908.

On July 1, 1910, President William Taft issued a pair of executive orders pertaining to the range reserve. First, the size of the Coronado National Forest was significantly reduced, with over 400 square miles of the low-lying areas north and west of the Santa Rita Mountains, from the Empire Hills to Tucson, returned to the public domain. Simultaneously, an area of approximately 65 square miles of range was proclaimed as a reserve "for the use of the Department of Agriculture for the purposes of an agricultural experiment station for experiments in improving forage production." This formally designated experimental range encompassed both the original 49-square mile enclosure and the adjacent pastures of the cooperating ranchers. The Bureau of Plant Industry with McCleary as local custodian continued to oversee the program.

In 1915, the Department of Agriculture transferred the operation of its non-Forest reserves and research stations from the Bureau of Plant Industry to the Forest Service. This meant significant changes for the Santa Rita reserve. For one, it finally received a name: the "Santa Rita Range Reserve." Second, the Forest Service's Branch of Grazing took over administration and soon opened the original enclosure to regulated grazing for the first time in 12 years. William McCleary, out of his job as Bureau representative and now over 60 years of age, moved to Tucson and allowed another cooperating rancher, William Nicholson to take over his ranch. Local administration was now conducted by a Forest

Service Grazing Examiner, of which there were at least two in the late 1910s (R.L. Hensel and R.R. Hill).

In 1921, the Forest Service drafted a new cooperative agreement with the University of Arizona for conducting grazing experiments at the range reserve. Among other items, the agreement directed that funds would be applied to construct a new headquarters (“a house for use as office and dwelling”). Nicholson had filed a homestead claim on McCleary’s old ranch and a new headquarters site was needed. The site selected was Florida Station, two miles or so farther up Florida Canyon on the Coronado National Forest rather than the Range Reserve. Grazing Examiner Matt Culley arrived in 1922 to become director of the Santa Rita Range Reserve, a position he would maintain for a quarter of a century. It was during Culley’s tenure that Florida Station grew from a single dwelling/office to a facility featuring some 20 structures.

Florida Station

All of the major construction at Florida Station Administrative Site took place between 1923 and 1934. A few small structures were added later in the 1930s, but the buildings present now were all in place by the end of the 1930s. Most of the building activity took place during the Great Depression with funding coming from a variety of emergency relief agencies. With 16 surviving buildings, the station is the largest depression-era administrative site on the Coronado National Forest.

Although records are spotty and sometimes give contradictory indications, there appear to have been five recognizable periods of building activity after the initial construction; the initial 1923-24, and additions in 1927, 1931-32, 1933-34, and 1935-36. The headquarters began modestly enough with a three-room frame house serving as Culley’s home and office. Eighty years later, this building is still in use as a dwelling. Culley soon added a barn and corrals, a garage and shop, and a water system.

In 1927, Culley reported that Forest Service funding “made it possible to erect an extremely satisfactory office building.” However, as with his building, the new office also served as the residence of his assistant (Warren Turner) and his family. During the same summer of 1927, a small duplex bunkhouse with a shared bathroom in the middle was built: one half was for the use of University and Biological Survey researchers; the other was for Forest Service assistants. (This building no longer exists).

In 1931 and 1932, emergency relief funds were used to build a larger, 6-bedroom bunkhouse, a new dwelling for the Administrative Officer’s Assistant, and a new office, one not also used as a residence. The Desert Grasslands Station with an

office, dwelling, and assorted out-buildings was built at the same time about two miles to the north of the station.

In late 1933-early 1934, a major building project using laborers paid by the Civilian Works Administration (CWA) was initiated. This project added three more dwellings along the upper or west side of station (including new Biological Survey quarters) and completely rebuilt the “service” portion of the station, i.e., the garages, workshops, and other facilities in the southern part of the station. In addition, several of the older buildings, including the “officer-in-charge dwelling” were substantially modified with new roofs and porches added.

Contrary to several written accounts, the best known of the Depression relief programs – the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) and Works Progress Administration (WPA) – had rather minor roles in the construction of Florida Station. There was a long-lasting CCC camp in nearby Madera Canyon, but the focus of the CCC enrollees was emergency conservation work. The CCC did a considerable amount of work on the reserve itself (which became the Santa Rita Experimental Range around 1930), building and improving roads, constructing fences and water developments, installing various erosion-control features, building deer pens and quail plots, and providing the labor for burroweed and mesquite eradication experiments. The CCC crews did do some projects at Florida Station, including construction of retaining walls, the entrance gate, an icehouse, and roads within the station; all the major buildings were built by other emergency relief programs.

Since the late 1930s, only minor additions have been made to the camp. A few buildings have been removed and others have been modified, but the facility today is not substantially different than it was during the 1930s. Sixteen buildings surviving from the 1930s include the office, six residences, the bunkhouse, five storage buildings, a small barn, a workshop, and an ice house. All of the residential structures are rectangular wood frame structures built on concrete foundations and typically with medium gable roofs, clapboard siding, one or more screened-in porches. Some of these attributes have been modified through the years, but the overall architecture and layout of the grounds conveys the feeling of a Depression-era facility.

Florida Station has been determined eligible for the National Register of Historic Places, both for its association with Depression relief programs and for the architectural qualities that reflect the construction methods and styles characteristic of Forest Service administrative facilities of the 1930s. In 1988, the lands of the Experimental Range were transferred to the Arizona State Land Department in a complicated deal. However, the headquarters facility at Florida Station remained with the Forest Service since it is located on the Coronado National Forest. It is currently leased to the University with management of the buildings carried out in cooperation with the Forest.