

# Why do so many Arizona mountains have letters?

<VALLEY 101 THEME SONG>

**KAILA:** Welcome to Valley 101, a podcast from The Arizona Republic and azcentral.com where we answer the questions *you* ask about metro Phoenix. I'm your host, Kaila White.

**KAILA:** Today, producer Taylor Seely answers a question from our youngest submitter so far.

*Q-and-A-with-Lucy.WAV [00:40] LUCY: My name is Lucy Bentz, I am 12 years old, and I come from Goodyear, Arizona.*

*TAYLOR: So Lucy, I think - I'm pretty sure you're our youngest question asker. What is your question?*

*LUCY: My question is why are there letters on mountains in Arizona? Like A mountain, Prescott P and Phoenix arrow? And is this exclusive to Arizona?*

*TAYLOR: And what made you curious about this question?*

*LUCY: My dad and I always listen to your podcast while driving near Prescott, so I was like, why do the mountains here have letters on them? Because I've noticed like A mountain and the Phoenix arrow...*

**KAILA:** There are at least seven mountains with letters on them in Maricopa County. But we'll focus on three for this episode: A mountain in Tempe, S mountain in Phoenix, and Usery mountain in Mesa. These are the three that Lucy specifically asked about when submitting her question.

*Q-and-A-with-Lucy.WAV [4:45] TAYLOR: Do you know anything about why there are letters? Have you looked anything up?*

*LUCY: Not quite, but I think I heard one thing about it. Like I think they're trying to label the areas or something! I don't really quite remember it because it was a long time ago.*

**KAILA:** And to shake things up just a little bit this week, we decided to bring Lucy and her dad Paul along with us to report it out.

**KAILA:** Let's dive in.

<VALLEY 101 THEME SONG FADES OUT>

## Part 1: Usery Mountain's "<Phoenix" sign

*\*\*Lucy dramatically reads comic\*\**

*\*INSERT PERCUSSION/DRUMROLL STYLE music\**

**TAYLOR:** That's Lucy Bentz. She's reading a boys magazine article dated August thirteenth, nineteen-fifty-six.

**\*\*[Lucy's voice]\*\***

**TAYLOR:** It's by Stookie Allen, and the headline reads .. Teenage Triumphs. Air marker the world's largest, exclamation point!

**\*PERCUSSION STYLE MUSIC ENDS\***

**\*\*[Lucy's voice]\*\***

**TAYLOR:** The article was gifted to her by our guide for the day.

***Brennan Basler:** [00:04:59] So I am Brennan Basler, a.k.a. Ranger B, and I'm the interpretive or educational ranger at Usery Mountain Regional Park, which is part of the Maricopa County Parks and Rec system [00:05:11][11.7]*

**TAYLOR:** It's me, Lucy, her dad Paul, and Ranger B. We've made the drive out to Usery Mountain in Mesa where there's a HUMONGOUS white arrow pointing west and letters spelling Phoenix on the side of the mountain.

**\*WALKING SOUNDS W/ SAND CRUNCHING UNDERNEATH FEET\***

***Brennan Basler:** [00:04:32] From the front of the arrow in front of Phoenix to the back of the X, it's 1000 feet wide. So that's the height of the Eiffel Tower if you were to turn it up vertically. [00:04:46][13.8]*

**TAYLOR:** Ranger B has taken the three of us past a no trespassing sign to the base of the mountain. It's guarded because, well...

***Ranger B Lucy and Paul at usery mtn \*gunshots\* Brennan Basler:** [00:07:43] \*laughs\* gunshots. There's a gun range at the base of the Phoenix sign here. So that's why we're on this side of the fence. [00:07:52][9.1]*

**TAYLOR:** So while bullets were flying, Ranger B shared with us the story of the Usery mountain sign.

***Brennan Basler:** [00:07:31] so the story behind the Phoenix sign here on the side of Usery Mountain is back in the 1950s.*

**\*50s style music\***

***Brennan Basler:** There was a Boy Scout troop [00:07:40][9.2] [00:07:52] this Boy Scout troop was under the direction of an ex World War Two pilot that had an interest in creating this sign. And his purpose in doing it was to create an air marker that guided airplanes toward Phoenix,*

*because you can see where the arrow is pointing to the west and Phoenix is west of us. And so he got this Boy Scout troop together and it took them five and a half years of their free time to come up here and create this sign. \*50s style music fades out\* [00:08:22] [00:08:24] now this is back in the 50s. I know it wouldn't work today, but these Boy Scouts were actually allowed to use boxes of dynamite. Yes. [00:08:32][00:08:33] To blast up the rock along the side of the mountain and then assemble those rocks into the word Phoenix. So the rocks come from the side of the mountain, but they had to break a lot of it up boulders and things like that to be able to create that sign there. And then they painted it when it was all finished. [00:08:50][17.0]*

**TAYLOR:** The leader of that Boy Scout troop was named Charlie Merritt.

***Brennan Basler:** [00:09:31] he thought to be really great to help pilots find Phoenix. My personal opinion about this sign, my personal opinion is that I would be nervous about getting on a plane with a pilot that needed this to find Phoenix. [00:09:45][13.2]*

**TAYLOR:** Let's talk about that. Because Lucy also seemed a little alarmed at the idea that pilots might need mountain signs for navigation.

***Paul Bentz:** [00:14:38] This thing was built by teenagers. You're about to be a teenager, Lucy. Do you think you'd spend five years moving rocks up a mountain like this? [00:14:45][7.0]*

***Lucy Bentz:** [00:14:45] No. I have better things to do. I don't want it. I think pilots should know where Phoenix is. [00:14:52][6.6]*

**TAYLOR:** So... do pilots really use these signs? Not anymore. Don't worry!

***Brennan Basler:** [00:14:56] You're right in today's world, Lucy. Pilots do know that because they go by instrumentation, they don't use visual markers from the plane to be able to know where they are. But back in the 1950s, especially for single planes, we're not talking noncommercial type planes. They used visual markers on the ground to find their way around. So it was a different era than it would be today.*

**TAYLOR:** So, you can rest easy on your next flight. Your pilot isn't searching for landmarks to know where to go. But, pilots weren't the only reason hillside letters were put up.

*\*cue football/marching band music\**

**TAYLOR:** A Mountain in Tempe, for example, was not put up for pilots.

## **Part 2: Tempe's A mountain**

***Rob Spindler:** [00:02:48] Well, we look at the work of James Parsons, which was published in the journal called Landscape to get the broader contexts of letters on mountains and Buttes.*

*\*cue football/marching band music\* fades out*

**TAYLOR:** That's Rob Spindler. He's the university archivist for the Arizona State University Libraries. I wanted to talk to him about the history of A mountain in Tempe. It's located at Rio Salado Parkway and Mill Avenue, about a six minute drive from the Sun Devil stadium. Rob told me that mountainside letters began as a team-building exercise between college students.

*Rob Spindler: [00:02:58] Parsons says that the first such letter was actually installed by the University of California at Berkeley in 1905. And it was an interesting story that he wrote because he indicated that it was viewed as a solution for inter class tensions among students at Berkeley. \*Med-Slow ambient MUSIC\**

**TAYLOR:** At the time, UC Berkeley students had an annual freshman vs. sophomore brawl. Parson's article said it was -- quote -- "Close to guerrilla warfare." The hillside letter was proposed as a solution.

*Rob Spindler: And so it was proposed in 1905. The sophomore class proposed to the freshman class. Well, instead of fighting about this stuff, why don't we just work together and install this letter on our mountain and show the pride of our university together? [00:03:41][43.1]*

*Rob Spindler: [00:03:52] And other institutions begin to take note of this because there were inter class tensions amongst a number of institutions. [00:04:01][9.6]*

**TAYLOR:** So, to Lucy's question in the beginning about whether Arizona's the only place with mountain letters? The answer is no. It started at UC Berkeley in 1905. *\*Med-Slow ambient music fades out\** It wasn't until 1918 that Arizona jumped on board. And it didn't start out as A mountain.

*Rob Spindler: [00:06:35] And so in 1918 you see the "N" um that appears on A mountain. [00:06:43][8.2] \*old timey music\**

*Rob Spindler: [00:06:54] The N stand stood for the Arizona Territorial Normal School. And then later, the same institution, our institution was named the Tempe Normal School.*

**TAYLOR:** It turns out, ASU had A LOT of other names before it finally became ASU. At least six that Rob knows of.

*Rob Spindler: [00:07:47] in 1926 a T was installed, the N was removed and a T was installed to represent the Tempe State Teachers College, which was the next name in the history of Arizona State University.*

**TAYLOR:** So there's been an N and T. But when does the A come along?

*Rob Spindler: [00:08:17] The A comes along in 1938. And that represents the beginning of the Arizona State College State Teacher's College [00:08:29][12.0] \*old timey music fades out\**

**TAYLOR:** By this point, students had developed new traditions around maintaining the A.

**Rob Spindler:** [00:09:43] And in those days, it was something that was done at the beginning of the school year. And often there were rituals that were associated with different aspects of the work. You know, who got to paint and who had to carry paint and things like that had to do with what your class standing was. And, you know, there, there were a lot of smaller sort of sub rituals associated with the act of, of installing and painting the A's.

**TAYLOR:** If you're local, you've probably heard on the news a few times here and there about how the A is sometimes guarded by ASU students. \*newsclip montage\* That whole phenomenon started in the 50s, after the A - which was made up of rocks -- was BLOWN up with dynamite.

**Rob Spindler:** [00:10:35] and they never found out who did it. [00:10:40][5.0]

**TAYLOR:** After that, the A was rebuilt with CONCRETE. But the pranks didn't stop.

**Rob Spindler:** [00:11:31] we start to see in the 50s and 60s stor-- news stories about individuals painting the A in different colors. And traditionally, it has been white for maximum visibility. And occasionally we would paint it gold for space, for a homecoming game or things like that. But other individuals were known to go up there in the dead of night and paint this a red or blue. [00:12:01][30.7]

**Rob Spindler:** [00:12:03] And that leads us to suggest the such nefarious activities were conducted by individuals from that university to the south of us in Arizona. [00:12:12][9.1]

**Taylor Seely:** [00:12:15] That that which shall not be named. [00:12:16][1.3]

**Rob Spindler:** [00:12:17] Yeah. Yeah. [00:12:17][0.5]

**TAYLOR:** OK, you caught me. I'm an ASU alum. So yeah: GO DEVILS!

**Rob Spindler:** [00:12:17] Well, try not to give them promo, but ultimately there's been a long tradition of of individuals coming up and repainting the A and then eventually a student body would try to collect volunteers to actually guard the A to keep it from being repainted. And so ~~students~~ a number of generations of students have spent the night up on top of that butte, especially before the big football game between UofA, ASU trying to protect it from being painted. [00:12:50][33.0]

\*musical interlude\*

**TAYLOR:** After talking to Rob, I was surprised at the history of college-based mountain letters. I wasn't expecting it to be a mechanism for students to better bond. But in retrospect, I think it's a good idea! And apparently, others did too. The idea spread like wildfire.

*Rob Spindler: [00:04:47] Well, I think it was an act of institutional university pride, ultimately. So I think you're partly right in that sense. But as we look more broadly at the history of these things, they were also eventually installed by a number of high schools as local civic pride projects. [00:05:07][20.6]*

**TAYLOR:** Enter S mountain. Home to the S installed and maintained by Sunnyslope high school students. It's located near Central Avenue and Hatcher Road in Phoenix. \*sound of birds chirping, cars driving by\*

### Part 3: Sunnyslope's S Mountain

**PAT WILKINSON:** [00:00:53] The s was originally put up there by a group of high school students The second year of the high school, which was in 1954, [00:01:07][14.4]

**TAYLOR:** That's Pat Wilkinson.

**Pat Wilkinson:** [00:19:06] I am Pat Wilkinson, vice president of the Sunnyslope Historical Society. [00:19:10][4.0]

**TAYLOR:** In 1954, Sunnyslope high school students received permission to paint an S on the hill that was located a half a mile to the north. A boy named Gary David stood on the mountain while another student named U.E. Wilson stood on the roof of the school. They used walkie talkies to work together \*radio interference sfx\* and begin shaping the S out of rocks from the mountain itself.

**Pat Wilkinson:** [00:02:04] It has gradually changed shape over the years. Used to be more square. It now has rounded corners and that and it originally when they started painting it, it took fifty five gallons of whitewash to paint it. [00:02:25][21.2]

**TAYLOR:** Like A mountain, S mountain has adopted its own traditions. Today, Sunnyslope students whitewash the S every year on the Thursday of homecoming week. It's a big ordeal. One that involves the freshman class, the football teams, student council, and even the weight training class and fire science class. It takes a LONG time. *But* , it's a good time.

### SUNNYSLOPE VIDEO

**TAYLOR:** Here's audio from a video I found on Youtube of the Sunnyslope students and teachers whitewashing it.

**Sunnyslope teacher:** [00:40 – 00:58] Here's what's goin' on. *THIS*, is our S! This is how we take care of our S every year! \*Students cheering in the background.\* The community gets together. Sunnyslope community. Freshman through senior. Football through media, student council. And we make this thing white and we make it look perfect. And that's what we do.

**TAYLOR:** Although there was one year it didn't get painted. *\*"down" music but not too somber\**

**Pat Wilkinson:** [00:07:35] *Only one year out of all the years of high school, it was not painted. And that was because of a practical joke that the two high school rivalries did for each other. So the principal told them they could not paint it that year. [00:07:58][22.6] \*"down" music but not too somber fades out\**

**TAYLOR:** But they also do more than just paint it. Every year, during the third quarter of the varsity homecoming football game, the *freshman* football team hike up to the S and line the perimeter of the letter with **288** road flares. When the game's over and the fireworks go off, *\*sfx\** the varsity team looks over at the mountain. And at that exact moment, the freshman light up the road flares, illuminating the S! It lasts for about 20 minutes as people exit the game. Word on the street is, it can be seen from 35 miles away.

**Taylor:** Now unlike A mountain, which eventually became a concrete letter, the S has remained entirely natural and made out of the original rocks that it started with. And that's because it's actually listed on the historic properties registry.

**Pat Wilkinson:** [00:07:58] *To get on the historic properties list, it had to be all material that was from the mountain. We could not use like cement or something to build it out of like the A over at ASU is. It has to be all natural products. [00:08:21][22.5]*

**TAYLOR:** You can find the bronze plaque establishing its historic status at the base of the mountain. And for the families who've lived in the community for generations, Pat said it means a lot. Because they had to fight for it.

*\*musical cue / tonal shift\**

**TAYLOR:** The Sunnyslope community applied for won historic status in 2011 to guard the mountain and the S from a developer who they thought might potentially demolish it.

**Pat Wilkinson:** [00:00:10] *the reason we did this was that there was a developer who purchased the mountain, kind of to the back side of the S mountain [00:00:21][11.1] Pat Wilkinson: [00:00:27] He wanted to put high rise townhouses up there. And we got the thought, well, you know, what prevents some developer from wanting to remove the S and develop the rest of that mountain? And so that's why we had it put on the historic properties list. [00:00:45][17.9]*

**TAYLOR:** I asked Pat why this mountainside letter was worth saving. Why it was worth the hassle of submitting a 13-page proposal to the city of Phoenix to designate it historic? And her answer was one that put the whole notion of mountainside letters into perspective for me.

*\*cue upbeat music\**



**Pat Wilkinson:** [00:09:46] Well, I think part of it is that it was a community effort to do it. You know, it wasn't just one, one or two people who had. And it was adults. It was students who did it. And those students have now grown up. They're now... You know, they own businesses. They live in Sunnyslope. They're raising their families. [00:10:11][24.8][00:10:56][8.1] **Pat Wilkinson:** [00:10:42] And most of it goes back to community pride. And it was something different, something fun to do that anybody could get involved in. And we now have people who are coming to the museum and they say, well, you know, my uncle painted the A. Now I get to paint it and they wait until they're old enough to go to the high school. And then they can say, OK, you know, this my year to get paint the S. I know some families that live here. They've had three generations paint the S. [00:11:22][40.0]

**TAYLOR:** Over the years, A mountain and S mountain have been stable landmarks for generations of Arizona families. We use them when offering directions - like: "Oh, let's meet at the restaurant just north of A mountain!" ... We use them for our Instagram photos .. We use them for good-spirited school rivalries... *\*news clip\** ... and we use them in times of difficulty to show that our community is united.

### Musical interlude

**TAYLOR:** We just don't use them for flight navigation. But that's OK.

### THEME MUSIC

## Outro

**KAILA:** Hey, it's me, Kaila again. Taylor, there seems to be a deep story behind each mountain letter you looked into.

**TAYLOR:** There really was. I picked this episode because I've lived in the Valley my whole life and I remember as a child wondering why there were letters and what they stood for... But as I got older, my curiosity sort of dwindled? I never took the time to figure it out. And so when I finally got around to it for this episode, I think that's what shocked me the most! Was just learning that there was a backstory to every single mountain.

**KAILA:** Did the stories surprise you?

**TAYLOR:** Sort of! The idea that it was for community pride didn't shock me. But going back to the start of students installing the letters as a team-bonding exercise - that was really cool to me. And it definitely helps me frame the letters in a new light. I totally understand why these letters matter to communities and I see how the traditions built around them could bring people together.

**KAILA:** So to answer the basic question of why mountains have letters on them, what's the recap?



**TAYLOR:** We have mountainside letters because for 1 - pilots used to use them for navigation..  
2: for community pride... and 3: student team building..

**KAILA:** Well, that's it for this week. Special thanks to Lucy Bentz our youngest question asker for not only submitting the question, but for coming along to report it out. Also, we want to hear from you! Tweet us @valley101pod and let us know: If Phoenix put in a new mountain letter, where and what should it be?

**KAILA:** And If any other students out there have questions, send 'em on in at valley101.azcentral.com. If you like our show, be sure to rate us 5 stars and leave a review. Plus, tell a friend or family member about us.