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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.

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Kaila: South Mountain is a hot spot for hiking enthusiasts, but its history is richer than you might think. There's even a mystery deep within the mountain that has prompted our listeners to ask --us for answers.

Today we're answering this listener submitted question... "What are the origins of the Lost Ranch?" " Producer Maritza takes us there.

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(cue hiking sounds)

South Mountain Park is located in south Phoenix. The park doesn't track the amount of visitors they receive a year, but they do know the amount of cars that enter the park. It's one million a year!

You can imagine it's a popular spot open to hikers, cyclists, or those who just want a reprieve from city life. For this episode I decided to take a drive up to the top of the mountain.

CUE: I'm at south mountain and on the other side of the mountain there's a trail called the Lost Ranch. I didn't want to hike it for this episode because technically you can't....

The hiking spot has dozens of trails. And The Lost Ranch is located within them.

Dan: *[00:04:14]* right now. It's just the ruins. So there's there's a couple of walls. There's a couple of chimneys from fireplaces to fireplaces. And then there's a bunch of foundations like squared off or rectangular foundations for various rooms. *[00:04:31][16.9]*

That's Dan Gronseth. He's the manager at South Mountain Park. I turned to him to learn more about the ruins.

Dan: *[00:01:49]* I started out here as a park ranger back in 1988 and worked here for about 12 years before going to another area and then came back here as a supervisor in, I think, 2015. *[00:02:03][14.5]*

The ruins are found 5 miles into the mountains. Far away from any water and as Dan put it not easily accessible to people. As time has passed the ruins have captivated hikers, questioning its origins. When I first started emailing Dan to research this episode he told me quote

“We do not have any definitive answers about it, only theories.” Endquote.

At first I was hesitant to figure out how I would report this story without a definitive answer. But I decided it was worth a call to see if any of those theories might lead to an answer.

Let's dive into some history about the park. Before South Mountain was a designated park, the mountains were scoured for mining opportunities.

Dan: [00:15:47] people in the late eighteen hundred people pretty much canvassed the state looking for claims and South Mountain was one that had many claims [00:16:00][13.5]

Companies like the Max Delta Mine had operations in South Mountain. Articles from the Arizona Republic in the 1920s and 30s mention the mine. Including an article from [April 1st 1934](#), that said “the property has laid idle beneath the very noses of Phoenicians for many years and many geologists and engineers who have inspected it have turned away in the belief it could not be operated profitably.” So for him the origins of the Lost ranch pointed to this mining connection.

Dan: [00:29:51] my theory is that it was originally a mining camp and after the mine kind of either played out or died down or shortly after World War one could have been that it kind of picked up for a little bit. But then the depression hit and they just didn't have money to keep it going. [00:30:13][22.4]

So the camp could have been used as a sleeping quarter where the miners would rest up in the two big rooms until the next day's work. Dan said because of the two world wars and the great depression that it could have been abandoned afterwards.

Since there are no official documents I asked Dan how they knew the age of the building. There is at least one fact they can confirm. The material the ruins are made of.

Dan: [00:12:08] It uses slump block, which is a concrete block [00:12:15][6.9]

Dan: [00:12:31] It was patented in 1904. So sometime probably well after that, at least at the earliest, maybe 1910. But I don't have the information as to when someone life would have been made more available here in Phenix or when a company started up and actually

produced that. I would think more likely roughly around 1920.
[00:12:55][24.1]

That's why the majority of the theories take place in the 1920s. I asked him what else the building was made of.

Dan: [00:14:56] So it's probably mostly timber, probably the bases were built up with with concrete or front blocks. They were filled and then with gravel most likely. So a lot of these places may not even have had a roof [00:15:13][16.9]

And here is another theory to discuss. To understand it we need to learn a bit more about the history of South Mountain Park itself.

Dan: [00:16:05] The park did become a park, a city park in 1926. It was set aside by Congress in 1924. So that's kind of what we use as our as our start date. But in 1926, the city actually paid for the land and it became a city park. [00:16:26][21.8]

Now if you've ever been to South Mountain Park as you're entering through the main entrance you'll see to the left there are *other* ruins. These.... we know where they came from.

During the Depression Era, President Franklin Delano Roosevelt created a program to help unemployed men.

US National Archives: [\[00:45\]](#) Employment for hundreds of thousands of young men and war veterans was imperative. Hard rock by soil erosion had long since shown the necessity of the immediate restoration of conservation and further development of the country's resources. As one solution for both problems the organisation and work of the Civilian Conservation Corps was undertaken. [1:06] [21.0]

The Civilian Conservation Corps or CCC worked in South Mountain Park. They built the entryway to the mountain, including the office buildings and some ramada areas.

Dan: [00:17:54] They built the road from telegraph path up to the top, up to the Dobbins look out. So so that was that was their one of their big contributions. [00:18:07][13.0]

Dan: [00:18:34] They built several trails, including the National Trail, which goes all the way across the park. The ranger trail, the Alta trail. And I believe what was originally called the neighborhood

trail, which is which is now called the Mormon Trail.
[00:18:52][18.2]

As I was researching for more information, I contacted two other people. First I emailed Philip Vandermeer, a retired Arizona State University history professor. He's been on previous episodes of the podcast. Now, he didn't have much knowledge of the Lost Ranch. Only that he was under the impression it was a CCC project.

Then I contacted Marilyn Murphy at the Arizona Historical Society. She pointed me to resources about the CCC's contributions to the entry complexes of the park. But they didn't mention or make reference to those lonely ruins in the middle of the mountain.

Dan said that the CCC kept meticulous daily records.

Dan: [00:11:02] Those records we do not have unfortunately here in the park but they do exist and we're trying to find those. But there's nothing that would indicate that that on the south side would have been a CCC structure. It just. It doesn't fit with with the work they did here. It just doesn't it doesn't seem like that would be something that they had done. And if it was, we would probably have some documentation on it [00:11:34][31.5]

So it would seem as though the Lost Ranch was separate from the CCC buildings at the park. Dan was able to tell me one more sure fact about the ruins.

Dan: [00:23:26] We do know that there are initials in the concrete. I S H but I don't know the significance of that. Hopefully we'll find that out someday and then maybe we can contact descendants and find out if there are any photographs or any any, you know, verbal or written history about the place. [00:23:45][19.4]

There are even more theories and these are perhaps more far fetched. Here's one of them.

Dan: [00:08:39] that it was a kind of a. The house of ill repute, if you will, for Hollywood types. Because, again, it's out of the limelight. Nobody would see them back there. [00:08:54][15.1]

Another theory is that it was used as a weekend getaway house for business executives. But Dan said the sheer size of the building doesn't make that a real possibility.

Dan: [00:08:56] there were only two concreted floors in this in this compound and. And again, the size of it just doesn't seem like that's what it would have been used for. [00:09:08][12.5]

He also said there's a theory that it was a speakeasy in the 1920s. A speakeasy was an illicit liquor store or nightclub during the Prohibition era when alcohol was illegal. Because the lost ranch was so far away from the city it *could* have been used for that but there are still doubts.

Dan: [00:07:55] People could go get their drinks and whatever and have a good time relatively unscathed by law. And if any any law came out, they would be very easily seen well before they got to the location. So that makes a little bit of sense as well. It's hard to tell. Hard to tell. There's no documentation on it. So there's really nothing to say that it wasn't. But, you know, is that it is that a good explanation? Hard to say. [00:08:30][34.8]

I asked Dan if we don't know how the ruins got there or what it was used for, why are they still there?

Dan: [00:21:42] Well, the removing the the foundations would be fairly difficult. Some of the some of the walls. One of the walls is still there was poured concrete. [00:21:50][8.5]

He said it's not really feasible to remove it.

Dan: [00:22:14] And you know, we don't know the age of it. So it is historic. It's just unfortunate that we don't know the real significance of it. [00:22:23][9.3]

Dan: [00:24:27] it has a link to earlier times the Wild West kind of feel for it. The mystery of it. I think there's just a lot of a feel that way. I don't know. It's just something that connects people, I think, to a piece of history that's nearly forgotten. [00:24:46][18.8]

Dan said he hopes one day someone will be able to point them to the true nature and history of the Lost Ranch. In the meantime as I said earlier in this episode the trail to the lost ranch is not an official one. The park is in the works to make it official.

Dan: [00:25:27] . So we need to we need to kind of verify that the trail that is being used is good [00:25:34][6.9]

Dan: [00:26:28] we would prefer that people don't go up in there. We will have trails soon. So it's the lost ranch isn't going away. So take your time. Wait a little bit and we'll have a trail up there [00:26:41][12.3]

{cue show MUSIC STARTS}

{Show music cue}

Kaila: Hey listeners, it's me Kaila again. Maritza, thanks for taking a deep dive into this Arizona mystery. Do you have any tips for hikers who might want to venture out to South Mountain?

Maritza: So for now Dan said to stay off that trail and be a little patient. But he did give me some tips if you're going to head out to south mountain. Especially now that we're in the middle of the summer. The park opens at 5 am so he recommends getting there as early as you can to beat the heat.

Dan: [00:28:38] Just bring water and. And if you really start running out of water, then you need to already be on your way back. If you're halfway done with your water, you should be halfway done with your hike [00:28:50][11.8]

Kaila: tktk

Audio in today's episode came from the US National Archives.

Well, that's it for today. If you have more questions about how metro Phoenix is changing, submit them to us at valley101.azcentral.com. And if you're a new listener, remember you can go back and listen to old episodes. Let us know what you think by leaving us a rating or review on your podcast-listening app. As always, thank you for listening to Valley 101, a podcast from *The Arizona Republic* and azcentral.com. See you next week.