

## BABOQUIVARI PEAK RANCH

Baboquivari Peak is a massive granite monolith towering above the other peaks of the Baboquivari Mountains. The elevation at the peak is 7730 feet. Baboquivari Peak is considered to be the most sacred place of the Tohono O’odham people and the home of their creator, I’itoi. It is also a popular location for hikers and rock climbers. There are two access routes to the mountain, one from the west and one from the east. The western route is controlled by the Tohono O’odham Nation and requires permits to gain access to the mountain. Access from the east is via State Trust Lands, private lands and more recently, a wilderness area administered by the Bureau of Land Management. This led to concerns that access to the peak could eventually be eliminated. The privately held ranch in Thomas Canyon held the key to continued unrestricted access to Baboquiveri. The following paragraphs tell the history of the ranch and how continued access to Baboquivari was achieved.

The ranch in Thomas Canyon in the foothills of the Baboquivari Mountains is referred to as the Baboquivari Peak Ranch. The ranch was initially homesteaded by Dick “Shorty” Riggs in 1928. Riggs had moved from Texas and was attracted to the Baboquivari area because his sister was married to one of the Perkins who owned the ranch just north of where he decided to homestead. Riggs enhanced the relationship with the Perkins by marrying Forrest Perkins sister Erma.

The Riggs first residence was a “soddy”, a dwelling dug into the side of a hill with a sod roof. In addition to being a rancher, Riggs also worked for the Highway Department building the road to Sasabe (SR-286). This gave him enough money to build the current ranch house and the other buildings. The ranch house (Figure 1) was built primarily of reused materials and was completed in 1942. Riggs was a collector of Indian artifacts and he used a number of metates (grinding stones) in the construction of the house. The stone house to the west (Figure 2) was built for one of their parents. Figures 3 and 4 show interior views of the ranch house.



Figure 1. Baboquivari Ranch House



Figure 2. Baboquivari Stone House

The Riggs lived at the ranch until Dick Riggs health deteriorated to the point that he could no longer maintain the ranch and they moved to Tucson. Their friend, Francis Edwards stayed on to watch over the ranch. They then sold the ranch in 1969 to Douglas and Kendall Cummings, the owners of the Rocking H Ranch in Peck Canyon, for \$75,000. In 1971, Herman Mayer, a German immigrant who had retired and had always wanted to be a cowboy, started working for the Cummings and moved to the Baboquivari Ranch to watch over it. There is a trail that the Green Valley Hiking Club uses that goes from the ranch to the saddle just north of Baboquivari Peak. This trail was built by the Cummings when they owned the ranch.



Figure 3. Ranch House Kitchen



Figure 4. Ranch Living Room

The Cummings kept the property until 1978 when they sold it to the Nature Conservancy for \$190,000. The Conservancy kept Herman Mayer on as caretaker. The U.S. Bureau of Land Management had originally planned to purchase the property and include it along with other areas on the slopes of the Baboquivari Mountains for a wilderness study area and to assure access to Baboquivari Peak. Secretary of the Interior James Watt initially disapproved of the plan but after a strong protest by the Tohono O'odham agreed to a much smaller wilderness area that did not include the Riggs Ranch. The Nature Conservancy had made the purchase at the request of the BLM to preclude a sale of the property for development pending the sale to the BLM. Since the sale to BLM did not materialize and the Conservancy did not want to continue the management of the property, they sold it to Ross and Susie Humphries in 1983 for \$225,000. The sale included deed restrictions which required the Humphries to permit pedestrian access to Babaquiveri Peak and to conserve plants and wildlife. After the sale, the Humphries asked Herman Mayer to stay on as



Figure 5. Baboquivari from Riggs Ranch

caretaker and he occupied the cabin until his health curtailed his activities. In recent years, the ranch house has been occupied only periodically.

The access route to Baboquivari follows the Baboquivari Peak Ranch road from the ranch gate to a fork in the road in the vicinity of the ranch house. The route follows the road around the house to the right for a short distance to the corrals where the trail to the north saddle starts. Since the ranch house is on private property and the house is sometimes occupied, care must be taken not to disturb anyone if there is someone in residence. The view of Baboquiveri Peak from the ranch house is quite spectacular (Figure 5).

Shortly after they acquired the property, the Nature Conservancy sponsored a study of the birds of the area. Erma J. Fisk stayed at the ranch from December 1978 to May 1979 to study and document the birds. Mist nets were used to catch the birds which were studied, banded and released unharmed. She banded 70 species and documented another 25 species. During her stay, there were also nine peacocks living on the ranch. In addition to the bird study, she wrote the book *“The Peacocks of Baboquivari”*. Erma Fisk was a prolific author whose work includes *“Parrot’s Wood”*, *“A Birdwatchers Cookbook”*, *“Bird with a Silver Bracelet”* and *“A Cape Cod Journal”*.

Summarized from various newspaper articles by T. Johnson in December 2016. Photos by T. Johnson