

FAIRBANK GHOST TOWN

HISTORY: The Fairbank town site was originally the location of the 18th century Native American village of Santa Cruz that was located at the junction of the San Pedro and Babocomari Rivers. However, all of the O'Odham villages along the San Pedro River had been abandoned by the early 1800s, probably because of increased pressure by the Apaches. The arrival of the New Mexico and Arizona Railroad that was being built to connect the towns of Benson and Nogales brought new life to the area in the early 1880s. Two enterprising ranchers, William Hall and Harry McKinney, filed a claim to land adjacent to the railroad tracks and started selling lots with the intent of establishing a town. By March of 1882, there was a store, a blacksmith, saloon and several houses. The town went through a series of names: Kendal, Junction City and Wye before finally settling on Fairbank when the railroad opened a depot in the town. The town was named for Nathaniel Kellogg Fairbank, a major stockholder in the railroad and the founder of the Grand Central Mining Company.

Fairbank was established in an ideal location. It was situated on the railroad about 8 miles west of Tombstone, the largest town in the southwest in the mid-1880s (about 14,000 people in 1886). Fairbank was the closest railhead to Tombstone and served as a waypoint between Tombstone and the rest of the country. Just about everything going to and from Tombstone processed through Fairbank. A major item was ore from Tombstone's silver mines that was on its way to 3 mills located along the San Pedro River. The 25 stamp Contention Mill and 15 stamp Sunset Mill were located about 10 miles north of Fairbank in Contention City along the railroad line and the 30 stamp Grand Central Mill was located about a mile north of Fairbank. Cattle from the surrounding ranches and milled silver and copper from the mills were major products headed to the rest of the country. The Fairbank Post Office opened on 16 May 1883 and by 1886, Fairbank had a population of about 100 residents, a steam quartz mill, a general store, butcher shop, restaurant, saloon, Wells Fargo office, railroad depot and a stage coach station.

By the 1890 s, the population had reached about 300 and was serviced by four different railroads (the Arizona and Southeastern, the El Paso and Southwestern and the Southern Pacific in addition to the original New Mexico and Arizona Railroad). Fairbank was truly a railroad town. The operation of all these railroads was consolidated by the Southern Pacific Railroad in 1924. Fairbank sat at the crossroads of these lines servicing Tombstone, Bisbee, Fort Huachuca, Elgin, and Patagonia among a number of other southern Arizona towns.

There were several events that affected the growth of Fairbank. In the mid-1880s, the major mines in Tombstone reached a depth that penetrated the water table and began to flood. Attempts were made to pump out the water and continue mining but an 1886 fire destroyed the Grand Central hoist and pumping plant resulting in an eventual closing of the mines that were the original reason for the establishment of Fairbank. The construction of the Arizona and Southeastern Railroad from Bisbee in 1888 breathed new life into Fairbank. The earthquake of

1887 damaged some of the Fairbank buildings and the San Pedro River flood of September 1890 caused significant property damage. The death knell for Fairbank was the closing of many of the southern Arizona mines and the development of an effective highway system. The short distance railway lines couldn't compete with automobiles and trucks for the declining mining and ranching businesses. The last train depot closed in 1966 and with it went the jobs held by most of Fairbank's residents. The Fairbank Mercantile managed to hold on as a store, gas station and post office until 1972. The last residents left in 1973. In 1986, the Bureau of Land Management created the San Pedro Riparian Conservation Area of which the ghost town of Fairbank became a part. There are currently seven structures still surviving although only one is currently open to the public. The school was restored in 2007 and serves as the Fairbank Visitor center. It is operated by the Friends of the San Pedro and is open on Friday, Saturday and Sunday from 9:30 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. The Fairbank Mercantile Building (Figure 1.) is the oldest of the surviving buildings. By 1883 it housed a general store, a post office and a saloon. The Schoolhouse (Figure 2) was built in 1920 after the original building burned. A school was operated in Fairbank from 1884 until 1944. At one time it had 50 students taught by two teachers. The classroom is shown in Figure 3 and the school library in Figure 4. The typical house (Figure 5) was built in 1925. It originally had two screened porches that were subsequently enclosed in 1954. The typical small house (Figure 6) located adjacent to the Mercantile Building was built in 1885 and consists of two rooms.



Figure 1. Fairbank Mercantile Building



Figure 2. Schoolhouse



Figure 3. Schoolhouse Classroom



Figure 4. Schoolhouse Library



Figure 5. Typical House



Figure 6. Typical Small House

There is a loop trail along the San Pedro River north of town where you can visit a couple of other remnants of Fairbank's glory days. Two of these are the ruins of the Grand Central Mill and the Fairbank Cemetery. The Grand Central mill was a thirty stamp mill completed in December of 1880 to process ore from the Tombstone mines. It was one of several stamp mills built in the area but at thirty stamps was the largest, the most important and employed 35 men. Figure 7 shows the site where the Grand Central Mill was located. Figure 8 is a photo of a portion of the Grand Central Mill display placard.



Figure 7. Grand Central Mill Site



Figure 8. Grand Central Mill

Summary prepared by T. Johnson in January 2018 from data obtained from a Bureau of Land Management pamphlet on the Fairbank Historic Townsite and various websites including Wikipedia, Arizona Ghost Town Trails, Explore Cochise and Southern Arizona Guide. Pictures by T. Johnson