

The San Francisco Peaks and Flagstaff Through the Lens of Time

John L. Vankat

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Pairing alluring photographs from the past and the present, The San Francisco Peaks and Flagstaff Through the Lens of Time captures changes to a diverse region.

John L. Vankat's photography collection *The San Francisco Peaks and Flagstaff Through the Lens of Time* spans multiple eras to deliver a scintillating look at the history of the region.

Working from 100+ images of Arizona's San Francisco Peaks and their surrounding areas that date from the nineteenth century to the early 1900s, this impressive investigative work is the result of having sought out the exact spots where the original photographs were taken to take updated shots. The originals and the contemporary photographs are paired together, resulting in an engrossing trip through time.

Illustrations from the 1850s document the first government-sponsored expeditions to the region. Later photographs document a variety of terrains and early settlements. And each of the book's sections center on a different area around the Peaks, from juniper woodlands to dome-shaped craters and alpine tundras. A substantial portion of the book is devoted to contemporary Flagstaff, showing the changes that time wrought on the city.

Many of the juxtapositions are striking. A photograph of cowboys herding cattle fades to a UPS parking lot in the present day; a street shown as bustling in the 1880s is now a sleepy residential area. An old stagecoach route over open plains is transformed into paved roads and railroad tracks, while the site of a major sawmill now houses a motel. Other photographs demonstrate how certain spots were unaffected by time, save for a few crumbling rocks or the appearance of a non-native tree or two.

Detailed commentary accompanies each photograph. Some of this work concerns ecological features, as with notes about changes to the flora and to the climate. Anecdotes from Vankat's quests to rediscover the exact spots where the original photographs were taken, which led him through national parks as well as private land, further complement the work.

Vankat's precise, straightforward observations are balanced by the poetry of his images. Capturing scenic wonders, these photographs suggest tales of Flagstaff's eras, as well as of landscapes scorched by fire that later regenerated. They depict structures and grasslands that survived massive changes, even while taking an even-handed view of progress. For example, the book credits modern fire-suppression strategies with the growth of lush ponderosa pine forests, and compares these to the more sparse vegetation shown in old photographs; but it also notes that such strategies result in wildfires that are harder to control. And the book laments that some spectacular nineteenth-century vistas have been obscured, whether by overgrown forests or human-made structures.

The San Francisco Peaks and Flagstaff Through the Lens of Time juxtaposes regional photographs from different eras to reflect historical changes and the passage of time.

HO LIN (July 7, 2022)

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