



SADDLE MOUNTAIN
UNIFIED SCHOOL DISTRICT #90
Everyone Learns, Every Day

Saddle Mountain Unified School District History

Saddle Mountain Unified School District No.90 serves a geographic area of roughly 550 square miles, in the western portion of the City of Buckeye and the unincorporated area of Tonopah, Arizona. Its boundaries on the east side start at Verrado Parkway and go west to the La Paz County line, with a northern boundary of where Bell Road will run and a southern boundary below Palo Verde Nuclear Generating Station.

For more than five thousand years, the Tonopah desert has been a place for travelling people to stop and rest. The earliest known archaeological sites in the area date back as far as 3000 BC. Much later, such groups as the Hohokam, Patayan, Hakataya and Yavapai traveled through the area to and from the Colorado River. At Tonopah, they stopped to hunt and gather wild plants.

Roughly two hundred years ago, the first pioneers crossed the desert. In 1811, a traveler carved his name on a rock outcropping northwest of Tonopah. There are many prehistoric petroglyphs in the Saddle Mountain region and histograms from some early settlers dated 1856 and 1862. Permanent settlement of the area began just prior to World War I. Most of the settlement was the direct result of homesteading. The first homestead in Tonopah was filed in 1916 by Elbert Winters. In 1920, Winters proved-up and received official ownership of his tract of land. A number of homesteaders that followed were World War I veterans. Many of the former soldiers had been exposed to mustard gas while in Europe and suffered with respiratory problems after being gassed. Other veterans had contracted tuberculosis. The dry desert air in Tonopah helped to ease their health problems and let them lead productive lives.

North of the settlement, the Tonopah-Belmont mine began mining lead and silver in the area around 1920. It was named for the large (and famous) mine in Nevada and the Belmont mountains in which it was located. The mountains were named after the mine in 1963. Approximately 50 miners were employed at the mine and lived in the area from 1924 to 1930. When a permanent settlement developed south of the mine, it too was called Tonopah (although the two were not directly related).

Around 1930, Tonopah and Wintersburg saw a small population boom. Homesteading had become quite popular. The area's first post office located at Winters' Well. On February 21, 1931, Marc Kentch became the first postmaster. Ten years later, mail service was discontinued and the post office closed. Wintersburg residents traveled to Arlington for their mail (oddly enough, not to Tonopah). The Tonopah post office opened on June 15, 1934, with John Beauchamp (a major landowner in the area) as postmaster. The Beauchamp homestead house still stands near the corner of Indian School and 411th Avenue.

Created in 1930, early-day students attended what was then called Winters' Well School, a one-room structure located at Wintersburg and Salome Roads. This was located on the old Winters Ranch, which was founded by E.H. Winters in 1885 as a stage-stop on the cross-country Butterfield Stagecoach Line. The District also had an accommodation school located near Indian

School Road and 411th Avenue, east of 'downtown' Tonopah near the banks of the Old Camp Wash in 1931. The school would open to 'accommodate' an increase in the number of children as needed. The school building moved closer to the 'downtown' area in later years.

When automobiles became available, all the students in the District attended the Winters' Well School. Increased student enrollment resulted in a new four-classroom building and a cafeteria-kitchen building on a five-acre site near the intersection of Indian School Road and Wintersburg Road, in 1963-64. Shortly before the school was moved from the old site to the new, Mrs. Ruth Fisher, a dedicated long-time teacher at the Winters' Well School, died of cancer. Soon after, the School Board decided to rename the new school and District in honor of Mrs. Ruth Fisher.

Mr. G.E. Sanders was hired in 1967 to be the head teacher and administrator of Ruth Fisher School. His goal was to make the school an extension of home for the students. A competitive athletic program grew under his direction as well as academic excellence. These activities and more flourished with his guidance for 29 years. Mr. Sanders had a saying that he would share with each student: "You are special and there is no one else like you." Sometimes he would dress up in a gorilla costume and go up on the roof of the school building as students were loading onto the bus.

During the 1969-70 school year, an additional 15 acres were purchased to add to the original five-acre site. A library room and four additional classrooms were added to the east of the original classrooms. The cafeteria building was extended to the south, and a bus-barn was constructed.

In the early 1970's, construction on Interstate 10 slowly cut its way through Tonopah on its way to Phoenix. This brought additional activity to the area. In 1976, construction of the \$9.3 billion Palo Verde Nuclear Generating Station began. It took eleven years to complete. At the height of the plant's construction in 1980 and 1981, 8,500 people were employed. PVNGS was dedicated in 1987 and was fully operational in 1988.

With the area's continued growth, the Ruth Fisher School became overcrowded. In 1983, a \$9 million school building was built. It was originally intended to be used as a high school and it included a gymnasium and an indoor swimming pool. The high school was not needed at the time and the school remained an elementary school.

Mr. Sanders retired from Ruth Fisher Elementary School District at the end of the 1994-95 school year. Ruben Jimenez, as the new superintendent, continued with Mr. Sander's vision. During Mr. Jimenez's time as superintendent another addition of six classrooms were added to the Ruth Fisher campus. The classrooms of the 1963 and 1969 era were also renovated to bring them up to the standard of modern classrooms. Two new classroom wings along with a 500-seat cafeteria were completed in the summer of 1999. Mr. Jimenez led the Ruth Fisher Elementary School District from being an elementary school district into becoming a unified school district, before retiring in 2001 after serving 30 years as a teacher, coach, and administrator. The Ruth Fisher School gymnasium is named in his honor.

The District continued to grow quickly and Mrs. Roxanne Morris was hired as the new superintendent. During the 2002-2003 school year, the growth rate was over 34%, and the student population had grown to nearly 700 students. By the spring of 2005-2006, there were 850 students.

In 2001, the newly unified district was renamed the Saddle Mountain Unified School District and planning began for K-12 programming. The District improved and increased physical facilities during the 2003-2004 school year, including a new kindergarten building, renovations to the track area, ballfields, and several other areas. A new high school, District Office, and Bus Barn were constructed 2003-2005, with Tonopah Valley High School opening for the 2005-2006 school year.

With projected growth in the Tonopah area, a new elementary school was planned and built near 355th Avenue and Buckeye Road. Winters' Well Elementary School opened for the 2007-2008 school year.

The down turn in the economy, the decline in student population, and expenditure issues caused financial hardships for the District and it went into receivership in mid-2007.

With the onset of construction of homes in the Tartesso development on the east side of the District, a new school was planned and constructed in the development, though its opening was delayed a year due to low projected enrollment and increased capacity with Winters' Well Elementary School. Tartesso Elementary School opened for the 2008-2009 school year.

In 2008, Dr. Mark Joraanstad became superintendent and led the efforts to take the Saddle Mountain School District out of receivership. The District regained local control in late 2010 after being under state receivership for three years. Dr. Mark Joraanstad served as superintendent for 8 years and is credited for creating the vision that "Everyone learns, every day."

The Ruth Fisher campus was closed for renovations for the 2009-2010 and 2010-2011 school years. When it reopened, there was declining enrollment and the Winters' Well ES was closed as a cost savings measure.

In mid-2016 Dr. Paul Tighe became the Saddle Mountain School District Superintendent and continues to serve in that position today.

In 2017, Winters' Well was reopened for specialized programs through partnerships with Childhelp and ACCEL. It reopened as a K-5 campus in 2019 as the District returned to high levels of growth in enrollment. Also in 2019, to alleviate overcrowding, Tartesso ES changed to a K-5 campus and Ruth Fisher became a 6-8th grade middle school. In 2019, voters passed a \$47.5 million bond to fund additions to TVHS and WWES as well as a new elementary school in the Tartesso development.

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This history was compiled through research of District records and online searches, including "History of Tonopah Area" by Jodey Lynne Elsner.