



Surprise Women's Club, Street Light Ceremony (South Side)

**Welcome** to the Surprise Women's Heritage Trail! As you visit these historical points of interest inside the city's Original Town Site, you'll learn about the diverse and fascinating women who lived, worked, and played important roles in the development of Surprise.



Oden's Service Station (South Side Site 1)



Ruth and Fidel Leon (North Side Site 6)



Clara "Fisher" Marshall (North Side Site 9)



Joan Shafer, Mayor of Surprise (1995-2007) (North Side Site 8)

### Credits

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First Baptist Church (South Side Site 2)



Nancy Oden Butler (South Side Site 1)

# Surprise Women's Heritage Trail

## Surprise, Arizona

In 1938, farm labor families began buying lots in the "Surprise" subdivision from Glendale realtor and property developer, Flora Statler. Several years later, she began selling home sites on the north side of Grand Avenue in a subdivision she named North El Mirage. Early residents included Mexican Americans, Euro-Americans, and African Americans who had migrated west from the south-central states of Texas, Missouri, Arkansas, and Oklahoma during, and in the years following, the Great Depression. They joined farm families who had come north from Mexico in the first decades of the twentieth-century. Each group brought the values, traditions, and beliefs of their places of origin to their new home. In its first decades, farm labor defined the economic and social fabric of this rural outpost. In Surprise and North El Mirage, residents used dirt roads and lived in make-shift housing, many with outdoor privies. A 1961 county survey described a landscape of 500, often substandard, residences and several small businesses in which only eighty-three percent of homes received electricity and an even smaller percentage connected to water service. More than two decades after its founding, Surprise still lacked a sewer system, garbage service, a park, and a library. In 1960, North El Mirage and Surprise residents joined forces to stop the annexation of their neighborhoods by the adjacent town of El Mirage. This effort led to the incorporation of the two communities as the town of Surprise.

Before and after incorporation, women made important contributions to the economic, social, and cultural evolution of the community. Whether operating businesses, participating in the political process, or establishing community celebratory traditions, they shaped the development of the town. This trail recognizes a few of the many women who helped define Surprise.

## Flora Statler

Flora Statler altered the cultural landscape of the Northwest Valley during her three decades as a real estate developer. From 1920 until her death in 1953, despite the many financial restrictions placed on Arizona women, she successfully built a thriving business, established large residential developments, and purchased and sold lots in properties that evolved into the cities of Surprise and El Mirage.



Born in Missouri in 1890, Statler's parents moved their family to Glendale, Arizona in 1895. In 1920, she began working in her father's business, an insurance and real estate partnership with Homer Ludden, a prominent Glendale civic leader. Despite the boom-bust cycles so common in the Arizona real estate market, Statler experienced success in the property development business. In 1928, she purchased an expansive parcel in Glendale and began developing a large residential tract she named Floralcroft, which became part of the National Register of Historic Places in 2006. During the next two decades, she purchased, subdivided, and sold property across the Northwest Valley. In 1938, she procured, platted, and began marketing lots in what she named "Surprise," the first neighborhood in what would become Surprise, Arizona.

Statler's ability to recognize value and assess market demand garnered praise from her peers in the business arena. Her obituary in the Glendale News noted that many had "high admiration for her business acumen." The local newspaper also labeled her one of the "most prominent businesswomen in the Valley."



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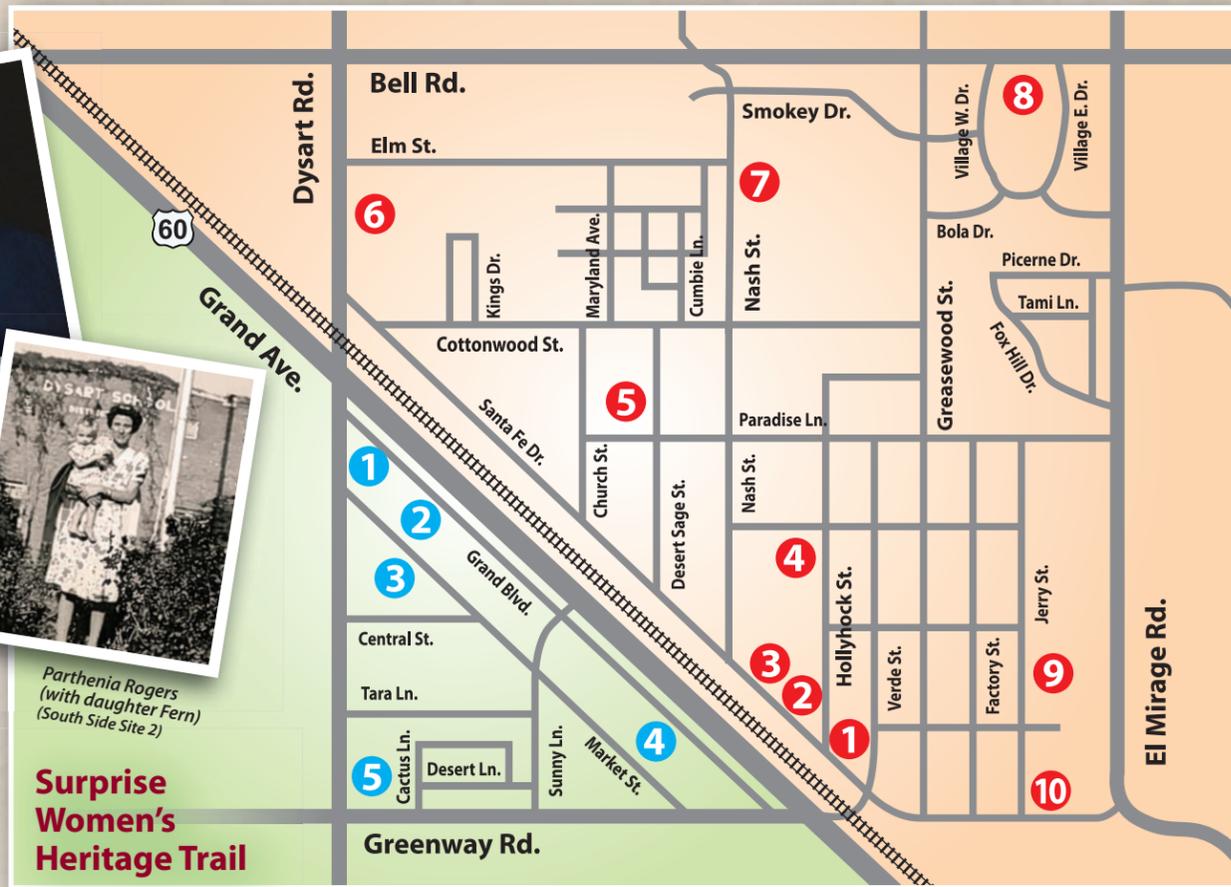


Alejandra Lopez  
(North Side Site 10)



Parthenia Rogers  
(with daughter Fern)  
(South Side Site 2)

### Surprise Women's Heritage Trail



## SOUTH SIDE SITES

### 1 Butler's Corner 13071/13073 N.W. Grand Avenue Frontage Road

General Forney Oden established a service station on this site in the first years of the community. Like many Surprise women, his daughter, Nancy Butler, contributed to the economic growth of the town. Working with her husband, Joseph, she maintained the business after her father's death. As Surprise grew and evolved, the Butlers expanded and modified their business operations. At different times, Butlers Corner included a café, a grocery store, an automobile supply shop, and other enterprises. In addition to running the business, Nancy Butler belonged to the Surprise Women's Club, worked as a local reporter for the Peoria Times, volunteered at Dysart School, and played an important role in the operations of the First Baptist Church, serving as its first treasurer.

### 2 First Baptist Church 12987 W. Market Street

On October 9, 1944, a group of Surprise residents organized the First Baptist Church. By 1951, it had 101 members, one-third of the town's residents. A decade later, church members reorganized the congregation as the First Freewill Baptist Church. For many years, this place of worship also served as one of the community's social hub. Families attended Sunday services, celebrated religious and secular holidays, and participated in weeknight and weekend events such as pie socials, potlucks, and group singing. In 1961, the church also hosted the twice-monthly town council meetings. The women of the church organized social events and participated in its operations. Nancy Butler served as its first treasurer. Lydia Montgomery played the piano at the church for over three decades. Parthenia Rogers was the soloist. Lois Moore, Julia Young, Mary Smith, Opal Johnson, Beulah Hornsby, Faye Hornsby, and others supported church activities and groups such as the youth club.

### 3 Williams Market 13001 NW Grand Avenue Frontage Road (No Building)

Beginning in the 1950s, Williams Market occupied this site, providing local families with a place to gather and to purchase groceries. For

decades, it also served as the town's polling place. While Bill Williams held office as the town's first mayor, his mother, Agnes Williams, served as the first president of the Surprise Women's Club. It is most likely not a coincidence that the agenda of the early town councils often reflected the objectives of the club.

### 4 Saylor's Root Beer Stand 12731 NW Grand Avenue Frontage Road

From 1965 until 1973, this building served as the town hall. Originally a root beer stand owned and operated by the Saylor family, town council members opted to lease and remodel the structure to fit their requirements. In addition to their root beer business, the Saylor family developed and operated several enterprises in Surprise's first decades, including a skating rink and a trading post. Nellie Saylor played a critical role in establishing and running these endeavors. Saylor also reported local news for the Peoria Times. As a community activist, she served on the citizen's committee that successfully fought the El Mirage Town Council's attempt to annex Surprise and neighboring North El Mirage.

### 5 Rosales Residence 15421 N. Dysart Road (House Demolished Recently)

The Rosales home sat on this site. In 1923, at the age of three, Maria Rosales migrated with her family from Sonora Mexico to the United States in a buckboard wagon. She married Julian Rosales in 1938. They worked as migrant farm laborers while raising twelve children. In 1959, they purchased this home site in Surprise. In the first decades after incorporation, the town's children and youth had limited access to activities and resources. Maria Rosales and other women filled this gap. She made costumes for young people participating in Founders' Day Parades and supported their participation in programs offered at Santa Teresita Church. When families encountered financial difficulty, she prepared food baskets to provide assistance. Rosales also supported the community by participating in clean-up programs and as a charter member of the Surprise Action Council. In a community where one-third of families lived below the poverty level, the determination and quietly effective efforts of women like Maria Rosales made a significant difference.

## NORTH SIDE SITES

### 1 Fulcher Home 12533 W. Santa Fe Drive

The Fulcher family was one of the first to establish a home in North El Mirage. They built this house using rocks gathered from the Agua Fria Riverbed during the 1940s. Jennie Merle Fulcher raised fifteen children in this home. Like other wives, she also supported her husband's cotton contracting business by operating the lunch wagon. Fulcher was one of the quietly effective women who helped those in need, making and donating quilts and volunteering at the community center. She also supported the town council by working as an official at town elections.

### 2 Town Hall 12604 W. Santa Fe Drive (Building Demolished in 2007)

In 1973, a modular building at this location became the first town-owned facility to house the local governing body. Although men held all of the elected positions until 1990, women played a significant role in Surprise politics. Lovena Luttrell served as the town clerk from the late 1960s until 1988, a period of growth and contentious politics. For much of her tenure, Luttrell was one of only a handful of employees and, as a result, she had many responsibilities in addition to recording council business. Outside of her official duties, she actively supported Founders' Day Festivities, an annual community celebration started in 1971 that attracted people from around the Valley with a parade, a rodeo, carnival rides, music, and food. While Luttrell held an appointed position, other Surprise women ran for elected office. Between 1969 and 1989, thirteen vied for seats on the town council. In 1990, Joan Shafer became the first woman to win a position on that body.

### 3 DoNorma RV Park 15637 N. Norma Lane (House located in back)

Norma Blankenship, working with her husband Don, built a home and a recreational vehicle park business, both of which still occupy this site. Blankenship also participated in town politics in multiple ways. She served as town clerk and ran for a council position in 1969. As a community activist, she led a 1965 petition drive protesting the town council's decision to reduce police coverage in the community. Blankenship was also a member of the Surprise Women's Club and the Surprise Sheriff's Posse.

### 4 Community Center 15832 N. Hollyhock Street

After incorporation, women lobbied for a town facility for community functions. At the March 23, 1961 town council meeting, the Surprise Women's Club donated \$39.45 to start a building fund for a community center. Seventeen years later, the town still lacked a facility and several women took the lead in the effort to fill this gap. As members of the Surprise Action Council, Louise Elam, Hazel Beck, Merle Fulcher, Maria Rosales and others held events to raise funds for a center. In 1979, they convinced the town council to apply for a Community Development Block Grant to pay for construction. After the 1981 grand opening, Merle Fulcher, Maria Rosales, Sylvia Occhiline, Alejandra Lopez and other women used the center to serve the community with educational and charitable services as well as social events.

### 5 Morgan's Lumberyard 12838 W. Paradise Lane (Concrete Slabs Remain)

Harold and Leona Morgan built a home, a lumberyard, and a tabernacle for revival meetings on this site. The first town council held their initial five meetings at this location. On March 22, 1961, a second association conducted their inaugural gathering at the lumberyard: the Surprise Women's Club (SWC). Agnes Williams chaired the initial meeting. The twelve charter members elected officers, proposed by-laws, and discussed ways they could help their newly incorporated town. By 1963, the club had thirty-three members and their work improved the lives of Surprise families. They initiated programs that brought residents together for celebrations and charitable work. Concurrently, the club pursued an agenda of community improvement, supporting and challenging the actions (or inactions) of the town council. Often working in tandem, occasionally at cross-purposes, the council and the club redefined Surprise. Early members of the SWC included Agnes Williams, Parthenia Rogers, Norma Blankenship, Leona Morgan, Lydia

Montgomery, Lois Moore, Imajean Dickey, Mary Annice Galyan, Rose Heth, Beulah Hornsby, Fay Hornsby, Ruth Leon, Alva O'Brian, and Coralee Vermilyea.

### 6 Leon's RV Park West 12939 W. Elm Street (House was located on this parcel)

In Surprise's first decades, farm work provided the majority of the income for many families. Like many women, Ruth Leon worked with her husband in the fields. Fidel Leon ran a cotton contracting business and she operated the lunch wagon that prepared meals for the field workers. Leon also worked with her husband to develop a recreational vehicle park to serve seasonal travelers and visitors to Sun City. She was a charter member of the Surprise Women's Club and served on the town's election boards.

### 7 Bi-Centennial Park 16705 N. Nash Street

In 1975, Elizabeth Statler Wusich and her husband Nick Wusich donated this property to the city for a park. The daughter of Flora Statler, the town's founder, Wusich assumed responsibility for her mother's business when she died in 1953. She developed and sold lots on the north and south side of Grand Avenue. Wusich supported the community in multiple ways, including the donation of land for this park.

### 8 City Hall on Bell Road 12425 W. Bell Road

In 1993, this retail complex became the city hall. Two years later, council member Joan Shafer became the first woman to serve as the city's mayor, a position she held until 2007. During her tenure, Surprise changed dramatically. It grew from less than 20,000 residents to more than 90,000. Under Shafer's leadership, the city obtained and developed the property that became the recreational campus and the city hall complex. During this period, the city constructed the spring training facility that serves the Texas Rangers and the Kansas City Royals. Shafer worked diligently to improve communications with residents, regularly holding "The Mayor is In" events at local retail outlets. An ardent supporter of the fire department and fire fighters, Shafer also successfully lobbied the legislature for passage of the Fire Fighters Cancer Bill.

### 9 Jerusalem Missionary Baptist Church 15631 N. Jerry Street

Established in the early 1950s, this church served as a social and cultural center for Surprise's African American community. Clara "Fisher" Davis Marshall and her husband Chester Marshall were instrumental in founding and maintaining the church. Established in 1952, Reverend John Dunbar initially held services at a Luke Field barrack relocated to Marshall Drive that served as the school for the Dysart School District's black children until it desegregated in 1951. In the early 1960s, the church moved to this location. Children who grew up in the community remember it as the social hub of their neighborhood, hosting Sunday school, morning worship, bible study, entertainment events, and social gatherings. Marshall supported church functions while providing daycare for her many grandchildren who lived in the neighborhood.

### 10 Lopez Residence 12327 W. Greenway Road (Main House Remains)

Alejandra Lopez and her husband established their home on this site in the late 1950s. They worked in the fields and raised ten children. Lopez also cultivated an organic garden and raised chickens, goats, and cows. She used the produce to feed her family and families in need. Lopez also provided medical assistance to women with limited resources. She served as a midwife and transported those who needed medical services to the county hospital. Mrs. Lopez assisted Dr. Konick in opening a make-shift clinic in their home. Lopez supported the children and youth in the community in multiple ways. She made costumes and piñatas for festivals and parades and organized Folklorico and Matachine dance groups at Santa Teresita Church. At the Surprise Community Center, she taught arts and crafts to seniors and children. When she turned 62, Lopez received her high school diploma.