In the summer of 1878, the US Army established a small outpost called Camp Supply in the Chiricahua Mountains, in the heart of the Chiricahua Apache homeland. The initial purpose of the post was to serve as base of operations and supply depot for companies of Indian Scouts. That function was cut short when the two young officers leading Indian Scout companies both drowned during a summer storm in the canyon. The camp was renamed Camp John A. Rucker in honor of one of them.

Although officially in use for less than three years, the Army continued to make occasional use of Camp Rucker for nearly 20 more years. The Army’s most intensive presence was during final campaign against Geronimo in the summer of 1886. Several companies of cavalry, including Buffalo Soldiers of the 10th Cavalry and Indian Scouts, came to the canyon and the army established a heliograph station.

The ranchers who lived at Camp Rucker in the decades that followed were an interesting group. Each of the first three private owners included family members with literary aspirations, each author (Mary Kidder Rak, John Plesent Gray, and Mathilde Hampe) writing at least one book or manuscript portraying life at Rucker in the 1880s through 1930s. Since acquiring Camp Rucker in 1970, the Forest Service has worked to preserve and interpret the old buildings remaining there.
This month’s guest presenter Bill Gillespie received his Bachelor’s and Master’s degrees in anthropology from the University of Colorado at Boulder. While in Colorado he spent four summers doing archaeological survey at Mesa Verde National Park and excavating in Mancos Canyon on the Ute Mountain Ute Homelands, and subsequently he spent parts of five seasons excavating at and near Chaco Canyon National Historical Park in New Mexico. He also has excavated in Jordan and investigated recent geological processes in the eastern Sahara Desert of Egypt and Sudan, and has specialized in the analysis of animal bones from archaeological sites.

After moving to southern Arizona Bill spent 25 years working as an archaeologist for the Coronado National Forest in southeastern Arizona, eventually becoming Forest Archaeologist and Heritage Program Leader before retiring at the end of 2015. As Forest Archaeologist he was responsible for overseeing the preservation and management of the numerous and varied heritage sites on the Forest’s 1.8 million acres. He and his Forest Service colleague Mary Farrell conducted a number of volunteer projects at Camp Rucker and prepared a successful nomination of the Rucker Canyon Archaeological District to the National Register of Historic Places. He also enjoys working with Arizona Site Stewards and other volunteers.

A Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) company was stationed in Rucker Canyon during the Great Depression of the twentieth century; Coronado National Forest photo

For more information contact Old Pueblo Archaeology Center at info@oldpueblo.org or 520-798-1201.