SUMMARY & PHOTOS FOR THE JANUARY 15, 2022 FIELD TRIP TO SEARS-KAY RUIN

By field trip organizer Brent Reed-Rim Country Chapter, photos provided by Brent Reed and Marie Britton

At 10am on Saturday, January 15th, eighteen intrepid members of AAS Rim Country, San Tan, and Phoenix chapters joined Scott Wood and me on a chilly and windy morning for a tour of the Sears-Kay site.

Sears-Kay is a fascinating site located in the foothills bordering the northeast side of the Salt River Valley. It is located above Camp Creek not far from Seven Springs, and is accessed from Cave Creek Road, and is about 7 miles northeast of Carefree.

Following Scott’s introductory overview of this Hohokam village that was built and occupied between about 1050 and 1200 AD, we began our trek up a nice trail that climbs the ridge to the site.

Sears-Kay consists of (5) stone room blocks along an inclined ridge, and culminates with a stone compound built on the mostly flat area where the ridge comes to an abrupt point, fortified with a massive encircling stone wall. The earliest structures at the site are pithouses, followed by oval rooms built with low stone foundations originally topped with jacal adobe and wood walls. These rooms typically had a single small doorway and a small firepit for cooking and heating inside. Later rooms, including those in the fortified hilltop compound, were built of full-height masonry walls, and some of those had no ground-level doorways, and were apparently entered through rooftop hatchways. This later dwelling construction style, along with the presence of a massive perimeter wall, suggest a very defensive posture that inhabitants took in response to likely social unrest and conflict during the late 12th century.
The fortified compound at the top of the ridge was constructed of massive full-height stone walls, with most of the stone sourced locally. However, some of the rock was carried from miles away, including monolithic basalt slabs used as doorway lintels, and distinctive light-colored volcanic rock built into both sides of the doorways, a very distinctive feature of Sears-Kay. The compound includes a courtyard area enclosed by storage rooms along its NW side, and the massive compound wall along its east boundary. Scott postulates that inhabitants occupying non-fortified dwellings lower down the ridge may have taken refuge in the fortified compound during times of attack, and also that the multiple storage rooms in the compound may have been for community use, rather than for individual households.

The site was discovered by cavalry soldiers from nearby Camp McDowell (later Fort McDowell) in 1867 while on patrol for Apaches, and was visited by various others during the late 19th century. The most notable of the military visitors who recorded their presence at the site was Army 1st US Cavalry officer and civil war veteran George B. Sanford, commanding officer at Camp McDowell/Fort McDowell. He left his name inscribed on a rock outcropping on top of the ridge.

The Sears-Kay Ruin takes its name from the Sears-Kay Ranch, established in 1887 by J.M. Sears on Camp Creek, visible from the site looking southeast from the ridge top.

Scott did a wonderful job of interpreting the site for our group, placing it in context within its environment, as well as within the larger Hohokam world as it developed in the Salt River Valley, and later expanded north into the foothills, mesas, and riparian valleys of Bloody Basin, Perry Mesa, the Verde Valley, and Tonto Basin. A major takeaway from his
talk is that the inhabitants of Sears-Kay, as well as those of the numerous other sites that dot the foothills of the northern periphery of the Salt River Valley, were very inter-connected with their neighbors in all directions, with craft specialization, a well-developed trading network, and social connections and alliances. They were by no means living in isolation.

By about 1pm, the wind finally calmed down, and our group of (20) carefully made our way downhill on the looped trail back to the parking area, after Scott had enthralled and entertained us all with his lively and insightful show-and-tell for nearly three hours. A fun and interesting time was had by all, and it was definitely a morning well-spent!

CREDIT: Some of the information for this Field Trip Summary was obtained from the site flyer provided to hike participants, created by Scott Wood and Friends of the Tonto National Forest. Friends of the Tonto maintains Sears-Kay Ruin as an interpretive cultural site. This group gladly welcomes volunteer help and donations to fund their many efforts to protect, preserve, and enhance the Tonto National Forest, and can be visited at friendsofthetonto.org