



South Mountain Antenna Farm

A city beacon, the blinking red lights reflect Phoenicians' hunger for talk, news, sports—and a bit of home.

Towering above the city from their perch atop the country's largest city park, the South Mountain antennas glow like fiery spires, providing the Valley's inhabitants with a sense of direction and, to some, a little love.

The towers sprouted on South Mountain in response to the Valley's post-war population explosion. The Arizona Highway Patrol, a precursor to the Department of Public Safety, put up the first towers in the 1940s to boost their radio power, says Eric Schecter, chairman of the South Mountain Users Association. And by the early '50s, the local TV stations had begun to follow suit. First, Channel 10's broadcast antenna migrated up the hill from Downtown Phoenix, then channels 12, 5, 3, and 8 each followed, according to Schecter. By the early '70s, virtually all of the FM radio broadcasting transmissions came from the antenna farm, too.

Of the 31 structures that beam transmissions from the mountaintop today, 23 relate in one form or another to TV and radio, says Schecter, who has worked in Phoenix radio for the past two decades and is the chief engineer for three FM stations.

The antennas and their red lights provide more than just communications and entertainment, though. For some, especially pilots and truckers, the red lights are a navigational tool, guiding desert travelers into the heart of Phoenix, a sort of man-made North Star.

As the highest point in Metro Phoenix, the view from South Mountain offers an expansive view of the Valley. It's especially impressive at night when the city is aglow in a massive sea of lights.

"Looking down on the Valley is awe inspiring," Schecter says. "The nicest aspect about working up there is the relative abundance and diversity of wildlife, especially at night. I've come across herds of javelina, curious ringtail cats, and a bobcat."

The red lights have also become fodder for quite a few urban legends. One often shared on East Valley playgrounds contends that the lights spell out the word "LOVE"—something Schecter says is just an optical illusion.

Whether they're just towers of mass communication or metaphorical beacons welcoming Phoenicians home, the towers have become a bone fide Valley landmark.

"They really strike me as a permanent part of the cityscape," Schecter says, "a feature that both anchors our sense of direction and inspires pride in our achievements." —M