

HAUNTED SOCORRO

Part 2 - The Hauntings Continue

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By Paul Harden
For El Defensor Chieftain
na5n@zianet.com

The first "Haunted Socorro" article appeared in El Defensor Chieftain for Halloween 2009. It contained stories of some famous haunts in Socorro, such as the Val Verde Hotel and Socorro County Courthouse. Since that time, many other stories have been shared with the author.

All of the following ghost stories were told to the author with sincerity. Some seem to be related to known historical events. Are the stories true? That is for the reader to decide.

Ghost of the Rio Salado

The earliest known report of hauntings near the Rio Salado was in 1940. A truck driver, en route to El Paso, Texas, had stopped at Bernardo for a few of hours of sleep near the Salas Trading Post. He awoke about 5 a.m., and continued his trip. In those days, Highway 85 crossed the old Rio Puerco bridge, turned south, and went through the sandy hills behind today's I-25 rest area by the Rio Salado.

As the truck approached the Rio Salado, the driver noticed a very young woman walking along the dark arroyo. He stopped his truck on



the Rio Salado bridge and yelled to see if the woman needed any help. The woman turned around and cried out, "It wasn't me. Take me home. I want to go home." Then, she faded out of sight.

The shaken truck driver stopped in Socorro for breakfast at the Coronado Cafe. The confused man shared his story with those who would listen, including the 16-year-old dishwasher -- who is now 88 years of age, still living in Socorro, and remembers the frightened truck driver and his story well.



Courtesy of David Torres

The popular Coronado Café in the 1940-50s. The view is from Manzanares Ave. looking north on the old 2-lane California Street. The Coronado Café is where the New Mexico Educators Federal Credit Union is today.

Over the following years, this story was repeated over and over again. Some saw the woman walking along the highway near the Rio Salado. Other motorists saw her roaming along the river bed with bare feet, as if she was looking for something. Residents in Alamillo would occasionally hear a young woman screaming or crying at night, but the source was seldom seen. Some said it was just La Llorona.

Who is this woman who appears to be looking for something or seeking a way home? Some say it's the spirit of 19-year-old Rose Garcia.

According to the original story, Rose

disappeared in November 1937, after a fight with her boyfriend, Wilbur Cassady, owner of the Socorro Laundry. She lived with her family in Polvadera. Sheriff Frank Knoblock, knowing the two had a tumultuous relationship, attempted to question the boyfriend. Cassady refused to answer any questions, so the sheriff jailed him on suspicion of murder.

But Cassady finally told his story. As reported in the Nov. 25 Socorro Chieftain: *“Cassady claims Rose pulled out a gun and shot herself in the breast and died while south of Albuquerque.”* Not knowing what to do, he dumped her body near Isleta, but could not remember where.

The Chieftain article continued: *“On Tuesday, Cassady tried hanging himself (in the Socorro jail) and after the failed attempt, told the sheriff where the body was buried on the Rio Salado. The body was found and recovered. She had a bullet hole through the breast as Cassady reported, but the body was mutilated in other ways as well, leading the sheriff to believe it was murder, not suicide.”*



Photo by Paul Harden

From the ghost of Rose Garcia to La Llorona, the Rio Salado, and Ladrone Peak, has long been the source of hauntings, ghosts stories and legends.

This became a big story in Socorro – a beautiful young woman killed by an older prominent Socorro businessman. In fact, so emotional were the feelings in town, the murder case was moved to Sierra County to find an unbiased jury. The outcome was reported in the Aug. 18, 1938, Chieftain: *“W. B. Cassady, former owner of Socorro Laundry, was convicted in Hillsboro (then county seat of Sierra County) of involuntary manslaughter in the killing of 19 year old Rose Garcia last November. Cassady was sentenced to 9-10 years of hard labor at the state penitentiary. The jury deliberated for nine hours.”*

Sightings of the Rio Salado ghost continued for years, although they seemed to wane when U.S. 85 was replaced by I-25 in 1964. Still, an occasional traveler at the I-25 Rio Salado rest area claims to hear the cries of a woman or sees a distant figure walking along the nearby dry riverbed.

Is the Ghost of the Rio Salado that of Rose Garcia? Or perhaps some other unknown woman, slain and buried in the Rio Salado, looking for peace? Nobody knows.

Ghosts of U.S. 380

U.S. 380, east of San Antonio, N.M., is another highway with a long history of ghostly sightings.

In the 1940s, what is now White Sands Missile Range, was once the home to dozens of ranch families. Some would shop in Tularosa, others in Socorro. Driving the old highway, they would occasionally see strange lights, campfires, galloping horsemen, and even bare-chested Indians crossing the



Created by Paul Harden
US 380, between San Antonio and Bingham, has been the source of ghostly sightings and apparitions for years.

road. Some say these are the ghosts of ancient Indians that once lived on the Jornada del Muerto.

In the 1950s, one Socorroan drove a truck to deliver coal from the Carthage mines to Magdalena. Upon returning the truck to Carthage one night, he was trailed by a man on a white horse. The truck driver would speed up, seemingly losing the horse and its rider, only to find the horseman next to the truck a few more miles down the road.

As the man arrived at the Carthage mines and backed up his truck, he saw the white horse and rider in his rear view mirror – directly behind him. He jumped out of the truck to confront the pesky horseman, but the horse and rider had vanished.

Reports of the white horse and its rider following traffic along U.S. 380 persist to this day.

In the 1980s, a traveler called the Sheriff's Department with reports of men riding horses on U.S. 380 and obstructing traffic. A deputy responded, and saw nothing in the pitch dark



Photo by Paul Harden

Reports of headless horsemen, riders in the night, ancient Indians, people dressed “out of time,” and phantom trucks, are some of the stories heard from nighttime motorists along US 380.

night. While turning his patrol car around at the Fite Ranch road, suddenly a white horse with rider reared up directly in front of him. So close, in fact, the deputy thought the horse’s hooves would come down and smash the hood or windshield of his patrol car. Instead, the apparition faded and disappeared into the night sky.

A couple of years later, another Socorro County Sheriff Deputy was dispatched to U.S. 380 for a stranded motorist needing assistance. The officer could not find the car. In pulling his vehicle over to turn around, the rear tires got stuck in the sand. The officer remembers it was about 1 a.m. He didn't radio for help, since he knew he was the only officer on duty that night.

The officer tried everything to get his patrol car out of the sand. He stacked rocks and pieces of wood under the tires in an attempt to get some traction. He was frustrated after 45 minutes of failures when he heard the sound of a large truck topping the hill behind him. He watched as the headlights came into view. What a relief when he heard the truck down-shifting to stop and render aid.

The truck came to a stop, and parked ahead of the patrol car. The deputy walked toward the cab to explain his plight to the driver. He was intrigued by the truck – an old 1930-style Mack with faded red paint and bug-eyed headlamps. Just as he approached the truck cab, the engine roared, the truck lurched, and it quickly drove off. He watched as the tail lights disappeared in the distance.

After yelling a few choice words at the mysterious truck, it hit him. There was no driver in the cab, and why such an old truck? Why did the

truck stop, only to immediately take off again? The deputy still asks himself these questions today.

Over the decades, there have been countless stories of such ghostly events along U.S. 380 between San Pedro and Bingham. Men and women dressed in old-time clothing, livestock on the road, some heard-but-never-seen horsemen in the night, even headless horsemen, to phantom trucks. And in recent years, with the advent of the 911 emergency call system, police dispatchers have heard them all. Calls about people “out of time,” that is, wearing old clothing, Civil War uniforms or pioneer garb, is especially prominent.

Our State Police and County Sheriff deputies



Courtesy of Antique Big Trucks Association

An old Mack truck, similar to the one pictured here, has been seen on US 380 stopping to help distressed travelers – with no driver.

are particularly prone to such haunting events. While we are safely tucked in bed, they are out on the road at night – and responding to such calls – with increased exposure to the strange and unexplained. This is true with law enforcement agencies across the country. If you see a policeman that looks like he's just seen a ghost – maybe he or she has!

Tragic Deaths at Carthage

If ghosts are the results of a tragic death, it would not be surprising for “lost spirits” to be found along U.S. 380. Nearby Carthage was the scene of a tragic disaster more than 100 years ago.

Carthage was a huge coal mining district. Carthage coal was used by the railroads, coke ovens and for heating homes throughout the state. It was a bustling mining enterprise employing

hundreds of local men and immigrant miners.

December 31, 1907, was no different. About 50 men were working in the Bernal mine, one of three large coal mines operated by the Carthage Fuel Company. As the noon hour approached, men began leaving the mine for lunch.

Suddenly, the company lunchroom was rocked by a terrific explosion in the mine. The ground shook for miles around – reportedly felt as far away as San Pedro. As the men rushed from the lunchroom, they watched in horror as gas and dust belched out of the mine entrance.

According to the Socorro Chieftain, Superintendent C.P. Weber immediately organized a party of several dozen rescuers. Two mangled bodies were found about 300 yards from the mine entrance, blown out of the mine by the explosion. Over the next few hours, six more bodies were recovered from inside the mine. Others with serious injuries were rescued and sent to Socorro for medical care.

The Chieftain reported combustible coal dust probably caused the explosion – the usual cause. Fine coal dust in the mine was likely ignited by the spark of a pick or a miner's headlamp. The men were killed instantly. Many bodies were mangled beyond recognition, identified only by surviving pieces of clothing. Several had been decapitated. Of the eight killed instantly, the Chieftain reported at least three more died from their wounds over the following week.

These men met a truly tragic death – literally blown to pieces. Had it not been for the lunch hour, about 50 men would have perished. The Chieftain identified those who were killed as O.L.



Courtesy of Socorro County Historical Society
A photo of the old Bernal mine at Carthage, before the 1907 mine disaster. Note the horses and coal wagons near the entrance.



Courtesy of El Defensor Chieftain archives
A 1908 Socorro Chieftain article describes the Carthage mine horror, killing a dozen men. Are the ghosts along US 380 the lost spirits of these tragically killed men?

Wilcox, the mine boss, two Italian immigrant miners, and the rest local men. Although not reported in the Chieftain, the explosion no doubt killed some horses at the mine entrance that were used for hauling the coal wagons, and scattered others waiting their turn in line.

Of interest is the fact that no telegraph lines ran to Carthage when the railroad was rebuilt to the mines, in 1906. As a result, express riders on horseback were dispatched throughout the day and night to San Antonio to deliver news of the disaster to waiting families and company officials. The news of this deadly mining accident was carried in newspapers across the country.

Are the ghosts sometimes seen along U.S. 380 the lost spirits of these men who were so tragically killed? Are the reports of horses on the highway the ghosts of the slain horses? Are the sightings of horsemen and the sounds of galloping horses these men rushing to find their families in San Pedro? One can only wonder.

Ghosts of White Sands

Some people who work at the Stallion Site, south of U.S. 380, claim they have never seen or heard anything unusual at night on the White Sands Missile Range. They are the minority. Almost everyone else has a story, or two or three.

Even those who haven't seen anything will report getting a “creepy feeling” at certain places when the sun goes down.

One night several years ago, a security guard, who still lives in Socorro, had to escort three carloads of people from the Stallion Site to their motel in Tularosa. They traveled along the old state highway that once ran from San Antonio, through Mockingbird Gap, and into Oscuro.

As usual, it was pitch dark with scarcely a man-made light in view -- just the headlights illuminating a small patch of pavement ahead. Approaching midnight, the small caravan was only about 15 miles south of the Stallion Site when a set of headlights appeared about a mile ahead. As a restricted military base, there should be no other traffic on the road. They decided to investigate before reporting the unauthorized car to base security.

Approaching a small bridge over an arroyo, a woman in Army fatigues suddenly ran onto the roadway, madly waving for help. The four-car caravan stopped. The woman pointed to a flipped jeep, upside down with headlights still on, a few hundred yards down the arroyo. She explained the driver was seriously injured and needed help. The escort reported the accident by radio and the Military Police were on their way.

As soon as the escort radioed Military Police, the men in the caravan noticed the headlights on the jeep suddenly went dark. They walked down the arroyo to see what had happened. There was no jeep. There was no Army private. There was nothing.

When the Military Police arrived, they told their



Photo by Paul Harden

This old building, on the corner of Manzanares and 6th streets, was once the NM State Police office, and well haunted. Employees and patrolmen often saw characters walking the halls and phantom uniformed officers sitting at desks or passing through doors.

far-fetched story. They were told, “this happens along this stretch of road every now and again.”

Apparently, many years before, two female soldiers were driving a jeep from Stallion to Alamogordo. Mud in the arroyo from a recent rain caused the jeep to slide and flip, and it rolled several times down the arroyo before coming to a stop. The driver was killed instantly, while the passenger, attempting to walk back to Stallion for help, succumbed to her injuries along the way. To this day, the woman is often seen flagging down traffic to seek help.

On another occasion, several workers in the main Stallion building went outside for a coffee and cigarette break. Stepping out of the hot, stuffy building into the cool, nighttime air was refreshing. It had rained heavily earlier that day. The men noticed that the normally quiet night air was filled with the sounds of croaking frogs, chirping crickets, and a pack of distant howling coyotes.

As the men sipped their coffee and talked about the World Series games in progress, they suddenly realized the night air had become deathly quiet. No frogs, no crickets, and no coyotes. A “creepy” feeling befell them all. In the dark building next door, unoccupied at night, they saw a window dimly light up, then the next window, as if someone was walking down the hallway with a flashlight. After the last window illuminated, they heard the back door open – which should have been locked. The silhouettes of three glowing



Created by Paul Harden

Two female soldiers were killed in a jeep accident years ago. They are still seen roaming White Sands looking for help.

figures emerged from the back of the building, walking out into the desert, away from the building. The figures turned into a green mist, and formed a cloud of vapor that disappeared a few moments later.

The men stared into the desert, then at each other, in total disbelief in what they had just seen. Walking back to their building, they noticed the sounds of the frogs, crickets, and coyotes had returned.

The Phantom Guard

One night, a new security dispatcher was on duty at Stallion Site when he heard the front door of the building open and footsteps tramp down the hallway to the men's room. The jingle of keys told him it was another security guard. A few moments later, the urinal flushed. Then nothing. No restroom door opened nor footsteps. The security officer walked toward the restroom, listening to his own footsteps echo in the hallway.

Cautiously peering into the men's room, it was pitch dark -- no lights had been turned on. Then, he heard the front door open and slam shut. There is no way a person could have traveled down the hallway without passing the security guard. He radioed the other guards on duty. None were in the area. He was told this happens every now and then.

A Wrong-Way Ghost?

Every once in awhile, a call comes into 911 reporting a wrong-way driver on I-25. Over the years, police would dispatch an officer to the area only to find nothing -- time and time again. This



Created by Paul Harden
Reports of wrong-way drivers on I-25, between Lemitar and San Acacia, has been a mystery for years.



Photo by Paul Harden

The ghost of an elderly woman with a wagon has been seen since the 1930s in Nogal Canyon on old US 85 – today's NM 1. She has also been seen on nearby I-25 through Nogal Canyon on occasion.

seems to be specific to the stretch of highway between Lemitar and San Acacia exits. It was always assumed to be a repeating prank call.

Today, with travelers now having cell phones, often several calls from motorists arrives within minutes, all reporting a wrong-way driver north of Lemitar. Several calls, moments apart, from nighttime travelers to truck drivers cannot be some orchestrated prank. Motorists are clearly seeing something, lights in the opposite lane, that appear to be a wrong-way driver – in some cases, coming directly at them – then disappears.

When a wrong-way driver report arrives, especially between Lemitar and San Acacia, the dispatcher and patrolmen on duty always wonder if it's the phantom wrong-way driver. Still, they respond, as a real wrong-way driver ends with tragic results. In fact, a few years ago, a real wrong-way driver did cause a fatal car accident – and it was north of Lemitar!

Is the mysterious wrong-way car a driver perhaps killed on I-25 years ago? The phantom wrong-way driver has baffled law enforcement, and the motorists who have seen it, for years.

The Ghost of Nogal Canyon

The Truth or Consequences dispatcher for the Sierra County Sheriff and State Patrol have a famous ghost story that has persisted for years. In fact, it goes back to the 1930s, when U.S. 85 was first built across the deep Nogal Canyon north of Truth or Consequences.

Early motorists would report seeing an elderly



Photo by Paul Harden

The old J.J. Baca building, north of the plaza, has long been a source of haunting experiences. Some claim to see Jose J. Baca walking this corridor, or pacing the floors in the second story.

woman in a white dress standing next to an old wagon, although always without any draft animals. As if stranded, she's seen standing next to her wagon with her thin, flowing dress and long white hair blowing in the canyon breeze, but never attempting to stop traffic. Motorists would pull over to render aid -- only to find nothing and no one when they stopped. The woman, and her wagon, were gone -- vanished into the night.

In the 1930s, seeing a horse- or mule-drawn wagon sharing the motor highway was not an uncommon sight. Her disappearance before their eyes, however, certainly was.

This sighting has persisted over the years, even today along the I-25 descent into Nogal Canyon. The same woman in the vintage white dress alongside her wagon. It's a mystery that has stumped motorists, and law enforcement, for generations.

The Homeless Lady

One local state patrolman interviewed for this story reported experiencing nothing unusual in Socorro County. However, he did experience something totally unexplained years ago while stationed in Española.

One night, while working the night shift, the dispatcher reported calls of a lady pulling a child's wagon, wandering into the roadway, along the highway to Abiquiu. The patrolman went looking for the woman. Several miles outside of Española, he spotted the old woman. She was safely on the side of the road, causing no traffic hazards. He saw

no reason to stop and talk to her. Besides, he recognized her from the Española area and assumed her to be a homeless woman often seen wandering at night.

The officer decided to continue his night patrol along the highway. A few miles outside of Abiquiu -- and many miles from Española -- he spotted the same woman pulling the child's wagon -- again. With the hairs on his arms standing on end, he wasted no time returning to Española.

Cautiously describing his experience back at the station, it was learned the old woman pulling a wagon between Española and Abiquiu was a common nighttime sighting.

The Animals Know

You say you don't believe in ghosts? Ever see your cat or dog growl or bark at something you can't see? Or your pet simply stares, as if looking directly at some unseen entity in the middle of the living room or in the hall closet? Just saying.

A Halloween Story

Here's a Halloween story for your children or grandchildren (with discretion).

There was once a family living in Socorro. A brother and sister would hear strange sounds and cries coming from the nearby cemetery. Sometimes, they would see scary creatures walk down the hill to their house. They would tell their parents, but they were always told there are no such things.

One night, a terrible storm hit Socorro. The wind blew the rain against the windows and the lightning struck all around the house. Then, all the lights went out. It was dark. Very dark. Finally, their parents decided to go to the store to buy some flashlights. They told the brother and sister to stay in the living room and that everything would be all right.

But, it wasn't all right. It was dark and the lightning flashes were scary. The wind blew trees against the house with a bang, bang, bang. Suddenly, there was a huge crash. The brother and sister saw a creature crash through the front door. It was a giant coffin with arms and legs and the face of a dried up old man. And, he was walking toward them.

"I'm going to get you," the coffin said.

The brother and sister picked up some books and threw them, but it didn't stop the coffin. The brother picked up a chair and smashed it over the head of the old man, but it didn't stop the coffin. They ran down the hall and hid in the bathroom. The coffin-man crashed through the door.

"I'm going to get you," he told them again.

The brother and sister started throwing everything they could find, but nothing stopped the coffin. They opened the medicine cabinet and started throwing bottles of medicine, mouth wash, aspirin -- but nothing stopped the coffin.

"I'm going to get you," the coffin said, and grabbed the sister around the neck.

There was only one thing left. A red bottle left in the medicine cabinet. The brother threw it at the coffin as hard as he could. The old man let out a scream and let go of his sister. The coffin turned into a big cloud of smoke. The coffin was gone, leaving only a small pile of sawdust on the floor.

The brother and sister picked up the red bottle to see what it was. It was a bottle of Vicks Formula 44 cough syrup-- "Guaranteed to kill any coffin."

Have a nice and safe Halloween, though personally, I'd avoid U.S. 380.

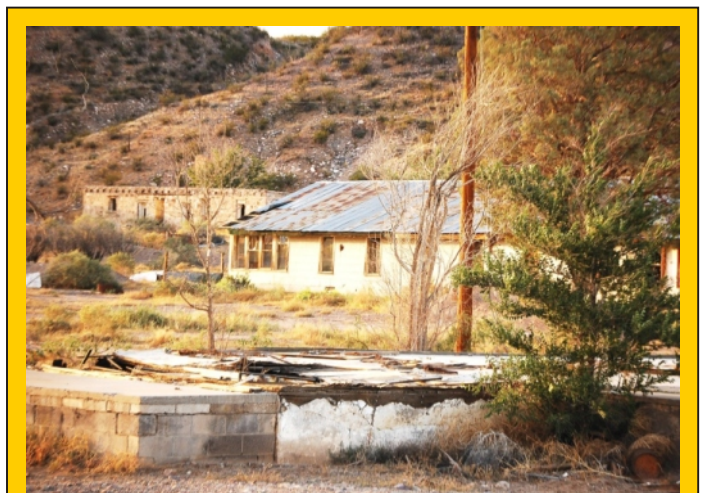


Photo by Paul Harden

The old Socorro Tuberculosis Sanitarium has long been a constant source of sightings of moving lights, ghosts, and moaning people. Built as a CCC camp in 1934, and later a tuberculosis sanitarium until closed in 1956. Many men and women died from TB inside these walls. Are there spirits still there?

UPDATE

I often receive a few emails following a history article from those sharing a similar story, adding more detail from personal knowledge, or just to say thanks (which I always appreciate).

I received a lot of email and a couple of letters following this article. Mostly sharing their own experiences with one of the stories in the article.

I was amazed at how many stories I received from readers with their own experiences along U.S. 380 east of San Antonio (page 2-4). The most dominant were reports of also seeing a horseman galloping across the desert on the southside of the highway, illuminated by the moonlight. A few said they thought it was a headless horseman; I was told that by one of my references, though elected to omit that fact from the article for fear it would be seen as too typical or corny.

I got a couple that said, "I drive U.S. 380 at night all the time and have never seen anything like what you described. But let me tell you what happened to me one night ..." Even those had a story!

I also received numerous emails about seeing the "wrong way driver" (page 6) on I-25 north of Lemitar. Apparently, this is a fairly common occurrence. Three emails were from past law enforcement officers once stationed in the Socorro area who had seen, and attempted to chase, the wrong way driver before it disappeared.

And, a nice letter from a retired N.M. State Patrolman, once stationed in Socorro, with several personal experiences in the old NMSP office (page 5).

And finally, the US-380 road sign photo (page 2) is clearly "doctored." The newspaper refused to print it with the original article for a general policy not to publish altered photos, and a fear it would be believed by some. I found this ironical. No concern if readers believe in headless horsemen, roaming ghosts, or the walking dead, but not get "hung up" on a fake road sign.

I appreciate the feedback and stories. I was surprised to learn how widespread some of these stories are.

Paul Harden
Socorro, NM