



# UNCANNY MYSTERIES of the BORDERLANDS



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Courtesy photos

**T**is the season to be scary, and what better way to celebrate the creepies and crawlies going bump in the night than a good old-fashioned stroll down Mystery Lane? The most frightening tales, after all, are those that are firmly rooted in the mysterious and unknown. Welcome to the Borderlands, a cultural crossroads steeped in mystery, where myths and legends have been known to cross over into our world, often with deadly consequences.

## CHUPACABRA

On January 9, 2010, César Garcia stepped out of his Horizon City home to discover 20 dead chickens piled up within their sheet metal coop. When César inspected the chickens, he discovered they had been drained of blood via two parallel holes in each body — the mark, he insisted, of the chupacabra. The next morning, 10 more chickens were found in a different coop, with the same markings, according to the *El Paso Times*.

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### Did You Know?

The legend of the chupacabra has haunted the borderlands for years, but it is believed to have first emerged in Puerto Rico in the early 1990s. Described as a bipedal creature four or five feet tall, with large eyes, long claws, and spikes running down its back, it is said to feed on livestock — including goats, which gave it the nickname, “goat sucker” — by draining them of their blood.

New Mexico resident Benjamin Radford, deputy editor of the science magazine *Skeptical Inquirer*, claimed to have solved the mystery of the chupacabra in 2010, after spending five years tracking it from its birthplace in Puerto Rico, through South America, and into the United States. His deduction? Chupacabras are actually coyotes or stray dogs with severe mange which, coupled with the natural coagulation of blood, make the victimized animals appear bloodless.

Even so, dead animals with mysterious markings continue to pile up year after year, and the legend grows with each sighting.

### SPANISH GOLD

On November 7, 1937, 19th century Spanish gold was said to have been discovered by Milton Ernest “Doc” Noss in the caverns permeating Victorio Peak. What followed was one of the greatest mysteries of the region. Doc is said to have removed several hundred gold bars from the caves before his murder in Hatch on March 5, 1949.

But the legend didn’t die with him. When the U.S. Army built a bombing range in the area during World War II, the mountain was annexed by the government. That didn’t stop others, in 1958 and 1968, from sneaking onto the range and bringing back gold bars. Even President Lyndon Johnson is said to have made several clandestine trips himself during the 1960s.

In 1977 — under pressure from noted attorney F. Lee Bailey, who represented several claimants to the gold — the Army relented, and Operation Goldfinder was launched. Unfortunately, it is believed the Army got there first and cleaned out the caverns, sealing up entrances as they went along. As a result, Operation Goldfinder proved to be a nationally scrutinized failure.

Today, all that is left is a string of affidavits and first-person reports by men and women who were haunted by their dealings with the Spanish gold. The eerie part is what happened to these people, more than 30 in all. Some died under mysterious circumstances, some were threatened along with their families and had to go into hiding, some simply disappeared. Clandestine government operation, or a deadly 200-year-old curse? Nobody knows for sure.



### TERATORNS

On July 19, 2007, Las Cruces resident Dave Zander, who had lived near the Doña Ana Mountains for more than 30 years, reported something that has haunted him ever since: two enormous birdlike creatures with wingspans at least 20 feet wide gliding along the Organ Mountains. There is nothing like them on modern record, though sightings throughout New Mexico have been reported since the late 1800s.



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Cryptozoologist and author Ken Gerhard said he believes the creatures sighted by Dave were surviving prehistoric raptor-like creatures called teratorns. These flying monsters are believed to have occupied the area as recently as 6,000 years ago. Well-preserved remains have been discovered in caves and isolated ravines, lending credence to the belief, though many scientists are skeptical that these creatures still exist.

In his book *Big Birds! Modern Sightings of Flying Monsters*, Ken includes sightings from throughout New Mexico, Colorado, Arizona, and Texas, even comparing them to the ancient thunderbird from Native American mythology. Many of those sightings have occurred along the Rio Grande and surrounding areas, making the teratorn the most frightening, scientifically supported, legendary creature of the modern Southwest.

## **HAUNTED JAIL**

On November 1, 1951, a patrolman discovered a woman lying unconscious outside the Amador Hotel. Mary Waters, a waitress, was assumed drunk, so she was taken to the Doña Ana Courthouse jail, where she was left alone in a cell. According to legend, it was only moments later that jailers heard a scream. They hurried to the cell, only to find poor Mary dead, "with a horrified look on her face."

The coroner declared the cause of death to be a ruptured kidney. Alcohol poisoning was also indicated. Whatever the reason, the story has drawn interest from paranormal groups across the country. To this day, the courthouse jail is considered one of the more haunted places in Las Cruces. Jail doors have been known to open and close by themselves. Footsteps are often heard. Many witnesses have claimed to hear a woman screaming in the area. Blood has been found on the floor and the spirit of a former judge is often seen peering from an upstairs window.

What did Mary Waters see on that fateful night in 1951? Was she the victim of a deadly haunting? And does she now walk the hallways of the old jailhouse, one of many lost souls bound to the historic courthouse? Your guess is as good as ours. ■



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