Socorro County Historical Society

Post Office Box 921
Socorro, New Mexico 87801

Membership News • Spring 2026
Printed periodically
SCHS is a 501(c)(3) non-profit organization

SCHS 2026

The SCHS Board of Directors has come out of our winter hibernation. The Board doesn't meet from November, the month following Oktoberfest, until March the following year for two reasons. First, there are no SCHS activities during the winter months. And secondly, Board meetings are held at the Hammel Museum. The old 3-story rock building has no heat. It's cold in there! Even this past winter. We're sure the building was nice and toasty when the boiler was boiling and brewing beer, but not these days.

That doesn't mean SCHS was completely idle. There's been lots of activity over the past two years you may have missed.

Oktoberfest 2025 was another great event, good attendance and good weather. As always we are deeply appreciative of the groups that volunteer their talents with music and dance that keeps as all well entertained and in support of SCHS. Oktoberfest and dues are our main revenue sources to fund our activities, support the Hammel Museum and maintenance needs. The Board thanks you for your support of our activities and the historic brewery building.

There's also lots of people "behind the scenes" that makes Oktoberfest a success that all deserve big thanks. Everything from purchasing the food and supplies, the cooks, the servers, building and yard cleanup, and the like. All done "in house" by Board members and volunteers. The Capitol Bar did a great job custom brewing this years prohibition era lager beer. We are also indebted to Mayor Ravi Bhaskar and City of Socorro for their help with yard cleanup, our new parking lot and other logistic support.

In this Issue . . .

Your SCHS Board of Directors:

President	Chuck Zimmerly
Vice President	Claudette Gallegos
Treasurer	Prescilla Mauldin
Secretary	Paul Harden

Board Members:
Jon Spargo
Mary Ann Lucero
Donna Voelker

Bob Eveleth – Past President Ex-officio

Concrete Patio. If you attended Oktoberfest, you probably noticed the brand new concrete patio. This has been needed for years to cut down on dust (and weeds) and to provide a better placement for the bands and entertainment groups behind the building.

Funding for the project came from donations of Board and SCHS members, and Cuatro Bursum. Thanks to all who contributed. Cement work was performed by Larry and Aaron Savedra with Edwards Construction.

Some time in the future, we would like to add some sort of overhead enclosure for shade and further protection. Something that blends in with the existing building architecture well.

Continued on next page

Our New Patio

Thank You, Roy!

Roy manning the Oktoberfest table

Board Member Roy Heatwole has resigned from the SCHS Board of Directors for personal and health reasons. Roy has been involved with SCHS and the Socorro Train Gang for many years. There just are not the words to express our appreciation for his years of service to the Society. When something needed to be done done, no matter what it was, Roy was always the first one to roll up his sleeves and get the job done. He was often a host at our monthly Open House and making the model trains available to children and guests. Roy performed much of building maintenance needs over the years from woodworking and repairing windows to painting. Even climbed ladders to clean out the bees (some still alive) in the top floor. The only thing I recall he refused to do was to climb on the roof! (Nobody else would either).

Thank-you Roy for your years of service to the Socorro County Historical Society. The historic Hammel Brewery and Museum is in very good condition thanks to your efforts.

New SCHS By–Laws

The SCHS Board of Directors approved a new set of By-laws, the first revision and update since 1970 and approved by those in attendance at the SCHS Annual Meeting with no objections.

The reason was simple: many of the 1970 By-laws were obsolete in today's world of email, the internet, cell phones, and online banking.

Some highlights of the pertinent changes are:

- Announcements were to be mailed out by April 15th for the May Annual Meeting.
  The May meeting has become very difficult to schedule due to all the local graduation activities. Annual meeting now at the Board's discretion and email preferred over postage mail. Currently the Annual meeting is now scheduled for late June or July as guest speakers and facilities are available.

- Simplification of membership classes and annual dues were fixed. *There were membership classifications no longer applicable. Life Member and regular membership are deemed sufficient.*

- Description of Board Officers antiquated – *Updated to reflect online banking, standard practices, and conform to current regulations.*

- Provisions for in-person Special Meetings – *Matters requiring immediate Board attention can now be conducted in-person or via email.*

New By-law items:

- *Define annual reporting obligations to the IRS, NM Secretary of State, 501(c)3 reporting, NM Tax Exempt reporting, etc. These legal requirements did not exist in 1970.*

- *For continuity, a document is maintained to indicate account numbers, PIN numbers and passwords to all SCHS accounts, IRS and NM reporting access, etc. This confidential document in the possession of Board President and others as selected. Not part of the 1970 SCHS By-Laws.*

- *All donations of historic artifacts to be approved by the Board to ensure conformity to SCHS mission and purpose.*

EL CAMINO REAL TRAIL – THROUGH SOCORRO COUNTY

EL CAMINO REAL DE TIERRA ADENTRO
THE ROYAL ROAD OF THE INTERIOR LANDS

THE ROAD THAT MADE NEW MEXICO

AMERICA'S OLDEST IMMIGRANT TRAIL

SIGNS NOW MARK THE HISTORIC ROUTE

El Camino Real trail is one of New Mexico's historic landmarks.Running from Mexico City and Zacatecas to Santa Fe and beyond, it was along this trail that brought colonists and settlers to the region for nearly 300 years.

The first colonists to settle the area were those on the Juan de Oñate expedition in 1598. Oñate crossed the Rio Grande at today's El Paso on April 31, 1598 and declared the land to the north *Nueva Espana* or New Spain. It is believed Oñate blazed El Camino Real with the assistance of Indian guides, following the foot paths between the Rio Grande pueblos.

The Spanish Empire fell in 1820, becoming a province of Mexico, and thus the name New Mexico. Unlike Spain that required a permit to travel the trail, Mexico opened New Mexico to the outside world. The reason the Santa Fe trail was first blazed in 1821.

Mexico only ruled New Mexico for about 27 years. In 1848, American forces took control of Santa Fe during the Mexican-American War, making New Mexico a U.S. Territory until 1912 statehood.

The death of El Camino Real is usually cited as 1885, when obsoleted by the railroad, though it continued to be used by local farmers and ranchers for years afterwards. The trail was the main lifeline to the outside world 1598–1885, or 287 years . . . making it the longest continuously used immigrant and historic trail in the nation.

Importance of the Trail

The impact of the trail on New Mexico's history can not be over stated. For nearly 300 years, the trail brought Spanish, Mexican, Chapas and Aztecas natives to colonize and formed the many towns and villages in the region. These people brought the Spanish language, the Christian religion, their music, foods and culture with them – all settling New Mexico via El Camino Real trail. New Mexico was not part of the Western expansion or the manifest destiny. It was a part of Spain and primarily Hispanic immigration. This influx of migrants was not based on race but ethnicity. This is what makes New Mexico so unique today among the 50 states due to El Camino Real.

In the 1600s, Socorro county extended from Dona Ana to Bernalillo, and from Texas to the Pacific Ocean. Following the Mexican American war in 1848, the western border was moved to the California border at the Colorado River. Much of El Camino Real in New Mexico runs through Socorro County, yesterday and still today.

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The Trail Through Socorro County

Traveling north, El Camino Real entered Socorro county north of Doña Ana where it departed the river for the 90-mile waterless "short cut" known as the *Jornada del Muerto* (Journey of Death). It rejoined the river south of Mesa del Contadero where the caravans would rest for a couple of days. They called this *Paraje*, the "camping place," which eventually became a village. There the trail continued north to pass through or near several Piro pueblos, such as Senecú, Qualacú, Teypama, and Tzelaqui (Sevilleta). These Piro puebloan people were the original inhabitants of Socorro County.

Fort Craig was built near Mesa del Contadero in 1854 to protect travelers along the trail with military escorts. To access the fort, the trail forded the river to the west bank of the Rio Grande. Caravans would stop at the fort to rest and purchase food and supplies at the Sutlery store. From there, the West Bank trail passed through San Marcial, San Antonio and Luis Lopez, very similar to the route of today's NM–1. At Luis Lopez, El Camino Real departed the paved highway and continued north along the river, entering Socorro along today's Cuba Road and South California Street in a diagonal (no longer existing) to the plaza and San Miguel mission church.

From the church, the trail traveled north along the ditch, the original *"Acequia Madre."* Indeed, today's El Camino Real Street was the route of the original West Bank trail. It then curved towards the river at Escondida, today's I–25 slicing the trail in two. NM–408, the Escondida Lake road to Lemitar, closely follows the original route. From the Sagrada Familia de Lemitar Church, the trail turned east to ford the river and rejoin the main trail at the village of Sabino."

Much of the Bosquecito Road is atop the old wagon ruts of El Camino Real. A drive along the Bosquecito Road between Pueblito and US–380 near San Pedro is a pristine drive to experience what travel was like along the historic trail 200 years ago. Except the caravans traveled about 10 miles per day. So for authenticity, drive this scenic dirt road segment of the t rail at 1.5 miles per hour with no air conditioning and eating the dust from the car ahead of you.

El Camino Real ran along the east bank of the Rio Grande to La Bajada Hill near Santa Fe. Fort Craig was built in 1854 to protect travelers along the trail. Weary travelers forded the Rio Grande at Ft. Craig for rest and supplies. This West Bank portion of the trail ran from Ft. Craig to Socorro and Lemitar, where it rejoined the main trail at the village of Sabino.

Socorro Desert Ratts are past and present SCHS members and others who have spent years mapping and documenting the trail with *boots on the ground.*

This information is being archived on the SCHS website, located here:

`www.socorro-history.org/CAMINOREAL/`

On top menu bar, click on **Detailed Trail Maps** for detailed maps, photos and drone videos of El Camino Real trail in Socorro & Sierra Counties.

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Signs Now Mark the Route Through Socorro

For those organizations and individuals involved with El Camino Real trail in New Mexico, the key issue is **preservation**. There are many visible segments of the famous trail in Socorro County — if you know where to look. However, much of the trail is slowly disappearing due to vegetation growth and modern development.

Shortly before the covid pandemic, National Historic Trails (NHT), administered by the National Park Service, began a program to mark the historic route in southern New Mexico. Paul Harden was contacted due to the trail maps and information found on the SCHS website, as was Kay Krehbiel, President of the Friends of El Camino Real. Both Socorro organizations worked with NHT in Santa Fe in providing the exact route through the City and County of Socorro, and selecting appropriate locations for signs marking the historic routes of the trail. NHT preferred to use local historical and trail organizations for their local expertise

Trail signs involve both City and County roads. In terms of the City, the project was presented to the City Council which was enthusiastically supported by Mayor Ravi Bhaskar and City Counselors. NHT funded the signs; the City was responsible for the installation. General Services Director Lloyd Martinez ensured the selected locations were suitable and Director of Water, Streets and Parks Oscar Acosta ensured the signs conformed to traffic standards. Both Martinez and Acosta installed the route signs.

Traveling El Camino Real through Socorro, from south to north, the signs are located here:

1. Northern end of Cuba Road
   (To be installed after upcoming road work)
2. South California St. at Clarke Field
3. El Camino St. north of San Miguel Church
4. El Camino St., north end Sedillo Park
5. El Camino St. near Newberry Road.

This project was due to the combined efforts of NPS and National Trails Outdoor Recreation Planner Faith Welty, the City of Socorro, Socorro County Historical Society and Friends of El Camino Real Trail.

El Defensor-Chieftain photo
Paul Harden, Kay Krehbiel, Oscar Acosta and Lloyd Martinez pose by the sign installed near San Miguel Church. El Camino Real approached the church on Bernard Street and continued north on today's El Camino Real Street.

SCHS Paul Harden photo
Kay Krehbiel watches as Lloyd Martinez and Oscar Acosta install the sign north of San Miguel Church.

Installing the route signs on the county roads is forthcoming. Those signs will be placed at the trail crossing near Johnson Hill, along Bosquecito Road, El Camino through the San Marcial townsite, NM-1 at Luis Lopez, San Antonio, and the Bosque del Apache NWR, and the trail crossing west of Fort Craig.

Future plans include preparing an annotated map of the trail on both sides of the Rio Grande for visitors to explore and preserve the historic route for future generations.

The Ghost Town of RILEY, NM (Santa Rita, NM)

Socorro County is home to one of New Mexico's best ghost towns: Riley, or Santa Rita. Riley is located fairly remote on the Rio Salado on the southwest flank of Ladron peak, about 22 miles north of Magdalena. A nice, easy drive generally, though a high clearance vehicle is recommended.

SANTA RITA HISTORY

Damaging floods along the Rio Grande in Socorro County were common place in the 1800s. In 1881, the fields from San Acacia to south of Socorro were flooded and covered in silt. This caused many families along the river to begin considering farming elsewhere. One was Pedro Aragon. Leaving Polvadera, he settled in a small fertile valley near Ladron peak in 1881. Water runs in the Rio Salado in this area, even today. Along with a nearby spring, there was a reliable source of water for irrigation. The following year, a few other families joined Aragon. They named their small village Santa Rita.

Santa Rita was a small farming and ranching community. By the 1890 census, records shows Santa Rita with a population of about 100 persons. From 1900 through World War II, the population was around 150.

The town was known for fields of pinto beans and orchards of fruit trees. The orchards were located on the south side of the town, between today's access road and the Rio Salado. A couple mentions in the *Socorro Chieftain* newspaper in the 1920s cite how a boxcar full of Santa Rita pears was shipped from Magdalena to market on the Santa Fe Railroad, one source of town income.

Corn, squash and other crops were planted as well. For the most part, Santa Rita was a remote, but self-sustaining community.

Most families also had livestock to survive. A small herd of cattle, goats and sheep was necessary for survival . Some had dairy cows, others had mules and oxen as draft animals for plowing the fields and hauling the harvest wagons. The commerce in the village was based mostly on barter. One family might trade some milk and corn for use of oxen from a neighbor to plow their fields. Bartering was a common survival tactic in many of New Mexico's small villages. For other supplies and needs, they traveled to the stores in Magdalena, Alamillo, San Acacia, or the Puertocito trading post.

Lawrence Aragon is one of the last residents in Riley and a descendent of town founder Pedro Aragon.

Remnants of the general store and Post Office, once operated by Marcelina and Sophia Nuñez.

The Town With Two Names

With the town's relative growth, Santa Rita applied for a post office. The application was rejected as the name Santa Rita was already in use — the copper mining town near Silver City. It seemed just about every Spanish name imaginable was in use in New Mexico. So the town's people decided on an Anglo name, and as former resident Hippolito Romero once explained, "About the only Anglo at Santa Rita was a rancher named Riley." That was the name they chose and the name accepted by the Post Office.

The Riley Post Office opened on January 30, 1892 with resident Perfino Sanchez the first post master. It operated until 1922, when Alejandro Sanchez vacated the job as postmaster. Mail was then delivered to the Puertocito trading post, about 10 miles west along the Rio Salado.

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Vicente Peralta reopened the Riley Post Office for a short time. The Riley post office was finally discontinued on February 28, 1931. Mail for Riley was then delivered to the post office in Magdalena.

Many small town post offices were closed in the 1930s, not only due to the Great Depression, but due to automobiles and trucks now being more efficient means of transportation than horse and wagon.

The population declined during WWII as men left the fields to go to war. While in the military, these men learned trades and skills. When the war was over, many decided to put their skills to use for good paying jobs than work the fields at Santa Rita. Many moved to Belen to work for the railroad as mechanics, engineers or on the track crews. The demise of Santa Rita had begun. Only a few families remained by the late 1950s.

SANTA RITA CHURCH

The Santa Rita church is one of the landmark buildings remaining in the village today. Early settlers of Santa Rita wasted little time building their church. Construction by the towns people began in 1882 and completed and dedicated in 1883. The town folks made the adobe bricks and cut down cottonwood trees along the Rio Salado for lumber, all the while building their own homes. Others built the pews and handmade the stations of the cross.

Twice a month, the Padre at Socorro would travel twice a month on horseback twto Santa Rita, Alamillo, Kelly, and Magdalena to offer mass and other ecclesiastical duties. It was always a pleasure for the local families to host the priest with a good meal and a soft bed, for which the Padre no doubt greatly appreciated.

In 1895 Santa Rita was transferred from Socorro to the Belen Parish where the priest would visit monthly. In 1913, the church was transferred back to Socorro, then to the newly formed Magdalena Parish in 1926 which served the remote church until 1974.

Many small village mission churches were dropped from the church rolls in the 1960s and 1970s which greatly upset the families who built those churches. As a compromise, the Arch Dioceses in Santa Fe agreed to keep all mission churches "on the church rolls" if mass is held at least once per year. This is why these charming villages and churches hold an annual fiesta and a mass. The priest from Socorro offers mass in the Santa Rita church once a year, on Saturday of the Memorial Day weekend during the annual fiestas. The church is maintained by former residents and their descendants.

The Santa Rita church in Riley, built 1883, still stands as one of the towns lasting landmarks.

Inside the Santa Rita church. It is kept pristine by descendants of the original families with mass still held during their annual fiesta on Memorial Day weekend.

SANTA RITA SCHOOL

Next to the church, the other distinctive landmark today at Riley is the old schoolhouse. Many schools were built throughout Socorro County by the WPA in the late 1930s. The Riley school was WPA built in 1937. This school operated through the 1953 school year.

However, the WPA built school replaced an older school in Riley. Former families recall the first schoolhouse was built around 1887-1888 by the townspeople, serving the village children until the new WPA schoolhouse was built.

The distinctive 1937 WPA built schoolhouse at Riley as it appears today.

WPA built schools had a standard look, such as the Escondida school shown here.

SCHOOLHOUSE MYSTERY

One of the mysteries associated with the Riley school is its unique Alamo style appearance. WPA buildings and schools were always built to established standards and had a unified appearance. So why is the Riley school so different with its rock construction and bell dome or belfry? Nobody seems to know.

Then in 2024, SCHS was contacted by Paula Vallejos in Albuquerque. The family had an old photograph of her grandmother – a school teacher at the Riley school in the 1920s. Because there are almost no photographs of early Riley, this photo is a real gem, not only for a view of the original 1887 built school, but for the numerous children and parents in the photo. The caption on the photo reads, *"The community of Riley, NM Socorro County 1921."*

SCHS Paul Harden agreed to escort Paula Vallejos to Riley so she could see the town of Riley and the present day school.

The first school was built by the people of Riley and they were no doubt very proud of its Alamo style and school bell. The photo does reveal the nearly 40 year old structure in a state of disrepair. In 1937, the WPA arrived to build a new schoolhouse for the town. It is assumed the people of Riley insisted the new school retain the Alamo look. Apparently, the WPA agreed.

Thank you, Paula Vallejos, for the photos and solving a long standing New Mexico and Santa Rita mystery. The photo is priceless.

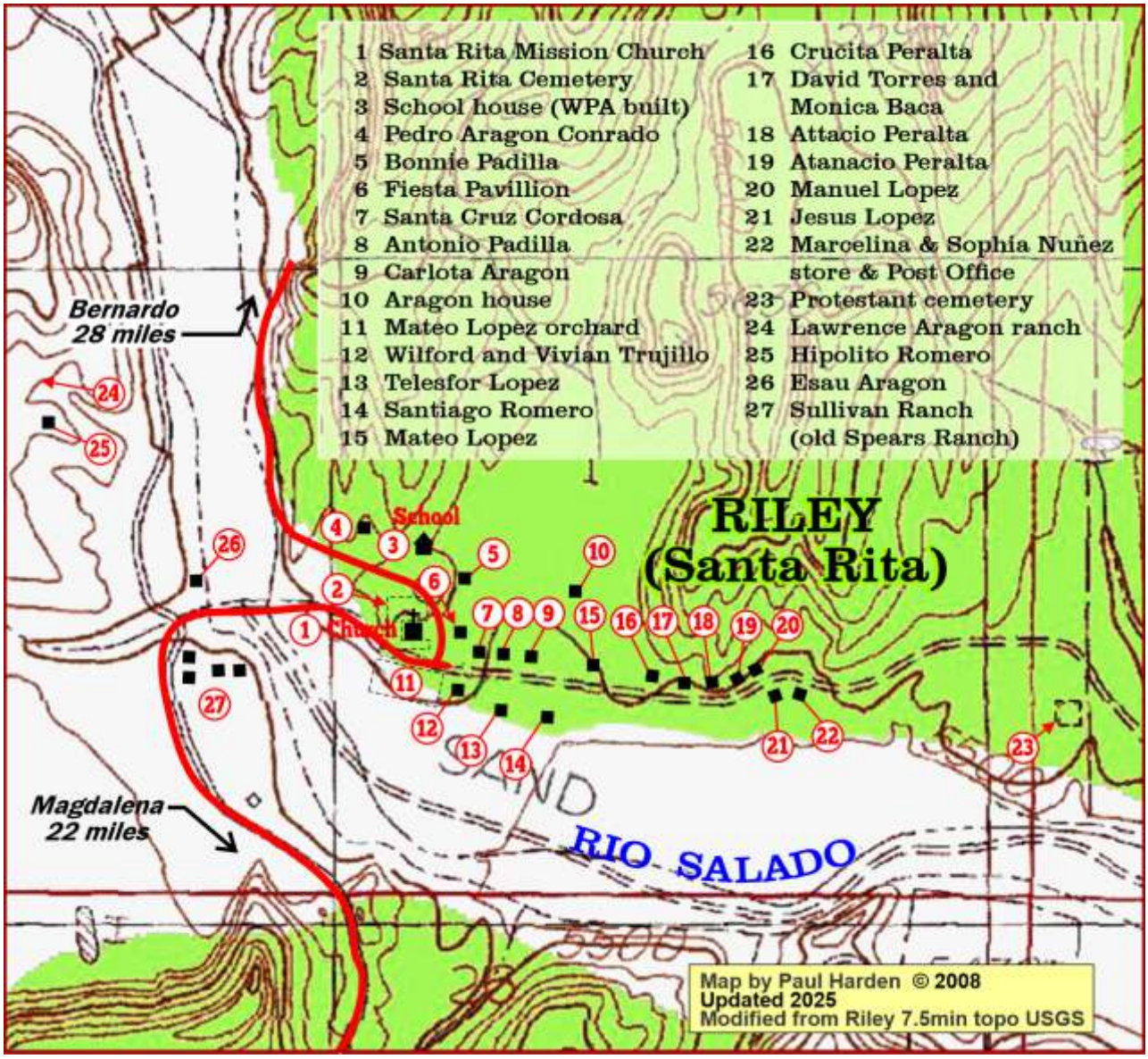
Paula Vallejos family photo

The 1921 photo of the original 1887 built Riley Alamo style schoolhouse and bell

Paula Vallejos visiting Riley, where her grandmother taught school over 100 years ago.

Paula Vallejos family photo

"Grandma Vallejos" posing with the Nellie Lopez family children in front of the first Riley schoolhouse in 1920.



Map of Riley made by Paul Harden with assistance of former residents Hippolito Romero and Alfred Bustamante (now deceased) and Lawrence Aragon. Only known map of Santa Rita/Riley.

The Star Wars Starfighter

Most everyone has seen the "Star Wars" movie, released in 1977. And, probably remember Luke Skywalker, in his X-wing Starfighter, with the luckiest shot in the universe that destroyed the death star. The detailed model of the Starfighter was made by Greg Jein, a special effects model maker for many movies. The model was believed lost when the studios moved from San Fernando to the Bay area. Jein died in 2022. As family began to clean out his garage, a world treasure of movie props were found tucked away in boxes. This included the Starfighter and models built by Jein for other movies such as Bat Man and Star Trek. Even the NCC-1701 Enterprise ship models used in the Star Trek TV shows were built by Jein – and found in his garage.

Jein's X-wing Starfighter sold at an auction, opening bid $400,000. Sale price not known. Jein said there was little interest following filming to save these relics. He kept them, not for their value, but because they were pieces of art and made by artists worthy of preservation.

NEW MEXICO URBAN LEGENDS

An urban legend is a story about an unusual event that many people believe to be true, usually with little or no proof. Often based on second hand tales and stories passed by word-of-mouth.

La Llarona is a centuries old tale of a woman who drowns her children in the Rio Grande to earn the love of her man. She roams the river at night looking for children to kidnap or to drown by another version. It is a popular story in Hispanic lore meant to keep small children from playing in the river. Every year, people claim to see the ghost of La Llorona along the river or hear her weeping cries in the bosque.

Big Foot or Sasquatch sightings seem to be everywhere, and New Mexico is no exception. Even in recent years, the big furry creature has reportedly been seen in various areas. The Valles Caldera seems to be one hot spot. In 2011, a group of investigators claim to have video of a 7-foot tall creature walking across the caldera floor, then slithering into the trees.

Dulce, NM is another strong urban legend based on a secret alien base built underneath Archuleta Mesa. Books, TV shows and documentaries have been made about this underground base supposedly operated by humans and aliens known as the "greys." They are breeding new human-alien hybrid creatures according to the stories, the reason for the numerous cattle mutilations reported in the area.

Prehistoric Vultures, known as teratorns, are giant birds long extinct. However, there have been sightings reported between Lordsburg and Las Cruces, and in the Organ Mountains into Texas, since the 1800s of this giant bird.

The Taos Hum seems to have been a real phenomenon. Many people heard it in the 1990s. However, it has taken on a life of its own as proof of secret underground government tunnels connecting to secret bases for some secret reason. The tunnel probably goes to Dulce.

Skinwalkers is a legend strong in the Navajo, Hopi and Ute cultures, though sightings have been reported by non-native people as well. They are ancients who can transform into various animals, such as wolves or birds. They seem to cause little harm other than inciting strong fear, often to keep people away from sacred sites and burial grounds.

Iron Door Mine was located on Socorro Peak in Blue Canyon. First mined by the Spaniards, it contained copious amounts of nearly pure silver. The missing silver alter from San Miguel church came from this mine. It was sealed with an iron door during the 1680 Pueblo Revolt. But, the miners never returned. Around 1690 an earthquake caused falling rock to bury the iron door entrance. Folks have searched for the legendary mine ever since, though today, you'll be nabbed by EMRTC security.

San Marcial Bank is buried under the silt from the 1929 flood with $150,000 in the safe waiting to be found. At least in legend. Many have dug looking for the bank. It is well documented the money was sent to El Paso before the floodwaters hit. Still, the legend of buried money persists.

There's a grain of truth somewhere in such legends.