

# THE 1964 SOCORRO UFO INCIDENT

The UFO Landing Site south of Socorro, New Mexico

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For *El Defensor Chieftain*

*In July 2008, discussion arose within the City of Socorro to erect a historical monument and make access easier to Socorro's most obscure tourist attraction: the site of the 1964 UFO landing. And, for good reason. Forty-four years after the incident, visitors enter Socorro every month looking for the landing site. They call the City, the Police Department, Chamber of Commerce, El Defensor Chieftain – even the Socorro Baptist Temple – looking for the site.*

*At the moment, there is no public identification of the site.*

*With this renewed interest in the story that “put Socorro on the map,” it is appropriate to review the 1964 events from an historical perspective.*

The Socorro UFO incident has been written about in dozens of books and internet web sites. Over the years, the story has been embellished and filled with half-truths. Where is the real story? Well, it's right here in Socorro. Mostly in the yellowed pages of the *Defensor Chieftain* and the memories of many.

## UFO SIGHTINGS

Project Blue Book, an arm of the U. S. Air Force, was formed in 1951 to scientifically explain unidentified flying objects and determine if they presented a threat to our national security.

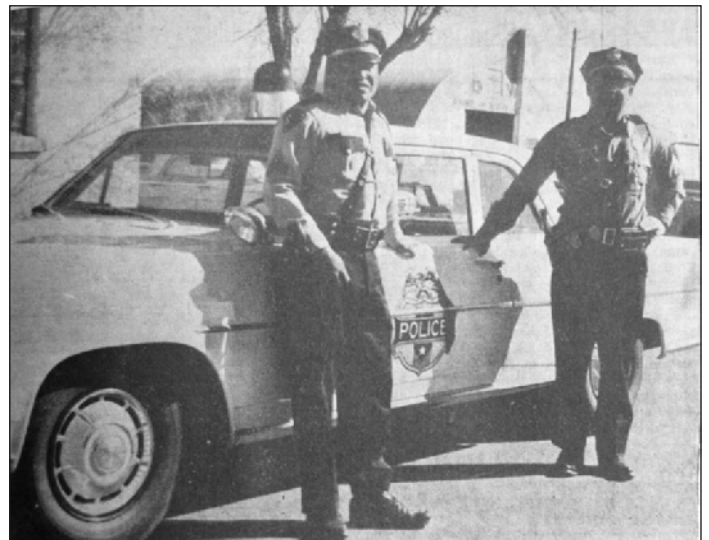
UFO sightings had reached epidemic proportions by the 1960s. When sightings occurred, Blue Book and Air Force personnel arrived at the scene to begin the “official” investigation. In some cases, their job was to keep the story at a low-profile, often discouraging local

newspapers from reporting the incident in detail. Supposedly, this was to keep public panic from developing over the rash of UFO reports. For the record, no UFO panic has yet been observed in Socorro.

Keeping the story at a low profile did not happen in Socorro.

The now famous Socorro UFO landing occurred early Friday evening, April 24, 1964. By Saturday, the incident had been reported to White Sands Missile Range and Kirtland Air Force Base in Albuquerque. The trek to Socorro by military and Project Blue Book personnel had begun.

Also by Saturday, half the town of Socorro had heard of the sighting. Many had gone searching for the landing site. Lewis Reddell, publisher of Socorro's *El Defensor Chieftain* newspaper, and editor Ted Raynor, were escorted to the site early Saturday morning by New Mexico State Patrolman Sergeant Sam Chavez.



*El Defensor Chieftain* archives

**A March 1964 *Chieftain* photo shows Socorro policeman Pete Archuleta (left) and Lonnie Zamora showing off their new patrol car. This is the patrol car that had a rough ride a month later.**

Raynor took numerous photographs of the depressions left in the sand by the landing legs, the burned greasewood plants, and of publisher Reddell and patrolman Chavez inspecting the site. These Chieftain photos remain part of the historic record to this day. Given to investigators, they have appeared in dozens of publications over the years, including the Blue Book report – though seldom credited to the Chieftain.

Over that weekend, Raynor and Reddell interviewed Socorro Policeman Lonnie Zamora, who sighted the UFO, and others related to the story. Returning to the newspaper office, Raynor's photographs were developed and the “breaking news story” written.

Early Monday morning, C. P. “Sonny” Otero, shop foreman, and typesetter Diana Pound, went to work. Sitting at the hot, smoldering Linotype machines, they set the old hot-lead type for the next issue of the paper, including the breaking story. In 1964, the Defensor Chieftain was printed on its own printing presses, located on east Manzanares Street.

The breaking story, with the headline “Evidence of UFO Landing Here Observed,” rolled off the presses late afternoon. The Chieftain “hit the streets” – about the time the Air Force investigators arrived in Socorro.

This was a time when many newspapers either elected not to report UFO related stories, or were discouraged from doing so. It is not known if editor Raynor saw this as a UFO story, or simply a breaking news story. Regardless, the depth and thoroughness of the Chieftain article remains one of the most detailed newspaper accounts ever published of a UFO incident.

With Defensor Chieftain photographs of the depressions from the landing legs and the burned bushes, it also remains one of the few UFO landings with some evidence that was captured on film. This made the Socorro incident truly unique.

If the military “covered up” UFO reports, they sure didn't in Socorro. With the Chieftain story already out there – in print – when the investigators arrived, there was nothing left to stifle. Any attempt to cover up the story at that point would have been embarrassingly obvious.

Today, the Socorro incident remains one of the most well known and documented “UFO stories” of all time. There are few newspaper articles of a witnessed UFO landing that received the detail and accuracy of the Defensor Chieftain article. In spite of efforts over the



Photo by Paul Harden - 9pt Arial

**The actual landing site as it appears today. The depressions in the sand from the landing legs of the craft were found just beyond the fallen tree limbs.**

years, the story has never been debunked or proven to have any major inaccuracies. Like the testimony of Lonnie Zamora, the Defensor Chieftain articles have passed the test of time.

### **THE ORIGINAL 1964 ARTICLE**

Following are excerpts from the original story, word for word, as it appeared in the Tuesday, April 28, 1964 issue of the Defensor Chieftain:

*City Policeman Zamora Reports Sighting Egg-Shaped Object and Views Take-Off; Tourist Sees Craft Just Before Landing*

*What appears to be substantial evidence of an unidentified flying object landing and taking off in Socorro has been observed.*

*City Policeman Lonnie Zamora, a highly reliable source, saw a four-legged, egg-shaped object, and two persons in a gully a mile south of the courthouse shortly before 6 p.m. Friday. He saw the object rise straight up and take off, and disappear beyond Six-Mile Canyon to the west. Some of the evidence of the landing and take-off remained in the gully. There were four shallow holes where the object apparently landed on its legs; there were burned greasewood and seared clumps of green grass; there were two round, very slight depressions. No footprints were found.*

*At least one other person – an unidentified tourist traveling north of U.S. 85 – saw the UFO just before it landed in the gully. Opal Grinder, manager of Whiting Brother's Service Station on 85 north, said the man stopped at the station and remarked that aircraft flew low around here. Grinder replied there were many*

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TUESDAY, APRIL 28, 1964

## Evidence Of UFO Landing Here Observed

### 2 Objects Sighted At Polvadera, Luis Lopez Recalled

The reported sighting of an unidentified flying object in Socorro shortly before 6 p.m. last Friday prompted Mrs. John H. Cardwell of Luis Lopez Monday to recall two night sightings of strange objects last summer. The sightings were at Luis Lopez and Polvadera.

Mrs. Cardwell and her husband were watching television in their living room at 9 or shortly after on that night when they noticed a brightly-lighted object through the large living room window on the east side. It was a dark, clear night.

The parents and their three children stepped outside to get a better view of the object slowly moving eastward. The object would become extremely bright white light and then dim. The lighted, moving object proceeded

(Continued on Page 5)



Where UFO Landed in Socorro: State Police Sgt. Sam Chavez and Lewis A. Reddell, publisher of El Defensor-Chieftain,

### City Policeman Zamora Reports Sighting Egg-Shaped Object and Views Take-Off; Tourist Sees Craft Just Before Landing

#### Santa Fean Reports Seeing UFO Landed North of Espanola

An unidentified flying object was reported to have landed and taken off near La Madera, north of Espanola, two days following the stop of a UFO in Socorro.

The evidence that Orlando Gallegos of Santa Fe reported was similar to that found in Socorro. He and his family went to visit his father, just north of La Madera, arriving about 12:30 a.m. Sunday.

Gallegos later told State Police he saw the object sitting on the ground in a gravel area when he went outside to chase away horses. He did not approach closer than 200 feet. He noticed a

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Zamora said he saw lettering on the side of the UFO, and he sketched the lettering on a paper

El Defensor Chieftain archives

**A portion of the April 28, 1964 issue of El Defensor Chieftain that broke the story to the world. After 44 years, neither the Chieftain article nor the testimony of Officer Zamora have ever been discounted or proven inaccurate.**

*helicopters in this vicinity.*

*The tourist said it was a "funny looking helicopter, if that's what it was." The man said further the object had flown over his car. It actually was headed straight for the gully where it landed moments later. The tourist also commented that he had seen a police car heading up the hill. This was Zamora's car.*

*Grinder did not know of the object at the time, and did not attach importance to the traveler's remarks.*

*Zamora doesn't know what the object was, but for those who desire to speculate, there are three possibilities: First, it may have been a top secret U.S. aircraft in an advanced stage of development. Second, it may have been an advanced type of aircraft or space ship of another power. Third, it may have been a space scout ship from another planet.*

*(Policeman Zamora) was patrolling Park Street, where he had begun pursuit of a fast-traveling car several blocks ahead of him. Zamora was almost on the old*

*road when he heard what he described as a blast or a roar. (The "old road" was old US 85, today's west Frontage Road to the Luis Lopez overpass. In 1964, I-25 had just opened from Albuquerque to San Antonio). His first thought was that an aluminum building used to store explosives had blown up. He forgot about the speeding car and headed up a very rocky, dirt road towards the building. On the third try, driving very slowly, he managed to get up the road which leads to the top of the mesa overlooking the gully where the UFO had landed. (This is the steep, dirt road and mesa just to the west of Raychester's Jewelry).*

*The policeman said he first saw the object at an estimated distance of 150 yards, and he thought it was an overturned car. He was looking out of his car window as he drove towards the top of the mesa. Zamora said one of two persons at the UFO, whose back was to him, turned his head and looked straight at him. The two persons standing by the object appeared to be dressed in white coveralls, and at the distance Zamora saw them they appeared to be "child-like," that is, small.*

*When he stopped his car on the top of the mesa and directly opposite the place in the gully where the UFO had landed, he saw it again, but the persons were not outside the object on which the sun gleamed brightly. He got out of his car and started towards the UFO. (With his car facing southwest, Zamora walked southward into the gully). Then he again heard the roar or blast that had brought him to the scene and saw flames. Dust was flying around the object.*

*The policeman believed the object was about to explode. He was about 50 feet from the UFO, and for protection he dropped to the ground and covered his face with an arm.*

*No explosion occurred, and Zamora also realized the object was not heading in his direction. He raised his head slightly. He saw the UFO, which seemed to be heading south on landing, rise straight up for an estimated 20 feet, which brought it about on a level with the police car on the mesa top. The object appeared to maintain this altitude beyond the explosives building and due west in a straight line for about two miles to the perlite mill. On the other side of the mill the UFO gained altitude very rapidly, passed over Six-Mile Canyon, became a speck in the sky, and disappeared.*

*Zamora radioed the sheriff's office immediately after the object had taken off. (The radio dispatcher on duty was Nep Lopez). State Police Sgt. Sam Chavez, State Policeman Ted Jordan, and Under sheriff James Luckie responded. Chavez and Luckie said the burned clumps of green grass and the greasewood were still hot when they arrived. The military later took samples of the burned earth for analysis.*

*An inspection of the scene Saturday morning (by Defensor Chieftain's Reddell and Raynor) showed the object landed astride a narrow, rock-strewn dry wash in the gully. Officers earlier had circled with stones the four places where the legs of the object had touched earth. The holes were shallow, about a foot long by six inches wide. They did not appear to have been made by an object striking the earth with great force, but by an object of considerable weight settling to earth at slow speed and not moving after touching the ground.*

*The clumps of green grass and two greasewood bushes seemed to have been seared all at once by an extremely hot flame. There were also broken branches on one greasewood.*

*After Capt. Holder (Capt. Richard Holder, U.S. Army up-range commander at White Sands Missile Range,*



Photo by Paul Harden

**The day after the landing, policemen placed rocks around the landing depressions to keep the flood of visitor's from trampling them. Today, the circles of rocks are still there. Two of the three landing depressions are shown in the above photographs.**

*living in Socorro) was appraised of the UFO occurrence, he made a report of it to the proper agencies at WSMR. Investigations of the incident will be conducted by designated government agencies.*

*By Sunday afternoon hundreds of curious persons had trampled the scene and there was virtually no evidence left of the landing marks." (Except the Defensor Chieftain photos taken Saturday morning while the site was relatively undisturbed).*

The dispatcher that took Zamora's radio call was Nep Lopez, accompanied that evening by his 20 year old son, Pablo. As under sheriff James Luckie dashed out of the office, he asked Pablo if he wanted to go along. Minutes later, Luckie and Pablo Lopez met policeman Zamora at the site. Sgt. Sam Chavez was already there. Moments later, State Patrolman Ted Jordan arrived. All of these individuals saw the landing depressions and the still smouldering bushes within ten minutes following the incident.

## DR. ALLEN HYNEK ARRIVES

The principal investigator for Project Blue Book, astronomer Dr. J. Allen Hynek, arrived in Socorro on Wednesday, April 29. As reported in the Thursday, April 30 Chieftain, "Dr. J. Allen Hynek, special consultant to the Air Force on unidentified flying objects, was here Wednesday at the request of the Air Force. He visited the site with Zamora, talked to him at length there, and interviewed others. He found the site so trampled by the curious that little of scientific value could be obtained."

The April 30 article was printed on the front page of the Chieftain, with the headline, "Air Force Consultant Checks UFO Site Here. Dr. Hynek Feels Zamora's Account Solid, Not a Hoax." A photo of Dr. Hynek, taken in the Defensor Chieftain office, accompanied the article.

In general, however, life went on in Socorro. Gas at the Whiting Brothers station was a blistering 21 cents a gallon. Socorroan's went to the Saturday matinee at the Loma Theater to watch the Sonny Liston vs. Cassius Clay (Mohamed Ali) fight, including "highlights in slow motion." By Monday, Brigitte Bardot entertained the town with her movie "A Very Private Affair."

On Wednesday, many Socorroans went to Safeway for their mid-week sale. Chuck steak for 55 cents a pound, short ribs 29 cents, and Nestle's Quick just 45 cents for a one-pound can. Life went on in Socorro as usual. No panic was evident. Except, one can imagine the conversations in the movie line, or while squeezing the cantaloupes at Safeway. After all, they were just 15 cents a pound.

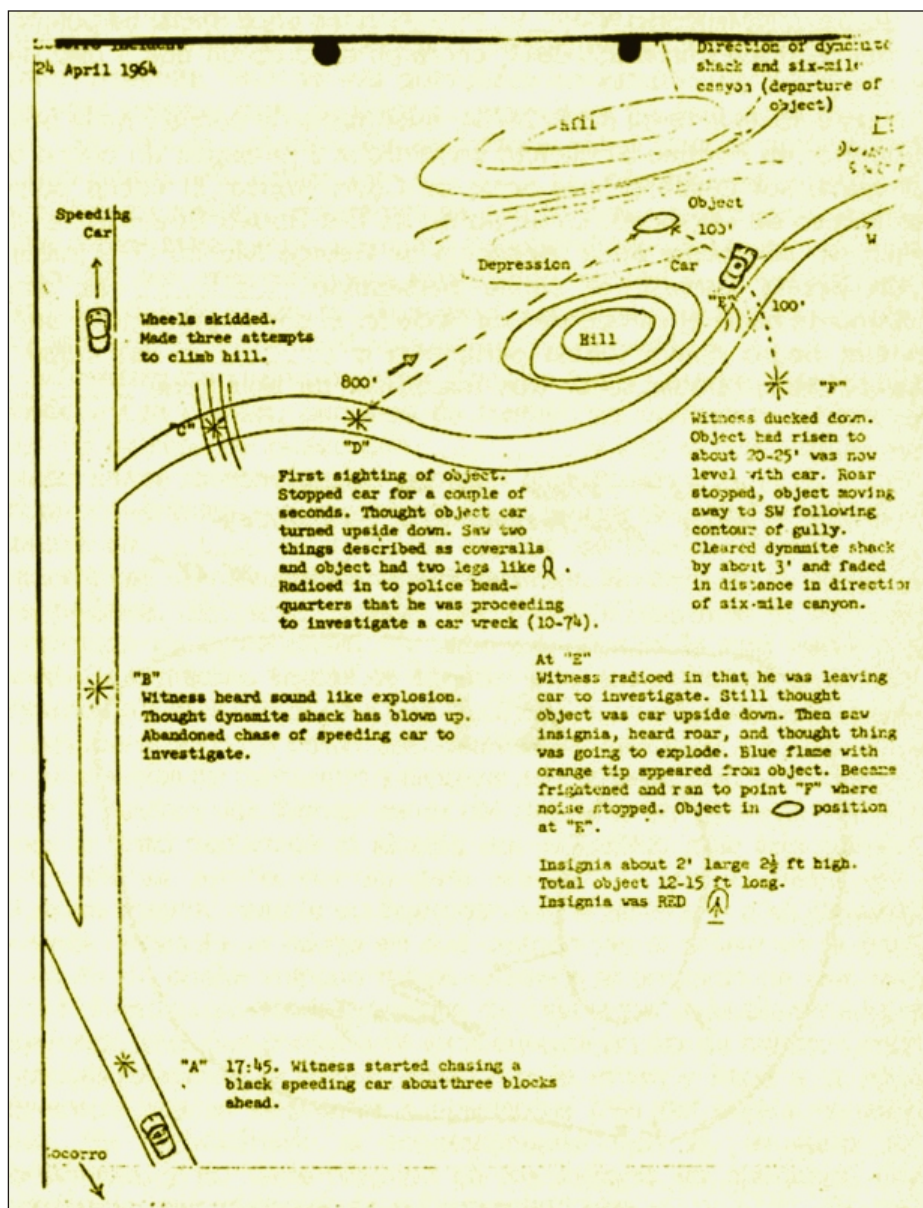
One amusing side effect of the Socorro UFO sighting came several weeks later. Motorists driving from Magdalena to Socorro noticed "shadowy figures with mysterious round lights seen roaming around the desert." This was promptly reported to the state patrol, who responded and found the strange alien creatures roaming the desert west of Socorro as reported. After a contentious

confrontation, the space aliens turned out to be a B.L.M. survey crew.

Dr. Hynek visited Socorro again three months later. The short article on the front page of the August 18 Chieftain read:

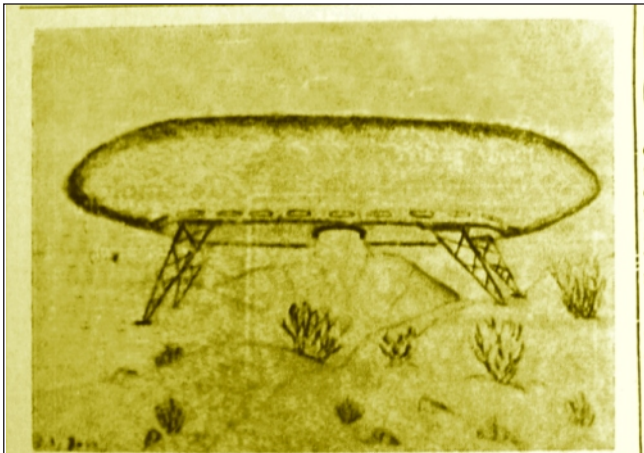
"Dr J. Allen Hynek, special consultant to the Air Force on Unidentified Flying Objects, said during a stop in Socorro Saturday (Aug. 15) that the reported landing and takeoff of a UFO here last April 24 is becoming "one of the classic cases."

"The Air Force is "very much interested in the case," Dr. Hynek said, and "there has been nothing to discredit the investigation." But, he said, "an acceptable answer" concerning the object observed by City Policeman



Operation Blue Book files

The map page of the Socorro Incident from the Project Blue Book report, based on Dr. Hynek's investigation in Socorro.



**Socorro's UFO:** This freehand charcoal drawing of the Unidentified Flying Object that landed and took off here on April 24 was done by Ricky Baca, 14, eighth grader in Socorro Junior High School. The boy based his drawing on news accounts given by City Policeman Lonnie Zamora who observed the UFO after it had landed and took off. Zamora commented that of the representations of the observed UFO he had seen Baca's drawing most closely resembled the object. The insignia on the UFO, an inverted "V", was described to Baca by Zamora. The boy is the son of Mr. and Mrs. Eliazim Baca of 318 Center Street.



Photo by Paul Harden

**Rick Baca still has the original charcoal sketch of the craft he drew as an 8th grade student in 1964. The red insignia, described by Zamora, is barely visible.**

El Defensor Chieftain Archives

**A sketch drawn by Ricky Baca based on Officer Zamora's description. The drawing was first published in the Defensor Chieftain on May 26, 1964.**

Lonnie Zamora has not yet been found."

Dr. Hynek was no stranger to the news. His real "claim to fame" came in 1966 when numerous UFOs were seen by about 100 witnesses, and even tracked by radar, near Dexter, Michigan. Hynek explained the UFO sightings as merely being "swamp gas" - an explanation that plagued him the rest of his life. To some, swamp gas was the equivalent to the weather balloon explanation given for Roswell. The credibility of Dr. Hynek, and Project Blue Book, never recovered from this blunder.

### THE END OF BLUE BOOK

In 1968, a report issued by the congressional Condon Committee concluded that further studies of UFOs were unlikely to yield any further scientific discoveries. The Air Force testified that UFOs did not pose a threat to national security. As a result, Project Blue Book was disbanded in January 1970.

Project Blue Book investigated 12,618 UFO sightings for the Air Force, determining 701 of them to be "unexplainable." The Socorro sighting remains one of the top 10 unexplained sightings.

Blue Book's director, Major Hector Quintanilla, wrote regarding the Zamora case, "There is no doubt that Lonnie Zamora saw an object which left quite an

impression on him. There is also no question about Zamora's reliability. He is a serious police officer, a pillar of his church, and a man well versed in recognizing airborne vehicles in his area. He is puzzled by what he saw and frankly, so are we. This is the best-documented case on record."

Officially, the U.S. Air Force no longer investigates UFO sightings. However, a document obtained through the Freedom of Information Act, signed by Brigadier General C. H. Bolander, states UFO reports "continue to be handled through the standard Air Force procedure designed for this purpose."

Should Socorro be visited again, thankfully, we still have someone to call.

### RUMORS AND MYTHS

Early skeptics of the Socorro UFO landing accused it was a colossal gimmick to promote tourism. Forty four years later, we're still waiting for that to kick in!

Debunkers claim the entire affair was a hoax, based on the fact that the landing occurred on land owned by Holm Bursum, Jr., the mayor of Socorro at the time. This is untrue. In 1964, the property where the landing occurred was owned by the Delia Harris estate. In 1968, the parcel was purchased by the Richardson family, who still owns the property and the previous deed



Photos by Paul Harden

**Views of the Chamber Site as it appears today, and the rock walkway that circles the site.**

documents. Holm Bursum never owned this parcel of land.

Another popular myth found in UFOlogy is that all of the Socorro newspapers reporting the landing have mysteriously disappeared. This is patently untrue. Much of the research for this article is based on the actual issues of *Defensor Chieftain's* of the period. They are in bound volumes in the Chieftain's archives, and on microfilm rolls located at the Socorro and New Mexico Tech libraries. Photos of the original front page story with this article should prove that point.

Historical research can not prove what policeman Zamora did or did not see that April evening. That is for the reader to decide. However, it can substantiate or disprove surrounding events.

### WHERE'S THE SITE?

In 1966, Chamber of Commerce president Paul Ridings proposed building up the site to promote tourism. The Chamber and volunteers built stone walkways and steps into the arroyo from the mesa top, a rock walkway circling the landing site, and some wooden benches. Much of this rock work remains at the site today.

Driving up the steep hill west of Raychester's Jewelry, this site is several hundred yards beyond the houses to the south in the arroyo bottom. Unfortunately, this is not the correct site. Since vegetation at the real site had not yet grown back, many people were spooked that the area might be radioactive. As a result, the "Chamber site" was built in the proper gully, but closer to old U.S. 85. It remains an interesting, historical site in itself.

Other popular locations behind the old drive in theater or along High School Road are also not correct.

The real site is about a quarter mile further west from the Chamber site in the gully to the south. It needs to be stabilized before being fully accessible to the public. Numerous rocks, seemingly randomly placed, have historical significance that need to be preserved.

### THE AFTERMATH

The 1964 incident has clearly become a chapter in New Mexico history. There is not much to see at the landing site except desert – like half of New Mexico. For some reason, it draws numerous visitors to Socorro every year.

About a month after the landing, Socorro Junior High student Rick Baca drew a sketch of the craft based on Zamora's description. It was published in the May 26,



**Where UFO Landed in Socorro:** State Police Sgt. Sam Chavez and Lewis A. Reddell, publisher of *El Defensor-Chieftain*, stand at one of the stone-circled depressions (arrow) made by a leg of an unidentified flying object which landed in a gully a mile from the courthouse last Friday. The arrow in left foreground points to another depression made by a leg. Near the center foreground are burned greasewood and clumps of grass. The person at the left also looks over the scene, which had not been trampled by the curious Saturday morning when this photo was taken.

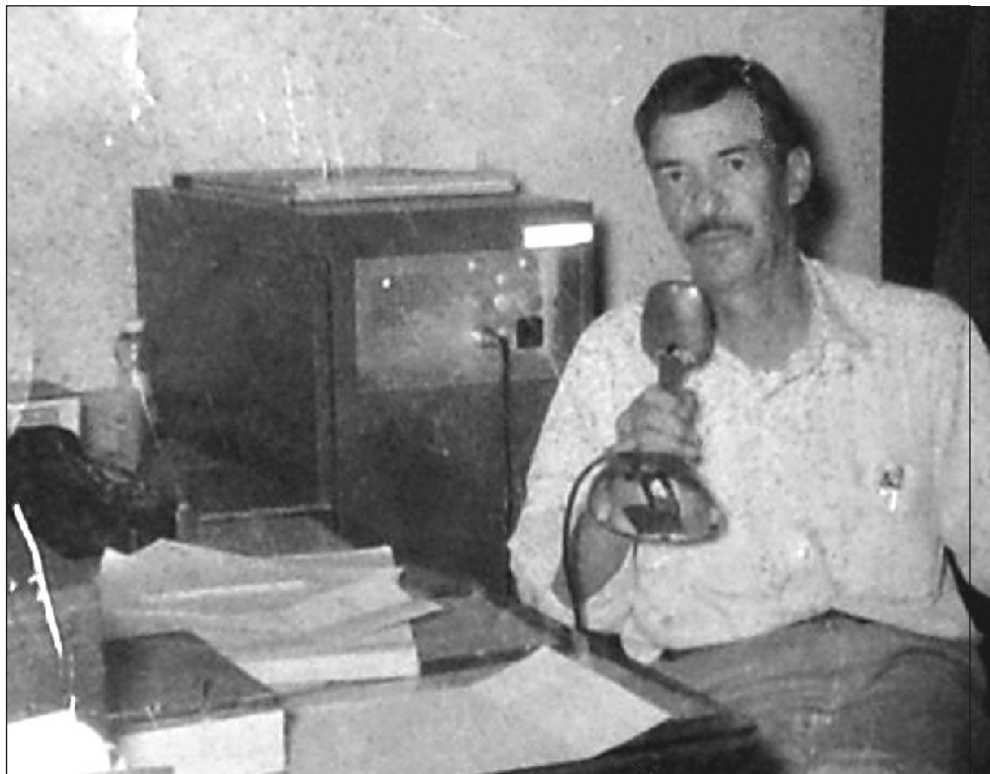
El Defensor Chieftain archives

**A photo showing Sgt. Sam Chavez and Lewis Reddell, El Defensor Chieftain publisher. Photos of the undisturbed site, appearing in dozens of books, were those taken by the newspaper the morning after the landing.**

## The Socorro Incident WHO'S WHO IN 1964



Courtesy Holm Bursum III  
**Mayor Holm Bursum Jr.**



Courtesy Paul Lopez

**Radio dispatcher Nep Lopez**



El Defensor Chieftain archives  
**A photo taken of Dr. J. Allen Hynek in the Defensor Chieftain offices on Aug. 29, 1964.**



Photo by Paul Harden  
**City Manager Ray Senn got a taste of UFO movie making.**



Photo by Paul Harden  
**Pablo Lopez, son of dispatcher Nep Lopez.**



Defensor Chieftain archives  
**State patrolman Sam Chavez.**

1964 issue of the Chieftain, and has since found its way into numerous books and UFO web sites. Baca still lives in Socorro and still has his original sketch.

Ray Senn, City Manager at the time, recalls how California film producer Mike Musto arrived to make a UFO documentary in 1965. Senn drove Musto around town in his pickup truck as he filmed scenes of Socorro “guaranteed to promote the town.” The movie was named, “Phenomenon 7.7” after the 7.7 percent of UFO reports determined to be unexplained. However, when the movie was completed, Musto wanted \$25,000 from the City and Loma Theater to premier the film in Socorro. Though the exact words are not recorded, Mayor Bursum told the film producer “no.”

Over the years, the movie was shown at various UFO conferences and gatherings. Even the UFO freaks considered it a flop. Critics said the strings holding up the flying saucer shots were embarrassing. The movie never produced the promised “flood of tourists” to Socorro.

Following the 1964 UFO landing, Zamora remained with the Socorro Police Department. Later, he continued to work for the City of Socorro in other capacities until his retirement. Following the initial investigations, Zamora has seldom since talked of the incident nor ever sought attention. Yet, though never his intent, Zamora is probably the world's most well known Socorroan – due largely to his admirable character and integrity.



**Some of the references used in this article:**

Numerous issues of Socorro Defensor Chieftain, including “Socorro’s UFO Incident Still Unexplained,” July 23, 2003 by Valerie Kimble, “Socorro Saucer in a Pentagon Pantry” by Ray Stanford, Project Blue Book, and interviews with Lawrence Romero, Rick Baca, Ray Senn, Raymond “Sonny” Baca, Kathy Richardson, Pablo Lopez, and field work by the author. The author was first shown the site by former Defensor Chieftain owners, Bob and Leona Klipsch, in 1979.

**Photos not appearing in the newspaper article**



El Defensor Chieftain archives  
**August 18, 1964 El Defensor Chieftain with article about Dr. Hynek’s second visit to Socorro.**



**An APRO photo of Air Force investigators checking for low level radiation at the landing site. Lonnie Zamora overlooks (far left).**

**APRO - Aerial Phenomenon Research Organization was a serious civilian UFO research organization - which became MUFON (Mutual UFO Network) in 1969.**



**An APRO photo of an investigator photographing the Socorro site.**



Google Earth image  
**A Google Earth image of Socorro (2008) showing the location of the landing site (Site 2) and the 1960s Chamber of Commerce Site (Site 1). This is roughly the same field of view as Dr. Hynek’s map in the Blue Book Report (see map, page 5).**

**This Google Earth image was taken on one of the few rare days that Socorro has snow cover.**

## HISTORY CHANNEL FILM CREW

A few weeks after this article was published in the August 2, 2008 *El Defensor Chieftain*, a film crew from the History Channel arrived to film a documentary on the Socorro UFO landing incident. They interviewed Lonnie Zamora, current Police Chief Lawrence Romero, current *Defensor Chieftain* General Manager Terry Last, and others, including the author of this article. The photos show the History Channel film crew at the landing site.

Even today, Socorro is often frequented by investigators, journalists, and other interested people looking for the landing site.



## THE “SYMBOL” ON ZAMORA’S CRAFT

As stated in the article, Ricky Baca drew a sketch of the craft under Zamora’s direction about two weeks after the sighting. Regarding the symbol, Baca did not have a red pencil, so Zamora drew it on a piece of paper, for which Baca added the symbol with a red pencil, the color of the symbol, later that evening at home. The sketch was approved by Zamora and published in the May 28, 1964 issue of the Socorro *Chieftain* newspaper (see page 6 of this article).

Hynek requested the symbol not be included to not influence other reports of craft symbols.

There are numerous renditions of Zamora’s symbol in the UFO literature. I am occasionally contacted and asked which symbol is the one seen by Zamora. All I can say is the above sketch was drawn under



Zamora’s direction within two weeks of the sighting, published one month after the sighting (though without the symbol) for a positive paper trail. Zamora never discounted the accuracy of the appearance of the craft or the symbol. I can only assume other versions of Zamora’s symbol came well after the sighting and are likely fabrications.