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Socorro's El Defensor Chieftain newspaper has received requests over the years for a history article on Socorro's "haunted houses." All of the following stories were either researched or portrayed to the author with sincerity. There are no fabrications. Are they true? That is for the reader to decide. The decision was made to use no names of those who shared their experiences.

### **Val Verde Steakhouse**

After sitting idle for many years, the restaurant in the Val Verde Hotel was completely renovated by Desi and Fita Apodaca. Opening in 1984, the new Val Verde Steakhouse quickly became a favorite fine dining establishment in Socorro? in keeping with the eloquent flavor of the famous old hotel and restaurant.

One autumn evening, a few months after their opening debut, the restaurant closed as usual at 9 p.m. Like any restaurant, the crew still had an hour or more of work to clean the kitchen, wash the pots and pans, and ready the restaurant for the next day's service. Like any other evening, the nightly cleanup routine had begun. Except, this evening would be different.

Earlier that evening a delivery truck stacked boxes of food and supplies at the rear kitchen door. Following the kitchen cleanup, these boxes had to be carried down to the basement for storage. The chef and his prep cook carried an arm load of boxes down to the basement, then back up to the kitchen for another load.

As the chef made his last trip, he lost track of where his prep cook was. Before turning off the lights, he looked down the narrow staircase to see if he was still in the basement. Instead, he saw "an older man, dressed in a suit and half-shaven" standing at the bottom of the stairs. Thinking his helper was playing a joke on him, he shouted, "What are you doing?" Just finishing up over here," he heard his prep cook reply from the kitchen.

Noticing his chef suddenly frozen in fear, the prep cook joined him at the stairs to see what his chef was looking at. He, too, saw the elderly half-shaved gentlemen at the foot of the stairs looking up at them. The two men exchanged glances.



Photo by Paul Harden

**The Val Verde Hotel is one of Socorro's haunted buildings. The former steakhouse and restaurant was located at the end of this breeze way on the right hand side. Several ghost hunting organizations have investigated the sightings in the old hotel.**

When they looked back into the basement, the older man was gone. Without turning off the lights, the two shaken men ran out of the kitchen and tried to explain what they had seen to the rest of the crew.

Their coworkers cautiously entered the kitchen and looked down the basement stairs. There was nothing to see; the stairway lights had somehow turned off, displaying only a pitch dark basement.

This was not the last time the half shaved man was seen. Over the years, one worker or another would see the elderly gentleman whose face was shaved on one side and bearded on the other. Sometimes he was seen in the basement, other times in the dining room after hours, or entering the men's room.

While the owners of the restaurant never saw the man, they did see the flushed faces of their workers after a haunting encounter. Some believe he may be the original owner of the Val Verde Hotel, or perhaps someone who had died suddenly in the building years before.

In 1990, the Val Verde Steakhouse was sold. The new owners, Lewis and Mary Gillard, operated the steakhouse for the next 13 years. It did not take long before the new owners began to hear stories from their workers of strange sightings, hearing footsteps in the vacant halls, or water pitchers and china wear flying off the banquet tables. Many of these incidences seemed confined to the rear, private banquet room and hallway. Even customers would occasionally report hearing someone in the lavatory rooms when nobody was there or other strange sounds. Others simply reported they felt "they were being watched."

## Val Verde Hotel

It was not just the restaurant area that seems to be haunted. Sightings, strange noises and moving furniture had been noticed for years in the lobby area? later converted into a bar and lounge.

There have been several reports of lounge guests seeing the figure of a woman in a "flowing



Photo by Paul Harden  
**Ghostly figures have been seen over the years in the Val Verde Hotel on the stairway and in the lobby.**

dress" walking down the stairs from the second story, only to "fade away" before reaching the lobby floor. Others reported hearing talking, sometimes muffled screams, or banging from the vacant basement below them. One former regular patron reported that going to the men's room was "just plain creepy" from the feeling of some unseen entity being there.

At least two former bar tenders reported seeing ghostly figures sitting at tables when they were cleaning up after closing for the night. After placing the chairs on the tables for mopping the floor, one or two chairs would suddenly be found back on the floor. They also reported drink glasses would move around on their own along the bar counter, or hearing doors slam after the bar was emptied for the night. A woman in a blue dress and a man wearing a white shirt would also make an infrequent appearance in the bar.

Of course, not every patron or employee of the Val Verde Hotel experienced seeing or hearing anything strange.

According to the Southwest Ghost Hunters Association, who has investigated the sightings in the Val Verde on several occasions, it is believed at least ten people have died in the old hotel: there are five known suicides and five men that were burned to death in the boiler room.

It is believed the boiler explosion and fire occurred in the 1920s. The news story on this deadly accident has yet to be located in the Socorro Chieftain archives. (If you know the approximate date of this boiler explosion, please contact the author). The boiler room does show clear signs of a past fire with scorched timbers and old repair work to the floor joists and supports.



Photo by Paul Harden  
**The hotel lobby is located behind the arches, with the boiler room underneath in the basement.**

Oddly, the boiler room, where the five men died, is located directly underneath the lobby and bar area. Are the Val Verde sightings the spirits of those men who tragically died in the boiler explosion? Are the muffled screams and banging on the floor these men still signaling for help? Is the half-shaved elderly man actually revealing his wounds? Had one-half of his face and beard been burned off?

Several ghost hunting organizations have investigated the Val Verde Hotel with various types of equipment and gadgets. Strange noises have been recorded, “orbs” and indistinct shapes captured on film, and abnormal magnetometer readings have been noted – but the evidence gathered so far has been classified as “inconclusive.” Still, the Val Verde Hotel has long been considered the most haunted place in Socorro, with plenty of witnesses to these haunting events.

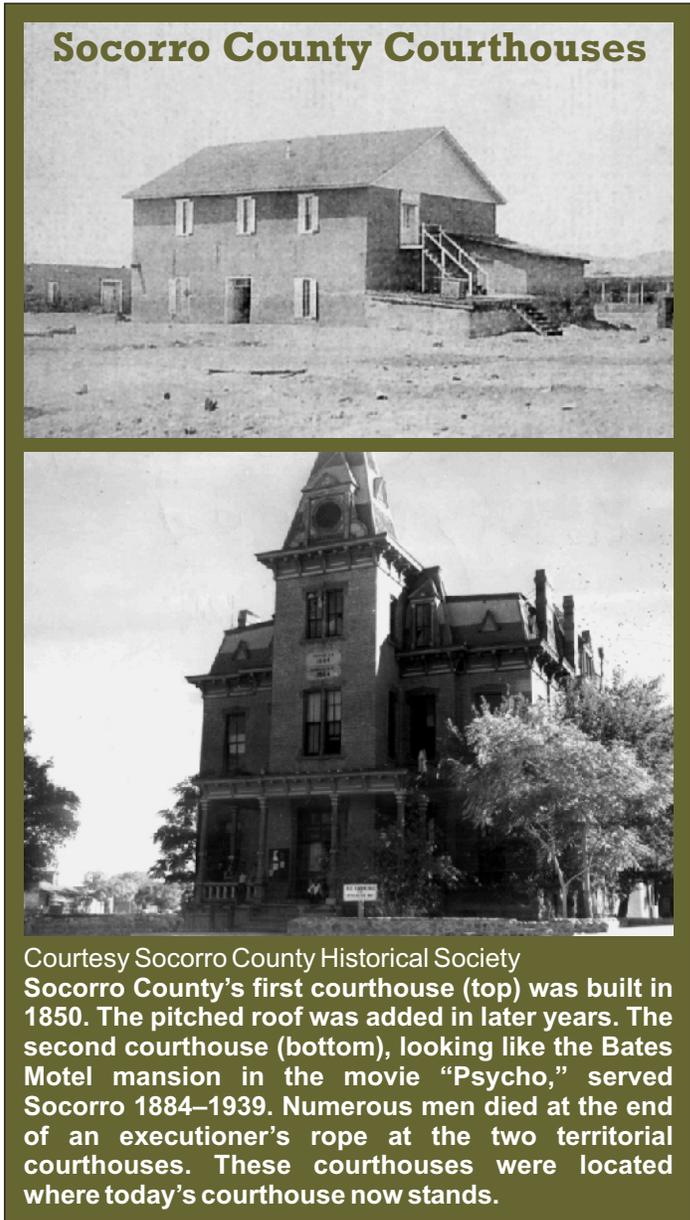
However, in researching this article, it was quickly discovered the Val Verde Hotel does not appear to be Socorro's most haunted building. That distinction goes to the Socorro County Court House.

### Socorro County Court House

Some years ago, several workers in the Clerk's office were working late preparing for an upcoming election. Working in the west room addition, the door suddenly slammed and locked them inside. The lights flickered on and off. They could hear talking and moaning sounds coming from the brick walls. One can only imagine the sudden fright these women must have experienced. Fortunately, another office worker



Photo by Paul Harden  
**The Socorro County Courthouse may be the most haunted building in Socorro – especially at night!**



Courtesy Socorro County Historical Society  
**Socorro County's first courthouse (top) was built in 1850. The pitched roof was added in later years. The second courthouse (bottom), looking like the Bates Motel mansion in the movie "Psycho," served Socorro 1884–1939. Numerous men died at the end of an executioner's rope at the two territorial courthouses. These courthouses were located where today's courthouse now stands.**

heard their screams and opened the safe-like metal door. They all immediately fled the building and refused to ever work alone again in the courthouse at night (a conviction they maintain to this day).

Years later before another election, a different crew in the Clerk's office was working late. They were told when they were done for the night, to call the jail and the deputy sheriff on duty would escort the workers to their cars. As they were preparing to leave for the night, they heard footsteps echoing towards them down the pitch dark hallway from the jail. They assumed it was one of the deputies. But then – the footsteps stopped. There was nobody there.

The frightened workers dashed for the front doors of the courthouse. When they reached the entrance, the front doors opened for them,

presumably by the deputy sheriff. As they flew out of the building, the doors closed behind them – but again, there was nobody there and no sheriff. “I was in my car, speeding and swerving down California Street, to get away from the court house,” one of the former workers told me. “I thought for sure I was going to get arrested for speeding or DWI.”

There are dozens of stories like these by both past and present courthouse employees.

Before the days of computers, it often took many late hours in the Treasurer’s Office keeping the ledger books up to date. They would use a blender for making enchiladas or burritos for something to eat. One night, they had made enchiladas in the break room. Upon returning to the Treasurer’s office, they heard the blender turn on – then off – then on and off again. Cautiously, they reentered the break room. Nobody was there, but their food, plates and tortillas had been scattered in disarray. This happened on several occasions. There are also reports of ledger books flying out of the shelves to crash on the floor, papers suddenly “blowing off the desks,” and the elevator running between floors for no reason at all (and nobody there).

One of the court clerks was working late on the second floor. She heard the elevator rise to the second floor, the doors opened, and heard two people talking as they walked down the hall. The only problem was, as they walked past her opened office door, nobody was there. Yet, their voices and footsteps continued until they entered the Court Room. Gaining her nerve, she walked to the court room. The doors were locked, the lights were off, yet voices were heard inside the court room.



Photos by Paul Harden

**Reports of books flying off the shelves, the sounds of footsteps, and even sightings of shadowy figures are common in the record storage areas in the basement. Some employees refuse to enter the basement alone.**



Photo by Paul Harden

**The court rooms have been an occasional source of haunting sightings and sounds over the years.**

Reports of the elevator starting by itself, the doors opening, and nobody there, is a common experience in the courthouse at night that has been reported for years.

A worker in the Assessor’s office had to retrieve some records from the basement. As she walked into the records storage room, she heard someone in the next room. She called out to see who it was. There was no answer. She nervously gathered the records she needed, but continued to hear someone else moving books from the shelves only feet away. Walking over to the area, there was nobody there.

On another occasion, a clerk was in the basement when she heard footsteps coming down the stairs and walk into the record room across the hall. The sounds of ledger books being pulled off the shelves and slamming onto the floor followed. Rushing across the hall, assuming someone needed help, she found nobody in the room except

a stack of ledger books lying amiss on the floor.

There are many similar stories in the courthouse basement. Many employees report areas that get very cold, or a sudden blast of cold air, with the feeling someone is behind you. Some employees will not go to the courthouse basement by themselves. Even the custodians, who often begin their work day at 4:30 in the morning, feel very uncomfortable when in the basement.

One weekend, a worker in the District Attorney's office was working on some case files. He heard the east doors to the courthouse open, footsteps coming down the hall and enter the men's room. Once in awhile, people from the plaza would enter the courthouse on weekends to use the rest rooms if the east doors were unlocked. On this occasion, he never heard the person or persons leave. Entering the men's room, no one was there. Checking the courthouse doors, they were all locked. Another phantom set of footsteps down the court house corridors.

If you've ever been in the courthouse, you know how your own footsteps echo throughout the building. When you're in the building by yourself, there is no mistaking footsteps echoing down the halls. How unnerving it must be to hear such footsteps with nobody there.

Another DA's office worker heard footsteps walking down the hall one Saturday afternoon. He saw the faint outline of a man as he walked past his office. Not sure what he saw, he walked out into the hall and watched the "fuzzy shape of a very tall man wearing an old fashioned black suit, kind of like an undertaker" exit through the east doors. Looking through his office windows, he watched



Photo by Paul Harden

**A ghostly figure has been seen sitting on the bench in the east side courtyard. He was described as "looking like an undertaker."**

the indistinct figure enter the small courtyard area on the east side of the courthouse and sit down on the bench. The figure turned around and stared at the worker for a moment, then disappeared. Apparently, others have seen this "undertaker" in the court yard as well.

Early one morning, a custodian was cleaning Court Room 1. Suddenly, the judges chair began to spin and rolled across the floor. He fled the courtroom and summoned his co-worker. Both custodians returned to the courtroom and timidly returned the judges chair to it's proper place behind the bench, all the while feeling "a very strong presence in the room."

Another custodian was spraying weeds along the perimeter of the building when he felt someone grab him by the arm near the outside basement stairs. He wrestled to release his arm from some unseen hand.

## **The County Jail**

Strange occurrences have also been reported in the jail area. One evening, a female detention worker felt someone grab her by the neck. When she turned around to see who was taunting her, nobody was there. Her neck began to burn. Later, her co-workers noticed an unmistakable rope burn around her neck.

On another occasion, the sheriff was spending the night in the jail office, as was the custom at the time, when he was jolted from his sleep by both ankles being grabbed by some unseen force.

Even recently, two detention workers witnessed a computer mysteriously turn on, the unmistakable sound of a mouse clicking, and an internet browser suddenly appearing on the screen. There was no one else in the office. Apparently, some ghosts are now internet saavy.

Unlike the Val Verde Hotel, there are no known murders, suicides or unexpected deaths that have occurred in the courthouse. The exception are a few deaths in the county jail over the years due to overdose or health problems. For those who have crossed paths with these haunting courthouse spirits, it seems a complete mystery.

However, today's courthouse is built on top of two previous courthouses. The first territorial courthouse, a two-story adobe structure, was built around 1850. It was razed for the second Socorro County Courthouse, built in 1884. Both of these previous courthouses had a jail and hanging scaffolds used for executions. The second

courthouse was used until 1939 when today's courthouse was built. There have been no executions at today's Courthouse.

The Clerk's office, Sheriff's office, and Detention Center now lie over the old hanging scaffold areas of these two former courthouses. Could a few men, unjustifiably hung from these scaffolds, be those haunting the Socorro County Courthouse today? And, what's the deal with the undertaker guy?

It should be noted that the numerous courthouse "sightings" over many years have never brought harm to anybody, except perhaps some raw nerves. None-the-less, it must be a frightening experience.

The traditional thinking is haunted places are where some unexpected or tragic death occurred with some lost spirit still lingering around. Other areas in Socorro, where known deaths and killings have occurred, were investigated for this article with some surprising stories.

### **El Torreon**

Across the street from the courthouse to the west are several old Socorro houses. On the corner of Park and McCutcheon Streets is one of Socorro's oldest known homes, El Torreon. The center of the structure was built around 1820. Who knows what those old walls have seen? Today, the house is used for apartments. Past tenants have reported strange phenomenon as hearing dishes rattle in the kitchen, lights unexpectedly turning on or off, and a darkened figure "floating" in front of the television.

On the corner of Park and Church streets is the Joseph Smith house, where Socorro's famous



Courtesy Hattie Hughes

**El Torreon is one of Socorro's oldest houses, built about 1820. The appearance has changed little since this circa. 1910 photo.**

photographer, pharmacist and business man first lived. This sprawling adobe complex is now also used for apartments with similar reports of rattling dishes, footsteps in the night, and even the sounds of horses and wagons passing by as if a century ago.

Before Joseph Smith purchased El Torreon to expand his home and photo studio, the Lone Star Saloon stood just to the west on Church Street. Around midnight on September 20, 1880, two drunk cowboys started shooting their guns into the darkness. One slug unexpectedly struck and killed Jose Trujillo. In the skirmish that followed, his friend, Remijio Escalante, was also killed.

Further down Church Street is the old Methodist Church (now used for aluminum recycling). Just a few months following the Trujillo and Escalante killings, Anthony Conklin, editor of the *Socorro Sun* newspaper, was gunned down at the church on Christmas Eve. The suspected killer, Enofre Baca, was hung shortly after by the Socorro Vigilante's from the nearby "hanging tree."

In short, just around Park and Church Streets, there were enough murders and senseless killings to haunt any neighborhood.

### **Socorro Post Office**

The Socorro Vigilante's took the law into their own hands and hung six people between 1881–1884. However, not all were strung from the hanging tree. At least two were lynched from the head post over the Park Hotel corral. The old hotel was also the scene of several murders and deaths. Are the ghostly spirits of any of these departed souls still lurking around?



Photo by Paul Harden

**El Torreon today. Now nearly 200 years old, who knows how many people might have met a tragic death within its walls to haunt the building today?**

The Socorro Post Office is built over the site of the Park Hotel corral. And indeed, two retired postal workers report a few strange experiences.

On several occasions, when locking up the Post Office at 6 p.m., people talking have been heard in the corridor by the postal boxes, as if accidentally locked in. Entering the corridor, no one was ever seen. Another said now and again he would hear the sound of a lock box being opened and footsteps leaving the building, even though the front door was locked. He was always too afraid to look into the hallway to see who was able to walk through the walls and disappear into the night.

Postal workers arrive before sunrise to begin sorting the mail. On various occasions, footsteps and muffled talking could be heard in the building – followed by the strong smell of kerosene lamps. Even during the day, some former clerks reported the sense of someone standing behind them while helping customers at the counter. The nearby Socorro Fire station, also hugging the old Park Hotel, has similar stories.

However, these spirits must be taking a break as today's Socorro Post Office employees have had no haunting experiences except for a few cranky customers.

## Reservoir Road

A long time resident of Reservoir Road sits in her living room, using the light from the front windows, to sew. Suddenly, a shadow passes by the window, the room gets cold, and she has the feeling someone else is in the room. There never is. At other times, she hears footsteps in the kitchen or in the hallway. She has accepted these intrusions, not necessarily frightened – as she is curious – as to who the spirit might be.

Not far away another homeowner reports similar events. Years ago, he explained, he and his neighbors would hear the sounds of wagons and men as if on a march. His father told him many of the old timers talked of hearing the unseen wagons as well.

Are these the sounds of the spirits of the Confederate dead? In 1862, following the Battle at Valverde, the wounded Confederate soldiers were left in Socorro for medical care in a makeshift hospital. Twenty seven of these Southern soldiers died in Socorro. Before the days of anesthesia to numb the nerves, torn limbs, gaping wounds, and amputations caused agonizing deaths. One officer committed suicide rather than endure the pain.



Photo by Paul Harden

**Some residents along Reservoir Road and Peralta street have reported hearing people marching, or the sounds of horses and wagons at night. Are these the spirits of the Confederate soldiers buried nearby?**

The local priest would not allow the non-Catholic intruders to be buried in the town cemetery. Instead, they were buried “west of town” somewhere near the cemetery. Unfortunately, the location of this Confederate cemetery is not known. The most likely location appears to be between the cemetery and Reservoir Road along Peralta Street.

Certainly the spirits of these suffering men, buried in forgotten graves, must still be calling out. Sometimes, those cries are heard.

## Highway 60 House

A good number of years ago, a Socorro man bought a “fixer-upper” house in west Socorro. The house required considerable repair, which he worked on at nights after work. Shortly before buying the home, a terrible accident on nearby U.S. 60 claimed three lives. It didn't take long working at night to realize something wasn't quite right with the house.

It began one night while replacing the plumbing under the kitchen sink. The front door opened and he heard footsteps leading into the kitchen. He called out to see who it was – there was no answer. Crawling out from under the sink, nobody was found in the house.

Night after night he would hear footsteps and the muffled sounds of talking, usually followed by a loud “thud” from the back bedroom that would sometimes shake the house. Inspection of the bedroom revealed nothing, except a caved-in

section of wall by the attic door when he bought the house.

The man reasoned that lost spirits from the nearby car wreck were haunting his house. He finally approached the priest about the matter who agreed. The priest visited the house and performed a religious ritual to help the spirits of the dead to “let go.” After that, nothing further was experienced.

Some time later, however, the owner of the house was talking to a former sheriff of Socorro County, who just happened to mention he had responded to a suicide in that house years before. The man had crawled into the attic, tied one end of the rope around his neck and the other end to a rafter. He hung himself by jumping through the attic door, snapping his neck instantly. His body slammed against the wall, caving-in the dry wall – the damage to the wall the owner had previously noticed.

Curious about this story, he opened the attic door to look around. He found the hangman's noose and rope still tied to the rafter.

What about the stories of hauntings at the old sanitarium, Fort Craig, or the San Pedro cemetery? For that, you'll have to wait for another Halloween.

Sleep well, and Happy Halloween.



Photo by Paul Harden

**Is Casa de Fletcha a haunted house? Many years ago, children would see a woman in white walking the halls. A “seer” was hired to learn the identity of this spirit, but nothing was found. Nothing has been reported in decades nor has the current owners experienced anything unusual. This unique Socorro home may be scary looking to some – but not haunted.**