

UFOs and Nuclear Folklore

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On March 26, 1880, at Galisteo Junction, near Santa Fe, a railroad engineer and two friends reportedly encountered a hot-air balloon shaped like a fish and occupied by people speaking a foreign language who dropped fine, silk-like paper inscribed with Japanese characters. This early UFO account reflects local anxiety over the technological and social changes introduced by the railroads. Similarly, modern UFO accounts from the 1940s to the present reflect a suspicion of government research activity and of everything related to nuclear technology. Contemporary tales of cattle mutilations and alien abductions further illustrate how some New Mexicans feel threatened by the scientific research conducted almost literally in their own backyards.

The Nuclear Age began in New Mexico, where established Native societies maintain spiritual and ritual-oriented cultures. This collision between older and super-modern worlds gives rise to post war and contemporary folklore and popular culture. In local and national lore and especially in Hollywood films, Native American shepherders or anachronistic cowpokes discover alien spacecraft hovering in the clear night skies of the desert Southwest or crash-landed in the draws and arroyos somewhere near White Sands Missile Range. Sometimes nuclear lore appropriates Native American images: in the early science fiction films, mutant ant or spider-like creatures emerged from the desert, just as

people once arose from underworlds through *sipapu*, the sacred place of emergence often pictured in Navajo sandpaintings.

Tales and legends about space travel abound. Some residents of Roswell, home of many famous UFO encounters, tell of four-foot-tall aliens captured in the late 1940s and secretly transported to Los Alamos where they were kept alive and studied for several years. Other New Mexicans maintain that there are nine underground levels below Los Alamos, housing various military and political “cabinets” headed by such powerful but elusive figures as Henry Kissinger.

Local narratives indicate suspicions of high-tech research. Ranchers in northern New Mexico repeatedly report seeing military helicopters hovering over their rangeland pastures just before they discover their cattle have been strangely mutilated and drained of all their blood. Some tell of seeing laser weapons employed in these midnight raids.

Nuclear folklore sometimes displays an ironic humor. Some say Trinity Test Site got its name when Col. Lex Stevens noted that Jumbo, the new atom bomb, sat at Pope’s Railway Siding, and the “Pope has special access to the Trinity.” But others say the name derives from three atom bombs — an “unholy trinity” — that were under construction at the time.

This modern lore grows out of the stark juxtaposition of some of the oldest and most traditional forms of American life with some of the newest and least familiar. That common themes are used to understand this encounter indicates the vitality of local cultures, even as they are threatened.

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