

FIRST DRAFT

Haunting questions arise in tales of outdoor spooks

Well, this is frightening. I usually refrain from writing about haunted things, but I feel compelled to do so this year.

Full disclosure: I am a skeptic when it comes to the supernatural. From Harry Houdini to James Randi to the Skeptical Inquirer website, I know smart people have been debunking stories of the supernatural for years.



BOB SILBERNAGEL



BOB SILBERNAGEL/Special to the Sentinel

A brush fence like this one was placed across this narrow neck at Dead Horse Point to keep horses corralled on the waterless point.

on unearthly equines.

Dead Horse Point sits 2,000 feet above the spectacular horseshoe bends of the Colorado River. It is a large plateau, but a very narrow neck of land made it possible for cowboys rounding up wild horses to drive them to the point's southern end, then build brush fences to hold them where there is grass but no water.

In one instance, cowboys allegedly drove the horses onto the point, captured a few to sell, and left an unknown number behind the brush fence.

Whether they forgot the animals or simply didn't care, the humans left the horses to die of thirst in a spot where they could see and probably smell the Colorado River far below.

If there are animal spirits, it's hardly surprising they would haunt such a place. But when my son and I camped there, no supernatural horses haunted our sleep.

Next, let's take a look at skinwalkers, those supposedly supernatural beings that can shift from human to animal forms by wearing the skins of the animals they wish to emulate.

Author and educator Darren Edwards, in a just-released book called "Supernatural Lore of Southern Utah," notes that the skinwalker tradition belongs to the Navajos.

However, non-Indians have appropriated the idea and turned it into their own versions of Hollywood horror stories.

"For non-Natives, skinwalkers are otherworldly beings, supernatural monsters," he wrote. "For Natives, skinwalkers are a human threat ... Skinwalker lore, for a Navajo, seems to be more about a darkness within one's community, with people they know, than with a strange mythical monster."

Edwards noted that non-Natives have reported skinwalker encounters near Bluff and Blanding and as far north as central Wyoming. He recalled hearing such a story around a campfire in Utah as a youngster.

Edwards describes himself as a skeptic, but he said the college class he teaches, "Academic Approaches to the Supernatural," is about understanding the cultural and personal reasons behind stories of the supernatural, not attempting to prove or debunk them.

North of the region Edwards writes about, near Ballard, Utah, is the Skinwalker Ranch. Since 1996, it has been the sub-



UTAH STATE PARKS

The legend of Dead Horse Point, as described in a free brochure from Dead Horse Point State Park. Some people believe the park is haunted by the horses that died there.



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Rafters near the entrance of Horsethief Canyon, just west of the Loma Boat Launch, earlier this month. Some websites claim Horsethief Canyon is haunted.

ject of multiple news and magazine articles, podcasts, documentary films and one feature film, which detail supposedly supernatural activity at the ranch.

Initially, that activity was related to skinwalker stories. More recently, the ranch seems to be the focus of UFO encounters. But people who owned the ranch before 1996 said they never had any such encounters — with space aliens or shape shifters. And noted skeptics such as James Randi and author Robert Sheaffer have debunked many myths surrounding the ranch.

Speaking of UFOs, Great Sand Dunes National Park, on the edge of the San Luis Valley in south-central Colorado, has reported more than 70 supposed sightings of unidentified flying objects or unexplained lights in the past two decades.

Some experts believe the clarity of the night skies in the Sand Dunes, and the San Luis Valley at large, makes the visibility of unusual lights more likely than in other locales, hence the many claimed UFO sightings.

Others say the largest collection of sand dunes in North America offers an inviting location for visiting alien spaceships.

Of course, Sand Dunes isn't the only location in Colorado where UFO

sightings have been reported. In the 1960s and 1970s, there were supposed sightings above the Book Cliffs north of Grand Junction, near Palisade, Glenwood Springs and New Castle, and multiple encounters in the Dry Creek Basin near Naturita.

A small group of people who camped in Colorado National Monument in 1975, even awaited alien spaceships that they believed would carry them to a better life. After a few weeks they left, disappointingly still earthbound. I've highlighted just a few outdoor areas in this region where the supernatural supposedly lurks. I'll let readers decide whether terror or skepticism is warranted.

Sources: "Echoes of a Dream," by Earlylyne Barcus and Irma Harrison; "Remembering Grand Junction History: The Daily Sentinel Columns of Kathy Jordan" by Kathy Jordan; "Dead Horse Point State Park brochures and plaques;" "Supernatural Lore of Southern Utah," by Darren M. Edwards; "Skinwalker Ranch," Wikipedia; Various websites; Supernatural sources known only to me.

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