

## Urban Legends of the San Gorgonio Pass

Urban legends are a form of contemporary folklore, with the stories often having elements of horror, humor, or mystery tinged with an element of fear. Familiar urban legends speak of giant alligators living in the sewers of cities or tell stories of vanishing ghost hitchhikers along the highway. Urban legends are rarely traceable to a single source but instead are often embellished through the years as they are repeated from individual to individual. Most urban legends are not considered to be factual although there is often a thread of truth within the origin of the legend. Some urban legends are used as morality tales to keep children from disobeying a parent, such as the Mexican urban legend of La Llorona, “The Crying Woman.” No child wants to be caught outside after dark and risk an encounter with La Llorona.

The San Gorgonio Pass has its share of urban legends unique to this area. It’s important to keep a humorous perspective when reading about these local urban legends. They are presented for entertainment purposes only. Many of the legends involve various “hauntings” that will be explored in more depth in an article later this Fall. Most of those who contributed stories for this article preferred to remain anonymous.

Some of the research on local urban legends has been gathered through the years as patrons of the Banning Public Library have visited the library and told their stories. The library staff has often been asked questions regarding the veracity of these stories. Current research has been supplied by responses to our last question in the Record Gazette. Following are some of the urban legends of the San Gorgonio Pass:

It has been reported that a man-like creature roams the foothills between Cherry Valley and the Morongo Reservation. One woman, who has had numerous encounters with this beast, has described it in terms commonly used for a Bigfoot or Sasquatch, although she characterized it as having more human features. Several sightings occurred along Noble Creek which runs north and south, bordering Bogart County Park.

Three sisters who were raised in the Noble Creek area near the present day Cherry Valley Fire Station #22, have all had experiences with this creature. They describe it as having reddish hair, some of it very long, and a face that has a man’s characteristics. The size of the monster is large but not more so than a large man. In the 1960s, the creature chased one of the sisters down the wash until it was confronted by an uncle of the terrified girl who shot the beast in the stomach. They described the sound it made as being the type of groan a man would make in pain as it stumbled back up the wash. It was such a human-like reaction the uncle was concerned he had indeed shot a man. Subsequent checks with the Beaumont Police Department and local hospital turned up no evidence of anything reported.

The sisters and their family had numerous encounters with this creature during the 1950s, 60s and 70s. They at one time kept a clump of long red hair that had been snagged on a barbed wire fence around their property in east Banning, again along the foothills. This occurred after the creature had awakened the family in the middle of the night trying to gain access to some of the animals that were kept in a pen behind their house. It was chased off and “flew” over the fence,

leaving the hair remnant behind. They described its leaping ability and overall physical strength as being “supernatural.”

Stories of the creature have continued into the year 2008. A security guard at the Cabazon Outlet Mall had an encounter while picnicking with his wife along a pond in a park campground. It was getting dark and they were the only ones left in the park. As they were preparing to leave he heard some rustling in the bushes near the picnic table they were using. He shined a powerful flashlight into the brush and saw two shining eyes staring at him. A large upright animal moving quickly ran away from them into the hills. The security guard, who prides himself on his bravery and ability to handle any situation, said he had never been so frightened in his life. Whatever it was that he saw chilled him to the bone.

An often repeated local urban legend, possibly connected to this Bigfoot-type creature, is that a severed human hand was found in the Bogart Park area a few years ago. The case was never solved and no one came forth to claim the hand.

Several stories have been told about local areas reported to be haunted. The San Gorgonio Memorial Park Cemetery has an alleged ghost in one section of the cemetery to be investigated more in the future. Other alleged hauntings include a building on the corner of Highland Springs and Ramsey. The story is told that the location used to be a children’s orphanage that burned to the ground about 100 years ago. Many people have reported seeing a woman and sometimes a child in burned clothing walking around the site late at night accompanied with a strong smell of smoke. Extensive research has not substantiated the existence of an orphanage at that location.

The Beaumont Public Library may have a ghost patron. A library worker told me his story about a frightening experience late one night in the older section of the library. As he was vacuuming he heard loud knocking coming from an inside door of a small office under the stairs. The door had been locked for a very long time and he had no key for it. It stopped for awhile and he continued working until the knocking started again. Fearing someone had been trapped inside the locked room he called out but got no response. He decided to call the police and three Beaumont Police Officers showed up to investigate the locked room. They located an ex-employee who had a key for the lock and after she brought the key to them they slowly opened the door and turned on a light to reveal an empty room. The spirit may have been let out because our storyteller often hears footsteps and other noises coming from the second floor of the library when he works there late at night.

There used to be a section of town in Banning known as Sapo, Spanish for “frog.” Sapo was a Mexican-American community near downtown Banning, south of Livingston. Most of the community was demolished by the construction of the I-10 freeway in 1961. Sapo was the site of another local urban legend about the “Floating Lady.” Many long time residents of Sapo have told stories of a woman who floated just off the ground, gliding up and down the streets and alleys of Sapo.

Cabazon has been the location for many local urban legends. There have been reports of UFOs in the skies above Cabazon and one unsubstantiated report of a meteorite crashing to the ground near the wash at the bottom of the foothills. Another local resident reports seeing bursts of

flames resembling those from a gas source dotting the foothills above Cabazon. The bursts are short ones and seem to come from several areas among the rocks.

One of the most interesting urban legends of Cabazon is the one of the circus train that allegedly derailed in Cabazon in the 1950s or 60s. Several members of the circus chose to remain behind after the train and track were repaired. They settled in Cabazon and kept many of the circus animals. I spoke with a retired Post Office worker who remembers a troupe of these circus workers who would walk to the Cabazon Post Office with several of the animals on leashes. She particularly remembered a bear on a leash walking along with the troupe. They were described as “little people” and at the time despairingly called “Circus Midgets.” They reportedly built a small castle out of the abundant rock in the area. After numerous attempts I finally found the rock castle on property located between Esperanza and Dolores Avenues, one day after it had been destroyed by fire. It was in the middle of a scorched grove of Eucalyptus trees and all that remained was the chimney, the doorway and a few feet of the rock wall. The doorway was very low and I had to duck to get under it. Inside the still smoldering structure were remnants of chairs and tables built to the size of children’s furniture. The caretaker of the property confirmed that it had been a rock castle built by “little people.” Does anyone remember these Cabazon residents or know what became of them?

This article wouldn’t be complete without the legend of a buried treasure. On October 29, 1862, a stagecoach transporting twelve hundred dollars locked in an express box, stopped at the Isaac W. Smith Ranch (now Highland Springs Resort). As the teams were being changed out the man in charge, Henry Wilkinson, discovered the express box was missing. Wilkinson suspected one of the ranch hands named Gordon was the most likely thief and tried to force a confession out of him by hanging him by the neck, just off the ground. The tactic backfired when Gordon wouldn’t confess and after being cut down he drew a knife and killed Wilkinson and another ranch hand. He was later found innocent of the robbery and killings but the robbery was never solved and the express box was never found. It was thought to have been buried close by. Since the 1860s, the location of the Smith Ranch and subsequent Highland Springs Resort has been developed to include many structures. Was the express box ever unearthed during any of this construction?

We will keep adding to our library file of urban legends of the San Gorgonio Pass. Thanks to all anonymous contributors to this article. We welcome any additional information our readers may want to share. (Banning Record Gazette, July 8, 2011, by Bill Bell)

**Sketch Caption for article:**

“Artist rendition of Bigfoot-type creature in Cherry Valley.”