



Originally published in Socorro's El Defensor Chieftain newspaper, Saturday, December 1, 2007.

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For El Defensor Chieftain

New Mexico's culture is rich with legends, most from old Spanish or Mexican roots. The most famous legend of the Southwest is that of La Llorona, which appears to be dominantly of southern New Mexico origin.

Encounter with La Llorona

A Socorro man and wife remember the summer of 1948 very well. It was July and the weather had become extremely hot. To escape the heat, they decided to camp a few days under the shade of the bosque along the Rio Grande with their neighbors. Two families, consisting of four adults and four children, camped along the river in a thick stand of cottonwood trees near Luis Lopez.

On the first day, they fished, swam the river, and played a variety of games. By sundown, they had a large camp fire burning, cooking hot dogs and a couple of catfish. It was a fun time for them all. Later in the evening, the four children disappeared into the darkness of the bosque, playing hide and seek amidst the trees, with a stern warning from the parents to not go near the river.

As the adults sat around the campfire, they suddenly noticed it was deathly quiet. The giggles and screams of their playful children went silent. The two mothers immediately got up and began calling their children's names into the darkness. There was no answer. Again they yelled their names, and again there was no answer. The mothers began to panic, fearing the children had slipped into the river.

Just then, they heard the rustling of brush as the older boy ran towards the light of the campfire, yelling, "Momma, momma." Though out of breath, he explained to his parents there was a strange woman talking to them down by the river.

"What is she saying?," one of the mothers asked.

The young lad replied, "She keeps asking *¿Has visto a mis hijos?*" (Have you seen my children?). "Oh my God – La Llorona," the two mothers screamed. The parents ran towards the river to rescue their children.

Running through the trees to the bank of the Rio Grande, they

could see the silhouettes of the three other children. Only a few feet away stood a tall, thin woman wearing a long white gown that seemed to glow in the moonlight.

The children stood frozen as the woman repeatedly asked, "*¿Donde estan mis hijos?*" (Where are my children?).

The parents began to yell, "Jose, Maria, Alicia – quickly – come here." The children obeyed and ran towards their parents. The woman in the river began a bone chilling scream, yelling, "*No, no abandóneme. Por favor, vuelto a mí, mis hijos*" (No, don't leave. Please, come back to me, my children).

The parents, and the children, were so frightened from the experience, they immediately abandoned their camp and sped back to their homes in Socorro.

These parents, and two of the children, still live in Socorro today, though requested not to be identified. And for good reason. They had a close encounter with La Llorona.

This is the New Mexico legend of La Llorona, pronounced "lah yoh ROH nah," a ghostly spirit woman who has been seen and heard roaming the Rio Grande, searching for her children, for centuries. To this day, the Socorro families that met her face-to-face that summer night in 1948, still consider themselves fortunate to have escaped with their lives.



Photo by Paul Harden

One Socorro family had an encounter with La Llorona in the thick bosque south of Socorro.

The Legend

La Llorona is New Mexico's most famous legend, and the state's most famous ghost. It is centered along the Rio Grande south to Juarez, Mexico. There is scarcely a child in New Mexico that has not been told the story of La Llorona as a youngster.

Though there are many variations, the legend goes something like this:

In the early 1700s, there was a young woman named Maria living in Juarez, Mexico. As Maria blossomed into a young woman, her striking beauty attracted the charms of many local men. Coming from a poor family, her mother encouraged her to marry one of these dashing young men for a good life. However, Maria refused, stating her beauty would one day attract the charms of a very rich man.

Before long, the handsome young man of her dreams rode into town. He was the son of a well known wealthy ranchero west of Juarez. He wore nice clothes and had a handsome, well groomed horse with a fancy saddle – all the signs of a man of wealth.

Maria would follow him around, trying to catch his eye, but he seemed to only notice the young women who were fairly “well to do.” At night, he would charm the local ladies with his guitar and golden voice, breaking Maria's heart.

One day, the young ranchero came into the tienda where Maria was shopping. She blushed from embarrassment, as she was wearing an old dirty, tattered dress. However, the blushing beauty suddenly caught the eye of the young ranchero. She was the most beautiful woman he had ever seen.

After a short courtship, the ranchero paid her father a large dowry and they were soon married, in spite of the objections of the rancheros father. After all, it was frowned upon for a wealthy man to marry a woman from a lower class.

After their marriage, they moved to Mesilla, where it is said he worked his own ranch and worked as a merchant along El Camino Real. Other say he moved to Mesilla to avoid the scorn of his father for marrying a woman from such a poor family. Regardless, over the following years, Maria bore him three children.

As the years went by, Maria and her wealthy husband grew apart. He was often gone for months at a time on the ranch, or shipping goods along the Camino Real. He developed little interest in Maria or the children. Maria suspected he was frequenting the company of other women during his travels.

One day Maria was walking along the street with her three children when her husband's buggy approached. Sitting close was another woman – a beautiful young woman. He passed her and the children, pretending not to notice them. Maria's heart was wrenched in two.

Her anger exploded into a jealous rage. If only she didn't have the children, she thought, then her husband would love her again. In her rage, she dragged her three children to the Rio Grande and held their heads under the water until they were dead. Maria had committed the ultimate sin – deliberately killing her own children.

Returning home later that night, she explained to her husband what she had done to please him. He was horrified and ordered her out of his life. It is said Maria roamed the streets of Mesilla for many nights, calling and crying for her children, earning her the name La Llorona – the wailing woman.

Realizing she had lost everything in life, she went down to the river and cried for her children one last time. When there was no answer, she drove a dagger deep into her chest, falling dead into the Rio Grande.

The people of Mesilla, finding her body, buried her in the town cemetery. It is said, even today, La Llorona can be seen roaming the cemetery and the river, crying for her children, giving the Mesilla cemetery the reputation for being haunted.



Photos courtesy El Camino Real International Heritage Center

Actress and storyteller Rosalia De Aragon portrays La Llorona as a beautiful young woman (left) and her appearance today (right) after centuries of searching the Rio Grande for her children.

Other Versions of La Llorona

Another popular version has the ranchero leaving Maria for a younger woman. In time, Maria killed her children when she could no longer support them, supposedly as a misdirected act of mercy. Other versions have Maria getting pregnant by a wealthy ranchero, who refused to marry her, and killed the child when born to hide the sin. And yet other versions, more common in northern New Mexico, tell of the husband killing the children.

In Santa Fe, Maria, of course, is from Santa Fe and roams the Santa Fe River. Even in 1700, Santa Fe thought the state revolved around them!

Was La Llorona deserted by her husband? Wronged by a lover? Or, the victim of a cheating husband? Regardless, most versions of the legend have La Llorona killing her children in the river, then herself.

¿Dónde están sus niños?

It is said when Maria appeared before God, He asked her, “¿Dónde están sus niños?” (Where are your children?).

Maria replied, “No sé” (I don't know).

God then disfigured her to punish her selfish pride, then damned her to prowl the rivers forever in search of her children. Horrid to look at, she roams the deserts, particularly along the Rio Grande, looking for her dead children to this day. It is said if she encounters children, she drags them into the river and drowns them, hoping to present them to God as her own.

Over the centuries, many claim to have seen, or heard, La Llorona. Many describe her as being a beautiful, alluring woman dressed in a white dress with long, black hair. Others say she is dressed in black. Only up close do people see her old, contorted face, and realize who she really is. Her spirit walks the rivers at night, often during a full moon, calling for her children, or luring the children of others into the river.

Some say she carries with her an evil aura. Anyone who survives an encounter with La Llorona will soon be followed by tragedy. Others believe she is a bruja – a witch – casting spells of death or misfortune on those who clash with her. Her eerie spine-chilling cry is said to be an omen of death. Many believe La Llorona is the cause of so many children drowning in the ditches and rivers of New Mexico. Others claim it is contact with La Llorona that causes the occasional mother to kill her own children.

Interviewing many Socorroans, there are few that did not know one version or another of La Llorona. The legend was taught to them at a young age. Some remember the story scared them to death every time the wind blew, or they heard mysterious sounds in the night. A few shuttered when La Llorona was mentioned, often followed by a personal experience with the wailing woman of the river.

One might question, “then why write a history article on a story



Courtesy of Cine Mexicano
This 1960 “La Llorona” remains a popular horror film in Mexico. The plot bears little resemblance to the actual legend of La Llorona.

that everyone knows?” Well, because not everyone in Socorro had the good fortune of having a Spanish speaking grandmother to forewarn you of the evils of the river. If you've ever caught an image of something in the corner of your eye, or heard an unexplained scream in the night – now you know. It was La Llorona. She is the most enduring legend of New Mexico in both story and song.

One old Spanish song of La Llorona tells the story like this:

*Don't go down to the river, child,
Don't go there alone;
For the sobbing woman, wet and wild,
Might claim you for her own.*

*She weeps when the sun is murky red;
She wails when the moon is old;
She cries for her babies, still and dead,
Who drowned in the water cold.*

*She seeks her children day and night,
Wandering, lost, and cold;
She weeps and moans in dark and light,
A tortured, restless soul.*

*Don't go down to the river, child,
Don't go there alone;
For the sobbing woman, wet and wild,
Might claim you for her own.*

Modern Day La Llorona

There have been recent crimes of mothers killing their children that have been compared to a modern day La Llorona. The similarities are striking. Here are a few of them.

Susan Smith

On October 25, 1994, Susan Smith of Union, South Carolina, reported to police she had been carjacked by an African-American man who drove away with her two children still in the car. A nationwide search began for the missing 1990 Mazda Protege and the two small children. Smith appeared on network television making tearful pleas for the safe return of her children. The heavily publicized kidnapping story captured the nation.

Nine days later, Smith confessed to killing her children. She told police where she had rolled her car into a nearby lake with her two children inside. Police found the automobile where Smith said it would be, and recovered the Mazda Protege from the lake. Inside they found the drowned, lifeless bodies of three year old Michael and his 14 month old brother, Alexander.

During the trial, Smith explained her husband had recently divorced her. She had killed her children to dispose of them so she might have a relationship with a wealthy, local man who had no desire for a ready-made family. Without her children, she thought, she would be able to capture the charms of her new suitor.

This reasoning for killing her two children was widely met with contempt and disgust by mothers and fathers across the country. She was compared to La Llorona in a Time magazine article.



Courtesy of Cine Mexicano

A ghostly spirit roaming the Rio Grande searching for her children is the legend of La Llorona. The legend has spread throughout the Southwest and California.

Susan Smith was sentenced to life in prison and not eligible for parole until 2024.

Andrea Yates

In 1993, Andrea Kennedy married the love of her life, Russell Yates. Due to their relationship with an extreme fundamentalist evangelist, they believed they should have as many children as possible. After four children, Andrea expressed she was exhausted caring for the children and felt four children was enough. However, after pressure from her husband and their minister, Andrea gave birth to another child in 2000.

Andrea went into a deep depression after the birth of her fifth child. Continued pressure from her husband and minister led her to believe she and her children were evil, unrighteous, and were doomed to burn in hell.

On June 20, 2001, Andrea Yates filled the bathtub in their home and proceeded to drown her five children. She calmly called her husband at work and told him, "You need to come home ... I've done it." Andrea then called 911 and requested a policeman and ambulance.

Upon arrival at the Yates home, the police found four dead children laying on a bed covered with a sheet. The fifth child was still face down in the bath tub. Drowned by their mother were seven month old Mary, two year old Luke, three year old Paul, five year old John, and seven year old Noah.

At the trial, Andrea confessed she had committed the "seventh deadliest sin" – filicide, or infanticide – the deliberate act of a parent killing their offspring. She did so to regain the love of her husband. Diagnosed with post mortem depression, she was

sentenced to 40 years in a Texas state criminal mental institution rather than prison. In 2004, two years after being sentenced, her husband, Russell, divorced her. She remains incarcerated in Texas.

Christina Riggs

Christina Riggs was a divorced single mother of two working as a nurse in Sherwood, Arkansas. After her second husband divorced her, she became depressed, morbidly obese, and frequented Karaoke bars looking for companionship.

On the evening of November 4, 1997, Riggs gave her two children Elavil, an anti-depressant drug that induces drowsiness, then put them to bed. Once asleep, she injected her son, 5 year old Justin, with potassium chloride. This is the heart stopping drug used to execute death row inmates. Justin awoke and cried out in terror as the burning pain from the lethal drug flowed through his veins. Riggs grabbed a pillow and finished the job by smothering her son to death.

She then smothered her other son, two year old Shelby, and placed the two dead children on the bed and covered them with a blanket. Riggs then swallowed 28 tablets of Elavil and injected herself with a lethal dose of potassium chloride.

The next morning, their bodies were found by police, along with a suicide note that read in part, "I hope one day you will forgive me for taking my life and the life of my children. I couldn't bear to leave my children behind ... and live knowing their mother killed herself."

Medical personnel at the scene noticed the mother still had a weak heartbeat and was rushed to the hospital. Miraculously, she survived. Her two children, however, were pronounced dead by the coroner.

Riggs stood trial for the infanticide death of her children. The jury deliberated for less than hour before returning their guilty verdict. She requested the death sentence so she could be with her children. Her wish was granted.

Christina Riggs was executed by a lethal injection of potassium chloride on May 2, 2000. This story earned national attention at the time, not only for cruelly killing her two children, but for the



Photo courtesy of Cinefania Mexico

Virginia Zuri plays La Llorona is a 1933 Mexican film, released in the United States as "The Crying Woman."

objections of numerous rights groups protesting the execution of a woman (even though she requested it). Arkansas governor, Mike Huckabee, refused to intervene. Riggs became the first woman put to death in Arkansas in 150 years.

Some have claimed Riggs spirit is sometimes seen and heard roaming the halls of the Cummins State Penitentiary in Arkansas calling for her children, an eerie likeness to La Llorona, inspite of the fact this famous legend is not well known outside of the Southwest and California.

Bernadette Flores

On October 2, 2002, Bureau of Land Management employees found an abandoned car in the Rio Grande gorge near the town of Pilar, south of Taos. Nearby they discovered the body of a woman face down in the river – apparently a self-inflicted drowning.

State Police identified the woman as 32 year old Bernadette Flores. When they notified the mother of Bernadette's apparent suicide, she inquired where her two grandchildren were. Flores had recently been divorced and was despondent over the inability to care for her children. Checking with other family members and friends, Flores' two children could not be located.

State Police returned to the scene with a search and rescue team. Farther down river, they discovered the bodies of two young children on the river bank. Family members identified the bodies as that of Flores' 10 month old son Martin, and four year old daughter Kiana.

State Police Lt. Rob Shilling told the news media, "There's no indication that anyone other than the mother and the children were involved in this incident." The Office of the Medical Investigator agreed. It surmised Bernadette Flores drowned her two children in the Rio Grande. Drugs in her system indicated she was highly sedated, allowing her to drown herself in the river. Family members, knowing of Flores' distraught state, agreed with the findings. Flores, and her two children, were buried on the Jicarilla Indian Reservation at Dulce.

The old Hispanic community of Pilar sits in a fertile valley along the Rio Grande on the road between Espanola and Taos. They knew well La Llorona had struck again.

Cries in the night

Along the Rio Grande, particularly from Belen to Juarez, many people over the years have reported not seeing La Llorona as much as hearing her. Her banshee screams are often heard in the bosque. Fishermen, hunters, and those simply exploring the bosque, have been startled at night with the screams from the lady of the river.

About twenty years ago, several Socorro men were having a party in the bosque south of the Escondida Lake bridge. It was a pleasant warm night, perfectly calm, with a clear sky full of stars. About midnight, a brisk wind began to blow through the trees, making a host of eerie sounds. Suddenly, a scream was heard coming from the river. Then another. A few seconds later, the screams were heard coming from behind them. Over several minutes, they followed the screams as it moved all around them, but never seeing a thing. As quickly as the wind, and the screaming of La Llorona began, it stopped. The men were certain – La Llorona was only feet away, hiding in the darkness behind the trees.

The man who related this story to me said he has never returned to that section of the river.

It is said the meaning of the legend of La Llorona is to keep children away from the river at night. Others say it is a lesson to young women not marry out of your class. Perhaps the real lesson of La Llorona is for adults – that mothers and fathers have the profound responsibility to love and protect their children. Those who betray this responsibility will suffer the consequences for eternity.

Still, I'd play it safe and stay away from the Rio Grande at night!

Some of the references used in this article: New Mexico Legends, Legends of America; Albuquerque Journal; The Taos News; El Camino Real International Heritage Center, and interviews with local people who had a brush with La Llorona.

Mug shots of Modern Day La Lloronas



Courtesy State of South Carolina
Susan Smith



Courtesy Texas Dept. of Criminal
Justice
Andrea Yates



Courtesy State of Arkansas
Christina Riggs