**Archaeology & History in Your Backyard**

**Hanging Trees Part I**

Hello Everyone! This is Archaeology and History in Your Back Yard and my name is Dixie. X 88.7 FM and the Torrance County Archaeological Society are pleased to bring you a series of programs designed to acquaint you, our listening audience with little known people, places and events that took place in the past, right here in your own back yard. For the most part, we will be covering interesting facts, stories and legends about the past, and people that lived right here in the Estancia Valley and surrounding areas in central New Mexico. Our goal is to inform, educate, and possibly enlist your help in preserving and protecting our past.

Our show today will start a two part series on the Old West practice of Using Hanging Trees.

This program was written by Dixie Boyle and Susan Lee and produced by Bill Simms. Thank you for joining us today.

Susan Lee published a delightful book in 1960 called *These Also Served.* She mainly writes about Catron and Socorro Counties since that is where she grew up and spent most of her working career. Unfortunately the book is out of print and hard to find.

She wrote about the hanging trees once found in both Los Lunas and Socorro. During the final years on the American frontier, it was not uncommon for the citizens to take the law into their own hands, and there were certain trees used for hanging these law breakers. Many of these trees are still known in many New Mexico towns.

Susan Lee wrote about these hanging trees and frontier justice. She wrote, “In those days there were no electric chairs or gas chambers and lumber was too scarce to be used for building scaffolds to hang murderers, horse thieves and rustlers. There were many sturdy old cottonwood trees handy so these were used to hang criminals. They were selected according to the low strong limbs that grew at a convenient height and projected straight out at a proper angle.

This part of the West became the haven for lawless people that were forced to leave places that were becoming populated with law abiding citizens so there was an abundant supply of outlaws and very little law and order.

The worst offense in those days was stealing a man’s horse. If the offender was caught he was promptly hanged to the handiest tree and not given a trial. This method of Justice was not always just as many an innocent person was hanged that if given time could have proven his innocence. On more than one occasion men were hung because they could not prove ownership of their horse. Then in a short time proof would turn up and the horse was rightfully his but too late for the dead man.

I have only seen two hanging trees: one in Los Lunas and the other in Socorro.

We had been living in Los Lunas for several years and I had noticed a very dangerous limb on one of the old cottonwood trees that grew on the main street. I thought the limb should be removed but did not give it much thought until I noticed an intoxicated man walking down the street—he was having a hard time remaining on his feet. When he was directly under the cottonwood limb he stopped removed his hat, blessed himself with the sign of the cross, bowed his head and stood there in silent prayer, then donned his hat and went staggering blissfully on his way.

His actions aroused my curiosity and I began asking questions about the large cottonwood tree. I soon discovered stories handed down throughout the years about this old tree. It seems that around the 1880s there was very little law enforcement and the outlaws were so numerous that the citizens formed a vigilante committee to deal with the criminals. At first this committee was a Godsend to the people, then as all such law enforcement committees turn out, it became a source of terror instead of a protection. Some of the men in the committee became as ruthless as the outlaws and loved the excitement of hanging men. I was told that if anyone was arrested by the sheriff and put in jail for minor crimes and he happened to be disliked by some members of the committee. They would wait until dark, break into the jail, and take the prisoners and hang him on one of the cottonwood trees.

The good people were in such a state of terror that had they heard a commotion during the night they dared not interfere. If they did, they would be the next to decorate the hanging limb.

The area in Los Lunas had once been a plaza with houses surrounding it. A descendant of one of the families that lived around the old plaza said she had heard her grandmother tell that one morning her husband, being the first out of bed, went to the window and looked out. There hanging from the hanging limb were three bodies of men that had been hung during the night.

Another story that is told about the Hangman’s Tree gives one something to shiver about. It seems that some stranger that was not accustomed to the Western way of dealing out justice got off the train one dark night and started to look for someone he knew that lived nearby. He passed under the Hangman’s Tree and something brushed against his face. He put out his hand to feel his way under the tree and took hold of a dead man’s foot that had been hung there earlier in the night. This frightened him so that he hurried on and passed beneath another that had some low branches and naturally one of the branches touched him in his face. He didn’t put out his hand to feel what was brushing buy turned and ran as fast as he could back to the depot and stayed there until daylight. He had received such a terrible shock and was so frightened that is it told that his hair had turned white which is understandable, of course, the second object that brushed his face was a branch, but in the state of shock the man was in he must have imagined that the trees were full of men that had been hung.

Please be sure to tune in next week for the conclusion of the Hanging Tree, a short history of frontier justice.

This has been Archaeology and History in Your Backyard, a series that will take you through our area’s history in future episodes.

The Torrance County Archaeological Society meets at 7 PM the first Tuesday of every month from March through November. We meet at the East Torrance Soil and Water Education Building at 700 S. 10th Street in Estancia. Please come and join us.

You can listen to Archaeology and History in Your Backyard Tuesday at 7 PM, Thursday at 12:15 PM and Saturday at 4 PM. Thanks for listening!

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