

San Antonio's "Haunted" Railroad Tracks

Written by Dr. Karen Stollznow
Monday, 10 September 2012 09:00

According to legend, a tragic event occurred in San Antonio during the 1930s (or 1940s). A school bus drove across an intersection of roadway crossed by railroad tracks, and then stalled. A train soon appeared, speeding along the tracks. The train driver saw the bus across the tracks, but it was already too late. The train collided with the bus, instantly killing the driver and his ten tiny passengers. To this day, the ghost children allegedly haunt the site to protect others from a similar fate. It is believed that if a car stalls or stops on the tracks, the ghosts of the little children will push the vehicle to safety, their tiny handprints appearing across the rear of the car.

Accompanied by paranormal claims investigator Matthew Baxter, I paid a visit to San Antonio, Texas. The infamous "haunted" railroad tracks are located on Shane Road, just south of San Antonio, near San Juan Mission. The area is littered with crucifixes, roses, rosary beads, and children's toys left scattered around as gifts for the "ghost children". Graffiti on the tracks wish that the children rest in peace.

Yet if we believe the stories, the children are unable to rest in peace. In another popular legend, a woman was driving past the area late one night when she spotted a little girl standing by the roadside. She stopped and offered the girl, Cindy Sue, a ride home. When they arrived at the girl's home she seemed reluctant to leave the car. Assuming she had fought with her parents and had run away from home, the driver approached the house and spoke to the girl's mother. You know what happens next. The mother cries in horror – this can't be; Cindy Sue is dead! When the two rush out to check the car, the little girl is gone; but the seat belt remains fastened. In a creepy postscript, as the woman drives away, she notices that the street is named Cindy Sue Way. The other children who died in the train wreck also have streets named after them.

We investigated the area, which was teeming with dozens of drive-by ghost hunters. We spoke to the occupants of one car and they had spent the previous night testing the theory. The site is so popular that there was a line of cars that took 45-minutes to reach the tracks. To test the claim, people park across the tracks, turn off the engine, and put the car into neutral, and it proceeds to roll across the tracks; every time. Cars are not pushed across the tracks by tiny, ghostly hands. To some people, the car appears to be going uphill, but the tracks are on a slight downward slope. This ghostly 'gravity hill' is an optical illusion.

To see if the "ghostly hands" and fingerprints would materialize, some drivers had coated the entire back of the vehicles with baby powder. Of course, sprinkling talcum powder across a car will reveal any oily mortal fingerprints. Other claims have earthly explanations too. The Cindy Sue story has all of the hallmarks of the classic hitchhiker urban legend. There is indeed a

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Cindy Sue Way in the area, and other streets nearby also have children's names, including Laura Lee, Nancy Carole, Bobbie Allen and Richey Otis. However, it turns out that these streets were named after the children of the contractors who built the suburb.

Allegedly, the voices and laughter of children can be heard in the area (although it's questionable why children who suffered such a tragic accident would be laughing). Yet during our investigation, we heard the sound of children screaming! Then we noticed the Victory Sports Park nearby, where children were playing soccer, which explained our experience, and likely the experiences of others.

Most damning of all, there is no record of the tragedy even occurring in San Antonio. However, Snopes reveals that a train wreck in Salt Lake City is probably the source of the story. In December of 1938 a school bus transporting twenty-six children stalled on railroad tracks and was hit by a freight train. The driver and children, aged 12 to 18, all died in the accident. So, how do we account for the story being transplanted from Salt Lake City to San Antonio? Snopes says:

No similar accident took place in San Antonio, but in 1938 that city was subjected to about ten days' worth of gruesomely detailed coverage in its local newspaper of the Salt Lake City crash, memory of which afterwards served to convince later generations the tragedy had taken place locally.¹

The optical illusion probably adds to the legend being attributed to San Antonio, rather than Salt Lake City.

Baxter's colleague Bryan Bonner relayed to me that a similar event occurred near Greeley, Colorado. On December 14, 1961, a Union Pacific streamliner was headed from Chicago to Denver. The crossing didn't have lights, and so an approaching school bus started across the tracks. The train travelled at 80 mph, and sliced the bus in half. 20 children in the rear of the vehicle were killed, while 13 were seriously injured.²

As we saw recently with the recent Bigfoot hoaxer who was killed in Montana, it is dangerous to try to recreate paranormal claims and urban legends. It is especially dangerous to play around on railroad tracks. Recently, two girls were killed in Poplar Bluff, Missouri, while playing a game.

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They sat in their car awaiting a legendary "ghost train" but were struck by a real train.³ Near Statesville, North Carolina, a group of ghost hunters were hoping to see and hear a phantom train crash. Instead, they heard the sounds of a real train, and scrambled to safety, except for one woman who was injured, and one man who was hit by the train and killed.

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In trying to recreate the San Antonio accident that never happened, how long will it be before someone becomes a real victim?

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