



REPORT

FORT PHANTOM

INVESTIGATION



*Abilene
Texas*

TX007

SOUTHWEST GHOST HUNTERS ASSOCIATION

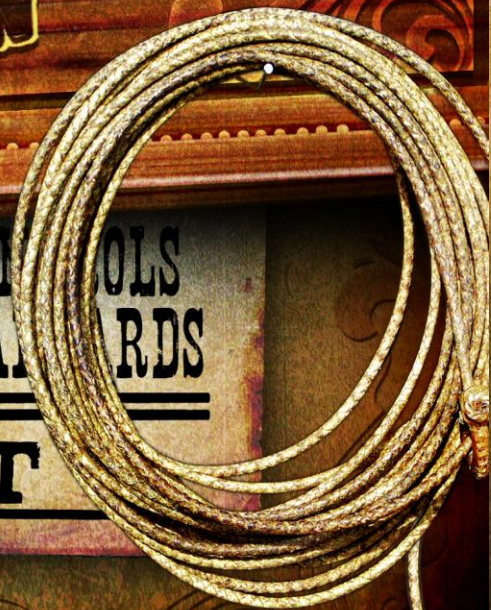


SOLVED

1991

COMPLAINTS
STANDARD

WWW.SGHA.NET



Forward

The word “investigation” is defined as
“a searching inquiry for ascertaining facts; detailed or careful examination.”

The key word here is “facts”. Do ghosts exist? No, it has not been proven.
Therefore are no facts to investigate.

What we do have is the testimony of the witnesses and this is where an investigational process will work. Investigations are often viewed as a skeptical activity because the main goal is trying to determine what the witness actually saw. Is it explainable or not? This is done through critical thinking and an event replication process developed by SGHA. This is an important concept because what defines a haunting or ghost sighting is “Multiple witnesses reporting unusual phenomena over a period of time”. If these phenomena can be explained, the witness reports are no longer validating paranormal activity as a cause and thus there is no ghost or haunting. Additionally historical research may be done in an attempt to validate facts.

It is important to understand that the goal of an investigation is not to find evidence of the paranormal but to attempt to identify any natural or manmade causes of the reported phenomena

Definition of Terms

Investigation Status: Unsolved investigations will have either an open or closed status. An investigation is given an “Open” status if:

The investigators were unable to replicate all of the witness events. Something significant remains that is still unsolved.

It is important to understand that an “open” investigation does not mean that the unsolved facts are paranormal in nature. It simply means that we have exhausted our resources and cannot solve the “open” items/events.

A “Closed” status indicates that there is insufficient data or confounding variables that prevents replication or identifying possible explanations. This often occurs when investigators do not have direct access to witnesses or some other environmental change have occurred that creates confounding variables.

Confidentiality Notice

Many of the witnesses interviewed have wished to remain anonymous in exchange for presenting their accounts of paranormal experiences. We honor that request and thus witnesses will often be identified by aliases. Any coincidence between aliases and actual persons is unintentional.

Contents

Part 1: Location Information.....	4
Part 2: Location History	4
Part 3: Witnesses	7
Part 4: Reported Phenomenon.....	8
Part 5: Investigation.....	9
1. The Ghost Photographs	9
2. Hearing "phantom" footsteps around the fort.	11
3. The feeling of being watched by "something"	11
4. The "time warp" incident reported by a visitor to the fort.	11
Part 6: Hypotheses	11
Part 7: Conclusion.....	12
Part 8: Photographs.....	13
References:.....	17

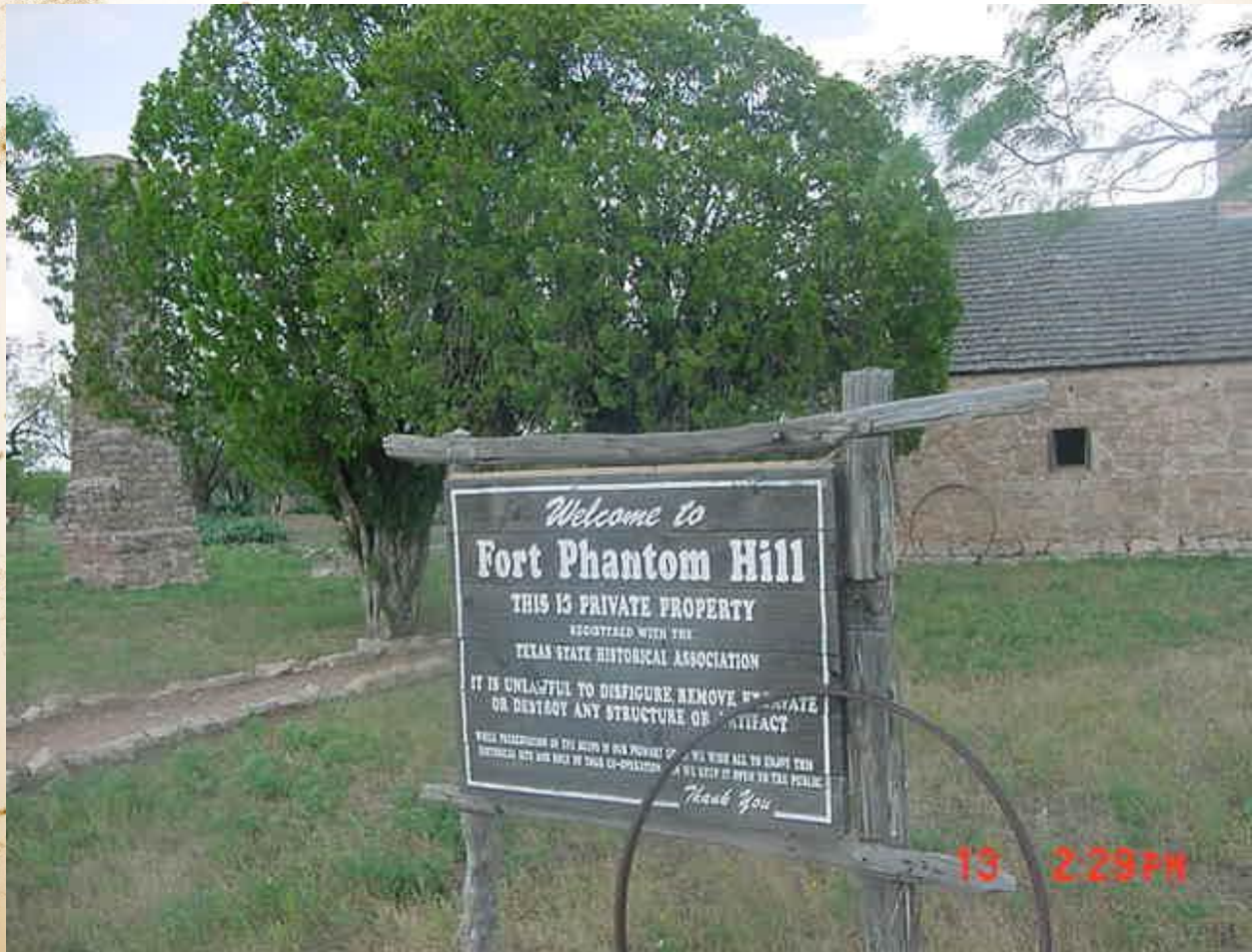
Part 1: Location Information

Fort Phantom Hill

Abilene Texas

Part 2: Location History

Although "Fort Phantom Hill" sounds like the quintessential name for a outpost on the wild plains of Texas in the mid 1800s, the fort actually never received a legal name. Built in late 1851, it was referenced in army missives as the "Post on the Clear Fork of the Brazos." Much less exotic. So, when Lt. Colonel W. G. Freeman, the chronicler of the birth and death of these forts on the Texas plains, referred to the fort as "Phantom Hill" in his 1853 records, the name stuck.



Not only was it legally unnamed but it also was founded at the incorrect location. The fort was commissioned by the dying General William Belknap, who ordered the new fort on Pecan Bayou. His replacement, General Persifor F. Smith, who was new to Texas and no geography scholar,

situated the fort on the Clear Fork of the Brazos, about ten miles north of present-day Abilene. With no name and the wrong location, someone should have figured out that this fort was doomed in some way.

First of all, there were never-ending water problems. Since the nearby creek was often dry, water was regularly hauled from four or five miles away. Wood was scarce and had to be gathered and hauled from a distance of five to eight miles. Records indicate that the ever-present drought destroyed any chances, and eventually hopes, for a garden. Destiny was simply trying to tell them that they weren't supposed to be there.

Only once did Fort Phantom Hill entertain a real war party. A band of 2,500 Comanche approached and, seeing that trenches had been dug around the fort and cannons perched ready for assault, figured the chances were probably better further on down the road. They left. Within a little over two



years, command of Fort Phantom Hill was repeatedly handed to lower and lower commissioned officers. Finally, Lt. Newton C. Givens was appointed post commander on March 26, 1854, and abandoned the fort within two weeks. Just after the last troops left in April 1854, Fort Phantom Hill was destroyed by fire. Nothing

was left standing except the stone fireplaces and a couple of stone buildings.

The remaining buildings were put to use a few times throughout the ensuing years, as a way station, a stable, and a base for subsequent military activities.

Although Fort Phantom Hill resides on private land now, ruins are visible from the highway. It is reported that the property owners deserve a tribute for the salvage and restorative work they performed on the ruins, adding labels and marking boundaries of buildings, streets, and other remnants of the Fort Without A Name.

Modern day visitors to Fort Phantom Hill can still get a feel for what life must have been like here in the 1850s as people tried to tame the unforgiving West Texas landscape. It seems the wisdom of General Persifor F. Smith's choice of this site for what was originally known as "The Post on the Clear Fork of the Brazos River" was disputed from the very beginning, especially by Major John Joseph Abercrombie. The major was a

West Point graduate who commanded the Post on the Clear Fork from the time of its establishment on November 14, 1851, until April 27, 1852, according to A History of Fort Phantom Hill, The Post on the Clear Fork of the Brazos River, Jones County, Texas (prepared by Martha Doty Freeman in May 1999 for The Fort Phantom Foundation).

All arguments notwithstanding, the post was indeed established and by 1853 it was transformed into a well organized and thoroughly developed post. However, conditions continued to be difficult for people at the fort, and in November 1853, approval was given for the military to abandon the fort. Shortly after the troops left, fire destroyed most of the log walls and thatch roofs of the buildings that made up this large and complex five company post on the Texas Frontier. However, several stone buildings, stone chimneys, and the stone building foundations remain intact today. In 1858, the property was reoccupied as a way station on the Southern Overland Mail route and the Butterfield Stagecoach set up a stop at the abandoned fort. Fort Phantom Hill was used again during the Civil War by the Confederacy's Frontier Battalion, and in 1871 became a sub post of Fort Griffin (near Albany, Texas) and was used by troops engaged in Indian campaigns.

After 1875, a town grew up around the ruins of Fort Phantom Hill. The location functioned first as a buying and shipping point for buffalo hides and eventually as a town of more than 500 residents. Census records in 1880 show more than 545 people living at the fort, which had a hotel and the staples of most West Texas towns. Fort Phantom Hill also served briefly as the Jones County seat, although residents later moved it to the community of Anson. By the 1890s, Fort Phantom Hill was largely abandoned.

The Fort Phantom Hill property has been owned by the family of Abilenian John Guitar since he purchased it in 1928. Mr. Guitar's grandson, Jim Alexander of Abilene, purchased the property in 1969. In 1997, Mr. Alexander deeded the property to the Fort Phantom Foundation to help assure its long-term preservation and to make it more accessible to the public.

Today Fort Phantom Hill is one of the most pristine historic sites in Texas. Besides the stone chimneys, other remnants of the developed fort remain for visitors to explore at the 22 acre site. These include an intact stone powder magazine, a stone guardhouse, and an almost intact commissary or warehouse.



1. Hospital
2. Commissary and Quartermaster Stores
3. Company Quarters
4. Company Kitchens
5. Officer's Quarters
6. Colonel's Quarters
7. Guard House
8. Adjutant's Office
9. Bakehouse
10. Magazine
11. Blacksmith's Shop
12. Sutler's Store
13. Carpenter Shops

Part 3: Witnesses

Unfortunately there are not any real solid witnesses that we were able to find. The stories are all second and third hand accounts.

Part 4: Reported Phenomenon

On approaching the post from the north you will see the remaining chimneys standing like sentinels on what looks like a formidable hill overlooking the Clear Fork of the Brazos. As one nears, the hill it disappears and becomes a gentle slope, barely perceptible when one arrives; thus one of the stories of how the post got its name. A second account has to do with a nervous sentry firing on what he thought was an Indian on the hill. A following investigation failed to discover the presence of any Indians, and one of the troopers suggested that the man had seen a ghost. Whatever the case, Maj. Gen. Persifor F. Smith, commanding the Fifth Military Department (Texas), in General Orders Number 91 ordered a post established "at, or in the immediate vicinity of, a point known as Phantom Hill" on the Clear Fork of the Brazos. (Richardson 1963, 68).

Several photographs have also appeared in the local Abilene Newspaper which have "ghost-like" figures in them. Visitors and caretakers have reported hearing footsteps around the fort and the feeling of being watched by "something", especially in the old Powder Magazine. There are also two reports of Phantom soldiers near the old hospital, both of which vanish seconds after they are spotted.

Several legends exist that the place is haunted by restless Indians of frontier times, who continue to stalk their ancient grounds during the night. Another says the fort is haunted by an innocent man who was wrongly hanged near the fort. After he was hanged, his accusers are all said to have died in mysterious ways.

One story often told is that a visitor to the fort walked into what was once the officers' quarters and was amazed to watch it change into its former condition right before his eyes. Two men in officers' uniforms stood before him, glaring as if unhappy with his intrusion. Shaking off his shock, the visitor turned to flee, and the apparitions and the building faded away.

This information was also presented in the television show "Unsolved Mysteries".

Fort Phantom Hill also carries some of the legends surrounding the lake nearby. The lake was the subject of another investigation and the phenomena that was reported was identified and explained.

Part 5: Investigation

Due to the lack of primary witness accounts we chose to investigate the four main elements that are associated with the ghost stories told about the fort. The elements are;

1. *Photographs in the local Abilene Newspaper which have "ghost-like" figures in them.*
2. *Hearing footsteps around the fort.*
3. *The feeling of being watched by "something".*
4. *The "time warp" incident reported by a visitor to the fort.*

1. The Ghost Photographs

The myths make it sound as if there are multiple photographs when in fact there is only one.

In 1959, the Pritchetts were taking pictures at the stone ruins of Fort Phantom Hill. When the photographs were developed, they were surprised to see two figures in the background of the photo, a young couple who appeared to be a man and a small woman or child.

The Pritchetts had no recollection of seeing the couple the day they were shooting the pictures around the fort. And, believing the legends of the fort being haunted, the Pritchetts embraced the idea that their family pictures had been visited by ghosts.

We were able to analyze a copy of the photo and determined that there was nothing in it that could be called paranormal. The couple in the background have no unusual characteristics that could indicate that they are nothing other than solid objects.

The assumption that the photo is of a ghost is based solely upon the belief of the photographer because he did not see anyone at the fort. It is completely possible that someone else was there but the photographer could not recall it or it was not a couple but something else which he could not remember.

UPDATE to this Report (2000):

In an article that appeared in the Abilene Reporter-News on October 31, 2000, the long-held mystery was solved. The article unveils the mystery some 40 years after it was taken. No ghost, just a little girl and her doll.

Photo's mystery solved

By Carol Dromgoole
Reporter-News Staff Writer

After 41 years, the mystery of at least one Fort Phantom Hill ghost has been solved.

It didn't take a great deal of detective work. When Jean Pritchett opened her *Abilene Reporter-News* Sunday morning, she recognized the ghostly couple that had materialized in the background of a snapshot taken amid Phantom's ruins.

It was her and her doll.

"When I saw the paper, I said, 'Well, that looks like me,' and (my sister) said that's what she thought.

"It was kind of funny to see what they were saying about me. I do look pretty weird."

In 1959, Pritchett was Emma Jean Ausborn, a 13-year-old tomboy who liked to dress in her daddy's clothes and play with her dolls, which she clad in long dresses and bonnets. She also spent a lot of time among the ruins.

Her family lived in a three-room frame home near the fort, where her father was employed by John Guitar. She often helped her dad with the chores.

"When I wasn't working, I liked to play among the chimneys out there," she recalled.

"I remember one day, I was out there behind a chimney," she said. "I had my dolls, and I remembered hearing somebody talking. I saw a man standing there, so I got real quiet, because I didn't want anyone to see me."

The girl ran to the house and told her mother some people were taking pictures. She was concerned about people seeing her play with dolls at such an advanced age.

A story in Sunday's Life section showed a photograph and told the tale of a family who was taking pictures in 1959 at the stone ruins. When their photographs were developed, they saw an image in the background of a couple — seemingly a man and a small woman or child — they didn't recall seeing that day.

The photograph belonging to Sharon Jones' family has remained a mystery all these years. The family had come to believe the images were ghostly.

Having believed the ghost story all these years,

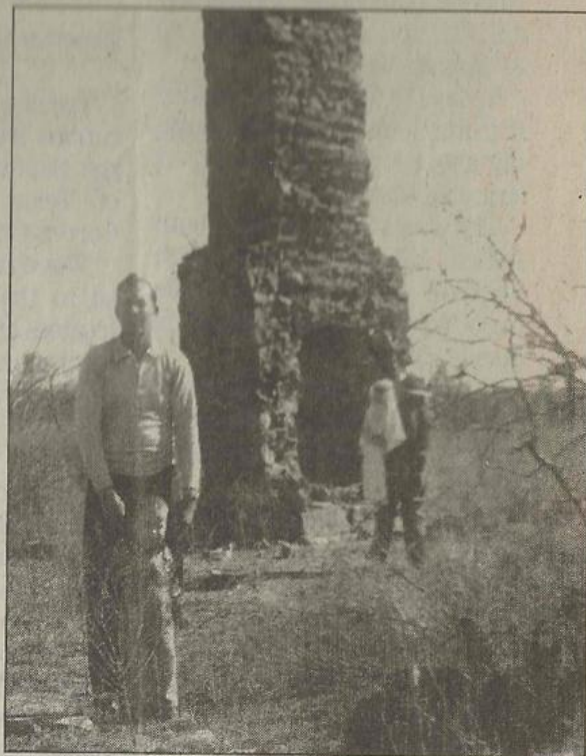


Photo courtesy Sharon Jones

For 41 years, the two figures in the background of this photo were a mystery. The *Reporter-News* ran a story Sunday and Jean Pritchett called to say she was the one in the photo, not a ghost.

Jones was shocked to hear about Pritchett's revelation.

"I don't believe my mom would have snapped the picture if someone else was in the background," Jones said. "That's what has made me think that there was no one there.

"But, you know, I was so young ... Who knows?"

Jones said she would love to meet Pritchett.

"There are things in the picture that I'd like to ask her about," Jones said.

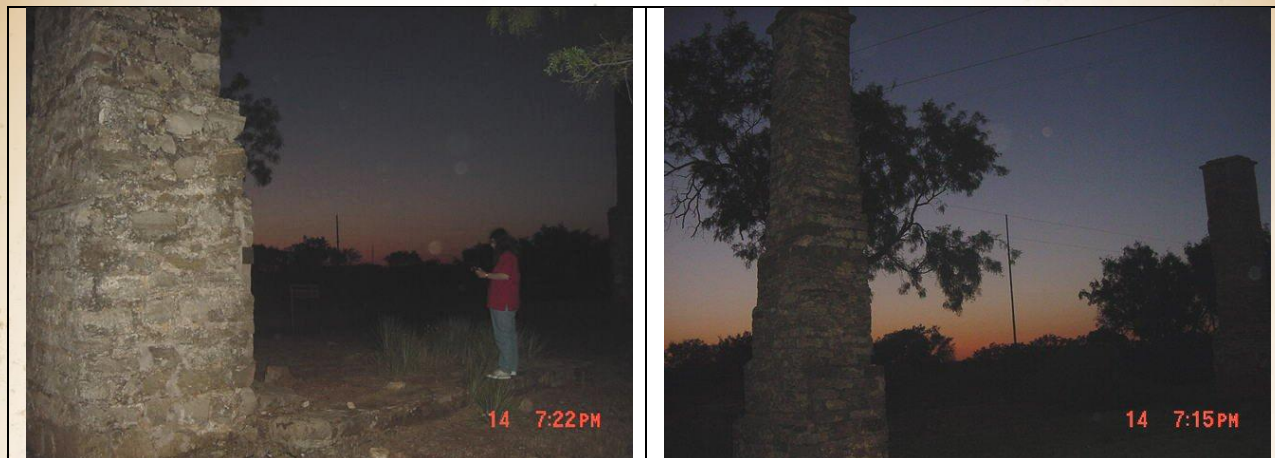
Pritchett said her family had always heard stories about ghosts and supernatural sightings at Fort Phantom Hill and its lake, but they never saw anything.

"We were always more worried about rattlesnakes," she said.

Contact features editor Carol Dromgoole at 676-6740 or dromgoolec@abinews.com. Check out our Web site at www.reporter-news.com.

2. Hearing "phantom" footsteps around the fort.

We spent two nights at the fort, observing what happens and searching for alternative explanations for the mysterious footsteps. As with the lake nearby, there are many nocturnal visitors who could be responsible for the footsteps including teenagers and whitetail deer.



During the daylight hours we found that the wind moving trees and brush also could easily be misinterpreted as the sounds of footsteps. During our investigation we could not locate any noises that could not be identified.

3. The feeling of being watched by "something".

The feeling of being watched is an evolutionary mechanism designed to keep us alert and ready for interaction before it really happens. It can also be created by the expectations and bias of the observer. If a visitor to the fort is expecting to find ghosts, the probability of "feeling watched" would expediently increase.

By itself, it is not a indication of paranormal activity.

4. The "time warp" incident reported by a visitor to the fort.

This claim was made by a former Abilene psychic, Sam Nesmith, when he was 16 years old. Yet, there are no other accounts of this nature from the caretakers or visitors to the fort. If the fort was haunted, by the classical definition, we should see repeated accounts of this nature. There are not any.

Part 6: Hypotheses

There are several problems with the local legends. The first is that the "lake" was not in existence during the time the fort was in operation. In fact

it is a Reservoir and was constructed in 1938. The second historical inconsistency is that there never was a battle between the soldiers at the fort and the Comanche.

The lack of eyewitnesses, distorted history and inconstant facts suggests that myth building has occurred and will continue to generate ghost stories about this location.

Part 7: Conclusion

With names like "Fort Phantom Hill" and "Lake Fort Phantom," one might think the area just north of Abilene would be crawling with apparitions and indeed might be one cause for all of the ghost stories in this area.

The first reports of ghosts in this area actually originate in the 1940's at Lake Fort Phantom. The back-story to that myth suggested that a tragedy occurred at the fort. The variations of her origin are many. The book *Phantoms of the Plains: Tales of West Texas Ghosts* (Copyright 1996, Republic of Texas Press) suggests causes ranging from death by a jealous lover to a self-inflicted wound to every tragic ghostly tale in between. The stories resembles two popular tales. the first comes from Mexican-American folklore, La Llorona, the weeping woman, who either drowned or searches and mourns her drowned children. The second originates near Dallas at White Rock lake where there is another story of a woman drowning and haunting the lake.

The mysterious female ghost at Lake Fort Phantom has also been reported in and around the vicinity of the Phantom Hill Cemetery and near the ground of the fort itself.

Local historians also disagree about the facts concerning the stories. They simply are not correct and the events that are associated with the ghostly events have no actual record of ever occurring.

Based on the lack of any real evidence and the common signs associated with myth building, we believe that the accounts of ghosts at the fort are nothing more than ghost stories / urban legends.

Part 8: Photographs











References:

Along Texas Old Forts Trail, by Rupert N. Richardson, B. W. Aston, Ira Donathan Taylor