

SOCORRO COUNTY COLD CASES

Part 2: Mysteries along U.S. 60

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Case of the Missing Tourists

George Lorius was a successful coal company president in East St. Louis, Ill. In May 1935, Laura and George Lorius, both 45 years old, left on vacation with their lifelong friends, Tillie and Albert Heberer. They often went on vacations together. This year, they decided to spend their vacation out West.

We know their travels took them along Route 66 from St. Louis to Oklahoma City and Amarillo, and then U.S. 60 to Vaughn and Socorro. One must remember that in 1935, these "highways" in New Mexico were not yet paved.

After four days on the road, the couples from Illinois arrived in Vaughn, N.M. That evening, they sent postcards home to family and friends, explaining that they were going to drive on to Boulder Dam after exploring some areas in New Mexico.

Boulder Dam, now known as Hoover Dam, had just been completed and opened to the public in May 1935. It would have been a unique experience to be one of the first tourists to visit the newly completed dam — at the time, it was considered to be the greatest engineering achievement of the century.

On the fifth day of their journey, the couples left

Vaughn and continued their travels along U.S. 60, and stopped in Socorro for gas.

Six days later, on May 29, the Lorius car was found abandoned in Dallas, Texas - the first sign that something went very, very wrong. Contacting the Lorius family in Illinois, Dallas Police learned George and Laura were on vacation in New Mexico, although they hadn't been heard from since the family received the postcard from Vaughn. They simply vanished. Even today, not a trace of their whereabouts has been found.

In 1934, Congress passed the Lindberg Act, which made kidnapping a federal crime. This allows all kidnappings to be investigated by the Federal Bureau of Investigation, which was then called the Bureau of Investigations — J. Edgar Hoover's agency that "always gets their man."

The Lorius disappearance case was ruled a kidnapping and quickly turned over to the FBI. The case was given to the Albuquerque Field Office with Detective Albert Raymond Gere placed in charge of the case. It was one of the first major abduction cases given to the FBI since the Lindberg Act went into effect.



Map by Paul Harden

The known route of George and Laura Lorius and Albert and Tillie Heberer in New Mexico, shown on a 1929 motor-map. They disappeared and presumed killed within 25 miles of Quemado in 1935. Highway 70, the nation's first "Coast-to-Coast" highway, was redesignated to U.S. 60 in 1932.

Gere immediately went to work. His first task was carefully checking George Lorius' car in Dallas for clues.

There was no evidence of violence, such as blood or signs of a struggle. He did find receipts and odometer readings that George Lorius kept during the trip. Gas receipts were found from St. Louis to Vaughn, then Socorro, with the last receipt dated May 23 at an unknown location.

The last positive location of the party was a service station in Socorro. Where did they go from Socorro?

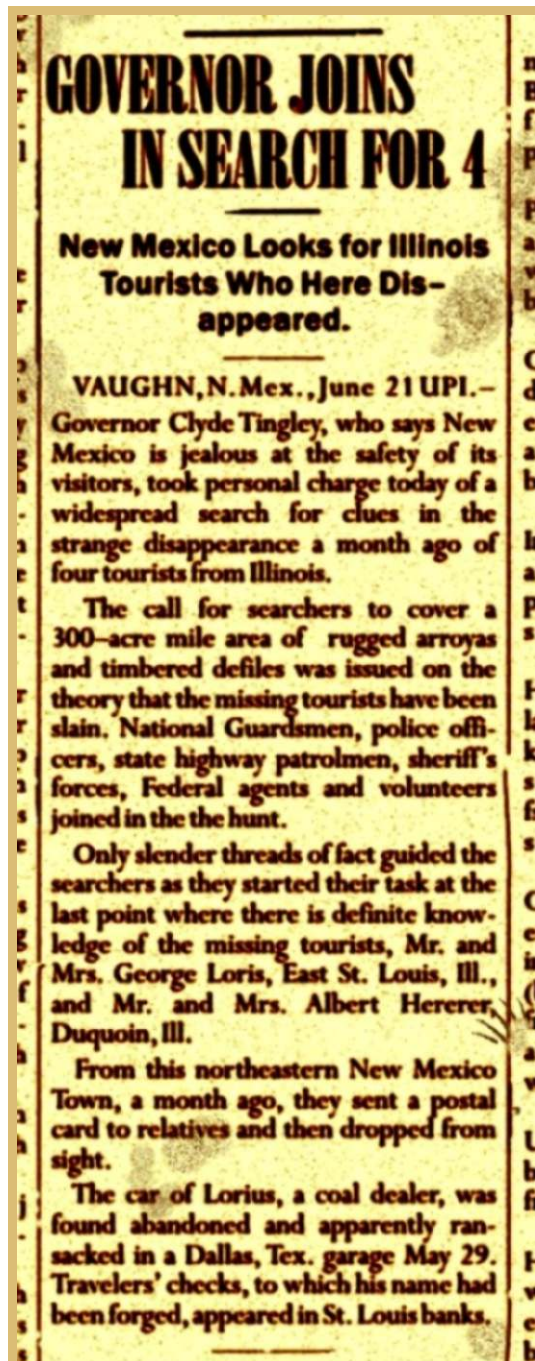
A few days later, traveler's checks belonging to George Lorius had been forged and cashed in and around Vaughn. The investigation quickly shifted to the small railroad town.

By mid-June, updates on the story were carried in newspapers across the country. It had become a national news story. This exposure was not good for New Mexico as motor-tourism virtually halted for peoples' fear of being killed "in the wilds of New Mexico."

Attendance figures from Santa Fe to Carlsbad Caverns dramatically dropped. Newspapers reported the vacationers were killed near Vaughn, near Socorro, near Carlsbad, or near any other place they could think of, thus affecting the reputation of the entire state.

New Mexico Gov. Clyde Tingley offered a \$1,000 reward for finding the bodies. He also ordered the National Guard to help the FBI search areas around Vaughn, Socorro and south along Elephant Butte Reservoir to find the bodies — and to save the state's image.

Weeks of investigation yielded no solid clues around



Courtesy Oswego—Palladium Times
The 1935 disappearance of four tourists in New Mexico was a national news story. This article appeared in the Oswego, NY newspaper.

the Vaughn area. Returning his attention to Socorro, Gere realized he needed to identify the location of that last, unknown gas receipt. He knew it must be about 150-200 miles from Socorro, the approximate distance of a tank of gas. He sent agents to interview every gas station worker along U.S. 85 south of Socorro to El Paso, and west along U.S. 60.

This proved successful. A gas station owner in Quemado recognized the photograph of the four missing vacationers and identified his hand writing on the gas receipt. He was also able to recall the make and model of the car precisely.

Gere then compared the odometer readings from the car found in Dallas to the mileage recorded on the receipt at Quemado. Less than 50 miles were unaccounted for, thus leading the FBI to conclude the car was turned around within 25 miles west of Quemado. A massive search of the roads, canyons and arroyos around Quemado turned up nothing.

As the search around Quemado was going on, the last known solid clue in the case surfaced. Luggage belonging to Laura and George Lorius was found in a burning heap near Albuquerque.

Few other clues have ever surfaced over the years. Every time an unidentified body was found anywhere in New Mexico,

or around Dallas, it was always hoped it would be that of one of the missing vacationers.

Although the story finally disappeared from the nation's newspapers, it remained an active FBI case for years with Detective Gere in charge.

In the July 31, 1947, issue of the Socorro Chieftain, there is an article interviewing investigator A. Raymond Gere upon his retirement from the FBI. Gere



Photo by Paul Harden
Old U.S. 60 enters Quemado south of today's paved highway. The old gas station is the building in the left rear. This area of Quemado is called "Old Town."



Photo by Paul Harden
The old Quemado gas station where George Lorius fueled his car on May 23, 1935. This is the last known location where the St. Louis party was seen alive.

had married Myrtle (Gresham) Andrews of San Antonio, N.M., in 1944 and was considered somewhat of a local character.

In the article, Gere states his biggest regret was his inability to solve the 1935 Lorius and Heberer murder mystery. He suggested that amateur sleuths should look for human bones along U.S. 60 in western New Mexico. He stated the case "has consumed 30 FBI volumes, seven years of my time as an agent, and countless pages of newspaper and magazine type."

"There have been hundreds of theories about what happened and where it happened to George and Laura Lorius, and Albert and Tillie Heberer," Gere told the Chieftain. "I am convinced they were murdered and their bodies were hidden within 25 miles west of Quemado, along U.S. 60."

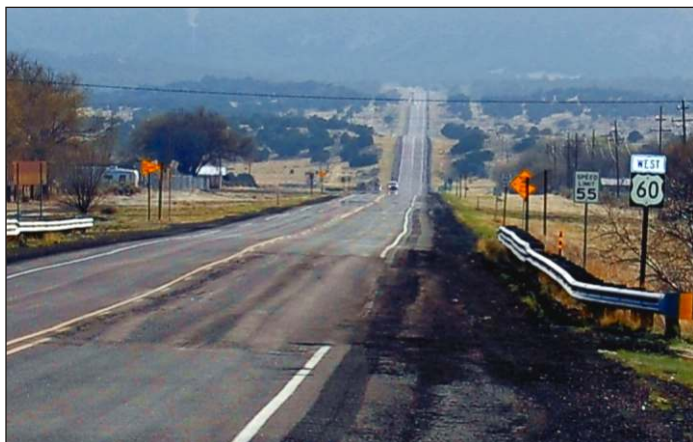


Photo by Paul Harden
The FBI believes the tourists from Illinois were killed and buried shortly after leaving Quemado in 1935 along U.S. 60. Their bodies have never been found.

Talking to old-timers in Quemado, they recall this incident very well. The service station in Quemado where the traveling couples got their gas was located on old Highway 60, near today's Quemado School. Of particular interest is how they all report a car being found some time after the murder along Largo Creek, near today's Quemado Lake. It was riddled with bullet holes.

The FBI summary report I used for this article never identifies the type of automobile, because that was a clue withheld from the public record. It is assumed the four traveled in the Lorius' car, but the report does not specifically state if they were traveling together, or in two separate cars. Was the bullet-riddled car found in Largo Canyon years ago the second car?

Was the FBI ever informed of this find?



Photo by Paul Harden
Quemado old timers believe a bullet-riddled car, found behind Slaughter Mesa along Largo Creek, was related to the 1935 murders.

Like most unsolved mysteries, the unanswered questions always outweigh those that are.

Today, 73 years later, no trace of their bodies has ever been found. This case, which at one time rose to national prominence, remains one of New Mexico's true cold cases. Most agree with Detective Gere, their bodies are likely buried somewhere near Quemado, along U.S. 60.

The Girly Hossencofft Case

The 1999 disappearance of Girly Hossencofft is one of the most bizarre murders in New Mexico's history — with connections to Socorro County. Although two people are serving time in prison for Girly's death, the Hossencofft case remains a cold case in that the exact nature of her murder and the whereabouts of her body remain a mystery.



Missing Persons Network
Malaysian born Girly Chew Hossencofft disappeared and presumed murdered in September 1999.

In 1992, Texas-born Armand Chavez changed his name to Diazien Hossencofft. The following year, he met a beautiful young Malaysian woman named Girly Chew. They later married and moved to Albuquerque. Diazien claimed to be a CIA agent and made well over \$100,000 selling a cure for cancer over the Internet. In 1995, the FBI ascertained his cancer cure was simply vitamin B6.

After leaving his wife in Albuquerque, Diazien fled to Canada to avoid arrest by the FBI.

While in Canada, he lived with a woman that bore him a son, Demetri. In late 1996, Diazien returned to Albuquerque with his newborn son. He told his wife the boy was orphaned by a friend in Mexico. Girly agrees to adopt the child as her own. For the next two years, Diazien flew under the radar and avoided FBI detection. Unbeknownst to Girly, Diazien was again conning people with his cancer cure — now claiming to be a medical doctor — and was having an affair with a woman named Linda Henning.

In late 1998, Girly learned that Demetri was Diazien's biological son born to a Japanese woman in Canada. Shortly thereafter, the FBI had again been alerted to Diazien's activities and began another investigation.

Girly's life came crashing down as she realized life with her husband was based on nothing but deceit and fraud.

In January 1999, Girly filed for divorce. She got a job at an Albuquerque bank and moved with her son into an apartment. Diazien, along with girlfriend Linda Henning, began harassing Girly for custody of Demetri. This included several violent confrontations. While Girly never reported these episodes to police as domestic violence, she did tell her co-workers at the bank and an FBI agent. She also stressed how she feared for her life.

Girly Hossencofft was last seen on Sept. 9, 1999. When she failed to show up for work the following day, concerned co-workers contacted the Albuquerque Police. They entered Girly's apartment and found evidence of a struggle with blood spatters on clothing, the couch and the carpeting. Girly was nowhere to be found. Demetri was later found to be with Linda Henning, Diazien's girlfriend.

The same day, and many miles away from Albuquerque, a state road worker, Raymond Gabaldon, found some bloody clothing along U.S. 60, near the rest area west of Magdalena. He found a green-and-white blouse, pink-and-orange shorts, a pair of green panties and duct tape with hair, all wrapped in a gray tarp, and stained with blood.

These items were sent to the Office of Medical Investigations for identification. The connection to the Hossencofft case had not yet been made.

In the meantime, Diazien disappeared from New Mexico. Three weeks later, he was found and arrested in South Carolina. The Hossencofft case was by now a high profile case in New Mexico, having been reported



Photo by Paul Harden
The bloody clothes of Girly Hossencofft were found near this familiar U.S. 60 rest area west of Magdalena.

almost daily in newspapers and television stations across the state.

Back in Albuquerque, a grand jury was seated to review the evidence to bring murder charges against Diazien Hossencofft. Linda Henning testified she had no knowledge of the murder, nor had she ever been in Girly's home.

In October 1999, the OMI released that the blood found in Girly's apartment was identified as Girly's, that of Linda Henning and a third unknown person. On Oct. 29, Henning was arrested for lying to the grand jury.

The new evidence was presented to another grand jury in November. They returned murder indictments against Linda Henning and Diazien Hossencofft. On Jan. 2, 2000, Diazien was returned to New Mexico to face the murder charges.

On a hunch, an OMI investigator compared the blood from the clothing found near Magdalena to Girly's blood and found a positive match. This immediately shifted the focus of the investigation to Socorro County.

Albuquerque Police contacted the Socorro County Sheriff's Department. They arranged a search of the area and were informed of the nearby mine shafts. In a meeting Bureau of Geology Senior Mining Engineer Robert Eveleth familiarized the investigators with the mines in the Montosa-Cat Mountain region west of Magdalena.

Instead of finding an old mine shaft or two where a

body could be disposed, Eveleth showed them more than two dozen. Suddenly, the search area got very complex.

This is an area about 10 miles west of Magdalena known as the Highway 60 Copper Prospects, owned by Eugene and Jack Cobb of Magdalena, and Seymour Thurmond of Socorro.

The area, on both the north and south sides of U.S. 60, were mined in the 1950s and '60s for copper. Most of the shafts are only 35-100 feet deep, but they are sufficiently deep enough to hide a body. These old mine shafts became the focus of the search for Girly Hossencofft's body, since it was a short distance from where Girly's bloody clothing had been found in 1999.

On the weekend of June 24-25, 2000, Albuquerque Police showed up with cadaver dogs in the hopes of finding Girly's remains. Searches on foot and from the air were conducted throughout the day.

In late afternoon, the cadaver dogs reacted to a shaft about 35 feet deep and filled with debris. The following day, rescue firefighters from Albuquerque entered the shaft. After removing wood beams and corrugated steel plates, they reached the bottom. At the bottom was the carcass of a deer.

After failing to find Girly's body, the search was called off. How many of the shafts and mines in the region that were searched is not known.

A few months later, on Sept. 24, a hunting guide above Water Canyon found some bones and women's clothing



Courtesy Bureau of Geology, New Mexico Tech
Clint McCarthy (left) and owner Eugene Cobb (right) working the Highway 60 Copper Mine in the 1960s.



Photo by Paul Harden
The Highway 60 Copper Mine as it appears today. It was one of the mines searched for Girly Hossencofft's remains in June 2000. Her bloody clothing was found about a mile away on U.S. 60.

at a remote campsite. The scene was investigated by Socorro Undersheriff George Van Winkle. District Attorney Ron Lopez had them sent to the OMI in case they were connected to the Hossencofft case.

The Sept. 30 Defensor Chieftain reports the bones were found "to be sheep, not human, leaving the search for Girly Hossencofft ongoing."

On Feb. 12, 2001, Bill Miller was arrested in his Albuquerque home for his role in the murder of Girly. Evidence surfaced that Miller had been hired by Diazien to dispose of the body. During the investigation of Miller, it was learned he was an avid hunter, owned a cabin in Socorro County and had several favorite campgrounds in the region where he preferred to hunt. All of these areas, including his cabin and mines near Kelly, were searched. No solid evidence linking Miller to the Hossencofft murder was found. Prosecutors did find the discovery of the bloody clothing near Magdalena, and Miller's frequent connection to Socorro County, to be eerie and beyond coincidence — but not proof.

It came as a complete surprise when Diazien pleaded guilty to murdering Girly on Jan. 9, 2002, to avoid the death penalty should he be found guilty by a jury. He was sentenced to life in prison plus 61 years, and sent to the State Penitentiary in Los Lunas.

The murder trial against Linda Henning was held in October 2002 and was aired on Court TV. The testimony turned into one bizarre case. For example, in an attempt to explain how Diazien had been seen speeding from Girly's apartment, while a witness



Courtesy Albuquerque Police Department

Diazien Hossencofft (left) and Linda Henning (right) are both serving sentences for the 1999 murder of Girly Chew Hossencofft.

placed him on the other side of Albuquerque at the same time, Diazien explained that he was a 2,000-year-old reptilian shape-shifter. He could instantly transform himself from one place to another, including to his home reptilian base on the moon. He also testified that he had invented a youth serum and was immortal from drinking human blood. Other testimony suggested that Girly might have been the victim of cannibalism.

Diazien claimed Henning had nothing to do with the murder. Instead, it was Bill Miller that killed her. Diazien gave Miller permission to "hunt her down and kill her" as a game in preparation for when the New World Order takes over.

On Oct. 26, the jury found Henning guilty of premeditated first-degree murder. She was sentenced to 73 years in prison. She is now at the New Mexico Women's Correctional Facility in Grants.

Diazien signed a plea agreement to reveal the location of Girly's body in exchange for serving his life sentence in Wyoming, which does not have the death penalty. Diazien identified an area along I-40 near the Rio Puerco where Bill Miller supposedly buried Girly's body. Police were unable to find the body and Diazien refused to reveal any further details.

Shortly thereafter, he was transferred to Wyoming to serve his life sentence, where he remains to this day. Why he was allowed to be transferred to the Wyoming prison, in spite of renegeing on his plea agreement, is one of the mysteries of this case.

On July 16, 2003, Bill Miller pleaded guilty to tampering with evidence — he was sentenced to 10 months supervised probation. He is still living in Albuquerque, and presumably still visits his cabin in Socorro County.



Photo by Paul Harden

Many law enforcement personnel believe Girly Hossencofft's murdered body is buried somewhere along U.S. 60 west of Magdalena. Her body has never been found.

This was the first murder case in New Mexico that resulted in convictions without a body. It was solved and tried primarily through DNA and trace evidence.

The exact nature of this case is not known, since Girly Hossencofft's body has never been found. The common belief by law enforcement and prosecutors is that Girly was killed in her apartment by Linda Henning following a vicious attack. Diazien hired Bill Miller to dispose the body, which he likely did somewhere in Socorro County. Several Socorro County Sheriff's deputies believe her body may be along U.S. 60 near Datil, although they would not elaborate, since this aspect of the case is still open.

Just a note, should you ever find yourself in court for murder, it is strongly recommended that you not use the reptilian shape-shifting defense. It doesn't work.

Socorro's Most Wanted

Are there any current cold cases in Socorro County? Unfortunately, the answer is yes. There are two deaths that occurred 11 and 13 years ago, which have never been solved. These are Socorro's real cold cases.

The first is the killing of 49-year-old Reyes Valenzuela. He was found dead at his Socorro home on Sunday morning, Feb. 19, 1995. He had been shot in the head with a small-caliber gun. City Police Chief Johnny Trujillo said the crime was not drug related, nor did the OMI find any drugs in Valenzuela's system.

Valenzuela was working under contract with the City of Socorro at the time of his death, refurbishing the old high school building for city offices and court space. He was known for being a good carpenter and a master brick mason. He was described as a very polite and sociable man. Valenzuela is survived by a large family, many of whom still live in the Socorro area.

In spite of a lengthy investigation, no motive for the crime, or who committed it, has ever been found.

The second case is the death of Pete Lopez, 50, of Socorro. His body was found at the U.S. 60 St. Jude Shrine west of Socorro by tourists on the morning of March 29, 1997 - Easter weekend. He died of multiple gunshot wounds.

This case also baffles the Socorro County Sheriff's Department because there are no subjects or any known reason for the killing. Lopez was found at the shrine with his automobile, wallet and other valuables

undisturbed — this seemingly rules out a robbery attempt.

Lopez had left early Saturday morning to return to his home in Alamogordo after a visit with his parents and family for Good Friday. He worked at White Sands Missile Range. It is not known why he had driven to the shrine, or if he had been lured there.

Pete Lopez also left behind a large family in Socorro, including his wife, whom he had married less than a year before. His brother, Ron Lopez, was the district attorney at the time. However, no cases that were being handled by the D.A.'s Office could be linked to the killing.

The cold cases of Reyes Valenzuela and Pete Lopez are not presented here for entertainment. Both killings are true crimes and true mysteries that need to be solved. There may likely be two murderers living among us. They are Socorro's Most Wanted.

If you know anything about either of these deaths, contact the Socorro County Sheriff's Department or the author. There are two families in Socorro that need closure on these senseless killings.

Some of the references used in this article: Various issues of El Defensor Chieftain; FBI files; Oswego-Palladium Times; Court TV Web site; "September Sacrifice," by Mark Horner and www.markhorner.com Web site; Missing Persons Web site; Bill Candalaria, Quemado; Robert Eveleth; Socorro County Sheriff's Department; and field work by the author.

Some photographs not published with the original article:

In the 1930s, several gas stations were built along U.S. 60 for the occasional traveler. Here are two of them:



Photo by Paul Harden

All that is left of the old Omega service station are the crumbling foundations and remnants of the wood walls.



Photo by Paul Harden

Located about five miles east of Quemado on U.S. 60 is the old gas station at the settlement of La Rita.

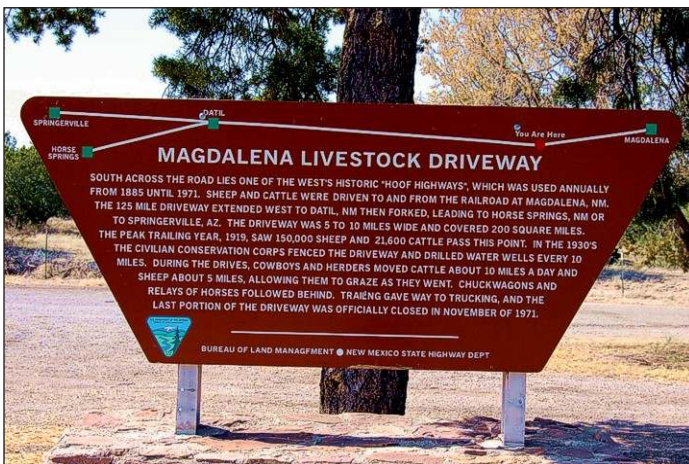


Photo by Paul Harden

The "Magdalena Livestock Driveway" sign at the U.S. 60 rest area. The cattle driveway, used from 1885 until 1971, terminated at the railroad in Magdalena.



Photo by Paul Harden

Entering Catron County (from Socorro County) along U.S. 60 through the Plains of San Augustin. Datil is about 10 miles ahead; Quemado another 57 miles.

Another couple of views of the Highway 60 Copper Mine, south of U.S. 60 and west of Magdalena

