

30th Year
OF PUBLICATION



FIRST
MAY NUMBER

May 7, 1954
Volume 185, No. 1

RANCH ROMANCES

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ON SALE EVERY OTHER FRIDAY



HELEN DAVIDGE
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SINGLE COPIES, 25c

YEARLY SUBSCRIPTION, \$5.00

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a fact
story



*The grotesque wraith seems to
be searching for something . . .*

Sand Devils

By
Ferris
Weddle

FIFTEEN MILES from Alamogordo, in south-central New Mexico, is located 176,000 acres of sand that is not sand. It is pure gypsum, as white as snow, and it is called The White Sands National Monument. But have you heard some of the legends about the sands?

At twilight, if you are fortunate, you might be able to understand the origin of one of the legends when you see the Pavlo Blanco, or White Wraith. The wind, apparently, is the creator of the wraith. A gust of wind climbs up a sand dune that may be forty feet high, picking up the powderfine gypsum. It revolves and twists, and abruptly it forms into what may be considered a human body. This sand devil skips across the dunes, along the crests, down the sides. It seems to be searching for something.

Spanish and Indian legend say that the wraith is searching, for it is the spirit body of a lovely señorita who seeks her



lover, who was lost many centuries ago in the sands. The explanation may not appeal to the scientific mind, but for those of us who are romantics at heart it is intriguing.

Other Mexican and Indian lore of the vicinity has fascinating frills, too. For instance there are red lakes formed when it rains. Legend says the red color is from the bloody battles fought between the Spanish and Indians, and between the Indians and whites later on. The scientists, of course, blast this as nonsense. The red is due to microscopic plants which arise in the water.

There is the case of the old Spanish cart, the *carreta*, which was disclosed by the shifting sands. What happened to the owners is an intriguing mystery. And on the west side of White Sands human tracks were found imprinted in gypsum rock—only these were not ordinary human tracks. They measured twenty-two inches long and were from eight to ten inches wide. Scientists have not tried to explain this discovery.

The Master Creator must get a great many chuckles from the efforts of mankind to explain the existence of the sands. Was it formed from the ashes of a volcano about sixty miles away? The geologists think not, nor was it made by a wash from Carlsbad Caverns. Possibly, say the logical-minded, a few million years ago the area was an inland lake. It dried up, and white crystals began to form, finally emerging into the great White Sands.

GEOLOGISTS have a more plausible story. The sands are located in the Tularosa Basin, and the basin floor, as well as the surrounding mountains, have layers of slab gypsum. Possibly the basin was once just a huge block of gypsum until the earth shifted, breaking it up. Rain and snow water, washing through the gypsum, dissolved it, carrying it into the lower areas. A gypsum lake was the result—and then the hot sun went to work, drying it up. The winds came along, picking up the particles and heaping them into dunes. This still goes on, the gypsum coming in from the mountains and up from the basin floor.

So White Sands still continues to grow.

This growth has intriguing possibilities, for it is estimated that Alamogordo may some day—a few hundred thousand years hence—be covered by the shifting sands, because the undecided sands move toward this atomic-minded city at the rate of about eight inches a year.

Plant and animal life takes on weird aspects, too, in the sands and surrounding country. One botanist claims that some sixty-two plants grow in the sand's edges or nearby. There are mice and lizards and various insects in the white world of gypsum, too. They are unlike other members of the same species. They are white, like their environment; otherwise they would stick out like a sore thumb. Mice and lizards of the same species in the black lava ravines are black; and those in the foothills are red. It's all a part of nature's trickery—and common sense.

Sooner or later, people always ask: Are the sands valuable? Sure, gypsum is used extensively in the building trades. And if there were not a plentiful supply elsewhere in the world, White Sands has enough to supply the whole world for sixty thousand years. At least that's the claim, and also, it is said, if all the gypsum was loaded on freight cars there would be enough to encircle the earth some hundred and fifteen times.

Because gypsum is plentiful, however, White Sands is considered priceless as inspirational sand. Over a hundred thousand people visit the monument each year, and grandmother takes off her shoes alongside the grandchildren and has a wonderful time playing in the smooth sands. Just to have the dazzling white dunes, twisting into odd shapes up to sixty feet in height, against the blue-black of the mountains, is sufficient. And in the evening, with red staining the mountains and the desert country, White Sands is a white world of shifting, delightful patterns. It is a place of moods, and a place to bring on moods.

In the land near where Billy the Kid had his lusty heyday, the White Sands is an eye-catching snow desert where the winds will form sand devils or *el Pavlo Blanco*.