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Fright Train: How San Juan's 'Ghost Train' Has Haunted Motorists for a Dozen Years

by Capo Dispatch — October 27, 2023 4:00AM in LIVING, SJC Living



San Juan Capistrano is known, in part, for its ghost stories and spooky history, but perhaps the most famous apparition of all is the "Ghost Train" at the Del Obispo crossing that's haunted motorists for more than a decade. Photo: Shawn Raymundo

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By Jonathan Volzke

A saloon keeper shot dead in front of his home in 1896 was seen in the old home for decades, until it was finally moved to another site.

A girl set to marry her love, killed along with 41 others in the collapse of the Great Stone Church in 1812, can still be seen in windows of the old church, her face often illuminated with a candle.

A mother longingly looking for her son, who died in the jail beneath El Adobe de Capistrano when it was used to hold prisoners, still taps visitors on the shoulder as she searches for him.

San Juan Capistrano may be famous for the return of the swallows, but the ghosts never leave. They're seen here or there, and their stories may evolve over the years, but the tales are persistent enough to bring SyFy's "Ghost Hunters" to town.

An author once opined that San Juan Capistrano was the most haunted city in California.

Many of the legends are based in the Los Rios District, which dates back to 1794 and is said to be the oldest continuously lived-in neighborhood in the state. That's what makes the Historical Society's Ghosts and Legends Tour so eerily perfect.

Not all of the ghosts who haunt San Juan are rooted in history, though. And not all taunt us with a glimpse in the dark of night.

Perhaps the most famous ghost of all first appeared in 2011—in October, appropriately enough—accompanied by creaks and clangs through Los Rios at all hours. Smart locals know to go another way to avoid the nightmare of the "[Ghost Train](#)."

Like other apparitions, the Ghost Train was borne of an accident, an unintended consequence when the Orange County Transportation Authority added new gates across Del Obispo Street—the main artery through town.

The sensors that trigger the gate are such that they sometimes activate even when the southbound trains stop at the station. The gates go down, creating a nightmare for motorists until the invisible Ghost Train passes and the gates rise.

spirit, haunting motorists for as long as 10 minutes.

Now, though, OCTA promises a treat after a dozen years of tricks.

Metrolink Chief Deputy Operating Officer Luis Carrasquero told the City Council in April that a new system will eliminate the Ghost Train.

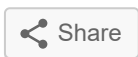
The train is in constant contact with GPS satellites for location data, as well as the trackside safety devices. The new system, expected to cost about \$400,000, will use GPS to precisely track trains and trigger the arms and signals at Del Obispo.

“At one point, OCTA said it just won’t happen; the only solution was adding a siding at the train depot, which was impossible because the houses on Los Rios Street were too close to the tracks,” explained Councilmember John Taylor, a Los Rios resident who’s been haunted by the Ghost Train since it first appeared.

“But, it’s finally here,” Taylor continued. “The Ghostbusters at the OCTA have the technology, and we are ecstatic to be chosen as the first city to have it installed.”

The system’s supposed to be in place by December 2024. If all goes as planned, the Ghost Train will drift away, becoming a legend told to frighten motorists hoping to hurry along the Del Obispo corridor.

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