



# Hands Across History



A joint newsletter for the White Sands Historical Foundation and the White Sands Pioneer Group.

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February 2023

## Darren Court Given Hall of Fame Award For Museum Work

Darren Court, the Director of the White Sands Missile Range Museum, was recognized on Jan. 28 by the Doña Ana County Historical Society with its Hall of Fame award. The award is designed to recognize an individual who is known for their exceptional contribution to the preservation of the history and culture in southern New Mexico.

The society took into account how Court stepped into the job as museum director in 2007 with a tiny budget and a smaller staff and has kept it growing. And now he is overseeing the rebuild of the museum which, when it opens in a few months, will be a brand new, state-of-the-art museum at the top of museums in the Army's system.



*The White Sands Missile Range Museum Director Darren Court, left, is congratulated by Dennis Daily, the president of the Dona Ana County Historical Society, on his "Hall of Fame" award presented on Jan. 28 at the society's annual awards banquet held at the Double Eagle restaurant in Mesilla.*

When Darren started, the museum was about a third of its current size, with the gallery only being in the back trailer area. There was little interpretation, just a collection of artifacts from many organizations and companies. The museum had no online presence at all and it did not conduct any tours.

Since then, it has become a valuable part of the Army Museum Enterprise and staff members are the subject matter experts in the army for rockets, missiles, space technology, and the Manhattan Project. The museum now really is a museum, with full interpretation, a robust and growing on-line presence, and the ability to provide both onsite and offsite tours to locations like the Hembrillo battlefield, Trinity Site, and Launch Complex 33, in addition to an ability to provide in-depth lectures on all aspects of the museum storyline. They have taken over much of what the Public Affairs Office used to do.

Rather than a collection of "things," it now has a learning center with a STEM education center as well as an extensive archive and research center.

Darren, 56 years old, is originally from Amarillo, Texas. He spent over seven years in the Army and left the service while at White Sands Missile Range. He earned his BA and MA degrees in history from NMSU.

The county historical society was created in 1963 by concerned citizens who set out to save Fort Selden. With that success, they took aim at some of the urban renewal projects around Las Cruces, trying to save important buildings. The first hall of fame honoree, given in 1964, was Elizabeth Fountain Armendariz. Court is the first White Sands employee to receive this award for preserving the history of the missile range.

# WSMR Now Accepting Nominations For Hall of Fame

White Sands Missile Range is now accepting nominations from all sources until the end of March for its Hall of Fame.

The Hall of Fame was established in 1980 for the purpose of giving appropriate and perpetual recognition to those members of the WSMR workforce, military and civilian, who have made singularly significant contributions to the mission on the Range and to the surrounding communities. It is the highest award the missile range can bestow on one of its own. There are 56 members in the Hall of Fame.

Past honorees include such individuals as Dr. Clyde Tombaugh, the astronomer who discovered Pluto, and other Las Cruces like Frances Williams, Mary Beth Reinhart, Jim Eckles and Ed Noble.

The Hall of Fame contains both men and women, both civilian and military personnel, both government and contractor employees and a huge mix of professions – everything from chaplain to missile flight safety to public affairs to professional engineer to equal employment opportunity to “mover and shaker.” It is the embodiment of “Team WSMR,” the phrase missile range leaders have thrown around for decades.

For information on nomination procedures or to request an updated copy of the White Sands Hall of Fame Guide, call the WSMR Public Affairs Office, (575) 678-1134. The guide contains the forms, guidelines and procedures for nomination. It is available as a PDF and can be emailed.

To get into the Hall of Fame a nominee must have been responsible for significant and lasting deeds or achievements during their career at WSMR. The contributions may be in various areas such as research, innovations, cost savings, technological advances, safety, public relations, equal opportunity or heroic deeds.

All former military, civilian and contractor personnel who have served at White Sands are eligible for nomination. No one currently working at the range is eligible.



*This is the medal that is currently awarded to hall of fame inductees. It is the second edition as WSMR ran out of the originals in the early 2000s. The original medals were created in a foundry on the east coast. Those originals had a small bit of copper from a V-2 that was mixed into the flux when the medals were cast.*

## Statement of Purpose and Membership

The “Hands Across History” newsletter is published by the White Sands Missile Range Historical Foundation and the White Sands Pioneer Group (WSPG). Both nonprofit organizations aim to preserve the accomplishments of White Sands Missile Range.

The newsletter is intended to keep

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members of both groups informed about current events and share information of common interest. The editor is Jim Eckles. He can be contacted by email at [nebraska1950@comcast.net](mailto:nebraska1950@comcast.net) or at either address below.

Membership to either organization is open to anyone who shares their goals.

White Sands Historical Foundation  
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# The President's Look Back At The Past Year

By Frances Williams  
President, WSMR Historical Foundation

This past year was momentous for the White Sands Missile Range Museum and the WSMR Historical Foundation. For building the new exhibit hall, the museum's exhibits were removed to another building with the assistance of the 3rd Battalion, 6th Air Defense Artillery Test Detachment. Thanks to them for the needed manpower to start the physical part of a new, re-imagined museum.

I may sound like a broken record, but this "new" museum was made possible by the funds raised by the historical foundation and the funding provided by the Center for Military History. The Historical Foundation raised over one million dollars and contributed it to the Museum to construct the new building. The Center for Military History (CMH) provided more than two million dollars for this project - building the new exhibits.

Most of the credit for the story line being followed in the new exhibit hall goes to the curator, Darren Court (a recent recipient of the Hall of Fame Award presented to him by the Dona Ana County Historical Society). CMH provided an outstanding individual, Roxanne Showers, Exhibit Curator, as the Contracting Officer's Representative who provided oversight for this project. This is the most exciting time since the museum was established.

The historical foundation also provided funding to the Museum for times that were not budgeted for by CMH:

- > A pivotal door was procured and placed in the museum to close off the archives to casual visitors.

- > Funding was provided to purchase six computers for a room which will be provided to visiting students.

- > Funding to improve STEM and the archival project.

- > We funded lights to fill in dead spaces in the new exhibit hall's lighting scheme.

- > A strategic plan was developed with the museum for planning and funding requirements to support future needs of the museum.

Darren Court and the foundation have been working as a very cohesive team. This museum is a true testament to the history of this area. It will be an exciting visit and a unique experience for visitors, their family and friends, and will introduce historical moments not always known to the public. The exhibits are stunning, the narratives informative and presentations exciting. It will be an unforgettable visit.

The foundation's board of directors has been honored to be a part of this historical event. Our board members have served for a number of years, and have worked diligently to see this day arrive. The WSMR Museum has been an intrinsic part of the surrounding communities, and we are grateful for all you have done for WSMR as a whole.

On a sadder note we have lost two of our museum and board members, Mary Beth Reinhart and Doyle Piland. Both made significant contributions to the foundation and museum. Mary Beth was the go to person and the lead on many of the events held by the foundation. Of course, we also know about her contributions to the missile range and its Bataan Memorial Death March.

See my piece on Doyle on the next page.

The foundation has a memorial fund for those who wish to make a contribution in memory of someone they wish to honor or remember. Donations should be sent to the foundation at:

WSMR Historical Foundation, P. O. Box 171, WSMR, New Mexico 88002.

## Foundation Needs Volunteers

The foundation is in need of volunteers to serve on the board of directors and as officers. There are several vacancies.

If you are interested, you can email Frances at: [ffw@newmexico.com](mailto:ffw@newmexico.com) or Jim Eckles at: [nebraska1950@comcast.net](mailto:nebraska1950@comcast.net). You can also call Frances at: 575-496-5183.

Membership is not as demanding as you might think. Now that the main goal of building a new building for the museum as been achieved, the jobs are smaller. In fact, instead of monthly board meetings, we are looking at quarterly ones.

# The Museum Reopening Is Getting Close

In the last newsletter we announced a tentative reopening date in December. (After decades of working for the Army, I learned the value of the term “tentative” in publicity.) The December event did not happen as deficiencies were discovered during a final inspection of the contract work. A list of fixes was created and the contractor has been busy making things right. These photos were recently posted on the museum’s Facebook page and show the exhibit hall is nearly ready to go.

If everything goes to plan, the grand reopening could be in March and probably April at the latest. Stay tuned, we’ll keep you posted.



## Doyle Piland, Longtime White Sands Supporter, Passes Away

By Frances Williams

Doyle Piland passed away recently and leaves a legacy of commitment, honor, integrity dedication and an educator. He was a man of few words and had little patience with those who did not understand the importance or were critical of White Sands Missile Range and its historic contributions to military development.

For many years he was a volunteer at the White Sands Missile Range (WSMR) Museum and also served as a board member of the WSMR Historical Foundation. Many of the data systems he developed are still in use today. He worked on the museum archives and trained volunteers for this task insuring that they understood the process and were able to work with the database he developed. He provided the museum staff invaluable

assistance in identifying many of the obscure missiles, test rockets, sites and locations which often showed up in boxes of photos and had to be processed. At one time the museum opened up the archives at WSMR to the installation during Organization Day so that employees could visit and see the museum’s holdings and understand the role of volunteers. Doyle was always on hand to greet visitors and provide a tour around the museum explaining details on the archives and holdings. He worked with researchers who visited the museum and provided them extra time to do their work and helped them with access to materials they needed.

Doyle was very dedicated to his work at the museum and his devotion and knowledge contributed to the success of WSMR and its museum.. May his memory be for a blessing.

# The Victorio Peak Treasure Story Receives CPR

By Jim Eckles, Editor

Just when things have been quiet for years, the Discovery Channel decided to try and breathe some life into the old Victorio Peak gold bar scam. The six-part series is called “Gold, Lies, and Videotape.” I call it the Victorio Peak Magical Mystery Tour.

With that going on, I thought I would share some material I recently received from Mike Burns that is destined for the WSMR Museum Archive. Mike’s father Ray was the deputy provost marshal at White Sands in the late 50s through the 1960s as a major and then as a civilian. The material is mostly newspaper and magazine clippings but there are also copies of a few White Sands documents. There is even what looks like a copy of a treasure map that I’ll put on the back page.

For those of you unfamiliar with the Victorio Peak treasure on White Sands, let me summarize. Milton Noss claimed that in 1937 he found gold bars stacked like cord wood in a cavern in the peak. In 1939, he accidentally closed the passage with a dynamite charge. From that point, Noss, descendants, and others have been trying to get at it. Many people believe it and many have claimed their share. I once talked to a man who purchased 1/20 of one percent of the treasure from Ova Noss for \$350 in the early 1950s.

OK, that kind of sounds possible until you hear what the descendants say was found. Terry Delonas told the Discovery people that the cavern held 28 billion dollars in gold. Nobody bothered with the math on the show. If you want to pursue it, you’ll find that using gold prices last year, when Delonas was recorded, you will end up with about 470 tons of gold in the peak. To put that in perspective, that is more gold than was harvested during the California gold rush of 1849-1855 when tens of thousands of people tore up the countryside extracting easily accessible gold. Another point of comparison is that the 470 tons is more than double the amount of gold now produced in the whole United States each year. Is that really possible?

I’m going to focus on a few things from 1973 in Mike’s collection. It was a time when the Victo-

rio Peak treasure story was showing up regularly both regionally and nationally. Eyes were focused on White Sands Missile Range and what the Army was going to do about the claims of billions of dollars in gold hidden in the Hembrillo Basin. Lawyer to the celebrities, F. Lee Baily publicly stated that if his clients were allowed onto the peak they would retrieve gold bars in less than an hour.

The story captured people’s imagination and they came out of the woodwork with their treasure maps, family stories and gold finding devices. Like the amount of gold in the peak, most of these people relied on some sort of magic. In my office we had file folders filled with letters from various “helpful” people but my favorite was the guy who built his own gold-detecting device. He offered his services to find the gold. Included was a Polaroid photo of him holding his instrument which was a bunch of PVC tubing duct taped together.

In Mike’s collection is a clipping of a story reported by Betty Pierce in the *El Paso Herald-Post* on August 25, 1973. This story was about Reverend John Lauretti, a Catholic priest at Immaculate Conception Church, who used “Radioesthesia” for finding things like gold.

Pierce wrote that Lauretti used a small instrument that was a “top-like object suspended from a string or chain.” The priest went on to explain that this form of “divining” could be used to find the gold in Victorio Peak. All he would need was a current aerial photo of the peak which he would place on a table. He would then suspend the instrument over the photo while holding a small gold item. He claimed the instrument would point to the spot where the gold was buried – just like Harry Potter could do with his magic wand.

He explained that to find something he needed to hold a “testimoni” in one hand and then hang the instrument from the other. The device would point to the spot where a similar material was hidden. For example, if he wanted to find a buried body, he’d hold a piece of bone. If it was oil he was looking for, he’d have some oil in his off hand. He said the testimoni acted as an antenna.

*See Mart Gilmore Was Skeptical, page 6*

## Mart Gilmore Was Skeptical — CONTINUED FROM PAGE 5

All things supposedly give off radiations and the antenna allowed him, the operator, to feel a particular one – even from a photograph.

Of course, practitioners of magic need an out when the hocus pocus fails. For Lauretti, that loophole was “belief.” He told the reporter anyone involved with the divining process must believe in the project. He said, “If they disbelieve, there is an influence on the person using the instrument.” Bingo, no gold. So, if cousin Tommy over there doesn’t believe hard enough, you are out of luck.

For the show on Victorio Peak, the magic of hundreds of tons of gold hidden in huge caverns hasn’t ever been proven even after decade after decade of searches. In this case, Discovery Channel says it is because the Army stole the gold and skillfully filled in the holes so no one can find the caverns now. In this day and age, where the public doubts the government, that is an easy fall back position.

In contrast to the divining article, there is another clipping in the Burns collection from the *El Paso Herald Post* in August of the same year casting doubt. It is an interview with Mart Gilmore who grew up and ranched all around Victorio Peak until 1927. The article leads with this quote from Gilmore, “There’s no gold hidden in the San Andres Mountains. I rode every foot of that country for years and if there was any gold there we would have found it.”

Tom Dayberry, a range rider for the missile range who grew up next to the Cox ranch, always said that if there was gold in the peak, the Henderson kids would have found it. One obvious omission in the gold claimant stories is that the Hendersons lived at the base of the peak and raised a family there. They were the last owners of the property before the Army extended the boundary to the west. Dayberry knew what ranch kids were like and it made sense that they would have explored everything in the neighborhood just like kids do today.

In the article, Gilmore says he met Doc Noss in 1936 when he took his mother to see the fake foot doctor. Gilmore says, “He asked me if I knew

of any caves in the San Andres Mountains and asked me to show him and I did.” He added, “I didn’t think much of it at the time but I knew there wasn’t any gold there.”

With Gilmore’s statements we are left to choose between two possibilities. One choice is the magical story of Noss stumbling into a cave filled with so much gold it should have a dragon like Smaug protecting it. An incredible, one might say, impossible possibility. The other is that another con artist established the basis for his scheme at Victorio and created a back story to pitch to customers - just like that email you get saying you’ve been singled out to receive five million dollars from a bank in Africa if you’ll just pay the transaction fees so the money can be transferred to you.

On a scary note, there are people, many of them believers, who take treasure very seriously. The third thing in Mike’s box are copies of two daily log reports from John Snow, a White Sands range rider. He reported threats against his life after patrolling the Victorio Peak area. The log entries are from June 16 and 17, 1973.

In those days, range riders worked for the provost marshal and were used to gather trespass livestock and deliver evacuation notices. Because of their knowledge of the landscape and its history, they also had a law enforcement function and patrolled backcountry areas like Victorio Peak. With all of the publicity nationwide, trespassers were becoming more and more of a problem on the range’s west boundary.

On June 16, Snow left main post at 10 a.m. and headed north. He detailed his day with times and places for his stops and observations. For instance, he reported at 11 a.m. he saw vehicle tracks going into Dead Man Canyon. He reported the road was too rough for his vehicle, so he stayed south and arrived at Victorio Peak at 1:25 p.m. finding “no evidence of trespass.” He returned to the Dead Man road and waited. He intercepted a “hunter” coming out at 7:30 p.m. The hunter, a retired warrant officer, had a hunting “badge” but on checking there was no record of it being issued.

*See Range Rider Threatened, page 7*

## Range Rider Threatened — CONTINUED FROM PAGE 6

Snow eventually got the guy off the range and headed back to White Sands where he arrived at 9 p.m. When Snow got home at 10:40, his wife stated she received a phone call at 2:15 p.m. where the caller said, “Mrs. Snow, tell your husband when he comes home that if he is smart he better stay home or he may get hurt.”

We don’t know if the hunter incident had anything to do with the phone call, but in the same report, Snow found that the “hunter” had repeatedly entered the mis-sile range beginning in March and running through June – a total of nine times. It was a pretty typical agenda for people entering the range to search for treasure and artifacts.

The second log entry for Snow, the next day, showed he again patrolled Victorio Peak as well as other locations. There was nothing to report. However, at the end of the record there is a “note” with Mrs. Snow receiving threatening phone calls on June 18 and June 19. The caller on the 18th said,

“Mrs. Snow, this is the last time I’m going to warn you, the next time your husband won’t be home in one piece.” On the 19th the caller said, “I’ll be gone but Mr. Snow will be watched.”

Of course, these calls may not be related to Snow’s job of patrolling the Victorio Peak area but it seems most likely. We’ll probably never know for sure. The problem with getting a box of stuff

collected by someone is that the materials often offer no resolution. They are tantalizing but incomplete. There is nothing in the box to provide further information about Snow and threats against him.

So the saga continues. Because of the cable show, I imagine White Sands will receive many more requests from people who are sure they can find the gold. More likely, I think they will be pointing fingers at people who killed the dragon and stole it. And then there are the thousands of government employees at White Sands, the Pentagon, the White House and the Dept. of Treasury covering it up for decades.



*This aerial photo of Victorio Peak was taken by the Army in the early 1970s in anticipation of the gold search that eventually happened in 1977. This is looking north and just by the road on the north side is the Henderson ranch house. Most of the roads on the peak were put in during the 1963 Gaddis Mining Company dig. The adits dug by Gaddis and the Ova Noss Family Partnership start on the west or left. In the Burns box were a few records relating to the 1977 search. Ray Burns served as a driver in support of Expeditions Unlimited.*

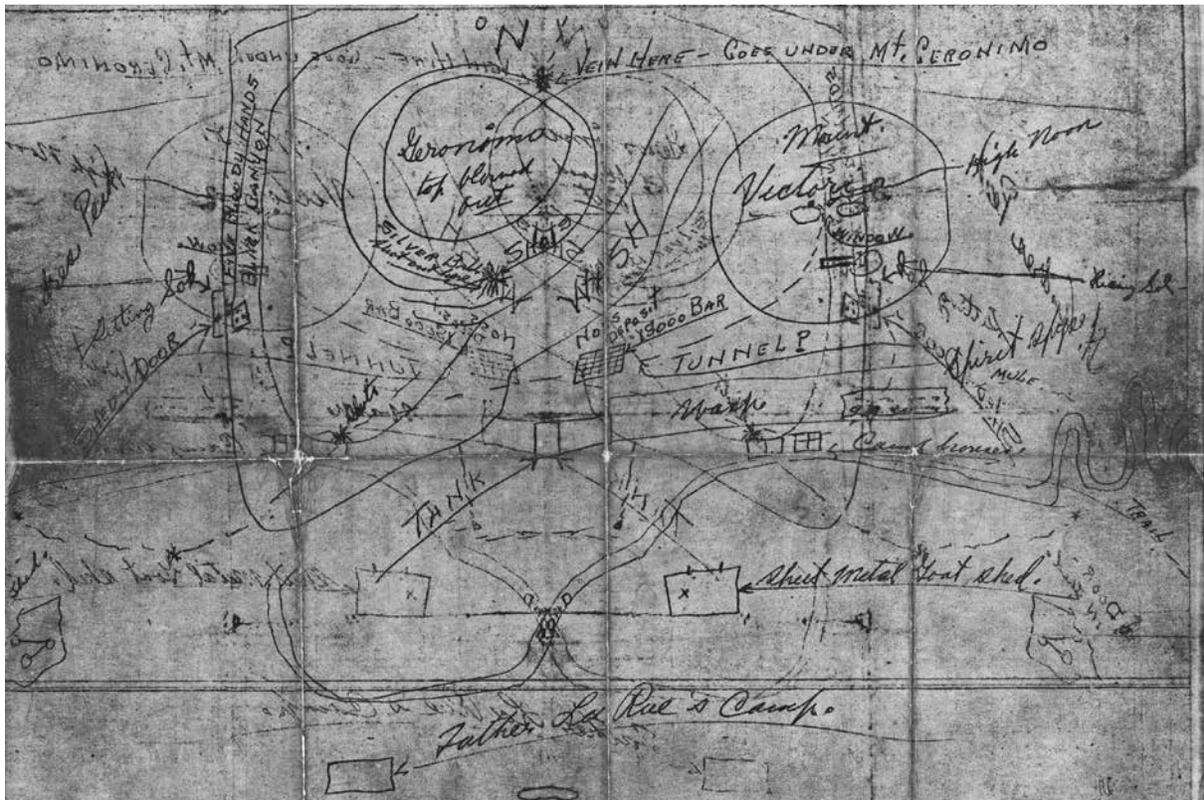
## **Thank You!**

To all the White Sands Historical Foundation  
Members Who Renewed Your Memberships For 2023  
And To Those Who Chipped In A Little Extra - Great.

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## The Back Page



*The Burns treasure map -- about as useful as "Hey, look on the north side."*