

# New Mexico's Eerie Stories and Abandoned Places

A Review Essay



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“Abandoned” and “forgotten” are two words that have long described New Mexico; terms used to frame the state as an empty middle ground along the edges of the Spanish, Mexican, and American empires. However, three recent works call such descriptors into question by helping us understand New Mexico as a rural but dynamic place since the end of the U.S.-Mexico War. These works offer a refreshing examination of New Mexico’s central place in Western and Borderland histories by recovering stories about people, places, and events, which offer new insights into how abandoned buildings and antiquated myths have shaped the modern New Mexican cultural landscape.

John M. Mulhouse’s *Abandoned New Mexico: Ghost Towns, Endangered Architecture, and Hidden History* and Susan Tatterson’s *Abandoned New Mexico: Enigmas and Endings*, are part of Arcadia Publishing’s America Through Time Series. As with most Arcadia books, these works rely on photographs, backed with sparse textual analysis, to narrate history. The series promises to give weight to local and regional history by showing how so-called modern forces have recreated a new sense of place. In this case, we see how New Mexico’s urban and rural landscapes changed with the introduction of railroads, automobiles, and government spending during and after World War II. These works do not engage with historical theories, literature reviews, or nomenclature,

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which often weigh down storytelling. Instead, the books emphasize oral histories and popular stories to understand New Mexicans in the early twenty-first century.

Mulhouse and Tatterson have produced similar books. They both cover many of the same abandoned spaces, use many of the same sources, and frame New Mexican history around romantic terms rooted in the modern world. Both begin by examining the Albuquerque Railyards, which for both authors form the epicenter for understanding abandoned and forgotten places in New Mexico. In addition, both photographers use the term *ghost town* to mean “abandoned places with and without people.” Ghost towns are no longer just dusty places set in Western movies, but livable and organic sites that continue to function on the fringes of New Mexican society. Mulhouse and Tatterson’s books complement one another. Mulhouse provides great historical context and Tatterson’s high-quality professional images capture New Mexico’s history over the last 150 years.

Mulhouse’s work is the more detailed of the two photographic books. *Ghost Towns, Endangered Architecture, and Hidden History* is a snapshot of Mulhouse’s City of Dust blog, which has showcased Mulhouse’s work on rural New Mexico since 2010. Mulhouse organizes his work around geographic locations throughout the state while focusing on two places in particular: the Albuquerque Railyards and the Old New Mexico State Penitentiary. The author lives up to his promise not to offer a voyeuristic view of New Mexico’s abandoned places as “ruin porn,” but as living and dynamic places. Mulhouse’s work is text-heavy for an Arcadia book and reflects a deeper and more concerted effort to place the state’s history within the context of larger historical moments after the U.S. Civil War. He uses ample source material from archives around the state, including the Office of the State Historian. Amateur and professional photographers will appreciate Mulhouse’s well-balanced use of digital and film photography. Many of the color photographs were reproduced from old and expired film, which add an antique touch to his written text. Some of the photographs dampen the rich blue hues of New Mexico’s skyline, resulting in an old-fashioned look. He also includes a generous selection of black-and-white photographs, which visually enrich the history of New Mexico’s mining camps, hotels, and churches. One of the highlights is Mulhouse’s examination of Organ, New Mexico, a mining community in southern Dona Aña County, which sits along the boundaries of White Sands Missile Range, the NASA complex, and the rapidly expanding Las Cruces cityscape. Mulhouse’s work depicts the little town of Organ as an abandoned mining community that is now home to professional government workers and southern New Mexican residents. This discussion of Organ embodies Mulhouse’s use of the modern ghost town.

Susan Tatterson's work, on the other hand, is more place-specific. She examines seven rural places and one city in northern and central New Mexico. Her work offers a closer look at many of the same places Mulhouse explores, with additional attention paid to the Tierra Amarillo Airforce Station. Tatterson, a professor of digital media at Central Arizona College, has been interested in abandoned spaces in Maryland and Arizona for nearly two decades. *Enigmas and Endings* is a continuation of her forgotten spaces research in New Mexico. Tatterson's photography speaks for itself. Each chapter begins with a brief description that provides a basic historical overview of the subject followed by a series of mesmerizing digital photographs. Tatterson, a master of her craft, brings new life to these abandoned and decayed places by carefully framing each photograph to tell a unique story. Her digital work on the Albuquerque Railyards alone makes her book worth purchasing. If you are a native New Mexican or a tourist just passing through the "Land of Enchantment," Tatterson's work brings new meaning to old places. Her photographs, when viewed alongside Mulhouse's text, illustrate New Mexico's rural spaces as living and quietly thriving communities worthy of appreciation and preservation in the twenty-first century.

Embracing an entirely different approach, Ray John de Aragón's *Eerie New Mexico* is a refreshing read that will appeal to general audiences. His book reminds us of forgotten stories that have molded New Mexico's identity since the arrival of the Spanish. Aragón has collected paranormal tales and ghost stories from all over the state. Appealing to those interested in the uncanny and bizarre, Aragón's work neatly sums up New Mexico's notable contribution to this genre. Aragón—who earned a Master's degree in American studies from New Mexico Highlands University—has dedicated most of his life to the study of New Mexico's haunted history. The author's own place within the text is also quite interesting. A native of Las Vegas, New Mexico, Aragón is a writer of ghost stories and believes in and records paranormal activities himself. Many of his stories will be quite familiar to native New Mexicans, like *Mal Ojo* and *La Llorona*, tales traditionally used to thrill and scare New Mexican children. The strength of Aragón's work lies in his use of oral history to retell these ghost stories, demonstrating how these stories vary from place-to-place. By the end, the reader has experienced a nuanced collection of personal insight, shared stories, and carefully researched materials that showcase paranormal New Mexico. Much like Mulhouse and Tatterson's built-environment histories of New Mexico, Aragón reminds us that myths are cultural markers. His book, as well as the works of Mulhouse and Tatterson, will appeal to native New Mexicans, tourists, or anyone interested in learning more about forgotten sides of New Mexico's history.

*Abandoned New Mexico: Ghost Towns, Endangered Architecture, and Hidden History.* By John M. Mulhouse. American Through Time. (Charleston, S.C.: Arcadia Publishing, 2020. 160 pp. 150 color plates, bibliography, index. \$23.99 paper, ISBN 978-1-63499-234-3.)

*Abandoned New Mexico: Enigmas and Endings.* By Susan Tatterson. America Through Time. (Charleston, S.C.: Arcadia Publishing, 2019. 112 pp. 138 color plates. \$23.99 paper, ISBN 978-1-63499-184-1.)

*Eerie New Mexico.* By Ray John de Aragón. (Charleston, S.C.: The History Press, 2020. 160 pp. 82 halftones, selected references. \$21.99 paper, ISBN 978-1-46714-594-7.)