

On the trail of the medallion trees

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Some of the medallions affixed to trees on trails throughout the Sandia Mountains. (Photos courtesy of Carl Gervais)

UPFRONT



Joline Gutierrez
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ALBUQUERQUE, N.M. — I'd like to imagine what happens when an impressionable hiker not well versed in the more esoteric particulars of history comes across a tree in the Sandias studded with a small metal marker that reads, Galileo's Death Tree.

Or one Anne Boleyn Beheaded Tree. Or Capt. Kidd Hanged Tree. Or Deerfield Massacre Tree.

Do they fear they've stumbled upon an ancient site of carnage? Do they shudder at the horror of their inadvertent find? Do they worry that spirits of the damned still haunt the forest?

Do they get the heck out of there?

Surely, though, they also wonder, as do we, who affixed these mysterious medallions to these trees.



The Santa Fe Trail Tree shows a germination date of 1821, when the trade route opened. (Courtesy of Carl Gervais)

Have you seen them? By some counts, there have been as many as 88 documented medallion trees, maybe even twice as many more once, scattered along the trails throughout the Sandia Mountains like secret little jewels of history.

At present, the locations of 84 medallion trees are known.

Each medallion – an aluminum or brass or steel washer about 1½ to 2 inches in diameter – is screwed into the tree over the hole where a core sample was taken to determine the tree’s age. A historic event that corresponds with the germination date, or GD, is stamped on the medallion.

Galileo's Death Tree, for example, lists a GD of 1642, the year Galileo died.

Most medallions commemorate far less dour moments in history.



The Coronado Expedition Tree medallion ties the tree's germination to 1541, the year Francisco Vázquez de Coronado made his way through New Mexico. (Courtesy of Carl Gervais)

There's the Ben Franklin's Kite Tree of 1752, the First UNM Classes Tree of 1892 and the First Fountain Pen Tree of 1780. There's the First Frankfurter Tree of 1652 and the Hershey's Chocolate Tree of 1857; George Washington's Birth Tree of 1732 and Elizabeth I Birth Tree of 1533.

The oldest tree appears to be the Robert II Crowned King of Scotland Tree in 1371 and the youngest is the Alaska 49th State Tree of 1959.

Some of the medallions include additional information, such as the date the tree was marked or the type of tree.

Little has been written about these trees, and finding them has largely been accomplished by word of mouth or the serendipity of a summer hike.

For the past couple of months, though, Albuquerque hiker Carl Gervais has been plotting out the medallion trees on trail maps to create hikes featuring the historical finds.

"It's kind of like a scavenger hunt for me," said Gervais, who hikes mostly with the Albuquerque Senior Centers' Hiking Groups – senior status beginning at the tender age of 50.

Gervais said he never hiked much before joining the group, never heard of the mysterious medallion trees until fellow hiker Tom Dieterle showed him a few.

Now he hikes three times a week, searching for medallion trees with a list of coordinates, a GPS receiver, a topo map and a pair of good hiking boots.

"People seem pretty excited about them," he said. "They're kind of amazing."

Many of the medallion trees are found along the Faulty Trail and the South Crest Trail. Others are located along the North Mystery, CCC and Three Gun Springs trails. A few are completely off trail.

Two are somewhere near the Chimney Canyon Trail, a steep, treacherous excursion considered one of the most dangerous hikes in the Sandias. So far, Gervais has not attempted to reach those.

He isn't sure who is responsible for the medallions. Apparently, nobody is.

According to the Sandia Mountain Natural History Center, they are the work of an "unknown person" in the 1920s.

David Ryan, writer of the "Gentle Art of Wandering" book and website, suggests that they started as a project of the Civilian Conservation Corps, which built roads, campgrounds and picnic areas in the Sandias between 1933 and 1942.

But other medallions, such as the TWA Flight 260 Crash Site Tree of 1955, were embedded long after the CCC passed into history.

Others appear to have been replaced with newer medallions as late as 1964.

"In a way, the mystery surrounding these things makes them even more fascinating," Gervais said.

Recently, he found one of the medallion trees uprooted and dead on the forest floor, a victim of bark beetles, disease or drought.

Another hiker reported that two other medallions have gone missing from their trees, possibly the victims of vandals.

Thankfully, getting to the trees requires more of an effort than the average scofflaw cares to exert.

Someday, it's likely that the medallions will fade, quite literally, into the woodwork. Trees will fall, history will march on.

For now, the medallion trees provide a little history, a little walk in the woods – and no spirits of the damned for miles.