



MarkHitsTheRoad

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Silver City and El Paso Road Trip (\$25A)

For my latest road trip, I decided to head to a pair of cities located in areas where there were sites, hikes and museums I wanted to see – Silver City, New Mexico and El Paso, Texas.

This meant another drive down through Phoenix and southeastern Arizona. Fortunately, there were a couple museums in Prescott, Arizona and Phoenix to break up the drive that I missed on past trips because they were closed when I was in town.

The Museum of Indigenous People in Prescott is a small museum in a not-so-big town, but it has a rather impressive collection of Native American artifacts related to prehistoric cultures in what is now Arizona. These included the usual assortment of pottery, tools, weavings and so on, but a couple artifacts were new to me.



The round disk is an extremely rare example of an intact comal. It was found in the ruins area I hiked in Arizona in January 2024. They're primarily associated with ancient Hohokam Culture sites, but they're still used in Mexican cooking to make tortillas.



These stone-carved bighorn sheep effigies were found together facing opposite direction. They're likely of Hohokam influence.

The Phoenix site combines a museum with a large platform mound site of Hohokam origin. I was there back in January 2020, but since then the museum was revamped, and the site was renamed the S'edav Va'aki Museum Archaeological Park.



Hohokam pottery on display at the S'edav Va'aki Museum.

En route to Silver City, New Mexico, I took a driving break in Willcox, Arizona. I spent a night there on a car trouble-truncated trip back in 2019, so this time I got to see more of the town.



That included the Old Pioneer Cemetery which features the grave of Warren Earp, one of the famous Earp brothers of “Gunfight at the O.K. Corral” fame. Warren missed the gunfight there, but met his demise at the wrong end of a gun in Willcox after a bar fight.

Silver City is about halfway between I-10 and the Gila Cliff Dwellings National Monument site. I’ve passed through the town on a couple past trips to the cliff dwellings, thought it looked interesting, and found some other nearby sites worth checking out. It has a long history as a mining area, and it is also the site of Western New Mexico University, but the numerous downtown galleries suggest that it is also home to a lot of artists.



Silver City’s Silco Theater and Murray Hotel feature some excellent Art Deco design.



This is Big Ditch Park. It used to be where Silver City's Main Street was. When the city planners laid out the town, they didn't take into consideration where floodwaters would flow during unusually heavy monsoon storms, especially after upstream mountains were stripped of their trees. Over the years, floods damaged and destroyed Main Street buildings and turned Main Street itself into a sizable gully. The city eventually added some flood control provisions and turned the gully into Big Ditch Park.

A key reason for my visit to Silver City was to see the museum on the college campus because of its sizeable collection of Mimbres Culture artifacts. The Mimbres were a sub-culture of the Mogollon Culture. Alas, it was closed for the week as it was the school's spring break, a schedule detail that was missing from the website when I planned my trip.

I did visit the Silver City Museum, though. Not much of a substitute, however, as it was a very small museum that had little to say about each of a handful of subjects. I did learn about the origin of the Big Ditch as well as the nearby Santa Rita Mine. The Santa Rita Mine is possibly the oldest mine in North America. Copper was readily available at the site and used by Native Americans in the area. In 1799, an Apache Indian showed the site to a Spaniard, who staked a claim and began to mine copper at the site in 1801. Mining stopped for a while during the Civil War, but eventually the mine reopened and the operation grew into what today is a large open pit copper mine.



As a remote town, medical equipment in Silver City's early days often had to perform double duty. For instance, this chair on display in the Silver City Museum's local medical history exhibit was used both as a barber's chair and for gynecological exams. This led to more than a little confusion among the townsfolk.



My other top reason for visiting Silver City was to hike the 3 ½ mile Dragonfly Trail so that I could see a small Mimbres petroglyph site that features this dragonfly petroglyph. I don't recall seeing a dragonfly petroglyph before, but they're a common motif in Mimbres pottery.



After the hike, I toured the grounds of historic Fort Bayard. Fort Bayard was established in 1866 to provide security against Native American attacks on settlers and miners in the region. Later, it became the army's first tuberculosis sanitarium and then a VA hospital. German POWs were held at the fort during WWII.



The monolith (red arrow) on the ridge above the Santa Rita Mine is known as the Kneeling Nun.



I finished my Silver City sightseeing with a return visit to the nearby City of Rocks State Park. Volcanic tuff is a soft rock formed from the consolidated ash and other debris ejected during volcanic eruptions, in this case from the nearby Emory Cauldron. It cracks and erodes easily, resulting in the formations found at City of Rocks. I hiked some of the trails that wandered through, around and on top of the formations.



If you “need to go” while visiting City of Rocks, rest assured that you’ll find a toilet there.



During my drive to El Paso, I stopped in Deming, New Mexico to visit the Deming Luna Mimbres Museum. It showcased the usual small town history artifacts, but it also had some good exhibits about WWII's Bataan Death March. Bataan involved the biggest military surrender in U.S. history. Those captured were marched 80 miles through Philippine jungles. Thousands died as their Japanese captors starved and beat the marchers and bayoneted those too weak to walk. More than 1800 soldiers from the New Mexico National Guard were among the captives, over half of whom died.



The museum also displayed a huge collection of Native American artifacts, especially from Casa Grande and Mimbres cultures.



This Mimbres bowl is decorated with a trio of birds carrying snakes.



I'm guessing that drug use was common in Mimbres Culture. I don't know how else to explain the squirrel-meets-man decoration on this bowl.



El Paso is a large city at the southwestern tip of Texas on the Mexican border. It has two major border crossing sites, including this one that leads all of these folks directly into downtown El Paso from Ciudad Juárez, Mexico. I've walked across this bridge into Juárez during two past visits to El Paso, but I stayed in Texas on this trip.



Many of the Mexicans who walk over the bridge to El Paso come here to shop in the city's El Centro shopping district. Most of the business names and signs here are in Spanish, and it reminded me of the shopping district in San José, Costa Rica.



During the Mexican Revolution (1910-1920), Pancho Villa used this El Paso house to stash \$500,000 in U.S. currency and gold coins, and another \$30,000 in jewelry. Villa used El Paso to purchase supplies, recruit soldiers and hide out from the Mexican government.



I visited the El Paso Museum of History. From its Native American past, through Spanish Colonialism, its important location on the trade route that connected Mexico City to the Santa Fe area (El Camino Real de Tierra Adentro, perhaps the oldest Euro-origin trade route in North America), to Mexican independence followed by Texas independence to becoming part of the United States, the area has quite a fascinating history, much of which was barely touched on in the small exhibit room focused on the area's general history.



Instead, temporary exhibits on the El Paso music scene (pictured is local-boy-who-hit-it-big Khalid's jacket), two-spiritedness (gay and trans) aspects in several Native American cultures, and the city's ties to the Korean War each occupied more space in the museum.



I wasn't any more impressed with the smallish El Paso Museum of Art, although there were some pieces I liked, and some that certainly caught my attention.

I suspected and later confirmed that this work was done by the same artist behind *Las Patsy*, *Los Homeboys y Los Quartos* and other airbrushed works I saw at the Las Cruces (New Mexico) Museum of Art during that 2023 road trip.



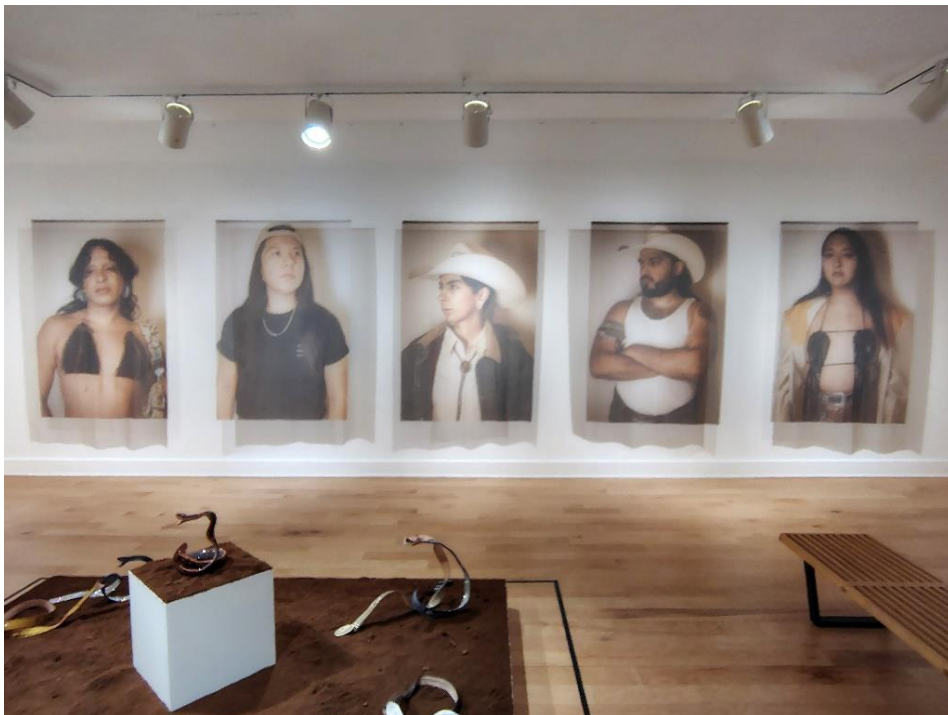
Rio Grande was probably my favorite work of this museum visit.



An exhibit on local artist José Villalobos included this video performance art of him slowly strangling himself with a pair of belts. “Villalobos works with leather, belt buckles, and other traditional menswear that are historically tied to toxic masculinity within *Norteño* culture. By manipulating these materials, Villalobos gives form to the inner conflict of upholding traditional gender roles and reconciling their *maricón* identity.” Well, obviously!



I don't associate belts with toxic masculinity, but this is how I view a belt when I discover that it no longer comfortably fits me.



I was not impressed by the video, but I did like this series of photos of his. On the wall behind me was a similar series of photos focused on belt buckles that did absolutely nothing for me. Art appreciation can be quite subjective, I guess.



Sometimes when I see a painting I like, I'll take a closer look at the brushwork. It's interesting to see how the small dabs of paint in this painting come together when you step back from it (not unlike the LED "hockey pucks" on the outside of the Sphere in Las Vegas that I saw on my last trip).

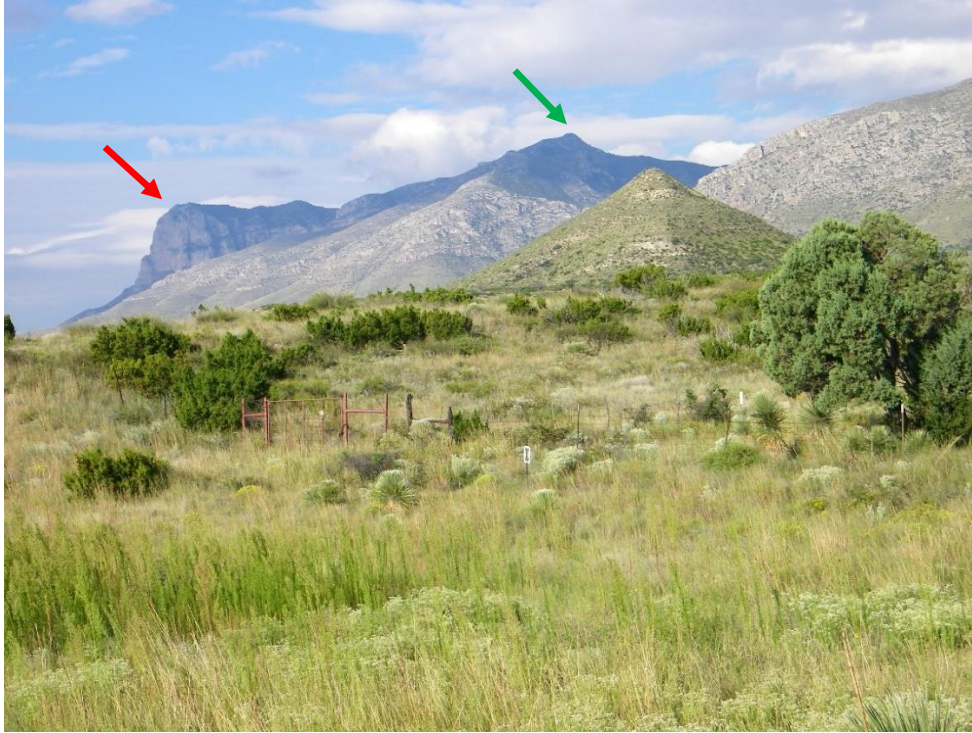


Another primary goal for my El Paso stay was to head out to Guadalupe Mountains National Park to hike its Salt Basin Dunes trail located on the park's remote west side. I had hoped to get views with the dunes in the foreground and the mountains in the background, but strong winds kicked up enough sand that the mountains were mostly obscured from view. You can barely make out the tops of the range about halfway up this picture.



The dunes look more like snow here.

(Compare the colors in these photos to the Rio Grande painting, above, that I said I liked. I actually saw the painting the day after this hike, so its colors reminded me of the hike.)



These are pictures at Guadalupe Mountains National Park that I took on past trips to the much more easily accessed east side. In this picture, you can see El Capitan (red arrow) and Guadalupe Peak (green arrow). Guadalupe Peak, at 8,751 feet above sea level, is the highest point in Texas.



During an earlier visit, I camped at the park for a couple days, and hiked to the summit of Guadalupe Peak. It's a steep hike up, climbing about 3000 feet in 4.2 miles (8.4 miles round trip). This is the view west from Guadalupe Peak towards the Salt Basin Dunes.



At the end of the war between the United States and Mexico, much of the new boundary between the countries followed the then-current deep channel of the Rio Grande River, including in the El Paso area. But like a number of other rivers, the Rio Grande sometimes altered its course. It moved south in the eastern El Paso area known as Chamizal, and the U.S. acted as if the hundreds of acres of Mexican territory that suddenly found itself north of the river was now U.S. territory.

Mexican President Benito Juárez first raised this issue with the Lincoln administration in the 1860s, but the issue wasn't resolved until the Kennedy administration, and was enacted by President Johnson after Kennedy's death. The land was divided, and a new, concrete-lined channel for the Rio Grande was built here to stabilize the boundary between the countries. Both countries created national parks on their portion of Chamizal, including Chamizal National Memorial on the U.S. side. The park has a small museum and cultural center with a statue of Benito Juárez in front, and large park-like grounds near the second El Paso-area border crossing bridge.



The border wall now at Chamizal



This site was the last stop along the Rio Grande River before El Camino Real de Tierra Adentro, the trade route between Mexico City and the Santa Fe area, headed away from the river to pass through the Jornada del Muerto (Dead Man's Journey), a waterless segment of the route that skirted a rugged stretch along the river. In 1861, the Confederacy established a camp here to help protect Confederate Arizona. In 1865, the U.S. built Fort Selden here to protect settlers and travelers from attacks by desperados and the Mescalero Apache. The New Mexico historic site now protects the adobe ruins of the fort and has a small museum focused on the fort's history.



This is what's left of an Officers Row house once occupied by Captain Arthur MacArthur and his family in the 1880s. His family included his young son Douglas, who went on to become the famous General Douglas MacArthur.



When you drive in the southwest within, say, 100 miles of the Mexican border, you may run into these. Traffic is diverted off the highway and through a U.S. Border Patrol checkpoint. I encountered three of these on this trip. Usually, I'm just waved through, but sometimes they ask a few questions.

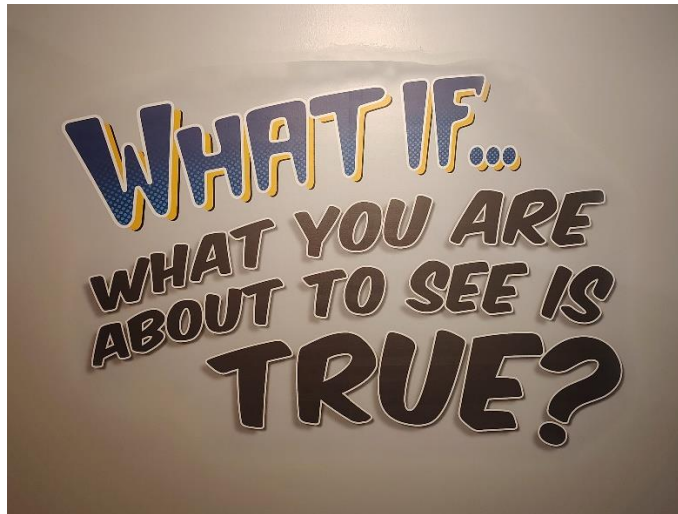


Hatch, New Mexico is famous for its green chile peppers, and there are several places in town to buy peppers and related products. But it is also home to (in spite of the presence of the A&W Burger Family) Sparky's Burgers and BBQ Restaurant, which is as famous for its collection of roadside kitsch as it is for its chile-enhanced menu of burgers, BBQ, hot dogs and tacos.



Next door is the Hatch Mercantile Company, which sells a lot of things that would be cool to have except you wouldn't know what to do with once you got them home. Like this Schweiss automatic chicken plucker. Basically, a motor drives a pulley that turns a cylinder that has several rubberized posts sticking out of it. I wasn't sure where the chicken goes, so I found a video on YouTube. You start it up, and when the cylinder is spinning, you get a firm grip on your chicken (it works best with a dead chicken), and hold it close enough so that the rubberized spikes hit and tug on the feathers. Hold the chicken in various positions in order to get all of the feathers (it seemed to be hit and miss with tailfeathers). It takes only about 1-2 minutes to pluck an entire chicken.





When driving across the northern Great Plains towards the Badlands, you will see signs advertising Wall Drug, a pharmacy that became famous in the 1930s for offering free ice water to Mount Rushmore-bound tourists and now is a tourist destination in its own right. Across southern New Mexico and Arizona are signs for "THE THING? A SIGHT TO BEHOLD" or "MYSTERY OF THE DESERT". You'll find a museum dedicated to THE THING? at I-10's Exit 322 in southeast Arizona. The museum provides the backstory for THE THING? before you reach the end of the tour and see THE THING? itself.



Needing a new planet, the RAH'thians came to earth during the Age of the Dinosaurs. Their Mylzerath clan were the warriors who sought power. Their Ammattria clan were the peace-loving scientists who could fight if needed, but believed in a greater power that created the universe.

Through mind control and dinosaur DNA manipulation, they gained domination over the dinosaurs and enslaved them. But the DNA manipulation eventually resulted in dinosaurs who could communicate with each other telepathically. Realizing that they were enslaved by the RAH'thians, the dinosaurs began rejecting alien control. The dinosaurs rose up against their alien masters. Some Ammattria were sympathetic to the plight of the dinosaurs and joined their fight against the Mylzerath. This war continued for hundreds of years.

Meanwhile, curious Ammattria scientists discovered mysterious cave dwelling creatures. They thought these creatures were more interesting than the dinosaurs. What if they are connected to the humans of today?

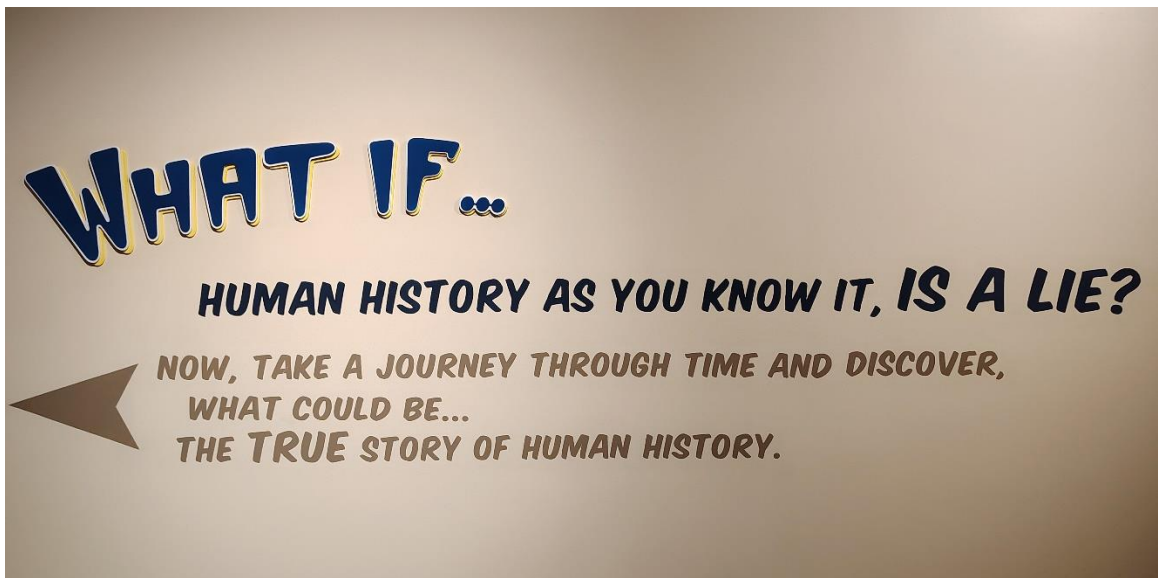


As the war raged on, the Mylzerath came to the realization that they were going to lose. Not willing to lose gracefully, they set a fiendish plan in motion.



They left Earth and then sent an asteroid towards Earth. According to their calculations, an impact at the Yucatan Peninsula would create the most damage, ending all life on the planet.

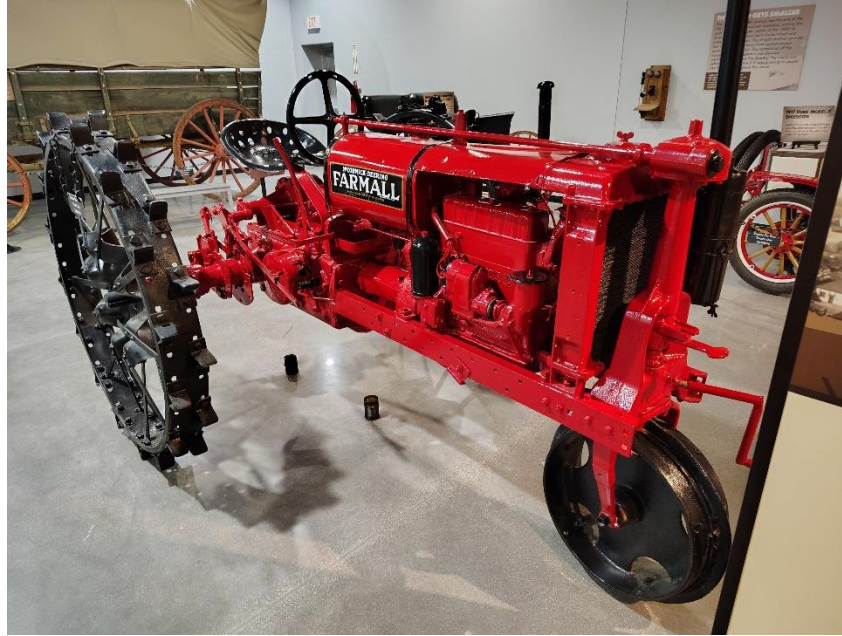
Things didn't work out quite as planned. They got the dinosaurs, alright, but other species survived and eventually thrived. This included the evolution of modern humans, which were similar to those ancient cave dwellers that the Ammattria found during the Dinosaur Age. As civilizations rose and fell, humans caught the attention of the RAH'thians once more, and they returned to Earth. However, the Mylzerath and Ammattria routinely found themselves supporting opposite sides. Humans became proxies for the disputes between the two RAH'thian clans.



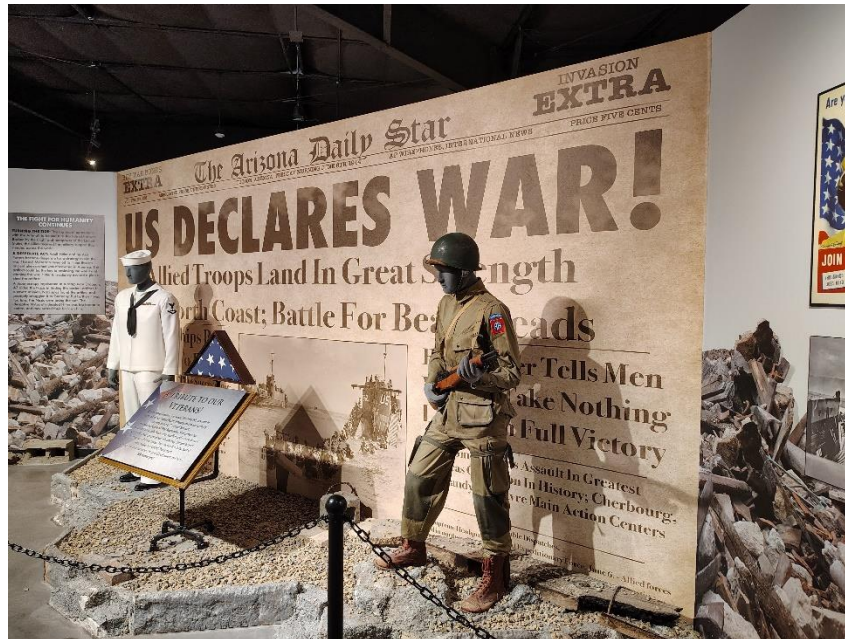
The Mylzerath sided with ancient Babylon. The Ammattia supported ancient Greece and Alexander the Great. The Mylzerath regained the upper hand through their control of the Roman Empire. Then a power struggle between the two clans led to the Dark Ages. Each side came to dominate different parts of the British Empire, with the Ammattia showing particular interest in the British American colonies.



The Ammattia helped secure American independence. That was too much for the Mylzerath, so they fomented the American Civil War. After the war, the U.S. settled across the continent. In the 1890s, a mysterious creature was unearthed deep in an Arizona copper mine. The discovery was so mysterious and controversial that the facts were hidden from the public. What was it? Why hide such an important find? What if it revealed evidence that aliens live among us? Was this THE THING?



THE THING? is an antique Farmall tractor? Well, no. It turns out that the person who set up THE THING? Museum also collected antique vehicles, and for some reason he decided to interrupt our narrative by putting them on display at this point, starting with the tractor.



Back to our story, we're now up to the world wars and the Great Depression. Not surprisingly, the Mylzerath supported Hitler and the Nazis. Desperate for a strategy to win the war, the Mylzerath revealed to Hitler that an ancient alien artifact was discovered in Arizona that could be key to enslaving the world and winning the war. With the help of a Japanese spy imprisoned at a camp near Dragoon, Arizona, Nazi spies found the artifact and smuggled it to Germany, although by this time it was too late to help Hitler's cause.



The Ammatria provided the U.S. with the technology to develop the atomic bomb and win the war in exchange for a pledge from Allied leadership to destroy all evidence related to the existence of aliens, leaving only conspiracy theories and rumors today. But there was also the matter of the alien artifact that the Nazis had taken. Hitler kept it at his Eagle's Nest retreat. General Eisenhower ordered the 101st Airborne to be the first to arrive at the site. They successfully recovered the ancient alien artifact and brought it back to the United States.



WHAT IF... ELVIS WAS ACTUALLY ABDUCTED BY ALIENS?

MYSTERY OF THE DESERT!

Many rumors have shrouded **THE THING?** in mystery.

WHAT IF... the story you just encountered was true... a story of aliens fighting dinosaurs... a battle that manipulated the course of human history?

WHAT IF... THE THING? is the last remnant of a prehistoric Cave Dweller?

WHAT IF... it was the mysterious cargo that resulted in the sinking of the Lusitania?

WHAT IF... it was the ancient alien artifact recovered through a daring mission in WWII?

WHAT IF... it is the missing link between humans and aliens from the other side of the galaxy?

WHAT IF... the best way to hide the truth is in plain sight, at an obscure roadside stop in Arizona?

Now, prepare to be **AMAZED**, as you discover the **"MYSTERY OF THE DESERT!"**

FUN FACT: T. Binkley Prince acquired **THE THING?** around 1950, although the details of how, are still shrouded in secrecy. In 1965 he built **THE THING?** roadside attraction right here. Mr. Prince ran the store with his wife until his death in 1969 at just 56 years of age. Upon his death, Claude Bowlin Jr. struck a deal with Mr. Prince's wife Janet to take over the store's operation. Bowlin Travel Centers, Inc. has maintained the mystery ever since.

Let's get a look at **THE THING?**



Okay, this isn't a picture of THE THING? It's just some random photo I used as a placeholder.

You see, although the museum generously allows visitors to take photos, they ask that we not reveal
THE THING?

So, I won't be posting my photos of THE THING? online. But if you're in my neck of the woods, stop by the house, and I'll show them to you offline. Or better yet, head to the remote museum in southeast Arizona on the edge of the Sonoran Desert and see it for yourself!

And that finishes this trip.