

Central Coast: Past, Present, Future



Have you seen the Dark Watchers?

By Mark James Miller, March 11, 2018

They have been seen for centuries, haunting the high peaks and cliffs of the Santa Lucia Mountains, dark figures wearing capes or large round hats.

They are seen in places no human could climb to. They are seen most often at sundown, although there have been reports of them appearing just before dawn. They are human-shaped but are much larger than humans. Witnesses describe them as standing anywhere from seven to 10 feet in height. Dark and shadowy, they disappear whenever anyone approaches them.

These are the Dark Watchers, strange and elusive phantoms who dwell in the mountains that run from Avila Beach to Monterey. Hikers in Big Sur report feeling as if they are being watched, and when they turn about to see who is stalking them they get a quick glimpse of a large, black shape that vanishes almost the moment it is seen.

They are most often described as looking out to sea, as if waiting for something to appear on the distant horizon.

Some say they bring bad luck to those who see them. Others claim they are benevolent spirits, while others feel they resemble the Grim Reaper.

Juan Rodriguez Cabrillo was the first European to document the Santa Lucia Mountains when he sailed past them in 1542, and they were named by Spanish cartographer Sebastian Vizcaino 60 years later. Early Spanish

settlers to the Central Coast quickly became aware of the Dark Watchers, dubbing them “Los Vigilantes Oscuros.”

As time passed the Dark Watchers became part of local lore. In 1937, poet Robinson Jeffers referred to them: “he thought it might be one of the watchers/who are often seen in this length of coast-range ...”

The following year John Steinbeck published a short story, “Flight,” in which Pepe, after killing a man in a drunken brawl, flees into the mountains to escape the police. His mother advises him: “When thou comest to the high mountains, if thou seest any of the dark watching men, go not near to them nor try to speak to them.”

Pepe is careful to heed his mother’s advice: “He saw a black figure for a moment; but he looked away quickly, for it was one of the dark watchers.”

The Dark Watchers are not altogether unique to the Central Coast. Witnesses describe similar specters in Canada, Texas and Alabama. A pilot reported seeing seven of them while flying north of Vandenberg Air Force Base in 2011. They have also been seen in the eastern Sierra Nevada mountains.

Psychologists offer varying explanations for the Dark Watchers. They could be hallucinations, or simply the mind’s misinterpretations of natural phenomena. They could also be the result of the “Brocken Spectre,” an optical illusion named after a foggy peak in Germany’s Harz Mountains. The Brocken Spectre happens when a low sun is behind a person climbing a mountain and looking downward into a mist or fog. The shadow that is cast is projected onto the point opposite the sun.

“Infrasound,” that is, sound below 20 Hz, lower than what the human ear can detect, could also explain the Dark Watchers. Infrasound can be generated by

ocean waves, and experiments have shown that it can cause anxiety, insomnia and can even cause human eyes to vibrate, creating distorted vision and hallucinations.

The next time you're driving up Pacific Coast Highway, take a look out your window as the sun goes down. Perhaps you'll catch a glimpse of the Dark Watchers. But don't stare at them for too long. The Dark Watchers just may be watching you.

Mark James Miller is an associate faculty in English at Allan Hancock College, and president of the Part-Time Faculty Association. He can be reached at mark@pfaofahc.com.