

DEATH MARKERS IN THE DESERT

In 1783 Antonio Reyes, Bishop of Sonora, complained about the popular custom of placing a cross beside the road wherever a traveler had been killed by the Apaches. This, he argued, led to profanation of the holy symbol of the cross, and was a chilling reminder of the stark realities of travel on the frontier. Over two centuries later, the crosses remain, although the automobile has replaced the Apaches as the major cause of roadside death.

The original purpose of the crosses was simple: they showed where someone died suddenly and without the preparation afforded by the Catholic Church, and passers-by could respond to their unspoken plea and pray for that person's soul. Such interactive sites had been part of the roadside scene since the arrival of the Spaniards in Mexico. In fact, they might be much older. Prehistoric trails in the desert have small rock piles by them, and some are still added to by passers-by.

As our region's population has grown in size and diversity, sudden death markers have remained a part of the landscape, but they have changed in many ways: in what they look like, in what they mean, in how they are regarded, and in the reaction that they elicit from passers-by. The basic form of the cross remains popular. There was even a time in the 1950s when the state Highway Department placed crosses at fatal accident sites as warnings to motorists. However, the crosses we see nowadays are usually placed by grieving friends and relatives...I suspect as a way of doing something to ease the pain of loss.

Today, not all the sudden death markers are crosses. I was recently shown a photograph of a Star of David marking a death site on Highway 87 near Sells. By the same token, the crosses need not be requests for prayers for the dead, but are simply commemorative monuments. Many are carefully tended by those left behind. I know death markers where the color of the artificial flowers placed on them changes with the seasons, or where special, seasonal decorations appear, such as ghosts or scarecrows in the fall. Others may start as simple crosses, and then have niches, photos, and benches added to them over time. Most give the name and dates of the deceased in easy-to-read form

The latest manifestation of this old, old custom may be the "ghost bikes" placed by members of the Tucson cycling community to commemorate the traffic

death of a fellow bike rider. These stark reminders are painted white and equipped with the name and dates of the deceased. Flowers are often placed nearby.

Whether they be invitations to prayer, acts in memory of loved ones, even reminders to both cyclists and motorists of the dangers of bike riding, these public memorials to tragedy and sudden death continue a long-standing tradition, and seem to be meaningful to an increasing number of people here in our desert.



