

V101 - El Tiradito.mp3

[00:00:05] **Amanda** All month long. On this podcast, we've been sharing some truly frightening stories from headless women to movie set Phantoms. We've traveled all around the state to hear tales of spirits from beyond the grave. And while today's episode is certainly about the afterlife, there's a little less spook and a little more divinity. It starts off with a salacious, true crime story that you'd only expect out of Hollywood and ends with an altar for hopes and dreams. Welcome to Valley 101, a podcast by the Arizona Republic and azcentral.com. I'm producer Amanda Lovato. And today I'm recounting the lore behind the El Tiradito wishing shrine in Tucson's Barrio Viejo.

[00:00:57] Drive slow. Oh, I think I see it. All right. Let me find a place to park. But it's actually of right out. Hello. Thank you for having me here. Absolutely.

[00:01:30] **Abraham** Amanda Abraham, So I just love to like, have first time people that are here just kind of take it in for a second because it's really just it's different than what you would just find like in a residential area.

[00:01:41] **Amanda** And it's smaller than I thought it was going to be.

[00:01:43] **Abraham** Yeah. Yeah.

[00:01:45] **Amanda** I wanted to see El Tiradito for myself, and I'm really glad that I did. In photos, it's hard to imagine the scale of the shrine. It sits in the Barrio Viejo area of Tucson, which is on the western side of the city. This area is predominantly and historically associated with Mexican-American culture. If you didn't know to look for it, you might miss the shrine altogether while driving past it. Nestled between a little Mexican restaurant and an elementary school, it's kind of a desolate looking piece of land, some art and some trees. But in general, it doesn't look very substantial. But if you look carefully, you'll find something kind of marvelous. A few steps away from the street on a plot of dirt is the remnants of a crumbling adobe building with dozens of candles around it and little pieces of paper sticking out of it. While the legend behind Altair, Dito, is much older. The structure was built in the 1940s.

[00:02:50] **Abraham** Symbolizes the Mexican head of this neighborhood. It symbolizes, you know, the mythology of this neighborhood. And it also, to me, it stands as an icon of like Tucson's true identity, being that it goes back to the early days of Tucson and is culturally authentic.

[00:03:06] **Amanda** Abraham Cooper is a historian, folklorist and native Tucsonan. He's dedicated almost 20 years to learning more about and writing about El Tiradito, the lore, the shrine and the impact it's had on the community around him.

[00:03:23] **Abraham** I was studying filmmaking at the community college here at Pima, and at that time I'd been in school for about three years and was taking a screenwriting class, and we were prompted to come up with a story. I had just moved into a house down the street from here at that time, first place I lived in by myself, so I was kind of fresh out of my parents house. My friend and I were he was in the program with me and we were kind of kicking around ideas for this script, and we both knew that we kind of wanted it to be like a real grassroots Tucson subject, whatever that might be, but it would focus on like a particular, like figure, historical figure. And so we got together in December of 2005. He was over and we were just like, Let's just go on a walk. And I didn't really know the

neighborhood very well at the time. So we were just kind of wandering around at night and came down the street here. And I just saw this yard with like all of these candles, let's imagine at night was just like all lit up. I felt like I was walking into some sort of temple or something, was like, What the heck is that doing there? Like in between these buildings is just like, so unassuming, you know? I immediately fell in. Love is like love at first sight. I was like, Wow, this is like got an energy to it, you know? And then as we approached the back wall and kind of walked around, I noticed the plaque over there from the historical register. And reading the story is about this guy that had been murdered in the 1800s. And there are tons of legends surrounding it for over a century. And and that's how I got hooked into it.

[00:04:50] **Amanda** Most of Abraham's writing about the relic is academic in nature. He's currently working on a scholarly thesis on it and hopes to maybe write a book one day.

[00:05:00] **Abraham** Not super lengthy, but something that just appeals to people's curiosity about it. And also not just like a simple tour guide like, Hey, check this cool place and Tucson, but more really kind of peeling back the layers of what this place is try to accurately describe based on research the evidence I've found to point to one conclusion or another.

[00:05:24] **Amanda** As we stood in the one shady spot on an unseasonably warm October day, I asked Abraham to tell me the titillating story behind El Tiradito. There are a few versions of what happened because it happened in the late 1800s. But he went with the account that, based on his research, is most likely.

[00:05:45] **Abraham** The man by the name of Juan Olivares, who worked on a ranch just outside of Tucson, was living with his in-laws on the ranch. His wife's family, as is common and a lot of Mexican folklore. He had a love affair with his mother in law. According to the legend, he was visiting his mother in law who was living in this neighborhood just down the street somewhere on this block. And one day, his father in law came home and found them in bed and in a fit of rage. Killed him right in front of the house. And there's varying accounts of how that happened in this particular legend. His father in law grabbed an ax and hacked him to death right on the steps of the house, which is supposedly where this Adobe Edifice. And so because he had sinned. And being that they were from an extremely Catholic community, he was not allowed to be buried in the cemetery with everybody else. Nevertheless, and this is the part of the legend that connects a lot of them. For some reason, the community felt this overwhelming sense of sympathy for him.

[00:06:43] **Amanda** Why people felt sympathy for him is still a mystery. Olivares was an adulterer and a sinner, and yet both his wife and his mother in law, who were both in love with him, started leaving candles at the site of his murder.

[00:07:00] **Abraham** And over time, people began this tradition of visiting it. And the idea goes that if and this is, again, something that's fundamental in Mexican folklore or Mexican American, is that oftentimes you'll have these figures that are called folk saints and they're liminal figures that are sort of stuck in purgatory. And so this spirit not being allowed into heaven didn't quite make it into hell. Then became an intermediary between the living and the spiritual realm.

[00:07:30] **Amanda** From this, tradition and the legend was born.

[00:07:33] **Abraham** So this idea developed that if you leave a candle and it stays lit overnight, that you can make a wish and it'll come true. Like, you can actually petition to this spirit. The spirit of Juan Olivares or whatever you want to call it, for him. And just by following these sort of unspoken rules that you'll get to gain fortune or maybe cure for a terminal disease. People began leaving written wishes into the holes in the wall, and although it looks kind of destructive, it is very much a part of the spiritual practice here that goes on.

[00:08:06] **Amanda** That practice has been happening for over a century now. I asked Abraham if he's ever left a wish in all of his years of visiting and researching the shrine.

[00:08:17] **Abraham** Oh, yeah. Yeah. Different wishes over the years. My father passed away about ten years ago, and when he was in the hospital, he came here and really sat down and just had a moment of silence and wrote a wish for him to get better, at least to just find peace and other relatives that have been ill.

[00:08:35] **Amanda** Not only is El Tiradito important to Abraham and the people who leave wishes, but the community actually fought for it to be historically recognized. When Tucson was further developing in the seventies, during this time, a lot of the traditionally Mexican-American areas of town were facing gentrification in wanting to bring more tourists to town. These older neighborhoods with historically immigrant roots were being pushed out.

[00:09:03] **Abraham** These folks had been living in an authentic way since the beginning of Tucson. That's real. And because of that, that kind of being the atmosphere of the time. During the 1960s and seventies, there began this discussion about tearing this down and people in the community, they got together and they fought against it really hard. That tension is what led to people in the community to fight to get it on the National Register of Historic Places, which it is now and has been since the seventies, which is amazing because this place symbolizes the Mexican hood of this neighborhood.

[00:09:37] **Amanda** Now, just because it's on the national Register doesn't mean that it's fully protected, but it does serve as a safety blanket for the community to rely that it will be around for years to come. With any story that is this old. There are bound to be some myths, some differences in the stories that are told. And since I had the expert with me, why not do some myth busting? So is the shrine at the actual place of the murder, or is it more of just a symbol that had happened?

[00:10:09] **Abraham** Yeah. So there are ideas that it was actually located like a block away, a block east of here. There's actually three different places that it's said to have been in. Based on my research, my historical research. I'm fairly confident that this is whether or not a murder happened here. This has been the same place that it's always been. And so that's kind of my feeling about it. But again, it's like there's always that murkiness when you're doing research on something that's going that far back, we don't know 100%.

[00:10:37] **Amanda** Another point of clarification I had for Abraham was something I read every single time while I was researching El Tiradito is the only Catholic shrine to a sinner.

[00:10:50] **Abraham** My understanding is that actually there are Catholic organizations that and co and Christian organizations that meet up here and they actually hold vigil for different events and stuff. So it's something that isn't taboo maybe as much as as it once was.

[00:11:05] **Amanda** While that is true, when I reached out to the Roman Catholic Diocese of Tucson, they denied their affiliation with the shrine, which means it's not really a Catholic shrine to a sinner, even if that makes for a snappier title. Another question I had is Are there rules? Can I only bring religious candles with saints on them to visit this saint?

[00:11:29] **Abraham** No, absolutely not. I think it's just that those are the cheapest ones you can find in bulk.

[00:11:35] **Amanda** Lighting a candle for your wish shouldn't break the bank. As I mentioned before, they're variations of the story. Every version had the same setup, though. Ranch Hand was having an affair with his mother in law, was killed by his father in law. But what happened next is what differs story to story in one common adaptation of history. The wife hangs herself in grief and the father in law is chased down, murdered by a group of vigilantes just over the border.

[00:12:05] **Abraham** Any kind of configuration of that, you can come up with that sort of Mexican soap opera. It exists, I'm sure, but I have heard a version similar to the one you're describing. He dies, his mother in law kills herself, and then the husband goes out and is hunted down and killed somewhere like right across the border. My research points away from that. The person who submitted that version of the story, Lola Perkins, she was the daughter of famous founding Tucson and who was a landowner and a ranch owner. And it was on her father's ranch who she claimed finally beat us, worked. So I'm a little suspicious of that because it's like, you know, if you want to make your family's name live on, you sort of tie it into your family history. And I'm not saying that it's not true. I'm just saying that, like, the evidence doesn't show that as far as I know. We have to look at the historical evidence as much as we can, because otherwise it's just a game of telephone, you know?

[00:13:00] **Amanda** As you've been listening to Ghost Stories all month on Valley one on one, you're probably wondering, is El Tiradito haunted? It marks the spot of a gruesome murder, and it is used to call upon the spirit world.

[00:13:15] **Abraham** No, I think these things are wildly interpretive, depending on who you ask. I've never experienced anything paranormal, so to speak, here.

[00:13:24] **Amanda** The history and the tale of El Tiradito is just one example of Mexican-American folklore, a community story that is passed down from generation to generation.

[00:13:36] **Abraham** I can only imagine that every city has something like this. Every town has a place that is mysterious and maybe kind of obscured by time, and that has a history that is waiting to be uncovered for people that are willing to take the time to do that. I really want to invite people to find that place in whatever community they're in, because I think it's important to preserve that type of history, especially as it's so much to do with cultural identity and authenticity. And it's a healthy practice, I think, to ask those questions and to do some critical research. It could just end with telling a good story, you know. But I think it's even more fun when you commit yourself to finding out what really happened. And I think that's really exciting. That could turn into a lifelong thing, which it seems to be doing so far for me.

[00:14:27] **Amanda** Thank you so much for listening to this week's episode of Valley 101. And in case you're wondering, I did leave a wish at El Tiradito. What it was, I'll never tell.

Thank you so much to Abraham Cooper for his expertise. This episode was written and produced by myself, Amanda Luberto with Audio assistance by Kaely Monahan. Episode Oversight is by Kathy Tulumello. Today's musical scoring came from universal production music. You can support Valley 101 by subscribing to us on your favorite podcasting app. Leave us a review on Apple Podcasts or every you're listening to us. And if you liked this episode or may be interested in visiting El Tiradito, share this one with a friend. Is there something about Arizona that you're curious about? Leave us your question at Valley 101.azcentral.com. You can follow us on social media at A-Z-C- podcasts. Valley 101 is an Arizona republic and azcentral.com production. I'm Amanda Luberto. Thank you so much for listening. We'll see you next week.