

Atras, Nevada

Population: 523

This small town is located two miles north of Parrot Peak, Nevada, and it excels in not being noticed. Then again, there's not much there to be noticed, honestly. Atras is a rural town that's dominated by a factory that makes metal frames for a particular type of Air Force electronics console; the design hasn't changed in forty years, the design probably won't *ever* change, and the contract is automatically renewed. And, to be fair, the contract is also both fair, and scrupulously adhered to.

The inhabitants are friendly enough, but they don't answer questions unless pestered. When they **do** get pestered, they patiently explain to the people pestering them that they're all descended from a Spanish expedition exploring Nevada in the late Eighteenth Century. According to legend (and the records to be found in the Atras library) the expedition and the Native American tribe that was hosting it were both cursed by an evil magician to be forever 'backwards.' The precise mechanism of the curse was unclear for centuries, but it quickly became clear that anyone from what would later become Atras would waste away and die if they left the area. Perforce, the Spaniards

and the tribe settled in what is now Atras, and have stayed there ever since.

Fast forward to 1940, and the Selective Training and Service Act (previous attempts at conscription were generally ignored). Five men from Atras were called up for military service: all five starved to death while in boot camp. Autopsies by Army doctors revealed that the five men were mirror-images of regular humans; their hearts were on the wrong side of their chests, and so forth. Further examination determined that their biochemistry was similarly flipped; the Atras draftees died because they could not derive nourishment from the amino acids in their foods. Only foods grown in Atras -- which were also flipped -- could be digested.

The US military spent the next twenty years trying to find a way to make this useful as something besides a dietary aid, and failed. Eventually they gave up; the factory was placed at Atras in order to give the inhabitants paid work, since the population was otherwise pretty much stuck there. And things have more or less stayed that way, ever since.

Note: there's no real conspiracy here. Nobody's silenced over the revelations, there's no cover-up, and nothing is

particularly classified. It's just a weird little town whose inhabitants can't go anywhere for more than a week without bringing their own food along. It's simply not very sexy.

A couple of people from outside *have* shown up, and tried to interest the outside world in all of this, and have found it surprisingly slow going. The most successful outsider is Nan Tenet, who has set up a bakery using local materials and then sells them to outsiders trying to lose weight. She has to import all of her own food -- things grown in Atras tend to revert to the other 'hand' after a few generations -- but it's a living. She can also eat her own cookies and not gain a pound, too.

It's not very dramatic, to be sure. But sometimes these mysteries are just minor -- well, except for how it started in the first place. 'Evil magician,' and all that. But, really: who is ready, in these secularist days, to go look for more evidence of evil magicians?

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