

A GHOST AMONG THE SPIRITS:

THE BANTA INN

Location: The Banta Inn, 22563 S 7th St, Banta, CA 95304

The Banta Inn is a folksy restaurant and bar in the tiny town of Banta, near the city of Tracy, about 90 minutes east of Oakland, CA. According to the plaque outside the Inn, it was originally built as a two storey saloon and sporting house by Frank Gallegos, who was reputed to be a former member of outlaw Joaquin Murieta's band. The upper floor had rooms that gave it the "inn" title. However, soon after opening, the Banta Inn spent time as a bordello. In 1937, the building was mostly destroyed by a major fire, and was rebuilt in its current configuration of a single storey using some of the original timbers.

In the 1960s, the place was owned by Tony & Jenny Gukan. Tony was Jenny's third husband and she herself was the youngest daughter of Frank Gallegos. We're told that Tony spent much of his time at the Banta Inn, and made a very lasting impression on the locals, both old and young. In 1968, he suffered a massive heart attack while behind the bar, and died there. The death was quite fast, as paramedics could not resuscitate him, even though they made it to the bar within a couple of minutes (they had a station across the street).

While alive, Tony had a couple of unusual habits. One had to do with keeping the register drawer open behind the bar (pre-electronic cash register days). He would often, and without thinking about it, stack the change in the register in nice neat rows.

The other “odd” habit, according to a couple of the regulars who knew him, was to play cards alone – poker, not solitaire. On his break, Tony would often sit in a corner table in the bar area, with cards in each hand, playing poker essentially against himself. Often he’d have a bottle of beer sitting between both hands.

Within a week of Tony’s death, a few of the regulars claimed to see him still playing cards at that corner table. Not too many people paid much attention to the sightings at first – after all, it was only the regular bar customers who said they saw him. But then others would occasionally reference the man playing cards by himself at a corner table. These would generally be patrons of the restaurant, who had to walk through the bar area to get to the dining room. Their descriptions of the man matched that of Tony Gukan.

But it was the physical effects that really began to get people’s attention. It wasn’t long after the initial sightings that things started moving. Beer bottles toppled and moved of their own accord, as did glassware, change and ashtrays on the bar, silverware on the dining room tables, and more. The change in the cash register began to do some odd things. The bartenders would toss change in the register drawer and close it, sometimes hard. But moments later, as they rang up their next drinks, the drawer would open and the change would be stacked in nice neat rows – apparently just as Tony used to do during life.

The inn remained with the family until 1981 when it was purchased by Joan Borland (now Costa) and her (then) husband, Dave (they’ve been divorced for a while). Joan had known Tony when she was younger (and of course, when he was alive). She knew about his ghost appearing in the place when she purchased it, and has stated that

this was one of the reasons she actually bought the Banta Inn. Dave Borland, who was in law enforcement, was not so believing – he was disbelieving, in fact. At least at first.

My own investigations into the Banta Inn began in the late 1980s, as Christopher Chacon, with whom I had founded the Office of Paranormal Investigations, was distantly related to Joan and had heard about the haunting through family members. Chris joined us on a couple of our initial visits before he moved down to Los Angeles and his work with another group of paranormal investigators. Over the years I've made numerous visits to the Banta Inn.

The Banta Inn has also served well as a place to bring television crews, as the owner has been very cooperative and the people who have witnessed things there have been quite forthcoming. The Banta Inn has proved to be a place where things do happen when the TV crew is present, but is a good example as to why one rarely sees paranormal events on television: in general, the events happen behind the camera or out of range of the camera, even though witnessed by several people.

On a visit with the old TV newsmagazine show *Hard Copy* (which aired February 1990), which was the first time I'd been to the Inn, a great example of the activity at the Banta Inn happened. I was seated on a barstool several feet from the bar, facing the camera and the bar. The cameraman and the director had their backs to the bar. To my left, at the far end of the bar, were several people, including Joan and the bartender (both behind the bar).

As I was being interviewed, a glass ashtray directly behind the cameraman popped up several feet into the air – its movement visible to everyone but the cameraman, director and camera – flipped over, and slapped back down on the bar without breaking.

The cameraman and director heard the sound of it landing, and asked what had happened.

The rest of us laughed about it, and then I recounted what I'd seen. The director deadpanned "hey, can you get Tony to do that again for the camera?"

Later during that same visit, a glass of orange juice slid across the bar under its own power. The TV crew was, of course, in the dining room at the time.

We did eventually get something on camera there on another visit, which I'll discuss in a bit.

In that first visit, and through subsequent visits on my own, with a team and with TV shows such as *Sightings*, *The Next Step* and *Beyond Bizarre*, I've had the opportunity to interview many people about their experiences at the Banta Inn. If you've seen any of the TV segments about the place, the story and some of these experiences may seem familiar.

One of the common events showed Tony's concern for the Inn and for the women working there. Said one witness "Once in a while the door will lock by itself – the front door. And usually that's if there's some sort of incident. Tony the ghost would look after whoever's here. So therefore we didn't have to deal with them anymore."

A bartender named Linda, who I met on my first visit, had a couple of exceptional encounters with Tony, the first in line with the statement above. She had come to work at the Banta Inn in the mid-eighties, after moving to the Tracy area from quite far away. Though born in the area, she'd lived most of her life elsewhere. She was told about the ghost from the moment she started work, but thought the customers were pulling her leg. Even though Joan confirmed that Tony's ghost was "around," she didn't think much of the ghost story, thinking it just that: a story.

One night shortly after she began working there, there was an incident with a couple of guys getting a bit drunk and unruly. It was not too far from closing time, so she escorted them out of the bar, turned, came back through the front door, and the door closed behind her. She heard the doorknob rattle as one of the guys tried to come back in. To her surprise, the door had locked itself. The door needed a key to lock/unlock or the deadbolt needed to be turned – both had happened without her doing anything.

A few days later, Linda was behind the bar after closing time (after 2 AM), cleaning glassware and putting it up on the back bar. At one point she saw an older man in the mirror, next to her. More than a little shocked, she turned to ask the man why he was in the place. As she turned, she saw no one standing next to her.

She turned back to the mirror and saw the man there, next to her. He smiled and waved. She looked to her side. Still no one physically there. She looked back at the mirror, and the smile and wave was repeated. Then, the man disappeared from the mirror.

Linda stopped what she was doing, shut off the lights quickly, locked the place up and left for home. Shaken, she picked up the phone and called Joan and Dave to report her encounter with the ghost. Disbelieving, Dave was not pleased with the late night wake-up call, and told Linda to meet him the next morning.

That next morning, Dave gathered photos of dozens of men around Tony's age, including several pictures that included many of Tony's friends and, of course, Tony Gukan. He essentially put together a mug book.

As in the situation in his law enforcement job of asking a witness to peruse a mug book to try to identify a suspect, Dave had Linda go over the photos. But this was not a

situation in which the witness had only caught a glimpse of a suspect, as Linda had gotten several looks at the man in the mirror. It took her only moments to identify the picture of the man she saw: it was Tony Gukan. And up to this point in time, Linda had not seen a photo of him (nor the other folks she'd been shown).

While not really accepting that Linda had seen a ghost, Dave was impressed by the process he'd put her through and her immediate identification of the "suspect." But for him, it was a personal experience a few days later that changed his attitude towards the bartending spirit.

According to Joan, the following weekend after Linda's experience, Dave was helping out in the kitchen. He was washing some of the dishes and utensils, moving them from soapy water to a rinse sink. While doing this, a spoon rose up out of the rinse-water and into the air. Holding itself horizontally, it hovered for a moment in front of Dave's face, then flew off across the kitchen, hitting an opposite wall and falling to floor.

Joan said Dave came shuffling out of the kitchen to where she was behind the bar and said "okay, I believe you now." He turned and shuffled, head down, back into the kitchen. She followed and got the story from him, laughing about it and "thanking Tony out loud."

As I mentioned earlier, besides the stacking change, things moved, and the service bell in the kitchen would ring even when no one was in the room, and candles would light on their own. Said one witness "It's pretty much an everyday happening. It's nothing to see pots and pans fly, beer bottles fly, he never does anything to hurt anyone. He's just mischievous."

A physicist named Tom had a couple of very visible experiences while there on a couple of occasions. During one visit when he sat at the bar, a “guy’s beer right next to me, tipped over and spun around three times.” On another occasion when he was headed for the dining room to have lunch with his son, “a guy came in and ordered a hamburger. The bartender asked him something about how he wanted it done. At that moment, from across the room where there was no one sitting, an ashtray picked up off the table and flew across the room, past the guy’s head, and dropped down in front of the bartender.”

I asked Tom “as a physicist, what do you think about these events?”

He replied “I think I have to rethink physics.” Indeed.

Tom’s son even had an experience that day as he stood by the CD-Jukebox in the front room near the bar to choose a song. “All of the sudden the CDs started flipping by themselves.”

The jukebox was another center of activity in the Banta Inn. Many others besides Tom’s son witnessed the CDs flipping in full view, with no one touching the jukebox. Songs would come on with no one punching in codes – or putting money in the jukebox. According to several people who knew Tony, he loved to listen to Patsy Cline, so it was no surprise that most of the mysteriously selected music would be from that singer (and yes, there were Patsy Cline CDs in the jukebox).

My team had its own jukebox encounter on an overnight investigation we conducted in the early nineties. That and a very odd coincidence.

Not much happened while we interviewed many witnesses during the evening hours. Joan had me come behind the bar sometime after 8 PM and talk about what we were doing there, as well as what kinds of things we’d be looking for and what people

had said they'd experienced. Someone asked if anything had "happened" so far that night.

"Nothing yet, but it's pretty crowded," I replied.

"Hey, ask Tony to do something to show he's there," came a voice from the crowd.

I smiled at Joan and with tongue planted firmly in cheek, raised my arms and said loudly "Tony, if you're here, give us a sign!"

The electricity went out, and we were plunged into near darkness (there were some candles lit). "That's some sign," came another voice from the crowd (followed by lots of laughter). We all stood there for a few moments.

Okay, I have to admit I was mystified at such a "sign" from a ghost. I'd never heard of something like that happening – the power going out.

But then, as if to rescue me from having to even speculate out loud whether the ghost had killed the electricity, the front door opened and someone popped in with a flashlight and an explanation. Someone had hit a power pole with his car just down the street. It was already called in, and the local utilities folks said power would be restored quickly.

We laughed, especially about the timing. The power came back on about a half hour later.

Later that night, about an hour after closing, I sat with several of my team members in the dining room discussing the experiences of the witnesses. Kathy Reardon, our team psychic practitioner, was in the bar with Joan and the bartender. The jukebox,



which had been quiet since closing, began playing a song, though not loud enough to really hear what it was.

Kathy came running back to us and said “come quick. The jukebox is doing something funny.”

We walked into the bar area and I heard the song clearly. The jukebox was playing “Spirits in the Material World” by The Police. “Very funny, Kathy,” I said.

Joan and the bartender began laughing. “No, Loyd,” said Kathy. “Look at the jukebox. Look at the plug.”

I examined the jukebox from the front, and saw nothing out of the ordinary. I looked behind it, reached down, and came up holding the power cord. The thing was *not* plugged in! I continued to hold the plug in my hand as we all reacted in amazement. The song continued to play. Once finished, the jukebox powered down, all lights and functions off (and to answer the question hanging in the air, the jukebox did not have its own internal power supply).

As I mentioned, people have seen Tony on several occasions. After Dave confronted Linda with his impromptu mug book, Joan put several of the photos up on the wall in the dining room, including a photo of Tony and his wife. People who reported seeing a ghost would be asked to review the photos on the wall and try to pick out who they saw. Joan has reported over and over that people unerringly find the photo of Tony Gukan.

Other experiences people had in the Banta Inn included women in the ladies room sensing a presence just outside the door. It’s as if there’s someone guarding the door for them while they’re in there, as they sense the presence as they go in or come out.

One of my favorite stories told by Joan illustrates Tony's lack of patience with skeptics even better than what happened with Dave. A couple of men who'd never been in the place before stopped by for a drink. They had heard about the ghost and began making fun of people who said they'd seen him or things moving. Joan sensed Tony's presence, and she as well as others at the bar – the two skeptics included – watched as some of the men's change on the bar moved, the coins stacking. The two guys watched with widened eyes, then hightailed it out of there and never returned. They left their money sitting on the bar.

On occasion, Tony apparently gets a bit frisky with some of the women. During the *Sightings* shoot years ago, witness K. Olsen reported "I felt like someone took a finger all the way up the back of my leg, and when I turned around there was nobody there." She felt playfulness in that touch, not anything lewd or lascivious.

Now I must mention that Joan and a few of the other residents of Banta have also spoken about another ghost in residence at the Banta Inn. Her name was Margaret, and she apparently was an old regular in 1950s and early 1960s. She died of a heart attack in the building, like Tony. And like Tony, she loved the building. While generally Tony has been associated with the goings-on at the Inn, Margaret may be responsible for many object movements. For Joan, it has been a matter of "feeling" whose presence was evident as things move around.

Margaret's ghost has been seen on only a couple of reported occasions over the years, and she is only rarely referred to in stories in the media about the Banta Inn. However, the *Sightings* piece in the early nineties did refer to her, and even showed a picture.

While Kathy Reardon was the main psychic I worked with at the Banta Inn, it was bringing in another psychic that led to us getting something moving on video. Between 1991 and 1994, I was fortunate to be involved in six productions for Tokyo Broadcasting System featuring the psychic medium Mrs. Aiko Gibo of Yokohama, Japan (now deceased). The productions focused on placing Gibo in different situations to effectively test the range of her abilities. Each featured me administering various kinds of experimental psi tasks to assess her abilities. But it was the location visits that had the best stuff.

Along with other investigators and/or psychics, we (Mrs. Gibo and me) would visit a reportedly haunted location in order to have her assess the situation and converse with the spirits. The first location we visited with Mrs. Gibo was the Moss Beach Distillery, which I describe in a later chapter.

The second location was the Banta Inn. Gibo felt a presence immediately upon walking into the entrance. She appeared a bit surprised, and related that she felt the presence of a woman's spirit. This was surprising to her as she'd been told there was a male entity present. What we'd held back from the production crew and Gibo was Margaret's occasional presence.

The female entity quickly disappeared, according to Gibo. She looked around the bar area and pointed to a table in the corner, describing an older man seated at the table with playing cards in each hand and a bottle of beer between them. She told us that he smiled at her, and that she felt quite welcome. However, Gibo told us the spirit did not appear to be interested in communicating with her at that moment.

We brought Gibo to the dining room and asked her to look over a series of photographs of a variety of people in couples and groups that hung on the walls. With one quick glance she focused on one particular photo, stating that the man in the picture was the same one she'd seen in the bar area. She had correctly identified Tony Gukan.

Later in the session, Gibo conversed with the now more cooperative apparition of Tony Gukan (maybe his break was over). She simply began a one-sided conversation with the ghost, listening, and then telling us what "Tony" had to say. Kathy Reardon was present with us at the time, and also perceived Tony. She confirmed much of what Gibo said, though added a bit – she put that down to Mrs. Gibo not understanding Tony correctly (possibly a translation issue?).

During this conversation, a mug with a handle (the kind that won't roll) struck the metal base of a table in the bar area and made a loud noise that attracted our immediate attention. Besides two members of the Japanese TV crew and my former partner Chris Chacon, no one was anywhere near the table when the mug hit it. Picking up the mug, we found it to be ice cold, yet there was piping hot coffee still in the mug and none spilled on the floor.

Later, as Gibo and I were sitting at the bar talking with Kathy (seated next to us) and Joan (on the other side of the bar), I happened to notice some movement behind and above me (saw it in the mirror first). One of the two wagon wheel chandeliers was swinging back and forth. No one was near enough to have started it swinging. Mrs. Gibo believed Margaret had started the chandelier swinging, and the TV crew immediately began filming. In accordance with her religious tradition, Gibo suggested we make an

offering to Margaret's spirit. She suggested a glass of wine, and Kathy added "make it red."

As Kathy approached the chandelier with the glass of red wine, the movement stopped.

Chris, and then I, got on chairs to check the chandelier for any rigging. There was none. We then discussed with Joan any situation, such as earthquakes or the train coming by on the tracks right near the restaurant that could cause the chandeliers to move. She commented that they would sometimes shake, but never swing. As it was, the other chandelier was not even shaking a little when the other was swinging. Nothing could account for the movement, nor for the way the chandelier stopped moving so suddenly when Margaret was "presented" with the glass of wine.

This is one occasion where we got the movement on video. The camera was rolling through the stopping of the chandelier, and even through Chris's check of the wagon-wheel. Sounds exciting to have it on video. But realize that it doesn't look all that paranormal: it's a chandelier swinging, then stopping. But if you were there with us, you certainly would have found excitement!

Apparently, Margaret did outdo Tony in the movement department that day, though Tony provided more communication with Mrs. Gibo and Kathy Reardon. Gibo even giggled a few times and said Tony was flirting with her.

Since that visit, other TV crews have experienced their own movements of objects, though generally when the cameras weren't rolling. The exception was a placemat flipping halfway into the air at the same moment the video-camera had some very odd interference during a shoot for *Beyond Bizarre*. None of the other placemats

moved, and at no other time did the camera experience the interference. Interesting, for sure.

While I made several visits to the Banta Inn throughout the 1990s, I've only been there very occasionally over the last few years. On my last visit in late 2003, Joan reported that Tony was still active, though not as much, and the same was said for Margaret. Perhaps they were getting bored. Or maybe they missed the TV cameras!

In any event, I don't turn down the chance to visit my favorite bartender ghost at the Banta Inn, hanging out amongst the spirits he used to serve.

And the food's good too!