

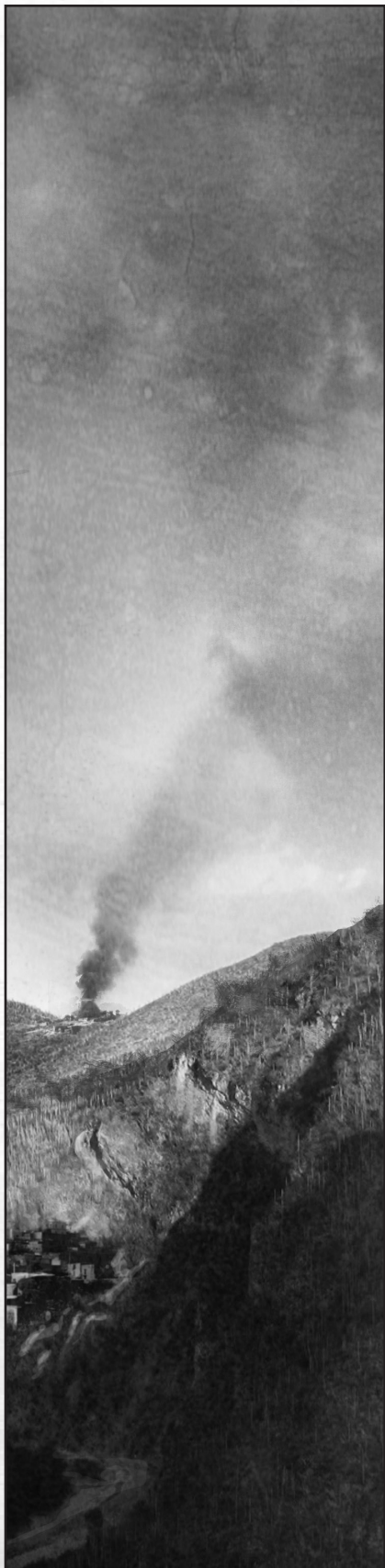
# Many Fires

by Jason Morningstar

Sample file

# TRAIL OF CTHULHU

## Credits



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## Introduction

In the mountains of northern Mexico, something ancient and obscene lies smoldering among ruins older than the Aztecs. In the green valleys beneath the Chihuahuan peaks, the problems are more modern - and they wear gun-belts. Do an unlikely band of Investigators have the courage to tackle the last remnants of Pancho Villa's bandit army? What secrets do they bring to the task? And what will they do when the trail of clues takes them into dangerous territory they cannot even imagine?

Many Fires is an adventure for Trail of Cthulhu. Taking place in the hills and valleys of the Mexican state of Chihuahua, it will introduce the Investigators to a surprising cast of characters and strange new weapons to employ in an epic struggle against an implacable and deadly enemy known as Kuu lá- Many Fires.

As always, abilities necessary for the revelation of various clues should be played flexibly - multiple approaches will work, depending on the situation. Consider those offered as suggestions and adapt as necessary.

### DISCLAIMER ONE

This is a pulp adventure - there will be shooting, and evil magic, and burning men cartwheeling out of windows - it is emphatically not for the fish-hearted or the purist. If your Investigators play their cards right, they may be able to punch an evil god straight back to Fomalhaut.

### DISCLAIMER TWO

Much of the information presented in this adventure is true. The history is factual as far as fact will carry in such a tumultuous time and place. The names of real people, are used extensively. As far as I know, there is no villainous fire cult in the mountains of northern Mexico, nor did anyone on either side of the Mexican Punitive Expedition traffic in the diabolic and unearthly. John Pershing in particular gets his name and reputation dragged through the mud for your entertainment, and his fictional representation here bears no bearing on the real man, who didn't need magic to do amazing things. I also apologize in advance to any Chiricahua speakers.

### THE HOOK

It is late fall, 1928. A ragged band of Investigators with strange ties to General John J. Pershing and the mountains of northern Mexico are returning one last time to the Sierra Madre del Norte. On the surface, their plan is to finish what Pershing started in 1916 - to kill or capture the last surviving Villista commander, "Major" Marcano Chimones. But beneath the surface lie conflicted loyalties and far stranger goals...

### THE HORRIBLE TRUTH

Up in the Sierra Madre del Norte there is an ancient fire cult, active since pre-Columbian times. They worship an unspeakable being and his burning otherworldly servitors.

Then-Lieutenant John J. Pershing, hunting Chiricahua Apache in the Sierra

Madre del Nortes in 1886, stumbled onto the evil band. He witnessed them summoning the terrible entity Kuu lá and forced the cultists to reveal their secrets. He learned their magic, then had his friend Julius Penn return to silence them forever.

Some survived.

Pershing's star rose. He used his magic against the Spanish in Cuba and the Moro in the Philippines. The cult regrouped, gathered strength, and punished Pershing. They burned his family alive.

Pershing returned in 1916 for the Mexican Punitive Expedition, determined to finish destroying the cult, by using their magic against them. It didn't work.

Now the General is an old, broken sorcerer, and his secrets have not been as closely held as he thinks. Obsessed with the terrible failures of his early career but too old, broken and frail to enact revenge or finish what he started, Pershing has dispatched surrogates - some half-knowing the truth and others completely ignorant.

### THE SPINE

The characters must:

- Discover the dark secret of Pershing's past, and confront the forces that would keep it hidden forever
- Defeat the last of the Villista bandits and mount an expedition into the Sierra Madre
- Confront Many Fires, destroy el Castillo Rojo, and break the fire cult forever



## Many Fires

Conflicting loyalties and ambitions will come into play as the Investigators are forced to make difficult choices about their own courses of action. To whom are they most loyal - themselves? The expedition? Pershing? Or something less savory?

### Many Fires as Part of a Campaign

Using established Investigators removes the adversarial element built into the pre-generated set, but will otherwise have no impact on play. Any hook that gets your campaign's Investigators in contact with the ailing General Pershing will be satisfactory. Consider choosing the pre-generated character you find most interesting, who by default has extensive experience in northern Mexico, to be the emissary of the General and a capable guide to the region. His agenda, whatever it is, can provide some interesting spice and confrontation as well.

### Many Fires as a One-Shot

When running this adventure as a one-shot, or for convention play, you'll need to truncate things quite a bit. Begin in media res, starting in San Antonio, and make the cult more aggressive than you would otherwise.

## REASONS TO JOIN PERSHING'S SECRET EXPEDITION

If you aren't using the pre-generated characters, you'll need an excuse for Pershing to assemble your player's Investigators into an expedition. Here are some suggestions.

### Alienist, Doctor, Nurse

Competent medical professionals are an obvious choice for a dangerous trip into lawless, unsanitary places. An alienist would be a somewhat unsettling but prescient addition to the team - the sort of detail Pershing might well want covered.

### Antiquarian, Archaeologist, Professor, Scientist

The troubled history of northern Mexico flows back for thousands of years, and untouched sites and artifacts remain, particularly high in the mountains. Her native people, similarly, follow a lifeway not far removed from their pre-Columbian ancestors. There's research gold in those forbidding mountains - not to mention priceless artifacts. Experience in the region, or in hard travel in remote locations, or perhaps just fluency in Spanish might be all it takes to get Pershing's attention.

### Artist, Author, Dilettante, Journalist

A plausible cover story is essential, and what is more plausible than privileged Americans descending on northern Mexico to plunder, gawp at the beauty, and to make asses of themselves?

### Clergy

Someone with missionary experience - particularly experience in Mexico or Central America - would be an odd but valuable addition to the expedition, provided they were willing to be somewhat liberal in their interpretation of scripture.

### Criminal, Hobo, Military

Pershing knows a lot of soldiers, and not all of them have taken to civilian life successfully. They are still hard men, though, and their experience facing the horrors of the battlefield, combined with a sense of obligation, might get them on the team.

### Police Detective, Private Investigator

Anyone operating along the US-Mexican border will be a treasure to the expedition, and Pershing might seek out a Texas Ranger or border P.I. to join the expedition. It's also possible that old military friends of his have adapted to civilian life in these roles, and would make logical additions to the team.

### Parapsychologist

Although a parapsychologist straddles the line between "plausible cover story" and scientist, Pershing has an open mind and might seek out a specialist in this fringe field - particularly if he knows them from their military service.

### Pilot

Airfields are limited but oat and bean fields abound - getting around by plane makes some sense, and Pershing has always been enamored with air power. Tapping a pilot for the expedition (preferably one with his own plane) is a natural.

## Many Fires

### BACKGROUND

The general background to current events in northern Mexico isn't secret. Any interested Investigator can dig up the relevant facts. The application of any appropriate skill (some obvious suggestions follow each below) will yield the pertinent information.

#### About Northern Mexico (History, Geology, Biology, Library Use)

The state of Chihuahua covers nearly a quarter of a million square kilometers and is sharply divided between east and west. In the west lie the Sierra Madre del Norte, rugged mountains reaching as high as 3,300 meters and home to the indigenous Tarahumara and Chiricahua peoples. In the east, Chihuahua is composed of broad desert punctuated by fertile valleys. The climate is temperate and dry - apple orchards aren't out of place in the protected lowlands, for example.

#### About Pershing (History, Library Use)

John J. Pershing was a soldier's soldier, fighting with the American army in every major campaign from 1886 to 1918. He began his career as a horse soldier with the sixth cavalry, being cited for bravery in battles with the Apache in Arizona and northern Mexico. He was present as a Second Lieutenant at the Wounded Knee massacre in 1890. He fought in Cuba and the Philippines, being cited again for bravery, and was a Brigadier General by 1905. During this period he served as an observer and military attache across the globe, from the Balkans to the Russo-Japanese War. In 1914 he was stationed at Fort Bliss, Texas and charged with maintaining security along the Mexican border.

It was at Fort Bliss that Pershing learned of the tragic deaths of his wife and three daughters in a fire in San Francisco. Only his son Warren survived the blaze.

This event marked Pershing, deeply affecting him for the rest of his life. He went on to lead the Mexican Punitive Expedition and serve as Commander of the American Expeditionary Force during the Great War. He retired from active military service in 1924.

#### About the Villistas (History, Bureaucracy, Library Use)

As the tides of Mexican politics shifted in the early twentieth century, Pancho Villa was at various times a cattle thief, murderous outlaw, revolutionary General and political juggernaut. At the peak of his power, Villa was the governor and undisputed ruler of Chihuahua, a Robin Hood-like figure and a brilliant tactician in command of a formidable, US-supplied army. He died a folk hero, assassinated in 1923 after intimating that he might end his retirement and return to the national stage.

Major Marciano Chimones was a key Villa lieutenant, and the last remaining Villista of any import. His "soldiers" have devolved into a large bandit gang that continue to terrorize the Valle de Bustillos and all of southern Chihuahua. He operates out of Villa's old rancho at the northern tip of Lake Bustillos.

#### About the Mexican Punitive Expedition (History, Library Use)

In 1916, furious over what he considered betrayal by the US government for their support of the Carranza regime, Villa ordered attacks on US interests and then on American towns. On March 9, 1916 Villistas raided Columbus New Mexico, killing 18 Americans. This incursion, coupled with continued cross-border attacks, prompted what became known as the Mexican Punitive Expedition.

The Mexican Punitive Expedition was the proving ground for another ambitious young officer, an Army

Lieutenant named George Patton. He endeared himself to the American press by launching a surprise raid by touring car that resulted in the death of Pancho Villa's personal bodyguard, Julio Cardenas. Patton made the most of the ambush, displaying Cardenas' corpse strapped to the hood of his car and taking the man's sword and saddle as trophies. Again the real target - Villa's right hand, "Major" Marciano Chimones, escaped.

Pancho Villa mocked the Americans and escaped justice, a hero to many in hardscrabble northern Mexico. He was finally assassinated in 1923 by parties unknown. The Villa organization disintegrated. Villistas, little more than bandits even under his command, became barbaric packs who answered only to themselves. Marciano Chimones, more powerful than most, still manages a shadowy feifdom in the Valle de Bustillos west of Chihuahua city.

#### About unusual and unexplained events in the Valle de Bustillos (Occult Studies, Anthropology, Library Use)

The forbidding Sierra Madre del Norte Occidental has been feared for centuries by the lowland natives and Spanish conquerors alike - in the steep and difficult terrain, expeditions have been known to vanish without a trace. Rumors of Satanists and other degenerates using the Sierra Madre as a hideout are rife.