

# Geologic Stress Could Be Clue To 'Marfa Lights' Phenomenon

[Editor's note: Paul E. King was born and raised in Fort Stockton. Although he now lives in Fort Worth and teaches at Texas Christian University, his heart remains in far West Texas. "For some time now," King says, "I have found myself becoming increasingly absorbed by the history and the legends of the area west of the Pecos."]

By Paul E. King

The phenomenon known as the "Marfa lights" would surely qualify as the most well known legend of the Big Bend area. An abundance of tall tales have circulated regarding the origin of the lights.

In his book, "Tales of the Big Bend," historian Elton Milés recounts over a dozen alleged "causes" of the Marfa lights. These tales range from Apache chief Alsate looking for his dead Indian braves to a secret experiment in lazer technology conducted by the government

during the second world war.

The two most popular and logical explanations are:

(1) the reflection of car headlights from the nearby Chinati mountains, and:

(2) silver, mica or some other shiny substance reflecting moonlight or starlight.

In the case of the first explanation, the lights were detected as early as 1883. Obviously, electrical lights were not in use until many years later than that.

The second explanation also appears to have some flaws. First, any mineral deposit capable of reflection must be a surface deposit. However, attempts to mark the location of the lights from the air have been made. In the daylight the areas thought to have been the source of the lights have revealed no unusual deposits or topography. Second, the lights move. Since moonlight and starlight are relatively stationary, the lights should also be stationary.

I believe it was Jake Sibley who recounted his attempts, several

years ago, to "catch" the lights by a combined air/ground effort. It proved to be impossible to stay up with the lights, especially in an area where cliffs and arroyos are abundant.

A more recent group of theories have included the following: gasses from the ground, uranium, phosphorus, swamp gas, and static electricity. None of these have been proven, of course. In fact, very little evidence exists to support any of them.

I would like to suggest a possibility somewhat related to this most recent train of thought. Recently, scientists have discovered some interesting things about rock. While conducting research designed to investigate earthquakes, it was noted that rock under severe stress emits radio frequency (RF) energy.

In one lab experiment, at the very moment a section of rock was broken, tiny flickers of light were photographed. These were not "sparks." They were tiny balls of

plasma energy, created and fed by the radio energy emitted from the fracture.

Researchers concluded that much greater quantities of RF energy would be present at areas where geologic faults might exist.

The Big Bend is an area of tremendous geologic upheaval. It is quite possible that the Marfa lights are globules, or balls of plasma energy, fed by RF energy. This RF energy is produced by tremendous pressure and strain on layers of rock in the Big Bend area.

If this theory is correct, then the "lights" are occurring continuously—but they may only be seen at night.

In fact, the desolate road to Marfa is probably one of the few places left in the nation where there is such a complete absence of artificial light that these relatively dim "natural" lights would not be "washed out" and unnoticeable.

This theory has several advantages. First, there is some

(though not much) evidence to support it. Second, it could explain the tendency of the lights to move in random patterns. Third, it can be tested.

I am not sure it should be tested, though. As long as the lights remain an unknown, we have our own "Loche Ness Monster." In fact, the lights are even better than Nessy since you can see them yourself almost any Summer night by driving out to the old air base on the road to Marfa.

When you are standing in the darkness on the side of the road, watching the eerie flickering lights bobbing up and down, static electricity and plasma energy are the farthest things from your mind. It becomes much easier to believe that they really are ghosts of dead Apache warriors.

In a world where the growth of knowledge is exploding and there is little left to explore—it's nice to know that much of West Texas is still a frontier—and that the Marfa lights are still out there.