

West Texas Town of Marfa Finds Flickering Fame in Mystery Lights

Curious Glow Out on the Mesa
Stirs Curious Theories:
Illuminated Jack Rabbits?

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MARFA, Texas—Steven Spielberg, eat your heart out. When it comes to close encounters and strange things that go blink in the night, residents of this little West Texas town are a lot closer to the action than Hollywood.

For more than 100 years, mysterious lights have been reported flickering at night in an area around a sparsely populated stretch of desert here called Mitchell Flat. Many who say they have seen the lights describe them as looking like lanterns twinkling among the foothills of the Chinati Mountains, 30 miles away. Others say they have seen brighter, closer lights that blaze up and cast shadows for a few seconds before fading. And then there are the reports that the lights grow out of, like Samuel Whatley's story.

About 10 years ago, Mr. Whatley was driving home a little before dawn from his night job as a computer operator when he saw what he thought were car lights speeding toward him on a road east of town. The next thing he knew, he says, a cantaloup-sized globe of orange-red light appeared and hovered a few feet outside the rolled-down window of his pickup.

"Hell, I was scared," he says. "I was crawling out of my skin." Mr. Whatley says he floored the accelerator, but the globe stayed with him for about two miles, then suddenly disappeared.

Though most sightings aren't that exciting, a great many people near this town of 2,500 are convinced they have seen something. The lights have been chased from the air and ground, gawked at by tourists, photographed and even televised. Since first being reported in 1883, they have inspired folklore, song lyrics, quite-a bit of tomfoolery and some hard scientific head-scratching. No one, however, has nailed down the explanation.

Who Is Gullible?

To be sure, there are skeptics here who say the source of all the fuss is just ranch and car lights perennially mistaken for something more mysterious. But those are the kind of folks who will believe anything, other Marfans say.

"The people who don't want to believe in the lights figure out that they're car lights," says Charlie Henderson, the local county judge. "But they're not, I assure you they're not."

Judge Henderson says he has seen distant lights that split up and go in opposite directions, bob up and down and move in other ways car lights aren't known to. Once, he says, he was hunting rabbits on Mitchell Flat when "about midnight I saw a light shining right down a little canyon I was in. It looked like the headlight on a freight train." It looked, in fact, a good deal like the lights he had seen on other occasions, only closer.

There is also the matter of a report drawn up by two geologists who prospected



for uranium here in the 1960s and early 1970s. The two, John P. Kenney and Elwood Wright, became fascinated with the lights and spent a number of nights on Mitchell Flat investigating. They recorded their observations in a journal.

On March 19, 1973, according to the handwritten account, the two were sitting in their car near a county road 10 miles east of Marfa about 10 p.m. Suddenly some horses in a field whinnied and bolted. Moments later, the two saw a ball of light rapidly moving in from the southwest, with another one behind it. The lights, which "appeared to be about one-half the size of a basketball," moved "behind some bushes and in front of other bushes" and hovered briefly a few hundred feet away before vanishing. Messrs. Wright and Kenney wrote.

The two never figured out what the lights were, but they agree that they weren't car or ranch lights. They also say they have never heard of Mr. Whatley's similar report, and he says he didn't know of the geologists' sighting.

Though such tales provide fertile ground

for occult speculation—and Marfa has produced a bumper crop of stories identifying the lights as ghosts or extraterrestrials—most people here think there must be a natural explanation. This isn't to say the explanation must be down-to-earth. One resident proposed that the lights are caused by jack rabbits with glowworms clinging to their fur.

Another theory has it that the lights come from phosphorescent minerals, even though no such minerals have been found here. Some theorists propose St. Elmo's fire, the static electricity known to light up ships' masts or airplane wings, although Mitchell Flat hasn't any obvious source of such electricity. Others lean to swamp gas, the vapors from rotting vegetation that occasionally burst into flame, but the aridity of this rangeland lends little support to that notion.

John Derr, a geophysicist with the U.S. Geological Survey in Denver, thinks that what are seen may be "earthquake lights," softball-size globes such as have been reported in places prone to tremors. Unfortunately for this theory, Marfa hasn't had any earthquakes. In any case, earthquake lights themselves stand in need of explanation. (Mr. Derr thinks they may be small clouds of charged particles.)

A lot of area residents believe odd atmospheric effects have something to do with the lights. Fritz Kahl, the manager of Marfa's airport, says he has often seen mirages in the area, such as false mountains shimmering in the distance. He says Marfa is in a basin between mountain ranges and has lots of unusual weather.

An astronomer who once worked nearby at McDonald Observatory has a theory built

along such lines. Eric Silverberg says that when he looked down toward Marfa from his perch on Mount Locke, 30 miles to the north, he used to see "twinkling lights well above the horizon where there shouldn't have been any. It was one of the most convincing UFO phenomena I've ever seen."

Mr. Silverberg believes that what he saw were light beams bent and carried over great distances by what is called the Novaya Zemlya effect, a "tunneling" of light due to adjacent layers of air at sharply different temperatures. The source could be either car lights or bright stars. Of course, it couldn't have been car lights in the case 100 years ago; and it could hardly be stars in the numerous sightings on cloudy nights.

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NEXT
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