

Marfa's mysterious Lights must be seen to be believed

And some people
don't believe them
when they see them

By DENNIS STACY
Special to The Post

MARFA — Shortly after dark two buses from the Prude Ranch pull off onto the shoulder of Highway 90, about five miles east of this West Texas town of 2,500. Down the steps pour 40 or 50 members of the Veterans' Motor Car Club of America who are holding their annual convention in nearby Fort Davis.

They crowd up to the gate framed by two concrete pillars or spread out along the fence line. Just over the barbed wire are a few scattered remains of the old army air base, where flyers trained for the assault on Hitler's fortress Europe. Beyond them stretches the shrub-brush cattle country of Mitchell Flat. On the southern horizon, barely visible against the darkening sky, looms the saw-toothed outline of the Chinati Mountains, source of Marfa's mysterious nocturnal lights.

A hushed chorus of oohs and ahs ripples through the anonymous assembly.

"There it is!" one voice whispers.

"Look! Another one!" someone else says in the dark, and the fence creaks against the forward press.

A bright light has materialized on the left shoulder of the largest mountain in the distance. It slides slowly down the slope to the right and is almost immediately followed by another light of equal brilliance. Then a third appears in the same spot slightly above the horizon, gradually descends, and winks out like the other two.

Are these the legendary Marfa Lights or merely the headlights of automobiles traveling Highway 67 connecting Marfa with Presidio on the Texas-Mexico border?

Seen through binoculars rested atop a sturdy fence post, the light sources do bear a strong resemblance to ordinary car lights. The Prude Ranch guide admits the Presidio highway passes between us and the base of the Chinatis, 20 miles away. "But you'll know

them when you see them," he adds. "I think these probably are headlights because they're not moving around as much."

Among other properties attributed to the Lights are the ability to divide in two and bob up and down like a ghostly, glowing, Mexican jumping bean. Tonight's lights, though, have all demurely followed the same path like they were on rails or, well, a paved road.

After another quarter-hour of staring into the darkness and a few false alarms spurred by the turning on of mercury vapor ranch lights, the car club boards the two buses and chugs back toward Fort Davis, having logged one more tourist attraction in a land short on people but long on legend and local folklore.

Published accounts of the Lights themselves go back at least 101 years to 1883, when the first white man in the area, rancher Robert Ellison, saw what he first thought were the campfires of then hostile Apache Indians. Later, it was learned that the Apaches had been seeing the Lights for generations and had already incorporated them in their own tribal lore. Needless to say, apologists note, the reports by both parties were made long before the desert succumbed either to electricity or the automobile.

Over the years, odd-behaving lights over Mitchell Flat have been seen by numerous reliable eyewitnesses, photographed, and even captured on videotape. The late Dallas Morning News columnist Frank X. Tolbert covered the Lights several times and on one occasion saw something strange himself. At first, wrote Tolbert, the almost searchlight-brilliant light was mistaken for the planet Venus. Trouble was, every time Tolbert had the car stopped to take a picture, the light winked out!

Aside from the stories of the Lights' passivity or playfulness, however, are those that hint of a darker nature, most of which are clearly legend and suited to the particular time. During World War I, for example, the Lights were said to be the pack train of Pancho Villa's ragtag army, marching for an attack on Texas. In the later stages of World War II they were supposed to be the rem-

nants of Hitler's Third Reich, joined by escaped POWs from El Paso and the Fuehrer himself.

Also told is the tale of the Lights lining up in a formation mimicking a landing strip and luring unsuspecting pilots and crew to their deaths. Another story has the malicious, luminous gremlins leading planes to crash against sheer mountain walls.

Finally, there are the contemporary accounts of both visitors and locals like Joe Skelton, who runs a corner filling station and lives in nearby Alpine. Skelton has seen weird lights several times in the area around Marfa. Once, he and his wife were driving back from the El Paso airport and she had fallen asleep in the front seat. In his rear-view mirror, Skelton suddenly noticed what he described as "an 18-wheeler lit up like a Christmas tree."

Fearing he was about to be run over or blown off the road, Skelton turned to look over his left shoulder. "Nothing!" he said, snapping his fingers. "Gone! Just like that!" Skelton said the incident shook him up.

Another time, in the Davis Mountains, Skelton was being trailed by a friend in a second pickup when he saw a bright light on the horizon. As soon as he picked up his CB microphone to radio his friend and ask him if he saw it too, the light went out. A little later the process was repeated.

"The Lights," said Skelton, "have made Christians out of a lot of people who weren't before they saw them."

Skeptical response to such stories ranges from sheer incredulity to the idea there may be some rare natural phenomenon behind the continuing sightings. Several theories have been put forward, including the notion that the Lights are due to atmospheric refractions of stars or planets, mica or quartz deposits reflecting moonlight, methane or "swamp" gas, ball lightning or piezoelectricity.

Believers point out that the Chihuahuahua desert, of which Mitchell Flat is a part, is noticeably devoid of swampland, that the Lights have been seen on overcast nights, and that local conditions are hardly conducive to storms that might be accompanied by lightning.

They add that the Lights seem to interface with humans, exhibiting a crude intelligence as witnessed by their responses to actions of Tolbert and Skelton.

Unfortunately, more serendipity than science is involved in their study, and neither side

seems capable of closing the gap. In the meantime, Marfa, short on the sort of western charm that oozes from neighboring Alpine and Fort Davis, touts the mystery Lights as a reason for stopping and staying.

One motel stocks its rooms with

a match cover reading "Come help solve the mystery of the Marfa Lights." The Chamber of Commerce distributes a black-and-white bumper sticker showing twinkling starlike lights against the backdrop of a desert sky.

Stacy is a free-lance writer.