

Marfa's mystery lights

MARFA — The whole thing is said to have originated with a man named Robert Ellison.

He was a pioneer cattleman in the western reaches of Texas in the second half of the 19th century, and the story is that one evening in 1883, while camping with his herd, he saw a series of strange lights out on the desert.

Ellison told his neighbors that the lights were like glowing balls at the base of the Chinati Mountains.

But they seemed to be free of the Earth.

He said they floated up and down for a bit, then bounced back and forth, and neither he nor his steers got a wink more of sleep that night.

Well, everyone thought old Bob must have backed into his branding iron.

The wags said he had been in one too many stampedes. But then others began seeing the flickering illuminations as well, "like campfires that get up and move around," and the mystery of the Marfa Lights was delivered into lore.

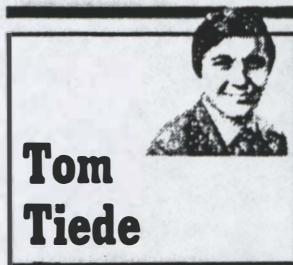
Today, 100 years and more later, the lights are still flickering in this isolated region of Texas.

And so is the confounding mystery.

There's no doubt at all anymore the lights are real. Thousands of people have seen them by now.

They are clustered on a sparsely populated prairie that is known as Mitchell Flat, and when they make their (decidedly sporadic) appearances the locals say they put on spectacular shows.

Some locals say they look like flashlights, way out in the distance.



**Tom
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Others claim they are the size of soccer balls, and up close.

However they are described, almost everyone agrees that they are spirited; they dance, they race about and, at times, they even chase one another across the sagebrush.

Indeed, Marfa Mayor Jane Churley says the lights are almost fun-loving.

And they have inspired what amounts to the stuff of pleasant legend here.

Songs have been composed and doggerel written, and junior high school students have drawn up and distributed a coloring book history of the curious phenomenon.

Tall tales have been created in addition. Marfa old-timers cite some amazing stories.

One man tells of the time he got lost on the desert, and started to perish from thirst: "There I was, almost a goner, and then I saw them wonderful Marfa Lights; naturally, they spelled out Budweiser beer."

Naturally. But don't snicker. Even sober Marfans like to think the lights are benevolent.

For instance, some residents say

the Chinati Mountains are inhabited by friendly creatures from other worlds, and they create the lights with their spacecraft when they fly after dark.

That viewpoint does not predominate, of course. But, on the other hand, no one seems to have a better explanation.

The obvious guesses range from car lights to fireflies, and there are a few votes for pranksters, but, as Churley points out, the facts do not support anything so ordinary:

"People will come here and say that it's nothing but swamp gas. But they forget there isn't a swamp in this desert for hundreds of miles. Then they will say that it must be ranch lights, and we have to remind them that there wasn't any electricity when the lights were seen last century."

That leaves the extraordinary. Not UFOs, but science.

Churley says professional researchers have been studying the lights for years, they have measured them, and tracked them; in the process, they have developed a variety of mostly complex opinions.

One astronomer says the illuminations may be the reflections of lights that originate elsewhere. They might possibly come from bright stars.

The astronomer thinks the lights are bent at their source, squeezed between air layers of different temperatures, and propelled to Mitchell Flat.

Then there is a geophysicist who thinks the glowing balls may be charged particles of dust.

And there is a geologist who says they could be phosphorescent minerals.

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There is even a scientist who believes the lights resemble St. Elmo's fire, which is a form of static electricity.

Bent stars? St. Elmo's fire? The people of Marfa say it's all very interesting, but the mystery remains. And maybe it's just as well.

The mayor says the town has been through hard times over the years, oil booms and busts and the like, and it needs something like this for equilibrium.

The lights mean Marfa is unique. The lights mean Marfa is notable.

"We had some tourist agents here the other day," the mayor says, "and the lights put on a fantastic display for them. The agents were flabbergasted, I've never seen the lights so bright, and everyone had an exciting time."

The mayor doesn't conceal her pride. And she's not the only one with that feeling in this area.

The nicest theory about the origin of the Marfa Lights is that they were gathered from the heavens by angels and sent down to make things a little more important, if enigmatic, out here on Mitchell Flat.