

Stopping for look

at Ghost Lights

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S. PARKER

MARFA — This little town, about 200 miles east of El Paso, is the county seat of Presidio County, which is one of the biggest counties in Texas. But that's not why Marfa is remembered by passing travelers. They remember the town because of the Ghost Lights.



**LEON
HALE**

Probably you have at least heard about these lights. Folk tales about the Marfa Ghost Lights go back a century or more. Some people who have seen them think they're exciting, mysterious, unexplainable. Some are even frightened by them.

Others give the lights a grin and a shrug.

I've been coming out to this Trans-Pecos country for many years and I never fooled with looking for the lights. But this time I did, and I saw them, and I have

to say they're pretty mysterious.

There's certainly no secret about where to go to watch for them. About eight miles east of Marfa on U.S. 99, the state highway department has put up an official sign telling you where to stop, and there's a parking area on the south shoulder.

At 9:30 on a recent evening, three cars carrying a dozen people stopped there and one of the cars was mine. All of us got out and said hello and laughed at ourselves a little for being out there on the road to watch for ghostly lights in the sky.

One lady seemed to have experience. She pointed off to the south at a great expanse of pasture that slopes gradually away until dark mountains rise up on the horizon. The lady said we were looking across a land area called Mitchell Flat and this is where the lights are seen.

Two blue-green lights, miles away, showed against the mountains and the lady said those were ranch lights and they wouldn't move. The Ghost Lights move, she said.

About 9:45 a young man unlimbered a tripod and set up a camera and pointed it directly south from the highway. A woman out of a van came hurrying along the parking lot, almost running. She said to the man with the camera, "You'll never see the lights in that direction. They're over this way, toward the railroad signal."

She pointed to the southwest. A red light, blinking in the semidarkness, showed where she pointed. I thought it must be five miles away. (It turned out to be more like 10.) "That's the railroad light," said the van woman. "There's a Ghost Light now, above it."

The way I figure a Ghost Light ought to look, it ought to be misty and ethereal and glowing. This light above the railroad signal looked like a star to me. An orange star, twinkling, but too low for a star, not but a couple of degrees above the horizon.

It moved down, slowly, and traveled above the horizon for half a minute and blinked out, just as another appeared back at the railroad signal. This one was higher, maybe three degrees, and it also moved to the north, and then down, almost to the horizon before it disappeared.

Then two appeared at once, and one of them seemed to divide and its two parts flew along side by side. Sometimes three lights appeared at once and danced a bit, in slow motion, and went out, and later reappeared where we last saw them. One or two of the lights moved from north to south but most moved the other way, from the railroad light toward Marfa.

And so it went for an hour, a nice performance by the Marfa Ghost Lights.

No way to tell the size of them because you can't know how far away they are. Some of us had binoculars and saw various colors in the lights but I could not. I could see only orange.

One lady kept saying, "They're flat. They're shaped like saucers." I kept studying with the binoculars until I saw what she meant. I think, except the shape seemed to me more pointed, with a hook, like a harpoon.

But the oldest stories of the Marfa Lights go way back, to horse and wagon times, long before cars. A couple of us drove 10 miles down U.S. 67 from Marfa to the area where the lights seemed to have appeared. Nothing was there. To see the lights again, we had to go back up on U.S. 99. I think that as a tourist attraction, the Marfa Lights are splendid. What they really are, I have no idea

In the folklore of the Trans-Pecos, these lights are the spirits of various Indian chiefs or Mexican revolutionaries. The widest-held belief is that the "ghosts" are caused by a trick of light from the headlamps of cars coming up U.S. 67 from Presidio to Marfa.

SCOTT
PARKER
COURTESY