



Fort Worth Star-Telegram

The Presidio County Courthouse was built in 1886

Tale of Marfa Lights shines back in history

John Robert Prude, acting patriarch at Prude Ranch in Fort Davis, knows where to see the Marfa Lights. He'll give directions and a passel of theories for the strange, bobbing balls of glow.

If he doesn't go with you, he'll tell you to drive 20 miles south of Fort Davis to Marfa and go east eight miles on U.S. 67/U.S. 90 toward Alpine. Pull off to the right where the highway department has finally made a watching place.

Then look toward the southwest at the Chinati Mountains and wait. Poof — there's the first one, a tiny round ball of white light, not exactly still. Then, poof, it splits and becomes two slightly wavering, shimmery spheres. In a minute, poof, another light appears to the right of the other two. And so on. Sometimes only two lights are present, sometimes six.

Several stories circulate, Prude said. Maybe the lights are those of an Indian chief's spirit lighting signal fires to help lead his lost tribe home. A pioneer leading a cattle drive in 1883 said he saw the lights and couldn't find the source.

In 1900, another pioneer said he was caught in a blizzard, but that when the lights appeared they seemed to signal his position and lead him to safe shelter. As recently as 1981, people have said lights came close to their car windshields or followed close behind their cars.

Current explanations say they may be headlights reflecting off layers of atmosphere or perhaps bats whose wings carry radioactive dust.

In Marfa — by daylight — there's the beautiful Presidio County Courthouse. The stone-and-brick Second Empire structure was built in 1886.

A few yards away, the elaborate Hotel Paisano stands as a 1927 symbol of an anticipated 1930s boom that never quite happened. but Franklin D. Roosevelt, John F. Kennedy and Harry S.

Trumanslept there. The hotel was renovated and given a Texas Historical Marker in 1978.

Giant was filmed near here, and cast and crew — including Elizabeth Taylor, Rock Hudson and James Dean — stayed at the Paisano. Past the fountain-detailed courtyard, inside the Spanish-detailed hotel lobby, there are cases of *Giant* movie-making memorabilia.

The Third and 14th U.S. Cavalry were stationed at Camp Marfa, on a rise above the town, to handle Mexican revolutionary disturbances. Troops also guarded the border against the raids of Pancho Villa. Renamed Fort D.A. Russell in 1930, the camp held German prisoners of war during World War II.

The chamber of commerce has maps for driving and walking tours of sites, including quartermaster buildings, bakery and commissary stores, prisoner of war detention centers, officers' quarters and club, hospital, gym and PX. North on 15th Avenue, there's a headstone marking the burial place of Louie, who was the oldest horse of the First Cavalry. The words read *animo et fide*, or *friend and faithful*. He lived to be 31.

Blue-ribbon quality chicken-fried steak is found at the Thunderbird Restaurant, a vinyl-and-veneer diner that's packed to overflowing at lunchtime. The fanciest thing in the restaurant is a framed *Fortune* magazine story that featured Marfa among West Texas towns.

Texas' only mile-high golf course is east of town about one mile on Fairground Road. Signs downtown point the way. The nine-hole course charges a small greens fee and has a pro shop.

Details can be obtained from the Marfa Chamber of Commerce, Box 635, Marfa 79843. (915)729-4942.

— JUNE G. NAYLOR

FORT WORTH STAR-TELEGRAM 11-20-88 CR/bS

DENNIS STACY VIA COUD — 1