

Museum News: Ghost Lights

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Everybody has a tale to tell when it comes to ghost lights. You can't live in West Texas and not see something strange going on in the sky or on the ground. I can speak with authority about this subject.

I have been to the Marfa Lights viewing area on Highway 90 just east of Marfa on many occasions, especially in my college years at Sul Ross.

But, I also have seen them regularly over the past 25 years that I have worked on Sundays at Marfa.

We usually get to the viewing area long before daylight and have

seen the shimmering lights, bobbing and weaving and racing across the prairie. Sometimes white, sometimes red or blue, they never fail to fascinate. And, no one has come up with a satisfactory explanation for them.

My personal observation is that they occur in an area where we frequently see mirages after sunrise. I suspect that those atmospheric conditions that produce the mirages have a part in producing the Marfa Lights, maybe by reflecting car lights or starlight just over the horizon.

So what are the ghost lights? Explanations range from the ridiculous...ghosts and headless train conductors...to the semi-scientific...swamp gas, static electricity, foxfire, cosmic worm holes and glow-in-the-dark, bioluminescent birds. And, you can't leave out the lunatic fringe that suspects paranormal activity, demonic infestation and little green men.

Although I think we can safely discount swamp gas in West Texas, the matter remains open to conjecture. Full scientific expeditions have failed to come to a definitive conclusion, but not for the lack of trying. The Marfa lights have been seriously investigated for years by some very reliable, no-nonsense investigators, such as airplane pilots, university professionals and bona fide scientists.

But the stories still crop up on a regular basis. Red Wagner of Marathon likes to tell of the time he and other Highway Department workers were traveling south on US 385 towards Big Bend National Park, with a large storm brewing in the distance. As they came to a high-voltage power line that crossed the highway, they were startled to see a ball of fire dancing down the line, cross over the road and skip on to the east. That, of course, is an example of a well documented phenomenon called ball lightning.

Similar to and often confused with ball lightning is St. Elmo's Fire, in which a small blue or violet pulsating orb of plasma is emitted from pointed metal objects and makes a hissing or crackling noise as it moves about. My own grandmother, Gertrude Odell Oatman, witnessed such a display in her home in Balmorhea in the 1930s.

One day while washing dishes, she heard a loud pop and saw a small orb of blue light jump out of the fuse box above her kitchen sink. It dropped down and skittered around on the metal cabinet top for a few seconds, then emitted a loud "phfft!" and winked out. She was terrified and worried about it for days after.

Sanderson is not immune to the phenomena. Both my wife and I have seen strange aerial phenomena in the area. And not too long ago, I ran across a ghost light story in the *El Paso Daily Herald* for February 13, 1899, in, of all places, the railroad column.

February of 1899 was much like the February of 2014, bitterly cold and disagreeable. On this particular Saturday in February a reporter for the *Daily Herald* wandered down to the GH&SA train yards in search of a good story.

Herald reporters often found news at the train yards, and it was a good bet that some would turn up on that day.



Marfa Lights

Photo: strangesounds.org

The weather being so bitter, with howling winds and frostbite-inducing cold, he found the railroad men huddled around a pot belly stove at the yard office, swapping yarns and hoping not to have to go outside.

On this particular day they seemed to be ganging up on one old engineer with constant barbs and jokes, merciless at times. Just like railroad men (and cowboys, and county workers, and every other good ole' Texas boy) will do, they were "hoorahing" him about a story he often told, and by which he firmly stood as the truth, no matter how hard the teasing from his buddies. The old man seemed to be taking it in stride, but the reporter was curious.

"If you want a good story," said one man when he saw the reporter standing there, "talk to this man...he'll tell you something rich!"

Mercifully, the reporter decided to wait until the room cleared when the men went back to their duties and the old engineer stayed behind. He approached the old gentleman and asked, "Hey, what was all this ribbing about? They seemed to be having a pretty good time at your expense."

The old fellow, who had years of experience running the old steam engines as a freight engineer between Del Rio and Sanderson on the GH&SA, leaned forward and said, "They are all good friends of mine and let them enjoy themselves at my expense if they wish to do so. I would not by even one word of contradiction mar their pleasure."

He said that all the merriment was caused by his story of an event that occurred not long after the railroad opened in 1883. He asked the reporter to have an open mind and forget the wisecracks and jokes of his friends. Truth be told, he said, it was not just this night that he saw the events, but many times through the years, but he didn't want his friends to think he had completely lost his mind.

He went on to say, "We left Sanderson at 9:45, just twenty minutes late and went against a stiff southeast wind and was soon lost sight of in the darkness. I was on the right hand side of the engine. We were traveling along at a lively clip with my thoughts centered on the family which I had just left, when all at once I beheld the danger signal swinging to and fro (sic) within 500 yards in front of me."

In this case, the danger signal was a red lantern being swung back and forth to warn oncoming trains to stop.

"I reversed my engine and stopped. As the engine came to a standstill the lights disappeared. I was almost dumbfounded for a time, but I again applied the steam without saying a word to my fireman.

"As I pulled away from that point the lights again appeared about 100 yards west of the track and traveled along with the engine for about a mile. Sometimes a red light would appear and then the white and green light would show up.

"On several occasions when I passed that point the lights would be visible possibly a mile from the track and the white light would be indicating the 'go ahead' signal.

"You may think this untrue but if you would take the trouble to go over the line with me sometime I will convince you of the truth of what I have just related."

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Maybe we should leave this subject with a quote from Fritz Kahl, who has seen the Marfa Lights and seriously investigated them since his days as a flight instructor at the Marfa Air Base in World War II. Says Mr. Kahl: "I still say the best way to see the lights is with a six-pack of beer and a good looking woman."

If you like beer and women, that is probably good advice for any endeavor.