

Ghost Lights Of Texas

HERBERT LINDEE

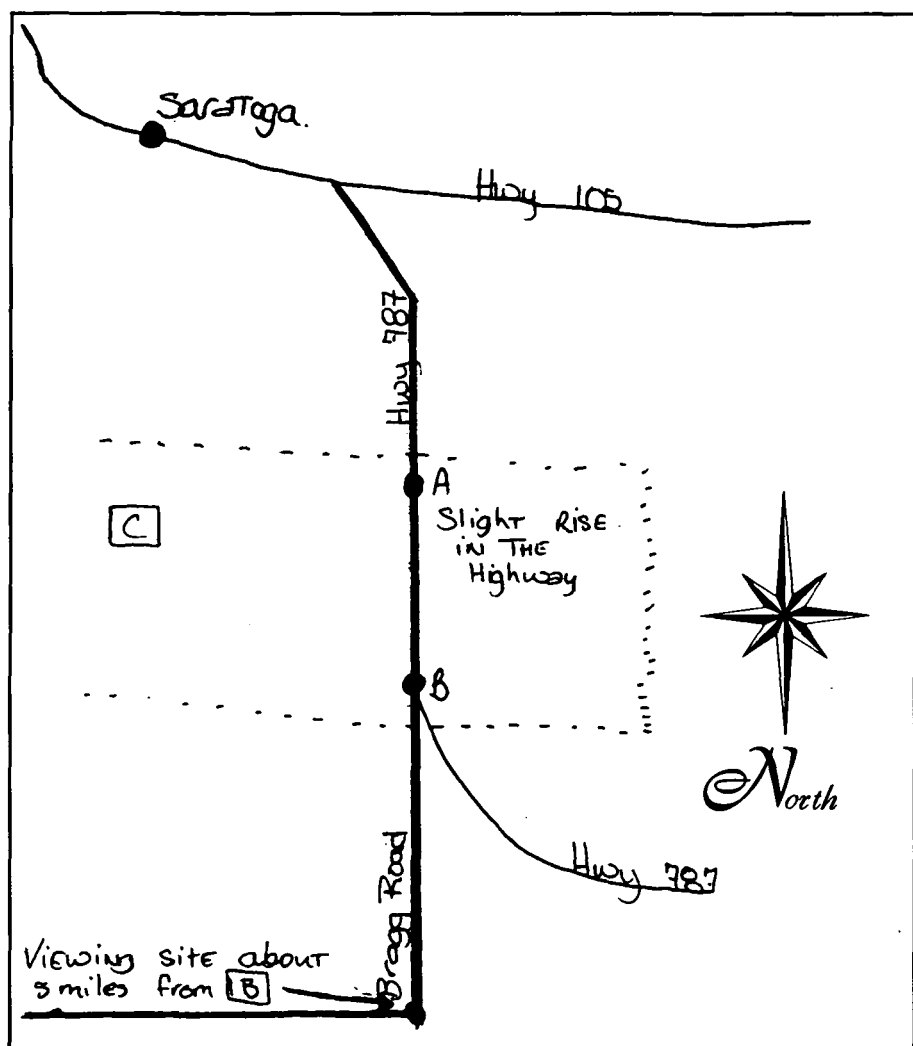
Like many other places, Texas has its share of reported ghost lights. The two best-known ghost lights in the state are at Saratoga and at Marfa. We at the Houston Association for Scientific Thinking (HAST) have seen both and have found simple causes for both. Explanations offered for the Saratoga and Marfa



The Saratoga and Marfa lights can look impressive and mysterious. Here is what causes them.

lights have included luminescence from human ghosts, swamp gas, Satan, UFOs, campfires seen from far away, piezoelectricity, mirages caused by temperature inversion, St. Elmo's Fire, ball lightning, the moon's reflection in water pools, the glow from bat guano phosphates, and phosphorescence from mineral deposits. Although simple logic dictates that there may indeed be more than one source of energy that produces strangely visible luminescence, there is strong evidence that what most tourists take to be ghost lights outside of these Texas cities is a phenomenon of no more subtlety than car headlights seen along a highway quite a bit farther away than the distance one normally encounters when perceiving such objects.

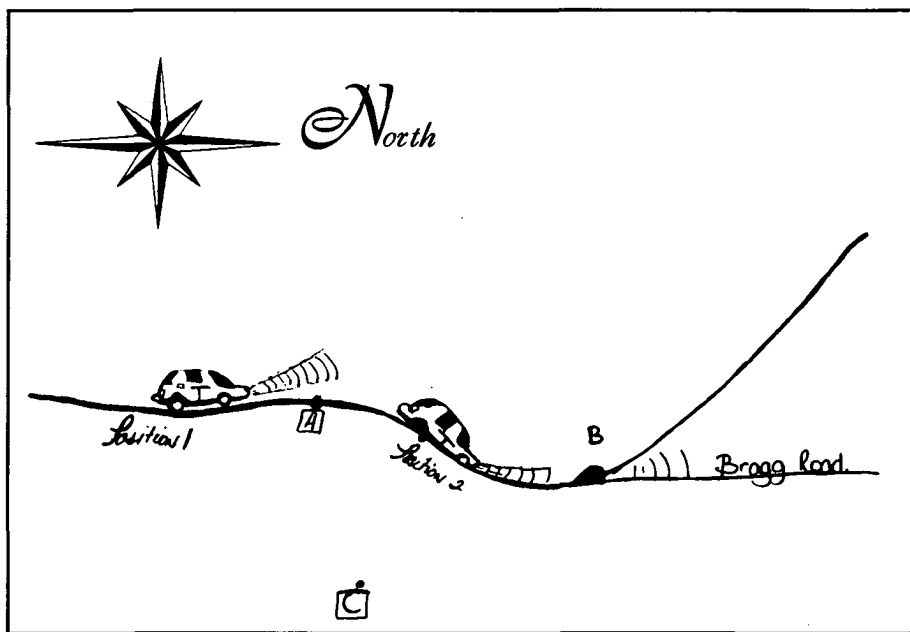
Saratoga is a small town in the East Texas



Map 1: Looking approximately south. (See Map 2, of dotted section.) Point C is a reference point. At point A, a car headed north comes over the rise. The lights then shine into the tunnel of trees formed along Bragg Road. Cars from B to A present a slight red glow with their taillights.

piney woods, a part of the Big Thicket, an ecological treasure whose name aptly describes its plant growth. Local legends claim the lights have been seen there since the times of the early Native Americans. Near Saratoga, stretching seven miles across the forest floor, is Bragg Road, an arrow-straight former railroad bed about seven miles long. (See map.) The

growth of the trees above it and the thicket beside it create a tunnel of vegetation as one peers down the roadway in the darkness of night. At night, if you travel five miles north into the tunnel and then look back, you can see the lights from the cars as they round the curve on Highway 787 (see diagram). To the naked eye, from such a great distance the two



Map 2: Dotted section of Map 1, looking approximately west. At Position 1, the car's headlights do not enter the tunnel of trees along Bragg Road. At Position 2, the car's headlights are suddenly directed full force along Bragg Road.

headlights appear to be one bright motionless spot in the middle of the tunnel. The bright spot appears in the exact middle of the tunnel for a short time, then suddenly disappears until the light from another car takes its place. The duration of the phenomenon varies with the speed of the cars as they travel along 787. A time-exposure photo of the Saratoga light can be seen on page 528 of the October 1974 *National Geographic*. The actual experience is eerier than the photo.

The slight rise in Highway 787 as a northbound car reaches the point at which its lights shine into the tunnel of trees produces a startling effect that contributes to the eeriness of the phenomenon. On a dark night along a straight highway, the light from an approaching car expands from a small dot until the first car is close enough for a person to observe two bright lights. But cars traveling on 787 to the tunnel of trees formed by Bragg Road

do something quite different. As the car approaches, the headlights are first directed upward into the sky above the tunnel of trees. When the car slips over the rise, about 60 to 100 yards from Bragg Road, the headlights suddenly are directed into the tunnel harboring Bragg Road. The viewer is rewarded with first a slight glow and then a sudden dramatic burst of light instead of the slow buildup one might expect along a stretch of straight highway. The lights do not appear to be the familiar lights of oncoming traffic, so they are often interpreted as mysterious.

This is what most watchers see as the Saratoga lights. We have been there four times. On all four occasions all participants saw the same thing with the naked eye, first a glow then a bright spot in the middle of the tunnel that appears suddenly, stays a short time, then disappears just as suddenly. Looking through binoculars

or through a good terrestrial telescope unmasks the mystery, for then one can see the single light separate into two car headlights. If the lights are exceptionally bright, one can even make out the license-plate holder on the front of the car.

Those with better eyesight say they can sometimes see a change of color in the light. This occurs if a car traveling south toward Saratoga appears in the viewing window just as one traveling north, away from Saratoga, exits the viewing window. The tail-lights of the southbound car replace the image of the white lights of the northbound car. It is quite a remarkable exhibition even when the cause is well understood.

Local residents seem willing to perpetuate this phenomenon as a mystery, for it brings in a considerable amount of tourism throughout the year. To their credit, they do not lie when asked about the lights. They either do not respond to questions, or they say something like, "Who knows what it might be?"

Another indicator of the true nature of the lights is the protest the town of Saratoga lodged a short time ago against the cutting of the trees along the road for forest management. Any destruction of that tunnel of trees might hinder the ability of the light to travel uncontaminated by other light sources along that five miles of dirt road directly to the viewer's eye. That would change the reputation of the Saratoga lights.

An interesting point arose on our first visit when we talked to the young man minding the local museum, one of the most interesting local museums in the state of Texas. He said he had never seen the lights because he had been on Bragg Road only in the summer to collect plants, and the lights seemed to be a winter phenomenon. We assumed he meant he

collected plants till darkness, then drove home. We surmised this is more a winter phenomenon because the heavy summer foliage filters out the light. To check this out, John Chalmers, HAST's vice-president, and I journeyed to Saratoga on July 29, 1991. The night was slightly hazy. We could see some stars, but it was not the clear night-sky background that our groups had had on previous expeditions. As we drove to Bragg Road, car lights along Highway 105, which intersects with 787, looked fuzzy when they were far away.

We entered Bragg Road after dark and stopped to look back toward 787 at one-mile intervals. After about two miles the phenomenon became less impressive. Something was filtering out the light from the cars along 787. By the time we were four miles in, we could only faintly see the lights that appeared at the end of the tunnel. The difference between these lights and the ones seen in the winter was like the difference between the light from a very powerful flashlight and that from a small penlight. We believe the cause of this dimming to be the filtering effect of the leaves that now covered the branches around the tunnel. It is also possible that the higher humidity of the summer might have some dimming effect on the light.

We saw far fewer occurrences of the lights than one does in winter. Two things could cause this. First, darkness occurs much earlier in winter than in summer. Second, our other visits were on weekend nights, when people are out doing the things they do on Friday or Saturday evenings. The traffic on a winter weekend night at six o'clock would be expected to be much heavier than that of a summer weekday night at nine o'clock.

After our excursions to the Sara-

toga lights, the Marfa lights in West Texas promised to offer something special. Persistent rumor claims that there is no roadway where the Marfa lights are seen. I visited Marfa during spring break of 1991 and found, to my great surprise, a highway running north-south from Marfa to Presidio exactly where the lights tend to be seen. (See map.) The viewing site is on Highway 90 some nine miles east of Marfa. Some people claim that records of the Marfa lights go back to the 1880s, when ranchers first reported seeing them. I visited the viewing site three nights in a row. Each night I stayed three hours, a total of nine hours of viewing time. On each of those nights close to 50 other tourists appeared at one time or another to watch the lights.

The first night there was complete agreement among those I talked to that the lights we were seeing were cars headed north from Presidio to Marfa on Highway 67. We would see the headlights as they came to high spots in the road and would see them disappear as the road went behind a cut or into a valley. Because the viewing distance is about 30 miles, no movement is seen, and not even good binoculars can separate the single light we see with the naked eye into two car headlights. Nightly one can also see three quite clear stationary lights—one red, one bluish-green, the other a bright white—that are unquestionably man-made, and these came into play the last day of the investigation.

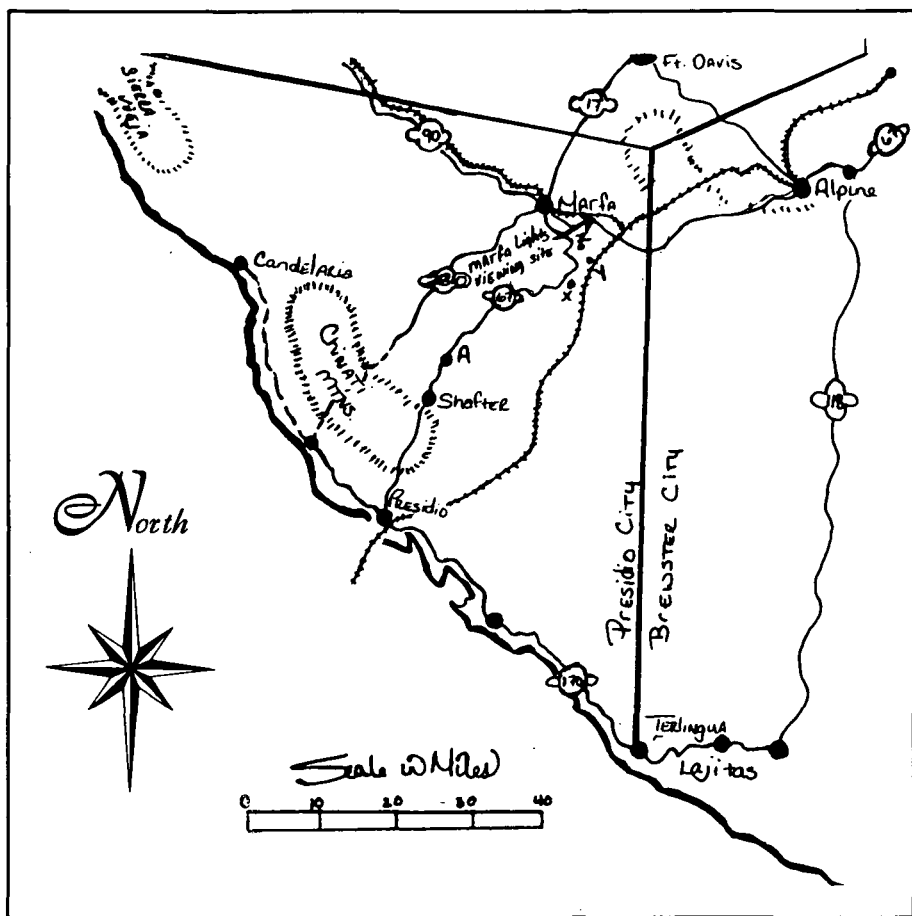
The second night fewer viewers knew of the highway to Presidio, and one or two maintained they were seeing magic lights. On the third day I decided to look at the lay of the land along Highway 67. I traveled in late afternoon from Marfa into the Chinati Mountains to Shafter, some 40 miles up the road. I turned around and

came to a point on the inner rim of the Chinati Mountains from which one can see the entire basin in which Marfa lies. There I waited until darkness fell. I could see car lights all along the road to Marfa, except where the bends and cuts obscured them, and I could see the lights of Marfa itself nestled at the end of this well-lit trail. I could also see the three different-colored stationary lights we had seen at the viewing site, and I made a mental note of their positions relative to Highway 67 as I traveled it north back to Marfa.

To get the straight-line distance from these mountains to the viewing point on Highway 90, I measured the distance along Highway 67 to Marfa from the point on the inner rim. Using this distance (which was only approximately straight) with the distance from Marfa to the viewing site, and slipping in a bit of Pythagoras, gave a distance of about 30 miles from the viewing site to the place on the rim where I waited for darkness.

At the viewing site I related the position of the stationary lights visible there to the stationary lights I saw appearing and disappearing as I drove north along Highway 67. The positions of these lights were exactly where they should have been relative to where the stationary lights had been on the trip northward along 67. The stationary lights that had been east of the highway and north of the point on the rim where I waited were now both east and north of the lights we saw as the Marfa lights.

Reports of the Marfa lights are more spectacular than those of the lights of Saratoga, and in truth the display at Marfa is more impressive. People at both places report sightings whose accoutrements resemble those associated with ball lightning, but ball lightning is something associated with electrical storms and is not peculiar



to either Marfa or Saratoga, so that it does not enter as anything special to just those places. However, a careful look about the Marfa area produced some ideas about the Marfa lights that are pure speculation.

As I drove into the Chinita Mountains toward dusk on the third day, I noticed a small, dark-colored plane circling the area near the mountains. This region is close to the border with Mexico, and the swooping plane evoked fantasies about smugglers or illegal immigrants. If the plane's lights were on at night they might be seen as easily as those of a car along the road, and perhaps the plane's move-

ments in a random pattern could be taken for just about anything from a ghost light to a UFO.

The geography around Marfa enhances the feeling of mystery and the majesty of its lights. Our vision sweeps across the basin to the mountains miles away, and we see lights blinking on and off as cars slip between the open spaces into sheltering cuts or valleys. The horizon is far away, and we feel the vastness of the basin in which Marfa lies. The prosaic stationary lights remind us that the winking lights could be something much more ordinary than a simple human artifact. We must not forget

that the entrancement of seeing the lights is not diminished by any realistic explanation of them. The experience is mildly mystical, and it is this that keeps the crowds coming again and again.

A reminder that caution must be taken. Because what we saw for four nights in Saratoga and three nights in Marfa did not go out of the bounds of the ordinary does not mean that the extraordinary has never occurred

in either place. I think we sometimes forget that skepticism must be open-ended. I do not think that anyone will ever see at Marfa or at Saratoga anything not explainable by natural or man-made causes, but too many skeptics think the door is shut when it should always be slightly ajar.

Herbert Lindee is president of the Houston Association for Scientific Thinking.



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