

MARFA, TEXAS

Marfa, the county seat of Presidio County, is at the junction of U.S. Highways 90 and 67 in the northeastern part of the county. It was established in 1883 as a water stop and freight headquarters for the Galveston, Harrisburg and San Antonio Railway. Reportedly, the wife of a railroad executive suggested the name *Marfa* from Fyodor Dostoyevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov*, which she was reading at the time. Another version of the story claims that the town was named for the character Marfa Strogoff in Jules Verne's *Michael Strogoff*. Marfa is in an area that has been called one of the last American frontiers. It is situated at an altitude of 4,830 feet above sea level in a semiarid region with many dry streambeds that the summer thunderstorms fill and further erode. To the north are the Davis Mountains, to the southeast the Chisos Mountains, and to the southwest the Chinati Mountains. Marfa lies semi-protected within these escarpments on a great highland plain known as the Marfa Plateau. By 1885 Marfa had one or two saloons, a hotel, and a general merchandise store—Humphries and Company. Poker bets in the saloons were often made with deeds to town lots. At the St. George Hotel stayed drummers—traveling salesmen—who came by train, established their headquarters in the hotel, and from Marfa made stagecoach trips to Shafter, Fort Davis, Valentine, and Presidio to show their wares. Humphries and Company's store also contained the bank, the post office (established in 1883), and a restaurant. In 1885 Marfa replaced Fort Davis as the Presidio county seat, and in July of that year the public records were moved from Fort Davis to Marfa. Also in 1885 a three-story Renaissance-revival courthouse was built at Marfa. It cost \$60,000, and in the early 1990s it still housed the county offices. In 1885 and 1886 Marfa gained churches, a school, and a newspaper. C. M. Jennings began publishing the *New Era*, the town's first weekly newspaper, in 1886. Over the years, it changed hands several times until the weekly finally merged with the *Big Bend Sentinel* under the management of T. E. Childers. In 1900 the population of Marfa was 900. Eventually the town had literary

clubs, fraternal organizations, telephone service, and a bank. By 1920 Marfa reported 3,553 residents.

Since the southern border of Presidio County was the Rio Grande, during the Mexican Revolution the United States government in 1911 sent cavalry troops to Marfa; it also built canvas hangars there from which biplanes flew reconnaissance missions. The military presence in Marfa and Presidio County was continued and enlarged by the establishment of Camp Albert (later renamed Camp Marfa and then renamed Fort D. A. Russell). These installations were on the southwest edge of town. The Marfa population continued to grow, and in 1930 the town had 3,909 residents. During the 1940s the government stationed the Chemical Warfare Brigades in Marfa and constructed a prisoners of war camp nearby. World War II also saw the building of Marfa Army Air Field ten miles east of Marfa; it was an advanced flight-training base. The military presence boosted Marfa's population to a record high of 5,000 in 1945. Both military installations were closed the next year, however, ending a vital economic and cultural influence to the area.

In 1924, a patrol called the "mounted watchmen" was established by the United States government to deter aliens from crossing the Rio Grande, primarily for the smuggling of liquor during Prohibition. The United States Border Patrol later replaced this organization. The Marfa Sector, with offices in the northeastern corner of the former Fort D. A. Russell compound, is responsible for immigration control in seventy-seven counties in West Texas and eighteen counties in Oklahoma, a total of 92,000 square miles and 365 miles of border. The administrative offices are housed in solar-powered headquarters built in 1977. In 1989 the federal government built an aerostat station near Marfa in an attempt to control drug smuggling across the border.

Tourism also plays a vital role in the Marfa economy. In the summer it is often one of the coolest places in the state. Beginning in 1963 a few glider enthusiasts found the thermals at Marfa to their liking, and Marfa eventually hosted two national soaring

competition meets, an international meet, several regional meets, and a number of annual soaring camps. In the early 1970s acclaimed sculptor Donald Judd purchased extensive acreage in the area of Marfa, including the buildings of Fort D. A. Russell, and established galleries for contemporary art. These beginnings eventually led to Marfa's growing reputation as an artists' community, and support for the visual arts has been carried on by the Chinati Foundation and other groups. Various art museums and galleries attract both aspiring and established artists as well as tourists and have garnered international attention. From Marfa, the Capote Falls (see CAPOTE SPRINGS), the Ruidosa Hot Springs, the ghost town of Shafter, and the hamlets along the Rio Grande can all be reached easily. Big Bend National Park is also in the vicinity.

The town's biggest attraction, however, is the famous Marfa Lights. The town and surrounding area have also provided the background for several Hollywood movies, including *Giant* (1956), the *Andromeda Strain* (1971), *There Will Be Blood* (2007), and *No Country for Old Men* (2007). The 1960 population of 2,799 had decreased to 2,647 by 1970. That year Marfa had several small local industries among its seventy-nine reported businesses. The 2,466 inhabitants of Marfa celebrated the town's 100th birthday on March 5, 6, and 7, 1983. For the celebration about 5,000 friends, relatives, and former Marfans came to have a memorable time and enjoy their city. In 1990 Marfa reported a population of 2,424.