There are many “Most Haunted” cemeteries in America. As the eternal home of Voodoo Queen Marie Laveau, St. Louis Cemetery No. 1 in New Orleans claims to be the most haunted cemetery. Another location that claims this title is Resurrection Cemetery in Chicago, allegedly haunted by the hitchhiking ghost of Resurrection Mary.

Silver Cliff Cemetery is a lesser-known most haunted cemetery. For over 40 years people have reported seeing “dancing lights” that appear between the tombstones in the burial ground at night. Silver Cliff is a three-hour drive south of Denver. The tiny town is nestled in the Wet Mountain Valley of Colorado, with a backdrop of the majestic Sangre de Cristo Mountains. During its days as a mining town Silver Cliff had a population ranging from 5,000 to 16,000 people. Today, less than 600 people live there, but the town draws a large number of visitors in search of the lights. Once it was an attraction for its silver deposits, now it is an attraction for its silvery lights.

The mysterious lights are alternatively known as “dancing lights”, “ghost lights” or “spook lights”. There are varying descriptions of them. They are usually blue in color, but occasionally silver or white. Some say the lights are round and silver dollar sized, others report a kind of glow. The lights appear to “float”, “fly”, “dance” or “dart” around the cemetery and even bounce around the headstones. Sometimes there are just a few lights, while at other times they appear across the cemetery, but they always disappear when you try to get a closer look. The best conditions to witness the activity are dark, overcast nights, with no moon visible.

The discovery of the lights is relegated to folklore. One story tells that drunken partygoers first saw them in the 1920s, while another says nineteenth century miners crossing the cemetery at night witnessed them. Some theorize that the lights must have a natural explanation, while others prefer a paranormal one, claiming that the lights are will-o’-the-wisps, fairies, or ghosts. There are stories that the lights are manifestations of murder victims related to a mining scam; that it is the ghost of a little girl who is buried there, or they are the restless souls of the old miners who died in the town.

Most references on the web claim that scientists who reportedly couldn’t explain the phenomenon have examined the site, but there is no evidence of any scientific studies performed on the land. These sources also state that the lights have been “investigated” or “featured” by *National Geographic*. Indeed, the story does appear in the magazine in an article by Edward Lineham. In fact, this is the first documented sighting of the lights. However, these people clearly haven’t read it. This is a travel article about Colorado, not an investigation. The

phenomenon is merely mentioned in a few paragraphs at the end of the 42-page article.

Here is Lineham’s description of the lights.

We climbed out beside the old burying ground and for long minutes I strained to see something, anything. Slowly, vague outlines of grave markers emerged, in ragged rows. “There.” Bill’s voice was quiet, almost a whisper. “And over there!” I saw them too. Dim, round spots of blue-white light glowed ethereally among the graves. I found another, and stepped forward for a better look. They vanished.

He attempted to catch the source of the lights, “I aimed my flashlight at one eerie glow and switched it on. It revealed only a tombstone.” The author was actually skeptical about the incident, remarking that, “No doubt someone, someday, will prove there’s nothing at all supernatural in the luminous manifestations of Silver Cliff’s cemetery.”

The article put the former silver boomtown back on the map. For decades, adventure seekers and ghost hunters have traveled to the tiny town to catch a glimpse of the lights. The phenomenon has taken on a life of its own, and modern reports barely resemble the original claim. Instead of the “dim glow” seen by Lineham, contemporary visitors mention bright, twinkling lights of various colors. Patty Quinn reported her personal experience to the pro-paranormal website Legends of America.

Around 9:00, the first lights were seen. They were small, most about the size of a pinky finger nail. They ranged in color from blue to green to white to yellow, and various combinations of these colors. As time went on, the lights became more numerous, larger, and more active. Some seemed to be extremely active, darting from headstone to headstone, never stopping. Others seemed to float in a “lazy fashion,” landing in the grass, on headstones, just wherever.

I recently took a trip to Silver Cliff to see the cemetery for myself. I spoke with people around town and while everyone had heard that the cemetery was “haunted”, no one had experienced the phenomenon firsthand. Just off Mill Road from the State Highway 96, a tall iron arch welcomes you to Silver Cliff Cemetery. A hand-painted wooden sign once read, “Founded in 1878, Famous for Ghost Lights Reported in National Geographic”. The sign has since been stolen. It is a small burial ground and there is only a sparse smattering of tombstones. The

cemetery is only 40% populated, and you can purchase a cheap plot for a mere $100. Beyond the boundaries of the cemetery you can see a tall white cross in the distance. This is “The Assumption”, a second burial ground for Catholics (although Wikipedia and ghost hunting websites will tell you it’s for Protestant burials only). The premises are well-maintained. This is a typical country town cemetery and there aren’t any features that are out of the ordinary.

It was a cold day and the ground was covered in about 6 inches of snow. This didn’t deter the several carloads of people who visited the cemetery during the time I was there. They weren’t there to pay their respects; they were there to check out the “haunted” cemetery. However, there wasn’t anything to see that night. The stars were bright and there was too much natural light to see the dancing lights. However, I did see lights from the glistening snow, and blue light coming from blue reflectors positioned about the cemetery.

Those who argue that the phenomenon has “never been explained” simply refuse to consider some of the natural explanations that have been posited to explain the lights. Granted, some are more plausible than others. One theory is that the lights are solar powered lights, but there aren’t any in the cemetery, or fireflies, although these insects are not found in the area. A popular explanation comes from the original article, “Some people think it’s phosphorescence,” said Bill. “You know, from decaying wood in the crosses or something.” However, this wouldn’t explain why the lights disappeared when they were approached. Nowadays, there are no permanent wooden crosses, just a few handmade ones left at gravesides as tributes. There are many wooden fence posts bordering the grounds, but not within the cemetery itself.

The article also mentions the most popular theory, that the lights are reflections from the town cast onto the tombstones. There is an urban legend that one night, the entire town of Silver Cliff turned off its lights to test this theory. When all the lights went off they still saw the cemetery lights! However, there is no proof that this experiment ever took place; it’s just part of the folklore. The author of the *National Geographic* article argued that the town was too far away to cause reflections. However, the town is only half a mile away, and Silver Cliff is flanked by its sister city Westcliffe, providing additional sources of light. An article in a 1998 issue of *Skeptical Inquirer* magazine also concluded that the lights are caused by reflections off the “mirrors” created by the smooth marble tombstones. The authors muse that the lights could come from natural sources, including the moon and stars, or from human made sources, such as street lights, cars or houses. It is highly likely that reflections are the source of some of the sightings.

However, given the range of descriptions it seems that there are several claims, and several possible explanations. One of these is that the colored lights might be phosphenes. These are

brief flashes of light that are perceived when there is no light entering the eye. You’ve probably experienced this yourself when you’ve seen “stars” after rubbing your eyes, or following a heavy sneeze. Importantly, phosphenes are seen when someone goes for a long time without visual stimuli, for example, when someone sits in a dark cemetery for a prolonged period of time. Phosphenes can create a light show of colors that appear out of the darkness. For this reason, the phenomenon is known as “prisoner’s cinema”. Phosphenes can be induced by eye movements, which would also explain the lights “dancing”, “floating” or “darting” across the cemetery.

A newly discovered light receptor on the retina of the eye may provide some insight into the “blue lights”. This receptor tells our brains whether it is light or dark outside. Interestingly, this light/dark receptor is tuned to only see *blue* light. This may explain the blue “glow” as described in the *National Geographic* story. By these explanations, it is possible that anyone could see these lights anywhere, under similar conditions. It’s just not as scary without the tombstones.

Despite the wealth of orb photos and EVPs collected by ghost hunters, there is no actual physical evidence of the lights, beyond the mounds of conflicting anecdotal evidence. Not everyone sees the lights either. This is all telling, and supports the idea that seeing lights during darkness in Silver Cliff Cemetery is a personal experience, likely caused by a person’s eyes and mind after they have spent many hours determined to “see” something.

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