

Santa Fe 'Courthouse Ghost' Mystery Solved

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A mysterious, glowing, white blob was captured on videotape June 15, 2007, by a security camera at a courthouse in Santa Fe, New Mexico. While the court personnel who first saw the baffling image didn't know what to make of it, others soon offered their own explanations. As might be expected, that it had been a ghost was among the most popular—possibly of a man killed there in 1985.

The “ghost video” became a nationwide hit and has been viewed over 85,000 times on the YouTube Web site (see www.youtube.com/watch?v=hWHRnjFCgd4&NR=1). What started as a local curiosity soon spread internationally, as CBS News, ABC News, and newspapers across the country from *The Boston Globe* to the *San Francisco Chronicle* carried the story of the “courthouse ghost.” Friends and bloggers shared their opinions about the mysterious object; one Santa Fe local asked if psychics had yet been asked to communicate with the restless spirit. Other theories included a video glitch, a hoax, a spider, and a reflection from a passing bicyclist or car.

I was asked by a reporter from the *Santa Fe New Mexican* newspaper to investigate the video. I traveled to Santa Fe to see the original surveillance tape and conducted a series of experiments over the course of two days. After some analysis and a series of measurements, I eliminated some of the more outlandish theories and focused on two of the most likely suspects: a floating cottonwood seed or an insect. There was plenty of speculation, but actually proving that a given suspect could create the “ghost”

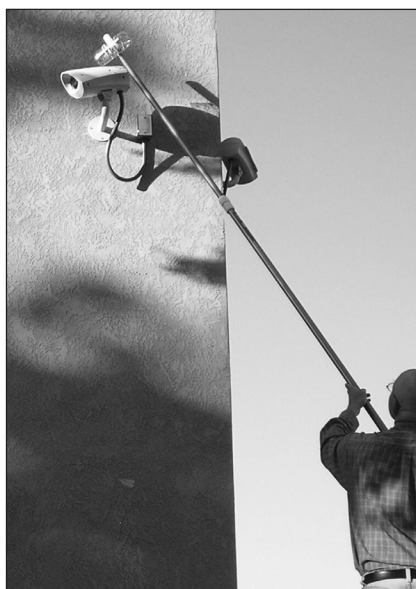


Figure 1. The author conducts an experiment to determine the origin of the Santa Fe Courthouse Ghost.



Figure 2. A still image of a bug (circled), taken from the District Courthouse's security camera, duplicating the original “ghost.”

image is a whole different matter.

I blew cottonwood seed into the air near the camera to see how closely the resulting image matched the ghost. A review of the tape showed only mixed results: while the size and shape was roughly correct, the color and movement did not match. The second set of experiments involved the bug hypothesis. While a crawling insect had been offered as an explanation, it wasn't clear

that a bug would indeed create that image. The next morning, I returned to the courthouse and carefully placed ladybugs and other insects on top of the video camera (see figure 1). After a few false starts, at 7:26 A.M. (within minutes of the time of the original “mystery” videotaping), I coaxed the “ghost” across the camera lens (see figure 2). Using the insects, I duplicated the ghost image in every respect, including size, shape, color, and movement. The deputies at courthouse agreed; “You got it,” Deputy John Lucero told me. “I’m convinced it was a bug.”

The mystery was solved: the Santa Fe Courthouse Ghost was a small insect or spider. The only real mystery is why the ghost label stuck, though the word *ghost* often is simply a catch-all term for something someone can't explain or doesn't understand. Frequently, these mysteries explode into the pop culture and make a splash, with little follow-up or resolution (while the original story appeared twice on the front page of the *New Mexican*, the definitive debunking was noted in one short sidebar in the C section).

While the investigation was a textbook success, there was only one thing I wished I'd done differently: before I started, I should have hired some local psychics to contact the ghostly spirit and tell us why it was haunting the courthouse. The answers would have been fascinating. Benjamin Radford is an investigator with the Committee for Skeptical Inquiry and the managing editor of the *SKEPTICAL INQUIRER*. His latest book, coauthored with Joe Nickell, is *Lake Monster Mysteries: Investigating the World's Most Elusive Creatures*.