

Search for the Soul

An introduction to the mystery of James Kidd, an Arizona miner who left a fortune for the search of a "scientific proof of a soul," preferably with photographic evidence.

Bill Jay

I have divided this report into four sections:

1. An introduction to the miner, James Kidd.
2. The Great Soul Trial
3. The Soul in Photographic History
4. The American Society for Psychical Research

1. James Kidd was born in Ogdensburg, New York, on July 18, 1879. Nothing is known of his early life and career. Indeed, very little is known of his subsequent career and life-style.

What is known is that James Kidd spent the last three decades of his life in Arizona. He had worked as a pumpkin for the Miami Copper Company for 28 years (from 1920 to 1948) before he cashed his last pay check and moved from Miami, Arizona, to an unpretentious rented room at 335 North 9th Avenue, Phoenix.

His rent was \$4. 00 per week, which Kidd considered exorbitant and he often paid his rent by exchanging odd jobs and yard chores. Kidd was a recluse, had as few contacts with other people as possible, and never spoke of any family or relatives. He seemed to be a lifelong bachelor and was never known to have consorted with any woman. He was excessively frugal, living in spartan conditions, never leaving a tip at a restaurant, where he scoured the menu for the cheapest meal, making a 5 cent cigar last all day, and wearing the same clothes for months at a time.

It was nothing unusual for James Kidd to disappear for days or even weeks at a time. In fact, it was a regular habit. If anyone asked, Kidd would politely but succinctly say that he was going mining. With a pick on his shoulder, but little else in the way of equipment or supplies, Kidd traveled east from Phoenix to Apache Junction. Prospectors talk very little about their claims and Kidd was no exception. Kidd let drop, or his acquaintances assumed, that sometimes he continued on foot or horseback over the Peralta Canyon or Dutchman's Trail towards Weaver's Needle in the Superstition

Mountains, and that sometimes he continued to Globe/ Miami and into the Pinal Mountains.

At 6 am on the morning of November 9, 1949, James Kidd left his Phoenix apartment, once again in order to grubstake in the Superstitions or Pinals with a borrowed pick. He was never seen again. His disappearance raised very little fuss or speculation. Kidd was not unfriendly but merely reserved and did not encourage close acquaintanceships. Also, he was in the habit of mining alone for extended periods and therefore his prolonged disappearance was not a signal for concern.

It was not until December 29 that Kidd's landlord reported that his tenant was missing. The rent was in arrears and if Kidd was not intending or able to return it was only fair that a new renter should move in. The police made a search of the room, contacted Globe and Miami police for further information and interviewed neighbors. There was not much else to be done. There was no pressure forced on the police by concerned relatives and the clues were few and insubstantial.

By 1954 the Kidd file in the Missing Persons Department of the Phoenix police was still sparse. A routine request, five years after the disappearance, for "confidential verification of death" was filed with the Division of Vital Statistics of the Arizona Department of Health. The Department answered with a brief notation: "There is no record of the above death in our files. Searched from 1942 - 1953. " The search for James Kidd was abandoned.

And that might have been the end of the story, except that a new act became state law in 1956. This was the Uniform Disposition of Unclaimed Property Act of Arizona. This act states that in the absence of a known will or heirs then the property of the deceased would be turned over to the State of Arizona, in a process known technically as escheating. Now previously stagnant assets in bank vaults could be freed for use by the State. These ghostly unclaimed accounts and safety deposit boxes would be collected in a large vault in a branch office of the First National Bank in Phoenix. Over the years this vault amassed a formidable pile of cartons, awaiting eventual disposition by the Estate Tax Commissioner of Arizona. With the accumulation of new work for the department since the passing of the new act it was barely possible to keep up with the routine work of inventory and audit, and therefore some boxes remained unopened for years. One such carton would become unknowingly a Pandora's Box.

On January 11, 1964, nearly fifteen years after Kidd's disappearance, the Estate Tax Commissioner and several auditors descended into the bank vault and, using flashlights due to an electrical failure, began opening boxes of unclaimed accounts. One was in

the name of James Kidd. It included a bulging white envelope containing scores of buying slips for stock certificates as well as references to other bank safety deposit boxes.

When an appraisal of James Kidd's estate was compiled, it was discovered that this frugal, hermit-like Arizona prospector had amassed assets to the total of \$174,065. 69. With accumulated interest this amount was now worth in excess of a quarter of a million dollars.

It looked as if the State of Arizona would receive a sudden and unexpected windfall. However, from the stock certificates fell a smallish slip of paper containing a handwritten note. Torn from a ledger-type book, the lined notebook page was a holographic will, dated and signed by James Kidd. In full, the note reads:

this is my first and only will and is dated the second of January, 1946. I have no heirs and have not been married in my life and after all my funeral expenses have been paid and 100 one hundred dollars to some preacher of the gospitel to say fare well at my grave sell all my property which is all in cash and stocks with E. F. Mutton Co Phoenix some in safety deposit box, and have this balance money to go in a research or some scientific proof of a soul of the human body which leaves at death I think in time their can be Photograph of soul leaving the human at death, James Kidd.

This small slip of paper would have immense repercussions - and the struggle over its contents began immediately. Members of one faction within the state office made no bones about their feelings. They said the paper should be destroyed and the funds deposited in the state's general funds avoiding the otherwise inevitable legal hassles and expenses. As it turned out, the Phoenix Gazette learned of the strange will and made its contents public. From that moment on, there could be no question of secrecy. The Superior Court of Maricopa County, Phoenix, after a great deal of legal maneuverings, accepted the will for probate, and the word spread like wildfire that a fortune could be claimed by the person or organization best qualified to conduct the search for a soul, preferably with photographic evidence.

2. Over 4,000 letters from 26 countries arrived at the court. Fortunately not all these claimants filed official court papers, and of those who did serve notice some applications were denied and others were withdrawn. By the time the first witness took the stand on June 6, 1967 there were still 133 individuals and organizations making formal claim to the Kidd estate. The judge, Robert L. Myers, Jr. had allotted 18 days for the hearings which, as it turned out, continued through the Arizona summer and concluded on September 1. The "Ghost Trial of the Century" had consumed 90 days

and its testimony ran to 800,000 words.

From the beginning it seemed that nothing could stop the legal process from degenerating into a circus of eccentrics. Many writers to the court were under the impression that they were entering a lottery or media game. One man asked for information on "The Kidd Mystery Contest. "

A man from Brazil wrote: "The human being has two souls, a white soul and a black soul - Which one do you want me to prove the existence of?"

An officer in the Thai army wanted the Kidd money in order to circulate his news on the afterlife on a global scale.

A woman from California claimed that Kidd's spirit often came into her bedroom and chatted with her.

A Right Reverend gentleman talked of visiting an alien who confirmed that travelers from outer space had visited the earth two million years ago.

A woman wanted "Some of Mr. Kidd's loot to buy me a new set of teeth. "

Another petitioner claimed to be both the evangelist St. Mark, as well as Wagner.

Other letters claimed to be long lost relatives of James Kidd and, most bizarre of all, one purported to be from Kidd himself: "I have a false name and I am watching this whole thing . . . I have always wanted to see what a person would do if given the chance to a large amount of money . . . "

A widow took the stand and concluded that the soul existed because a dead dentist caused her head and limbs to twitch.

A professor leavened the court proceedings by discoursing on the difference between the brain and the mind, comparing the former to a can of spaghetti and the latter to apples, grapefruit and a television set.

A religious research organization testified that it had proven that Gen. Charles de Gaulle was a reincarnation of Napoleon Bonaparte.

In contrast to these and hundreds of other exotic petitioners, some of the claimants were more sober and realistic.

A few of the individuals approached the court with impeccable qualifications and modest expectations of fulfilling Kidd's charge. Some of the organizations were frank about their disinterest in the terms of the will but felt their claims were justified. For example, the Barrow Neurological Institute of Phoenix testified that it had never conducted research in whether there exists a soul in the human body, and that it did not intend to start such research. Nevertheless, it wanted the money for research into the central nervous system. Similarly, the Arizona Board of Regents applied for the legacy in order to endow a Chair of Philosophy at Northern Arizona University, although it frankly admitted that it had no intention of sponsoring soul separation experiments.

Somewhere in between the wild assertions of the eccentrics and the sober pragmatists with no interest in matters of the soul, were the more reputable organizations engaged in psychical research, such as the American Society for Psychical Research.

Indeed, the first witness of the trial was Dr. Gardner Murphy, president of the ASPR, who had been director of research for the Menniger Foundation and had been awarded a fellowship at Harvard University to conduct experiments in telepathy. He was a credible witness who could bolster his petition not only with his personal credentials but also with the names of the distinguished individuals who had been associated with his society, including William James, John Dewey, Sigmund Freud and Sir Oliver Lodge.

After all 133 claimants had been heard Judge Myers delivered his verdict on October 20, 1967. To the surprise of most, and the relief of some, he directed that James Kidd's estate should be given to the Barrow Neurological Institute, because, said Myers, research into the soul "can best be done in the combined fields of medical science, psychiatry and psychology. "

Two individuals and two organizations appealed the decision on the basis that the Barrow Neurological Institute had no intention of using the Kidd money for the purpose the miner had specified.

In February 1971, the Chief Justice of the Arizona Supreme Court agreed, and reversed the finding of the lower court. It was ruled that the legacy should be awarded to one of the several claimants who had contested the decision. They included the Reverend Russell Ditts, who allegedly had captured the spirit of Kidd on film; Joseph W. Still, a California physician who was studying the aging and dying process; the Psychical Research Foundation of Durham, North Carolina, which had specifically investigated the manifestations of human personality after death since its founding in 1961; and the American Society of Psychical Research. The two organizations joined forces, agreeing

to share the legacy (two thirds to the ASPR) if the court found in its favor. This proved to be a sound strategy.

On December 29, 1972 the Kidd estate, now amounting to \$270,000 was awarded to the American Society for Psychical Research.

3. Before noting how this money has been used by the Society in its research into the soul, it is useful and instructive to see how such investigations were conducted in the past. Surprisingly very little knowledge of early psychic/photographic experiments was revealed by any of the witnesses at the trial. Indeed there is almost no discussion of photography in all of the court records.

This omission is extraordinary for several reasons.

First, James Kidd specifically mentions "a photograph of the soul leaving the human at death" in the will, the *raison d'être* of the whole legal event.

Second, in a court of law, especially, the participants should have been aware of, and concerned with, the nature of photographs as evidence.

Third, the claimants who were hoping to be awarded in excess of a quarter million dollars might have been expected to familiarize themselves with the extensive history of experiments in photographing the human soul. If, as appears unlikely, they were conversant with this information then either they did not bother to reveal it or the lawyers were ignorant of, or disinterested in, such pertinent facts.

But these omissions are consistent with a strange irrelevancy which permeates the trial. One cannot read the transcripts for any length of time without a pervading and overpowering sense that 99 per cent of the questions/answers were totally inconsequential to the matter at hand: which of the claimants was most knowledgeable and best qualified to use the legacy according to Kidd's instructions. Much of the time it appears that not a single person in the court whether judge, witness, lawyer or spectator was able to follow any discernible path through the bewildering maze of pseudo-philosophical definitions. "Confusion worse confounded" reigned supreme.

But what historical evidence could have been, but was not, presented for a photograph of the soul? There is, for example, an immense body of literature on the phenomenon of spirit photography, from 1860 to the present day. Probably no other single topic in the history of the medium has spawned so many papers, articles, essays, letters and speculations. But even accepting this subject's relevancy, let us admit that it is not

directly applicable to a literal interpretation of Kidd's intent: "a photograph of the soul *leaving the human at death.*"

Even with the narrowest of interpretations, this charge has a rich and interesting photographic history. Prominent among the names of experimenters into the human soul was the indefatigable Hippolyte-Ferdinand Baraduc (1850-1909). Baraduc specialized in mental illnesses and through careful observation of his patients, followed by scientific test procedures developed some remarkable theories about what he called the human "life force," which were published in a series of books from 1893 to 1905, including La Force Vitale and Photographie des Etats Hypervibratoires de la Vitalite Humaine.

In one series of photographic experiments conducted around 1896 and 1897, Baraduc claimed to have proved that the soul, or life force, leaves the body at the moment of death - or several hours later. A typical experiment involved a pigeon which was fastened to a board, with its outstretched wings and legs firmly secured, and strapping a photographic plate to its chest. When the pigeon's throat was cut, the plate depicted its death agony, "taking the form of curling eddies," said Baraduc. After death, "no photographic effect can be procured and a sheer blank is the only result."

In a paper read before the Society of Psychic Sciences, Paris, Baraduc claimed to have photographed the soul of a dying man by placing a plate on the body in a dark room. The plate "received an impression from the vital forces three hours after death."

With excessive zeal, even for a tireless experimenter, Baraduc also photographed both his son and his wife, one four minutes after death, the other 24 hours after death, and claimed that the life force was pictured stretching from the bodies in a fluid stream which hit the ceiling of the room and arced down again.

In one of Baraduc's books, the author claimed he focused a camera for 3 hours on his dying son, taking pictures at 15 minute intervals. Some of them revealed a hazy blob of light above the body.

It should be emphasized that Baraduc was not a secretive experimenter whose work was hidden from public scrutiny or even rejected by his scientific colleagues. Many of his papers were read before the prestigious French Academy of Medicine and widely distributed to the international press. The reports rarely failed to capture the public's imagination.

It was experimental attempts at photographing the human soul at the moment of death

by Baraduc and others which inspired novelists and writers of fiction, providing them with many ingenious plots likely to tickle the fancies of readers already familiar with news accounts of actual tests.

One example was The Camera Fiend by E. W. Hornung (1866-1921). Hornung was a popular author of the time, the creator of the "Raffles" character, and a writer of charm and wit. He was brother-in-law to Sir Arthur Conan Doyle and the two men were good friends and mutual admirers.

In The Camera Fiend, written in 1911, Hornung recounts the story of Dr. Baumgartner, a psychic photographer, whose ambition is "to intercept the actual flight of the soul" at the moment of death. Baumgartner fanatically believed that "a man's soul may be caught apart, may be cut off from his body by no other medium than a good sound lens in a light-tight camera." After a lot of experimental failures, Baumgartner invented an ingenious camera/gun. Pressing the shutter fired a pistol (killing the victim); releasing it exposed the plate.

Scientific experiments (and novelistic plots) on the subject of the soul were not the prerogative of a peculiar turn-of-the-century Zeitgeist. The topic continued to fascinate scientists, authors and the public throughout the first half of the 20 century.

Hereward Carrington (1881-1959) was a prolific author of more than 100 popular books on psychical research during his career as an investigator of strange phenomena.

In his book The Invisible World, published in 1946, Carrington described the experiments of Dr. R. A. Watters, a physicist and X-ray technician. Watters constructed an airtight glass container surrounding his test chamber, inside of which animals could be guillotined. He killed the animal and immediately took a picture of the hermetically sealed enclosure. Of his first 50 photographs, 14 indicated a nebulous cloud in the container. Watters asserted that this image did not appear until the animal died.

Subsequent tests by Watters, and attempts to verify his research, were unproductive. The point of mentioning these experiments, however, is not to lend credence to the claims but to merely indicate the continuing interest in the subject of soul photographs.

It is interesting to speculate that James Kidd might have read about the experiments of Baraduc, Watters, and many others, which could have captured his imagination during the lonely nights in the desert, when speculations on mortality seem to be inevitable.

4. Such speculations on mortality/immortality have certainly obsessed many investigators, whose results are often published in the Journal of the American Society for Psychical Research, the principal benefactor of the Kidd legacy. More specifically, and relevant in this context, the Society has also sponsored and/or published experimental attempts to quantify the soul. An interesting case in point is the scientific attempt to determine the actual *weight* of a soul, reported by Dr. Duncan MacDougall in the May 1907 issue of the Journal.

Six terminally ill patients agreed to participate in the tests. Prior to their deaths the patients were moved to a light bed supported by "very delicately balanced platform beam scales." MacDougall recorded the weight loss at the moment of death, as far as this could be determined. The results seemed to indicate that the human soul weighs between 3/8 ounce and 1 1/2 ounces, depending on the subject. MacDougall repeated the experiments with dying dogs. No weight variance was observed at the moment of death, suggesting, said the doctor, that canines, unlike humans, had no "soul substance."

This single example of a scientific effort to quantify the soul is used to underline the fact that the ASPR, unlike most of the claimants, had demonstrated an interest in, and commitment to, moment-of-death studies prior to the trial. It therefore seemed best qualified to carry out the terms of Kidd's will. With over a quarter of a million dollars now available for research purposes it might be reasonable to assume that a great deal of new data is available on the nature of the soul and its depiction in a photograph at the moment of death. Such an assumption would be unfounded.

The Society was awarded the legacy in December 1972. A progress report on the uses of the money was published in the ASPR Newsletter (not the Journal) in the Summer of 1974.

As soon as the court's decision was made, Karlis Osis, Research Director of ASPR, and Erlendur Haraldsson traveled to India to collect accounts of death bed visions. But they were most impressed by two avatars. The researchers talked to men who said they had been with one of these avatars when they had appeared to other men at the opposite side of the country.

Osis also reported on a series of "fly-in" experiments, which he had supervised. More than 100 volunteers attempted to project themselves astrally from their homes to Osis's office, on West 73 Street in New York City, and "read" a target object on a table near his fireplace. The volunteers filled in after-visit questionnaires and explained what they had observed on the table.

No scores were given in the report. Osis said the results had not been significant.

Attempts were made to photograph the arrival of out-of-body visitors. On one occasion a woman who had been scheduled to "fly-in" telephoned to complain that a flashbulb had been fired under her astral nose. What was on the film? That is an even bigger mystery. Osis said the camera was stolen before the film could be unloaded and processed.

Osis concluded his report with high hopes that evidence of the existence of the human personality outside the body could be found. In spite of the lack of results by Osis the general feeling of interested onlookers seems to be that the Kidd legacy "is being spent as he wished it to be. " (Milbourne Christopher, "Search for a Soul," Mediums, Mystics and the Occult, New York: Thomas Y Crowell Company, 1975, p. 258).

That is a highly questionable sentiment, for the following reasons.

Even if evidence of the existence of the human personality outside the body was found, this would not be pertinent to the question of the soul. The two phenomena might be related (who knows?) but can not be assumed to be the same.

Also, the ASPR experiments do not fulfill the terms of Kidd's will, which specifically and unambiguously charges that the money be spent on "some scientific proof of a soul . . . which leaves *at death*. "

A collection of deathbed visions would be anecdotal and not "scientific. "

Repeated requests from the ASPR for an accounting of further research and details of the manner in which the Kidd legacy has been spent in the subsequent years, have merely resulted in reprints of the 1974 Newsletter.

The ASPR might have been conducting extensive research into the search for a soul in the intervening decades. But if it has, it is not telling.

A quarter of a million dollars, now worth considerably more after several decades, directed towards answering one of the most intriguing questions of the human species might be expected to yield some interesting (if inconclusive) results. That is a reasonable expectation. The ASPR's silence on the matter is anything but reasonable. Indeed, it is highly suspicious.

c. 1988, unpublished.