

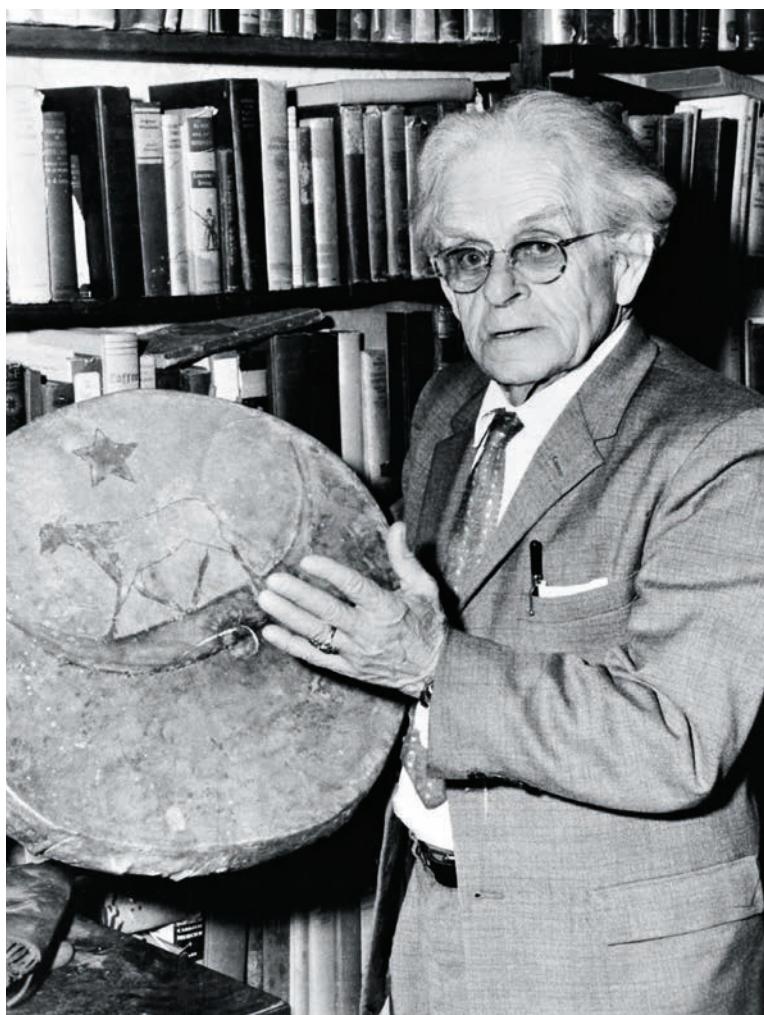


SUBURBAN SUBLIME

SHANNON TAGGART ON THE PARANORMAL ARCHIVE OF SORRAT

Opposite page: Early SORRAT séance experiment at John G. Neihardt's home, Skyrim, Columbia, MO, February 9, 1962.

Below: John Neihardt holding Black Elk's drum in his study at Skyrim, at the start of the SORRAT experiments, Columbia, MO, 1961.



POET, SCHOLAR, AND TEACHER John G. Neihardt (1881–1973) is best known for *Black Elk Speaks* (1932), a widely read text that was highly influential among various American countercultures of the twentieth century—including the Beat and New Age movements—whose participants were searching for different avenues to spiritual and intellectual enlightenment. The book details the life and otherworldly visions of Black Elk, the Oglala Lakota healer and shaman who bore witness to the horrors of white settler colonialism firsthand, including at the battles of Little Big Horn (1876) and Wounded Knee (1890). The two men forged a deep bond through shared encounters with near-death experiences and altered states, deepening Neihardt's conviction that consciousness could exist beyond the physical plane. Indeed, Neihardt believed in the afterlife. But after accidentally causing the death of his wife, Mona, he likely may have needed proof. Thus began the Society for Research on Rapport and Telekinesis (SORRAT), a vast psychic experiment born of the author's most celebrated work and most devastating heartbreak.

A look at the group's archive reveals SORRAT—long dismissed as an embarrassing footnote to Neihardt's career—as a mythopoetic extension of his literary cosmos. Collapsing art, science, paranormal phenomena, and ritual, SORRAT expands Neihardt's search for visionary truth via poetry and experimentation. As an inadvertent art collective, the group both mirrors and anticipates many vanguard, cross-disciplinary approaches throughout the twentieth century: Consider Marcel Duchamp's recontextualizations of common objects and experiences, John Cage's aleatoric methodologies, and various forms of radical play (à la Cage, neo-Dada, and Fluxus) embraced by artists such as Alison Knowles and Yoko Ono. SORRAT's central preoccupations with invisible transmission and amalgamated authorship connect to fundamental questions regarding distributed agency and who—or *what*—it is that creates.

I first encountered the work of SORRAT in “The Perfect Medium: Photography and the Occult,” a major survey of psychic photography at New York’s Metropolitan Museum of Art in 2005. Amid the black-and-white portraits of Civil War mourners, stiffly seated beside ghostly doubles and half-dressed Victorian women exhaling ectoplasmic goo, were four small Instamatic prints that stopped me cold: snaps of a levitating TV tray and a kitschy clown doll floating before a Beethoven record album in someone’s living room. They were unlike any of the other pictures on view, sending me straight into a haunted suburbia circa 1970. SORRAT offered up a unique vision of enchantment in domestic settings—colorful, crisp, postwar, and distinctly American. The art historian Susan Aberth characterized these images beautifully: “It’s like *Poltergeist* meets Stephen Shore.”

In 2020, sociologist and SORRAT member James McClenon learned of my interest in the group’s photographs and began shipping me portions of its archive, which was in danger of being orphaned. The following year, I traveled to Rolla, Missouri, to meet Elaine Richards, a core participant and the widow of John Thomas (Tom) Richards, the group’s de facto historian. In her home, where many of SORRAT’s photographs had been made, I located what was left of the collective’s library in an office closet and a basement laboratory known as the “Isolation Room.” Previous SORRAT investigators had dismissed this trove as junk fit for the trash. I felt the opposite and packed everything up for safekeeping and cataloguing.



SORRAT J 111XIII
 WE EXIST?
 WE REALLY
 EXIST! WE ARE
NOT PARTS OF
 YOUR OWN DIMES
 OR JUST PK.
 WE RECENTLY DO
 SURVIVE. PLEASE
 BELIEVE US! JOINING



Opposite page, clockwise from top left: The clown doll levitates, Cape Girardeau, MO, November 25, 1968. Masked Ouija board experiment, home of Tom and Elaine Richards, Columbia, MO, February 22, 1966. Observation box experiment, Cape Girardeau, MO, August 3, 1969. Astral travel experiment, home of Tom and Elaine Richards, Columbia, MO, July 20, 1967. Left: Spirit message to SORRAT, written in ink on a notecard and signed by a spirit guide, 1979. Above: SORRAT experiment hosted at Skyrim by Alice Neihardt Thompson and Hilda Neihardt Petri, Columbia, MO, June 6, 1978.

Working through the archive over the past five years felt less like piecing together a narrative about the group than entering a world that had already scripted itself. What begins as paranormal record-keeping gradually reveals a mythic tale centered on people who, fittingly, were mostly writers. Taken as a whole, the archive reads like a multi-act tragedy in which humans confront the forces of nature. It is thick with symbolic devices, recurring motifs, and unforgettable characters. In classic dramatic fashion, the story begins with a shock so deep it seems to fracture reality: In 1958, Neihardt swerved his blue Studebaker to avoid a truck and collided head-on into an oncoming car. His wife of fifty years, Mona, who was seated beside him, emerged from the wreck shaken but seemingly unharmed, brushing off a small bump on her brow. But two weeks later and without warning, thrombosis killed her. She died mid-sentence.

Mona's memorial was held at Skyrim, the family farmhouse perched on a hilltop outside Columbia, Missouri. Shortly after, the haunting began. It started off with a single ping from a mixing bowl in Neihardt's kitchen, as if an unseen hand had tapped its rim with a spoon. Over the following months, the noises intensified.

Knocks zigzagged through the rooms of Skyrim at roughly the speed of a person casually walking. The noise seeped outside the walls, echoing across the field as their daughter Alice fed her horses. The Neihardts assumed the phantom sounds came from Mona. The couple had shared an interest in psychic states, and they promised to each other that whoever died first would try to make contact from beyond the veil.

In 1959, the aforementioned Tom Richards, at that time an English literature student and aspiring science fiction writer, enrolled in one of Neihardt's classes after being captivated by a series of lectures he gave that were broadcast on public television. The two became friends. After Neihardt told him about the disturbances at Skyrim and his desire to investigate them properly, Richards offered to assemble a like-minded group of individuals to help him. By September 1961, SORRAT—a circle of curious students from the University of Missouri in Columbia, where Neihardt taught—was meeting every Friday night inside the poet's home.

Embarking on a quest to prove the supernatural, the group fused Spiritualist séance techniques, Black Elk's sacred worldview, the scientific protocols of J. B. Rhine (the founder of parapsychology who established a lab for its study at Duke University in Durham, North Carolina), and Neihardt's theories of poetic consciousness, which understands art as a means of giving form to truth. Their syncretic practice was fueled by "rapport"—the energy generated when human beings merge in harmony. As friends, they did this by cultivating a group mind to use as a psychic engine. SORRAT's goal was to seek truth from higher planes for practical use, a philosophy Neihardt termed "pragmatic mysticism." The members agreed that if SORRAT could harness paranormal power, it might rival the discovery of fire or the invention of the wheel.

Nobody could have anticipated that the profound affection Neihardt shared with his wife—later described by biographers as one of the great love stories in American letters—would converge with his work on Black Elk and culminate in one of the most exotic cases in the history of psychical research. The floating objects, trance communications, phantom touches, miraculous healings, and poltergeist



This page: Successful levitation experiment, Rolla, MO, August 18, 1972.

Opposite page, clockwise from top left: Successful levitation experiment, Skyrim, Columbia, MO, April 8, 1967. Successful levitation experiment, home of Tom and Elaine Richards, Cape Girardeau, MO, January 11, 1970. Successful levitation experiment, home of Tom and Elaine Richards, Cape Girardeau, MO, October 13, 1969. SORRAT experiment directed by John Neilhardt ("The table started in the living room, went through the dining room, down the stairs, and through the kitchen and the garage, and did not stop until it was in the driveway."), Skyrim, Columbia, MO, March 18, 1966.



After dying, Neihardt reportedly communicated with his cohorts by levitating his old fedora and tapping out messages in letter code, such as DON'T THINK I LOST MY ABILITY TO THINK CRITICALLY! and TRUST FEELINGS OF LOVE.

writings that followed in the five decades after Mona's death were attributed to her and a pantheon of other notable spirits, including Black Elk. After dying, Neihardt reportedly communicated with his cohorts by levitating his old fedora and tapping out messages in letter code, such as DON'T THINK I LOST MY ABILITY TO THINK CRITICALLY! and TRUST FEELINGS OF LOVE.

From 1961 to 2015, SORRAT operated across different parts of Missouri, continually reconfiguring itself after cycles of breakthrough and collapse. Internal rivalries, theoretical disputes, and public ridicule repeatedly tested the group. What ultimately sustained the project was its core principle of rapport—the psychic bonds and real-world friendships that held the members together. As the decades passed, their experiments escalated into increasingly absurd inquiries, muddying the boundaries between subjective and objective reality. Richards documented every turn, convinced the record would one day vindicate them: "Like Galileo, we offer our critics the telescope."

The archive is itself an anomaly. It's an avalanche of photo albums, negatives, notebooks, spirit writings, audio recordings, and 8-mm telecine VHS masters—the last of which are said to be the first examples of spirit cinema. While making my inventory, I began to understand why SORRAT had tested the limits of credulity for so many witnesses and participants.

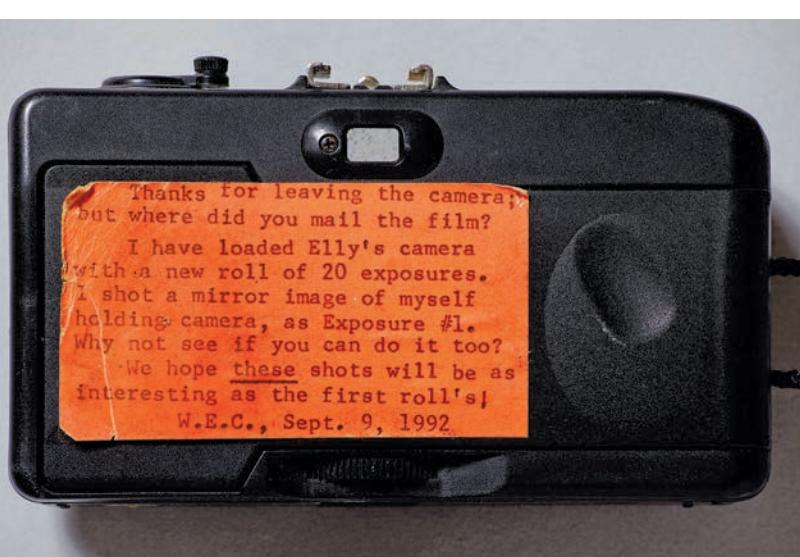
The photo albums—handcrafted binders assembled over the course of five decades—are crammed with small prints glued to card stock and annotated in Richards's cursive script. They map a life in which the paranormal is embedded in the everyday. Pictures of birthday cakes, hospital visits, church functions, and target practice sessions sit beside snaps of a levitating water can, a flying briefcase, or an entranced friend. The palette is candy-colored, more Easter morning than Halloween night. The cumulative effect is disarming—a seemingly impossible world is rendered with a clear, matter-of-fact weirdness.

The most striking pictures are those that capture flying TV trays, as they feel utterly staged yet totally authentic—phantasmagorias that unsettle perception. In a 1966 snapshot documenting SORRAT's first complete levitation, we see a tray





Above: Spread from one of Tom Richards's SORRAT albums, 1969-70. Below: SORRAT camera with an instruction note for the spirits, directing their photography, 1992. Opposite page, clockwise from top left: Psychokinetic photograph taken by SORRAT spirits in the Isolation Room, home of Tom and Elaine Richards, Rolla, MO, April, 1996. Psychokinetic photograph taken by SORRAT spirits in the Isolation Room, home of Tom and Elaine Richards, Rolla, MO, October, 1997. New members attend a SORRAT experiment in the Isolation Room, home of Tom and Elaine Richards, Rolla, MO, 1998. Film strip from SORRAT 8-mm, mini-lab film, September 1981.



galloping toward a ceiling on electrified legs—a moment that echoes a vision in which Black Elk saw lightning-shocked horses dancing across the sky. In Neihardt's book, Black Elk's tribal elders instruct him to stage his revelation as a performance so that its power might circulate among his people. This idea of enacted vision underwrites SORRAT's practice. When Neihardt saw the first levitation photograph, he urged the group to make more, convinced that potent images could usher in "more tenuous items of spirit communication."

The group's notebooks read like fragments of fairy tales or magical realism—years of stories within stories within stories, like Russian nesting dolls. One diary entry details an ironing board and a winter coat shuffling out of a closet to dance a jig with a TV tray. As the objects shimmy, an umbrella emerges from behind to join in. It opens and floats to the ceiling as a clown doll turns its head to watch. Richards notes: "Nobody would believe this. We know it happened, but as I write it, it seems completely irrational."

Dead visitors pop in and out over the years, picking up their plotlines where they left off. Famous spirits make occasional cameos, too. In one entry, the ghost of Lenny Bruce arrives, spelling out obscenities. In another episode, Carl Jung



Point-and-shoot cameras were set up in the Isolation Room for ghosts to use, accompanied by instructions to not only stage phenomena but also take some photographs themselves if they so wished. The resulting images of floating cameras, canisters, and film boxes push the idea of spirit photography to a conceptual (and rather comic) extreme.





Above: SORRAT member in a trance, Skyrim, Columbia, MO, April 29, 1966. Opposite page, top row, from left: SORRAT member in a trance embraces Alice Neihardt Thompson and Hilda Neihardt, Skyrim, Columbia, MO, October 29, 1976. Tom Richards and parapsychologist William Edward Cox listen to letter-coded spirit raps, home of Tom and Elaine Richards, Rolla, MO, November 15, 1979. Successful levitation experiment, ("The stuffed cat levitates"), home of Tom and Elaine Richards, Cape Girardeau, MO, March 4, 1972. Parapsychologist William Edward Cox working on the mini-lab automated filming device in his garage, Rolla, MO, October 8, 1979. Opposite page, center row, from left: Psychokinesis experiment, Cape Girardeau, MO, January 4, 1970. Successful levitation experiment, home of Tom and Elaine Richards, Cape Girardeau, MO, March 4, 1972. Parapsychologist William Edward Cox working on the mini-lab automated filming device in his garage, Rolla, MO, October 8, 1979. Opposite page, bottom row, from left: Spontaneous levitation ("Up goes the umbrella"), home of Tom and Elaine Richards, Cape Girardeau, MO, November 15, 1972. Attempt at "kitty-kinetics" in the Isolation Room, home of Tom and Elaine Richards, Rolla, MO, November 15, 2007. SORRAT experiment directed by John Neihardt, successful levitation ("Judy's mask slips a [trifle]"), Skyrim, Columbia, MO, February 25, 1967.

makes a brief appearance, only to introduce the ghost of John Philip Sousa. Later, Alfred, Lord Tennyson shows up: He offers writing advice and confesses that he had been visiting a SORRAT member during his night shifts at Kmart, making noise in the jewelry department before peeking out between registers six and seven.

But out of everything, the archive's most astonishing component is a series of home movies that allegedly capture impromptu moments of psychokinetic activity within an upside-down fish tank. These "mini-lab" films were recorded autonomously by a motion-triggered Super-8 camera and lighting rig, wired to electronic switches—a device created by parapsychologist William Edward Cox—in the Richardses' Isolation Room. Created in the name of science, the shorts play like absurdist, avant-garde films made in the style of Harry Smith or Jan Švankmajer—or, as one critic put it, "[circuses] in a box." In the stuttering rhythm of stop-motion, toy cars circle as if searching for parking; a medieval knight figurine shuffles across the aquarium clutching a cocktail umbrella; ESP cards escape a sealed pack, sort themselves by suit, and leap back inside. Some sequences would have required knowledge of special effects, with balloons inflating and deflating under glass, and pieces of paper bursting into flames. Addressing the spontaneous combustion, the

spirits left a note: "The molecular friction during a botched apport is a real bitch." (For the uninitiated, an *apport* is an object that materializes during a séance.)

The mini-lab movies reveal how Conceptual art, scientific experimentation, and spiritual inquiry share a common grammar for transforming absence into presence. But later, SORRAT went even further with its experiments in ritualized procedure, chance operation, and delegated authorship. Point-and-shoot cameras were set up in the Isolation Room for ghosts to use, accompanied by instructions to not only stage phenomena but also take some photographs themselves if they so wished. The resulting images of floating cameras, canisters, and film boxes push the idea of spirit photography to a conceptual (and rather comic) extreme.

All of these meta-events were taking place while older examples of SORRAT's unique output were on display in "The Perfect Medium." Unaware of their art-world premiere in New York at the Met—one of the most prestigious museums on Earth—the group faithfully continued their investigations until Richards's death in 2015. □

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