



# *The North Texas*

# Skeptic

Volume 17

November 2003

Number 11

<http://www.ntskeptics.org>

## Program for November

### The Ghost in the Universe

For our program in November we are pleased to have with us Taner Edis, assistant professor of physics at Truman State University. Taner Edis will discuss his new book *The Ghost in the Universe: God in Light of Modern Science*. He will be available after the talk to sign copies of his book. He will also have copies to sell, so bring your money.

NTS will be paying an honorarium to help defray Taner's travel expense to the meeting. Tax-deductible donations to the NTS will be accepted at the meeting (and any other time for that matter) to offset this expense.

Taner Edis was born in Istanbul, 1967, to Turkish and American parents. After completing his undergraduate work at Bogaziçi University, he received his Ph.D. from The Johns Hopkins University in 1994, in theoretical and computational condensed matter physics. Working in diverse areas, from atmospheric modeling with collaborators at Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory to the philosophy of machine intelligence, he is currently assistant professor of physics at Truman State University, Kirksville, MO.

Fascinated by the plethora of supernatural and fringe science beliefs around him, and concerned about the rise of Islamist politics back in Turkey, Edis first got involved with skeptical inquiry into paranormal claims during his graduate studies. He has since written numerous articles, particularly on the topic of anti-evolutionary thought, appearing in *The Skeptical Inquirer*,

*Reports* of the National Center for Science Education, and *Skeptic*. His critique of "Intelligent Design" in the March 2001 *Skeptical Inquirer* attracted national media attention, including notice in a front-page *New York Times* article of April 8, 2001. His writing has characteristically combined scientific rigor with an ability to reach a broad audience.

Edis's book, *The Ghost in the Universe: God in Light of Modern Science*, an accessible defense of a naturalistic view of the world, was published by Prometheus Books, and received the Morris D. Forkosch award for "best humanist book of 2002."

Taner Edis can be reached through his web site — [www2.truman.edu/~edis](http://www2.truman.edu/~edis)

Saturday, November 8, 2003, at 2:00 p.m.  
Center for Non-Profit Management  
2900 Live Oak Street in Dallas

On that same day (November 8) we will have lunch with Taner at the Black-eyed Pea Restaurant at our usual location: Forest Lane in Dallas, about

one block west of Central Expressway. It's set for 7:30 p.m. Let us know if you plan to attend the dinner, since we need to have the restaurant set up a table in advance.

All activities are free and open to the public (you have to buy your own dinner). However, we are paying part of Taner's expenses, so we are soliciting donations to help cover our costs. We are looking for \$5, \$10, \$20, etc. Don't let your generosity be constrained. Gifts to the NTS are tax-deductible. We will provide receipts to those giving cash.

Phone the NTS hotline at 214-335-9248 or e-mail — [skeptic@ntskeptics.org](mailto:skeptic@ntskeptics.org) for additional information.

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Our newsletter, *The North Texas Skeptic*, is  
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## Stiffed, again

by John Blanton

**W**e are known to be very skeptical, but it appears we are not very  
 s-m-a-r-t. For the second time the NTS has been stood up by a  
 creationist who arranged to do business with us. Maybe we should  
 switch to a different deodorant.

**On August 7 Jason Gastrich sent us the following e-mail:**

Dear North Texas Skeptics,

I hope you are well, today.

I've debated many atheists such as Doug Krueger (author of  
 "What is Atheism? An Introduction), Dan Barker (author of  
 "Losing Faith in Faith"), Farrell Till (editor of "The Skeptical  
 Review"), Reggie Finley (host of "Live with the Infidel Guy"),  
 Ed Babinski (author of "Leaving the Fold"), etc. I've also inter-  
 viewed James Randi and discussed a few things with him (I  
 wouldn't call it a "debate," though). Would you consider having  
 me debate an atheist at your next convention?

Please contact me at my email address. If you prefer talking on  
 the telephone number, here is my toll free number: [Jason's  
 toll-free number].

Thanks for your time.

Sincerely,

Jason Gastrich, B.A., M.A.

P.S. I've written a book called, "The Skeptic's Annotated Bible:  
 Corrected and Explained." You can see it here:  
<http://sab.jcsm.org>.

**Of course we were flattered, and I instantly responded:**

Jason,

You are cordially invited to come by any time. We have monthly  
 meetings on the second Saturday each month. Can you be here  
 11 October at 2 p.m.?

Best,

John Blanton

**Since Jason was too busy** to come out from California, we arranged  
 to do the debate over the phone. Everything seemed to be going swim-  
 mingly. Not only did Jason have a fantastic creationist Web site, but he  
 was at the time running for governor of California. So was Arnold  
 Schwarzenegger it turned out.

Alas, it all soon began to unravel. And it was all my fault. Jason ob-  
 jected to my billing the event as a "debate with a kook." Naturally that  
 caught me off guard, since I had been expecting to catch flak from a  
 bunch of kooks.

Jason reassured me the debate was still on despite my egregious lack  
 of good manners. Then, came the big day and the big hour. There was  
 not a peep out of Jason. He did not phone.

Call me cynical, but I have always thought if a person really doesn't want to do something there will always be a reason not to. We were sure Jason would not let us down in this respect.

He *did* post the following on his Web site at <http://jcsn.org/NoDebate.htm>. A more gracious explanation we have not seen before:

#### No Blanton Debate

On Friday, I called John Blanton at the appointed time (3pm), so we could test our equipment for the debate on Saturday. I called his cell phone and his other phone number (presumably his work line). He didn't answer either phone call, so I left a message.

Since John couldn't bother to be available at 3pm for the phone test and since he was unwilling to return my phone call, I will be unable to be available on Saturday for the debate. I had specifically set aside this time and made a special trip to my office to test this equipment; all for nothing.

If John had been a bit more sensible and cordial, in the days leading up to the debate, perhaps I would have been able to overlook his last minute antics. However, after he labeled the event as "Debate with a Kook," advertised it as such, and refused to change the title, even after I voiced my disapproval, after he insisted on using a cell phone during the debate, even after I told him it would make a very poor recording, and after he failed to articulate whether the debate was at 2:15pm PST or CST, I have come to the conclusion that we need to postpone this debate and he needs to reevaluate his behavior (among other things).

Thanks for coming to this page. I hope you weren't inconvenienced, today. Please visit my debate archive and hear one of our debates on free, digital audio! Link: <http://sa.jcsn.org>.

Even I have to admit *that* was class to the extreme. I am now sorry I forgot to mention to Jason that our October meeting was scheduled for 2 p.m. *Dallas* time. I also regret being away from my office at 5 p.m. on Friday (3 p.m. California time) when Jason phoned. Jason called my cell phone, as well, but for some reason it did not record any incoming calls at that time. Hey. Miracles do happen.

Fortunately, though we are not very bright, we *are* psychic. We had been sure all along that Jason wasn't really going to call. Did we mention he's a creationist? So, without waiting for the inevitable we had arranged to do a program *about* him. I'm sure he feels honored.

First, we expressed our condolences for his loss in the governor's race. We were a little disappointed to learn he was not actually *in* the race. Apparently, instead of paying the filing fee and scrounging up the signatures (he's not Arnold), Jason just

announced himself as a write-in and waited for the votes to roll in. History records the outcome.

Next we discussed creationists and creationism. Nothing new turned up. We played one of Jason's on-line debates to get a flavor of what we were missing by not having him present in person, or at least by phone. We decided it would have been fun to have Jason on live.

Regarding Jason's mastery of the debate topic and his level of personal commitment, we will leave it for others to comment. However, as a creationist we think he's looking mighty good.




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## The San Antonio Ghost Children

### Exploring the facts behind an urban legend

By Virginia and Daniel Barnett

San Antonio, which sits on the Salado River some 275 miles south of the Dallas/Fort Worth area, is home to an unusual ghost story that caught our attention a few months ago, especially when a film crew invited representatives of the North Texas Skeptics to participate in a documentary to be broadcast on The Discovery Channel in the not-too-distant future. The North Texas Skeptics are apparently the only active skeptics' organization in Texas today that we're aware of, so it was only fitting that one of us – in this case, Ginny Barnett – lend some skeptical observations to the film project. Thus, Ginny and Danny made the six-hour trip down Interstate 35 to visit the film crew and the site of the alleged haunting.

Unfortunately, as many of you are now aware, Ginny developed a life-threatening illness down in San Antonio just hours before she was scheduled to appear in front of the camera, so Danny received permission from Ginny to take her place, as well as all of her research notes.

And where did Danny travel to find these ghosts on a sweltering Sunday afternoon in San Antonio? Not to the historic Alamo, where many Mexican soldiers and Texan defenders lost their lives in battle - prime real estate for the restless undead. Not to the nearby Hotel Menger, a lavish landmark believed to be inhabited by its own spectres, including that of the founder of King Ranch. No, Danny instead found himself chasing ghosts at an isolated railroad crossing out in the middle of nowhere with only a 32-oz. cola to help make the 100-degree heat more bearable. And he was far from alone, thanks to the legend

of the San Antonio Ghost Children that has drawn historians, paranormal investigators, and the just plain curious from all over to this unassuming locale.

### From Legend to Tourist Attraction

According to the legend, sometime in the 1930s or 1940s a San Antonio schoolbus loaded with children stalled on the old Southern Pacific railroad tracks at the bend in the road where Villamain Street turns into Shane Road, not far from the nearby Mission San Francisco de la Espada. A passing train plowed into the bus before anyone had a chance to evacuate; the bus driver and all of the children were killed in the tragic collision. To commemorate the young victims, the city of San Antonio named the streets of a nearby neighborhood after the deceased schoolchildren.

Reports of strange phenomena at the railroad crossing began to surface some time afterwards, with the first such accounts dating back to at least the 1970s. If a car stalls on westbound Shane Road 80-100 feet from the tracks, or if someone just stops their car at that same point and puts the car in neutral, an unseen force will push that car down the road, over the railroad tracks, and safely out of the path of any oncoming train. Dust the car with talcum powder, and mysterious fingerprints show up on the back of the car. Why, this must be the work of those poor schoolchildren killed so many years ago, forever pushing automobiles over the railroad tracks to prevent motorists from sharing their fate!

But wait, there's more. Doubters were told that westbound Shane Road is actually an upward grade, which meant that the cars weren't simply rolling downhill and over the tracks; the ghost children had to be pushing the cars uphill to clear the railroad crossing. Some who have visited the site also claim that the cries of these children can even be heard on occasion.

When Danny drove out to the site to rendezvous with a film crew from Actuality Productions in connection with the Discovery Channel project, he also found a steady stream of people driving up in their automobiles to experience the phenomena themselves. Sports cars, hatchbacks, SUVs, and even the occasional heavy truck attempted the experiment, positioning themselves at an appropriate spot on Shane that someone had marked

on the pavement with fluorescent red paint. With only a couple of exceptions, all of them cleared the tracks – traveling uphill, mind you – and rolled onto Villamain. Even Danny's car cleared the tracks in 3 out of 4 attempts.

Many of the drivers came prepared with bottles of baby powder to sprinkle on their trunks and rear bumpers. Unexplained fingerprints started popping up on the car almost as soon as the talcum hit. This understandably caused a lot of excitement with some folks. Various people came up to Danny swearing that this whole ghost thing had to be true; how much more proof did the skeptics need?

### Ghost Story or Fish Story?

When Ginny researched the story of the "Haunted Railroad Crossing," as the legend is sometimes known, she found a few problems with the original story. For starters, nobody could pin an exact date on the accident from which the story sprang. To complicate matters, not a single newspaper in Texas has ever

documented any such accident taking place in San Antonio, not even *The San Antonio Express-News*. But Ginny didn't let up; after some diligent research and a few phone calls, she finally got what she was looking for.

The accident occurred on December 1, 1938. At 8:43 a.m., a school bus loaded with students was heading for Jordan High School. Visibility was severely compromised by a snowstorm and heavy fog when the bus crossed the railroad tracks. The *Flying Ute*, a freight locomotive be-

longing to the Denver & Rio Grande Western Railroad, plowed into the bus, killing 23 Jordan students as well as the bus driver. It was the worst motor vehicle accident in American history at that time.

There was just one little detail that somehow got overlooked. The accident took place in the small town of Midvale, Utah, which sits just south of Salt Lake City – some 1,100 miles northwest of San Antonio.

So how did this tragic event develop into a San Antonio ghost legend? Owing to its very nature, the story quickly spread across the nation, appearing in newspapers everywhere from *The New York Times* to *The San Antonio Express-News*. The latter paper, for whatever reason, ran the story for about 10



One of many cars supposedly pushed over the tracks by the San Antonio Ghost Children. The film crew and some surveyors can be seen to the left. (Photo by Daniel Barnett)

days, including gruesome details of the accident. The local media saturation may have resulted in San Antonio residents telling their children that the wreck happened locally, completely forgetting about the Salt Lake City dateline. As for the streets near the railroad tracks allegedly named after the young victims, they were instead named by the subdivision developer after his grandchildren.

Now all we had to do was figure out why those cars were rolling uphill over the railroad tracks. And where were those fingerprints coming from?

## Running “Up” That Hill

Jonathan Levitt of Actuality Productions spent a lot of time with some local surveyors who took careful measurements of the grade of Shane Road as it approached the tracks.

While Danny didn't record their exact readings, the surveyors did report something fascinating about that uphill grade that the ghost children push cars over – turns out it isn't uphill after all, but rather downhill for most of the stretch. It certainly *looks* uphill to many people approaching the tracks, but stand on the shoulder of the road next to the tracks and you may detect a slight downward slope. It's all a perfectly natural but nevertheless convincing optical illusion.

Alamo City Paranormal, a local organization that conducts its own paranormal investigations, also had the road surveyed a while back. According to their findings as reported by Katie Phillips of the Lone Star Spirits Web site, if someone starts 80 feet away from the tracks and moves westward toward the tracks, the road slopes downhill about 12 inches in a span of 65 feet. The road levels off for 5-7 feet and then rises 6 inches over the remaining 8-10 feet.<sup>1</sup>

The point is that if you set your car in neutral gear 80 feet away from the tracks, the car will slowly roll downhill for 65 feet, gaining enough momentum to carry that car over the small uphill slope and the railroad tracks until it's dumped onto northbound Villamain. It's an explanation that doesn't involve poltergeists – only a little basic physics.

As for the fingerprints showing up on people's cars, many people wash their cars to remove dirt and older fingerprints before they drive over the tracks in order to avoid picking up their

own prints. Their cars are definitely clean - but only up to a certain point. Just as traces of blood can be discovered with Luminol on floors and carpets despite careful cleaning, fingerprints demonstrate a similar resiliency due to the oils secreted by fingers that cause the prints (ask any criminal investigator). These oils are surprisingly durable and resistant, and can remain on most car surfaces, including chrome, for weeks or even years despite various rainstorms and trips to the car wash. This is yet another reason why museum curators become displeased if anyone touches the exhibits. Your best bet would be to wash the car with a degreaser rather than traditional car washing compounds and then see if any fingerprints show up after the car clears the tracks.

And the occasional screams heard at the site? There's a peacock farm on Shane Road not too far away from the tracks.

Suffice it to say that not all birds go “tweet-tweet.”

While the story of the San Antonio Ghost Children is indeed fascinating, our investigation seems to cast doubt on any poltergeist activity at the railroad tracks, providing scientific explanations for many of the phenomena observed at the site. Ours is by no means the last word on this subject, as some folks also claim to have captured ghosts on photographs and videotape at the crossing. We'll leave such images for another time, though, especially considering that if any haunting re-

sulted from the bus crash, it seems more reasonable to expect the ghosts to appear in a small Utah town instead of in San Antonio.

Special thanks to Scott Goldie, Jonathan Levitt, and the rest of the crew from Actuality Productions as well as Jim Lindsey of Jim Lindsey Productions. Watch for the North Texas Skeptics on the Actuality Productions program *Miracle Hunters*, to be broadcast on the Discovery Channel either later this year or in early 2004. □

## References

- 1 Katie Phillips, “The Other Side of ‘THE TRACKS.’” <http://www.lonestarspirits.org/investigations/tracks.html>. Accessed July 31, 2003.



Jonathan Levitt of Actuality Productions (center) with surveyors from San Antonio measuring the grade on a portion of Shane Road. (Photo by Daniel Barnett)

## What are your chances of being lucky?

by Prasad Golla

Are you a lucky person? Do you feel that luck always favors you and has favored you in your life? Or do you feel you are an unlucky person, never winning anything, losing everything you bet on and even imparting your bad luck to the people near you?

Whether you feel one way or the other – lucky or unlucky – depends on your state of mind alone; that's part of your personality. It is similar to perceiving whether a glass is half full or half empty, depending on whether you are an optimist or a pessimist. The physical situation of the plastic container holding hot liquid for which it wasn't specified is the same. Half empty or half full, who cares? We Engineers are upset when the specifications are violated.

Richard Wiseman of the University of Herfordshire says that there are certain characteristics of a person that distinguish him as being a lucky person. Assuming that feeling unlucky is a pathological condition, because we usually get what we think, he suggests ways for a person to transfer from the unlucky to the lucky camp. His four keys are: Feeling lucky, thinking lucky, denying fate, and creating chance opportunities.

Dr. Wiseman has written a self-help book called *The Luck Factor*<sup>1</sup>, based on his three years of extensive research on luck. He says that what we think of and call luck is mainly superstition. We know that luck plays a very important part in our life. A chance encounter with a book on magic when he was a child changed Dr. Wiseman's entire life. Had he not happened upon this book he would not have won the CSICOP *public education in science award*. The award was not for chancing upon the book, of course. It set him on a course, which he would not have taken had he not read that book, that led him to do things he otherwise would not have.

Since chance plays such an important role in our lives, we try to control it. (Control-freaks that we are.) What better way to control chance than with a system that doesn't work – supersti-

tion? His experiments show that our odds of being successful do not budge because of tinkering with superstitious beliefs. Whether you walk into a convenience store to buy a Texas Lotto ticket with a rabbit foot in your hand or with a pink handkerchief tied around your neck, your chances of winning the big bucks will remain firmly implanted at about 26 million to one. That is assuming you bought one set of numbers. Unless you buy a few million sets, your chances won't be significantly higher. It's been gravely unlucky for the poor rabbit, however, whose leg is now in your hand.

Taking a chance at a little bit of public education in science myself, I presented this topic to my fellow Toastmasters in our public speaking club. The first two times I presented it, I noticed that the topic interested the audience, but somehow it left them a little baffled. It's not just that skeptical oriented topics leave people a little gasping for air. This question even baffled me. If the idea of luck is a superstition then what is it we feel when we *feel* lucky?

It occurred to me that *we confuse chance for luck*. The former is strictly in the physical plane while the latter is of the psychological one.



There is one place on this earth where this confusion cannot be any more prominent – Las Vegas. Gamblers throng to try their *luck* all year long. Casinos, however, depend on something more mundane. We all must have heard it: *The odds always favor the house*. But, the superstition of luck makes us behave irrationally. Somehow we think it favors us.

Casinos, arguably the modern day palaces of the world, are built with losers' money. Anyone who owns a simple dwelling knows how much it costs to maintain it. If you feel your electric bill is high, just imagine paying for all those lights on the outside and the inside of a casino. And some of these casinos even give away all-you-can-eat

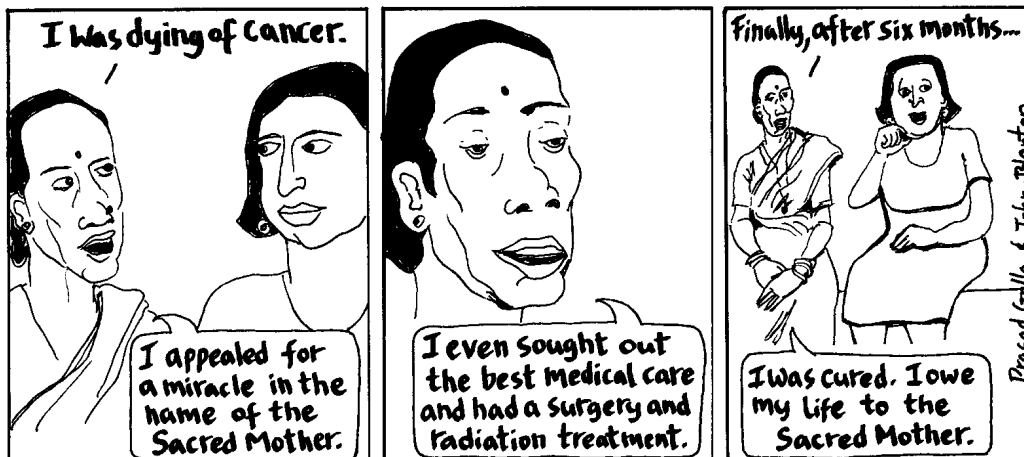
meals to gamblers. They probably figure that a person with a full stomach will not walk over to the next casino, thereby *spending* his money there instead.

It is good to think beyond this superstition of luck. Luck is just a state of mind; and one which is a positive factor of life. As we know, positive frame of mind has a survival advantage. Wiseman says the characteristics of feeling lucky as a positive attitude should be developed, in case one does not already have that frame of mind.

## Skeptic Ink

by Prasad Golla and John Blanton.

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Having a realistic perception of our chances of being successful at any endeavor we undertake in life by *calculating* risks rather than trying to control luck to favor us is wise. It is simply unrealistic to expect that a dice would give better odds than  $1/6^{\text{th}}$  on any particular number.

### Reference:

1 *The Luck Factor: Changing your luck, changing your life, the four essential principles*, Dr. Richard Wiseman, Miramax books, ISBN 0786914-3.

## What's new

By Robert Park

[Robert Park publishes the What's New column at <http://www.aps.org/WN/>. Following are some clippings of interest.]

### Mother Teresa: a Nobel's nice, but she's gotta have a miracle.

This tiny woman had devoted her life to caring for "the poorest of the poor," built a charity network that spans 120 countries, and was awarded the 1979 Nobel Peace Prize, but no miracle, no sainthood. It was easy in the middle ages; you could whip up a miracle or two before breakfast, but this is the age of science. So the Vatican sent a crack team of investigators to India, where a woman said a beam of light from a picture of Mother Teresa had cured her of cancer. The team pronounced it a genuine miracle. But her doctor says no one asked him. He insists it was a cyst, not cancer, and he cured it with medicine. Who's right? I asked an old classmate, Dom Credulo, who

knows a lot about miracles. "Do you think this is a miracle?" I asked. "Of course it's a miracle," Dom snapped, "how many times have you seen a picture emit light and cure cancer?" He had me there.

### Intelligent design: urgent appeal to Texas scientists.

The Texas Board of Education has scheduled the science textbook vote for November 6. The books they approve will be used by Texas students for several years and will influence the choice in many other states. The Discovery Institute, based in Washington state, pushes I.D., and seeks to dilute arguments for evolution. C.A. Quarles, the Chair of the Texas Section of APS, is gathering signatures on a letter to the Texas Board of Education. For info Texas scientists and teachers should e-mail [slakey@aps.org](mailto:slakey@aps.org).

### Hafnium-178 bomb: some believe it, but few have seen it.

Some in the Pentagon apparently choose scientific beliefs the way they choose to be Methodists, or Democrats or Chicago Cubs fans. Claims that the Hf-178 isomer can be triggered to release its stored energy by irradiating it with X-rays found plenty of fans in the Pentagon. The energy would lie somewhere between chemical and nuclear. That is, it would if it was so. A group using the Advanced Photon Source (APS) at Argonne tried to repeat the isomer-triggering effect reported by Carl Collins and colleagues at U. of Texas at Dallas, using a borrowed dental X-ray machine. Despite a far greater X-ray intensity, the APS group, led by John Schiffer and Don Gemmell found no effect (WN 15 Aug 03). Still, some at the Pentagon call for a costly program to make Hf-178.

Bob Park can be reached via email at [opa@aps.org](mailto:opa@aps.org)

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**FIRST CLASS**

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