

Ripleys Believe it or Not

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Entertainment

Midnight Facts for Insomniacs

Podcast Transcript

(Note: transcript consists of episode outline)

Let's talk about LeRoy Robert Ripley, he went by Roy or Bob in his personal life, he was born in 1890 and grew up in CA, not far from this podcast studio. Sort of. at least it wouldn't be considered far today, in the age of cars. Ripley was raised in Santa Rosa, which is only a couple hours from here by freeway, I've spent time in Santa Rosa, it's a scenic little place. But back in the 1900s, the early 20th century, it was basically a dusty wild west ghost town. It was the middle of nowhere. Ripley's family was poor; Ripley was often clothed in ill fitting garments, and he had possibly one of the worst cases of snagglemouth I've ever seen. His dental condition has been described as "buck teeth," but that is a kind and generous description. I think it would be fair to classify his teeth as a deformity. They're that bad. But don't cry for Ripley, Argentina; later in life when his cartoon had a readership of some 60 million people and he was

making the 1930s equivalent of over \$1000,000 a week he would get his teeth fixed, but only partly; he actually instructed the dentist not to completely straighten his grill because by then crooked teeth had become his trademark. That's my thing, dental problems. I wonder if he sued other snaggletoothed celebrities for copyright infringement. Throughout his life Ripley also had a stutter, and it's no surprise that at school he was an outcast and a loner. I don't think it would be a stretch to say that Ripley's eventual fascination with oddities and outliers has its origins in his own sense of not belonging, of being other and different. Ripley's father died when he was young and so Ripley dropped out of high school to help support his family. He had always had a knack for drawing, and was soon working as a sports cartoonist San Francisco's Bulletin newspaper. Wikipedia claims that he was already publishing in newspapers at age 16, but a well-researched PBS documentary has a copy of the first newspaper to feature a Ripley illustration, the February 22, 1909 issue of the bulletin, and if his commonly cited birth year of 1890 is correct, Ripley would've been 19. Still pretty young to be a newspaper cartoonist. I guess. I don't know anything about cartoon-illustrator demographics. Ripley eventually moved to New York City to work for the New York Globe. It was in New York that Ripley changed his name: he swapped the order of his first and

middle name because he preferred Robert over Leroy (remember branding?) so he became Robert Leroy Ripley. He also took up competitive handball and became a distinguished handball player and eventually won a championship, and he even bought a new wardrobe to complete his personal reinvention, his zero-to-hero makeover. (Still had the fucked up teeth.) So now he was enjoying life as a bachelor in the big city, but the problem with being a sports cartoonist is that athletics is a pretty narrow artistic subject, and all of the popular sports have off-seasons, so he often found himself scrambling to come up with content for his cartoons. Ripley eventually began brainstorming different ideas to fill space. He finally came up with a concept for a brand new segment that he called Champs and Chumps; it was be a rectangular section in the middle of a newspaper page made up of 11 drawings, each of which illustrated some particular oddity in the sporting world. So for instance one of the figures in the first and only Champs and Chumps cartoon is a guy running backwards, and scrawled next to it is, "A. Forrester of Toronto ran 100 yards backwards in 14 seconds." and above that a sketch of two guys lashed together next to the caption, "W. Willman and Lawson Robertson did 100 yards in 11 seconds in a three-legged race." That seems fast. The random-sports-facts cartoon was not an immediate sensation, it seems to have been something he threw together at the last minute just

to make his deadline, and In fact it would be 10 months before he again resorted to sports trivia to fill space. However even though his second "random facts" cartoon followed the same format as the first, it wasn't called champs and chumps any more; this one was titled "believe it or not." " And it includes a bunch of supposedly shocking and interesting sports facts that I do not understand. I'm kind of a sports guy, but I think the lingo was different back in the day. And I guess the average reader cared about different sports. From one of the illustrations of a guy playing pool: "Jack Shaffer ran 3000 Points straight rail billiards." 3000, that's a lot of points. I'm guessing. I know more about three legged race than I do about real billiards. Here's another shocking fact from that first "Believe it or not" cartoon: "MS Cauley played a full game at first base without having a single chance." And there is a sketch of a guy laying down and relaxing on first base, I don't know what that means but I'm assuming that no batters made it to first base? So it was like a no hitter? Or no balls came his way at all? But I guess it made sense to sports fans of the day. In the beginning these " Believe it or nots" were very sporadic; Ripley would produce one every few months, presumably when he was out of ideas. His contributions to the sporting sections of newspapers became increasingly popular, and he would often write accompanying article articles as well. So he was moderately

successful, but his big break was on the horizon: 10 years into his newspaper career Ripley got an amazing opportunity when he was sent by his editors on an ocean liner called the Laconia to document its voyage around the world.

Even today, this would be a mindboggling adventure, and it was made more perilous by the fact that Ripley never learned to swim. Even when the guy later built a mansion on an island, and had to travel by boat if you wanted to go anywhere, the man never even bothered to learn to dog paddle. I don't know if that's brave or stubborn. I guess maybe stupid is also an option. The Laconia set sail in 1922 from New York and the itinerary included stops in (and this is just a partial list): Havana, Panama, San Francisco, Honolulu, Yokohama, Hong Kong, manila, Singapore, Kolkata, Bombay, Alexandria, Naples, Monaco, Gibraltar, and eventually back to New York. His job was to write and illustrate columns describing his experiences. Pretty sweet. These columns titled "Ramble Round the world with Ripley," were basically like a travel blog, some very beautiful sketches and illustrations alongside some horrifically racist and insensitive text. Of one neighborhood in Shanghai Ripley wrote: "surely there is no lower form of life to be found than in this decayed old poverty-stricken spot. Beggars who looked scarcely human in their bundles of rags; lepers exposed their sores as mute pleadings for charity; crawling cripples with twisted

limbs extended their scrawny hands for alms—an altogether gruesome sight. One of the good god's unfortunates was strapped to a board as both hands and feet had been eaten away by leprosy...I tried to avoid him but another dirty beggar picked up one end of the board and dragged the poor wretch bumping along after me. It is not pleasant to be chased by a thing like that."

However he often took pains to undercut some of the stereotypes about foreigners and foreign lands. For instance, his overall impression of Shanghai was more charitable: it is "hardly a Chinese city. It is more than that – it is one of those interesting and cosmopolitan places in the world." kind of a backhanded compliment, " this is not your standard filthy Chinese shithole." But a compliment nonetheless. Similarly, he praised Tokyo, assuring anyone who believed Japan was "any distance behind the times" that the imperial Hotel was as fine as any hotel the world had ever seen. "Surprisingly, those Asians can build a decent hotel! Who would've thought." The stories captivated readers. Ripley Included sketches of beautiful women in Hawaii offering flower necklaces and men riding elephants in Burma (now Myanmar). You can almost feel the excitement vibrating from the page when he writes in giant black letters "we see our first **Hindu**," with the word "Hindu" underlined., followed by "his turban is 30 feet long." And a not super flattering sketch of a bearded

man with a large turban, I have no idea how accurate it was or the actual length of the turban, and I'm pretty sure the guy didn't unroll it for him. India in particular was one of the places that clearly blew Ripley's mind. He included breathless descriptions of Hindu religious figures like Kali, the patron goddess of Calcutta "a black figure with four arms—three red eyes—a long scarlet tongue—a necklace of human skulls—and no legs. The Hindus worship such as this!" That particular drawing is pretty sad, not his best. I'll post it in the discord. Ripley was blown away by what he considered the strangeness of India. The untouchables, the yogis, religious ceremonies that to him seemed incomprehensible. "Never, in the wildest, rarin', buckin' nightmare could such a sight as these surroundings be imagined. I never saw such a weird, unusual, and motley mob. Sadhus—religious ascetics—sit in twisted postures in mystic contemplation. Yogi's squat about in front of fires which fill the place with smoke. A fanatic lies on his bed of spikes in the corner, another is crawling on the ground like a worm; still another with wild yellow hair and face painted white sits looking up at the sun.. nearby, the pavements are running red with blood. The crying of young goats that are being offered in sacrifice fills the air as the bespattered Hindu lobs off their heads with a huge knife." He didn't include an illustration of that particular image. Thankfully. That's a horror movie. He did give at least some credit

to India where it was due, calling the Taj Mahal "an unsurpassed monument of beauty and human devotion." He's very impressed with a nice building... he finds it amazing that savages can build stuff.

When he returned from his journey, Ripley's mind had been expanded, and he wasn't content to go back to drawing sketches of napping first basemen and dudes who were really good at playing pool. He expanded his "believe it or not" cartoon series, now including more sketches from his travels alongside the boxers and high jumpers. Soon, the images of Burmese girls with 14-inch necks that they had gradually extended via expanding stacks of metal rings overshadowed the tiny sketches of athletes.

The cartoons proved so popular that Simon and Schuster offered him the opportunity to publish a book of his cartoons, which he initially rejected. He saw himself strictly as a newspaper illustrator, but that all changed after Charles Lindbergh achieved what was publicized as the first solo flight across the Atlantic, a journey we covered in our crimes of the century episode.

As a response, Ripley published a cartoon that seemed to undermine Lindbergh's achievement. It included the large statement in block letters: "Lindbergh was the 67th man to make a nonstop flight over the Atlantic ocean!"

The reaction was swift and vicious. Ripley was accused of being un-American, a liar, and a traitor. He

subsequently published his explanation: while it was true that Lindbergh had achieved the first SOLO nonstop flight over the Atlantic Ocean, at least a couple of dirigibles filled with passengers and also some airplanes with more than one pilot or crewmember had flown it as well, so Ripley was proved right on a technicality. Although no other man of them had flown it solo, It was true that 66 other men had made the trip,. This strikes me as a sneaky neckbeard moment, the cartoon equivalent of "actually,"...like it doesn't get much more nitpicky than that, but you know what they say: no publicity is bad publicity. Ripley continued publishing cartoons that undermined and questioned conventional wisdom, with clickbaity headlines like "Saint Patrick was neither a Catholic, a saint, nor an Irishman! And his name was not Patrick!" This is true, BTW. He was Roman-British and his real name was **Maewyn Succat**.

Ripley's already relatively-recognizable cartoon exploded in popularity, and Ripley finally agreed to publish a book. It was a smash hit. Deservedly so. Before the Internet, before commercial air travel, how was the regular person in America going to find out about the Chinese priest in Shanghai who spent 27 years growing fingernails that measured 22 3/4 inches long? And many of the illustrations are genuinely gorgeous. Whatever you want to say about Ripley —and pretty soon you might have a few choice words to say—Ripley was a

real artist. He works in a style that today you might associate with Frank Miller, using stark shading to create these almost Gothic, haunting images. The success of the *Believe it or Not* book prompted newspaper titan William Randolph Hearst to offer Ripley a \$100,000 per year contract, 10 times his current salary. And that was 1929 money. Not bad for a cartoonist.

Ripley expanded the scope of his cartoon to include what he called curioddities, anything weird or out of the ordinary, some of which were genuinely impressive and others... Less so. The tree climbing fish of the Dutch west Indies, pretty cool. "Johnny cigars" of Roxbury Massachusetts who could smoke six cigars at one time, or the tree trunk near Monterey California shaped like a pig...less. Two carrots that grew through a metal ring? Sure. According to author Melissa Prichard, Ripley would say "There's an infinity of strangeness in the world that will never run out, it's inexhaustible. I think he felt he was barely scratching the surface of it."

To drum up more content, the Hearst papers initiated a "Believe it or Not" contest, in which readers could submit their own suggestions for the comic. It was such a success that the US postmaster general complained about the volume of mail address to Ripley.

Anytime you open up the floodgates to the unwashed masses, you're going to

get a predictable torrent of crazy and ridiculous nonsense. Reap the whirlwind. So now you had Ripley publishing cartoons like this one which was a drawing of an elderly couple eating dinner: "Mr. and Mrs. Frederick Butsky vowed on their wedding day to always eat from the same plate. They have never dined otherwise in 49 years." and, "Max H Calvin of Brooklyn can put 25 quarters in his ear."

Seems ridiculous and trite, but it was also an opportunity for regular weirdos to get their 15 minutes of fame.

Everyone wanted to be immortalized by Ripley in one of his cartoons.

Probably not everyone, I personally wouldn't want my habit of shoving quarters in my ears to be broadcast, but different strokes for different folks.

While it seems pretty ridiculous to me, the cartoon has been described as "a celebration of the underdog," it was a chance for people who had one little unique feature that no one else cared about to be celebrated unironically for a simple talent or minor point of uniqueness. One of my favorite Ripleys believe it or not curioddities: The fact that there was once a ham seller named Sam Heller.

So, flush with cash and bankrolled by the Hearst newspaper company, Ripley became a globe trotting adventurer, visiting over 200 of the 230 countries that were recognized at the time, cataloging more and more curioddities. He didn't stick to only cartoons, he videotaped much of his journey. His relationship with the truth

is complicated, Ripley seems to have delighted in research and facts and correct misconceptions, but he also contributed to plenty of them. His "Great Wall of China" cartoon refers to the wall as "the only one that would be visible to the human eye from the moon." And mentions "1,000,000 men were buried in the walls to make them strong." even though he was exposing Americans to more and more of the world, his focus on weirdness and stereotypes and oddities emphasize the otherness of the cultures he visited rather than similarities, and of course the blatant racism continued to be pretty cringe. The previously referenced great wall cartoon included a random scribble in the corner that said: "can a Chinaman whistle? Answer next Sunday." And referred to Chinese people as "the heathen Chinee."

He never bothered to learn another language, according to the excellent PBS American Experience documentary about Ripley, "he boasted that he would go to places and just speak English louder if people couldn't understand him."

You might wonder how a man who seems a bit like an ignorant stereotypical American jack ass was managing to coordinate these travels and dig up all of these facts. Well, Ripley had a secret weapon. He had a collaborator, a research assistant who in reality was the brains of the operation. His name was Norbert Pearlroth, and he was a brilliant researcher who spent countless hours in the New York Public Library digging

up interesting facts and unique locations for Ripley to pretend to stumble upon and discover.

Where Ripley didn't bother learning even a single additional language, Norbert reportedly spoke over a dozen. He worked full time as a library researcher, contributing to an often conceiving of the cartoons that would make Ripley famous, that he was never credited in any of the publications.

By 1930 Ripleys believe it or not had gone multimedia. Produced by Warner Brothers studio, short videos of Ripley's various travels and "discoveries" would play before feature films. They're awkward AF. He is not a natural performer. The uncomfortable stiffness, stilted speech, and teeth are on full display. Regardless, the awkward weirdo with all of his foibles came across as endearing and probably appealed to many of the outsiders and outcasts that saw themselves in him. In an example of what seems to be bass Ackwards order, Ripleys video shorts led to a successful career in radio. I guess that actually makes total sense. Once they saw his face they were like, "kid, you got a face for radio."

Ripley pioneered the field of on-location broadcasting, bringing listeners to the bottom of the Grand Canyon, to caves and shark tanks. He hosted a show underwater, he Didn't hesitate to occasionally put himself in danger for the benefit of the show. He quickly became one of the most recognizable figures in America. At one point a survey of young boys

revealed that more of them would prefer to grow up to be Robert Ripley than a famous baseball player or President of the United States.

Ripley and his fucked up grill even became a ladies man, publicly dating models and actresses. It probably didn't hurt that he was one of the few people thriving in the depths of the depression. He built a giant mansion on his own personal island in Mamaroneck upstate New York that he nicknamed Believe it or not island. It was alternately known by its acronym BION. And like so many weirdos with money he indulged in all of the weirdness that his money could buy. He had a particular fascination and fetishization for Chinese culture and liked to surround himself with all manner of caricatures and stereotypes. He would dress in what he considered to be traditional Chinese outfits and sail his Chinese junk ship and invite his celebrity friends to Chinese themed dinner parties where he served, you guessed it, McDonald's. No, Chinese food.

Ripley opened his first museum, which he called the "odditorium" (like "o-d-d", get it?) at the Chicago's worlds fair of 1933. For some reason we can't get away from Chicago world's fairs. At least this one is different, this wasn't the white city. This was the worlds fair celebrating Chicago's Centennial. Everyone was shocked that chicago had lasted 100 years and was like fuck, we need to throw a party. While we're still around. In the front was a standard museum with displays and

plaques and dioramas, but the back was a full on freak show. Like, literally, the "step right up, you won't believe your eyes, you will literally argue with your eyeballs, you'll be like wtf eyeballs, why do you lie to me, there's no way a woman could have facial hair" or whatever. A carny sideshows. Human exhibits (which is an awful phrase to begin with) included the fireproof man of India who supposedly could blast a blow torch into his eyes without injury. The "leopard skinned man" which was obviously just a guy with a bad case of vitiligo [vit E Lie go]. The "rubber skinned girl," "obviously another person with an unfortunate skin condition. The human pin cushion, just a dude with a bunch of piercings. Speaking of which, there was a guy who lifted barbells with his nipple piercings. One of the most popular attractions was Freda Pushnik, a girl with no arms or legs, who was billed as "little half girl" Ouch. To be fair (to be fair) Ripley bristled at any mention of the word Freakshow, insisting that everyone use the term oddity instead, i'm not sure how that's much better, and under pressure he conceded that an oddity was really just a "high class freak." OK. Interesting choice of words. "I only employ the most sophisticated of freaks. There's nothing classier than a men swallowing a live rat or a guy blowing up a balloon with his eyeball." Of course the worlds fair museum was yet another massive success, and would lead to a long-term museum located on Broadway in Manhattan

followed by franchises across the country.

Some of the stuff in Ripley's human exhibits collection is really uncomfortable for me to watch, honestly. A woman eating razor blades, a guy slipping metal hooks into his lower eyelids and pulling carts around with them. A dude who smokes a cigarette through his eyesocket. You know, sophisticated stuff.

When World War II broke out, and international travel was restricted, Ripley's cartoons became patriotic, "believe it or not" facts oriented toward the war. Most of them as far as I can tell weren't particularly unbelievable. "Believe it or not: Lieutenant Jack Bradford found a real fox in his fox hole! He killed the animal. " I believe it. Sadly that's pretty believable. Kinda wish I didn't know about it.

Ripley's first postwar world tour seems to have been eye-opening for him. His beloved China had been ravaged during the Japanese occupation, and of course The Japanese cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki had been pulverized by atom bombs. He broadcast one of his episodes live from Hiroshima. By this point his health was in decline, and he seemed to have been profoundly affected by the grim postwar voyage. In 1949, an overweight, aging Ripley hosted his first television show. It was pretty terrible to be honest. He hadn't ever become comfortable on camera, and seems that encroaching senility doesn't improve one's on-screen

persona. As he was verbally stumbling through the live broadcast of the 13th episode, Ripley experienced a minor heart attack; he slumped over briefly and then seemed to awaken and gather himself enough to power through. Less than a week later he was dead. He was buried next to his parents in Santa Rosa, in a cemetery called Odd Fellows. That's true.

Some fast facts about Ripley:

"'Peanuts' cartoonist Charles Schulz's first published drawing appeared in a Believe It or Not! cartoon in 1937. The sketch featured a little dog that would later become famously known as 'Snoopy.'"

<https://www.tpt.org/ripley-believe-it-or-not-american-experience/video/american-experience-ripley-believe-it-or-not-chapter-1/>

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