

# Believe It Or Not!

## Robert Ripley: The Most Inquisitive Man in History

*Did you ever hear about the chicken that survived without a head for 18 months? Or the man who could play piano although he had no hands? What about the doctor who died at the age of 140, after drinking a glass of whiskey every day since the age of 25?*

*These are just a sampling of the hundreds of thousands of interesting anecdotes that became famous thanks to Robert Ripley. Ripley was a journalistic cartoonist who traveled the globe to find material to satisfy his insatiable curiosity about the world. He uncovered all sorts of odd and astonishing facts that were eagerly devoured by millions of avid readers.*

*In his time, he was one of the best-known names in the world. Today his memory is kept alive by the numerous "Believe It or Not!" museums that he inspired.*





**B**elieve it or not: an ostrich egg is so strong that it can support a 280-pound person without cracking. A smoker nicknamed “Smoky” exhaled the smoke from his cigarettes through a hole in his back. A Chinese farmer named Wang had a 13-inch horn on his head. Frank Foss of St. Petersburg, Florida, played banjos made from frying pans at the age of 92. A monkey-man from India never walked upright.

These fantastic facts may or may not be true. Regardless, the only reason we are aware of them is because of Robert Ripley, the man who coined the now popular phrase “Believe it or not.”

Ripley was a strange and most fascinating figure. Already a legend in his lifetime, his unquenchable curiosity drove him to the most remote corners of the planet to uncover ever more interesting facts, unusual people, odd creatures, mysterious objects and seemingly unexplainable stories.

Ripley visited 200 countries over his life. On one expedition alone he visited two continents and covered 25,000 miles. Of those, approximately 15,000 miles were done by plane, 8,000 miles by ship and another 1,000 miles on camel, donkey or horseback.

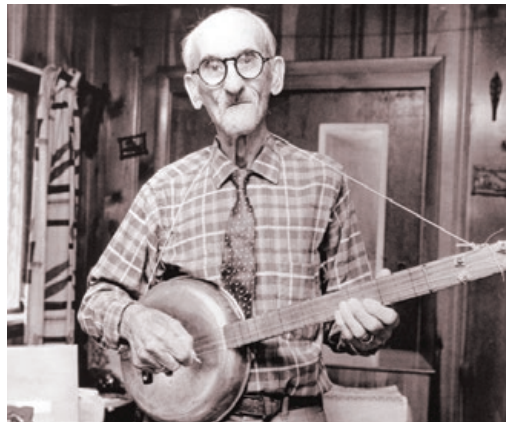
## Who Was Robert Ripley?

When Robert Ripley died on May 27, 1949, he was at the height of his fame. He was also a millionaire. He owned



Wang, the Chinese man with a 13-inch horn on his head.

expensive houses, cars and an island, as well as countless oddball objects, mementos and souvenirs acquired over the years from his unusual line of work. As just one example, he owned a bullet that a man had



Frank Foss played banjos made of frying pans at age 92.



A figure on display in the Ripley Museum of the “Lighthouse Man” discovered by Ripley in China who built a candle into his head to give tours at night.

coughed up 49 years after being shot in the chest.

However, the millionaire who had a radio show and was paid top dollar to speak publicly began his career in poverty as an extremely shy young boy. He rarely opened his mouth in class and never even completed high school. He had unseemly buckteeth, which impaired his speech and caused him to stutter. (Years later, when his wealth made it possible, he underwent a painful procedure to replace his natural teeth with false ones.) Yet, he grew into a goofy everyman whose limited education matched that of his core readership, but whose voracious curiosity and capacity for hard work and entrepreneurship led to the unintended creation of an empire that would far outlive him.

Leroy Robert Ripley was born in Santa Rosa, California in 1890 (Ripley later

changed the date to make people believe he was several years younger). His father was an impoverished carpenter who died when Robert was just 15. Ripley’s mother then took jobs as a laundry woman for the wealthy to support herself and her children. The following year, in 1906, the infamous earthquake that leveled San Francisco also destroyed nearby Santa Rosa.

Young Leroy (as Ripley was then known) had few friends, but he was a talented artist, and entirely self-taught. Hired to draw for his school newspaper, the sketches he produced looked so professional that in 1908 Life magazine paid him \$8.00, a hefty sum in those days, for one of his works.

A year later, Ripley was hired as the official cartoonist for a small San Francisco newspaper. When a competitor offered him better pay, he accepted the offer. Later, he was drawn to New York City to work on the staff of the New York Globe, then still a small newspaper. (It was the editors of the Globe who finally convinced Ripley to go by his middle name, Robert.)

Ripley arrived at the Globe at the perfect time. The newspaper had just joined a national syndicate, meaning that his drawings were now being sent across America. His cartoons became so popular that he alone was responsible for a significant increase in Globe’s circulation. The editors rewarded him by assigning him to a prestigious journalistic mission visiting US military bases and Europe during World War I.

One day in 1918 Ripley was struggling with writer’s block. He wracked his brain trying to think of an idea for his cartoons while the deadline loomed ahead. With time running out, he turned to a notebook in which he had jotted down various interesting anecdotes he had come across in the course of his travels. Based on his notes, he drew nine figures that performed outstanding feats. One could hold his breath underwater for six-and-a-half minutes. Another could cover 300 feet in 14 seconds running backward. He depicted a man jumping backward 12 feet and 11 inches while holding weights in his hands and another



Top: Ostrich eggs are tough enough to support the weight of a grown person. Bottom: The egg’s durability makes it suitable for various artistic purposes.



Robert Ripley.