

RIPLLEY

BELIEVE IT
OR NOT

1 X 60 HD

JOHNNY "CIGARS" CONNORS
SMOKES 6 CIGARS

THE TREE CLIMBING
FISH
of the Dutch West Indies

HOWARD
HASELTINE
Bristol, Vermont.

AND
PLAYS
THE
PIANO



PBS®

INTERNATIONAL

RIPLEY

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LeRoy Robert Ripley rose to fame during the Great Depression, transforming himself from a skinny, buck-toothed boy into an entertainer who mesmerized the world with his razzle-dazzle blend of homespun Americana, colorful exotica, and freakish oddities. Over three decades, his “Believe It or Not!” franchise grew into an entertainment empire, expanding from newspapers to every form of new media in the 20th century: radio, film, and, ultimately, television. At the center of it all was Ripley, whose obsession with the odd and keen eye for the curious made him one of the richest men in the country.

Born in Santa Rosa, California, in 1890, Ripley was a loner child. He began drawing at an early age and had a cartoon published in *Life* magazine when he was still a teenager. With the help of a family friend, he soon became a sports cartoonist in San Francisco and quickly parlayed his artistic knack and wide-eyed enthusiasm for adventure into a job as a sports cartoonist with New York’s *Globe and Commercial Advertiser*. It was at the *Globe* that he created his first sports-themed “Believe It or Not!” and the popular feature took off.

The opportunity of a lifetime soon came when the *Globe*’s editors sent him on a four-month around-the-world cruise, and Ripley’s daily dispatches, chronicling the most bizarre forms of human behavior and the man-made oddities he witnessed, captivated readers. His columns caught the attention of Simon & Schuster, who published a *Believe It or Not* book—an instant best-seller that led to a syndicated column in Hearst newspapers. Now earning \$100,000 a year, “Believe It or Not!” quickly entered the national vocabulary as Americans embraced a steady diet of the weird and wondrous. From a man who could blow up a balloon with his eye to an Indian holy man who walked on hot coals, to another who shaved with a blowtorch, Ripley fed the country’s natural fascination with the odd, the unusual, and the grotesque.

Outfitted in his trademark pith helmet, Ripley embarked on fact-finding expeditions from Afghanistan to Zanzibar, Fiji to Finland, Mombasa to Marrekesh, earning him the nickname “the modern day Marco Polo.” With his empire raking in half-a-million dollars a year at the height of the Depression, Ripley had transformed himself from a homely hayseed to a dashing man-about-town, squiring actresses and models and living in a 27-room mansion and a luxury apartment overlooking Central Park. Hosting elaborate parties and sailing Long Island Sound with a bevy of beauties in a Chinese junk, Ripley had succeeded in transforming himself into one of the most admired and successful men in America.

The advent of the Second World War grounded Ripley. Unable to travel overseas, he used his many platforms to provide patriotic stories about U.S. soldiers and their battlefield exploits. When the war ended, Ripley travelled to his beloved Far East and was heartbroken by the devastation he witnessed. Returning home from the sobering trip, Ripley threw himself into the latest frontier—television. *Believe It or Not!* premiered on NBC in 1949. However, during its 13th episode, he suffered a heart attack and died shortly thereafter.

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AMERICAN EXPERIENCE

CREDITS

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