A CURIOUS MAN

THE STRANGE & BRILLIANT LIFE OF ROBERT 'BELIEVE IT OR NOT' RIPLEY

NEAL THOMPSON

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About the Book

One of the most successful entertainment figures of his time, Robert Ripley's life is the stuff of a classic American fairy tale. Buck-toothed and hampered by shyness, Ripley turned his sense of being an outsider into an appreciation of the weird and wonderful. He sold his first cartoon to *LIFE* magazine at eighteen, but it was his wildly popular *Believe It or Not!* radio shows that won him international fame, and spurred him on to search the globe's farthest corners for bizarre facts, human curiosities and shocking phenomena.

Ripley delighted in making preposterous declarations that somehow turned out to be true – such as that Charles Lindburgh was only the sixty-seventh man to fly across the Atlantic or that 'The Star Spangled Banner' was *not* the USA's national anthem. And he demanded respect for those who were labelled 'eccentrics' or 'freaks' – whether it be E. L. Blystone, who wrote 2,871 alphabet letters on a grain of rice, or the man who could swallow his own nose. By the 1930s, Ripley possessed a wide fortune, a private yacht and a huge mansion stocked with such oddities as shrunken heads and medieval torture devices. His pioneering firsts in print, radio and television tapped into something deep in the American consciousness – a taste for the titillating and exotic, and a fascination with the fastest, biggest, wackiest and weirdest – and ensured a worldwide legacy that continues today.

This compelling biography portrays a man who was dedicated to exalting the strange and unusual – but who may have been the most amazing oddity of all.

About the Author

Neal Thompson is the critically acclaimed author of *Light This Dandle, Driving with the Devil* and *Hurricane Season,* and has contributed to such publications as *Outside*, *Esquire* and *Sports Illustrated*. He lives in Seattle with his wife and their two sons.

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A CURIOUS MAN

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NEAL THOMPSON

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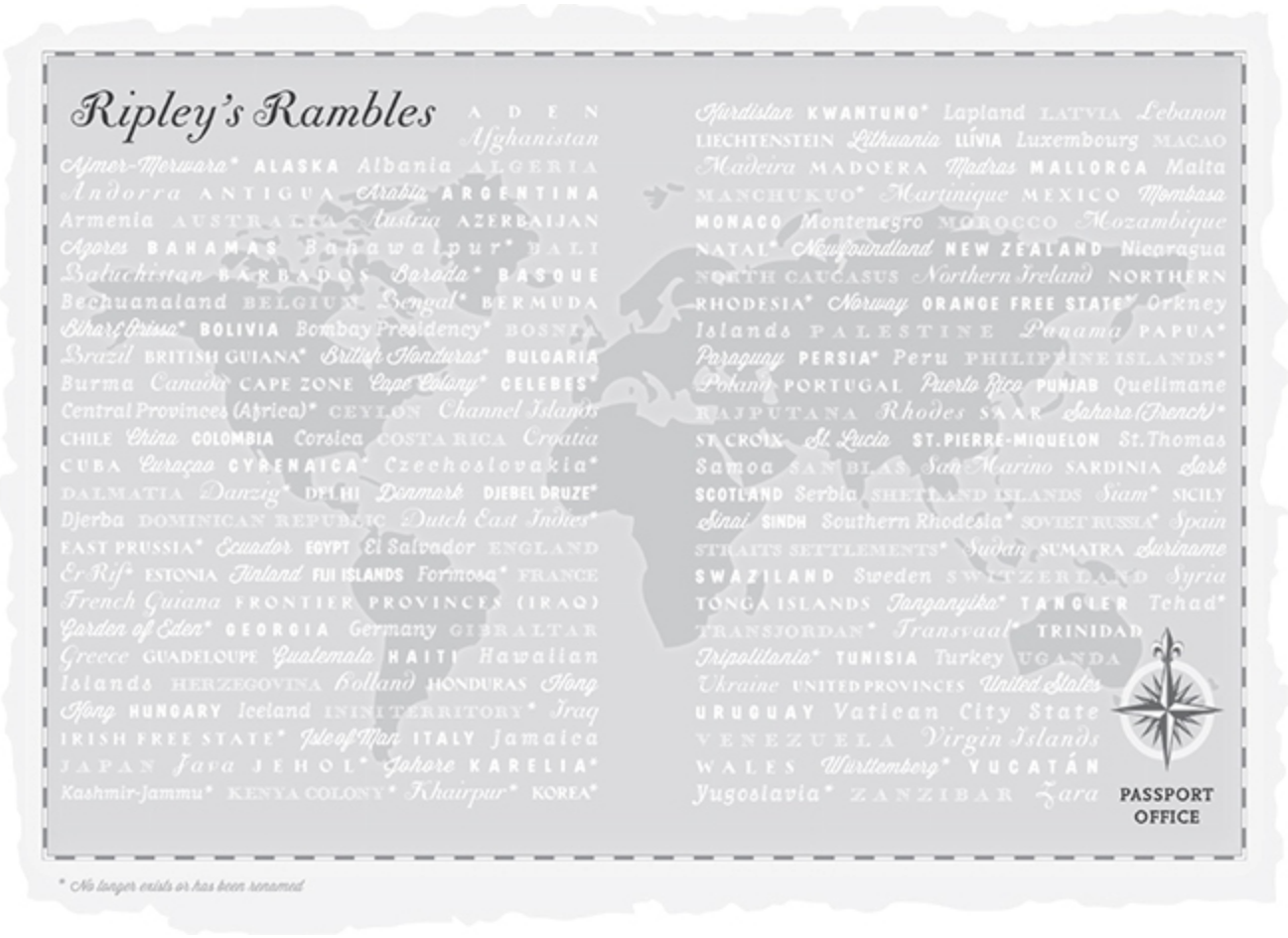
BOOKS

For Mary, always

For Sean and Leo



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Buck-toothed LeRoy Ripley, age eight. "Everyone at school picked on him because he was so different," a classmate would later say. "Not one of the guys," said another.

Though he'd later claim to have sold his first drawing at age fourteen, Ripley was actually eighteen when this cartoon was published in ***LIFE*** magazine, in June of 1908. He was paid $8, which inspired him [illegible] cartooning [illegible]

At far right with the ***San Francisco Chronicle*** art staff, 1912. After moving to San Francisco in 1903, Ripley was fired from his first newspaper job, at the ***San Francisco Bulletin***—"My work was poor," he admitted—but was quickly hired at the ***Chronicle***.

The freakish breaks all rules; it seems beyond belief because it fails to make any sense; it upsets comforting notions. The freakish is the ultimate avant-garde, a finger in the eye of the buttoned-up bourgeois vision of ordered life, like a tattoo parlor in the midst of a holistic spa.

—"O, Believers, Prepare to Be Amazed!"
Edward Rothstein, *New York Times*

Our daily life is so cut and dried that we get relief from fairy tales. Except Ripley's fairy tales are true, and this excites people. They like to learn that nature makes exceptions. These are fairy tales for grown-ups.

—Norbert Pearlroth

In the middle of the Syrian Desert, halfway between Damascus and Baghdad, the half-breed vehicle with twelve sand-surfing balloon tires came to a stop at an indistinct pile of rocks bordered by a scrawny stand of palm trees. It was time for lunch.

Passengers stepped off the car-bus into the brutal heat, including two Americans, one of them more portly and distinctly American than the other.

Robert L. Ripley was dressed in his preferred global traveler's outfit—black-and-white wing tips, knee-high socks, white shorts, and a short-sleeved shirt. Atop his head sat a wide-brimmed pith helmet. As the tour bus staff handed out bagged sandwiches, Ripley withdrew his own lunch: a thermos of scotch and soda. He turned and offered a swig to his traveling partner, an earnest young Mormon from Utah named Joe Simpson, who worked for Ripley's boss.

Newspaperman William Randolph Hearst had hired Ripley in 1929, paying him more than $100,000 a year and making Ripley one of the best-paid journalists in all of newspapers. Simpson's job was to protect and serve the famed and famously erratic cartoonist, a role that veered from traveling secretary to photographer to drinking partner. That night, Ripley's caravan stopped at the sprawling fortress compound called Rutbah Wells, whose gates lifted as a small crowd gathered to greet the new arrivals. Ripley emerged from his vehicle to hear the

distinct drawl of his friend, Will Rogers: “Hi, Bob. Where d’you think you’re goin’?”

Rogers was headed the opposite way, toward Damascus, while Ripley was trying to add two new countries to his list, Iraq and Persia, part of his relentless search for material for his increasingly popular cartoon and its lucrative offshoots: books, films, radio shows and, currently on display at the Chicago World’s Fair, a kooky museum and performance hall called the Odditorium.

After a three-hour stopover at the bustling Rutbah encampment, Ripley said good-bye to Rogers and reboarded his bus, which drove on through the sweltering night. At dawn, 250 miles later, Ripley spotted the sun-sparkled minarets of Baghdad’s mosques.

* * *

RIPLEY HAD BEEN TRAVELING the world ever since moving to New York as a skittish rookie newspaper cartoonist in 1912. In recent years, thanks to his six-figure salary from Hearst and even more income from other ventures, he’d ramped up his travels, accumulating more than 130,000 miles in the past two years alone—more than half the distance to the moon—ranging from South America to North Africa, Fiji to Singapore, Indian holy cities to war-wracked China. His current journey had routed him through Naples, Alexandria, Tel Aviv, Jerusalem, Haifa, and then Damascus. His real goal was the Garden of Eden, in Iraq, then on to Persia and, finally, forbidden *Russia*.

At the Tigris Palace Hotel in Baghdad, Ripley washed away two days of Syrian Desert dust and walked among the ancient city’s coffeehouses, jotting his first impressions of Iraq in a journal: “never see women. men everywhere, talking and drinking–smoking … they talk constantly … they are talking about nothing at all.”

Ripley had been warned that Iraqis didn't always appreciate the arrival of "unbelievers" in their towns, that visitors were sometimes injured for failing to respect local customs and protocols. Despite such warnings, Ripley and Simpson pointed their cameras at everything, which usually drew curious and sometimes angry crowds, especially in poor and remote villages. At a school in Najaf, where cross-legged men studied the Koran, a group of locals surrounded them, gesturing urgently at Simpson's camera and shouting at Ripley, who later called them "a strange mixture of humanity, paralytic, half-blind, dirty, ragged, and altogether unfriendly."

In the city of Ur, he and Simpson found a secret canteen that sold cold beer and, despite a sign warning NO DRINKING ON THE PREMISES, tossed back twenty-one bottles between them, then fell asleep on an overnight train ride to Basra, where they finally reached the purported site of the Garden of Eden. An unfaithful husband and Prohibition violator, Ripley was both familiar with and fascinated by sin, which he once called "the curse of the human race—although it is very popular."

He was disappointed not to find an intact version of the biblical garden where man's first sin allegedly occurred. "NO APPLES. NO FIG LEAVES," he complained. Instead of the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil, from which Eve had plucked the forbidden fruit, Ripley found only a dead stump.

Still, before getting back on the road, he was sufficiently inspired to strip naked and have Simpson take pictures of him posing, Adam-esque, behind a palm tree.

Back in Baghdad, Ripley drank German beers at a café near Maude Bridge, then dressed in the white robe and *keffiyeh* headdress he'd purchased, to the amusement of a nearby crowd. An overnight train ride delivered him to

Persia, his 153rd country, where he drank beer for breakfast and began mapping a route home.

* * *

DURING THE DEPRESSION, as Americans in a pre-television era sought affordable means of escape and entertainment, Ripley the traveling cartoonist provided both.

A connoisseur of mosts and bests, of fastest and farthest, of the weirdest and freakiest that the world could offer, his cartoons and essays appeared in hundreds of newspapers around the globe, in dozens of languages, and were read by many millions. His life's mission was to prove to readers that veracity and reality were elusive—King George I of England never spoke English; Aesop did not write Aesop's Fables; Buffalo Bill never once shot a buffalo; Lindbergh wasn't the first man to fly the Atlantic—and that sometimes you can't recognize truth until someone shines a light.

"I think mine is the only business in which the customer is never right," Ripley once said. "Being called untruthful is, to me, a compliment. And as long as I continue to receive the lion's share of this odd form of flattery, I don't worry about a wolf being at my door."

Fans yearned to see their own strange accomplishments, their disfigurements, and their curious misfortunes reimagined inside a *Believe It or Not* rectangle. But Ripley, never content to rely on volunteers, roamed constantly, always searching for strange facts and exotic faces for his cartoons. He met beggars and bedouins, headhunters and heads of state, royal highnesses and holy men, most of these forays funded by Hearst, whose publicists dubbed Ripley the Modern Marco Polo.

An insecure and effete kid named LeRoy, with terrible buckteeth and no shoes, Ripley had grown into an athletic and self-assured young man who always seemed to have luck and an influential patron in his corner. Once he

stumbled onto his Believe It or Not concept (on the verge of age thirty), he was smart enough to parlay it into more than a newspaper cartoon, transforming and expanding himself from artist to radio and film star, to museum curator, to unlikely playboy-millionaire.

His goofy everyman perception of the world, his limited education and simplistic worldview, his naiveté … turns out, it all meshed with that of his core readership.

The shy, awkward misfit-loner had become champion of the freakishness of others. By celebrating weirdness, he made it mainstream, becoming one of the most widely read and influential syndicated cartoonists of his day—and among the best-traveled men in history.

More than entertainment, his global dispatches gave readers hope.

* * *

DURING THE SEVENTEEN-HOUR DRIVE from the Iraq border to Tehran, Ripley was stopped nearly every hour by police. He complained bitterly about the “deadly barrenness and dryness” of the police-controlled country.

Ripley had hoped to escape Tehran by plane and fly into the Soviet Republic of Georgia, anxious to slip into the USSR and finally witness the collectivist, communist regime that Stalin had recently formed. Unable to secure a flight, he and Simpson decided to drive to the Persian-Soviet border, where they would walk across into Azerbaijan and then drive to Georgia—an ambitious and potentially hazardous route that would require passage through the snow-packed Caucasus Mountains.

When Ripley and Simpson finally reached the Aras River Bridge, across which lay Soviet territory, they waited two hours for the Persian border patrol to arrive and awaken their sleeping chief. Sullen officials took their time searching each piece of Ripley’s luggage, which had

multiplied to more than a dozen pieces in recent weeks with a surging accumulation of trinkets, carvings, and artwork.

When the guards finished with each bag, they'd carry it to the middle of the bridge and drop it in a growing heap. Ripley and Simpson were finally allowed to cross to the middle of the bridge, where they were ordered to "Halt!" Persian soldiers told them to wait while they finished their tea.

Across the bridge, young and twitchy Soviet soldiers stared coldly, aiming their bayonets as if primed for attack. Already Ripley had been at the border for more than four hours, the longest crossing in his two decades of travel. The sky grew dark as he and Simpson, hungry and cold, tired and angry, stood beside their rumpled pile of bags, hour after hour, in no-man's-land. Just thirty yards away sat their unreachable transportation: a donkey-pulled wooden carriage and its bored-looking driver.

Meanwhile, editors back in New York waited for their well-paid, peripatetic cartoonist to *please* send another batch of popular and profitable *Believe It or Not*s.

Isaac Davis Ripley, whose son would one day explore all corners of the earth, fled his dead-end Appalachian home at age fourteen and headed west. He didn't get far before the Ohio River blocked his path. Unable to pay for a ferry crossing, Isaac swam solo across the turbulent river, eventually making his way to Northern California, seeking gold but instead finding work as a carpenter and cabinetmaker. By 1889, having settled in Santa Rosa, he fell in love with a woman fourteen years younger.

Lillie Belle Yocka's family made their own risky journey toward dreams of a sunnier California life. The Yocka clan left Westport Landing (later called Kansas City) in the late 1860s, joining a straggly crowd along the Santa Fe Trail. During the westward journey, Lillie Belle was born in the back of a covered wagon, and she spent her childhood in a Northern California encampment on the banks of the Russian River.

On October 3, 1889, Lillie Belle—twenty-one and pregnant—married thirty-five-year-old Isaac Ripley, their union earning a brief mention in the *Sonoma Democrat*. Isaac built a cottage on a postage-stamp lot on Glenn Street, with intricate wood trim that looked like icicles.

A son arrived five months later, although the exact year and date of birth would remain a lingering mystery. Possibly to prevent profilers from revealing his mother's premarital pregnancy, LeRoy Robert Ripley would never admit to being born on February 22, 1890; on passport applications and other documents he'd declare 1891, 1892,

1893, or 1894 as his birth year. He'd also later claim to have been born on Christmas Day or Christmas Eve.

Isaac and Lillie named him LeRoy but usually called him Roy. Only later in life would he adopt his middle name. A daughter, Ethel, arrived three years later and the family moved into a two-story bungalow Isaac built on Orchard Street, in a quiet grid of streets, home to saloon keepers and dentists, milliners and hops brokers.

* * *

LEROY WAS LEAN and slight, socially timid but full of energy. He had a ball-shaped head and high forehead, a tousled mop of hair above comically jutted-out ears, a freckled and often-dirty face. His most notable feature was an unfortunate set of protruding and misaligned front teeth, a crooked jumble that practically tumbled from his mouth. When he smiled, it looked like he was wearing novelty teeth. He usually kept his mouth closed, lips stretched to hide his dental deformity.

He suffered from a debilitating shyness, caused largely by his disfigured smile, and by a stutter that filled his speech with *uhs*, *ums*, and frozen words. Ripley carried himself in ways meant to shield his smile and stutter from others: hunched inward, chin tucked down, shoulders drawn forward, a protective stance. He seemed fragile, almost effeminate, and years later would admit to feeling embarrassed about his "backwardness."

Though thin, he grew to be fast and fit. A tireless neighborhood explorer, he ventured into the orchards north of town and probed south into the beckoning city. Mostly, he preferred to be alone. Barefoot, wearing carpenter's overalls or knickerbocker pants and a ragged straw hat, the curious, dreamy boy roved and reconnoitered, collecting bottle caps, cigar bands, and the baseball cards that came inside cigarette packs. He amassed a set of nails bent in

the shape of each letter of the alphabet, keeping them in a cigar box under his bed.

At the one-room Lewis School, he was forced to wear shoes. He owned a single beat-up pair and would stuff newspaper into the holes and gloss them over with shoe polish. Once, he actually made a pair of shoes from folded-up newspapers, tied together with string and caked black with polish. “He wasn’t fooling anyone,” said one classmate. When his clothes began to fray and tear, his mother crafted new outfits by recycling old dresses and leftovers from her laundry jobs. In his flower-print pants and shirts, LeRoy was cruelly mocked. *Hey kid, why are you wearing a dress?*

At lunchtime, while the other boys chased girls around the water pump and outhouse, Ripley sat beneath a tree, drawing pictures or reading books about pirates or explorers. In class, students were required to stand and recite poems or essays, but Ripley’s stutter made this an excruciating nightmare. Hunched over at his desk, he constantly scribbled and sketched in his notebooks. One teacher would smack him upside the head whenever she caught him copying scenes out of his history book instead of paying attention to the lessons.

“Everyone at school picked on him because he was so different,” a classmate would later say. “Not one of the guys,” said another.

After a bad day at school he’d escape to the attic of his house to draw or carve letters into the roof beams. Other early artistic inclinations included defacing his bedroom wall and chewing on pencils.

* * *

THOUGH IT WOULD become an epicurean mecca, the land of Ripley’s youth—known by the Pomo and Miwok Indians as *Sonoma*, or Valley of the Moon—was more Wild West than

wine country. A few years past its cowboy-and-Indian days, Santa Rosa and nearby Sonoma and Napa could be dangerous and deadly. When Ripley was a toddler, the *Sonoma Democrat* reported in breathless detail how Indians had looted a winery, adding: “The red-skins have been on a wild debauch.”

Also full of debauch were the newspapers. LeRoy learned to read in a lively two-paper town whose editors practiced what would soon be called yellow journalism. The *Democrat* and its rival, the *Santa Rosa Republican*, cackled with stories of murderous deeds and accidental deaths, divorces, suicides, and all variety of lunacy, a daily “news of the weird.” People plunged off railroad trestles, lost limbs beneath train wheels, became mangled by farm machines. They shot each other over card games, stole horses, robbed banks. The *Democrat* was especially poetic in its depictions of death, offering vivid descriptions of “putrescent” bodies “lying in pools of blood.”

Santa Rosa’s children were kept close to home and warned to stay away from the streets of downtown, especially Chinatown and its alleged opium dens. With his parents working—Dad as a carpenter, Mom taking in laundry and sewing jobs—Ripley had the freedom to ramble. A shoeless ragamuffin, he scampered through streets and alleys, avoiding the train and trolley traffic but irresistibly lured to Chinatown, where he’d peek into the laundries, restaurants, and shops. The proprietors, all men, puffed on long bamboo pipes and beckoned the curious kid, offering peculiar treats like lychee nuts.

Ripley found Santa Rosa’s small Chinese community exotic and bizarre. He was awed by the strange clothes, the spicy food smells, and the hand-lettered signs whose symbols looked like hieroglyphs. On the few occasions his parents took him to San Francisco, the highlight was always a brief glimpse of shambling Chinatown.

By 1900, Santa Rosa was home to six thousand farmers, timbermen, miners, vintners, and railroad workers—a vibrant downtown of dusty roads clotted by horse-drawn carts, bicycles, and livestock. The region had attracted a variegated mix of romantic eccentrics, including Thomas Lake Harris, charismatic leader of an alternative-lifestyle "Brotherhood of the New Life" commune, who extolled the virtues of wine, tobacco, and sexuality. As one Sonoma County historian put it, Santa Rosa and its environs was a land of "explorers, rancheros, vintners, artists, writers, athletes, movers & shakers & dreamers."

Among the dreamers was famed horticulturalist Luther Burbank, who created hundreds of fruit, flower, and vegetable varieties at his agricultural laboratory—a thornless cactus, a white blackberry, a "New Seedling Cherry," the result of grafting two hundred cherry varieties onto one tree. Burbank considered California an unconquered land, a new world where a man who avoided alcohol and tobacco "has ten thousand chances of success."

BELIEVE IT!

Burbank's prized creation, the perky perennial he named the Shasta Daisy, took seventeen years of trial and error.

* * *

THE SANTA ROSA of his childhood taught Ripley many things, not least of which was to appreciate off-kilter hobbyists, obsessives, and fanatics, the kind who would years later become targets of his own journalistic curiosity. Ripley's hometown confirmed that you could be both odd and fascinating, obsessive and successful.

Even Ripley's mother's church had an appealingly curious backstory. In 1873, congregants of the First Baptist Church, having outgrown their place of worship, felled a 275-foot redwood; sawed and sliced it into studs, beams,

and planks; hauled it to town; and assembled a new church from the single tree. Isaac Ripley had been among the builders of the structure that earned headlines as “The Church Built of One Tree.”

Evidence that a town of death and debauchery could also be a place of magic and wonder was found on the city’s stages, too. The Athenaeum Theatre hosted a unique medley of entertainment, from Shakespeare to vaudeville to minstrel shows. Newspaper ads hawked the “world’s greatest cornetist” and the “world’s most marvelous dancer.” The nearby Novelty Theatre hosted lowlier acts: a midget show, a bone-playing musician, a boxing kangaroo.

Santa Rosa was also a regular stop on the circus circuit, visited by Tom Thumb’s “Smallest Human Beings in the World” and Buffalo Bill’s “Wild West Show.” The Ringling Brothers Circus visited annually, and when Barnum & Bailey’s “Greatest Show on Earth” arrived in town, the *Democrat* described its “troupe of wonderful midgets [and] a giant who stands nearly eight feet tall—All these curious people … living wonders.”

For a kid who was mocked and teased for his funny looks and shabby clothes, his balky speech and his pathological dread of girls, Santa Rosa proved to be an ideal hometown, a place where the unusual was acceptable, where a person could be a bit peculiar and still succeed.

“Anybody who is born in Santa Rosa must turn out to be either an artist or a poet, for the spirit of the hills gets into your blood out there,” Ripley would say years later, calling his home “the quaintest little town in the United States.”

* * *

BY THE FALL OF 1904, when he entered Santa Rosa High, Ripley had grown taller and stronger, filling out his scrawny frame and showing signs of athletic prowess. In the spring of his freshman year he joined the baseball

team, though he remained an awkward, eye-averting doodler. “No one thought he would amount to much of anything,” said a classmate.

In the presence of female classmates, he showed a laughable insecurity. Teachers recalled seeing him run when girls came near and classmates would later remember him as “not much of a ladies’ man.” His one true female friend, who had roamed with him through downtown and among Chinatown’s alleys, was Nell “Nellie Bell” Griffith. By high school, Nell had grown into a dark-haired beauty, a poet and basketball standout. Though she’d tell classmates that she and LeRoy were just “very close friends,” Ripley clearly thought it was more than that.

Nell never seemed bothered by Ripley’s gawky looks. She knew he was “awkward,” but also funny, smart, and artistic. Nell’s parents owned an orchard, where she and Ripley often played among the rows of trees. Ripley once upset a bees’ nest and ran away screaming—a scene that he captured in a pencil drawing, which he presented to Nell.

In class, Ripley began letting classmates lean over his shoulder to watch him draw amusing caricatures of peers and teachers. Among his popular sketches were those of the balding, bespectacled history teacher, Charles T. Conger, despised by students and teachers alike, whom Ripley posed in what he called “some of his favorite attitudes”: sitting at his desk with arms spread wide; sitting on a stool pointing a long ruler at the blackboard. Conger didn’t appreciate the likenesses, but others did, and classmates’ reactions to his drawings marked the first time Ripley stood out for reasons other than his crooked teeth and stammer.

Notebooks, textbooks, sheets of scrap paper—no empty space was safe from Ripley’s eager pencil. His happiest, purest school moments were with a pencil in his right hand, a clean white space before him. His family couldn’t afford

art supplies, so he hoarded butcher paper and used a cutting board as an easel. Though he never took drawing lessons, he practiced relentlessly, sitting in front of a mirror to study his own lips, eyes, and facial muscles, then drawing his own expressions on crumpled scraps of butcher paper, smiling, scowling, frowning.

He once splurged on a five-cent postcard featuring a painting called *The Wedding Feast*, and practiced copying the scene, over and over. He would follow his sister and mother around, sketching them as they cleaned dishes, washed clothes, or hung laundry, pleading with Ethel or Lillie Belle to sit or stand still for just a few minutes. “Pose for me just a little while, will you?” he’d ask, and they usually gave in.

As he prepared to enter his second year of high school, in mid-1905, Ripley seemed to be settling into a comfortable routine. He’d started making a few friends, and had begun making a less-than-negative impression on classmates. The bucktoothed young misfit was beginning to feel *normal*.

That’s when everything changed.

* * *

ISAAC RIPLEY WAS A GLUM, gruff, and serious man, judging by the scant few surviving photographs: the corners of his mustachioed mouth were pulled low and his deep, dark eyes were typically pinched into a scowl. He must have seemed especially forlorn that Friday night in September of 1905.

Ripley’s grandmother, who had recently moved to Santa Rosa, had died of a lung hemorrhage that summer, and Isaac was still mourning his mother’s death. After dinner on the night of September 15, he felt a crushing pain in his chest. Lillie Belle summoned the local physician, Dr. Jesse, who gave Isaac some medicine to ease his discomfort. A few hours later, just before midnight, Isaac was beset by

another attack. Within thirty minutes he was dead, his wife and children by his side.

Ten days shy of his fifty-first birthday, Isaac was buried at the Odd Fellows Cemetery, just blocks from his home. A choral quartet sang as Isaac's brethren from the carpenters' union and the Woodmen of the World lowered his casket into the ground. LeRoy and sister, Ethel, stood beside their mother, who held in her arms the newest family member, sixteen-month-old Douglas.

Alone with three children, Lillie had no apparent skills with which to find a decent job. She began renting out a room to tenants, baking bread, continuing to take on needlework and the laundry of others while looking for a nursing job. Somehow, she was determined to keep her fragile household intact.

Short, tough, and attractive, she had always been the dominant parent, quick-witted and sharp-tongued. With a pouty mouth, dark skin and eyes, narrow waist, and shapely hips, even Ripley's classmates thought his mother was "quite attractive." Though he'd later speak adoringly of Lillie, Ripley "never spoke much about his father," according to one longtime friend. "And the impression is left, somehow, that he did not think too much of him."

Ripley tried to continue in the pose of a typical high school kid, joining the yearbook and school newsletter staffs in his sophomore year. His first credited drawings were published in *The Porcupine* just weeks after his father's death, including a caricature of the football team's fullback. His mother thought little of her son's drawings, though. Without a family breadwinner, she needed her son to find a job. He reluctantly started delivering newspapers before school but quickly decided that early-morning newspaper delivery wasn't for him, and by early 1906 he had quit.

Leaving his newspaper job kept Ripley safely in bed the morning of April 18, 1906, the deadly and historic day that

he’d rarely talk about as an adult.

In downtown Santa Rosa, the Fourth Street trolley was preparing for its morning runs and Chinatown's laundrymen began washing the day's clothes. On that otherwise normal morning, paperboys were among the few people outside before dawn, loading up copies of the *Press Democrat* to hurl onto steps and stoops. Among the headline-wielding delivery boys were Charles Shepard and brothers George and Willie Bluth. They would be the first to die.

As the deadliest earthquake in US history began to inflict its devastating wrath, sixteen-year-old ex-paperboy LeRoy Ripley was asleep at his Orchard Street home.

Just past five a.m., miles to the west and deep beneath the Pacific, slabs of earth began to wrench and buck, sending shivers along the San Andreas Fault, the recently discovered jagged crack in the planet. Estimated between 7.9 and 8.3 on the Richter scale, the quake ripped up and down America's western shoreline, heaving earthen grumbles that began rocking Northern California and sending quivers as far north as Oregon and as far south as Los Angeles.

The timbers of the Ripley house twisted and bowed, and the cottage that Isaac had built seemed about to implode into splinters. Pictures popped off walls, beds and furniture danced, dishes fell and shattered. Ripley and his family sprinted out the front door, across the small front yard and onto the dirt-paved street, which undulated as if liquefied. No place felt safe.

Santa Rosans were used to occasional seismic episodes; Ripley had experienced dozens and older residents had survived hundreds. But this felt different. Houses jumped, swayed, and moaned. During an excruciating sixty seconds of tremors, Ripley's town was torn apart. Local plant king Luther Burbank would later describe how everything moved in all directions at once, the "violent vertical and horizontal vibrations … a twisting back and forth … all this tipping from side to side."

Trees jumped like pogo sticks, streets rose and fell like ocean swells. Seemingly indestructible brick-and-mortar buildings imploded. The courthouse, the Athenaeum, department stores, and banks wiggled and fell, crushing or trapping occupants. One witness later described scenes of sheer chaos: "With fires advancing unchecked, people were crawling out through the rubbish, bleeding and half-dressed, covered from head to foot with lime and sickening dust."

Downed electrical wires crackled and sparked, a broken gas line caught fire, and eight people died when Haven Hardware exploded. A blaze at Rochdale's grocery store swept through downtown, killing Eli Loeb, whose wife's legs had to be amputated to save her from the fire. One man found himself trapped beneath a large timber and with flames prowling nearer begged someone to shoot him, but no one could get close.

Flames raged unchecked all morning. The Occidental, Saint Rose, and Grand hotels all "fell as if constructed of playing cards, and in the heaps were buried the hundreds of lodgers," the *San Francisco Bulletin* would report the next day.

The *Press Democrat* would describe its own losses. During the first rumblings, employees had rushed from the building. A press operator named W. S. Lindley was last to reach the exit, and as he got to the door the outer wall collapsed, falling away from him and onto three paperboys