

100% TRUE. WE CHECKED.

That Actually Happened

The Craziest Events in History



THE ROBOT BOOK CLUB



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Cartoons are original illustrations created for this book. Every event described really happened and is documented in the historical record; where popular versions of a story are exaggerated, this book sticks to what the records support.

Published by The Robot Book Club

*For every kid who ever narrowed their eyes,
crossed their arms, and said, "No way—prove it."*

How to Read This Book

Every event in this book gets two pages, and — this is the important part — **every single one really happened**. Historians checked. Newspapers reported it. Somebody filed the paperwork.

Each spread has the same equipment:

 The **when-and-where badge** pins the event to a real place and date.

— **How It Went Down** is a timeline of the event, step by step, from "seemed like a good idea" to "aftermath."

 The **NO, REALLY box** holds the most unbelievable detail that is verified — the one to read out loud to the whole car.

 The **Crazy-o-Meter** rates the event from 1 flame (mildly odd) to 5 flames (certified bananas).

 The **cartoon** shows the most absurd moment. The moment is real; the drawing is ours.

Read it front to back, or flip to the highest flame counts first. Either way: yes, it actually happened.

How We Know This Really Happened

Imagine telling your best friend that the Australian army once went to war against 20,000 giant, flightless birds—with actual machine guns—and the birds *won*. Your friend would probably roll their eyes, call you a liar, and tell you to stop making things up. Until you pull up the official records of the Australian Parliament from November 18, 1932, and point to the exact page in the *Senate Hansard* where Senator James Dunn roasts the Minister of Defence for leading the "emu war." Or until you show them the *Sydney Morning Herald* from that same month, where reporters tracked Major Gwynydd Meredith and his troops as the emus outran their bullets at thirty miles per hour. Suddenly, your friend isn't laughing anymore. Because here is the secret about the wildest, most ridiculous stories in this book: every single one of them is 100 percent true. And we don't just take somebody's word for it—we have the receipts.

Paper Trails: The Boring Records of Crazy Events

When something completely bananas happens in the real world, it leaves behind a massive mess of paperwork. Governments, courts, and newspapers don't care about telling a funny story—they care about tracking money, property damage, and the law. That boring bureaucracy is a history detective's best friend. Best of all, you don't even need a time machine to see it; anyone with an internet connection can look up digitized archives like the National Library of Australia's "Trove" and read centuries-old newspapers exact word for word.

Take the London Beer Flood of October 17, 1814. If someone told you a 15-foot-high tidal wave of hot, dark ale smashed through a London neighborhood, you'd think it was a tall tale. But at the Meux and Company Horse Shoe Brewery, a 700-pound iron hoop really did snap off a 22-foot wooden vat, triggering a domino effect that unleashed 320,000 gallons of fermenting porter into the St. Giles Rookery. How do we know for sure? Two days later, *The Times* of London and the *Morning Chronicle* reported on the smashed brick walls and collapsed roofs. Even more sobering, the Middlesex coroner, George Hodgson, held an official inquest at the St. Giles parish workhouse and recorded the exact names and ages of the eight victims—like 14-year-old Eleanor Cooper and 3-year-old Sarah Bates.

The paper trail doesn't just prove what happened; it also proves what *didn't*. A modern rumor claims a rowdy mob showed up with pots and pans to drink the street beer until a ninth person died of alcohol poisoning. When historians checked the actual 1814 newspapers, that mob was nowhere to be found. The neighborhood was full of Irish immigrants, whom the prejudiced British newspapers of 1814 loved to criticize. If a drunken riot had actually happened, those papers would have blasted it on the front page. Instead, the records show the survivors were quiet, brave, and busy rescuing their neighbors.

Photos, Film, and Frozen Clues

For more recent history, we don't just have paper—we have cameras. On November 9, 1970, a 45-foot, 8-ton rotting Pacific gray whale washed up near Florence, Oregon. The Oregon State Highway Division decided the smartest way to get rid of the smelly carcass was to pack it with 20 cases—half a ton!—of dynamite. We know what happened next because reporter Paul Linnman and cameraman Doug Brazil from Portland's KATU Channel 2 were rolling 16mm color film. You can literally watch the blast send boulder-sized chunks of whale blubber flying through the sky before one flattens the roof of a brand-new car. And if you look up *The Plain Dealer* newspaper archives from September 27, 1986, you'll see surreal photos of Cleveland's Terminal Tower swallowed by a swarm of 1.5 million helium balloons—a world-record stunt gone wrong that collided with a rainstorm, spooked prized Arabian horses, and forced the Coast Guard to pause a rescue mission on Lake Erie.

But what if something happened before cameras were invented? History detectives turn to physical clues locked inside the Earth itself. In 1816—known as "The Year Without a Summer" or "Eighteen Hundred and Froze to Death"—snow fell in New England in June and lakes stayed frozen in Pennsylvania in July. To prove old diaries weren't exaggerating the freak weather, scientists used dendrochronology (tree-ring dating), a method pioneered by A.E. Douglass alongside researchers at the American Museum of Natural History. Trees inside the Northern Hemisphere grew super-skinny, frost-damaged rings in 1816. And when scientists drilled deep ice cores out of Greenland and Antarctica, the 1815–1816 ice layer was packed with volcanic sulfur—the exact chemical fingerprint of Indonesia's Mount Tambora, which had erupted in April 1815 and blasted a sun-blocking cloud of ash across the globe.

Sometimes, early scientific machines leave physical proof behind, too (or even giant museum artifacts, like the *Vasa*, a Swedish warship built so top-heavy in 1628 that it sank on its very first trip and was pulled right out of the mud in 1961!). During the Carrington Event of September 1859, a solar storm was so intense that telegraph operators like Frederick W. Royce in Washington, D.C., got zapped with electricity and telegraph paper burst into flames. At the exact same time, astronomer Richard Carrington sketched a blinding white solar flare on the sun, while magnetometers at London's Kew Observatory went completely haywire—etching a massive, off-the-charts spike onto photographic paper that scientists can still look at today.

Cross-Checking: Why One Witness Isn't Enough

Historians live by a strict detective rule: one source is just a claim, but two or more independent sources are evidence. People forget things, exaggerate to look cool, or twist facts to fit a good story. That's why historians use "cross-checking"—lining up different letters, diaries, and official logs from people who didn't know each other to see where the facts overlap.

Look at the famous midnight ride of Paul Revere on April 18, 1775. Most people think Revere rode all by himself across Massachusetts yelling that the British were coming. Why? Because in 1861—more than 85 years later!—a poet named Henry

Wadsworth Longfellow published "Paul Revere's Ride" in *The Atlantic Monthly*. Longfellow wanted to inspire people right before the Civil War, so he turned Revere into a solo superhero. When historians cross-checked Longfellow's poem against 1775 documents—including British military reports and Revere's own letters—they found a totally different story. Revere wasn't alone; he rode alongside William Dawes, Dr. Samuel Prescott, and a whole network of riders. The famous lanterns in the Old North Church ("one if by land, two if by sea") weren't even a signal *to* Revere—they were a backup signal *from* Revere to friends across the river. Best of all, Revere never even made it to Concord! British soldiers captured him outside Lexington and took his horse, leaving Dr. Samuel Prescott to jump a stone wall and finish the mission.

Cross-checking also solves the mystery of why everyone thinks French Emperor Napoleon Bonaparte was super tiny. British cartoonists loved drawing him as a miniature temper tantrum, and his own soldiers called him "*Le Petit Caporal*" (The Little Corporal). But when historians cross-checked his medical records, they saw he measured around 5 feet 5 inches in French measurements—which, because the old French inch (*pouce*) was longer than the British inch, made him about 5 feet 6 or 7 inches in modern measurements! That was actually average, or slightly *tall*, for a Frenchman in 1800. His nickname was just an affectionate joke from his troops, and he only looked short because he surrounded himself with his Imperial Guard, an elite unit of giant bodyguards.

Legend Detectors: How to Smell a Fake

Once you know how historians prove the truth, you develop a superpower: a built-in Legend Detector. Urban legends and historical myths spread because every person who retells the story adds a new "floor" to make it funnier or more dramatic. You can spot a fake by looking for three major red flags: it happened to a "friend of a friend," it's missing specific names and dates, or the story has a punchline that feels way too neat.

For over a century, kids learned that the Great Chicago Fire of October 8, 1871, started because a clumsy cow belonging to an Irish immigrant named Catherine O'Leary kicked over a lantern in her barn on DeKoven Street. It's a neat story, and prejudiced newspapers loved having an Irish immigrant to blame. There's just one

problem: it's completely fake. During the official 1871 inquiry, Mrs. O'Leary swore under oath she was asleep in bed, and she was never charged. Then, in 1921, on the 50th anniversary of the fire, a reporter named Michael Ahern published a confession right in the *Chicago Tribune*. He admitted that he and his fellow reporters totally made up the cow-and-lantern story just to add "color" to their articles! In 1997, after amateur historian Richard Bales dug into the old records, the Chicago City Council officially cleared Mrs. O'Leary—and her innocent cow—of all blame.

Our Legend Detector also clears up the most famous bathroom rumor in American history: that President William Howard Taft, who weighed over 300 pounds, got wedged inside a White House bathtub in 1909 and needed six men and a tub of butter to pry him out. When historians checked White House logs, staff letters, and newspapers from 1909 to 1913, they found zero mention of a stuck president. Instead, they watched the myth get built floor by floor. Floor One: Taft really did order massive, custom bathtubs—including a one-ton, 7-foot-long tub for the battleship *USS North Carolina*, which was photographed with four grown men sitting inside it. Floor Two: In 1934, White House usher Ike Hoover wrote a memoir hinting at vague "bathtub difficulties." Floor Three: In 1979, seventy years after Taft took office, an NBC TV miniseries called *Backstairs at the White House* invented a funny scene about Taft getting stuck in a tub, and 20 million viewers assumed it was real history. No primary sources? No proof. We threw the fake stories out of this book—because as you're about to see, real history is way crazier than anything a TV writer could invent.

CHAPTER 1

Animal Mayhem

Sometimes the animals win. An army surrenders to giant flightless birds, a dead whale out-plots a highway department, and a bear gets an official military rank. Nature keeps the receipts.

6 EVENTS · ALL OF THEM REAL

1 The Great Emu War

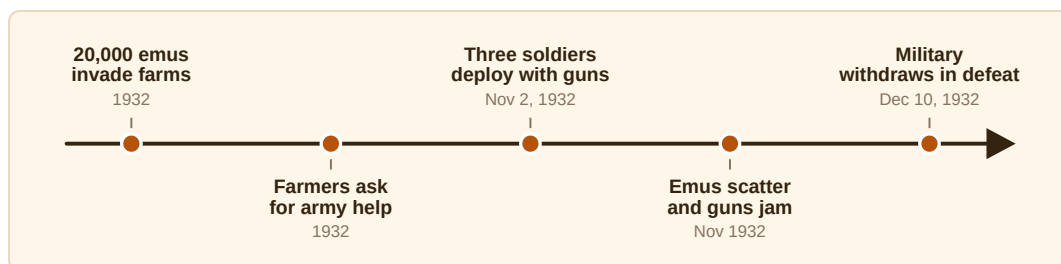
Australia sent soldiers with machine guns to stop 20,000 crop-eating emus—and the flightless birds won.

In 1932, struggling farmers in Western Australia's Campion district faced a feathery disaster. Twenty thousand migrating emus showed up for breeding season and began systematically wrecking their crops and water supplies. Desperate, the farmers asked the Australian Defence Minister for military backup.

Instead of a massive army, the government sent just three men from the Royal Australian Artillery: Major G.P.W. Meredith and two soldiers, armed with Lewis machine guns. On November 2, the tiny squad set out to ambush the giant flightless birds.

The emus refused to cooperate. Whenever the soldiers opened fire, the giant flock instantly split into small, fast-moving groups that easily outran the men. Worse, the machine guns kept jamming. After a month of exhausting, dusty chases, the military officially withdrew on December 10, leaving the victorious emus to roam the fields.

HOW IT WENT DOWN



NO, REALLY

The Unbelievable Part

After firing roughly 2,500 rounds of military ammunition, the soldiers eliminated fewer than 1,000 of the 20,000 birds—prompting Major Meredith to compare the tough, fast-moving emus to invulnerable "tanks."

CRAZY-O-METER

Hard to believe

NO. 1



The Great Emu War — Western Australia, 1932

2 The Exploding Whale of Florence

When a massive dead whale washed onto an Oregon beach, state engineers decided the cleanest way to remove it was dynamite.

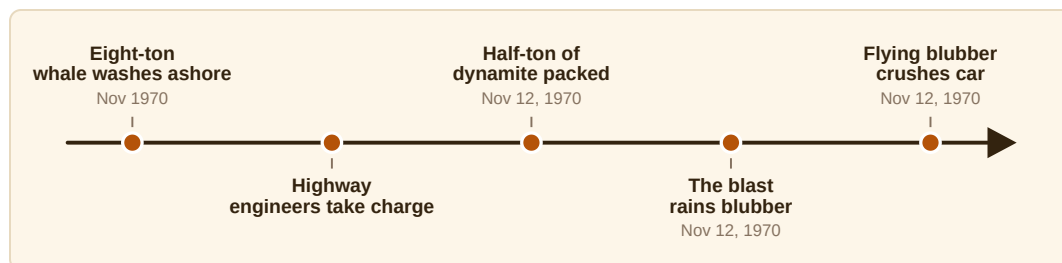
In November 1970, a 45-foot, eight-ton dead sperm whale washed onto the beach in Florence, Oregon. Because the Oregon State Highway Division had jurisdiction over the beaches, they got stuck with the smelly problem. Assistant District Highway Engineer George Thornton worried people might climb on the rotting giant—or that it might burst on its own.

Thornton decided to treat the whale like a giant boulder in the middle of a road. His plan was to pack a half-ton of dynamite against the carcass and blow it toward the ocean. The engineers figured the blast would vaporize the whale into bite-sized pieces that seagulls would happily clean up.

On November 12, television reporter Paul Linnman and a crowd of curious citizens gathered a quarter-mile away to watch. When the dynamite blew, it did not vaporize the whale. Instead, the explosion launched heavy chunks of rotting blubber hundreds of feet into the sky. Screaming spectators ran for cover as foul-smelling whale meat rained down, while the main bulk of the carcass stayed right on the beach.

Miraculously, nobody was hurt.

HOW IT WENT DOWN



NO, REALLY

The Unbelievable Part

One flying chunk of whale blubber was so massive and traveled so far that it completely crushed the roof of a brand-new 1969 Oldsmobile parked a full quarter-mile away from the blast.

CRAZY-O-METER



Certified bananas

NO. 2



The Exploding Whale of Florence — Florence, Oregon, 1970

3 Wojtek the Soldier Bear

When Polish soldiers needed to sneak their giant pet bear onto a British troopship, they simply enlisted him in the army.

In the spring of 1942, Polish soldiers from the 22nd Artillery Supply Company bought an orphaned Syrian brown bear cub from a boy in Iran. They named him Wojtek and fed him condensed milk from an old vodka bottle. Soon, the massive bear was sleeping in their tents, wrestling with the troops, and swallowing lit cigarettes whole as a party trick.

When the unit was ordered to sail to Italy, British transport ships refused to take pets. Thinking fast, the Polish army officially enlisted Wojtek as a Private, complete with his own paybook and service number.

During the fierce Battle of Monte Cassino in 1944, Private Wojtek watched his human friends work and decided to help. Standing on his hind legs under enemy fire, the bear carried heavy crates of artillery shells from supply trucks straight to the cannons.

HOW IT WENT DOWN



NO, REALLY

The Unbelievable Part

For his bravery under fire, Wojtek was officially promoted to the rank of Corporal, and the 22nd Artillery Supply Company changed their official military badge to a picture of a bear carrying an artillery shell.

CRAZY-O-METER ●●●●○

Hard to believe

NO. 3



Wojtek the Soldier Bear — Iran to Italy, 1942–1944

4 Project X-Ray: The Bat Bombs

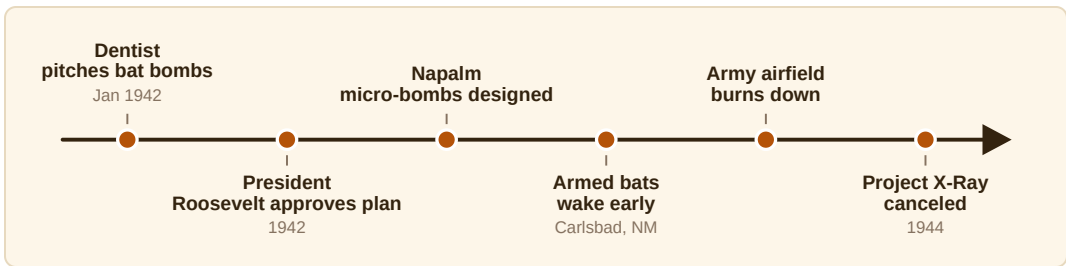
The U.S. military spent millions strapping tiny time bombs to hibernating bats, until the bats woke up at the wrong base.

In January 1942, a month after Pearl Harbor, Pennsylvania dentist Lytle S. Adams pitched a wild idea to the White House: strap tiny time bombs to a million Mexican free-tailed bats and drop them over Japan. Inspired by a trip to Carlsbad Caverns, Adams figured the bats would roost under wooden roofs before exploding.

President Franklin D. Roosevelt actually approved it. The U.S. Navy and Marine Corps spent over two years and millions of dollars on the top-secret project. They even hired Louis Fieser, the inventor of napalm, to design half-ounce micro-bombs, and built parachuting bomb casings that held over a thousand hibernating bats each.

The bat bombs worked in testing, except for one massive backfire at the Carlsbad Army Airfield. During a transport error, several armed bats woke up from hibernation early. Doing what bats naturally do, they flew straight under the base's buildings and fuel tanks, sparking a massive inferno that burned the airfield to the ground.

How It Went Down



NO, REALLY

The Unbelievable Part

The National Defense Research Committee officially ruled that the bat bomb was an effective weapon—estimating one load could spark 4,700 fires compared to 400 from standard bombs—and only canceled it because the atomic bomb project was faster.

CRAZY-O-METER



Certified bananas

NO. 4



Project X-Ray: The Bat Bombs — New Mexico, USA, 1942–1944

5 The Pig War

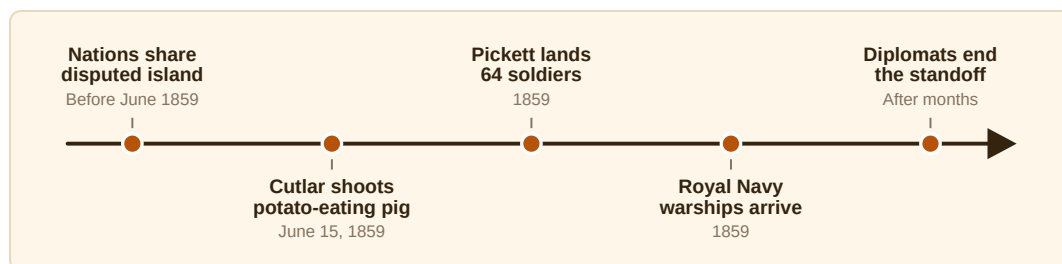
Two world superpowers marched to the brink of war because a hungry pig ate the wrong potatoes.

In 1859, San Juan Island in the Pacific Northwest had a roommate problem. Both the United States and Britain claimed they owned it, so American settlers and British Hudson's Bay Company workers lived side by side in tense peace. Then, on June 15, a large black British-owned pig wandered into American squatter Lyman Cutlar's prized potato patch.

Cutlar lost his temper and shot the trespassing porker dead. When British authorities threatened to arrest him for property damage, the Americans called the U.S. Army. Captain George Pickett landed 64 soldiers on the island. The British Empire answered by sending heavily armed Royal Navy warships.

For months, troops genuinely prepared for a bloodbath over a single farm animal. Finally, high-level international diplomats stepped in to cool tempers, ending the standoff without a single human shot being fired.

HOW IT WENT DOWN



NO, REALLY

The Unbelievable Part

At the height of the crisis, Britain massed three warships, 62 cannons, and 2,140 men, and war was only avoided because Rear Admiral Robert Baynes refused orders to attack over a squabble about a pig.

CRAZY-O-METER



Hard to believe

NO. 5



The Pig War — San Juan Island, 1859

6 Jack the Signalman

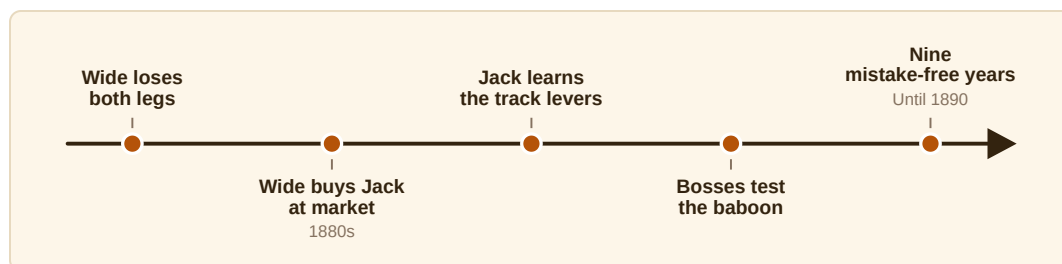
When a legless railway guard needed help at the train station, he hired a brilliant baboon to switch the tracks.

After railway guard James "Jumper" Wide lost both legs at the knee in a terrible train accident, working as a station signalman in Uitenhage got much harder. At a local marketplace, Wide spotted a sharp Chacma baboon named Jack. He bought the primate and trained him to push his wheelchair to work.

Soon, Jack learned a bigger job: operating the station's complex track switches. Approaching trains blew a specific number of whistle toots to signal which track they needed. Jack listened carefully, counted the blasts, and yanked the matching heavy iron levers with ease.

When horrified passengers reported a literal baboon running the railroad, bosses marched down to fire Wide. Instead, they tested Jack themselves. Watching the primate work with total precision, the stunned managers decided to keep him on the job.

HOW IT WENT DOWN



NO, REALLY

The Unbelievable Part

The Cape Government Railways gave Jack an official employment number and paid him 20 cents a day plus a half-bottle of beer a week. He operated the signals for nine years without a single recorded mistake.

CRAZY-O-METER

Hard to believe

NO. 6



Jack the Signalman — Uitenhage, South Africa, 1880s–1890

CHAPTER 2

Weird Weather and Strange Skies

The sky has moods. Some years it snows in June, some nights the whole world glows pink, and some afternoons it genuinely rains fish. Meteorologists wrote it all down.

6 EVENTS · ALL OF THEM REAL

7 The Carrington Event

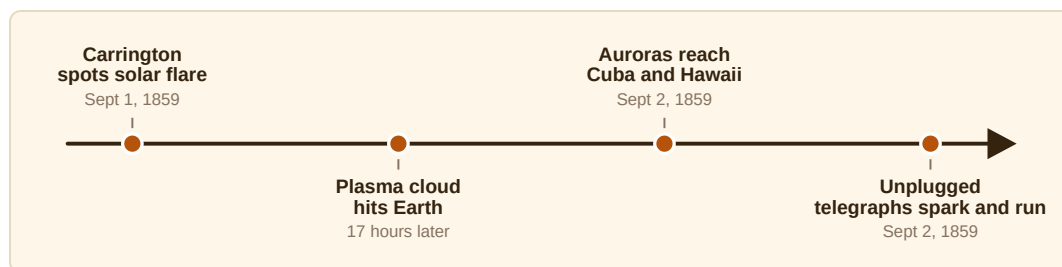
A massive blast from the sun slammed into Earth, painting tropical skies with auroras and turning telegraph offices into electrical nightmares.

On the morning of September 1, 1859, British astronomer Richard Carrington was quietly sketching sunspots when he witnessed a sudden, blinding flash of white light erupting from the sun. Fellow astronomer Richard Hodgson saw it too. Neither knew a colossal cloud of solar plasma was now hurtling straight toward Earth.

Just seventeen hours later, that solar blast slammed into Earth's magnetic shield, triggering the most severe geomagnetic storm in recorded history. The night skies ignited with brilliant Northern Lights that stretched as far south as Hawaii and Cuba. In the northeastern United States, people stood outside at midnight reading newspapers by the glowing sky.

Meanwhile, the storm pumped massive electrical currents into the planet's newest technology: the telegraph network. Across Europe and North America, telegraph systems went haywire. Operators were zapped by their own brass keys, and when they unplugged the heavy batteries for safety, the machines kept sending messages—powered entirely by the electricity in the air.

How It Went Down



NO, REALLY

The Unbelievable Part

Sparks leaping from the supercharged telegraph machines physically shocked operators and set telegraph paper on fire, while unplugged equipment kept working on aurora power alone.

CRAZY-O-METER ● ● ● ● ●

Certified bananas

NO. 7



The Carrington Event — Global (London origin), 1859

8 The Kentucky Meat Shower

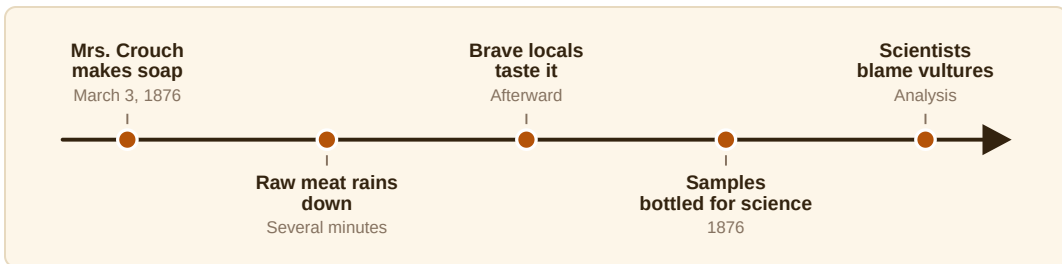
On a sunny, cloudless Friday morning, chunks of raw red flesh suddenly rained down onto a Kentucky farm.

On March 3, 1876, in Olympia Springs, Kentucky, a farmer's wife named Mrs. Crouch was on her porch making soap beneath a cloudless sky. Suddenly, she heard snapping noises hitting the ground around her. Looking up, she watched chunks of raw, red meat—two to four inches square—falling from the clear blue sky.

The shower lasted several minutes, scattering flesh across a 100-by-50-yard patch of her yard. Local hunters and grocers rushed over to inspect the mystery. A few daring locals actually tasted the fallen chunks, declaring them to be either mutton or venison.

Other pieces were preserved in alcohol and sent to scientists, who wrote about the puzzle in journals like *Scientific American*—and one sample still sits in a museum at Transylvania University today.

How It Went Down



NO, REALLY

The Unbelievable Part

Scientists analyzing the preserved samples identified lung tissue and cartilage—concluding that a flock of startled vultures flying overhead had simultaneously projectile-vomited their heavy meals to lighten their load for a fast getaway.

CRAZY-O-METER



Certified bananas

NO. 8



The Kentucky Meat Shower — Bath County, Kentucky, 1876

9 The Marksville Fish Fall

On a calm, foggy morning, thousands of fish dropped from the sky right as a wildlife biologist was eating breakfast.

On October 23, 1947, residents of Marksville, Louisiana, stepped into a calm, foggy morning and got pelted by fish. The scaly shower covered a strip 1,000 feet long and 80 feet wide, blanketing streets, roofs, and bank courtyards with about one fish per square yard.

By pure luck, biologist Dr. Alexander Bajkov and his wife, Virginia, were eating breakfast at a local diner. When a waitress told them the sky was dropping seafood, they rushed outside to watch the fish fall at short intervals.

The wind that morning was under eight miles per hour—nowhere near strong enough to lift aquatic life. Bajkov concluded that localized waterspouts or swirling "devil dusters" had scooped the fish up the day before, carrying them aloft until the updrafts finally gave out. He preserved specimens in jars of formalin for museums and published a report in the journal *Science*.

HOW IT WENT DOWN



NO, REALLY

The Unbelievable Part

The fallen fish—including largemouth bass, sunfish, minnows, and hickory shad up to nine inches long—landed alive or completely pristine and "fit for human consumption," prompting several locals to gather them up and fry them for breakfast.

CRAZY-O-METER



Hard to believe

NO. 9



The Marksville Fish Fall — Marksville, Louisiana, 1947

10 The Jakarta Incident

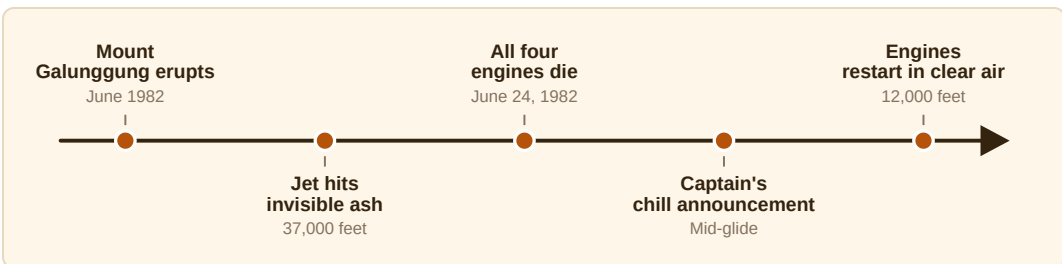
A jumbo jet flew into an invisible cloud of volcanic rock, turning a Boeing 747 into the world's largest glider.

On the clear night of June 24, 1982, British Airways Flight 9 was cruising smoothly at 37,000 feet south of Jakarta. Suddenly, eerie dancing sparks of St. Elmo's fire lit up the cockpit windows, and smoke smelling of sulfur poured into the cabin carrying 263 passengers.

The Boeing 747 had flown straight into a cloud of volcanic ash blasted from Mount Galunggung. Because standard weather radar only detects moisture, the dry, microscopic silica was completely invisible. The gritty ash sandblasted the windshield opaque, melted inside the hot turbines, and choked out all four engines.

With no power, the massive jumbo jet became the world's largest glider. As the plane silently dropped through the dark sky, the crew kept their cool. Once they glided out of the ash cloud down to 12,000 feet, the engines finally cooled enough for the pilots to restart them.

HOW IT WENT DOWN



NO, REALLY

The Unbelievable Part

As the powerless jumbo jet glided silently through the night, Captain Eric Moody calmly announced to the passengers: "Ladies and gentlemen, this is your captain speaking. We have a small problem. All four engines have stopped... I trust you are not in too much distress."

CRAZY-O-METER ● ● ● ● ●

Certified bananas

NO. 10



The Jakarta Incident — Mount Galunggung, Indonesia, 1982

11 The Kerala Blood Rain

For nearly two months, the skies over southern India poured crimson rain that stained laundry bright pink.

On July 25, 2001, residents in the southern Indian state of Kerala heard a loud thunderclap and saw a flash of light. Then the monsoon rains began. Instead of clear water, the sky poured shocking shades of blood-red.

The eerie downpours were localized, stopping and starting for nearly two months until September 23. Whenever the crimson rain fell, it stained people's clothes a deep pink. Early guesses blamed an exploding meteor or red dust blown in from the Arabian desert.

When Indian government and university biologists put the water under microscopes, they found zero desert dust. Instead, the rain was packed with living, microscopic red cells—and the mystery was finally solved when scientists grew them in a lab.

HOW IT WENT DOWN



NO, REALLY

The Unbelievable Part

A formal study commissioned by the Government of India proved the blood-red rain was actually packed with massive clouds of airborne spores from a local, lichen-forming green algae called *Trentepohlia*.

CRAZY-O-METER ● ● ● ● ○

Hard to believe

NO. 11



The Kerala Blood Rain — Kerala, India, 2001

12 New England's Dark Day

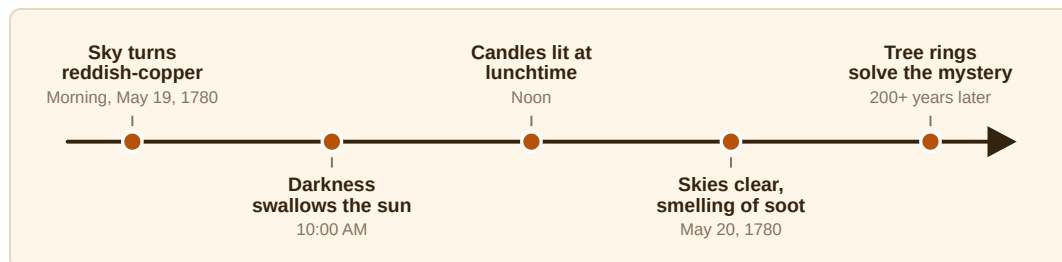
A mysterious copper sky rolled in and turned ten in the morning into pitch-black midnight across an entire region.

On the morning of May 19, 1780, the sky from Maine to New Jersey turned a strange, reddish-copper color. By 10:00 AM, a wall of impenetrable darkness rolled in and switched off the sun.

Nature was completely fooled. Flowers folded up their petals for the night, and singing birds went silent and flew to roost. Inside, people had to light candles at noon just to find their way around their own homes. Outside, Revolutionary War soldier Joseph Plumb Martin and Harvard Professor Samuel Williams recorded the bizarre scene while terrified colonists wondered if the world was ending.

The pitch-black gloom lasted all day and deep into the following night. When the skies finally cleared, the air smelled strongly of soot.

How It Went Down



NO, REALLY

The Unbelievable Part

Over two centuries later, scientists finally solved the mystery using tree rings in Ontario, Canada: fire scars in the wood proved that massive Canadian wildfires had sent a continent-sized smoke cloud to mix with heavy New England fog.

CRAZY-O-METER 🔴 🔴 🔴 🔴 🔴

Hard to believe

NO. 12



New England's Dark Day — New England, USA, 1780

CHAPTER 3

Great Blunders

Everyone makes mistakes — but not everyone sinks a warship on day one or loses a spacecraft over a math mix-up. These are history's most spectacular oopsies, all fully documented.

6 EVENTS · ALL OF THEM REAL

13 The Leaning Tower of Pisa

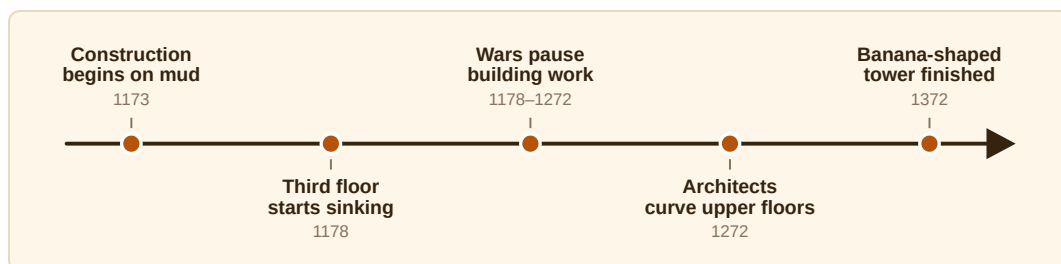
Medieval builders constructed a massive stone bell tower on squishy mud, then accidentally curved it like a banana trying to fix it.

In 1173, architect Bonanno Pisano began building a freestanding bell tower in Pisa, Italy. There was just one problem: a shallow foundation dug into soft, marshy subsoil. By 1178, when workers reached the third floor, the heavy tower was already sinking on one side.

Then the Republic of Pisa got busy fighting wars, halting construction for nearly a century. That hundred-year break accidentally saved the tower! The immense weight of the first three floors slowly squished and compacted the muddy soil beneath it. Had they kept building right away, the whole thing would have toppled.

When architects finally resumed work in 1272, they tried to fix the tilt by building the walls on the short side taller than the walls on the high side. By the time it was finished in 1372, the tower wasn't just leaning—it was visibly curved like a banana.

How It Went Down



NO, REALLY

The Unbelievable Part

In the twentieth century, Italian dictator Benito Mussolini decided the tilted tower was a national embarrassment and ordered engineers to pump concrete into the foundation. The heavy concrete sank into the mud, making the tower lean even further.

CRAZY-O-METER



Hard to believe

NO. 13



The Leaning Tower of Pisa — Pisa, Italy, 1173–1372

14 The Sinking of the Vasa

Sweden built the mightiest warship in the world, and a light breeze sank it in twenty minutes.

King Gustav II Adolf of Sweden wanted the most fearsome warship on the seas. Experienced Dutch shipwright Henrik Hybertsson built the *Vasa* with an unprecedented two gun decks packed with 64 heavy bronze cannons. Without seventeenth-century math to calculate a center of gravity, they built it by eye—and made it dangerously top-heavy.

Before the maiden voyage, Admiral Klas Fleming ran a stability check called a lurch test. Thirty sailors sprinted from one side of the deck to the other. The *Vasa* rolled so violently it nearly capsized right at the dock. Fleming had to stop the test before the ship flipped over.

On August 10, 1628, the *Vasa* set sail anyway before thousands of cheering spectators. After gliding just 1,300 meters into Stockholm Harbor, a light gust of wind caught the sails. The top-heavy ship tilted, water poured through the open lower gun ports, and the mighty warship sank in under twenty minutes.

How It Went Down



NO, REALLY

The Unbelievable Part

Top naval officials watched the *Vasa* fail its dockside stability test, proving it was completely unseaworthy—and launched it anyway because they were too terrified of the King's temper to delay the voyage.

CRAZY-O-METER



Hard to believe

NO. 14



The Sinking of the Vasa — Stockholm Harbor, Sweden, 1628

15 The Lake Peigneur Drill Disaster

A coordinate mix-up caused an oil rig to accidentally pull the plug on an entire lake.

On November 20, 1980, a Texaco oil rig operated by Wilson Brothers was drilling in Louisiana's shallow, 10-foot-deep Lake Peigneur. Directly beneath the lakebed sat the cavernous tunnels of the active Diamond Crystal salt mine. Because of a coordinate calculation error, the crew's 14-inch drill bit missed its target and poked right through the mine's roof 1,200 feet below.

Freshwater instantly poured into the hole. Since water dissolves salt, the massive underground salt pillars holding up the roof melted away. The 14-inch puncture rapidly widened into a giant crater, turning the lake into a roaring bathtub drain.

The violent whirlpool swallowed the entire drilling platform, a tugboat, 11 barges, and 65 acres of surrounding land. The suction was so intense that a canal connected to the Gulf of Mexico reversed direction, pouring backward into the crater as a 164-foot waterfall.

How It Went Down



NO, REALLY

The Unbelievable Part

Despite an apocalyptic whirlpool that swallowed an oil rig, 11 barges, and 65 acres of land, all 55 miners working underground safely evacuated, and not a single human life was lost.

CRAZY-O-METER



Certified bananas

NO. 15



The Lake Peigneur Drill Disaster — Louisiana, USA, 1980

16 Mars Climate Orbiter Metric Mishap

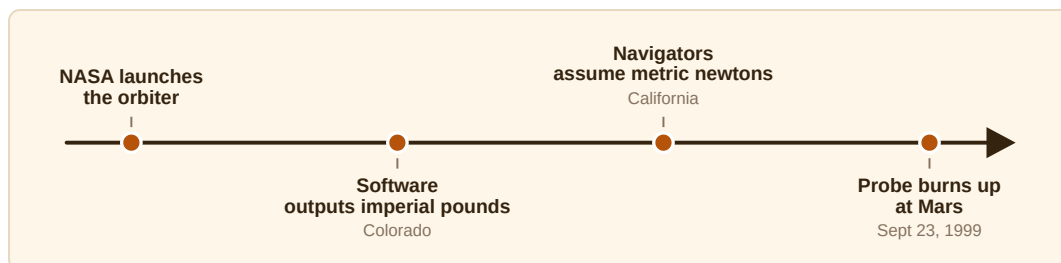
A \$327.6 million spacecraft vanished at Mars because two teams of rocket scientists used different measuring systems.

NASA launched the Mars Climate Orbiter to study the red planet's weather and relay signals from space. Building and flying the \$327.6 million probe took two powerhouse teams: Lockheed Martin in Colorado built the spacecraft, while navigators at NASA's Jet Propulsion Laboratory in California steered it.

There was just one problem. Lockheed Martin programmed its thruster software to calculate force in imperial pound-force seconds. Across the country, NASA's navigators fed those exact numbers into their computers, assuming they were in metric newton-seconds.

Because one pound of force equals 4.45 newtons, the navigation math was wildly off. On September 23, 1999, instead of coasting safely into orbit 226 kilometers above Mars, the probe dove straight into the atmosphere at just 57 kilometers and burned to pieces.

How It Went Down



NO, REALLY

The Unbelievable Part

The software didn't glitch or break—it worked exactly as programmed. A \$327.6 million interplanetary mission was destroyed simply because two teams of brilliant rocket scientists never checked that they were using the same units of measurement.

CRAZY-O-METER

Hard to believe

NO. 16



Mars Climate Orbiter Metric Mishap — Mars Orbit & USA, 1999

17 The Walkie-Talkie Skyscraper Death Ray

A shiny new London skyscraper accidentally became a giant magnifying glass that cooked the street below.

In 2013, builders in London were finishing up a 37-story skyscraper at 20 Fenchurch Street. Because the building was wider at the top and curved inward, locals nicknamed it the "Walkie-Talkie." Its south-facing wall was covered in sleek, curved glass.

By September, that inward-curving glass wall was acting like a giant parabolic mirror. Whenever the sun hit the building at the right angle, the windows bounced and focused the sunlight into a super-concentrated beam aimed straight down at Eastcheap street.

Temperatures in the beam shot past 90 degrees Celsius. The heat blistered paint on storefronts, singed a barbershop's doormat, and got so intense that reporters actually fried eggs in a pan right on the sidewalk.

One businessman parked his Jaguar XJ on the street and returned to find its plastic body panels, dashboard, and wing mirror warped and melted. City officials had to suspend parking spots in the hot zone while developers figured out how to shade the building.

How It Went Down



NO, REALLY

The Unbelievable Part

The exact same architect, Rafael Viñoly, had previously designed the Vdara Hotel in Las Vegas, which had the exact same flaw—its curved glass focused a beam of sunlight that singed guests' hair by the swimming pool.

CRAZY-O-METER



Hard to believe

NO. 17



The Walkie-Talkie Skyscraper Death Ray — London, England, 2013

18 The SNCF Train Width Blunder

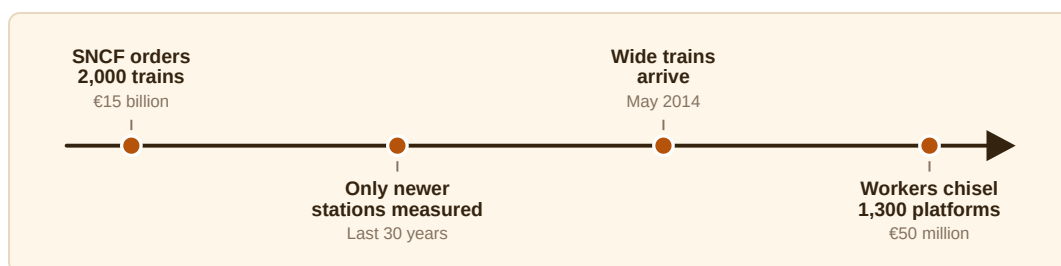
France spent €15 billion on brand-new trains before realizing they had forgotten to measure the older stations.

In 2014, the French national train service, SNCF, decided to modernize its fleet. They ordered 2,000 sleek, brand-new regional trains from the manufacturers Alstom and Bombardier for a whopping €15 billion. Before building them, SNCF responsibly asked the rail network operator, RFF, for the exact dimensions of the country's station platforms.

RFF sent over completely accurate numbers—with one tiny catch. They had only measured platforms built in the last thirty years. Everyone completely forgot that hundreds of older, rural stations across France had been built much closer to the tracks.

When the shiny new trains were finally delivered, officials realized they were several centimeters too wide. They couldn't squeeze through the older stations without scraping violently against the concrete edges. Since the €15 billion trains were already built, there was only one way to make them fit: move the stations back.

How It Went Down



NO, REALLY

The Unbelievable Part

France's Transport Minister called the blunder a "comic drama" as the government spent €50 million sending workers with hammers and chisels to physically shave down the concrete edges of 1,300 train platforms.

CRAZY-O-METER ●●●●○

Hard to believe

NO. 18



The SNCF Train Width Blunder — France, May 2014

CHAPTER 4

Strange Crazes

Every so often, thousands of people catch the same wild idea at once — dancing for days, paying a fortune for a flower bulb, or releasing a million and a half balloons. It never goes as planned.

6 EVENTS · ALL OF THEM REAL

19 The Dancing Plague of 1518

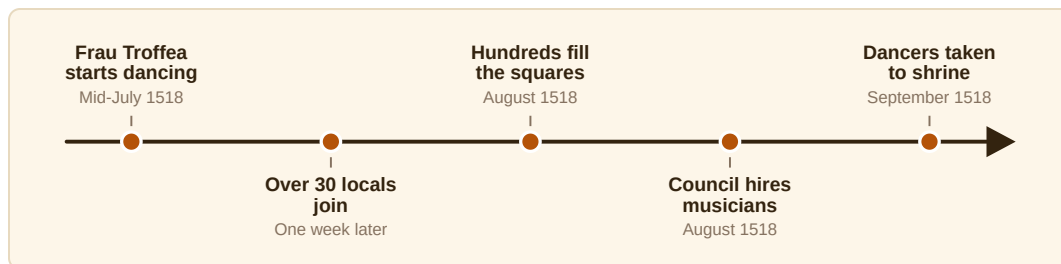
One woman started dancing in the street without music, and soon hundreds of neighbors couldn't stop jigging either.

In mid-July 1518, a woman named Frau Troffea stepped into a narrow street in Strasbourg and began to dance. There was no music playing, and she didn't look happy. Her husband begged her to stop, but she kept jigging for days until she collapsed from exhaustion—only to wake up and start right back up again.

Within a week, more than thirty neighbors had joined the involuntary boogie. By August, hundreds of citizens were leaping and twirling uncontrollably across the city's public squares and horse market, gripped by a bizarre stress-induced mania.

At first, city leaders made the problem much worse by encouraging the dancers to keep moving. Realizing their awful mistake, the council finally banned public music and carted the exhausted citizens up into the hills of Saverne to pray at a shrine to St. Vitus. By September, the strange plague finally ground to a halt.

How It Went Down



NO, REALLY

The Unbelievable Part

Believing the victims suffered from "hot blood" that had to be danced out of their bodies, the Strasbourg city council used taxpayer money to build a wooden stage and hire professional pipers and drummers to keep them moving.

CRAZY-O-METER ● ● ● ● ●

Certified bananas

NO. 19



The Dancing Plague of 1518 — Strasbourg, Alsace, 1518

20 Dutch Tulip Mania

Wealthy Dutch merchants gathered in taverns to bet outrageous fortunes on flower bulbs that had not even sprouted yet.

During the prosperous Dutch Golden Age, tulips were the ultimate luxury item—especially rare bulbs infected with a virus that striped their petals. Because tulips spend months underground before blooming in spring, eager traders started buying and selling paper contracts for bulbs still buried in the dirt.

In the winter of 1636–1637, this futures market turned into a tavern game for a small circle of wealthy merchants. Gathering over drinks, they traded contracts back and forth, bidding prices for unbloomed flowers up to outrageous heights.

The party ended in early February 1637, when a routine bulb auction in Haarlem failed to attract buyers. Panic flashed through the taverns. The market froze overnight, prices crashed, and mythmakers later claimed the whole country went broke—though historian Anne Goldgar's check of Dutch archives found almost zero tulip bankruptcies.

HOW IT WENT DOWN



NO, REALLY

The Unbelievable Part

When the market crashed, the government refused to strictly enforce the tulip contracts—meaning buyers who had promised outrageous sums simply walked away after paying minor penalties, leaving the sellers holding the bulbs.

CRAZY-O-METER



Seriously strange

NO. 20



Dutch Tulip Mania — The Dutch Republic, 1636–1637

21 1920s Flagpole Sitting

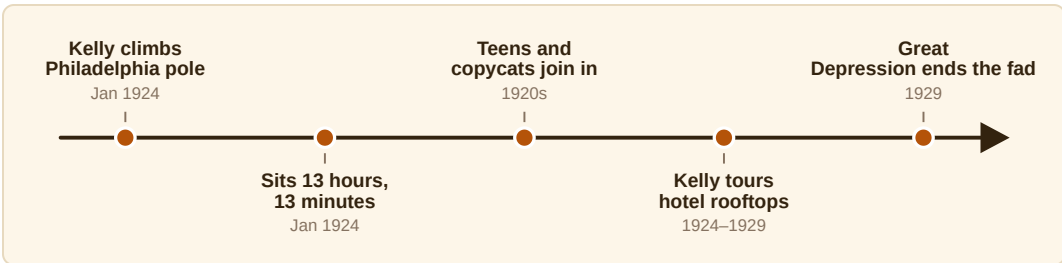
One daredevil climbed a pole in Philadelphia and accidentally convinced the entire country that sitting in the sky was the ultimate sport.

In January 1924, Alvin "Shipwreck" Kelly—an orphaned former stuntman and merchant sailor—took on a bizarre challenge in Philadelphia. Either on a friend's dare or as a department store publicity stunt, Kelly shinnied up a flagpole and perched at the very top for 13 hours and 13 minutes.

Instead of asking why anyone would do this, the Roaring Twenties went wild for it. Copycats across America, including teenagers, started scrambling up poles of their own to battle for endurance records.

Kelly turned his strange talent into a touring career. He perched on poles atop skyscrapers and hotels for weeks at a time while helpers hoisted food and drinks up on ropes. Thousands of spectators craned their necks below until the Great Depression arrived in 1929 and brought everyone back to earth.

How It Went Down



NO, REALLY

The Unbelievable Part

Shipwreck Kelly slept sitting upright on a tiny wooden disk hundreds of feet in the air by hooking his thumbs into holes carved in his seat—so if he leaned too far, the pain in his thumbs snapped him awake.

CRAZY-O-METER 🔴 🔴 🔴 ⚪ ⚪

Seriously strange

NO. 21



1920s Flagpole Sitting — United States, 1924–1929

22 The Seattle Windshield Pitting Epidemic

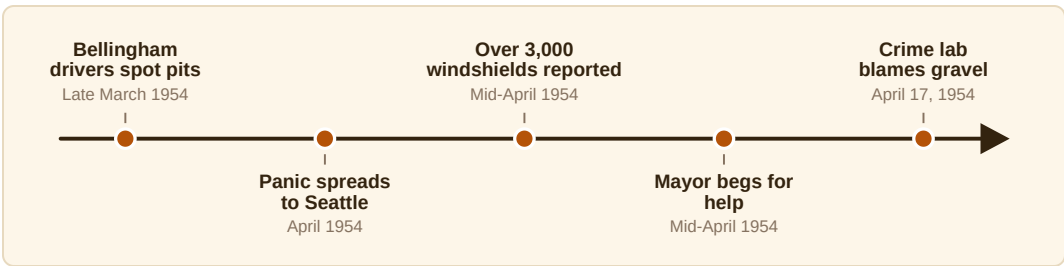
Thousands of terrified drivers called the police when mysterious tiny holes suddenly appeared in their car windshields.

In late March 1954, drivers in Bellingham, Washington, noticed strange, tiny pits in their car windshields. At first, people blamed vandals with BB guns. Soon, the panic sped south down the highway to Seattle, with terrified motorists flagging down police officers on the street to report fresh damage.

By mid-April, over 3,000 damaged windshields had been reported. The mayor of Seattle begged the state governor and the federal government for emergency help. What was eating through solid glass?

On April 17, the Seattle police crime lab solved the mystery. Five percent of the damage was ordinary vandalism, and ninety-five percent was mass hysteria. The pits were just normal dings from flying gravel on newly paved highways. Normally, drivers looked *through* their windshields. Once the rumors started, everyone began looking *at* them for the very first time—and the panic vanished overnight.

How It Went Down



NO, REALLY

The Unbelievable Part

Desperate to explain the tiny glass dings, citizens and local officials seriously blamed the damage on mutated sand flea eggs, a million-watt Navy radio transmitter, cosmic rays, and nuclear bomb fallout.

CRAZY-O-METER ● ● ● ○ ○

Seriously strange

NO. 22



The Seattle Windshield Pitting Epidemic — Washington State, 1954

23 The Tanganyika Laughter Epidemic

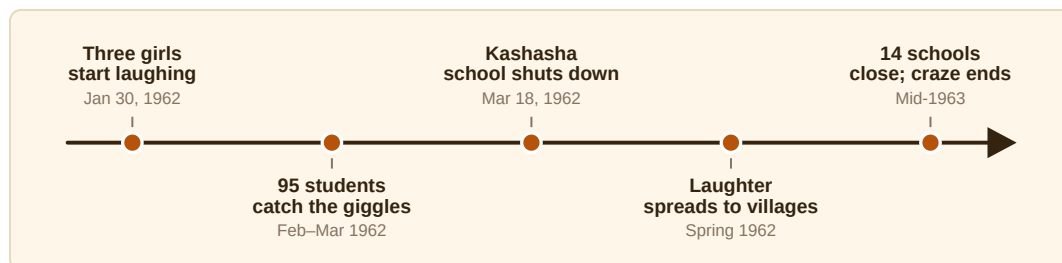
A fit of giggles started with three boarding-school girls and spread until it shut down fourteen schools.

On January 30, 1962, three girls at a mission-run boarding school in the village of Kashasha started laughing—and physically could not stop. Their fits of laughter, mixed with crying and total exhaustion, acted like an invisible virus. Soon, 95 of the school's 159 students were roaring with uncontrollable giggles.

Teachers couldn't teach, so the school shut down and sent the girls home. Big mistake. In the village of Nshamba alone, over 200 relatives and neighbors caught the exact same symptoms.

Experts call this a mass psychogenic illness, where real physical symptoms spread through stress and social contagion. Individual bouts lasted from a few hours up to 16 days. Before the epidemic mysteriously vanished 18 months later, it rippled across the Bukoba region, temporarily closing 14 schools and infecting roughly 1,000 people.

HOW IT WENT DOWN



NO, REALLY

The Unbelievable Part

The initial outbreak of continuous, disruptive laughter at the Kashasha boarding school lasted for an astonishing 48 days, completely paralyzing the school before it finally had to close its doors.

CRAZY-O-METER



Hard to believe

NO. 23



The Tanganyika Laughter Epidemic — Tanganyika (Tanzania), 1962–1963

24 The Cabbage Patch Riots

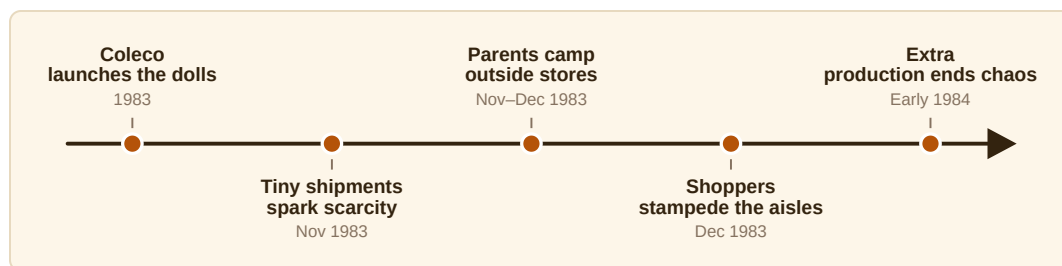
Thousands of grown-ups stampeded department stores to wrestle over chubby dolls that came with their own birth certificates.

Heading into the 1983 holiday season, the toy company Coleco introduced the Cabbage Patch Kids. These soft-sculpted dolls came with unique "adoption papers" and birth certificates. Kids across America didn't just want to unwrap a toy—they wanted to adopt a baby. Demand skyrocketed overnight.

There was just one huge problem: stores only received tiny shipments of 200 to 500 dolls at a time. Desperate not to ruin Christmas, thousands of parents camped out in the cold outside department stores like Sears, Macy's, and Zayre, waiting for the doors to unlock.

When the doors finally opened, holiday cheer vanished. The crowds surged inside in violent stampedes. Grown adults shoved, trampled, and physically fought one another in the aisles just to grab a box. The nationwide chaos only ended in early 1984, when Coleco finally ramped up production and made enough dolls for everyone.

How It Went Down



NO, REALLY

The Unbelievable Part

The holiday crowds got so violent that one toy store manager armed himself with a baseball bat to protect his staff, while another store had its doll shipment delivered in a heavily guarded armored vehicle.

CRAZY-O-METER ●●●●○

Hard to believe

NO. 24



The Cabbage Patch Riots — United States, 1983

CHAPTER 5

Impossible Escapes and Journeys

Some people just refuse to stay put. They sail broken ships across frozen seas, drift alone across an ocean on a raft, or fly to the wrong continent and become famous for it.

6 EVENTS · ALL OF THEM REAL

25 Robert Smalls' Escape on the CSS Planter

An enslaved pilot put on the captain's straw hat and sailed a Confederate warship past five enemy forts straight to freedom.

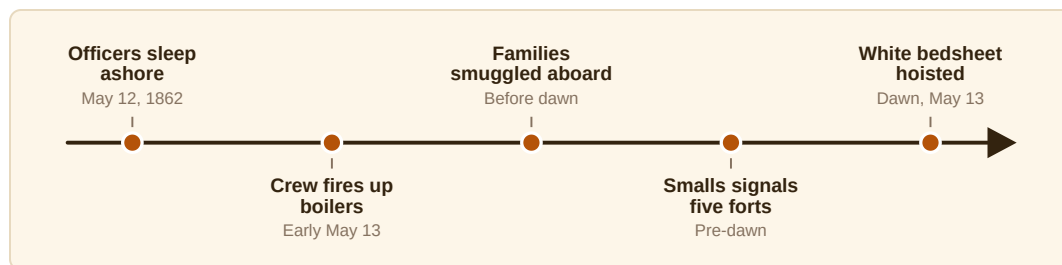
In 1862, 23-year-old Robert Smalls was an enslaved man forced to steer the CSS *Planter*, a heavily armed Confederate warship in Charleston Harbor. On the night of May 12, the white officers broke the rules and went ashore to sleep. Smalls and the enslaved crew saw their chance.

In the dark early hours of May 13, they quietly fired up the ship's boilers and smuggled their hidden families aboard. Smalls put on the captain's wide-brimmed straw hat to disguise his silhouette in the dim light and steered straight toward the harbor's heavily guarded checkpoints.

Because Smalls knew the Confederate protocols by heart, he blew the exact secret whistle signals needed to pass five different Confederate forts without raising a single alarm.

Once the *Planter* steamed out of range of the Confederate guns at dawn, Smalls lowered the rebel flags, hoisted a white bedsheet for truce, and handed the ship to the stunned Union Navy. President Lincoln soon recognized his bravery, and Smalls later became a U.S. Congressman.

HOW IT WENT DOWN



NO, REALLY

The Unbelievable Part

Smalls didn't just free 17 enslaved people—he delivered the Union Navy a 140-foot Confederate warship packed with four massive artillery guns, 200 pounds of ammunition, and top-secret Confederate naval codebooks.

CRAZY-O-METER



Certified bananas

NO. 25



Robert Smalls' Escape on the CSS Planter — Charleston Harbor, South Carolina, 1862

26 The Voyage of the James Caird

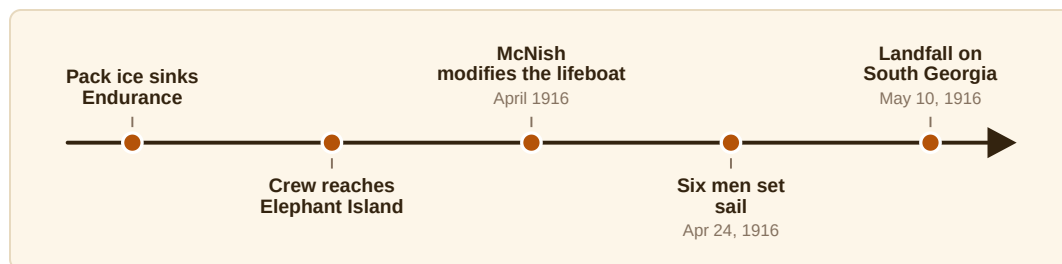
Stranded on a frozen island, six men sailed a tiny open lifeboat across 800 miles of Earth's most violent ocean.

After Antarctic pack ice crushed and sank their ship, the *Endurance*, explorer Ernest Shackleton and his crew camped on floating ice before rowing lifeboats to desolate, uninhabited Elephant Island. Nobody knew where they were. No rescue ship was coming.

Shackleton realized they had one desperate shot. He chose five men—including ship's carpenter Harry "Chippy" McNish and Captain Frank Worsley—to sail a 22.5-foot lifeboat named the *James Caird* across 800 miles of open ocean to a whaling station on South Georgia Island. McNish hastily raised the tiny boat's sides and built a makeshift deck out of salvaged wood and canvas.

On April 24, 1916, the six men launched into the "Furious Fifties," a stretch of ocean famous for freezing, hurricane-force winds and 50-foot rogue waves. With the sun almost never visible through the storm clouds, Captain Worsley navigated using only a sextant from the pitching deck. Seventeen brutal days later, on May 10, the half-frozen crew miraculously hit the southern coast of South Georgia.

How It Went Down



NO, REALLY

The Unbelievable Part

To make the tiny wooden boat watertight against 50-foot rogue waves, carpenter Harry McNish sealed the gaps in the makeshift canvas deck using an improvised paste made of oil paint, lamp wick, and fresh seal blood.

CRAZY-O-METER ● ● ● ● ●

Certified bananas

NO. 26



The Voyage of the James Caird — Antarctica to South Georgia, 1916

27 "Wrong Way" Corrigan's Transatlantic Flight

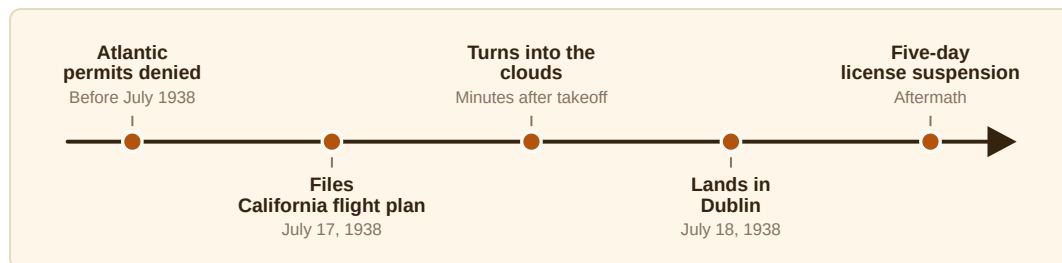
Told his rickety airplane couldn't cross the ocean, a sneaky mechanic filed a flight plan for California—and landed in Ireland.

Douglas Corrigan was a clever aircraft mechanic who helped build Charles Lindbergh's famous plane, the *Spirit of St. Louis*. Corrigan dreamed of flying nonstop from New York to Ireland himself. For years he asked for permission, and for years officials said no, declaring his beat-up jalopy of a plane totally unsafe for an ocean crossing.

On July 17, 1938, Corrigan tried a different tactic. At New York's Floyd Bennett Field, he filed a legally approved flight plan to fly back home to California. He loaded his plane with 320 gallons of fuel, a quart of water, and two chocolate bars. Minutes after takeoff, he turned 180 degrees into a cloud bank and vanished.

Twenty-eight hours later, Corrigan touched down at Baldonnell Airport in Dublin, Ireland. Stepping out of the cockpit, he wryly told officials that his compass had broken and he had accidentally flown the "wrong way." Virtually no expert believed it was an accident, and U.S. aviation officials suspended his license for just five days.

How It Went Down



NO, REALLY

The Unbelievable Part

Corrigan flew 3,150 miles across the Atlantic Ocean in a 1929 Curtiss Robin airplane that he had literally rescued from a trash heap and rebuilt himself for a total cost of \$310.

CRAZY-O-METER

Hard to believe

NO. 27



"Wrong Way" Corrigan's Transatlantic Flight — New York to Dublin, 1938

28 The June 1962 Alcatraz Escape

Three inmates fooled the night guards with homemade dummy heads and vanished from America's most inescapable island prison.

Alcatraz Federal Penitentiary sat on a rocky island in the middle of freezing, fast-moving San Francisco Bay. It was supposed to be completely escape-proof. Yet for six months, inmate Frank Morris and brothers John and Clarence Anglin secretly chipped away at their six-by-nine-inch cell air vents using stolen spoons and homemade drills.

On the night of June 11, 1962, the three men tucked lifelike dummy heads—sculpted from soap, toilet paper, and real hair swept from the prison barbershop—into their bunks. While guards walked past the sleeping decoys, the inmates squeezed through the widened vents into an unguarded utility corridor.

They climbed onto the prison roof, scrambled down to the water's edge, inflated a homemade raft, and paddled off into the thick bay fog. The documented facts stop at the shoreline: nobody knows if they drowned or reached land, and the U.S. Marshals still keep their arrest warrants open.

How It Went Down



NO, REALLY

The Unbelievable Part

The escapees built a functional, six-by-fourteen-foot inflatable raft and life preservers by stealing and stitching together more than 50 prison-issue raincoats, sealing the seams with heat from the prison's steam pipes.

CRAZY-O-METER



Certified bananas

NO. 28



The June 1962 Alcatraz Escape — San Francisco Bay, California, 1962

29 The Apollo 13 Lunar Rescue

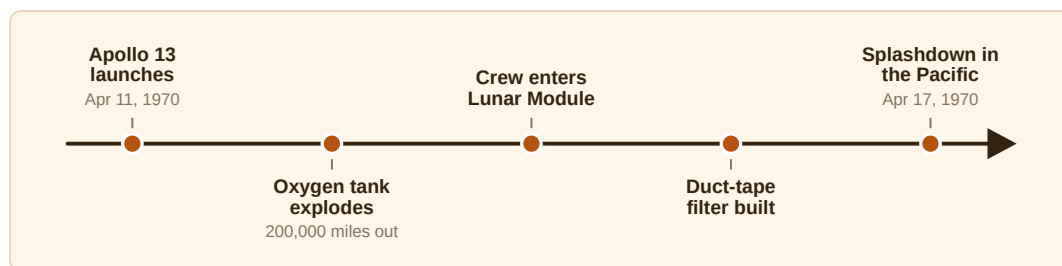
When an explosion crippled their spaceship 200,000 miles from Earth, three astronauts had to MacGyver their way home.

In April 1970, two days into NASA's third lunar landing mission, Apollo 13 was nearly 200,000 miles from Earth. Then a routine fan activation made an oxygen tank in the Service Module violently explode. Astronauts Jim Lovell, Jack Swigert, and Fred Haise suddenly started losing their main supplies of oxygen, water, and electricity.

Calm and cooperative, the three men abandoned their dying Command Module and crawled into the attached Lunar Module to use it as a high-tech lifeboat. There was just one problem: the Lunar Module was only built to keep two men alive for two days, and poisonous carbon dioxide was quickly building up.

Thinking fast, Mission Control in Houston invented a desperate workaround on the fly. They radioed instructions for the crew to build a makeshift air filter out of plastic bags, cardboard, and duct tape. The contraption worked, and the astronauts slingshotted around the Moon to splash down safely in the Pacific Ocean.

How It Went Down



NO, REALLY

The Unbelievable Part

To save power, the crew had to turn almost everything off—surviving on less than six ounces of water per person each day while cabin temperatures dropped below 40°F (4°C), effectively freezing them as they flew home.

CRAZY-O-METER



Certified bananas

NO. 29



The Apollo 13 Lunar Rescue — Deep Space, April 1970

30 The Jascon-4 Air Bubble Survival

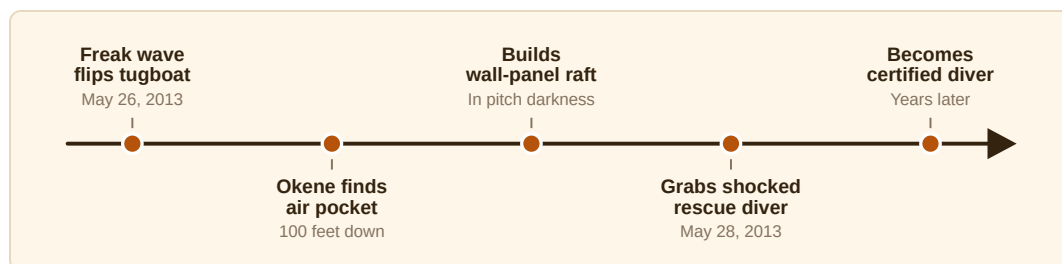
A ship's cook survived 100 feet at the bottom of the Atlantic Ocean inside a tiny bubble of trapped air.

On May 26, 2013, 29-year-old ship's cook Harrison Okene was in the bathroom of the tugboat *Jascon-4* when a freak ocean swell hit. The boat flipped upside-down and sank 100 feet to the pitch-black floor of the Atlantic Ocean.

Wearing only his underwear, Okene scrambled through the flooding, inverted hallways until he stumbled into a pocket of trapped air inside an engineer's office. To avoid freezing in the icy water, he ripped paneling off the walls and built a makeshift floating platform to keep his upper body dry.

Sixty hours later, South African deep-sea divers arrived to recover bodies from the wreck. When a pale hand suddenly reached out of the dark water and grabbed a diver's glove, both men got the shock of their lives. Guided to a diving bell, Okene survived—and later became a certified commercial deep-sea diver himself.

How It Went Down



NO, REALLY

The Unbelievable Part

Okene survived for 60 hours in a pitch-black air pocket measuring barely 13.5 cubic meters—just hours away from fatal carbon dioxide poisoning when divers found him.

CRAZY-O-METER



Certified bananas

NO. 30



The Jascon-4 Air Bubble Survival — Escravos Coast, Nigeria, 2013

CHAPTER 6

Accidental Genius

A moldy dish, a melted chocolate bar, a burr stuck to a dog — some of the most important inventions in history started as somebody's mess. The trick was noticing.

6 EVENTS · ALL OF THEM REAL

31 Alexander Fleming's Discovery of Penicillin

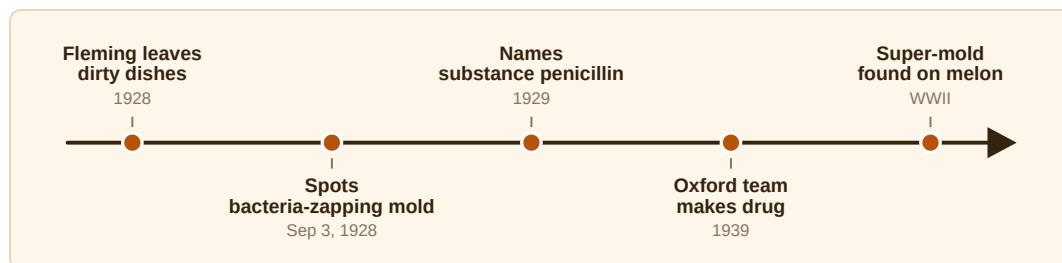
A scientist came back from vacation to a stack of dirty dishes and found a blob of mold that changed medicine forever.

Before heading off on a family vacation, Scottish bacteriologist Alexander Fleming left his laboratory at St. Mary's Hospital in London a total mess. When he returned on September 3, 1928, his bench was piled high with unwashed petri dishes full of *Staphylococcus aureus* bacteria.

As Fleming sorted through the clutter, one dish made him stop. A blob of blue-green mold had snuck in and contaminated it. Even weirder, there was a clear ring around the invader where the deadly bacteria had been completely wiped out.

Fleming isolated the mold—later identified as *Penicillium notatum*—and extracted its bacteria-killing "mould juice," naming it penicillin in 1929. He didn't have the chemistry skills to stabilize it for medicine, though. Ten years later, an Oxford University team led by Florey, Chain, and Heatley finally turned his messy accident into a life-saving drug.

HOW IT WENT DOWN



NO, REALLY

The Unbelievable Part

When scientists desperately needed to mass-produce penicillin for World War II, a lab assistant named Mary Hunt found the highest-yielding strain of mold growing on a rotting cantaloupe at a local market in Peoria, Illinois.

CRAZY-O-METER ● ● ● ● ○

Hard to believe

NO. 31



Alexander Fleming's Discovery of Penicillin — London, England, 1928

32 Percy Spencer and the Microwave Oven

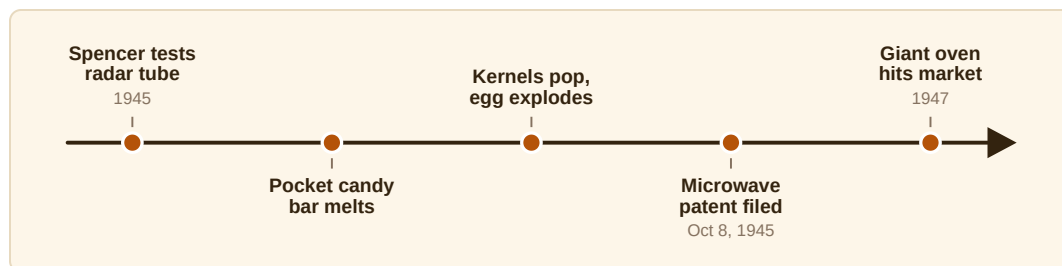
A radar engineer's ruined snack led to exploding eggs, flying popcorn, and a brand-new way to cook dinner.

In 1945, self-taught engineer Percy Spencer was working at Raytheon Laboratories in Massachusetts. While standing in front of a buzzing cavity magnetron—a high-powered vacuum tube used for military radar during World War II—he reached into his pocket for a candy bar. Instead of a solid snack, he found a warm, gooey mess.

Spencer realized the invisible radar waves had cooked his candy. Being a curious guy, he immediately sent for unpopped popcorn kernels, placed them near the tube, and watched them pop into white clouds across the lab.

Next, Spencer decided to test a raw egg. The radar waves heated the inside so fast that the egg exploded! Convinced he was onto something big, Spencer filed a patent for the first microwave cooking device on October 8, 1945.

HOW IT WENT DOWN



NO, REALLY

The Unbelievable Part

The first commercial microwave oven, released by Raytheon in 1947, was a total monster: it stood nearly six feet tall, weighed 750 pounds, and cost \$3,000—about \$40,000 in today's money!

CRAZY-O-METER ● ● ● ○ ○

Seriously strange

NO. 32



Percy Spencer and the Microwave Oven — Massachusetts, USA, 1945

33 Wilhelm Röntgen's Discovery of X-Rays

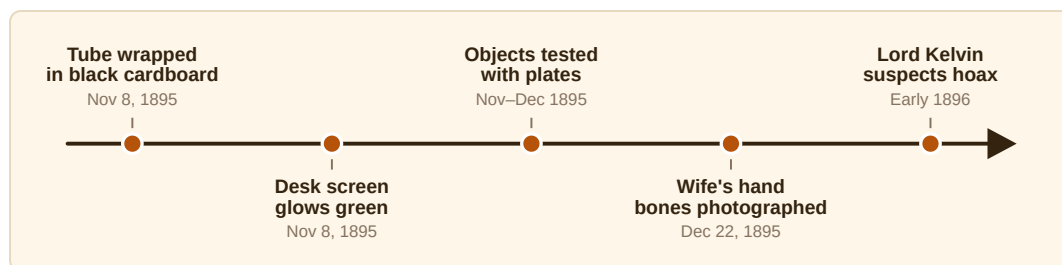
A glowing screen in a dark room revealed invisible rays that could pass straight through solid objects.

On November 8, 1895, at the University of Würzburg, physicist Wilhelm Röntgen was testing electric discharges in a dark room. He wrapped a Crookes vacuum tube in thick black cardboard to block out every bit of visible light. Nothing should have been glowing.

Yet about a meter away on his desk, a chemically coated screen suddenly shimmered with faint green light. Röntgen realized invisible rays were shooting right through the solid cardboard.

Curious, he began placing solid objects between the tube and photographic plates. On December 22, 1895, he placed his wife Anna Bertha's hand in the path of the mysterious rays—capturing the world's very first medical picture of living human bones.

HOW IT WENT DOWN



NO, REALLY

The Unbelievable Part

When the famous physicist Lord Kelvin first received Röntgen's research paper and bone photographs in early 1896, he initially suspected the entire discovery was an elaborate hoax or a "fairy tale" until he saw the proof himself.

CRAZY-O-METER



Hard to believe

NO. 33



Wilhelm Röntgen's Discovery of X-Rays — Würzburg, Germany, 1895

34 George de Mestral and the Velcro Fastener

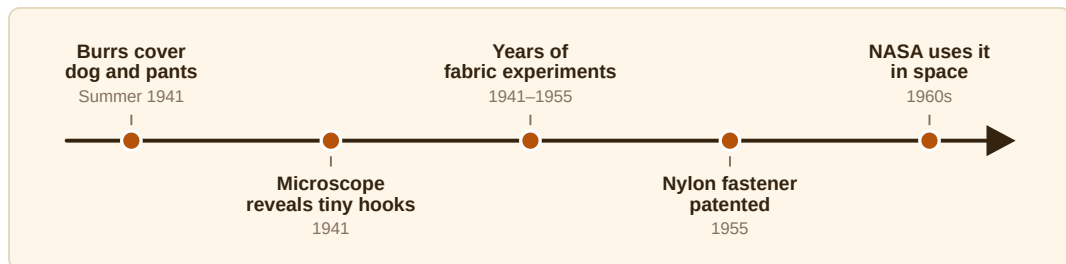
A dog covered in stubborn mountain weeds inspired an engineer to spend fourteen years inventing a fastener without buttons or zippers.

In the summer of 1941, Swiss engineer George de Mestral returned from a hunting trip in the Jura Mountains with a very prickly problem. Both his trousers and his Irish Pointer dog were completely covered in stubborn burrs from the burdock plant.

Instead of just picking them off and tossing them away, de Mestral got curious. He slid a burr under his microscope and discovered its secret: hundreds of tiny, springy hooks that latched onto the microscopic loops in fabric and dog fur.

Copying nature was not easy. De Mestral spent fourteen years slogging through failed textile experiments to recreate those tiny hooks. He finally cracked the code by weaving nylon under infrared light and cutting the loops to form stiff, permanent hooks, earning his patent in 1955.

HOW IT WENT DOWN



NO, REALLY

The Unbelievable Part

The fashion industry initially rejected Velcro. It only became a global sensation after NASA used it in the 1960s to keep astronauts' tools from floating away in zero-gravity space cabins.

CRAZY-O-METER ● ● ○ ○ ○

Pretty weird

NO. 34



George de Mestral and the Velcro Fastener — Jura Mountains, Switzerland, 1941

35 Constantin Fahlberg's Artificial Sweetener

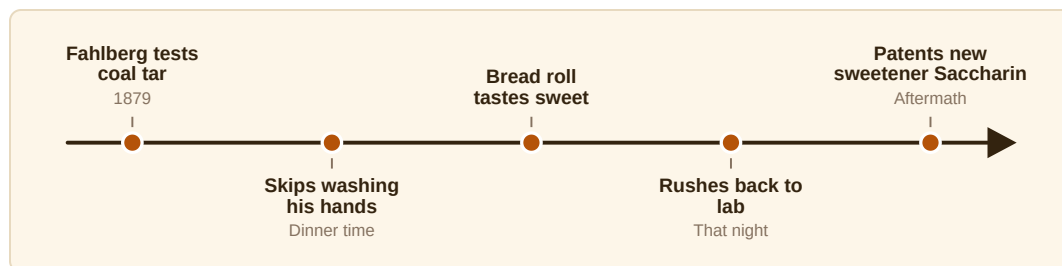
A chemist forgot to wash his hands before dinner and accidentally tasted the world's first zero-calorie sweetener on his bread roll.

In 1879, chemist Constantin Fahlberg spent a long day at Johns Hopkins University in Professor Ira Remsen's laboratory, running experiments on coal tar derivatives. Exhausted and hungry, Fahlberg headed to dinner—and broke the number-one rule of chemistry by forgetting to thoroughly wash his hands.

When he bit into an ordinary bread roll, it tasted intensely, shockingly sweet. The bread wasn't frosted. Curious, Fahlberg licked his own fingers and realized the sweetness was coming from invisible chemical residue on his skin.

He abandoned his meal and sprinted back to the lab to taste-test his beakers. He tracked the flavor to a compound called benzoic sulfimide, which he patented as "Saccharin," the world's first zero-calorie artificial sweetener.

HOW IT WENT DOWN



NO, REALLY

The Unbelievable Part

When the U.S. Department of Agriculture tried to ban Saccharin in 1906, President Theodore Roosevelt—who used it for weight loss—blocked the ban and declared, "Anyone who says saccharin is injurious to health is an idiot."

CRAZY-O-METER



Seriously strange

NO. 35



Constantin Fahlberg's Artificial Sweetener — Baltimore, Maryland, 1879

36 Frank Epperson's Popsicle

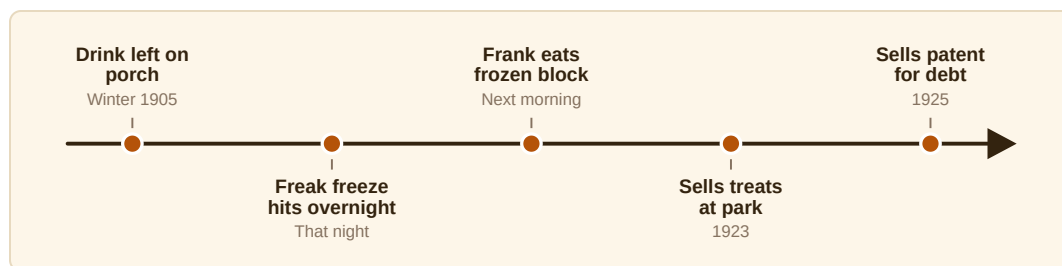
An eleven-year-old forgot his sugary drink on a freezing porch and accidentally invented summer's favorite treat.

In the winter of 1905, eleven-year-old Frank Epperson was on his porch mixing sugary soda powder with water. Being eleven, he got distracted and walked away, leaving the cup outside with the wooden stirring stick still standing in it. That night, a freak cold snap hit the San Francisco Bay Area.

The next morning, Frank discovered his drink had frozen solid around the stick. Curious, he ran the glass under hot water, tugged the wooden handle, and slid out a flavorful block of ice. He ate his accidental creation right off the stick.

Eighteen years later, in 1923, grown-up Frank started selling his frozen "Epsicles" at a local amusement park and filed for a patent. Unfortunately, inventing a legendary snack didn't make him rich. Struggling with debt, Frank sold the rights to the Joe Lowe Company in 1925, later admitting, "I haven't been the same since."

How It Went Down



NO, REALLY

The Unbelievable Part

Epperson's 1924 patent outlines the exact science of the treat, legally requiring the stick to be made of splinter-free woods like bass, birch, or poplar so kids wouldn't hurt their tongues.

CRAZY-O-METER 🔥 🔥 ❄️ ❄️ ❄️

Pretty weird

NO. 36



Frank Epperson's Popsicle — San Francisco Bay Area, 1905