

The HOME FORUM

Historic hoaxes

and how not to be fooled yourself

YOU'D THINK THAT, after 300 years, people would catch on. A "kick me" sign pinned to someone's back dates to the 1700s. Pennies glued to the pavement are just as old. Faked photos have been around nearly as long as photography itself (a 19th-century invention). Concocted creatures – ever hear of a "jackalope"? – are old, old news as well.

But that doesn't mean people don't fall for such things today. And while pranks such as "kick me" signs and superglued coins are exposed in a moment, faked photos and other hoaxes can last longer. A host of hoaxes – deceptions publicly parading as truths – circulate on the Internet every day. Some hoaxes last for weeks, months, even decades.

So, to arm you for April Fool's Day, here are a few well-known hoaxes from the past and present.

Do you believe in fairies?

In 1917, 15-year-old Elsie Wright and her cousin, 10-year-old Frances Griffiths, gushed to their parents that they'd been out playing with fairies. Naturally, the grownups didn't believe them – until they saw pictures. The photos appeared to show the girls in a garden in Cottingley, Yorkshire, with tiny winged creatures prancing about.

After a local photographic expert pro-

nounced the images real, word spread. Many people began to believe in fairies. The photos even duped Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, author of the Sherlock Holmes mysteries!

Sixty years later, the cousins confessed: They had cut out the fairy figures from a children's book and attached them to garden plants with hatpins. It began as a prank and got out of hand.

Earlier, in the late 1800s, faked photos had been used to try to convince people that a phantom city existed in Alaska and that "brain waves" could produce the image of a cat on film. By the early 1900s, "freak postcards" showed corn as big as trees, barn-size cabbages, and whopper grasshoppers. The photos were cut out and pasted together to create the effect.

Then along came "Snowball, the Monster Cat." In early 2000, a startling image began circulating on the Internet. It showed a bearded man holding a cat as big as a large dog. It seemed outlandish, but it *looked* so real. A story began circulating with the photo: Snowball's mother (a normal-size cat) had been abandoned near a nuclear lab. Somehow, nuclear radiation had resulted in the enormous Snowball. Many believed it – or scoffed



PHOTO COURTESY OF CORDELL HAUGLIE

THE AMAZING GIANT HOUSE CAT
 Soon after this 'SNOWBALL, THE MONSTER CAT' image was on 'The Tonight Show With Jay Leno,' the man holding the cat stepped forward to say that he'd made the image as a joke for friends. 'Snowball' (real name: Jumper) is normal size and weighs 21 pounds.

that it was a normal-size cat with a very small man. When the photo appeared on "The Tonight Show with Jay Leno," the cat was let out of the bag.

In May 2001, Washington resident Cordell Hauglie announced that "Snowball" was his daughter's cat, Jumper, who weighed a mere 21 pounds. He had created the fake image in 20 minutes using photo manipulation software. He'd e-mailed the image to friends as a joke. Somehow, the joke ... snowballed.

Today, Mr. Hauglie is still mystified and amused. Even after the image was exposed as a fake, people wanted to come by to see "the giant cat." He created the photo "never thinking for a moment that adults would assume such a cat really existed!" he says via e-mail.

The most convincing hoaxes, however, are often the ones created by the experts themselves. On April 1, 1957, the BBC's prestigious "Panorama" TV show reported on the "spaghetti harvest" in Switzerland. Viewers saw Richard Dimbleby, the show's anchor, walking among trees dripping with noo-

Anti-hoax resources

IF YOU HEAR of something on April 1 that seems too weird, extreme, or amazing to be true, check it out on one of these rumor-bashing websites:

MuseumOfHoaxes.com is Alex Boese's site, which began as research for his PhD on the history of science.

TruthOrFiction.com is operated by broadcaster Rich Buhler, a longtime researcher of rumors and urban legends.

UrbanLegends.About.com is run by David Emery, a writer and an avid chronicler of urban folklore and hoaxes. (Be skeptical of insistent language with lots of exclamation marks, dire warnings, and capitalized words, Mr. Emery says.)

If you're wondering if an e-mail virus warning is bogus, try **Vmyths.com**, run by security expert Rob Rosenberger.

Researcher and editor John Ratliff's **BreakTheChain.org** offers a lowdown on current e-mail chain letters.

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dles as a rural family plucked pasta and put in baskets.

"The spaghetti harvest here in Switzerland is not, of course, carried

out on anything like the tremendous scale of the Italian industry," Dimbleday told viewers. "For the Swiss ... it tends to be more of a family affair." Viewers eager to grow spaghetti were reportedly told by the BBC to "place a sprig of spaghetti in a tin of tomato sauce and hope for the best." (To be fair, spaghetti was an exotic dish in Britain in the 1950s.) To see the broadcast, go to www.bbc.co.uk and search for "Swiss spaghetti harvest."

Alex Boese, who has tracked hoaxes for several years on **MuseumOfHoaxes.com**, says this is his favorite. It meets his top criteria for a "good" hoax: "That it's not mean, and that it makes people laugh."

A new name for the Liberty Bell

Today, many companies send out phony press releases or publish fake ads on April Fool's Day. They want to show customers that they can be lighthearted and, of course, they want the publicity.

On April 1, 1996, Taco Bell took out full-page ads in five major newspapers announcing that they were buying the Liberty Bell and renaming it. It would now be known as the "Taco Liberty Bell."

"A lot of people were angry," says Mr. Boese. "You just think of all the sports stadiums being named after companies these days – but now the *Liberty Bell*?" Taco Bell kept a straight corporate face until noon and then revealed that it was a joke.

Taco Bell got an estimated \$25 million in free publicity for the stunt. And sales for that April 1-2 were \$1.1 million higher compared with sales on March 25-26.

Finally, a favorite play of hoaxers has

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NATIONAL MUSEUM OF PHOTOGRAPHY, FILM, & TELEVISION, BRADFORD, ENGLAND



THE COTTINGLEY FAIRIES
 Even the creator of Sherlock Holmes fell for this one. Many **BEGAN TO BELIEVE IN FAIRIES** when experts declared the photos real. Decades later, it turned out the 'fairies' were cut out of a book and stuck on plants with hatpins.

BBC/FILE



PASTA THAT GROWS ON TREES

The BBC's 'Panorama' TV show of April 1, 1957, featured a SWISS FAMILY 'HARVESTING' SPAGHETTI. Some viewers wrote in to ask how they could grow their own noodles.

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been to make their stories hard to verify. In 1702, the self-proclaimed "Native of Formosa" arrived in Holland. His eccentric behavior seemed to prove his claim: He worshiped the sun and moon and ate heavily spiced raw meat. Because the people had never met anyone from Formosa (now Taiwan), he was treated as a celebrity.

He managed to confound his critics for years. No one could check his story. In 1706, he finally confessed. He was an imposter looking for easy money.

Today, the Internet and e-mails make great use of this trick. Among the classic examples is the "Internet Cleaning" e-mail of 1997. It warned that the Internet would be shut down on April 1. Everyone was encouraged to turn off their computers and servers and disconnect their Internet connections so that "Internet-crawling robots" could remove "electronic flotsam and jetsam" to create a "better-working and faster" Internet.

"It was just plausible enough for new computer users to believe it," says David Emory of UrbanLegends.About.com. But

one giveaway that it was fraudulent, he

says, was that the source on the e-mail was phony, so there was no one to contact to verify the story.

Good hoaxes always seem outlandish, but possible, Boese says. But often, so does the truth. How did people greet the news that the Earth was round? Or that it revolved around the sun? Common sense sometimes exposes a hoax, but look deeper.

Boese says to ask yourself:

- Where did this come from, and is that source trustworthy? (If no source is given, that's a danger flag.)

- What do other sources say about it? Check with some websites you trust.

- Who produced this and why? What were their motives for producing it?

Finally, check the date: Was it published on April 1? (A dead giveaway: Is it

How New Year's became April Fool's Day

THE ORIGINS of April Fool's Day are unknown, though one popular theory goes like this: In 16th-century France, the start of the new year was April 1. It was celebrated with parties and dancing into the night. Then in 1582, Pope Gregory VIII introduced a new calendar for the Christian world, and the new year began on Jan. 1. But some people didn't hear about the date change, or didn't believe it, so they continued to celebrate New Year's Day on April 1. Others made fun of these traditionalists and played tricks on them. In 1752, Britain finally adopted the Gregorian calendar, and April Fool's Day began to be celebrated in England and in the American colonies.

The tradition of practical joking and mischiefmaking, however, dates back to ancient Greek and Roman times. On some holidays, for example, "slaves were allowed to play tricks on their masters and children could play tricks on their parents," says Alex Boese, author of "The Museum of Hoaxes" (Dutton,

2002). The purpose of the unruly holidays was to "let people release a bit of steam on one day of the year, helping to preserve the social order for the remaining days," Mr. Boese says.

Meanwhile, hoax trends have evolved through the years. In the 14th century, fake religious artifacts were the most popular hoaxes, says Boese. In the 18th century, hoaxes that poked fun at society's flaws were all the rage. For example, big-time hoaxer Benjamin Franklin published phony stories under a false name to mock the drunkenness of locals, the fashion of hoop petticoats, and the public's obsession with prophecy.

Today, Internet and media hoaxes dominate. "On April Fool's Day, some of the biggest hoaxers are companies who place fake ads in newspapers, hoping to gain publicity," says Boese. And thanks to the Internet and e-mail, now anyone can spread a hoax both cheaply and easily.

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