Bizarre Historical Hoaxes and Scams

Weird History Handout Series – Vol. 3

Hoaxes and scams have fooled scientists, governments, and the public for centuries. Whether for fame, fortune, or a good laugh, these elaborate tricks reveal how easily people can be convinced by what they want to believe. This collection showcases some of history's boldest deceptions, each with a brief story and its aftermath.

Piltdown Man (1912–1953)

Description: A fossilized skull fragment discovered in England was hailed as the "missing link" between apes and humans. For decades, it shaped theories of human evolution.

Outcome: In 1953, scientists proved it was a forgery — a human skull combined with an orangutan's jaw, stained to appear ancient. The revelation embarrassed the scientific community.

The Cardiff Giant (1869)

Description: A massive stone figure was "discovered" in New York, claimed to be a petrified biblical giant. Crowds paid to see it, sparking debates between believers and skeptics.

Outcome: It was exposed as a fake, carved by George Hull to mock religious fundamentalism. P.T. Barnum even made a duplicate, turning the scandal into a profitable spectacle.

The Cottingley Fairies (1917)

Description: Two English girls produced photos showing themselves with tiny fairies, convincing even Sir Arthur Conan Doyle. The images captured a war-weary world's imagination.

Outcome: Decades later, the women admitted the fairies were paper cutouts but insisted they genuinely believed in magical beings. The hoax highlighted the power of photography.

The War of the Worlds Panic (1938)

Description: Orson Welles' radio drama adaptation of H.G. Wells' novel was broadcast as a series of news bulletins. Many listeners thought Martians were invading Earth.

Outcome: The panic, though exaggerated in later reports, showed how realistic storytelling could stir mass hysteria. It's now a classic lesson in media responsibility and audience trust.

Victor Lustig's Eiffel Tower Sale (1925)

Description: Con artist Victor Lustig posed as a French government official and "sold" the Eiffel Tower to a scrap dealer, claiming it was too costly to maintain.

Outcome: Lustig pulled off the scam twice before fleeing to the U.S. He later became one of America's most infamous swindlers, even tricking Al Capone.

The Great Moon Hoax (1835)

Description: The New York Sun published articles claiming astronomers had discovered life on the Moon, including unicorns and winged humans. Readers were captivated.

Outcome: The story was pure fiction but dramatically boosted newspaper sales, showing early examples of sensationalist journalism. It remains a milestone in media history.

The Loch Ness Monster Surge (1934)

Description: A famous photo, known as the "Surgeon's Photograph," appeared to show a sea monster in Scotland's Loch Ness. It fueled decades of speculation.

Outcome: The image was revealed in 1994 to be a staged photo of a toy submarine with a model head. Yet tourism around Loch Ness still thrives on the legend.

The Turk: Chess-Playing Automaton (1770)

Description: A mechanical device toured Europe, seemingly capable of beating skilled chess players. Even Napoleon Bonaparte and Benjamin Franklin faced "The Turk."

Outcome: The automaton hid a human chess master inside, controlling the moves. The illusion sparked fascination with machines and foreshadowed modern AI discussions.

The Balloon Boy Hoax (2009)

Description: A Colorado family claimed their 6-year-old son was trapped in a helium balloon, prompting a massive rescue operation broadcast live.

Outcome: The boy was later found safe at home, and the parents admitted it was a publicity stunt. They were charged with filing a false report and fined heavily.

The Tasaday Tribe Discovery (1971)

Description: A remote Filipino tribe was introduced to the world as "stone-age people" untouched by modern civilization.

Outcome: Later investigations revealed the tribe had modern tools and contact with outsiders. The hoax questioned anthropological ethics and how easily outsiders romanticize "lost" cultures.