

Offbeat Oregon History: Evel Knievel of the 1920s

By Finn JD John
For The Sentinel

The 1920s were the era of daredevils: from Ormer Locklear hanging

upside down from the wings of his war-surplus Curtiss biplane, to Edmondo Zacchini getting shot out of a cannon, to Harry Houdini getting dropped upside down and manacled into a narrow tank of water and emerging triumphant.

To that list of high-risk adrenaline artists can be added Al Faussett, the only person in the history of the universe to have paddled over Willamette Falls in Oregon City, Celilo Falls near The Dalles, and 186-foot South Falls at Silver Falls State Park — and lived to tell about it.

The story of “Daredevil Al” Faussett is an interesting one; and nobody who knew him as a young man would ever have accepted a bet that he’d dying in bed of natural causes at the end of a long life. Even before his waterfall-jumping days, he was an adrenaline junkie. He made a living as a logger, but was always up for extracurricular high-risk hijinks.

Then in 1926, Twentieth Century Fox expressed interest in working with someone who could make it down Sunset Falls on the Skykomish River in a canoe. Sources differ on the nature of the offer, with some claiming there was a \$1,500 prize offered and others claiming it was Al’s idea and that it had been him who approached Fox. But either way, he soon was making plans, and building a special boat to carry him to the bottom of the 104-foot plunge in (relative) safety.

The boat was a fully enclosed thing made of a 32-foot hollowed-out log, lined and padded with inner-tube tires and equipped with bottled oxygen. Al teamed up with his old friend Charles “Cap” Elwell, a steamboat skipper, to build it.

If there was a deal with Fox, the studio backed out — although there were film crews there to capture the scene. Still, Al’s design called for him to be fully inside the boat at all times, so it would have looked on film more or less like a log going over the falls; it wouldn’t have looked like much in a movie.

Al made it, a little battered and bruised but basically OK. Sunset Falls is about halfway between a waterfall and a horrifically unnavigable rapid; the Skykomish River roars at speeds of up to 80 miles per hour down an incline of 20 to 70 degrees, dropping 104 feet in less than 95 yards. So

Al wasn’t just falling through space. Impacts with boulders and side currents filled the boat with water and broke the line to his air tank, and he had to hold his breath and hope for the best.

It worked out, and Al Faussett was instantly famous.

He wasn’t instantly rich, though. Most of the witnesses of the event had snuck in, evading his ticket booth and the \$1 admission fee. This would continue to be a problem for Al throughout his career.

Al had found his calling, and he immediately set about one-upping himself. The first thing he did was to try to get permission to shoot 268-foot Snoqualmie Falls. Probably the second was to see about traveling to New York and doing the big one — Niagara, at 176 feet. He would continue to chase these two big waterfalls for years, but could never get the needed permissions to do them.

Later in 1926 Al shot 28-foot Eagle Falls on the Skykomish, and the next year tackled Spokane Falls — his tallest yet, at 186 feet. This one left him in bad shape, with a concussion and numerous bad bruises.

Willamette Falls, in Oregon City, was next for Al. The falls are only 42 feet high, but the Willamette River makes up for any deficit in height with sheer mass. Al showed up to shoot Willamette Falls on March 30, 1928, close to the height of the spring run-off. The hydraulic pressure burst the hatch open when he hit the splash pool, filling the boat with water and battering Al around. The boat couldn’t sink, of course, with all the inner tubes in it; but the action in the splash pool at the base of Willamette Falls is quite rough, and kept Al underwater for several long, terrifying minutes. Al needed a few days in the hospital to recover from this one.

By this time Al was starting to notice something vexing: He was getting famous, but he wasn’t getting rich. Again, in Oregon City, the vast majority of people who watched him shoot the falls had dodged his ticket booth and watched for free. He decided what he needed to do was find something truly spectacular — a really tall waterfall on remote private property, to which access could be completely controlled.

And that’s what led him to the biggest waterfall in what’s now Silver Falls State Park: South Falls.

South Falls takes little Silver Creek over a 177-foot drop into a splash pool that looks, from the

top, just a tiny bit larger than a child’s wading pool. It’s way out in the middle of nowhere, far away from any towns, and in 1928 it was still owned by Daniel Geisler of Silverton; it wouldn’t become public land until 1935. It was perfect.

Geisler, who already was making small amounts of money charging folks admission to watch him shove junk cars off the top, was amenable to Al’s plan; but he was worried about liability. So the two men made a deal: Al would “buy” the falls and surrounding land, own it for one day, and Geisler would “buy” it back after the stunt (or inherit it in Al’s will, if things went really badly).

To make it work, Al and his partner, Keith McCullagh, dammed up Silver Creek at the top and rigged a chute to push Al’s boat out over the rocky lip. Then they rigged a cable that would guide the boat into that pint-size splash pool so it wouldn’t end up splattering on the nearby rocks instead.

The big day was July 1, 1928. Thousands of spectators were there to watch, and soon they started getting restless; it seemed like they’d been waiting a long time. One spectator, Bryan Gordon of Silverton, said he went to investigate and found Faussett “sitting in the canoe bracing himself with spirits for the ordeal ahead, for which you could not blame him.”

That was, of course, bootleg spirits, as Prohibition was still going strong in 1928. There was a rumor that Al wanted to back out and McCullagh was helping him change his mind “with a little help from a bottle of hand-crafted gin,” as Brekas puts it. Given Al’s track record of waterfall jumps, though, this seems unlikely. It’s far more likely Al was just having a drink or six while waiting for confirmation that the huge crowd gathered to watch didn’t include freeloaders.

Finally, Al gave the signal. The dam was opened. (Some sources say the dam never worked, and he had to be pushed.) The water roared and Al shot out into space as the spectators “caught their hearts in their throats and held their breath” (Brekas again).

But 30 feet above the water, the boat hung up on a splice in the guide cable, which snapped it to a momentary halt in midair. Then the guide ring ripped off the boat and it dropped to the water, where it landed flat with a terrific crack.

Brekas compares this to a high diver doing a belly flop. The boat had been intended to knife into the water like a torpedo and then pop back

to the surface again with a soggy but triumphant Faussett ready to jump out and shake some hands. Instead, a badly injured Faussett barely managed a feeble wave before being brought to shore and rushed to the hospital.

And while he was there recuperating, McCullagh skipped town with the entire \$2,500 proceeds from the gate.

After shooting Silver Creek Falls, Al considered quitting. Instead, he re-engineered his system, designing a cigar-shaped boat in which he would lie at full length, surrounded by inner tubes, like the Michelin Man. In this, he successfully shot his tallest waterfall yet — 212-foot Shosone Falls in Idaho — and finished off with a trouble-free navigation over 83-foot Celilo Falls on the Columbia River.

But Celilo would be his last jump. It just wasn’t penciling; gate receipts just wouldn’t cover his construction expenses and hospital bills. He went to Hollywood to seek employment as a stunt man, but that didn’t work out either; by 1934 he’d moved to Portland, where he quietly lived for the next 15 years, making a living with his mechanical skills and regaling anyone who would listen with tales of his past glory. He died at the age of 68, in bed.

But even at the time of his death, he was still working on a new boat for that long-delayed attempt on Niagara Falls.



AL FAUSSETT POSES FOR A PHOTOGRAPH WITH SOUTH FALLS IN THE BACKGROUND

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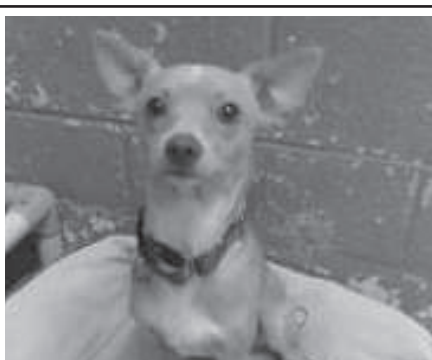
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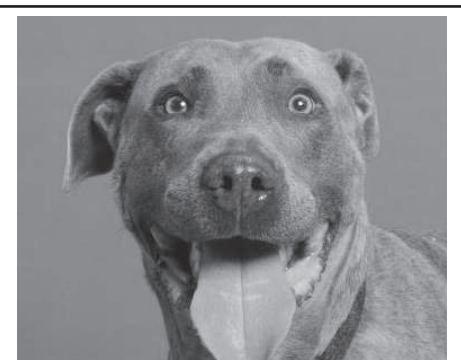
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