

Al Faussett (1879-1948)

By Jim Schepke

Al Faussett was an accomplished daredevil in the Pacific Northwest who, from 1926 to 1929, traveled across Oregon, Washington, and Idaho to traverse seven waterfalls inside crafts he designed himself. His death-defying acts at Willamette Falls, Silver Creek Falls, and Celilo Falls in Oregon attracted thousands of spectators.

Alfred Isiah Faussett was born in 1879 to Irish immigrant farmers living near Princeton, Minnesota. In 1899, the family moved to Monroe, Washington, where Faussett found work as a logger. His first marriage ended in divorce in 1903, but he married a second time to Elvira "Vera" Schalkaw in 1908. Their first son died months after his birth, and they had a second son, Irvin, in 1910. Faussett was not content to be a logger and wanted the success that his father and older brothers were having in real estate and other ventures. According to his grandson, Guy Faussett, "[He] was always betting and wild and into something new ... he always had some new scheme...because he was going to get rich somehow." His erratic behavior led to his divorce in 1925.

In 1926, Faussett and a partner built a 32-foot dugout canoe from a single spruce log that they named the "Skykomish Queen." His plan was to charge spectators \$1 to witness him take the canoe over the 104-foot Sunset Falls on the Skykomish River, about sixty miles northeast of Seattle. Faussett accomplished the feat on May 30, 1926, without serious injury, but the ticket receipts were a disappointment as most spectators avoided the gate. He followed that up with a similar stunt at the nearby 28-foot Eagle Falls on September 6, 1926.

Ready for a new challenge, Faussett took a new barrel-shaped enclosure over the 186-foot Spokane Falls on June 1, 1927, with 10,000 spectators in attendance. The stunt did not go well. His craft made it over the lesser of two falls but sank to the bottom of the river and was caught in a whirlpool. Faussett had to be rescued from the craft, which was destroyed. He suffered a concussion, several broken ribs, and numerous contusions.

Undeterred, Faussett was ready to take his daredevil act to Oregon. On March 31, 1928, he took a new barrel-shaped craft over the 42-foot Willamette Falls. When he hit the pool at the bottom of the falls, the hatch blew open and the craft filled with water and disappeared under water for several minutes before reappearing downriver. Faussett had to be hospitalized for his injuries. As with his previous appearances, most spectators avoided paying the advertised fee.

In July, Faussett took his act to the 177-foot Silver Creek Falls (today's South Falls) east of Salem with a new 12-foot canvas boat built for him by Hirsch-Weis, a Portland tent company. The boat had thirty-six inflated inner tubes inside and a guide ring attached to a cable to guide it to a smooth landing. Faussett also dammed the creek upstream to produce a strong release of water to boost him over the edge.

On July 1, 1928, more than 1,000 spectators assembled, some having paid the 50-cent admission fee, and Faussett wore a promotional sweater given to him by the Columbia Knit Company with their logo. None of his safety measures worked as planned. The water from the dam did not give him the boost he desired, and the boat had to be pushed over the edge of the falls. About halfway down, the guide ring hit a splice on the cable, ripping it off the boat, which then belly flopped about 60 feet into the pool beneath the falls, landing on its side. Spectator Albert Harris, age twelve, recalled the boat hitting the water: "Boy, it just went boom!"

Faussett was knocked out from the fall. He had sprained ankles, a fractured right hand, and serious internal injuries and was rushed to a hospital in Silverton. To make matters worse, his partner Keith McCullagh absconded with the admission proceeds and side bets—nearly \$3,000 (about \$57,000 in 2025 dollars)—and was later said to have left the country.

Faussett spent months recovering from his injuries, but in 1929 he was ready to go again, this time at 212-foot Shoshone Falls outside of Twin Falls, Idaho. On July 28, about 5,000 spectators watched him go over the falls in a new cigar-shaped craft with him inside encased in inner tubes described to be like the Michelin Man. Having suffered no injuries, he returned to Oregon in what would be his last stunt, at Celilo Falls on the Columbia River. Native fishermen warned Faussett

that he would not survive the rocks at the base of the main falls, so Faussett chose to go over one of the lesser branches, which greatly disappointed the estimated 3,000 spectators, but he avoided injury.

In 1929, at age fifty, Faussett moved to Hollywood to attempt a new career as a stunt performer, but found no success. After living for a few years with relatives in Ukiah, California, Faussett moved to Portland in 1934, where he lived out his years doing odd jobs, including repairing cars and trucks in his backyard. He never gave up his dream of going over Niagara Falls and was building a boat for that purpose when he died at age sixty-eight in 1948. The *Seattle Post Intelligencer* noted his passing with a story headlined "Famed Stuntsman Dies in Bed."

Sources

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