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Rampant Unknowns

*The devilish details lurking behind the race to plant the **first footprint on the moon***

"Fate has ordained that the men who went to the moon to explore in peace will stay on the moon to rest in peace," President Nixon would somberly declare. "These brave men, Neil Armstrong and Edwin 'Buzz' Aldrin, know that there is no hope for their recovery. But they also know that there is hope for mankind in their sacrifice."

As Nixon reviewed the contingency announcement written by his speechwriter, William Safire, he prayed he would never have to read it to a horrified television audience. He also knew, though, that there would be more than a few potential devils hiding in the details of the incredibly complex upcoming moon-landing mission that might compel him to deliver that mournful message.



One of those devils didn't show itself until after the astronauts had successfully walked on the moon's surface and reentered their Lunar Module. Aldrin and Armstrong shifted around in the cramped environment, preparing to settle back for a few hours of rest before they lifted off the surface of the moon to rejoin Michael Collins in the orbiting Command Module. After they had shed their cumbersome backpacks, Aldrin curled up on the floor while Armstrong sat on the engine cover and leaned back to rest.

In a split second, the priority of their lunar naps dropped to the bottom of their list. As Aldrin surveyed the cabin floor, he noticed something that obviously didn't belong there. It seemed to be a small black plastic switch for a circuit breaker. "Apparently, during movement wearing our large spacesuit backpacks," Aldrin would later relate, "either Neil or I bumped into this panel and broke off that particular switch."

That "particular switch," as fate would have it, was no minor control for a panel light or a seat adjustment. Instead, it was required to connect the circuit to ignite the main engine for liftoff from the moon's surface. When the astronauts relayed the information to NASA's mission control team, Houston's experts snapped into mental overdrive. They told Aldrin and Armstrong to try to get some sleep while they searched for an answer. But sleep didn't settle over the potentially stranded astronauts. As the mission control team 240,000 miles away wrinkled their brows and rubbed their chins, Aldrin and Armstrong tried unsuccessfully to divert their thoughts.

Perhaps there was an alternative method of reaching the vital circuit breaker, the controllers considered, but nothing came to mind. Theoretically, they could reconfigure the Lunar Module's circuitry to ignite the engine by bypassing the circuit breaker. When morning came, the room full of anxious, exhausted scientists and technicians had still not concurred on a workable solution. "Mission Control verified that the switch was open, meaning that the engine was currently unarmed," Buzz would summarize in his book *Magnificent Desolation*. "If we could not get the engine armed, we could be stranded on the moon."

Finally, combining a mixture of common sense and brute force, Aldrin contemplated jamming a writing pen into the opening left by the missing switch. His first thought was to use his specially designed Fisher anti-gravity pen. Then the notion crossed his mind that perhaps sticking a metal pen into an electric circuit breaker might not be the smartest idea. Instead, he employed an inexpensive plastic felt-tip pen that he had been using to take notes.

Fortunately, the makeshift switch worked like a charm. "I made a point to push it in hours before liftoff," Aldrin recalled, "so we knew that it would actually stay in!" At last, the rocket scientists back home could stop their brow-wrinkling and chin-rubbing. In the early afternoon of July 21st, two sleep-deprived but intensely relieved astronauts fired up their engine to leave their potential space prison behind.

Although the memory of that little plastic pen nowadays brings a head shake and subtle smile to the faces of nostalgic former NASA personnel, that was not their initial reaction back in the summer of 1969. They knew all too well that, as Neil Armstrong would later summarize, "The unknowns were rampant. There were just a thousand things to worry about." Those unknowns should have convinced any rational, level-headed person to simply gaze at the moon on a clear night and wonder what was up there, rather than risk unknown disaster to actually go there to find out. Throughout time, though, great mysteries have seldom been solved by "rational, level-headed" people.

The roots of the desire to reach the mysterious sphere wind back past resourceful scientists, imaginative science fiction writers, and maybe even a few contemplative cavemen. The spark, though, that would ignite the push leading to Neil Armstrong's first lunar boot print, was struck in a joint session of Congress on May 25th, 1961.

"I believe that this nation should commit itself to achieving the goal before this decade is out," President John Kennedy proclaimed in his now-famous speech, "of landing a man on the moon and returning him safely to Earth." Of course, Kennedy's words didn't solve any of the "rampant unknowns" that Neil Armstrong would later reference. But they somehow seemed to transform them from a huge swirling cloud of nameless barriers into an equally huge, but slightly less overwhelming, cluster of challenges waiting to be solved.

The question embedded in one of those challenges had already been answered a month before Kennedy's challenge: Could man actually survive in outer space? Russian cosmonaut Yuri Gagarin had successfully endured a suborbital flight into space aboard Vostok 1. Shortly after that, American astronaut Alan Shepard would duplicate the feat in a Freedom 7 spacecraft. These had been preceded by experimental launches of astrodogs and monkeys—some successful, and sadly, some not. Despite the safe returns of Gagarin and Shepard, NASA knew they were only a few steps from the starting line of the extraordinary space race.

The path from that starting line to the surface of the moon would be anything but a smooth passage. For a while, it looked like Kennedy's words might be just that: simply words. Although they stirred the nation's pride, they didn't resolve the looming obstacles. The huge Atlas rockets "were blowing up every day at Cape Canaveral,"

astronaut Jim Lovell recalled in a later documentary. Then, echoing the unspoken concern of every astronaut in training, he concluded, “It looked like a quick way to have a short career.”

Not only did rockets stop blowing up daily, but as the decade neared its end, enough successful tests and flights had transpired for NASA to actually decide it was time to attempt to fulfill President Kennedy’s challenge. Millions of words have been written about the matchless drama of the first steps on the lunar soil. Those words, however, might have read like those in the morbid contingency speech President Nixon reviewed, had it not been for the most important components of the mission: the people inside the high-tech space gadgetry.

With their quick thinking, expert flying skills, and a cheap felt-tip pen, those grown-up space-travel dreamers turned potential tragedy into triumph. The culmination of that triumph was forever recorded on the customs and declarations forms they had to fill out for security following their return. Despite likely smirking a bit as they completed the routine bureaucratic form, all three of the lunar travelers felt a surge of pride as they reflected on the “rampant unknowns” they had conquered in order to fill in the “departure from” section with two words: “The Moon.”

What do you think?

- Do you remember where you were when Neil Armstrong first stepped on the surface of the moon? How did you feel, and what were your thoughts at the time?
- Did you ever want to be an astronaut? If so, how do you think you would have done? Do you have any memories of watching space launches, following the news about astronauts, or perhaps dreaming of space travel yourself?
- Buzz Aldrin's quick thinking with the felt-tip pen helped save the mission. Can you recall a time when you or someone you knew used an unexpected solution to solve a problem? Have you ever found that a simple tool or object unexpectedly became very important in your life?
- President Kennedy's famous speech set the goal of landing on the moon. Do you remember any other speeches or speakers that inspired you or made a big impact on the world?
- Do you think there is life on other planets in the universe? Do you think we will get to Mars?
- Jim Lovell mentioned the risks astronauts faced with the early rocket failures. Do you recall a time when you faced or witnessed a situation that required taking significant risks to achieve a goal?

Mouse Ears and Imagineers

Walt Disney and the origin of Disneyland



Like many other amusement park visitors in the 1950s, a discontented guest sat on a bench in a deteriorating park and glumly observed the shabby, peeling paint and the timeworn rides. He had taken his daughters, Diane and Sharon, to the park for a fun day, but as he watched the broken-down rides and the ill-mannered antics of the pushy workers, his mind filled with disillusionment.

His disappointment, however, slowly transformed into a vivid image. He envisioned sparkling clean attractions run by

well-mannered hosts. And what if, rather than simply a clean, safe version of the standard amusement park, it focused on a specific theme?

So, sitting there on the bench, that guest, Walt Disney, envisioned the future of the amusement park. It wasn't difficult for him to come up with a theme since he had already helped give birth to a delightful cast of characters. They could jump off the drawing board and add the touch of fantasy the park would need. Mickey, Pluto, Donald, Goofy, and the rest had already won the hearts of Americans. The problem, as Walt found out all too soon, would be in convincing the needed financial backers that his dream could succeed.

Walt soon cashed in an insurance policy to fund a field study of amusement parks around the nation and overseas. As he toured around the world, looking at the existing parks, he gathered ideas for his own "dream park." In 1952, he drew on his personal savings to hire a small group of designers to develop plans and models for the park. The "Imagineers," as he named them, set to work helping him establish some basic standards for the park. It would need wide walkways so guests could leisurely stroll through the area, and there should be a huge custodial staff to make sure it was always spotless. There had to be plenty of food and entertainment, and there must be attractions that were unique to that park.

As his Imagineers built the park on paper and in clay models, Walt was becoming more and more anxious to build it in concrete and steel. He refused to even consider making any more movies until he could get his new dream underway. Unfortunately, not everyone around Walt shared his enthusiasm for this new dream park, especially his brother and partner Roy. Unlike Walt, with his obsessive belief in his new vision, Roy was extremely apprehensive. He felt they were doing well as a film studio and shouldn't gamble on something unfamiliar. His fears even led him to circulate a false story in the business community that the banks were against the idea of the park.

One by one, they all gave Walt's request for a loan a sympathetic but firm "No." When Walt discovered the reason for their reactions, he became even more committed to the project. He refused to even talk to his brother, and they communicated solely

through each other's secretaries or wives. Since it was obvious that Roy would continue to hinder his attempts to commit Disney Studio's time and money to the project, Walt developed a separate company to take control of the affairs of his dream park, which he had now decided should bear the name of Disneyland.

After some world-class wheeling and dealing, he eventually landed a contract with the newly organized television network, ABC, for a series about a masked Mexican bandit-hero named Zorro. Both CBS and NBC told Walt they needed to see a film pilot before they would consider signing up for the potential series. Walt told them firmly that he didn't make pilots and they would have to trust him on his film reputation. They were not interested in taking the gamble.

One morning, though, Walt received a call from a TV vice president named Kintner from ABC. "Walt, I hear you need money to build your fairground," he told him. Walt's immediate response was not exactly delight. "For God's sake," he blurted, "how many times do I have to tell people it's a leisure park, not a fairground!" Then, when Walt found out Kintner worked for the newly formed ABC network, he was even less responsive. ABC was, in Walt's opinion, "The peanuts network."

Walt explained that they were simply too new and too small to help him out. Unruffled, Kintner persevered. "Give us Mickey Mouse, Walt, plus the Disney name," he offered, "and I guarantee that within two years we'll be one of the big three." Then, when Kintner offered half a million in cash and a four-and-a-half-million-dollar loan guarantee, Walt made an agreement on the spot. Now that Walt had the funding, there was no slowing his dream. As he and his Imagineers refined his visions, a fantasy world slowly began to take shape.

By opening day, July 17, 1955, he was ready to show the world his new brainchild. Well, he was sort of ready. Actually, as he proudly stood in front of the live television cameras, concrete was still being poured and the asphalt on some of the streets was steaming. In fact, the grand opening of his dream park was not exactly the fantasyland he had hoped for. As ladies walked across the sections of newly poured asphalt, they left behind high-heeled shoes stuck in the road.

Because of a plumber's strike, there were not enough water fountains, and thousands of grumbling guests were convinced that this was Walt's greedy plan to sell more soft drinks. The riverboat, *Mark Twain*, very nearly capsized during its overloaded maiden voyage. And to top it off, Fess Parker, Disney's popular Davy Crockett, made a highly publicized grand entrance just as the automatic sprinklers suddenly came to life and soaked him to the skin.

Somehow, though, Walt and his Imagineers persevered. Throughout the following months, they constantly modified their ideas to fit reality. Walt, for example, had originally wanted to stock live animals throughout his jungle cruise. Zoologists, however, convinced him that the animals would likely sleep during most of the park's operating hours. As a concession, he used animated animals but did rent several live alligators from an attraction near Knott's Berry Farm. He caged them in chicken-wire pens near the Jungle Cruise entrance to impress the guests waiting in line.

In a sense, Walt still got his wish to have live animals in the attraction because, more than once, one of the reptiles broke out of the pen and slinked into the attraction's

lagoon. When this happened, the alligator farm's handler was summoned to lure his gator back into the cage. In the meantime, however, the divers who regularly needed to jump in the water to dislodge a boat that had become stuck on its track likely did so in record time.

Once Walt had ironed out the problems with the sprinklers, the gators, and the rest, it was becoming clear that his new vision of the old amusement park was a winner. Within six months of the opening, over a million guests had entered his "magic kingdom." Less than ten years later, the 50-millionth visitor crossed through the gates. As Walt stood back, surveying the lighthearted crowd of fun-seekers who strolled through his dream, he likely reflected upon the pitfalls and obstacles he had to cross before completing it. Getting Americans to relax and enjoy themselves, he realized, is hard work!

What do you think?

- Have you been to Disneyland in California or Walt Disney World in Florida? If so, what was your favorite attraction or memory of your trip?
- Do you remember Fess Parker in the *Davy Crockett* television show? Did you or your children ever have a coonskin cap?
- Which of Disney's characters is your favorite and why?
- Do you remember when there were only three or four television networks you could watch? Do you think there may be too many now?

Timeline of Walt Disney

- **December 5, 1901:** Walt Disney is born in Chicago, Illinois. In 1911, his family moves to Kansas City, Missouri, where he develops an interest in drawing.
- **1919:** After serving as an ambulance driver in World War I, Walt begins working as a commercial artist in Kansas City.
- **1923:** Walt and his brother Roy create Disney Brothers Studio in Hollywood.
- **1928:** Walt and Ub Iwerks create Mickey Mouse, debuting in "Steamboat Willie."
- **1932:** Walt wins a special Academy Award for the creation of Mickey Mouse.
- **1937:** *Snow White* premieres as the first full-length animated feature film.
- **1941:** The studio faces an animators' strike but successfully releases *Dumbo*.
- **1950:** *Cinderella* is a success that helps revive the studio's fortunes post-WWII.
- **July 17, 1955:** Disneyland opens in Anaheim, the first-ever theme park of its kind.
- **1964:** Disney's attractions at the New York World's Fair introduce new technologies for future parks.
- **December 15, 1966:** Walt Disney passes away in Burbank, California.

"Complete" Ignorance

John Bidwell and his adventurous friends know everything about California as they head out to the glorious land—except how to get there

The patchwork collection of enthusiastic young adventurers stood proud and strong on the brink of history. They were more than ready to take their place as the first overland emigrant party to enter California. As they set out in May of 1841 from Sapling Grove, Missouri, their heads were swimming with images of the glorious land. They knew California was a place of perennial spring and boundless fertility. They knew wild game roamed freely, and luscious oranges hung for the picking. And they also knew that neither disease nor disputes among settlers had yet marred the virgin landscape.

Yes, they knew all they needed to know about the golden land. Well, they knew almost all they needed to know. Actually, there was one little detail they hadn't quite worked out yet: how to get there. Many years later, their organizer, John Bidwell, would summarize their situation. "Our ignorance of the route," he noted, "was complete. We only knew that California lay west."

Fortunately for their unbridled enthusiasm, the excited pioneers-to-be were also ignorant of the hardships that lurked ahead on their six-month excursion. Before they would see the free-roaming wild game or taste the luscious oranges, they would see near-starvation and have a potent taste of torturous desert days and frigid mountain nights.

The seed of adventure that produced this rigorous journey began to germinate in John Bidwell's mind during his twentieth year. "I conceived a desire," he remembered, "to see the great prairies of the West." In the spring of 1839, he set out on foot from western Ohio toward Cincinnati. He was fortunate enough to hitch a ride most of the way on a produce wagon. From Cincinnati, he made his way down the Ohio River by steamboat to the Mississippi.

In Missouri, he met a Frenchman named Joseph Roubidoux, who told Bidwell he had been to California and had found it to be an ideal land. He described the countless herds of wild horses, the free-roaming game, and the wide-open fertile valleys. Roubidoux also said there was hardly any sign of the fever that had spread across Missouri. He said there had been only one man in California who had ever had a chill. "It was a matter of so much wonderment to the people of Monterey," he added, "that they went eighteen miles into the country to see him shake."

Bidwell rounded up potential emigrants and invited Roubidoux to speak to them. Roubidoux filled the gathering with dreams of the virgin country and endless opportunities, just as he had done with Bidwell. The group members decided to recruit others and meet on May 9th at Sapling Grove "armed and equipped to cross the Rocky Mountains to California."

During the next few months, the size of the group swelled as a positive article about California, written by a Doctor John Marsh, was printed in the area papers. Then it dwindled as another newspaper article appeared, which told of scorching desert heat and the unfriendly attitudes of the native Californians. That letter was gleefully reprinted in area papers by the Platte County merchants. From the beginning, they felt the

emigrant movement was "the most unheard of, foolish, wild-goose chase that ever entered into the brain of man."

When May 9th arrived, Bidwell and a few others excitedly headed for Sapling Grove. On arriving, they found only one wagon ahead of them. Throughout the next few days, one or two wagons pulled in each day. Five days after Bidwell's arrival, the party numbered sixty-nine. As the enthusiastic group members began to quiz each other, a startling realization fell over them. None of the sixty-nine knew which path to take.

Once again, destiny played a winning card for them. One of the last members to arrive said he had passed a company of missionaries who had hired an experienced Rocky Mountaineer to guide them to the Flathead Indian nation. Their destination was Fort Hall in the present-day state of Idaho. The missionaries' guide turned out to be the veteran mountain man, Captain Thomas "Broken Hand" Fitzpatrick.

At last, the Western Emigration Society was on the move. As they rolled along the yet-unnamed Oregon Trail, they realized how sensible they had been to wait for Fitzpatrick to lead them. In fact, Fitzpatrick's knowledge of the frontier likely saved their lives one night as they camped on the south fork of the Platte River. For days, they had traveled past immense buffalo herds heading toward the Platte for water. As they camped, the ground began to tremble from the buffalo's thundering onrush.

Fitzpatrick instructed them to set up fires a good distance from the wagons to turn the buffalo away from the campsite. The lead buffalo must have room to maneuver, he explained. If not, the pressure of the thousands of animals from behind would prevent them from veering around the wagons. Had they not diverted the herd, Bidwell judged, "wagons, animals, and emigrants would have been trodden under their feet."

The thundering buffalo herd was not the only taste of danger the Platte River served them. During one scorching afternoon, a heavy rainstorm suddenly broke the stillness. On the tail of the rain, hailstones "as large as a turkey's egg" hammered the wagons. Before the icy volley subsided, it had blanketed the prairie with hail four inches deep. The very next day, nature again turned on them. A menacing waterspout suddenly emerged, sucking water from the Platte. The society members were now becoming seasoned to frontier dangers. They quickly threw themselves against the sides of the wagons to prevent them from overturning. The swirling mass passed within a quarter of a mile. "Had it struck us," Bidwell solemnly recalled, "it would doubtless have demolished us."

As they continued and crossed the Rocky Mountains at the South Pass, a sobering realization must have penetrated their thoughts. Fitzpatrick, the veteran mountaineer who had led them safely through one hazard after another, would soon be turning northwest. After all, the missionaries had hired him to take them to Idaho, not California. The point of separation was Soda Springs in present-day Idaho. A decision had to be made by each group member. Would he or she continue in the safety of Fitzpatrick's group to Fort Hall or follow the original California dream? Thirty-two decided to stick to that dream.

This time, Bidwell and the remaining thirty-one were not the only ones unaware of the best route. Fitzpatrick himself was not much better informed. He had heard, though, that some trappers had trekked west and northwest of Salt Lake looking for beaver. So

he suggested that four of the party accompany him to Fort Hall to consult with anyone who might know a logical starting path. The remaining twenty-eight said their thankful goodbyes to Fitzpatrick and the missionaries. They then headed down the west side of Bear River into a country that was, as Bidwell put it, "a veritable terra incognita."

Somehow, with scant directions obtained from Fort Hall and the fortunes of Fate, they managed to wander forward through the veritable terra incognita. Eventually, they found the fresh water of the Stanislaus River as well as abundant game and wild grapes. Despite their unfamiliarity with the path, they had become the first emigrant party to reach California. Their courage, stamina, and resolve, much like their previous ignorance of the route, had apparently been "complete."

What do you think?

- Do you think Bidwell and the rest of the party would have set out if they knew how dangerous the trek would be?
- Have you ever visited sites along the Oregon Trail during a vacation? Did you see Chimney Rock, Independence Rock, Scotts Bluff or Courthouse Rock?
- Can you imagine four inches of hailstones?
- Have you ever seen a waterspout?
- The pioneers had a vision of California as a land of opportunity. Have you ever taken a journey or made a big move with high hopes or dreams for the future? What was it like?
- What challenges do you remember facing when traveling or moving to a new place? How did you overcome them?
- Some of the families in the party had children. Do you think they kept asking "Are we there yet" for the whole six months? How did your parents keep you occupied on long trips when you were a child? How did you keep your own children occupied when you took them on trips as a family?
- The emigrants' courage, stamina, and resolve were key to their success. Who do you consider to be some of the most courageous and determined people you've known, and what did they accomplish?

America's Songwriter

The inimitable Irving Berlin

"Geez, another one?!" Harry Ruby asked as his friend handed him a patriotic song he'd just written. "There were so many patriotic songs coming out at the same time," Ruby later explained. "Every songwriter was pouring them out." His friend, Irving, had intended to use it as a finale for a military revue he was creating. Irving knew, though, that Harry was a good music critic, and after taking another look at his song, he agreed that its overt sentimentality might make it "just a little sticky." So, with this assessment, Irving Berlin tossed the sheet music in his song trunk and started writing a substitute number.

The discarded sheet would remain there for twenty years until his friend, Kate Smith, asked him if he would write a patriotic song for her 1938 radio program on the twentieth anniversary of Armistice Day. Rather than writing a new one, Berlin decided to use the song he had written for the 1918 Army revue. In fact, he had recently unearthed the yellowed song sheet and made a couple of slight revisions. So at Kate's request, Irving Berlin handed her his new-old song: "God Bless America."

By that time, Berlin had established his place as one of America's up-and-coming songwriters. This song, however, would help elevate him to a status not only as an American songwriter but as an American icon. Despite some grumbling about a Jewish songwriter writing an American patriotic song, even the grumblers got a hearty case of goosebumps when Kate Smith belted it out. Those same grumblers would renew their criticism when the Jewish Irving Berlin wrote two celebrated Christian holiday songs, "Easter Parade" and "White Christmas." Just as with Berlin's patriotic anthem, though, even his dissenters couldn't control the warm feelings that swept over them as his inimitable songs accompanied timeless holiday movies. He had a unique ability to trigger universal emotions in individuals from divergent cultures.

That skill was likely honed during his hardscrabble years in the immigrant neighborhoods of New York's Lower East Side. Thrown into the great melting pot at a young age, he learned to get along with people of all backgrounds. His family had escaped the growing menace of Russia's brutal persecution of the Jewish people. Irving later recalled that his mother would often tell her friends about their journey from Eastern Russia to the safety of America. When she did, she usually ended her story with, "And God bless America." This later found its way into the song that would linger in his song trunk for two decades.

Irving's family had found freedom in their new environment, but not much in the way of employment. At different points in time, each of his family members would sell papers on the street corner. Irving began his paper-selling duties at the age of eight to help the family budget. Then named Israel Beilin, he took an after-school job hawking copies of *The Evening Journal* on the street corner.

His family had taught him the value of money, and his frugality would soon be demonstrated. One day in 1901, as he was peddling papers, a crane accidentally swung its load into his path, knocking him into the river. He was fished out unconscious and revived with artificial respiration. Then he was rushed to Gouverneur Hospital, near the