

## **Al Faussett: Skykomish Valley's Daredevil**

Among the more interesting developments of the “Roaring Twenties” was the rise of the “daredevil,” those crazed adrenalin junkies who went way beyond the line between bravery and foolhardiness for money and fame. Evel Knievel is among the most famous of the breed, but in the mid 1920s, there were all manner of thrill-seekers willing to walk on the wings of airplanes, go over falls in barrels, walk a tightrope at great heights over famous landmarks, and do other things most sane people would eschew.

Perhaps the most famous in the Pacific Northwest was Al Faussett of Monroe, or maybe Sultan, a man said to be a good faller of trees in the logging trade. Always a bit of a showman and gambler, his entire adult history offers an interesting list of bets and hustles and get-rich-quick schemes very few of which netted a dime.



The prevailing legend as to why he decided to run Sunset Falls in a canoe is that a film company offered big money to anyone who would dress like an Indian and do the deed on film. The reported figure was \$5,000, but it is clear that well before his attempt on 30 May 1926, there would be no Hollywood funds, nor filmmakers, involved. One account says that Hollywood rejected his effort because the “canoe” he built to run the falls didn’t fit the profile they were seeking. By then perhaps it was just one more get-rich-quick scheme, or maybe it was because crazy stunts were all the rage and Al loved the limelight. In any case at age 47 Al took up serious daredevil.

Whatever the impetus, once Al had decided he was going to run Sunset Falls, he set about constructing his canoe, the Skykomish Queen, a 32 ft. monster hewn from a single spruce log. It is not clear from the photos, but the generally reliable source [historylink.org](http://historylink.org) states the canoe had a “steel front cover to protect from battering on rocks and was fitted with strong vine maple branches that stuck out at angles to deflect the craft from huge boulders.” Of the many accounts of Al’s life and exploits reviewed for this article, one mentions he consulted with members of Pilchuck & Tulalip tribes about the design of that first canoe, but none indicates he patterned anything after boats used successfully anywhere else. Nor does anything in the accounts of his half a dozen other most famous daredevil stunts lead one to believe he was a meticulous planner nor a student of other’s successes or failures.

One of his later exploits, going over 177-foot Silver Falls in Oregon, which was hardly more than a large trickle, involved his building a dam upriver which would be breeched at the appropriate time so the huge gush of water would launch him out and down. He also built a chute to shoot him past the rocks directly below and rigged a cable so the canvas boat stuffed with half filled inner tubes would slide down and knife directly into the pool below then pop up so Al could bounce out and wave to his adoring fans.



***Al Faussett at Silver Creek Falls near Silverton, OR, wearing his Columbiaknit sweater. The firm was a sponsor of his infamous attempt to “shoot” this tall trickle. Several accounts say on the day of the jump he needed some bottled courage to make the leap, and when the dam he’d built on the creek above didn’t release the water to push him off, his helpers did.***

When the day came and the crowd was assembled, the dam didn’t release the flood of water, so two men had to just push the craft off the edge. Next, the boat hung up for a second on a splice in the cable about 30 feet from the top causing the guide rings to pull out of the hull so the boat dropped straight down landing on its top in the pool. Al was badly injured, but he managed to wave to his fans as he was being carted off to hospital.

Then insult was added to injury, the story goes, because while he was in recovery his manager/promoter skipped town with the entire gate, estimated as high as \$5,000, never to be heard from again, leaving friends and family to come up with the money to pay Al’s hospital bills.

He hadn't apparently learned much from earlier stunts, every one of which had not come off at all as planned nor produced much revenue of consequence despite their seeming promise. Even his first big-time stunt, the one that launched his "career," the Sunset Falls run, was as close to a disaster as a success.



***Somewhere here in Sunset Falls Al Fausset and the Skykomish Queen are tumbling down. The stunt is said to have drawn a huge crowd, but in the end Al didn't make any money at it.***

He had promoted the stunt lavishly, and 3,500 to 5,000 souls were estimated to have turned out to see the big event. The historylink.org account says, "Even a special Great Northern Railway train was enlisted to carry passengers to the site, and large areas of land were cleared for parking." So while Al drew the throng he wanted, his crowd control and ticket selling efforts failed miserably at collecting the \$1 per head entrance fee from more than a few. It is reported he did, however, earn close to \$1,500 from his "side bet" booth, where people mostly bet against his survival. One can but wonder what the terms for paying off were, since the loser in this case would have to be dead in order to lose the bet.

By his own account published in The Everett News, "...little did I dream of the power of those treacherous waters in the falls. When I went under the water hit me with a crushing force and hurt my lungs. It twisted my body and head. I was hurt inside and could not breathe. The line to my air tank had broken with the first meeting of the fast water and I was forced to hold my breath as best I could against the crushing water. The water came so fast it crammed down my nostrils and throat ...". (historylink.org) The account went on to say he'd do it again, and do other falls, but not until he first saw "the color of money."

Over the next five years he "shot," as the saying goes, at least half a dozen more falls becoming more famous and visiting more hospitals, but never coming close to real financial success. He tried unsuccessfully for years to get permission to leap Snoqualmie Falls but was denied. Nor was he able to ever mount a serious attempt to shoot Niagara Falls, an often-announced goal he carried to the grave. In the end he died in a bed in Multnomah, OR, at age 68, while the craft he continued to believe he was building for a Niagara attempt was being completed in Portland.

Google "Al Faussett" to read more about this remarkable Skykomish Valley character.

The final three photos in this article are used courtesy of HistoryLink.org.

Portions of this article by Warren Carlson were originally written for and appeared in *The Index Wall*