# Accidental Accomplishments

**He cultivated it and fenced it  
and planted it with the choicest vines...  
and he expected that it should bring forth grapes,  
but it brought forth wild grapes.  
(Isaiah 5:2)**

**Since so many good things are discovered by accident, shouldn't accidents be encouraged? (Ashleigh Brilliant, in Pot-Shots)The medieval alchemists sought methods for forming gold out of cheaper metals. They failed and are sneered at in consequence. In the process of searching, however, they discovered the strong acids: sulfuric acid, nitric acid, and hydrochloric acid -- substances infinitely more useful to modern industry than gold could possibly be. They get no credit for this. (Isaac Asimov's Book of Chance, p. 18)  
Barry Fitzgerald, the stage and screen actor, began his career when as a visitor backstage at Dublin's Abbey Theater he was accidentally shoved onstage during a mob scene. (Ripley's Believe It or Not!: Book of Chance, p. 14)**

**I do not believe things happen accidentally. I believe you earn them. (Madeleine Albright, in Time magazine)**

***\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\**There is a feeling among sailors that borders on fatalism. It is born of the belief that a ship can never get lost. When you run out of water, you always run into land. It may not be the right land; but then, if it were, America would still be undiscovered. (Robert F. Mirvish, in There You Are, But Where Are You?)**

[**America was officially discovered in 1492 when Christopher Columbus set out with financial aid from the king and queen of Spain. But what the history books fail to point out is that it was all a complete accident! Columbus was, in fact, trying to discover a shortcut to the Orient, so he could bring the fabulous riches of the East back to his sponsors. *(Ripley's Believe It or Not!: Book of Chance, p. 244***](http://www.bbc.co.uk/)***)***

***\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\**On September 12, 1940, four French teenagers followed their dog into a cavern near Lascaux, France, and discovered ancient cave paintings made by Stone Age artists. The paintings are between 15,000 and 17,000 years old. After being open to the public for 15 years, the Cave of Lascaux was closed in 1963 to prevent further damage to the art. (The Daily Chronicle)**

**Ken Mattingly was devastated when he was bumped from Apollo 13 – but having him on the ground may have saved the mission. Mattingly had trained for months to serve on the 1970 trip to the moon. He was in his car when he heard on the radio that fellow astronaut Jack Swigert would be the command-module pilot instead, because a blood test had shown that Mattingly had been exposed to measles. “I just kind of pulled over to the side of the road and sat there for a while,” Mattingly said in 2001. “If this is a practical joke, it’s really well done, but I don’t think this is a joke.” The rocket blasted off without him. Three days later, an oxygen-tank explosion damaged the spacecraft, stranding the Apollo 13 astronauts 200,000 miles from Earth. From a command center in Houston, Mattingly worked round the clock to help engineer a way to get the astronauts home safely using the lunar-landing module. (The Week magazine, December 1, 2023)**

**Since important discoveries are invariably unexpected (if they were expected, they would be too routine to be important), they are almost always serendipitous. They have to be. (Isaac Asimov, American scientist and sci-fi writer)**

**For thousands of years doctors told patients suffering from pain to chew on the bark of a willow tree. Even as far back as 400 B.C. Hippocrates recommended a tea made from willow leaves. It wasn’t until the 1800s that scientists discovered what was in the willow tree that relieved pain and reduced fever. The substance was named salicylic acid. But when people suffering from pain took the salicylic acid, it caused severe stomach and mouth irritation. In 1853, a thirty-seven-year-old French chemist named Charles Gerhardt mixed another chemical with the acid and produced good results, but the procedure was difficult and took a lot of time. Gerhardt decided the new compound wasn’t practical, so he set it aside. Forty-one years later a German chemist, Felix Hoffman, was searching for something to relieve his father’s arthritis. He studied Gerhardt’s experiments and “rediscovered” acetylsalicylic acid – or aspirin, as we now know it. Charles Gerhardt had mistakenly thought his compound was not useful, but today over 70 million pounds of it are produced annually all over the world. Americans take more than 20 billion aspirin tablets a year, making it America’s most widely used drug. And the little white tablet is certainly easier to carry in a pocket than the willow tree! *(Charlotte Foltz Jones, in Mistakes That Worked, p. 27)***

**A California man who meant to donate $150 to Bangladesh Relief, a nonprofit that supports Bangladeshis with food, clothing, and essential supplies, started a rush of giving with a typo. Instead of typing $150, the man, who asked to be identified only as Michael, added stray digits and put in $15,041. He planned to call the organization to correct the mistake, but as video thanks poured in, he decided to make it $1,500. Meanwhile, news of the donation spread online, and the funding campaign ended up netting more than $120,000. (The Week magazine, July 28, 2023)**

[**It’s hard to picture Ringo Starr as a retired factory worker, said Cole Moreton in the London Daily Mail. Yet had fate not intervened back in 1962, that might have been his reality today. Starr was working in a factory when he got an offer to play drums for a local band; he was then approached to play a gig with the Beatles. “Within Liverpool I was more known than them,” says Starr, 70. “They were lucky to get me.” At that time, Starr didn’t see a future in music. “We didn’t think it would last. Even Paul thought, ‘Well, I’ll probably end up as a writer.’ So did John. George was going to have a garage. I was an apprentice engineer, which was a big thing in my family. All my uncles and aunties came over to try to tell me that drumming was okay as a hobby.” Half a century later, he and Paul McCartney are the last remaining Beatles. “He likes to think he’s the only one,” says Starr, a bit testily. He still feels that he never got his due: Why hasn’t he been knighted like Sir Paul? “People have tried campaigns, but it never goes anywhere. Maybe you should just start one. That’s why I called my last album Y Not?” *(The Week magazine, June 10, 2011)***](http://www.bbc.co.uk/)

**Actor Humphrey Bogart was famous for his expressionless face and rasping lisp. Both of these characteristics were the result of a war wound. While he was serving in the military during World War I, his troopship was shelled by the Germans. Although he recovered from his wounds, he was left with a permanent partial paralysis of his upper lip. (Paul Stirling Hagerman, in It's a Weird World, p. 36)  
  
Chicken feet may soon provide a new burn treatment. Scientist Harry Robertson discovered the process while working in his lab in Maryland. He accidentally burned himself over a Bunsen burner and by chance reached for a new gel made from chicken feet. His untested process worked. The pain stopped immediately and Harry's burn healed without a scar. The gel called Revital, is now being market-tested. Harry claims it regenerates nerve and muscle tissue, heals third-degree burns, and eliminates acne scarring, skin ulcerations and bedsores. (Ripley's Believe It or Not!: Book of Chance)**

**Buttered bread was invented by the astronomer Copernicus. He was trying to find a cure for the plague. *(Noel Botham, in The Amazing Book of Useless Information, p. 165)***

**Charlie Chaplin broke into show business at age five because his mother, a music-hall performer, lost her voice during the performance and had to leave the stage, and Charlie went on and sang a well-known song. Halfway through the song a shower of money poured onto the stage. Charlie stopped singing and told the audience he would pick up the money first and then finish the song. The audience laughed. This was the first of millions of laughs in Charlie Chaplin's fabulous career. (Isaac Asimov's Book of Facts, p. 431)**

**Anybody you know over age 67 is older than the cheeseburger. It was that long ago, in 1924, that Lionel Steinberger whimsically tossed a slice of cheese on a hamburger he was grilling in his dad's cafe in Pasadena, California. It soon was on the menu. (L. M. Boyd)**

**The date was May 8, 1886. The Civil War had been over twenty-one years. Grover Cleveland was President of the United States. And in Atlanta, Georgia, a pharmacist named John Pemberton was busy in his backyard. Pemberton had already invented “French Wine Coca – The Ideal Nerve Tonic, Health Restorer and Stimulant,” “Lemon and Orange Elixir,” and Dr. Pemberton’s Indian Queen Magic Hair Dye.” But he wanted to invent a remedy for people who imbibed too much. Using a boat oar to stir, Pemberton cooked up a mixture in a brass kettle heated over an open fire. When he finished, he had a new medicine to relieve exhaustion, aid the nervous, and soothe headaches. Pemberton took his new medicine to the Jacobs pharmacy. He instructed Venable, his assistant, to mix the syrup with water and chill it with ice. They tasted it and agreed it waas delicious. But when Venable mixed another glass, he accidentally added carbonated water instead of plain water. This time the men became excited. They decided that instead of offering the beverage as a headache remedy, they would sell it as a fountain drink – an alternative to ginger and root beer. They named it Coca-Cola after the coca leaves and cola nuts it contained. *(Charlotte Foltz Jones, in Mistakes That Worked, p. 8)***

**A coincidence is a small miracle where God prefers to remain anonymous. *(Bits & Pieces)*  
America was officially discovered in 1492 when Christopher Columbus set out with financial aid from the king and queen of Spain. But what the history books fail to point out is that it was all a complete accident! Columbus was, in fact, trying to discover a shortcut to the Orient, so he could bring the fabulous riches of the East back to his sponsors. (Ripley's Believe It or Not!: Book of Chance, p. 244)  
Both Arturo Toscanini and Leonard Bernstein got their big opportunities as conductors when they were called upon to substitute. Toscanini, a cellist at the time, took the podium at the opera house in Rio de Janeiro and conducted Verdi's Aida from memory. Bernstein substituted for an ailing Bruno Walter in Carnegie Hall, and his performance as conductor made the front page of newspapers in New York the next morning. (Isaac Asimov's Book of Facts, p. 384)**

**In 1894, Dr. John Kellogg, the superintendent of the Battle Creek Sanitarium in Michigan, accidentally invented corn flakes. *(The Daily Chronicle)***

[**Jacques Cousteau, the French underwater explorer, trained as a naval pilot in France but a near-fatal automobile accident ended his flying career. His doctor wanted to amputate his left arm because it was badly crushed but he refused to approve the operation and began swimming as therapy. Cousteau went on to invent the Aqua-lung. *(Ed Lucaire, in Celebrity Setbacks, p. 178)***](http://www.bbc.co.uk/)

**In the 1890s, Josiah Bent of Milton, Mass., forgot to take his biscuits out of the oven in time. Got pretty crisp. So crisp, in fact, they crackled. So he coined the word “crackers.” (L. M. Boyd)**

**Discovered by accident: LSD; Duct tape; Phonograph; Nylon; the Match; Fahrenheit scale; Caramel; Styrofoam; WD-40; Super Glue; Kitty litter; the drink Gin; Rabies vaccine; Polyethylene; Rayon; Phosphorous; Radio transmissions; Armless Venus de Milo; Dead Sea Scrolls; Rosetta Stone; Cave paintings of Lascaux, France; Lost city of Pompeii; Largest gold nugget (130 pounds), found by wagon wheel** **in Australia, in 1869; Dramamine to relieve motion sickness; Pulsars; Ships of the Bronze Age; Pluto's moon; and Red delicious apple. (World Features Syndicate)**

**At the office of the orthopedic surgeon who had cared for my fractured foot, I filled out a patient information form. Since I had met the doctor in the emergency room, I paused at the question, "How did you learn about my practice?” My husband suggested that the appropriate answer would be "Accidentally." (Anita M. McGee, in Reader's Digest)  
  
If descriptions of how the new drugs function seem hazy, that partly reflects how they were discovered. “Serendipity,” says George J. Galasso, a virologist at the NIH, “Many were discovered while people were looking for something else.” (Alan Sternberg, in Reader's Digest)**

**Someone knocked over a lamp in the home of a French dyemaker in 1825. The fuel removed the stains on the tablecloth, and dry cleaning was invented! (Ripley's Believe It Or Not!: Book of Chance, p. 146)  
The first synthetic dye was produced by William Henry Perkin, an eighteen-year-old English schoolboy, in 1856. His teacher had mentioned how valuable it would be to have someone figure out how to make synthetic quinine, and Perkin decided to try in his home laboratory. He failed, but he noticed a purple tint in the mess he produced, left school, opened a factory -- and became a millionaire. (Isaac Asimov's Book of Facts, p. 99)**

**\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*Just because something doesn't do what you planned it to do doesn't mean it's useless. (Thomas Edison)**

**I never did anything worth doing by accident; nor did any of my inventions come by accident; they came by work. *(Thomas Alva Edison)***

**\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*Coincidences are God's way of remaining anonymous. (Albert Einstein)  
Hans Christian Oersted, a Danish professor of electricity and physics, was in the midst of a lecture in January 1819 when he discovered electromagnetism! He was demonstrating a wet-cell battery when he noticed that a nearby compass was pointing east instead of to the magnetic north. And presto, the connection between electricity and magnetism was made! (Ripley's Believe It Or Not!: Book of Chance, p. 149)**

[**The famed actor who owed much of his success to adversity, W. C. Fields, who was a vagrant at the age of 11, got his swollen red nose from alley fights, and his hoarse voice from childhood colds. *(Ripley's Believe It or Not!: Book of Chance, p. 317)***](http://www.bbc.co.uk/)

**I was going through my couch looking for stuff the other day, and I scored huge. I found a bed! *(John Hoogasian, as heard on Rooftop Comedy)***

**On June 11, 1770, Captain James Cook discovered the Great Barrier Reef off the coast of Australia when his ship, HMS Endeavour, collided with the coral. (The Daily Chronicle)**

**Achievement is often a happy offshoot, an accidental result, of the main effort. Exploiting these “happy accidents” is one of the most common sources of scientific discovery, as well as new ideas in many other fields. Horace Walpole called this process Serendipity after the heroes in the fairy tale, The Three Princes of Serendip, who “were always making discoveries by accident of things they were not in quest of.” *(Bits & Pieces)***

**While seeking a Pacific entry to the Northwest Passage in January 1778, British explorer Captain James Cook found something else: Hawaii. He and his crew were the first Europeans to set foot on the islands – which he dubbed Sandwich after the fourth earl. Cook returned the next winter but was killed by islanders in a fight. In 2006, Hawaii, a state since 1959, hosted 104,000 visiting Europeans – and five million Americans. *(Alison McLean, in Smithsonian magazine)***

**Hollywood Walk of Fame: In 1927, the silent movie actress Norma Talmadge started a Hollywood tradition when she blundered into a patch of wet cement outside of Grauman's Chinese Theatre in Hollywood. Since then, hundreds of movie stars have had their footprints and handprints enshrined in the cement outside the theatre. What began as a clumsy accident has resulted in the elevation of the theatre of one of Los Angeles' foremost tourist attractions. (Paul Stirling Hagerman, in It's a Weird World, p. 37)**

**Elisabeth Kubler-Ross became well known quite by accident. Someone from Life magazine read an article she had written about her unorthodox approach to the psychiatric care of terminally ill patients. When Life magazine ran a story on her work, she was ostracized from the university where she was teaching. Her lack of employment coincided with numerous demands for lectures, and she ultimately went on to bring the hospice movement to the United States. (Eleanor M. Dawson, in Unity magazine)**

***\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\**At the World's Fair in St. Louis in 1904, a man selling ice cream ran out of dishes. In the next booth was a man selling waffles. The ice cream man borrowed some waffles and put the ice cream in the waffles. He found that people enjoyed eating their ice cream held by a waffle -- and the ice cream cone was born. (Charles Reichblum, in Knowledge in a Nutshell, p. 171)**

**Denver restaurateur Otto Baur is credited with inventing this creation by accident in 1871. A regular customer came to his restaurant at 16th and Lawrence Street every morning for a glass of ice cream charged with seltzer water. One morning, the man came in before the cream was delivered, and Baur suggested he try a glass of ice cream into which the charged water had been added. The man was delighted and the Ice Cream Soda was born. (Rocky Mountain News)**

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**In 1879, Proctor and Gamble's best seller was candles. But the company was in trouble. Thomas Edison had invented the light bulb, and it looked as if candles would become obsolete. Their fears became reality when the market for candles plummeted since they were now sold only for special occasions. The outlook appeared to be bleak for Proctor and Gamble. However, at this time, it seemed that destiny played a dramatic part in pulling the struggling company from the clutches of bankruptcy. A forgetful employee at a small factory in Cincinnati forgot to turn off his machine when he went to lunch. The result? A frothing mass of lather filled with air bubbles. He almost threw the stuff away but instead decided to make it into soap. The soap floated. Thus, Ivory soap was born and became the mainstay of the Proctor and Gamble Company. Why was soap that floats such a hot item at that time? In Cincinnati, during that period, some people bathed in the Ohio River. Floating soap would never sink and consequently never got lost. So, Ivory soap became a best seller. (Glenn Van Ekeren, in The Speaker's Sourcebook, p. 102)**

**The greatest pleasure I know is to do a good action by stealth and to have it found out by accident. (Charles Lamb)**

[**In the year 1174, Bonnano Pisano, an Italian engineer, began work on a bell tower for the cathedral in Pisa, Italy. When Pisano started, he had no idea the bell tower would become a tourist attraction and one of the most famous structures in the world. Nor did he guess it would be famous because of a mistake. The tower was to be 185 feet high. Construction started and three stories were completed. Then the tower began to lean. The soil beneath the tower was soft and the ten-foot-thick foundation was not strong enough to support the weight. Pisano tried to offset the lean by making the new stories slightly taller on the short side, but the extra building materials caused the tower to lean still further. Construction was halted for almost a hundred years. In 1275 construction began again. This time two stories were built out of line with the others, in an attempt to alter the center of gravity. The tower was finally finished in the fourteenth century, but each year it leans 1.25 millimeters (about a quarter of an inch). It currently tilts 5 degrees or about 17 feet (5.2 meters). In 1934 the Italian government pumped concrete under the base to try to correct the leaning, but the tilt increased. Architects are still searching for a solution. While the town of Pisa enjoys the money tourists bring when they visit the Leaning Tower of Pisa, they fear someday their tower will lean too far and become the Toppled Tower of Pisa. *(Charlotte Foltz Jones, in Mistakes That Worked, p. 58***](http://www.bbc.co.uk/)***)***

[**In 1850, Levi Strauss, a 20-year-old Bavarian immigrant, arrived by sailing ship in San Francisco to seek his fortune in the gold fields. He brought with him a stock of dry goods, including some heavy brown canvas he planned to sell to miners for tents and wagon covers. Tents, he soon found, were not in demand, but few prospectors had work clothes sturdy enough to stand up to the rough life of the diggings. The enterprising young man had a tailor make pants out of his rugged canvas. Word spread that “those pants of Levi's (hence Levi's) were the strongest around, and they sold quickly.” *(Jean Libman Block, in Reader's Digest)***](http://www.bbc.co.uk/)

**Clarence A. Crane kept trying to get this mint candy machine to work, but it went on punching holes in the centers of the mints. He finally gave up and invented Life Savers. *(L. M. Boyd)***

**There's many a mistake made on purpose. (Thomas Haliburton, Canadian jurist-humorist)**

[**Walt Disney got his idea for Mickey Mouse because he was forced to work in a garage. Disney couldn't afford an art studio when he started, so he set up shop in an old garage. He was watching mice play there one night, and got the inspiration for Mickey Mouse. *(Charles Reichblum, in Knowledge in a Nutshell, p. 45)***](http://www.bbc.co.uk/)

**The microwave oven was invented by mistake when an engineer testing a magnetron tube noticed that the radiation from it melted the chocolate bar he had in his pocket. *(The Daily Chronicle)***

**The modern science of mineralogy began with an accident, in 1781. The French mineralogist Rene Just Hauy accidentally dropped a piece of calcite, and it broke into small fragments. When he bent to sweep it up, he noticed that every fragment had a neat geometrical shape. He discovered that minerals cleave in certain directions and that the cleavage planes meet at fixed angles. This eventually was found to reflect the arrangement of the atoms in the mineral. (Isaac Asimov's Book of Facts, p. 247)  
  
A coincidence is a small miracle where God prefers to remain anonymous. (Bits & Pieces)**

**Alaska became the forty-ninth state in 1959, but it was more than a hundred years earlier that the city of Nome, Alaska, was named. The name “Nome” does NOT honor a famous explorer or a brave hero or a wise president. “Nome” is NOT a Spanish or French or German word for anything. It is, instead, an accident. In the 1850s, a British ship was charting the waters and shoreline around Alaska. An officer noted on the map he was charting that a point of land did not have a name. He wrote, “? Name” on the map, meaning “Unknown Name.” When the ship returned to England and the maps were recopied, another draftsman thought the “?” was “C.” (for “Cape”) and that the “a” in “Name” was an “o.” So the draftsman inserted Cape Nome as the name of the area. While this story is generally accepted, some locals have another version of how Nome got its name. The second explanation says when English explorers asked an Eskimo the name of the cape, they were told in Eskimo, “Kn-no-me,” which meant, “I don’t know.” Whichever version one wants to believe, the area with the “unknown” name has grown and flourished as “Nome.” *(Charlotte Foltz Jones, in Mistakes That Worked, p. 61)*  
Struck oil accidentally while exhibiting a drilling set! Portable rotary drilling unit set up for demonstration purposes struck oil at the International Petroleum Exposition in Tulsa, Oklahoma. (Ripley's Book of Chance)  
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The largest oyster farm in the world is in France, in the Arcachon Basin off the Bay of Biscay. The development of the Arcachon beds came about by complete accident. A Portuguese cargo ship carrying oysters was shipwrecked off the coast of France, and the surviving mollusks founded a colony in the nearby Basin. (Richard B. Manchester, in Amazing Facts)**

**The famed Marennes oyster owes its origin to a peculiar incident that took place during the 17th-century religious wars. At the siege of La Rochelle -- described in Dumas’ The Three Musketeers -- the Huguenot defenders began tossing oysters from the parapets of the city when they ran out of more potent ammunition. Some of the missiles landed in the nearby salt marshes. Peasants who later found the oysters discovered the meat had turned an odd green color. The characteristic Marennes green proved to be the result of diatoms (algae) living in the marsh water. (Richard B. Manchester, in Amazing Facts, p. 206)\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*  
Am told the invention of the paper towel was an accident. First batch was supposed to have been soft bathroom tissue. (L. M. Boyd)**

[**In the early 1900s, Scott Paper Company, a large distributor of bathroom tissue, purchased large rolls of tissue paper and converted them into bathroom tissue. In 1907 one of the paper suppliers sent a shipment of paper that had too much wrinkling and was too heavy. Arthur Scott didn’t return the paper to the manufacturer. Although it was unsuitable for bathroom tissue, he knew it could be used. He perforated the tissue so it could be dispensed in individual sheets. He called the sheets Sani Towels and sold them to railroad stations, hotels, schools, and business and industrial buildings. In 1931, he made the disposable towels available to American homes. Today they come in “decorator colors” or “country designs.” Some are big and tough; others are strong and absorbent. Some are soft; others, economical. But the paper towels we use today are the result of a paper manufacturer’s mistake. *(Charlotte Foltz Jones, in Mistakes That Worked, p. 49)***](http://www.bbc.co.uk/) ***\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\**  
Even stranger are the stories of the chance discovery such as the one made by an exhausted Louis Pasteur, who brought us a cholera cure because he took a vacation. (Ripley's Believe It Or Not!: Book of Chance)  
*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\****[**Alexander Fleming didn’t get out of bed one September morning in 1928 planning to invent Penicillin. But that’s exactly what he did. Fleming, then forty-seven years old, was a bacteriologist, a scientist who studies germs. He was experimenting in his laboratory at St. Mary’s Hospital in London, England, and set one of the laboratory plates containing staphylococci bacteria beside an open window. Later, when he returned to the plate, he discovered some mold had blown in the window and contaminated the bacteria. With the experiment “spoiled,” many people would have thrown it away, but Fleming reexamined the plate. Under his microscope, he saw mold growing on the staphylococci. But around the mold there was a clear zone. The deadly staphylococci were actually being dissolved by the mold. Through the accident of the moldy culture, Alexander Fleming gave the world penicillin. *(Charlotte Foltz Jones, in Mistakes That Worked, p. 31)***](http://www.bbc.co.uk/)

**In 1928 a British bacteriologist at St. Mary's Hospital in London was conducting experiments with bacteria cultures. He accidentally left them by an open window one day, and when he later returned to his laboratory, he noticed that bits of fungus had flown into the room through the window and had landed on the bacterial culture. When he looked further, he discovered that no bacteria had grown around these bits of fungus. From this chance beginning, Alexander (later Sir Alexander) Fleming soon realized he had stumbled across a possible miracle drug to combat disease. Penicillin, as the drug was called, became so widely used that by 1950 it was being prescribed for 60 percent of all patients in the United States. (M. Hirsh Goldberg, in The Blunder Book, p. 106)  
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It was while he was examining urine, seeking the philosopher's stone (the major elixir needed to change baser metals into gold), that the German chemist Hennig brand discovered phosphorus. (Isaac Asimov)**

**Pink lemonade was created in 1857 by Pete Conklin who unwittingly used a bucket of water in which a circus performer had soaked his red tights. (Ripley's Believe It or Not!: Weird Inventions & Discoveries)**

**The entire plastics industry began because somebody was looking for a cheaper way to make billiard balls. In the nineteenth century, billiard balls were made of natural ivory, and were very expensive. A manufacturer offered $10,000 to anyone who could make a substitute material that would still be tough enough. A New York printer, John Hyatt, came up with the new material – plastics -- for billiard balls, and that was the beginning of the plastics industry. (Charles Reichblum, in Knowledge in a Nutshell, p. 175)  
On a cold winter night in 1905, 11-year-old Frank Epperson went outside to whip up some homemade soda pop using powdered soda and water. As he was mixing the brew, he was called away – and forgot all about the beverage he was making. When he went back outside the next morning, he saw the jar and went over. The mix was frozen solid, the stirring stick standing erect in the center. He pulled on the stick and the frozen soda came out with it. The 11-year-old tasted the soda icicle: Not only was it tasty, but the locked-in carbonation made it light and gave it a nice texture. Epperson didn't have to be hit on the head to know what he had. He began making “Epsicles” for friends, their fame quickly spread, and soon he renamed them the more testive “Popsicles” -- after the soda pop from which they were made. Epperson received a patent for his dessert in 1923. (Jeff Rovin, in I Wish I'd Thought of That!, p. 33)  
A donkey got loose in the vineyard of the Abbey of Marmoutier in Southern France. Chewed up a lot of vines. Our grapes are ruined, said the monks. Wrong. Next year came the best crop ever. Pruning helps, they realized and vintners have been pruning ever since. There is an unworthy play on words about the jackass that built the wine industry, but the historical truth is that pruning was truly a significant development. (L. M. Boyd)**

**Eucalyptus wood won't hold a railroad spike. The Santa Fe Land Improvement Company didn't know that. So north of San Diego near the turn of the century, it devoted three years to plant 3 million eucalyptus seedlings for eventual railroad ties. It got groves of trees. It got Rancho Santa Fe where the average home now runs $750,000. But it got no railroad ties. (L. M. Boyd)**

[**That service members should connect with the magazine is fitting: The idea for Reader’s Digest was fine-tuned in war. The founder, DeWitt Wallace, had joined the army in 1917. A year later, he was severely wounded during the massive Meuse-Argonne offensive. As he lay in a French hospital for four months recuperating from shrapnel wounds to his neck, back, and shoulder, he read American magazines and practiced trimming down the articles. After the war, Wallace honed his idea for a magazine filled with articles condensed from other publications – one that would blend human interest, advice, and humor, and tackle problems of the day. He couldn’t find a publisher to take a chance on him, so he and his wife Lila Acheson Wallace, published it themselves. Since the magazine’s debut in 1922, Wallace always made space for pieces about the military. *(Brian Mockenhaupt, in Reader’s Digest) 22278***](http://www.bbc.co.uk/)

**Norman Rockwell loved serendipitous moments, especially when searching for creative ideas to develop for the cover of The Saturday Evening Post. One day in early 1924, Rockwell walked into a local stationery store hoping to convince the manager, Dave Campion – one of his favorite models – to pose as a bookkeeper sitting at his desk while daydreaming of sailing the high seas with all the excitement, treasure, and adventure one could imagine. Instead, he interrupted a conversation between Michael Campion, Dave’s Brother, and an expressman making a delivery. In Dave’s absence, Michael was attending to business – while getting an earful of war stories from the older, proud truck driver. Always interested in a good tale, Rockwell listened attentively. The delivery man, Edward Klaes, enlisted in the Army at 37. The oldest of six children, he wanted to serve his country and set an example for his male siblings. After becoming seasick more often than he could remember sailing the rough seas of the Atlantic, Klaes finally reached Europe and was assigned as an ambulance driver near the front lines in France. During his tour of duty, he witnessed the horrors of war and talked to the injured, battle-weary men – many amputees – who dreamed of going home. Klaes’ emotional story inspired Rockwell to paint back-to-back Post covers. The June 7, 1924 issue featured Michael Campion as the mild-mannered bookkeeper dreaming of adventure, followed a week later by Edward Klaes as the salty swashbuckler dreaming of home. Serendipity – “making a desirable discovery by accident” – captured on canvas by America’s own Norman Rockwell. *(The Saturday Evening Post, July/August, 2011, page 76)  
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In 1903, a chemist named Edouard Benedictus dropped a flask. It cracked but didn't break apart. He noted it had contained a solution of celluloid in acetone which had dried up. At that moment, he invented safety glass. (L. M. Boyd)  
The safety pin, one of the most useful inventions, was created by Walter Hunt, a New York mechanic by accident -- he was idly twisting a wire while trying to think of something that would enable him to pay a debt of $15. (Ripley's Believe It or Not!: Book of Chance, p. 94)**

***\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\**A taffy seller on Atlantic City's Boardwalk in the late 1800s thought all his candy was ruined when a freak gust blew seawater all over it. He sold it, anyhow, as “saltwater taffy.” Buyers came back for more and the name stuck. (L. M. Boyd)**

**At the turn of the century, Dr. Ludwig Roselius was one of the leading coffee importers in Europe, as well as one of the leading figures in the hunt for jitter-free coffee. But every time he and his associates were able to remove the caffeine from the bean, they also removed the flavor and aroma. In 1903, a shipment of coffee headed to Roselius’ warehouse was caught in a storm and soaked through with sea water. Since the beans couldn’t be sold, he sent the entire batch to his researchers. Much to their surprise, the scientists discovered that the beans reacted differently to the chemicals because they’d been immersed in salt water. Experimenting with beans soaked in salt and water, they found that it was possible to extract 97 percent of the caffeine without losing the flavor. Dr. Roselius called the new coffee Sanka, a contraction of the French sans caffeine - ‘without caffeine’. *(Jeff Rovin, in I Wish I’d Thought of That!, p. 32)***

**Late one evening a professor sat at his desk working on the next day's lectures. He shuffled through the papers and mail placed there by his housekeeper. He began to throw them in the wastebasket when one magazine -- not even addressed to him, but delivered to his office by mistake -- caught his attention. It fell open to an article titled "The Needs of the Congo Mission." The professor began reading it idly, but then he was consumed by these words, "The need is great here. We have no one to work the northern province of Gabon in the central Congo. And it is my prayer as I write this article that God will lay His hand on one -- one on whom, already, the Master's eyes have been cast -- that he or she shall be called to this place to help us." The professor closed the magazine and wrote in his diary: "My search is over." He gave himself to go to the Congo. The professor's name was Albert Schweitzer. That little article, hidden in a periodical intended for someone else, was placed by accident in Schweitzer's mailbox. By chance his housekeeper put the magazine on the professor's desk. By chance he noticed the title, which seemed to leap out at him. Dr. Schweitzer became one of the great figures this century in a humanitarian work nearly unmatched in human history. *(S.C.U.C.A. Regional Reporter)***

[**“Scotchgard” is the brand name of a fabric protector. Apply it to carpeting or a chair cover and dirt won’t stick to the fabric. Minor miracle. Right? In the 1950s, researchers at 3-M were working with fluorochemicals to use on aircraft. When some spilled on a researcher’s tennis shoe, she found the chemical was almost impossible to remove. As time went on she noticed that as her tennis shoes got dirty from wear, the spot where the fluorochemical spilled remained clean. Scotchgard wasn’t the laboratory’s goal that day, but today it is still keeping carpeting, furniture, clothing, car upholstery, and many other things stain-free. *(Charlotte Foltz Jones, in Mistakes That Worked, p. 55)***](http://www.bbc.co.uk/)

**Achievement is often a happy offshoot, an accidental result, of the main effort. Exploiting these “happy accidents” is one of the most common sources of scientific discovery, as well as new ideas in many other fields. Horace Walpole called this process Serendipity after the heroes in the fairy tale, The Three Princes of Serendip, who “were always making discoveries by accident of things they were not in quest of.” (Bits & Pieces)**

**Archeologists have uncovered what they believe are the remains of the playhouse where William Shakespeare staged some of his first works. Built in 1576 and known simply as "The Theatre," the open-air structure was located in East London. Shakespeare not only performed there, he used it to premiere an early version of Hamlet. Coincidentally, the remains were discovered during construction of a new home for the famous Tower Theatre Company. "The discovery that we shall be building a 21st-century playhouse where Shakespeare played is a huge inspiration," said company chairman Jeff Kelly. (The Week magazine, August 22-29, 2008)  
  
In 1903 a Canadian blacksmith, Fred La Rose, of Cobalt, Ontario, threw his hammer at a marauding fox, missed – and struck silver. The hammer landed on what turned out to be the world's richest vein of silver. La Rose sold his claim for $30,000, and by 1913 the vein had yielded silver worth $300 million. (Reader's Digest Book of Facts, p. 360)**

**Officials called to investigate a sinkhole in Florida stumbled upon a 150-foot-long tunnel being dug in the direction of a Chase bank. Authorities found the 3-foot-wide shaft in Pembroke Pines after a sinkhole opened above it on a public roadway. FBI Special Agent Michael Leverock said that since the diggers were headed toward the bank, it was being classified as an attempted bank robbery. "I don't think they were doing that for any other reason," Leverock said. (The Week magazine, February 22, 2019)  
  
The big, fun-to-hold metal “Slinky” was the invention of engineer Richard James. In 1946, he was trying to create a powerful yet responsive spring that would function as a counter-balance for navigational instruments on ships--one that would keep them from giving inaccurate readings caused by wave motion. James' spring never made it to sea, but it sure was fun watching it walk down stairs. James had placed one of the prototypes on a high shelf and accidentally knocked it off. When he did so, it hit the floor and seemed to take on a life of its own: The spring hopped then fell to its side and wriggled about for a long moment. Realizing that he had a new and exciting toy, he formed the James Toy Company, found interested investors, and began manufacturing the spring as Slinky. The toy became one of the success stories of the 1940s and '50s and is still with us today--only now they are made of colorful plastic to keep kids from cutting themselves. But the Slinky is still able to coil down the stairs faster than most 50-year-olds! ((Jeff Rovin, in I Wish I'd Thought of That)  
In 1957, Belgian cartoonist Pierre “Peyo” Culliford was in a restaurant with a friend and asked him to pass the salt. Only Peyo couldn't think of the word salt, so he asked his friend to pass the schtroumpf, which is Flemish for “whatchamacallit”. The word made the friend and Peyo laugh, and the cartoonist couldn't help but wonder if it would make other people laugh too. When he got home, he began trying to visualize what a schtroumpf might look like. He came up with tubby, blue-skinned little trolls with big noses, big smiles, and wide eyes. Small Schtroumpf figures were sold in England beginning in 1978, and they came to the U.S. three years later. Known here as the Smurfs, the characters caught on and, in 1982, they became the stars of their own animated TV series. (Jeff Rovin, in I Wish I'd Thought of That , p. 53)  
The most popular song of troops of both sides during World War II almost never made it to the air. “Lili Marleen” is still sung by veterans around the world, but it wasn't supposed to be a hit: German cabaret singer Lale Andersen insisted on recording the song in 1939 over everyone's objections. She wanted it to be a backup to the other side of the record, “Three Red Roses,” which was being promoted as a hit. A drunken disk jockey on Radio Belgrade put on the wrong side of the record one night and started a wave of requests. (Ripley's Believe It or Not!: Book of Chance, p. 29)  
According to one tale, a 19th-century French chef was charged with preparing a banquet to celebrate the opening of a new railroad line. While preparing the repast at one of the new stations, the chef was notified that the train carrying a coach load of dignitaries to the banquet would be delayed. So he took his half-cooked french fries out of the oil and began preparing a fresh batch. Then he was notified that the train was pulling into the station, on time after all. Frantic, the chef plunged the half-cooked potatoes back into the fat, and the soggy fries puffed into crisp ovals -- pommessoufflees! (Denver P. Tarle, in A Treasury of Trivia, p. 23)**

**Splenda (sucralose) was discovered accidentally by researchers who were actually trying to develop an insecticide. One of the scientists, who had been asked to “test” the chemical, thought he had been asked to “taste” it. *(Don Voorhees, in The Perfectly Useless Book of Useless Information, p. 54)***

**Stainless steel was developed in 1913 by British metallurgist Harry Brearley, who was searching for a better lining for cannons. He discovered that chromium had the ability to create an oxide lining, and that steel made from iron and chromium resisted many corrosive chemicals. (Don Voorhees, in Thoughts for the Throne, p. 92)**

**Pat Summerall's career as America's most beloved broadcaster began with a happy accident. After the 1961 NFL season -- his last one playing as a placekicker for the New York Giants -- a radio producer called the hotel room that Summerall was sharing with quarterback Charlie Conerly to ask Conerly if he'd like to audition to be a broadcaster. When the producer heard Summerall's sonorous bass on the phone, he offered him the tryout instead. (The Week magazine, May 3, 2013)  
  
All three of the most commonly-used artificial sweeteners of the 20th century were discovered by accident. Aspartame, also known as Nutri-Sweet, was discovered in 1965 by a chemist searching for a new ulcer drug. Cyclamate was discovered in 1937 when a researcher, working on developing a new fever-reducing drug, flicked some tobacco off his lips and wondered why his fingers tasted so sweet. Saccharin was discovered in 1879 by two university scientists investigating the medicinal properties of coal tar derivatives. (Paul Stirling Hagerman, in It's a Weird World)\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*  
The tea bag was invented by mistake in 1904 when a tea merchant passed out samples of tea wrapped in little silk bags. People didn't understand that the merchant meant for them to open the bags. They found it convenient and tidy just to dunk the whole bag into the water and soon came back to the surprised “inventor” clamoring for more of his “tea bags.” (Paul Stirling Hagerman, in It's a Weird World, p. 47)**

[**TEA BAGS: In 1908, a New York tea importer mailed his customers free samples of tea, which he packaged in tiny silk bags. When customers wrote back asking for more of the bags, the importer realized they were using them to steep the tea. . . and began packaging all his tea that way. *(Uncle John's Unstoppable Bathroom Reader, p. 28)***](http://www.bbc.co.uk/)

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**Alexander Graham Bell invented the telephone while searching for a way to help the deaf by means of electronic transmission of sound. He unknowingly gave teenage girls a reason for being. *(Bernie Smith, in The Joy of Trivia, p. 50)***

**When Alexander Graham Bell was working on the telephone in 1876, he spilled battery acid on his pants and called out to his assistant, “Watson, please come here. I want you.” Watson, who was on another floor, heard the call through the instrument he was hooking up, and ran to Bell's room. Bell's were the first words anyone spoke on the telephone. In 1915, when the first transcontinental telephone line was opened, the first person who spoke into it was Bell on the East Coast. His words were, “Watson, please come here. I want you.” This time Watson couldn't come. He heard the plea, but he was in California, 3,000 miles away. (Isaac Asimov)\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*  
A cathedral in St. Petersburg (now Leningrad) installed a magnificent organ with tin pipes. Came a cold, cold winter and the pipes disintegrated--which is how chemists learned about white tin and gray tin. Ordinary metallic “white tin" is stable only at relatively warm temperatures. In winter cold, there is a tendency for it to turn into a crumbly nonmetallic “gray tin.” (Isaac Asimov's Book of Facts, p. 246)**

**Velcro: For thousands of years, man has walked through fields of weeds and arrived home with burrs stuck to his clothing. It’s amazing no one took advantage of the problem until 1948. George de Mestral, a Swiss engineer, returned from a walk one day in 1948 and found some cockleburs clinging to his cloth jacket. When de Mestral loosened them, he examined one under his microscope. The principle was simple. The cocklebur is a maze of thin strands with burrs (or hooks) on the ends that cling to fabrics or animal fur. By the accident of the cockleburs sticking to his jacket, George de Mestral recognized the potential for a practical new fastener. It took eight years to experiment, develop, and perfect the invention, which consists of two strips of nylon fabric. One strip contains thousands of small hooks. The other strip contains small loops. When the strips are pressed together, they form a strong bond. (Charlotte Foltz Jones, in Mistakes That Worked, p. 68)  
One of the most famous statues in the world -- the Venus de Milo -- was unearthed by accident. A Greek farmer was digging in his field one day and found an ancient statue of Venus, the goddess of love. The statue, with both arms missing, was purchased from the farmer by a French ambassador and given to French King Louis XVIII in 1820. Because it had been unearthed on the Greek island of Milos, Louis gave it the name of Venus of Milos, or Venus de Milo, and he presented it to the Louvre Museum in Paris, where it remains a major attraction. (Charles Reichblum, in Knowledge in a Nutshell, p. 159)**

**“Wheaties” were invented by accident. In 1921, a dietitian mixing a batch of bran gruel for his patients spilled some on a hot stove top. He brought the resulting flakes to the cereal company who immediately agreed that the concoction had all the nutritional value of bran gruel but a much better taste. (Paul Stirling Hagerman, in It's a Weird World, p. 48) *\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\**  
German scientist William Roentgen was experimenting with cathode rays in 1895--when he discovered X-rays! There happened to be some paper coated with barium platinocyanide nearby, which glowed when he turned his machine on. He put his hand between the apparatus and the screen-- and saw the outline of his bones! (Ripley's Believe It or Not!: Book of Chance)**

[**Credit for the invention of X rays goes to Wilhelm C. Roentgen, who died in 1923. Roentgen was a German physicist and professor at the University of Wurzburg. On November 8, 1895, he was working in his laboratory with a Crookes tube, a vacuum tube which produced streams of weak electrons called cathode rays. While experimenting in a darkened room with cathode rays and an electric current, he noticed that a fluorescent screen three or four feet away glowed. He was amazed since the Crookes tube was surrounded by black paper that prevented ordinary light from escaping. A popular story says he discovered the rays’ penetrating power when he realized that he unknowingly photographed a key which was inside a book. Roentgen continued his experiments with the new invisible rays, and named them X rays since they were unknown. *(Charlotte Foltz Jones, in Mistakes That* *Worked*, *p. 32)***](http://www.bbc.co.uk/)

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