30 Unusual Wills - mental_floss on YouTube (Ep.226)

List Show
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0:00 Hi, I'm John Green, welcome to my salon, this is Mental Floss on YouTube and one of my favorite pieces of writing of all time is John Keats's Will. It's one line of perfect iambic pentameter, "My chest of books divide amongst my friends."

0:13 That's the first of many unique wills that I'm going to share with you today in the hopes that when your time comes, you will be able to annoy, and/or amuse, those who live on.

0:23 (Intro music)

0:30 A man named Samuel Bratt died in 1960 after what must have been a long life of his wife complaining about his cigar smoking, because he left her three hundred thirty thousand pounds, IF she smoked 5 cigars every day for the rest of her life.

0:45 He seems like he was a nice guy, come to think of it, the theme of this video is going to be sometimes, people who die are jerks.

0:51 For instance, T. M. Zink left no money to his wife and 5 dollars to his daughter, and wanted 35 thousand dollars of his money to be put in a trust for 75 years.

1:01 And then he wanted his money to be used to create the Zink Woman-less Library. The library would have no books by women, no art or furniture made by women, and of course, no women allowed.

1:12 But then some wills are actually sweet, like comedian Jack Benny arranged to have a rose delivered to his wife, Mary Livingstone, every single day after he died. He died in 1974, she died 9 years later, by that time she had received over 3,000 roses.

1:28 And then there's the extraordinary kindness of an Englishman named Henry Budd who left 200,000 pounds for his sons in 1862 on one condition: neither could grow a mustache. If one did, the rest would go to the other son. Henry Budd, protecting his children from hipsterism.

1:43 A similarly weird request came from Samuel Houston, Senator of Texas in the mid-1800s who wrote in his will, 'I wish my sons early taught an utter contempt for novels and light reading.' Here at Mental Floss our books are tiny, so all of our reading is light.

1:57 It's not just sons who receive weird instructions. Benjamin Franklin left his daughter Sarah a portrait of King Louis XVI, which contained 408 diamonds, but he asked, quote, that she would 'not form any of those diamonds into ornaments either for herself or daughters, and thereby... countenance the expensive, vain, and useless fashion of wearing jewels in this country.' So she sold the painting to pay for a trip to Europe, where, presumably you can wear jewels.

2:20 Another quote straight from a will. Charles Dickens demanded that, 'those who attend my funeral wear no scarf, black bow, long hat band or other such revolting absurdity.' Those dudes had a lot of opinions about fashion.

2:31 And then there's the will of American Garvey B. White who died in 1908. It read, in part, 'Before anything else is done, fifty cents [is to] be paid to my son-in-law to enable him to buy for himself a good stout rope with which to hang himself.'

2:44 Moving on to strange post-cremation requests like Fredric J. Baur, who invented the Pringles can, had his ashes buried in a Pringles can. Mark Gruenwald, who wrote for Marvel comics, wanted his ashes mixed with ink to print comic books. They ended up in the first edition of the Squadron Supreme collection.

3:00 Star Trek creator Gene Roddenberry had some of his ashes launched into space, which you can also do thanks to a company called Celestis. Now if you think that's unreasonable, in 1977 socialite Sandra West was buried in her powder blue Ferrari. she requested that the seat be, quote, 'slanted comfortably'.

3:16 Harry Houdini has one of the most famous wills of all time, even though it's an agreement with his wife, Bess, rather than like an actual physical will. The two came up with a secret code and she promised to hold a séance each year on the anniversary of his death so he could contact her with the code. She tried, for ten years. Surprisingly enough, it didn't work out. The code, in case you want to attempt it was, 'Rosabelle, answer, tell, pray, answer, look, tell, answer, answer, tell.' Like I wouldn't have just been, like, 'Hey, it's me, Harry Houdini, my, my appendix still hurts in the afterlife.'

3:49 Two more wife stories. So Patrick Henry, who made the 'Give me liberty or give me death' speech, put in his will that his wife would lose her inheritance if she remarried and Shakespeare left his wife Anne Hathaway, his quote, his 'second best bed.' Some scholars think that was a nostalgic thing, like, couples slept in their second best bed and so it was their bed. Some people think that he was just, you know, dissing on his wife.

4:09 In the 1800's Solomon Sanborn from Medford, Massachusetts requested that his skin be made into two drum-heads. He asked for one to be inscribed with 'Universal Prayer' by Alexander Pope and the other with the Declaration of Independence. He also wanted them beat every June 17th at sunrise on Bunker Hill.

4:27 Similar, but far less disgusting, Napoleon Bonaparte asked for his head to be shaved when he died so locks of hair could be sent to his family and friends.

4:34 In 1996 a woman from Louisville, Kentucky named Audrey Knauer left actor Charles Bronson all of her money, a total of about 300,000 dollars. She never met him, she was just a fan. Which reminds me, if you enjoy Mental Floss video here on Youtube, don't forget to put us in your will! Anyway in 1999, Bronson settled out of court with Knauer's family, so we don't know who actually got the money but the fact that Charles Bronson even contested that will, aaah, mm, REALLY?!

5:00 Speaking of celebrities, Janis Joplin left her friends twenty five hundred dollars for a two hundred guest party at a pub in San Anselmo, California [quote], "so my friends can get blasted after I'm gone."
In fact she added that to her will just two days before she died.

5:13 Portuguese aristocrat Luis Carlos de Noronha Cabral de Camara, a man with not enough names, didn't have any family so he randomly picked seventy people out of a Lisbon phone book to inherit his fortune. They received their money in 2007. It's funny because people used to use phone books.

5:28 When philosopher Jeremy Bentham died in 1832 his will revealed that he wanted his body dissected in a lecture on anatomy, which, you know, isn't really that weird in the context of weird wills. But then he wanted his skeleton to be put together and put on display at the University College London. His body is still there, he even attended a board meeting once.

5:47 Oh that's interesting because the dinosaur skeleton attends all of our board meetings - shut up we have a board, it's Mark, and Meredith, and the dino skeleton and Hello Kitty in a jar.

5:55 Speaking of universities, Marie Curie left a gram of radium to the University of Paris in her will but she included that her daughter, Irene Curie, would have the rights to use the radium in her own

scientific research. I'm not a regular mom, I'm a cool mom, I'm gonna let you play with radium. Anyway Irene Curie went on to win a Nobel Prize so, you know, it worked out. Although I guess it didn't work out that well since they both died as a result of radiation poisoning.

6:18 Newspaper publisher William Randolph Hearst was annoyed with rumors about him having illegitimate children, so in his will he left one entire dollar to anyone who could prove that they were his kid. Now that's a man who's confident he doesn't have illegitimate children. He also wrote that anyone who claimed to be was [quote], "utterly false and wholly fraudulent". Of course this was pre DNA testing when you could make such broad statements without fear of, you know, being caught.

6:41 Moving on to a weird will story. So in 1976, a fifteen year old named Diane Roepke found a message in a bottle and it read, "I, Howard Robard Hughes, being of sound mind & body, do hereby declare this to be my last will and testament". That would be billionaire businessman Howard Hughes, you know, who Leo DiCaprio played in *The Aviator*. He'd previously refused to sign his will even after it had been written and in addition to giving 500 million dollars to an illegitimate son in Italy, the will gave 10 million dollars to the "finder of the bottle".

7:13 Now we'll never know if it's real, but just in case you want to drop your will in the ocean, bear in mind that it was not considered a legal document and no one has gotten money from it.

7:21 Now you know from our episode about dogs that German Countess Carlotta Liebenstein left about a 106 million dollars to her German shepherd, but she's not the only one who's left outrageous amounts of money to pets. Like businesswoman Leona Helmsley who died in 2007, leaving 12 million dollars to her Maltese, Trouble. Although a heroic judge later lowered that amount to 2 million because, you know, Trouble just wasn't worth that much trouble.

7:43 And then there's the 1880 case of an Ohio man named Jonathan Jackson who, in his will, set aside money for a "cat house". Not that kind of cat house, the kind that, you know, actually houses cats. He instructed that it should include [quote], "sleeping quarters, a conversation room, and an auditorium where they could listen to live accordion music".

8:00 Farmer Thomas Shewbridge left his dogs thousands of shares in a California electric company in 1958. So naturally they began to attend shareholder meetings.

8:08 And then there's singer Dusty Springfield, know for songs like "Son of a Preacher Man", who put an arranged marriage in her will. A marriage between her thirteen year old cat, Nicholas, and a friend's cat. I know you're concerned so, just for the record, these cats are just friends.

8:20 And finally I return to my salon to tell you about the Great Stork Derby. Rich Canadian lawyer, Charles Vance Millar, died in 1926. He was a jokester and left the majority of his estate to whichever mom in Toronto gave birth to the most children in the next ten years. And thus began the Great Stork Derby. In 1936, four women received 125,000 dollars apiece. They'd each had nine children in ten years.

8:47 Thanks for watching Mental Floss here on YouTube, which is made with the help of all of these nice people. Usually this is where we answer a mind blowing question, but now we have a whole new show for that here on Mondays, so please check it out. Thanks again for watching, and as we say in my hometown, Don't Forget to Be Awesome.

(Outro music).