

**Meeting:** 1003, Atlanta, Georgia, MAA CP X1, MAA General Contributed Paper Session, I

1003-X1-461            **Vince Schielack\*** (vincses@math.tamu.edu), Department of Mathematics, Texas A&M University, College Station, TX 77843-3368. *Believe It or Not: Some Mathematical Lies of Ripley.*

It would be difficult to overstate the immense popularity of Robert L. Ripley during the first half of the last century. His Believe It or Not! cartoons captivated America; many of his monumental influences are still felt today. In rare form for a pop-culture icon, he never missed an opportunity to expose his readers to mathematics, for which he had a genuine fondness (if not a talent). He published numerous cartoons dealing with topics such as arithmetic tricks, number theory, algebra, permutations and combinations, and probability. To the mathematically literate, some of these cartoons are interesting and thought-provoking, others are trite and obvious, and still others demonstrate that Ripley sometimes bent the truth and sometimes broke it. The last seems especially true in Ripley's attempts at counting, which almost invariably resulted in numbers that were impressively astronomical to the unquestioning eye. To be fair, Ripley did not have modern technology at his disposal; but even so, some of the mistakes he perpetrated are painful to behold, such as his vast overcounting of the number of ways of arranging five letter-blocks or the ways of changing a five-dollar bill. This paper examines these and other examples of Ripley's counting miscues. (Received September 15, 2004)