

The Astounding Story of a Woman With Four Legs and the Unusual Life That She Lived

YAS! | By Fred Foster | May 11, 2023

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Let's be honest; there are parts of our bodies that we struggle to love. Whether you wish for curly hair, smaller hips, or smoother skin, there's always room for improvement (and someone else who lives in our ideal body). But we are all wonderful in our own way and should strive to love our imperfections. This is much easier to achieve when we have two arms and two legs — but more difficult when you have *four* lower limbs!

In 1868, Josephine Myrtle Corbin was born with four legs. Imagine her parents' horror when they were handed a newly born babe with such an unthinkable deformity! It was the start of a challenging life for Myrtle, filled with hardship and triumphs. Are you intrigued? Let's dive right into the fascinating story of the four-legged girl and the interesting life she lived.

A Highly Unusual Birthing Experience

Pregnancy is a gift and a time of excitement. In the modern age, women and their partners visit the doctor with great anticipation, watching the ultrasound scan over their swollen bellies and identifying the various features of their growing baby. Yet in the 1800s, this technology didn't exist, and parents had to anxiously wait until the big day

before they got their first look at their bundle of joy.



In 1868, a couple got more than they bargained for when Josephine Myrtle Corbin was born in Lincoln County, Tennessee. While she was breathing just fine, doctors noticed that she had a rare fetal anomaly called dipygus. The child was perfectly healthy from her head to her belly button, but then her body split to have two pelvises, which further split into four lower limbs.

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Learning To Live With an Abnormal Body

Learning to walk as a toddler is challenging enough with an average body. Toddlers struggle to stand, stumble over their own feet, and hobble a few steps before crashing down. Now, imagine the difficult task of learning to walk with *four* legs. The extreme challenge was compounded by the limited mobility of Myrtle's legs, which were not up to scratch.





When Myrtle was born, her two inner legs were discovered lying flat on the belly. While they could move, their mobility was extremely limited. At first glance, her inner legs appeared as a parasitic twin, but closer inspection revealed that her pelvis split during fetal development. As such, each pair of legs had one atrophic leg, which was smaller and offered limited development.

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Doctors Did the Best With What They Had Available

Medicine and technology have come a long way since the 1800s, with significant advancements and insights helping doctors deal with myriad medical deviations and adaption. Yet, during Myrtle's life, these resources were significantly more limited. At the time, medical reports suggested that each pair of legs had distinct genital organs. These organs were both external and internal and supported by a pubic arch.



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Based on these medical reports, each set of legs acted independently of one another, with separate bowel movements and daily functions. The only time that they were in sync was during the menstrual period. By these accounts, Myrtle could be experiencing a loose stool on the one side, with constipation on the other. Doctors were dumbfounded — and the world was amazed!

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Barnum Circus Welcomes Myrtle With Open Arms

Needless to say, Myrtle attracted a lot of attention. People would stop and stare, astounded by her abnormality (and wondering if it was real). Luckily, the condition didn't impact Myrtle's life span, and she continued to grow and age as a normal child would — but she didn't have the same experiences. When Myrtle turned 13, her life took an interesting and wacky turn.



When she became a teenager, Myrtle joined Barnum Circus, a famous traveling circus that P.T. Barnum founded in the United States in the mid-19th century. The circus featured many attractions, including exotic animals, acrobats, clowns, and other performers. Among these performances was the collection of “freaks” born with unique physical attributes or medical conditions that set them apart from the general population. They were often displayed for the entertainment of circus-goers — and Myrtle was among them.

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The Unethical Craze of Freak Shows

While exploiting individuals with physical differences is now widely considered unethical, the legacy of the Barnum Circus "freaks" lives on in popular culture and the ongoing conversation about disability rights and representation. Popular performances included Tom Thumb, the tiny man standing just over two feet tall, and Chang and Eng Bunker, the conjoined twins introduced as "The Siamese Twins."



When attending the circus, audience members expected to see human anomalies. So, when Myrtle first stepped out on stage, they were confused. She was an attractive girl with no freakish features. She seemed perfectly normal, besides her large hips and clubbed right foot. Then, she lifted her gown, and the crowd was left speechless as they stared at her four legs.

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Leading a Successful Personal Life

You may think someone with four legs would struggle to find a life partner, and under normal circumstances, you'd be correct in your assumptions. But Myrtle was lucky enough to find love. As an attractive young woman, she would often get the attention of

enough to find love is an attractive young woman; she would often get the attention of young men — only to have them find out about her unique form at a later stage.



One man, in particular, stole Myrtle's heart. When she was 19 years old, Myrtle exchanged vows with James Clinton Bicknell, and the pair looked forward to a happy life together. Yet the following year, Myrtle started experiencing pain in her left side and went to see a professional named Dr. Lewis Whaley. After a thorough examination, the doctor shared his findings with Myrtle — leaving her shocked!

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Breaking the Happy New With the Young Couple

As it turns out, Myrtle was experiencing pain in her left abdomen because she was pregnant in her left uterus. The couple was astounded by the news, with their disbelief dominating their facial expressions. With all of the other symptoms that Myrtle experienced regularly, the last thing that she expected was pregnancy. But there was another reason that she had her doubts about the verdict...



Surprised by the news, Myrtle exclaimed, “I think you are mistaken; if it had been on my right side, I would come nearer believing it.” Confused by her comment, the doctor asked his patient a few more questions. Eventually, the lightbulb flickered on when he learned that her *right* genitals were predominately used for sexual intercourse, making it unlikely that she would fall pregnant in her left uterus.

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Could Myrtle Have Babies?

You may be wondering whether Myrtle’s body could fall pregnant, grow babies to a healthy weight, and birth them without complications — and you wouldn’t be the only one. After all, seemingly healthy, normal-bodied women struggle with pregnancy and fertility complications. Myrtle’s double pelvis and duplicate lower body certainly complicated her reproductive system. But it didn’t hinder her ability to have children!

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Sadly, Myrtle's struggled with severe illness during her first pregnancy, and Dr. Whaley was concerned about her health complications. After consulting with colleagues, he recommended an abortion eight weeks after Myrtle's examination (she was between three and four months pregnant at the time). Luckily, this was a once-off struggle, and Myrtle continued to have four perfectly healthy children once she retired from show business.

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An Irreplaceable One-of-a-Kind Show

It's common practice for the entertainment industry to repeat successful formulas and methods. Consider how all sitcoms follow the same story arc, pop songs have a similar beat, and how movies tend to follow the hero's journey. During Myrtle's era, her performance in the Barnum Circus was a raging success, and other circuses tried replicating the act. Of course, they struggled to find a woman with four legs.

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Miss Corbin was born near Charleston, in Tennessee, seventeen years ago. She has two sisters and three brothers, and being the eldest of the family. Her appearance in the world with twice the ordinary number of perfectly formed legs and arms amazed her parents, but created the greatest excitement in the neighborhood. At first she was somewhat delicate and fragile, but her parents secured the services of some of the most eminent physicians to guard her health, the result being that she grew to maturity and beauty.

Miss Corbin is a pretty, intelligent young lady, and the public, who generally observe her actions with interest and are utterly unprepared, she walks on 2, 4, 6, 8, and 4 Feet. Don't Miss Seeing Her. Come Early and Avoid the Crowds.

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P.T. Barnum presented Myrtle as a unique and genuine act, a feat that other circuses could not claim. Doctors were invited to examine Myrtle as part of the performance to prove that they were the real deal. She would also wiggle all four legs upon request. At the height of her popularity, P.T. Barnum paid Myrtle a significant wage of \$450 a week!

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Various Attempts at Replicating Myrtle's Act

At the time, people stood in long queues to catch a glimpse of Myrtle and her four legs, and other circus performers set their minds to replicating the performance to attract the same audience (and their money). Just because they didn't have the real deal, doesn't mean they wouldn't try to make it work (through one ruse or another).