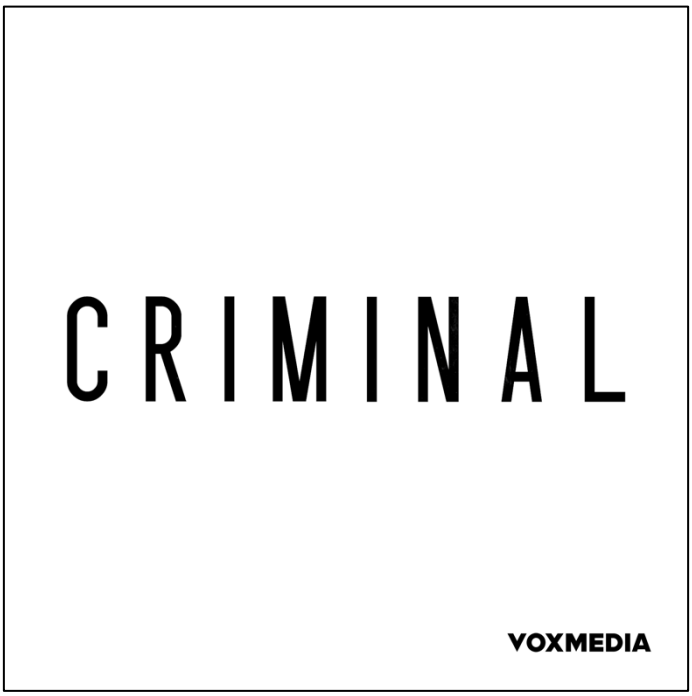


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Episode 323: The Clearwater Monster
Air Date: July 4, 2025

Phoebe Judge: Today we're sharing an episode of This is Love with you, one we thought you'd enjoy.

One morning in 1948, a phone call woke up the police chief in the small beach town of Clearwater, Florida. It was 3:00 a.m. The man on the phone said he'd seen something strange at Clearwater Beach. He told the police chief that he'd seen something in the water and that it was big. It was, quote, "billowing and spouting and about ten feet high." The caller asked to borrow a high-powered rifle from the police to go shoot the thing. The police chief said no. The man wouldn't give his name because he had, quote, "Been parked at the beach with a girl when the thing rose out of the water." The police chief told the man to go home and sleep it off. But that morning residents of Clearwater woke up to find that a strange set of footprints had appeared in the sand at Clearwater Beach overnight.

Jeff Klinkenberg: [music comes in] And they were big! They were like fourteen inches long, eleven inches wide, narrow heel, big toes. Kind of like Big Bird in *Sesame Street.*

Phoebe: Jeff Klinkenberg was a reporter in this part of Florida for almost four decades writing primarily for what was then known as the *St. Petersburg Times.*

Jeff K: It was like something that didn't exist, like some kind of dinosaur from the Jurassic age. And it was something that no one had seen before.

Phoebe: The tracks had a stride of nearly four feet, sunk an inch deep in the sand, and had three toes. There were dozens of them coming out of the water and heading inland. One man who had come up to the beach for his usual morning swim told a reporter, "I saw those tracks leading from the water, then returning to the water. And I thought that I was going crazy. I think that people should be told what it is. If it's anything dangerous, then we should be warned. I've never seen anything like it."

A crowd started forming on the beach to look at the prints. Some people thought they might've been left by a bear. One man told the reporter that there were large crocodiles in the salt marsh to the south and that they could have somehow gotten north to the beach. Some people said it was a huge sea turtle looking for a place to lay its eggs. But the police chief told the reporter, "I've never heard of a sea turtle with a stride of that length. If it was a turtle, you can take my word for it: it was the granddaddy of them all."

Plans were made to send photographs of the tracks to the Smithsonian to be studied. But the rumor was already circulating that Clearwater Beach had a sea monster. [music fades out]

Jeff K: It ends up in the newspapers. It ends up on the radio. There's no television, but everybody's talking about it in this sleepy little town. And, you know, it was after World War II and there wasn't a whole lot to do except fishing there. There were loggerhead turtles. Usually if you went to the beach that's– at night, I mean, you might, if you were lucky, you might see a turtle come up out of the gulf and lay its eggs. But who would have expected a monster?

Phoebe: [music comes in] One visitor to the area said he thought he might've seen something while he was out fishing on his boat. He told the reporter that he had been very startled when he saw a, quote, "Hideous looking something break water twice," near his motor. He described it as having a round face that was about a foot wide and a gray body about two feet in diameter. He said it wasn't a sea turtle, crocodile, or porpoise.

[to Jeff K]

So, people are thinking this must be a new species or something. Was that what they were thinking?

Jeff K: They're thinking, well, they don't know. I mean, it's just a mystery, you know? It's a mystery, but it's also lots of fun.

[as narrator]

Phoebe: The story went national. And the Clearwater police chief started receiving letters from all over the country, including from scientists. Everyone had a theory. The police chief said the theories ranged, quote, "From the sublime to the ridiculous." He said that if the letters were any indication, Clearwater would be getting a lot of curious visitors soon.

[to Jeff K]

I mean, I think if I heard about this, I would go out all night and wait for this thing. I think– I mean, I can imagine this must've been pretty exciting news.

Jeff K: You know, if I had been born then, and if I had been old enough, I would have been there with a flashlight, sitting quietly though up by the sand dunes and just waiting for something - a noise, a silhouette. Man, I mean, that's just how– I live for that stuff.

[as narrator]

Phoebe: And then, about three weeks after the first tracks appeared, the chief of the Sheriff's Identification Bureau got a call at 11:30 p.m. on a Friday night to come out to

Indian Rocks Bridge about six miles south of Clearwater. The caller told the chief to hurry. The monster was on the beach. [music fades out]

When the chief arrived, he found tracks coming out of the water and going back in. He described them as being about a foot wide and as having three long toes with claws. One woman said her dog had seen a sea monster earlier that night. She knew her dog had seen it because it started yelping furiously at about 10:30 p.m. [music comes in]

The sheriff said he'd been called that night by a person who gave his name as John Moore. Residents said the ghost of a man named Moore had been hovering around the beach since he had been killed there in an accident. Whatever the explanation, the tracks kept coming. A reporter for the *Tampa Bay Time*s wrote, "It appears that old ugly really gets around."

Richard Grigonis: And so, all this excitement and this attention helps to bring down this guy named Ivan Sanderson–

[to Richard]

Phoebe: [crosstalk] Who was he?

Richard: – from New York. Well, he was a self-taught zoologist. He was an author. He worked for WNBC radio and he came down. And apparently, I've seen pictures of him, he was sort of like a Douglas Fairbanks, you know. Slick black hair, pencil thin mustache, a wardrobe, you know. I don't know if he was wearing a pith helmet, but I'd like to think he was. I would say from what I've read, a ham. This was perfect for both the Clearwater Monster and Ivan Sanderson. [chuckles] There was a match made in heaven. And he gets into it. He was quite taken with the whole idea of– 'cause he was always looking for something spectacular, new thing.

[as narrator]

Phoebe: Richard Grigonis is working on a biography of Ivan Sanderson. He says that Sanderson was known for his charismatic personality. He would often walk into restaurants with a parrot on his shoulder. He was especially curious about mysterious or legendary creatures. He coined the term "cryptozoology" in the 1930s, meaning the search for creatures that haven't been found and aren't recognized by science, like the Loch Ness Monster or Bigfoot.

Richard: He had collected tens of thousands of specimens of animals for the British Museum back in the 1930s when he did his major expeditions to, you know, Africa, Cameroon, and the Caribbean and whatever. So, he was always looking for that great

discovery. That great thing. And he thought this might be it. That this was some strange paleolithic creature that was living and leaving these footprints on the beach.

[as narrator]

Phoebe: Ivan Sanderson convinced the *New York Herald Tribune* and NBC to send him from New York to Florida to examine the prints and to see if he could figure out what or who had left them.

Richard: He would make plaster casts and he would dig things up. He would dig up the actual plaster cast after making them. He had an aircraft and a pilot. He was flying around looking for additional tracks. And– nothing extremely sophisticated. I mean, it didn't have– there weren't any [laughs] electronic devices for like a sonar or something. He would look for the actual creature. It was all relatively simple stuff that a zoologist would have, you know? And would talk to people, you know, "What did you see?" "Where did you see it?"

Phoebe: He concluded that the creature was probably generally unhappy based on its wandering path. He said it was probably lost. He noted that, quote, "The general impression of the imprints is one of remarkable pudginess and that one of the toes seemed to incline slightly inward indicating," he said, "that the tracks could not possibly have been manmade."

Richard: And he simply through the process of elimination decided they were giant penguins.

Phoebe: No giant penguins were ever seen. And eventually Ivan Sanderson just went back to New York. The tracks reappeared every once in a while. And people in Clearwater would start talking all over again, excited that the monster had come back to visit.

Jeff Signorini: But anytime it was being discussed and anytime there was any kind of a story on it, he would just have the biggest grin on his face. Dad was the most unassuming guy. And he was the last person that anybody would have ever expected such a thing out of. My name is Jeff Signorini. I'm from Clearwater, Florida. Spent most all of my life there. Tony Signorini was my father and he is also known as "The Clearwater Monster." Even to us kids as we found out about it, [chuckles] it was like, *really? Dad?*

Phoebe: I'm Phoebe Judge. And This Is Love.

We'll be right back.

Phoebe: Jeff Signorini's father grew up in a little town in Pennsylvania, Monongahela, where he met Mary Jeff's mother in 1942. He joined the Air Force as a flight engineer during World War II. And when the war ended, the two of them went on a two-week vacation to Florida.

Jeff S: And then, we're intending on going back to Monongahela. And at the end of two weeks, Mom said, "Well," hesitantly, she said, "Well, I guess we better start getting things packed up, huh?" And Dad's answer was, "Why? I'm not going anywhere. Are you?" And [laughs] they never went back. They lived in Florida the rest of their lives.

Phoebe: Tony got a job working at an auto shop there called Auto Electric with a man named Al Williams.

Jeff S: Al was a great guy. He was, I guess, a curmudgeon, would kind of be about the best description of him as I saw him as a child in my years growing up around.

Richard: Al Williams had this reputation of being kind of crabby. But as far as Tony was concerned, Al wasn't crabby, he was very funny, and he liked practical jokes.

Jeff S: And Dad I'm sure was his willing accomplice on a lot of the things. Some of the ones that I'm aware of was they had at one point snuck a horse into a holding cell in the police department. And actually gotten it locked inside, left, and it was just waited for it to be discovered.

[to Jeff S]

Phoebe: Wait a second.

Jeff S: Uh-huh?

Phoebe: How'd they do that?

Jeff S: I don't know. [laughs]

Phoebe: Now, this must have been a different time because–

Jeff S: Oh yes. One of them they used to do, they used to hold Saturday night dances in Clearwater. There was an auditorium on the waterfront. So, all the cars would be parked out front and they would go down there and remove hoods from one vehicle and put it on to a matching vehicle of a different color. And so, people would come out of the dance and it would be dark, and they wouldn't notice anything. But they'd go home. And then the next morning, they would find that maybe their green car had a blue hood, or their black car had a red hood [laughs] or they would intermix with things. And it– I think it always kind of came back on them as, "Okay. They got us."

[as narrator]

Phoebe: Jeff says his father and Al would sometimes attach whistles to the ignition switches of their friend's cars.

Jeff S: You know, you'd turn the key on the car, and it would just [Jeff S makes whizzing sound] go with a whistling sound. And I think it was all the same. I think it was just a matter of pranking and having some fun and surprising people. It was just always something to be having fun and something to do. And nothing that caused any damage or problems, but, you know, just having fun.

Phoebe: Tony Signorini and Al Williams came up with the idea for a prank that would top them all.

Jeff S: About 1947, Al had seen a photo in *National Geographics* of a fossilized dinosaur footprint. And he was looking at it and he showed it to Dad and he said, "We could have some fun with this."

Phoebe: We'll be right back.

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[to Jeff S]

So, your father and Al– Al said, “What do you think about this idea?” And your father immediately said why not?

Jeff S: I think so.

Phoebe: How do you make monster feet? I mean, I'm just trying–- what is the blueprint for monster [Jeff S laughs] feet?

Jeff S: Well, I think they just worked from that image in the photo of an imprint of a dinosaur foot. And they drew it out from there. And it was really intricate as far as how they did it. I mean, they had the three toes, they had claws on the end which were just a part of the cast. So, it made it look like there were claws out on the end of the toes. It was made so that it actually kicked sand up at the back like it would when you take a regular footstep in sand. So, they first tried some– they made some concrete feet, made a cast, and poured the concrete feet out. And they found in testing it that it wasn't heavy enough and it wouldn't make a good imprint into the sand. So, then they took their photos and what they had drawn up and their description of it to a friend of theirs who had a metal shop in Clearwater and told them what they wanted to do. And he said, "Sure, I can do that." They weigh almost thirty pounds apiece. After having had the cast-iron part of it completed, having that cast, they then bolted on a pair of converse high

top sneakers. [music fades out] And then you would just put the shoes on, and the feet would be attached. So, even just moving these things around when you're just picking them up, not wearing them, they're quite heavy. [laughs] [music comes in]

In the beginning when they first left the first tracks on Clearwater Beach, they would go out at night. And at that time, it's not like you had condos, you know, towering condos looking down on everything. There would have been a few bungalow type buildings around, but you could go out to the beach at night and it wasn't lit up and nobody would see anything. And the way they did it was they went out in a rowboat and then would roll back up just up to the shore. And Dad would put the feet on and step overboard and walk up out of the water. And go up onto the sand and then start down the beach for a distance. At various times they dropped seaweed behind, like it had come off of the monster, and then he would walk down the beach for a distance. And he would just turn and walk back out into the water. So, it looked like the creature had come up onto the beach from the water, walked down the shore ways, and then walked back into the water and swam away. And Al would be waiting there for him to pick him up. And I always said that Dad had to be very trusting of Al Williams that he didn't put him out in a little bit deeper [chuckling] water because he was going right to the bottom and staying there with those shoes. [music fades out]

Phoebe: Did your father have a plan of how big of a stride he needed to make these realistic? Or did he just try to walk as a regular person? Was there some rhyme or reason in how he actually took his footsteps?

Jeff S: Well, the decision was to make them as long as possible to make the creature seem as big as possible. And as he described it, it was, “Get a foot put down and get that footprint set.” And then you just start swinging the other leg a little bit and then swing it out to as far as that one could reach and bringing the other leg with you. And with that, from what they measured, he was able to get between four and six foot strides, which was part of what made them think it was so large.

Phoebe: So, there was some skill in this. This wasn't just strapping these on and going for a walk.

Jeff S: Correct. Yes, definitely.

Phoebe: [as narrator]

Every now and again, Tony Signorini and Al Williams would pull out the feet. They nicknamed them "Dinny the Dinosaur." They did this for ten years.

Jeff S: I don't know what generated it, if they just said, "Okay, let's go do it again." Or "Hey, don't you think it would be a good time to bring it back out?" [music comes in] Or

some story ran in the paper and said nothing was ever known and it hasn't been seen for six months and they'd say, "Yeah, might be time for it to be seen again." [laughs]

[to Jeff S]

Phoebe: Did your mother know what was going on?

Jeff S: Oh, yeah. [laughs] It wasn't anything uncommon for Al Williams to give Dad a call and say, "Hey, let's go." And they would take off and go do something and come back. And then Dad would tell her about it after the fact.

Alyssa Shimko: The story that I heard was that he came home in the wee hours of the morning, you know, two or 3:00 a.m. just giggling to himself and covered in sand.

[as narrator]

Phoebe: Tony Signorini's granddaughter, Alyssa Shimko**.**

Alyssa: And she knew something was up, obviously, because that wasn't normal behavior. But I think she just found it entertaining to know what was going on with them.

[to Alyssa]

Phoebe: Did you know your grandfather well?

Alyssa: I did. I spent a lot of time with him growing up. Their– my grandparents' house was maybe a couple miles from where my family lived. And so, I grew up there. And I remember the monster feet being in this like wooden crate underneath one of the workbenches at the shop, just out in the garage. [laughs] So, it was kind of an open secret in that sense that they were just sitting there and that we knew about it. But it also feels like just a kind of cool family thing that makes me feel like I can do cool stuff or do silly stuff and the important thing is always just to try to make other people smile.

[as narrator]

Phoebe: The family kept the secret for forty years. And then Tony Signorini decided to let everyone in on the joke. Al Williams had passed away and it was Tony's secret to tell. He invited a reporter to the auto shop and pulled out the feet which were still in their box under the work bench. The reporter's headline read, "Clearwater Can Relax. Monster is Unmasked."

[to Jeff S]

Do you think he was proud of it?

Jeff S: Oh yeah, absolutely. [laughs]

Phoebe: I mean there must be a thrill after having hidden something for so long to finally be able to say, "It was me."

Jeff S: Absolutely.

[as narrator]

Phoebe: Tony Signorini died in 2012. Jeff wrote in his obituary that his father and mother were high school sweethearts. His father was devoted to his church. And was famous for being “The Clearwater Monster.”

Jeff S: I just couldn't imagine it not being included. It was a part of who he was. [music comes in] All the other things that were in there about his service in World War II, and what he did, and where he worked, and how involved he was in church and everything, those were all true. Those were all the primary parts of his life. They were all the things that were so much a part of him and the man that he was. But so was Dinny the Dinosaur. It was just, it was an alternate thing that could not *not* be included. It was something he took great joy in. I don't know about pride; maybe pride, but mainly joy in the entire episode and the fooling of everyone with it. And it just, it was part of him. And it had to be part of his story.

Phoebe: The last line of Tony Signorini's obituary reads, "Men like him are few indeed."

[to Jeff S]

Do you think of your father when you pull a good prank?

Jeff S: [laughs] Yes, absolutely. Anything that's done, that's the, you know– he became the guidance to things in that way. [sighs contently]

[as narrator]

Phoebe: Jeff Signorini has inherited the huge cast iron feet that his father once wore. And he says that now that the secret is out, at least two historical groups have asked him to donate them. But he's hesitant to let them go.

Jeff S: He wanted to keep them. It was a family kind of a thing. I have them. It's a part of him. It's a connection to Dad.

[to Jeff K]

Phoebe: You know, I like thinking about Tony and Al and thinking about them doing this just to entertain themselves, you know, just kind of play with reality. Whether it made a big deal or not, but just the joy of them thinking maybe they could get a rise out of someone.

Jeff K: Yes. And it must have brought them great joy to, you know, the next day to talk about what they'd done the night before and just to relish the stories in the newspaper or what they heard on the radio.

Phoebe: Journalist, Jeff Klinkenberg.

Jeff K: And then even better, people who then made the claim that they had actually seen the monster out on the beach - that must've been very satisfying. [music fades out]

[to Jeff K]

Phoebe: You know, what is it about a great prank that we love so much? I mean, there can be so many things going on in the world and tons of technology and people have attention spans that last ten seconds now. But still, there's something about a great prank that seems to wipe that all away and that everyone will stop to hear about a good prank.

Jeff K: You know, and the thing about that prank in particular, first of all, it wasn't cruel. It wasn't like a prank at the expense of somebody else. It was just one of these things that gave people some excitement and I would say joy. [music comes in] Just this idea, *I live in this world, nothing happens...*blah, blah, blah, blah. And suddenly there's something outlandish. It was just fun, you know? It was fun. Pranks are fun. And you're right. I mean, especially now. I mean, a lot of mystery has just disappeared. Most of us think we know everything. Of course, we don't, but we like to think we do. We have access to all this information. So, it's really kind of funny when something can knock us for a loop. It's the stuff that makes life worth living.

Jeff S: It is! It lets you– it gives you a sense of wonder. It makes you curious as to what it's all about. It keeps you looking for the answer. Seeing this one from the inside I feel that way. And when I see something else from the outside, I feel that way, when it's just something that you can't figure out. We have so much information, anymore and so many variations. So, when something is just, *huh?* it's neat in its own way, yeah.

[to Richard]

Phoebe: You know, I wonder, do you think we should all try to spend a little time thinking about a good prank that we could pull? I think it might do us good to spend a little more time figuring out how we can have some more fun.

Richard: I think it would be a good idea. And in fact, if you turn around right now, you'll see that I'm in the studio. [laughs]

Phoebe: [laughs] That's a good– now that's a good one. I'm going to try it. I'm going to work on that into my own repertoire right there. [Richard laughs]

[as narrator]

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END OF EPISODE.