

# MONEY MYTHS

**THE MYTH: A CON MAN IN NEW YORK ONCE PERSUADED AN UNWARY TOURIST TO BUY THE BROOKLYN BRIDGE.**

**THE REALITY:** In this case, truth really is stranger than fiction. The con man in question was George C Parker, who successfully sold the Brooklyn Bridge not just once, but time and time again.

When the bridge, linking Manhattan Island with the borough of Brooklyn, was opened in 1883, it quickly became a tourist attraction. Parker found so many gullible victims among the visitors that he was able to turn the scam into a full-time living.

In his book *Hoaxes and Scams*, Carl Sifakis explains: "Parker became the chief dealer of some of Gotham's best-loved landmarks, regularly selling the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the first Madison Square Garden, Grant's Tomb and the Statue of Liberty for whatever the sucker market would bear, from \$50 to \$50,000.

"But the Brooklyn Bridge was his special pride, and by his own later confession he sold it at an average of twice a week."

Parker's success depended on convincing his victims that they could become rich by buying the bridge and collecting a toll from the pedestrians and vehicles using it. As is so often the case, it was the victim's own greed that ensured the scam would work.

Sometimes he would simply approach a stranger on the bridge and offer him a job operating the toll booth which he, Parker, planned to erect.

Parker would explain that he planned to set the toll at the ludicrously low figure of 1 cent. If all went to plan, the potential victim would protest that the toll could be set much higher and would soon find himself offering to buy the bridge from

Parker and run the toll booths himself.

Where he had a richer potential buyer in mind, Parker would bombard his victim with skilfully faked documents, sometimes accepting a down-payment to reserve the bridge and collecting the balance in instalments before handing over the counterfeit deeds.

New York police became accustomed to removing indignant buyers from the bridge as they proudly set about erecting

their toll booths and barriers. In 1928 Parker, then 67, was arrested for a fourth and final time. He was sentenced to serve the remainder of his life in Sing Sing prison, where he died nine years later.

Another persistent myth is that an American developer bought the old London Bridge, which spanned the Thames at Monument, in the belief that he was buying



**BRIDGEWORK**

the more famous Tower Bridge.

The story is an attractive one, giving the British a chance to have a good old laugh at the Yanks' supposed gullibility and lack of historical appreciation.

In fact the developer in question, the McCulloch Oil Corporation, knew full well what it was buying. It bought London Bridge as an additional attraction at its leisure park in Lake Havasu, Arizona, about 150 miles north-west of Phoenix.

McCulloch Oil approached the City of London with its offer in 1968, completing the deal with the bridge's installation on its new site in 1971.

Tower Bridge education officer Doug Pond points out that Tower Bridge is, in any case, not long enough to span Lake Havasu. "If they'd meant to buy Tower Bridge," he says, "it's curious that the size of the lake fits the bridge they bought."

**Paul Slade**

● *Hoaxes and Scams* by Carl Sifakis is published by Michael O'Mara Books (£17.99).