

Edgar Rice Burroughs

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Edgar Rice Burroughs was born in Chicago on September 1st, 1875. His father, George Tyler Burroughs, was a Civil War veteran and now a successful businessman. Major Burroughs and his wife Mary had five other boys besides Edgar, but two of the children died in infancy, leaving Edgar the youngest of the family.

"Eddie" attended several schools during his formative years, often being shuttled from one to another due to the outbreak of various diseases. At this time it was standard to learn Greek and Latin in addition to English composition, and Burroughs would often lament his erratic schooling, which resulted in his (or so he said) learning little English while taking the same Greek and Latin courses over and over again. Despite his claims to the contrary, this early exposure to Classical literature and mythology would serve Burroughs well in his future writing career.

An influenza epidemic hit Chicago in 1891; hundreds died, and Edgar's worried parents wondered how they could protect their fifteen-year-old son. A few years earlier two of Edgar's brothers, George and Harry, had started a cattle ranch out west in Idaho. This seemed like a logical safe haven, so George and Mary packed Edgar onto an Idaho-bound train.

Ed took to the frontier life like a duck to water. He rode the range, herded cattle, busted a bucking broncho, and got to know a few thieves, murderers and bad men. Idaho at this time was still a pretty rough-and-tumble place; a range war was brewing between cattle ranchers and sheepmen, the law was fairly lax, and there were even shootouts at the local saloon. Young Ed loved the half year he spent in Idaho ~ then his parents found out about these sordid events of frontier life and sent Ed off to the Phillips Academy in Andover, Massachusetts.

But Ed wound up being a bit too rough-and-tumble himself for the faculty at Andover, so the Major shipped his son off to the Michigan Military Academy at Orchard Lake. Here Ed's frontier skills stood him in good stead; he became an excellent trick rider and crack shot, and even did fairly well in his studies. Not that he was an angel during his stay at MMI (he tried deserting during his first year, among other escapades) but Burroughs had apparently found an atmosphere conducive to his spirit.

Burroughs graduated from the Michigan Military Academy in 1895 but, not really knowing what to do with his life, accepted the Academy's offer of an instructorship. (He had tried for an appointment to the West Point Military Academy but failed the entrance exam.) Hankering to see some action, Ed quit his position with the Academy early the next year and signed up with the U.S. Army as a buck private in the hopes of eventually becoming an officer. Being a natural horseman Ed got his wish and was assigned to the Seventh United States Cavalry (General Custer's old regiment) stationed at Fort Grant, Arizona Territory.

Burroughs would define this as a time where he "chased Apaches, but never caught up with them." The best he succeeded in catching was dysentery. The work was far from glamorous, mainly digging ditches and repairing the rickety fort. Burroughs went out on patrols but the few Apache renegades still roaming free proved quite elusive. To compound matters, during a routine medical exam the post doctor determined that Burroughs had a heart murmur ~ and thus ineligible to be promoted to the officer class. With an army career now out of the question, Ed received his discharge in early 1897.

Ed made another go of it in Idaho, punching cows for his brothers and others, even running a dry goods store for a time. This rather freeform life couldn't last forever, so in 1899 it was back to Chicago and work at his father's American Battery Company. With a steady paycheck he decided to marry his childhood sweetheart, Emma Centennia Hulbert, in 1900. But a regular routine apparently wasn't what Ed wanted, so in 1904 he and Emma struck out again for Idaho.

The next several years would be a frustrating search by Ed for his place in life. His brothers George and Harry had given up cattle ranching for gold dredging, but this program fizzled shortly after Ed arrived. He got a job as a railway policeman in Salt Lake City but gave up after awhile and took Emma back to Chicago. Among his many

short-live jobs were door-to-door salesman, an accountant, the manager for the clerical department of Sears, Roebuck & Company, peddler for a quack alcoholism cure and, finally, a pencil sharpener wholesaler. By this point (1911) Burroughs had two children (Joan and Hulbert), was flat broke, and was left with only one way out of this cycle: he could dream.

So the story goes, Edgar Rice Burroughs was sitting in his rented office and waiting for his crack pencil sharpener salesmen to report in, supposedly their pockets bulging with orders. Besides waiting, one of Burroughs' duties was to verify the placement of advertisements for his sharpeners in various magazines. These were all-fiction "pulp" magazines, a prime source of escapist reading material for the rapidly expanding middle class. Verifying the pencil sharpener ads didn't exactly take much time. The pencil sharpener salesmen never showed up, so Burroughs spent his idle time reading those pulp magazines. And an idea was born.

After reading several thousand words of breathless pulp fiction Burroughs determined ~ or so he claimed ~ that "if people were paid for writing rot such as I read in some of those magazines that I could write stories just as rotten. As a matter of fact, although I had never written a story, I knew absolutely that I could write stories just as entertaining and probably a whole lot more so than any I chanced to read in those magazines." This may be nothing more than a legend Burroughs liked to tell to show how he came into his own as a writer. He had actually written stories before this time, mostly fairy tales and poems he created for his children, nieces and nephews. The most elaborate of these stories, Minidoka, 937th Earl of One Mile Series M, has been printed by Dark Horse Comics.

But in 1911, Burroughs decided to write a full-blown novel, and the tale he wrote was as far removed from the life of a pencil sharpener wholesaler as one could possibly imagine. This flight of fancy, entitled "Dejah Thoris, Martian Princess," was so exotic that Burroughs was worried that editors might think he was a little touched in the head. So he submitted the story under a pseudonym, Normal Bean, a joke indicating that his head was indeed screwed on the right way.

In submitting his manuscript to All-Story magazine he found luck the first time out: editor Thomas Metcalf liked the tale and offered Burroughs 400 dollars, an extravagant sum. The story, renamed "Under the Moons of Mars," was serialized from February to July of 1912. Burroughs wound up being renamed as well: his pseudonym was changed to Norman Bean. (When this story appeared in book form it received its final title, A Princess of Mars; both Normal and Norman were abandoned in favor of the author's real name.) By the time of the last installment of "Under the Moons of Mars" Burroughs had completed his *third* novel. The second one, "The Outlaw of Torn," was rejected by Metcalf, but the third novel was a little trifle called "Tarzan of the Apes." Burroughs was now a bona fide full-time writer.

"Tarzan of the Apes" appeared in the October 1912 issue of All-Story magazine. Burroughs received 700 dollars for the tale ~ and his career was off and running. Burroughs quickly discovered (probably to his secret delight, and certainly to the delight of countless readers) that he had many more tales to tell. There would be the inevitable Tarzan and Mars sequels but Burroughs' imagination needed even more worlds in which to roam, and so in the next few years he would try his hand at almost every type of story imaginable. Burroughs created the fabulous prehistoric inner world of Pellucidar (starting with At the Earth's Core), wrote other cave man fantasies (The Eternal Savage and The Land That Time Forgot), tales of courtly intrigue (The Mad King), a horror story (The Monster Men), novels of social realism (The Girl From Hollywood), Robinson Crusoe-type adventures (The Cave Girl), and one story that combined all of the above (The Mucker). Later still he would write westerns (The War Chief and others) and created yet another series, this one set on the planet Venus (starting with Pirates of Venus). But Tarzan would earn Burroughs his greatest success.

A second son and third child of the Burroughses, John Coleman, was born in 1913, and the following year saw a birth of a different sort: Tarzan of the Apes was published as a book. This novel is still in print today. The first Tarzan movie appeared in 1918, with Elmo Lincoln in the title role, which only helped to make Tarzan and Burroughs even more popular. Eventually Burroughs would put out a total of 26 Tarzan books, and left a fragment of another that was only discovered long after his death. Most of Burroughs' other stories would also appear in book form, and are available in libraries and bookstores worldwide.

By 1916 Burroughs felt that he had earned a vacation, and so he packed up Emma and the children (and their dog Tarzan) and set out on a cross-country camping trip. At this time there was no such thing as an interstate highway system ~ actually, there were very few roads at all. Heading out with a touring car, a truck and a trailer the party set off for Maine but eventually wound up in Southern California. Eventually the expedition made the

return trip to Chicago, but the California bug had bitten Burroughs. In 1919, thanks to the success of Tarzan, Burroughs was able to purchase a large ranch north of Los Angeles. He named it Tarzana.

As the Lord of Tarzana, Burroughs had seemingly found the good life. Tarzan had provided him with a comfortable living, his books were selling worldwide (even in the Soviet Union, where such tales were not well regarded by the Communist government), and the nearby community of Hollywood was busy cranking out Tarzan movies. (Tinsel Town even provided Burroughs with a son-in-law: Jim Pierce, who starred in "Tarzan and the Golden Lion," married Joan Burroughs in 1928.) The ultimate compliment was paid by the citizens of the community that had sprung up around the Tarzana ranch: they voted to adopt the name "Tarzana" when their town was incorporated in 1928.

Burroughs liked to think of himself as a hard-headed businessman and concluded that he could make an even better living if he founded his own company. And so in 1923 Burroughs became an employee of Edgar Rice Burroughs, Inc. This was an unusual step for an author to take, although it is now quite common. Burroughs would even start publishing his own books, beginning in 1931 with Tarzan the Invincible. The last book to appear under the Edgar Rice Burroughs, Inc. imprint was I Am a Barbarian in 1967.

The year 1932 was ushered in with a scream, as MGM released the first sound Tarzan movie, "Tarzan the Ape Man" with the now legendary Johnny Weissmuller. Hollywood did not show a great deal of fidelity to Burroughs' original story this time around, but the movie's success meant that the Tarzan books were selling better than ever. But financial success was overshadowed by the problems in Burroughs' personal life, as he and Emma divorced in 1934. He married Florence Dearholt the following year and in 1940, with war raging in Europe, the couple decided to head further west to Hawaii.

Even though he was entering the last decade of his life Burroughs continued to be physically active, and still wrote stories for the pulp magazines and his own company. Hulbert Burroughs came out to Hawaii to visit his father in late 1941, and on the morning of December 7th, as the two played tennis, the Japanese bombed nearby Pearl Harbor. Thus began the last adventure of Edgar Rice Burroughs' life.

Edgar Rice Burroughs was too old to see active service in World War II ~ he was 66 at the time of the Pearl Harbor attack ~ but as an established writer he served the war effort by becoming a war correspondent. He was the oldest war correspondent to serve in the Pacific theater, flying from island to island (even bumping into his son Hulbert, who was serving as a war photographer), reporting on troop activities, even going out on bombing runs with the 7th Air Force. Burroughs came through this period of life unscathed, although he would send Tarzan out on a more danger-filled mission in Tarzan and the "Foreign Legion" (1944).

With the war's end Burroughs returned to California and settled into a small home near Tarzana. He and Florence had divorced in 1942, so Ed devoted his final years to his children. He died on March 19, 1950. His writings and characters had entertained three generations of readers and moviegoers. In the 1960s, thanks to a paperback boom, a new generation discovered the writings of Edgar Rice Burroughs. And now, at the beginning of a new millennium, another generation has rediscovered Burroughs through Disney's animated classic "Tarzan."

The works of Edgar Rice Burroughs will endure as classic tales of adventure, romance and wonder. Tarzan remains one of the best-known literary characters in the entire world. But there is more to Burroughs than just Tarzan. Take a look around the rest of our website ~ we're sure you'll discover some surprises here or there! If you wish to learn more about Burroughs, the best source remains Irwin Porges' 1975 biography Edgar Rice Burroughs: The Man Who Created Tarzan. While the book is out of print you can still find it in libraries and through used book dealers.