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Editorial

Overcoming vascular overgrowth in the 19th Century: The story of Grace McDaniels☆☆☆

In her youth, Grace was very sensitive about her appearance. She was constantly ridiculed for looking different. She tried to hide her birthmark with makeup ([The Human Marvels, 2018](#)). As the port-wine stain thickened, she resorted to wearing a veil ([The Human Marvels, 2018](#)). Only years later would Grace claim her condition and put herself out in the public eye.

In 1933, Grace exhibited her face at the Chicago World's Fair, after which one reporter offensively wrote: "This is no fake because the lady did look exactly like a mule and she could flap her lower lip in a way to make a boy from Mexico break down and cry of homesickness" ([Findagrave.com, 2005](#)). Two years later, she would go on to win The Ugliest Woman contest, propelling her career in

show business. She joined Harry Lewiston's Traveling Circus, earning an impressive income of \$175 per week ([Ripley's Believe it or Not!, 2018](#)).

The circus troupe traveled the United States and Canada. Grace shared the stage with other notable entertainers, such as Tony Marino, The Sword Swallower. In her early circus days, Grace took issue with her first billing as advertisements declared her an "Ugly Freak." ([Ripley's Believe it or Not!, 2018](#)). Conflicted with parading her deformity versus upholding her own truth, she grappled with how she was portrayed. At times, she would not want any photographs taken because she felt advertising herself would show a lack of self-respect ([Ripley's Believe it or Not!, 2018](#)). She even covered her ears to block out announcers introducing her as the "Ugliest Woman" ([The Human Marvels, 2018](#)). As years of touring with the circus, she adjusted to the constant ridicule and accepted her appearance. She even asked promoters to refer to her as the "Mule-Faced Woman" ([The Human Marvels, 2018](#)).

It was not uncommon for patrons to faint at the sight of Grace's face. All the same, she was rumored to have received a number of marriage proposals ([Austin, 2016](#); [The Human Marvels, 2018](#)). There are conflicting reports on whether she ever married. However, she did give birth to a healthy baby boy, Elmer, whom she called "her greatest treasure" ([Revolv, 2018](#)). Grace was described as a dedicated mother who would do anything for her child's happiness ([Revolv, 2018](#)).

As Elmer grew up, he was known for being quite handsome and went on to become his mother's traveling business manager ([Revolv, 2018](#); [Ripley's Believe it or Not!, 2018](#); [The Human Marvels, 2018](#)). Unfortunately, he was a physically abusive alcoholic and morphine addict ([The Human Marvels, 2018](#)). He regularly stole from Grace and the circus to pay off his gambling debts, which led the circus to part ways with Grace ([The Human Marvels, 2018](#)). Eventually, Elmer succumbed to his illness and passed away from liver cirrhosis ([The Human Marvels, 2018](#)).

On March 14, 1958, Grace McDaniels passed away from natural causes in Gibsonton, Florida, at the age of 69 years ([Findagrave.com, 2005](#); [The Human Marvels, 2018](#)). No official medical records documenting her diagnosis have been recovered. Although a diagnosis of Sturge-Weber syndrome is favored, Grace could also have had PHACE syndrome (alternate rapidly progressive vascular malformation) or a variant of overgrowth syndrome. Today, Grace is portrayed in Ripley's Believe It or Not museum as the World's Ugliest Woman. However, this is not a fitting title for a woman who endured a lifetime with a disfiguring birthmark that

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she could not hide. Grace was known by her colleagues and friends for having a kind demeanor and warm heart. She should be remembered for the life she lived and the positive persona she embodied. Grace McDaniels: A resilient woman, mother, and circus performer.

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