

# It Seems As If Anything I Like Is Either Illegal, Immoral, or Fattening

 [quoteresearch](#)

 [April 9, 2013](#)

**Alexander Woollcott? W. C. Fields? Frank Rand of St. Louis?  
Anonymous?**

**Dear Quote Investigator:** The candor of my favorite saying makes it wonderfully humorous. Here are three versions I have seen:

- All the things I really like to do are either illegal, immoral, or fattening.
- Anything in life that's any fun is either immoral, illegal or fattening
- Everything good in life is either illegal, immoral, or fattening.

Can you track this down?

**Quote Investigator:** In the past, this saying has been attributed to the noted wit Alexander Woollcott who was an influential columnist in The New Yorker magazine and a member of the celebrated Algonquin Round Table. Now **QI** has found a significant piece of new evidence indicating that Alexander Woollcott was not the coiner of this popular phrase, but he was an important locus for its popularization.

On September 16, 1933 the Albany Evening News of Albany, New York published a column called "As I Hear It" by "The Listener" which reported on the content of recently broadcast radio programs. The columnist stated that Alexander Woollcott could be heard on the WOKO radio station on Wednesday and Friday nights at 10:30 PM.

The program began with a cry of "Hear ye! Hear ye!" and the ringing of a bell according to "The Listener". Indeed, Woollcott's CBS radio show "The Town Crier" used precisely that introduction. Fortunately for 21st century researchers, the columnist decided to record some of the remarks made by Woollcott over the air:[\[1\]](#)

As for instance quoting Woollcott's story about the Mr. Frank Rand of St. Louis who in the interest of his girth was lunching on bouillon cubes and undressed lettuce.

“Do you eat that stuff because you like it?” someone asked Rand. “No, I hate it,” he replied. “But it seems as if anything I like is either illegal or immoral or fattening.”

Hence, the first known instance of the expression occurred in an anecdote told by Woollcott to his radio audience, and the words were credited to a person named Frank Rand. Top-notch researcher Suzanne Watkins identified “The Listener” as Mary A. O'Neill based on an engagement notice in the Albany Evening News in February 1934 that stated she was the writer of the “As I Hear It” column.<sup>[2]</sup>

The second earliest citation appeared in the mass-circulation Reader's Digest in December 1933 where the saying was directly credited to Woollcott:<sup>[3]</sup>

All the things I really like to do are either immoral, illegal or fattening.  
— Alexander Woollcott

The saying was printed on a page titled “Patter” which listed a collection of fourteen unrelated miscellaneous quotations. No precise source was given for the Woollcott attribution. **QI** hypothesizes that the phrase was derived from the radio broadcast, but a process of simplification and elision resulted in the omission of Frank Rand's name.

Here are additional comments and selected citations in chronological order.

For many years the instance in the Reader's Digest was the first recorded evidence. Important references such as The Dictionary of Modern Proverbs,<sup>[4]</sup> Barry Popik's [website \(now updated\)](#),<sup>[5]</sup> The Quote Verifier,<sup>[6]</sup> and The Yale Book of Quotations<sup>[7]</sup> listed this cite. Hence, unsurprisingly, Woollcott has been given credit for the jest. Note that the order of the three key terms in the saying was sometimes permuted. Typically, “fattening” was listed third, but the ordering of “illegal” and “immoral” varied.

In February 1934 the motion picture “Six of a Kind” was released, and one of the stars was the prominent funnyman W. C. Fields who played Sheriff John Hoxley, a.k.a. ‘Honest John’. Youtube has a [short video](#) showing the

dialog between Fields and a character named Mrs. K. Rumford played by Alison Skipworth during which Fields deployed a version of the saying:<sup>[8]</sup>

Rumford: Now listen to me, Honest John, why do you drink so much?  
Hoxley: Because I like it!  
Rumford: Everything you like to do is wrong!  
Hoxley: According to you, everything I like to do is either illegal, immoral, or fattening.

In April 1934 an article in a Richmond, Virginia newspaper discussing the intimacies of youth, i.e., hand squeezing, hot dancing, and petting, also mentioned the saying:<sup>[9]</sup>

Alexander Woollcott says everything he wants to do is either immoral, illegal or fattening.

In July 1934 a one panel newspaper cartoon in the series Girligags by Gettier depicted an elegant woman sitting on a staircase with a caption that contained the expression without attribution:<sup>[10]</sup>

“Life’s like that,” says modern Mitzi. “Everything that seems worth while is either illegal, immoral or fattening.”

In December 1934 a version of the joke was printed in a newspaper in Fayetteville, Arkansas:<sup>[11]</sup>

Mr. Woollcott is remembered by us who are rather rotund for a joke he originated some months ago when he said: “Everything I want to do is either illegal, immoral or fattening.”

In 1938 the powerful syndicated columnist Walter Winchell included an instance of the jest in an article and commented on its changing attribution:<sup>[12]</sup>

The Trib credited the British Consul-General with: “Everything the modern girl wants to do is either illegal, immoral or fattening” . . . Which is the way we ran it years ago, when it was credited to Alexander Woollcott.

In conclusion, **QI** believes that this expression should be credited to Frank Rand of St. Louis based on current evidence. Alexander Woollcott was

probably the prime catalyst of its popularity, but he did not claim credit for crafting the saying when he used it during his radio program.

(Special thanks to Suzanne Watkins for firmly attaching a name to the pseudonym “The Listener”.)

Update on April 11, 2013: The citation dated February 19, 1934 with information about “The Listener” was added.

# References

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- 2** 1934 February 19, Albany Evening News, "Mary II Engaged to Warren H. Flood; Alliance Tea Wedr y Announcement of Coming Wedding by Parents ide-to-Be", Quote Page 19, Column 2, Albany, Ne k. (Old Fulton) (Text identifying The Listener as C l: "She is employed in the State Department of A nd Control and is also the writer of the "As I Hear lumn of The Knickerbocker Press.")
- 3** 1933 December, Reader's Digest, Volume 24, Pa Quote Page 109, The Reader's Digest Associatio rified on microfilm)
- 4** 2012, The Dictionary of Modern Proverbs, Comp y Charles Clay Doyle, Wolfgang Mieder, and Fred hapiro, Quote Page 106 and 107, Yale University l s, New Haven. (Verified on paper)
- 5** Website of Barry Popik, Entry title: "All the things y like to do are either immoral, illegal, or fattening e: February 18, 2009. (Accessed April 9, 2013) [ii](#)
- 6** 2006, The Quote Verifier by Ralph Keyes, Page 9 d 298, St Martin's Griffin, New York. (Verified on p r)
- 7** 2006, The Yale Book of Quotations by Fred R. Sh o, Section Alexander Woollcott, Page 838, Yale U sity Press, New Haven. (Verified on paper)

- 8** YouTube video, Video excerpt from Six of a Kind (4), (Paramount Productions, Inc.), YouTube Title: "Fields on Drink & Immorality", (Quote spoken during), Uploaded by HyperBoricTheosophy on Oct 6, 2008. (Accessed youtube.com on April 9, 2013) [link](#)
- 9** 1934 April 5, Richmond Times Dispatch, "Maids, Slaves and Widows" by Emma Speed Sampson, Quote Page 6, Column 7, Richmond, Virginia. (GenealogyBank)
- 10** 1934 July 27, The Daily Courier, Girligags by Gettysburg (Caption of one panel cartoon), Quote Page 9, Column 2, Connellsville, Pennsylvania. (NewspaperArchive)
- 11** 1934 December 26, Fayetteville Daily Democrat, "See It: A Column of Comment" by Roberta Fulbright, Quote Page 2, Column 2, Fayetteville, Arkansas. (NewspaperArchive)
- 12** 1938 April 7, The Brownsville Herald, On Broadway by Walter Winchell, Quote Page 4, Column 7, Brownsville, Texas. (GenealogyBank)