



Buffalo Tales



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Buffalo County Historical Society

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THE GIRL WHO INTERVIEWED NELLIE BLY

by Margaret E. Nielsen

In January of 1890, the attention of the nation was riveted on a train engine with two cars which was rocketing toward New York. Miss Nellie Bly was about to best the record of Jules Verne's hero, Phileas Fogg, by circling the world in seventy-two days.

At every stop, reporters shouldered their way through the crowd to fire questions at Miss Bly. But a young woman from Kearney scooped the nation's press by getting the only exclusive interview with the traveler.



**Maud
Marston
Burrows
1913**

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Editor. Gene E. Hamaker

Membership in the Buffalo County Historical Society is open to anyone who has an interest in Buffalo County and its people, or in the history of the area.

Annual dues, payable January 1:

Family membership. \$ 5.00
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Box 523, Kearney, Nebraska 68847

Buffalo County Depot Museum Phone. 234-3041

WITH THE SOCIETY

Historic Shelton will be the program when the BCHS meets in Shelton on Sunday, February 25, at 2:00 p.m. in the meeting room of the First State Bank. Douglas Duncan, editor of the Shelton Clipper, is in charge of the program. A slide presentation of early Shelton pictures will also be shown. Other upcoming events:

- March 25 Tour of Phelps County Historical Museum.
- April 22 Opening of BCHS Museum, with presentation of ca-boose and flat car by an official of the Union Pacific Railroad.
- May 6 Annual meeting, 1:00 p.m., Buffet Luncheon at the Nebraskan on the KSC campus.

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Volunteers are needed at the museum. If you can spare two hours any morning or afternoon to help out, please call President Alice Howell at 237-7858.

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Support the Nebraska Heritage Center, proposed new home of the State Historical Society, to be built on a block of ground adjacent to the Capitol in Lincoln. Plans are nearing completion; the project needs the support of all Nebraskans if construction funds are to be appropriated by the Legislature. Write the Governor and your representative in the Legislature in support of this needed Center. The State Historical Society has outgrown its present inadequate facilities and there is no room for expansion at its present location.

Maud Marston represented the **Kearney Enterprise** whose editors were as enterprising as the name of their paper. They had secured permission from the **New York World** for Miss Marston to board the train in western Nebraska and ride with Nellie for several hours.

However, snow along the Union Pacific made it necessary to re-route the train on the Santa-Fe Railroad. Maud, learning of the change, rode to Kansas City with her father, Ira Marston, to intercept the train there. The **Chicago Tribune** had dispatched its woman reporter to Omaha before the change was discovered, leaving Maud a clear field. While the train sped along "with lightning velocity" she was received "with utmost cordiality" by Miss Bly.

Maud described her as "a charming girl, much younger than I had been led to suppose, with a bright and vivacious manner....She has grey eyes that flash forth determination and pluck, an expressive mouth and a nose indicative of character."

Miss Bly told of her distinguished career in journalism and described her trip. A highlight was an interview with Jules Verne. "He was surprised and delighted to learn that she was taking the trip....but said it could not be done in seventy-five days."

Nellie Bly was the pen name Miss Elizabeth Cochrane took when she had herself committed to New York's insane asylum on Blackwell's Island, where she investigated the terrible conditions existing there. She urged Maud, who wrote under the name of "Miss Muffett", to use her own name.

Nellie said of her interviewer, "During the early night I had the companionship of Miss Maud Marston of the **Kearney (Neb.) Enterprise**, who came 600 miles to interview me....Miss Marston has been writing under the nom de plume of Miss Muffett,



"Auld Ingle"

Mrs. Burrows' home at 119 West 27th Street.

her pet name at home. She has grit and good sense and will succeed. She rode with me to Galesburg, Ill." Maud returned home to the plaudits of newspapers throughout the midwest. The experience was the highlight of her life.

When her father moved to Kearney from Cambridge, Illinois in 1887, Maud was dismayed by "this little huddle of houses on the wide, flat prairie." Although "it was totally unorganized socially," Kearney did not remain that way long. When eastern investors flocked to the booming town, the social life flourished, with Maud in the middle of it. In 1889, as society editor of the *Enterprise*, she began to write of the sumptuous parties, describing in flowery detail the women's dresses and the furnishings of the ornate new mansions.

June 20, 1889. "About nine o'clock Friday evening the carriages began rolling toward the Midway laden with their merry freight. The night was perfect, cool and clear, while the sky glittered with 'the innumerable host of heaven' -an auspicious omen to the young couples, whose health, happiness and prosperity were to be celebrated in the coming festivities. Arrived at the hotel, the guests were ushered from the dressing rooms into the east parlor, where Mr. and Mrs. E. Frank Brown and Mr. and Mrs. E. E. Dodson, in whose honor the reception was given were receiving the congratulations of their friends.

"Mrs. Brown was dressed in a bridal ~~toilet~~ of white surah, square corsage and lace trimmings with white and pink roses, Mrs. Dodson in white wool with Persian trimmings; Mrs. Porterfield in an Empire suit of pale blue brillantine; Miss Belle Earley in pin nun's veiling with cream lace; Miss Downing in pale blue china silk with crepe lisse, Marshall Neil roses."

December 20, 1889. "There are a few handsome residences on Twenty-seventh street, but among them all the home of General A. H. Connor, is unequalled....The hardwood floor of the hall is covered with rugs, and a staircase with a unique balustrade ascends at one side....From an alcove under the stairs opens a small conservatory....The west parlor, the handsomest room in the city....a carved mantel of cherry, with tiling to match the colors in the rug, and with the shelves and niches filled with bric-a-brac....one or two sofas and tete-tetes, a handsome etagere in the corner, and Miss Connor's fine Steinway piano."

January 24, 1890. "A large tea party was given by Mr. and Mrs. W. C. Tillson at Tower Hill₂ on Monday evening. In spite of the strong wind almost all to whom invitations had been extended responded. Tea was served in the dining room and parlor, and the ride up the hill had given all appropriate appetites. There is something in the atmosphere of that house that bids all guests 'eat, drink and be merry'....At the conclusion of the supper the rooms were cleared, and dancing was made a means of fun....until the howling storm approaching forced all to a hasty good night.

"A number of guests were lost on the way home, one carriage was overturned, another stopped on the very verge of the canal....But all finally reached home safely and the evening will be twice remembered for the pleasant part indoors, and the experience with the elements outdoors."

1. The Jake Hellman residence at 505 West 27th.
2. The Country Club.

When Mr. and Mrs. G. L. Keck, owners of the Midway Hotel, gave a series of parties, "the menu was faultlessly served and consisted of the following tempting courses:"

	Oysters on the Half Shell		
	Soup		
Roast Turkey	Mashed Potatoes	Asparagus on Toast	
Fresh Cucumbers	Fresh Tomatoes	Cranberry Jelly	
Roast Duck	Olives	String Beans	
Quail Patties		French Peas	
	Roman Punch		
Mince Pie		Strawberry Shortcake	
Icecream	Preserved Ginger	Oranges	Grapes
Angel Food Cake	Nuts	Raisins	
Coffee		Champagne	

In the words of one friend, "The days of the beautiful parties, when she rode side-saddle on the prairie, were probably the happiest of her life."

During the boom period an extravagant production of **H.M.S. Pinafore** was staged at the pavilion on Kearney Lake, with Maud singing in the role of Buttercup. As an exacting music supervisor at the Kearney schools, she was active in the musical affairs of the town. In addition to singing in the Episcopal choir, she was active in the Republican Party, The League of Women Voters, the Altrusa Club, and was in demand as a public speaker.

When Kearney's shaky financial structure began to collapse, the **Enterprise** was one of the first of the businesses to go. With no more parties to report, Miss Marston turned to reading law in her father's office, and was admitted to the bar in 1893. Going to Chicago to gain experience in a large firm, she also reported on the Chicago World's Fair for the **Kearney Journal** in a series called "Our Chicago Letter". After studying in Europe, she returned to Kearney to go into partnership with her father.

Under less auspicious circumstances than Nellie Bly, another writer became painfully conscious of the family's passion for facts. In 1912, **Country Life Magazine** sent Gene Stratton Porter to interview H. D. Watson, who was credited with introducing alfalfa to the Platte Valley.

Mr. Watson was "a spellbinder in every sense of the word...with a spanking team of black horses and a driver, he whirled Mrs. Porter from place to place; she accepted what he pointed out to her and saw all these places as part of the (1733) ranch." The home of George W. Frank, Sr. became the "ranch residence", and Watson's property miraculously expanded to include the Spenser and Juan Boyle homes, beet fields belonging to the State Industrial School, and Mrs. Black's celery farm on an island in the Platte.

Maud's brother, Glenn, who was living in New York; saw a copy of the magazine. Going to the publisher's office, he pointed out the discrepancies in the article.

Maud wrote, "Mrs. Porter was exceedingly disturbed, declared that her literary reputation was at stake." Through a Kearney lawyer she collected damages from Wat-

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Box 523
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son, but it was decided not to seek a refutation of the article by the magazine as it would cause "too great and too public a reflection upon Mrs. Porter. And Nebraska was far away."

In 1912, Maud married an old friend from Cambridge, Illinois, S. Henry Burrows.

She was a strong-minded person; when she came into a room "she just scooped everyone up and her voice boomed out." When someone else was talking she often would say, "May I interpolate", and without apology, would correct the speaker or give her own opinions.

Mrs. Burrows contributed articles to the Kearney papers on a variety of subjects. She gave a scrapbook containing her writings to the Kearney Public Library. They provide a vivid picture of Kearney's boom period, as well as other highlights in the history of the town.

SOURCES

Burrows Scrapbook in the Kearney Public Library; "Notes on the Kearney Boom," by Mrs. Burrows, loaned by Marian Johnson; "Maud Marston Burrows" by Ruth Gitchel Anderson, pp. 322-330, *Where the Buffalo Roamed*; "The Making of a Great Ranch," by Gene Stratton Porter in *Country Life Magazine*, April 1912.

Pictures courtesy of Ruth Gitchel Anderson.