

An undated portrait shows Bertha Muzzy Bower later in life, most likely after 1908, when she'd left Montana for good. She continued to write prolifically until her death in 1940.

PHOTO COURTESY DIANE BOWER CLEGG

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out of town to a cabin in a hayfield, Bert called the place “Bleak Cabin” and brought her extensive collection of books to keep her company. And in 1900, she began to write.

For two years she wrote short stories with little to show but rejections. But she persisted, sending stories back out each month without fail. She did this while juggling the duties of a pioneer wife with young children, and not much formal education to draw from. She took inspiration from the people and landscape around her, while at the same time, Anderson noted, “Clayton became jealous of his wife’s popularity at dances and socials around the area.”

Money struggles continued, too, so they agreed to board Bill Sinclair, a cowpuncher at a nearby ranch. Sinclair stood out from the rest of the ranch hands, a tall, handsome Canadian Scot who was said to favor pretty ladies, whisky, literature and Socialist philosophy. He and Bert became friends, with Sinclair reviewing her written descriptions of ranch life. He also borrowed Bert’s books, and with her encouragement, began writing himself. He was 22 years old, nine years her junior.

One might guess where all this is headed.

“The Bowers’ last year in Bleak Cabin was anything but sunny,” Anderson wrote. “Clayton took exception to his wife’s friendship with the unusual cowpuncher. The winter of 1903–04, Bill Sinclair retired to a line shack away from the hayfield, where he struggled with his first potentially saleable story and rode over to tend the calves. He called on Bert when his chores were done to help her along and borrow another book.”

In 1904, Bert sent her novelette, *Chip of the Flying U*, to the editor of *Popular* magazine, earning what was then considered a very large fee. She left Clayton, and with the help of Sinclair, traveled to her brother’s house on the West Coast while she decided what to do next.

On a trip to San Francisco with Sinclair in January 1905, she signed her first story-writing contract with *Popular* magazine, which would provide her with a steady income. Her divorce from Clayton was final that March, and he took custody of the oldest two children, while Bert took their youngest son, Roy.

According to an online report entitled “100 Years of Divorce and Marriage Statistics,” only 5 to 7 percent of marriages ended in divorce in that era and husbands often retained custody of the children.

Bert probably was an early feminist. The main female character in her first novel, *Chip of the Flying U*, has just graduated from medical school when she lands on her brother’s Montana ranch and is known as the “Little Doctor.” And she refused Sinclair’s offers of marriage until she was able to

support herself and her son.

The two married in Great Falls in 1905, and *Chip* was published the next year in hardback by George Dillingham Co. of New York, with colored-plate sketches by Bert’s friend, Charlie Russell. In the decades that followed, the book was filmed four different times. *Chip* set the stage for a whole series of novels which followed her characters’ lives and adventures and has been compared to Owen Wister’s 1902 novel *The Virginian*, at least in terms of popularity, and is now often considered the second classic to emerge in the new genre of Western fiction.

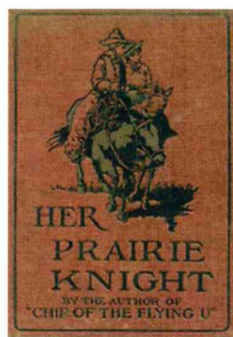
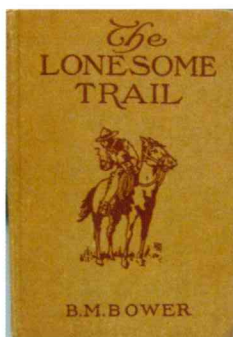
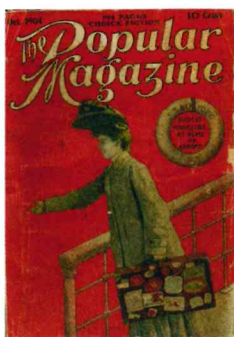
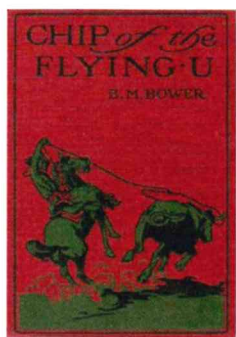
Literary scorecards aside, Bert was certainly the first woman to make a living writing Western fiction. Keeping her identity obscure was not her choice. Her first few publishers insisted on using only the initials of her given names, afraid that revealing that she was a woman in a male-dominated field might spoil the growing market for her work. “She never liked the deception,” Anderson wrote. Yet discerning readers might have sensed a difference: unlike the bulk of male-written Westerns, her novels offered a comparative lack of violence and story lines that weren’t so action-packed. Bert explained her perspective in a 1924 interview:

“There’s more of loneliness and monotony in pioneering than there is of battle. I can personally vouch for the fact that pioneering was—and still is—about 90 percent monotonous isolation to 10 percent thrill. It is scarcely fair to turn the picture upside down and present the public with 90 percent thrill and 10 percent normal, everyday life.”

And of course, an innocent romance sprinkled with humorous descriptions certainly appealed to readers (“Mrs. Denson, a large woman who narrowly escaped being ginger-whiskered like her husband, beamed upon them from the doorway.”—*Chip of the Flying U*).

Not long after the life-changing publication of Bert’s first novel and a subsequent move to California, Sinclair—who was a cousin of author Upton Sinclair, a future winner of the Pulitzer Prize—found his own success in 1908 with publisher George Dillingham, who published the first of his many novels, *Raw Gold*. By then the couple had welcomed a daughter into the world, Dele Francis Sinclair (named after Dell, the “Little Doctor” in Bert’s first novel).

Despite the comforts of their new home in California, the two did their best writing in the wilderness, in places including the mountains near Monterey. There they escaped for months at a time with their children, traveling by donkey



More than 70 years after B. M. Bower's death, her novels remain available in many libraries, but her story as a pioneering Western author is largely unknown.

and setting up separate tents for each of them to write with portable typewriters, with other tents for living.

Bert and Sinclair continued amassing publication credits until they decided to part ways, divorcing in 1921. Little information exists concerning the breakup. Bert was a private woman, leaving more questions than you might expect about a woman who had sold 2 million copies of her 66 novels by the time she died.

What is known about Bert after she left Sinclair is that she moved to Hollywood and married again in 1921, this time to a former sheriff of Choteau County, Montana, a man by the name of Robert Ellsworth "Bud" Cowan, whom she'd met back in Big Sandy. The two moved to Depoe Bay, Oregon, then to Las Vegas, where Cowan became the chief of police. The couple bought a silver mine while Bert continued writing. As the Depression took hold, the mine lost ever more money, taking much of Bert's earnings, until the two retreated back to Depoe Bay.

The couple remained married until Bud Cowan's death in 1939, although biographer Orrin Engen suggests that Bert's own life wasn't as happy as that of her characters:

"Bower married three times, yet supposedly never married the man she really loved, who has not been clearly identified. Because of her unsatisfying personal life, which she insisted on keeping private, we can perhaps understand the happy endings of her novels a little better."

Bert died of cancer in her daughter Dele's Hollywood home a year after Cowan died, in 1940. By that time, in addition to her popular novels, she'd written around 200 short stories and 17 screenplays. Anderson, Dele's daughter, remembered a generous grandmother who paid for piano lessons, taught her to appreciate delicious and unusual food, and gave books as gifts instead of toys. She also remembered the early morning tapping of her typewriter until illness consumed Bert: "That discipline was one of several secrets

of her successful 40-year career."

Regarding the fact that Bert—who seemingly fancied both writing and Montana cowboys—chose to leave Montana for good in 1907, Anderson says, "Thirty-eight of Bower's 66 hardcover novels are set in Montana. Whenever she lost interest in a subject she always returned mentally to the place that had inspired her first and best-known work. Montana gave Bertha Muzzy Bower her calling and a special vision of the wide open spaces. In sharing that vision with millions of readers she did Montana proud. And Montana can be proud of her." ■

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