

Her Bly-Line: Elizabeth Jane Cochran was a bold 19th Century reporter. She was born in 1864 in Armstrong County, PA, forty miles northeast of Pittsburgh. Her father a wealthy associate justice, died when she was just 6 years old. When she was 9, her mother remarried but divorced five years later. Elizabeth Jane, 14, was called to testify against her drunken, violent stepfather. She left boarding school after one year to move with her family to Pittsburgh and added an “e” to her surname for a touch of sophistication.

A sexist column she read in the *Pittsburgh Dispatch* prompted a fiery rebuttal to the editor. Impressed with her spirit, he asked her to join the editorial staff. Since it was considered improper at the time for women to write publicly under their own names, he requested she choose a pseudonym. Cochran chose “Nellie Bly” from a song by Stephen Foster.

Bly’s writing focused on the plight of working women. Her series of investigative reports on female factory workers exposed heinous conditions and got her moved to the women’s pages to cover fashion, society and gardening. She followed that move with one of her own at age 20 when she chose to go to Mexico as a foreign correspondent for the *Dispatch* to report on the lives and customs of the Mexican people. Her reports led to her first book, titled *Six Months in Mexico*.

One of her reports protested the incarceration of a local journalist who had been imprisoned for criticizing the Mexican government under the dictatorship of Porfirio Díaz. Threatened with arrest for this report, she wisely left the country. Back in the states, free of any censorship and fear of her own incarceration, she continued to denounce Díaz for suppressing the Mexican people and controlling the press.

Back at the *Dispatch*, she once again was assigned to social reporting. This time she left the paper as well as Pittsburgh and moved to New York. Twenty-three and broke, Bly talked her way into the offices of the *New York World*, a Joseph Pulitzer newspaper and landed an assignment to investigate rumors of brutality and neglect at the Women’s Lunatic Asylum on Blackwell’s Island. To get the assignment she agreed to feign insanity and get committed.

She studied female behaviors labeled as lunacy and practiced deranged expressions in front of a mirror. She checked into a working-class boardinghouse and began behaving bizarrely. She refused to go to bed, cowered and told the boarders she was afraid of them and they looked crazy. The boarders, themselves afraid of her, agreed it was she who was crazy and summoned the police who hauled her away.

When brought before a judge, she faked amnesia. He had her examined by doctors who declared her insane and the court committed her to Blackwell. The *New York Sun* and the *New York Times* reported on this “mysterious waif” with the “wild, hunted look in her eyes,” and her desperate outcry: “I can’t remember! I can’t remember!”

Once committed, she went to work. She found the food inedible: gruel broth, spoiled meat, and bread, that was little more than dried dough. She experienced conditions first hand for ten days until the *World* had her released to begin reporting.

She described how the patients were mistreated, made to sit on straight-back benches from 6 a.m. to 8 p.m. during which time they were not allowed to talk. They were not given any reading material. They received no news of the outside world.* Two months of this, she reported, would make any sane person insane. Her reports launched a grand jury investigation and became her famous book, *Ten Days in a Madhouse*.

She next suggested to her editor a trip around the world, derisively miming Jules Verne’s 1888 book, *Around the World in Eighty Days*. He sent her. She returned in 72 days, 6 hours, 11 minutes and 14 seconds - a new world record. Of course she reported this. As she traveled the world by steamship, railroad, rickshaw and sampan, she demonstrated female independence from men and that travel was safe and fun for single women.

Back home, Bly continued to relentlessly report on poor conditions around the country and now the world. In 1922 Elizabeth Jane Cochran died of pneumonia at age 57.

*See: Charlotte Perkins Gilman, “The Yellow Wallpaper.”

March is Women’s History Month. For information and ways to celebrate, visit www.nwhp.org or womenshistorymonth.gov.