Nellie Bly

Nellie Bly refused to behave like a “proper” Victorian lady. Her groundbreaking reporting and fantastic exploits made her one of the most famous women in the world and a powerful feminist role model at the turn of the 19th century.

Bly was born Elizabeth Jane Cochran on May 5, 1864, just outside of Pittsburgh. She got her first job in journalism at age 20 after she wrote to complain to the editor of the Pittsburgh Dispatch because of a sexist column the paper had published. The editor, so impressed by her writing, hired her as a reporter. Most female journalists at this time wrote under pen names, and he chose for her “Nellie Bly,” after a popular Stephen Foster song.

With her exposé on the Blackwell Insane Asylum for the New York World newspaper in 1887, Bly became one of the first investigative reporters in the United States. To go undercover, she faked insanity and fooled the asylum’s doctors into committing her. Bly spent 10 days there, during which she witnessed abusive staff and the general squalor in which the patients lived. Her report created a sensation and prompted a Supreme Court investigation into the asylum. People all across America were now talking about Nellie Bly.

In 1889, as a publicity stunt for the New York World, she embarked on a trip around the world in an attempt to beat the record set by Jules Verne’s fictional character Phileas Fogg in his recently published, Around the World in 80 Days. This was a daunting task for anyone, especially for a woman traveling alone in the 19th century. With just one small traveling bag, Bly left the United States on November 14, 1889. She would cross the Atlantic and Pacific oceans and journey through Europe, Africa, and Asia before all was said and done. She made the trek in just 72 days, beating all previous records of around-the-world travel.

Bly was the first woman to report on the Eastern Front during World War I, and she covered many other important events later in her life. She died of pneumonia in 1922 at the age of 57. Her life serves as a testament to what a woman could accomplish in a 19th-century man’s world.

Lauren Uhl is Museum Project Manager at the History Center.

Innovators
By Lauren Uhl

Nellie Bly

Nellie Bly’s globe-trotting made her a household name.}

Nellie Bly’s adventurous image was used to promote a variety of products.
Seventy-three days and Nellie Bly had rounded the world, beating Jules Verne’s character Phileas Fogg. This boardgame is testament to Nellie’s and Jules Verne’s popularity, and the public’s fascination with their intriguing stories.