

# This Day in History... November 14, 1889

## Nellie Bly Begins Record-Setting Trip Around the Globe

On November 14, 1889, Nellie Bly embarked on a trip around the globe, inspired by Jules Verne's *Around the World in Eighty Days*.

Bly was born Elizabeth Jane Cochran on May 5, 1864, in Cochran's Mills, Pennsylvania. When she was a teenager, Bly read an offensive article in the *Pittsburgh Dispatch* titled, "What Girls are Good For." She was so upset she wrote an angry response to the editor under the name, "Lonely Orphan Girl." The editor was so impressed he ran an advertisement asking her to reveal herself and ultimately offered her a full-time job. It was at this time that she adopted the pen name Nellie Bly, after the character in a Stephen Foster song.

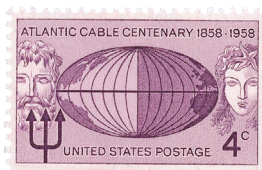


*She got her penname from an 1850 song by Stephen Collins Foster.*

Bly's early writing focused on the difficulties of working women. But she was soon pressured to write about "women's issues" such as fashion and gardening. Bly then spent six months in Mexico as a foreign correspondent. When she returned to the *Dispatch* she was again forced to write about issues she found boring so she quit and moved to New York. There she found work with the *New York World* and agreed to fake insanity so she could investigate alleged brutality and neglect at the Women's Lunatic Asylum on Blackwell's Island.

Bly put on a good act that earned her a spot in the asylum where she witnessed the poor conditions firsthand. The women were fed spoiled food and undrinkable water. Those considered dangerous were tied together. Many women were forced to sit entire days on hard benches with rats and waste everywhere. Bly witnessed nurses beating patients. When she spoke with her fellow patients, she realized some of them were as sane as she was and could have been driven mad by the deplorable conditions. After 10 days, the *World* demanded her release and Bly published her story, which was later made into a book – *Ten Days in a Mad-House*. The asylum was then investigated and major changes followed. Bly soon enjoyed widespread fame.

In 1888, Bly suggested to her editor that she take a trip around the world in an attempt to make the fictional trip from *Around the World in Eighty Days* a reality. Bly grew increasingly excited for the trip and with two days' notice, embarked on the voyage at 9:40 a.m. on November 14, 1889. That morning she boarded the *Augusta Victoria* of the Hamburg America Line to begin her 24,899-mile journey.



*Bly used underwater cables and telegraphs to report on her journey.*

Around the same time, rival New York newspaper *00* sent reporter Elizabeth Bisland to beat Bly's time. To retain interest in her story, Bly's paper hosted the "Nellie Bly Guessing Match" encouraging readers to guess her arrival time to the second. The grand prize was a trip to Europe with spending money. Bly traveled through England, France (where she met Jules Verne), Italy, the Suez Canal, Ceylon (Sri Lanka), Singapore, Hong Kong, and Japan.

Through underwater cable networks and electric telegraphs, Bly was able to update her editor on her trip's progress. Despite arriving in San Francisco two days late due to inclement weather, Bly arrived back in New Jersey at 3:51 p.m. on January 25, 1890. Her total trip was 72 days, 6 hours, 11 minutes, and 14 seconds, beating the fictional record set in Verne's masterpiece. Bly's rival, Bisland, had missed a connection along the way and was forced to take a slower ship, ending her chances of beating Bly. Bly's world record was broken just a few months later by George France Train, who completed the trip in 67 days. The record was again broken in 1913 when a group of three men did it in less than 36 days. One of those men, John Henry Mears, broke the record again in 1928 with a time less than 24 days.

After getting married in 1895, Bly retired from journalism and became president of the Iron Clad Manufacturing Company, which produced steel containers including milk cans and boilers. There, Bly received patents for a novel milk can and stacking garbage can. She was briefly one of the nation's leading female industrialists, but employee embezzlement ultimately left the company bankrupt. Bly then returned to journalism, covering the Woman Suffrage Parade of 1913 and the Eastern Front during World War I. She died of pneumonia in New York City on January 27, 1922.



*From a 2002 issue honoring pioneering female journalists.*



*Bly's report improved conditions in mental hospitals.*



*Bly became a leader in the steel industry.*

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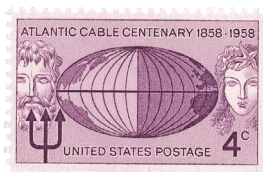


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