Stunt Girls: Elizabeth Bisland, Nell Nelson, and Ada Patterson as Rivals to Nellie Bly

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This thesis titled
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Abstract

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Stunt Girls: Elizabeth Bisland, Nell Nelson, and Ada Patterson as Rivals to Nellie Bly

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In the 1880s, women journalists working for newspapers were confined to writing for the “women’s pages.” They wrote about food, fashion, and culture. But change was on the horizon. Nellie Bly made headlines for her “stunt girl” reporting in 1887, and papers around the country were quick to follow. “Stunt girl” journalism opened the doors for many women reporters. Women reporters transitioned from being a novelty to a welcome addition to the newsrooms. Yet, other than Nellie Bly, the legacies and reports of Bly’s adversaries has been lost to history. This thesis resurrects three “stunt girls” who were well known in their own time: Nell Nelson, Elizabeth Bisland, and Ada Patterson. Primary sources from the nineteenth century were studied to determine who these women were, what they did, and how they used their notoriety to create a place for themselves at a job that they were initially barred from entering.
Dedication

This thesis is in dedication to my advisor, Dr. Michael S. Sweeney, whose invaluable guidance and mentorship helped recover the legacy of three “stunt girls.”
Acknowledgements

This thesis could not have been accomplished without the guidance from my thesis committee members, Dr. Michael Sweeney, Dr. Aimee Edmondson and Dr. Marilyn Greenwald, and the American Journalism Historians Association (AJHA) and the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication (AEJMC) for providing feedback on research presented at the AJHA national conference in Oklahoma and AEJMC Southeast Colloquium in Louisiana.
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Chapter 1: Introduction

In 1887, a young and ambitious woman with questioning grey eyes met with the publisher of the *New York World*, Joseph Pulitzer. She was determined to become a journalist, despite months of rejection from numerous New York editors. She offered to travel to Europe and return steerage class to document the experience of the waves of immigrants coming to the U.S. But Pulitzer rejected the idea. Instead, he suggested feigning insanity. The stunt was one of many that Nellie Bly would take on. Bly’s adventures were a success, and with that success came a new era in journalism for women reporters.¹

Bly, born Elizabeth Cochran (a name she changed to Cochrane as a youth because she felt the “e” added sophistication),² had created a sensation when she began work for Pulitzer’s *New York World* in 1887. Bly’s reporting fit into Pulitzer’s marketing strategy and demonstrated “a desire to serve the underserved,” according to New York University journalism professor Brooke Kroeger, who wrote a biography of Bly. “There was something in her personal style that was kind of coy and flirty and outrageous, all at the same time. . . . She attracted readers. It’s almost like she was linkbait for the Victorian era.”³

Pulitzer had moved to New York from St. Louis, Missouri, and purchased the *World* in 1883. He broke ground with his “new journalism.” Among Pulitzer’s strategies was to invigorate his newspaper with flashy, sensational news, large headlines and illustrations, crusades and stunts. Newspaper reading had become a habit for many
Americans during and after the Civil War,¹ and Pulitzer sought to create a true mass-circulation newspaper, with hundreds of thousands of readers, by keeping his paper’s price low and appealing to the working classes and immigrants who poured into New York City.

At the time, the typical American newsroom was dominated by men, with women consigned to writing for the woman’s page about topics considered appropriate for their sex: food, fashion, family, and furniture, as well as society teas and women’s club gatherings.² This began to change when Bly, who had managed to convince the editor of her hometown Pittsburgh (Pennsylvania) Dispatch to write about the difficulties faced by working women, moved to New York in 1887 and sought newspaper work. She was turned down again and again until she talked an editor for Pulitzer’s World into allowing her to go undercover for a story.

Bly posed as an insane woman so she could be committed to Blackwell’s Island and gather information for an insider’s view of the lives of women held there. The resulting series of stories, gripping for their detailed account of physical and mental abuse, proved explosively popular and launched her on a successful career.³ Pulitzer put her to work as a “stunt girl,” trying different jobs and taking on a variety of undercover

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¹ Frank Luther Mott, *American Journalism: A History: 1690 to 1960* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1962), 387. Mott attributed the increase in newspaper reading to the extension of the telegraph. The telegraph enabled people to learn about news from all around the world. Although the telegraph had been around since the late eighteenth century, the technology was evolving. By the 1860s, transcontinental lines were running, which brought news from Europe to America. American newspapers formed partnerships with the Western Union Telegraph Company, who had a monopoly on the wire service at the time.

² Ishbel Ross, *Ladies of the Press* (New York: Harper & Brothers Publishers, 1936), 425. Ross noted that by the early 1880s the women’s pages started to appear, because newspaper publishers were starting to recognize that it was important to appeal to women readers for circulation. The women’s pages targeted the stereotypical woman reader.
investigations, all to boost circulation. The most spectacular stunt was Bly’s race around the world in 1889 in an attempt to beat the fictional record of eighty days by Jules Verne’s Phileas Fogg (she made it in seventy-two). Other stunts and crusades of Bly in the 1880s included an expose of the Bell telephone monopoly, a police officer accused of assaulting a little girl, and the white slave traffic of a pseudo-astrologer.

These undercover news stories did not violate ethical boundaries of the day. At the time, reporters considered any method of getting information ethical, especially if the investigation would cover wrongdoing. Posing as another person was fair game. Some people said that journalists were taking things too far in their pursuit of information. In 1890, Samuel Warren and Louis Brandeis published an article in the Harvard Law Review on an individuals’ right to privacy. Despite the circulating criticism that was prompted by Brandeis and Warren’s article, newspaper publishers continued to push boundaries. The pervading popular belief was that newspapers were a vehicle of persuasion. Along with privacy, objectivity was also not a factor of consideration until into the twentieth century. In the 1880s and 1890s, editors and publishers believed that newspapers had the power to evoke social change. Rather than concealing their personal biases, reporters took liberty with embellishment. Bly and the stunt girl journalists wrote their reports in first-person narrative and said what they thought.

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Matthew Goodman, Eighty Days: Nellie Bly and Elizabeth Bisland’s History-Making Race around the World (New York: Ballantine Books, 2013), xv. Goodman wrote that Bly had proposed the race around the world one year prior to taking on the stunt. There is no indication as whey Bly wanted to race around the world. At first, the World’s editors rejected the idea of having a woman travel unchaperoned, but by 1889 they had warmed up to the idea. The race was highly publicized. The concept of the race was based off of Jules Verne’s book, in which the main character, Phileas Fogg, takes a bet to travel around the world in 80 days. Jules Verne, Around the World in Eighty Days, Translated by Geo. M. Towle (Philadelphia: Porter and Coates, 1873).
Bly’s “Inside the Madhouse” series on the women’s asylum at Blackwell’s Island, in New York City’s East River, “inspired a whole slew of imitators,” according to Villanova University Professor Jean Marie Lutes, another chronicler of Bly’s life. “Women were considered less brave, less smart. The ‘girl’ before the name was a diminutive,” Lutes said, which set it apart from previous stunt reporting by men. Other papers were quick to hire their own stunt girls in an attempt to duplicate the circulation-boosting success of Bly. This trend helped boost the numbers of women in newsrooms, as scholars have linked the rise in journalism opportunities to women with the “new journalism” begun by Pulitzer and copied by William Randolph Hearst and others. The trade publication *The Journalist* estimated in 1886 that five hundred women worked regularly on the editorial side of newspapers throughout the United States, and by 1888 there were two hundred on the New York papers alone. Local women’s press clubs were organized, and in 1885 a Woman’s International Press Association was launched. “Stunt girl” journalism was popular beginning in 1887, after Bly’s Blackwell’s Island stunt. The end date for stunt girl journalism was around the early 1900s.

“Stunt girl” reporters posed as beggars, pretended to seek illegal abortions, visited opium dens, and more to fill reporting positions that, as noted, were typically given to men in the late 1880s and into the 1890s. Eva Gay masqueraded as a poor worker for the *St. Paul Globe*. Fannie B. Merrill went undercover for the *New York World* and rolled cigarettes in a New York factory, and Viola Roseboro also posed as a beggar and wrote about it for the *New York World*. S.J. Stevenson crossed the Atlantic Ocean in the steerage compartment, below the waterline where a ship’s lowest-class passengers stayed, of the White Star Steamer Adriatic in 1890. Additionally, Lutes noted
that many stunt girls were not named, going by initials – E.M.S. also posed as a beggar, W.P.H. performed repetitive chores in the workhouse for a month, and C.S.S. toiled as a clerk in a government department. – ¹⁶ or by the generic name “Meg Merrilies.”¹⁷

The “sob sister” movement, prompted by Harry K. Thaw’s murder trial in 1907, marked the end for stunt girl reporting. Thaw was the son of Pittsburgh coal and railroad baron and heir to a multimillion-dollar mine and railroad fortune. Thaw was put on trial for murdering famed architect Stanford White, who was the former lover of Thaw’s wife, Evelyn Nesbit. The women reporters were called “sob sisters” because the emotion-laden coverage of a dramatic case often aimed to make readers cry.¹⁸

Other than Nellie Bly, most of the women who helped define the “stunt girl” era have not been mentioned in historical scholarship.¹⁹ A search of Kroeger’s database on stunt girls turned up only one story each for Fannie B. Merrill, Viola Roseboro, S.J. Stevenson, E.M.S., W.P.H., C.S.S, and Eva Gay. The database includes links to articles written by stunt girls.²⁰ A search for Elizabeth Bisland, Elizabeth Banks, Kathleen “Kit” Coleman, Ada Patterson, Nell Nelson, Caroline Lockhart, and Winifred Black yielded more research findings. Names were found through a search through historical mentions of stunt girls such as Jean Marie Lutes and Ishbel Ross’s research on women writers during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century of the general literature, Kroeger’s database, and search through google and google scholar with keywords “stunt girls.” Scholarly articles and internet research were then used to find if anything could be rendered for any of the names of the stunt girls. The results for most were meager. Elizabeth Banks worked in London investigating working conditions of women and chronicled her works in her book, Campaigns of Curiosity: Journalistic Adventures of an
American Girl in Late Victorian London, but only a handful of mentions of her exist in the published scholarship of journalism history. Kathleen “Kit” Coleman was more frequently mentioned because she covered the Spanish-American War after her “stunt girl” career ended. Caroline Lockhart, who was known as “Boston’s Nellie Bly,” was known for writing novels about the West, and Winifred Black was mentioned in published scholarship because of her work when she transitioned from “stunt girl” into the “sob sister” movement.

Historians have already noted that most newspaper editors hired “stunt girls” because they thought their work would help sell papers, but for the women who were “stunt girls” the genre was an opportunity. Nell Nelson helped bring about labor reform, Elizabeth Bisland started a national conversation about the role of the then-modern woman, and Ada Patterson interviewed many politicians and covered major criminal trials.

This thesis seeks to resurrect three “stunt girls” who were well known in their own time—Nell Nelson, Elizabeth Bisland, and Ada Patterson—to uncover what they did and how they used their notoriety. Many more “stunt girls” merit study, but their names and their works have been lost to history; these three were chosen partly because of the author’s somewhat subjective opinion about their significance and partly because of the unusual availability of many of their bylined stories as primary documents. To trace the history of Nelson, Bisland, and Patterson, the author dug into their work as published in newspapers and later captured on microfilm or in online databases. Biographical information was also sought through research on what had already been written about each “stunt girl.” Often, “stunt girls” are mentioned in historical research, but only in
brief. Little information has been written the content of their work. The Nell Nelson chapter analyzes all twenty-one articles Nelson wrote for the Chicago Times as well as seven found articles for her New York World series from the Newspapers.com database. The Elizabeth Bisland chapter looks at thirteen articles in The North American Review yielded by a search through JSTOR that linked to an archive at the University of Iowa. The Ada Patterson chapter analyzes fifty-nine articles in the St. Louis Republic through searching keyword “Ada Patterson” through the Readex Microprint Corporation digital archive collection of the St. Louis Republic. All told, the thesis draws upon more than 140 newspaper articles and advertisements.

The thesis has five chapters: An introduction that describes the stunt girl movement and places it in historical context; one chapter each on Nelson, Bisland, and Patterson; and a chapter of conclusion and discussion. Each chapter on a stunt girl is self-contained—written to stand alone as a potential book chapter or journal article. Each attempts a biographical sketch and a recounting and assessment of published articles. Assessment of their significance—an attempt to answer the “so what” question—is touched on briefly in each chapter, allowing for a broader synthesis and comparison in the concluding chapter.

Nell Nelson was an undercover reporter for the Chicago Times, on assignment to explore and expose the labor conditions of poor, working class women in 1888. Her series of twenty-one stories, The White Slave Girls of Chicago, would be hailed as a landmark of investigative and stunt girl journalism of the late nineteenth century for calling attention to the dark world of low-wage pay for strenuous, long-term work. By posing as a working girl, Nelson was able to gain access into factories in Chicago and
New York and expose poor working conditions. Her first article titled “City Slave Girls: A Lady Reporter’s Experience in the Shops with Sewing Serfs” was published on July 30, 1888. Chapter 2 explores Nelson’s life and her series on “White Slave Girls” for the Chicago Times and New York World. It seeks to answer how Nelson reported and wrote the series, with particular attention to the techniques she used that resonated with her reading audience.

The following year, in November, 1889, Elizabeth Bisland was commissioned to race around the world by Cosmopolitan’s publisher, John Brisben Walker, and to try to do it faster than Nellie Bly. The race was mentioned in newspapers around the country. Chapter 3 details the life of a stunt girl after the fame of the stunt elapsed. Unlike fellow “sob sisters,” Winifred Black and Ada Patterson, Bisland continued her work writing for magazines about the Victorian woman. The fame of the “stunt” never truly left, as mentions of Bisland years after the “stunt” still referred to the race around the world. Bisland was found to use this image and create a name for herself as an essayist on women’s rights. This chapter examines her contributions to the North American Review.

In 1896, Ada Patterson was making headlines. Her popularity was such that she was called the “Nellie Bly of the West.” Patterson performed such stunts as spending a night at a police station, going “husband hunting,” watching a medical surgery being performed, riding with St. Louis’s fire chief, and standing next to the famed Arthur Duestrow while he was being hung for murder so that she might describe the execution process. The last stunt appears to have helped Patterson transition into the “sob sister” movement. She received mention in the New York World for her coverage of the Duestrow trial, and later accepted a position with the New York American.
she became affiliated with the “sob sisters,” and was one of the few women who covered the famous Thaw trial. Chapter 4 explore Patterson’s contributions for the *St. Louis Republic.*
Notes


2 Ibid, 25.


7 Kroeger, *Nellie Bly*, 100.


28 Ada Patterson, “Ada Patterson Sees a Gory Operation. An Experience that Shocked a Woman Accustomed to Unusual Newspaper Adventures,” *St. Louis Republic* (Missouri), September 27, 1896.


Chapter 2: Nell Nelson’s Undercover Reporting

On Tuesday, July 10, 1888, eighteen-year-old Martha Rhafferty and another young woman climbed the stairs of a lace manufacturing company on State Street in the downtown heart of Chicago’s shopping district. One flight up, they found an office that was “not uninviting,” for although the carpet was cheap, the room was well-ventilated and had high ceilings, strong light, and a table displaying the company’s wares. Behind the table was a clerk, working at both a writing stand and a desk, who grudgingly greeted the two women after five minutes of silence. Rhafferty announced that she had come to hand in a dozen lace mats she had crocheted, each the “size of a tea-plate,” and receive payment for the piece-work. She handed the mats to the clerk, who took them and asked if Rhafferty would like more work. The teen-ager demurred, saying her mother did not want her to do any more crocheting. At that moment, the clerk was called away, leaving Rhafferty alone with the other young woman in the office foyer.

Rhafferty did not know it, but that other woman, Nell Nelson, was an undercover reporter for the Chicago Times, on assignment to explore and expose the labor conditions of poor, working class women. Her series of twenty-one stories, The City Slave Girls of Chicago, would be hailed as a landmark of investigative and “stunt girl” journalism of the late nineteenth century for calling attention to the dark world of low-wage pay for strenuous, long-term work. While the clerk was away, Nelson quizzed Rhafferty on her life. In her first article in the series, Nelson wrote:

Martha showed me her contract in which the firm had agreed to refund $1 of the three deposited when she had finished $15 worth of work. On the back of the contact were the credit receipts of the company entered in lead pencil, dating from January to July. She told me she lived in Gross Park, away out on the West Side; that she helped her mother, and had been trying to earn $15 since January. She received 60 cents for a dozen mats and it took her a week to crochet a dozen.
“Then I must pay 10 cents car fare each time, and that leaves me only 40 cents. I had to pay $3 before I could get any work. I always knew how to crochet, but they made me pay $2 for lessons and $1 as a security. I began in January, the first week, and now I am through. I have made $15, and when they give me back the dollar I shall have $16.” Here is a company paying a girl of 18 $15 for six months and one week’s labor.¹

This chapter explores Nell Nelson’s life and her series on “City Slave Girls” for the Chicago Times and “White Slave Girls” for the New York World. It seeks to answer how Nelson reported and wrote the series, with particular attention to the techniques she used that resonated with her reading audience. The series was referenced by newspapers in New York and other cities and prompted an outpouring of public support for her work and rage against the labor conditions she reported. The Chicago Trades and Labor Assembly congratulated Nelson at its August 1888 meeting, with one declaring that Nelson’s journalism, no doubt aided by its being written by a woman who had worked her way into places and situations where no man could go, had done more than any laboring man to open the eyes of the “skeptical class.” Readers sent letters to the Times, which gave them prominent display on the front page. One woman who worked in conditions similar to those described by Nelson said, “Oh, you have not told half; you do not know half we have to bear. We are indeed slaves, worse slaves than those our brothers died to free [in the Civil War].”² Eric W. Liguori connected Nell Nelson’s articles to the creation of the Illinois Women’s Alliance (IWA). To prove this connection, Liguori found that during their first meeting on August 18, 1888, they discussed Nelson’s articles. The IWA was largely influential in pushing for educational reform because of the large number of children working in sweatshops or wandering the streets (estimated at around 50,000 at the time). The educational reform bill mandated that children, ages
seven to fourteen, would be enrolled in a twelve- to twenty-four-week school program. In addition to IWA, many other organizations concerned with working conditions for women and children cropped up around the time that Nelson’s articles were circulating. Liguori also connected Nelson’s articles to the creation of the Hull House\(^1\) and Chicago Trade and Labor Assembly.\(^2\)

In examining Nelson’s work, this chapter seeks to restore to journalism history a woman whose work has been largely overlooked, as well as overshadowed by the more significant, and well-known, Nellie Bly. Nelson also attracted readers, but unlike Bly has not been the subject of a biography or scholarly article. Her work on the White Slave Girl series merits three pages in Kroeger’s biography of Bly,\(^3\) and the series forms the basis of an academic analysis of the spread of labor reform in the late nineteenth century in a 2012 article in the *Journal of Management History*.\(^4\) Previous scholarship has touched lightly on Bly’s undercover work in exposing white slave girl work in New York City, when Bly got a job in 1887 making boxes in a tenement on the Lower East Side. The headline on her article read, “The Girls Who Make Boxes: Nellie Bly Tells How It Feels to Be a White Slave.” A journal article by Lutes and a feature article in the *New Yorker* mentioned Bly’s work investigating white women’s slave-like working conditions, but no

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substantial treatment of the episode could be found. Nor could any published work about Nelson’s work in Chicago a year later, which, as described above, had a significant impact on the labor movement. Nelson is also absent in the most comprehensive biography of Joseph Pulitzer, a 2010 book by James McGrath Morris.

The lack of an academic study of Nelson is unfortunate. While Bly remains well-known, Nelson’s name has all but disappeared. In the 1890s and early 1900s, however, both names were well known. “‘Nell Nelson’ was to the *Evening World* what ‘Nellie Bly’ was to the morning edition,” one writer noted in a syndicated newspaper article. “She [Nelson] is a very bright woman and, except in the matter of audacity, superior to her feminine rival.” In 1912, an article in the *Brooklyn Daily Eagle* about the newly opened Pulitzer College of Journalism at Columbia University, established in 1911 by Pulitzer’s will, described Nelson as one of Pulitzer’s “more efficient” female reporters.

This chapter examines all twenty-one articles in Nelson’s *Chicago Times* series as well as seven articles found from her *New York World* series on female factory workers, seeking through deep reading to identify key reporting and writing techniques. Information about Nelson’s life and the impact of her series were sought through the Library of Congress’s Chronicling America website of full-text American newspapers published before 1923, as well as the for-profit Newspapers.com database, using “Nell Nelson” and “Helen Cusack” (her birth name) as search keywords. The chapter sketches what little is known about Nelson’s life, turn to her slave girl articles, and assess their content and significance.
Nell Nelson’s Life

Helen Cusack was born in Missouri around 1860. She was married to Solomon Solis “S.S.” Carvalho in May 1895, after she returned to the United States from a visit to Europe. Carvalho was the general manager of Pulitzer’s *Evening World*. They had two daughters, Frank and Helen. Her marriage to Carvalho may have ended her journalism career; no stories attributed to “Nell Nelson” or “Helen Carvalho” could be found in keyword searches of the *New York World* in 1896 and beyond in the databases consulted.

Much of Nelson’s newspaper work focused on women and the family. Children were important to her. Nelson once remarked to the *New York World*, “I think that that woman who doesn’t love little babies is hardly a woman.” She died in Plainfield, New Jersey, on October 27, 1945, at the age of around eighty-five. Carvalho died three years earlier, on April 12, 1942. Nelson’s obituary mentioned her as a “special writer on the old *New York World*."

Nelson worked for several Chicago newspapers in the 1880s, including society work for the *Chicago Herald*, while simultaneously teaching school on the city’s west side. It is unclear why she adopted her particular pen name, although it was common practice for women writers at the time to keep their given names from the public. Women at the time were rarely accepted into the workforce, let alone journalism. She was hired to write for the *Chicago Times* in June 1888 by editor Charles Chapin to work undercover, answering help-wanted advertisements for factory jobs and sweat shops, and

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reporting on the conditions. This was the beginning of the “City Slave Girl” series. She was described by Chapin as a pretty, young, brown-haired and brown-eyed woman who had been a school teacher.\textsuperscript{17} Nelson’s first article in the \textit{Chicago Times} appeared on July 30, 1888. Her series ran all summer. Additional press runs were ordered and the readership increased.\textsuperscript{18} Eventually the series was collected into two books.

By September 1888, Nelson had moved on to New York. She continued her series at the \textit{New York World}.\textsuperscript{19} Pulitzer had appointed Carvalho to manage the \textit{Evening World} in 1887,\textsuperscript{20} and Carvalho’s position brought him and Nelson into a working relationship that later blossomed into romance. The \textit{World}, no doubt with Carvalho’s blessing, trumpeted Nelson’s investigation into the lives of New York female factory workers with stories announcing her research and her upcoming series: “Nell Nelson in the New York Factories. A striking series of articles about working-girl life will appear in THE EVENING WORLD next week. Don’t fail to read them.”\textsuperscript{21}

Within two years, she had established a reputation that extended beyond New York. “Western writers are making their presence known in New York journalism,” an unnamed special correspondent wrote in \textit{The (Grand Rapids, Michigan) Telegram Herald} in November 1890. “When one speaks of the metropolitan newspaper work of western women one’s mind naturally turns to the work of ‘Nell Nelson’ of \textit{The World}.” The writer recalled feeling “something akin to stage fright” upon meeting Nelson while the writer worked for the \textit{Chicago Herald} and Nelson for \textit{The (Chicago) Inter Ocean}. “How could I, a greenhorn, go on before an experienced newspaper woman?”\textsuperscript{22}

The article in the Grand Rapids paper added that after joining the \textit{World} staff, Nelson spent an entire summer working for the “poor sick babies in the slums, and her
heart being profoundly stirred at the misery she saw, the influence was felt in the graphic and pathetic stories she wrote.” Again, her various stories aimed primarily at a female audience. These included a detailed description of the factory work of “ribbon girls,” from how the threads are dyed to how the girls wove it into ribbon. She also judged a contest of the most beautiful babies of New York, based on photographs sent to the World, and gave advice to letter writers, such as her telling one woman that wearing a wig was appropriate no matter what her fiancé said: “Small simpleton, you will not ‘be in a terrible predicament if [your] hair falls out, and a bald spot is nothing like as [sic] mortifying as you imagine.” A series of her stories also raised thousands of dollars for indigent children.

Nelson took time off from her World job in late 1890 to return to Chicago to care for her sick sister Virginia. Virginia Cusack’s death on December 22 freed Nelson to return to New York and continue her newspaper work. In 1892, the World sent her to Germany and France to write about the labor conditions faced by women there. Nelson took her invalid mother with her to enjoy the sights and attempt to regain some of her health. Nelson returned to the World and got married, as noted, in 1895.

A news report about her marriage to Carvalho described her thus:

Miss Cusack is a very pretty woman, as well as exceedingly refined. She has clear cut features and a refined wealth of beautiful brown hair. The most striking feature of her face, next to her merry grey eyes, is her mouth, which is fine and beautiful, and her exquisite teeth, which are literally perfect.

Miss Cusack is a woman of great sweetness and character and rare unselfishness. For years she was the sole support of her mother and two sisters, both of whom she educated. She has always been blessed with good health, which is perhaps the only reason she has been able to work so unceasingly and untiringly.
Nelson’s Slave Girl Series: Chicago

Nelson’s work with the *Chicago Times* began on July 10, 1888. After leaving the Western Lace Manufacturing Corporation, on 133 West Washington Street, Nelson found employment at the Never Rip Jersey Company putting the finishing stitches into the jerseys. The workroom was hot and crowded. She was shocked by the depravity of the scene before her:

> Scarcely a head was raised from machine or lap. Shoulders were bent down, chests hollowed in, and faces drooped so low that I could not begin to make a study of the ‘windows of the souls’ before me.

Nelson reported that the girls worked for 41 cents a day, an average of $2.87 a week. The job began at 7:30 in the morning and ended with just enough time to eat dinner and sleep.30

The article titled, “A Lady Reporter’s Experience in the Shops with Sewing Serfs,” appeared on July 30, 1888. From the onset, the series was controversial. The Never Rip Jersey Company had filed a libel lawsuit as a result of Nelson’s undercover investigations. Whether the suit delayed the publication of the first article or the company filed the suit immediately after seeing the article is unclear. Other local papers, such as *The (Chicago) Inter Ocean*, reported the court case on August 1, 1888:

> The Never Rip Jersey Company of Chicago sued the Chicago Times Company for $50,000 damages in the Circuit Court. The *Times* has been publishing articles showing the miserable wages received by shop women in Chicago. One writer recorded her experience with the Never Rip Jersey Company which insists that the statements made are greatly exaggerated, and that they pay their girls an average of $7 a week. In consequence of the publication in the *Times* thirty girls have left the plaintiff’s employ rather than be made fun of.31

The Never Rip Jersey Company claimed that Nelson had reported the wages inaccurately and the girls were not nearly as miserable as Nelson portrayed them to be. *The Chicago*
Times reported that the plaintiff, C.S. Batdorf, had said in conversation that what hurt him most was that he was a member of society and the report made him ashamed.\(^{32}\)

The controversy did little to impede the series. The Chicago Times promoted Nelson’s work in full-page advertisements:

> The Times will print tomorrow the second batch of facts concerning the workings of some of the factories of Chicago where girls and women are employed. These articles are written by a young lady who passed through the common experiences of those unfortunates of her own sex who are compelled to undergo the hardships and tortures of factory life in this city. She tells plainly what she saw and what she heard; gives names and places whenever necessary, and backs up her statements with unquestionable proofs.\(^{33}\)

Nelson gathered information in two ways. One was to apply for jobs and perform the duties assigned, providing the audience with a first-person narrative about women’s working conditions. The other was gained by conversations and eavesdropping. She would often apply for a job and then asked a series of questions. At the Western Lace and Manufacturing Corporation, Nelson argued with the clerk about having to pay a $3 down payment, $2 for samples and instructions and $1 for security. The $1 security was to be returned when $15 worth of work was completed in a six-month time frame. She told the clerk, “I don’t need instruction. I can make the stitch and I don’t want to put any such amount in samples. If you can’t trust me with a spool of thread and a pattern will you sell the material?” The clerk responded by telling Nelson “that’s not the way we do business.” Nelson continued to interrogate the clerk to learn how much of a profit the company made from each sample. The clerk showed her a price tag. Nelson discovered that the company was making $1.20 in profit for a dozen crotched lace patterns and only paying the girls 60 cents for a week’s worth. The interrogation ended when Nelson asked
the clerk for the name of the market for the goods; he refused to give her any more information. “Poor Mr. Ford [the clerk] was so furious by this time,” Nelson wrote.

After she left the office, she questioned several girls who had paid the $3 down payment. She discovered that none of the girls had received the $15 because the work was too much to complete in the time frame. The investigation concluded with Nelson going to the Women’s Protection Agency. At the agency she learned that several girls had filed suit, but no judgment had been made. The contract that each worker had signed was legally valid. Nelson noted in her report that many of the girls that signed the contract were deceived. It was only until after the work commenced that the girls realized how long the work would take them, and by then the contract was already signed.34

At a coat factory, on 282 Madison Street, Nelson waited for forty-five minutes to apply for work. She spied a dozen girls in the waiting room with cloaks, check-books and tickets, and hand-made fringe. She approached the “fringe-girl,” Maggie W:

She told me she received 5 cents a yard for making an imitation of seal-ball fringe, such as winter cloaks are trimmed with. She had a piece three yards and a quarter long that had taken her all the previous day to make.

She continued to watch Maggie W. as her fringe was being measured. When Maggie W. left, Nelson approached another girl who told her that “she can only make one cloak a day” and she was paid 30 to 50 cents for one. Nelson’s conversations were cut short when a clerk warned her to go and wait for the forewoman. Once the forewoman arrived, Nelson asked how much she would be paid, how many girls worked at the shop and how much “experienced cloak hands” could earn in a day. The forewoman tried to avoid the questions but Nelson was persistent, until the forewoman explained everything out of frustration.
This is a 65-cent cloak. Do you get that through your head? The stitcher gets 20 cents, the binder gets 15 cents, and you get 30 cents for finishing if the work is right.

Nelson responded by thanking her. Shortly after, she made her exit at the coat factory by throwing the cloak in the faces of a Mr. Ellinger, the owner of the factory, and the forewoman.35

Nelson often wrote about the unbalance between the price an item would sell at a store and the wages that were paid to the laborers. At Henry W. King & Co. manufacture on Union Street, she discovered that the women “sweaters” were paid $1.25 for sewing a dozen trousers:

Your fashionable tailors may pay $3 for having a pair of trousers made, but the stitching is not a whit better than Mr. King gets on cloth pants for $1.25 a dozen. The difference is in the fabric, in the sewing silk, and the trimmings, but slip-shod work is not accepted from the “sweaters.”36

While working undercover, Nelson accepted positions in factories, typically as a seamstress at tailor shops or cloak factories, but she also took on positions as a clerk and cigar girl too. To find these jobs sometimes Nelson would gain tips from conversations, but primarily she would go door to door and ask at shops if they needed help. If she was turned away, then she would go to another shop. There were times that Nelson would have to wait for more than an hour to find out if there was an opening. At a department store called the Boston store, she walked up and down the floors asking at each department if they were needing help the entire day.37

On the job, she would perform tasks such as finishing an overcoat. These tasks often tested her skills and patience. “We want experienced hands,” she was told at an overcoat factory when she asked how much they would pay her.38 Nelson had to learn quickly to keep her positions. She also had to work ten hour days in poor working
conditions to get an inside view. Factory work held no guarantee of long term employment. On day one, an applicant was given a job to do and paid upon completion. If the work was satisfactory, the shopkeeper might offer more work. Nelson was rarely told upfront how much money she could earn a week, because everything depended on what a worker could produce. For many of the positions, the pay differed each day. Furthermore, the only way Nelson could keep her positions was to work as efficiently as her coworkers, or risk being thrown out prematurely.

While Nelson applied for work as a clerk, she found difficulty getting a company to hire her without experience. She applied at several stores and told them that she was good with numbers but did not have any luck. She then settled on a position at Pardrige and Company on State Street with no pay for six weeks. While working for Mr. Pardrige, she seized the first opportunity to get a position at another department. Despite the fact that she has only been employed for less than a day, she managed to convince the man who sold gloves to give her a chance. She sold six pairs and was offered a permanent position.39

Nelson was always on the move from one factory to the next. Over time, Nelson was able to pick up skills necessary for working girls. At a tailor shop, she is asked about her experience. She told the “boss” honestly that she had worked for Goldsmith’s, Julius Stein’s, and Ellinger’s. When asked if she had done any tailoring, she told the “boss” plenty.40

It was important for Nelson to get an inside view to write her series. Beyond asking the girls how much they were paid and how many hours they worked, she also observed workplace conditions. On August 3, 1888, she wrote about working at a cloak
factory at H. Zimmerman on Monroe Street. She learned about the factory from a sermon given by the Reverend Mr. Goss. He had talked about a “good Jew” who provided “every day for 1 cent a substantial lunch,” so she asked for a name of the “good Jew” and applied at the same factory. Nelson considered the lunch to be far from “substantial.” She described the pie’s dough as sufficient for “hinging a cellar door.” She wrote,

The lunch the “good Jew” served consisted of a cup of black coffee that was neither nutritious nor fragrant, and minus cream and sugar, for which the girls paid 2 cents a cup…This is certainly not the lunch Rev. Mr. Goss referred to in his sermon, but it’s the only one the girls in the Zimmerman factory knew anything about.41

Workplace conditions in the shops and factories were often dismal. Nelson often observed how much the girls were paying for transportation and lunches. She would also describe the atmosphere. At the Boston store, she described the condition as unbearably hot and poorly ventilated. She even looked at the facilities and noted that the Boston store’s washroom had soap but there were no towels.42 At a tailor shop on Elm and Wesson streets, she noticed that the staircases were blocked in. In the advent of a fire the serfs would have no escape, she wrote.43 At Brougham’s packing house, on Jackson Street, she wrote about the children working in the canning room, who painted tin cans filled with meat. The children stood for hours in a room without windows for only $3 a week.44

Nelson wrote about her investigations as though she was a character and invited the reader to uncover corruption with her. She would also add colorful and detailed descriptions of the scenery, which described the look and smell of the places where she worked.
On August 1, 1888, she wrote about a jersey factory called Julius Stein & Co. on Market Street. The jersey company was paying 65 cents for three days of labor. She wrote, “That is the way Stein & Co. solve the problem; but the question is one that capital, Christianity, and civilization are invited to analyze.” Nelson wrote descriptions in elaborate detail. At the jersey factory, she wrote about her climb down the stairs and into the work room by describing every object she encountered along the way:

Down I walked as directed past long tables that towered with long cloaks, dolmans, ulsters, jackets, and short wraps; past two or three busy, unobserving clerks; past a pair of forbidding-looking men who glared at me from under their black hats and blacker brows; past an earthen-gray stringy crash towel that waved at half-mast above a dirty wash-basin; past a tier of closets that emitted a stifling odor, and on down to the packing room.

What she found at the bottom of the stairs was children workers, “girls of 13 in rags and death-like pallor, with work in their arms,” and women who were too old to work, “older and paler women, some with white hair and spectacles, carrying work to be pressed, examined, altered, or checked.”

To provide these descriptions, Nelson toured the factories. At a box factory called Maxwell Brothers, Nelson described everything she saw to her audience:

The manufactory occupies three-fourths of an entire block and is composed of three separate buildings. One batter of boilers runs two engines on a single shaft, the combined power being 500 horse. It is claimed that a great gain in power can be had by this plan of division, but that has no direct bearing upon the subject of “white slaves.” Indirectly, however, this fact may be at least collateral. The shavings from all machines are carried in pipes to a brick building 40 by 40 feet and 45 feet high and having a chimney of its own, which is useless except in case the shavings should catch fire.

She ended the narrative with a price comparison of the wages paid for the work to the cost of the good for sale: a large packing box cost from 67 to 70 cents but the boys were only paid $2 a week.
Employing children was common at most of the factories where Nelson worked, despite the fact that it was illegal to employ laborers who were less than fifteen years old. At Maxwell Brothers she interviewed Mr. Maxwell, who said that most children would claim to be of age so there was no way to tell if they were really fifteen. Nelson identified herself as a reporter on this occasion, but she managed to further investigate the area while not under the eyes of management. While exploring the factory, she saw “boys” sitting on top of nailing machines to feed the machines. Nelson reported that there were one-hundred boys employed out of 320 employees. They worked for ten hours a day, she reported.47

Children especially pulled at Nelson’s sense of compassion. At the Princess Knitting Company, she knitted women’s shirts with girls who ranged in age from nine to sixteen. The forewoman almost turned Nelson away for being too old. She was around twenty-eight years old at the time. The forewoman told Nelson that she could not live on the salary that the factory paid. “We have generally employed little girls of 12 and 13 to do it,” the forewoman was reported as having said. Nelson told the forewoman that she could live on little, which enabled her to work at the factory for a day. She described her young co-workers as sickly in appearance. “Pale? Yes: blanched by confinement and thin as reeds from loss of sleep, loss of sunshine, of pure air, of wholesome food, and of play,” she wrote. As usual, she talked to many of the girls employed there. A child named Maggie told her that she was “terribly sick” but she had to work because she was saving up for a cloak. Nelson noticed another child who had not eaten because she was in a hurry to get to work.48
Nelson advocated for educational reform. In an editorial report published on August 26, 1888, her entire column talked about how she felt the factory girls would benefit from charity. Mainly, Nelson talked about how education would benefit these girls. For example, many of the girls did not know simple math, but they had to figure calculations when cutting fabric or working as clerks. Nelson also asked that schools provide more practical education, such as lessons in how to maintain health and domestic skills. “The girl must have a sufficiency of physical culture not only to enable her to protect and preserve her health, but to promote it and to economize her strength for a future generation,” she wrote. 

While Nelson appealed to her audiences’ sympathy by describing the conditions of the workers around her, she made herself the heroine of her series by exposing those she felt mistreated her while she was in disguise. Her accounts were written in first-person narrative, but she made an obvious distinction between herself and the workers in the factory. She often referred to her positions as temporary and exposed those in positions of power over the working classes. On August 2, 1888, the headline read, “‘The Times’ Lady Reporter, in the Guise of a Factory Bondwoman, is Insulted by a Scoundrel.” The incident occurred when Nelson was on her way to apply at another factory. She got into a South-side car (dressed in disguise) and realized that she did not have her pocket book with her. “A well-dressed man” paid the fare for her. She got out of the cab and was beginning to cross the road when she was stopped by the same man. He flirted with Nelson. “Instead of raising his hat he jauntily cocked his left eye and came so close to me that the sleeve of my ‘never-rip’ jersey was pressed,” she wrote. She responded by insisting that he give her his business card so she could pay him back, but
he continued to flirt. “With pleasure, my dear,” he responded. She replied with, “You are mistaken, sir. That is not my name.” He called her “mischievous,” to which she forcefully insisted again that she have his card (the name on the card is published in the article). She wrote on the back of the card a simple description of herself which read, “Reporter. The Times.” She handed him the card.\textsuperscript{50}

Nelson’s boldness was something that many working girls could not afford, as noted by a separate report the \textit{Chicago Times} published. In August 1888, the \textit{Chicago Times} learned that the Health Department was investigating a print factory because of a report of indecency. A reporter was asked by the Health Department’s inspector, George Rodgers, if the reporter would like to see a factory where a girl had accused her employer of misconduct. The incident occurred after the employee was told that she had damaged some goods and was going to get docked pay. The shopkeeper offered to straighten out her account so she would not lose any money, after hours. Once she arrived back at the shop after 6 o’clock, the shopkeeper locked the door. The girl quickly unlocked it, ran away, and went to the inspector’s home, the \textit{Chicago Times} reported.\textsuperscript{51} On August 14, 1888, another article in the series was published by Nelson about a court trial that she attended. The judge fined a woman $25 for prostitution. The woman claimed that she had become a prostitute only because she could not make enough money to support herself and her child on factory wages. The choice was between starvation and degradation, Nelson wrote.\textsuperscript{52}

As an undercover working girl, Nelson was exposed to insults and the physical requirements of completing the work, which tasked her endurance. At a tailor shop on Rumsey Street owned by a man named Goldsmith, she became so physically exhausted
that she had to stop. “I perspired at every pore,” she wrote. The second she laid aside the cloak she was supposed to put the finishing stitches into, an argument ensued. The tailor was furious and demanded that she continue working. She refused and asked for her pay. A quarter was thrown at her, and after more arguing she was forced to leave. At a tailor shop at Olson’s on Sedgwick Street she took a position finishing pants. After her work was done for the day, she wrote that her face and hands were coated with dust and dye because again the washroom did not supply soap or towels. At the Union Slipper company on West Lake Street, she struggled to learn how to use a sewing machine for stitching shoe linings. She wrote that the thread kept slipping and the steam coming from the machines made the task unbearable.

The thread kept breaking and at every attempt I ran off the cloth, raveling the edge and getting very much disgusted with my clumsiness. Just as I was beginning to admire the grateful taciturnity and generous forbearance of Foreman Shaffer he told me I had “better get out,” but I begged for tolerance and sawed away on a pair of rags for another hour. A second time I was told to quit and again I begged for mercy, but when the wheel in the region of my knee began to burn I threw down the few pairs of lining I had succeeded in stitching and retired.

While Nelson’s reports continued, controversy remained. The Chicago Times was still fighting the libel lawsuit with The Never Rip Jersey Company, and all of the factories investigated had been writing letters or sending representatives to complain about the newspaper’s coverage of workplace conditions. The Chicago Times responded by printing the dispute on August 6, 1888, in an article titled, “A Second Investigation by Request of Some of the Places Already Visited.” All of the factories that had been written about (the names and addresses were published) had contacted the office either in person or sent a representative. The factory owners protested that the stories were “overdrawn”
and asked that Nelson report on the “real condition of things.” But the Chicago Times stood by Nelson’s reporting:

The entire public seems to be watching the progress of the revelations made by Miss Nelson not only with interest but with constantly increasing indignation at the slave-drivers who are responsible for the state of affairs. Hundreds of letters are received at this office daily commending the work and urging that it be prosecuted until the public is so thoroughly aroused that the evil shall be speedily and permanently corrected.

The Chicago Times article went on to state that many of the establishments that Nelson wrote about had promised to “open their books” for the reporter to look at, but only one (Julius Stein & Co.) of the places followed through on that promise. The Chicago Times requested to see the accounts of how much the girls were paid and a copy of the rules posted in the workroom; both were printed. Mr. Batdorf, owner of The Never-Rip Jersey Company, presented a written letter signed by the workers that attested that the statements Nelson wrote were false. “We feel it our duty to tender you our sympathy at the injustice done you,” the reprinted letter read. But, the Chicago Times said that the letter was drafted by the secretary of the company, George Hamilton, and the girls were asked to sign it in the managers’ presence, and the “handwriting was so similar as to raise a suspicion about it.” Batdorf was so angry that the Chicago Times reported that he threatened to slap Nelson in the face if he met her, she was no lady, and the Chicago Times would pay for what it had published. Unfortunately, the court’s decision could not be found.4

On August 11, 1888, the Chicago Times published an article written by an unnamed male reporter to investigate the factories under the “City Slave Girls” headline.

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4 The Seventh Circuit Court Library in Chicago, the Library of Congress in Washington D.C., and the National Archives and Records Administration in Washington, D.C., were contacted but no records of the case were found.
Quite possibly the newspaper wanted to corroborate Nelson’s accounts by sending in another reporter to investigate workplace conditions. The factories chosen came from a tip that came from a man named Schlesinger, who had worked in the tailor-shops.

Schlesinger said that he knew workplaces that were worse than those Nelson described. The reporter’s findings were similar to Nelson’s: the laborers were being paid only a fraction of what their labor was worth. At Herzog he interviewed Mr. Herzog about the girls who put the finishing stitches into overcoats, and concluded that the shopkeepers were despots.

The factory lords are mere petty tyrants, holding about the position that foremen do in other factories. They get the cloth ready cut from the warehouse and have only to do the sewing. For instance, it was learned that a year or two ago Maunhelmer, Lioman & Co. paid $3 a dozen for sewing cloaks, making 25 cents a cloak. The ordinary rate is from 25 to 35 cents in the factories, according to the grade of the goods. To this is added 4 to 6 cents for finishing. The boss gets 50, 60, 70 cents from the wholesale houses. The Chicago Times again sent another reporter to investigate factory conditions with the health inspector, Rodgers, and the findings were compiled into several reports published with the “City Slave Girls” title. The reporter and health inspector discovered that many women, children, and men were working “where the air is laden with vile odors and diseases” and for money that was only enough to “keep from starving.”

Other complications arose with some of the girls who answered Nelson’s questions, without realizing that their comments would wind up in the paper days later. On August 19, the Chicago Times published another report by the unknown reporter. This reporter found out that at K.B. Oleson’s, an establishment where Nelson worked finishing trousers, she had written that the workers were only paid 5 cents a trouser.
information had come from an employee named Mary Kane. Kane was fired by Mr. Oleson after he read Nelson’s report.⁶⁰

Nelson did find work opportunities that treated their workers fairly and reported this in the series, though finding decent work was rare. Nelson wrote about a business that built chair backs. She compared the trade to “piece-work” done in clothing factories. Instead of putting in finishing stitches into a pair of pants, girls pieced together chairs. Nelson was impressed by this establishment, reporting that it was clean, the employers gave an hour for lunch and a half-holiday on Saturdays, and the girls earned $1.25 to $9 a day (a great improvement from the average $3 or less that shop girls were paid for most jobs Nelson wrote about in her series).⁶¹

The last article of the series in Chicago was published on August 27, 1888. Nelson wrote about a meeting with a woman named Mary McGray who worked in the shops as a seamstress and had written a letter to the editor. Nelson went to McGray’s home on State Street where McGray talked to Nelson about the series. McGray called Nelson “spunky” for finding out the prices of coats, because she said she never knew what she got paid until pay day arrived. McGray confessed that she had tried to talk to a reporter before, but the shopkeeper threatened to fire her the moment the reporter left. Nelson left McGray’s home after giving her some money that another fan of the series had sent.⁶²

Nell Nelson’s Slave Girl Series: New York

In New York City, Nelson resumed her factory investigations series in the New York World’s Sunday editions, less than two weeks later. How the series got picked up in New York or why it ended in Chicago is still a mystery. The first article found in the
World appeared in print on October 7, 1888, titled, “They Work in an Inferno.” In the article, Nelson applied for work at Number 96 Cannon Street finishing coats for one day. Her findings in New York City were similar to those in Chicago. At the tailor shop, she discovered that the workers were living on as little as 50 cents a week and washed their hands in a rusty can because there was no washroom. Nelson added scope and context to her reporting, writing that there were sixty-seven thousand seamstresses in New York City, a number that did not include the women who worked at other factory jobs such as weaving carpets or rolling cigars. By 1890, Nelson’s investigative series took a new direction. She stopped working undercover. In an article called “Girl Toilers,” published on February 18, 1890, Nelson investigated working conditions in one of New York City’s mills by conducting interviews while she toured the building. She concluded her narrative by going home with one of the shop girls.

“Say something in the paper for me,” Nelson’s source asked her. The source was a twenty-year-old girl, who asked Nelson to report that mill girls were treated poorly. She was never named. At Higgins carpet mill, Nelson talked to the manager and employees. A manager named Tibbitts told her there were 1,000 females employed at the mill and that their wages were between $7 and $9 a week, but Nelson found out from a worker that the girls received the money every two weeks, not one. In the weaving room, Nelson interviewed a girl worker named Maggie who said she could make sixty yards of carpet a day. After interviewing several more workers, Nelson found out how much the workers were paid in every department including the weavers, pickers, and printers. The wages had been reduced four times that year. She also asked what time the workers arrived at work to find that they came in at 6:45 a.m. and worked until 7:15 p.m. six days a week.
and a half a day on Saturdays. After Nelson finished looking around the factory, she investigated the home life of the workers. She followed a girl home to her apartment on Tenth Avenue.

She had just returned from a carpet factory, and shreds of colored wool clung to her shabby gown. There was no covering on the floor, and a few chairs and a table made up the furniture. In an adjoining windowless room was a bed and a bureau. It looked an unhappy abode. The girl looked frightened when questioned about her work and pay at the factory. Nelson identified herself as a reporter. The girl asked Nelson not to mention her name because she was afraid of being fired for talking to a reporter. After being reassured that she would remain anonymous, the girl agreed to the interview. She told Nelson that she was earning $25 to $30 a month as a picker at the factory. As a picker, the girl would be given pieces of woven carpet and then pick the threads off of it until the carpet looked clean enough to sell.

At a cigar factory, Nelson found two-hundred women and girls. She wrote that most of the workers were from other countries. “There were no colored girls at any of the tables or boxes, only a few Americans and less than fifty Irish girls,” she wrote. Inside the cigar factory, Nelson was shocked to see women working side-by-side with men, a situation which she reported often led to “laxity of behavior.”

By 1890, Nelson was considered by the World an expert on factory conditions. Underneath an article titled “Sewing Girls” the subhead read, “Nell Nelson Tells of the Hardships of New York Slaves of the Needle.” In more than half of the article, Nelson wrote about the daily lives of seamstresses, though she did not mention any sources. In another article titled “Ribbon Girls,” Nelson referred to her own experience in the
factories. “In a brief, but varied experience, I have explored a score or more workshops in and about New York,” she wrote.

Her notoriety began to make it difficult to talk to sources. While attempting to conduct interviews at a ribbon factory called A & B Blumenthal on West Eighty-Ninth Street, she wrote that the girls were “taciturn, suspicious, and repellent.” “I could get none of them to tell me anything about their income and but little in general about their life. All were loud in their praise of the firm,” she wrote.68

Nelson advocated for better labor conditions by writing an editorial about what she felt needed to be changed. In the article “A Factory Need,” Nelson asked for women inspectors to better factory conditions for the workers by listing things that she felt would improve their conditions.

A few women inspectors might get for the factory girls a little more fresh air and sunlight, a few more chairs, a lunchroom of some sort, a separate entrance or protection from ribald remarks on leaving the shop, cleaner workrooms, safer hallways, an occasional towel, a convenient supply of water and the luxury of dressing-rooms insuring privacy, a hook for wraps and clothing, and the safety of these articles during working hours.69

In the article “Women Inspectors,” Nelson wrote that there were numerous cases of injustice that were reported. She reported that one worker wrote a letter to the New York World that said she had to ask for a pass to get a drink of water, another wrote that in the factory where she worked the dressing room was infested with rats.

But change was on the horizon. Nelson reported that eight women deputy inspectors would be appointed by New York’s Governor with the passage of the Fassett bill. At the time, New York papers were pushing for women factory inspectors and the introduction of the bill, which was made into law three months later, on May 21, 1890.70
The improvements included child labor reduction, ensuring there were fire escapes, clean break rooms, and for retribution for women that were insulted at their workplaces.\textsuperscript{71}

On December 24, 1888, \textit{The St. Paul Daily Globe}, commended Nelson her labor investigations. They even claimed to have inspired Nelson’s series. The Minnesota newspaper also had its own stunt girl working undercover investigating labor conditions, Eva Gay. In response to a report given by the Minnesota state labor commissioner on labor conditions for women, the \textit{Globe} promoted Gay’s undercover investigations by comparing her to Nellie Bly and Nell Nelson.

Those letters attracted general attention, not in labor circles alone, or locally, but throughout the United States. The highest compliment paid them was in the duplication of their character and scope by such newspapers as the Chicago Times and New York World. The ‘White Slave” series, by ‘Nell Nelson’ in Chicago, and the investigations in New York, following the ‘Nellie Bly’ letters in the World, both were suggested by the ‘Eva Gay’ articles in the Globe and were upon the same plan.\textsuperscript{72}

Gay’s series actually followed Nellie Bly’s investigative series on girls making boxes in 1887.\textsuperscript{73} Her investigative reports consisted of five articles that ran shortly in April 1888.\textsuperscript{74} Nelson’s series was printed in the papers for almost two years.
Notes


3 Kroeger, Nellie Bly, 68-70.


12 “Mrs. S.S. Carvalho Was Widow of Former General Manager of Hearst Papers.”


14 Ibid.
“Both Wield the Pen.”


Ibid.

Ibid.

Ibid.


Ibid.


“Both Wield the Pen.”

“Miss Virginia Cusack, a Well-Known Teacher in the Chicago Schools,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, December 23, 1890.

“Both Wield the Pen.”


“The Court Record,” *The Daily Inter Ocean* (Illinois), August 1, 1888.


Nelson, “City Slave Girls: A Lady Reporter’s Experience in the Shops with Sewing Serfs.”


Nelson, “City Slave Girls: Nell Nelson Investigates the Boston Store and Is Shocked at What She Finds.”

Nelson, “City Slave Girls: Nell Nelson Spends a Day among the Serfs and Bondwomen in the Shops of Little Hell.”


Ibid.


Nell Nelson, “City Slave Girls: They Want Neither Pity, Charity, Nor Tracts, but Practical Instruction,” The Chicago Times, August 26, 1888.


Nelson, “City Slave Girls: Nell Nelson Spends a Day Among the Serfs and Bondwomen in the Shops of Little Hell.”


Nelson, “City Slave Girls: A Times Reporter Accompanies a Health Officer on Another Visit to the Slave-Pens.”


68 Nell Nelson, “Ribbon Girls.”


72 [No Title], *St. Paul Daily Globe*, December 24, 1888.


Chapter 3: Elizabeth Bisland and the North American Review

In 1889, Elizabeth Bisland and Nellie Bly embarked on a journey around the world in less than eighty days. The stunt was inspired by Jules Verne’s adventure novel, *Around the World in Eighty Days*, published in 1873. After John Brisben Walker, then-publisher of *Cosmopolitan*, read about Nellie Bly’s pending stunt to mimic Phileas Fogg’s journey in a front-page article in *The New York World*, he saw an opportunity. Walker commissioned young staff writer Elizabeth Bisland to also travel the world in less than eighty days, but going in the opposite direction. On November 14, Bisland boarded a New York Central Railroad Train headed for Chicago, eight and a half hours behind Bly, who was onboard the *Augusta Victoria* headed for England. Thus, the race around the world began.¹

Bisland caught the attention of many newspapers. She was the unknown upstart, while Bly was already famous for her investigative reporting. “Nellie Bly, the well-known correspondent, started on November 13 to go around the world in 75 days,” began an article in the Vermont *Caledonian*, whereas Bisland was referred to as the competitor and for her affiliation with *Cosmopolitan*: “J.B. Walker, the millionaire owner of the *Cosmopolitan* magazine, started Elizabeth Bisland to beat Nellie Bly’s record.”² In Minnesota’s *Daily Globe*, an article that described the two women who were “flying around the earth” was published in December. Bisland was casually referred to as “Nellie Bly’s chaser” and was “outside of the circle of literature.” Both were given brief bios, and there was mention of Bly’s journalistic coverage of working women and Bisland’s journalistic writings on the home, but while Bly’s bio extended a full column and a half, Bisland’s background was summed up in a paragraph.³
After the race was under way, newspapers across the nation largely dramatized the competition. Bisland, no longer referred to as the underling, became synonymously attached to Bly and the race. “If the two young ladies should happen to meet there would be a collision which would make the whole world see stars,” wrote a Missouri newspaper, The Sedalia Weekly Bazoo.4 “These charming racers are Miss Nellie Bly, the famous correspondent of the New York World, and Miss Elizabeth Bisland, the gifted and beautiful literary editor of the Cosmopolitan magazine,” South Carolina’s The Newberry Herald and News wrote about the race in January.5 Comparisons were also made between Bisland and Bly’s characters, in which one was a promisingly young and beautiful southerner the other was the older seasoned reporter. “Miss Bisland is an intelligent and beautiful Creole from New Orleans, and is said to be only 22 years old. Miss Corcoran (Nellie Bly) is near thirty, and has made quite a record as a newspaper reporter,” wrote the Homer (Louisiana) Guardian.6

During the race, Bisland began to build a reputation. She was beautiful and had feminine charm; most importantly, newspapers started to refer to her as a talented writer in the making. When she reached San Francisco, Kansas’s Wichita Eagle commented on Bisland’s beauty and domesticity. “Miss Bisland is quite a beauty. She lives in a little home which is said to be very daintily arranged in its interior.” After the race, Bisland was expected to receive regular assignments from Cosmopolitan, the newspaper reported.7

Bisland returned to New York on January 6, 1890, four days behind Bly, the ultimate winner of the challenge, both in the actual race and as the recipient of the most publicity. Despite losing the challenge, Bisland’s journey did not come without its
reward. She received a lot of attention after *Cosmopolitan* printed the account of her trip, “A Flying Trip around the World,” from April until October of 1890 in seven installments. In 1891, the *Los Angeles Herald* mentioned that while Bly’s career was on the back-burner, Bisland’s seemed to be blooming.

Miss Bly won the race around the world by three days, but she has sunk into obscurity, and her name, which was on everybody’s lips a year ago, is now only tradition. On the other hand, Miss Bisland is still a favorite contributor to *The Cosmopolitan*, from which she is drawing so liberal a salary that she is able to live in London. Miss Bisland has business talent as well as literary ability and personal beauty.

Bisland in History

Despite the *Herald*’s promise of bright prospects, little is known about Bisland after the race. In a search for literature on Bisland, it was discovered that though Bisland’s name appears in some works in relation to the race, as the author of *The Life and Letters of Lafcadio Hearn*—a publication of correspondence between Bisland and the Greek-Irish author Hearn—and for writing for New Orleans’s *Daily Picayune*; however, most historians seem to have forgotten about the woman who once made headlines for her part in the race. Two articles were found that attempted to resurrect Bisland’s name. Paulette D. Kilmer wrote a side-by-side comparison article about Bisland and Bly and their race around the world in relation to how each represented women journalists. The author found that the characters of the two were very different: while Bly boldly challenged women journalists’ roles by accepting challenges and had personal drive that seemed to equal any man’s, Bisland was reserved and seemed apprehensive to go on her journey around the world. Karen Roggenkamp wrote about Bisland’s stunt and how it contributed to the *Cosmopolitan*’s finances. Roggenkamp found that Bisland identified herself as a writer and disliked the bustle of newspaper writing; her accounts of the
journey read like a travel narrative and are filled with poetic descriptions of her travel experiences. The author compared Bisland’s “dignified sensationalism” with The World’s publication, and found that after the race had ended, Cosmopolitan’s circulation bloomed. There was nothing found in scholarly research written about Bisland after the stunt that brought her success, despite the fact that she continued to be published. This chapter begins to fill that gap. In particular, after sketching Bisland’s early life, this chapter looks at Bisland’s contributions to The North American Review, in which she wrote about women’s issues. As an extension of Kilmer’s dual portraits of Bly and Bisland, the study seeks to better understand Bisland, as a writer and a woman during one of the most tumultuous times in women’s history—the suffragette movement. In every work found that was written about Bisland, from Matthew Goodman’s Eighty Days: Nellie Bly and Elizabeth Bisland’s History-Making Race around the World to Roggenkamp’s “Dignified Sensationalism: Elizabeth Bisland, Cosmopolitan, and Trips Around the World,” the study only found her contributions to The North American Review briefly mentioned. No dates of publication in that magazine were mentioned. Based on the earliest work found through this study, it is believed that she started writing for the magazine from around 1894 and continued until 1910.

This study looked at thirteen articles in The North American Review yielded by a search through JSTOR to an archive located at the University of Iowa. The author then selected seven articles to study, after identifying themes of Bisland’s work. Bisland writes about science (medicine and dreams) and socialism (poverty and the unequal distribution of wealth)—four out of thirteen were science related and two out of thirteen focused on socialism. More than half of Bisland’s articles—seven out of thirteen—
mention women as the sole focus of the article, and it is this topic upon which this thesis chapter focuses. In her writings on women, Bisland addresses “the woman question.” She wrote about women in the private sphere, their marital duties and obligations to the children, and women in the public sphere. This chapter analyzes Bisland’s writings in *The North American Review* about women as well as the responses they prompted in other U.S. newspapers, as found by searching for her name in the Library of Congress’s online *Chronicling America* database.

Elizabeth Bisland’s Life

Bisland was born in Louisiana on February 1861. Her father, Thomas Bisland, practiced medicine and was a sugar planter on his inherited estates. She was the second of nine children. She was married on October 6, 1891, to Charles W. Wetmore, a prominent New York lawyer, who also held shares in whaleback steamships. Her biography does not mention her having children.

Bisland’s literary career started when she was only sixteen. Her first work was a Christmas sonnet written under the penname B.L.R. Dane that appeared in New Orleans’s *Times-Democrat*. She continued sending verses in secret, until her writings caught the attention of the editor who wrote to Bisland asking for the name of Dane. Bisland confessed to ownership and began to earn a small living as a salaried writer, now under her real name, for the *Times-Democrat*, writing reviews, verse, and articles.

In 1886, she decided to expand her horizons and moved to New York. With a few letters of introduction and fifty dollars in her pocket, she asked Chester Lord of the *Sun* for work. He tried to persuade her to return home, but eventually agreed to a temporary
trial. She brought him an account of an African burial in New York. The article impressed Chester to the extent that she was given weekly assignments for the Sun.15

Bisland strove to build a reputation, conversing with the literary and artistic set of New York around her tea table and by 1889 started working for the Illustrated American, the Brooklyn Eagle, the Chicago Tribune, as assistant editor of Cosmopolitan Magazine (during which she was assigned to race around the world), and for the New York Sun writing fifty thousand words a month and earning five thousand dollars a year.16

By 1894, Bisland was writing essays for the The North American Review. It is unclear how she got this position, but it is likely that her fame as a “stunt girl” prompted it. The publication was a monthly journal of opinion and literature dealing with current events and comments.17 From 1889 to 1896, the magazine was under the editorship of Lloyd Bryce and was lively and successful for discussing the problems of the day. It featured some critics, including some who claimed that the publication was too “sensational.”18 F.F. Browne, editor of the Dial, a journal of literary criticism,19 commented in 1892 that The North American Review promoted sensation at the cost of dignity. At the time, The North American Review was featuring several essays on contemporary life and manners by progressive writers including Grant Allen, Ouida, Sarah Grand, and Gail Hamilton, among others. The magazine had discussions about many problems including the William Ewart Gladstone and James Gillespie Blaine debate on free trade in 1890, symposiums, and joint debates. In 1899, George B.M. Harvey ran the publication and introduced essays by prominent authors, such as Mark Twain and Henry James.20

Bisland was a writer and woman who had a voice to be heard, and the North American Review enabled her to prove that she was more than the woman who raced with
Bly. In her obituary, *The New York Times* provided detailed account of all of her literary accomplishments under the headline, “Mrs. E.B. Wetmore, Author, Dies in South.”  

Bisland wrote for the *New Orleans Times-Democrat* (founded in 1877), was one of the editors for *Cosmopolitan Magazine*, and contributed to *The Atlantic Monthly* and *The North American Review*. She also wrote many novels: *A Flying Trip Around the World, A Candle of Understanding, The Secret Life, Life and Letters of Lafcadio Hearn, At the Sign of the Hobbyhorse, Seekers in Sicily, The Case of John Smith, The Truth About Men and Other Matters, and Three Wise Men of the East*. She died on January 6, 1929.  

Bisland did not appear to have completely removed herself from her association with Bly and the stunt to race around the world. However, she did continue to write for most of her life and maintain a literary figure status. In particular, her work editing the *Life and Letters of Lafcadio Hearn* earned her attention. The last work that she published *Three Wise Men of the East* was published posthumously in 1930.  

Her name also continued to appear in newspapers well after her race with Bly. In an article on high society in *The Washington Times* in 1919, the newspaper mentioned sighting Bisland and her husband at Lady Baden Powell’s party.  

Another person at whom I caught myself staring was Mrs. Charles Whitman Wetmore, a picturesque figure in a white gown, with a cap of fine lace on her white hair. As Elizabeth Bisland she won fame as a writer and one of her claims of distinction is that she edited the letters of Lafcadio Hern. She lived for many years in the Orient and the lovely home in the woods just off Massachusetts avenue gives evidence of strong Oriental influence. The Wetmores have made their home in Washington for three or four years.  

The publication was nearly thirty years after the race, and mentioned Bisland as being a famous author.
Bisland and “the Woman Question”

Much of Bisland’s early writings on women in The North American Review argued for women to be respected for their feminine attributes. In summary, she wrote that women should not be treated like men; they should be treated like women, and deserved credit for what they bring to the home and the private sphere. She did not believe that women could live without men. Bisland wrote about the importance of maintaining marital institutions, and referred to those who wished to eliminate marital institutions as being destructive. In her later works, beginning in 1898 with “Abdication of Man” the tone changed. Bisland wrote about economic inequality, and called attention to the fact that women were dependent upon men financially, which could be problematic when one’s partner did not fulfill his end of the marital bargain. Bisland’s writings were a reaction to the women’s movement, and often sparred debate.

Although neither Bly nor Bisland identified themselves as suffragists, as working professional women, these issues permeated their lives; therein, before evaluating Bisland’s magazine contributions, it is necessary to summarize that reform’s struggle in the 1890s. The National American Woman Suffrage Association (NAWSA), founded in 1890, was lobbying for change. NAWSA had many objectives, but its primary goal was for women to gain the right to vote. Women supporters of NAWSA believed that the right to vote would help women create a political force that would raise women’s status and promote equality of the sexes.25 It took nearly fifty more years for women to earn the right to vote, granted by the Nineteenth Amendment on August 18, 1920. For the suffragettes to progress their cause they needed to develop their brand of politics, create a constituency, and covert many women to join the cause.26 However, women living during
the suffrage movement were far from being in unilateral agreement as to how the women’s movement should progress, as evidenced in Bisland’s writings.

In “The Cry of the Women,” published on June 1894, Bisland addressed the influx of literature arguing for women’s rights. She mentioned early feminist authors such as Sarah Grand, who also contributed works to *The North American Review* and considered marriage an entrapment, but concluded that these writers were chasing an unpractical ideal and neglected to recognize what women have to offer. Bisland’s response was likely prompted by writings involving “the woman question,” a term that encompassed questions on the role of women in the family and society.27 The question asked how a woman finds a place in society, how women could develop their abilities to become useful members of society. Victorian women argued that they should be able to develop their minds and improve their conditions, in the same way that men do. Some women argued for more educational opportunities, to enable women to enter higher-paid professions, and were suffering because of their economic dependence on men. Others also argued that women needed to have a place in public discourse. On the flip side, many women still held that women should not work outside of the home, because they did not possess the mental capacity to make decisions or direct others.28 Bisland attempted to explain this rift in her essay on the women’s movement. She wrote,

> Free speech and free thought are new to women. Her mind, long cramped in the swaddling-bands of repression and convention, moves with staggering uncertainty towards its aim, she cannot define, even to herself, much less state clearly to the world, the true meaning of the pain she feels.29

Bisland wrote that the “pain” that women feel stemmed from arguing that women should be on equal footing with men, instead women needed to work on developing their identity as women. “For heaven’s sake let the woman cease to set the mental and material
achievements of man before her as the standard to which she must perforce raise herself at the sacrifice of her own great talent,” she wrote later in the narrative.30

In the same edition alongside “The Cry of the Woman” The North American Review also published two articles on woman suffrage by Governor Davis Hanson Waite of Colorado and Governor Lorenzo Crounse of Nebraska, who were both in favor of women’s right to vote.31 The letters were in response to NAWSA rallies in New York to strike the word “male” from the U.S. Constitution.32 During the suffrage movement, the word “male” was a main justification in prohibiting women from voting.33 Although Bisland never directly addressed the women’s right to vote, her consistent references to masculine and feminine attributes could have been prompted by the political context.

For Bisland, women’s accomplishments included being a good wife and, mainly, raising children. She argued that these accomplishments should be considered equal to men’s accomplishments by society and women should not compare their accomplishments with male achievements—both legally and politically. Instead, women should be proud of raising their children and dedicate themselves to raising future generations. “Let women run the race, paint, write, teach, speak, as her talents dictate, but let her use these things as being only the pasttimes, not the work, of her life,” she wrote.34 Furthermore, Bisland argued that too many women were attempting to compare themselves to the male standards of accomplishment. To this she responded that while women had gifts that men did not have, such comparison did little to uplift women. After all, women are what made men, she argued: “Did man make this? Well, I made those who made this!”35
Bisland provided an overview of feminine accomplishments again in “Educating a Daughter,” published in November 1894, in an essay that argued for women to have an education in housewifery. “Fifty years—a hundred years—ago,” American women were masters of trades such as, “carding, weaving, spinning, dyeing, sewing, butter and cheese and lard marking, canning, preserving, pickling, curing of meats, candle moulding, and manufacture of stockings.” Bisland wrote that the “girl of today” did not learn any of those necessary skills. She asked for a different kind of education, one that would train and teach women “higher housewifery” to equip them for life. She wrote this to challenge the educational system, which taught girls an overview of skills, such as math and science that they could do little with since occupations that require said skills were solely occupied by men.

However, there were growing numbers of women entering the workforce from 1860 to 1920. In the 1890s, many women in the workforce were single and under twenty-five, and by 1900 twenty percent of women in America were employed. At the same time, change was a topic of discussion. In the 1890s a growing number of women’s clubs were sprouting. These clubs primarily focused on self-development and literary activities, but increasing numbers also participated in volunteer activities that aided women and children as well as advocated for legislation on child labor and mother’s pensions. This shift created a separation between the duties that a woman had to the home and her children and to the outside world’s politics and marketplace, the private and the public sphere.

Despite these numbers and the fact that Bisland herself was a professional writer, it did not appear that she felt that woman’s place was in the workforce. It is possible that
her belief was supported by the fact that she was did not have to depend on her own income as a writer as a means of support because of her husband’s wealth whom she had married three years earlier. Wetmore was attractive and a millionaire. North Dakota’s Evening Times wrote in a marriage announcement titled “Brilliant Marriage by Southern Girls” that she had married one of New York’s most eligible bachelors. Despite the growing numbers of women entering the workforce, women were not accepted into the public sphere. Women were forced to accept low-paying jobs with limited opportunity, and many left their occupations as soon as they were married. For most working women, having a profession was more of a necessity than a challenge to the public sphere, as the workforce was comprised mainly of immigrants and African-Americans. Women worked as nurses and teachers. Few worked in literature, law, medicine, ministry, and journalism.

By 1895, Bisland’s refinement began to earn her a reputation, and she was referred to as the soft-spoken southern girl with a dignified bearing: “Beautiful, high-bred and refined, yet she had the brains of a clever man, and used them ably,” wrote Jennie June in the Daily Globe on the aftermath of Bisland’s race.

In “The Modern Woman and Marriage,” published in June 1895, Bisland argued that the feminine instinct was to care for her children: “Love of offspring is in man a cultivated emotion; in woman an instinct.” Bisland furthered this discussion by relating motherhood to an allusion of an alligator protecting its young from being eaten by the male through her writings. She wrote about women’s tenacity and endurance:

She has yielded all outward show of authority; she has submitted to be scoffed at as an inferior creation, to be sneered at for feebleness and shallow-mindedness, to be laughed at for chattering inconsequence, and to be regarded as a toy and trifle to amuse man’s leisure hours, or as a dull drudge for his convenience, for ends are
not achieved by talking about them. All the ages of masculine discussion of the Eternal Feminine show no reply from her, but to-day the world is a woman’s world.45

On marriage, she found that women found power and “raised the relation between man and herself” and criticized those that attacked the marital institution.46 For Bisland, a woman’s duty was to her children first and foremost, but that duty was important because she could not imagine a man fulfilling it. She ended her narrative by asking, “if she were alone, she might choose to make herself homeless—but how of the little children?”47

On June 18, 1895, Minnesota’s New Ulm Review discussed the outcry of suffragettes who were upset by a speech given by Bishop William Croswell Doane of Albany to a graduating class in a women’s seminary. The bishop made remarks such as that the suffragette movement was an infliction and that not only did women seem to want to vote but they also wanted to do man’s work as well. The writer of the article advised that if the bishop had read Bisland’s writings prior to giving his speech, he would have known that the “new woman” was a “dangerous creature to stir.”48 Despite the fact that Bisland was simply talking about the importance of maintaining women’s place in the private sphere, the article did not seem to make any distinction. “She is bent on full emancipation. Elizabeth Bisland says woman now has man under her feet and means to keep them there,” the articles said, referring to Bisland’s article “The Modern Woman and Marriage.”49 In “The Modern Woman and Marriage,” Bisland wrote, “She has with bare and bloody feet climbed the steep road of wide empire, but to-day she stands at the top—mistress of the world.”50 The article continued to warn about how women had changed and how that change would affect society. “Constant association by young women with men, doing business with men, adopting men’s expressions, slang and all,
inevitably evaporates the lovely feminine characteristics of gentleness, modesty; the woman nature is impaired,” the newspaper said. Bisland’s work did support domesticity, but her articles did not support female modesty or subjectivity.

“The Modern Woman and Marriage” caught the attention of newspapers across the nation. Several newspapers reprinted Bisland’s writing, and discussion on women’s roles in society was played out in the media. Sacramento’s The Record-Union did not accord with the New Ulm’s Review’s commentary on Bisland’s work and the “new woman,” which called Bisland’s article “brave and courageous.” On July 8, 1895, the Orleans County Monitor republished sections of Bisland’s work, as did The United Opinion in Vermont a few days later. Under the headline “Modern Woman and Marriage: Why She Cannot Toss Away the Prize She Has Won after Ages of Effort,” the Times introduced Bisland as “striking” the hearts of every woman.

In her able paper in The North American Review; under the above heading, Elizabeth Bisland strikes a note that should vibrate in the heart of every woman in the land. After showing how the instinct of motherhood has kept up the courage and endurance of woman through endless generations to fight for and finally win that foundation stone of her power—monogamous marriage.

Bisland also contended that men had a part to play as well: to praise women for their feminine virtues. “Her ideal husband regards her neither as a mistress, chum, nor servant. Her motherhood raises her in his eyes above all three,” she wrote of women’s ideal husband, in “A Study of Husbands,” published in January 1896. Bisland believed that the problem with modern times, probably referring to the suffragettes, came about because men often overlooked women’s contributions to the home. She referred to women as “priestesses” in both “Educating a Daughter” and in “A Study in Husbands.” Furthermore, men should encourage women to develop their skills. “While he assumes all
the rougher share of life he is extremely exacting of her within her sphere, and demands the very best exertion of her powers,” she wrote. Bisland directly referenced the “sphere” presumably to differentiate a woman’s place from a man’s. She also mentioned that men should “demand” that women exercise their domestic skills. She referred to women who seem charming yet ornamental, types of women who could be taken to social engagements, as being negative. Instead, men should look for the type of woman who has the capacity to care for the home and children. However, Bisland was mindful of how societal changes complicate the “natural order.” As she wrote, many women were forced to find occupations out of necessity. She wrote that if men were not going to provide for women, then women must have a way to earn their living and this has changed the nature of the relationship between husbands and wives: “No wonder a woman finding herself forced to work insists on having a room to do it in.”

By 1896, Bisland no longer needed to be identified as the woman who raced with Nellie Bly. She was known as a literary lady. In a blurb about whether women can be both attractive and intelligent Arizona’s The St. Johns Herald wrote, “Elizabeth Bisland Whetmore [sic] and Miss Grace Gould would be notable for their physical beauty if they had not already gained distinction by their intellectuality.”

The ways in which children are raised were also a concern for Bisland. In “Are American Parents Selfish?” published in July 1897, Bisland discussed parents’ indulgences. She criticized parents for spending all of their wealth to make life easier for their children, but neglecting to provide for their own children’s futures. “No thought is taken of the time when they must set up households for themselves—almost invariably upon a very different scale from the one to which they have been used,” she wrote. This
expenditure becomes an issue when the children become accustomed to having
everything and cannot adapt when they enter adulthood. As far as expenditures, Bisland
commented about summer trips, eating rich food, and amusements. For girls these
excesses can be particularly problematic “When his daughters marry he expects their
husbands to be solely responsible for their future, and if they do not succeed in marrying
wealth, why so much the worse for them,” she wrote.\textsuperscript{60} Though the focus of her essay
was on providing for children, Bisland recognized the difficulty that many women faced:
if there was no inheritance a woman would be forced to enter the public sphere.

In “The Abdication of Man,” published in August 1898, Bisland’s writings
became bolder and angrier. She began her article by references of the United States’ war
with Spain, but related it to status of the woman question.

In the midst of the excursions and alarums of war and preparation for war a
sudden and great silence has fallen upon the everlasting discussion of the relations
of the sexes. Before the stern realities of that final and bloody argument of
Republics as well as Kings further dissection of the Woman Question has been
deferred.\textsuperscript{61}

The rest of her essay transitions into a narrative about men, whom she referred to as
knights and heroes who have become selfish. She wrote about how women were taking
on more responsibilities, and delved into history to explain how men have reigned
historically. She mentioned guilds and the crusades and talked about women who were
forced to work at undesirable occupations, and the labor organizations that would not
allow women in. She contrasted this with a narrative of women who have successfully
held power, such as Queen Elizabeth I, and mentioned feminist writer Mary
Wollstonecraft’s questioning of man’s right. She accused men of abdicating their duties.
“When man ceased to govern, woman was not long in throwing off the sham of
subjection that remained,” she wrote. She continued to write about how men used to hunt and gather, but that machinery put an end to the “old patriarchal system of home manufactures.” Bisland lamented that many women have to provide their own roofs and bread. In addition to not providing for women, Bisland again mentioned domesticity, though in a less positive light than in her earlier writings. “The universal unpopularity of domestic service proves that the duties of a woman are in themselves neither agreeable nor interesting.”

In an unsigned editorial published by *The Wichita Daily Eagle*, Bisland appeared to have sparked controversy again. “Why Miss Bisland did not take the bovine by the horns and hold for a conclusion on this vexed question does not appear,” the newspaper wrote on the woman question. Further on, the article concluded that Bisland’s vision would destroy the fabric of society. “Marriage, instead of a sacrament, will degenerate, first into a civil contract, then into a simple optional copartnership, with compensating concessions to the woman in the event of motherhood,” the article said. In a letter to the editor written the following day, one reader fired back at the writer of the editorial. “Is it a vexing question? Swear at her if you will. What man now-a-days wants a nonentity to sit at his side to held his pens,” she wrote.

In “The Morals of the Modern Heroine,” Bisland wrote about female literary figures’ evolution and how they operate as representations of society. Female literary figures were at first idealized. In Greek literature they were “rosy, laughing, comfortable young persons with the morals of rabbits and the mentality of butterflies,” she wrote in 1908. Women became bolder in the Victorian age. She referenced others such as Jane Austen and George Eliot, with transitions about her own time. “We are now in the period
of the full emancipation of the heroine—an emancipation which she owes largely to her own sex,” she wrote. The unquestioning loyalty to men and unchecked virtue belonged to women in the past, she wrote. “The Hester Prynne of to-day would make scarlet letters fashionable.” She ended her narrative by taking a jab at her old competitor, Nellie Bly.

There is a suggestion here of a new direction for a certain well-known person’s inexhaustible energy. A fresh interpretation of the Constitution might easily be made to cover her case and bring her under Federal regulation.

Bisland referred to her old competitor as “a certain well-known person” with “inexhaustible energy,” alluding to Bly’s determination to win the race. She contrasted her own views on women and how they should behave in society by referencing the then current debate to rephrase the constitution to include women, but poked fun at the fact Bly’s supposed lack of femininity needed to be regulated. By doing so, Bisland distanced herself from more liberal women writers. Her writing alluded to impeding changes—on women’s social status and lack of opportunities in the public sphere, but ultimately she still carried her belief that women’s contributions to the home were important and necessary for a functioning society.

Bisland’s humor does not seem to have resonated with her audience. In an article reacting to “The Morals of the Modern Heroine,” in the *New York Times*, the writer implied that Bisland was afraid of saying too much. The article commended Bisland for discussing that the characters in literature have changed and that this was a reflection of society, but the writer of the article did not feel that Bisland went far enough with her interpretations. “But when the novelist critic comes to her own opinion on the bewildering changes she notes, and on the relation which the morals of the modern heroines bear to her own conception of standard morals, she is disappointingly vague,”
the newspaper said. The article went on to say that Bisland’s work seemed to be
“question begging,” because she presented an issue but did not give any resolution. The
*Times* compared Bisland’s apparent timidity with Bly’s lack of it by spinning Bisland’s
pun on Bly.

Is the varied manifestation of changing notions described by the writer in the
Review regarded by women generally as, at the last, it is regarded by her, as a
passing pleasantry which may be dismissed by referring it to treatment by “a
certain well-known person’s inexhaustible energy,” along with railway rates and
race suicide?71

Bisland’s writings in *The North American Review* challenged notions of
domesticity, and argued that women’s accomplishments should be respected. This
challenge earned Bisland an audience that was inspired enough to write articles about her
words in newspapers all across the country; whether they agreed with them or not, her
words were worthy of debate. Bisland’s writings encouraged discussion on women’s
place in society during a pivotal time in women’s history, a role that established her as a
writer and enabled her to build a reputation that went beyond being Bly’s competitor, the
stunt girl, or a sensational headline.
Notes


2 “Note and Comment,” *St. Johnsbury (Vermont) Caledonian*, November 21, 1889.


4 *The Sedalia Weekly Bazoo* (Missouri), November 26, 1889.


6 “A Trip around the World,” *Homer Guardian* (Homer, Louisiana), January 24, 1890.

7 “She is Running a Race around the World with Nellie Bly,” *Wichita Eagle* (Wichita, Kansas), December 26, 1889.


9 “Miss Bisland’s Business Tactics,” *Los Angeles Herald*, April 7, 1891.


14 Ibid. 5768-69.
Ibid. 5770.

Ibid.


Ibid. 51.

Ibid. 99.

Ibid. 51.


“Mrs. E. B. Wetmore, Author, Dies in South;” Roggenkamp, “Dignified Sensationalism.”

Roggenkamp, “Dignified Sensationalism.”


Ibid. 324.


Ibid. 759.


Ibid.

37 Ibid.


39 Ibid.


42 Harris, *Beyond her Sphere*, 95-126.


44 Elizabeth Bisland, ”The Modern Woman and Marriage” *The North American Review*, June 1895, 753.

45 Ibid.

46 Ibid.

47 Ibid.


49 Ibid.


51 “Mad at Bishop.”

52 “Note and Comment,” *The Record-Union* (Sacramento, California). June 4, 1895.


56 Ibid. 116.
57 Ibid. 118.
60 Ibid. 40.
62 Ibid. 195.
63 Ibid.
64 Ibid. 198.
68 Ibid. 231.
69 Ibid. 235.
70 Ibid. 236.
Chapter 4: Ada Patterson the “Nellie Bly of the West”

A colleague of Ada Patterson’s at the San Francisco Call said in 1895 that Patterson, known as the “Nellie Bly of the West,” exhibited male and female attributes:

Virile of intellect, alert, clear sighted, with all the varied qualities necessary to a successful business man. Miss Patterson is at the same time an attractive little woman, gentle, tender, sensitive and unassuming.¹

Historians have noted that at the heart of the stunt girl movement were women journalists who saw an opportunity to break into reporting by taking on dangerous assignments. Patterson’s career reflected this sentiment. From climbing the St. Louis City Tower to interviewing men before they faced the gallows, Patterson was a woman who would do anything to break the gender barrier and become a journalist.²

When looking for the third stunt girl to complete the series, the author stumbled upon the name of Ada Patterson, who was said to be the “Nellie Bly of the West.” Out of curiosity, the author decided to look more deeply into Patterson’s work and what biographical content could be found that could explain meriting the name. After searching for Patterson in scholarly articles and sifting through citations, it was discovered that Patterson had a diverse career in journalism, spanning from the late nineteenth century into the early twentieth century. Determined to be just as good at journalism as her male cohorts, Patterson took on many assignments from stunts to covering murder trials.

The articles she wrote for the St. Louis Republic were selected for further study because the name “Nellie Bly of the West” was said to be a byproduct of her work as a reporter at the St. Louis Republic. After leaving the St. Louis Republic, Patterson
transitioned into the “sob sister” movement, and later wrote articles about New York’s theater scene for New York magazines.  

To trace Patterson’s life, the author referenced a short biography of Ada Patterson written by Stacey Hamilton for *American National Biography Online*, Phyllis Leslie Abramson’s *Sob Sister Journalism* in which she briefly looked at Patterson’s contributions to the *New York American* to provide biographical information, and two well-known “stunt girl” and “sob sister” researchers: Villanova University Professor Jean Marie Lutes and journalist and biographer, Ishbel Ross. In Lute’s *Front-Page Girls*, Lutes briefly wrote about Patterson’s career as a stunt girl and Patterson’s coverage of millionaire Harry K. Thaw’s murder trial in 1907 for killing famed architect Stanford White. Ross was the only biographer found to have interviewed Ada Patterson. Ross’s *Ladies of the Press*, published in 1936, provided a brief summary of Patterson’s career and her coverage of Thaw and fellow millionaire murderer Arthur Duestrow from interviews collected.  

This chapter examines all found articles that Ada Patterson wrote as a reporter for the *St. Louis Republic*, seeking through deep reading to identify her reporting tactics. Articles were sought through the library subscription based service called Readex Microprint Corporation, a division of NewsBank. The website’s American’s historical newspapers’ database had copies of the *St. Louis Republic* full-text from 1888 to 1900. Ada Patterson’s name was searched and rendered 188 results. Of those, articles that did not refer to Ada Patterson as an author of the article and advertisements for upcoming articles were thrown out. Sixty-two articles were found and five-nine articles were selected for study. The last three articles were written while Ada Patterson was in New
York, and presumably working for the *New York American*, so those were also removed from study as they do not showcase her work while she was a reporter for the *St. Louis Republic*. Three additional advertisements advertised an additional three articles, but they were not available in the archives. To help fill in some biographical content, a search through the Library of Congress’s Chronicling America website of full-text American newspapers published before 1923 was conducted with keywords “Ada Patterson.”

Ada Patterson and her Newspaper Contributions

Ada Patterson was born in Mount Joy, Pennsylvania, on July 5, 1867, the daughter of John M. Patterson, a farmer, and Elizabeth Ellen McDannel Patterson. At the age of ten, the Patterson family moved to Franklin County, Nebraska. Ada Patterson attended the Franklin Academy until she was eighteen years old and then became a teacher. She taught in Riverton and for one or two years in Lincoln. Patterson started writing for newspapers fairly early in life; some biographers have said that she was as young as fourteen. But it does not appear that she was writing regularly until around the early 1890s. Patterson moved from city to city taking on journalism jobs. She wrote for newspapers across the country, including the *Chicago Tribune* and *Nebraska State Journal*.

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1 Ada Patterson, “One Week in the Chorus,” *St. Louis Republic*, August 13, 1896; Ada Patterson, “Her Midnight Ride,” *St Louis Republic*, August 23, 1896. The dates and titles of the articles are based on advertisements found. The actual articles were unrecovered. An additional article was mentioned in a heading that read, “Ada Patterson Will Write of Notable Criminals Who Have Been Forgotten in the Obscurity of the Missouri Penitentiary.” The article should have appeared on Sunday, June 27, 1897.

2 “San Francisco Newspaper Women,” *The Salt Lake City* (Utah) *Herald*, September 19, 1895 and “Off for the Coast,” *The Salt Lake City Herald*, May 22, 1895. *The Salt Lake City Herald* article “San Francisco Newspaper Women” mentioned that Patterson had worked for the *Chicago Tribune* and *Nebraska State Journal* for a few years before she began working for *The Salt Lake City Herald*. *The Salt Lake City Herald* article “Off for the Coast” mentioned that Patterson had worked for the paper for two years, which would have been sometime in 1893.
Journal. When Patterson moved to Utah in 1893, she was offered a position as the society editor for The Salt Lake City Herald. The staff loved her enough that they continued writing updates about Patterson’s career well after she left the paper.

At The Salt Lake City Herald, Patterson was more than just a society editor. She reported on proceedings of a sixty-day session of the Utah Senate, despite notions that a woman could not write about politics. She also interviewed Enoch Davis, who was on death row for murdering his wife, because the paper had sent its male reporters to inspect the stock yards on another story. Despite her success, Patterson was always thinking of her next move.

In 1895, Patterson left The Salt Lake City Herald to work for the San Francisco Call, where she was able to progress beyond the women’s pages. This transition meant a promotion from society editor to a general assignment reporter in around three years’ time. As a general assignment reporter, Patterson also took on her first “stunts,” such as applying to work undercover at a canning factory. It is unclear why Patterson left the Call, but articles in the St. Louis Republic begin to appear in 1896.

Patterson’s work at the St. Louis Republic merited her the title “Nellie Bly of the West,” according to her obituary in the New York American. How she got the name was not mentioned. At the St. Louis Republic, Patterson started working as a feature reporter. She wrote for the St. Louis Republic for more than one year. The reputation she gained and her ability to cover criminal cases landed her a job in New York, and eventually a reputation as being one of the four “sob sisters.”

Around August of 1897, Patterson left the St. Louis Republic because an offer from Bradford Merrill, editor of The World. Her coverage of the Duestrow trial while
working at the *St. Louis Republic* earned her reputation and an accompanying feature
story in the *World* just months prior for being the first woman to cover an execution.\(^\text{13}\)

But, upon arriving in New York, Patterson found that Merrill was on a holiday and no
one at *The World* knew about the job offer. A man she knew out West came to her rescue,
which led to a job with the *New York American* instead. She was told, “Come over to our
shop. An editor wants a woman’s job done in a hurry.”\(^\text{14}\)

In New York City, Patterson’s first assignment for the *New York American* was to
inspect the caisson of the East River Bridge. The men working under the bridge were
working underwater to fashion the foundations of the bridge’s towers. By breathing
compressed air, many experienced decompression sickness—sometimes called “the
bends”—when they resurfaced. She was forewarned that the air pressure in the caisson at
the bottom of the river might cause deafness. Unfortunately, by the time the *New York
American* went to print the story a reporter from another paper had been tipped off. Both
stories were printed on the same day. The misfortune was one that Patterson would not
easily forget, as she would safeguard her “tips” from eavesdropping reporters for the rest
of her career.\(^3\)

At the *New York American*, she took on assignments such as riding in a
submarine and with a race car driver.\(^\text{15}\) But, she became more noted for her trial
coverage. The most famous trial she covered was the Harry K. Thaw murder trial in

\(^3\) Ross, *Ladies of the Press*, 68-69. There are historical discrepancies as to the date that Patterson started
writing for the *New York American*. According to Lutes, Patterson covered the “East River Scoop” in 1894.
Lutes attributed this to an article “Down under the East River” by “Meg Merrilies” in the *New York World*
published on April 22, 1894. However, the article refers to a “Meg Merrilies” who inspected a tunnel under
the East River Bridge, whereas Ross mentioned that Patterson wrote about men who were suffering from
decompression sickness, Caisson’s Disease. In addition, it was found in the study that Ada Patterson was
writing for *The Salt Lake City Herald* at the time. Though it is possible that Patterson travelled to New
York City and took on an assignment with the *New York American* (a paper that she would work for later in
her career) while working for *The Salt Lake City Herald*, it was deemed unlikely.
1907, in which she reported alongside Dorothy Dix, Winifred Black, and Nixola Greely-Smith, and became associated with the “sob sister” genre, writing at the time for the *New York Evening Journal*.

Patterson ended her career writing magazine articles for women’s and theater magazines starting in 1923. She was never married. She died in Sarasota, Florida, on June 26, 1939, at the age of 72. Biographer Ross described Patterson’s career as “spectacular.” “She [Patterson] entered journalism by way of a pupil teacher’s desk and long before she found the open door on Park Row, she was known as the Nellie Bly of the West.”

Ada Patterson’s Reporting for the *St. Louis Republic*

“John Grant, McKinley’s manager in Texas will be the Adonis of the convention,” Ada Patterson wrote in an article titled “Big Politicians as They Seem to a Little Woman” days before the National Convention, published on June, 10, 1896. Nearly a hundred other correspondents had traveled to St. Louis for the 1896 National Convention of the Republican Party held in St. Louis’ City Hall. The Republican candidates included Thomas Brackett from Maine, Matthew S. Quay, who was a senator from Pennsylvania; New York Governor Levi P. Morton, and former Ohio Governor William McKinley, who would become the twenty-fifth president of the United States. Patterson was in a group of twenty male reporters assigned by the *St. Louis Republic* to cover the convention. She provided the “woman’s point of view.”

Patterson had already been chatting with representatives to the parties before the June 16 to 18 convention. She asked John Grant, McKinley’s manager, about McKinley’s opposition to so-called “silver men” because they supported the silver trade. “Silver men”
wanted to switch the foundation of American money from gold to silver. McKinley was a
gold man. McKinley would later help pass the Gold Standard Act approved on March 14,
1900 which said all U.S. currency was worth a percentage in gold, not silver.²³ The
bimetallism debate was an ongoing hot topic during the 1896 election. Grant told
Patterson that the McKinley team would “snow them [the silver men] under, so deep we
will never hear from them again.”²⁴ Four days before the convention Patterson reported
that there was “dissention” between the “goldites” and “silver forces.”²⁵

Yet, for all the hype leading to the convention, Patterson found the actual event!
boring. “There were no surging waves of enthusiasm such as I was led to expect; no
masculine hysterics and no oratory. It was as tame as a church service,” she wrote.²⁶ The
only amusement occurred during the morning, when some “goldbugs’” seats were given
to the “sulverties.” She wrote she heard some profanity when the error was discovered.

Once everyone was settled into the St. Louis City Hall, after around 11 a.m., the
nine hundred delegates were called to order. The speeches were long, and Patterson
nearly drifted often to sleep but was awakened with the words “that the men nominated
here will be the President and Vice President of this country.” She struggled to pay
attention, but was ultimately disappointed, even with the candidates. “The one candidate
in view, fat and placid Senator Garret A. Hobart, was as calmly observant as any other
person in the unimpassioned audience,” she wrote about the man who would be the future
vice president of the United States.²⁷ On the last day of the convention Patterson wrote
descriptions of everyone she saw, from the wives of the candidates to the Republican
Party members’ dress. “General Grosvenor of Ohio was the most picturesque figure on
the platform,” she wrote.²⁸ Patterson wrote that politics did not agree with her. But she
was also a Democrat. “I don’t know exactly what can be had instead of them [the conventions]. Perhaps a monarchy,” she wrote. The *Hartford (Kentucky) Herald* quoted Patterson as saying, “I think politics is a mania.”

Despite Patterson’s comments about steering clear of politics, just weeks later, she went to Chicago to cover the Democratic Convention held at the Chicago Coliseum from July 7 to July 11. The Democratic presidential candidate was William Jennings Bryan. Days before the convention, on July 3, Patterson wrote that she came to Chicago to learn what men see in politics. “Games are being played fast and furious in Chicago. They are much like checkers, except that delegations take the place of kings, and sudden and startling are the jumps and double jumps,” she wrote.

Patterson began her study of “games” by paying a call to Colonel Griff Prather, Missouri’s Democratic national committeeman, at his office. Colonel Prather was surprised by the unexpected visit, “Talk to you about the money question? But what’s the use?” the colonel asked. Patterson persisted. “I don’t want to see our currency debased and our financial standing discredited,” he said briefly. Unsatisfied, Patterson then went to seek out some “silver” supporters. She chose George Congdon Gorham, a Republican politician from California and former secretary of the United States Senate. Patterson decided to pay a visit to Gorham at his home. He was surprised by the visit but decided to indulge Patterson with an interview. Gorham told her the history of silver demonetization was a “surreptitious fraud upon Congress and the people, perpetrated chiefly by John Sherman in the Senate and Samuel Hopper in the House.”

In the end, Patterson wrote that she was not swayed by either party’s explanations, “And it struck me that the silver men have missed on of their best
arguments: Appearances. Think of how heavy five silver dollars make a purse look,” she wrote. Yet when she saw Bryan at the convention, she described Bryan as a “grand young man of the Democracy.” She continued that he had an “imposing figure, Roman features, smooth-shaven face and hair like the proverbial raven’s wing.” Bryan’s speech on “freeing silver” (known today as the Cross of Gold speech, which won the nomination for Bryan) swayed Patterson. “I don’t know and don’t care whether it was logical, it was superb and that was enough for me,” she wrote. She later wrote that she was wearing a “Bryan badge.”

By August 1896, Patterson was writing frequently for the *St. Louis Republic,* at least one or two articles a week. She was not covering politics anymore, though it is unclear as to why the transition occurred. Patterson’s writings became predominately adventure driven. The *St. Louis Republic* published advertisements on the front page of the paper that read “Ada Patterson will have one of her most engaging chapters in The Sunday Republic.” Most of the articles were placed on the back pages of the Sunday paper under “Special Features.” Patterson said later, “I did anything I was asked to” during her early newspaper career.

Her adventures included spending the night at the central police headquarters and describe the incoming offenders, attending a ball at a mental hospital, and having her fortune told. For one story, Patterson learned how to be a cub pilot on a steamship. She took turns steering with the other boys on the ship who worked in shifts. Patterson had the night shift. The *St. Louis Republic* positioned the article next to a cartoon drawing of Patterson behind the wheel. The cutline read, “How a Republic Girl Steered the Quincy.”
Many stories involved Patterson, who was the central character, describing professions or situations that were out of the ordinary. She viewed a cremation ceremony at the Missouri Crematoria, providing a detailed description of bodies during every step in the process. For another assignment, she went on to witness a dissection, in which she was horrified to see medical men excitedly cutting into the corpses.

Patterson was up for anything. She once asked to witness an operation at the City Hospital. The doctor agreed on the provision that she would not faint. The patient had fractured his skull after jumping off of a moving train. She made good on her promise, despite the strong chloroform odor that filled the room and the sickening, crunching noise that came from the surgeon’s knife cutting into the man’s skull.

Many of her adventure articles, or “stunt journalism,” were humorous or just amusing to read. For one article, she traveled from St. Louis to Cincinnati, Ohio, to write about Phillip Fosdick’s Anti-High-Theater-Hat Law. The 1896 Ohio law mandated that women’s hats could only be a certain height when attending a theater. Patterson found many offenders that night.

On another occasion she was assigned to go husband hunting for one day. She applied for a husband at the Matrimonial Bureau. Miss Felicity, a buxom woman with blond hair and brown eyes who served as the establishment’s manager, conducted the interview. “Are you fond of society,” Miss Felicity asked. Patterson told her “not especially.” “Do you like to travel,” was the next question. Patterson said “yes.” The last question was “how much must your husband be worth?” Patterson did not know how to respond, but she resolved to say “$5,000.” After providing Miss Felicity with some fake addresses of references and paying $5 for Miss Felicity’s services, Patterson was asked to
come back in the evening to meet some eligible bachelors. An artist at the *St. Louis Republic* accompanied Patterson. Patterson was nervous, but grateful that she had company. “I looked upon him as a tower of strength in that borderland of matrimony,” she wrote. To excuse the presence of the artist, Patterson said that he was her brother.

Patterson was taken into a small pallor room in the rear of Miss Felicity’s establishment. The artist sat in a chair in the hallway and waited while she was introduced to her matrimonial candidates. The first turned out to be a very tall newspaperman. At first she was nervous to learn that the bachelor worked in newspapers, but she was reassured when she learned that it was in advertising. Her date spent most of the time talking about himself. Patterson wrote that she wished she could ring a bell to exchange partners.

Eventually she abruptly told the newspaperman, “Don’t let me detain you any longer, Mr. Sillykins,” to politely end the date. When Miss Felicity entered again, Patterson was told that she would be introduced to another man who worked as a contractor building wells. The conversation was awkward and there were long periods of silence. Patterson ended the night by using her “brother” as an excuse and said that it was getting to be late. She gave the second bachelor a card with another fake address on it, and left the establishment still unmarried.46

Always ready for another adventure, when Patterson climbed St. Louis’s city tower to ring its bell she had to walk across unsteady boards high above the ground. The St. Louis City Tower was still under construction. Accompanied by a male construction worker, Patterson struggled not to look down or let her fear show. On her return to the ground Patterson wrote, “it was really thrilling this time, and with only enough danger to give spice to the adventure.” Later, her guide told her that she was a “brave woman.”47
Her next stunt involved a ride-a-long with the St. Louis fire chief. Patterson wrote:

If you of the genus feminine, whether of the species new or old, contemplate a drive to a fire with the Chief, secure your hat with at least four extra pins, those friends of your sex, and renew your courage and faith.\textsuperscript{48}

The assignment was a result of reports the day before that an assistant fire chief had been severely injured on duty. The assistant had gotten tangled in the hose and knocked unconscious. Patterson accompanied the fire chief on a round to see the dangerous job responsibilities for herself. At one point during the ride to put out a street fire, the horses got out of control and the carriage nearly tipped. Patterson described the near death experience in full detail.\textsuperscript{49}

Many articles featured Patterson traveling to poorer areas in St. Louis. For one article, she interviewed homeless men who lived by a levee near the Mississippi River’s Eads’ railway bridge. Patterson asked about their history and asked why they were homeless. Two men named John Lookaup and Mike Loftus explained their sad stories, blaming the “drink” for their downfalls. An Irish immigrant named John McGowan came to seek his fortune as a traveling salesman but could not make a living on his sales. Many of the men could not find jobs and fell into depression. “Social conditions are in great measure responsible. I do not blame a man for getting desperate when he is anxious to work, and nowhere in this great city is there any work for him,” Patterson wrote.\textsuperscript{50}

Another assignment took her to the “House of Blazes” on St. Louis’s Plum Street. Plum Street was a predominantly black neighborhood in St. Louis. Patterson found that the house she toured with a police officer was filthy and crowded. The policeman also told her that many “thieves” and “criminals” resided in the house.
There were children in many of the rooms. Children with dull little faces, on which there were no penciling of though life as yet. The inevitableness of their future! The inexorableness of their fate! The hopelessness of an attempt to plant honesty or virtue in such soil.51

In November 1896, Patterson toured the newly renovated “Third District,” otherwise known as “Clabber Alley.” The police had sectioned off the city weeks before in an attempt to clean up the area. Patterson described the gory murders that had been committed there.52 A year later, Patterson went again to the “Bloody Third” district for a follow-up article. She was not accompanied by a police officer for the second report. She interviewed boys from the neighborhood. One boy told her that he wanted to be president one day, but he would not be able to because he could not get the “Irish vote.” Patterson asked why. “Because I am a Republican and the Irish vote is Democratic,” he told her. Many boys talked to Patterson about their great ambitions. The fantasies were also telling, because many times the boys alluded to the difficulties in growing up in such a poor area. “Arnold Carter, a thoughtful-looking negro boy, said he intended to save all he could earn by driving a coal wagon and distribute it among the poor people in the troublous district. He says that most people would not steal if they had bread,” Patterson reported.53

Patterson was curious about what was going on in the seedier places in St. Louis. When she was taken on a trip through pawn shops in St. Louis guided by a detective, she insisted on being shown the shops that were less “clean.”54 In December, she distributed baskets of sweetmeats, with a St. Louis Republic artist who was dressed as Santa Claus, to poorer districts in St. Louis. She visited many of St. Louis’s poor for the story. One woman had a son in the workhouse and two in prison. Patterson spoke with a nine-year-old girl who raised her four younger brothers.
She did not know why Christmas was celebrated; had no idea whose birthday it was, and looked anxiously from us to the dirty babies, evidently fearing that ours was a kidnapping expedition.\(^5^5\)

For another assignment, Patterson went to the Good Shepherd convent, which had taken in former prostitutes in St. Louis. She reported that most of the girls were younger than eighteen years old.\(^5^6\)

Patterson did not hide her sentiments or her opinions in her reporting; she capitalized on making people feel what she felt. On one occasion, she wrote a eulogy for a woman she had interviewed while a society writer for the *Herald* after reading the woman’s obituary. The woman, who was not named in Patterson’s article, had given up a promising musical career once she was married. Patterson wrote that the woman had sacrificed her dream to marry a man for money, a choice which led to a lifetime of unhappiness. The report did not contain any news element and was written with a poetic flair.\(^5^7\) For another article, she wrote another about a girl she had never met. Patterson stumbled upon a police officer placing the body of a young girl into the arms of an unnamed matron. The girl had gotten lost in a blizzard and froze to death, a death that was expedited by the fact that she was not dressed for the harsh weather. She wrote an article that memorialized the girl, who she learned was named Rosa Giovanni. Written as though she had known Giovanni, Patterson wrote:

Rosa was a dwarf-like girl with a well-developed head, pale, olive skin and big brown eyes that would not permit you to forget her. There was a haunting earnestness, a wistful questioning in them, that you recalled sometimes in gay crowds where the hungry orbs were out of place.

Patterson described Giovanni, the ashman’s daughter, and her struggle with poverty. She wrote that Giovanni was a “dreamer” who was always looking towards the hills, and even in death Giovanni’s body was stretched out as if to embrace the hills.\(^5^8\)
Giovanni’s story was reprinted by newspapers across the country.\textsuperscript{59} But

Patterson’s sentimental reporting also led to some light criticism by other Missouri newspapers:

The actions of our Missouri Legislators Thursday, on the out-going of President Cleveland and the prayer of Chaplain given, would make quite a master piece of romance, and if Ada Patterson had been in close range she certainly could, and would give some choice reading to the public on the affair.\textsuperscript{60}

Yet, behind Patterson’s sentimentalism was also the ability to get almost anyone to talk, which would become increasingly more important throughout her career. Arthur Brisbane, the editor who hired Patterson to work at the \textit{New York American} after her time with the \textit{St. Louis Republic}, said in an interview that Patterson had the ability to talk to people when other reporters failed. “When no one else can get a thing we send Ada Patterson after it,” he said.\textsuperscript{61}

At the \textit{St. Louis Republic}, Patterson interviewed many people of varying professions. She interviewed a man who had been a pastor for fifty years,\textsuperscript{62} the train director at St. Louis’s Union Station,\textsuperscript{63} police detectives,\textsuperscript{64} forest rangers,\textsuperscript{65} and instructors at a school that provided domestic skills-building classes for women.\textsuperscript{66} For one article, she interviewed an astronomer. She looked through his telescope to see the stars flit across the lens. The astronomer was attempting to measure the longitude of Sioux Falls by studying the movement of ten stars. “A difference of 15 degrees of longitude equals a difference of one hour of time,” he explained to Patterson.\textsuperscript{67}

She also was able to get people to gossip. She conducted another interview with two St. Louis judges who had opposing views. Judge Peabody sentenced many to the workhouse while Judge Murphy regularly dismissed criminal cases. Patterson asked both judges what they thought of one another, which led to some colorful quotes. “I wouldn’t
believe Judge Peabody under oath,” she quoted Judge Murphy as saying. Judge Murphy said that Judge Peabody was “an irresponsible windmill.”

One of her most controversial features was her interview with Judge Isaac Parker. She was the only reporter to secure an interview with Judge Parker of Fort Smith, Arkansas, who had sentenced more than two hundred men to death, more than any other judge in the country. He agreed to the interview because Patterson drove a locomotive from Chicago back to St. Louis for a story. Parker had also driven a locomotive once, and he wanted to compare experiences. Parker was a congressman for Missouri and presiding judge over the Western District of Arkansas. Patterson interviewed Parker while he was seriously ill, and he died just one month after the article was published. Patterson sympathized with the judge, “I am glad I have the honor of knowing this alleged cruel judge,” she wrote.

By 1897, Patterson began writing a series of articles titled “Snap Shots of Well-Known St. Louisans.” In the first article, she wrote briefs about the lives of Colonel Prather, the St. Louis Post Office inspector, Joe P. Johnston, a theatrical manager, a professor, the ex-lieutenant governor, and a hotel owner.

In 1897, Patterson became the first woman journalist to cover an execution. At Dr. Arthur Duestrow’s hanging, she even stood next to the guilty party on the scaffold. Duestrow faced the gallows for killing his wife. Patterson was assigned to take on the

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4 Hamilton, “Patterson, Ada;” Patterson, “Her Midnight Ride. The reference to Patterson’s ride in the locomotive was linked to the article “Her Midnight Ride” (which was unrecovered) because the advertisement published on August 22, 1896 by the St. Louis Republic mentioned Patterson riding on the engine of the midnight express from Chicago to St. Louis.
story in place of a fellow reporter who had gone on a bender. She also had interviewed Duestrow several times while he was in jail. 

Duestrow was a millionaire who had inherited his wealth from his father, who earned his wealth from his stock in a lucrative mine. On February 13, 1894, he came home after drinking heavily. An altercation occurred between Duestrow and a female servant. His wife stepped in to end the fight and instead she became the target of his anger. He struck Mrs. Duestrow twice, and she landed on the bed. Then he got his pistol and fired two shots. Mrs. Duestrow fell unconscious on the floor. But the violence did not stop. Duestrow then picked up his infant child and also fired a shot into the child’s breast. The trial was ugly. Duestrow’s lawyers fought for the insanity plea. After four trials, the United States Supreme Court ruled that Duestrow was guilty, upholding his death sentence.

Patterson interviewed Duestrow for the first time for a report published on November 8, 1896, at the Four Courts prison. She had a difficult time interviewing Duestrow, who was obviously not behaving sanely. She wrote later that she spent hours conducting tedious interviews with Duestrow. He told Patterson that Mrs. Duestrow and his son were still alive, and that they had been taken into protective custody because he was part of a secret mission. He claimed that he was a Mason and had put President McKinley into office. Patterson tried vainly to get something out of Duestrow about the crimes he committed, but he kept talking nonsense. The second attempt came nearly a year later and days after the Supreme Court ruling on January 19, 1897. The report, published on January 31, 1897, was advertised on the front page of the Sunday edition. Patterson had learned that Duestrow’s brain was going to be examined with an X-ray
machine. She had written earlier to a letter to Missouri Lieutenant Governor, Charles P. Johnson, who served as Duestrow’s lawyer for permission to join the investigative party.

On Friday, January 29, 1897, at 8 p.m., Patterson went again to the Four Courts prison.

But, as with the previous interview, Duestrow was far from cooperative. Patterson wrote:

> The murderer, Duestrow, eyed our preparations craftily, at times delivering utterances that may or may not have been indicative of his mental condition. At the suggestion of his counsel [Johnson] he took a seat in front of the Crookes tube, which hung directly in the cell doorway.

> The motor was started and the rays were being developed when, as if stricken with a new thought, the man jumped from the chair, kicked it over, uttered a curse, and declared that he would not submit.

Duestrow refused to go through with the experiment to look inside his brain. The X-ray was supposed to show if Duestrow was truly insane. Patterson watched as they questioned the man, who kept insisting that he was not Duestrow. He insisted that he was actually General Van Bruningen and that Mrs. Duestrow was still alive and well.

Between 1 and 1:20 on a sunny, Tuesday afternoon on February 16, 1897, Duestrow hung for his crimes. The execution took place in Union, Missouri. Many newspapers reported that Duestrow wept like a “woman” and confessed hours before his execution, but on the scaffold he behaved differently. Duestrow kept repeating his delusions, insisting that he was the General Van Bruningen.

The crowd numbered around one hundred. Patterson stood on the scaffold next to Duestrow while the other reporters had assigned seats at the edge of the gallows. She was the only reporter who was permitted to walk with Duestrow to the gallows. Many reporters tried to gain access to the jail before Duestrow’s walk to the scaffold but were denied. It is probable that Patterson’s local connections, especially with Duestrow’s lawyer, helped her gain access. “Have you anything to say,” Patterson asked Duestrow. “I
am not Duestrow,” he replied. Other reporters wrote that Patterson looked as though she too was about ready to faint.82

Patterson’s article appeared on the front page of the *St. Louis Republic* the following day. “A short drop and an emaciated frame made death slow, but not necessarily painful,” she wrote. When the deputy sheriff asked Duestrow if he minded having Patterson next to him on the scaffold, Duestrow said no because she was his wife. She asked Duestrow if he remembered her. “Yes,” he said. “Did you see my letter to Governor Johnson?” “What was in it?” she asked. “I told him that you and I were married,” he said.

It took twenty minutes to pronounce Deustrow dead. Patterson wrote:

At a signal from the Sheriff, Marshal Krekel cut the slender rope that held the lever. The trap door fell and the emaciated figure of the murderer dropped noiselessly into the space beneath. The body twitched slightly and swung out with a gentle perpendicular motion. The work of the executioners was done.

Under the floor of the scaffold physicians assembled to count the moments while the dying man’s pulse told of the fast ebbing of the tide of life. They disputed with each other in a grave, professional way as to whether life was entirely extinct. Twenty minutes after the drop fell there was no doubt in any mind.83

Patterson’s coverage gained attention. On February 28, 1897, *The (New York) Evening World* published her coverage of the Duestrow trial. The *St. Louis Republic* publicized the honor.

The New York Sunday World of this morning will recognize The Republic’s original enterprise in having a woman’s description of the Duestrow hanging. The Sunday World will have a half page article on the experience of Miss Ada Patterson, the first woman journalist in America to attend such an exhibition in a professional capacity.84

Patterson was not just writing the news; she was the news. The *World* ran her narrative under the headline, “A Western Woman Watches a Man Die on the Scaffold: Miss Ada
Patterson, who Witnessed the Execution of Arthur Duestrow, the St. Louis Millionaire Murderer, is the Only Woman Ever Permitted to Attend a Legal Hanging.³⁸⁵

Patterson’s next article appeared on the front page of the Sunday edition of the *St. Louis Republic*. She went to investigate pool halls, but she ran into complications. At one establishment, women were not permitted inside the pool hall, where they raced horses. Patterson waited to hear about the races while inside the manager’s office.³⁸⁶ Many of the assignments that followed a similar theme as her earlier reporting; she interviewed someone interesting or doing something interesting.

For one article, she became a chorus girl in a Wagnerian Opera for a performance at St. Louis’ music hall.³⁸⁷ On another assignment she lived on ten-cent meals for a week.³⁸⁸ And for another article, Patterson went to a vaudeville theater, which she termed the theater the “wickedest place in St. Louis.” Many of the performers were also prostitutes, which she found while roaming around the back rooms.³⁸⁹ In May 1897, Patterson covered a train collision. Sponsored by the St. Louis Collision Company, the spectacle involved having two trains collide at a predetermined injunction. Patterson was among the crowd of around a thousand onlookers to watch the wreckage occur.³⁹⁰ She also interviewed Army troops in Arcadia Valley, eighty-nine miles outside of St. Louis. She described shooting practices and the regimen of army life.³⁹¹

She also continued interviewing well-known people. She interviewed a Spanish dancer ³⁹² who was performing “Carmen” at the Century Theater in St. Louis and a pianist for the same performance of “Carmen.”³⁹³ She interviewed Captain Adrian C. “Cap” Anson who told her that baseball was the most honest of sports.³⁹⁴ She spoke with a comedienne who was outspoken about women politics. Jeannie Yeamans said that
women should never marry because of professional jealousy: “If she is the leading lady he is likely to be the leading man or the comedian. She makes it. He doesn’t. He sulks,” Patterson wrote.\textsuperscript{95}

Although many of the articles followed a similar pattern, there were more frequent articles that covered crime and politics after the Duestrow trial. Patterson wrote commentary about the men on the municipal assembly on March, 14, 1897,\textsuperscript{96} and interviewed the St. Louis mayor days after he was elected into office the next month. Patterson asked the mayor about his political agenda, to which he gave a political reply. “I’m going to keep all the promises I made in my platform. I just don’t know how nor when, so I can’t tell you, but I’ll keep them,” he told Patterson.\textsuperscript{97}

Another prominent figure that Patterson talked to was “Bloody Bridles,” Davis H. Waite, who was then the ex-governor of Colorado. Waite was active in the Populist movement and had lost his campaign for reelection. As with earlier interview subjects, such as Judge Parker, Waite was a controversial figure. He talked politics with Patterson. He told her the railroads were anarchistic because they were charging unfair ticket prices and that he believed bankers were anarchists too for issuing their own notes.\textsuperscript{98}

On June 13, 1897, Patterson had the opportunity to cover crime again. Another sensational trial, the Foley murder trial, was making headlines. William Foley was tried for murdering his mother and one of his sisters in Liberty, Missouri. Foley was the son of a farmer, managing the family farm after his father’s death. Issues with how to manage the family livelihood arose, and Foley often complained that he was under the rule of “petticoats.” The conflict escalated when Foley fell in love and wanted to marry, but the girl’s family did not approve because of his finances. Foley only owned one of four
shares of the farm. The other shares went to his mother and his two sisters, one living at home and the other was married.

One night in November of 1897, Foley went to his brother-in-law’s house to say that his mother and sister were dead. Foley claimed that hit men must have been responsible, but he gave questionable testimony. “Foley said he had reached home soon after 9 o’clock, he did not know how long after, and that he had heard no shots. Persons living one and a half miles away in the same direction from which he was coming had heard the shots,” Patterson reported. Foley was arrested within hours.

She watched the trial, but like most of the public she already believed that Foley was guilty, regardless of what the judge’s verdict would be. Before his conviction, Patterson wrote,

His vindictiveness, his desire to gain the mastery or even his share of the proceeds of the sale of the farm, his plan to marry, which had been frustrated by his mother’s opposition, one or all of these were deemed sufficient motive for the commission of murder.

Patterson wrote that the courtroom in Liberty was crowded to “suffocation” at Foley’s three-day trial. She described Foley’s appearance as “it is a dark face with round, black, beadlike eyes and a curious malformation of the right cheek, causing the flesh to overlap the mouth at right angles to the lips.” She talked to Foley about the trial. “I do not know whether I will be acquitted. If I am I will go away,” he said. “My lawyers won’t let me make any more remarks,” he told Patterson.99

Foley’s case was the last trial she covered for the St. Louis Republic, but it was just a taste of the sentimental crime reporting which shaped her career later on. As a “sob sister,” Patterson reported on Harry Thaw’s 1907 trial alongside Dorothy Dix, Winifred Black, and Nixola Greeley-Smith. The women’s sympathetic portrayal of Evelyn Nesbit
became a popular read. As biographer Jean Marie Lutes wrote, “the sentimental case gave women reporters unprecedented visibility and new opportunities to cover serious news.” 100 Patterson wrote that the public needed to hear the “feminine angle of vision on the Thaw case” and argued that the courts should allow women jurors for that same reason. 101 Throughout Patterson’s career at the St. Louis Republic, she strove to build her reputation as a reporter. Her jailhouse talks with Duestrow may have been a foreshadowing of this determination to report on serious topics that she was typically not assigned. What characterized Ada Patterson most was her ability to use her popularity to further her career. Patterson had the ability to talk to almost anyone, and used these connections to gain interviews and stories that would move her beyond the women’s pages.
Notes


3 Hamilton, “Patterson, Ada.”


6 Hamilton, “Patterson, Ada.”

7 “San Francisco Newspaper Women.”

8 Hamilton. “Patterson, Ada;” “In the Social Realm,” *Salt Lake City Herald*, April 1, 1894. The latter mentioned Patterson as a society editor.

9 “San Francisco Newspaper Women.”

10 Hamilton, “Patterson, Ada;” “Off for the Coast.”


14 Ross, *Ladies of the Press*, 69-73
15 Hamilton. “Patterson, Ada.”


17 Ross, *Front-Page Girls*, 73.

18 Hamilton. “Patterson, Ada.”


20 Ada Patterson, “Big Politicians as They Seem to a Little Woman,” *St. Louis Republic*, June 10, 1896.


22 Patterson, “Big Politicians as They Seem to a Little Woman.”


24 Ibid.

25 Ada Patterson, “Silver and Other Politics in Woman’s Eyes,” *St. Louis Republic*, June 12, 1896.

26 Ada Patterson, “Not Enough Ginger to Suit a Woman,” *St. Louis Republic*, June 17, 1896.

27 Ibid.

28 Ada Patterson, “As She Saw Them in the Convention,” *St. Louis Republic*, June 18, 1896.

29 Ada Patterson, “Scorched in the Crucible of a Woman’s Eye,” *St. Louis Republic*, June 19, 1896.


33 Ibid.


37 Hamilton, “Patterson, Ada.”


39 Ada Patterson, “An Evening with the Insane Ada Patterson Attends a Ball with a Large Company of People off their Mental Balance,” *St. Louis Republic*, October 11, 1896.

40 Ada Patterson, “She Looked into the Future for a Sunday Republic Young Woman,” *St. Louis Republic*, October 11, 1896.


43 Ada Patterson, “Ada Patterson Views a Dissection,” *St. Louis Republic*, December, 6, 1896.


47 Ada Patterson, “Ada Patterson Climbs the City Hall Tower: What She Saw from the Top of it,” *St. Louis Republic*, October 25, 1896.
Ada Patterson, “Ada Patterson’s Wild Ride with the City’s Fire Chief,” *St. Louis Republic*, November 15, 1896.

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Ada Patterson, “These Men Tell Why They Failed in Life: Ada Patterson Finds that Drink was an Active Agent,” *St. Louis Republic*, June 28, 1896.

Ada Patterson, “New Year’s Eve in the House of Blazes,” *St. Louis Republic*, January 3, 1897.

Ada Patterson, “The Passing of the Notorious Third District,” *St. Louis Republic*, November 22, 1896.


Ada Patterson, “Christmas Brought Little Joy to Drear Ashley House: Ada Patterson and a Sunday Republic Artist Distribute Candy to Unfortunate Youngsters to Whom Santa Claus is Less Seldom Kind,” *St. Louis Republic*, December 27, 1896.


Ada Patterson, “The Unhappiest Women I Ever Knew,” *St. Louis Republic*, August 8, 1897.


“Annapolis News,” *Iron County (Missouri) Register*, March 11, 1897.

“Ada Patterson, Ex-Journalist, Succumbs.”

Ada Patterson, “Fifty Years in the Pulpit,” *St. Louis Republic*, November 1, 1896.

Ada Patterson, “A Trio of Detectives Who Find out Things: Like a Soldier Going to Battle,” *St. Louis Republic*, January 10, 1897.


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Ada Patterson Interviews the Most Talked about Man in St. Louis: Two Judges who Rail at Each Other,” *St. Louis Republic*, January 17, 1897.


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Patterson, “Snap Shots,” January 3, 1897.


“From Riches to the Gallows,” *The San Francisco Call*, February 17, 1897.


Ada Patterson, “Arthur Duestrow in His Cell at the Four Courts: A Pen Picture by Ada Patterson,” *St. Louis Republic*, November 8, 1896.

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Patterson, “Aurthur Duestrow in His Cell at the Four Courts.”

Ada Patterson, “Murderer Duestrow Refused to Stand the Test,” *St. Louis Republic*, January 31, 1897.


“Atoned for his Crime.”

“A Millionaire Hung.”

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Ada Patterson, “Ada Patterson Watches Uncle Sam’s Soldiers at Their New Target Practice: Her Description of the Ideally Beautiful Arcadia,” *St. Louis Republic*, July 18, 1897.


Ada Patterson, “Calve as Viewed by Ada Patterson,” *St. Louis Republic*, March 22, 1897.
Ada Patterson, “Pop Anson Talks about His Calling: Baseball Playing is No Trifling Occupation. He Asserts—Calls it the Most Honest of Sports,” *St. Louis Republic*, May 2, 1897.

Ada Patterson, “Jennie Yeamans Comedienne and Her Vinegar Baths,” *St. Louis Republic*, May 30, 1897.

Ada Patterson, “Ada Patterson’s Pen Picture of the Municipal Assembly,” *St. Louis Republic*, March 14, 1897.

Ada Patterson, “Pen Pictures of Our Next Mayor,” *St. Louis Republic*, April 11, 1897.

Ada Patterson, “Bloody Bridles Waite Says He is Not an Anarchist: An interview with Miss Ada Patterson,” *St. Louis Republic*, May 9, 1897.


Ibid, 523.
Chapter 5: Conclusion

Around the beginning of the twentieth century, “stunt girl” reporting had become less frequent. The movement had been trending for more than a decade. Its icon, Nellie Bly, had retired her pen, temporarily, in 1896 to focus on her new marriage. Journalist and biographer Ishbel Ross attributed the end of the “stunt girl” genre to the 1898 Spanish-American War. Ross wrote that coverage of the war would have predominated over stunts performed, and the budgets for the newspaper girls were cut. In addition, as the 1890s neared their end, many women journalists were becoming frustrated by “stunt journalism;” women were prostituting themselves for a good story, they said. Even as early as in 1894, Nellie Bly biographer Brooke Kroeger wrote that the “stunt girl” sensation was becoming a topic of jest. Kroeger noted that when one “Meg Merrilies” tested out a bullet proof vest while being shot at for a story, the paper Town Topics wrote that the invention would end the hope of forever silencing those “long-winded Sunday creatures.” Villanova University Professor Jean Marie Lutes wrote simply that the “stunt girl” phenomenon died out and transitioned into the “sob sister” movement. Two of the founding “sob sisters” (Winifred Black and Ada Patterson) had undergone a “stunt girl” career phase. Although it would be unfair to say that “stunt girl” journalism was purely sensational, it is likely that readers wanted something new. While stunt assignment might have diminished, the empathetic, long narratives remained a popular element in “sob sister” journalism.

Today, many reporters, male and female, could be considered the descendants of the “stunt girls.” Pam Zekman, is a current investigative reporter for CBS 2 Chicago’s investigative team, is a Pulitzer Prize-winning reporter. Some of her stunts include
working undercover in restaurants to expose unsanitary conditions and exposing medical clinics for committing Medicaid and Medicare fraud. In Gene Weingarten’s “Pearls Before Breakfast,” published in The Washington Post in 2007, a world-famous violinist played in Washington D.C.’s metro station while people passed him by without much notice. The Washington Post’s Anne Hull and Dana Priest conducted an investigation on wounded soldiers and Marines at the Walter Reed Army Medical Center. The reporters did not conceal their identities when interviewing sources or decline to reveal themselves if asked, but made efforts to blend in and even sources not to spread the fact that had been interviewed. Hull said in an interview with the Poynter Institute, “Working beneath the radar was crucial because we needed to see the problems at Walter Reed with our own eyes.” The reporters’ narrative eyewitness accounts of patient maltreatment at Walter Reed were published in series of ten articles that ran from February to September, 2007. Hull’s and Priest’s narrative accounts and penchant to expose misconduct is similar to Pulitzer’s “new journalism” movement, and of course their predecessors the “stunt girls.”

However, current cases of misrepresentation in today’s world of journalism can often led to legal issues. In the 1880s, “stunt girls” used whatever tactics necessary to gain their reports. Although Nelson did battle a libel law suit because of her undercover investigations, all she had to prove was that her reports were true to be cleared. In the case of Food Lion versus ABC in 1996, Food Lion sued ABC for fraud, breach of the duty of loyalty, trespass, and unfair trade practices, because of undercover reports that exposed unsanitary meat handling practices. Food Lion did not argue that the reports were untrue, but that the footage had been gained by deceptive practices. The controversy
started in November 1992, when two ABC News producers obtained jobs at Food Lion grocery stores in North and South Carolina by submitting applications with false information and fake references. In December 1996, a jury found ABC guilty of fraud and trespass. The case was retried in the circuit court and had the fraud charges overturned but the jury still found ABC guilty of trespass. The court explained that the journalists only had permission to work in the facility, not film it. In 1888, Nelson would not have considered her undercover reports as deceptive because they were exposing injustice. Fred Fedler, who wrote about deceitful journalism practices from 1850 to 1950, summed up questionably unethical reporting tactics in journalism’s early years by citing eight reasons: beating the competition, the belief that the results justified the means, fear of punishment for returning without a story, loyalty to their paper, considered dishonesty common in every field, low salaries (explains taking bribes), standards were different, and that a reporter could not get the story any other way. Women journalists in the late nineteenth century were expected to take on different roles, because their point of view helped tell the real story.

While “stunt girl” journalism thrived, it enabled women to break through the gender barriers that prevented them from becoming recognized reporters in the late 1880s and early 1890s. Prior to the “stunt girl” movement, magazines had women in top managerial positions, but newspapers were lagging behind. Although women journalists did exist, such as Jennie June who wrote about food and fashion in the 1850s, women writers were not sought after. In addition to a small number of openings there was also little opportunity to cover any real news. Single columns written by women, “the women’s pages,” cropped up around the early 1880s but featured articles written by
women did not appear until the “stunt girl” journalism movement took hold.\textsuperscript{12} For the most part “stunt girls” knew how to play their part, because while for men taking on a stunt was a choice for women a stunt was the only way to avoid writing about society and gossip.\textsuperscript{13} Margherita Arlina Hamm wrote, “the average managing editor or city editor will not believe that woman is capable of covering anything but the latest parties, the latest dresses, the newest bonnets, the latest weddings.”\textsuperscript{14} She appealed to newspapers to let women cover hard news topics like crime and disaster in her column, “Among the Newspaper Women,” published by \textit{The Journalist} on May 28, 1892. She wrote, 

Where a woman has a real talent for descriptive writing she is simply inapproachable by the newspaper man. She will contrive to lend a certain lustre [sic], purity and brilliancy to even the meanest subject, and in her deftness in word-painting and in the skillful coloring of a bare prosaic fact would powerfully improve the newspaper work at police headquarters.\textsuperscript{15}

To further illustrate her point, Hamm mentions examples of women that had successfully covered hard news, among them she listed Julia Hayes Percy (writer for the New York World who wrote about poor women and children),\textsuperscript{16} Nellie Bly, and Nell Nelson.\textsuperscript{17} Nelson’s undercover factory reports and Bly’s act to have herself committed started out as a stunt but what they were able to uncover would also serve as inspiration for women to fight for their place in the newsroom. The numbers of women journalists went from 288 in 1880 to more than 2,000 by 1900. Even when comparing the overall number journalists, which increased from more than 12,000 to 30,000, the number of women in journalism showed a significant rise during the “stunt girl” journalism period.\textsuperscript{18}

Still, this only accounted for roughly seven percent of the newsroom staff, but even today the newsroom statistics are far from equal. According to the 2014 The Status of Women in the U.S. Media report, women are still more likely to cover health and lifestyle
topics than crime, justice, and world politics. The report mentioned that women reporters were bylined for 32 percent of criminal justice and world politics news reports in 2013. Sports reporting shows that most astonishing gap, considering 90 percent of sports journalists are male. The overall report concluded that women account for 35 percent of evening broadcasts, 37 percent for print journalists, 40 percent in online, and 35 percent of wires (Associated Press and Reuters), with an overall average of 36 percent of newsrooms having women on the payroll.\textsuperscript{19}

In the 1880s, many of the “stunt girls” articles were featured in the newly enlarged Sunday papers, which become a trend at the time. Women were not hired because of editorial openings, but rather a larger newspaper trend aimed at expansion and fueled by an increase in advertising.\textsuperscript{20} With the addition of newspaper sections there came an opening for new content to fill them. “Stunt girl” reporting, which focused on scandal, crime, and shocking circumstances in the spirit of a crusade and embodied Joseph Pulitzer’s “new journalism” mentality, created something for the empty pages.\textsuperscript{21} Kroeger wrote, “[I]t was the advent of both the stunt girls and the large separate women’s sections that created the first real place for women as regular members of the newspaper staff and an important part of the editorial mix.”\textsuperscript{22}

Although more women were working as journalists in the 1880s and 1890s, there were still limitations for women who wanted to make journalism a career. Nelson, Patterson, and Bisland had educational backgrounds in teaching and a long history of writing, however the length of their careers varied. Nelson wrote until she was married and Bisland transitioned into writing essays and novels also shortly after her marriage, a job that could be done at home. Patterson was the only woman that seemed to have a life-long
career as a journalist, but she never married. Even Bly took time off from reporting when she was married. Hamm wrote in her column that many of the newswomen she knew were bachelors.

A very bright newspaper woman whom I know has been dubbed by her friends “that bachelor girl,” and I think it seems very appropriate to all or nearly all the newspaper women I know. They live alone, depend upon no one for livelihood, mentality, or entertainment, and in fact paddle their own canoe with the nerve and independence of a full-fledged bachelor.23

For many women journalists, there were also financial constraints that hindered them from supporting themselves through their work alone. In another column in The Journalist taken from The Minneapolis Times the reporter interviewed more than thirty women journalists who said their biggest complaints were that “unless a woman be unusually gifted she is not likely to be promoted beyond a certain grade” and that men often received the higher pay for the same work. The report also mentioned that hundreds of women writers in New York made $10 or less a week (which would have been nearly comparable to the salaries of the factory girls Nelson wrote about) and those paid by the column typically a greater salary of $30 per week.24

Some men also tried to take on “stunts” for the papers, but the narrative quality of the “stunt girls’” writing and sympathetic voice was not replicated by any of the male reporters of the time. Audiences wanted “stunt girls” not “stunt boys.”25 Women wrote long narrative and often emotional coverages. Nelson’s series often spilled over pages, consuming multiple columns. “Stunt girls” also thrived in writing first-person narrative accounts and did not shield their sympathies. Perhaps their emotional narratives provided the “skillful coloring” that Hamm mentioned women writers added to their reports.26

Patterson often made moral conclusions in her writings, blaming homelessness on alcohol
or defending a judge’s decision to hang offenders just added perspective to her writings. Nelson wrote editorials on women and children working in the factories in addition to her articles. The women writers did more than just cover the story, they were characters in them. Biographer Alice Fahs wrote, “their [women journalists in the 1890s] articles, featuring independent heroines reflecting on urban adventures, were part of a new articulation of modern life in which newspaper women became performative public figures.” When Patterson climbed the St. Louis Tower, she wrote into her narrative that she was called a “brave woman” by her construction worker chaperon and Nelson’s occasional outburst at her employers, such as throwing a coat in one owner’s face, provided a dramatic flair to her reports. Newspaper editors also promoted the sensation by portraying the women in character drawings that accompanied their stunts. The fact that it was women reporting and not men was made apparent in many of the “stunt girls” headlines, Nell Nelson was often referred to as the “Times lady reporter” and Ada Patterson was named a “Sunday Republic girl.” Although the papers did sometimes drop the feminine attributes, the names of the “stunt girls” were always written into the headlines. When newspapers described the “stunt girls,” they often focused on their physical attributes. Bisland was often referred to as “beautiful” and “refined.”

No one welcomed the celebrity status nor embodied the spirit of “new journalism” better than Nellie Bly. Bly’s popularity and ability to sustain her notoriety may explain why the feats and names of the “stunt girls” faded. Bly’s notoriety was partially fueled by a heavy amount of propaganda by her newspaper as well as self-promotion. When Bly raced around the world The World even published a daily “Nellie Bly Guessing Match” to allow readers to guess how long it would take Bly to race around the world. The
The winner received a free trip to Europe. The overall excess of promotion during the world tour was to such an extent that critics poked fun by saying that *The World* had a installed a “Nellie Bly Department.” *The World’s* Bly brand enabled her to receive assignments and an accompanying prominent byline for most of her life even despite long periodic bursts in which she was not writing, after her marriage it took sixteen years for another article to appear. As Kroeger noted in her biography of Bly, reporting was always a fallback for Bly when she fell into financial difficulty and the newspapers welcomed her return. Bly also appeared to have embraced her notority to the extent that her personal life also became a topic of discussion. When Bly was fighting a suit against workers that she learned had embezzled from her company the Iron Clad, acquired after her husband’s death, she appealed to newspapers to write about the suit because she believed that the public attention could help her regain her losses. By consequence, this scandal among others helped keep Bly’s name in circulation while she was not writing.

Whether the public was less interested in the “stunt girls” or the “stunt girls” themselves choose to be private, it is clear from the databases consulted that no one attained the level of fame that Nellie Bly had. However, “stunt girls” and Bly did coexist. After all, would Bly’s race around the world be as sensational if she was not racing against Elizabeth Bisland? Bly often shared the spotlight with her ever-persistent adversaries, as she was frequently compared to them. Bly’s competitors created competition for women in the newsrooms, something that prior to the late 1880s could not possibly have existed. Newspapers were persuaded to hire these women journalists because they wanted their own “Nellie Bly,” but the movement’s momentum was supported by the women who took the initiative to capitalize on the opportunity.
With only a list of names of factories, in 1888 Nell Nelson infiltrated Chicago and New York factories to write about poor working conditions. Her investigations required her to learn quickly and adapt to different environments. The positions she took, tasked her physically. Behind each report was a woman who braved unsanitary and disease ridden working environments and a shadow of possible sexual threat. Her drive to write stories that were meaningful, that would help change labor conditions, drove her to brave unpleasant circumstances. This drive and ambition was the underlying motivational factor that inspired many of the stunt girls. From undercover investigations to asking persistent and often invasive interview questions, Nelson was able to expose poor working conditions in Chicago and New York City through her controversial reports. Nelson put herself in harsh and dangerous situations to get the information she needed for her reports—reports that quite possibly changed the lives of thousands of working “slaves.” Clearly, while Nelson succeeded as a “stunt girl,” the power of her reporting demonstrated she was a woman of substance. She was the professional equal of any of the more numerous male reporters, as well as rivaling the style, brass, and impact of Nellie Bly.

Elizabeth Bisland made headlines for racing around that world with Nellie Bly, but the stunt did not define the writer behind it. Bisland was able to use her notoriety to influence social change for women. Though her ideologies on domesticity and women’s work in the home may seem old fashioned today, the women’s right’s movement, much like journalism, was evolving. Bisland challenged the notion that women’s work was less important than men’s.
Patterson was a woman who took any opportunity that was given to her. She did not mind moving from city to city, or even taking on dangerous assignments (such as climbing the St. Louis City Tower) for an article. Patterson strove to push her stories from the back pages to the front page. To do so, she used her ability to talk to people to land interviews that other reporters could not and she covered any topic. She also welcomed the chance to publicize herself. Patterson used her notoriety as the only woman to attend a hanging and used it to break into the New York newspaper scene. These connections and her determination helped her transition from society editor at The Salt Lake City Herald to gaining recognition from the World for her St. Louis Republic reports. And, more importantly, Patterson’s life shows the story of a woman reporter who used stunt girl reporting as a career opportunity. This opportunity would pave the way for many women journalists with savvy investigative skills and a knack for adventure later on.

For all of these women, the stunt girl movement was a chance to write for the papers. Though some of their reports were perhaps merely sensational, such as climbing a tower or racing around the world, stunt girls also wrote about serious topics. In fact, the majority of the articles uncovered were more investigative than sensational. Nelson wrote about labor conditions, Bisland wrote about the women’s rights movement, and Patterson wrote about politics and criminal trials. What defines the movement most was the fact that each stunt assignment tasked women reporters’ physical endurance and bravery. “Stunt girls” traveled to unknown places and take on dangerous assignments. In 1897, when Patterson was assigned to write the “East River Scoop” she was told that the New York American wanted a “woman’s job done in a hurry.” Stunt girls covered any
assignment the editors and published offered, which is what made them popular employees with the heads of the papers. Unfortunately, for many of these women, once they were married their writing career suffered. Or, like Patterson, they never married. But the movement represents an evolution, and a growing shift towards accepting more women into the field of journalism.
Notes


15 Hamm, “Among the Newspaper Women.”

17 Ibid.

18 Ibid, 170 (written in the notes section).


20 Kroeger, Nellie Bly, 126-27.

21 Ibid, 87-88.

22 Ibid, 126.

23 Margherita Arlina Hamm, “Among the Newspaper Women,” The Journalist, August 13, 1892.

24 “Women in Journalism,” The Journalist, November 12, 1892.


26 “Among the Newspaper Women,” May 28, 1892.


28 Ibid, 102.

29 Kroeger, Nellie Bly, 162.

30 Ibid, 164.


32 Ibid, 243.

33 Ross, Ladies of the Press, 68-69.
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