

## Around the World in 72 Days... and She Forgot the Camera!

When I first suggested writing an article on Nellie Bly for WTT, I was answered with “Who?” This statement is more a commentary on my vast knowledge of trivia rather than anyone’s ignorance. Anyone who knows me knows I am constantly reading—fiction, nonfiction, the back of the cereal box, whatever—it doesn’t matter. I came across Nellie Bly years ago when reading about the New York City newspaper “wars” for readership during the 1890s. Ah, but I digress as bookworms can do... Here’s the story.

Over a hundred years ago, a 25 year old female reporter for the *New York World* set a record for traveling around the world—72 days. What is truly amazing looking back at this feat is that she did *alone*. The late 19<sup>th</sup> century was most definitely a man’s world. Women did not have the right to vote (and wouldn’t for another 30 years) nor in many cases the right to own their own property. Most women did not work outside the home and proper young ladies did not visit relatives across town alone much less travel the world unchaperoned.

But then, Nellie Bly had already broken a lot of the rules. Nellie was born Elizabeth Jane Cochran in 1864 in Cochran’s Mills, Pennsylvania to a wealthy judge and his wife. Unfortunately, the judge died when Nellie was six. Her mother remarried but filed for divorce when Nellie was 14. Divorce was uncommon—almost taboo—in 19<sup>th</sup> century America but teenaged Nellie testified to her stepfather’s drunken, violent behavior and helped the divorce become final.

After the divorce, Nellie and her mother moved to Pittsburgh where she came to the attention of the editor of the *Pittsburgh Dispatch* in 1880. The paper had published a column deriding the mental and emotional capacities of women. Nellie wrote such an eloquent rebuttal, the editor offered her a job. As it was not entirely proper for young ladies to write for a living, female newspaper writers often took pen names. The editor chose the name Nellie Bly, the title character in a popular song by Stephen Foster.

Nellie’s early work at the *Pittsburgh Dispatch* centered on the plight of female factory workers in a series of investigative articles, but editorial pressure pushed her into coverage of fashion and society—the usual topics for female journalists at the time. Frustrated, she pushed her way into an assignment as a foreign correspondent in Mexico where she spent six months reporting on the lives and customs of the people. After protesting the imprisonment of a local journalist in her articles who had criticized the government, Nellie was forced to hightail it back to Pittsburgh after Mexican authorities issued a warrant for her arrest.

Back in Pittsburgh and forced to report on theater and the arts, Nellie left for New York City in 1887. It took her four months, but Nellie talked her way into the office of Joseph Pulitzer’s paper, the *New York World*. She immediately took an assignment to investigate reports of brutality and neglect at the Women’s Lunatic Asylum on Blackwell’s Island. Pretending to be insane, she fooled several doctors and spent ten days in the women’s asylum. Nellie’s report on conditions in the asylum brought her fame but more importantly, prompted a grand jury investigation that eventually produced major changes in the care of the mentally ill in New York City.

Feeling restless after this triumph and frustrated trying to come up with new story ideas, one afternoon Nellie said “I wish I was at the other end of the earth!” This got her thinking. She had read Jules Verne’s popular novel *Around the World in Eighty Days* in which the protagonist, Phileas Fogg, circles the globe in 80 days. Nellie researched steamer (ocean liner) and train schedules worldwide and became convinced she could beat the fictional 80 day record. After almost a year of lobbying for the assignment and ultimately threatening to have another newspaper sponsor her, Nellie finally got her way. On a



Nellie Bly at the time of her round the world trip.

## Around the World in 72 Days, cont'd.

Monday, the editor made the decision to have the newspaper sponsor her trip around the world. Three days later, on Thursday, November 14, 1889, Nellie set sail from Hoboken, New York.

During the less than three days she had to prepare for her trip around the world, Nellie was busy. She had a special traveling suit made, crammed what she needed into one small suitcase, obtained a special passport and stuffed 200 pounds worth of English gold into her pockets. She also brought along some American money to see who on her travels would accept it. Unfortunately, she forgot to bring a camera (see sidebar).

After stalling Nellie's assignment, *The New York World* put its full resources behind coverage of Nellie's worldwide voyage and sponsored a contest for readers to predict exactly when she would arrive back home. The paper received over half a million guesses and coverage of Nellie's journey boosted the paper's circulation to new heights.

Nellie's trip took her from New York to England, then to France where she took a brief side trip to visit Jules Verne, then through the Suez Canal, to Sri Lanka, Singapore, Hong Kong and Japan. From Japan it was on to San Francisco and then cross-country by train to New York City. Nellie sent dispatches back home which were eventually published as a book, *Around the World in 72 Days* which became a bestseller.

In 1894, Nellie retired from journalism and married millionaire manufacturer Robert Seaman who at age 72 was forty-four years her senior. For a while, Nellie became one of the country's leading female industrialists, becoming president of the Iron Clad Manufacturing Co. which made steel milk cans and boilers. In 1904, she invented and patented a steel barrel which is still the model for the 55 gallon drum in use today. Eventually, her company failed and she went back to journalism and reported on women's suffrage and Europe's Eastern Front during World War I. In her later years, she became interested in bettering the lives of children in New York's orphanages. Nellie died of pneumonia in 1922 at the age of 57.

Nellie Bly was one of the world's best known women of her day. With her progressive and feminist point of view, she became a symbol of an emerging "new" woman who fought for independence and new possibilities—including traveling around the world without a chaperone. ❖

Sources for this article included an html version of Nellie's book *Around the World in 72 Days*, [wikepeida.org](http://wikepeida.org) and PBS's website.

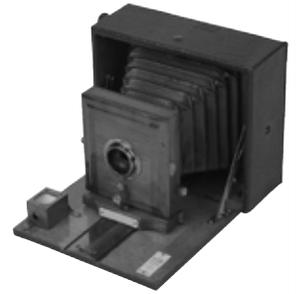
## Nellie Bly's Travel Advice

Although written over 100 years ago, Nellie's book *Around the World in 72 Days* contains some observations about travel that still make sense today.

### Don't Forget the Camera!

Nellie lamented the fact that she had forgotten to bring a "Kodak" the choice of amateur photographers at the time.

*"The only regret of my trip, and one I can never cease to deplore, was that in my hasty departure I forgot to take a Kodak. On every ship and at every port I met others—and envied them—with Kodaks. They could photograph everything that pleased them..."*



### Pack Light

Nellie got lots of advice on what to bring on her trip. In the end, Nellie took one small handbag. Only 16 inches wide by 7 inches high, the bag was stuffed with two caps, three veils, slippers, toilet articles, an ink stand, pens, pencils, paper, pins, needles, thread, a dressing gown, a small flask and drinking cup, a few changes of underwear and a jar of cold cream. Many urged her to take a small gun but Nellie refused to arm herself. Nellie also decided to wear her only dress which she had specially made for the trip. While one dress and one bag is a bit extreme, Nellie's observation on luggage is still valid:

*"It will be seen that if one is traveling simply for the sake of traveling and not for the purpose of impressing one's fellow passengers, the problem of baggage becomes a very simple one."*

