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# AN EDITORIAL FORETHOUGHT

In the Spring (1974) issue of this magazine, we published a third segment of Dorothy Johnson's reminiscences about her youthful years in Whitefish, Montana. We announced, with regret, that this series had ended. But then we asked her to contribute a piece for this special edition. We hoped it could be about her later adventures as a career woman in New York and her deliberate move back to Montana in 1950 to pursue a hard-working schedule of newspaper editing, administrative journalism, teaching, and free-lance writing. This time we will not say the series is ended, for we have reason to hope there may be more.

But getting back to our request: to Miss Johnson, our invitation to participate in this issue on women sounded like a request for a name-dropping autobiography. "This makes me nervous," she wrote. "Who cares about my autobiography, and why should it be in your magazine?"

In truth, what follows is not an orderly autobiography at all, and name-dropping, with which it could be filled, is held to a minimum. There are some mild and funny female-in-a-man's-world confrontations (the young male chauvinists in Whitefish seem to have made the most lasting impression); there is some self-analysis on why a woman can and should write of high adventure (the fact that she lived in a raw new Montana town as a child may have had some influence, but not necessarily so).

There isn't space here to do even a short biography of Dorothy Johnson. But for the sake of orderliness: She was born in Iowa and her parents moved to Great Falls when she was four, then to Whitefish when she was seven. Her father died when she was ten, and her education-minded mother strove to support them both in many ways, including some described in earlier Johnson reminiscences we have published.

After graduating from Whitefish High School, Dorothy went to Missoula, and in 1928 earned her B.A. from the University of Montana. On commencement night, she tells us, she was 200 miles away, looking for a job in Spokane, Washington. The first time she ever attended a university commencement was some twenty-five years later, when she marched in the faculty procession at the University of Montana. Twenty years after that, the Missoula institution awarded Miss Johnson a Doctor of Letters degree.

After her college degree arrived by mail in 1928, Miss Johnson went to Okanogan, a little fruit-growing community north of Spokane, where she worked as a secretary for two years. She spent five years doing the same kind of work in Menasha, Wisconsin. In 1935, she became an assistant editor for the Gregg Publishing Company, which specialized in publications for teachers. She spent nine years at Gregg, during which a "long, dry spell" in outside publishing ended when the *Saturday Evening Post* sent a generous check for some of her short stories. Although her manuscript published here doesn't say so, Dorothy eventually did

become advertising manager at Gregg, but before she got "settled into that triumph over male dominance," she accepted managing editorship of *The Woman*, a digest magazine for women, published in New York City. After six years, because of mounting disillusionment with the publication (it's long defunct) and with New York life generally, Miss Johnson and her mother, who had been widowed a second time, decided to return to Montana. It was October, 1950.

Miss Johnson was welcomed back to Whitefish in a tangible way when she was offered an editorial job on the *Whitefish Pilot* by Publisher Gurnie Moss. She became news editor, editorial writer and society editor, and at the same time kept up a steady flow of free-lance writing, a lot of which brought rejection slips.

This dry spell ended in 1953, when Ballantine Books of New York published *Indian Country*, a compilation of western stories which had appeared in the *Saturday Evening Post*. For some time after that, however, the market for short stories seems to have dried up, perhaps due to the radical new television in many homes, and the author began writing books for young readers. As might be expected, these were fresh and different from the usual fare offered youngsters.

In 1957 came the book-length publication of a collection of stories under title *The Hanging Tree*, also by Ballantine Books. The title story became a movie in 1959, starring Gary Cooper. Since then, there have been many more books, which a bibliographical essay at the end of this article reveals. Not revealed in any such compilation, however, are the hundreds of newspaper and magazine articles, frequent and happy raconteur appearances before many groups, countless research trips by "Dangerous Dorothy" to Montana ranches and mountains and exotic far-away places about which a near-sighted young Dorothy had read with such voracious appetite.

In 1953, Miss Johnson left Whitefish to become secretary-manager of the Montana Press Association, an organization of newspaper publishers (mostly males), with headquarters at the School of Journalism on the University campus in Missoula. This was an improbable job for a lady author (who is "equally clumsy with a press camera or a set of books") but one she filled with imagination and zest for fourteen years. She also taught classes in magazine journalism at the University. In 1967, nagging health problems forced her to give up both jobs.

Today, Miss Johnson writes at her home in Missoula, trying to master a baffling new electric typewriter which seems to make errors with terrible speed and comes up with disturbing spaces between letters. We have no doubt she will master it. But for now, paraphrasing this indomitable woman writer, please excuse us. We have another helping of Dorothy Johnson to share with you.



THE AUTHOR DOING RESEARCH  
ON A MONTANA RANCH, 1940s.

# THE SAFE AND EASY WAY TO ADVENTURE

by DOROTHY M. JOHNSON

Once my mother told another woman, "My daughter writes western stories." The other woman replied haughtily, "MY daughter writes high-class stories, about night clubs." Somebody is always putting me on the defensive. But why shouldn't women write action stories? Quite a bunch of them do. Several women, including me, belong to the Western Writers of America. After all, men who write about the Frontier West weren't there either. We all get our historical background material from the same printed sources. An inclination to write about the frontier is not a sex-linked characteristic, like hair on the chest.

It's safer and easier, for either gender, to go adventuring now than it used to be. Just duck back temporarily to the Nineteenth Century while keeping the door open for a quick return to the Twentieth. We don't have to fire a shot or an arrow in anger. We don't have to flee from the law or, shiny badge on vest, enforce it. We need not get really scared or really mad — but I do tend to breathe faster and get duck bumps while the people I invent are experiencing these emotions on my typewriter. I become those people.

Action stories provide the writer, as well as the reader, with escape from Now to Then, from current vexations to hair-raising problems that were all solved long ago. Suppose I'm lost in the wilderness with a broken leg. Winter is coming on. The friendly Indians with whom I was traveling have gone on, not knowing of my situation. Or I'm the helpless captive of a bunch of not-so-friendly Indians, with no hope of getting away.\* What can I do? Why, cover up the typewriter and go to bed. Tomorrow will be time enough to get out of this mess.

\*The harrowing situations set forth in this paragraph came, respectively, from "Journal of Adventure," *The Hanging Tree and Other Stories*, 1957, and "A Man Called Horse," *Indian Country*, 1953, both published by Ballantine Books. In the movie, "A Man Called Horse," Richard Harris was the captive.

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The town where I grew up — Whitefish, Montana — may have influenced me toward writing action stories. It was raw and new. Some people assume that an author just writes down true stories that someone told him. We should be so lucky! I have seen in print the statement that my stories are based on tales I heard old-timers tell in Whitefish. This sounds charming — the benevolent old pioneer settler gathering the neighborhood kids around him to listen to his reminiscences. But it didn't happen.

There were some hair-raising events around town, all right. Some very rough men tackled an old drunk in an alley and burned him with a hot poker. A little boy disappeared in the woods near town and was never seen again, in spite of a concentrated search by dozens of sharp-eyed hunters. The axe-hacked body of a woman known as Cayuse Mary was found near the railroad track. These things I heard about, and they were true, but they weren't stories; they were only incidents. They were part of the background. Violence *did* exist, therefore it obviously *could* exist, with countless variations. So why not write about it?

Children in my neighborhood used to play cowboys-and-Indians. We didn't wonder *why* we played that instead of something else. It was simply what *we did*, just as children where I live now toss a basketball endlessly at a contraption over the garage door. One summer the little girls around here spent a lot of time putting bumblebees into bottles. They didn't know why — I asked them — and they did get stung. But they went grimly on, putting bumblebees into bottles as if the world's future depended on it.

Some of my contemporaries received cowboy suits or Indian costumes for Christmas. Those who didn't could improvise easily enough. A red bandanna, a home-made wooden pistol and a straw hat turned up in front made any boy a cowboy; his lariat, which he soon lost, was a piece of old clothesline. All an Indian really needed were a band around his head with a feather stuck in it, a bow and one arrow that he made himself, and some juice of wild Oregon grapes for war paint. (He couldn't borrow a lipstick from his mother; no respectable woman possessed one).

Cowboys and Indians fought each other, because this was our tradition. Nobody told us that real live cowboys and Indians seldom battled to the death, having little occasion to do so. We didn't give a hang about history anyway. In our world, cowboys fought Indians, and Indians yelled *KI YI PUNKAJEE* all the time. I still wonder where *PUNKAJEE* came from. It was just something we Indians were supposed to yell, so we did.

The store in St. Paul that shipped my Indian suit, a present from my aunt, made a mistake and sent one with fringed pants, so I was a male Indian. Some of the older ladies in our church thought this wasn't quite nice. Little girls wore dresses and played quietly with other little girls. But all the kids available to play with near our house (four regulars and two or three occasional drop-ins) were boys. I was handicapped enough, being unable to throw a ball properly

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("Yah, yah, you throw like a girl!") and having to wear glasses after a bad attack of measles ("Yah, yah, Four Eyes!") without having to wear a dress all the time. But I could yell *KI YI PUNKAJEE!* as well as anybody, and I could always find my jumping rope when a cowboy needed to be tied to a stake. Boys didn't have jumping ropes, yah, yah!

Once I tried to vary the fare with King Arthur and his Knights, but it didn't work. When you hold a shield on your left arm and brandish a spear with your right, you have no hand left over to hold up your horse. Strange to say, as cowboys and Indians, we saw no need for horses. We always fought dismounted.

My specialty was dreaming up plots. I yelled suggestions: "Play like Dean and Billy and Henry capture Lawrenco and tie him up and play like I come in to rescue him and play like we all shoot and . . ." To all this, my companions paid no attention. I was great at laying out a story line but was, alas, no leader of men. We might get as far as tying up somebody with my jumping rope, but neither the cowboys nor the Indians would use my dialogue. Combatants were shot and fell with heroic gestures but wouldn't stay down. They got up and rejoined the fray, screaming, "Bang, you're dead! . . . I'm not!" The whole chaotic affair usually ended in a dog pile of struggling, squabbling, giggling cowboys and Indians while I was still shrieking stage directions and a plot that would have ended in a dramatic tableau with me center stage.

Then the snake entered Eden. I had always assumed that, although different, I was almost equal. But one day one of the boys gave me an inimical look and announced brutally, "If you play you gotta be a squaw." So the despised minority picked up her jumping rope and stumbled home in tears. Maybe we were outgrowing the game anyway. I was definitely outgrowing the fringed pants of my Indian costume. Half a century later, I realized what my childhood companions were: male chauvinist pigs, that's what.

I never planned to write westerns. The basic idea of writing about the frontier may have evolved from those stylized encounters between cowboys and Indians. In Whitefish we never saw any of either except in the movies. In high school, when I should have been doing something else, I wrote a story, never finished, about a boy named Edward who was lost in the woods. He's still lost and no doubt still trying to find his way out. This was a western — anyway the woods were those I knew, right near town, and I had been awfully confused in them myself if not totally and irrevocably lost. I also wrote an eastern, a melodramatic story including a scene in a cabaret where "waiters shrieked and bright lights glared," this being my early teen-age idea of high life among the pampered rich way back east. I still wouldn't recognize a cabaret if I woke up in one; "cabaret" was just a glamorous word. Last time I reread this story about the moral decline of a beautiful society woman, I concluded that it was intended to be satirical. I'd hate to think I meant it to be serious.\*

\*This unpublished opus and some other early efforts are in a tattered notebook that has long been the property of Marguerite Cole Moomaw, Lincoln, Nebraska. The society woman's name, probably by no coincidence, was Marguerite.

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As a student at the University of Montana, I wrote stories, some of which were published in *Frontier*, the campus literary magazine. A trapper murdered two others; a deputy sheriff let a guilty man get away; an old rancher killed his young wife's lover. These stories worried me a little because aspiring writers were cautioned to write about what they knew. I didn't know any murderous trappers or conniving law-enforcement officers or cuckolded ranchers. But the background was familiar, and such people fit into it better than opera singers or beautiful quadrooms or French counts.

**M**y first job after graduation from the University was in the office of a store in Okanogan, Washington, which *did* have cowboys and Indians. The latter wore blankets and, when they came to town, sat on the sidewalks with their feet stuck out before them. Matilda Wapito used to show up whenever she got a check from her son. First she went to the bank, where a teller read the accompanying letter to her, and cashed the check. Then she came to our store, where the cashier read the letter to her and she settled her account. Then she did some small shopping, and in each department a sales person read the letter to her. She never said a word, but when she joined the sidewalk-sitters she was obviously pleased because now everybody knew what a good son she had.

Okanogan had fruit tramps, too — itinerant workers who came in the fall, homeless and rootless. They earned big money and spent it fast. They were not beloved, but they were vital to the economy of the orchards.

Just before I moved to Wisconsin, after two years in Okanogan, Opal Colbert took me to see some bucking-horse riding on a ranch that raised rodeo stock. One rider was knocked out and, with a played-down minimum of fuss, was carried into the house. Quite a while later his wife quietly followed. This puzzled me; shouldn't she be upset? Opal explained that she was, but custom required that she must not show it.

As soon as I got the typewriter open on my stepfather's farm in Wisconsin, I wrote a story about that. To my utter astonishment and unbounded delight, the *Saturday Evening Post* bought it for \$400, which was four months' pay on the job I had left in Okanogan — and five months' pay on the one I got later in Menasha, Wisconsin, as secretary to the advertising manager in a paper factory. The depression had set in.

My boss sometimes let me write advertising copy. Along with a lot of other people, he got fired during an economy campaign. I asked the appropriate executive higher up to consider me for the job when it opened up again and was assured that I would be in the running, so I strove mightily to prove my worth. Some months later I was introduced to my new boss, the new advertising manager. When I asked Mr. Big Promises how come, he laughed merrily and replied, "We would never consider a woman for that job!"

But there came a happy day when I was able to announce, "I'll be leaving in two weeks — I have an editorial job with a publishing company in New York."

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Being female was no handicap in the publishing business, especially with a boss who let me do all sorts of writing jobs, including a textbook. But the stories I wrote on my own time were not published anywhere.

When I had been away from the West for eleven homesick years, I began to write about Okanogan with its cowboys and Indians and fruit tramps — and the *Post* bought four stories all at once, to be followed by many more about the same people. But I had a desperate need to know more about cowboys and Indians and horses and cattle and things pertaining to an earlier period: history and gold mining and how to hang a man and the appropriate way to act if you're the man being hanged and thoroughly deserve it. A writer can find out a lot about these things simply by reading the right books. He need not personally lift scalps, rustle cattle, or shoot it out with a bad guy on Main Street.\*

I spent a vacation studying cows and horses under the tutelage of Bob Fancher and his daughter, Roberta, on the Pilot Wheel Ranch near Tonasket, Washington, and other vacations learning at the 3 Circle and R Bar ranches near Birney, Montana, from the Brown and Woodard families and their relatives, hired hands and saddle horses. I did research while doggedly clutching a saddlehorn or perched on a log of a branding corral or following nervous cowboys around with notebook and camera. They were nervous because they knew how to act with dude ladies who pursued them on account of their charms, but they didn't know what to make of one who just kept asking silly questions.

Once at the 3 Circle, Joe Brown asked what I was reading, and I answered, *Diseases of the Horse*.

"What?" he asked in a puzzled way, so I repeated. He sighed with relief. "I thought you said 'Jesus on a Horse,' and I knew I didn't have a book named that!"

He had a lot of others, though, about Cheyennes and Crows and pioneer settlers, and he had known many of the authors and the Indians mentioned in them. He was a gold mine. Cowboy phraseology, notes on traditional customs, anecdotes about hairy events of pioneer days — all these went into my notebooks. Back in New York I bought more books. The pride of my library today is a copy of Fanny Kelly's *Narrative of My Captivity Among the Sioux Indians*, autographed by the author, who was 19 when she was captured in 1865.

Argosy sometimes bought western stories that the *Post* had turned down. But Argosy wouldn't let me be Dorothy M. No, sir. The author of those stories was D. M. Johnson. One afternoon at a press party I cornered the top editor. He had a cocktail glass in each hand, and I thought he couldn't fight back. I had a glass in one hand, which made me bold enough to ask, "How come you make a man out of me?" I may even have used strong language, like "dammit." After all, I was a fellow named D. M. Johnson.

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\*A collection of *The Saturday Evening Post* stories was published in 1942 by Wm. Morrow under title *Beulah Bunny Tells All*. The hanging episodes and shooting it out on Main Street were plotted for *The Hanging Tree* and "The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance," in *Indian Country*. A movie carrying the latter title, had John Wayne shooting Lee Marvin, but James Stewart thought he did it.



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The editor answered sweetly, "Argosy doesn't publish material by women writers."

"You don't object to women in your stories," I argued.

"Oh, we don't object to women . . .," he agreed with a small leer. ". . . in their place." He wouldn't budge on the issue of letting me be a lady.

Time passed. Argosy published some more stories by D. M. Johnson, and I kept arguing by mail. At last the editor agreed: "All right, hereafter you're Dorothy." But Argosy has never bought a story from me since.

Once Argosy's art director worried about an illustration; he phoned to ask me to come over to his office, a couple of blocks from mine, to take a look. The picture showed my heroine in the background with half a dozen beef critters bunched up in the foreground. Only their faces showed.

"Are those Hereford bulls all right?" he wanted to know.

They were Herefords, sure enough, but I had to admit that I can't tell a bull from a steer by looking at its face. There should be more people like this man working on the he-man magazines. Some caption writers use "bull" and "steer" interchangeably. Of course a bull can become a steer, but it can't be changed back.

Once in New York, while working on a story about Montana, I needed to know how far a galloping horse can travel in an hour. (I no longer remember what the desperate situation was that required full speed ahead.) Where do you find out a thing like that in a big eastern city? At a meeting of the Authors' Guild, sitting next to a woman who specialized in profiles for *The New Yorker*, I mentioned the problem.

"Ask Rex Stout," she suggested. "He's right over there, and he knows absolutely everything." I was timid, so she went over and asked him. She came back with his answer: "Ten miles." That's what I used, and no reader complained.

I left New York because after fifteen years I couldn't stand it any more. Research is easier in Missoula, with two good libraries and people all around who know all sorts of things. Peculiar questions about imaginary characters' accidents and illnesses do not disturb my doctor, although some of them might prompt a big city physician to phone the police.

Recently at a dinner party I expressed a need to know some facts about grizzly bears, because an Indian woman in my current project gets her leg badly clawed by one. Seated at my left was David MacLay, whose career has brought him into more intimate contact with grizzlies than I'd care for myself. So that's settled.

Now please excuse me. I have some unfinished fiction business. It's June of 1876. My people are Oglala Sioux in Crazy Horse's band. We licked General Crook at the Battle of the Rosebud a few days ago, then we joined Sitting Bull's Hunkpapas. Now here we are, thousands of us, camped along the Little Big Horn and minding our own business—and look what's coming. Another bunch of those blue-coated pony soldiers! Come on, fellows—*KI YI PUNKAJEE!*

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# THE BOOKS OF DOROTHY JOHNSON

A teacher named Beulah Bunny who could not resist meddling in the affairs of her students and friends is the central character and narrator for the stories in Dorothy Johnson's first book, entitled, appropriately enough, *Beulah Bunny Tells All*. When William Morrow and Company published it in 1942, readers of the *Saturday Evening Post* were already familiar with many of the exploits of this warm-hearted fictional character, always vividly alive and believable despite her unlikely name. Beulah was the star in the first of fourteen Johnson books; as of this writing, all indications point to many more.

A little more than a decade after *Beulah* appeared, Miss Johnson's second collection of short stories was published, this time under the imprint of Ballantine Books and this time featuring western themes, which were to serve both the author and her readers so well. Entitled *Indian Country*, this volume came out in 1953, and contained several stories that are currently very well known: "The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance" and "A Man Called Horse" were both later made into motion pictures in 1962 and 1969, respectively.

Clearly establishing her reputation for graphic portrayal of the interplay of complex characters against authentic western situations was Miss Johnson's third (and probably best known) volume, *The Hanging Tree*, published in 1957 by Ballantine. The novelette of the same name became a motion picture in 1959, starring Gary Cooper. Although the native Montana actor came to Missoula and hit it off famously with the author, the actual shooting took place in the Yakima Valley in Washington, which the producers thought "looked more like Montana than Montana." The premiere showing was in New York City, but Montana was honored with the second, at the Fox Theater in Missoula.

As the market for short stories began to wane, Dorothy Johnson turned to writing books for young readers, all solidly based on historical research, and many dealing with western subjects. *Famous Lawmen of the Old West* (Dodd, Mead, 1963) deals with the west's violent peace officers, but is dedicated to good George Tayler, the Whitefish police officer who is familiar to readers of this magazine for his supervision of the Tin Can Clean-up in Whitefish, recounted in our Winter issue, 1974.

Dorothy Johnson's childhood hunger for reading (this worried her mother, because her eyes had been seriously affected by a bout with measles) resulted in a lifelong urge to travel. Two trips to Greece, for instance, resulted in two books, both published in 1964: *Greece: Wonderland of the Past and Present* (Dodd, Mead) and *Farewell to Troy* (Houghton-Mifflin). She has traveled to many other places, including Central and South America and Africa, and aside from new writing ideas, these forays added to another somewhat

improbable Johnson enthusiasm: collecting "small but deadly weapons."

In 1965, Miss Johnson again returned to western themes, when Dodd, Mead published *Some Went West*, an account of the experiences of women on the frontier. In 1967, the same publisher brought out *Flame on the Frontier*, a compilation of short stories for girls. In *Witch Princess*, published in 1967 by Houghton-Mifflin, the author again turned to ancient Greece for a fictionalized account of a young serving girl in the court of Medea.

In 1969, the stubborn Sioux medicine man, Sitting Bull, became a subject for biography, published by Westminster Press under title *Warrior for a Lost Nation*. Then in 1970 came *Western Badmen* (Dodd, Mead) which contained sketches of twenty-two outlaws, ranging from Billy the Kid to some not so famous, with young readers advised in the introduction: "All the badmen in this book did vicious damage to other people. And what did they get out of it? Constant fear, never-ending suspicion, prison sentences, and, in most cases, death by a bullet or at the end of a rope."

Also aimed at the young reader is Miss Johnson's 1970 contribution to Coward McCann's series, *States of the Nation*. This short volume on Montana indicates the author's obvious love for her home state, to which she returned after a notable career in New York, described in her article published here.

In 1971, Miss Johnson returned to writing books for adults, but this time it was not to fiction, but to historical facts. *The Bloody Bozeman* (McGraw-Hill) deals with the dangerous road leading from the south to Montana gold fields which the fierce Red Cloud finally succeeded in closing despite the presence of troops all the way from Fort Laramie in Wyoming to Fort C. F. Smith in Montana.

The author's fourteenth volume appeared in 1973, published by McGraw-Hill and for the first time, with a co-author, the late R. T. Turner of the University of Montana. Another improbable title, *The Bedside Book of Bastards*, refers to the character of history's villains whose lawless and/or bloody ways are recounted, not to their parentage. These witty (and often very informative) anecdotes are guaranteed not to put the nocturnal reader to sleep. There must, indeed, be many a sleepless reader, for the first printing was sold out well before Christmas last year.

The many and varied fans of Dorothy Johnson will be pleased to know that she is currently at work on a biography of Montana's cowboy artist, Charlie Russell. In spite of the weight of material on this subject, one can expect a fresh approach. Nor are young readers to be neglected: at the same time a Sioux mother and daughter, who lived between 1820 and 1890, are coming vividly to life.