

# CHIP *of the* FLYING-U

B.M.BOWER



pen and ink drawings by C. M. Russell, used with this article, were reproduced from B. M. Bower's novel, "The Lure of the Dim Trails," published in 1907 by G. W. Dillingham Co., New York.

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# THE AUTHOR

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by STANLEY R. DAVISON

In the first decade of this century, readers of Montana fiction discovered a new ranch in the state. Bearing the alluring name of "The Flying U," it was peopled by a half-dozen personable cowboys, "The Happy Family," along with the crusty but agreeable owner, "Old Man" Whitmore. Assorted hired hands, visitors and neighboring ranchers made up the rest of the cast.

These people and their land were introduced in a series of short stories and serialized novels in Street & Smith magazines, starting in 1904. But it was two years later, with publication of a modest little book called *Chip of the Flying U*, that Montanans became aware of the place. Soon after came *The Lonesome Trail*, made up of a novelette bearing that name, plus six short stories relating adventures of the Happy Family. So smoothly were these tales blended that readers would hardly suspect that they had not been written as chapters in this novel. Most were so absorbed by the characters, their conversation and activities, that they had little concern for technicalities of the author's craft.

But they did wonder about a couple of things. Who was this writer, B. M. Bower, who could create characters as real as the folks one had known for a lifetime? And where was the Flying U Ranch? It was too real not to exist somewhere in the foothills of North Central Montana.

Probably there were many who knew from the first that the masculine-sounding name concealed a lady whose name was Bertha, whose family name was Muzzey, and whose first husband was named Bower. But some who heard this refused to believe it. No woman could write like that, or would know so much about cattle and horses and the land where they ran, and the men who lived among them, much less penetrate a man's thinking about himself and the life he was living.

*Was a Lady*



Aside from all these considerations, didn't some of the Bower books have "his" real name, B. M. Sinclair, in parentheses? Yes, explained the knowing ones, "she" had since married a man named Sinclair. But many more have regarded Bower as a man, right through to the present day. Some fans recall their own shock when they learned the truth. One western historian confessed: "I have skulked in the shadows ever since. It broke my heart." An early novel, *The Range Dwellers*, told in the first person as by a male narrator, must have added to the misunderstanding. The experiment in this style, incidentally, was not successful; this book lacks much of the Bower appeal.

Even journalists concerned with literary news were confused for a long time, as a survey of comment in the *New York Times* will show. In 1908 a review of *The Lure of the Dim Trails* ascribed authorship to Mr. B. M. Bower. Some light dawned early in 1909, when a note on *The Lonesome Trail* declared "the author's real name is Miss B. M. Sinclair." Retrogression sets in with the 1914 report on *Ranch at the Wolverine*, credited to "Mr. Bower." The next year, we learn that Miss Sinclair has written *The Flying U's Last Stand*; but when *The Phantom Herd* was reviewed in 1916, it was stated that "Mr. Bower is writing romances of the movies . . ." A few months later, *The Heritage of the Sioux* was noted with no comment on the author's personal identity. Reviews in the next few years either ignored the matter, or used the word "he," but a note on *The Sky rider* late in 1918 mentions "her book." With *Rim of the World* in 1920, credit went to "Miss B. M. Bower." No one had gotten it exactly straight. But at last a critic of *The Trail of the White Mule* in 1922 identified its author as Mrs. Robert E. Cowan. The truth was out, but it didn't stay out.

In 1926, a new reviewer, who obviously had not read his predecessor's material, wrote this gem:

*B. M. Bower, the president and general manager of a silver-copper mine in Nevada, is a strong but not altogether silent man who, during the intermissions in his professional duties, has found time to write thirty-four books, aptly described on the dust jacket of this, his latest, as "rollicking novels of Western adventure."*<sup>1</sup>

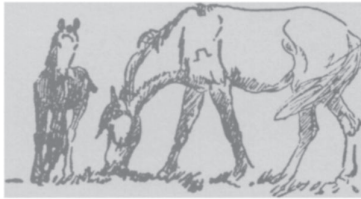
Momentarily departing from the *Times* and its blunders, we note one rival and possible companion to this fumble. An individual who tried to furnish clues on Bower's points of residence stated that "he" had been associated with the notorious "Diamondfield Jack" Davis in the murder of two sheepherders in eastern Idaho in 1896. The J. E. Bower involved in that episode was the general manager of Sparks-Harrell, a Nevada firm with ranches extending into Idaho. It would be hard to connect all this with our lady author. It is true that she held the title of President in a company formed to develop some claims owned by herself and Cowan, but this was incidental to her career as a novelist and would not justify depicting her as a mining executive.

When *White Wolves* appeared in 1927, a more charitable soul was on hand to deliver words of praise and again to refer to Bower as "she." One might suppose that from here out, all would be well. But no; comes 1934 and *The*



<sup>1</sup> *New York Times*, Jan. 17, 1926.





*Flying U Strikes*. Calling Bower a good writer, the reviewer says, "it is doubtful if he has ever devised a more complicated plot." Reviews of the next few books seem to dodge the question, referring to the author vaguely and indirectly.

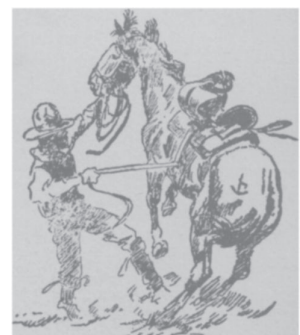
Starting in 1936, signed critiques by George W. Harris lack any indication of what he might know; his frequent expression was "this veteran novelist." Possibly Harris was co-operating with publishers who thought the books would sell better if a new generation of readers believed the author to be masculine. On dust-jackets, the publishers (who surely knew better) were quoting reviews mentioning Bower as "he," obviously carrying on a minor hoax.

The author's own preference as to names is not clear. Usually the title page carries a simple "B. M. Bower," but some early books follow this with "B. M. Sinclair" in parentheses. *The Long Loop*, dated 1931, claims the copyright for "Bertha M. Sinclair-Cowan." Bertrand W. Sinclair, to whom she was married between 1907 and 1912, was himself a successful author of western and Canadian stories, and used the style "B. W. Sinclair." A published biographical note on him states that he "wrote a number of western books under his real name, B. M. Sinclair," with no mention of Bower. No wonder confusion abounds! A personal letter, written in 1924, is on stationery with a simple B. M. Bower in block capitals, and signed "Bower."

As for the Flying U Ranch itself, there are several facets to that question. True believers held that there really was such an outfit, and under that name. Moderates surmised that one or more existing ranches were involved, not necessarily running that magic brand. The more realistic felt that the Flying U was a composite of several places, scrambled with bits from the author's imagination, hence a site that never could be located.

All must have shared a curiosity, however, as to where Bower herself thought of it as being. Most Happy Family tales contain clues which pinpoint the area along the southern fringe of the Bear Paw Mountains. *The Lonesome Trail* uses the ranch as a reference point in mentioning places north of the Bear Paws as only a short distance away. The re-write, *Spirit of the Range*, explains on its first page that the ranch lay between the Missouri River and the Milk, and adjacent to the Bear Paws, but that posthumous book shows indications of tinkering by hands other than Bower's, so this evidence is tainted. Mrs. Bower was living in and around Big Sandy when *Chip* appeared, and that town is probably "Dry Lake" where the family got its mail. We are told that the post office was 22 miles from the ranch, and this distance east from Big Sandy takes us into the area already identified. The interviews, printed herewith, quoting a pair of old-timers in the Milk River country, indicate that the novelist had lived on ranches in that neighborhood.

Another mystery has intrigued Bower readers, again most particularly those with Montana backgrounds. When the book version of *Chip* was published in 1906, it bore three watercolor illustrations by Charles M. Russell. That artist was already well along in his career as an illustrator and was recognized also for some of his more lasting work. But the exposure of his pictures in this initial Bower book and three others soon to follow surely added to his





**THE LAST STAND**, the original of which is in the Gilcrease Institution of American History and Art, Tulsa, Oklahoma, was painted in 1905 and reproduced, facing page 176, in *CHIP OF THE FLYING U*, published in 1906 by G. W. Dillingham Co., New York.

fame. Similarly, the appealing Russell illustrations must have helped the rising Bower star.

An added effect was to reinforce the spreading belief that the character of Chip was inspired by Russell. Support for this theory comes from the incident where the talented but untrained cowboy finishes a canvas begun by the heroine, the result being the dramatic tableau of a starved and freezing cow and her calf, menaced by wolves. Its title, "The Last Stand," and similarity of theme, bring to mind the original CMR bombshell, his "Last of 5000" or "Waiting for a Chinook," which had moved him out of obscurity in 1887. Less known is another "Last Stand," done in oil before 1900. It can be assumed that Bower had seen these pictures and consciously wrote the episode into her story. This made the tragic scene an obvious choice for one of the illustrations.

As the story develops, so does Chip's yearning to draw and paint, as the means of escape from his lowly status as a cow hand. Russell had been a cowboy with this urge to paint and to model in wax, coupled with the talent to do them well. Another small point: CMR was called "Kid" in his earliest days on the range, and Bower has Chip addressed as "Kid Bennett" by a thinly disguised Senator W. A. Clark, who bids for the picture of the gallant cow. Speculation on the whole matter has been in print often. The pioneer A. J. "Ajax" Noyes,



who spent some time in the Chinook area and knew both parties, quotes a direct denial by Russell.<sup>2</sup> But, the renowned Texan, J. Frank Dobie, says of the artist, "Contrary to his denials, he is supposed to have been the prototype of Chip."<sup>3</sup>

As soon as it was generally known in Montana that Bower was a lady, rumors circulated that not only was Russell the model for Chip, but that there was some romantic feeling between the novelist and the artist. I believe that among the grown-ups devouring the Flying U stories (while this writer was learning to read from the same) it was firmly held that she had rather lovingly developed her portrayal of Chip in resemblance to her friend, and that his supplying the illustrations cinched that point.

All that can be supported beyond conjecture is that Bower knew Russell early and well enough to have picked up from him the concept of a cowboy who harbors an artistic talent. However, the well known details of Russell's life do not jibe with the story of Chip, either in the first or later books. As to the circumstances of his being commissioned to do the illustrations, the artist's biographers are of limited assistance. Harold McCracken states that the contract grew out of Russell's visit to New York in 1904. Fred G. Renner, in a sketch on CMR, adds a few details:

*Their old Montana friend, Bertha Muzzie, a school teacher from Trout Creek Basin, had just completed a novel called "Chip of the Flying U" that was to come out under the pen name, B. M. Bower. Through her, Nancy met the publishers, Street & Smith, and arrangements were made for Charley to do the illustrations.*<sup>4</sup>

Mr. Renner also relates that the publishers considered Russell's price too high at \$100 apiece for the three illustrations, and that Bower volunteered to pay half the cost. She obviously wanted to have the Russell pictures, possibly because she saw the country much as he did; can anyone read this, from *The Range Dwellers*, without thinking of CMR?

*The land was a dull, yellowish brown, with a purple line of hills off to the south, and with untidy snowdrifts crouching in the hollows.*

Both artist and author reveal elsewhere that they shared a fondness for this notion of the talented cowboy as a character in western fiction. In preparing the illustrations for *The Range Dwellers*, Russell chose a minor episode involving a young lady painting a landscape while her cowboy admirer offers his suggestions, if not his help. Bower used the theme in *White Wolves*, when a young rancher lets his flair for painting get him into trouble. This lad is in no way like Charlie Russell, except in his sensitiveness to the scenery of Montana's midlands, but Bower plainly was intrigued with the concept of cowboys with artistic sidelines.

There is evidence that she, as well as her second and third husbands, were long-time friends of the Russells. An accompanying letter by B. W. Sinclair, recalling the years before 1907, speaks of them as neighbors and close associates. Another letter, written by Bower in 1924 while she was married to Robert Cowan, tells of the two couples spending a day together in Nevada, with indications that the visit was in the nature of a reunion.

<sup>2</sup> A. J. Noyes, *Land of the Chinook* (Helena, 1917), p. 121.

<sup>3</sup> J. Frank Dobie, *Guide to Life and Literature of the Southwest*, (Dallas, 1952), p. 97. A letter from B. M. Bower to Fred G. Renner, dated May 17, 1937, should remove doubt for all time, however, about this matter. "No, Charlie Russell was not the original Chip," Bertha wrote, "I did not know Charlie until I went to see if he would do the illustrations for the book."

<sup>4</sup> F. G. Renner, "Charles Marion Russell — the Man and his Work," in Senate Document 133, 85th Cong., 2nd. Sess. The letter from Bower to Renner, referred to in footnote 3, explored the matter of illustrating.





Bud Cowan could well have been the model for Bower cowboys who were musical rather than artistic. He had a talent for playing keyboard instruments and the guitar, as well as for singing. His total contribution to her stories is uncertain, but she acknowledged use of his adventures in *Cow Country* and *The Lure of the Dim Trails*.<sup>5</sup>

Bower's books appeared just in time to encounter the movies, but while her contemporaries found their novels in demand for costly feature films, hers had less acceptance. It is true that Chip's title was used on more than one movie, seemingly with the story line always mangled beyond recognition. One critic wrote: "A talking picture version released in 1939 preserved few of its values." One might suppose that with her large and loyal readership, a Bower-based show would pack the theaters, but the industry judged otherwise. She seems to have taken aim at Hollywood, both in novels dealing with the film industry and in those with settings in the Southwest, accessible to the studios and with plots and action geared for drama. Yet no big feature movies resulted, at least not in comparison to the successful super-Westerns of the time.

A possible answer is that Bower's readers seemed to think in terms of Chip and the rest of the Happy Family, precisely the stories with the least appeal as horse operas. The tales which seemed perfect for movies (such as *Casey Ryan*) were those furthest from Montana and the Flying U. The film-makers may have felt that patrons coming to a theater advertising a Bower picture would be disappointed at anything but another story of Chip and his friends. Some of her later books would have supplied plenty of gore and gunfire, but scripts for such Class B shoot-'em-ups could be obtained from writers like Max Brand, whose followers always knew what to expect.

In the early Flying U stories, and most importantly the first one, there was little to attract the movie-makers. Violence is limited largely to snow storms and fractious horses. On the few occasions when someone has to be shot, the action tends to be off stage and without undue stressing of details. Fights and other brutalities are not the climactic points, while the movies preferred building up to bloody confrontations. When Chip needs his revolver, it is to destroy an injured horse, and he has to hunt around in the bunkhouse for the gun and some shells; the weapon wasn't riding on his hip, with the muzzle sticking out of an open holster.

Even the language is so mild it need not be indicated by series of stars and exclamation points. Chip's own phrase to convey emphatic agreement is "I'd tell a man!", while his friend, Weary, when exasperated or astonished, exclaims "Oh Mamma!" When confronted by anything unbelievable, the cowboy, Happy Jack, always cries out, "Ah, gwan!"

In place of cursing and fighting are pleasant little vignettes establishing mood and atmosphere. A snug ranch kitchen comes to life when Bower pictures a tea-kettle "singing placidly to itself and puffing steam with an air of lazy comfort, as if it were smoking a cigarette."<sup>6</sup> This style of writing attracted swarms of readers but it did not offer much for the films.

Into the 1920's, at least, Hollywood had not matured to the point where psychological material could be handled against a western background. Even the book reviewers back east were not conditioned to the idea that a story about cowboys and ranch hands might probe deeper into human feelings. The



<sup>5</sup> *Adventure Magazine*, Dec. 10, 1924.

<sup>6</sup> *The Long Shadow*, p. 12.

*New York Times* wrote, "No one expects any particular delving into the complexities of human character in a western story . . ." Maybe so, but it's possible that such insight is exactly the element which lifts Bower into a higher realm than that occupied by Zane Grey, and accordingly beyond the grasp of directors and actors then assigned to "westerns."

As would be expected, critics have compared the character of Chip with that of another fictional cowboy, Owen Wister's Virginian. They emerged about the same time and became accepted as standards of western range riders, but that is about the end of the parallel. One significant likeness is that both the Virginian and Chip came into existence in a series of short stories, later to be arranged into book-length novels. Apparently neither author at first considered the cowboy as a possible subject for a novel, nor the range land as a setting for one. Both probably were surprised when their respective publishers suggested the possibility of profitable markets in that direction. It is clear that in Bower's case, at least, she wrote some of her early work to comply with requests from the publishers, and almost had to be coaxed into doing the thing which was to be so rewarding. Her own statement: "I was asked to write about cattle, and took the Montana range for my subject . . ."<sup>7</sup> This was in 1905, and the story was laid in 1886 or thereabout." She had already written the serialized material and short stories which went into *Chip* and the next few; the new book about cattle was to be *The Lure of the Dim Trails*.

Books dealing with western literature have given Bower some notice. One of the first in the field, Douglas Branch's *The Cowboy and His Interpreters*, shows an appreciative reading of a few of her books. One comment will ring true with most readers: "In *Chip*, as in many a novel, the minor characters are its salvation," adding that the boys in the Happy Family were "a convincing outfit."

J. Frank Dobie, in his *Guide to Life and Literature of the Southwest*, recalled reading the early novels and having rated them as good as those of Eugene Manlove Rhodes. Bower's many stories with southwestern settings qualified her for Dobie's attention, but it is her Montana books that he is describing, as he credits her with the use of "chaste English" and with producing "true to life" fiction.

In *The American Cowboy: Myth and Reality*, Joe B. Frantz and Julian E. Choate, Jr. do not concur that Bower was Rhodes' equal, but grant that her books do benefit from a "real background of life among the bow-legged brethren." (A biographical note elsewhere mentions this less graciously, saying that Bertha's parents brought her to Montana where "she was permitted to roam the Montana ranges and fraternize with the cowboys.") They ascribe to her "a playful, humorous vein" and a lack of any "pontifical" approach in writing about cowboys. H. G. Merriam's chapter on "Montana Writing" in *Burlingame & Toole* lists her among the best in the field of westerns, and "perhaps the Montana founder of the type."

It seems significant that each of these is an evaluation of Bower in terms of her cowboy characters, leading to the suspicion that they, like myself, think first of the Flying U Ranch and its Happy Family. Those books are different from the others which concerned Montana and still further distinguished from those with remote settings. The first few Flying U stories are the real Bower; later, she lapsed more into the commonplace pattern of conflict and gunplay. *Chip*,

<sup>7</sup> *Adventure Magazine*, Dec. 10, 1924.





the first one to be seen as a book, demonstrates better than any other the excellences and special qualities which are pure Bower. Probably the people who picked up any of the subsequent books were hoping each time that she had equalled her original effort; it is not certain that she ever did.

When Bertha Bower left Montana to live, variously, in Nevada, Idaho, New Mexico and on the West Coast, and as she drew upon these areas for plots and backgrounds, her situation was different from what it had been around Big Sandy. There, she had written as an experienced member of the social group she was telling about. Wherever she lived afterward, she would be an outsider — an established writer, a person of some consequence. She would never learn as much about the life of a Nevada prospector as she already knew about the life of a Montana rancher. Her writing may not have changed greatly, but it did tend to become more conventional and less genuine.

However, in the opinion of most readers and critics, the quality of Bower's output remained high for the next thirty-five years. She seems to have been equally popular in the West, where her versions of people and places were judged to be convincing, and in the East, where fewer readers felt competent to evaluate the factor of reality. Will James, himself a successful writer in the field, liked the Bower books, saying of *Points West*, "there's everything that'll please them who don't know the West and them who do."<sup>8</sup>

Bower's term of residence in Oregon was brief and near the end of her career, yet she was proudly claimed as a resident and almost as a native. The *Oregonian's* literary section took note of her new books with friendly comments:

*She is one of the most successful, prolific and most widely read of all writers of westerns. She belongs to the old-timer school of Zane Grey, Clarence Mulford and Harold Bell Wright. About twenty years ago [sic — it was really thirty] she wrote the first Flying U story, which gained her a large following. They were delightfully human stories with a real western background. Her return to the Flying U in The Flying U Strikes, published this spring, created a spurt in sales of all her books.*

Through the years and across the country, reviewers were generally won over by whatever extension they found of the basic merits which made *Chip* and the other early books so attractive; persuasive drawing of likable characters and of a geographical setting which seemed real even to readers who had never seen that part of the country. A review in the *New York Times* summed it up well in 1922:

*She has never professed to be anything but a spinner of yarns to divert an idle hour, but there has always been an authenticity about them, a genuine smell of sagebrush and saddle leather, which many of her pretentious rivals lack. Her humor, too, is native and unforced, and lingers in the mind.*

There is evidence that Bertha Bower was aware of the problem of maintaining historical accuracy while writing fiction. An occasion for expressing her ideas occurred in 1924, when the novelist, Emerson Hough, was criticized strongly by Stuart Henry for presenting a false picture of the Texas cattle drive and of the people of the West at that time, in his popular novel *North of '36*. Writers and critics took sides, with most of them coming to Hough's defense. He died while this wrangle was in progress, but his friends stood by

<sup>8</sup> *Book Review Digest*, 1928.



him stoutly. Bower had her say in a long letter to *Adventure Magazine*. Henry had taken exception to Hough's portrayal of dashing, vigorous characters, insisting that frontier people had been a forlorn lot, dull and spiritless. She seems to have been especially galled by Henry's claim that the pioneers lacked determination and courage:

*. . . the kind of men and women Stuart Henry imagines the pioneers to have been could never have met the test which life gave daily to cattlemen. They HAD to be made of good stuff. They had to think for themselves — and think quickly. A weary, weazened, hopeless and forlorn type could not have existed under the conditions they would have to meet . . . the forlorn and hopeless ones never had the imagination and initiative to leave home and strike out boldly into the wilderness . . . The men and women who had to depend on their wit and endurance and their initiative for their very existence could not be clods.*<sup>9</sup>

Bower goes on to contend that these very traits did breed a belligerent population, even a "six-gun type.":

*From meeting and interpreting emergencies according to their own individual judgment, men came to making their own laws and enforcing them. They developed a hair-trigger pride that magnified their own importance and made mountain insults out of molehill offenses . . . I venture to say that there never lived a six-gun badman who hadn't a warped kind of pride in himself and what he called his honor; a childish passion for impressing his individuality upon those around him. They HAD to respect him and fear him and jump when he spoke — or take the consequences. I've heard bad men boast, and that was the burden of their thoughts — a determination to be hailed master among their fellows. It's an ideal as old as humanity itself.*

She conceded that too much emphasis was being put on the violent side of western life:

*There's more of loneliness and monotony in pioneering than there is of battle . . . Pioneering was, and still is, about ninety percent monotonous isolation and ten percent thrill. It is scarcely fair to turn the picture upside down . . .*

But she had to admit there was occasional action:

*Ask any old-timer who learned to put on his hat before he pulled on his breeches, and to turn his boots upside down and shake them to make sure a rattler hadn't crawled in during the night. Wild times do come to those who travel the dim trails. I speak in the present tense deliberately.*

Bower stressed the fact that the old-timers still living at the time she wrote were fully aware of the unique drama of their lives and times. She stated that at least a hundred had offered recollections and memoirs for a book that she might write. "They were quick to see the dramatic element in their lives," and this included the women, "never happier than when they could talk of past adventures and paint in all the dramatic highlights." She recalled one in particular, who

*used to talk by the hour of her experiences during the Indian outbreaks and gold rushes, and times when she took her children to the stockades during the uprisings, and cooked for the men and nursed the wounded and*

<sup>9</sup> *Adventure Magazine*, Dec. 10, 1924.





THE LADY AUTHOR and her second husband, Bud Cowan, posed for this semiformal portrait by Witzel. Cowan could well have been the model for "Happy Family" cowboys who had musical talent. He was a singer, and played the piano and guitar.

*said prayers over the dead . . . A movie serial could be kept going for months on the stories she told me. And there were hundreds of such women throughout the west.*

Not surprisingly, the best-drawn of Bower's women characters are the comparatively rough types — boarding-house keepers, cooks, ranch wives, not the more delicate heroines. Her work with the latter was only about average. In general, however, Bower seems to have put more attention on her masculine characters, most of them skillfully drawn and completely believable. Occasionally she wasted words in the process, but less commonly than with most writers of her time. She was adroit in helping readers to distinguish between nice individuals and their opposites without making them into cartoons, avoiding the common fault of creating villains who are convincing and heroes who are boring and obnoxious. She seemed to like most of the people in her stories and attracted the reader's good will toward them. Not caring much for the bad guys, she introduced few of them and spent little time trying to paint them life-size.

An old-timer who was interviewed about Bertha Bower in 1940 remembered her as "plump and red-haired, freckle-faced and always laughing." He went on to describe a happy and friendly person, recalling one incident on the ranch where they were both employed, when he was about to miss out on a dance because he had snagged his trousers. Mrs. Bower came to the rescue with needle and thread. "Bertha patched it for me, laughing all the time." This basic friendliness spilled over into her books.

An exception exists in the case of those known today as "minorities." In her time, authors felt no need to spare the feelings of racial and ethnic groups. Even the genial Bower paints a hostile picture of Indians and Mexicans, apparently assured that readers would go along with labeling them as dirty and depraved. *Cow Country* has a strong anti-Indian tone, and uses the word "nigger" casually. The chronically poor get no favors at her hands. In *Casey Ryan* there is a foreshadowing of Steinbeck's migrants along Route 66, but here Bower invites the reader's approval when her hero beats up the destitute father of a





THROWING HERSELF FROM THE SADDLE, SHE SLID PRECIPITATELY INTO THE WASHOUT, JUST AS DENVER THUNDERED UP, is the full caption for this painting by C. M. Russell, also completed in 1905 and reproduced, facing page 252, in the 1906 edition of *CHIP OF THE FLYING U*, published by Dillingham. The original of the painting is in the Amon Carter Museum of Western Art, Fort Worth.



carload of Okies. Members of the Mormon Church are treated roughly in some of her novels. Even allowing for the passage of fifty years, Bower may seem tainted with prejudice, but she probably had her audience sized up accurately.

Bower also seems old-fashioned even for her time in her habit of breaking in periodically with a first-person comment addressed to the reader. In the midst of some cowboy adventure, she speaks up to say, "Those of you who live in the West will know what I mean." On occasions where a story has reached its allotted 300 pages and there are still some loose ends, Bower comes on stage to speak as if she were concluding a personal letter:

*You will wonder what happened next to the Happy Family . . . they planned great things, but I am not going to tell you about them just now. If I should try to satisfy you, there would be no more meetings between you and the Happy Family — since there would be no more to tell . . . Not another thing shall you know about them now.*

Bower must have been about the last writer who was able to get away with this; today it reads like something for pre-schoolers. But it did serve to set up the reader for another sequel in due time.

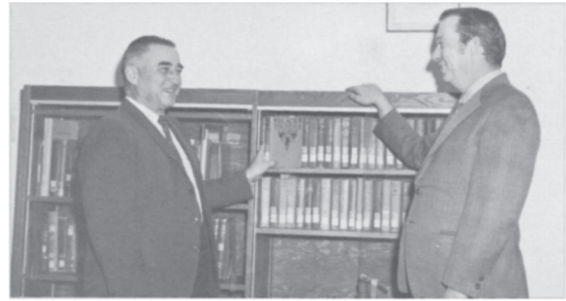
A common complaint against western writers has been their failure to recognize changes that occurred after the 1870's, and their reliance on stock characters. Bower stands acquitted on both counts. She was sensitive to world developments, readily bringing in cars and planes, and the motion picture industry, as these elements intruded into the frontier West. Moreover, she understood what was taking place as homesteaders swarmed over the range land around 1900, and as her cowboys and ranch owners organize a last stand against settlers and land agents, one sees that there was more involved than the water rights to a creek where Flying U cows drank.

One of her better southwest stories is *Starr of the Desert*, dealing with a conspiracy to detach the border states and return them to Mexico. Such a scheme did exist, early in World War I, and Bower neatly built a novel around



## AUTHOR'S ACKNOWLEDGMENT

Rarely has the author of so little been indebted to so many for so much. The idea of an article about Bertha M. Bower was suggested by President James E. Short of Western Montana College, Dillon, whose further contribution involved the gathering of a collection of her books, presently standing at sixty-six out of a possible sixty-seven. The finding and acquiring of these books is a story in itself. Like so many, Dr. Short read a number of the Bower volumes as they came out, appreciating their numerous good qualities, and with interest heightened by the fact that members of the family owned and used the Flying U brand. In the course of building the collection, he made contact with Orrin A. Engen, one of the few known authorities on Bower, who parted with some spare titles and must also be named among those assisting this effort. The set has grown to near completion in a remarkably brief time, as volunteers helped in locating books, miraculously often the very ones that were needed. President Short's own efforts to acquire missing titles similarly has led to providential finds of really scarce books. He has donated the collection to the College, where it is displayed in the Montana Room in the new Library facility. Others on the campus who have read some of the books and contributed their thoughts are too numerous to mention separately here. But particular thanks go to Professor Frank Busch, who corresponded with and interviewed a number of people in the Southwest, obtaining information and pictures. (Dr. Short, left, and Dr. Busch are pictured above with the collection of Bower books at Western Montana College). Much of my own work has been in organizing and utilizing what these colleagues have gathered. Without involving them in responsibility for the result, their share in the project is sincerely acknowledged.



### THE NOVELS OF B. M. BOWER

CHIP OF THE FLYING U (1904)  
LONESOME TRAIL (1904)  
RANGE DWELLERS (1906)  
HAPPY FAMILY (1907)  
LURE OF THE DIM TRAILS (1907)  
HER PRAIRIE KNIGHT and  
ROWDY OF THE CROSS L  
(1908)  
LONG SHADOW (1908)  
LONESOME LAND (1911)  
FLYING U RANCH (1912)  
GOOD INDIAN (1912)  
GRINGOS (1913)  
UPHILL CLIMB (1913)  
RANCH AT THE WOLVERINE  
(1914)  
FLYING U'S LAST STAND (1915)  
JEAN OF THE LAZY A (1915)  
PHANTOM HERD (1916)  
HERITAGE OF THE SIOUX (1916)  
LOOKOUT MAN (1917)  
STARR OF THE DESERT (1917)  
CABIN FEVER (1918)  
SKYRIDER (1918)  
RIM O' THE WORLD (1919)  
THUNDERBIRD (1919)  
QUIRT (1920)  
CASEY RYAN (1921)  
COW COUNTRY (1921)  
TRAIL OF THE WHITE MULE  
(1922)  
VOICE AT JOHNNY WATER  
(1923)  
PAROWAN BONANZA (1923)  
BELLEHELEN MINE (1924)



it. She showed further awareness of change and of conditions outside the make-believe West, in *The Eagle's Wing*, a perceptive treatment of large-scale dam-building by the Federal Government. Some of her desert stories take note of the Prohibition Era and of the attractive rascals among the violators of the related laws.

Among Bower's memorable characters are those with some specialized ability — a girl employed as a railway telegrapher, a prospector who can repair automobiles, cowboys who paint pictures and play the piano. She herself seems to have had most of these interests which enrich her fictional men and women with a broad variety of traits. In contrast, the people in most other westerns are narrow and undeveloped, with one or two specialties like gun-slinging or card-dealing. Bower's characters seem real because they are normal, enabling the reader to become interested in them as people.

Her skill in that area was consistently noted by reviewers, including professionals who were well able to judge. The *Book Review Digest* said of *Cabin Fever*, "The author has managed to convey very finely the character of her people, and to make them humanly lovable." The *Literary Review* found in *The Bellehelen Mine* "character drawing of a fine quality." The *Boston Transcript*, reporting on *The Long Loop*, stated, "Her tales, although cowboy in their setting, have always been rather stories of actual people than stories of picturesque figures who are handy with a lasso or branding iron." For several years around 1930 the *New York Herald Tribune* reviews were done by Will Cuppy, himself a prominent author; he frequently complimented Bower for her portrayal of people.

In view of this approval from competent critics, it seems surprising that there were two who accused her of creating unconvincing characters and of setting plots in situations that had not changed since the 1870's. The *Saturday Review of Literature* thus evaluated *Meadowlark Basin*: "... the sorry adventures of a set of persons wholly devoid of principle or attraction. But the strongest objection is the language of the characters; entirely colloquial — a dialect which resembles nothing on land or sea."

One other really sour estimate of Bower's work is known to exist. The same nameless (and probably fatherless) person who had her figured to be a mining man, maintained in 1926 that the West of B. M. Bower, like that of Bret Harte, had "faded some time ago into the rosy nimbus of the past," and went on

After thirty-three novels, Mr. Bower's facility in his thirty-fourth, has hardened into something of a formula. He cannot create character, yet the things he writes about — landslides, knives, campfires, tomahawks — exist very vehemently on the printed page; they have the illusion of reality, although the people who deal with them are fleshless shadows; it is real whisky that these phantoms drink; real bullets strike them down, and they breathe their last on real beds, although through the blur of their bodiless shapes, the ticking of the mattress may be seen.

But what does it matter that they are shadows, dummies, once you have projected yourself inside them — when once their adventures are happening to you? What matters their stiffness and unreality when compared to your quickened breath and staring eyes — your fevered hand turning the page?

Critics will say that B. M. Bower has merely found out how to build a novel out of the literary buffalo chips left aridly behind by the great herds of writers who have crossed the western plains in search of a plot, and whose bones strew the way. They will say that this book is merely one more attempt, like so many of Mr. Zane Grey's, to bring the nickel "thriller" to the dignity of cloth quartos — and they will be quite right.<sup>10</sup>

Fleshless shadows and bodiless shapes, is it? — and arid buffalo chips? That critic deserves the answer he would have gotten from Happy Jack of the Flying U: "Aw, gwan!"

<sup>10</sup> New York Times, Jan. 17, 1926.



STANLEY R. DAVISON, who has been a member of our Editorial Board for several years, is also one of our favorite contributors to these columns. A native of East Helena, he graduated from Helena High School, then took B.A. and M.A. degrees in history from the University of Montana. He earned his Ph.D. from the University of California at Berkeley, and for many years now has been on the faculty at Western Montana College in Dillon, teaching Montana and frontier history.

#### THE NOVELS OF B. M. BOWER

DESERT BREW (1924)  
EAGLES WING (1924)  
BLACK THUNDER (1925)  
MEADOWLARK BASIN (1925)  
VAN PATTEN (1926)  
ADAM CHASERS (1927)  
WHITE WOLVES (1927)  
HAYWIRE (1928)  
POINTS WEST (1928)  
RODEO (1928)  
SWALLOWFORK BULLS (1929)  
TIGER EYE (1929)  
FOOL'S GOAL (1930)  
DARK HORSE (1931)  
LONG LOOP (1931)  
LAUGHING WATER (1932)  
ROCKING ARROW (1932)  
FLYING U STRIKES (1933)  
OPEN LAND (1933)  
TRAILS MEET (1933)  
WHOO UP TRAIL (1933)  
HAUNTED HILLS (1934)  
DRY RIDGE GANG (1935)  
TROUBLE RIDES THE WIND (1935)  
FIVE FURIES OF LEANING LADDER (1936)  
SHADOW MOUNTAIN (1936)  
NORTH WIND DO BLOW (1937)  
PIRATES OF THE RANGE (1937)  
WIND BLOWS WEST (1938)  
SINGING HILLS (1938)  
STARRY NIGHT (1938)  
MAN ON HORSEBACK (1940)  
SPIRIT OF THE RANGE (1940)  
SWEET GRASS (1940)  
FAMILY FAILING (1941)  
BORDER VENGEANCE (1951)  
GUNFIGHT AT HORSE THIEF RANGE (1951)  
OUTLAW MOON (1952)