

# REFLECTIONS ON THE PAST

## ADVENTURER MARY GERRITSE

By ELAINE TRUCKE  
For EO Media Group

CANNON BEACH — Last week, I was going through some old notes and happened upon information on a local woman named Mary Gerritse. I’ve written about her before, although it was about three years ago. As I was reading about Mary, I started thinking about another woman from history who I think was pretty amazing — Gertrude Bell.

For those who have not heard of Gertrude Bell, she was a traveler, explorer and mapmaker, and at times an accidental policymaker. She was also a woman history books often forget. According to Georgina Howell, who wrote “Gertrude Bell: Queen of the Desert, Shaper of Nations,” Bell was acquainted with Lawrence of Arabia (T.E. Lawrence), and did or helped do many of the things that he is thought to be responsible for. I will never forget one of the beginning scenes of “The English Patient” where the soldiers desperately peer over a large map. They are desperate for escape so another soldier pulls out the Bell maps, he points to a pass marked on this map that is unfamiliar to him and the other soldier says, “Let’s hope he was right.” He!

Mary Gerritse, to me, was Oregon’s very own Gertrude Bell. Mary would not have thought of herself as an intrepid or courageous woman. She was a woman who did what needed to be done. She did, however, have a lot in common with Bell: they were both fond of traveling; both were fond of going where most women were not expected or even allowed to go; and they both ruffled a few feathers along the way.

Mary enjoyed quiet moments to herself with the wind rustling her hair with her horse, Prince, by her side.

Not unlike Bell, who ventured into the Saudi Arabian desert by camelback, Mary plunged through the wilds of the Oregon rain forest, braving northwestern squalls, changing tides and narrow cliff-hugging trails to deliver the mail from 1897 until 1902. Mary was fearless. Once while delivering the mail, she came upon several men on the trail she frequented. They waved at her not to come. The trail was rather narrow and



Mary Gerritse

Submitted photos

***‘When I carried the mail,  
I rode astride on a saddle.’***

Mary Gerritse  
early adventurer

they were afraid she would not be able to pass. Without hesitation she plunged onward. As one man became so afraid he clambered up the opposite cliffside clinging to grass while she rode past, she commented in her journal: “I felt sorry for him. The other side of the trail went down 400 feet to the ocean. I did not know how to be afraid.” On more than one occasion Mary held herself together when most would have struggled with fright. Whether it was coming face-to-face with a bear or a cougar, she held her ground. When Prince, Mary’s beloved

horse, was close to skittering down a cliff into the sea, she remained calm, slid down the 150 feet to where Prince teetered on the edge and soothed him back onto the trail. Despite Prince’s cracked ribs, and Mary’s own slide, the mail was saved!

In her journal, she recalls that summer tides often forced her to rise earlier to deliver the mail. She would arise at 3:30 a.m.! On these days she would return to the location of one her old cabins, though the cabin was no longer there (perhaps lost in a fire), she would rest there and nap while Prince grazed on

clovers growing nearby. Prince was the ideal horse, as much of a friend to Mary as a human being.

There were two trails that she would often take to deliver the mail, one was the back trail — it went over the mountains and through the woods — while the other was the front trail and went along the shore in some spots. It was along the front trail on one frightful occasion when Prince was lost to a change in the tides. The loss devastated her. Mary blamed herself for the death of her favorite horse — and yet she plowed on. She rode

a new horse, this one not nearly as kindhearted as Prince. The horse was so temperamental that few could control him.

Like Bell, Mary ruffled feathers. She refused to ride sidesaddle, as was customary of women at the time. She felt that she was doing man’s work, so should be able to ride like a man! Mary said, “When I carried the mail, I rode astride on a saddle. I got a lot of criticism because, it was not lady-like.” Under a thin skirt she wore boots and overalls. She hoped that this would appease the naysayers and as she says, “What was the difference? I was not doing a lady’s work anyway.”

Mary was also accomplished at fishing, racing and hunting. After a close encounter with a cougar, she demanded her husband teach her how to use a gun. He armed her with a 32-caliber pistol. A year or so later a bear wandered onto the Gerritse property. In order to protect the livestock she ran out to face the bear. “I knelt on the ground and took sight across my knee, waited until he (the bear) was about 50 feet away,” she said. Unbeknownst to Mary the pistol was not loaded. Lucky for her the bear was frightened by the sound of the gun clicking and took off.

Mary Gerritse grew up in the Manzanita-Nehalem area and stayed there for most of her life, living in one place or another. She spent many hours of every day in the deep woods alone, walking trails that many found too hazardous, and taking on work that many women would scoff at. The Gerritse mail route took her from Nehalem to Seaside and back once a day or once a week. Along muddy narrow trails she and her horse trudged on. Like Gertrude Bell, Mary did not think of herself as doing anything overly courageous. She was doing what made sense.

I love sharing Mary’s story with visitors and sometimes even when I give lectures. It is easy to look at historic photos or to talk about history and lose sight of the people who were there. Knowing about these people humanizes this information and makes it more memorable for all. I hope you enjoyed this unique local history as much as I did.

Elaine Trucke is the director of the Cannon Beach History Center.



Gertrude Bell in Saudi Arabia.

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