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Review of *When Montana and I Were Young: A Frontier Childhood* By Margaret Bell

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When Montana and I Were Young: A Frontier Childhood. By Margaret Bell. Edited and with an introduction by Mary Clearman Blew. Afterword by Lee Rostad. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2002. xxx + 251 pp. Notes. \$30.00 cloth, \$14.95 paper.

"I might not have gone to school, but I had to solve more problems than most children," asserts Margaret Bell in *When Montana and I Were Young: A Frontier Childhood*. As the oldest child in a family of four girls with no mother

and a shiftless stepfather, Bell relates that she was often responsible for tasks not usually relegated to women—and especially not to children. In her childhood memoir, she describes pulling a yearling calf out of an iced-over spring by herself, developing an intricate system for managing ranch chores while her stepfather was away, and spending her days on the prairie searching for lost cattle. Most of these events occur during Bell's impoverished childhood on a homestead on the Canadian Plains, but the narrative begins and ends on the Plains of north-central Montana where Bell was born in 1888.

In the isolation of the Plains, one problem emerges that even the resourceful, young Peggy Bell cannot solve: throughout her childhood her stepfather physically and sexually abuses her. At one point, Bell tells of her desire to “put an end to my intolerable life” by attempting to kill herself with the same strychnine she used to poison coyotes on the ranch. Bell eventually gets away from her stepfather and returns to Montana as a teenager where she soon becomes noted for her ability to break horses. In her absence, though, the Montana prairies had evolved from “green, with tall grass waving like grain” to “a dirty gray, with no grass at all that I could see.” The story ends when Bell is eighteen, and her childhood, along with Montana's youth, comes to an end.

As interesting as Bell's story is the history of its transformation from Bell's desire to “get her life story told” to its publication in the *Women in the West* series from the University of Nebraska Press. In her introduction to Bell's memoir, Mary Clearman Blew explains that the manuscript—first developed in 1947—went through several drafts, yet always avoided publication. Bell died in 1982. In the mid-1990s, Lee Rostad rescued a version of the manuscript from a box of papers in a friend's garage in Martinsdale, Montana. Rostad and Clearman Blew collaborated—with Clearman Blew's revisions and introduction and Rostad's afterword—to bring Bell's memoir to publication. The memoir is a consequential addition to Plains literature, providing a narrative that

brings to light the significance of being a child and female on the frontier Plains.

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