



Bertha Muzzy Bower

Also Known As:

B. M. Bower, Mrs. Clayton Bower, Bertha Muzzy Sinclair, Mrs. Bertrand W. Sinclair, Bertrand W. Sinclair, B. M. Sinclair, Mrs. Robert Elsworth Cowan

Lived:

November 15, 1871 - July 22, 1940

Worked as:

novelist, scenario writer, screenwriter, source author, writer

Worked In:

United States

by Charles H. Williamson

Bertha Muzzy Bower was perhaps the first female author of mass-market Western fiction. In her lifetime, Bower wrote sixty-eight Western novels under an androgynous nom de plume, a mandate made by her early publisher Street & Smith in order to conceal her gender from readers. While it is difficult to accurately assess the massive popularity of these novels, her works—particularly her *Flying U* novels—attracted the attention of several Hollywood producers and were regularly adapted into films. Her most popular novel, *Chip, of the Flying U*, seemed to have been a favorite among moviemakers, as it was adapted four times. As most scholarship on Bower focuses on her literary career, information on her work in cinema remains sketchy and indeterminable. Nonetheless, several sources tell us that Bower was attracted to cinema and particularly to the Hollywood Western. According to Orrin Engen, Bower believed that “the early cowboys of the films projected the essential vitality of life on the range” (11). Outside of the film adaptations, her ties to Hollywood seem tangential at best, though she also worked as a scenario writer and screenwriter, collaborating extensively with director Colin Campbell and cowboy actor Tom Mix.

Although Bower’s professional career as a novelist technically began with the 1904 publication of “Ghost in the Red Shirt” in *Lippincott’s Magazine*, she only attained a truly wide-ranging readership later that year with the publication of her first Western novel, *Chip, of the Flying U*, which was serialized in Street & Smith’s *Popular Magazine*. It became a sensation with readers, generating enough interest to be reissued as a hardback in 1906 by G. W. Dillingham. The novel, which was published under *Popular Magazine*’s mission to print authentic stories of Western ranch life after the massive popularity of Owen Wister’s *The Virginian*, centers on Chip, a tough

but sensitive cowboy who works on the fictional “Flying U” ranch. Much of the novel focuses on the romantic tension between Chip and the ranch owner’s sister, Dell Whitmore, an upper-class medical student traveling to the Flying U after the completion of her degree out East. Initially, their relationship is antagonistic, as Dell takes credit for one of Chip’s landscape paintings in order to sell it; this conflict resolves itself and blossoms into romance after Dell identifies Chip as the true artist and, in a rousing adventure sequence, Chip rescues her from a runaway horse. Immensely popular, *Chip* spawned an entire series of novels set within the fictional Flying U universe. These novels, as Victoria Lamont attests, solidified Bower’s reputation as a renowned fiction writer: “Bower’s transition from pulp author to ‘serious’ novelist was enabled by the success of her ‘Flying U’ stories” (1993, 63). From here, Bower would write continuously for the rest of her life, averaging two or three novels a year until her death in 1940.

Chip of the Flying U was adapted for the screen four times, which, as Lamont suggests, might be the most accurate indicator scholars have of the novel’s immense popularity (1998, 164). Bower’s narrative, however, seemed to be altered more and more dramatically with each successive film. Selig produced the first adaptation of *Chip* in 1914, a five-reel feature starring Tom Mix in the title role. According to William Everson, *Chip* remains singular among the films produced from the pairing of Mix and Selig, writing that this was the only of “Mix’s Selig films [that] made a strong impression” (1992, 84). The second adaptation, retitled *The Galloping Devil* (1920), was directed by Nate Watt and starred Bud Osbourne and Genevieve Berte. This version jettisons much of Bower’s narrative, promoting Chip from farmhand to ranch owner, and adding in characters such as the villainous foreman Dink and heroic cowboy Andy. With the 1926 adaptation produced by Universal, romantic melodrama faded into the background, as the film made the comedic stylings of Hoot Gibson its most salient feature. For many scholars and contemporary critics, the 1939 Talkie adaptation remains the most satisfying version of this novel although the original story was significantly transformed. In addition to *Chip*, several other motion pictures were adapted from Bower’s novels, including *The Wolverines* (1921), *The Taming of the West* (1925), and *Ridin’ Thunder* (1925). However, little has been written on any of Bower’s adaptations outside of the four versions of *Chip*.

Aside from the occasional mention of these film adaptations, Bower’s contributions to cinema did not receive much academic attention. After the publication of *Chip*, Bower collaborated with director Colin Campbell, writing stories and screenplays for seven one-to-five-reel Westerns under the name Bertha Muzzy Sinclair (her second husband’s surname). As Hollywood producers and location scouts flocked to Montana in order to find the assistance of cowhands, Bower became acquainted and developed friendships with Gary Cooper and Tom Mix, and she eventually developed a professional relationship with Mix. In addition to taking on the titular role in Selig’s *Chip of the Flying U*, Mix starred in three other films written by Bower: *When the Cook Fell Ill* (1914), *The Lonesome Trail* (1914), and *Weary Goes A’ Wooing* (1915). In 1920, Bower moved to Hollywood with her third husband, tearing herself away from the untamed West she had called home all of her life. Bower continued to write for Hollywood, and would on occasion use her experiences working within the studio system as the source material for her novels, as in *Jean of*

the Lazy A (1915), *The Heritage of the Sioux* (1915), *The Phantom Herd* (1915), and *The Quirt* (1920).

Bibliography

Anderson, Kate Baird. "Bertha Muzzy Bower: A Montana Pioneer." Western History Collections, University of Oklahoma Libraries, 1997. n.p.

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Everson, William K. *The Hollywood Western: 90 Years of Cowboys and Indians, Train Robbers, Sheriffs and Gunslingers, and Assorted Heroes and Desperados*. Secaucus, N.J.: Carol Pub. Group, 1992.

Lamont, Victoria. "Cattle Branding and the Traffic in Women in Early Twentieth-Century Westerns by Women." *A Journal of American Women Writers* vol. 22, no. 1 (2005): 30-46.

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Meyer, Roy W. "B. M. Bower: The Poor Man's Wister." *Journal of Popular Culture* vol. 7, no. 3 (Winter 1973): 667-679.

Archival Paper Collections:

B.M. Bower Papers. [University of Oklahoma Libraries, Western History Collections](#).

Filmography

A. Archival Filmography: Extant Film Titles:

1. Bertha Muzzy Bower as Screenwriter and Source Author

Chip of the Flying U. Dir.: Colin Campbell, sc.: B. M. Bower (Selig Polyscope Co. US 1914) cas.: Tom Mix, Wheeler Oakman, si, b&w, 35mm. Archive: [Library of Congress \[USW\]](#).

A Modern Knight. Dir.: William Bertram, sc.: B. M. Bower (Mustang US 1916) cas.: Art Acord, Nita Davis, si, b&w, 35mm. Archive: [Library of Congress \[USW\]](#).

The Galloping Devil. Dir.: Nate Watt, sc.: W. E. Wing, aut.: B. M. Bower (Canyon Pictures Corp. US 1920) cas.: Franklyn Farnum, Genevieve Berte, si, b&w, 35mm. Archive: [Library of Congress \[USW\]](#).

Chip of the Flying U. Dir.: Lynn F. Reynolds, sc.: Lynn F. Reynolds, Harry Dittmer, aut.: B. M. Bower (Universal Pictures Corp. US 1926) cas.: Hoot Gibson, Virginia Browne Faire, si, b&w. Archive: [UCLA Film and Television Archive \[USL\]](#).

The Flying U Ranch. Dir.: Robert De Lacey, aut.: B. M. Bower (R-C Pictures Corp. US 1927) cas.: Tom Tyler, Nora Lane, si, b&w. Archive: [Cinémathèque Royale de Belgique \[BEB\]](#).

King of the Rodeo. Dir.: Henry MacRae, sc.: B. M. Bower (Universal Pictures Corp. US 1929) cas.: Hoot Gibson, Kathryn Crawford, si, b&w. Archive: [Library of Congress \[USW\]](#), [Lobster Films \[FRL\]](#).

Chip of the Flying U. Dir.: Ralph Staub, sc.: Larry Rhine, Andrew Bennison, aut.: B. M. Bower (Universal Pictures Corp. US 1939) cas.: Johnny Mack Brown, Bob Baker, b&w.

B. Filmography: Non-Extant Film Titles:

1. Bertha Muzzy Bower as Screenwriter and Source Author

The Last of Her Tribe, 1912; *The Cherry Pickers*, 1914; *The Lonesome Trail*, 1914; *The Reveler*, 1914; *Shotgun Jones*, 1914; *The Up-Hill Climb*, 1914; *When the Cook Fell Ill*, 1914; *Weary Goes A'Wooin'*, 1915; *Curlew Corliss*, 1916; *North of "53,"* 1917; *Big Timber*, 1917; *The Raiders*, 1921; *The Wolvering*, 1921; *Ridin' Thunder*, 1925; *The Taming of the West*, 1925; *Points West*, 1929.

Credit Report

The films *North of "53," Shotgun Jones, Big Timber, Sweethearts of the Sage,* and *The Raiders* are all credited in AFI to Bower's pseudonym Bertrand W. Sinclair. There is confusion regarding *Sweethearts of the Sage*. Though the author lists Bower as the author of *The Cherry Pickers*, her participation cannot be found in the standard sources. FIAF does not list an archive for the 1939 adaption of *Chip, of the Flying U*.

Citation

Williamson, Charles H. "Bertha Muzzy Bower." In Jane Gaines, Radha Vatsal, and Monica Dall'Asta, eds. *Women Film Pioneers Project*. New York, NY: Columbia University Libraries, 2013. <<https://wfpp-test.cul.columbia.edu/pioneer/ccp-bertha-muzzy-bower/>>

