

# The Amazing Nellie Bly: Teaching about Women in United States History

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March is Women’s History Month. While the approach to the study of the role of women in U.S. history has changed dramatically since I was a classroom teacher, we still need to do more to fully integrate women into history throughout the curriculum and throughout the school year. “Women’s History Month,” like “Black History Month” and months highlighting other underrepresented groups, can focus our attention on relevant topics and issues, enabling us to become more inclusive throughout the curriculum.

Why did I mention Nellie Bly in the title? All of us have little habits or quirks in our lives. One of mine is that I always name my cars—after explorers. So, my previous vehicles have included Magellan T. Van, Vasco deHonda, Zebulon, and York (my 2001 black Honda named after the slave who was very important in the success of Lewis and Clark’s expedition). My green 1968 VW bus is St. Brendan, the Irish monk who may have discovered the Americas before Columbus. When it was time to trade in York, both my wife Pegi and Kristi, a coworker, said: “Fred, none of your cars have been named after a woman. It’s time for a change.”

I went on the Internet and looked up “women explorers,” fully intending to name my car after Amelia Earhart. Then, I read about Nellie Bly, the journalist. I became entranced with her story. Breaking into a field with almost no women (save a few who were relegated to society reporting), she faked insanity and spent 10 days in a Women’s Lunatic

Asylum in New York. The series of stories she wrote led to reform of mental health facilities throughout the nation. Then, when Jules Verne published *Around the World in 80 Days*, she persuaded her publisher to let her travel around the world alone. Women never traveled alone at that time. She was back in New Jersey in 62 days. And what adventures she had! So, I’ve been planning on writing about “notable women in U.S. history” for several months—since my car Nellie and I have been together.

Finding good sites to help classroom teachers and curriculum supervisors find great information and lesson plans for teaching about notable women—and all women in history—is not difficult. Women’s History Month gives the topic a boost. I’ve recommended several sites that I think are some of the best, but I’m sure you can find many others to fit specific needs and courses. And, if you get to Bloomington, I’ll take you for a ride in Nellie.

## Edsiteement!: National Endowment for the Humanities

<http://edsitement.neh.gov/feature/womens-history-month>



This is my favorite site of the group that I am recommending. Those politicians who would reduce funding for such programs as the NEH are wrong! Their “History and Social Studies” section provides some teachers great resources, many of which open new doors about content to teach. You’ll find many that will help you teach about women’s role in U.S. history and society. My favorite link is titled “Scribbling Women” which features stories and dramatizations about women written by women. The plays are available as radio programs and each has lesson plans designed for classroom use. But this entire site is great—and so are all the pages for teachers at NEH.

## Honor Roll of Notable Women

<http://teacher.scholastic.com/activities/women/notable.html>

This Scholastic page lists women rang-

ing from Susan B. Anthony to Babe Didrikson Zaharias, provides a short explanation about why each woman is on the list and provides a link to a site where you can find more about her. Click on the “Student Activities” or “Strategies and Ideas” links at the top of the page, type in “women in history,” and you’ll find lesson plans, activities, and other resources. The sites have been reviewed to ensure they are child appropriate.

### Education World’s Women’s History Month Lesson Plans and Activities

[www.educationworld.com/a\\_special/women\\_history\\_lesson\\_plan.shtml](http://www.educationworld.com/a_special/women_history_lesson_plan.shtml)



There are several good lesson plans on this page that can be used at several grade levels, including an interesting webquest. Under “More Resources,” there are several interesting articles and links to some great ideas and materials. The site titled “Women’s History Gets Its Due on the Web” highlights the work of the National Women’s History Project and is a great essay for teacher background information.

### Educating Jane

[www.educatingjane.com/Women/womenLP.htm](http://www.educatingjane.com/Women/womenLP.htm)



This is a superb site if you’re looking for lesson plans. They come from a variety of respected sources, some are

designed by teachers, and are grade-level specific. There’s an “Assessing Women’s Past Through Art,” that’s a very well-conceived “interpretation activity.”

### Teacher Planet

[www.lessonplans.com/womens-history-on-the-table/](http://www.lessonplans.com/womens-history-on-the-table/)



Teacher Planet always has good lesson plans and they come with necessary activity sheets and other resources. There are five useful lesson plans on this page and you can find lesson plans on just about every topic and for every grade level. Just click on the grade level and type “women’s history” (or whatever topic you’re interested in) and lesson plans will pop right up.

### Teach U.S. History.org

[www.teachushistory.org/search/node/women%27s%20history](http://www.teachushistory.org/search/node/women%27s%20history)

Teach U.S. History.org is a wonderful site for all U.S. history teachers to have on their bookmarks/favorites list. This specific page provides links to many primary sources about women—both prominent and regular citizens—and their lives throughout history. Everything from camp meetings, changing status of New England women in the 1790-1840 period, and “women’s work during the Civil War are covered.

### About.Com: Women’s History

[http://womenshistory.about.com/od/essentials/Womens\\_History\\_What\\_You\\_Need\\_to\\_Know.htm](http://womenshistory.about.com/od/essentials/Womens_History_What_You_Need_to_Know.htm)

At this site, you’ll find links to 237 biographies of women, myths about women’s history, 236 pictures of women in history, teacher strategies and tips for further student research. This is another site

that will not only provide you with many resources, but lead you to other websites that will be helpful. This companion page—[http://womenshistory.about.com/od/biographies/u/biographies\\_women.htm](http://womenshistory.about.com/od/biographies/u/biographies_women.htm)—has biographies of women in sports, in medicine, science and health, and many other areas of endeavor. It also has notable quotes from women, and a list of the “Top 100 Women on the Net.”

As I mentioned earlier, I found at least a dozen other websites that I could have used in this column. I want to encourage you again to include the lives, contributions, and voices of women and all under-represented groups throughout the curriculum, not just on designated months. Now, I’m going to get back to reading the amazing biography of Nellie Bly. 🌐

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