



Photo courtesy of Gloria Duffy

The First Annual Dear Mad'm Picnic

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President and C.E.O.

Stella Walthall Patterson, one of California's least known but most interesting women writers, was born in Stockton in 1866. Graduating from Mills Seminary at 16, she studied in Paris, becoming

a painter and a fine musician. She employed an equal talent for writing to publish in some of the country's leading magazines, including *Collier's* and *Century*. Stella married Judge Augustus Belcher in San Francisco, living the life of a San Francisco literary socialite, mingling with Jack London and Ambrose Bierce.

After she and Belcher took a hunting trip in the Trinity Mountains guided by a colorful local rancher named Big Jim Patterson, and spooked by the 1906 San Francisco earthquake and fire, Stella left to marry Patterson in 1907, and took up residence on his spread at Willow Creek in Trinity County. Apparently because Patterson spent his time on cattle, bear hunting and women, in that order, she eventually left Big Jim, too.

A visit to the doctor in the late 1940s to have a hurt leg examined prompted a nurse's comment that Stella had "young legs." As Stella told the story, this caused her to think about what she still might do on her "young legs," as her 80th birthday approached. She decided to move to a primitive cabin on a mining claim she owned along the Klamath River near Happy Camp, California, and to live there alone for a year. She wrote a book about her experiences, *Dear Mad'm*, with the title taken from the way she and her rugged neighbor Fred Crook addressed one another – he was "Dear Sir" and she was "Dear Mad'm" from their early meetings, when neither could recall the other's name.

Dear Mad'm is a charming chronicle of backwoods life, with stories about goats on her roof, a local character named Frenchy who ambles along the road eating garlic, her confrontation with a cougar, surviving a storm and flood on the river, coaxing glorious flowers from her garden without running water, gold mining, a Native American girl who lives by the guidance of Emily Post, and the routine of daily life in her tiny cabin. Originally published by W.W. Norton, the book is still in print through a small publishing house based in Happy Camp, and it continues to elicit enthusiastic reviews on Amazon from its

small but loyal following.

In early August, my husband Rod and I attended the First Annual Dear Mad'm Picnic, sponsored by the Happy Camp Chamber of Commerce. The picnic was held on the lawn of the Klamath River Inn in Happy Camp, a tiny hamlet with a giant statue of Bigfoot where you enter town. Stella was a distant relative of my husband's, and at the picnic Rod spoke about her, drawing on the summers he and his siblings spent with their grandfather, Stella's cousin, on the mining claim next to Stella's on the Klamath River, when they were kids.

The best part of our Happy Camp visit was meeting a real-life "Dear Mad'm" named Barbara Brown. In her early 80s, Ms. Brown lives in a farmhouse near Happy Camp that is slightly more modern than Stella's cabin. Here she combines a self-sufficient rural life with running a publishing house, Naturegraph Press. Naturegraph is the publisher of *Dear Mad'm*, as well as 100 other titles covering birds, plants, animals, geology, history of the Pacific Northwest, Native Americans, organic gardening and crafts. Titles range from *Handbook of California Birds* to *Barns of Yesteryear* and *Packing with Burros*. Naturegraph was founded 65 years ago in Los Altos by Mrs. Brown and her late husband, Vinson Brown, an anthropologist, to publish his work and that of his colleagues; the publisher moved to Happy Camp in 1976.

The Naturegraph printing plant is on the grounds of Mrs. Brown's farm, where she, friends and family work a large organic garden, and keep chickens and sheep. Our first night in Happy Camp, Barbara hosted dinner in the library of the publishing building, with nearly everything we ate coming from her garden, including zucchini, eggs, onions, blueberries, tomatoes, berry pies, even cherry juice made from the fruit of her trees. After we ate, we toured the presses, darkroom, cutting and binding room and other areas of the active publishing enterprise. It was fascinating to see the combination of the farm with the publishing company – a rare model of sustainability in practice.

In addition to publishing *Dear Mad'm*, Naturegraph will soon release a new title, *Dear Mad'm – Who Was She?* This biography of Stella was penned by Rod's cousin, Liz Lizmer, a retired public school teacher from the Bay Area. Rod and I served as witnesses last month when Liz and her husband Pete signed the book contract with Barbara Brown. Soon, the story of this strong and independent California woman writer will become a little better known. Ω