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SADIE KNELLER MILLER

BY ELEANOR S. DARCY

It all began with baseball. Almost every town and village in Carroll County had a team, and on game days, everybody turned out to cheer the home team. Carroll Countians loved the game, and so did Sadie Kneller. Although Western Maryland College did not field an official team until after her graduation—President James Thomas Ward thought the game too dangerous—the boys did play, and beginning in October 1883 Daniel Geiman let them use his field adjacent to the campus.

Sarah (Sadie) Alice Virginia Kneller was born in Westminster, Maryland, on October 7, 1867, the only child of Samuel and Martha (Dell) Kneller. She attended the Western Maryland College preparatory school for four years beginning in 1878 and then enrolled in the college's three-year course for women. While at the college, she attended lectures on photography given by Professor William H. Zimmerman and in her spare time began writing accounts of baseball games for the local newspaper, the *Democratic Advocate*. When awarded the B.A. degree in 1885—it was she who wrote the class prophesy—she was not yet eighteen.



Sadie Kneller Miller, 1905.
Portrait by William Getz, Baltimore.

Following college, Sadie continued to write for the *Democratic Advocate* for two years, covering baseball and probably other events. That is where she learned her craft. Westminster's win over the Orioles, the National League champions, on June 22, 1885, was a big story. Bobby Miller, her future husband, played second base for Westminster in that game. For some time, Sadie was also an elocutionist, giving dramatic readings at churches and other locations around the county; in deference to her family's wishes, she gave up any thought of becoming an actress.

On June 14, 1894, Sadie Kneller married Charles Robert Miller in Baltimore. Miller, one of thirteen children, was the son of George Washington and Charity (Brown) Miller. He, like Sadie, had grown up in Westminster and attended Western Maryland College, class of 1881, before studying law with Judge Charles B. Roberts in Westminster. After practicing law and serving from 1885 to 1887 as both deputy clerk of the Carroll County Circuit Court and deputy Register of Wills, Miller moved to Baltimore in 1888, about the same time the Knellers did, to work for Edwin Warfield, who was then

Surveyor of the Port of Baltimore and who became Governor of Maryland, 1904-1908. When Warfield founded the Fidelity and Deposit Company of Maryland in 1890, he quickly recruited Miller. Robert Miller spent the rest of his life with the company, becoming vice president in 1903, president in 1924, and eventually chairman of the board.

The Millers set up housekeeping on West Fayette Street a block from her parents. Soon Sadie was reporting regularly on the Orioles for the *Baltimore Telegram*, hiding her identity by signing her articles "SKM." Many of her stories were picked up by other papers. Her cover was blown, however, when she appeared for an appointment with Andy Freeman, president of the New York baseball club. "You're a lady!" he exclaimed. "I hope so," she replied and proceeded with the interview.

The love of baseball led her to purchase her first camera, which she studied carefully, hoping to use it to illustrate her baseball articles. It was to *Leslie's Illustrated Weekly* in New York, however, not the *Telegram*, that she sold her first picture, a photo taken at Annapolis of three Spanish officers captured during the Spanish-American War. Thereafter, she entered photographs regularly in *Leslie's* amateur photography contests, winning her initial first prize (\$5.00) with pictures of the preparations for a crab feast for 10,000 Elks that were published August 20, 1903. [Figure 1] By that time, she was already on the magazine's staff, her first cover, a picture of Glacier Point in Yosemite, appearing on October 1, 1903.

Sadie, who preferred to be known as Mrs. Charles R. Miller, was determined and fearless. She favored travelling alone, saying once that if she was among tourists, they snapped the same pictures, she no longer had the exclusive shot. Free to choose her own assignments, she travelled all over the United States, to Alaska, all around the Caribbean, to Europe including the Balkans, to Russia, and even to Morocco, occasionally with her husband but usually alone. She always got her pictures. Persistence was her forte. Even though her credentials were in order, she sometimes had to be creative, once climbing a back fence when she had been refused entrance at the gate, and on another occasion using her feminine wiles to beg the use of a ladder at a national

convention. That escapade eventually led to an introduction to a senator. Having the first, the most unusual, or the only shot was what sold magazines, not necessarily the most beautiful or best composition, although some of her pictures are stunning. [Figure 2]

Five feet tall with brown eyes and hair, she dressed in brown during the winter. In summer she wore white, which she found both more "sanitary" and attractive. Embroidery, with which she embellished her blouses, was a favorite pastime, and she tastefully decorated her home with mementoes of her many trips. Despite her independence, however, Sadie was careful to keep her husband's well-being in mind. A staff of two long-time employees ran the house smoothly to her standards when she was not in town, and she planned all meals weeks in advance so that she always knew what her husband was having for dinner no matter where she might be.

During her career, Sadie covered many events in Baltimore and Maryland, from local horse shows and groups of fashionable women shopping to conventions of all sorts—at one she took what turned out to be the last picture of Susan B. Anthony [Figure 3]. Her photographs of the Great Baltimore Fire in 1904 [Figures 4 & 5] were the first to be published. She wrote articles with pictures on monuments to both George Washington and Abraham Lincoln and chronicled tours of the Gettysburg and Antietam battlefields in an open car. [Figures 6 & 7]. In December 1903 *Leslie's* carried her article "What Rural Free Delivery Is Doing for the Farmer" with a page of six pictures [Figure 8]. History attracted her attention but so did modern times. Many of her pictures of the 1904 St. Louis World's Fair and the Lewis and Clark Centennial Exposition in Portland, Oregon, [Figure 9] the following year show the lighted buildings at night. In 1909, she and her husband drove in an open car with friends for four hours through the newly constructed Baltimore sewer. Along the way, they had a flat tire and eventually, unable to turn around, had to back out. [Figure 10] She also In 1910, she caught on film both the first flight over Baltimore [Figure 11] and the destruction of a monoplane and its hanger in a severe windstorm, taking the latter shots even though soaked by a cold rain. [Figure 12]

A large part of her work focused on the Naval Academy, with which she had a close association: the buildings, the cadets, their boats, and their various activities, including artillery drill and, of course, physical training and sports, as she was adept at taking pictures of bodies in motion. Sadie also took many pictures for the student yearbook, *The Lucky Bag*. The only photographer allowed at the reinterment of John Paul Jones in 1913, she was as well the only one permitted to visit the U.S. Navy's Indian Head Proving Ground. When her editor complained that one of those last photos was dim, Sadie retorted that she had been unable to use a light because she was surrounded by smokeless powder.

The World's Fair, the Olympic Games, and the Democratic National Convention all took place in St. Louis in 1904, and, of course, Sadie was there, filing stories and pictures of Marylanders who competed in the games, "Germany's Impressive Exhibit at the Fair," Queen Victoria's jubilee gifts, the New York State pavilion, and the convention. Having also covered the Republican Convention in Chicago earlier in the summer, in September she did an article on the "Hard Work of Preparing for a National Convention." The Democratic party made her a sergeant-at-arms, which gave her full access to their convention. Eventually, she covered five national conventions, including the Democratic National Convention of 1908 in Denver, for which she did an entire special edition of *Leslie's*. [Figure 13]

One of her biggest scoops, of which she was quite proud, was her coverage of the inauguration of William Howard Taft in 1909. A blizzard delayed the trains after the ceremony, but Sadie caught the first one out of Washington, arriving in New York at 2:30 a.m. Going immediately to *Leslie's*, she spent the rest of the night developing her photographic plates and turned her pictures in at 7:00 a.m., for which the presses had been held. She caught the 10:00 o'clock back to Baltimore so she could start for Chicago in the evening. "I beat the country that time!" she told a reporter from the Baltimore *Evening Sun*.

Perhaps Sadie's most unusual experiences occurred on her foreign trips. In 1909 she became the first American woman war correspondent when she went

to Melilla, Morocco, to cover Spain's war against the Rifs. Not only did she get some spectacular pictures on the firing line including a cover shot [Figure 14], she was also the only white woman some of the prisoners had ever seen. She told a reporter for the *Evening Sun* that the Spanish soldiers were "well-disciplined" and there was no drunkenness. On other occasions, she was in Turkey when the Sultan fell and in Russia, the country she found most interesting, during a cholera epidemic.

On a visit in 1912 to Helgoland, an island in the North Sea that Germany had recently bought from England and was busy fortifying, she was stopped as an English spy and told that photographs were not permitted. Eventually released without having promised not to take pictures, she proceeded to take all she wanted but with greater discretion, turning them over to the U.S. government on her return. She flew in a zeppelin over Berlin in 1913, and in 1914 took a portrait of Germany's Kaiser Wilhelm II and his wife, Kaiserin Augusta Victoria. [Figure 15]

One of Sadie's last adventures was also, perhaps, her most brash. In 1914, she drove across the Mexican border, presented herself at the door of Pancho Villa's house, and asked to see him. Here is her account as printed in *Leslie's* on February 26, 1914:

Few people who have been along the Texas border and have listened to the stories told of General Francisco Villa, could, I venture, approach that redoubtable ogre of the Federalists without at least a tremor of apprehension. I must confess that anxious as I was to see him for myself and under the safe conduct of his youthful secretary, Senor Viscari, my heart fluttered as we approached the one-storey adobe house that was his headquarters in Juarez, Mex. I had been warned that the best I could expect would be an insulting refusal to see me, and more than one friend in El Paso, Tex., had expressed the fear that my adventure might have an unpleasant ending. Imagine my surprise, then, to be received with perfect courtesy, to have the General through his secretary, as interpreter, answer patiently and politely, my many questions, and to most obligingly pose for me while I photographed him. The perfect knight of romance he is not, but to all appearances he is the blunt, straightforward soldier—the man of the people

*developed into a world figure by an emergency
that only a strong man could meet.*

The general struck her as “a medium-sized, well-built, mild-mannered man with a most fascinating smile and eyes that indicate keen perception.” Denying any suitability for high office, he claimed only to be fighting for the people. Villa and his wife not only posed for pictures, he also permitted Sadie to photograph his armored truck with its seven machine guns and two sets of wheels that allowed it to run on rails as well as roads and fields. Her success in getting the interview and photographs appears to have hinged on her personal charm, the assistance of Viscari, and the fact that Mrs. Villa met her at the door and escorted her in while many others waited outside. [Figure 16]

The advent of World War I put severe constraints on Sadie’s activities: travel to Europe became difficult, and men were preferred as war correspondents. Her career came to an end in 1918 when she suffered a debilitating stroke. She died two years later on November 21, 1920, at the age of 53. A mausoleum in Westminster Cemetery holds her remains and those of her husband, her only survivor, who died in 1949 at the age of 89. *Leslie’s* folded in 1922; the building burned shortly thereafter, destroying all their records. Over the years, her family disposed of her papers, leaving nothing except what survives in library copies of *Leslie’s*.

Sadie Miller was not the only woman working in journalism at the start of the twentieth century, but there were few others. Three stand out: Kit Coleman (1856-1915), Ida Tarbell (1857-1944), and Nellie Bly (1864-1922). Kit Coleman (née Catherine Ferguson) edited the women’s pages of the *Toronto Daily Mail* from 1889 until 1911. Chafing under the restrictions of that assignment, she took it upon herself to write on other matters that concerned women, reported on trips abroad beginning in 1892, and was an authorized war correspondent for the Spanish-American War. Kept out of Cuba until July of 1898, she wrote stories on Cuba in the aftermath of the war that garnered considerable attention. Ida Tarbell grew up in the Pennsylvania oil fields, graduating from Allegheny College in 1880. Although she taught school for a short while, it was

biography that particularly interested her. In 1891, she went to Paris to do research on Madame Roland, a heroine of the French Revolution, submitting occasional pieces on Paris to magazines to support herself that led to her being hired by *McClure’s Magazine* in 1894. In 1902-1904, they published her meticulously-researched, nineteen-part series on Standard Oil, which made her reputation. Nellie Bly (Elizabeth Jane Cochran) was the daughter of a wealthy father who left her mother, his second wife, penniless on his death, an event that colored the rest of Nellie’s life. It was her letter to the editor of the *Pittsburgh Dispatch* in defense of working women that gave her her pen name and led to her career as an investigative reporter. When she was 23, she applied for a job with Joseph Pulitzer’s *New York World*, securing the position with a carefully researched article on mental illness. She worked for the *World* for seven years, always championing the disadvantaged, until her marriage in 1894, returning to journalism only after her husband’s death.

Sadie was a contemporary with a different slant. She had a well-to-do and indulgent husband, her camera, and connections. And she always got her pictures.

KEITH N. RICHWINE SADIE’S BIGGEST FAN

Keith N. Richwine, Professor of English and chair of the Department of English at Western Maryland College (1962-1994), spent years researching Sadie Miller, poring over old issues of *Leslie’s Illustrated Weekly* in the basement of Baltimore’s Enoch Pratt Library. In the end, he had cataloged some 2,560 of her photographs and hundreds of her articles. From these, Richwine selected 200 images as part of a travelling exhibit, *Mrs. Miller’s Maryland: The Lady from Leslie’s. An Exhibition of the Early 20th-Century Photo-Journalism of Sadie Kneller Miller*. Funded by the Maryland Humanities Council, the exhibit opened in 1984 and travelled to locations across the state. As a result of Richwine’s work, in 1988 Sadie was elected to the Maryland Women’s Hall of Fame.



Figure 1

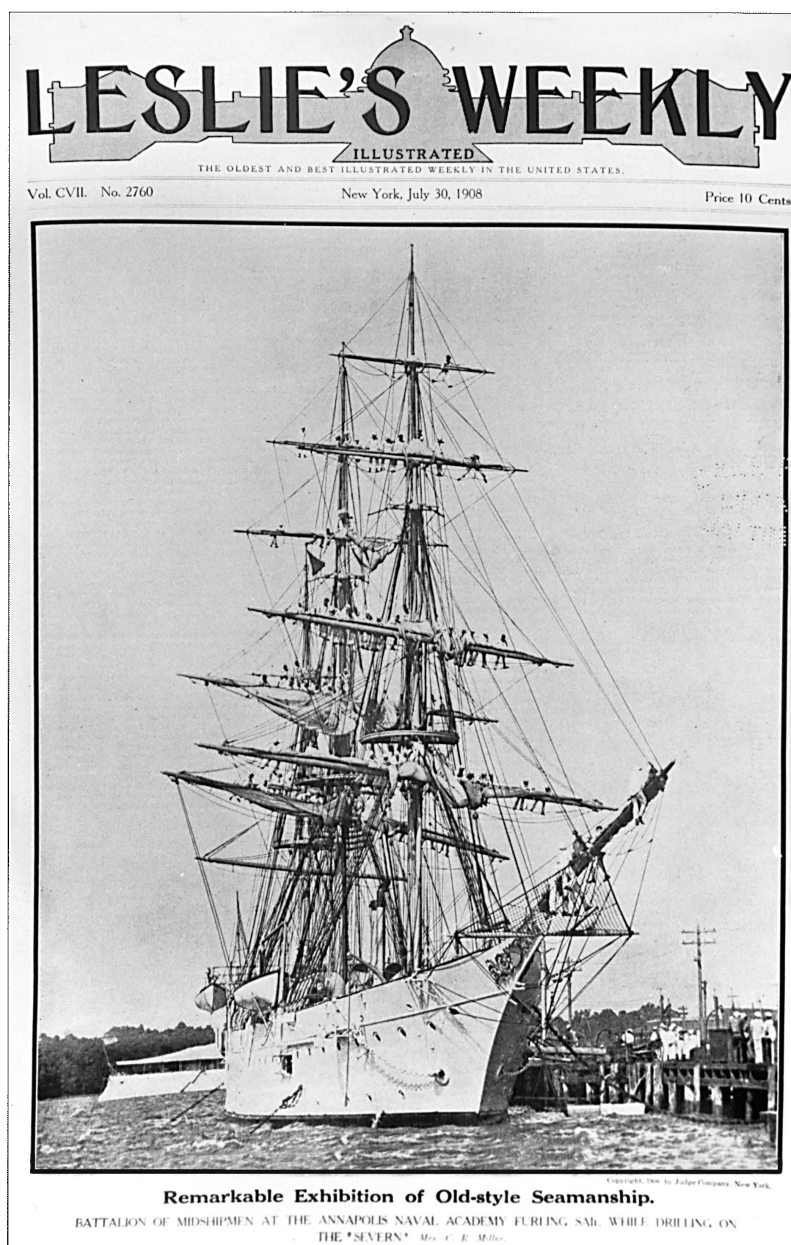


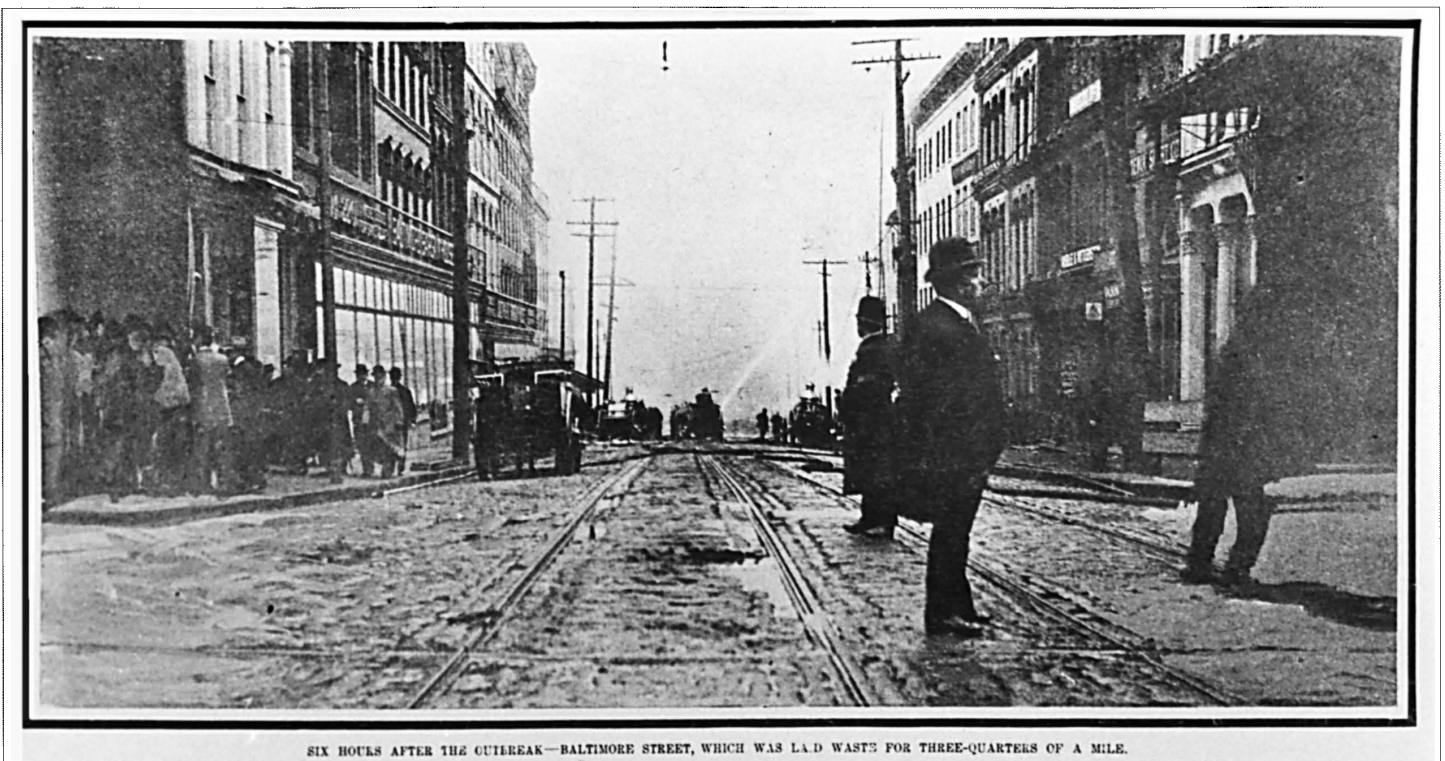
Figure 2



Figure 3



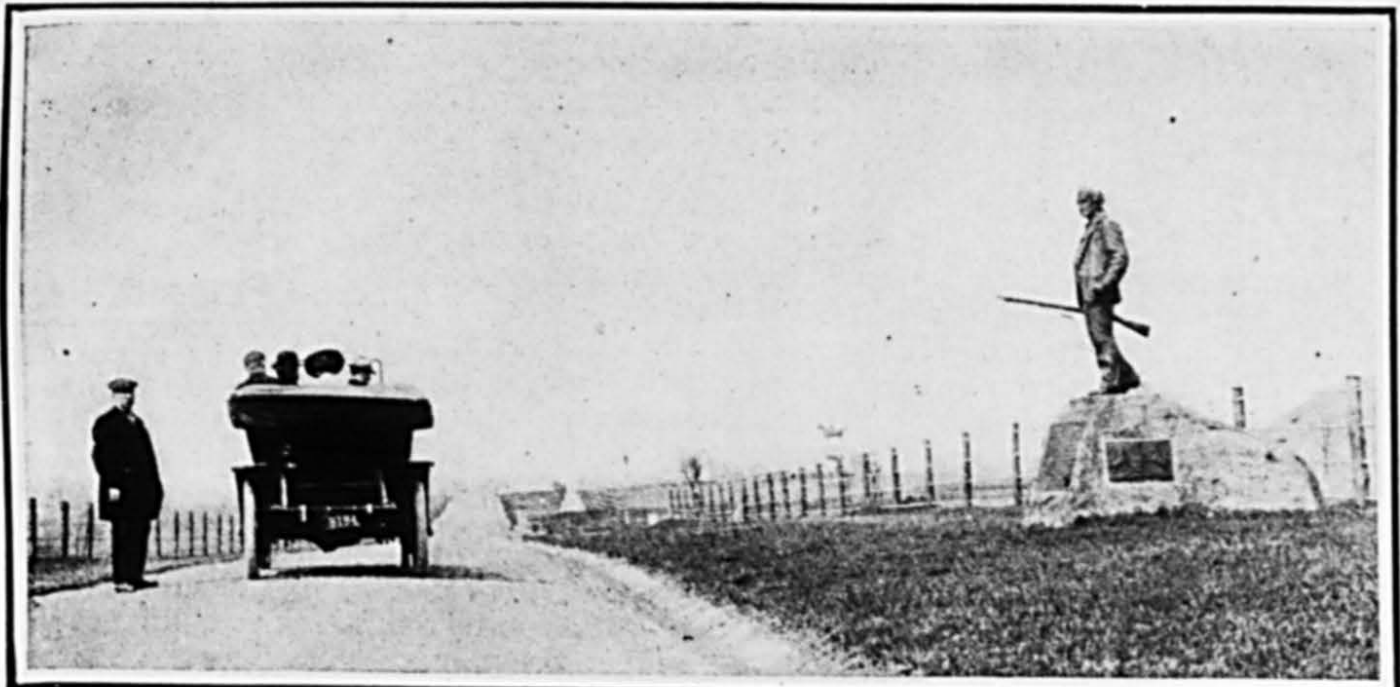
Figures 4 and 5





HELD UP AT A TOLL-GATE—AUTOMOBILE EN ROUTE TO GETTYSBURG FORCED TO PAY FOUR CENTS PER MILE TOLL IN PENNSYLVANIA FOR THE PRIVILEGE OF TRAVELING ON BAD ROADS.

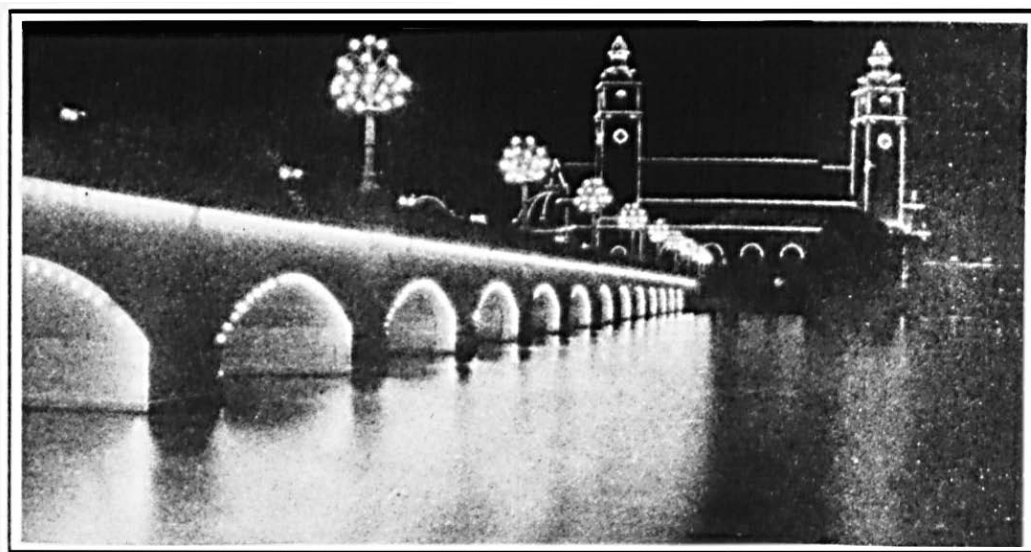
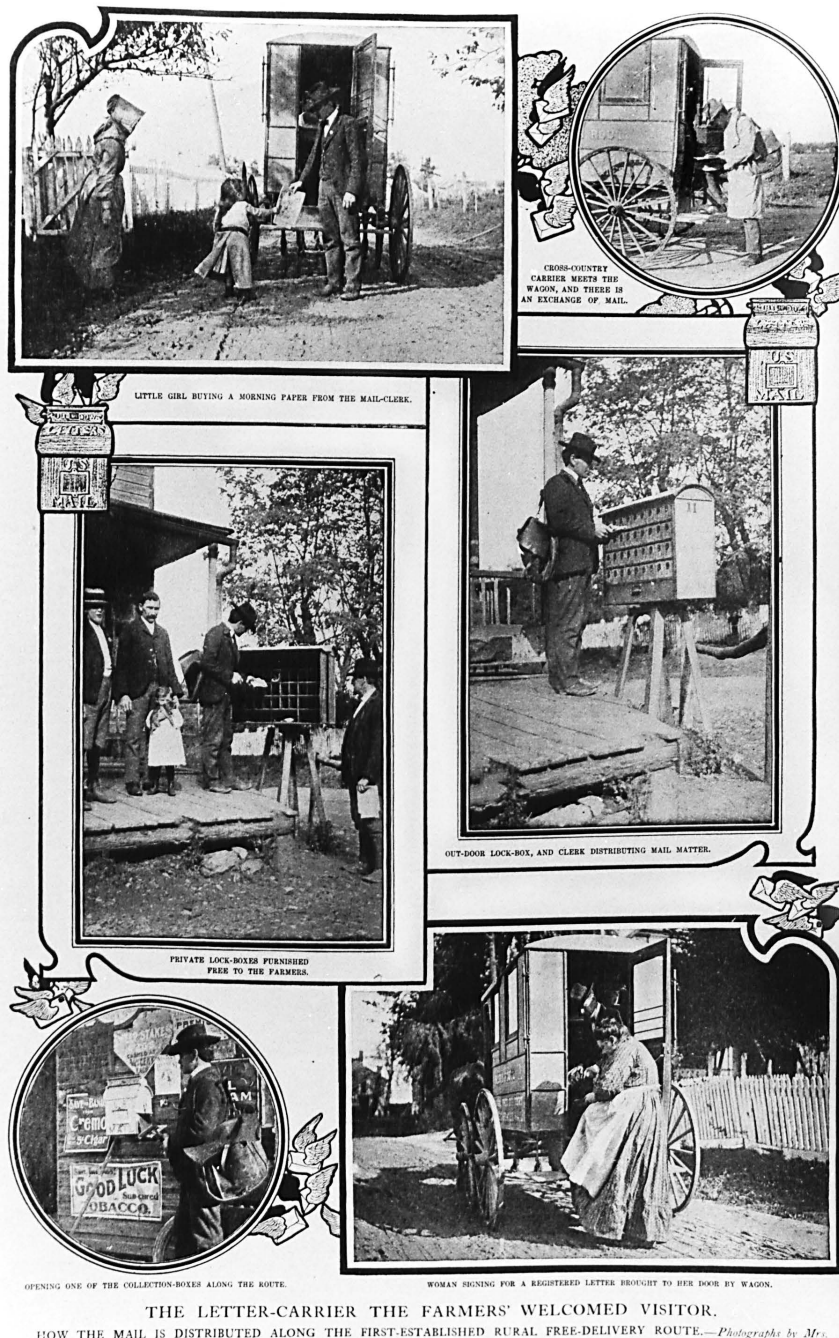
Figures 6 and 7



STONE AVENUE, LOOKING TOWARD THE CHAMBERSBURG PIKE, A SPECIMEN OF THE FINE ROADS ON THE BATTLEFIELD—STATUE ON THE RIGHT OF JOHN BURNS, ONE OF THE HEROES OF GETTYSBURG.

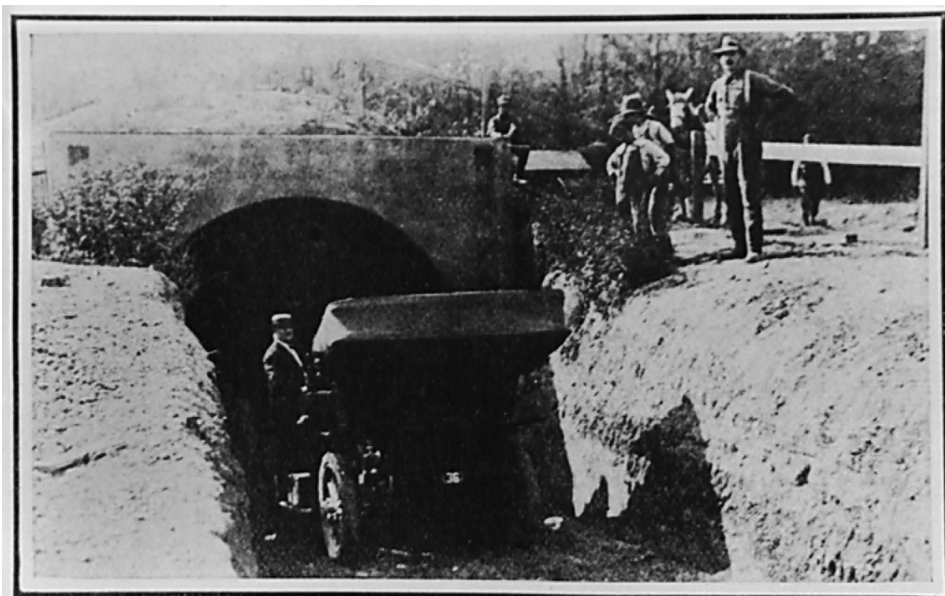
Burns fought in the War of 1812 and the Mexican War, but was not allowed to enlist in the Civil War because of his age. He raised a company of volunteers, however, and fought bravely at Gettysburg on the Union side.

Figure 8



BRIDGE OF NATIONS AND GOVERNMENT BUILDINGS AS THEY APPEAR AT NIGHT, SHOWING BRILLIANT REFLECTION OF ELECTRIC LIGHTS ON THE SURFACE OF THE WATER.

Figure 9



DAYLIGHT AT LAST—BACKING OUT AFTER MORE THAN FOUR HOURS UNDER BALTIMORE. Figure 10



Figure 11



MRS. C. R. MILLER

A NOTABLE CONVENTION VISITOR.

Mrs. William H. Taft (at right), mistress of the White House, leaving the Democratic Convention Hall with Mrs. Mack, wife of the Chairman of the Democratic National Committee. Mrs. Taft displayed great interest in the proceedings.

Figure 13



Figure 14

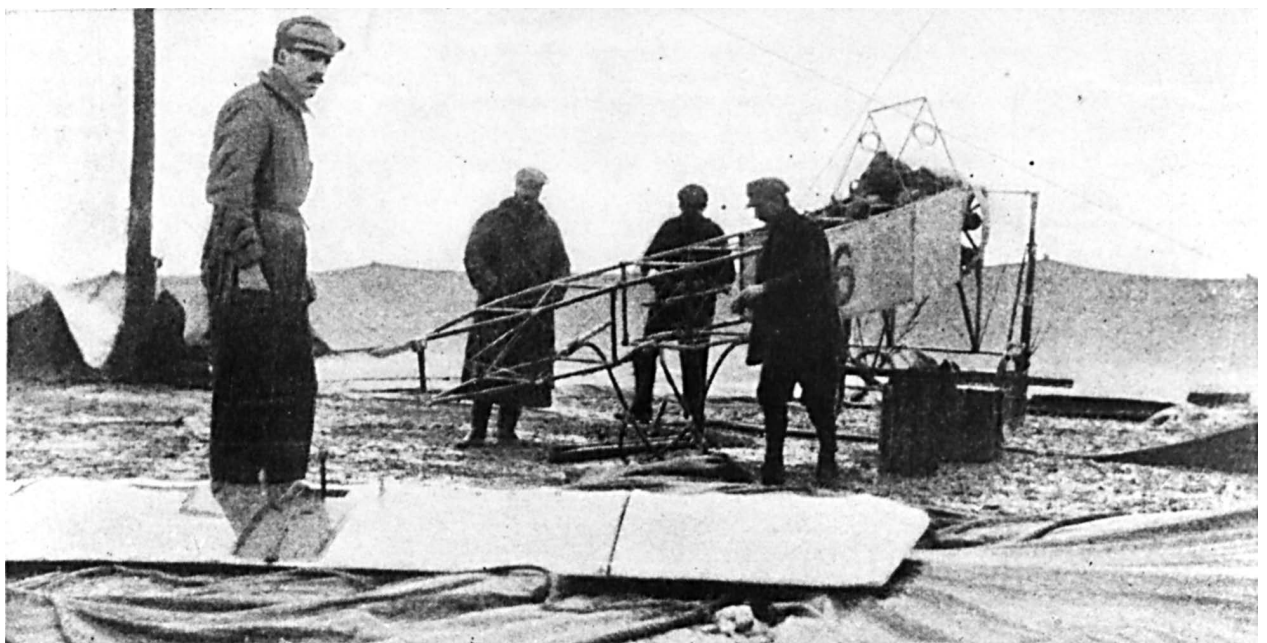


Figure 12

Figure 15



THE KAISER AND THE KAISERIN NEW. C. R. MILLER

All the world is talking about the German Emperor but very little is heard about his devoted wife, who represents all the virtues of the German woman. Her anxiety over this terrible war may be pictured when we remember that her five sons and her only daughter's husband are at the front, as, indeed, are nearly all her other male relatives capable of bearing arms.



DISCLAIMS PERSONAL AMBITION MILLER

General Villa, as photographed by Leslie's correspondent, just after saying that he would never be President.



SUSTAINED BY WOMAN'S FAITH VILLER

Mrs. Villa is proud of her husband and believes that he is sure to be successful in conquering Mexico.

Figure 16

Sources:

Research materials, including Sadie's pictures and articles published in *Leslie's*, collected by Professor Keith Richwine for an exhibit of her photographs used by permission. McDaniel College Archives.

Dolly and I [Lillian Craigen Coyle] "Mrs. Miller A Globe Trotter and Writer," Baltimore (Md.) *American*, April 24, 1911.

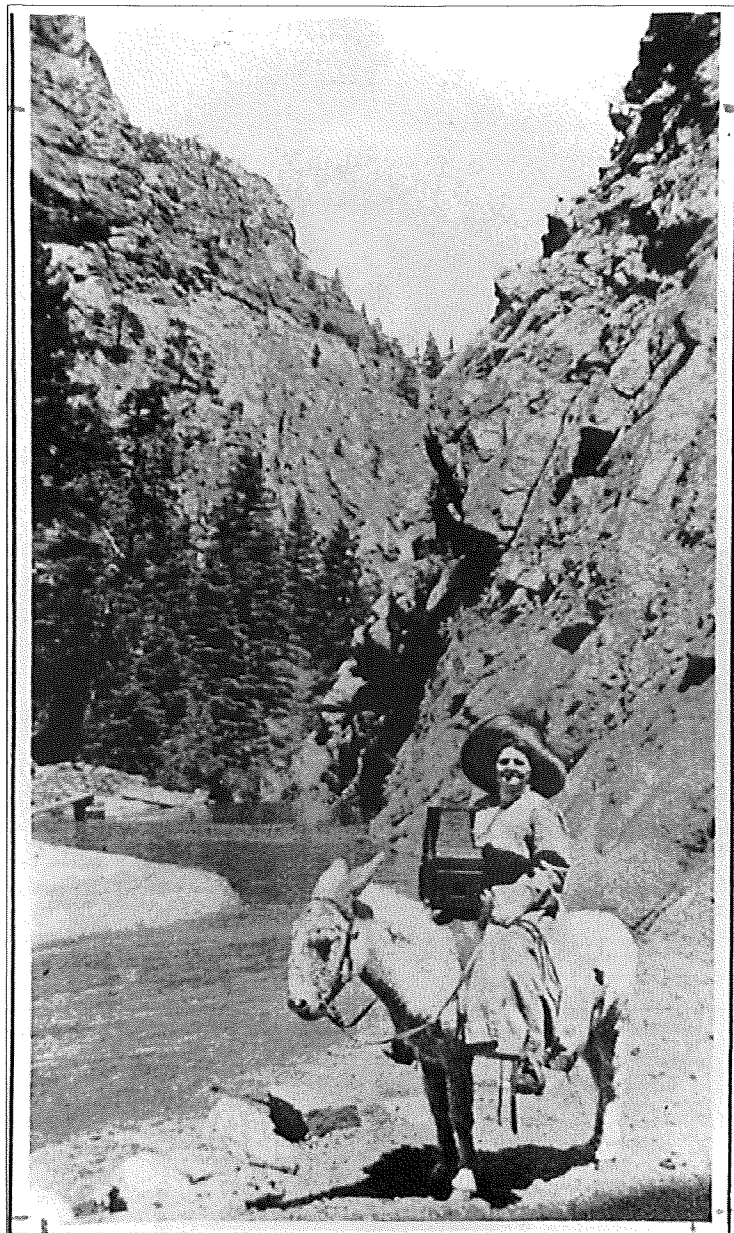
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Sheridan, George. "The World's Only Woman War Correspondent," *Leslie's Illustrated Weekly Newspaper* (New York, N.Y.), February 27, 1913.

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On line sources include PBS for biographies of Ida Tarbell and Nellie Bly and *The Dictionary of Canadian Biography* for that of Kit Coleman.

All images in this article are from the McDaniel College archives. Special thanks to Barbara O'Brien, College Archivist, for her assistance in providing the images.



ONE OF OUR ARTISTS IN THE ROCKIES—EXPERT CAMERIST ON A MOUNTAIN TOUR, RIDING OLD DICK, FORTY-FOUR YEARS OLD.

Sadie Kneller Miller at work in the Rockies

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