

Millie's Column

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Her Pen Made The Desert Bloom

By Millie Robbins

ALTHOUGH she was not a native, nor did she die here, Mary Austin, one of America's most distinguished literary figures — and a unique one — may be claimed by California.

Born Mary Hunter in Carlinville, Ill., in 1868, she came to the West Coast with her parents in the late '80s and with them settled on a ranch near Tejon Pass on the edge of the Mojave desert.

From the first, the extraordinary beauty of the silent, sandy stretches fascinated her.

Mary taught school for awhile before she married Stafford W. Austin, an engineer and oil expert, in Bakersfield in 1891. They moved into the heart of the desert, which he also loved, making their home in a little town of some 300 inhabitants in Inyo county.

She had grown up in simple, unsophisticated communities, where cultural advantages were few and not much of consequence ever happened. Nevertheless, she nursed a burning desire to write.

But now there was little time for it. As she later told friends, she "worked like an Indian woman."

The desert — and the Indians — though, were to furnish her with the inspiration for the work that initially made her famous.



MARY AUSTIN
A burning desire

Despite multiple domestic duties, Mary managed to turn out a few short stories and poems. Then, while recuperating from an illness, she wrote "The Land of Little Rain." The words practically gushed out of her and the book was completed virtually without revision.

Our heroine was on her way, a way that eventually would lead her away from the desert and from her husband as well.

Other books quickly followed — "The Basket Woman," "The Flock" and her first novel, "Isidro," a romance of California in the days of Spanish rule and Franciscan missions.

"Santa Lucia" — about that range of mountains close to the Monterey Peninsula — came out in 1908.

Three years later "The Arrowmaker," a play based on Indian life, was produced in New York. Whereas the public didn't send up rockets, the press was pronounced an artistic triumph.

After leaving her husband — and the Mojave — she lived for a time in Carmel, a popular and prominent member of the era's art colony, and subsequently moved to New York.

Mary's enormous output, which included countless magazine articles, was not restricted to Western tales, by any means. She became vitally interested in the problems of the individual in an increasingly standardized and mechanized age; in marriage, divorce and other sociological subjects, as well as politics.

Her views on morals and matrimony, with emphasis on the emancipation of the talented woman, were considered quite radical for her day.

"It is not only the fallibility of women to attempt to make love fill out the whole round of life for them . . . but they go farther and undertake to make marriage a career," she wrote in "Love and the Soul Maker."

Mary was active to the end. She had recently completed "Starry Adventure" and was working on a sequel, when one afternoon in August 1934, while taking a nap in her home in Santa Fe, N.M., she died in her sleep.