

Margaret Jewett Bailey aka Ruth Rover

By Marsha Weber

Margaret Jewett (Smith) Bailey was born in Saugus, Massachusetts, in 1812. Most all that is known of her life was penned by her in the guise of a novel titled: *The Grains or Passages in the Life of Ruth Rover with Occasional Pictures of Oregon Natural and Moral*, published in 1854 by Cater & Austin, in Portland, Oregon. The original work appeared in two parts in August and September of 1854. Oregon State University Press published a reconstructed reprint in one volume in 1986, edited by Evelyn Leasher and Robert J. Frank, with a foreword by University of Oregon Professor Emeritus Edwin R. Bingham.

In a preface to *The Grains*, Bailey, under her nom de plume Ruth Rover, advises readers: “All the reasons which have induced the compiler to publish this work, at the present time, cannot now be given.” She considered the undertaking to be bold and hazardous – due to her inexperience as a writer.

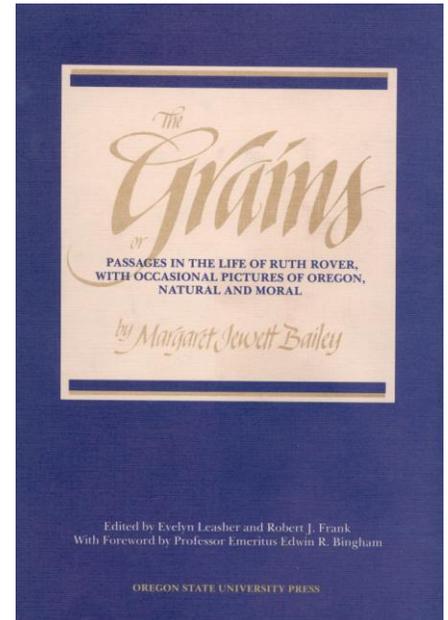
Jean M. Ward & Elaine A Maveety, editors of *Pacific Northwest Women 1815-1925 – Lives, Memories and Writings* (Oregon State University Press, 1995) write that Margaret Jewett Bailey understood the power of the written word to praise and to cast blame, to establish character and to destroy credibility. With the hindsight history provides it is now believed that Bailey hoped to clear the record of her troubled association with the Methodist Willamette Mission and stifle continuing rumors about her divorce from Dr. William J. Bailey and, to do so, chose to make her side of the story public through the personal narrative of Ruth Rover. This bold and hazardous venture, as she deems it, suggests that the sometimes impetuous decisions that formed her circumstances were viewed by Bailey as necessary and deigned by her faith and belief in her God rather than incautious for women during her era.

Her inexperience as a writer is disputable. Her letters home while serving with the mission at Champoege had appeared in Christian newspapers in Boston and New York. One of her poems had been published in the first edition of the *Oregon Spectator*, February 5, 1846, making her the first poet to be published west of the Rocky Mountains. In the words of Ruth Rover readers are told: “My first attempt at poetry was made at three years of age, before I knew the meaning of words. But selecting words which sounded alike I placed them at the ends of lines, and getting an elder schoolmate to write for me, I concluded that I should at last have a seat in the Temple of Fame for this great production.” Ruth was ridiculed by her siblings for these attempts, however, and vowed to never again make rhyme. Her will to refrain from poetry disintegrated and she eventually suffered it to be printed despite all its errors.

As historian Edwin Bingham observed in the foreword to the 1986 reprint: “By stretching the definition, *The Grains* may be called a novel, the first novel written and published [in English] on the Pacific Coast.” Today, one can only imagine what Bailey’s reaction might be to find her work shelved in libraries throughout the United States as Biography. Margaret Jewett Bailey, though not the first determined woman of independent spirit to settle in Oregon country, was a woman of firsts. In addition to those cited, she was the first author whose work became the subject of the first known book review; and the first woman editor of the first women’s pages in the *Portland Spectator*.

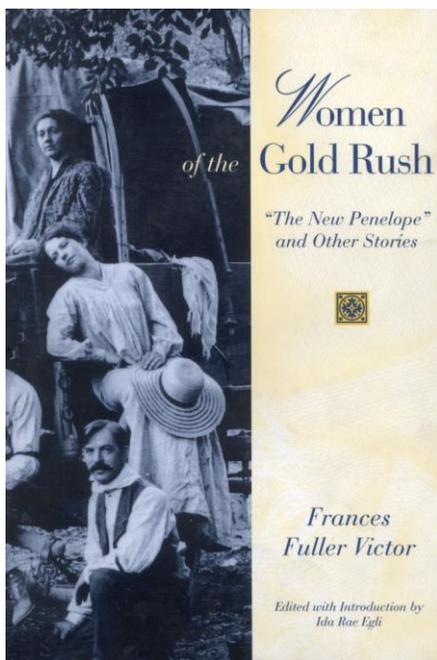
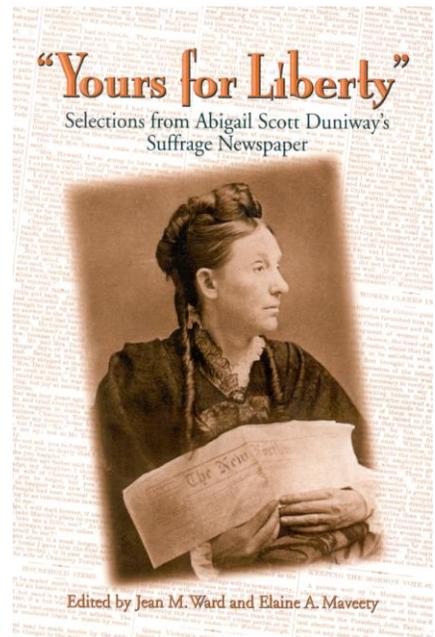
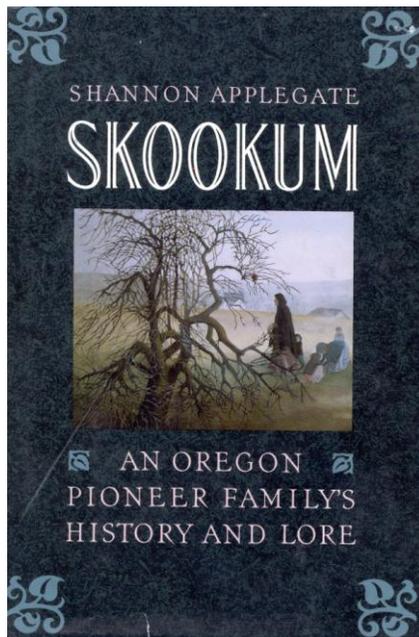
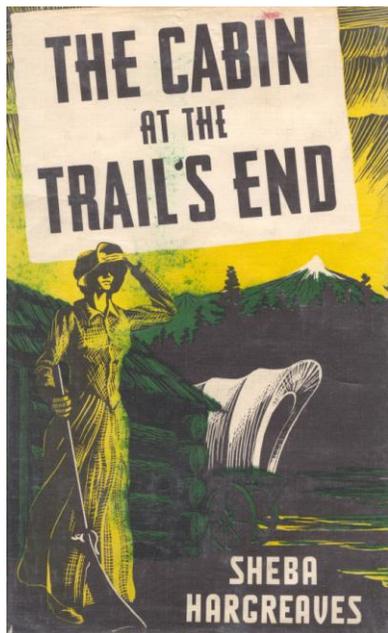
Although Bailey escaped her abusive husband, through divorce in 1854, her life did not improve, for the stigma of the divorce made it difficult, if not impossible, for her to support herself: “It is in vain that I attempt any innocent employment, whether it be intended for recreation or to obtain a livelihood. The young of my classes are withdrawn when a slander reaches them, from fear of contamination. I am avoided, shunned, and slighted, and regarded with suspicions in every place, till my life is more burdensome than death would be.” (*The Grains*, Chapter I)

Bailey married Frances Waddle in Polk County, Oregon, on September 4, 1855. They divorced on September 6, 1858. She later married once again, after a move to Washington State. She died destitute, May 17, 1882 in Seattle.



Close Encounters of a Feminine Kind

Additional Texts of Merit:



Now a pounding barrel is an absolute necessity in a household where cleanliness rules... A pounder is made of a block of wood about eight inches square, grooved on all its surfaces like a washboard, and fitted with a long handle. A barrel of hot water with a pounder plunged violently up and down in it will remove the grime very effectively from clothing. Wristbands and badly soiled spots can be rubbed clean between the hands after a pounding barrel has gotten in its good work...

"I 'lowed we'd git along just like the folks did afore poundin'-bar'ls wuz invented, but it's powerful hard to wash fur a big family without conveniences."

**Aunt Morning Ann in *The Cabin at the Trail's End*,
Sheba Hargreaves, 1928 / 1952, pgs. 133-4**

"When you examine the motives of women," said Mrs. Greyfield, "I think you will find there is a sordid self-interest in their mercy... While some women are so weak and foolishly fond of the men to whom they became early attached as to be willing to overlook everything rather than part with them, a far greater number yield in unwilling submission to wrongs imposed upon them simply because they do not know how to do without the pecuniary support afforded them by their husbands. The bread-and-butter question is demoralizing to women as well as to men, the difference being that men have a wider field to be demoralized in, and that the demoralization of women is greatly consequent upon their circumscribed field of action."

***Women of the Gold Rush*, "The New Penelope,"
Frances Fuller Victor, 1877 / 1998, pg. 47**

**Oregon Cultural
Heritage Commission**
PO Box 3588 Portland, OR 97208
info@ochcom.org www.ochcom.org

