

Name _____ Date _____

A Frontier Woman

In the 1880s, a black woman went to Cascade, Montana, in the northwestern United States. Her name was Mary Fields. Mary became a legend in that part of the old west. In Cascade, she was so loved that the famous cowboy artist Charles Russell drew her picture. It now hangs in the Stockmen's Bank in Cascade. Not much is known of Mary Field's life. She was born a slave in Tennessee about 1832. At the age of forty, she left the south. She went north to Toledo, Ohio. There she found work in the home of a family named Dunne.

In this family there was a nun named Sister Amadeus. She was sent to Montana to start a girls school. There the nun, Mother Amadeus, became ill. Mary went west to care for her. At St. Peter's Mission, near the town of Cascade, Mary nursed the nun back to health. For the next ten years, Mary worked at the mission. She was a huge woman, with the great strength and courage. She worked for Mother Amadeus and took care of the chickens and cows. She helped to build a convent for the nuns.

Mary also drove a cart to town for supplies. The courage she showed in this work made her a legend. Winters in northern Montana are very cold. Sometimes it is forty degrees below zero. Huge blizzards blow across the land. Mary often fought her way through such storms. One night howling wolves came close. The horses were frightened. When they snorted and reared, the cart overturned. Mary could not recover the goods in the dark. She stood guard. All night she walked back and forth to keep from freezing. In the morning she picked up the supplies and went back to the convent.

Mary's speech and manners were rough. The nuns loved her, for she was a good worker. She had a quick temper. The rest of the workers at the mission were afraid of her. They kept complaining to the bishop. At last he told the nuns that Mary had to leave. Mother Amadeus arranged for her to run a restaurant in town. In spite of her temper, Mary was kind. Often people could not pay her for a meal. She would not let anyone go hungry. Soon the restaurant failed. The nuns helped her get back some of the money owed her. She tried to run the restaurant again. Once more she failed. She was too kind.

Mary was next hired as a driver on a mail route. She delivered mail between Cascade and the mission. She loved the work. She sat proudly on the high seat, whipping the reins over the horses' backs. Visitors to the mission were met at the train by Mary. Few of them ever knew that the huge driver was a woman. For eight years Mary met every train. When there was a storm, she could not drive. Then she would load the mailbag on her shoulder and trudge to the mission.

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In 1903, Mary gave up the mail route and made her home in Cascade. For a time, she did washing for her friends. She worked as a babysitter, too. She spent most of her small pay to buy sweets for the children. She loved baseball, and the Cascade team made her their mascot. Before each game she gave the players flowers from her garden.

Mary died in 1914. She was about eighty one years old. Her friends buried her beside the road to the mission. This was the road she had travelled in a cart and on foot for more than twenty-five years.