

Woman's work under a man's name

Authors to 1989
Santa Cruz
poet marked
the 1800s

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SHE SIGNED her articles and poems with a man's name she made up. She was totally deaf most of her life and could not — or would not — speak for years.

She spent her last years in Santa Cruz and so loved this place that she wrote poems about it ... poems that were read by President Abraham Lincoln and were complimented by poet John Greenleaf Whittier.

She was Laura Catherine Redden Searing. But the readers of her articles and poems knew her as Howard Glyndon. Her poetry is of the flowery style of the 1800s, but Whittier in 1887 wrote to her regarding "The Hills of Santa Cruz" that it was "fine in conception and felicitous in expression ...". He also said that "it will do for the little city by the sea what Bret Harte has done for San Francisco ...".

Who was Laura Redden Searing — a.k.a. Howard Glyndon?

She was born Feb. 2, 1840, in Somerset County, Md. Among her ancestors were Sir William Waller of Maryland and the poet Edmund Waller of England.

Her childhood was happy and uneventful until her family moved to Missouri when Laura was about 11 years old. She was a precocious child, she liked to read and she was already writing poems.

She wrote once that she had "grown very fast" ... by age 11 she was almost as tall as she would be. The first winter in Missouri was a "very severe one" and Laura became ill with what was called the "ague" in those days. Treatment consisted of large quantities of quinine. Her bout with the "ague" was followed by a bad cold two weeks before Christmas.

She came home from school a week later and collapsed on her bed and lapsed into a coma which lasted for weeks. Her parents feared for her life.

When Laura regained con-



Laura Redden Searing with daughter, Elsa McGinn.

sciousness, the doctor and her mother were standing beside her bed, talking. She could see their lips move, but she could not hear a thing they said. With a terrible shock, she realized that she was totally deaf.

As she regained her health, she could communicate only with paper and pencil. Her ears, which had never ached or pained her, were examined by the best physicians available; they all agreed that nothing could be done.

To make matters worse, Laura's voice which had been girlishly pleasing in speech and song, now ranged wildly between guttural and falsetto. She had no control over it; her vocal cords had been affected.

As she began to appear in pub-

lic again, she immediately became sensitive to reactions to her unpleasant voice.

"I began to talk less and less," she wrote in later years.

In addition to her uncontrollable voice, her words were often garbled and not understandable. She was sent to a sign school for two years where she learned the manual alphabet, but she still relied on pencil and paper most of the time. Her desire to speak was intense, but she shrank from seeing people look at each other, puzzled, to ask "What did she say?" Worst of all, there was no one who could help her.

Laura was virtually speechless until 1871, when she was sent to the Clarke Institute at Northampton, Mass., the first

"articulation school" to be established in the United States.

One of her instructors was Professor Alexander Graham Bell. She also studied in Connecticut with Zerah C. Whipple, one of the few teachers of the deaf at that time. After years of struggle and study, she developed a pleasant speaking voice.

During those years, Laura was writing articles advocating the teaching of speech in schools for the deaf. The New York Mail published them under the heading, "Silent Children." In 1874, she wrote "Sounds From the Secret Chamber," which also was published. She had been writing poetry for years and when she was 19, she had contributed poems and patriotic articles to the St. Louis Republican, using the nom de plume Howard Glyndon.

It is probable that she adopted the male name because her patriotic articles were not exactly appreciated by southerners. Also in that day and age, women were not encouraged to write anything except family letters and thank you notes.

Anyhow, her articles started an investigation with resulting sarcastic comments about the "school girl" who meddled with politics.

The Republican thought so much of her abilities that it sent her as its correspondent to Washington, D.C. There she formed friendships with President Lincoln, General Ulysses Grant and other prominent national leaders. General Grant invited her to go with him to visit the front lines of the Union Army, a most unusual event for a woman in those Civil War days.

In 1865, Laura had sailed (with a companion) for Europe where she studied French, German, Spanish and Italian. She also collected material on the growing of oranges and on the silkworm culture for the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

In 1876, Laura married Edward W. Searing, a New York attorney. Letters, telegrams and gifts came from many prominent friends including Whittier, Joaquin Miller, Whitelaw Reid and Bayard Taylor.

The Searings established a home at Sherwood, N.Y., and they had one child, Elsa Searing



Laura Searing, 1873

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McGinn, who eventually established a home in San Mateo.

In 1886, Laura visited California with the Convention of Instructors for the Deaf. In frail health, she decided that Santa Cruz was the place where she would spend the rest of her life. Her years here inspired some of her best known poems: "The Hills of Santa Cruz," "Homes of Santa Cruz" and "Capitola," according to the late Callista Duke who researched Laura's life.

"The Hills" begins:
*I've seen the far-off Apennines
Melt into dreamy skies;
I've seen the peaks the Switzers
love*

*In snowy grandeur rise;
And many more, to which the
world*

*Its praise cannot refuse —
But of them all, I love the best
The hills of Santa Cruz ...*

Laura's last lines were prophetic:

*Oh hush thee, hush thee, heart;
Lie still within my lonely
breast;*

*For soon shall come a time
when thou*

*And I shall be laid well at rest.
There must be fairer friends
for us*

*Beyond the midsts of human
ken.*

She wrote that on April 5, 1908, and died shortly afterward.