

Blazing Trails with an American Legend

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Being a crack rifle shot has its down side. In Annie Oakley's case, a little blurred vision might have changed the course of history when in 1891, Germany's Crown Prince Wilhelm challenged the darling of Buffalo Bill Cody's Wild West show to shoot a cigar out of his mouth.

The crown prince would later become Kaiser Wilhelm II, the man who led Germany during World War I.

To back up a few years, it was in 1887 that a ship first brought Oakley down the Thames and into London's Albert Docks. She was touring with Cody's famous Wild West troupe and the arrival of the ship after many days at sea called to mind a real-life Noah's Ark. The buffalo, elk, sheep, mules, horses, cowboys, Vaqueros and Native Americans all piled onto an awaiting train and headed for Earl's Court, where they pitched camp.

"The crush and fight, and struggle amongst both quadrupeds and bipeds to reach the gates of the Yankeeeries, was, for some hours, something terrific," a reporter from the *London Times* wrote when the show opened. "All the world and his wife was there." Even the normally reclusive Queen Victoria ventured out from Buckingham Palace to Earl's Court, where she was joined by the *creme-de-la-creme* of European royalty.

As for Crown Prince Wilhelm's dare, the story goes that Oakley fired a single shot, knocking the ash off a cigar he held in his hand, instead of the head off his neck.

And that's just a single chapter in an epic existence. Remarkably, before Riva Freifeld's documentary about Oakley started making the rounds on PBS stations last year, the only other television program to recount the epic sharpshooter's life was an 1954 episodic drama on ABC which bore her name

Biographer Shirl Kasper writes that watching that series as a child was a revelation. She eventually produced a book about Oakley on which much of the new film is based. Sifting through stacks of old news clippings and reading the sharpshooter's diary, the author unraveled a real enigma. Although she generally associated with the guns and ammo circuit, Oakley preached a surprisingly liberal stripe of politics and helped put young women through business school. She also taught them how to shoot, raised money for charity, and eventually went head to head with one of the country's most powerful tycoons, newspaper baron William Randolph Hearst.

For all that, Oakley is rather deprecatingly remembered today as more of a caricature than a person. She's even confused with Calamity Jane, the hard-drinking woman who traversed the Dakota territories on horseback.

Born Phoebe Ann Moses on August 13, 1860, Oakley was the daughter of Quaker parents who lived in Darke County, Ohio. At



Photo: Denver Public Library

Annie Oakley wasn't a bad tailor, either, sewing all her own clothes.

the age of eight, she gunned down her first game, a squirrel darting outside the family cabin.

"It was a wonderful shot, going right through the head from side to side," she would later recall.

Bad times caught up, however, when her father died after being caught out in a snowstorm. His departure left the family broke, and Oakley was sent to the poor farm in Greenville. Here, a farmer and his wife appropriated her to work as their household servant. Even after uncovering evidence of frequent beatings, the authorities did nothing to intervene, causing Oakley to hightail it out of Dodge on her own dime. Her mother remarried a few years later and they were re-united.

To help put food on the table, Susan Moses bought her daughter a new 16-gauge rifle. With a

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breech-loading hammer, it was a significant advance over the old muzzle-loaders, and soon, Oakley's daily haul climbed into the double digits. The general store in Greenville bought the inventory and shipped it to restaurants in Cincinnati.

"Legend has it," writes Kasper, "that hotel keepers preferred the quail and rabbits that Annie killed because they were always shot through the head. That way, guests never complained of finding buckshot in their dinner meat."

In 1881, a marksman traveling with the Sells Brothers Circus, Frank Butler, was offered \$100 by some Greenville men if he could beat an unknown sharpshooter who lived nearby. Butler didn't know his opponent was female, but when he lost the contest, he invited Oakley to accompany him on the rest of his tour that year.

One night, when Butler's stage partner got the flu and couldn't make the performance, Annie offered to throw the targets. The star of the show proceeded to miss a dozen glass balls in succession.

"Let the girl shoot," the audience groaned. So Butler switched places with Oakley and after missing the first toss, she began smashing the balls one after another. The audience went wild and the episode proved the undoing for Butler's stage partner. A year later, the new husband and wife sharpshooting duo met up with Wild Bill Cody, the former prairie scout turned entertainer.

Within a year, Annie was performing solo before capacity crowds across the United States.

Cody's three-hour show featured Indians ambushing a stagecoach, counterattacks by cowboys, a lot of whooping and screaming, and a considerable discharge of firearms. The choreographed

scenes were devised by Cody and his partner Nate Salsbury, a former playwright. Oakley proved such a crowd-pleaser that her name began appearing on the billboards right below Cody himself.

"As her act began," Kasper explains, "she ran to the center of the arena, where she took her place by a plain wooden table, draped with a silken cover and laden with rifles and shotguns. Frank [Annie's husband] stood by, unannounced, to load the traps and release the clay birds. They came singly at first, then in pairs, triplets, and finally, four at a time. No matter, Annie broke them, never hesitating. She was a whirl of motion – notably accurate, incredibly fast."

Then twenty years later, during a long hiatus from touring, scandal struck. In 1903, the front page of the August 11th *Chicago Examiner and American* (a Hearst paper) screamed the headline, "Famous Woman Crack Shot Steals to Secure Cocaine". Oakley was reported to have absconded some trousers from a Negro in order to pay for her drug addiction. Newspapers from coast to coast ran the story. In truth, a burlesque dancer who played Oakley on stage once had been arrested and sentenced to 45 days in jail for the crime.

The celebrity, who spent years crafting a reputation as a law-abiding, proper Victorian woman, was flabbergasted. "Make those people pay you big money," drama critic Amy Leslie is said to have advised her, "and go at it as if you meant to shoot and kill."

Oakley did just that, filing



Photo: Nutley Historical Society

lawsuits against all the publications who ran the story. Of some 55 cases, she won or settled all but one. While most awards were small, she got \$20,000 from the *St. Louis Star* and almost \$28,000 from "Gloomy Bill" himself, as William Randolph Hearst came to be referred to in the course of the Chicago trial.

In her later years, Oakley lived in New Jersey. Whenever she performed, she made tickets available to children living in orphanages, never forgetting her own stint in the shelter.

"The elephants were great, and the clowns did their best to make Young Buffalo's Wild West show," according to a newspaper account in 1912, "but it remained for the veteran Annie Oakley, best female shot in the world, to make the show a success. Of all the stunts presented there was none which gained greater applause in the crowded tents than that of the 'young woman'."

Towards the end of her life, she returned to her native Ohio, where she died on November 3, 1926.