

# Annie's Got Her Gun

There's a man in the distance with a cigarette in his mouth. A woman stares him down through a Marlin model 1897 lever-action rifle barrel. She pulls the hammer back, squeezes the trigger, and a controlled explosion erupts at the end of the gun. She hits her target dead-center, just as she always does. The target remnants fall to the ground as the man spits what's left of the cigarette out of his mouth to the thunderous applause of an audience. They've seen Annie Oakley, a legend of the West, show off her marksmanship skills, and they don't leave disappointed.

Like many legends, the highest accomplishments come from the humblest of beginnings. Her skill with a firearm was born out of necessity rather than ambition. Born Phoebe Ann Moses in Darke County, Ohio, on August 13, 1860, Oakley had to learn how to provide for her family early on. Her father, Jacob Moses, died when she was six, and her stepfather, Daniel Brumbaugh, passed away the following year. By the age of eight, she was hunting small game with her father's rifle.

"In the American West, contract meat hunters, that's their sole job, providing game on the table; she did it not only for her survival but for her siblings," said Michael Grauer, McCasland Chair of Cowboy Culture and Curator of Cowboy Collections & Western Art at the National Cowboy and Western Heritage Museum. "In this case, she helped raise her siblings and put a few dollars in her pocket."

Eventually, Oakley earned more than a few dollars, because, by the time she was fifteen, she was paying the \$200 mortgage on her mother's house by selling the meat that she hunted to the Katzenberger brothers' grocery store in Greenville, Oklahoma. It was then sold to restaurants and hotels in Cincinnati. Because of this, she received an invitation from hotel owner Jack Frost to participate in a shooting contest against Frank Butler, a well-respected marksman who offered challenges to locals. Out of twenty-five shots, Oakley made every single one she took. Butler missed by one.

The two of them would marry in 1876, eventually becoming a performance act after Oakley substituted for Butler's sick partner in a show in 1882. On the road, she changed her name to "Oakley," based on the town of Oakley, Ohio. They performed in several tours, including

the Sells Brothers Circus, but Oakley became famous when they performed for Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show. They performed all over the country and overseas, going to countries such as Spain, England, Italy, and France. This is when Oakley became a renowned sharpshooter and offered a shift in the dynamic between herself and Butler. She became the star headliner instead of part of a traveling duo. Still, Butler remained a proud and loyal husband.

"They were true equal partners, and there was no resentment on Frank's part. I think he realized that she was the better of the two. He became a manager and promoter, and mainly her assistant. I think that speaks to their marriage being a true partnership," said Grauer.

Oakley became widely regarded for her ability to shoot small objects from far distances, items such as dimes and British pennies that were thrown in the air, aiming at targets using a mirror, and quite dangerous stunts like shooting a cigarette out of her husband's mouth. Her speed was impressive, considering that she predominantly used shotguns and rifles, never sidearm.

Throughout her life and career, Annie Oakley became widely known for her crack shot skills, often surpassing the skills of the men she would compete against, which gave her worldwide accolades.

"Her costume that she wore in her performances was just covered with medals. She received medals from European countries, cities where she performed, and so on. I don't think any particular one was of higher stature than another, but they were all

acknowledgments of recognition," said Grauer.

Oakley gained respect from those she encountered, especially Hunkpapa Lakota leader Sitting Bull, who admired her skills and assertive confidence and would refer to her as Wayanya Cicilla or "Little Sure Shot." Her life and achievements have been made into the famous Broadway musical and film *Annie Get Your Gun*, and her rifles are on display at the National Cowboy & Western Heritage Museum in Oklahoma City. Despite the hardships of her youth, her experiences shaped her into the person she would become—one of the great American sharpshooters, and a true legend of the Old West.

