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The Real Annie Oakley

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March is National Women's History Month. It celebrates a process not unique to the women's movement: reclaiming "lost" history, and revising popular notions about the past.

Even if as a nation we don't exactly revere history, our perceptions of the past shape and guide our choices. We move in certain ways believing "that's the way it's always been." We yearn for (and politicians promise) "the good old days."

Yet upon reexamination many popular notions about history turn out to be misunderstanding, distortion, or outright myth. Take Annie Oakley, for example.

Everyone knows the story of Annie Oakley. As the coarse and cocky sharpshooter of Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show, she fell madly in love with the slick Frank Butler. He was attracted to her, too, but when she defeated him in a shooting match, he assuaged his bruised ego in the company of softer, more feminine companions.

Their rivalry kept them apart until Annie's adoptive father, Chief Sitting Bull, explained the facts of life to her: the only way to win Frank's heart was to forfeit the next match. She did, and lived happily ever after in her supporting role.

We know this story through the musical, "Annie Get Your Gun." It starred Ethel Merman on Broadway in 1946, went on to become one of MGM's great musicals in 1950, and is a favorite today with professional and amateur theater groups around the country. A Broadway revival in 1999 swept several categories of the Tony Awards.

But that story is myth. The real story, compiled from sources predating the musical, reminds us that truth is often more interesting than fiction.

Phoebe Ann Mosey (or Moses, another spelling used by the family) was born in Darke County, Ohio, on August 13, 1860. From the age of twelve, after her father's death, Annie supported her large family by providing game for the dining rooms of a hotel in Cincinnati. She was paid a premium because she could shoot birds cleanly through the head, thereby sparing diners the usual annoyance of spitting out buckshot...and their teeth.

In 1881 the barnstorming marksman Frank Butler came to southwestern Ohio and issued a challenge for a shooting match; the locals put up \$100 to back an unknown at a match to be held near Annie's girlhood home in North Star ten days hence. As Frank later recounted in a newspaper article, "I almost dropped dead when a little slim girl in short dresses stepped out to the mark with me...I never shot better in my life, but never did a person make more impossible shots than did that little girl. It was her first big match - and my first defeat."

It was also love at first sight for both. They were married soon after in 1882, and toured together as the team of "Oakley and Butler" before Frank retired as a professional to become her manager and ring assistant.

Annie was to captivate the public for over 40 years. In 1885 she joined Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show as one of its stars, often earning as much as \$1000 a week during her 16-year stint. Her skill and dexterity were world-renowned; at the invitation of Kaiser Wilhelm II she once shot the ashes off a cigarette he held in his hand. She was a friend of Queen Victoria, and corresponded with her until the queen's death. And yes, the great Sioux Chief Sitting Bull really did adopt her, naming her "Machin Chilla Wyton Ceclia," or "My daughter, Little Sure Shot."

A train accident in 1901 ended her career with the Wild West Show, but she never lost her ability to shoot. She celebrated her 50th birthday in 1910 with a promotional stunt for the Ithaca Gun by breaking 98 targets out of 100. During World War I, at nearly 60, she taught marksmanship to American soldiers.

Newspaper accounts of the period consistently describe her as a slight woman, modest and unassuming yet possessing unusual force and character. In 1924, when she was bedridden from an auto accident, Will Rogers encouraged his audience to visit her. "She will be a lesson to you. She is a greater character than she was a rifle shot."

And Frank Butler?

Throughout their long marriage, Frank was a devoted husband, apparently content with his supporting role as manager and ring assistant. He often wrote long love poems for her. They had no children, but legend says they quietly paid for the rearing and education of at least 19 young women. When she retired, she was considered one of the country's wealthiest women, and the center of her charitable activities was Darke County.

Annie died on November 3, 1926, in Greenville Ohio, and Frank died several days later - of a broken heart, according to some friends. Her tombstone bears the inscription, "AT REST."

The truth is an exquisite story, even by Hollywood standards. So why was it distorted 20 years after her death? Probably to suit the prevailing social norm, for in the period following World War II, society had a goal: to get women out of the work force and back into the home.

World War II had created severe labor shortages, and nearly 7 million women answered the call to replace men in the work force. It was assumed that after the war, these women would eagerly retreat to hearth and home. But they didn't. Polls in 1945 showed that 68% of women preferred (or needed) to stay in the paid work force.

Returning veterans needed those jobs, so society mobilized for a new "war." An outpouring of literature urged women to relinquish their independence and adapt their interests to those of the returning soldiers - for the good of their country. Magazines, novels, movies, even advertisements portrayed working women as greedy and selfish, guaranteed to lose the affections of men and turn their children into delinquents.

So in 1946, since the real story of Annie Oakley ran counter to the prevailing social climate, "Annie Get Your Gun" fabricated a docile, compliant role model for women.

But today, as we struggle to redefine gender roles and relationships, it's time to reclaim the real story. After all, it provides far more interesting - and inspiring - role models for both men and women.

*Learn more about Annie Oakley, and the new film about her life,
ANNIE OAKLEY: AMERICAN LEGEND, through the
Annie Oakley Foundation
PO Box 127, Greenville OH 45331*

On the web at AnnieOakleyFoundation.org