

ANNIE OAKLEY (1860 – 1926)



ANNIE OAKLEY (1860 – 1926)

Annie Oakley was born on 13 August 1860 in Darke County, Ohio. The fifth daughter of Jacob and Susan Moses, the Quaker family had migrated to Ohio after the family tavern in Hollidaysburg, Pennsylvania burned. Jacob Moses died of pneumonia in 1866. For the next several years, Annie helped her family by trapping and performing chores on the family farm.

At the age of eight or nine, she went to live with the Superintendent's family at the county poor farm. At one point during her stay at the poor farm, she was "lent out" to a local farm family as a servant. According to her autobiography, this family abused her mentally and physically. After two years, she ran back to the poor farm and remained there until she was thirteen or fourteen. While there, she learned to sew and received an education.

When Annie returned to her family, she found that they had been suffering through a very difficult period. Annie's mother had remarried but this second husband died after leaving her with a new child. Annie's mother then married a third time. Even with this remarriage, the family finances were not very good and the family was on the verge of losing their farm. Upon Annie's return home, she used her father's old Kentucky rifle to hunt small game for resale in Greenville and hotels and restaurants in northern Ohio. Prior to leaving for the poor farm, she had been trapping game and had taught herself how to use the rifle.

Annie was so successful at hunting that she was able to pay the entire mortgage on the family farm with the money she had earned from the sale of her game. In her autobiography she notes "Oh, how my heart leaped with joy as I handed the money to mother and told her that I had saved enough to pay it off!" At the time, she was fifteen.



As a result of her accurate shooting and prolific production, Annie gained a reputation in the region. She was particularly noted for her ability to place the shot in the head of the animal so as to leave the meat unspoiled by the shotgun pellets or bullets. One consequence of her ability was an invitation from one customer, the owner of a hotel in Cincinnati, to participate in a shooting contest near that city against a well-known marksman, Frank E. Butler.

Butler was in Cincinnati on a tour with several other marksmen. While on tour, Butler always offered a challenge to local shooters, claiming that he could outshoot "anything then living, save Carver or Bogardus." She agreed to the competition and, along with a brother, put up \$50.00 as an entry fee. Butler is reported to have laughed when he learned that the young woman was to be his local competition. However, she won the match with twenty-five shoots out of twenty-five attempts. Mr. Butler missed one of his shoots. The two shooters began a relationship that resulted in marriage on 23 August 1876.

Annie Oakley and Frank Butler first appeared in a show together on 1 May 1882. Butler's usual partner was taken ill and Annie filled in by holding objects for Frank to shoot at and also doing some of her own shooting. It was at this time that Annie adopted the stage name of Oakley. In private, she was always Mrs. Frank Butler. For the next couple of years, the Butlers travelled across the country giving shooting exhibitions with their dog, George, as an integral part of the act.

It was at a performance in March 1884 in St. Paul, Minnesota, that Annie befriended Sitting Bull. Sitting Bull, the victor over George Custer at the Battle of Little Big Horn in 1876, was impressed with Annie's shooting and with her appearance and manner. She was only five-foot tall and always appeared on stage and in public in modest clothes and was always sure of herself and her position. Sitting Bull arranged to meet Annie Oakley, and after many long conversations, Sitting Bull adopted

ANNIE OAKLEY (1860 – 1926)

her. In his mind, Sitting Bull was replacing a daughter lost after Little Big Horn with Annie, whom he called "Little Sure Shot."

Later in life, Annie Oakley would use this name, "little Sure Shot," as part of the advertising for her shooting skills, particularly when she was with the Wild West shows. This was the first step in the close identification of Annie Oakley with the wild west of fact and fiction. In fact, Annie was an Ohio girl and had never been part of the settlement of the west. Butler used the relationship with Sitting Bull in some advertising material after their meeting but the relationship did not continue for long at that time. Later, it would become an important part of Annie Oakley's life and the lore that developed around her in later life and after her death.



In 1884, the Butlers joined the Sells Brothers Circus as "champion rifle shots." They stayed with the circus for that one season. Although the Sells Brothers Circus was successful and competed against some of the larger shows such as Barnum and Bailey, Butler and Oakley felt that the working conditions were not safe. At one point, Oakley led a protest against unsafe equipment. Butler and Oakley left the Sells Brothers Circus after one season.

After a brief period on their own, Butler and Oakley joined "Buffalo Bill's Wild West." They had been rejected on their first attempt to join the "Wild West" because the show already had an impressive collection of champion shooters, Captain Adam H. Bogardus and his sons. However, Bogardus left the show in 1885 and Oakley and Butler were signed to replace him.

This was a significant turning point in Annie Oakley's life and in her relationship with Butler. Until this time either Butler had received top billing or they had shared the limelight. However, with the "Wild West," Oakley was the star. It was her name that was on the advertising posters as "Champion Markswoman." From this time forward, Butler was her manager and assistant; Annie Oakley was the star. However, in private and off the stage, she was always Mrs. Frank Butler. Oakley and Butler prospered with the "Wild West" and stayed with it until 1901.

The "Wild West" was a unique production that played to audiences all over the world. First popular in the United States, the production was designed to showcase the talents and stories of Buffalo Bill Cody and his band of cowboys, scouts, and Indians. Many of the performers in his production had been with Buffalo Bill during his adventures in the west, others had become legends of their own because of dime novels or because they were true historical figures.

William F. Cody or Buffalo Bill, as he was mostly known, had been a part of the American West since the beginning. Born in 1846, Buffalo Bill had been a pony express rider, soldier, trail scout, hunter, Indian fighter, a state legislator, cattle rancher and an entertainer. He received his nickname because of his skill at buffalo hunting for the Kansas Pacific Railroad construction crews.

He made his first effort at show business in 1882, organizing a show in Nebraska for the 4th of July. The next year, he organized a show for the summer season titled "The Wild West, Hon. W.F. Cody and Dr. W.F. Carver's Rocky Mountain and Prairie Exhibition." The next year, with a new partner-Nate Salsbury, Cody opened a new show "Buffalo Bill's Wild West." This show would continue to play to audiences across the continent and the world until Buffalo Bill sold the production in 1913.

The second year that Oakley and Butler were with the show, Buffalo Bill took the entire production on a tour of Europe. It was during this tour that Oakley and Butler learned a great deal about showmanship and that Oakley's reputation as a sharpshooter and as a lady was highlighted. The production was going to England to participate in the Golden Jubilee of Queen Victoria's reign as Queen of the British Empire. When the show opened in May 1887, Oakley was the subject of a

ANNIE OAKLEY (1860 – 1926)

considerable press following because of her shooting skills. At the same time, the English newspapers began to embellish Oakley's western background. She also received a great number of invitations to social events and to hunting and shooting events. She received large numbers of presents and tokens, especially on her birthday. This tour also helped Oakley increase her growing collection of shooting medals, awards, and trophies.



When the "Wild West" returned to Europe, Oakley had become a seasoned performer with many tricks in her presentation. When they arrived in France in 1889, Oakley had star billing. They remained in Paris for a six-month exhibition and then travelled to other parts of France, to Italy, and Spain. When they returned to the United States in 1890, the performers of the "Wild West" were greeted with the news that, according to U.S. Census figures, the frontier west or Wild West was a piece of history, the victim of increasing population density.

During the next decade the "Wild West" and Annie Oakley toured the world to offer both Americans and others a look at the Wild West. Buffalo Bill often used the phrase "a visit West in three hours to see scenes that have cost thousands their lives to view" as part of this advertising. Buffalo Bill expanded the production to include scenes from the western experience. These included stage robberies, gun fights, Indian raids, military engagements, and exhibitions of the crafts required to survive in the west. During all of this period, Oakley was a featured performer, usually second on the program. She was especially popular with women and was used by Buffalo Bill to demonstrate that shooting was not harmful and that the extensive gunfights and other shooting exhibitions were not too intense for women and children.

With all of her success and travels, Oakley wanted another side of life for herself and her husband, a permanent house. In 1892, she and Butler bought property in Nutley, New Jersey, about thirteen miles south of New York City. They lived in the house between tours. Sometimes the house was rented during their longer travels. Oakley and Butler both acknowledged that they enjoyed home ownership but that Oakley was not a housekeeper and was not happy having servants and not being in control of her domestic arrangements. They finally sold the house in Nutley in 1904. It was demolished in 1937.

One event, which is worth noting during this period, is Oakley's performance in an early film. Buffalo Bill and Thomas Edison were good friends. Edison had personally designed the electrical plant for the "Wild West," claimed to be the largest in the world at the time. In 1894, Edison had Buffalo Bill and fifteen of his Indians appear in an Edison film. Later, Oakley would demonstrate her shooting skills for Edison. He was particularly interested in the potential for his cameras to follow the flight of a bullet. Edison had these films made into nickelodeons.

Oakley and Butler's period of home ownership and their desire for a change in the extensive travel required by the "Wild West" caused them to leave the show in 1901. Oakley continued to perform and eventually joined another Wild West show, "The Young Buffalo Show" in 1911. Another reason for them to have left the "Wild West" was a 1901 train accident that injured her back. She required five operations on her spine to correct the injuries. During this period, Butler signed a contract as a representative for the Union Metallic Cartridge Company in Connecticut. This was a position that allowed both Butler and Oakley to make endorsements for the company and to continue their shooting exhibitions. Finally, in 1913, the couple retired from the arena and settled down in Cambridge.

During their years with the "Wild West" and while on their own, Oakley and Butler had been careful with their money. They had also made large sums of money. A significant portion of that income

ANNIE OAKLEY (1860 – 1926)

had been sent to Annie's family in Ohio, particularly to her mother and her nieces and nephews. She had also sent money to orphans and to others that had come into her life. Annie was so generous with free passes to her shows that this type of pass is known in the theatre as an "Annie Oakley."

During their travels with the "Wild West" and with the "Young Buffalo Show" Oakley and Butler had been to Cambridge on Maryland's Eastern Shore. Butler had liked the rural location and the hunting potential and had suggested that they retire to the community. Butler described Cambridge as a town with "four banks, several fine churches, but no saloons." They bought several properties in Cambridge, the first in 1912, and the second in 1913. The latter purchase consisted of two lots and would include the lot on which they built their retirement home.

Annie Oakley had considerable design advice to provide the builders. The rooms were to be square with no projecting closets and the sink and work areas in the kitchen were to be suitable for a five-foot woman. The unusual plaster cove cornice in the dining room was also, most likely, a suggestion from her because it is not common to other early twentieth century houses in Cambridge. There is little information on the furnishings of the house beyond photographs of Oakley and Butler sitting on casual furniture on their front porch. One visitor did note that "she'd placed her trophies here and there around the house and piled her scrapbooks on a table."

During their retirement in Cambridge, the Butlers hunted and fished. Frank Butler referred to Cambridge as a "sportsman's paradise" and wrote a poem about the Eastern Shore of Maryland and its people. Both Butler and Oakley invited their friends to come to Cambridge for the hunting and fishing. They apparently had many responses to their offers. At one point, Annie Oakley wrote to American Field that "While there has been a great deal of game bagged here, I am pleased to say that there is plenty left over. When I say that there were more than 1,700 game licenses taken out in this county, the reader can imagine the amount of hunting that was done."

The Butlers were popular with the local community. Several residents remember the Butlers walking through town and corresponded with Annie Oakley after she left the community. Annie gave shooting exhibitions at the Dorchester County Fair and helped raise money for the fair. The Butlers also spent time at the Alfred I. du Pont estate just outside of Cambridge. Du Pont and other wealthy sportsman had hunting preserves in the surrounding countryside, a tradition that remains today.



While in Cambridge, Annie Oakley wrote her first autobiography. Titled *Powders I have Used*, it was published in 1914 by the Du Pont Powder Company. She also wrote articles for sportsmen's and other magazines on the pleasures of shooting and hunting and encouraged other women to take up the sport. She also continued to encourage women to learn to shoot as a means of self defence.

While in Cambridge, the Butlers welcomed a new member into their family, their dog Dave. Named for a friend Dave Montgomery, of the comedy team of Montgomery and Stone, Dave was to be a constant companion to the Butlers until his death. When they returned to the arena, Dave was to become an important part of the act. One of the most well-known tricks was for Annie to shoot an apple from the top of Dave's head. There are numerous photographs and advertising pieces commemorating that particular trick.

ANNIE OAKLEY (1860 – 1926)

Although life was pleasant for the Butlers in Cambridge, Annie found it difficult to settle down. She was quoted as saying "I went all to pieces under the care of a home." Her husband is said to have made the statement that "She was a rotten housekeeper. Her record in this department was seven cooks in five days." After about a year of retirement, Annie became somewhat restless. As a cure, Butler took her and her niece, Fern, for a motor trip across the country. While on the tour in 1915, they came upon Buffalo Bill. He had sold his production in 1913 and was performing in others' shows.



During their retirement, the Butlers began to travel south, particularly to Leesburg, Florida and to Pinehurst, North Carolina for shooting and hunting. While they enjoyed Leesburg, Annie found the bugs and snakes unpleasant. As a result, the Butlers began to spend more time in Pinehurst. There they found an active social life at the resort and found that they were in demand for shooting and hunting exhibitions and that there was a large demand, especially among the women, for shooting lessons.

During 1915 and 1916, the Butlers travelled between Pinehurst, Cambridge, and Newcastle-by-the-Sea, New Hampshire. The latter was a small resort owned by the owner of their hotel in Pinehurst. Finally, in 1917, the Butlers sold their home in Cambridge and moved to Pinehurst. That same year, Buffalo Bill Cody died. Annie Oakley wrote a long eulogy for him and for the passing of the Wild West era.

With Buffalo Bill gone, Annie Oakley continued to press on with her own career. Although she did not return to the travelling arena, she continued to give performances and to remind people how she had fought for her right as a woman to compete with men and to be a performer. She also took great care to remind her fans that she had always been careful to be a lady and to act and dress as such. She and Butler were often unhappy about the costumes and manners of performers in other shows and would never associate with them. However, Annie also made a great effort to make a distinction between her efforts for women's rights and the woman's suffrage movement.

When the United States was pulled into World War I, Annie Oakley offered to raise a regiment of woman volunteers to fight in the war. She had made the same offer during the Spanish-American War. At neither time was that offer accepted. She also offered to teach marksmanship to the troops. She did travel across the country for the National War Council of the Young Men's Christian Association and War Camp Community Service. At stops at training camps, she gave shooting demonstrations. She also raised money for the Red Cross. The Butlers' dog, Dave, became the "Red Cross Dog" by sniffing out donations of cash hidden in handkerchiefs.

After the war, the Butlers returned to Pinehurst. They continued to give shooting exhibitions and lessons to the guests at the hotel in which they stayed. In 1922, Annie began to make plans for a comeback. She performed before 100,000 people in Brockton, Massachusetts. She also attracted crowds in New York and other major cities. In addition, she had plans to star in a motion picture. Unfortunately, at the end of the year, she and Butler were severely injured in an automobile accident. The next year their dog, Dave, was killed in an automobile accident in Leesburg.

ANNIE OAKLEY (1860 – 1926)

Annie took almost one-and-one-half years to recover from her injuries. By 1924, she was performing and setting new records. Unfortunately, her recovery did not last long. By 1925, she was frail and in poor health. She and Butler moved to her hometown in Ohio so that they could be near to her family. They attended shooting matches in the local area and Oakley began to write out some of her memoirs. These were published by newspapers across the country.

Finally, in 1926, the Butlers died. She died on November 3 and Butler died November 21. Both died of natural causes after a long and adventuresome life.

Annie Oakley, a champion shooter and star of Buffalo Bill's Wild West, is remembered as a western folk hero and American legend. She has been the subject of numerous books. Television shows, movies, and stage plays have been written about her life and her exploits with a gun. Some of those are fictionalized accounts. Others are more accurate. However, the myths and legends that have developed around Annie Oakley have become somewhat more important than the actual facts, which are considerable in their own right. Among the most famous are the various movie and stage productions of *Annie Get Your Gun*. Also, well known is the 1950s television show *Annie Oakley and Tagg*.

Annie Oakley memorabilia and artefacts are very much sought after in the western collectors markets. Her guns, medals, and trophies rarely come on the market but when they are available, they sell for large sums of money. There are also several museums that contain artefacts from Annie Oakley. The Garst Museum in Greenville, Ohio has a considerable collection of Annie Oakley materials that she left with various relatives in the area. The Nutley Historical Society in Nutley, New Jersey has additional material. Also, the Dorchester County Public Library and the Dorchester County Historical Society in Cambridge, Maryland have Annie Oakley collections. There is also a great deal of material on Annie Oakley and on the Wild West Shows at the Buffalo Bill Historical Centre in Cody, Wyoming.

The Annie Oakley house in Cambridge, Maryland was listed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1995. The previous article is based on the statement of significance that accompanied the Annie Oakley house's National Register nomination and was prepared by Stephen G. Del Sordo, Senior Associate, Heritage Resource Group. For additional information about the Annie Oakley house, Mr. Del Sordo may be contacted at delsordo@shore.intercom.net.

