

Entertainment

Ethel Simmons editor/644-1100



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Aiming to keep Annie Oakley's story on target

By Cathie Breidenbach
special writer

AT 30 PACES, Annie Oakley could split a playing card end to end and hit a dime in mid air. She could pick off 945 of 1,000 tossed balls and hit 96 out of 100 clay pigeons. The lady was a sharpshooting phenomenon who became the star of Buffalo Bill Cody's famous Wild West Show.

In the traditional male arena of marksmanship and guns, Annie Oakley rose to the top because she could out-shoot the best.

She led a life of high adventure for a girl born into a poor farm family in Ohio. Annie counted Mark Twain and Sitting Bull as friends, acted briefly on Broadway, and married the famous crack shot Frank Butler who became her agent and manager. They travelled the world and Annie charmed Queen Victoria with her skill and shot a cigarette from the lips of Crown Prince Wilhelm of Germany. She survived two tragic train wrecks from which she never completely recovered and walked with a slight limp to the end of her life.

The real Annie Oakley was a far cry from the loud-mouthed, brassy person Ethel Merman made her out to be in the Broadway show "Annie Get Your Gun," yet most people tend to think of Annie in that bumptious image.

Bess Edwards, whose grandfather was Annie's only brother, John, said she hopes to restore the image of Annie through the efforts of the Annie Oakley Foundation founded by relatives and friends in 1983.

Edwards grew up in Birmingham and now lives in Royal Oak where she works with the foundation. Besides restoring the legend of the real

Annie Oakley through speaking engagements using slides and mementos from Annie's remarkable life, the foundation plans to build an Annie Oakley museum in Greenville, Ohio, her home town, as well as petition for a commemorative postage stamp and set up scholarships for young women.

EDWARDS HAS BEEN asked to join the speakers' bureau of the National Rifle Association to speak about her great aunt. Architecture students from Lawrence Institute of Technology travelled to Greenville and designed plans for the Annie Oakley Museum as a class project. The Foundation selected the winning design is working now to raise money for the building fund. They encourage interested people to join the Annie Oakley Foundation.

What convergence of skill, character and circumstance made Annie Oakley an American heroine? She was born Phoebe Ann Moses in Greenville, Ohio, in 1860, and grew up to be a pretty little woman weighing 100 pounds and standing just over 5 feet tall. When Annie was 6, her father died of pneumonia leaving her mother to raise her five sisters and one brother on 27 acres of poor farm land.

Out of necessity, Annie started hunting squirrels and rabbits for the dinner table when she was 8. She was soon supplementing the family income by trading game for supplies at the local general store, and she said in her letters, "Since I was 9, I never had a nickel that I didn't earn myself."

At 15 she moved to Cincinnati and there she outshot Frank Butler, the leading marksman of the time, in a match. That match began a 50-year romance; she and Frank were mar-

ried the following year when she was 16.

A little known fact about Annie is that throughout her life, she gave money toward the education of deserving women and to friends in the entertainment business down on their luck. Raised a God-fearing Quaker, she spoke in a sweet voice and remained conservative, frugal and humble in the face of worldwide fame. When she was travelling with the Wild West Show she was severely injured in a train accident and doctors said she'd never walk again. Within a year, she determined Annie was back on the performing circuit.

THE RESILIENCE, independence, and determination of the real Annie Oakley impressed the young actress, Pam Martin, as she delved into historical accounts, letters and diaries of Annie to prepare a monologue for a drama class at the University of Windsor.

Martin is a senior working on a bachelor's in fine arts degree in drama, and she's had abundant stage experience in productions at Birmingham-Seabolt High School, at the Birmingham Theatre, and with her father's theater company, The Actors' Trunk. In 1982 she won the State Forensic Championship for Single Interpretation and followed it the next year with the championship in Dramatic Duo.

When Martin began doing research for her class monologue, she discovered that the great-niece of Annie Oakley lived just 10 minutes from her home.

"It was absolute fate," she said of the coincidence.

In reading Annie's letters and diaries and talking with Edwards, Martin was struck by unexpected similarities between herself and Annie. Martin's just over 5 feet tall — so was Annie. Martin's left hand — so was Annie. Fate seemed to approve the pairing. Beyond fate, Martin knew that acting careers have been launched by bringing legendary heroes to life. Hal Holbrook first developed his characterization of Mark Twain for a class project, and he built a career playing the outspoken cynic in the impeccable white suit.

Martin has gone beyond the classroom to present her Annie Oakley monologue to the Elks Club in Greenville, Ohio, Annie Oakley's hometown. The mayor of Greenville admitted that hearing Martin bring Annie Oakley to life gave him a lump in his throat.

"That's what acting's all about," Martin said, "capturing the spirit, the essence of someone."

Martin has plans to expand the monologue and perhaps take part in the annual Annie Oakley Days celebration next July in Greenville.

CHARACTER IS the stuff of which heroes are made, and in recent years, American women are especially thirsty for information about bona fide heroines who thrived in pursuits usually out of bounds to women.

Annie was blessed with perfect eyesight plus superior coordination and timing, but she didn't earn a place in the "Guinness Book of World Records" solely on the basis

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STEPHEN CANTRELL/staff photographer

Aiming at an acting career, Birmingham-based actress Pamela Ann Martin portrays Annie Oakley in a one-woman show. Martin's taken her enactment right to the sharpshooter's hometown of Greenville, Ohio, for the city's annual Annie Oakley Days.



STEPHEN CANTRELL/staff photographer

Sitting amid posters praising the skills of her great aunt Annie Oakley, Bess Edwards is working to keep Oakley's legend alive and accurate. According to Edwards, the sharpshooter was a far cry from the Broadway portrayal of her as a brassy bumpkin.

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