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*Actions Speak Louder Than Words*

Although she did not regard herself as one, Annie Oakley was an early feminist. It was not so much by her words, but more so by her actions that she demonstrated these ideals. This often quiet but charismatic woman had many different experiences throughout her life that contributed to her feminist way of thinking. Her childhood, although traumatic, was a major contribution to her beliefs. Her one and only husband further contributed to her feminist ideas. Together, these two elements created a strong foundation for Annie to be the strong confident female she was during her lifetime. Perhaps the most important part of the shaping of her role as a feminist was her career choice as a gunslinger. All these different aspects contributed to her demonstration as a strong female figure during this time period. Her strong female presence is significant because it was not accepted or held with high regard during this era. Her actions showed women of the time they did not have to sit back and do as they were told or expected to do by a man. It all started during her early childhood.

After General (“Mad”) Anthony Wayne built his fort at Greenville and defeated the Indians at the Battle of Fallen Timbers white settlers flocked in to plant corn and graze cows.

<sup>1</sup>Jacob Moses moved to Woodland, Darke County, Ohio in 1855, with his wife Susan and their three young daughters and his old Kentucky rifle.<sup>2</sup> He was a very athletic man and was known to

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<sup>1</sup> Kasper, Shirl. *Annie Oakley*. Oklahoma: University of Oklahoma Press, Norman Publishing Division, 1992, 3.

<sup>2</sup> Kasper, *Annie Oakley*, 3.

be very good with a gun. Like many of the other white settlers he was determined to live off the land. He cleared a plot just northwest of town. From the forest he built a cabin for the family.

On August 13, 1860 Susan gave birth to a baby girl.<sup>3</sup> She called the new baby Phoebe Ann. The baby was never called Phoebe, though, because her sisters always called her Annie, and it stuck.<sup>4</sup> As Annie grew up, she never liked to play with dolls like her sisters did. She would rather go out with her father and her younger brother John, to do things such as pick brush, build fences and tan cow hides. These were things the men were often tasked with, but Annie joined in on the chores and no one ever seemed to mind.

She was an admitted tomboy.<sup>5</sup> Although she admitted to it, a female performing what was thought to be male's duties during this time period was not a popular choice, so it was not until her later years of life that she did so. It was not widely accepted back then, as it is today. Nonetheless, it went unnoticed to Annie. Her father supported her choices and often encouraged them. Jacob taught his young daughter to make and set traps in the woods. After learning how to track and trap game, she wanted to proceed to the next step, shooting. She was very eager to learn and practice shooting, and her father's old Kentucky rifle sat hanging over their fireplace but forbidden to be touched by anyone.<sup>6</sup> Annie did not seem to be bothered by the fact that she was more interested in hunting and shooting far more than other girls around her were.

In fact, the strong attraction she had to guns would lead her down the path to take her first shot. Even though there is little documented facts known about her first shot, Annie recalled it years later, "I was eight years old when I took my first shot, and I still consider it one of the best

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<sup>3</sup> Kasper, *Annie Oakley*, 4.

<sup>4</sup> Kasper, *Annie Oakley*, 4.

<sup>5</sup> Kasper, *Annie Oakley*, 4.

<sup>6</sup> Kasper, *Annie Oakley*, 4.

shots I ever made, I saw a squirrel run down over the grass in front of the house, through the orchard and stop on a fence to get a hickory nut.” She ran into the house, climbed on a chair and slid the rifle down to the mantel. She lugged it outside, rested the barrel on the porch railing, and took aim. “It was a wonderful shot, going right through the head from side to side.”<sup>7</sup> Annie was an eight-year-old girl growing up in the late 1880’s, during a time when girls were not supposed to like shooting. The fact alone was enough to upset other women of the era who performed their duties they were expected to do such as taking care of the children, meals and the home. But what made it worse was not only did Annie enjoy shooting, she was actually very good at it, she could hit the target, and she was only eight.

Her father Jacob supported the interests Annie took a liking too. He continued to help her expand her knowledge of tracking and trapping. This all came crashing down on a snowy day in 1866. Jacob Moses set out to take his corn and wheat to the local mill. He was gone all day and a blizzard had set in. It was past midnight and the weather was still bad when the family heard a wagon pull up to the cabin. Annie’s mother threw open the door and the family saw her father, sitting on the wagon seat, reins around his neck and wrists. His hands were frozen, and he could not speak. The doctor came but there was not much he could do. That March Jacob passed away.<sup>8</sup>

Annie had just lost her biggest supporter in the world. The family had lost their head of the household. Susan, Annie’s mother, tried to fill the role but just could not do it. The youngest sister of the family, Hulda, was the first to be placed in a different home in an attempt for the family to regain some financial ground. It did not work, so next came Annie. Her mother sent her

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<sup>7</sup> Kasper, *Annie Oakley*, 4.

<sup>8</sup> Kasper, *Annie Oakley*, 5.

off to the county poor house. This was a common practice during this time, if the farm families were too poor, they would send their children to the family poor house to help offset expenses.<sup>9</sup> Not long after entering the poor house a local farmer came in looking for a girl to serve as a companion to his wife and new baby. Annie fit the bill and was moved to the man's house. It was there that she was required to do all the family's chores and was subjected to physical abuse. She later recounted, "Mother wrote for me to come home, but they would not let me go. I was held prisoner."<sup>10</sup> The events of being traumatized by her father's death, being shipped off away from home, being overworked, then abused all contributed to Annie's view of the world and her perception of her future.

She was already a strong independent girl growing up. She had the support of her family to foster that idea and hold onto it. Even though she lost her father, who immensely supported her, she still held on to those ideals instilled in her at a very young age, as she grew up, no matter how rough it got. Kasper summed this up well by stating, "Though she never denied her early struggles, she was too proud – or perhaps too hurt – ever to admit that her mother sent her away from home to save money."<sup>11</sup> Although she was not aware of what she was doing, Annie was growing into someone that would greatly influence females of this era. Her childhood and her family began to mold this girl into a woman that would show how strong females could be.

Annie continued to grow into a young woman. She faced more tragedy as she was faced with one of her sister's deaths. She eventually grew tired of living with the couple that overworked and abused her, to her dying day she would never speak their names, and she

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<sup>9</sup> Kasper, *Annie Oakley*, 6.

<sup>10</sup> Kasper, *Annie Oakley*, 6.

<sup>11</sup> Kasper, *Annie Oakley*, 5.

decided to run away. It was 1872 and she ran back to the county poor house. There was a new superintendent that had taken over the facility, and he took young Annie in. She lived with the superintendent, his wife, and their children.

Samuel Crawford Edington and his family treated Annie like one of their own. As she grew older, they paid her to be a seamstress for the poor house. After proving to be responsible with that job he gave her a promotion to be put in charge of the facility's dairy. Annie began to save her money.<sup>12</sup> She continued to work hard and build up her funds. At the age of fifteen she decided to return to her mother. Susan had remarried and rebuilt a house in a town called North Star.<sup>13</sup>

When she moved back with her mother, she was only fifteen. At this time Annie decided she was done being poor and had big plans for her future. On her way back home, she stopped at the local market she had been too many times while she lived with the Edingtons. It was the Katzenberger brothers' grocery store. Because the young girl had been to the store many times before she knew that local hunters and trappers could trade their wild game there for merchandise such as wheat, flour and ammunition. The brothers had purchased game from Annie before.

So, determined to not be poor anymore, Annie recognized an opportunity to purpose a new business deal to G. Anthony and Charles Katzenberger. She told the brothers' she was going back home and planned to trap and hunt game in the North County woods. She wanted the Katzenbergers to buy the small game she shipped to town. When they agreed her trade was launched. This was the destined path Annie would follow for the rest of her life, earning a living

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<sup>12</sup> Kasper, *Annie Oakley*, 6-7.

<sup>13</sup> Kasper, *Annie Oakley*, 7.

with a gun.<sup>14</sup> As the teenager continued her market hunting job, she was able to earn and save up two hundred dollars. This was a significant amount because she used that money to pay off her mother's mortgage.<sup>15</sup> During a time when women were supposed to take care of things around the house this young woman thought up a business plan and proposed it without any help from a male. She then proceeded to compete in a market full of men earning a significant amount of money. As a teenager Annie Oakley undoubtedly carried the strong foundation that was laid during her childhood into her adult years as a strong, proud, self sufficient woman.

That confidence and pride only grew as Annie entered many shooting contests and continued to win them. The Sells Brothers' Circus was in Cincinnati, Ohio during the spring of 1881. A young man named Frank Butler had joined the circus after becoming a divorced man. He was considered a sharp shooter and did many gunslinger acts as part of his performance. Frank was staying in a local hotel where many farmers from the smaller surrounding cities would stay. There were a few farmers who had asked him if he was interested in making some money by entering a shooting contest. They told him they had the perfect opponent for him. Frank, needing the money, and thinking he was one of the best shooters in the world, naturally agreed.

Frank arrived in the small town of North Star confidently, until he saw a small five-foot girl walk out, as his opponent. After the competition Frank had said, "I was a beaten man the moment she appeared for I was taken off guard. Never were the birds so hard for two shooters as they flew from us, but never did a person make more impossible shots than did that little girl. She killed 23 and I killed 21. It was her first big match – my first defeat."<sup>16</sup> Afterwards he

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<sup>14</sup> Kasper, *Annie Oakley*, 7.

<sup>15</sup> Kasper, *Annie Oakley*, 9.

<sup>16</sup> Kasper, *Annie Oakley*, 17.

invited Annie to the circus to see his performance. The circus act of a gunslinger was common, but a female usually provided aid to the man's act. Frank had no female in his act, but he did have his poodle, George and another man to assist him. Later that evening Annie went to see Frank's performance and while she was waiting, she had made friends with the poodle. It is said that during Frank Butler's act he shot an apple off his poodle's head and George picked a piece of it up and laid it at Annie's feet, and that is where the romance began between the two.<sup>17</sup> The two decided to wed a short time later when Annie was around the age of twenty-two.

Annie managed to find a man that was willing to accept her as the strong, proud, confident woman she was. Frank Butler only continued to support the ideas Annie held onto pertaining to woman in that society. Like her father, Jacob, her husband Frank would also become one her biggest supporters in their future. Her opportunity came when Frank's male assistant fell ill. Annie accompanied Frank on stage that night as his assistant. That night, Frank tried as hard as he could to hit the target from his difficult shot, multiple times, but he could not hit it. One of the audience members yelled to let the girl shoot. Frank informed the audience it was a tricky shot and Annie had not had a chance to practice it. In the end he decided to let her attempt it. She was able to hit the target on her second try. Later discussing this event Frank said, "The crowd went into an uproar, and when I attempted to resume my act I was howled down, and Annie Oakley continued."<sup>18</sup>

Not caring if he had been beaten essentially twice by the young girl Frank was able to recognize how the crowd responded to Annie's accuracy with a gun. Frank was able to put aside his pride and take the back seat. He remained proud to have Annie as his wife throughout the rest

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<sup>17</sup> Kasper, *Annie Oakley*, 17.

<sup>18</sup> Kasper, *Annie Oakley*, 22.

of their lives together. When asked about this event Frank had no trouble admitting he had been beaten, he had just simply said, “She outclassed me.”<sup>19</sup> Being that Frank Butler knew the business of performing he would guide Annie in practicing the fancy shots that would draw a crowd. The stunning element is that he never took credit for any of it. In fact, he had said “I didn’t teach her to shoot, because she could have taught me even then, although I was supposed to be a crack shot myself in those days, I simply got her a position and she did the rest.”<sup>20</sup>

It was that night her sharpshooting career had begun, and Annie remained in a class of her own. Sharpshooting acts were a common form of entertainment, but Annie Oakley’s was very different. Kasper summed this up by stating, “She didn’t brag boldly like Lillian Smith or wear sexy tights like Tillie Russell. Annie Oakley dressed simply in a dark dress with a starched white collar and pretty cuffs at the sleeve. She stood only five feet tall and weighed about 110 pounds.”<sup>21</sup> The author of this biography also discussed what made her so popular, “She looked innocent and above reproach, a sweet little girl – yet a sharpshooter of matchless ability. That paradox was her appeal. She had a pleasant, wide smile, and thick, dark hair cut close around her face and worn long in back, falling over her shoulders. There was magnetism in the way she smiled, curtsied in the footlights and did that funny little kick as she ran into the wings.”<sup>22</sup>

Frank continued to be Annie’s manager and book shows across the country. After a few successful acts under her belt now, Phoebe Moses took her stage name as Annie Oakley in 1882.<sup>23</sup> There is little documentation as to why she took that name and she never discussed the

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<sup>19</sup> Kasper, *Annie Oakley*, 22.

<sup>20</sup> Kasper, *Annie Oakley*, 23-24.

<sup>21</sup> Kasper, *Annie Oakley*, 22.

<sup>22</sup> Kasper, *Annie Oakley*, 22.

<sup>23</sup> Kasper, *Annie Oakley*, 23.

matter. One theory brought up by historians is that she took Oakley from the Cincinnati neighborhood of Oakley. The more popular theory is that she did not like her last name, Moses. Annie was known to often insist that the family name was not Moses, but Mozee, and she was often dubbed as being stubborn because of that.<sup>24</sup> That season was a very wet one, so bookings became slow, and the couple became stressed about their financial situation. Together they decided to join the Sells Brothers' Circus in order to gain guaranteed work under a contract. But, before they started their contract they had one last job on their own they had wanted to fulfill. It was a performance at the Olympic Theatre in St. Paul Minnesota. This last booking Frank had made would make Annie Oakley famous.

The famous prisoner of war in Dakota Territory was in St. Paul. Sitting Bull was treated like a celebrity when he entered the town. He was taken on special tours of different facilities throughout town. On Wednesday March 19, 1881 Sitting Bull was asked to attend the show that night as a special guest, sitting in the best seats in the house. He agreed. This is where he saw Annie's last performance as an uncontracted act, booked by her husband. During this act, Annie was able to put out a candle, knock corks from bottles, and cigarettes out of Frank's mouth, all with the ammunition that left her gun. After the performance Annie retired to her hotel room for the night. Sitting Bull was fascinated with the small female that had been able to shoot with such precision. Recalling the encounter Annie had said, "His messengers kept coming down to my hotel to enquire if I could come and see him. I had other things to do and I could not spare the time."<sup>25</sup> The other things she was referring to was another shooting match booked for the following day and she did not want to have to forfeit. Her and Frank were trying to earn money

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<sup>24</sup> Kasper, *Annie Oakley*, 23.

<sup>25</sup> Kasper, *Annie Oakley*, 27.

any way they could and if she did not show up to the shooting match, she would lose her entry fee. Money was in the forefront of the couple's minds. After many attempts of trying to get Annie's attention Sitting Bull decided to send sixty-five dollars in hopes of getting a photo of Annie. This caught her attention and she had said, "This amused me, so I sent him back his money and a photograph, with my love, and a message to say I would call the following morning. I did so, and the old man was so pleased with me, he insisted upon adopting me, and I was then and there christened 'Watanya Cicilla,' or 'Little Sharp Shooter.'"<sup>26</sup>

Annie and Sitting Bull had went their separate ways after this encounter. The wet season continued and the Sells Brothers Circus had to close for awhile due to the weather. Worried about money again, Frank began looking for work and came across the Buffalo Bill Wild West Park advertisement. Annie and Frank made their way to the act and asked Buffalo Bill for an act but he informed them he had plenty of sharpshooters and did not need them. The weather continued to be horrible and as the Buffalo Bill show was being transported down the river on a steamship, it collided with another ship and sank. All the equipment was lost and many of the acts became discouraged and quit. Buffalo Bill had the same perception of Annie many in that society did. She recalled his apprehensions, "At first, Colonel Cody entertained a grave doubt as to whether I should be able to withstand the recoil from a shot gun."<sup>27</sup> Annie said Cody's fears did not faze her, she was always confident and proud. After a brief trial period, Annie Oakley became part of the Buffalo Bill Wild West show, which she is most known for.

Overall, Annie's strong foundation fostered by her father during her early childhood allowed her to carry on as a strong female during the more difficult times she had to encounter as

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<sup>26</sup> Kasper, *Annie Oakley*, 27.

<sup>27</sup> Kasper, *Annie Oakley*, 32.

a girl. Frank Butler proved to continue fostering the strong foundation already laid, as he supported his wife, even though she took actions that any other females of the time rarely took. He continued to build her up and was very proud to call her his wife. Holding such confidence, Annie Oakley was able to become a legend by capturing audiences everywhere. Her childhood, her husband, and her career built her up as a strong, confident, proud woman that was able to hold her own, with or without having a male companion. Although she was known to disregard the idea of her contribution to changing the female role during that era, her actions spoke a lot louder than her words.

### Bibliography

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