

# This Day in History... August 13, 1860

## Birth of Annie Oakley

Annie Oakley was born Phoebe Ann Mosey on August 13, 1860, in Darke County, Ohio. She was one of the most talented sharpshooters of her day and solidified the image of the American cowgirl.

The sixth of nine children, Annie learned to trap animals by the time she was seven and was shooting and hunting by age eight. She showed remarkable skill with guns and would often shoot and sell wild game to local restaurants to help support her impoverished family. She helped pay off the mortgage on their home by the time she was 15.

In 1875 (or 1881), traveling marksman Frank Butler came to town and issued a challenge to local shooters. He bet \$100 that he could beat any local shooter. One of the hotel owners convinced Annie to participate. As he recalled, "The last opponent Butler expected was a five-foot-tall 15-year-old named Annie." To the cheers of the amazed crowd, she defeated Butler on the last shot, 25 to 24. The pair were married a year later.



From the 1994 *Legends of the West* sheet



*Annie earned more than every performer except Buffalo Bill. Much of her earnings went to family and charities for orphans.*

The couple lived in Cincinnati and toured with vaudeville shows and circuses. It was at this time that Annie adopted her stage name. It's believed she chose Oakley as that was the neighborhood they lived in. Other accounts claim Oakley may have been the name of the man who paid her train fare when she was a child.

In 1885, Oakley joined *Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show*. So enthusiastic was the response to her daring feats, she was given top billing as "Miss Annie Oakley – the Peerless Lady Wingshot," while her husband served as her assistant. As part of her act, she would shoot a dime held in Butler's hand, use a mirror to shoot at a target behind her, shoot a playing card thrown in the air 90 feet away from her, and fire shots while riding a bicycle. The group traveled to Europe, where Annie met Queen Victoria and shot a cigarette out of Kaiser Wilhelm's hand during a show in Berlin.

Annie proposed that women be allowed to fight with the US armed forces. In April 1898, she sent a letter to President William McKinley, "offering the government the services of a company of 50 'lady sharpshooters' who would provide their own arms and ammunition should the US go to war with Spain." The Spanish-American War broke out less than three weeks later, but her offer wasn't accepted. Over the course of her life, she claimed to have taught more than 15,000 women how to use a gun. She believed it was important for their physical and mental well-being and safety, and believed that women should "know how to handle guns, as naturally as they know how to handle babies."

Annie was badly injured in a train accident in 1901. She was temporarily paralyzed and needed five operations, but managed to recover. She left Buffalo Bill's show the following year to join the stage play, *The Western Girl*, which was written for her.



Fellow performer *Sitting Bull* nicknamed Annie Watanya Cicilla (Little Sure Shot)



*Annie filmed a 21-second shooting exhibition for Thomas Edison in 1894. It was one of the earliest Kinetoscopes.*

including the National

In 1916, Annie and Butler moved to Pinehurst, North Carolina. They joined the staff of the Carolina Hotel and the Pinehurst Gun Club. Annie gave shooting lessons and exhibitions twice a week, teaching some 125,000 men and women over the course of four years. During one of these demonstrations, on March 5, 1922, Annie hit 98 out of 100 clay targets from 16 yards away. (Some sources say she hit all 100.) This broke all existing records, showing that at age 62, she was still one of the best shooters in the world.

Many believed Oakley was going to stage a comeback in 1922, but that summer she and her husband were in a serious car accident. After two years, Oakley was able to perform again – and even set new records – but her health began to decline in 1925, and she died on November 3, 1926.

The popular Broadway musical *Annie Get Your Gun* was loosely based on Annie's life. Although the musical portrays her as an outspoken tomboy, she was actually a quiet person who practiced needlepoint in her spare time. She's been inducted into several halls of fame, including the National Cowgirl Museum, National Women's, Ohio Women's, and New Jersey Hall of Fame.

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