

Feature



Annie Oakley: Costuming a Legend of the American West *Philip Gust*

A young woman from Ohio who taught herself to shoot became an embodiment of the vanishing American West.

By the end of the 19th Century, the American West was vanishing, but that didn't mean it was forgotten. Americans, and people from all over the world, first heard of the glamor and spectacle of the Wild West through paintings, sculptures, literature, and lectures that were designed to entice settlers to visit and help populate the vast U.S. territories west of the Mississippi.

The West began to vanish with the completion of the transcontinental railroad and white settlement of Native American lands, but nostalgia for it only grew. Although most could afford neither the time nor the money to make the journey, people still longed to experience the excitement first-hand before it disappeared entirely.

In 1883, real-life Western legend William Cody saw the opportunity and

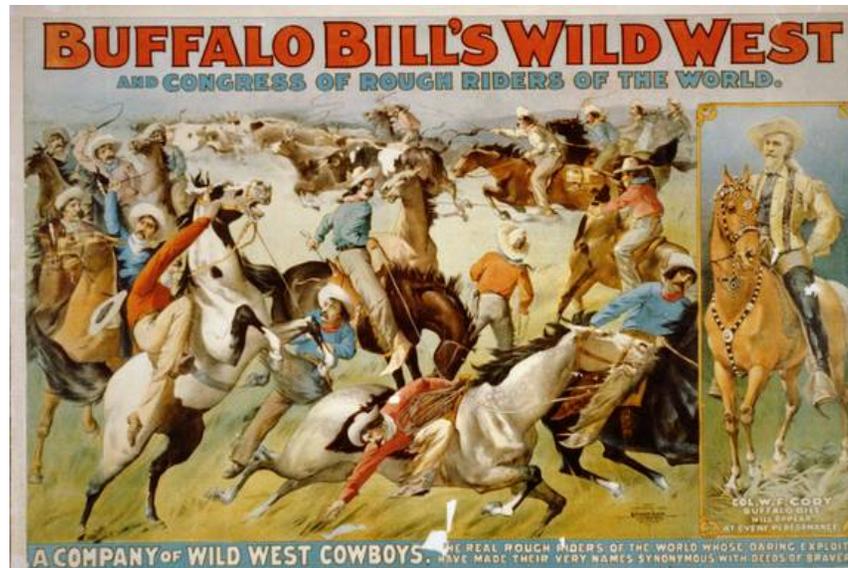
organized a company of performers to bring the experience to people where they lived. By that time, Cody had earned his nickname, "Buffalo Bill" as a scout and hunter in western campaigns by the Army following the U.S. Civil War. His exploits were glamorized in books like the 1869 Ned Buntline novel *Buffalo Bill, the King of Border Men* and he even performed on stage in plays like *The Scouts of the Prairie*.

With his black eyes, flowing hair, and impressive mustache, one newspaper declared, "Everyone is of the opinion that he is altogether the handsomest man they have ever seen." Cody continued to perform for

the next decade, interrupted only a return summons to serve as a scout.

Cody was also a brilliant showman. Advertisements billed his "Wild West" show as "A Visit to the West in Three Hours." As early as 1876, Native Americans had been put on display for millions of visitors at the Centennial Exhibition in Philadelphia, but Cody's show brought together cowboys and Indians who actually roamed parade grounds of cities they visited. The show featured buffalos and horses, sharpshooting, reenactments of Pony Express rides, Indian attacks on an authentic "Deadwood stagecoach," and even a recreation of Custer's Last Stand with Native Americans who had actually participated in it.

The show was seen by presidents and monarchs, as well as by millions of Americans and Europeans, who regarded it as an authentic depiction of what the West was really like. Granted, some inaccuracies were deliberate, but others just reflected the passage of time. During its 30-year run, the "Wild West" went from a semi-authentic depiction of the experiences Cody and some of his performers had known, conveniently presented for a modern public, to a historical recreation of a vanishing past.



Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show and Congress of Rough Riders of the World - Circus poster showing cowboys rounding up cattle and portrait of Col. W.F. Cody on horseback. 1899. Source: [Wikipedia](#).

In the era depicted by the show, shooting well was an important skill for a man, and shooting contests were a favorite spectator sport. Sharpshooters traveled the country, betting on their ability to perform feats of marksmanship and challenging all comers. They were also popular acts in variety shows of the day. Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show included several sharpshooters who thrilled the crowds with their skills.



Annie Oakley with her father's rifle. c. 1884, by J. Wood, NY. Source: Annie Oakley Foundation.

The show's most famous sharpshooter wasn't one of the male veterans of the day, but a 24 year old Ohio woman named Phoebe Ann "Annie" Mosey, who had taught herself to shoot at age 13 using her late father's shotgun to help feed her impoverished Quaker family. By age 15, she had earned enough as a market shooter to pay off her mother's mortgage, and had gained a reputation as one of the best shots in Darke county, Ohio.



That same year, 1875, Cincinnati hotel keeper Jack Frost arranged a shooting match at a local park between Annie and a traveling sharpshooter named Frank Butler. After both hit 24 birds in a row, Frank finally missed. "I stopped for an instant," Annie remembered. "I knew I would win." And she did.

Frank lost not only the match to her, but also his heart. To Annie, who lived her life in the Ohio woods, Frank seemed like a man of the world, and she thought that she was lucky to find him; he knew that he was lucky, too. They married in August 1876 when she was 16.

Annie traveled the variety circuit for six years with Frank and his stage partner, who had a shooting act. In May 1882, when his partner fell ill, Annie stepped in as Frank's assistant. One night when Frank kept missing, someone in the audience called out to "Let the girl shoot!" She hit the target every time, and was an immediate hit. She adopted the stage name "Annie Oakley" after a park in Cincinnati where they first met, and the act became "Butler and Oakley."

Annie Oakley created this shooting costume of an embroidered, pleated, and fringed skirt, long-sleeve blouse with embroidered and fringed collar, gaiters, and low black shoes. c. 1888. Source: [Wikimedia](#).



The variety circuit where they performed was rife with coarseness and semi-nudity, so Annie determined to set herself apart in both manner and dress. Self-presentation was important to her, and she decided that her costumes would become her trademark.

Annie's costumes covered her entire body, and were simple but not plain. Her blouses were generally loose and long-sleeved. She wore calf-length A-line or pleated skirts. When the weather was not too hot, her costume was of fine broadcloth, resembling buckskin (she never wore buckskin). In hot weather they were made of wash material, usually blue or light brown. She stitched ribbon trim along hems and embroidered flowers on her skirts and collars. She pinned a six-pointed star to her large Stetson felt hat.

She wore pearl-button [gaiters](#) that she cut and fit herself, because she found it was

impossible to have them made to suit her. They extended from her knees to the tops of her low, black shoes. Every seam of her costumes had to be finished just right, and everything had to match perfectly.

Annie's costumes enabled her to move in them easily, yet they made her look respectable and, at just five feet tall and one hundred pounds, even childlike. She knew that success depended on a delicate line between a talent for shooting and Victorian norms that valued ladylike behavior.

In early 1885, Annie and Frank approached Cody about joining his Wild West show. At first, Cody turned them down because he already had a sharpshooter. Shortly afterwards, however, that act left his show, and Annie and Frank approached Cody again. This time he agreed after seeing her shooting skills.

This was a significant turning point in Annie Oakley's life and in her relationship with Frank Butler. Until this time either Butler received top billing or they had shared the limelight. However, Frank soon realized that Annie was the star, and when they joined the Wild West show, he happily accepted became her manager and assistant.

When Annie first joined the Wild West Show in April 1885, Cody placed her low on the bill. Being a champion sharpshooter himself, he knew the physical toll it took, and wasn't sure that Annie had the physical stamina to perform day after day. She proved him wrong in short order.

When she entered the arena, she didn't just walk: she playfully skipped in, blew kisses, bowed, and waved to the crowd. With her small frame, flowing hair, and girlish enthusiasm, she soon became an audience favorite. At thirty paces she could split a playing card held edge-on, shoot out a

candle flame, hit playing cards and coins tossed into the air, and shoot cigarettes from her husband's lips. She often gave out shot playing cards and coins as souvenirs. She could shoot either right or left-handed, and could even shoot backwards using a mirror to aim. (below)



Buffalo Bill's Wild West show poster (c. late 1880s) shows Annie Oakley wearing two types of attire. The foreground costume is somewhat "dressy" (i.e. corseted), while in the background she wears loser costume for full athletic exertion. Source: [Wikimedia](#).



Annie Oakley shooting a playing card over her shoulder using a hand mirror. Source: Buffalo Bill Historical Museum.

Annie also used glass balls filled with feathers and colored sawdust in her act. The balls, popularized by sharpshooter Ira Paine (below), produced an explosion of color when she threw one into the air and shot them. Then she threw two and shot both of them; then four, and then six, hitting them all before any of them reached the ground. Although her performances were generally short, they generated great excitement.

Once Annie's act started getting rave reviews, Cody moved her up the bill, right after the opening procession and began promoting her performances. That season, over 150,000 people in 40 cities across America saw something entirely new – a woman who could shoot as well as any man, while conveying a youthful innocence. The image of American womanhood she presented in dress



Annie Oakley used shotguns to explode feather-filled glass balls. Source Annie Oakley Center Foundation.

and demeanor was provocative, but one that the public, and especially women, felt comfortable with.



For several months in 1885, the Lakota leader Sitting Bull, the victor over George Custer at the 1876 Battle of Little Big Horn, toured with Annie in Buffalo Bill's show. Anne first met him in St. Paul, Minnesota in 1884 when she and Frank were still touring. Sitting Bull had been impressed with Annie's shooting, her modest appearance and her self-assured manner. They became fast friends. The old warrior eventually "adopted" Annie, and christened his new daughter "Watanya Cecilia" – Lakota for "Little Sure Shot."



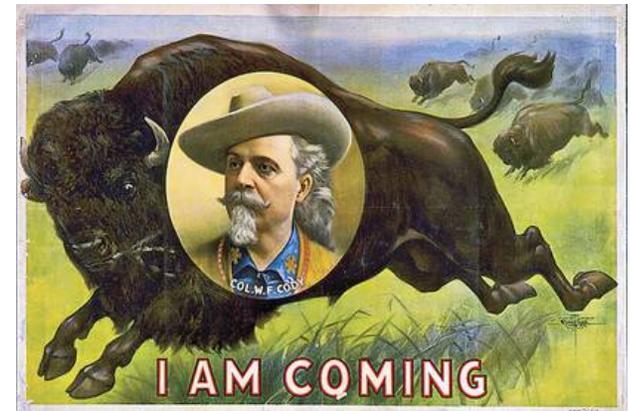
Sitting Bull and Annie Oakley. 1885. Source: Annie Oakley Center Foundation.

When Buffalo Bill's Wild West show opened in Madison Square Garden in the fall of 1886, "Little Sure Shot" became the darling of Manhattan. She performed before 6,000 people, many in evening dress. The half-starved little girl from Ohio had become an icon of the American West.

In 1893, the Columbian Exposition opened in Chicago, showing off the latest technological marvels. Buffalo Bill was not invited, so he set up in an adjacent lot. His old time Wild West show drew larger crowds than the Exposition by showcasing those values that people feared were being lost. Oakley and Cody were living symbols of the Wild West – a place that was fast disappearing.



Above: Ad for Ira Paine's feather-filled glass balls from *Forrest and Stream & Rod and Gun*, December 13, 1877. Top: surviving example of Paine feather-filled glass ball. Source: Glass Target Balls [website](http://www.glass-target-balls.com).



Show poster announcing the show's Chicago arrival in 1893, said it all. Source: Library of Congress.



Stills from Thomas Edison film of Annie Oakley, November, 1884. View Library of Congress video on [YouTube](#).

The Exposition showcased Thomas Edison's electric lighting, as well as other inventions including his kinetoscope, an early device for viewing movies. Cody and Edison became friends after Edison personally built for the Wild West show what in the 1890s was the world's largest electrical power plant. Edison became fascinated with the potential for making and exhibiting movies to the general public. He had already filmed some of the Wild West show in September 1894. That November, he invited Annie and Frank to his New Jersey "Black Maria" studio to capture parts of her performance that would have been too difficult outdoors. Edison's camera was able capture over forty seconds. (above)

For the rest of the 1890s, Annie Oakley and Buffalo Bill were as popular as ever. All over the country, excited crowds welcomed their arrival. However, by the early 1900s, both the Wild West show and Annie Oakley had become an artifact of the past. Her fame was founded on shooting, a skill that had been necessary in the winning of the West, but was now no longer so necessary, or even very salable. The whole medium that had made her a star had lost its audience to the movies.

Annie and Frank left Buffalo Bill's Wild West Shows in 1901 after 16 years, and finally retired in 1913 to a new home in Maryland. Annie focused her energies on issues of women's equality, and advocating that women learn to handle firearms, for both exercise and self-defense. She advised women to carry pistols in their parasols; the purse was too awkward. During World War I, she offered to train women sharpshooters

for the war, but her offer was again refused as it had been during the Spanish-American war several decades earlier.

A charity event one afternoon in 1922 drew thousands to a Long Island race track. The main attraction was a small woman with white hair. She skipped into the arena as she had done in years past, adjusted her spectacles, and signaled her husband of 46 years to begin. "Miss Annie Oakley was the hit of the afternoon," wrote *The New York Herald*. "She said she felt a little out of practice, but old timers said that during the 16 years she was with Buffalo Bill she never gave a more entertaining exhibition." (*The New York Herald*, July 4, 1922)



Annie Oakley in street clothes (right) teaching other woman how to shoot, c.1920. She regularly gave lessons to women only. Source: Buffalo Bill Center of the West, Cody, Wyoming, MS6 William F. Cody Collection. P.69.1177

It would be one of her last. On November 3, 1926, Annie Oakley died at home in her sleep at age 66. Frank died of grief three weeks later. They were married for just over fifty years.



Annie Oakley at 1922 charity event with gun given to her by Buffalo Bill Cody. Source: [Library of Congress](#).

There was probably never a woman in the history of the United States who was better equipped to take up the challenge of creating a legend of the Western Woman, and then embodying that legend with her skills, her costumes, and a lady-like demeanor that gained her such acceptance. It was a remarkable achievement.

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Philip Gust enjoys sci-fi and fantasy costuming, and has particular interests in props, special effects, and prosthetic makeup. He also costumes in historical periods, including Regency, Victorian, and early 20th C.

Costuming Annie Oakley

Annie Oakley's costumes provide a wide range of opportunities for historical costumers at all ages and experience. Although there are no extant costumes from her heyday, there is a rich pool of photographs available. Most are studio portraits, made when the Buffalo Bill's Wild West show was on tour, showing costumes she actually wore in shows.

The photographs are monochrome images, so costumers will need to guess at colors. Her favorite colors were blue and light brown, so it's possible to make educated guesses in many cases.

Beginning historical costumers can use a combination of commercial patterns for an interpretation of her trademark costume style, and do basic research to identify and choose fabrics that would have been available at the time.

Intermediate historical costumers will want to go further by reproducing a specific costume based on multiple photographs of the same one, and adding embellishments like the embroidery she added to her costumes.

Expert historical costumers can use actual historically accurate patterns from the time, and period sewing techniques.

The most important thing, regardless of experience, is to ensure, as she did, that every seam is finished just right and everything matches perfectly.