



Women cannot conveniently become hunters or anglers, nor can they without some eccentricity of conduct follow birds and quadrupeds into the woods. —Wilson Flagg

Women & Hunting in the West

by Mary Zeiss Stange

When essayist Wilson Flagg penned the words of the epigraph in an 1871 issue of the *Atlantic Monthly*, he was surely reflecting conventional opinion about women's appropriate place in the outdoors (he exhorted women who felt impelled to venture beyond the sitting room to take up botany rather than blood sports).¹ He was also, if unwittingly, highlighting the constraints within which outdoorswomen of his time pursued their sport. Throughout much of Euramerican history, it indeed has not been "convenient" for women to take up activities so deeply male identified as hunting. And, given the patriarchal social structures that shaped American society, those women who did venture afield, whether with the men in their lives or with other women, were more often than not judged by most of their peers to be displaying "eccentricity of conduct."

In the second half of the nineteenth century, women established themselves as hunters throughout the American West. Here Mrs. Henry Houghton and Mrs. Jerome Marble of Worcester, Massachusetts, pose with hunting dogs and game next to a Northern Pacific Railroad car in Dakota Territory in 1876.

Yet even as Flagg was writing, frontier women were establishing themselves as hunters throughout the American West, and the next several decades would see growing numbers of middle- and upper-class easterners drawn westward to share some of the adventure of their pioneering sisters. That Flagg, and successive generations of social commentators, remained largely oblivious to this trend is not surprising. Well into the twentieth century, conventional wisdom held that women (good women, anyway) were constitutionally unsuited for the rough-and-tumble side of life so treasured by men. As one western writer of the 1930s put it: "It is not in women that the pioneer spirit stirs; the horizon does not beckon them; hills and rivers are to them a barrier, not an invitation to explore. It was the men only who pressed on across the great plains; the women had little more to say than the horses who drew the wagons in which they sat."²

This, of course, was nonsense. Even before archival work by feminist historians gave the lie to the supposed scarcity of historical testimony in women's own words, historians of hunting had long, and logically, assumed that frontier women must have been adept at both hunting and shooting. They needed to be able to fend for themselves when the men were either away from home or lost to sickness or accident, as in the case



Myra Wright Stevens, photographer, MHS Photograph Archives, Helena

Fully armed, this unidentified huntress poses with her dog on the "Lo Lo Fork" in southwestern Montana in the 1890s.

of little Phoebe Ann Mosey, who started hunting before the age of ten to help feed her family, and later, through market hunting, to support them financially. And, like Phoebe Mosey, who grew up to be the shooting superstar Annie Oakley, untold numbers of these women both developed a life-long affinity for guns and hunting and drew an explicit connection between arms use and their personal safety and freedom.³

These women's stories have only in recent years begun to be reconstructed. The more we learn about the role hunting, and gun use more broadly considered, played in the lives of western women, the clearer it appears that there was a more than incidental connection between these "eccentricities of conduct" and women's political and social empowerment. Despite the overt pressure to conform to the "cult of true womanhood," western outdoorswomen were, sometimes unintentionally but often quite explicitly, expanding the boundaries of what was socially and culturally possible for women.⁴ Public figures such as Oakley—who, although Buffalo Bill Cody dubbed her the "Maid of the Western Plains," never lived farther west than her Ohio birthplace—paved the way for broader popular acceptance of these social changes. But the real story of women's hunting in relation to their push for social equality was simultaneously less spectacular and more variegated than "Little Sure Shot's" illustrious career suggests.

Far more obviously in the United States than elsewhere in the world, women's participation in the shooting sports has long been regarded, if not necessarily welcomed, as an assertion of their equality with men. Even as the "first wave" of American feminists pressed for women's suffrage at the national level in the years following the Civil War, growing numbers of western women—some by choice, others out



F. Jay Haynes, photographer, Haynes Fnd. Coll., MHS Photograph Archives, Helena

Mrs. J. L. Grandin and Miss Hague display their quarry on the Grandin farm in Dakota Territory in 1879.

Myrta and Albert Stevens (right, 1890s) return to their Blackfoot summer camp in western Montana carrying the birds they shot.



Myrta Wright Stevens, photographer; MHS Photograph Archives, Helena

of necessity—were joining their husbands and brothers in the hunting field. Some agreed with the suffragists' politics, others did not, among them Oakley herself. But all were clearly buoyed by the possibility of pursuing masculine pursuits.

For homesteading women, while hunting might have started out as a way of subsisting in hard times, it could also hold recreational value. In her *Letters of a Woman Homesteader* (1914), Wyoming rancher Elinore Pruitt Stewart (1878–1933) recounted her “charming adventure” of stealing away for an impromptu hunting excursion with her toddler daughter when the men had gone off for a roundup and all the other women to gather wild fruits. She subsequently devoted an entire volume of letters to her experience of an elk hunt.⁵

Around the same time Stewart's letters were seeing their original publication in the *Atlantic Monthly*, Alberta Claire, “The Girl from Wyoming,” was writing about her hunting and other outdoor exploits in *Outdoor Life*. And whereas Stewart kept mum on the subject of politics, Claire drew a direct and explicit connection between the social liberation of being able to ride, rope, and shoot as well as



MHS Photograph Archives, Helena

Bertie Lord photographed his wife Finetta with a bear that she killed near their home on Warm Springs Creek in Montana's Bitterroot Valley circa 1900.

1. Quoted in Daniel Justin Herman, *Hunting and the American Imagination* (Washington, D.C., 2001), 229.

2. Quoted in H. Elaine Lindgren, *Land in Her Own Name: Women as Homesteaders in North Dakota* (Norman, 1996), xii.

3. Excellent examples drawn from diaries and memoirs are collected by Lindgren, *Land in Her Own Name*. See pages 11, 109, 140, 149, 153, 163, 172, 173, 180, and 182 for illustrations of the ways in which gun use—both for hunting and self-protection—was a normal part of homesteading women's lives. As for Oakley, she was throughout her adult life both an avid hunter and a tireless advocate of women's armed self-defense. See especially Glenda Riley, *The Life and Legacy of Annie Oakley* (Norman, 2000).

4. On this idea in the homesteading context, see Lindgren, *Land in Her Own Name*, 218.

5. See Elinore Pruitt Stewart, *Letters of a Woman Homesteader* (1914; repr., Boston, 1988), chap. 4; and Elinore Pruitt Stewart, *Letters on an Elk Hunt by a Woman Homesteader* (1915; repr., Lincoln, 1979), especially chap. 7 and 8.

George Eastman House, Rochester, New York



“The Girl from Wyoming,” Alberta Claire, who frequently wrote of her hunting and outdoors exploits, prized her right to vote. Claire drew a direct connection between the social liberation of being able to ride, rope, and shoot and women’s political equality. She is pictured above circa 1910 receiving congratulations following her “10,000 mile ride across the continent.”

any other “cowpuncher” and women’s political equality. Chiding another “Outdoor Life Girl” for admitting she had never voted in her home state of Washington, Claire (who was born in England and whose ship’s captain father eventually settled in Wyoming) proclaimed: “How that will delight the hearts of Englishmen and antis! Yes, indeed, I am proud of the fact that I was able to cast my vote in favor of that splendid specimen of manhood at present inhabiting the White House at Washington, for we women of Wyoming inherit suffrage, it was granted in 1868.”⁶

Between Wyoming’s entry into the Union in 1890 as the first state granting women suffrage and 1916, when Claire was writing, ten states—all of them in the West—had given women the vote. By contrast, the only eastern state to give women full voting rights prior to the ratification of the Nineteenth Amendment in 1920 was New York, in 1917.⁷

While it would be facile to claim that women literally hunted and shot their way into the voting booth, there

nonetheless appears to have been a logical, if not precisely causal, connection between bullets and ballots for them. “Once women became hunters,” historian Daniel Justin Herman observed, “suffrage was not far behind. If women were strong enough to hunt, surely they were strong enough to enter politics and business. Among women the right to hunt could be as much a metaphor for the right to citizenship as it was among men.”⁸

Like their eastern sisters who had spearheaded the abolitionist movement and gone on to agitate for suffrage, there were women in the West who perceived a direct connection between fundamental human rights and women’s liberation. Hunting played a crucial role in this perception.

The career of Martha Maxwell (1831–1881), the “Colorado Huntress,” is a case in point. Maxwell was educated at Oberlin College (perhaps not incidentally, a stop on the Underground Railroad) and in 1860 moved to the Boulder,

6. Alberta Claire, “The Story of Two Girls,” *Outdoor Life*, 37 (March 1916), 250. Claire is actually off by a year: women received the right to vote in territorial elections in 1869. When Wyoming gained statehood in 1890, it was the first state to grant women suffrage. The “splendid specimen of manhood” was, of course, Woodrow Wilson.

7. In addition to Wyoming, the states granting women full suffrage were Utah, Colorado, and Idaho (1900), Washington (1910), California (1911), Arizona, Kansas, and Oregon (1912), and Montana and Nevada (1914). Sandra Browne, “Making Democracy Work,” <http://www.lwvabc.org/history.html>, accessed January 17, 2005.

8. Herman, *Hunting*, 231.

Colorado, area with her husband. She learned the then-infant art of taxidermy and in keeping with Victorian-era trends in housekeeping, festooned her drawing room with cunningly posed animal mounts of her own fashioning. “Birds looked down in listening attitudes into the music-book upon the organ, scolded each other from the corners of neighboring picture-frames. . . . [T]he smaller animals of the neighborhood were represented among the rocks [at the foot of a tree], and the whole formed a picture not less interesting than novel,” wrote Maxwell’s sister, describing the “tableau” in Maxwell’s parlor.⁹ Neighbors flocked to marvel at every new addition to her décor.

Maxwell was not, however, content to confine her skills to mere decorating. In 1874 she founded the Rocky Mountain Museum to house larger and more naturalistic displays of native flora and fauna. Two years later, representing the states of Colorado and Kansas, she constructed for the Philadelphia Centennial Exhibition a complex diorama of Rocky Mountain and Great Plains species, including a bull elk, a leaping cougar, whitetail and mule deer, wolves, a bear, eagles, and bison as well as numerous smaller animal and bird mounts. On the wrought-iron fence before the massive installation, Maxwell hung a sign. It read, “Woman’s Work.”

Hunting was an essential element of that work. A petite woman described as “modest” and “tenderhearted,” Maxwell had herself killed every one of the animals she mounted. To those among her contemporaries who questioned the ethicality of shooting wild animals for the purpose of putting them on display, she countered that her educational work was morally superior to their customary dining habits, adding, “I never take life for such carnivorous purposes! I only shorten the period of consciousness that I may give their forms a perpetual memory; and I leave it to you, which is the more cruel? to kill to eat, or to kill to immortalize?”¹⁰

In Maxwell’s time, market hunting was driving some species toward extinction. She drew a direct connection between ethical sport hunting and the survival of the Rocky Mountain species she hunted and “immortalized.” In this, she was a good generation ahead of the American conservation movement as it developed under the likes of Theodore Roosevelt and George Bird Grinnell.

9. Quoted in Vera Norwood, *Made from This Earth: American Women and Nature* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1993), 213.

10. Quoted in Glenda Riley, *Women and Nature: Saving the “Wild” West* (Lincoln, 1999), 55.

11. It is helpful to recall in this context that, prior to the advent of live-action wildlife photography and documentary film and television, museum displays and zoos were the primary sites for educating the increasingly urban-centered public about wild animals, their habitats, and conservation.

12. See Barbara R. Stein, *On Her Own Terms: Annie Montague Alexander and the Rise of Science in the American West* (Berkeley, Calif., 2001).

Maxwell was also a technical innovator whose work foreshadowed the subsequent rise of taxidermy as simultaneously an art form and a tool for conservation education, in such venues as Chicago’s Field Museum and New York’s American Museum of Natural History.¹¹ At the same time, as an outspoken feminist, Maxwell regarded her “Woman’s Work” as a way to demonstrate that women were men’s equals in both science and art. In this, she had much in common with another westerner, the passionate hunter and paleontologist Annie Montague Alexander (1864–1950), who founded the Museum of Vertebrate Zoology at the University of California in Berkeley and devoted her life to the field training of women scientists.¹²

If hunting provided women such as these with an entrée into the realm of male-dominated science and art, for others it offered a proving ground for their nascent social and political activism. Such was the case for Grace Gallatin Seton-Thompson (1872–1959). A native Californian, upon her parents’ divorce she relocated with her mother to New York City, where she grew up in pampered elegance. On a voyage to France in her early twenties, she met the naturalist Ernest Thompson Seton, whom she



Colorado Historical Society, Denver, P-42.146

For some women, hunting provided an entrée into the realm of male-dominated science and art. Martha Maxwell (above, 1876), the “Colorado Huntress,” mastered the art of taxidermy and in 1874 founded the Rocky Mountain Museum to “immortalize” the wild animals that she killed.

For other women, hunting offered a proving ground for social activism. After her marriage to Ernest Thompson Seton in 1896, Grace Gallatin Seton-Thompson discovered a passion for hunting in the Rocky Mountain West and wrote several books about her experiences. She later went on to forge a distinguished career as a journalist and suffragist. This illustration of tracking antelope is from her book, *A Woman Tenderfoot* (New York, 1901), p. 165.



married in 1896.¹³ Before long, Grace discovered that she was in for some lifestyle changes. Even as she was planning their summer holiday abroad, Nimrod, her nickname for her husband, “announced that the mountain madness was again working in his blood, and that he must go West and take up the trail for his holiday.”¹⁴ Upper lip resolutely stiff, the devoted newlywed “tucked my summer-watering-place-and-Europe-flying-trip-mind away (not without regret, I confess) and cautiously tried to acquire a new vocabulary and some new ideas.” She learned her lessons well. Years later in his autobiography, Ernest would recall that although his young wife was most at home “among receptions and pink teas . . . hobnobbing with artists and writers,” nonetheless, “as a camper she was a great success, never grumbled at hardship, or scolded anyone. She was a dead shot with a rifle, often far ahead of the guides, and met all kinds of danger with unflinching nerve.”¹⁵ That judgment was echoed by a native guide, who said of Grace after a harrowing experience of near drowning, “She no cry! Take her anywhere.”¹⁶ Indeed, her

13. A word about nomenclature is in order here: Ernest Evan Seton Thompson published under the name Ernest Thompson Seton. His wife published, variously, under the names Grace Gallatin Seton, Grace Gallatin Seton-Thompson, Grace Gallatin Thompson-Seton, and occasionally (prior to their divorce) Mrs. Ernest Thompson Seton. Hence, in an attempt to avoid undue confusion, I refer to her in this article simply as “Grace.”

14. Grace Gallatin Seton-Thompson, *A Woman Tenderfoot* (New York, 1900), 15–16.

15. From Ernest Thompson Seton’s *Trail of an Artist-Naturalist*, quoted in Marion Tinling, *Women into the Unknown: A Sourcebook on Women Explorers and Travelers* (Westport, Conn., 1989), 250.

16. Grace Gallatin Seton, *Nimrod’s Wife* (New York, 1907), 300.

passion for the outdoor life long outlasted her marriage to Seton.

Grace had by and large set her own burgeoning writing career aside when she married and spent most of her and Ernest’s early (and only happy) years together serving as his editorial assistant and booking agent and working with him on such projects as the founding of the Girl Guides (later known as the Campfire Girls). She did, however, find time to produce her first two books under her own name: *A Woman Tenderfoot* (1900) and *Nimrod’s Wife* (1907).¹⁷ Her intention in these volumes was to lure other genteel women like herself into a western adventure. As she wrote in the brief introduction to her first book, “This Book Is A Tribute To The West. I can only add that the events related really happened in the Rocky Mountains of the United States and Canada; and this is why, being a woman, I wanted to tell about them, in the hope that some going-to-Europe-in-the-summer-woman may be tempted to go West instead.”¹⁸

In *A Woman Tenderfoot*, Grace tried to provide all the practical information a novice huntress might need, ranging from advice about sensible-yet-attractive clothing and female-appropriate camping gear to suitable guns for women, the advantages of riding astride, and insights about the gender politics of hunting camp. The book was, as nature writer Dorcas Miller aptly put it, “a primer for women’s independence.”¹⁹

Read in the context of Grace Gallatin Seton’s subsequent career, this book and its sequel, *Nimrod’s Wife*, trace the very direct role hunting played in the intellectual and emotional development of one of the early twentieth century’s most interesting and enterprising feminists. When she and her husband drifted apart, owing primarily to her disinclination to put her own professional life on

17. Both works are available in reprint editions: Grace Gallatin Seton-Thompson, *A Woman Tenderfoot*, with an introduction by Worth Mathewson (New York 1990); and Grace Gallatin Seton, *Nimrod’s Wife*, with a foreword by Mary Zeiss Stange (Mechanicsburg, Penn., 2004).

18. Seton-Thompson, *A Woman Tenderfoot*, 7.

19. Dorcas S. Miller, *Adventurous Women: The Inspiring Lives of Nine Early Outdoorswomen* (Boulder, Colo., 2000), 83. Miller’s book also includes a chapter on Elinore Pruitt Stewart.



MHS Photograph Archives, Helena

Many women enjoyed the recreation provided by hunting. Starting home from a hunting trip to the Little Belt Mountains of central Montana in November 1913, Mrs. Smith keeps a sharp eye out for game.

permanent hold, Grace went on to forge a distinguished career as a journalist and suffragist, an advocate and role model for professional women writers, and a champion of women's rights on the international stage. As a lingering legacy of her first steps toward independence in the Rocky Mountain West, whether she was touring India to study the education of girls under the caste system, venturing to China to research the political status of women there, or on the trail of a supposedly matriarchal tribe indigenous to the forests of Vietnam and Cambodia, she always had her gun and hunting togs with her.

Aside from Annie Oakley, none of the women mentioned in this article is a household name in the contemporary West—and even in Oakley's case, most of what most people think they know about her is more a product of Hollywood than of history. Yet approximately 10 percent of western hunters today are women, many of whom have much in common with their historical forebears. And by engaging in activities that are still regarded by a significant proportion of the American public as, if not "eccentric," then certainly out of the cultural mainstream, modern outdoorswomen—whether outspokenly feminist or not—continue to show how a frontier past creates the template for a more liberated future. ~

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MHS Photograph Archives, Helena

Today, female hunters benefit from a frontier past that cleared the way for a more liberated future. Here Elizabeth Nelson, later Mrs. Charles Greenfield of Helena, shows off the ground squirrels she killed on her family's Riverdale Ranch on the Missouri River, nine miles north of Cascade, Montana, about 1902.