A Class Act

Pinned to Annie Oakley's dress are the numerous awards and medals she won for her sharpshooting.
Frank Butler stood at the edge of a trapshooting range waiting for his opponent. He looked every bit the professional marksman in his shooting jacket and feathered hat. He had been told to expect "a crack shot from upcountry." He was flabbergasted when 15-year-old Phoebe Ann "Annie" Moses—a small, slim girl who stood five feet tall and weighed 100 pounds—appeared. She carried a gun that was almost as long as she was tall.

It was the year 1875, and Butler was in Cincinnati, Ohio, performing with a trick-shooting act on the vaudeville stage. Trapshooting, involving the release of clay pigeons from a small boxlike house or sprung trap to simulate game birds in flight, was a popular sport in Cincinnati. Butler had issued a general challenge to beat anyone who cared to face him.

Butler was experienced and confident, but the sport was new to Annie. The match began with the toss of a coin. Butler won, allowing him to shoot first. "Pull!" he called, and the bird was released. A shot rang out. "Dead!" the referee shouted. Annie stepped up for her first target. "Pull!" she called, following the flight of the bird as she fired. "Dead!" shouted the referee.

"I never shot better in my life," Butler later said, "but never did a person make more impossible shots than did that little girl... It was her first big match and my first defeat." Most sources say that Butler shot 24 of his 25 birds. Annie missed none.

Butler was a handsome man with a ruddy complexion, blue eyes, and a dark mustache. He congratulated Annie, and feeling attracted to the spunky girl who had beat him, he invited her to watch his show and later called on her at her sister's home. They fell in love and were married less than a year later.

Butler was 10 years older than Annie, but their difficult childhoods gave them common ground. Annie's skill as a shooter had resulted from her determination to help feed her struggling family on the Ohio frontier. Butler had left his native Ireland unskilled but determined to support himself. He worked at various jobs before he trained himself to become a sharpshooter so that he could join a vaudeville act.
Then Oakley reached for a rifle. Butler tossed five glass balls into the air. Within five seconds, she shattered them all.

He held out a playing card, the ace of hearts. She knocked out every trace of the red heart with 25 rapid shots.

He held up a dime between two fingers, and she shot a hole through the center of it.

After they were married, Annie accompanied Butler on his tours with his partner. When there were no performances and Butler traveled to book shows, Annie stayed with her family to further her education. Butler had begun to teach her how to read because she had not been able to attend school as a child.

In 1882, just prior to the opening of a show in Springfield, Ohio, Butler’s partner became ill. He suggested that Annie assist him on stage. She said she could do more than that and proposed that they take turns shooting. Butler quickly agreed. Annie took the stage name Oakley, which was the suburb of Cincinnati where
she and Butler had met, and their act became known as Butler and Oakley. Oakley became an important part of the show as she mastered the tricks Butler developed, such as shooting a cigarette from his mouth. Oakley’s natural talent enabled her to learn quickly, and her petite, feminine appearance appealed to audiences.

As they went from performing vaudeville acts to joining the Sells Brothers Circus, Oakley gradually became the star, while Butler assumed the role of assistant and business manager. When Butler and Oakley joined Buffalo Bill’s Wild West in 1885, Oakley was billed as the “Peerless Lady Wing-Shot.” She was just 25 years old, but she entertained audiences with feats of skill and amazing tricks. Butler saw to it that the act never became repetitious or stale, while Oakley practiced and practiced, determined to do her best. Their routine brought audiences to their feet with applause and cheers.

Butler and Oakley traveled and performed all over the United States and Europe. Although Butler was the business manager, he always consulted Oakley on important decisions. An adoring husband, he would brag that “my wife is the best marksman in America.” And although Oakley was born and raised in Ohio, east of the Mississippi River, she became one of the biggest stars of Buffalo Bill’s Wild West.

In the early 1900s, a train accident badly injured Oakley’s back, and she left the show. She recovered enough to perform again in public until shortly before her death in November 1926. In failing health and grieving for his wife, Butler died less than a month later. Butler and Oakley were married for 50 years. They were buried, side by side, in Brock, Ohio. Written on their gravestones, along with their names, are the words “At Rest.”

Finally, Butler lit a cigarette and placed it between his lips. Oakley again lifted a rifle to her shoulder. It seemed to the audience that she was taking aim right at his head. Without hesitating, she squeezed the trigger. The audience burst into applause as the tip of the cigarette flew into the air.

**Sounds like Annie Oakley’s performance was worth the price of admission!**

*Oakley holds a gun given to her by William F. “Buffalo Bill” Cody.*