

May 8, 2006

TV REVIEW

## That Superstar in Buckskin, Doin' What Came Natur'lly

By [NEIL GENZLINGER](#)

Correction Appended

Plenty of women accomplished plenty of things in the first century or so of United States history, so it's a little dismaying to think that the country's first female superstar was famous not for her voice or her musicianship or her brain, but for her ability to shoot firearms accurately. Yet tonight's installment of "American Experience" on PBS makes the case that Annie Oakley was the first American woman whose fame and knack for spawning legends (a close cousin of gossip) qualified as superstardom.

Even if her particular talent is not to your liking, it would be difficult to watch this program and not be awed by the woman's life. Oakley, born Phoebe Ann Moses in Ohio in 1860, lived during a remarkable stretch of history that encompassed both the Civil War and World War I, one that began on horseback by lamplight and ended in automobiles under electric bulbs.

So familiar are the images of Oakley in old-time Western regalia, making her seem like some preindustrial artifact, that it's surprising to see movies of her, shot by Thomas Edison in his New Jersey studio. It's surprising too to track the incredible array of luminaries she met or performed for or with, Sitting Bull on the one extreme, [Oscar Wilde](#) on the other.

Oakley escaped the hard life through a serendipitous encounter as a teenager with a crack shot named Frank Butler, whom she first bested in a shooting competition, then married. He eventually put her in his traveling marksmanship show, and she quickly became the main attraction. In 1885 she began a long association with Buffalo Bill Cody's Wild West extravaganza. The show's summer residency on Staten Island the next year was a breakthrough.

"Half a million people sailed past the new Statue of Liberty, then rode on special trains straight to the Wild West," says Ken Chowder's unusually well-written narration, read by [Laura Linney](#).

Perhaps most striking, Oakley's life shows that superstardom has never been all it's cracked up to be. The program's most interesting segment tells of the lawsuits Oakley brought against 55 newspapers after William Randolph Hearst's chain erroneously reported in 1903 that she was destitute and in prison for theft. Then as now, it was often no fun being famous.

## **American Experience**

### *Annie Oakley*

PBS, tonight at 9; check local listings.

Produced and directed by Riva Freifeld; Amy Brown, co-producer; David Espar, editor; written by Ken Chowder; music by Sheldon Mirowitz; [Laura Linney](#), narrator; Mark Samels, series executive producer; Sharon Grimberg, series producer. Produced by Riva Productions for WGBH, Boston.

#### **Correction: May 9, 2006**

*A listing of credits yesterday with a television review of an "American Experience" program about Annie Oakley on PBS misspelled the surname of the producer and director. She is Riva Freifeld, not Friefeld.*

[Copyright 2006 The New York Times Company](#)

[Privacy Policy](#) | [Search](#) | [Corrections](#) | [XML](#) | [Help](#) | [Contact Us](#) | [Work for Us](#) | [Site Map](#)

---