The Sport Hunters:
Distaff Hunters in the Golden Age

An Excerpt from
Hunting the American West:
The Pursuit of Big Game for Life, Profit, and Sport 1800-1900
By Richard C. Rattenbury

The "golden age" of sport hunting in the American West attracted many devotees of the chase beyond the military officers, aristocrats, and foreign gentlemen-sportsmen discussed earlier. The same factors that drew the "top-shelfers" to the hunt—the still-abundant game, convenient rail transportation, and improved firearms—also stimulated a growing tide of upper- and middle-class Americans to go west in search of adventure and trophy. Perhaps the most important inducement for these elements of American society lay in the tremendous expansion of the domestic economy during the last third of the nineteenth century. The increase of disposable income allowed many to adopt big-game hunting as a favored element in their recreational repertoire. Now businessmen, lawyers, politicians, doctors, and many others from the professional and middle classes took up the chase. No longer viewed as the exclusive province of the wealthy or well-placed, in which only some scores of well-heeled gentlemen hunters savored the chase, now the avid pursuit of the West's big game attracted many hundreds—including a handful of adventurous women—from various levels of American society.

Although admittedly few, female hunters were not unknown even in the antebellum West. Theodore Potter, who in 1852 went overland from Michigan to California, joined a party at Saint Joseph, Missouri, that included four unmarried young women from Memphis and New Orleans, who "...were members of southern hunting clubs and were taking the land route...for the purpose of hunting large game such as buffalo, elk and antelope." These ardent Dianas wore red bloomer suits, rode astride on well-trained horses, and proved to be practiced shots. Their distinctive dress evidently provided a natural lure to antelope, and they kept the party in fresh meat whenever the usually elusive animals came available. At the eastern base of the Sierra Nevada Mountains, the young ladies participated in a grizzly bear drive—along with the daughter of the local guide. They killed one and mortally wounded another of the five bruins brought to bag. As Potter recalled in his autobiography, "The skins of the five bears were given to the ladies, making a splendid addition to the collection of trophies which they had secured on the trip."

Through the democratizing and emancipating influences prevalent in America following the Civil War, the pursuit of western big game increasingly became the aim of women. In 1872, for example, the *Denver Daily Tribune* advised its readers, "Last evening the night train on the Kansas Pacific brought out a party of seventeen ladies and gentlemen, who stopped off at Wallace [Kansas] for a buffalo hunt....They left England only a short time since for the sole purpose of enjoying a hunt after the American Bison." In albeit comparatively limited numbers, women of varying social station were taking to the field. These

{ **Photographer unknown. *No. 14*. From a stereograph published in "Mrs. M.A. Maxwell's Rocky Mountain Series," 1876.** Here, Mrs. Maxwell poses with a stuffed-but-stately antelope in her own museum installation. The pop-eyed little dog below most likely is a living companion. Dickinson Research Center, National Cowboy & Western Heritage Museum, RC2007.012. }

frontier huntresses brought a variety of motivations to the chase—many hunted purely for sport, some for subsistence, a few for their livelihood, at least one out of scientific interest. Whatever their reasons in adopting the chase, all shared with their male counterparts that stimulating sense of adventure and accomplishment so intimately associated with big-game hunting in the still-unsettled West.

Among the most intriguing and dedicated distaff hunters during the golden age was Mrs. Martha Maxwell of Colorado. As a skilled markswoman, practiced huntress, self-taught naturalist, and talented taxidermist, she in many ways epitomized the best qualities and accomplishments of the era's most esteemed hunter-naturalists. Martha took an early and active interest in the out-of-doors and animal life, roaming the woods as a child in Pennsylvania and Wisconsin, and learning to shoot both shotgun and rifle with remarkable precision. After her graduation from Lawrence College, she married in 1860 and followed her husband to the remote frontier of the Colorado Territory, where the abundant wildlife rekindled her interest in natural studies and inspired her to take up taxidermy as a hobby. She harvested many of her specimens herself, including big-game animals like deer and antelope, and proved very adept at mounting them in lifelike postures.

To obtain her many specimens, Mrs. Maxwell made frequent collecting excursions into the Middle Park region of Colorado, and even ventured as far north as the Black Hills of Wyoming. There she harvested an antelope by adopting the time-honored flagging stratagem. Her specimens received meticulous reconstruction in Martha's taxidermy studio, which one observer described as being

{ **Photographer unknown. [*Martha Maxwell*]. Cabinet card from "Mrs. M.A. Maxwell's Rocky Mountain Series," circa 1878.** Here, the accomplished huntress and celebrated taxidermist, accompanied by her slumbering hound, models in her field costume with double-barreled shotgun, macrameed game bag, and leather shot flask. Other pictures in the series depict her with an Evans repeating rifle. Dickinson Research Center, National Cowboy & Western Heritage Museum, 2002.143. }

{ **A.G. Wallihan, photographer. *Killed at One Shot by Mrs. A.G. Wallihan, Craig, Colo.* Albumen print, circa 1893.** Seemingly attired for church instead of the field, Mrs. "Gusty" Wallihan poses in commemoration of her remarkable shooting feat. She invariably hunted with her .40-70-caliber, Remington-Hepburn single-shot rifle. Image courtesy Museum of Northwest Colorado, 02-79-12. }

filled with, "Wire, hemp, cotton, and hay; clay, salt, plaster, and alum; mosses, grasses, and branches of trees; bars of iron and blocks of wood; palette, brushes, putty, and paints;...glass eyes, and tools; heads and horns of buffalo, antelope, and mountain sheep;...guns and ammunition..." By the early 1870s, her reputation for lifelike renderings brought her the additional business of many area sport hunters.

Made an offer she couldn't refuse, Martha Maxwell sold her first natural history collection to Shaw's Botanical Gardens of Saint Louis in 1870. She immediately started another assemblage, and in 1873 opened the Rocky Mountain Museum in her hometown of Boulder, of which a visitor observed:

> The distinctive feature of the museum...is a dramatic group of animals placed at the further end of the room. Here are arranged mounds of earth, rocks, and pine trees, in a by no means bad imitation of a wild, rocky landscape. And among these rocks and trees are grouped the stuffed animals...and every one in a most lifelike and significant attitude. A doe is licking two exquisite little fawns, while the stag looks on with a proud expression. A bear is crawling out of the mouth of a cave. A fox is slyly prowling along, ready to spring on a rabbit.

Two years later the museum moved to Denver and, not long thereafter, the territorial legislature requested that Mrs. Maxwell display her collection on behalf of Colorado at the United States Centennial Exhibition in Philadelphia. Her impressive wildlife exhibit, which commanded a corner of the Kansas-Colorado Building next to a sign that read

{ **Photographer unknown. [*Mr. and Mrs. A.G. Wallihan*]. Albumen print, circa 1892.** From their roadhouse-post office at Lay, the Wallihans hunted and photographed the big game of northwestern Colorado. Both favored Remington-Hepburn, single-shot sporting rifles with peep sights—his with double-set trigger. Image courtesy Museum of Northwest Colorado, 94-99-15. }

"Woman's Work," proved to be one of the most popular at the 1876 celebration.

The Philadelphia installation included Rocky Mountain and Great Plains environments, and was inhabited by bighorn sheep, grizzly and black bears, cougars, elk, deer, antelope, buffalo, and many lesser game, "each in an attitude of lifelike action." By placing her animals in rustic settings and mounting them to reflect realistic behaviors, Martha Maxwell certainly contributed to the refinement (if not the origination) of the natural habitat diorama—an exhibit technique still widely employed in natural science museums around the world. Her enduring legacy also included the discovery of the Rocky Mountain screech owl, which was named *Scops Maxwellae* in her honor. When challenged once about shooting so many animals, the "Colorado Huntress" replied: "There isn't a day you don't tacitly consent to have some creature killed that you may eat it. I never take life for such carnivorous purposes! All must die some time...and I leave it to you, which is the more cruel? To kill to eat or to kill to *immortalize*?"

About ten years after Martha Maxwell's celebrated exhibition in Philadelphia, yet another Colorado huntress, Mary Augusta Wallihan, settled with her husband, A.G. Wallihan, in the small hamlet of Lay, where they ran a road house and post office for many years. A Wisconsin native, "Gusty" Wallihan later recalled that, "Though interested in shooting...I never had an opportunity to try my skill until I came west....My brother and Mr. Wallihan wanted me to learn [as we] were miles from any house—alone in the mountains." Although then approaching her fiftieth birthday, she quickly graduated from shotgun to rifle. "My first deer I got next spring," she later wrote, "shooting him in the neck, dropping him." Before long she had become a practiced subsistence and sport hunter of mule deer and began to keep a tally of her successes. A photograph taken in the early 1890s captured her in the field with her ubiquitous Remington-Hepburn rifle and her thirtieth mule deer! She and her husband also guided sport hunters after antelope, deer, and elk from the late 1880s into the mid-1890s.

In 1889 Mrs. Wallihan cajoled her husband into purchasing a camera to immortalize the big-game animals of northwestern Colorado. The couple conducted many "shooting" excursions throughout the region in the 1890s and early 1900s, he capturing some of the finest wildlife views of the time while she bagged one deer after another to supply their campsites. In their first album, *Hoofs, Claws and Antlers of the Rocky Mountains—By The Camera* (1894), "Gusty" authored an extended caption for an image of her standing over two fallen mule deer bucks:

> In the fall of 1891 my husband told me I must get the winter's meat while he took photographs of the deer. So we commenced in the usual way by saddling our ponies and starting out with rifle to kill the deer and camera to take the photos. The first day I got nothing. The second I lost a fine buck because I had to shoot past my husband, as I thought, too close for safety. Then I moved a hundred yards or more from him. I had hardly got ready before I saw two fine bucks and a number of does and fawns. I confess I was a little selfish—I wanted both bucks very much. As I had lost the large one I thought two with one shot would please my husband very much. So quicker than I can tell

{ **A.G. Wallihan, photographer.** ***Augusta Wallihan—Grocery Shopping.*** **Albumen print, circa 1895.** Standing over one of her many trophy mule deer, subsistence-and-sport huntress "Gusty" Wallihan appears every inch the frontier matron with her dressy bonnet, prairie-pattern cartridge belt, floral-embroidered gauntlets, hunting knife, and Remington-Hepburn rifle.
Image courtesy Museum of Northwest Colorado, 02-79-11. }

Experience the grandeur, excitement, and peril of the quest for big game in the West from 1800-1900 in this vivid interpretation with engaging narrative, direct quotations, and historic imagery.

Hunting the American West is a thoroughly illustrated, narrative history of big-game hunting in the nineteenth-century American West. The engaging narrative draws extensively on the writings of original participants and observers of the subject and affords unusual insight into the diverse methods and motives for hunting big game in the Old West. No other work on the subject conveys the feeling and character of the hunt in its various eras and styles, or its profound consequences, as convincingly.

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it I fired and killed them both at 130 yards with one shot.

Of this accomplishment the *Rocky Mountain News* later proclaimed, "There is no record in the annals of sportsmen of anyone getting two bucks at one shot before, although two deer at a shot have been dropped several times....Owing to an injury to her right shoulder a year ago, she now generally shoots taking a knee rest. She always takes deliberate aim, and very rarely misses."

By 1895 the reputation of Mrs. Wallihan as a western huntress was such that *Shooting and Fishing* magazine invited her to take charge of the Hunter's Cabin at the special Sportsmen's Exhibition held in Madison Square Garden in New York City. As the last decade of the century closed, both the Wallihans became disturbed by the rapid decline of big game in their corner of Colorado. Both spoke out against the depredations of market hunters. In a 1901 letter to *Outdoor Life*, Augusta Wallihan publicly decried the sight of four wagon loads of slaughtered mule deer leaving her country for the Union Pacific Railroad in Wyoming, noting that the local game warden spent all of his time politicking in the hotels of nearby Craig, Colorado.

By the late 1890s, quite a few adventurous women of good social standing headed west to experience the excitement of the trophy hunt after big game. Perhaps typical of these was Grace Gallatin Thompson Seton, wife of the well-known nature writer, Ernest Thompson Seton, and a long-time denizen of New York City. Wishing to more fully share her husband's abiding interests in camping, fishing, and hunting, she learned to shoot a rifle and ride astride in preparation for an extended sporting excursion to Wyoming's Jackson Hole area in 1897. As she later recalled in her book, *A Woman Tenderfoot*: "Plenty of women have handled guns and have gone to the Rocky Mountains on hunting trips—but they [were] not among my friends. However, my imagination was good, and the outfit I got together for my first trip appalled that good man, my husband, while the number of things I had to learn appalled me."

Her first witnessing of the actual killing of an elk by her husband appalled Grace Seton the most. Yet she learned from him where to place an instantaneously fatal shot and decided that if she was "...out West for all the experiences that life could give me...one elk would be sacrificed to that end." A few days later, beneath the majestic Teton Mountains, the couple encountered some elk and Grace set out to enlarge her experience.

> I took the gun without a word and crept down the mountain side, keeping under cover as much as possible. The sunset quiet surrounded me; the deadly quiet of but one idea—to creep upon that

{ A trio of cabinet card photographs of female hunters, the likes of whom sought sport and adventure in the American West during the waning years of the golden age of hunting.

(*Top*) Photographer unknown. [*Untitled*]. Great Britain (?), circa 1890-1895. Attired in an ankle-length shooting dress, this demure sportswoman cradles a fine, breech-loading sporting rifle with back-action lock and octagon barrel.

(*Center*) E. Hamel, photographer. [*Untitled*]. Lexington, Nebraska, circa 1900-1905. Stylishly dressed distaff-hunter Georgia Gray poses in the studio with her single-shot, Stevens Ideal rifle and her slumbering dog.

(*Bottom*) Photographer unknown. [*Untitled*]. America, circa 1905-1910. Sporting a wide-brimmed hat with middy blouse and skirt, this huntress strikes a jaunty pose with her Model 1892 Winchester rifle. Dickinson Research Center, National Cowboy & Western Heritage Museum, 2003.090 - 2004.158 - 2004.045. **}**

elk and kill him—possessed me....I crawled nearer until I was within one hundred and fifty yards of him, when at the snapping of a twig he raised his head with its crown of branching horn. He saw nothing, so turned again to drink.

Now was the time. I crawled a few feet nearer and raised the deadly weapon. The stag turned partly away from me. In another moment he would be gone. I sighted along the metal barrel and a terrible bang went booming through the dim secluded spot. The elk raised his proud, antlered head and looked in my direction. Another shot tore through the air. Without another move the animal dropped where he stood....

At 135 yards, she had placed her first bullet through the elk's heart, the second through its brain. Yet, what would have been a moment of elation and pride for most men, Grace Seton found quite otherwise. "Death had been so sudden," she wrote, "I had no regret, I had no triumph—just a sort of wonder at what I had done—a surprise that the breath of life could be taken away so easily....I felt no glory in the achievement."

Even given her mixed emotions following her first successful foray as a western huntress, Grace Seton was not dissuaded from the further pursuit of big game. She and her husband next stalked antelope—she on one occasion making a painstaking approach on a slumbering buck only to find it "a nice buff stone." The stalking of a large band out on the plains, however, proved more fruitful:

We mounted immediately and went after those antelope—by pretending to go away from them. For three hours, we drew nearer to the quietly browsing animals. We hid behind low hills, and crawled down a water-course, and finally dismounted behind the very mound of prairie on the other side of which they were resting....There were twenty does, and proudly in their midst moved the king of the harem, a powerful buck with royal horns.

The crowning point of my long day's hunt was before me. That I should get my chance to get one of the finest bucks ever hunted was clear. What should I do, should I hit or miss? Fail! What a thought—never!

Just then a drumming of hoofs which rapidly faded away showed that the wind had betrayed us, and the whole band was off like a flight of arrows. "Shoot! Shoot!" cried Nimrod [Seton], but my gun was already up and levelled on the flying buck—now nearly a hundred yards away. Bang! The deadly thing went forth to do its work. Sliding another cartridge into the chamber, I held ready for another shot.

There was no need. The fleet-footed monarch's reign was over, and already he had gone to the happy hunting ground. The bullet had gone straight to his heart, and he had not suffered.

A few years later on a trek in the Bitterroot Mountains, Mrs. Seton found herself alone in the wilderness one evening while her husband went off to retrieve some horses. Huddled by a small fire, she heard the unmistakable passing of a large animal as it went to a nearby creek to drink. Rising to look, she found a grizzly bear not forty feet away. After a moment of indecision she resolved to shoot. "How the glory of it would ring down through the family annals," she later wrote in *Nimrod's Wife*, "unaided, hand to hand, so to speak, [the] encounter of a monster and the wonderful heroism of the woman, etc." She took unsteady aim, fired, and missed.

The bear turned and started back toward me the way he had come, evidently on a runway, he looked as big as an elephant; already another cartridge was jerked in....I had the gun at shoulder and then for the first time the creature, who was now a mastodon, saw me. Its little eyes glared straight at me. I shall never forget them, and there we stood, transfixed.

For the fraction of a second he debated what to do and then turned slowly away. Now was the moment. There would have been no miss this time....I sighted along the barrel, a clear shot to the brain—it was so close—my finger on the trigger! Then I lowered the muzzle to the ground—and let him go. He had refused to injure me! Could I do less?

Grace Seton obviously combined the eye of a good markswoman with the heart of one who abhorred suffering. Yet, like an increasing number of women in her era, she clearly harbored the sense of adventure, self-command, and openness to new experience that personified the emancipated distaff hunter in the late-nineteenth-century West. Perhaps as well as any Diana of the West, Grace Seton captured this spirit: "One elk with an eleven-point crown, and one antelope, of the finest ever brought down, is the tax I levied on the wild things. Of the many, many times I have watched them and left them unmolested, and of the lessons they have taught me...I have not space to tell, for the real fascination of hunting is not in the killing but in seeing the creature at home amid his glorious surroundings, and feeling the freely rushing blood, the health-giving air, the gleeful sense of joy and life in nature, both within and without." ■