

✓ She who rocked cradle sometimes pulled trigger

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GUNS HAVE ALWAYS been considered "men's stuff" down through the centuries, but occasionally a woman has made news by pulling the trigger.

Pioneer women, living in isolated places, often alone when husbands were off working or hunting, had to learn to shoot as a matter of self defense. And Annie Oakley of enduring theatrical fame, learned to shoot when she was 9, again out of necessity.

Olive Mann Isbell, believed to be the first public school teacher in what was to become the state of California, was handed a long rifle, a muzzle loader, and told to keep it handy.

Everyone thought One-Eyed Charley Parkhurst was a man, but "he" was a "she" who drove stagecoach, carried a six-shooter and used it.

Amd certainly no one — but NO ONE! — argued with Mary "The Widow" Bennett of the San Lorenzo Valley when she was carrying her muzzle loader.

Perhaps it should be explained that the very first firearms were cannons, used about 1250. The Chinese had invented gunpowder in the early 1200s. The rifle wasn't invented until the late 1500s and it was loaded from the muzzle, an extremely dangerous maneuver with the powder and ball being stuffed down the barrel and tamped in firmly. Until the 1850s, a flint set it all off — if you were lucky and had tamped everything down just right. These early firearms were inaccurate at 100 yards, they were 6

or 7 feet long and they weighed about 40 pounds. They were used during the Revolutionary War.

Quite a handful for a woman — or a man, for that matter. And after the muzzle loader was fired, it took a few minutes and steady hands to reload for a second shot.

AMONG WOMEN gunslingers, Oakley made the biggest headlines. She was born in 1860 in a log cabin in Ohio. When her father died she learned to shoot small wild animals for food for the family. Annie's fame spread and she spent 17 years as a star crack shot, doing all sorts of shooting tricks with Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show. From 1885 to 1902, she toured the U.S. and Europe with the show but she was not with Buffalo Bill when he made three appearances in Santa Cruz.

Oakley even shot a cigarette from the lips of German Crown Prince Wilhelm (after he invited her to do it) and horrified his court, it was reported.

Oakley, barely 5 feet tall, earned the title "Little Sure Shot." She shot with pistols, rifles and shot-guns. At 90 feet, she could hit a playing card — with the thin edge toward her. She could also hit a card five or six times while it fell to the ground. Oakley died in 1926, but her prowess with guns is legendary in film and on stage.

There is no record that Olive Mann Isbell ever fired a gun but she had one and she was ready if the need arose. She arrived at Mission Santa Clara in October 1846, after crossing the plains with her physician husband. Being a niece of Horace Mann and a school



Mary 'The Widow' Bennett was wounded in a gunfight.

teacher herself, she immediately set up a school in an abandoned stable with about 20 children as her students.

But Alta California politics were shaky at best and anti-Yankee sentiment was growing among the Mexican officials; an attack on the Mission was feared. One of the American father-parents handed a muzzle loader to Isbell, saying "You'd better learn to use this and keep it handy." She did, but fortunately no attack materialized.

She and Dr. Isbell moved to Monterey where he set up his medical practice. She opened a school, of course.

Parkhurst was a runaway from a Massachusetts orphanage who masqueraded as a man for more than 20 years. She became a stagecoach driver of note in California.

Once in the gold country,
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Cradle/ Women known to kill

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Parkhurst was held up by a bandit and ordered to "throw down the box!" The box was a shipment of gold. Parkhurst was trapped, without a gun and taken by surprise. But as she drove away, she yelled, "Next time I'll be ready for you!" And she was.

Ever after that she carried a six-shooter on the "box" (seat) beside her as she drove. A year or so later, when she again heard the same voice command her to throw down the box, Parkhurst fired first and killed Sugarfoot, a notorious highwayman.

No one suspected Parkhurst was a woman and she drove the stagecoach from Santa Cruz to San Juan Bautista in her later years before retiring to a cabin between Santa Cruz and Watsonville. The tobacco-chewing "whip" died in 1879 of cancer of the tongue. And much to the surprise of neighbors who prepared the body for burial — Parkhurst turned out to be a woman.

THE WIDOW BENNETT was the terror of the San Lorenzo Valley, more or less. A loud, forceful woman who spoke her mind, she came west with husband Vardamon and four daughters and four sons in 1843.

By 1845, daughter Catherine

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Tillatha had caught the eye of a tough old mountain man, Isaac Graham, and love bloomed. He was 45, considered over the hill in those days. Catherine was 21.

The Widow Bennett raged like a lion against the romance but the couple had a contract marriage drawn up and witnessed by Henry L. Ford, all legal-like. There was no Protestant minister or justice of the peace around in those days.

Now as far as the Widow was concerned, that contract marriage wasn't worth the paper it was written on. She considered it no marriage at all and even tried to persuade Catherine to poison her new husband. The Widow also went to Alta California authorities in Monterey to try to separate the couple but they, knowing of

Graham's fiery temper, declined to do anything about it.

Two girls were born to the happy couple while the Widow fumed and fretted in the background.

And then, one unhappy day in 1849, a young man appeared at Catherine's door. He was Graham's grown son Jesse, by a wife living in Texas — something Graham had forgotten to mention to Catherine. This news so upset Catherine that she helped herself to Isaac's box of gold, disguised herself as a man, took the kids and fled to San Francisco.

From there, she hopped a ship for the Sandwich Islands (Hawaii) and eventually, Oregon. Isaac found them and brought them back to Santa Cruz where a bitter court battle took place over custody of the little girls. Gunplay erupted with the Widow taking part. She shot and missed but was herself wounded and her son Dennis was killed by Graham's son Jesse.

Jesse escaped and was not apprehended until 38 years later when he was a respected farmer in Fresno; he pleaded self defense and was acquitted. Catherine's contract marriage was annulled and she married a dairy farmer. The Widow recovered from her gunshot wound and was heard from no more. Perhaps she decided that guns were "men's stuff" after all.