



Season 6, Episode 1: Annie Oakley Coin, Cody, Wyoming

Elyse Luray: our last story re-awakens the myths and legends of the American Wild West. In the late 1800s, the public was enthralled by epic tales from the frontier...and one woman symbolized the romance and independence of the Wild West more than any other.

Her name was Annie Oakley. By her mid-20s, her sharpshooting skills made her a headliner for the greatest traveling entertainment of its day – Buffalo Bill's Wild West show – where she charmed fans who would give anything for a token from the famous gunslinger. Now, a woman from Bath, Maine, thinks her family may have just such a token: an Annie Oakley original.

Meadow: I have a coin that family legend says was shot by Annie Oakley.

Elyse: I'm Elyse Luray and I'm meeting Meadow Merrill to look into her story. Why would your family have a coin shot by Annie Oakley?

Meadow: Apparently I had some distant uncles who were in Buffalo Bill Cody's Wild West band.

Elyse: I know that the cowboy band musicians were big stars of their day who brought popular music to the masses, playing rousing marches while stars like Annie Oakley wowed audiences. And the Wild West show was really incredible at that time; it was one of the biggest forms of entertainment. There was no television; there was no radio. And people traveled from all over the country just to see Buffalo Bill and Annie Oakley.

Meadow: Yeah, it would be great if we had that real connection.

Elyse: What specifically do you want me to find out?

Meadow: I want to know whether Annie Oakley could have shot this coin.

Elyse: That might be a tough one. Do you have any information for me to go on, anything else I could use?

Meadow: I've got some old family photographs that were in the secretary where my mother kept the coin.

Elyse: Oh, look at that. Now who's this?

Meadow: This is one of my distant uncles. He's got his clarinet.

Elyse: He's quite the cowboy.



Meadow: And then here is a family photo I think.

Elyse: This might be Meadow's uncle here, without his mustache.

Meadow: And I'm assuming that one of these other young men here perhaps was his brother.

Elyse: But she's not sure which one.

Meadow: And then here is the whole cowboy band together.

Elyse: Oh, that's great. Family lore has long held that Meadow's two great-uncles are also in this photo of the Wild West band. But it's difficult to tell who's who. Meadow's uncles could be here...or here...or here.

Meadow: it's a legend I grew up hearing as a little girl, but I don't have any information to put it all together.

Elyse: Do you have any information from the family? Any names or anything like that I can go on? Meadow tells me her relatives lived in Connecticut, and that their last names might be either Lincoln or Livingston. I'm going to do some research and I'll get back to you.

Meadow: Great. Thank you.

Elyse: All right, right off the bat I can tell you that it's made of bronze and it's really worn and something really ripped this coin apart. But was it a bullet? It looks like it's a Napoleon the 3rd, 1853 bronze coin. A coin like this would have been in circulation through the early 1900's. That would date to Annie's time, but I'm curious: how would a French coin have met with the wrong end of a Western girl's gun? From an appraising point of view I don't think the coin is really worth a lot of money, but if I can associate it with Annie Oakley then we have an extraordinary piece of western memorabilia. To find out more about my mystery sharpshooter, I'm headed to Cody, Wyoming, located at the edge of the Bighorn Basin and Yellowstone National Park. It's not tough to imagine Annie Oakley herself appearing on horseback somewhere in these hills. In fact, she and Buffalo Bill Cody are household names in these parts – and the town was named for him. I'm starting my search at the town's rodeo grounds. Before I get deep into my investigation, I want to get a better sense of the kind of shooting we're talking about. Local sharpshooter and Annie Oakley firearms expert, Sam Nicholson, has agreed to try to recreate the alleged shot using an antique Winchester with a 44 caliber cartridge, which he says Annie favored. And he's mounted a French coin – just like ours.

Now is this distance from here to where we're going to shoot the same as Annie Oakley would shoot?



Sam: Yeah 75 feet.

Elyse: 75 feet. So she would shoot from 75 feet away that little coin?

Sam: Yes ma'am, very similar to what she would have done. She used a model 92 Winchester, lever action, magazine tube gun. This is very, very much like what she would have used.

Elyse: All right, well can you show me how she did it?

Sam's set up the shot – but leaves me holding the gun! He wants me to get a better feeling for who Annie Oakley was. And right away I'm impressed – she was just over 5 feet tall, and the Winchester is a lot heavier than I thought. Okay, take a deep breath. I miss the coin, and get the feeling this could go on all day. The gun goes to an expert before I do some real damage. All right Sam, let's see if you can beat me. It's your turn.

Sam: Let's see if we can get somewhere close here.

Elyse: Bingo! Let's go check it out. Finally, Sam nails the target. But it took eight tries!

Sam: Barely, but I tagged it. See here?

Elyse: And something else is a little odd. Sam's shot left the coin with a smooth marking, while ours is more torn and jagged. He's not sure what to make of this, so I'm checking in with historian Paul Fees at Cody's historic Irma Hotel. Could Annie Oakley really have shot our coin? Paul, does the coin story I have make any sense to you? Could Annie Oakley have shot this coin?

Paul: Annie Oakley was as good as legend has it. She was so good that some friends of hers set her up in a match with a traveling variety show marksman named Frank Butler. She beat him, they fell in love, and she learned to be a professional marksperson.

Elyse: Annie had been born into poverty in Ohio, where her survival depended on teaching herself to shoot and hunt. But in 1885 the showman Buffalo Bill folded her into his grand showcase of western curiosities. The Wild West show traveled throughout the United States and Europe. That may be where our coin was shot, and Paul says there's no doubt coins were part of her show.



Paul: She used to run into the arena, leap over a table, grab a shotgun and shoot clay pigeons out of the air. She could split a playing card held on end. She could turn her back to her dog and using a mirror shoot the apple off its head. She could shoot a coin held in her husband's fingers.

Elyse: I tell Paul about Meadow's relatives, who may have gotten the coin while playing in the Wild West cowboy band. Paul tells me the band pumped up the crowd with patriotic, military-style brass band music. They started the show with the star spangled banner long before it was the national anthem.

Elyse: Would Annie Oakley have known members of the cowboy band?

Paul: The Wild West show was, as Annie herself said, one big family.

Elyse: So it's not hard to imagine a shot coin changing hands between shows and tour stops.

Paul: Something to show the folks back home that yes, he had really know the great Annie Oakley.

Elyse: Paul has no way of telling if Annie Oakley shot our coin, but he suggests someone at Cody's Buffalo Bill Historical Center might be able to help. Curator Lynne Houze shows me the Annie Oakley display.

Lynne: This is a picture of Annie Oakley sitting out in front of her tent, the way she was when she was not performing in the arena. Ankle length dress, very much a lady, and yet she went into the arena and shot the lights out of things.

Elyse: How unique was Annie Oakley for her time period?

Lynne: You have to remember in this time frame women just didn't do things like this. This was the Victorian age. It was a man's sport.

Elyse: Lynne has something she thinks may help us.

Lynne: We have some coins right here on display that we know were shot by Annie Oakley.

Elyse: Can we compare the two?

Lynne: We certainly can.

Elyse: That's quite a shot. I mean, that's exactly right through the target.



Lynne: Right, it is.

Elyse: And what are the markings on it?

Lynne: It says it's shot with a Remington rifle.

Elyse: Sam told me that Annie had favored a Winchester. But Lynne explains that Annie's popularity made her an attractive figure for advertisers, who were eager for her to endorse their products.

Lynne: This coin was made specifically for Annie Oakley to shoot. She was a huge commodity.

Elyse: But other than being two damaged pieces of metal, the coins are very different. Mine is much smaller, it's a different kind of coin, and even the shot is different. Were Meadow's relatives even in the cowboy band? Lynne offers to let me do some digging in the museum's research library. Unfortunately, there's no official cowboy band musician roster. So I'm checking a database compiled over the years of all of Buffalo Bill's employees, friends, and acquaintances. This was a huge production – there are eight thousand names on this list! The last names for the brothers that Meadow gave me were either Lincoln or Livingston. So let's check the L's. It takes a while – but this may be something. Okay, here's a couple of names. Livingston, Harry and David. And they're listed as musicians. Maybe Lynne has more information about the men? Are these musicians Meadow's uncles? Question for you: I have two strong possibilities of brothers that were in the band....I ask her if she knows when Harry and David Livingston were with the Wild West show.

Lynne: The Livingston brothers I'm not familiar with, but I we may have something on them.

Elyse: While Lynne's hunting for information on the Livingstons, she says there's someone else in town who should see my coin. The town is also home to one of the world's most comprehensive collections of American firearms, here at the Cody Firearms Museum. Ballistics expert David Kennedy has agreed to inspect our mystery coin for clues. Dave, here's the coin that I called you about. Is there anyway you can tell me if Annie Oakley could have shot that coin?

Dave: It's a possibility. The first thing I would do would be to try and see if there are any marks left by the bullet. Each model of rifle has slightly different patterns internal to the barrel. Those bullets will occasionally leave marks on whatever objects they strike.

Elyse: So the markings are like fingerprints.



Dave: Yes.

Elyse: And how do you find these markings? How do you see them?

Dave: Well we've got a nice binocular microscope here.

Elyse: The information could tell us what kind of firearm was used for the shot...and whether it's one Annie Oakley would have used... So what do you see?

Dave: A large number of fractures in the metal. But there's no other marks here that would identify the type of firearm used.

Elyse: David says any identifying markings may have worn off with time. If there's no markings what's the next step?

David: All right, we'll need to take these cartridges.

Elyse: If we can't identify the gun, David suggests figuring out what size bullet might have ripped through our coin. The damaged area should fit the bullet that shot it. First, David tries a .44 caliber, the one we tested at the rodeo grounds, but it's not a snug fit. Right, I see a little space.

Dave: There is a little air there.

Elyse: So that's not right.

Dave: That's not correct.

Elyse: Then he places the coin next to a smaller .38 caliber bullet. Looks pretty good to me.

Dave: This looks pretty good. It looks like this is going to be a .38.

Elyse: Would Annie Oakley have used a .38 caliber to shoot this coin? Annie did favor a Winchester and a .44 shell, but David says she was also a sure-shot with lots of other guns.

Dave: Annie Oakley was quite fond of the .38 caliber and it was one of the more popular cartridges during that era.



Elyse: David then solves another mystery from the rodeo grounds – why the two coins looked so different. In our test we had shot the coin while fixed to a target board. That wasn't the case with Meadow's coin.

Dave: By the shape of this coin, it was obviously shot at in the air.

Elyse: The uniform bending and tearing, suggests to David our coin was first thrown, then blasted, by our mystery sharpshooter.

Dave: I think it was shot in the air because of the curvature of the coin. If it was held in a sort of a mound or a clamp, it would have been flat, and then it would have folded the coin over sideways.

Elyse: But it's so tiny, that's an amazing shot! Isn't that impossible to do? I mean how many people could possibly do that?

Dave: Very few people could do that. Annie Oakley was one of those people.

Elyse: An expert shot had marked our coin...but that doesn't prove it was Annie Oakley. Our investigation may hinge on whether Lynne's found information linking Meadow's uncles to the cowboy band. Unfortunately, Lynne has no information about my suspects, Harry and David Livingston. But she has dug up some cowboy band photos.

Lynne: Now I also found this photo.

Elyse: Including one that looks a lot like the photo Meadow left with me. Oh, it's the same one as mine. Although you have writing and I don't.

Lynne: This says the name of the photographer, which is Banks.

Elyse: Right.

Lynne: On Market Street in Manchester.

Elyse: Manchester. Is that New Hampshire?

Lynne: No, that's England.



Elyse: Oh, really?

Lynne: The Wild West was in England in Manchester in 1887.

Elyse: If Meadow's relatives are in this picture, we know for sure they were in Europe, where they might have gotten the French coin. Truthfully, I may be running out of leads. Let me take a different approach. Meadow said her uncles lived in Connecticut. But again it's a frustrating search. Census records do not turn up Harry and David Livingston. I've got one thing left to try.

We know these guys exist. And from my past genealogical research experience, I know that names can be misspelled, or often they're changed. So I'm going to cast a wider research net, and I'm going to change their name a little bit, misspell it, and see what I can find. It takes a while, but my hunch finally pays off. I found it. The information I need is right here. Time to check back with Meadow.

This was a tricky one.

Meadow: What did you find?

Elyse: I tell Meadow her coin appears to have been targeted in mid air...something Annie Oakley was known to do, and a shot that very few marksmen – or women – were capable of making.

Meadow: Oh, that's neat.

Elyse: but the real challenge has been linking her uncles to Annie Oakley and the cowboy band. It was only when I tried an old genealogy trick that I made any progress. When I try Livingstone with an "e" things look up. This is interesting. I found Harry and David Livingstone, and they're living in Connecticut. They had five sisters. Are the Livingstone's I found in the cowboy band somehow connected to Meadow? It seems that one of the band member's sisters is the missing link. Ah ha! It looks like the younger sister Sarah is the connection. She married Harold Lincoln and they had a son, Spencer. And that's Meadow's grandfather. So your musician ancestors were definitely in Buffalo Bill's Wild West show.

Meadow: That's so exciting. So the story was true.

Elyse: Given the link between Meadow's relatives and Annie Oakley, there's a pretty good chance Annie was indeed our markswoman.

Meadow: That's terrific.



Elyse: I can't be 100% certain how the coin fell into your relatives' hands. It could be a memento that they picked up or Annie Oakley could have personally given it to them, but I can say that it's an amazing piece of western memorabilia.

Meadow: My mom is going to be thrilled. Thank you so much for finally bringing these answers to my family.

Elyse: After retiring from the Buffalo Bill Wild West show, Annie Oakley continued performing on her own, mentoring young women in shooting, and even becoming a film star. Annie Oakley died in 1926 at the age of 66. Her death was followed only three weeks later by that of her husband and shooting partner of half a century, Frank Butler.