

FORT PITT MUSEUM

By Alan Gutches
Director, Fort Pitt Museum

“These Spartan Females”: Riflemen on the Frontier

By the time of our Revolutionary War, the rifle-toting backwoodsman had become an icon of the American frontier. A combination of hunter, marksman, and warrior, his unnerving accuracy and unconventional appearance fascinated the public and terrorized enemies. The exploits of real and fictional riflemen, from Daniel Boone to Natty “Hawkeye” Bumppo, became popular reading material for all ages during the 19th century.

A revival of interest in those heroic figures began in the 1950s. Movies, TV shows, books, and comics spun mostly fanciful tales to a new generation. Sales of coonskin caps soared to more than 5,000 a day. In spite of this attention, another group of gun-toting frontier folk—women—were largely overlooked in most early-American frontier histories and popular fiction.

The nature of life in America’s back country during the 18th and 19th centuries dictated that women might also have to pick up arms, including rifles, for hunting and defense—activities far less common

for their city-dwelling sisters. In 1763 James Kenny, a trader at Fort Pitt, described some settlers reacting to the threat posed by Pontiac’s War; Kenny noted that while some prepared to flee east, “Two Women & some Children being by themselves on that side ye Creek stayed there & one of them Loaded a Gun I heard to stand in her defence if ye Indians Should come.”

Use of firearms by women in the backwoods appears to have been fairly common. In 1810, traveler Christian Schultz noted, “On more than one occasion have I

seen these Spartan females, while engaged at the spinning wheel, or in some other domestic occupation, snatch up the loaded rifle, and fell the bounding deer as he incautiously passed within shot of the cabin.”

Louisa St. Clair, daughter of General Arthur St. Clair, is an excellent example of a woman who took marksmanship seriously. Born about 1772 and raised in Western Pennsylvania, she relocated in 1790 with her family to the Ohio settlement of Marietta, where her father served as governor of the Northwest Territory. An extremely popular young lady (in spite



**Rifleswoman
Ann Bailey.**
Private collection.

of bucking conventional 18th-century gender roles), she excelled in running, ice skating, and horseback riding. But she had other talents; one early historian compared her to a Roman goddess:

She was also an expert huntress; and would have afforded a good figure of Diana in her rambles through the woods, had she been armed with the bow, instead of the rifle. Of this instrument she was a perfect mistress; loading and firing from the highest tree, or cutting off the head of a partridge with wonderful precision.

Louisa returned to Western Pennsylvania, where she married Samuel Robb. They settled near Ligonier and raised a family.


An even more flamboyant riflewoman was Anne Bailey. Born about 1742, she came to America as a servant, settling in Virginia. She engaged in numerous frontier adventures, had at least one child, and was widowed twice before the age of 50. Due to her unconventional behavior, she earned the nickname “Mad Anne.” In the early 1820s,

a traveler in Western Virginia recorded her encounter with the aging legend shortly before her passing:

This female is a Welch woman, and is now very old. At the time Gen. Lewis’s army lay at the point. A station on the Kenhawa River. Ann would shoulder her rifle, hang her shot-pouch over her shoulder, and lead a horse laden with ammunition to the army, two hundred miles distance, when not a man could be found to undertake the perilous task—the way thither being a perfect Wilderness, and infested with Indians. I asked if she was afraid — she replied, “No she was not; she trusted in the Almighty—She knew she couldn’t only be killed, and she had to die sometime.”

The stories of these “Spartan females” and their more abundant male counterparts are part of a new exhibition at Fort Pitt Museum through October 30, 2011. *The American Frontier Rifleman: Tall Tales & Truth* examines the lives of these hunters and warriors as well as showcases a variety of rare items, many never before displayed



publicly. These include one of only four currently known surviving 18th-century hunting shirts, several Revolutionary War rifles, (including examples of those used by the British army), and nearly 50 other related objects. 

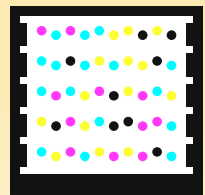
Smithsonian Connection



Smithsonian Affiliations Membership Program

The boxing gloves used by heavyweight contender Joe Louis in his June 19, 1936, loss to Max Schmeling will be on display in the History Center’s *Pittsburgh Courier* exhibition through September 2011.

*Smithsonian Institution,
National Museum of American History,
Kenneth E. Behring Center.*



These gloves are part of 1939, a Smithsonian exhibition revealing how Americans were entertained between the Great Depression and World War II.