



INTRODUCTION

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On June 30, 1991, I bought a gun. I did not buy it for self-defense, sport, or hobby. I bought it because I missed my brother. The catalyst was Desert Storm. People I knew were being sent to fight in Iraq, and this stirred up strong memories of Jimmy and the Vietnam War. An excellent marksman who had had hopes of becoming a gunsmith, Jimmy left for boot camp when I was nine and died in Vietnam when I was twelve—he was all of twenty-one years of age. Guns were always a part of his life. I bought my gun because I wanted to understand what he loved about firearms. By doing what he loved most, I thought I might learn more about him.

I bought my revolver out of curiosity, with no intention of becoming a long-term gun owner. I had ideas of what gun people were like, and I wasn't going to become one of them. I thought I would shoot for a while and then sell my gun. This didn't happen. I grew to enjoy shooting for a number of reasons; being in the company of gun women played a major role. I enjoyed target practice—shooting at paper targets and learning how to improve my skills. My gun range welcomed women, and a few of us formed a club and met weekly to shoot. Nothing formal. We talked about our accomplishments and failures, and we encouraged each other. We even invited a female police officer to talk to us about her experience as a cop, and some of us took a shooting class together. I found myself hanging out after practice, talking about different types of firearms.



Maggie C. Brown in her garden with her Remington Single Shot .22, Farmington, Georgia; 1997.
[Chromogenic print. Photograph by Nancy Floyd.]

Maggie Brown: My mother had eleven children. I'm the baby. The youngest sister left home when I was eight years old and I grew up with my brothers. They would take me hunting and they got me a .22 rifle. We'd hunt sometimes two or three times a week. And I finally learned how to shoot as good as they did, even better.



Off the range we didn't know each other, but on the range we were a small collective with a focus. Our group was not an anomaly: around the country, in various places, women shooters in the 1990s were seeking the company of other women and looking for information and training to meet their needs.

The first year I spent with my revolver I read everything I could find on guns, including *Women & Guns* magazine (1989 to present) and Paxton Quigley's best seller, *Armed and Female* (1989). *Thelma and Louise* (1991) and *Terminator 2: Judgment Day* (1991), new movies my gun friends and my feminist friends

talked about, provoked debate over definitions of self-defense and the reasons behind Hollywood's increased interest in armed female characters. Because my own documentary projects as a photographer often included research about social or cultural issues, armed women interested me, and in 1993 I began interviewing and photographing some of the women I met at the range.

I was curious—I wanted to know who these women were and what motivated them to pick up a gun. I wanted to know how they handled their difference at a mostly male shooting range, police precinct, or military base. Where did they get their training? What kinds of guns did they shoot? Even the clothing they wore and the types of carrying cases they chose interested me. Why were they entering, in many cases, troubled waters where “no women allowed” signs were posted in most people’s minds?

My interviews and photographs evolved over the years, moving far beyond my initial gun range contacts. Since that first visit to the gun range, I’ve conducted more than fifty interviews and made portraits of women from California, Georgia, New York, Massachusetts, South Dakota, and Wyoming, and I’ve amassed hundreds of photographs of gun-related activities. While a few of these women are well known in the gun world, most are not. They come from all walks of life, and their stories include those of a woman whose grandmother was killed by an intruder, an eleven-year-old girl competing in her first gun competition, and a woman who experienced firefights in Iraq.

By the second half of the 1990s I was traveling to archives and libraries to further my research. Because of my interest in visual materials, I focused on the period from the Civil War to the present. Since the mid-nineteenth century, advances in publishing and photographic technology have allowed stories, photographs, and illustrations of armed females to be circulated widely in the popular press, in fiction, and in advertising. For the past 150 years American women have acquired guns for hunting, competition, and self-defense. They’ve gone to war, some by cross-dressing, and they’ve joined police departments when allowed to. Because their actions are still contrary to standard notions of femininity and female behavior, these wives, abolitionists, feisty girls, rioters, suffragists, feminists, and military wannabes have often been thought of as curiosities, novelties, and, sometimes, freaks of nature. These women, especially those who bucked oppressive systems or chose their own path, regardless of the challenge, captivated me.

The gun I bought in 1991 was a revolver, a Ruger .38 Special. After the fifteen-day waiting period required by California law, the gun became legally mine, even though I had never before owned or fired a firearm. For six months I flinched with each trigger pull; a year passed before I knew that I was keeping my gun, and

right: Sears Christmas Catalog, 1965, p. 153. Clothing and toy catalogs of the 1950s and 1960s commonly pictured girls in cowgirl outfits with toy guns. [Reprint courtesy of Sears®.]

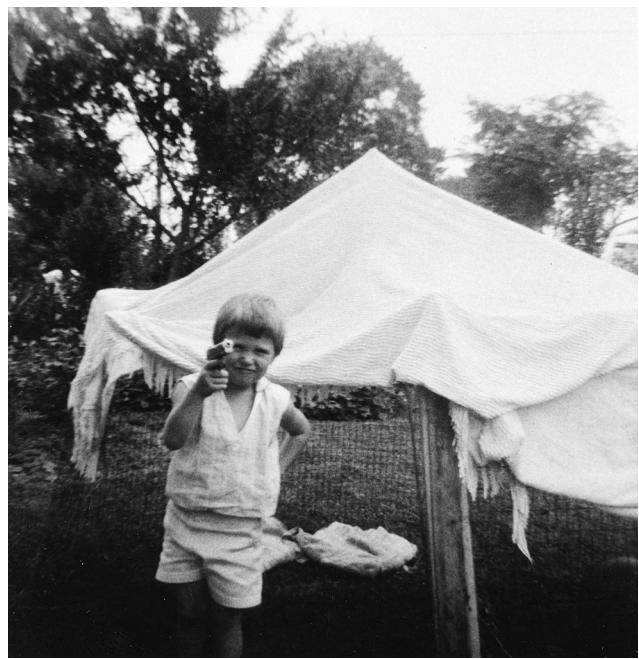
I needed three more years before I knew I wanted to shoot competitively.

When Mother learned that I wanted to enter competitions, her response was, "Just like Jimmy." And on the surface, it did seem as though I were following in my brother's footsteps. But there were significant differences: my interest in guns has not erased my ambivalence and, at times, my contradictory feelings toward firearms. Unlike Jimmy, I do not like John Wayne movies, nor am I interested in hunting. Additionally, because I am a woman, I cannot blend in easily at a gun range, and I cannot ignore the sexism and malevolence that sometimes erupts when women attempt to enter a male environment.

Culture and upbringing play an important role in my overall thoughts about firearms. I grew up in a small Texas town in the 1960s and 1970s, in a time and place where hunting was common and rifles decorated many pickup interiors and the walls of many homes. Most prepubescent girls I knew, including me, owned a cowgirl outfit. Some of our costumes came with a sidearm. For years, my brother, sisters, and I played shootout with the neighborhood kids; our arsenal included popguns, cap guns, rubber-band guns, and water pistols. I even owned a glass gun containing candy that I sucked out through its barrel. Before Jimmy left for Vietnam, it was common practice for him and his best friend, Wesley, to practice quick draw, emulating *Gunsmoke's* Marshal Dillon. I was impressed by their mastery.

My family watched TV Westerns while I was growing up, even though Dad was often quick to editorialize, pointing out that the horses weren't breathing heavily after a long chase, or remarking on the amazing ability of the cowboy to be so well groomed after living on the trail for a month without a bath or change of clothes. My brother, sisters, and I were under the spell of the mas-





left: Joy Wasson playing with younger brother Charles on Christmas Day, ca. 1962.

[Chromogenic print, 3" x 3". Reprint courtesy of Joy Wasson.]

right: Joy Wasson at her grandparent's house, ca. early 1960s.

[Silver gelatin print, 3" x 3". Reprint courtesy of Joy Wasson.]

Joy Wasson: My parents saved a letter I had written when I was about six. It read 'Dear Santa: I want all of these,' followed by pictures of every toy gun in the Sears catalog. I had cut out rifles and pistols and pasted them down, hoping I'd get my very own arsenal for playing cowboys with my little brother. Santa was good to me and gave me a toy rifle and the western wear to go with it. In the very gender-specific "wish book" I was always craving the boys' stuff—which appealed to me much more than dolls ever did. It amuses me now that I was so into playing with guns since I became a pacifist and very anti-gun as soon as I got a little older.

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line, gun-toting persona projected by many of the actors, but we also laughed at our heroes because Dad's critiques were in a language we could understand. His disparaging comments allowed me to see the absurdity in our melodramas, but they did not stop me from experiencing the excitement of an action-packed Western. Until my brother's death, bravado excited my fancy.

I'm not quite sure why unsupervised twelve- and thirteen-year-old boys were allowed to travel around the town I grew up in carrying .22 rifles, but my one and only real fistfight occurred when I caught my enemy and his friends shooting birds in the pasture where I kept my horse. While many places in

and around League City were designated for hunting, horse pastures were not among them. I didn't like my nemesis shooting birds, and I didn't like his rifle carelessly pointing in the direction of the horses in the distance. It never crossed my mind that he might point the rifle in my direction. I chastised him for improper handling of a firearm; his cocky attitude toward my criticism made me angry, and I challenged him to a fistfight. There are two explanations for my fearlessness: I saw no connection between Hollywood portrayals of armed bad guys and armed boys from my neighborhood, and I was a bit naïve. Luckily, after a brief heated argument, my enemy disarmed and we proceeded to slug it out bare-fisted.

Like many Texas families, mine visited the Alamo, and I learned about heroism and fighting until the last man falls. Like all American schoolchildren, I studied the American Revolution in history class, with teachers and textbooks stressing the importance of the militia and armed rebellion. We were also told that the North won the Civil War because, among other things, Northerners had better access to artillery, rifles, and revolvers. In government class, the militia came up again when we learned about the Second Amendment to the Constitution. Then as now, American children were taught that our victories over belligerent and evil foreign foes were due to America's democracy and superior firepower. American history is loaded with stories of armed resistance.

In the late 1960s and 1970s I occasionally watched *The Avengers* (1961 to 1969), *Policewoman* (1974 to 1978), and *Charlie's Angels* (1976 to 1981) on television, but footage of female Black Panthers and other armed women on the nightly news made the biggest impact on me. Women angry with America surprised and interested this “peace, love, and understanding” antiwar teen.

In 1979 and again in 1986, Sigourney Weaver's supertough character in *Alien* and *Aliens* won my emerging feminist heart. Ellen Ripley was smart, tough, powerful, and she could save herself. She also looked really good in her underwear, and she loved her cat. I'd fight aliens with her any day.

What I didn't know at the time was that while Hollywood's armed women entertained Americans, police and military women were fighting for economic parity in precincts and bases across the country. These women had advantages their previous sisters did not—the feminist movement had influenced mainstream attitudes about equal opportunity, and the 1972 Amendment to Title VII of the 1964 Civil Rights Act mandated equal access to jobs in both the private and the public sectors. Also helpful were understaffed police forces and a volunteer military looking for more recruits. Letting women in was one thing, but allowing them opportunities on par with men was another. Female cops



C. Lemke,

Wausau, Wis.

Victorian cabinet card, ca. 1860-1900.
[Photograph by Carl Lemke, Wausau, Wisconsin. 4 1/4" x 6 1/2".]



Studio portrait of cowgirl, no postmark, ca. 1909-18.
[Postcard by Louis. Real photo postcard, 3 3/8" x 5 3/8".]

and servicewomen still threatened manhood, masculinity, and definitions of the American warrior. And while women were needed in the military, America was not quite ready to let them fight and die in combat.

During the 1980s, women who exerted power and influence impressed me: a friend joined the police force, gun-toting feminist politician Ann Richards was elected governor of Texas, and the television show *Cagney and Lacy* (1982 to 1988) featured strong female characters using their intellect, their skills, and, on occasion, their guns to catch the bad guys.

Americans had become increasingly preoccupied with gun violence by the 1990s, with activists for and against gun control taking to the airwaves to promote their points of view. No one seemed to want to compromise. The National Rifle Association (NRA) and other pro-gun groups worked to ensure that all law-abiding citizens could arm themselves and carry weapons whenever and wherever they felt threatened. They opposed the passage of the Fed-

eral Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act of 1994. Among other things, the act banned certain types of firearms and set limits on the number of rounds allowed in magazines. With a Democratic Congress in power throughout much of the 1990s, the NRA's supporters grew increasingly concerned about further firearm restrictions.

Antigun groups saw things differently. With upward of thirty thousand deaths by firearms a year—half by suicide—and children taking guns to school and using them on their peers, with gang activity and workplace shootings receiving persistent media attention, they were outraged to discover how easy it was to acquire firearms. The topic of firearm possession became a media frenzy.

Like other groups in the 1990s, the NRA became interested in gun women (female NRA members played a significant part in this) and targeted women for the group's own agenda. At the NRA's 1995 annual meeting in Phoenix, Arizona, for example, I was encouraged by some male members to become active in the organization. At an evening banquet, I was informed by the man sitting next to me that I could become a powerful woman if I were to head an NRA chapter in California. Unfortunately, I didn't get a chance to find out what kind of power he thought I might acquire, because our honored speaker of the evening was introduced just then. Perhaps my friend meant that I could chair local meetings with a couple of Colt .45 revolvers at my side, looking cool and well equipped. If someone got out of line, I'd just shoot 'em—after all, starting fistfights was now in my past.

Women in the NRA were no joke, however, and their presence was all the buzz that year for two reasons. Marion Hammer became the NRA's first female president (1996 to 1998), reigning a few years alongside the executive director of the NRA's Institute for Legislative Action, Tanya Metaksa (1994 to 1998). For the first time in its history, the NRA leadership included a public female face. These two strong women had battled in the trenches with the

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Girl with flintlock muzzle-loading musket, ca. 1911.

[Silver gelatin print, 3 1/8" x 5 7/16".]





men for years and were now coming into their own. Even while my political views collided with theirs, I was impressed by their fortitude and their influence on other women—I’m pretty sure it wasn’t an easy job being female figureheads in the NRA.

The NRA leadership became the butt of many antigun jokes because of its efforts to recruit more women. Leaders freely admitted that they needed us to join because female members would improve the group’s weakened image as an all-American family organization. I was disappointed that one of the oldest, most conservative mens’ clubs in America didn’t want my membership because of my pleasant personality, excellent shooting skills, and ability to get along with others. Even though women were active within the NRA, the organization certainly wasn’t known for embracing women’s particular needs.

Now as then, while the NRA keeps trying to get our memberships, antigun leaders tell us that we’re being duped by the gun industry, that we’re being sold a false sense of security, and that armed women will further break down the safety of our society. I interpret this antigun argument to read: women who choose to own a gun are really dumb and need help making decisions when it comes to issues involving violence and men’s toys. Antigunners seem especially critical of gun women with children, which in turn angers many gun moms for good reason. As Sharon Higashi forcefully asked me in an interview in 1996,

Why is that line drawn, the line that says I can have all this dangerous stuff in my home: knives, poisons, a swimming pool, a car, but not a gun? You can depend on me to teach my children not to drink the bleach, not to stab themselves with a knife, and not to use the power saw on themselves. So why is it when it comes to firearms all of a sudden I’m an inept bimbo?¹

My journey into armed citizenship began around the same time that women with guns became front-page media fodder. While pro- and antigun groups were going at it in Washington, women with firearms were being “discovered” by the press, and gun-toting women of all types and backgrounds were being paraded on talk shows and news programs, explaining to stunned audiences why they owned firearms. Usually an antigun spokesperson or a woman with a bad gun experience would be trotted out alongside a pro-gun woman. “Balance” was the host’s excuse, but it was hard to get good information, because the strategy on each side was to deliver the best sound bite.² Mean-spirited low blows and a confusing barrage of statistics proving that everyone in the room was right didn’t help. For example, the antigunner would state the number of people killed that

year by firearms, and then the pro-gunner would state how many lives had been saved that year with firearms. Or one would give a personal story about a firearm tragedy and the other would tell a tale of survival thanks to a firearm. Complex issues were raised occasionally, but the dog-and-pony shows informed no one. Stories and opinions about these women appeared in both popular and academic journals, with politicians, gun lobbyists, feminists, and antigun groups weighing in. Guns are a part of American culture, yet many people seemed surprised and concerned to learn that more than 10 million women were armed and that some aspired to careers that require the use of firearms.³

While Americans were battling over arming or disarming on the home front, a war abroad was changing our understanding of women who wanted equal access to traditionally male professions. For the first time in our history, large numbers of servicewomen, some trained in weapons and fighter-pilot roles, left their families to participate in the United States' first war with Iraq in 1991. More than thirty thousand female personnel were sent: some received medals; a few were wounded or killed.

A profusion of books and other publications about armed women began to appear in the 1990s. Mystery novels take top prize for true diversity in developing armed female characters. Today, mystery books come in all flavors and for every female audience: black and white, young and old, rich and poor, gay and straight. Popular history books include *An Uncommon Soldier* (1994), *Amazons and Military Maids* (1989), and *They Fought Like Demons: Women Soldiers in the American Civil War* (2002).⁴ Books for self-defense enthusiasts include *Effective Defense: The Woman, the Plan, the Gun* (1994), *Not an Easy Target* (1995), and *Safety for Stalking Victims* (2001).⁵ Books about women with guns include *Woman the Hunter* (1997), *Gun Women* (2000), *Women and Guns* (2001), *Silk and Steel* (2003), *Blown Away* (2004), and *Her Best Shot* (2006).⁶

In fact, the armed woman appears throughout our history—in pop culture, literature, criminology, sociology, military and police history, advertising, social history, and art. Sensationalist press coverage and political agendas merely made us a hot topic for a short time in the 1990s. Interest declined, however, once the stories began to repeat themselves, and most gun women's lives did not change dramatically, with the exception of police officers and servicewomen. The media frenzy ended, and the fact that some armed women continued to use their weapons wisely, some continued to use their weapons stupidly, and most we never heard from at all, apparently interested few people.

Sensationalist stories are nothing new, and sometimes it's fun to watch how far a scoop can go. But the media focused primarily on one question: did fire-



arms empower women or not? Such a simple question turned an individual who had made a complex decision to arm herself into a one-dimensional caricature. Across the spectrum of American pundits who made armed women a topic of discussion, conversations tended to focus more on the host's own baggage; women's own experience proved to be secondary, at best.

She's Got a Gun is about my experience with guns and some of the gun women I've met over the past fifteen years. I've combined this with a brief and select history of women and guns in America from the mid-1850s to the present. The women who interest me most, and the ones who figure most prominently in this book, are the ones who openly or clandestinely (e.g., women who cross-dressed in order to serve as soldiers) claimed their right to have guns for pleasure, power, or profession. Part I, "Pleasure," looks at the act of shooting at targets for recreation or in competition, as well as the act of watching shooting superstars and fictional gun women perform on stage, in an arena, on television, and on the big screen; Part II, "Power," looks at women who took up arms because they were concerned about personal safety and self-defense; and Part III, "Professional," looks at women who chose careers that require the use of a gun, including police officers and military servicewomen.

I begin with an introduction to firearms and my forays into shooting and becoming a gun woman. Chapter 1, "Guns 101" is part personal journey and part factual information about guns. It serves two purposes: it covers the ways in which my interest in and initial fear of my gun changed over time, and it explains to the uninitiated what shooting a gun and entering a gun range are like. Because the captions for many of the images in this book include the type of gun and the caliber and power of firearms that women use, "Guns 101" fills in gaps in experience and knowledge for people who don't own or use guns.

Over the years I've spent a lot of time talking with others about firearms. These conversations haven't always been pleasant, nor am I any more comfortable in the hot seat than most people. However, I have chosen to listen to those with whom I don't agree—some pro-gun, some anti, as well as many who fall in between—and by doing so, I've come to understand the complicated nature of armed resistance, personal desires, and fear. This book includes a journey through some women's lives and how they negotiate their choices as gun women.

Because I focus on gun issues relevant to the gun women I interviewed and photographed, some categories of gun women have not been covered. I've omitted hunters because there are many good books about female hunters—you will find these listed in the bibliography. I do include a few photographs and illustrations of hunters, however, because female hunters have been

represented in sports magazines, targeted by advertisers since the 1800s, and popularized in theater, film, and books. I have also omitted farmers and ranchers; female criminals; women anarchists (for example, the Montana Militia) and racists (for example, the Ku Klux Klan); women who commit suicide with firearms; women portrayed naked or seminaked with guns; and female characters in the video gaming industry and mainstream comic books.

The only women whom I discuss who handle weapons only occasionally or transitionally are found in Chapter 5, on self-defense; these are women who may possess weapons for defensive purposes only. I've included them because approximately two-thirds of American gun women have firearms for self-protection.⁷ Another exception is female entertainers; I'm interested in their performance with a gun, how they are represented, and how their representation affects culture.

I've been a visual artist for more than twenty years, producing work that mostly reflects my own background and experience. In 1986, for example, I completed a memorial room installation about Jimmy and his death at the age of twenty-one (*The James M. Floyd Memorial*, 1985–86). In 1992 I completed a photo documentary on nuclear power workers and their families—at the time my husband was an instrument technician at the San Onofre Nuclear Generating Station in Southern California (*Nuclear Families*, 1988–92); in 2002 I completed a photo/video installation about the passage of time on both my body and my childhood home (*Weathering Time*, 1982–2002); and *She's Got a Gun* evolved out of my wish to revisit Jimmy's past and learn more about him.

Because of my interest in images and how they are used in our culture, *She's Got a Gun* is also a picture book. As a photographer and a teacher I grapple professionally with the power of images. Images of people, whether painted, photographed, or computer generated, are commonly constructed to tell us something about individuals. In the right context, the producer of the image is able to make us feel affinity with and compassion for someone we don't know or understand. The producer of an image can also exaggerate the image to tell half-truths or lies. The image can be designed to keep certain groups of people down while empowering others. Through the repetition of certain types of images in the mass media, what is socially and culturally learned comes to seem natural. For this reason, it is important to look at images critically and to analyze the types of messages they send about race, class, gender, sexuality, values, taste, and acceptable modes of behavior. One of my goals for this book is to look at how images of women with guns have changed over time, primarily in mainstream popular culture—from Annie Oakley to Foxy Brown to the slew of female action heroes seen today—and to make connections between these mass-produced images of



armed women and changes in our culture, which influence the way we think about women's ability to handle firearms in the real world.

We all assign a certain amount of veracity to photographs—that person was standing in that space in that outfit, she held her gun that way, and those are her belongings in the background. Like all artists, however, I am the creator of my images—I've chosen a particular style in an attempt to convey certain types of information to viewers. While my photographs may appear unmanipulated (as opposed to a collage, montage, or altered digital images), there is a formula to their construction. I knew in advance how I wanted my portraits to look: what camera angle to use, what type of lighting, and how I would place the women inside the frame. With rare exceptions, I positioned the camera at, or slightly below, the eye level of the subject (not too low, not too high), giving the viewer a straight-on view. The lighting is almost always diffused (no bright white spots or shadows), allowing detail in all parts of the image to show clearly. It's a flattering style of lighting, used heavily in studio portraiture to hide wrinkles and flaws in the face (due to a lack of shadows that can create texture on the skin). The women are centered in the frame, creating a sort of bull's-eye view, like a target. Because I prefer some collaboration with my subjects, I tried not to control their pose any more than necessary, encouraging them to guide me in the making of their images. I'd say things like, "Stand over there and hold your gun any way you wish," or "Show me your gun." This strategy didn't always work, because not all the women knew how they wished to be represented. When possible, however, their input was part of the process. In exhibition, the photographs are printed large, at least 15" × 15", because I want the viewer to spend time looking at the portraits and studying the subject's demeanor, her choice of gun, and her environment.

Excerpts from interviews with gun women either accompany my photographs or are included within the text of this book. While their statements are only a fraction of each thirty-plus-minute conversation, and while they're edited for sentence flow, I tried to pick out passages that reflected the sentiments or personality of the individual—something that stood out in my mind, something I wanted the viewer to know about them. What I hoped to produce was a series of portraits that others would find engaging both because of the straightforward manner in which the women were photographed and because of the individual stories they tell or the opinions they express. These women, like many of the historical women I write about, will tell you straight up—they have guns for pleasure, power, and/or profession.

I was not trained as a historian, and one of my challenges when looking at old newspapers and magazines has been to assess what I read in them about



women with guns. When I've been lucky, I have been able to find verifiable information to confirm the accuracy or inaccuracy of reported events or stories, but often the accounts I've found appear to have been created for commercial purposes—for example, to sell tickets to an event, to increase newspaper, magazine, or book sales, or to sway public opinion. After generations of storytelling, these tales begin to assume the aura of fact. Some stories contain no hint of truth, and I know it—they're complete fabrications, all facts be damned; that's entertainment! Even when the armed woman tells her own story, I'm not always sure of the truthfulness of her statements.

This question of truthfulness matters to me: I want to believe that the real Calamity Jane—not the one in dime novels—enjoyed all the drinking, men, and wild adventures she partook of, even though evidence seems to suggest that she was a loud-mouthed, disagreeable drunk for much of her life. She still has a lot to offer me as a historical figure, however, because of what she tells us about her life and what the press tells us about her. While I'll never know the “real” Calamity Jane and do not intend to romanticize her life, I'm nonetheless intrigued by the image of a woman in the late 1800s doing what she pleased at a time when most women's activities were highly restricted.

I focus on armed women who make up part of the American imagination, both the famous and the not so famous. By looking at women whom we find endearing (Annie Oakley), who excite us by their daring (armed professionals), and who scared people with their acts of defiance (Black Panthers), I have gained a complex picture of armed women in American history. Using pictures and text dating back to the Civil War era, I look at how armed women have positioned themselves within or against the mainstream culture of their time.

A woman with a gun is a powerful symbol in America. A woman who arms herself is often held up not as an individual but as an example of what women should or should not aspire to. Until the 1980s most armed women, both fictional and real, were a novelty, and both purposefully stayed within mainstream ideas of femininity and behavior, even while armed. Those who stepped outside the norm, asking for equal opportunities with men or behaving in a manner deemed inappropriate for a lady, were often ostracized, and in many cases demonized. For women of all backgrounds, the message was clear: society might accept a woman who armed herself to protect her children, but not those who wanted to be in charge.

Significant change for armed women came slowly through the first half of the twentieth century and gathered momentum in the 1960s through the 1980s. Gun women have always been around. However, by the 1980s

and continuing today, a new and seemingly diverse group of armed females, including myself, emerged on the scene. Some of these women became activists in the 1980s, taking on issues of armed self-defense, the opportunity to compete in sports, and better job opportunities in traditionally male professions. Change was upon the country, and one of the most notable changes occurred among professional women: servicewomen and police officers. The change was most visible among female military personnel because of two wars with Iraq. While some Americans still believe that women in war are a bad idea, military women didn't seem to agree: today, one out of seven of the troops in Iraq is female.

Military women have experienced many firsts in the past fifteen years, and their efforts have paralleled those of the first female police officers. Today, while both continue to battle for equal opportunities, servicewomen take part in firefights in Iraq and female officers walk beats fully armed and prepared to shoot if necessary. At the beginning of the twentieth century, shooting phenomenon Annie Oakley encouraged girls and women to shoot for recreation, to protect themselves, and to protect the home front should men be away at war; at the dawn of the twenty-first century, female professionals are encouraging girls and women to set their career sites higher and aspire to leadership roles in community or national defense, where they may be asked to shoot to kill.

This past Christmas my brother Tom told me about a conversation he had with Jimmy sometime between 1965 and 1967. Tom was home from college and Jimmy spoke about his attempt to make an automatic weapon out of a cheap, semiautomatic pistol as part of his practice to be a gunsmith. Apparently the first attempt to modify and install an auto sear (a part that makes the pistol fully automatic) had failed, and he was in the process of ordering a new part to try again. No one in my family remembers whether Jimmy was successful or not.

My knowledge and experience with firearms has expanded greatly over the years, allowing me to better imagine Jimmy sitting at the big oak desk in his bedroom. The table lamp is set close to provide adequate light, gun parts are carefully strewn on the surface before him, and the fragrance of gunmetal and oil permeates the air. His rifles rest on the racks close to the entrance of his room and his handguns are hidden in a box in the closet. A small bookshelf holds books and magazines, including the 1954 two-volume set of Funk and Wagnall's *The Modern Gunsmith* by James Virgil Howe and *American Rifleman* magazines published by the NRA. A marmot skin with head intact stares at



him from the headboard of his bed. There are other hides as well. I can picture the hours passing while a teenage boy with black-rimmed glasses focuses on the job at hand, undeterred by setbacks. You see, he was a perfectionist who loved altering firearms—and he was curious about everything related to his chosen craft. He worked hard to better himself as a marksman, hunter, and gunsmith, and while in Vietnam as a small-arms repairman. The last five months of his life he was a gunner on a Chinook helicopter. Yes, he was passionate about firearms.

I do know Jimmy better because I have guns, and I'll tell you more about this in Chapter 6. But I would like to disclose my most valuable discovery here. Not only do I share Jimmy's interest in guns; I've discovered that we share personality traits. Jimmy's enthusiasm for gunsmithing and his determination to alter the semiautomatic pistol is similar to what an artist must do: accept failure as important to growth. Like Jimmy, I can spend long periods of time without distraction while I'm taking photographs, printing in the darkroom, creating three-dimensional objects, and constructing my installations. I too am a perfectionist; my passion is making art.

Jimmy left home when I was nine. I didn't know him as one adult to another, but today, as a gun woman and an artist, I feel a deeper connection with him—Jimmy's essence will always be with me when I pick up a firearm or tell a gun story.

t's 1998. I decide to act out a Marshal Dillon pose—the stance he takes right before he draws his gun and shoots the bad guy on Dodge's Main Street. You know: hands at his side, elbows slightly bent, preparing to grab the pistol fast. I want to create a photograph of myself, an image that says, "Don't mess with MY town, you no-good scoundrel!"

The photo shoot is in my studio. Donning a black outfit and holster, with my Para-Ordnance P-16 race gun and high-capacity magazines, I endeavor to alter my countenance. I have no badge, but a string of pearls establishes my authority. I take off my glasses so the bad guy can see the whites of my eyes.

I stand on a black sweep. A mirror by the lens allows me to see what the camera sees. I go through poses swiftly. If I don't smile, I look mean, in a grumpy sort of way. If I smile, I'm too easygoing. If I try the squinty grin Dillon does so well, I look just plain goofy. Disappointed, I acknowledge that no one's going to pay attention to a grumpy, easygoing, goofy female marshal. Marshals like me get killed off in the first scene. After three rolls of film, I'm forced to



*"It's only a cousin of mine!"
Bildred.*

accept the truth: I will never have the tough look—the look that townspeople respect in Marshal Dillon.

I imagine Jimmy standing in front of a mirror posing like Marshal Dillon.

He certainly would look a lot more convincing. Jimmy would also practice his quick draw, trying to beat his own image in the mirror.

I imagine Dad catching us in Marshal Dillon poses.

He'd tell us the bad guy isn't going to participate in a fair fight. Bad guys aren't fair. More likely, the no-good thievin' varmint will hightail it out of Dodge, circle around, sneak back in, and shoot us in the back. No glamour or heroism in that.

I imagine me and Jimmy leaving Dodge, galloping off into the sunset on powerful steeds.

In our clean clothes, on our calm horses, we discuss the action-packed Western we're going to make. We'll create our own Dodge City, where Jim will be the fastest gun in the West, and I'll look tough, in a respected sort of way. Dad will be on the film's oversight and small-details committee. Because this is my fantasy, women will take the starring roles in our melodrama, experience lots of adventures, and own their own guns. Ripley, Thelma, and Louise will be featured. Aliens and truckers will be optional.