

Sisterhood in the Wilderness

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I was delighted when my friend Tim* announced that he had a new girlfriend, not only because I was happy that he had found a companion, but also because I would no longer be quite so outnumbered by my male counterparts when we embarked on adventures in the outdoors on weekends.

I couldn't ask for better hiking comrades, but when I found myself gradually acquiring pink apparel to wear on our adventures, I became more aware that perhaps I was making a statement without really intending to do so. My passion and my determination once fuelled my efforts to 'keep up' with my male climbing partners. But keeping up with a guy that's a full foot taller than you is a nearly impossible task, so I eventually settled on passionately prodding away at my own pace, enhancing the already beautiful landscape with my pink presence.

And if I know Tim well, he wouldn't date a woman who wasn't willing to pull on her hiking boots more often than her high heels. For this, I am eternally grateful.

Living and working in Banff National Park in Alberta, I have easy access to the surrounding peaks, and have made quite a hobby of hitting high elevations on my days off for the past five years. Perhaps 'hobby' is too soft a word. I could never call myself an expert, but with over 50 peaks under my belt, a few of which are some of the highest in the area, one could say I have become a genuine, modern-day mountain woman.

By no means am I the first one. Had I lived about 100 years ago, I would have found a kindred spirit in a woman named Mary Schaffer. Unlike me, however, this woman created controversy just by wearing pants. An artist, writer, photographer and all-around adventurer, Mary set off on a variety of explorations in the Canadian Rockies, the most famous of which led to the 'discovery' of Maligne Lake in 1907. Mary was granted the name "Yahe Weha" by the Stoney Nakoda, which means "Mountain Woman," and is regarded as the quintessential, modern-day female explorer.

Just prior to Schaffer's hey-day, had I been alive, I may have also crossed paths with the Iron Woman of the Canadian Rockies, Gertrude Benham, a woman who far surpassed any amount of determination, and insanity, I could ever muster up. In the summer of 1904, accompanied by Swiss Guides, Gertrude made the famous first ascent of Mount Fay, even beating out Professor Fay himself to the top. That same summer, she climbed Mounts Allen, Lefroy, Victoria, Temple, Stephen, Assiniboine, Gordon, Baker, Balfour, Sir Donald, and many more. Not only are these peaks some of the largest in the Canadian Rockies, these unthinkable climbs were done before Mountain Equipment Co-op became a climber's second home, before trails provided an invited ease from bushwhacking, and when knickers on women were about as rare as snow in the desert (not that this stopped Gertrude from shedding the traditional Edwardian attire.) Not to be

forgotten, however, is Gertrude's flair for femininity amidst her manly pursuits, selling embroidery and knitting to finance her climbing and travels in and beyond The Rockies.

Alas, I was born about 100 years too late. My pink jacket may be synonymous to Gertrude's knitting needles, but I am not really a pioneer in the field, pushing the limits for other women. Instead, that has been done for me, by these women and many others. As history shows us, a woman's claim to fame could be being the first woman, not person, to do just about anything. Junko Tabei made history when she stood on the roof of the world, becoming the first woman to summit Mount Everest. Ann Bancroft was the first woman to reach the North Pole. And the pursuits continue: Jennifer Figge, for instance, is trying to become the first woman to swim across the Atlantic. And in the slightly insane footsteps of Gertrude Benham, she is swimming in a shark cage attached to a sail boat.

At times it is hard to believe, but even in the 21st century, I am a mountain woman in a man's world of mountaineering. Naturally, fewer women enjoy adventurous sports, which means that they will always be outnumbered by men. For me there is nothing like the chalky smell of rock rubbing on rock, the sound of gear squeaking and jingling in the early hours of the morning, and the relief of arriving at an alpine hut where a wood fire awaits to dry your wet socks and warm the chills out of you. It is a special thing to enjoy these more rustic pleasures with other people, and on the rare occasion where a woman also joins in, I am overjoyed.

When the pace is just too darn fast, when going to the bathroom is an Olympic event, and when emotions kick in, there is nothing quite like a Sisterhood in the Wilderness. No words need to be spoken. A simple glance and smile offer a silent reassurance and encouragement, and inspire you to plod on as passionately as you can.

Ultimately, I am thankful that at least the presence of women in outdoor sports is being acknowledged in a more equitable way in the 21st Century. Equipment and apparel companies are finally recognizing that women's bodies are different than men's, as obvious as that might be already, and are making the necessary adjustments to ensure a proper fit. Sometimes I wonder how much more a person like Gertrude Benham would have accomplished with the latest in mountaineering equipment. Still, her accomplishments, despite the lack of technological advances, are perhaps what set her apart from even the men of the times.

What can we learn from our mountain predecessors like Gertrude Benham and Mary Schaffer? I believe these women would tell me to carve the path if it has not been carved for me already. Be the first one. Be a pioneer, if only for yourself. And don't let gender hold you back. In fact, celebrate it, and put your feminine stamp on the mountain's rocky face.

**This name has been changed.*