

# MARY SCHAFFER WARREN

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## Explorer

*Mary Schaffer a beaucoup voyagé dans  
les montagnes Rocheuses canadiennes entre les années  
1889 et 1903, aidant son mari dans sa quête de spécimens botaniques.  
Après la mort de ce dernier, elle a continué ses explorations  
et en 1908, elle a été la première femme  
non-indienne à atteindre le lac Maligne en Alberta.*

Within the borders of Jasper National Park, Alberta are peaks named for Edith Cavell and Mary Vaux, but there is no feature—mountain, lake, or pass—named for the first white woman to visit much of the area—Mary Schaffer Warren.

Born in 1869, Mary Schaffer, an amateur photographer, was unusual among explorers in several ways. For one thing, she was a woman; for another, she came to live with nature, not to 'conquer' it. Her expeditions had goals, but achieving them was not crucial. Of her four-month expedition in the summer of 1907 she wrote: 'Our chief aim was to penetrate to the head waters of the Saskatchewan and Athabasca rivers. To be quite truthful it was but an aim, an excuse, for our real object was to delve into the heart of an untouched land, to tread where no human foot had trod before, to turn the unthumbed pages of an unread book, and to learn daily those secrets which dear Mother Nature is so willing to tell to those who seek.' This admission may not now seem novel, but we should remember that it was made at a time when Rocky Mountain peaks were being climbed for the first time by some famous men in the mountaineering world: Stuttfeld, Collie, Woolley, Outram, and Wilcox, among others.

More peculiar than motivation was the simple fact of Mary Schaffer's sex. When she entered the world of exploration in the Canadian Rockies she entered an almost exclusively male domain. She was hardly of 'pioneer stock,' being a Quaker woman of comfortable means from Philadelphia, and it was a long way from the closed windows and crinolines of a Philadelphia parlor to breeches in the Rockies. Fortunately, Mrs. Schaffer's writings guide us a good part of the way.

In a short story called 'Heart of a Child'

Mrs. Schaffer's heroine is a girl named Mary whose imagination is captured by tales of the plains, buffalo hunts, and Indians, told by a romantic figure called Cousin Jim. Her young heart weeps at the plight of an Indian baby which, hidden under the dead body of its mother, survives a murderous cavalry attack: 'Even her young mind taught her [Indians] had not had fair treatment from the interlopers of their land.' The girl grows up and attends school and dances and dinners, 'but there always remained an insistent longing to see the people of the plains.'

In 1888 Mary Schaffer—then Mary Sharples, a girl of nineteen—first visited the Rockies with Mary Vaux of Philadelphia and her brothers, William and George. The men were keen geologists whose photographs are still used by glaciologists studying movement of the ice.

Around Glacier House, in the Selkirk Mountains near the top of Rogers Pass, the women did some minor exploring on their own. They visited Nakimoo caves, a few miles west of Glacier House. A newspaper of the time quoted Mary Vaux: '... finally we found our way back to the light by the same slippery ladders we had descended and realized how impracticable such a trip would be for a woman's skirts, our climbing costume making it possible for us to accomplish our end. . . . Our tent was pitched near the spot where Charles Deutchman [discoverer of the caves] had killed a large grizzly a short time before.' Oddly, Mary Schaffer recalled not the grizzly, but that Deutchman 'was a lover of animals and one of the strangest was a tame fly.' She added, 'I have learned to tame that special variety myself.'

The subject of clothing for women was often on Mary Schaffer's mind—as well it might have been for an active woman in an

era of heavy, ankle-length skirts. Years later she recalled how pleased she was to find a skirt that 'buttoned at will both hind and fore. When you mounted your steed you unbuttoned just enough to give your pommel full play in front and the cantle of your saddle behind. You then advanced amidst the public looking respectability itself. As soon as the village and critics were well left behind, you poked the old thing into your duffel bag and that was the end of anything but modern breeches, till you hailed back to civilization.' Her usual outfit included breeches, a buckskin jacket, and a red bandanna tied around the neck.

At age twenty Mary married Dr. Charles Schaffer, a Philadelphia physician and a serious amateur botanist. From 1889 until Dr. Schaffer's death in 1903 the couple made annual trips to the Rockies. Mary hiked, rode horseback, and climbed, primarily to aid her husband by gathering botanical specimens. Of this time she recalled: 'I had been studying botany in a rather desultory way—a delicate girl, not staunch enough to attempt some of the "first climbs" of which I was hearing daily or to penetrate some of the "new" valleys of which others spoke, but satisfying myself in gathering wild flowers . . . and bringing them back to one to whom botany meant so much and who was in himself a true botanist.'

The first pony trip Mary Schaffer engaged in was more ridiculous than sublime. 'It was in 1893 that a party of nine decided to see for themselves a lake known as Louise. [It was only eleven years earlier that Tom Wilson had become the first non-Indian to gaze upon the soon-to-be-famous lake.] I have often wondered whoever had the bright idea to suggest that we go our own forty miles to Louise on the

Mark J. Roth

top of a box-car. But we were so eastern we simply reveled in it and the mountain scenery, taking very little note of the belching smoke and cinders forward.' Indian ponies were engaged for the trek from the Canadian Pacific station at Laggan (now Lake Louise Station) to the lake. Mary bribed their owner, an Indian called William Twin, with a half-dollar to steer her to the most reliable steed. 'In a few moments we started on the Great Adventure. To stop and consider that day in the years so long gone, is funny. Those poor animals, the squaws and babies had been dragged eighty miles for nine "tender-feet" to ascend a moderate slope whose length was but three miles. When we reached our destination, I could have fallen off my horse with surprise, so suddenly had the great experience come to an end. Still, we had a sensation of having "done something."'

At that time, 'Lake Louise boasted no hotel at all—we slept in tents in '93, and from our door looked out upon that magnificent scene with chattering teeth and shivering bodies and vowed never again to camp in the Canadian Rockies. The promise, of course, was not kept.'

Later Mary ventured further afield and slowly learned the ways of Indian ponies. One day she threw a blanket and saddle on a horse called Buck and set off by herself. 'I had a premonition that I might not have fixed that cinch according to Hoyle. Leaning over, I took an extra reef in it, finding it, decidedly loose. About two hundred yards further along, I was suddenly astonished to find I was lying directly under the pony, the back cinch somewhere round his tail and the other gaily flopping to the breeze. The moment I had a chance to know what happened, I looked up to see a perfectly puzzled expression on old Buck's face, which was enough to make anyone laugh.'

Though physically small, Mary Schaffer had a toughness that slowly began to reveal itself. On one occasion she set off on a camping trip with five women, including her good friend and trail companion Mollie Adams. The party soon split into two factions: the majority, led by a formidably large woman, wanted to cut their excursion by three days to return sooner to 'civilization and a tub'; the diminutive Mary and her friend Mollie were the opposition. Mary got her way by simply declaring 'That won't be possible,' to the plan to shorten the trip. 'Why not possible?' the larger woman inquired with an icy air. 'Well,' said Mary, stretching truth a bit, 'tomorrow is Sunday and I never travel on Sundays.' After that Mary vowed to keep her travelling party to a more manageable size.

Pleasant summers in the Rockies might have alternated indefinitely with comfort-

able and sociable winters in Philadelphia, had not Dr. Schaffer died early in 1903 leaving Mary a widow at the age of thirty-four. A letter of condolence from friend Sir James Hector, famed member of the Palliser Expedition, suggests the enormity of her loss: 'What must it be to you to be left quite alone in the world—to have lost your best friend—your chief companion.'

But the loss forced Mary to discover her own strength and powers. 'I had reached the point where I knew I must lay down the playing with botany and take it up in seriousness for I had touched the place where there was no longer the companion to help me in my work and I knew I must face the future alone. . . . But work, and hard work at that, is a great panacea for the broken threads in life, and to come across a new and undescribed primula or anemone, was, in time, to feel a glow which helped life's path immeasurably.'

Eventually she completed her dead husband's work and published, with Stewardson Brown, *The Alpine Flora of the Canadian Rocky Mountains*. Mary contributed photographs and watercolour drawings to the volume. Many of her photographs were taken with a Pony Primo #6 camera manufactured by The Rochester Optical Company. She made lantern slides which she skillfully hand coloured and used as lecture material.

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Of working on that project Mrs. Schaffer recollected, 'I finished that botany, learned a little more about flowers from a scientist's point of view, learned considerably more about Indian ponies and learned a great deal more about the people who lived three thousand miles from what I had always held sacred as civilization.' In a 1928 letter she notes a more private emotion: 'No one may know that I went among those hills with a broken heart and only on the high places could I learn that I and mine were very close to-gether.'

In the last years of the nineteenth century and the first years of the twentieth, increasing numbers of tourists, mountaineers, and climbers were lured to the Rockies by the publicity of the Canadian Pacific Railroad. They were transported by the railway and lodged at C.P.R. hotels, which included Banff Springs, Mount Stephen House, and Glacier House. Soon the region within easy access of the C.P.R. line, including much of the area now within Banff and Yoho National Parks, began to seem crowded to one who had been visiting the area since only three

years after the railroad was completed. 'Our pet playgrounds [were] being swallowed up.'

With increasing longing Mary looked to the north. In addition to being troubled by the number of people in the more accessible areas, completing the book on alpine flowers seemed to have written *finis* to a phase of her life. She was looking for a new adventure, something which would continue to distinguish her wanderings in the Rockies from the self-indulgent play of the idle rich. In time, she began the explorations in the northern Rockies for which she is most known, but in 1906 her plans were still tentative.

She watched men like Wilcox, Stuttfeld, Woolley, Collie, Outram, and Coleman depart for uncharted terrain while she was left 'sitting on the railroad tracks following them with hungry eyes as they plunged into the distant hills; to listen just as hungrily to the camp-fire tales of their return, of all the wonders of the more northern Rockies.'

At last the limits of patience were reached. It was no longer possible 'to sit with folded hands and listen calmly to the stories of the hills we so longed to see, the hills which had lured and beckoned us for years before this long list of men had ever set foot in the country. Our cups splashed over. Then we looked into each other's eyes and said: "Why not? We can starve as well as they; the muskeg will be not softer for us than for them; the ground will be no harder to sleep upon; the waters no deeper to swim, nor the bath colder if we fall in,"—so—we planned a trip.' The matter was resolved. 'In spite of the protests of anxious relatives and friends, our plans were laid for a four-months' trip during the summer of 1907, and a vow made not to return till driven back by the snows.'

Mary's companion for the 1907 trip, as again in 1908, was Mollie Adams. Her guide was Billy Warren, assisted by Sidney Unwin; both men worked from Banff but had been born and educated in England. Some twenty years later Mary commented in a letter, 'I am ready to hand it to Jack B. [Brewster] that he is a good guide, but only a kind Providence ever gave my friend Mollie and me the delightful companions which made three perfect summers. . . . Imagine the nephew of one of England's best publishers cooking the bacon for us, but Mr. Warren would have no one with us unless it was the best. Our evenings at camp-fire were the best of the day because we could always talk on *any* subject.'

Sid Unwin was even known to joke in Latin. Still, the cultivation of her companions could not shelter the woman who once described herself as a 'delicate' girl from the rigors of camp life. 'Our first camp-fire was built in mud, we ate in mud, slept in mud, and our horses stalked around in mud, nibbling the few spears of grass which the late cold spring had permitted to sprout.'

The explorations of 1907 and 1908 are described in detail by Mary Schaffer in a

book called *Old Indian Trails*, and are nicely summarized in Esther Fraser's *The Canadian Rockies*. These trips made the two eastern women the first of their sex to see many areas now included in the Banff and Jasper National Parks. Regardless of sex, they were the first non-Indians to reach Maligne Lake from the south, and the first to sail upon and explore it. (Maligne had been briefly glimpsed by a railway surveyor named McLeod decades before.)

Icy rivers were forded, muskeg slogged through, mountains climbed, heavy photographic equipment set up, makeshift mosquito nets devised and sewn. Mary Schaffer and Molly Adams tracked the Athabasca River to Fortress Lake and Mount Columbia and the Columbia Glacier; they explored the Alexandra River, crossed Thompson Pass, and

formerly trapped beaver by its shores.

Snow immobilized the party at Brazeau Lake and forward progress was impeded by the almost impenetrable glacier-mantled mountains between Brazeau and Maligne Lakes. The return trip over Cataract Pass was miserable; horses slipped and starved, and Mary was bruised and scratched by branches she could not see, for her eyes were painfully snow-blinded and had to be bandaged.

Chaba Imne (Maligne Lake) was not found that year, but a map sketching its supposed location was carried back to Philadelphia. The map was drawn for Yahe Weha, or Mountain Woman, as Mary was called by the Indians, by Sampson Beaver. He drew from memory, as the beaver had been over-trapped and he had not visited Maligne for many years.

Finding Chaba Imne was made the

Louise and one month later they sighted Maligne Lake, hiking to it over the shoulder of the mountain they named for Unwin. En route the usual discomforts of snow, rain, mud, and mosquitoes were encountered. Mollie's journal includes such notes as 'M. [Mary] ate supper with her gloves on too.' That because of mosquitoes, not cold. But cold could be counted on also. Another journal entry: 'W. [Warren] remarked that in this country there were 24 kinds of weather for the 24 hours of the day—hot, and cold, and 22 kinds of rotten.'

It is easy to imagine the pleasure and excitement Maligne inspired in 1908 in people who had struggled for a month to reach it, when today it still captivates visitors who arrive via the paved road from Jasper in half an hour. Mollie noted, 'We all agree that Maligne Lake is one of the



Archives of the Canadian Rockies, Peter & Catherine Whyte Foundation

Relaxed camp scene was probably recorded in 1908.  
Molly Adams, Mary Schaffer, Warren and Billy Warrenson.

viewed the Columbia Icefield from Mount Bryce. Then, already into the second week in September, they turned northeast over Nigel Pass to follow the Brazeau River to Brazeau Lake. From there they hoped to find Chaba Imne, or Beaver Lake, which they had learned of from Jimmy Simpson, a friend of the Stoney Indians who had

primary goal of the 1908 expedition. Yet Mary admitted that merely searching for it 'was a good excuse to be in the open, to follow the trail for the simple love of following it. . . . To me the whole charm was always looking for what was to come ahead.'

On June 8, 1908 the party left Lake

finest things in the Rockies or Selkirks.' Looking south from the narrows, 'all in our little company agreed [that] was the finest view any of us had ever beheld in the Rockies.' With these judgments observers over the years have concurred. But fortunately the explorers were wrong in one prediction. 'It [Maligne Lake] will proba-

bly be a great resort some day when the Grand Trunk is done.' The railroad created Jasper as a town site, but National Park policy has protected Maligne; except for a few buildings at its northern end, it is not very changed from when it was called Chaba Imne and visited only by Indians.

Many of the names around Maligne Lake were assigned by Mary Schaffer. Sampson Peak, Sampson Narrows, and Leah Peak commemorate the Stoney Indian who drew the map to Maligne. Mount Paul is named for Mary's nephew, and Mount Mary Vaux for her friend and early companion in the Rockies. Her guides are remembered by Mounts Warren and Unwin.

Later in the 1908 trip, Mary's party trekked on to the Tête Jaune Cache for a view of Mount Robson, highest peak in the Canadian Rockies. There they joined prospectors for a comically backwoods version of a dinner party. Mollie was amused: 'Mary was very much dressed up . . . and was carrying a clean pocket handkerchief never used before, of a bright lilac color, which was anything but harmonious with the red bandanna she wears around her neck.' One of the prospectors raised his glass and offered a toast, 'Here's to a life of unnumbered summers in the mountains, with stars above by night, sunshine and soft winds by day, with the music of the waters at our banquet.' Mary could only add, 'Civilization! How little it means when one has tasted the free life of the trail!'

Mary returned to Maligne as an explorer once more. That was in 1911, but access was then by way of the Grand Trunk Pacific railway (now the Canadian National) from Edmonton, and her mission was less romantic than that which inspired the first trip; she was to survey and map the lake for the Canadian government. Among her companions were her sister-in-law Mrs. Mary Sharples, and her nephew Paul.

The 1911 trip gives us a last glimpse of Mary in the wilderness of her beloved Rockies. The days of Maligne's status as terra incognita were numbered, but the lake was still pristine—and, as usual, the weather contributed to the aura of wildness. One morning in early July a guide had to dig through the snow with a frying pan.

But if the land had changed little, and the weather not at all, Mary herself had altered greatly from the 'delicate girl' and the uncertain young widow with a 'whole-some horror' of Indian ponies. By 1911 she gives a matter-of-fact record of an incident such as the following: 'Not more than eight feet away at the top of the bank, and sharpening his claws (as a cat does) on a spruce tree, was a marten. He turned to stare [and] . . . look me out of the place. I did not budge; this did not suit him; he spit at me like an angry family cat, and made a threatening move as though to come on and insist I get out of there. I said,—“You impertinent rascal, clear out yourself, I am big enough to choke you.”'

At a ferry crossing on the Athabasca a

sign read 'horses .50 cts per head, men .25 cts.' Mary by then had the assurance to enjoy the irony of having her sex ignored at a crossing giving access to a region explored by two women. 'The old ferryman shook his head when we asked him if we went free, he said they hadn't any arrangement for women, so for once in our lives we had a man's privilege, and paid our quarter.'

Most revealing, perhaps, is the description of a pioneer family which Mary and her party overtook in the Athabasca Valley. One must strain to recall that it is written by the same woman who once deferred to the 'superior' strength and endurance of men as she sat forlornly by the station at Laggan watching them ride north into new lands.

'We rode up along side of the struggling team; I looked into the face of the woman; I shall probably never know who she was, we shall perhaps never meet again, but she was one of the universal sisters, her way was as stony as the hill she was climbing, and my heart went out to her. Her face was hard, weary, discouraged and hopeless. She hardly noticed us, unless in her inmost heart to compare her life with ours. . . . Nodding to her, I called out, "I wish I could take you with me on my fresh little pony over this stony hill." The driven face lit into one of almost beauty, and she shyly said,—“O thank you for that kind thought,” then closing the window of brightness as quickly as she had opened it,

***The Archives of the Canadian Rockies, the Peter and Katherine Whyte Foundation, will be producing a book on Mary Schaffer Warren (December 1980). Introduction by E. J. Hart.***

her head went down, we rode on by, wishing, wishing, it might have been in our power to do more than toss her a word, and for the rest of the day I thought of her, and of all the other women, who had given up life and home to follow the fortunes of their husbands into a new land where hardship stalked their heels, disappointment, death perhaps. But so it has been since our ancestors first touched this continent, and it has been the women who were the true pioneers, the women who suffered; one of the vastest continents of the world has been meekly and silently conquered by women, and even at this late date, few men know it. . . . And the World goes on singing the praises of the pioneer, the "man who opens the door." Could he open it if the woman did not hand him the key? Not from what I have seen.'

In 1912 Mary Schaffer herself moved west, to settle permanently in Banff. Three years later, in 1915, she married her guide, Billy Warren. The house in which they lived still stands on Grizzly Street; its former inhabitants lie in their graves a short distance away in the cemetery at the foot of Tunnel Mountain. Nearby are stones engraved with the names of other pioneers—Brewster, Simpson, Wilson, and Peyto. ☉

## THE CAMERA FIEND



***Camera! Camera! Camera!***

*For breakfast, dinner, and tea,  
And I would that my tongue dare utter  
The thoughts that arise in me,  
But, alas! there's a law for too much  
jaw*

*While the camera fiend goes free.*

***Camera! Camera! Camera!***

*No matter how fine the days  
The dark room's charms and the ruby  
glow  
Are better than old Sol's rays;  
And the cat and the dog and the  
chimney log  
Have been "took" in a hundred  
ways.*

***Camera! Camera! Camera!***

*I never shall feel the same,  
I've a simpering gaze which I cannot  
brook  
And posing is all to blame;  
While the conscious look of this shady  
nook  
To me is a burning shame.*

***Camera! Camera! Camera!***

*The world is no longer the same.  
Since my landscapes were foggy and  
failed to please  
The plates I say are to blame.  
But my three-legged horses and houses  
like trees  
Have brought me undying fame.*

LILLIAN M. RATCLIFFE

*Photo Era*, 10, no. 1 (January 1903).