

WILDERNESS WOMAN

A Story about Thelma Edwards
by Debo Powers

Four woman backpackers must have been quite a sight in 1929. Their broad hats kept the sun off their faces as they posed for a picture at snow-covered Logan Pass. Nurses were considered a wild bunch in those days and I suppose it was true, because here they were on a two-week backpacking trip into the heart of Glacier National Park in Montana.

Backpacking was not a common thing for women to do in 1929. Actually, it was not a common thing for anyone to do. In those days, people usually traveled through the wilderness on horseback. It wasn't until many years later that backpacking became a popular sport and even a few decades ago, it was unusual to find women backpacking, especially without the company of men.

I first saw the picture of these hardy women backpackers in 1980 when a friend of mine took me to meet Thelma Edwards and her husband, Burt. They lived in a small homestead cabin built in Montana around 1910. The beautiful, hand-hewn logs that formed the walls of the cabin displayed the attention and skill of its builder. As I sat in the cozy cabin talking to Thelma and Burt, I noticed the picture.

"What's this?" I asked.

"That's a picture of three girls and me on a backpacking trip in Glacier National Park in 1929," replied Thelma proudly.

I was incredulous. "Thelma, they didn't even make *pants* for women in 1929!!!"

"Oh, I know," she said, with a shrug and a grin, "I was into that women's lib stuff way before it was very popular."

She was instantly my friend. I admire women who know who they are and pursue their dreams, even defying the convention of the times, to lead a life without limits. I wanted to hear her stories, not only this one, but all the stories about her life, her choices, her struggles.

Thelma was almost not allowed to go on that backpacking trip. The leader of the group, Helen, thought that she was too young. She was told that she wouldn't carry her own pack. "Yes, I can!" she insisted and her sister, Vera, backed her up. Thelma eagerly decided to prove Helen wrong and she did. As it turned out, she was not the one who had someone carry her pack.

All four women were excited about their adventure. Thelma was the youngest at 17. She was in her senior year in high school and lived with her parents in Kalispell, Montana. She was familiar with Glacier National Park because, at 14 (she told them she was 18), she had started working in the park's hotel during the summers. Thelma was well acquainted with the outdoors having gone on several trips with her father, who was a hunting guide, but this was her first trip on her own.

Agnes, a 23 year old nurse, was a lively young woman with short, curly hair who loved to dance the Charleston and flirt with men. Agnes would always become quite animated whenever there was a man around, giggling a lot and rolling her eyes. She would probably qualify for what history books refer to as a "Flapper". The other women loved her bubbly cheerfulness and enthusiasm.

Thelma's sister, Vera, was 26. She was married to Agnes' brother and already had two children. She was delighted to be away from her domestic responsibilities. Sometimes her days seemed filled with endless chores of washing, cooking, cleaning, and taking care of everyone else first. She felt grateful that she had a husband who would let her go on an adventure like this one.

Helen, the instigator of this trip, was a 24 year old nurse. She was a fiercely independent, strong, rugged woman who was an expert at fishing and loved the outdoors. She was outspoken, known to use a great deal of profanity, and would stand up to anyone. She was the most experienced woodswoman of the group.

The four women set off on the backpacking trip in early July, 1929, when there was still snow in the passes. They had no tent or sleeping bags, only a tarp and blankets. They carried Boy Scout packs and wore men's britches and cowboy hats. They practically had the wilderness to themselves, seeing only one Swiss man the entire two weeks. They did, however, see a lot of wildlife along the way. They could even hear grizzly bears digging for ground squirrels at night.

They hiked all over Glacier Park and up into Canada. At one point, they camped near the Prince of Wales Hotel on Waterton Lake. They decided to walk to the hotel and buy some postcards to mail to family members. When the head bellhop saw four "ladies" coming through the door wearing men's pants, he stood in their way and told them that they couldn't come in.

Helen looked him straight in the eye and said, "I don't think we want anything from your damn hotel anyway!" They were all insulted to be treated like bums when they had just taken baths in a mountain creek and put on clean clothes!

It rained a great deal on their two-week journey. Helen didn't seem to care whether it rained or not. She caught fish for the group along the way. Thelma caught grouse to supplement the dried rations that they brought with them.

The Swiss man who they met on the trail caused some problems among the group. He struck up a friendship with Agnes and started tagging along. Sometimes he carried her pack which made Helen really mad. Helen insisted that he camp away from her group, but at Crosley Lake, he pulled his tent up closer. That was the end of it. Helen told him to get lost. They didn't see him again.

As they ended their backpacking trip, they passed a chalet where many tourists were staying. People were amazed to see these women coming out of the wilderness and plied them with many questions:

"There are no *men* with you?!!!!"

"What did you eat?"

"You mean, you girls camped out there for two weeks *alone*?"

"What about the grizzly bears?"

Helen, of course, replied, "The only bear who bothered us walked on two legs and carried a Swiss backpack!"

Agnes just rolled her eyes.