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Can you imagine being married, moving away from your family, and trying to run a household at 14 years old? Elizabeth Fisher Baird did all this and more.

We know this because she taught herself English and then wrote about her adventures on the 1800s Wisconsin frontier. Elizabeth not only worked as an interpreter in her husband’s law firm, but also operated the family’s farm and raised four children. She organized the relief efforts for the victims of the Peshtigo Fire as well. Elizabeth was a hardworking and determined woman.
EARLY LIFE

Elizabeth Fisher was born on April 24, 1810, in Prairie du Chien, Wisconsin. At that time, Wisconsin was part of Illinois Territory. The land was renamed Wisconsin Territory on April 20, 1836, and became the 30th state in the United States on May 29, 1848.

Elizabeth’s father, Henry Fisher, was a Scottish fur trader at a post in Prairie du Chien. Her maternal grandmother, Thérèse Schindler, and great-aunt, Madeleine Laframboise, were also successful fur traders who traded in the central Great Lakes area.

Elizabeth’s Great Aunt Madeleine ran her husband’s fur trade business after he was murdered. She always wore Odawa clothing.

Elizabeth’s Grandmother Thérèse was the granddaughter of an Odawa Chief named Kewinaquot, which means Returning Cloud.
Elizabeth did not live in Prairie du Chien for long. She and her mother Marienne visited her family on Mackinac Island in June, 1812. The War of 1812 broke out shortly after their arrival. Marienne decided they should stay on the island. From then on, Elizabeth rarely saw her father.

Elizabeth lived with her mother, grandmother, and step-grandfather on Mackinac Island. Marienne helped her mother, Thérèse, with the fur trade before opening a school for fur traders’ daughters. It was the first boarding school in the area. The students ranged in age from 12 to 18 years old and were Métis or American Indian. But spoiled Elizabeth only wanted to play with the boarding school students, not learn.

Mackinac Island (Mack-i-naw) is part of Michigan and is located northeast of Green Bay, Wisconsin. Native people originally named the island Matchimackinac, which means “big turtle” before the French renamed it Michilimackinack. The English later shortened the name to Mackinac.
Life on Mackinac Island

Most people spoke French on Mackinac Island. Mail came only once a month. Fur traders traveled the island, trading their goods for furs from American Indians.

Once snow fell, Elizabeth rode in a cariole, or dog sled, called *La Boudeuse*. It was pulled by a black dog named Nero and a white one named Caribou. Elizabeth stayed warm in a brown cape, beaver hat, and buckskin mittens and moccasins.

In early March, Elizabeth sometimes traveled with her family to a nearby island for sugar camp. There they harvested sugar maple sap and boiled it into sugar. Workers lived in some of the camp’s small buildings while they made sugar in others.

Sugar was a scarce resource when Elizabeth was young. This is a sugar camp in Michigan. Elizabeth’s family’s sugar camp might have looked like this.
Fur Trade

The fur trade era began in Wisconsin when fur traders from France and French-speaking Canada arrived in the area in the early 1600s. The beaver pelts they sought were popular for use as clothing. The French did not hunt beavers themselves. Instead, American Indians living in the area would trap animals and trade the pelts for goods such as metal knives, metal cooking pots, jewelry, wool blankets, guns, and ammunition. They would also exchange wild rice, fish, venison, canoes, and trade route information to the fur traders for the goods. The era ended in the mid-1800s when overhunting caused the fur trade to shift west and out of Wisconsin.

Beaver pelts were made into waterproof hats that kept the wearer warm and dry. The pelt could also be shaved, pressed, and made into a hat or clothing.
Elizabeth met Henry Baird when she was about 14 years old. He was a young lawyer working as a teacher on the island. Henry did not plan to stay on Mackinac for long. He hoped to move back to Ohio. Instead, he stayed to become a successful frontier lawyer.

Elizabeth and Henry married at her home on August 12, 1824. They moved to Green Bay the next month. Henry became the first lawyer in what is now Wisconsin.

In 1805, 5-year-old Henry immigrated to Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania from Dublin, Ireland, with his father (Henry), mother (Ann), and three older siblings (Eliza, Robert, and Thomas) (1856).
Wisconsin changed Elizabeth’s life. She used to have paved streets and stores nearby on the island. But in Green Bay, people traveled on footpaths and there weren’t any butcher shops, grocery stores, or bakeries close by.

The Bairds bought a home in a small settlement along the Fox River called Shantytown. Henry worked all day, leaving Elizabeth home alone. She was just 14 and did not know how to manage a household. So the Bairds hired a young maid. Soon Elizabeth learned to bake, cook, and care for the home.

But she was still lonely. Her English-speaking neighbors visited and thought her very shy. But that was not her problem. Elizabeth only spoke French and Odawa. She could not understand her neighbors.

Fort Howard was built in 1816 to protect settlers on the Wisconsin frontier. It was located on the Fox River in Green Bay (1851).
So Elizabeth taught herself English. She already knew French reading and writing basics from her step-grandfather and Henry. That helped her learn to read, write, and understand English. Soon Elizabeth learned enough to interpret for Henry’s French-speaking clients.

The Bairds moved from Shantytown to a farm in 1832. Henry thought he could be both a lawyer and a farmer. Once it was clear he did not have time to farm, Elizabeth took the lead. She planted crops and cared for the livestock while raising four daughters: Eliza, Emilie, Elinor, and Louisa.

Elizabeth often hosted parties at her home for area residents and her husband’s clients. The once-spoiled girl transformed into an expert hostess, housekeeper, mother, and farmer.
Lumbering was a major industry in Wisconsin in the mid-1800s. The trains that hauled lumber from the area sometimes caused sparks that set fire to brush.

On the evening of October 8, 1871, residents of Peshtigo and other nearby Wisconsin communities awoke to a raging fire. Many people lost their lives, homes, and businesses during the Peshtigo Fire. After the tragedy, area residents turned to Elizabeth and Henry to lead relief efforts.

People from all over the United States sent clothing, medical supplies, household goods, and money to the Bairds for the fire’s victims. Some also wrote Elizabeth letters to beg her to ensure the care of their friends and families. The once-spoiled child had become a respected local leader.

It is unknown how many people were killed by the Peshtigo Fire. Some estimate between 1,200 and 2,500 people lost their lives.
The Peshtigo Fire turned approximately 1.5 million acres to ash.
Elizabeth wanted to share her life’s stories with others so that they could learn and remember the land’s history. She wrote colorful descriptions about her adventures on Mackinac Island and in Wisconsin, which she published in the *Green Bay State Gazette* during 1886 and 1887. Her writings were later made into two books called *Reminiscences of Early Life on Mackinac Island* and *Reminiscences of Life in Territorial Wisconsin*.

Elizabeth died on November 5, 1890, in Green Bay, Wisconsin. She saw Wisconsin grow from a wild frontier into a state. We know much about what life was like in 1800s Wisconsin from her descriptive stories. Elizabeth changed from a young girl into a strong and courageous leader that others turned to in times of need.
Glossary

frontier (n): unsettled land with few people and businesses

fur trader (n): a person who exchanged European goods like beads and cloth for American Indian goods such as wild rice and animal pelts

generation (n): a group of people born and living during the same time period

goods (n): materials such as clothing, weapons, food, etc.

immigrate (v): to move to a country to live there

interpreter (n): a person who translates words into a different language

Métis (n): a person of both American Indian and European heritage

moccasin (n): a soft leather shoe

settlement (n): a newly established place to live in frontier land

settler (n): a person who moves to and lives in a new frontier
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