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“Upon August 12, 1824, I was married at our home on Mackinac Island to Henry S. Baird, and the following month we left for Green Bay.”

Can you imagine being married at 14 years old? This happened to Elizabeth Fisher Baird. Getting married at 14 was just one of her many adventures on the 1800s Wisconsin frontier.

Elizabeth was a woman with fierce determination and a solid work ethic. She not only worked as an interpreter in her husband’s law firm but also operated the family’s farm, raised four children, and led relief efforts after the devastating Peshtigo Fire. As a native French and Odawa speaker, Elizabeth taught herself English when she was a young woman and became a prolific writer about her life adventures.
On April 24, 1810, Elizabeth Fisher was born in Prairie du Chien in what is now called Wisconsin. At that time, the land was part of Illinois Territory which covered all of present-day Wisconsin and Illinois, as well as parts of Michigan and Minnesota. The land was renamed Michigan Territory before becoming Wisconsin Territory on April 20, 1836. Wisconsin became the 30th state in the United States on May 29, 1848.

Henry Fisher, Elizabeth’s father, was a Scottish fur trader at a post in Prairie du Chien. Her grandmother, Thérèse Schindler, and her great-aunt, Madeleine Laframboise, were successful fur traders in the central Great Lakes area. Madeleine earned an estimated $10,000 per year—ten times more than other experienced fur traders earned at that time.
In 1812, Elizabeth’s mother, Marienne Schindler, took her to Mackinac Island to visit her family. Shortly after their arrival, the War of 1812 broke out. Marienne chose to remain on the island. Elizabeth’s father empathized with the British during with the war, so he moved to Manitoba, Canada. He returned to Prairie du Chien in 1827 but did not play much of a role in Elizabeth’s life.

Elizabeth lived with her mother, grandmother, and step-grandfather on Mackinac Island. Marienne helped her mother Thérèse with the fur trade before opening the first area boarding school for fur traders’ daughters. The students ranged in age from 12 to 18 years and were either Métis or American Indian. Marienne taught her pupils how to read, write, sew, and keep house. Even though her mother was the headmistress of the school, Elizabeth did not take an interest in learning. She described herself as a “spoiled child” and a pet to the boarding school students.

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.
Mackinac Island was a place of both splendor and serenity. French was the primary language spoken on the island. The mail came only once a month. Fur traders traversed the island, trading the goods they brought from Montreal in birch-bark canoes for furs from American Indian trappers. In the summer, its white pebble beaches glistened and in the winter, snow blanketed the ground. Some years, the frozen waters of Lake Huron were as smooth as silk. Other times, ice mountains rose as a protective fence around the island.

Once snow fell, Elizabeth traveled in her cariole, or dog sled, called La Boudeuse. Her two dogs, Nero and Caribou, pulled it. Nero’s coat was solid black while Caribou’s glowed a perfect white. Elizabeth stayed warm riding in her cariole in a long, circular cloak, brown cape, beaver hat, and buckskin mittens and moccasins.

In early March, Elizabeth’s family would sometimes go to a nearby island for sugar camp. There they harvested maple tree sap and boiled it into sugar. The camp consisted of several small buildings. Some housed the workers and sugar was made in others.
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.

Martín, H. 1892. Wikimedia Commons.

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.
When she was about 14 years old, Elizabeth met Henry Baird, a teacher studying law on the island. He had moved there to recover from a malaria-like disease. Henry intended to move back to Ohio once he recovered but the opportunity to practice law on the frontier kept him there.

After a short courtship, Elizabeth and Henry married in her home on August 12, 1824. Within a month, Henry had persuaded his young bride to move to Green Bay. The pair set off on an eight-day boat ride to the new land. Shortly after their arrival, Territory Judge James Duane Doty appointed Henry the area’s first lawyer.

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).
Life in primitive Wisconsin was much different from Elizabeth’s life on Mackinac Island. Fort Howard rested on the western shore of Green Bay, while a dense wood covered the eastern shore. People traveled on footpaths as there were no streets. Nor were there any butcher shops, grocery stores, or bakeries nearby.

The Bairds bought a home in Shantytown, a settlement south of the bay along the eastern shore of the Fox River. Henry worked two miles from home, leaving Elizabeth alone all day. Since she was just 14, housekeeping was new to Elizabeth. While other girls learned it from their mothers, Elizabeth had refused to learn housekeeping from hers. The Bairds hired a young maid to help with domestic chores, as well as a hunter to shoot wild game and a young man to cut and haul wood. Soon Elizabeth learned how to bake bread and prepare venison and fowl.
But she was still lonely. Her neighbors came to visit, but she could not understand them. She spoke French and Odawa and they spoke English. They thought Elizabeth was extremely shy.

Elizabeth had never attended school, but she knew French reading and writing basics from her step-grandfather and Henry. So Elizabeth taught herself to read, write, and understand English. When she became proficient, she served as interpreter in Henry’s law office for his French clients—a great benefit to the business.

In 1832, Elizabeth and Henry moved from Shantytown to a farm. Henry thought he could be both a lawyer and a farmer, but soon realized he did not have time. So Elizabeth took the reins, farming the land and caring for the livestock. In addition, she raised four daughters: Eliza, Emilie, Elinor, and Louisa.

Elizabeth often hosted parties at her home for area residents and her husband’s clients. The once-inexperienced girl transformed into an expert hostess, housekeeper, mother, and farmer.
In the mid-1800s, vast forests covered much of northern Wisconsin. Lumbering was a major industry in Peshtigo, a small community approximately 50 miles north of Green Bay. The trains that transported lumber from the area often created sparks on the tracks, setting fire to nearby brush. Local residents feared the fires but got used to the almost daily occurrences.

On the evening of October 8, 1871, residents of Peshtigo and the surrounding communities woke to raging tornadoes of fire engulfing people, homes, and businesses. After the tragic Peshtigo Fire, 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 distribution to the victims. Some also wrote letters to Elizabeth, asking her to ensure their friends and families received appropriate care. The once-spoiled child now emerged as 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 the stories of her life on the frontier with others so that they could learn and remember the land’s history. She wrote colorful descriptions of her adventures on Mackinac Island and in Wisconsin, which she published in the *Green Bay State Gazette* during 1886 and 1887. Later, her writings became 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. She experienced the birth of Wisconsin and saw it grow from a wild frontier into a state, just as she had grown from a spoiled girl into a skilled woman. As her heritage, she left a rich and descriptive record of life in 1800s Wisconsin. She did this so that those who followed would know the colorful history of the area in the time before Wisconsin became a state.
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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