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Introduction

Have you ever felt limited by a stereotype? A stereotype is a belief about how someone should behave or what they should do. Stereotypes can be based on your gender, your culture, where you are from, how old you are, or other factors.

Carrie Frost grew up in an era of many stereotypes about what women should and should not do. Carrie defied stereotypes by becoming a thriving business owner and creating work opportunities for other women.

Photo courtesy of Trace Frost.

Carrie Frost holds up a prized catch.
Early Life

Carrie Frost was born on October 14, 1868, in La Crosse, Wisconsin. Her father John Frost was a blacksmith with the railroad. Carrie’s family moved around quite a bit because of that. In 1870 they moved to Hoka, Minnesota, and later to Wells, Minnesota. Carrie spent her early grade-school years in these two towns. Her family moved to Stevens Point in 1885.

Photo credit: University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point Archives.

Map of Stevens Point from 1877.
Carrie loved the outdoors and spent much of her free time in the streams with her nine brothers and sisters. Her father was a skilled angler, and Carrie grew up watching him fish.

At that time, fly fishing was considered a male sport. Fly fishing was not considered very lady-like, so many women and girls didn’t do it. But like her father, Carrie loved fly fishing. She loved the sunshine reflecting on the water, the little “whoosh” sound of casting a line, and the big fat trout you could catch in Wisconsin streams.

Carrie worked hard to gain her father’s fly fishing skills. She learned to tie flies like an expert. Eventually, local fly fishers could not match Carrie’s skill.

Carrie and her father, John Clarke Frost. This photo was taken a few years before John’s death in 1914.
After high school Carrie did not have the freedom to do whatever she wanted. Given the right opportunities, men could become doctors, lawyers, or any other profession. Women had few options open to them. Like many single women of her day, Carrie earned money as a schoolteacher. But in her free time, Carrie dreamt of forging her own path doing what she loved most in the world.

Carrie poses for a photo in 1895. Carrie (standing second from the left) poses with her sister Florence (on the far right) and three other friends.
Carrie Solves a Problem

One day while she was out fishing, Carrie noticed that the fish didn’t take the bait. At that time, most fly-fishers used flies imported to the United States from Europe. Carrie believed that Wisconsin fish were not attracted to these flies because they were made of materials that were not from the area. She wondered what might happen if she made flies from the fur and feathers of local animals instead?

Carrie got to work. She gathered local feathers, animal fur, and bristles from deer tails. She made new flies at her parents’ kitchen table. The fish began to bite those flies! Fly fishers in Stevens Point soon took notice.

Demand for Carrie’s flies grew quickly. Carrie asked the housekeeper in her parent’s home to help make more flies. Some of Carrie’s town friends joined in too. Soon there was an all-female fly-making workforce in Carrie’s parents’ home. They even dyed feathers in the basement.

So many people wanted Carrie’s flies that she opened her own fly-tackle business in 1896. It was very rare for a woman to own a business at that time. Carrie worried that men might not buy her flies if they knew a woman owned the company. She used her initials instead of her first name to help make the company more successful, despite the times she lived in. She called it the C.J. Frost Fishing Tackle Manufacturing Company.
The C.J. Frost Fishing Tackle factory was built in Stevens Point, Wisconsin.
The business did well. Carrie kept moving to bigger and bigger buildings as it grew. Her business became so big that in 1906 she had a new brick building built. Carrie’s business outgrew that building as well, so in 1917 she added a second brick building to house her employees.

Carrie hired more and more women to tie flies. At one point she employed over 150 people—almost all of them were women. Carrie’s business put Stevens Point on the map. It became known as the “Fly Tackle Capital of the World.”

Photo courtesy of Bill Frost Jenkins.

Carrie sits in the middle next to her brother, G.W. Frost, at a company picnic in 1911. Notice that all the employees in this photo are women. Carrie’s brother started his own fly-tying business around 1920 after Carrie retired.
Breaking Barriers

Few women of her time had the chance to do what Carrie did. Women were expected to stay at home to do housework and raise a family instead. Carrie never married or had children. She made a full life out of her business career and was an example for future women to create businesses. When Carrie retired in 1919, her business was the largest manufacturer of flies in the United States.

When Carrie first opened her business she used her initials C.J. Frost. As her business became more successful she made a point to let the world know that she was a female business owner using the name Miss C.J. Frost on the fly tying cards used to sell her ties in stores.

Photo courtesy of PBS Wisconsin.
Carrie enjoyed fishing at Wedde Creek near her farm. Today the farm is owned by her relative, Trace Frost, who runs an alpaca farm with his wife.

Carrie also owned her own land in Rickford, Waushara County, and had a cabin built next to a trout stream there. After she retired, Carrie sold her business to Dan Frost (no relation) in 1920. Carrie then spent most of her time outdoors on her own land. She fished with her pet cocker spaniel and her friends at her farm.

Carrie truly lived for herself. She broke barriers in big ways, and even small ones (Carrie’s great-niece noted that Carrie was the first woman she ever saw wearing pants)! Carrie didn’t let the expectations society had of women in her time period control her life.
Conclusions

On October 6, 1937, Carrie died at the age of 67.

Carrie—and all the other women who dared to challenge stereotypes to follow their passions—paved the way for women in the United States. The year Carrie retired, 1920, became a breakthrough year for female entrepreneurs and for women’s rights.

The life Carrie lived shows what is possible when you follow your passions and dreams. Like Carrie, you can beat the odds and stereotypes of your time.
How did you get into fly fishing?
I got into fly fishing in a way that many think is backward. I took a fly tying class one really cold winter night in Ann Arbor, Michigan, and immediately fell in love with everything that was fly fishing. I spent most nights during that winter tying flies of all kinds. As soon as the ice was off the Huron River, I would spend every day after work in the river teaching myself to fly cast and catch fish.

What is your favorite place to fly fish in Wisconsin?
I have fished all over the world, but if I only had one place to fish, it would be in Viroqua, Wisconsin, in the heart of the Driftless Area. Not only is it my favorite place in Wisconsin, it’s my favorite place in all the world.

Jen Ripple, Editor-in-Chief of DUN Magazine, shares her love of fly fishing!
What is your favorite fly fishing memory?
My favorite fishing memory is catching a huge Jack off of a small skiff in Cuba. The water was crystal clear, so I could see the fish coming right for my fly. I cast to him, and watched him eat and then run away with my fly. It took quite a fight to bring him to the boat, but I did it!

What advice do you have for young people who want to get into fly fishing?
Fly fishing only looks hard, but it’s quite easy once you understand the technique. If you want to try it, like anything in life, just go for it. I’ve taught many children (and adults) to fly fish, and many of them are still involved in the sport today.

In Carrie Frost’s day, fly fishing was very much considered a man’s sport. Is that still the case? How has it changed?
It’s true that for many years fly fishing has been a male-dominated sport, even though the first book of fly fishing was written by a woman in the 15th century! While women have always been involved in the sport, and fly fishing would not be what it is today without the contribution of Carrie and many women like her, it hasn’t been until recently that this has changed. Today there are many women involved in the sport, and many women who work as guides on fly fishing trips. There are many companies who make gear specifically for women and also female entrepreneurs who own fly fishing shops!
Glossary

Angler (n) a person who fishes using a rod, line, and fly

Entrepreneur (n) a person who creates and runs a new business

Era (n) a long period of time marked by specific cultural or historical features

Flies (n) a type of bait used in fly-fishing that mimics the motion of bugs on the water

Forging (v) to work hard to create or form something

Import (v) to bring goods to sell into the country from another country

Manufacturing (v) the act of making products at large scale using machines

Stereotypes (n) an over-generalized belief about how someone should behave