

Mary Schäffer Warren

Mary Schäffer Warren defied the strictures of her time.

She first glimpsed the Rocky Mountains at four a.m. in the summer of 1889 from the train siding at Gleichen, Alberta. An American from Philadelphia, she was immediately smitten. Because Schäffer regarded herself as “a delicate girl,” not strong enough to hike, she did not venture far from the railway on her early visits to the Rockies. Eventually, she rebelled at her own timidity, becoming an experienced mountain trail rider and camper.



Group Around Campfire (Mary Schäffer Warren, second from left)
Glenbow Archives NA-529-8

She travelled extensively through Banff and Jasper Parks and, with her best friend, Mollie Adams, explored areas where no white woman had been. Their first act when they escaped frowning propriety was to stuff their dresses into the bottoms of their packs and pull-on pants. Even Schäffer’s marriages were unconventional. Her first husband, Charles Schäffer, was 20 years older and her second, Billy Warren, her guide, 20 years younger than she.

Named Yale-Weha, or Mountain Woman by the Nakoda, Mary wore out her boots promoting the beauty of the Rockies and became a permanent resident of Banff in 1912.

Mary: The Artist

Mary Schäffer Warren’s first brushstrokes in the West struggled between artistic beauty and scientific accuracy.

Her first husband, Charles, was writing a book on mountain wildflowers. If Mary’s sketches and paintings were to be included, they had to be accurate. Mary needed to balance precision with her desire to convey the beauty of the flowers growing in the region.

In time, Mary perfected her approach; the book *Alpine Flora of the Canadian Rockies* features over 100 of her meticulous illustrations and watercolours.

As Mary's exploration of the Rocky Mountains expanded, so did her artistic practice. She left behind the landscapes that surrounded her railway car and hotel room, and travelled by horseback into the mountains, her paintbox and a camera with her.

Roughing it in the Rockies

After many expeditions in the Rocky Mountains, Mary Schäffer Warren knew how to rough it.

Breeches replaced her riding skirt as soon as she left civilization behind. In camps where water was scarce, Warren adapted. "Experience taught us how to wash our hands in a teaspoon and take a bath in a teacup," she said.

Heat and brewing storms brought mosquitos in droves; they hummed and howled, and prodded the netting that surrounded the sleeping campers until sleep was no longer possible.

But Warren appreciated her no-frills existence in the backcountry. "Camp life is fascinating," she said. "There is never any house-cleaning. When your carpet of flowers wears out, move on and Nature gets the place in shape for another year."

Shopping in the Wilderness

Mary Schäffer Warren appreciated the beauty of First Nations clothing and its practicality. Buckskin garments withstood the rigors of life on the trail: the evening chills, the damp mornings, the rough terrain.

In 1908, Warren and her travelling companion, Mollie Adams, were on an expedition to Yellowhead Trail, Mount Robson and Tete Jaune Cache when they encountered a Métis woman selling her handiwork.

"She had quantities of silk embroidery on the softest buckskin I have yet seen," Warren said. "There was a most delicious odour to the skins, which she said was through their being tanned by poplar smoke. Gloves, moccasins, and beautiful coats, we took everything and wished she had more; it was a grand afternoon's shopping for us all."

Born: 1861 – Died: 1939

Additional Resources

- **The Canadian Encyclopedia**
<https://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/mary-schaeffer-warren>
- **Whyte Museum of the Canadian Rockies | Peaks and People**
<http://whytemuseum.blogspot.com/2011/05/mary-schaffer-warren-in-canadian.html>

Our Collections

Glenbow Museum

<https://www.glenbow.org>

Glenbow Western Research Centre | Glenbow Library and Archives

<https://libguides.ucalgary.ca/glenbowlibraryandarchives>

Glenbow Library and Archives | Digital Collection

<https://digitalcollections.ucalgary.ca/asset-management/2R340826N9XM?WS=PackagePres&Flat=1>