The Gender of Survival
by Erica Hampton

The modern West of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries has seen a rapid evolution of gender roles. The line between masculinity and femininity is becoming less clear as each gender takes on characteristics of the other and women, in particular, become more assertive and independent, frequently performing the roles once exclusive to men. Where formerly it was the task of men to hold jobs requiring official authority or physical strength, women are now finding their own niches doing these tasks. Such is the case of Lt. Brenda Berkman, a New York City firefighter whose class action lawsuit in 1982 won women the right to work as firefighters in that city (Miller 12). Twenty years before Berkman’s victory, a more noted contributor to the feminist movement made a great impact on society. Betty Friedan, the author of the best-selling book *The Feminine Mystique* (1963), became a rising star for women’s liberation with a career that “highlight[ed]…the astonishing momentum that drove the American women’s movement from the early 1960s to the mid-1970s…” (Orleck 574). Another significant contributor to the feminist movement was Eleanor Roosevelt, whose “insistence on her right to an identity of her own apart from her husband and her family…transcended the dictates of her times to become one of the century’s most powerful and effective advocates for social justice” (Goodwin 12). Some of Roosevelt’s most memorable contributions were to the cause for equal job opportunities, not only for women, but also for minorities of race and religion. A particularly amusing strategy she employed was the barring of male journalists from press conferences, which forced news agencies nation-wide to hire female reporters in order to gain an audience with her (Goodwin 10). The efforts of Roosevelt, Friedan and countless others blazed the trail to the modern independence of women. More recent leading ladies include Shirley M. Tilghman, the first female president of Princeton University; Margaret Thatcher, the first female Prime Minister of Great Britain; and Hilary Clinton, the
powerful New York State Senator. Each of these women had to face criticism and condescension for crossing the traditional line between the masculine and the feminine in order to rise to positions of power.

While many rejoice at these modern changes, others are left to wonder if the new role of femininity is a natural one. Can women compete with men for physically challenging jobs? Are they capable of sustaining the survival-of-the-fittest, dog-eat-dog mentality that so defines the American economy? Are women suited to carrying out the role of bread-winner and independent aggressor, taking charge of their own futures and achieving their own dreams independently of men? In the early years of our country, before American women won the right to vote, Theodore Roosevelt would have said "no." As one of the nation’s leading role models in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, his speeches and writing had a considerable impact on the views of his fellow Americans. For example, in his speech on women, “Women and the Home,” which was addressed to the National Congress of Mothers in Washington in March of 1905, he asserted his opinion that, while women and men occupy distinctive and exclusive roles in life, they must function together: "The primary duty of the husband is to be the home-maker, the bread-winner for his wife and children, and that the primary duty of the woman is to be the helpmate, the housewife, and mother" (Roosevelt 315). He goes on to clarify that, although these roles are separate, they are equal. Men and women must lend both aspects to the world, not only for the good of the family, but also for that of the American people. Although it could be argued that Roosevelt’s intent was to encourage cooperation between the genders and promote a healthier American society, the ultimate outcome was the reinforcement of traditional gender roles in which men joined the work-force and led adventurous public lives while women cooked, cleaned and raised children within the confines of the home. Roosevelt’s ideal of this healthier society hinged upon the idea that men and women must avoid overlapping their respective duties so that each gender might be an expert in its role. By cooperating with one another, the two pieces would create an efficient machine in which both halves were equally important, yet also co-dependent. Although Roosevelt’s ideal system might have succeeded on some level during the early days of America’s history, it is impractical to pursue it to its conclusion in light of modern social developments. Inevitably, most individuals will, at some point in life, be unpaired with a counterpart, whether due to circumstance or choice. In reality, it is more efficient for individuals to combine the two halves within themselves to create one fully-operational whole, thereby becoming better suited to living independently—as everyone does eventually, whether for a month, a year or a lifetime.

Such archaic views as those supported by Teddy Roosevelt, intent upon separating masculine and feminine responsibilities, have been widely accepted, yet they do not account for the vast number of exceptions throughout history, such as Joan of Arc, Queen Elizabeth I of England and Harriet Tubman. Hanna Breece, a contemporary of Roosevelt’s, is one such variant. Breece dedicated her life to educating underprivileged children like those in the Iliamna village in the harsh climate of early twentieth-century Alaska. This is quite admirable in light of the commonly held view of that region. Sheldon Jackson, held as a leading authority of Breece’s time, portrayed the inhabitants in his 1880 book, Alaska, as “almost subhuman demons from hell: frenzied men who ate dogs alive; cannibals who tore into raw corpses with their teeth; killers of babies; sexual abusers of little girls…torturers; mutilators; enslavers;
murderers; etc” (qtd. in Breece 199-200). Regardless of Jackson’s assessment of the inhabitants of the region, Breece determinedly shouldered her duties as a teacher, hoping to carry the torch of enlightenment and prosperity to the native people. In the pursuit of her goal, she endured the Alaskan subzero temperatures and snowstorms without the benefits of modern conveniences, braved wild animals, and still had the energy to educate not only the children, but also the village as a whole. As a woman alone, she was forced to splice traditional gender roles the way a geneticist might splice pieces of DNA. In genetics, splicing is done to combine desirable qualities from separate organisms in one specimen. Breece’s ability to successfully accomplish this answers the question of suitability with a resounding “yes.” Yes, women are suited to being independent and, yes, women are suited to traditionally masculine aspects of character. By following Breece’s example of gender merging and becoming a more androgynous creature, individuals can contribute to creating a society that is healthier than even Roosevelt had envisioned. Breece pioneered a mentality in which society is not based on the rigid idea of “separate, but equal,” as in Roosevelt’s vision. The path she carved in Old Alaska leads to a world in which gender roles are hybridized and more fluid for maximum effectiveness.

In her memoir, *A Schoolteacher in Old Alaska*, Breece shows herself to be a woman capable of combining both masculine and feminine traits to create a balance fit for survival. In other words, she meshes the best of both worlds, making herself into a person that not only survives in a harsh environment, but helps others survive as well. One example of Breece’s successful splicing of masculine and feminine characteristics is her conformity to standards of dress, regardless of impracticality. In the early 1900’s it was expected of a woman to wear several layers of clothing. The usual mode of dress consisted of chemise, bloomers, one or two petticoats, woolen stockings, and an outer garment. A chemise is akin to a modern nightgown worn under the outer garment, extending from shoulder to mid-calf, and was worn either long-sleeved or sleeveless, depending on the weather. Bloomers were another type of undergarment, similar to pants but considerably baggier, although by this time a more fitted bloomer had begun to emerge on the frontier for greater mobility. Undergarments were usually made of cotton or wool, and in Alaska wool was worn nine to twelve months a year. The outer garments were ankle length or longer, with a high neck and sleeves extending to the wrist. All outer garments except the skirt were tight fitting and restrictive, and were fashioned of cotton or calico for summer months and wool for winter. An apron was often worn over the dress as well.

These materials and many layers made women’s everyday clothing cumbersome and generally uncomfortable to wear. In addition, it is important to note that falling into deep water while clothed in this fashion usually meant certain death, as the multitude of garments would gain twice their weight in water. Women who could swim were rare, even on the frontier. This is most likely the reason for Breece’s horror at having to descend from the ship, the *Dora*, via a rope ladder. Breece describes the incident, saying “I was told I must climb down a rope ladder thrown over the steamer’s rolling, tossing side and from there jump into a rowboat. I told the crew I simply would not do it” (8). Her reaction is no wonder, considering the risk of falling into the freezing water and being dragged under by her voluminous skirts.

Restricted as she was, Breece accomplished many masculine tasks, such as hiking and fighting a pack of vicious dogs, which might have been less difficult were she not encumbered by such ungainly clothing. At one point,
she even managed to stay afloat in a swift stream while her skirts fought against her. After working late one night, she finally decided to head home in the dark with the sky pouring rain. Upon realizing that a wild animal was chasing her, she ran to the narrow bridge to escape by crossing to the other side. In her fright, she slipped and “pitched headlong into the swift current” (85). She describes her experience saying, “Somehow I scrambled up on the lodged log. My skirts bound around my feet so I could not move, the water was halfway over the sides of the log, my lantern was gone and I was in utter darkness. But so far, so good” (84-85). Rather than linger on the impracticality of her clothing, Breece accepted that her skirts endangered her life and persevered; she held on and called out until someone heard and came to her aide. Although her awkward garb is frequently inconvenient and even hazardous in Old Alaska, to wear anything else would be labeled improper, and thereby hamper her effectiveness with the villagers. Undoubtedly, Breece’s willingness to conform to her gender’s criteria of dress also stems from the pride she held for the role of women in American culture as facilitators of survival for the species. For this reason, she accepted this part of her gender role and adopted traditionally masculine characteristics to compensate, using rational thought, perseverance and strength of spirit to overcome any dilemma her dress might cause.

Another example of combining masculine and feminine characteristics occurred while Breece was stationed in the village of Iliamna. As a schoolteacher, Breece was responsible for the village’s children. When she discovered that the children were malnourished due to the purposeful misuse of food supplies by the parents, she used her blend of gender traits to seek the best possible outcome for her students. She writes:

I had a suspicion that the children were even less well off than could be expected. So I told them to bring a piece of pilot bread to school... the bread had been made of flour from the fermented mess left in the bottom of hooch barrels. After school that day I stormed to the village and made the biggest racket of which I was capable. They would not, I
made sure, use their flour that way again.” (143)

Hooch is an alcoholic beverage made with fermented flour, completely lacking in nutrients, but appealing due to the fogginess of mind available upon consumption. The parents, facing months of famine and thoroughly disheartened, found respite in the stupor the liquor provided. Yet in the middle of a famine, as was the case in Iliamna, the loss of nutrients was a double blow. It was for this reason Breece stormed to the village to reprimand the adults. She showed her feminine side through her compassion for the children, as well as through her indignation at their parents’ irresponsibility. She coupled these with the more masculine tactics of aggression and confrontation, playing the role of independent aggressor so that she might help those less fortunate than she. During the winter of the following year, the second year of famine in Iliamna, Breece again interceded to ensure the welfare of the villagers. Without the knowledge of her superiors, she encouraged the men of the village to cut firewood for the school in exchange for emergency food rations provided by the government (153-9). This is yet another prime example of successful splicing, as Breece demonstrated authority and initiative in her decision-making while being motivated by her compassionate and nurturing nature.

In pursuit of a healthier, hybridized society, there is one particular phenomenon to note: the commonly held belief that men and women are inherently different. Breece was aware of this stance on gender differences, and used such beliefs to her advantage, as insinuated in a letter to a supervisor in which she accounts for her willful lack of business sense by writing, “I’m a woman and cannot think and speak like a man” (205). Although Breece was clearly capable of both thinking and speaking like a man, she played upon the misconceptions of gender to bend her supervisor to her will.

This view is further built upon in the commentary of Jane Jacobs, the editor of Breece’s memoir and her great-niece, who states, “Many little observations, as well as many little silences in her memoir, add up to the impression that she thought men, by and large, behaved like controllers of other people when they were in a position to do so, and all too often were ready to take advantage of those in their power. She did not regard this as usual behavior for women” (Breece 205). In a memoir riddled with Breece’s own opinions and commentary, Jacobs is quick to pick up on the lack of explicit criticism. One such instance occurs in reference to Mr. Miller, the husband of Breece’s friend. This particular man routinely made his wife tend their trapping lines and carry all of their equipment between posts while he selfishly did nothing. In addition, he proudly announced that he had once been wealthy due to dealing in whiskey. In Breece’s commentary, she simply states: “I well realized he was too old to change his ideals…so I made no comment” (157). The telling absence of Breece’s usual byline in reference to these “many little observations” indicates her disapproval of the man’s aggressive domination, though it might be concluded that she is content with the use of obscure manipulation. Breece sees these men as controllers in destructive competition for the superior role in their sphere. While they push those in their power to do their bidding, they ignore, and often facilitate, the suffering of others. The lack of this characteristic in women allows for the nurturing side of humanity to emerge, even if by subtle manipulation, thereby cultivating the well-being of the community by focusing on more than just the individual.

Although Breece was aware of gender differences, even going so far as to actively combine traits of each gender for her own pur-
poses, it is the opinion of Jacobs that “it is clear that what she saw as a gender difference was something she did not care to change in herself” (205). It would seem that Breece changed only those differences that did not suit her, and retained those that did. Perhaps the most striking question is not whether she intended to change gender differences, but whether they were changed regardless. Breece was a liberator of women, taking it upon herself to educate them, as in the case with a young mother who was afraid to bathe her child:

She was furious and insisted it would kill the baby if I made her put him in the water…The only recourse was an object lesson. So I took the baby, and in spite of her efforts to stop me, removed his filthy rags and put him in the tub and he had the washing of his life…when it was all over, and the mother saw her child so clean and comfortable, lying there in his little white bed, she thanked me over and over (104).

Though it might not be said that Breece was one of the great engineers of women’s liberation, as her contribution was only discovered years after her death, it could be said that she was one of the early pioneers. Where one will lead, others may follow, which is certainly the case with Breece. By setting an example for those directly connected to her, she started a ripple-effect, one of many pebbles in the pond of women’s liberation.

Hanna Breece’s experiences in Alaska support the idea that women are suited to being aggressive and independent of men. Breece exhibited the physical strength, assertiveness, independence, and determination usually attributed to men, but softened these with the compassion, nurturing, and patience attributed to women. By splicing these traits together, she made herself into a creature that was not only stronger on her own, but that also strengthened those around her. Her story demonstrates that it is not necessary for women and men to create teams with separate but equal characteristics, as Theodore Roosevelt suggested. Rather, each person needs traditionally “masculine” qualities for his or her own survival, and traditionally “feminine” qualities for the survival of the species. In Old Alaska, Breece learned that while traditionally masculine qualities such as physical strength, ruthlessness, and competitive drive could facilitate the survival of one individual, it was often at the expense of others. By following the examples set by such exemplary ladies as Eleanor Roosevelt, and utilizing traditionally feminine aspects such as compassion, nurturing, and active involvement in our communities, we encourage the survival of the human race. Without this, there is no humanity.

Works Cited