Not Here to Make Friends

[Season 2]

S2 E2

They Don't Let Girls in the Swamp

By Celeste Amidon

Medieval Wife Swap was a simple idea, really. Take the beloved ABC format in which two radically different families (think: military-strict middle Americans and coastal hippie-dippies) switch wives for two weeks, but set it in medieval times. Using dramatic recreations, talking heads, archival footage, and deep dives into fascinating moments in history, *Medieval Wife Swap* would serve viewers a fresh, engaging way to understand the past. *Drunk History* meets *The Tudors*.

I was twenty-one years old and living in New York City's East Village. My role as a development coordinator at The History Channel was my first job out of college. The development team was small, occupying the fifth floor of the A+E building in Murray Hill. The History Channel was known by dads for its presidential documentaries, by middle Americans for its treasure hunting and swamp people and mountain men, by critics for its obsession with Hitler, and by stoners for its unequivocal evidence that aliens are indeed out there and they coexisted with dinosaurs, thank you very much. When I announced my new job to my family, my eight-year-old nephew pulled me aside with an idea. "Hitler's Toilet," he said with a grave expression on his face. I jotted it down in my running list of ideas, above *David Blaine Escapes Sing Sing*, below *House Hunters for Men*.

The History Channel started out as just that: a channel dedicated to history. But the channel didn't just focus on any old history. Nope, there were no princesses and puffy dresses in this version of the past. This was *male* history. Wars, presidents, more wars. The History Channel dealt largely with the extremely heterosexual "Male Romance" and had since its inception. The Male Romance, a term coined by one of the OG executives at History and parroted in almost every pitch thereafter, outlined a way for the American man to transport himself to a place where he was not just wanted, but needed. Be that riding a horse through Gettysburg or slaying gators on Bayou Sorrel, searching for gold on Oak Island, or discovering evidence of aliens at Stonehenge, The History Channel served men a pristine, idealized version of maleness on a silver platter.

The History Channel belongs to A+E Networks, which belongs to Hearst. A+E Networks is home to two other channels: Lifetime and A+E. And, while those two channels are largely "female" (*Dance*

Moms, Leah Remini, Court Cam [yes, *Court Cam* is for girls; no, you will not take that away from us]), The History Channel is squarely "male." After a handful of years, the boilerplate Vietnam War documentaries at History gave way to more experimental stuff. The History Channel began dealing in ... well, let's call them *hypotheticals*, shall we? What if John Wilkes Booth didn't actually kill Lincoln? What if Amelia Earhart was captured by Japanese forces? Historical conspiracies then gave way to pseudoarchaeology (aliens at Watergate, anyone?) before that morphed into cryptids (think: Bigfoot). It was clear what the viewers wanted. They wanted crazy conceits with murky evidence. They wanted to question history without really questioning it at all.

When I arrived at the network, I was young and ambitious and had never watched The History Channel in my life. An NYU grad and aspiring TV writer, I was determined to break into the industry however I could. I applied for the impenetrable Netflix and HBO jobs while simultaneously throwing my hat in the ring for weirder fits (I really had my fingers crossed for a gig on WE tv's *Love After Lockup*, the undisputed greatest show in history, but that didn't end up panning out). I was shocked to land an interview at History. I was sure that when they saw little old me with my mid-length skirt and love of improv comedy, they'd laugh me out of the building and hire a guy wearing a baseball cap instead. But, over the course of many high-intensity interviews, I played the part of Gen Zillennial, who views *American Pickers* religiously. When one of the execs asked me who my favorite *Swamp People* character was, I froze. I had never seen the show before. "The girl...?" I ventured. I was hired.

And I was shocked that I was hired. *Why* was I hired? Did they really think I was a History Channel aficionado? Or did they need a young woman at the network to fill some sort of quota? It was when I got to the office on my first day that I realized the male environment I had pictured couldn't have been further from reality. The SVP of development was a woman who wore sun dresses and had pillows that read "I like big books and I cannot lie" in her office. The maleness on air was not reflected in our offices. Sure, there were the guys who'd been there since the beginning, with conspiracy corkboards and framed pictures of William Shatner in the offices, but about half the execs were women who squarely rejected the

one-of-the-boys role they could have easily taken on in such an environment. My fellow coordinators worked hard and shared an in-the-trenches camaraderie. I became friends with aspiring photographers and musicians who left their cubicles at the end of the day and went downtown and made art. It should not have come as a surprise to me that the people The History Channel was meant for were nowhere in sight.

In my third month, I was getting ready to pitch an original idea to my superiors for the first time. After sifting through dozens of kernels I'd jotted down: *Alien Submarines, Fossil Game Show, Taxidermy Wars, Surviving in an Abandoned Mall*—I landed on *Medieval Wife Swap*. Now, *Wife Swap* was a bit of a gamble because the idea was inherently ... female. "Female" used to be a dirty word at The History Channel. Female, as in, "We don't do food shows here—food is too female." As in, "We only do shows about victimless crimes—crimes with victims are female." As in, "I get that you want to do this paranormal show, Celeste, but it's not going to happen. Yes, mysteries are male. But mysteries involving ghosts are decidedly female." But The History Channel also needed to adapt to stay afloat. It was 2019. Things were changing in the country, and the channel had to adopt some twenty-first-century ideals, or it would sink like the Lusitania. The premium docs about presidents gave the channel prestige, gave it a seat at the serious-grown-ups table, but it was the reality shows, the competitions, that made the money. "Co-viewing" was the big buzzword in the office those days. Men in Wisconsin were now allowing their wives to enter their man caves. Women were tentatively perching on the edge of the couch, cautiously sucked in by that spunky female blade-smith on *Forged in Fire* and that new show about the history of Hostess Snacks.

"Who's to say the History Channel can't teach us about love?"

I stood in the fifth-floor conference room, hands shaking, reading off my prepared pitch, watched by the unreadable men and women on my team. I breathed in. I breathed out. *You got this*, I said to myself. *You're here for a reason. You bring a fresh perspective to the History Channel. A young one. A feminine one. Remember that.*

"It teaches us about everything else: war, courage, the improbable, the impossible," I continued. "But since its inception, The History Channel has been afraid of love. Why? Because it's too

female? Think of the wars, the conflicts, the leaders, the mayhem, the major events in our shared past that were defined by romance. *Medieval Wife Swap* is a fun, unique, bite-sized take on romance and history—a creative play on an already beloved format. Each episode takes a look at two historical romances and imagines what would happen if the wives traded places. Through premium historical re-enactments, first-rate actors will find humor in this setup while remaining true to history, from the costumes to the sets to the dialogue. What if Anne Boleyn and Marie Antoinette swapped for a week? What lessons could Jackie O have taught Queen Elizabeth II? Would Sappho have been able to swing it in Cleopatra's position? How would history have changed? History's wives played an astronomical role in major events, no doubt. But how astronomical? And, hey, who says The History Channel can't tell us a little something about love?"

I breathed out and looked at the sea of execs gazing back at me. Somebody blew their nose. Another checked their phone.

"It's a bit ... female."

"We don't do comedy."

"Sounds expensive."

I left the office that day, dejected. Right after my pitch, an idea about cutting down trees made it to the next level, to be reviewed by the big boss. I was foolish to think I could have made a difference there. Even if *Wife Swap* had captured the attention of the History Channel execs, what would it have mattered? Female or not, co-viewing or single-viewing, at the end of the day, whatever we did, even if we put David Blaine in Sing Sing, the escape artist himself could not help us escape one simple fact: Cable TV was a dying breed, a relic, much like the artifacts found in garages on *American Pickers*, much like the trash dug up on *Oak Island*, much like Hitler's toilet. People just didn't consume media by turning the TV on and flipping around anymore.

The Discovery Channel, our rival, got with the times during my tenure at History and became Discovery+, a behemoth streaming service with shiny, clickable options galore. But The History Channel hung onto its online library of shows for dear life: its constant reruns of *Hacksaw Ridge* and its obsession with a specific kind of past. And maybe it made sense for a channel dedicated to history to rely on

nostalgia and outdated beliefs about masculinity instead of striving for a future that isn't full of heroes and villains but a murky and strange middle ground. Reality. Because reality TV isn't very fun when it deals in *actual* reality, right? And, let's be honest, the future of history is not fun. The future of history understands that its heroes were shady and the pyramids were built by slavery, not aliens. That isn't very romantic.

Reality TV is aspirational. Whether it aspires to the glamor of the Kardashians or the soul-Boraxing of the *Queer Eye* makeover, the fairytale of the traditional marriage promise or the parental comfort of a *Great British Bake Off* win, the vast majority of reality TV enforces age-old ideals of race, of gender, of family. Of history. At least for now.

I left my job a year into the pandemic. Fourteen months had passed since *Medieval Wife Swap* was shot down, and I continued to pitch, though it mostly became an exercise in public speaking for me. I knew the team was never going to chase my wild ideas. As the pandemic raged and we hunkered down, pitching and editing from home, the world changed in ways we could never have anticipated. The murder of George Floyd marked a tide change in media, and A+E was especially affected. In reaction to public outcry, A+E canceled its booming ratings driver *Live PD* and was expected to pivot away from cop-loving content and into ... well, it didn't know what. The History Channel was forced to really consider inclusivity. It wasn't an option anymore. Diversity in casting became a must. Premium docs could no longer only be about Grant and Roosevelt. The stories the network told had to include the people it had previously left out. Docs like *Black Patriots* and *After Jackie* were prioritized and subsequently adored by critics. The execs who had been following a rote script for so long were forced to spread their wings and brave uncharted territories.

I didn't exit my job in a dramatic way. I was simply finished. I wanted to focus on my writing. I didn't feel the History Channel had anything left to offer me. They would never make *Medieval Wife Swap* or *David Blaine Escapes Sing Sing* or *Abandoned Mall Survival* or any of the other grand ideas I'd had. Perhaps they would have, if I'd stayed. With the changing times came a greater influx of different voices to The History Channel. Despite that, I haven't

looked back much. One day, though, I took a trip to Los Angeles and stayed in a hotel. I got home from a criminally expensive sushi dinner my first evening there and turned on the TV. I flipped around the channels for a while: QVC, hysteria on the local news, nail-biting drama on *Below Deck*, a baseball game, an Investigation ID special about a love story gone very sour. I landed on The History Channel. It was a rerun of a *Swamp People* episode about a bayou that the swampers believed to be cursed. I watched it for a moment and realized how nice it was to be lulled into entertainment by something that was pre-set, decided for you by people who didn't really understand you. A storm was on the horizon. The swampers spotted a gator rippling below the water's black surface. Cut to commercial. I changed the channel.