The newspaper excerpt above describes the first ever Wild West exhibition of William F. “Buffalo Bill” Cody, performed in Omaha to an enthusiastic crowd. Along with Cody was his one-time partner, Doc Carver, and their large troupe of performers, including Capt. A.H. Bogardus (U.S. champion trap shooter), as well as numerous Pony Express riders and Sioux, Omaha and Pawnee Indians (Chief Sitting Bull and Annie Oakley would later join the troupe) and even a small herd of buffalo. The newspaper reported “no less than 8,000 persons were present to witness the opening” of Cody’s extravaganza, a substantial number even by today’s standards.

Buffalo Bill’s re-enactments were the first in a long line of Wild West exhibitions that served to keep the legend of the outlaws and gunslingers alive; more than 80 companies have been documented to operate in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, and these re-enactments continue to thrive today. On any given weekend across the country, re-enactment troupes depict the era of the rough-and-tumble cowboy hero. Though America’s history boasts many interesting and unique periods, it is the era of wild, western cowboys – roughly 1860 to 1890 – that seems to capture the public’s imagination. What was, and continues to be, the attraction to these shows and the Wild West?

Cody’s “The Wild West, Rocky Mountain, and Prairie Exhibition” (he was careful not to use the word “show” in the title, as he argued the performances were “reality itself”) and others like them served as a way to satisfy the public’s fascination with the West. Even as early as the late 1880s, Cody and others believed the West was dying, and that his exhibitions were a way to keep it alive. According to Sarah Blackstone, author of Buckskins, Bullets and Business, by the time Cody’s shows were at the height of their popularity in the early 1890s, “all but four of the Western territories had become states, the last Indian uprising had been quelled, and there were four transcontinental railroads.”

Settlers were coming west by the thousands, and for Buffalo Bill, these exhibitions served to not only entertain, but to quell what was becoming known as “frontier anxiety.” Many Americans became concerned, believing the free land was nearly gone, and feared its disappearance would change society. The belief that the frontier had ended created a nostalgia that spurred many Americans to wonder what they had missed by not going west. The Wild West shows satisfied their craving for adventure.

Cody’s exhibitions, which thrilled audiences with displays of shootouts, stagecoach robberies and Indians on foot racing against horses, glamorized the West. According to Paul Reddin, author of Wild West Shows, these elaborate “re-enactments” satisfied a cultural need for Americans who...
Buffalo Bill’s Wild West and Congress of Rough Riders of the World

Many Wild West exhibition posters often depicted heroic riders coming to the rescue of white settlers from the “savage Indians,” as shown here. The show’s depiction of Indians reinforced inaccurate stereotypes that followed Native Americans into 20th century films.

Cody’s Wild West show performed to a crowd of 18,000 at Chicago’s World’s Fair in 1893. At the same fair, a scholar declared in a speech that “The frontier has gone.” This was the beginning of the end of the Wild West shows. Cody’s exhibition closed up for good in 1913, partly due to the advent of the motion picture. The first narrative film ever in 1903, The Great Train Robbery, was inspired by the robbing of a Union Pacific train by Butch Cassidy’s Hole in the Wall Gang. Other exhibitions continued with mixed success for another decade, but the characters lived on. Even though the Wild West shows were dying off, the shaping of the mythological American hero continued in paintings, dime-novels and film. Buffalo Bill became the most often-portrayed western hero in re-enactments and on screen.

“It’s embedded in Americans’ psyche. When we see those characters riding the range, taming the horses, saving the farm or ranch, it touches on our basic emotions of not only survival, but that we can make a difference,” said J. B. Tyson, Nebraska filmmaker and film studies specialist. “It comes down to the basic battle of good versus evil. Even though the idea of the Wild West and its heroes is based in legend and surrounded by myth, the desire to be the hero is real.”

Even though these shows slowly came to an end, they created a passion for westernism and entertainment, and the contemporary rodes are a direct result of Cody’s Wild West exhibitions. Though informal rodeos existed in the 1820s and 1830s, competitive rodeo emerged after the Civil War, and often Wild West shows introduced rodeo exhibitions into their acts. Professional rodeo had an explosion of popularity in the decade after World War I and, in many cases, “rodeo” seemed to be substituted for “Wild West” as a more popular drawing card. Today’s rodeos often intermingle western-style re-enactments with competition.

North Platte’s NEBRASKALand Days came out of Buffalo Bill’s “Old Glory Lagoon,” which celebrated the Fourth of July in 1882 and is argued to have been the first rodeo in the country. Cheyenne Frontier Days is another immensely popular example, going strong since 1897. Another legend that lives on in re-enactments is Wild Bill Hickok. In 1881, the Nebraska Game and Parks Commission began to develop Rock Creek Station, located on the outskirts of Fairbury and established along the Oregon Trail as a stage and Pony Express stop, is where Hickok began his gunsmuggling career in what is known as the “McCanles Massacre.”

In 1980, the Nebraska Game and Parks Commission began to develop Rock Creek Station as a state historical park. Today, the park hosts “Rock Creek Trail Days” the first weekend of June, an event that boasts living history demonstrations, stagecoach rides, trick rope demonstrations, a buffalo stew cookout and re-enactments of the McCandles-Hickok shootout.

“Probably the most popular,” said Krueger, “are the re-enactments.”

Hand Krueger, along with his wife Carol and a band of about 15 volunteers, form the Old West Theater Group, which produces and perform the famous McCanes shootout that set Wild Bill Hickok’s reputation in motion. At Fairbury’s Trail Days: “We not only recreate the actual shootout that took place here, but we also reenact the Pony Express changing of the mochila.” These mochilas (from the Spanish word for “knapsack”) were thrown over the saddle and held in place by the weight of the rider, and the mail pockets (caminus) were padlocked. Only two minutes were allowed at a station, so changing of the Pony Express’s mochila became an art unto itself.

“I got started in cowboy action shooting and that got us started doing the re-enactments,” said Krueger.
Many Oglala Sioux tribe members traveled with Cody’s Wild West troupe, but often wore costumes from tribes other than their own during the show’s performances.

Annie Oakley and the Role of Women

Though arguably the first female superstar, sharpshooter Annie Oakley’s (nicknamed “Watanya Cicilia” or “Little Sure Shot”) presence in Buffalo Bill’s Wild West shows was not the result of Cody’s or management’s intention to recognize the role of frontier women. After auditioning in 1884, before the show had no position for her until sharpshooter A. H. Bogardus left unexpectedly. Oakley auditioned again and was hired, so having her more as a result of an unplanned hiring than any inclination of Cody or management to include a “more a result of an unplanned hiring than any inclination of Cody or management to include a woman in the show. Cody’s later autobiography included little mention of any contributions of women – the “winning of the West” was still believed to be a strictly male accomplishment.

“We’re getting older so we don’t do as much as we used to, but the re-enactments are extremely popular.” Buffalo Bill and Wild Bill Hickok were both famed Pony Express riders before they became famous gunslingers. Another popular troupe of re-enactors is Wild West Creations out of Nebraska. Frank Murcek, a.k.a. Wyatt Earp, along with his brother, Steve, and a band of outlaws, stage shootouts, bank and train robberies, and will even perform a shotgun wedding if needed.

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“Part of the charm of the old west, as viewed through our eyes, has always been the colorful characters of those days,” says Deb Skinner, director of marketing for Wild West Creations. “We find that live performances of the old west history are the best way to bring the west alive.” Americans are not the only audience hungry for a taste of our rough and rowdy history. Wild West re-enactment groups are widely popular in England and other European countries. One large troupe meets every weekend in their own “Western” town in England.

Most of the Native Americans used in the shows came from the Pine Ridge Reservation and were Oglala Sioux, but had to represent themselves from multiple tribes. Many of the Native Americans used in the shows as a way to advance recognition of Indian lives, as well as an avenue to be “useful and productive” citizens. Both Standing Bear and Black Elk discuss their experiences in the Wild West shows in their respective autobiographies, “My People the Sioux” and “Black Elk Speaks.”

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Myth of the Savage Indian

Scholars believe that negative stereotypes of Native Americans grew out of the same dime novels and Wild West shows that glamorized the cowboy and gunfighters. William Cody is said to have greatly respected and admired the great Indian chiefs, featuring them prominently in his shows as noble warriors, though in many of his exhibitions, Cody featured Native Americans as wild savages attacking whites – with Cody and his Rough Riders riding in to save the day. Some of the re-enactments included the Lewis and Clark Expedition, Battle of Little Bighorn and many battles from the Plains wars. Other performances depicted “Attack on Settler’s Cabin” and “Attack on the Emigrant Train,” where natives were defeated by the brave settlers. Custer’s Last Stand was staged with actual survivors of the massacre. All were paid for their performances and also made side money signing autographs and photographs after the show.

Native Americans taking part in Cody’s show included: Sitting Bull (who never actually performed in any re-enactments) Black Elk Geronimo Rains in the Face (reported as the man who killed Custer) Standing Bear

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