

The Wild West

Keeping the American Legend Alive

By Elizabeth Mack

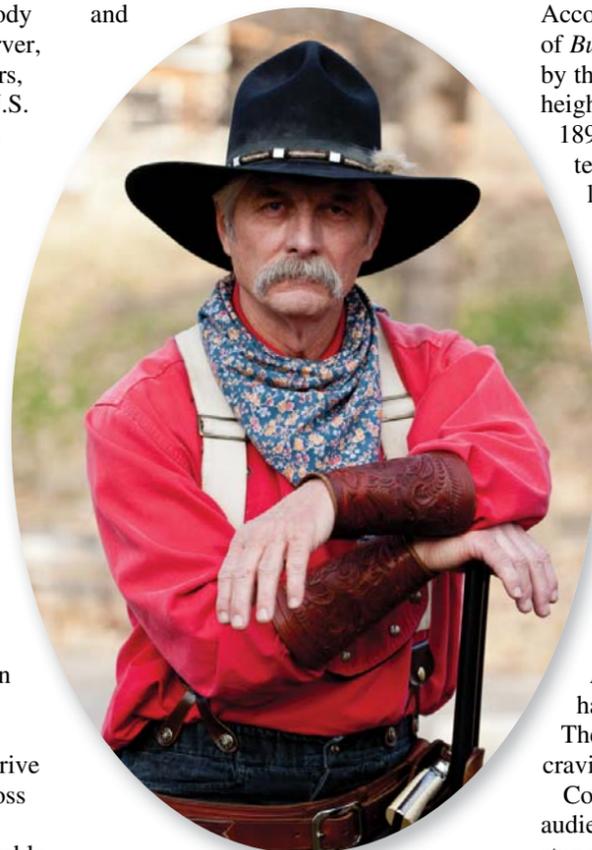
For a month past the great event to which all our citizens were looking forward was the appearance of the Cody and Carver combination, with their original and novel Nebraska show, entitled the "Wild West."

— *The Omaha Daily Bee, May 21, 1883*

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.

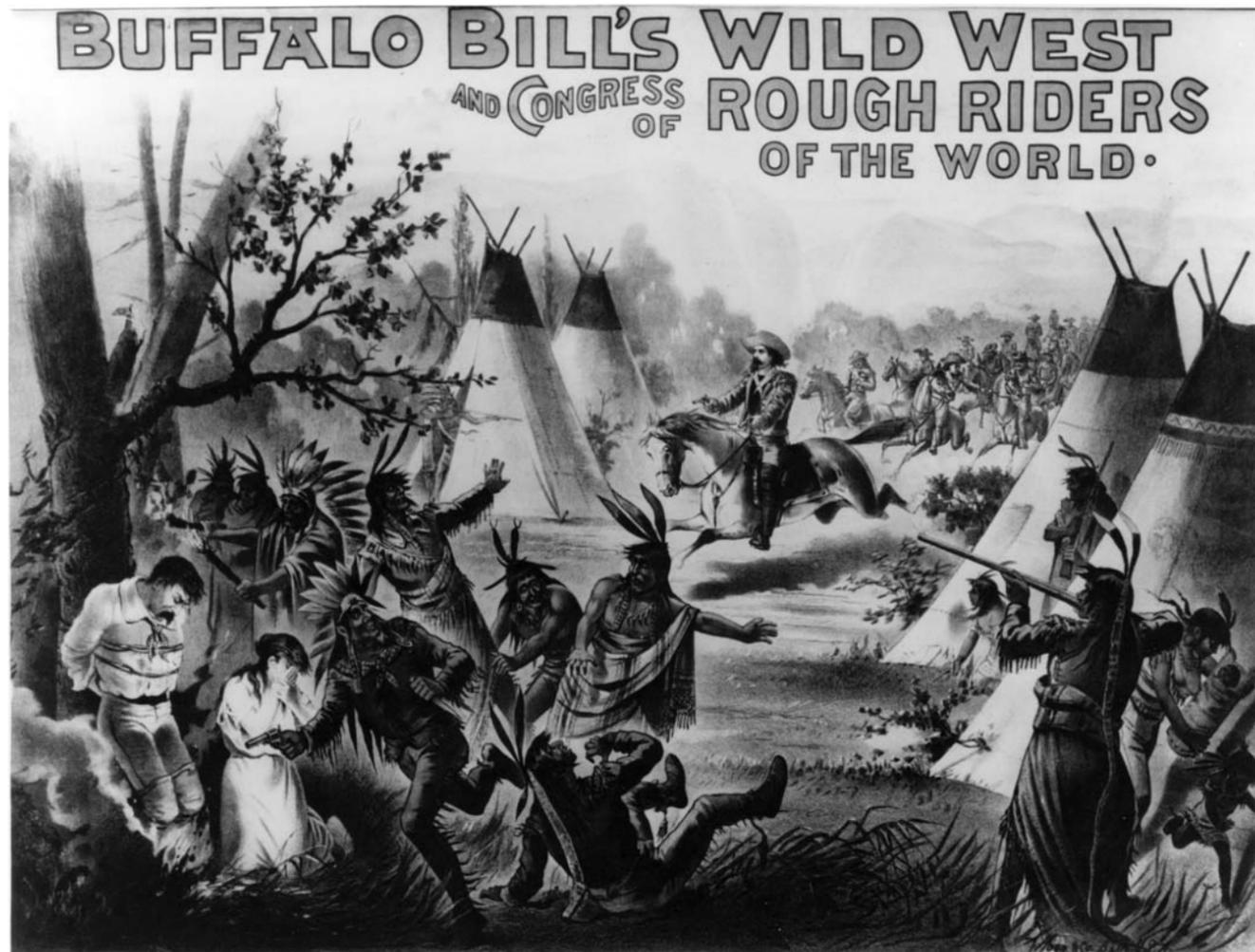
Cody's exhibitions, which thrilled audiences with displays of shootouts, stagecoach robberies and Indians on foot racing against horses, glamorized the West. According to Paul Reddin, author of *Wild West Shows*, these elaborate "re-enactments" satisfied a cultural need for Americans who

PHOTO BY PASQUALE MINIGARELLI



In Buffalo Bill's Wild West show posters, the Congress of Rough Riders were always highlighted as great hunters, expert equestrians and skilled sharpshooters. The posters – and word of mouth – were the primary forms of advertisement at the time. Even today, modern reenactors often try to keep the legends of the Wild West alive by dressing in period dress (left) and using replicas of period weaponry as they recreate famous gunfights or popular heroes of the time.

COURTESY OF NEBRASKA STATE HISTORICAL SOCIETY



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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.



This Omaha Daily Bee clipping reports Buffalo Bill's 1883 opening exhibition a “sensation.” The show was over three hours long and thousands attended.

wanted to see the conquest of the country as a grand accomplishment filled with drama and excitement: “Characterizing the winning of the Plains frontier as easy and peaceful would have minimized something that Americans wanted to see as heroic.” It would have been difficult (and boring) to show a farming family raising a cabin and planting crops – Americans needed a larger-than-life hero to represent the epic “conquering” of the Plains, and the dashing and adventurous Buffalo Bill Cody fit the bill. Cody’s “National Entertainment” advertised “Object Lessons” and “Educational Exhibitions” but Buffalo Bill’s realistic portrayals of the West were often so mingled with myth, it became impossible to differentiate between the two.

These myths of the Wild West began with the minstrel shows and popular

music in the 1840s. During this period, American showman P. T. Barnum exhibited Indian chiefs, dances and an array of Wild West displays in his museums before he became known for his circus. The myths grew bigger and more exaggerated when the dime novel took off in the late-1850s. These novels captured the public’s fascination with sensational tales of violence and heroics – cowboys versus Indians, lawmen versus outlaws, settlers versus predatory cattlemen. One of the most successful of these dime novels was Ned Buntline’s series on William Cody. *Buffalo Bill Cody - King of the Bordermen* was the first of 550 titles featuring the hero. Bill Cody decided to promote his own now widely popular legend, and after a brief stint in the theater began to form his traveling Wild West exhibitions.

At the height of its popularity,

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 basics 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 that hero is real.”

Even though these shows slowly came to an end, they created a passion for western-style entertainment, and the contemporary rodeo is 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. The only difference is Buffalo Bill’s and other shows hired performers instead of prize-money contestants. 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

Wild West Re-Enactments – Nebraska to Arizona

Nebraska

- Rock Creek Trail Days – Fairbury, Nebraska. First weekend in June.
- Railroad Days – Railroad heritage at Durham Western Heritage Museum, Lauritzen Gardens, Union Pacific Railroad Museum, The Historic General Dodge House and RailsWest Railroad Museum in Omaha, Nebraska. July.
- Grand Duke Alexis Rendezvous – Russian Czar, Alexander II, the Grand Duke Alexis visited Nebraska in 1872 for a buffalo hunt led by Buffalo Bill Cody, General George Custer, and General Phil Sheridan. This celebration includes storytelling from the “actual” characters and other events at Camp Hayes Lake, Hayes Center, Nebraska. September.
- NEBRASKALAND DAYS – Buffalo Bill Rodeo, The Frontier Revue, Heritage Festival and more. North Platte, Nebraska. June.
- The Great Platte River Road Archway – Kearney, daily.

Outside Nebraska

- Gathering of the Gunfighters – Yuma, Arizona. January.
- Custer’s Last Stand Re-enactment & Little Bighorn Days – Hardin & Crow Agency, Montana. June.
- Buffalo Bill’s Wild West Days – Sheridan, Wyoming. June.
- Wild West Shakespeare – Much Ado About Nothing or . . . A Whole Lotta Fussin’ over Nothin’ – American West Heritage Center, Logan Utah. Weekends in July.

came out of Buffalo Bill’s “Old Glory Blowout,” 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. 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 gunslinging 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 roping demonstrations, a buffalo stew cookout and re-enactments of the McCanles-Hickok shootout.

“We do basket weaving, blacksmithing, loom weaving and

other period-specific demonstrations,” said Judy Weers with the Rock Creek Station Visitors Center and Museum, “but the shootouts with the re-enactors are always the most popular.”

Harlin Krueger, along with his wife Carol and a band of about 15 volunteers, form the Old West Theater Group, a band of re-enactors who perform the famed McCanles 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 (*cantinas*) 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.

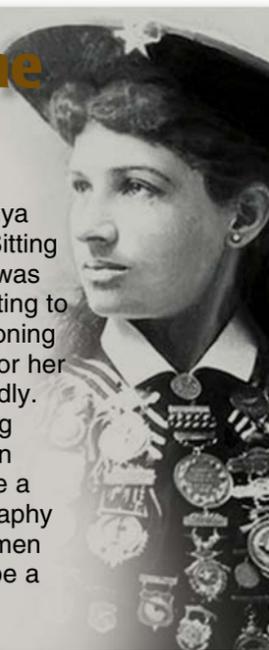


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Many Oglala Sioux tribe members traveled with Cody's Wild West troupe, but often wore costumes from tribes other than their own during the shows' performances.

Annie Oakley and the Role of Women

Though arguably the first female superstar, sharpshooter Annie Oakley's (nicknamed "Watanya Cicilla" or "Little Sure Shot" by fellow performer Sitting Bull) presence in Buffalo Bill's Wild West shows was not the result of Cody or other management wanting to recognize the role of frontier women. After auditioning in 1884, they decided the show had no position for her until sharpshooter A. H. Bogardus left unexpectedly. Oakley auditioned again and was hired, so having her was more a result of an unplanned hiring than any inclination of Cody or management to include a white 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 Omaha. 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.

"When I was young, I grew up with the western on TV, so I've always had a love for cowboys like John Wayne, Roy Rogers and Gene Autry," says Murcek. "In 1958, of the top 10 programs on TV, seven of them were westerns. Now there are none. So for us, it's the nostalgia, and what we do in the re-enactments is bring this part of

history to younger kids.

"Kids will come up to us after a performance and ask if we're 'real' cowboys. We get a chance to educate a new generation," he said.

The era portrayed by Wild West Creations' cowboys is the lawless era after the end of the Civil War, which according to the troupe, was dominated by diverse personalities of law abiding and lawless men and women settling the untamed land.

"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. Nestled in the Kent countryside outside of London is the town of Laredo, an

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 were "Attack on Setter'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 melee. 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

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 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."

"authentic" Wild West town complete with twenty-six period-correct buildings lit by oil lamp, cowboys and saloon girls, stagecoaches and hitching posts. Colin Winter, Laredo's resident spokesperson, believes the popularity of the Wild West for outsiders is rooted in childhood nostalgia: "I think it goes back to when we were young – we were always playing cowboys and Indians. I always watched the old films with Roy Rogers, Lone Ranger and Cisco Kid – we had some great adventures."

J.B. Tyson believes America's vibrant history not only crosses cultural boundaries, but geographic boundaries as well: "A rich history has the ability to intertwine geography and capture the imagination of any generation."

The old West conjures up images of cowboys and Indians, six-shooters and spurs, John Wayne and Roy Rogers. Who hasn't, at some time in their childhood, slung a holster over their hips and challenged the neighbor kid to a quick draw? Even though the Wild West is now only a faint memory, the

Wild West exhibitions have created a lasting image of the American West. Although the shows are based largely on myth, they have helped in some ways to preserve part of the history of the American frontier, including the colorful characters of the legendary time. As the public continues to remain enthralled with the long-vanished rugged frontier and its inhabitants, re-enactments live on to capture the strength and spirit of the wild, wild West. ■

Historical information was taken from Wild West Shows by Paul Reddin; The Wild West: A History of the Wild West Shows by Don Russell; Buckskins, Bullets and Business by Sarah Blackstone; Outside American; Race, Ethnicity, and the Role of the American West in National Belonging by Dan Moos.

For more information on Wild West Creations, go to wildwestcreations.net. Visitors to England can find the town of Laredo 25 miles outside of London, or visit their web site at laredo.org.uk.



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Ned Buntline, Buffalo Bill and Texas Jack; 1872.