

## About Buffalo Bill

William F. Cody "Buffalo Bill" (1846-1917)

In a life that was part legend and part fabrication, William F. Cody came to embody the spirit of the West for millions, transmuting his own experience into a national myth of frontier life that still endures today.

Born in Scott County, Iowa, in 1846, Cody grew up on the prairie. When his father died in 1857, his mother moved to Kansas, where Cody worked for a wagon-freight company as a mounted messenger and wrangler. In 1859, he tried his luck as a prospector in the Pikes Peak gold rush, and the next year, joined the Pony Express, which had advertised for "skinny, expert riders willing to risk death daily." Already a seasoned plainsman at age 14, Cody fit the bill.

During the Civil War, Cody served first as a Union scout in campaigns against the Kiowa and Comanche, then in 1863 he enlisted with the Seventh Kansas Cavalry, which saw action in Missouri and Tennessee. After the war, he married Louisa Frederici in St. Louis and continued to work for the Army as a scout and dispatch carrier, operating out of Fort Ellsworth, Kansas.

Finally, in 1867, Cody took up the trade that gave him his nickname, hunting buffalo to feed the construction crews of the Kansas Pacific Railroad. By his own count, he killed 4,280 head of buffalo in seventeen months. He is supposed to have won the name "Buffalo Bill" in an eight-hour shooting match with a hunter named William Comstock, presumably to determine which of the two Buffalo Bills deserved the title.

Beginning in 1868, Cody returned to his work for the Army. He was chief of scouts for the Fifth Cavalry and took part in 16 battles, including the Cheyenne defeat at Summit Springs, Colorado, in 1869. For his service over these years, he was awarded the Congressional Medal of Honor in 1872, although this award was revoked in 1916 on the grounds that Cody was not a regular member of the armed forces at the time. (The award was restored posthumously in 1989).

All the while Cody was earning a reputation for skill and bravery in real life, he was also becoming a national folk hero, thanks to the exploits of his alter ego, "Buffalo Bill," in the dime novels of Ned Buntline (pen name of the writer E. Z. C. Judson). Beginning in 1869, Buntline created a Buffalo Bill who ranked with Davy Crockett, Daniel Boone and Kit Carson in the popular imagination, and who was, like them, a mixture of incredible fact and romantic fiction.

In 1872 Buntline persuaded Cody to assume this role on stage by starring in his play, *The Scouts of the Plains*, and though Cody was never a polished actor, he proved a natural showman, winning enthusiastic applause for his good-humored self-portrayal. Despite a falling out with Buntline, Cody remained an actor for eleven seasons, and became an author as well, producing the first edition of his autobiography in 1879 and publishing a number of his own Buffalo Bill dime novels. Eventually, there would be some 1,700 of these frontier tales, the majority written by Prentiss Ingraham.

But not even show business success could keep Cody from returning to the West. Between theater seasons, he regularly escorted rich Easterners and European nobility on Western hunting expeditions, and in 1876 he was called back to service as an army scout in the campaign that followed Custer's defeat at the Little Bighorn.

On this occasion, Cody added a new chapter to his legend in a "duel" with the Cheyenne chief Yellow Hair, whom he supposedly first shot with a rifle, then stabbed in the heart and finally scalped "in about five seconds," according to his own account. Others described the encounter as hand-to-hand combat, and misreported the chief's name as Yellow Hand. Still others said that Cody merely lifted the chief's scalp after he had died in battle. Whatever actually occurred, Cody characteristically had the event embroidered into a melodrama-- *Buffalo Bill's First Scalp for Custer*--for the fall theater season.

Cody's own theatrical genius revealed itself in 1883, when he organized Buffalo Bill's Wild West, an outdoor extravaganza that dramatized some of the most picturesque elements of frontier life: a buffalo hunt with real buffalos, an Indian attack on the Deadwood stage with real Indians, a Pony Express ride, and at the climax, a tableau presentation of Custer's Last Stand in which some Lakota who had actually fought in the battle played a part. Half circus and half history lesson, mixing sentimentality with sensationalism, the show proved an enormous success, touring the country for three decades and playing to enthusiastic crowds across Europe.

In later years Buffalo Bill's Wild West would star the sharpshooter Annie Oakley, the first "King of the Cowboys," Buck Taylor, and for one season, "the slayer of General Custer," Chief Sitting Bull. Cody even added an international flavor by assembling a "Congress of Rough Riders of the World" that included cossacks, lancers and other Old World cavalymen along with the vaqueros, cowboys and Indians of the American West.

Though he was by this time almost wholly absorbed in his celebrity existence as Buffalo Bill, Cody still had a real-life reputation in the West, and in 1890 he was called back by the army once more during the Indian uprisings associated with the Ghost Dance. He came with some Indians from his troupe who proved effective peacemakers, and even traveled to Wounded Knee after the massacre to help restore order.

Cody made a fortune from his show business success and lost it to mismanagement and a weakness for dubious investment schemes. In the end, even the Wild West show itself was lost to creditors. Cody died on January 10, 1917, and is buried in a tomb blasted from solid rock at the summit of Lookout Mountain near Denver, Colorado.

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