
The Enduring *Buffalo Bill*

William F. "Buffalo Bill" Cody was born in LeClaire, Iowa in 1846. He left home at the age of eleven. He herded cattle and worked as a driver on a wagon train, crossing the Great Plains several times. He went on to fur trapping and gold mining, then joined the Pony Express in 1860. After the Civil War, Cody scouted for the Army and gained the nickname "Buffalo Bill" as a hunter. His life in the West offered the stuff from which legends were made and he soon was popularized in newspaper accounts and dime novels.

Buffalo Bill's show business career began in 1872 in Chicago; he was twenty-six. "The Scouts of the Prairie" was a drama created by dime novelist Ned Buntline, who appeared in it with Cody and another well-known scout, "Texas Jack" Omohundro. The show was a success. The following season Cody organized his own troupe, the Buffalo Bill Combination. The troupe's show included Buffalo Bill, Texas Jack, and Cody's old friend "Wild Bill" Hickok. Wild Bill and Texas Jack eventually left the show, but Cody continued staging a variety of plays until 1882. That year the Wild West show was conceived. It was an outdoor spectacle, designed to both educate and entertain, using a cast of hundreds as well as live buffalo, elk, cattle, and other animals.

The show used real cowboys and cowgirls, recruited from ranches in the West. By the end of the 19th century, the cowboy became much more popular, thanks in large part to the Buffalo Bill Wild West shows. The shows demonstrated bronco riding, roping, and other skills that would later become part of public rodeos. The Wild West was invited to England in 1887 to be the main American contribution to Queen Victoria's Golden Jubilee celebration. It was the hit of the celebration, visited by Queen Victoria, herself, and soon rose to international fame and returned two years later to tour Europe.

Cody treated his former foes (Indians) with great respect and dignity, giving them an opportunity to leave the reservation and represent their culture when many were trying to destroy it. Wild West show posters frequently portrayed the Indian as "The American."

Buffalo Bill had a great love and concern for people, particularly children. Many free passes were distributed to orphanages when the Wild West show came to town. He also was a champion of women's rights. The women in his show received comparable pay for comparable work to the men in the show. In fact, the women in the Wild West often out-rode and out-gunned the men. Certainly the most famous was Annie Oakley, nicknamed "Little Sure Shot" by Sitting Bull.

Buffalo Bill never retired. He died in 1917 and was buried, as this cover indicates, in Colorado. [<http://www.buffalobill.org/history.htm>]

