

BUFFALO BILL CODY, MARYLAND, AND THE GERMANS

William F. "Buffalo Bill" Cody (1846-1917) is in all likelihood the best-known American hero to emerge in the latter third of the nineteenth century. His legend dominated the American consciousness during the period of Reconstruction directly following the American Civil War. For many he typified the pioneer of the American West at the time. Yet in what would become a typical *modus operandi*, Cody himself went to great lengths to augment and develop his reputation as the greatest frontiersman of the West without actually misrepresenting the facts. In 1869, he talked extensively to Ned Buntline, the most prolific and successful writer of dime novels of the time. Cody then worked with Buntline to create "Buffalo Bill, The King of the Border Men," which appeared serially in hundreds of newspapers in the country the same year. At about the same time, New York journalists began to publicize in extensive newspaper articles the buffalo hunts organized by Cody. Two years later, in 1871, a military publicist wrote a privately-printed and influential book about this Great Plains frontier of Kansas and Nebraska. He described Cody as "a mild, agreeable, well-mannered man, quiet and retiring in disposition, though well informed. ...Tall and somewhat slight in figure, though possessed of great strength and iron endurance; straight and erect as an arrow, and with strikingly handsome features,"¹ Cody projected his own life as symbolic of the settlement pattern of the Trans-Mississippi valley, using the elements of his own experiences from 1861 to 1879 as a model. Thus he referred to the American West as one inhabited by

Plains Indians, such as the Sioux, living in their teepees, hunting buffalo, and resisting the domesticating values of Middle Western and European families who settled the region.

In creating his own legend, Cody drew heavily on his own life experience. He had served the U. S. Army as a scout in the plains area of Kansas and Nebraska in the 1870s. He was viewed as a natural gentleman, always proper with the ladies and acting as their protector. Superficially this had the appearance of truth. In the early years of the twentieth century, he had been married for over thirty years, had several children, and a beloved homestead, "Scouts Rest," near North Platte, Nebraska. In his business dealings, he relied upon a handshake more than a written contract, but he was certainly as ethical as his competitors.

However, Cody did develop one personal problem which influenced his everyday life if not his career. He always started the day with a good shot of rye whisky, called "tanglefoot" colloquially. As a result there were many tensions behind the scenes over the years. A string of "girl friends," drunken behavior, and other, similar *peccadilloes* led finally to a very public divorce in 1905. The trial which ended thirty-eight years of marriage was held in Wyoming and thoroughly covered by the newspapers. The reports there painted a very different picture of Cody's life and character from the one he had so carefully crafted for public consumption. Family members were angry at Cody not only for his mistreatment of his wife, but also for his public defense of the boorish behavior. His nephew, Herbert Cody, pre-

sented the view of many family members by stating "were all of us to contribute a chapter each—Cody wouldn't look so big—a man who would come out of a saloon—drunk and knock his wife down in the street—which Cody did—is no angel."² Although he reconciled with his wife in 1910, the damage to his reputation was done. By May 1910, Cody gave the first of the farewell speeches which signaled the final year of his national tour, starting with the show in Madison Square Garden which as usual was the first stop on the American tour.

At the beginning of his career forty years earlier, however, Cody's reputation was intact, and he was able to reinforce the legend he and Buntline had built for him during national and international tours with his own troupe. As an entertainer, Cody used fairly traditional methods for travelling companies at the time. He reconstituted his group annually by organizing a new "combination" of partners, players, and staff. Cody and his cowboy colleagues presented their tales of the "Old West" to a truly national audience extending as far south as Alabama, Arkansas, and Georgia.³ For thirteen years between 1873 and 1886, Cody toured nationally, acting in western plays in rented theaters. On six of those tours, Cody brought his melodramatic productions to Baltimore, where he starred in plays such as "Scouts of the Prairie" in front of large and enthusiastic audiences. In reviewing one of Cody's shows in a local newspaper, one commentator wrote that those who did not attend had "missed one of the most striking and stirring dramas of the age, performed by men who have gone through in stern reality what they stimulate on the stage."⁴ Amidst stilted language, with lots of guns blazing on the proscenium, these cowboy melo-

mas played successfully not only in the industrial regions of the Northeast, but also in Alabama, Arkansas, North Carolina, South Carolina, Georgia, and Virginia, six states which had a generation earlier been part of the Confederate States of America.

The popularity of Cody's troupe in both the North and the South is somewhat surprising given his strong and well-known sympathy for the Union cause. Cody had joined the irregular militia in southeastern Kansas, acting in concert with other "Jayhawkers" during the first few years of the Civil War. In 1864 he joined the Seventh Kansas Volunteer Cavalry. In post-war years he continued as a civilian scout for the U. S. Army of the West, maintaining his Union connections throughout his career. Cody's contemporaries would have well understood that it was no oversight that he and his troupe were ignored by Henry M. Stanley, top correspondent for Gordon Bennett's *New York Tribune*, who was actually in Nebraska in July, 1869. Stanley had been an ardent sympathizer for the Southern cause, and Cody would have nothing to do with him. Stanley was simply giving as good as he got. Nonetheless, the early performances by Cody and his company gained him national acceptance as an authentic hero of the Western region which he defined, the frontier scout who "realized to perfection the bold hunter and gallant sportsman of the plains."⁶ He and his network of Union veterans and cowboy friends created his first successful entertainment experience. A few years later, Cody and friends returned to the Eastern Shore of Maryland with a new cowboy play called "May Cody; or Lost and Won." Supposedly focused on the exploits of Cody's sister, the play was written by Major Andrew Burt, who had served in the Sixth Ohio Voluntary Infantry during the

Civil War and had subsequently befriended Cody. Unfortunately, the opening of this new play was marred by the use of firearms. In the last act, there was a lot of firing from guns using blank charges, which was typical for these quasi-dramatic presentations, "In one of the exciting scenes near the close of the drama, Buffalo Bill, while riding on a pony up a mimic mountain, fired several shots at supposed Indian pursuers, and by some grave mischance one barrel was loaded with ball, and a boy..., Michael Gardner, occupying a front seat in the gallery, received a bullet in the left shoulder."⁵ Luckily the boy survived and later traveled to Cody's home in North Platte, Nebraska. True to the conventions of the time, Cody spared no expense in providing medical services to the accident victim, who became a friend of the family.

Cody's career and his reputation expanded as his troupe embellished its basic presentation. He developed a more interactive performance to be held in the open spaces of an emerging urban America. Cody capitalized on his earlier experiences to develop a new version of his show. The result was ultimately the world-famous "Wild West Show," which made "Buffalo Bill" a household name from 1880 until 1910.

One less well-known aspect of the incredible success of the show which became known as "Wild West" was Cody's keen understanding of the importance of German-Americans as part of his audience.⁶ While he was a boy in eastern Iowa, his father managed a farm with upwards of twenty laborers, all of them German-speaking workers. His older sister in all likelihood learned to speak German. Cody later married Louisa Frederici, whose father, John Frederici (1817-1905), had migrated

to St. Louis in 1830 from the Duchy of Alsace. After his retirement from the St. Louis Police Department in 1878, John Frederici lived with his daughter and son-in-law for the next twenty-seven years. Thus it is quite probable that Cody learned conversational German—not the educated version of the university, but the language of the people, *Plattduutsch*, or Low German, which was the terminology usually used to designate the dialects of much of North Germany. In America it remained an oral language, and for Cody, who always struggled with sentence structure and grammar even in English, spoken German proved helpful in formulating a new international standard of entertainment.

Cody's association with the German language reveals itself in his hiring of two performers in particular. In 1887-1888 Cody toured the British Isles and created for himself an international reputation. One of the "combination" members on that tour was Emma Lake, a famous horse woman who rode side-saddle. Recent research has unearthed the fact that she sometimes billed herself as Emma Lake Hickok. Her mother was Agnes Lake, a circus owner who had been married briefly to Cody's old friend "Wild Bill" Hickock before his death in Deadwood, South Dakota. More to the point, Agnes was born in 1826 in Oldenburg, Germany, with the family name Pohlschneider.⁷ The last name underwent several changes but sixty-one-year-old Agnes spoke *Plattduutsche* and her German-American daughter was hired with that firm ethnic underpinning.

A second German connection appeared in 1889, when Cody and his troupe were playing to large and appreciative crowds in Paris. He discovered that the famous Sioux hunter, Black Elk, and five other tribal

members had been employed in an inferior western show called "Mexican Joe's." They had missed the steamship in 1887, and ended up in northern Germany and France!⁸ The twenty-six-year old Oglala Sioux was linguistically gifted and had no trouble in touring the northern German provinces, as he had learned spoken German from the Jesuit priests on the Rosebud Indian Reservation! Since the 1870s, the tribe had requested Catholic priests for their mission, and Black Elk was proficient enough to tour by himself for a year before being discovered by Cody and company.⁹

Cody had gained a lot of experience from years of presenting his plays in a traditional theater. That experience became fundamental to his plans for developing an entirely new show, this time in an outdoor venue. In the early 1880s, there were more than fifty circuses touring the country. This, of course, was the time when the Wisconsin-born Ringling Brothers started their circus. The competition for shows like the one Cody produced was fierce. To be successful, an entrepreneur had to keep costs down yet develop a program which was different enough and entertaining enough to attract an audience. Cody liked the idea of presenting his shows in inexpensive outdoor venues, but it would be difficult to modify the fanciful plays of the prior decade to accommodate an all-natural setting. The solution was an outdoor show which presented a series of frontier episodes with real cowboys and scenes showing the increasing degree of civilization in the American West. The outdoors was an appropriate backdrop for a show about the American West, and the adventurous aspects of pioneer life proved a suitable substitute for the romantic tales which had been the staple of the indoor shows. One recurring scene was that of the

Virginia Reel danced on horseback. Another perennial set performance was an action tableau of the type presented in the "Attack on the Burning Cabin," which became almost a signature scene. The classic show of the 1890s used recurring images which fixed Cody in the collective imagination of Europe, and particularly Germany, as the greatest frontiersman of the age. Cody was able to transcend his ordinary roots and to exploit the romantic possibilities of a fast-vanishing western region while making the story of America's expansion westward accessible to a world audience. One can imagine the impact which the show had on German-speaking audiences in Europe by recalling four scenes from the production which came to be known as the "Wild West" show. Together they summarize the key elements of Cody's myth of the American West as envisioned by German artists: „*Der Oberst der Kundschafter Buffalo Bill*" (The Scout Buffalo Bill); „*Buffalo Bill im Galopp Schiessend*" (Buffalo Bill Shooting while Riding); „*Angriff von Sioux Indianer auf die Dead-wood-Post-Kutsche*" (Attack on the Old Deadwood Coach by Indians); and „*Portraitblatt*" (Gen. W. F. Cody/Annie Oakley).¹⁰

Cody and local investors invested in a new type of entertainment on 4 July 1882 in North Platte, Nebraska. It was called "Old Glory Blowout," and from the numerous newspaper advertisements and first-hand impressions, one can deduce that it was basically a rodeo-type version of cowboy skills and excitement. Although sharpshooting and Indian fights remained a central part of the show, they were transformed into a scenic portrayal of how a "Prairie Aristocracy" was responsible for the civilizing of the American frontier.

For the second season of its existence, Cody renamed his newly recast show the "Wild West" and brought together an all-star cast of authentic western celebrities who had never appeared publicly before.¹¹ When he brought his show to the outskirts of Baltimore for a six-day "stand" (his own nomenclature for a performance venue), the large and enthusiastic audiences enjoyed cowboys, Indians, Mexican *vaqueros*, buffalo, elk, mountain sheep, bucking horses and the one prop to be used continuously for the next three decades, the Old Deadwood Stagecoach. Performances by Cody's troupe were meant to be both entertaining and educational. To underscore the authenticity of the scenes, the show featured five authentic Western heroes: Major Frank North, "Pilot of the Prairie;" Captain Daniel L. "Oklahoma" Payne; Con Groner, "Cowboy Sheriff of the Platte River;" Groner's good friend, thirty-seven-year-old Dr. Frank Powell from Lacrosse, Wisconsin (his Sioux nickname was "White Beaver," but he had Seneca tribal ancestry!), who put on sensational shooting exhibits. Perhaps the greatest star was William Levi "Buck" Taylor, the first and original "King of the Cowboys" (1857-1929). Taylor was tall, 6'5", and it was said that he could "throw a steer by the horns or tail and tie him singlehanded, pick up a handkerchief from the ground while riding a horse at full speed, and master the worst of bucking broncos."¹² Thus the Maryland audiences were treated to a cowboy spectacular which remained a principal part of the show.

In June 1885, Cody returned to the Eastern Shore with fewer rodeo stars than he had had previously. Of the original five, only Buck Taylor and Con Groner remained, but Cody had persuaded Johnny Baker, "The Cowboy Kid," to appear along

with two genuine standouts, Sitting Bull and Annie Oakley. Sitting Bull (1831-1890), whom Cody insisted on paying at the same wages as white cowboys in the show, was a chief and medicine man of the Hunkpapa Sioux. Annie Oakley (1860-1926), who was known as "Little Sure Shot," was a skilled performer. At only five feet tall, she was able to use either a rifle or a six-shooter for exhibition purposes.

In 1888, Cody spent most of the summer at Erastiana, a major summer resort on Staten Island across from New York and Brooklyn. After this successful run, Cody moved south, reaching Baltimore in September and eventually closing at the Virginia Agricultural, Mechanical and Tobacco Exposition in Richmond. As opposed to the popularity of the earlier indoor shows in the South, the new outdoor show was never particularly well received outside of the Northeast region. The farthest south Cody ever ventured with the "Wild West" was Virginia. The dangers of going too far afield from the industrialized cities of the north were made painfully apparent that year to Pawnee Bill, one of Cody's competitors. Pawnee Bill was underfinanced and overly confident when he merged his western show with Buckskin Joe and hired Annie Oakley after Cody's show ended. "The combined shows drew big crowds at Gloucester Beach, New Jersey. In the fall they started south, playing fairs, but unfavorable contracts and bad weather melted away profits. Buckskin Joe withdrew, and the show was attached by the sheriff at Easton, Maryland. Pawnee Bill could not pay his hotel bill, and his trucks were seized."¹³ The content of the "Wild West" show never succeeded in any of the former Confederate states. Cody learned this and managed to remain profitable.

For half a decade, Cody's "Mid West" was at its finest, with huge crowds and profits. Cody enjoyed tremendous popularity in England with the help of Queen Victoria, her family, and other aristocrats. He gained the support of German aristocrats and the personal imprimatur of Kaiser Wilhelm II, and he was successful at home as well. After returning to the states, he added a subtitle, "Congress of Rough Riders," which Teddy Roosevelt appropriated and used in naming his own personal regiment during the Spanish-American War of 1898. The phrase Rough Rider was apparently cowboy talk, for the bronco buster given the wildest horses was said to be "riding the rough stray." Moreover, Cody began to apply the Kaiser's techniques of public pageantry to his pre-show parade in town, and many of the new flourishes appeared in the Baltimore "stand" of 30 September 1895. The huge audiences thrilled to the revised program of the running of the Deadwood coach, the Pony Express chase, and the spectacle of a buffalo hunt. The program also featured a military parade of international cavalry units. After the "6th Cavalry of the United States Army [came a] company of 1st Guard Uhlan Regiment of his Majesty, King William II, German Emperor, popularly known as the 'Potsdammer Reds,' a company of French Chasseurs; and a Company of 12th Lancers of British Army"¹⁴

One very interesting German-American development was Cody's shift towards more spectacular set-pieces in his "Wild West" show, following the public pageantry of Wilhelmine Germany, influential in Berlin and other German cities in the early twentieth century. Baltimoreans watched the last performance of the expensively staged scene called "Custer's Last Fight" on 11-12 May 1898. The scene was, in fact, so

extravagant that it actually appeared only five times during the run of the show. The next year Cody returned to the Eastern Shore with sixteen of Roosevelt's "Rough Riders" participating in a mock Battle of San Juan Hill. Two years later San Juan Hill had become the "Capture of Peking." From 1907 to 1909 the show reappeared in late May with spectacles already pretested at Madison Square Garden. These consisted of The "Battle of Summit Springs," the "Great Union Pacific Hold-Up," and "Football on Horseback."¹⁵

The move towards more elaborate and spectacle-laden performances actually paralleled developments in vaudeville. During this time, famous performers such as Blackstone and Houdini invested heavily in stage illusions: unique acts such as the disappearance of an elephant before 16,000 people in the old Madison Square Garden or soldiers marching right through a brick wall mimicked the extravagances of British stage productions of the time.¹⁶

During this same period of time, Cody experimented with major logistical improvements in moving his show by train. In 1895 he had 131 performances in 190 days; fifty-two railway cars traveled over 9,000 miles of track.¹⁷ In 1898 he employed 467 people in the show for its wide-spread performances. He improvised and experimented between 1903 and 1906 when the "Wild West" toured England, Scotland, France, Italy, the Austro-Hungarian Empire, and the German Empire. In Europe he used "50 cars, each 54' long and 8' wide, moved in three sections. There were 22 flats, 18 orange stock cars, 9 red sleepers, including one box sleeper, and an advance car."¹⁸ It was during this time that members of the show observed special representatives of the Kaiser watching the logistics; long after-

wards this was adduced as the source for the Imperial High Command's ability to use the railways for their initial successes in the First World War.

By 1910 there were major changes in audience appeal, and an erosion of support for the "Wild West." Cody gave his first of many farewell speeches at the end of his Madison Square "stand" in May 1910. It became a basic appeal to increase ticket sales during the remaining six years of his career, with appearances in 1911, 1913 and 1916. In that last year on the road, the show was billed as the "Pageant of Preparedness," as Cody had obviously become a tired, old trouper of seventy years.

Certain observations follow from this analysis of Cody's appeal to Marylanders,

German-Americans, and Germans. First, the interdisciplinary techniques of German-American Studies imply interaction between Germans and Americans. In Cody's case the influence flowed both ways. If Cody learned from the pageantry of the Kaiser Wilhelm's Germany, it seems probable that the Imperial bureaucracy learned from the logistics of Cody's Wild West. Second, several generations of cultural historians have missed the structural basis of Cody's phenomenal success. It was not a national cultural pattern of showmanship, but rather one which shrewdly recognized the importance of the industrial cities of the Middle West and the East Coast, and the key ingredient for large and enthusiastic audiences: the German-American population of these cities, whether Chicago or Baltimore.

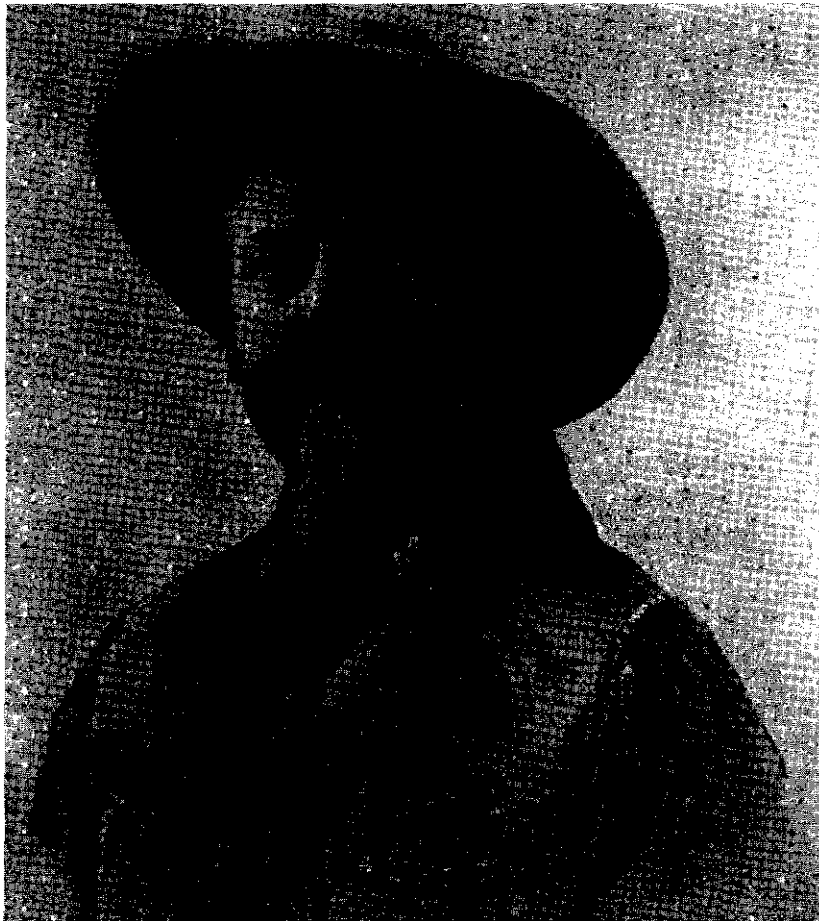
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Notes

- 1 Henry Davies, *Ten Days on the Plains* (New York: Crocker & Co., 1872), 79.
- 2 Cody used the reference to whisky in a letter to Buckskin Sam Hall, 2 September 1879. *The Business of Being Buffalo Bill; Selected Letters of William F. Cody, 1879-1917*, Sarah J. Blackstone, ed. (New York: Praeger, 1988). The notes and marginalia by Herbert Cody Blake appear in a copy of Helen Cody Wetmore's *Last of the Great Scouts; Life Story of Col. W. F. Cody* (Duluth, IA: Privately published, 1899) which is owned by an anonymous book collector. The trial is recapitulated by Arthur Sears Henning, "Buffalo Bill's Suit for Divorce Recalled by Henning," *Chicago Tribune* (8 January 1854).
- 3 Sandra K. Sagala, *Buffalo Bill, Actor: A Chronicle of Cody's Theatrical Career*. (Bowie, MD: Heritage Books, 2002).
- 4 Davies, 83.
- 5 *Baltimore American* (10 September 1878).
- 6 William Roba, *German-Iowan Studies: Selected Essays* (New York: Lang, 2004), Chapter 3 [forthcoming].
- 7 Linda Fisher, "Immigration in Disguise: Agnes Mersman Lake," paper presented at the 28th annual symposium of the Society for German-American Studies, New Ulm, MN, 23 April 2004.
- 8 *Black Elk Speaks; Being, the Life Story of a Holy Man of the Oglala Sioux as told to Johannes Gneisenau Neihardt*. (New York: Morrow, 1932), 225-228.
- 9 Anthony Richter, "Father Eugene Buechel and the Lakota Sioux," paper presented at the 28th annual Society for German-American Studies symposium, New Ulm, MN, 23 April 2004.

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- 10 Carl Henckel, *Buffalo Bill und sein wilder Westen. Zeichnungen nach dem Leben* (München: A. Twietmeyer, 1891). This portfolio of fifteen plates, which also appeared in French, is located in the Rare Books Room — Research Libraries of the New York Public Library.
- 11 Russell, Don., *The Lives and Legends of Buffalo Bill* (Oklahoma: U. of Oklahoma Press, 1960), 305.
- 12 Russell, 305.
- 13 Russell, 349.
- 14 Russell, 76-377. The Uhlan Cavalry Regiment had been an elite unit during the Franco-Prussian War, and it was rejuvenated by Kaiser Wilhelm II; Marlene Dietrich's father was a major in the unit.
- 15 See Kevin Starr, *Embattled Dreams; California in War and Peace, 1940-1950* (New York: Oxford UP, 2002), 179.
- 16 See Kenneth Silverman, *Houdini!!! The Career of Ehrich Weiss* (Harper-Collins, New York, 1996) and J. B. Priestly, *Lost Empires* (Boston, Little, Brown & Co., 1965).
- 17 Russell, 379.
- 18 Russell, 444.



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