The Frontier Showman:
An Examination of Buffalo Bill Cody as a Mythic Western Hero

by Ryan Burruss

"I next have the honor of introducing to your attention a man whose record as a servant of the government, whose skill and daring as a frontiersman, whose place in history as the Chief of Scouts of the United States Army . . . and whose adherence throughout an eventful life to his chosen principle of 'true friend and foe,' has made him well and popularly known throughout the world. You all know to whom I allude — the Honorable William F. Cody, "Buffalo Bill."[1]

In her collection of William F. Cody's correspondence, Sarah Blackstone concedes that the man has been called both "an American hero and an American heel."[2] The truth, though, as it so often is, is found somewhere in the middle, somewhere between those two harsh generalizations. The man known far and wide as "Buffalo Bill" has been labeled a Western super-hero[3] , a legend, a lie, a fraud, the last true frontiersman, and a master showman. His reputation has evolved and devolved over the course of the twentieth century as historians have tried to apologize Cody's myth with the known facts of his life. Some take the perspective that he was another fraudulent byproduct of the concept of Manifest Destiny, a bedtime story to appease the guilt and fear of European Americans intent on conquest. Others, particularly that element of the population that proudly deem themselves "history buffs," choose to cling to the attractive iconography of the American West, especially the legends and anecdotes that settle around the names of certain key figures.[4]

A modern historian's first inclination when confronted with a legendary figure (especially a figure born of the West) probably is to deconstruct the legend's myth; in essence, comparing factual evidence to stories on a point by point basis, stripping the legendary figure naked, removing all the exaggeration and hyperbole — taking the wind out of his sails. With Buffalo Bill Cody, however, the "ideological waters"[5] get even murkier, considering the fact that Cody had a willing and purposeful hand in his own myth in his own time, not simply for the sake of posterity, but to ensure continued success in a changing landscape, to feed his own family. Whether one sees the man as a sell-out or an opportunistic genius, one cannot simply strip the myth that surrounds him and discard it without losing the heart of the man. Instead one must understand the myth, and what that myth meant to the audiences that flocked to see him throughout the course of his stage career and the thirty-year run of his Wild West Show, in order to come to a better understanding of the man and his true place in Western History. When dealing with Buffalo Bill Cody, one must contend with the problem of the historical significance of the recreation of myths based on events of historical significance. These are murky waters, indeed.

William Frederick Cody was born on the twenty-sixth of February, 1846, in Iowa. His family moved to the newly-opened Kansas territory when Cody was eight years old, in 1854. There his father was stabbed while speaking in favor of Kansas becoming a free

state. He died of complications from the wounds shortly thereafter. Not much is known of Cody during the early periods of his life on the frontier. The only accounts we have are from Cody's own autobiography's and his sisters' memoirs — these are less than historically accurate sources, as will be seen in detail throughout the following pages. As Kent Ladd Steckhesser writes, "Cody's books must be used with extreme care."[6]
The books "written" by his sisters and wife should likewise be handled with care. Though these biographies promise to tell the "true tales" of Buffalo Bill (particularly the version credited to Elizabeth Jane Leonard and Julia Cody Goodman, which takes great pains in the introduction to establish its own authenticity), they are simply rehashes of the same old fictional and exaggerated stories purported to have been the acts of Buffalo Bill that appear in an endless parade of dime novels and ghostwritten autobiographies by authors with active imaginations. These books "are obvious examples of hero worship,"[7] adding another layer of confusion over the figure of William Cody.
These "biographies" (biographies only in the loosest sense of the word) profess to explain little known anecdotes of a young Cody yet, by the very nature of these stories, they must be discounted as untrue and biased representations of a heroic figure-head rather than a man. Many, if not most, of the facts found in these writings are unsubstantiated, and attempt to legitimize unwitnessed and unproven events. They are written in a style that romanticizes the ladies' famous kin, and would be completely irrelevant to the understanding of the "real" Buffalo Bill except for the fact that they serve one important purpose: they give the reader first-hand insight into the power of myths surrounding a man who, later in life, built a successful career based both directly (Cody's portrayal of certain events in his show) and indirectly (his popularity based on the romanticization of the Western hero in general) on those myths.
One clear example appeared in Helen Cody Wetmore's biography of her brother, Last of the Great Scouts (Buffalo Bill), that appeared in 1899 (the same time Cody was travelling the country with his Wild West Show). She related the story of Cody's first bear kill. While a young man, Cody and a partner were trapping in the woods, when Cody's friend was attacked by a ferocious bear. With timely drama, Cody swooped in at the last moment and saved the young man, bravely felling the magnificent beast. On another occasion, Cody broke his leg and, while his companion traveled back to civilization for help, Cody braved the elements (not to mention an Indian encounter during which a warrior-chief allowed the injured man to live out of respect for a previous favor) for months.[8] These stories, though entertaining and often exciting, have no basis in fact. The writer incorporates Cody's supposed thoughts and dialogue during these adventures, putting the man's life to paper with "rhetorical flourishes which embroider frontier legends."[9]
In fact, these depictions of the young man surviving the wildness of the romanticized frontier are a standard of frontier narratives.[10] Man against nature is a classic theme of epic literature; in this case, it is the Western hero in combat with a ferocious bear, a wild animal as an extension of unforgiving Nature (also, it should be noted, Indians were likewise seen as extensions of the cruel landscape by contemporary audiences, not far removed from ferocious animals). These "nature narratives" appeared in the biographies of virtually every major Western figure of the frontier period, and were considered a "badge of prowess"[11] that served to legitimize the hero in the public eye. Cody himself attributed such brushes with nature to those heroes that came before him, namely Kit

Carson and Daniel Boone.
Just as bravery and violence characterize a romantic hero, so does his gentility and morality. Helen Cody Wetmore even hints that Cody was a distant descendant of Milesius, a king of Spain; Buffalo Bill was a "genuine" example of American royalty. As late as 1955, Henry Blackman Sell blushed that when Cody would take to his white steed to face the dangerous Indians of the West, long hair flowing, he "seemed Richard the Lion Hearted on the way to face Saladin."12 Wetmore related another story of a young Cody, this time who was on an emergency ride for the Pony Express. During the course of his trip he was victim to a robbery attempt. The young Cody disarmed the robber, injuring the man in the process. Rather than leave the criminal, Cody gave him medical attention, then brought the man to the office of his destination "out of pure kindness." Stories like this attempted to establish Cody's fundamental goodness, portraying him as a loving, tender young man (perhaps to subconsciously offset the violence of some of his later exploits). In Western legend, heroes become stereotypically idealistic, the good men in the bad land, and these tales of Cody's youth added to that notion of his character.
The facts of Cody's early life didn't always coincide with these romantic characterizations. He became a rider for the Pony Express at the age of sixteen, after working several years as a messenger for the company of Russel, Majors, and Waddell, which founded the Pony Express. He was known as a distinguished rider, holding the record for the third longest emergency trip in the Express' short existence. After its disbanding, it seems the young, impressionable Cody fell in with a less than reputable crowd, and it has been documented that he spent some time carousing, drinking, and jay-hawking (stealing horses). In 1864 he fought with the Seventh Kansas Volunteer Calvary, a Union troop. In 1866, he married Louisa Fredereci while stationed as a private. After his discharge from the military, Cody tried his hand at running a hotel, and supplemented his income with part-time work as a scout and guide. Whether because he felt constrained by the day-to-day responsibilities of a hotel keeper, or because he wasn't very good at it, Cody abandoned the hotel business for the opportunity to become a full-time scout.
He was employed as a hunter for the Kansas Pacific Railroad, killing buffalo to supply the railroad workers with meat. He was so efficient at his task, that he acquired the nickname "Buffalo Bill" from the railroad men. Even at this early stage of his life, Cody "was showing signs of becoming a showman."13 Apparently, there was another "Buffalo Bill" around, a William Comstock, who disputed Cody's use of the name. To find out which one of the two Bills was deserving of the title, a contest was set up where the man who killed the most buffalo in a day was given the title. At the end of the day, with the contest locked up, Cody showed a little extra flair by chasing his final kill towards the grandstands (where the ladies were seated) and shooting it down in front of an adoring audience. After this display, whispers of what was to come of the young upstart could be heard in song:

Buffalo Bill, Buffalo Bill
Never missed and never will;

Always aims and shoots to kill
And the company pays his buffalo bill.14

Though this is a song of praise of Cody's marksmanship, a staple of the Western hero, it also hints at one of the major inconsistencies of the Western heroic myth with the final line, "and the company pays his buffalo bill." One of the dominant stereotypes of the frontiersman was that he was fiercely independent, free from, for lack of a better term, "upper-management." Western heroes were supposed to be self-made men, yet it is almost invariably overlooked "that he [the western hero] very likely was working for somebody."15 Frontiersmen were almost always employed by another force, more often than not dependent on a major economic backer, whether the Federal government or private industry. Cody was certainly no exception; he spent most of his life under someone else's command. Even in his later years, when he ran his Wild West show, he was dependent on various partners and outside contracts to keep the show going, especially as profits began to dwindle near the end of his run.

In 1868, Cody was named Chief of Scouts for the Fifth United States Calvary. Over the course of his tenure, he was involved in sixteen documented Indian battles. He also served as a guide to various celebrities and dignitaries traveling West for the first time in search of adventure. His contact with these royal and aristocratic personalities, and his observance of their strong reactions to the excitement of the frontier, may have planted the seeds that would soon blossom into his unique Western carnival show.

Around 1872, Cody was noticed by a rather exploitative writer by the name of Edward Zane Carroll Judson, more popularly known as Ned Buntline. Buntline was making a name for himself as a particularly imaginative chronicler of the West, but he needed a new figure on which to base his fantastical adventure stories. Cody fit the bill perfectly. Buntline's first story about Cody was for the New York Weekly and was entitled "Buffalo Bill, The King of the Border Men." Later that year, Buntline convinced Cody to appear on stage as himself in a play based on Buntline's adventures. Cody was hesitant at first but, upon learning of the stage's financial possibilities, he agreed.

"The Scouts of the Prairie" opened in Chicago on December 18, 1872. The play was a play only in the loosest sense; some stories state that Buntline wrote it up in haste the day before the performance. Buntline had an ace up his sleeve though — he had a popular Western hero (due in large part to Buntline's rapidly printed dime novels, which celebrated Cody's "real life" adventures, adventures that were almost always fiction) in the lead role. Buntline knew the story line was inconsequential to the play's success; audiences would come just to see their hero (that he, in many ways, conjured up with his pen).

And they did. Though a critical flop in many ways, the play (and subsequent adventure plots) packed theaters as young men and boys filled the seats just to get a glimpse of their hero. Even though Cody could not remember a single line for his first stage appearance, his charm and charisma came shining through. It is interesting to note that it was his authenticity that won crowds over, despite the fact that the situations and adventures that he played out on stage were often ridiculous, with no basis in reality. He was simply playing himself, or at least (and probably more to the point) that version of himself that Eastern audiences would pay to see. In his own way, Cody was doing only what every

other homesteader was trying to accomplish: he was exploiting the West in order to become an American success story. There was never anything phony about him — he simply was learning during these experiences on the stage what audiences wanted, and, armed with this knowledge, spent the greater part of his life putting on an exciting show.16

After a year, Cody abandoned Buntline to run his own troupe, which included various Western figures. It was Cody the audiences paid for, not Buntline's stories. He continued scouting for the Calvary during the spring and summer, heading East each winter to perform in his plays, a regimen he practiced for several years.

1876 was a pivotal year in both Cody's personal life and his career. In that year, his only son, Kit Carson Cody (named after one of Cody's frontier precursors) died at a young age. Cody considered himself very much a family man, and the death struck him hard. It was with this frame of mind that he went out with the Fifth Calvary in Kansas in July of that summer. As the troop tracked a Cheyenne tribe, news arrived of General Custer's tragic fall at Little Big Horn. Embittered by the massacre, the Fifth Calvary, with Cody as scout, came upon a group of Cheyenne warriors. What followed has been the subject of much debate, as different versions of Cody's duel with the Cheyenne chief, Yellow Hair (mistranslated as Yellow Hand in several narratives) have evolved over time.

The story of this particular battle (focusing exclusively on the "duel" aspect between Cody and Yellow Hair) is important for several reasons. One is that it is an event based in fact, supported in part by eyewitnesses, so that one may trace the truth to myth that developed out of it. One can see where Cody and other writers embellished the story in later accounts with dramatic flair without disturbing the basic facts. Also, in the context of the country's outcry over Custer's dismal fate, Cody's symbolic revenge thrust him in the national spotlight. In short, on that battlefield on the morning of July 17, 1876, the theatrical Cody and the frontiersman Cody blurred together into one indelible image on a national stage.

Cody, for his part, did not walk into this situation blindly. He knew all the implications of the battle in the wake of the Little Big Horn tragedy, and he knew that the newspapers in the East would be looking for a good story to tell their readers. The public needed a hero, and Cody was more than ready to fulfill their expectations. Being on stage for the last several years had given him an taste for the dramatic. So, on that July day, he was dressed out in his most theatrical outfit, adorned with polished silver buckles and punctuated by a crimson shirt and sash. He was aware that a victory would manifest itself in box office dollars back East. He knew this was a perfect opportunity to legitimize his myth.

The facts of the battle (which lasted but minutes) are as follows: two messengers from a fellow company were riding at full speed, trying to reach Cody's troop. The commanding officer saw that they were in danger of being ambushed by the Cheyenne warriors, and sent a small group of men to interfere, led by Cody. As Cody's troop and the Cheyenne collided on the battlefield, Cody and the young chief, Yellow Hair, fired simultaneously at each other. Yellow Hair missed, but Cody's bullet cut through the young chief's leg and into the heart of his horse, throwing Yellow Hair to the ground. Cody's horse than tripped in a gopher hole, throwing Cody to the ground, but leaving him unhurt. Cody then "got up, recovered his rifle, and fired again, killing the Indian who was lying on the ground."17 At this point the rest of the cavalry rode into battle, passing

Cody as he held his kill's headdress. At some point Cody scalped the Indian, but at least one soldier who was at the rear of the calvary states that he did not see Cody scalp the Indian before he passed, an element of the story that will grow in importance as it is retold. With the aid of Company B, led by Captain Robert H. Montgomery, and Company I, led by Sanford C. Kellog, the Fifth Calvary scattered and chased the Indians, the majority of whom escaped. It was, however, a moral victory, a battle that most people saw as a display of the superiority of their Western heroes over Custer's murderers.

Though a definitive win, the story almost immediately began to take on a life of its own. The battle scene was expanded in a New York Herald article that made Cody and his heroics the focal point of the battle. From there, the story began to snowball. Cody himself (or, at least, his ghostwriters) was responsible for much of the dramatic embellishment that was quickly becoming a fundamental element of his public life.

The newer versions of the story varied to some degree, but most did not veer too much from the truth — Cody and others simply "tweaked" that truth to get the most mileage they could out of it. In the revised story, Yellow Hair recognized Cody on the battlefield as a great warrior. He paced before his men, baiting Cody by calling out, "I know you, Pa-ho-has-ka [Long Yellow Hair]! Come and fight with me."18 Both men attacked each other, the other soldiers and warriors apparently looking on in admiration. Both men fired, with Yellow Hair falling from his horse moments before Cody was thrown from his. Both men recovered themselves, and Yellow Hair fired another shot at Cody, missing. Cody coolly gunned down the Cheyenne chief, moving in for the kill with his knife. Some narratives even had Cody and Yellow Hand continuing the duel in hand-to-hand combat, with a Bowie knife and a tomahawk, respectively. Regardless, Cody killed and "scientifically scalped" the Cheyenne right there on the spot. Holding up the enemy's scalp, Cody yelled out, "The first scalp for Custer!" as the cheering calvary rode past. The Cheyenne warriors, frightened by the white man's dominance over their warrior leader, turned and fled, bested by an American hero. One contemporary visual depiction of the scene had Cody standing atop a cliff, victoriously raising his fallen enemy's headdress to the heavens, as soldiers stared up at him in admiration from below. Without revising the outcome or basic facts of the incident, Cody, his biographers, various dime novelists, and his press agent were able to spin the story to Cody's best advantage; in effect, he was turned into (and marketed) as a Western "super-hero," the Batman of his day.

Buffalo Bill was a hotter ticket than ever. He was not through yet, though. In 1879, Cody released his first so-called "autobiography," a collection of his adventures that had been, like the famous duel with Yellow Hair, embellished to fit the mythology of the Western hero. Also, as was the case with all his subsequent "autobiographies," the book was obviously constructed by a ghost writer and, as Don Russell points out, "any suggestion that any of them were not seems preposterous."19 In fact, Cody probably never even read many of the books he attached his name to. He was unconcerned with their content so long as audiences enjoyed them and, more importantly, paid for them. Cody did not receive much of an education on the frontier as a child, and even a quick study of the letters he wrote later in life showed that he was incapable of the language used in these writings.

Though these books (and the hundreds of "true life" dime novels and biographies of

Cody) have very little historical value on their own, they are important in understanding Cody's shrewdness as a showman. These adventures kept him in the public eye, and acted as supplements to his stage work. Cody was not working alone, however: "this tie-in between dime novel and stage, a large element in the success of Buffalo Bill, is an idea for which Ned Buntline deserves full credit."20 It was an ingenious move that made Cody a multimedia phenomenon. Audiences that read about his adventures crowded to see him in person on stage, and those who were mesmerized by him on stage soaked in as many of the readings about their hero as they could find. Cody, in short, became a star. He took his fame one step forward in 1883 when, feeling constrained by the physical dimensions of the theater, he put on a western-style exhibition show in his native Kansas. The show was a rousing success, and Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show was born. Cody retired as a scout and he performed in a theater for the last time in April of 1886, in order to focus more attention on his increasingly growing Wild West Show.

The show lasted thirty years, and was viewed by millions of adoring fans. It made two major European tours, the first being in 1887, during which it was performed as part of Queen Victoria's Jubilee. Cody was no longer just a Western success story, or even an American success story; he was an international success story.21

The show itself was an unapologetic celebration of the Western myths that Cody's fans had grown accustomed to. Cody employed real Western figures in the show, including Bronco Bill, John Hacock, Pawnee Bill, and even Wild Bill Hickock and Sitting Bull (for a season each). Of course, Cody himself was prominently featured, as was a seemingly never-ending parade of cowboys, Mexicans, and authentic Indians. The show included races, equestrian acrobatics, and daredevil gunplay, all contributing to an "exhibition of skill, on the part of men who have acquired that quality while gaining a livelihood."22 The show also presented reenactments of "real life" incidents that occurred in the West, including stage coach raids, cowboy/Indian skirmishes, and even Cody's victory over Yellow Hair.

It is interesting to examine Cody's portrayal and treatment of Indians during this period. On the surface, in the spotlight, Cody portrayed Indians as the enemy, as the losers in a grand struggle. They were generic bad guys for the reenactments, vehicles for white men to "save the day." Cody's personal relationship to his Indian performers, however, was much more complex. He fought to bring in authentic Indians to his show, gave them housing and food, as well as paying them wages. He hired translators so that they could keep their native tongue, and yet communicate with the others in the show. A later autobiography, Life and Adventure of Buffalo Bill, which Cody seemed to be at least partly involved with, ends with a plea for the Federal Government to treat American Indians fairly, and expresses displeasure at some of its policies.23

The Wild West Show allowed Cody to celebrate his own Western myth long after the West was officially closed. In this respect, the so-called "last frontiersman" outlived the frontier. The show remained successful throughout the early part of the twentieth century, as audiences continued to flock to experience a West that never really existed, except in their imaginations. This was the unique power of the Western myth, personified in Buffalo Bill.

The financial success of the show allowed Cody to explore other business ventures, including a mining operation (that ultimately failed and nearly bankrupted him) and developing the town of Cody, Wyoming. Though his show attempted to relive the past,

the man certainly did not; he was deeply interested in the development of the West and its progression in the future. The old myths were just one way to pay for it.

As Cody entered his late-sixties and seventies, audiences began to dwindle. Racked by health problems related both to his age and several failed business ventures, Cody relinquished much of his power concerning the show. He still traveled the country, however, and his mere presence, even simply waving from a stagecoach, still brought in a good share of admirers. He worked until his death at the age of 73 in 1917.

As the last frontiersman, Buffalo Bill Cody was in a unique position, and used that leverage to his full advantage. He inherited a great Western tradition, a tradition he embraced whole-heartedly. He used his talents to keep that tradition alive long after it no longer existed (if it ever truly existed at all, besides on paper), and used a combination of showmanship and true heroics to support himself and his family. As the great showman of the West, he was a forefather to later commercial representations of the West, whether for good or bad. But, in fairness to Cody, this was not his concern. He was not perpetrating his myth for the sake of posterity, to muddle modern interpretations of fact and fiction but, rather, to entertain a public that wanted to idolize him as much as he wanted to please them. Certainly, though he spent as much time on the stage as on the frontier, his importance to the American West cannot be denied. After all, how many young men and boys in his audience were influenced by his romantic vision, encouraged to ride off into the sunset in search of their own American success story? William F. Cody was neither super-hero nor heel; he was an American man.

Notes

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10Ibid, p. 118.

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13Don Russell. The Lives and Legends of Buffalo Bill. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1960; p. 94.

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15Paul Fees and Sarah Boehae. Frontier America: Art and Treasures of the Old West from the Buffalo Bill Historical Center. New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1988; p. 119.

16"Buffalo Bill the Actor," The Journal of the West, Jan 1995, p. 62-68

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21Howard R. Lamar, ed. "Cody, 'Buffalo Bill' [William Frederick]," The New Encyclopedia of the American West. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998.

22Botkin, p. 150.

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