

Me And Buffalo Bill

by John R. Roath



Buffalo Bill in a publicity photo, c. 1913. Courtesy Buffalo Bill Historical Center, Cody, Wyoming.

PREFACE: *William F. “Buffalo Bill” Cody (1846-1917) was a man not so much born as discovered. When adventure pulp writer Ned Buntline found him, at age 23, awakening, hung over, beneath a covered wagon, he knew immediately that there was something special about this man. Says Buffalo Bill biographer John Burke of the moment, “If Buntline was a writer in search of a hero, Cody was a hero in search of a role.” He was soon to find that role in the employ of the army and the railroads, as a scout and provider of food to fuel the westward expansion. And his frontier naivete was soon displaced by that same zeal which created the great capital empires of the end 19th century. Cody founded and*

successfully promoted the economy of his namesake town in northwest Wyoming. He roamed America and the Continent for years with his stupendous Wild West Shows, becoming an international icon. He even produced the first realistic western movies. But it was toward the end of his glory, in 1913, that the train carrying Buffalo Bill's show rumbled into the Lancaster railroad yards. The real wild west had long since passed into history, and people were more interested in the exotic, new experience of the motion picture, but as Burke says, "Most Americans it seemed, were willing to spend one more dollar to watch [their hero] fade into the sunset ..." One such American was a young Maytown boy, John Roath.

"If only I could touch the fringes on his jacket," I said to my buddy, "then I would be satisfied." I was already in my early teens and had waited a long time to meet my idol - Buffalo Bill.

One day, when I was quite young, my father read in the daily paper that Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show was coming to Lancaster which was about twenty miles from my home in Maytown, Pennsylvania. When Dad said he would take me to the show, I jumped for joy. But the waiting seemed insufferable.

At last the great day dawned bright and clear. I was the first one out of bed. Since the horse-drawn hack made only two trips daily out of my town, we decided to walk the three miles to the trolley car line. When we arrived at the circus grounds in Lancaster, we saw a large oval surrounded by wooden bleachers. It was similar to our present day football bowls. We chose seats about half way up.

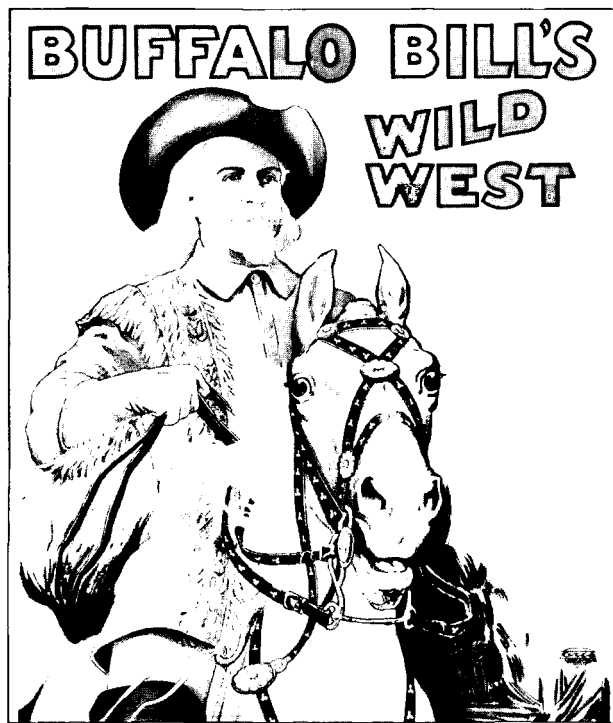
The parade was headed by Buffalo Bill. He wore white buckskin trousers, a fancy jacket and a matching ten gallon hat. His long white hair, Vandyke beard, and flowing moustache made him a very striking and handsome figure. He rode a beautiful white horse. The silver mountings on the bridle and saddle glistened brightly in the afternoon sun.

The first act was a military one. A cannon was mounted on a gun caisson drawn by four sleek black horses. After making one complete circuit around the field, they came to an abrupt halt. Men in soldiers' uniforms sprang from their seats on the powder box and pointed the muzzle of the cannon in our direction. There was a blinding flash and a loud roar which caused many of the adults to scream. It frightened the daylights out of me. My father tried to reassure me. The procedure was repeated. This was too much for me. I set up a howl that I am sure could be heard for quite a distance.

Next came a drill executed by a company of real Zouaves. Even though seventy-six years have passed, I can still see, in my mind's eye, the oriental style of uniform. I can hear the rhythmical beat of their feet and the unified thump of the rifle butts as they came to a halt. They also demonstrated wall-scaling on a large wooden barricade about twenty feet high. This action was carried out with all the ease and grace of an Olympic vaulting team.

Then I saw the premiere showing of a man being shot from a cannon. I have witnessed this stunt many times since then but the distance never seemed so great. The next portion of the program was comparable to our present day rodeo. It consisted of trick riding, lassoing, and bronco busting in which both Indians and cowboys participated.

Finally, the moment arrived for the stellar attraction. It featured Buffalo Bill in his role as crack marksman. He carried a plated barreled rifle in his hands while riding his white horse. He rode slightly behind and to the right of an Indian who was riding a pinto pony. The Indian carried a basket filled with small glass balls. At various intervals, he threw the balls high into the air. Buffalo Bill shattered every one. I did not see him miss one ball. Some said that he was using bullets. Even if shot cartridges were being used, he was still doing some fancy shooting from the back of his cantering horse. The grand finale showed the attack on the wagon train.



Poster from the Erie Litho. & Ptg. Co. (c. 1913) of the type which may have influenced young Roath to attend the Wild West Show in Lancaster. Courtesy Buffalo Bill Historical Center, Cody, Wyoming.

By the time we had arrived home, my mind was made up. I was going to have some personal contact with this great man. I learned that his name was William F. Cody and that he was born in 1846. He was called Buffalo Bill because as a contract hunter during the construction of the Pacific Railroad he is reported to have killed 4,280 bull buffaloes in a period of eighteen months. A few

years later he, General Custer, and General Sheridan were assigned to be guides and escorts to the Grand Duke Alexis of Russia when he hunted in the West. As I listened to my father and Civil War veterans relate more tales concerning his daring exploits, Buffalo Bill was truly becoming my legendary hero. Even my playtime reflected the influence this great frontier scout and showman had on me. When we played cowboys, the pattern was always the same. I was Buffalo Bill riding the prairie in search of the buffalo which had given me my name. Those were pleasant boyhood years. Before I realized it, I was a teenager ready to try and carry out my wish.

About this time, Buffalo Bill had combined his show with that of Pawnee Bill and again he was scheduled to appear in Lancaster, Pennsylvania. This, I felt, was the big chance I had been waiting for. My parents agreed that I could go if a friend accompanied me.

When the red-letter day finally arrived, we were disappointed to see rain. Although we did not know if there would be a performance, we were determined to find out. My chum's mother tried to dissuade us from going. With a shrug of her shoulders, she handed us an exceptionally large umbrella. It had a greenish cast to it from age. Since an uncle from the neighboring town had just delivered coal to our village, we rode with him on the horse-drawn wagon to the street car line all the while keeping under the protection of our vintage umbrella.

Next, we boarded the yellow trolley car which made innumerable stops before arriving in historic Lancaster. We heard that a man from our town was the proprietor of the White Swan Hotel. With ravenous appetites, we hurried there and purchased full course dinners for twenty-five cents each. We were so afraid of missing the opening of the show that we did not wait for the dessert. We hurried back to the square and boarded the first car with a large sign on the cowcatcher that read "Direct to Circus." After we got off the trolley, we discovered that we had forgotten our old but much needed umbrella. We started running up the street yelling and pursuing the car. When the car stopped to take on passengers, we would gain on it. Then it would go again and outdistance us. This continued for several blocks until, finally, the conductor saw us and waited. We felt quite victorious and very happy carrying friend umbrella again. Wet and panting like hounds, we made our way to the circus grounds. We went immediately to the ticket wagon. I remember that the crowd was so great that at times we were almost pushed off our feet. The admission was fifty cents and the wicket on the wagon seemed extremely high. Many arms were extended around mine but before I realized it someone had snatched the half dollar from my hand and thrust a ticket into it.

Not having enough money for side shows, we wandered aimlessly about but always on the lookout for Buffalo Bill. Suddenly, I spied both Pawnee Bill and my hero leaning over the corral fence looking at the horses. They had their backs turned to us. Immediately I began planning a course of action. However,

now that the opportunity was here, I lacked the audacity to confront this great man. I decided I would satisfy my desire for contact by sneaking up behind him and touching the long fringes on his deerskin jacket. Both men seemed to be quite absorbed in their conversation. Just as I extended my hand to touch that beautiful jacket, Buffalo Bill turned around and confronted us. Too nonplussed to speak, I stood and stared at him. My hero smiled and, with a twinkle in his eye, asked if there was something that he could do for us. I stammered that I only wanted to shake his hand which he graciously held out. I really felt awkward. After a short



This photo of Buffalo Bill with a group of children dates from his later years. Courtesy Buffalo Bill Historical Center, Cody, Wyoming.

conversation, we left him and went to get our seats for the show. Again, we went about half way up the tier. It rained intermittently. We opened our large umbrella much to the annoyance of the other spectators. During the excitement, I accidentally dropped our Cracker Jack box down through the seats. I volunteered to retrieve it. After jumping to the ground, I recovered the box but was unable to climb back up. I started to walk towards the other end. A guard saw me and thought that I had sneaked in under the canvas. He started chasing me. I outran him and quickly mingled with the crowd. Now I was separated from my friend.

When the show was over, the milling people turned the wet field into a sea of mud and sawdust. Just when I had decided that I would have to go home alone, I heard a loud voice calling my name. I looked up and saw my friend waving the old umbrella from the highest row where he had gone to try and see me. To this day I cannot understand how he spotted me among all those people.

After I arrived home and ate a late but hearty supper, I went to bed--the most tired but the happiest boy in the world.

Appendix:

The Buffalo Bill Wild West Show visited Lancaster on a number of occasions. Performances were given in 1881, September 9-10, 1895, April 1911, and on May 16, 1913. These last two shows were interrupted by heavy storms. The May 17, 1913 issue of the *Lancaster Intelligencer Journal* provides a graphic supplement to Roath's description of that last, wild, Wild West Show.

The show experienced several minor accidents enroute to Lancaster so the show train arrived too late to allow a street parade. It was 3 P.M. before the tents were erected on the CTC carbarn lot at the corner of Reservoir and Walnut streets, and tickets went on sale. Thousands, according to the newspaper, waited patiently for the "doors to open." The band played ragtime tunes until Buffalo Bill, now in his sixty-eighth year, was ready to make his grand entrance. A hush fell over the crowd as Buffalo Bill, in a rig drawn by two cream-colored horses, drove into the arena. When the applause died down, Cody thanked the audience for coming to the show and then introduced Pawnee Bill to roars of delight.

One act after another entertained the crowd: The Far East Troupe, the Imperial Russian Dancers, the Mikado's Jujitsu Experts, Tokio Risley Gymnasts, Egyptian entertainers, Dahounian Whirlwinds, Cingolese Dancers and Herr Gruber's trained animals. It was during the animal act that the storm arrived. Thunder rolled and lightning flashed outside the tents. "Rain of cyclonic proportions" pounded the tents while the winds billowed the canvas. Tent poles swayed and broke loose from their moorings. Some show personnel acted to calm the crowd as others grabbed at tent poles to keep them from striking the audience. Hail beat on the canvas, ripping the smaller stands to pieces. Meanwhile the patrons, thoroughly drenched and their finery ruined, struggled to find children separated from them in the rush to the exits. A large tree had blown down across Broad Street, blocking traffic and cutting power to the street car line. Soaked patrons stood waiting in the downpour for cars which did not arrive.

When the rain finally stopped and the storm subsided, workers re-erected the tents in time for the evening performance. Fortunately there had been no serious injuries. Although the arena was a "sea of mud," the Buffalo Bill Wild West Show went on as scheduled that memorable Friday evening.

The author, John Roath, was a Maytown native and Millersville Normal School graduate. He served in the U.S. Navy during World War I and then became a career state employee before retiring to Elizabethtown. Roath was very interested in preserving and sharing this memorable boyhood experience and asked an Elizabethtown neighbor, Mrs. Sara Steelman, to transcribe it in the early 1980s. She provided the manuscript to the Society after Roath's death in 1986.