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## Article Title: Nebraska's Unique Contribution to the Entertainment World

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Article Summary: Buffalo Bill Cody and Dr. W F Carver were not the first to mount a Wild West show, but their opening performances in 1883 were the first truly successful entertainments of that type. Their varied acts attracted audiences familiar with Cody and his adventures.

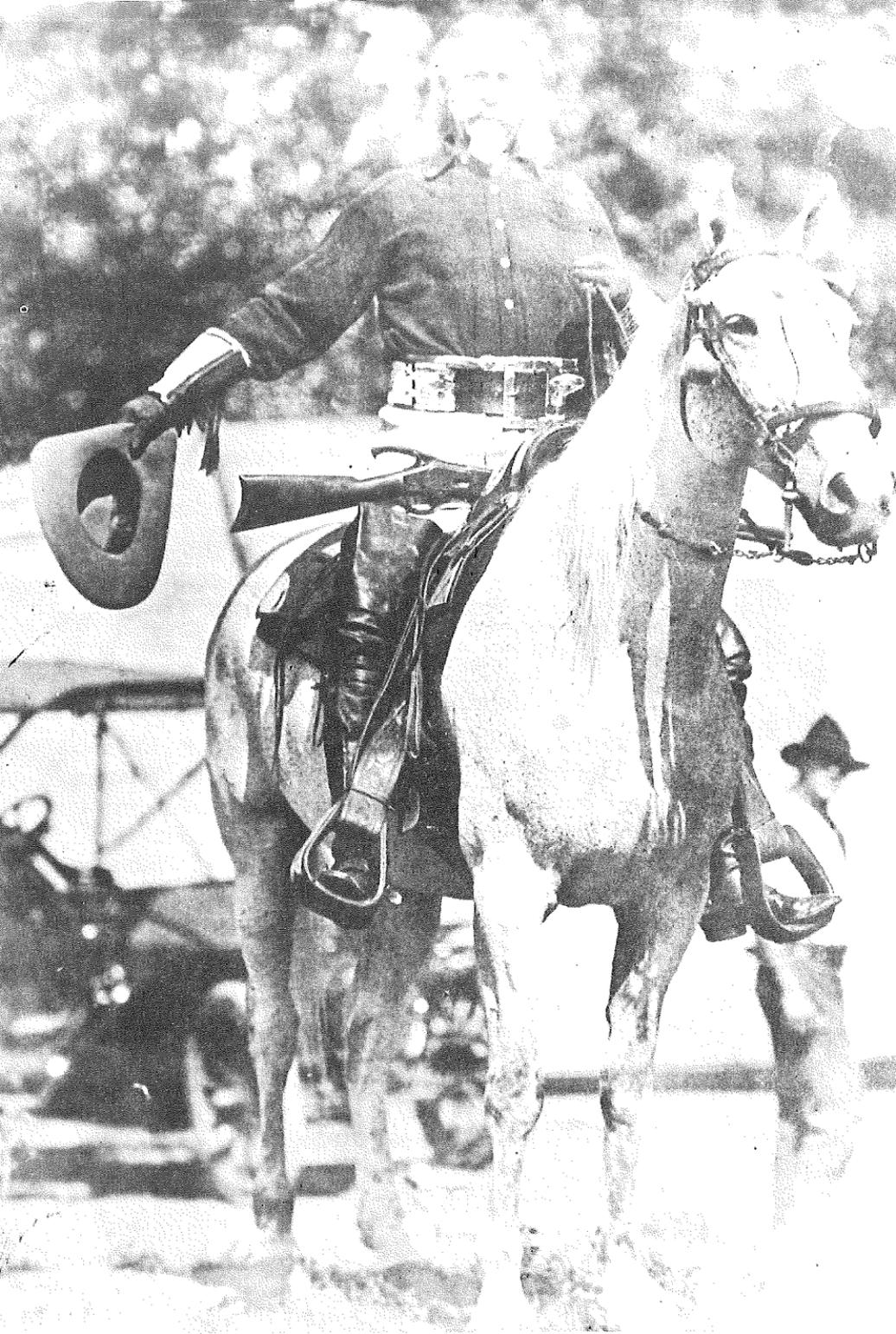
### Cataloging Information:

Names: William F Cody, W F Carver, James Butler Hickok, P T Barnum, Sidney Barnett, Ned Buntline (Edward Zane Carroll Judson), Joseph G McCoy, Nate Salsbury, Frank North, A H Bogardus

Nebraska Place Names: Omaha

Wild West Shows: Wild West, Rocky Mountain and Prairie Exhibition (William F Cody and W F Carver's Wild West Show); Grand Buffalo Hunt (P T Barnum, Sidney Barnett); Daring Buffalo Chase of the Plains (James Butler Hickok); Mabie Brothers Menagerie/Dan Stone's Circus/Tyler's Indian Exhibition; "The Scouts of the Prairie" (Ned Buntline)

Photographs / Images: Showman William F Cody, Buffalo Bill shattering glass balls from horseback, Dr W F Carver and Captain A H Bogardus at a shooting match in Des Moines, the Deadwood Stage with Indians ready to attack, a "programme" of a Wild West Show



*Showman William F. Cody*

# NEBRASKA'S UNIQUE CONTRIBUTION TO THE ENTERTAINMENT WORLD

By WILLIAM E. DEAHL, JR.

THE election of William F. Cody in August, 1967, to the Nebraska Hall of Fame indicated a popular interest in the history of Western America and the people contributing to its colorful lore. Buffalo Bill was one of those people. His contributions are disputed in extremes by everyone from hero worshipers to those seeking to debunk him. However, one is able to assign Cody with at least one unique contribution during his lifetime. William F. Cody gave the world the Wild West Show, a unique form of Western American entertainment, with its format and success established in the State of Nebraska, then presented to America and Europe.

The concept of the Wild West Show was not the original idea of William F. Cody and Dr. W. F. Carver when they opened their Wild West, Rocky Mountain and Prairie Exhibition in Omaha in May of 1883. There had been at least five other attempts at this type of entertainment, and various

*Mr. Deahl, a student at the Iliff School of Theology in Denver, Colorado, has spent the past summer as an instructor in the Department of Speech and Dramatic Arts at Nebraska Wesleyan University in Lincoln.*

persons have claimed they originated the idea of the Wild West Show. However, Cody and his partner were the first to produce such an entertainment successfully. Their Wild West Show of 1883 established the Western theme and style of events adopted by all subsequent Wild West Shows, both those undertaken by Cody and his partners and those conducted by imitators.

The first of these five previous attempts was a Grand Buffalo Hunt, staged on August 31, 1843, by P. T. Barnum in Hoboken, New Jersey. Barnum's display of buffalo was quickly turned into a roping exhibition by C. D. French when the buffalo calves were stampeded by the shouts of the audience, crashed through a fence, and fled to a swamp.<sup>1</sup>

A similar attempt at Western entertainment was held in 1856: The Mabie Brothers Menagerie and Den Stone's Circus were combined with Tyler's Indian Exhibition. This new show used the Indians in portrayals of a buffalo hunt, a corn gathering, Pocahontas rescuing Captain John Smith, and Indian dances.<sup>2</sup>

A third predecessor to Cody's Wild West Show was influenced by the value of exhibiting western animals in order to promote sightseeing and hunting on the buffalo ranges or other business ventures. This show, which occurred in 1868, is cited by Wayne Gard in his book *The Great Buffalo Hunt*: "Joseph G. McCoy, who had established a new market for Texas Longhorn cattle at Abilene, Kansas, included three buffaloes in a Wild West show he staged that year in St. Louis and Chicago to advertise his business."<sup>3</sup>

James Butler (Wild Bill) Hickok is credited with the fourth attempt at establishing a Western entertainment. His show was presented as a single series in a single location and thus was not planned on the same basis as later touring shows. Several of Hickok's biographers have stated he staged his

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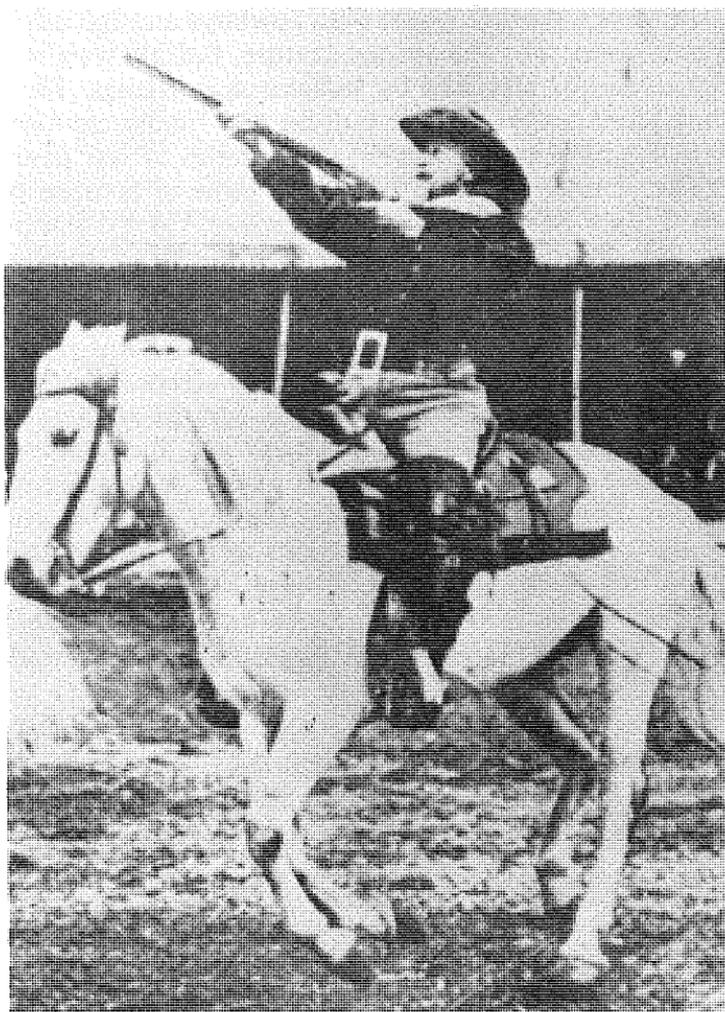
1. P.T. Barnum, *The Life of P. T. Barnum* (London: Willoughby and Co., 1885), 287-289.

2. Elbert R. Bowen, "The Circus in Early Rural Missouri," *Missouri Historical Review*, XLVII, No. 10 (October, 1952), 1-17.

3. Wayne Gard, *The Great Buffalo Hunt* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1959), 65.

Daring Buffalo Chase of the Plains on the Canadian shore of Niagara Falls on July 20, 1870. Hickok's show supposedly degenerated into chaos when the buffalo crashed through the

*Part of the "novel and extraordinary shooting" included in every Wild West Show was Buffalo Bill shattering glass balls from horseback.*



fence and escaped toward the residential section of town.<sup>4</sup> However, one of Hickok's more recent biographers offers a different account of Wild Bill's venture into show business: Joseph E. Rosa states in his book *They Called Him Wild Bill* that the show took place on August 28 and 30, 1872, that the promoter was Sidney Barnett, and that his "thrilling spectacle" was called the Grand Buffalo Hunt. This was the same title used by Barnum. Hickok was the featured star and the master of ceremonies.

Barnett's venture began with cowboys and Indians lassoing Texas steers. For the second feature, buffalo were set free in the arena and attacked by Indians on mustangs. The Indians shot blunt arrows at the buffalo and finally captured them with lassos. The third event was a series of war dances, and the final major attraction was "a game of lacrosse between two Indian tribes for the championship." Music was provided by the Forty-fourth Regiment from St. Catharines. An additional feature was a rope-walking exhibition by Stephen Peer.<sup>5</sup>

Some of the spectators found that Barnett's venture fell short of its thrilling advertising and that the animals were too tame. Perhaps the greatest excitement had come on the midwestern plains where Texas Jack Omohundro, Dashing Charlie Emmett, and Andy Barrett had struggled arduously to capture the buffalo in the first place. The animals kept dying before they could be shipped East. Barnett had spared no expense in financing his venture, but his returns for the event did not even match his expenses and the show ended as a financial loss.<sup>6</sup>

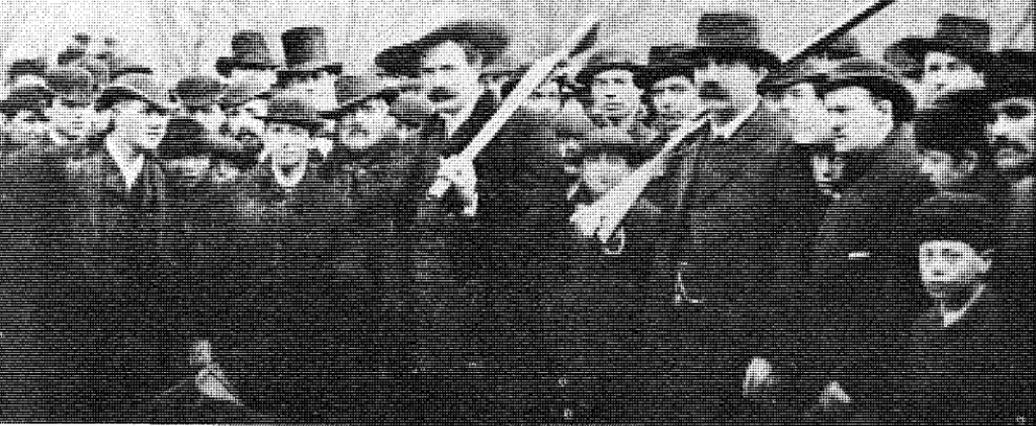
The fifth forerunner to the Wild West Show was undertaken by Ned Buntline (pseudonym of Edward Zane Carroll Judson), who had attempted to develop Western entertainment in the form of dime novels and stage shows.

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4. Richard O'Connor, *Wild Bill Hickok* (Garden City, N. Y.: Doubleday & Co., 1959), 198-201; Frank J. Wiltach, *Wild Bill Hickok: The Prince of Pistoleers* (Garden City, N. Y.: Doubleday & Co., 1926), 189-193.

5. Joseph G. Rosa, *They Called Him Wild Bill: The Life and Adventures of James Butler Hickok* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1964), 113-114.

6. *Ibid.*, 114-116.



*Dr. W. F. Carver and Captain A. H. Bogardus at a shooting match in Des Moines, Iowa. Carver won.*

Buntline was also largely responsible for the reputation of Buffalo Bill Cody, established before the days of Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show. Buntline wrote the first Buffalo Bill dime novel in 1869: *Buffalo Bill, the King of Border Men*. In this novel and three successive ones, he capitalized upon Cody's reputation as a Pony Express rider, a buffalo hunter, and a scout for the United States Army. Following the first three novels, Buntline induced Cody to perform on stage as the star of his melodrama, *The Scouts of the Prairie*, during 1872 and 1873. Cody was not satisfied, however, and he parted company with Buntline on June 16, 1873, in Port Jervis, New York. Cody proceeded to form his own melodrama company, the Buffalo Bill Combination, which successfully produced stage shows from 1875 to 1882. Besides Buntline's play, Cody starred in the following melodramas: *The Red Right Hand: or Buffalo Bill's First Scalp for Custer*, *Life on the Border*, *May Cody: or Lost and Won*, and *The Knights of the Plains: or Buffalo Bill's Best Trail*. It was during this period that Cody developed the showmanship he would later exhibit in his Wild West Shows.<sup>7</sup>

Meanwhile, Buntline's next venture was to produce *The Scouts of the Prairie* outdoors, featuring Comanche Indians and his two new dime novel heroes, Arizona Frank and

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7. Donald Bert Russell, *The Lives and Legends of Buffalo Bill* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1960), 192-203, 252-264.

Dashing Charlie, the Texas Whirlwind. The show included Indians doing the corn dance, shooting at targets with bows and arrows, beating drums, and singing. One of the chiefs delivered an oration in his native tongue, followed by Dashing Charlie playing the banjo and Arizona Frank singing while performing a jig step. Although the show seemed novel enough, Buntline declared that it was a financial loss by the end of one season.<sup>8</sup> Thus, Buntline's attempt at outdoor entertainment with a Western theme disappeared just as Barnum's and Hickok's Grand Buffalo Hunts, the combined menagerie-circus-Indian show, and McCoy's buffalo exhibition had done.

Various claims are made as to who had the "original" idea of the Wild West Show. Louisa Frederici Cody, William Cody's wife, contended the idea of the Wild West Show originated in their home. She related that Cody had told her in their living room that he had a great idea: to give the people back East a view of the West that it was impossible to present on a conventional stage. Cody's idea was to "take the prairies and Injun's and everything else right to 'em! That's what they want. Then show the whole business on big lots, where we could have horses and buffalo and the Deadwood stagecoach and everything."<sup>9</sup>

In opposition to Mrs. Cody's assertion, Nate Salsbury laid claim to the initial germ of the idea and stated it had occurred to him on his return from his 1876 visit to Australia with his acting company. Salsbury had been in an argument about the riding abilities of Australian jockeys as compared with American cowboys and Mexican riders. Salsbury stated:

. . . I began to construct a show in my mind that would embody the whole subject of horsemanship and before I went to sleep I had mapped out a show that would be constituted of elements that had never been employed in concerted effort in the history of the show business. Of course I knew that various circus managers had tried to reproduce the

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8. James Monaghan, *The Great Rascal* (Boston: Little, Brown, & Co., 1953), 29-30.

9. Louisa Frederici Cody and Courtney Ryley Cooper, "Reminiscences of Buffalo Bill by His Widow," *Ladies Home Journal*, XXXVI, No. 11 (November, 1919), 111.

riding of the plains made up of professional circus riders but I knew they had never had the real thing.<sup>10</sup>

Salsbury decided his new entertainment would need a well-known figure to attract attention and quickly solve the problem of advertising his new idea. He decided upon William F. Cody, largely because of his reputation as "Buffalo Bill" which had been established with the Buntline dime novels and stage shows and with Cody's own theatrical company, which was then in existence. Salsbury and Cody met in 1882 while both were performing in New York. Salsbury unfolded his idea to Cody, and they agreed to an 1884 tour of Europe to follow Salsbury's investigation of the Continent during the summer of 1883.<sup>11</sup>

Whether the "original" idea was Cody's or Salsbury's, Cody proceeded to try it out and met with success at the Old Glory Blow-Out on July 4, 1882, in North Platte, Nebraska. William Cody was made grand marshal<sup>12</sup> for the celebration and produced the following event:

From their original plan to put on a kind of rodeo and bronco-busting contest, Cody switched to the kind of Wild West Show of which he had been dreaming. He hired a number of Indians and bought the old Deadwood stagecoach. With these, plus local cowboys, he enacted a famous stagecoach holdup. He put on horse races and a sharp-shooting contest. For good measure, he also included a drive on a small herd of buffalo.<sup>13</sup>

Cody went to work to take his successful new enterprise back East. In the early part of 1883, he formed a partnership with Dr. W. F. Carver in Omaha; Carver had achieved quite a reputation as a crack shot and claimed to be the champion

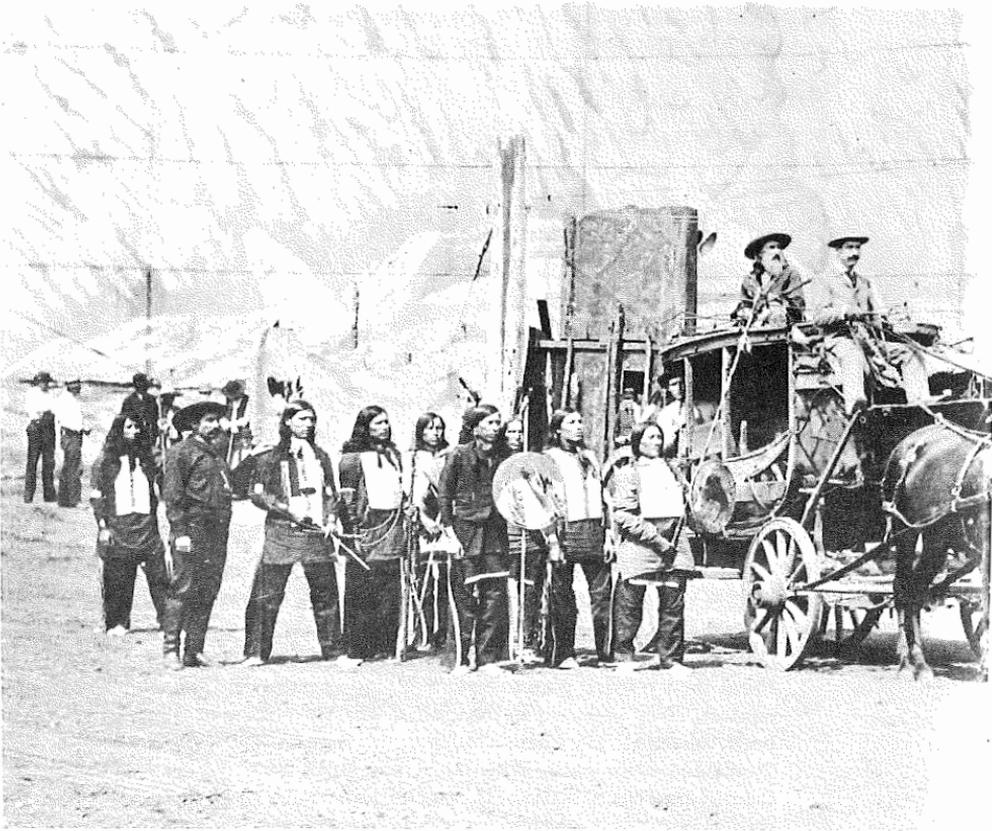
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10. Nate Salsbury, "The Origin of the Wild West Show," *Colorado Magazine*, XXXII, No. 3 (July, 1955), 206.

11. *Ibid.*, 206-207.

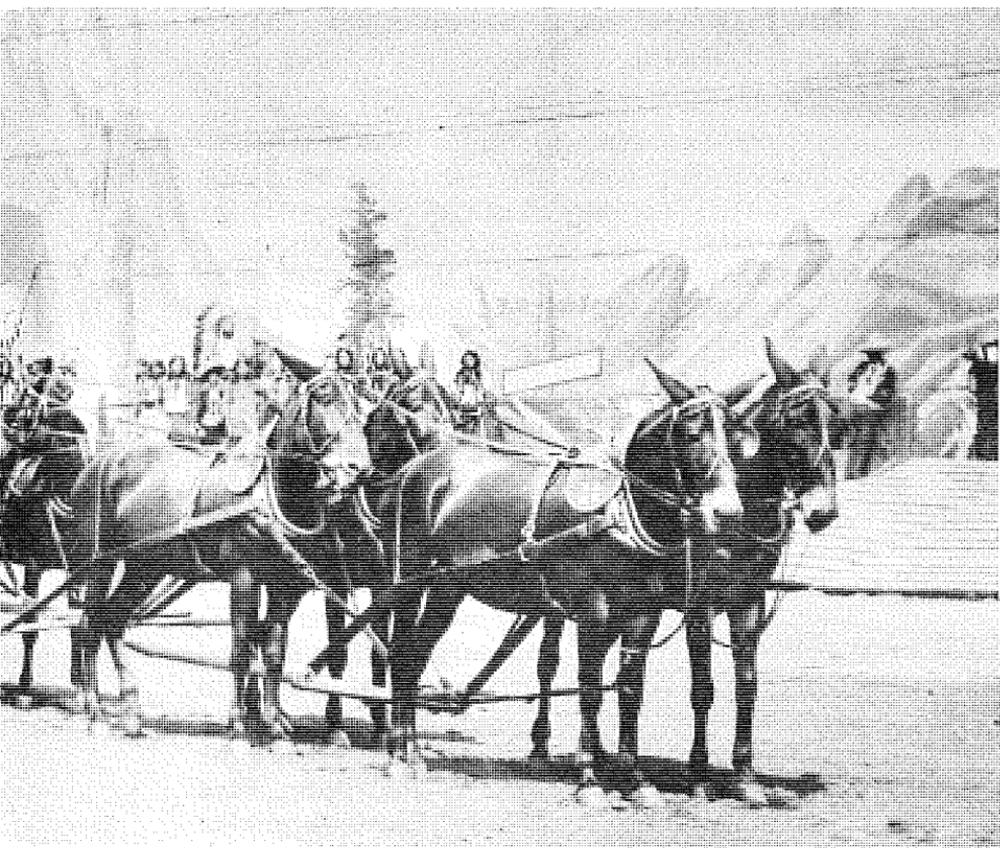
12. Richard W. Walsh makes mention of William Cody's service as grand marshal. The June 15, 1882 *Telegraph* of North Platte lists Cody as a member of the committee in charge of arranging the program for July 4. W. H. McDonald, banker from North Platte, confirms Cody's service as grand marshal in a letter to Margaret McCann dated April 6, 1929.

13. Henry Blackman Sell and Victor Weybright, *Buffalo Bill and the Wild West* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1955), 133.



*The often-attacked Deadwood Stage with its persistent enemies*

rifle shot of the world. The repercussions of this partnership are found in the fireworks of accusations and claims made on both sides. Dr. Carver is credited by his biographer, Raymond W. Thorp, with having dreamed of a show exhibiting the American West as early as 1867. Thorp claims the original name of the Cody-Carver enterprise was "The Golden West," but Cody changed the name of the show to "Cody and Carver's Wild West Show" and had all the printing done with the new title without Carver's knowledge. The appearance of Cody's name first on the posters irked Carver, "since he had conceived the show, and put up all the



*the Indians. Seated on top as guard is Johnny Nelson.*

money.”<sup>14</sup> In August of 1926, Dr. Carver was still claiming to have been responsible for putting Cody in the “first out-door show he was ever in.”<sup>15</sup> However, the evidence in support of Dr. Carver’s claim is quite slim, especially considering the fact that he did not even come West until 1872, five years after he supposedly invented the idea of the show. Carver arrived in Nebraska from Illinois in August,

14. Raymond W. Thorp, *Spirit Gun of the West* (Glendale: A. H. Clark Co., 1957) 127-128, 138.

15. Letter from Dr. W. F. Carver to Richard Tanner, August 29, 1926. Richard Jerome Tanner Collection, Nebraska State Historical Society.

1872, just after the big chase to capture buffalo for the Barnett show on the Niagara.

On the evening of May 6, 1883, Dr. Carver left Buffalo Bill for a few days to make arrangements for the show in Omaha.<sup>16</sup> During his absence, the show was rehearsing at "Camp North, on the Platte, Nebraska"<sup>17</sup> when on May 10 the following fiasco occurred. Cody had invited all the citizens of Columbus, Nebraska, to be his guests for the rehearsal. As an added feature, certain of these guests, including the mayor and town councilmen of Columbus, were to be in the stagecoach when it was attacked. Cody wanted everything "strictly in accordance with reality"; therefore, the team of mules pulling the stage was wild, difficult to manage, and almost unbroken to harness. With the signal of the band playing "Hail Columbia," the stagecoach started around the half mile track. After its third trip around, the coach was attacked by the Indians. The mules bolted and tried to stampede. This caused the Indians to intensify their yelling and whooping. The rescue party with Buffalo Bill in the lead attempted to head off the Indians, but they were swept into the confusion when the Indians forgot their instructions about retiring. When the coach went by the grandstand, the mayor stuck out his head and yelled to the driver, Fred Matthews: "Stop: Hell: stop—let us out." The Indians were cut out of the confusion in bunches until the situation was under control. Fred Matthews' skill had kept the coach from turning over, but it took the combined efforts of the councilmen to keep the enraged mayor from thrashing Buffalo Bill once the coach had stopped. At the suggestion of Major Frank North, who was in charge of the Indians with the Wild West Show, the performance was recast and reorganized along the lines of a show of illusion, not realism.<sup>18</sup>

The rehearsal of the Wild West Show brings out an interesting point concerning Cody's policy toward the acts in

16. *Western Nebraskan* (North Platte), May 12, 1883.

17. *New York Dramatic Mirror*, May 19, 1883.

18. L. O. Leonard, "Buffalo Bill's First Wild West Rehearsal," *Union Pacific Magazine*, I, No. 8 (August, 1922), 26-27.



Mountain and Prairie Exhibition at the Omaha Fairgrounds. Richard Walsh has listed the opening date as the seventeenth, the day the exhibition had intended to open. All works following Walsh, i.e. Shirley, Sells, and Russell, have accepted the date as correct. However, the *New York Dramatic Mirror* carried the following note: "The Cody-Carver Wild West Co. show meant to have opened yesterday, but the rain fell in torrents all day, and the entertainment, being an outdoor one, was postponed till the 19th."<sup>19</sup> The effect of the elements on the opening date of the Wild West Show is supported by the following announcement in the *Omaha Daily Herald*: "POSTPONED! UNTIL SATURDAY, MAY 19."<sup>20</sup>

The postponement caused some disappointment because the people of Omaha and the surrounding areas had developed a keen interest in the announced product of Cody and Carver. They looked upon the show as a home institution, conceived by home energy and enterprise and backed by local capital. The amount of interest in the show was indicated by the number of people who were in Omaha to witness the exhibition. The *Herald* estimated at least two thousand people were in the city from outside towns; the cities listed and their respective delegations were North Platte, two hundred; Council Bluffs, at least two hundred; Columbus, sixty; Fremont, sixty; Lincoln, forty; and Nebraska City, fifty.<sup>21</sup>

The Wild West Show was inaugurated on Saturday, May 19, 1883, with a parade through downtown Omaha, beginning at nine o'clock in the morning. The *Herald* described the parade as "picturesque and well gotten up." The procession was headed by a twenty-piece marching band; then came Little Sitting Bull riding a pony and decorated in his war bonnet and paint, followed by three Pawnee Indians on ponies, three grown buffalo, and a baby buffalo. Then came a group of Omaha Indian squaws with papooses; they

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19. *New York Dramatic Mirror*, May 26, 1883.

20. *Omaha Daily Herald*, May 18, 1883.

21. *Ibid.*

were riding on ponies led by their respective bucks. An Indian wagon of hickory poles was next with a group of squaws trailing behind it. There were roughly forty Sioux and Pawnee braves in war paint, mounted on horseback. Cody and Carver appeared after the Indians in the procession. They were followed by a party of cowboys, two strings of elk, a pair of burros with packs, and a dog team and goat team driven by Indian boys. The Monroe and Salisbury Stagecoach was drawn by six fine mules. A second band brought the parade to a close.<sup>22</sup>

The initial performance of the Wild West Show was held the afternoon of May 19, 1883, and was witnessed by an enthusiastic audience of eight thousand people. At last an outdoor entertainment built on a Western theme had achieved success. The show and its events can be generally reconstructed from newspaper accounts. First of the nine events was a half mile race for Indian ponies by ten contestants. The next feature was an exhibition of the Pony Express rider's method of carrying dispatches.<sup>23</sup>

Then the focus shifted to the representation of an attack on a stagecoach. Although an agent warned the stage driver of the dangers involved, the coach, carrying a load of passengers, rolled around the track. When the coach reached the last quarter of the track, a band of fifty Indians emerged from a hiding place to pursue it. Dust flew as the driver sought to escape. However, the Indians surrounded the coach and interchanged revolver shots with the guard of the coach. When the "capture" of the stage seemed imminent, Buffalo Bill and Dr. Carver with their party of scouts "came to its rescue, driving the Indians back, shooting and scalping them, and routing the discomfited savages from the road." The audience went wild with excitement as they stood cheering the act and calling for a repetition.<sup>24</sup>

Feats of shooting were then performed for the audience. Captain Bogardus led off with an exhibition of shooting glass

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22. *Ibid.*, May 20, 1883.

23. *Ibid.*

24. *Ibid.*

balls and clay pigeons, displaying both the English and American rules. Buffalo Bill and Dr. Carver displayed their skill with the shotgun and rifle, concluding with shots fired while riding a horse at a full gallop.<sup>25</sup> Following Cody and Carver, an act entitled "The Cowboy's Frolic" included bucking broncos and the riding of a Texas steer. A buffalo chase was next with the buffalo sent galloping over the grounds before being returned to their corral. The performance concluded with Indians dashing around the grounds and causing much excitement.<sup>26</sup>

Cody and Dr. Carver rode over to the grandstand after the performance. Cody made a speech which was greeted with applause, saying that "he trusted the enterprise had pleased the people, and that he aimed to make it a thoroughbred Nebraska show in which they should hold the mirror up to nature."<sup>27</sup>

In addition to the morning parade and the afternoon performance, a night performance was offered, illuminated by blazing campfires. This show featured acts such as Indian dances, rockets fired by Captain Bogardus, and other acts which could be given at night. However, the night performance apparently did not have the appeal of the afternoon show; its attendance was small.<sup>28</sup>

The next day, Cody and Carver produced a Sunday matinee which was even more successful than Saturday's performance. The immense crowd numbered fully nine thousand people. They were also an enthusiastic audience: they called for a repeat of the stagecoach act, and their request was fulfilled.<sup>29</sup>

Thus on May 19-20, 1883, William F. Cody and Dr. W. F. Carver had established a successful outdoor entertainment using a Western theme and events—something Barnum, Barnett, McCoy, Buntline, and the combined

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25. *Ibid.*

26. *Ibid.*

27. *Ibid.*

28. *Ibid.*

29. *Ibid.*, May 22, 1883.

menagerie-circus-Indian show had failed to do. The success of the Wild West, Rocky Mountain and Prairie Exhibition could be attributed to the variety and scope of Western events and activities it included as compared to the narrow focus of its predecessors. The Western events used in this first show were to be the features of Buffalo Bill's Wild West Shows through 1913 as well as the features to be copied by the imitators of Cody's show. Buffalo Bill's Wild West Shows were built around these basic Western events with other acts changed, omitted, or added to contribute novelty and add greater spectacle to the show. The Wild West Show always featured equestrianism, a demonstration of the Pony Express, cowboys and Indians, shooting acts, the appearance of Buffalo Bill, an attack on the Deadwood stagecoach, and spectacular attractions.

Another main ingredient in the success of Cody and Carver's Wild West, Rocky Mountain and Prairie Exhibition was William F. Cody himself. Cody had been a participant in the development of the West, and his adventures as a Pony Express rider, a buffalo hunter, and an Indian scout had been publicized in dime novels and popular melodramas. By the time the Wild West Show opened in 1883, Cody had become a Western hero. Moreover, he was a godlike hero who rode, shot, scalped Indians, saved fair maidens in distress, and performed other heroic acts.<sup>30</sup> Thus, the Wild West Show afforded the opportunity to see Cody perform re-enactments of some of his heroic feats.

Although Cody and Carver were not the first to attempt a Wild West Show, theirs was the first truly successful entertainment of this type. They were able to capitalize upon a variety of Western acts, popular enthusiasm and support, and Cody's reputation as "Buffalo Bill" to give the world a unique American entertainment which had its successful beginning in the State of Nebraska.

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30. Courtney Ryley Cooper, *Under the Big Top* (Boston: Little, Brown, & Co., 1924), 45.