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Article Summary: "Wild Bill" Hickok, billed as "the most celebrated Scout and Hunter of the Plains," began his show-business career in 1872 in Niagara Falls with a staged hunt and a few weary buffalo captured in Nebraska.

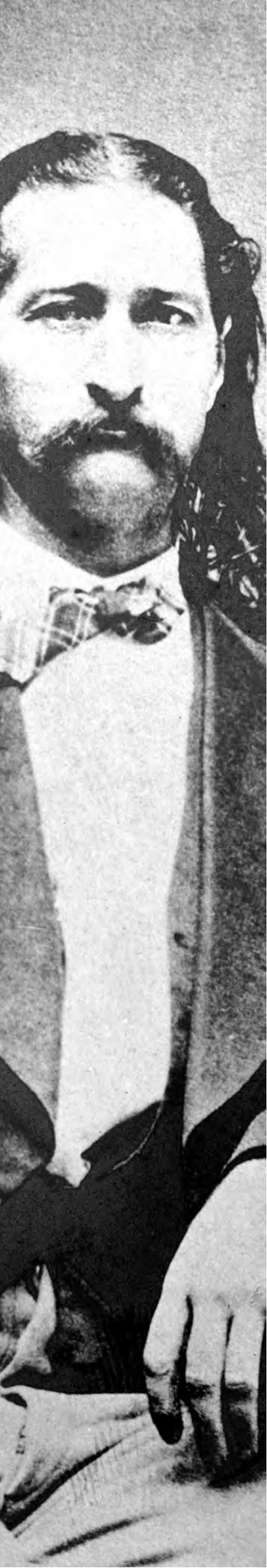
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Photographs / Images: three icons of the West: Buffalo Bill Cody, the American bison, and Wild Bill Hickok; John Baker Omohundro, "Texas Jack," who described the proposal to capture buffalo for Barnett's exhibition; illustration of captured buffalo being loaded onto a railroad car; museum owner Thomas Barnett; Fred Matthews, driver of the Deadwood stagecoach in Buffalo Bill's Wild West; broadside advertising the Grand Buffalo Hunt; Hickok, who appeared briefly in 1873 in Cody's stage dramas



Wild Bill Hickok, Buffalo Bill Cody, &

THE GRAND BUFFALO HUNT



In 1873–74, James Butler “Wild Bill” Hickok appeared briefly, as himself, in William F. Cody’s wild west show, Buffalo Bill’s Combination. It is often regarded as his earliest public performance, but in fact it was not his first appearance before a live audience. A year earlier, in 1872, he had acted as master of ceremonies for a “Grand Buffalo Hunt” on the Canadian side of Niagara Falls.

Hickok’s involvement in the event was



AT

BY JOSEPH G. ROSA

NIAGARA FALLS

not generally publicized until 1882 when J. W. Buel wrote that Wild Bill had hit upon a novel idea that would make him a fortune—taking buffalo to Niagara to entertain the tourists. Accompanied by a number of Comanche Indians, the buffalo were to be shipped via Omaha through to Niagara Falls. But Buel's account of the chaotic outcome suggests that he relied more upon hearsay and a fertile imagination than fact.¹



THE NIAGARA FALLS HUNT WAS NOT A NOVEL IDEA. In 1843 Phineas T. Barnum had purchased fifteen half-starved and weary year-old buffalo calves and the services of one C. D. French, a noted rider and lasso expert, and exhibited them at Hoboken, New Jersey, describing the event as a “Grand Buffalo Hunt.” An estimated twenty-four thousand people were attracted to the show, but there was panic when the buffalo escaped, a number of people were injured, and one died. In 1860 Barnum, in partnership with James Capon “Grizzly” Adams, produced a similar venture that met with a limited success.²

In 1868 Joseph G. McCoy, the “father of the Texas cattle trade,”³ organized a “Grand Excursion to the Far West! A Wild and Exciting Chase after Buffalo, on his Native Plains” in an effort to persuade Texas cattlemen to drive their herds to Abilene, Kansas. McCoy supplied the horses and equipment, but each man was expected to provide “his own firearms.”⁴

A year later, in 1869, Sidney Barnett, the son of Thomas Barnett, began planning a hunt similar to Barnum’s, the event that eventually included Hickok. The Barnetts owned a museum on the Canadian side of Niagara Falls devoted to exhibits and relics obtained worldwide. Opened in 1827, the museum was popular with tourists, and to attract custom the Barnetts kept their admission prices low and admitted school children free.

Sidney Barnett, sometimes called “Colonel” because of a connection with the local militia, believed that an event featuring live buffalo would be a major attraction at the falls (although it is doubtful that he knew much about the problems associated with the capture and control of them), and his attention was drawn to North Platte, Nebraska. A cache of letters to Barnett on the subject, some written by Buffalo Bill Cody and Texas Jack Omohundro, helps explain how Hickok became involved.

Early in 1869 Barnett received the following from Cody:

North Platte Neb
Mar[ch] 29th 1869
Mr Sidney Barnett

Dear Sir

I have just met Mr Omohundro & am now on my way to Spotted Tail[']s Indian Village with horses and rations for his people. Will return as soon as I deliver them to him. Mr Omohundro & myself will catch you the buffalo and put them in the cars in good condition for you at this place or some other

station close [by] if you will pay enough for the trouble[.] it is a big job but it can be done.

Money will do anything. He [Omohundro?] will write you what will get them for. And he will come on with them if he is well paid. I am in Government employ and cannot leave—Let him know immediately. It will take a waggon [sic] for each buffalo to haul him to the road & we have to send a good ways for more good Ropes. You make the arrangements with him[.] You will have to forward money. It will look more like business we of course are both strangers. The same as when Prof Ward ⁵ and I commenced business but I think we can do it on the square. If anything should happen that we could not get the buffalo although if we commence to do the thing it will be done but should such a thing happen as we could not get them I assure you the money will be returned if sent to our order.

Yours Respectfully,
(Signed) W. F. Cody
Buffalo Bill⁶

The outcome of that correspondence is uncertain, but Barnett continued his efforts to secure the animals. More than fifty years later, William F. “Doc” Carver, the self-styled “Evil Spirit of the Plains,” claimed that he actually had captured the buffaloes, and that Hickok was among his helpers. Doc claimed to have signed a contract with someone not identified, “to deliver a hundred live buffalo to the railroad Yard in Kansas City. They were to be shipped to Niagara Falls, New York, for a great exhibition and buffalo hunt to be held there in the following year.” Besides Hickok, Doc said he had hired Hank and Monty Clifford, Old John Nelson and others, among them some “Oglala Sioux braves who were visiting their white kinsman, Nelson.” Unfortunately, Carver added no further information.⁷

Early in 1872 Barnett approached the railroad for advice and received the following response:

Union Pacific Railroad Company.
Agent’s Office.
North Platte Station, March 1st 1872
Sidney Barnett Esq

Dr Sir,

Yours of the 24th Feby. At hand. I think the enterprise you propose not only hazardous but very expensive—

There are plenty of Buffaloes in this section—say from thirty to forty miles from this town. I have mentioned to the commander of the Post here the matter of capturing full grown Buffalo Bulls, he is a skilled Buffalo hunter,

Previous pages: Three icons of the West: Buffalo Bill Cody (left); the American bison (*Bison bison*), commonly called buffalo; and Wild Bill Hickok. NSHS RG2603-6; Harper’s New Monthly Magazine; NSHS RG3004-150

A former contributor to Nebraska History, Joseph G. Rosa is the leading authority on Wild Bill Hickok and the author of many books and articles on Hickok and other Old West characters and themes. His most recent book is Wild Bill Hickok, Gunfighter, published by the University of Oklahoma Press.

but he thinks it next to impossible to capture them alive. However I'll give you his figures—he agrees to corral them here for one thousand dollars (\$1000.00) per head—transportation would cost you near three hundred dollars (\$300.00) the carload—the Indians would not be allowed to go unless it was by an order from Washington—

The Indian Tents or "Tepees" would cost from \$75.00 to \$100.00 the Tent—Will take pleasure in giving information or rendering you any assistance in my power in carrying out proposed Buffalo hunt—

Respectfully, &c
(Signed) Joe Bell

On March 13 Barnett wrote to the post commander at North Platte Station. The post was garrisoned by Co. K of the Second U.S. Cavalry under the command of Capt. James Egan, who held that position from November 1871 until April 1872. Although he was probably experienced in the ways of the buffalo, he may well have decided to pass Barnett's enquiry on to Maj. Frank North, whose Pawnee Battalion of scouts was famous on the frontier. North was at that time on detachment at Fort D. A. Russell in Wyoming Territory, which led to a delay in his response.

In the meantime, exactly three years to the day since Barnett received Buffalo Bill's letter of March 29, 1869, Texas Jack wrote to Barnett:

North Plat[t]e Neb
Mar 29th 1872.
Mr. S. Barnett,

Dear Sir,

I received your dispatch several days ago. Should have given you an answer but did not know positively what to say as my Pardner W. F. Cody was not here, he returned yestoday [sic] just after I had read your let[t]er we had a talk together and decided that we could capture those Buffaloe and deliver them here or some Sta [station?] near for the sum of \$500.00 per head and that you are to take whatever number we get from two to Six head, all we ask is that you deposit \$1000.00 in the First Nash. [sic] Bank Omaha subject to our order. This might not be ne[ce]ssary only that we need aid from parties that would not work unless on a certa[i]nty, you can have what reference you wish in regard to your deposit we will expect the Balance of the pay as soon as the Buffalo[e]s are safely delivered a board the Train [.] if you except [sic] this offer which I think is as well as you can do let us know at once by telgraph [sic] and we will



John Baker Omohundro, "Texas Jack," referred to Barnett by Buffalo Bill Cody, replied with details of the proposal to capture buffalo for Barnett's exhibition. Photograph by Varley, Baltimore, Maryland. Author's collection.

procede [sic] to business you an [can?] prepare your part give out your advertizements [sic] and and [sic] make all other ne[ce]ssary arrangements the Biffalo [sic] will bee there [sic] between the first and fifteenth.

I would much have prefered [sic] your offer as a pardner in this project as I am sure it will be a perfect success only for the objection of certain parties which I could not pos[s]ibly perform the capture without. I would except your offer however as you have given me some inducements I have made up my mind to come through with the Biffalos to take care of them over the road and to play any part in the hunt that you may wish me after we are once together perhaps I will join you in the Exhabition [sic] that you spoke of. I will send you a scetch [sic] of my life in a few days that you may use it in your Publications if nessary we have writ[t]en to the Indian Reservation to know if we can get the Indians required will let you know as soon as [we] get an answer.

I have a good rig here of Bows and arrors [arrows] that I have captured from the Indians also nice Lassoos that I will bring a long so as I

"...we could capture those Buffaloe and deliver...for the sum of \$500.00 per head and that you are to take whatever number we get from two to Six head... ."

can play Indian or white man as you may wish. I have always intended to go into something of this kind but have never had the capital to commence with. You know it requires money to do any thing out here[.] I was speaking to my old Friend Professor Ward about it last winter he recommends the Idear [*sic*] and I am sure that you and what ever Parties you may have with you will make Big money out of what you have undertaking [*sic*].

what business we transact from this [point?] on must be through telagrap [*sic*] as our time will be limited[.] you may feel perfectly safe in regards to our succes[s] and make your arrangements according[ly] as we seldom undertake a thing that [we] do not car[r]ly out. nomore [*sic*] at pres[ent] from your most obd [*sic*]

J. B. Omohundro.
Texas Jack

There appears to be a postscript following the signature, but it is very faint and unreadable.

A week later Barnett received a significant reply to his letter written early in March to Maj. North:

Fort D. A. Russell, W. T.
April 5th 1872
Sidney Barnett Esq
Niagara Falls
N.Y.

Dear Sir

Yours of 13th March is received and I hasten an answer. I am sorry to say that the chances for getting the Buffalo you require are very slim as there are no Buffaloes now near the Union Pacific R.R. they all having gone south. I think your chances would be better on the Kansas Pacific. I would refer you to Bill Hickok or better known as Wild Bill, sheriff of— direct to Abilene Kan. It would be possible at some seasons of the year to fill your bill here but not now. I can get the Indians and at a small expense aside from transportation, Write me when you hear from H.

Very truly yours
Frank North

No correspondence between Hickok and Barnett has so far been found, but North's letter establishes a link between them earlier than their reported meeting at Kansas City a few of months later.

Barnett reached Fort McPherson late in May, from where, on June 1, he wrote to his wife that he hoped to conduct his business and be back home in two days, but wished he had been better informed of progress. On June 12, the Omaha



Weekly Herald published a letter from a correspondent at Fort McPherson dated June 3:

A novel undertaking is on foot here, and is of gigantic proportions. Colonel Sidney Barnett, of Niagara Falls, is getting up a grand Buffalo hunt at Niagara Falls, from the 1st to the 4th of July. He is now here for the purpose of completing arrangements and superintending the starting of the enterprise, and shipping the buffaloes East.

He has secured the services of the celebrated scout and hunter, Mr. J. B. Omohundro, better known as "Texas Jack," the hero of the Loup Fork. "Texas Jack" is a partner of "Buffalo Bill," and nothing that skill and foresight can accomplish will be spared to make this hunt a perfect success.

Through the kindness of Major North, the commander of the Pawnee scouts, arrangements are being made for a party of Pawnee Indians—the deadly and bitter enemies of the Sioux—to go to Niagara with their fleet ponies and lodges, and full war and hunting equipment.

The buffaloes will pass through Omaha the



Three gentlemen well known to Western men for daring were chosen as the leaders, viz., Dashing Charley [Charles E. Emmett?], Texas Jack, and a man by the name of Barrett [Barnett?] (his initials I did not know, as my informant did not know them). They started from Red Willow early Sunday morning, 9th June, crossed the Republican, and proceeded to Beaver Creek, 15 miles away, and before noon the eight bulls were prisoners, and loaded on wagons. The mode of capture was as follows: One would throw a lasso over the animal's neck, and follow with a slack rope, until another could lasso the foot. Then they proceeded to down the "baste." Once down he was quickly tied, and ready for loading on the wagons, and so the fun went on with one variation. After Texas Jack had lassoed an uncomm[on] large ugly old bull, and before any one could secure his leg, he turned short, and charged, caught the horse, and pitched both into a gully. Here the grit and action of a true western hunter became apparent; his well trained horse waited for its rider, and my informant stated that the rope was not even dropped, but man and horse were together, again following the buffalo, until he was finally captured. To read of such things is all very well; but to do them is quite a different thing. For my part I believe rather than be one to capture one of those fellows, I had rather go through the Battle of Chickamauga again.

"FOR MY PART
I BELIEVE RATHER THAN
BE ONE TO CAPTURE
ONE OF THOSE
FELLOWS, I HAD
RATHER GO THROUGH
THE BATTLE OF
CHICKAMAUGA
AGAIN."

latter part of this, or early part of next month.

We think this is a grand affair, and believe there can be no question of success from the reputation of the parties engaged in it. The spectacle that will present itself to the scores of thousands who will be spectators at Niagara will be the most novel and thrilling ever seen east of the great plains, and will give our eastern friends an idea of what buffalo hunting is in Nebraska.

This was followed up on July 2 by the Lincoln *Daily State Journal* with a report from its correspondent, W. D. Wildman, who described Texas Jack's attempts to capture the buffaloes alive:

I will relate an incident heretofore unheard of in Buffalo Hunting. A gentleman from Saratoga, N. Y., came to Fort McPherson and hired three of the Western scouts to capture eight fully grown Buffalo, to astonish the town of Saratoga, on the 4th of July, at a grand celebration on that day, and I understand a party of Pawnee Indians were to be taken along to shew the uninitiated how Lo [Indians] could do the Buffalo on a hunt.

Texas Jack, in his capacity as trail agent for the Pawnees, wrote to Jacob M. Troth, the Pawnee Indian agent at Genoa, requesting that he be allowed to take some of the Indians to Niagara Falls to appear in Barnett's hunt. Troth contacted his own superior, Barclay White, superintendent of Indian affairs stationed at Omaha. On June 13, Troth advised Texas Jack:

Your letter was rec[eived] and I have had an interview with the Superintendent on the subject and we unite in our view in reference to our Indians going off [on] an expedition of the kind you propose. It is also prohibited by the Department.⁸

Barnett, meantime, was growing impatient with bureaucratic delays. On June 20 he telegraphed F. A. Walker the commissioner of Indian affairs in Washington:

I made arrangements with Major North of Columbus, Nebraska, for five Pawnee Indians to come here for a Buffalo Hunt Exhibition first July. Their tickets were bought and great expense incurred by advertisements &c. The Agent on Reserve now refused to let them

Standing as tall as six feet at the shoulder, weighing up to two thousand pounds, and able to run up to thirty miles per hour, a full grown adult buffalo is a formidable creature. Capturing a half dozen for shipment to Niagara Falls was no small assignment. Source unknown. NSHS RG3211-74

come will you direct that they be allowed
come. Can refer you to any person here.
Will be most serious loss to me & disappoint
thousands if Indians not allowed to come.

Sidney Barnett.⁹

On the twenty-first Barnett sent another telegram
to the commissioner:

I have incurred expenditure of five
thousand dollars. This disappointment will
utterly ruin me. Can refer you as to my charac-
ter to Col. Parker ex Comm. To Mr. Chilton
ex Consult at Clifton or any person at Niagara
will give any amount of security. Please
reconsider.

Sidney Barnett
Ans[wer] quick.¹⁰

Commissioner Walker's response was brief and
to the point: "Matter cannot be reconsidered."¹¹

Barnett was furious, but he now had another
problem. Once his Pawnees had been refused
permission to travel to Canada, Texas Jack backed
out, and Buffalo Bill was otherwise engaged with
his scouting duties for the Fifth Cavalry. Worse,
many of the buffalo that had been captured had
died—as so many of them did in captivity.

Again Barnett wrote to Maj. North who was
back at Fort D. A. Russell, and who replied on
July 2, 1872:

My Dear Mr. Barnett

Your letter of June 28th is received and I
must feeling as I do answer at once.

I heartily sympathize with you and were it
in my power I should offer help and amends
in some way, but I see nothing I could to [do?]
to help the lost cause, There was one blunder
made in regard to the Indians and that was by
Mathews yet he was perfectly innocent in the
matter. When I left Columbus I was very poorly
not hardly able to get around and my instruc-
tions to Mathews were limited, but on my
arrival here I immediately wrote him and told
him to take my team and go at once to the
Reserve and select his men and get the Agents
permission for them to go but he (Mathews)
thought as you and I do that the trip would be
beneficial and that the Agent would have no
objections to their going as they are roaming
around the country all the time and some of
them he has not seen for one year that I know
of. I can find Pawnees in Omaha that will
testify that they have not been on the Reserve
for six months and perhaps a year; the sticking
point is this, the Quaker Agent wants to show
his authority and make out that their policy is
the only safe one with Indians and so help me



Museum owners Thomas
Barnett (above) and his
son Sidney planned the
"hunt" believing the event
would be popular with
tourists. No photographs of
Sidney have come to light.
Courtesy William Jamieson



God I never as long as I have known those
Indians, I never knew so cor[r]upt a set of
Officers over them as now. I think their race
is nearly run, if Greeley is elected I know it is,
anything I can do for you command and I will
obey.

With great respect,
I remain yours very truly,
(signed) Frank North

P.S. what I have wrote is between you and me
as I am in the service. I wish this kept.

Truly F. North

Major North's reference to Mathews offers a
possible explanation for what had led to the
official intervention of the commissioner for
Indian affairs. "Mathews" was Lt. Fred Matthews,
a Canadian and former stagecoach driver who
served with the Pawnee Scouts and later joined
Buffalo Bill's Wild West, where his skill with a six-
in-hand was put to use on the Deadwood stage.
Matthews, as an act of courtesy, took it upon him-
self to inform the Indian agent of their intent in the
belief that there would be no objection. Clearly,
North was annoyed with the agent, but because of
his official status he had to divorce himself from
the situation.¹²

During Barnett's exchanges with Commissioner
Walker, A. A. Porter of the legal firm Griffith and



Fred Matthews, shown here as driver of the “six-in-hand” (in this case six mules) Deadwood stagecoach in Buffalo Bill’s Wild West, was a lieutenant under Maj. Frank North when Barnett was seeking permission from the commissioner of Indian affairs to take a number of Pawnees to Niagara falls for the hunt. NSHS RG-2586

Porter at Niagara Falls, New York, also wrote on Barnett’s behalf to Walker. In his letter of July 3 Porter asked if there was some way “existing laws and treaty regulations” could resolve the matter since Barnett had incurred a great deal of expense and would provide whatever security was necessary. On July 18 Barnett himself wrote directly to President Grant’s secretary, General Horace Porter, outlining the efforts and expense involved, and the part played by Major North and Captain Matthews. He said he was unaware of any U.S. laws that prevented the Indians from visiting “civilized” countries. Such travel would be beneficial. President Grant agreed that the Indians should be allowed to go, but the Office of Indian Affairs thought otherwise.¹³

With no hope of producing a hunt for the Fourth of July celebrations, Barnett determined on a later date. It was reported that one of his agents had reached Wichita where the *Weekly Eagle* of August 9, 1872, noted, “One of the parties connected with the promised big buffalo hunt at Niagara Falls was in Wichita last week hiring Mexican greasers [*sic*] and buying Indian ponies and Texas cattle for the great sell.”

Barnett had probably given up any hope of procuring buffalo or Indians from within the United States, but an obscure account published

in 1895 claimed that he “went to the Indian territory [present day Oklahoma] where he engaged some Sac and Fox Indians and Mexican cowboys, and secured a fresh lot of buffaloes for his show. It was in Kansas City that he met Bill Hickok, one of the most daring and dashing scouts in the west, and he engaged him to go east and manage the Niagara Falls buffalo hunt.”¹⁴

By the summer of 1872 Hickok was a living legend, thanks to his real exploits and to such publications as *Harper’s New Monthly Magazine*. His reputation had been further enhanced when, for eight months from April to December 1871, he served as the marshal or chief of police of Abilene, the premier cow town in Kansas.

In Abilene he was involved in only one gunfight. It was on October 5 when, in the glare of kerosene lamps outside a saloon, he confronted a drunken mob of about fifty armed Texans. One of them fired at him but missed. Hickok fired back, hitting him twice in the stomach, and he died three days later. Another man, brandishing a pistol, ran into the line of fire and was also shot by Hickok, who did not recognize him in the glare. It was his friend Mike Williams, a former city jailer. It was generally agreed that the shooting was a tragic accident. Hickok had Williams’ body shipped back to his family at Kansas City, paid for the funeral,

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days later.”

GRAND
BUFFALO HUNT!
 AT
NIAGARA FALLS,
 ON THE
28th and 30th August, 1872.

THE BUFFALOES CAPTURED FOR THIS PURPOSE NEAR THE FOOT OF THE
ROCKY MOUNTAINS,
After one of the most exciting chases ever witnessed on the plains, will be liberated in a
LARGE AND BEAUTIFUL PARK AT NIAGARA FALLS,
CANADA SIDE.

This Park has been specially made for the purpose, the portion set apart for spectators is secured from the slightest danger by fences strong enough to resist an elephant.
 This Novel and most exciting affair will be under the direction and management of the most celebrated Scout and Hunter of the great plains.

Mr. Wm. HICKOK

better known as WILD BILL, of whom General Custer says "whether on foot or on horse back, he is one of the most perfect types of physical manhood I ever saw and then, as now, the most famous scout on the plains."
 Notwithstanding the refusal of the Commissioner of Indian Affairs at Washington to allow the Pawnee Indians engaged by me to leave their reservation, and which caused the postponement of the Hunt on a former occasion, through the expenditure of a large amount of money I have secured the services of some of the

INDIANS OF THE BEST HUNTING BAND

A broadside advertising the Grand Buffalo Hunt was distributed (only the top half is reproduced here), and the event was advertised in the *Niagara Falls Gazette*, but it was otherwise virtually unpublicized. No photographs of the event or the principles involved have been found. Courtesy Hugh Macmillian

handbills advertising the event, only one of them is known. In describing the fame of "Mr. Wm. Hickok better known as Wild Bill" (Barnett's use of "William" instead of James is understandable), he publicized his dispute with Washington: "Notwithstanding the refusal of the Commissioner of Indian affairs at Washington to allow the Pawnee Indians engaged by me to leave their reservation, and which caused the postponement of the Hunt on a former occasion" he had now secured "Indians of the Best Hunting Band of the Sacs and Fox Tribes" and over "fifty Indians of different tribes" would "appear in full War Dress, and take part in the Hunt."

On August 28 the following advertisement appeared in the *Niagara Falls (New York) Gazette*:

GRAND BUFFALO HUNT
 AT NIAGARA FALLS
 28 & 30 August, 1872

This novel and most exciting affair will positively take place on the days mentioned and will be under the management and direction of "Wild Bill" (Mr. William Hickok), the most celebrated Scout and Hunter of the Plains. No expense has been spared to make it the most interesting, the most exciting, and the

and later visited Williams' wife to explain what had happened.

By mid December the city council decided to ban the next season's cattle drive because of the "evils of the trade," leaving Hickok out of a job, but he was publicly commended for his efforts to preserve life and property in Abilene. He then moved to Kansas City, where he was living when Barnett arrived.

Back at Niagara Falls it was late in August before Barnett was ready to stage his hunt. Although he had prepared and distributed broadsides or

most thrilling spectacle ever witnessed east of the Missouri River.

In a preview in the same issue the paper added the following news item:

The Grand Buffalo Hunt over the river opens today at 3 o'clock P. M. Sidney Barnett has spared neither pains nor expense to make the undertaking a perfect success, and the most novel and exciting time may confidently be expected. Seats have been prepared to accommodate 50,000 spectators. The hunt will be under the direction of the celebrated William Hickok, or "Wild Bill" as he is familiarly called. A number of the Sacs and Fox Tribes of Indians will appear in full war costume, mounted on fleet ponies brought from the plains. A Mexican Vaquero Troupe will also participate. Altogether there will be over fifty Indians and mounted men taking part in the chase. The second day of the hunt will be equally interesting and exciting. Excursion trains are being run on all the principal railroads, and it is expected that a large concourse of people will witness the hunt.

On September 4, however, the *Gazette* carried this review of the show:

The great Buffalo Hunt over the river came off last week according to the programme. The managers of the enterprise used every endeavour to make the exhibition one of interest and amusement to the spectators, and to meet the expectations of all concerned. No doubt some were disappointed in not seeing a herd of wild buffaloes instead of 3. Some 3,000 people were present the first day and a large number on Friday. "Wild Bill" was on hand with several Indians and Mexicans accustomed to the western plains, and exhibited what they knew about lassoing wild cattle and buffaloes.

The large race course gave ample room for an exciting chase and the whole field was traversed. The skill of these men in riding and lassoing is remarkable. A large number of Cayuga and Tuscarora Indians played a game of "La Crosse" which was novel to a good many and quite exciting.

In fact, the whole show was such as every person would like to see.

Others did not share that view. On August 29 the *Toronto Globe* was quite scathing in its comments:

THE BUFFALO HUNT
 THE WHOLE THING A FARCE.
 (By Telegraph from our own Correspondent.)
 Clifton, Aug. 28.

The buffalo hunt to-day was a failure.

The animals turned out had been caged up for some years past, and did not appear to manifest any disposition to run. "Wild Bill," mounted on a low-sized mustang, careered about after a small-sized ox, and, finally, by the aid of some of his satellites, managed to secure a cow, which required to be goaded to desperation before it would run at all. The throwing of the lasso, or lariat, was a mere sham, inasmuch as many of the Indian chiefs had de facto to take the bull by the horns to make him run. The chase after the Texan cattle was also a farce, as the Indians, disguised in the traditional war paint, wandered about on ponies after a cow that had evidently been roaming about for the last two years in the pastures of some peaceful agriculturist in the neighbourhood of the Falls. The whole affair is to be repeated on Friday next, and if no better fun is to be offered to those who patronize the entertainment, the exhibition will be but poorly attended. The proceeding was somewhat enlivened by the band of the 44th Battalion.

The Lincoln County, Nebraska, *Advertiser* on September 4 remarked,

We hear that the late buffalo hunt at Niagara commenced with a sun-dance by the Indians. Four buffaloes were then chased around the park, the Indians pitching in with their arrows, some of which landed among the spectators. A number of roughs broke down the enclosure, and the buffaloes went for some of the crowd. There was a general stampede all around for a time . . .

The writer added that the animals were then rounded up and ready for another exhibition.

Sixty years later, a Canadian writer further described the hunt and its outcome:

The performance actually took place on August 28th and 30th, 1872, in an enclosure of possibly 80 acres or more in which the Hydro transformer building and the Falls View school now stand. The attendance fell far short of expectations. Many were delighted and considered the event highly satisfactory and entertaining.

The program consisted of lassoing wild Texas steers by cowboys and Indians. Wild Bill, Wm. Hickok, a famous Western scout, had charge of the ceremonies.

Buffaloes were loosened and attacked by the Indians who charged on fleet mustangs, shooting with blunt arrows and finally capturing them by lassos. There were some war dances and the final event was an interesting,

exciting and well-contested game of lacross between two Indian tribes for the championship. The band of the 44th regiment from St. Catharines provided the music. Stephen Peer of Lundy's Lane gave exhibitions of rope-walking on ropes stretched across the street.

There were spectators, however, who were disappointed, claiming the show was too tame and the animals were disposed to be docile and inactive and showed very little fight and spirit. Nevertheless, Mr. Barnett had spared no expense. The travelling expenses, engaging the Indians and cowboys, capturing and transporting the buffaloes and steers, constructing the high board fences and grandstands all cost an enormous sum of money with very little prospect of corresponding returns, the result of which was a heavy financial loss to the Barnetts, and was one of the contributory causes leading to their relinquishment of the museum business at the Falls.

The two postponements had a tendency to blight the prospects and dampen the confidence and enthusiasm of the public.¹⁵

**"THE GRAND BUFFALO HUNT HAD INDEED BEEN A
DISASTER FOR THE BARNETTS. THEY NEVER RECOVERED
FINANCIALLY, AND IN 1877 SOLD THE MUSEUM."**

The Grand Buffalo Hunt had indeed been a disaster for the Barnetts. They never recovered financially, and in 1877 sold the museum. One writer has suggested that they lost twenty thousand dollars and that Sidney, who died in 1925, had been reduced to selling Bibles in South America and other demeaning tasks during his last years. The same writer blamed it all on Buffalo Bill who, having let Barnett down, later cashed in on the idea and made himself a name and fortune world-wide. Hickok, however, proved to be more reliable.¹⁶

Cody may have been guilty of many things, but there is no evidence to suggest that he let Barnett down. Rather, we are faced with an undertaking that was ill prepared, mismanaged and suffered from bureaucratic interference. In fact, Cody himself became a victim of the bureaucrats in December 1872. Shortly before he and Texas Jack resigned from military service and departed for Chicago to join Ned Buntline and become stage

actors at the request of the Earl of Dunraven and several others Cody telegraphed Barclay White for permission to take six Pawnees on an all expenses paid six-week trip East. Again White refused claiming that such a venture

...will encourage the Indians to continue or practice any of their savage customs, or of placing them under the care of any persons, who will not be to them Christian examples in every respect, I have in every case of application to take them from their reserves, for any such purpose, given a positive refusal, and did so in the present instance, stating my reasons therefore.

“That narrow-minded view was common among those involved with Indian affairs, and resulted in contempt for ‘ignoble savages’ by some...”

He added that only a positive order from his superior officer (Walker) would “induce me to allow the Indians to go.”¹⁷

That narrow-minded view was common among those involved with Indian affairs, and resulted in contempt for “ignoble savages” by some and a desire by others to encourage the Indians to keep their culture but adapt to the white man’s way.¹⁸

Wild Bill, however, had fared much better. His reported antics in the arena chasing buffalo or steers and his futile attempts to rope them—something he had probably rarely tried on the plains—amused the audience who may have believed it was intentional. But the hunt had introduced Hickok to a live audience, a point noted by another later writer who declared:

The Buffalo hunt and rodeo may not have been a happy event in the lives of the Barnett family but it gave many a local lad his first glimpse of a real wild West show and the chance to see that hero of the old West, Wild Bill Hickock [*sic*]. Clifton and Drummondville had witnessed something that was to be the talk of the town for many days to come, the like of which is still yet to be seen by today’s generation.¹⁹

Curiously, having got Hickok to Niagara Falls, Barnett failed to publicize the fact, and despite rumours to the contrary, no photographs have



In 1873, a year after the grand hunt, Hickok appeared briefly in Cody’s stage dramas, but he disliked the sham and public attention, and returned to the West in 1874. On August 2, 1876, he was killed at Deadwood, Dakota Territory. NSHS RG2603-31

been found of the principals involved in the Grand Buffalo Hunt. Neither have any interviews with Hickok or any mention of his arrival and departure been noted in the several newspapers on either side of the falls. Instead, we have imagined recollections written years later. One writer noted that while there Hickok wore “the picturesque sombrero of the cowboy,” and was dressed in “a buckskin suit—leggings and all” and carried a pair of derringer pistols in his pockets when on the street “for emergencies.”²⁰

A search of the museum’s surviving visitors registers, which might have confirmed Hickok’s arrival and departure dates, was fruitless—some time between 1872 and the present, someone had cut out Hickok’s signature and others considered “collectable”!²¹

Despite his problems Barnett had brought before the public a live action spectacle and hired a living legend to host it. Ten years later, in 1882, after years of presenting Western dramas on stage, Buffalo Bill produced an “Old Glory Blow Out” at Omaha featuring live action, cowboys, Indians, and other frontier types, which in 1883 was transformed into his “Wild West Rocky Mountain and Prairie Exhibition.” His initial partnership with Doc Carver proved to be a disaster,²² but he eventually achieved worldwide fame and, more than anyone else, is credited with publicizing the American West.

It is doubtful that Wild Bill was aware of all of Barnett’s problems. Having kept his side of the bargain and having been paid, he returned to Kansas City before moving on to Springfield, Missouri. His subsequent appearance in Cody’s stage dramas beginning late in 1873 was short-lived, for despite his tremendous draw (press reports indicate that his presence rather than his acting skills boosted attendances), he hated the sham, the public attention, and living out of a suitcase. He left the company in March 1874 and returned to the West. Two years later, on August 2, 1876, he was murdered at Deadwood, Dakota Territory, as he sat playing cards in Saloon No. 10. Ironically, only five months before, on March 5, he had married Agnes Lake Thatcher, herself a circus performer of some merit and fame who, unlike her husband, loved the limelight.

NOTES

I am indebted to Mr. William Jamieson, present owner of the Niagara Falls Museum, who read the manuscript and allowed me to reproduce the texts of letters from Buffalo Bill and others to Sidney Barnett, and for some of the illustrations. I am also

grateful to Mr. Hugh MacMillan for additional materials.

¹ J. W. Buel, *Heroes of the Plains* (New York, 1882), 124–33.

² Irving Wallace, *The Fabulous Showman*, (London: Hutchinson, 1960), 96–98.

³ Following the Civil War, Texas cattlemen were anxious to find Northern markets. McCoy, an Illinois cattle buyer, learned that Jesse Chisholm a part-Indian trader, had blazed a trail up from Texas to what became Wichita, Kansas. In 1867, McCoy persuaded the Union Pacific Railway Company (Eastern Division), which in March 1869 changed its name to the Kansas Pacific Railway, to install a switch and a one-hundred-car siding and shipping pens for cattle at Abilene. McCoy then encouraged the Texans to drive their cattle up “Chisholm’s Trail” to Wichita then via “The Abilene Trail” or “McCoy’s Extension,” to the railhead.

⁴ Joseph G. McCoy, *Historic Sketches of the Cattle Trade of the West and Southwest*, ed. by Ralph P. Bieber (Lincoln and London: Univ. of Neb. Press, 1966), 246–48.

⁵ Prof. Henry A. Ward had met Cody while a member of a hunting party, and he became friendly with both Cody and Texas Jack. When Cody first visited the East early in 1872, Ward showed him “the sights” including Niagara Falls.

⁶ Unless otherwise stated, all Barnett-related letters are from the Niagara Falls Museum Collection. Cody’s fame at the time was still localized, but within months he would meet dime novelist E. Z. C. Judson, alias Ned Buntline, and by the end of the year would be known nationwide as “Buffalo Bill.”

⁷ Raymond W. Thorp, *Doc W. F. Carver Spirit Gun of the West*, (Glendale, Cal.: A. H. Clark Co., 1957), 43–49. Carver told Thorp that he captured the buffalo in 1867, but advised Dr. Richard Tanner that it was during “the ’70s (Carver to Tanner, February 15, 1927, the Richard J. Tanner Papers, MS1345, Nebraska State Historical Society).

⁸ Pawnee Agency Documents, Vol. II, Microfilm copy, Nebraska State Historical Society (hereafter NSHS).

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² Luther North, *Man of the Plains: Recollections of Luther North, 1856–1882*, ed. by Donald F. Danker (Lincoln: Univ. of Neb. Press, 1961), 49–50.

¹³ Letters Received by the Office of Indian Affairs, Pawnee Agency, 1870–72 (National Archives Microfilm Publication M234, reel 661), Records of the Bureau of Indian Affairs, NARA.

¹⁴ *Denver Field and Farm*, June 1, 1895.

¹⁵ J. C. Morden, *Historic Niagara* (Niagara Falls, Ontario, 1932, 105–06).

¹⁶ Peter Moon, “Buffalo Bill Blew It,” *The Canadian*, September 12, 1970.

¹⁷ Letters Received by the Office of Indian Affairs, Pawnee Agency, 1870–72 (National Archives Microfilm Publication M234, reel 661), Records of the Bureau of Indian Affairs, NARA.

¹⁸ L. G. Moses, *Wild West Shows and the Images of American Indians 1883–1933* (Albuquerque: Univ. of New Mexico Press, 1996), 4.

¹⁹ Francis J. Petrie, “Buffalo Hunt, Wild West Show Was Staged Here in 1872,” [Niagara Falls?] *Evening Review*, Sept. 17, 1966.

²⁰ *Denver Field and Farm*, June 1, 1895.

²¹ William Jamieson to Joseph G. Rosa, July 19, 2004.

²² Sandra K. Sagala, “Buffalo Bill Cody v. Doc Carver: The Battle over the Wild West,” *Nebraska History* 85:1 (Spring 2004), 1–15.