

*TEACHING WITH ON-LINE PRIMARY SOURCES:  
DOCUMENTS FROM NARA*

**BUFFALO BILL: A LIFE IN THREE REELS**

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When I was growing up, the most famous and popular building in my hometown of Sheridan, Wyoming, was the *Sheridan Inn* because it was once owned by William F. "Buffalo Bill" Cody. Nearly everything he was associated with became as well known as he. "Perhaps no popular idol ever lived who is so well known as "Buffalo Bill" reads the document featured in this article, an advertisement for Buffalo Bill's three-reel film biography that appeared in the 1912 issue of *The Moving Picture World* magazine. With the announcement of the film in May of 1912, *The Moving Picture World* stated, "... no doubt with the great popularity of Wm. F. Cody, who is retiring to private life after having toured the world for thirty years as America's representative frontiersman and Wild West hero, these pictures, depicting actual happenings in the life of the Last of the Great Scouts, should prove to be one of the most successful features yet offered to the showmen of America." According to the magazine's January 4, 1913, issue, "the 'Life of Buffalo Bill' has re-awakened great interest in the western productions of a historical nature ... playing to record breaking houses. ... shown after school hours, the picture seems to appeal chiefly to school children." This document advertised not only Buffalo Bill Cody's film biography but his life as well for Cody embodied the West for millions of Americans. He helped create an image of the West that was part of a national myth about frontier life. Elements of that myth still exist today.

During his lifetime, William F. Cody experienced nearly every aspect of America's westward expansion. As the advertisement claimed, his was "The eventful career of America's most popular hero ... the true story of a useful life. A series of events in the life of a great Scout from his boyhood until present time ... the Indian Wars; Building the Canadian Pacific, etc." He was born in Scott County, Iowa, in 1846 and grew up on the prairie. In 1853, Cody's father, a "Free Soiler," moved the family to Kansas, but they were constantly harassed by slavery supporters, which forced his father to stay away from home. At one point his father was stabbed while giving an antislavery speech and died from the results of that stabbing in 1857. In 1859, young Bill Cody got gold fever and tried his luck as a prospector during the Pike's Peak gold rush in Colorado. The next year, at age fourteen, he was one of the youngest Pony Express riders, and he claimed to have once ridden 322 miles in 21 hours and 40 minutes, exhausting twenty horses.

During the Civil War, Cody served first as a Union scout in campaigns against the Kiowa and Comanche and then enlisted in 1863 with the Seventh Kansas Cavalry. He served nineteen months and saw action in Tennessee, Mississippi, and Missouri. While a "jayhawker," he battled Confederate guerrillas in Missouri, including Jesse

James. After the war, Cody provided buffalo meat for workers on the Kansas Pacific Railroad. For \$500 a month, he killed over 4,000 buffalo in an eight-month period and established his reputation as the greatest buffalo hunter of the plains. His nickname, Buffalo Bill, resulted from a buffalo hunting contest in which he killed 69 buffalo to his opponent's 46.

Cody returned to the army in 1868 as Chief of Scouts for the 5<sup>th</sup> Cavalry. He participated in several battles, including the defeat of the Cheyenne at Summit Springs, Colorado, in 1869. By 1876, Cody had added to his notoriety by engaging in a "duel" with Cheyenne Chief Yellow Hair. Cody purportedly shot, stabbed, and scalped the Indian chief. Accounts of the event vary widely, particularly that of Cody's dedication of the scalp to General George Armstrong Custer, who had died at the Little Big Horn just a month earlier. But Cody's exploits were providing considerable material for newspaper reporters and dime novelists who were intent on promulgating Buffalo Bill as the ultimate and most authentic Western hero.

The featured advertisement for Buffalo Bill's film biography celebrated his fame: "Many are known by reputation, but few by sight. Colonel Cody's renown is not confined to America. He is a world character, known in every civilized land, and is popular with our foreign citizens." According to some historians, at the turn of the century, Buffalo Bill was probably the most famous and most recognizable celebrity in the world.

The process of transforming William F. Cody into an internationally known Western figure began in 1869 with the creation of the "Buffalo Bill" character in Ned Buntline's (writer E. Z.C. Judson) dime novels. This character, part factual and part romantic fiction, eventually ranked with Davy Crockett, Daniel Boone, and Kit Carson in the popular myths about the West. By 1872, Buntline had convinced Cody to actually play himself on stage, which he did for several seasons. That same year, Buffalo Bill guided Grand Duke Alexis of Russia on a hunting trip and was nearly elected on the Democratic ticket to the Nebraska legislature. He also published the first edition of his own biography and a number of his own dime novels.

Emphasizing the educational value of the three-reel biography of Buffalo Bill, the advertising document asserts that "From James Fennimore Cooper we learn, through books, the early Western life, but—by Buffalo Bill the world was given the actual sight of it." And the actual sight of it started with the "Old Glory Blowout" that Cody staged in North Platte, Nebraska, on the Fourth of July 1882. This show was the forerunner of not only his Wild West shows, but also of rodeo in the United States. The following year, on May 17, Buffalo Bill's Wild West was born in Omaha, Nebraska, and billed as "A Visit West in Three Hours." In this show, real working cowboys and Sioux Indians roamed the parade grounds; sharp shooters such as Annie Oakley, Frank Butler, Calamity Jane, and Wild Bill Hickock demonstrated their shooting skills; highly skilled riders reenacted Pony Express rides; Indians attacked the Deadwood stagecoach; and buffalo hunts were staged with real buffalo. At the top off the events, there was a re-creation of Custer's Last Stand featuring Sitting Bull and other Indians who had



participated in it, with Cody playing the part of Custer. During its thirty-year run, the show toured Europe for ten years. For an international flavor, a "Congress of Rough Riders of the World" joined the show, including Cossacks, lancers, and other Old World cavalymen along with the vaqueros, cowboys, and Indians of the American West. The show was a feature attraction at the celebration of Queen Victoria's Golden Jubilee in 1887 and was one of the most popular attractions at the World's Columbian Exposition in 1893. Buffalo Bill's Wild West was tremendously successful, being a perfect mix of circus, history, sensationalism, and nostalgia for a West that was fading fast. Cody combined his show with that of James A. Bailey (Barnum and Bailey) in 1900, and the next year this expanded show again toured Europe. But by then the magnetism of Wild West shows had run its course. In 1908, Cody merged his show with William Lillie's (known as Pawnee Bill) Pawnee Bill's Far East Show. Cody appeared on the show circuit for the last time in 1916 with the Sells-Floto Circus.

Buffalo Bill Cody was often referred to as "Colonel Cody." This honorary rank was bestowed on him by Nebraska Governor John Thayer (former governor of Wyoming Territory) in 1887, as a result of Cody's role as aide-de-camp on the Governor's staff. He was never an officer in the U.S. Army.

In a concluding pitch, the advertisement of Cody's film biography suggested that "As an educational picture it shows us the development of the great West including the personality of one of the great pioneers who did the work." But the educational value of Buffalo Bill's life and Wild West pageant must be tempered by some considerations. At the pinnacle of his career, Cody's show represented a West that no longer existed.

At the Columbian Exposition in Chicago in 1893, the young historian Frederick Jackson Turner quoted from the United States Census Bureau's 1890 report that the frontier was officially closed, even as Buffalo Bill's Wild West played to overflow crowds. In his paper, "The Significance of the Frontier in American History," Turner asserted that the frontier experience had a significant impact on American history and the development of American character. Turner's ideas about the West became the consensus explanation of the role of the frontier in American history, until the 1980s when other historians, particularly Patricia Limerick, challenged Turner's narrow view of American's frontier experience. So, too, as Cody's show became more and more popular, the West it portrayed was becoming extinct. The coming of the transcontinental railroad, the near annihilation of both the buffalo and the Indians, the removal of Indians to the reservation system, and the division of land with barbed wire all contributed to the disappearance of the West as Cody knew it. Ironically, Buffalo Bill's Wild West went from being an authentic representation of the West by authentic characters to a historical re-creation of a bygone era.

Even at its most authentic point, Buffalo Bill's Wild West concealed the realities of life in the West. His show did not depict the real hardships on the frontier: blizzards, droughts, floods, wild animals, disease, starvation, boredom, desolation and loneliness, murders, and drunkenness. His depictions of Indians as aggressors and their practice of scalping resulted in erroneous stereotypes. However, Cody did use his fame and

credibility to support various Western causes such as the rights of Indians, conservation, and women's right to vote. He spoke out against the hide hunters who were slaughtering the buffalo herds and in favor of the establishment of game preserves in Colorado and Wyoming.

Cody died in Denver, Colorado, on January 10, 1917. On the single day his body lay in the state capitol in Denver, 25,000 people filed by to pay their respects. In what some say was the last commercial venture Cody was involved in, his family agreed to have him buried in Colorado, near the top of Lookout Mountain outside of Denver. As one of the most authentic characters of the Western frontier, Cody had managed to transform the real West into a romantic and mythic place that attracts millions, physically and psychologically, still.

And we have his whole life in three reels.

NOTE: For access to the document, visit [www.archives.gov/research/arc/](http://www.archives.gov/research/arc/). After clicking the yellow search button, type the identifying ARC #292754 into the keyword box and check the box for "descriptions linked to digital copies" just below the keyword box. The document may be printed and duplicated in any quantity. This document is from the National Archives Rocky Mountain Region in Denver, Colorado, and is part of a collection of documents connected to a civil case involving Cody's copyright on the "Buffalo Bill" moniker. The author extends particular gratitude to Eric Bittner at the Rocky Mountain Region for his help.

## Teaching Suggestions

### 1. Focus Activity: Defining the West with Document Analysis

While this article and film advertisement for Buffalo Bill's biography suggest that he was an authentic Western hero, the article also argues that Buffalo Bill's Wild West was not a completely authentic representation of the West. To help students separate the myth from the reality, ask them to make a list of what images come to mind when they hear the phrase "the West." Encourage them to include the sources of those images: for example, books, movies, or personal experiences. Read or supply them with descriptions of Buffalo Bill's Wild West and ask them to indicate which of their images could have come from seeing Buffalo Bill's show. Ask them to conclude whether Buffalo Bill's Wild West was myth or reality and what changes they would make to his show. Provide students with a copy of the featured document. Also supply students with a copy of the document analysis worksheet found at [www.archives.gov/education/lessons/worksheets/document.html](http://www.archives.gov/education/lessons/worksheets/document.html). Ask students, grouped in pairs, to analyze the document and complete the worksheet. Then guide a class discussion based on the questions from the worksheet. From this article and other sources, present students with information about Cody's life and his Wild West show and ask them to discuss how the additional details affect their analysis of the document.



**2. Cross Curricular Activity Geography: The West as a Geographic Place**

Supply students with a list of all the geographic locations mentioned in the article and featured document. Assign each locale to a small group of students and ask them to do research and report their findings orally. Their reports should include an explanation of how that locale played a role in westward expansion. Provide all students with a map of the United States so that they can plot and annotate each locale during the reports.

**3. Comparative Analysis Activity: Describing Buffalo Bill**

American poet E.E. Cummings wrote an untitled poem describing Buffalo Bill Cody that is referred to as "Buffalo Bill's defunct" from the first lines of the poem (<http://www.poets.org/viewmedia.php/prmMID/15399>). Supply students with a copy of the poem and help them analyze the poem (or invite a language arts colleague in to help them as well). Then ask the students to write a short poem describing Cody, based on Cummings's style, from the information about Cody in the article and featured document. Allow class time for them to read their poems and compare their descriptions of Cody with Cummings's and the description in the article and featured document.

**4. Individual Project: Creating Frontier Hero Advertisements**

The featured document is an advertisement for the film biography of a Western frontier hero. With your students, and using a much broader definition of the word frontier, make a list of other "frontier" heroes such as Daniel Boone, Kit Carson, Billy Jean King, Christopher Columbus, and Chuck Yeager. Supply each student with a copy of the featured document and ask them to create an advertisement of their own for a film featuring one of the heroes on the list. Require them to discuss how their hero's characteristics and accomplishments compares with Buffalo Bill's from the featured document. Allow class time for students to display and explain their advertisements.

**5. Cross Curricular Activity Literature: Writing a Dime Novel**

Dime novels accounted for much of Buffalo Bill's fame and the mythology about Western heroes. Introduce students to the history and examples of dime novels. (The Library of Congress's website at <http://www.loc.gov/exhibits/treasures/tri015.html> and the website of the Stanford University Library at [http://library.stanford.edu/depts/dp/pennies/texts/dimes\\_toc.html](http://library.stanford.edu/depts/dp/pennies/texts/dimes_toc.html) will be very useful.) Ask students to begin creating a dime novel by developing and writing a plot summary or outline for a novel. Require students to read a modern dime novel about the West from authors such as Zane Grey (<http://www.zgws.org/>) or Louis L'Amour (<http://www.louislamour.com/aboutlouis/biography.htm>). Finally, allow class time for discussion of dime novels and their role in creating heroes such as Buffalo Bill and myths about the American West. The discussion should include a list of myths about heroes and the West.

### 6. Visualizing History: Charting Westward Expansion

Buffalo Bill Cody was involved in nearly every aspect or phase of westward expansion. Ask students to make a list of some specific examples from the featured document and the article. Assign small groups of students various forms of illustration (maps, overhead transparencies, Power Points, flip charts, graphs, timelines, and websites) to trace the course of westward expansion from the end of the Revolutionary War to the present. Students should also include a written explanation of the causes and results of each stage or phase of westward expansion. Allow class time for students to display and explain their projects.

### 7. Extended Activity or Extra Credit: The West on Film

It is no accident that the feature document is an advertisement for a biography of Buffalo Bill on film; motion pictures were the most popular form of entertainment in that era. Motion pictures about the West and Western heroes have been plentiful. In addition to playing himself, Buffalo Bill was portrayed by others in many films. Supply students with a list of films about the West (the list might include *The Searchers*, *The Ox-Bow Incident*, *High Noon*, *Shane*, *The Big Sky*, *Dances with Wolves*, *Little Big Man*, *The Unforgiven*, and *Lonesome Dove*) and ask them to write a comparative essay on Western heroes in their film and the information about Buffalo Bill's West from the featured document.

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