

When Buffalo Bill's Wild West Played Scranton

by

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Three cannon shots echoing through the city.

Ripped coats and crushed hats.

Closed schools.

A football game on horseback on the Providence Road fields.

Little boys running away from home.

Crowds along Lackawanna Avenue cheering a procession of South American Gauchos, Mexican vaqueros, Russian Cossacks, Western cowboys, Irish Lancers, and Rough Riders.

An Indian village set up along Wyoming Avenue.

A buffalo hunt on Ash Street.

The cause of such noise, commotion, and excitement? The arrival of Buffalo Bill's Wild West in Scranton.

For three decades, in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, Buffalo Bill's Wild West, one of the most successful outdoor traveling shows in American history, brought entertainment to thousands of people in the United States as well as Europe and Canada.¹ To many Scranton area residents, the show's arrival in their community highlighted the spring or summer seasons. William F. "Buffalo Bill" Cody's troupe appeared in the Lackawanna Valley several times in the 1884-1917 period (ten times in Scranton and once in Carbondale).²

A measure of the Wild West's popularity was the public response to the two performances of May 22, 1899, in the city. Billed as Buffalo Bill's Wild West and Congress of Rough Riders of the World, the show set a record for Scranton. According to the *Scranton Tribune*, over 28,000 people witnessed the two performances on that day, setting a record for attendance "under canvas."³ Later the number was recorded as 30,000.⁴ The show's *Route-Book* for the 1899 season summarized the May 22 shows in Scranton: "Weather cleared, and a bright, warm

day brings out a large crowd, making it necessary to close the doors on the afternoon performance.”⁵

Scrantonians had been anticipating the show’s arrival for weeks, and excitement built when the huge entourage finally pulled into town on Sunday, May 21. Two trains of 50 or more cars arrived on the Jersey Central road at the Central Yards on West Lackawanna Avenue throughout the day and night. Some 500-600 workers then labored to set it all up on the Ash Street Grounds in Pine Brook, at the corner of Wyoming Avenue and Ash Street, near where Scranton Prep stands today. Crews set up seating for thousands, protected by canvas covers.⁶ The center of the performance area, measuring 168 feet by 369 feet, was open to the weather, but the show went on rain or shine.⁷

By the afternoon, thousands of local residents had visited the grounds, mingling with many of the performers including “Indians in their wigwams.” A new-born buffalo calf intrigued many.⁸

Meanwhile, tickets for the Monday performances sold briskly at 50 cents for general admission and 25 cents for children under 9 for the two hour show.⁹

On the morning of the exhibition, a grand “Parade of Nations” from the grounds into downtown Scranton built further excitement, as if that was necessary. Three cannon shots alerted the city that the parade was starting.¹⁰ The hundreds of Wild West performers and various animals, all led by a Cowboy Band, entertained the people lining the route from Washington Avenue to Vine to Wyoming to Spruce to Penn to Lackawanna and back to Washington and to the grounds. According to the *Tribune*, “it seemed as if the whole city and the country roundabout turned out en masse to see the parade...”¹¹

The arrival, set up, and parade were all part of a detailed and practiced design by Cody, the internationally famous Indian fighter, scout, hunter, Pony Express rider, show man and

entrepreneur. After spending several years touring with a smaller company and presenting dramatic scenes from Western life and history in theatres across the country (including Scranton in the 1870s and 1880s), he decided to develop a much larger production.¹² He sensed that Americans would pay to see real elements of the old West presented live with great drama and excitement in their hometowns. Thus was born his Wild West. The show made its debut in Omaha, Nebraska in 1883.¹³

For the first dozen years or so, Cody scheduled Wild West performances over several days in larger cities such as New York and Chicago. But he brought his exhibition to Scranton for two days in September, 1884, at the Scranton Driving Park. The *Evening Times* noted that the performances were “most realistic and worthy of a large patronage and universal admiration.”¹⁴

But profits did not match expectations, and so in 1895, Cody and his associates decided to expand their reach by also playing smaller communities, moving the show almost daily from town to town. In that year, there were 131 presentations in 190 days.¹⁵ Included in that schedule were two stops in the Lackawanna Valley: May 11 in Scranton and a one and only May 13 show in Carbondale. (May 12 was a Sunday, and there were never performances on Sundays).¹⁶

Using pioneering press agency and poster advertising techniques, the Wild West’s promoters usually heralded the show’s arrival in a community weeks in advance in hopes of building ticket sales. For the 1899 Scranton performance, about six weeks ahead of the arrival date, large lithograph posters featuring the show’s attractions were plastered on the walls of city buildings or on wooden fences. They were hard to miss with their colorful and dramatic designs showing Indians, cowboys, horses and other show features, along with Buffalo Bill. One Scranton bill consisted of 108 large sheets.¹⁷

In addition, a steady stream of news releases were written and delivered to local newspapers, highlighting the show's content. Often the stories would emphasize the educational value of the presentation, something that could not be matched in the classroom. ("It Is To Educate" was the headline for a story on May 9, 1899 in the *Tribune*.¹⁸ The presentation "entertains while instructing.") In Scranton, school principals could use their discretion on this "circus day" to cancel classes so their students could attend.¹⁹

Other stories would promote the appearance of some 600 "bucking mustangs" or "vaqueros from Mexico, Gauchos from South America, Arabs from the North African desert, and Cossacks from the steppes of Russia."²⁰ Of course the appearance of Buffalo Bill, "a true soldier and brave man," as the leader of this spectacular troupe was promoted.²¹ An advertisement in the *Tribune* on July 20, 1897 promised that the show would be the same as the one given at the Columbian World's Fair in Chicago in 1893, with additions.²²

These press agents certainly built up the spectacular nature of the show, but, as Robert Carter noted in his book on Cody, "the show itself was honest, true to its period, and free from all faking."²³ And that is the way Buffalo Bill wanted it. The official reference was to Buffalo Bill's Wild West; the word "show" was not used because it seemed to suggest something not authentic and purely for entertainment. Always, Cody insisted on using real Indians or cowboys or soldiers in the presentations.

One of the "advance" people sent to Scranton generated local interest. She was Mayme Jester, Col. Cody's niece. She came to Scranton as a press agent to help promote the scheduled show. The *Tribune* noted that it was rather "novel" to have a woman perform such duties. As part of the publicity effort, Miss Jester used a brightly painted wagon dubbed "Last of the Great Scouts" in honor of her uncle. Its appearance on Scranton streets drew great attention.²⁴

The usual show program, as performed in Scranton in July 1897, on the grounds off Providence Road, began with the 36-man Cowboy Band, playing the National Anthem. Then various groups entered the arena including Indians, German Uhlans, and Irish Lancers, all on horseback. This was followed by a drill from the U.S. artillery. Annie Oakley, “Little Miss Sure Shot,” would show her sharpshooting skills by breaking glass balls tossed into the air. This was followed by a horse race and then a Pony Express demonstration. A staple of the show was a re-enactment of an Indian attack on an emigrant wagon train. This was followed by Arabian horsemen demonstrating riding skills. Another marksman, Johnny Baker would show his skills. Mexican riders would perform their lasso rope tricks. German Uhlans and Irish Lancers would appear again on horseback, followed by cowboy riding demonstrations. Another staple, an attack on the Deadwood stage coach, thrilled the crowd. Indians and cowboys then conducted a buffalo hunt featuring six live bison. Then came the attack on a settler’s cabin in which Buffalo Bill himself rode to the rescue. The program ended with the Grand Salute and the parade of all the riders, gaining great cheers from the crowds.²⁵

By 1895, Cody had added more features that made the show more international in scope (the Congress of Rough Riders of the World) while retaining its historic roots of highlighting the American West.

Playing off the headlines from the Spanish-American War of 1898 in the Pacific and Caribbean areas, the 1899 show included the usual Wild West themes but added a troop of Cuban cavalry, authentic Theodore Roosevelt’s Rough Riders, and groups of Hawaiians, Filipinos, and Samoans. Tom Isbell, who claimed to be the first Rough Rider to fire a shot in the famous charge up San Juan Hill, was a featured performer, bearing scars from eight bullets which supposedly struck him during the fight. A *Tribune* review noted that the storming of San

Juan Hill, with actual participants, was the “most picturesque and thrilling number” on the program. The writer pointed out that this was the first opportunity Scranton had to show its appreciation for the heroes of the war.²⁶

The Wild West’s performance in Scranton in 1901 featured vignettes from the Boxer Rebellion (1899-1901) in China including the capture of Peking and the Battle of Tien-Tsin. With each new season, Cody adapted the program to meet current interests while maintaining the proven staple of Western features.²⁷ The 1908 performance in Scranton also added something new, a “foot-ball” game on horseback featuring Cowboys versus Indians on the Providence Road grounds. (The *Scranton Republican* noted lots of wagering on the game’s outcome.)²⁸

Local press coverage in communities where the show played gave some sense of the excitement it generated. In 1901, a *Tribune* headline reported that “Clothes Torn at Buffalo Bill Ticket Wagon.” The rush to buy tickets to the shows was so great that coats were torn and ladies’ hats crushed by the crowds pushing toward the ticket sellers.²⁹ The paper also reported that thousands were turned away and that the crowds for the performances were “enormous.”³⁰ The 1899 record-setting crowds had been well-behaved. Col. Cody sent his congratulations to Mayor Moir on the excellent manner in which the Scranton police had handled such large crowds. Not a single accident or case of picking pockets or the like was reported, according to the newspaper.³¹

Another measure of the excitement of the shows’ appearance in Scranton could be seen in reports of children running away from home to join the troupe. In 1897, five boys, aged 10 to 14, including a 12-year-old from Hemlock Street, two boys from Capouse Avenue, and one from Dunmore, ran off to follow the show when it left town.³²

The big show that Cody began in Omaha in 1883 became a popular pastime, earning favorable reviews as it played across the country beginning in 1884. In so doing, it ushered in the

golden age of outdoor shows, according to historians. Buffalo Bill's "fame and credibility as a westerner lent star appeal and an aura of authenticity," notes Paul Fees, former curator of the Buffalo Bill Museum in Cody, Wyoming.³³

In 1887 Cody took the Wild West to Europe, where the production was part of the American exhibition at Queen Victoria's Jubilee in London. The show would make regular, extended tours in Europe until 1906.

By the second decade of the 20th century, the show had run its course as the public turned its attention to current news headlines and to other forms of entertainment such as motion pictures and sports such as baseball and football. The performances in Scranton in May of 1916 still drew thousands, and a writer for the *Scranton Times* offered an opinion: "It was the same Wild West exhibition that has been shown here for years and will probably continue to show..." However, in that same edition of the *Times* was a large advertisement announcing the Scranton opening of the controversial, pioneering motion picture, "The Birth of a Nation" at the Majestic Theatre (230 Penn Ave.).³⁴ The transition was underway with the old and the new in town at the same time.

The Wild West played Scranton one more time, in May of 1917. But the leader of the troupe was missing; Cody had died earlier in the year in Denver. The *Scranton Times* sensed the difference when it reported: "Whether it was the cold weather or the lack of 'pep' is hard to tell, but the big crowds did not seem to enjoy the wild west performance...as in previous years. There was something lacking..."³⁵ Perhaps it was because Buffalo Bill was gone or the impact of new entertainment options was being felt. Most likely contributing to the difference was the reality of the Great War in Europe that America had officially entered the month before.

Regardless, many could look back fondly to the excitement of Cody's creation. In 1899,

Buffalo Bill's Wild West had covered over 11,000 miles in 200 days, giving 341 performances in 132 cities and towns in the United States, including Scranton where it set records.³⁶ The images presented by Cody forged a vision of the West and American historical events in the minds of a generation of Americans and Europeans. Thousands of residents of the Lackawanna Valley were part of the experience and excitement when Buffalo Bill's Wild West played Scranton.

Endnotes

- ¹Paul Fees. "Wild West Shows: Buffalo Bill's Wild West," Buffalo Bill Historical Center. <http://www.bbhc.org/learn/western-essays/wild-west-shows/> (Accessed May 22, 2012).
- ²Buffalo Bill Museum and Grave, "Did Buffalo Bill Visit Your Town?" [ww.buffalobill.org](http://www.buffalobill.org) (accessed May 22, 2012).
- ³"Scranton Broke A Record," *Scranton Tribune (Pa.)*, May 24, 1899.
- ⁴*Scranton Tribune Year Book for the Year 1900* (Scranton: Tribune Publishing Co., 1900), 20.
- ⁵George Gooch, *Route-Book: Buffalo Bill's Wild West, 1899* (Buffalo, N.Y.:Matthews-Northrup Co., 1899), 29.
- ⁶"Buffalo Bill Is Here," *Scranton Tribune (Pa.)*, May 22, 1899.
- ⁷Gooch, 29.
- ⁸"Buffalo Bill Is Here," *Scranton Tribune (Pa.)*, May 22, 1899.
- ⁹Buffalo Bill's Wild West advertisement, *Scranton Tribune (Pa.)*, May 13, 1899.
- ¹⁰"Buffalo Bill Today," *Scranton Tribune (Pa.)*, July 30, 1897.
- ¹¹"First Circus Day of the Summer," *Scranton Tribune (Pa.)*, May 23, 1899.
- ¹²Fees.
- ¹³Ibid.
- ¹⁴"Buffalo Bill's Show," *The Evening Times* (Scranton, Pa.), September 12, 1884.
- ¹⁵Robert Carter, *Buffalo Bill Cody: The Man Behind the Legend* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 2000), 381.
- ¹⁶"Buffalo Bill Special Train," *Scranton Tribune (Pa.)*, May 13, 1895.
- ¹⁷"Buffalo Bill Is Coming," *Scranton Tribune (Pa.)*, April 29, 1899.
- ¹⁸"It Is To Educate," *Scranton Tribune (Pa.)*, May 9, 1899.
- ¹⁹"Many Schools Dismissed," *Scranton Tribune (Pa.)*, May 23, 1899.
- ²⁰"Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show," *Scranton Tribune (Pa.)*, July 20, 1897.
- ²¹"The World Loves A Hero," *Scranton Tribune (Pa.)*, July 17, 1897.
- ²²Buffalo Bill's Wild West advertisement, *Scranton Tribune (Pa.)*, July 20, 1897.
- ²³Carter, 264.
- ²⁴"Not Without Novelties," *Scranton Tribune (Pa.)*, May 15, 1899.
- ²⁵"Cody's Great Show Delights Thousands," *Scranton Tribune (Pa.)*, July 31, 1897.
- ²⁶"First Circus Day of the Summer," *Scranton Tribune (Pa.)*, May 23, 1899.
- ²⁷"Buffalo Bill Show," *Scranton Tribune (Pa.)*, June 7, 1901.
- ²⁸"A Novelty of the Buffalo Bill Wild West Show," *Scranton Republican (Pa.)*, June 28, 1908.
- ²⁹"Clothes Torn at Buffalo Bill Ticket Wagon," *Scranton Tribune (Pa.)*, June 10, 1897.
- ³⁰"Crowds Were Enormous," *Scranton Tribune (Pa.)*, June 10, 1897.
- ³¹"Scranton Broke A Record," *Scranton Tribune (Pa.)*, May 24, 1899.
- ³²"Did Buffalo Bill's Posters Do It?" *Scranton Tribune (Pa.)*, August 3, 1897.
- ³³Fees.
- ³⁴"Only A Glimpse of Cody, But Show Was Dandy; Indians Pleased Kids," *Scranton Times (Pa.)*, May 20, 1916.
- ³⁵"Wild West Show Makes Public Pay An Extra Quarter To See Jess," *Scranton Times (Pa.)*, May 12, 1917.
- ³⁶Fees.

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