

INVENTORY:

WILLIAM F. CODY COLLECTION

NO. 126

COLORADO HISTORICAL SOCIETY

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INTRODUCTION

William F. Cody, or "Buffalo Bill," was one of the early West's most famous figures. It is difficult to determine accurately which of his reported exploits were real and which were legend as Cody was the subject of a large number of western legends and childrens' western books, but it is clear that he was a prominent citizen of the early West and that his Wild West Show helped spread the legend of the West to the eastern U.S. and around the world.

William F. Cody was born in Scott County, Iowa, on February 26, 1845. In 1852 his family moved to Salt Creek Valley, Kansas, where his father ran a trading post. In 1857, at the height of the controversy as to whether Kansas should enter the Union as a slave or free state, Cody's father, who advocated entrance as a free state, was stabbed by pro-slavery men and died soon after from his wound.

William went to work during 1857-1858 for the "Plains Courier," a wagon train, during which time he is said to have killed his first Indian. In 1858 he worked as a trapper for a few months, then returned to school for a few months. In 1859 he was one of the "59ers" who came to Denver to pan for gold, but he left after a few months of terrible luck. In 1860 he rode for the Pony Express, establishing the record for the longest single ride of 321 miles.

In 1863 Cody enlisted in the Union army, serving as a scout for the Seventh Kansas Cavalry. He earned the Congressional Medal of Honor for his service. In 1866 he married Louisa Federici in St. Louis and attempted to settle down with her by running a hotel in Salt Creek Valley. In 1868 Cody returned to scouting, however, when he was made Chief of Plains Scouts by General Sheridan.

Cody was hired for \$500 per month by Goddard Brothers to hunt buffalo to fulfill the firm's contract to provide fresh meat to the workers on the Kansas Pacific Railroad. During the eighteen months of his employment, Cody killed 4280 buffaloes, a feat which earned him his nickname.

In 1872, Cody was elected to the Nebraska Legislature, but he had no real interest in the work and participated in the making of laws only rarely. On December 16, 1872, Cody was inspired by Ned Buntline, author of a series of Buffalo Bill adventure books, to make his first stage appearance in "The Scout of the Prairie" in Chicago. Cody's interest in stage westerns continued, with a break in 1876 during which he served as a scout against the Sioux and fought his legendary duel against Yellow Hand. In 1883 he presented the first version of the Wild West Show at the Chicago World's Fair.

The Wild West Show was a great succes for the next twenty years, touring all over the United States and Europe. During one season in England Cody is reported to have shown a net profit of \$350,000.

Cody died in Denver on January 10, 1917, having moved from his home in North Platte, Nebraska, to live out his final days. He was buried at Lookout Mountain, Colorado, where a monument and a museum stand today.

SIGNIFICANCE:

The collection contains correspondence (6/11/1900-4/7/1904); Cody's various wills (copies, 2/14/1906-9/16/1914); materials from the play "Life on the Border" (1877); souvenirs from the Wild West Show; correspondence to the Colorado Historical Society about Cody (1897-1966); Memorial documents (1917); books, pamphlets and historical publications (1904-1954); photographs; and microfilm of the "Life on the Border" material and a Buffalo Bill Scrapbook (1891-1927).

The collection provides information on the career of Cody and the creation of the legend of Buffalo Bill, one of the most famous of the west's frontier heroes.

PROVENANCE:

The material comes from a variety of sources, not all of which are on record.

Mr. Robert Peale of North Platte, Nebraska, Cody's son-in-law, loaned to the Historical Society indefinitely the role books and account book from "Life on the Border," which he asked not be reproduced without permission, photographs found in FF 16 and 17, and correspondence found in FF 1. Mr. Peale made his donation on June 19, 1958.

Eugene Parsons donated some of the newspaper clippings found in FF 12 and 13.

The copies of the wills of Cody were provided by Milward C. Simpson of Cody, Wyoming. (FF 3)

Mr. John Barsotti of Columbus, Ohio, donated the copy of Outdoor Life from May, 1917 (FF 10) on March 5, 1959.

INVENTORY:

BOX 1:

- FF 1: Correspondence 6/11/1900-4/7/1904
- FF 2: Wedding Announcement: Arta L. Cody and Horton L. Boal 11/27/1899
- FF 3: Wills of W.F. Cody 2/14/1906-9/16/1914
- FF 4: "Life on the Border," theatrical production: Account Book, three Role Books (Col. Cody, Mrs Reynolds, and Grasshopper Jim)
- FF 5: Wild West Show: Season Ticket 1893, Official Route Flyer 1912
- FF 6: Correspondence to the Colorado Historical Society 3/25/1897-2/3/1966
- FF 7: Memorial Documents: Eulogy 1/14/1917, California Legislature Memorial Resolution 1/18/1917
- FF 8: "America's Pioneer Memorial," proposed building, fund raising publication 1917
- FF 9: Books and Pamphlets:
The Adventures of Buffalo Bill by W.F. Cody, 1904
Buffalo Bill and his Horses by Agnes Wright Spring, 1953
Letters from Buffalo Bill by Stella Adelyne Foote, 1954
Sons of the West (excerpt), no author or date listed
- FF 10: Historical Publications:
"A Champion Buffalo Hunter" by John M. Burke, in The Trail, March 1918
"Buffalo Bill's Last Interview" by Chauncey Thomas, in Outdoor Life, May 1917
"The Riders of the World" by John M. Burke, in The Trail, October 1918
"Buffalo Bill-My Grandfather" by Jane Cody Garlow, in The Texaco Star, October 1929
"Tall Bull and Buffalo Bill," no publication, date or author listed
- FF 11: "Buffalo Bill" in Paris Match, 9/25/1954
- FF 12: Newspaper Clippings and Copies 6/18/1887-6/4/1917
- ~~FF 13:~~
- FF 13: Newspaper Clippings 5/2/1919-4/12/53, also n.d.
- FF 14: Schedule of Events, Buffalo Bill Centenary 7/28/46, and Buffalo Bill Museum Pamphlet
- FF 15: Map of North Platte, Nebraska, n.d.

FF 16: Photographs: Irma Cody 1899-1900, n.d.

FF 17: Photographs:

Ara (?) Cody (pre-1882)
Sitting Bull's Son (1883)
Buffalo Bill's Wild West, Washington, D.C. (5/10/1898)
Buffalo Bill's Mules, Washington, D.C. (5/98)
Buffalo Bill arrives home, North Platte, Nebraska (Fall 1898)
Mrs. W.F. Cody, Mrs. Mike Russell, Miss Cora Tiffany, and
Mr. Robert Peale (1899)
Church of our Savior, North Platte, Nebraska (1899)
Sitting Bull and Buffalo Bill, Toronto (1899)

FF 18: Microfilm:

Account Book and Role Books from "Life on the Border"
(see FF 4)

Buffalo Bill Scrapbook 1891-1927: Newspaper articles, photographs,
and letters