

Buffalo Bill: The Man Behind the Showman



©2001CHS

AFTER serving his country as an army scout and Indian fighter in the 1860s, Buffalo Bill (whose real name was William F. Cody) became a famous entertainer. His Wild West shows, which featured real Indians, cowboys, buffalo, horses, and sharpshooters, thrilled fans around the world. Many shows dramatized scenes from Cody's own life. With each performance, the legend of Buffalo Bill grew. But who was the real Buffalo Bill? Did the man match the myth? In fact, Buffalo Bill's genuine deeds rivaled the stories he played out on stage.

Here are some of Cody's REAL-LIFE adventures:

CODY once rode for the celebrated, but short-lived, **PONY EXPRESS**. Adventurous horsemen like Cody helped families, friends, and businesses keep in touch across the vast western frontier by speeding mail back and forth between Missouri and California. The average rider covered 75 to 100 miles per day. Cody once rode 322 miles between stations on the North Platte River. This was the third longest ride for the Pony Express. He was just fifteen at the time.

YOUNG William enlisted in the **U.S. ARMY** in 1864. He served with the Seventh Kansas Volunteer Cavalry during the Civil War, taking part in a winning fight against one of the South's greatest commanders, General Nathan Bedford Forrest.

AFTER the war, Cody earned the nickname "Buffalo Bill" by supplying buffalo meat to the **KANSAS PACIFIC RAILROAD**, which was building tracks from Kansas City to Denver. Mounted on a steed named Brigham, Cody shot twelve buffalo per day. But his work didn't stop there; his crew loaded the meat on wagons and distributed the food to 1,200 workers.

LATER, Cody rejoined the U.S. Army as a **SCOUT**. He worked for seven expeditions and fought in nine battles. This was more than any other soldier or scout in the U.S. Army. In 1869, while scouting for the Fifth Cavalry, he tracked a warrior band of the Cheyenne tribe. He found them on the grassy plains near present-day Sterling, Colorado. During the battle Buffalo Bill himself is said to have shot the great Cheyenne chief, Tall Bull. This conflict marked the end of the Indian Wars on Colorado's eastern plains.



IN 1872 Grand Duke Alexis of Russia mounted a hunting expedition through the Rocky Mountains. The nobleman wanted the best **GUIDE** he could find: Buffalo Bill. In fact, Cody may have been *too* good: the Duke himself bagged eight buffaloes.

BUT not all stories depict Buffalo Bill as a hero. Once, while travelling in New York City, Cody attended a play that featured scenes from his own life. When the audience noticed that the real Buffalo Bill was seated among them, they cheered wildly and demanded that he get up on stage and deliver a speech. Reluctantly, Cody agreed. But despite his prowess behind a pistol, he showed no talent for acting. Embarrassed, Cody mumbled a few quiet words and sat down.

CODY overcame his stage fright and became one of the great performers of his time. He neither mumbled nor stammered as he introduced each Wild West show—including a performance for England’s Queen Victoria—with the words, **“LA-A-DIES AND GEN-TLEMEN, MAY I PRESENT TO YOU THE CONGRESS OF THE ROUGH RIDERS OF THE WO-OR-LD!”**



BY BEN FOGELBERG, Editor, *Colorado History NOW*.

Adapted from “Buffalo Bill” by DAVID F. HALAAS, Chief Historian. Original article published in *Colorado History NOW*, August, 1997.