

Wild West Shows: An Unlikely Vehicle for the Survival of Native American Culture in the Late Nineteenth Century

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ABSTRACT

This essay discusses how Wild West shows, such as Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show, were places where Native Americans could safely practice their cultural and spiritual customs and traditions in the late nineteenth century. When the Bureau of Indian Affairs forced Native Americans to abandon their entire cultural system for an American one, Native Americans, like the Lakota Sioux, actively sought to participate in Wild West shows, despite being portrayed as savages and as the enemy of white settlers.

Keywords: Wild West shows, Buffalo Bill, Native Americans, Lakota Sioux, Bureau of Indian Affairs, assimilation, detribalization, reservations

Espectáculos del salvaje oeste: un vehículo poco probable para la supervivencia de la cultura nativa americana a finales del siglo XIX

RESUMEN

Este ensayo analiza cómo los espectáculos del salvaje oeste, como el espectáculo del salvaje oeste de Buffalo Bill, eran lugares donde los nativos americanos podían practicar con seguridad sus costumbres y tradiciones culturales y espirituales a finales del siglo XIX. Cuando la Oficina de Asuntos Indígenas obligó a los nativos americanos a abandonar todo su sistema cultural por uno estadounidense, los nativos americanos, como los Lakota Sioux, buscaron activamente participar en espectáculos del Lejano Oeste, a pesar de ser retratados como salvajes y enemigos de los colonos blancos.

Palabras clave: Espectáculos del Lejano Oeste, Buffalo Bill, Nativos Americanos, Lakota Sioux, Oficina de Asuntos Indígenas, asimilación, destribalización, reservas

狂野西部秀：19世纪末期一个不太可能让本土美国文化存活的工具

摘要

本文探讨了美国西部秀—例如布法罗·比尔的狂野西部秀—如何曾是19世纪末本土美国人安全发扬其文化和精神习俗及传统的场所。当印第安事务局强制本土美国人抛弃其全部的文化系统并遵循美国文化系统时，本土美国人—例如Lakota Sioux—试图积极参与狂野西部秀，尽管他们被描绘为野蛮人和白人殖民者的敌人。

关键词：狂野西部秀（Wild West shows），布法罗·比尔，本土美国人，Lakota Sioux，印第安事务局，同化，去部落化（detrribalization），保留地

Wild West shows were among the most successful and popular forms of entertainment across the United States and Europe in the late nineteenth century. Audiences sat spellbound through hours of historical reenactments involving soldiers, cowboys, and Native Americans. It was the Indian shows, however, that made the Wild West shows so popular. Drawn from the reservations on which they lived and forced to assimilate into the white society, Native Americans were portrayed in the shows as foe, not friend of white settlers. They were meant to play the “savage” to show that there was, indeed, a need to remove them onto small, isolated reservations so that they would not hinder national expansion in the West. Despite the stereotypical portrayal of Natives as savages and the enemy of white settlers in the American West, Native Americans

actively sought employment in Wild West shows. Native Americans willingly participated in the Wild West shows, like Buffalo Bill’s Wild West Show, because it was the only vehicle through which they could continue practicing their cultural customs, spiritual beliefs, and language, which were being eradicated by the United States government through assimilations methods such as farming and education in Indian boarding schools.

The Indian reservation system resulted from the Federal Government’s laws beginning in 1830, which eventually forced all Native American tribes into small, isolated areas west of the Mississippi River. These areas included most of present-day Oklahoma, Kansas, Colorado, New Mexico, Arizona, Wyoming, and Montana, so that white settlers could use their land for homestead building. By 1868, after a series of conflicts oppos-

ing the reservation system, known as the Indian Wars, President Ulysses S. Grant determined that the best way to end the ongoing conflicts was to assimilate the Native “savages” into mainstream society as a civilized people.

One of the first assimilation initiatives taught Native Americans how to farm, which promoted self-sufficiency. They learned animal husbandry, how and when to plant seeds, and how to use and repair tools and equipment. However, the land allotted on the reservations west of the Mississippi River, such as in the Great Plains and Northwest Territories, had short agricultural seasons or a lack of water, making the land more suitable to ranching than farming. For the few allotments suitable to farming, Indians were too poor to afford the livestock needed to plow or to purchase the necessary tools. As a result of those conditions, farming on the reservations proved to be a failure. More importantly, however, Indians were resistant to this American way of life because it “ran counter to hunter-warrior traditions.”¹ Therefore, Native Americans, although resigned to life on the reservation after the collapse of armed resistance by 1890, tried to fight back and hold onto their traditional way of life.

Added to the resistance of assimilation was the continued encroachment of white settlers onto Indian lands, despite being allotted acreage through the General Allotment Act of 1887. In the end, the Act was a failure to Native Americans because it divided the reservations into smaller and smaller allotments, significantly reducing Na-

tive-owned land and making it impossible to farm the allotted land given to them and to live. Christine Haug posits that Native Americans were also cheated out of their allotments or forced to sell their land to pay their bills and have money to feed their families, adding to their growing resentment of the American way of life.²

Another method of the United States government to assimilate Indians into white society had to do with education. When Indian reservations were first established, missionaries set up schools to teach the English language, Protestantism, and the American way of life. By 1877, it was observed that on-reservation schools were inhibiting full American acculturation, especially in children, because they remained geographically close to their parents, who were still living according to their native customs and beliefs and speaking their native language at home. Therefore, the United States government built off-reservation boarding schools, and forced Native children as young as five years old to live away from their parents for several years to obtain an American education.

As Indian boarding schools became the leading instrument of assimilation, school officials stripped Native American youth of their cultural identity upon entering the off-reservation schools. One such school was the Carlisle Indian School in Pennsylvania, established by Richard Pratt in 1879. Pratt’s goal was to “kill the Indian, and save the man.”³ The schools forced Native American children to



The Carlisle Indian School became the model for over two dozen Indian boarding schools across the United States. By 1918, the Carlisle school saw over 10,000 Native American children come through its doors. Posed on the school grounds is presumed to be 375 students, which made up the entire student body, c. 1884. Courtesy Cumberland County Historical Society.



Stripped of his Sioux culture, his long hair cut short, and dressed in American-style clothing, Luther Standing Bear stares stoically at the camera at the Carlisle Indian School, c. 1890. Courtesy National Archives and Records Administration.

pick Anglo-American names, receive Anglo-American haircuts and clothes, and speak only English. Severe punishments were administered, such as whippings and starvation, if they did not speak English. Basic subjects, such as U.S. history, and Christianity, such as the Beatitudes, were taught during one-half of the day. The second half of the day was committed to gaining knowledge in carpentry and farming for boys, and the domestic arts, like cooking and sewing, for girls.

Moreover, the off-reservation schools were hundreds of miles away from the reservations, and their conditions were so horrendous that often parents refused to send their children away; some children even ran away once from school, but Congress passed a law in 1893 that made it mandatory for Native American youth to be sent to the boarding schools. The Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA), a federal agency that used agents assigned to each reservation to oversee that acculturation was being implemented, were authorized to send children away to school by any means necessary, including seizing children from their parents, withholding food rations from families, and jailing parents. Besides forcing the children to go to the off-reservation boarding schools, BIA agents made reservation life and assimilation difficult for Native Americans.

The Bureau of Indian Affairs was established in 1824 by Secretary of War John C. Calhoun. Its first role was to negotiate treaties between the Native tribes and the Federal Government, so

that white settlers moving to the West could build their homesteads without fear of armed retaliation. According to Edmund J. Danzinger Jr., BIA agents carried out the federal laws pertaining to the tribes, but after making new treaties was banned in the wake of the Indian Wars in the 1870s, it “charged each federal agent, who was responsible for one or more reservations, with destroying tribal customs and beliefs, replacing them with mainstream American lifestyles and values, and encouraging Indian integration into dominant society.”⁴ Consequently, reservations became like open-air prisons.

To deconstruct Native tribes’ political structures, spiritual beliefs, and customs, BIA agents administered tedious work, property, and money, which the agent often withheld for his own greedy purposes. BIA agents also controlled the actions of the chiefs and aggressively enforced farming, domesticity, the wearing of Anglo-American clothing and hairstyles, the speaking of only the English language, Christian values, and the education of their youth at Indian boarding schools.⁵ Polygamy was also prohibited. Even joking about having more than one wife could mean prosecution.⁶ Women were forced to give up beading and made to learn the domestic arts of cleaning, sewing, and preparing American-style meals. Furthermore, food and property sharing and gift-giving were discouraged, and religious ceremonies and dances, such as the Sun Dance, were banned because they were deemed barbaric or a form of self-torture.



A typical performance in Wild West shows involved heroic cowboys coming to the aid of a homesteading family's burning covered wagon, set on fire by the Native enemy. Courtesy David R. Phillips Collection at the McCracken Research Library.



Wild West shows promised spectators reenactments of historic events, such as the attack of the Deadwood Stagecoach and the Battle of Little Big Horn, at every show. Here, William Gordon Lillie, professionally known as Pawnee Bill, plays General Custer in a dramatic reenactment of Custer's Last Stand, c. 1905. Courtesy Library of Congress.

Moreover, no one was allowed to leave the reservation for any reason without BIA agent approval. Stephen Rockwell, author of *Indian Affairs and the Administrative State in the Nineteenth Century*, stated that although “the agent was to devote time to the welfare and improvement of the Indians in his charge,” the discretion given to BIA agents by the government to use their own judgement in how to best carry out assimilation methods allowed for rampant corruption, fraud, and abuse on the reservations.⁷ Historian Arrel M. Gibson argued that the “needless, agonizing, unthinkable suffering, and personal and group decline . . . matched, and in some cases, exceeded, the somber Trail of Tears.”⁸ Simon Pokagon, a Sioux Native, who wrote *An Indian on the Problems of His Race* in 1895, said “the [reservation] is a bad one for our people. It kills energy and begets idleness, the mother of vice. It certainly will prove a fatal blow to our people if long continued.”⁹ Comanche Chief Ten Bears echoed other tribal leaders, such as Crazy Horse, Sitting Bull, and Geronimo, when he said, “you wanted to put us upon a reservation . . . I do not want them . . . I was born upon the prairie . . . where there are no enclosures . . . I want to die there, and not within walls.”¹⁰ Therefore, when recruiters from the Wild West shows came to the reservations looking for Natives to join the shows, hundreds jumped at the opportunity to escape the dreadful reservation life.

Wild West shows, such as Buffalo Bill’s Wild West Show (BBWWS), created by William F. Cody in 1883, were

meant to educate American audiences on the “real” American West and justify national expansion. The shows entertained audiences with hours of horsemanship, marksmanship, frontier life, cowboys, white settlers, and most importantly, Native Americans.

The stars of the Wild West shows were the Native Americans, who were portrayed as American society perceived them to be—the savage enemies of white settlers who inhibited national expansion. Through the reenactment of historical events called vignettes, such as the Battle of Little Big Horn, Custer’s Last Stand, and the attack on the Deadwood Stagecoach, or attacks on white families making their way West, the Native Americans were encouraged to “be themselves” and “savagely” attack soldiers, cowboys, and settlers. In a story from the *Washington Post* in 1885, the newspaper reported that “Indians, yelling like mad and exchanging rapid shots with the passengers . . . poured shot after shot into the driver . . . Spectators were spellbound.”¹¹ An article published by the *Wheeling Register* only a few days later reported that fifteen Natives “wore their war costume. Their faces embellished with red and yellow paint, on their heads they wore immense feathers.”¹² According to Alexander Erez Echelman, no matter what reenactment was being played out, the Natives were always the enemy and the white settlers the victims and the heroes, and although audiences sat in awe and applauded the attacks while the Native Americans “played Indian,” they “openly engaged in Indian behavior and fought. . . .”¹³ Native Americans were de-

picted savagely, but they were happy to be employed in the shows.

Native Americans willingly participated in the shows for economic benefits, steady income, travel and adventure, and to learn about the “white” world in a non-threatening manner, but the main reason was because doing so allowed them to hold onto their cultural customs, beliefs, and language, which were being eradicated on the reservations.

Reservation agents detribalized Native Americans by discouraging and outlawing the practice of their cultural customs and beliefs. However, Native American customs, traditions, and native languages were encouraged in Wild West shows. Furthermore, families could stay together if all were employed in the show, which allowed Native Americans to stave off their children’s acculturation in off-reservation boarding schools. They could also roam freely, whereas they could not leave the reservation without permission from the BIA agent. Those things greatly appealed to Native Americans, whose lives on the reservations were constantly overseen by corrupt and fraudulent BIA agents enforcing assimilation by any means necessary, which consequently made reservation life extremely difficult and demoralizing. BIA agents even tried putting a stop to the employment of Native Americans in the Wild West shows. In another *Washington Post* story in 1890, it was reported that “if any of the Indians should . . . attempt to leave their reservations for exhibition purposes, it will be regarded as open defiance of the

authority of the government, and that prompt measures will be adopted to detain them.”¹⁴ However, Native Americans were so essential to Buffalo Bill’s educational exhibitions that he paid several thousand dollars to the BIA to get “his” Indians.¹⁵ That action allowed Native Americans to actively seek out employment in the shows. For instance, when Luther Standing Bear returned to the Pine Ridge reservation from a European tour with Buffalo Bill, he was “besieged on all sides from those who wanted to go out with the show.”¹⁶

In the Wild West shows, as well after each show, Native Americans were highly encouraged to wear their traditional clothing, headdresses, wampums, belts, instruments of war, such as bows and arrows, and pursue beadwork and quillwork without punishment from BIA agents. Buffalo Bill reminisced in his autobiography that he “worked hard on the program entertainment, taking care to make it realistic in every detail,”¹⁷ from their village, dances, chants, and depictions of each tribe, right down to their clothing. He even sent “men on journeys more than a hundred miles to get the right kind of war-bonnets.”¹⁸ It was imperative for Bill “to depict [the West] as it was.”¹⁹ Since the shows were to be realistic, the Sioux, Ogallala, Pawnee, Cheyenne, Cherokee, Arapaho, Sac and Fox, and Kiowa men and women employed in the shows were encouraged to keep their hair long and braided, to speak their native languages, to perform traditional dances and ceremonies, such as the Sun Dance and Ghost Dance, and to live in traditional tipis set up on the outskirts of the show. George

Dull Knife, who worked in the BBWWS for its entirety, recollected it “began to resemble the camps they had always lived in on the Plains” with campfires, women beading, men smoking and talking, and eating buffalo, away from the watchful eye of BIA agents.²⁰ An article appearing in the *New York Times* in 1901 related that “the Indian show is very little different behind the scenes from what he is before the curtain. When on the road he lives in wigwams, brought from his native heath, just like those quickly made ones in the show. He always wears the same costume he exhibits in the show and off the stage he revels in the same fantastic painting of his face and body.”²¹ John M. Burke,

a recruiter for BBWWS, was asked by the same newspaper, “if the Indians’ makeup for the show is his own.”²² He replied: “Indeed it is. No pale face could ever devise such curious, quaint, and significant arrangements of paint and cork. All that the Indians puts on his face and body means something. It tells of war, of peace, happiness, of misery. The Indians’ garments are his own, too . . . Most of the Indian acts in the Wild West Show were devised by the redskins themselves. Their dances are their own absolutely.”²³ When Buffalo Bill took his exhibition abroad to Europe, they were not discouraged from being themselves, and were allowed to live according to their cultural system openly and freely.



Luther Standing Bear, cast member in Buffalo Bill’s Wild West Show, Manchester, England, c. 1902, in his Sioux headdress, beaded breastplate, and holding a lance. Courtesy Buffalo Bill Museum and Grave, Identification Number 71.0219.

Luther Standing Bear, a Sioux educated at the off-reservation boarding school Carlisle Indian School, joined Buffalo Bill for the tour's duration. Ryan E. Burt argued that Luther Standing Bear's reason for joining Cody's troupe was directly linked to the local conditions on the Pine Ridge and Rosebud reservations, conditions closely tied to the policies of the General Allotment Act of 1887.²⁴ Therefore, Standing Bear jumped at the chance when Buffalo Bill asked him to join him overseas.

Luther Standing Bear wrote in his 1928 autobiography that "we were supposed to represent four different tribes," but received "no orders" on how or what to perform.²⁵ He continued: "each tribe was horseback," and in his performance for King Edward VII he "had a beautiful lance," and as he performed a dance in front of the king, "shook the lance in his face and danced my very prettiest," giving a few Sioux yells.²⁶ He concluded the recollection by saying that "when our part in the show was over we went to our village where the visitors had a chance to see how we lived"²⁷ This included erected tipis where they held regular council meetings and pow-wows before each show.

Standing Bear's account of his experience in BBWWS indicated that Native Americans in the Wild West shows were allowed to keep their traditional ways without persecution, while BIA agents, who believed that Wild West shows were a threat to the American acculturation of the Native American, tried to inhibit their recruitment while they forced Anglo-American lifestyles

on reservation residents. The Wild West shows presented them as they were, albeit for educational purposes, but there was no glamour, everything was authentic and they were allowed to hold onto their vanishing culture and language, which is what drew them to shows like Buffalo Bill's, even if he portrayed them in a stereotypical way. Short Boy, employed in BBWWS, said he "wouldn't go back to the reservation for a new rifle and cartridges enough to last me the rest of my life."²⁸ That statement echoed many others, who, once their employment contracts ran out, were made to return to the reservations and don American style clothing and lifestyle again.

Although the Wild West shows, like Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show, in the late nineteenth century were more educational exhibits than entertainment shows and used to justify national expansion in the West, the shows were the only way for the Native American culture to survive at a time when the United States government believed it was best to stop fighting them and assimilate them into mainstream white society through the eradication of their entire cultural system. Forcing them off their native lands and onto small, isolated reservations where they were also forced to acculturate into American citizens through farming, education, and the replacement of their cultural identity with an American one made Native Americans actively and consciously seek out employment in Wild West shows. To them, that was the only way to avoid the attempts of the Federal Government and Bureau of Indi-

an Affairs agents to assimilate them; there, they could hide their culture in plain sight. Although Wild West shows portrayed Native Americans as savages and the enemy of white settlers in the American West through reenactments

of attacks on the battlefield or on the prairie, they willingly “played Indian” to keep their culture alive when there was no other place to do so freely and safely in the late nineteenth century.

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