



# BUFFALO BILL

By Laurie Triefeldt

Buffalo Bill Cody’s Wild West show celebrated the vanishing American West. The skills of real cowboys and Indians were showcased, laying the groundwork for the modern rodeo. Much of Cody’s popularity can be attributed to self-promotion and dime novels, but his life was truly colorful.

## Civil War period

Too young to enlist, Cody served as a Union scout and ranger during the Civil War. When he was older, in 1863, he enlisted with the 7th Kansas Cavalry, where he served until the end of the war in 1865.

## In a name

After the war, Cody worked as a scout and supplied the U.S. Army and the Kansas Pacific Railroad with bison meat. It was during this time that Cody earned the nickname “Buffalo Bill” by reportedly killing 4,280 American bison (commonly known as buffalo) in 18 months (1867–1868). A man named Billy Comstock also claimed this nickname, and the two men had a buffalo-shooting contest for exclusive rights to the name. The contest took eight hours, and Buffalo Bill took \$500 in prize money. Cody killed 69 buffalo; Comstock killed 46.

## A star is born

In 1872, at age 26, Buffalo Bill went to Chicago to act in a stage production of “The Scouts of the Prairie.” Enjoying the limelight and bitten by the show-business bug, Cody formed his own performing troupe called the Buffalo Bill Combination. The troupe toured for 10 years and was the early foundation of his famous Buffalo Bill’s Wild West show.

## The Wild West show

In 1883, Cody founded Buffalo Bill’s Wild West, a circuslike touring attraction. (Despite popular misconception, the word “show” was not a part of the title.)

The show celebrated the rapidly disappearing lifestyle of the Western frontier. Although the act has been criticized for portraying Native Americans in a negative light (attacking wagon trains and taking scalps), Cody also tried to show the Indians as a proud and honorable people deserving of respect. His show employed 40 to 120 Native Americans every year, and he paid them fairly. Cody called them “the former foe, present friend, the American.”

Cody also supported the rights of women: “What we want to do is give women even more liberty than they have. Let them do any kind of work they see fit, and if they do it as well as men, give them the same pay.”

The fortune Buffalo Bill made from his show was invested in lands in Nebraska and what is now Cody, Wyo. But dwindling attendance, poor management and bad investments caused the show to go bankrupt. The last Wild West show was held in 1913. Cody died four years later.

Cody named his favorite gun, a Model 1866 .48/70 caliber Springfield “trap-door” rifle, the “Lucretia Borgia.”

## Early years

Buffalo Bill was born William F. Cody on a farm near LeClaire, Iowa, on Feb. 26, 1846. Before moving to Kansas in 1853, the family lived in Canada. (His father was born in Ontario.) Of Quaker stock, the family was well-known for its anti-slavery politics.

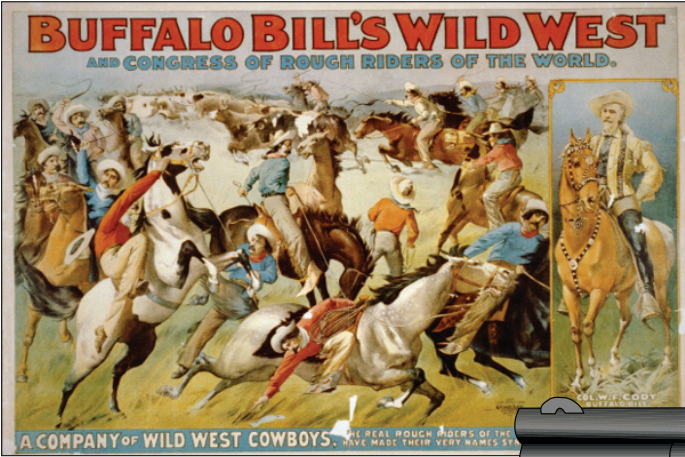
Young William learned how to read and write, but he was not an attentive student and preferred riding horses and swimming.

When Bill was 11 years old, his father died. To help support his family, Bill took many jobs. He was a messenger boy for wagon trains, a trapper, a gold miner and a Pony Express rider, all by age 14.



**Sitting Bull** was a Hunkpapa Lakota Sioux holy man and tribal chief who became legendary for leading his people to victory at the Battle of the Little Bighorn against Lt. Col. George Armstrong Custer and the 7th U.S. Cavalry in 1876.

Although Sitting Bull was with Buffalo Bill Cody’s Wild West show for just four months in 1884, he was hugely popular. After leaving the show, Sitting Bull made a small fortune by charging for his autograph and picture.



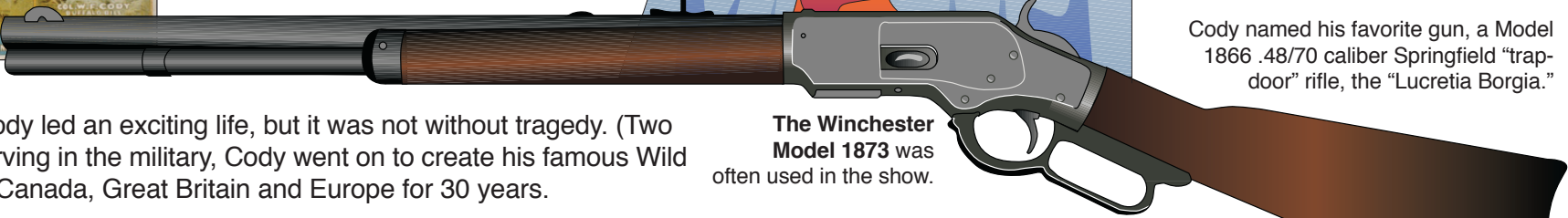
**Annie Oakley** was a famous sharpshooter. She was 25 years old in 1885 when she joined Buffalo Bill’s Wild West. She stayed with the show for 17 years.

**Buffalo Bill poster** (far left), c. 1899

**Buffalo Bill stamp**, issued 1994



**The Winchester Model 1873** was often used in the show.



## Historic events

Buffalo Bill Cody led an exciting life, but it was not without tragedy. (Two of his four children died young.) After serving in the military, Cody went on to create his famous Wild West show, traveling the United States, Canada, Great Britain and Europe for 30 years.

**1846:** William F. Cody (aka Buffalo Bill) is born Feb. 26 at his family’s farmhouse in Iowa.

**1860:** Works for the famous Pony Express.

**1863:** Enlists with the 7th Kansas Cavalry during the Civil War (sees action in Missouri and Tennessee).

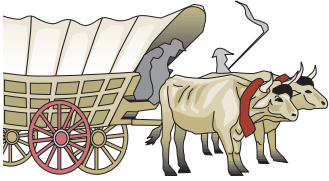
**1866:** Marries Louisa Frederici.

**1872:** Receives the Medal of Honor for “gallantry in action” while serving as a civilian scout. Cody leaves the military.

**1883:** Begins his Wild West show.  
**1887:** Performs in London.  
**1889:** Tours Europe, where crowds enthusiastically greet the show.

**1901:** A train carrying Buffalo Bill’s show collides with another train, killing hundreds of animals.

**1913:** Poor revenues force the Buffalo Bill show to shut down.



Bowie knife



Buffalo Bill became a superhero in thousands of dime novels published during and after his lifetime. Stories of Buffalo Bill overcoming evil villains laid the groundwork for future comic book superheroes like Superman and Batman.

**1853:** The family moves to Kansas.  
**1857:** Bill’s father, Isaac Cody, dies.  
**1858:** Cody works as a bullwhacker (oxen driver) for a wagon train.  
**1859:** Travels to Colorado to try his luck as a gold prospector.



**1867:** Takes a job killing buffalo for the Kansas Pacific Railroad.  
**1868:** Earns name “Buffalo Bill” in buffalo-killing contest.  
**1868:** Returns to his work for the Army (took part in 16 battles).

**1876:** Called back into service as an Army scout.

**1893:** Sets up an exhibition near the Chicago World’s Fair, which greatly contributes to his popularity.  
**1896:** The city of Cody, Wyo., is founded by Cody and some investors.

**1917:** After a brief illness, Buffalo Bill dies in Denver on Jan. 10 at age 70.

SOURCES: World Book Encyclopedia, World Book Inc.; www.buffalobill.org; www.madeinwyoming.net; www.bbhc.org; www.scottcountyiowa.com

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