

Frederick Jackson Turner and Buffalo Bill Richard White

Americans have never had much use for history, but we do like anniversaries. In 1893 Frederick Jackson Turner, who would become the most eminent historian of his generation, was in Chicago to deliver an academic paper at the historical congress convened in conjunction with the Columbian Exposition. The occasion for the exposition was a slightly belated celebration of the four hundredth anniversary of Columbus's arrival in the Western Hemisphere. The paper Turner presented was "The Significance of the Frontier in American History."¹

Although public anniversaries often have educational pretensions, they are primarily popular entertainments; it is the combination of the popular and the educational that makes the figurative meeting of Buffalo Bill and Turner at the Columbian Exposition so suggestive. Chicago celebrated its own progress from frontier beginnings. While Turner gave his academic talk on the frontier, Buffalo Bill played, twice a day, "every day, rain or shine," at "63rd St—Opposite the World's Fair," before a covered grandstand that could hold eighteen thousand people.² Turner was an educator, an academic, but he had also achieved great popular success because of his mastery of popular frontier iconography. Buffalo Bill was a showman (though he never referred to his Wild West as a show) with educational pretensions. Characteristically, his program in 1893 bore the title *Buffalo Bill's Wild West and Congress of Rough Riders of the World* (Figure 1).³ In one of the numerous endorsements reproduced in the program, a well-known midwestern journalist, Brick Pomeroy, proclaimed the exhibition a "Wild West Reality . . . a correct representation of life on the plains . . . brought to the East for the inspection and education of the public."⁴

Although Turner, along with the other historians, was invited, he did not attend the Wild West; nor was Buffalo Bill in the audience for Turner's lecture. Nonetheless, their convergence in Chicago was a happy coincidence for historians. The two master narrators of American westering had come together at the greatest of American celebrations with compelling stories to tell. The juxtaposition of Turner and Buffalo Bill remains, as Richard Slotkin has fruitfully demonstrated in his *Gunfighter Nation*, a useful and revealing one for understanding America's frontier myth.⁵ The Newberry exhibition juxtaposes Turner and Buffalo Bill for reasons somewhat different from Slotkin's. But like Slotkin the exhibition takes Buffalo Bill Cody as seriously as Frederick Jackson Turner. Cody produced a master narrative of the West as finished and culturally significant as Turner's own.

Turner and Buffalo Bill told separate stories; indeed, each contradicted the other in significant ways. Turner's history was one of free land, the essentially peaceful occupation of a largely empty continent, and the creation of a unique American identity. Cody's Wild West told of violent conquest, of wresting the continent from the American Indian peoples who occupied the land. Although fictional, Buffalo Bill's story claimed to represent a history, for like Turner, Buffalo Bill worked with real historical events and real historical figures.

These different stories demanded different lead characters: the true pioneer for Turner was the farmer; for Buffalo Bill, the scout. Turner's farmers were peaceful; they overcame a wilderness; Indians figured only peripherally in this story. In Cody's story Indians were vital. The scout, a man distinguished by his "knowledge of Indians' habits and language, familiar with the hunt, and trustworthy in the hour of extremest danger,"⁶ took on meaning only because he overcame Indians. He was, as Richard Slotkin has emphasized, the man who ultimately defeated them.⁷ In Turner's telling the tools of civilization were the axe and the plow; in Buffalo Bill's, the rifle and the bullet. The bullet, the Wild West program declared, was "the pioneer of civilization."⁸

As different as the two narratives were, they led to remarkably similar conclusions. Both declared the frontier over. Turner built his talk on "the closing of a great historic movement."⁹ The opening paragraph of Buffalo Bill's 1893 program gave a conventional enough account of the "rapidly extending frontier" and the West as a scene of "wildness." But it concluded with a significant parenthetical addition: "This last [the existence of a wild, "rapidly extending frontier"], while perfectly true when written (1883), is at present inapplicable, so fast does law and order and progress pervade the Great West."¹⁰ The frontier, which according to Buffalo Bill had opened on the Hudson, had now closed. Indeed, Buffalo Bill the Indian fighter and rancher had become Buffalo Bill the promoter of irrigated farming.¹¹

Both Turner and Buffalo Bill credited the pioneers with creating a new and distinctive nation, and both worried about what the end of the frontier signified. Buffalo Bill reminded his audience that generations were settling down

to enjoy "the homes their fathers located and fenced for them."¹² But by implication the pioneers' children who inherited the West were a lesser breed. The pioneers had disdained, in the Wild West program's metaphor, to crowd into cities to live like worms. But with the West won, with free land gone, urban wormdom seemed the inevitable destiny of most Americans.¹³



Figure 1.
Buffalo Bill's Wild West and Congress of Rough Riders of the World:
Historical Sketches and Programme, Chicago, 1893.

The major elements of Turner's and Cody's stories were not new in 1893. Take, for example, the close of the frontier. Predictions of the frontier's imminent demise had been current for a quarter of a century. In 1869 Albert Richardson's popular *Beyond the Mississippi* was predicting the end of an era:

Twenty years ago, half our continent was an unknown land, and the Rocky Mountains were our Pillars of Hercules. Five years hence, the Orient will be our next door neighbor. We shall hold the world's granary, the world's treasury, the world's highway. But we shall have no West, no border, no Civilization, in line of battle, pressing back hostile savages, and conquering hostile nature.¹⁴

Theodore Roosevelt rather begrudgingly credited Turner with having "put into shape a good deal of thought that has been floating around rather loosely."¹⁵ And numerous historians have found elements of the Turner thesis presaged in one form or another in the scholarship of the late nineteenth century.¹⁶ Forty years ago Henry Nash Smith took the process one step further by making the Turner thesis itself an expression of the nineteenth-century pastoral myth of the garden.¹⁷

To contextualize Turner, and indeed Buffalo Bill, however, creates a mystery rather than solves one. For if these ideas and symbols were so prevalent, how did the particular versions offered by Turner and Buffalo Bill come to be so culturally dominant and persistent? Why did they overshadow, and indeed erase, their antecedents and competitors? No one, after all, reads Richardson; and Pawnee Bill—sometimes Buffalo Bill's partner, sometimes his competitor—is known only to antiquarians.¹⁸

The answer has two elements. First, the very contradictions between Turner's story and Buffalo Bill's suggest a clue. Turner and Buffalo Bill, in effect, divided up the existing narratives of American frontier mythology. Each erased part of the larger, and more confusing and tangled, cultural story to deliver up a clean, dramatic, and compelling narrative. Richardson, for example, had offered a narrative of conquest that emphasized both hostile nature and hostile "savages." Turner took as his theme the conquest of nature; he considered savagery incidental. Buffalo Bill made the conquest of savages central; the conquest of nature was incidental. Yet both Turner's and Buffalo Bill's stories, it must be remembered, taught the same lessons. Second, the very ubiquity of frontier icons allowed both Turner and Buffalo Bill to deliver powerful messages with incredible economy and resonance. Precisely because they could mobilize familiar symbols, Buffalo Bill in a performance of several hours and Frederick Jackson Turner in a short essay could persuade and convince their audiences.

Both Buffalo Bill and Turner were geniuses at using frontier iconography. They capitalized on our modern talent for the mimetic—our ability to create countless mass-produced imitations of an original. In putting their talents to use, they drew on existing stories as well as on symbols, from log cabins to stagecoaches, that were reproduced over and over in American life. Turner incorporated such icons into his talk; Buffalo Bill adapted them as stage props. Indeed, he re-created himself as a walking icon, at once real and make-believe. As the 1893 program put it at a time when Buffalo Bill was forty-seven years old, "Young, sturdy, a remarkable specimen of manly beauty, with the brain to conceive and the nerve to execute, Buffalo Bill par excellence is the exemplar of the strong and unique traits that characterize a true American frontiersman."¹⁹

Frederick Jackson Turner: Regression and Progress

Turner's "frontier thesis" quickly emerged as an incantation repeated in thousands of high school and college classrooms and textbooks: "The existence of an area of free land, its continuous recession, and the advance of American settlement westward explain American development."²⁰ Turner asserted that American westering produced a succession of frontiers from the Appalachians to the Pacific; the essence of the frontier thesis lay in his claim that in settling these frontiers, migrants had created a distinctively American democratic outlook. Americans (gendered as male) were practical, egalitarian, and democratic because the successive Wests of this country's formative years had provided the "free" land on which equality and democracy could flourish as integral aspects of progress. Turner's farmers conquered a wilderness and extended what Thomas Jefferson had called an empire of liberty.²¹

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Turner summoned the frontier from the dim academic backcountry, but in popular American culture the frontier already stood squarely in the foreground. Turner did not have to tell Americans about the frontier; he could mobilize images they already knew. Ubiquitous representations of covered wagons and log cabins already contained latent narratives of expansion and progress. Americans had recognized for generations the cultural utility of the frontier in their politics, folklore, music, literature, art, and speech. All Turner had to do was to tell Americans about the SIGNIFICANCE of this familiar frontier.

Turner masterfully deployed the images of log cabins, wagon trains, and frontier farming—and the stories that went with them. He fashioned these into a sweeping explanation of the nation's past. Along with the familiar themes of conquering a "wilderness" and making homes upon the land, Turner emphasized another, less familiar, theme: in advancing the frontier, a diverse people of European origins had remade themselves into Americans. "The frontier," he declared, "is the line of most rapid and effective Americanization."²² "In the crucible of the frontier the immigrants were Americanized, liberated, and fused into a mixed race, English in neither nationality nor characteristics."²³ Turner had extended the meaning of progress. Progress was not merely an increase in material well-being but was cultural as well: growing democracy, greater equality, more opportunity.

Like his academic peers, Turner used no visual images to illustrate either the talks he gave or the academic articles he wrote. Instead, he relied on an almost painterly prose that evoked familiar scenes of migration, primitive beginnings, and ultimate progress. Americans already thought in terms of great achievements from primitive beginnings; Americans already thought of themselves as egalitarian and democratic. They had already symbolized such beliefs in images of log cabins and migration into a land of opportunity, and had turned those images into icons. Turner used the icons.

Turner often placed himself and his audience not in the West but in popular representations of the West. He instructed his audience to "stand at Cumberland Gap and watch the procession of civilization marching single file—the buffalo following the trail to the salt springs, the Indian, the fur trader and hunter, the cattle-raiser, the pioneer farmer—and the frontier has passed by."²⁴ He asked them to stand figuratively where George Caleb Bingham placed the viewer in *Daniel Boone Escorting Settlers through the Cumberland Gap* (Figure 2).²⁵

This figure standing at the gap, or on the height or border, and watching progress unfold was one of the central American icons of the frontier. Its elements were at once relatively constant and quite flexible. The observer might—as in the Bingham painting, or in Francis Palmer's 1866 lithograph *The Rocky Mountains—Emigrants Crossing the Plains*, or in the illustration "Emigration to the Western Country" (see Frontispiece)—face the emigrant party already on the road. They are surrounded by a vast emptiness and, in Bingham's painting, darkness. A second variant placed the viewer on a height behind the migrants, who were now, more often than not, departing from the known and familiar and heading west, as in "The March of Destiny" (Figure 3). Indians might appear on the margins of the picture, but the space into which the migrants moved was to be understood as vast and devoid of people (see Plate 1).



Figure 2.

George Caleb Bingham, *Daniel Boone Escorting Settlers through the Cumberland Gap*. Oil on canvas, 1851–52. Courtesy Washington University Gallery of Art, Saint Louis. Gift of Nathaniel Phillips, 1890.

The emblematic titles of such pictures as "The March of Destiny" made their meaning obvious. Such didacticism was a common device. In one of the most familiar pictures of westward movement, the Currier and Ives print *Across the Continent: "Westward the Course of Empire Takes Its Way"* (Figure 4), a wagon train wends westward in the distance, but it is almost incidental. A railroad train steaming toward the center of the picture now bears the major burden of progress. The train leaves two Indians literally in its smoke as it departs a frontier village on its way west, while in the distance two more Indians pursue a fleeing herd of buffalo.

Turner, in standing with his readers at Cumberland Gap or South Pass, invoked these representations of settlement as a movement of pioneers into a largely uninhabited nature. This was how the pioneers themselves understood their experience. Wagon trains, Indians quietly moving to the margins of the scene, and the steady progression into the open and available West were the symbols used, for example, in the 1890 commemorative pictorial map of the route of the Mormon pioneers (see Plate 2). It is no wonder that Turner's interpretation of the West evoked such a deep popular response. The Turnerian plot resonated with already-familiar images of westward migration.

Standing on the height and watching progress unfold was the dominant image of the Turnerian story, but its power rested on two other Turnerian ideas: that the "free land" into which the pioneers moved was available for the taking and that American progress began with a regenerative retreat to the primitive, followed by a recapitulation of the stages of civilization.²⁶ Turner gave these ideas a powerful, almost epigrammatic, formulation and argued that they explained all of American history. The iconography of the frontier had already prepared his audience to accept these bold claims as mere common sense.

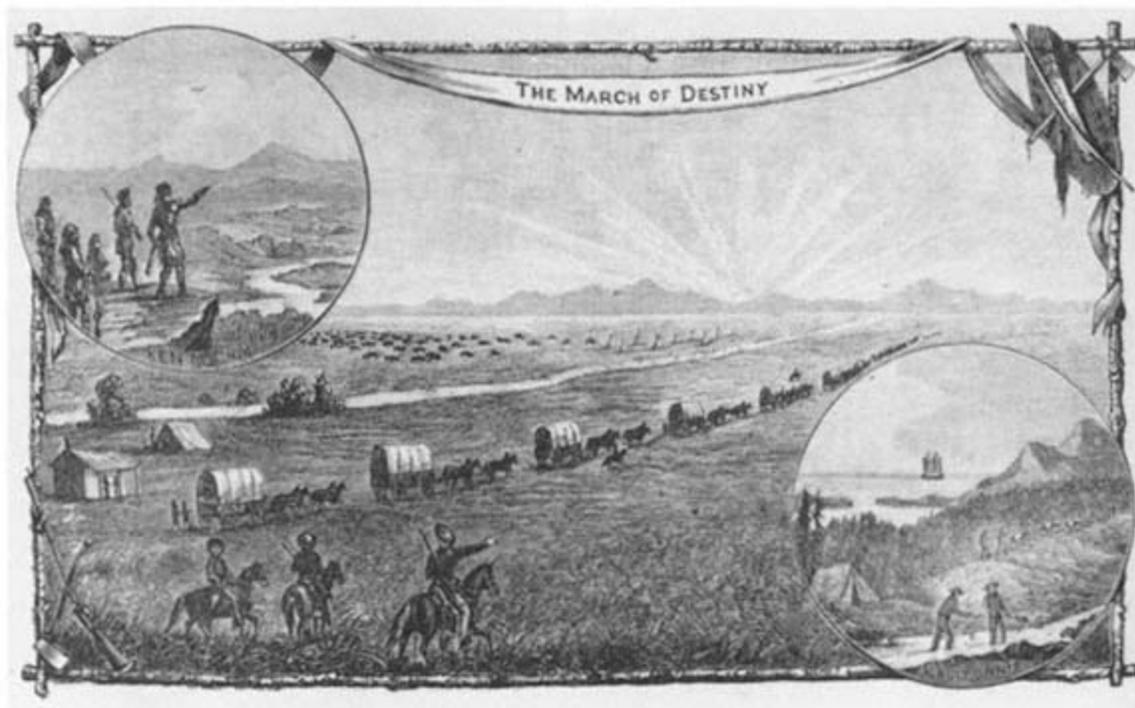


Figure 3.
"The March of Destiny," from Colonel Frank Triplett, *Conquering the Wilderness; or, New Pictorial History of the Heros and Heroines of America . . .* (New York, 1883).



Figure 4.
Across the Continent:
"Westward the Course
of Empire Takes Its Way," 1868.

By the nineteenth century western North America was represented conventionally on maps as largely empty and unknown. But earlier maps, those of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, for example, had portrayed a densely occupied continent teeming with people. The 1718 *Carte de la Louisiane et du Cours du Mississipi* (Figure 5) depicted an occupied continent with Indian as well as European towns and villages. A similar 1776 map of the region east of the Mississippi showed an equally inhabited interior. Although Europeans had only a partial knowledge of this interior, they assumed that it was occupied.²⁷

By the nineteenth century all this had changed. In illustrated maps, as in contemporary prints depicting the progress of pioneers, only a few scattered Indians appeared. They were either retreating or quietly observing the coming of whites. The maps Americans studied at school broadcast the same message even more forcefully. The map of the early republic in the companion atlas to Emma Willard's widely used nineteenth-century school text vividly portrays the West as empty land (Figure 6). Small villages of French Canadians appear on the map, but Willard has completely erased Indians. This message of settlers peacefully occupying vacant territory recurred in the popular literature of the West. Joaquin Miller's "Westward Ho," for example, celebrated a conquest "without the guilt/Of studied battle."



O bearded, stalwart, westmost men,
So tower-like, so Gothic built!
A kingdom won without the guilt
Of studied battle, that hath been
Your blood's inheritance. . . .²⁸

Figure 5.
Guillaume de Lisle, *Carte
de la Louisiane et du Cours du Mississipi*, 1718.

Turner, like Miller, recognized conflict with the Indians, but for him it was merely part of a much larger contact with wilderness that engulfed settlers in a primitive world and necessitated the pioneers' initial regression subsequent recapitulation of the stages of civilization. Conquest was not "studied," it carried no burden of "guilt."

Turner symbolized the initial regression from which future progress sprang with the log cabin. The "wilderness," he declared in Chicago, "masters the colonist. . . . It puts him in the log cabin of the Cherokee and Iroquois."²⁹ Through the log cabin, Turner linked pioneers with Indians and wilderness. By the 1890s the log cabin had long been the chief icon of the nineteenth-century frontier, if not of American culture itself. It marked both regression, as the wilderness mastered the settler, and the beginning of the recapitulation of civilized progress. A cabin, built with simple tools from local materials, proclaimed self-reliance and a connection with place. Usually isolated, it stressed the courage of the builder and the challenge that the surrounding wilderness represented. But most of all, the cabin had come to represent progress.

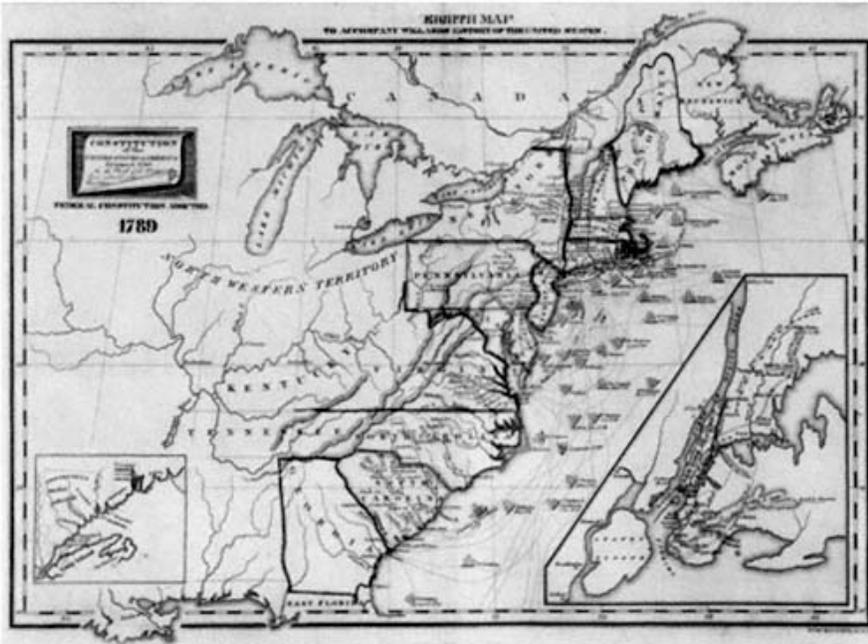


Figure 6.
Eighth map in the bound series of maps that accompanies Emma Willard's *History of the United States, or Republic of America . . .* (New York, 1828).



Figure 7.
"An American Log-house," from Georges Henri Victor Collot, *Voyage dans l'Amérique septentrionale . . .* (Paris, 1826).

This link to progress was not intrinsic. Indeed an early representation of the log cabin, the etching in the atlas accompanying Georges Henri Victor Collot's *Voyage dans l'Amérique septentrionale*, only hints at progress (Figure 7). The woman standing at the door identifies this cabin as the home of a family rather than a hunter, and the stumps suggest the family's intention to farm. But the message of progress is diluted and ambiguous. The stumps, juxtaposed with the beautiful, haunting trees and the primitive and isolated structure, give no strong indication of change for the better. Even at mid-century the log cabin sometimes retained its tinge of rustic backwardness. George Caleb Bingham's painting of a squatter's cabin has little of the progressive about it.³⁰ And later, in different contexts, sharecroppers' cabins or cabins in Appalachia represented backwardness and poverty rather than progress and prosperity.

Only when coupled with a knowledge of the success to follow did the cabin proclaim great achievements from small beginnings. This was its purpose in William Henry Harrison's Log Cabin campaign and in the Lincoln presidential campaign. On the cover of the sheet music *Tippecanoe, the Hero of North Bend: Six Patriotic Ballads* (Figure 8), published in 1840, the portrait of Harrison looms like the sun over a log cabin, which basks in reflected glory. Presidential birth or residence in a log cabin assumed meaning only in light of the subsequent presidency.³¹ The achievements of modern America made frontier cabins symbols of progress. The cabin demanded such pairings to evoke the historical narrative of national progress accomplished through self-reliance and individual energy.

Local and popular histories made similar use of cabin imagery. In Joseph Smith's *Old Redstone* (1854) a set of four illustrations (Figure 9) progressed from a "Log Cabin Meeting House" to "A Meeting House of 2nd Class" (still a log cabin) and finally to the ornate twin-towered "First Presbyterian Church, Pittsburg, Pa." Such visual narratives provided a tangible groundwork for Turner.

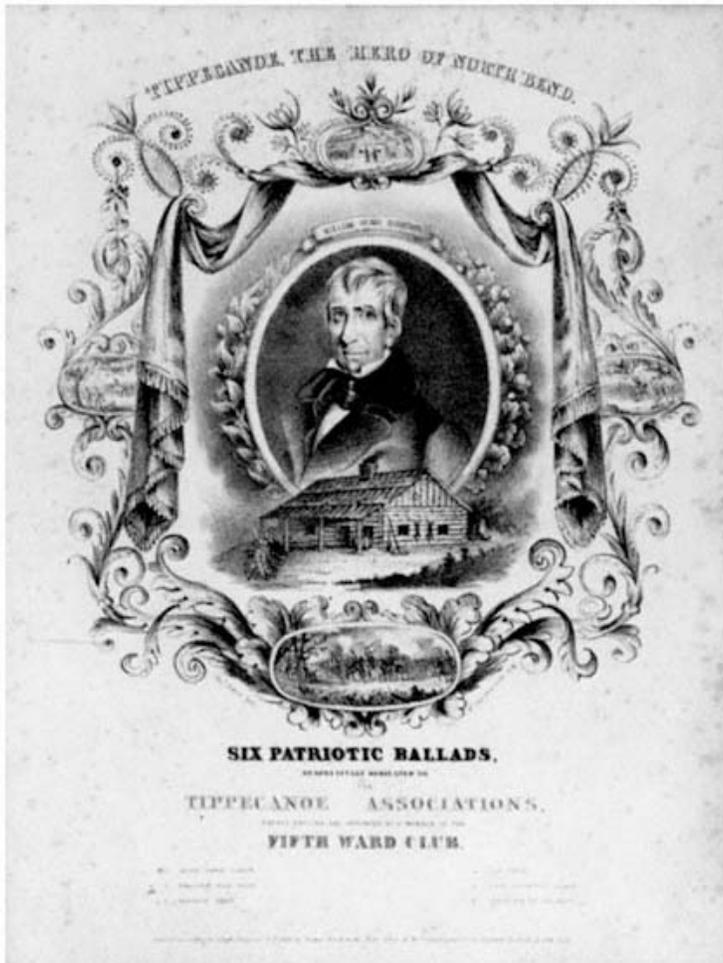


Figure 8.
Tippecanoe, the Hero of North Bend: Six
Patriotic Ballads . . . (New York, 1840).



Figure 9.
 Illustration from Joseph Smith, *Old Redstone; or, Historical Sketches of Western Presbyterianism: Its Early Ministers, Its Perilous Times, and Its First Records.*

But the cabin iconography that probably most clearly prefigured Turner appeared first in county atlases and then in the county histories that proliferated throughout the Midwest in the 1880s. These books commonly featured illustrations of prosperous contemporary farms that included, either in the picture itself or in an inset, a log cabin. The movement from the cabin to the developed farm signified progress. In many cases the message was made explicit. In the *History of Calhoun County, Michigan* (Figure 10), portraits of Ira A. Warren and Susan J. Warren framed an inset of a cabin, while the bottom half of the picture portrayed their current farm. In the *History of Ingham and Eaton Counties*, the large and lavish "Residence of Jas. T. Bullen" served as a symbol of his success, but hovering above it is an inset of a small cabin behind a split-rail fence labeled "First Home in the Woods."³²

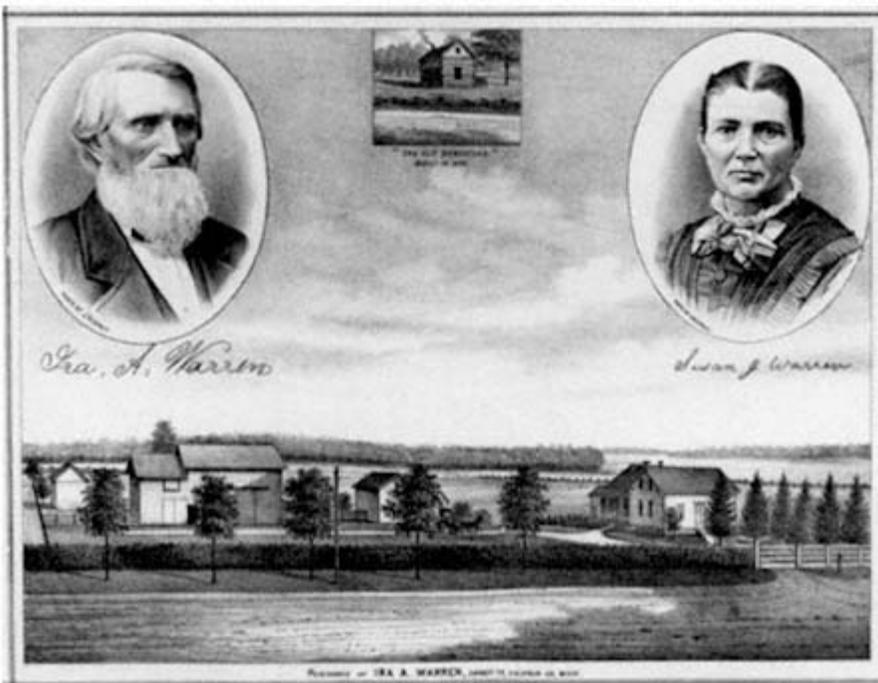


Figure 10.
 Residence of Ira A. Warren, from H. B. Pierce, *History of Calhoun County, Michigan* (Philadelphia, 1877).

Images of personal progress could also illustrate collective progress. Early maps of Chicago employed the same progressive imagery as the county histories. A poster entitled *Chicago in Early Days, 1779–1857*, originally published in 1893, traces Chicago's development from fur-trading outpost and Indian town to growing city.³³ In the insets surrounding the map, cabins yield to frame buildings. A second poster published the same year, *Chicago in 1832* (Figure 11), focuses on a placid "faithful" view of the early settlement. But insets show both the city's geographical expansion by the 1890s and the extraordinary growth of its population.



Figure 11.
George Davis, *Chicago in 1832*. A later version (1893) of progressive imagery in Chicago maps.

Turner defined American culture as progressive, but the progress he envisioned was achieved, paradoxically, by retreating to the primitive along successive frontiers. Being in "continuous touch with the simplicity of primitive society" shaped American character.³⁴ New frontiers implied a constant reinvigoration of the country and its people. "American development has exhibited not merely advance along a single line, but a return to primitive conditions on a continually advancing frontier line, and a new development for that area." Turner framed these ideas with an elegance and sophistication beyond that of the writers and illustrators of county histories and popular accounts of pioneer life. But he adopted the theme of these works, which had, in effect, prepared the way for him. Midwestern farmers who understood their own lives as tracing the trajectory of progress from log cabins to prosperous farms, or Chicagoans not far removed from the time when their city was an Indian town with only a fur trader's cabin representing non-Indian occupation, formed an ideal audience for Turner. His themes would resonate with readers because he gave sophisticated form to what they already believed. His story of the country mimicked and validated their stories of their own lives and collective accomplishments. Their story became the American story.

The inhabitants of the various American Wests, no matter what their actual descent, considered their lives American. The environment of the frontier made them so. They said as much in the county histories and in the biographical dictionaries, or mugbooks, that followed them. In popular histories as well, the frontier acted like an acid eating away the immigrants' past and forcing them to remake themselves in the present as representative Americans. James W. Steele in *The Sons of the Border* (1873) declared:

The Borderer is a man not born, but unconsciously to himself, *made* by his surroundings and necessities. He may have been born on the Chesapeake or the banks of Juniata; he may hail from Lincolnshire or Cork: far Western life will clothe him with a new individuality, make him forget the tastes and habits of early life, and transform him into one of that restless horde of cosmopolites who form the crest of the slow wave of humanity which year by year creeps toward the setting sun.³⁵

In basing the genuine American character upon the experience of pioneers—an experience that at once stripped them of their past and gave them a new and uniform set of American characteristics—Turner conceptualized what was already conventional.³⁶ With the frontier as an organizing idea, he built a monumental narrative whose framework would guide the study of American history in succeeding generations.

Buffalo Bill's Inverted Conquest

Buffalo Bill told another story and deployed a different set of icons. His narrative differs most noticeably from Turner's in the roles assigned to Indians (Figure 12). On Turner's frontier Indians were not so much absent as peripheral; they were not essential to the meaning of his narrative. But Indians were everywhere in Buffalo Bill's Wild West. Illustrations of Indians were prominent not only in advertisements but throughout the program. A "horde of war-painted Arapahoes, Cheyenne, and Sioux Indians" participated in the Wild West.³⁷

The role of these Indians in the show was to attack whites. Many of the great set pieces of the Wild West—"A Prairie Emigrant Train Crossing the Plains," the "Capture of the Deadwood Mail Coach by the Indians," and, the most famous of all, "The Battle of the Little Big Horn, Showing with Historical Accuracy the Scene of Custer's Last Charge"—featured Indian attacks.³⁸

Buffalo Bill offered what to a modern historian seems an odd story of conquest: everything is inverted. His spectacles presented an account of Indian aggression and white defense; of Indian killers and white victims; of, in effect, badly abused conquerors. Such reenactments open a window onto a particularly interesting aspect of American iconography of the frontier. To achieve Joaquin Miller's "kingdom won without the guilt/Of studied battle," Americans had to transform conquerors into victims. The great military icons of American westward expansion are not victories, they are defeats: the Alamo and the Battle of the Little Bighorn. We, these stories say, do not plan our conquests—we do not, in Joaquin Miller's words, fight "studied battles." We just retaliate against barbaric massacres.

Like Turner, Buffalo Bill found both the theme and the icons for his narrative readily available. The theme of white victimization was so common that Turner himself, in what amounted to an aside, also made conquerors into victims. He spoke of Indians as a "common danger" that kept alive "the power of resistance to aggression." He, as much as Buffalo Bill, presented this striking reversal of the actual history as mere conventional wisdom.³⁹ Popular iconography gave this reversal of roles its power, surrounding Americans with images of valiant white victims overpowered by savage assailants. In the version of the frontier Buffalo Bill developed, the continent was no longer empty; it teemed with murderous Indian enemies.



Figure 12.
"Sitting Bull and Buffalo
Bill." Postcard (no date).

Buffalo Bill exploited an iconography that stretched back to Puritan captivity narratives and continued through the wars of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Along with captivity narratives and popular fiction, nineteenth-century accounts of assaults by the Indians, such as the "Massacre of Baldwin's Family by the Savages" and "Murder of the whole Family of Samuel Wells . . . by the Indians" (Figure 13), kept this theme of white victimization central to the American understanding of Indian wars. Pictures of Indians attacking helpless white women and children or badly outnumbered white men became a staple of nineteenth-century popular histories (Figure 14).⁴⁰

Indeed, the theme of Indian aggression persisted even after the United States had placed the Indians on reservations. As Buffalo Bill restaged the Little Bighorn in Chicago, the *Chicago Tribune* carried accounts of Indian aggression and white defense, with headlines in June and July 1893 proclaiming "Fears of Outbreak . . . Agent's House Is Surrounded and He Is Compelled to Send for Aid," and "Maddened by Liquor: Indians at Leech Lake Threaten to Do Serious Harm," and, finally, "Indians Attempt to Lynch a Farmer."⁴¹

Buffalo Bill played no small part in making the image of Custer's defeat and the slaughter of most of his command the chief icon of this theme of the conquering victim.⁴² Where representation stopped and lived experience began were never very clear in Buffalo Bill's Wild West, especially with regard to Buffalo Bill's relationship to Custer (Figure 15). This ambiguity gave the Wild West its power. Buffalo Bill created what now seems a postmodern West in which performance and history were hopelessly intertwined. The story Buffalo Bill told gained credence from his claim (and the claim of many of the Indians who accompanied him) that he had lived part of it.

The show and lived historical reality constantly imitated each other. Sitting Bull, whom Americans credited with being the architect of Custer's defeat, toured afterward with the Wild West. And a famous picture (reproduced in Figure 12) shows him, in a long eagle-feather headdress, posing with Buffalo Bill before a studio backdrop.⁴³ Some of the Sioux who charged Custer at the Little Bighorn would later charge him nightly in the Wild West. Indians who fought whites in Cody's Wild West would return to the Dakotas to fight whites for real during the culmination of the Ghost Dance troubles that led to the slaughter of the Sioux at Wounded Knee in 1890. Buffalo Bill would step off the stage during both the Custer Campaign and the Ghost Dance to serve as an army scout, each time incorporating aspects of his experience into the show.⁴⁴

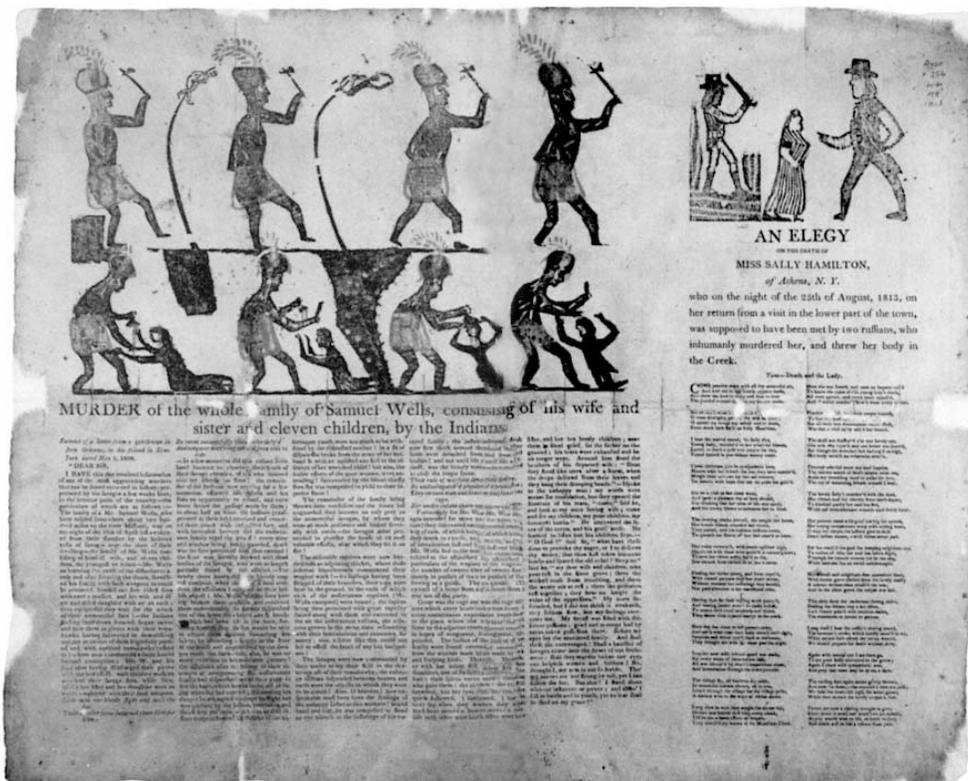
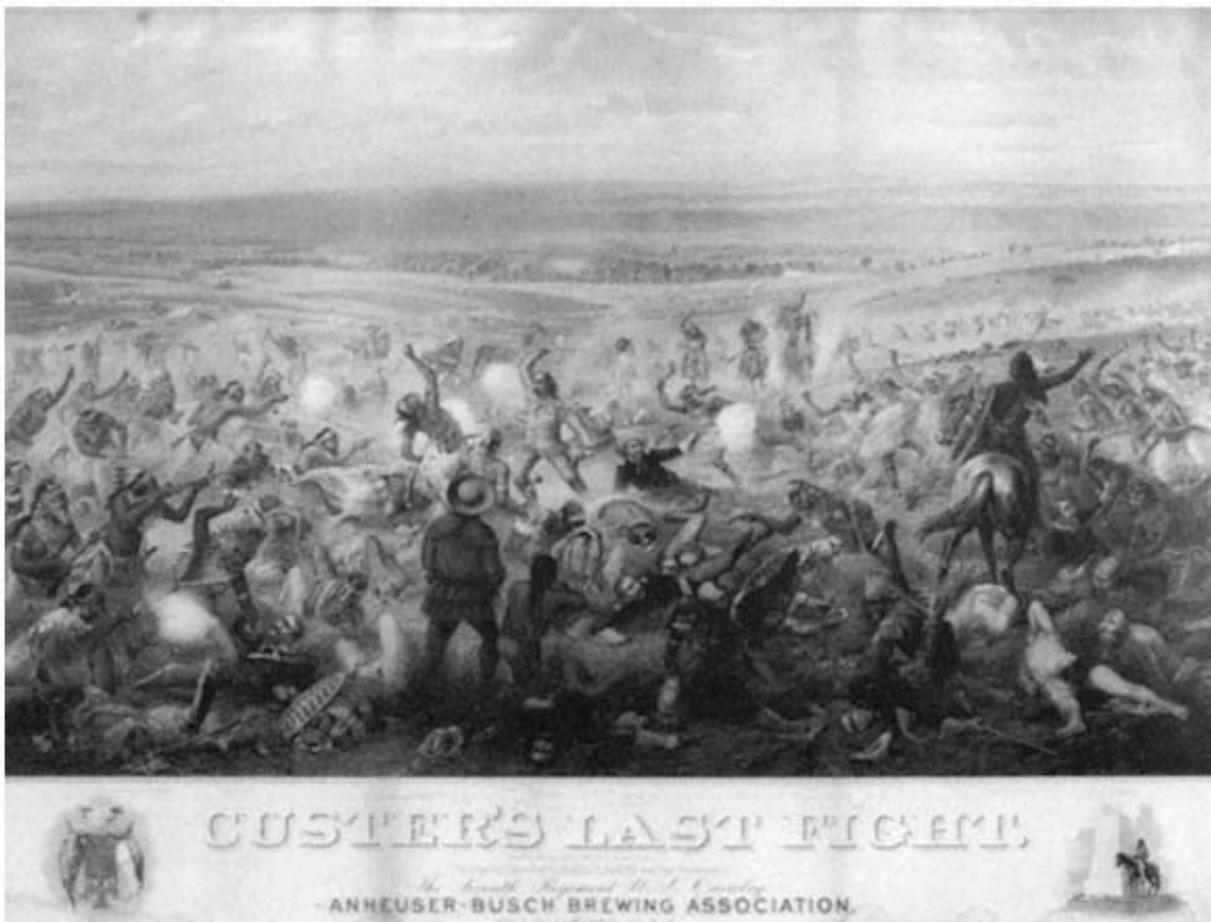


Figure 13. "Murder of the whole Family of Samuel Wells, consisting of his wife and sister and eleven children, by the Indians: Extract of a letter from a gentleman in New Orleans, to his friend in New-York, dated May 1, 1809."



Figure 14.
 "Heroism of a Pioneer Woman," from Henry Howe,
 The Great West: The Vast, Illimitable, Changing
 West (New York, 1860). Not all women were
 portrayed as helpless victims.

Figure 15.
 "Custer's Last Fight." Poster advertisement, first edition.
 Anheuser-Busch Brewing Association,
 St. Louis, Mo., 1896. Photograph courtesy of the Anheuser-
 Busch Corporate Archives, St. Louis.



The most dramatic and revealing example of this complicated mimesis is the Yellow Hand incident. Leaving the stage in Wilmington, Delaware, in June 1876, Buffalo Bill had joined the Fifth Cavalry as a scout. He was in the field when the Sioux defeated Custer. During a skirmish that July, he had killed and scalped the Cheyenne Hay-owei, whose name was translated Yellow Hand (see Plate 3).⁴⁵ The skirmish with Yellow Hand, a piece of reality staged as theater, was being assimilated into Buffalo Bill's stage persona even as it happened. Buffalo Bill had prepared for the anticipated engagement by dressing in his showman's costume—"a Mexican vaquero outfit of black velvet slashed with scarlet and trimmed with silver buttons and lace"—which in his performances became the very clothing in which he had fought Yellow Hand.⁴⁶

Killed by a man in theatrical dress, Yellow Hand died only to have Buffalo Bill resurrect him for the stage melodrama entitled "The Red Right Hand; or the First Scalp for Custer."⁴⁷ Buffalo Bill dispatched Yellow Hand nightly, repeatedly taking that "first scalp." Meanwhile Yellow Hand's actual scalp went on display in theaters where Buffalo Bill performed in what the program described as another "realistic Western Drama," *Life on the Border* (Figure 16). Yellow Hand had become a prop that validated Buffalo Bill's stories.⁴⁸

Buffalo Bill, particularly in his identification with Custer, provided what Turner left out: the story of the conquest of the Indians. He did it by adopting a mythic mode already familiar to Americans, that of heroic victims and their rescuers and avengers (see Plate 4). The posters for Buffalo Bill's Wild West showed Indian assaults on covered wagons, Indian assaults on the Deadwood stage, and Indian assaults on small beleaguered bands of white men who valiantly defended themselves against circling warriors (see Plate 5). On the rare occasions when whites attacked, they were clearly coming to the rescue. In one scene Buffalo Bill and his Rough Riders charged in to save a white man being burned at a slow fire, a weeping white woman on her knees beside him (see Figure 24).⁴⁹

Whereas Turner called forth well-known images in words, Buffalo Bill literally brought images to life. Where books, paintings, and some other shows depicting Indians offered only words, pictures, or white actors, Buffalo Bill presented actual Indians, who now inhabited their own representations. This was the most complicated kind of mimesis. Indians were imitating imitations of themselves. They reenacted white versions of events in which some of them had actually participated. In a way that prefigured the movies, Buffalo Bill enacted history. For millions of people his representation of the West became the reality. The genius of Buffalo Bill was to recognize the power of the mimetic, of the imitation, in the modern world.

Captain Jack Crawford, who joined Buffalo Bill in these pre-Wild West performances in 1877, was equally attuned to the power of the mimetic. Captain Jack, the Poet Scout (Figure 17), went on to a long career of his own, but Custer and Buffalo Bill gave him his big break. Jack Crawford was an Irish immigrant who had worked in the coal mines of Pennsylvania. After moving west following the Civil War, he apparently found employment as a janitor at the *Omaha Daily Bee*. By the time of the gold rush to Lakota lands that precipitated Custer's last campaign, he had become the paper's Black Hills correspondent. When Lakota resistance began, he set himself up as chief of a hastily organized volunteer company of scouts, but he did little (if any) scouting. Crawford was on his way back to Omaha, seeking to persuade eastern capitalists to invest in the Black Hills, when the Lakotas defeated Custer.⁵⁰

At the end of July, outfitted in buckskin by his employers at the *Bee*, he went west to join the Fifth Cavalry and Buffalo Bill. When Buffalo Bill departed in mid-campaign to resume his stage career, he recommended Captain Jack to succeed him as chief of scouts. In September Crawford was fired for leaving the command to deliver dispatches to the *New York Herald*. But the *Herald* advanced Captain Jack's celebrity by publishing his own story of the ride. That winter Captain Jack joined Buffalo Bill on the stage.⁵¹

Buffalo Bill and Captain Jack created malleable combinations of experience and staged fiction. The 1877 program recounted how Buffalo Bill had sent Captain Jack a dispatch informing him of Custer's death, which in turn had supposedly occasioned Captain Jack's rather confused poem, "Custer's Death," published in the *Black Hills Pioneer*, August 5, 1876, and reproduced the following year in the program for Buffalo Bill's *Life on the Border* (see Figure 16). The poem demanded vengeance on "these demons" who had killed Custer. Custer's death was to be avenged by volunteers whose identity (much like Captain Jack's own) shifted according to the need of the poet. Their efforts would not "leave a red."⁵² Unfortunately for Captain Jack, it was he who was playing the "red," Yellow Hand,

onstage in Virginia City, reenacting the famous duel, when a drunken Buffalo Bill accidentally slashed him twice in the scripted knife fight. When he recovered, Captain Jack left the show.⁵³

In poetry and onstage the basic message was clear: The slaughter of the heroic Custer justified retaliatory massacre. This inversion of aggressor and victim that justified conquest was played out over and over again. Buffalo Bill's 1893 program reprinted from *Beadle's Weekly* a poem, "Cody's Corral," by Buckskin Sam, whose last few lines read:

. . . the victors quick dismounted, and looking all around,
 On their dead and mangled enemies, whose corsers [sic] strewed the ground,
 "I had sworn I would avenge them"—were the words of Buffalo Bill—
 "The mothers and their infants they slew at Medicine Hill.
 Our work is done—done nobly—I looked for that from you;
 Boys when a cause is just, you need but stand firm and true!"⁵⁴

Buffalo Bill and Captain Jack, linked with Custer at least tangentially through actual experience and directly through their reenactments and commemorations of his death, carried the connection one step further. They looked like Custer (Figure 18). But then Custer himself had affected the long hair and buckskin clothing of a scout; in effect, he had imitated an icon on his way to becoming one. Pictures of Buffalo Bill in profile and portraits of Custer in profile are startlingly similar, and Captain Jack, like so many western performers, mirrored both of them. The effect is not accidental. Buffalo Bill imitates Custer's pose, wears his hat, and in one representation is "surrounded" by pictures of Indians, including Sitting Bull, who fought whites.⁵⁵

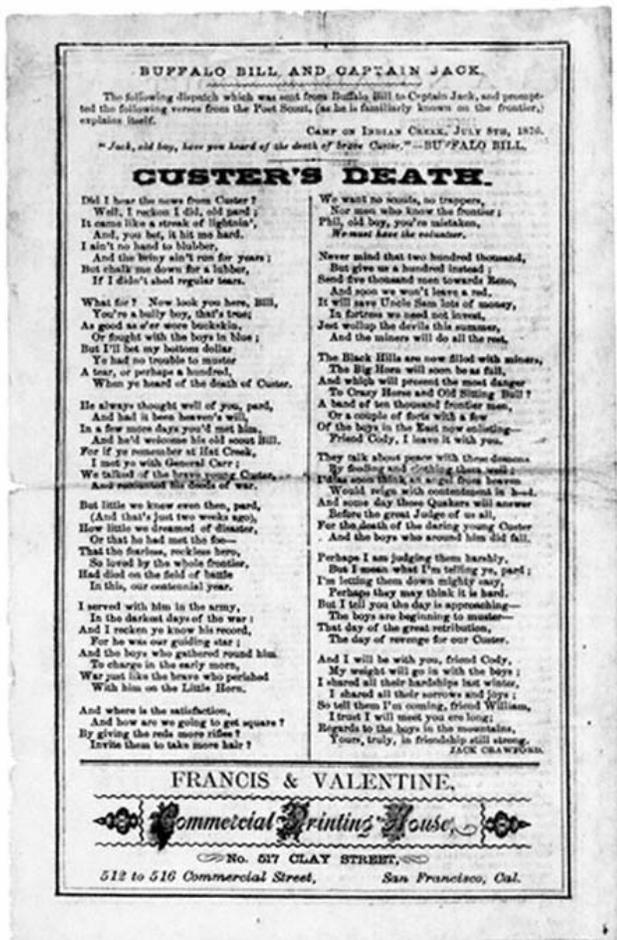


Figure 16.
 Back and front
 cover of the program for
 Buffalo Bill and Captain Jack in
 Life on the Border; with "Custer's
 Death," a poem by Captain
 Jack Crawford (Oakland, Calif., 1877).

The Newberry Library
The Everett D. Graff Collection
of Western Americana

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ATZ OPERA HOUSE, OAKLAND,
ONLY WEDNESDAY, JUNE 13th, 1877.
50 Cts. & \$1.00. No extra charge for Reserved Seats.—At usual places.

THE RENOWNED HISTORICAL CELEBRITIES.

BUFFALO BILL AND CAPTAIN JACK

(HON. W. F. CODY.)

(J. W. CRAWFORD.)

Chief Scout for Gen'l TERRY and CROOK.

The "Post Scout" of the Black Hills, direct from GEN'L. CROOK'S command.



HON. W. F. CODY — (BUFFALO BILL.)

In the realistic Western Drama, written especially for BUFFALO BILL, by J. A. COLE, entitled

LIFE ON THE BORDER

Supported by a Powerful Dramatic Organization.

CHANCE OF PROGRAMME NIGHTLY.

THE SCALP AND WAR PARAPHERNALIA OF YELLOW HAND, Chief of 800 Cheyenne Braves, KILLED BY BUFFALO BILL, at the Battle of Indian Creek, Black Hills, July 26th, 1876, are on Free Exhibition in the most prominent Show Window in this City on the advertised dates.

Printed & Published by J. W. CRAWFORD, 217 The Block, San Francisco.

Figure 16.
Back and front cover of the program for Buffalo Bill and Captain Jack in Life on the Border; with "Custer's Death," a poem by Captain Jack Crawford (Oakland, Calif., 1877).

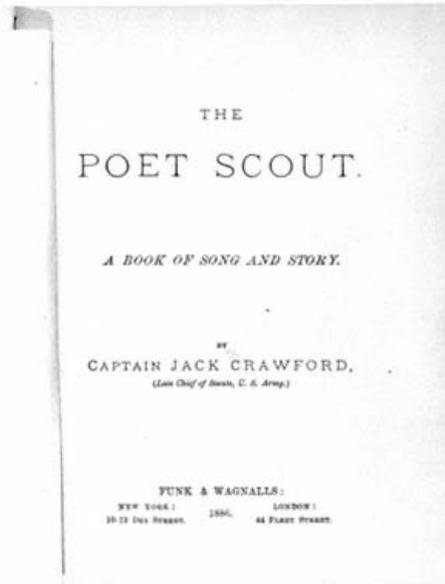


Figure 17.
The Poet Scout, by Captain
Jack Crawford (New York, 1886).



Figure 18.
Profile of George Armstrong
Custer from his book Wild Life on
the Plains (St. Louis, Mo., 1891).

But as it turns out, the Indians who came to inhabit Buffalo Bill's version of the Custer fight had their own story to tell. At least eight Northern Cheyenne artists, for example, drew pictures of the Custer campaign in a ledger book now in the Newberry Library. These drawings depict battles and skirmishes that took place as part of the Sioux campaign of 1876, but they focus on events not featured in American accounts. In the midst of their own terrible defeat—the Mackenzie Fight at the Powder River—Northern Cheyenne artists depicted the power contained in the war bonnet and bow-lance carried by the leading man of Kit Fox Society, a Cheyenne warrior society (Figure 19). Bullets rain around him and his companions, all of whom remain unscathed.⁵⁶

Unlike the Cheyenne artists, Amos Bad Heart Buffalo, a Lakota artist, produced, in the early twentieth century, pictures of the Custer fight itself. Basing his paintings on the accounts of warriors who had fought in the Battle of the Little Bighorn, he created a series of striking depictions. Indians on blue and green horses sweep in among the soldiers (see Plate 6). There is neither a last stand nor an exclusive focus on Custer. Instead, the battle emerges as a bloody running fight, with Lakotas, Cheyennes, and American soldiers mixed together.

Such Lakota and Cheyenne images initially existed separate from the American iconography of Custer and the Sioux campaign of 1876. Indian and white artists shared a common subject, but they understood and organized it in

dramatically different ways. Within a few years of the Amos Bad Heart Buffalo paintings, some Lakota depictions of the battle began to change in a manner that suggests a convergence of American and Lakota concerns. About 1913–14 Aaron McGaffey Beede, an Episcopalian former missionary to the Sioux and a Fort Yates attorney and newspaper publisher, obtained a series of "portraits" of Custer from Indians at Standing Rock. Red Fish, a Santee-Yanktonai on the Standing Rock Reservation, drew (apparently at Beede's request) several pictures of Custer (see Plate 7).⁵⁷ Another artist, No-Two-Horn, drew a picture of Sitting Bull and Custer on the title page of a copy of Beede's verse play *Sitting Bull-Custer* (Figure 20). He depicted Sitting Bull, who in the play visits Custer's corpse at sunset on the day of the battle, as being startled by Custer's *woniya*, or spirit.⁵⁸

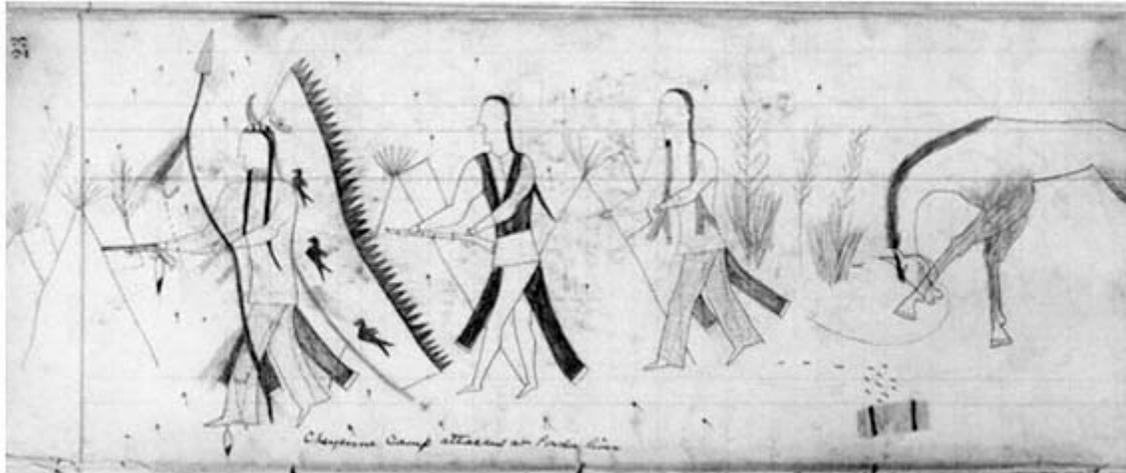


Figure 19.
"Cheyenne Camp attacked at Powder River," drawing in the
Newberry Library's "Cheyenne Ledger Book" (no date).

It is dangerous to read too much into these intriguing and ambiguous drawings, but it does seem clear enough that through Beede, Lakota and American depictions of the battle entered into an interesting, if tangled, conversation.⁵⁹ Red Fish, in one of his paintings, portrays what the historian Phil Deloria has called cultural cross-dressing. Custer, dressed as an Indian, had, a notation on one of the pictures claims, the "tun" of an Indian. *Tun* (or *tunj* or *ton*) is a difficult word to translate. Nineteenth-century dictionaries render it "spirit," but for modern Lakotas it means "of a place or of the homeland of a people." Beede argued that the Lakotas respected Custer and thought he had the spiritual power of an Indian.⁶⁰ If this unusual claim is true, then Red Fish's depiction of him as an Indian has a certain logic. Custer and his image were being assimilated by at least some of the Indians at Standing Rock. Their portrayals of him as an alien in Lakota dress were similar to Amos Bad Heart Buffalo's portrayal of himself as a cowboy in white man's clothing.⁶¹ He was an Indian cowboy; Custer was a white warrior.

Although such interpretations of the meaning Lakota artists intended can be only tentative, the association of these artists with Beede is clear and revealing.⁶² Beede, claiming that his play, *Sitting Bull-Custer*, represented an Indian understanding of the conflict with Custer, incorporated into it elements of a Lakota cosmology. Custer's *woniya*, for example, predicts Sitting Bull's own death fifteen years later.⁶³ In response to this text, No-Two-Horn, a Lakota, drew Beede's version of a supposedly Lakota story. But No-Two-Horn's style is distinct from that of other Lakota art of the time,⁶⁴ and the portrait of Custer itself appears to have been drawn from pictures available in the popular press.



Figure. 20.

Hand-colored photograph of painting by No-Two-Horn opposite the title page in Aaron McGaffey Beede, *Sitting Bull-Custer*. Annotated (by Beede?) as follows: "This shows S. Bull by Custer's dead body about sunset. Custer's ghost (Woniya) is departing. The Woniya of a man or a beast first assumes the form of a young tree or plant, then in time. . . ."

We are confronted with a complicated cultural product: a Lakota drawing (by No-Two-Horn) produced in a style that borrows elements from popular illustrations to depict a scene in a white man's play written to communicate the Indians' point of view. Custer had come to be part of Sioux culture just as Sitting Bull had become part of American culture. According to Beede, the Lakotas in the early twentieth century still reported appearances of Custer's ghost along the Grand River.⁶⁵ In a complex process of cross-fertilization in the early twentieth century, Lakota stories and American stories were merging.

The signs of this cross-fertilization have left their traces in library collections. Beede sent the original drawings by Red Fish to Edward Ayer, whose collection was already part of the Newberry Library in Chicago. Someone, either Beede or Dr. N. W. Jipson, who received a shipment of Lakota art from Beede, appears to have made a photograph of the No-Two-Horn drawing and to have had it hand colored (this version is reproduced as Figure 20). It, too, found its way into the Ayer collection.⁶⁶ Whites were constantly soliciting other Indians' accounts of the battle, and the Crow scout Curley and Lakota warriors, including Rain-in-the-Face, the Lakota reputed to have killed Custer (Figure 21), provided them.⁶⁷ Ayer acquired the ledger books and paintings commemorating the battle and added them to the portraits his nephew Elbridge Ayer Burbank had painted of Lakotas and other western Indians.⁶⁸ Indian and white paintings and stories met in public and private collections in confrontations more complex, if less bloody, than those on the battlefield.

There is a nice symbolism in this meeting. In the Ayer collection Burbank's portrait of Rain-in-the-Face portrayed him in white man's dress, which in fact he often wore. In the collection, too, was Red Fish's picture of Custer in Lakota dress.⁶⁹ In different ways white representations and Lakota representations of the battle mimicked, fed on, and challenged each other. By the time of Big Bill Thompson's administration (he was mayor of Chicago from 1915 to 1923 and 1927 to 1931), a visiting Lakota delegation had him posing in a headdress as part of their campaign to change the portrayal of the Battle of the Little Bighorn in Chicago schoolbooks from an Indian massacre of whites to an American attack on Indians.⁷⁰



Figure 21.
Elbridge Ayer Burbank, Rain-in-the-Face. Sioux. Oil on board, 1898.

The Frontier and American Identity

When the Lakotas moved to change the stories told about the Custer fight, they encountered the legacy of their old colleague Buffalo Bill.⁷¹ For by the early twentieth century there was no way to tell stories about the West, no way to talk about an American identity, without confronting either Buffalo Bill or Turner. They had divided the narrative space of the West between them.

The division was not simple. Turner's "Significance of the Frontier" and Buffalo Bill's Wild West stand in complex and revealing relation to each other, a point we miss by trivializing Buffalo Bill and thus obscuring the common grounding of his and Turner's stories. To see Turner as serious and significant and Buffalo Bill as a charlatan and a curiosity, to see Turner as history and Buffalo Bill as entertainment, to see one as concerned with reality and the other with myth is to miss their common reliance on, and promotion of, the iconography of their time. Turner and Cody followed separate but connected strands of a single mythic cloth. And as in Chicago one hundred years ago, their seemingly contradictory stories make historical sense only when told together.

Even as they told their stories, however, Turner and Buffalo Bill shared a conviction that the experience that had produced them was no longer available: the Wild West, the frontier, was dead. And the icons of that frontier themselves became tinged with an aura of loss.

Cowboys had been part of Buffalo Bill's Wild West from its beginnings in 1882 (see Plate 8).⁷² Indeed, Buffalo Bill and other Wild West showmen created the cowboy as an icon as much as they capitalized on an existing iconography. Gradually cowboys elbowed aside Indians and scouts as the main attraction in Buffalo Bill's Wild

West. But they clearly dominated both the posters and the shows only in the twentieth century, when they became the representative roughriders.⁷³

Many, however, felt that the actual cowboy was vanishing even as the iconographic cowboy populated the American imagination. Ironically, the cowboy became an American symbol in the very era that announced the end of the West and the closing of the frontier that had created him. Cowboys too joined the chorus: by the early twentieth century, Charlie Russell, the most thoughtful of the cowboy artists, could declare that the West was dead.⁷⁴

For him as much as for Turner and Buffalo Bill the story of the West ended with progress killing its parents. Born of the frontier—a constant return to the primitive and natural—progress became its mortal enemy, for it eliminated the wellspring of primitivism upon which the western experience depended. The image of the future—a not altogether happy future—became the city. Russell wrote to a friend in 1916, "If I had a winter home in Hell and a summer home in Chicago I think I'd spend my summers at my winter home." There might be as many people in hell, Russell thought, but there couldn't be more smoke. Great Falls, Montana, he conceded, would one day be like Chicago, but he was glad he would not be around to see it.⁷⁵ Progress had ceased to seem desirable.

Frederick Jackson Turner, for his part, struggled to escape the pessimism that followed from his own logic. He sought equivalents to the frontier that would act as engines to create democracy and individualism. But mostly he dwelt on the challenges of a postfrontier America. On September 25, 1901, in one of a series of articles written for the *Chicago Record-Herald*, Turner analyzed the difference between earlier immigration and that of his own time:

The immigrant of the preceding period was assimilated with comparative ease, and it can hardly be doubted that valuable contributions to American character have come from this infusion of non-English stock into the American people. But the free lands that made the process of absorption easy have gone. The immigration is becoming increasingly more difficult of assimilation. Its competition with American labor under existing conditions may give increased power to the producer, but the effects upon American social well-being are dangerous in the extreme.

But as in so many other things, Turner's audience had in a sense anticipated his conclusions. The county histories celebrated men like Ernst Dressel: "Although not a native of America, he is loyal to the country of his adoption, and unswervingly devoted to the interest of Lenzburg Township where he has resided for many years."⁷⁶ Dressel had become an American, first, by consenting to do so and offering his loyalty and, second, by undergoing the profoundly Americanizing experience of settling new land. But with the frontier, in Turner's terms, closed, many Americans began to think that only descent from "real" Americans could now produce Americans. Genealogy, which would become an obsession of native-born Americans, was tied to this growing conviction. "Old settlers" validated not only their own but also their children's standing by identifying their families with frontier stories and frontier virtues.

Indeed, Turner's own father, Andrew Jackson Turner, portrayed Columbia County, Wisconsin (Frederick Jackson Turner's boyhood home), in genealogical terms in both the title and the frontispiece (Figure 22) of *The Family Tree of Columbia County, Wis.*, the county history.

Buffalo Bill had said that the children of the pioneers inherited "the homes their fathers located and fenced for them."⁷⁷ But they inherited more than that. They inherited an American identity. What their parents had secured through experience, they secured as an inheritance; descent from true Americans had replaced the pioneers' consenting to undergo the quintessential American frontier experience. New immigrants, to whom this frontier experience was foreclosed, seemed like dangerous, exotic, and unassimilable aliens to many native-born Americans.

In lamenting the lost frontier, the primitive, and direct combat with nature, Turner, Buffalo Bill, and Russell worried not only about assimilation but about manhood as well. Like most of their peers, they understood American space and American experience in gendered terms. The frontier was masculine; machines and cities were its antithesis. They emasculated men, robbed them of their true manhood. Thus cities and machines were defined as feminine. Russell confronted this issue directly:

Invention has made it easy for man kind but it has made him no better. Machinery has no branes. A lady with manicured fingers can drive an automobile with out roaring her polished nails. But to sit behind six range bred horses with both hands full of ribbons these are God made animals and have branes. To drive these over a mountain road takes both hands feet and head its no lady's job. ²⁸



Figure 22.
"The Family Tree of Columbia County, Wis[consin]," from the 1904 book of the same name by Andrew Jackson Turner. Photograph courtesy of the State Historical Society of Wisconsin.

Russell made the same point even more pithily in a painting, *The Old Story*: a car spooks a team of horses pulling a buckboard, throwing the cowboy holding the reins while the well-dressed goggled motorist in his machine looks on. ²⁹

In defining the frontier as both the engine of progress and the domain of real men who dominated other men and nature, Russell, Turner, and Buffalo Bill had seemingly painted themselves into a corner. The frontier story of progress had hidden within it a message of eventual decline. Progress had turned on them and trapped them. Narratives that had summarized firsts now memorialized lasts—the last "real" cowboy, the last "real" Indian, the "last" herd of buffalo—even if, as with Buffalo Bill's last show, the encores seemed to go on for years. And the encores, in a real sense, were the point. For Turner, Buffalo Bill, and Russell had both over-estimated their grasp of

the "real West" and underestimated the power of the stories they had created. So powerful were these that the West had become as much an American story as an American experience. The story could take on a life of its own, and a variety of other Americans attempted to place their own stories within it.

Charlie Russell had at least an inkling that this might happen. In 1917 he inscribed a drawing and a verse to a neighbor's child.

The west is dead my Friend
But writers hold the seed
And what they saw
will live and grow
Again to those who read. ⁸⁰

But what Russell credited to writers—the ability to make the story "live and grow"—really belonged to a much wider group of Americans.

The people of the West and their actual western experiences were, of course, always much more varied and complex than those Turner or Buffalo Bill or Russell had portrayed. Only a few signs of this complexity had not vanished beneath the dominant iconography. The frontispiece of A. T. Andreas's *History of Chicago*, for example, contained the usual log cabin imagery (Figure 23). But the log cabin was that of a black man, Jean Baptiste Pointe du Sable, not a white man. And it was set not in the midst of an empty forest, but near an Indian village. ⁸¹

The stories, like the reality, however, could contain a more diverse cast. What Buffalo Bill and Captain Jack had known, what the Indian showmen had known, was that to be a westerner or a scout or a warrior was at a certain level to inhabit a role. And assume it, occupy it, and reshape it, Americans did. Imaginative possession was not available only to showmen. Upper-class easterners, from Owen Wister (the author of *The Virginian* [1902]) to Frederic Remington to Teddy Roosevelt, created or adopted cowboy identities. ⁸² Roosevelt turned his quest for manhood into a western story. He was the eastern dude who became the cowboy president. He boosted his own cowboy credentials with a series of articles later published as *Ranch Life and the Hunting Trail* (1888), with illustrations by Frederic Remington in later editions. ⁸³ As an army officer he recruited cowboys whose regimental nickname—the Rough Riders—echoed the name of Buffalo Bill's Wild West and Congress of Rough Riders (Figures 24, 25). His cowboy soldiers secured as a gift for Roosevelt a bronze sculpture by Remington—*The Bronco Buster*—that Roosevelt had long admired. Indeed, the cowboy on the bronco looked like Roosevelt, or perhaps vice versa. ⁸⁴

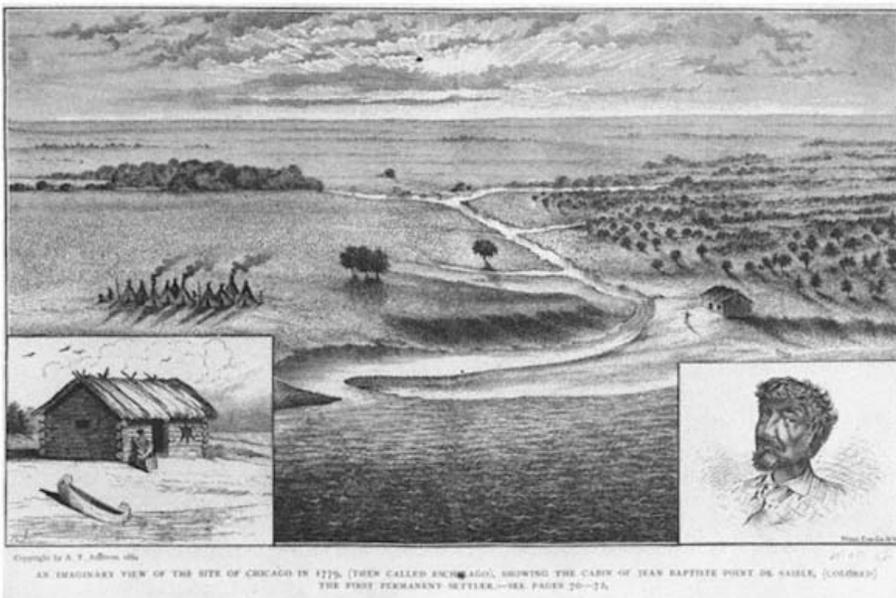


Figure 23.
Frontispiece from A. T. Andreas,
*History of Chicago from the Earliest
Period to the Present Time* (Chicago,
1884), vol. 1.



Figure 24.
 To the Rescue. Poster advertising Buffalo Bill's Wild West (Baltimore, 1894).
 Photograph courtesy of the Buffalo Bill Museum, Cody, Wyoming.

The West of Remington, Roosevelt, and Wister was an unabashedly masculine and nasty place, the domain of Anglo-Saxon men bent on keeping all they regarded as lesser breeds in their place. Wister, Remington, and Roosevelt sought to populate their stories of the West largely with men like themselves. But the stories also slipped from their grasp, just as they had escaped the control of Turner and Buffalo Bill. The stories became contested. They could be inhabited by the very people Remington, Roosevelt, and Wister despised or marginalized: non-whites, immigrants, and women. This initial repopulation of the Wild West was largely imaginative.

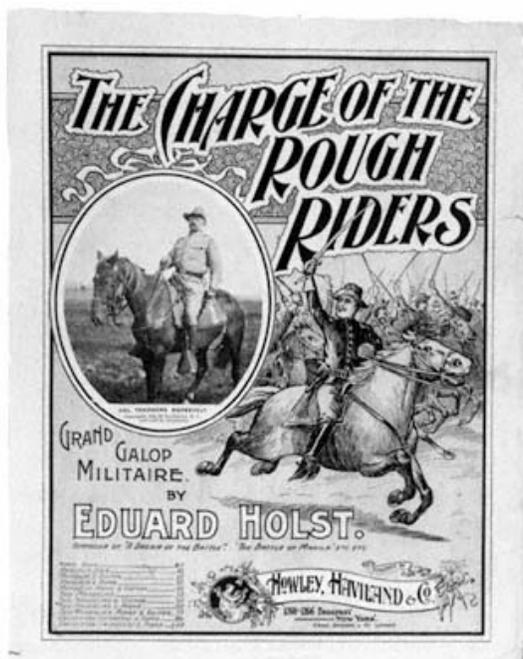


Figure 25.
 Eduard Holst, The Charge of the Rough Riders:
 Grand Galop Militaire, 1898.

In various fictions, for example, women inhabited roles and representations once occupied by white native-born males. This colonization—a kind of cultural cross-dressing—had appeared with Annie Oakley in Buffalo Bill's Wild West, but it was also apparent in popular fiction even as Russell lamented the death of the West. Florence Ryerson's story "The Codfish and the Cattle Princess," which appeared in the September 1918 edition of *Sunset*, was illustrated with a picture in which a woman in cowboy clothes stood before a seated man, their horses in the background. The caption read: "He didn't know any girls at home who dressed like men and could talk to a fellow in this frank and unconscious fashion." Similar images showed up in advertising—as in the famous Jordan automobile advertisement of a "broncho-busting, steer-roping girl"—and later in the movies (see Plate 9). ⁸⁵

Americans, however, did not simply view such representations. They were invited, as consumers, to reenact the stories, and they accepted the invitation. A common convention in the early road maps, for example, was that tourists followed in the path of the pioneers, encountering in some sense what the settlers and scouts had encountered (see Plate 10). Preserved frontier sites or, better yet, newly constructed ones, such as Frontierland in Disneyland or the western town at Knott's Berry Farm, opened opportunities for children, and indeed adults, to reenact western stories.

Such reenactments, such inhabiting of the roles of frontier stories, became a part of most American childhoods. American children dressed as cowboys and Indians. As play space and performance space, the West was fully populated with Jewish and Catholic, African American and Latino, Polish American, Italian American, male and female cowboys and Indians. This imaginative West was a startlingly diverse place.

But so, in fact, was the nineteenth-century West. To be fair to Buffalo Bill, he had recognized this. His Wild West had Indians. It had Annie Oakley. It had Mexican vaqueros such as Vincent Orapeza and Antonio Esquivel. ⁸⁶ Turner, too, of course, had recognized diversity. Although he paid far less attention to non-whites and women, his West had been full of non-English-speaking Europeans whose frontier experience had created an American identity.

In a real sense the imaginative creation of a diverse and performative West, one with more roots in Buffalo Bill than in Turner, prepared the way for a new history that reexamined actual lived nineteenth-century experience in a West much more diverse than that of the Turnerian story. Like Turner and Cody, late-twentieth-century historians have drawn on their world. They have worked from the icons, representations, symbols, images, and possible stories already present in their culture. New Western Histories challenge both the narratives of Buffalo Bill's conquest and the Turnerian story of an advance into an empty continent. They seek to portray an experience more varied and complicated than Buffalo Bill or Turner or Russell had provided.

These stories we tell about the West matter. They not only reveal how we think about ourselves but also help determine how we choose to act toward each other.

Both Turner and Buffalo Bill were storytellers, but neither was content to be a mere storyteller. Each claimed to be an educator, a historian—to represent in his story an actual past. The stories they told were not so much invented (although there was some of that) as selected from the past, with the authors erasing images that did not fit. Such selectivity was necessary, for the past itself is not a story; it is the raw material from which we make coherent stories, not all of them factual. We can, within the repertoire of stories our culture provides, tell any story we want, but not all representations of the past can stand up against the evidence we can recover of real past events and real people

These stories told about the frontier and the West have certainly not always been told with democratic intent, but they have sometimes had democratic consequences. Attempts to close them off, to claim them for certain groups, have failed. They have become democratic stories inhabited by diverse Americans and open to multiple retellings—but at a price. For to tell so many stories of this kind is to cut off the telling of other stories, other narratives, other imaginings.

In any nation's history there can come a time for new stories, but in a country as diverse as the United States the long dominance of this central imaginative narrative of the frontier has had significant virtues. In a country with so many variants of actual experience, it is perhaps a good thing to find imaginative coherence in a set of stories that accept change and conflict as givens. When we all mount up, when we assume the right to inhabit and retell a common past, then there seems to be a unity among us that transcends, without erasing, our differences.

Notes

1. Frederick Jackson Turner, "The Significance of the Frontier in American History," *Annual Report of the American Historical Association for the Year 1893* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1894), 199–227. For details regarding Turner's formulation of the frontier thesis and his appearance in Chicago, see Ray Allen Billington, *Frederick Jackson Turner: Historian, Teacher, Scholar* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973), 82–131.
2. See the advertisement in the *Chicago Tribune*, April 27, 1893.
3. The standard biography of Buffalo Bill is Don Russell, *The Lives and Legends of Buffalo Bill* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1960). Russell has also written the most comprehensive study of Wild West shows, *The Wild West; or, A History of the Wild West Shows, . . .* (Fort Worth, Tex.: Amon Carter Museum of Western Art, 1970). For a discussion of Buffalo Bill and Turner, see also Richard Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation: The Myth of the Frontier in Twentieth-Century America* (New York: Atheneum, 1992), 67.
4. *Buffalo Bill's Wild West and Congress of Rough Riders of the World* (Chicago, 1893), 9.
5. Richard Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation*, 55–59, 66–87. For Buffalo Bill's invitation to the historians, see Billington, *Frederick Jackson Turner*, 127.
6. *Buffalo Bill's Wild West and Congress of Rough Riders of the World*, 4.
7. Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation*, 14, 75.
8. *Buffalo Bill's Wild West and Congress of Rough Riders of the World*, 22.
9. Turner, "Significance," 199.
10. *Buffalo Bill's Wild West and Congress of Rough Riders of the World*, 4.
11. Sarah J. Blackstone has compiled a revealing selection of Buffalo Bill's business correspondence, including his efforts in irrigation, mining, and western resorts (*The Business of Being Buffalo Bill* [New York: Praeger, 1988]; see, for example, 44–45, 55–61).
12. *Buffalo Bill's Wild West and Congress of Rough Riders of the World*, 10.
13. *Ibid.*, 10.
14. Albert Richardson, *Beyond the Mississippi: From the Great River to the Great Ocean . . .* (Hartford, Conn.: American Publishing Company, 1867), i. Proclamations of the centrality of the frontier were a staple of mid- and late-nineteenth-century writing: see Justin Winsor, *Narrative and Critical History of America* (1888); Theodore Roosevelt, *The Winning of the West*, 4 vols. (New York: Putnam, 1889), 1:1; Henry Howe, *Historical Collections for the Great West* (Cincinnati, Ohio: Henry Howe, 1856), 7–8. Howe's book went through numerous editions and had sold eighty thousand copies by 1860. This "extraordinary sale" demonstrated the public interest in the frontier; see the preface to the enlarged edition (Howe, *The Great West* [New York: George F. Tuttle, 1860]), viii.
15. Ray Allen Billington, *Frederick Jackson Turner*, 130.
16. See my "Frederick Jackson Turner," in *Historians of the American Frontier: A Bio-Bibliographical Sourcebook*, ed. John Wunder (Greenwood, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1988), 664–65.
17. Henry Nash Smith, *Virgin Land: The American West as Symbol and Myth* (1950; rpt. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1970), 251.
18. For Pawnee Bill and other Wild West shows see Russell, *The Wild West*, 32–33, 50–52, 75–76, 98–103, 129–33.
19. *Buffalo Bill's Wild West and Congress of Rough Riders of the World*, 7. For Cody's birthdate, see Russell, *Lives and Legends of Buffalo Bill*, 6.
20. Turner, "Significance," 199.
21. Turner, "Significance," 199–227. My emphasis here is on Turner's talk in Chicago in 1893. I have given a wider analysis of Turner's historical thinking in "Frederick Jackson Turner," 660–81.
22. Turner, "Significance," 201.
23. *Ibid.*, 216.
24. *Ibid.*, 208.
25. Bingham's painting, as Nancy Rash has emphasized, was notable for its featuring of pioneer families. Rash details its initial disappointing reception and its subsequent mass reproduction as a print (*The Painting and Politics of George Caleb Bingham* [New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1991], 60–65).
26. Turner, "Significance," 200–201.

27. See the map by J. C. Jeager, *Schauplatz des Kriegs zwischen Engelland und seinen Collonien in America . . .*, 1776, Newberry Library.
28. "Westward Ho," in *The Complete Poetical Works of Joaquin Miller* (San Francisco: Whitaker and Ray Co., 1897), 187–88.
29. Turner, "Significance," 201.
30. For *The Squatters* (1850), see Rash, *Painting and Politics*, 58–60.
31. See Edward Pessen, *The Log Cabin Myth: The Social Backgrounds of the Presidents* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1984), 10–26.
32. Samuel W. Durant, *History of Ingham and Eaton Counties* (Philadelphia: D. W. Ensign, 1880), facing 222. The county histories of the D. W. Ensign Company were not the only ones to employ this symbolism. See also *History of Calhoun County, Michigan* (Philadelphia: Everts, 1877), facing 185.
33. The poster was reproduced in 1974 by Historic Urban Plans, Ithaca, N.Y., from a lithograph in its collections.
34. Turner, "Significance," 200.
35. James W. Steele, *The Sons of the Border* (Topeka, Kans., 1873), 9.
36. See, for example, J. L. McConnel, *Western Characters* (New York: Redfield, 1853), 109–37.
37. *Chicago Tribune*, April 27, 1893, p. 2, and advertisement, same issue. See the illustrations and stories throughout the program *Buffalo Bill's Wild West and Congress of Rough Riders of the World*.
38. *Buffalo Bill's Wild West and Congress of Rough Riders of the World*. See also Don Russell, *The Wild West*, 27, 46.
39. Turner, "Significance," 38.
40. See, for example, Colonel Frank Triplett, *Conquering the Wilderness* (New York: N. D. Thompson, 1883), 62.
41. *Chicago Tribune*, June 14 and 16, 1893; July 27, 1893. In each case careful readers would discover that the first act of violence had been by whites.
42. For an analysis of visual representations of Custer's battle, see Brian Dippie, *Custer's Last Stand: The Anatomy of an American Myth* (Missoula: University of Montana Press, 1976). For a fine discussion of the portrayal of the Custer fight in the movies, see Paul Hutton, "'Correct in Every Detail': General Custer in Hollywood," *Montana: The Magazine of Western History* 41, no. 1 (Winter 1991): 28–57. See also Don Russell, *Custer's Last; or, The Battle of the Little Big Horn in Picturesque Perspective . . .* (Fort Worth, Tex.: Amon Carter Museum of Western Art, 1968). For the cultivation of the Custer myth and its uses, see Richard Slotkin, *Fatal Environment: The Myth of the Frontier in the Age of Industrialization, 1800–1890* (New York: Atheneum, 1985).
43. There are several copies of this photograph in the Elmo Scott Watson Collection, box 15 (Sitting Bull, Totanka i-Yotanka, Hunk papa Sioux folder), Edward E. Ayer Collection, Newberry Library.
44. Russell, *The Wild West*, 24, 44, 47, 65.
45. For Yellow Hand, see Russell, *The Lives and Legends of Buffalo Bill*, 215, 219–35. The name supposedly should be translated Yellow Hair. There is still controversy over the translation.
46. Russell, *The Lives and Legends of Buffalo Bill*, 231.
47. Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation*, 72.
48. For an account of *Life on the Border* in the East and the attack on the display of the scalp, see Russell, *The Lives and Legends of Buffalo Bill*, 254–55. According to Father Peter Powell, who has worked with the Northern Cheyenne for years, the style of some of the beadwork in the headdress Buffalo Bill captured from Yellow Hand/Yellow Hair dates to a time after his death. Buffalo Bill might later have repaired or altered the headdress, or he might have had it manufactured for his show.
49. For Buffalo Bill posters, see Jack Rennert, *One Hundred Posters of Buffalo Bill's Wild West* (New York: Darien House, 1976).
50. Captain Jack Crawford, letter, dated July 13, 1876, published in the *Black Hills Pioneer*, August 12, 1876, p. 1. I would like to thank Brian Dippie for sending me copies of Crawford's letters to the *Black Hills Pioneer*.
51. See Darlis A. Miller's biography, *Captain Jack Crawford: Buckskin Poet, Scout, and Showman* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1993), 1–65. Her account is at variance with the memories of Crawford's employer, but his letter about Captain Jack was written long

after the events it recounts. See the letter from Alfred Sorenson to Elmo Scott Watson, dated May 23, 1938, in the Elmo Scott Watson Collection, box 10 (Crawford, Captain Jack folder), Edward E. Ayer Collection, Newberry Library.

52. Darlis Miller (*Captain Jack Crawford*, 52–53) believes that Captain Jack actually did receive a dispatch from Buffalo Bill that prompted him to write the poem, but this is doubtful. There is no evidence that Captain Jack knew Buffalo Bill before joining the Fifth Cavalry. It is hard to understand how Buffalo Bill would have known Captain Jack was in Omaha or why he would have sent him a telegram about an event that was national news. It seems far more likely that Captain Jack read of Custer's defeat and wrote the poem. Captain Jack was peeved because General Phil Sheridan had refused the services of volunteers in avenging Custer's death (letter from Captain Jack to the editor of the *Black Hills Pioneer*, dated July 13, 1876, and published August 12, p. 1).

53. Miller, *Captain Jack Crawford*, 74–75. The next night Buffalo Bill played both himself and Captain Jack.

54. Buckskin Sam, "Cody's Corral; or, The Scouts and the Sioux," *Buffalo Bill's Wild West and Congress of Rough Riders of the World*, 12.

55. See, for example, the pictures of Buffalo Bill in Rennert, *One Hundred Posters of Buffalo Bill's Wild West*, 33, 71, and compare them to the picture of Custer reproduced in Glenn Bradley, *Winning of the Southwest* (Chicago: H. C. McClurg, 1912), facing 174, and my Figure 20. For Custer in buckskin in a hunter's pose, see Elmo Scott Watson Collection, box 6 (Custer Pictures folder), Edward E. Ayer Collection, Newberry Library. For a similar picture of Buffalo Bill, see *The West of Buffalo Bill: Frontier Art, Indian Crafts, Memorabilia from the Buffalo Bill Historical Center* (New York: Abrams, [1974]), 15. For Captain Jack's cultivation of the image, see Figure 17 and the photograph entitled "Capt. Jack Crawford, Poet-Scout of the Black Hills," Watson Collection, Ayer Collection, Newberry Library.

56. Indians initially worried about the consequences of their representations if they came into white hands. Before they sold the ledger book now in the Edward E. Ayer Collection of the Newberry Library, unknown Cheyennes redrew some of the figures of the soldiers, ineffectively disguising them as Crow Indians so as not to offend whites with pictures of dead soldiers. I would like to thank Father Peter Powell, who has worked for years on Cheyenne ledger book art and helped me to understand the significance of the scenes and figures represented. Any mistakes made in this interpretation are my own.

57. The Red Fish who drew these pictures appears to be the same Red Fish (Hogan'-Lu'Ta) who acted as an information for Frances Densmore; see her *Teton Sioux Music*, Bureau of American Ethnology, Bulletin 61 (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1918), 91. Fort Yates was the headquarters of the Standing Rock Agency. For an account of the drawings and their subsequent sale, see the letter from Aaron McGaffey Beede to Dr. N. W. Jipson, January 4, 1922, in *Sioux Indian Drawings*, Fort Yates, Edward E. Ayer Art Collection. Beede explains how he commissioned the art during what he called the terrible "starving time" of 1913–14 among the Lakotas at Standing Rock.

58. The location of the original edition painted by No-Two-Horn is unknown. A photographically reproduced edition of Aaron McGaffey Beede's *Sitting Bull-Custer* (Bismarck, N.D.: Bismarck Tribune Company, 1913), is in the Edward E. Ayer Collection, Newberry Library. Beede gives an account of the origin of the drawing in "The Custer Massacre, an Address by Judge Aaron McGaffey Beede of Fort Yates, North Dakota, before the Chicago Historical Society, November 23, 1922," typescript, Ayer Collection, Newberry Library, 15–17.

59. Without the accompanying notations and the descriptions, Red Fish's pictures would appear to be portraits of Lakotas and of a mounted white man. There is nothing in the figures themselves to suggest that they are Custer. But all the figures are labeled Custer. In one Custer seems dressed as much like a cowboy as a cavalry man, but the caption says that he has the "tonj" of an Indian. *Ton* (or *tun* or *tunj*) translates as "the power to do supernatural things"; it is the spiritual essence of a person. See James R. Walker, *Lakota Belief and Ritual*, ed. Raymond J. DeMallie and Elaine A. Jahner (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1980), 95, 127. I would like to thank Ray DeMallie for explaining Lakota concepts to me.

60. See Beede, *Sitting Bull-Custer*, title page and 31–33, and Beede, "The Custer Massacre," 9, for Lakota respect for Custer.

61. Amos Bad Heart Buffalo, in fact, sometimes worked as a cowboy. See Leslie Tillet, ed., *Wind on the Buffalo Grass: The Indians' Own Account of the Battle at the Little Big Horn River, and the Death of Their Life on the Plains* (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell, 1976), xv; Hartley Burr Alexander, ed., *Sioux Indian Paintings, Part II: The Art of Amos Bad Heart Buffalo* (Nice: C. Szwedzicki, 1938), 5.

62. Among other possible interpretations are that Red Fish might simply have labeled existing figures as Custer to please Beede and that his paintings might be an elaborate joke, a deception of white people. Or Beede may have mistranslated: Red Fish may, for example, have been offering a drawing of Custer's Arikara scouts rather than one of Custer himself.

63. Walker, *Lakota Belief and Ritual*, 70–71. *Woniya* refers to a spirit when it dwells in a human being. A *wanagi* or *woniya* is a spirit that has once been a human spirit.

64. *Sioux Indian Drawings*, Fort Yates Collection, Edward E. Ayer Collection, Newberry Library.

65. For the merging of Lakota and American stories, see Beede, *Sitting Bull-Custer* (Newberry Library copy), 31–33; for reports of sightings of Custer's ghost, see Beede, "The Custer Massacre," 9.

66. Letter from Beede to Jipson, January 4, 1922, Edward E. Ayer Art Collection, Newberry Library. The picture itself was donated by Jipson.

67. Rain-in-the-Face (who was also at the Columbian Exposition; he did not claim to have killed Custer) and Curley, among others, were the objects of considerable press attention (Beede, "The Custer Massacre," 31). Elbridge Ayer Burbank portraits of participants in the battle, now

in the Ayer Collection, illustrated several of these accounts. See, for example, Charles A. Eastman (Ohiyesa), "Rain-in-the-Face: The Story of a Sioux Warrior," *Outlook*, October 27, 1906, 507–12. Ohiyesa was Eastman's original Santee name.

See also clipping file, Indians-Chiefs-Rain-in-the-Face, Elmo Scott Watson Collection, box 15, Edward E. Ayer Collection, Newberry Library. For Curley and his stories and accounts in the popular press, see the folder labeled Indian Wars-Custer Scouts-Crow-Curley, Watson Collection, box 6, Edward E. Ayer Collection, Newberry Library. See also Hamlin Garland, "General Custer's Last Fight As Seen by Two Moon: The Battle Described by a Chief Who Took Part in It," *McClure's Magazine* 11, no. 5 (September 1898): 443–48. The 1891 reissue of *Custer's Life on the Plains* also contained reproductions of a ledger book with drawings by Sitting Bull (*Wild Life on the Plains*, 381–85). For a modern collection of Indian accounts and art of the Little Bighorn, see Tillet, ed., *Wind on the Buffalo Grass*.

68. Charles Francis Browne, "Elbridge Ayer Burbank: A Painter of Indian Portraits," *Brush and Pencil: An Illustrated Magazine of the Arts and Crafts* 3 (1898): 17–35.

69. A photograph of Burbank's painting was used as an illustration in Hamlin Garland's article "General Custer's Last Fight," *McClure's Magazine* (as in note 67).

70. "Custer's Last Battle in New Light," undated clipping, Elmo Scott Watson Collection, Edward E. Ayer Collection, Newberry Library.

71. Many Lakotas appear to have been quite fond of Buffalo Bill and to have enjoyed their life as showmen. Jack Red Cloud forwarded a resolution of the Oglala council to Mrs. Cody to express their sympathy on news of his death. They had, the letter said, "found in Buffalo Bill a warm and lasting friend" (Blackstone, *The Business of Being Buffalo Bill*, 84).

72. Russell, *The Wild West*, 2–3.

73. For another representation of the cowboy in the 1880s, see Bob Grantham Quickfall, *Western Life and How I Became a Bronco Buster* (London: J. W. Wright, c. 1890), cover. Remington added representations of cowboys to his portraits of western life. See, for example, his illustration in *Harper's Weekly* 33 (1889): 1016–17. See also the work of the cowboy artists Charlie Russell and Will James; James's illustrated books include *All in the Day's Riding* (New York: Scribner, 1936) and *The Drifting Cowboy* (New York: Scribner, 1925).

74. "The West Is Dead My Friend," in Elizabeth A. Dear, ed., *Regards to the Bunch: Letters, Poems, and Illustrations of C. M. Russell* (Great Falls, Mont.: C. M. Russell Museum, 1992), p. 40. See also Brian Dippie, ed., *"Paper Talk": Charlie Russell's American West* (New York: Knopf, 1979), 124–25.

75. Russell to "Friend Trigg," February 24, 1916, in Dear, ed., *Regards to the Bunch*, 26; Dippie, ed., *"Paper Talk,"* 122–23.

76. *Portrait and Biographical Record of St. Clair County, Illinois* (Chicago: Chapman Bros., 1892), 52577. *Buffalo Bill's Wild West and Congress of Rough Riders of the World*, 10.

77. *Buffalo Bill's Wild West and Congress of Rough Riders of the World*, 10.

78. Russell to "Friend Bob [Thoroughman]," April 14, 1920, in Dear, ed., *Regards to the Bunch*, 31.

79. *The Old Story*, watercolor, 15 3/4" × 20", signed and dated lower left, 1910, C. M. Russell Museum, Great Falls, Montana. There is a print in Ray W. Steele and Para Yascavage, eds., *The C. M. Russell Museum Permanent Collection Catalog* (Great Falls, Mont.: C. M. Russell Museum, 1989), 13.

80. "The West Is Dead My Friend," in Dear, ed., *Regards to the Bunch*, 40.

81. Other iconographic representations of the founding of Chicago featured John Kinzie, a white man, rather than du Sable.

82. See G. Edward White, *The Eastern Establishment and the Western Experience: The West of Frederic Remington, Theodore Roosevelt, and Owen Wister* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1968). Remington, along with Charles Russell, illustrated an edition of *The Virginian* (New York: Macmillan, 1911). He also illustrated two editions of Theodore Roosevelt's *Ranch Life and the Hunting Trail* (London: Unwin, 1896; New York: Century Co., 1901).

83. Roosevelt claimed a frontier identity in the preface to his four-volume *Winning of the West*, 1:xiv (as in note 14).

84. Douglas Allen, *Frederic Remington and the Spanish-American War* (New York: Crown, 1971), 133–35.

85. See *Vanity Fair*, July 1923, and the *Saturday Evening Post*, July 23, 1923. For a discussion of the West, gender, and automobile advertising, particularly the influential Jordan advertisements, see R. A. Corrigan, "Somewhere West of Laramie, on the Road to West Egg: Automobiles, Fillies, and the West in *The Great Gatsby*," *Journal of Popular Culture* 7 (Summer 1973): 152–58. Relevant movies include Columbia Pictures' *Renegades* ("The Red-Blooded Story of a Red-Headed Girl . . . riding with the Dembrows . . . the West's most notorious outlaw band") and, of course, *Johnny Guitar*, with Joan Crawford.

86. Russell, *Lives and Legends of Buffalo Bill*, 377.