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Life as the Wife of Buffalo Bill

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An Idealized Love Story

“Memories of Buffalo Bill,” written by his wife Louisa Frederici Cody, not only captures the life of a great American celebrity, but also provides a fresh look at frontier life from the eyes of a well-mannered young woman. Her convent childhood in civilized society led her to faint at her first gunshot, yet she marries the world-renown symbol of the Wild West. The biography breaks down the character of William Cody, certainly, but because it is written by a female from such a refined background, her unique perspective provides insights into western life that place the book’s value above just another Buffalo Bill story. She tells of courage in the midst of chaos, all while her husband is away for extended periods of time. This book exemplifies the importance of understanding that not all Westerners were “cow punchers”—some were elegant and brave young ladies just trying to make do with the wild life their husbands loved.

Written after Cody’s death, this memoir is strategically designed to reveal the “real” William Cody while still upholding his public appearance as Buffalo Bill. We see a humbled young Willie as he holds his child for the first time, yet a few chapters later we hear of Buffalo Bill’s merciless first scalping. To Louisa and William, “Buffalo Bill” was not a stage name. In Louisa’s own words, “Buffalo Bill he became...and Buffalo Bill he remained even after death, the typification of the old West, when the buffalo roamed the short grass and when the New World was young” (114). Even as his wife lovingly writes his memoir, William Cody cannot escape the feeling that the world’s eyes were watching. In this biography, Louisa Cody downplays her own strength in order to maintain the idealized image of her husband. With Buffalo Bill acting as a representative of the American West both at home and abroad, his character must not be marred with the truth of marital troubles. Just as the frontier was idealized,

so must Louisa Cody portray a polished image of her husband—a perfect husband, father, frontiersman, and living legend.

A Continuation of Buffalo Bill's Façade

When William F. Cody first met his future wife, Louisa, they were as love-struck as two attractive young people could ever be. Cody in *The Life of Buffalo Bill* fondly reflects on Louisa's "lovely face, her gentle disposition and her graceful manners" with a sense of admiration (Cody 113). Louisa found herself equally smitten, writing "graceful, lithe, smooth in his movements and in the modulations of his speech, he was quite the most wonderful man I had ever known, and I almost bit my tongue to keep from telling him so" (6). In fact, according to *Memories of Buffalo Bill*, it wasn't just their first encounter that was perfect. The rest of their lives together were filled with blissful adventures, and fifty years later, Louisa writes, "He is still my ideal—yes, and my idol" (30).

Interestingly, Louisa's account fails to mention William Cody's two attempts to divorce her. Louisa portrayed their marriage as close and affectionate, while Cody claims to have been "tricked into marriage" after he returned from war (Russell 73). After quite a bit of fact checking, it becomes clear that Louisa's account of her life with Buffalo Bill cannot be taken as historically accurate. Instead, the purpose of this biography was to carry on the tradition of Buffalo Bill as the perfect western man.

As for Mrs. Cody herself, Louisa could not be more ill-suited for life in the Wild West. Don Russell, in *The Lives and Legends of Buffalo Bill*, simply describes her tender footedness by saying "Of the stuff that made pioneers she had none" (76). While she eventually grew to run a ranch and practically raise four children on her own, dear Louisa did not share her husband's

longing for the freedom of the West. In *Buffalo Bill's America*, Louis S. Warren explains, "She expected a middle-class life when she married William Cody. Almost immediately, she began to have doubts about her choice of husband and his financial capabilities, both of which would trouble her for the rest of her life" (44). Louisa writes often of her weak constitution and her fears of Indians and outlaws, but never once does she reveal her doubts in her choice of husband. According to her memoir, William Cody's rugged magnetism caused her to love the Wild West as her own home. It would not be suitable for the public to know that the symbol of the Wild West had "made a terrible mistake in taking such a little tender-foot for a wife" (41).

The Frontier in Louisa's Eyes

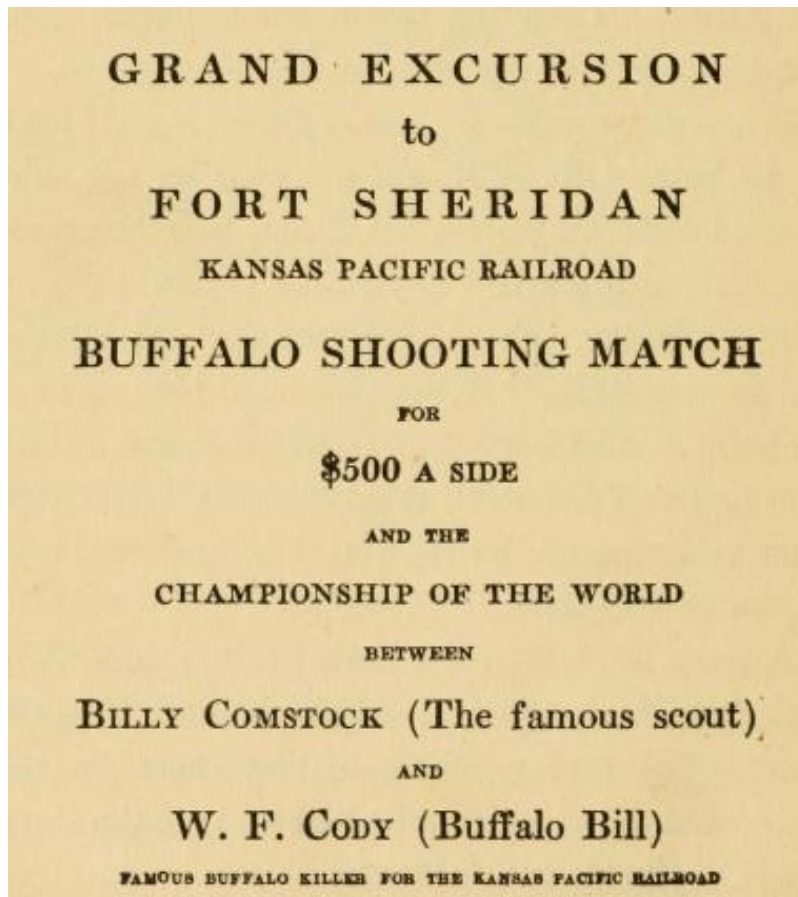
What is perhaps the most intriguing element of Louisa's book is the fact that she, as a character in her own story, undergoes a grand transformation from a tender-foot to a tough ranch hand. In the beginning scenes, when Louisa and Cody are happy newlyweds, they embark on a voyage up the Missouri river. A brawl and gunshot cause poor Louisa to faint, and ultimately question her decisions up to that point. She writes:

I was homesick, I was frightened, I was going into a strange land. From a convent I was bound for a country where men often killed for the love of killing, where saloons and fights were common, where the life was coarse and rough and crude.... The tears came to my eyes. I wanted to cry to him that home was calling, that I cringed at the thought of what was before me. (44)

Despite Louisa's decision to continue traveling with William Cody, she has several scenes of anxiety and distress before the Wild West begins to transform her. She remains the gentle convent girl throughout the first half of the memoir. However, the rough and tumble of the west

eventually takes its toll, as Frederick Jackson Turner asserts it does for every individual. Of the extreme environment of the frontier, Turner writes, “The wilderness masters the colonist. It finds him a European in dress, industries, tools, mode of travel, and thought...It strips off the garments of civilization and arrays him in the hunting shirt and the moccasin” (Turner 33). Louisa was this naïve European colonist at first. The nature of the west tossed her around and left her helpless, with the exhausted Louisa crying out, “I had held my nerve as long as holding it was possible...I had tried to be brave; but the force of circumstances had been too much for me” (75). This, and other traumatic events, led Louisa to move back east with young baby Arta to recover. Louisa’s transformation was a slow one—the west had not yet hardened this soft eastern girl from Frenchtown.

Once Louisa grew tired of spending her days in the comfort of the east, that’s when her character begins to shift. (Yes, I say character because in this memoir, Louisa has constructed herself as a character rather than portraying a real woman.) She missed her husband, of course, as she did not see him for many months. However, she began to miss the west itself upon seeing this advertisement:



This poster, advertising the grand competition between Buffalo Bill and Billy Comstock, caused Louisa to long for the west just as she longed for her husband. She writes, “There, in that glaring sign, the West called to me, the wide stretches of the prairie, the twisting, winding roads...I wanted to go back home—for the sudden realization came over me that St. Louis no longer was home” (123). Here, Louisa’s transformation begins. She moves back “home” to the west with Will, where she gains more confidence and responsibility. No longer the helpless damsel she once was, Louisa can now write of her experience in the west as a person standing side-by-side with Buffalo Bill. She is no longer the awe-struck fan girl dreaming the adventures she read of in *The Family Fireside*. This act of transforming her character gives her both credibility and relatability. She can now be understood by soft-hearted eastern women as well as the hardened companions of Buffalo Bill himself.

Louisa's Frontier

Thanks to Louisa's transition partway through the memoir, we see the frontier through the eyes of an outsider and then a participator. From her 'outsider' perspective, we see the Wild West in all of its bloody glory. Louisa fears the lawlessness of the land, as well as the gossiped savagery of the Native Americans. When their wagon train stopped for the night in Three Wells, Louisa recalled an earlier massacre in horror: "It had only been a matter of months since the Indians had swooped down upon an emigrant train here, killed the drivers and the passengers, burned the wagons...Now I was to spend the night on the very spot where that massacre had taken place" (61). In this instance, it is not just the ruffian gamblers that are at risk of being overrun by the west. Here, young women and children are facing the raw power of no-man's land. This overwhelming sense of danger can coexist with many of the modern-day movies of sheriffs shooting bad guys, but it doesn't cover the whole story.

Louisa's chilling paranoia, although not without cause, is slowly shifted to a reverent awe as she herself grows fond of the west from her time away. This book portrays the frontier as it would a loving husband—which is why Louisa draws so many parallels between the west and William Cody. The way Louisa grows to long for the west acts as an explanation for why the commercialization of the frontier has been so successful. Louisa's buffalo hunt can be considered her first transition scene when she really starts to become part of the west, rather than an observer of it. She writes, "Then, with a thrill that I never again shall know, I saw the buffalo stumble, stagger a second and fall headlong. From behind came a wild sound, and I saw Will standing in his stirrups and whooping like a wild Indian" (143). The excitement of a first kill (for Will it was an Indian at age 11) is both thrilling and contagious. For audience members watching the Wild West Show, these hunting and fighting scenes would give them that same excitement.

The west in this sense gives the individual power—power to kill, power to love, and power to live free from an abusive government. For Europeans and early Americans, that would be a monarchy. For Louisa, this excitement of the west gives her the power to no longer be a supporter or observer in her own relationship; rather, she becomes an equal partner with Will and therefore a credible source for the mythification of the west. She establishes her own credibility by transitioning from a sensitive easterner to a buffalo-slaying seamstress, which further enables to her to maintain her husband's place as a symbol of the American West.

The Myth of the American Frontier

In order to see how Buffalo Bill can stand as a symbol for the American West, we must first understand how the frontier itself came to be mythologized. Benson Tong and Regan Lutz, editors of *The Human Tradition in the American West*, summarized the thoughts of Frederick Turner to give context to the frontier myth. They wrote, “The rigors of the frontier experience turned settlers into rugged defenders of democracy and freedom, possessing minds at once idealistic and practical. Such ideal qualities, however, hinged on the availability of “free” or abundant land.” Unfortunately, the land itself was running out. The frontier, “defined as a land with a population density of two or fewer persons per square mile,” was coming to a close (xiv). Because the physical landscape that was once the American West would soon be gone, the American people had to keep the western myth alive in other ways. Along comes Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show, and several others like it. Even now we have rodeos, movies, reenactments, merchandise...anything and everything to keep the idea of American freedom and frontierism alive.

As an important note, calling it the “frontier myth” does not imply that the frontier itself did not exist. A myth in this context is different from a fable or a legend in the way that it is

entirely based upon fact. A *myth* is more similar to *history*, except with one key difference—a myth is made into something more than just events that occurred in the past. As an example, we have mythologized Buffalo Bill himself by allowing his character to be more well-known than the real man, William F. Cody. So have we mythologized the frontier by giving it a level of importance above simply expanding our nation westward. To us, the frontier myth is the symbol of American freedom and endurance—we were willing and able to survive in harsh climates to make our own way and distance ourselves from our European past. In that sense, the frontier can be spoken of in both a literal and figurative context.

To further explain the power of the frontier myth, I'll share an experience I had while travelling abroad. On a trip to Iceland in the summer of 2017, I struck up a conversation with a local about Yellowstone. It has natural hot springs and geysers very similar to those in Iceland, and it's an iconic American treasure. This local Icelandic woman said, "Yellowstone? That sounds very cowboy. Is it cowboy-ish?" To those outside of the U.S.A., we are cowboys. Forever and always, America will be wild and untamed because the frontier was so fabulously mythologized. To give an example of how well this exhibition of American frontierism was carried out, let me share a newspaper review of Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show. In an article titled, "The Wild West: A Picturesque and Striking Portrayal of Frontier Life," the *Daily Evening Bulletin* proclaimed, "If those who doubt the reality of the scenes presented by these men will pause and consider for a moment, they will find themselves compelled to admit that Buffalo Bill and his comrades are by no means actors. They simply appear as they are; nothing more, nothing less" (3). To viewers of the Wild West Show, whether curious easterners or enthusiastic Europeans, this portrayal of the west was entirely *real*. Buffalo Bill, the character created and maintained by William Cody, is representative of what life is like in the west. TV series and

movies with exaggerated violence, similar to the Wild West Show, have succeeded in keeping the freedom of the American West alive, and this memoir by Louisa Cody is no exception.

Louisa and Will “Working for Tomorrow”

Perhaps the most puzzling aspect of Louisa’s tribute to Buffalo Bill is the question of why she wrote it. Her husband passed away two years before it was published in 1919, and the excitement of the Wild West Show was dying down. One possibility would be the continuation of his character’s fame—perhaps Louisa wanted to promote her husband one last time and further preserve his façade. However, Don Russell adamantly proclaimed that “show business she detested” (76). Louisa did not want the fame of being Buffalo Bill’s wife, seeing as she rarely even travelled with him.

With this in mind, a passage from *Memories of Buffalo Bill* has led me to believe that perhaps Louisa was writing an idealized version of her marriage not for her husband’s sake, but for the sake of the frontier myth. On that same boat voyage they took the night of their marriage, Louisa and William made a promise to each other. If William Cody was not a perfect husband, he certainly was a champion for the American west. He told her, very passionately, “The world isn’t big enough for everybody that’s in it. It’s got to spread—And I’ve got to do my part...I’m working for to-morrow, Lou—and I want you to help me.” Louisa responds with courage, despite her fears of what a life in the west might hold: “And again I gave my promise, while the old steamer plowed on, up the muddy Missouri toward Fort Leavenworth” (46). This promise made between love-struck newlyweds is what drove Louisa to stick with William Cody through two divorce attempts and the deaths of their children. It’s what motivated Will to take on the character of Buffalo Bill. It’s what inspired him to move the Wild West Show to Europe and strike up a frontier myth there. To Louisa, she had a duty to keep the frontier alive because that was their goal as a couple. Buffalo

Bill's death was a new opportunity to idealize him and keep the frontier myth fresh in the minds of Americans and Europeans alike. With Cody as a symbol for the American West, his memoir continues to promote America as free and wild as his show portrayed it to be.

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