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CODY'S LAST STAND: MASCULINE ANXIETY, THE CUSTER MYTH, AND THE FRONTIER OF DOMESTICITY IN BUFFALO BILL'S WILD WEST

LOUIS S. WARREN

Close analysis of Buffalo Bill's Wild West show suggests that frontier mythology of the late nineteenth century was more domestically oriented than most historians have assumed. In fact, the show relied on scenes of family defense more than it did on depictions of "Custer's Last Fight." How William F. "Buffalo Bill" Cody utilized domestic imagery, and why he appears to have dropped it near the end of his career, suggests changes in his personal biographical needs and in frontier myth at the beginning of the twentieth century.

EVEN A CURSORY GLANCE AT THE LITERATURE ON William F. Cody will turn up the connection between the West's greatest showman and its fallen boy general, George Armstrong Custer. Indeed, the study of Cody has become so entangled with Custer as to make the two nearly inseparable. It is a commonplace of western scholarship that Buffalo Bill's Wild West show consistently re-enacted the Battle of Little Big Horn, or "Custer's Last Fight," as the show called it, and that the spectacle enhanced Cody's mythic stature. Consequently, as various historians have told us, the Custer legend was profoundly influenced by Cody's presentation. In one of the most influential arguments, Richard Slotkin recounted that after Cody founded the Wild West show in 1883, he quickly hit on the notion of presenting American history as a series of frontier epochs. "Three years later, a reenactment of 'Custer's Last Fight' was added to the Wild West's repertoire, and it eventually became not only the most spectacular of the 'epochs' but the center of a reorganized program."¹

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¹ Richard Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation: The Myth of the Frontier in Twentieth Century America* (New York, 1992), 76.

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Slotkin built on older interpretations. Over forty years ago, Don Russell penned what is still reckoned the most scholarly biography of Cody, in which he described “Custer’s Last Fight” as “long the crowning spectacle” of the Wild West show.² More recently, Richard White has concluded that “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 a theme of Indian aggression against whites.³ Joy Kasson speculates that the popularity of Cody’s reenactments of Custer’s defeat inspired Otto Becker’s imaginative lithograph of the battle, which was displayed in bars across America after it became an advertisement for Budweiser in 1896.⁴ Not surprisingly, the link between Custer and Cody permeates popular treatments of western history. In the illustrated companion to the Ken Burns-Stephen Ives documentary series “The West,” the Custer reenactment is described as “the perennial finale of Cody’s show.”⁵

So strong is the Custer-Cody connection that arguments about the show’s cultural significance almost invariably flow from exploration of the Custer myth. Thus, various scholars of the Wild West show teach us that Cody’s version of Custer’s Last Fight was an icon of imperial expansion and race war, that it reflected deep anxieties, particularly among the managerial classes about the swamping of America by immigrants, freed blacks, and union organizers, and that it was a set-piece of masculine combat in an age profoundly concerned about the survival of white masculinity. In 1893, Cody’s publicists hailed Buffalo Bill’s Wild West show as the key to understanding the complex world on display at the Chicago World’s Columbian Exposition of 1893. In the twentieth century, scholars came to see the Custer reenactment as a kind of key to understanding the cultural messages of Buffalo Bill’s show.⁶

And this is a problem. For the Custer reenactment was a relative rarity in the Wild West show, and even more rarely was it the show’s climax. To be sure, the Custer myth was central to Cody’s career. But the showman’s references to Custer, such as they were, constituted threads in a larger myth of frontier domestication. That myth was most directly expressed in the show’s most common climactic scene, which had no

² Don Russell, *The Lives and Legends of Buffalo Bill* (Norman, 1960), 376. Russell mistakenly argued that the 1893 Wild West Show with the “Battle of Little Big Horn” finale, “proved so successful that it remained virtually unchanged for nearly a decade.”

³ Richard White, “Frederick Jackson Turner and Buffalo Bill,” in *The Frontier in American Culture*, ed. James R. Grossman (Berkeley, 1994), 7–66, for quote see 29. See also Brian W. Dippie, *Custer’s Last Stand: The Anatomy of an American Myth* (Missoula, 1976), 91.

⁴ Joy S. Kasson, *Buffalo Bill’s Wild West: Celebrity, Memory, and Popular History* (New York, 2000), 244–8.

⁵ Geoffrey C. Ward, *The West: An Illustrated History* (Boston, 1996), 375. See the caption to the illustration.

⁶ These arguments are distilled from Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation*, 76–83; Richard White, “Frederick Jackson Turner and Buffalo Bill”; Jonathan D. Martin, “‘The Grandest and Most Cosmopolitan Object Teacher’: Buffalo Bill’s Wild West and the Politics of American Identity, 1883–1899,” *Radical History Review* 66 (1996): 92–123. For Wild West as key to the Chicago World’s Fair, see the 1893 show herald, James W. Wojtowicz, *The W. F. Cody Buffalo Bill Collector’s Guide with Values* (Paducah, KY, 1998), 92, and Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation*.

direct relation to Custer, and which scholars have long overlooked. By exploring domestic imagery in Buffalo Bill's Wild West show, and its relevance to audiences and to William Cody himself, we can begin to appreciate the centrality of domesticity and home-making to frontier mythology of the late-nineteenth-century. Changes in Wild West show performance after 1900 suggest a diminution of domestic elements in the show, in keeping with the development of an emergent, less domestic frontier myth, the Western. Ironically, these changes reflect shifts in Cody's own biography, which the show was also intended to display, and which took a publically anti-domestic turn in the early 1900s.

Scholarly eagerness to explain Cody by invoking Custer has less to do with what audiences saw at the Wild West show than with the showman's early efforts at crafting a public image in his pre-Wild West show days. While Custer was alive, he and William Cody had little to do with one another. Their only documented meeting occurred when Cody served as guide for the widely-publicized buffalo hunting expedition of Russia's Grand Duke Alexis in 1872. Custer was an officer and a Civil War hero. He was far more famous than Cody, a younger, civilian scout possessed of fewer military laurels, who was known mostly as a character in a dime novel by Ned Buntline. Not surprisingly, Custer attended the Duke and attracted the bulk of the publicity, leaving Cody on the sidelines.⁷ But in the summer of 1876, the general suddenly became the nation's pre-eminent martyr to the cause of Indian conquest. This posed a problem for Buffalo Bill, who was by this time a theater celebrity in frontier melodramas, and who found himself in need of a firm connection to the suddenly mythic Custer if he wanted his own star to rise.

So, upon news of Custer's death, Cody self-consciously set out to take the "first scalp for Custer." Soon after, while scouting for the Fifth Cavalry, he killed and scalped a Cheyenne sub-chief named Yellow Hair, whose name was mis-translated to "Yellow Hand" in show publicity. The scalping of Yellow Hand, and the avenging of Custer, became the subject of a Cody stage play the following fall, and a staple of his career thereafter. Three years later, in his autobiography, he extended his association with Custer backward, claiming to have scouted for "the dashing and gallant" Custer in Kansas in 1867, although he clearly did not.⁸ Eventually the Duel with Yellow Hand

⁷ W. Tucker, *The Grand Duke Alexis in the United States of America* (1872; reprint, New York, 1972), 150–90. Ned Buntline's *Buffalo Bill, The King of Border Men* appeared as a serial in Street & Smith's *New York Weekly* in 1869–70, and was syndicated by hundreds of papers thereafter. See Ned Buntline, *Buffalo Bill, The King of Border Men*, ed. William Roba (1870; reprint Daventport, IA, 1987) and Russell, *Lives and Legends of Buffalo Bill*, 153–5, 160–1.

⁸ William F. Cody, *The Life of Hon. William F. Cody Known as Buffalo Bill* (1879; reprint, New York, 1991), 145 (hereafter *Life of Buffalo Bill*). Military records establish that Cody did not become a scout until 1868, and they contain no evidence that he ever scouted for Custer. "Memorandum," 20 March 1924, "Service Record of William F. Cody," in 201 File for William F. Cody, Box 219, RG 407, National Archives, Washington, DC; Joseph Rosa and Robin May, *Buffalo Bill and his Wild West* (Lawrence, KS, 1989), 23. Custer's 1872 memoir of his life on the Plains, which is peppered with warm references to Wild Bill Hickok, California Joe Milner, and other scouts, fails to mention Cody even once. George Armstrong Custer, *My Life on the Plains, or Personal Experiences with Indians* (1872; reprint, Norman, 1962).

became a standard offering of the Wild West show, more than the Custer fight itself was. Show programs thus contained many references to Custer, including illustrations of the Yellow Hand scalping and Custer's Last Fight, even when the Custer reenactment was not staged.

In a limited sense, scholars of the Wild West show have been correct. Cody labored to connect his own legend to Custer's, and that association was essential to his public persona. When it appeared, the Custer reenactment (like much of the Wild West show), did speak to American fears of race war and class strife, and it did express a public yearning for American empire and the restoration of an endangered masculinity. The showman may even have cultivated a resemblance to Custer.⁹ But the image of Cody as heir to Custer's mantle was so firmly entrenched before the Wild West show began, in 1883, that it made re-enacting Custer's demise unnecessary, or even superfluous.

Indeed, a tour through show programs suggests exactly how marginal the reenactment was to the success of Cody's most famous entertainment. Cody began his Wild West show in 1883, but it was not until early 1887 that he staged "Custer's Last Fight" at Madison Square Garden, after his show had been playing to packed houses for over a month and he needed a new attraction to draw return audiences.¹⁰

But just as quickly as the showman added the act, he dropped it. It was not seen in the United States again until 1893, for half the show season in Chicago. It appeared regularly in 1894, but disappeared again the next year. It featured in some shows, but not others, in 1896 and sporadically in 1898. After 1898, it was never shown in the United States again.¹¹

⁹ But as Richard White has argued, it is fair to say that Custer himself grew his hair to look like a frontier scout, and that at the time of his death his public persona—long-haired and buckskin clad—represented the soldier's attempt to mimic Buffalo Bill, who was already a dime novel hero and theatrical stage star by 1876. White, "Frederick Jackson Turner and Buffalo Bill," 39.

¹⁰ Martin, "The Grandest and Most Cosmopolitan Object Teacher," 105; Programs for Buffalo Bill's Wild West (hereafter BBWW Program) 1883–1885 at the Buffalo Bill Historical Center, Cody, WY (hereafter BBHC) have no Custer reenactment. The only show program for 1886 that I have been able to find is in the Denver Public Library, WH 72, "Programs 1884–1898." There is no mention of any Custer installment on it. The show closed in February 1887. Henry Blackman Sell and Victor Weybright, *Buffalo Bill and the Wild West* (New York, 1955), 156.

¹¹ The show went overseas in 1887, returned to the U.S. for 1888, then went overseas again from 1889 through 1892. It returned to Europe again, for four years, in the early 1900s. Because very few Americans saw Cody's show overseas, its content there did little to shape his American image, and I will not analyze European performances in detail. Nevertheless, it is worth observing that the Custer reenactment was absent from many of the legendary European appearances. It was not performed in London during the long season of 1887, nor in Paris at the Universal Exposition in 1889, nor during much of the continental tour in 1890, for example. Wojtowicz, *W.F. Cody Buffalo Bill Collector's Guide with Values*, 10–47; also BBWW 1887 program and BBWW 1888 program, MS 6, BBHC; BBWW 1889 program, "L'Ouest Savage de Buffalo Bill," in MS 62 Don Russell Collection, I-G, Box 2/27, BBHC. Also BBWW programs 1890–1895, BBHC

At most, Cody's reliance on the Custer segment was fleeting.¹² Let us be clear. Buffalo Bill's Wild West ran for thirty-three consecutive years, from 1883 to 1916. Twenty-three of those seasons were in the United States. Of those twenty-three years of U. S. shows, Custer's Last Stand or some semblance of it appeared consistently for one season, 1894. It appeared during parts of four others, in 1887, 1893, 1896, and 1898. For the other seventeen American seasons, it was absent. We can only conclude that most Americans who saw Buffalo Bill's Wild West did not see the Custer reenactment.

At least as important as the relative rarity of the Custer moment in the Wild West program was its position within the show. Scholars have variously described the act as the center of the program, and as its climax.¹³ And yet, Custer's death was the finale only during parts of two seasons (1887 and 1893). In the three other seasons when it appeared, it was one of the acts in the middle of the show. So rare was it, and so rarely was it the finale, that few of the scholarly assumptions about the act's pivotal role bear much scrutiny.

Our search for the show's cultural meaning leads us to ask if Buffalo Bill's Wild West was not continually valorizing the Custer myth and all its imperial implications, what was it doing?

In one sense at least, it is easy to see how America's premier western showman has hoodwinked historians for so long on the issue of his connection to Custer. To survey Buffalo Bill's Wild West programs and to try to grasp what was happening in each show is at best bewildering. One is immediately swamped by cowboy fun, bevies of beautiful rancheras, sharp shooting, Indian dances, Indian fights, prairie fires, cyclones, and buffalo stampedes.

Focusing on the reenactments of Custer's demise has helped scholars make sense of the show's variability, and it has allowed scholars to attribute to the show a large

and M Cody L Box 1, Denver Public Library Western History Room (hereafter DPL). After February 1887, the show did not reprise the Custer segment in the U.S. until late in the 1893 season, at the end of August. Kasson, *Buffalo Bill's Wild West*, 113. Custer's Last Fight is mentioned in newspaper coverage of the show's week-long run in St. Louis in 1896, but it does not appear in extant programs for that year. Compare "It Has Made a Hit," *St. Louis Republic*, 21 May 1896, clipping in Beck Family Papers, No. 10386, Box 15/13, American Heritage Center, University of Wyoming, Laramie, WY, to BBWW 1896 program, DPL, and BBWW 1896 program, Huntington Library, San Marino, CA, also Wojtowicz, *W.F. Cody Buffalo Bill Collector's Guide with Values*, 29; BBWW 1897 program, BBWW 1898 program in BBHC; programs for 1899–1916 in BBHC and DPL.

¹² The imperial implications of the Custer scene are heightened in the work of Slotkin and others by referring to its successor segments, especially the reenactment of the Battle of San Juan Hill, which replaced it. But these "imperial" scenes were as rare as the Custer fight itself. The Battle of San Juan Hill appeared in 1900 and 1902 in the U.S., and in London in 1903–1904. The other reenactment, which figured in this imperial succession to Custer, was Battle of Tien-Tsin, in the 1901 program. See programs in BBHC and DPL.

¹³ See notes 1–5.

amount of cultural expression about American foreign policy, race, and masculine anxiety—the fear that declining white manliness in an increasingly feminized workplace was diluting white racial power.¹⁴ A closer examination of the show's staple entertainments suggests that focusing on masculine anxiety can take us in the right direction, but only if we pursue it with a more domestic angle.¹⁵

Let us begin where so many others have meant to begin, with the show's finale. Year after year, the climax of the show was always thrilling, according to commentators. And after the show's first year, it was a regular event: "Attack on a Settler's Cabin by Hostile Indians. Repulse by Cowboys, under the leadership of Buffalo Bill."¹⁶ There were interesting and significant variations. In the early years, the rescue was carried out by Buffalo Bill and "his Scouts, Cowboys, and Mexicans."¹⁷ In another year, the settler's cabin episode would be replaced by one of ranch life, featuring homebuilding and community celebrations interrupted by an Indian attack. But the important point is that this act of home defense was as present as Custer's Last Fight was absent. Beginning with its second year of existence in 1884, and continuing every year thereafter through 1907, Cody's show featured the spectacle of a house in which a white family, sometimes a white woman and sons, took refuge from mounted Indians who rode down on the building, firing guns and whooping. The attackers were in turn driven off by the heroic Buffalo Bill and a cowboy entourage.¹⁸ With few exceptions, this act served as the finale in every show season. Even in those few cases when it did not, it almost always occurred earlier in the program.¹⁹

¹⁴ Martin, "The Grandest and Most Cosmopolitan Object Teacher," 101; for masculine anxiety in the period, see John Higham, "The Reorientation of American Culture in the 1890s," in *Writing American History: Essays on Modern Scholarship*, ed. John Higham (Bloomington, IN, 1970), 79; for masculinity and race, Gail Bederman, *Manliness and Civilization: A Cultural History of Gender and Race in the United States, 1880–1917* (Chicago, 1995), 10–5.

¹⁵ Gender studies have provided some of the most intriguing reexaminations of western and American history in recent years. I have been influenced by the following: Matthew Basso, Laura McCall, and Dee Garceau, *Across the Great Divide: Cultures of Manhood in the American West* (New York, 2001); Lee Clark Mitchell, *Westerns: Making the Man in Fiction and Film* (Chicago, 1996); Susan Lee Johnson, *Roaring Camp: The Social World of the California Gold Rush* (New York, 2000); Bederman, *Manliness and Civilization*.

¹⁶ See Nellie Snyder Yost, *Buffalo Bill: His Family, Friends, Fame, Failures, and Fortunes* (Chicago, 1979), 135.

¹⁷ See the handbill in BBWW 1884 program (Hartford), BBHC; also Wojtowicz, W.F. *Cody Buffalo Bill Collector's Guide with Values*, 13–6.

¹⁸ For descriptions of the scene, see "Royalty at the 'Wild West,'" *The Era* (UK) 7 May 1887, 15; "Buffalo Bill," *The Globe* (Toronto), 19 August 1885, clipping in Series VI: G, Box 1, Folder 15, BBHC.

¹⁹ Alternative finales included a cyclone during parts of the 1886 and 1887 seasons, the Battle of Tsien-Tsien in 1901, and an avalanche in 1907. BBWW 1886 (Madison Square Garden); "Inaugural Invitation Exhibition of Buffalo Bill's Wild West," (Manchester, UK, 1887) n.p., M Cody Box 6, DPL; BBWW 1907, various programs, MS 6: VI A, BBHC.

ATTACK ON THE BURNING CABIN. GRAND FINALE OF "THE WILD WEST."



Buffalo Bill's Wild West Program, 1885. Photo courtesy of author's collection.

Any display of a home under attack, such as the act that was the signature climax of the Wild West show for twenty-three years of its thirty-three year life, would tap into a set of profound cultural anxieties. For nineteenth-century audiences, a home, particularly a rural "settler's" home, was imbued with much symbolic meaning. Richard White has noted that the log cabin, by the 1890s, served as an icon of progressive history, the humble origins of a great nation.²⁰ But exploring the gendered meanings of the symbol can take us further. The home itself was synonymous with the presence of a woman, particularly a wife. In that sense, the home conveyed notions of womanhood, domesticity, and family. When the mostly Oglala Indians rode down on the Settler's Cabin at the end of the Wild West show, they were attacking more than a building with some white people in it. In the minds of many in the audience, the piece resonated of an attack on whiteness, on family, and domesticity itself.

For the rest of this article, I will be following three strands of an investigation into the implications of the Attack on the Settler's Cabin. First, and most immediately, we will look at how the act functioned within the show, how it heightened and then resolved tensions raised by the show's earlier acts, allowing the audience a sense of resolution before they headed out of the arena—and home.

Second, and woven with the first strand, we will account for at least some of the ways the scene likely spoke to the anxieties of audiences beyond the arena, the concerns they brought with them to the show. I will argue that the Wild West show was perennially popular in part because it was so adept at manipulating and soothing certain popular fears about women, homemaking, and the role of men.

Third and finally, as with any exercise in analyzing the Wild West show, we will explore the appeal of the Settler's Cabin finale to William Cody. Because Cody always

²⁰ White, "Frederick Jackson Turner and Buffalo Bill," 19–26.

maintained that the show distilled not just national experience but the outlines of his own biography, any act within the show that featured him had to be understood by him and his audience as at least analogous to his lived experience.²¹ How the Settler's Cabin scene met these requirements helps explain its longevity. How it may have failed him might help explain why the most enduring show climax suddenly disappeared from the show altogether after 1907, never to return.

First, and most obviously, we move to the issue of the masculine anxieties that are so obviously addressed with this scene, and how its function in this regard served the needs of the show. The Attack on the Settler's Cabin, with its vulnerable white woman at the center, acts out the beginning of the recurring American nightmare of Indian captivity.²² By initiating a dramatic sequence that implied the vulnerability of women to men, it resonated with the show's appeal to manly virtues, especially martial virtues, of the kind that were on display in the exhibitions of cavalry riding and the reenactments of Custer's fight and other battles. But the appeal of this scene was enhanced by the way it eased doubts concerning the martial superiority of men created in some of the show's other acts, particularly in the performances of women sharpshooters, such as Lillian Smith and, most famously, Annie Oakley. Oakley was a star in Buffalo Bill's Wild West from 1885 to 1901. She usually appeared in the beginning or middle of the program, firing a rifle at targets in the hands of her manager-husband. A performance in which a diminutive, girlish—even virginal—woman raised a gun to her husband might seem socially subversive at first. But scholars have argued that Annie Oakley's act was in fact a conservative spectacle, a complete inversion of domestic norms that served to heighten awareness and sensitivity to the “normal” domestic order.²³

Still, we might see the Settler's Cabin scene as a symbolic constraining of women for anybody who still had doubts about the “proper” place of women. Cody himself eventually endorsed woman suffrage, but his show harbored deep suspicions of the Progressive Era's New Woman. Where Annie Oakley was an independent woman, a celebrity for mastering the most modern industrial and masculine weaponry and her own career, the woman in the Settler's Cabin was prisoner to masculine whim. Any

²¹ The congruence between the show and Cody's life was well known, and widely accepted. See for example “Buffalo Bill Arrives Sunday,” *Winnipeg Telegram* (Manitoba), 20 August 1910, clipping, Series VI: G, Box 1, Folder 15, BBHC.

²² The literature on this subject is enormous. See Richard Slotkin, *Regeneration through Violence: The Mythology of the American Frontier, 1600–1860* (Middletown, CT, 1973), esp. 116–45; James Axtell, *The Invasion Within: The Contest of Cultures in Colonial North America* (New York, 1985); June Namias, *White Captives: Gender and Ethnicity on the American Frontier* (Chapel Hill, NC, 1993); John Demos, *The Unredeemed Captive: A Family Story from Early America* (New York, 1994).

²³ For Oakley's career, see Isabelle S. Sayers, *Annie Oakley and Buffalo Bill's Wild West* (New York, 1981), 23, 76. For conservative spectacle: Tracy C. Davis, “Shotgun Wedlock: Annie Oakley's Power Politics in the Wild West,” in *Gender in Performance: The Presentation of Difference in the Performing Arts*, ed. Laurence Senelick (Hanover, NH, 1992), 140–53, see p. 29.

anxiety about masculine power remaining from the spectacle of the virginal, girlish, dead-shot Oakley could be put to rest after seeing the savage men driven off by the white men, who arrived just in time to prevent the victimization of the helpless white woman in the show's final scene.²⁴

Where the Settler's Cabin scene reestablished a domestic order for women, it thereby served symbolically to constrain them. As much as women were symbols of domestic order, as Carroll Smith-Rosenberg points out, "from the mid-nineteenth century on, woman had become the quintessential symbol of social danger and disorder."²⁵ The power of the home as symbol depended on a connection with women. And the possibility that women might wish to sever or reshape that bond generated a large amount of cultural anxiety. Indeed, American society was transfixed by the problem of shoring up womanly domesticity, as the industrial revolution both called women to work for wages and created a new bourgeoisie for whom a principal symbol of status was a stay-at-home wife. The dangers of the new cities were legion, from crime and prostitution to alcoholism and many, many threats of nervous disorder. But none was more confounding than the danger of women *choosing* to leave the dwelling place of men, either to work, or in more symbolic ways, by availing themselves of birth control or abortion.²⁶ The presence of the gun-toting Oakley and other female sharpshooters, cowgirls, and trick riders highlighted these concerns. The willingness of white women to combat established notions of home and domesticity in this way left them open to accusations of weakening the white race and the culture.

The Settler's Cabin scene, spectacle of a woman threatened by rape and abduction, must have spoken to these anxieties. By sketching a dangerous landscape of savagery in which the only safe place for a woman was the house and the only safe social condition was dependence on white men, the show cast what one scholar has called a "narrative of sexual danger," wherein the wider cultural anxieties about women leaving the home were expressed in melodramatic display of female vulnerability.²⁷

But as much as the Settler's Cabin scene represented the containment of women, it also rang a cautionary note regarding manly power. The show's principal energy was

²⁴ In this sense the scene harkened to traditions of American melodrama. David Grimstead, *Melodrama Unveiled: American Theater and Culture, 1800–1850* (Chicago, 1968); also Robert C. Allen, *Horrible Prettiness: Burlesque and American Culture* (Chapel Hill, NC, 1991), 81–7.

²⁵ Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, *Disorderly Conduct: Visions of Gender in Victorian America* (New York, 1985), 181.

²⁶ "Women and the home represented stability in a rapidly changing society, and women were forced into a more circumscribed position to facilitate the transition to an industrial society." Joyce Warren, quoted in Tracy Davis, "Annie Oakley and Her Ideal Husband of No Importance," in *Critical Theory and Performance*, ed. Janelle G. Reinelt and Joseph R. Roach (Ann Arbor, 1992), 229–312, for quote see 302.

²⁷ Judith R. Walkowitz, *City of Dreadful Delight: Narratives of Sexual Danger in Late-Victorian London* (Chicago, 1992).

animal energy, horsepower, and the men who sat astride the horses—Indians, cowboys, vaqueros, and later cossacks, gauchos, and Hungarian Magyars—were horsemen, “centaurs” in the words of show promoters. Centaurs were popular symbols of horsemanship in nineteenth-century America. Cody himself was fascinated with centaurs, and from his show’s early days the word “centaur” was sprinkled throughout its literature.²⁸ The first program, in 1883, hailed Buck Taylor as “the Centaur Ranchman of the Plains.”²⁹ English journalists dubbed the show cowboys “Transatlantic Centaurs,” and Cody himself became “the Centaur Heroic” in the pages of *Punch* magazine. The image took hold in the U. S. In the words of one elderly American woman who recalled his show when she wrote in the 1950s, Cody was “the complete restoration of the Centaur.”³⁰

If the salvation of the home by white men was imperative, the show also required they be on horseback. Indeed, in many ways, the show implied that men on foot had failed, that the home’s patriarchal figure could not resist the tide of nearly naked and consistently mounted Indians. The erotics of the scene—the bare bodies of the Indians swirling round and round, ever closer to the vulnerable woman, whose unhorsed and fully clothed man is about to fail—required a narrative resolution itself. In the show, as in American culture, to be unhorsed was to be unmanned.

The arrival of white men on horseback, guns blazing, was not just about the superiority of the white race. It also suggested the need for an infusion of natural power, here symbolized by horse power, into white manhood to make it successful in the defense of the home. White centaurs embodied the reasoning attributes of masculinity combined with the stallion’s virility and power.³¹ In this respect, the symbolism of white centaurs appealed to cultural anxieties about the feminizing powers of civilization, which could be countered by mixing appropriate quantities of wild nature into America’s white men. Thus, the show’s teachings complemented the efforts of such organizations as the Boy Scouts, the YMCA, the Boone and Crockett Club, and much of the broader conservation movement, which sought to instill in American manhood some approximation of Theodore Roosevelt’s “strenuous life” to fend off the deleterious effects of modernism.³²

²⁸ For Cody’s interest in centaurs, see Ralph D. Blumenfeld, *R.D.B.’s Procession* (New York, 1935) 32–3.

²⁹ “Buffalo Bill and Doc Carver Rocky Mountain and Prairie Exhibition,” 1883, n.p. MS 6 BBHC.

³⁰ *The Era*, 23 April 1887, Johnny Baker Scrapbook, DPL; W.F. Cody, *Story of the Wild West and Camp Fire Chats* (Richmond, VA, 1888), 721. Stella Adelyne Foot, *Letters from Buffalo Bill* (Billings, MT, 1954), 15.

³¹ Page DuBois, *Centaurs and Amazons: Women and the Pre-History of the Great Chain of Being* (Ann Arbor, 1982).

³² Philip J. Deloria, *Playing Indian* (New Haven, CT, 1998), 107–9; Daniel Justin Herman, *Hunters and the American Imagination* (Washington, DC, 2001), 237–69.

As the mythical creature that marks the ultimate limit between culture and nature, the centaur was in many ways an ideal symbol of frontier life.³³ But the number and exuberance of Cody's centaurs—his roving, energetic, raucous, and warlike horsemen—always threatened to overwhelm the homey virtues of his Wild West show. The success of Cody's show hinged on its appeal to families in an era when popular amusements often created consternation among the middle classes because of bawdy or otherwise "unsuitable" content.³⁴ Buffalo Bill's Wild West needed to appeal to the tastes of middle-class women at least as much as to men, for a mixed audience of middle-class men *and* women was the benchmark of a respectable show, and the key to the elusive treasure sought by many entertainers: middle-class, familial audiences.³⁵ In other words, to be successful, the show had to be about more than rowdy men on horses who fought a lot. Thus, in allowing free rein to the masculine anxieties of the age, the show threatened to *create* anxieties about its own excessive masculinity.³⁶

The show compensated for this in various ways, but perhaps most prominently by sequences that illustrated how the hot-tempered centaurs could be domesticated. Critically, though, it also racialized these moments by portraying white frontiersmen as the only Wild Westerners, the only centaurs, who could take up a domestic order. Through these acts, white women emerged as central to American history. Even before he began to exploit the centaur imagery, Cody imposed one of the most enduring acts—in which he usually featured himself—near the center of the program: the Virginia Reel on Horseback. Frequently, this scene depicted a community in transition—either on its way across the prairie by wagon train or in the midst of building a ranch or town. A celebration would be called for, the music struck up, and because no dance floor could be found, the young men and women would square off and begin a Virginia Reel—on horseback.

This might seem a silly novelty, but it was one of the most enduring and consistent of show scenes. An English critic—one of the few observers who took the time to

³³ DuBois, *Centaur and Amazons*.

³⁴ Allen, *Horrible Prettiness*; John F. Kasson, *Amusing the Million: Coney Island at the Turn of the Century* (New York, 1978), 6–7.

³⁵ David Nasaw, *Going Out: The Rise and Fall of Public Amusements* (New York, 1993), 18, 26. Cody's publicity appealed to middle-class women from his stage theater days on. "Opera House," clipping, n.d., no publisher, in "WFC Stage Play Notices and Reviews, 1875–80," BBHC. Cody gave away autographed portraits of himself and his cast to ladies in attendance at stage performances. See "Amphitheatre Play Bill," n.d., no publisher, in "WFC Stage Play Notices and Reviews, 1875–80," BBHC. For the appeal of the Wild West show to families, see "The Wild West," *Montreal Herald and Commercial Gazette* (Quebec), 17 August 1885, n.p., clipping in Series VI: G Box 1, folder 15, BBHC.

³⁶ This explains why so much of the show's publicity was also devoted to the "orderliness" and temperance of Buffalo Bill's Wild West camp, and the community of the huge (500+ member) cast. See, for example, Cody's own celebration of the fact that his show cast was "everywhere acclaimed gentlemen," and "free of impure associations," in "The Wild West," *Montreal Herald and Commercial Gazette*, BBHC.

write an assessment of the scene—described the spectacle of Buffalo Bill himself, with three cowboys, dancing with three young women on horseback, “a performance at once pretty, graceful, and pleasing,” as “a grateful relief” from the “bloodcurdling” attack on the emigrant train that preceded it.³⁷ A close reading of Wild West ephemera suggests that any audience member would have been far more likely to witness a Virginia Reel on horseback than Custer’s Last Stand. The dance scene first appeared in 1886, and was likely a feature of the show in nearly every year thereafter, even as late as 1915, the show’s penultimate year.³⁸

In its importance, I would argue that it was not unlike later dance scenes in western movies, from Edwin Porter’s *The Great Train Robbery* in 1903 to John Ford’s *Fort Apache* in 1948. In these films, the good guys—white guys—are recognizable as harbingers of civilization in part because they dance with women, particularly white women. Their opponents do not. The forces of progress in these films often do a Virginia Reel or a quadrille, which is an exuberant, community-oriented dance with measured cadence and somewhat specific steps. Whenever it featured in the Wild West show’s drama, this equestrian dance scene showed cowboys (centaurs) whom cowgirls (female centaurs) allowed ritually to enter domesticity and community by dancing in an organized if energetic fashion, on horseback. The scene distinguished for audiences the white centaurs—capable of making homes, of settling—from their Indian opponents, whose shortcomings flowed from the classic centaur condition, hyper-masculinity leading to savage behavior, all constantly aggravated by the absence of women, home, and family. Indian dances were also featured in the program, but these were invariably described as “scalp, war, and other dances,” the opposite of the domestic dance that the whites performed.³⁹ Simply put, the presence of white women allowed white men to “tame” their savage natures, an option Indians, Mexicans, and others ostensibly did not have. Doing it on horseback provided levity for what was, no doubt, a comical scene, but it also suggested that the male-female bonding that created domestic union, the keystone of settlement, would take place amidst the mastery of nature, represented by the horses beneath the riders.

The Wild West show required these spectacles of domesticity to remind (and reassure) audiences of the superiority of white people in the making of domestic space, in settling. And for this reason, white women, or at least white wives, were essential to the show. There were Indian women in the show (and backstage, a well-developed Indian domestic order, too) but in the terms of performance, Indians were unable to

³⁷ “The Wild West” (illegible attribution), clipping in W.F. Cody Scrapbook, 1887, Buffalo Bill Museum, Lookout Mountain, Colorado.

³⁸ See the show programs, 1886–1915, in BBHC and DPL. The frequency of the Virginia Reel or Quadrille on Horseback scene is difficult to judge, given that it was often folded into the Attack on the Emigrant Train scene, and not mentioned separately. For connection of the dance and Emigrant Train scenes, see BBWW programs for 1886, 1888, 1898, 1902, 1903, 1910.

³⁹ Wojtowicz, *W.F. Cody Buffalo Bill Collector’s Guide with Values*, 15, 17, 30.

make homes, to settle, to domesticate the land. They represented mobility, nomadism, the opposite of settlement.

And yet, even with the Virginia Reel on Horseback in place, in seeking to cast its epic history as a contest between domesticity and mobility, the Wild West show was in grave danger of becoming incoherent, because, after all, the show's defining characteristic was its constant mobility. The social Darwinism of its teachings, its emphasis on race progress through racial collision, was underscored by the constant motion, the racing of its many races, including white people. In addition to the Settler's Cabin scene, the Wild West featured three other enduring action tableaux of fast-moving white and Indian combatants, which were so consistent that they appeared in the show even when, late in life, Cody combined the Wild West with a circus and other western shows, at times when the Custer Fight and even the Settler's Cabin scenes were completely abandoned. These were: the Pony Express, an Attack on an Emigrant Train, and the Attack on the Deadwood Stage. These acts, in which white people in motion were attacked by Indians in motion, drew crowds consistently for thirty-three years. The constant speed of the white cast throughout the show required the show's creators to self-consciously remind audiences that whites, unlike their racial competitors, were bound to become domesticated and settled. This explains the positioning of the Virginia Reel on Horseback almost always somewhere around the middle of the program, and the Attack on the Settler's Cabin at the end.⁴⁰ The show reinforced the idea that the story of the West was not just one of civilization trumping savagery, and culture springing from nature, but of fixity and settlement triumphing over mobility and nomadism, or, better yet, (white) domesticity as the culmination of American history. The story of the Wild West thus ended with a homecoming, a return to the scene of a white family domicile, settled, rural, and virtuous. This, the show seemed to be saying, was where (and how) the Pony Express Trail and the Deadwood Stage Line and, indeed, the history of the West should—would—end.

Where the Settler's Cabin scene resolved tensions between the mobile and the settled, it seems quite likely it would also have been of enormous appeal to Wild West audiences of most social classes for reasons external to the show. Americans may have been enamored of settled homes, but they were also painfully aware of the mobility required for social and economic advancement that allowed the purchase of homes in the first place. Across all social classes, geographical transience was one of the most salient characteristics of American life.⁴¹ By exploiting tensions between mobility and

⁴⁰ In other ways, the show was at pains to remind people that the white people were only temporary nomads. Thus, in the 1887 season at least, the wagons were loaded with white families, as well as furniture and household effects, the very stuff of domesticity. For families, see "The Wild West Show," *The Era*, 14 May 1887, Annie Oakley Scrapbook, 1887, BBHC. For furniture, see "Royal Visit to the Wild West," *The Sporting Life*, 12 May 1887, Annie Oakley Scrapbook, BBHC.

⁴¹ In the words of one study, "Population movement was ubiquitous" in the nineteenth century. Michael Katz, Michael J. Doucet, and Mark J. Stern, *The Social Organization of Early Industrial Capitalism* (Cambridge, MA, 1982), 113, 119.

homemaking, and placing them at the center of a progressive myth of American conquest, the show spoke to some of the most prevalent cultural anxieties of the age. In essence, by bringing the show's heroes home at the end of the show, the Wild West show suggested that the proper return of the conquering hero was to the hearth, and to the settled domestic order.⁴² Mobility, in a sense, brought the heroes home.

Such a message was not necessarily reactionary or conservative. The connection between women, home, and settlement could be a powerful tool for reformers. Throughout this period, Progressive women seized on the icon of the home as their proper place, from which they would work to reform society. Women reformers called for domestication of urban society, and it was more than coincidence that Jane Addams and Florence Kelly sought to transform urban America through the settlement house movement.

And it could also be that the Attack on the Settler's Cabin allowed urban men to think of themselves in new ways, to recreate urban manhood by looking to this simulacrum of the frontier West. As suburban neighborhoods began to draw residents away from the cities in the latter nineteenth century, many men were attracted to them because they separated women from the dangers—and diversions—of the city.⁴³ The move to the suburbs, in other words, was a way of keeping women at home, of keeping them literally “domesticated.” According to Margaret Marsh, in the suburbs men and women together formed a sort of compromise. Women gave up the city, in return for a kind of “masculine domesticity,” in which men took more of a hand in the running of the home, and in raising children, in part so that their boys would have “manly” role models close by.⁴⁴ (By seizing the role of educator of children rather than showman, Cody himself embodied a kind of male ideal that appealed to middle-class white women and men.) Moreover, just as the Wild West show was conceived as a family entertainment, so too suburban homes were designed to assure, even compel, family togetherness, as an antidote to the ostensibly anti-family city. In this context, Buffalo Bill's Wild West show comprised an outpost of family entertainment and education amidst a wilderness of seemingly anti-family urbanism, and his symbolic act of riding to the home at the end might have seemed entirely suitable for middle-class men of the Progressive Era, many of them bound for the suburbs after the show.

The conjunction of the show's internal needs and the external anxieties of the audience did a great deal to ensure the continuing popularity of many show segments, including its classic finale, the Attack on the Settler's Cabin. But perhaps the premier reason for its inclusion was that it fit the needs of the show's preeminent star, Buffalo

⁴² The fact that the settler's cabin itself occupied a prominent place in the arena throughout the show, so that all other acts in some way swirled around it, suggested too that the home anchored the drama, and that all of the movement and energy on display in the arena would in fact end up there. See the arena photos, series XI: J Box 2, BBHC.

⁴³ Margaret Marsh, *Suburban Lives* (New Brunswick, NJ, 1990), 67–74.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 79.

Bill himself. His primary claim to fame was that he was a frontier scout. In American history the scout rides to the front, alone, but his significance derives from what comes in his train. He is the vanguard of civilization. If families and settlement do not follow in his wake—if the security of the settler's cabin is *not* his final act—then he is not a scout, but a recluse, a hermit, or a frontier vagrant. For William Cody, the biography he exhibited in the show acts depended critically on a display of domesticity as the culmination of history. Without it, his entire life—Pony Express rider, army scout, buffalo hunter, Indian fighter—had no denouement. It was climax, with no resolution.

And indeed, Cody's show programs emphasized not just his martial abilities, but his accomplishments as a progressive settler, who not only conquered the West, but domesticated it. One example might suffice. In the 1893 program (republished many times thereafter), compressed onto one page, is a pair of photographs and a poem sandwiched between them that suggests Cody's connection to the domestic narrative of this show. At the top of the page is an image of a savage frontier, a pen-and-ink sketch of Buffalo Bill "Lassoing Wild Horses on the Platte in the Old Days." Below, a photograph of cattle grazing peacefully in front of a Victorian home and a barn clearly labeled "Scout's Rest Ranch," with the caption "'Buffalo Bill's' Home and Horse Ranch on the Old Fighting Ground of the Pawnee and Sioux."⁴⁵ The narrative sequence is clear, from top to bottom: the progress from frontier to pastoral countryside, from war to peace, and even from open space to domestic space, has been made possible by Buffalo Bill. The progress is made all the more apparent in the movement from pen-and-ink illustration at the top to photograph at the bottom, and in the transformed nature in the two scenes. The animals in the bottom image do not need lassoing—they graze without being forced, and they even point mostly from left to right, like words on the page. Perhaps the most salient component of the bottom image is Buffalo Bill's house, slightly to the left. It is a remarkable Gilded Age middle-class home, planted in the Nebraska prairie in front of a row of trees. Audiences would not need any prompting to associate this elegant middle-class home with a wife. The message was clear: by subduing the frontier, Buffalo Bill made homes possible. And he made it possible to keep women—or better, wives—inside them.

Mid-page, between the two images, is a telling poem, "Lines Inspired on Witnessing the Prairie Chief Caressing His Baby Daughter, Little Irma Cody":

Only a baby's fingers patting a brawny cheek,
 Only a laughing dimple in the chin so soft and sleek,
 Only a cooing babble, only a frightened tear,
 But it makes a man both brave and kind
 To have them ever near.

⁴⁵ 1893 program, BBWW, 19.



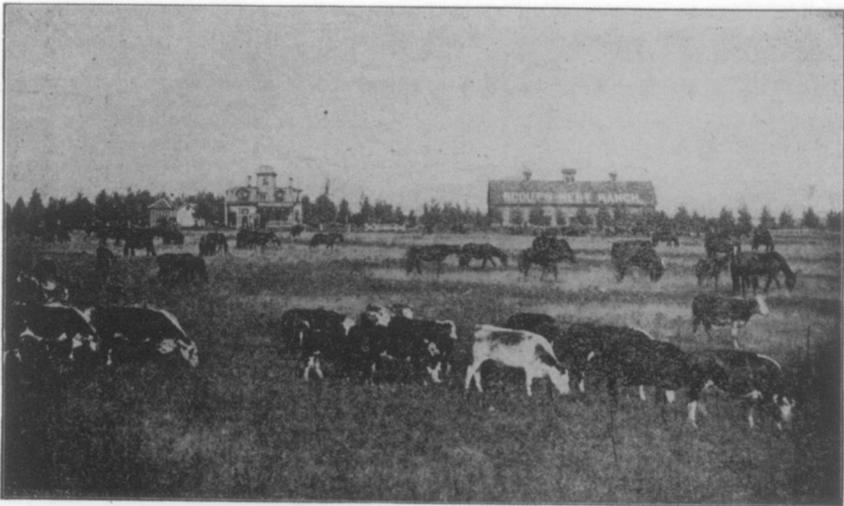
LASSOING WILD HORSES ON THE FLATTE IN OLD DAYS.

LINES INSPIRED ON WITNESSING THE PRAIRIE CHIEF CARESSING HIS BABY DAUGHTER,
LITTLE IRMA CODY.

Only a baby's fingers patting a brawny cheek,
Only a laughing dimple in the chin so soft and sleek,
Only a cooing babble, only a frightened tear,
But it makes a man both brave and kind
To have them ever near.
The hand that seemed harsh and cruel,
Nerved by a righteous hate

As it cleft the heart of the Yellow Hand,
In revenge of Custer's fate,
Has the tender touch of a woman,
As, rifle and knife laid by,
He coos and tosses the baby,
Darling 'appie of his eye.'

—Richmond.



"BUFFALO BILL'S" HOME AND HORSE RANCH ON THE OLD FIGHTING GROUND OF THE PAWNEE AND SIOUX.

Wild West Program, 1893, page 19. Photo courtesy of Western History Department, Denver Public Library, Denver, Colorado.

The hand that seemed so harsh and cruel,
 Nerved by a righteous hate
 As it cleft the heart of Yellow Hand,
 In revenge of Custer's fate,
 Has the tender touch of a woman,
 As, rifle and knife laid by,
 He coos and tosses the baby,
 Darling "apple of his eye."⁴⁶

Thus, the prairie centaur featured in the top illustration, the vengeful slayer of Yellow Hand, has been domesticated by the daughter—and the wife who provided her—in the bottom image. In a limited way, the frontier hero has become a paragon of the new, suburban “masculine domesticity.”

The usefulness of the Attack on the Settler's Cabin is readily apparent when we consider it in relation to the show's other acts and the needs of the audience, and in the context of Cody's career and the requirements of his reputation. So why did it disappear from the show after 1907? What accounts for his sudden abandonment of the climactic show scene after twenty-three years? He might have been bored with it, but other show acts—the Deadwood Stagecoach, the Emigrant Train, and the Pony Express—remained in the program. How do we explain the vanishing of the home where they all metaphorically gathered?

There were no doubt many factors at work, and it would be a mistake to single out any as the primary cause. Cody's return to the U. S., after his four-year European tour in 1907, was his first American season without a managing partner. Nate Salsbury, who had run most of the show's business operations since 1884, died in late 1902. Ultimately, his firm business hand was sorely missed by Cody, and it could be that his absence was reflected in the absence of the show's foundational finale.

But there are larger, and more convincing explanations. America's cultural attachment to the West was shifting, and Cody, who was an intuitive performance genius, probably sensed it. As motion pictures began to draw audiences away from the show, the frontier myth found new form in the Western, a literary and performance genre that both drew on earlier dime novels and Wild West shows and differed from them. In 1902, Owen Wister published *The Virginian*, which became in many ways the template for the Western genre prior to World War II. *The Virginian* made many contributions to western mythology, but few could disagree that it represented a distancing of western heroes from domesticity. Whether we attribute its anti-domestic leanings to a reaction against the domestic novel and reform Christianity, as Jane Tompkins has argued, or whether we take the view that Wister sought to reassure men that they remained firmly in charge even in “The Equality State” of Wyoming, where women had the vote, as Lee Clark Mitchell suggests, *The Virginian's* plot turns on a

⁴⁶ Ibid.

new kind of subordination of the independent woman to the novel's hero.⁴⁷ In Buffalo Bill's Wild West show, as in many nineteenth-century dime novels, heroes raced to rescue women bodily from the clutches of evil. The woman in the settler's cabin, or the women in the wagon train, supported the armed combat of their men without hesitation. The alternative was abduction and subordination to a primitive and racially "other" regime.

With *The Virginian*, the central trope of the Western novel becomes a hero who ventures out to battle evil despite the pleas of the good woman. In fact, his passage to the showdown is marked by his turning away from the woman (who is left indoors), and who has announced that she will leave him if he insists on fighting. By venturing out the door, and into the street, the hero announces that he will forsake his wife and the domestic order she represents in order to defend the honor he embodies. In the Western, heroes must renounce domesticity to fight villainy.

Of course, this development is resolved by the reassertion of domesticity, but only on the hero's terms. After killing the bad man, the Virginian is taken back by his love, Molly Wood. Thus, she validates his violation of her wishes.

The climactic scene of *The Virginian*, with its domestic gender war followed by a showdown, was repeated in various forms throughout the corpus of Westerns, throughout the twentieth century. It is vitally different from the climax of the Wild West show. Where the heroes triumphed over nomadic savagery in the Wild West show, they were energized by the domesticating influence of women. Indeed, as we have seen, the presence of white women was the signature "racial" characteristic that allowed them to settle and vanquish Indians in the first place. In the Western novel the protagonist vanquishes not one, but two, very different adversaries: the woman, who must be refused, and the villain, who must be killed. Indeed, the killing can only follow the refusal. Thus, the modern Western novel emerges as a symbolic defense of manly honor in ways that require *denial* of the constraining power of home and womanhood. The domesticating influence of woman, indeed, becomes a chief threat to the hero, who needs violence to underscore honor and integrity and—though she does not understand this—to defend the woman's honor. Indeed, woman's moral blindness to the need for killing is a sharp contrast to the moral clarity of the hero's vision.⁴⁸

Of course, in a thousand ways, the picture of western centaurs racing *home* could still resonate with this myth. (Picture the desperate race to the cabin in John Ford's *The Searchers* [1956].) But a symbolic homecoming of western heroes, like the finale of the Wild West show, perhaps brought the scout and his cowboys too close to home to be comfortable after 1907. It certainly clashed with the needs of the Western as it developed in the twentieth century. (Thus, one sees the final scene of so many Westerns, echoed and reasserted in *The Searchers*, when the hero, having restored the

⁴⁷ Jane Tompkins, *West of Everything: The Inner Life of Westerns* (New York, 1992), 23–45, 131–55; Mitchell, 113–9.

⁴⁸ Mitchell, 28–54.

abducted woman to her family, walks away from the cabin and back into the wilderness.)

Given his genius for tuning his mythology to national longings, it would be hard to imagine that Cody was completely unaware of these shifting cultural predilections. The nuanced gender commentary of the *Western* was difficult to enact in a show arena, and Cody's search for a new ending to the *Wild West* show was unsuccessful, leading to its many different, less-than-satisfying finales between 1907 and 1916, when it finally closed forever. Nonetheless, Cody's decision to abandon the *Settler's Cabin* was in remarkable concordance with the nation's changing western mythology.

In the final analysis, it may have been the interplay between changing western mythology and Cody's personal life that drove much of his decision about the show's finale. Buffalo Bill embodied the entwining of frontier mythology and real life, and after 1905, the abandonment of the show's *Settler's Cabin* was a singularly appropriate, and perhaps necessary, public gesture. The demise of this signature finale came close on the heels of Buffalo Bill's greatest public relations disaster: his own turn away from domestication, with his unsuccessful suit for divorce in 1904 and 1905. In the early months of 1904, after thirty-eight years of marriage, Buffalo Bill Cody abandoned propriety and sued his wife for divorce. Initially alleging that she had tried to poison him in 1901, and that it had been "nag, nag, nag" throughout his marriage, the case became more spectacular after Louisa Cody contested the suit and it went to trial in Wyoming in 1905.⁴⁹ Cody longed to move permanently to the Shoshone River in Wyoming, where he had secreted his alleged mistress, Bess Isbell, at the forty-acre "BQ" ranch, a property he had gifted to her. Publically, Cody downplayed his connection to Isbell and denied any romantic involvement with her. He sought only "peace" from the forty-year war that was his marriage, and a quiet place to retire from show business.⁵⁰ However much he was aware of it, Cody was in a sense acting out the new dispensation of the *Western*: the final wars won, the show complete, the hero sought retirement away from the domestic order, in the wilderness.

But Cody had not reckoned with the powerful counter-mythology of the home and the domestic order that had long complemented frontier mythology, and with which his show had been entwined for a generation. Very quickly, his wife's attorneys cast William Cody as an aggressor against his own home. Throughout the trial, Louisa Cody exploited the public's fascination with home-making as salve to the dissipating influence of nomadism. She played the role of a loyal wife aggrieved by a befuddled, peripatetic husband, whose drinking, infidelities, and unsteady business hand became primary exhibits in the case against him.

At the same time, the trial testimony made clear how astute a business-woman Louisa Cody was, how she, operating from her home in Nebraska, oversaw the

⁴⁹ Yost, 324; "'Buffalo Bill' at Last Stand," *Chicago Daily Tribune* 17 February 1905, 1.

⁵⁰ Sheridan Co. District Court, Civil Case 970, Cody v. Cody, Folder 2, Deposition of W. F. Cody, 23 March 1904.

profitable Scout's Rest Ranch that was featured in show programs (and where, it emerged in testimony, she had in fact refused to live for many years, preferring a home in the heart of town to the lonely manse near the railroad). The implication that she had a better head for business than he did began to circle around the trial. William Cody seemed unable after a time to say anything negative about his wife in his own testimony, as if he were either unable to think of anything, or more likely, constrained by his own code of honor in which a man did not speak ill of a reputable woman.⁵¹

The case did not terminate until early 1905, when the judge refused William Cody's petition and declared the couple still married. Buffalo Bill lost his divorce case. But much worse than the trial or its legal result were the consequences for his reputation. Marriage was a bulwark of the family and the nation, and to attack one's own marriage, as Cody learned, was to risk public censure.⁵² The press covered the story in sensational fashion, and correspondents of big city dailies filed report after report about Buffalo Bill's "Last Stand," and Mrs. Cody's vow to fight "to the last ditch" to keep the old man from leaving her to marry a younger woman.⁵³ In what was the greatest blow to his reputation in his lifetime, Buffalo Bill, the savior of the Settler's Cabin and the embodiment of all it represented, was widely excoriated for barbarously attacking his own family. Although he would eventually reconcile with his wife, in 1910, his reputation was sullied for the remainder of his life. (He died in 1917.)⁵⁴

For the first three seasons after the trial, the show included the Attack on the Settler's Cabin, but then it vanished. The most enduring show finale, the defense of the home, which had been Cody's "last stand" in the performance night after night for over three decades, was not seen again after 1907. It was replaced by a variety of other segments: Cossack riding tricks, "auto polo," and "equestrian maneuvers" by riders of different nations.⁵⁵

⁵¹ This account of the trial is condensed from depositions in Sheridan Co. District Court, Civil Case File 970, *Cody v. Cody*, Wyoming State Archives, Cheyenne, WY. For Cody's drinking, infidelities, and financial troubles, see depositions of: Beach Hinman, 8 February 1905, Folder 8; C.M. Newton, 8 February 1905, Folder 8; Frank R. Bullard, 10 February 1905, Folder 8. For Louisa Cody's business acumen see Charles F. Iddings, 18 February 1905, Folder 7-2; Mary M. Harrington, 21 February 1905, Folder 10. For testimony about Bess Isbell, see esp. depositions of John W. Clair, 15 April 1904, File 11; Louis "Ed" Clark, 5 November 1904, Folder 12. See also note 50.

⁵² Nancy F. Cott, *Public Vows: A History of Marriage and the Nation* (Cambridge, MA, 2000), esp. 105-31.

⁵³ Yost, 322-36; also "'Buffalo Bill' at Last Stand," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, 1; See the following from *Chicago Daily Tribune*: "Buffalo Bill Reads of Love," 19 February 1905, 5; "Cody's Heart Won by Press Agent?" 20 February 1905, 3; "Dinner for Cody Causes Disgust," 21 February 1905, 2; "Blow for Buffalo Bill," 28 February 1905, 3; "Loves Cody, Swears It," 1 March 1905, 2; "Mrs. Cody Again Denies," 2 March 1905, 7; "Cody's Sister Scores Wife," 14 March 1905, 3; "Col. Cody Beaten in Divorce Case," 24 March 1905, 7.

⁵⁴ Kasson, *Buffalo Bill's Wild West*, 139.

⁵⁵ See BBWW Programs for 1905-16 in BBHC and DPL.

The reasons for the vanishing of the cabin may remain mysterious, but this sad denouement of Cody's career was also doubly fitting. On the one hand, the show that claimed to tell the nation's history *and* the biography of its star and creator ceased to include this segment shortly after he made a public, and losing, attack on his own marriage. On the other hand, the man who had so carefully entwined his life with western myth seemed to recognize how the myth was changing. Almost at the moment when Cody himself was venturing into movie making, he sought to inscribe what would become the primary denouement of western film into his real life.

Scholarship on the Wild West show's attachment to Custer's Last Stand and the show's appeal to yearnings for empire and general masculine anxiety have taught us a great deal about American culture and the myth of the West. What they have failed to account for is the show's emphasis on domesticity and all its attendant gender relations, features that suggest that nineteenth-century frontier myth was more domestically oriented than its twentieth-century successors. Along with all of the emphasis on racial competition and military conquest, Buffalo Bill's Wild West show spun a powerful central narrative about mobility and fixity, men and women, conquest and domesticity. The long-term success of the show's signature finale was testament to its usefulness for the American public as a symbolic resolution of tensions in the show and in American society. Its disappearance reflected broader changes in popular notions of the West, and may well have been connected to its irrelevance for the show's creator, who, after 1905, ceased to embody the defense of the home.

