

Brother William F. Cody “Buffalo Bill”

by
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In a life that was part legend and part fabrication William Frederick Cody came to embody the spirit of the American West and create a national myth and ideal of frontier life.

William F. Cody was born near LeClaire in Scott County, Iowa on February 26, 1846. He grew up on the prairie and managed only a small amount of formal education. He was the son of Isaac and Mary Ann Cody. Isaac was a half-hearted farmer, and a sometimes prospector. He eventually supported his family by working as a stagecoach driver. Isaac was made a Justice of the Peace and also served in the Iowa legislature. In 1852, Isaac moved the family to Kansas near Fort Leavenworth.

While in Kansas, Isaac became involved in farming and several unsuccessful business ventures. He also became known as an outspoken abolitionist. He made a number of enemies and when Bill was still a young boy, there were at least two attempts by pro-slavery factions to murder Isaac because of his politics.

Isaac Cody died in 1857. Bill, who was only eleven years old, left home and went to work for a wagon freight company as a mounted messenger and wrangler. In 1859 he tried his luck as a prospector in the Pike's Peak gold rush. In 1860, Bill answered an ad for the Pony Express for “skinny expert riders who were not afraid to risk death daily”. Bill, being an expert plainsman at the ripe old age of fourteen, was a perfect fit for the Express.

At the onset of the Civil War, Cody served for the Union's Ninth Kansas Cavalry and served in western campaigns against the Kiowa and Comanche. In 1863 he enlisted in the Seventh Kansas Cavalry and saw action in Missouri and Tennessee.

After the war Bill married Louisa Frederici in St. Louis. He continued to work for the Army as a scout and dispatch carrier operating out of Fort Ellsworth, Kansas. During this time he also tried several business ventures including running a hotel, a freight business and railroad construction. In 1867 and 1868 he worked as a buffalo hunter supplying meat to work crews of the Kansas Pacific Railroad. It was during this time that he gained his famous nickname “Buffalo Bill”. He killed, by his count, 4280 buffalo in an eighteen-month period.

Between 1868 and 1872, Cody worked as Chief of civilian scouts for the Fifth Cavalry. He took part in campaigns against the Sioux and Cheyenne and was awarded the Congressional Medal of Honor for his service during this time. (This medal was taken away in 1916 on the grounds that Cody was not a member of the regular military. It was restored posthumously in 1989).

In 1872, Bill tried yet another career, show business. He made his Chicago stage debut on December 17 in a drama called “The Scouts of the Prairie” created by the dime novelist, Ned Buntline. Bill was not a polished actor but he was a natural showman. Bill remained an actor for eleven seasons returning to the west in the off season to scout for the Army and escort rich Easterners and European nobility on Western hunting expeditions. He eventually became an author as well and published his autobiography in 1879 and some seventeen hundred Buffalo Bill dime novels.

After Custer's defeat in 1876 at Little Bighorn, Bill was called back into service as a fulltime army scout in a punitive campaign against the Sioux and Cheyenne. It was at this time he is said to have fought his famous “duel” with the Cheyenne Chief, Yellow Hand. While details of this incident are sketchy, Bill ever the showman, had his version of the “event” written into a melodrama. In the fall theater season of 1876, Bill thrilled Easterners with Buffalo Bill's First Scalp for Custer”

In 1883 Bill determined to cash in on his popularity and organized Buffalo Bill's Wild West. This show was an outdoor extravaganza and featured real cowboys and indians. Bill dramatized what he perceived to be the most picturesque elements of frontier life including a buffalo hunt with real buffalos, an indian attack on the Deadwood stage with real indians and as a climax a presentation of Custer's Last Stand with some of the Lakota who had actually fought in the battle.

In later years Buffalo Bill's Wild West would star sharpshooter Annie Oakley, Cowboy Buck

Taylor and for one season in 1884, Chief Sitting Bull the “slayer of General Custer”. Buffalo Bill’s Wild West toured for the next thirty years including ten years in Europe. Crowds were wildly enthusiastic and the show enjoyed great popularity.

In addition to performing, Bill engaged in a number of business ventures most of which were not financially successful. He also served as a member of the Nebraska legislature. In 1913 his wild west show was sold in Denver to pay off a \$20,000.00 loan. Bill was forced to perform for other owners until his death in 1917.

Brother William Frederick Cody was a member of Platte Valley Lodge No. 32 in North Platte, Nebraska. He was initiated on March 5, 1870, passed April 2, 1870 and raised January 10 1871. He was a member of Euphrates Chapter No. 15 in North Platte. He became a Mark, Past and Most Excellent Master on November 14, 1888 and was exalted on November 15 of 1888. Companion Cody selected for his mark a buffalo head. He was created a Knight Templar on April 2, 1889 in Palestine Commandry in North Platte. At his death in 1917 Golden City Lodge No. 1 of Golden Colorado gave him Masonic burial. He is buried on Lookout Mountain near Denver. At his funeral, all his pallbearers were Knights Templar. It was reported that Masons from all over the West attended his funeral and stated that over three thousand automobiles were included in the funeral procession up Lookout Mountain. Sadly, there is no Masonic marking of any sort at his grave

Sources

The William F. Cody Museum
The City of Cody, Wyoming Chamber of Commerce
PBS Archive of the West 1877-1887
North Platte and It's Associations- 1910
Frontier Army Lodge of Research #1875