Indians on the Midway:
Wild West Shows and
the Indian Bureau at
World's Fairs, 1893-1904

L. G. Moses

In the decade preceding the 1893 World's Columbian Exposition
in Chicago, Wild West shows achieved remarkable success. William
F. (“Buffalo Bill”) Cody and his many imitators toured cities in the
eastern United States and, after 1887, many cities in Europe with
spectacles that re-created in a fashion the theme of “the winning
of the West.” Except for the actor-entrepreneurs themselves (such
as Cody, William F. Carver, Gordon W. Lillie, Adam Forepaugh, and
the Miller Brothers), American Indians, and mainly plains Sioux,
assumed roles as principal actors in the dramas that portrayed them
as heroic warriors of a vanishing culture. In this way, the Wild West
shows created images of Indians for public consumption that chal-
lenged those the United States Office of Indian Affairs sought to
foster. The Indian Bureau consciously projected Indians as on their
way to “productive citizenship” under the influence of allotment,
education, manual training, and Christianity. This rivalry in the cre-
ation of popular images found its literal expression at the American
world’s fairs between the Chicago World’s Columbian Exposition
in 1893 and the Saint Louis Louisiana Purchase Exposition in 1904.
On the fairground, the Indian Office directly challenged the Wild
West show for supremacy in a battle over whose image of the In-
dian would prevail.

Historian Robert F. Berkhofer, Jr., has called Wild West shows
“dime novels come alive,” but they were much more than that.1 Buf-

William F. ("Buffalo Bill") Cody, shown here with Sitting Bull, claimed he promoted the Wild West show as a way of bringing Indians and whites together.

Buffalo Bill’s show celebrated both past and present in the supposed recreations of western, or "frontier," life. In telling his story of the triumph of civilization over savagery, however, he reminded his audiences that, where once Euro-Americans and American Indians had met as enemies, challenging each other for mastery of a continental empire, they must now live together as friends. Early in his career as Wild West showman, Buffalo Bill insisted that it was his "honorable ambition" to educate Americans in the East to respect the native inhabitants of the West. He and his more reputable imitators traded upon the seeming educational value of their shows to claim respect-
ability. Even though Cody's company offered other Americans an “untinselled representation of a . . . Frontier history that is fast passing away,” the Indians remained. In Cody's scheme, Indians and other Wild West performers, by living and working together, would demonstrate to the world the showman's self-proclaimed mission to “bring the white and red races closer together.”

Indians in Wild West shows performed in a variety of ways. They demonstrated their equestrian skill, their prowess with bows and arrows, their speed and agility on foot, and their artistry in the dance. Most memorable perhaps for their audiences—and certainly for critics and historians ever since—were the historical tableaux, in which performers re-created events in the nation’s recent past. The shows included Indian attacks on settlers' cabins, stagecoaches, pony-express riders, and wagon trains. A number of the shows between 1885 and 1898, beginning with Buffalo Bill's, staged reenactments of the Battle of the Little Bighorn. Invariably, each show employed one of the dozen or so Indians who claimed to be or, more often, received billing as the “Killer of Custer.”

2. Cody’s “intentions” are described in John Burke to Commissioner of Indian Affairs (CIA), n.d. [ca. 1886], Land, No. 1886-5564, Letters Received (LR), 1881-1907, Records of the Bureau of Indian Affairs, Record Group 75 (RG 75), National Archives (NA), Washington, D.C.


Custer's Last Stand has been re-created as recently as Memorial Day weekend of 1991, when Pawnee Bill's Wild West Show, "The Amusement Triumph of the Age," staged "Re-enactments of the Mount [sic] Meadows Massacre and Custer's Last Stand" at Pawnee Bill State Park just outside Pawnee, Oklahoma.
Clearly, the images the shows projected conflicted with those traits Christian humanitarian reformers and their allies in the Indian service encouraged. In the late 1880s, Indian-policy reformers began to condemn Wild West shows as injurious to the sober image of Indians embracing civilization. The gypsy life of show people also ran counter to the settled habits of industry in vogue at the Indian Bureau. How could Indians develop the proper attitudes toward work and citizenship if the shows used gold to entice them away from their reservations to play? At best, the reformers claimed, Wild West shows celebrated the heroism of the independent warrior, and at worst, they exploited the idea of Indian menace. Either way, audiences received the wrong message. The Interior Department consequently designed its Indian displays at the fairs to counteract the image projected in the shows.

A third, closely related force in the marketing of Indian images at world’s fairs was the ethnological exhibit, including the “Indian congress,” that displayed not only the products of anthropological work but also the Indians themselves as the embodiments of both evolutionary theory and the comparative method of anthropology. Fairgoers could tour Indian encampments along the midway or browse museum displays in the anthropology and United States government buildings. There, they could marvel at both the observers and the observed: the adventurer-anthropologists who brought back from the field trophies of their scholarly pursuits, laying them out in such a fashion as to confirm evolutionary progress and the su-

5. Among professional American anthropologists, many of whom worked for the Smithsonian Institution's Bureau of American Ethnology (BAE) in the late nineteenth century, the belief prevailed that civilization was hierarchical; that societies went through various evolutionary stages from savagery through barbarism to "civilization." According to Lewis Henry Morgan, whose theories dominated the BAE for many years, each stage found expression in kinship, types of property, technology, aesthetics, and religious beliefs. One of the tenets of the comparative method was that, by studying "primitive" societies, a person could restore the lost or "conjectural history" of civilized societies at the same stage of development. The comparative method rested on the assumption of "the psychic unity of mankind," i.e., the basic similarity of human minds in every place and every culture. Because of psychic unity, the past cultures of any people could be reconstructed through close observation of the "survivals" of past cultural traits. Through the comparative method, the discoveries made about present Indian societies would contribute to a greater understanding of the evolution of more sophisticated cultures. Thus, in a sense, Indians were mirrors of modern Americans at a much earlier stage of development. See Curtis M. Hinsley, Jr., Savages and Scientists: The Smithsonian Institution and the Development of American Anthropology, 1846-1910 (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1981), pp. 130-39, and L. G. Moses, The Indian Man: A Biography of James Mooney (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1984), pp. 30-31.
Located in the ornate United States Government Building at the 1893 World's Columbian Exposition (below), the Smithsonian Institution exhibit (above) used the American Indian to depict evolutionary progress.
The priority of white-skinned peoples; and the American Indians at work or play, those living anachronisms whose societies verged on extinction. Fairgoers might even take some comfort in the knowledge that anthropology, or the "Science of Man," might someday unravel the mysteries of human history and behavior. At times, however, both the ethnological exhibits and the Indian Bureau exhibits took on the trappings of Wild West shows. For their part, the shows themselves, most prominently Buffalo Bill’s, in turn promised anthropological displays of "real Indians" living and occasionally fighting as they had even after the arrival of "civilized" Old World people.

The difference in interpretation showed up clearly during planning for the Chicago fair. Regarding Buffalo Bill’s Wild West show as unseemly and not up to the educational standards of other exhibits, the Board of Fair Managers of the 1893 World’s Columbian Exposition refused Cody permission to locate his show within the fairgrounds. The theme of the Chicago fair was the progress made in technology, science, government, aesthetics, and human relations since Columbus first made American landfall four hundred years earlier. In designing the exhibits, officials planned to group natives of the continent in villages that, when compared to the main exposition buildings of the neoclassical “White City,” would demonstrate their lack of progress and show fairgoers what life must have been like at the moment Europeans effectively discovered Americans. It was one thing to portray docile natives who had not progressed much since the late fifteenth century, but it was quite another matter to portray some of them as armed and dangerous. The managers would not dignify an exhibition like Cody’s that supposedly demonstrated, with plenty of shooting, what Indians had been like until only recently.

Originally, the Indian Bureau had agreed to sponsor and supervise the Columbian Exposition’s American Indian exhibit, including an Indian encampment. A model Indian school to be situated near

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the midway would serve as a counterpoise to the natives in their pantomime villages. According to the original plan, the exhibits would include “specimens of the handiwork of the North American Indians showing their native self-taught industries in comparison with the accomplishments in the arts of civilization and the methods adopted in the management of Indian schools.” The school itself would re-create life and labor in a typical reservation boarding school for fifteen to thirty students. “The windows,” according to

The Indian Bureau designed its model school for the Columbian Exposition to demonstrate the progress American Indians had made under bureau supervision.
Commissioner of Indian Affairs Thomas J. Morgan, “will be filled with transparencies showing scenes on Indian reservations and pictures of Indian life and customs.” Groups of Indian students drawn from reservation boarding schools in the western United States would visit Chicago at intervals throughout the run of the fair. Each group would remain a week or two, becoming part of the exhibit and, in their leisure time, seeing the sights. The school, however, represented “only the civilized and becoming civilized side of Indian life. To be picturesque and impressive, to satisfy the curiosity and philanthropic and scientific interest of people,” Morgan concluded, “the primitive Indian must be presented, living in his own habitation and carrying on his own avocations, such as making baskets, blankets, jewelry, bead work, pottery etc. This part of the exhibit is not to be omitted.”

The bureau, however, withdrew its sponsorship of the ethnological portion of the exhibit early in 1892, and the fair’s Department of Ethnology and Archaeology, under the directorship of Frederick W. Putnam of Harvard’s Peabody Museum, assumed responsibility for the Indian village. To some extent, finances dictated the withdrawal, but other considerations influenced Commissioner Morgan as well. He feared that a display that included the sale of Indian handicrafts, such as the one planned for the Midway Plaisance, might create a conflict of interest and generate criticism of the bureau. As he explained in a meeting with Putnam, sales of handicrafts “would involve us in difficulties and possible scandals. That is to say, everybody is critical about anything the Indian Office does. It would be charged that somebody is making money out of that, somebody is getting privileges and concessions that other people don’t, and I would prefer that the Government as such would not have anything to do with that.”

8. Morgan’s comments can be found in F. W. Clarke, Department of the Interior, to Secretary of the Interior, 8 Nov. 1893, World’s Columbian Exposition, Correspondence, 1891-1894, Box 1, Records of the Office of the Secretary of the Interior, Record Group 48, NA.

9. “Indian Office Exhibit at the World’s Columbian Exposition” (report of conversation held in Office of Commissioner of Indian Affairs), 1 Feb. 1892, ibid. Frederick E. Hoxie gives a different account of the split. He suggests that both of the groups Putnam and Morgan represented intended to present their own work rather than adhere to a common theme. Dividing the Indian exhibit between Putnam’s and Morgan’s jurisdiction was more than a bureaucratic convenience, for the themes of the two displays were strikingly different. The Indian village “conveyed the idea that Indians were members of an exotic race with little connection to modern America.” The model Indian school, by concentrating on Indian progress, “pointed to the possibility of Indian assimilation,” Hoxie noted. “What is more, there seemed to be a
Instead, Morgan used his portion of the Interior Department’s appropriation to build and run the model Indian school. He did not decry the purpose of the midway’s Indian village, but he hoped that it would be located near enough to the school that no one could miss the work the United States was doing for civilization of the Indian through education. “There,” he imagined, would be “the native Indians, customs, etc.,” and “here are the educated Indians,

Ethnological exhibits like this Penobscot Indian village at the Columbian Exposition depicted the “primitive” ways of a number of native groups.

good deal of uncertainty—among the organizers of the fair as well as the public—over which focus was more appropriate” (Hoxie, Final Promise, pp. 88-89). Hoxie may be right about the ambivalence of both patrons and commissioner, but Morgan had intended to undertake the Indian encampment. “As stated in my annual report,” he wrote to Interior Secretary John W. Noble, “this exhibit of Indians in civilized conditions ought to have for its back-ground a setting forth of the Indian in primitive conditions. It was first my intention to have the Indian Office undertake this work; but the lack of expert services for the making of such an exhibit, and more especially the complete lack of funds required to make it a success, have made the Office very glad to accept the suggestion of Professor Putnam” (T. J. Morgan to Secretary of the Interior, 10 Feb. 1892, World’s Columbian Exposition, Correspondence, Box 1, RG 48, NA).
and it is to be so arranged that everything shall put forth the school in its best light.” The commissioner even suggested that Putnam organize the American Indians in their separate encampments according to an evolutionary scheme. The school would represent the “apex—as the culmination” of the progress of civilization. For instance, Morgan continued, “Suppose you have some of the Yumas there. Follow these with those [Indians] that are a little higher, until here is a group of people living very much as white people live, and from that to the school would be only a step.” Such a display would also serve as an antidote to the impressions Buffalo Bill created outside the fairgrounds.

Putnam, however, organized his ethnological village geographically and situated it at a considerable distance from the school, making it of little value in establishing the school’s place in Morgan’s hierarchy. Nevertheless, Morgan continued to cooperate with Putnam in securing “persons or materials” from the reservations. The bureau paid transportation expenses for bringing Indian delegations to participate in the running of the school, but other Indians had to pay their own way to Chicago.

Meanwhile, Buffalo Bill’s partner, Nate Salsbury, had leased a fourteen-acre parcel of land near the main entrance of the fair, and the company constructed stands around the arena to seat eighteen thousand spectators. Cody contracted seventy-four men and women from the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation in South Dakota to perform in his show, which had just returned from a six-year European tour and been renamed “Buffalo Bill’s Wild West and Congress of Rough Riders of the World.” As an act of generosity, and partly to show up the Indian Bureau, Cody also brought an additional one hundred Sioux from the Pine Ridge, Standing Rock, and Rosebud reser-

11. Ibid. Daniel M. Browning, Morgan’s successor as commissioner, reported enthusiastically about the success of the exhibit, which attracted over one hundred thousand people each week. The secretary of the Board of Indian Commissioners, on the other hand, described the school as “a little, mean-looking building in the midst of those grand and imposing structures” (Francis Paul Prucha, American Indian Policy in Crisis: Christian Reformers and the Indian, 1865-1900 [Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1976], pp. 325-26). Under orders from the secretary of the interior, Josephus Daniels, chief of the department’s appointment division, spent ten days at the fair examining government exhibits. He later criticized the school. Daniels preferred Morgan’s original plan of contrasting the primitive Indians with those approaching civilization. “I regard it as a mistake,” he wrote, “not to have carried out the original plan and give a picturesque and impressive comparison by presenting here the primitive Indian... as he was before he had ever felt the helpful—or hurtful—hand of civilization” (Daniels to Secretary of the Interior, 24 July 1893, World’s Columbian Exposition, Correspondence, Box 1, RG 48, NA).
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vations. These Sioux visited the fair at his expense and took part in the opening ceremonies that included President Grover Cleveland as the guest of honor.12

Buffalo Bill received permission to take his friends and employees onto the highest balcony of the fair’s administration building to view the opening festivities, of which they inadvertently became a focus. Amy Leslie, whose column “Amy Leslie at the Fair” appeared regularly in the Chicago News and was later published as a book, effused about the scene on 1 May 1893: “A very pretty accident gave an unexpected American tinge to the climax of the interesting ceremonies. . . . By an unintentional gauge of time that seemed strategic just as the machinery began to roar, the whistles blow and the magnificent chorus intone ‘My Country, ‘Tis of Thee’ these Indians in their resplendent war paint, gorgeous necklets [sic] and representative American savagery appeared on the north abutment of the building, a blazing line of character moving along with high, flaunting crests of feathers and flaming blankets which stood out against the gleaming white of the staff dome like a rainbow cleft into remembrances of a lost, primitive glory.” The scene concluded with “this fallen majesty slowly filing out of sight as the flags of all nations swept satin kisses through the air, waving congratulations to cultured achievement and submissive admiration to a new world.”13

It is highly unlikely, in retrospect, that the group, which included the ghost dancers Kicking Bear, Two Strike, Jack Red Cloud, and Short Bull, actually filed out in fallen majesty or, like the flags of other nations, waved in submissive admiration to Euro-American spectacle. When asked about the ceremony, Rocky Bear, an Oglala showman, commented that Cleveland “must be a good president because he is fat and looks so prosperous.” Young Man Afraid of His Horses and Rocky Bear said they rather liked the merry-go-round on the midway.14


14. Chicago Herald, 2 May 1893, and Chicago Record, 14 June 1893, in “Scrapbook Chicago Season, 1893,” BBHC.
Performers with Buffalo Bill's Wild West show posed for this group photograph at the 1893 World's Columbian Exposition.

The Chicago fair board had initially resolved to keep the midway from becoming a sideshow by selectively choosing exhibitors, but as the opening date drew closer and expenses mounted, this resolve had crumbled. Easing their restrictions, fair managers granted licenses to concessionaires, including some Indian shows, along the Midway Plaisance for a cut of the profits. As the fair opened, it was along the midway, the marketplace of pleasure, that the educational ideals of ethnological villages competed for attention, if not dollars, with concerns like the Kickapoo Medicine Company.\(^\text{15}\) What patrons were thinking while wandering the midway cannot be determined, but one may safely assume that they knew little or cared less about the fine distinctions between what truly represented the spirit of the enterprise and what represented crassness. Novelty probably intrigued them. And there was much to dazzle them.

Historian Robert W. Rydell argues that it was on the midway at the Columbian Exposition that evolutionary theory, ethnology, and popular amusement interlocked as "active agents and bulwarks of hegemonic assertion of ruling-class authority."\(^\text{16}\) He sees Putnam's

16. Ibid., p. 41.
arrangement of the Indian encampment near the midway as a "fundamental flaw," which "immediately degraded" the Indians because of the association. He also asserts that the Indians who participated in the exhibits did not benefit from the exposition. "Rather," he concludes, "they were the victims of a torrent of abuse and ridicule."  

Certainly there were flaws in Putnam's arrangements. The Indian Office, once the fair began, went to great lengths to disassociate itself from responsibility for the midway, and, in retrospect, the evolutionary theory of developmentalism appears both racist and wrong-headed. Indians may also have been abused and ridiculed, but neither the newspaper accounts nor the agency records that contain comments by and about Indians bears this out. Finally, how is one to judge whether or not Indians benefited from participation in the exhibition? Some may just have had a good time. It would

17. Ibid., p. 63.
18. See, for example, the evocative description by Amy Leslie of her visit behind the scenes at the Wild West show with Buffalo Bill. Chicago News, n.d., p. 5, Cody Scrapbook, SHSC.

The Columbian Exposition's Midway Plaisance, where many of the ethnological exhibits were located, stretched for several blocks toward Lake Michigan.
Along the Midway Plaisance, entertainment activities competed with educational exhibits for the fairgoer’s attention.

be better to examine that topic from the perspective of the Indians themselves. Seeing or participating in the pageantry of Chicago’s White City probably did not change their lives significantly, but few Euro-Americans were transformed by their visits either. In the end, Buffalo Bill’s show Indians may have benefited the most, for they at least had their salaries to show for their stay at the fair.

Buffalo Bill’s Wild West had its most prosperous season at Chicago, netting almost one million dollars. Although commissioner Morgan and the fair managers detested Cody’s show, the patrons loved it. To most fair visitors, the Wild West show located near the main entrance appeared as an integral part not to be missed. A few journalists also saw the show as part of the larger ethnological exhibits on the fairgrounds. One reporter for the Chicago Reform Advocate claimed that Cody’s site was “an object lesson of incalculable value

19. Russell, Lives and Legends, p. 375; Blackstone, Buckskins, Bullets, and Business, p. 27; Prucha, American Indian Policy in Crisis, p. 324. One newspaper reporter commented that “every line of transportation leading to the World’s Fair first stops at the entrance to Buffalo Bill’s Wild West grounds.” Some patrons assumed they were at the entrance of the fair itself. Undated newspaper clipping, p. 5, Cody Scrapbook, SHSC.
showing as it does the Red Man camped in primitive style on the same ground where one hundred years ago his forefathers lived and battled with the advance guard of Caucasian settlers.” During that century of progress, the Indian tipis had been replaced by “sky-scraping brick and mortar wigwams.” To many Americans, Indians had become the vanishing Americans. If Cody and his imitators had their way, however, they would survive for a few more seasons.

Increasingly after the Chicago Exposition in 1893, Indian agents and other bureau personnel began to refer to Indians employed in Wild West shows and other exhibitions as “show Indians,” thereby proffering them a kind of professional status. The bureau also changed its policy of granting a single contract to cover all Indians a show employed to requiring individual contracts between individual Indians and their employers. That, too, represented a subtle shift, a grudging recognition that show performers were professionals and had to be treated as such. In 1893, Cody signed one contract to employ seventy-five Indians. In 1894, he signed one hundred contracts with one hundred Indians.

Not all Indians who joined Wild West shows or performed for concessionaires at world’s fairs, however, did so under contract. At

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21. The term “show Indian” probably had its origin among newspaper reporters and editorial writers. In early 1891, for example, when Secretary of the Interior John W. Noble gave Cody permission to take some of the Sioux ghost dancers from their confinement at Fort Sheridan to perform in his show in Europe, the editor of the *Gordon Independent* (Nebr.) wrote, “We have seen these show Indians return home reeling drunk, dead drunk, so drunk it was necessary to carry them to their teepees” (*Gordon Independent*, ca. Mar. 1891, in Folder 48 [Wild West Shows], Mary C. Collins Family Papers, South Dakota State Historical Society [SDSHS], Pierre, S.Dak.). By 1893, the term appears with greater frequency in Indian Bureau correspondence but without the opprobrium or derision implicit in the remark of the *Independent* editor.

The Cody contracts appear in various locations. See, for example, earlier contracts such as T. J. Morgan to James McLaughlin, 9 Mar. 1891, Records of Standing Rock Reservation, General Records, Miscellaneous Correspondence, 1891, Box 517204, and Acting Agent Charles G. Penny, PR, to CIA, 28 Mar. 1891, PR, Letters Sent (LS), Press Copy Book 10, Box 3, both RG 75, KC FARC. On this occasion, Commissioner Morgan informed Agent McLaughlin that Cody had recently signed one contract and provided surety bond for “seventy-five Indians of agencies in North and South Dakota, sixty of whom are adult males and fifteen are women and children.” Captain Penny forwarded the original contract to the BIA. Cody’s 1893 contract appears in George Le Roy Brown, Acting Agent, PR, to Cody and Salsbury, 19 Apr. 1893, PR, Letters Received and General Files, Series 1, Box 15, RG 75, KC FARC. The individual 1894 contracts are reported in C. D. Marwell, Attorney, to Penny, 14 Feb. 1894, PR, General Records, Box 23, 12 June 1891-14 Dec. 1895, RG 75, KC FARC.
Chicago, for example, a number of Indians appeared with various shows along the midway; none apparently possessed a contract. P. B. Wickham of Mandan, North Dakota, ran a show called “Sitting Bull’s Cabin,” in which nine Oglalas acted. Henry (“Buckskin Joe”) De Ford of Topeka, Kansas, employed another sixty Indians, many of them Sioux, in his “American Indian Village” (separate and distinct from Putnam’s exhibit). Because of the popularity of the Indian ethnological village at Chicago as well as Cody’s great success, individual concessionaires at subsequent fairs in the United States would apply to Indian agents for permission to hire individual Indians. Less reputable shows simply hired them without agent or Interior Department permission, and as stories of the mistreatment of these Indians appeared in the press, the situation stimulated even greater criticism from Indian-policy reformers, who denounced the bureau for failing to act as guardian to its wards. As far as reformers were concerned, Indians should stay on their reservations and act as rural Euro-Americans.  

The 1895 Cotton States and International Exposition in Atlanta and the 1897 Tennessee Centennial Exposition in Nashville featured Indians to a considerably lesser extent than did Chicago in 1893. The midways of both expositions—Midway Heights at Atlanta and Vanity Fair at Nashville—hosted small Indian villages. True ethnological exhibits, despite the claims of midway concessionaires, were confined largely to the Smithsonian Institution exhibits in the United States government building at each fair. Buffalo Bill’s show played the Atlanta fair but did not remain for the duration as it had at Chicago. By 1895, Cody’s show went on extensive national tours, often stopping in a city to give a single performance before moving on.


23. Rydell, All the World’s a Fair, pp. 96-97; Russell, The Wild West, pp. 26, 33, 40, 60-61. When Nate Salsbury became ill in 1894, he and Cody negotiated an agreement with James Bailey of the Barnum and Bailey Circus to take over management of the show in his absence. Bailey provided transportation and expenses in return for a share in the profits. His influence, according to Sarah J. Blackstone, was pronounced. Using standard circus practice, Bailey routed the show through a series of one-a-day stands for much of the 1895 season. The show traveled 9,000 miles to cover 131 stands in 190 days. Blackstone, Buckskins, Bullets, and Business, p. 27.
By the turn of the century, Wild West shows and ethnological exhibits had merged in fact. In the 1897 season, Cody’s press agent, John M. (“Arizona John”) Burke, billed the show as “An Ethnological, Anthropological and Etymological Congress—Greatest since Adam.”

The next year at the Trans-Mississippi and International Exposition in Omaha, the Indian Office agreed to cooperate in creating an Indian congress that was purportedly an ethnological exhibit but was actually a Wild West show. In the words of its originator, Omaha Daily Bee-owner Edward Rosewater, the congress would be “an extensive exhibit illustrative of the life and customs and decline of the aboriginal inhabitants of the western hemisphere.” Designed as an assembly rather than a mock legislative body debating the concerns of the moment, this “grand ethnological exhibit undoubtedly would,” Rosewater claimed, “be the last gathering of


Through exhibits like this Kiowa camp circle model at the 1897 Tennessee Centennial Exposition, anthropologists attempted to show visitors what American Indians had once been.
these tribes before the bronze sons of the forests and plains, who have resisted the encroachments of the white man, are gathered to the happy hunting ground."25

Rosewater planned to bring representatives of all the tribes of North and South America to Omaha. Such a plan proved wildly impractical and too expensive. Instead, organizers brought representatives from American Indian tribes in the trans-Mississippi West to live and work in a large encampment located near the midway. The Indian Bureau and the War Department (some Chiricahua Apache prisoners of war, Geronimo among them, inhabited the village) chose Capt. William A. Mercer, acting agent at the Omaha and Winnebago reservation, to supervise the congress. Rather than staging Indian ceremonials and demonstrations of native industries, Mercer scheduled a series of sham battles. Each skirmish featured fantastic coalitions of cowboys and "friendly Indians," played by local white businessmen who belonged to a fraternal organization called the Improved Order of Red Men, arrayed against the real Indians of the thirty-one tribes participating in the congress.26

Both the commissioner of Indian affairs and secretary of the interior, who had endorsed the idea of an Indian congress, came to regret their decision, for the sham battles quickly became popular, and elements of the fair continued into 1899 as the Greater American Exposition, also in Omaha. In this second year, Col. Frederick T. Cummins managed the congress, in which seventy-five Sioux from Pine Ridge fought it out with cowboys and friendly Indians. The bureau had decided to support the congress in order to scale back its own exhibits. From the bureau's point of view, a group of long-haired Indians engaged in native industries would have contrasted effectively with its own relatively inexpensive display of photographs, foodstuff, and handicrafts illustrating the role of Indian education. Instead, the congress had become a Wild West show, and as could have been expected, the bureau's apparent connivance in staging sham battles ignited further criticism from reformers. From the reformers' point of view, fairgoers could easily overlook the achievements of American Indian education when they were secreted away in a series of photographs that hung in the government building. Criticism of the Omaha exposition led Commissioner William A. Jones to refuse any more contracts for Indians to perform in shows.

Indians could still participate in the 1901 Pan-American Exposition in Buffalo, New York, and the 1904 Louisiana Purchase Exposition in Saint Louis, but they did so without either the blessing or sanction of the Indian Bureau.  

Between the Columbian Exposition and the Louisiana Purchase Exposition, Cody's Wild West and those who followed his lead changed considerably, for no longer were they just cowboys-cum-soldiers and Indians. At Chicago in 1893, Buffalo Bill had introduced his Congress of Rough Riders of the World to an American audience. During the next few years, not only did the shows add "rough riders" (soldiers or other equestrian riders) from Europe, South America, Africa, and central Asia, but after the Spanish-American War and the scramble for empire, they featured depictions from the Boer War, the Boxer Rebellion, and the Charge at San Juan Hill. Despite these additions, the number of scenes depicting mayhem between Indians and Euro-Americans actually increased. For example, Buffalo Bill's Wild West "programme" during its 1893 Chicago run featured nineteen scenes. Indians appeared in ten of them, and only three involved conflict: (1) Buffalo Bill, his fellow scouts, and some cowboys repulsed an Indian attack on an "Emigrant Train Crossing the Plains"; (2) in an Indian attack on the Deadwood Mail Coach, Buffalo Bill and his "attendant Cowboys" rode to the rescue; and (3) a recreation of the Battle of the Little Bighorn, or "Custer's Last Charge," featured Buffalo Bill arriving on the scene too late either to help or to add his body to the harvest of the dead. The fight at the Little Bighorn replaced the show's vintage "Attack on a Settler's Cabin," which had already proved a crowd-pleaser in the United States and Europe. Those Indians and soldiers pretending to be dead at Custer's last rally rejoined the cast for the conclusion, a salute to the audience.

After the 1893 Chicago season, Buffalo Bill's show not only recreated Custer's Last Stand, but it also featured the Indian attack on the settler's cabin. Four instead of three firefights with Indians

28. Walsh, Making of Buffalo Bill, pp. 313-21; show program reproduced in Rosa and May, Buffalo Bill and His Wild West, p. 158. The program shows "Attack on a Settler's Cabin" overprinted with "Battle of the Little Big Horn, or Custer's Last Charge."
became the new standard for Wild West shows. Overall, the amount of shooting in the shows increased as the “Winning of the West” theme received less prominence alongside United States Marines fighting their way into Peking, Col. Teddy Roosevelt shooting a Spaniard in the charge up San Juan Hill, or pastoral Boers bedeviling British regulars in the Transvaal. So popular were the sham battles that they became permanent features of the world’s fairs held in the years between the Columbian Exposition and the Louisiana Purchase Exposition.29

At the Saint Louis fair, the Indian Office returned to the concept it had used in Chicago and operated a model Indian school to compete with the Indian congress, which this time represented fifty-one tribes. The size of the fair itself dwarfed all previous world’s expositions. As at Buffalo and Omaha, the ethnological village located on the midway included representatives from Asia and Africa. Commissioner of Indian Affairs William A. Jones appointed Samuel McCowan, superintendent of the Chilocco Indian School in Oklahoma Territory, to administer the Indian Bureau exhibit depicting the progress Indians living in the region of the Louisiana Purchase had made since 1804.30 At the Omaha exposition, where he had managed the bureau display in the government building, McCowan had condemned the Indian congress and the sham battles. Perhaps for that reason, McCowan joined forces with William J. McGee, who headed the Saint Louis fair’s Department of Anthropology and was also planning ethnological displays that depicted racial progress. As McGee’s assistant, McCowan supervised the ethnological village, which, since the 1893 exposition, had been managed by individual concessionaires such as Frederick Cummins. In this capacity, McCowan could borrow some of the “life groups” from the midway to set up shop near the Indian school. In a variation on Commissioner Morgan’s plan of 1892, the “primitive ways” of the Indians from the midway would highlight the achievements of the boys and girls in the school.31

29. Show programs, Buffalo Bill’s Wild West and Congress of Rough Riders of the World, Folder 6, William Frederick Cody Papers, Special Collections Library, University of Arizona, Tucson, Ariz.
30. Russell, Wild West, pp. 64-65; Rydell, All the World’s a Fair, pp. 157, 162; Moses, Indian Man, pp. 155-57; CIA to U.S. Indian Agents, 6 May 1903, Records of the Consolidated Ute Agency (CU), Main Decimal Files, 897, Educational Exhibits, 1892-1933, Box 161, RG 75, FARC, Denver, Colo. (DEN).
The model Indian school exhibit for the Louisiana Purchase Exposition would be much grander than the one built for the Columbian Exposition. McCowan spent a great amount of time overseeing construction of the Indian building (adjoining the model-school classrooms, which were housed in an imposing stone building of Washington University); organizing a band of Indian musicians from throughout the country; and gathering Indians who had not, in his

The model Indian school at the 1904 Louisiana Purchase Exposition included both "primitive" and "civilized" Indians working at their respective crafts and trades.

Frederick T. Cummins, who managed the Indian congress for the Greater American Exposition, also managed the Indian congresses for both the 1901 Pan-American Exposition in Buffalo, New York, and the 1904 Louisiana Purchase Exposition in Saint Louis. The son of a Council Bluffs, Iowa, Indian trader, Cummins later toured the United States and Europe with his Indian congresses under various titles and combinations that featured "Wild West Show" in the name. Rydell, All the World's a Fair, p. 130; Russell, Wild West, pp. 64-65; Russell, Lives and Legends of Buffalo Bill, pp. 383, 385.
estimation, advanced very far up the ladder of civilization. In his effort to locate Indians for his exhibit, McCowan sent out a circular requesting "any old Indians to work at their occupations" such as building birch-bark canoes, manufacturing stone implements, chipping arrows, weaving blankets, fashioning jewelry, or making baskets. In one of the more humorous letters he received in reply, the inimitable John H. Seger, superintendent of the Indian Industrial School at Colony, Oklahoma, replied: "I do not know of any old Indians in this district who can make a basket. I have a few young men who have been doing something at stone work and can lay a very fair stone wall, but as this is an acquired art with them, and it is young men that does [sic] it, it would not fit in the exhibit. I have some quite old men that are quite expert with spade and shovel and some that are quite handy with an axe. I am sure they would make a more creditable showing along this line than they would at basket weaving. Then again, I believe that basket-weaving would be too sedentary an occupation for the old Indians of this district." Seger added that his work among the Indians, at which he had been successful for thirty years, had been directed at getting them to forget their old ways. "It would now take," he concluded, "some time and expense to get them back to where they would make a creditable showing in any pursuit peculiar to Indians. . . . I leave those kind of exhibits to the frontiersmen from Boston and other frontier places." Ironically, McCowan did end up bringing a number of veterans from Wild West show tours to the encampment. If one needed untamed Indians, better to go to the source—Wild West shows—rather than seek them among the pupils or alumni of government Indian schools.

32. Indian Office Circular, M. 44592/1903, CIA to U.S. Indian Agents, 24 July 1903, CU, Main Decimal Files, 897, Educational Exhibits, 1892-1935, Box 161, RG 75, DEN FARC, and Folder 7-03, Chilocco Fair Files, OHS. See also F. J. V. Skiff, Director of Exhibits, Department of Anthropology, Louisiana Purchase Exposition, to McCowan, 5 Dec. 1903, Folder 12-03, and A. C. Tonner, Acting Commissioner, to Rev. H. B. Frissell, Hampton, Va., 8 Aug. 1903, Folder 8-03, both in Chilocco Fair Files, OHS.

33. Seger to McCowan, 22 June 1903, Chilocco Fair Files, 1903, OHS.

34. There were other difficulties in depicting Indians as they once were. In the years between the Columbian and Louisiana Purchase expositions, the demands ethnologists and Wild West show promoters placed upon the material cultures of plains tribes created shortages in aboriginal equipment and raiment. Wild West shows from 1893 onward had to contract with Indian traders to purchase or, more frequently, lease articles Indians used in the shows. For example, when groups of show Indians left the Pine Ridge reservation, they stopped at Rushville, Nebraska, or at other spots along the rail line, to acquire headdresses, blankets, drums, and bows and arrows from mercantile companies to re-create their part in losing the West. See "Sketch of Capt. George E. Bartlett," 8 Dec. 1903, Judge Eli S. Ricker Collection, roll 4, series
Indians from the Rosebud reservation were among two hundred American Indians who took part in the congress, or ethnological village, at the Louisiana Purchase Exposition.

Although the government did not sponsor sham battles at Saint Louis, a few genuine brawls did break out at the ethnological village along the midway. William J. McGee, head of the exposition’s Department of Anthropology and formerly ethnologist-in-charge at the Bureau of American Ethnology, had hoped to create an ethical lesson in human harmony and, at the same time, present a living exhibit of human evolution. His hopes collapsed, however, as Indians left the fair, irritated as much by poor sanitation as by certain representatives from the Philippines who kept stealing and eating their pet dogs.^{35}

The Louisiana Purchase Exposition was the last of the great fairs in the United States before World War I, and despite the efforts of

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2, tablet 45, p. 12, NSHS. William H. Barten, for a time a teacher on the Pine Ridge reservation, opened a mercantile store in Gordon, Nebraska, and from 1902 onward outfitted Wild West shows. Manuscript Record, MS 406, W. H. Barten Papers, 1904-1924, NSHS.

reformers and the Indian Office, it signaled the fact that show Indians had won the battle of images. Wild West shows had achieved such great popularity before and during the 1893 Columbian Exposition that many of the later world’s fairs incorporated their features. By granting licenses for concessionaires who staged miniature versions of the shows along the midways, fair managers gave tacit approval to their portrayals of American Indians. Fair officials had originally considered it unseemly to sanction entertainment of such dubious educational or ethnological value, but the midway concessionaires who employed Indians portraying famous warriors enjoyed considerable success, and the managers ultimately shared in their profits. At Omaha, Buffalo, and Saint Louis, boards of fair managers incorporated the Wild West shows themselves as major attractions, disguising them as Indian congresses, each one more elaborate than its predecessor.

Even as it fought the images the Wild West shows projected, the government became involved in the “show Indian” trade. At Chicago, Commissioner Morgan had hoped to contrast “long-haired blanket Indians” (essentially the “real” Indians of the Wild West show) with uniformed and disciplined Indian students. Owing to the expense involved, however, he consigned the “untamed” Indians to the ethnological village and the fair’s Anthropology Department. At Saint Louis ten years later, Samuel McCowan, with a larger budget from the Interior Department, combined show Indians with Indian students “on show” to make, he thought, an effective display. In the hands of the Indian Bureau, the Indian that Cody’s Wild West portrayed heroically and sympathetically as a vanishing American became either a barbarian best forgotten or a measure for the progress worthy members of the race had made. Thus, at the world’s fairs, the image of the vanishing Indian was set beside the aspiring Indian who, through the government’s efforts on behalf of civilization, would also presumably vanish one day into mainstream society.

36. For Morgan and many others, long hair represented the old ways of Indians. When John Shangrau, a Sioux of mixed heritage and a former student at government schools, wished to accompany Cody to Chicago as an interpreter, the Indian Office ordered him to cut his hair. When the agent at Pine Ridge informed Cody of the commissioner’s wishes, he added: “I am willing to allow John to join your Troupe in Chicago, providing he has his hair cut. I want to say Colonel, in this connection, that I have no objection to long hair, ‘per se’: on the contrary, believe that it is often ornamental and attractive; but, as representing the advanced Indians, and on account of his English speaking ability, and his white blood, I believe that John should have his hair short” (George Le Roy Brown to Cody, 26 Apr. 1893, PR, Miscellaneous LS, Press Copy Book 23, 1893, p. 31, RG 75, KC FARC).
Even though the Louisiana Purchase Exposition brought an end to the prewar era of expositions, Indian exhibits did not vanish. American Indians continued to perform on midways, in arenas, and in school displays. Wild West shows still touted their educational value as ethnological dioramas come alive. The Bureau of Indian Affairs still displayed Indians as representatives of what their race had been or might become once their hair was cut, their bodies cleansed of paint, and their minds cultivated. Indeed, by the first decade of the twentieth century, a second generation of performers, those born after the “Indian wars,” began to join the shows and ethnological exhibits. They and their heirs would continue to find employment when Euro-Americans desired to add authenticity to recreations of the “Wild West.”
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