

"BUFFALO BILL" CODY

by Ernest J. Goppert, Jr., P.G.M. Grand Lodge Of Wyoming

The 110th Annual Communication of the Grand Lodge Of Wyoming was held in Cody Wyoming in August, 1984, and was dedicated to the memory of the town's founder, Pony Express Rider, scout, Frontiersman, showman, Brother William F. "Buffalo Bill" Cody This Short Talk Bulletin has been adapted from one of the presentations at that memorable Annual Communication.

A child, destined to great fame, was born on a farm in LeClaire, Scott County, Iowa, on February 26, 1846 to Isaac Cody and Mary Leacock Cody. Isaac abandoned his farm to work as a stage driver and the family moved to the vicinity of Fort Leavenworth, Kansas. At the age of eleven, Bill lost his father in the Kansas border war. Bill's mother was a woman of the highest character and developed in him nobility of soul, fortitude and courage which endeared him to the hearts of all who were destined to meet and know him. She died when Bill who was still in his teens was serving with the Kansas Cavalry.

Following his father's death, Bill secured employment as a "carrier boy" on a supply train. Later at age fourteen he obtained a lucrative job as a rider for the Pony Express. Bill made the longest trip on record. Upon reaching Three Crossings he learned that the rider at Sweetwater had been killed and he was requested to ride the next leg. He made a trip of 321 miles without stopping except for meals and to change horses.

At seventeen, Bill enlisted in the 9th Kansas Cavalry. Later he served as a Scout in Tennessee and as a Trooper in Missouri. In 1866 he married Louisa Frederici in St. Louis. Bill contracted with the Goddard Brothers to furnish the Kansas Pacific Railroad with all the buffalo meat required to feed the laborers engaged in road construction and in eighteen months (1867-68) killed 4,280 buffalo which earned him the name by which he is best known--"Buffalo Bill. "

From September, 1869, when he first caught the notice of General Phil Sheridan by some daring riding through Indian country, until December, 1872, when he resigned to go on the stage, Cody was continuously on army payrolls as a civilian scout. In July, 1869, he achieved some fame for guiding the 5th Cavalry to its spectacular victory at Summit Springs, Colorado. The troops returned in August, 1869, to Fort McPherson, Nebraska. Cody felt sure enough of his employment to send for his wife. According to Mrs. Cody, when she saw him at Fort McPherson, for the first time, he was wearing long hair, moustache and goatee-the style of prairie scouts of those days. In September, while buffalo hunting with Major Frank North to supply the garrison with meat, Cody and North were surrounded by Indians and barely fought their way back to the command. With the 5th Cavalry, they then pursued the Indians for ninety miles to Standing Rock Agency, Dakota. Finally, the expedition returned to Fort McPherson on October 28.

Within less than three weeks, Captain W.B. Brown organized in his quarters the Plate Valley Lodge No. 32 of the A.F. & A.M. under the jurisdiction of the Grand Lodge of Nebraska. Cody and Brown were close friends, and it is likely that Cody petitioned right away for membership. One of the officers of the Lodge was the post's physician, Dr. David Frank Powell. Powell, later known as "White Beaver," became fast friends with "Buffalo Bill" and eventually died in Cody, Wyoming. On his 24th birthday, Cody was elected to membership. He was initiated March 6, 1870 and passed April 2, 1870. During 1870, Cody was involved in only one official Indian fight. However, he was kept busy hunting and guiding visiting dignitaries. One of those dignitaries Professor Othniel Marsh, a Yale paleontologist, was on his way to the Big Horn Basin to do some dinosaur bone hunting. It is Marsh whom Cody credited for exciting his interest in the Big Horn Basin country. Cody also served in the capacity of Justice of the Peace at Fort McPherson. He had been appointed by the army commander because he was the most reliable of the local civilian employees. In addition to performing routine chores such as marriages ("whom God and 'Buffalo Bill' have joined together let no man put asunder"). Cody also served as a sort of unofficial detective and policeman. Certainly one of the biggest events in his life was the birth late in the year of his only son, Kit Carson Cody.

On January 10, 1871, Cody was raised to the sublime degree of Master Mason. Within a few months, he was cited for "conspicuous and gallant conduct" for a skirmish on Bird Wood Creek, Nebraska. He also began to achieve wider national fame as a guide for distinguished hunting parties. In September, 1871, he led the famous Bennett/Jerome hunt which resulted in an invitation to New York. General Sheridan was so pleased with his conduct of that and a subsequent hunt that he asked Cody to guide the Grand Duke Alexis of Russia in January, 1872. Three months later, April, Cody was awarded the Medal of Honor for a skirmish while on detached duty with the 3rd Cavalry. Finally, in 1872, he accepted the invitation to go to New York. There he saw himself portrayed in a stage play and was persuaded by Ned Buntline to star in a drama written expressly for him. From that time forward, he and his partner, Texas Jack Omohundro, spent half their lives on the plains and half on the stages of all the major cities of the East.

Cody founded his famous Wild West Show in 1883. In 1887, he took the show to Europe for the first time to be the featured attraction during the celebration of Queen Victoria's Golden Jubilee. Though he remained in England as the toast of British society through October he petitioned Euphrates Chapter No. 15, Royal Arch Masons of North Platte, Nebraska by mail in September. Within a month of the closing of the 1888 season on November 18th, he was advanced to the degree of Mark Master, inducted into the Oriental Chair and received and acknowledged a Most Excellent Master. On the following day he was exalted to the Royal Arch Degree. In addition to running the Wild West Show, which showed on Staten Island in 1888, Cody was running a stock ranch near North Platte and traveling back and forth between the East and Far West.

Thereafter, Cody petitioned Palestine Commandery No. 13, order of Knights Templar of North Platte, Nebraska, and duly elected and received the Illustrious Order of the Red Cross on April 1, 1889 and on the following day received the Order of Malta and was dubbed a Knight Templar, just before sailing once again to Europe. This European tour, which began in Paris for the Centennial Exposition, lasted for three years. Cody was back and forth between Europe and America during that time.

Just before returning for another tour of England, he petitioned Tangier Temple of the Ancient Arabic Order Nobles of the Mystic Shrine of Omaha, Nebraska on March 22, 1892, and walked the burning sands three days later. In the meantime, he had found time to lead a hunting expedition through the Grand Canyon and into the Kaibab country of Utah, serve as a marshal during the inauguration of President Benjamin Harrison, and act as Chief of Scouts for General Miles in a futile attempt to head off what became the Wounded Knee Massacre.

1893 had been his most successful year in show business, perhaps the most successful year in history in outdoor show business. The season of 1894 in Brooklyn promised to be just as good. Cody by this time had been seen in person by millions of people on two continents and his name was a household word. He was well on his way to being the most famous man, perhaps, in the world, and certainly the most photographed.

The Northern Jurisdiction of the Ancient Accepted Scottish Rite of Freemasonry in the Valley of New York City honored "Buffalo Bill" by conferring all of its degrees in the Lodge of Perfection (4ø-14ø), the Council of Princes (15ø-16ø), the Chapter of Rose Croix (17ø-18ø), and the Consistory (19ø-32ø) in the same day, April 4, 1894. This special action by this New York Body exemplified their desire and that of all Masons of the time to recognize not only "Buffalo Bill's" dedication to his fraternal duties, but also to acknowledge the adherence to the principles of friendship, morality, and brotherly love.

By all accounts, Cody's life provided an exemplary model for Masons. he was a man of his word in his dealings with all people. He dealt with people of all races, religions, sexes, and occupations, as equals, and was always open handed in helping those less fortunate than himself .

"Buffalo Bill" gave the last performance of his Wild West Show at Portsmouth, Virginia where he became ill with a cold and headed for his Wyoming ranch. He stopped off at Denver to visit his sister and died suddenly from uremia on January 10, 1917. Although "Buffalo Bill" left a will stating he wished to be buried on top of Cedar Mountain about five miles west of his town, Cody, Wyoming, he was actually buried atop Lookout Mountain, 20 miles west of Denver. After his remains had lain in state in a bronze casket in the Capitol Rotunda in Denver, a service was held, and his body was placed in a temporary vault while a permanent tomb could be cut out of the solid granite atop Lookout Mountain.

At the request of Platte Valley Lodge of North Platte, Golden City Lodge No. 1, Golden, Colorado conferred Masonic burial rites on June 3, 1917, atop Lookout Mountain, at 3:00 o'clock in the afternoon. Worshipful Master G.W. Parfet, Jr. of Golden City Lodge No. 1 appointed eight brother pallbearers who were dressed in their Knight Templar uniforms. At the request of Mrs. Cody, and almost five months after his death, the casket was opened and an estimated 10,000 viewed the dead pioneer and trail blazer. It was estimated that more than 20,000 persons visited the spot and 15,000 were present at the burial ceremony having walked or ridden to the top of Lookout Mountain. It was certainly one of the largest, if not the largest, Masonic burial ever. These words were said by the Masons over the grave:

"His spirit ascends to God who gave it,

His memory we cherish in our hearts.

His body we consign to the earth."

Before his burial, a group of friends and family members formed an organization to foster and perpetuate the memory of "Buffalo Bill" in Cody, Wyoming. From this timely but meager start the world famous Buffalo Bill Historical Center has developed.