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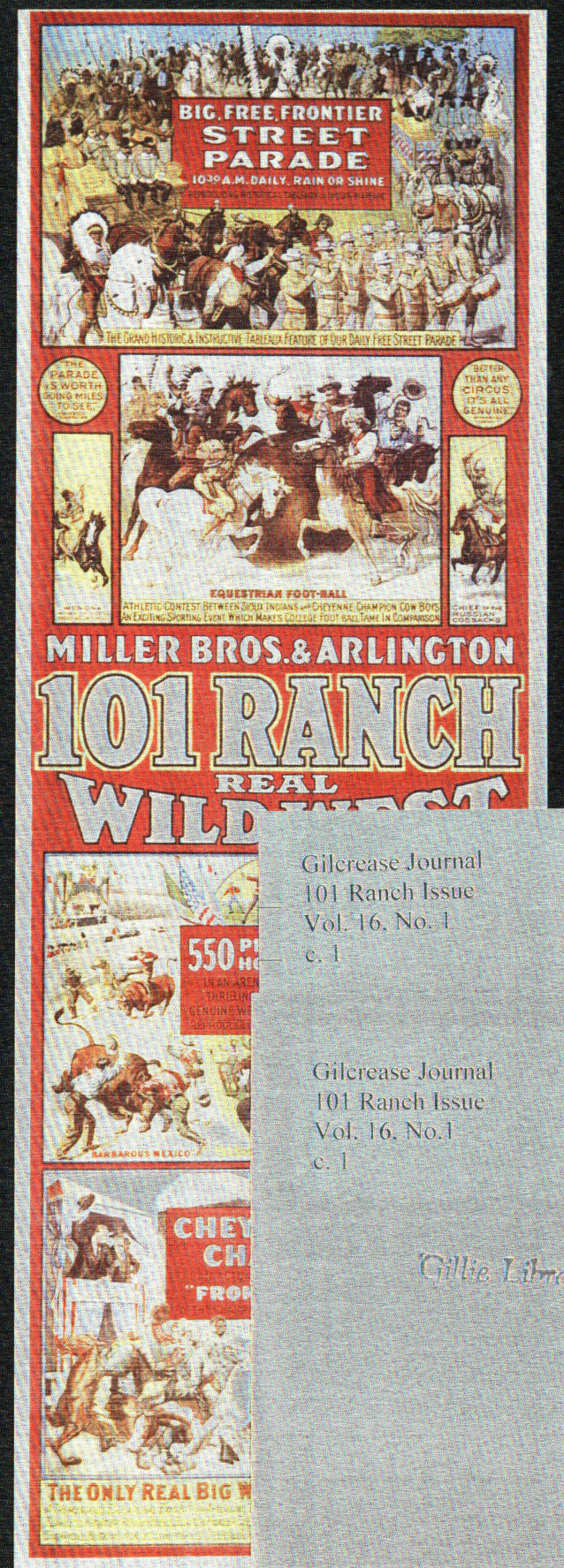
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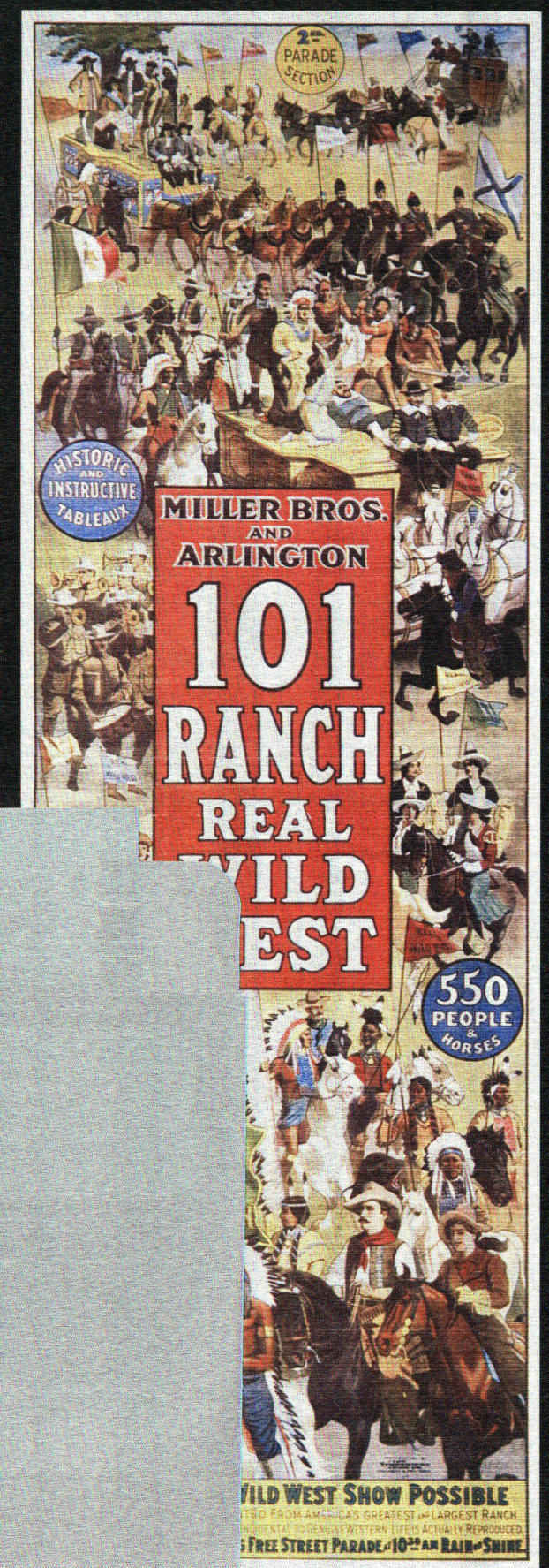
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101 Ranch Issue
Vol. 16
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WINNER OF THE AMERICAN ASSOCIATION OF MUSEUMS AWARD FOR EXCELLENCE IN DESIGN 1998, 1999, 2000, 2004, 2006, AND 2008

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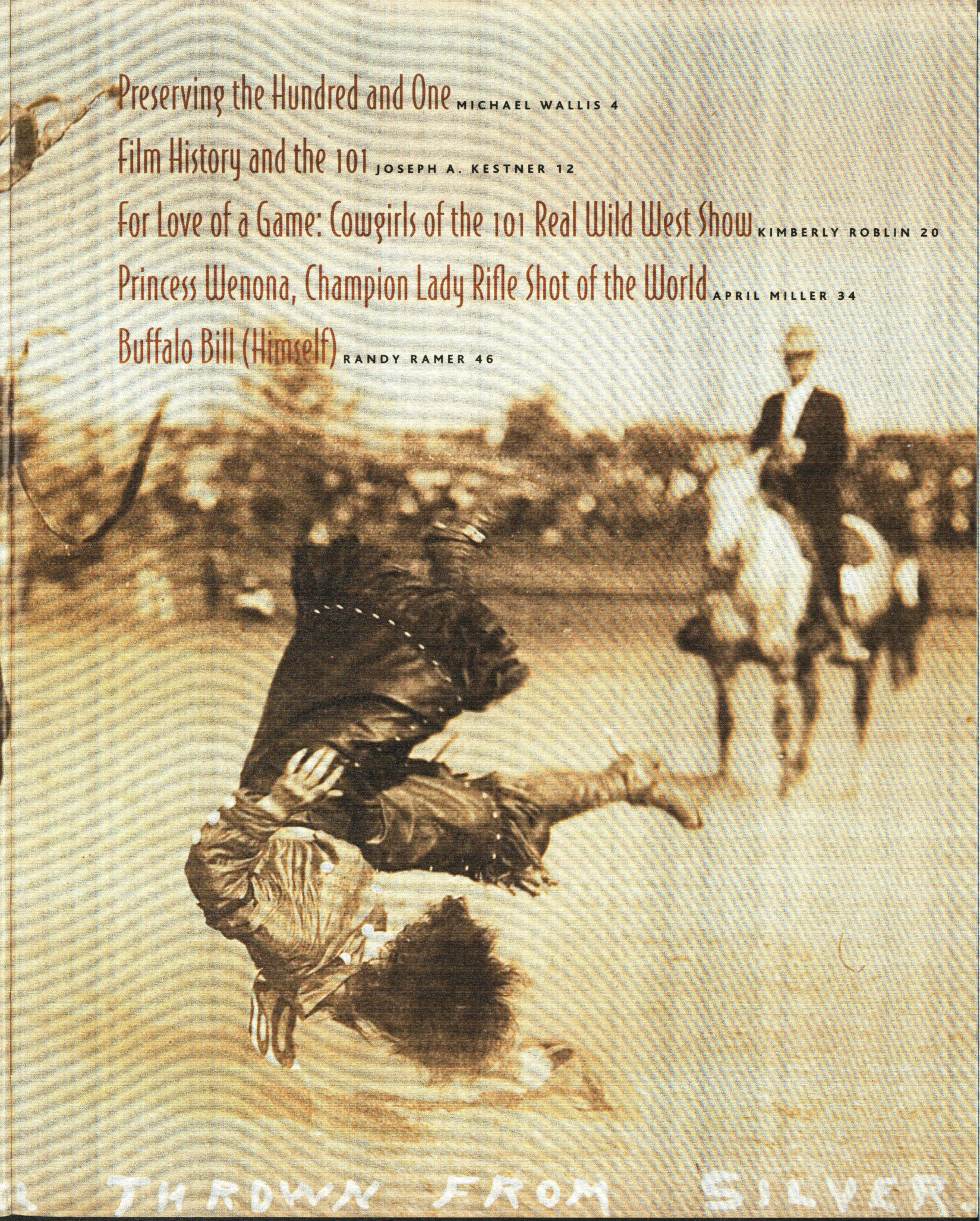
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BONNIE McCARROLL THROWN FROM SILVER.



Colonel G.W. Miller's three sons, the "Miller boys": Zack, Joe and George., on the cover of a 101 magazine and in a color postcard (facing).

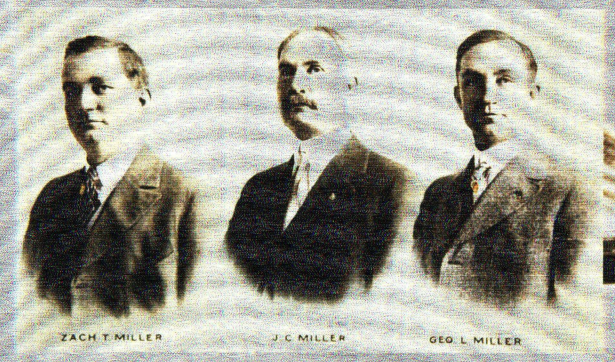
Preserving the Hundred and One

BY MICHAEL WALLIS

As for so many others, for me the words of a popular Willie Nelson song still ring true—my heroes have always been cowboys. Some of my favorites rode for the Miller Brothers' 101 Ranch. To this day—be it in a saloon, at a rodeo, or around a campfire—wherever seasoned cowhands hunker down to call up the ghosts, likely as not their talk may turn to the Hundred and One. The stuff of tall tales and dreams, the ranch was a cowboy and cowgirl's Valhalla. Some of the more savvy veterans believe it still is. On this legendary ranch the West of imagination collided and merged with the West of reality. It made for a spectacle that will not be duplicated nor seen again. Located on the banks of the Salt Fork River not far from Ponca City, in north-central Oklahoma, the ranch was founded by a cantankerous Kentuckian named Colonel George Washington Miller. Carried on after Miller's death in 1903 by his wife and daughter and a trio of stalwart sons—Joe, Zack, and George—the fabled ranch at one time encompassed three towns and spread over portions of four counties.

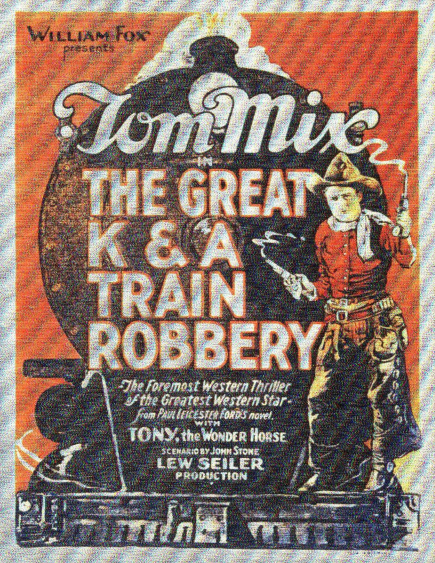
"The Old West is not a certain place in a certain time, it's a state of mind. It's whatever you want it to be."

— Tom Mix

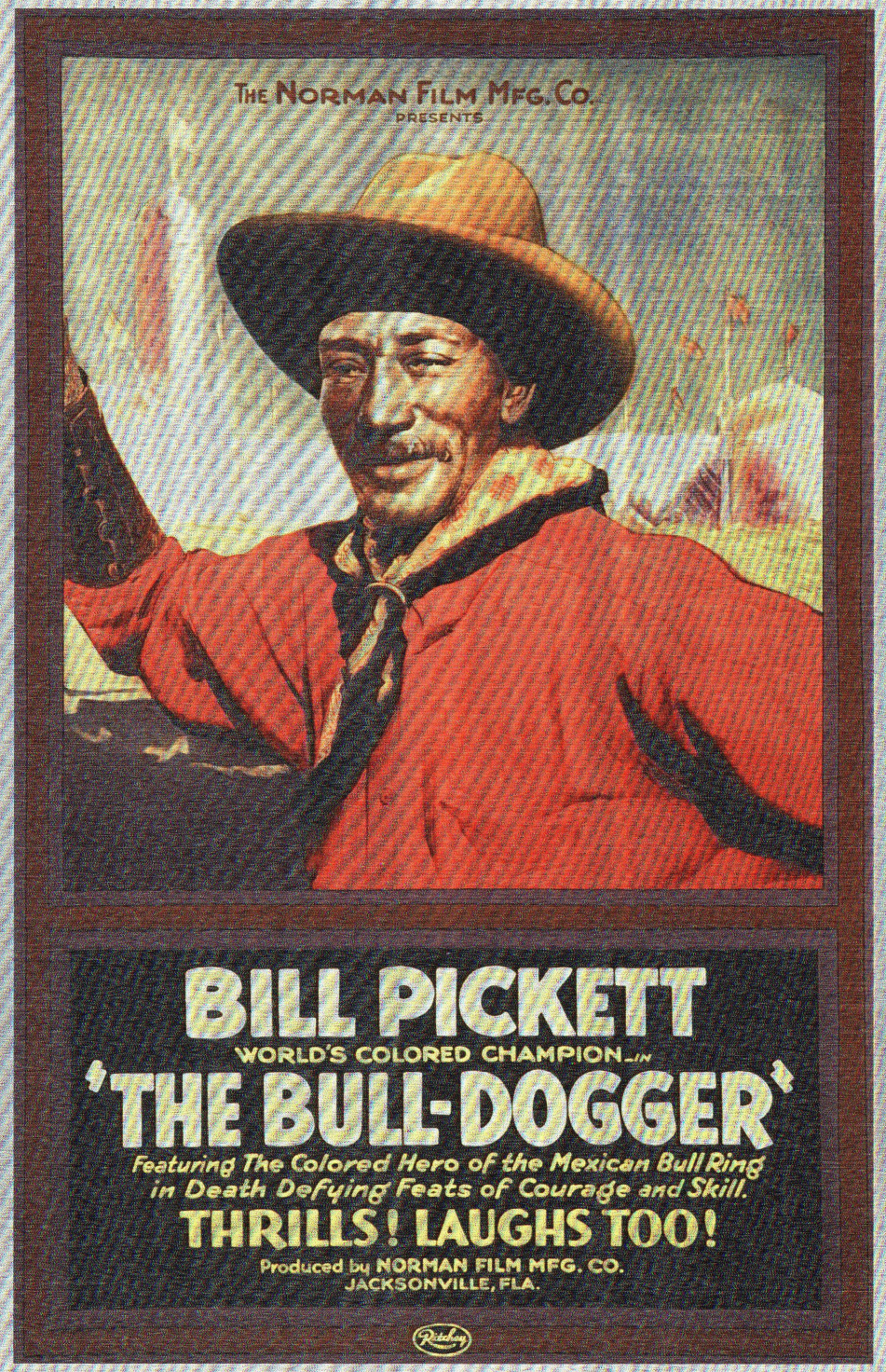




Famous around the world, the 110,000-acre spread was not only a showplace for champion livestock and diversified farming but the birthplace of a spectacular wild west show and the first professional home of a legion of cowboys, cowgirls, and performers, many of whom went on to stardom as Saturday matinee idols in Western motion pictures. Tom Mix, Buck Jones, Ken Maynard, and Hoot Gibson, to name but a few notables, all drew paychecks from the Millers. Bill Pickett, the legendary cowboy credited with inventing bulldogging, spent most of his career riding for the 101. Pickett died at the ranch in 1932 after a half-broken horse kicked him in the head.





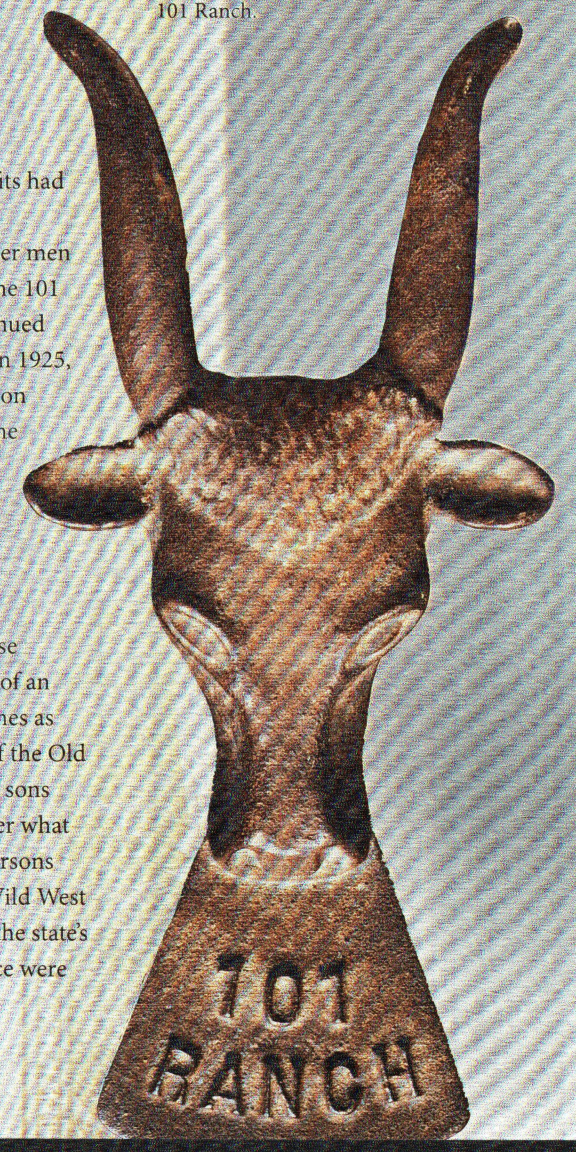




During the glory years at the 101 in the early 1900s, the Miller family hosted presidents and celebrities, including Theodore Roosevelt, Geronimo, Buffalo Bill Cody, John D. Rockefeller, and Will Rogers. Employing hundreds at its peak, the ranch was entirely self-sufficient, with its own monetary system, schools and churches, mail and telephone service, newspaper, ice plant and packinghouses, dairy and cannery, cider and alfalfa mills, electric power plant, and even an oil refinery. The 101 Wild West Show entertained two continents with riding, roping, bulldogging, and sharpshooting.



Miller Brothers ranch currency.

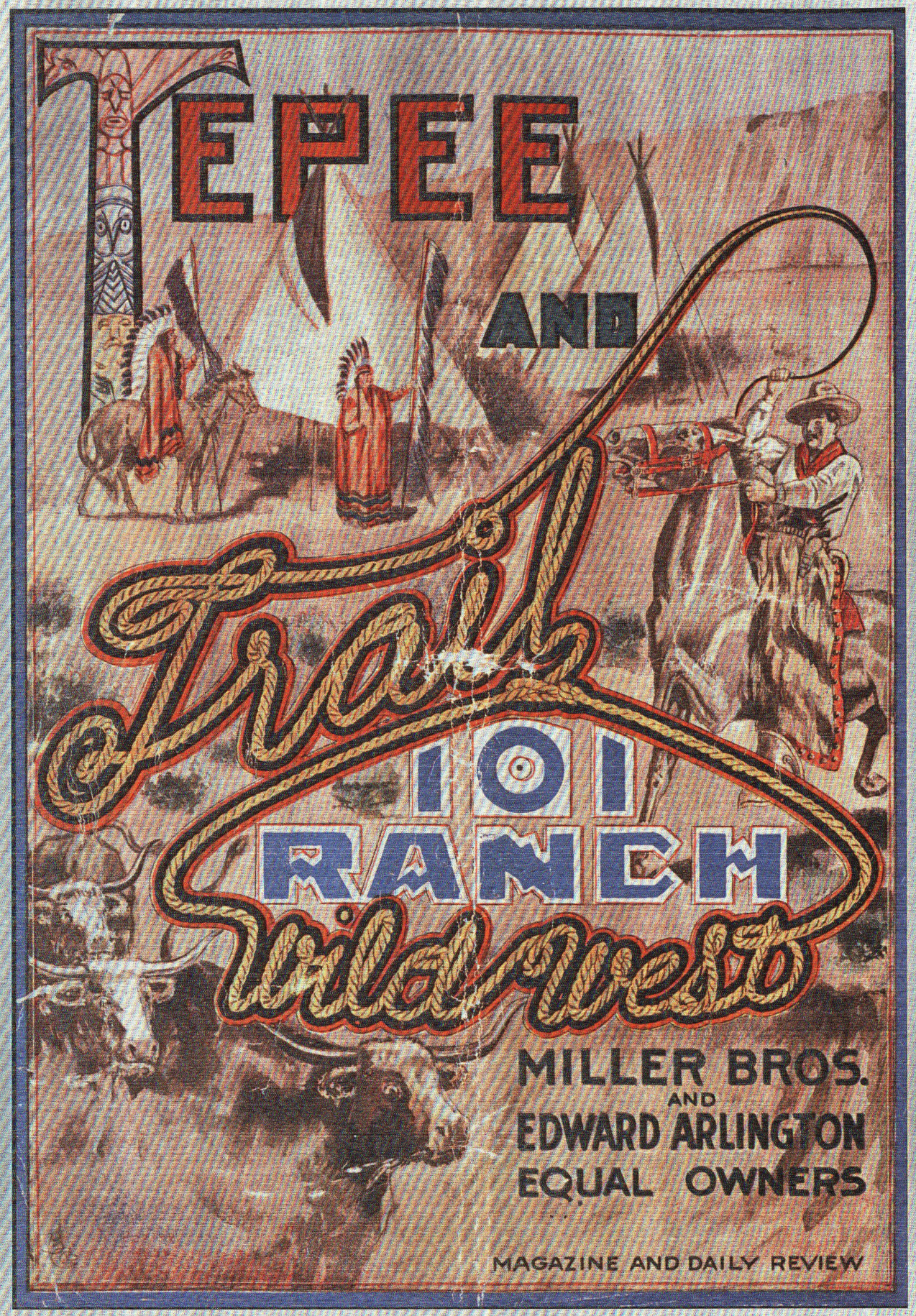


A 212 iron boot jack from the 101 Ranch.

As Fred Gipson put it in his folksy 1946 book about the Millers and the 101, it truly was a "Fabulous Empire." In another book simply entitled *The 101 Ranch*, Glenn Shirley had this to say in the foreword: "Great reputations have been given to a score of big cattle ranches that once covered the western United States from Mexico to Canada. But the Miller Brothers' 101 Ranch of Oklahoma was the most fabulous. It survived longer than most and reached its peak after the other big outfits had disintegrated. None ever duplicated its spectacle. It can never be repeated."

And now, all of it is gone. The ranch empire that the Millers and so many other men and women worked so hard to create has vanished. Things started going sour for the 101 when the wild west show closed with the advent of World War I. The Millers continued ranching and their performers took to the road again when the show was revived in 1925, but the stock market crash of 1929 sent the 101 Ranch deep into debt. The show soon went broke. Joe Miller had died in 1927 and George passed away in 1929. Finally the surviving brother, Zack, lost the battle to save the land. In 1936 the entire contents of the twenty-two–room ranch headquarters, dubbed the White House, were auctioned off. A reporter from the *Daily Oklahoman* was on hand to record the sad occasion:

> Grim, gray-haired Zack T. Miller stood in the shadows of the old White House Saturday and watched the last of his vast empire crumble under the hammer of an auctioneer. He stood without visible emotion, although his face set in hard lines as one by one his personal belongings went on the block, ending another epic of the Old West. The sale ended, and bargain hunters scattered. The last of three famous sons of a famous father stood on the steps of the big white mansion, and gazed over what was once a 110,000 acre ranch. Perhaps he saw another time, when 50,000 persons gathered in 1905 to cheer the first annual round up that later grew into the Wild West circus. Miller looked at the deserted, fallen farm buildings that once housed the state's finest blooded cattle and hogs. He looked over weeds and disorder where once were



showplace orchids [sic], wheat fields, packing houses and power plants. Miller walked slowly down the steps to the car of his sister, Mrs. Alma England, and drove toward Ponca City.

The ranch went into receivership and was eventually sold in parcels. Purchasers razed most of the structures and hauled away the lumber. Only a handful of buildings, foundations, and scattered remnants of machinery and tools were left. But fire, vandals, floods, tornadoes, and high winds took their toll. Today, hardly any trace of the ranch remains. It is too bad about what happened to the 101. It is a crying shame.

Still, not all was lost, thanks to Jerry and Ruth Murphey. Blessed with the intestinal fortitude of seasoned bronc busters, the diligence of Texas Rangers in pursuit, and the stamina of a herd of longhorns, this dynamic husband and wife became much more than the custodians of the faded memories and scattered dreams that remain of the 101. The Murpheys never looked the part of stalwart saviors but they were as fiercely protective of the memory of the 101 Ranch as a mama bear is of her cubs. The Murpheys did not pack six-shooters. And instead of riding tall in the saddle on cow ponies, they lumbered the range in a well-used motor home. Still, no one has done more than this dedicated duo to guard the 101 Ranch image and gather remembrances of it, ensuring that the once proud name will forever remain in the public eye. "We keep alive the memories and name of the 101 Ranch," Jerry told me many years ago. "That is our primary mission. That is our passion. We are obsessed."

Born the day after Christmas, 1932, outside of Allen, Oklahoma, Jerry was the only son of a hardworking mother and an oil field roustabout father. After earning a geology degree from Oklahoma A & M (today's Oklahoma State University), Jerry hitched up with his high school sweetheart, Thurma Jean, and in 1954 the young couple moved to the Lone Star State where Jerry took a job with a refinery in Corpus Christi. Thurma Jean passed away thirteen years later, leaving Jerry with three daughters, a son, and his orphaned little sister to raise. In 1968 Jerry married Ruth, a native of Corpus Christi and a widow whose husband, Wayne Penick, died in a 1955 helicopter crash in Japan while serving with the Marine Corps. The addition of Ruth's two growing sons to Jerry's brood totaled seven youngsters to care for. "We built a 'dormitory' to hold them all," says Ruth. "Those were mighty busy times."

The Murpheys' magnificent obsession with the 101 was cultivated over the years as their children grew up and struck out on their own. "I always had an abiding interest in the 101," says Jerry. "My father's mother—Minnie Alameda Burgess Murphey—was a Cherokee Indian. She married an Irish immigrant horse trader out of Missouri, but for one year—during the 1915 season—she was an Indian dancer with the 101 Wild West Show. I grew up hearing all those wonderful stories about the ranch and the show. The 101 was part of my family. . . part of my life. It still is." It did not take long for the 101 bug to bite Ruth. "She's actually worse than I am now when it comes to obtaining 101 material," laughs Jerry, who has even more time for roaming the countryside in pursuit of 101 material since his retirement. For more years than either can recall, the Murpheys were both avid seekers as well as curators of what is now considered the most complete assembly of 101 Ranch items in existence. The Murphey collection numbers thousands of separate pieces, including costumes, photographs, show posters, ranch currency, artifacts, saddles, guns, and many other rare mementos and belongings once owned by the Millers and many of the men and women who rode for them.

"Sometimes I think we're crazy," Jerry explains. "But then we get to thinking about it and we know what we're doing is important work. We feel that in our own way we are preserving history. That is what keeps us going. That is what makes us feel good."

As good as they may have felt about their impressive collection, in recent years the Murpheys also became concerned about its future. They wanted the collection not only to



Hoot Gibson.
BACKGROUND: Jack Hoxie.





Passing of the West truck.
Gilcrease 4327.8123

stay intact but also find a suitable public home in Oklahoma. Their prayer was answered in 2008 when it was announced that Gilcrease Museum had purchased the Jerry and Ruth Murphey Collection, one of the largest collections of Western Americana to be acquired in the museum's history.

The more than 3,700 objects that comprise the collection—ranging from relics and historical firearms to rare photos and posters—are valued at more than $2 million. Their purchase by Gilcrease was made possible by support from Randi and Fred Wightman, The Gilcrease Museum Endowment Trust, and the City of Tulsa. During the public announcement of the monumental acquisition in the museum's Vista Room, my thoughts turned to the past. I considered a blustery March day in 1999 and another unveiling event. That was when my book *The Real Wild West: The 101 Ranch and the Creation of the American West* was first made public during ceremonies at the old 101 Ranch headquarters site near the Salt Fork of the Arkansas River below Ponca City. Although cold and rainy, it turned out to be an auspicious day. I memorized the scene and tucked away the memory. Sometimes I retrieve it from a storehouse of remembrances worth more to me than gold.

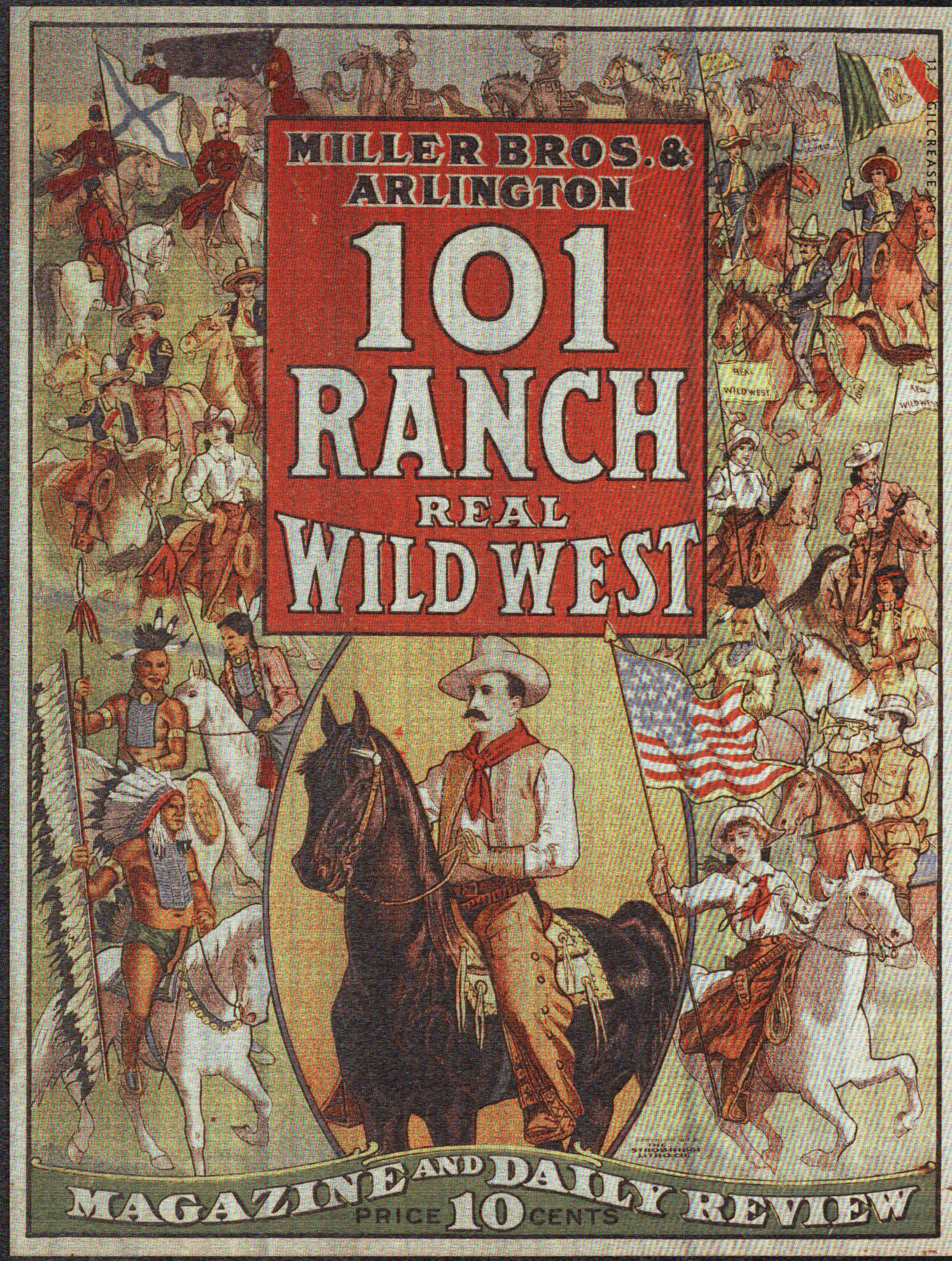
I can see in my mind's eye the big flatbed truck that served as a stage, and I can hear the reading of a proclamation from the governor declaring it "The Real Wild West Day" in Oklahoma. There were speeches and salutes, Indian dances, and a bunch of cowboys and cowgirls showed up in the rain to pay their respects. That weekend I signed more than 1,200 copies of the book for people who came from across the nation to witness the birth of my tribute to the 101 Ranch and all those who ever rode for the brand. Still the most important moment of that time came when Ronald Good Eagle, a Pawnee spiritual leader, kindled a cedar fire below the makeshift stage and performed a special book-blessing ceremony. He used an eagle feather to fan sacred smoke over my book and the smoke rose into the gray sky along with the prayers that Ronald quietly spoke. Sitting on a folding chair just a few feet from the fire was Ronald's father, Kenneth Good Eagle, who as a young man rode the show circuit for Pawnee Bill and the Miller's Wild West shows.

Kenneth—in his boots and cowboy hat and clutching a cane as gnarled as he was—sat next to other old veteran cowhands and performers including Joe Miller, Jr., a grandson of George Washington Miller, founder and patriarch of the 101 Ranch empire. When I saw Kenneth and the others I thought about all those who were gone—the famous, infamous, and unknown who rode for the Hundred and One. I recalled the high times—the days and nights of long ago—and all those who were left behind. And then I turned to my book and the last sentences I wrote at the end of the long saga:

> . . . sometimes if the morning light is just right, or late at night, when the moon makes puzzling shadows, those who know what was once there pause along the two-lane road running across the pastures and over the Salt Fork. They let their minds play tricks. In the thistle and clumps of sumac and out in the tall grass, the wind sounds like strong cow ponies on the move. Hundreds of ghosts are difficult to silence. The beating drums, the solemn chants, the crack of pistols, the waves of applause cannot be stilled. None of what happened there can ever be forgotten.

Nor will any of it be forgotten. The 101 Ranch lives on thanks to a pair of dedicated and passionate collectors and a world-class museum with its own healthy obsession for preserving and protecting the legacy of the American West.

MICHAEL WALLIS is the award-winning author of sixteen books.









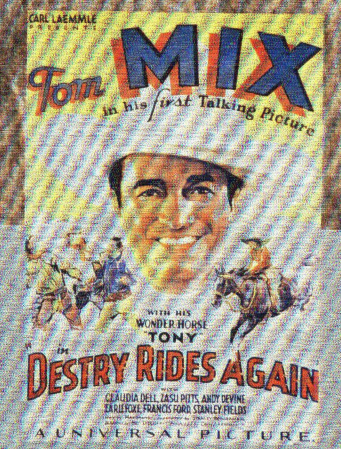


JOSEPH A. KESTNER

PROFESSOR OF FILM STUDIES, UNIVERSITY OF TULSA



Film History and the 101



Real or *reel*? Real cowboys or reel cowboys? Real Indians or reel Indians? The Jerry and Ruth Murphey 101 Ranch Collection of 37,000 individual items is an archive of cinematic history.

This history can be traced in three phases: first, the filming in the early twentieth century of moving pictures at the original 101 Ranch, founded in 1879 by Colonel George Washington Miller near what is now Ponca City, Oklahoma; second, the collaboration between the 101 Ranch and California film producer/director Thomas H. Ince; and third, the 101 Ranch and its wild west shows as a Western-genre "star factory."

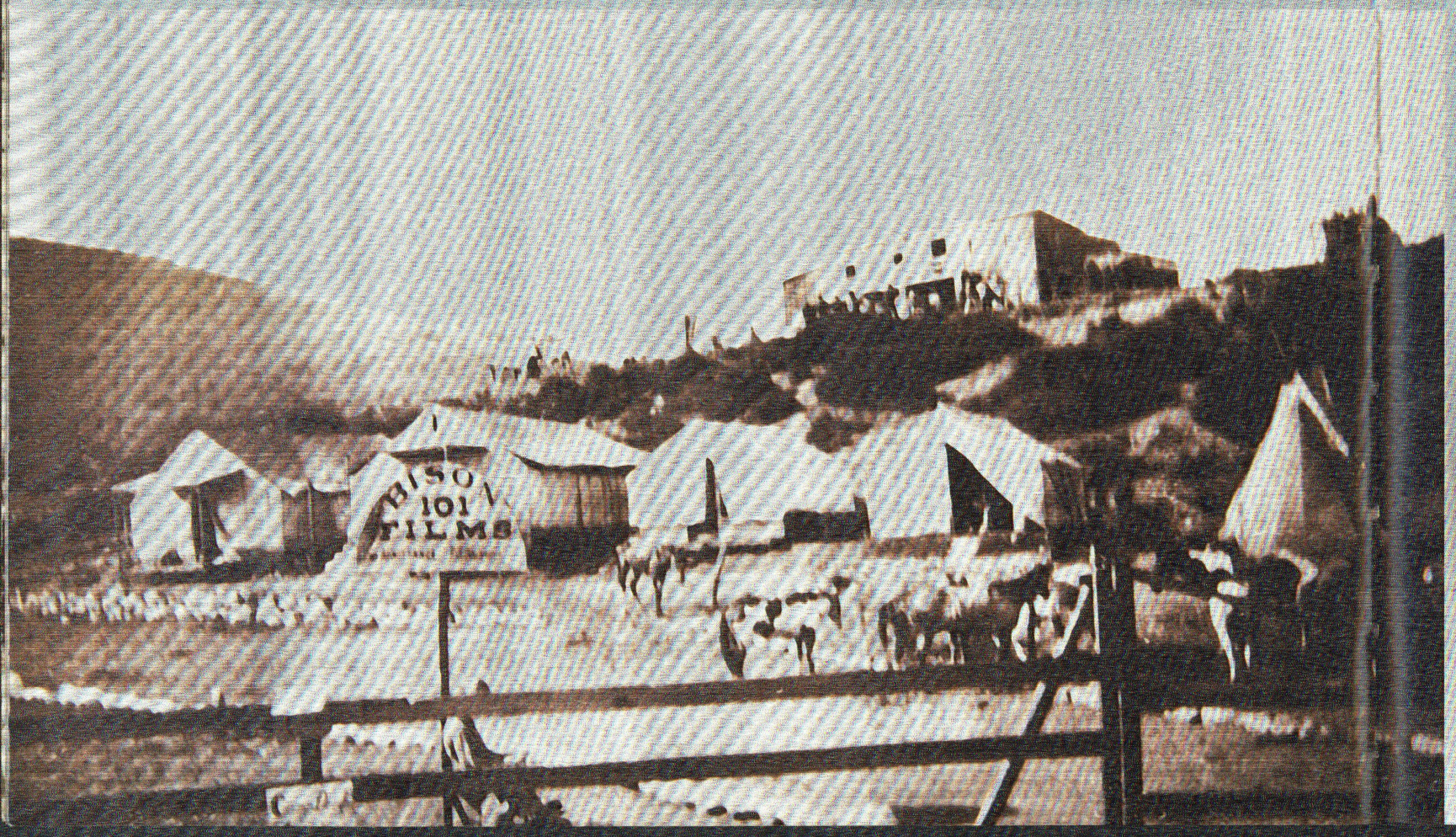
THE FIRST PHASE OF THIS FILM HISTORY begins in 1905, when the Miller brothers, Joe, Zack, and George, created the Miller Brothers Real Wild West, a live show that would eventually feature such future film stars as Hoot Gibson, Bill Pickett, and Tom Mix.

Filming on 101 Ranch, May 18th, 1914. Gilcrease 4327.8112.

INSET FACING: Tom Mix, Buck Jones, and Hoot Gibson, stars of the early Westerns. Gilcrease

LEFT: Tom Mix and Tex Cooper (far right) in a movie still from *The Bronco Twister*, 1927. Gilcrease 4337.8227.





With its massive herds of steer and buffalo, its cowboys, Native American performers, horses, and prop paraphernalia, the 101 was a perfect filming location with a full Western cast already in place. A filmmaker had his pre-production work handed to him on a chuckwagon platter. Pioneer producer William N. Selig took advantage of these opportunities to film many one- and two-reel films at the 101 for the Selig Polyscope Company. Such a picture is the lost 1910 *Ranch Life in the Great Southwest.* W. A. Brooks, a cousin of the Millers, became Selig's film director at the 101 Ranch location in Oklahoma.

THE SECOND PHASE OF THE ASSOCIATION between the 101 and the emerging film industry began when the 101 joined forces with the Bison Motion Picture Company. Headed by Adam Kessel, Charles O. Bauman, and Fred J. Balshofer, the Bison company had moved to southern California from New York in November 1909. As luck would have it, the traveling 101 Ranch Wild West had decided to winter in Venice, California. On December 2, 1911, the magazine *Moving Picture World* announced the alliance between Bison and 101, thereafter called the Bison 101.

The personnel from the 101 show (including seventy-five cowboys, twenty-five cowgirls, and thirty-five Indians) moved to a 20,000-acre site near Santa Monica in the hills above Malibu to begin production. Producer and director Thomas H. Ince (1882–1924), who had come to California in 1911, took control of production, and soon the location was known as Inceville. Ince would be credited with the invention of many modern film conventions such as the shooting script and scene plot. By February 1912, 101 Bison Pictures had produced four two-reeler movies.

Their success was astonishing. The magazine *Film Fancies* declared in its February 24, 1912 issue: "The world has gone wild over the 101 Bison pictures." These included the titles *War on the Plains, The Indian Massacre, The Battle of the Red Men,* and *The Deserter.* William Goetzmann in *The West of the Imagination* wrote of Ince as "a genius who foreshadowed the studio moguls of the 1920s and '30s." In his masterful *The War, The West, and The Wilderness,* film historian Kevin Brownlow compared the importance of Inceville to the Western to "the importance of Detroit to the automobile."

In particular, *Moving Picture World* on January 27, 1912, wrote about *War on the Plains:* "The true history of early life in the Wildest West is being written on film. The impression it all leaves is that here we have a presentation of Western life that is real and that is true to life, and that we would like to see it again and again so as to absorb more of the details."

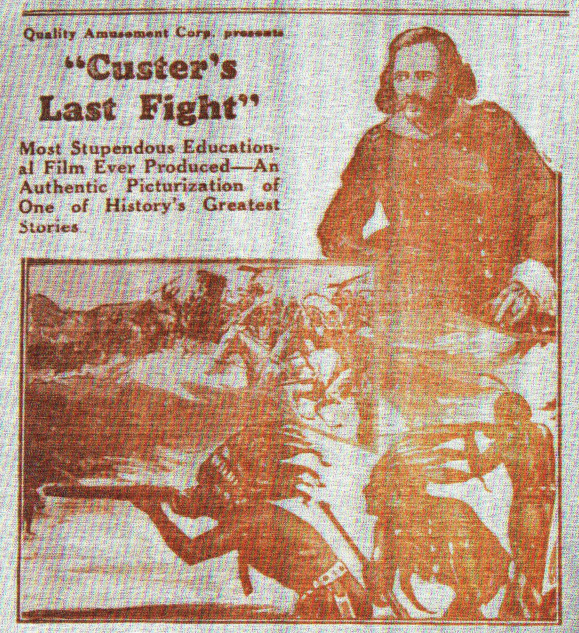
However, Ince did not rest on these laurels. In 1912, he produced several films extremely important to film history. Preeminent among these is *Custer's Last Fight,* directed by and starring Francis Ford (1882–1953), the older brother of the famed John Ford. The promotional pamphlet accompanying its release declared it "The Most Colossal and Sensational War Picture in the Entire History of Motion Pictures." Released in 1912 as a three-reel picture, the film survives today in a five-reel version. In 1969, the 1925 re-release version was discovered, which included two additional reels. The film has amazing authenticity so far as its personnel and costumes are concerned, thanks to the 101 Ranch resources. The film was adapted from a story by Richard V. Spencer and edited and titled by Inez A. Ridgway.

The film is surprising in its chronological scope, covering the attacks on the forts along the Bozeman Wagon Trail in the 1860s, the closing of the Bozeman Trail in 1868, the arrival

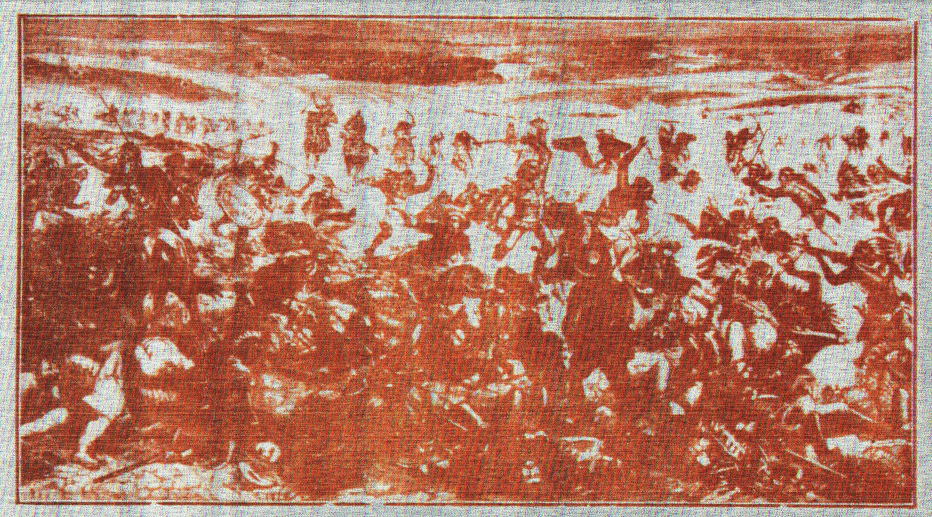




TOP: Thomas Ince Studios, Los Angeles. Gilcrease 4337.8713.
IMMEDIATELY ABOVE: Thomas H. Ince.
FACING: Early studio, Bison 101 Films. Gilcrease 4327.8129.







of railway land surveyors in 1873, the Battle of the Little Big Horn on June 25, 1876, in eastern Montana Territory, and the death of Sitting Bull on December 15, 1890. Thus, the scope of the events embraced by the film is epical. That this stunning defeat of white forces occurred during the first Centennial of the United States only gave it more power in the imagination of the country.

Why the title? It was after the battle that painters transformed the event to "Custer's Last Stand." As Goetzmann notes, it was George A. Custer's last fight but "the red man's last stand." The promotional pamphlet has it both ways, with "The Last Stand of Gen. Custer" placed under a still on its first page. The pamphlet boasts of 1,000 soldiers and 1,000 Indians "engaged in deadly conflict," stressing that *Custer's Last Fight* was "the most thrilling film ever seen, costing more than $30,000."

The film is wonderfully shot, using striking angles to take advantage of its stunning California scenery. (This film was not shot on location at the Little Big Horn.) In particular, ranks of mounted cavalry stream into the left side of the frame during the crossing of the river by Major Marcus Reno's troops. The visually dramatic pyramid shape of the "last stand" fighters is taken from the imagery of nineteenth-century battle art.

Adherence to detail is remarkable. In one example, Custer, who was known to have cut his hair before the encounter, appears in shorn locks in his final moments on the hill. On the other hand, accuracy was not always observed. For example, in the final sequence Mrs. Custer is shown at the dedication of the memorial at Little Big Horn, when in fact she was absent.

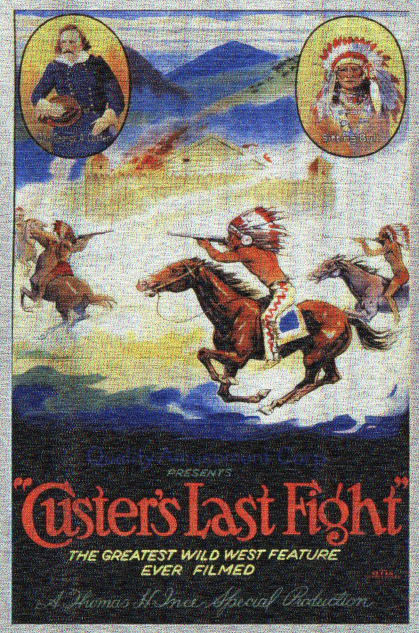
There are, however, disturbing racial elements in *Custer's Last Fight.* In the titles throughout the film, the Sioux are referred to as "the hostiles." Young Indians are labeled "bucks," a pernicious racist term. Indians "lurk" in the valleys. An Indian charge is a "last red wave of destruction." Nevertheless, the pamphlet asserts that every American "with a spark of patriotism" should see the film.

More disturbing, the promotional pamphlet essay is by Louis Reeves Harrison, who was virulently anti-Indian. Interweaving plot summary with racist commentary, he writes: "The Sioux were as destitute of nobility as other savage races. They were as merciless to the weak, inhuman in their outrages upon white women and children and were as incapable of gratitude as any body of grafters now supported by our Government." Harrison ignores the fact that Indians were forced off their lands on to reservations.

Harrison wrote an essay on April 27, 1912, for *Moving Picture World* entitled "The 'Bison-101' Headliners" in which his racism was explicit. Characterizing the Indians as "incapable of contributing anything of value to human evolution," he raved: "[The Indian] was essentially a man of physical action, using only that part of his brain which enabled him to be crafty. . . . He took to drink on small provocation and had a drunkard's lack of ambition."

The film also manages to whitewash Colonel Custer. Harrison notes: "Whatever his errors of judgment, the gallant soldier atoned for his mistakes by his heroic fight and death." This is scarcely the entire Custer story. Think of the fact that in 1867 Custer was court-martialed "for cruelty to his men" (Goetzmann) and that on November 27, 1868, Custer led the troops in the Washita Massacre in Indian Territory near what is now Cheyenne, Oklahoma.

Interestingly, however, critics recognized such racisim very early in the history of Westerns. *Moving Picture World* of March 4, 1911, noted that Indians "resented the untrue, unreal, and unfair representations of themselves" in motion pictures. The magazine called for "a series of films of REAL Indian life." In an article entitled "Moving Picture Absurdities" in the September 16, 1911 issue of the same magazine, W. Stephen Bush declared: "The only kind [of Indians] we lack are the real Indians."



ABOVE AND FACING: Promotional materials for Ince's epic *Custer's Last Fight.*





Early movie scene with Tex Cooper (in black hat and with gun). Gilcrease 4327.8106. RIGHT: Tex Cooper's membership card for the Film Players' Club, Inc. Gilcrease 5327.1002. Jack Hoxie in The Red Rider. Gilcrease 4337.8127.

The title of another 1912 Inceville film, *The Invaders* (beautifully preserved by the American Film Institute) offers an alternative point of view, perhaps compensating in part for the racism of *Custer's Last Fight*. The word *invaders* in the film's title refers to white railroad land surveyors.

The value of the 101 Ranch Collection exists in the complexity of the cultural history its artifacts preserve, including such elements of controversy.

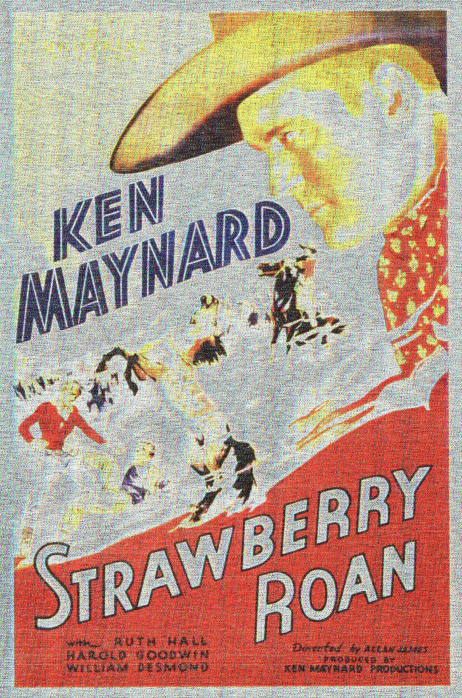
THE THIRD COMPONENT OF THE FILM LEGACY OF THE 101 RANCH is its indisputable star-making power.

The 101 Ranch Collection is rich in posters of such luminaries as black champion Bill Pickett in *The Bull-Dogger* and Yakima Canutt, who joined the Wild West show in 1914, in the film *Days of the Buffalo*.

Other great stars who learned it all at the 101 include Buck Jones, who joined the show in 1913; Jack Hoxie, who appeared in the show in 1911; Hoot Gibson; Tom Mix, who was on the ranch by 1906; and William F. "Buffalo Bill" Cody, who joined the show in 1916.

All these major threads of film history—pioneer filming in Oklahoma, the partnership between the 101 and the emerging California film industry, and the origins of larger-than-life Western film stars—can be read in the wealth of artifacts in the 101 Ranch Collection. The newly acquired and justly celebrated collection now makes Gilcrease Museum a core repository of cinematic history.

... major threads of film history ... can be read in the wealth of artifacts in the 101 Ranch Collection. The newly acquired and justly celebrated collection now makes Gilcrease Museum a core repository of cinematic history











KIMBERLY ROBLIN

ASSISTANT CURATOR, GILCREASE MUSEUM



For Love of a Game: Cowgirls of the 101 Ranch Real Wild West Show

The era of the Wild West—idolized, vilified, and romanticized—is often defined through dichotomies. Cowboys versus Indians, outlaws versus lawmen, mythology versus history. Yet through it all the Wild West has retained its rugged reputation as a time untamed, unforgiving, and unwilling to suffer fools. Inherently compelling, it continues to fascinate people of all ages and backgrounds as it has for over a century.

FACING: Top, left to right: Bea Kirnan, Prairie Rose Henderson, Mabel Strickland, Princess Mohawk, Ruth Roach, Kittie Canutt, and Prairie Lillie. Gilcrease 4327.8158. BOTTOM, left to right: Rene Hafley, Fox Hastings, Rose Smith, Ruth Roach, Mabel Strickland, Prairie Rose Henderson, Dorothy Morell. Gilcrease 4317.8146.
ABOVE: Fox Hastings bulldogging. Gilcrease 4327.8154.
INSET: "Queens of the Rodeo." Left to right: Ruth Roach, Fox Hastings, Florence Hughes, Mabel Strickland. Gilcrease 4327.8152.



Lucille Mulhall. Courtesy of the University of Oklahoma Western History Collection.
INSET: Unidentified cowgirl, 1912. Gilcrease 4327.8150.

Today, the Wild West exists only as a memory; in the early 1900s it had not yet made that transition. And yet, even as they lived it, people seem to have sensed the flow of their colorful present into a sepia-toned past. They clamored for anything related to it: books, articles, and early movies. One form of such lionizing entertainment surpassed all others in what it offered the public—the chance to sit in the grandstands on a perfect afternoon while the West came alive before them, close enough so they could smell the dust and sweat, as thrilling and captivating as they had always imagined it to be.

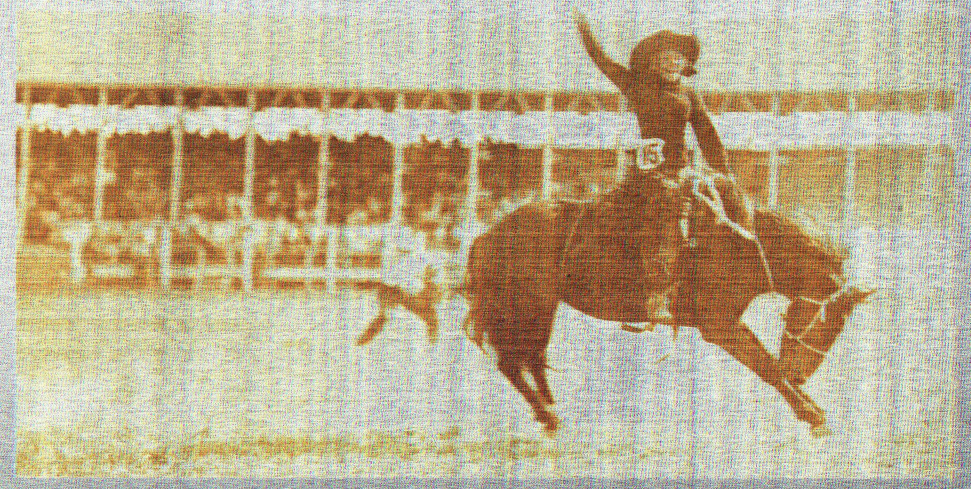
Wild West shows began on the Nebraska plains in 1883, a creation of William F. "Buffalo Bill" Cody. Part vaudeville, part rodeo, they toured the country and eventually the world drawing hundreds at every venue. Before long other traveling shows emerged, anxious to accommodate the ever-increasing fascination with anything and anyone western. All shows were not created equal though, and only a handful claimed true profit and popularity. One of these, apart from Buffalo Bill's, was the 101 Ranch Real Wild West Show launched by the Miller brothers in the north-central part of what is today Oklahoma.

The Millers managed a sprawling spread of 110,000 acres inherited from their late father, the Confederate veteran Colonel George W. Miller. Together, Joe, Zack, and George Jr. oversaw the "largest diversified farm and ranch in America." Always the entrepreneurs, they constantly looked for opportunities, and on a hot, dusty June day in 1905 they found



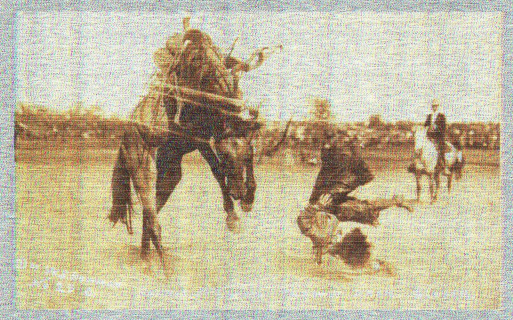


Ruth Roach on the bronco Wild Bunch. Gilcrease 4327.8137.
Ruth Roach. Gilcrease 4317.8136.



Around Cowgirl, World's Champion Trick Rider, and World's Champion Girl Bronc Rider. By her professional rodeo retirement in 1938, she had more than secured her place in rodeo history, men and women's. She is a member of both the National Cowboy Hall of Fame and the National Cowgirl Hall of Fame.

BONNIE MCCARROLL (1897-1929)



Bonnie thrown from Silver. This photograph is often described as depicitng Bonnie's death at the Pendleton Round-up in 1929. In fact, it was taken fourteen years earlier. Note the lack of hobbles under the horse. Gilcrease. 4317.8141.

Born Mary Ellen Treadwell in 1897, the blue-eyed brunette Bonnie McCarroll frequently was described as "about as big as a minute." She spent her childhood riding horses and eventually broncos on her grandfather's ranch near Boise, Idaho, and at fourteen rode her first bronc: "I mounted, the boys let go, and the broncho began to behave like a wild cat. I held for about five seconds and then all at once I seemed to grow wings. Up I soared, and turned a sumersault, and the earth seemed about ten miles below. Then I went to sleep and woke in bed."

While such an experience might have dissuaded some from a dangerous sport, it only sparked Bonnie's love of it. Her subsequent career and personal life paralleled many other cowgirls'; she married young, traveled the country and the world, and won many titles at the Pendleton Round-up, Cheyenne Frontier Days, Madison Square Gardens, and Wembley. Sadly, however, her career did not end with such felicity.

Most women rode hobbled, with the stirrups tied under the horse, but Bonnie had always prided herself on being one of the only cowgirls to ride slick, with the stirrups left loose. She once explained:

> We cowgirls have butted in on a so-called strictly man's game—and if to "play" on the hurricane deck on a sun-fishin', whirlly-giggin', rearin'-up, fallin'-over-backward, squallin', bitin', strikin', buckin', roman-nosed cayuse ain't a heman's game, there never will be one—still, as I say, we cowgirls that like the game well enough to play it should play it just like the cowboys do. Why, I'd feel insulted…if I was told to tie my stirrups down!

On September 19, 1929, Bonnie mounted a bronco named Black Cat at the Pendleton Round-up. It was to be her last ride before retirement. Against her wishes, she rode hobbled; the Pendleton Round-up Committee had insisted that no women, including Bonnie, could ride slick. Black Cat was blindfolded and led to the center of the ring, the common method before the use of chutes and pens. When the blindfold came off, he spooked and stumbled forward. After righting himself, he began to buck and Bonnie was pitched from the saddle and knocked unconscious. Her leg became caught in the hobbles and was not freed until the boot finally pulled away. By then it was too late. The ride was indeed Bonnie's last and she died eleven days later at the age of thirty-two.

Bonnie had been one of the most successful and well liked of the circuit, and her passing shook the rodeo community. Afterwards, the Pendleton Round-up and other similar events removed women's bronco competition from their line-ups. Her tragic death, however, should not overshadow her achievements as one of the most accomplished cowgirls in round-up history. In 2002, Bonnie was inducted into the National Cowboy Hall of Fame, and in 2006 into the National Cowgirl Hall of Fame.



Fox Hastings. Gilcrease 4327.8155.
Fox Hastings with bulldogged steer. Gilcrease 4327.8157.

FOX HASTINGS (1898-1948)

Eloise Fox was born in 1898 in California. Following a familiar pattern in cowgirl biographies, she left home as a teenager, restless to rodeo. Her big break came in 1924 when she set a record of seventeen seconds in bulldogging—a game almost exclusively played by men. One of the most dangerous events in the rodeo, it consisted of throwing a steer by grabbing the horns and twisting the animal to the ground. As one of the rare female bulldoggers, Eloise (she became Fox Hastings upon marrying Mike Hastings) was known for her toughness in the arena. One newspaper reported that "Though she had suffered a broken rib the day before the show opened, she bulldogged her steer each of the three days of the rodeo proper. She had a contract to fulfill and couldn't let management down."



Fox did take extra precaution against injury, often wearing a football helmet while bulldogging. As one of the most interviewed and photographed of the cowgirls, Fox enjoyed popularity and acclaim. Unfortunately, her personal life was not as fortunate. After retiring from the rodeo she struggled with tuberculosis, and years later suffered more misfortune when her second husband Chuck Wilson passed away in 1948. Two weeks later, Fox sadly took her own life in an Arizona hotel room. She was posthumously inducted into the National Cowboy Hall of Fame in 1987.

Mabel Strickland. Gilcrease 4337.8230; Mabel on Topsy. Gilcrease 4327.8156.

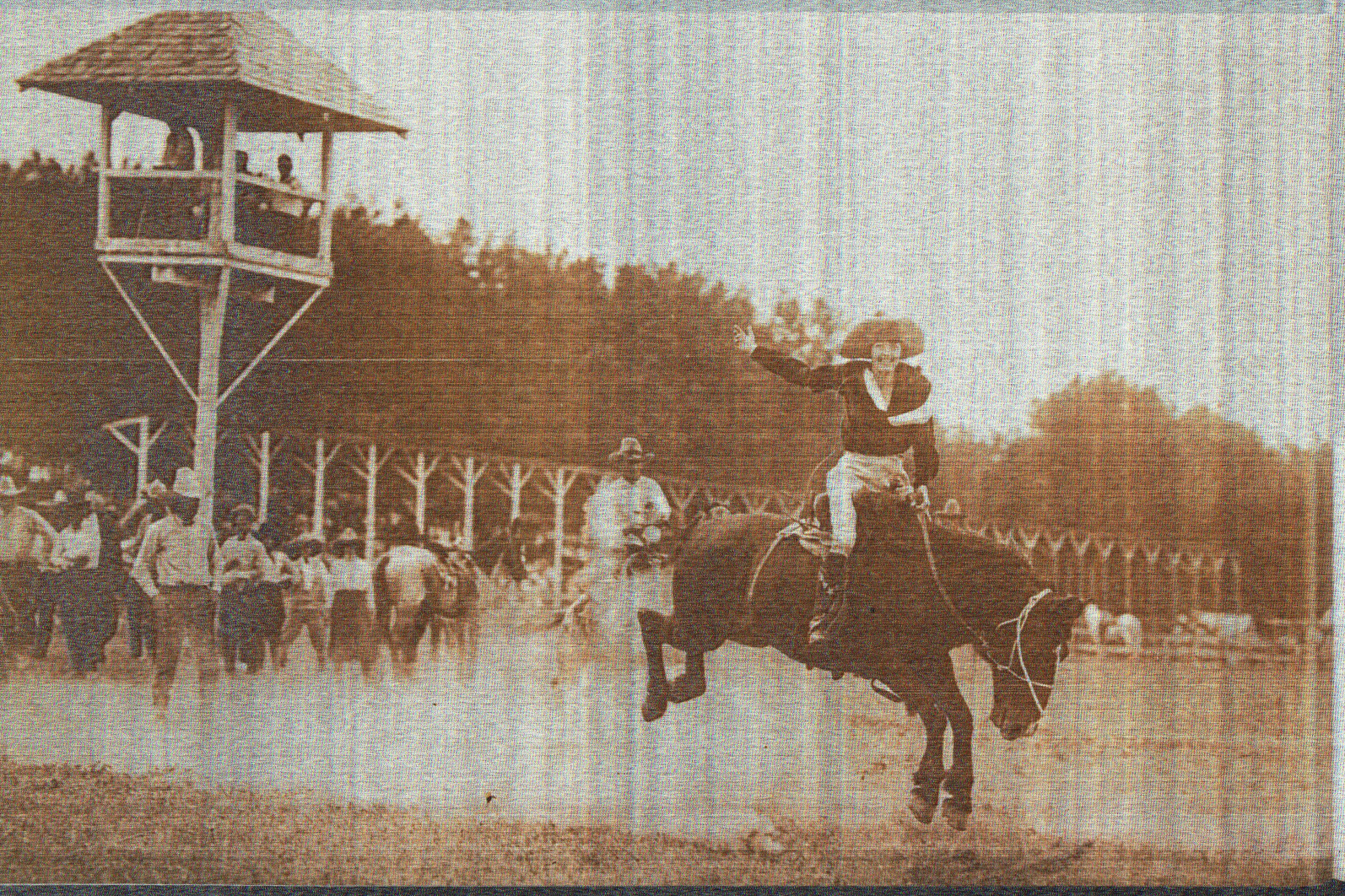


MABEL STRICKLAND (1897-1976)

Called the "Lovely Lady of the Rodeo," Mabel Strickland possessed both movie-star looks and rodeo talent.

Born Mabel DeLong near Walla Walla, Washington, in 1897, she was introduced to riding by her father as a young girl. With natural talent and dedication she was quickly competing as a trick rider and a relay rider. After marrying Hugh Strickland in 1918 she settled down on a small farm, but mounting debts forced the couple to find new means of income. They entered a rodeo and did so well in prize earnings that they decided to leave farm life behind.

For twenty-five years Mabel competed and even took some uncredited roles in Hollywood movies. By the 1930s the Stricklands had moved to Hollywood and Mabel became active in the Association of Film Equestriennes, eventually becoming its president in 1935. Like most of her rodeo sisters, Mabel was inducted into the National Cowboy (1981) and National Cowgirl Halls of Fame.

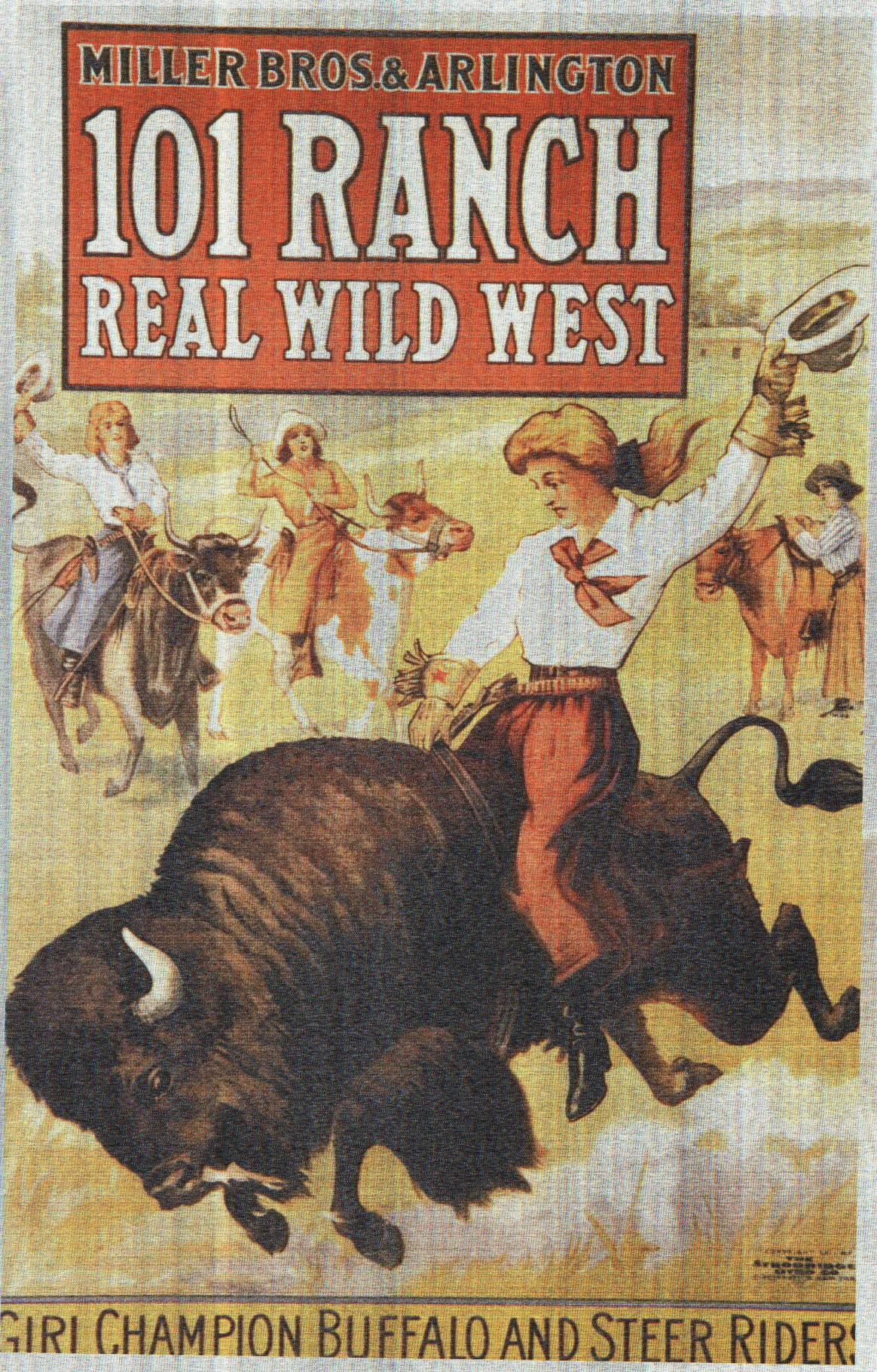


EDITH TANTLINGER

Edith was one of the first women to perform with the 101 show, beginning her career in 1903. Her primary skill was sharpshooting, although she also entertained audiences with her trick roping. While not a classic cowgirl, Edith still embodied the same spirit, refusing to let society confine her to traditional female roles.

LEFT AND RIGHT BELOW: Edith Tantlinger. Gilcrease 4327.8153;. Edith Tantlinger. Edith Tantlinger on horse with lasso. Gilcrease 4327.8151; BOTTOM: Lulu Parr Courtesy of the University of Oklahoma Western History Collection.





MILDRED DOUGLAS (1895-1983)

Mildred defied convention from the beginning. Unlike most cowgirls, she was born on the East coast and learned to ride not on a ranch or farm, but in an indoor ring in Connecticut. Her eastern roots, however, did not prevent her from becoming a real cowgirl of the West and she performed in both Wild West shows and early western movies.

DOROTHY MORRELL

A traditional cowgirl, Dorothy Morrell was the 1914 World's Champion Cowgirl Bronc Rider at the Pendleton Round-up. Occasionally making movies, she spent most of her time on the rodeo circuit. Like so many, she suffered injuries from the dangerous sport. One such injury forced Dorothy to stay in San Francisco while she recovered. Days after her release from the hospital, she took the opportunity to speak at the Congressional Union for Women's Suffrage Conference. Her "rough" speech marked one of the rare times a cowgirl spoke of or aligned herself with the national movement.







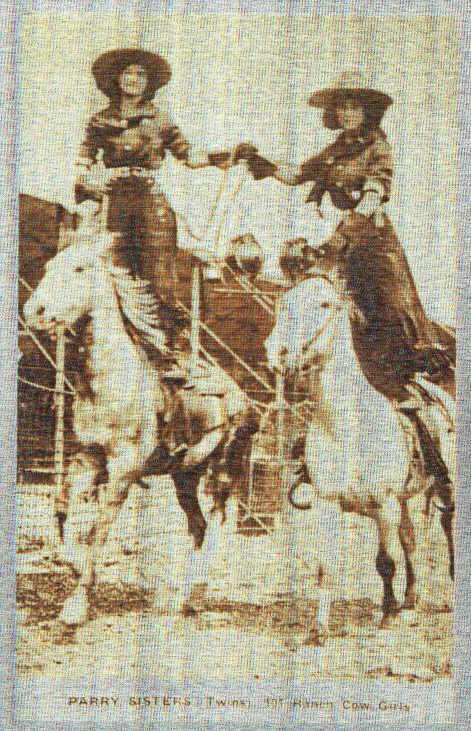
TOP: Mildred Douglas. Gilcrease 4327.8149.

LEFT AND ABOVE: Dorothy Morrell, one of the only cowgirls to speak on the suffrage movement. Gilcrease 4327.8143, 4317.8144.

FACING: Poster of Lulu Parr. Courtesy Circus World Museum.

Ethel and Juanita Parry, also called the Parry Twins. Gilcrease 4327.8148; The Parry Twins. Gilcrease 4327.8140; Lulu Parr—an early 101 cowgirl known for her handmade and elaborate costumes. Gilcrease 4327.8159; cowgirl trick riders. Gilcrease 4327.8151..







Cowgirls, whether they intended to or not, demonstrated that a woman's life could be more than an exercise in conventional exclusivities, that a woman's life could be built from choice instead of sacrifice.

Similar to the era they arose in, cowgirls are often thought of as exemplifying an inherent dichotomy—between fierce and agile "male" traits and the supposed softer aspects of the "fairer sex."

But to consider these women in those simple terms would be to overlook their true nature and contributions. They were born in a male-dominated society, when men presumed to tell women what they could and could not do, what they could and could not have. A woman could be feminine or she could be strong. She could not be both. A woman could have a family or a career. She could not have both.

In the early twentieth century women began to challenge these embedded ultimatums. Cowgirls, whether they intended to or not, demonstrated that a woman's life could be more than an exercise in conventional exclusivities, that a woman's life could be built from choice instead of sacrifice. They chose to be mothers and wives. They chose to be cowgirls—motivated not by political or social agendas, but by the simple and perfect love of a game.



SOURCES

Wallis, Michael. *The Real Wild West: The 101 Ranch and the Creation of the American West*. New York: St. Martin's Press. 1999.

The National Cowboy and Western Heritage Museum.

The National Cowgirl Hall of Fame.



APRIL MILLER, CURATOR OF ARCHIVES, GILCREASE MUSEUM



Princess Wenona

Champion Lady Rifle Shot of the World



A young Lillian Smith during her time with Buffalo Bill's Wild West; FACING: Princess Wenona performing with Rabbit. Gilcrease 4317.8165.

Before the great American Western film, before *Bonanza* or *Gunsmoke*, there was the Wild West show. In a culture that craved images of free and exhilarating life beneath the endless skies of the mystifying West, few spectator events were more popular with audiences in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries than these traveling exhibitions. With their entertaining blend of vaudeville, circus, and rodeo, Wild West shows brought the legendary action of rough frontier towns like Dodge City and Tombstone to the big cities of the East, where families could experience firsthand the great gunfights and Indian raids of the mythologized American frontier. The Wild West shows were filled with purposefully colorful and mysterious characters, but few stars were as colorful, or as mysterious, as the great female sharpshooter Miss Lillian Smith, otherwise known as Princess Wenona.

Lillian Frances Smith began her career as a sharpshooter while still a young girl in 1870s California. Her parents maintained a shooting gallery in Sacramento, where, according to an article published in *The Breeder and Sportsman* she "astonished all-comers by her remarkable ability." In July 1881, her father presented her to the public of San Francisco. In seven demonstration receptions at Woodward Gardens, her amazing accuracy (coupled with her extreme youth) created a huge sensation and won her many admirers. As Lillian gained fame she acquired the nickname "The California Huntress"—allegedly after shooting a wildcat while on a camping trip with friends and family. On August 21, 1884, the *New York Times* published a challenge from "The California Girl Champion Rifle Shot of the World" to sharpshooters everywhere. The challenge read, "The Youthful Diana will be matched by her father against Dr. Carver, Eugene Borgardus, E.E. Stubbs, or any other professional shot in the world to shoot in a bona fide contest with the rifle."

By April of 1885, the *Times* had followed up with a statement reporting that Dr. Carver's record had been beaten. Miss Lillian Smith had broken 100 glass balls with a Winchester rifle in two minutes, thirty-five seconds. Carver's best time was two minutes thirty-six seconds. Lillian had yet to reach her fifteenth birthday.



In 1886, William F. "Buffalo Bill" Cody recruited Lillian into his traveling Wild West show. He dubbed her "The California Girl," originally billing her as interlude amusement to hold the attention of the crowd while the big acts were being changed. This arrangement did not last long—Lillian soon enjoyed equal billing with fellow female sharpshooter Annie Oakley, who had joined the show shortly before. Accompanied by her father, Lillian toured the country with the show, performing at the St. Louis Fairgrounds in the spring of 1886, then traveling to New York for a six-month engagement on Staten Island. During her time with the Buffalo Bill Show in New York, Lillian began to gain a reputation for being boastful and aloof, and her sometimes coarse manner and arrogance offended her fellow performers. In a letter to his sister dated July 6, 1886, Ed Goodman, the nephew of Buffalo Bill, writes of young Lillian, "She is not liked by any of the camp. She thinks herself so much better than anyone else and she will not associate with Johnie and I. . ."

Also during the summer of 1886, the headstrong Lillian married bronc buster Jim Kidd against her father's wishes. A column in the *New York Times* described the event:

> At the time of the first appearance on Staten Island of the Wild West Show, James G. Willougby, otherwise 'Jim, the Kid,' became enamored of Miss Lillian Smith of California, a champion rifle shot, who was attached to the show. A romantic marriage was the result. . . . A few friends who were in the secret were present, while the father of Miss Lillian was watching outside eagerly with gun in hand to shoot 'the Kid,' as he was opposed to the match.

Lillian would no longer require her father as chaperone and manager and, for better or for worse, she was free to go her own way.

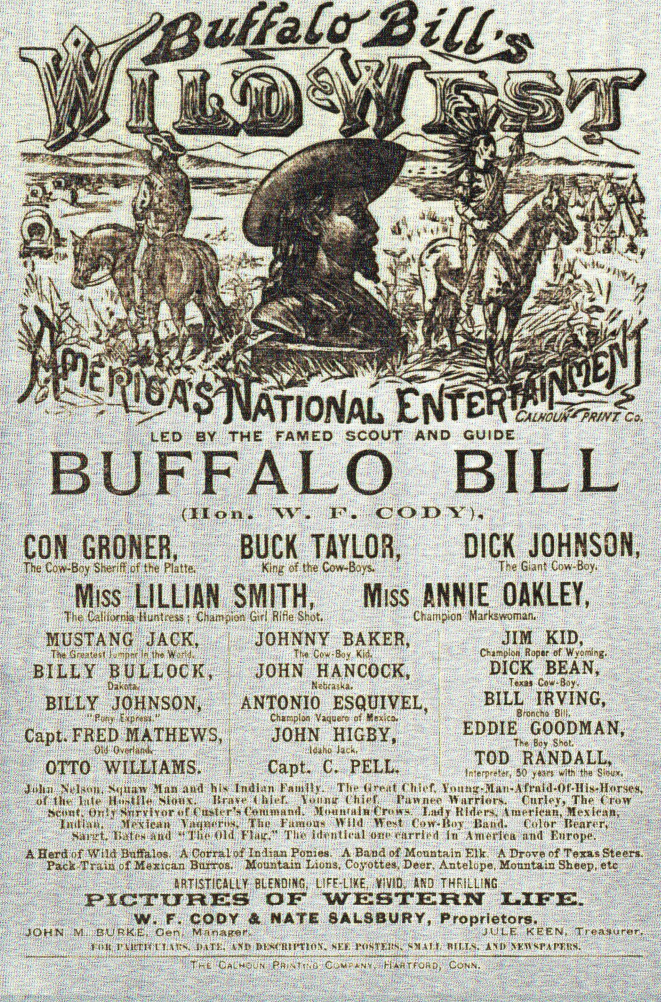
In spring of 1887, the Buffalo Bill Wild West Show traveled to England to participate in the American Exhibition at Queen Victoria's Golden Jubilee. Sailing across the Atlantic on the *State of Nebraska*, the American celebrities arrived at Kent in mid-April and made their way to the exhibition grounds in West London. The grounds of the American Exhibition as a whole encompassed twenty-three acres, with great avenues named for famous Americans and a main gallery more than 1,200 feet long. The excitement at the arrival of the Wild West performers was evident in the number of prominent visitors to the camp, as well as in the many newspaper features that reported on the activities of the crew. An excerpt from *The Weekly Dispatch* described a sighting of Miss Lillian:





TOP TO BOTTOM: Early portrait of Lillian Smith posed with her rifles; Annie Oakley circa 1887.

FACING: A show roster from Buffalo Bill Wild West Show program gave Lillian and Annie equal billing. Gilcrease 5126.972.



> On Tuesday we had a visit from Miss Lillian Smith, the shootist accompanied by sundry of her satellites, including a small Indian boy, most resplendently arrayed in a blue silk shirt, and a pair of red silk trousers—a costume utterly upsetting all our notions of the noble redskin as borrowed from Fenimore Cooper. Miss Smith herself presented a striking combination of native eccentricity and feminine slavishness to the dictates of fashion in her garb. One of the orthodox white summer dresses, cut rather short, but duly furnished with an improver, was incongruously accompanied by a yellow silk Mexican sash and plug hat.

The show had its official grand opening on May 9, 1887, and the *London Times* reported that 28,000 people attended. The show was a triumph. There was no end to the media frenzy that followed, including descriptions and critical reviews of the feats executed by the performers. A London reporter excitedly described Lillian's performance:

> Lillian's forte was shooting at a swinging target. She complicated her feats by adding all kinds of difficulties to her aim, and her crowning achievements of smashing a glass ball made to revolve horizontally at great speed and clearing off ball after ball on the target just mentioned to the number of twenty were really marvelous.

A special performance for Queen Victoria herself was requested, and on May 11 the Buffalo Bill Show obliged. Cody described the event in his autobiography:

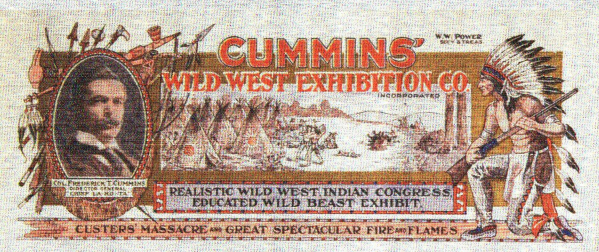
> Under the stimulus of the Queen's presence, the performance was admirably given. The whole company seemed infected with a determination to excel. Personally I missed not a single shot; the young ladies excelled themselves in the same line; the charges on the Indians were delivered with terrific vim; and the very bucking horses seemed to buck like steam-engines under the influence of that half minute of excitement. . . . I had the pleasure of presenting Miss Lillian Smith, the mechanism of whose Winchester repeater was explained to her Majesty, who takes a remarkable interest in fire-arms. Young California spoke up gracefully and like a little woman.

The attention accorded Lillian during her time in England contributed to a rivalry that had grown between the California sharpshooter and Annie Oakley. Lillian enjoyed the spotlight and was not shy in claiming the superiority of her skills over Annie's. Annie, equally confident, was contemptuous of Lillian's often unrefined grammar, manner of dress, and somewhat fuller figure. Reporters, columnists, and critics went back and forth on who was the better shot. Allegations of cheating and the suspicion that Lillian's husband sent an anonymous letter to a newspaper touting Lillian's skills added fuel to the fire. Directly following the London performances, Annie and her husband Frank Butler left the Buffalo Bill Show.

Lillian herself was not destined to spend her career traveling with Buffalo Bill Cody and his Wild West Show. The contention between Annie and herself may or may not have contributed to Lillian's abbreviated time with the outfit. An alternative cause may have been the disintegration of her short-lived marriage to Jim Kidd. Conceit was not Lillian's only fault; she'd also gained notoriety for fraternizing a bit too much with other men from the crew. An 1889 letter home from C.L.







Daily, one of the cowboys with the show, reported that "Jim Kid, my tent mate. . . received a letter a few days ago saying that his wife had gone off with another cowboy. . . . When Jim got the letter, he almost went crazy. . . . He thinks an awful sight of Smith."

The show returned to the United States in 1888 after finishing a tour throughout Europe, and Lillian and Jim were officially divorced. Within a year, Lillian was married to Frank C. Smith, also known as "California Frank" Hafley, and she left the crew of Cody's show—the same year that Annie Oakley rejoined. Frank and Lillian formed their own act and began performing on the vaudeville circuit as "Lillian F. Smith, The California Girl, Champion Rifle Shot of the World and Frank C. Smith, Expert Rifle and Pistol Shot." Lillian wrote to her lifelong friend and fellow sharpshooter Alf Reickhoff while she and her husband were performing in Troy, New York: "Frank Butler was out yesterday and after the show he came and told me that I had a fine act—that it was catchy and pleased the people, and that was all that we needed to do. I thought that it was pretty good for him to say, don't you think so?"



In an effort to draw more attention to their act, Lillian adopted the stage name Wenona and the duo became known simply as "Wenona and Frank, The World's Champion Rifle Shots." Lillian took to darkening her skin and dressing in Native American costume for some performances, eventually changing her onstage persona to "Princess Wenona." During the next few years, "Wenona and Frank" toured on their own, as well as with other shows such as Pawnee Bill's Wild West Show and Cummins' Indian Congress. Varying accounts circulated in show publicity as to her parentage—the publicity for the Pawnee Bill show depicted her as a Sioux Indian and the daughter of Crazy Snake, one of the most prominent chiefs of that nation. Another version of her life described her as the child of a Delaware lighthouse keeper who relocated to California for the sake of Lillian's shooting career; yet another claimed that she was the daughter of a woman who had been taken prisoner by the Sioux after their attack on a westward emigrant train.

It was while traveling with the Pawnee Bill Wild West Show that Pawnee Bill himself gifted Wenona with a piebald horse named Rabbit. The horse became a permanent fixture in Wenona's act, and she executed many of her amazing feats astride her loyal equine companion. It was also during this period of time that Wenona's sister Nellie began her Wild West show career, performing as a sharpshooter and touring with Cummins' Indian Congress.

TOP: Pawnee Bill's Wild West Show ticket, front and back. Gilcrease 5327.1016; Cummins' Wild West Exhibition presentation label. Gilcrease 5127.970.

LEFT: Lillian Smith and three men from Buffalo Bill's Wild West circa 1887. Courtesy of Buffalo Bill Historical Center.

FACING: Frank and Wenona during their vaudeville days; Frank and Wenona stationery letterhead. Gilcrease 3827.8202.



Apparently, their father began managing Nellie's career soon after Wenona's emancipation. Wenona wrote to Alf Reickhoff in 1904 regarding her sibling:

> Thanks for the clipping about Nellie—glad you met her—it was a nice thing for her to have her picture in the paper. She wrote me from Indianapolis. I guess she is going West again—I was in hopes that she would stay East. I think she could do much better here. Well, as she says, the old man is a drawback for her—as he was with me for about seventeen years. He nor she like Frank because he has made a success. The best thing she could do would be to marry or go with some man that was smart enough to manage her . . .

Unfortunately, Wenona's happy years traveling and performing with Frank were not to last. The act and the marriage broke up, and by 1909 Frank was remarried to Mamie Francis, a cowgirl performer and sharpshooter more than ten years Wenona's junior.

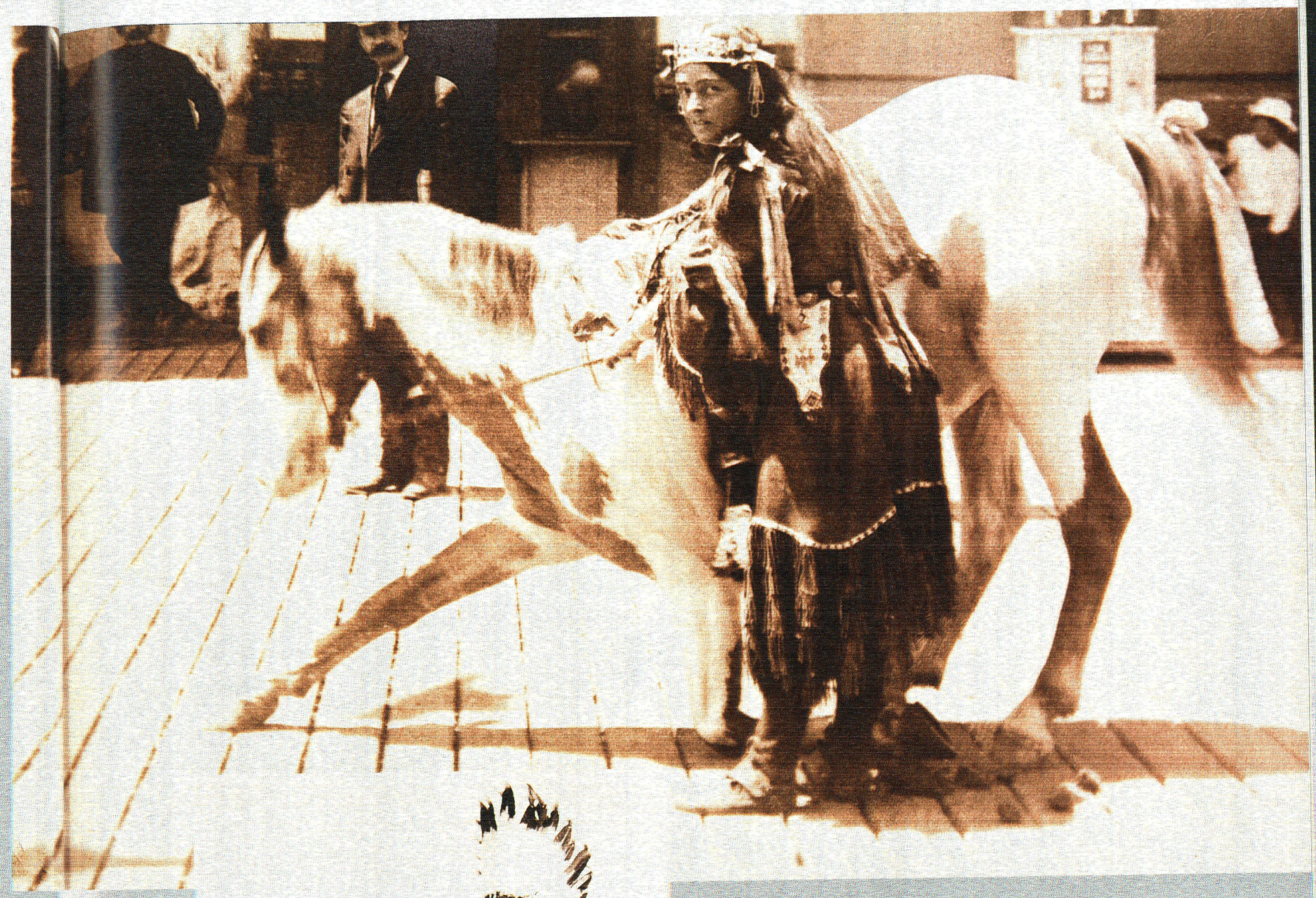
In 1911 Wenona joined the Miller Brothers' 101 Real Wild West Show. Performing with 101 notables such as Bill Pickett, Tom Mix, Lucille Mulhall, and Vern and Edith Tantlinger, she continued to impress and entertain audiences with her sharpshooting and riding ability. Wenona married twice more while with the Miller Brothers' show, first to 101 cowboy performer Wayne Beasley (her name is listed as Princess Wenona Beasley on a 1911 show roster), then to William Eagle Shirt, who became one of the first Native Americans to land a major role in a motion picture.

It was during Wenona's early years with the show that the Miller Brothers established a winter headquarters for their Wild West Show in Wenona's native California. In 1911, after the last performance of the season concluded near Los Angeles, Joe Miller decided to winter the show in the warm climate of southern California. Many of the performers rented oceanfront cabins in Venice, and the Miller's grand parade featuring marching bands, cowboys, Indians, and Russian Cossacks marked the beginning of a long relationship between the people of the town and the 101 Ranch. In addition to the attraction of sunny climes and ocean views was proximity to Hollywood, center of the burgeoning motion picture industry in which the Miller Brothers and the 101 Ranch were to become important players.

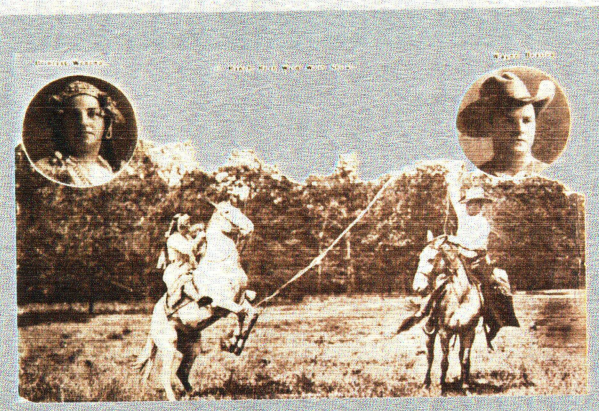


Miller Brothers 101 Ranch stationery letterhead. Gilcrease 3827.8210; Custom .38 Caliber Smith and Wesson revolver. Acquired by Frank and Wenona in 1901. Gilcrease 62.148.









Wenona and Rabbit take a bow. Gilcrease 4327.8134; LEFT: Eagle Shirt and Wenona. Gilcrease 4327.8163; ABOVE: Princess Wenona and Wayne Beasley. Gilcrease 4327.8164.

Wenona herself was not fated for a career on the big screen. By the 1920s, she was single again, had retired from show business, and was settled in one of the 101 Ranch's cabins at Riverside Camp, an area previously used to house seasonal travelers to the Ranch. It was during the next few years that she developed a relationship with Emil William Lenders, the prominent painter of buffalo and the American West. Although not married, they acquired property together by obtaining a mortgage from the 101 Ranch Trust for a twenty-acre spread they called the Thunderbird Ranch. There they grew grapes, peaches and blackberries, raised chickens, and kept many animals as pets, including a large pack of stray dogs. Again, Wenona's happiness was fleeting. In 1926 Lenders left her to open a studio in Ponca City. Although both had been identified themselves as "single" on the mortgage agreement, Lenders had in fact never divorced his wife, who had remained at their home in Philadelphia. In 1927, he sued for divorce, but not to marry Wenona. His divorce was granted on July 26, 1928, and by July of the next year he was wed to Carrico Vigus in a ceremony held in Yates Center, Kansas.





Princess Wenona and Rabbit. Gilcrease 4317.8166. Princess Wenona and trick dog. Gilcrease 4317.8167.

Wenona remained on the ranch for a time with her animals for company. Virtually destitute, she eventually moved into town after her beloved horse Rabbit died in 1928. After years of battling a weight problem and an alcohol habit, Wenona's health began to fail her. She died only a couple of years later, passing away on February 3, 1930, due to heart trouble in a Ponca City hospital. In her handwritten will, she requested that she be buried in her Indian clothes, in "an inexpensive funeral." She assigned a Marland, Oklahoma, pharmacist, Arthur Rynearson, to execute her affairs, and left $100 to the Ponca City Salvation Army and some of her few personal belongings from her show business career to the Oklahoma Historical Society.

Zack Miller, now in charge of the 101 Ranch enterprise, was away, so W.A. Brooks, a cousin of the Miller brothers, made the funeral arrangements for Wenona. She was buried in the Ponca City I.O.O.F. Cemetery in a grave simply marked with a small stone that read "P. Wenona." According to the *Ponca City News*, Wenona had no family present at the ceremony, but many who had known her during the last ten years of her life and a few friends from her entertainment career were there.

In 1999, the 101 Ranch Old Timers Association and other sponsors dedicated a handsome stone monument at Wenona's gravesite, and August 21, 1999 was proclaimed "Princess Wenona Day" by the Mayor of Ponca City. The black marble memorial headstone stands four feet tall and features an image of Princess Wenona, as well as her recordbreaking accomplishments as a trick shooter and Wild West performer.

Whether shooting a cigar out of her husband's mouth on the vaudeville stage or firing at swinging targets from the back of a running horse, Princess Wenona always thrived on an admiring public. She lived for the spotlight and loved the attention that a live audience gave her. As the rise of the American Western film brought about the decline of the venerated Wild West show, a new breed of performer was to take the stage. Not destined for a career on the silver screen, Wenona lived her final years reminiscing on her days as a champion rifle shot and live entertainer. During the Golden Age of the Wild West show Wenona traveled the world, consorted with royalty, broke multiple sharpshooting records, and, overall, lived an extraordinary version of the American Dream. The boastful, flirty, and flashy Wenona may not have been the best behaved woman of her time, but she was certainly one of the most dynamic and compelling characters in the lively group of people who called themselves Wild West show performers.

Note: The details of Lillian Smith's origins are hazy and often contradictory. According to an 1880 census record, "Lillie Smith" was born in 1873 and lived in Tuolumne County, California. She and the rest of her family were listed with an "I" in the category of race, indicating American Indian heritage (also listed on this census record is her older sister Nellie, who also became a sharpshooter in the Wild West entertainment circuit). Lillian F. Smith is listed under Frank Smith in a 1900 census taken in Chicago; there the information states that she was born in California in August 1873 and is listed as being "white." According to her official State of Oklahoma death certificate, her birth date is listed as February 3, 1871, again with "white" written in under the category of race.



Princess Wenona circa 1905. Gilcrease 4327.8160.

SOURCES

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Emil Lenders Papers, Gilcrease Museum

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CARVED INTO WENONA'S HEADSTONE IS A LIST OF HER UNBROKEN RECORDS:

Breaking glass balls thrown in the air using a .22 rifle

323 balls without a miss

495 of 500 balls

100 balls in 80 seconds

From the back of a running horse, she broke 71 of 72 balls thrown in the air

300 swinging balls in 14 minutes 33 seconds using a single loading .22 rifle

72,800 swinging balls in 6 days using 4 Winchester repeating rifles .22 caliber, 3 hours daily

Made 24 of 25 bull's eyes at 200 yards.





Colored glass target balls,
Gilcrease 57.518 & 57.519.



William Frederick Cody on Isham, posing before a performance. Gilcrease 4300.6670.

Featuring Buffalo Bill (Himself)

RANDY RAMER, COLLECTIONS MANAGER, GILCREASE MUSEUM



In November 1916, William Frederick Cody boarded a westbound train after finishing another season on the road. After four decades on the stage and in the arena before an adoring public, he was embarking on a journey that would be his last. Buffalo Bill was on his way home to Wyoming, intent on finishing his memoirs for a series of articles in William Randolph Hearst's *International Magazine*. Titled "The Great West That Was: Buffalo Bill's Life Story," the series was only one of many projects Cody was pursuing. He had in recent years dabbled in mining, land development, tourism, and motion pictures. He had given lectures and made public appearances at small towns across the nation. Cody was an international celebrity without equal. As Buffalo Bill, he had traveled the nation and the world. He had performed before thousands upon thousands of spectators in an enterprise of his own invention—the Wild West show. For the past several months, Cody had been under contract to perform with his longtime competitors the Miller brothers in their 101 Ranch Real Wild West Show. Now, at age seventy, he was going home to rest and plan for the coming year and another touring season.



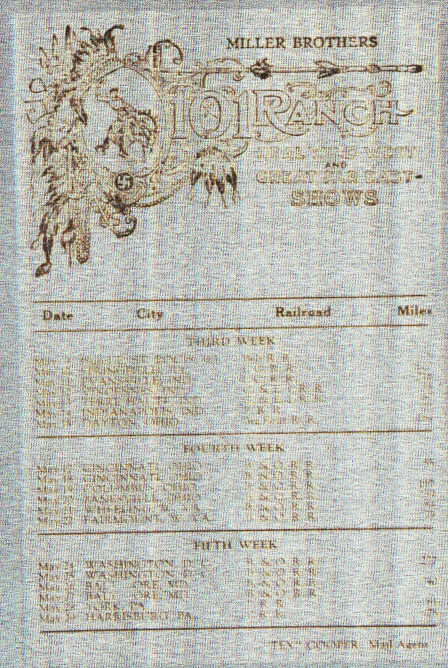
As Buffalo Bill, William Cody had invented a uniquely American form of entertainment—and in so doing had spawned his own competition. The Miller brothers, who owed everything to Cody's earlier success, were his prime competitors as they contended for audiences throughout the United States.

Cody's life had been one of constant movement. As the train rolled west, it passed many of the cities and towns that had sustained his long career. If he was thinking back over those years as he clacked along the tracks, he would have seen in his mind's eye a thirty-year history, beginning with the show he originated, Buffalo Bill's Wild West and Congress of Rough Riders of the World. The show had enjoyed enormous success for some two decades until the death of Cody's longtime partner and show manager Nate Salsbury in 1902. For the next several years, its revenues declined while expenses were at an all-time high. Buffalo Bill's Wild West also faced increasing competition, particularly from shows operated by Oklahoma-based Gordon Lillie (Pawnee Bill) and the Miller brothers of the 101 Ranch. In 1908, Cody merged with Pawnee Bill to form what was commonly called the "Two Bills Show." Officially dubbed "Buffalo Bill's Wild West Combined with Pawnee Bill's Great Far East," the show achieved a measure of success over the next few years.

As Buffalo Bill, William Cody had invented a uniquely American form of entertainment—and in so doing had spawned his own competition. The Miller brothers, who owed everything to Cody's earlier success, were his prime competitors as they contended for audiences throughout the United States. The rivalry remained aggressive as the shows competed not just for audiences and ticket sales but for the services of performers as well. During the 1911 season, the competition reached an apex when the Millers strategically played towns early on Cody's published tour schedule, often only weeks ahead of Cody's booking. The Millers' scheme backfired, however, when the route allowed Cody to arrive first in Philadelphia. In a letter, Cody happily comments, "We will take nearly $70,000 here this week. Guess 101 Ranch wish they had never got ahead of us. . . Keep me posted on their business this week. . ."

Cody continued to tour over the next few years, offering the public a series of farewell performances. While always active, he was also determined to retire to his ranch home in Wyoming. Each season's profits, however, began to progressively decline. Much of what Cody earned was invested in an Arizona gold mine that produced only enough to maintain his business interest. At the end of the 1912 season, Buffalo Bill found it financially impossible to quit his life as a performer. In order to pay his share of the show's winter expenses, Cody borrowed $20,000 from Harry H. Tammen, co-owner of the *Denver Post* and Sells-Floto Circus. According to Don Russell, author of *The Lives and Legends of Buffalo Bill* and longtime editor of the Westerners Brand Book, Tammen and his associate Frederick G. Bonfils were "probably the most amoral and unscrupulous partners ever to publish a newspaper." Tammen and Bonfils had purchased the *Denver Post* in 1894 and together "furbished it with red and black headlines and made it noisy, vulgar, and highly successful."





Pan-American Exposition 1901 envelope, Gilcrease 3827.8211.



Tammen's $20,000 loan to Cody would eventually lead to the Great Scout's financial ruin. During the 1913 season, Buffalo Bill's Wild West was poised on the brink of disaster. After months of poor box office receipts and mounting expenses, the show arrived in Denver only days from when Tammen's loan to Cody came due. Tammen eagerly influenced Cody's other creditors to foreclose. Buffalo Bill was bankrupt. His show and all its accouterments were sold at sheriff's auction to the highest bidder. The show's performers were sent home without the season's wages. Silver saddles and other gear were sold for pennies on the dollar. Livestock, including horses, oxen, and a number of camels were purchased by competitors, including the Miller Brothers of the 101 Ranch.



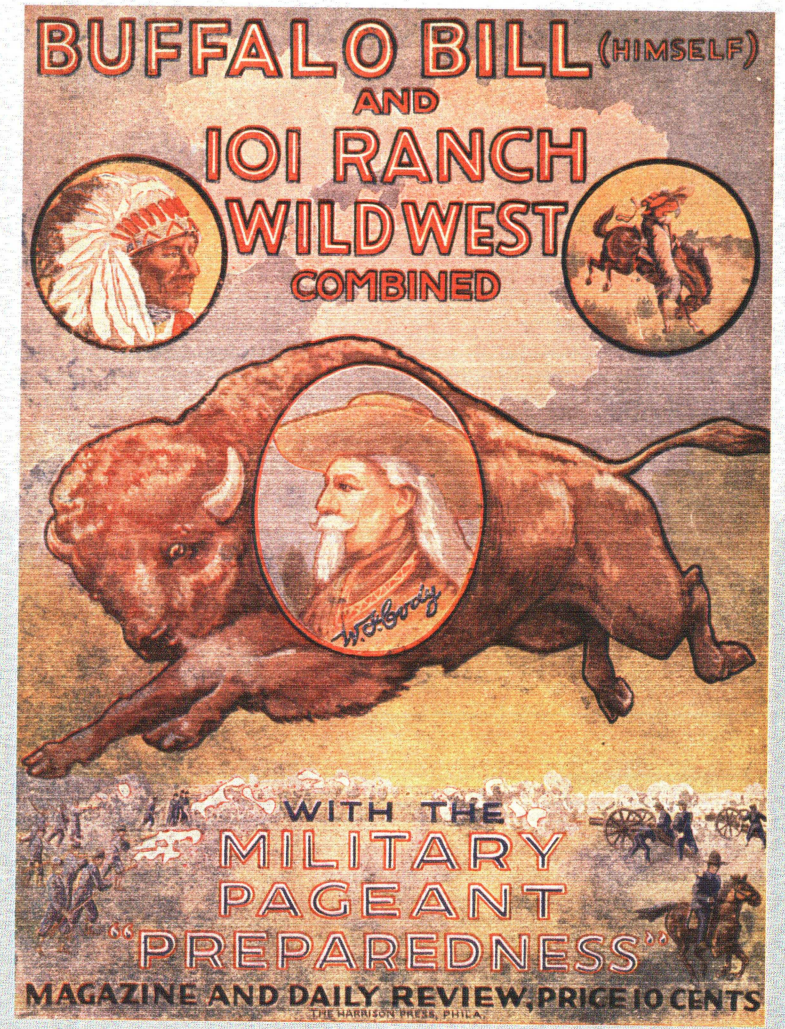
Buffalo Bill and Wild West Show cowboys, ca. 1906. Gilcrease 4327.8348.

FACING: Buffalo Bill and Native American performers in 1913. Gilcrease 4317.8126.

Most unsavory of all of Cody's misfortunes was his financial indenture to Tammen and Bonfils. For the first time in his long career, Cody was to become a contract employee. During the 1914 season, he would work for the "Sells-Floto Circus and Buffalo Bill's Wild West." He was to be paid $100 a day plus a percentage of the receipts for his services. While the situation was far from ideal, Cody remained the consummate professional. He made appearances in the arena and in promotional efforts. Though troubled by his circumstances, he remained ever optimistic and generally in good health. Cody remained eager to develop a new plan to become financially solvent and in control of his own fate and fortune.

The 1915 season with the Sells-Floto Circus was undoubtedly one of the worst experiences of Cody's life as a showman. By the end of July, he wrote old friend E.E. Arbuckle of his frustration: "This is the all fired darkest summer to stay in the road I ever seen. Once in a while I think I've struck a plain trail then I loose *(sic)* it again and I don't know where I am going. In about two weeks write me again and see if I have picked up a trail I can hang to."

Cody's disgust with the poor production quality of the show and his dealings with Tammen continued for the remainder of the season. By its close, he was eager to move on. Though under contract, Cody began making plans to organize another show. He was anxious to sever all ties with Tammen and Bonfils, urging his Denver attorney to settle his account and secure the exclusive use of the Buffalo Bill name. His association with Tammen and earlier bankruptcy, however, created considerable hesitancy among potential



financial backers. Although weary and with ongoing financial troubles, Cody remained hopeful. In a letter to his grandson, he wrote, "Courage is the one thing that does not fail me. I had all the money I wanted to build and start a new dandy show. Tammen got out in the "Bill Board" one of his dishonest bluffs and it frightened the moneyed men and they refused to put up the money. So I am trying others. If my courage holds out I'll win…"

Cody's imagination was ever resilient. Determined to settle his affairs, he knew that any new show would have to be more than a mere a break-even venture or moderate success. For over forty years as a performer, his sense of the public demand had remained unequaled among his peers. He understood that a new show would require a new theme—one that would not only employ the Buffalo Bill persona but would make that persona relevant to contemporary times. Barely able to mount a horse, he knew that it would take more than the force of his own picturesque performance to bring audiences back to the arena and investors to the planning table.

True to heroic form, Cody conceived of a tour that would appeal to common patriotic sensibilities. While past performances had dealt with the retelling of historic events, Cody now envisioned a demonstration of modern military might.

The old entrepreneur's spirit and imagination did not fail him. At the close of 1915, as the First World War raged in Europe, many Americans were becoming increasingly resistant to the continuing neutralist posture of American foreign policy. True to heroic form, Cody conceived of a tour that would appeal to common patriotic sensibilities. While past performances had dealt with the retelling of historic events, Cody now envisioned a demonstration of modern military might. He imagined mock battles and displays of American military prowess. His idea was enthusiastically embraced by Army Chief of Staff Major General Hugh Scott. Cody's notion of a "preparedness" tour would have full government support, including modern artillery devices and the services of soldiers on furlough to man them.



As Cody searched for an appropriate vehicle to showcase the preparedness effort, the Miller Brothers 101 Ranch Real Wild West became an obvious candidate…

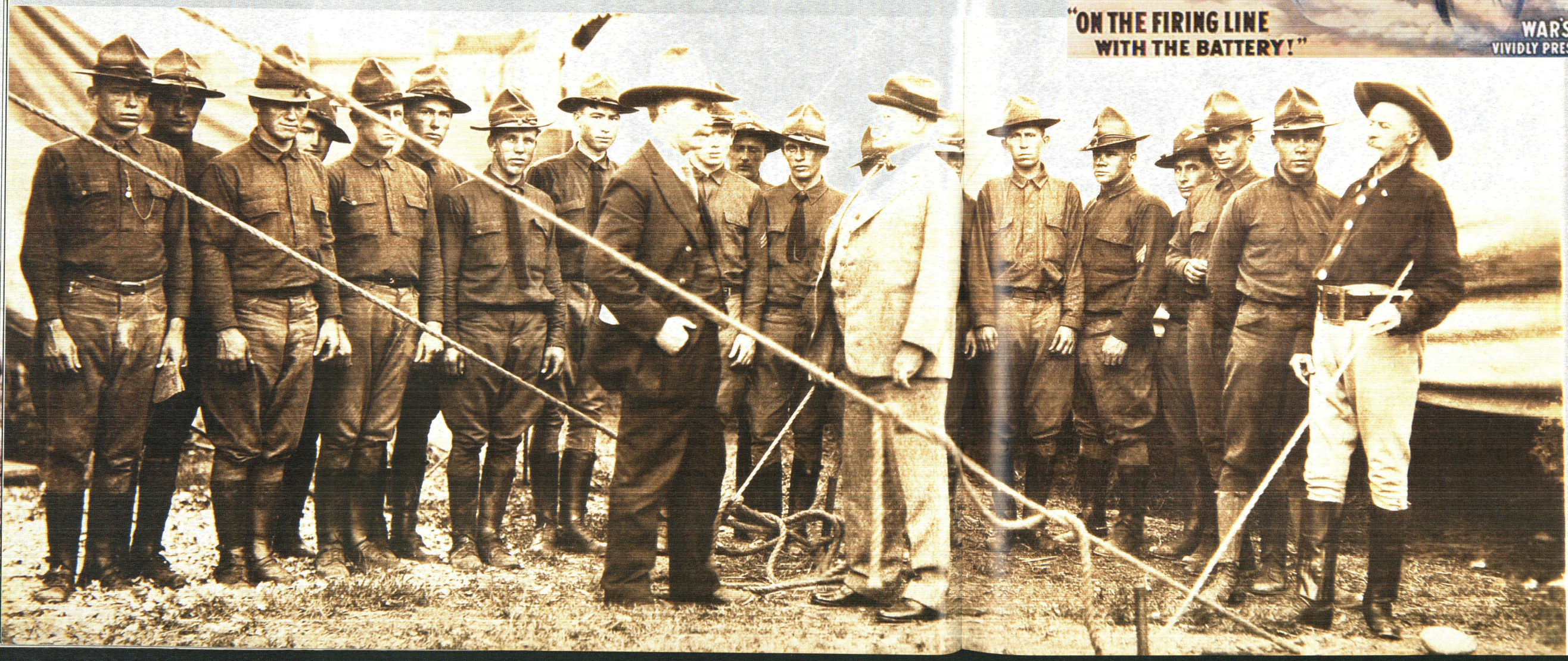
Joe C. Miller and Major General Hugh Scott (at center), W.F. Cody (at far right), in 1916. Gilcrease 4327.8349.

FACING: Advertisement for the Preparedness Pageant, 1916. Gilcrease 5127.990.

As Cody searched for an appropriate vehicle to showcase the preparedness effort, the Miller Brothers 101 Ranch Real Wild West became an obvious candidate for the initiative. As rivals, the Millers and Cody had maintained a mutual respect and admiration. While he sought backers to purchase the Millers' show and to pay off his debt to Tammen, Cody ultimately settled for yet another season as a contract performer. Records indicate that the Millers paid Tammen $4,500 for Cody's services during the 1916 season.

Cody's tour with the Millers would be his last as a performer. The show was officially called "Buffalo Bill (Himself) and 101 Ranch Wild West Combined." As long as Tammen had a right to use his "birthright," Cody wanted to make certain that his audiences knew that the combined show featured the genuine article. The show's program proudly announced:

> Colonel William F. Cody, Buffalo Bill, one of the last of the real border scouts, is again in the saddle…This year Colonel Cody comes into his own again, for as the leading figure of the Buffalo Bill-101 Ranch shows he is offering to the public…the greatest exhibition with which his name has ever been identified.









Gordon Lillie (Pawnee Bill) and Cody (at right) making preparations for the "Two Bills" tour, ca. 1905 Gilcrease 4326.5477.

Regardless of best efforts, the Buffalo Bill and 101 Ranch Wild West encountered many difficulties during the 1916 season. Inclement weather and polio epidemics were major obstacles. For Cody, his own health became a growing concern. Buffalo Bill had long given up being an active participant in the horse dramas of the arena. He was content to make an appearance, even if by horse-drawn buggy instead of the triumphal equestrian marches he had perfected and which had been such a vital display of his own mythological status.

In the summer of his last year, despite being advertised as "again in the saddle," Cody could barely mount a horse. His natural optimism often clashed with the realities of age, day-to-day disappointments, and declining health. In September, he faltered. "Show business is bad and no showman can understand why," he wrote. "I calculate because I am out of luck. I wonder if my luck will ever change…" And yet his optimism did not desert him. In October, he wrote, "It's wounderful *(sic)* how I can come up smiling every day. And with all my financial trouble. I could give up to if I would allow myself." Less than a month before the close of the season, he seemed even more resilient. "I am allways *(sic)* rushed. The weather is fine & business fair. My health is better than it's been for years. I am gaining strength and weight daily."

William Frederick Cody last performed as Buffalo Bill in Portsmouth, Virginia, on November 11, 1916. Afterwards he traveled to Denver for a court date to settle his longstanding dispute with Tammen and Bonfils. He spent a few days at the home of his sister May Cody Decker in Denver and then traveled on to his Wyoming ranch. Within weeks he was back again in Denver to seek medical care from his physician Dr. J. H. East.

In January, a few days into the new year, Cody suffered a crisis in Glenwood Springs, Colorado, where he had gone for therapeutic treatment in the mineral baths. Press reports indicated that it was a nervous breakdown. In fact, Cody was plagued with a number of ailments, including heart problems and kidney failure. He went to the home of his sister May, where, in a matter of days, the full extent of his condition became evident. On January 8, Cody's physician publicly announced that there was "practically no hope for his recovery."

In a small upstairs bedroom overlooking Lafayette Street in Denver, Cody's final hours were calm and somber. There were no more plans, no grand ideas. Surrounded by family, the Great Scout waited quietly. Newspapers around the country kept vigil as the world outside waited anxiously for any word of improvement. None came. Heads of state from around the globe sent greetings and good wishes. Few visitors were allowed. Family acquaintance Chauncey Thomas, also a writer for *Outdoor Life,* was granted access and later recalled Cody's final hours:

> It was the end, and we all knew it. We talked at random, as all do, perhaps, at such times…The Grand Old American talked of this and of that, now of the early days on the Great Plains, now of the boyhood of the present King of England—and in the room was a personal message from that King, and another from the President of the United States, and from others of equal rank throughout the world.

From his bed, Cody was baptized into the Roman Catholic Church. He died on January 10, 1917, a little more than a month from his seventy-first birthday. Thousands gathered in the days that followed to pay tribute. The Colorado legislature ordered that his body lie in state in the capitol rotunda. He was later buried on Lookout Mountain near Denver.

Buffalo Bill Cody was among the most celebrated figures of his time. His celebrity was founded on deeds both actual and greatly fictionalized. By the end of his life, Cody's persona had become deeply embedded in the American collective consciousness. His face was familiar to presidents and popes, kings and queens. Around the world, both children and adults embraced the Great Scout as the physical embodiment of American virtue. Cody was indeed a man suited to his times. He was a central player in the creation and perpetuation of an American Western myth—a fable concerned with the taming of nature's wilderness and the inevitable march of "progress." The accounts of his life, both real and dramatized, became intertwined and ultimately inseparable. In his *Buffalo Bill's America,* historian Louis S. Warren sums up the dual nature of Cody's persona:

> Hailing from a West that was practically a borderland between real and fake, full of charlatans posing as heroes and of everyday people invited to assume heroic poses, Cody learned the allure of that tense space between authentic and copy, regeneration and degeneration. Americans imbued that space with a story about the ascent of civilization, and that narrative was so pervasive that settlers easily adopted it as their own…



One of the last photographs taken of Cody (left), in Glenwood Springs, Colorado, January 1917. Courtesy of the Buffalo Bill Historical Center.

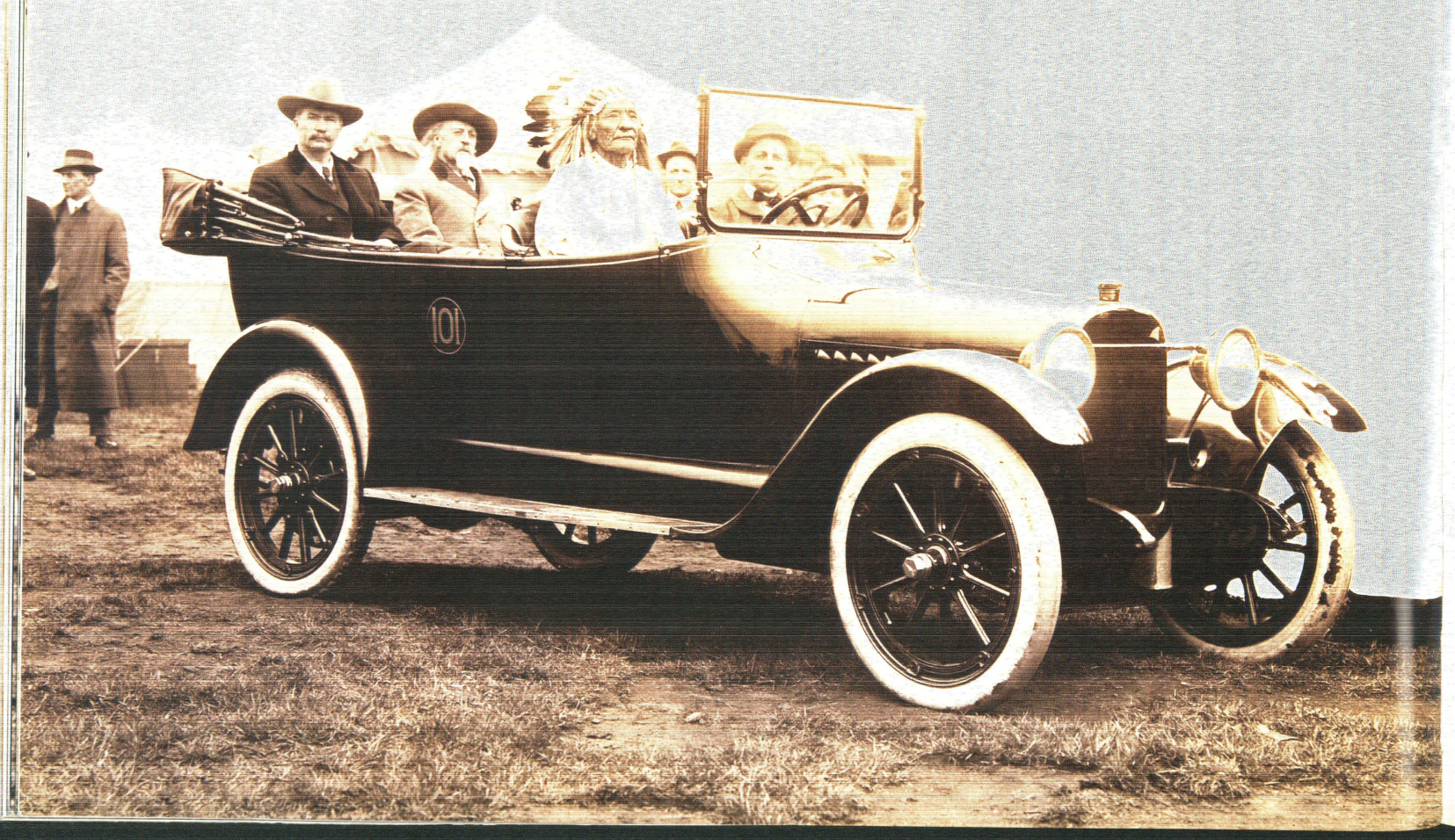
Well before the advent of motion pictures and mass media production, Cody's Wild West was dramatically influencing how the American Self was seen and understood by Others around the globe.

The performances of Buffalo Bill's Wild West and those of the shows that followed can be seen as celebrations of American initiative, perseverance and sacrifice—a commemoration of a wild, wooly and sometimes glorious past. They can also be seen as denouements to Manifest Destiny—a rationalization and justification of western expansion, Indian removal and annihilation.

The Wild West show acts "Attack on the Settler's Cabin" and "Custer's Last Stand" became metaphors for the Western experience. Cody's performances became visual expressions of American values. These values were framed and celebrated in arenas and parade grounds around the nation and beyond. Well before the advent of motion pictures and mass media production, Cody's Wild West was dramatically influencing how the American Self was seen and understood by Others around the globe.

In a biography of her brother, Helen Cody Wetmore wrote, "in his own person he condenses a period of national history.... He is the vanishing-point between the rugged wilderness of the past in Western life and the vast achievement in the present." To many, Buffalo Bill Cody *was* the American West. The story he represented was easily understood, told through a language of symbols and structured movement, through ritual in a temple of canvas and dirt. It was a story that remains deeply embedded in the collective understanding of Americans.

Riding into history in a 101 Ranch car. Joe C. Miller, W. F. Cody and Iron Tail (one of the models for the Indian head nickel), 1916. Gilcrease 4306.6668.



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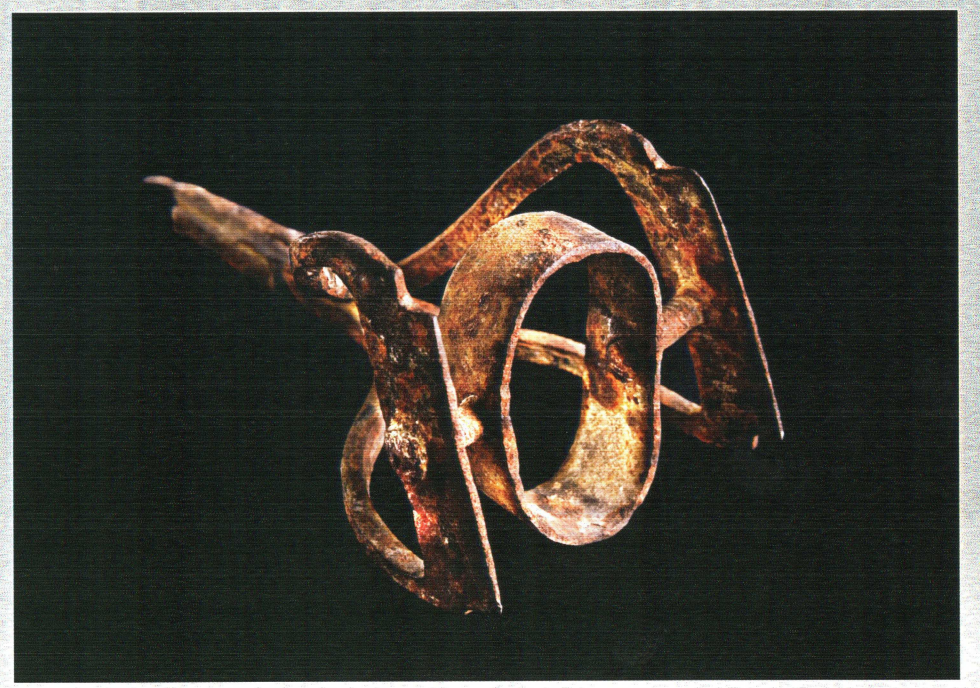
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