

## History

# Buffalo Bill entertains Willimantic

Probably one of the most well known figures in American history — and someone who is instantly recognizable — is Buffalo Bill, or William Cody (1846-1917). It's not widely known that Cody appeared in two theatrical shows in Willimantic, in 1878 and in 1883.



Tom  
Beardsley

Cody was born in Iowa, and soon afterwards his family moved to the Nebraska Territory. In his youth, Cody herded cattle, was a fur trapper, gold miner and worked as a driver on wagon trains crossing the Great Plains. He joined the Pony express in 1860, and after the Civil War, he scouted for the Army and worked for Gen. William Tecumseh Sherman.

Cody acquired the name, "Buffalo Bill" while under contract to provide buffalo meat for the workers of the Kansas Pacific Railroad. From 1868 until 1872, Cody was chief of scouts for the Fifth Cavalry.

Fame came to Cody when Ned Buntline published the first of more than 500 dime novels featuring Cody's adventures, entitled "Buffalo Bill, the King of the Border Men." In 1872, Cody formed a traveling theatrical group called the "Buffalo Bill Combination," with Wild Bill Hickock and Texas Jack Omohundro, and toured the United States for 11 seasons. This was Cody's less-known career, before he embarked upon his more spectacular Wild West shows in 1883.

There was great excitement in Willimantic when the local newspaper, the Enterprise, announced that Cody and his theatrical group would be appearing at the Franklin Hall theater on Nov. 8, 1878, for one night only. The paper announced that "the play is out of the usual line, and with the Indians will attract a crowd. Such a large company of performers seldom appear in a town the size of Willimantic." This was true. Willimantic benefited by a visit from Cody's



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famous troupe thanks to its important position on the New England railroad network.

The Franklin Hall theater was a small venue that could squeeze in around 400 people. There were few seats, and these were located on wheeled settees that were moved for dances. The seat tickets quickly sold out, even at the inflated price of 75 cents each — but this was Buffalo Bill's "new refined melodrama," called "Lost and Won." It was performed by 22 artists that included the White Boy Chief of the Pawnees, and a group of Nez Pierce Indians who performed war dances in native costumes, and gave expert demonstrations of archery. This was followed up by "fancy rifle shooting" by Buffalo Bill himself.

Cody's theatrical show was preceded by a street parade along Willimantic's Main Street, featuring the Indians in full costume, led by a military band. These parades usually ensured that the evening shows were a sell out.

The Willimantic Enterprise, however, was not enthused by Cody's performance. "Buffalo Bill had a full house on Friday evening, the play and the acting were ordinary, but everybody wanted to see Buffalo Bill and the Indians, and were willing to pay for it."

*Continued Next Week — read about Cody's February, 1883 visit to Willimantic.*



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