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History

Cody performs to a sell-out crowd

Part Two

Willimantic's grand new theater, the Loomer Opera House, opened in 1879 and became an important venue for touring theatrical and vaudeville troupes. Probably one of the most famous groups to perform at the Loomer, which stood on the corner of Main and North until 1940, was the Buffalo Bill Combination.

William F. Cody had been appearing in traveling theatrical shows, with Indians and sharpshooters since 1872. Cody returned to Willimantic on Thursday, Feb. 8, 1883. He had packed out the city's Franklin Hall theater back in 1878, and was keen to perform in the borough's showcase 1,200-seat theater, considered to be the finest between Hartford and Providence. "Buffalo Bill's Pledge"



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was lauded as the best play Cody had ever produced. It was written after the publication of Helen Hunt Jackson's famous 1881 book, "A Century of Dishonor," which exposed the U.S. Government's disgraceful treatment of Indians, so the 1883 Loomer performance didn't feature the deaths of "thousands of Indians in every scene."

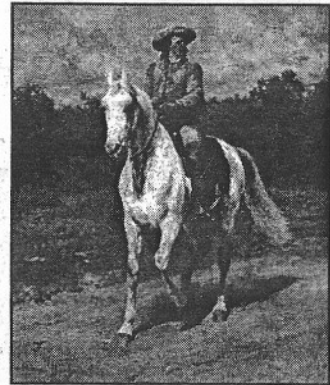
The new play included a comedic actor, Jule Keen, as a Dutchman with a performing donkey. The Indians were "gen-

uine" and the scenery was considered to be top class. But Cody was the main attraction and he was loudly applauded in each scene he appeared, particularly when giving demonstrations of crack rifle shooting. There were 25 actors in the troupe, plus six Winnebago Indian chiefs. The street parade around Willimantic which preceded the performance was considered by all to be sensational, particularly the fine costumes of the Sioux Indians. Needless to say the performance was a sell out. This was the first time the Loomer had sold out during its 1882-83 season,

The 1882-83 theatrical season was Cody's last. On May 17, 1883, Buffalo Bill introduced his spectacular open air Wild West Show. This extravaganza

of burning wagons, rodeos and Indian attacks became particularly popular in the East and across New England, where urban populations, such as Willimantic, consisted of mainly recent immigrants who had little conception of life in the "Wild West." Buffalo Bill signed up Annie Oakley, "Little Sure Shot" in 1884, and in 1885, Chief Sitting Bull became a popular attraction. In 1887, Cody's famed Wild West show was performed in England as part of Queen Victoria's jubilee. Buffalo Bill's show was one of the most popular attractions to visitors to the Chicago World's Fair in 1893.

In 1896 he founded the town of Cody, Wyo. The fact that such a famous performer as Cody, appeared in Willimantic in 1878 and 1883, bears testa-



Buffalo Bill Cody performed to a sell-out crowd on Feb. 8, 1883, at the Loomer Opera House in Willimantic. It was the first time the Loomer had sold out during its 1882-83 season.

ment to the importance of the expanding textile city in the late 19th century.

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