

## THE COWBOY LEGEND: OWEN WISTER'S VIRGINIAN AND THE CANADIAN-AMERICAN FRONTIER by John Jennings

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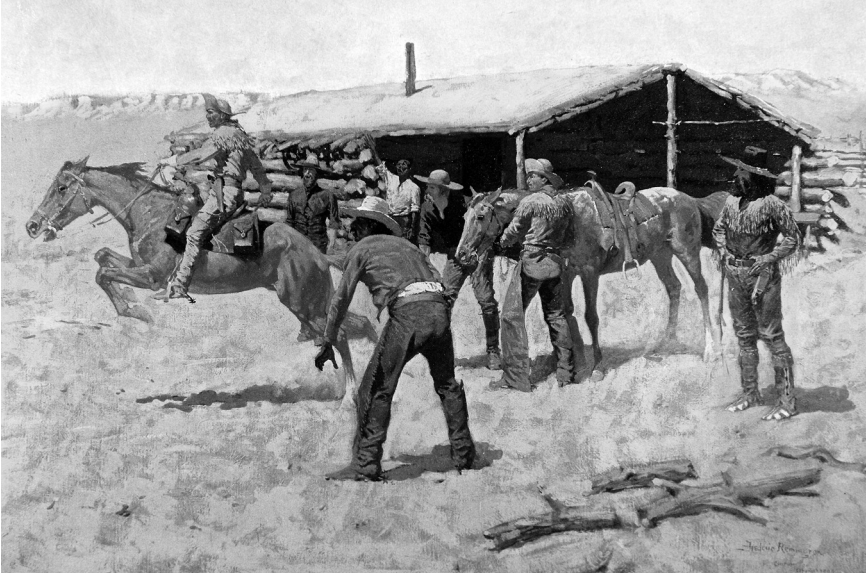
### 3: Bill Cody (1876–78)

When Johnson first rode the Great Plains, large herds of buffalo still roamed the West. From a high hill, he once saw a herd that he estimated to be over a hundred thousand head. On several occasions, he forded a river behind a herd and found the trail deep in mud for a quarter of a mile from the water dripping off many thousands of buffalo. These buffalo still numbered in the millions at mid-century. But the great herds were to become extinct in an alarmingly short time – by 1879 in Canada and shortly after on the American plains.

On the Canadian side, most of the buffalo were killed by Native and Métis hunters, mostly for the fur trade, Canada's premier industry. But, on the American plains, professional buffalo hunters like Bill Cody accounted for much of the slaughter.

Johnson, when reminiscing about Cody and Hickok, considered Cody far more worthy of a place in history than Hickok; however, in later years, he damned Cody with faint praise. He said that Cody was not a frontiersman – not in the same class as Kit Carson or Portuguese Phillips – but he said that Cody had a fine seat in the saddle, was strikingly handsome, a crack shot, an excellent showman, and a virtuoso liar. Johnson, just after the Custer debacle, happened to be in the right place to witness a Cody incident that was to become central to the Cody mystique and to feature prominently in his Wild West show.

Johnson was perhaps not being quite fair to Cody. Certainly, Cody became a master at embellishing his image, but he was no fraud. He did not initiate the embellishments, though he later contributed to the Cody legend with great enthusiasm. Clearly, Johnson shared the same reservations



Frederic Remington, *Coming and Going of the Pony Express* (1900). The company of Russell, Majors and Waddell established the Pony Express Service in 1860. Remington has depicted one of the 190 waystations on the route.

toward him as the other Deadwood freighters and stage drivers, who referred to Cody as “See Me Bill” because he was always seeking notoriety.<sup>1</sup> Johnson said that the real frontiersmen that he admired had a strict code of truth. Exhibition and boastfulness, unless tongue-in-cheek, were not part of that code. Cody was clearly suspect, as was Hickok, with his silk shirts and carefully coiffed and perfumed hair.

Stripped of the dime novel absurdities, Cody was still an extraordinary man. Born in Iowa in 1846 to a father who came from Canada, he was a product of “Bleeding Kansas” in the 1850s and of the restless flow of Americans to the plains. He grew up, much as Johnson, drifting from one excitement to another. To a reader a century later, shielded from most dangers and largely looked after by the state, his life seems implausible. But it was actually rather typical of those on the “cutting edge” of the frontier. What made Bill Cody special is that, through a combination of luck, ability, and self-promotion, he became the best at what he did and was not diffident about letting people know. His self-promotion started early and – because many of his supposed exploits were considered quite possible by the standards of the day – he was believed not only by American audiences, but by his first important biographer, Don Russell. Russell claimed that Cody, at

the age of fourteen, was a Pony Express rider, during the very brief period of that institution's existence in 1860 and 1861, and he was credited with one of the longest rides ever performed by the Pony Express.<sup>2</sup>

He was already, he claimed, an Indian fighter when he was only fifteen. Russell stated that Cody was part of a group led by Bill Hickok that attacked a Sioux village on Clear Creek in northern Wyoming in order to retrieve stolen horses in 1861. Later, the town of Buffalo, which held such a prominent place in Wister's novel, would be built near this spot.

It seems, however, that Cody began to embroider his reputation at an early stage. Both of the above claims are convincingly debunked by Cody's recent biographer, Louis Warren. Warren states that Cody's claim to have ridden for the Pony Express was pure fiction. Cody claimed that he rode for the Express in 1859 – but it did not yet exist then. None of the stations he listed was the right one. Three eyewitnesses, who said that they saw him ride, made their statements long after the event. Moreover, the third one, Alexander Major, one of the three owners of the Pony Express firm, dictated the account long after in a ghost-written biography by the dime novelist Prentiss Ingraham, which was paid for by Cody! Cody's sister Julia remembered that Cody was at home and going to school during this period.<sup>3</sup> The second claim – the raid on the Indian village at Powder River with Bill Hickok – has also been debunked by Warren, who has found that Hickok was some distance away in Nebraska in 1861.<sup>4</sup>

Cody's reputation began to build shortly after the Civil War when he became a scout for the army in its quest to subdue the Plains Indians. By 1868 he was chief of scouts for the Fifth Cavalry and was recognized in army circles for his superior scouting abilities and for his outstanding courage, for which he was awarded the Congressional Medal of Honor.<sup>5</sup> He became generally regarded as the western army's foremost scout.

At the same time, his reputation became established in another line of work – the wanton destruction of the once-vast herds of buffalo. No name is more clearly associated with this extermination – although Cody was far from the only buffalo hunter in the West, he was one of the most successful. Cody fluctuated between scouting and providing buffalo meat for the Kansas Pacific, one of the railways that were sprinting across the continent now that the Civil War and the South's freeze on westward railway building had ended. Cody was a commercial buffalo hunter from the fall of 1867 through 1868. Buffalo hides in this period were turned into robes and coats; then, in the early 1870s, a new method of tanning led to a great demand for buffalo leather for industrial belts, especially in Europe.

Buffalo were pathetically easy to kill. All a buffalo hunter had to do was position himself downwind from the herd and then try to drop the lead cow through the heart, so that she would fall on the spot and not disturb the herd. Then the rest of the herd would usually just mill around her. A good hunter could kill a large number from one spot with a high-powered rifle. Cody calculated that in eighteen months as a market buffalo hunter, he killed 4,280 buffalo. His favourite buffalo gun was a 50-calibre Springfield needle gun, which had great accuracy and impressive killing power.<sup>6</sup>

In the final period of the buffalo extermination in the 1870s, roughly 5,000 white hunters were involved. After the invention, in 1871, of a method of turning buffalo hides into industrial drive belts and military equipment, the buffalo trade became extremely lucrative. Russell Barsh claims that the annual white commercial buffalo harvest was twice that of the Native hunt, which totalled about a million buffalo per year, but this statistic is disputed by Louis Warren.<sup>7</sup>

According to Warren, despite the great publicity surrounding the white buffalo hunters of the period, the majority of buffalo hunters were Native. In 1870, for instance, the vast majority of the 200,000 robes brought to American trading posts on the Missouri River were brought there by Native hunters, intent mainly on trading for guns.<sup>8</sup> Whichever claim is closer to the truth, the sad fact is that the southern herds were gone by 1878 and the northern ones by 1883. On the Canadian prairies, the buffalo were effectively exterminated by 1879.<sup>9</sup>

Russell writes of a much-publicized contest with a well-known buffalo hunter, William Comstock, to see who could slaughter the most beasts in the shortest time. Cody was proclaimed champion buffalo hunter of the plains, due in part to the accuracy and penetrating power of his .50-calibre breech-loading Springfield, affectionately christened "Lucretia Borgia" because of its deadliness.<sup>10</sup> But Warren claims that the contest never took place, at least not as Cody described it. At the time of the alleged match, Comstock, an army scout, was wanted for murder and on the run.<sup>11</sup>

In 1869 the first transcontinental railway, the Union Pacific, was completed. Immediately there was a rush of tourists to the West, and Cody's fame was substantial enough that he was in great demand as a guide for the very rich, often titled, gentlemen who wished to make a hunting excursion to the Great Plains. These shooting parties were executed with great style, and who better to lend drama to the occasion than Bill Cody, with his finely honed ability to spin a yarn and turn the uneventful into an adventure.

These hunting excursions did no harm to Cody's reputation. One of his more famous clients, the Earl of Dunraven, was a correspondent for the

*Daily Telegraph*, so Cody was already well-known in England when he later appeared there with his Wild West show. A hunting expedition mounted in 1871 by General Sheridan, with Cody as guide, included several prominent eastern journalists, including August Belmont and James Gordon Bennett Jr. of the fashionable *New York Herald*, Leonard Jerome, known as the “King of Wall Street” and a large stockholder in the *New York Times*, Leonard’s brother Lawrence Jerome, and Charles L. Wilson of the *Chicago Evening Herald*.<sup>12</sup> Bennett, that same year, had sent Henry Morton Stanley to Africa in search of the presumed Doctor Livingstone. The theme of Bennett’s writing, which focused on the actions of both Livingstone and Cody, was the bringing of light to dark, savage places. Later, the unifying central theme of the Wild West show would be the taming of the Indian frontier by the white forces of progress.<sup>13</sup> Sheridan’s party included an escort of one hundred cavalry and sixteen wagons of provisions.

Cody’s reputation did not suffer from the description of him that found its way to eastern papers: “Tall and somewhat slight in figure, though possessed of great strength and iron endurance; straight and erect as an arrow and with strikingly handsome features.” Cody chose his costume carefully, to accent his white horse – a soft-fringed buckskin suit, crimson shirt, and his trademark wide hat. This party left in its wake six hundred buffalo, two hundred elk, and sundry other luckless animals, slaughtered for the pure sport of it.<sup>14</sup> Undoubtedly, weary from the hunt, the evening campfire conversation would turn, with unconscious irony, to the difficulty of convincing the Indians to abandon the chase and embrace the “advanced” civilization of white people.

Cody’s most famous client in this period was the Grand Duke Alexis, the son of Tsar Alexander of Russia. Once again, General Sheridan planned this excursion, which was to include a hundred or so somewhat pliant Sioux, hired to stage a buffalo hunt and war dance. It seems that the army had its own modest part in developing the formula that Cody was later to use so effectively in the Wild West show. (Cody carefully avoided the word “show,” a word that implies something artificial. To persuade audiences that this was the real thing, Cody used the title “Buffalo Bill’s Wild West,” later adding “Congress of Rough Riders of the World.”)

The Grand Duke’s cavalcade, numbering roughly five hundred, set off in January 1872 in search of anything that moved. Pictures of Alexis convey a soft, indulgent impression, and it seems that he was not terribly adept with firearms; Cody had his work cut out in ensuring that the Grand Duke would pot a buffalo before returning home. But, finally, after a very large expenditure of ammunition, Alexis did manage to connect with a luckless beast,



Studio portrait of George Armstrong Custer (left) and Grand Duke Alexis, son of the Czar of Russia. Library of Congress, LC-USZ62-42305.



and Cody, greatly relieved, was able to order the uncorking of quantities of champagne.<sup>15</sup>

However, Cody was not the main attraction for the Grand Duke's hunt. That honour went to George Armstrong Custer and the Sioux chief, Spotted Tail. Throughout the hunt, Cody was clearly in Custer's shadow; he was to find the buffalo and Alexis would give chase. Later, on the train, Alexis continued the hunt, firing away with great jollity through the train windows and watching the wounded animals limp off to die. During the evening entertainment, the Sioux dance, Custer flirted shamelessly with Chief Spotted Tail's sixteen-year-old daughter.

In 1872, Cody was still a bit player; his dime-novel notoriety had not yet fully kicked in. He was not, for instance, in the official photographs. Later, after Custer's death, Cody had to splice his photograph next to those

of Custer and the Grand Duke to show the nation what good friends they had been. In fact, Cody and Custer didn't particularly like each other; they were in each other's light.<sup>16</sup>

Alexis was escorted across the plains in as much pomp as the army could muster, in an open four-horse carriage driven by Bill Reid, an overland stagecoach driver and good friend of Cody for whom the Grand Duke expressed much admiration. Previously, Cody, who was more than a little casual about family matters, had left his wife and daughter with the Reids for a year or more when the Fifth Cavalry was stationed at Fort McPherson, where Reid ran the trading post.<sup>17</sup> Bill Reid was a good friend of Johnson's, and it was perhaps through this connection that Johnson met Cody and briefly joined forces with him. As mentioned earlier, Bill Reid's son, Jack, was a close friend of both Johnson and my father. It was Jack who introduced Johnson to my parents.

It was during the year of the Grand Duke's hunt that Cody was invited to New York by some of his hunting clients. There, Cody sought out someone he had met briefly in 1869 in the West, on his return from the battle of Summit Springs in Colorado – a fascinating fraud who went by the name of Ned Buntline.<sup>18</sup> It was Buntline (Edward Zane Carroll Judson) who guaranteed Cody's fame, first through several hurriedly written dime novels and then as the driving force behind a stage production of Cody's exploits, as pictured in the dime novel. In 1869, Buntline produced the first of his four dime novels about Cody, *Buffalo Bill: The King of the Border Men*. This novel began Cody's reputation as a western hero, which, in turn, led to his appeal as a hunting guide. Buntline would be followed by Prentiss Ingraham, who cranked out 88 dime novels about Cody. All told, there were more than 550 dime novels written about Cody!<sup>19</sup>

In late 1872, Buntline produced a play in four hours, grabbed some men off the street and retooled them into ferocious Sioux and Pawnee chiefs, and, not least, convinced Cody that he could face an eastern audience. And so was born the first stage "Western."<sup>20</sup> As it turned out, Buntline almost unwittingly brought the dime novel to the stage and thus launched a formula that was to remain remarkably unchanged over more than a century of stage, movie, and television. The stage show was an instant success. As one critic said, "Everything is so bad it is almost good."<sup>21</sup> With the West as the setting, it could not lose. Cody began his climb to international celebrity. At first, the show featured Wild Bill Hickok, but his time with the show was brief because he "had a voice like a girl" and annoyed the other actors by shooting too close to their legs, leaving nasty powder burns.<sup>22</sup> After his stint at acting, Hickok drifted to Cheyenne where he spent most of his time



gambling. He married a widow who owned a circus, toured briefly with the circus, and then left his new wife for Deadwood. There, as we have seen, he had the bad luck to join a card game at the Number Ten Saloon in which he was not able to take his usual seat with his back to the wall. He exited this world, August 2, 1876, at the hands of a cowardly murderer.

\* \* \* \* \*

Meanwhile, Cody was about to become involved in an incident that would become the central attraction of the Wild West show. As it happened, Johnson was there at just the right moment to witness the event. Understandably, the army of the west was horrified by Custer's annihilation by the Sioux and Cheyenne at the Little Big Horn in the summer of 1876. Punitive expeditions were mounted by the army, and Cody was quickly called back to service with the Fifth Cavalry. Initially the Fifth Cavalry, under General Wesley Merritt, was to join forces with General Crook in the area of the Custer fight, but Merritt was informed by the Indian agent at the Red Cloud Agency that several thousand Cheyennes were planning to leave their reservation near Fort Robinson in northwestern Nebraska in an attempt to join forces with Crazy Horse's Sioux. The agent stressed the urgency of the situation, claiming that the Indians had become arrogant and threatening on hearing of Custer's demise. So Merritt quickly changed plans, deciding instead to try to contain these Cheyennes if they attempted to leave their reservation.

After a lightning march of eighty-five miles in thirty-one hours while subsisting on hardtack,<sup>23</sup> seven troops of the Fifth Cavalry – 500 men in all – did manage, early in the morning of July 17, 1876, to intercept part of Little Wolf's band of Northern Cheyenne on Hat Creek (otherwise known as Warbonnet Creek – Johnson called it Indian Creek). The conflict took place where the Indian trail to the west crossed the creek, on the border between Wyoming and Nebraska, 150 miles northwest of the Red Cloud Agency. The army had successfully remained hidden from the Cheyennes, who knew nothing of the army's presence until they saw two army couriers in advance of the supply wagon train galloping toward the hidden soldiers. At once, a group of Cheyennes began to move toward the couriers, and Cody, being in an opportune position, suggested that they be intercepted.<sup>24</sup> Cody was in the vanguard of the troop and ready for action in his scouting costume of black velvet, slashed with scarlet and trimmed with silver buttons. He was accompanied, according to Warren, by a number of scouts serving under him, many of them probably Shawnee.<sup>25</sup>



Cody's stage outfit of black velvet and silver trim, which he wore when he killed and scalped Yellow Hair. Buffalo Bill Center of the West, Cody, Wyoming.

At this point, the accounts of what happened next seem to vary according to the imagination of the teller. An incident such as this is both fascinating and frustrating for the historian, since rarely do eyewitness accounts agree. And it is little short of magic how many extra “eyewitnesses” can materialize as an incident gains momentum and notoriety. First, it is interesting to trace the evolution of Cody’s own account of what became known as the Yellow Hand incident. (The Cheyenne man’s real name was Yellow Hair, or Hay-o-wei, because of the blond scalp that he carried about with him.) This Yellow Hair is not to be confused with the illegitimate son that General Custer supposedly had with Monahsetah, his Cheyenne captive from the Battle of the Washita in 1868.<sup>26</sup> Cody’s first description is contained in a letter to his wife, written the day following the fight:

We have had a fight. I killed Yellow Hand a Cheyenne Chief in a single-handed fight. ... Sent the war bonnet, shield, bridal [*sic*], whip, arms and his scalp to Kerngold [who had a clothing store in Rochester] to put up in his window. I will write Kerngold to bring it [the scalp] up to the house so you can show it to the neighbors.<sup>27</sup>

Cody's killing of Yellow Hair was a very minor incident in the history of frontier warfare, but it took on an elevated status because it was the first retaliation for Custer's death. As well, Cody's showmanship certainly caught the public's imagination.

Three years later, in 1879, and obviously warming to the subject, Cody gave the following description of the fight in his autobiography:

I finally suggested that the best plan was to wait until the couriers came closer to the command, and then, just as the Indians were about to charge, to let me take the scouts and cut them off from the main body of the Cheyennes. ... I rushed back to my command, jumped on my horse, picked out fifteen men, and returned with them to the point of observation. ... We instantly dashed over the bluffs, and advanced on a gallop towards the Indians. A running fight lasted several minutes, during which we drove the enemy some little distance and killed three of their number. The rest of them rode off toward the main body. ... We were about half a mile from General Merritt, and the Indians whom we were chasing suddenly turned upon us, and another lively skirmish took place. One of the Indians, who was handsomely decorated with all the ornaments usually worn by a war chief when engaged in a fight, sang out to me in his own tongue: "I know you, Pa-he-haska; if you want to fight, come ahead and fight me."

The chief was riding his horse back and forth in front of his men, as if to banter me, and I concluded to accept the challenge. I galloped toward him for fifty yards and he advanced toward me about the same distance, both of us riding at full speed, and then, when we were only about thirty yards apart, I raised my rifle and fired; his horse fell to the ground, having been killed by my bullet.

Almost at the same instant my own horse went down, he having stepped in a hole. The fall did not hurt me much, and I instantly sprang to my feet ... we were now both on foot, and not more



Charles M. Russell, *First Scalp for Custer*. The fanciful depictions of Cody's killing and scalping of Yellow Hair added greatly to Cody's fame.

than twenty paces apart. We fired at each other simultaneously. My usual luck did not desert me on this occasion, for his bullet missed me, while mine struck him in the breast. He reeled and fell, but before he had fairly touched the ground I was upon him, knife in hand, and had driven the keen-edged weapon to its hilt in his heart. Jerking his war-bonnet off, I scientifically scalped him in about five seconds. ... As the soldiers came up I swung the Indian chieftain's top-knot and bonnet in the air, and shouted: "The first scalp for Custer."<sup>28</sup>

Just for a start, there are two problems with this account. The first, and most glaring, is that Cody spoke no Native language. Therefore, he would have had no idea what Yellow Hair said, if, indeed, he did say anything. Also, not being an avid reader of dime novels, Yellow Hair would have no idea who Cody was. It is clear that Cody's account in his autobiography was written to square with the play that Cody had commissioned in the fall of 1876, *The Red Hand*, or *First Scalp for Custer*.<sup>29</sup>

1876 was not a good year for the western army: first Crook's humiliation at the Rosebud and then the Little Big Horn. Americans badly needed a boost, especially as they were enduring a period of economic depression and political scandal. Cody gave them what they badly needed. The skirmish on

the Warbonnet was pretty small stuff, with only one killed and possibly two others. But Cody's "first scalp" caught the popular imagination, and Cody was shrewd enough to capitalize on the incident. Soon, the duel with Yellow Hair became a central feature of the Wild West show, re-enacted with a high degree of dramatic licence. The short-range gun duel of Cody's first account now became a hand-to-hand struggle to the death with Cody finally holding aloft the reeking scalp and uttering the now immortal words. Poor Yellow Hair had the ignominy of being dispatched nightly by a white guy in a stage outfit. And to give authenticity to the scalping finale, Yellow Hair's actual scalp was on display for paying customers. Audiences loved it and, though undoubtedly aware that the facts were embellished somewhat, probably believed in the essential truth of the drama.

The message that audiences were to take away from this climax of Cody's Wild West extravaganza was the conquest of savage America. In Cody's version, however, the Indians were the aggressors; the whites were only reacting to violent Indian savagery. Many of the Native actors, who nightly worked themselves into a state of frenzy, had been, like Sitting Bull, the real thing. They must have had some very mixed feelings when they were instructed to imitate false depictions of themselves.<sup>30</sup>

It will come as no surprise that Johnson's account differs somewhat from Cody's. It is not clear in what capacity he happened to be at Warbonnet Creek, but he was probably a minor scout under Cody. When the Cheyennes appeared on that early morning, Johnson must have been one of the fifteen men mentioned in Cody's autobiography who accompanied him in charging the Cheyennes as they tried to intercept the couriers. Johnson said that when the Indians saw Cody and his men, Yellow Hair, son of old Chief Cut Nose, ran out in front of the other Cheyennes and executed a sort of war dance, thumping his chest and making signs that he wanted to fight. The distance between Cody and Yellow Hair was about three hundred yards. Cody dismounted and, with his horse standing broadside to the Indian, laid his rifle across the saddle and fired a high drop shot. Yellow Hair fell dead – shot through the chest. Johnson said it was a fluke shot; Cody's marksmanship was fantastic, but with the rifle and the ammunition available then, and at that distance, no man could shoot that accurately. It had to be a fluke. The Indians fled back to their main party, which made no further attempt to join Sitting Bull. Cody disgusted Johnson when he so falsified facts in his autobiography and in the Wild West show; he forever lost Johnson's respect. Johnson never could decide whether Cody really did believe that he had uttered the words, "The first scalp for Custer."

In all this, one thing is clear. Cody was an inveterate liar. He had fabricated his Pony Express career, his buffalo-killing contest with Comstock, his expedition with General Sherman to negotiate a treaty with the Comanche and Kiowa, and now the essential details of the Yellow Hair incident.<sup>31</sup>

However, can we believe Johnson's account? It varies in several important details from several accounts of other eyewitnesses. First, we can safely conclude, as Johnson said, that Cody was a virtuoso liar. The various accounts of the incident make it clear that there was no duel at close quarters. But, after that, no two accounts agree completely, so we will probably never be satisfied that we know exactly what happened that morning.

The two accounts thought to be most reliable are those of Charles King, then a lieutenant, and trooper Chris Madsen, a signalman stationed on a butte some distance away, who both witnessed the event from a distance and sharply disagreed on some points. Madsen later prepared a commentary listing twenty-eight points of disagreement with King's account.<sup>32</sup> So what are we to believe? None of the accounts so far, except Cody's, came from someone at close quarters. What credence can we give to Johnson's account, since he claims to have been with Cody at the time?

First, the recorded testimony is very vague concerning who was with Cody during the encounter. Cody said there were fifteen individuals, but named none of them. Other reliable accounts have said there were only seven or eight, but only one scout, Jonathan White, has been clearly identified.<sup>33</sup> So it is entirely possible that Johnson, though not named in any of the existing accounts, was with Cody at the time. It is unlikely that Cody was lying when he claimed that fifteen others accompanied him; a smaller number would have made his feat seem all the braver. The two witnesses, King and Madsen, probably could not see all that was happening in hilly terrain and from some distance, one with field glasses and the other with a telescope, both of which limited the field of vision.

Does Johnson's account come close enough to those of King and Madsen to be believed? Unfortunately, all three accounts are annoyingly vague, but in broad outline they are not that far apart. All three speak of a short preliminary skirmish. At this point, Madsen remembered Cody and Yellow Hair firing simultaneously, Yellow Hair's horse going down, and, almost at the same moment, Cody's horse stumbling in a hole and unseating him. Native testimony backs up this point.<sup>34</sup> Johnson did not mention this part of the action, but it would fit with his memory of events that there was a preliminary skirmish, after which Cody found himself on foot and in a position, as Johnson claimed, to make a deliberate long-range drop shot across his saddle at his now-stationary foe. King said only that at this moment



Cody “connected with a well placed shot.”<sup>35</sup> But Madsen claimed that Cody knelt, took deliberate aim, and killed Yellow Hair with a shot through the head, at the same moment that Yellow Hair fired at him.<sup>36</sup> Do these details discredit Johnson’s version? Perhaps not. Madsen gave his testimony more than sixty years after the incident.<sup>37</sup> Memories do become a bit selective and vague over half a century. Johnson, too, when recounting this incident to his daughter-in-law, was remembering an event long past. But a detail such as shooting over a horse’s saddle is one that is likely to stick in one’s mind. And it is entirely logical that this is how it happened; Cody’s horse undoubtedly was accustomed to Cody making similar shots during a buffalo hunt and so would have stood still. Also, since Yellow Hair, though apparently wounded, was still in a position to fire at Cody, it made sense for Cody to use a horse as a shield so that he could make a deliberate shot. It would be interesting to know whether the weapon in question was, in fact, the famous Lucretia Borgia.

Johnson’s version should be given at least as much credence as those of Madsen and King, the only two that are generally given much weight. As already mentioned, Madsen gave his account over sixty years after the event. King, on the other hand, recorded his account soon after, in his book *Campaigning with Crook*. But King’s reputation for truth is in serious question. At the time of the Yellow Hair incident, King was moonlighting as a special correspondent for the *New York Herald*. Later he became a novelist, writing sixty-nine novels between 1885 and 1909. He has been accused of not letting the truth spoil a good story.<sup>38</sup> In this case, King was clearly trying to create a heroic battle for the Fifth Cavalry out of a no-account little skirmish.

This incident has been dissected, partly to satisfy the reader concerning Johnson’s credibility, but, more importantly, to make a general point. Very rarely does the historian of the West have the confidence that he or she has struck pure truth. Of course, this is true for all historical fields, but the American West is particularly tricky. Usually the more diligent the research is, the more uncertain the historian becomes, faced with ever-mounting conflicting evidence. It is almost as if many westerners, even at an early stage, were determined to make their country live up to the myth that was already being manufactured in the East. In the case of the Yellow Hair scrap, an ordinary account would not do. Cody concocted a hand-to-hand duel to spice up the episode and, with retelling, casualties began to mount. In fact, Yellow Hair may have been the sole casualty, as the *Cheyenne Daily Leader* had remarked, “It is a pity that only one ‘good Indian’ is the result of this campaign.” But as the incident took on national appeal, new “eyewitnesses” emerged to give their versions, some claiming as many as eleven extra “good

Indians”; several others claimed to have killed Yellow Hair and depicted Cody as jumping in only to liberate his scalp.<sup>39</sup> As Don Russell, an authority on this incident, has observed, no two versions agree. There are significant disagreements between the official army version and those of King and Madsen. Then there are the claims of five people who said that they killed Yellow Hair, and the eyewitness who swore that Cody killed Yellow Hair in an hour-long duel with knives within sight of Fort Robinson.<sup>40</sup>

The most bizarre account of the fight came in 1936 when an old-timer claimed that the enmity between Cody and Yellow Hair began on the stage in 1874 when Yellow Hair, a member of the cast, insulted some female members of the show, and Cody flattened him. At that moment, Yellow Hair swore vengeance!<sup>41</sup>

It also appears that numbers have been inflated shamelessly. Instead of the 800 Cheyennes attempting to escape their reservation that is recorded in some accounts, there may have been as few as 30. General Carr reported:

There were not over 30 Indians in sight at any time and we had over 400 men. There were a few sacks of flour destroyed, three Indians killed, 12 ponies captured and a few went back to the agency.<sup>42</sup>

There were only about 200 Cheyennes on that particular reservation, and General Merritt reported seeing only seven with Yellow Hair.<sup>43</sup>

And then there is the Native side. In 1930, Beaver Heart, a Northern Cheyenne man who had been at the event stated:

I have heard the story as related by him [Cody] regarding the fight, and the fact that Yellow Hair challenged him, this is not true. Buffalo Bill, whoever he was, could not talk Cheyenne, and Yellow Hair could not talk English or Sioux, and I do not know how these people could talk to each other. ... Furthermore, Yellow Hair was not killed by any one man as far as I could see, as the whole two troops of soldiers were firing at him. If Buffalo Bill was one of these soldiers he stayed with them until Yellow Hair was killed, and he didn't come out and engage Yellow Hair single-handed.<sup>44</sup>

The army was also most happy to inflate events. When Cody's 1879 autobiography appeared, General Carr wrote the preface and General Sheridan wrote an endorsement – on army letterhead – calling the book “scrupulously correct.” In return, Cody dedicated the book to Sheridan. Clearly, senior

army officers endorsed Cody's inflated depictions of frontier army life to make themselves and the army appear in a very favourable light.<sup>45</sup>

In 1906, Cody wrote General Carr of his plan to re-enact the battle of Summit Springs and asked for a testimonial of his actions at the battle. Cody added that he hoped that the general would be a guest of honour at the opening performance at Madison Square Garden in New York. As expected, Gen. Carr wrote the testimonial, putting Cody at the centre of the action and essentially following Cody's version of events.<sup>46</sup>

The arch-inflator of them all, George Armstrong Custer, made no mention of Cody in his own self-aggrandizing writing, and went out of his way to praise other scouts, especially William Comstock. Cody got around the fact that there was no mention of him – but a very effusive mention of Comstock – in Custer's *My Life on the Plains* by concocting the fictitious contest with Comstock for the boast of champion buffalo murderer.<sup>47</sup> Custer and Cody were clearly rivals for popular adulation and disliked each other. But, after Custer's dramatic death, Cody realized that Custer was now a national martyr of dramatic proportion. So he quickly manufactured a friendship and, for most of his life, traded on this supposed friendship as, night after night, he raised the reeking scalp of Yellow Hair and told the audiences that he was the first to avenge the killing of his great friend. It worked beyond his most calculated imaginings.

The verdict on Cody is inescapable; his version of events became increasingly fraudulent. And there is something a little sickening in his calculated preparation for the encounter with Yellow Hair. Sensing that there was good publicity in the offing, he had donned for the conflict his Wild West show's Mexican vaquero outfit of black and scarlet velvet, trimmed with silver buttons and lace.<sup>48</sup>

The verdict on Custer, too, is a little sickening. At the battle of Gettysburg, Custer, like Cody, wore a uniform of his own design – black velvet, with gaudy coils of gold lace. But there was no question of his courage. He rallied his Michigan troops against Jeb Stuart's attack and played a significant role in the Union victory and, thus, in the outcome of the war. Custer always believed that he possessed an inflated destiny and did all he could to help it along. When he attacked Sitting Bull at the Little Big Horn on June 25, he was all-too-conscious that the Democratic National Convention opened in Saint Louis on June 27. Although Samuel Tilden was the clearly favoured candidate, there was still time, after a brilliant defeat of the Sioux, for a last-minute "draft Custer" movement.<sup>49</sup>

But the blame for distorting events cannot rest merely with Cody. Though certainly an opportunist who was happy to falsify the facts, he

was reacting to an American propensity to create a western folk mythology that so distorted truth that it is sometimes very difficult for the historian to separate fact from legend. If Cody wanted to remain at the forefront of the popular imagination, which he clearly did, no ordinary stirring deeds would do. His embellishments to the Yellow Hair story, which so disgusted Johnson, were necessary to keep the attention of his audience, which demanded of its heroes absurd feats and, of its villains, impossible depths of depravity, in keeping with the popular belief that America was the “Biggest and the Bestest.” The seeming limitless gullibility of audiences and the reading public continually astounds historians looking at this period. It was as if they really did believe in the inflated history that Cody and others like him were manufacturing. And it was not just American audiences that could so easily suspend their disbelief. Later, when Cody took Europe by storm with his Wild West show, Europeans, too, proved to be remarkably gullible. If Cody was not to be relegated to obscurity, it was necessary to “improve” the facts.

In 1883, Cody’s stage show, which had achieved success through the seventies, was about to go to a much higher level. That year, Cody’s truly dreadful melodrama was happily terminated, and there emerged, instead, “Buffalo Bill’s Wild West,” which Cody refused to call a show, arguing that it was the recreation of the real thing. Buffalo Bill’s Wild West was to be a huge outdoor extravaganza, replete with cowboys, Indians, Mexican vaqueros, bucking horses, wild buffalo, the real Deadwood stagecoach, and much more. The beginning of the rodeo can be seen in “Cow-Boys’ Fun” – bucking horses, roping, steer riding and races. Cody’s exhibition was to become phenomenally successful in both America and Europe and would last until 1916 – a total of thirty-three years! The only setback that first year came with the wild buffalo riding. Cody insisted on riding Monarch, a buffalo bull that most of the cowboys refused to ride. Cody landed in hospital for two weeks, a period that some alleged was the only time that summer that he was sober.<sup>50</sup> Buffalo Bill’s Wild West first opened in Nebraska at the Omaha fairgrounds; it never looked back.

An instant star of the Wild West was Phoebe Ann Moses – Annie Oakley – who joined Cody’s troupe in 1885, the same year that Sitting Bull joined and Cody added a new finale – the scalping of Yellow Hand. Perhaps no other American woman in outdoor show business became more famous, even long before Rodgers and Hammerstein’s musical hit *Annie Get Your Gun*. She dazzled crowds with her combination of modesty and the unlady-like ability to do such things as shooting a cigarette from her husband’s mouth or a dime held between his fingers.<sup>51</sup> This was certainly an excellent



Poster for Cody's Wild West. Cody played shamelessly on his supposed friendship with Custer. The "Last Stand" was often the finale of the show.

formula for maintaining a very respectful husband! Her nickname "Little Sure Shot" came from one of her chief admirers, Sitting Bull, who was with Buffalo Bill's Wild West for only one season in 1885. Some have seen Sitting Bull as mercenary, interested more in money than in dignity, but Sitting Bull sent almost all the money he made that summer back to his people or gave it to bootblacks and street urchins who hovered around the show. He could not understand how such a rich country could let its children exist in such poverty.<sup>52</sup>

One of Cody's greatest inspirations in the creation of the Wild West was the hiring of a large number of recently defeated Sioux. He was among the very first to have "real Indians" playing themselves. Why the Sioux, in effect, joined the enemy to re-enact their own demise still remains, to some degree, a puzzlement. But there were good reasons. For a start, they could make good money and see the wider world. Perhaps the real answer is in the numbing hopelessness of the reservation. Many of them would do just about anything to escape that purgatory. Also, Cody was very careful to have them play the "good Indians." The bad ones were played by non-Indian extras, and the really evil element was always the Mormon polygamist with his retinue of abused wives.<sup>53</sup> Black Elk, a Sioux who had fought at the Little

Big Horn, aptly summed up possible reasons why some Sioux joined Buffalo Bill's Wild West: "I wanted to see the great water, the great world and the ways of the white man."<sup>54</sup>

In 1887, Buffalo Bill's Wild West achieved international stature when it was included as part of the American Exhibition at Queen Victoria's Golden Jubilee at Earl's Court, celebrating the Queen's fiftieth year on the throne. Cody arrived in London with a cast of 209, which included almost 100 Sioux, 200 horses, and eighteen buffalo.<sup>55</sup> The high point of that season for the Wild West was clearly the command performance for the Queen. It was so successful that a second command performance had to be arranged for all the crowned heads of Europe who gathered in London to honour Queen Victoria. By the time Cody and his troupe left England, it is perhaps fair to say that Cody had so thoroughly indoctrinated the British that their view of the American West, probably for generations, was essentially that of Buffalo Bill's Wild West. In an era when empire was celebrated and Darwin's ideas concerning the survival of the fittest were popular, the British certainly agreed with the Wild West's central theme: the virility of the Anglo-Saxon and the triumph of that breed over all others.<sup>56</sup>

According to one of the performers, the Queen was so carried away by the performance that she rose and saluted the American flag, the first time a British monarch had done such a thing since the American Revolution. This made terrific press back home in America, but the truth was somewhat different. Cody had the flag dipped in deference to her, and she acknowledged the gesture with a royal nod.<sup>57</sup>

A very significant element in the success of Buffalo Bill's Wild West in London was the same theme that so resonated with American audiences – the issue of racial decay. One of the central themes of the show was the revitalization of the Anglo-Saxon on the frontier. The English had the same fear in the late nineteenth century that their ruling class was becoming soft and effete.<sup>58</sup> These themes – the fear of racial decay and eastern effeminacy, and a belief that the West was the seat of Anglo-Saxon revitalization – would be at the centre of Wister's later writing. The Queen's jubilee came at the height of empire, and Cody's message certainly resonated among British people who had a passionate belief that it was their country's mission to send their best to the far-flung frontiers of the world.

After captivating London and clearly amusing Queen Victoria, Cody next descended on Paris, his arrival coinciding with the celebration of the completion of the thousand-foot Eiffel Tower, the centrepiece of the 1889 Exposition Universelle. Curious Parisians watched the entourage disembark a hundred Sioux Indians in brilliant war paint, Mexican vaqueros,



Poster from Rosa Bonheur's famous painting of Cody and his white horse (1889). Cody was a superb horseman, an attribute which was at the forefront of his Wild West.



Eskimo sled dogs and the erection of corrals for the many horses and buffalo. At the centre of all this was Buffalo Bill's luxurious tent with its special display – once again, Yellow Hand's actual scalp!<sup>59</sup>

As in London, the main theme of the Wild West extravaganza was the triumph of white civilization and the taming of the West. This theme fit very nicely with the American inventions brought by Thomas Edison, demonstrating the miracle of electricity and the telephone and telegraph. American progress was clearly on display.

At first, the French were a bit aloof, as if Euro Disney had just invaded, but they quickly began to soften when the wife of a French nobleman eloped with a Sioux warrior.<sup>60</sup> Then Annie Oakley utterly charmed them too with her combination of dazzling shooting and folksy ways. Soon, Buffalo Bill became the most celebrated American in Paris since Benjamin Franklin. The themes of Cody's Wild West enthralled Parisians: the Pony Express, an



Yellow Hair's belongings including his scalp, which Cody took on tour with The Wild West. Audiences in London and Paris lined up patiently to see the famous "first scalp for Custer". Buffalo Bill Center of the West, Cody, Wyoming.

Indian ambush of the Deadwood Stage, bronco busting and sharpshooting, an Indian attack thwarted by the cavalry – and Cody!

Rosa Bonheur, the most celebrated animal painter of the era, happened to be in Paris, and she, too, became enthralled with the Wild West. She produced altogether seventeen paintings of the Wild West; her painting of Cody on his white horse became one of her most famous.<sup>61</sup>

Finally, Cody introduced Parisians to his new finale – his hand-to-hand duel with Yellow Hand and the dramatic scalping. The Parisians loved it and lined up to file past Cody's tent, which held Yellow Hand's war bonnet, shield, gun and scabbard – and scalp.<sup>62</sup> The young Norwegian painter Edvard Munch wrote home to his father, "Bilboa Bill is the most renowned trapper in America. ... Bilboa Bill took part in several Indian wars ... among other things in a big fight with a well-known Indian Chief and took his scalp with a knife. The knife and scalp are displayed in his tent."<sup>63</sup>

Paris was followed by a tour of Rome, Venice, Austria-Hungary, and Germany. While on this tour, Cody decided to return to the United States to dispel charges that he was mistreating "his" Indians. He happened to return at a very touchy moment for relations between the US government and the

Sioux – and Sitting Bull. Government officials believed that Sitting Bull was one of the main forces behind the Ghost Dance movement of 1890, which was unsettling the Sioux. A Paiute mystic named Wovoka was preaching a doctrine of non-violent resistance to white colonialism. The Sioux developed their own version of Wovoka's religion, including the belief that if they wore special ghost shirts and danced the Ghost Dance, they would bring back the pre-contact "old" world and their ancestors would rise again. The evil whites would disappear and the buffalo would return, in preparation for the appearance of a Native messiah. It seems to have been only in the Sioux version, as taught by Kicking Bear, that the ghost shirts must be worn to repel bullets. The army's slaughter of the Sioux at Wounded Knee, using the newly invented Gatling gun, ended that particular belief.

This "Ghost Dance craze" was part of a larger phenomenon seen worldwide among colonized peoples. These messianic religions were a backlash against colonial domination and, in one form or another, preached that if indigenous populations returned to their true beliefs, the bad things would disappear and the good times would return. Pontiac's Rebellion was one example; Tecumseh's brother, the Prophet, preached a similar doctrine. There were clear overtones of a messianic religion in Louis Riel's message in 1884–85.

James McLaughlin, the Indian agent at the Standing Rock Agency, was convinced that Sitting Bull was at the centre of the Ghost Dance religion and recommended that the army arrest him. On Cody's arrival in New York, he was given a telegram from General Nelson Miles requesting that he come to Chicago. There General Miles convinced him that the country was facing a serious Indian war. It seems clear that Cody only intended to speak to Sitting Bull and try to persuade him not to go to war, but then came another telegram from Miles: "Confidential: you are hereby authorized to secure the person of Sitting Bull and deliver him to the nearest com'g officer of U.S. troops."<sup>64</sup> Meanwhile, Agent McLaughlin telegraphed the Commissioner of Indian Affairs to say that a military arrest of Sitting Bull would provoke a war; it would be far better to have his Indian police do the job. McLaughlin's plea went all the way to President Harrison, who had Cody's order rescinded.

Two weeks later, in December 1890, the Indian police on the Pine Ridge Agency launched a pre-dawn raid to capture Sitting Bull and remove him from the agency, but about 150 of his followers were alerted and resisted the police. In the melee that ensued, Sitting Bull was killed by one of the Indian police. Eleven days later, the US cavalry surrounded a large group of Sioux who had fled their reservation after Sitting Bull's death. When the army's

Gatling guns fell silent at Wounded Knee, almost two hundred Sioux lay dead – mostly women and children.

It so happens that when I was researching my doctoral thesis on the Mounted Police and Canadian Native policy, I came upon an account in the Mounted Police files of an incident of Sioux horse stealing by one of Sitting Bull's followers. Sitting Bull and over 5,000 Sioux were in Canada after the Battle of the Little Big Horn until the spring of 1881. The Mounted Police confronted Sitting Bull and asked that the culprit be turned over. Sitting Bull persuaded them, instead, to leave the horse thief to Sioux justice. Sitting Bull had the accused man stripped naked and staked out in a mosquito swamp for a goodly time, a far worse punishment than the Mounted Police had in mind. I happened to remember the name. It was the same name as the Indian policeman, Bull Head, commander of the Indian Police, accused of killing Sitting Bull on that cold December morning in 1890!

The Wild West reached its pinnacle in 1893 at Chicago's slightly belated celebration of the four hundredth anniversary of Columbus reaching the Americas at the World's Columbian Exposition, with the newly christened subtitle *Buffalo Bill's Wild West and Congress of Rough Riders of the World*. Two new additions that year were the actual log cabins of Theodore Roosevelt and that of the recently murdered Sitting Bull, the latter complete with a Sioux guide to gleefully show visitors the bullet holes from that December morning in 1890.<sup>65</sup> There is perhaps more than a small irony that Buffalo Bill's popularity reached its zenith precisely at the moment that the American frontier was officially pronounced dead. As Cody was immortalizing the violent conquest of the American West, almost across the street, Frederick Jackson Turner was giving his address to the American Historical Association on "The Significance of the Frontier in American History," remarking on the American census department's 1890 announcement that there was no longer a frontier in America. (This theme will be pursued again in chapter 7 in the context of Turner's frontier thesis and the influence of Roosevelt, Cody, Wister, and Remington on popular beliefs about the frontier.)

Cody had leased fifteen acres at Chicago for Buffalo Bill's Wild West because the organizers of the world's fair wouldn't allow it to be an official act. Over the six months of the fair, the Wild West averaged 12,000 people a day, a total of almost four million. Cody made about a million dollars from the Chicago tour (thirty million dollars today), part of which he used to establish the town of Cody, Wyoming.<sup>66</sup>

After the Chicago exposition of 1893, the Wild West persisted for many years, well into the twentieth century. There is no question that Cody and

his Wild West had an enormous influence on the popular perception of the western American frontier both in the United States and in Europe. And what of Cody the man? It is too easy to belittle him as a charlatan. He was certainly happy to play into the dime-novel image of the West, but he was larger than life and it says much that he gained, and kept, the loyalty of so many. Perhaps Annie Oakley said it as well as any:

I travelled with him for seventeen years – there were thousands of men in the outfit during that time, Comanches, cowboys, Cosacks, Arabs, and every kind of person. And the whole time we were one great family loyal to a man. His words were more than most contracts. Personally I never had a contract with the show after I started. It would have been superfluous.<sup>67</sup>

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Soon after the Yellow Hair incident of 1876 and after Cody had returned to the stage, Johnson left his employment with Cody and drifted around the West. It is unlikely that Johnson was bothered by the demise of Yellow Hair. He was a man of his time and shared the current attitudes toward Native people. As a child in Minnesota, he was weaned on the lurid details of the Santee Sioux uprising in 1862. In Texas, he encountered the Comanches first-hand and undoubtedly shared some of the Texan antipathy for those people. Later he became involved in several skirmishes with the Apaches and learned to hate them. The Osages he dismissed as a “no account outfit.” In Wyoming, he grew to respect the Cheyennes, but he continued to hate and distrust the Sioux. Like most of his contemporaries who grew up on the frontier, his attitudes toward Native people were shaped by overblown stories of ambushed wagon trains, kidnapped women and children, and unspeakable torture. Of course, the whites were blameless!

Johnson would say very little about the period between being a scout for Cody at the death of Yellow Hair and becoming a cowboy in Wyoming, but he did acknowledge that he had spent most of that time in Arizona, Colorado, Indian Territory, and the Staked Plains of Texas. And it was at some time during that period that he and a few companions got into a scrape with some Apaches that almost ended his life. While travelling through Apache country, he and his friends were ambushed by Apaches who fired at them from behind an outcropping of rock high on a hillside. They retreated to the shelter of the timber and, while one watched for any move the Apaches might make, the other two cut a pile of brush, which they tied in a

large bundle with their saddle ropes. Then, rolling the bundle in front of them, they started up the hill toward the Apaches. Johnson was on the end where the brush was thinnest. The Apaches kept shooting and finally hit Johnson. He dropped as if dead. The other two, riled by the loss of their friend, redoubled their efforts, got into a strategic position, and managed to kill all three Natives. When they got back to Johnson, they found him just regaining consciousness, the bullet having spent its force on the brush. The bullet lodged in his chin and left a scar for life. After patching him up, his companions happened to catch a glimpse of two Apache women making off with the horses of the dead Apaches. They took off after them and killed them both.

On another occasion, Johnson was part of a group that came upon a man who had either been tortured and killed by Apaches or dismembered after death. They had cut off his genitals and stuffed them in his mouth. It is perhaps this story that Wister hinted at in *The Virginian*.

And while Johnson was in the Black Hills, he, of course, encountered the Sioux. Actually, the Sioux were surprisingly peaceful while Johnson was in the Hills, but there were incidents and the whites in the area were understandably jumpy. Any Sioux was automatically considered a hostile. On one occasion, Johnson and a man named Kneebone rode up to a house and found two terrified women, a mother and daughter, who told them that two Sioux had been watching them all day from a hill behind the house. Kneebone took his rifle and stole quietly out the front door. There were two quick shots and then he was back. He said, "They won't trouble you any more." He had not even bothered to walk up the hill to see if they were dead; Johnson added that Kneebone could not have been less concerned had they been coyotes. Kneebone later came to Alberta with Johnson. In hindsight, this casual brutality toward the Sioux is shocking, considering the fact that Johnson and his fellow frontiersmen were the trespassers on Sioux land and, in most cases, the Sioux were merely retaliating against white incursions. But this logic was lost on the great majority of frontiersmen.

\* \* \* \* \*

For a time after the Yellow Hair incident, Johnson went back to driving stage and then drifted for a while. He happened to be in Laramie, Wyoming, in 1876 when he found himself in the middle of a gunfight between Laramie's marshal and two men who were making their escape on horseback. Johnson fired at one of the men and to his surprise, the man dropped from his horse, dead.



The marshal, Nat Boswell, was obviously grateful and persuaded Johnson to stay on for a while as one of his deputies.<sup>68</sup> This Johnson did, but he had to lie about his age, being only sixteen at the time. He had great respect for Boswell, saying that he was one of the real lawmen, quiet and determined – nothing like “Hickok and that set.” Boswell was one of the famous lawmen of the West. In the late 1860s, he had been elected the first sheriff of Albany County (which included Laramie), and in 1876, when Johnson knew him, he had recently been appointed marshal of Laramie. He later became the chief detective for the Wyoming Stock Growers Association. His quiet style and iron determination did much to reverse the earlier reputation of Laramie as one of the wickedest towns in the West, where lynchings, including that of the former marshal of Laramie, Sam Duggan, were common.<sup>69</sup> Johnson would never say much about those days, but he did admit years later, when excavators found two bodies under an old building in Laramie with bullet holes in their heads, that he knew who they were.

On one occasion, he and Boswell went in search of an outlaw, known to be a dangerous character, who was thought to be in a small abandoned log cabin. Boswell and Johnson found the cabin and approached it at night, leaving their horses some distance away. Then they took up their positions, one hidden in the woods in front of the cabin and one behind it. Just at day-break, the outlaw stepped out of the cabin door, looked around, and then, as they had expected, began to urinate. While thus preoccupied, he heard the order to put his hands above his head. Resistance was rather pointless; he was soon handcuffed and on his way back to Laramie.

They started back single file, Boswell ahead and Johnson behind the outlaw. Shortly, they came to a difficult muskeg where they had to walk and lead their horses for some distance. Boswell, being a humane man, took the handcuffs off the outlaw and allowed him to lead his horse. Several times Johnson noticed the outlaw’s hand steal forward to take Boswell’s rifle from the scabbard, but he always just missed getting it. Finally, Boswell caught him at it and shouted, “Shoot the son-of-a-bitch!” But that was not necessary. Johnson had had a bead on him all the time; if his hand had touched the gun, he would have been shot.

Johnson was probably lucky that his short stint as lawman was not more eventful. Two years later, two of Boswell’s deputies were murdered by Dutch Charley’s and Big Nose George’s gang. The next year, 1879, Dutch Charley was captured, admitted his guilt – in fact, bragged about it – and, soon after, was liberated from the law by a group of masked citizens in Carbon, the hometown of the two deputy sheriffs he had murdered. They promptly lynched him. The headline in the *Cheyenne Daily Sun* was joyfully upbeat:

DUTCH CHARLEY TAKES HIS LAST DANCE in a HEMP NECKTIE, WITH TELEGRAPH POLE FOR a PARTNER. The coroner ruled him dead from exposure.

In 1881, a similar fate befell Big Nose George Parrott. He was arrested by two deputies, and, while being transported by train, he, too, was liberated from the law in Carbon. He was first subjected to a “faux” hanging, with the same objective as present-day waterboarding, and when he had confessed to the murders of the two lawmen, Widdowfield and Vincent, he was returned to the two deputies. He was subsequently tried for murder and convicted. According to one witness, when a sentence of death was pronounced, he “wept like a child and broke down completely.” In the spring of 1881, shortly before his execution date, he attempted to escape but was foiled by his jailer’s wife, who alerted the town with several shots. He was subdued, and, later that night, an armed mob descended on the jail, took him to a telegraph pole, and attempted to hang him. The mob made several very bumbling attempts to hang him and then Big Nose George pleaded with them to let him do it right. He then climbed the ladder to the top of the telegraph pole and managed to strangle himself properly.<sup>70</sup> He had achieved, by now, a celebrity status, so his remains were in some demand. An enterprising young medical student, John Osborne, later to become governor of Wyoming, was given the body “for medical study.” He partially skinned George and made him into various mementoes, including a pair of shoes and a medicine bag.<sup>71</sup> He also sawed off the top of his head, which was later found doing effective duty as a doorstep.<sup>72</sup>

Life in Laramie did not appeal to Johnson for long. He took every opportunity to work among cattle and to mingle with the Texans who were driving herds into southern Wyoming. After a year or so of drifting, he decided that working cattle was really the thing for him. While in Cheyenne in 1878, he decided to sign on with a cow outfit that had located in the new cattle country of northern Wyoming.

