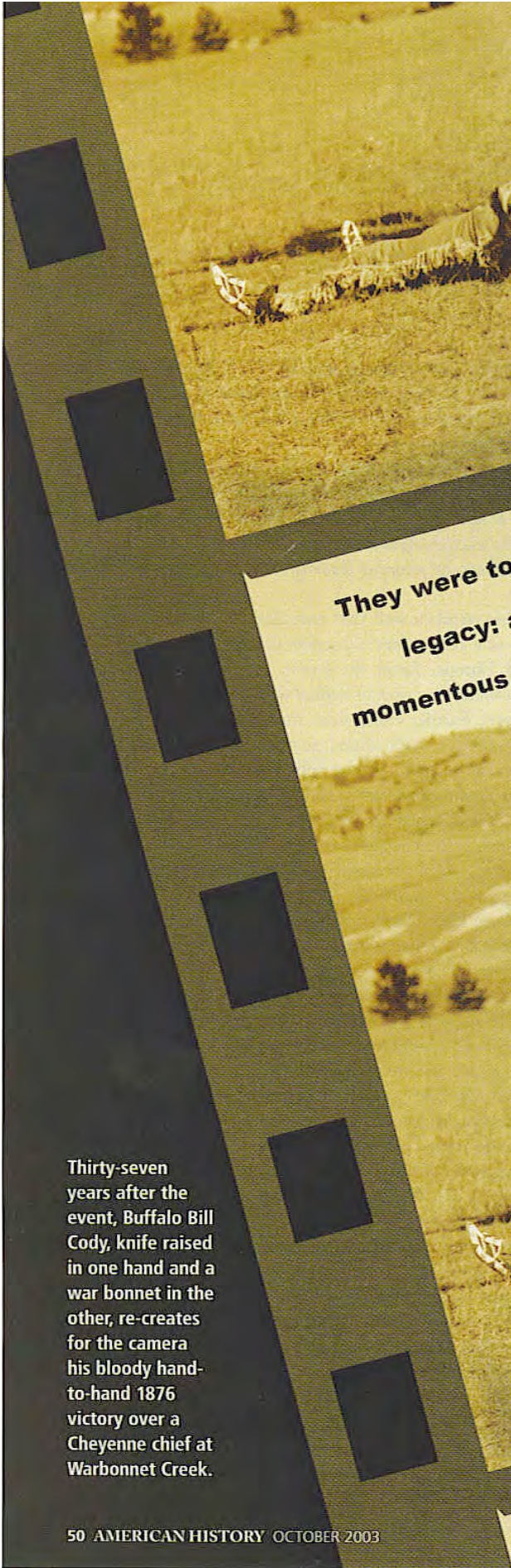
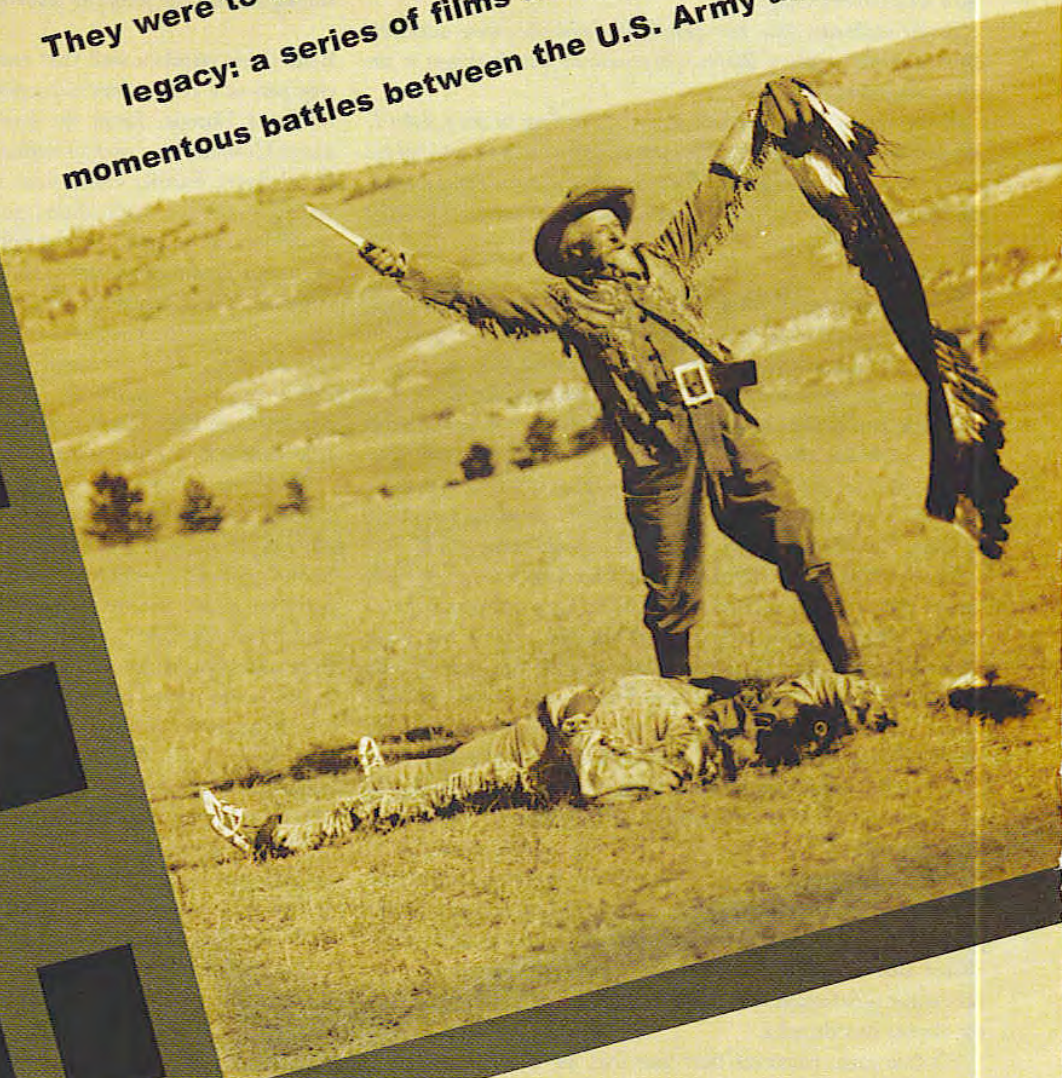
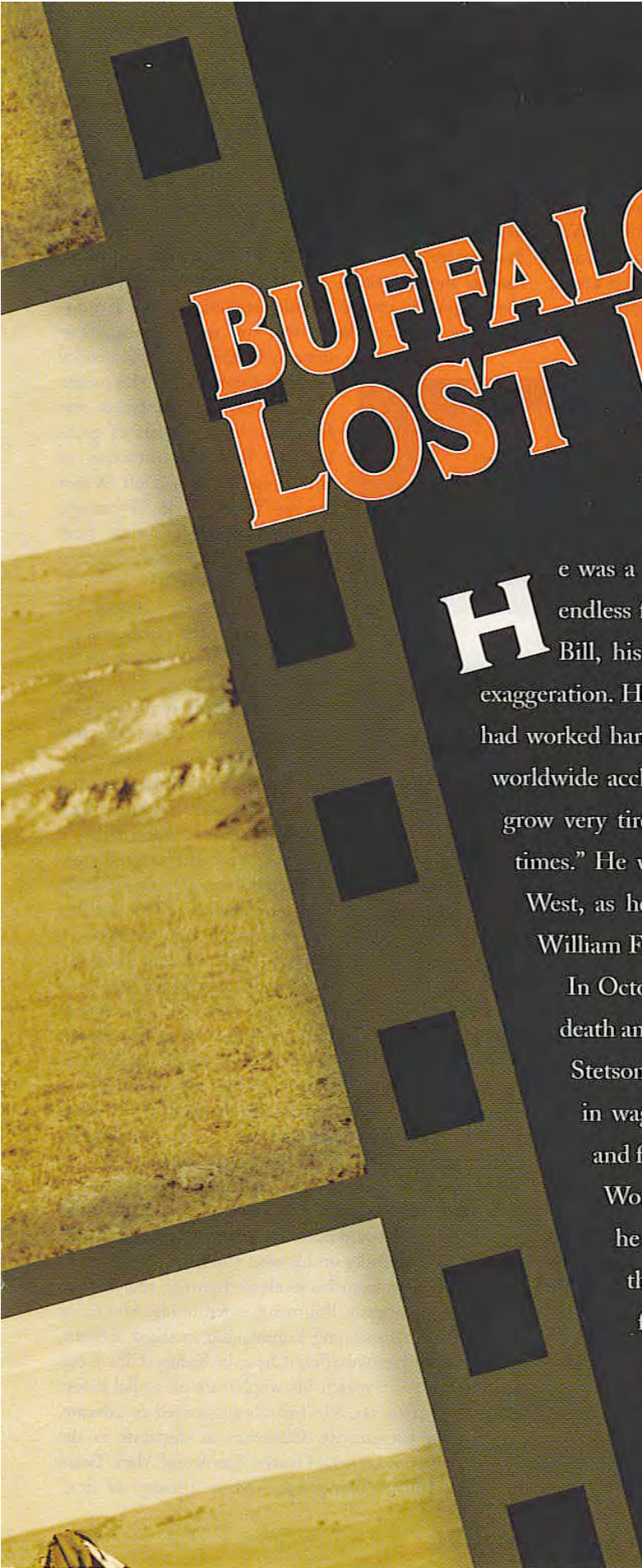




They were to be William F. Cody's 'Last Stand,' his lasting legacy: a series of films accurately portraying the momentous battles between the U.S. Army and the Indians.



Thirty-seven years after the event, Buffalo Bill Cody, knife raised in one hand and a war bonnet in the other, re-creates for the camera his bloody hand-to-hand 1876 victory over a Cheyenne chief at Warbonnet Creek.



BUFFALO BILL'S LOST LEGACY

By Nancy M. Peterson

He was a hero of legendary proportions, the subject of endless fantasies. Known around the world as Buffalo Bill, his public persona radiated derring-do, invited exaggeration. He was flamboyant, a spectacle, an idol, and he had worked hard to maintain that stature. Yet at the peak of worldwide acclaim, in 1897, he had confided to a friend, "I grow very tired of this sort of sham hero-worship sometimes." He wanted to be real. He wanted to present his West, as he knew it was, with no need for hyperbole. William Frederick Cody wanted to be an educator.

In October 1913, he was 67 years old, tired nearly to death and mortgaged to the crown of his custom-made Stetson. But as he watched hundreds of Sioux, many in wagons, some on horseback, flow over the hills and filter out of the South Dakota Badlands toward Wounded Knee Creek, Cody had a vision of what he could create. It would be his legacy when all the hoopla had died away, his lasting gift to future generations: accurate, historically correct films of the significant clashes between the U.S. Army and the Indians in the West's final battles.

Films were the coming thing in entertainment, he was sure. He had allowed Thomas Edison to film his Wild West show in 1894, had filmed portions himself in 1910 and 1911. But the movies currently being made were little more than novelties, short two-reel thrillers that played in nickelodeons. They had no more credence than the novels Ned Buntline had spewed out about him. The Col. W.F. Cody Historical Pictures he was about to produce would all be made on location. The actors would not be actors; they'd be men who'd lived through the battles, both trooper and Indian, some still bearing physical and emotional scars. No one had ever done it his way.

That he had the energy and the will to be there at all was testament to his irrepressible optimism. In Denver, less than a month before, on September 15, he had writhed in humiliation as every silver saddle, wagon, lasso and head of stock that made up his famed Wild West show was hammered over to the highest bidder. *Denver Post* copublisher Harry H. Tammen had seen to that. Cody had been foolish enough to borrow \$20,000 from Tammen. Cody was a magnet for bad investments and generous beyond reason with everyone from his extended family to chance acquaintances. He often was forced to borrow from friends. But the deceptively warm newspaperman was no friend, and when Cody's six-month note came due unpaid, Tammen sent the sheriff to attach the show.

Cody was arguably the best-known, most-pictured man in the world. But the last 10 years had seen the Wild West show's phenomenal success dwindle away. The show that had entertained tens of millions was becoming an anachronism; audiences were more intrigued with Pierce-Arrows than prairie schooners. Bedeviled by bad weather, accidents and his own lavish spending habits, Cody had had to merge his show with a competitor's in 1909. Gordon W. Lillie, better known as Pawnee Bill, had supplied badly needed cash, and the combined groups were popularly known as the Two Bills show. Cody could still count on his devoted foster son, Johnny Baker, who headlined as a sharpshooter and was a major help in managing the show's cast and crew. Publicist Major John M. Burke, in whose eyes the showman could do no wrong, was always ready to write copy. But Cody was continually juggling creditors, borrowing from one to pay off another, and his recurring nightmare had become the specter of his show being attached.

When it finally happened in July 1913 in Denver, taking all cash receipts and tying up all properties, his first thought was for the members of his company, left without food, shelter or a way home. "It broke my heart that we could not pay our people," he said later. A friend wired a \$500 donation; he distributed it among the cast. When the degrading public auction of show property took place Cody thought he could stand to see everything go except his favorite mount, Isham, the white steed that had carried him so grandly around countless arenas. Waiting at a distance, he could not know that two men bidding determinedly for this item each intended to give the horse back to his owner.

When Cody learned Isham was his again, he shed tears of gratitude at this demonstration of friendship. Yet he had left Denver for his TE ranch in Wyoming's Big Horn Basin facing the stark reality: "I have to start life over again with no capital."

He couldn't even consider not starting over. Too many people depended on him. Some years he had employed more than 4,000 people, in addition to the 400 plus involved in the show. He had workers installing innovative irrigation projects on his large ranches in Nebraska and Wyoming; men equipping and working mines in Wyoming and Arizona; and more people developing his town (Cody, Wyo., founded in 1896), staffing two newspapers, two hotels and a military academy. The Nebraska ranch and Cody's Hotel Irma were no longer his, but his family responsibilities remained heavy. He had to do something to earn money. While he abhorred the scandal and the publicity, he wrote

a friend, "I am not down and out...." He promised he would soon reappear in the public eye, restore his good name and, most essential, make money.

He was always sure that if he could just have a little luck his latest project would make his fortune. And he'd already set the wheels turning on his next enterprise. Strangely, it was a suggestion from his nemesis Tammen that had set him on this new path. Tammen wanted to hire him to act in a movie. But everything Tammen did smacked of circus, of sideshow, of exploitation. Once, in Kansas City, Cody had threatened to march his whole cast off to jail before he'd pay a circus tax. He had always strived to educate, insisting on authenticity. Observers as disparate as the *London Observer*, General George Crook and Mark Twain had praised his exhibitions as "sternly a matter of fact,"



Whether in his own Wild West show or after merging it with Pawnee Bill's (poster top), Buffalo Bill, shown mounted near the stands before entering the ring, was a striking figure and the star of the show.

BUFFALO BILL MUSEUM & GRAVE



Adventures of BUFFALO BILL



- ¶ His Indian battles, last hunting trip with the Prince of Monaco, owner of Monte Carlo, and incidents of his home life.
- ¶ 5,000 U. S. troops and Indians take part, including the famous generals and chiefs engaged in the Indian wars.
- ¶ Actual battles refought on Western Plains and the Bad Lands—Col. Cody's death fight with Chief Yellow Hand.
- ¶ BUFFALO BILL is the most romantic figure in American History—the idol of every man and boy.
- ¶ BOOK IT NOW WHILE HIS NAME IS ON EVERY TONGUE.

Screen Time, 1 hour, 15 minutes



Trading on Buffalo Bill's national celebrity, a flier advertises *Adventures of Buffalo Bill*, the shortened version of the original eight-reel series titled *The Last Indian Battles from the War Path to the Peace Pipe*.

forms, were wheeling up four deadly Hotchkiss guns and cleaning their rifles. Revolvers and cases of ammunition were much in evidence as rectangular brown tents spread over acres of hillside. Some Sioux wondered if the coming morning's battle would really be pretend. Or were they to be slaughtered like their ancestors? Painted stick markers shuddered above the sacred grave as the increasing wind filled it with snow. Younger braves thought perhaps the time had come for vengeance. Some talked of loading their rifles with live rounds instead of blanks. Soon death songs shrilled above thudding drums.

Short Bull, who had gathered and led the people here, and Iron Tail and No Neck, who had traveled with Cody for many years, heard the threats and knew the futility of such action. They advised Cody, and he and the elders called the principals to a council in the mess tent. Young men were warned that foolhardy actions could lead only to tragic consequences. Cody lectured and reassured. The familiar and sympathetic voice of his foster son, Johnny Baker, offered advice and counsel. The talk was long, and emotions ran high, but when the council closed, the "feeling of unrest" Cody described later as "the greatest difficulty encountered" in the filming had lost its fire.

In the meantime, Essanay cameramen erected a 15-foot wooden filming tower in a wagon bed and producer/director Theodore Wharton worked with Cody and General Miles to be ready for the next day's shooting. Miles, known as Bearcoat to the Sioux, was commander during the Ghost Dance War and received the Indians' final surrender. As both technical adviser and actor, he was adamant that every detail be played out as it actually happened. General Charles King, who had become a novelist since his retirement, assisted with the scenario. "No particular parts were given out to other than the leading characters," Cody explained, "all were told to simply reenact the parts taken by them at the original battles."

The next morning, October 13, the cameras rolled as the outnumbered Sioux families were surrounded in the ravine that held Wounded Knee Creek. There was the parley as scout-interpreter Philip Wells, playing himself, tried to make the Indians give up their guns. Suddenly the air erupted with gun smoke, shrieks and howls. Rifles crackled, ponies whirled and Wells relived nearly losing his nose to a warrior's knife in the original battle. With the camp aflame, people fled down the ravine and the artillery atop the hill lobbed exploding shells into their midst. It was a tragic, bloody business, but Cody noted some braves were too excited to remain "dead" until they were absolutely out of ammunition; then they rolled over to watch the antics of their brothers. "Thus," he remembered, "comedy is injected into an otherwise very serious affair."

It was all serious to Miles, who insisted the 600 cavalrymen on hand be marched again and again before the cameras until the 11,000 troops he had commanded in 1890 were on film. At least he thought they were, but when they'd had more than enough, savvy cameramen left the



PHOTOS: KEVIN BROWNLOW COLLECTION, LONDON

In photos taken during the reenactment filming, the 7th Cavalry wreaks havoc on an Indian village (top); Buffalo Bill, on his favorite horse Isham, points the way as he re-creates his role as a military scout at Warbonnet Creek; and (above) soldiers and warriors struggle in mock combat. Although the film's promoters claimed as many as 5,000 participated, only about 600 troopers and fewer than 1,000 Indians took part.

lens closed on the camera. The troops had no such option. On October 17 they filmed the Battle of the Mission at Pine Ridge, which took place the day after Wounded Knee, and a watching reporter noted the contrast: "At Wounded Knee the entrapped, outnumbered Indians died by the score; at the Mission they were the greater force, free to fight in their own freewheeling style to far greater effect."

With bad weather forcing delays, the cameras next focused on the events that began the Messiah wars: Sioux in starving conditions, news of a messiah in Nevada, ghost dances, the arrest of Sitting Bull and his death. Miles next insisted the fight for the stronghold in the Badlands be filmed on location. He called it the Indians' Gibraltar, surrounded by dry, eroded cliffs and crevices seemingly accessible only to mountain sheep. But that meant an arduous 55-mile trek for 50 Sioux families, a company of troops and heavy wagons loaded with hay, grain and provisions. The filmmakers thought the trip would require weeks and wanted to use similar terrain nearby. Johnny Baker broke the impasse when he promised, "I'll take the Indians and troops in there and I'll bring them out again." He did, in five days, and the film in the cameras exceeded even Miles' expectations.

Two clashes remained on the director's schedule. For the 1876 Battle of Warbonnet Creek, Cody reenacted his legendary fight with Cheyenne Chief Yellow Hand (properly Yellow Hair) and his claim of "the first scalp for Custer." This incident, distorted by legend, has many versions. But the 1869 Battle of Summit Springs, enacted next in bright, cold sunshine, complete with the rescue of one woman hostage and the death of a second, is confirmed by military personnel. They give Cody, then a strong, virile 23-year-old scout, credit for finding the Cheyenne camp and killing Chief Tall Bull. On October 28, 1913, his long, white hair blowing in the wind, the old scout spent the day in the saddle, again riding the grassy hills and eroded gullies. Winchester swinging by his saddle or in his hand, he relived the event that had brought him to the attention of Ned Buntline and eventually to his life as a showman.

Before the huge camp broke up, the cameras recorded



KEVIN BROWNLOW COLLECTION, LONDON



BUFFALO BILL MUSEUM & GRAVE

Generals Nelson Miles, Frank Baldwin and Colonel Marion Maus (top, from left), all veterans of the Indian wars, served as consultants and played themselves in the reenactments. Essanay Film Manufacturing Co. crews (above) had to manhandle large, bulky cameras and gear to capture the action on film.

the modern day-to-day life on the Pine Ridge Reservation, the activity around the agency, children in school, farmers bringing in crops. On October 30 the filmmakers said goodbye with a great feast of celebration for the Sioux. But before Pahaska climbed into the seven-passenger Ford touring car that would take him south, he called together 53 Sioux who had been stranded in Denver by the foreclosure. Saying, "You have been my friends and I am going to be yours," he wrote a check for \$1,313 in back salaries.

The miles of film went to Chicago, where the Essanay staff edited them into eight single reels, described in ads as "six miles of reels of realistic photo drama." Presumably, along with shots ruined by darkness or static electricity, a few Sioux too involved in the action to stay dead ended up on the cutting room floor.

Cody returned home and prepared himself to lecture with the films. By the end of

February 1914, he was in Washington, D.C., to screen the films before Secretaries Lane and Garrison and several other members of President Woodrow Wilson's cabinet, congressmen and the National Press Club. Described by a reporter as "still straight as the arrows that have whizzed around his noble head," Cody reportedly held his audience of 1,000 "spellbound."

"It has been my object and my desire," Cody said, "to preserve history by the aid of the camera, with the living participants who took an active part in the closing Indian wars of America." Secretaries Lane and Garrison declared the films "historically correct in every detail." Titled *The Last Indian Battles from the War Path to the Peace Pipe*, copies of the films were to be preserved in the archives of the Indian and War departments "for the education of future generations." Later Cody told reporters, "I have yet a great life work before I hit the last trail."

A few days later, Cody was back in Denver, and newspaper ads trumpeted a week's run, twice daily, at the Tabor Grand Opera House beginning March 8, 1914. He introduced the films to a full house before the lights dimmed and the show began.

Continued on page 80

Buffalo Bill's Lost Legacy

Continued from page 56

"Nothing like this has ever been done before," declared the *Denver Post*. "It is War, itself, grim, un pitying and terrible, and it holds your heart still as you watch it and leaves you in the end, amazed and spellbound at the courage and the folly of mankind." The reporter said the audience experienced combat, "killing reduced to a business," until one thought, "My God! Why don't they surrender?"

Perhaps in his quest for realism Cody had reached too far. Perhaps desperate fighting that left "the palms of one's hands wet and one's lips dry," was too intense for his audiences. Perhaps the slaughter at Wounded Knee Creek could be seen only for what it was. Perhaps the cavalry seemed too much like a killing machine and the Sioux on the reservation at Pine Ridge more pitiable than pacified. Whatever the reason, the happy boast by Cody's publicist, Major Burke, on March 28, 1914, that Cody had another fortune in sight and "the world by the ears," did not prove true—the film was a financial failure. Cody went back on the road, joining the Sells-Floto Circus and Buffalo Bill (Himself) in Albuquerque. He was required to appear in every show and parade. That summer he wrote his sister, Julia, "...without hope one is dead."

For the next two seasons, Tammen held Cody in servitude by finagling contracts, and he had no time to lecture with his historical pictures. He toured briefly with the film in 1916, but again spent the summer in the show ring. When that season ended in November, the exhausted showman sank into his final illness. His death on January 10, 1917, inspired the greatest national outpouring of grief since the death of Abraham Lincoln some 50 years before.

Cody's "Indian Wars" pictures, never a commercial success, were reedited by Essanay in 1917 into a shorter version titled *The Adventures of Buffalo Bill*. Although the original documentary was reportedly donated to War and Interior department archives, there is no record it was ever received. The historic documentary Cody created to be his legacy, to educate Americans about the West, exists only in fragments, absorbed and overshadowed by the romantic image he himself created. □