



THE TWO BILLS

Keith Allen

Buffalo Bill and Wild Bill were probably the two most widely known figures of the Wild West. Some even say they were the same. In actuality, James Butler "Wild Bill" Hickok, was born in 1836 some nine years before William Frederick "Buffalo Bill" Cody. Their lives did cross paths and intertwine many times and it appears "Wild Bill" was a mentor and role model for "Buffalo Bill". Both of these western legends were scouts, buffalo hunters, and representatives of what the West was at that time. Each became a legend in his time through the dime novel publications that immortalized so many western characters.

Cody first met Hickok in 1857 while driving for the Russell, Majors and Waddel Freight Line. Hickok defended the eleven year old Cody from a bully on the wagon train. Cody would never forget this incident and later commented, "From that time forward Wild Bill was my protector and intimate friend and the friendship thus begun continued until his death".

In 1859 and 1860 Hickok became a stage driver through the Raton Mountains to Santa Fe, New Mexico. It was here that he met Kit Carson. Carson was an important figure for both Hickok and Cody as they both admired this legendary mountain man and explorer. Cody did not meet Carson until 1867, the last year of Carsons's life. Cody declared his admiration for Carson by naming his only son Kit Carson Cody.

Both Bills received their nicknames through legendary acts. Hickok was dubbed "Wild Bill" when he singlehandedly took on the McCanles "gang". He was credited with killing 10 gang members - in reality he killed three. Buffalo Bill received his nickname at the age of 21 while providing buffalo meat for the Union Pacific railroad workers.

Hickok was a spy for the Union Army, even enlisting as a Confederate in this role, although he never enlisted in the Union Army. At one point in the Civil War he was recognized as a spy and had to beat a hasty retreat. After the war, in September of 1866, while Hickok was Deputy U.S. Marshall of Ft. Riley, Kansas, Hickok and Cody again met in Junction City, Kansas. Cody, then in his early twenties, and married only six months, was headed west again. Cody and Hickok traveled together to Ft. Ellsworth, Kansas, where Cody was hired as an Army Scout for the first time. Cody's appointment was primarily due to his friendship with Hickok.

Buffalo Bill, achieving world fame for his Wild West Exhibition, followed in Hickok's footsteps. Hickok should be credited with the first traveling Wild West Show, which was launched on July 20, 1870 in Niagara Falls, New York. Hickok's cast included three cowboys, six wild buffalo, four Comanche



Indians, along with their pet brown bear and pet monkey, all led by the legendary "Wild Bill" himself. His investment to launch this dramatic event was \$2,000. The gross receipts totaled only \$121.89. Hickok as usual, took total responsibility for the failure. He sold the buffalo to a butcher and with the proceeds put the Indians and their pets on a westbound train. Then he headed for a saloon.

In contrast, Buffalo Bill's first show was the idea of Ned Buntline who actually approached Hickok to be his star first; the annoyed Marshal Hickok promptly ran him out of town. Buntline then solicited Cody and in 1872 "Scouts of the Prairie" opened in New York with Cody, Buntline, and a friend of Cody's, "Texas Jack", as stars. After several disagreements, primarily over money, Buntline was dismissed and Cody headed west to find and engage his close friend, Hickok to be a part of the show. Hickok performed in Buffalo Bill's stage plays intermittently from 1872 through 1874. Nine years later, after Hickok's death, Cody made Hickok's idea of reenacting western events in an arena setting successful when he launched his Wild West Exhibitions. Cody's performances lasted more than 30 years.

Hickok's life ended tragically much sooner than Cody's. He was killed by a gunshot wound to the back of the head while playing cards in a saloon in Deadwood, South Dakota. Hickok was only 39 and had recently married for the first time. Cody paid homage to his close friend by visiting his grave in Deadwood as late as 1906, some thirty years after Hickok's death.

Cody would outlive his friend by some 40 years. He passed away in January of 1917, long after the wild days of the Old West had gone.

Editor's Note: Keith Allen was a Utility Worker for the Buffalo Bill Museum and Grave. He was with the museum for a number of years and received his 20 year pin for service to the City and County of Denver the same year that this publication appeared in our Nov/Dec 1995 newsletter. Since this publication, he has passed away. One of his avocations was exploring the life and legends of Wild Bill Hickok.



WILD BILL.