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RACIALIZED NATIONALITY: MEXICANS, VAQUEROS, AND  
U.S. NATIONALISM IN BUFFALO BILL'S WILD WEST

By

Pablo Antonio Rangel

A THESIS

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In Partial Fulfillment of Requirements

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Major: History

Under the Supervision of Professor James A. Garza

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# RACIALIZED NATIONALITY: MEXICANS, VAQUEROS, AND

## U.S. NATIONALISM IN BUFFALO BILL'S WILD WEST

Pablo Antonio Rangel, M.A.

University of Nebraska, 2013

Adviser: James A. Garza

The development of the vaquero, as he appeared in Buffalo Bill's Wild West performances and other shows, mirrors the experiences of Mexicans and Mexican-descent people in the United States at the end of the nineteenth-century and the beginning of the twentieth century. This thesis explores and analyzes the history of the vaquero in the Wild West show through an analysis of the principal performers and their experiences. Chapter one explores the history of the Wild West show with an emphasis on the vaqueros. This chapter will also explore the origins of the vaqueros. Chapter two explores how the Wild West show incorporated American Imperialism. This chapter is centered on the ways in which news media, periodicals, and live entertainment integrated representations of US military strength and masculinity in the 1890s and in the years immediately following the Spanish American War. Chapter three explores the daily life of vaqueros in Wild West shows. This chapter focuses on specific celebrity vaqueros and also considers the lesser-known Mexican showmen to demonstrate the ways in which vaqueros were viewed as racial others in comparison to the American cowboy.

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## DEDICATION

For my family,  
and my immigrant ancestors who  
got me here.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This thesis would not have been achieved without the endless support from colleagues, mentors, advisors, professors, and archivists in Lincoln, Nebraska, Norman and Oklahoma City, Oklahoma, and Cody, Wyoming. Also, the patience of many conference panel participants, chairs, and spectators, who sat quietly while I discussed vaqueros as though it was the most important thing in the world, did not go unnoticed. I am forever indebted to all of them for their constructive criticism that helped me at pivotal moments during the research.

This thesis first developed in 2011 as a topic for the Buffalo Bill Project, advised by Doug Seelfedt, who at that time managed the project at UNL through the Center for Digital Research in the Humanities with a grant from the Buffalo Bill Historical Center (BBHC). Jeremy Johnston (BBHC managing editor of the *Papers of William F. Cody*), Doug, and I first discussed Wild West vaqueros at a barbeque in Doug's back yard. I must first thank them both for suggesting such a wonderful topic and helping me to establish a network of colleagues who focus on American West and Buffalo Bill history. Also, my research was partially funded through the BBHC. I am grateful for their continued support, as I worked through this project.

Most importantly, I benefitted from the constant leadership of my main adviser James A. Garza, who said to me in 2008, "I see your future. You are a historian." At that time I was searching for my place in the world. It is no coincidence that I have achieved success along this journey. Dr. Garza has been essential to my development as a scholar and has challenged my worldview over the years. I am eternally grateful for his kindness,

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My deepest thanks go to my family. My parents, Johnny and Sharon, my brother Juan, sister Teresa and their families, and my mother-in-law Pat Geiger, believe in me and foster my interests in and dedication to history. Their constant support and understanding has allowed me to see this project through to the end. Finally, I am eternally grateful to my wife, Tammy Lee, whose attention, care, and love has been as indispensable in this work as it has been in my life.

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## INTRODUCTION

In 1893 Frederick Jackson Turner delivered his speech “The Significance of the Frontier in American History” at the annual American Historical Association meeting during the World’s Fair in Chicago. The speech, later published as a paper, did not ignite immediate interest among historians. However, that changed over time. Many historians during the first half of the twentieth century considered Turner’s work to be dynamic and important to understanding how expansion into the West affected American politics, ideologies, and identity. Because many historians and scholars cited Turner’s paper, its argument became central to debates concerning American exceptionalism and Western expansion, becoming known simply as “The Frontier Thesis” or “The Turner Thesis.” Not long after Turner unveiled his argument, Theodore Roosevelt expanded on it when he posited America’s “Winning of the West” as a definitive and unique experience, which forever removed Americans from their traditional European past.

While Turner and Roosevelt commented on the significance of the west to American values, William F. Cody and other entrepreneurs invested in Wild West entertainment exhibitions and traveled the globe distributing mythic and historic renditions of the American West. Shows like Buffalo Bill’s Wild West, Pawnee Bill’s Historic Wild West and Great Far East, and The Miller Bros. 101 Ranch Real Wild West attempted to accurately portray a historic Western past. These shows celebrated the people, landscapes, and animals associated with westward expansion. In particular, the Cody show featured characters such as Indians, white pioneers, sharpshooters, buffalo, horses, and the Mexican vaqueros. Each character displayed traditional skills and costumes associated with the history of the west. Eventually, the U.S. military joined the

exhibitions. The shows began to display American military might shortly after the Spanish-American War during the 1899 season. Cody's show was not exceptional in this regard, however. Many, if not all, Wild West traveling entertainment shows included a militarized segment in their programs by the first decade of the twentieth century.

By the late 1910s Wild West shows were no longer the best-selling ticket in town. As horses and cowboys lost favor due to, the show managers increasingly added foreign and "exotic" content to the program with hopes of enticing the old crowd to attend. Elephants, zebras, Arabs, and African Bushmen did not fit the traditional western motif. Including these performers conflicted with the shows' original purpose to demonstrate American exceptionalism via the Western expansion narrative. In addition, the financial expense integral to touring two one-hundred car trains full of animals, laborers, trainers, entertainers, and all the equipment and props they would need for an eight-month tour season weighed heavily on managers and investors. Moreover, economic decline in the United States and Europe following the First World War, though not a death knell for traveling Wild West entertainment, was certainly a warning shot. New forms of popular culture and "cheap amusements", particularly motion pictures, gradually gained popularity. During the 1920s, movies emerged as the premier entertainment for U.S. and international audiences.<sup>1</sup> Nevertheless, Wild West shows had a lasting impact on the American cultural landscape and imagination, imprinting stereotypical images of Western characters that would translate to celluloid.

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<sup>1</sup> Robert Sklar, *Movie Made America: A Cultural History of American Movies*, (Vintage Books Edition 1994).



The development of the vaquero, as he appeared in Buffalo Bill's Wild West performances and other shows, mirrors the experiences of Mexicans and Mexican-descent people in the United States at the end of the nineteenth-century and the beginning of the twentieth century. This thesis will analyze the history of the vaquero in the Wild West show through an exploration of the lives and experiences of the principal performers. Cody integrated vaqueros into his Wild West show because he realized their historical importance to the development of the American West—namely, their mastery of horsemanship and ranching techniques. Thus, I argue that Cody's inclusion of the vaquero as a skilled horseman and laborer in his shows proved representative of the historical reality of Mexican and Mexican-American experiences on Western ranches. However, Cody's show did not exist in a cultural and political vacuum. Growing American imperialism and expansionism in the late nineteenth century militarized the Wild West show as well as other traveling performances. This development promoted American exceptionalism and increasingly relegated the vaquero to the show's fringes, exoticizing him as a foreign "other". Increasing racial discrimination felt by Mexicans and Mexican-American during the Jim Crow era added to the vaquero's marginalization. Two conflicts, the Spanish-American War in 1898 and the 1910 Mexican Revolution, were crucial factors in this process since they helped to characterize dark-skinned foreigners, such as the vaquero, as intellectually and culturally inferior but at the same time savage and dangerous. This subtle shift in imagining racialized others proved crucial after Hollywood took over the representation of the Cowboy in the 1920s. Vaqueros practically disappeared from the popular history of the West and were replaced on screen

by the Mexican bandit—an archetype based on American propaganda about Francisco “Pancho” Villa.

This thesis explores the history of the vaquero--both real and imagined--through the lenses of public memory and performance. Chapter One discusses the history of the Wild West show with an emphasis on the vaqueros. The vaquero was crucial to the development of ranching culture in northern New Spain and its continued development in Mexico’s far north in the early nineteenth century. The vaquero’s inclusion in Cody’s Wild West show demonstrated his historical importance to daily life in the North American West. As Cody developed his enterprise, so too did the vaquero evolve to fit American sensibilities and perceptions of race. The violence associated with U.S. involvement in international conflict influenced how showmen portrayed the vaqueros to their audiences. Chapter Two explores the ways in which the 1898 Spanish-American War, part of the growing American expansionist project of the late nineteenth-century, militarized the Wild West show. Chapter Three investigates the daily life of vaqueros in Wild West shows. This chapter focuses on specific celebrity vaqueros and also considers the lesser-known Mexican showmen to demonstrate the ways in which the shows presented vaqueros as racial others in comparison to the white American cowboy. One factor that influenced this perception was the 1910 Mexican Revolution. Viewed in this framework this thesis argues that Vaqueros became accessories to American empire and thus, their place in the shows became marginalized. The conflict, part of the growing American expansionist project of the late nineteenth-century, militarized the Wild West show. Vaqueros became accessories to American empire and thus, their place in the shows became marginalized.

Late nineteenth and early twentieth-century constructions of race played an important part in the depiction of vaqueros on the stage and in public performance. As social ideas concerning race and nationality transformed over the late nineteenth century, popular narratives of American exceptionalism expunged non-whites such as Mexicans from that history. Furthermore, as American hegemonic forces stressed US exceptionalism in transnational events such as the Spanish-American war and the Mexican Revolution, mainstream Americans predominantly viewed Mexican-descended people as foreign racial others. By extension, traveling Wild West exhibitions such as Buffalo Bill's show that incorporated American imperialism into its performances increasingly represented vaqueros in relation to their supposed Mexican nationality, when in fact many were U.S.-born. As a result, vaqueros were no longer valued for their talent and contributions to the development of the American West. Instead, show promoters transformed the ways in which they represented vaqueros from docile horsemen to violent representatives of supposed savage incivility. As Eric Lott has shown, representations of race in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were not mere manifestations or reflections of race politics. Instead he asserts that the representations themselves were racial politics.<sup>2</sup> The representations of race in live Wild West shows and accompanying printed materials such as show programs, advertisement posters, souvenir postcards, and news reports were not created in a vacuum. They were influenced by economics, popular culture, politics, and national metanarratives about race and modernity at the turn of the century.

### Historiography

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<sup>2</sup> Annemarie Bean. James V. Hatch, Brooks McNamara. Ed. *Inside the Minstrel Mask: Reading in Nineteenth-Century Blackface Minstrelsy*. (Hanover: Wesleyan University Press, 1966), 17.

Arguably, nothing conjures the quintessential American West experience or individual more than the cowboy. In, *The Cowboy Hero*, historian William Savage explains that the cowboy's cultural significance in the U.S. is his marketability.<sup>3</sup> This assertion seems valid if one confronts the cowboy's ubiquitous presence in popular media in the United States over the past one hundred years. Cowboy adventures on the frontier were central themes in many late-nineteenth century popular dime novels. The cowboy's literary reputation seemed to be legitimized by the cowboy's presence in Wild West productions, like Buffalo Bill's Wild West and Pawnee Bill's Real Wild West, which traveled around the Western world in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Charles Marion Russell, a one-time cowhand who became a well-known American artist, immortalized the cowboy in his painting "Herd Quitters," in 1902. Furthermore, Hollywood popularized the Western during the silent-film era, and cowboys continued to gallop across the silver screen well into the 1920s.

These examples demonstrate how U.S. popular culture reifies the mythic cowboy. However, these examples do not address the vaquero's importance as historical figure nor do they ground the vaquero sufficiently in historical context of Western expansion. Most scholarship that considers the origins and traditions of vaqueros outside the U.S. Southwest has been produced relatively recently by historians who count themselves among the "New Western History" movement. These scholars focus on the social, racial, gender, class, and environmental issues that have been mostly forgotten or ignored throughout western historiography. This movement, led by notable historians Patricia Limerick, Richard White, William Cronon, and Donald Worster, includes *Borderlands*

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<sup>3</sup> William Savage. *The Cowboy Hero*. (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1989).

studies and bridges Latin American studies as seen in the work of s David J. Weber, Carey McWilliams and Richard W. Slatta. These latter scholars incorporate archival evidence from outside the United States do not limit their research to the English language.<sup>4</sup> In the thirty years since this movement began, many of these historians have focused on topics such as American Indians, women on the frontier, and the environment. Because the old historiography ignored racial and transnational components of western history, early studies in the “New Western” historiography relied on popular histories published by non-academics in the early twentieth century.

Dane Coolidge was a travelling photographer and writer that explored the evolving U.S. West in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Coolidge’s photographs and essays were published in many magazines during the early twentieth century. However, Coolidge is mostly remembered for writing some of the first historically accurate books about cowboys. Particularly, Coolidge’s *California Cowboys*, originally published in 1939 as *Old California Cowboys*, has remained a significant contribution to cowboy history and was most recently republished by The University of Arizona Press in 1985. New western historians consider this book valuable because it laid the foundation for multi-ethnic studies of cowboy history. Written in three parts, “Cowboys is California”; “Cowboys in Arizona”; “Cowboys in Old Mexico”, this book is a narrative account of the interactions between white Americans and Mexican-descended

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<sup>4</sup> Please see: Patricia Nelson Limerick. *The Legacy of Conquest: The Unbroken Past of the American West*. (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1987).; Cornon, William. *Nature’s Metropolis: Chicago and the Great West*. (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1992).; Richard White. *The Middle Ground: Indians, Empire, and Republics in the Great Lakes Region, 1650-1815*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991).; Donald Worster. *Rivers of Empire: Water, Aridity, and the Growth of the American West*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992).; David J. Weber, *The Spanish Frontier in North America*. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994).; Carey McWilliams, *North from Mexico: The Spanish-Speaking People of the United States*. (New York: Greenwood Press, 1948); Richard Slatta, *Gauchos & the Vanishing Frontier* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1983).

people in these three geographical areas. Coolidge's work includes what today's scholars consider oral history. Coolidge interviewed people in these three regions to elicit their experiences as ranch-hands, horsemen, and immigrants. Also, Coolidge recorded oral histories from men who lived in the West. However, even Coolidge admits that some of the stories collected "may be fables."<sup>5</sup> Nevertheless, the book remains a groundbreaking work in understanding cowboys and vaqueros in a transnational framework.

V. H. Whitlock, in his book, *Cowboys on the Llano Estacado* (1970), describes cowboy life in western Texas and eastern New Mexico during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.<sup>6</sup> He used case studies of three different men over a sixty-year period to describe ranching life in the area known as the Llano Estacado (Stalked Plains). The chronological structure is broken into three parts with a conclusion that brings the storyline to the Llano in the mid-1960s. The author's primary purpose in this book is to commit his family history to the written word. The book, therefore, is a narrative history that does not cite any archival resources. Instead, the stories are written from informal discussions that the author had with his great-uncle, uncles, their friends, and their families who lived along the Texas/New Mexico border from the 1880s to the 1940s. Because Whitlock uses only oral interviews to view cowboy life in the Llano Estacado, his book limits the historical claims that can be derived from it. Nevertheless, this book does provide a glimpse into the life on the flat, arid, often-deadly landscape in the U.S. Southwest. Assuming that the reminiscences are true, this book can be used for researchers who seek to understand how the Llano Estacado developed over one hundred years ago, and how vaqueros were part of that growth.

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<sup>5</sup> Dane Coolidge, *California Cowboys* (Tucson: The University of Arizona Press, 1939), 39.

<sup>6</sup> Vivian H. Whitlock, *Cowboys on the Llano Estacado* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2011).

At about the same time that Whitlock was committing his family history to the written page, Charles Zurhorst was finishing his manuscript that attempts to chart the history of the American cowboy. The result *The First Cowboys and Those Who Followed*, sets the cowboy in a purely U.S. context.<sup>7</sup> Zurhorst splits his chronological history into two parts, beginning in seventeenth century New England and tracing the American horseman as he makes his way across the Appalachians, eventually ending the story on the Texas plains at the turn of the twentieth century. This book situates the cowboy as a real and mythic character that navigated the American frontier. Part one, titled “The First Cowboys” describes the cowboy in heroic terms and relates his history to familiar narratives about the winning of the West that emphasize man’s supposed mastery over nature, and the triumph of civilization over savagery. Additionally, the author explains the cowboy in simple terms as a rugged individual whose work is to move cattle across the range for economic purposes. In this section Zurhorst addresses the “Mystery of the Origin” of the cowboy. Here he touches on the cowboy’s Spanish roots and notes that Mexican-Indian horsemen were already rustling cattle when the first Euro-American horsemen arrived in Texas. However, he quickly disregards this evidence because his research shows that these Mexican-Indians were not really working the cattle daily, they simply rounded them up twice per year. Zurhorst argues instead that the real cowboy is an American tradition with roots in Colonial Virginia. Part two, “Those Who Followed,” is a who’s-who of Frontier Cowboys. This section details the men who left the saddle for other jobs in the west, which include ranch owners, politicians, lawmen, and artists. Thus, while the study touches upon vaqueros, it dismisses them in favor of the

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| <sup>7</sup> Charles Zurhorst, *The First Cowboys and Those Who Followed* (New York: Abelard-Schuman, 1973).

misconceived notion that the American cowboy brought his traditions from the east coast to the American west.

David Dary's book, *Cowboy Culture: A Saga of Five Centuries*, first published in 1981, reevaluates the origins of the cowboy.<sup>8</sup> Dary argues that the time was right for completing a definitive work on cowboys because one had not been done in the five hundred years since the first cattle came to the western hemisphere in 1494. His work examines the horseman traditions in New Spain and for the first time includes the vaquero as a major character in the cowboy historical narrative. Dary explores hacienda history from sixteenth and seventeenth century New Spain and argues that the American cowboy is a reflection of this past. Dary also examines the complete history of cowboys in the context of the U.S. southwest by researching the large events and factors that shaped cowboy / vaquero culture such as the annexation of territories that became part of the States, drought, and foreign investment in business such as mining and cattle industry. Also, Dary includes a social study of the men that participated in cattle drives and sedentary ranch work, providing descriptions of clothing, food consumption and language particular to the cowboy.

Culture is central to Dary's study as well. He provides a textbook definition of cowboy culture as the "socially transmitted behavior patterns, beliefs, institutions, and all other products and thoughts included in the human endeavor involved in cattle raising."<sup>9</sup> However, the author argues that in order to truly understand cowboy culture one must also consider the "horse, saddle, branding iron, lariats, and the smell of hot coffee on an

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<sup>8</sup> David Dary, *Cowboy Culture: A Saga of Five Centuries* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1981).

<sup>9</sup> David Dary, *Cowboy Culture: A Saga of Five Centuries* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1981), xi.



cold morning.”<sup>10</sup> Furthermore, Dary contends that cowboy culture is “learned and a culture of mobility, little permanence...a frontier institution that died when the frontier died.”<sup>11</sup> Dary was the first to define the cowboy in cultural terms that cross borders, languages and centuries. In this way, Dary’s is a transnational approach that changes the way historians think about cowboys and vaqueros. Yet, in many ways Dary mythologizes the cowboy, offering little analysis of the role of race and ethnicity in shaping the interactions between cowboys over the centuries.

The transnational approach to cowboy history is best reflected in *Gauchos & the Vanishing Frontier*, where U.S. West historian Richard W. Slatta examines the significance of the gaucho, Argentina’s horseman.<sup>12</sup> Slatta explains that the gaucho’s cultural importance in modern Argentina is similar to the American cowboy’s prominence in the United States. Slatta explains that scholarship concerning the gaucho’s origins is mired in uncertainty fueled by inconsistencies between two separate ideological approaches: the Hispanist and the Americanist. The former contends that the gaucho’s cultural roots are deeply embedded in Andalusia, Spain, cultivated there by Arabian occupiers during Western Europe’s High Middle Ages. The latter views the gaucho’s evolution in a more Turnerian sense. Americanists tend to explain gaucho culture as a “New World” frontier phenomenon that took place in Argentina over the four centuries following the Spanish invasion. Some Americanists focus on indigenous influences, but most tend to emphasize the mestizo reality. Either way, the bifurcation inherent in the Americanist perspective sets the gaucho culture apart from the European model. Situating

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid, xii.

<sup>12</sup> Slatta, *Gauchos & the Vanishing Frontier*.

his study in this framework, Slatta investigates the people who identified as gauchos in the context of nineteenth century Argentina's frontier. Slatta argues that gaucho culture increasingly disappeared by the early twentieth century as elite exploitation of rural inhabitants forced modernization on them. Slatta concludes with a discussion concerning the gaucho's presence in modern-day Argentina. The author argues that faced with foreign influences on its centuries old culture, the Argentinian elite chose to celebrate the gaucho's significance to Argentine nationalism. In this way, Slatta explains the gaucho's mythic presence in late twentieth century cultural expression.<sup>13</sup>

Jack Weston examines the cowboy presence in Western cultural expression in his book *The Real American Cowboy* (1985). Weston charts the development of the actual cowboy in the American frontier in contrast to the mythic cowboy. Weston does not set out to debunk the Hollywood version of the cowboy, but rather challenges the narrow descriptions of cowboys as violent, solitary, (mostly) Euro-American males found in movies, plays, and novels created in the late nineteenth and first half of the twentieth centuries. The author accounts for these impressions by, theorizing "that workers in industrializing America needed a fantasy of preindustrial, rural society to compensate them for the loss of community and nature in their real lives."<sup>14</sup> Furthermore, Weston's revisionist history reinterprets the role that women, blacks, Mexicans, and Native peoples played in the shaping the frontier and the cattle ranching industry. Nevertheless, this book's main focus is the Anglo-cowboy that roamed the range in Texas, New Mexico and the Great Plains during the late nineteenth century, rustling cattle in an increasingly industrializing United States. Weston returns to the mythic cowboy image at the end of

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<sup>13</sup> Slatta, *Gauchos & the Vanishing Frontier*, 180.

<sup>14</sup> Jack Weston, *The Real American Cowboy*, (New York: Shocken Books, 1985), xvii.

his book and concludes that in the fading popularity of western novels and movies in the 1970s and 1980s, the cowboy was reduced to a cultural icon. Instead, cowboy culture exists in the fashion, lifestyle, and public relations image best represented by President Ronald Reagan.<sup>15</sup>

Perhaps the most important historian of the vaquero was David Weber. In his landmark studies *The Spanish Frontier in North America* (1994) and *The Mexican Frontier, 1821-1846: The American Southwest Under Mexico* (1982) Weber discusses the origins of the vaquero and his traditions by decentering them from the old Western mythic tradition and placing them within the context of Borderlands history, a field established by Herbert Eugene Bolton.<sup>16</sup> Indeed, Weber's history is important since it not only tells the history of vaqueros, but places them within the context of Spanish colonial and Mexican history. These two works are crucial for an understanding of the origins and nature of the vaquero.<sup>17</sup>

Another historian who places the vaquero within the greater context of the American West and the overall history of the United States is Jerry Thompson. In his study *Vaqueros in Blue and Gray* Thompson discusses the vaquero involvement in the Civil War as well as other conflicts. Thompson's discussion is important since it defines vaqueros as the indispensable frontier inhabitant of the Mexican far north, a figure that knew how to work the vast cattle ranges and fight in the numerous conflicts that affected the Mexican borderlands between 1821 and 1876—the dates of Mexican independence

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<sup>15</sup> Weston, *The Real American Cowboy*, 251.

<sup>16</sup> Please see: Eugene Bolton, *Bolton and the Spanish Borderlands*, (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1974).

<sup>17</sup> For more on the vaquero in the borderland context please see: David J. Weber, *The Mexican Frontier 1821-1846: the American Southwest Under Mexico* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1982); Weber, *The Spanish Frontier in North America*.

and the creation of the Porfiriato, respectively. Thus, the vaquero is a Mexican *fronterizo*, a scout and worker who patrolled the vast stretches from Nuevo Santander to California and fought against Native Americans, North Americans and “bandits”, as well as those forces that sought to dismember the young Mexican nation.<sup>18</sup>

The aforementioned studies discuss the vaquero in many different ways but many also marginalize this important historical figure. To date, there are no studies of vaqueros outside their traditional homeland (Mexico) and in positions that reflect their experiences in the post-Turnerian world. This thesis therefore places the vaquero alongside other western historical figures such as Anglo cowboys, Native Americans, miners, and settlers. The vaquero represented the origins of the cattle empires that stretched across the Texas and the Central Great Plains as well as other regions of the American southwest. The vaquero was also part of the American expansionist project and the popular representations attended to that imperialist project. Thus, through a discussion of the Wild West show and its championing of American imperialism, we can understand how and why the vaquero became part of the mythic west narrative, as well as how and why promoters of this narrative eventually erased the vaquero figure, replacing him with the bandito archetype.

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<sup>18</sup> Jerry Thompson, *Vaqueros in Blue and Gray*, (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2002).

## CHAPTER 1: VAQUEROS PERFORM THE WILD WEST

*"Between the 'cow-boy' and the 'vaquero' there is only a slight line of demarcation. The one is usually an American, inured from boyhood to the excitements and hardships of his life, and the other represents in his blood the stock of the Mexican, or it may be of the half-breed."*

- From the description of "The Vaquero of the Southwest," Buffalo Bill's Wild West show program, 1884.

On a summer day in 1886, smiling, giddy fans filed out of the circus grounds onto Grand River Avenue in Detroit, Michigan while hundreds of onlookers stood outside the stadium, unable to get tickets for Pawnee Bill's Wild West's two sold-out shows. As the audience left the show, onlookers heard their comments about Cowboys and Indians, western lady riders, and "Señor Antonio," master of the lasso and troop leader of the Mexican vaqueros.<sup>1</sup> Inside the ring the dust settled as the sun faded behind the silhouetted urban landscape. Working men dismantled the cookhouse and stables and loaded them, along with the arena and draft stock, into the carts and horse-drawn wagons that would deliver the equipment and animals to the first-section train half a mile down the road. Silence fell about the city, as the clock neared midnight and the conductors stoked the engine fires. Work-men, show managers, and performers settled into their seats for the long ride to Toledo, Ohio where they would awake the following day to perform the same tasks and the show all over again.<sup>2</sup> In car 52, equipped with roomy seats and a permanent water closet, American cowboys mingled with the bosses, the band, and the ladies who had performed in the show that day. Back at the end of the train, in car 115, the bronco

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<sup>1</sup> The Detroit Free Press, "What Detroit Thought of the Wild West," August 1, 1886.

<sup>2</sup> Please see: Transportation notes and description. Gordon W. Lille Collection, box 4, folder 5, Western History Collection, University of Oklahoma Libraries.

grooms, Cossacks, and Mexicans settled in amid the sweating, snorting, smelly buffalo, waiting for first light and a glimpse of Toledo.<sup>3</sup>

As the year came to a close, Buffalo Bill's Wild West made a two-week stand of performances at New York City's Madison Square Garden. On Sunday, December 18, 1886, William F. Cody led a celebration of his vaqueros and their Mexican heritage by providing an authentic taste of the West to the public. Cooks prepared and served *almuerzo a lo Mexicano*, a Mexican breakfast, at the Mexican annex that was new and temporary addition to Madison Square Garden. Curious easterners ate up the *chile con carne*, *picadillo con tortillas*, and *chiles rellenos*. Although Buffalo Bill intended this experience to be fun and interesting to those unfamiliar with the traditions of the Southwest, urban elites and newspaper reporters found the food unpleasant. They judged the fare as something that they imagined "the prodigal son subsisted on when he was in the hog business."<sup>4</sup>

The unfavorable response to the meal from the New York elite and press aside, the decision to hold the feast elicits several questions for the historian. First, why did William F. Cody devote an entire section in his show to vaqueros? Why did he insist on celebrating the Mexican heritage of his performers when many patrons of his shows viewed cowboys and Indians as the most important iconic figures of the Wild West? In other words, why did Cody forgo presenting a meal of standard "cowboy", chuck wagon, or "frontier" fare? Perhaps Cody respected the Mexicans' ranch-work mastery that he showcased in his historic rendition of the Wild West. Certainly, he respected the horsemanship and lasso expertise that these men wielded so much that his show

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<sup>3</sup> Please see: Train Section 1, car layout and diagrams booklet. Gordon W. Lille Collection, box 4, folder 5, Western History Collection, University of Oklahoma Libraries.

<sup>4</sup> *New York Times*, "A Mexican Breakfast," December 19, 1886.

maintained a specific Mexican episode during all thirty-three seasons (except one) that it toured. The Mexican episode had many different titles and content varied over time, from 1883 to 1916, as did every other aspect of the show.<sup>5</sup> Nevertheless, Cody consistently displayed Mexicans as ranch workers from the West—as vaqueros or Mexican cowboys. For Cody, a performative history of the Wild West could not elide their presence or history as actual participant in Mexico’s far north and the American Southwest.

The vaquero’s inclusion as a mainstay of Wild West performances was significant as Mexican-descent people were increasingly disenfranchised across the United States at the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth centuries. This process was especially felt in the American Southwest, a region that had once been part of Spain and Mexico and still contained sizable populations of Mexican-descent people. Vaqueros were an integral part of this area and contributed to its economic and social development since the arrival of the first conquistadors in the 1530s-1540s. As U.S. economic control in the American West increased after the Treaty of Guadalupe-Hidalgo in 1848, vaqueros sustained their role as indispensable cowboys and ranch workers. As the American Frontier receded, some vaqueros found a new arena for their skills in the Wild West shows. Through an analysis of advertisement posters, show programs, and newspaper reports, this chapter explores the vaquero’s representation in the Buffalo Bill Wild West Show as well as other traveling shows. The popularity of these performances relied upon a patriotic and believable narrative that mythologized the West vis-à-vis a contemporary understanding of Manifest Destiny, which supposed white western domination.

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<sup>5</sup> Titles include: A Group of Mexicans, 1884; Roping and Riding by cowboys and Mexicans, 1888; A Group of Mexicans from Old Mexico, 1894-1905. Mexicans were included in the episode, Cowboy Fun from 1884 till 1900. At that time only American cowboys were included. This same year, Mexicans were included in the episode Race of Races that lasted for only two years.

Beginning in 1883, and continuing into the 1930s, Mexicans significantly contributed to this narrative albeit in a subordinate role by performing as vaqueros in exhibitions. As Patricia Limerick has shown, vaqueros and other marginalized groups were part of this mythology although their actual roles fit more acutely into a subordinate economic reality. Vaqueros reinforced the dominant myth of American West and were part of a longer history of labor migration.<sup>6</sup>

This chapter first section discusses the historical origins of the vaquero. An integral part of the Spanish colonial project and later the Mexican national effort, vaqueros played an important role in the development of what would later become the American Southwest. When Mexico's far North became part of the United States in 1848, vaqueros entered a new environment shaped by American westward expansionism and racial thinking. The second section discusses the development of the Wild West shows within the context of other traveling performances and public entertainments during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Wild West exhibitions such as the Buffalo Bill show were an important tool of American empire as they forged an official national memory of the conquest of the West and subordination of Native Americans and Mexicans. The vaquero played an important role in this process. The third section discussed visual representations of the vaquero in show programs and advertisement posters. The images are useful to analyze racial attitudes concerning vaqueros specifically, but also Mexicans more generally, as expressed in popular print media during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

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<sup>6</sup>For social roles and subordinate economy see: Patricia Nelson Limerick. *The Legacy of Conquest: The Unbroken Past of the American West*. (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1987).



### Vaqueros in New Spain

Vaqueros existed as day-to-day ranch workers in the Spanish colonial project long before they participated as celebrities in Wild West entertainment shows. Their origins have been traced to seventeenth-century catholic missions in New Spain, where they tended to livestock.<sup>7</sup> As the missions moved to northern New Spain, territories in what are now Sonora, Chihuahua, Coahuila, Nuevo Leon and the United States Southwest, vaqueros continued to perform essential duties that focused on maintaining food supplies. They also served as Indian fighters and as auxiliaries during numerous conflicts. The vaqueros' cultural significance and legacy was so ingrained into Northern Mexican society that they were commemorated on the ten-peso note, minted by the *Banco de Sonora* between 1897 and 1911. The costumes Wild West vaqueros wore were also part of this Spanish colonial and Mexican past. Clothing and horse rigging unique to the vaquero accommodated the rough terrain and harsh climate in Mexico's northern desert. Because most Mexican ranch hands were illiterate, few, if any, first-hand written historical accounts of their experiences have been uncovered.<sup>8</sup>

Vaqueros' first historical role was centered on tending to New Spain's vast cattle ranches. These ranches, or haciendas, were an important part of New Spain's northern frontier. The cattle supplied meat and hides to the silver mines in Central Mexico. To manage the cattle and other livestock, wealthy *hacendados* employed vaqueros, whose horsemanship origin dates back to Medieval Spain. However, vaqueros as ranch workers, as men on horseback controlling cattle with ropes and teamwork, demonstrate a talent that originated in the Americas over the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. By the

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<sup>7</sup> Richard Slatta, *Comparing Cowboys & Frontiers*, (New Haven: Yale, 1990), 74.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 82.

middle of the eighteenth century great numbers of cattle roamed free through out New Spain. Comanche and other Indian nations threatened Mission populations and cattle herds. In order to contain the cattle close to the missions the Franciscan missionaries developed new herding and ranching techniques.<sup>9</sup>

One of the missionaries' main objectives was to convert *Indios* to Catholicism. Indians lived, learned, and worked on these northern outposts. However, the missionaries taught local indigenous populations more than just Western religion. They instructed them on how to cultivate agriculture using European methods. The friars also taught Indians how to raise livestock such as cattle, horses, sheep, and hogs. To simplify the work and increase production, the ranch hands worked as laborers on horseback. Thus the first vaqueros were actually Indians.<sup>10</sup> However, as ranch work spread and the need for more vaqueros increased, mestizos and Spanish creoles (Spaniards born in Mexico) entered the labor force. These men were often young, poor, single men. They did not have families to protect or for whom they needed to provide. This made the vaquero mobile and swift and also allowed him to work the range and ranches in northern New Spain and in the frontier regions of California, Texas and New Mexico. Since missions were often located near ranches, settlements, and presidios (forts), vaqueros were useful in a large variety of tasks. For example, vaqueros from Paso del Norte would join forces with other groups from Mesilla and Las Cruces and go hunt buffalo on the eastern plains near the Texas Panhandle.<sup>11</sup> To survive on their own far from towns and missions vaqueros would braid their own rope, build their own saddles and craft their own

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<sup>9</sup> José Cisneros, *Riders Across the Centuries: Horsemen of the Spanish Borderlands* (El Paso: Texas Western Press, 1984), 79.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 92.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 142.

*chapparreras* (chaps). As a result, vaqueros such as those from the El Paso region were equally if not better suited for ranch work than their northern Spanish creole counterparts.<sup>12</sup>

Ideas about race influenced labor patterns and determined occupations in New Spain. Spaniards and creoles ascribed racial stereotypes to mestizos and other non-whites (e.g., Africans and *Indios*) in New Spain since the beginning of conquistador expeditions in the early sixteenth century. For example, in the *mesta* code in 1574 Spaniards barred non-whites from many daily life events such as riding horses.<sup>13</sup> Over the centuries, Spaniards and creoles considered mestizos to be untrustworthy, criminal and ignorant by birth. Subsequently they similarly stereotyped vaqueros because of their mixed race descent. The elites classified many vaqueros as mestizos. However, the legal bans on the movement and labor of non-whites proved difficult to enforce in northern New Spain and employers often ignored them. As ranching demands increased coupled with Spaniards' disdain for manual labor, mestizos, Indians, and blacks were allowed to ride horses and to become the primary ranch workers, and inevitably some of the best horsemen in New Spain.<sup>14</sup>

Throughout the seventeenth century, Spanish exploration into Northern New Spain increased. In many ways determined ranchers worked to expand this northern frontier in order to find grazing land to accommodate the increasing size of the cattle herds. Although the ranchers are often noted for leading the charge north, they did not go it alone. Because Indian bands such as the Comanche controlled the territory, these

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Joe S. Graham, *El Rancho in South Texas: Continuity and change from 1750* (Denton: University of North Texas, 1994), 15.

<sup>14</sup> Richard W. Slatta, *Cowboys of the Americas* (New Haven: Yale, 1990), 38.

expeditions almost always included mission and military personnel. The expeditions were centered on the religious necessity inherent in the missions. The military presence established presidios, military outposts to defend the interlopers. The ranches also served as residence and workplace for vaqueros.<sup>15</sup> Nevertheless, these expeditions did not only rely on vaqueros to be laborers. These Indian horsemen also participated as fighters and soldiers for the Spanish military. Indian involvement in all aspects of these Northern expeditions helped to support the multipurpose of the presidios. They protected the missions, worked as ranch laborers, and acted as scouts for expeditions into Indian controlled territories.<sup>16</sup>

As John Tutino has shown, capitalism arrived in Northern New Spain early thanks to the increased global reach of Mexican silver.<sup>17</sup> The vaquero was part of global capitalism before 1848; vaqueros managed cattle herds that fed the mines of New Spain. In the nineteenth century, after Mexican independence, vaqueros continued their roles as ranch workers but the breakdown of Spanish rule and the haphazard and weak implantation of Mexican power in the far north meant that vaqueros also functioned as soldiers and scouts. However, their horsemanship skills were superb. After the Treaty of Guadalupe-Hidalgo, vaqueros continued in their task as ranch workers but were increasingly integrated into the North American economic system. By the mid to late nineteenth century, vaqueros had graduated from the cattle roundup system to regular employment as ranch hands in the hundreds of cattle ranches that dotted the Trans-Mississippi West. It was at this point that they entered the world of Buffalo Bill.

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<sup>15</sup> Graham, *El Rancho in South Texas*, 7.

<sup>16</sup> Graham, *El Rancho in South Texas*, 8.

<sup>17</sup> John Tutino, *Making a New World: Founding Capitalism in the Bajío and Spanish North America* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), 317.

### Wild West Shows

Wild West exhibitions in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries centered on representations of actual events that transpired in the American Frontier. The frontier, as Turner had proclaimed, was closed in 1890.<sup>18</sup> However, Wild West performances would mythologize the American West in numerous ways. Many of the episodes in the first performances during the 1880s focused on settler immigrants who participated in Westward expansion such as “Oklahoma” Payne, advertised in show programs as the “Progressive Pioneer.”<sup>19</sup> The show also celebrated rugged individuals such as Con Grover and Buffalo Bill. However, the shows represented American expansionism and exceptionalism of men such as these in contrast to the American Indian and the Mexican. Wild West shows set aside Native Peoples and Mexicans as being present in the West when white settlers arrived. However, Indians and Mexicans were part of the past; the American cowboy was a civilizing force.<sup>20</sup>

Wild West shows demonstrated and often celebrated the horsemanship and other skills that these vaqueros possessed. However, by the late 1890s they were considered relics of the frontier past. Furthermore, the shows contrasted the American “patriotic devotion” to expanding into and developing the West with Indian and Mexican “savage resistance” that U.S. settlers and military encountered on the frontier. Reenactments such as “Illustrating a Prairie Immigrant Train Crossing the Plains” exhibited this native resistance. The program explains that the immigrant train will be “attacked by marauding

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<sup>18</sup> Frederick Jackson Turner, *The Frontier in American History* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1921), 9.

<sup>19</sup> Buffalo Bill’s Wild West show program, 1884.

<sup>20</sup> See the section on “The Demography of Mestizaje” in John M. Nieto-Phillips, *The Language of Blood: The Making of Spanish-American Identity in New Mexico, 1880s-1930s* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2004), 25-27.

Indians and repulsed by Buffalo Bill and a number of scouts and cowboys.”<sup>21</sup> This demonstration reveals how the show utilized American expansionism as a central theme in the show. Moreover, in the 1890s Cody added demonstrations of modern military armament to the show. These additions also demonstrated how U.S. modernization at that time was a continuation of American Empire in the West and in other parts of the world such as Cuba and the Philippines during the Spanish-American War. Although Cody and others included these themes in their shows to demonstrate American exceptionalism, they also incorporated ideas such as these because they were revealing their true lived experience on the American Frontier.

William F. Cody (1846-1917) worked in a variety of jobs in the late nineteenth century including Pony Express rider, Civil War soldier, and as a hunting expedition scout. Cody earned his nickname Buffalo Bill when he worked as a buffalo hunter for the Kansas Pacific Railroad Company. Cody killed nearly five thousand buffalo in just a few years, supposedly to provide meat to feed the railroad workers. Although Cody was born at Le Claire in the Iowa territory and lived as a child with his family for many years in Canada, his life on the Plains primarily took place in Kansas, where he was raised, and later as an adult in Nebraska where he owned and worked a ranch. Cody did not initially set out to begin a show business career. That aspect of his life began after he met Edward Z.C. Judson, better known as Ned Buntline.

Buntline was a voluminous writer, drafting more than four hundred novels during the late nineteenth century. These narratives often included fictitious accounts of actual people in heroic accounts in American history such as Davey Crocket. Buntline was impressed by Cody’s emerging popularity as a frontiersman and knew that if he wrote a

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<sup>21</sup> Buffalo Bill’s Wild West show program, 1899.

dime novel about Cody's exploits, real or imagined, there would be money in it.<sup>22</sup> For these reasons, Buntline wrote his first story about Cody in *Buffalo Bill, the King of Border Men* first published in 1869. Although this text was not published in book form until 1881 after Cody became well known nationally, it did set the trajectory for Buffalo Bill as a performer.<sup>23</sup> Cody, at Buntline's behest, joined "The Scouts of the Prairie," one of the first Wild West entertainment shows, at Chicago in 1872. Cody toured with this group until he created his own show, Buffalo Bill's Wild West in 1882 at North Platte, Nebraska.

Cody used the contacts that he developed during his tenure with Buntline to establish a tour schedule that spread across the US and eventually Europe. Cody joined forces with Nate Salsbury and John M. Burke as managers and toured his show from 1883 to 1896, the year before his death. Cody never added the word "show" to the title of his Buffalo Bill's Wild West. This deliberate choice was central to Cody's idea that his program would tell the real history of the American West, which celebrated American Empire through out the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The 1883 show program describes the events as "scenes from the prairie" and the 1884 show program introduction states that the show will, "illustrate life as witnessed on the plains." In this way, Cody and show management promoted Buffalo Bill's Wild West as historic truth.<sup>24</sup>

Cody's show accurately portrayed the American West in the early years because the personnel reenacted actual events. For example, Cody participated in the western expansion as a frontiersman and the show included many of his adventures such as pony

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<sup>22</sup> Robert A. Carter, *Buffalo Bill Cody: The Man Behind the Legend* (New York: John Wiley & Sons Inc., 2000), 141.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 176.

<sup>24</sup> In the 1899 show program introduction Nate Salsbury writes, referring to Cody, "The historian on horseback has Truth for his amanuensis."

express exhibitions, buffalo hunts, and the “First Scalp for Custer.”<sup>25</sup> Other participants, such as Annie Oakley and Sitting Bull also demonstrated their experience in the West. Although the narratives produced for the show were specifically intended to demonstrate “the pressures of the white man [and] the advance of civilization” others were also included.<sup>26</sup> For example, the Mexican vaquero played a significant role in Cody’s version of the West from the very beginning. The vaqueros remained popular with crowds throughout the U.S. and Europe every year that Cody toured. However, they were not always included as part of the modern West. Instead, the show represented these Mexicans as a conquered people. The U.S. had seized Mexican land, so to had the people and their culture. For example, although Mexican and American cowboys participated simultaneously in demonstrations of horsemanship and rope trick displays, they were not organized as a homogenous group. Instead, they were set apart, often by description. Programs described vaqueros and remnants on the plains from Old Mexico, while American cowboys were considered current participants in history because many of Roosevelt’s Rough Riders were cowboys from Texas ranches. Nevertheless, over time the cast of characters and the events that the show managers chose to portray drastically changed and began to include people and events that did not appear in the American West, such as Arabs, gauchos, and African bushman. Furthermore, the storyline began to represent and support American expansionism by demonstrating modern U.S. military might. Although including this theme may seem out of place for a show that attempts to

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<sup>25</sup> This was a reenactment episode where in Cody kills Yellow Hand, a Native American. Supposedly, Cody killed and scalped Yellow Hand as retribution for the death of George Custer at the Battle at Little Big Horn. Buffalo Bill’s Wild West reenacted this scene in the early years, but by 1900 it was no longer part of the program. Some people disputed whether or not Cody actually killed Yellow Hand. Cody, by the late nineteenth century, was beginning to exploit his love of Native Americans instead of his record as an Indian killer. For more please see Robert A. Cater, *Buffalo Bill Cody: The Man Behind the Legend* (New York: Jon Wiley & Sons, Inc., 2000), 196.

<sup>26</sup> See introduction for the 1886 Buffalo Bill’s Wild West show program.



historicize the nineteenth century American frontier, documentation elucidates the motivations behind the decision.

Pawnee Bill's Historic Wild West, like Cody's show, included a segment in the program that showcased modern military armory. However, show owners and managers did not contrive the idea to include these demonstrations on their own. Gordon Lille (a.k.a. Pawnee Bill) accepted monetary support from the U.S. government in the early 1900s, payments that helped him continue to tour his show in the waning days of Wild West exhibition popularity. The Diplomatic Corps in Washington D.C. offered to Lillie military armament and service personnel to participate in Pawnee Bill's Historic Wild West. Lillie writes in his journal that, "The U.S. is desirous of stimulating interest in military affairs, and I have already been assured that they will furnish all of our military contingent and defray the cost to us."<sup>27</sup> Although traveling Wild West shows struggled to remain current and attractive to international audiences in the twentieth century, many entertainment entrepreneurs developed shows that imitated the ones which Cody and Lille toured throughout the U.S., Canada and Europe.

An official list of Wild West shows compiled and published in 1970 shows the various forms of traveling Wild West entertainment from the 1880s through the 1940s.<sup>28</sup> The similar programming and show names such as Buckskin Bill's Wild West (1900), Buffalo and Wild West (1902), and Buffalo Tom's Wild West demonstrates that many show producers chose to imitate Buffalo Bill's Wild West. Cody's show also is noted for spin-off entertainment shows such as Dr. W. F. Carver's Wild America (1889-1893),

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<sup>27</sup> Gordon Lillie Collection, box 4, folder 5, Western History Collections, University of Oklahoma Libraries.

<sup>28</sup> Don Russell, *The Wild West: A History of the Wild West Shows* (Fort Worth: Amon Carter Museum of Western Art, 1970), 121-127.

Buck Taylor's Wild West (1894) and Mexican Joe's Wild West (1888). Carver, Taylor, and Mexican Joe (José Barrera) had each become famous as Wild West entertainers while working in Cody's show. Later, entrepreneurs chose to capitalize on their talent and Western themed entertainment popularity in the U.S. and Europe.

Although Cody's show helped to propagate Wild West exhibitions it did so within a context of popular traveling entertainment that existed in the U.S. since the mid-eighteenth century. Before Buffalo Bill hired Indians, vaqueros, and military marksmen and carted them across the continent on train, other entertainment genres such as circuses and minstrel shows were already traveling the rails. Although the circus was pioneered in London in the 1760s, it was imported to the United States in the early 1800s. The modern circus, which "combines the exhibition of exotic beasts with horsemanship and gymnastics," surfaced in the 1830s.<sup>29</sup> The development and completion of the intercontinental railroad in the 1860s helped to bring these shows to America's western hinterlands, however, by then circuses had already established a popular following on the East coast.

These early American "myths on wheels" included Den Stone's Circus and Tyler's Indian Exhibition (1850s).<sup>30</sup> Perhaps the most well known circus at that time, P. T. Barnum's circus, also included a frontier theme such as the "Grand Buffalo Hunt" in the 1840s. Even though the show at Hoboken, New Jersey on August 31, 1843 ended with a small herd of buffalo getting loose and injuring a few and killing one spectator, the show was a monetary and critical success. Barnum's rendition of the West did not just

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<sup>29</sup> Robert M. Lewis, *From Traveling Show to Vaudeville: Theatrical Spectacle in America, 1830-1910*, (Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 2003), 108.

<sup>30</sup> Antoinette McCloskey Gustafson, *The Image of the West in American Popular Performance*. Dissertation, New York University, 1988, 158.

include buffalo, but also included a band and Mr. C. D. French in Indian costume.<sup>31</sup> 38

French's job was to lasso a yearling buffalo. This demonstration where in an Indian on horseback lassoed a buffalo showed the origins of cowboy and vaquero ranching traditions, even if it did not include an ethnic Native American.<sup>32</sup>

Beginning in 1884, the same year that Cody began his second year touring Buffalo Bill's Wild West, the five Ringling brothers introduced their carnival and circus at Baraboo, Wisconsin. The Ringling Brothers Circus immediate success eliminated many of their competitors and in 1907 they purchased Barnum and Bailey's Greatest Show on Earth.<sup>33</sup> In 1900 Alfred T. Ringling wrote an article titled. "What the public does not see at a Circus." This article demonstrated that shows such as the Ringling Brothers & Barnum and Bailey Circus implemented the same traveling techniques as Wild West shows such as Cody's. From the multiple-train transportation to the big-tent displays, all types of traveling entertainment operated similarly. For example, Cody's show, the Ringling Brothers, and many others' first public interactions began with a parade on the town's main street, with a "long cavalcade of hundreds of horses, uniformed people, and gaily trapped animals."<sup>34</sup> Although the Ringling Brothers' primarily focused on human trainers interacting with exotic animals they did not ignore Wild West themes. For instance, José Barrera, as many other horsemen at the time, periodically worked in the Ringling Brothers show and found success and popularity

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<sup>31</sup> Cody's show and many others always had a band that played music during the demonstrations to add dramatic effect.

<sup>32</sup> Antoinette McCloskey Gustafson, *The Image of the West in American Popular Performance*. Dissertation, New York University, 1988, 158.

<sup>33</sup> Lewis, *From Traveling Show to Vaudeville*, 137.

<sup>34</sup> Alfred T. Ringling, "What the Public Does Not See at a Circus," *National Magazine* 12, 1900, 189-92.

performing as a vaquero.<sup>35</sup> These examples clearly demonstrate that Cody's show and others like it were steeped in circus tradition in the US. Furthermore, circus popularity and profitability continued well into the twentieth century as Wild West shows popularity waned in the 1910s. For this reason Cody chose to merge his show with Sells-Floto circus for the 1914 and 1915 seasons, advertised as the Sells-Floto-Buffalo Bill (Himself) Shows. The list of Wild West shows that merged with circuses in the first two decades of the twentieth century reveal how horsemanship demonstrations remained significant to traveling entertainment. However, vaquero traditions and legacy are perhaps most visible in modern rodeo.

Portions of Buffalo Bill's Wild West show, such as "Cowboy Fun" and "A Group of Mexicans" exhibited horsemanship and rope/lasso mastery that remains central to modern rodeos in the twenty first century. Although Wild West shows and modern rodeo share late nineteenth century origins, there are distinct differences. For example, the Wild West show traveled as a cohesive troop of individuals from town to town. Conversely, rodeos tend to be set in a place and the participants travel to perform in the rodeo. Also, rodeo sportsmen competed for awards or prizes and the Wild West performers did not. Rodeos popularity increased during the first decades of the twentieth century while Wild West entertainment waned. For this reason, many Wild West performers left their positions in the traveling shows to participate in rodeos. These cowboys and vaqueros competed to make more money, and in many instances hoped to

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<sup>35</sup> "Reminiscences of Mrs. Joe (Effie) Barrera," Glen Shirley Collection, Folder, Mexican Joe, Donald C. & Elizabeth M. Dickinson Research Center at the National Cowboy & Western Heritage Museum.

earn an offer to work in the burgeoning movie industry as talented horsemen and lasso throwers.<sup>36</sup>

Some of the first modern rodeos often occurred during holiday weekends such as the Fourth of July at event such as Cheyenne Frontier Days in 1887. Cody staged the Old Glory Blowout in North Platte, Nebraska on July 4, 1882 that showcased bronco-riding, bull riding and roping. This event, later named the Buffalo Bill Rodeo, continues to be the central event at Nebraskaland Days in North Platte.<sup>37</sup> However, rodeo's origins have a past that has been documented to antiquity. Events such as bull-leaping and bulldogging, made famous by African American cowboy Bill Pickett, were well known in Minoan Crete and Thessaly and later in Rome between 41 and 45 C.E.<sup>38 39</sup> Furthermore, rodeo developed in North America during the late sixteenth century in Mexico as the *charreada* by the landed gentry known as *charros*. These events known as *ramadas* (cattle round-ups) occurred on saint's days. This is arguably the origin of U.S. rodeos taking place on holiday weekends.<sup>40</sup> Wild West entertainment, then, is not the origins of American rodeo. However, Buffalo Bill's Wild West and Cody's economic promotion of horsemanship and lasso experts is credited with expanding rodeos reach into modern American culture as a competitive sport. Without Cody implementing commercial incentive to rodeo it is

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<sup>36</sup> Gustafson, *The Image of the West in American Popular Performance*, 257.

<sup>37</sup> See [http://nebraskalanddays.com/?page\\_id=86](http://nebraskalanddays.com/?page_id=86), accessed May 6, 2013.

<sup>38</sup> Gustafson, *The Image of the West in American Popular Performance*, 258.

<sup>39</sup> Bill Pickett performed with the Miller Brothers 101 Ranch Real Wild West. His bulldogging performances became legendary on the Wild West circuit. His performance was the only one in the show that impressed Mexican audiences in Mexico City in 1908. This was the only Wild West show that traveled to and performed in Mexico. Please see Michael Wallis, *The Real Wild West: The 101 Ranch and the Creation of the American West* (New York, St. Martin's Press, 1999), 322.

likely that rodeo would have remained a local folk amusement and not become a common contemporary popular entertainment.<sup>41</sup>

### Picturing the Rope-trick Horseman

Buffalo Bill's Wild West show made use of a variety of images to promote its appearances and tours. These images, often displayed in programs and posters, are important sources for analyzing the issue of race. While the show's vaqueros were an important part of the show's depiction of the American West, they cannot be divorced from their subordinate or secondary racial position. Indeed, the vaquero's role mirrored their real position in American history. Their depictions also reflected traditional masculine images of Mexicans. Moreover, as the show evolved, so did the vaquero position. They became more "Mexican" and less American, a process that reflected mounting racial discrimination in the United States.

The racial depictions of vaqueros are best seen through their representation in the official programs from the Wild West shows. The 1883 Buffalo Bill Wild West program describes The American cowboy, simply labeled, "The Cow Boy," as, "A class without whose aid the great grazing Pampas of the West would be valueless.... How often spoken of, how falsely imagined, how greatly despised (where not known), how little understood." The cowboys in this show, "will be the genuine cattle herders...who have earned an honorable title."<sup>42</sup> Alongside this description, an image titled "Terror of the Stampede," shows American cowboys struggling to regulate an out-of-control cattle herd.

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<sup>40</sup> Gustafson, *The Image of the West in American Popular Performance*, 262.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 267.

<sup>42</sup> 1883 Buffalo Bill's Wild West program, 10.

They are in motion, wide-eyed, and staring at the viewer, their faces identifiable.

Although both the American cowboy and the vaquero worked together on ranches and cattle drives in the West and they participated in the same exhibitions in Wild West entertainment shows, the representations in the programs are decidedly different. A paragraph titled, “Vaqueros of the Southwest,” describes the Mexican vaquero as, “Ordinarily a peaceful young fellow, but when the whiskey is present in undue proportions he is a good individual to avoid. At heart he is not bad.... True types of this peculiar class, seen nowhere else than on the plains, will be among the attractions of the show.”<sup>43</sup> A drawing titled “MEXICANS,” which accompanies this description shows five vaqueros on the range.<sup>44</sup> These men are only recognizable by their telltale sombreros and broad dark mustaches. They are motionless shady characters, with nondescript, unidentifiable faces, literally obscured in darkness. Nevertheless, vaqueros participated in the shows, demonstrating their talents and even wore traditional clothing. Additionally, they were described in the programs. Their presence in both suggests that the show’s observers, promoters and directors valued them. Nevertheless, show promoters separated the vaqueros from white cowboys with racialized nationalism. The vaqueros were described as being from “old Mexico.” The images depicting the vaqueros as lazy and Mexican (mestizo) reflect the racial stereotypes that vaqueros faced for centuries.

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<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 11.

<sup>44</sup> See Figure 1.1.



Figure 1.1. Mexican Vaqueros in Buffalo Bill's Wild West show program, 1884.

Beginning in 1884, the program publicized show headliners in large bold print. "Buck" Taylor is listed as "King of the Cowboys." The program also contained a less specific list of characters titled "A host of Western Celebrities." The cowboys were separated again here as "Round-up of Western Cow-Boys," and "A group of Mexicans." Although they were divided as distinct categories the cowboys and vaqueros participated in the same events. Both demonstrated their mastery of horsemanship and rope-tricks in bronco riding, lassoing steers, and a quarter-mile race between one another and Indians. The show's finale reenacted an Indian attack on a settler cabin. Even though the Mexicans are identified as others, they are included with the group of cowboys that assist Buffalo Bill as he heroically rescues the settlers.



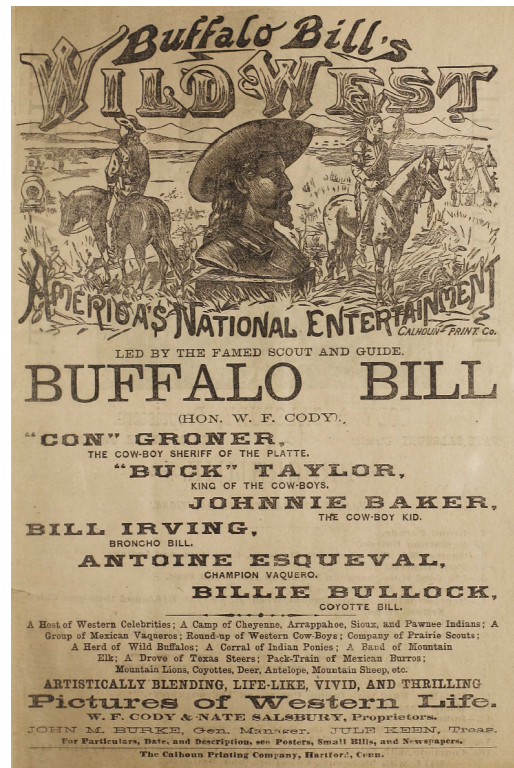


Figure 1.2. Antoine Esqueval, Buffalo Bill's Wild West program, 1885.

The 1885 program reveals the vaqueros' popularity. Antoine Esqueval, listed as "Champion Vaquero," appears with "Buck" Taylor and Buffalo Bill in bold script at the top of the program, was singled out as a prominent figure in the show.<sup>45</sup> The following year, the name was changed to Antonio Esquivel, "Champion Vaquero of Mexico." Esquivel was a prominent and popular vaquero rope-trick man and the first noted Mexican-descent celebrity with this skill. The 1886 program includes a new section after the "Vaqueros of the Southwest," paragraph titled, "Tony Esquivel-Champion Vaquero Rider," which describes Esquivel as being, "Born in Mexico, and is descended from the best Castillian and native stock, dating through the history of the section along the Rio Grande. He possesses all the sterling qualities for which the higher bred rancheros are

<sup>45</sup> See figure 1.2.

famed. As a Pony Express Rider, Herdsman, and Horseman, he stands unexcelled.” In the years to come Vicente Oropeza and Jose “Mexican Joe” Barrera would follow in his footsteps, being billed as Mexico’s vaquero champions in Buffalo Bill’s Wild West, Pawnee Bill’s Wild West, and the 101 Ranch Real Wild West shows.

The choice to link Esquivel with “Castilian stock” in this description, combined with Mexicans being removed from the “Attack on a Settler’s Cabin” in 1886, reflects late nineteenth-century racial attitudes. During that era legislators maintained a goal for racial homogeneity in the United States. For example, residents in the New Mexico Territory fought for statehood, but were denied because large ethnic-Mexican populations resided there. “Mexican” signified mestizo, or mixed blood, while “American” indicated blood purity and whiteness.<sup>46</sup> Castilian, on the other hand, referred to a Spanish ancestry and would have been understood as whiteness to the contemporary observer. As the twentieth century approached, and more immigrants than ever entered the United States, Euro-American racial ideologies forged nationality with ethnicity. As a result, it was not enough that Mexican-descent people had lived in the U.S. for generations; that did not make them “American” in the eyes of turn-of-the-century society. Instead, they were seen as nationally and ethnically Mexican. Their mestizo origins threatened racial hegemony. Increasingly, popular and political dialogues made Mexicans and Mexican-Americans unwelcomed invaders who shared no historical or cultural associations with other Americans.<sup>47</sup> From 1886 forward, Buffalo Bill’s Wild West and other Wild West traveling entertainment shows reflected U.S. anxieties concerning Mexican nationals and immigrants by predominantly referring to them as Spanish. For example, when

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<sup>46</sup> Anthony Mora, *Border Dilemmas: Racial and National Uncertainties in New Mexico, 1848-1912* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), 276.

<sup>47</sup> Mora, *Border Dilemmas*, 281.

participants were referred to as Mexican, they were said to be from “Old Mexico” and not the West. In this way vaqueros were severed from the American cowboy and increasingly connected to racial otherness.

This racial otherness also had a masculine component. As Gail Bederman has shown, late nineteenth century ideas concerning masculinity centered on virulent violence and interracial conflict, both a consistent component of the Wild West shows. Moreover, manliness, a more refined version of masculinity, required civilized morality that was best represented by white American men.<sup>48</sup> Viewed in this way, it becomes clear that racial otherness separates not only white men from nonwhites socially but also culturally and morally. Furthermore, the distinctions that the shows presented between Mexican vaqueros and American cowboys, for example, demonstrate a distinction between the supposed evolved white races in relation to the under-civilized Mexican. However, late nineteenth century attitudes concerning American manliness and racial superiority were not completely derived from European ancestry. Bederman suggests that Social Darwinist ideologies, commonplace at the time, supported many Americans’ belief that they retained superior racial traits from their British or Germanic heritage. However, late nineteenth century intellectuals such as Theodore Roosevelt and Mayne Reid argued that American whiteness was a new race and therefore exceptional.<sup>49</sup> The racial mixing in North America combined with the uniquely American experience of “winning the West,” placed Americans in a special category and separated them racially from Europeans.<sup>50</sup> Of course, the races that mixed to make the exceptional American were only European.

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<sup>48</sup> Gail Bederman, *Manliness and Civilization: A Cultural History of Gender and Race in the United States, 1880-1917* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1995), 178.

<sup>49</sup> Bederman describes Mayne Reid’s *Boy Hunters* and Theodore Roosevelt’s *The Winning of the West* as defining American exceptionalism ideas concerning American racial superiority in the 1880s.

<sup>50</sup> Bederman, *Manliness and Civilization*, 179.

African Americans, Mexicans and Native People did not fit into Reid or Roosevelt's version of frontier history and the modern civilized American.<sup>51</sup> Viewed in this way, Wild West show exhibitions that simultaneously include American cowboys and Mexican vaqueros while explicitly expressing racial otherness clearly demonstrate Reid and Roosevelt's ideas concerning manliness and civilization.

Traveling entertainment in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries brought with them themes concerning the American advancement into the West and the closing of the frontier. Shows such as Buffalo Bill's Wild West attempted to create a historical narrative that included actual characters from the West including cowboys, Indians, settlers, and vaqueros. Although Cody and others provided a place for vaqueros in their programs, the Mexican cowboy met challenges such as racial stereotypes fueled by Social Darwinism that fit the common social structure in the United States at that time. Nevertheless, audiences favored the talents of vaqueros in these Wild West shows generally, and in some cases the vaqueros' popularity helped them to attain celebrity status in the U.S. and Europe. The vaqueros were, despite all their skills, employees who could be fired at will by management. Their experiences provide an interesting look at daily life in the Wild West shows and also reveal the different ways Mexican-descent performers were treated in comparison to white cowboys. Yet, as we will see, the vaquero experience was also influenced by events that took place outside the Wild West shows.

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<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

## CHAPTER 2: BUFFALO BILL, EMPIRE, AND THE AMERICAN IMAGINATION

*“So long as we remain free to roam for new worlds – be they in the sciences, art, material progress or human betterment – there will always be a Wild West show, with Buffalo Bill at the head, in the arena of America’s shared national imagination.”*

- George Weissman, Chairman of the Board and Chief Executive Officer, Phillip Morris Incorporated.  
*From Buffalo Bill and the Wild West*, 1981.

The reaction to the outcome of the Spanish-American War assumed a confident if not completely enthusiastic response in the United States. Predominantly optimistic news reports characterized the U.S. military action in Cuba as necessary and successful. On July 18, 1898 the Chicago Tribune article, “United States Flag Hoisted in Santiago,” described the valiant American efforts and the response by locals. As the US infantry and cavalry escorted US General Shafter into town “The balconies were crowded with people. Many of them waived welcome to our men. Others showed their satisfaction more quietly. From none came threats or words of discontent. Even the Spanish soldiers massed about took the arrival of the victors calmly.”<sup>1</sup> This report would have the reader believe that locals in Cuba, and even Spanish military personnel, readily accepted an US occupational presence. Arguably, the post-war reports that pervaded US newspapers in 1898 and 1899 greatly influenced American memory of the events and the popular American interpretation concerning the Spanish American War. The “Splendid Little War” would become an affirmation of Manifest Destiny and a celebration of American republican values, themes that were prevalent in justifying America’s westward expansion.

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<sup>1</sup> *Chicago Tribune*, “United States Flag Hoisted in Santiago,” July 18, 1898.

Influenced by American military adventures abroad, traveling Wild West shows increasingly incorporated American military exhibitions in their programs at the turn of the twentieth century. This development helped to increase public support for US expansion outside the continental United States. The increasingly militarized performances also continued the dominant theme of American exceptionalism, a process that took place at the expense of other ethnic groups, especially Mexicans. While the Buffalo Bill show still presented Mexican vaqueros, they were increasingly depicted as the racial other and placed alongside other foreign horse riders such as Mongols. As noted in the previous chapter, foreign events such as the 1910 Mexican Revolution often influenced negative portrayals of Mexicans and affected the show's vaqueros themselves. Yet while the Mexican Revolution was a confirmation of the supposed foreign savagery of the mestizo and indigenous Mexicans, the Spanish-American War of 1898 was an affirmation of America's duty to guide the "inferior" former Spanish colonial subjects.

This chapter explores the ways in which news media, periodicals, and live entertainment integrated representations of US military strength and masculinity in the 1890s and in the years immediately following the Spanish-American War, with a focus on depictions of Mexicans and "Hispanics" that became conflated as Spanish-speaking others. These images helped to maintain US exceptionalism in the American imagination during the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth centuries. As a result the popular narrative that emerged enhanced existing racialized nationalism in the United States that further marginalized Mexicans and Mexican-descent people as well as other foreigners. The first part explores the transformation of the show programs. Images in these show programs transformed representations of Cody into a more militarized figure

as the turn of the century approached. The programs also depict an increasing sense of American empire. This perception, influenced by the growing American presence in Latin America, would also help transform the Vaquero from his position as a vital part of the American West to an accessory of empire. At the same time, vaqueros were increasingly portrayed as docile figures. The second part explores how the influence of Teddy Roosevelt and the 1898 War with Spain helped militarize the Wild West Show. This development took place as attendance waned due to the increasing attraction of film as well as the audiences' thirst for new and exotic entertainment. The war with Spain helped fill these needs but also as well the growing popularization of overseas empire. The inclusion of exotic horse riders from distant lands helped invigorate the show but also reinforced the dominant trope of American exceptionalism.

### The Program of Empire

During its first years the show primarily depicted historical accounts concerning interactions between American settlers and Native Peoples. To that end, programs focused on Cody's frontiersman persona and experience. However, as the US military flexed its muscle in events such as the Spanish-American War, the show began to display Cody's military background and connections. An analysis of three successive show programs illustrates these transformations.

Programs covers from 1883 through 1892 depict Buffalo Bill within a Western American context. The drawings, mostly in color, position a large portrait of Cody in the center of flora and fauna still-life imagery. Some drawings, such as the cover to the 1892

program, place Cody at the center of two images that demonstrate pastoral daily life on the Great Plains.<sup>2</sup> The top image displays an Indian in traditional dress on horseback surveying the landscape upon which roams a grazing buffalo herd. In the background evergreen trees and a mountain scape fade into atmospheric perspective. The bottom image shows two cowboys approaching a six-horse drawn stagecoach driven by two men. These four men wave to one another as if their paths crossed unintentionally. These show program covers set the scene for what audiences can expect to see: historic accounts of the Wild West. These accounts portrayed a version of the West with Cody as the center of attention. Illustrated at a time when the war between American settlers and Native Americans was winding down, the 1893 program hints at the changes to come.

The 1893 program, however, is more descriptive and reflects a growing American exceptionalism as well as a recasting of the West as a place of overt violence and savagery that men such as Cody helped to tame. Similar to previous programs the 1893 program cover places Cody's portrait at the center with images of two episodes from the show audiences would see in the exhibition.<sup>3</sup> The top image includes Buffalo Bill and an obscured individual on horseback hunting two stampeding buffalo with handguns. The bottom image includes a six-horse drawn stagecoach with two drivers, similar to previous program covers. However, this image includes a group of Indians firing arrows at the coach, while the drivers and the men inside the carriage shoot back with pistols and long guns. In the distance a group of five cowboys led by Cody close in while shooting rifles at the Indians. This image likely represents the episode in the show titled, "Illustrating a Prairie Emigrant Train Crossing the Plains." The program describes this demonstration as

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<sup>2</sup> See: Figure 3.1.

<sup>3</sup> See Figure 3.2.



an “Attack by marauding Indians repulsed by Buffalo Bill with Scouts and Cowboys.”

Although the show included the Prairie Emigrant Train episode throughout the 1880s violent images such as this did not accompany the program until 1893. As the show reflected American militarism, violence and imperialism in this way, it also revealed common attitudes in the US during the late nineteenth century concerning racial otherness. Cody’s gaze, what Mary Louis Pratt calls “the monarch-of-all-I-see,” transformed the American West into a spectacle with Cody as some sort of conquering hero.<sup>4</sup>

The 1893 show also came at a time when the frontier closed and Native Americans were being rapidly placed in reservations. The Indian threat was no more; however audiences still enjoyed hearing the tales of hardy pioneers traveling across the Great Plains and fending off savage Indians. Increasing industrialization in the United States fed this public memory for a time when brave pioneers fought against primitive and violent peoples. It was a longing for a time that had never really existed since Native American attacks against stagecoaches were exceedingly rare and almost solely prompted by U.S. army and settler violence against innocent Native Americans in the first place. The program also appeared at a time when American interest in foreign adventures was increasing. The regime of Porfirio Diaz in Mexico had paved the way for increasing American investment in that country. Moreover, Latin America, at least the Central American States and the Caribbean, were increasingly falling into the North American

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<sup>4</sup> Mary Louise Pratt, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* (London: Routledge, 1992), 1-11; 201-227.

orbit. The violent 1893 program reminded Americans of their conquering past at a time when the drums of war were beating again.<sup>5</sup>

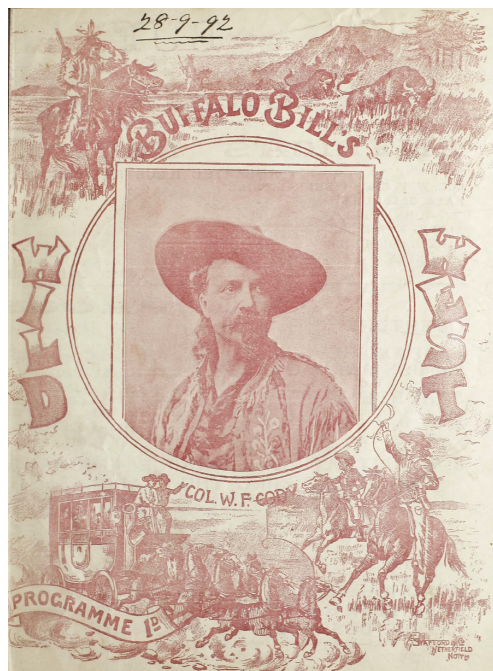


Figure 2.1. Show Program Cover, 1892.



Figure 2.2. Show Program Cover, 1893.

<sup>5</sup> See the following: William Appleman Williams, *The Tragedy of American Diplomacy* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1972); James Alex Garza, *The Imagined Underworld: Sex, Crime, and Vice in Porfirian Mexico* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2007); Richard Slotkin, *The Fatal Environment: The Myth of the Frontier in the Age of Industrialization* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1988).



Figure 2.3. Show Program Cover, 1894.

One aspect of this new Imperial gaze centered on elevating American manhood over foreign competitors, a process that would be a useful tool in casting the Spanish-American War. Even before the events of 1898, Cody was already busy at work renaming the show as a performance of American Empire. For example, Cody introduced his Rough Riders of the World during the 1893 tour just outside the World's Columbian Exposition at Chicago and included them on tours of US, Canada and Europe in the years immediately following the Chicago World's Fair. This display of American manhood on an international stage that was itself a celebration of Western Imperialism helped Cody to demonstrate the exceptionalism that he and others believed was an essential part of the US West. An influx of foreign immigrants during the 1890s posed a

threat to the mainstream vision concerning American racial inclusion. Comparing American manhood in relation to foreign manhood represented by racial and national others in the demonstrations of skill central to the Congress of Rough Rider exhibitions allowed Cody to display his version of white American superiority. The 1894 show program cover incorporates the different racial types and national origins of the Rough Rider participants.<sup>6</sup> At once, combining them as horseman experts and separating them into categories defined by race and nationality. These attitudes concerning violence and racial otherness that show programs covers reveal effected interpretations concerning Mexicans generally, and show vaqueros more specifically as well.<sup>7</sup>

Promotional show posters in the 1880s displayed vaqueros as docile ranch workers from “Old Mexico.” Vaqueros’ presence and participation in the American Southwest and Northern Mexico earned them a place in Cody’s historical rendition of the Wild West. However, increasing representations concerning racial otherness and violence in Cody’s show helped to transform the Mexican image in show posters and souvenir postcards. This was especially prevalent during the 1890s, the height of the Porfiriato, the time period when Porfirio Díaz ruled Mexico with an iron fist. One of the tools Díaz used was the Rurales, a mobile police force that patrolled rural Mexico and kept the peace, albeit through violence and corruption. As Paul Vanderwood has shown, Díaz hired former bandits to become members of the vaunted police force. Displayed in their finest regalia during celebrations in Mexico City, the Rurales impressed foreign observers and investors alike and helped convey an image of a Mexico that was safe but also

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<sup>6</sup> Please see: Figure 3.3.

<sup>7</sup> Please see: Norman Bolotin, *The World’s Columbian Exposition: The Chicago World’s Fair of 1893* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2002).

subordinate to American interests since the Rurales patrolled mainly industrial areas and zones frequented by tourists. Cody recognized their value and included the Rurales as part of his show.<sup>8</sup>



Figure 2.4. Colony of Vaqueros, undated.



Figure 2.5. Mexican Rurales, undated.

<sup>8</sup> See Figure 3.5. Also see: Paul J. Vanderwood, *Disorder and Progress: Bandits, Police, and Mexican Development* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1981).

The portrayals of Mexicans as Vaqueros and as Rurales reinforced American exceptionalism and at the same time marginalized and exoticized these groups to the fringes of the show as well as to the periphery of Cody's performative empire. However, conflict sold tickets and a show that demonstrated American informal Empire was boring. In 1898 Cody got a chance to infuse his enterprise with new tales of American exceptionalism and further solidify the Wild West Show as a piece of American history.

### Roosevelt and Cody - Rough Riders and the Battle of San Juan Hill

As an undergraduate student at Harvard University in the late 1870s, Theodore Roosevelt learned from a college physician that he suffered from heart trouble and, therefore, should not attempt strenuous exercise.<sup>9</sup> Roosevelt, a member of the rowing team, did not heed the warning and instead continued a life of physical fitness. Intent to live the true life of a rugged individualist, Teddy spent two years in the mid-1880s as a ranchman in the Dakotas, a life he would commemorate in his second book, *Hunting Trips of a Ranchman*, published in 1885. Roosevelt's experience working the land and animals on the open prairie remained central to his identity as an American and greatly influenced his attitude concerning American exceptionalism.

Roosevelt committed to public service in the last decades of the nineteenth century. He served as a US Civil Service Commissioner, and police Commissioner of New York City. In 1897 President McKinley appointed Roosevelt Assistant Secretary of the Navy, from which he resigned in May the following year. At that time, Roosevelt

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<sup>9</sup> Kasson, John F. *Houdini, Tarzan, and the Perfect Man: The White Male Body and the Challenge of Modernity in America*. New York: Hill and Wang, 2001, 5.



asked for and was granted authorization to create and then lead the First Volunteer Cavalry Regiment. He assumed commission as Lieutenant Colonel and personally selected many of the 1,060 men who joined the ranks. These volunteers, later known as *The Rough Riders*, were “tough, colorful cowboys and well-bred Easterners [that] demonstrated the physical hardihood, courage, strength of purpose, and sense of higher duty that Roosevelt deemed essential to the past conquest of the frontier, the current defeat of Spain and the future vitality of the American people.”<sup>10</sup>

Roosevelt prepared his regiment for an impending invasion of Cuba to thwart the dissolving Spanish military. This motley crew of non-military types would be the last to enter the fray of war with high-level appointments without enlisting in the American military. Transformations in military tactics ensured that extensive training would forever outweigh the “spirit of adventure and romance” that mostly motivated the First Volunteer Cavalry Regiment’s popularity.<sup>11</sup> The idealistic patriotism, which the Rough Riders demonstrated, was ripe for popular entertainment. Newspapers seemed to report the regiment’s every move. They documented enlistment, training, and then engagement with Spanish troops at San Juan Heights on July 1, 1898, in vivid detail. Accounts in American newspapers continued to showcase Roosevelt’s volunteers until they returned to the US. The public was so enamored with the group that newspapers continued to publish stories with “Rough Riders” in the title for several years after the war. Interestingly, an exhaustive search through Spanish periodicals from the same time does not yield any trace of the event. This begs the question: Why were Roosevelt’s Rough

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<sup>10</sup> See the introduction to the Bison Books Edition by Matthew M. Oyes in: Theodore Roosevelt. *The Rough Riders*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1998, ix.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

Riders extremely popular in American imagination and media at the turn of the twentieth century?

Indeed, the story, as told through newspaper and early newsreel accounts, expresses American exceptionalism. That is, America (and therefore Americans) is good, moral, and protector of civilization and shields freedom against the threat of evil. Even though the Rough Riders story fits this mold, perhaps Theodore Roosevelt's involvement with the regiment affected the media attention. Moreover, Roosevelt's personal account *The Rough Riders*, published in 1899, became the definitive narrative at that time and has since then been cited in movies, popular books, and even most scholarship concerning the Spanish-American War. Placing himself at the center of the narrative has kept Roosevelt's participation in the Battle of San Juan Hill visible throughout modern history. Commemorated as a national hero in American memory, Roosevelt's story continues to demonstrate the ideology of American exceptionalism.

The Rough Riders departed to Cuba in late May 29, 1898 and returned to the United States on August 14, that same year. During their two and one-half month tour of duty, the volunteers engaged with Spanish soldiers at the Siege of Santiago, the Battle of Las Guasimas, and most famously, the Battle of San Juan Hill. The later took place at San Juan Heights where two hills, San Juan Hill and Kettle Hill, formed the geography. American military strategists did not plan for the Rough Riders to contribute significantly to the war or American history that day. Brigadier General Henry Lawson ordered Roosevelt to simply march over San Juan Hill and join other US infantry regiments in Santiago eight miles down the road.



Roosevelt and his men were instantly pinned down in the valley between the hills by Spanish snipers and other soldiers whose weaponry was superior to the firepower the Rough Riders carried.<sup>12</sup> Facing certain death with no reinforcements in sight, Roosevelt commanded his troops to follow him in a charge up the hill and escape to Santiago. Roosevelt would lead the charge on horseback and his men would proceed on foot. Organized in this fashion, Roosevelt would be visible and could more easily be followed. The Rough Riders successfully navigated through the brush on the hillside and eventually reached the top. Armed Spanish soldiers continued to shoot and on many occasions hit their targets. Although the regiment suffered casualties, Roosevelt was ultimately honored for his bravery and leadership at what became known as the Battle of San Juan Hill.<sup>13</sup> Spanish-American war veterans in cities and towns throughout the United States commemorated Roosevelt, his Rough Riders and the events at San Juan Heights beginning 1899.<sup>14</sup> Moreover, the battle became well known throughout the world in other ways as well.

In an attempt to accurately display the American West, William F. Cody exhibited the characters that “tamed the West” and participated in what was then believed to be a Manifest Destiny. In the final years of the nineteenth century Cody’s show, and others like it, struggled economically. US success in the Spanish-American War exemplified a modern version of American exceptionalism and provided Cody with fresh material to include in his traveling show. Nate Salsbury, Cody’s business partner and show manager, in the introduction to the 1999 program for Buffalo Bill’s Wild West writes:

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<sup>12</sup> Roosevelt, *The Rough Riders*, 80-81.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 87-101.

<sup>14</sup> See “Scene Setting Being Built at Washington Park Club Grounds,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, June 22, 1899.

Buffalo Bill's Wild West and Congress of Rough Riders of the World is the only genuine, legitimate, and possible enterprise and entertainment of its scope and kind; wherein the historian on horseback has Truth for his amanuensis; where nothing approaching misrepresentation or deception is ever, or for the moment tolerated; and where the conclusive proof of perfect and spotless realism and international educational value and recreation is unanimously overwhelming, as voiced in the unqualified admiration and recommendation of the world's greatest generals, rulers, statesmen, scientists, spreading broadcast upon the pages of the press in every language, and chronicled with enduring honor in current history, official record and governmental endorsement.

Salsbury concludes: "It is something of which intelligence, morality and patriotism approve, because it is history not vaudeville; not cheep and ephemeral theatrical mimicry, confined within the limits of four walls, but the perpetuation and magnificent material re-introduction of a crowning epoch of transcendent, electrifying Reality, whose natural stage dwarfs that of Caesar's Coliseum and is illuminated by the lamps of heaven." Certainly, Salsbury's description is intended for theatrical splendor. Nevertheless, it also situates the show in a historical context and attempts to set spectators at ease. It encourages observers to consider what they are about to see as true and real. Representing the West and the late nineteenth century American military might in this context reassures the viewers' belief in American exceptionalism. Furthermore, the fact that Buffalo Bill's Wild West endured as the premiere traveling show of its time reveals its impact on people around the world.

From 1898 through the first decade of the twentieth century, reenactments of Roosevelt's heroism and the Battle of San Juan Hill were demonstrated in the United States and across Europe in traveling Wild West entertainment shows, the most notable being William F. Cody's Buffalo Bill's Wild West. No less than 10 million Americans in more than 300 cities witnessed these recreations in Cody's show.<sup>15</sup> These presentations were not included simply because Cody believed in American exceptionalism, although that too can be argued. Instead, Buffalo Bill's Wild West and other shows like it were beginning to feel the effects of waning popularity because the film industry offered a modern alternative for public entertainment. For this reason Cody and others accepted the US government's offer to display American Military might because the US government was willing to pay them to do it.<sup>16</sup> Also, the US military provided personnel, armaments, and other materials to make realistic reenactments possible. Over time, Wild West shows increasingly included examples of US military might, up to and after the First World War.

From 1899 through the 1907 season, Buffalo Bill's Wild West showcased American military might in demonstrations titled, "U.S. Artillery Drill" and "The Battle of San Juan Hill."<sup>17</sup> Even though Cody respected Theodore Roosevelt he did not allow the spectators of the show to forget that the original Rough Riders were in fact a part of Buffalo Bill's Wild West. The 1899 show program quotes Roosevelt, "For some reason or other, the public promptly christened us the 'Rough Riders'...first we fought against

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<sup>15</sup> Bonnie M. Miller, *From Liberation to Conquest: The Visual and Popular Cultures of the Spanish-American War of 1898* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2011), 99.

<sup>16</sup> See Personnel Ledger in Gordon W. Lille Collection, Western History Collections, University of Oklahoma Libraries, Norman Oklahoma.

<sup>17</sup> See Buffalo Bill's Show Programs in the gallery at <http://segonku.unl.edu/~prangel/vaqueros/vaqueros-exhibit.html>, accessed online, December 9, 2012.

the use of the term but to no purpose.” Nevertheless, editors of the program set the record straight when they wrote, “The ‘some reason or other’ for calling his regiment ‘Rough Riders’ regarding which Colonel Roosevelt seem to be in doubt, is so readily found and explained that his failure to discover it is really surprising. The name is one with which the public has become familiar, and in a way fascinated, through its adoption some years ago by Buffalo Bill to designate precisely the class of frontiersmen associate with his Wild West Exhibition.” In this way the show managers reclaim the phrase Rough Riders. The fact that the American public used the term to describe Roosevelt’s regiment of volunteers further supports the claim made here that Cody’s show, and the attitudes and storylines presented, greatly affected American popular culture and memory.

Evidence of mounting nationalism in the US during the years before the Spanish-American war can also be found in Cody’s show. Wild West shows centered on themes of conquest from the beginning. For example, the segment, “Attack on a Settler’s Cabin,” proclaimed the exceptional strength and fortitude that Americans demonstrated in their quest to claim land in Indian Territory. Weaponry was also a central theme in Wild West entertainment. “The Riffle as Aid to Civilization,” description in programs from the early years asserts that riffles were in the hands of American settlers along with the axe, the bible, and the schoolbook. This European invention had replaced the “savage bow and arrow” as the main tool for defense and hunting. Moreover, the program claims, “Without the riffle ball, we of America would not be today in the possession of a free and united country, and mighty in our strength.”<sup>18</sup> These preexisting attitudes concerning modern

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<sup>18</sup> 1884 Buffalo Bill’s Wild West show program, 25.

weaponry and American exceptionalism continued to be present in shows and programs throughout the 1890s and into the twentieth century.

During the 1893 tour Buffalo Bill's Wild West show managers introduced the Congress of Rough Riders of the World into the exhibition. The show began with a demonstration called the Grand Review that included "fully equipped regular soldiers of the armies of America, England, France, Germany, and Russia."<sup>19</sup> The teams of legionnaires entered the ring on horseback at full gallop with each squad displaying their national flag. The groups, racing in tight formation, took a lap around the arena and finished at the center of the ring lined up at full attention. Each group quickly followed by the last until, finally, Cody entered, took his lap solo, and rested at the head of the regiments. Cody, sitting tall in the saddle upon his white horse, removed his hat and waved to the thousands of fans as they cheered in excited delight.<sup>20</sup> French artist Rosa Bonheur immortalized this pose in a poster created for Buffalo Bill's Wild West that same year. The image positions Cody to the right, sitting "straight, tall and sure of himself," in contrast with Napoleon, who on the left, slouching, "flabby, beaten and despondent." Without words, this visual comparison communicates that European military dominance was on the wane and in its place, America generally, and Cody specifically reigned supreme.<sup>21</sup>

In yet another segment from the 1893 program titled "Military Representatives," Nate Salsbury justifies the decision to include military forces. He explains that Cody and

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<sup>19</sup> 1893 Buffalo Bill's Wild West program, 3.

<sup>20</sup> Please see a short video that shows the Rough Riders entering the ring here: <http://codyarchive.org/multimedia/wfc.vid00007.html> (accessed May 11, 2013).

<sup>21</sup> Paul Reddin, *Wild West Shows* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1999), 132.

others with the show had a long history as soldiers and scouts for the US army and that cavalry skills centered on horsemanship. Since the show also revolved around this skill Cody and Salsbury found it necessary to pit European and Russian horsemen in contrast to and comparison with the American riders. Furthermore, Salsbury explains that show managers had witnessed numerous equestrian skills and styles during their tours throughout the world in the 1880s and early 1890s. By including the world's best horsemen, Salbury argued, spectators could judge for themselves the truly exceptional skill of the American riders.<sup>22</sup>

Show managers expanded the Grand Review beginning in the 1894 tour. The presentation now included all the different teams of horsemen performers segregated by nationality and ethnicity. "Indians, cowboys, Mexicans, Cossacks, gauchos, Arabs, scouts, and American negroes" accompanied the regular soldiers from Europe, Russia and the US and entered the arena as before. In this way, the show exhibited a historical trajectory of horsemen from the primitive to the modern. Additionally, the program consigns these recently included participants in the Grand Review to a historic past. Although they are included with the more modern military types, they are set apart as representing the origins of horsemanship that the modern armies embody.

The 1894 program also bares a more robust racialization of Mexicans than can be seen in previous advertisements. These men are no longer called vaqueros, but instead referred to by their supposed Mexican national origin. This wording change in the program further separated vaqueros from the American cowboy and integrated them with these new characters from other parts of the globe. Events titled, "A Group of Syrian and

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<sup>22</sup> 1893 Buffalo Bill's Wild West program, 51.

Arabian Horsemen,” “Cossacks,” and “A Group of Mexicans” preform one after the other in between “Illustrating a Prairie Emigrant Train Crossing the Plains,” and “Military Evolutions.”<sup>23</sup> Although Buffalo Bill’s Wild West and other Wild West traveling entertainment shows celebrated these men and their talents, they set them aside as others and promoted an exoticism in pageantry, written descriptions, and images. The order in which the exhibitions emerge in the show is significant because the program is more than merely a showcase of men and women demonstrating horsemanship and marksmanship. Instead, the show follows a historic narrative concerning the development of the American West and the people in it. Seen in this way, it becomes clear that settlers, Indians, Mexicans etc. are part of the US past and modern American territorial expansion and military strength is exceptional. Separating the characters from the American West in this way further segregates them into racial categories based on national origin as well.

Show posters from the 1890s that advertise the Congress of Rough Riders as “Genuine Characters” in “Actual Scenes” express the differences and similarities between Mexican vaqueros and American cowboys as well. One has a large headshot image of an Anglo-American cowboy at the center, surrounded by smaller depictions of cowboys in motion. The cowboys are seen rustling cows and wild broncos in prairieland and rounding up cattle and ridding the “buckers” in a rodeo setting. The vaquero is similarly presented, with a “Mexican Caballero” (or gentleman) at the center of the poster surrounded by depictions of Mexicans. On the left the Mexicans are shown as being from “Old Mexico.” One image shows eight vaqueros slowly riding along a mesa. A second image shows a celebration where a man and women are dancing while on-lookers sit and

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<sup>23</sup> 1893 Buffalo Bill’s Wild West program, 3.

play guitars. On the right side of the poster vaqueros are shown as they appear in Buffalo Bill's Wild West. The top image shows five Mexicans congregating in front of a stable. Three are standing and two are sitting down. This image is reminiscent of the image titled "MEXICANS" that accompanied the description of "Vaqueros from the Southwest" which appeared in the first Buffalo Bill's Wild West programs. The image directly below shows two mounted vaqueros holding up serapes that are blowing in the wind as they chase a drove of horses. The bottoms of both posters depict the horsemen in action, as they would have appeared in the show. Mounted American cowboys brandish rifles, lassos, and whips. The vaqueros demonstrate their rope-tricks, some on horseback and others standing in the center of the ring. These colorful images certainly would have influenced the expectations and interpretations that observers made concerning these two groups of men. They were similar in skill and performed simultaneously in many events during the show. However, race and nationality provided the "slight line of demarcation" that continued to wedge distance between these trick-rope horsemen.

Social Darwinist ideologies were not only evident in advertisements, but also continued to play out in the show. This was on full display in the 1899 version of the Grand Review, which incorporated a color guard of Cuban veterans, "Porto" Ricans, Hawaiians, and Filipinos into the Rough Riders. Also, a new event called "Race of Races" that followed the Grand Review set a Mexican, a Cossack, an Arab, a gaucho, an Indian, and a cowboy against one another. This competition demonstrated horsemanship in which each contestant would ride a horse supposedly from his own country. Racing for national pride and personal distinction motivated the participants to win. American spectators cheered their countrymen and were delighted that American cowboys almost



always won the contest.<sup>24</sup> Although there is little evidence about the actual participants and whether or not the best riders in each nationalized category participated, journalists jumped at the opportunity to explain the American victories in Darwinist terminology. One reporter claimed that Mexicans could not win because their Spanish decent left them without the “free-and-easy countenance of the cowboy.”<sup>25</sup>

The premise of the “Race of Races,” and the Social Darwinist implications there in were not Cody’s invention. Instead, the Buffalo Bill show reflected existing racialized attitudes that pervaded American culture, politics, and imagination during the late nineteenth century. Perhaps the most visible example is the Columbian Exposition at the 1893 World’s Fair in Chicago. Robert W. Rydell argues that “the fair did not merely reflect American racial attitudes, it grounded them on ethnological bedrock.” Evidence concerning the expo supports this thesis. Fredrick Ward Putnum, director of Harvard’s Peabody Museum of American Archaeology and Ethnology of the Smithsonian supplied many exhibits, as did ethnological research centers in other countries throughout the world. The fair’s midway was designed as a modern utopia centered on the White City and teamed with ethnological displays. These exhibits presented the history of humanity to fairgoers with evolutionary ideas about race that also asserted hegemonic ideas about ruling-class superiority.<sup>26</sup> These descriptions and attitudes influenced public sentiment concerning race and nationality in the United States. Furthermore the ethnographic focus

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<sup>24</sup> Reddin, *Wild West Shows*, 128.

<sup>25</sup> *New York Recorder*, 13 May 1894, vol. 4, NSS.

<sup>26</sup> Robert W. Rydell, *All the Worlds a Fair: Visions of Empire at American International Expositions, 1876-1916* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1984), 40-41.

also continued to inspire similar themes in Wild West shows leading up to and following the Spanish-American War.

Show organizers delayed printing the 1899 Buffalo Bill's Wild West program "to the last possible moment," to include the latest American conquest of place and people at the end of the Spanish-American War. The delay allowed publicists to incorporate a program segment called, "Strange People from Our New Possessions." This narrative correlates the show with American expansion into "Porto Rico, the Sandwich and the Philippine Islands." Although the Grand Review that year included Puerto Rican and Filipino horsemen their images do not appear in the program. Instead, a photograph with ten dark-skinned males, three men and seven boys, accompany the description. The individuals stand side-by-side wearing nothing but loincloths. A small thatched-roof shelter, surrounded by a pathetic outcropping of palm trees, rests in the background. The individuals' specific nationality, ethnicity, and location are not central to the story. However, this does not seem to be an oversight by the program editors. Rather, the subjects' ethnic and national inferiority in relation to American exceptionalism seems to be the focus. All individuals from these regions have been "grouped by the fate of war, the hand of progress and the conquering march of civilization under Old Glory's protecting folds." The program continues:

"These insular and oceanic chiefs and warriors, with their dark-eyed wives and wildly cunning children, uniquely and fascinatingly complete the ethnological scope of the Congress of Rough Riders of the World, which thus adds the last and greatest of living novelties of the nation; the most stirring and romantic episodes in whose history it alone perpetuates, in

both personality and heroic action. In semi-civilized and barbaric dress, ornaments and arms, these roamers of tropical jungles and surf-beaten volcanic shores will faithfully illustrate the martial, heathen and home peculiarities of their lives of intermingled feud, pastimes and superstitions; introducing extraordinary feats of strength and skills with weapons singular and sinuous dances, supple gymnastics, pagan ceremonies and peculiar sports such as comparatively but few Christian eyes have ever seen.”<sup>27</sup>

This excerpt and others like it from Buffalo Bill’s Wild West program reflect common themes in American culture and politics concerning race and nationalism. By relegating these “strange people” as “new possessions” American hegemonic forces increasingly marginalized nonwhite ethnicities from the defacto definition concerning who should be considered American. Nevertheless, a contradiction exists in the program description.

In the beginning the recently conquered are described as cunning, barbaric novelties. However, the end of the description states that on the show’s behalf, Cody will, “for the first time, introduce them to his and their future countrymen.”<sup>28</sup> This early attitude concerning the new countrymen from places like Puerto Rico, Cuba and the Philippines subsided not long after it started. Initially, Americans predominantly shared enthusiasm concerning the idea of including them into the US because they had fought against the Spanish. However, gentle attitudes toward Third World people quickly

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<sup>27</sup> 1899 Buffalo Bill’s Wild West show program, 63.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

transformed into discontent once it became clear that the Islanders did not openly accept American political, military, and industrial expansion into their countries.<sup>29</sup> Uneasiness at admitting allegedly racially inferior people also influenced this discontent. In this way, the unstable relationship between the American government and leaders in places such as the Philippines changed audiences' attitudes concerning these "Strange People from Our New Possessions." The backlash against this portion of the program was so intense that Cody removed the demonstration and the Filipino horsemen from the show in 1900. The Filipino insurrection against occupying American forces further cemented in the minds of many Americans that the island chain was populated by ungrateful inhabitants. Nevertheless, military armament and battle reenactments continued to delight crowds around the US and abroad at the turn of the twentieth century.<sup>30</sup>

One of those delights centered on Buffalo Bill's Wild West presentation of the Battle of San Juan Hill which introduced detachments from Roosevelt's Rough Riders, twenty-fourth infantry, ninth and tenth cavalry, Grime's battery, Garcia's Cuban scouts, and a pack train that carried ammunition. These characters participated in a two-scene reenactment from the Spanish American war. The first act titled, "A halt on the Road to San Juan" set the scene as a bivouac of troops prepared their camp on the night before the battle. Cooks lit the campfires, and soldiers readied their munitions as they ate evening meal. As they tried to forget their "toil and dangers in story, songs and jest; the familiar songs of patriotic anthems" wafted through the still night. The crowd relaxed and settled in to sleep and dream of distant loved ones as a lone bugler stoically plays taps.

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<sup>29</sup> Reddin, *Wild West Shows*, 134.

<sup>30</sup> For the insurrection, see Stuart Creighton Miller, *Benevolent Assimilation: The American Conquest of the Philippines, 1899-1903* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984).

The second scene “The Rough Riders’ Immortal Charge,” began with soldiers in position at the foot of San Juan Hill. As the regiment lay pinned down in their rifle pits, Spanish forces rained “an incessant torrent of shrapnel and Mauser bullets” into the ranks of American fighters. Rendered immobile and without option to retreat, the US division appears surrounded by the Spanish onslaught. At that very moment a Soldier horseman wearing a Rough Rider uniform emerges at the foot of the “death-swept hill and, calling upon the men to follow him, rides straight up and at the fortified foe. There is a frantic yell of admiration and approval as the soldiers...spring from their cowering position of utter helplessness and follow Roosevelt and the flag.” In moments, amid a volley of gunfire from all directions the Americans reach the Spanish stronghold the “gold and crimson emblem of ruthless oppression is torn from the rampart, and Old Glory streams on the breeze, triumphant in its place.” The crowd cheers as the American flag flutters in the smoke filled air and the Rough Riders take a bow.

Cody displayed this reenactment in the show through the 1907 season. Cody did not take part in the Battle of San Juan Hill so he did not take part in the reenactment. However, the program notes that Buffalo Bill had been called to volunteer for the Spanish-American War. Although Cody did not deny his hope to one day join the fight he chose to remain a civilian and instead continue to tour his Wild West show. He did however offer to reenlist in the American army if the fighting continued for very long. Since the war lasted only a few short months, Cody did not have to make that decision and instead chose to incorporate the Battle of San Juan Hill into his show. Roosevelt, witnessing the demonstration at Madison Square Garden in 1899, confirmed the accurate representation of the reenactment and verified that many of the men in the show were

actual participants during the real episode a year earlier. This endorsement increased the popularity of Cody's episode and fortified it as a show favorite for nearly a decade.

US involvement in the Spanish-American War and the territorial expansion in its aftermath supported existing notions of American exceptionalism. The fervent nationalism expressed by journalists and entertainers such as William F. Cody in the wake of American victory overseas effected popular attitudes concerning distant lands and the people who occupied them. Furthermore, prevailing racial attitudes in the US in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries increasingly marginalized nonwhite ethnic groups such as Mexican-descent people. Moreover, representations and attitudes concerning the racial-other promoted a more robust presence of racialized nationality in American politics, entertainment and popular culture. As we will see, vaqueros in traveling Wild West entertainment were directly impacted by these changing attitudes and representations.

## CHAPTER 3: SHOW VAQUEROS

*"No more buffalo, blue skies or open road. No more rodeo, for these old boys."*

-James McMurtry from "No More Buffalo", 2010.

The Vaquero experience in the Wild West shows often reflected the reality of race in late nineteenth and early twentieth century America. On one hand vaqueros were valued for their contributions to the development of the American West. On the other hand, vaqueros and other minority groups were placed in subordinate positions in Wild West performances. Further, many vaqueros were simply employees that could be disciplined or fired at will. In a way, this economic reality reflected their actual historical role in the West. As has been argued, the Buffalo Bill show and similar performances and Wild West venues often romanticized the American West. Vaqueros and other performers were depicted in exotic and highly stylized forms. However, most vaqueros were in reality ranch hands that were experienced with cattle and horse management techniques. Thus their skills were useful on and off the stage since the shows transported large numbers of animals. The reality of life in the actual West also found an expression in the challenges Vaqueros faced. Just as Mexicans had been routinely discriminated against in the American Southwest since 1848, many Vaqueros found themselves on the receiving end of racially charged controversies, such as the Mexican flag incident, that were influenced by events outside their control.

This chapter explores the experiences of a select few vaqueros from Buffalo Bill's show to illustrate how race circumscribed their opportunity to represent American culture and history and instead relegated them to a racial other that was defined by supposed national origin. The first section will focus on the experiences and skills of the vaqueros themselves, specifically those of Antonio and Pedro Esquivel, Vicente Oropeza, and José

Barrera. The vaqueros were, despite all their skills, employees who could be fired at will by management. While skilled with the rope and lasso, vaqueros worked for a financial enterprise and were thus subject to the highs and lows of capitalism and the fickleness of crowds. The second section discusses the less popular vaqueros in Wild West shows and focuses on their involvement in the Miller Brother's 101 Ranch Real Wild West shows in April 1914. The events during this particular tour demonstrate the ways in which vaqueros were viewed as racial others in comparison to the Anglo American cowboy. It was the aftermath of the 1910 Mexican Revolution that began to significantly alter attitudes concerning vaqueros and other Mexican-descent people in the United States. Since the vaqueros often traveled all over the United States, they experienced first-hand the perceptions Americans of the conflict south of the border and by extension of them.

### Mexicans on Horseback

Beginning with the 1883 inaugural season of Buffalo Bill's Wild West, vaqueros were an integral part of the show's entertainment. Antonio Esquivel joined the show that year and, starting in 1885, appeared in the program as "Champion Vaquero." Along with other top entertainers such as Buffalo Bill, Con T. Grover, and Buck Taylor, Esquivel's name, face, and talents became synonymous with the best of the West that the traveling exhibitions showcased. Esquivel's skill and popularity earned him a place in the official program as well. Although the show included between eight and thirty vaqueros each year, Esquivel is the only one whose name appears in the program's overview of entertainers. Furthermore, he is the only Mexican to be recognized with a personal



biography within the program throughout the show's thirty years of operation.

Nevertheless, Esquivel remained on the show's racial fringe.

While entertainers such as Buffalo Bill and Con T. Grover, "The Cowboy Sheriff of the Platte," were described and celebrated with full-page accounts that told their familial origins and explained their importance in the American West narrative, Esquivel's past was mostly left to observers' imaginations. His three-sentence description reads, "Tony Esquivel – Champion Vaquero Rider. Born in Mexico and is descended from the best Castillian and native stock, dating through the history of the section along the Rio Grande. He possesses all the sterling qualities that the higher bred rancheros are famed. As a Pony Express Rider, Herdsman, and Horseman, he stands unexcelled."

Like many other statements in Buffalo Bill's Wild West show programs, this one is not completely correct. Esquivel was not born in Mexico, but Bandera, Texas, a rural outpost fifty miles northwest of San Antonio, on February 13, 1862. He descended from Castilian stock as the bio suggests, his father reportedly a Spanish immigrant. However, his mother was Polish, not Mexican or Indian. If the producers intended "native stock" to mean Indian or Mexican then the claim simply is untrue. However, he lived in a diverse community that included many languages and traditions. Because Esquivel spoke Spanish, Polish, English, and a Sioux dialect Cody valued him not only as a horseman, but also as a translator. Nevertheless, Antonio Esquivel was in fact a superb horseman. While on tour in England he demonstrated his talent as a Pony Express Rider many times. The *Hull Daily Mail* reported one such exhibition on May 4, 1888.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> R.L. Wilson, with Greg Martin, *Buffalo Bill's Wild West: An American Legend* (Edition: Chartwell Books, 2004), 78.

Antonio, representing the American horseman, saddled a quarter horse and waited at the starting line for J. Latham, an English thoroughbred jockey. The two men were set to begin a ten-mile race in which they would change horses every half-mile. Although the Englishman's larger horse kept a faster pace, Esquivel's mounting technique saved valuable time. Instead of stopping to dismount the first horse and having help to mount the new one, as Latham did, Antonio changed horses in true Pony Express fashion. That is, he did not stop at all. Instead, Esquivel leaped from one moving horse to the other, never breaking stride and barely slowing his speed. Within twenty-two minutes, The "Champion Vaquero" had crossed the finish line four hundred yards in front of the Englishman, taking with him the cheers from the crowd and the handsome five hundred Pounds-Shillings-Pence prize.<sup>2</sup>

Antonio's brother Pedro Esquivel, known in the Wild West ranks as Joe, also worked for Cody as a vaquero. Joe performed in the show for many years during the 1890s through the 1910s. An early photograph shows Joe dressed in traditional vaquero attire, wide-brimmed leather sombrero, and matching leggings, jacket, and vest embellished with embroidery and braids. During the 1890s the show promoted him as the "Chief of Cowboys." Once Joe attained this status he no longer performed as a Mexican vaquero but instead as an American cowboy. From this point forward he dressed in the traditional garb of the latter, with a white long-sleeve shirt and white neckerchief, and denim pants covered by full-length leather chaps. Joe donned a Western American cowboy hat and mounted his quarter horse with a Texas style saddle that had a smaller horn than the saddles that vaqueros preferred. Although the Esquivel brothers'

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<sup>2</sup> 500 pounds in 1888 would be worth roughly \$3,000 US dollars in 2013.

participation and costuming transformed over the decades, they were not the only vaqueros to navigate between cultural expressions.

For example, Vicente Oropeza (1858-1923) was the Wild West's "Chief of Vaqueros" for many years, especially during the turn of the century. While performing in the show he primarily wore the traditional vaquero costume. A show postcard features him surrounded by eight vaqueros each dressed as they would have appeared in the show. Other promotional materials, including posters, also reveal drawings of Oropeza's likeness, clad in sombrero, leggings and embroidered jacket, wielding a lasso. Nevertheless, photographs from the 1900s show Oropeza in American cowboy gear as well. Many such images were taken in front of President Grant's tomb in New York City during the 1907 season. During this visit the entire cast of characters from Buffalo Bill's Wild West traveled to the president's grave and monument on an April day. Photographers captured images of Indians, cowboys, Cossacks, and Mexican vaqueros dressed in their performance costumes. For this reason it seems that show managers intended to take promotional photographs of the troop. Although vaqueros are photographed in traditional dress, Oropeza is not. Instead, he wears dark pants, cowboy boots, an overcoat, and an American cowboy hat. One image shows Oropeza sitting in the front seat of a 1905 Cadillac with the convertible top down. His contemporary American fashion in stark contrast with the eight vaqueros cramped in the back seat, each dressed in full vaquero regalia.<sup>3</sup> The similarities between Oropeza's and the Esquivel brothers' appearance is remarkable because it demonstrates cultural navigation. These men were at once Mexican and American. They were simultaneously workers and leaders. For this reason, perhaps, audiences and news reporters recognized them by name

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<sup>3</sup> See Figure 2.1.

as well as ethnicity. In contrast, available newspaper articles show programs and archival photographs do not include other vaqueros by name.



Figure 3.1. Vaqueros in a Cadillac, 1905.

There was more to Vicente Oropeza than the clothes he wore. His legacy remains central to the Buffalo Bill's Wild West narrative, but his fame predates his tenure with Cody and it lives on in other ways. In 1891 Oropeza traveled with his team of vaqueros throughout Texas, billing himself as the "Primier 'Charro Mexicano' of the World." It is through these early performances that Vicente was first credited with formulating some of the most popular events in modern-American rodeo.<sup>4</sup> Oropeza was well liked by audiences but also revered by his peers and fellow showmen. In 1881 Vicente was presented with a commemorative silver-plated pistol. The Fancy Colt Single Action Army revolver's grip butt was inscribed: "De Sus Amigos/Los Charros/Mexico 1881" and "Para El Major Charro/Don Vicente Oropeza."<sup>5</sup>

In 1894, after joining Cody's traveling exhibition, The Charro Mexicano was featured in a film titled *Lasso Thrower* (also known as *Champion Lasso Thrower*),

<sup>4</sup> Jorge Iber, ed., *Latinos in U.S. Sport: A History of Isolation, Cultural Identity, and Acceptance* (Champaign: Human Kinetics, 2011), 59.

<sup>5</sup> Martin Wilson, *Buffalo Bill's Wild West*, 80.

produced by Tomas Edison's lab near West Orange, New Jersey during the East coast tour that year. This short silent film shows Vicente alone, twirling a lasso around his waist and above his head. Although Oropeza's image leaves a lasting impression concerning the Mexican as rope expert, the other film produced that day images Mexicans negatively. *Mexican Knife Duel* (also known as *Mexican Duel*), stars Dionecio Gonzales and Pedro Esquirel (probably a miss spelling of Esquivel). This movie memorializes an act supposedly in Cody's show. The two Mexicans fight it out, each with a knife in hand, rolling around in the dirt and dodging the blade as each lunges at the other in a stabbing motion. These conflicting images of Mexicans, the latter violent and bloodthirsty, the former heroic and awe inspiring, are reportedly the first moving images of Mexicans on U.S. film. Nevertheless, *Mexican Knife Duel* appears to have had little impact on Oropeza's acceptance at the turn of the twentieth century.

Vicente Oropeza's legacy suggests that he was one of the most skilled ropemen in popular memory. Will Rogers credited Vicente with showing him how to work the lasso. Although Rogers eventually became an international celebrity and remains in the modern-American consciousness, Oropeza has not been completely forgotten. The National Cowboy & Western Heritage Museum in Oklahoma City, Oklahoma inducted the Charro Mexicano into the Cowboy Hall of Fame as a Rodeo Trick Roper in 1975. Although Oropeza was born in Mexico, his influence on American culture, vis-à-vis Buffalo Bill's Wild West and his own traveling exhibition lives on.

One of the most popular vaqueros was José "Mexican Joe" Barrera. He was born at San Antonio, Texas in 1876 and died at Pawnee, Oklahoma on November 11, 1949. We know a lot about Mexican Joe because of two important events that accompanied his

career: the New York City elephant incident and the Alton controversy. These events also reveal important issues centered on the experiences of the vaqueros. While their skills were valuable to Cody and other organizers, they were essentially for contract-employees who could be fired at will. Thus their experiences fit well with the overall historical experiences of the tens of thousands of performers who traveled the American landscape of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.<sup>6</sup>

The New York incident took place during a parade by the Miller Brothers 101 show on Sunday, April 12, 1914. There was nothing unusual about the parade that day, at least not at first. New York City had seen Wild West performers before. In fact, they had been coming to the City for the better part of three decades by then. Each time Buffalo Bill's Wild West, Pawnee Bill's Historic Wild West and Great Far East, or Miller Brother's 101 Ranch Real Wild West came to town they would enter the city from the north and march down Broadway, eventually ending up at Madison Square Garden, their final destination. This day was no different. The streets were lined with spectators, alive with enthusiasm and wonder as they watched the 101 Ranch pass by. Then it happened.

A full-grown elephant, weighing upwards of six tons, broke away from the parade route, and stampeded down a side street. Spectators and parade participants stood in awe and fear as the behemoth bellowed from his trunk and neared a full-speed gallop. Hearing the commotion, José Barrera famously known as "Mexican Joe", leader of the Mexican Vaqueros and manager of the 101 Ranch in Bliss, Oklahoma, kicked his steed into a dead-sprint and caught up with the elephant three blocks down sixth avenue. A block before catching up, Barrera was already wielding his lasso. Small and tight at first, as

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<sup>6</sup> Janet Davis, *The Circus Age: Culture and Society Under the Big Top* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2002), 44.

Barrera's wrist speed increased the loop got wider until, eventually, it was eight feet across. Moments before the pachyderm plowed headlong into a bakery storefront Barrera let the lasso fly from his hand and immediately pulled back on the horse's reins, stopping abruptly in the street. Before the loop even tightened around the elephant's neck, Barrera was already winding the lasso around the six-inch thick wooden horn at the front of his saddle. As the lariat constricted, the elephant's forward motion stopped. As Barrera pulled back on the reins and the his horse walked backward into the street two elephant trainers emerged from the stunned onlookers and guided the recalcitrant giant back to the parade route.

Several New York City newspapers recounted this story in their evening editions. Although the elephant incident was unusual, stories about Mexican performers in Wild West shows were not. Journalists throughout the United States included specific Mexican vaqueros in their reports concerning Wild West traveling entertainment shows. However, no other individual saw as much press as Mexican Joe. In fact, Barrera gained such notoriety during Buffalo Bill's Wild West 1887 performance in London that entrepreneurs invested in Mexican Joe's Wild West, which performed in London the following year.<sup>7</sup> Barrera's show was short lived, but he continually performed throughout the world, showcasing his horse and roping skills with many entertainment shows including the Ringling Brothers Circus. Even though Barrera found fame along the way, he was not immune to the economic disasters that plagued traveling entertainment shows in the 1910s.

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<sup>7</sup> Don Russell, *The Wild West: A History of the Wild West Shows* (Fort Worth: Amon Carter Museum of Western Art, 1970), 124.

In spring 1914, shortly after the elephant incident in New York City, Barrera traveled with the Young Buffaloes Wild West Show performing as the lead vaquero among a troop of cowboys. Barrera awoke early on June 6 like he did every day while on tour. The show had performed the night before in Alton, Illinois, a budding industrial town along the Mississippi River approximately twenty miles north of St. Louis, Missouri. This Saturday began as any other. He dressed in his denim pants, weathered flannel shirt and leather cowboy boots and wide-brimmed hat. Before settling down with the work-hands to sip coffee and tell stories, he planned to tend the vaquero-troop horses and equipment. The sleeping cars were parked on the railroad tracks at the edge of town. As Barrera departed his quarters that he shared with his wife Effie, who also performed as a horse riding and roping star with the show, Joe realized that the animal and equipment cars had vanished in the night. So too, the manager's fancy train cars were also missing. Barrera approached the porter who stood slumped against the train.<sup>8</sup>

"Where is everybody?" Effie asked. "The Show is busted," replied the porter. As Joe and Effie pressed him for more information they learned that the management had unhitched the employee sleeping cars in the dark of night. Slowly, and as quietly as possible, they moved the train containing the stock, equipment, and supplies across the river into Missouri hoping to protect themselves and their investments from the employees. The management believed that they could make their escape and not have to deal with the people and the debts that they left in their wake.

Joe led a group of men and women along the track headed toward Missouri. Five miles outside Alton, on the Illinois side of the river, the posse found the show-train

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<sup>8</sup> See "Reminiscences of Mrs. Joe (Effie) Barrera" in Mexican Joe file in Glen Shirley Collection, Donald C. & Elizabeth M. Dickinson Research Center at the National Cowboy & Western Heritage Museum.



standing still. As they approached the equipment cars they realized that management had retained and armed employees to guard the property. Apparently, the show had been sold. Management ordered the guards, which included “cowboys and forty Negro canvasmen,” to await the new owners and let no one access the cars’ content. However, Joe persuaded a few guards to let him into a car that held Effie’s and his saddles and traveling trunks. Joe argued that if the show was not going to pay him he had the right to get his property and move on. The guards agreed. The scene was less chaotic than one might imagine. The women headed to the cookhouse wagons and by the time they arrived workers had saddled the horses and were feeding them. The cooks, who were also unemployed overnight, already unpacked the mess tent and were feeding the stranded workers alongside the silent rail line. The cook manager told the women and men that they would feed as many as they could for as long as possible, but supplies were short and no one knew when the new show owners would arrive and shut them down. There was no hot coffee. There were no fresh biscuits, but the cooks scrambled eggs and fried sausage. The employees ate well and discussed their plans to escape Alton.

Joe did not sit and discuss; he did not wait. He acted almost immediately. Once the guard allowed Joe to gather his belongings from the property-car he quickly located his wife Effie’s diamond wedding ring and the minimal amount of cash they stowed away and headed back into town. Joe found a friend in Alton that put him in contact with a man who pawned the ring for “some money” and together, Effie and Joe got a room at a local hotel. When they entered they realized that the show managers had been hiding in the same hotel. Although Joe wanted his wages from the previous night’s performances, the

future prospects for he and Effie were mostly on his mind. The same cannot be said of the other employees.

As night began to fall on Alton, many stranded workers and performers continued drinking whiskey at the tavern. A group of inebriated Indians emerged from behind the sleeping cars and walked down the middle of the street toward the hotel where the show managers had been holed up since the night before. The Indians reportedly shouted from the street, threatening the managers. They wanted their money. They wanted it now. Before long, a protest that included cowboys, vaqueros, Indians and work-hands, gathered in Alton's low-lit main street demanding their property and pay. The management hid behind the hotel's draped windows and closed doors hoping the mob would tire and retreat. Fearful onlookers called the sheriff and he arrived within minutes. In order to quell the situation, disband the wayward crowd and hopefully get them out of town before violence erupted, the sheriff ordered the show managers to bow to the employees' demands. The show owners reluctantly paid their debts and the mob was ordered to leave town. However, Mexican Joe made a call to his friends at the Ringling Brothers Circus and made arrangements for him, Effie, and a band of Vaqueros to meet up with the circus at Omaha in early July. Often, as described above, Barrera was able to negotiate labor on his own terms. However, that was not always the case for many vaqueros that participated in Wild West shows. Nevertheless, vaqueros continued to work as everyday ranch labor and as celebrities in the traveling entertainment well into the 1920s. While many shows went bankrupt in 1914, such as the Young Buffalo's Wild West, others such as the Miller Brother's 101 Ranch Real Wild West flourished.

In the late nineteenth century many Wild West shows cropped up claiming to represent the authentic American West. Most lasted only a few years at best because they did not have performance stars with wide reaching popularity or they did not operate under wise management. However, one of the most successful and longest lasting Wild West troops was owed and operated by the Miller brothers from Bliss, Oklahoma. Established in 1893, the Miller Brothers 101 Ranch was one of hundreds of big cattle ranches that dotted the landscape from northern Mexico to Canada in the nineteenth century. As Oklahoma historian Glenn Shirley has shown, the 101 Ranch was the most fabulous and continued to reach its zenith while most big business ranches dissolved in the early twentieth century.<sup>9</sup> Like their ranching business, The Miller Brother's 101 Ranch Real Wild West continued to flourish through the 1920s. As other shows popularity waned the Miller Brothers hosted celebrities in their show such as Buffalo Bill, Pawnee Bill, and José "Mexican Joe" Barrera. Oil was discovered beneath the sod on the ranch in 1905, providing the Millers significant operating capital in the following decades.

#### The 1910 Mexican Revolution and Miller Brothers 101 Ranch and Real Wild West

As most other Wild West shows, the Miller brothers included vaqueros in their Real Wild West. However, in most cases the vaqueros did not need to find alternative employment after the tour ended. Instead, many of the performers, such as Mexican Joe, worked as ranch hands at the 101 during the off-season. Although at times the Miller brothers hired vaqueros away from their competition they often located the workers

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<sup>9</sup> Ellsworth Collins and Alma Miller England, *The 101 Ranch* (Norman: The University of Oklahoma Press, 1973), vi.

independently. J.C. Miller worked with R.F. Dowe manager of Eagle Hardware Company to locate and hire vaqueros as new talent for the show and laboring ranch workers. Eagle Hardware Company operated as an importer of Mexican goods and workers in Eagle Pass, Texas, a border town adjacent to Piedras Negras, Mexico. In addition to locating vaqueros to work the ranch and in the show, Dowe imported hand made goods such as woven baskets for the Millers to sell as souvenirs during the tour. Also, the Millers purchased handcrafted saddles from Mexico through the Eagle Hardware Company.<sup>10</sup>

With vaqueros in the show, the Miller Brothers 101 Ranch Real Wild West toured the United States throughout the 1910s. During this decade American newspapers popularized the Mexican Revolution in the United States. Although there was an increased sense of fear and paranoia in the U.S. concerning the possibility of revolutionary violence spilling over the border into places such as South Texas and New Mexico, the Miller Brothers show continued to advertise the Mexican element of their performances in programs and posters. The pervasive nationalism in the United States that effected shows such as Buffalo Bill's Wild West is also visible in the Miller Brothers exhibitions. Following Cody's model that demonstrated nationality vis-à-vis show participants carrying their national flag, the Millers also included Mexicans, Americans, and European horseman with flags representing supposed national origin. However, a backlash against displays of the Mexican flag developed during the 1910s and 1920s. Miller Brothers 101 Ranch show program covers displayed the vaquero and the Mexican flag prominently in 1911. However, by 1927, the flag had vanished from the program and

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<sup>10</sup> Letter from J.C. Miller to R.F. Dowe, June 12, 1920. Miller Brothers 101 Ranch Collection, box 4, folder 5, Western Histories Collection, University of Oklahoma.

the vaquero had receded into the background only recognizable by the shadowy sombrero that had connoted the Mexican in Wild West shows over the decades.

The controversy concerning the presence of the Mexican flag in the Miller Brothers 101 Ranch Real Wild West came to a crescendo during the 1914 tour at New York City. During the 1910s heated debate concerning the Mexican Revolution and the possibility of U.S. involvement simmered in newspapers and political discussions. Reports in local papers expressed surprise that protests and possible violence against Mexicans in the show did not transpire during the parade on Broadway as the Miller Brothers show entered New York. Instead, the Mexicans were welcomed with friendliness. For example, as the show stopped along the route, one spectator approached a mounted vaquero and offered to light his cigarette. Although the public reception was cordial, the show management responded more readily to political suggestions to remove the Mexican national flag from the performances.<sup>11</sup> The nationalized tension surrounding Mexican representation in the shows affected relations between performers, including interactions between cowboys and vaqueros. One incident illustrates this tension.

On April 27, 1914 the headline in the New York City World newspaper read, “Wild West Mexicans Nearly at War over Flag.” The article claims that J.C. Miller had ordered the vaqueros to no longer display the Mexican flag during parades and show exhibitions. The vaqueros reportedly angered by the decision planned to boycott the show until they were able to ride with their flag in tow. This decision allegedly infuriated the American cowboys and backstage fights between the cowboys and vaqueros were reported in many newspapers that same week. The New York Dramatic Mirror article titled, “101 Ranch Wild West Show Helps Take the ‘Victor’ Out of Victoriano Huerta,”

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<sup>11</sup> “Broadway Sees Wild West Parade,” *New York Times*, April 21, 1914.

reported that by eliminating the Mexican flag from the show the vaqueros would no longer represent a dictatorial Mexican regime, but instead once again simply demonstrate lasso talent and horsemanship.<sup>12</sup> Nevertheless, the tension did not subside, but rather it continued to mount throughout the show's weeklong stand at New York City's Madison Square Garden.

Anxiety concerning the Mexican flag controversy seemed to be less important to New York City citizens than to the participants of the 101 Ranch show. Spectators continued to attend the sold-out shows that were scheduled twice daily at the Garden. However, increased infighting among the cast did not subside for long. Texas cowboys in the show posted a sign that read, "Mexicans are Huertistas!" on the vaqueros' dressing room door. Mexican officials responded to increasingly negative press such as this and dispatched three representatives to New York City, Jesus Alvarez, José Ortega, and Manuel Juarez, to meet with the Mexicans that participated in the 101 show. In the end, the representatives organized forty vaqueros to protest the situation outside of Madison Square Garden on Monday, April 27, 1914.<sup>13</sup> Local coverage of the protest claims that New York City Police were called out to "quell the race riot."<sup>14</sup> Authorities dispersed the feuding crowds without incident and the show continued inside the Garden for the remainder of the week.

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<sup>12</sup> Victoriano Huerta was president of Mexico from February 18, 1913 – July 15, 1914. Huerta was a dictatorial president. Constitutional revolutionaries, Pancho Villa, Emiliano Zapata, and Venustiano Carranza, who were backed by U.S. President Woodrow Wilson, almost immediately challenged his leadership.

<sup>13</sup> This article reports that forty vaqueros attended the protest, which implies that there were at least that many vaqueros in the 101 show during the New York City tour. This number has not been independently verified through other sources. Available sources concerning performance vaquero personnel in various shows during the 1880-1920s reveals that there were far fewer than forty vaqueros in any show at any given time. Most sources that detail the vaquero personnel list as few as four and as many as twelve. Similarly, photographic images of show personnel in various Wild West shows only contain four to twelve men wearing costumes that visually represent them as vaqueros.

<sup>14</sup> "Police Called Out to Quell Race Riot," *Paterson New Jersey Call*, April 28, 1914.

Even though vaqueros protested their ascribed Mexican nationality and the political ramifications therein, they continued to be active participants in their own racialized nationality in show performances. This is evident in the transformation of the “Attack of the Overland Mail Coach” episode reenactment during the week preceding the protest. Wild West shows had reproduced an attack on a settler’s cabin, the Deadwood Stagecoach, or the Pony Express rider since the inaugural season of Buffalo Bill’s Wild West in 1883. For example, Buffalo Bill’s “Attack on a Settler’s Cabin” climaxed with Cody as heroic savior swooping in on his white horse alongside “cowboys and Mexicans to save the settlers from the marauding Indians.”<sup>15</sup> Although the victims had changed overtime one thing stayed the same: the perpetrators had always been Indians. The Miller Brothers’ rendition of the “Attack on the Overland Mail Coach” was no exception; Indians remained central to the 101’s show American West theme. However, that Wild West tradition was about to change.

In the Wednesday edition on April 22, 1914, The New York City Press published an article titled, “Overland Mail Held Up by a Gang of Mexicans.” The narrative recounted the “savage violence” that had been witnessed along the Mexican border. The article described how The Garden filled with smoke and the crescendo of “noisy battle” as Indians, cowboys, Cossacks, and “Mexican Bandits” mingled in a volley of gunfire. The New York City World reported the events the same day in an article titled, “Wild West Smacks of War,” in which the reporter claimed that the audience did not fear the Mexicans, but instead was enthralled with enthusiasm by the violent outburst and the realness of war that the show produced. A week later news reporters continued to write about the Mexican attack, this time claiming that, “The real atmosphere of the Prairie can

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<sup>15</sup> Buffalo Bill’s Wild West show program, 1883.

be seen in the Garden this week, as the historic hold up of the Stagecoach shows a band of marauding Mexicans who attack the defenseless passengers.”<sup>16</sup> The text in this article reveals how the demonstration and description of the “Attack on the Stagecoach” remains the same while only the perpetrator has been replaced; the Indian removed and the Mexican inserted.

The fascination with Mexicans and violence during the 101 performances at New York City that week may also relate to the invasion by approximately one thousand US Marines at Veracruz, Mexico on April 21, 1914. President Wilson ordered the invasion as a response to three separate incidents that occurred in the first two weeks of April concerning American sailors and other U.S. personnel that ensued at Tampico, Veracruz, and Mexico City, most importantly the arrest of American sailors who had gone ashore in the smaller port of Tampico looking for oil for their ship. Wilson’s order to besiege the major Mexican port city of Veracruz was predicated on the necessity to hold up a shipment of artillery and ammunition carried by the German ship *Ypiranga*, destined for Huerta’s army to support his war against the revolutionary faction headed by Francisco ‘Pancho’ Villa, Venustiano Carranza and Emiliano Zapata.<sup>17</sup> However, as Robert E. Quirk has shown, Wilson’s decision to occupy the Mexican port of Veracruz characterized American interventionist attitudes in Latin America, a policy deeply influenced by American disdain for its weaker neighbors. Wilson had been waiting for a reason to eliminate Victoriano Huerta and these incidents proved to be a valid excuse. Wilson did not expect that Mexicans would resist the attack. Nevertheless, Mexican federal troops met the Marines with gunfire resulting in about twenty American casualties

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<sup>16</sup> “Some of The Interesting Exploits of the 101 Ranch Wild West Show,” *New York City Globe*, April 27, 1914.

<sup>17</sup> “Marines Landed by U.S. Take Veracruz Waterfront,” *The Christian Science Monitor*, April 22, 1914.



and more than two hundred Mexican fatalities. Although the armed violence subsided within hours, the Marines occupied Veracruz for six months.<sup>18</sup>

In spite of the ongoing Mexican Revolution, or perhaps because of it, New York audiences were fascinated by the presences of Mexicans at Madison Square Garden during the exhibitions in April 1914. Many New York City and New Jersey newspapers reported on the events at the 101 shows throughout the week that they performed at the Garden. Furthermore, most of the articles related stories about “Mexicans,” no longer referring to the participants as vaqueros. One reporter did include a description of Mexican mastery of the lasso, but did not do so in terms of ranching talent in the historic West. Instead, the reporter considered the lasso a modern apparatus of violence. Quoting a rancher who worked with the Mexicans at the 101, the article reports, “On the 101 Ranch there are employed several Mexicans, for they are excellent horseman and their roping at roundups is generally without error. But, don’t mind what others tell you. These Mex are a bad lot and to me they always remind me of cats playing with mice.”<sup>19</sup> The paranoia concerning Mexicans as less than trust worthy predators lying in wait to pounce their prey at the most opportune time is also visible in correspondence by the Miller brothers in the 1910s.

J.C. Miller held a grudge against the Mexican nation and its people after the 101 show traveled to and performed in Mexico City in 1908. Although many Wild West shows, including Cody’s, had performed across the U.S.-Mexico borderlands during the 1880s through the 1910s, the 101 was the only such exhibition to cross the border into

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<sup>18</sup> William H. Beezley and Colin M. MacLachlan, *Mexicans in Revolution 1910-1946* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2009), 26-28; Robert Quirk, *An Affair of Honor: Woodrow Wilson and the Occupation of Veracruz*, (New York: Norton & Company Inc., 1967), 2.

<sup>19</sup> “Mex Lariat a War Weapon Says Rancher,” *New York City Mail*, April 25, 1914.

Mexico. Originally, the Millers had not intended to make a journey to the Valley of the Aztecs, but a bad tour season in the US motivated them to continue on the rails rather than cutting their losses and returning to the ranch in Bliss, Oklahoma.

The 101 crossed into Nuevo Laredo on December 5 and were immediately detained by Mexican police for a day and a half. Although the Revolution led by Francisco Madero against dictator president, Porfirio Díaz was still two years away; anxious border patrolmen searched all incoming trains feverishly for weapons that might be used by Mexican insurgents. The 101's train did not evade such detection. Armed Porfirian guards stopped the caravan. Their painstaking search included opening canned and pickled food containers, thrusting their knives inside, to ensure that contraband had not been hidden within. The guards even "all but stripped the eight blonde-haired hootchy-coochy dancers in the search for implements of war."<sup>20</sup> After this unforeseen delay, the train conductors set their sights on Mexico City and arrived in the afternoon on December 11.

The 101 began their engagement at the circus arena at the Paseo in Porfirio Díaz Park on December 12 and continued performances twice daily through December 25. From the beginning the show lost more than a thousand dollars per day. Although the Miller brothers thought that their rendition of the American West would become a popular entertainment in the Federal District once word of mouth spread among its residents, this did not come to pass. It did not take the Millers long to discover why attendance did not rise over the two-week stand. J.C. realized that the economic and social climate in Mexico was not prepared for his sort of entertainment. Instead, it seemed that Mexican citizens were more concerned with the struggles of their own daily

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<sup>20</sup> Fred Gibson, *Fabulous Empire* (Boston: Houghton Mufflin Company, 1946), 259.

lives that they were with paying to see a foreign circus perform a historical account of a place and people with whom most Mexicans were unfamiliar or perhaps too reminiscent of Manifest Destiny.<sup>21</sup> Reeling from economic failure and critical disappointment, the Millers packed up their Wild West troops and headed back to the 101 Ranch following the Christmas holiday.

In light of the 101's experience in Mexico during the 1908 tour, J.C. Miller's correspondence concerning the "Mexican situation" in July 1913 is not surprising. In a letter to Dr. Park A. Findley of De Moines, Iowa Miller expresses his feelings concerning the Mexican Revolution and the possibility of U.S. involvement. Believing that military interaction between the two nations was inevitable, Miller writes that America will undoubtedly prevail. Rather than considering a diplomatic approach, Miller describes that the eventual violence has only one end. He writes, "The only way to clean them up down there, and the only way to have peace in that country with the United States in charge would be to kill all the Mexicans, and as far as I am personally concerned, I would not care how soon it was done, as they certainly gave us a tough deal when we were down there with the show."<sup>22</sup> The following April, J.C. Miller offered his 101,000-acre ranch to the U.S. war department as a place to muster and prepare troops to invade Mexico. Furthermore, a la Roosevelt's Rough Riders, Miller offered to ready his cowboy contingent to accompany the US military when they decided to attack.<sup>23</sup>

Although the Miller brothers considered Mexican Revolutionary violence to be a threat to American security they did not refrain from attempting to capitalize on the

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<sup>21</sup> Michael Wallis, *The Real Wild West: The 101 Ranch and the Creation of the American West*, (New York, St. Martin's Press, 1999), 319.

<sup>22</sup> Letter from J.C. Miller to Dr. Park A. Findley, July 31, 1913. Western History Collections, University of Oklahoma Libraries, Norman, Oklahoma.

<sup>23</sup> "J.C. Miller has 500 for the War Department," *New York Times*, April 26, 1914.

popularity of perhaps the most notable revolutionary in Northern Mexico, Pancho Villa.

In the winter of 1915 the Millers and Cody entertained the idea to include a Mexican Revolution spectacle during the 1916 tour. Allegedly, Villa had agreed to join the show, not only as a participant, but also as a partner. All parties approved and signed a preliminary contract that provided Villa a handsome income that included a percentage of profits, guaranteed to not fall below five hundred dollars per show. Reports contend that the Mexican insurgent would be the central attraction in the episode. Villa had even notified journalist that he intended to retire from the “Mexican situation” and spend the rest of his days living in the U.S., intent to become a Wild West star. In the end, it came as a surprise to 101 show management when, instead, Villa invaded Columbus, New Mexico on March 9, 1916.<sup>24</sup>

Villa’s raid on the sleepy border town just a few miles north of Puerto Palomas, Chihuahua, Mexico did not emerge out of nowhere. Instead, the attack was centered on U.S. President Woodrow Wilson severing his support of Villa’s rebellion to instead support Mexican politico, Venustiano Carranza. In Wilson’s view, Carranza had made significant democratic reform in Mexico and so warranted the U.S. governmental support. Also, the Wilson administration decided, in the fallout of the raid on Veracruz, to embargo their arms shipments to Villa as a measure to ensure that Carranza would not have access to more weapons.<sup>25</sup> In response, Villa led approximately fifteen hundred troops across the border into Columbus, New Mexico. Villa’s men reportedly killed nineteen US civilians and retreated to the Mexican countryside after leaving the town in

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<sup>24</sup> “Wanted Villa as Circus Feature; And Bandit Chief Agreed to Sign,” *The Washington Post*, May 28, 1916. For a look at Villa’s ambition to become a media sensation, look at Mark Cronlund Anderson, *Pancho Villa’s Revolution by Headlines*, 45.

<sup>25</sup> Friedrich Katz, *The Life and Times of Pancho Villa* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), 500.

flames. Wilson, angered and insisting on retribution, ordered General John “Black Jack” Pershing to seek out and eliminate Villa once and for all.

Wilson provided Pershing’s regiment all the power that the U.S. army could afford. Pershing quickly selected approximately six thousand troops, including as his deputy, a recent West Point graduate, George S. Patton for the expedition. Pershing’s quest for Villa marked a last hurrah for the American Cavalry and implemented the first deployment of armored tanks, trucks and airplanes against an enemy.<sup>26</sup> President Carranza reluctantly allowed the U.S. to invade Mexico and for two years Pershing and his men feverishly searched towns, villages and the rural countryside albeit, to no avail. As William H. Beezley argues, this punitive expedition proved to be a “disastrous dress rehearsal for world war.” The mechanized military support that reeked of modernity was an ultimate failure. Villa outlasted Pershing and his men, and the U.S. did not succeed as they had in the most recent military expeditions such as the Spanish-American War.<sup>27</sup> Perhaps for this reason, 101 and other Wild West exhibitions did not include the Pershing expedition in their reenactments of US military events throughout the 1920s.

The harsh historical realities of life as a paid performer and the challenges posed by events such as the Mexican Revolution made life for show vaqueros interesting. Given the violent events surrounding the Mexican Revolution and the long history of racial animosity toward Mexicans, vaqueros such as José “Mexican Joe” Barrera and Vicente Oropeza reinforced positive images of Mexicans despite the tendency for the show in its later years to feature more negative racial performances.

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<sup>26</sup> Eileen Welsome, *The General and the Jaguar: Pershing’s Hunt for Pancho Villa, a True Story of Revolution and Revenge* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2006), 261.

<sup>27</sup> Beezley and Maclachlan, *Mexicans in Revolution*, 37.

## CONCLUSION

*“It was long ago remarked that at no time does a man feel so superior to fate and fortune, so confident of himself, and so much above his fellow creatures, as when he looks down upon things of this world from the back of a good horse.”*

- Nate Salsbury, from the Introductory, Buffalo Bill’s Wild West program, 1903.

On Sunday March 31, 1901, the New York Times ran an advertisement for Buffalo Bill’s Wild West.<sup>1</sup> A drawing of a bearded military scout on horseback with rifle in hand dominates the center of the promotion. Described as “a combination of contemporaneous consequence not on fiction founded,” the ad details many exhibitions that audiences would surely witness during the performances that were scheduled for the following two week and five day stand at Madison Square Garden. In bold large-type print, the show promises to include Armed Mounted Warriors of the World that will reenact events such as The Capture of Pekin and the Battle of Tien-Tsin. Boer and Briton soldiers, Canadian Mounted Rifles, Northwest Mounted Police and even the Coast Guard will take part in a Grand Military tournament. This entire “grand ensemble of moving humanity” would be led in person by none other than Colonel William F. “Buffalo Bill” Cody. On the advertisement’s lower right corner, in small print as if an afterthought, the roster includes Mexican vaqueros and Rurales. Situating these men literally on the margins of Wild West show advertisements demonstrates the waning popularity of the historical west and introduces the new and perhaps more fascinating contemporary militarized entertainment. However, things had not always been this way.

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<sup>1</sup> “Buffalo Bill’s Wild West and Rough Rider,” *New York Times* March 31, 1910.

During the first years that traveling Wild West shows became popular in the 1880s and early 1890s, they focused on representing historical events from the American Western Frontier. Although these shows traveled extensively throughout western US states, Canada, and Europe they experienced lengthy layovers on the eastern seaboard, especially in places such as New York City. Perhaps these tours centered on eastern America because established cities there retained the majority of the US population. However, shows such as Buffalo Bill's also specifically intended to demonstrate to eastern people events from the West and the people that participated in them. After all, Cody, and others such as Fredrick Jackson Turner, claimed that the frontier, its people, and its incidents made American history exceptional to western civilization. By bringing the West to the East, Wild West shows transported with them American exceptionalism. In this way, easterners witnessed firsthand their shared American history. Additionally, vaqueros were an essential part of that history, and so too played a significant role in Wild West entertainment throughout the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

In an attempt to accurately portray the American West, Cody included Mexican-descent people in his show by incorporating them as vaqueros. These men displayed their traditional costumes, horsemanship, and lasso expertise that has been traced to seventeenth century missions in Northern New Spain, the area that is now Northern Mexico and the American Southwest. Early programs accurately portray these Mexican performers as essential contributors to US history because they were in fact fundamental to ranching and cowboy traditions that today are commonly misrepresented as originating in places such as Texas. Contemporary cattle roundup techniques, rodeo custom, and even cowboy terminology origins can be traced back to the vaqueros who worked as

ranchers, warriors, and laborers long ago in Mexico's far north. Over the early twentieth century modern technology such as the railroad, cattle feedlots, and stockyards transformed traditional ranching and cattle herding techniques that vaqueros mastered for centuries. In this new industrialized economy vaqueros faced challenges to find work in the cattle trade and therefore in many ways their presence and active participation in the cattle industry faded into oblivion. Nevertheless, vaqueros shared celebrity status with other important men and women who contributed to the Western myth and history presented in traveling Wild West exhibitions.

Although Buffalo Bill and others incorporated vaqueros in their shows from the beginning, the narrative transformed at the turn of the twentieth century. Mexicans and others were increasingly marginalized as the racial other in show programs, promotions, and live performances. The western motif central to Cody's show waned in popularity at the turn of the twentieth century. Instead, Cody and others chose to quench show audiences' thirst for representations of current events that demonstrated American military success and exceptionalism such as the Battle of San Juan Hill. These reenactments proved successful especially in light of soon-to-be President Teddy Roosevelt's endorsement concerning the reenactments' authenticity in accurately representing the event and incorporating actual military personnel who had participated in the invasion of San Juan. On one hand, incorporating military exhibitions and other nationalistic subjects increased the popularity of Cody's show in the early twentieth century. On the other hand, however, these modern American exceptionalism themes further marginalized Mexican performers as violent racial others and under civilized people.



The 1901 New York Times advertisement that correlates vaqueros with Rurales exemplifies how depictions concerning Mexican-descent people in the US transformed at the turn of the twentieth century. Within the next year show programs increasingly represented these men in terms of racialized nationality rather than their traditional skill as horsemen from the West. Show promotional material used the term vaquero less often than in previous years. Instead, “Mexican” was the primary word used to describe these men. Moreover, the scenes in which Mexican-descent people participated were less about vaquero skill that had been essential in taming the West and increasingly centered on the burgeoning American empire project. Nationalization of Mexicans in the show also allowed producers to incorporate the Mexican Revolution as a way to interpret America as militarily and racially superior. In the end, these themes outlasted Cody and his Buffalo Bill show.

Although Cody died in January 1917 just a few short months after ending his tour with the Miller and Arlington Wild West Show, the Wild West era and its legacy did not die with him. The Miller Brothers Wild West and other entertainment troops continued to spread the American history that Cody had so vehemently protected and proclaimed. Although many of these shows continued to incorporate military exhibitions throughout the 1910s they were once again transformed in the 1920s. The aftermath of World War One seemed to quench Americans thirst for demonstrations of war and modern weaponry. Wild West shows returned the focus to horsemanship once again, showcasing American cowboys and Mexican vaqueros. However, modern audiences became restless and no longer considered these shows as essential diversion. Instead, American audiences increasingly chose movies as their main supply for western theme entertainment. In their

diminishing popularity Wild West entrepreneurs such as the Miller brothers squandered fortunes on the shows, refusing to fold up their tents until they faced bankruptcy and foreclosure. Although most of the tours ended by the 1930s the show's most popular entertainers fled to Hollywood. Acting in the film industry's first western genre movies cowboys such as Tom Mix and Gene Autry brought with them the skills and traditions that they had learned from Mexican vaqueros throughout their years performing the Wild West. Although vaqueros experienced resurgence in popularity in the final years that they toured with outfits such as the 101 Ranch Real Wild West, they did not find equal work in American films.

Hollywood incorporated Mexican characters and some Mexican-descent actors into films in the first decades of the twentieth century. Nevertheless, filmmakers did not choose to represent Mexicans in their traditional role as horsemen of the West. Instead, they imaged the Mexican as a violent loaner, a criminal in most cases that scoured the countryside in search of easy money and opportunity. These characters, known as Greasers, reveal cultural tensions between the US and Mexico during the early twentieth century. Over time, Hollywood filmmakers did little to improve the Mexican image in their films even though Latin American countries threatened to boycott all American films unless significant changes were made. Perhaps the visibility of negative Mexican incarnations in American films throughout the twentieth century affected the ways in which Americans view Mexican-descent people. Perhaps this enduring image from early US films has had a lasting impact on the American imagination and has neutralized alternative images concerning Mexicans in the US. When one peels back the layers of history one can see the vaquero's significant contributions to modern America.

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