

**UCLA**

**American Indian Culture and Research Journal**

**Title**

“Buffalo Bill” and the Siouan Image

**Permalink**

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/85k434c7>

**Journal**

American Indian Culture and Research Journal , 7(3)

**ISSN**

0161-6463

**Author**

Rogers, Phyllis

**Publication Date**

1983-06-01

**DOI**

10.17953

**Copyright Information**

This work is made available under the terms of a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial License, available at <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>

Peer reviewed

## **“Buffalo Bill” and the Siouan Image**

**PHYLLIS ROGERS**

---

This article concerns William F. Cody and his influence in creating the “Sioux” image of the American Indian. It does not attempt to deal with the Siouan stereotyping which has both limited and distanced the native American but rather examines the visual imagery that later developed into that visual stereotypic image.

“Buffalo Bill’s” interactions with the Indians appearing in the Wild West were at times lucrative, difficult, patronizing and adventuresome for the Indians, but malice never entered into their association with Cody.

Unlike the other Wild West showmen Cody almost exclusively employed Sioux. He did not present a, or the, stereotypic image in his depiction of Indians in his posters or in the ring. He attempted to present an honest lithographic representation of the Indians on his show. The actual process of producing the artwork was carefully monitored by Cody himself. Black and white art studies were approved and final color runs were accepted only with his signature. We may now smirk at the fact that many of the posters depicted Indians charging or galloping in a war whoop, but remember the Indian men representative of those who toured with him, as well as he himself, had participated in the Great Plains Indian Wars. They were braves and chiefs who had fought along with Sitting Bull and Crazy Horse. Even Sitting Bull appeared with him for a time!

The role of the equestrian was central to American life at this time and while the posters may seem a bit bombastic they were

Phyllis Rogers holds a joint position in Anthropology and American Studies at the University of California, Santa Cruz.

after all advertisement. Today it's still hard to get people to spend good money to see a dull show.

There are in fact at least two steps to creating a stereotype. The first is the initiation of an image that can or does become universal. The second step is the transformation of the image into its pervasive mode. This article will only deal with that first step, the creation of the visual image. Stereotyping was never Cody's intention; he attempted to present in an ethnographically accurate way the American Indian contingent of his show as he did the other ethnic equestrians touring with him such as Prussians, Tartars and Cossacks.

In order to view this in context we must now place our current understanding of the harsh realities of stereotyping aside to understand how these images came to the fore. Sometimes from outside our system we get glimpses that hold up larger truths. Let me first tell you a story.

One evening my husband and I found ourselves entertaining a group of actors from Poland. Only one of our ten or so guests spoke English and it was at best rather halting. Our conversation drifted around until one of the troupe members asked what nationality I was. I answered, "Navajo." "Na-va-who?" the English speaking man asked. "Navajo," I repeated. He turned to my husband for help. "American Indian," my husband told him. There was a flash of recognition across the man's and the group's faces. "Sukes!" one of them shouted as he jumped from the table and mimed a war dance. "Sukes!" the rest of them said as they parodied feathered headdresses, fighting and riding. "Sukes!"

I wondered for quite some time after that evening how a group of Poles came to associate the Sioux with the term American Indian, but my curiosity was abated for several years. While doing some research as I neared the completion of my doctoral dissertation on the American Circus clown, I came across a letter from "Buffalo Bill" Cody which peaked my curiosity. He had written his partner James Bailey, the sole owner of the Barnum and Bailey Circus. Cody was requesting monies to buy the Indians on his show new ponies after theirs had been destroyed by the French government during an outbreak of glanders. The ponies would be shipped from America to France at Cody's expense and the Indians would keep the ponies at the end of the tour. This didn't sound like the William F. Cody I had read so much about, and as I continued my reading of the letters I

discovered that Cody only hired Great Plains Indians, usually from the Pine Ridge Agency. Finally, Cody had sole control of the posters used for the show. I began to wonder, knowing that "Buffalo Bill's" Wild West had toured Europe as well as the United States, just how influential had he been in the creation of the visual stereotype we have of the American Indian today.

Academicians, based on the scholarly work of John Ewers on the emergence of the Plains Indian as a pervasive image, are of the opinion that the image of the Great Plains Indian (Sioux) was started by the fine arts, specifically with the artists Charles Bird King, George Catlin and Karl Bodmer. Ewers's general assumption is that since the fine arts had first displayed the Sioux, it was they who created the pervasive image (Ewers, 1964).

I had begun to question this premise at first simply because the two images, that of the fine arts and that of Cody, looked so different. I began to wonder if Cody had not started a separate image when he began to advertise his Wild West and if the stereotyping which continues to the present is a result of his imagery.

What I needed to prove my premise was a visual indicator of the Indian that began sometime after the first appearance of the fine arts imagery and continued until at least a little after the introduction of Cody's posters. Only then could I accurately track the visual impact of each of the images. I found just what I needed in the dime novel, but I'm jumping ahead of myself.

Let us first consider the fine arts, since chronologically these works preceded "Buffalo Bill's" Wild West by fifty years. One of the men responsible for the first series of oil portraits of the Great Plains Indians was the prominent Washington artist Charles Bird King. From 1822 until 1842 when he painted his last commissioned portrait King painted one hundred and forty-three portraits receiving more than thirty-five hundred dollars for his services (Viola, 1976:21). The artist never traveled any farther than Washington, D.C. to capture the images of his sitters. Most of the Indians he painted were visitors to the nation's capitol; and more often than not they were there to sign treaties establishing peace between the two nations and to forfeit more of their tribal lands. The other Indians painted by King came to him by way of miniature portraits taken in the field by James Otto Lewis and then copied to the appropriate size and suitably interpreted by Mr. King (Viola, 1976:56).

The portraits formed the nucleus of the collection which came to be known as the National Indian Portrait Gallery. Thomas McKenney, the unofficial first Commissioner of the Bureau of Indian Affairs, is credited with suggesting the establishment of the gallery. He believed the Indian was about to become extinct, and he wanted to leave some record of these people for the examination of future generations of Americans. In addition to his other activities, McKenney, initially in cooperation with James Hall, wrote *The History of the Indian Tribes of North America*. This three volume work, illustrated with the paintings of King and other fine artists, was published in Philadelphia from 1836-1844.

McKenney announced the work in 1830. The prospectus promised one hundred and twenty portraits printed on fine, heavy paper, "corresponding to the value and size of the work and to its intended perpetuity." (Viola, 1976:71). The cost was six dollars a number or one hundred and twenty dollars for the entire set. By 1836 McKenney had twelve hundred and fifty subscribers and he was anticipating an income of one hundred and fifty thousand dollars from the book, but the Panic of 1837 which was followed by the Depression of 1838 all but destroyed McKenney's hopes for financial success (Viola, 1976:80). It seems that most of the original subscribers were Southern planters, merchants and financiers and this group was particularly hard hit by the financial hard times. Half of the subscribers never paid their bill, so that only half of the orders were printed. As McKenney later said, "'Embarrassments thickened over the land, . . . whilst many of the subscribers who were rich when they patronized the work, failed, or changed their residence, or died. Under such circumstances,' he sighed, 'were my cherished hopes crushed' " (Viola, 1976:85).

In 1858 one hundred and fifty paintings in the National Indian Portrait Gallery were transferred from the offices of the Bureau of Indian Affairs to the Smithsonian Institution, where they remained on permanent display until a fire destroyed most of the paintings in 1865.

George Catlin's paintings are the result of a series of journeys he made west of the Mississippi in the summers of 1830 and 1834. The first public exhibition of this self-taught artist's work was held in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania in 1833. The large, one-man show that made him famous was held in New York City in 1837 and toured Washington, D.C., Philadelphia and Boston. Catlin's

exhibition which toured into 1838 combined his lecturing in addition to the exhibition. Most of the paintings which hung on display had not been finished; the backgrounds in most cases and a great many of the details had not yet been painted by the artist (Truettner, 1979:36). While the tour was a critical success, financially Catlin did not break even (Truettner, 1979:39).

In 1839 Catlin moved his exhibition and all of his sketches to Europe where he was to remain for the next thirty-one years. Curiously, the European tours also proved to be financially unsuccessful, while being a critical hit. Attendance began dropping rather early in the exhibition (Truettner, 1979:41). Attendance never met up to Catlin’s expectations. He even toured the exhibit with a group of Indians who had gone to England, but once again he did not show a profit. It was during his European stay that Catlin became a famous author. Academicians say that thousands of people in America who had never seen his original art show saw the 312 pen and ink sketches in Catlin’s two volume *Letters and Notes on the Manners, Customs and Conditions of the North American Indian*, published in 1841, and the color drawings in Catlin’s *North American Indian Portfolio*, published in 1844.

Karl Bodmer, a German national, was the artist on Prince Maximilian Weid-Neuweid’s scientific expedition to the Great Plains. The expedition occurred two years after Catlin’s first trip into the same area, but the two men painted during different seasons and do not appear to have portrayed more than a few of the same people in their paintings. Bodmer’s paintings and sketches are the illustrations for Maximilian’s treatise *Reise in das Innere Nord-Amerika in den Jahren 1832 bis 1834*, published in Coblenz, Germany in 1839.

The works of these men were shown extensively from the 1830s to the 1860s. King’s paintings were the first to appear before the American public and were on permanent display in the Smithsonian from 1858 to 1865. The works of Bodmer, while not widely seen by the American public, were quite well known to both the scientific and academic community. George Catlin’s paintings were widely exhibited and his books were popular. But were the works of King, Bodmer and Catlin popular enough to have inspired the pervasive Siouan image? A closer analysis of the information raises some doubts.

King’s paintings in the National Indian Portrait Gallery collection were on public display within the rather secluded and dimly

lit confines of the Bureau of Indian Affairs from 1822 to 1858 (Viola, 1976:56). They were then moved to the Smithsonian Institution where they were on permanent display until they were all but destroyed by fire in 1865. These paintings were only on display in Washington, D.C.; they never toured this country or Europe. In fact, we still have copies of the portraits only because they appeared as illustrations in the McKenney-Hall volumes. The McKenney-Hall histories are extremely large volumes and all of the prints are in color. Today publication of such a volume would be extremely expensive; in the 1830s the cost was prohibitive for any but the wealthy and we see from the financial crisis of 1837 and 1838 that the subscriptions were halved. According to John Hall, McKenney's partner in the work and the man who carried the project to fruition, "The large and expensive form of the work, has confined it to public libraries, or to the collections of wealthy persons, so that it is not known in the literature of the country, nor has it gained me any recognition" (Viola, 1976:85-87).

The Bodmer sketches and watercolors were seen by an even more limited audience than the King portraits because they were only published as illustrations in Maximilian's treatise (Thomas, 1982:6). The journal was held in high esteem by the scientific and academic community in America, but, once again, only the wealthy could afford to purchase this over-sized volume with its blue tinted prints. The total number of editions published has not been determined but undoubtedly the number is well under one thousand (Thomas, 1982:12). In addition, the work was sold only by subscription and as the sheets came off the presses so they were sent to the subscribers; binding was up to the individual (Thomas, 1982:12)

George Catlin's work, of course, was more widely distributed, but several things must be kept in mind concerning the exhibition and distribution of his work. First, Catlin exhibited his paintings only in the larger cities of the United States. Second, his paintings toured this country for only two years and this was followed by a thirty-one year absence from America! Granted, during his stay in Europe he published what are now considered to be widely read books, but several other factors must be kept in mind when we consider the popularity of his work. Catlin could not find an American or European publisher who would handle his book, so he published it himself on eighty-five hun-

dred dollars which was only in part acquired through subscription (Truettner, 1979:43). Another challenge to the theory of the books' popularity is that while the books were a critical success they sold poorly and Catlin was obliged to place most of the copies in the hands of publishers in England and America, which cut his profits markedly (Truettner, 1979:44). It is not known how much the books sold for in this country but in England they sold for fifty shillings each, quite a sum for those days (Truettner, 1979:44). Once again only the well-to-do could afford such luxuries.

If we consider the cost of the books and the places where the paintings were exhibited, we see that these images of the Plains Indian were accessible only to a limited, rather wealthy sector of the American populace. The question we are faced with is, given the size, exposure and socio-economic status of their audience, were these artists influential enough to create the pervasive Siouan image?

We can assume that for an image to be called pervasive it must straddle all socio-economic barriers and enter the imagination of that nebulous entity known as the general public. Our index of the influence of these forms is one of the first mass-produced publications for the general public, the dime novel. These books were printed on low quality paper, rarely exceeded a hundred pages and were small in size. The only illustration appeared on the cover and most of the tales dealt with the Indians. The first dime novel was published in 1860, almost forty years after the first portrait of a Plains Indian appeared before the American public. In 1860 the books containing Bodmer's and King's works were still in print, the King portraits were on permanent display at the Smithsonian and Catlin's books were still very popular.

The publishing house of Beadel and Adams was the most successful publisher of this pulp literature. Every three weeks, for thirty years, sixty thousand copies of the latest edition with a new tale hit the streets (Johannsen, 1950). Not all of these novels cost a dime, many could be had for a nickel, and people who could not afford regular books could buy these novels. During the Civil War the Union troops were inundated with them. Even though these novels were both cheap and plentiful, they were still a luxury item.

The dime novels I read which dated from 1860 to 1879 had as their locales the northeastern United States, Florida, the



Southwest, the Midwest and the South Seas. Their topics range from love stories to adventure tales, to accounts of the American Revolution, to captivity narratives. The stories are set in time periods ranging from the sixteenth century to 1863. The tribes discussed in the novels are Navajo, Shawnee, Sioux, Mohave, Ute, Cheyenne, Apache, Mohawk and Seminole, but the only Indian we see on the covers of these novels are Algonkian.

It appears that the image of the Indian in these first mass-produced novels was not based on the current representations but rather on the still relevant and pervasive Algonkian image. All we see on the covers of these novels, which were published in Philadelphia and New York, are pictures of the Indian populations that were once indigenous to those areas. The Algonkians on the covers represent any tribe discussed in the book and this occurred while the Siouan representations of Catlin, Bodmer and King were still in the public eye! Furthermore, during the period in which these novels were published Custer was killed at the Little Big Horn and Chief Joseph fled the Nez Perce reservation. Both of these events were widely covered by the press and both involved Indians who roamed the Great Plains; but in spite of this the Indian on the cover of the dime novel from 1860 to 1879 remained Algonkian.

The first Wild West performance occurred in 1883. Its star and co-producer was William F. Cody, better known as "Buffalo Bill." Cody grew up in Nebraska where one of his first jobs was to supply meat for the railroad crews in the area, hence his nickname. By the time he was twenty he had become a scout for the U.S. Army stationed in the Great Plains region and had served for such military figures as William Tecumseh Sherman and George Armstrong Custer. He also served as a tour guide, taking visitors on buffalo hunts and displaying Indians to visiting dignitaries. A casual talk with the infamous pulp writer, Ned Buntline, catapulted Cody into the national limelight as a dime novel hero. Encouraged by Buntline, Cody performed on stage throughout the 1870s as an actor in dramas written about the dime novel hero, Buffalo Bill.

"Buffalo Bill" Cody toured his Wild West from 1883 to 1917 and by 1885 his Wild West was one of the most popular forms of outdoor entertainment in the world. During the thirty-four years that he toured, his annual advertising budget ranged from three to four thousand dollars to a hundred thousand dollars.

That bought quite a lot of posters since the standard size poster—30×40 inches—cost a penny. Cody used the best lithography houses in this country and his graphics were superb. All of the Indians on Cody's posters were members of one of the Great Plains' tribes.

By the 1890s Cody had begun to use the term Sioux for all of the Great Plains Indians on his show. It has been estimated, based on financial records, that during the thirty-four years of touring fifty million people saw "Buffalo Bill's" Wild West. We have no way of knowing how many people saw the millions of posters "Buffalo Bill" had pasted on the buildings and fences of the towns he played. These posters were put up a few weeks before the actual performance and usually came down several months later due to wear and tear from the elements. Up to several thousand posters could be placed in a single town, based on the size of the town and that of the expected crowd. Most of "Buffalo Bill's" Wild West posters displayed the Sioux.

If once again we use pulp literature to measure the influence of the poster art of the Wild West on the general populace, we see that after 1884 all of the Indians on the covers of the dime novels (by now a catch-all term for all pulp literature) were modeled or adapted from "Buffalo Bill's" Siouan image. Who is responsible for the Siouan image of the American Indian? The visual and statistical data indicate it was the popular art of "Buffalo Bill."

The paintings of Catlin, Bodmer and King were seen by the wealthy segment of the American population. These artists' works were popular from the 1830s to the 1870s, yet they appear to have had virtually no impact on the general public's concept of the Indian. The works of these artists were found in books few people could afford or hung in galleries which few people had leisure time or the funds to visit. Most of the works stayed in those cities for years at a time. The paintings of the most popular member of this group, George Catlin, were absent from this country for thirty-four years.

"Buffalo Bill's" Wild West was in the public arena for thirty-four consecutive years. Each year during that period he took his show on a six month tour of several hundred American cities and towns, and he organized railroad excursions to bring in thousands of people from outlying areas to the show. In those thirty-four years more Americans saw his show than any other form of

popular entertainment, and we have no way of knowing how many people saw the millions of posters that covered barns, buildings, fences, bridges and walls in every town he toured. For months after the show had left town the citizens could still see the vividly colored posters on every available space in their town or city.

In conclusion, I feel it was William F. Cody and his popular art rather than the fine arts which created the visual imagery of the American Indian which later we have come to know as the Siouan stereotype. Charles Bird King, George Catlin and Karl Bodmer painted an Indian that was unknown to the general public and was destined to remain so after the advent of the Wild West. "Buffalo Bill" Cody, the advertising methods of the American circus, the railroad and lithographic technology of the day were responsible for the creation and production on a massive scale of an image that has become so universally seen and established throughout the world.

#### REFERENCES

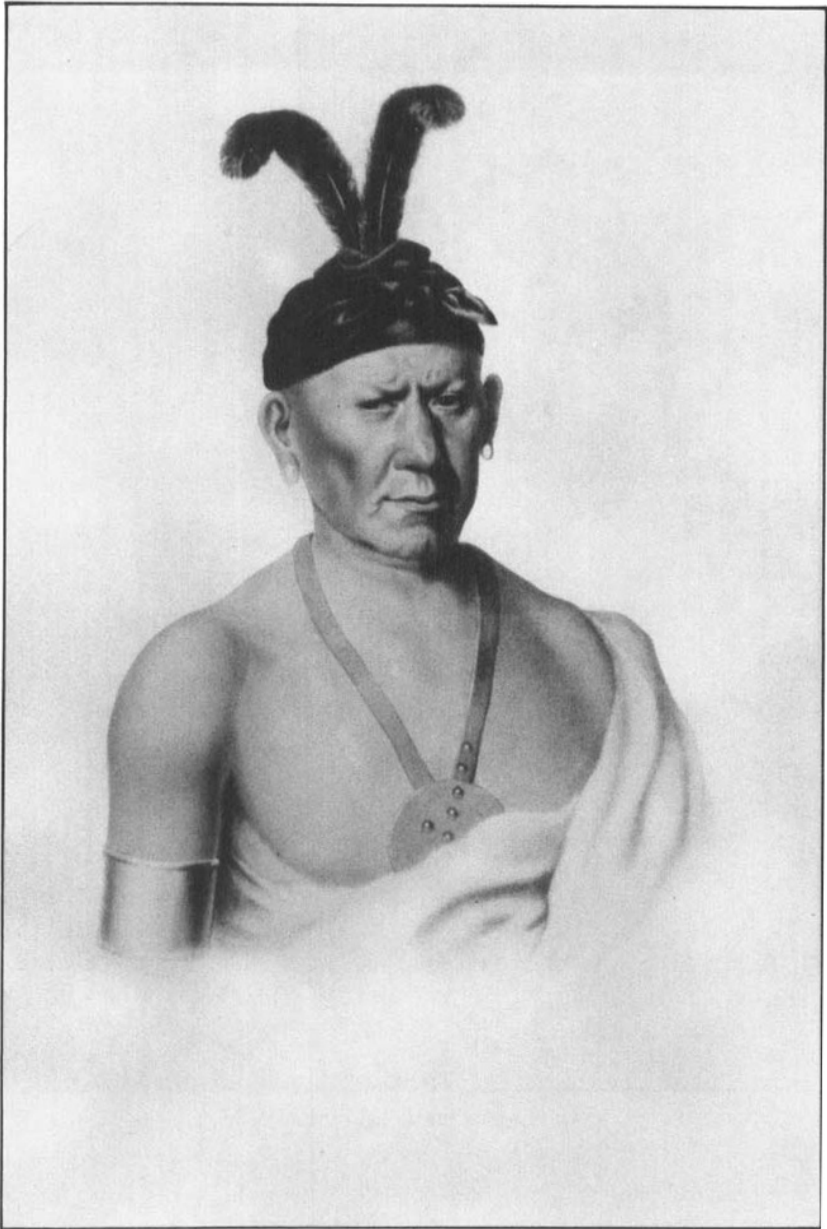
- Ewers, John.  
1964 "The Emergence of the Plains Indian as the Symbol of the North American Indian." *Annual Report of the Smithsonian Institute*. Washington, D.C.
- Hassrick, Peter.  
1981 "The Artists." *Buffalo Bill and the Wild West*. New York: The Brooklyn Museum.
- Johannsen, Albert.  
1950 *The House of Beadle and Adams*. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press.
- McCracken, Harold.  
1959 *George Catlin and the Old Frontier*. New York: The Dial Press.
- Thomas, Davis and Ronnefeldt, Karin.  
1982 *People of the First Man: Life Among the Plains Indians in Their Final Days of Glory; The Firsthand Account of Prince Maximilian's Expedition Up the Missouri River, 1833-34*. New York: Promontory Press.
- Truettner, William.  
1950 *The Natural Man Observed: A Study in Catlin's Indian Gallery*. Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press.
- Viola, Herman.  
1976 *The Indian Legacy of Charles Bird King*. Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press.

I would like to thank the following institutions for permission to use their posters and novels and for their support of this project.

The American Indian Studies Center, UCLA  
The Buffalo Bill Museum; Cody, Wyoming  
The Circus World Museum Library; Baraboo, Wisconsin  
The Cultural History Museum, UCLA  
The Institute of American Cultures, UCLA  
The National Archives; Washington, D.C.  
The Rare Book Collection, Firestone Library, Princeton University  
The Rosenbach Museum and Library; Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

### LEGEND OF ILLUSTRATIONS

- a The American Indian paintings of Charles Bird King were published by McKenney-Hall during this period.
- b The American Indian paintings of George Catlin and Karl Bodmer were created during these periods.
- c Dates when *The Red Outlaw* and *Boys of New York* were published.
- d Dates when posters were in use.



Charles Bird King, (1836-1844)<sup>a</sup>




George Catlin, (1834 and 1836)<sup>b</sup>



Karl Bodmer, (1833-1834)<sup>b</sup>

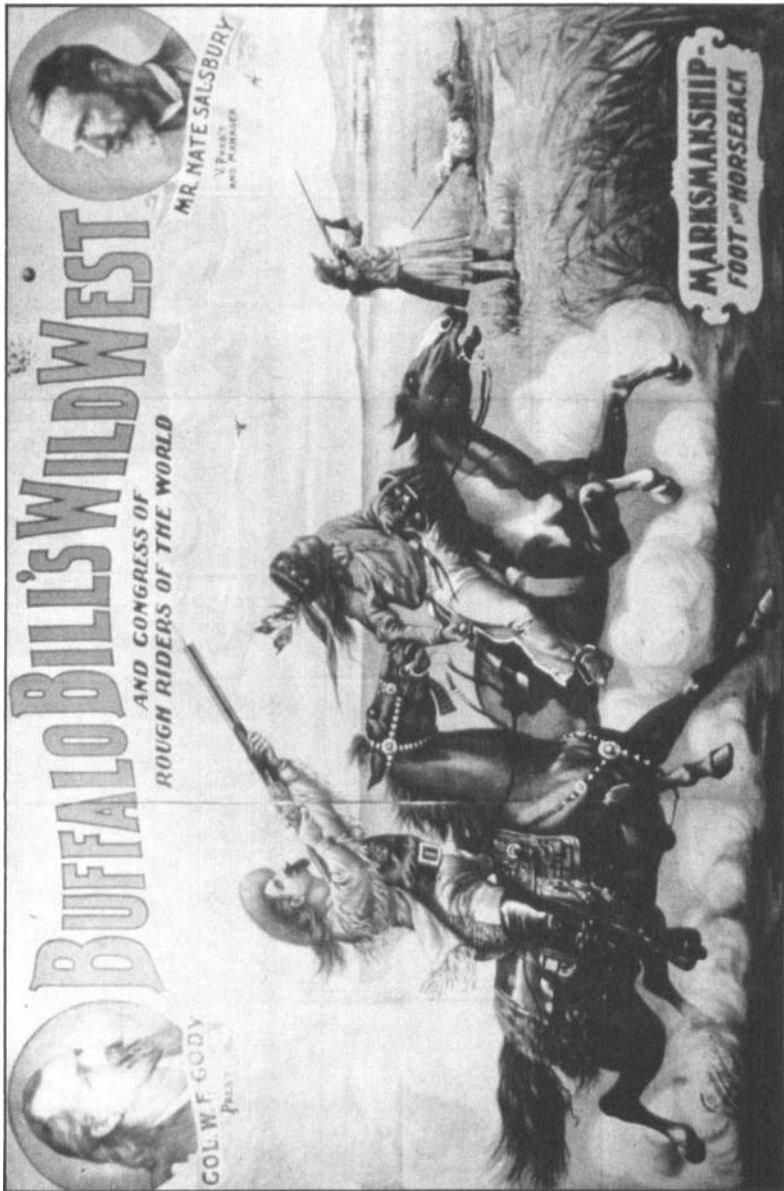


Semi-Monthly  
No. **BEADLE'S** No. 1  
**DIME NOVELS**  
1046/1 (6)



**THE RED OUTLAW.**  
BEADLE AND COMPANY, 98 WILLIAM STREET, NEW YORK.  
New York News Co., 8 Spruce St., N. Y.

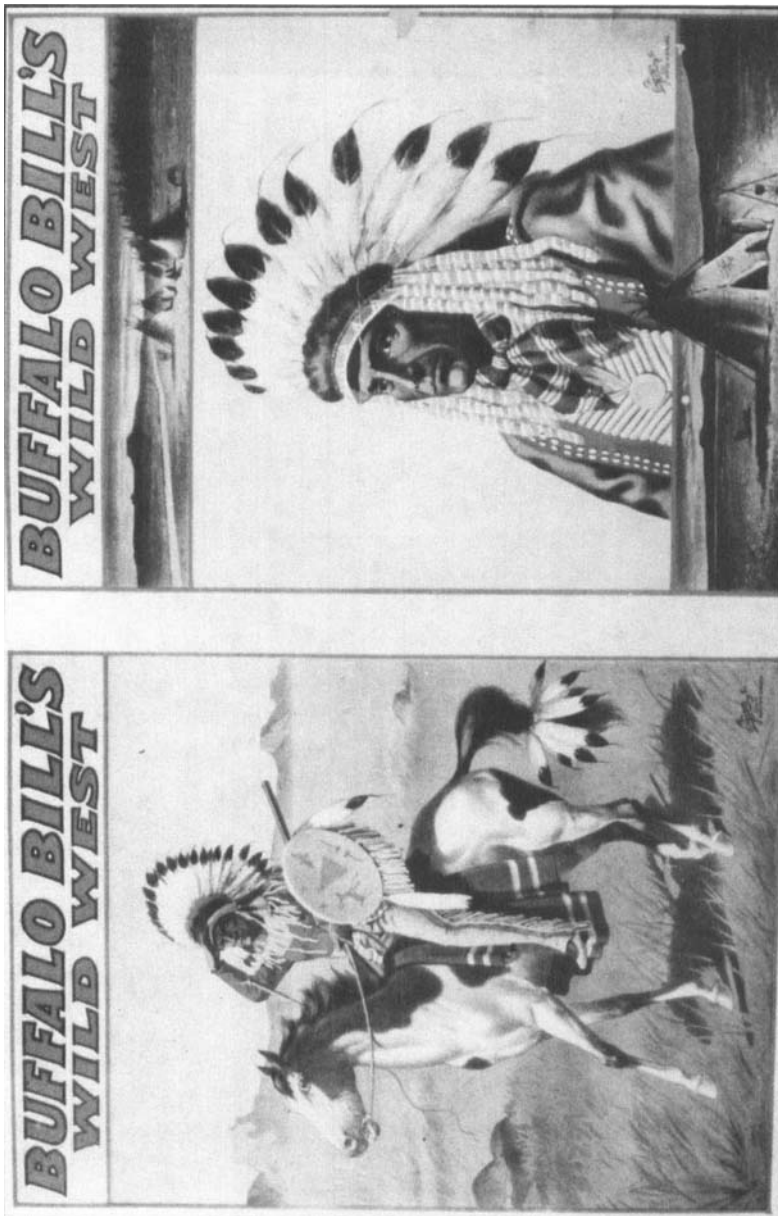
*The Red Outlaw* (Dime Novel), (1870)<sup>c</sup>



"Buffalo Bill's" Wild West (Poster), (1890-1902)<sup>d</sup>



"Buffalo Bill's" Wild West (Poster), (1890-1902)<sup>d</sup>



"Buffalo Bill's" Wild West (Poster), (1903)<sup>d</sup>

