

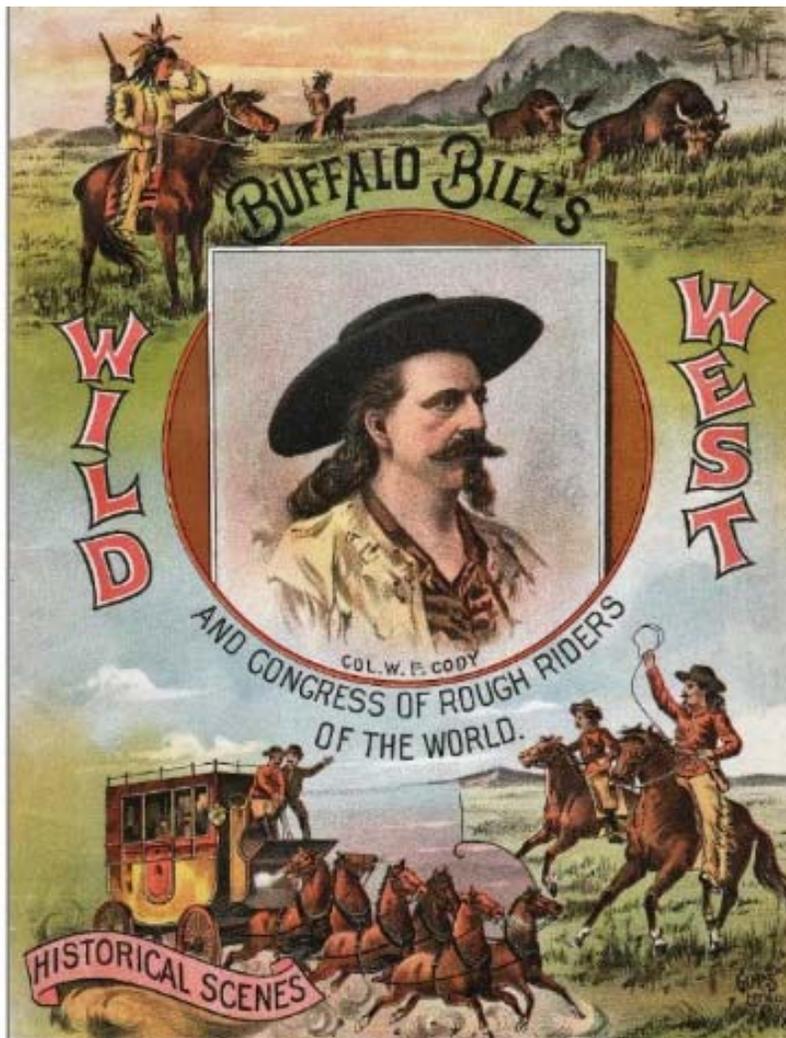
NEW ORLEANS NOSTALGIA

Remembering New Orleans History, Culture and Traditions

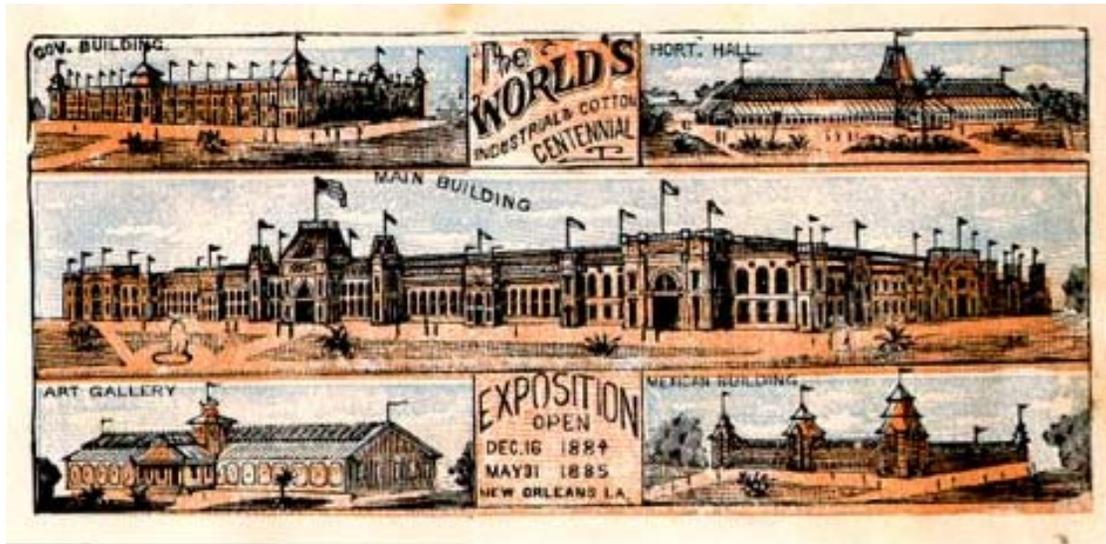
By Ned Hémard

Almost the Greatest Show on Earth

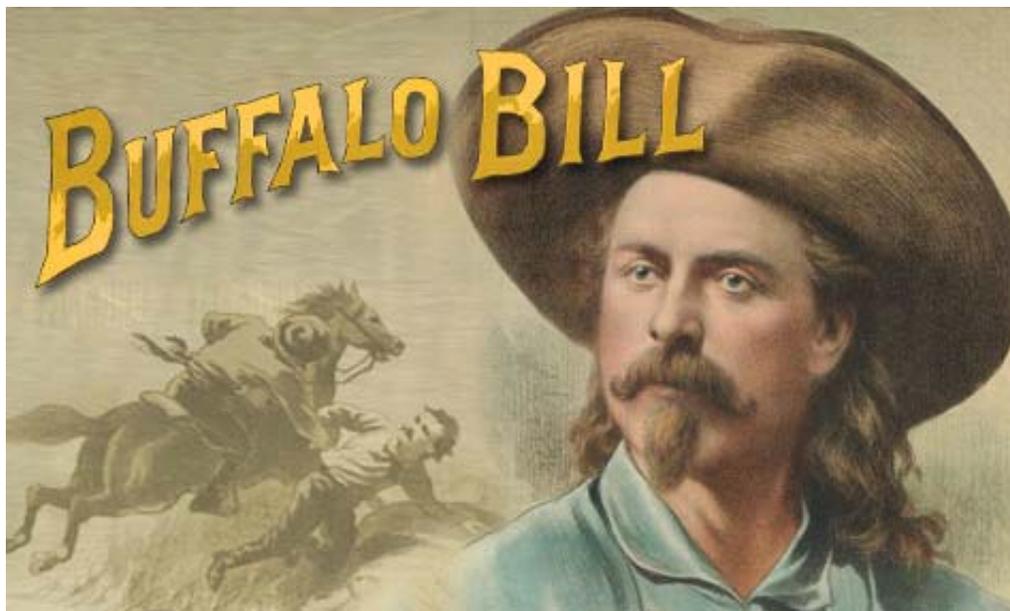
Mardi Gras has been called "The Greatest Free Show on Earth," but in the winter of 1884-1885 another "Greatest Show" visited the Crescent City. It wasn't that of the Ringling Brothers (whose slogan is "The Greatest Show on Earth"), although they had their start in 1884. It was the "Wild West Show" of Buffalo Bill Cody, which he had decided to bring to New Orleans.



The former bison hunter's idea was to link his performances with the World's Industrial and Cotton Centennial Exposition, scheduled to open on December 16, 1884. The Fair's "Centennial" name was to commemorate (one hundred years earlier) the earliest surviving record of export of a shipment of cotton to England from the United States in 1784.



But, on his journey to New Orleans, disaster met William Frederick Cody at every turn. On the way down to the city, the riverboat transporting the troupe collided with another vessel near Rodney Landing, Mississippi, and sank in less than an hour. Cody later wrote: "we lost all our personal effects, including wagons, camp equipage, arms, ammunition, donkeys, buffaloes and one elk."



After being telegraphed by his partner to reorganize and go on with the show, Colonel Cody had more problems. The Exposition

fairgrounds in what is now Audubon Park were turned into a muddy swamp by continuous rainfall. In addition to natural mire, there was the mire of corruption and poor planning. Major Edward A. Burke, chief promoter of the fair, ended up in Honduras with between one and two million dollars missing from the Louisiana Treasury. The rains were so disastrous that on one day Buffalo Bill performed for a crowd of only nine persons and left town after several months \$60,000 in debt.



But even Dickens would have described it as the best and worst of times. Mardi Gras of 1885 saw the parading of the first Mardi Gras Indians, actual Plains Indians and four chiefs from the “Wild West Show” adorned in colorful headdresses and tribal garb. The African American population was positively inspired by them to create their own Mardi Gras Indian culture, which thrives today.

In fact, most agree that the first tribe was Big Chief B. K. (Becate) Batiste’s “Creole Wild West” and was formed very soon after Buffalo Bill’s visit. Both the World’s Cotton Exposition’s Eighth Regiment Mexican Cavalry Band and the African rhythms initiated by these early Mardi Gras Indians were important influences on New Orleans music, from Jazz to Rock and Roll. A number of these eighty musicians remained in New Orleans, as well as their instruments.



Modern-day Mardi Gras Indian with scenes of Custer's life and death

Despite the hardships, the "Wild West Show" had perhaps one of its best seasons. It was in New Orleans in that Bill met 24 year-old Annie Oakley, dubbed "Little Sure Shot" by Sitting Bull. She and her husband, Frank Butler, had a contract with the Sells Brothers Circus that had concluded in New Orleans in December of 1884. There they asked Cody for a job but were not hired until four months later in Louisville, Kentucky. Annie appeared in the "Wild West Show" that season before 150,000 people in 40 cities, becoming its most loved performer. Sitting Bull signed on soon after Annie.

Plus it turned out to be a great idea to connect the show's presentations with World's Fairs. This western spectacular would go on to appear in eight other World's Fairs with overwhelming success. Two years after New Orleans, the show was invited to England where it made quite a favorable impression on Queen Victoria. Cody recalled that her majesty "bowed deeply and impressively" to the American flag paraded by the show's mounted rider. A command performance as the main American participant in Victoria's Golden Jubilee Celebration soon followed. Commoners and nobility alike thrilled to the exciting Western panorama and the fantastic feats of marksmanship. And Ohio-born sharpshooter Annie Oakley (nee

Phoebe Ann Mosey) continued to wow the crowds.



A tour of Europe followed in 1889 where an unusual offer came from Queen Victoria's grandson, the man who would become Kaiser Wilhelm II. Part of the show involved Annie shooting the ashes off a cigarette held between the lips of her husband. Willie volunteered to stand in for Frank, and Annie had him hold the cigarette in his hand instead. The diminutive sharpshooter executed the challenge without fail. Years later some wondered if she should've missed.



Future Mardi Gras Indian "Big Chief" and present Saints Fan



Big Chief David Montana in his "New Suit", 2012

NED HÉMARD

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Article and photographs by
Ned Hémard
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