

University of Nebraska - Lincoln

DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln

Great Plains Quarterly

Great Plains Studies, Center for

1988

Review of Buckskins, Bullets, and Business: A History of Buffalo Bill's Wild West

Andrew Gulliford

Western New Mexico University

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/greatplainsquarterly>



Part of the [Other International and Area Studies Commons](#)

Gulliford, Andrew, "Review of Buckskins, Bullets, and Business: A History of Buffalo Bill's Wild West" (1988). *Great Plains Quarterly*. 515.

<https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/greatplainsquarterly/515>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Great Plains Studies, Center for at DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln. It has been accepted for inclusion in Great Plains Quarterly by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln.

Buckskins, Bullets, and Business: A History of Buffalo Bill's Wild West. By Sarah J. Blackstone. Westport, Conn: Greenwood Press, Inc., 1986. Illustrations, photographs, notes, bibliographic essay, index. xi + 157 pp. \$27.95.

Of all the popular culture heroes of the American West, Buffalo Bill stands out as the quintessential frontiersman, hunter, Indian scout, cattle rancher, land speculator, and showman par excellence. The subject of countless dime novels, plays, melodramas, and no fewer than thirty five films, Colonel W. F. Cody was a living legend whose expertise in organizing and touring "Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show and Congress of Rough Riders of the World" made it one of the largest and longest running outdoor entertainments in history. For more than thirty years, between 1882 and 1913, the Wild West Show toured America and Europe. Many of those shows played only once in a given location, yet each night a dedicated and competent staff pro-

vided living and dining quarters for 700 people, as well as feeding and stabling for 500 horses, 18 buffalo, and other assorted animals.

Though numerous scholarly articles and books have been written about Buffalo Bill and his imitators, Sarah J. Blackstone in *Buckskins, Bullets, and Business* adds significantly to the literature of popular culture and the mythology of the West by utilizing her background in theatre and performance to focus on the business and touring aspects of the Wild West Show. She explains the logistical problems of mobilizing such a large outdoor show and maintaining thematic unity over time while improvising new acts and improving old ones.

During one week in June 1894, the staff ate 5694 pounds of beef, 966 pounds of pork, 350 pounds of bacon, 12 cases of sweet corn, 20 pounds of pepper, and 200 pounds of cornmeal, among other foodstuffs. Setting up the show required 22,750 yards of canvas, twenty miles of rope, and 1104 stakes. In chapters titled "How Truth Became Fiction," "Getting the Show on the Road," "On With the Show," and "Messages and Meanings" the author clearly explains the evolution of the Wild West Show and its attraction for audiences from Madison Square Garden to the Roman coliseum. Perhaps the most innovative chapter is a semiotic analysis of audience reaction to the Wild West Show based upon the significance of text, context, linguistic messages, performer's accessories, lighting effects, and other stimuli.

Though Blackstone does a marvelous job of chronicling the success and final demise of the show by concentrating on form, function, and business matters, she avoids the larger cultural question of racism. Racist attitudes were prevalent in Cody's time, and he capitalized on those attitudes in both implicit and explicit ways. Dozens of Indians traveled with the show as did Mexicans, Arabs, Cossacks, and South American gauchos. The Indians were a large drawing card for Buffalo Bill's show, and because they helped ensure the show's financial success, they merit far more analysis than

they receive in a book which is a business history. How minority performers related to each other, how they related to the audience, and how they felt about their roles in the show are not explained.

Despite this significant omission, *Buckskins, Bullets, and Business* is a well-written and concise book which answers many questions about the Wild West Show and offers new insights into Buffalo Bill's enormous impact on the culture and myth of the American West.

ANDREW GULLIFORD
Director of the Museum
Western New Mexico University