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How the West was Played: The Influence of Wild West Shows on American Identity and Perceptions of Gender, 1870 to 1920

Justine Macauley

The United States has always been mythologized as the land of freedom, exploration, independence, and restlessness. From the nation's beginning with its daring American Revolution, the spirit of the American has been straightforward, devil-may-care, down-and-dirty, and will not stand for anyone getting in the way of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.¹ The dream of moving west where open territory waited captured the imaginations of thousands all over the country and brought with it depictions of men and women who staunchly faced the unknown. When the 1890 census officially declared that the frontier was closed, anxieties arose concerning Americans' opportunistic drive, freedom to move, and that spirited character that thrived in the open air.² As a way to combat those anxieties, writers, poets, artists, and entertain-

¹ See William G. Robbins, "Western History: A Dialectic on the Modern Condition," *Western Historical Quarterly* 20 no. 4 (1989), 429-449 for further discussion of this idea.

² Frederick Jackson Turner's "The Significance of the Frontier in American History" (1893) comments on the impact of the closing of the frontier on American history and psyche, and Henry Steele Commager discusses the social changes and anxieties of the nineteenth century in Chapter II "The Watershed of the Nineties" in *The American Mind* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1950).

ers created the means to keep that character alive all over the country. This national character became a solid identifier of an American during the late 1800s and early 1900s as large-scale entertainment in the form of extravagant Wild West shows took the message of American masculinity and bravery around the globe.

Opportunistic showmen with dreams of furthering American legacy capitalized on the sense of adventure and opportunity that the West provided, presenting a highly exaggerated version of the real-life experiences of western settlers and cowboys. Through glorification of the cowboy, the Indian, the settler, and the cowgirl, and exploits of daring fights and freedom, Wild West entertainers put America at the center of world popular culture for the first time beginning in the 1870s.³ In this America, people discounted social expectations and followed their wild instincts, and were rough-and-tumble adventure-seekers who faced real danger but always triumphed. From 1870 to 1920, the Wild West shows provided Americans with an outlet for exploring their dreams of what kinds of people they wanted to be, cementing a romanticized vision of America that helped shape gender roles about both men and women.

The shows demonstrated gendered ideas about men and women, giving Westerners romanticized, adventure-filled lives that were presented before audiences in a safe, guaranteed-to-succeed environment that downplayed the harsh realities that settlers, soldiers, and frontiersmen faced. Along with the sense

³ See Robert W. Rydell and Rob Kroes, *Buffalo Bill in Bologna: The Americanization of the World, 1869-1922* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2005).

of adventure, the displays in the shows also highlighted physical strength as well as the morals and values needed to survive in a harsh environment.⁴

The late 1800s and early 1900s was a time of great social change, marked by technological and social progress, increasing globalization, colonization, and growing international trade of goods and ideas. Gender spheres made it easier for Americans to package their worldview into a small, understandable, controlled environment that was, in a sense, romanticized, just like the Wild West shows romanticized the American spirit. As protectors of the home, men were supposed to be physically and mentally strong, taking a heroic stance against anything that got in the way of their individualistic goals. Women were the masters of the home, promoting both domesticity and the gentler side of men through their even tempers, innocence, and elegance.⁵

The Wild West shows, however, displayed women stepping out of their prescribed gender role to become part of the rough-and-tumble environment of the West. The cautious, level-headed wife and mother dedicated to the care of home and family was not the American woman with whom audiences all over the globe became familiar. Instead, she was a horseback-riding, gun-slinging cowgirl who trooped around the world

⁴ See Joy S. Kasson, *Buffalo Bill's Wild West: Celebrity, Memory, and Popular History* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2000), and Richard Slotkin's *The Fatal Environment* (New York: Harper Collins, 1985).

⁵ See Henry Steele Commager, *The American Mind* (1950) for American self-perception and Ellen M. Plante, *Women at Home in Victorian America* (New York: Facts on File, Inc., 1997) for male and female gender spheres.

with hundreds of men to perform feats of daring previously reserved for men (since danger rested in the male sphere). Because the women performers had to move away from proper female behavior, the show organizers counteracted the women's activities through the performers' clothing and stage presence; nevertheless the rules were altered in how women acted during the shows.⁶

Men did not have to make outright changes to how they presented themselves in the shows, since their acts involved feats that were appropriately masculine, but the level of violence and social nicety changed to fit a harsher landscape. There was a higher degree of manliness that entertainers needed to exploit in order to give men an extra degree of credibility when they rode around on horseback and displayed both their dominance over the Indians and their courage in the face of danger. This image of masculinity placed pressure on men to become brawny protectors of the home, able to fight off any attacker or injustice through any means necessary.⁷

The American mindset at the turn of the century reveals how Wild West shows permeated society to create a national identity readily embraced by white Americans. Manifest Destiny, the beginnings of global-

⁶ See Glenda Riley, *The Life and Legacy of Annie Oakley* (Norman: U of Oklahoma P, 1994) for a discussion of women in the performance arena.

⁷ Theodore Roosevelt (political leader and president), Owen Wister (author), and Frederic Remington (artist) present arguments in their work about the importance of masculinity and an emphasis on physical as well as mental capacities. See Robert V. Hine and John Mack Faragher's *The American West: A New Interpretive History* (New Haven: Yale UP, 2000), 495-498.

ization, and comparisons of "civilized" and "uncivilized" countries contributed to this ideology. Historians, starting with Frederick Jackson Turner in 1893, have been studying the impact of the west on the American imagination even while people were still traveling across the plains to settle in the wild.⁸ Despite significant scholarship on the meaning and influence of Wild West shows in the United States at the turn of the century, the role of gender has not been given its due commentary. This paper discusses the formation of a national character, and demonstrates how the American self-image, as reflected by Wild West shows, helped shaped gender roles and perceptions for the viewing population in America.

The Wild West shows were extravaganzas, emerging straight out of the imaginations of showmen eager to keep the spirit of the West at the forefront of the public's mind. Entertainers and publicity agents exploited the desire for adventure that had already been established in dime novels, popular illustrations,

⁸ Study of the American mindset has a long scholarly history, beginning with Turner's influential essay "The Significance of the Frontier" (1893), which describes the influence of sheer space on American character. Henry Steele Commager's *The American Mind* (1950) discusses cultural aspects that influenced thought, character, and conduct. Henry Nash Smith's *Virgin Land* (1950) and Roderick Nash's *Wilderness and the American Mind* (1967) discuss the need to explore and conquer the West. Richard Slotkin examines the frontier myth and American identity in *The Fatal Environment* (1985). Books like Robert V. Hine and John Mack Faragher's *The American West: A New Interpretive History* (2000) as well as *The Legacy of Conquest* (1987) by Patricia Nelson Limerick look at neglected aspects of Western expansion and expose myths created by media like the Wild West shows.

and early stage shows that began appearing in great numbers in the 1830s. The public devoured the strong images of cowboys, Indians, female pioneers, horses, guns, buffaloes, and stagecoaches.

Showmen perpetuated these interests in their unashamedly dramatic performances. From the 1880s until the 1940s, over a hundred shows toured in the country and internationally.⁹ The most influential and wide-reaching performers were George Catlin, Buffalo Bill Cody, and the Miller Brothers. From the 1830s until the 1860s, George Catlin traveled around the U.S. and Europe to expose the world to life in the West with his lectures, stage playacting, museum-like displays, and exhibitions. William "Buffalo Bill" Cody took up the idea of exhibition in the 1880s and expanded it into the extravaganza for which audiences clamored. The Miller Brothers and the 101 Ranch Wild West show promoted the West from their ranch in the 1900s and 1910s, using Cody's success to recreate admiration for the frontier but adding a more circus-like air and using advanced technology like automobiles.¹⁰

But it was Buffalo Bill who became the iconic master of early popular culture and one of the first

⁹ Paul Reddin follows the original four Wild West shows in *Wild West Shows* (1999). Joy S. Kasson's *Buffalo Bill's Wild West: Celebrity, Memory and Popular History* (2000) looks at how Buffalo Bill developed the national character in his shows. In *Buffalo Bill in Bologna* (2005), Robert W. Rydell and Rob Kroes explain the formation of mass culture and its impact on Europe and the image that America projected.

¹⁰ Paul Reddin's *Wild West Shows* (Chicago: U of Illinois P, 1999) was an excellent source for this paper for information on the careers and extravaganzas of George Catlin, Buffalo Bill Cody, and the Miller Brothers.

international stars, beginning with his first show in 1883. Other show owners mimicked his demonstrations of action and adventure, but he was first to understand both the desire for an accessible, visual American epic as well as which aspects of the West most appealed to people looking for escapist entertainment.¹¹ He brought the romantic image of America to the four corners of the earth, impacting American self-image at home for both those who had been to the west and those who had never visited.¹²

The rollicking affair that was a Wild West show began with an invitation to embrace a vision of the West that was a “simplified, patriotic, and believable national epic.”¹³ An announcer began the show with an assertion of the show’s authenticity and of the special privilege the viewers would receive in witnessing the realities of the frontier in front of them. Spectacle, exaggeration, image, and excitement were key. According to Buffalo Bill, the shows were not performances, and the actors were not actors. “They simply appear just as they are,” he said, “nothing more, nothing less.”¹⁴

While the cowboy band played patriotic songs, cowboys, Indians, scouts, and cowgirls rode into the arena on horses. After the host introduced the company of men and women, the show began. It was typical for a woman shooter to start the show to help

¹¹ Kasson’s *Buffalo Bill’s Wild West* (2000) provides a thorough look at the impact that Cody had on national identity and entertainment.

¹² Rydell and Kroes, 30. Also see Kasson for William Cody’s influence on Wild West entertainment.

¹³ Reddin, 60.

¹⁴ Reddin, 61.

make the audience—particularly female viewers—more comfortable with the sound of guns going off. In Buffalo Bill's Wild West, this woman was Annie Oakley. Her presence in the arena helped calm the fears of women in the audience and convey the idea that the West could be a place for ladies, too.

The audience soon became accustomed to noise and constant action, and the energy remained high throughout to keep their attention. Acts began and ended rapidly. Marksmen demonstrated the importance of firearms on the frontier and a more relaxed attitude toward violence. Riders participated in races and did tricks to show off their riding abilities and the power of the horses. Cowboys did rope tricks, lassoing cows and bucking broncos. Constant in the shows were good vs. bad acts based on incidents from the frontier, like the attack on the Deadwood mail coach and the attack on the settlers' cabin. Those acts always featured a representative of civilization, either the stagecoach, a home, or a helpless woman, being attacked by Indians and rescued by the white riders. It was a display of morality: the bad Indians, symbolizing evil and barbarism, would attack civilization and be defeated by the good white Americans.¹⁵ The heroic rescues displayed their dominance and power in making the frontier safe for women and society. All these acts were intended to expose the audience to ways of life on the frontier and the fantastic things soldiers and settlers were doing there to replace wilderness with civilization. They allowed the audience to share the experience of the west—the sights, the smells, the danger—but in a comfortable, contained

¹⁵ Reddin, 76.

environment.

The Wild West shows captured the spirit of a strong man who emerged from westward movement. Nationalism and patriotism contributed to that identity, culminating in a character that appeared in popular stories, myths, and eventually the Wild West performances. This American character arose out of not only the opportunistic, freedom-seeking mindset, but also the physical demands of the landscape, requiring people's mental strength when battling the imperfect Eden they had not expected, and their courage to forge new paths and drive out the Indian populations. The performances were especially pertinent because anxieties about the closing frontier were on the rise; no one knew what would happen to the American—who relied so heavily on the opportunity to move—when the land filled up. Buffalo Bill Cody noticed the nostalgic impulses in Americans and their love for the dime novels and incorporated the desire for independence and adventure into his exhibitions. Publicized as “the gladiatorial contest revived” rife with excitement, danger, and triumph, the Wild West show represented a dream of a country—and the people that lived in it—to its citizens.¹⁶ The shows addressed those hopes, assuring audiences that a national character based on independence and self-sufficiency would not disappear.

The shows' cowboys and marksmen who displayed their talents and ease with violence in the arena had to be believable, otherwise the performances would not have been received well. Characteristics that showmen and the American public came to associate with

¹⁶ Reddin, 62.

cowboys and marksmen made them into believable participants. The performers took example from popular characters from fiction or history, like Leatherstocking, Daniel Boone, Wild Bill Hickok, Davy Crockett, James Fremont, Kit Carson, and General Custer. These men—fictional or otherwise—established an idea of the traits men needed in order to be successful on the frontier. They were able to take advantage of the wilderness and had adventures battling the landscape and its Indian populations. They had free reign of the land; there was no obstacle to their desires; they became the models for what every male, from little boys to grown men, wanted out of his life. The Wild West cowboys personified and perpetuated that go-get-'em spirit.

But the frontier character first had to contend with the assumptions about strict definitions of a proper Victorian American's character before those values could be altered to fit a rougher terrain. People had to maintain standards of propriety: men were the protectors of the home, women provided the calm demeanor that sustained husband and children.¹⁷ Americans established their roles as men and women in relation to a domestic life because there they would raise new citizens with the values necessary to further proper society—often into the west. Proper presentation of identity and self, and a clear set of values guided

¹⁷ In this paper, Stanley Coben's *Rebellion against Victorianism* (New York: Oxford UP, 1991), Ellen M. Plante's *Women at Home in Victorian America* (1997), and Sandra L. Myres' *Westering Women and the Frontier Experience 1800-1915* (Albuquerque: U of New Mexico P, 1982) have been particularly useful in outlining basic Victorian expectations for men and women.

American Victorians as they exuded morality and propriety to outside eyes, and brought "civilization" out west.¹⁸

But Victorian values were sorely tested on the frontier. As much as settlers tried to maintain the level of society that they had established in the east, it was almost impossible to successfully integrate all those requirements into a rough terrain where danger lurked in the landscape, the weather, the wildlife, the native populations. Fierce masculinity and demure femininity were exaggerated and romanticized by the national identity presented in the Wild West shows to clearly differentiate between men and women, but the performers also bent gender roles and gave women a larger role as athletes in the arena, and men license to emphasize violent impulses, instead of the self control the Victorians valued.¹⁹

The white men who acted as cowboys in the arena were the image of what Americans wanted their men to be. They displayed the physical strength and moral superiority that Americans felt that they needed to bring to the frontier. The cowboy became one of the great legacies of the West, garnering high praise and respect. Before Buffalo Bill got his hands on him, the

¹⁸ Coben, 4.

¹⁹ These books take Victorian expectations further: *The Life and Legacy of Annie Oakley* (1994) by Glenda Riley demonstrates how the legendary lady shooter impacted the vision of American women but still maintained her Victorian femininity. Matthew Basso, Laura McCall and Dee Garceau's compilation, *Across the Divide: Cultures of Manhood in the American West* (2001), comments on masculinity in the west while debunking myths about machismo and manhood on the frontier.

cowboy was a vulgar, disrespected figure of the frontier. People distrusted the man who had been away from civilization for so long. But the cowboy got a new identity—an admirable one—when Cody and his partners recognized and promoted his work ethic and drive to extend American civilization, becoming a cultural hero that fit the expectation for American men. There was a wildness to him that people could understand and for which they longed in themselves. Buffalo Bill insisted that living on the frontier instilled in the inner person just as much excellence as the lifestyle did to the exterior one, encouraging moral values instead of detracting from them. Frontiersmen had to have a strong moral code and be able to stick to it because they were battling the “other” in the untamed land: both the landscape itself in its unwieldy and dangerous state, and the Indian populations with their unfamiliar ways that white Americans feared. They needed their national character to distinguish themselves as more civilized and superior than the rest of the world.²⁰

The frontier’s barrenness meant independence. Men could be free from the barriers of society and live under their own rules. But, as the Wild West shows indicated, men could only have freedom if they had something to protect. The shows encouraged that protective spirit with their depictions of cowboys, marksmen, scouts, and riders as capable, intelligent, resourceful, and courageous, because they had to protect the weaker sex, the softer side of civilization.

²⁰ See Slotkin’s *The Fatal Environment* (1985) for a discussion of the formation of national character during the nineteenth century.

The goal of moving west was to civilize the land and prepare it for the bonds of society. As protectors of the home, especially on the wild Western frontier, men had to adapt their eastern values to fit a more dangerous lifestyle while remaining respectable. Their characteristics served to protect the dignity of American civilization and domesticity. According to London's *Era* newspaper, American men—American cowboys—possessed an even temper, an “absolute indifference to peril, perfect fealty to a friend, extreme amicability and openness, coupled with a readiness to ‘shoot’ as soon as a certain code of civility has been transgressed.”²¹ The shows encouraged this point of view and made it an admirable standard for all men.

The cowboy represented the anxieties of the day, a symbol for people who feared the encroaching influences of modernization in an age of new technology, industrial growth, increasing population due to immigration, and the closing of the frontier. These anxieties encouraged Wild West shows to display their male actors as physically strong and mentally capable of bringing American values across the plains as they civilized the wild frontier. When men showed off their horsemanship, skill with a gun, or ease with violence, they demonstrated to audiences that all Americans had the ability to spread the morals, values, and characteristics of society to tame wild lands. According to a reporter for the *Era* in 1887, “There are few types of manhood more essentially masculine than the better

²¹ “Buffalo Bill in Camp,” *Era* (London) 23 April 1887, qtd. In “Buffalo Bill’s Cowboys Abroad” by Clifford P. Westermeier, *Colorado Magazine* 52 no. 4 (1975) 281.

class of Western men.”²² Audiences were at once adoring and fearful of the cowboys, admiring their strength of will and the way they were able to step outside of strict Victorian values while maintaining certain principles and facing danger with faith, determination, and resolve. Alone on the frontier, the cowboy faced dangers and emerged triumphant, assuring middle-class Americans that the individual would survive even when it appeared that the opportunities for freedom were disappearing.

The softer sex had a place in the Wild West shows as well, one that walked a fine line between maintaining and challenging Victorian gender boundaries to comfort audiences as well as shock them. In Victorian America, women were keepers of the home, charged with maintaining domesticity to give their children and their husbands a place to which to return after a day out of the house. A woman focused her life on her home, her family, hard work, and the value of self-control.²³ She moderated the fierceness in her husband with her sexual and temperamental purity and virtue, giving her man assurance that she could provide a haven if he did well enough to give her the resources. Women were required to be demure and submissive, always inferior to men because they were the “weaker sex.” Every aspect of a woman’s life was designed to keep her in the home as the figure meant to be protected at all times from outside forces bent on destroying the sanctity of the American Victorian

²² “The Wild West Show,” *Era* (London) 23 April 1887, qtd. in Westermeier, 283.

²³ Coben, 7.

home.²⁴

With these restraints in mind, white female performers in the Wild West shows had to maintain a delicate balance of their femininity while carrying out the more masculine activities of riding, shooting, and performing in front of audiences. On the one hand, they fit into the Victorian stereotype as the delicate flowers that cowboys and marksmen had to defend from the savage Indians in staged attacks. On the other, they were self-sufficient gun-wielders who knew how to handle themselves on a violent frontier. People had developed three images of women on the frontier: the weary, forlorn wife, the sturdy helpmate and civilizer of the frontier, and the untamed, masculine woman.²⁵ Entertainers and publicity agents used all three stereotypes tactfully to serve different purposes in introducing a new kind of woman to audiences: one who could keep her elegant Victorian femininity while participating in the public sphere.

Women were bound by the Victorian gender roles of conduct and propriety, which limited how they could participate in the shows without being seen as unfeminine or unrefined. For many acts, they took on the role of the helpless victims, screaming and fainting, requiring rescue during staged Indian attacks or dramatized burnings of the settlers' cabins. These acts allowed audiences a glimpse of the "superiority" of the white Americans their ability to tame the wild lands and the

²⁴ See Plante for a more thorough discussion of women's duties in the home and their role as moral guides for the rest of society, as well as Chapter 1, "Women's Social Sphere" of Shelia M. Rothman's *Women's Proper Place* (New York: Basic Books, 1978) for a discussion of women's sexuality.

²⁵ Myres, 3-4.

wild hearts of the people who lived there.

But women did not only play the victim in these extravaganzas. They were also riders and gun-bearers, unashamedly displaying their athleticism and physical prowess in the arena where they did tricks on horseback, shot rifles, and did not flinch at the sound of gunfire. This female performer reflected a sense of being needed, mirroring the new span of responsibilities that women had to take on the actual frontier. They helped on the homestead, got their hands dirty, and, alongside men, built the community from scratch. Even so, entertainers had to be very careful about how their female performers were represented, since the shows were defined by danger and violence and completely dominated by men, and the world which the entertainers inhabited was fraught with danger and situations unsuitable for the upstanding Victorian woman. Despite all the dangers that viewers assumed were present, the cowgirl managed to maintain her Victorian femininity while becoming the strong female character that women viewers could admire, especially when they crossed the gender boundary and used guns and rode horses for sport. Publicity agents and entertainers' clever, strategic use of femininity mixed with physical prowess appealed successfully to female audiences and calmed the fears of those who believed women could not make it in the West.

Female performers accomplished this delicate balance through their costume and stage presence. Perhaps the greatest and most admired—and certainly the first—of the daring Western women was Annie Oakley. Oakley was a sharpshooter extraordinaire, using shotguns and rifles to hit both stationary and moving targets and beat many of the best male shoot-

ers. Her presence in Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show not only made the expositions appeal to female as well as male viewers, but offered assurance that domesticity could permeate the rough terrain and atmosphere in the west, and that women had a place there, too. She fulfilled Victorian expectations for true womanhood by emphasizing her femininity during shows.²⁶ Her girlish appearance made it admirable, attractive, and acceptable for women to ride and shoot in front of audiences.²⁷ Oakley garnered support and admiration from audiences all over the world through her exciting acts coupled with her attention to Victorian expectations, and became an example for women who wanted to take up some aspect of sports. But it was important for her, as well as the Wild West entertainers and publicity agents, to emphasize that female dependence on men was vital. Victorian ladies could take example from the Wild West cowgirls and become more physically active outdoors, but could not shirk their domestic responsibilities or proper gendered behavior. The shows helped encourage the idea of a more active female participant in the larger public sphere, but did not allow her to forget obligations at home.

The image that Annie Oakley and other women of the Wild West shows promoted was one of femininity coupled with license to use physical abilities in the public sphere. As Oakley and other cowgirls adopted the new athleticism of Western women while maintaining Victorian propriety, Wild West women helped female viewers become more comfortable with females in the public sphere. In the 1900s, Wild West cowgirls

²⁶ Reddin, 71.

²⁷ Riley, "Annie Oakley: Creating the Cowgirl," 33.

became symbols for a healthy, western lifestyle. The Miller 101 Ranch Wild West Show cowgirls furthered that image by rejecting Victorian clothing standards and encouraging a more active, healthy, rigorous lifestyle. A reporter from New York stated that the cowgirls were the “sauciest, happiest, loveliest assemblage of femininity available,” and others reported physically fit women as beautiful, even sexy.²⁸ Cowgirls helped American society accept the idea of a more active woman, especially important because of the growing women’s movement during the 1910s.

With extravagant sets, exotic animals, wild Indians, gun-bearing women, and brawny men, audiences could witness the West as it existed in the public imagination: adventurous, dangerous, magnanimous, virtuous. Cowboys became the heroes of subsequent generations, appealing to the desires for adventure and escapism. Cowgirls were examples of women who were athletic and more active in the public sphere while maintaining Victorian standards of dress and demure, innocent attitudes. Americans appreciated their place in a glorious tradition and could be a part of the country’s progress by just sitting in the arena to watch the shows. The shows were their truth: General William Tecumseh Sherman wrote that Buffalo Bill’s exposition was “wonderfully realistic and historically reminiscent,” just as Mark Twain stated that “Down to its smallest details the show is genuine—cowboys, vaqueros, Indians, stagecoach, costumes and all: it is wholly free from sham and insincerity.”²⁹

As society changed, technology progressed, and

²⁸ Reddin, 171.

²⁹ Riley, *The Life and Legacy of Annie Oakley*, 150.

more people moved west, Americans needed reassurance that they could still maintain their free, devil-may-care independence and wildness that they had when the frontier was still open. The Wild West shows brought audiences this comfort with vigor. Through the shows' visions of wild buffalo, brave cowboys, intelligent scouts, wily Indians, and daring cowgirls, American audiences could embrace their nostalgic impulses and allowed themselves to be wooed by the draw of adventure and self-sufficiency.

But the shows also paid homage to the future, depicting the advancement of civilization and society across the plains not as a loss but the best thing to happen to the wide, open, wild landscape, ripe with opportunity to spread American ideals to the far reaches of the continent. The shows eased the anxieties of audiences and encouraged optimistic thinking about society's progress. They presented adventures infused with morals and ideals that Americans were already familiar with, but shifted them to encompass the social change as old Victorian social standards became less rigid and gender spheres blurred on the east coast as well as on the frontier. The shows displayed men and women acting to embrace those changes: women threw off the strict rules of propriety that the Victorian gender spheres dictated to become more active; men became more masculine as women crossed those gender boundaries and got involved in the public sphere. The Wild West shows offered comfort to anxious Americans by showing them a world where adventure and romantic independence still thrived, while allowing gender boundaries to change, so that Americans could embrace a progressing

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society, a new active woman, and a fierce brave man with resolve, courage, and guns a-blazin’.

Justine Macauley is a senior history major with an English minor and has focused her studies at Santa Clara on gender, the West, the Progressive Era, and Victorians in America. This is her History Capstone paper which allowed her to combine aspects of history about which she is most passionate.