

# BUFFALO BILL BUILDS A TOWN

part 1 one



**BY JEREMY M. JOHNSTON**

*Although many credit William F. "Buffalo Bill" Cody for the founding of Cody, Wyoming, there is ongoing debate about who truly established the town that bears his name. Many historians believe Buffalo Bill's business partner George Washington Thornton Beck deserves the lion's share of the credit for guaranteeing the success of the community. Beck and Cody, along with their contemporaries, documented the completion of the Cody Canal and the establishment of Cody. Long after both men passed away, historians continue to debate the role and significance of these two community leaders, basing their perspectives on these various conflicting first-hand accounts. Were Cody and Beck close business partners? Did they share business responsibilities equally? Should one individual receive more credit than the other? Additionally, what role did other individuals play in the founding of Cody? Finally, what does the archival record reveal about these questions?*

At the turn of the twentieth century, city fathers had great plans for Cody, Wyoming, shown here in 1899. But who really deserves the credit for establishing the town? MS6 William F. Cody Collection. P.69.568





William F. Cody, seated, with George Beck (left), and Henry J. Fulton, thought to be a sheep rancher (right), ca. 1910. MS6 William F. Cody Collection. P.6.266

## **CODY AND BECK BECOME PARTNERS**

William F. Cody and George W.T. Beck officially became business partners in 1895 with the founding of Shoshone Land and Irrigation Company, later known as Shoshone Irrigation Company. Buffalo Bill served as president of the new company with Beck as general manager. This company planned to irrigate more than 400,000 acres along the Stinking Water River, today's Shoshone River. The men also envisioned establishing towns within these irrigated farmlands. In the end, what seemed simple at first proved to be quite challenging, creating an endeavor neither man could complete on his own or without outside support.

Both Beck and Buffalo Bill had previous experience in founding communities. Beck established a small settlement named Beckton, located east of the Bighorn Mountains near Sheridan, Wyoming, diversifying the local economy by building a flourmill and introducing sheep to the open range. Buffalo Bill attempted to build a town in Kansas named Rome. Unfortunately, when Cody refused to cooperate with Kansas Pacific Railroad officials on the sale of town lots, the railroad shifted their facilities to another location, and Rome quickly disappeared.

Both men probably believed their previous experiences would allow them to overcome the great challenges of settling the Shoshone River Valley. Yet their combined expertise little prepared them for the difficulty of building canals and recruiting settlers. Ensuring the success of reclamation in the Bighorn Basin and the community of Cody would be difficult, costly, and stressful for both founders.

A contemporary of both men, the artist and rancher A.A. Anderson from Meeteetse, Wyoming, told a simple



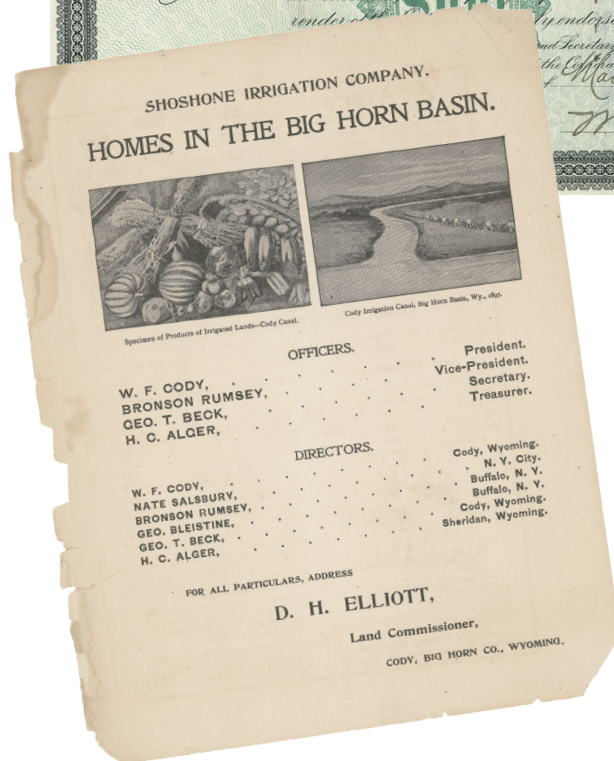
Photo courtesy the Beck-Johnson-Gerber Family.

yet romantic version of the founding of the town of Cody in his autobiography. Anderson claimed Cody and some companions were camping along the Shoshone River. After dinner, one member of the party shouted, "Let's found a town here, and name it for Cody!" All agreed, and Beck mounted his horse, rode to the bluff overlooking the river, threw his hat down, and rode back to camp proclaiming, "Gentlemen, the city of Cody is founded." Anderson's rendition is far different from the accounts written by Beck and Cody. Buffalo Bill's and Beck's early reminiscences about the founding of Cody offer us varied and conflicting depictions of the town-building process.

## THE ATTRACTION OF THE BIGHORN BASIN

Buffalo Bill's early accounts ignored the difficulties of building the new community and focused on the scenic Bighorn Basin and its healthy environment—obviously his effort to recruit even more settlers to the region. Buffalo Bill's own story of discovering the Bighorn Basin appeared in *The Big Horn River Pilot*, a Thermopolis, Wyoming, newspaper, on October 12, 1898. According to this account, Cody suffered from infected and inflamed eyes. A doctor in Deadwood, South Dakota, prescribed bathing his eyes in whiskey, a prescription Cody refused to carry out—because of his reluctance to waste good whiskey. Instead, he bandaged his eyes and set out with a group of companions to the Bighorn Mountains.

One day in camp, a fellow traveler removed the bandages, and for the first time, Cody viewed the Bighorn Basin. "No one looked upon a happier, a more delightful valley...At such a moment a man, no matter what his creed may be, sees the hand of a Mighty Master and becomes sensibly conscious of his own littleness...and I chanced to be viewing one of nature's master-



Shoshone Irrigation Company stock certificate. MS6 William F. Cody Collection. MS6.0512.5.01a

With their Shoshone Irrigation Company, Cody and Beck had big plans for settling Wyoming's Bighorn Basin with the construction of the Cody Canal. MS6 William F. Cody Collection. MS6.6.A.4.9.1.01



*Romanticized though it was, to his sister Helen Cody Wetmore, the reason for Buffalo Bill's mission to irrigate the Bighorn Basin was to "prepare a land flowing with milk and honey for the reception of thousands of homeless wanderers. Like the children of Israel, these would never reach the promised land but for the untiring efforts of a Moses to go on before...It is [my brother's] wish to finish his days as he began them, in opening up for those who come after him the great regions of the still undeveloped West..."*



The Shoshone Project in Wyoming, ca. 1910. Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division, Washington, DC, 20540 USA. LC-F82-724

pieces." According to Cody's account, the water from DeMaris Springs near the future site of Cody cured his eye infection—saving his valuable whiskey. Of course, the Thermopolis paper denied it was DeMaris Springs Buffalo Bill visited, claiming instead the water was from the hot springs near their town.

In *Last of the Great Scouts*, Helen Cody Wetmore, William F. Cody's sister and biographer, retold her brother's version of riding to the height of the Bighorn Mountains in a blind state. Adding her own literary embellishments, her account relates that an Arapaho warrior bathed Cody's eyes with spring water, curing his blindness to allow him to see the Eden-like Bighorn Basin—known as "Ethete" to the Arapaho nation.

Beck provided a brief and less romantic account of developing the Bighorn Basin to the State of Wyoming Historical Department in 1924. He noted, "To many of the Eastern men [the investors] the project was sport, and I was left to complete the work as best I might." He mentioned his fellow founder Buffalo Bill only in passing throughout this published account. Shortly before he passed away in 1943, Beck wrote about bringing Buffalo Bill into the project shortly after he, Beck, returned from a trip investigating the site in 1893:

*I returned full of enthusiasm, and with Horace Alger, who was cashier of the bank in Sheridan, I began to figure on building the canal I visualized. In the middle of the*

*figuring, Colonel Cody, Buffalo Bill of the famous Wild West, came to Sheridan. He had an interest in the Sheridan Inn and his elder daughter, Arta, was the wife of my friend Horton Boal. Of course, Boal told his father-in-law of our summer's expedition and all about the country over to the west and what I was planning to do. Cody came to me and asked to be let in on it...*

*Horace was quick to agree that by taking Cody in we would acquire probably the best advertised name in the world. That alone, we reasoned, would be advantageous and we thereupon made Cody president of the company we organized. Alger was treasurer and I was secretary-manager. However, no money was put up then, except the expenses I personally bore.*

## THE CODY CANAL

A project as massive as the Cody Canal required collaboration among many individuals beyond Buffalo Bill and Beck, and often scholars forget the others who contributed to the success of Cody. Wyoming's U.S. Senators Joseph Carey and Francis E. Warren established the foundation for such projects with the passage of the Carey Act in 1894. This legislation provided arid states with up to one-million acres of federal land if the state would irrigate the land. States then worked with private companies to irrigate, and potential settlers would buy land from the state and water rights from the company. For the Cody Canal, the company would receive \$10 per acre for the water rights.

Credit for "discovering" the future site of Cody belongs to Laban Hillberry, one of Beck's employees who walked from Bald Mountain City in the Bighorn Mountains to investigate the Shoshone Canyon. After reporting to Beck, Hillberry returned to the site with engineer Jerry Ryan to determine the feasibility of completing an irrigation project. Beck then led a small group of men to investigate the site in the spring of 1893. The group barely survived crossing the Bighorn River, swollen with water from snowmelt.

Wyoming State Engineer Elwood

Mead assisted Buffalo Bill and Beck in setting realistic goals for the project and visited the site with Beck in 1893. Mead recommended reducing Beck's and Cody's original plan of irrigating 400,000 acres to irrigating a more manageable 25,000 acres. Instead of costing the company an estimated two-million dollars to complete 400,000 acres, the expense would be around \$150,000. (Lake Mead is named in honor of Elwood Mead—not for his work on the Cody Canal, but for the completion of Hoover Dam.)

Even the scaled-down project required substantial funding from investors, though. Buffalo Bill enticed a group of investors from Buffalo, New York: Bronson Rumsey, a real estate investor; George Bleistein who owned the Courier Printing Company that printed most of the posters and ephemera for Buffalo Bill's Wild West; and H.M. Gerrans who owned the Iroquois Hotel in Buffalo. In addition to their hopes of turning a profit by irrigating the Bighorn Basin, these investors also participated in a number of hunting trips and decorated the famed Buffalo Club in Buffalo, New York, with taxidermy mounts acquired from Wyoming.

Additional investors also put their money toward the reclamation project, including Nathan Salisbury, Vice President of Buffalo Bill's Wild West. However, the

demanding tolls of the project soon eroded the company's funds. Short of money, Beck approached a long-time family friend for additional capital: Phoebe Hearst, mother of the rising newspaper mogul William Randolph Hearst. Mrs. Hearst agreed to purchase \$30,000 in bonds from the company, giving Shoshone Irrigation Company enough funding to continue the work. Although her funds saved the canal and the town of Cody, Mrs. Hearst is the only investor who does not have a local street named in her honor.

## WHO REALLY FOUNDED CODY, WYOMING?

Based on these firsthand accounts, who should receive the credit for founding the town of Cody, Wyoming? George Beck? William F. Cody? Others? Historians have long debated this question, which I will discuss in the second installment of this story. A key goal of the *Papers of William F. Cody* is to provide primary documents and various interpretations to the public so that researchers can study these contrasted views to reach their own conclusions. Readers are asked to become historians and join this ongoing debate. ■

## FIND OUT MORE

Recently, through the generous support of the Wyoming Cultural Trust Fund, the *Papers of William F. Cody* published a number of primary resources on [codyarchive.org](http://codyarchive.org) related to the founding of "Buffalo Bill's town in the Rockies." These collections include numerous business records from the Bronson Rumsey Collection archived at McCracken Research Library and significant correspondence from the George W.T. Beck collections at the American Heritage Center at the University of Wyoming. Access to the combined Rumsey and Beck materials substantially expands our present understanding of the partnership of Buffalo Bill and George Beck, in addition to their contributions that are still evident and valued today.

In the near future, the *Papers of William F.*

*Cody* is expanding its online access to include the Ed Goodman Collection, recently acquired from the Goodman family by the Buffalo Bill Center of the West. This collection contains more than sixty letters written by Buffalo Bill to his nephew Ed directing his actions in the Bighorn Basin, which mainly meant spying on George Beck to report on Beck's work. These letters offer yet another perspective of William F. Cody and George W.T. Beck and will offer even more insight into the founding of Cody, Wyoming. Additionally, the *Papers* plans to publish George Beck's memoirs through the University of Nebraska Press as a volume in our ongoing reprint series.

For visitors onsite and online, researching your own questions regarding the founding of Cody, Wyoming, has never been easier.

Hundreds of documents related to the topic are readily available and at the tip of researcher fingers. Please join the conversation at [codyarchive.org](http://codyarchive.org) and [codystudies.org](http://codystudies.org) where you can view and analyze various historical documents related to the founding of Cody and form your own interpretation on this intriguing event. ■

**But wait: There's more to the story; check it out in the next issue of *Points West*.**

*Johnston is the Managing Editor of the Papers of William F. Cody at the Center of the West. His great-grandfather James A. Johnston arrived in Cody in 1900 and later served as superintendent of the Cody Canal. James married Glenna L. Spaulding in 1914—her parents homesteaded on the Southfork of the Shoshone River in 1899.*