

# BUFFALO BILL BUILDS A TOWN

In the twenty-first century, farmers in the Bighorn Basin continue to benefit from Buffalo Bill's efforts to build a community through irrigation—like this field of sunflowers east of Cody at Powell, Wyoming.

part **2** two



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*In the previous issue of Points West, Curator Jeremy Johnston posed the question, "Who should receive the credit for founding the town of Cody, Wyoming? George Beck? William F. Cody? Others?" He noted that historians have long debated this question, and with this edition of Points West, Johnston tackles that issue.*

On April 30, 1897, water flowed into the Cody Canal, greening the arid lands near the developing community of Cody, Wyoming. Lucille Patrick later wrote in her history of Cody, *The Best Little Town by A Dam Site*, (page 25), "The job was done... It was a beautiful spring day and the promises for the future of the arid country were all there to be seen in the flowing moisture darkening the earth." Yet the completion of the Cody Canal itself did not necessarily ensure the economic future of early-day Cody. The dream of reclaiming the arid region and expanding the town of Cody continued to be a struggle for business partners George W.T. Beck and William F. "Buffalo Bill" Cody.

## FLOODING, PRAIRIE DOGS, AND RAILROADS

Despite whatever optimism Buffalo Bill and his partner George Beck experienced that day, the Cody Canal was far from complete. The newly-finished canal required numerous repairs due to flooding that wiped out flumes and sections of the canal. Even the smallest of creatures created problems, causing project surveyor Charles Hayden to declare war on the local prairie dog population to keep the burrowing creatures from diverting water from sections of the canal.

Additionally, Buffalo Bill and his business partners had a difficult time recruiting settlers to the arid region, even with promises of guaranteed water access. The lack of a railroad connection to the new



Buffalo Bill promoted both the Shoshone Project and travel to Yellowstone in this 1909 *Courier*, a program of Buffalo Bill's Wild West/Pawnee Bill's Great Far East. William F. Cody Collection. MS6.6.A.2.9.1.14



Aerial view of the Shoshone River on the north side of Cody and the Cody train station across the river, ca. 1930s. MS3 Charles Belden Collection. PN.67.739b. INSET: The Cody Railroad Station, ca. 1930s. MS3 Charles Belden Collection. Gift of Mrs. Verna Belden. PN.67.426f

community also complicated efforts to increase Cody's population, and only one stage line crossed through the frontier town.

Not ones to shirk great challenges, both Buffalo Bill and Beck continued to promote the region and make improvements, hoping to see some return on their investments. Using their political and business connections, both men endeavored to attract railroads and to improve upon other transportation routes, with the goal of connecting their new town to Yellowstone National Park and distant urban markets.

Additionally, Buffalo Bill sought to claim more land within the Shoshone Valley under the Carey Act, which provided federal lands to both western states and private enterprises who provided water to the arid lands through irrigation projects. Buffalo Bill envisioned irrigated farmland from the Shoshone Canyon to the confluence of the Shoshone River with the Bighorn River through the completion of the Cody-Salsbury Canal, which would irrigate lands east of Cody, north of the Shoshone River.

## CODY GETS A RAILROAD

Buffalo Bill used his public persona and international fame to publicize the new region through the massive marketing operation

developed to promote Buffalo Bill's Wild West. In an article for *Success* magazine dated June 1900, Cody wrote the following:

Now the Big Horn Basin is awakening in its might. It is beginning to feel its power. It is a world of marvels in itself and the pulse-beats of civilization are causing its mighty veins to throb with a new life that is letting the world know all that is within itself. It is the heritage of the people, too, for no one can claim more than the usual limited homestead from the government...Already farms are dotting the hills, valleys, and plains, and Cody, scarcely two years old, has a church, a public school, a court house, and a newspaper, "The Enterprise," not to speak of stores, hotels, and many pleasant homes. This is my chosen land! Here I want my bones to rest!

Corporations were soon attracted to Cody, Wyoming, providing more economic stability to the new community. Charles E. Perkins, President of the Burlington Railroad, ensured the completion of a

rail line to Cody in 1901—not to appease Buffalo Bill, but to secure for his company a connection to Yellowstone National Park. In addition, the railroad sought to profit from selling town lots in the new community through the Lincoln Land Company, headed by Charles Henry Morrill. Beck noted in his unpublished manuscript that the original town founders had little choice but to offer the railroad half the town lots in exchange for the railroad connection, especially after Morrill threatened to create his own town near Corbett, a few miles east of Cody.

Despite the railroad’s highhanded techniques, Beck and Buffalo Bill realized a rail connection secured the stability necessary for the success of their reclamation project and the town of Cody, and acquiesced to their demands. The Lincoln Land Company began selling town lots for the communities of Cody, Ralston, and Garland. Within Cody, the Lincoln Land Company acquired half the town lots at \$10 per acre in exchange for constructing a railroad line to Cody.

## ROOSEVELT AND THE RECLAMATION SERVICE

Buffalo Bill acquired some land near Ralston, Wyoming, believing this small railroad community would expand after the completion of the Cody-Salsbury Canal; however, Buffalo Bill soon discovered that completing this massive reclamation project was beyond his financial means. Hoping to benefit from his developing connections to President Theodore Roosevelt, Buffalo Bill pushed the federal government to take over the work on the Cody-Salsbury Canal. Shortly before Buffalo Bill relinquished his Carey Act claim, Roosevelt signed the Newlands Act of 1902 creating the Reclamation Service (today’s Bureau of Reclamation), and this new agency would continue work on the proposed Cody-Salsbury Canal, renamed the Shoshone Project.

The Reclamation Service eventually fulfilled Cody’s dream of irrigating the whole Shoshone River Valley by completing the Shoshone Project; however, Buffalo Bill’s hopes to secure a profit from his Ralston claims collapsed as the Reclamation Service pushed for the creation of Powell. Buffalo Bill feared that the development of a new town in the middle of the Garland Division—the first phase of the Shoshone Project—would curtail the expansion of Ralston.

Under the direction of Roosevelt, Frederick Haynes Newell, the first director of the Reclamation Service, examined Buffalo Bill’s request and determined a centrally-located community better fulfilled the needs of future settlers. Per Buffalo Bill’s prediction, the community of Powell steadily developed, and the established communities of Garland and Ralston slowly declined. Today, population figures for these communities are:

- Cody – 9,520
  - Powell – 6,308
  - Ralston – 280
  - Garland – 115
- } 2010 U.S. Census



Corbett Dam



Willwood Dam

Shoshone River dams Corbett, east of Cody (top), and Willwood, at Ralston, provide irrigation water for the Bighorn Basin. U.S. Department of Interior Bureau of Reclamation.

After learning of Newell’s decision, Buffalo Bill sent the following reply to the Hon. James R. Garfield, Secretary of the Interior for the Roosevelt Administration:

I am truly very sorry to give you so much trouble... Being a pioneer of this country, having spent a fortune here in its development, besides being an old soldier of the Civil War and of the Indian Campaigns, standing between civilization and savagery for many years on this frontier, I was in hopes of receiving a little benefit from the sale of town lots in Ralston, Wyo.

Despite later historians’ interpretations that Theodore Roosevelt and Buffalo Bill established a partnership between Cody pioneers and the federal government that successfully developed the Bighorn Basin, clearly Buffalo Bill and the Lincoln Land Company did not realize any great profits from the sale of town lots in Ralston, when the government decided to back Powell.

## A “POST-BUFFALO BILL” CODY, WYOMING

Even with the completion of the railroad connection and the federal reclamation project, the population of Cody, Wyoming, was just over 1,200 residents by 1920. Yet, the entrepreneurial skills of Beck, combined with the popularity of the town’s namesake, continued to shape the community.

A few years after Buffalo Bill’s passing in 1917, a new equestrian statue of Buffalo Bill by Gertrude Vanderbilt Whitney, titled *Buffalo Bill – The Scout*, was erected in 1924 at the west end of Sheridan Avenue. In 1927, the Buffalo Bill Museum opened in a small log cabin modeled after Cody’s TE Ranch house, currently the Cody Country Chamber of Commerce and Visitor Center. Many tourists traveling to Yellowstone National Park visited Buffalo Bill’s town to partake of the cultural heritage sites honoring his memory—and they still do today.

The immediate results of Beck’s and Buffalo Bill’s town building venture may not seem to be an impressive accomplishment; however, when one examines the impact of the Carey Act within the State of Wyoming, the town of Cody was one of the few success stories. T.A. Larson noted in his seminal book, *The History of Wyoming*, that between 1894 and 1910, various promoters applied for fifty-seven different projects under the Carey Act, hoping to irrigate nearly two-million acres. Of these claims, projects only reclaimed 92,000 acres. “Obviously, the Carey Act did not work very well,” concluded Larson.

After struggling with the Cody Canal, Beck avoided future reclamation projects and invested in a number of businesses and services within the town of Cody, becoming one of the more successful entrepreneurs of Wyoming. Shortly before he passed away, George Beck wrote in his unpublished memoirs, “A lot of the men I knew and liked out here in Wyoming—[Buffalo Bill] Cody and the others—have grown old and died, but the country itself is still young, still beckoning to adventurous men who love its freedom of space and its unlimited resources.” He concluded his memoir by noting he was going out prospecting with a group of students from Princeton, hoping to find yet another significant discovery that would contribute to the economic development of the Bighorn Basin.

## LOCAL HISTORIANS WEIGH IN

After Buffalo Bill and George Beck passed away, later historians offered their contrasted views of the founding of Cody and the completion of the Cody Canal. These historians’ writings vary on who deserves the most credit for founding the town of Cody, either Beck or Buffalo Bill. As President Harry S. Truman once remarked in the book *Plain Speaking*, “No two historians ever agree on what happened, and the damn thing is they both think they are telling the truth.” This applies to the history of Cody, Wyoming, and Beck’s and Buffalo Bill’s respective legacies.

In her book, *The Best Little Town by A Dam Site*, Lucille Nichols Patrick described Cody as an enthusiastic promoter. “Buffalo Bill was a dreamer. He could see things that the

ordinary man could not, and he too envisioned a glorious future for the country, and he became excited at the prospects...Buffalo Bill was enthusiastic and he was a great talker. It wasn’t long before his enthusiasm was catching fire.” As for Beck, Patrick wrote, “The summer of 1895 was a busy one for Beck who had all the paperwork as well as bossing the physical work to do.”

On the back of Patrick’s book is a statement by the Honorable Robert D. Coe, the second son of William Robertson Coe. He noted that the history of Cody, Wyoming, “has much to do with Colonel Cody’s activities. He was the virtual founder of the town that now bears his name; his enthusiasm and energy were indeed responsible for the opening up of the land. The irrigation projects were largely achieved through his efforts.”

James D. McLaird published two articles based on his Master’s thesis titled “George T. Beck: Western Entrepreneur” in *Annals of Wyoming*. McLaird summed up the two men’s contributions.

“The meager records reveal that Cody invested more heavily in the company than Beck, but Beck probably was the chief promoter and administrator.” According to McLaird, all board members of the Shoshone Irrigation Company “learned that building a canal was no easy task. The construction of the ditch was only one aspect of their difficulties. The townsite, legal problems concerning water rights, the upkeep of the canal, the arduous task of obtaining settlers, and the internal conflicts and lawsuits of the company all brought splitting headaches to the investors.”

McLaird based his findings mainly on the George Beck Collection at the University of Wyoming’s American Heritage Center. In the early 1990s, Jack Rosenthal uncovered a cache of thirty additional letters from Cody to Beck, now available on *CodyArchive.org*, that shed more light on the business interactions between both men. Many of these letters are stern instructions written by Buffalo Bill, who continually demanded progress and questioned Beck’s effectiveness as an administrator. These letters would shape much of Robert Bonner’s later research on the caustic relationship between Beck and Cody.

During the centennial of Cody, historians again examined the role of Beck and Buffalo Bill in completing the Cody Canal and establishing the community named for Buffalo Bill. Paul Fees, former curator of the Buffalo Bill Museum, described Cody’s role as town founder in the centennial history of Cody, *Buffalo Bill’s Town in the Rockies*. Fees wrote, “More than just words, Buffalo Bill Cody was his own best advertisement for the West. He represented not only wilderness values and the romance of the wild but also the practical vision of the town builder.”

In 2007, Robert Bonner published *William F. Cody’s Wyoming Empire: The Buffalo Bill Nobody Knows*, a critical examination of Cody as a town builder. According to Bonner:

The Big Horn Basin was not a stage or show arena, and the development business in the West had left a lot of broken men scattered over the landscape. Constructing an irrigation system, attracting settlers to a new colony in the Far West, founding a town,

and negotiating the thickets of government and politics, required skills that Buffalo Bill had never needed to make his way in show business. His attempts to meet these challenges would show us a view of this conflicted giant of a man that can be found nowhere else...”

Bonner argued that Beck was a hard-worker, struggling to ensure the success of the Shoshone Irrigation Company's goals, while Cody was a “capitalist imposture”—an actor playing a role who hoped his audience would see some truth in his performance, blurring the harsh reality and failures he encountered as a town founder.

## SUMMING UP

How can one clarify all these contrasted views of Beck and Cody's respective legacies? Keep in mind that building a community is tough, especially in Wyoming's past “boom and bust” economy. Wyoming is full of ghost towns. Not only did Buffalo Bill have many individuals willing to stake funds, time, and effort to build a town, he also had in George Beck a manager who could see the project through completion. The new town also had in William F. Cody a celebrity who could “sell” the new community to a worldwide audience with flare through Buffalo Bill's Wild West.

As I often told my students, history is complicated, and oftentimes there are no clear-cut answers to our questions about the past. One must remember history is more than learning dates and people's names. Historians must also examine various interpretations to shape their own understanding—a process which demonstrates that our shared memory of the past is constantly evolving. Sometimes a historian considers two contrasting views and struggles to decide which perspective is more valid, frequently failing to make a final decision due to the apparent validity of conflicting interpretations.

In the first installment of this article, I encouraged readers of *Points West* to examine the primary resources for themselves at *CodyArchive.org* to form their own conclusions. I now also encourage you to visit *CodyStudies.org* to examine various interpretations offered by past and current scholars researching Buffalo Bill's legacy. Perhaps by examining these contrasting views, we can come to a better understanding of the fascinating and contrasted history of Beck, Buffalo Bill, and their town, Cody, Wyoming. ■

*A Powell, Wyoming, native, Jeremy Johnston taught Wyoming and western history at Northwest College in Powell, 1994 – 2010, before being tapped as Managing Editor of the Papers of William F. Cody at the Buffalo Bill Center of the West. In February, Johnston was named the Center's Curator of Western American History, with oversight of the Buffalo Bill Museum. A prolific writer and popular speaker, Johnston continues to research all things related to the American West. He will earn his PhD from the University of Strathclyde in summer 2014.*

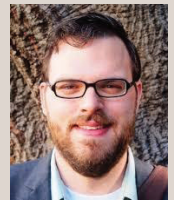
## Papers of William F. Cody launches careers...

Scholars are definitely taking notice of *CodyStudies.org*. Managed by Dr. Douglas Seefeldt, Senior Digital Editor of the *Papers of William F. Cody* and Assistant Professor of History at Ball State University, this project uses digital resources to examine the life and times of William F. “Buffalo Bill” Cody.

The Cody Studies platform emphasizes digital humanities research modules and interpretive digital scholarship to explore Cody's influence on the development of the American West, and his Wild West's broader cultural contributions. Combined with the growing *CodyArchive.org*, Cody Studies provides an opportunity for international audiences to examine Cody's life and legacy on many levels.

Under Seefeldt's supervision, University of Nebraska-Lincoln graduate student Jason Heppler produced one of the first digital modules for Cody Studies. His experience not only resulted in an interesting project, it also greatly contributed to his career in history.

### JASON A. HEPPLER, Stanford University



Growing up in Mitchell, South Dakota, I earned a BA in history from South Dakota State University. Given my interest in the history of the American West and a curiosity about digital history, I attended the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, where I obtained a Master's degree, and am now working toward a PhD in history, focusing on the North American West during the Cold War, especially the creation of ARPANET (the precursor to today's Internet).

My initial project for the *Papers of William F. Cody* examined Native Americans hired by Buffalo Bill's Wild West—practices reflecting a form of Progressive thought by Cody. Using digital methods rooted in text analysis, I examined attitudes of people toward the employment of show Indians, especially the conflicts between government reformers and the Wild West. Using numerous primary sources, I also compiled the first thorough, publicly available database of Plains Indians hired by Cody.

I learned more about the complicated Progressive attitudes regarding American Indians at the turn of the twentieth century, as well as Cody's view of race and his own place in American culture. On the one hand, Cody's hiring of Plains Indians reflected his belief that the show was a true representation of the West's history. On the other, Cody thought highly of Native people even if performances did not always reflect positively on American Indian culture.

In 2011, I became the project manager for the Cody Archive, expanding my digital skills—now my chosen career—and gaining more experience in collaboration and project management. In January 2013, I became academic technology specialist at Stanford University's history department, working with faculty and graduate students to integrate technology into their teaching and research. My experiences as a Cody researcher, and ultimately as project manager, prepared me well for my current job. (See Heppler's work at [codystudies.org/showindians](http://codystudies.org/showindians).)