

American frontierswoman and professional scout Martha Jane Canary was better known to Americans as Calamity Jane. A figure in western folklore, Calamity Jane was a central character in many of the increasingly popular novels and films that romanticized western life in the twentieth century. C. 1895. Library of Congress.



rodeos, and Wild West shows mythologized the American West throughout the post–Civil War era.

In the 1860s, Americans devoured dime novels that embellished the lives of real-life individuals such as Calamity Jane and Billy the Kid. Owen Wister's novels, especially *The Virginian*, established the character of the cowboy as a gritty stoic with a rough exterior but the courage and heroism needed to rescue people from train robbers, Indians, and cattle rustlers. Such images were later reinforced when the emergence of rodeo added to popular conceptions of the American West. Rodeos began as small roping and riding contests among cowboys in towns near ranches or at camps at the end of the cattle trails. In Pecos, Texas, on July 4, 1883, cowboys from two ranches, the Hash Knife and the W Ranch, competed in roping and riding contests as a way to settle an argument; this event is recognized by historians of the West as the first real rodeo. Casual contests evolved into planned celebrations. Many were scheduled around national holidays, such as Independence Day, or during traditional roundup times in the spring and fall. Early rodeos took place in open grassy areas—not arenas—and included calf and steer roping and



roughstock events such as bronc riding. They gained popularity and soon dedicated rodeo circuits developed. Although about 90 percent of rodeo contestants were men, women helped popularize the rodeo and several popular female bronc riders, such as Bertha Kaepernick, entered men's events, until around 1916 when women's competitive participation was curtailed. Americans also experienced the "Wild West"—the mythical West imagined in so many dime novels—by attending traveling Wild West shows, arguably the unofficial national entertainment of the United States from the 1880s to the 1910s. Wildly popular across the country, the shows traveled throughout the eastern United States and even across Europe and showcased what was already a mythic frontier life. William Frederick "Buffalo Bill" Cody was the first to recognize the broad national appeal of the stock "characters" of the American West—cowboys, Indians, sharpshooters, cavalrymen, and rangers—and put them all together into a single massive traveling extravaganza. Operating out of Omaha, Nebraska, Buffalo Bill launched his touring show in 1883. Cody himself shunned the word *show*, fearing that it implied an exaggeration or misrepresentation of the West. He instead called his production "Buffalo Bill's Wild West." He employed real cowboys and Indians in his

William Frederick "Buffalo Bill" Cody helped commercialize the cowboy lifestyle by building a profitable mythology around life in the Old West. 1900. Wikimedia.

productions. But it was still, of course, a show. It was entertainment, little different in its broad outlines from contemporary theater. Storylines depicted westward migration, life on the Plains, and Indian attacks, all punctuated by “cowboy fun”: bucking broncos, roping cattle, and sharpshooting contests.²⁵

Buffalo Bill, joined by shrewd business partners skilled in marketing, turned his shows into a sensation. But he was not alone. Gordon William “Pawnee Bill” Lillie, another popular Wild West showman, got his start in 1886 when Cody employed him as an interpreter for Pawnee members of the show. Lillie went on to create his own production in 1888, “Pawnee Bill’s Historic Wild West.” He was Cody’s only real competitor in the business until 1908, when the two men combined their shows to create a new extravaganza, “Buffalo Bill’s Wild West and Pawnee Bill’s Great Far East” (most people called it the “Two Bills Show”). It was an unparalleled spectacle. The cast included American cowboys, Mexican *vaqueros*, Native Americans, Russian Cossacks, Japanese acrobats, and an Australian aboriginal.

Cody and Lillie knew that Native Americans fascinated audiences in the United States and Europe, and both featured them prominently in their Wild West shows. Most Americans believed that Native cultures were disappearing or had already, and felt a sense of urgency to see their dances, hear their song, and be captivated by their bareback riding skills and their elaborate buckskin and feather attire. The shows certainly veiled the true cultural and historic value of so many Native demonstrations, and the Indian performers were curiosities to white Americans, but the shows were one of the few ways for many Native Americans to make a living in the late nineteenth century.

In an attempt to appeal to women, Cody recruited Annie Oakley, a female sharpshooter who thrilled onlookers with her many stunts. Billed as “Little Sure Shot,” she shot apples off her poodle’s head and the ash from her husband’s cigar, clenched trustingly between his teeth. Gordon Lillie’s wife, May Manning Lillie, also became a skilled shot and performed as “World’s Greatest Lady Horseback Shot.” Female sharpshooters were Wild West show staples. As many as eighty toured the country at the shows’ peak. But if such acts challenged expected Victorian gender roles, female performers were typically careful to blunt criticism by maintaining their feminine identity—for example, by riding sidesaddle and wearing full skirts and corsets—during their acts.

The western “cowboys and Indians” mystique, perpetuated in novels, rodeos, and Wild West shows, was rooted in romantic nostalgia and, per-



haps, in the anxieties that many felt in the late nineteenth century's new seemingly "soft" industrial world of factory and office work. The mythical cowboy's "aggressive masculinity" was the seemingly perfect antidote for middle- and upper-class, city-dwelling Americans who feared they "had become over-civilized" and longed for what Theodore Roosevelt called the "strenuous life." Roosevelt himself, a scion of a wealthy New York family and later a popular American president, turned a brief tenure as a failed Dakota ranch owner into a potent part of his political image. Americans looked longingly to the West, whose romance would continue to pull at generations of Americans.

VIII. The West as History: The Turner Thesis

In 1893, the American Historical Association met during that year's World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago. The young Wisconsin historian Frederick Jackson Turner presented his "frontier thesis," one of the most influential theories of American history, in his essay "The Significance of the Frontier in American History."

Turner looked back at the historical changes in the West and saw, instead of a tsunami of war and plunder and industry, waves of "civilization" that washed across the continent. A frontier line "between savagery and civilization" had moved west from the earliest English settlements in Massachusetts and Virginia across the Appalachians to the Mississippi

American anthropologist and ethnographer Frances Densmore plays a recording for the Blackfoot chief Mountain Chief in 1916 for the Bureau of American Ethnology. Library of Congress.



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and finally across the Plains to California and Oregon. Turner invited his audience to “stand at Cumberland Gap [the famous pass through the Appalachian Mountains], and watch the procession of civilization, marching single file—the buffalo following the trail to the salt springs, the Indian, the fur trader and hunter, the cattle-raiser, the pioneer farmer—and the frontier has passed by.”²⁶

Americans, Turner said, had been forced by necessity to build a rough-hewn civilization out of the frontier, giving the nation its exceptional hustle and its democratic spirit and distinguishing North America from the stale monarchies of Europe. Moreover, the *style* of history Turner called for was democratic as well, arguing that the work of ordinary people (in this case, pioneers) deserved the same study as that of great statesmen. Such was a novel approach in 1893.

But Turner looked ominously to the future. The Census Bureau in 1890 had declared the frontier closed. There was no longer a discernible line running north to south that, Turner said, any longer divided civilization from savagery. Turner worried for the United States’ future: what would become of the nation without the safety valve of the frontier? It was a common sentiment. Theodore Roosevelt wrote to Turner that his essay “put into shape a good deal of thought that has been floating around rather loosely.”²⁷

The history of the West was many-sided and it was made by many persons and peoples. Turner’s thesis was rife with faults, not only in its bald Anglo-Saxon chauvinism—in which nonwhites fell before the march of “civilization” and Chinese and Mexican immigrants were invisible—but in its utter inability to appreciate the impact of technology and government subsidies and large-scale economic enterprises alongside the work of hardy pioneers. Still, Turner’s thesis held an almost canonical position among historians for much of the twentieth century and, more importantly, captured Americans’ enduring romanticization of the West and the simplification of a long and complicated story into a march of progress.

IX. Reference Material

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NOTES TO CHAPTER 17

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4. Matthew Bowman, *The Mormon People: The Making of an American Faith* (New York: Random House, 2012).
5. White, *It's Your Misfortune*, 142–148; Patricia Nelson Limerick, *The Legacy of Conquest: The Unbroken Past of the American West* (New York: Norton, 1987), 161–162.
6. White, *It's Your Misfortune*; Limerick, *Legacy of Conquest*.
7. John D. Hicks, *The Populist Revolt: A History of the Farmers' Alliance and the People's Party* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1931), 6.
8. Robert Utley, *The Indian Frontier 1846–1890* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1984), 76.
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12. Bureau of Indian Affairs, *Annual Report of the Commissioner of Indian Affairs to the Secretary of the Interior* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1875), 221.
13. For the Comanche, see especially Pekka Hämäläinen, *The Comanche Empire* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2008).
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27. Kasson, *Buffalo Bill's Wild West*, 117.

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