

Richard D. Parker, *Wicked Western Kentucky*, The History Press, Charleston, SC, 2022

## Chapter 8, Buckskin Bill's Wild West Show

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returned his money. These men, dubbed "shortchange grafters," were common in all entertainment circles at the turn of the twentieth century.<sup>118</sup>

The opening of the 1901 season was not without its drama, as many of the show's members were arrested for public drunkenness or forgery. The "bad egg" of the show seemed to be a man named Charles Elliott. Elliott was arrested twice for forgery and stealing. He was arrested for forging an order from John Terrell, one of the show's owners, for \$1.50 at a boardinghouse. Elliott was not alone in jail, as four of his coworkers were also arrested for drunkenness and made to pay a \$1.00 fine. After his initial release, Elliott did not last long in the free world. Just two days later, he was arrested once again, this time for selling stolen goods. He was charged with selling a pair of leather shoes that had been stolen from Charles Clark. After the evidence in the case was heard, the court determined that Elliott was a "bad egg." He even wore a vest he had stolen from another man to court. Elliott claimed he had bought all of the items from a strange man.<sup>119</sup>

On May 14, the show ran into some bad luck in Vincennes, Indiana, when one of the cowgirls was killed during the show. Thresa Russell, dubbed "queen of the cowgirls," was dragged to death when her foot got caught in her horse's stirrups. Russell was practicing a new stunt in which she jumped from one horse to another. Several cowboys attempted to stop the horse. One cowboy eventually stabbed the horse with a pitchfork, instantly killing

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it. When Russell was finally picked up, she was unconscious and suffering from internal and external injuries, which proved to be fatal.<sup>120</sup>

While on the road in New Castle, Indiana, shortly after Russell's death, one member of *Buckskin Bill's* cooking staff was stabbed to death by another. Edward Wallace was killed by Williams Briggs, who escaped to the woods located near the show's performance grounds. Then, in Zanesville, Ohio, a bad storm wreaked havoc when a strong windstorm destroyed the show's setup and killed two men. Henry Butler and Wm. Case were killed when a tent pole struck them in the head, killing them both. Another victim of the storm's wrath, James Conn, nearly died when a rope became wrapped around his neck, nearly choking him. Other members of the show rescued Conn, but he still suffered severe injuries. Twelve others also suffered minor injuries during the storm.<sup>121</sup>

To add to the headache of equipment being destroyed by storms and members of the show being wanted for murder, the Natives in the show decided to strike for higher wages. Twenty-five Cheyenne Natives wanted \$100 more a week for their services. Their demands were not met, and they left the show in Ashland, Ohio, and headed to Columbus to wait for transportation home. At this time, Natives were not allowed to leave their reservations unless someone paid for their return, so the government charged the show for their safe return.<sup>122</sup>

The show officially disbanded in Laporte, Indiana, and returned to

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the show for their safe return.<sup>122</sup>

The show officially disbanded in Laporte, Indiana, and returned to Paducah on July 22, 1901. The show's early return to Paducah seems to have been blamed on a severe drought that had been plaguing the Midwest, the windstorm that had damaged the show's tents and the deaths of Butler and Case. In an interview with a *Paducah Sun* reporter, a man who was working for the show stated, "If the weather gets cooler and the crops get so that we can be readily supplied, we will probably start on a southern tour."<sup>123</sup>

After the show was dissolved at Laporte, many of the employees headed to their respective homes. One group, however, was not so lucky in their quest back. The Natives who were part of the show were stranded in various cities across the United States. Red Feather Swallow and his wife, both Cheyenne Natives, were stranded in St. Louis after running out of the money they were given for travel expenses. The Natives were only given eight dollars each for their travels back home. Police found them at the train station and provided them shelter until arrangements could be made to take them back to El Reno, Oklahoma. Sixteen Natives who were a part of the show were also stranded in Cleveland, Ohio, and made national news in a *Washington Times* article. Chief White Eye, a member of this group, telegraphed the Cheyenne and

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Arapaho Agency in Oklahoma, asking for money to complete their travels. The agency wired back the following message: "You will have to look to your employer for means to get home. You took the risk, and you have no one to blame but yourself. The office has no funds to aid you."<sup>124</sup>

In January 1902, the Terrell brothers filed for bankruptcy. According to the *Billboard*, Fletcher Terrell's liabilities included \$10,942.77. Years of mismanagement and their show's run of bad luck contributed to the bankruptcy. In February, the *Paducah Sun* announced that the show had been purchased by Chicago businessmen Henry E. Allott (or Bunk Allen), John C. O'Brien and Val Hoffman. The purchase included sixteen carloads of property, and the show's new owners promised that the show would return to Paducah every year for its winter quarters. The new management said they planned to open the season in Paducah on May 3 and then travel to New York.<sup>125</sup>

The new owners wasted no time bringing new talent to the show, with additions such as Bille Earthquake, a Zulu warrior; Miss Lewis, a Circassian; Madam Lelan, a mind reader; G.L. Wiltse, a tattooed man; and Mill Slivino, a strong lady. In April, the *Billboard* reported that twenty sewing girls were hard at work sewing wagon covers, flags and banners for the 1902 season. The new manager of the show, H.E. Allott, also known as "Bunk," sent a telegraph from South Dakota to the *Billboard*, stating he had secured fifty Sioux Natives for the show. With these additions to the show, the 1902 season looked to be the best yet.<sup>126</sup>

On May 3, the show's parade opened to stellar reviews. The *Paducah Sun* said that it "proved to be one of the most creditable displays ever seen in Paducah."<sup>127</sup> A large crowd with many people from all over the region was on hand to witness the parade. The show included thirty-six Natives from the Sioux Reservation, led by chiefs "Short Bull" and "Red Bear," a medicine man named "Hollow Horn Bear," a policeman named "Bad Corn Cob" and two sub-chiefs named "Two Dogs" and "Bear Shield." The show provided a \$19,000 bond for the safe return of the Natives to their reservation, unlike the 1901 season, in which the Natives were on their own. From the sharpshooters to those in the cooking tent, every aspect of the show seemed better managed than they had been in previous seasons. The *Paducah Sun* declared, "There is a corps of efficient trainers, managers in charge, and every indication is for the success the company deserves."<sup>128</sup>

The 1902 season featured twenty-two seventy-foot-long railcars, including three sleeping cars, one private hotel car (occupied by the managers), two baggage cars, ten flat cars and six stock cars. Two advance cars, newly

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