

Lansingburg's Rensselaer Park Once Wild West Scene

Do you remember when Kemp Sisters' Wild West, Indian Congress and American Hippodrome played Rensselaer Park?

You don't if you are now under the 50-year age mark.

The biggest thing about the Kemp Sisters' show was its name. For those who had seen the wild west shows of Col. William F. Cody, (Buffalo Bill) and of Col. William Lillie, (Pawnee Bill), the Kemp Sisters' aggregation might be compared to the tool from a penny whistle alongside Chief Iron Tail's full-lunged war whoop after he'd had several swigs of firewater.

The Kemp Sisters' Wild West Show was the only one of its kind presumably with female ownership. It exhibited in Troy at Rensselaer Park, Aug. 8 to 22, 1908. Admission for adults was 15 cents; children, 10 cents and the four-page "souvenir program" sold for five cents.

The canvas tent, designed like Buffalo Bill's, but much smaller, was open to the sky over the arena with board seats under cover around the show field. A canvas curtain at one end of the arena was pulled aside for the entry and exit of the performers.

When the Kemp Sisters' show played here, Rensselaer Park extended along the east side of 5th avenue from near the present 109th street to 111th street, thence easterly as far as the E. & M. Railroad tracks. There were a midway, roller coaster, dance hall and various other amusement concessions in the park. The Kemp Sisters' show was an added temporary attraction.

The smaller wild west show copied many of the features of the larger exhibitions of Colonel Cody and Colonel Lillie. These larger wild west shows exhibited in Troy at the old circus grounds, located along the east side of 5th avenue, south of 109th street to 106th street and to the east.

Colonel Cody's name had been synonymous with wild west shows for many years. One of the attractions of the Kemp Sisters' show was a teen age girl, whose name might have been Maggie McGillicuddy, but who was billed as "Miss Jennie Cody." She starred as a fancy trick rifle shot. Another spectacular marksman was listed

as "Col. V. F. Cody," whose name came within one initial of being the same as Buffalo Bill's.

Today's younger element, which is more interested in space travel of the future than in wild west shows, would probably be little interested in the Kemp Sisters' program were it to be presented today.

Here is a partial list of the acts presented by the Kemp Sisters' show during its exhibition in Troy in 1908: Grand entree; attack on the overland stage; fancy and trick rifle shooting; horse thief, showing how they dealt out justice to such a thief in the old days in the Far West; Indian war dance; pickup or cowboy pastime, where the cowboys throw a small object on the group and pick it up from the backs of their horses while running at full speed.

Trick and fancy riding; chase for a bribe or showing how a cowboy was once known to win a wife by lifting her from her horse while running at high speed; attack upon an emigrant train. (And just as it seems that the whooping Indians are about to capture the stage, a huge sound and a detachment of mounted U. S. cavalry come dashing in and puts the Indians to rout amid the stentorian cheering of the onlookers.

The riding of bucking horses; fancy roping; Roman chariot races (although what the shades of the Old Romans were doing in the Far West atmosphere wasn't explained); cowboys in town after pay day; pony express and the closing act showing "the burning of Trapper Tom's cabin and the carrying off of his daughter by the Indians."

Kent Walker, stage driver for the Kemp Sisters' show, it was stated in the program, is "better known as Rocky Mountain Kent, the oldest stage driver living today, and who knows more about Indians on the war path than Buffalo Bill or any other white man."

It was also noted that Chief In the Mountain "is a Sioux Indian . . . from South Dakota. One who was interested in the Custer massacre."

The program added that the show "contains 100 people and 90 head of stock . . . Every one belonging to the show are ladies and gentlemen, no others being allowed to travel with the show."

The next time you drive up Fifth Avenue, between 109th and 110th street, try to imagine where Kemp Sisters' Wild West Show exhibited in 1908. They'd have a hard time performing there now with the Indians whooping it through a gas station and getting mixed up with a flock of used automobiles while a squad of cavalrymen tried to find them.

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