



## The Look of the West--1854

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Photographs / Images: Buffalo Bill, Fort Laramie

## THE LOOK OF THE WEST—1854

BY MARI SANDOZ

THERE are few things that I dislike more than public speaking and few things that you will dislike more than listening to me. Yet I am happy to be here—happy as a native Nebraskan, a Society member. I am particularly happy as a former staff member whose part in the annual dinner was usually as official coattail jerker, to remind some old-timer beginning to wander in his account that he had said enough, that it was time to sit down.

### A SECOND LOOK

Because you have had many months of territorial centennial celebration, with, I am sure, much material on the Missouri settlements and the trails up the Platte, I am going to omit these and concentrate on what were more particularly the Indian and buffalo regions of Nebraska in 1854. Little of what I have to say here will be new to you, deeply interested in the history of our region as you all are, but perhaps I can offer a sidelight or two, a sort of second look, let's say.

I recall a sort of second look I got back when I was five at what was already history. My father was known as a good hunter, and often visiting hunters to the region sought him out when they were having bad luck getting wild game. One early fall evening, during a violent thunder-

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storm, a top buggy drew into our yard. Out of it came Buffalo Bill Cody and a friend of his from Alliance. Bill was a little under the weather, and in the commotion I awoke and sneaked a look out into our kitchen. There, leaning against the closed door, was the handsomest man I had ever seen, wearing a fine beaded jacket, with beautiful flowing white hair that fell over his shoulders.

I was ordered back to bed, and the next morning, when breakfast was ready, Mother sent me to call Mr. Cody. I tapped on the door where he slept, but there was no answer, no stir, and I pushed the door open a crack. The bed was empty; Buffalo Bill was up and gone hunting for quail with my father, but on the bedpost hung that beautiful head of flowing white hair.

It was a most disillusioning sight, but since that day I've always felt it necessary for me, at least, to get a second look.

### NOTION OF NEBRASKA

Since I took an apartment in New York I have discovered that, in the minds of many people, Nebraska has really changed very little from 1854. There was a time when Nebraska was the state of Senator George Norris, and, depending upon the observer's politics, was a region of great acumen and progressiveness, or of dangerous radicalism. But since the death of the great Senator, Nebraska is usually characterized as "that long flat state that sets between me and any place I want to go."

Certainly this would agree with the characterization of the region in the spring of 1854—a long, monotonous and perhaps fatally dangerous stretch of land lying across the path of the emigrant for California, Oregon, or Utah. It was a stretch where oxen wearied, wagons broke down, wheels dried out and lost their iron tires, cholera struck an appalling percentage of the summer parties, and where there was growing uneasiness about the Indians, although these had just begun to realize their nuisance value.



BUFFALO BILL

(Is this the "long white hair"?)



### FORT LARAMIE

(From a sketch by Frederick Piercy, 1853, in James Linforth, ed., *Route From Liverpool to Great Salt Lake...*, Liverpool, 1855.)

## A YEAR OF CRISIS

But 1854 was a time of crisis to others besides the emigrant on the trail, a time that compelled some turning into new ways, new paths. Internationally, the west-European powers had joined with an old enemy, Turkey, against Russia in the Crimean War; and here for the first time a modern army, the British, was marching on shoes of buffalo leather and riding saddles of buffalo. Much of this leather came from animals taken by the Red River breeds and other Canadians in the Dakota and Montana regions and shipped over the Great Lakes to the sea, the first real harvest, I suspect, of flint buffalo hides, the dried, untanned skins. But from this beginning the buffalo hide business was to grow to mammoth size by the time the new territory of Nebraska became a state in 1867.

Nationally, the strained relationships between the North and the South had resulted in the creation of the new territories of Kansas and Nebraska, followed by the formation of the new Republican party. Within six years this party was to win the presidency and become, for the rest of the nineteenth century at least, the most powerful political group the nation had ever seen.

## END OF THE ROMANTIC NOBLE RED MAN

The year of 1854 saw another change—the end of the romantic notion of the Plains Indian as the Noble Red Man. Eastern and foreign visitors to the hide dwellings of this Unspoiled Son of Nature—the influx of men like Catlin, Parkman, Prince Maximilian, Sir William Drummond Stewart, and Sir Charles Augustus Murray—had about simmered out. Almost the last, yet one of the most amusing of these visitors, came in 1854—the Irishman, Sir Gore, with his great entourage including forty servants, and, of course, his towering Irish temper. From 1854 the Indian of the Plains was a bloodthirsty savage who stood in the path of progress, to be removed, to be exterminated.

## CHANGES AMONG THE INDIANS

Many changes were taking place in Indian society, too, changes beyond those that the treaty of 1851 attempted to

lay upon them. The Cheyennes had staged their last formal scalp dance in 1852, never to be repeated. White Eye, an old Sioux friend of my father's, used to tell of the Pawnees coming to the streams like the Birdwood, north of the Platte, for their human sacrifice ceremonials, but not after 1850. By that time the Sioux, too, were dropping some of their important ceremonials, particularly those of the Horse Owners Society. This society had been started at least two hundred years before, when the ownership of a horse was still looked upon as a special gift from the Great Powers, endowing the owner with very strong medicine, and with very special responsibilities in the hunt, in war, and in the flight of the people from danger. Now, in 1854, horse ownership seemed a very poor thing when any eight-year-old boy could go out and catch himself a horse of sorts, particularly in midwinter, when the colts and mares of the vast mustang herds were weak. White Eye and early traders in the region used to tell of the mustangs around Box Butte, up northeast of Alliance, estimated at around 50,000. Usually they grazed in hundreds of small herds but when moved by lightning or prairie fire, they swept over the plain in a swift, flying carpet that was much like the stampeding buffalo herds of the day, only brighter colored, fleetier.

Incidentally, old White Eye refused to believe that the Spaniards brought the horse to America. To him the wild herds came out of the buttes of the High Plains as they came out of the white man's stables and corrals, which the buttes resembled in a gigantic way. But he agreed that however the horses came, by 1854 it was no longer a mark of distinction just to own one. The Sioux and the Cheyennes both had herds that were dark on the hills around their camps, and thousands of the good strong stock that they called American horses passed on the trails before their eyes.

#### ISLANDS OF WHITES

In 1854 Nebraska was supposed to have a white population of between 2500 and 2800—less than sometimes camped around the Fort Laramie region at the height of

the emigrant season, particularly during bad weather. Usually, however, the little army and trading posts of the whole High Plains were only little islands of whites in a great sea of Indians and buffaloes. Even the entire population of Nebraska was little more than a fringe settlement along that great sea of wilderness. By 1854 buffalo bones already lay white on the Platte Valley, particularly the North Platte—so white that the emigrants from far off thought the spring prairie was streaked and patched with snow. Still there were millions of buffaloes left to roam over Nebraska Territory, even though the herds found the grass of the Platte region too worn and the air too full of the smell of man and of death for much lingering.

Certainly in the summer of 1854 the few white men at Laramie and the trading posts below it were literally tiny islands in a sea of Indians—thousands and thousands of Indians waiting for their agent to come so they could get their treaty goods and return to their hunting. But the lame Mormon cow got loose and was killed by a Sioux. Lieutenant Grattan came to the great camp with a handful of men and a cannon, shot down the government-made chief of all the Sioux, and never got out.

This Grattan fight was followed by the first scattering of Plains Indians before the threat of United States troops, but it was not the last. Typically, the bands fled as from a plague of measles, smallpox, or cholera, separating, running north or south, east or west as fast as their horses could go. The Brule Sioux hurried northeast toward the sandhills of Nebraska, carrying their dying chief, Conquering Bear, on a jolting travois. Some say they were running for the upper Snake River at the west end of Cherry County, deep in the hills. Others insist that they were trying to get the chief to the medicine spring at the head of Deer Creek, which flows from the sandhills north to the Niobrara. This medicine spring, in what was later the Modisett ranch (purchased by Chris Abbott before his death) boils out under a sandy knob. It was said to have great curative powers, and here the wounded chief was to be healed. But Conquering Bear, or Bear Chief, as he is sometimes called, died before the Indians reached the spring. He was placed upon

a burial platform erected on a bench of the bluffs overlooking his beloved Running Water, the Niobrara River, in what later became the first Old Jules orchard, the place where I was born. According to some of the old Brules who used to come to visit the spot, the scaffold stood just above one of our old Dyehouse cherry trees. As late as 1910 they came to smoke and meditate there. One old man used to dance a few solemn, mournful steps in the evening sun. These men gave me my first real sense of the massacre of peaceful Indians by our troops, and it made a deep and sorrowful impression on me.

#### LITTLE ISLANDS OF INDIANS IN A SEA OF WHITES

Although this Grattan fight was the first of a long series of skirmishes, battles, treaty councils, and more battles called the Sioux (and Cheyenne) Wars, I think the central problem in this whole period was never fully appreciated by either side. The white man never understood the Indian's notion of property. It was impossible for the American Indian to imagine personal ownership of land. His food, arms, clothing and livestock were his to give, sell, or destroy as he wished. In addition he might have the sole right from his people to some ceremonial object, a sacred song and so on. He could even sell his membership in a warrior society, although the other members had the right to reject the buyer. Land, however, was held by the tribe for the use of everyone, and in permanent trust for the future. When the Indians "sold" land by treaty, they understood that this was only for temporary use, temporary occupancy; and when the periodic payment of goods did not come, the land was automatically once more wholly the property of the tribe, given them by the Great Powers for the use of their people. When the annuities of 1854 were not given out and the Indians got cannon shot instead, many understood that the sale of the Holy Road was done, the trail up the Platte once more theirs.

So the Brules had not only a chief's death to avenge but the opportunity to plunder white men traveling on Indian land, destroying the grass of the pony herds, scaring away the buffalo. The Sioux began to raid the Platte trails, and here a piece of real historical irony crops up. Spotted

Tail was blamed for the attack on a stage coach supposedly carrying \$85,000, really not more than \$20,000, if that. Spotted Tail was taken away in irons and thrown into prison. When he returned he was made a council chief by the Sioux and then killed years later because, as a government-selected agency chief, the sole head of all his reservation, he seemed to be selling tribal lands to the whites.

Two weeks before the meeting here in Lincoln I was approached by some Brules to write the biography of Spotted Tail. They wished me to show the kind of man he was and why he lived the life he did. They wanted it all told, from the raiding of the Platte trails after the Grattan fight to his end at the hands of Crow Dog, who had drawn the lot of executioner when the Brules suspected their agency chief was planning to sell part of the reservation. These men wanted me to point out that the Brules had lost two great chiefs through the white man's misunderstanding of the Sioux system of chieftainship. The government had made Conquering Bear the first head, the white man's head, of all the Teton Sioux, and then shot him because he could not exceed his Indian power and deliver the killer of the Mormon cow but offered to pay for the animal instead. They made Spotted Tail agency chief of all the Brules and got him killed because he was acting like the all-powerful man the whites thought him, not like a Sioux chief. Sioux tribal government was based upon an elected council of chiefs who could only act as a majority on tribal matters and with temporary powers. Any chief could be "thrown from his place" as the Indians called it, when he seemed to forget the people. Spotted Tail, as agency chief, could not be deposed; and so he had to be killed.

But in 1854 and immediately thereafter nobody worried much about the complaints of the Sioux. Little Thunder's band was shot to pieces at the Blue Water. Rumors of gold in the Black Hills and the actual discovery of gold in Colorado and at Alder Gulch brought new travel to the trails and a company of prospectors marching up the Niobrara on what they called the Sawyer Wagon Road. The Indians fought back as well as they could with the

poor arms they had, but it was a losing game, with the end visible to only a few, but inevitable nevertheless.

### GROWING GRASS

The climate, too, of the western half of Nebraska seemed to be changing. Called a sea of mud from Grand Island to the Laramie region in 1836, by the middle of the 1840's it was on the verge of a dustbowl drouth, with the emigrants complaining that they could not see the sun for days on end. But by the 1860's the grass was growing tall, due partly to the shrinking of the buffalo herds. Freight bulls that strayed away came through the winter alive and strong. Encouraged by this, bull ranches were started in the Nebraska Panhandle and by the time of statehood a more efficient hay burner than the buffalo was grazing the range—the longhorn from Texas, forerunner of the later shorthorn, Hereford and Angus.

### THE HIDE MEN

The Civil War brought some changes to the Nebraska plains but perhaps less than might be anticipated. Indian troubles increased but chiefly from the increased pressure of settlement and the disappearance of the grazing buffalo herds along the Platte. Buffalo hunters were moving out from the trails to gather the hides that the empty bull trains returning from the Colorado and Idaho mines would haul cheaply. By 1864 hundreds of these professional hunters harvested tallow for war industries as well as the flint hides for leather. Unfortunately while the buffalo grew scarcer and wilder for the bow, the annuities to the Indians were cut. Besides, there were more trouble-makers among the travelers on the trails, many of them draft dodgers, bounty-jumpers, or deserters. War demands reduced the number of troops on the frontier as well as the quality. Often the best were the Galvanized Yankees who had, as they said, lost no Indians. Add to this such troops as the Colorado Volunteers, who stirred up a little Indian War at Sand Creek, rather than to go fight a well-armed enemy like the Confederates. By 1865 the situation was so bad at Laramie that it took the mouth of a cannon to move some

of the troops out into the Powder River country. Only the disinterest of the Indians in butchery let the expedition get back at all.

By 1867, the new state of Nebraska was crossed by the Union Pacific, tapping the great buffalo herd that wintered in the Republican River region. Now finally the cheaper freight rates of the railroad made hide-taking profitable on a gigantic scale. In the face of the still hunter and his buffalo gun the herd melted like snow. The strings of hide wagons rolled in to the railroad from all over the prairie, loaded high as hayracks, while the long-range buffalo guns and the marching troops of Hancock and Custer held most of the poorly-armed Indians back.

By 1872 all but the fringes of the Republican herd were gone, scattered in bleaching bones on the prairie and in piles of hides at such depots as Sidney and Cheyenne, or Chicago, New York, and the leather towns of England. The buffalo hides had kept the Union Pacific in freight, as they would later pay for the construction of the Kansas Pacific, the Sante Fe, and finally the Northern Pacific up in the Yellowstone country. Literally, one might almost say, the roadbeds of the transcontinental railroads were carpeted in buffalo robes.

#### POST-WAR AGGRANDIZEMENT OF THE VIOLENT

I have long been working on a theory, not original with me but one I throw out here and there in my writing. I think postwar society is a sick society, psychologically so sick that it has no patience or tolerance for the moderate or the responsible, but feverishly aggrandizes the melodramatic, the flamboyant, the violent, and criminal. The degree and extent of this aggrandizement depends, I think, upon the duration and the bloodiness of the war. On the High Plains, at least, this sickness seemed to strike less the veteran of the Civil War, North or South, than those who avoided the fighting and those unfit or too young. They were ably led by the newspapers and magazines trying to spur their lagging circulations with the sensational, for, as always after a war, both newspaper and magazine sales tended to slump.

It is interesting that the most colorful characters of the postwar frontier of the 1860's were closely tied to Nebraska—Wild Bill Hickok and Buffalo Bill Cody, as well as such lesser figures as California Joe, Lonesome Charley Reynolds, and even the Jack McCall who later shot Hickok.

Cody and Wild Bill had a common point of moderation in their Nebraska records: they both seemed to have filed on homesteads, Hickok at least twice, probably under different names. But from that one point on they differed: Cody the handsome, expansive man-about-the-saloons, the excellent showman who probably never willfully harmed anyone; Hickok the fine buffalo hunter, the frontier dandy who seemed most certainly a psychotic killer, and rapidly going blind when he was shot.

Apparently Hickok was antisouthern from the start. I doubt whether this was antislavery so much as fury over the stiff competition the picturesque, swashbuckling southerners gave him, even back in his boyhood when they came along the canal. Whether this hatred of the South was so pronounced before his difficulties that ended in the killing of the North Carolinian McCanles at Rock Creek Station is perhaps difficult to prove now. Certainly the antisouthern feeling was involved in much of his later violence except in such fights as those with Tom Custer and Mike Sheridan around Fort Hays and some of the troubles up in Wyoming. It is very possible that if Hickok had not feared the revenge of the southerners, particularly the Texans, he might have joined the hide men going south to the Texas herd in 1874 and never been in Deadwood to be shot by McCall in 1876. To be sure Wild Bill's eyesight was too impaired for much buffalo hunting by then, but he might have hung around the hide towns and lived on into blindness. Yet given a choice, the flamboyant dandy would certainly have chosen Deadwood and the bullet to a long life in darkness and obscurity.

Another flamboyant character identified with Nebraska, particularly old Sidney barracks in the 1860's, was Calamity Jane Canary, called Calamity Jane No. 2. It is reported that on August 4, 1877, the *Sidney Telegraph* said: "Calamity Jane No. 2 has arrived from the Black Hills.

She received promotion on the road to assistant wagon boss. She became so powerful as to lead to the discharge of a number of hands. She has now gone west with a bull-whacker to learn the trade. She is a stubby customer, American and cus-sed (sic). If she has any conscience, she took it with her, and if she had any virtue, her husband didn't know it. Her child is now in good hands, and the painter is happy."

In my limited effort to untangle the three Calamity Janes, I discovered that the first had died in the early Seventies, somewhere in Colorado, if I remember correctly, and that the third was named later. By now all the stories are tied to one woman, but there were really three. With the stories of three Wild Bill Hickoks, I discovered just the opposite long ago and verified my findings in talks with Luther North and in further research since. The Nebraska Wild Bill was the man who shot McCanles, killed the Sioux chief Whistler, and lived in a dugout on a homestead in the territory for a while. It wasn't difficult to prove that this was the same man as the Wild Bill Hickok around Abilene, Hays, Topeka, and Kansas City and later of Cheyenne and Denver and Deadwood. From the AGO Records in the National Archives it is plain that the military always knew who killed Whistler and that the three Wild Bills were one. And while Hickok did a great many things in his short years on the frontier, almost none of them were the ones reported in newspapers or magazines or even in the rash of books about him. James Butler Hickok is worth a serious and saddening biography, and some day it will be written.

#### A SORT OF SECOND LOOK AHEAD

But the aspects that I have touched upon here are just some stray glances at "The Look of the West in 1854" and its possible projection into the future. Of all the time and the region, only the soil, the sun, and the changing winds are unchanged. The Indians are little islands in the sea of whites, whether on the reservations or in the tent slums behind towns like Gordon or Chadron or Rapid City. The buffaloes are gone; the grass, protected and developed and

fortified by cultivated feeds, fattens the finest beef in the world. The earth holds not only the fertility for great yields of grain and other crops but also oil and who can say what further? Water is carried to the fields and electricity to the homes and the factories. It is about the latter that I wish to say one last word.

In our urgent decentralization, both for economic reasons and for safety, we are developing a new kind of social body, the farm-factory unit, with small agricultural developments for factory workers, either to dovetail into seasonal employment or the current short hours. Frequently in New York I am asked by financiers and industrialists (who find me through their interest in Custer and the Indian wars) what the prospects are for large-scale electric power in the western section of our state. More recently there has been a change in their queries. With the coming development in atomic power, a factory unit can be established almost anywhere—preferably out in the open country where the workers can have some agricultural sideline—gardening, farming, stockgrowing—for increased health and greater economic security than either farming or factory labor alone can offer. And this can be done, I am assured, without blighting the region by smoke or destructive run-off into lakes and streams, and with the prosperity and foresight to preserve the scenic charm and the historic significance of the region.

More and more I find eastern capital and industry looking westward, not across the mountains, but to the wide open spaces of our High Plains. I said one thing in 1940 at Columbus, Nebraska, that I wish to repeat here: I expect to live to see Nebraska a dual state, an agricultural-industrial region, with increased economic security, a greater richness for the life of the individual and the group—altogether greater prospects than the wildest dreamer could have envisioned in 1854.