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Article Summary: William F "Buffalo Bill" Cody was a natural born showman. He was a media star, a cultural icon, and founder of Buffalo Bill's Wild West show. When kinetoscope was introduced in the beginning of the twentieth century, he was provided another opportunity to promote his career: a controversial movie, *The Indian Wars*, which was produced and exhibited—and of which only two minutes has been found. This is the story of the production of that film.

Cataloging Information:

Names: Edward Z C Judson, Ned Buntline, Thomas Edison, Harry H Tamman, Fred G Bonfils, George K Spoor V R Day, Nelson A Miles, Frank Baldwin, Jesse M Lee, Charles King, Marion Maus, H G Sickel, Lindley M Garrison, Franklin K Lane, John R Brennan, Prince of Monaco, Theodore Wharton, Mrs Brennan, Jack Red Cloud, Cato Sells, Melvin R Gilmore, Chauncey Yellow Robe, C Ryley Cooper, Broncho Billy, Harry Carey, Tom Mix, William S Hart, William F "Buffalo Bill" Cody, Sitting Bull

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Photographs / Images: Fay King caricature for the *Denver Post*, March 9, 1914; Cameraman setting up a shot before filming; Observers witnessing the Wounded Knee filming, in cars, wagons, horseback; Philip F Wells, an Indian interpreter with Cody; General Miles, military advisory leading Indian actors to their positions. Jack Red Cloud identified; Photos before and during the Battle of Wounded Knee reenactment; *Moving Picture World* photo of the Besse Theater, South Omaha, August 15, 1914; Advertisement for *The Indian Wars* in *Moving Picture World*, August 22, 1914

GEE, STELL, THEM INDIAN PICTURES MADE FAY WANT TO BE SCALPER



BUFFALO BILL AND WOUNDED KNEE: THE MOVIE

By Andrea I. Paul

If there is one point upon which biographers of William F. "Buffalo Bill" Cody can agree, it is that Cody was a natural-born showman. His career as a nineteenth century media star and cultural icon began in 1869 when he was discovered by Edward Z. C. Judson who, as Ned Buntline, transformed Cody into a hero of dime novels. Eventually Cody's career progressed onto the stage, where he first appeared reenacting (and exaggerating) many of his frontier experiences. This evolved into Buffalo Bill's Wild West, a show featuring stunts and skills of great horsemen, terrific sharpshooters, and thrilling reenactments of "historical" incidents. Among the reenactments were scenes of Indian uprisings on the frontier and the ultimate imposition of peace, through violent counterattack, by the U.S. military. During the last two decades of the 1800s, audiences worldwide saw the Wild West and received a history lesson on the settlement of the frontier, courtesy of Buffalo Bill.

By the beginning of the twentieth century, a new entertainment form was introduced to the public, a form that would provide Buffalo Bill another opportunity to promote his career as a master showman. In 1893 Thomas Edison exhibited what he thought would be one of the least useful of his

many inventions, the kinetoscope. This was the first in a long line of motion picture devices, one that was actually more akin to a peep show. Although he did not realize initially the importance or potential of his "toy," Edison soon felt its impact when his first moving pictures of exotic dancers and animal acts, each running only a few seconds, were huge popular successes. As kinetoscope parlors sprang up across the country, the Edison studio in West Orange, New Jersey, began production of other moving pictures to supply products for the new entertainment sensation.

Among the first to visit the Edison studio to pose for the camera was Buffalo Bill and his troupe of Wild West Indians. The *East Orange Gazette* and the *Orange Chronicle* noted the 1894 appearance of Cody and the Indians under the headlines "Indians Before the Kinetoscope" and "'Wild West' Kinetoscoped." The articles described Cody's exhibition of rapid fire shooting, Indian dances, and a war council in which the peace pipe was passed among all of the participants.¹

It was not until nearly twenty years later, in a last desperate attempt to revive his career and his bank account, that Cody hit upon the idea of filming the story of his life. Not only would this serve to keep Cody's legend alive in the public consciousness (even after his death), but it might also help him regain financial solvency.

In early 1913, the sixty-seven-year-old Cody borrowed \$20,000 from Harry H. Tamman and Fred G. Bonfils, owners of the *Denver Post* and the Sells-Floto Circus. As collateral for the loan,

Cody offered the only possession of value that he had, the Wild West show property. When he was unable to pay even the interest on the note, Tamman and Bonfils foreclosed and the show property was sold at public auction.

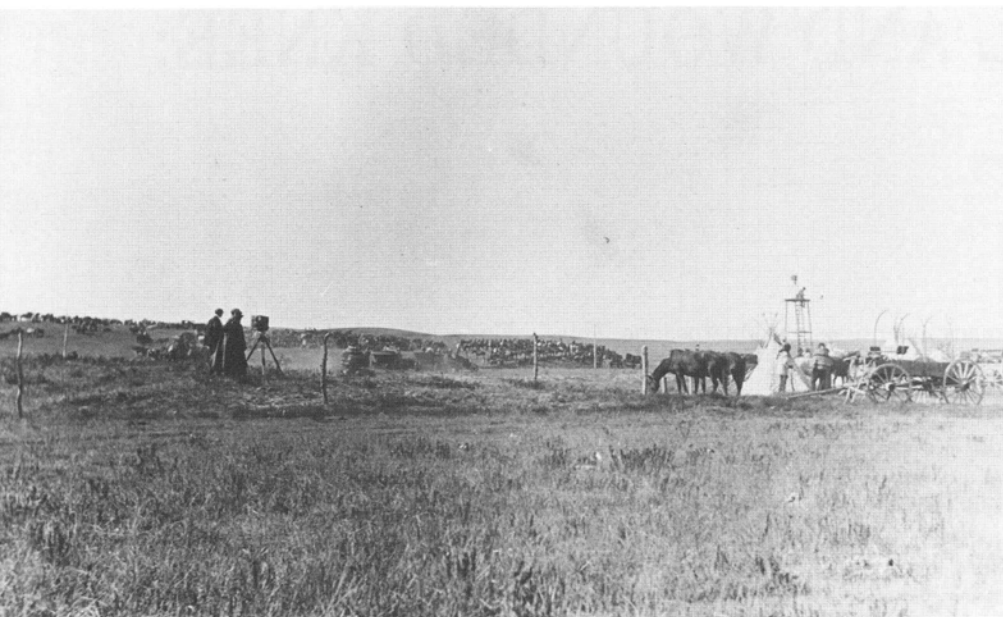
Still believing that Cody could make money for them, Tamman and Bonfils were enticed to join in his film scheme and form the Colonel William F. (Buffalo Bill) Historical Pictures Company. In September 1913 the company was incorporated in Colorado, with Bonfils as president and Tamman as secretary. Other officers were George K. Spoor, treasurer, and V. R. Day, assistant secretary, both of the Essanay Film Company of Chicago.² Essanay, as a full partner, would supply the technical assistance required of the film project, as well as the knowledge to market the finished product.³ Although no financial investment was demanded of Cody, he received one-third interest in the company for his services and for the use of his well-known name in the company's title.⁴ In addition, he was to receive a copy of the film for his own use. This duplicate copy could be seen as an annuity for Cody if the film proved a box office success.

The *Denver Post*, with its financial interest in the project, set the publicity wheels in motion. The first in a series of favorable articles announced that the film would be a historical spectacle of the West, with Buffalo Bill as its centerpiece:

His whole life and service to the West will be shown from his boyhood days. He is to be pictured as the buffalo hunter, the Indian scout, the pacifier of the reds, the greatest factor in the settlement of the plains, the real pathfinder and trailblazer.⁵

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Fay King, a cartoonist for the *Denver Post*, caricatured several incidents from the film on March 9, 1914.



Cameraman setting up a shot before filming. (NSHS-B624.8-53) (below) According to the Martin (South Dakota) Messenger of October 15, 1913, some 1,500 observers witnessed the Wounded Knee filming, some of them in cars or wagons or on horseback.



The film would be unique because of the appearance of military participants in the Indian wars. In addition to Cody, the film was to include Generals Nelson A. Miles, Frank Baldwin, Jesse M. Lee, Charles King, and Colonels Marion Maus and H. G. Sickel, all recreating their roles as officers on the frontier.⁶ Their mission was "to present historic events, which paved the way to racial peace between red and white, for the optical education of future generations and act as factors in the preservation of a national story."⁷ This motion picture was to be not only a record of the past, but also an educational lesson depicting the progress made by the Indian under the stewardship of the whites and, specifically, the federal government.

Both the U.S. Departments of War and Interior threw their influence behind Cody's plan. Secretary of War Lindley M. Garrison agreed to detail soldiers of the Twelfth Cavalry from Ft. Robinson to serve as actors. Similarly, Secretary of the Interior Franklin K. Lane agreed to allow Indians from the Pine Ridge Reservation to appear in the film,⁸ recreating the 1869 battle of Summit Springs, Custer's Last Stand, Cody's "first scalp for Custer" at Warbonnet Creek, and the Wounded Knee conflict. Secretary Lane hoped that the planned final scenes of the film, in which the progress of reservation Indians would be shown through pictures of their modern homes, schools, and farming practices, would stand in sharp contrast to their pre-reservation lifestyle. He instructed Pine Ridge Agency superintendent John R. Brennan to make sure that the film included "pictures of the children in school working and on the farm and otherwise industrially engaged. The whole presenting an historical event of the progress of the Indians for the last twenty years."⁹

For its part, the military saw the film as a potentially effective propaganda tool that would present the army's role during the Indian wars in the best possible light. The official line was that the



Philip F. Wells, an Indian who served as an interpreter at Wounded Knee and survived the battle, acted as a technical advisor to Cody during the filming. Later he came to the defense of Cody and Miles when they were criticized for inaccurately reenacting the Wounded Knee battle. Responding to attacks by Melvin Gilmore and Chauncey Yellow Robe, Wells characterized the reenactment as "a very fair representation." Denver Post, October 10, 1913, 9.

Cody film would "give the people of today an idea of what the Army had to do in paving the way for the advent of the settlers and in protecting them in the development of the western country."¹⁰ The fact that two copies of the film were to be preserved in government repositories in Washington, D.C. ensured that future generations would also be exposed to the military's view of frontier history.

As a prelude to the filming, Buffalo Bill visited Cody, Wyoming, with an Essanay cameraman in tow to take pictures of his home life. The cameraman

also recorded the visiting Prince of Monaco's hunting expedition, led by Cody, as well as reenactments of stage holdups, Indian fights, and other scenes of early day Wyoming.¹¹ Cody must have thought of this as a small scale dress rehearsal for the monumental project that lay ahead.

During most of October 1913 the filming of *The Indian Wars*, as the film came to be called,¹² took place. Adding to the realism engendered by the use of the military men as actors and advisors to the project was the use of some of the original locales in the reenactments.

From the outset, controversy surrounded the decision of Cody and Essanay director Theodore Wharton to use the actual Wounded Knee site for the filmed reenactment. General Charles King, Cody's closest friend among the military advisors, believed that Wounded Knee was not the type of historical event that should be replayed for the camera. His concern was strong enough that he obtained a promise from Cody that the Wounded Knee segment would be withheld from circulation until the war department had approved its content.¹³

Similarly, General Nelson Miles opposed the inclusion of the Wounded Knee episode in the planned reenactment. In his autobiography Miles made clear that he blamed subordinates for the massacre, stating, "I have never felt that the action was judicious or justifiable, and have always believed that it could have been avoided."¹⁴ While the Wounded Knee segment of the film was produced, Miles maintained his distance by remaining at the Pine Ridge Agency.¹⁵ Mrs. Brennan, the wife of the agency superintendent, witnessed the Wounded Knee reenactment and commented on the long distance editorial control imposed by Miles when she wrote to her daughter that "Gen. Miles would not allow them to show the women and children in the fight and that was left out."¹⁶

Whether or not the finished film presented a sanitized view of the slaughter, it is impossible to judge,

because only two minutes of *The Indian Wars* picture exists. (This footage is preserved at the Buffalo Bill Historical Center, Cody, Wyoming.) Only some thirty seconds of the material relates to the Wounded Knee period, and no footage of the reenacted battle is included. The surviving portion of the film shows scouting and cavalry maneuvers during the Battle of Warbonnet Creek and a scene of Cody being intercepted by Indian police as he is being driven to meet Sitting Bull in a futile effort to calm the volatile situation during the Ghost Dance uprising. This brief segment was only a fraction of the film's length; adver-

tisements stated that the film ran two hours.

That the film met General Miles's high standards was indicated by his approval of it following a private showing for the military advisors and financial backers in Chicago on January 21, 1914. With Miles's endorsement that the incidents comprising the film were "historically correct, just as they happened,"¹⁷ Cody and his partners sought the approbation of the government officials who had initially supported the project.

The film was presented to two different Washington, D.C., audiences on February 27, 1914. During an afternoon

matinee, the audience was comprised of members of the National Press Club. Perhaps the producers felt that publicity provided by the newspaper writers would result in large crowds as the film toured the country.

The endorsements most dear to the film's producers, however, were those that followed the evening presentation to the New Home Club, a social organization of the Interior Department, hosted by Interior Secretary Lane. Among the 1,000 persons in attendance were Secretary of War Garrison, numerous congressmen, Commissioner of Indian Affairs Cato Sells, and other government officials.¹⁸ The

General Miles, though not present at the Wounded Knee filming, was principal military advisor to the project. Here he leads Indian actors to their positions for another scene. Jack Red Cloud, on the white horse, is the only Indian identified. Courtesy of Buffalo Bill Memorial Museum, Denver.





Before and during the battle reenactment. It is likely that the photograph depicts the ravine where the slaughter actually occurred. Courtesy of Arthur Bowring Sandhills Ranch State Historical Park, Nebraska Game and Parks Commission.





The best evidence that *The Indian Wars* played in Omaha is this photo which appeared in *Moving Picture World*, August 15, 1914. At the Besse Theater of South Omaha, the special eight-reel feature commanded an admission fee of twenty-five cents.

producers were no doubt pleased with the endorsements provided by the Interior and War departments, as the press reported, "Both Secretaries Lane and Garrison expressed the deepest satisfaction with the pictures, claiming them to be historically correct in every detail."¹⁹ The producers were able to proceed with the scheme to publicize the film as a production made with the assistance and support of the U.S. government.

Just a little over a week later, on March 8, the film premiered in Denver at the Tabor Grand Opera House and remained there for a one-week engagement. The *Denver Post*, continuing in its role as publicity agent, praised the reenactments:

The like we have never seen before. Their splendid accuracy, their lack of posing, their genuineness, their vividness, make them extraordinary. To the young they are an education. To the old a revival of fading memory; to all a display of American patriotism and bravery that cannot be too highly extolled.²⁰

Modern film historians contend that *The Indian Wars* became mired in controversy because of its depiction of the Indian as a savage, and government

pressure soon forced the film from public view.²¹ Yet newspaper clippings indicate that the film appeared in other cities during 1914 including Omaha, Chadron, and Alliance, Nebraska, as well as Milwaukee and in 1915, Eau Claire, Wisconsin.²² By 1914 *Moving Picture World* listed the film among those productions going into wide release during November.²³ Further newspaper research might reveal that the film was seen in other areas throughout the country.

Criticism of the film centered around the mistaken notion that Buffalo Bill and General Miles had appeared in the film as heroes of the reenacted Battle of Wounded Knee. Superintendent Brennan responded to newspaper attacks, explaining:

The newspaper articles were fakes written by a disgruntled crank for the deliberate purpose of besmirching General Miles, the other Generals, the Secretary of the Interior and the Commissioner of Indian Affairs.²⁴

The instigator of the negative publicity campaign to which Brennan referred was Nebraska State Historical Society museum curator Melvin R. Gilmore. Gilmore's criticisms began

shortly after the filming was completed when he complained that the filmmakers sought to blame the Indians for the Wounded Knee battle even though the Indians were far outnumbered by the military. Gilmore called the production "a disgrace to the government under whose sanction it was made."²⁵

The Indians were not without their own critics of the film. Chauncey Yellow Robe, a Sioux man educated at the Carlisle Indian School, castigated the film and its producers in a speech before the Society of American Indians. Believing that history was manipulated by Cody and Miles for their own self-aggrandizement, Yellow Robe, following the same line of argument initiated by Gilmore, attacked Cody and Miles as pretenders who

went back and became heroes for a moving picture machine . . . they want to be heroes for moving pictures. You will be able to see their bravery and their hair-breadth escapes soon in your theaters.²⁶

Although Melvin Gilmore was in the Pine Ridge area during the fall of 1913, it is unknown if he witnessed the reenactment of the Wounded Knee battle (or if Yellow Robe viewed the finished footage). One indication of how the scene might have been filmed comes from the pen of C. Ryley Cooper, who provided the readers of the *Denver Post* with summaries of the scenes contained in the film. In recounting the Wounded Knee incident, Cooper's interpretation of the historical event would be acceptable to historians today:

There (at Wounded Knee) the white man was the aggressor, they far outnumbering the Indians. The red men were crowded down into a great ravine where lines of bullets sent them to death in scores.²⁷

If the filmed reenactment followed this scenario, then the indictment of the film as a fabrication of history was unfair.

The producers might have found themselves in an untenable position: Supporters of Gilmore's and Yellow Robe's position could claim that the Indians were unfairly portrayed as savages in other segments of the film, if

Buffalo

Bill

The last of the great Indian fighters, Colonel Wm. F. Cody and Lieutenant General Nelson A. Miles (retired) of the United States Army, are the leading players in this most realistic film of the age.



This picture, which has been APPROVED BY THE UNITED STATES GOVERNMENT and made under the DIRECTION OF THE WAR DEPARTMENT, has attracted the attention of the entire world.

"THE INDIAN WARS"

As a Money-Maker this film is without an equal. The Advertising Possibilities of the picture are unlimited. It is a **FIVE-REEL THRILLER THAT WILL LIVE FOREVER.**

1000 INDIANS, many of whom were leaders in the original battles; **12th U. S. CAVALRY**, and **MANY OFFICERS** now retired, again took their places in the re-enacted scenes.

Historically Correct and **all scenes TAKEN ON THE EXACT LOCATION** of the original battles.

State Rights Now Ready

Get Busy!

THE POSTERS will STOP THE CROWDS and get you the business—6 one-sheets, 3 three-sheets, 1 six-sheet, 2 eight-sheets, 2 sixteen-sheets.

EXHIBITORS—Write or wire us at once and if your state has not been sold, we will book you direct.



General Nelson A. Miles (U. S. A., Retired)

**THE
COL. WM. F. CODY
(BUFFALO BILL)
HISTORICAL
PICTURE CO.**

**521 First National Bank Bldg.
CHICAGO ILL.**



An American Aborigine

Advertisement for The Indian Wars in Moving Picture World, August 22, 1914. The film's producers were anxious to publicize the government's approval of the film and the involvement of General Nelson A. Miles.

not in the Wounded Knee sequence. On the other hand, the government might have been displeased that the film made the military look too much like the aggressor at Wounded Knee. In either case, the film could be criticized by individuals who advocated a particular view of frontier history.

Contemporary film historians speculate that the film was forced from view by the government through the use of behind-the-scenes pressure on the filmmakers. Because there are indications that the film was seen in towns as small as Chadron and Alliance, another explanation for its disappearance should be considered. There is a strong possibility that the film simply did not please the public and, therefore, a short run in the theatres was imposed upon the producers. It is conceivable that the appearance of a seventy-year-old Buffalo Bill portraying the Buffalo Bill of some fifty years earlier struck the audience as ludicrous at best, an anachronism at worst. This, coupled with the fact that the public was anxious to see newer (and considerably younger) western stars such as "Broncho Billy," Harry Carey, Tom Mix, and William S. Hart might have caused *The Indian Wars* to wither at the box office.

Historians who believe that the government pressured the filmmakers to remove the film from distribution further point out that the two copies of *The Indian Wars* which were to have been preserved by the War and Interior Departments in Washington, D.C. have disappeared. Although the copies have never been located among the government archives and it is unclear if the films were ever deposited, it should be emphasized that the majority of films from the first few decades of this century have been lost due to the instability of the nitrate film upon which they were produced. It is likely that *The Indian Wars* met the same fate as hundreds of other movies of that era — it turned to dust.

It is always possible that *The Indian Wars* may reappear, in whole or in

fragments.²⁸ Unfortunately, until that time, film historians can only speculate on the details and historical value of this early film, based upon the sketchy documentation presented in contemporary publications, documents, and photographs.

NOTES

The author would like to acknowledge the assistance of Paul Fees, senior curator of the Buffalo Bill Museum, Cody, Wyoming, in providing research leads and materials. Mr. Fees also graciously allowed a copy of the film to be viewed by the author.

¹*East Orange Gazette*, September 27, 1894, 3; *Orange Chronicle*, September 29, 1894, 4.

²Essanay, one of the leading film companies during the early years of American cinema, derived its unique name by taking the first letters of the last names of its founding partners, George K. Spoor and Gilbert M. Anderson, 'S' and 'A,' which became "Essanay." Anderson was better known to movie audiences as the first great cowboy film star, "Broncho Billy."

³*Moving Picture World*, September 27, 1913, 1375.

⁴Unidentified clipping, Buffalo Bill Scrapbook, Buffalo Bill Historical Center, Cody, WY.

⁵*Denver Post*, September 11, 1913, 2.

⁶Although all of these military men served on the frontier during the Indian Wars period, only Sichel was a participant in the Wounded Knee fight.

⁷*Rapid City Daily Journal*, October 22, 1913, 5.

⁸According to Pine Ridge Agency Superintendent John R. Brennan, during the time the film crew was at the agency, the Indians were paid \$1.50 per day and provisions, as well as hay and grain for their horses. (Brennan to Wm. McCune, November 25, 1913, Letters Sent by Agents or Superintendents of Pine Ridge Agency, Vol. 73, 365-66). In a March 9, 1914, *Denver Post* article, Cody claimed that he paid the Indians between \$2.00 and \$5.00 per day, the total cost for the use of Indians in the case being \$40,000. One suspects that Superintendent Brennan's figure on the daily pay rate is closer to the truth.

⁹*Rapid City Daily Journal*, October 22, 1913, 5.

¹⁰*U.S. Army and Navy Journal*, November 8, 1913, 306-7.

¹¹*Denver Post*, September 14, 1913, Sec. 1, 7 and September 23, 1913, 3.

¹²Advertisements for this film show that other titles were used, among them *The Indian Wars*, *Refought*, *The Last Indian Battles* or *From the Warpath to the Peace Pipe*, *The Wars for Civilization in America*, *Buffalo Bill's Indian Wars*, and *Indian War Pictures*.

¹³Harry A. Anderson, "The Friendship of Buffalo Bill and Charles King," *Milwaukee History* (Winter, 1986), 127.

¹⁴Nelson A. Miles, *Serving the Republic: Memoirs of the Civil and Military Life of Nelson A. Miles* (New York & London: Harper & Brothers, 1911), 243.

¹⁵Miles's eschewing of the Wounded Knee filming caused *Denver Post* reporter/publicist C. Ryley Cooper to provide explicit instruction to his managing editor: "If any of my stuff speaks of the general in connection with the battle, please cut it out. General Miles objects to headlines or any references to himself in connection with the battle, which he looks upon as an unnecessary massacre. None of the generals were present at Wounded Knee and object to being coupled with it." Cooper to E. C. Shepard, October 17, 1913, John R. Brennan Diary and Scrapbook, 1907-15, FB28, South Dakota State Historical Society.

¹⁶Mrs. John Brennan to Ruth Hill, October 1913, John R. Brennan Family Papers, F25, South Dakota State Historical Society.

¹⁷Unidentified clipping, Buffalo Bill Scrapbook, Buffalo Bill Historical Center, Cody, WY.

¹⁸President Woodrow Wilson, although invited, was unable to attend. Some ad campaigns claimed that the president had endorsed the film, but there is no verification that he ever viewed the production.

¹⁹*Denver Post*, February 28, 1914, 1; *Washington Post*, February 28, 1914, 2.

²⁰*Denver Post*, March 9, 1914, 2.

²¹Film historian Kevin Brownlow argues that the film was suppressed by the government and withheld from release. This argument is questionable since the film opened in Denver just a week after the Washington, D.C. showings. Brownlow's study of the Cody film appears in *The War, The West, and The Wilderness* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1979), 224-35. In a series of newspaper articles on the Cody film, South Dakota journalist Bob Lee cites the "nebulous report" of government suppression of the finished product. See *Rapid City Journal*, August 3, 1969, 24. Others who mention the possibility of government interference include Harry K. Hollenbach, in an undated clipping from the *Reading (PA) Eagle* newspaper; and George LeRoy, former superintendent of Scout's Rest Ranch, in the *Omaha World-Herald*, May 26, 1983, 2. For Hollenbach's experiences during the filming, see Thomas R. Buecker, "In the Old Army: Harry K. Hollenbach at Fort Robinson, 1911-1913," *Nebraska History* 71 (Spring 1990): 13-22.

²²Unidentified clipping, Buffalo Bill Scrapbook, Buffalo Bill Historical Center, Cody, WY.

²³*Moving Picture World*, November 7, 1914, 813.

²⁴Letters Sent by Agents or Superintendents at Pine Ridge Agency, Vol. 75, 488-90.

²⁵*Omaha Evening Bee*, November 4, 1913, 5.

²⁶*Rocky Mountain Daily News*, October 16, 1913, 7.

²⁷*Ibid*, October 17, 1913, 3.

²⁸It is possible that segments of *The Indian Wars* will appear as part of another film. After Cody's death in 1917, segments of *The Indian Wars* were probably edited and used in a biographical work entitled *The Life of Buffalo Bill*. (It also appeared under the title of *The Adventures of Buffalo Bill*.) Advertised as an hour and ten minutes of "thrilling action, terrifying Indian battles and prairie skirmishes," it is apparent that at least some portions of *The Indian Wars* were reused in this way. Information on the latter film appears in *Moving Picture World*, January 27, 1917, 553, and February 3, 1917, 672.