

An Iowan with Buffalo Bill: Charles Eldridge Griffin in Europe, 1903-1906

by
H. Roger Grant*

Since colonial times Americans have enjoyed live entertainment. Troupes of jugglers, aerialists, acrobats, magicians, and clowns have toured the country just as they have done in Europe since the Middle Ages. During the late eighteenth century some of these performers began to join animal trainers to form the circus as we now know it. Circuses enjoyed almost universal popularity. They were an exciting form of entertainment and as Hamlin Garland would later note, "The circus relieved the dullness of farm life."

In the 1880's more than fifty circuses operated in America, although most were small and shortlived. By World War I the number of circuses dropped considerably while their size steadily increased. Just as consolidation movements swept American industry following the great depression of the 1890's, circus companies, too, banded together or bought out their principal rivals. Ringling Brothers, Barnum & Bailey, and Forepaugh-Sells dominated

the industry by the turn of the century and in 1907 the Ringlings took control of the latter two firms.¹

With the end of frontier conditions in the late nineteenth century, the American public, now nostalgically viewing the Indian as a "noble savage," and craving the raw excitement of a vanishing phase of their history, flocked to a new variation of the circus, the Wild West show.² Unlike the circus, the Wild West show featured scenes and events depicting life in the trans-Mississippi West. The first true Wild West show appeared in 1882 when William Frederick Cody, "Buffalo Bill," launched his "Cowboy Fun" extravaganza in North Platte, Nebraska.

Born in Scott County, Iowa in 1846, Cody embodied all the romance of the West.³ In his youth he was a daring pony express rider. Later, he became a professional hunter supplying buffalo meat to construction gangs of the Kansas Pacific Railroad. He also was a scout and guide for the army during several post-Civil War Indian campaigns. In the 1870's, however, Cody left the frontier for the melodrama stage. A born showman and organizer, Buffalo Bill converted popular

¹There are numerous circus histories. The best over-all studies are Earl Chapin May, *The Circus from Rome to Ringling* (New York: Duffield & Green, 1932) and George L. Chindahl, *A History of the Circus in America* (Caldwell, Ida.: The Caxton Printers, 1959).

²While the complete history of the Wild West show has not been written, the leading work is Don Russell, *The Wild West: A History of the Wild West Shows* (Fort Worth: Amon Carter Museum of Western Art, 1970).

³For Buffalo Bill's own colorful story see Don Russell, *The Lives and Legends of Buffalo Bill* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1960) and William Frederick Cody, *Story of the Wild West and Camp-Fire Chats* (Philadelphia: Historical Publishing Company, 1888).

*The author is indebted to John W. Griffin of Albia for supplying material relating to Mr. Griffin's uncle.

interest in the West into a prosperous business venture. His new show featured a variety of riding, roping, and shooting acts along with pageant-like productions characterizing Western life: stage coach robberies, cavalry-Indian shoot-outs, and buffalo hunts. By 1887 the Cody company had toured the United States and Europe in an extensive and successful series of engagements. In fact, Buffalo Bill and his show continued to visit England and the continent until the fall of

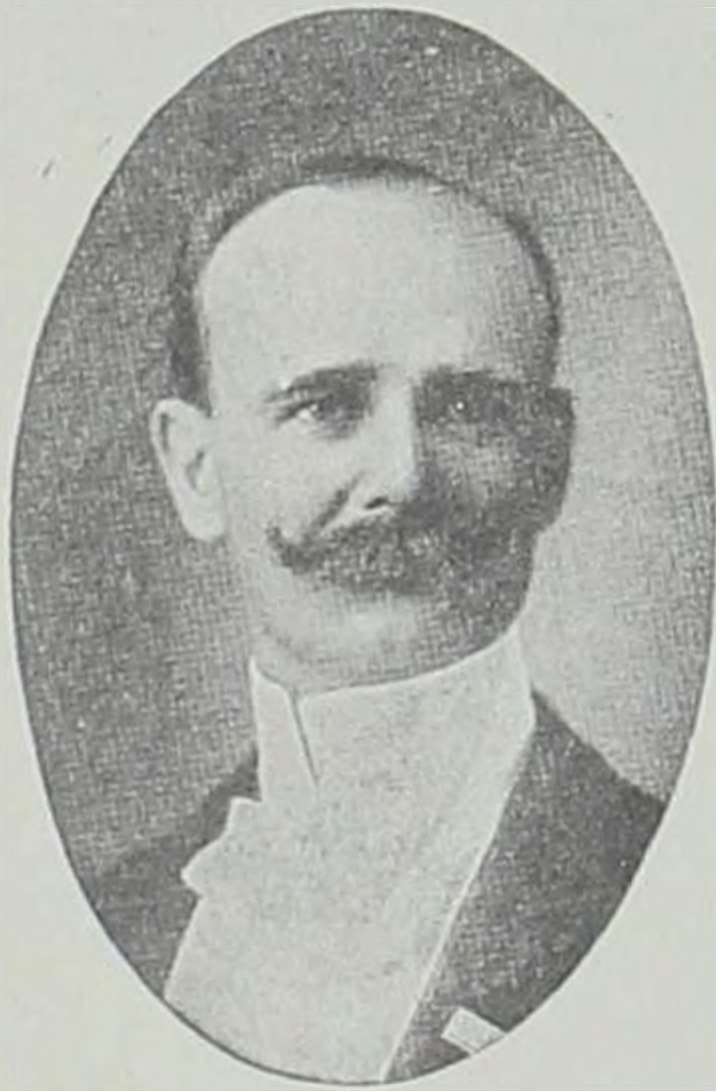
1892, but then did not return to Europe until a decade later.

Although Buffalo Bill's troupe is perhaps the best known Wild West show, many others appeared from the late eighties well into the twentieth century. Pawnee Bill's Historic Wild West, Col. Zack Mulhall's Wild West, Dr. E. F. Carver's Wild America, and the Miller Brothers' 101 Ranch Show were among the more famous. Like Buffalo Bill's Wild West, these shows stressed the colorful and episodic.

An Iowan, Charles Eldridge Griffin, was associated with both the circus and the Wild West show during their golden age. Although Griffin was never a central figure in either entertainment form, he authored the only book-length commentary on Buffalo Bill's second great tour of Europe. Published in Albia, Iowa in 1908 by the Stage Publishing Company, *Four Years in Europe with Buffalo Bill* is not only a valuable collector's item (only 500 copies were printed) but provides useful glimpses into the operations of the show and the attitudes of one troupe member toward a variety of subjects. Moreover, Griffin the entertainer represents an important social type. His background, activities, and triumphs were probably typical of hundreds of other performers during the years between the Civil War and World War I.

Griffin was born on June 16, 1859 in St. Joseph, Missouri. When a child, his family moved to Albia, the seat of Monroe County. Here Griffin's father, John W. H.

FOUR YEARS IN EUROPE
WITH
BUFFALO BILL



BY

CHARLES ELDRIDGE GRIFFIN

A DESCRIPTIVE NARRATIVE OF THE BIG AMERICAN SHOW'S
SUCCESSFUL TOUR IN FOREIGN LANDS, ILLUSTRATED
WITH ORIGINAL PHOTOS BY THE AUTHOR.

ALBIA, IOWA:
STAGE PUBLISHING CO.
1908.

The title page of *Four Years in Europe*. Most of the photographs which accompany this article are from Griffin's book.

Griffin, served as Monroe County superintendent of schools and later as county clerk of courts. Charles' mother, Fanny, quickly became known for her musical abilities, particularly organ playing. Talent, however, was not limited solely to Mrs. Griffin. In time Charles and three other Griffin children, Frank, Fred, and Lucia B., gained a degree of fame for their special abilities. Frank and Fred joined Charles in the circus business and Lucia B. became a popular platform speaker. All of the Griffins were known for their extroverted personalities.

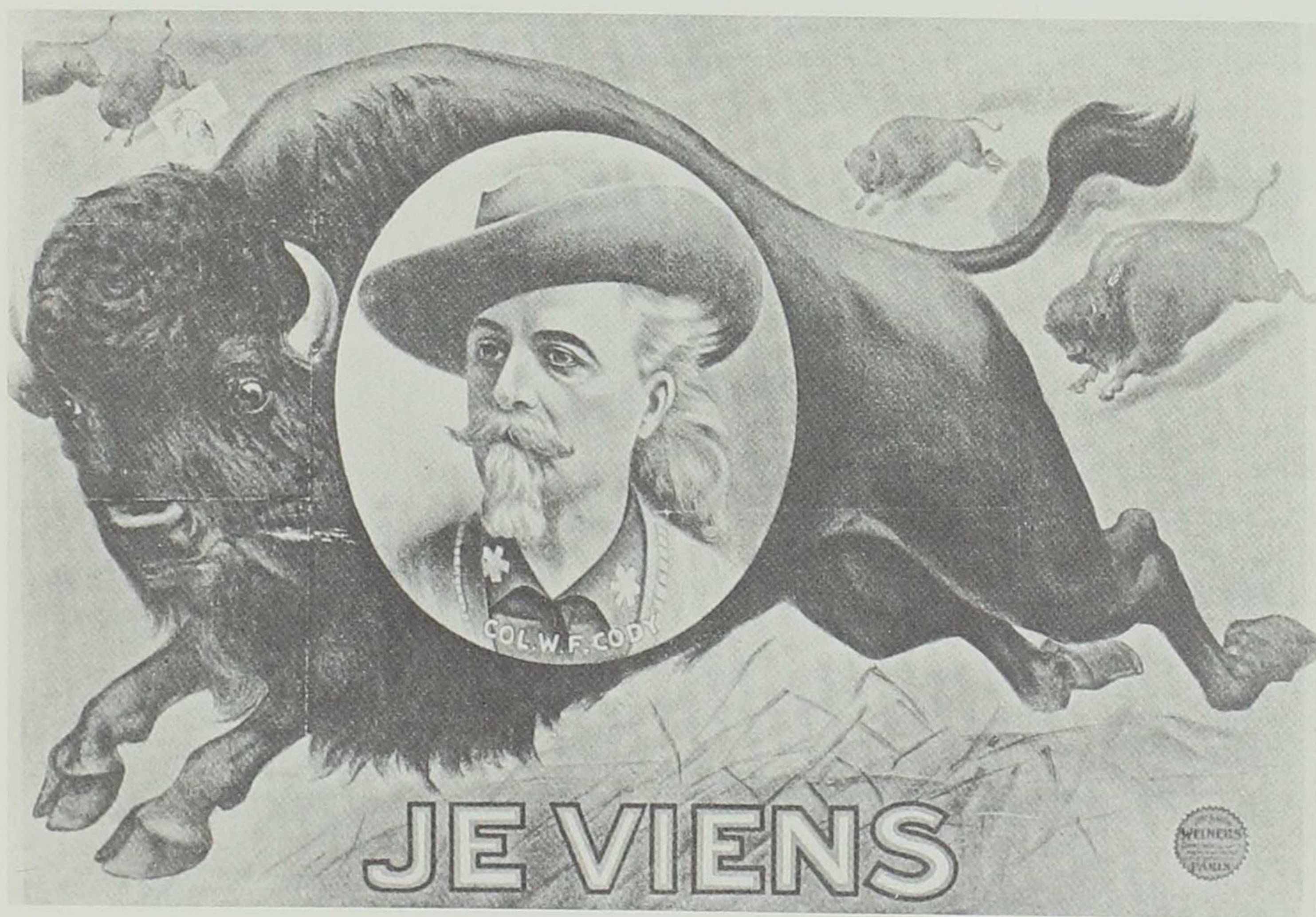
Although information concerning Charles Griffin's early show business career is tantalizingly obscure, it is known that as a sixteen year-old he toured country school houses, town halls, and county fairs with his own "one man valise troupe." In all probability it was here that young Griffin began to perfect his talents as a magician and ventriloquist.

In 1881, Griffin, now an established Iowa entertainer, joined his first show, Hilliard & DeMott's Circus, as a "magician and lecturer." After that company folded, he traveled to France to become general manager of the Paris Pavilion Shows. Next, Griffin, who called himself "The Comic Yankee Conjuror," joined Pullman & Mack's Circus. He stayed with this group for its short existence, 1884 to 1885. As a sign of his growing popularity and skill, he then affiliated with the nationally famous Sells Brothers' Circus as a "lecturer in side show and featured in concert (Fire Act)." In 1886, however,

he left Peter and Lewis Sells to become a member of the newly formed Hurlburt & Hunting Circus in New York City, later known as Bob Hunting's New York Circus. Griffin stayed with Hunting for twelve seasons. Here he owned and operated the side show, and in 1898 he held a similar position with Frank A. Robbin's Circus.

In the 1890's Griffin began writing and publishing side-show books and pamphlets. While never best sellers, his works were read widely by fellow entertainers and starry-eyed youngsters who hoped to leave home for an exciting life with the circus. In all, Griffin penned fourteen specialty publications, including *Griffin's Book of Wonders: A Description of Various Acts, Strange Phenomena, Illusions, &c, Taught at the Griffin Conjuring College; How to Charm Snakes; Satan's Supper; or Secrets of a Fire King* (which went through nineteen editions); *New and Sure Key to Ventriloquism*; and *How to Become a Contortionist*. After the turn of the century he acquired his own publishing house in Albia, the Stage Publishing Company, which reprinted earlier works and published additional titles, including his well-known *Four Years in Europe with Buffalo Bill*. Between 1897 and 1901 he was part owner of the *Maquoketa* (Iowa) *Weekly Excelsior*.

Griffin took a giant step professionally after leaving the Robbin's Circus. In 1899 he became a performer and stage manager for Ringling Brothers' side show. Based in Baraboo, Wisconsin, the five Ringling



A French version of Buffalo Bill's famous "I'm Coming" slogan, probably dating from 1905.

Buffalo Bill Historical Center, Cody, Wyoming.



"Les Gallerie de les Phenomen" or the Side Show, Paris, 1906.

Brothers had built their circus into a gigantic corporation by the late nineties. Little is known about Griffin's four years with the Ringlings, except that he entertained thousands with his sleight of hand and ventriloquist acts, remembered as "the very best." His wife Octavia, a snake charmer, joined him as did his brothers Frank and Fred, and Fred's wife Julia, a mind reader.

While the Ringling Brothers' Circus was in Canton, Ohio, in June 1902, James A. Bailey of Barnum & Bailey fame visited the show. At this time the two circuses were fierce rivals and Bailey was there to buy talent. He sought personnel not for his own circus but for Buffalo Bill's Wild West show. Bailey, whose own company had toured Europe from 1897 to 1902, recently had traded territory and equipment with Buffalo Bill, thus allowing Bailey to increase his American business while enabling Buffalo Bill to work the lucrative European market. Among the showpeople hired in Canton were



CHARLES ELDRIDGE GRIFFIN,

The Comic Yankee Conjuror.

Who for four years pleased and perplexed the Royalty and Peasantry of Europe.

Re-engaged for Season of 1907 as Manager of Privileges with Buffalo Bill's Wild West.

Looking Backward

1875 to 1880 Country School Houses, Town Halls and County Fairs with my own one man valise troupe; 1881-2 magician and lecturer with Hilliard & Demott's Circus; 1883 gen'l mgr. Paris Pavilion Shows; 1884 mgr. side show Pullman & Mack's Circus; 1885 lecturer in side show and featured in concert (Fire Act) with Sells Bros.' Circus; 1886 to 1897 twelve consecutive seasons owner and manager of privileges with "Bob" Hunting's New York Circus; 1898 owner and manager side show with Frank A. Robbin's Circus; 1899 to 1902 lecturer and stage manager Ringling Bros.' Side Show; 1903 went to England with Buffalo Bill's Wild West as lecturer and magician (under Lew Graham); Winter 1903-1904 at Bostock's Hippodrome, Paris; 1904-1905-1906 manager of privileges with Buffalo Bill's Wild West in Europe; Winter 1904-5 Music Halls of Great Britain and Waverly Market Carnival, Edinboro, under Sir H. E. Moss.

An example of Griffin's letterhead. The impulse to advertise was so strong that almost no room was left for a message. This is a nostalgic letter to Griffin's brother.

Charles Griffin and his family. "I was among the lucky ones," Griffin later remarked, "and when I received my contract I felt highly elated at the prospect of a European tour with the most successful amusement institution of modern times."

In December 1902 the Buffalo Bill show sailed for England. Charles, his wife Octavia, and Fred and Julia Griffin, however, did not leave America until late March 1903. After landing at Liverpool, the Griffin contingent joined the show at Manchester. Charles immediately assumed his duties as performer of "Yankee magic" in the side show, working closely with the side show's manager Lew Graham.

Throughout England Buffalo Bill's Wild West presented its standard program. The side show offered a variety of popular acts: Punch and Judy shows; two bands, "Sig. Sagatta's Belgian Hare Band" and "Tito Altobelli's Italian Band;" numbers featuring magic, ventriloquism,

fire-eating, snake charming, and mind reading; and the "Wonders of the Known World." The latter curiosities featured the "Blue Man," the "Three-legged Man," two "Tattooed Men," "Grace Gilbert, the Auburn Bearded Venus," a "Scotch Piper and Polyphonist," and Professor James T. Jukes, "one of the Original P. T. Barnum Bohemian Glass Blowers." At the main show the public heard the "Star Spangled Banner" overture played by Colonel William Sweeney and his thirty-six member Cowboy Band. They then thrilled to the Grand Review. This colorful performance, reminiscent of the circus parade, included "Rough Riders of the World, genuine Sioux and Cheyenne Indians, Cowboys, Cossacks, Mexicans, Scouts and Guides, veteran members of the United States Cavalry, a group of Western Girl Rough Riders, and a detachment of colorguards, soldiers of the armies of America, England, Germany, Japan, Russia, Arabia and Mexico." The Grand Review had been an integral part of all Wild West shows



A long line of ticket buyers, waiting to get into the Wild West in Paris, 1905.



A "Bunch" (to use Griffin's description) of the Wild West in front of the Colosseum in Rome. A strange mixture of Italian workmen, American showmen, and Sioux, the latter decked out in uniform Wild West outfits.

since their inception. Frequently the Review was followed by the "Race of Races"—a spirited horseback contest between American cowboy, Indian, Mexican, Arabian, and Cossack riders which illustrated their differing styles of horsemanship. Next to occur were artillery drills, various military exercises, reenactments of pony express relay rides, attacks on wagon trains, buffalo hunts, and train hold-ups. As the show's program for 1907 noted, no performance was complete without the appearance of Colonel Cody: "The original Buffalo Bill, the last of the great scouts the first to conceive, originate and

produce this class of realistic entertainment. He will give an exhibition of expert shooting from horseback, while galloping around the arena."

Buffalo Bill's Wild West had instant audience appeal. This can be explained by the colorful and fast-moving acts themselves and the fact they mirrored popularly-held assumptions. In both Europe and America the populace frequently glorified military life, expressed an extreme brand of national and racial pride, and firmly believed in the eventual triumph of Western civilization over the world's heathens. Not surprisingly, the greatest applause

often came with a cowboy victory over an Indian or Mexican during the "Race of Races." As Griffin himself said, "We gave them a show that was full of action and something that they wanted and expected to see."

During the 1903 season, the 800-member show moved from Manchester to Birmingham and then to Wales and back to various English cities closing on October 23 at Burton-on-Trent. "We had a very pleasant and prosperous season, notwithstanding the fact that the elements were against us most of the time," noted Griffin. "Three hundred and thirty-three performances were given, and it can be recorded with satisfaction that only one performance was omitted . . . and that made necessary as a matter of public safety on account of the high gale prevailing at the time."

Although most members of the Buffalo Bill show returned to the United States at the end of the 1903 season, Griffin and his wife stayed in England. After extensive sight-seeing in the London area, Charles accepted a four week engagement at Frank C. Bostock's Hippodrome in Paris, "one of the finest amusement temples in the world." Here the "Comic Yankee Conjuror" once again displayed his talents.

Buffalo Bill's second successful season in Great Britain began in April 1904. The show visited various English and Welsh cities and performed in Scotland for the first time. When Lew Graham resigned as side show manager before the start of

the season to accept a similar post with Ringling Brothers, Griffin took his place. He would keep this job for the remainder of the European tour and for one year after the show returned to America. After the 1904 season closed the Griffins once more wintered in England. Charles again found a temporary position. Instead of returning to Paris, he traveled to Edinburgh for the twentieth annual Waverly Market Carnival. Here he had a three week contract with Sir Henry E. Moss, the well-known British entertainment tycoon.

The third season abroad shifted to the Continent when the show opened in Paris in April 1905. Griffin, who did not speak French, took a cram course from the Berlitz School of Languages in London prior to rejoining the show. His twenty French lessons were some preparation for his ventriloquist and magic acts. "Well, I got along pretty fair, considering that I did not know the meaning of half the words I was saying. Anyway it amused them, so I was satisfied. I honestly believe that more people came in the side show in Paris to hear and laugh at my 'rotten' French than anything else, and when I found that a certain word or expression excited their risibilities, I never changed it."

The Paris stand from April 2 to June 4 was exceedingly successful. According to historian Don Russell, it was "the most prosperous in tent-show history." From the French capital, the show zigzagged across the country, stopping in Cher-



"A Sad Farewell," soon to be shot.

bourg, Rouen, Le Havre, Lille, Lyons, St. Malo, Bordeaux, and several other cities. In the midst of popular success a minor disaster struck the show. In early July show officials discovered to their great dismay that glanders had broken out among the horses. This disease was highly infectious among animals and could be transmitted to humans. By the time the Wild West closed the season in November at Marseilles, nearly two hundred horses had been shot, leaving only about one hundred. The show was able to keep the glanders problem a virtual secret and Griffin boasted in his *Four Years in Europe* that "the story has never been publicly told until now."

From November 1905 until March 1906, the Buffalo Bill show wintered in

Marseilles. The final season in Europe opened there on March 4. Rather than touring France for a second consecutive season, the show moved to Italy, stopping in Genoa, Spezia, Livorno, and Rome. Italians enthusiastically greeted Buffalo Bill's Wild West. As Griffin wrote: "Never in the twenty-four years' history of the Wild West was there such a crowd of people to welcome its arrival [in Rome]. The streets were blocked and traffic suspended in the vicinity of the station. The police reserves were called out, and they finally cleared the way for us to the Piazzia d'Armi, where we were to exhibit." As in England and France nobility and prominent politicians were in attendance. The showmen and the "blue bloods" seemed to admire one another. This rapport simi-

larly extended to the commonfolk, for the show throughout its existence provided considerable cross-class appeal.

From Italy, Buffalo Bill's Wild West journeyed into the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Performances came in Trieste, Agram (Zagreb), Vienna, Budapest, and in a number of smaller communities. The show briefly visited czarist Russia. Then in August 1906, the Wild West arrived in Germany. At Dresden it enjoyed an unusually fine four-day stand. "I never saw so many people on a show ground in my life as there were at Dresden, Sunday afternoon, August 19," remarked Griffin. "Although our seating capacity was about 17,000 people, we could not accommodate half of those who desired admission." After a successful tour of the country, the show went to Belgium, closing the 1906 season in Ghent on September 21. "Take it all in all, the tour was a most successful one, both financially and artistically," Buffalo Bill then sold most of the animals, shipped the railroad cars and show wagons to the Barnum & Bailey winter quarters in England, and sent the remaining livestock, mostly the bucking bronchos and other Wild West paraphernalia, back to New York. Nearly all of the show's personnel returned immediately to America, but Griffin took a much needed vacation in England. "When we closed our season . . . , I felt as though I was on the verge of nervous prostration, having been at a high nervous tension all Summer" He and Octavia arrived back in New York in late October 1906.

Although Griffin's *Four Years in Europe with Buffalo Bill* contains much narrative material, it clearly reveals the author's views toward Europe and Europeans. It is

likely that Griffin's conclusions were fairly typical of other Wild West entertainers. For example, he liked the British, not suffering from the Anglophobia that plagued so many of his fellow countrymen. Perhaps this was because he felt at home throughout the country, particularly London. Griffin noted that, "There are American shoe stores, American quick lunches, American pharmacies, American barbers, American dentists, American bars, American this and American that." As a ventriloquist, the fact that he did not have to learn or memorize a new language might have made him inclined toward the British. Moreover, business was good in England and this likely put Griffin in a pro-English mood. He particularly liked English politeness and their "wholesome regard for law and order."

Griffin had different views toward the French. Although business was good in France and there were numerous tourist attractions to enjoy, the country bothered him. "There are two classes of people in Paris," he complained, "one class is there for the sole purpose of making money, and the other class to spend it. They are both working overtime, and as a result you pay top prices for everything." Griffin blasted some who attended Wild West performances. "The Hooligan element was very much in evidence there, reminding one of the early days in America, when the 'bad' element of a section regarded the advent of a circus as an intrusion or menace, and would attack the show people for no other reason than that they were strangers." He grumbled, too, about the French money situation. "I never saw so much bad coin in my life as in France, and particularly Marseilles. It is not con-

sidered bad form to pass out a counterfeit piece if you have been unwise enough to accept one. The government does not seem to make any effort to keep bad money out of circulation."

Griffin admitted that he was pleasantly surprised with Italy. "Many of us had it down as a land of anarchists, with bombs and stilettos, but we found the people the most peaceable and most subject to police control than any country we visited outside of England." He generally had the same thoughts about the Austro-Hungarian Empire, and he seemed sympathetic to the problems of the various ethnic groups in that sprawling nation. "We think we have a race problem in America, but it is more complicated and acute [here] . . . , and it is not a matter of color, either. The majority of the peasantry are on a par, educationally, with the negroes of our Southern States, and the poor Jew is far more persecuted." Finally, Griffin appeared favorably inclined toward both the Germans and Belgians, although he admitted that he wished he could perform in the English language. These people were orderly and respected authority, ideal traits for "law and order" advocate Griffin.

Four Years in Europe also indicates the author's attitude toward Buffalo Bill. Griffin worshipped Cody. As he said in the book's introduction, "It is really too bad that everybody cannot know the Colonel as his friends know him. He is truly one of the best fellows in the world—open hearted and generous to a fault.

Why, his managers have to hedge him in and keep the people from him during the season, otherwise he would have his tents filled with free tickets" Such a feeling of admiration toward Buffalo Bill was common and perhaps explains why the great showman consistently kept the loyalty of his employees.

Apparently Charles Griffin's four active years in Europe proved too much for him. Shortly after arriving back in the United States, he suffered a mild stroke. Nevertheless this indefatigable showman dem-



W. J. Cody
"Buffalo Bill"
1906
To: Chas. E. Griffin

A photo of Cody himself, inscribed to Griffin, and printed at the front of *Four Years in Europe*.







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Advertisements proclaiming Griffin's side show library. See p. 14.

onstrated his loyalty for Buffalo Bill and rejoined the show for the 1907 season. This ended his affiliation with a national entertainment group. Returning to Albia that fall, Griffin concentrated on publishing and writing. However, he entertained

local residents with performances at Albia's opera house. Soon he was the victim of a more serious stroke and as a nephew remembers "he wasn't able to do anything." Griffin died in Albia on January 3, 1914 at the age of fifty-four.