

Montana's Landless Cree and Metis in Wild West Show

In the late 1880s and early 1890s the itinerant Metis and Cree refugees who headed to Montana after the 1885 Resistance were destitute and starving. They lived on the road allowances and worked as seasonal laborers. In order to feed their people Gabriel Dumont and others joined *Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show*. It is not as well known that Little Bear and another group joined *Beveridge's Wild West Show*.

In the summer of 1895, the Beveridge's Montana Wildest West show was developed in Helena, Montana, and toured by rail across seven Midwestern states. This show employed a unique Made in Montana cast, including Montana's so-called landless Cree and Metis as a feature attraction. The *Anaconda Standard* reported on April 6, 1895 that Charles Trottier of Box Elder, Choteau County was working for Dan Davenport to recruit Metis and Cree from Butte, Montana and Medicine Hat, Alberta to join the show. The troupe left Montana in April 1895, stopped at Havre where more Metis and Cree joined, then moved on to Joliet Illinois. Later, it played Chicago, New York, and New Orleans. Beveridge claimed his Cree and Metis cast were not very good actors, whereas the Cree and Metis claimed that entrepreneurs Beveridge and his partner Don Davenport paid them nothing more than money to buy food and left them stranded in Cincinnati, Ohio in the spring of 1886..

Newspapers of the day reported:

Beveridge's Wildest West Show

On June 9, 1895, the Cincinnati papers announced that Beveridge's Wildest West Show was coming to Cincinnati. It would perform on the old Campus Grounds of the Order of Cincinnati at the foot of Bank Street; what today is near Spring Grove Avenue just south of the Western Hills viaduct. The *Enquirer* noted that "several attempts have been made to foist fake shows of this kind on the public" and the *Gazette* seconded that, saying "The public of Cincinnati has been fooled frequently by Wild West announcements." Both papers assured, however, that this was the real deal, and featured 178 Cree Indians as the feature of the shows.

There would be three shows only, Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday. The show would feature, in addition to the Cree, according to the *Gazette*, a "team of crack shots; a score of cowboys, each of whom has won distinction by his skill and bravery; several cowgirls; all sorts of Western rough riders; Salem Nassar's troupe of Arabs, said to be by far the best troupe ever brought to this country, and to contain a genuine whirling dervish, or spinning Mohammedan priest; a complete card of Hippodrome races; [and] many legitimate circus features that have been lent to add variety." The *Enquirer* said their tent would hold 8,000 people, and would be the largest ever erected in Cincinnati.

The Cree

A little background on the Crees: The Cree were Native American Indians originally from Manitoba, Canada. Under Chiefs Wandering Spirit (who, as the white Canadians hung him, sang not a death song, but a love song to his wife) and Big Bear, they found their beloved buffalo in fewer and fewer numbers. The local Indian agent was only interested in helping them if they agreed to settle down, raise crops, and embrace Christianity, but the Cree were having no part of that. The Cree believed that since the Whites had destroyed all of the Cree's food source, the buffalo, the Crees were entitled to eat from the plentiful stores of the White man. The standoff's got violent, most famously during the Riel Rebellion. Ultimately, the Cree fled to Montana, where the US refused to recognize them, since they were not native to the USA. Big Bear was the Chief who led them in Manitoba, but his capture by the Canadians put his son, Little Bear in charge of a tribe that was hungry and homeless, adrift in Montana with no food. They were, the *Enquirer* noted, the only Indian Tribe to have never signed a treaty. To eat, they joined Beveridge and his Wildest West Show. They had seen Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show, and figured they could do that. They also may have been led to believe that going east would eventually enable them to talk to authorities in Washington.

The first Monday morning they were in Cincinnati, June 10, 1895, they were paraded to the Cincinnati Zoo. They got to ride the elephant, and the *Enquirer* wrote that the big lions and tigers, upon glimpsing the Indians, were caused to growl violently. Little Bear said his people wanted to know if there were Buffalo on display, and the Indians were able to "stroke the mangy hair through the bars of the enclosure." Little Bear told the head of the zoo "My heart is smiling. My people shall talk of your wonderful place at their council fires when they are old men." The march to and from the zoo was used as a promotional tool, and the "parade through the principal thoroughfares of the city attracted the curious in such crowds that many of the streets were fairly blocked."

That afternoon and evening were the first of the shows, and the local papers went into a frenzy of Manifest-Destiny-ism and yellow journalism that would last for weeks. The *Gazette* said that the Cree's "feathers are of the primest and best; their red blankets are the proper shade of carmine; their war paint is sufficiently brilliant, and their war dances so inspiring;" adding that folks should see the show twice. The *Enquirer* said "The entry of the Indians, under command of their chiefs, 10 men with each, was an impressive sight. They noted Little Bear, Buffalo Coat, Long Hair, and Sun each conducted 10 warriors into the arena, each in full war paint, and they certainly looked fierce and ugly enough to fulfill the claims of the most sensational Indian story writer."

Tuesday's *Enquirer*, the 12th, ran another very positive if less detailed review. The *Gazette* ran no review, but did have a small piece about the ownership of the show being changed.

A story in the *Gazette* on the 13th about the death of one of the Cree children, named Ho-te-ot-te-na-wish, one and a half years old, and said to have died from "pulmonary tuberculosis." The child was to be buried in the "Wesleyan Cemetery."

And Then It Gets Real Interesting

So three scheduled days of shows took place on June 10-12, and the press remains silent until we get to June 15, that Saturday, when most of the Cree have ended up at Taylor's Bottoms in Bellevue. The *Post* reported that the promoters of the wild west show were furious, because between when the show's advance men came to Bellevue and the time the show was due to open, there was passed an ordinance passed calling for a \$30 fee to be levied on circuses.

By Monday, the *Gazette* was reporting that "The tied up circus, with its squad of Indians, drew a large crowd to Taylor Bottoms yesterday, and what, with the wild men of the west and the rag-tag and bob-tail element which makes Taylor Bottoms a gambling hole from craps to poker every Sunday, Chief Ratliffe and his officers had a busy time of it. Fights were frequent and there was a perfect riot among a lot of young sports at one time during the day over a game of craps."

While in Bellevue, it seems that the Sheriff, Jake Plummer, attached the receipts of the show based on a claim by Donaldson Lithographing. And after the Saturday show, Bellevue Constable Albert Ashmoor had attachments totaling \$173. The Indians were also not being paid, and refused to go on again until they were paid.

On Saturday night, the Indians had been told that if they persisted, and went to Washington, they could get their own land. Further, they were told that they could get a corps of soldiers from Fort Thomas to go with them. The show left town for Greensburg, Indiana with some Indians, but 142 (or maybe 80, or 150, sources vary) of the 178 stayed in Bellevue. At midnight on Sunday the 16th, the Crees show up at Fort Thomas. The sentry sent for the base commander, Major Cochran, who was told that six sick Indians were wanting in. The Colonel ordered them sent from the Fort, but Campbell County Sheriff argued that they should be admitted. While they were arguing, 87 Indians with their ponies marched into the Fort, and complained loudly about their treatment in Bellevue, and their fear of the place.

Little Bear related his dissatisfaction with Beveridge's payments to the Cree, and the Sheriff outlined the attachment issues. Mayor Nogel of Bellevue had ordered the Indians out of town as a nuisance. Also, a group in Bellevue masquerading as Kentucky's Governor Brown had told the Indians that if they were not out of the State in 10 hours they would be jailed.

Ultimately, Fort Thomas took them in. Because, as the *Gazette* noted, "If anything is natural to the soldier of the regular army, it is the protection of the

Indian." Right. Anyway, negotiations with the wild west show Monday morning were broken by that afternoon, and the Indians refused to leave the Fort. They pitched their teepees accordingly.

On Tuesday, Everything Changes

It was on Tuesday the 18th that the Fort was inspected by the touring Secretary of War, The Hon. Daniel S. Lamont. The press does not report Major Cochran's reaction to being inspected by the Secretary of War after agreeing to take in 100 stranded Indians, but you can image it was not one of his better days. After viewing a number of war dances put on by Little Bear and his retinue, Lamont washed his hands of the whole mess, saying "Pshaw! There's nothing to it. The War Department has nothing whatever to do with Indians. We only see them as enemies. They get no supplies from us, nor can we issue any without orders of the Secretary of the Interior." Cochran and Lamont agreed to let them stay as long as a week, until they could get on their feet, at which point they would have to go home.

There were two other developments on Tuesday.

First, the Beveridge show, without the Crees in Fort Thomas, and now in Greensburg, Indiana, was served with a number of additional attachments. The *Enquirer* reported that shows proprietors were in "a good hotel," and that the rest of the show were "desperate" from "hunger." A man who had come to take the Indians back to the rest of their group in Cincinnati was accused of horse-theft by the cowboys with the show, but they were found not guilty.

The Beveridge show was originally funded by Montana's Colonel Beveridge, a man of wealth in Helena, Montana. He turned it over to his son, and the show started performances in Joliet, Illinois. On the 11th, the *Enquirer* names E. D. Colvin as the manager of the show, while the *Gazette* on the 12th reports a change of ownership in the show. On the 18th the *Gazette* refers to Allen and Davenport as the owners, and Hamilton as the manager, but on the 21st, the *Enquirer* quotes Beveridge, who, as alleged owner, says he only leased the show, from a man named Wallace. At the very least (and I apologize for the coming sentence), it was a case of too many chiefs *and* too many Indians. The Beveridge Wildest West Show died in Greensburg, Indiana.

The second event of Tuesday, was that the Cincinnati Zoo agreed to take the Cree. 87 Cree with their 65 ponies marched from Fort Thomas to the zoo about 6 pm on Tuesday evening, where they were to perform until they could afford to go home. Secretary Lamont was reported to be pleased with the turn of events.

At The Zoo

The zoo saw the exhibit as being in line with their mission. In their 1896 annual report, the zoo noted "The exhibit of wild people is in line with zoology, and so, when we exhibit Indians, or South Sea Islanders, or Esquimaux, [sic - sound it out] or Arabians, or any wild or strange people in existence, we are keeping within our province as a zoological institution." The press reports nothing but idyllic pastoral scenes from the Indians at the zoo. The Cree performed every stereotypical scene the managers could think of, wearing "pseudo Plains clothing in untraditional ways," wore feathers from the birds at the zoo, and the public response was enthusiastic. They performed from mid-June to July 15, when they had made enough to return to the west.

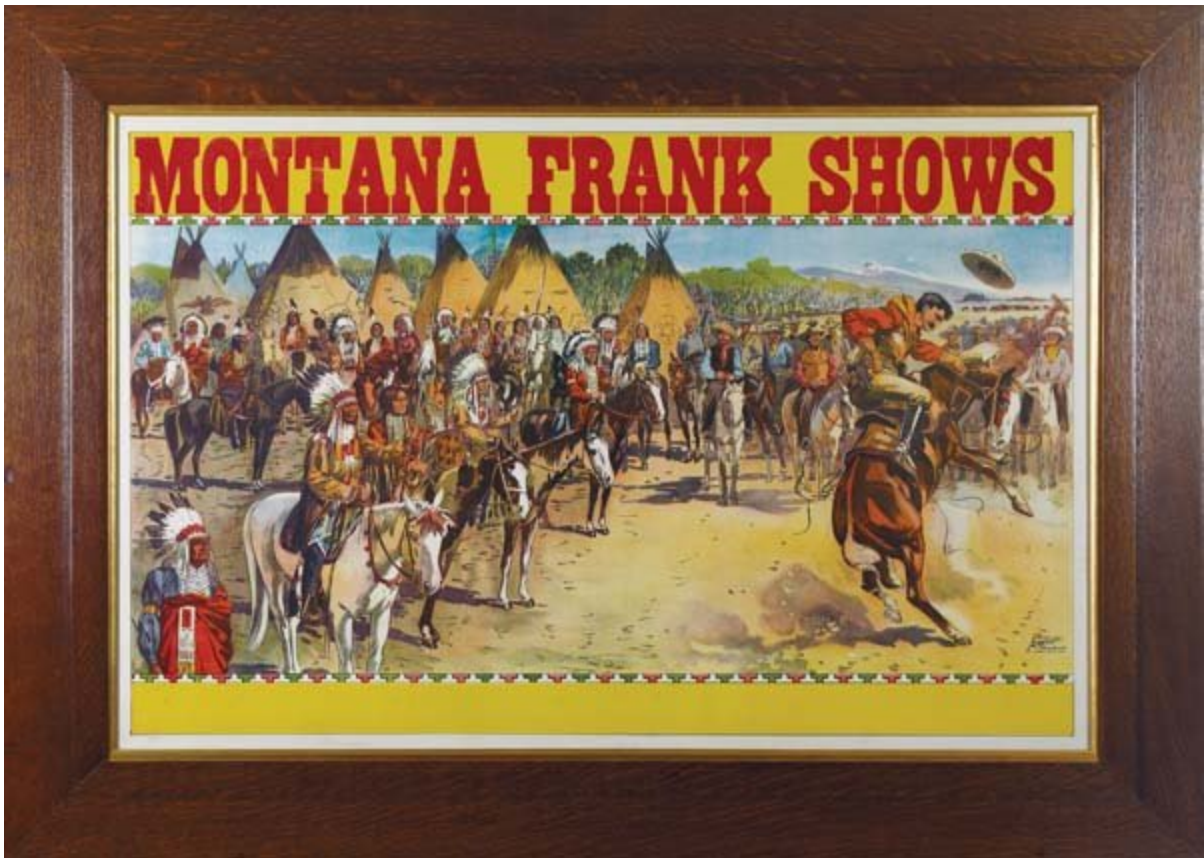
The zoo had had to sell of 25 acres of its location in 1886 to make ends meet, and operated close to the edge ever since it opened in 1873. But the Cree made \$25,000 for the zoo, a serious sum in those days. It was the best year, financially, the zoo had ever had to that date.

The next year, 1896, the Zoo imported a number of Sioux to replicate the success with the Cree, but there was another Indian exhibit in town by then, it was a rainy summer, and that was the end of Indians at the zoo.

Posted on: <http://www.nkyviews.com/campbell/text/crees.htm>

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All of the information above is from the *Cincinnati Enquirer*, the *Cincinnati Commercial Gazette*, and the *Kentucky Post* from June 9 through June 24, 1895.



Typical Wild West Show Poster



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