

Johnny Baker:  
The Cowboy Kid

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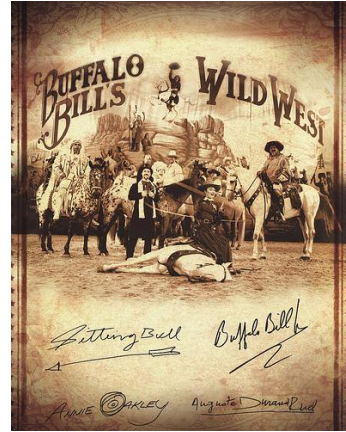
Description of the life of Johnny Baker, formally known as Lewis H. Baker (January 13, 1869-April 22, 1931) who is now buried in Mount Hope Cemetery next to his wife, Olive Burgess (October 28, 1874- July 16, 1956). Also includes a brief overview of the Buffalo Bill's Wild West show and William Frederick Cody (February 26, 1846-January 10, 1917).

Celia Lenarz  
Project 2

### Johnny Baker: The Cowboy Kid

In 1920 e.e. Cummings wrote a poem honoring the Western celebrity, Buffalo Bill:

Buffalo Bill's  
defunct  
who used to ride a water-smooth-silver  
stallion  
and break onetwothreefourfive pigeonsjustlikethat  
Jesus  
he was a handsome man  
and what i want to know is  
how do you like your blueeyed boy  
Mister Death (Cummings)



This poem is written in a tone of a young boy worshiping the adventure of the Wild West show. Such idolizing of Buffalo Bill was embodied in the soul of his foster son, Johnny Baker. From childhood until death Johnny sought to meet, work for, and guard the history of William Frederick Cody, more commonly known as Buffalo Bill. e.e. cummings' description of William as "handsome" and "blueeyed boy," even though it was written after William's death, connote the western hero as forever young. This portrayal of immortal glory relates to Johnny's dedication to preserving the memory of Buffalo Bill and his accomplishments.

Johnny Baker was born on January 13, 1869 as Lewis H. Baker (Democrat and Chronicle), a name he kept for only 7 years. Early on in his life, Johnny's birth parents encountered a financial disaster involving the destruction of their house in western Nebraska. After having moved to the North Platte, his parents found their situation to be

too much of a financial burden to adequately raise their son (Democrat and Chronicle). Destiny had another family in mind for Johnny, a family consisting of hundreds of performers and animals brought together by the enduring spirit of the untamed Western frontier.



In the 1875, William Frederick Cody moved his family into a brown frame house on the East side of Exchange St. opposite of Hubble Park in Rochester, New York (Democrat and Chronicle). While on tour, William's only son, Kit Carson, died of scarlet fever and was buried in Mt. Hope Cemetery (gravestone pictured on left). Kit Carson, born only a year after Johnny, was almost six years old at the time of his death. William Cody was devastated; he had grand dreams of his son joining his troupe and carrying on the legacy of the Wild West shows (Democrat and Chronicle). After having returned to Rochester for his son's burial, William Cody continued his tour. At one of his performances, Cody met seven-year-old Johnny Baker who idolized the Western hero Buffalo Bill. Although the location of this performance is unknown, the only two shows in Nebraska that year were in Nebraska City and Omaha. Johnny was thrilled to hold the reins of Buffalo Bill's horse as he rode through town. William drew a special connection with the boy who reminded him of his dead son. William hoped to take in and adopt the enthusiastic boy, yet Johnny's birth parents were not willing to part entirely with their child. At the age of 7 Johnny Baker was unofficially adopted into William's biological and professional families. Johnny continued to keep in touch with his birth parents throughout his life while taking advantage of his opportunity to take part in the historic show of Buffalo Bill.

Joining Buffalo Bill's Wild West show was a momentous part of Johnny's life. Johnny did not become an official charter member of the troupe until he was 14 (pictured on right) and continued performing for the following 33 years. In order to comprehend the far-reaching influence of being part of "Buffalo Bill's Combination," it is necessary to understand what the show was about. Buffalo Bill's Wild West (contrary to popular misconception, show was never part of the title) was an outdoor spectacle incorporating as many as 1,200 performers at once. A show lasted 3-4 hours and incorporated



reenactments of historical or legendary scenes as well as feats of showmanship. Many of



William Cody's values were intertwined with the structure and content of the performances. As a champion of women's rights, Cody constructed the performance and cast so that women had a strong presence. Despite having killed Chief Yellow Hand at the Battle of Indian Creek, William Cody (Democrat and Chronicle) supported limited rights of Native Americans and claimed that every Native American outbreak "has

resulted from broken promises and broken treaties by the government" (Wilson 78). He employed many Native Americans and claimed to have treated them with great respect. Officially started in Nebraska in 1883, the show turned William Cody and his peers into celebrities (Wilson 78).

The show acted as an American symbol of patriotism, history, adventure and the spirit of the frontier movement.

Soon after joining William's troupe, formally known as the "Buffalo Bill Combination," Johnny Baker became a sharpshooter (pictured right and left). Being a sharpshooter consisted of showing off aiming skills through feats such as shooting objects that were thrown



into the air or shooting objects while often positioned in convoluted poses. Johnny usually filled this role as a counter part to Annie Oakley, who was nicknamed after her shooting skill as "Little Sure Shot." In addition to his shooting acts, Johnny was featured as a skilled rider and given the nickname "The Cowboy

Kid." The animals that he attempted to ride included buffalo, elk, and cattle. He later was promoted to arena director and business manager taking in tasks such as booking the performances (Belle-Isle 1).

After having performed in Buffalo Bill's Wild West for 10 years, Johnny was able to awe the British Royalty with his tricks. In 1886 the organizer of London's American Exhibition invited Buffalo Bill's Wild West to perform in London. This event was co-sponsored by the American government, including President Cleveland himself (Rydell, and Kroes 105-117). After being postponed for a year, Buffalo Bill's Combination boarded a steamship headed for London with "83 saloon passengers, 38 steerage

passengers, 97 Indians, 180 horses, 18 buffalo, 10 elk, 5 Texan steers, 4 donkeys and 2 deer” (Rydell, and Kroes 105-117). The performance was attended by the Prince of Wales, who later became King Edward VII, as well as his mother, Queen Victoria. The Queen’s attendance was a magnificent honor, as she had not made a public appearance since being widowed a quarter century prior. As a topic of news all over the English-speaking world, the visit to England was only the beginning to the ground success of the Wild West shows.

Two years after their London exhibition, the troupe reigned in another triumphant success through their European tour. When returning to London, King Edward VII requested to meet Johnny Baker. While congratulating Johnny on his performance, the King was surprised by Johnny giving him a Western handshake. This breach of protocol sparked up a controversial storm in the press, yet the King himself seemed charmed

rather than offended (Reisem 2). Johnny went on to perform in front of other European royalty such as Archduke Franz Ferdinand, the kings of Belgium, Greece, Saxony, Denmark, and the future German Kaiser, William II. One of the grandest performances was held within the



coliseum of Verona, Italy (Reisem 2).

After returning from Europe, Johnny married Jule Keen, the daughter of the show’s treasurer (McGinty, Fulbright, and Stehno 109). They had two daughters before Jule passed away.



Johnny and his two daughters, Della and Gladys are pictured her. In 1900 Johnny married his second wife, Olive Burgess, who was from Holyoke, Massachusetts. She accompanied her husband on tours for the next 18 years. The photograph on the right was taken soon after the marriage of Olive and Johnny while on tour.



On January 10, 1917 William Cody passed away in Denver, Colorado due to kidney failure. Prior to death, Cody had



requested to be buried on Lookout Mountain in Golden, Colorado where his stone-covered gravesite still overlooks the Great Plains.

Pictured on the left is Buffalo Bill's gated gravesite with visitors, Johnny (right) and the representative of the Showman's League of

America (left). Ten months after the departure of Buffalo Bill, the final Buffalo Bill's Wild West show came to a close. Johnny did not allow the death of his idolized father to dim the glory and memories of his accomplishments. In addition to lecturing on the career of his adopted father, Johnny began a museum dedicated to the memory of Buffalo Bill and his Wild West show in 1921. The

Buffalo Bill Museum, whose roof is visible in the photograph to the right, is located near the grave of William Cody and remains a heavily visited site to this





day. Within the museum are collections of world tour souvenirs, paintings, Indian relic and photographs. One of the rare artifacts housed in the museum is one of the first phonographs (a recording device invented by Thomas Edison in 1877) ever made. The



device holds the voice of the chief of the Sioux Nation, Iron Tail, speaking in his native language to Buffalo Bill (Democrat and Chronicle). Chief Iron Tail was once part of the Buffalo Bill Wild West cast and is the subject of the photograph on the left which was taken on the grounds of the show. Johnny was not only able to be an active member of a historical event, he was

able to preserve his experience.

On Christmas of 1929 Johnny Baker made his last visit to Rochester, New York. On this holiday Johnny carried on William Cody's rite of placing wreaths at the graves of Cody's three children buried in Mount Hope Cemetery. He then paid visit to an old friend, Martha D. Jeffrey, who was living at 32 Chestnut St. The Jeffrey family was very close with the Cody family throughout Johnny's life and is buried near Johnny's gravestone at Mount Hope Cemetery (Foster).

A little over a year after his last Rochester visit, on April 22<sup>nd</sup>, 1931, Johnny Baker passed away due to cancer (interment record). Johnny was cremated and his ashes were placed in a bronze urn. During a brisk January morning service officiated by Reverend Charles C.W. Carver of Christ Episcopal Church, the urn with Johnny's ashes was





placed under a his gravestone in Mount Hope Cemetery. Among the close friends present was Martha Jeffreys. Johnny's wife, Olive, placed red roses over his urn before it was enclosed by his gravestone. As a loyal widow, Olive kept up Johnny's museum until her own death in 1956. In 1934 Olive was proud to announce to the newspaper that the museum received over 600,000 visitors in one year (Democrat and Chronicle). After her death, Olive was buried next to her husband with her name engraved into his gravestone.

After the ashes of Johnny were interred into Mount Hope Cemetery, the former press agent and long-standing admirer of Buffalo Bill, A.C. Irving, sought to transfer the three biological children (gravestones pictured on right) and Johnny to near the gravesite of Cody. William Cody, his wife, and two of their daughters were buried at Lookout



Mountain, and A.C. Irving felt that William would have wanted the family to be reunited. Though A.C. Irving fought passionately for this movement, it was to no avail. The state law and cemetery ordinances of the time required the consent of the two surviving grandsons to remove the bodies from the cemetery (Democrat and Chronicle). Although



the reasoning of William Cody's grandsons is unclear, their consent was never obtained and no bodies or ashes were brought to Colorado. Instead, a memorial rock was placed off a path near the gravesite of his father which reads "In Memory of 'Johnny' Baker Foster Son of Buffalo Bill."

As a young boy Johnny's future involvement in Buffalo Bill's Wild West was a mere fantasy. After expressing his eagerness to take part in the historical era, Johnny was granted the opportunity to join. In addition to living and working with his admired foster father, William Cody, Johnny experienced the joy of entertaining others. Having encountered the atmosphere, people, and travels of the performances, Johnny became dedicated to preserving the history of his encounter with the western frontier. Johnny Baker showed as the "blue eyed boy" in honoring the memory of Buffalo Bill and his era-defining show of America's adventurous and enduring spirit.

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