

*Native Performers in Wild West Shows: From Buffalo Bill to Euro Disney* by Linda Scarangella McNenly, University of Oklahoma Press, 254 pages

Depictions of Native American performers in Wild West shows in movies and on television convey mournful acceptance, irony, or resentment — particularly if the story is set in the late-19th- or early-20th centuries, the heyday of these entertainments. But does the average viewer consider what the performance experience might have been for the Indians involved? Audiences might decry that Native American performers were exploited — stereotyped — and that their culture was commercialized. In *Native Performers in Wild West Shows: From Buffalo Bill to Euro Disney* Linda Scarangella McNenly presents the Natives' perspective. She targets their outlook by diving into accounts of Natives' participation in those shows, as well as interviewing descendants of the performers and performers today. Besides reading accounts of the shows at the height of their popularity, she traveled to Euro Disney in Paris and to Buffalo Bill Days in Sheridan, Wyoming. Her conclusions upend misperceptions about the Natives' performance experiences. For the most part these performers were proud of what they did. They were free of the reservation and rationing. They gained status for their skills in dancing, singing, and riding. They could also provide for their families. Even more advantageously, the women sold beadwork when a family traveled together.

The career of the Mohawk entertainer Princess White Deer (Esther Deer) epitomizes success gleaned from participation in Wild West shows. Renowned for her dancing style and ability, she eventually performed in the Ziegfeld Follies, in European theaters, and at a command performance for Czar Nicholas II. Eddie Cantor, Al Jolson, and Will Rogers were friends. She owned a night club and a drugstore. Her house in Port Chester, New York, had gardens and was staffed with servants.

At the outset of Wild West shows — like those of Buffalo Bill, Pawnee Bill, and the Miller Brothers — Native performers' participation in these entertainments undermined the goals of the Office of Indian Affairs. Its policies dictated that Indians should pursue education and farming, effectively forcing assimilation and expunging Native culture. Joining a Wild West show, “wearing traditional clothing, dancing, and riding around like warriors only encouraged traditional ways.” Not only that, such a pursuit exposed the Native Americans to possible abandonment in Europe and “many vices such as alcohol and gambling.”

McNenly's chief concern is the dynamic between the shows' managers and the performers. The managers represented the dominant culture while the Native performers represented an underclass. The former upheld the stereotypes of stoicism and savagery in performances. How did the Native performers maintain their identity? How did they express that identity within the clichéd model? Despite the reigning show business image that all North American Indians dressed like Plains Indians, McNenly argues, various tribes were able to subversively assert their own identities through their dances, songs, and dress — much as gangstas might rap in code or girls in school uniforms might personalize their appearance.

*Native Performers in Wild West Shows* is a valuable piece of scholarship. McNenly explicates the methodologies that support her position. She should be congratulated for showcasing this aspect of Native American history and Native performances today.

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