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American Indian Culture and Research Journal

Title

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Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/2t38d01x>

Journal

American Indian Culture and Research Journal , 26(4)

ISSN

0161-6463

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Publication Date

2002-09-01

DOI

10.17953

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Cincinnati's Wild West: The 1896 Rosebud Sioux Encampment

SUSAN LABRY MEYN

During the summer of 1896, the Queen City of the West experienced the Wild West. That June, eighty-nine intrepid men, women, and children from the Sicangu Lakota Sioux band traveled more than a thousand miles by train from Valentine, Nebraska, a small town near their home on Rosebud Reservation in western South Dakota, to Cincinnati, Ohio, a mid-western city of German heritage located on the Ohio River. The Sicangu packed their fine Plains clothing and large tipis, boarded their horses onto the train, and departed for the unknown. They had just signed contracts with Cincinnati Zoological Society officials agreeing to camp on the Zoological Garden's grounds for three months and participate in a series of educational programs illustrating frontier and pioneer life for Cincinnati's citizens. The zoo's summer program imitated William F. "Buffalo Bill" Cody's Wild West shows that were capturing the imagination of awestruck crowds nationwide.¹

Many people believed that these spectacles, promising to be realistic reenactments of frontier life, had deleterious effects on the Indians in the show. At least one Indian and numerous whites, including federal officials, humanitarians, and educators, claimed that these shows only reinforced the stereotype of Plains Indians prevalent at that time. Others maintained that Wild West events encouraged Indians to retain their culture at a time when government administrators preached that civilizing Native Americans and encouraging them to farm was critical to their survival. Still others felt that show Indians were exposed to undesirable elements of white society. Worse yet, some show owners abruptly abandoned Indians in out-of-the-way places, fueling the prevailing attitude that these shows were bad for Indians. Buffalo Bill was probably the only authority who, at that time, maintained that these frontier reenactments benefited Indians by educating the participants about white society. John M. Burke, Buffalo Bill's general manager and press agent, publicly endorsed the zoo's 1896 program.²

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PHOTO 1. A group of Sicangu men standing around Fred Nevin (seated, left) and Will S. Heck (seated, right). Left to right the Sicangu are Goes to War, Little Bald Eagle, Valentine McKenzie, Young Iron Shell, and an unknown man. Courtesy of the late Jean Linde Wagner.

Non-Indians left many records of their opinions, but rarely do we find insights into Indians' views of these shows. The 1896 Rosebud Sioux encampment at the Cincinnati Zoo, however, left a legacy that may force those taking a negative view to reconsider their opinions. Six letters from the Sicangu after they returned to Rosebud have survived and demonstrate that these individuals, at least, did not view themselves as pawns or victims. In addition, more than one hundred newspaper articles, an unpublished manuscript, and documentation about the visit in the National Archives in Washington, D.C., and Kansas City support a positive view of the zoo encampment. The Sicangu's decision to leave the depressing situation on the reservation was a rare opportunity to exercise some control over their lives. Government legislation had confined Plains Indians to remote areas and subjected them to the whims of an often uncaring Indian agent. The buffalo were nearly extinct, and so the Indians were forced to live on government rations. Essentially, the Sicangu were destitute, unable to practice many of their traditional lifeways, and forbidden to perform their religious ceremonies. Departing for Cincinnati and wearing their Plains finery may have provided some relief to a dreadful existence.

The Sicangu's lengthy stay (shows began on 20 June and ended on 6 September) allowed some local citizens time to develop friendships with the Indians. From the letters and the newspapers we have evidence that some people went to the zoo repeatedly to photograph, draw, or visit the Sicangu. Sometimes Cincinnatians took their Indian friends on excursions throughout the city, creating an unusual sight on the streets and in stores.

One friendship endured beyond the summer of 1896. Enno Meyer, a young photographer, took pictures of his new friends and wrote to them after they returned home to Rosebud. A few Sicangu wrote back and sent him different kinds of beadwork. These objects are in the Cincinnati Museum of Natural History, now part of the Cincinnati Museum Center. Meyer's fond memories of his experiences that summer prompted him to save his glass negatives and photographs of the Sicangu as well as their letters to him. Even though the letters are short, they are invaluable because they provide a rare view of Sicangu life from their viewpoint.

Planning and implementing the Sicangu's stay was an ambitious undertaking for the Zoological Society, which had patterned its animal park after the large zoological gardens of Europe. Two phenomena clearly influenced the society to pursue the idea. The first factor probably was the ethnographic exhibits Carl Hagenbeck planned for the Hamburg Zoological Gardens. The society must have been aware of these because Sol (Salvator) A. Stephan, who first worked as an animal trainer for the Cincinnati Zoo and was appointed superintendent in 1886, had a business arrangement with Hagenbeck. Members of Stephan's staff acquired exotic animals from Hagenbeck, and Stephan later became his animal sales representative in America. Toward the end of the 1870s, Hagenbeck acknowledged that "the animal trade itself was in an exceedingly bad way, so that the anthropological side of my business became more and more important."³

The Queen City's sizeable German immigrant population had easy access to information about their mother country and maintained their link through numerous weekly and daily German language newspapers. These German immigrants influenced the zoo's early history; in fact, Andrew (Andreas) Erkenbrecher, a wealthy immigrant who was fond of animals, had founded the zoo in 1873. Dr. Alfred Brehm, a noted German zoologist, assisted with information about establishing a zoological garden in Cincinnati.⁴ The close affiliation between the city's citizens and their mother country probably meant that many were cognizant not only of Hagenbeck's zoological garden, but also of his presentations of exotic people from distant parts of the world.

The other factor pertained to another type of ethnographic exhibit taking America by storm. These action-packed shows, originated by William F. "Buffalo Bill" Cody, focused on the American frontier and captured the stereotype of the Wild West for a nation whose once untamed regions had become populated and civilized. On 4 July 1882 Cody planned an "Old Glory Blowout," complete with buffalo, steers, and cowboy competitions in roping, riding, and bronco breaking, to entertain his hometown folks in North Platte, Nebraska. At Cody's unique outdoor event the West came alive, and that Independence Day celebration launched the beginnings of the Wild West show and rodeo as we know it today. The drama's unexpected, outrageous success led Cody to present his first commercial Wild West Show in Omaha, Nebraska, the following year.⁵

Following this event, Cody began bringing the drama of western frontier culture to the rest of the United States, to the crowned heads of Europe, and

to the world. Soon his spectacular dramas included the sharpshooter Annie Oakley, “Little Sure Shot,” and Indians from the western reservations astride charging horses, participating in reenactments of historic frontier battles, and portraying themselves as fearsome warriors. The Indians rode with the Congress of Rough Riders, demonstrating the abilities of some of the finest horsemen in the world. So successful was Cody’s portrayal of the western frontier that in 1893, when his spectacle appeared on a huge lot adjacent to the Columbian World’s Fair in Chicago, he earned more than \$700,000.⁶ Cincinnati zoological officials, like most of the rest of the United States, were aware of the crowds that Buffalo Bill drew and his resulting financial gains. When, for two profitable months in 1895, the society hosted a band of Cree performers stranded just across the Ohio River in Bellevue, Kentucky, the zoo had a taste of increased admissions revenue — and all the Indians did was camp on the grounds near the buffalo and bears. It was a win-win situation: the Cree earned enough money from the zoo to pay their fare home to Havre, Montana. So successful was the venture that one enthusiastic newspaper printed the headline, “What the World’s Fair Was to Chicago the Zoo Is to Cincinnati!”⁷

To the zoo’s officials, living approximately three hundred miles south of Chicago, the idea of producing a more grandiose spectacle modeled after Buffalo Bill’s, complete with Lakota Sioux Indians, held grand potential. The entire United States was gripped with a nostalgia for the frontier. The Queen City’s frontier days had long passed and Indians had departed the region. A few prehistoric Indian mounds were the only reminder that Indians had once lived on this site by the Ohio River. Capitalizing on the nation’s interest in its early history seemed a logical way to increase the zoo’s profits. The expanded program, the society reasoned, would appeal to everyone because they would be able to see the West in their hometown. The fact that the version was mythical probably did not concern them, if they thought of it at all. In 1896 the newspaper headlines claimed the zoo’s drama was “The Only Genuine Wild West Show and Congress of Rough Riders of the World Here This Season.”⁸

The zoo’s program closely replicated Buffalo Bill’s staged dramas and, like Cody, the officials had to obtain the federal government’s approval and post a bond guaranteeing the safety of the show Indians. Cody’s show was profitable and, more impor-



PHOTO 2. *Owens a Dog.* The photograph, identified on the reverse side, was part of the Rookwood Pottery Collection. Courtesy of John W. Painter.

tant, he treated the Indians honestly and had acquired their respect.⁹ But some other entrepreneurs felt no responsibility to their show Indians and when the speculators did not realize the financial gains they anticipated, they deserted the Indians without notice—as was the case with the hapless Cree in 1895. In an effort to stop such incidents, the Indian Office began to require show owners to post a bond guaranteeing the security of the Indians and the completion of the contracts. The Cincinnati Zoological Society, for example, posted a \$10,000 bond, a huge sum at the time.¹⁰ Unfortunately, not all speculators went through the Indian Office, meaning they had no legal obligations. Yet some Indians, men and women alike, destitute and confined to reservations where there were no jobs and precious few options, signed up for adventure and unknown risks. Such was the case when twenty-six Cheyenne and Arapaho Indians, including women and children, left their reservation surreptitiously in the early morning to join Pawnee Bill, who competed with the zoo by bringing his Wild West show to Cincinnati that same summer.¹¹

On 11 April 1896, Will S. Heck, the zoo's manager, wrote his first letter requesting Indians from "Western Reservations" for the purpose of exhibitions.¹² On 16 April, he wrote to Hoke Smith, the secretary of the Interior, stating that he knew that William F. Cody had an arrangement by which he secured Indians for his show. Heck said that the Zoological Garden, "having been founded and maintained by philanthropists as an educational institution—as a field of object lessons for the study of Natural History" would be a natural place "to illustrate during the summer season, the various races of men." He offered John G. Carlisle, Charles P. Taft, and Jacob H. Bromwell as people who would attest to the high character of the society.¹³ Bromwell and Taft followed through and helped the society obtain permission to employ "a party of Indians for exhibition purposes."¹⁴

After receiving official permission "to engage the services of, not to exceed one hundred, Indians," Heck inquired about salaries and wrote the Indian agents at both Pine Ridge and Rosebud reservations, noting that the final decision rested with the Executive Committee.¹⁵ On 11 May, J. George Wright, the Indian agent at Rosebud, wrote Heck about the Indians' salaries. The average salary, Wright said, was "\$25.00 per month for each individual male Indian; \$10.00 and \$15.00 per month for each woman, and \$5.00 per month for each child. Chiefs or head men would probably demand \$30 or \$35 or possibly \$50 per month."¹⁶

The amount paid to each man was noted on his contract (fifty-nine men, hence fifty-nine contracts); women and children probably received a small salary, in the range agent Wright had recommended. The contracts in the National Archives list two men at forty dollars a month; the interpreter, Valentine McKenzie, at thirty dollars a month; and the rest at either twenty-five or fifteen dollars a month. Those salaries were probably comparable to the customary starting wage for a keeper at the zoo. In 1903, eight years later and the closest year for which there is documentation for the zoo's salaries, the beginning salary for a keeper was forty dollars a month.¹⁷

Wright told Heck that in addition the Indians would bring their "native costume, feathers, etc." and that he, Heck, "would have no trouble whatever

in controlling [*sic*] these Indians, provided strict discipline was maintained, and they not [*sic*] permitted to obtain liquor under any circumstances.”¹⁸

The society decided to “engage the services” of the Indians, and Heck forwarded the required \$10,000 bond to Smith, the acting commissioner of Indian Affairs. Heck told Smith that Fred E. Nevin, a representative of the Zoological Society, would start for Rosebud Reservation on 31 May.¹⁹

On 11 June, Charles E. McChesney, United States Indian Agent at Rosebud Reservation, wrote the commissioner of Indian Affairs, “I have the honor to transmit herewith fifty-nine Articles of Agreement between Fred E. Nevin, duly authorized representative of the Zoological Society of Cincinnati Ohio, and sundry Indians of this agency. These agreements cover 89 persons, who left this agency for Cincinnati, Ohio, today.”²⁰ This procedure—posting a bond, signing contracts, and sending a representative—was identical to the one Buffalo Bill followed when seeking show Indians, although he mostly hired the Oglala Lakota Sioux from Pine Ridge Reservation.

The contract was paternalistic. The Society promised to protect the Sicangu

from all immoral influences and surroundings, and to provide all needful medical attendance and medicine, and do all such other acts and things as may be requisite and proper for the health, comfort and welfare of the said party of the second part, and to return [them] to the said Agency within the time specified by the Interior Department from the date hereof.²¹

When Nevin signed the contracts, the society incurred a serious financial responsibility. Goetz justified his decision in the annual report by saying that the board of directors believed that the \$25,000 earned in 1895, the year the Cree camped at the zoo, “could be kept up and probably exceeded.”²² The board was banking on the public’s fascination with Wild West shows to offset any of its current deficits.

Prior to departing for Cincinnati the Sicangu posed in front of Charles P. Jordan’s trading post on Rosebud for an official photograph by John A. Anderson, who documented numerous other Rosebud Sioux activities. The men looked splendid in their Plains Indian finery, many astride their horses with women and children seated on the ground in front.²³ By Saturday, 20 June, Cincinnati residents knew that genuine, “legitimate Indians” were at the zoo, living in a “picturesque village” where aboriginal life could be seen firsthand and where they could meet Little Bald Eagle, Young Iron Shell, Spotted Owl, Goes to War, and other Sicangu.²⁴ Newspaper articles invited the public to walk around and witness the frontier as it once was; the board of directors felt that this event “gave a rare opportunity of showing the character and mode of life of the Indian tribes” to the city’s citizens.²⁵

Valentine McKenzie, a Sicangu who had been educated at Carlisle Indian School, served as interpreter when the contracts were signed and when Cincinnati dignitaries, reporters, and visitors toured the camp. In Anderson’s photograph, and in many of Meyer’s photographs, McKenzie can be easily

identified by his white cowboy hat, which is also noted in local newspaper articles. The Sicangu erected their tipis in the northeastern portion of the zoo's garden, a lovely wooded section quite different from most of the landscape in the Great Plains. One local reporter described the open-air camp, "The [Sicangu] village is diversified by hill and dale, and plain and valley. The tepees, whose sides are covered with rude pictures, showing the Indian's passion, if not his talent, for drawing, are distributed with a charming disregard for symmetry and distance over the grounds."²⁶

The landscape probably was not the only thing that surprised the Sicangu. Cincinnati's summers are not only hot but humid and it must have been uncomfortable dressing up in leather and woolen blankets. Two Sicangu women brought and wore their finest apparel — Navajo Chief Blankets, one second- and one third-phase blanket. Numerous photographs, newspaper articles, and an unpublished manuscript reveal that the Sicangu were good sports as they went about their job of rehearsing for and performing in two entertainments daily, one at 3:00 p.m. and the other at 8:30 p.m. Advertisements recommended that spectators attend the night performances because the electric and pyrotechnic lighting and red-fire effects intensified the stirring frontier and pioneer scenes.

Surprises moved in both directions that summer. The chefs, probably of German descent, hired by the zoo to prepare meals for the Sicangu quickly learned that the Indians had sophisticated palates. Soon after their arrival the Sicangu, accomplished butchers themselves, requested choice cuts of beef, like sirloins and porterhouses, rather than the cheaper cuts the chefs had initially prepared. "Then they wanted more vegetables and expressed a preference for cabbage. Later they wanted blackberries and watermelons while nothing in the bake-shop came amiss."²⁷ Obviously, the Sicangu enjoyed eating foods different from those available at Rosebud.

Even though Cincinnati's Wild West was a small endeavor compared to Buffalo Bill's grand spectacles, it closely mimicked the larger show and prompted Major John Burke, the general manager of Buffalo's Bill's show, to endorse the zoo's program. By late June, about two weeks after the Sicangu arrived, performances became more elaborate and even included the zoo's interpretation of Buffalo Bill's Congress of Rough Riders: Sicangu Lakota Sioux and Bedouin Arabs, who were on tour from the Near East, excitedly thundering around the zoo's outdoor arena in "a grand combination drill of horsemen from the Wild West and the Wild East."²⁸ Other features on the program were the introduction of the Lakota chiefs and warriors, Native dances of all types, and reenactments of well-known historical events and stereotypical Indian-white encounters: the Massacre of Wounded Knee, the Battle of Little Big Horn, an attack on a frontier stage coach, and the proverbial burning of a prisoner at the stake. A company of the First Regiment of Infantry from the Ohio National Guard played the roles of the United States soldiers. These "educational" dramas captured the imagination of the West for Cincinnatians.

As the summer progressed the zoo's leaders, fired with creativity, staged "Historical Cincinnati," a play that purported to portray the frontier history

of Cincinnati. This engaged the zoo's visitors in an anachronistic show that stereotyped the eastern frontier. The city's untamed days and encounters with Indians had ended more than one hundred years earlier. For the new play the Sicangu, wearing their Plains clothing, played the parts of Eastern Woodland Indians and participated in a sham battle staged before a gigantic scene depicting Fort Washington, the city's first permanent white settlement. The intense confrontation culminated in a thrilling attack on the fort, which was being bravely defended by frontiersmen. When they asked Indians to storm and attack Fort Washington the zoo's officials rewrote Cincinnati history. The fort had never been attacked in a serious manner, and certainly never by Plains Indians. Incidents in the lives of such renowned frontiersmen from the region as Daniel Boone, Simon Kenton, James Smith, and Colonel Crawford were also depicted. The playwrights at the zoo used these historical figures to enliven their performances and fatten their gate receipts.²⁹

In addition to the planned Wild West dramas the Sicangu sometimes participated in special activities at the zoo. For example, when the McKinley Club opened the Republican presidential campaign, the Indians paraded in a spectacular grand entry.³⁰ As a souvenir, McKinley supporters gave everyone a campaign button with his picture on it; the Sicangu liked these mementos. Thomas H. Kelley, an attorney who was an accomplished amateur photographer, took a photograph of the Sicangu Goes to War wearing a campaign button; he had pinned it beneath his United States Indian Police badge. At least five other Indians posed for Kelley that summer.³¹

Even though the Sicangu were busy participating in two programs each day and posing for numerous photographers and artists, they still found time to dress in their finest Plains clothing for a day of touring and shopping for themselves and their friends back on Rosebud. They visited the city's best stores and purchased discriminatingly, being particularly fond of colored shirts, silk Windsor ties, and red blankets.³² Newspaper reporters, curious about the Sicangu, frequently followed them on their various excursions, then told the public the next day about what they had seen. One article stated that Chief Iron Shell's daughter bought large cotton handkerchiefs, beads, a feather duster, some sticks of peppermint candy, a red and yellow work basket, and a majolica beer mug.³³

Zoo officials felt responsible for the Indians' welfare and, as far as is known, behaved professionally toward them. Two occasions in particular are documented. One night a major thunderstorm, accompanied by blasts of lightning and violent wind, caused zoo officials to hurry the Sicangu to "an old road and lay flat so as not to blow away." Another incident occurred when Little Left Hand Bull became ill. Black Bear, a traditional medicine man, conducted a healing ceremony, while zoo officials enlisted the services of a Dr. Thompson. Despite both men's efforts, the child died. Relatives dressed him in Lakota finery and performed a mourning ritual. Following the ceremony Black Bear carefully placed the child's body in a small casket, which was then put inside a white hearse provided by a local undertaker. The grief-stricken entourage included four additional carriages for relatives and friends and Black Bear, astride his horse, rode behind the procession. Mourners pro-

ceeded down the hill to Cincinnati's central train depot, where the child's parents and Iron Shell departed for the interment on Rosebud.³⁴

Enno Meyer, whose photographs catalyzed my current research about the Lakota visit, became friends with some of the Sicangu men close to his own age. Meyer's nephew, William Meyer, recalls a family story about Enno Meyer and Enno's father taking some Indians downtown to the family's photograph studio for some portrait shots. (This explains the plain backdrop seen in some of the images.) Following the session the group went upstairs for coffee and cake. William Meyer remembered that one of the elderly Sicangu was not acquainted with stairs and was initially frightened by them. Another family story pertains to the fact that one of the Indians was fluent in English. Most likely this was McKenzie.³⁵

When they returned to Valentine, Nebraska, the Sicangu not only brought home unique gifts, but also unusual stories and anecdotes for the welcoming delegation. The entire community celebrated their safe return with a huge powwow.³⁶

The wealth of information located in Cincinnati and in the National Archives demonstrates that the Cincinnati Zoo and Botanical Garden planned an unusual program that summer of 1896. Nonetheless, in spite of the Zoological Society's high expectations, its speculative endeavor failed to generate the anticipated monetary returns. It failed for several reasons: the zoo's program had competition from Pawnee Bill's Historic Wild West and Great Far East show; the streetcar facilities did not provide easy access to the Zoological Gardens; and the inclement weather of that summer was not conducive to outdoor programs. The society's president, John Goetz, Jr., admitted that the "expense of exhibiting these Indians . . . exceeded by several thousands of dollars our receipts." He blamed the nation's economy, but felt "the real and principal cause of our loss this year was the unprecedentedly rainy season." He said that it rained forty-six of the one hundred days of extra amusements and when it was not raining, the sky was "cloudy and threatening." To make his point he prepared a table comparing the attendance and receipts of 1895 with those in 1896 for twenty-four of the rainiest days of the



PHOTO 3. *Left Hand Bull and Family. The photograph, identified on the reverse side, was part of the Rookwood Pottery Collection. Courtesy of John W. Painter.*

season. "On these twenty-four rainy days, the total attendance was 25,490 and the receipts were \$5,670.65; the total attendance for the corresponding days of 1895 was 77,180 people . . . and the receipts were \$14,724.50." Even though the deficit was enormous, Goetz continued to believe that ethnological villages should be scheduled because they had "vast educational value" and were a "profitable investment."³⁷

How did the Sicangu and other Indians feel about participating in these so-called educational programs? Very little, in fact almost nothing, is written by show Indians about their experiences traveling with Wild West or medicine shows, but sometimes a few expressed their thoughts through an interpreter and a few of these comments can be found in the literature.³⁸

During the last decades of the nineteenth century government officials, ministers, reformers, and even a few Indians vehemently claimed that these events led Indians to forsake both family and responsibilities at home to tour all over the country. They maintained that the shows' owners exploited the Indians and that the spectacles only glorified the Indians' savage past and prevented them from becoming "proper" citizens. One Lakota Sioux, Chauncey Yellow Robe, expressed these sentiments:

Tribal habits and customs are apt to be degraded for show purposes, because the Indian Bureau under our government is constantly encouraging the Indian to degenerate by permitting hundreds of them to leave their homes for fraudulent savage demonstrations before the world. All these Wild West Shows are exhibiting the Indian worse than he ever was, and deprive him of his high manhood and individuality.³⁹

Without question there were times when Indian participants were maltreated, exploited, and sometimes abandoned, as happened with the Cree in Kentucky in 1895. But performing Indians understood the risks involved and some found meaningful careers that enabled them to travel the world.

In 1886, American Horse, a Lakota Sioux, spoke with Dr. Thomas A. Bland, the editor of *Council Fire*, when Bland visited Cody's summer camp. American Horse said:

We are very poor now, and that is why we come with Mr. Cody. He takes good care of us, and pays us well for our time. Another reason is we get to see how white folks live while we are with him, and learn things we did not know before.⁴⁰

Young Chief, a Pawnee, added:

We sold our land in Nebraska to the Government, and bought land in Indian Territory. We don't think we have as much land as we paid for, and we got no pay for our land. Besides the Government owes us big money, and we need it. We are very poor, because the Government

don't pay us, and we came with Mr. Cody to get money to send to our families. We don't spend our money; we send it home every moon.⁴¹

Luther Standing Bear, the interpreter who traveled with Buffalo Bill, wrote about his tour in England and the persistent dampness in London. The wet weather affected his leather clothes and moccasins, leaving everyone with persistently damp feet. Setting up tipis in the mud was hard work; packing and moving campsites and horses after an evening's performance was exhausting. "And so it went, day after day and week after week, as long as the season lasted."⁴² None of the Sicangu complained about Cincinnati's weather to either Meyer or the newspapers, though no doubt the rainy 1896 summer made many days miserable. But being able to remain at one campsite may have ameliorated some of the discomfort.

Black Elk, the Oglala Lakota holy man, traditional healer, and visionary, also traveled with Buffalo Bill and expressed a few of his thoughts in *Black Elk Speaks*:

We stayed there and made shows for many, many Wasichus [whites] all that winter. I liked the part of the show we made, but not the part the Wasichus made. Afterwhile I got used to being there, but I was like a man who had never had a vision.⁴³

Black Elk was concerned because

I could see that the Wasichus did not care for each other the way our people did before the nation's hoop was broken. They would take everything from each other if they could, and so there were some who had more of everything than they could use, while crowds of people had nothing at all and maybe were starving.⁴⁴

These words demonstrate that show Indians had their own ideas about what was beneficial for them and, while on tour, they closely observed white society.

The Sicangu Lakota who corresponded with Enno Meyer, the young Cincinnati photographer, and called him "*kola*" (friend), opened a tiny window to their thoughts and the activities on Rosebud through their letters. Six of these letters survive today: Arthur Belt, whose Indian name was Blokaciqa, wrote on 3 April 1900 and 2 April 1901; Good Voice Eagle, whose Indian name was Wanbli Ho Waste, wrote on 11 December 1896, 4 May 1898, and 8 August 1898; and Oliver T. Bear wrote on 29 May 1901.⁴⁵ Writing must have been arduous for each of the correspondents, just as it would be for us to compose a letter in a foreign language, but they were writing to a *kola*.

While in Cincinnati the Indians established relationships with other people who frequented the zoo during their stay, particularly Henry F. Farny and Joseph Henry Sharp, artists renowned for their paintings of Plains Indians. In a 1900 letter, Arthur Belt asked Meyer to: "Please let me know where is Mr. Farning [Farny] you know him. and I am remember Mr. Sharp. But I don't

know his number street. tell him I send him my best regards.” He also inquires about Will Heck, reminding Meyer that “he is Manger [manager] in Zoo Garden. I want write to him.”⁴⁶

Another major hurdle to the correspondence was the scarcity of stamps on the reservation. Meyer’s friends begged him to send them stamps so that they could write to him. Wanbli Ho Waste, Good Voice Eagle, wrote, “I wait for you letter after while when I get a money I send you indian word I want some stamps I shade [shake] hand with you.”⁴⁷ Blokaciqa, Arthur Belt, also needed financial assistance and offered to sell Meyer some Plains beadwork:

and now I got some bead work But I don’t Know How I sent you. if you can send me \$1. I sent you some nice bead work for you. and I wish you send me a good Indian women picture. I know that you lots of pictures. I like have one of picture (goes to war) wife some of women picture too. don’t forget will you.⁴⁸

These letters reveal that Meyer’s portrait-style photographs of the Sicangu as they posed on either the zoo’s grounds or in his father’s studio downtown were popular because each of the correspondents either thanks Meyer for the photographs he sent or requests additional ones. Obviously Oliver T. Bear saw the potential for marketing these pictures on Rosebud. In his 1901 letter he requested additional pictures.

Just received my picture and I am very glad that you have sent me my picture so again dear friend please sent me two of the picture which I stand with Black Hawk and his wife and also 3 of then Eagle Deer sister which she stand with Black Hawk wife and when you sent them please write to me and Let me know if you could sent all the different picture you got when we were at zoo garden. and I will pay you for it Because Indian are buying picture and it may be that if you sent them these picture they mine pay you for. Enclose my letter for this time Good bye friend bye bye

Your truly
Oliver T. Bear⁴⁹



PHOTO 4. *John Elk. The photograph which is identified on the reverse side also states that he was a medicine man. The image was part of the Rookwood Pottery Collection. Courtesy of John W. Painter.*

Requests also came for tail feathers from the eagles at the zoo and pieces of red, blue, green, and yellow ribbon. Meyer must have been able to send some feathers because Good Voice Eagle asked for them again, reminding Meyer that “feathers I ask you Eagle tail Indian very want Eagle tail me made over head [probably meaning he made a headdress] you see last time I want send me to much when you get this letter.”⁵⁰

Their letters also reveal how the Sicangu felt about participating in another “play” at the zoo. In December 1896, Good Voice Eagle asked “and I want question Samething zoological play it Now I want your tell me which month get indian tell me and How many pay all he get tell me I want when the indian coming [coming] I came [come] Say and I come There.” Then in May 1898 he repeated his question, “Today I am going to write to you again How is Zoological words you have no more shows at zoologi[cal] or run again we want to hear that things.” On 8 August 1898 the same inquiry appeared, “Will [indecipherable word, but probably refers to Heck] now you know him To tell me and run Show again to tell me we want that Zoological gardens word.”⁵¹ Unfortunately, the financial burden the society incurred was not relieved by the 1897 season, and the Zoological Garden went into receivership the following year.

The reason the Indians wanted to return pertained to their situation on Rosebud. Buying something as insignificant as a stamp proved a financial burden. Paper must have also been a problem because Good Voice Eagle’s 1896 letter is written on a “Daily Report” form for the Zoological Gardens, Cincinnati, Ohio. The potential for earning a salary was critical to the destitute, reservation-bound Sicangu. But for the society, the inclement weather during the summer of 1896 had created a financial disaster. Meals and travel expenses plus the wages paid to the Sicangu compounded the deficit.

When eighty-nine Sicangu consented to participate in an educational program in Cincinnati, they committed themselves to an event that brought the romantic western frontier east. Their three-month stay also left a legacy that created ties between Cincinnati and Rosebud because their visit generated not only official documentation, photographs, and an unpublished manuscript, but also fond memories of that summer that have survived generations. These records are not surprising because as one newspaper reported, “Many [Cincinnatians] have gone so often that they have formed the acquaintance of a great many of the Indians.”⁵² Five years later in a letter, Arthur Belt inquired about “my girl,” Dora Tucker, one of his newfound Cincinnati friends.⁵³

On the Sunday before their departure, the *Enquirer* noted that friends would be visiting the gardens “in order to shake hands with them and bid them good-by before they turn their faces toward the setting sun.” The reporter correctly stated that they would not forget their stay and that “in their Western lodges this winter, around the blazing fagot fire while the wind is careening over the prairie, they will sit about and tell their friends who remained at home what wonderful things they saw in the Queen City of the West.”⁵⁴

FIELDWORK AMONG THE SICANGU

The Sicangu's encampment also resulted in a treasure trove of additional documentation that has disclosed the complete story of this nearly forgotten event and permitted a study of Rosebud Lakota Sioux activities just when the people were being forced to abandon their traditional ways of life. The research involved in the rediscovery of the Rosebud Sioux's connection to Cincinnati included fieldwork opportunities with the Sicangu over a number of years.

The initial goal was to identify the Sicangu in Meyer's photographs by matching the names on the contracts to the images. Several Sicangu were identified in a photograph album Meyer kept, but many of Meyer's original identifications of the people he photographed became separated from the glass negatives. In 1988 Charles Hill, the director for the Lakota Archives and Historical Research Center at Sinte Gleska University, became involved with the project. As time went on, the primary goal evolved to include leaving a complete record of all photographs and archival material for the Sicangu.⁵⁵ This author photocopied the documentation in the National Archives and in Cincinnati. Cincinnatians R. Howard and Janet C. Melvin and Monte P. and Mary Louise Melvin, generously donated 8x10 black and white copy prints of all of Meyer's glass negatives, as well as copy prints of the images in Meyer's album.

In January 1989 this researcher traveled to Rosebud to present a lecture for Sinte Gleska University's Founders' Day. The goal was to discover some memories among the Sicangu and solicit their assistance in matching some of the names on the contracts to Meyer's photographs. After the presentation, a few people came up to say they had the same name, but could not remember anything specific about the Cincinnati event.

In an effort to elicit information from a broader audience, Hill and Marcella Cash, the present director of the archives at Sinte Gleska University, designed some creative approaches. The first attempt, in 1989 under Hill's guidance, was called the "Lakota Archives Photographic ID Project" and consisted of publishing one photograph a week in *The Lakota Times* and *The Todd County Tribune* and asking if anyone knew the person's name or remembered anything about the event. Photographs were published from 18 January to 21 June 1989. This endeavor accomplished an important objective by advertising the archives to Indians throughout the reservation and surrounding areas. Kernit Grimshaw, then vice-president and manager for Farmer's State Bank in Mission, provided funding.

In the summer of 1993 the archives launched another identification project. This time, with Cash's guidance, the archives worked with Marlene Whipple, the director of the Rosebud Sioux Tribe Elderly Nutrition Program. The idea was to present a slide lecture about the 1896 visit at different centers where older people gathered for conversation and a meal. Each day for five days, this researcher traveled around the reservation, ate lunch with the people, and gave an informal program. Because Lakota families frequently continue to live in the same geographic areas, Cash and Whipple selected program sites based on the family surnames on the contracts. Prior to the researcher's visit,

the directors had published and distributed a "Wanted" flyer listing the names from the contracts. Although little specific information emerged, Cash, Whipple, and the researcher learned that the Sicangu loved seeing photographs of their ancestors and learning about a forgotten part of their history. Similar feelings were expressed by non-Sicangu in letters to the Sinte Gleska archives.

More than a decade later, photographs continue to surface in unexpected places. The rare book section of the Public Library of Cincinnati and Hamilton County contains six undated and unidentified images of the Sicangu Sioux taken by renowned western artist Henry Farny. The photographs, unposed images of the people at the zoo, show them astride their horses or standing beside a tipi.⁵⁶



PHOTO 5. *Young Iron Shell beside a tipi on the zoo's grounds. Photograph by Henry Farny in the Langstroth Collection. Courtesy of the Public Library of Cincinnati and Hamilton County, Rare Book Division.*

In 1997 Jean Linde Wagner, the granddaughter of Cincinnati Zoo manager Will S. Heck, contacted the zoo about some pictures and a collection of Indian objects she owned. The researcher visited Wagner at her home in Chapel Hill that fall and discovered another group of previously unseen images of the Cree and the Sicangu. Wagner also provided copy prints of the images to the Sinte Gleska archives. In addition she recalled a tale her grandfather used to tell about an Indian who sometimes hid in a hollow tree on zoo grounds. When night fell, he walked to a local bar. Wagner said her grandfather had difficulty with the behavior of a few Indians. She did not recall how Heck resolved these issues. Most likely he relied on the chiefs to assist him. Later, Claes Jacobson, a researcher living in Sweden who studies Rosebud photographer John Anderson, assigned names to some of Wagner's photographs.

In 2002 previously unseen images from the Rookwood Pottery Collection surfaced at a Cincinnati auction house. The Rookwood designers used their photographic collection as inspiration for images of Indians on vases. Each of these new photographs was identified and the name matched to the census record. To date, however, none of the images from the Rookwood collection have matched the company's finished vases.

The Sicangu visit to Cincinnati, while brief, yielded information not only about Indian participation in Wild West events, but also about the deprivations and pleasures of life on a Lakota reservation at the turn of the last century. The negative aspects of participating in these anthropological exhibits were numerous, beginning with the fact that displaying themselves had to be demeaning for many of the Indians. Even though the zoo's officials carefully oversaw the needs of the Sicangu, most of the authorities and journalists probably still viewed the Sicangu in a paternalistic manner and retained a superior attitude towards them. The zoo's leaders hoped to resolve their deficits by placing the Indians on display, and the newspapers hoped to garner



PHOTO 6. *Little Bald Eagle. The photograph, identified on the reverse side, was part of the Rookwood Pottery Collection. Courtesy of John W. Painter.*

additional readership by printing articles about the fierce Indians camping at the zoo that summer. There is no denying the fact that these Wild West shows placed the Sicangu in an anthropological zoo where visitors could stare relentlessly at their different clothing and foreign lifeways. In addition there was a language barrier, and visitors could not learn the Indians' true feelings or really discover more about their culture. When Indians agreed to participate they had to trust the sponsor, who may or may not have been honest. History has demonstrated that Indians were often abandoned.

In today's politically correct world such displays of people can cause a knee-jerk reaction leading critics to state that across the board all exhibits of this type were deleterious to the participants. Before making this judgment, however, it is important to examine the specific incident to the fullest extent and review it in the light of that time. All human experiences contain positive as well as negative aspects. A good case can be made for the zoo's encampment having enriched Sicangu lives by providing the people with some money, new experiences, and insights into the world beyond the reservation. For some participating as actors, performing prompted pride in their skills because audiences cheered them loudly. Others probably viewed it as most people think about a job—as a necessary activity to earn money.

It must be remembered that participation in the zoo's event was voluntary; no one was forced to leave the reservation. The Wild West plays gave the

men the opportunity to display their horsemanship and wear their regalia before an admiring audience. At the same time, Indians observed white society while being observed by whites. Whether performing or resting in their "village," the Native Americans could see how whites behaved to one another and to their children, how much liquor they consumed, and then could discuss their insights with each other just as people of all cultures do. The Indians were given the chance to earn a small salary and visit a region of the United States previously unknown to them, at a time when only great chiefs generally traveled to the East and met whites.

Probably the most tangible remnant of the Sicangu encampment was the friendships that Cincinnatians and Indians formed. Some visitors to the zoo cared enough to take and save photographs of friends for more than a hundred years. Today, the Sicangu have the opportunity to see those photographs in their archives and learn about a forgotten event.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank all of the Sicangu and Cincinnatians who have assisted with this project over the years and Anita Buck for her editorial expertise.

NOTES

1. Charles E. McChesney to Commissioner of Indian Affairs, 11 June 1896, Letters Received 1896 #22637, Record Group 75, National Archives, Washington, D.C. Hereafter cited as RG, NA, DC. The contracts, #22637, are stored with #20489. *Republican* (Valentine, Nebraska), 19 June 1896, 1. John C. Ewers, "The Emergence of the Plains Indian as the Symbol of the North American Indian," in *Annual Report of the Board of Regents of the Smithsonian Institution, Showing the Operations, Expenditures, and Condition of the Institution for the Year Ended June 30, 1964*, Publication 4613 (Washington, DC: GPO, 1965), 531–545. The present name of the zoo is the Cincinnati Zoo and Botanical Garden.

2. *Enquirer*, 23 June 1895, 19; Herbert Welsh to Morgan, 4 June 1891, Letters Received 1891, #20212; Morgan to Herbert Welsh, 13 June 1891, Land-Vol. 109, RG 75, NA, DC. Commissioner Morgan sent Welsh the replies from various Indian agents to an Indian Office circular calling for information on the effects of wild westing. Charles E. McChesney at Cheyenne River Agency to Thomas Morgan, 15 November 1889, #33536, RG 75, NA, DC. Chauncey Yellow Robe, "The Indian and the Wild West Show," *Quarterly Journal of the Society of American Indians* 2 (July–September 1914): 39–40, and "The Menace of the Wild West Show," *Quarterly Journal of the Society of American Indians* 2 (1914): 224–225. *Enquirer*, 30 June 1896, 7. For an understanding of how Indians viewed Buffalo Bill see Vine Deloria, Jr., "The Indians," in *Buffalo Bill and the Wild West* (Brooklyn: Brooklyn Museum, 1981), 45–56. See also L. G. Moses, *Wild West Shows and the Images of American Indians, 1883–1933* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1996).

3. Hugh S. R. Elliott and A. G. Thacker, *Beasts and Men: Being Carl Hagenbeck's Experiences for Half a Century among Wild Animals* (in German) (London: Longmans, Green, 1909), 25–26. David Ehrlinger, *The Cincinnati Zoo and Botanical Garden from Past to Present* (Cincinnati: Cincinnati Zoo and Botanical Garden, 1993), 42–43.

4. Ehrlinger, *The Cincinnati Zoo*, 5.
5. Don Russell, *The Wild West or, a History of the Wild West Shows* (Fort Worth, TX: Amon Carter Museum of Western Art, 1970), 1–2.
6. Russell, *The Wild West*, 43.
7. *Enquirer*, 7 July 1895, 19.
8. *Enquirer*, 20 June 1896, 6; 28 June 1896, 19; 29 June 1896, 5.
9. Deloria, “The Indians,” 51–5. *The Council Fire* 9, 8 (Washington DC, August–September 1886): 118.
10. *Op. cit.*, end note #1. The bond agreement is #20489.
11. Woodson to Commissioner of Indian Affairs, 23 June 1896, Letters Received 1896 #23925; RG 75 NA, DC. Pawnee Bill’s group of show Indians did not sign contracts with the federal government because the Department of the Interior rejected Pawnee Bill’s request.
12. Will Heck to John Carlisle, 11 April 1896 and Will Heck to Daniel Lamont, 11 April 1896; Letters Received 1896, #15220 (both letters), RG 75, NA, DC.
13. Will Heck to Hoke Smith, 16 April 1896, Letters Received 1896, #15237, RG 75, NA, DC.
14. Jacob Bromwell to Daniel Browning, 22 April 1896, Letters Received 1896, #15327, RG 75, NA, Washington, DC; *Twenty-third Annual Report of the Zoological Society of Cincinnati for the Year 1896* (Cincinnati, OH: Webb Stationery and Printing, 1897), 10.
15. Will Heck to Thomas Smith, Acting Commissioner of Indian Affairs, 2 May 1896, Letters Received 1896, #16705, RG 75, NA, DC.
16. J. George Wright to Zoological Society, 11 May 1896, Outgoing Correspondence for Rosebud, 1878–1910, Book 25, RG 75, NA, Kansas City Branch.
17. Sol A. Stephan to W. Kesley Schoepf, 30 April 1903, Cincinnati Zoo and Botanical Garden archives.
18. J. George Wright to Zoological Society, 11 May 1896, Outgoing Correspondence for Rosebud, 1878–1910, Book 25, RG 75, NA, Kansas City Branch.
19. Will Heck to Thomas Smith, 30 May 1896, Letters Received 1896, #20489, RG 75, NA, DC.
20. Charles McChesney to Commissioner of Indian Affairs, 11 June 1896, Letters Received 1896, #22637. The letter and the contracts are stored with #20489, RG 75, NA, DC.
21. Charles McChesney to Commissioner of Indian Affairs, 11 June 1896, Letters Received 1896, #22637. The letter and the contracts are stored with #20489, RG 75, NA, DC.
22. *Twenty-third Annual Report*, 10.
23. Henry W. Hamilton and Jean Tyree Hamilton, *The Sioux of the Rosebud: A History in Pictures* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1980), plate 96. Even though the caption under the photograph reads 1897, this is incorrect because there was no Indian exhibit at the zoo that year. This photograph is also reproduced in Paul Dyck, *Brulé: The Sioux People of the Rosebud* (Flagstaff, AZ: Northland Press, 1971), plate 21. The captions are different in the two books because they are derived from different sources. Susan Labry Meyn, “Who’s Who: The 1896 Sicangu Sioux Visit to the Cincinnati Zoological Gardens,” *Museum Anthropology: Journal of the Council for Museum Anthropology* 16, 2 (1992): 26, note 3.

24. *Enquirer*, 20 June 1896, 6; 26 June 1896, 9; 3 July 1896, 8.
25. *Twenty-third Annual Report*, 10.
26. *Enquirer*, 26 July 1896, 19.
27. James Albert Green, unpublished manuscript, 3, Mss G797u Box 2, Cincinnati Museum Center, Cincinnati Historical Society, Cincinnati, Ohio.
28. *Enquirer*, 28 June 1896, 19; 30 June 1896, 7.
29. *Enquirer*, 12 August 1896, 10; 16 August 1896, 19; 23 August 1896, 19.
30. *Enquirer*, 20 August 1896, 10.
31. Green's unpublished manuscript contains six photographs taken by Kelley.
32. Green, unpublished manuscript, 3.
33. *Enquirer*, 20 August 1896, 6.
34. *Enquirer*, 23 August 1896, 1 and 5. A lead article details the widespread destruction left by the storm. Personal communication, Francis Paul Two Charger and Marie Kills Plenty to Meyn, 22 June 1993. The couple identified one of Meyer's photographs as Francis Paul's great-grandfather, Paul Two Charger, and said that he was married to Cheyenne Woman. Her name matches the census record. The couple then related a story about a storm and their remembrance coincides with a newspaper article describing a night of heavy rain and wind. Marie Kills Plenty also recognized some of the beadwork designs as being a family pattern. For a description and sketches of the ceremonies surrounding the child's illness and death see *Enquirer*, 1 August 1896, 8 and 3 August 1896, 8. The name of the father is incorrect because there is no contract for Big Brave, but there is one for Left Hand Bull whose recently discovered photograph shows him with a young son.
35. Personal communication, William Meyer to Meyn, 29 March 1990. At the time, 1896, the family's studio was located at 1309 Vine Street in downtown Cincinnati.
36. *Valentine Democrat* (Nebraska), 10 September 1896, 8.
37. *Twenty-third Annual Report of the Zoological Society of Cincinnati, for the Year 1896*, 10–13, 15.
38. Moses, *Wild West Shows*, is a comprehensive study of the shows and the Indian performers.
39. Yellow Robe, "The Indian and the Wild West Show," 39 and "The Menace of the Wild West Show," 224–225.
40. *Council Fire* 9, 8 (August–September, 1886): 118. Bland cofounded the National Indian Defense Association in Washington, DC, and lobbied to prevent the passage of the Dawes Severalty Act. See Robert W. Mardock, "Bland, Thomas Augustus 1830–?" in Wilcomb E. Washburn, ed., vol. 4, *Handbook of North American Indians: History of Indian-White Relations* (Washington, DC: GPO and Smithsonian Institution, 1988), 622–623.
41. *Council Fire* 9, 8 (1886): 118.
42. Luther Standing Bear, *My People the Sioux* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1928), 262, 248–267.
43. John G. Neihardt, *Black Elk Speaks, Being the Life Story of a Holy Man of the Oglala Sioux*. (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1979), 217.
44. Neihardt, *Black Elk Speaks*, 217.
45. The six letters to Meyer are in the Cincinnati Museum of Natural History, Cincinnati Museum Center and have the numbers TT4899, TT4901, TT4902, TT4904, TT4905, TT4906.

46. Arthur Belt to Enno Meyer, 3 April 1900, TT4899.
47. Good Voice Eagle to Enno Meyer, 8 August 1898, TT4904.
48. Arthur Belt to Enno Meyer, 2 April 1901, TT4905.
49. Oliver T. Bear to Enno Meyer, 29 May 1901, TT4906.
50. Good Voice Eagle to Enno Meyer, 8 August 1898, TT4904.
51. Good Voice Eagle to Enno Meyer, 11 December 1896, TT4901; 4 May 1898, TT4902; 8 August 1898, TT4904.
52. *Enquirer*, 2 September 1896, 9.
53. Arthur Belt to Enno Meyer, 2 April 1901, TT4905.
54. *Enquirer*, 6 September 1896, 19.
55. Meyn, "Who's Who," 21–26 and Susan Labry Meyn, "Mutual Infatuation: Rosebud Sioux and Cincinnatians," *Queen City Heritage: Journal of the Cincinnati Historical Society* 52, 1–2 (Spring–Summer 1994): 30–48.
56. Theodore A. Langstroth Collection Lithographs, #616, rare book section of the Public Library of Cincinnati and Hamilton County. Langstroth was an obsessive collector who, according to library notes, colored Fanny's prints. The photographs may be identified on the reverse side, but they are glued to a piece of poster board. John Fleischmann, "The Labyrinthine World of the Scrapbook King," *Smithsonian* 22, 11 (1992): 79–87.