Fact versus Fiction in the Kansas Boyhood of Buffalo Bill

by John S. Gray

Despite the fallibility of the best of human memories, conscientious reminiscences have contributed a valuable personal dimension to the history of the frontier. Other recollections, less conscientious and sometimes fraudulent, have contributed a great deal to frontier legendry. Some that feature an interweaving of simple truth and pure invention pose a tricky problem in sorting fact from fiction.

A case in point is the original autobiography that William Frederick Cody, known the world over as "Buffalo Bill," published in 1879, after he had forsaken the Plains for the stage. He undoubtedly wrote it himself, from his unaided memory, though it probably received such editing as needed to prepare it for the printer. Much of the book reflects an excellent memory, though it tends to over dramatize, as might be expected of a work designed for publicity and the popular market. However, his account of his Kansas boyhood features such chronological confusion, absurd heroics, and sheer impossibilities as to defy anyone's credulity. As one glaring example, it crams nine years of adventures into the seven calendar years from 1854 to 1861.

Cody's press agents, relatives, and friends repeatedly rewrote and amplified the original autobiography to generate a whole library of "autobiographies." These derivative creations grew ever more inventive and sensational. As to his boyhood years, they all freely revised dates and sequences, but as they added rather than subtracted, they abated neither confusion nor implausibility. Sporadic debunkers fared no better, for they proved no more discriminating than the myth builders.

Not until 1960 did Don Russell publish the first serious historical biography, which analyzed Cody's professional career on the stage and the Wild West arena, and most significant for frontier history, firmly established that its subject had indeed earned laurels as an expert and valued army scout during the Indian wars that followed the Civil War. More recently, Nellie Snyder Yost has drawn on a wealth of newly found sources to paint a convincing portrait of Cody as a generous and public-spirited rancher during the years he made North Platte, Nebraska, his home.

These significant clarifications pertain only to Cody's adult years, for Russell found his boyhood essentially intractable and Yost did not address herself to this period. The present inquiry began casually, many years ago, as a trial at sorting fact from fiction in Cody's Kansas boyhood—an exercise in historical analysis. As new evidence gradually accumulated, it proved possible to identify the spurious and establish the genuine. This led to an obvious explanation of the curious mixture, and finally it became apparent that his real experiences in these formative years, previously obscured by intrusive nonsense, were shaping the character that Russell and Yost had perceived in the adult years.

Russell had made an indispensable contribution to

primarily on the childhood years she shared so closely with “Willie.” When she wrote from her own personal knowledge she hewed to the truth, heedless of the damage to her brother’s version, but not out of malice, for no brother and sister remained so devoted to one another as this pair. When Cody read her manuscript in 1911, he wrote to her: “Say that write up of yours was fine. You have a wonderful memory.”

The present analysis supplies an explanation of Cody’s resort to imaginary adventures and his use of it in a fashion that has long baffled efforts to sort it out. The Cody home was so near Fort Leavenworth, a hub of west-bound trains, that freighters assembled and dispersed their outfits practically in Bill’s backyard. A bright and curious boy must have found these frontiersmen utterly fascinating. By hanging around their camps, drinking in every word they told of their adventures on the trail, he received a full course in frontier history. He probably daydreamed, not of onerous farm-boy chores, but of sharing in their exploits.

These memories must have come flooding back when he came to write of those years, prompting him to recount these real events, perfectly recognizable by

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any student of those times. But he also succumbed to
the temptation to insert himself into them, even spicing
him with his own youthful daydreams. This yielded
a warp of historical verity and a woof of fantasy
not easy to unravel. The mere verification of an event
in such a fabric ceased to validate participation; but
claimed sharings in multiple real events that transpired concurrently at far-separated places still
remained a dead giveaway. This inexorable razor proved
useful in shaving off the impossible, leaving a residue
that proved vastly more to Cody's credit.

Bill's father, Isaac Cody, was born in Canada in
1811 but emigrated to Ohio in 1838. There, Bill's
mother, Mary Ann Laycock, became Isaac's third wife
in 1840. Shortly afterward, the family moved to Scott
County in eastern Iowa, where Julia was born on
March 28, 1843, and Bill on February 26, 1846 (not
1845 as he stated in his autobiography). As both the
Cody parents were educated and Isaac was industrious
and gainfully employed, they were eager to support
local schools and teachers for their children. Bill
remained there until his eighth year, undoubtly
benefiting from elementary schooling, as he admitted.

In April of 1854, Isaac trekked westward with his
family by wagon, aiming to settle in Kansas Territory
as soon as Congress passed the Kansas-Nebraska Act.
While awaiting this news, he parked the family in St.
Joseph, Missouri, at the home of his brother, Elijah
Cody, a prominent merchant of that town, while he
crossed the river to locate an attractive spot in Salt
Creek Valley three miles west of Fort Leavenworth.
There he built a temporary log cabin in what would
become Kickapoo Township, Leavenworth County,
Kansas Territory. It stood on the south side of the busy
emigrant and military road that crossed northwest to
Fort Kearny, Nebraska Territory, and points west. The
president signed the Kansas-Nebraska Act on May 30,
1854, and the minute the news reached St. Joseph, the
Cody family crossed to their new Kansas home.

In his autobiography, Bill wrote about this move to
Kansas, but his account is a hodgepodge of dates (he
says they moved in 1852) and sequences, as he was but
eight years old. Julia, however, was eleven, and her
account is quite detailed and remarkably accurate. For
this reason we shall follow her story, checking it thor-
oughly, collating it with Bill's jumbled version, and but-
tressing the results from independent sources.6

1854. Bill at Home (Julia 11, Bill 8)

Mrs. Mary A. Cody, as the widowed administratrix
of Isaac Cody's estate, submitted a claim for losses in
the Kansas border troubles, along with hundreds of
other victims. Her claim papers consist of a petition
signed by her attorneys, Delahay, Dugger and Gall-
lagher, and her own affidavit, dated June 18, 1859.
The latter opens with the statement that Isaac Cody
became a citizen of Kansas Territory in June of 1854;
that they were the first settlers in Kansas after the pas-
sage of the act; and that they had resided in Salt Creek
Valley ever since.7

Julia's first Kansas date, June 10, 1854 (p. 457),
did not, as she thought, apply to the signing of the
Kansas-Nebraska Act, but it did mark the first impor-
tant event at their new home. On that date the local
settlers gathered at the Kickapoo Indian trading post
of M. Pierce Rively, a Cody neighbor, to organize the
Salt Creek Squatters (or Claim) Association. Such
clubs were a standard frontier device for governing the
making of claims in unorganized and unsurveyed coun-
country by setting up a register of claims and appoint-
ing a board to adjudicate disputes and handle claim-
jumpers. This particular meeting appointed thirteen
men, including Isaac Cody, to a "vigilance" committee
for these purposes.8

Since nearly all of these first squatters were strong
proslavers, they also passed resolutions to afford no
protection to "abolitionists," their epithet for anyone
unwilling to spread slavery. They accepted Isaac Cody
as "sound on the goose" because he was known to them
as the brother of slaveholding Elijah Cody, but in fact
he was a free-stater, opposed to spreading slavery to
Kansas. He may have been uneasy on learning how
dedicated to opposite principles his neighbors were.

Julia (p. 458) then tells of a Fourth of July barbe-
que put on by her father, trader Rively, and the family
of Mr. Grover of the nearby Kickapoo Indian mission.
Her reference to the latter's family is accurate, for the
Rev. Joel Grover, head of the Southern Methodist Mis-
ion to the Kickapoos, had died the preceding April
24, leaving two sons, D. A. N. and Charles H. Grover,
who were as ardent proslavers as Rively.9 Julia and Bill
(p. 38) both thought the feast was for the Indians and
had a great time, not clearly remembering how many
Missourians also attended.

6. The analysis to follow gives innumerable statements from Bill's
Autobiography and Julia's "Memoir," but the need for condensation
precludes quotation marks. Instead, the text will identify the source
as from Bill or Julia, followed by the pagination enclosed in paren-
theses. Other sources will be cited in standard fashion.

Reps. 104, in H. Reps. 3:2, 1881–82 (Serial 1107).
8. Louise Barry, The Beginning of the West: Annals of the Kansas
Gateway to the American West, 1840–1854 (Topeka: Kansas State His-
torical Society, 1972), 1226.
9. Ibid., 1294.
This affair was actually an early political meeting to rally the faithful to the proslavery cause. A Liberty, Missouri, newspaper of June 22 announced the meeting as follows:

We are authorized to state that the citizens of Kansas Territory, will celebrate the approaching Anniversary of American Independence at Salt Creek Valley near the trading post of Mr. Kivaly (Rively). Ample preparations will be made, and a public dinner will be furnished. The citizens of Missouri, generally, are invited to be present. Charles Grover, Esq., has consented to deliver the address.

Another claim association to the north in Doniphan County, Kansas Territory, resolved on June 24 to send an official delegation to the "General Territorial Convention, to be held at Salt Creek, on the 4th day of July." This meeting must have disturbed Isaac Cody even more than the first.

The few proslavers in Kansas and their multitude of supporters in Missouri had been confident that they could dominate the politics of the new territory, but when they learned that antislavery forces in the East were sending in settlers, their indignation knew no bounds. So far as the Codys were concerned, their peaceful coexistence blew up violently on September 18 at the next meeting of the squatters' association. A Missouri newspaper of September 28 ran two items that outline the story:

The following resolutions were passed by a large meeting of the squatters at Salt Creek, K.T., a week or two since [September 18].

Resolved, 8. That we are wholly and entirely opposed to the doctrines and principles of the so-called "Massachusetts Emigrant Aid Society"; that any individual among us under the auspices of said society, seeking to settle will not be tolerated by us either as individuals or as an association.

Resolved, 9. That we are opposed to abolitionism in every shape, manner and form, and that as a body we will protect each member of this association in the possession of every species of property owned by him and recognized as such by the Constitution of the United States.

A Mr. Cody, a noisy abolitionist, living near Salt Creek in Kansas Territory, was severely stabbed, while in a dispute about a claim with Mr. Dunn, on Monday week last.—[September 18]. Cody is severely hurt, but not enough it is feared to cause his death. The settlers on Salt Creek regret that his wound is not more dangerous, and all sustain Mr. Dunn in the course he took. Abolitionists will yet find "Jordan a hard road to travel!"

Clearly the squatters' club had met again, not to adjudicate a claim but in a proslavery rally. Equally clearly, the dispute was whether "abolitionist" Cody could be "tolerated." The knifing made the answer clear. Bill (p. 41) identifies the culprit as an employee of his Uncle Elijah, but only derivative accounts supply his given name. Charles. This marks him as the notorious Charles Dunn, a local ruffian soon to become a captain of the "Kickapoo Rangers" who would soon terrorize Leavenworth County in general and the Cody family in particular.

Julia's account of this affair (pp. 458-60) starts with her father, an experienced surveyor, being called upon to locate claims for proslavery Missourians. Since father "would talk," they soon reported him as an "abolitionist." Then at this meeting, the few free-staters present urged Isaac to speak for them. He began in a conciliatory manner, but hecklers prodded him into declaring his principles, which point Charles Dunn drove a knife into his chest, puncturing his lung. Isaac was taken for treatment to Uncle Elijah's home in Weston, where he spent three weeks recovering. Bill relates a similar story (pp. 44-43), adding a fanciful version of his father's speech. But he does not even hint at his own presence at the meeting, in contrast to the heroic myths that sully derivative accounts. Hereafter, the Cody family met continual harassment from their proslavery neighbors. The first instance, cited by Julia (p. 460), was the burning of the stacked hay her father had cut to fill a contract at Fort Leavenworth.

Far from being intimidated, Isaac Cody turned openly active in the free-state cause, as trader Rively testified to a congressional committee investigating Kansas vote frauds on May 31, 1856. He stated that he had come to Kansas from Philadelphia in 1852; that Mr. Flannigan, a free-soil candidate for territorial delegate to Congress, arrived at Fort Leavenworth with Gov. Andrew Reeder (on October 7, 1854); that about ten days later (October 17?) Judge Flannigan came out to Salt Creek Valley and went to the house of Isaac Cody (just recovering from his wound?), announced his candidacy, and made a free-state speech at Cody's house.

This delegate election was held on November 29, but Isaac's name does not appear on the pollbooks.

Julia (p. 460) reveals the reason: a party of emigrants...
from the East had come out and asked Father to help them locate good claims. Among them were (James) Frazier, (A. J.) Whitney, and (H. B.) Jolly. After they helped the Codys move into their large seven-room log home, just completed, Father took them thirty miles west to the Falls of Grasshopper Creek, Jefferson County, Kansas Territory. These four men did indeed stake claims on Christmas Day, thereby founding Grasshopper Falls (present Valley Falls).19

1855. Bill at Home (Julia 12, Bill 9)

Since the delegate election had featured a mass influx of Missourians to cast illegal votes in Kansas, a census of legal voters was ordered to be taken in late January and early February of 1855. It names Isaac "Cooly" from Iowa as a legal voter in District 16, which included the south side of the military road out of Leavenworth.14 Another election was held on March 30 for members of the First Territorial Legislature. Despite the census, massive vote frauds brought another proslavery victory and a legislature soon dubbed "bogus" by free-staters. Isaac does not appear on these pollbooks, for that spring, as Julia relates (p. 462), her father had taken out more Ohioans to settle at Grasshopper Falls, where he was building a sawmill. A letter Isaac wrote from there that April mentions his sawmill, condemns the March 30 election frauds, and reveals that he had not seen his family for two weeks.15

Julia mentions (p. 462) the birth of a baby brother in May (specifically May 10) named Charles Whitney Cody, the middle name taken from one of the Falls settlers. This completed the Cody family, which then included Martha (by Isaac’s first wife), born June 14, 1835, in Ohio; Julia and Bill; Eliza Alice, born March 20, 1848; Laura Ella, born June 27, 1850; Mary Hannah, born October 12, 1853, all in Iowa; and baby Charles.

Since Father had taken the horses out to the Falls with him, Julia says (pp. 462–63) she and Bill had to use their own ponies to plow and plant ten acres of

15. This letter is quoted in Julia's "Memoirs," 443–44.
corn that spring. They also had to help with various home chores but found free moments to hunt rabbits with their dog, Turk. She adds (p. 464) that unhappy over the lack of schools, Mother and Father had their first log cabin, now empty, fitted up as a schoolroom and hired a teacher, Miss "Jennie Lyons." Both Julia and Bill attended it with some neighbor children and a pair of Kickapoo Indian boys, but proslavery children shunned it. After three months (into summer), while Father was at the Falls, proslavers closed the school, threatening to burn it down.

Bill dates this schooling in the winter of 1855–56 (p. 49), which is unacceptable, for at that time Julia would be attending a different school in Leavenworth. Bill notes, however, that he made good progress in his lessons, as Miss "Jennie Lyons" was a good teacher, who afterward married a Mr. Hook, the future first mayor of Cheyenne, Wyoming. In this Bill was largely correct, for H. M. Hook, the first mayor of Cheyenne, had lived in Leavenworth from November 14, 1854, to 1859 and there married Miss Eliza A. Lyon in 1856.16

Julia now tells another tale of harassment (p. 465). Father, having come home from the Falls sick (he never fully recovered from his chest wound), was confined to his bed when a ruffian came hunting for him. Mother blandly told him that her husband was away. Overhearing this, Father stationed Bill with a gun and Julia with an ax to guard his upstairs sickroom. Half-sister Martha calmly fixed a meal for the intruder, who then seized Father’s saddlebags and left. Bill tells a similar story, apparently dated 1856 (p. 51).

In July and August the “bogus” legislature chose Lecompton as the territorial capital and passed laws that imposed severe penalties for antislavery agitation. In convention at Big Springs on September 3, free-staters repudiated the legislature as illegal and launched a movement to organize a free-state government. Another convention at Topeka on September 19–20 called for an election of delegates to a free-state constitutional convention. At this election of October 9, Isaac Cody appears as a voter in the pollbook of his home district, the sixteenth.17

The delegates met at Topeka on October 29, and by November 11 they had framed a free-state, or Topeka, constitution, which the voters were asked to accept or reject on December 15. These moves provoked proslavers to violence that broke out as the Wa-karusa War and Siege of Lawrence by an army of "Kansas" militia, made up of Missourians, in November and December.

By this time Julia (p. 466) had been taken to Leavenworth to accept a job for room and board with the "Managers of the Big stores" (which may refer to Russell, Majors and Waddell, who had moved their headquarters from Missouri to Leavenworth the preceding April). This enabled Julia to attend a city school that winter of 1855–56. She also accounts for Bill over this period by saying that on one Saturday each month he led her pony into town to enable her to make visits home.

This absence from home may explain one of Julia’s rare errors (pp. 461–62). In the context of 1854, she says that Father had written east to draw more Ohioans to Kansas, and as they came out he located claims for them at the Falls. One of these latecomers was Dr. Northrup, who stayed all winter at the Cody home before proceeding to the Falls the next spring. That this all happened a year later is confirmed by Dr. Lorenzo Northrup’s depredation claim, which reveals that he had come to Kansas in the fall of 1855 and was practicing medicine at the Falls by the summer of 1856.18

Living in Leavenworth gave Julia (pp. 464–65) the opportunity to visit with her friend Mollie, the daughter of Mark W. Delahay, a lawyer of Leavenworth and a friend of her father. Julia remembered that Delahay had launched the first free-state newspaper (the Territorial Register) in that part of Kansas in the summer of 1855 (about May 20), but that ruffians closed it down (on December 15, while Julia was in Leavenworth). She adds that Delahay urged Father to run as free-state delegate to a Topeka convention (incorrect, but Father was later elected to the Topeka Legislature). Proslavers boycotted the election of December 15, thus leaving free-staters to accept their Topeka Constitution. Isaac Cody again voted, but this time at the Falls in District 9.19 A mob of ruffians rendered the voting futile in Leavenworth by abscinding with the ballot box and then closing down Delahay’s newspaper. Some of this mob had come over from Missouri, but others were Missourians returning from the Wa-karusa War and Siege of Lawrence. Their commander artfully disband them at Leavenworth on the eve of election day and urged them to form companies to terrorize free-staters. Prominent in this mob was Charles...

16. The 1859 Kansas territorial census lists H. M. Hook in Leavenworth City on July 11, and as having settled there November 14, 1854; he was an election judge in Leavenworth, December 15, 1855, when the ballot box was stolen, and a senator in the Topeka Legislature, March 1856; the 1860 federal census of Nebraska lists him as a stage station keeper just west of Fort Kearny, with wife Eliza A. and baby daughter, living next door to John Lyon. He later moved to Laporte, Colorado, and from there to Cheyenne, where he was the first mayor (fall 1867); his obituary in the Cheyenne Daily Leader, June 18, 1869, notes his marriage in 1856 to a sister of John Lyon.


Dunn, now operating a grocery, or grog shop, not far from the Cody home. 20

1856. Bill at Home (Julia 13, Bill 10)

Julia, who remained in Leavenworth for the winter, says Father spent that season in Grassopper Falls (p. 466). In confirmation, Isaac voted there on January 15, 1856, at which time he won election to the first Topeka Legislature as a representative from his home district. 16 This important fact had escaped Julia's memory.

Since proslavers had again interfered with this election at Leavenworth, a second polling day was appointed for January 17 at nearby Easton. Getting wind of this move, John W. Martin and Charles Dunn showed up with a mob of Kickapoo Rangers. A skirmish brought the death of a proslaver and the capture of a handful of free-staters under E. Reese Brown. Captain Martin, disgusted with his drunken men, succeeded in freeing all but Reese, who was soon hacked to pieces with hatchets. Nobody, however, tendered any claim of temperateness in behalf of Captain Dunn. 22

Proslavery Governor Wilson Shannon issued commissions on February 1 to the following officers of the Leavenworth Militia calling themselves the Kickapoo Rangers: Capt. John W. Martin, 1st Lt. W. H. Elliot, 2d Lt. D. A. N. Grover, and 3d Lt. M. Pierce Rively. Later, on September 1, when the guerrilla warfare was at its peak, commissions were also issued to officers of the Fourth Regiment, Northern Division, Kansas Militia. This was Col. J. J. Clarkson's regiment, also with the collective name of Kickapoo Rangers. Its companies included Captain Martin's Kickapoo Rangers, Capt. H. C. Dunn's Union Guards, Capt. A. B. Miller's Southern Rangers, and Capt. James Emery's Regulators. The ranks featured a sprinkling of Kansans. 23

Julia returned home from Leavenworth in March (p. 466) to help Bill with the home chores in the absence of Father, who was taking more emigrants (Dr. Northrup) out to the Falls. Among them was half-sister Martha, who staked a claim there herself. Julia of course did not remember that Isaac attended the entire first session of the Topeka Legislature in that city from March 4 to March 15. 24 She did recall, however, (p. 466) that fighting broke out that spring (the Kansas Militia sacked Lawrence on May 21, launching a reign of terror that persisted into the fall). Mrs. Cody stated in her claim affidavit that there was much excitement and stealing in the area and that "her husband was particularly obnoxious to the pro-slavery party, then dominant in the Territory, he having been a member of the Topeka Legislature." 25

When Father returned home from Topeka by way of the Falls, Julia says (p. 467) he had to travel with an armed party for protection from their neighbors, the Kickapoo Rangers. He then sent Julia and Bill back to the Falls alone on their ponies (children were usually safe) to fetch seven cows and calves he had been pasturing there. A day's hard ride took the pair to Dr. Northrup's claim, where they rested while the cows were being gathered. It took two days to drive the cattle home, but at the end of the first day, the pair put up at the cabin of the "Lellie" family (probably Benjamin F. Lillie, commissioned September 8, 1858, as supervisor of Jefferson Township, Jefferson County, on the road to Leavenworth). 26 Julia remembered this trip, for that evening she witnessed her first wedding, that of Daisy Lillie.

Before Father returned to the Falls, Julia says (p. 468) he hired a couple to work the farm, thus freeing Julia and Bill to handle the more suitable chores of tending the cows. In spare moments the pair rode to Leavenworth to do the family shopping and picked fruit and berries all summer and into the fall, but with a few sinister interruptions that sorely tried the family.

Julia says (p. 469) that when Mother learned that the Kickapoo Rangers were lying in wait for Father's return home, she sent Bill out on his pony, Prince, to warn Father to stay away. Though sick with fever, Bill sped eight miles west to Stranger Creek, where proslavers spotted him and chased him for nine miles to the "Hewette" cabin (the 1860 census of Grassopper Falls Township, Jefferson County, lists Harvey Hewitt and family). The sick boy arrived so exhausted and scared that he poked all over Prince, as realistic Julia put it. After a night's sleep, he rode on to deliver his message to Father, but Julia and Mother heard nothing for several weeks.

Bill tells the same story, without specific date, with no embellishments whatever, either sensational or re-

istic (pp. 45–46). He adds that Father took him to "Lawrence," where the "Lecompton" Legislature was organizing. He means Topeka in both cases, of course, but the sentence does date the event to July 4, 1856, indicating that Bill's ride started in early summer. On that July 4 the Topeka Legislature was convening at Topeka, when Col. E. V. Sumner, of the regular army, dispersed it on Governor Shannon's orders. Though no roll call could be taken, the faithful Isaac Cody was undoubtedly present. On this same Fourth of July, at Salt Creek Valley, Captain Martin's Kickapoo Rangers and Captain Dunn's Union Guards figured prominently in the day's proslavery parade. Isaac Cody must have taken Bill to Topeka in preference to sending the boy to run another gauntlet home. Bill's account makes one more feature clear; he returned home with two other men, carrying to his mother an exclamationary letter from his father. Obviously, Isaac returned to the Falls, where he had been warned to remain, but he had sent Bill home in protection of others going in the proper direction. This finds confirmation in Mrs. Cody's claim affidavit, which states that Isaac was sick in bed at Grasshopper Falls on August 1, 1856, when a horse was stolen. Thus, contrary to Julia's recollection, Bill returned home some time before his father.

Julia relates another incident of that summer (pp. 468–69), which she places before Bill's warning ride to Father but which must have occurred after Bill's return and before Father's return. In the night a mob of drunken ruffians came to seize Father, but Mother said he was coming home with Jim Lane's company. The children ran to a neighbor who was putting up government hay (a midsummer job) and brought back a large crew who drove off the ruffians; they found a keg of powder left behind, designed to blow up the Cody home. The reference to Lane's company confirms a midsummer date, for James H. Lane, who had been east for the preceding six months, led a host of free-state settlers across Iowa and entered Kansas about August 9, 1856. Bill's variant version is this time also dated 1856 (pp. 49–51).

It was probably late August when Isaac, still (or again) ill, managed to sneak home at night through a cordon of Rangers. Julia says (p. 472) he took sick with the quinsy, and since it was too risky to keep him in the house, Mother disguised him in woman's clothing so that Julia and Bill could bed him down in the cornfield. Dr. Hathaway, a neighbor, came to treat him at night for two weeks. On growing weaker, Father decided to seek refuge and treatment at Fort Leavenworth, and Julia and Bill helped him to steal his feeble way across cornfields in the dark of the night. But the fort would neither admit him nor provide protection. In confirmation, a new governor, John W. Geary, landing at the fort September 9, 1856, found the area terrorized by Rangers and the post crowded with refugees; but he also found official notices posted, ordering all refugees to leave the fort the next day. Governor Geary would soon disband all armed bodies in the territory, which would reduce the general freebooting that winter.

Julia continues (pp. 472–73) by saying that Father decided to leave for Cleveland, where he could recover his health at the home of another brother, Joseph A. Cody, Delahay having provided him with a letter to Abraham Lincoln, should he meet him in Chicago. After recovering at Uncle Joe's, Father gave lectures to recruit settlers, delivered the letter to Lincoln, and returned home after two months (or longer). Julia erred, however, in saying Father met Lincoln at the Republican National Convention, which was held on June 17 at Philadelphia. The meeting was probably at Chicago on December 10, 1856, when Lincoln addressed a banquet, as his sole visit to that city in the relevant six-month period.

1857. Bill at Home (Julia 14, Bill 11)

It was probably January 1857 before Isaac returned home, and Julia says (pp. 474–75) new settlers followed him to gather at their home to await good spring weather. In April scarlet fever and measles broke out in this settlers' camp, bringing four fatal cases. Having buried a little girl in a cold rain, Father came down with a severe chill. Despite the doctor's best efforts, the head of the Cody family survived only four days. Half-sister Martha came in from her claim at the Falls on the day he died, and Uncle Elijah came out from Weston, Missouri, to help bury his brother on Pilot Knob (but the July 1859 census of Leavenworth City notes that Elijah Cody had settled in Kansas on February 17, 1856).

Isaac Cody's death is usually given as March 10, 1857, although Julia says April, as does Bill's less detailed account (p. 57). Mrs. Cody's claim affidavit also gives April, and her lawyer's petition specifies April 21, which we presume is correct. Father had often warned Julia (p. 475) that proslavers might kill him, in which event she and Bill would have to help support the family. "We were prepared for the worst," she wrote, "and we went to work to do as we promised Father." These two children had suffered enough animosity from neighbors and former friends to demoralize any but the strong; having lost their father and breadwinner, they were suddenly left with a mother, resolute but ailing, and four younger siblings to care for. To their everlasting credit, they rose nobly to the challenge.

Julia remembers (pp. 475–76) that Martha returned to her claim at the Falls, leaving only her and Bill to keep things going that spring. Mother sold Father's heavy team and bought another pony to make a light team with Prince that Bill could work, while Julia took over all the housework. Mother also rented out the fenced portion of their farmland to another couple and had them fence in the remainder. (This imposed a gate between the road and the setback house, which reduced the number of paying guests that stopped in for meals or overnight visits.)

That summer, Julia continues (pp. 476–77), all the children but herself developed sore eyes (measles?) and were confined to darkened rooms. To help out, Bill resolved to look for work as soon as his eyes were well. His first job was hauling hay to Leavenworth for a neighbor at fifty cents a day. After several weeks he proudly brought his pay home to Mother. She then took him to Leavenworth to see Majors and Russell, who hired him to carry messages between the store and the fort telegraph office, three miles distant. This second job lasted two months (far into the summer).

Bill says not a word about these spring and summer doings; instead, he claims (p. 57) that in May, the month after his father's death, he left for Salt Lake City on a trip for his old employers (referring to Russell, Majors and Waddell, whom he had introduced erroneously in 1855), which met disaster and returned him home again in July (p. 63). The sole agreements with Julia are the references to Russell, Majors and Waddell and his presence at home in July. But in an independent source, Bill definitely confirms Julia. He wrote a preface to Alexander Majors' memoirs, in which he stated:

Family reverses after the killing (?) of my father in the Kansas War, caused me to start out, though a mere

boy, in 1855 [sic, necessarily 1857] to seek aid in the support of my mother and sisters, and it was to Mr. Alexander Majors that I applied for a situation. He looked me over carefully in his kind way, and after questioning me closely gave me the place of messenger boy, that was, one to ride with dispatches between the overland freighters—wagon trains going westward. . . . That was my first meeting with Alexander Majors. . . .

In the same book, Majors himself tells of this meeting, dating it vaguely "nearly forty years ago":

In Kansas a handsome, wiry little lad [Little Billy Cody] came to me accompanied by his good mother, and said that he had her permission to take a position under me as a messenger boy. I gave him the place, though it was one of peril, carrying dispatches between our wagon-trains upon the march across the plains. . . . When he first came to me he had to sign the pay-roll each month by making the sign of a cross, his mark. ⑧

We can extend Bill's messenger route to include the place near home where the trains made up and dispersed but reject Bill's hint and Majors' claim that he operated on the Plains, especially when Majors implies that Bill had been the village idiot by failing to scrawl his name after his Iowa schooling and the progress he had made in Miss Lyon's school.

Julia resumes (pp. 476–77) by saying that Bill found two months as local messenger boy too confining. He then met John Willis, a wagonmaster for the same firm, just returned from the Plains (implying late summer or fall), who suggested that Bill ask permission of their mutual employer to come out and help him herd the draft oxen. Permission obtained, Bill herded with Willis within eight miles of home, which he often visited. He continued to herd until late fall, when the oxen were sent across the river to winter in Missouri.

Julia receives a little support from a biographical sketch of John R. Willis, which reveals that he had indeed served Russell, Majors and Waddell as wagonmaster out of Leavenworth for seven years, starting in 1855 or 1856, and at some time or times during this span had hired Buffalo Bill. ⑧ Bill himself tells two mutually exclusive stories; one claims (p. 64) that in the summer of 1857 he left home again with a Russell,

34. Ibid., 243, 245.
Majors and Waddell ox train for Salt Lake which absented him for a year.

Bill's other story (p. 49) states that his first service with Russell, Majors and Waddell came in the spring of 1855, as a herder. At this date he was attending Miss Lyon's school, and we have his own word that he first met Majors in 1857 after his father's death. The date correction makes this story confirm Julia's. He says that Russell asked him to come to Leavenworth to take a job as herder at twenty-five dollars a month. He ran away from home (?) to take the job and was given a gray mule to ride. When he took his pay home to Mother two months later, she forgave him and let him continue herding for the rest of the summer. He does not name his herding boss, but he later (p. 55) names John Willis as an old acquaintance in the summer of 1856 (actually 1858, as will emerge). This, and more evidence to come, is convincing that Bill's true account of 1857 agrees with Julia's.

That fall Julia says (pp. 477–78) she went to Leavenworth to care for the children of her cousin, Lucinda Conyers (daughter of Elijah Cody), which enabled her once again to attend a city school until February 1858. She accounts for Bill's whereabouts over this period by saying that since there was no school for him to attend she faithfully passed on to him what she was learning (pp. 478–79).

1858. Bill's First Trip West (Julia 15, Bill 12)

Early in 1858 Julia (pp. 477–78) visited home to attend the wedding of half-sister Martha to "John" Crain. She says Bill disapproved of the groom and also implies that he was still at home. This wedding made the newspapers: "Crain, S. E., and Martha M. Cody, mar. Feb. 7, 1858, at residence of Mrs. Cody on Salt creek, by the Rev. B. C. Dennis." Mother was so unwell on this occasion that Julia decided not to return to school, a decision she discussed with Bill. She adds that both renewed their pledge to shoulder the responsibility of helping Mother. When spring opened, Mother rented their farm land to the "Buchers" (the family of George and Mary Butcher appears in the 1860 census adjacent to the Codys).

A schoolteacher from Illinois was roaming with the Codys while looking for a claim, and Mother organized a subscription school for him to teach (pp. 478–79). Julia was too busy to attend, but Bill and his younger sisters did and for several months he reciprocated with Julia by passing on to her all that he was learning. Bill (p. 53) also tells of this man-taught subscription school, in which he made "considerable progress," but his date of July 1856 is unacceptable, as no school was held at the peak of border troubles.

Both Julia (pp. 479–81) and Bill (pp. 53–57) tell the same story of the Goble incident that abruptly terminated Bill's term at school (Bill's date is still 1856). Bill had a sweetheart, Mary Hyatt (then eleven years old, by the 1860 census), but Stephen Goble (then seventeen by the census) was teasing the young couple. The dispute ended in a fight with Bill knifeing Steve in the leg. Bill fled over the hill where he had seen the train of his "old friend, John Willis." Willis gave him sanctuary and convinced Mother that he should take Bill on his trip until the storm blew over, pledging solemnly to take personal care of the boy. Bill specified this as his "first trip to the plains."

Julia says nothing of the trip, except that Willis was bound for Fort Laramie, but she adds (pp. 481–82)
that when Bill returned in December, he was so dirty and verminous that his clothes had to be burned. She served him a banquet and assured him the Goble trouble had been patched up, but that Martha had just died in November, heartbroken, they believed, because her husband had been exposed as a bigamist. John R. Willis again comes to Julia’s support. In a letter he wrote to Buffalo Bill in 1897, he recalled hunting buffalo with Bill riding at his heels on a gray mule and stated that Bill had diverted a buffalo stampede that threatened the train’s oxen.37 This implies that the train had gone as far as Fort Laramie, for at that time buffalo were found only beyond Fort Kearny.

Bill seems to tell two different versions of this first trip on the Plains. The first (pp. 56–57) is told as the continuation of the Goble affair (still misdated 1856, when he was at home). Even correcting the date does not make his suspiciously laconic story jibe; he merely says that Willis took him to Fort Kearny and back in forty days on an enjoyable, but uneventful, journey. But still fearing to come home because of the Goble fight, he herded oxen for Russell, Majors and Waddell for the rest of the fall. Finally venturing home, he found the Goble affair patched up, but he does not mention Martha’s death.

Bill’s second version (pp. 85–89), dated 1858, is a trip to Fort Laramie for army contractors Russell, Majors and Waddell. He left in mid-August as assistant wagonmaster (at age twelve!) under Buck Bomer. On reaching Fort Laramie, the train was ordered to haul supplies to “Fort Wallach” at Cheyenne Pass, returning to Fort Laramie November 1. He then quit his job (a heinous breach of discipline) to join a party that (Seth E.) Ward, the post sutler, sent out to trap up Laramie River. Two months of poor luck returned them to the fort in late December. Heading east with two pals, Bill met with some weird adventures before reaching home in February 1859.

This venture, as described, could have occurred only in Cody’s year of 1858, for Camp Walbach, at Cheyenne Pass, existed only from September 20, 1858, to April 19, 1859. Quartermaster mule trains, rather than contractor’s ox trains, supplied it from Fort Laramie. “Occasionally teamsters of the Russell, Majors & Waddell firm, heading to or from Utah, stopped overnight at the post. Even these rare visits ceased once Major [Thomas] Williams [Fourth Artillery, commanding] became convinced that the teamsters were hauling hard liquor to Walbach as well as freight to Utah.”38

Bill relates adventures in excess by several years of what the calendar can accommodate, and since there could have been but one trip for the firm in the fall of 1858, we conclude that Bill told the same story twice, first laconically and then embellished. The following are suggested as the acceptable features of this first trip on the Plains: as a refugee from the Goble fight, he left in August with Willis; en route to Fort Laramie he saw a buffalo hunt and stampede; the sidetrip to Camp Walbach is improbable, but possible; he neither quit nor made a trapping trip, but stayed in Willis’ care for the return trip; still worried by the Goble affair, he remained out to herd oxen with Willis but arrived home in December.

1857–58. Fictional Adventures in the Mormon War

Up to this point, a multitude of checks against independent records have proved the reliability of Julia’s memoirs in accounting for Bill’s doings and whereabouts from 1854 until his first trip west in the fall of 1858, a period they spent together at home in close association. Untangling Bill’s dates and sequences has exposed the same events in his autobiography. Taken together and supported by external checks, they make a simple and convincing story, one that is perfectly appropriate to Bill’s tender years and the troubled times in Kansas.

For the years 1857–58, however, Bill also tells a concurrent and utterly incompatible story of boyhood exploits in the Far West during the Mormon War. Julia, aware of these claims, was unable to reconcile them with her personal knowledge. She escaped the dilemma, not by rejection but by naively postponing the Mormon War for two years. Records of the Mormon War, however, prove Bill’s claims of participation to be untenable. Although they reveal that he related some real events quite faithfully, his own narrative betrays his absence by omitting things most likely to stick in a boy’s memory and inserting personal heroics typical of a boy’s fantasies.

In brief, Bill claims that as an employee of Russell’s firm: a) he left home in May 1857 to drive to Utah a herd of beef cattle, which Indians stampeded just beyond Fort Kearny, whence he returned home in July; b) then in the summer, Lew Simpson took him as an extra hand to haul army supplies to Utah by ox train,


which the Mormons destroyed that fall near Green River; c) after wintering with the troops near Fort Bridger, he left in the spring to reach home in mid-July 1858.

The two out-bound trips that Bill claims he accompanied in succession were in fact concurrent. The first two troop units left Fort Leavenworth on July 18 and 19 to reach Fort Kearny on August 7. The beef herd had left a week earlier to pass Fort Kearny on August 2 and to lose the herd to Indians at Plum Creek on August 2; the discharged herders returned to Leavenworth in the last half of August. Lew Simpson's ox train (tenth in a total of fourteen) started out with the first troop units and was entwined with them all the way to Fort Kearny; near Green River, Lot Smith's Mormon Militia captured and destroyed the train on October 6. Since the ox train was only a week behind the beef herd during the latter's aborted trip, Bill simply could not have started out with both. 39

Bill's account (pp. 58–63) of the Indian raid on the beef herd is quite detailed and accurate, except for an inserted fantasy. His account (pp. 74–77) of the Mormon destruction of the ox train is less detailed but features no fantasies. 40 There is no mystery as to the source of both stories: Bill undoubtedly heard them over campfires in his own backyard, perhaps even from participants. That he remembered them so accurately is no proof of his participation but does reveal the keenness of his memory.


40. An excellent account of the Mormon destruction of his ox train is given in Lewis Simpson's affidavit, taken at Green River County, Utah Territory, November 15, 1857, in the New York Tribune, January 18, 1858.

In order to insert his fantasies into the Indian raid, Bill had to falsify the story of the flight of the herders back to Fort Kearny. He claimed the crew waded all night down the Platte, rafting the wounded man, with the Indians hot on their trail. Tuckered by wading, Bill lagged behind and was all alone when he glanced up to spot the plumed head of a brave silhouetted against the moon. Instantly firing, his one sure shot dispatched his first Indian, thus saving the grateful crew. Now this was a feat indeed, for the un molested overland escape soon met a carriage bearing two company officials, and together they reached the fort by 9:00 p.m. Bill added, as gilding on the lily, that on reaching Leavenworth, "John Hutchinson, a reporter," interviewed him for a scoop that hailed him as the "youngest Indian-slayer on the plains." At that time a John Hutchinson was a lawyer in Lawrence, where Clinton

“Killing My First Indian,” a graphic depiction of an undoubtedly fictionalized event from William F. Cody's autobiography.
C. Hutchinson was a news editor, but no such article turns up in either Lawrence or Leavenworth papers. Such heroism and acclaim certainly accord with a boy's fantasies.

A bright, keen-memoried, eleven-year-old boy should have retained a myriad of indelible impressions of two real trips to Forts Kearny and Bridger. Yet, Bill's one-word description of the first is identical to that of his 1858 trip to Fort Kearny with John Willis: "uneventful." Of the months-long trek over the Continental Divide, he mentions (pp. 73-74) only a buffalo stampede beyond Fort Kearny, which John Willis also mentioned. The only explanation for such amnesia and borrowing from a later trip is that Bill made neither of the Mormon War journeys.

Bill's account of the grueling winter at Fort Bridger (p. 78) is meager, but he does note that the stranded teamsters were compelled, for survival, to enlist in the army (for nine months, in a four-company battalion of volunteers, commanded by Col. Barnard E. Bee, Tenth Infantry). Yet he is utterly mute on how his boyship survived when too young to enlist. Of course, rule bending and mascoting were possibilities, but could he have forgotten this? He then covers the spring of 1858 in one sentence, devoid of truth: "Early in the spring, as soon as we could travel, the civil employees of the government, with the teamsters and freighters, started for the Missouri river; the Johnson expedition having been abandoned." (p. 79). (Col. Albert S. Johnston Marched with his troops, civil officials, and Colonel Bee's battalion from Fort Bridger to parade peacefully through the Mormon capital on June 26; on July 19 Colonel Bee's battalion started for the Missouri, where most were mustered out at Fort Leavenworth in September.)

Bill then suddenly waxes loquacious, filling several pages (pp. 79-84) with fantasized adventures on the return trip that brought him home in mid-July.

If Bill had actually spent a year with the Utah Expedition, he would have met a host of prominent soldiers and civil officials, to say nothing of Chief Washakie's Shoshone tribesmen and a platoon of picturesque mountain men, including every boy's idol—famed, story-telling Jim Bridger, the expedition's chief guide and scout. Yet he can conjure up only one character, an unknown at that time. He claims (pp. 69-72) he had made a pal of Wild Bill Hickok, one of Simpson's teamsters, who protected him from bullies. On reaching home, he invited his pal to visit with his family. Hickok stayed several weeks and then became a frequent visitor.

James Butler Hickok's presence on the Utah Expedition is simply one of Bill's inventions, for he, too, was in Kansas throughout the relevant period. All claims to the contrary stem uniquely from Bill's autobiography. Hickok was twice seen in Kansas in the fall of 1857, both times serving as bodyguard to James H. Lane, then engaged in an energetic speaking campaign for the free-state cause. More conclusive are the letters Hickok wrote in August 1858 from his residence in Monticello, Johnson County, Kansas Territory, to his family in Illinois. In one of August 14, he wrote: "I made you both a claim on them lands [Delaware Indian lands]. I made them last fall [1857].” The same letter mentioned his own claim, also made in 1857. He was probably there over the winter, for he was elected constable of Monticello Township on March 22, 1858, for which Gov. James W. Denver issued him a commission on April 21. Another Hickok letter of August 23 told of his local presence on July 4. These letters frequently mention his duties as constable but are deafeningly silent on any prolonged trip to Utah.

Often cited as confirming Bill's Utah trip are the reminiscences of Robert M. Peck, once of the First Dragoons, who marched to Utah in the summer of 1858 (not 1857). He recalled that a comrade once chided him for not remembering Buffalo Bill as an extra hand with Simpson's train.

In view of the above evidence, and the preceding evidence that Bill was at home in 1857-58, there is no escape from the conclusion that his claimed participation in the Utah Expedition is fictional, a literary device to spice his autobiography. A further implication is that he did not deem his actual experiences to be very glamorous.

1859. Bill at Home until November
(Julia 16, Bill 13)

Returning to more realistic events, the year 1859 appears somewhat uncertain. Julia's account collapses during the summer, Bill attributes to 1859 events that

41. Parenthetical information on enlistment is from "Utah Expedition," 90, 108, 112 (Serial 956); that on return and discharge is from the New York Times, August 30, 1858, and the Missouri Republican, St. Louis, December 15, 1858.


45. Russell, Buffalo Bill, 36.
belong to 1860, and independent checks are sparse.

Julia begins the year (p. 482) with the confident statement that since there was no school this winter, she and Bill spent the cold season at home, cutting and hauling firewood, apparently for pay, and hunting together. In the spring, Mother engaged a contractor to build a new seventeen-room house right on the road to draw more travelers’ trade. In addition to minding the children and caring for occasional lodgers, Julia had to wait on the building crew; Bill was her loyal helper but balked at milking the cows.

At this point Julia (pp. 483–84) flounders and packs into just the summer of 1859 Bill’s fictional year in Utah. But she does say that he was home for a few days in the summer after the herding trip to see how the new house was coming and that he returned from the ox train trip just as they were about to move in. She says Bill offered to induce his teamster friends, including Hickok, to become regular boarders when the house was ready, but she never mentions Hickok again, nor even hints that she ever saw him. (The July 1859 territorial census lists Hickok at home in Johnson County, but the returns from Kickapoo Township unfortunately are missing.)

Since Bill was not in Utah, as Julia got trapped into saying, nor in Colorado, as Bill claimed, Julia’s references to his presence in the summer and fall suggest he was never away. This is also the implication of her failure to complain of a quadruple burden his absence would have placed on her. Mrs. Cody, in a letter of August 28, 1859, to friends in Iowa, wrote that “Willie is one of the smartest and best of boys.” This sounds as though he was helping out at home and even going to school.

That Bill and his younger sisters, but not poor Julia, attended school sometime between June 1859 and June 1860 is noted in the 1860 census, which also listed Francis Bivinny as a schoolteacher boarding with the family of Richard Hathaway, whose son, Eugene, was a neighbor friend of Bill. Bill also says (p. 93) he left with Harrington in November 1859, but his sequences are still reversed. At this critical juncture, Julia also dates an event a year late (p. 487); she tells of dining with Abraham Lincoln at the Delahay home in Leavenworth late in 1860, while Bill was away. The record, however, shows that Lincoln, on his sole visit to Kansas, gave an address at Leavenworth on December 5, 1859, and two days later he signed the Delahay autograph album. Thus, if the trapping trip was not fictional, it fits nicely into the winter of 1859–60.

1860–61. Bill to Colorado and Back to School (Julia 17, Bill 14)

Bill’s account (pp. 93–102) of his winter trapping trip on the Republican River with Dave Harrington is a dramatic one, for he broke his leg and was left alone for a month while Davy went to the settlements to fetch a rescue team. (The venture is reasonable, but not the bit about Rain-in-the-Face, whose Hunkpapa band roamed far to the north in Montana.) The trappers, however, made it home in March 1860, with Bill on crutches but boasting a fine catch of beaver. Julia copied the story so faithfully (pp. 484–86) as to lapse into Bill’s use of the first person.

Bill adds that it took several months at home before he regained the use of his leg and so did not leave again until the warm days of summer; Julia agrees that he remained home until after his leg was well. As to where he went, they disagree. Bill, having reversed the years of 1859 and 1860, says he left for present Wyoming; Julia, knowing that Bill was mistaken on his dates, presumes he went to ride the Pony Express. We accept the implied date of June for Bill’s departure, but must lay a foundation for the correct destination—Colorado.

This was a census year, and the census-taker was required to record data as of June 1, but whom he found at home to give the information depended on when he arrived. He listed the entire Cody family at Kickapoo Township on August 13, properly including Bill (aged fourteen, born in Iowa), although he had undoubtedly already left. He also listed the neighboring family of John Patterson, whose son, Arthur H. (aged fifteen, born in Pennsylvania) was a friend of Bill; as will soon emerge, young “Pat” accompanied Bill to Colorado. The family of Elijah Cody was recorded as living in Leavenworth, but that summer they left for Denver, where on September 10, 1860, wife Margaret opened a millinery shop; it is a speculative possibility that Bill and Pat were teamsters with the train that hauled these millinery goods to Denver. To complete the roll, Uncle Joseph A. Cody, lawyer, was also recorded as living in Grasshopper Falls with his older widowed sister, Sophia Billings; the next year Uncle Joe would be appointed upper Platte Indian agent, with headquarters near Fort Laramie.

Pat Patterson later settled in Fort Collins, Colorado, where he became the subject of two biographical sketches. The first, of 1878, states that “he came west

46. This letter is quoted in a note to Julia’s “Memoirs,” 488.

47. Ibid., 487 (for Delahay album entry); Daily Times, Leavenworth, December 5, 1859 (for Lincoln at Leavenworth).

in 1860, driving six yoke of oxen across the plains." The second, of 1883, after he had renewed his old friendship with the then famous Buffalo Bill, notes that "Mr. Patterson came to Colorado in company with W. F. Cody, better known as Buffalo Bill, in the year 1860 and landed in Denver." Going as teamsters was almost inevitable, as boys without means had to work their passage west.

Bill himself confirms all this in a letter he wrote from North Platte, Nebraska, to Patterson at Fort Collins. The letter was published without date in March 1882, within a week of its receipt:

My Dear Pat:

It has been a long time since I heard from you. Why don't you write me out a few lines now and then? You know a letter sent to North Platte will find me. We were good friends as boys; mule whacked together for $20 per month; played _____ making our fortunes in the early days of Colorado mining, but have at last lived most of the old timers, and, with our own hands, have at least got a pretty good start in the world. Now, I propose a reunion in the near future, to spend a few days swopping lies. Shall I come to your camp or you come to mine? I will be home by the 5th of May; take a run down to my tepee about that time and let me touch your flesh. Do you reckon there could be any fish caught up in your country next summer? I ain't much on the fish catch, but I could do the drinking.

Bill

Now knowing that Bill's 1860 destination was Colorado and that he probably left in June, we pick up his skimpy account of his misdated Colorado trip (p. 90). Having caught the gold fever, he joined a party bound for Auraria but continued on to Black Hawk, where he prospected for two months without success before turning back (to Denver—Auraria). Unsatisfactory as this is, it helps to deduce some key time features. The trip by ox train would consume a month and a half, dating their arrival no earlier than mid-July. Two months prospecting in Black Hawk, a mining camp a little west of Denver and expensive living for all but the lucky few, undoubtedly left them broke by mid-September for the return. Their first priority was to get home again with money in their jeans to help their struggling families. The surest and easiest way was to hire out again as teamsters, which would get them home in November.

Before this time, however, Bill's account has turned so fictional that we postpone its consideration and examine the Patterson evidence. The earlier quoted sketch of 1883, apparently skipping the year 1861, says Patterson "had charge of one of Jones and Cartwright's trains freighting from the Missouri River to Denver in 1862." This date has to be 1861, for two reasons: first, the firm of John S. Jones and Joseph L. Cartwright started freighting from Leavenworth to Denver in 1859 and was still operating in the spring of 1861 but then dissolved that summer; and second, the 1883 sketch has Patterson engaged elsewhere and verifiably in 1862. If Patterson freighted for the firm, it was in the spring of 1861, indicating that he had returned home from Colorado in the fall of 1860, undoubtedly with Bill, as calculated above.

Julia now supplies confirmation (pp. 487–88). She says quite definitely that Bill did come home that fall and that Mother coaxed him to go to school again, for they had just built a new school and hired an excellent teacher, "Mr. Valentin Divinn." Still overburdened, she again had to forgo school, but all the other children attended, and Bill was still a student in the spring of 1861, though becoming restless.

Confirming Julia, a biographical sketch of Valentine Devinn reveals that "in 1860 he removed [from Ohio] to Kansas, and taught school near Leavenworth. Among his pupils was... the Hon. William Cody, or Buffalo Bill." He then married in Kansas in 1861 and moved to Colorado the next year. He could not have taught Bill before the fall of 1860, for he does not appear in the summer census, which fits Julia's recollection.

In 1904 Devinn published a sentimental romance of an 1860 crossing of the Plains, in which the heroine is saved from a stampeding buffalo by "Bill Cody... an old friend and pupil of the writer... in a country schoolhouse near Leavenworth. At this time he was making his second trip across the plains as an oxteamster." In an introduction to this novel, Cody himself wrote: "There was an immense immigration to the goldfields of Colorado in the spring of 1860 and sub-

49. J. A. Cody's bond of office, June 26, 1861, is in Letters Received, Upper Platte Agency, 1857–62, Record Group 79, Records of the Bureau of Indian Affairs, National Archives and Records Service, Washington, D.C. (M254, Roll 890). He arrived at his agency at Deer Creek on August 21; moved it down to Fort Laramie in October; reported from St. Joseph, Missouri, November 20, 1861. On apparent trumped-up charges (from Bills friend, George W. Chismar), he went out in July 1862 to turn over his agency to John L ore, a notorious grafter; Uncle Joe ultimately (August 4, 1865) cleared himself.

50. Fort Collins Courier, July 27, 1878, and February 8, 1885.

51. Ibid., March 2, 1882.

52. Conservative, Leavenworth, August 7, 1861, in Rocky Mountain News, Denver, August 21, 1861.

sequent years... which was experienced by myself and by the author of this book... whom I claim as my last and most efficient instructor in the days of my boyhood.**

Thus even Bill confirms the 1860 date for his Colorado trip and his return to school under Valentine Devinn, which started in the fall of 1860 and lasted until the summer of 1861, after the Civil War had started. Both Bill (pp. 125–27) and Julia (pp. 488–89) agree that Bill spent the rest of that summer and fall jayhawking in Kansas and Missouri, which is all that is needed for our next plunge into fiction.

At this date the present attempt to sort fact from fiction terminates, not because Cody's autobiography is free from errors and inventions for succeeding years, but because independent sources sufficient to establish what is true have not yet come to hand. After 1868, when he became an army scout, the record has already been clarified by Don Russell.

**1860–61. Fictional Pony Express Riding**

Bill claims that he rode Pony Express, which operated only from April 3, 1860, to November 1861, for two intervals: first, for two months in the fall of 1859 out of Julesburg, Colorado, and second, from the summer of 1860 through the spring of 1861 along the Sweetwater River in present Wyoming. Since he places the first in the autumn part of his Colorado trip, which was actually in 1860, it is evident that the second completely encompasses the first in time, but in far different places—an impossibility. Furthermore, the longer period is irreconcilable with his well-documented attendance at Devinn's school. Even his own accounts of pony riding feature the damaging weaknesses of his Mormon War exploits.

We now resume Bill's account (pp. 90–92) from where we earlier left him in Denver in mid-September, redated to 1860. He says he joined a party preparing to return East by rafting down the South Platte, but at Julesburg a raft wreck stripped them of everything. (Rafting meant spending money when he and Patterson desperately needed to earn it. Since the South Platte in late September can scarcely float a bar of soap, the trip would consume a month of miracles, say to mid-October.)

At Julesburg, Bill says he found the Pony Express had just started (it had been running for six months), and his old friend George Chrisman, the company agent, gave him a job riding the ponies on a forty-five-mile stretch of the line. He rode for two months (say to mid-December), but learning of his mother's illness, he returned home and shortly left again (in November to trap with Harrington). Only later (p. 104) does Bill recall that this pony riding had been on Bill Trotter's division. Unfortunately, this later stage-driver and eventual division agent (fort Kearny to Julesburg) was bullwhacking to Denver just like Bill.**

Julesburg marked the junction of three divisions of the stage line. A. A. White's division extended east to Fort Kearny, Joseph A. Slade's ran west to South Pass, and Alexander Benham's branched southwest to Denver, carrying stage but no Pony Express. In the 1860 census of Nebraska, A. A. White appears, apparently at Fremont Springs, but Slade and wife were temporarily absent (June 29) from his headquarters at Horsehoe Station, 37 miles west of Fort Laramie. At Julesburg (August 27) appears trader and station-keeper G. W. Chrisman, pony-rider George McGee, and Alexander Benham.**

Presumably, Bill imagined Julesburg to be his home station, from which his 45-mile run could only be east on White's division, or northwest on Slade's. Running east, the successive stations, with mileages from Julesburg, were Frontz (11), Diamond Spring (26), Gill's (38), Alkali Lake (50), Dansey's (65), and Fremont Springs (76), the first home station. Running west, they were Nine-Mile (9), Pole Creek No. 2 (21), Pole Creek No. 3 (33), and Mud Springs (59), the first home station.** Since Bill's 45 miles fits neither possibility, one may ask, did someone hire another youth to ride the other half, or a superman to ride a run-and-a-half? Also, how did fourteen-year-old Bill convince his old friend Chrisman that he had years enough to handle so grueling a job? And why was a mere station-

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57. The only official list of Pony Express stations and miles is in the Postmaster General's Record Book as of March 12, 1861, Records of the Post Office Department, Record Group 29, National Archives and Records Service. The route from Fort Joseph, Missouri, to Placerville, California, was 1,788 miles, with 138 stations; 3 were mail stops with no remounts. The scheduled time (summer) was 226 hours, making the average speed 8 miles per hour. The average station interval (pony run) was 13.5 miles, taking 1 hour, 40 minutes. The average rider run was about 75 miles, taking 8–10 hours and using 5–6 horses. Probably 3 riders were available for each rider run, making 72 riders. Service was weekly until July 1860 and semi-weekly thereafter; thus all of Cody's claimed riding fell in the period of semiweekly service. These orienting figures do not jibe with a great deal of folklore.
keeper usurping an authority vested only in a division agent?

The most striking thing about these two months of glamorous pony riding is Bill's amnesia. He does not recall a single event, nor even his route; he remembers no station but Julesburg and only two people, one in error.

Turning now to Bill's account of his long spell of pony riding (pp. 103–25), he left home in the summer of 1860 to bullwhack (for 577 miles—about forty days) to Slade's headquarters at Horseshoe Station. Slade gave him the pony run from Red Buttes west to Three Crossings of the Sweetwater, 76 miles. (Some minor errors have been omitted, but we add the intervening stations, going west: Willow Springs, 12 miles, Horse Creek, 26 miles, Sweetwater Bridge, 38 miles, Plante's, 50 miles, and Split Rock, 62 miles.)

The story of Bill's greatest ride promptly follows. One day, having finished his regular run to his home station at Three Crossings, he found the rider on the next run west, named Miller, had been killed in a row the night before. He had to ride on for 85 miles to Rocky Ridge, and without rest, return again for a total of 322 miles.

The arithmetic is correct, assuming no rest on his regular round trip, but the length of his extra run is not; Rocky Ridge was only 36 miles, but the next home station was probably Upper Sweetwater, the old Gilbert Station, 60 miles. This is minor, but what is major is that Charles H. Miller was killed in a row at the old Gilbert Station at South Pass on February 4, 1859, long before the Pony Express started.†

We skip an anachronistic Indian attack, because Bill solidifies the anachronism in his next story of a real event. He says that in mid-September 1860, Indians robbed a stagecoach between Split Rock and

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Three Crossings, killing the driver and two passengers and badly wounding "Lt." Flowers, assistant division agent. This halted the Pony Express, and nearly the stages, for six weeks.

The facts are that in December 1861, after Bill was long gone and the Pony Express was discontinued, William A. Reid became agent for a new Sweetwater division, taken from the western end of Slade's overly long division. On April 5, 1862, after Ben Holladay had bought up the stage line and renamed it the Overland Stage Company, Lemuel Flowers replaced Reid as division agent. Because of disastrous Indian raids, agent Flowers and ex-agent Reid started west with two coaches loaded with mail, armed employees, and one passenger. Indians ambushed them between Split Rock and Three Crossings, wounding all but one employee and the passenger. This event closed down the stage line for six weeks. That some of Bill's details are awry is understandable, but the true date is devastating—April 17, 1862.9

Bill now springs his own booby trap by injecting himself into these anachronistic events. He says he and others promptly made a campaign north into Indian country and recovered all the stage stock the Indians had stolen, as well as a hundred Indian ponies. This coup was masterminded by none other than his old pal, Wild Bill Hickok, who conveniently enters the stage.

Unfortunately, Hickok was probably on the Santa Fe Trail in 1860, but from March to August 1861 he was a stock-tender at Rock Creek Station in eastern Nebraska. He then went to Missouri to remain for several years.46 Because the stock was not recovered, Holladay submitted claims for his losses. The service resumed in June, but Indians closed it down again promptly. Holladay reacted by moving the line south to the Cherokee Trail in July 1862.61

Bill now resorts to fantasy. Having been brought down by Slade to Horseshoe Station as a relief pony rider, Bill bumped into a nest of outlaws but easily escaped by slugging one, shooting another dead, and outriding the others to warn Slade, who led out a posse that found the outlaw hangout deserted. During the eventless winter and spring of 1861, Bill tended stock and occasionally rode the ponies. Having heard of his mother's illness, he rode home on a stage pass, arriving June 1, 1861.

Every one of the recognizable and datable events of this long spell of pony riding occurred either before or after the existence of the Pony Express. Parts are concurrent with his claim of riding out of distant Julesburg; all are concurrent with his trip to Colorado and attendance at Devinn's school. As in his Mormon War fiction, Bill relates a secondhand account of a real incident, suffers spells of amnesia, but turns verbose when fantasizing and even pales with Wild Bill Hickok, who wasn't there either.

What did Julia, who was perfectly familiar with Bill's claims, think of his pony riding? Entirely omitting his Colorado trip, she telescopes his seven chapters into a few phrases (p. 487): in the year it started, Bill went out to ride Pony Express and made the longest ride of all, staying several months. This reflects distress, not confidence.

There is one pseudoconfirmation of Bill's pony riding. Edward E. Ayer, the eminent collector of America, recalled: "I crossed the Plains in 1860, and . . . [Bill Cody] was riding by our train about a month, and would give us news in a loud voice as he rushed by." Are we to believe that Ayer's train took a month to cover the forty-five or even seventy-six miles of Cody's run? Or that he recorded the names of the speeding riders? More likely, Ayer remembered what he had read in his Buffalo Bill books. The biography that quotes this recollection reveals that Ayer's train left Omaha near the end of May 1860 and followed the north bank of the Platte, whereas the Pony Express followed the south bank. Ayer's trip thus preceded both of Bill's alleged stints of pony riding.62

Not just every book about Cody but every one about the Pony Express recites Cody's Pony Express exploits, even Alexander Majors' memoirs. All, however, are easily recognized as mere quotations, paraphrases, or embellishments of Bill's autobiography. There is but one tiny ember beneath these billows of smoke: for two months in the summer of 1857, the eleven-year-old Cody rode as messenger boy for Russell, Majors and Waddell within a three-mile radius of Leavenworth.

There seems no point in resisting the inevitable; Bill's pony riding represents another spate of fiction. Some readers have been so impressed with the verifiable events that Cody related in his autobiography as to accept the whole. Others have been so offended by the implausibility of other parts as to reject the whole.

59. This paragraph is based on "Testimony as to the Claim of Ben Holladay," 46th Cong., 2d sess., 1879–80, S. Misc. Doc. 19, 2, 8 (Serial 1890), and the full accounts of the attack in Desert News, Salt Lake City, May 21, 1862, and Alta California, San Francisco, May 29, 1862.
60. Rosa, They Called Him Wild Bill, 42, 53ff.
The present analysis, however, supports neither reaction.

It is unfortunate that Cody so clouded the truth with fiction, for the reality is an impressive record of character and fortitude. He and his family suffered severe, life-threatening harassment in the violent Kansas troubles, starting before he was a teenager. After his father’s untimely death, the eleven-year-old boy and his older sister, Julia, had to assume heavy burdens in sustaining the family, then headed by a resolute but chronically ill mother. To the everlasting credit of both children, they succeeded remarkably well. Julia became the maid of all work in their expanded boardinghouse, as well as proxy mother to four young siblings. Bill, suddenly the man of the house, became her unfailing supporter. He handled all sorts of chores beyond his years and picked up a variety of paying jobs, even managing to acquire a creditable amount of schooling.

Such adversity tends to make or break a youngster. It did not break Willie Cody. He early developed a sense of responsibility and a determination to do well whatever fate demanded of him, all tempered by good nature, boundless generosity, and concern for others, traits he manifested for the rest of his life.

It is such a portrait of Buffalo Bill that is sharpened by clearing away the spurious legends that have demeaned him.