

Larger Than Life: Discovery and Restoration of an 1878 “Buffalo Bill” Billboard

ABSTRACT

In spring 2002, a construction crew discovered a tattered 26' x 10' paper billboard beneath a crumbling brick wall in Jamestown, NY. The billboard proved to be a rare artifact advertising an 1878 show by William Cody and his theatrical troupe, the “Buffalo Bill Combination, at the historic Allen Opera House. Following an award in October 2004 to the Reg Lenna Civic Center (billboard owners) of a federal “Save America’s Treasures” grant from the National Endowment of the Arts, Laura Schell, a paper conservator in private practice, conserved the entire billboard.

The extremely degraded, ephemeral, paper billboard consisted of multiple oversized text sections and illustration panels; its conservation was a complex, four-year project. Several, specific challenges emerged as the project proceeded, including overall fragmentation and significant losses within the text sections. Ultimately, an unusual collaboration between paper conservator and graphic artist was required to reconstruct the missing text.

Dating from early in Cody’s theatrical career, the billboard is one of the earliest, most rare, and largest Buffalo Bill items known. Research indicates that it may be the oldest existing twenty-four-sheet billboard in the country.

BACKGROUND

In spring 2002, the Reg Lenna Civic Center, a non-profit arts organization located in Jamestown, in western New York State, dismantled a crumbling brick façade from one of its buildings. The bricks were collapsing outward, and needed to be taken down in a controlled manner. Because the multi-story building was located in an area with high tourist traffic, the dismantling procedure was scheduled at night. Despite low light levels, one of the crew members discovered tattered paper remnants of faces and text attached to the wooden wall

underlying the bricks. Portions of the text were intact enough to decipher the words “Buffalo Bill”.

An entire 10' x 26' ephemera advertisement for a very early Buffalo Bill, aka. William Cody, theatrical touring show from 1878 was attached to the wooden wall. Cody and his theatrical troupe (the “Buffalo Bill Combination”) had performed a melodrama in Jamestown’s historic Allen Opera House soon after the billboard was posted. The enormous advertisement had been pasted up on a building that was then undergoing construction, subsequently bricked over, and eventually forgotten.

Concealment from the elements enabled the ephemera object to survive over a century, although it sustained many damages. Through the years, the billboard’s wood pulp-based paper substrate had taken on the acidity, color, and even discernible grain pattern of the wooden boards it was pasted to. The billboard had torn into hundreds of fragments in conjunction with movement of the underlying boards in response to climactic changes. The edges of adjacent fragments were often very rough, without obvious joins. The surface was covered with dirt, mortar grit, and soot from a previous fire in close proximity.

After the brick façade was taken down, the majority of the billboard simply fell off the wall in many pieces. The fragments varied in dimension from large sections approximately 48" high to scraps the size of a thumbnail. All fragments were extremely degraded by age and brittle to the point that even the most careful handling could cause breakage and/or shattering. A quickly organized corps of volunteers from the Jamestown community gathered every fragment possible before they scattered to the winds. The hundreds of salvaged fragments were sorted by color, gathered into seventeen large, shallow boxes, and stored for safekeeping in the vaults of the nearby Roger Tory Peterson Institute (RTPI). The billboard fragments remaining on the wall were temporarily protected from the elements with tarps until they could be faced with Japanese tissue/methylcellulose for support and steamed off (fig. 1). The faced fragments were numbered, boxed, and stored with the rest of the billboard at RTPI.

Presented at the Book and Paper Group session, AIC 36th Annual Meeting, April 21–24, 2008, Denver, Colorado.



Fig. 1.

Extensive research proved Jamestown's 1878 Buffalo Bill billboard to be the oldest twenty-four-sheet paper billboard of this size actually used for advertising still existing in the United States. According to Juti Winchester, curator of the Buffalo Bill Historical Center, the Jamestown billboard is historically important for several reasons:

- It is one of the earliest, most rare, and largest Buffalo Bill items known. The ten years Cody spent with the Buffalo Bill Combination were prior to his spectacular Wild West period, for which he is most famous. Cody's Combination years are largely under documented. This billboard helps to fill a gap concerning the nature of Cody's theatrical enterprises in the late 1870s.
- The object is genuine ephemera. It was actually used—not bought by collectors and immediately put into storage.
- The object is currently displayed at the site where Cody performed in 1878, and retains a high level of historic integrity. The program the billboard was printed for, and period when the billboard was posted, are documented facts.
- To date, a billboard matching this size, scope and age has not been found to exist anywhere else in the world. (Winchester 2007)

HISTORY OF BUFFALO BILL

William Frederick Cody, aka. Buffalo Bill, was a true larger-than-life celebrity of the nineteenth century (fig. 2). At the height of his career as an entertainer, Cody was lionized both in the United States and Europe. Born in 1846, Cody worked at a variety of dangerous jobs from a young age, including Pony Express rider, stagecoach driver, civilian and military scout, and dispatch bearer through hostile Indian territories. Cody soon acquired a reputation for being brave, dependable, and an exceptionally skilled marksman and horseman. Cody acquired the public name of Buffalo Bill after his prowess at killing buffaloes that

were used to feed the tracklayers of the Kansas Pacific Railroad in 1867–68 (Carter 2005).

In the early 1870s, Cody occasionally guided visiting high-ranking officials, and even royalty, on western big-game hunting expeditions (Carter 2005). Journalists from one of these outings invited him to circulate in high society in New York City, where the eastern population was curious about the untamed, still-wild West. The charismatic Cody in his buckskin garb was well received by New York society. Ned Buntline, the famous dime novelist and playwright with whom Cody had previously been acquainted, persuaded him to leave the west and perform on stage (as himself) (Russell 1973). After a year on the stage with Ned, Cody struck out on his own and starred in his own theatrical troupe simply titled the "Buffalo Bill Combination".

The Buffalo Bill Combination performed western melodramas from 1872–1882, and initiated Cody's long and illustrious career as a showman. Cody and his entourage of authentic western characters (the likes of "Texas Jack" Omohundro, Wild Bill Hickock, and John Nelson) played



Fig. 2.

themselves on stage and drew heavily from their own adventures. The Combination presented a realistic, occasionally fictitious, highly entertaining account of the true west that was currently in the process of disappearing through the spread of white civilization. Performances provided genuine action and adventure featuring throwing knives, shooting guns, live animals, and war dances to a receptive public. Cody used the Combination's success as a springboard, and went on to produce and star in his Wild West shows for the next thirty years.

METHOD OF EXECUTION

The billboard was executed in multiple colors via a block printing process from many separate blocks. It was printed with oil-based printing inks on separate sheets of relatively poor-quality, wood pulp-based paper that was not intended to last beyond the event it was advertising (i.e., ephemera). The Jamestown billboard was 10' x 26' in dimension, or what would be classified as a twenty-four-sheet billboard. Printing, distribution, and installation of advertising posters was formulaic:

...For the most part a one-sheet poster was of a size 28 x 42 inches...with this as the basic unit, there were half sheets, one-sheets, 2, 3, 6, 9, 12, 16, 20, 24, 28, and 32 sheets...[posters] would usually be sent to the show's management with four-sheet sections already pasted together on the shingle plan, that is the upper sheet overlapping the under sheet and thus shedding much rain after the manner of a shingled roof...it took one man about 20 to 30 minutes to unfold, paste-up, and post such a billboard. (Rennert 1976, 5)

ARRANGEMENT/COMPOSITION

The Jamestown billboard included: six oversized illustration panels, each measuring approximately 90" x 48"; opening and signature text panels of comparable size; and a large section of text over the whole (called the text streamer), measuring approximately 28" x 230". The unknown artisan(s) executed the printed advertisement in multiple colors with a high level of craftsmanship and creativity.

Central Double Panorama

The center of the billboard featured a red and black double title panorama (two adjacent, overlapping panels) prominently featuring Buffalo Bill waving a cowboy hat while on horseback (fig. 3). Large letters at the top and bottom of the panels read "May Cody, or Lost and Won". May Cody referred to Cody's sister, whose character often starred in Buffalo Bill dime novels; this particular melodrama involved the kidnap of May and her heroic rescue by Cody.

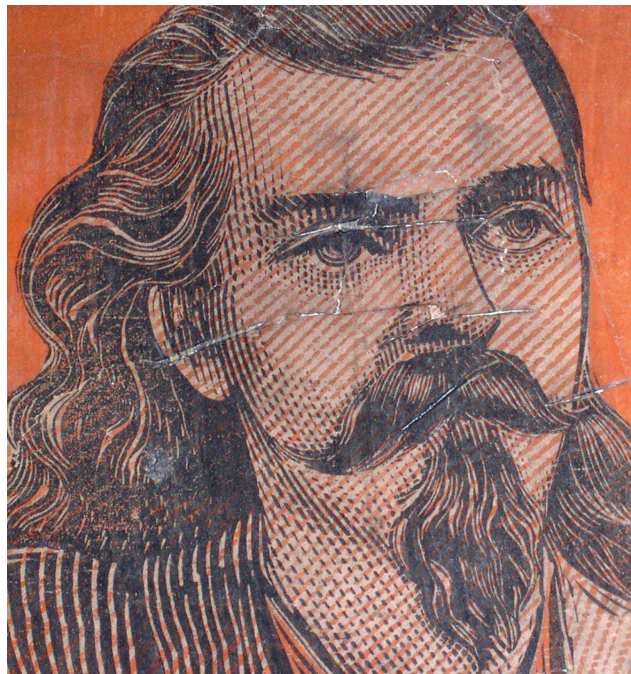


Fig. 3.

Massacre Panels

On each side of the central panorama were two red and black panels containing a total of four different scenes from the Mountain Meadows Massacre of 1857, with Cody prominently featured in the lower half of each panel. The Mountain Meadows Massacre was a bloody incident from the Mormons' early settlement in Utah, in which almost an entire wagon train of white emigrant settlers was killed, including 120 men, women and children; only seventeen children considered too young to tell the tale were spared. Several conflicting versions of the incident exist (in one version, extremist Mormons disguised as Indians killed the settlers; another version has Mormons and Indians working together to perform the slaughter). The incident was initially blamed on the Indians, but eventually John D. Lee, a Mormon elder, was convicted of complicity after a prolonged trial and executed by firing squad in 1877. Both Mormons and the Mountain Meadows Massacre were very much in the public eye in the late 1870s; Cody capitalized on this general interest by including his own version of events in a Buffalo Bill melodrama.

Portrait Panels

Flanking the Massacre panels were full-length portraits of Buffalo Bill (at left) and John Nelson (at right). Buffalo Bill is colorfully depicted as he performed, in buckskin garb, cowboy hat, and rifle.

John Nelson was a white man adopted by the Lakota tribe and given the name Cha-Sha-Sha-O-Pogeo (Red Willow

Holds the Pipe). Nelson started with the Combination as an interpreter for the Lakota Indians hired by Cody to perform onstage as Plains Indians (Russell 1973). However, Nelson soon became a Combination performer due to his excellent shooting skills and horsemanship.

Text Panels

Opening and signature panels—The opening text panel (extreme left side of the billboard) was deteriorated beyond recovery and was unable to be removed from the wall in Jamestown. The paper had completely disintegrated, and only a kind of “shadow” or staining on the wooden boards indicated presence of former text. The signature text panel (extreme right of the billboard) was deteriorated to the point that it was almost indecipherable. Its blue, partially water-soluble printing ink had run and faded over a paper substrate so degraded that it tended to powder when dry, and was prone to dissolving when wet. This panel provided information about the show and its participants. Digital manipulation of the signature panel text on a life-size facsimile will enable access to this information during exhibition.

Text streamer—The text streamer was a block print of large letters, probably printed from hand-cut paper stencils. The streamer spanned the top of the whole billboard, and originally read “BUFFALO BILL COMBINATION”.

Bannerette—Also included with the text sections was a narrow strip approximately 7" high (bannerette) that spanned the entire billboard bearing the word sequence “Buffalo Bill Combination. / Allen Opera House!” This text was repeated in an unbroken line, located directly beneath the graphic and text panels.

Jack Kass

Two of the panels, including the right-hand central panorama, and the top half of one of the Massacre panels, prominently featured a small mule or donkey. Although the mule’s rider has not been identified, research identified this little mule had the stage name Jack Kass. This particular animal (whose real name was Jerry) actually performed on stage with the rest of the actors (Sagala 2008). Jack Kass must have been important to the Buffalo Bill Combination, perhaps providing comic relief.

TREATMENT CHALLENGES

Conservation of the Jamestown billboard commenced in 2004, funded by a multi-year grant for conservation through National Endowment for the Art’s “Save America’s Treasures” program. The six illustration panels were completed between 2004 and 2007; the signature text panel, text streamer, and



Fig. 4.

bannerette were completed from 2007 to 2008. Several, specific challenges emerged as the project proceeded.

Fragmentation

Initially, the billboard was fragmented to the point that its composition was almost a mystery. The many boxes of fragments contained a jumble of shattered imagery encompassing bits of faces, horses’ legs, soldiers, and guns (fig. 4). No one living had seen the billboard in its entirety before treatment; nothing quite like it could be found despite extensive research. The billboard was a gigantic jigsaw puzzle without a box top, and without knowing how many pieces were missing. After reintegration of all fragments to their respective panels was accomplished, each panel was found to have extensive losses up to approximately 40%.

Red panels—Four of the illustration panels were primarily red with black, necessitating simultaneous reintegration of the oversized images from the boxes containing red fragments. These panels were slowly reconstructed from the ground up, with all red fragments eventually reintegrated with their proper panels. Only a small handful of red fragments (from the panels’ backgrounds) was unable to be placed.

Buffalo Bill portrait—The Buffalo Bill portrait panel came down from the wall almost entirely in fragments. It wasn’t clear this *was* actually a panel until fragments from one particular box were pieced together several years into the project. Upon this discovery, a video crew from Rochester, NY filmed the conservation process of Buffalo Bill’s portrait panel from start to finish. This HD film footage is in the pipeline for a documentary to be released to PBS (Machi and Machi).



Fig. 5.



Fig. 6.

Text Sections

Although the billboard's main visual interest lay in the illustration panels, the accompanying text sections were an essential part of the whole. The streamer, which was a block print created from hand-cut stencils (probably cut from paper), presented many challenges. This section of the billboard was exceptionally damaged, with many oversized letters missing from the sequence "BUFFALO BILL COMBINATION". Most of the word COMBINATION was recovered from the wall; those letters that survived required partial reconstruction (fig. 5). However, nothing of the sequence "BUFFALO BILL" survived except small fragments of the last two Ls (fig. 6).

Small letters/fragments at the upper portion of the "COMBINATION" streamer existed (enough to extrapolate the words "OR OF THE"). There *must* have been corresponding small text at the top of the missing "BUFFALO BILL" streamer, but since so much was lost the answer may never be revealed.

The challenge of conserving the text streamer involved properly reconstructing the significant amount of missing text in keeping with the rest of the billboard. This task was made difficult from the many irregularities of the oversized letters. The text did *not* line up perfectly in many places. Several fragments were removed from the wall with the seam between adjoining pieces intact, and misaligned text (as it was pasted up in 1878). Letters were rendered slightly differently from one location to the next within the same line of text. These imperfections were retained as part of the billboard's history and character.

To recreate the missing text, the billboard's font had to be clearly identified, an appropriate reconstruction of the

missing letters generated, and the proper placement of missing letters had to be determined in relation to existing font. The missing text spurred much ethical discussion with the project directors. Eventually, recreation was determined to be appropriate, provided the fabricated portion of the streamer was made as historically accurate as possible and clearly labeled as a reconstruction.

Reconstruction of the text streamer required collaboration with a specialist outside of the field of conservation. Toward this purpose, Nathan Arnone, a graphic artist and specialist in typefaces and antique fonts from Jamestown, NY, provided invaluable assistance in the billboard's restoration. After an exhaustive search through turn-of-the-century wood and metal type archives and printer's supply catalogs from this period, Arnone was able to identify the font of the billboard's streamer as a 'display type' in the class of slab serif fonts related to today's Egyptienne.

Contemporary digital versions of Egyptienne do not share exact proportions with the billboard. Specifically, the "slab" portions of the streamer's font are much larger than contemporary Egyptienne. The counters, or enclosed portions of letters like A, and O, are much shorter than compared with the contemporary version. The billboard's letters are also vertically lengthened. The font was probably condensed and stretched to fit the wall in Jamestown, and to impart maximum visual impact to the would-be audience.

CONSERVATION TREATMENT

The entire billboard commenced treatment as many separate fragments (both faced and unsupported), all of which required painstaking surface cleaning to reduce as possible the thick layer of mortar grit, soot, and dirt on front and reverse. Where applicable, the supportive Japanese tissue facing was moistened and carefully coaxed from the faced fragments with tweezers. Each fragment was washed on a suction table to deacidify the degraded paper structure and impart an alkaline reserve. Immediately after washing, the fragments were individually lined with lightweight Japanese paper using a 1:1 wheat starch paste and methyl cellulose mixture. Once the fragments were lined, they were still fragile but could be gently handled without further damage.

Individual panels were pieced together, though significant losses occurred in each. The reintegrated panels required much additional support due to their enormous size, fragile paper, and complicated joins. After inserting toned fills (Japanese paper toned with acrylic washes), the reintegrated fragments were given an overall lining for added strength of heavyweight Japanese paper and wheat starch paste. The panels were then mounted to 1/2" Tycore honeycomb panels with Lascaux 360 HV adhesive. The overall Japanese paper lining served as a barrier that prevented penetration of the Lascaux to the face side. As Lascaux 360 HV adhesive is reversible with

acetone, the text section may be separated from the Tycore in the future without reversing the water-soluble linings. This formulation of Lascaux is miscible with water in its liquid form, and was highly conducive toward getting the composites of pieced fragments completely flat again. To counteract dimensional warping from transferred water vapor, the panels were weighted with several changes of blotters for approximately forty-eight hours until the adhesive completely dried.

Conservation of Text Streamer (Combination Portion)

The word COMBINATION was reintegrated from its separate fragments, though most of the C and the last N were lost. Enough of the text still existed to reconstruct missing portions of letters after the fills were inserted. Watercolor pencil was used to recreate the letter outlines, and several layers of acrylic wash served to duplicate the streaky, weathered appearance of the text.

Collaborative Efforts

Once the COMBINATION streamer was completed, the accompanying, mostly missing BUFFALO BILL streamer was tackled as a collaborative effort between paper conservator and graphic artist. Arnone was given a full-size tracing of the COMBINATION streamer, and commenced his efforts at re-creating the billboard text based on Egyptienne bold font. Using some math and much artistry, he was able to proportionally manipulate the contemporary style of Egyptienne to the billboard's elongated, condensed version. Using the existing streamer text as a reference, the missing letters were recreated on frosted Mylar with technical pens. The Mylar letter templates were greatly relied on in the restoration process.

Reconstruction of the Buffalo Bill Streamer

Letters needed for the word BUFFALO BILL that existed in the COMBINATION streamer (such as the B, I, A, and O) were traced directly from the completed streamer. Exact copies of these letters were used in the reconstructed BUFFALO BILL streamer. A 28" x 115" section of Japanese paper (same dimension as the COMBINATION streamer) was toned with acrylic washes to duplicate the background color. Existing fragments of the two Ls that remained from the BUFFALO BILL sequence were inserted into the right end of the paper, providing a reference point from which to reconstruct the missing font. Arnone's transparent overlays were placed over the text fragments, and used to determine the lower edge of the entire line of font.

The spacing from the COMBINATION streamer was used to approximate the placement of font from the BUFFALO BILL streamer. After closely examining the existing text on the intact panel, spacing that was consistent could be calculated and applied.

CONCLUSION

The Jamestown billboard was created to attract the general public with its exciting, appealing images. It promised a thrilling stage performance from Buffalo Bill and his Combination. The miraculously discovered Jamestown billboard (and legions of other advertising billboards throughout Cody's career) "...played a major part in the shaping of our image, tradition, and romance of the American West" (Rennert 1976, 3).

The restored billboard has been installed at the scene of the original performance where Cody and his Combination performed in 1878 (fig. 7). Originally the Allen Opera House, the site has been renovated into an award-winning movie palace reminiscent of the 1920s. The billboard will remain in Jamestown on permanent exhibit.



Fig. 7.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

National Endowment for the Arts; Reg Lenna Civic Center; Roger Tory Peterson Institute; Buffalo Bill Historical Center; Machi and Machi Communications; Nathan Arnone; Elizabeth Seramur; Stephanie Porto; and Brian Schell.

REFERENCES

- Carter, Robert A. 2005. *Buffalo Bill Cody: The man behind the legend*. Edison, NJ: Castle Books.
- Machi and Machi Communications. Unreleased documentary. Rochester, NY.
- Rennert, Jack. 1976. *100 posters of Buffalo Bill's Wild West*. New York: Darien House.
- Russell, Jack. 1973. *The lives and legends of Buffalo Bill*. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press.

Sagala, Sandy. 2007. Personal communication. Erie Public Library. Erie, PA.

Winchester, Judi. 2007. Personal communication. Buffalo Bill Historical Center. Cody, WY.

LAURA SCHELL
Conservator in Private Practice
Lockport, New York
Schell.paperconserve@verizon.net