



Pawnee Bill, ca. 1880

Brother "Pawnee Bill" Frontiersman and Showman ©

by Dr. Ivan M. Tribe, KCT, KYCH, 33°

The American frontier produced a number of persons who achieved prominence, and some gained a legendary status. A surprising number of these individuals were Masons, despite the fact that Masonry tends to be associated with a more settled society. Masonic figures on the frontier range from men like explorers, Meriwether Lewis and William Clark, as well as Kit Carson and the leadership of the Montana Vigilantes to a number of noted Texas Rangers. One of the most famed, William F. Cody, gained wide recognition as "Buffalo Bill," a frontier scout, dime novel hero, and developer of the Wild West Show.

The subject of this sketch, Gordon William Lillie, gained only slightly less renown as "Pawnee Bill." While younger and having less frontier experience than Cody, Lillie, nonetheless, had his share of experience in the wild West. He was probably as good a showman, sometimes a rival, occasionally a partner, and certainly a better business man than Buffalo Bill.

Much of America's frontier experience had already happened when Gordon William Lillie was born near Bloomington, Illinois, on February 14, 1860. As the eldest of four children of a flour mill operator, young Gordon was much influenced by stories of the wild West, particularly those contained in dime novels about Buffalo Bill that began to appear in 1869. He persuaded his family to move to Sumner County, Kansas, in 1873 and then in mid-1875 finally coaxed them to let him leave home.

After visiting in the booming cow town of Wichita, he found a job at the Pawnee Indian Reservation helping to build a house for the agent. Over the next several years, young Gordon Lillie would spend a great deal of time among the Pawnees learning their language and way of life. These experiences would result in his gaining the nickname by which he would become known, "Pawnee Bill" and also in 1878 another sobriquet bestowed upon him by his Native American friends, "White Chief of the Pawnees."

During his' years among the Pawnees, Lillie worked in a variety of jobs, including interpreter and teacher in the agency school. He also became skilled in hunting and trapping and gained the general knowledge needed for survival on the plains and prairies. He left the Agency in August 1881 and worked as a farm and ranch hand in the general vicinity of Caldwell, Kansas.

Then in 1883, Buffalo Bill Cody, who had been working in a variety of stage plays, began organizing his fabled Wild West Show, and a man named Charlie Burgess, whose father had known Gordon Lillie at the Pawnee Agency, was looking for Gordon on Cody's behalf. A group of Pawnees were to work in the show, but the Indian Commissioner would approve only if someone would be responsible for them and look out for their well-being. He was told that "there is a young man out there who was in the service for a time who talks Indian like a native, wears long hair and is a great friend of the Pawnees."

Having seen Cody in person back in 1873 just before his family moved to Kansas, young Gordon Lillie accepted the offer and went to work in the show. He found some personal disappointment learning that his hero had human frailties including a periodic drinking problem and being financially irresponsible. Still, he also noted the man's positive qualities. (Cody had also been a member of Platte Valley Lodge since January 10, 1871.) Lillie became a key member of his troupe. As the show moved eastward attracting huge crowds, Gordon Lillie met the love of his life when the group reached Philadelphia. He met a girl named May Manning, who was a student at Smith College. The two soon began to correspond and following her graduation were married on August 31, 1886. Although uncertain as to how she would adjust to life on the plains, May somewhat surprisingly became an expert rider and rifle shot. In December 1887 friends back in Philadelphia presented her a medal inscribed "Champion Girl Shot of the West," and her fame was almost equal to that of Annie Oakley. When Pawnee Bill established his own show, May Lillie became one of the star attractions.

At about the same time that May received her medal, Pawnee Bill, who had been thinking about starting his own show, entered the fray. He launched Pawnee Bill's Wild West in the spring of 1888 and for the first few weeks drew large crowds with Bill and Mayas star attractions, along with Annie Oakley, who had a temporary rift from her normal employer, Buffalo Bill.

But after Cody returned from England and the weather turned bad, things went sour. In late October Bill gave up and the show folded.

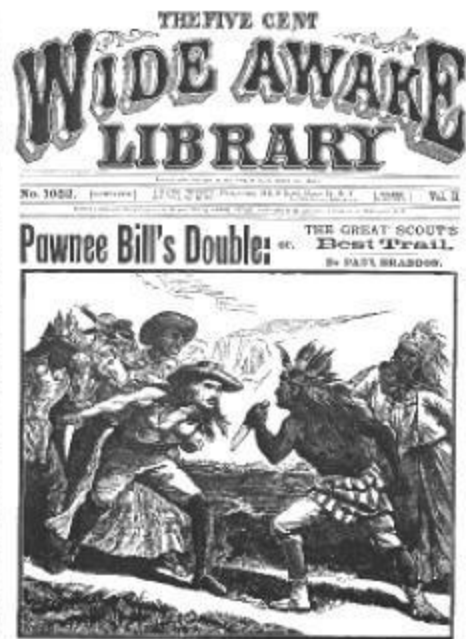
Gordon Lillie returned to Kansas in time to lead a party of "boomers (Le. settlers)" into a section of what was newly Oklahoma Territory. Then, he reorganized his show as Pawnee Bill's Historical Wild West, Indian Museum and Encampment. Benefiting from his earlier mishaps, this time his production proved successful, and he gave his former employer, Buffalo Bill, real competition.

Lillie's show popularity undoubtedly also was buoyed by his own appearance as a dime novel hero. In 1888 the first of fourteen of these lurid pieces of fiction came off the presses of Beadle & Adams, Frank Tousey, and Street & Smith, written by such masters of the art as Colonel Prentiss Ingraham (who had written many of the Buffalo Bill stories), Paul Braddon, and Edward W. Wheeler. The stories had little basis in fact, but kids continued to devour them with gusto. One offering in 1891 even bore the title Pawnee Bill's Shadow; or, May Lillie, the Girl Dead Shot.

Many years later (1917-1919), another series in which both Buffalo Bill and Pawnee appeared together resulted in twentyseven additional titles. Meanwhile, the Wild West Show continued to do well, and more lands in Oklahoma Territory opened for settlement, including what would become the town of Pawnee. Not only did Gordon and May Lillie establish their home then1 in the off-season, but Bill's parents and sisters also located there.

In 1894, he took his wild West show to Europe where the troupe performed for royalty, including King Leopold of Belgium and Queen Wilhemina of the Netherlands.

Back in Oklahoma, Gordon Lillie used his profits to become a stockholder in the Arkansas Valley Bank, of which he eventually became Vice President. Interested in preventing the American bison from becoming extinct, he purchased 2,000 acres south of town and established his Buffalo Ranch.



Above left, ca. 1890: Buckskin Joe (A. F. Hoyt) is at left, and Pawnee Bill (Gordon Lillie) is at right. Above right: cover of a Pawnee Bill dime novel, ca. 1889.

It was during one of the wild West show off-seasons that Pawnee Bill became a Mason in Pawnee Lodge No. 82. Gordon William Lillie was initiated an Entered Apprentice on January 7, 1899; was passed to the degree of Fellowcraft on January 14, 1899; and was raised to the sublime degree of Master Mason on February 2, 1899. He remained a faithful member until his death forty-three years later. He also joined the Scottish Rite bodies in Guthrie and became a Noble of Akdar Temple, AAONMS, in Tulsa.



Pawnee Bill, ca. 1900

After his own retirement from show business, Bill and the Miller Brothers of 101 Ranch fame (were the Miller Brothers Masonic?), who had the last wild West show, staged a rodeo for the Imperial Shrine session at Washington, D.C., in June 1923.

Not exclusively Masonic, Bill joined Lodge No. 654 of the Benevolent and Protective Order of Elks and a number of old-time cowboy groups. He also proved to be a firm supporter of the Boy Scouts of America.

Pawnee Bill's Historic Wild West continued to prosper. In 1907 he expanded the show and added Great Far East to his billing, including such features as elephants and exotic attractions associated with Asia, Australia, and Africa. In other words, it became more like a regular circus. Meanwhile, Lillie's chief rival experienced a series of problems; including a wreck of his show train, injuries and retirement of Annie Oakley, the death of his principal advisor Nate Salsbury, heavy debts to James Bailey of Barnum & Bailey fame, and a personal scandal. In 1908 Pawnee Bill and Buffalo Bill came to an agreement to merge their shows.

Cody's financial recklessness still troubled Lillie, but against his own better judgment and out of lingering respect for his long-time idol, he agreed to the union as "Buffalo Bill's Wild West and Pawnee Bill's Great Far East" for the 1909 season.

In 1910 and 1911 the combination made money, partly because it was advertised as Buffalo Bill's "farewell tour." By 1912, however, this concept was beginning to wear thin, and business declined. As Lillie's biographer, Glenn Shirley, put it, "there were profits, but hardly enough to keep Buffalo Bill ahead of creditors." Things went worse in 1913, and in July legal entanglements caught up with the show. The last performance took place in Denver on July 21, 1913, as Pawnee Bill refused to spend any more of his personal funds to keep it afloat. To again quote Glenn Shirley, "thus, Buffalo Bill's Wild West and Pawnee's Far East died ingloriously." Cody went back to his home in North Platte, Nebraska, and Pawnee Bill returned to Oklahoma, having sufficient personal funds to survive in comfort. When the old scout died in 1917, Gordon Lillie wrote "time smoothes everything. Buffalo Bill died my friend" adding the conclusion, "he was just an irresponsible boy."

Back in Pawnee, Oklahoma, Gordon and May Lillie had their numerous business interests and friends. He supported the Boy Scouts and efforts to protect and enlarge the surviving bison herds. To accommodate numerous tourists, he built a facility known as Old Town and Indian Trading Post, which was completed in 1930 and provided employment for many of his Pawnee Indian friends. Generally speaking, one might say that he enjoyed his status of what one person termed "being famous for being famous."

In retirement he often spent part of each summer at Taos, New Mexico, where he and May celebrated their Golden Wedding Anniversary on August 31, 1936. Unfortunately, this gala would prove to be a last hurrah for the aging couple. Two weeks later on a return trip to Pawnee from Tulsa, they were involved in a serious auto crash, and May died from injuries on the morning of September 14. Bill's own health began to deteriorate in the following months, but he continued to drive about his properties in his old Pierce Arrow and made plans to donate some of his attractions to the ranch prepared to arrange an 82nd birthday party, the old frontiersman died on February 3, 1942, one day after the 43rd anniversary of his raising in Pawnee Lodge. He was buried beside May in the family mausoleum in the local Highland Cemetery. One of the few remaining symbols of a vanished era had gone to his reward.

Note: The definitive work on Gordon Lillie is Glenn Shirley's Pawnee Bill: A Biography of Major Gordon W Lillie (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1965). For his Masonic Record, I appreciate the rapid assistance of the staff at the Grand Lodge of Oklahoma, Garry Odom, P.G.M., Grand Secretary

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