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## "A Serious Ethnological Exhibition": The Indian Congress of the Trans-Mississippi and International Exposition of 1898

J. Brent Etzel

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“A SERIOUS ETHNOLOGICAL EXHIBITION”: THE INDIAN CONGRESS  
OF THE TRANS-MISSISSIPPI AND INTERNATIONAL  
EXPOSITION OF 1898

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“A SERIOUS ETHNOLOGICAL EXHIBITION”: THE INDIAN CONGRESS  
OF THE TRANS-MISSISSIPPI AND INTERNATIONAL  
EXPOSITION OF 1898

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The thesis explores the development and presentation of the Indian Congress exhibit at the 1898 Trans-Mississippi and International Exposition in Omaha. Intended to provide fairgoers an opportunity to witness an ethnological representation of the life and customs of Native Americans, the exhibit ultimately took a different shape than its creators intended. Funding delays and mismanagement resulted in the Indian Congress taking on many of the traits of a Wild West show, and sham battle performances became a regular feature at the exhibit. Despite these changes, the Indian Congress continued to be promoted as a “serious ethnological exhibit,” and became the most popular feature of the exposition, much to the dismay of those who had endorsed its original design.

The popular success of the Indian exhibit at the Trans-Mississippi Exposition ultimately led to the addition of similar “Indian Congresses” featuring sham battles at larger expositions, including Buffalo’s Pan American Exposition in 1901 and St. Louis’s Louisiana Purchase Exposition in 1904. Ethnologists would have the opportunity to compete with these sensationalized depictions of Native American life with their own exhibits, but they would struggle to attract public interest.

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J.B.E.

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## INTRODUCTION

*“It will be either a colossal success or a colossal failure, and time alone can decide which.”<sup>1</sup>*

This was the prediction of Edward Rosewater, editor and publisher of the *Omaha Daily Bee*, regarding his city’s Trans-Mississippi and International Exposition, held from June to November 1898. The few historians who have studied the event agree that the exposition was a huge commercial success. The fair drew over 2.7 million visitors to a remote and economically depressed city during wartime, and those who purchased stock in the exposition corporation gained over a ninety percent return on their investment.<sup>2</sup> The exposition also gained national attention as host to a victorious President William McKinley just weeks after the American military defeated the Spanish in the “splendid little war.”

The exposition’s greatest triumph, however, was the popularity of its leading exhibit, the Indian Congress. Conceived by Rosewater himself, the Indian Congress was intended to provide fairgoers an opportunity to observe thousands of Native Americans from across the continent engaged in all of the manners of their traditional culture. Because many believed that Indian culture would soon become extinct through

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<sup>1</sup> Alice French (Octave Thanet), “The Trans-Mississippi Exposition,” *The Cosmopolitan* 25, no. 6 (1898): 599.

<sup>2</sup> James B. Haynes, *History of the Trans-Mississippi and International Exposition of 1898*, (Omaha: Trans-Mississippi and International Exposition, 1910), 487.

government efforts to assimilate Native Americans into white society, the exhibit was widely promoted as the “last chance” to see a “dying race.” It was designed with the help of James Mooney, a prominent expert from the Bureau of American Ethnology, and was the first exhibit of its kind ever to be funded by the federal government. In addition, the exhibit received the endorsement of leading proponents of Indian schools, since they believed the Indian Congress would demonstrate to the public the importance of assimilating Native Americans into mainstream American society.

Unfortunately for Rosewater and Mooney, circumstances beyond their control resulted in the exhibit being radically different from what they had intended. Due to the outbreak of the Spanish-American War in April 1898, congressional approval of the allocation for the Indian Congress was held up, and the proposed funding was drastically reduced from an anticipated \$100,000 to just \$40,000.<sup>3</sup> The final approval for the provision did not come until a month after the exposition had already begun. Worse, the final version of the bill which passed Congress specified that it was not the Bureau of American Ethnology which would control the planned exhibit, but rather the Bureau of Indian Affairs. The Indian Affairs Commissioner, William A. Jones, was not committed to the original design of the Indian Congress, and his selection to oversee the project, Captain William A. Mercer, chose to employ the hundreds of Native Americans in attendance in regularly-scheduled sham battles.

The Indian Congress continued to be promoted as a “serious ethnological exhibit,” but had been corrupted into a profit-driven Wild West show. To those who had

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<sup>3</sup> “The Trans-Mississippi International Exposition at Omaha,” *Report of the Commissioner of Indian Affairs*, Washington: Government Printing Office (1898): 27.

endorsed the original design of the project, the result was a debacle. But to the public, the exhibit became the most memorable and entertaining spectacle of the exposition. The popular success of the Indian exhibit at the Trans-Mississippi Exposition ultimately led to the addition of similar “Indian Congresses” featuring sham battles at future expositions. Ethnologists would attempt to compete with their own exhibits, but they would struggle to attract public interest.

### **The Importance of World Expositions**

Expositions held great cultural and political influence at the turn of the last century. As John P. Burris writes in his book, *Exhibiting Religion: Colonialism and Spectacle at International Expositions, 1851-1893*, the expositions held during this time “were the most comprehensively global intercultural events that had ever been staged.”<sup>4</sup> Such events provided opportunities for people from around the world to interact with (or at least observe) one another, and to marvel at new inventions and uses of technology. Omaha’s Trans-Mississippi and International Exposition was the fourth in a series of “international” fairs that took place in the United States during the 1890s. Chicago’s Columbian Exposition and World’s Fair, a slightly-belated celebration of the four hundredth anniversary of the discovery of the Americas, was by far the largest, attracting approximately twenty-seven million visitors and receiving international acclaim.<sup>5</sup> Atlanta’s Cotton States and International Exposition of 1895 and Nashville’s Centennial

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<sup>4</sup> John P. Burris, *Exhibiting Religion: Colonialism and Spectacle at International Expositions, 1851-1893* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2001), xiii.

<sup>5</sup> Paul Reddin, *Wild West Shows* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1999), 117.

and International Exposition of 1897 were much smaller affairs that attracted fewer than two million visitors each and emphasized regional accomplishments and concerns.

Expositions provided governments an opportunity to influence public opinion on matters of morality, social order, and patriotism. Given the cycle of economic depressions and labor unrest that the United States experienced in the latter part of the nineteenth century, fairs served as a way of unifying Americans by offering a choreographed explanation of how the world operated. In his book *All the World's a Fair*, Robert W. Rydell argues that the federal government used expositions as an arena to enforce its moral authority. Such events “performed a hegemonic function,” Rydell states, “because they propagated the ideas and values of the country’s political, financial, corporate, and intellectual leaders and offered these ideas as the proper interpretation of social and political reality.”<sup>6</sup> In addition, expositions held in the United States provided the government an opportunity to promote the idea that the nation had become a world power. Exhibits that demonstrated American military strength were a regular feature at expositions, and after the U.S. victory in the war against Spain, displays highlighting the resources, industries, and products from newly acquired territories provided evidence of the country’s rising international dominance.<sup>7</sup>

Expositions also served as indicators of prevailing attitudes regarding racial and ethnic distinction. Historians have noted how Columbian Exposition organizers

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<sup>6</sup> Robert W. Rydell, *All the World's a Fair: Visions of Empire at American International Expositions, 1876-1916*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), 3.

<sup>7</sup> Paul Greenhalgh, *Ephemeral Vistas: The Expositions Universelles, Great Exhibitions and World's Fairs, 1851-1939*. (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1988.), 75-77.

deliberately placed exhibits of those national and ethnic groups most similar to white American culture closer to the “White City” at the center of the fairgrounds. Thus, displays featuring European food and dress were within easy reach, while more “exotic” exhibits of African, Asian, or American Indian culture were placed in more remote locations.<sup>8</sup> At the expositions in Atlanta and Nashville, organizers put great effort into exhibits that defined white attitudes about race in the American South. Displays at each of these expositions attempted to portray contemporary black Americans as “inferior beings” content with their subservient role in Southern society. This presentation was coupled with depictions of unruly slave life that had once existed on the “Old Plantation.” Thus, white organizers tried to put forward the notion that the South had managed to resolve racial tension that had existed since the Civil War, and that African Americans were happy with their new position.<sup>9</sup>

In regards to race in America, organizers of the Omaha exposition continually promoted the belief that Native American culture was not only inferior to that of whites, but quickly headed for oblivion. The 1890 Census had shown that the country’s Indian population was declining, and the Interior Department was actively engaged in a policy of assimilating Indians into white society. Even ethnologists like Mooney wondered how long the “aboriginal material” of his research would continue to exist.<sup>10</sup> The official guide book of Trans-Mississippi Exposition claimed that the fair provided visitors “the

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<sup>8</sup> Reddin, 118.

<sup>9</sup> Rydell, 88.

<sup>10</sup> James Mooney, “The Indian Congress at Omaha,” *American Anthropologist*, n.s. 1, no. 1 (1899): 127.

last opportunity of seeing the American Indian as a savage,” since the government was likely to succeed in converting Indians into American citizens “before this generation passes into history.”<sup>11</sup> By reinforcing popular opinion that the American Indian was on the verge of extinction, the exposition helped create a sense of urgency that motivated people to attend the fair.

### **Representations of Native Americans at Earlier Expositions**

Representations of Indians and the American West were not new to world expositions in 1898, but they had never been such an important part of a fair as they were in Omaha. The Bureau of Indian Affairs had considered sponsoring an Indian encampment at the 1893 Columbian Exposition in Chicago, but Commissioner Thomas J. Morgan withdrew support for the plan due to lack of funding and a desire to avoid controversy.<sup>12</sup> The government’s efforts to assimilate Indians continued to be hotly debated, and an exhibit preserving traditional Indian life may have appeared contradictory to the agency’s stated goals. Instead, the Bureau of Indian Affairs built a model Indian school that visitors could enter and observe. The exhibit was intended to promote the benefits of assimilating Indians into the dominant culture, but poor planning resulted in the school being unfinished at the opening of the exposition. Budget constraints forced the project’s administrators to ask Indian students scheduled to attend

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<sup>11</sup> *Official Guide Book to Omaha and the Trans-Mississippi and International Exposition*. (Omaha: Megeath Stationary Co., 1898. Reprint: Omaha: Omaha History Center, 1998), 97.

<sup>12</sup> L.G. Moses, *Wild West Shows and the Images of American Indians, 1883-1933* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1996), 133-134.

the school in the first weeks of the exposition to help with the construction of the facility. According to historian Robert A. Trennert, the resulting structure suffered from an unimpressive appearance and poor design that attracted few visitors and undermined the political aims of the exhibit.<sup>13</sup>

While the Bureau of Indian Affairs sought to promote U.S. policy of assimilation, the Bureau of American Ethnology wanted to preserve traditional Indian culture so that it could be thoroughly researched. These two organizations had seemingly contradictory missions, but many proponents of assimilation accepted the presence of ethnological exhibits because they provided a contrast to accomplishments of students from the Indian Schools. In Chicago, ethnologists set up exhibits featuring Native Americans in traditional dress, but, similar to the model Indian School, the presentations were inadequately funded and undistinguished. For twenty-five cents, fairgoers could tour encampments of Cree, Iroquois, Ojibwa, Sioux, Apache, and other tribes.<sup>14</sup>

Chicago's exposition played host to one of the most important historical presentations of its day, for it was there that Frederick Jackson Turner delivered his famous paper, *The Significance of the Frontier in American History*. Although Turner acknowledged that the United States had to fight a series of Indian wars to advance westward, his understanding of American history was that the continent had been largely unoccupied, and that "the demand for land and the love of wilderness freedom drew the

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<sup>13</sup> Robert A. Trennert, Jr., "Selling Indian Education at World's Fairs and Expositions, 1893-1904," *American Indian Quarterly* 11, no. 3 (1987): 205-210.

<sup>14</sup> Norman Bolotin and Christine Lang, *The World's Columbian Exposition: a 100-Year Perspective*. (Washington: Preservation Press, 1992), 77, 107.

frontier ever onward." Furthermore, he wrote that it was chiefly the earliest settlers' toil in the virgin wilderness that "promoted the formation of a composite nationality for the American people."<sup>15</sup>

A very different interpretation of the history of the American West was offered by "Buffalo Bill" Cody, who sought to have his celebrated "Wild West and Congress of Rough Riders of the World" show included as an official part of Chicago's Columbian Exposition. Cody's program featured dozens of "show Indians" who participated in war reenactments and demonstrations of native dances and horsemanship. Rebuffed by organizers who regarded his act as unbecoming for a world exposition, Cody instead chose to compete with the fair, leasing a fourteen-acre site adjacent to the fairgrounds and constructing an eighteen-thousand seat arena. L.G. Moses writes in *Wild West Shows and the Images of American Indians, 1883-1933* that the entrance to Cody's production was so close to the gates of the exposition that many visitors mistakenly thought the Wild West show was part the fair.<sup>16</sup> Before its conclusion, nearly six million people attended Cody's show, generating over \$1 million in profit.<sup>17</sup>

Historian Richard White contends that this unintentional juxtaposition of two very different (and mythological) narratives of the American West is important because, despite their inaccuracies, together they provide a more accurate understanding of American history. Turner's scholarly account focused on the notion that the West was

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<sup>15</sup> Frederick Jackson Turner, *The Frontier in American History* (New York: H. Holt, 1921), 22.

<sup>16</sup> Moses, *Wild West Shows and the Images of American Indians*, 137.

<sup>17</sup> Reddin, 118-119.



basically vacant and was peacefully settled by successive waves of Americans, and that the frontier itself was the central agent in the definition of the American identity. Cody's reenactments of the Battle of Little Big Horn and other brutal encounters served both to entertain and to create a bloody and violent understanding of the West that was very different from that put forward by Turner.<sup>18</sup>

It is important to note that although there were two divergent interpretations of the West offered at the Columbian Exposition, fair organizers took great care to discount the violent narrative offered by Cody, and prevented him from taking part in the "official" presentation of Native Americans. Wild West shows were invited to participate in the expositions of Atlanta and Nashville, but they were relegated to a place alongside the sideshow attractions of the Midway, and had no stated affiliation with the government. What makes the Indian Congress of Omaha's Trans-Mississippi and International Exposition so noteworthy is that ultimately there was no distinction between what had been promoted by the government and the media as a scholarly representation of American Indians – in this case the exhibit that was proposed by Rosewater and Mooney – and the popular account presented in the sham battles of a Wild West show. The Indian Congress helped attract millions of visitors to Omaha, would provide a backdrop for a visit from Buffalo Bill himself, and ultimately welcomed President McKinley, who attended a sham battle during his visit to the exposition.

To the irritation of ethnologists, the Indian Congress became so popular that the Bureau of American Ethnology struggled to discount as vulgar the very same exhibition

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<sup>18</sup> Richard White, *The Frontier in American Culture* (Chicago: Newberry Library, 1994), 9.

it had helped promote as being scientific. Ethnologists managed to take advantage of the increasing white interest in Native American culture by gaining funding to organize exhibits that advanced a more “scientific” representation of Indians at subsequent fairs. Indeed, displays featuring “peaceful” Indian encampments were important features at the international expositions held in Buffalo in 1901 and St. Louis in 1904. But at both of these expositions, these ethnological displays had to compete for the public attention with “Indian Congresses” styled after Omaha’s popular exhibit. In each case, ethnologists struggled to distinguish their exhibits as being more accurate, and were frequently undermined by exposition organizers who promote the Indian Congresses as “educational” and “authentic.”

### **Historical Writing about the Omaha Exposition**

Other historians have written about the Indian exhibits at world expositions during the late nineteenth century, but none have specifically addressed how its popular success of the Trans-Mississippi Exposition’s Indian Congress affected the presentation of Indians at subsequent fairs. Rydell’s book *All the World’s a Fair* includes a detailed account of the Indian Congress in the context of other American expositions of the period, but his research focuses primarily on how the exhibit contributed to expositions asserting America’s rising status as an imperial power. Sarah J. Moore’s 2001 article “Mapping Empire in Omaha and Buffalo” from *Bilingual Review* addresses how the 1898 and 1901 expositions existed as “cultural performances” that confirmed popular

assumptions about race, national identity, and empire during and after the Spanish-American War.<sup>19</sup>

Robert A. Trennert's 1987 article, "Selling Indian Education at World's Fairs and Expositions, 1893-1904," from *American Indian Quarterly*, details the challenges faced by the Bureau of Indian Affairs in its attempts to attract popular support for Indian schools. While the Bureau sought to demonstrate the benefits of assimilating Indians into white society through education, he writes that their exhibits were often upstaged by more popular exhibits organized by ethnologists seeking to show Indians in traditional regalia. Trennert writes much about the Bureau's experience at Chicago's Columbian Exposition, and includes mention of most of the fairs that followed. Since budget cuts reduced the Indian school exhibit to a few photographs and charts within the Government Building at the 1898 Omaha exposition, Trennert leaves out any mention of Trans-Mississippi Exposition.<sup>20</sup>

A detailed description of the political and economic challenges faced by organizers of the Omaha fair can be found in Kenneth G. Alferts' article, "Triumph of the West: The Trans-Mississippi Exposition," from *Nebraska History*. The article discusses the process involved in preparing the event and the political issues surrounding it in the Nebraska legislature. Alferts also addresses how certain displays, such as nude statues

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<sup>19</sup> Sarah J. Moore, "Mapping Empire in Omaha and Buffalo: World's Fairs and the Spanish-American War." *Bilingual Review* 25, no. 1 (2000): 111-126.

<sup>20</sup> Trennert, "Selling Indian Education," 212. The historian does discuss the Indian School exhibit featured at the 1899 Greater American Exposition in Omaha. This topic is addressed further in Chapter III.

and exhibits promoting alcoholic beverages, generated controversy because of the moral issues of the day. The Indian Congress is briefly mentioned, but falls outside the scope of his research.<sup>21</sup>

Josh Clough's article "'Vanishing Indians?' Cultural Persistence on Display at the Omaha World's Fair of 1898" in the Spring 2005 issue of *Great Plains Quarterly* provides a thorough account of the history of the Trans-Mississippi Exposition, including the bureaucratic mistakes and other challenges that altered the purpose and organization of the Indian Congress. Clough emphasizes the notion that the Indians invited to participate in the fair were active players in the formulation of the exhibit, and that they "created their own program of events that defied the notion that they were either subservient or assimilated."<sup>22</sup> Though the Indians chose on their own accord to participate in sham battles, the expressed opposition by ethnologists and Indian Affairs officials led Commissioner Jones to prohibit Wild West show organizers from entering reservations to recruit Indians for future performances. Clough's article examines only the Omaha exposition, and he concludes that the Indian Congress, "aside from its immediate impact on federal Indian policy, probably had few enduring consequences."<sup>23</sup>

This thesis will advance the argument that given the historical context of Indian exhibits at American expositions before and after the Omaha fair, and the universal praise

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<sup>21</sup> Kenneth G. Alfors, "Triumph of the West; The Trans-Mississippi Exposition." *Nebraska History* 53, no. 3 (1972): 313-329.

<sup>22</sup> Josh Clough, "'Vanishing Indians?' Cultural Persistence on Display at the Omaha World's Fair of 1898," *Great Plains Quarterly* 25, no. 2 (2005): 67.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 83.

of the Indian Congress as a major ethnological exhibit, the Trans-Mississippi and International Exposition did indeed have lasting consequences in shaping popular understanding of the American West. The combination of the ethnological presentation of Indians and the sham battles proved to be so popular and profitable that similar exhibits were prominent features at the much larger expositions held in Buffalo and St. Louis. Considering the fact that world's fairs were influential in advancing a common perspective of civilization and race, the inclusion of Wild West performances helped to legitimize such presentations as an accurate, historical representation of Native American culture.

## CHAPTER I

### THE PROPOSAL FOR AN EXPOSITION IN OMAHA

#### **A Response to an Economic Crisis**

Soon after Chicago's financially successful 1893 Columbian Exposition, many western business and political leaders sought to host a similar event in the American West before the end of the century in order to stimulate the regional economy. The country was suffering through the "Panic of 1893," one of the worst economic crises to occur in the United States up to that time. Precipitated by international factors, including a worldwide overproduction of manufacturing and farm products, uncontrolled speculation in foreign markets, and weakened financial institutions overseas, the crisis caused not only a run on federal gold reserves but also the bankruptcies of thousands of businesses in the United States.<sup>24</sup> At the worst point of the depression, eighteen percent of the American workforce was unemployed. The western states suffered deeply. The Northern Pacific Railway, Union Pacific Railroad, and the Santa Fe Railroad all went into bankruptcy, severely hindering the transportation industry. At the outset of the depression, agricultural prices dipped, and drought conditions in 1894 and 1895 resulted in devastating crop failures.

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<sup>24</sup> Steven R. Weisman, *The Great Tax Wars: Lincoln to Wilson, the Fierce Battles over Money and Power that Transformed the Nation*. (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2002), 108.

James C. Olson writes in the *History of Nebraska* that some business leaders saw the venture of a world exposition as a way to “lick the depression by demonstrating to the world that it did not exist.”<sup>25</sup> Despite the potential incentives for economic development and tourism revenue, some western cities found the economic crisis so great that they were in no position to finance such an undertaking. A committee in Denver raised \$15,000 as part of an effort to host a “Western States Exposition” before deciding that the project would be unfeasible until at least the next decade. Leaders from Kansas City sought to host a “Mid-Continent Exposition,” while a Texas contingent sought to host a celebration of the importance of Gulf Coast ports with a “Western and Southern Stages Exposition” in Galveston, but neither project moved beyond the planning stage. In addition to Omaha, St. Paul and Minneapolis also considered proposals to host a fair.<sup>26</sup>

To consolidate efforts to hold an exposition celebrating the American West, leaders from several western states and territories gathered at the “Trans-Mississippi Congress” in St. Louis in November 1894. The Nebraska delegation offered to host a subsequent meeting in Omaha in November 1895 after the delegates failed to agree on a host city. At the Omaha meeting, the leader of Nebraska’s delegation, William Jennings Bryan, was elected president of the Congress during the first day of the proceedings. He wasted little time in proposing a resolution that Omaha should be chosen as the site for an exposition. Bryan stated that the city was best suited to host a fair, since “all of the northern part of the country can find its way here on direct lines.” Omaha’s accessibility

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<sup>25</sup> James C. Olson, *History of Nebraska*, (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition, 1966), 255.

<sup>26</sup> Haynes, 11.

by rail, he argued, would surely lure Americans from the east to visit the western states for the first time, just as Atlanta had succeeded in attracting first-time visitors with its 1895 “Cotton States and International Exposition.”<sup>27</sup> Several delegates from other cities endorsed Bryan’s proposal, giving praise to the growth Omaha had experienced. John Doniphan of St. Joseph, Missouri, spoke of the city as “one of the grandest inland cities of the whole United States,” and hypothesized that in fifty years, “Omaha would be as great as New York — greater perhaps than New York or Chicago or any other city that exists on this continent.”<sup>28</sup> The delegates voted unanimously to endorse Omaha’s proposal to host the exposition in the summer of 1898.<sup>29</sup>

The next step toward organizing Omaha’s exposition came in December 1895, when approximately thirty business and civic leaders held a public meeting in the city’s Commercial Club Room. The meeting participants chose to name the project “The Trans-Mississippi and International Exposition,” and set June 1898 as the target date to commence the fair. The committee resolved to raise \$1 million by sale of public stock, divided into shares of ten dollars.<sup>30</sup> In early 1896, David H. Mercer, congressman from

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<sup>27</sup> John A. Wakefield, “Origin,” *A History of the Trans-Mississippi & International Exposition* (Omaha: Trans-Mississippi Exposition, 1903, accessed 24 June 2006); available from <http://www.omaha.lib.ne.us/transmiss/secretary/origin.html>; Internet.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> John A. Wakefield, “Organization,” *A History of the Trans-Mississippi & International Exposition* (Omaha: Trans-Mississippi Exposition, 1903, accessed 24 June 2006); available from <http://www.omaha.lib.ne.us/transmiss/secretary/organization.html>; Internet.



the Nebraska district that included Omaha, introduced in Congress a bill to provide \$500,000 in federal support of the exposition. A similar bill was introduced in the Senate by Nebraska's Senator John M. Thurston. The size of the proposed allocation met resistance, and the funding request was lowered to \$200,000, matching the amount given to the organizers of the Atlanta exposition. Another amendment required that the organizing committee raise \$250,000 before federal funds could be released. The Senate bill passed easily, but Congressman Mercer faced intense opposition in the House, especially from Nebraska's own Omar M. Kem, a member of the Populist Party from rural Custer County. Eventually Mercer succeeded, and the appropriation received final approval on June 9.<sup>31</sup>

Kem's opposition to the exposition was replicated the following year by Populists in the Nebraska legislature. Although the project received broad support throughout the state, Populist leaders, including Charles Wooster, rejected state funding of the exposition, calling it a "job lot of politicians" intended solely to generate wealth for Omaha businessmen. He argued that, given the economic condition of the state, "the proper thing for Nebraska to do would be to pay her debts." The bill to help fund the exposition passed, but not before the Populists succeeded in reducing the amount of the appropriation.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> *Nebraska State Journal*, 20 January 1897.

### **Plan for an Indian Congress**

It was Edward Rosewater, the editor and publisher of the *Omaha Daily Bee*, who first proposed the plan for a large-scale ethnological exhibit featuring Indians from across North America at the exposition. Born Edward Rosenwasser to Jewish parents in Bukovan, Bohemia in 1841, he and his family immigrated to the United States when he was thirteen years old. At the outset of the Civil War, Rosewater worked as a telegraph operator in Stevenson, Alabama and Nashville, Tennessee. He remained loyal to the Union, and after Union troops captured Nashville in 1862, he enlisted in the Union army, serving as a telegraph operator. While stationed in Washington, Rosewater earned the distinction of being the first person to transmit the Emancipation Proclamation to the world. In 1863, he took the position of Chief of Operations for the Omaha City telegraph office, and in 1871, he founded the *Daily Bee*. He was active in Republican politics and twice unsuccessfully sought his party's nomination for the U.S. Senate.<sup>33</sup> Rosewater served as an original member of the Omaha Exposition Association, and served as the manager of the Department of Publicity and Promotions through the duration of the fair.

Rosewater first conceived of the Indian Congress in the summer of 1897 and shared an outline of the plan in an article in the August 16, 1897 issue of the *Daily Bee*. From the beginning, the Indian Congress was promoted as an educational exhibit, and that it would provide fairgoers a final opportunity to see traditional Indian culture.

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<sup>33</sup> John A. Garraty and Mark C. Carnes, eds., *American National Biography*, vol. 18, *Rosewater, Edward* by David Hellerstein (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 896-897.

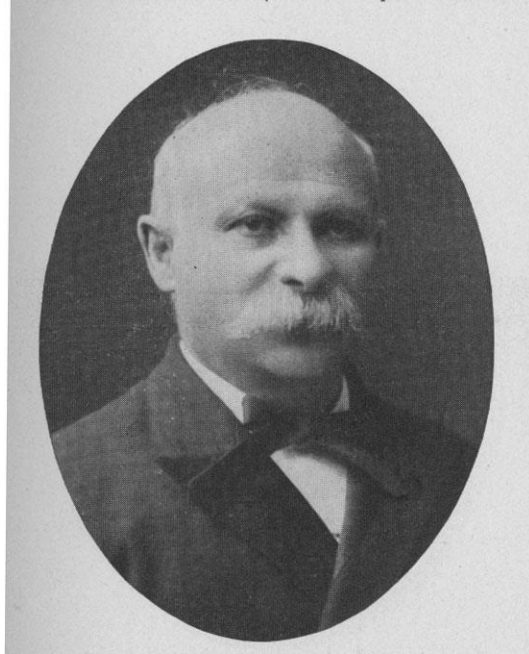


Figure 1. Edward Rosewater. Reprinted from James B. Haynes, *History of the Trans-Mississippi and International Exposition*, (Omaha: Trans-Mississippi and International Exposition, 1910), 59.

Describing the exhibit as an illustration of the “life, customs, and decline” of the American Indian, he predicted that it would undoubtedly serve as “the last gathering of these tribes before the bronzed sons of the forests and plains...are gathered to the happy hunting grounds.” He proposed that Congress appropriate \$100,000 and allow for the transport of Indians from various reservations, since “all these remnants of tribes are wards of the federal government.” The plan would involve the construction of an Indian village, with each tribe residing in a housing structure common to their way of life. Additional space would be allotted for Indian activities, such as horse races and “other Indian games.” Rosewater wrote that another feature of the Indian Congress would be an

assembly of “descendants of native Americans who have adopted the ways of their white brother and are now called ‘civilized,’” and he predicted that such a gathering might prove interesting since “there are among the Indians of this country a number of men of the highest intelligence and great business ability.” He did not explain what the participants of this assembly might discuss.<sup>34</sup>

An article published two days later announced support for the proposal from the president of the Exposition Association, Gurdon W. Wattles. The exposition president affirmed Rosewater’s assertion that the Indian Congress would offer a final opportunity to see Indians, and he maintained that the exhibit would be based on scholarship. He theorized that “within the next twenty-five years every Indian will be an individual land owner and be self-supporting,” and that the proposed exhibit would serve both to educate whites about Indian history and ethnology, and to educate Indians about the technological advances of the dominant culture. “If representatives of every tribe are gathered and are shown the advantages of development over the old manners of life before the white man came,” he was certain “that a powerful impression will be produced upon their minds.” Wattles repeated Rosewater’s desire to have the exhibit feature demonstrations of games and other traditional customs, and was adamant that an Indian exhibit was central to the success of the fair. “A western exposition without the Indian as a prominent feature,” he stated, “would be like that old familiar illustration of Hamlet with Hamlet left out.”<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> *Omaha Daily Bee*, 16 August 1897,

<sup>35</sup> *Omaha Daily Bee*, 18 August 1897.

Rosewater contacted the Bureau of American Ethnology for assistance in the design of the Indian Congress and was put in contact with the renowned ethnologist James Mooney. Noted for his research of the Cheyenne and Arapaho Indians, Mooney's report "The Ghost Dance Religion and the Sioux Outbreak of 1890," published in the fourteenth annual *Report of the Bureau of Ethnology*, was highly acclaimed and earned him a reputation as a prominent scholar of anthropology and history.<sup>36</sup> Mooney traveled to Omaha in October 1897 as part of an extended honeymoon with his wife in order to discuss the plan with Rosewater.

The newspaper editor hoped to bring Indians from every tribe in the country and considered gathering individuals from tribes of Canada and Latin America. Mooney felt that this would not be feasible or desirable. Even if such a plan were affordable, he argued, there would be unnecessary duplication of Indian cultures and housing types represented.<sup>37</sup> Mooney suggested instead that the tribes selected for exhibit be based on the various types of American Indian dwellings. Rosewater accepted Mooney's modifications, but he still wanted to offer something novel compared to ethnological displays at previous expositions. He proposed the inclusion of special "Indian Days" to highlight the various tribes, as well as regularly-scheduled Indian dances and ceremonies that would highlight traditional culture. Mooney commended Rosewater for his efforts and offered to serve as the exhibit's representative to the Bureau of Indian Affairs,

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<sup>36</sup> John A. Garraty and Mark C. Carnes, eds., *American National Biography*, vol. 15, *Mooney, James* by L.G. Moses, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 729-730.

<sup>37</sup> L.G. Moses, *The Indian Man: A Biography of James Mooney*, (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1984): 114-115.

since that agency's approval would be needed for reservation Indians to participate in the exposition.

Mooney was confident that the exposition organizers were committed to the Indian Congress being an ethnological representation of Native Americans. In a message sent to Bureau of American Ethnology director W.J. McGee, Mooney endorsed the proposed exhibit as legitimate and "not of the dime museum variety."<sup>38</sup> After leaving Omaha, Mooney and Rosewater continued corresponding by mail as they considered plans for the exhibit. On October 27 Mooney wrote that he would soon have a detailed plan in hand, making the observation that "nothing of the kind has ever been undertaken."<sup>39</sup> Five days later, Mooney sent plans of what he described as "an Indian exhibit on a large scale," complete with an outline map and list of ethnological experts who could assist in developing the exhibit. Mooney offered to serve as the authority for the Kiowa and Wichita encampments. Not having much faith in the abilities of Native Americans, Mooney urged Rosewater to contact "a reliable white man" from each of the reservations represented because "Indians are perfectly helpless away from home."<sup>40</sup>

Rosewater published much of Mooney's grandiose plan in the November 15 issue of the *Daily Bee*. The ethnologist proposed that "a relief map of the United States, constructed on a gigantic scale and covering an area of about fifty acres," serve as the

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<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 115.

<sup>39</sup> James Mooney, Denver, Colorado, to Edward Rosewater, Omaha, Nebraska, 27 October 1897, Rosewater Collection, Omaha Public Library, Omaha.

<sup>40</sup> James Mooney, Salida, Colorado, to Edward Rosewater, Omaha, Nebraska, 1 November 1897, Rosewater Collection, Omaha Public Library, Omaha.

grounds for the encampments. Various tribes would be set up at the approximate location on the map which corresponded to their location when European settlers first arrived in North America. It would be constructed by engineers and landscape gardeners on a “raised terrace of earth,” with “actual streams of water” marking principal rivers. The surface of the map would be covered in grass, with mountains constructed from paper maché and covered in sackcloth, with elevations in correct proportion. Mooney also proposed that paths across the map “should be, as far as possible, along the lines of actual noted trails, such as the Santa Fe trail, the California trail along the North Platte, etc.”<sup>41</sup>

In the unoccupied spaces of the proposed map, buildings in the shape of oversized Indian dwellings would be erected, containing Indian artifacts and tools, photographs, and other educational objects. Mooney suggested that other buildings could feature demonstrations of Indian schools or Indian-owned printing presses and newspapers printed in indigenous languages. The buildings could be placed in the charge of “civilized Indian students, or better, might be prepared and officered by the five civilized tribes of Indian territory.” This, Mooney suggested, “would give the most adequate idea of the capacity and limitations of the civilized Indian when acting alone.”<sup>42</sup>

### **The Problem of Funding the Indian Congress**

Rosewater and the Exposition’s Executive Committee embraced the proposal and enlisted Nebraska's Senator William V. Allen to submit a bill requesting \$100,000 for “a

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<sup>41</sup> *Omaha Daily Bee*, 15 November 1897.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*

congress of representative families of Indian tribes” at the exposition.<sup>43</sup> In support of the bill, Allen submitted letters from Secretary of the Interior Cornelius B. Bliss, Bureau of Ethnology director John Wesley Powell, and Indian Rights Association secretary Herbert Welsh, all endorsing the Indian exhibit. It is important to note that both Bliss and Powell acknowledged that the Indians' active participation in the exhibit would enhance the success of the plan. Bliss stated the importance of consulting the Commissioner of Indian Affairs in order to determine the likelihood that Indians would be willing to participate. Powell's letter emphasized how the inclusion of several different tribes, each with different housing styles, would have great educational value for the fairgoers, but he also stated that it would be advantageous for the Indians to have the opportunity to sell their arts and crafts.<sup>44</sup>

Although the Indian Rights Association of today strives to help Indian tribes maintain their language, culture, and heritage, the mission of the organization during the late nineteenth century was to promote the Indian schools and cultural assimilation of Native Americans.<sup>45</sup> With this goal in mind, Welsh stressed that the proposed exhibit would help the public understand the importance of assimilating Indians into the mainstream American society. He also stated that the inclusion of learned Indians would illustrate the success of the Indian education program, since "there is no better means of

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<sup>43</sup> *Omaha Daily Bee*, 11 December 1897.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>45</sup> For more information on the evolving mission of the Indian Rights Association, see William Thomas Hagan, *The Indian Rights Association: the Herbert Welsh Years, 1882-1904*, Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1985.



reaching the popular mind and touching the warm and true instincts of the American heart than such an object lesson as this." Welsh warned that the project should be kept under government control so as to protect it from "the designs of persons who might be disposed to divert it to personal schemes of money-making notoriety," but he expressed confidence that the project would be well protected under the leadership of the government agency entrusted in managing the exhibit.<sup>46</sup> Powell joined in support of the inclusion of an Indian school exhibit, asserting the "inestimable value" of impressing upon the general public the challenge of "the endeavor to lift the aboriginal inhabitants of the country into the status of civilization."<sup>47</sup>

The appropriation bill passed the Senate on January 6, 1898, but not before amendments reduced the amount to \$45,000 and specified that the exhibit would be under the authority of the Secretary of the Interior. The reduced allocation signaled that Mooney's extravagant map design would have to be abandoned, as the reduced sum would likely match the cost for transporting Indians to the exposition. Rosewater reported in the *Daily Bee* that, after being amended, the bill passed without significant resistance, and that senators from both parties praised the proposal for being "of incalculable benefit to white people, as well as to the red man." The article noted that Congressman Mercer was campaigning for the bill's passage in the House, but that it was likely to face difficulty there.<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> *Omaha Daily Bee*, 11 December 1897.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>48</sup> *Omaha Daily Bee*, 7 January 1898.

Unfortunately for the proponents of the Indian Congress, Mercer did not succeed before international events diverted the attention of Congress elsewhere. On February 15 the American battleship *Maine* exploded in Havana harbor, killing 266 crewmen on board. Diplomatic relations between the United States and Spain were extremely tense due to American support of the Cuban independence movement. Although cause of the explosion of the battleship remains a mystery to this day, popular support at the time for the United States to seek its own colonial empire in the Caribbean, coupled with the efforts of major newspaper publishers to bring the United States into hostilities with Spain, fueled the demands for a declaration of war. On March 8 Congress approved \$50 million for the creation of a war fund, and two weeks later the Naval Court of Inquiry announced its conclusion that the Spanish had caused the Maine to explode. While President McKinley was reluctant to commit American troops to war, attempts to find a diplomatic solution failed. On April 11, the president asked Congress for a declaration of war. Spain reciprocated on April 24. For the first time since the conclusion of the Indian Wars, the U.S. military was engaged in battle. As the prepared nation for war, nearly all of functions of the government, including the distribution of federal funds, ceased. For the next several months, there was no action on the Indian Congress bill.

In spite of the government's inaction on the funding of the Indian exhibit, the Interior Department continued preparations in anticipation of its passage. In March the Bureau of Indian Affairs selected army Captain William A. Mercer to manage the Indian Congress. Captain Mercer had been serving as the acting agent of the Omaha and Winnebago Agency, and immediately began preparations for the exposition "at his own

risk” on the contingency that the funding would come through. Meanwhile, the Bureau of Indian Affairs circulated a request to other Indian agents, asking that they begin identifying Indians willing to participate in the exhibit. By the end of March, this appeal had been sent to at least twenty-four agents, requesting more than 470 Indians.<sup>49</sup>

Mooney was granted a leave of absence from the Bureau of American Ethnology in order to assist Mercer and the Exposition Association in preparations for the Indian Congress, but without Congressional approval, he had little to do. He wrote to Rosewater on April 4 expressing his frustration of the setback in funding, saying that “my office work and personal affairs are suffering from the delay uncertainty, every day of delay makes it harder to carry out our contemplated plan.” Mooney offered to sketch out an alternative plan for the exhibit, which could be put in action immediately after funding was assured, but that he “could hardly undertake good work if delayed beyond the 15<sup>th</sup>” of April.<sup>50</sup> Rosewater shared Mooney’s frustration, and implored Senator Allen to do all he could to advance the appropriation through Congress, calling the holdup “very embarrassing.” Rosewater also wrote to Secretary Bliss offering to have the exposition directors fund the Indian Congress themselves.<sup>51</sup>

Meanwhile the editor of the *Daily Bee* found himself to be the center of an investigation concerning his role as the Exposition Association’s manager of publicity &

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<sup>49</sup> James Mooney, Washington, D.C., to Edward Rosewater, Omaha, Nebraska, 4 April 1898, Rosewater Collection, Omaha Public Library, Omaha.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

<sup>51</sup> Rydell, 113.

promotions, as he had awarded a \$3,200 publicity contract to his own newspaper.<sup>52</sup> In addition, much hostility arose between Rosewater and Gilbert M. Hitchcock, the editor of Omaha's other major newspaper, the *Evening World Herald*. Because of the close affiliation between the exposition organizers and Rosewater, the *Evening World Herald* published scant details of the exposition's progress, hampering promotion of the fair in the city. In the official review of the history of the exposition, John Wakefield reported that "the enmities and jealousies of the publishers of the two principal newspapers of the city resulted in such criticism and such strenuous defense as to detract from that unanimity of purpose and concentration of energy so vital to securing success." Wakefield concluded that the "Publicity Department of an Exposition should be in charge of a good business man, who is not a publisher of a newspaper."<sup>53</sup>

### **Promotion of the Indian Congress in the National Media**

While hostilities raged in the local press, popular national magazines began publishing stories promoting the exposition, highlighting the Indian Congress as a central feature. Several articles hailed the display as a serious ethnological exhibit, and many perpetuated the notion that Indian culture would soon disappear. *Century Illustrated* ran a four-page story in its February 1898 issue complete with drawings of the various buildings along the exposition's Grand Court. The article stated that an enormous tepee

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<sup>52</sup> *Lincoln Journal*, 12 March 1898.

<sup>53</sup> John A. Wakefield, "Review," *A History of the Trans-Mississippi & International Exposition* (Omaha: Trans-Mississippi Exposition, 1903, accessed 24 June 2006); available from <http://www.omaha.lib.ne.us/transmiss/secretary/review.html>; Internet.

would be constructed to serve as an ethnological museum, and that “an encampment of the fast-disappearing aborigines of the plains” would be on hand to demonstrate Indian life and customs “perhaps for the last time.”<sup>54</sup>

The June 1898 issue of *The North American Review* stated that the Indian Congress would be “one of the strongest features of the Exposition,” featuring members of every Indian tribe in the country, along with demonstrations of Indian schools and products of native civilization.<sup>55</sup> Also in June, *Godey’s Magazine* printed a story claiming that the Indian exhibit would be “the most wonderful and complete that the world has ever had the opportunity to witness.” The article grossly overstated even the original designs of the Indian Congress, claiming that “every known tribe in North America will be represented,” and that “three or four thousand” Indians would arrive at the exposition to demonstrate the “many phases of life of this fast-dying race.”<sup>56</sup>

Congressman Mercer and Senator Allen succeeded in their efforts to have a special fund for the Indian Congress included in the general appropriation for the Bureau of Indian Affairs. The federal government was hesitant to commit spending to any function of government during the beginning of the war, and so the passage of the bill was delayed until the end of June. Without congressional approval to utilize reservation

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<sup>54</sup> Charles Howard Walker, “The Great Exposition at Omaha,” *Century Illustrated Magazine* 40, no. 4, 521.

<sup>55</sup> “Trans-Mississippi and International Exposition,” *The North American Review* 166, no. 499, 762.

<sup>56</sup> Elsie Reasoner, “A National Wonder,” *Godey’s Magazine*, 136, no. 816, 616-617.

Indians and no federal funds committed for the project, there was no Indian Congress at the opening of the exposition.

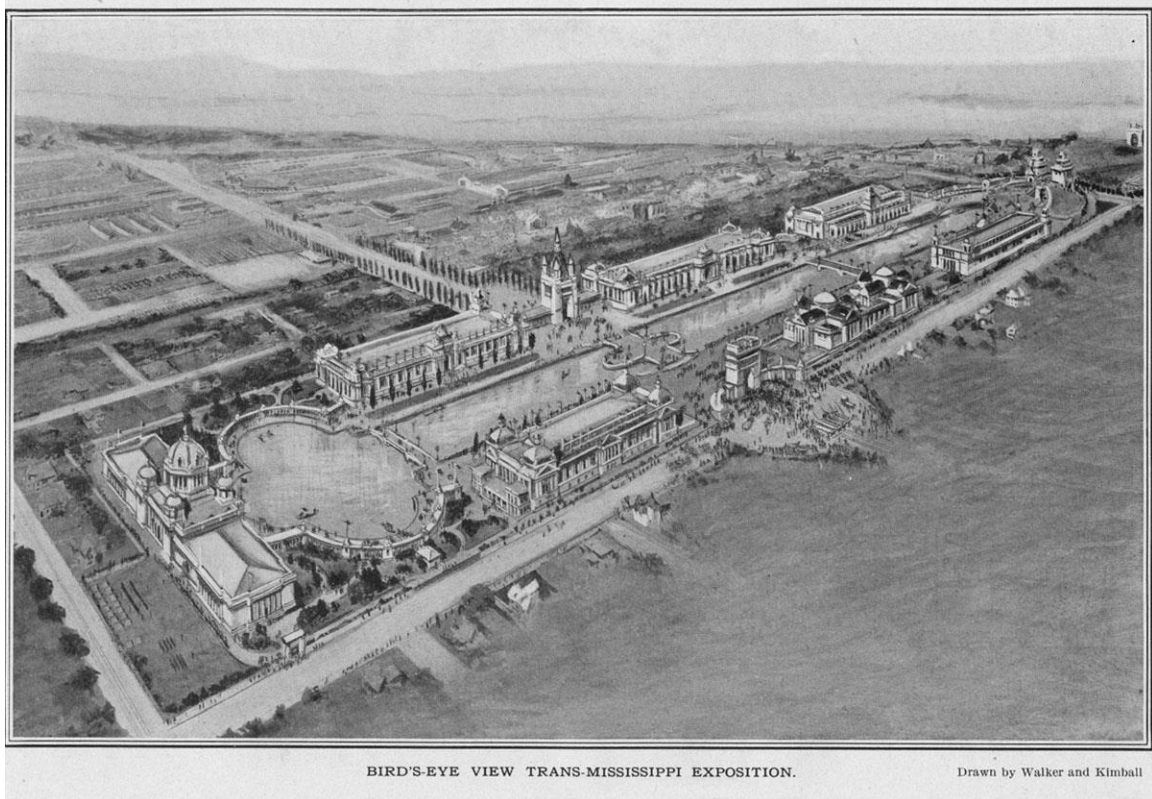


Figure 2. Bird's-Eye View, Trans-Mississippi Exposition. Reprinted from James B. Haynes, *History of the Trans-Mississippi and International Exposition*, (Omaha: Trans-Mississippi and International Exposition, 1910), 30.

## CHAPTER II

### THE EVOLUTION OF THE INDIAN CONGRESS

#### **The Exposition Begins**

Despite concerns that the war with Spain would draw the nation's attention away from the exposition, organizers went ahead with plans to open the gates to the fair on the first of June. As the manager of the department of publicity and promotions, Rosewater had counted on receiving plenty of free advertising from newspaper writers across the country, but reports of the war took up much of the printed space that might otherwise have gone to the exposition. Despite this, nearly twenty-eight thousand people attended Opening Day. President McKinley and members of Nebraska's congressional delegation had been invited to deliver addresses at the opening ceremonies, but they remained in Washington to cope with the war. Thanks to the local Western Union Telegraph office however, Nebraska Governor Silas Holcomb shared a message from the president as it was transmitted from the White House. At the end of the message, it was said that McKinley pressed a button which resulted in the illumination of the electric lights on the fairgrounds.<sup>57</sup>

In addition to the President's transmitted speech and an address given by Governor Holcomb, the opening day ceremonies included a speech by John L. Webster, a

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<sup>57</sup> Haynes, 62-66.

prominent attorney who had served on the exposition's planning committee. Given the continuing difficulties in gaining federal approval for the Indian Congress, it is ironic that Webster began his speech by claiming that the absence of any Indians in Omaha was a testament to the city's progress:

These mighty structures stand where fifty years ago were clustered tepees of the Omaha Indians. Then the silence of this place was disturbed only by the Indian war-sound, by the revelry of the Indian dance, and the prairies rang with no sound but the war-whoop of the aborigine. Today it is surrounded by twenty thousand buildings, the homes of 150,000 people, who are the members of the rich commercial city of Omaha.<sup>58</sup>

Webster continued by asserting that the marvels of the exposition represented the greatness of an expanding American Empire. He declared that the standing of the United States had become equal to the great empires of the history of Europe. "Our nation has grown up," he claimed, "and the scepter of supremacy has passed from the old world to the new. In the fulfillment of our destiny... we have to work out the problem of universal civilization." The nations of Europe had to decide if they would collaborate in America's "grand work of human civilization." In reference to the war, Webster claimed that, "Spain has clung to her old idols and her despotic empire."<sup>59</sup>

There were other references to the war and America's territorial aspirations throughout the exhibits of the fair. The Government Building featured vestiges from battles fought in Cuba, including a captured Spanish flag and American military equipment. The naval department's exhibit included a scale model of the *U.S.S. Maine*

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<sup>58</sup> Ibid., 340-341.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid., 344-345.



that was very popular with fairgoers.<sup>60</sup> Even the amusements of the Midway reminded people of the war against Spain. A depiction of the Battle of Manila was on display for passengers riding on the Scenic Railway. Visitors could also enjoy a multi-media presentation that depicted the destruction of the *Maine* and the opening scenes from the war. Rydell writes that from the very first day, the exposition “provided ideological scaffolding for mass support for the government’s imperial policies.”<sup>61</sup>

Although funding delays caused by the war had prevented the Indian Congress exhibit from being ready at the start of the exposition, organizers succeeded in constructing an impressive array of buildings that helped support the assertion that Omaha’s fair was a significant event worthy of national attention. The white, neoclassical architecture featured at the exposition was modeled after that of Chicago’s Columbian Exposition. (See Figure 3.) In fact, Omaha’s Grand Court was so reminiscent of the Chicago fair that it gained the nickname “Little White City” from the media. The most prominent buildings, including those highlighting achievements in agriculture, manufacturing, and electricity, stood along a scenic half-mile long lagoon. Southeast of the Grand Court was the Bluff Tract, on which several American states constructed their own display buildings. To the east and north, the Midway featured amusement rides, animal shows, and a variety of exhibits from Europe and Asia. While dubbed an “international” exposition, most foreign countries chose to send only modest representation, if any at all. Exposition organizers had found it difficult to convince

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<sup>60</sup> Ibid., 145-146.

<sup>61</sup> Rydell, 108.



Figure 3. Grand Court, Looking West. Reprinted from James B. Haynes, *History of the Trans-Mississippi and International Exposition*, (Omaha: Trans-Mississippi and International Exposition, 1910), 40.

foreign governments and businesses that Omaha could succeed in hosting a noteworthy event.<sup>62</sup>

In the absence of the Indian Congress, fairgoers still had the opportunity to see other so-called living ethnological exhibits, but these other displays did not enjoy the status of being sanctioned by the federal government. An exhibit of the soon-to-be annexed Hawaiian Islands included a colony of natives occupying “primitive huts.” The Hawaiians were said to be wearing costumes and using tools from “when the Islanders were in [a] savage state.”<sup>63</sup> The Afro-American Village, located on the Midway, was an exhibit that had first appeared at the Nashville exposition, and featured several “jolly, rollicking” African Americans living in slave cabins.<sup>64</sup> The Chinese Village, organized by Chinese-owned trading company from Chicago, secured the transport of over two hundred “artisans” from China. At the conclusion of the exposition, it was discovered that the exhibit had been a front to circumvent immigration law. All of the “artisans” had disappeared from Omaha.<sup>65</sup>

### **“Indian Congress in Assured”**

Two days after Opening Day, Rosewater cheerfully announced in the *Daily Bee* that the Indian Congress appeared to be safe. On June 2 a joint committee of the House and Senate Indian Affairs committees agreed to earmark \$40,000 for the exhibit in the

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<sup>62</sup> Haynes, 158, 189.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid., 192.

<sup>64</sup> Rydell, 119.

<sup>65</sup> *Omaha Daily Bee*, 25 October 1898.

final version of the Indian Bureau appropriation. The amendment stated that the purpose of the spending was for:

Illustrating the past and present conditions of the various Indian tribes of the United States and progress made by education and such other matters and things as will fully illustrate Indian advancement and education, details of which shall be at the discretion of the secretary of the interior.<sup>66</sup>

Rosewater wrote that Senator Thurston planned to make an attempt to amend the language so that funds for the Indian Congress would be available immediately after passage, and that expenses already incurred in the planning of the exhibit would be reimbursed.<sup>67</sup> He apparently was not successful, as there is no such language in the final version of the Indian appropriation. Congress ultimately passed it on June 30, and the president signed it into law on the following day.

In spite of the deep funding cut and the lengthy delay in funding, the organizers of the Indian Congress remained optimistic that an educational exhibit could be put together quickly. Given the language in the final version of the bill, they continued to believe that the original mission of the exhibit would be preserved. An article in the July 3 issue of the *Daily Bee* reported that invitations had been sent to the governments of Canada and Mexico requesting that those governments allow for the transport of “aboriginals” to the exposition for the purpose of joining the encampment. He reiterated the expectation that the Indians in attendance would perform dances and religious ceremonies for public viewing, and that a complementary exhibit would somehow demonstrate the progress of Indian schools in the “civilization” of their pupils. In addition, the article stated that the

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<sup>66</sup> *Report of the Commissioner of Indian Affairs*, 27.

<sup>67</sup> *Omaha Daily Bee*, 3 June 1898.

Indian Congress would consist of twenty-five tribes, representing many different regions of the continent, and "carefully selected by experienced ethnologists." It was well understood, Rosewater claimed, that "the main object to be kept in view is educational and historic."<sup>68</sup>

In truth, it was the Indian agents who would determine which Indians would participate in the exhibit, and in many cases, the Indians decided for themselves whether or not they wanted to come. On July 11 Commissioner of Indian Affairs William A. Jones officially authorized Captain Mercer to organize and manage the Indian Congress, and within days he sent to other Indian agents instructions concerning the project. His letter was similar to the one sent in March by the Bureau of Indian Affairs that requested Indians be identified for participation in the exhibit. The letter stated the purpose of bringing together representatives from "all the principal tribes" and having them set up traditional domiciles on the expositions grounds, where they would be allowed to "conduct their domestic affairs as they do at home, and make and sell their wares for their own profit."<sup>69</sup>

Mercer's letter demonstrates prevailing white attitudes about what constituted an "accurate" representation of a "traditional" Native American in the late nineteenth century. Mercer included many stipulations regarding the Indians that would be allowed to participate in the Indian Congress. First, he required that all participants be "full bloods," and preferred those chosen to be "leading men or chiefs and their families."

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<sup>68</sup> *Omaha Daily Bee*, 3 July 1898.

<sup>69</sup> *Report of the Commissioner of Indian Affairs*, 27.

They also needed to be "of good morals and habits," but most of all, "strictly temperate." In order to make the encampment as "thoroughly aboriginal in every respect as practicable," Mercer requested that the Indians chosen to come to the exposition bring their homes or materials to construct them, along with furnishings and decorations. In addition, he specified that participants dress in traditional clothing and bring cooking utensils (as "primitive as possible") and objects of warfare. Finally, he stated that transportation costs to Omaha would be provided, and that the Indians would be "well cared for."<sup>70</sup>

Mercer soon found that many his fellow Indian agents lacked his enthusiasm for the project, and few Indians were interested in the free trip to the exposition. In his report to the Bureau of Indian Affairs, he lamented that many agents failed to take an interest, or did not fully appreciate the importance of the Indian Congress. In addition, many of the Indians were "distrustful or hesitated, giving the many excuses which only an Indian can conceive of for not wanting to come to the Congress."<sup>71</sup> Clough writes that one of the "excuses" used by the Indians was that the Indian Congress was not offering payment for participating. The superintendent of the Pine Ridge Agency, W.H. Clapp, responded to Mercer, saying that after being told there would be no compensation, the Indians "want nothing to do with the project."<sup>72</sup> Buffalo Bill Cody had visited the reservation as

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<sup>70</sup> Ibid., 28.

<sup>71</sup> W.A. Mercer, "Report to the Commissioner" 15 September 1898, quoted in John A. Wakefield, *A History of the Trans-Mississippi and International Exposition* (Omaha: Trans-Mississippi and International Exposition, 1903; reprint, Omaha: Omaha Public Library, 1992), 632-633.

recently as January of that year, seeking 100 Sioux to perform with him in the Wild West show.<sup>73</sup> Clapp reported that Cody paid the Indians generously, and that they had "an idea of their commercial value as show men."<sup>74</sup> Clough writes that Indians of the Pueblo and Jicarilla Agency in New Mexico did not want to participate without compensation, since they were accustomed to being paid for performances in Santa Fe, and selling their wares at the Colorado State Fair.

The responses that Mercer received to his appeal for Indian participants demonstrated that the "traditional" Indian imagined by whites did not exist. Some Indians who were willing to accept the invitation to the exposition found themselves in a quandary regarding the specifications set forth by Mercer. The Jicarilla Apaches agreed to travel to Omaha, but since they had already begun to dress in modern clothing, insisted on receiving twenty dollars each in order to buy the materials necessary to make native costumes.<sup>75</sup> Similarly, all of the "leading men" of the Flathead reservation had abandoned their native style of dress, and faced the dilemma of what to wear at the Indian Congress. The Flathead Indian agent wrote to Mercer asking "is it necessary that these people discard their civilized dress and mode of living during this encampment?"<sup>76</sup>

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<sup>72</sup> Clough, 72.

<sup>73</sup> *Report of the Commissioner of Indian Affairs*, 32.

<sup>74</sup> Clough, 72.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*, 72.

<sup>76</sup> Robert Bigart and Clarence Woodcock. "The Trans-Mississippi Exposition and the Flathead Delegation." *Montana: The Magazine of Western History* 29, Autumn (1979): 19.

Serving the duration of the exposition as an employee of the Indian Bureau, Mooney found much resistance from agents as he traveled to reservations in hopes of recruiting Indians for the exhibit. The ethnologist met unexplained resistance to the project from the administrator at Anadarko agency, W.T. Walker, who refused to allow any of the Kiowa Indians there to participate. Though Mooney carried a telegram of authorization from the Assistant Secretary of War, George de Rue Meiklejohn, to "select such Indians as he wishes among the Apaches including Geronimo to go to the trans-Mississippi Exposition," he struggled to get Lieutenant Frederick Beach, the officer in charge at Ft. Sill, to permit the Apache leader and his fellow prisoners leave for Omaha. Beach argued that the Apaches would be better served staying to gather the harvest, but ultimately relented to Mooney's request. Whether the Apaches wanted to go on their own accord is not known. Beach ultimately agreed to Mooney's request, and Geronimo would a popular feature of the exhibit.<sup>77</sup>

The July 25 issue of the *Daily Bee* reported that preparations for the Indian Congress were nearly complete and that only minor details regarding the grounds remained. Mercer was unable to say when the Indians would arrive at the exposition, but he felt "pretty certain" that many would be on hand for the "Indian Day" parade, scheduled for August 4.<sup>78</sup> The captain was still having trouble securing commitments from Indian agents to send tribal representatives, and according to Clough, even the Indians from the Omaha and Winnebago agency that Mercer managed refused to attend

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<sup>77</sup> Moses, 116-117.

<sup>78</sup> *Omaha Daily Bee*, 25 July 1898.



until after their wheat harvest and annual powwow.<sup>79</sup> The *Daily Bee* article reported that organizers had abandoned the original plan of bringing “partially civilized” Indians to the exhibit, preferring instead to secure those who had “seldom come in touch with the whites,” as this would be a “more attractive feature.” The article estimated that a total of seven hundred Indians from “forty-odd” tribes would attend. It is not clear if this lofty number was merely the wishful thinking of Rosewater or Mercer.<sup>80</sup>

Once Indian Day arrived on August 4, much of the original design of the Indian Congress had already been compromised. Instead of thousands of being in attendance, approximately 450 Native Americans were present on the exposition grounds. While just over twenty tribes were represented, there was little geographic diversity among the participants. About eighty percent of the Indians present were from the Plains region. Just fifteen Indians of the Flathead, Kootenai, and Calispel tribes represented the northwestern United States, and there were no representatives from the Iroquois, Navajo, Pawnee, or from any of the tribes of the southeastern United States.<sup>81</sup> (See Table 1.) Although Mooney had originally planned the Indian Congress to feature a wide variety of aboriginal housing types, nearly all the Indians present were housed in tepees while living on the fairgrounds. He would later complain that “not even the characteristic earth lodge

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<sup>79</sup> Clough, 72.

<sup>80</sup> *Omaha Daily Bee*, 25 July 1898.

<sup>81</sup> Mooney, “The Indian Congress at Omaha,” 129-130.

TABLE 1

Participants of the Trans-Mississippi Exposition Indian Congress  
(as of September 15, 1898)

Tribe	Reservation Location	Number in Delegation
Sioux	Rosebud, SD	48
	Crow Creek, SD	5
	Cheyenne River, SD	9
	Lower Brule, SD	7
	Pine Ridge, SD	10
	Standing Rock, ND & SD	9
Blackfeet	Blackfeet, MT	22
Assiniboine	Fort Peck, MT	25
Sac and Fox	Sac and Fox, IA	16
Apache	San Carlos, AZ	21
Chippewa	Lac du Flambeau, WI	25
	Bad River, WI	5
Flathead, Kootenai, and Calispel	Flathead, MT	15
Crow	Crow, MT	26
Sac and Fox	Sac and Fox, OK	33
Iowa	Iowa, OK	4
Ponca	Ponca, OK	30
Tonkawa	Oakland, OK	10
Cheyenne (Southern)	Cheyenne and Arapaho, OK	43
Arapaho (Southern)	Cheyenne and Arapaho, OK	24
Kiowa	Kiowa and Comanche, OK	22
Apache (Geronimo's Band)	Fort Sill, OK	22
Wichita	Wichita, OK	36
Omaha	Omaha, NE	31
Winnebago	Winnebago, NE	9
Pueblo	Pueblo, NM	15
Otoe	Otoe, OK	11
<b>Total</b>		<b>545</b>

*Source:* Reprinted, with permission of the publisher, from John A. Wakefield, *A History of the Trans-Mississippi and International Exposition*. (Omaha: Trans-Mississippi and International Exposition, 1903. Reprint: Omaha: Omaha Public Library, 1992), 632.

of the Omaha Indians was shown, although such houses are still in occupancy on the reservation less than sixty miles distant.”<sup>82</sup>

The encampment was set up on a multi-acre site on the north end of the exposition fairgrounds. The Indians had been encouraged to bring traditional cooking utensils and were responsible for preparing their own meals, but the Bureau of Indian Affairs supplied the food rations from a warehouse built nearby. Filtered water was on hand for drinking, and a large pool, build of cement, approximately 750 square feet in size, and three feet deep, was constructed for bathing and sports.<sup>83</sup> A reporter from the *Daily Bee* observed that women did most of the work setting up the tepees and other chores, while the men socialized or relaxed in the shade. He deduced amusingly that the “Indian man is a firm believer in the rights of woman. At least he believes that the woman has a perfect and undisputed right to work while he takes life easy.”<sup>84</sup>

According to the *Daily Bee*, Captain Mercer quickly assumed a paternal role over the Indians present. The newspaper reporter wrote that the Indians “look upon him as the man who stands next to President McKinley, and consequently all of them come to him to pour their joys and trouble into his ears.” While Mercer was already known to the Omaha and Winnebago tribes, the Jicarilla Apaches bestowed upon him the name “He Who Feeds All.”<sup>85</sup> In describing Indian Day celebration, Rosewater wrote that the event

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<sup>82</sup> Ibid., 129.

<sup>83</sup> *Omaha Daily Bee*, 25 July 1898.

<sup>84</sup> *Omaha Daily Bee*, 4 August 1898.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid.

“was commenced by Captain Mercer taking 150 of his children of the plains and the forests down town and parading them” through the streets of the fairgrounds.<sup>86</sup>

### **Plans for a Shame Battle**

As late as August 5, Rosewater continued to describe the Indian Congress in the *Daily Bee* as “one of the most remarkable gatherings, whether viewed from an ethnological or anthropological standpoint, ever offered,” but Mercer was already in negotiations to drastically alter the exhibit put forth.<sup>87</sup> The Improved Order of Red Men, a secret society made up entirely of white males, had contacted Mercer in late July in hopes that he would allow Indians from the encampment to participate in two sham battles that they hoped to organize on the exposition grounds.<sup>88</sup> The fraternal organization was scheduled to hold their annual lodge meeting in Omaha on August 10 and was being honored at the exposition with a “Redmen’s Day” celebration. The Improved Order of Red Men order was known for dressing in American Indian costume and imitating native customs in their ceremonies. The organization experienced a spike in membership in the 1890s, owed largely to the heightened public interest in the history of the American Indian. The rise in the interest in Native American life may have been the result of the prevailing belief that Indian culture would soon become extinct. In the last five years of the nineteenth century, the organization swelled from nearly 200,000

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<sup>86</sup> *Omaha Daily Bee*, 5 August 1898.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>88</sup> *Omaha Daily Bee*, 11 August 1898.

members to over approximately 350,000 in 1900.<sup>89</sup> Well over two thousand members were expected to be in attendance for the lodge meeting.<sup>90</sup>

Ignoring the purpose of the Indian Congress as described in the Indian Affairs appropriation bill, Mercer not only agreed to their request, but offered to take part as the “renegade white” man. Rosewater received word of the plan and a report in the August 10 *Daily Bee* stated that “it will take place about 6:30 o’clock in the evening in the Indian village, and will continue until the last Indian bites the dust, for the program calls for the destruction of the noble red man after the whites are on the razor edge of death.”<sup>91</sup> The article went on to report that the Indians would be headed by Mercer, who would have the responsibility of preventing the Native Americans from engaging in genuine combat during the sham battle. The reporter wrote that Mercer must be certain that “his pets do not turn play into earnest.”<sup>92</sup>

In Mooney’s plan for the Indian Congress, the variety of indigenous homes was supposed to serve as the defining piece of the exhibit. In order to make room for the sham battle, Mercer decided that the Indian lodges in the center of the encampment needed to be moved to the far west end of the grounds.<sup>93</sup> As many as five hundred members of the Improved Order of Red Men, as well as the entire encampment of

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<sup>89</sup> Mark C. Carnes, *Secret Ritual and Manhood in Victorian America* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), 1, 98-99.

<sup>90</sup> *Omaha Daily Bee*, 8 August 1898.

<sup>91</sup> *Omaha Daily Bee*, 10 August 1898.

<sup>92</sup> Ibid.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid.

Indians, were expected to participate in the performance. Five thousand rounds of blank ammunition were ordered and were to be divided between the whites and the Indians, and Mercer sent a request to the Omaha and Winnebago agency requesting to borrow at least 150 horses. Combined with the horses already brought by the Indians at the exposition, at least 300 horses would be available for a Native American cavalry. The members of the Red Men would also field a company of cavalry, but most would fight on foot.<sup>94</sup>

The battle plan called for the white forces to make a preemptive assault on the Indians. A cavalry unit made up of members of the Red Men would enter the grounds of the Indian Congress under the pretense that they were looking for some lost Indians. Upon seeing the large number of Indian lodges in the distance, the commander would gather his officers to discuss their plan of action. Scouts would be sent to gather information about the Indian population, and would return with the news that the lodges housed a large number of Indian warriors and their families. The council of officers would then decide that they should attack the Indians. About five hundred white soldiers would then be lined up and given the option of fighting or returning to their homes. All of the men would shout out their willingness to fight until “the last Indian is killed.”<sup>95</sup>

As the Indians ate their dinners, the whites would then advance into the encampment having been given the instructions “whenever you see a head, hit it.”<sup>96</sup> The attacking army would soon find itself outnumbered by the Indian warriors, led by Captain

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<sup>94</sup> *Omaha Daily Bee*, 8 August 1898.

<sup>95</sup> *Omaha Daily Bee*, 10 August 1898.

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid.*

Mercer playing the role of “Wyoki Nicyople Tigurebli Acolthj,” or “Great Man Who Fights Them All.” Counterattacking by horseback and on foot, the Indians would force the whites into retreat. Those not retreating or pretending to be dead would be captured, and the Indians would act as if they were scalping them or preparing to burn them at the stake. Discovering the initial defeat of their comrades, a second unit of whites would then enter the field of battle in a final climax. This second wave of whites would pretend to kill or capture all of the Indians, including Mercer, and rescue the white captives. At the conclusion of the battle, the audience would be treated to a fireworks display.<sup>97</sup>

### **The First Sham Battle**

Because of problems encountered by many of the members of the Improved Order of Red Men in arriving in Omaha at the scheduled time, the idea for a sham battle could have been abandoned. However, Mercer insisted that the show must go on. Three hours before the sham battle was to begin, Mercer received news from officials from the fraternal society that, aside from a few volunteers, they would not be able to provide the hundreds of soldiers that they had guaranteed. The Red Men’s army was to have been made up mostly of members of the organization coming from Tennessee, but they did not arrive in time for the scheduled performance.<sup>98</sup> At this point Mercer had the option of canceling the performance and continuing with the original design of the Indian Congress; but having already promoted the sham battle and sensing public

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<sup>97</sup> Ibid.

<sup>98</sup> *Omaha Daily Bee*, 11 August 1898.

disappointment, he scrambled to find participants and props necessary to stage a show. He managed to acquire guns used by cadets of a nearby high school, purchased several blank cartridges, and hired enough horses for the Indians and whites to field cavalries during the performance. Mercer then contacted Dick Maddox, the manager of a Wild West show that had set up on the Midway of the exposition fairgrounds, to request his participation and that of the rough riders in his show. Maddox agreed, and along with his sidekick, Rattlesnake Pete, led the white army into the sham battle.<sup>99</sup> Finally, Mercer decided to supplement the white army with members of the Indian Congress whom he dubbed as “friendly Indians.” In all, this collection of protagonists totaled at least six hundred men. Mercer’s “hostile” force included the rest of the men from the Indian Congress, as well as two of his clerks from the Indian Agency.<sup>100</sup>

With “thousands of spectators” on hand, Mercer managed to stage the sham battle almost entirely to the script that he had helped devise the week before. As an added feature, some of the women of the Indian Congress participated in the performance by pretending to join in the torturing of the white soldiers. Two members of the Red Men were mistakenly arrested for trespassing during the battle after they momentarily stepped away from the action to collect more blank cartridges.<sup>101</sup> In the concluding scene of the battle, Mercer’s character was captured and told that his followers had been annihilated. Ironically, “Great Man Who Fights Them All” then agreed to give up his wickedness and

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<sup>99</sup> *Omaha Evening World Herald*, 11 August 1898.

<sup>100</sup> *Omaha Daily Bee*, 11 August 1898.

<sup>101</sup> *Omaha Evening World Herald*, 11 August 1898.





Figure 5. Sham Battle. From the collections of the Omaha Public Library. Used with permission.

become an Indian agent. In return, he was promised that “after the exposition he could have the Omaha agency and that his Indians could return to the reservations from which they came.” At the conclusion of the show, Indians and spectators alike surrounded Mercer and offered cheers.<sup>102</sup>

Although the sham battle was a drastic departure from Rosewater’s original concept for the Indian Congress, his newspaper wrote glowing reviews of the

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<sup>102</sup> *Omaha Daily Bee*, 11 August 1898.

performance in the *Daily Bee*. It is likely that given his role as the manager of publicity and promotions, Rosewater felt obligated to promote all of the events taking place at the fair. An article appearing the following day praised Mercer for his determination to stage the sham battle despite the failure of the Red Men to come through on their promises. Even the *Omaha Evening World Herald* broke from its practice of offering little coverage of the exposition by providing favorable coverage of the sham battle on its front page the following day. Complete with an artist's crude depiction of the battle, the article described the performance as a "realistic fight."<sup>103</sup> (See Figure 4.) The popular success of the sham battle led Mercer to schedule additional performances, as often as three times per week, throughout the following months. Mercer continued to design the sham battles, pitting various tribal alliances against another. On some occasions he would have the Sioux fight a grand coalition of all the other tribes of the Indian Congress. Each performance would end with a war dance, and a number of unfortunate participants from the losing side tied to a stake, threatened with a fiery death. The short supply of blank ammunition proved to be a frequent problem for Mercer, as some battles would end after just five minutes of gunfire.<sup>104</sup>

A typical sham battle is outlined in the James B. Haynes's official *History of the Trans-Mississippi and International Exposition*:

The Sioux, the Wichitas, the Kiowas and the Assiniboines came into camp with a prisoner of the Blackfeet. Round and about him the Indians danced and taunted him in anticipation of the burning. A couple of scouts were thrown out to protect

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<sup>103</sup> *Omaha Evening World Herald*, 11 August 1898.

<sup>104</sup> Moses, *The Indian Man*, 119.



Figure 5. A Special Artist's Impression of the Wednesday Evening's Sham Battle on the Exposition Grounds. Reprinted from the *Omaha Evening World Herald*, 11 August 1898.

the camp from the enemy. The latter were killed and scalped by a couple of scouts of the enemy. The latter rushed into their camp with information of the other encampment, and just as the match was applied to the brush about the feet of the victim at the stake, the Blackfeet descended upon the Sioux and swept them away. In the fight four prisoners were taken, and the now victorious party were preparing for a stake burning of their own. But before their arrangements were completed the Sioux had secured reinforcements and returned to rescue their tribesmen. A pitched battle ensued, in which men were killed and scalped and the bodies of the dead warriors were mutilated by the women of the respective parties.<sup>105</sup>

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<sup>105</sup> Haynes, 230.

Haynes claims that the sham battles were designed so that the “fearlessness, agility, horsemanship, etc.” of the Indian could be on full display for the onlookers, and that the performance took on such realism that “the onlooker was often carried away with the excitement of the moment.”<sup>106</sup>

The scalping, killing, and burning at the stake clearly reinforced the belief to white audiences that Indians were an aggressive and violent people, but they also employed other stereotypical depictions of the time. Haynes notes that “A retreat of the Indians was frequently a feature of the sham battles,” emphasizing the idea of the defeated Indian. In addition, during the performances it was the women of the tribes who completed the bulk of work, playing on a common stereotype of the time that Indian males were lazy.<sup>107</sup> Finally, reports of the exposition Indians’ enthusiasm for participation in the sham battles played into the notion that the Indians were warlike and “uncivilized.” Haynes writes that “these contests were entered into with zest on the part of the Indians.”<sup>108</sup>

It is reasonable to believe that the Indians were willing to participate in sham battles because they served as a source of income while they were away from their livelihoods at home, and they provided relief from the monotony of life in the encampment, where otherwise their purpose was merely to be seen by white onlookers.

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<sup>106</sup> Ibid., 230.

<sup>107</sup> A list of stereotypes of this period can be found in A.L. Benedict, “Has the Indian Been Misjudged? – A Study of Indian Character,” *International Journal of Ethics* 12, no. 1 (Oct. 1901): 99-113.

<sup>108</sup> Haynes, 230.

Mercer had arranged for the participants of the sham battle to receive approximately half of the ten-cent admission fee, with women earning half the amount given to men. The remainder of the gate receipts went to covering the cost of constructing a grandstand of five thousand seats. During the busiest periods of the exposition, male participants earned as much as eight dollars per week.<sup>109</sup>

### **Buffalo Bill Comes to Town**

The ethnological presentation of the Indian Congress became further entangled with the Wild West shows later in August, when Buffalo Bill Cody arrived at the exposition for four performances over a two-day period. In scheduling his appearance with the exposition association, Cody was granted his request to be honored with a “special day,” similar to the honor given to the Improved Order of Red Men.<sup>110</sup> Rosewater promoted the pending arrival of Cody in the *Daily Bee* by describing his show as an “ethnological congress” that had provided “educational entertainment” at past expositions in the United States and Europe. Though Cody was born in Scott County, Iowa, and spent most of his childhood in Iowa and Kansas, he began his career as a showman in Omaha.<sup>111</sup> The *Daily Bee* touted Cody as a “celebrated son of Nebraska” and asserted that it was fitting to honor the showman “with an especial day when he comes to visit the superb fair which is now glorifying the rapidity of progress...of his own

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<sup>109</sup> Bigart and Woodcock, 20.

<sup>110</sup> Ibid., 411.

<sup>111</sup> Don Russell, *The Wild West*. (Ft. Worth: Amon Carter Museum of Western Art, 1970), 16.

state.” Plans for “Cody Day” featured a parade through the fairgrounds that included Indian performers of the Wild West show as well as the Indians from the Indian Congress. Rosewater describes the parade of various Indian tribes as being “a sight to touch the heart of the anthropologist.” The festivities would also include a ceremonial welcome to Cody given by exposition officials and several prominent political officials from the state.<sup>112</sup>

Cody’s *Wild West and Congress of Rough Riders of the World* arrived by rail early on the morning of August 30. His employees quickly constructed an amphitheater capable of holding several thousand spectators on the north Midway of the fairgrounds, and by two o’clock were ready for the first of two performances that day. The show featured “Custer’s Last Rally,” a reenactment of the Battle of Little Big Horn that included Indian performers that had fought in the actual fight. Supporting the notion that Cody’s show represented an officially sanctioned presentation of the West, the performance included a weapons demonstration by uniformed veterans of the fifth regiment of the United States Artillery, as well as military exercises by veterans of sixth regiment of the United States Cavalry. Staying current with the public’s interest in the war with Spain, Cody included a presentation of Cuban troops who had purportedly fought against the Spanish. The show also featured feats of marksmanship by Annie Oakley and Johnnie Baker, a demonstration of “tent pegging” by English lancers, and performances by horsemen from Russia, Arabia, and Mexico. In addition to the Little Big Horn reenactment, the Indians of the Wild West show participated in a dramatized

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<sup>112</sup> *Omaha Daily Bee*, 28 August, 1898.

attack on a stagecoach and a frontier cabin. The also performed a buffalo hunt and engaged in horse racing. According to the *Daily Bee*, the first performance attracted over five thousand spectators, with even more in attendance for the evening performance.<sup>113</sup>

It is important to note that while the exposition's Indian Congress was originally intended to afford white Americans the opportunity to see an "authentic" depiction of the life and customs of various tribes of Indians, the staging of Cody's Wild West show provided the Indians of the congress an opportunity to see a theatrical depiction of Indians as imagined by white Americans. The *Daily Bee* reported that an unusual feature of the Wild West show performance at the exposition was that hundreds of Indian Congress participants were present in the audience, appearing "to take as much interest in the acts of their fellow redskins as did any of the others present." At the conclusion of the afternoon performance, the Indians in the audience were welcomed to enter the staging area to socialize with the Indians of the Wild West show. The newspaper reporter observed that this unplanned interaction was "a show in itself."<sup>114</sup>

The August 31 "Cody Day" festivities attracted 22,540 visitors, the fifth largest daily attendance for the exposition to that date.<sup>115</sup> It began with performers from the Wild West show being greeted at the gates of the fairgrounds by the exposition's general manager, Thaddeau S. Clarkson, along with approximately 150 mounted Indians from the

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<sup>113</sup> *Omaha Daily Bee*, 30 August 1898, and 31 August 1898.

<sup>114</sup> *Omaha Daily Bee*, 31 August 1898.

<sup>115</sup> Haynes, 245-246.

Indian Congress.<sup>116</sup> Following the parade of performers was Cody, mounted on a “magnificent chestnut” gelding that had been given to him by his former commander and hero of the Spanish-American War, Major General Nelson A. Miles. Thousands of spectators cheered along the parade route, while a multitude of government and business dignitaries assembled on a band stand to pay tribute to Cody. Attending the ceremony were Governor Holcomb, four former Nebraska governors, Senator Thurston, and Pony Express co-founder and Cody’s former employer, Alexander Waters.<sup>117</sup> At the conclusion of the parade, horsemen from the Wild West show gave a performance on the exposition plaza. Cody then made his way to the grand stand, where he was greeted by Clarkson and given a thunderous ovation from the audience.<sup>118</sup>

The speeches offered by Holcomb, Waters, and Thurston reinforced the understanding that both the Indian Congress and Cody’s Wild West show represented accurate portrayals of the history of the American West. Holcomb repeated earlier predictions that the fair would likely serve as a final opportunity for whites to observe Native Americans in large numbers, for Indian culture was “going further and further toward the setting sun.” He asserted that fairgoers should view the Indian Congress as an “educational and instructive scene” that, in contrast to the technological marvels found elsewhere on the fairgrounds, helped to demonstrate the “evolution in the progress of

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<sup>116</sup> Clarkson took on the role of official host in the absence of exposition president Gurdon W. Wattles, who had left for Washington, D.C. the previous day to make arrangements for President McKinley October visit to the exposition.

<sup>117</sup> *Omaha Daily Bee*, 1 September 1898, and Haynes, 411.

<sup>118</sup> *Omaha Daily Bee*, 1 September 1898.



human society.” In addition, the Holcomb praised Cody as someone who understood the history of the American West, and through the Wild West show, presented a genuine representation of the region as it existed just “a quarter of a century” before.<sup>119</sup>

After sharing anecdotes of Cody’s service in the Pony Express, Majors took the opportunity in his speech to elevate Cody as one of the most significant figures in American history. Majors listed several statesmen, including Andrew Jackson, Henry Clay, and Abraham Lincoln, who had worked to make the country great. He continued by saying that, while there had been important men in American industry and entertainment, Cody was “even greater and higher,” and that he was “not at the head of the shomen of the United States of America, but of the world.”<sup>120</sup>

Senator Thurston repeated the claim that the Wild West show was an instructive endeavor. Thurston asserted that Cody was not “a showman in the common sense of the word,” but rather “a great national and an international educator of men.” Cody’s travels to Europe with the Wild West show “furnished a demonstration of the possibilities” of the United States that had “advanced us in the opinion of all the world.” Finally, the senator praised the showman for having worked to protect white Americans from “hostile” Indians. Remembering Cody’s earlier career as a scout, Thurston stated that:

we remember that when this whole western land was a wilderness; when these representatives of the aborigines were attempting to hold their own against the onward tide of civilization, the settler and the hard pioneer, the women and the

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<sup>119</sup> Ibid.

<sup>120</sup> Ibid.

children, always felt safe wherever Cody rode along the frontier, and he was their protector and defender.<sup>121</sup>

Thus, Cody's Wild West show served to reinforce the commonly-held understanding that Indians were an inherently violent and inferior people, and that their culture was incompatible with white "progress."<sup>122</sup>

In Cody's address, he affirmed that the removal of Indians from the frontier was necessary for progress, and that pioneers like himself could never forget "the trials and tribulations that we had to encounter while paving the path for civilization and national prosperity."<sup>123</sup> At the conclusion of his speech, Cody prompted the performers of the Wild West show to offer three cheers to Nebraska and to the exposition, and Cody's band played "The Red, White and Blue." At the song's conclusion, the exposition's band played the "Star Spangled Banner" as the Wild West performers formed a parade line out of the plaza. The description of the parade given in the *Daily Bee*, particularly the order of the procession, reinforced prevailing attitudes about white racial superiority and the hierarchy of races. The outgoing procession was led by Cody on horseback and the public officials and business leaders riding carriages. Following them were the representatives from several nations (many from non-Western cultures) who performed with the Wild West show. In the rear was Captain Mercer, leading the representatives of

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<sup>121</sup> Ibid.

<sup>122</sup> Ibid.

<sup>123</sup> Ibid.

the Indian Congress.<sup>124</sup> Before leaving the fairgrounds, the parade made its way through the encampments of the Indian Congress, affording the opportunity for the dignitaries and the Indians there to regard one another.<sup>125</sup> Given the prevailing attitude that Indian culture would soon become extinct, many whites in the procession must have thought that this was a final opportunity to see an Indian encampment.

### **Daily Life at the Indian Congress**

To be sure, daily life in the Indian Congress encompassed more than just the sham battles. In the first week of the August, visitors had the opportunity to attend a traditional dance performed by several Assiniboine women. The *Daily Bee* described the performance as “an easy swinging affair,” with dance movements that appeared similar to “a chicken that hops about with badly frozen feet.”<sup>126</sup> On other occasions, Indians gave public performances of the “Grass Dance.” This particular dance, also known as the “Omaha Dance” for the tribe that originated it, was frequently performed by Indians employed in Wild West shows. It was regarded as controversial because officials of the Bureau of Indian Affairs believed it roused aggression and unrest among young men. The dance requires several motions using the head and shoulders, and suggested a “sense of arrogance or pride.”<sup>127</sup>

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<sup>124</sup> Ibid.

<sup>125</sup> Haynes, 411.

<sup>126</sup> *Omaha Daily Bee*, 6 August 1898.

In order to prevent performances of the Grass Dance on reservations, some Indian agents had gone so far as to withhold rations, threaten military action, or jail those who engaged in the ceremony. Agents had no legal grounds to abolish the dance, but many did their best to regulate its occurrence. Clough hypothesizes that Mercer allowed the Grass Dance at the Indian Congress because it was performed in front of thousands of spectators, rather than at an isolated reservation, where it could incite unrest. The dance also served as a popular attraction among visitors.<sup>128</sup> Unfortunately for the exposition organizers, the Indians refused to conform to a regular performance schedule, choosing instead to dance only when “they [felt] like it.”<sup>129</sup>

Although the dances were well received, Mercer decided early in his tenure that the general public was not interested in the ethnological features of the Indian Congress. In a report submitted to Commissioner Jones in September, Mercer stated that while the encampment held educational value to students of ethnology:

This feature of it was of comparatively little interest to the average visitor, who, having seen one or two camps had seen them all. In other words, the real differences and characteristics of the Indians were of very little interest to the average visitor. A scientific exhibit appeals to but a small percentage of the Exposition visitors. The greater portion of the people coming to the Exposition visit the Indian Congress, and invariably express the fullest satisfaction. However, what they really desire is amusement; they prefer to see the Indians in their full dress on parade, conducting their ceremonies, their dances, or participating in sham-battles. All of these are being provided so far as

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<sup>127</sup> William K. Powers, *War Dance: Plains Indian Musical Performance* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1990), 70-72.

<sup>128</sup> Clough, 77-78.

<sup>129</sup> *Omaha Daily Bee*, 1 September 1898.

practicable, to the delight of the eager crowds which are often larger than the grounds can comfortably accommodate.<sup>130</sup>

Considering that the first sham battle took place within a week of the opening of the Indian Congress, Mercer probably had made up his mind to abandon the approved plans for the exhibit before the public ever had a chance to respond.

Mercer had hoped to stage a regular schedule of foot races and other sporting activities, but for much of August, the Indians refused. The region endured an intense heat wave throughout most of the month, and many of the Indians did not wish to suffer further by engaging in rigorous activities. Only the Apaches seemed accustomed to the weather, and were reported to have been “as frolicsome as a lot of kittens” in the daytime sun.<sup>131</sup> In Mercer’s communication with Jones, he reported that “in justice to myself and to the Indians in attendance...the weather has been trying in the extreme.”<sup>132</sup> In lieu of athletic competitions, Mercer decided to amuse the public by holding a “dog feast” for the Indians. It was publicized that in order for an Indian to partake of dog meat, he “must have been a warrior” who had “returned to his people with some scalps attached to his girdle.” About forty men were found worthy of sharing in the meal. The white visitors in attendance were said to have enjoyed watching what they considered to be a primitive rite.<sup>133</sup>

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<sup>130</sup> Mercer, 633.

<sup>131</sup> *Omaha Daily Bee*, 22 August 1898.

<sup>132</sup> Mercer, 634.

<sup>133</sup> Haynes, 228-229.

Another popular attraction at the encampment was the presence of several Indian “celebrities” who were on hand for visitors to see. Chief among them was Geronimo, who attended the Indian Congress with twenty-one other Apaches who were prisoners at Fort Sill, Oklahoma. They had arrived at the exposition accompanied by several federal guards, and resided in military tents while living on the fairgrounds. They were the only participants of the Indian Congress who did not live in a traditional dwelling. In addition, the Apache prisoners’ military warden specified that Geronimo was not permitted to wear traditional Indian dress. According to Alexia Kosmider, the military feared that his native clothing might evoke “savageness” in the chief and among the Apaches, and did not want to remind Geronimo of his former life.<sup>134</sup> (See Figure 6.) In spite of his prisoner status, Geronimo was permitted to sell autographs and pictures of himself for fifty cents and a dollar, respectively.<sup>135</sup> The Apache was the only member of the Indian delegation whose reactions to the exposition have been recorded. In an interview featured in the *Daily Bee*, he stated he favored Indians assimilating into the prevailing society. “I want to see my people learn the ways of the whites. I want to see them raise corn and cattle and live in houses and,” he believed, “the president and the big men at Washington will help my people if they will help themselves.”<sup>136</sup>

Described as a “noted old chief,” Strikes the Iron was a Standing Rock Sioux who was estimated to be nearly 100 years old at the time of the exposition. The *Daily Bee*

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<sup>134</sup> Alexia Kosmider, “Refracting the Imperial Gaze onto the Colonizers: Geronimo Poses for the Empire,” *ATQ* 15, no. 4 (2001), 324.

<sup>135</sup> Haynes, 233.

<sup>136</sup> Omaha Daily Bee, 10 October 1898.

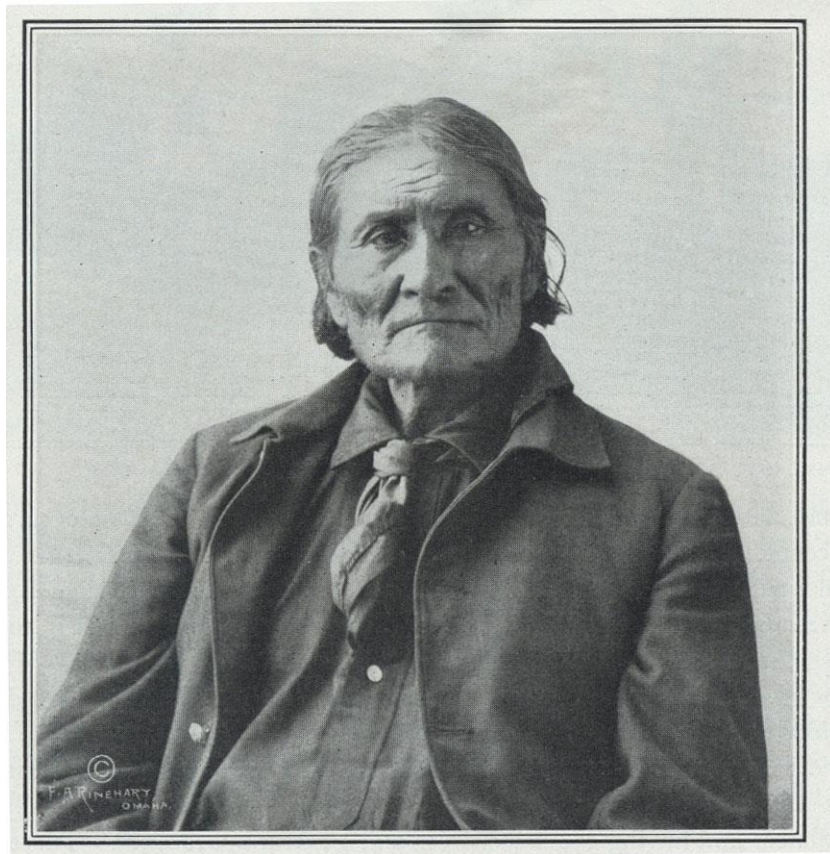


Figure 6. Geronimo. Photograph by F.A. Rinehart. Reprinted from James B. Haynes, *History of the Trans-Mississippi and International Exposition*, (Omaha: Trans-Mississippi and International Exposition, 1910), 224.

speculated that he had killed several whites in the Minnesota Uprising of 1862, and that regarding this incident, “he is not talkative and when approached upon the subject shuts up like a clam.”<sup>137</sup> Having such a warrior at the encampment probably added an element of excitement to fairgoers. Given the man’s age, he was no longer regarded as a threat. Visitors to the Indian Congress also had the opportunity to see Indians who had served

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<sup>137</sup> *Omaha Daily Bee*, 8 August 1898.

the United States in battle. White Swan, a member of the Crow tribe and former scout for the U.S. Army, was said to be the “sole survivor of the Custer massacre.” His battle injuries had left him deaf, badly scarred, and without the full use of his hands, but he was able to tell of his experiences through an interpreter through the use of sign language.<sup>138</sup>

The Indian Congress continued to be promoted as a place where visitors could see “the red man just as nature produces him.” In spite of this claim, many of the Indians were willfully living a far more rustic life at the encampment than what they were accustomed to, in order to appear “authentic” in the eyes of whites. As stated earlier, the Jicarilla Apaches and Flatheads typically wore western clothing and had to make or purchase traditional costumes in order to meet the specifications set forth to appear at the Indian Congress. They were not the only ones who were “playing the part” of “traditional” Indians at the fair. An article in the August 19 *Daily Bee* listed several other “Indians with good records” who had temporarily left their modern homes and lifestyle in order to participate in the exposition. Among them was Standing Bear of the Pine Ridge Agency. Described as a wealthy farmer, he lived in a tepee on the encampment, but usually lived in a “fine log house” with his wife and several children. While staying in Omaha, he took the opportunity to purchase a two-seated family carriage and farm wagon, and enjoyed a discount for paying the full amount with cash.<sup>139</sup> Chief Red Eagle of the Pine Ridge Agency was another successful farmer who lived in a “large comfortable log house” with his wife and child. He temporarily left his four-hundred

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<sup>138</sup> Haynes, 222-223.

<sup>139</sup> *Omaha Daily Bee*, 19 August 1898.



acre farm to live in a tepee and see the sights at the exposition. Another Sioux Chief in attendance, American Horse, visited Washington frequently and had met each of the presidents of the United States going back to James Garfield in 1881.<sup>140</sup>

### **Mooney's Reaction to the Indian Congress**

The ethnologist who was instrumental in making the Indian Congress a part of the Trans-Mississippi Exposition found the end result to frustrating and discouraging. James Mooney arrived in Omaha in late August, accompanied by 106 Indians that he had recruited to participate in the Indian Congress. While gathering participants, the ethnologist also purchased a Wichita grass house which was then transported to Omaha and set up in the encampment. Mooney quickly became disillusioned by the state of affairs at the Indian Congress, and sent a letter of frustration to W.J. McGee:

This grass house and a tipi windbreak – for both of which the Exposition Management paid – constitute about the only ethnology on the grounds as outlined in the original plans or in the circular from the Commissioner. The rest of it has degenerated into a Wild West show with the sole purpose of increasing gate receipts....There is no attempt at representing Indian industries, skin dressing, hide smoking, corn growing, buckskin painting, weaving or silver work. Success is measured by the amount of noise and by ticket sales.<sup>141</sup>

The ethnologist reported that a further difficulty stemmed from hostilities between Mercer and the exposition management, and presumably Rosewater in particular. Mooney did not explain the root cause of the conflict, but stated that it had resulted in

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<sup>140</sup> Ibid.

<sup>141</sup> James Mooney, Omaha, Nebraska to W.J. McGee, Washington, D.C., 27 September 1898, Records of the Bureau of American Ethnology, National Anthropological Archives, Washington, D.C.

Mercer filing an injunction suit. In retaliation, the exposition management refused to post Mercer's announcements of Indian Congress events on the fairgrounds. Probably due to Mooney's association with Rosewater, Mercer refused to endorse any of Mooney's purchases, and refused to pay for the transport of a model Kiowa village that the ethnologist had designed.<sup>142</sup>

Mooney's Kiowa Sun Dance camp was a scale model of a Kiowa village as it existed in 1867, the year that the tribe signed a treaty requiring that it move to a reservation. It consisted of eighty tepees, three feet high and about three feet in diameter, as well as several dozen shields featuring the heraldic emblem of each Kiowa warrior. Each tepee had been hand-painted by a member of tribe, and featured many of the details of the original structures. A smaller version of the exhibit, consisting of twenty-eight tepees, had been on display at Nashville's Centennial Exposition, but Mooney had yet to enjoy seeing the full exhibit on public display. Because of the hostilities with Mercer, the exhibit would remain in storage until the final days of the Trans-Mississippi Exposition.<sup>143</sup>

In Mooney's correspondence to McGee, he requested that he be given the discretion of leaving Omaha before the conclusion of the exposition. "In this place," he lamented, "an ethnologist's time is wasted and his labor lost." Mooney stated that all there was left to gain were taking photographs and the possibility of purchasing artifacts

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<sup>142</sup> Ibid.

<sup>143</sup> Moses, *The Indian Man*, 108-120.

for display in museums.<sup>144</sup> Ultimately, Mooney stayed in Omaha until the final week of the fair.<sup>145</sup> By staying, he succeeded in coordinating an agreement between the Bureau of American Ethnology and the exposition organizers to hire photographer F. A. Rinehart to produce hundreds of portraits of the Indians in traditional costume. Rinehart's photographs remain as one of the most celebrated collections of Native American portraits, but considering that many of the Indians were wearing clothing made especially for the exposition, the photographs are not entirely authentic.<sup>146</sup>

With the arrival of autumn, temperatures cooled and new activities could be observed by visitors to the Indian Congress. Apparently, hostilities between Mercer and Mooney cooled as well, for the ethnologist was asked to oversee both an organized series of races and a performance of the famed Ghost Dance. Both events were scheduled for October 7. The races took place on a one-hundred yard track, and consisted of three heats of eight male runners. The first three races were won by an Apache, a Crow, and a Sioux, respectively, with the Crow runner winning the championship race.<sup>147</sup> In the evening, many Indians participated in the Ghost Dance. The ceremony had originated twelve years earlier, based on vision of Wovoka, a Paiute Indian of western Nevada. Wovoka claimed to have had a vision in which he traveled to heaven and saw "the great god of the Indians, by whom he was informed that by going into a trance the people of

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<sup>144</sup> Mooney to McGee, 27 September 1898.

<sup>145</sup> Moses, *The Indian Man*, 121.

<sup>146</sup> Mooney, "The Indian Congress at Omaha," 147.

<sup>147</sup> *Omaha Daily Bee*, 8 October 1898.

the earth might gain sight of heaven and meet their departed friends.” The dance was soon reproduced by other tribes throughout the American West, and caused Indian agents to fear that the movement might lead to insurrection. This reaction culminated in the massacre at Wounded Knee in 1890. The reenactment of the Ghost Dance marked a rare moment in which the Indian Congress held close to its original purpose. But, as the *Daily Bee* reported, the occasion simply amounted to “a pleasing variation to the sham battles.”<sup>148</sup> The most important sham battle of all would take place the following week, when President McKinley came to visit.

### **President McKinley’s Visit**

Given that the entire course of the Spanish-American War had taken place during the preparation and opening months of the exposition, organizers sought to commemorate the American victory with a special commemoration. Once again, the Indian Congress was held up as an educational exhibit worthy of national attention, and even the president would attend a sham battle performance. The six-day Peace Jubilee Week, held October 10 to 15, was highlighted by the appearance of President McKinley, and included other special days honoring branches of the armed forces, governors, mayors, civil servants, and finally, children. The occasion marked the pinnacle of success for the exposition in terms of attendance and national attention. Over 290,000 people passed through the gates during that week, with a record crowd of 98,845 on October 12, the day of the president’s

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<sup>148</sup> Ibid.

visit.<sup>149</sup> McKinley was accompanied by several members of his cabinet, the foreign ministers of China, Korea, and Brazil, members of Congress, and representatives of the United States military, including Major General Miles. In addition, the president's speech and activities in Omaha were covered by newspapers across the country.<sup>150</sup> (See Figure 7.)

During ceremonies honoring the president and the recent military victory against the Spanish, the Indian Congress was used as evidence of the military dominance of the United States, for the exhibit demonstrated the country's previous successes in subduing a hostile enemy. Exposition president Wattles delivered the opening address of the President's Day ceremony, first offering gratitude to McKinley for "the return of peace to our nation," and then focusing on the significance of celebrating America's victory at the Trans-Mississippi Exposition. Wattles then stated that as the United States took on the challenge of governing new territories in the Pacific and the Caribbean, the country should look to the Indian Congress and reflect on the people and lands that America had already conquered. He asserted that "no better illustration of the greatness and power of our people can be found than the demonstration here made." Wattles asked those in attendance to remember that:

These representatives of a fast-fading race, which for many years contested by war and massacre the westward march of civilization, now dwell in peace and contentment and daily celebrate their rites and victories, surrounded by the triumphs of civilization.<sup>151</sup>

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<sup>149</sup> Haynes, 247.

<sup>150</sup> Ibid., 87-88.

<sup>151</sup> Ibid., 463.

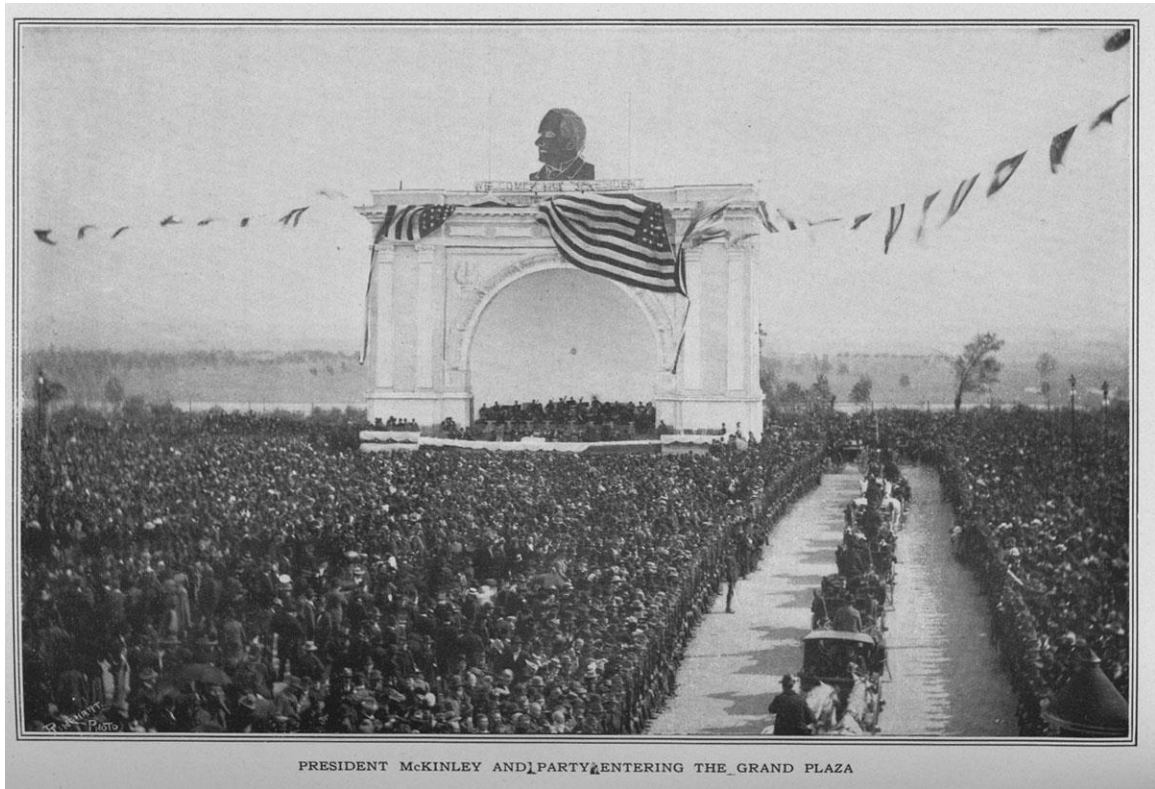


Figure 7. President McKinley and Party Entering the Grand Plaza. Reprinted from James B. Haynes, *History of the Trans-Mississippi and International Exposition*, (Omaha: Trans-Mississippi and International Exposition, 1910), 462.

McKinley followed with a speech praising Omaha and the organizers of the fair, stating that “in an age of expositions they have added yet another magnificent example.” He went on to give a summation of the events leading to war and the successful execution of it, claiming that America’s success was a result of Divine providence. He said that:

The faith of a Christian nation recognizes the hand of Almighty God in this ordeal through which we have passed. Divine favor seemed manifest everywhere. In fighting for humanity’s sake we have been signally blessed. ...

Right action follows right purpose. We may not at all times be able to divine the future, the way may not always seem clear; but if our aims are high and unselfish, somehow and in some way the right end will be reached. The genius of the nation, its freedom, its wisdom, its humanity, its courage, its justice, favored by Divine Providence, will make it equal to every task and the master of every emergency.<sup>152</sup>

One can deduce that McKinley believed that the success of U.S. Indian policy was also the work of a higher power.

Following the ceremony, the president and his entourage traveled by carriage to grounds of the Indian Congress, where they attended a sham battle performance scheduled that afternoon. According the *Daily Bee*, McKinley had confided in his associates that the sham battle was “one feature of the exposition that he did not wish to miss.”<sup>153</sup> With a record crowd attending the exposition that day, the stands quickly filled to their full capacity of five thousand. Many thousands more crowded the edges of the performance area to catch a glimpse of the spectacle that was about to unfold.<sup>154</sup>

Given the occasion of performing before the President, Captain Mercer decided that the attire the Indians had worn up to this point was not suitable for such an important guest. Mercer convinced the Indians to wear costumes that were “peculiar to their original customs,” and arranged for the purchase of brilliantly colored fabric, blankets, and feathers for the creation of new garments.<sup>155</sup> In addition, all of the men, women and children (as well as the horses) participating in the sham battle were covered in copious

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<sup>152</sup> Ibid., 467-468.

<sup>153</sup> *Omaha Daily Bee*, 13 October 1898.

<sup>154</sup> Ibid.

<sup>155</sup> Haynes, 93.

amounts of bright war paint. Although the “hideously, fantastically or ridiculously attired Indians” paid “awkward homage” to the president, the *Daily Bee* reported that the actors “played their parts to perfection and gave the best exhibition yet held on the grounds.”<sup>156</sup>

Before the start of the sham battle, Mercer instructed the Indians to assemble in front of the presidential stand, divided by tribal membership. Members of each tribe stepped forward to greet the president as Mercer announced their affiliation. Some tribes elected to halt motionless before returning to the assembly, while others removed headgear, smiled, or made other respectful gestures. Never before had an American president addressed so many Indians of so many different tribes at once. After each occasion, McKinley doffed his hat in acknowledgement of the greetings.<sup>157</sup>

When the Apaches were announced, Geronimo, seated on a horse and wearing an army scout’s jacket, removed his headgear, grinned, and saluted the president. Haynes writes that Geronimo identified General Miles among those seated near the president. It was Miles who had captured the Apache chief and negotiated the terms of his surrender years before. After staring at the general for “perhaps a couple of minutes,” Geronimo dismounted his horse and walked toward the stands, intent on greeting his former adversary. Once he reached Miles, he extended his hand and said “How, General, I am glad to see you.” Before the general could complete the handshake, Geronimo withdrew his hand, and instead embraced him. Haynes writes of the scene in language seeping with paternalism, stating that “the head of the Apache dropped over on General Miles’

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<sup>156</sup> *Omaha Daily Bee*, 13 October 1898.

<sup>157</sup> *Ibid.*



shoulder, and the old man appeared as contented as a babe laying his head upon the breast of his mother.”<sup>158</sup> The thousands in the audience and the Indians in the arena responded to the friendly reunion by erupting in applause. Miles then removed his Peace Jubilee badge and pinned it to Geronimo’s jacket. Geronimo accepted the badge appreciatively, and was permitted to watch the sham battle seated alongside the general.<sup>159</sup>

On this day Mercer had arranged for an alliance of Sioux, Wichitas, Kiowas, and Assiniboines against the Blackfeet. In the opening scene, the four-tribe alliance returned to their camp with a prisoner from the Blackfeet tribe. The captors tied the prisoner to a stake and placed brush around him, then danced around and taunted their victim before threatening to burn him to death. Before the killing could occur, several Blackfeet warriors entered the camp, freeing the captive and taking four prisoners of their own. Upon returning to their camp, the Blackfeet prepared to burn their prisoners at the stake. Once the alliance secured reinforcements, they rode to the Blackfeet camp, where an intense battle ensued. Many participants pretended to be scalped or die in action, and the women participated in the “mutilating” the victims.<sup>160</sup> The *Daily Bee* reported that the sham battle almost seemed too real, as “Captain Mercer was apparently unable to put an end to the fray. He shouted ordered to cease, but the Indians were determined to kill each

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<sup>158</sup> Haynes, 232.

<sup>159</sup> Ibid., 232-233.

<sup>160</sup> *Omaha Daily Bee*, 13 October 1898.

other off entirely.”<sup>161</sup> Haynes writes that the Indians became so enthusiastic in their efforts to entertain McKinley that “it was with difficulty they were persuaded to desist from shooting at one another – and in fact, but few of them did desist short of firing the last blank cartridge which had been served to them.”<sup>162</sup> In the end, the performance was described as being “so realistic that it almost seemed to be a re-enactment of one of the bloody battles in earlier times.”<sup>163</sup>

The *Daily Bee* reported that McKinley “appeared to study rather than to take amusement out of the spectacle.”<sup>164</sup> For the president and the other government officials in the audience, the sham battle may have seemed disturbingly similar to current events. Just six days earlier, members of the Pillager band of Chippewa Indians fought against federal troops near Leech Lake, Minnesota. Members of the tribe had gathered to resist the arrest a dissident elder of the tribe. During the standoff between the two sides, a rifle discharged accidentally, and Indians opened fire on the soldiers. After a truce, the soldiers withdrew without completing the arrest. It would be the last “war” between Indians and federal troops in the United States. The scale of the uprising had been exaggerated in the national media, and the possibility that hostilities would resume was the news of the day when the president arrived in Nebraska.<sup>165</sup>

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<sup>161</sup> Ibid.

<sup>162</sup> Haynes, 230.

<sup>163</sup> Ibid., 94.

<sup>164</sup> *Omaha Daily Bee*, 13 October 1898.

<sup>165</sup> *New York Times*, 11 October 1898.

At the conclusion of the sham battle, the Indians formed a line in front of the presidential section of the arena. Mercer delivered an appeal from the performers that McKinley descend to the field to personally greet the Indians. The president agreed to the request, and was accompanied by Mercer as he walked along the line, exchanging bows with each of the men, women, and children of the Indian Congress. The *Daily Bee* reported that the scene was “most interesting act in the proceedings of the day,” as it represented a “dying nation” giving honor to “the greatest civilization of the world’s history” that was “just commencing to play its great part upon the stage of the universe.”<sup>166</sup> The president would begin his return to Washington by train the following morning, while General Miles immediately headed to Minnesota to investigate the uprising at Leech Lake.<sup>167</sup>

### **The Final Weeks of the Exposition**

The weather turned cold soon after the president’s visit, and cold winds and snow brought an end to the sham battles. Meanwhile, Mercer finally approved Mooney’s request to assemble his miniature Kiowa camp circle. The exhibit, which Moses describes as “an entirely different kind of celebration of American Indians than those created by Captain Mercer,” took Mooney and a number of Wichita helpers a week to set up. It included eighty tepees and shields within an eighty-foot-wide circle and was

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<sup>166</sup> *Omaha Daily Bee*, 13 October 1898.

<sup>167</sup> *New York Times*, 14 October 1898.

located in a canvas pavilion situated in the Indian encampment.<sup>168</sup> Rosewater offered his colleague the opportunity to explain the significance and detail of the camp circle in a lengthy *Daily Bee* article that appeared on day of the exhibit's opening. In the interview Mooney stated that:

The designs on the tipis are, most of them, of so ancient an origin that the present members of the tribe cannot remember how they originated. In general they grew out of what the original designer claimed were visions. On dying, the warrior who held what was called the "tipi right" delegated it to some member of his family. When it happened that for any reason he failed in this, the design, or coat of arms, as it may be called, became extinct, as no one was allowed to revive it....

The miniature reproduction of the Kiowa circle exhibits with a minuteness of detail all the features of the original. The fact that it has been constructed by the Indians themselves adds to the interest that would naturally attach itself to a subject about which so few are well informed. It will remain on the Indian grounds during the remainder of the exposition...as part of the government exhibit, and will then be returned to the Smithsonian.<sup>169</sup>

The inclusion of Kiowa village at the Indian Congress must have brought some satisfaction to Mooney, but unfortunately the exhibit opened to the public less than three weeks before the close of the exposition.

In the final days of the exposition, the Native Americans at the Indian Congress began collecting their belongings and preparing for the voyage home. Some of the unique dwellings and utensils of the Indians, including the Wichita grass house and accompanying artifacts, were purchased by the Smithsonian Institution for display at future exhibits.<sup>170</sup> Because of the inclement weather, Mercer arranged for the Indians to

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<sup>168</sup> Moses, *The Indian Man*, 120-121.

<sup>169</sup> *Omaha Daily Bee*, 16 October 1898.

<sup>170</sup> Mooney, "The Indian Congress at Omaha," 131-133.

receive blankets and cold weather clothing for their return home. Each of the Indian Congress participants also received a certificate of participation, as well as a gold-plated medal with the inscription “United States Indian Congress, Omaha Exposition, 1898.”<sup>171</sup> Many participants had acquired numerous goods and souvenirs during their time in Omaha, and it was reported that over four hundred wooden trunks were purchased by Indians before their departure.<sup>172</sup>

Mooney expressed his gratitude to those who participated in the Indian Congress by throwing a barbeque at the end of the exposition. He accompanied the Wichita Indians on their return to Oklahoma by rail on October 27. Moses writes that “as a final gesture of enmity, Mercer refused to pay Mooney for five days of work” counting the days between his departure and his stated term of service to the Bureau of Indian Affairs. Mooney eventually received full compensation, but not before assistant comptroller of the treasury got involved at the urging of Bureau of Ethnology director John Wesley Powell.<sup>173</sup>

Over 61,000 visitors attended “Omaha Day,” the final day of the Trans-Mississippi Exposition. The day was made an official holiday in the city, with the Board of Education ordering schools closed and exposition officials encouraging local businesses to close for the day, so as to allow employees to participate in the celebration occurring on the fairgrounds. The closing ceremonies of the afternoon included

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<sup>171</sup> *Omaha Daily Bee*, 23 October 1898.

<sup>172</sup> Haynes, 233.

<sup>173</sup> Moses, *The Indian Man*, 121.

addresses by Edward Rosewater and Exposition President Wattles. In his speech, Rosewater compared the decision for Omaha to host the exposition to his experience in broadcasting news of the Emancipation Proclamation in Washington thirty-five years earlier. Each occasion, he explained, “excited no visible demonstration in the city where it was promulgated,” yet each represented a “momentous epoch in the history of the world.”<sup>174</sup> Rosewater took the opportunity to defend himself from critics who had questioned his management of the promotions department, stating that his responsibilities received “daily and nightly attention,” and helped produce “the most marvelous achievement that the pioneers of the West have ever undertaken and accomplished.”<sup>175</sup>

President Wattles spent little time speaking of the exposition’s place in history, and instead focused on the economic benefits that the exposition had brought the city and the region. “Like a rain in a drouth,” he explained, “it has put new life and energy in all our business interests...Our people have forgotten the evils of panic and depression in the enjoyment of the beauties and pleasures so abundant on these grounds.”<sup>176</sup> He proudly shared news that the exposition itself had been a huge financial success, stating that paying back the nearly \$300,000 invested by exposition stockholders, over \$270,000 remained in assets, allowing for over a ninety-percent return on investment. Wattles reported that he would recommend “an immediate dividend of fifty per cent be declared

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<sup>174</sup> Haynes, 479.

<sup>175</sup> Ibid.

<sup>176</sup> Ibid., 485.

and paid without delay.” Such profits for were unprecedented for expositions held in the United States up to that time.<sup>177</sup>

The Indian Congress was a major factor in the success of the Trans-Mississippi Exposition. It provided the fair a unique feature that distinguished it from other expositions that had been held up to that time. Until the arrival of the Indians in early August, visitor turnout at the exposition was disappointing. Between the opening of the fair on June 1 and Indian Day, daily attendance exceeded twenty thousand only twice, and crowds of fewer than ten thousand were commonplace. After the first two days of the Indian Congress attracted a total of 41,089 visitors, the exposition regularly attracted over twenty thousand daily. On only one occasion afterwards did daily attendance slip below ten thousand. (See Figure 8.) In addition, the monthly attendance rose nearly eighty percent in August, the greatest percent increase during any month of the exposition.<sup>178</sup> (See Table 2.)

The financial success of the exposition and the popular acclaim of the Indian Congress caught the attention of organizers of future expositions who wanted to duplicate the success experienced in Omaha. In fact, the Trans-Mississippi Exposition was so successful that it attracted the interest of private investors who sought to purchase the fairgrounds in order to hold a second exposition in the city the following year. Wattles acknowledged this development by stating that “while I wish God-speed to any new company of enterprising men who under some other name or title may bring new features

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<sup>177</sup> Ibid.

<sup>178</sup> Ibid., 245-247.

here next year, I sincerely hope that the luster of our assured success will not be dimmed by any less important or successful subsequent event.”<sup>179</sup>

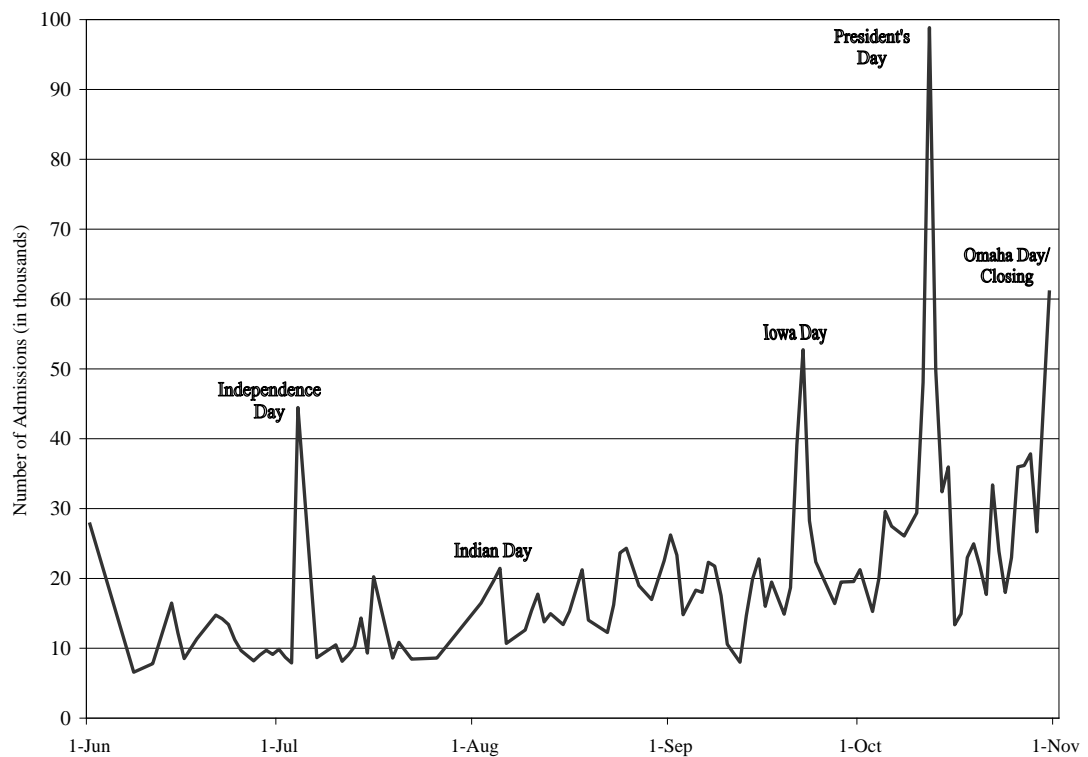


Figure 7. Daily Admissions to the Trans-Mississippi Exposition. Source: James B. Haynes, *History of the Trans-Mississippi and International Exposition of 1898*. (Omaha: Trans-Mississippi and International Exposition, 1910), 245-247.

<sup>179</sup> Ibid., 485.



TABLE 2

## Total Monthly Admissions to the Trans-Mississippi Exposition

Month	Admissions
June	289,351
July	331,684
August	474,177
September	593,168
October	925,128
Total:	2,613,508

Source: James B. Haynes, *History of the Trans-Mississippi and International Exposition of 1898*. (Omaha: Trans-Mississippi and International Exposition, 1910), 245.

## CHAPTER III

### AFTER THE EXPOSITION: REACTIONS AND CONSEQUENCES

#### **Media Reaction to the Exposition and Indian Congress**

The media's praise of the Trans-Mississippi Exposition and Indian Congress would help perpetuate the belief that the Mercer's exhibit represented an ethnologically valid presentation of Native American life. Articles about the Indian Congress began appearing in national magazines by October, and nearly all of the reviews were positive. However, many of the articles that described the exhibit were probably written before any of the Indians actually arrived in Omaha, and were full of information that had been circulated by the Exposition's publicity and promotions department. Since it was not known that Mercer would abandon the stated mission of the Indian Congress until the second week of August, writers who completed their articles before that time could not provide details of exhibit, and were left to use the promotional information offered by Rosewater. Thus, the reviews continued to assert that the exhibit was a "scientific" ethnological exhibit of the traditional life of Indians. Articles appearing in *The Cosmopolitan*, *Scientific American*, and *Century Illustrated Magazine*, along with similar news stories released before the start of the exposition, inadvertently contributed to the belief that the exhibit represented genuine scholarship.

Writing in *The Cosmopolitan*, Alice French declared that after Chicago's 1893 Columbian Exposition, the Trans-Mississippi Exposition was "the finest, the most interesting and the most wonderful, as well as the most beautiful, of American expositions."<sup>180</sup> Especially impressive was the fact that Omaha was relatively small in comparison other cities that had hosted expositions, and that, "at the time of its inception, the whole country was in the wake of a commercial panic." In addition, the outbreak of war in the weeks before opening day deprived the exposition of valuable media attention. In spite of the obstacles, she wrote, "the result must give a thrill of admiration for Western energy."<sup>181</sup>

Although French's article was published in October 1898, the language she uses to describe the Indian Congress, and the inaccuracies regarding the number of tribes attending and the variety of housing types, suggest that she completed the article sometime in July or early August, after federal funding was approved, but before the Indians had arrived. She writes that:

The Indian Congress (rather a misleading name, by the way) is intended to be a representation of Indian life in all its phases. Indians from every considerable tribe will be present. They will live precisely as at home on the plains, so far as their domestic life, industries and sports are concerned. There are, now, several hundred Indians encamped in the fields to the rear of the Transportation Building. Their tepees, wickiups and wigwams are scattered in tribal settlements among the cornfields....Congress has appropriated \$40,000 for the exhibit.<sup>182</sup>

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<sup>180</sup> French, 600.

<sup>181</sup> Ibid., 599-600.

<sup>182</sup> Ibid., 612.

Because she appears to have relied on information given to her from the exposition's promotions department before the staging of the first sham battle, she describes the Indian Congress as "not a Wild West show, but a serious ethnological exhibition." Ironically, as she imagined the scene of the Indians living on the encampment, she was reminded of the traditional salute given by gladiators before entering battle: "Caesar, we who are about to die, salute you." She reasoned that the Indians who were "dancing in the smiling Omaha fields would fitly salute us in such a phrase, since they and their customs are doomed."<sup>183</sup> The analogy is strangely appropriate given that the Indians would perform a sham battle for the president.

Another review that was probably written before the opening of the Indian Congress appeared in the October 15, 1898 issue of *Scientific American*. Describing the Indian Congress "an ethnological exhibit never before attempted," the unknown writer acknowledges that organizers received \$40,000 from the federal government to assemble "the representatives of every tribe of Indians on this continent." No mention is made of the sham battles. Much of the article seems to be based on Mercer's circular to Indian agents. It states that:

The Indians were not coerced into going to Omaha, but, having once reached that city, they seemed to understand what the Indian congress really meant, and are satisfied and happy. The agents were instructed to send old men, and, as far as possible, "head men," who would typically represent the old-time Indian, subdued, it is true, but otherwise uninfluenced by the government system of civilization.<sup>184</sup>

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<sup>183</sup> Ibid., 612-613.

<sup>184</sup> "The Omaha Exposition and the Indian Congress," *Scientific American* 79, no. 16 (1898): 248.

The article claims that the exhibit organizers “faithfully followed” the instructions to gather “hundreds of the best types” of Indians, and that on the opening day of the Indian Congress, “thirty-five tribes were encamped on the grounds.”<sup>185</sup> In truth, only twenty tribes were represented when the exhibit opened.

Albert Shaw’s article on the exposition that appeared in the October 1898 *Century Illustrated Magazine* also was likely written before the sham battles occurred.

Describing the Indian Congress as “the most picturesque and distinctive feature of the exposition,” he goes on to state that “this gathering of Indians was not to partake in any sense of the character of the Midway diversions or the Wild West shows,” but would be managed “under the auspices of the government’s Indian Bureau, with the aid of ethnologists of the Smithsonian Institution.” Shaw predicted that in the final weeks of the exposition, “the assemblage of Indians will have attracted not only national but world-wide attention as the most unusual feature of the exposition.” The article contains no information about the sham battles.<sup>186</sup>

In contrast to the three articles list above, Mary Alice Harriman’s review of the Indian Congress appeared in the June 1899 issue of *Overland Monthly and Out West Magazine* and was clearly written *after* the completion of the exposition. She includes specific details about Mooney’s Kiowa Camp Circle and describes it as “the most elaborate, and certainly the most unique” feature of the encampment.” Harriman writes approvingly of the sham battles as a “spectacular drama with a touch of the genuine.”

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<sup>185</sup> Ibid..

<sup>186</sup> Albert Shaw, “The Trans-Mississippians and Their Fair at Omaha,” *Century Illustrated Magazine* 56, no. 6 (1898): 848.

She writes that the performances were tinged with sadness, for “this little band of a few hundred of a fast-dying race were [sic] once lords of the continent.”<sup>187</sup> Harriman concludes that the Indians’ attendance at the exposition was to their own benefit, for it gave them the opportunity to gain respect and admiration for “the wonderful accomplishments of the white race.” Conversely, she writes that through the exposition, whites were given the chance to see that Indians “are not wholly bad,” and that “generations of ignorance and wrong-doing must be overcome in educating them.”<sup>188</sup>

Curiously, one negative review of the Indian exhibit appeared in the October 1898 issue *McClure’s Magazine*, but the author, William Allen White, took issue not with the sham battles, but with the modest Indian school display that was contained within the Government Building. The Interior Department had intended to construct a model Indian school similar to the one featured at the Chicago exposition, but budget cuts reduced the exhibit to a display case containing samples of work completed by Indian students, along with maps and photographs of the schools.<sup>189</sup> White panned the display as a “pitiable tragic accompaniment” to the Indian Congress, for “it shows the Indian trying vainly to make the jump of forty centuries...all in one wild hopeless leap.” White believed that efforts to “civilize” Indians through education would ultimately fail. “In barren soil,” he wrote, “the mustard-seed dies.” He praised the demonstrations of the Indians’ “savage customs” and “barbaric industries” because they provided a stark contrast to other

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<sup>187</sup> Mary Alice Harriman, “The Congress of American Aborigines at the Omaha Exposition,” *Overland Monthly and Out West Magazine* 33, no. 198 (June 1899): 510-512.

<sup>188</sup> *Ibid.*, 512.

<sup>189</sup> Haynes, 152.

exhibits showing the scientific and technological achievements of whites. Thus, the Indian Congress helped make the “the civilized man more significant.”<sup>190</sup>

### **Reactions from Indian Rights Advocates and Ethnologists**

While the majority of the popular press spoke well of the Indian Congress, Mercer’s management of the exhibit was widely criticized by Indian rights advocates, other Bureau of Indian Affairs officials, and ethnologists. Proponents of assimilation had endorsed the original design of the exhibit because they believed that the Indian Congress would prominently feature the success of the Indian education program. With the inclusion of sham battles and native dancing at a federally sponsored exhibit, Indian school advocates believed that the exhibit had conveyed the message to the public that efforts to “civilize” Indians had failed. After learning of what became of the Indian Congress, Herbert Welsh wrote to Commissioner Jones stating that it would be “very undesirable” to allow for a “repetition of the so-called Indian Congress.”<sup>191</sup> R.H. Pratt of the renowned Carlisle Indian School denounced the exposition as “a Wild West show of the most degenerate sort.”<sup>192</sup>

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<sup>190</sup> William Allen White, “An Appreciation of the West,” *McClure’s Magazine* 11, no. 6 (1898): 578.

<sup>191</sup> Herbert Welsh, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, to William A. Jones, Washington, D.C., 17 March 1899, Indian Rights Association Papers, Thomas Tredway Library, Augustana College, Rock Island, IL, Reel 14.

<sup>192</sup> R.H. Pratt, *The Indian Industrial School, Carlisle Pennsylvania* (Carlisle: Hamilton Library Association, 1908. Reprint: Carlisle: Cumberland County Historical Society, 1979), 40.

Jones also received criticism from members of his own staff. Lieutenant Colonel W.H. Clapp, the acting Indian agent of the Pine Ridge Agency, wrote to the Commissioner protesting the policy of allowing West Show recruiters to enter reservations. He believed that this practice made a “mockery” of the U.S. Indian policy of assimilation, since it effectively encouraged Indians to retain their traditional customs and engage in “savagery”:

Now people will not be curious to see civilized Indians – those whom at great expense the government has educated and to some extent civilized – none such are wanted, but only these who are distinctively barbarous, or who can pose as such. All others are unwelcome and are denied employment. The result is a premium upon barbarism. It is in effect saying to the Indian: “If you retain purely Indian customs, remain a savage with all the gaud of feather, naked bodies, hideous dancing, and other evidence of savagery, we want you, and should you have or can procure a dress trimmed with scalps, we want you very much, and will pay you accordingly.” The Indian is thus taught that savagery has a market value and is worth retaining. The boys in the day schools know it, and speak longingly of the time when they will no longer be required to attend school, but can let their hair grow long, dance Omaha, and go off with shows.<sup>193</sup>

He went on to say that “whether the exhibition is labeled an ‘Indian Congress’ or a ‘Wild West Show,’” the result was detrimental to whites as well. Arguing that whites “go to see naked painted Indians” with the same motive “as they do to see freaks: a two headed girl, or a six legged calf,” Clapp believed that the staging of sham battles fostered “a morbid curiosity unworthy of civilized human beings.”<sup>194</sup> In contrast to Harriman’s article stating that participation in expositions would help Indians gain respect and admiration for white civilization, Clapp wrote that Midway attractions, some of which

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<sup>193</sup> Lt. Col. W.H. Clapp, Pine Ridge Agency, South Dakota, to William A. Jones, Washington, D.C., 9 July 1899, Indian Rights Association papers, Thomas Tredway Library, Augustana College, Rock Island, IL, Reel 25.

<sup>194</sup> Ibid.



featured exotic women, were often “suggestively immoral” and designed to pander to “the lowest passions.” He felt that exposure to such displays gave the Indian “an intimate knowledge of the seamy side of white civilization.”<sup>195</sup>

Alfred Riggs, a Presbyterian missionary at the Santee Agency in Nebraska, rejected the Indian Congress as a “pagan orgy” and “consummate fraud,” and questioned how the government could allow Mercer to organize a “Wild West show at government expense.” Writing in the Santee Agency’s newsletter *Word Carrier*, Riggs was especially upset that Captain Mercer encouraged Native Americans to wear traditional clothing and participate in dances, for this behavior led to the moral decay of the Indians. He wrote that:

Those whom [Mercer]...can get to come are the half-bloods and young educated Indians. From them he strips off their civilized dress and makes them don the shameful toggery of former days. Returned students...are those made over into the semblance of aboriginal pagans....many whose civilized habits and Christian ideals do not permit them to join in these pagan and savage dances at home have been compelled to take part in them at Omaha.<sup>196</sup>

Clough notes that much of the criticism against the Bureau of Indian Affairs for allowing Indians to participate in shows and expositions stems from a sense of paternalism among those who regarded themselves as advocates of Indian rights. “In actuality,” he observes, “it was the Indians themselves who made the decision to engage in Grass dances and sham battles.”<sup>197</sup>

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<sup>195</sup> Ibid.

<sup>196</sup> Alfred Riggs, “That Indian Congress,” *The Word Carrier* 27 (November-December 1898): 30.

<sup>197</sup> Clough, 82.

The Commissioner of Indian Affairs was sympathetic to the complaints regarding the Indian Congress. In response to the criticism, Commissioner Jones wrote to Welsh acknowledging that the Indian Congress “has had a very demoralizing effect” on the Native Americans who participated. He also stated that he would “certainly oppose all movements in the future” of allowing a repeat of what took place at the Trans-Mississippi Exposition.<sup>198</sup> Later that year the Bureau of Indian Affairs enacted a policy of refusing to allow the recruitment of Indians living on reservations to participate in shows or exhibitions. In Jones’ 1900 annual report, he stated that among the firms turned away was “Cody (Buffalo Bill) & Salisbury, which for several years past secured Indians for its ‘Wild West Show.’”<sup>199</sup>

Those who supported efforts to assimilate Native Americans into white society were critical of the Indian Congress because they believed it undermined public support for Indian schools and encouraged Indians to retain their native customs. In contrast, as an ethnologist, Mooney was critical only of how the Indian Congress was managed, seeing it as a lost opportunity to put together an unparalleled scientific exhibit. He believed that it might have been possible to build on the popular success of the Indian Congress with valid ethnological exhibits at future expositions. In an article published in the January 1899 issue of the *American Anthropologist*, Mooney praised Rosewater specifically for originating the idea of the exhibit, and credited his “tireless activity and

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<sup>198</sup> William A. Jones, Washington, D.C., to Herbert Welsh, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, 17 March, 1899, Indian Rights Association Papers, Thomas Tredway Library, Augustana College, Rock Island, IL, Reel 25.

<sup>199</sup> Department of the Interior, Bureau of Indian Affairs. 1900, *Report of Commissioner*, by William A. Jones, 49.

unfaltering courage” for the success of the exposition. While the Indian Congress had “serious imperfections,” it did mark the first time that an exposition had sought and received a federal appropriation for ethnology.<sup>200</sup>

Mooney surely wanted to distance himself from the “Wild West” elements of the Indian Congress, and choose to leave out any mention of the sham battles in the article. Without mentioning Mercer by name, Mooney blamed the failure of the Indian Congress on its administrator’s incompetence:

Unfortunately the execution of the project was intrusted [*sic*] to an official unacquainted with the tribal characteristics, arts, or ceremonies. As a result, no [*sic*] one of the leading native industries was represented....Not even the characteristic earth lodge of the Omaha Indians was shown, although such houses are still in occupancy on the reservation less than sixty miles distant.”<sup>201</sup>

Mooney reported that what ethnological substance did exist was the work of “an expert detailed at the special request of the management” and was paid for “outside of the appropriation” granted by Congress. Presumably, the “expert” to whom he refers is himself.

In spite of its problems, Mooney believed that the Trans-Mississippi Exposition had been “the most successful ever held in this country...not even excepting the World’s Fair” in Chicago. And, given the financial success of the exposition and the popularity of the Indian Congress, he saw an opportunity for ethnologists to pursue Indian exhibits at future expositions. “Indeed,” he wrote, “the projectors of one or two contemplated expositions, after looking over the ground at Omaha, have already included an Indian

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<sup>200</sup> Mooney, “The Indian Congress at Omaha,” 126-127.

<sup>201</sup> *Ibid.*, 129.

exhibit on a large scale as part of their plans.”<sup>202</sup> At the time that Mooney was writing the article, Omaha businessmen were negotiating with President Wattles to purchase the fairgrounds in hopes of staging an encore exposition the following year.<sup>203</sup> Both the Bureau of American Ethnology and the Bureau of Indian Affairs would soon have other opportunities to host exhibits that would please their critics, but the public would continue to be captivated by attractions like the Indian Congress.

### **Consequences of the Indian Congress**

Given the unprecedented profits generated by the Trans-Mississippi Exposition and the popular success of the Indian Congress, later expositions attempted to duplicate what had worked so well in Omaha. The Greater American Exposition, held in Omaha the following year; the Pan-American Exposition of Buffalo; and the Louisiana Purchase Exposition of St. Louis each made ethnology a central focus, and all three included popular “Indian Congresses” that featured sham battles. Ethnologists and Indian School proponents had the opportunity to put forward competing exhibits, but their presentations often failed to capture the public’s interest, and the exhibits suffered from inadequate funding.

Additionally, while ethnologists attempted to convince fairgoers of the validity of their exhibits at the Buffalo and St. Louis world’s fairs, their efforts were undermined by exposition organizers who promoted the competing Indian Congress exhibits as

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<sup>202</sup> Ibid., 127.

<sup>203</sup> Haynes, 485.

“authentic” and “educational.” Sham battle performances continued to be popular at expositions, and served to perpetuate the belief that Indians were inherently aggressive and uncivilized.

### **The Greater American Exposition of 1899**

The association of businessmen who purchased the fairgrounds of the Trans-Mississippi Exposition hoped to capitalize on the public’s interest in the territories recently gained from the war. Named the “Greater American Exposition,” the fair was intended to highlight the art, industries, resources, and “present state of civilization” of the “native peoples” in the recently acquired territories of the United States. Claiming that the Spanish-American War had been a detriment to the 1898 fair, the organizers asserted that this second effort would “present to the American people the first exhibition of the fruits of that war.” Building on the success of the Indian Congress, organizers planned to put together a living exhibit of “more than a thousand natives” from the Philippines, Guam, and the West Indies, and had taken measures to secure materials to design an appropriate landscape for each. They also intended to duplicate the “famous Indian Encampment” of the previous year.<sup>204</sup>

The Bureau of Indian Affairs had not moved to prohibit reservation Indians from working as “show Indians” before the start of the Greater American Exposition, and grudgingly allowed for some Indians to go to Omaha. On this occasion, the Bureau of American Ethnology decline to participate in the organization of an Indian exhibit. The

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<sup>204</sup> Greater American Exposition, July 1st to November 1<sup>st</sup>, 1899, Omaha, U.S.A. (Omaha: Klopp & Bartlett, 1899): 3.

1899 Indian Congress was central feature of the exposition, and was under the direction of Wild West showman Frederick Cummins.<sup>205</sup>

Unlike during the previous year, the Bureau of Indian Affairs displayed a model Indian school on the fairgrounds. Under the direction of Samuel M. McCowan, the superintendent of the Phoenix Indian School, Indian students provided another representation of the Native American that was sorely lacking in the previous year's event. Unfortunately, few came to see it.<sup>206</sup> Omaha's second exposition proved to be far less successful than the first. Organizers had claimed that the Greater American Exposition was "amply supplied with capital" and needed no government assistance to succeed in organizing the fair, but ultimately this was not the case.<sup>207</sup> The exposition suffered from poor attendance, and the federal government was more concerned with the expenses of managing its new territories than in funding a second Omaha fair. The Greater American Exposition closed after just three months in operation, and was dismissed as "a joke and a failure."<sup>208</sup>

### **The Pan-American Exposition of 1901**

Base on the success of the Trans-Mississippi Exposition, organizers of the Pan-American Exposition in Buffalo organized an Indian Congress of their own, and sought

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<sup>205</sup> Rydell, 130.

<sup>206</sup> Trennert, "Selling Indian Education," 212.

<sup>207</sup> *Greater American Exposition*, 3.

<sup>208</sup> Rydell, 124.

advice from Omaha on how to run a successful fair. Representatives of the Pan-American exposition met with Edward Rosewater in 1899 to learn how they could successfully incorporate an Indian exhibit into their fair. The Exposition later hired Frederick Cummins to establish an Indian exhibit on the “Pan” of the fairgrounds, where Midway-type attractions would be established. Again, based on the success of Omaha’s exposition, Cummins’ exhibit would take the name “Indian Congress.” It was understood that the exhibit would feature sham battles and other attractions common to a Wild West show.<sup>209</sup>

Exposition organizers also hoped to make ethnology a central theme of the fair, and selected A.L. Benedict, a professor of physiology and digestive diseases, to serve as the exposition’s Head of Ethnology. Benedict was charged with selecting and overseeing the exhibits of the Ethnology Building, located near the center of the fairgrounds. Given the theme of the exposition, Benedict sought the feature artifacts and other materials from the cultures of the Americas. According to Virginia L. Bartos, Benedict also considered it his responsibility to refute the “dubious claims to scholarship” by the Indian Congress.<sup>210</sup> To this end, Benedict sought to fill his nearly twelve-thousand square feet of space with exhibits borrowed from the finest anthropological and archaeological museums in the country, but he had a difficult time finding enough material. His alma mater, the University of Pennsylvania, loaned him a notable

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<sup>209</sup> Ibid., 130.

<sup>210</sup> Virginia L. Bartos, “A ‘Fine Exhibit by the Bureau of Ethnology’: Dr. A.L. Benedict and the Presentation of Culture at the Pan-American Exposition at the Pan American Exposition” (Ph.D. diss., State University of New York at Buffalo, 2004), 84.

collection of Native American artifacts, but many other institutions declined his request.<sup>211</sup> Benedict resorted to submitting a letter to *Scientific American*, asking for “students from all parts of the country” to send “exhibits or memoranda” from their field research.<sup>212</sup>

In addition to Benedict’s ethnological exhibits, Indian School proponents organized a modest display at the exposition. Limited funds and space kept the exhibit from receiving much attention. Alice C. Fletcher of the Peabody Museum in Massachusetts coordinated a display featuring the scholarly accomplishments of students, as well as traditional crafts produced by those enrolled in Indian schools. Unlike at the Greater American Exposition of 1899, no model school was constructed, and no Indian students came to demonstrate classroom activities.<sup>213</sup>

The Pan-American Exposition provided ethnologists a unique opportunity to manage a living ethnological exhibit that was in direct competition with a Wild West Show. Benedict had authority over the “Six Nations Stockade,” an encampment of approximately eighty Iroquois from the Six Nations Reserve near Brantford, Ontario, Canada. The Indians built their own cabins and offered fairgoers demonstrations in the production of traditional crafts and other activities. The living exhibit was the only one of its kind at the exposition not located along the Pan. Benedict intended to preserve the ethnological “accuracy” of the Stockade, but he soon found it difficult to convince

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<sup>211</sup> Ibid., 118-119.

<sup>212</sup> A.L. Benedict, “Ethnology at the Pan-American Exposition,” *Scientific American* 83, no. 9 (Sept 1, 1900): 134.

<sup>213</sup> Trennert, “Selling Indian Education,” 212-213.



fairgoers that he offered a more authentic exhibit than Cummins. The Indian Congress was much larger than the Iroquois encampment, and being profit-driven, had more money for advertising.<sup>214</sup>

The Indian Congress promoted itself as offering an accurate representation of Indian life, and took advantage of celebrity endorsements. General Nelson A. Miles was quoted in the Indian Congress' program, saying the exhibit offered "great educational value" to those not familiar with traditional Indian life. During a visit to Buffalo, Vice President Theodore Roosevelt participated in one of the sham battles, being captured as part of one of the performances. Cummins even managed to secure an extended appearance of Geronimo, who again was permitted to leave Ft. Sill under military guard.<sup>215</sup>

While Benedict and Cummins competed for the attention of fairgoers, the Indians from the two exhibits entered into a conflict of their own. Iroquois elders from the Six Nations Stockade accused members of the Indian Congress of stealing materials from their encampment, and were upset about some of the "show Indians" fraternizing with the young women of the ethnological exhibit. The Iroquois threatened to leave the exposition if the grievances were not addressed. A writer for the *Buffalo Courier* reported that the matter was so serious that "three ceremonial dances were performed" by

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<sup>214</sup> Bartos, 180-184.

<sup>215</sup> *Ibid.*, 187.

the Iroquois, and that any additional altercations would “surely provoke personal encounters.”<sup>216</sup>

Though Benedict did his best to present an attractive ethnological display with the Six Nations Stockade, it proved to be, with regard to promotions, no match for the supposedly educational Indian Congress in promoting itself as an enlightening exhibit. Rydell writes that William Jennings Bryan’s wife Mary reportedly described the Indian Congress as “a school of instruction, a schoolhouse of information, a happy, merry playground for little children.”<sup>217</sup> It is no wonder that many visitors of the Pan-American Exposition had trouble differentiating the two Indian exhibits. Sixty years later, the matter of which exhibit was which still confused one Buffalo historian. In a 1961 booklet about the Pan-American Exposition published by the Buffalo and Erie County Historical Society, Isabel Vaughan James describes the “Indian Congress” as the encampment of Iroquois on the fairgrounds.<sup>218</sup>

### **The Louisiana Purchase Exposition of 1904**

The Louisiana Purchase Exposition in St. Louis also invited Frederick Cummins to organize an “Indian Congress” on the fairgrounds. His exhibit featured approximately two hundred Indians who participated in sham battles and other performances. In addition, the St. Louis fair featured a substantial ethnological exhibit that included over

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<sup>216</sup> *Buffalo Courier*, 19 July 1901.

<sup>217</sup> Rydell, 149.

<sup>218</sup> Isabel Vaughan James, *The Pan-American Exposition*. (Buffalo: Buffalo and Erie County Historical Society, 1961), 6.

two thousand representing cultures from across the globe. Included in this exhibit was an Indian encampment where over three hundred Indians dressed in traditional clothing and lived in tepees. The exhibit also featured a model Indian school with about 175 students. To some extent, the ethnologists who designed the exhibit were successful in conveying the message that the Indian exhibit was no “Wild West show,” but in other ways they undermined their exhibit in the pursuit of public interest.

Organizers of the Louisiana Purchase Exposition in St. Louis sought to create the largest and most important world’s fair in history. The fairgrounds encompassed over 650 acres, a size nearly twice as large as Chicago’s Columbian Exposition.<sup>219</sup> Likewise, exposition planners sought to host the most significant ethnological exhibit ever featured at a world’s fair. To this end, W.J. McGee was selected to serve as the exposition’s Head of the Department of Anthropology. McGee had recently stepped down from the role of director of the Bureau of American Ethnology in the wake of a scandal regarding the agency’s finances, and perhaps he regarded this opportunity as a chance to revive his career.<sup>220</sup> The ethnologist devised an extravagant plan to put on display individuals from many different cultures of the world. This included Igorots of the Philippines, Pygmies from Africa, the Ainu of remote northern Japan, Patagonians of South America, and several Indian tribes of North America.<sup>221</sup>

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<sup>219</sup> Rydell, 157.

<sup>220</sup> *St. Louis Globe-Democrat*, 14 August 1903.

<sup>221</sup> David R. Francis, *The Universal Exposition of 1904* (St. Louis: Louisiana Purchase Exposition Company, 1913), 522-529.

The various ethnicities were arranged within the Anthropology Exhibit based on the degree to which they were considered to be civilized. The Pygmies and Igorots were regarded as the “most primitive races of the earth,” and were situated on the outlying edge of the exhibit. “Semi-civilized savages,” including the Patagonians, the Ainu, and North American Indians, were set up nearer the center of the exhibit. At the central point of the exhibit stood the model Indian School, which represented the potential of “intellectual development,” which could elevate those assembled from “dull-minded and self-centered tribal existence” to a more fulfilling “life of modern humanity.”<sup>222</sup>

Exposition organizers successfully lobbied Congress in 1902 to appropriate \$40,000 for the purpose of creating an exhibit which illustrated “the past and present conditions of the Indians,” as well as “the progress made by such in education, art...and such other matters and things as will fully illustrate Indian advancement in civilization.” The measure authorized the exposition to gather Native Americans for public display, overriding the policy instituted by the Bureau of Indian Affairs in 1899. Congress later appropriated an additional \$25,000 in 1904 for the Indian exhibit.<sup>223</sup>

McGee’s choice to manage the exhibit, Samuel M. McCowan, was committed to maintaining an ethnologically valid presentation. McGowan had directed the model Indian school at the Greater American Exposition of 1899, and was serving as the superintendent of the Chilocco Indian School in Oklahoma at the time of the appointment. McCowan actively promoted the exhibit as an authentic representation of

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<sup>222</sup> Ibid.

<sup>223</sup> Russell M. Magnaghi, “America Views Her Indians at the 1904 World’s Fair,” *Gateway Heritage* 4, (Winter 1983-84): 23-24.

the Indian and not “as fiction has painted him.” In a 1903 interview in the St. Louis *Globe-Democrat*, McCowan insisted that “the government is especially desirous of keeping out of the exhibit any suggestion of bloodthirstiness.”<sup>224</sup> On the opening day of the exposition, McCowan was quoted in a St. Louis *Post-Dispatch* article, explaining that the Indian exhibit “was not to be a wild west show but was intended to show the educational and industrial progress of the American Indian.”<sup>225</sup>

McCowan sought to avoid the mistakes of earlier Indian exhibits by finding ways of making his displays more appealing to fairgoers. The “old Indians” assembled on the encampment outside of the school building were permitted to sell basketry, beadwork, and other handicrafts to fairgoers. Within the school, McCowan supplemented the usual classroom demonstrations with a booth featuring none other than Geronimo. McCowan must have reasoned that the Apache prisoner had long been associated with popular Indian exhibits at previous expositions, and that his presence in the school building would attract more visitors. As in the past, Geronimo sold autographs and portraits of himself.<sup>226</sup>

McCowan tried to distinguish his ethnological exhibit from Cummins’ Indian Congress, but the Exposition’s organizers undermined his efforts. Cummins was given the honor of being the Grand Marshall of the “All Nations Parade,” which included all of

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<sup>224</sup> *St. Louis Globe-Democrat*, 21 November 1903.

<sup>225</sup> *St. Louis Post Dispatch*, 1 May 1904.

<sup>226</sup> Francis, 528-529.

the ethnic groups featured in the Anthropology Exhibit.<sup>227</sup> The exposition's Press Bureau promoted Cummins' Wild West performances as "authentic," "educational," and "scientific," and helped the Indian Congress attract large audiences.<sup>228</sup> Additionally, the official history of the Louisiana Purchase Exposition does not distinguish between the "show Indians" of the Indian Congress and the Native Americans of McCowan's ethnological and Indian School exhibits when tallying the over two thousand "alien peoples on the grounds" providing fairgoers an object lesson in anthropology.<sup>229</sup> Trennert writes that, in spite of McCowan's efforts, "the public drew little distinction between official and commercial Indian displays."<sup>230</sup>

Though McCowan found ways to enhance the Native American exhibits in St. Louis, the funding provided by the government proved to be inadequate for operating both an ethnological display and a model Indian school. The "traditional" Indians living on the encampment suffered from a poorly-designed sanitation system that left open sewers running alongside their residences. Many of those living at the Anthropology Exhibit contracted diseases, and the Ainu encampment was reported to have suffered from an outbreak of malarial fever. In addition, drinking water was often in short supply. McCowan wrote many letters to the exposition administration requesting that they improve the living conditions. Many Indians carried out their threats to leave before the

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<sup>227</sup> *St. Louis Globe-Democrat*, 1 May 1904.

<sup>228</sup> Martha R. Clevenger, ed. *"Indescribably Grand": Diaries and Letters from the 1904 World's Fair*. (St. Louis: Missouri Historical Society Press, 1996), 16.

<sup>229</sup> Francis, 529.

<sup>230</sup> Trennert, "Selling Indian Education," 217.

conclusion of the fair, and some of the fairgoers who visited the Indian encampment were so appalled by the living conditions that they petitioned the exposition to make improvements.<sup>231</sup>

In addition, like Captain Mercer, who decided to have the Indians of the Omaha Exposition engage in activities not consistent with the stated purpose of his exhibit, W.J. McGee induced the Native Americans and other peoples of the Anthropology Exhibit to participate in activities designed primarily to attract popular interest. Since the Louisiana Purchase Exposition ran concurrently with the 1904 Olympic Games, also held in St. Louis, McGee sought to gain attention by showcasing the physical abilities of the various “savages” of his exhibit in similar athletic events. While the Olympics featured contests among various countries, the Anthropology Days events offered competitions between different races. The participants of Anthropology Days competitions were not necessary athletes, and had no opportunity to train for the events in which they competed, but their performances were publicly compared to those of the white athletes participating in the Olympics. The results were presented by McGee as proof that whites were more advanced physiologically than other races.<sup>232</sup> Just as in Omaha, the Indian exhibit in St. Louis was touted as an opportunity to see an authentic representation of Native

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<sup>231</sup> John William Troutman, “‘The Overlord of the Savage World’: Anthropology, the Media, and the American Indian Experience at the 1904 Louisiana Purchase Exposition ” (M.A. thesis, University of Arizona, 1997), 29-32.

<sup>232</sup> Matti Goksyr, “‘One Certainly Expected a Great Deal More from the Savages’: the Anthropology Days in St. Louis, 1904, and Their Aftermath,” *The International Journal of the History of Sport* 7, no. 2 (1990): 297-299.

Americans, but ultimately, the Indians (and other races) were used to reinforce long-held notions of white racial superiority.



## CONCLUSION

Many cities that have hosted world expositions continue to enjoy great works of architecture that stand as a testament of past glory. The Eiffel Tower in Paris, the Space Needle in Seattle, and the Atomium in Brussels offer continuous reminders that great expositions once took place in those cities. None of the buildings constructed for the Trans-Mississippi and International Exposition were designed to endure for the ages. Except for a dip in North Twentieth Street where the Midway lagoon had existed, hardly any evidence remains in Omaha of the fair.<sup>233</sup> While the Trans-Mississippi Exposition did not leave any landmarks, the legacy of its most celebrated exhibit, the Indian Congress, can be seen in the expositions that came after it.

Edward Rosewater's proposal of a substantial Indian exhibit provided the Trans-Mississippi Exposition a unique attraction that distinguished the fair from those that had come before it. Occurring at time when many whites believed that Native American culture would soon become extinct, the exposition benefited from the notion that the Indian Congress provided visitors an opportunity to witness a part of American heritage for the last time. The involvement of the Bureau of American Ethnology in the design of the exhibit, as well as the federal government's endorsement and funding, helped give the

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<sup>233</sup> Alfes, 328.

Indian Congress credibility as a scientifically-based and educational representation of Native American life.

In the end, the Indian Congress took a very different form than what had been intended by Rosewater, James Mooney and those who had supported its original design. Instead of an exhibit that highlighted the ethnological distinctions of the various Indian tribes of the country, Captain William Mercer transformed the Indian Congress into a popular attraction that featured sham battles similar to those seen at Wild West shows. The resulting exhibit attracted large audiences and earned praise in the media, but was seen as a betrayal by those who endorsed its original purpose. In the end, the Indian Congress helped to make the Omaha fair one of the most successful expositions in American history.

Given the unprecedented profits generated by the fair, it is no wonder that later expositions attempted to duplicate the success experienced in Omaha. The expositions that came after, including Buffalo's Pan-American Exposition of 1901, and St. Louis' Louisiana Purchase Exposition of 1904, made ethnology a central feature in their design. Additionally, each of these subsequent expositions included an "Indian Congress" exhibit that enticed audiences with sham battles. Although these exhibits were organized by showmen and operated for a profit, exposition organizers promoted them as "authentic" and "educational" representations of Native American culture.

Ethnologists organized exhibits at the Buffalo and St. Louis fairs that they believed were more "scientific" representations of "traditional Indian life," but they found it difficult to convince audiences that their representations were any more accurate

than those found at the Indian Congress. Likewise, Indian school proponents attempted to create displays to convince fairgoers of the need to assimilate Native Americans into white society, but such exhibits often failed to generate public interest. The commercial success of Omaha's Indian Congress, and the continued success of similar exhibits at later fairs, demonstrated that white audiences found sham battles and "show Indians" very appealing. This kind of exhibit served to entertain, but it also reinforced common racial stereotypes held by whites that Native Americans were a violent, inferior people. Although expositions had earlier sought to portray Indian life in a more peaceful manner, the Indian Congress of the Trans-Mississippi Exposition helped to bring greater credibility to the Wild West interpretation of Native American culture.

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