the late-1870s most Tom Shows included black specialty acts and what one company boasted was a “stage packed with Colored people.” Ironically, these Tom troupes were the only racially integrated shows in the country.

For many Tom troupes the jubilee cho- ruses and black specialty performers became the major attractions. Abbey’s Double Mam- moth Uncle Tom’s Cabin Company, for example, gave such a poor show, one critic com- plained, that “not till the jubilee singers appeared was the audience pleased.” By the end of the century, when Negro musicals and stars like Williams and Walker created public sensations, many so-called Tom Shows were in reality little more than vehicles for Negroes to perform the plantation caricatures and other “Negro specialties” that white audi- ences loved. One 1879 Tom Show bore such “little resemblance to the original,” a critic sniped, that it should be called, “The Cake Walk, with Spasmotic Glimpses of Uncle Tom and His Newly Painted Cabin.” The show contained, the critic protested, “an intolerable deal of cake walking, plantation singing, buck [tap] dancing, voodoo [sic] festi- valizing and various other irrelevant things.” Yet even this critic had to admit that “without all these specialties the play and the acting would induce a combined attack of hypochondria and insomnia.”

Uncle Tom’s Cabin became a show business institution, “America’s Greatest Hit,” because of its emotional melodramatic content and its flexible incorporation of novelties, min- nstrel features, and black performers. On deeper, less conscious levels, it offered a myth of a loving, rural American home life— the romanticized plantation—destroyed by slave-traders’ and Legree’s crass commercial- ism; it provided a full range of sentimental family images, from loving security to tragic destruction; it allowed insecure, frustrated whites to escape vicariously into the carefree world of stereotyped stage Negroes while at the same time feeling superior to the irrespon- sible, childish blacks. Most of all, Uncle Tom’s Cabin was a smashing good show, one that gave average white Americans a chance to feel good about themselves and a chance to let out their pent-up feelings.

Nostalgia for the American past, or rather the creation of myths of an idyllic American past—a simpler, nobler, more carefree, more humane time—ran throughout late-nineteenth- century popular drama. As people around the nation felt themselves caught up in modernization, they grasped for escapist amusement, for a sense of stability, for some reassurance about the worth, dignity, and power of common Americans. In this atmosphere, plays centered on positive images of rural and frontier America proved tremendously popular and provided actors specializing in such roles with long prosperous careers, many of them playing only one character, a longevity possible only because national touring to the heart- land meant constantly changing audiences.

In 1876, Donman Thompson began his twenty-four year stint as Uncle Joshua in The Old Homestead. This stage fixture opens in a beautiful New Hampshire farm, the stage realistically set with a barn, haystacks, and live oxen. While Uncle Josh, a simple old farmer, goes about his chores happily singing to himself, he learns that his son Reuben has been accused of robbing a bank. Josh immediately sets out to find and redeem his son, a journey that exposes him to cities and commercialism, both of which make him thankful for his life on the farm. First, he visits an ex-boyhood friend, who has grown rich but still longs for the rural simplicity of their youth, an experience Josh would still be enjoying if city life
GRISWOLD OPERA HOUSE, TWO NIGHTS & MATINEE, FRIDAY & SATURDAY, DEC. 16 & 17

MRS. G. C. HOWARD

PLANTATION SCENE

THE ORIGINAL TOPSY

UNCLE TOM'S CABIN.

Poster for a lavish late-nineteenth-century production featuring Mrs. Howard and plantation scenes. HTC.
had not tempted and corrupted his son. Josh’s quest for Reuben ultimately takes him to New York City, the epitome of urban life, Sodom and Gomorrah itself. This journey gives rural audiences a good glimpse of life in the big city, contrasting the beauty of Grace Cathedral, complete with its dazzling stained-glass windows, to the general urban degradation and corruption. When Josh finally finds Reuben, he is lying in a gutter, an impoverished drunk. Josh takes him home to the farm, where the healthy, curative country atmosphere restores Reuben, and he and his father live happily ever after. With pieces borrowed from other melodramas, innumerable Uncle Shows based on The Old Homestead toured the country, carrying the message that the traditional rural values were far superior to the new urban ways.

But the type of rural images that pervaded the popular stage were in fact undergoing major changes themselves along with the fundamental changes in the lives of the audiences they entertained and served. The Yankee and the frontiersman who before the Civil War embodied the coarse, earthy vitality of the backland folk, who lambasted and ridiculed civilization, and who stood for change and a “new order” were transformed for playgoers after the Civil War into objects of sentimentalism, quaint, colorful relics, just the sorts of characters they themselves had once ridiculed as effete weaklings. Superficial folksy charm replaced hardy folk realities.

“Well, here’s your good health, and your families’ good health, and may they all live long and prosper!” For nearly half a century, roughly 1865 to 1904, Joseph Jefferson III as Rip Van Winkle delivered this toast to his drinking companions on stage and to the thousands upon thousands of people from every part of the nation who sat in his audiences.

Before Jefferson began to play Rip, this third-generation American actor had only a moderately successful acting career, never recapturing the acclaim he received when as a four-year-old boy with a blackened face he danced as “Jim Crow Jr.” with T. D. Rice. Jefferson and others had staged versions of Washington Irving’s story of the New York Dutchman who slept away twenty years of his life after drinking a toast of elves’ brew with the ghost of Henry Hudson. But they were not successful until Dion Boucicault, a British playwright who became an American as well...
as an English favorite, rewrote the play so that it began with Rip, Boucicaut explained, "as a young scamp, thoughtless gay, just a curly-headed, good-humored fellow such as all the village girls would love and the children and dogs run after." Opening with Rip as a prancing, frolicking boy in a grown-up's body gave Rip his warm human appeal and provided a dramatic background for his aging and rejection.

Early in the play, Rip innocently cavorts in the tavern like a boy with his playmates, drinking too much but always in a gay, harm-
people in the audience, that time has passed him by, that everything he knew and loved has changed, that he has been “forgotten so soon.” In nineteenth-century America, each generation felt that it had to undergo more fundamental and pervasive change than any others, that its youth had been a simpler, less hectic time. And each generation was right. America developed at a lightning pace, physical changes far outracing psychological evolution. Like Rip, many Americans might well have felt that they woke up one morning to find that twenty years had somehow flown by and taken the world they knew with them. Rip embodied and played to this sense of “future shock.”

Rip provided a fantasy, an escape, but also a parable that could teach modern, urban people valuable lessons. “Come with your shiftless, lazy ways,” an 1896 reviewer wrote of and to Rip, “and teach the work-ridden citizens of a working city to sympathize, if not in fact, at least in fancy, with your magnificent exemption from the primal curse which bears too heavily in these later days . . . the avarice that drains men’s blood of human kindliness and the ambition that tramples down the national affections.” Mourning with Rip for the carefree, jolly days of their youth allowed audiences to endorse the humane sensitivities and values that so many people found lacking in American civilization, while at the same time castigating urbanization, industrialism, and commercialism as the villains, not the American people. Rip was a wish-fulfillment of what Americans wanted to believe they were or had been like and also a momentary escape into a world free of responsibility and anxiety, as stage Negroes were.

Although originally Dutch, Rip seemed to audiences a typical American, as much a Yankee as Uncle Joshua. But Rip was a far cry from the sharp-tongued, rapier-witted Yankee country boy of the 1830s and 1840s. Jefferson softened the Yankee, substituting jocularity for acidic wit, sentimentality for social criticism. Perhaps even more importantly, where Brother Jonathan, the Yankee hero, had been an aggressive activist, successfully fighting evil and city-slickers, Rip was a passive, childlike victim, with little or no control over either his actions or his fate. This transformation symbolizes the change from the 1830s, when average Americans felt they were in control, democratizing American political, economic, and cultural institutions—shaping the nation.
Mr. Jefferson.

Rip Van Winkle.
and its destiny in their own image—to the late nineteenth century, when unmanageable, incomprehensible forces seemed to be running their lives, when common people seemed more like puppets dancing on strings than free men determining their own fate. There seemed to be no solutions, no remedies for this predicament. The nostalgic shows at least offered reassurance that it had not always been that way and the slim hope that sometime in the future things might return to the good old days. But the way performers and audiences shaped their rural characters inevitably reflected the new realities, as hapless Rip did.

A similar softening took place in the frontier characters who were also central figures in the post-Civil War nostalgia craze. Between 1872 and 1896, Frank Mayo played Davy Crockett almost as many times as Joseph Jefferson played Rip. And, if possible, Mayo’s Crockett was even farther removed from his pre-Civil War popular culture predecessors than Jefferson’s Rip was from the Yankee. In contrast to the swaggering, crude, cocky, exploitative Crockett of the 1830s, Mayo’s Davy more closely resembled James Fenimore Cooper’s romanticized frontiersman. Mayo portrayed a rustic gentleman, one who is so soft that he has a sweetheart, a refined young woman whom he protects from wolves, blizzards, Indians, and the predictable mortgage-wielding villain. When she is injured, he even “tenderly” nurses her—woman’s work unsuited for an earlier Davy Crockett. After a number of melodramatic close calls, they marry and live happily ever after.

Even Cooper did not domesticate the “free spirit” of the American woods, the glorification of the natural man spawned and perfected by the wilderness. Mayo’s production was a different kind of morality play for a different age, a melodrama in which a frontiersman, subduing both natural and human enemies, heroically saved the helpless girl from evil and then settled down to a civilized
life, much as the nation itself did in the late nineteenth century. In domesticating Davy Crockett, Mayo symbolically portrayed the taming of the West, the taming of the unfettered American spirit. Yet the play was not a tragedy but a triumph, a statement that American heroism need not be opposed to family life, the basic unit of civilized society. Mayo was not portraying the destruction of the mythic American, but suggesting that the strength of the American forest, the root of American greatness, could be channeled into building a great and loving civilization. Mayo’s Crockett, tamed by a woman’s beauty, seemed to late-nineteenth-century viewers an idealization of “true manhood,” one with the tender emotions so often considered unmanly. No one could claim that Davy Crockett, even Mayo’s Crockett, was unmanly.

Reviewers realized that Mayo’s Davy was not a realistic portrayal of the frontiersman. “It must be admitted,” a New York critic wrote in 1895, “that the backwoodsman of the stage bears very slight resemblance to the real pioneers of our civilization in the wilderness [a phrase that would formerly have seemed laughably contradictory]. But it is surely allowable,” he continued “to idealize a character who is supposed to possess endurance and heroism.” In other words, who wants a crude, bragging bully for a national hero? Another writer felt the play was a “poem of young Lochinvar dramatized and Americanized,” a meaning not too subtly conveyed in the play when the heroine, after being rescued by Davy, read Sir Walter Scott’s poem about Lochinvar aloud to the exhausted Crockett. As these reviewers realized, the playwright wanted to create much more than another action-packed frontier tale, much more than a spine-tingling melodrama. He wanted to create an idealized American hero combining strength and courage with tenderness, love, and a dedication to family life. The quarter-century of Mayo’s stardom as Davy Crockett testifies to the play’s success at what one critic described as the “assemblage of virtues” into “one ideal creation.” That this “ideal creation” differed in almost every way except name from his show business predecessors of forty

Frank Mayo’s Crockett getting married. HTC.
years earlier further underscored the great changes in American life between 1835 and 1875.

In the same years that Josh, Rip, and Davy brought lovable rural characters from the East to the Beaver Dams, William F. Cody rode out of the great plains and into the nation’s theaters and arenas with a show that testified that hardy American pioneers still existed and that American greatness had grown out of the heroic conquest of the frontier, not out of cities or industrialism. These two images—the domesticated and the untamed frontier characters—beautifully complemented each other, providing between them reassurance of American heroes’ humanity and of their manhood. Americans could not find a way to combine these two attributes in one figure. Cody, a sensation throughout America and Europe with his ritualized re-enactment of one of the central American myths, created a distinctively American entertainment form—the Wild West Show, the forerunner of the Western movie. Cody, a pony express rider, Union army scout, spy, and Indian fighter, first entered popular culture in the 1860s as a fictional character in dime novels, the inexpensive paperback books of the day. Then in 1872, Ned Buntline, author of the novels, persuaded Cody to leave Nebraska, where he was fighting Indians, acting as a guide for European buffalo hunters, and being elected to and resigning from the state legislature, to star in a play. When they first met in Chicago, Buntline planned to open in six days, even though he had a totally inexperienced star, no troupe, and no play. Relying on one of his novels, Buntline needed only four hours to write “The Scouts of the Plains.” Cody and his fellow scout Texas Jack, who had never even seen a play let alone been in one, found the rigor of rehearsal eased by enormous quantities of whisky, which made their lack of preparation seem less important. But the show went on in the six days anyway, with Buntline interviewing Cody and Texas Jack on stage about their exploits and then, whenever the reminiscences lagged, signalling for “spontaneous” Indian attacks. Both acts concluded with mock battles fought with loud war-whoops and barrages of gunshots that produced an ear-shattering din along with wild, flamboyant action. “We say nothing about acting,” a critic sniped in 1873, “because none is apparent.” But audiences loved the show.

Eastern newspapers and dime novels lavishly described the westward expansion and Indian wars of the 1870s and 1880s in all their gory detail, stimulating public curiosity about the wars and its heroes. Increasingly urbanized, physically inactive people found a source of escape, excitement, and vicarious identification with real heroes in the frontier shows. Combining the need for action heroes and for reassurance about the strength of American
manhood with the interest in the mythic West, the dime novels about him, and his own good looks, Cody became an instant celebrity. He was, after all, a real scout, hunter, and Indian fighter. People could believe his performance was more fact than fiction, more a real exhibition than a show.

Despite his instant popularity in the East and in show business, Cody, restless for a little real action, periodically returned to the West in the 1870s, as a $1000 a month guide for a wealthy English hunter and as a guide for cavalry units rounding up Arapahoes. In 1874-75, he organized his own troupe for “Scouts of the Plains, or Red Devilry As It Is,” touring with the crude melodrama featuring Indian war dances and attacks, lots of action, and, of course, Buffalo Bill’s heroic rescues. In 1876 when his son died, Cody went back to war. Gold had been discovered in Indian land in the Black Hills of the Dakotas a few years earlier, and after miners flocked in despite government injunctions, war erupted, during which General George Custer and his men were annihilated. At the time of the “massacre,” Cody was with a different unit fighting Cheyennes, when as Cody’s press agent told it, a war chief personally challenged Cody to individual combat. The battle supposedly concluded with Cody scalping the Indian, thrusting his bloody trophy into the air, and bellowing: “The first scalp for Custer!” Right after the war, Cody capitalized on his well-publicized exploit with the “Red Right Hand, or Buffalo Bill’s First Scalp for Custer,” a title that doubtless did not hurt attendance. In subsequent years, he toured with similar action-

studded shows based on the melodramatic rescue of helpless white settlers from blood-crazed savages who died three to five times a night, depending on the number of acts in the productions. Whether titled “The Knight of the Plains, or Buffalo Bill’s Last Trail,” “The Prairie Waif, a Story of the Far West,” or “Twenty Days, or Buffalo Bill’s Last Stand,” the shows were interchangeable.
Then in 1883, Cody, with his money-belt bulging, planned a new show, one that would portray the saga of the West on a scale and with a freedom impossible within the confines of theaters. Cody envisioned an exhibition that would re-create the history of the American West, literally acting out a version of the national history, one including Indian villages, scouts and trappers, buffalo hunts, settlers moving west, the Deadwood stagecoach, the Pony Express, Indian attacks and rescues, and the Black Hills war. Cody’s frontier circus toured the nation’s arenas, drawing good crowds but losing money because of Cody’s bad management. Like the huge traveling circuses, the Wild West Show was something new, something requiring sophisticated administration and organization, skills Cody lacked. When Nate Salisbury, the creator of profitable musical comedies, saw the Cody show, he realized its potential and took over its management. Like P. T. Barnum, J. H. Haverly, W. C. Coup and other producers, Salisbury expanded the size of the show to enhance its appeal, adding bears, elk, buffalo, famous plainsmen, and one hundred Indians including Sitting Bull. Shortly after that Annie Oakley—“Little Sure Shot” to Sitting Bull—already a crack shot and a veteran of vaudeville circuits and circuses at age nineteen, joined the show. But even though the show’s great appeal drew large crowds, its huge traveling and production costs resulted in a $60,000 loss during the winter of 1884–85 alone.

When, in 1886, the show settled down in the East, it profited from small travel costs and huge audiences anxious to see the “educational exhibit in concrete form,” the heroic
greatness of America in what for Easterners was actually a fantasy or mythic setting. For sedentary Americans, Cody provided a living, breathing, shooting spectacle of manly combat, a direct link to the past. By keeping the trappings—even some of the participants—of the violent taming of the West and packaging them in a slick, harmless show, he filled a Staten Island arena throughout 1886-87, even in bad weather. To continue cashing in on the show’s great appeal in New York, Salisbury moved it indoors into Madison Square Garden for the winter.

When the show was brought indoors and modestly renamed “The Drama of Civilization,” it was tamed down. “Those who have seen the Wild West Show in an open field,” a reviewer complained, “will not care for it at the Garden.” Its principal appeals, “its wildness and savagery,” had given way, he lamented, “to tame theatricality.” Adding lavish scenery and new features to clearly delineate stages in the progression of “The Drama of Civilization,” the pageant opens with the “Primeval forest,” replete with wild animals and equally wild Indians. Next, emigrant trains move onto the prairie. After a roaring fire and a thundering stampede, the scene shifts to a cattle ranch, where an Indian attack interrupts a rollicking rodeo and brings the army galloping to the rescue. Finally, the pony express and stagecoach visit a mining camp which is robbed by outlaws and destroyed by a howling cyclone. (The Black Hills War was added later to complete the mythic conquest of the land and the Indians.) By adding these special effects and mounting the show on a proscenium stage, Salisbury further domesticated the production, but he retained enough action and violence while structuring the show into an epic of the taming of the West that it consistently filled the Garden’s 15,000 seats, making both Salisbury and Cody wealthy.

Like Barnum and others, Cody, after establishing himself in America, took his show to Britain. It won the plaudits of the Prince of Wales and Queen Victoria, toured England with great success, returned briefly to the United States, and left again for a continental tour in 1889. The Wild West Show became an international sensation. In Paris, the show turned Western clothes, buffalo-ropes, bear-skins, Indian crafts, Mexican saddles, and buckskin clothes into sensations. In Rome, Pope Leon XII received the company and blessed Cody. In Berlin, Annie Oakley shot the ash off the Kaiser’s cigar while he held it in his mouth. And everywhere they went, Cody freely sampled the local alcoholic beverages. Cody and the show were flying high. In 1893, Cody pitched the show outside the Chicago Columbia Exposition, reportedly attracting six million patrons.

Despite the show’s great success and Cody’s large income, he managed to get and keep himself in debt, by investing in every foolhardy scheme he heard of, by giving money to anyone with a hard-luck story, and by drinking up what was left. All his life he remained a hard-living, free-spending, action-seeking adventurer. In 1894, James A. Bailey, of Barnum and Bailey, bought half interest in the show, running it successfully with Salisbury as traveling manager for the next eight years. In the late 1890s, Bailey, doing what he knew best, made it an all-American production by adding a sideshow featuring snake-charmers, sword-swallowers, midgets, giants, magicians, jugglers, fire-eaters, a human ostrich, and a bearded Venus. Interest in the show remained high as did Cody’s debts. By 1897, he owed Salisbury $100,000, and after Salisbury’s death in 1902, the show and Cody
ON WITH THE SHOW

Romanticized sheetmusic cover of Buffalo Bill Cody, from 1892. HTC.

deteriorated rapidly. Never too drunk to fall off his horse, he continued to enjoy the high life and to stagger through tours in America and Europe until his death in 1917, spending his last four years with a second-rate circus after the Wild West Show went bankrupt.

Buffalo Bill was a poor businessman, a profligate, and not really much of an entertainer. Basically what he did was ride around the arena shooting Indians or glass balls thrown into the air and looking every inch the towering, handsome figure that a true hero should be. At least superficially, he represented something that late-nineteenth-century Americans and Europeans wanted to believe in—the mythic saga of genuine heroes taming the wilderness, paving the way for civilization, and producing a noble American national character, what one reviewer called “a manly race.” Cody and much of his troupe had actually fought the battles, but the result was not great character or noble achievements. It was an egotistical drunk on horseback touring with a bing-bang-shoot-'em-up, the-only-good-Indian-is-a-dead-Indian show. Patrons, of course, did not see it that way; they did not want to. They saw an exciting, reassuring enactment of a basic American myth of manly combat resulting in the survival of the fittest. Cody’s and his many show business successors’ portrayals of the wilderness creating and rejuvenating American character made a much greater impact on popular thought than historian Frederick Jackson Turner’s celebrated frontier thesis or William Graham Sumner’s Social Darwinism. With minor modifications, Cody’s saga—in the Western movie—remains a staple of American popular culture.

Ironically, the nation’s greatest source of genuine heroism, the Civil War, did not become a part of popular drama, actually melodrama, until the 1880s when the passage of time had somewhat dulled the pain of the war. And even then the wounds were too tender, the scars too sensitive, to allow popular plays to focus on the brutal struggle or violent heroism of the bloody combat. To most Americans, the Wild West Show was a fantasy, but the Civil War remained a recurrent nightmare. Thus, popular plays about the war—William Gillette’s Held By the Enemy and Secret Service, Shenandoah, and the many others—centered on healing the wounds, on pulling the American national family back together. Almost always set in the South, often focusing on a Union Army spy behind Confederate lines, the plays usually ignored the causes of
the war, the broad issues involved, and even the suffering. Instead, they concentrated on the harrowing situations the war imposed on individuals, which offered exciting opportunities for suspense, intrigue, and near-catastrophes. A love affair between a Union Army officer and a lovely Southern belle was the most common device personalizing the conflict, a device that created the classic melodramatic dilemma, the characters being torn between their duty and their feelings, their love for their countries and their love for each other. As in other melodramas, the heroines were most often called upon to make the greatest sacrifices. In one of the most popular of the Civil War plays, David Belasco’s *Heart of Maryland*, for example, the Southern heroine climbed a forty-foot bell tower, where she swung on the bell’s clapper so that the Confederate soldiers could not ring the alarm that would have prevented her beloved Union Army lover from escaping. These intersectonal romances testified that common Americans, whether they happened to be born above or below the Mason-Dixon line, belonged together as one people. Together, the plays implied, they could survive the catastrophe of the Civil War or even the devastating onslaught of modernization.

Popular plays in their heyday might have helped the American people cope with modernization, but live drama in the concert halls
of the heartland could not survive the forces of the new order forever. Modernization brought drama to the Beaver Dams; to a great extent, it shaped the plays’ form, tone, and content; and it ultimately destroyed live theater as a major entertainment form for common Americans. In the early twentieth century, the mass-production technology of the machine age brought the centralized production and distribution systems that characterized the nation’s industry and business to popular drama. A new industry, the motion picture industry, emerged, one that could record popular plays on film and offer the people fine shows featuring famous stars at inexpensive prices. Broadway had never gotten closer to Beaver Dam than Milwaukee, sixty miles away. But Hollywood reached right into the heartland, right into the Beaver Dams. Motion pictures changed the medium more than the message, from live actors on stages to inanimate, larger-than-life images on screens. Although films continued to exploit the formulas that traveling theater groups had discovered and although acting companies continued to tour with the “old chestnuts,” never again was live drama the only show or even the best show in the Beaver Dams; never again could audiences of common Americans directly shape their dramatic entertainment; never again was live drama the people’s theater.