

EDDIE BURGESS: FROM MILLVILLE SCHOOLBOY
TO PAWNEE CHIEF

W. M. Baillie

A playbill in the DeMott collection of Millville memorabilia (a portion is represented below) led me to the remarkable story of a Millville schoolboy, Eddie Burgess, who left for the Wild West in the 1870's and within a few years became a chief of the Pawnee nation in Nebraska. Afterwards, he became a World Champion calf roper and a marquee star of Buffalo Bill Cody's touring Wild West show.

The Millville schoolboy, transplanted to the Great Plains as a teen with his family, when only in his mid-twenties became the hero of a "dime novel" about his boyhood adventures among the Sioux and Pawnee tribes and was nationally famous.

Eddie Burgess was born Henry E. Burgess in 1859, the son of William and Elizabeth (Henry) Burgess. The father was an educator from Bucks County, Pennsylvania, who came to Millville in 1851 to serve as principal of the newly-founded Greenwood Seminary. This boarding school (see photo next column) was established by the Friends community of Millville to provide quality education for their children, and under William Burgess' leadership it quickly became a leading academy in the region. Young Henry, or Eddie as he was known, grew up on his father's farm outside Millville (Rohrsburg P.O.); the household included seven children and a dozen or so teachers and farm and domestic workers.

PROGRAMME FOR THIS EVENING!

The Renowned SCOUT, GUIDE, AUTHOR and ACTOR

HON. WM. F. CODY,

BUFFALO BILL

AND HIS FAMOUS COMBINATION

Will present COL. PRENTISS INGRAHAM'S new Melo-drama

BUFFALO BILL AT BAY

Or, THE PEARL OF THE PRAIRIE!

Written expressly for Hon. W. F. Cody, and founded upon actual scenes in his eventful life, with
A BAND OF GENUINE INDIANS!

Who are accompanied by the U. S. Government Scouts and Interpreters,

EDDIE BURGESS; or, Pe-risk-y-la-shar!

THE BOY CHIEF OF THE PAWNEES,

The youngest Chief of which any record is given among the Indian Nations., and

C. A. BURGESS, Scout and Interpreter

In 1872 President Ulysses S. Grant appointed William Burgess as Indian Agent to the Pawnee nation in Nebraska, and the family moved to the agency station at Genoa, Nance County, Nebraska. The government had recently established the Pawnee Reservation, an area thirty by fifteen miles, but numerous white settlers cast covetous eyes on that land and there were repeated and bloody clashes between settlers and Pawnees. At this time, too, the Pawnee warriors

suffered a disastrous defeat in a battle with the neighboring Sioux, and some sixty Pawnee women and girls were massacred in the aftermath.

In these troubled conditions Agent Burgess, who had gained the trust of the Pawnee chiefs, joined them in their search for another home. They looked southward to the Indian Territory (now Oklahoma) and their cry became “To the Wachitas!” In the fall of 1874, under orders from the Indian Agency office in Washington, Agent Burgess conducted an inspection tour of the Indian Territory, accompanied by his son Harry E. (“Eddie”). The teenager was a valuable, indeed essential, aide because he had spent time among the Indians and knew their ways and at least two of their languages.

How Eddie came to be a Sioux warrior, and then escaped from his captors, is the subject of the exciting short novel about him by Col. Prentiss Ingraham in the popular dime-novel series “Beadle’s Boy’s Library of Sport, Story and Adventure.” Ingraham’s fast-moving adventure story was published September 6, 1884 under the title **Yellow Hair, the Boy Chief of the Pawnees. The Adventurous Career of Eddie Burgess of Nebraska.** The novel was Number 21 in the Octavo Series (No. 27 in the smaller-format Quarto Series) and contained about 40,000 words. In that era before TV and comic books, dime novels were a prime source of both entertainment and learning for older children and their parents. Beadle’s series of weekly issues ran to hundreds of titles.

In the novel, seven-year-old Eddie and his older brother Charlie set out on their ponies for a summer-long visit to the family of their friend Bob Babbitt, who lives on the Nebraska frontier, a two-day ride away. The boys arrive safely, but that very night the family is attacked and massacred by a band of Sioux, and Eddie and Charlie Burgess are carried away captives to live in a distant Sioux village. After some months or years, Eddie escapes, aided by a chief’s daughter who fancies him, and after a great ordeal—including the killing of a panther with his knife—he reaches a Pawnee village. He arrives just in time to warn them of an imminent attack by an army of a thousand Sioux warriors. His clever plan for an ambush saves the Pawnees, and in gratitude they appoint him a chief—supposedly the youngest ever. He leads a band of Pawnee braves in a successful revenge raid against the Sioux, killing the fierce renegade white who had led the Sioux attack.

For a sample of Ingraham’s narrative, we can take the episode from Chapter XVIII, “AN UNLOOKED-FOR FOE,” when Eddie, exhausted from his long escape journey, suddenly meets a panther on the trail:

Calmly, even in the face of such danger, he ripped up his outer shirt of buck-skin, and wrapped it securely around his left arm.

Then he tightened his belt, and, with his knife held in an iron gripe, marched boldly upon the savage beast.

If the struggle must come he would force the fighting and bring it on at once, ending the battle as best he could. . . .

Yellow Hair kept his eyes upon those of the beast, and seeing him show signs of weakening advanced still more rapidly. . . .

With a ringing yell he sprung toward the panther, which jumped lightly backward for a couple of bounds, then halted, crouched and gave the leap he had so long meditated.

Quick as a flash Eddie sprung aside, and the panther missed his game and fell heavily, and deep into his back went the keen blade, driven with a hand that meant to kill.

The struggle continues, with Eddie severely bitten and clawed by the “beast” but ultimately triumphant. The novel is packed full of similar one-on-one encounters in which Eddie Burgess shows almost superhuman bravery, endurance, and cleverness. The novel ends with mention that Eddie “now” (in 1884) lives on his ranch in Nebraska and is still popular as Yellow Hair among the Pawnee.

Like Ingraham’s many other “true-life” novels, the tale of *Yellow Hair* was fictionalized so that it is impossible to tell now which events are fact, which are exaggerated, and which are wholly invented. The novelist shows Eddie as a boy of just seven years when he and his brother are captured by the Sioux—but actually Eddie was thirteen when his family went to Nebraska.

Eddie Burgess, after ranching and other pursuits, joined his friend Buffalo Bill Cody as a star in Cody’s traveling theatrical troupe. The handbill mentioned earlier names Eddie as “Pe-risk-y-la-shar, the Boy Chief of the Pawnees”; also given star billing is his brother C[harlie]. A. Burgess, and both are listed as “United States Government Scouts and Interpreters.” The drama in which they perform concerns events in the life of Buffalo Bill; the cast includes “A BAND OF GENUINE INDIANS!” shepherded by Eddie and Charlie Burgess.

Eddie continued his career in varying roles as rodeo performer, rancher, and actor. He died while performing in a rodeo at Cheyenne, Wyoming in 1923.

Eddie’s parents, after living as far away as California, returned to Pennsylvania in 1897; his father William Burgess (shown in photo) was honored that summer at a large reunion of Greenwood Seminary teachers and alumni. He later, in retirement, went to live with a daughter in Chicago, but both William (died 1905) and his wife Elizabeth (died 1900) asked to return to their beloved Millville for their final resting-place. The couple lie buried side by side in the Millville Boro Cemetery, next to their daughter Anna Mary who died in childhood in 1853.

A NOTE ON SOURCES: A photocopy of Ingraham’s *Yellow Hair* is in the Society’s library; information on the Burgess family comes mainly from the family history in J. Sterling Morton and Albert Watkins, *History of Nebraska* (Lincoln, 1918). Special thanks to Society volunteer George Holdren, who first drew my attention to the playbill.