

# Renovating The Cody Firearms Museum

By Ashley Hlebinsky

Firearms have been around for hundreds of years. They play integral roles in countless narratives that address conflict, war, individual usage and ownership, manufacturing, sport, science, technology, and art. The Cody Firearms Museum (CFM) at the Buffalo Bill Center of the West (the Center) celebrates this diversity in firearms history. However, after 25 years of interpreting firearms, the CFM is about to undergo a reinstallation. Through this renovation, the museum seeks to better highlight these stories for a 21<sup>st</sup> century audience.

The new museum will exhibit thousands of firearms dating back to 1400 and continuing to modern day. Through engaging and interpretive displays, the CFM will better contextualize the various roles firearms have played in the history of human endeavor. This essay will address the following: 1) a history of the organization and the roles firearms have played, and 2) a look at the upcoming plans for renovation.

## 100 YEARS AT THE BUFFALO BILL CENTER OF THE WEST

The Cody Firearms Museum is one of five major museums and a research library at the Buffalo Bill Center of the West in Cody, Wyoming.<sup>1</sup> While firearms are specifically the focus and mission of the CFM — a relatively recent addition to the Center (1976) — firearms have been integral artifacts in the Center's 100-year history.

In 1917, William F. "Buffalo Bill" Cody passed away. That same year in Cody, Wyoming, the community, including Cody's niece Mary Jester Allan, founded the Buffalo Bill Memorial Association to commemorate his life. A hundred



years later the Center has grown into a 40-acre property that features the Whitney Western Art Museum, Buffalo Bill Museum, Plains Indian Museum, Draper Natural History Museum, Cody Firearms Museum, and the McCracken Research Library. Every museum has at least one firearm in the collection, totaling over 8,000 firearms. However, approximately 90% belong in the Cody Firearms Collection — one that has grown significantly over the past few decades.

In 1975, the Olin Corporation began the paperwork to loan the Winchester Arms Collection to the Center. This loan included thousands of firearms and a large collection of design drawings, ephemera, and corporate records. It was international in scale and included firearms from as early as



This photograph shows the exterior of the Buffalo Bill Center of the West. Courtesy of the Center.



This aerial view is of the current CFM design in the military history wing, Buffalo Bill Center of the West, Cody, WY.

1425. For July 4, 1976 famed western actor John Wayne traveled to Wyoming for the dedication of the collection to the center. Because of its generous lender, the museum initially opened in the basement of the Buffalo Bill Museum as the Winchester Arms Museum in the early 1980s. However, in 1988, Olin donated the collection and the institution built a separate wing to house the growing museum.

Before reopening in its new location in 1991, the museum underwent a name change. Firearms manufacturer William B. Ruger, who housed a portion of his personal collection in the museum and sat on the Center's board, provided a substantial donation to alter the name to be more reflective of the diverse collection. Thus, in the summer of 1991, the Cody Firearms Museum opened. At present the CFM has about 7,000 firearms and more than 20,000 firearms-related artifacts.

Today, the Buffalo Bill Center of the West is an American Alliance of Museums accredited institution — an honor bestowed upon only 5% of all museums in the country. As part of a larger institution, the CFM is privy to several advantages. First, the interdisciplinary nature of the Center allows guns to be entwined with all facets of both American

and international history. Second, the Center attracts a diverse audience. About 200,000 people visit the Center per annum, most on their way to Yellowstone National Park. Thus, the CFM has an opportunity to reach not only gun enthusiasts, but an international audience that does not have great familiarity with firearms. These advantages, especially the diverse audience base, have been taken into consideration for the future of the museum.



Seen here is a way of display firearms so that visitors can see every side to the gun and does not take up a lot of square footage.

### A TIME FOR CHANGE

Project Vision: *The CFM will become an even stronger destination for both firearm enthusiasts and the general public as the foremost institution in the nation for interpreting firearms.*

The Cody Firearms Museum has been around for

over 25 years. While that may not seem like a long time in the lengthier history of the Center, a reinstatement is long overdue. It is important to note: In the reinstatement, the staff will not take away the elements of the museum that make it so iconic; however, they hope to supplement the collection's significance with interactive learning sites and refined case-work that permits more guns than are currently on display. At present, the museum has 3,948 firearms on exhibit; the new museum has a target goal of at least 4,500 firearms.

The current CFM's main floor is divided into the following wings: Coors Theater, Robert W. Woodruff Gallery of Sporting Arms and Action Types, Military History Gallery, Boone & Crockett Cabin, Firearms by Manufacturer<sup>2</sup>, and the Robert W. Woodruff Embellished Arms Gallery. Each of these exhibitions examines a different aspect in the comprehensive history of firearms. However, the average non-gun enthusiast visitor often finds the museum difficult to digest. The visitor almost needs a baseline of understanding to take away larger concepts of why firearms are so essential throughout history. While the enthusiast can draw these connections simply, it is a struggle for our firearms-novice visitors. In the reinstatement, we are seeking to find a balance between these two ends of the spectrum. To complete this task, we intend to double the number of media and mechanical interactive displays in addition to increasing the number of guns on display.



This image shows the general layout of the new museum. It highlights all seven thematic areas and their locations within the plan.

The current plan focuses on the main floor of the museum. The new galleries will address the following thematic areas:

- Area 1: Introduction
  - Museum Intro
  - Primer and Orientation Space
  - Popular Culture and Sport Shooting



Seen here is a 3D rendering of the front entry space. Note the graphic on the right hand side of shooter's stance.

- Area 2: Evolution of Firearms
  - Timeline
  - Artisan Gunsmiths (One-of-a-kind) to Interchangeable
  - From Single Shot to Repeaters
  - From Necessity to Recreation
  - Making of the Modern Gun
  - From Organics to Synthetics
- Area 3: Story of the West
  - Wild West Myth and Popular Culture
  - The Innovators and Manufacturers
  - The Hunters (Cabin)
  - The Consumers (Store)
  - Custom Firearms Shop (Freund Brothers)
- Area 4: Military History
  - The Way We Fight Wars
  - Oral Histories
- Area 5: Science of Firearms
  - Physics of Precision
  - Myth vs. Reality
- Area 6: Art of Firearms
  - Embellishment
  - Presentation
  - Commemoration
- Area 7: Temporary Exhibits

#### Area 1: Introduction

The front of the museum is dedicated to firearms safety and basics alongside modern popular culture. It will encompass a tactile learning experience where visitors will interact with mechanical actions to see how the various types function. Visitors can also learn pertinent terminology that they will encounter on labels and within text panels throughout the rest of the museum.<sup>3</sup> In the

back of this section is a simulated shooting experience where they will learn about modern day sport shooting, firearms safety, and proper handling.

Essentially the entrance to the museum will orient the firearms novice to the function of firearms so that they gain the “baseline of understanding” as they wander throughout the museum. For those more adept at firearms, they can choose to participate in the discovery learning area or walk left into the museum’s galleries.

#### Area 2: Evolution of Firearms

This section will be a comprehensive timeline that covers the entirety of firearms history. A central case will run down the left side of the museum discussing not only technological changes, but why these technologies evolved. This will be an opportunity for visitors to draw larger connections to firearms with different cultures and world events. These artifacts will be accompanied by a series of tablets that will show the firearms in action. While the timeline is a chronology, it is accompanied by thematic pullout galleries on both sides that will discuss significant times of transition in this lengthy history.

This timeline also functions as a “fast track” version of the museum for those who do not have enough time or the desire to spend longer in the museum.

#### Area 3: Story of the West

In the center of the timeline, one of the aforementioned thematic segments will be dedicated to the mythology of the West and the concept behind firearms’ “Winning the West.” It will posit the popular culture that we associate



This 3D rendering showcases the “Fast Track” Museum timeline. It includes the linear chronology, inter-active tablets, and pull out galleries to the right of the image.

with the region and challenge misperceptions about the actual history. This small display on the timeline will open to the right to lead visitors down a corridor where they will address firearms' roles in the real West.

The core of this section will be a recreated Western town. In the middle of the gallery will be a media-interactive that will address migration of people, supplies, and especially guns in the West. The museum will retain its 19<sup>th</sup> Century arms factory from the current exhibition so visitors can learn about brand names associated with the West, such as Winchester and Colt. In a hunting cabin, they can view an exhibit and a movie on the history of hunting from fur trapping to the conservation movement. In a recreated small gun shop, visitors can learn about gun designers who lived and worked in the West such as John Moses Browning. The final structure will be a small store where visitors can learn the types of guns that people could afford in the American West.

#### *Area 4: Military History*

The military history wing has two main components. The first is a traditional military weapons' display around the outer rim of the exhibition area. This section will be densely packed with firearms and will showcase the evolution of firearms from early conflicts on American soil to more modern battles fought globally by Americans.

This second focuses on soldiers' experience through oral history. In the center of the gallery is a tent. Inside the tent, viewers can hear and read oral histories of soldiers. Projected on the outside of the tent will be filmed battle footage. A Room of Reflection at the back of the gallery will be an ongoing oral history room for current veterans. There,

they can record their own stories for us to keep and share in the future.

#### *Area 5: Science of Firearms*

This miniature science center will look comprehensively at the physics of precision. Similar to the introductory area, this hands-on gallery will let visitors understand firearms mechanics. It will also look at popular misperceptions of firearms and their accessories. For example, are silencers silent?

The section will also feature another simulated shooting experience. Unlike the shooting galleries in the front of the museum that will focus on basic handling, this will take that knowledge on step further. It will teach visitors about all the internal and external factors involved in long range precision shooting.

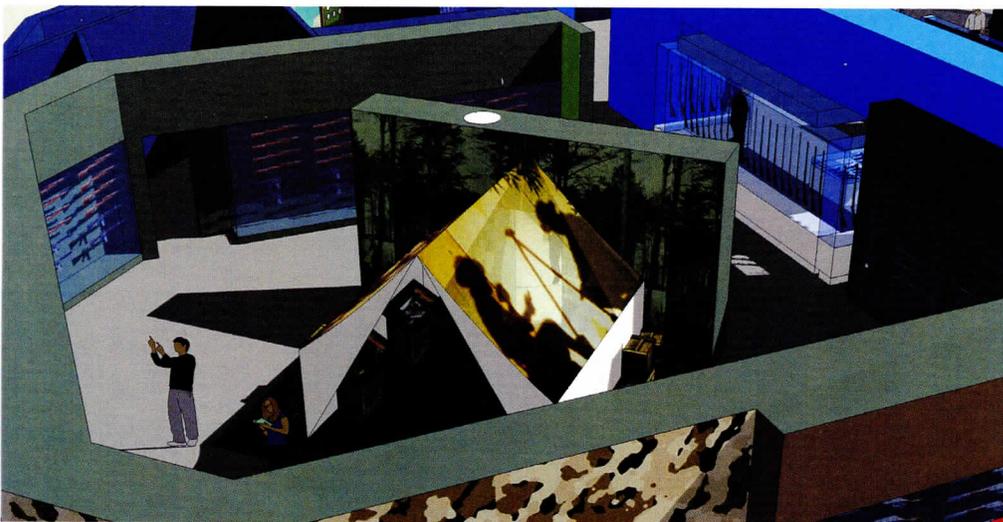
#### *Area 6: Art of Firearms*

Located next to the science wing, the art of the firearms exhibition will look at embellishment throughout history, with an emphasis on 19<sup>th</sup> century factory custom shop engraving, presentation arms, and commemoratives.

In addition to drawing connections to art, visitors will have an opportunity to create their own style of engraving through a computer program.

#### *Area 7: Temporary Exhibits*

The special exhibits gallery will be the most fluid. It will have displays on a rotating basis which can include thematic exhibitions as well as manufacturer and collector's displays.



This 3D rendering shows the traditional firearms display around the outside of the gallery and the oral history tent in the center.

#### MOVING FORWARD

To date, the CFM plan has completed the schematic design phase. This phase established overall layout and theme, with a brief synopsis of each section. The museum will next undergo 10 months of design development. In this stage, each section will be examined and all text panels, labels, and object lists will be completed. Following design development will be 5 months of construction documentation and finally a year of implementation.



This image is a 3D rendering of the current space. In the next phase, each of these sections will have specific objects assigned and all the text written.

The plan is to close the current CFM in October of the year of implementation and reopen before the busy season in June the following year. While the museum is closed, many of the firearms will be featured in the old location of the Winchester Arms Museum so that visitors will always be able to see firearms.

To reiterate, the goal of the Cody Firearms Museum is to become “an even stronger destination for both firearm enthusiasts and the general public.” Through this new plan, the museum will have something for everyone and, as a non-advocacy institution, the CFM holds a niche for visitors unfamiliar with guns. The purpose of the museum is not necessarily to breed a next generation of gun enthusiasts (although that is always a bonus), but to create a learning environment that addresses the significance of firearms while hopefully reducing both stigma and misinformation that is spread in today’s world.

#### NOTES

1. Formerly known as the Buffalo Bill Historical Center
2. This wing includes several smaller named galleries
3. I.E. rifle, cartridge, carbine, pistol, revolver, etc.