

**MARY (MAY)
EMMA MANNING
LILLIE
1869-1936**



**PRINCESS
OF
THE
PRAIRIE**

A black-and-white photograph of marksman May Lille with one eye closed and pointing a six-shooter at the camera became one of the most widely publicized Wild West posters of the early 1900s.

Mary Emma Manning was born a Quaker in March 1869 in Philadelphia. Her father, a prominent physician, and her mother, who called her “May”, wanted her to grow up to be a doting mother. While attending Smith College in 1886, May went to see the Buffalo Bill Wild West Show in Philadelphia. During the parade of arriving performers, 15-year-old May caught the eye of 26-year-old cowboy Gordon Lillie.

Lillie was raised in Wellington, Kansas, where he met Pawnee leader Blue Hawk as the tribe was winter camping. At fifteen, he joined a Wichita cattle drive before joining them in Indian Territory. He was named Pawnee Bill, after working for the Pawnee Agency. When Buffalo Bill wrote the agency asking for Indians for his newly-organized Wild West Show, Gordon volunteered. The chance meeting with May was love at first sight for Gordon, who pursued her for two years until she graduated from college. They were married in August 1866 and relocated to his Kansas ranch.

May worked as a bank vice-president while Gordon traveled with the Wild West Show. She was alone when she gave birth but the son died six weeks later. An operation after the birth prevented her from having any more children, which added to her unhappiness. Inspired by Gordon’s horsemanship, she began riding and roping. The more time she spent on horseback, the better she felt. She also took up shooting to help further ease her pain. After only a few months, she became an excellent marksman and equestrian.

Gordon created his own Wild West Show in 1888, with May as one of the stars, becoming “Princess of the Prairie”. He encouraged her to pair her trick shooting and trick riding. She became an expert rider, always wearing a full-length skirt and only riding sidesaddle during performances. The first year wasn’t financially successful. At the same time, Gordon, after the death of David Payne, led four thousand people of the Boomer Movement in the Land Run of April 1889, which brought him into the national spotlight.

The Lillies regrouped the show to feature a Native American museum and encampment, which became highly successful. They performed shooting acts, taking turns holding or throwing targets. After an injury while holding a target, May had two fingers amputated. Thereafter May kept her right hand gloved or hidden in photographs. In 1902, with May’s exceptional money management skills, the couple bought a 2,000-acre buffalo sanctuary near Pawnee from Blue Hawk.

The Buffalo Bill and Pawnee Bill Wild West Shows merged in 1908, with Gordon in charge. May soon retired after twenty years due to Buffalo Bill’s drinking and womanizing. The new show, Buffalo Bill’s Wild West and Pawnee Bill’s Great Far East, was unequaled at the time. The couple moved into their dream home in 1910 with 200 grazing buffalo. Gordon returned to the ranch after the financially-troubled show closed in 1913. In January 1917, they adopted a newborn, naming him Billy. Gordon expanded his business interests to include a Yale oil refinery and a motion-picture company. Tragically eight-year-old Billy died in a ranch accident in 1925.

In 1936, the couple decided to renew their vows at their favorite vacation spot Taos, New Mexico. On the mayor’s encouragement, over 500 townspeople in traditional native costumes attended the August 31st ceremony. While driving home after a subsequent Tulsa celebration, Gordon lost control of his car, seriously injuring May, who died a few days later at age 67. In 2011, May Lillie was inducted into the National Cowgirl Hall of Fame. In the 1960s, their home and bison reserve became the 500-acre Pawnee Bill Ranch and Museum that still is a showcase for an annual Wild West Fest.