

## Wild Ride: Local author's book gives life to little-known history

By James Abraham, Special to Florida Weekly

Richard Alexis Georgian recalls tales of his ancestors – steely riders of the east who bedazzled the crowned heads of Europe – and a few innocent rubes.

Mr. Georgian, whose ancestors hail from Guria, a province of the Black Sea nation of Georgia, are part of an odd wrinkle in history that lasted about 30 years but influenced generations.

That story, told with detail by Mr. Georgian in his book “Cossacks, Indians and Buffalo Bill.” Is one of those great examples of how sometimes disparate factors come together to make history.

As the author notes, the confluence that led to his being born in the United States started when a Wild West show ran out of Indians. A few years after the director of the United States census declared the American frontier closed, Buffalo Bill Cody and a raft of wannabes decided to bring the old West to the rest of the world. Mr. Cody, as Mr. Georgian correctly points out, was an overblown self-promoter who saw an opportunity to make a buck. Playing to crowds of eastern dudes, southern hayseeds and jaded Hoosiers, Mr. Cody paraded a panoply of riding acts and scenarios of derring-do. But his show mistreated the Indians and lost the services of its people – thus leading to an emergency search for suitable replacements.

Mr. Georgian tells the story of Ivane Makharadze, who ran away from home, founded a circus riding act, made a bundle, returned to his roots and built an American style home. He also told his friends about what he had seen and done during his tour of the world beyond the Black Sea. In 1892, he led a band of Gurians to England to join Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show. They did well, but business boomed when Buffalo Bill's troupe performed at the Columbian Exposition in Chicago the following year. From there, it was 30 years of trick riding around the world, as new contingents of Gurians, lured by the stories of the neighbors, joined Buffalo Bill's troupe and others like it.

Mr. Georgian has done meticulous work on this book, and it shows. There are 550 footnotes, an index and pronunciation guide. Two concerns: The format is too rigid and photographs are too small. Mr. Georgian adheres to a static formula of ending each chapter with a recapitulation of the three subjects of the title; “Cossacks, Indians and Buffalo Bill.” But in the one-size fits-all formula, trivial items vie with important ones, and sometimes major topics are skirted over.

The photographs are too small. The book is 6-by-9 which gives enough room to reproduce a 5-by-7 print with minimal reduction. Yet the photographs, many of them the author's family heirlooms, are so small and grainy as to be almost unrecognizable.

But those are criticisms of the format, not the wealth of material. And the author offers much better reproductions of the photographs on his well-designed website, [www.richardgeorgian.com](http://www.richardgeorgian.com).

Mr. Georgian honors well his forbearers in “Cossacks, Indians and Buffalo Bill.” In an era in which so many people are pursuing genealogical work, Mr. Georgian's book is both a guide and resource.

And, at times, it's a pretty good ride as well.

*James Abraham is a book publisher and critic*