

# ARIZONA CHARLIE

BY MARSHALL TRIMBLE, OFFICIAL ARIZONA STATE HISTORIAN  
PHOTOS COURTESY JEAN BEACH KING



**ARIZONA IS HOME TODAY** to a number of “superstars,” but the first was a rodeo cowboy and Wild West performer named “Arizona Charlie” Meadows.

Arizona Charlie’s given name was Abraham Henson Meadows, but that would soon change. He was born on a snowy day on a ranch near Visalia, California, in 1860, just before the outbreak of the Civil War. His father, John, was a Confederate sympathizer who, with the election of Mr. Lincoln, changed the lad’s name to Charles. In 1877, the family settled on a ranch at Diamond Valley, north of Payson, where the community of Whispering Pines is today.

In July 1882, Charlie left the Meadows ranch and rode to Pine Creek to guide an army detachment through the pass at the head of the East Verde River onto the Mogollon Rim. While he was there, a war party of Apache swept through the Rim Country and attacked the Meadows ranch. His father, John, was killed, and two of his brothers were wounded in the ambush. John Meadows would be the first person to be buried in the Payson Pioneer Cemetery. A short time later, his brother Harry William Meadows died from his wounds.

Charlie was left in charge to care for the family ranch. In 1884, he organized

America’s first rodeo, along with John C. Chilson. On a horse named Snowstorm, Charlie won nearly every event, beating the famous Tom Horn in the roping contest. He went on the rodeo circuit with Snowstorm and set new records in steer tying at Prescott. He won again in Phoenix. Show business was in his blood, and Charlie made up his mind to become a performer in a Wild West show. By 1892, he was riding in Buffalo Bill’s Wild West Show.

Two years earlier, on August 16, 1890, Charlie married off his young sister, Maggie, along with her friend, by staging a cow gathering and a double wedding at what was called the August Doins. The two couples were welcome to all the cattle on the Meadows ranch they could rope and brand by sundown. Unbridled from the responsibilities of running the ranch, Charlie left Payson to pursue his dream.

Arizona Charlie had an illustrious career performing all over the world with Buffalo Bill’s Wild West Show before going off to form a show of his own. During the Alaska Gold Rush of 1898, he headed for the Klondike, where he struck it rich but then lost his gold mine in a poker game. He opened the Palace Grand Theater in Dawson, in Yukon Territory, Canada, which is

still in operation. In 1988, a relative, Ernest Becker, opened an \$18 million resort and casino in Las Vegas called Arizona Charlie’s. The famous photo of him in his Wild West outfit graces the front of the building.

When his show biz days ended, Charlie retired to the town of Yuma, where his long, dark hair turned to silver. He wasn’t ready to go on to his reward yet, and he believed the dry, healthy climate in Yuma would extend his life.

Back before the Californians started calling us “Zonies,” old-time Arizonans referred to themselves Hassayampers, after the storied Hassayampa River. Legend claimed that once you drink its water, you can never tell the truth again. “It’ll be a snowy day in Yuma,” Charlie would say, “when they bury this old Hassayamper.”

Arizona Charlie died on December 19, 1932, and on that day it snowed an inch and a half in downtown Yuma. He was born and died in places where it seldom if ever snows.

Today, Arizona Charlie Meadows is Payson’s most famous and colorful citizen. He bears the title of Father of the Payson Rodeo for having organized and competed in America’s first one, organized in 1884. 

