

Theodore Roosevelt as a Naturalist and Badlands Rancher

By Valerie Sherer Mathes

The American president noted for rugged self-reliance, his skills as a naturalist, and his stint as a Badlands cowboy began life, he wrote, as “a sickly, delicate boy, (who) suffered much from asthma One of my memories is of my father walking up and down the room with me in his arms at night when I was a very small person, and of sitting up in bed gasping, with my father and mother trying to help me.”¹ It is difficult to imagine that this dynamic man, **Theodore Roosevelt**, who inspired millions of Americans with his exciting exploits as a Dakota ranchman, a deputy sheriff, a New York City police commissioner, and a colonel of the Rough Riders, began life as a puny, sickly child. By the time he had reached the presidency, he had, through strenuous activity, built his body until his five-foot-eight-inch frame carried two hundred pounds of solid muscle. English statesman John Morley once noted that the two most wonderful things he had seen in the United States were Niagara Falls and the president, “both great wonders of nature!” he exclaimed.

But Roosevelt was not only brawny, he was also intellectual. H. G. Wells once wrote that he had “the most vigorous brain in a conspicuously responsible position in all the world.”² A world authority on big-game animals and animal coloration as well as one of the country’s best field naturalists, Roosevelt was also perfectly at home discussing forestry, Greek drama, naval strategy, metaphysics, or a cattle roundup. Author of thirty-eight books, scores of scientific articles and

literary reviews, and an estimated fifty thousand personal letters, Roosevelt was also a voracious reader. As a result of this incredible energy, he packed several normal lifetimes of activities into six decades.

Roosevelt’s “strenuous” life came largely as a result of his admiration for nature.³ As one naturalist noted, “His love of nature is equaled only by his love of the ways and marts of men.”⁴

Born October 27, 1858, in New York City, the son of Martha Bulloch Roosevelt and Theodore Roosevelt, Sr., young Roosevelt developed asthma when he was about three. His family feared he would never reach his fourth birthday. One aunt even compared his fragility and whiteness to a pale azalea. In later years Roosevelt fondly remembered that when his father held him, he could breathe and sleep. “My father—he got me breath, he got me lungs, strength—life,” he wrote.⁵

Writing in 1864, contemporary authority on asthma Henry Hyde Salter emphasized the role of exercise, especially horseback riding. The Roosevelt family was probably aware of Salter; soon

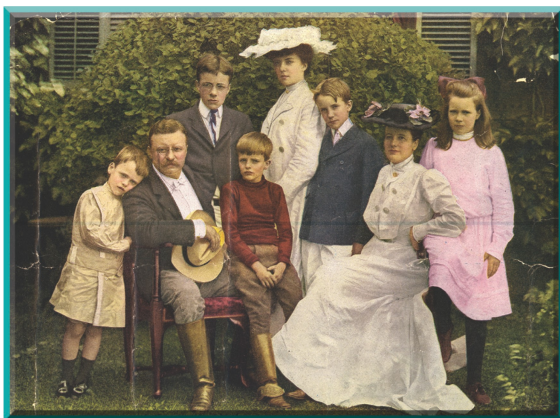


Figure 1. Theodore Roosevelt Family, circa 1903. Theodore Roosevelt was President of the United States 1901–1909. (SHSND 0410-062)

they were spending summers in Madison, New Jersey, where the children acquired their first pony, Pony Grant. Young Roosevelt's love of horses becomes apparent in almost all of his writings. With this summer move to the country, the health of all the Roosevelt children improved; however, in the fall of 1870 the elder Roosevelt informed his young son that he had to make his body even stronger. Accepting this challenge, Roosevelt with determination began daily workouts at Wood's Gymnasium. Soon the second floor piazza of the Roosevelt home was outfitted with athletic equipment, and young Theodore spent the winter and spring of 1870–1871 pushing and pulling his body into shape. His diary for August 1871 reveals no mention of an asthma attack—the longest spell of good health. With his vigor renewed young Roosevelt was able to remain outdoors developing his life-long interest in nature. Winters and spare time found him curled up in his favorite red velvet chair reading about nature or stories of outdoors adventure. A childhood companion once called him “The most studious little brute I ever knew in my life.”⁶ (Throughout his adult life, even on his “holidays in the open,” he took numerous books along.)

“I remember distinctly the first day that I started on my career as zoologist,” Roosevelt wrote in his *Autobiography*.⁷ One day in New York City while walking past a market, he noticed a dead seal, which immediately filled him “with every possible feeling of romance and adventure.”⁸ He haunted the market as long as the seal remained and immediately wrote a history of the strength of a seal. After acquiring the skull, Roosevelt and two of his cousins started the Roosevelt Museum of Natural History in the family home in 1867. Years later his collection was given to the Smithsonian Institution and the American Museum of Natural History, the latter of which his father helped found in 1869. At first young Roosevelt was a general collector of nature, from minnows to salamanders, but eventually he began to specialize in birds. In his writings about the Badlands and about travels abroad as an adult, he constantly referred to the music of various birds.

His hobby frequently caused embarrassment for his family. Absentmindedly, he once raised his hat on a streetcar in greeting Mrs. Hamilton Fish; several frogs leaped out, causing consternation to fellow passengers. The chambermaid complained she was unable to do the family laundry as long as a snapping turtle was tied to the sink's leg. Guests often sat apprehensively wondering what might leap out at them and carefully checked water pitchers for signs of Teddie's pets. His mother once threw out a litter of mice discovered in the icebox, and finally even the good-natured cook rebelled when ordered by the young man to boil his freshly killed woodchuck, skin and all, for twenty-four hours.⁹ His boyhood *Notes on Natural History* reveal other interesting episodes. On August 3, 1872, he found a nest of grey squirrels at the summer home in Dobbs Ferry, New York. After unsuccessfully trying to get the little ones to take milk, he finally in desperation filled a syringe, and when one male seized it, he let him have as much as he could drink. After weighing the squirrel, Roosevelt then pumped the others full of milk to the same weight. His notebook entry read that one died, but the “others lived happily on.”¹⁰

Roosevelt had his first encounter with actual wilderness on a family expedition to the Adirondacks in the summer of 1871. Despite sleeping on the ground and the rigors of camping, his health was never better. That year he continued using his athletic equipment, was tutored privately in English, French, German, and Latin, and learned a new skill, taxidermy, from John G. Bell, who worked with John James Audubon. In the summer of 1872 his father gave him his first gun for collecting purposes, but only when the family realized that his eyesight was poor and had him fitted for glasses did his shooting improve. “I was very nearsighted, so that the only things I could study were those I ran against or stumbled over,”¹¹ he wrote. “Through the miraculous little windows that now gripped his nose, the world leaped into pristine focus, disclosing an infinity of detail, of color, of nuance, and of movement just when the screen of his mind was at its most receptive,” wrote his biographer, Edmund Morris.¹²

Roosevelt himself noted, “I had no idea how beautiful the world was until I got those spectacles.”¹³ But fortunately for his reading public, his myopic years resulted in an abnormal sensitivity to sound which became one of the best features of his wildlife writings.

Armed with his new glasses, his trusty gun, and his newly acquired taxidermy skills, young Roosevelt set out with his family on their second trip to Europe in the fall of 1872. His new glasses allowed him to focus on smaller animals where before he had been forced to concentrate on longer, slower-moving ones. His main interest soon became the study of birds, a hobby he practiced the rest of his life, especially during wilderness retreats in the Badlands, Yellowstone, Brazil, and Africa.

During this trip, his family and friends were forced to put up with smelly arsenic, which he used to cure specimens: more than one hundred birds were catalogued on that journey. There were moments of suffering with his hobby, even personal suffering. He wrote in his *Autobiography*, “especially on one occasion when a well-meaning maid extracted from my taxidermist’s outfit the old tooth-brush with which I put on the skins the arsenical soap necessary for their preservation, partially washed it, and left it with the rest of my wash-kit for my own personal use.”¹⁴ During the summer of 1873, Roosevelt and his younger brother Elliott stayed in the home of Dr. Minkwitz, a Dresden City

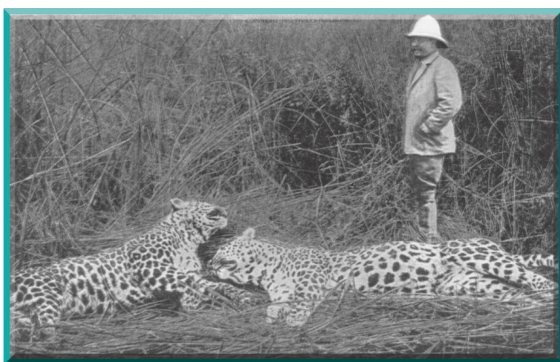


Figure 2. Theodore Roosevelt, an avid sportsman, is shown here on a hunting trip to Africa. (Courtesy of the Library of Congress)

Counselor. The Minkwitz family did not much approve of their young guest’s naturalist activities, confiscated his arsenic, and threw his mice out the window. They probably disliked having his hedgehog skins hanging out their windows. By this time brother Elliott also wearied of the smells of arsenic and of sharing the room with dissected mice and dead owls.

Upon their return from Europe the Roosevelt family moved into a new home, closer to Central Park with a more suburban atmosphere. The top floor had a fully equipped gymnasium. With the continued interest of his less-than-healthy children always on his mind, the elder Roosevelt in the spring of 1874 began taking the family to Oyster Bay, Long Island, where a permanent summer house, Tranquillity, was rented. Now young Roosevelt was exposed to the flora and fauna of Long Island and happily engaged in swimming, rowing, horseback riding, and long jaunts through the woods with gun and notebook in hand. Brother Elliott continued to share a bedroom but not the hobby; he once drew a chalk line along the middle of the floor in their New York City bedroom after finding a snake under his older brother’s bed.

In the fall of 1876 Roosevelt enrolled at Harvard, where he engaged rooms on the second floor of a boarding house. He surrounded himself with his birds, snakes, salamanders, and a huge tortoise that got out of his pen one day and was discovered escaping down the hall by the hysterical landlady. Asked to present a paper on the gills of crustaceans at Harvard before the Natural History Society, he went to Boston one day for a basket of lobsters. On the return trip in the streetcar, several escaped and crawled out on the seat, causing great excitement among the female passengers.¹⁵

Before long Roosevelt had joined many of Harvard’s clubs, including the Rifle Club, Glee Club, Natural History Society, and the Nuttall Ornithological Club. In addition, he engaged in boxing, wrestling, body building, and a weekly dance class, taught Sunday school, hunted in the woods

around Cambridge, stuffed and dissected his specimens, participated in poetry-reading sessions, and took his various academic classes. As Morris notes, Roosevelt “plotted every day with the methodism of a Wesleyan minister.”¹⁶

During his freshman year he became friends with **Henry Davis Minot**, who shared his love of birds. The two spent weekends at Minot’s home comparing notes or engaging in nature jaunts. In June 1877, they spent a week in the Adirondacks at a time when the birds were in full voice and plume. While hunting deer one dark night before the moon had risen, the quiet of the night was broken by the hermit thrush “until the sweet, sad music seemed to fill the very air and to conquer for the moment the gloom of the night; and then it died away and ceased as suddenly as it had begun. . . . I shall never forget it,” wrote the observant eighteen-year-old Roosevelt in his notebook.¹⁷ Their joint effort resulted in the privately-financed publication of *The Summer Birds of the Adirondacks*, a scientific catalogue of ninety-seven species. This publication was duly noted by zoologist C. Hart Merriam in the *Bulletin of the Nuttall Ornithological Society* in April 1878. Roosevelt was well on his way to becoming a renowned naturalist. Unfortunately, further writings with Minot were ended when Minot’s father removed him from Harvard and placed him in his own law office. However, during his junior year Roosevelt wrote and printed *Notes on Some of the Birds at Oyster Bay*.¹⁸

Roosevelt’s happy existence was shattered on February 9, 1878, by the unexpected death of his beloved father. That summer young Roosevelt spent a strenuous time among the wilds of Oyster Bay, rowing and riding in an effort to assuage his grief. Lightfoot, his horse, probably suffered the most as Roosevelt whipped both into a frenzy of exhaustion. The poor animal had to endure tremendous feats, including one twenty-mile gallop. Roosevelt confided to his diary one day: “My ride was so long and hard today that I fear it may have injured my horse.”¹⁹ Yet several days later he was again astride the same animal.



Figure 3. Theodore Roosevelt, posing in buckskins and armed with his rifle and a huge hunting knife, looked every inch the frontiersman in this and other photographs that he sent to friends and family “back east” during stays in the Little Missouri Badlands. (SHSND A2773)

The last weeks of his vacation were spent in the wilds of Aroostook Country in Northern Maine at Island Falls with a cousin and a friend. He became acquainted with backwoodsman **Bill Sewall**, and after many long hikes the two became close friends. In later years Sewall and his nephew **Wilmot Dow** would join Roosevelt in ranching in the Badlands. Roosevelt made two more trips to Island Falls before leaving Harvard. During his March 1879 visit, he trailed a caribou for thirty-six hours on snowshoes without benefit of tent or blanket under the expert guidance of Sewall. He returned from the trip loaded with trophies; he had also kept their table supplied with rabbit and partridge.

During his September 1879 visit, Roosevelt climbed Mt. Katahdin, the highest mountain in Maine, carrying a forty-five-pound pack. He triumphantly reached the top with Sewall and Dow despite having lost a shoe in the stream and replacing it with a moccasin that gave little protection. Then Roosevelt and Sewall set out on a fifty-mile, six-day trip up the Aroostook River in a pirogue, often dragging or pushing the heavy canoe through rapids, spending ten hours a day in water up to their hips. And finally before returning to Boston, the three men undertook a third jaunt of one hundred miles in three days. Roosevelt had really accepted his father's challenge to building up his body.²⁰

However, the focus of Roosevelt's life was about to change. During his junior year, through a friend and fellow classmate, he was introduced to **Alice Hathaway Lee**, described by her contemporaries as "exceptionally bright," "the light of the party," and an "enchanted creature." Roosevelt, swept off his feet, even had Lightfoot shipped from home so he



Figure 4. Alice Hathaway Lee married Theodore Roosevelt in 1880 and died at the age of 22 in 1884. (Courtesy of the Library of Congress)

could gallop the twenty-four miles daily to visit Alice, whom he called his "star of heaven," his "pearl," and his "pure flower." When she died in 1884 after the birth of their only child, Roosevelt wrote in an otherwise empty diary for the year, "The light has gone out of my life,"²¹ after making a large X on February 14.

In June 1880 Roosevelt graduated from Harvard *magna cum laude* with an honorable mention in Natural History. However, before his October wedding, he and Elliott set out on a six-week hunting trip beginning in Illinois and then Iowa, where by the end of six days Roosevelt had broken both guns, been bitten by a snake, and had been thrown from a wagon. However, this did not deter the two brothers from moving on to the Red River of the North in Minnesota. At the end of their trip on September 20, 1880, they compared their game bags; Elliott had bagged 201 animals while his older brother had 203.²²

Following his October 1880 wedding to Alice Lee in the Unitarian Church, Roosevelt plunged into classes at Columbia Law School. In his characteristic Rooseveltian walk, described by Morris as "arms pumping, toe caps shooting out sideways, every heel fall biting like a pickax,"²³ he covered the three miles to school in forty-five minutes. After class he headed for the Astor Library to continue work on *The Naval War of 1812*, which had been started during the winter of 1879–80. He also began to frequent the headquarters of the Twenty-First District Republican Association. Nominated on October 28, 1882, for his assembly district, Roosevelt was elected in November and the following month placed the manuscript of *The Naval War of 1812* in the hands of the publishers.

His record in the 1882 legislature assured him of renomination, and he was easily elected by a two-to-one majority. Then in May 1883, several weeks after adjournment, he accepted the invitation of Commander Henry Honeychurch Goringe to join him on a buffalo hunt in the **Badlands** of Dakota Territory. On September 3, Roosevelt, loaded with his duffel bag and gun case, boarded the train alone because Goringe had decided four

days earlier not to accompany him. Descending at Little Missouri on September 8, 1883, Roosevelt spent his first night in the Badlands in the **Pyramid Park Hotel** in the only empty cot of fourteen in a long unpartitioned room.

After some persuasion **Joe Ferris**, barn superintendent for Commander Gorringe, agreed to guide Roosevelt in the search for buffalo. But first Ferris took the young Easterner to the **Maltese Cross Ranch**, the home of his brother, **Sylvane**, and **Bill Merrifield**, some seven miles south of **Little Missouri**. All three men were Canadians who had migrated to the Dakotas only two years before. The next stop was at the ranch of Gregor Lang²⁴ at the mouth of the Little Cannonball, which would serve as hunt headquarters. Fortunately, his years of tramping through rugged terrain as a youngster either to hunt game or collect specimens for his naturalist collection proved to be an excellent training ground for his initial visit to Dakota. For five days in ceaseless rain, Roosevelt and Ferris trudged through the sticky gumbo clay of the Badlands, returning every night with both men and horses covered from head to foot with mud. Finally on the sixth day they spotted three specks on the horizon, but Roosevelt only succeeded in wounding one of the bulls, which charged him and then ran off. Nightfall found the two men miles from headquarters, and they were forced to bed down under the stars until a cold rain woke them.

During the seventh day Roosevelt's horse stepped into a hole and threw him; later both horse and rider were almost swallowed by quicksand. But despite these hardships Roosevelt enjoyed himself greatly. By the time they returned to the Lang ranch, he had decided to invest in the cattle industry. When Lang, already involved with others, refused his offer of partnership, Roosevelt made an arrangement with Sylvane Ferris and Merrifield and handed over a check for \$14,000 to buy cattle, which they would manage on shares. While his two new partners headed to Minnesota to break their contact with their Minnesota investors, Roosevelt returned to the hunt and finally on September 20 bagged his first buffalo.²⁵



Figure 5. The Maltese Cross cabin, headquarters for Theodore Roosevelt's first ranch in the Badlands, was originally five miles south of Medora along the Little Missouri River. It is now located near the South Unit Visitor Center at Theodore Roosevelt National Park in Medora. Built a year before Roosevelt's much larger "home ranch" cabin at the Elkhorn, it had three rooms plus a sleeping and storage loft. (Courtesy of Theodore Roosevelt National Park)

The following day Roosevelt headed back to Little Missouri to catch his train home, where he plunged back into the political world. The death of his mother in mid-February 1884, followed eleven hours later by the death of his wife, shattered the young man. And not until June could he lay aside his assemblyman's duties and head west again. Early in the month "he hiked away to the wilderness to get away from the world. He went out there a brokenhearted man," recalled fellow assemblyman Isaac Hunt.²⁶

Discovering that his herd of 440 had weathered the mild winter with only minor losses, Roosevelt gave Ferris and Merrifield an additional \$26,000 to buy a thousand more head. While they were purchasing cattle in St. Paul, Roosevelt headed his horse **Manitou** out onto the Badlands to enjoy the sights and sounds of nature as he galloped along the ground, broken here and there with buttes, ravines, and coulees. He made a stop at the growing metropolis of **Medora**, founded on April Fool's Day 1883 by Antoine Amedee Marie Vincent Amat Manca de Vallombrosa, the **Marquis de Mores**, a wealthy Frenchman and the husband of Medora von Hoffman, daughter of a wealthy Wall Street banker. Naming the town after his wife, the Marquis had established a ranch and formed the **Northern Pacific Refrigerator Car Company** with partners in the hopes of slaughtering range cattle, dressing them in his packing plant on the east side of the Little

Missouri, and sending the beef east in refrigerator cars. Roosevelt met the Marquis and his lovely wife during his second visit to the Badlands. He also took the time to visit the weekly newspaper in Medora, the *Bad Lands Cow Boy*. The next issue of the weekly was impressed with the new dude in town: "Theodore Roosevelt, the young New York

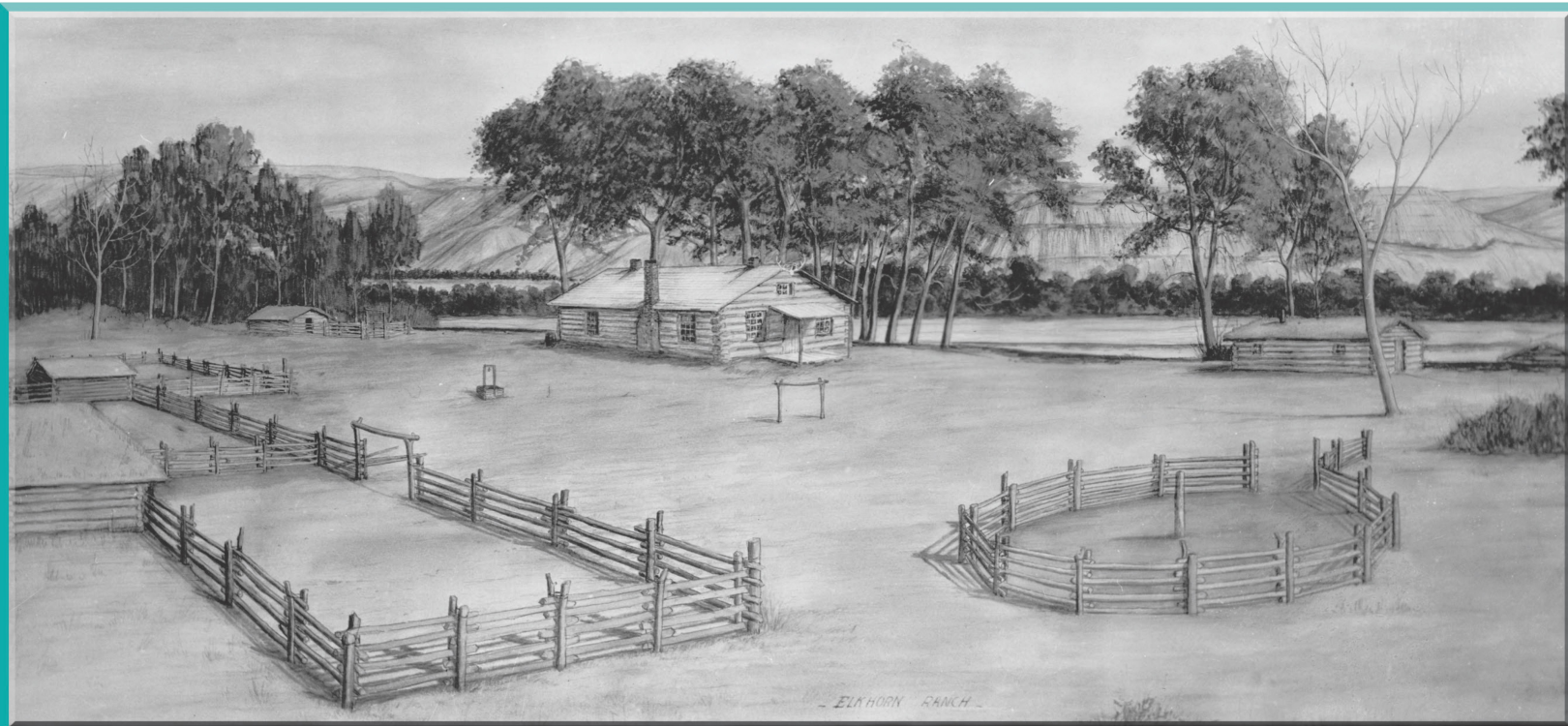
reformer, made us a very pleasant call Monday, in full cowboy regalia. New York will certainly lose him for a time at least, as he is perfectly charmed with our free Western life. . ."²⁷



Figure 6. The Marquis de Mores also ranched in the Badlands during the time Roosevelt spent there. Roosevelt met the Marquis and his wife, Medora, on his second visit to the Badlands. (SHSND 0042-089)

The Maltese Cross, located a few miles south of Medora, was on a popular trail, and dozens of cowboys continually traveled past Roosevelt's door; many stopped to pass the time of day. Desiring a location with complete solitude in order to write, Roosevelt set out to find a more isolated site. He headed north from the Maltese Cross and, some thirty miles later along the Little Missouri River in a stretch of bottomland, found the perfect spot. One day while exploring the property, he came upon interlocked antlers of two elk who had died in combat—the name **Elkhorn** became permanently associated with the new ranch. Needing partners and someone to build his dream ranch house of hewn logs with a veranda where he could sit in his rocking chair and read poetry or watch his cattle, he wrote his friends Bill Sewall and Wilmot Dow to invite them to join him. In a letter to his sister Anna on June 17 he informed her he was having a glorious time, had just spent thirteen hours in the saddle, had never been in better health, and had recently shot an antelope.²⁸

Figure 7. Roosevelt's Elkhorn Ranch lay along the Little Missouri in the heart of the Badlands north of Medora. Artist Charles O. Miller's sketch depicts the place as it might have looked after several years under Roosevelt's ownership. The ranch location is now part of the Theodore Roosevelt National Park complex in southwestern North Dakota. (SHSND A2294)



On July 1, 1884, Roosevelt left Medora for New York. In less than a month, he had surveyed his cattle, signed over \$26,000 for more cattle, participated in a **roundup**, located a site for a second ranch, traveled to Miles City, Montana, with the Marquis on cattle business, and spent five days alone on the plains with only his rifle, a book, a blanket, an oilskin, a metal cup, some tea, salt, and dry biscuits. Along the way he got bogged down in the quicksand and shot an antelope.²⁹

Following a quick visit with his sister and baby daughter in New York in August, Roosevelt was back in the Badlands accompanied by Sewall and Dow. Anxious to go to the Big Horn country of Wyoming to hunt grizzly but detained until August 18 by the shortage of extra horses, Roosevelt expended his energy riding. For seventeen days he ranged the Badlands, riding on one day as much as seventy-two miles between dawn and darkness. This strenuous exercise and other equally grueling work would soon shrink him into a wiry one hundred fifty pounds, which Sewall described as “clear bone, muscle, and grit.”³⁰

In mid-August Roosevelt, guided by Merrifield and accompanied by a cook who doubled as a teamster, headed into the Big Horn country. Since Alice’s death his days had become “a monotonous record of things slain.”³¹ This trip was no different: in forty-seven days, he shot a total of one hundred seventy animals—deer, elk, and a variety of small game, including rabbit, grouse, dove, and teal. He drove himself mercilessly, covering nearly one thousand miles on foot and in the saddle. Weather conditions were severe with below-freezing temperatures and huge hailstones. On September 13, a twelve-hundred pound grizzly reared up only eight paces in front of him. A perfect shot to the head brought the animal down. Headed for home on October 4 with only seventy-five miles left to go, Roosevelt, as impatient as ever, and Merrifield left the wagon and extra ponies with the driver and rode non-stop by night to the Maltese Cross. They had plodded alongside the wagon, weary and hot all day, but, he wrote:



Figure 8. Rounding up cattle on the North Dakota range, about 1905. (Courtesy of the Library of Congress)

Under the bright moonlight, and then under the starlight, we loped and cantered mile after mile over the high prairie. We passed bands of antelope and herds of longhorn Texas cattle, and at last, just as the first red beams of sun flamed over the bluffs in front of us, we rode down into the valley of the Little Missouri, where our ranchhouse stood.³²

After a one-day recovery he rode an additional forty miles to visit Sewall and Dow before leaving for New York.³³ Home during the first week of October, Roosevelt was back astride Manitou in mid-November 1884. After spending his first night at Maltese Cross, early the next morning he drove a small herd of cattle to the Medora railroad corrals for shipment east. Leaving Medora, he went north to Elkhorn, some thirty-three miles distance. Winter was beginning to set in. The river was partially frozen, and cattle with icicles hanging from their chins shivered in coulees. By nightfall, only half-way to his destination, he was forced to take shelter in an empty shack by the river. Arriving at Elkhorn, he found Sewall and Dow busy felling trees for the new ranch house. Discouraged by his partners from helping them, Roosevelt returned to the Maltese Cross to try to write about his experiences in the Dakotas.

However, it was too cold, and he was too restless; so once again, he roamed the plains on Manitou after bighorn sheep despite the weather, which sometimes dipped fifty degrees at night.

He also set out campaigning among local ranchers to organize a **Little Missouri Stockmen's Association** in order to prevent overstocking, and to organize roundups, handle cattle diseases, and establish and enforce other range regulations. Some eleven cattle companies and individuals representing eight others attended the December 19 meeting in Medora, called to order by Roosevelt. He was not only elected chairman, but authorized to draw bylaws following the format of a similar group in Montana. Roosevelt departed the Badlands just before Christmas and ironically found that he did his best writing at home in New York.³⁴

On March 8, 1885, *Hunting Trips of a Ranchman* was completed. Organizing the book around animals hunted rather than the usual chronological order, Roosevelt wrote of his 1880 trip with Elliott, his buffalo hunt in the Badlands in 1883, his 1884 jaunt after antelope, his deer hunting in the Badlands and in Wyoming, and his adventures with bear and elk in the Big Horn Mountains. Published in July, the book was dedicated to Elliott, whom Roosevelt called "the keenest of Sportsmen and truest of Friends." George Bird Grinnell, editor of *Forest and Stream*, who reviewed the book and later became a close friend, wrote about the impact of the Badlands upon Roosevelt: "His experience in ranch life, in association with his fellows, and in hunting, taught him, besides a knowledge of men, good judgment, readiness of adaption to a variety of conditions, and promptness of decisions on the course of action to be followed."³⁵

Figure 9. Astride his beloved "Manitou," Roosevelt worked as hard as any of his cowboys during roundups and drives in the Badlands. His nickname, "Old Four Eyes," came to imply a grudging respect that later translated into whole-hearted approval from the people of the West. (SHSND D0632)





Figure 10. Cowboys camped in the Badlands. Since the little dude from New York always pulled his own weight, the Badlands cowboys grew to love and respect Roosevelt. (SHSND A0686)

Roosevelt returned to the Badlands in mid-April 1885. As he rode his horse along the Little Missouri, still swollen with water run-off, Manitou lost his balance and both horse and rider plunged into the swirling river. When he surfaced, swimming next to his horse, Roosevelt had to push ice blocks out of the way continually and splash water into Manitou's face to guide him to shore.

Upon reaching the Elkhorn, he found the eight-room ranch house completed and evidence that his cattle had again weathered the rather severe winter. Although Sewall was still skeptical about the capability of the Badlands to sustain a cattle industry, Roosevelt was so convinced that he invested an additional \$39,000 for fifteen hundred head, five hundred for the Maltese Cross and one thousand for the Elkhorn. The new cattle arrived in Medora on May 5, and Roosevelt personally supervised the driving of one thousand to Elkhorn. However, on the third day out, the cattle stampeded. Several men, including Roosevelt, took a tumble when their horses turned complete summersaults, but finally "dripping with sweat" and on ponies "quivering and trembling like quaking aspens" they stopped the thirst-maddened cattle.³⁶

The spring roundup in the Badlands began in May, and Roosevelt arrived at Box Elder Creek on the nineteenth ready and eager to assist. For thirty-

two days he rode nearly one thousand miles and on one occasion noted, ". . . I had been nearly forty hours in the saddle, changing horses five times, and my clothes had thoroughly dried on me, and I fell asleep as soon as I touched the bedding." Some of his mounts were not very cooperative: "The time I smashed my rib I was bucked off on a stone," he noted.³⁷ Another time he broke the point of his shoulder while riding Ben Butler, a big, sulky roan that went over backwards with him. Since the little dude from New York always pulled his own weight, the **cowboys**, who initially chided him, calling him "**four eyes**" as a result of his glasses, grew to love and respect him. Lincoln Lang, the sixteen-year-old son of rancher Gregor Lang, noted that Roosevelt "asked for and received no favors, the same forcefulness that had characterized his earlier buffalo hunt being in evidence all the way through."³⁸

On June 2 the cattle, unnerved by a peal of thunder followed by a streak of lightning, stampeded. "For a minute or two I could make out nothing except the dark forms of beasts running on every side of me," Roosevelt wrote, "And I should have been very sorry if my horse had stumbled, for those behind would have trodden me down." He desperately tried to reach the leaders in order to turn them:

I could dimly make out the cattle immediately ahead and to one side of me were dis-

appearing, and the next moment the horse and I went off a cut bank into the Little Missouri. I bent away back in the saddle, and though the horse almost went down he just recovered himself, and, plunging and struggling through water and quicksand, we made the other side.³⁹

This exalting, strenuous life was attractive to Roosevelt. “It was a fine, healthy life, . . . it taught a man self reliance, hardihood, and the values of instant decisions. . .” he wrote. He praised not only the healthy, invigorating western life but also those who lived it. “I owe more than I can every express to the West, which of course means to the men and women I met in the West,”⁴⁰ he continued.

Although he praised the men and women who were cattlemen like himself, Roosevelt saved the highest praise for the hired man on horseback, the everyday cowboy. He had ridden with him, and shared meals, perhaps a laugh or two, and many dangers. He found them bold, good-humored, and thoroughly interested in their



Figure 11. Putting tragedy behind him, Theodore Roosevelt married Edith Kermit Carow, his childhood sweetheart, in 1886. (Courtesy of the Library of Congress)

work. The cowboy was self-reliant, hardy, and, above all, a dashing horseman. He “prepares the way for the civilization from before whose face he must himself disappear.” At the same time he meets “death . . . with quiet, uncomplaining fortitude. . .,” and runs “risks of life and limb that are unknown to the dwellers of the cities. . .”⁴¹

Roosevelt made a quick trip East for eight weeks of rest during the summer of 1885, but returned to the Badlands on August 25 to take care of both ranching duties and his obligations to the Little Missouri Stockmen’s Association. Meanwhile changes had been made at the Elkhorn; both Sewall and Dow had brought their wives out West. After a pleasant visit, on September 5 Roosevelt called the meeting of the Stockmen’s Association to order. He was again unanimously elected president. The chief business was to make plans for the coming fall roundup.

Autumn of 1885 in the Badlands saw the beginning of a drought. In addition, numerous grass fires broke out, some supposedly set by Indians who were protesting the encroachment of the cattle ranchers upon traditional hunting grounds. Several times during September Roosevelt had to fight fire on his own range. In his *Autobiography* he described the typical method used by range cowboys to put out a blaze. A steer was killed, split lengthwise, and dragged with the

blood side downward along the line of flames, men followed on foot with slickers or wet horseblankets to beat out any flickering blaze that was still left. It was exciting work, for the fire and the twitching and plucking of the ox carcass over the uneven ground maddened the fierce little horses so that it was necessary to do some riding in order to keep them to their work.⁴²

By the end of the month, Roosevelt was again home in New York. One October day he met his childhood sweetheart **Edith Carow** coming down the stairs of his sister’s home. The Roosevelt that stood before Edith was not the same

unhealthy man she had remembered, but a strong, tanned young stranger, heavy with muscle. On November 17 he proposed marriage, and she accepted. Despite this new addition to his life, the Badlands, which he had not seen for six months, pulled him west. He left for Medora on March 15, 1886. As usual he found winter cattle loss slight. Upon settling in at the ranch, he immediately began work on his biography of Thomas Hart Benton, taking time out on April 13 to chair the spring meeting of the Stockmen's Association. Five days later he arrived in Miles City as delegate to the larger Montana Stock Grower's Convention, where plans for the Little Missouri roundup were finalized.

During the spring roundup, Roosevelt put in his fair share of twenty-four-hour days beginning in late May. However, this roundup was much more difficult, due in part to the dryness and dust but also because there were more cattle than ever before. The ranges were becoming increasingly overstocked. In a June 28 letter to his sister Anna he wrote, "I have been working like a beaver; it is now five weeks since I have had breakfast as late as four o'clock any morning." He told her she would not know his sunburned and wind-roughened face. He then added, "But I really enjoyed it and am tough as hickory now."⁴³

By July temperatures soared to over 120 degrees, killing off most of the grass. Early in the month he had returned to New York to check his Benton manuscript in the Astor Library, but returned to Medora on August 5. During his absence the heat had not abated, and as he rode the Badlands, Roosevelt's naturalist trained eyes were well aware that the once understocked, overgrassed lands had changed dramatically. He had repeatedly warned the Stockmen's Association of the dangers of overstocking and had reiterated it in some of his 1886 writings:

Overstocking may cause little or no harm for two or three years, but sooner or later there comes a winter which means ruin to the ranches that have too many cattle on

them; and in our country, which is even now getting crowded, it is merely a question of time as to when a winter will come that will understock the ranges by the summary process of killing off about half of all the cattle throughout the Northwest.⁴⁴

Partially to escape the heat, Roosevelt, Merrifield, and a companion set out on a hunting expedition to the Coeur d'Alene Mountains of northern Idaho between August 21 and September 18. Danger stalked Roosevelt. In the past he had faced wounded buffalo and angry grizzly bears and had ridden pell mell over lands so broken with gullies and holes that one misstep of his horse would have plunged him to his death. On this trip, however, he took another kind of plunge—off a slate-covered ledge while pursuing bighorn sheep. Fortunately, forty feet down he "got caught in a pine top, bounced down through it, and brought up in a balsam" with only a shaking.⁴⁵ Soon after seeing a magnificent waterfall, he asked Merrifield and their companion to lower him part way down the gorge on a rope so he could get a better shot with his camera. However, the men were unable to pull him back up. For two hours Roosevelt dangled at the end of a two-hundred-foot rope, some sixty feet above raging water. His companions added an additional twenty-five feet to the rope and Roosevelt was lowered further. Then tossing his camera to his friend, while Merrifield at the top cut the rope, Roosevelt plunged into the raging waters.⁴⁶

Returning from his almost fatal hunting trip, Roosevelt found both Sewall and Dow discouraged. They had been unable to sell the fall shipment profitably. Chicago slaughterhouses were paying ten dollars less than the cost of raising and shipping the cattle. The three friends squared their accounts, and Roosevelt departed first; Sewall and Dow and their families left on October 9, 1886.⁴⁷

Now a pale haze had settled over the Badlands, due in part to the numerous grass fires. Roosevelt's quick ornithologist's eye noticed that the wild geese

and song birds hurried south six weeks earlier than usual. The beaver were busy cutting and storing willow brush for the winter, and oldtimers began to lay in extra food supplies. Unfortunately, the Badlands was occupied by many newcomers who took no notice of nature's preparations for winter and thus did not pay attention to the beginning growths of heavy coats on the wild animals. The snow began on November 13, bringing the worst season of **blizzards** in the history of the area. On New Year's Day, it was minus forty-one degrees. Lincoln Lang and a hired hand, off to Medora for supplies, got caught one day forty miles from home when they were hit by a second blizzard. Taking shelter in a roofless shack, they spread the wagon tarp overhead to provide a roof. The heat from the fireplace and that generated by their horses, which had been brought inside, prevented them from freezing to death. This was only a harbinger of the worst yet to come.

A January 28 blizzard lasted seventy-two hours. Men rode out on the range never to return, children froze to death only yards from their homes, women committed suicide, cattle already weakened from the summer drought easily blew over in the gale-force winds and died where they fell. Lang, watching as the cattle began to perish, wrote:

Bunching up in the more sheltered corners, they refused to be chased out. Refused to do anything save stand there and invite a quick release from their misery. As the snow piled up around them, many became drifted under and smothered. Others froze to death, often on their feet . . . As we visited their shelter places it was always to find a new layer going down on top of those already buried.⁴⁸

Those cattle from southern ranges which had been recently introduced to the Badlands died first. The older range stock with their shaggier coats held out until February, but even they became maddened with hunger. Some drifted

into Medora and ate the tarpaper from the sides of the shacks.

March of 1887 brought the chinook winds, and the Little Missouri, swollen with melted snow, carried countless numbers of carcasses as it tumbled its way through the Badlands: "One had only to stand by the river bank for a few minutes and watch the grim procession ceaselessly going down, to realize in full the depth of the tragedy that had been enacted within the past few months." The first day weather permitted, Merrifield rode out; during the entire day he saw no live cattle. The extreme winter, the previous drought, and the overgrazing had taken their toll. "Roosevelt at least had demonstrated the wisdom of the limited stocking policy which he had so strenuously advocated the season before,"⁴⁹ reflected Lang years later.

During the winter of 1886–87 Roosevelt had married and taken a 15-week European honeymoon. He returned to the United States on March 28, but was not free until April 4 to go West. He arrived to find Medora virtually a ghost town. The Marquis de Mores's slaughterhouse had closed its doors in November 1886, the *Bad Lands Cow Boy* had been abandoned, and the old Pyramid Park Hotel, where he had spent his very first night in the Badlands, had been taken to Dickinson by flatcar. That spring of 1887 he rode from Medora, possibly reflecting on his very first ride over the country. But the scene this April day was vastly different. "It would be impossible to imagine any sight more dreary and melancholy than that offered by the ranges when the snow went off in March," he wrote, "The land was a mere barren waste; not a green thing could be seen."⁵⁰ Wherever he looked he could see blackened carcasses of cattle in sheltered spots, but he would have no idea what his losses were until after the roundup. The Little Missouri Stockmen's Association meeting held on April 16 with Roosevelt in the chair decided that a cooperative roundup would not be necessary; instead, each rancher would be responsible for his own. Fortunately, the fact that Roosevelt's ranches contained thickly-wooded bottomlands where his cattle could find shelter meant his losses were not

as high as those of his neighbors. Nevertheless, it was a dreadful sight. “For the first time I have been utterly unable to enjoy the visit of my ranch,” he wrote Henry Cabot Lodge, “I shall be glad to get home.”⁵¹

One wonders what was in Roosevelt’s mind as he climbed back on the train in May 1887 and returned to New York. However, the thought of hunting in the Badlands drew him West in early November; accompanied by a cousin and a friend, he spent five weeks ranching and shooting. When his companions returned to New York after only ten days, Roosevelt rode out again through the Badlands, which were virtually denuded of big game. He did, however, succeed in shooting two black-tailed deer.⁵²

The almost total absence of big game—buffalo, bighorn, and pronghorn—and the fact that some migratory birds had failed to return to the Little Missouri Valley made Roosevelt, now a man of twenty-nine with a new-born son, aware that the preservation of big game animals was essential to America’s future. He came to realize the need for game refuges, not only for wealthy gentlemen hunters but also for the average man. To be sure, the wealthy could provide their own game, but Roosevelt “insisted on game protection, because it is only by making game more abundant that the poor man may have the opportunity to indulge his fondness for sport.”⁵³

Returning to New York in early December 1887, he invited a dozen wealthy hunters and animal lovers to dine with him. These men, including George Bird Grinnell, were asked to join him in an association of amateur riflemen devoted to the preservation of wildlife. As a result the club, called the Boone and Crockett Club after two of Roosevelt’s personal heroes, was established to promote, among other things, hunting with rifles, to encourage travel and exploration in the United States, and to preserve large game animals. Formally organized in January 1888, the club, with Roosevelt as president, eventually numbered among its membership some of

the country’s most eminent citizens, including Henry Cabot Lodge, United States Senator from Massachusetts; Caspar Whitney, editor of *Outing Magazine*; and C. Hart Merriam, head of the United States Biological Survey. Honorary members include generals William Tecumseh Sherman and Philip Sheridan, and historian Francis Parkman.

The club’s committee on parks was instrumental in the creation of the **National Zoo** in Washington, D.C. Pressure by members in 1894 encouraged Congress to pass the Park Protection Act, which protected Yellowstone’s animal life and forest and geological formations. In the spring of 1895 the New York Zoological Society was organized with nine Boone and Crockett members on its first Board of Directors, and a year later the zoo was opened to the public. In addition the Boone and Crockett Club aided Roosevelt in bringing about protection of the nation’s forests which he had grown to love after hunting in the Rockies. Joining with the American Forestry Association, club members helped get the **Forest Reserve Act** passed in March 1891, which empowered the President to reserve public lands containing forests; its passage led quickly to preservation of almost fifty million acres of forest lands.⁵⁴

As governor of New York⁵⁵ and later as President of the United States,⁵⁶ Roosevelt continued his **conservation** activities. During the seven years he was President, he added almost 150 million acres of timberlands to the nation’s forest reserves, including the Tongas National Forest in southeastern Alaska, the largest forest reserve in the country.⁵⁷ He added five national parks to the system: Oregon’s Crater Lake, Oklahoma’s Platt National Park, South Dakota’s Wind Cave, North Dakota’s Sully’s Hill, and Colorado’s Mesa Verde. Following the June 1906 establishment by Congress of the **National Monuments Act**, Roosevelt created sixteen National Monuments, including the Muir Woods in California, the Petrified Forest and Grand Canyon in Arizona, and the Devil’s Tower in Wyoming. Roosevelt did not forget his beloved winged and feathered

friends. On March 14, 1903, he established the first Federal Wildlife Refuge on Pelican Island in Florida. Before he left office he had established fifty more bird reservations, protecting, for example, brown pelicans and laughing gulls on the Breton Island Reservation in Louisiana, migratory waterfowl on Klamath Lake, and puffins, cormorants, and petrels at Three Arch Rock Reservation off the coast of Oregon.⁵⁸

His concern for conservation of the country's **natural resources** did not stop with animals and forests, but also included methods to prevent droughts, flooding, and soil erosion and techniques to utilize the full resources of water for navigation and power. In 1908 he invited the governors of all the states to join him in the nation's capitol in a National Conservation Congress. He thus interested the various states in conserving the national resources within their boundaries.⁵⁹



Figure 12. Theodore Roosevelt National Park, located in the North Dakota Badlands, encompasses a landscape still very much like it was when TR lived and ranched in the area. Sudden thunderstorms still surprise visitors, but no one can doubt the stark beauty of the seasons. (Courtesy of Theodore Roosevelt National Park)

Although the parks and monuments and bird refuges are legacies that are reasonably well known, another legacy of equal importance, and one often less remembered, is his various wildlife writings. His visits to North Dakota resulted in his *Hunting Trips of a Ranchman* (1885), *Ranch Life and Hunting Trail* (1888), and the *Wilderness Hunter* (1893), among others. He wrote lovingly of the Badlands and of his times there. He did not totally abandon his ranch life in the West, returning almost annually for an autumn hunting trip until 1896. John Burroughs, a naturalist who accompanied him on a 1903 trip to Yellowstone, noted that Roosevelt craved and hungered for nature regularly once a year, “a hunger . . . [that] drives him forth on his hunting trips for big game in the West.”⁶⁰ He even took his wife to the Elkhorn Ranch in 1890, made a hurried trip to Medora as candidate for vice president in 1900, and in 1903 returned during his presidency for a very brief stop.

Nothing suited him better than to ride off on his favorite horse across the broad expanse of the Badlands. “These long, swift rides in the glorious spring mornings are not soon to be forgotten,” he wrote. “The sweet, fresh air, with a touch of sharpness thus early in the day, and the rapid motion of the fiery little horse combine to make a man’s blood thrill and leap with sheer buoyant light-heartedness and eager, exultant pleasure in the boldness and freedom of the life he is leading.”⁶¹

Roosevelt is at his best when writing of the land and its animal inhabitants. His West was “a land of vast silent spaces, of lonely rivers, and of plains where the wild game stared at the passing horseman.” His Badlands under the moonlight with the river gleaming “seem to be stranger and wilder than ever, the silvery rays turning the country into a kind of grim fairyland.”⁶²

His birds were ever-present in his writings. In *Hunting Trips of a Ranchman* he wrote:

The skylark sings on the wing, soaring overhead and mounting in spiral curves



Figure 13. In 1886 three local desperados stole a boat belonging to Roosevelt and took off down the Little Missouri River. Roosevelt tracked them downstream, captured them, and brought them to Dickinson for trial. This photograph is a reenactment by Roosevelt of that feat. (SHSND A5056)

until it can hardly be seen, while its bright, tender strains never cease for a moment. I have sat on my horse and listened to one singing for a quarter of an hour at a time without stopping.⁶³

The Elkhorn ranch and environs was the subject of an entire chapter of his *Ranch Life in the Far West*. The ranch house was fronted by a row of cottonwood trees and Roosevelt could hear “from these trees . . . the far-away, melancholy cooing of mourning-doves, and little owls perched in them and called tremulously at night.”⁶⁴ The reader is always able to hear the birds through Roosevelt’s descriptions. “Throughout June the thickets and groves above the ranch house are loud with bird music from before dawn till long after sunset,” he noted. He listened with pleasure to their “creakings, gurglings, hisses, twitters, and every now and then a liquid note or two.” “At nightfall the poor-wills began to utter their boding call from the wooded ravines back in the hills,” and one night a poor-will landed on the floor next to him and remained for some time “now and then uttering

its mournful cries.” But as he sat on the ranch’s veranda listening to the birds, he could also hear the voices of wilderness animals—the wail of a coyote, the “strident challenge of a lynx,” or the snort and stamp of a deer—and in the same breath he lamented the rapid destruction of the game animals.⁶⁵ As early as June 1884, he had written to Anna, “There is not much game however, the cattle men have crowded it out and only a few antelope and deer remain.”⁶⁶ The destruction of the lordly buffalo he called “a veritable tragedy of the animal world.”⁶⁷

Roosevelt had realized as he rode the Badlands in 1886 that the days of the cattleman were numbered. But what really saddened him about the prospect of the end of the cattle frontier was that “those who came after us are not to see, as we have seen, what is perhaps the pleasantest, healthiest, and most exciting phase of American existence.”⁶⁸

Throughout the remainder of his life Roosevelt’s boyhood love of nature never ended; everything was delightful or an adventure. In a 1903 trip to

Yellowstone this aspect of his character definitely emerged: “The spirit of the boy was in the air that day about the Canyon of the Yellowstone, and the biggest boy of all was President Roosevelt,” noted his companion.⁶⁹ Old age did not dull Roosevelt’s spirit and enthusiasm and exuberance for life. In his later fifties he challenged his readers in the forward to *A Book-Lover’s Holidays in the Open* to seek adventure. He encouraged them to become a helmsman, a rifleman, a wielder of axe, or better “the rider of fiery horses, the master of the craft that leaps through white water.” He told them to thrill to the saddle not the hearthstone. Even an older man could find joy in a rigorous life he noted: “The beauty and charm of the Wilderness are his for the asking, for the edges of the Wilderness lie close beside the beaten roads of present travel.”⁷⁰

His very being exuded energy, strength, and excitement and he inspired others. Those who met him never forgot him. His long-time friend, Owen Wister, who dedicated *The Virginian* to him, wrote of Roosevelt after his death:

Always in the days when he was here and the world at so high a pitch that each morning’s news, whether of ourselves or of other nations, touched the limits of significance, my first thought would be, What will he say about this? Twelve years are gone since his voice ceased, yet so deep in me had this looking to him rooted itself, that still upon some sudden news of moment the thought springs out, What will he say?⁷¹

About the Author

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