

When Teddy Roosevelt played cowboy

(With two Maine guides as foremen)

By Raymond Schuessler
Deland, Florida

Before he became president, Theodore Roosevelt, who always loved the outdoors, decided to try his hand playing 'Cowboy and Indians.'

Having soaked the plains of the Dakotas with buffalo blood on many hunting expeditions, he forthwith bought the Maltese Cross Ranch in the Badlands of North Dakota. Besides the 400 head of cattle he bought to stock the ranch, he also purchased cowboy riggings to play his role properly.

Eager to double whatever profits he might make, he bought another ranch, the Elkhorn, on the Little Missouri River about 35 miles north of Medora. Two Maine guides, Wilnot Dow and William Sewall were induced to become foremen of the new ranch. By August, his cattle numbered a sizeable herd of 1,600 cattle.

In the months that followed, Roosevelt was delighted by the open, bold life on the plains. He wrote his sister:

"I wear a sombrero, silk neckerchief, fringed buckskin shirt, sealskin chaps, and alligator boots; and with my pearl-hilted revolver and beautifully finished Winchester rifle, I feel able to face anything."

But Roosevelt loved the cowboy life. As he wrote: "The cowboys are a much-misrepresented set of people. It is a popular impression that when one goes among them he must be prepared to shoot. But this is a false idea. I have taken part with them in the rounding up, have eaten, slept, hunted, and herded cattle with them and have never had any difficulty.

"If you choose to enter rum shops and go on drinking sprees with them, it is as easy to get into a difficulty there as in New York. But if a man minds his own business and at the same time shows that he is fully prepared to assert his

right-if he is neither a bully nor a coward and keeps out of places in which he has no business to be-he will get along as well as in Fifth Avenue. I have found them a most brave and hospitable set of men.

"There is no use in trying to be overbearing with them for they won't stand the least assumption of superiority, yet there are many places in our cities where I should feel less safe than I would among the wildest cowboys of the West."

How could a dude like Roosevelt be accepted out in the West where Easterners were looked down upon by the gravel-eating cowhand? Teddy at 25 wasn't too strong then: shy, slender, polite, and wearing the despised "cheaters." But Roosevelt was wiry, strong, fearless and he had taken boxing lessons in college.

Once around a campfire a young cowboy began to ride Teddy, calling him "Four Eyes" and "Storm Windows". After an interminable length, Roosevelt went up to him and asked him bluntly, "Be friends or fight." The young cowpoke began to stutter but managed to stammer, "Make it friends." Roosevelt shook hands with him and sat down. The entire crew had more respect for him right then.

In another instance, reaching Mingsville about 30 miles south of Medora after dark, he found the hotel (Nolan's) full of boisterous men and one

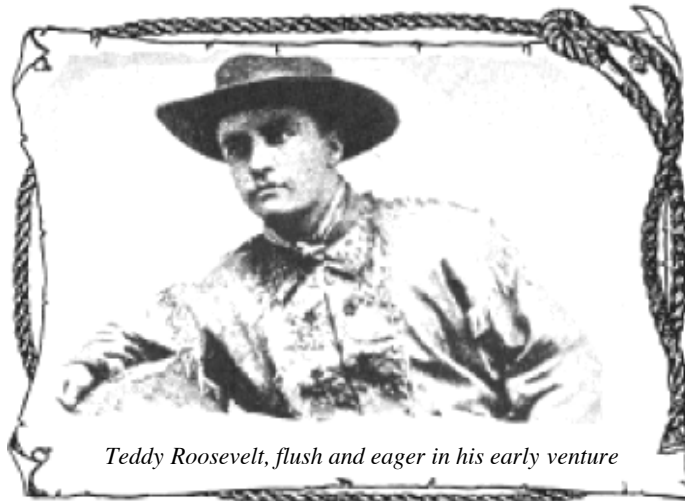
drunken cowboy with two drawn guns. Roosevelt tried to avoid trouble by quietly going to his room, even after the bully said, "Four eyes is going to treat."

Roosevelt later wrote of the incident: "An objectionable creature. . .I tried to pass it off. . .but he stood over me using foul language. . .I noticed his heels were close together, a position quite unstable. I said, "Well, if I've got to, I've got to, and rose looking past him.

"As I rose I struck quick and hard with a right to the side of his jaw, a left and then a right-all this while his guns were going off. He went down and struck his head on the bar He was senseless and the patrons put him in a shed."

When Roosevelt first came West, he used such Oxfordian English such as "Hasten forward quickly there," which amused the cowboys for days and became part of the jargon of the Badlands as mud-splattered cowboys took up the cry-"Hasten forward quickly there, you (expletive deleted)."

Soon after Roosevelt's return to his Maltese Cross Ranch in 1864, he wrote his sister again: "The cattle have done well, and I regard the outlook for making the business a success as being very



Teddy Roosevelt, flush and eager in his early venture

hopeful. This winter I lost about 25 head from wolves, cold, etc., while the others are in admirable shape, and I have about 155 calves. I shall put on a thousand more cattle and make it my regular business."

The future president really did put in time at the ranch. He broke horses with the best of them and some remembered him being thrown repeatedly and even after his nose was bleeding, he remounted to finally break the horse. A foreman of a nearby ranch commented, "That four-eyed maverick has got sand in his craw aplenty."

He was caught in stampedes, wrestled down calves, (he was too nearsighted to rope), rode 100 miles on horseback, and was instrumental in organizing a stock association to repel rustlers and brought some semblance of law to the wild territory.

That summer the newspaper Cow Boy noted Roosevelt's expanding operations: "Mr. Roosevelt is still at Ferris & Merrifield's Ranch (the original owners who he had hired to run his ranch), hunting and playing cowboy. It seems to be more congenial work than reforming New York state politics. He is thoroughly impressed with the profit of raising cattle in the Badlands."

During the winter of 1885-86 when losses were light, Roosevelt felt confident of making a profit... "While I do not see any great fortune ahead, yet if things go on as they are now going I think I will net enough money to pay a good interest on the capital."

During 1885-86, Roosevelt's ranching operations were at their peak. The census records estimate he owned from about 3,000 to 5,000 head. He was not the biggest operation in the Badlands, nor the smallest.

In the Little Missouri spring roundup of 1886, Roosevelt took part as co-captain. In letters to his family in 1886 he wrote of spending considerable time in the saddle. On June 7, he wrote his sister: "I have been on the roundup for a fortnight and really enjoy the work greatly; in fact I am passing a most pleasant summer. We breakfast at three every morning, and work from sixteen to eighteen hours a day, counting night guard, so I get pretty sleepy; but I feel strong as a bear."

Roosevelt even managed to catch a few thieves, not cattle rustlers, but boat-robbers. One morning Roosevelt discovered that his boat had been stolen. His foremen, Sewall and Dow, immediately improvised another boat and the three started their search for the culprits. The weather was bitterly cold. At the mouth of Cherry Creek (about 12 miles east of the North Park), Roosevelt and his foremen caught up with the three thieves while they were encamped, got

"the drop" on them, and forced the trio to surrender.

Roosevelt was not alone out here among ruffians. Quite a few elegant financiers and even noblemen emigrated here and entertained each other. There was the Marquis de Mores, a French capitalist, who married an American



Standing watch over the boat thieves. Roosevelt reportedly read Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina* while guarding the prisoners

millionaire and hoped to increase his fortune by opening a packing house and shipping frozen beef East. There was Sir John Pendor. There were scions of British nobility who had come to hunt. As one friend of Roosevelt's said, "Ranching in



A far cry from the boardrooms of New York.

Dakota was more of an adventure rather than a business."

Much has been written about Roosevelt's relations with a neighboring rancher, the Marquis de Mores. De Mores and Roosevelt, two strong-willed men, never hit it off too well although they did entertain each other. At one time, it was rumored that a feud existed and a duel had narrowly been avoided.

Several months before Roosevelt first came to the Badlands, the Marquis and several of his men were involved in a gunfight in which Riley Luffsey was killed. In a trial held July 1883, the Marquis and the other defendants were

acquitted. But in 1885, another indictment was brought against them for the murder of Luffsey.

While the Marquis was in jail in connection with this second trial, and under serious mental strain, he wrote the following letter to Roosevelt which has been interpreted by some as a challenge to a duel:

Bismark, Dak., Sept. 3, 1885

"My dear Roosevelt:"

"My principle is to take the bull by the horns. Joe Ferris is very active against me and has been instrumental in getting me indicted by furnishing money to witnesses and hunting them up. The papers also publish very stupid accounts of our quarrelling-I sent you the paper to New York. Is this done by your orders? I thought you my friend. If you are my enemy I want to know it. I am always on hand as you know, and between gentlemen it is easy to settle matters of that sort directly."

Certainly Roosevelt took the message as an invitation to a duel, and he was ready to choose rifles at 12 paces, although some of his friends later wrote that Teddy had thought about "shotguns loaded with buckshot." At any rate, he made plans to choose Sewall as his second should the duel come to pass. Some of his friends advised him that Mores was indeed a crack shot with rifle or pistol. They were probably thinking that Roosevelt as a "made athlete" might be a little slower in reacting.

Nevertheless, he replied to the challenge as honestly as he knew how but yet not backing down on his honor. In short, if Mores wanted a duel he could have it.

An undated draft of Roosevelt's reply:

"Most emphatically I am not your enemy; if I were you would know it, for I would be an open one, and would not have asked you to my house nor gone to yours. As your final words however seem to imply a threat it is due to myself to say that the statement is not made through any fear of possible consequences to me; I too, as you know, am always on hand, and ever ready to hold myself accountable in any way for anything I have said or done."

Yours very truly,
Theodore Roosevelt."

This exchange of correspondence apparently ended the incident.

Up to 1886, nature had been kind to the ranchers in the Little Missouri Badlands. But now the winter on the southern plains had been unusually savage. During the summer of 1886 cattlemen from the south continued to drive herds to the parched and already overstocked ranges of the north.

By midsummer the situation had become dangerous. Roosevelt wrote:

"In certain sections of the West the losses this year are enormous, owing to the drought and overstocking. Each steer needs from fifteen to twenty-five acres, but they are crowded on very much thicker, and the cattlemen this season have paid the penalty. Between the drought, the grasshoppers, and the late frost, ice forming as late as June 10, there is not a green thing in all the region."

In late November the first severe storm struck. The *Bismarck Tribune* described it as "in many respects the worst on record."

During that winter, blizzard followed blizzard as death and destruction swept across the Badlands. Only warm chinook winds which struck in the northern plains in early March saved the stockmen from complete disaster.

When Roosevelt heard of the hard winter on the northern plains and the heavy losses in cattle he hurried back from Europe. He went immediately to the Badlands. From there he wrote his friend, Henry Cabot Lodge, soon after his arrival: "Well, we have had perfect smashup all through the cattle country of the northwest. The losses are crippling. For the first time I have been utterly - unable to enjoy a visit to my ranch. I

shall be glad to get home."

He also wrote his sister: "It is even worse than I feared, I wish I was sure I would lose no more than half the money (\$80,000) I invested out here. I am planning to get out of it."

The ranchers combed the country in vain for the cattle they believed had drifted in the winter storms. As one stockman pointed out, "Search it (the range) minutely and there was no end of the tragedy. The carcasses withered up by the end of August, a few bones grass-covered at wide intervals and that was all. How the thousands of cows and steers that died left no trace is an enigma." The Mandan Pioneer estimated the losses for the northern plains at about 75 percent.

The Billing County tax records indicate Roosevelt paid 60 percent less cattle in 1887 than in 1886.

After the hard winter of 1886-87, Roosevelt's trips to his Dakota ranches were less frequent. His devotion to his family and his rising political fortunes were no doubt influences that kept him in the East. Nevertheless, he continued trying for more than a decade to recoup his losses in the Badlands.

In 1899, Roosevelt decided to sell out. His losses from his ranching ventures were heavy. Roosevelt's initial investment in the two ranches was \$82,500. Of this, he lost approximately \$23,500. His

investment in Elkhorn Stock Company, however, yielded him a profit of \$3,250, which reduced his net loss from his Dakota venture to about \$20,000. Considering loss on interest on \$82,500 at five percent for the period from September 1884 to February 1899, his total loss would amount to about \$50,000.

Roosevelt's excursion as a rancher had a redeeming feature—he had been given a first-hand glimpse of the need for conserving our wilderness resources which he saw going to waste, and when he became President he did something about it. He began movements to conserve our water, forest, and mineral resources, all of which have made the cattle industry more solvent today than it ever would have been without Roosevelt.

Roosevelt's excursion as a cowboy had a powerful effect in building the staunch character of the future president. As he said in a speech in 1910, "I can never sufficiently express the obligation I am under to the Dakotas . . . I regard my experience during those years when I worked and lived with my fellow ranchmen on what was then the frontier as the most important education asset of my life."

AJ