

Dakota's Recovering Spirit

Teddy Roosevelt discovered conservation, compassion and confidence in America's frontier.

By Clay S. Jenkinson

Theodore Roosevelt spent the better part of three years living in the badlands of Dakota Territory. He first ventured to the Little Missouri River country in 1883 to kill a buffalo. He was

25 years old. Before he lugged his shaggy trophy back to New York, Roosevelt invested \$14,000 in the cattle business. In 1884 he returned, invested in a second ranch, and decided to make Dakota his permanent or semipermanent home.

Roosevelt came to Dakota for two reasons: to bag a buffalo, and to recover from simultaneously losing his mother and his bride to illnesses. Roosevelt was successful in both quests. When he shot his first buffalo, he was so delighted that he did an impromptu "Indian war dance" around the corpse. And though the emotional scars of his first wife's death never fully disappeared, Roosevelt recovered his spirit in Dakota.

North Dakotans love to invoke Roosevelt as a kind of favorite son, and they cling to his later statement, "I never would have been president if it had not been for my experiences in North Dakota."

Theodore Roosevelt learned five essential lessons during his sojourn in the American West. First, he recognized the essential commonality of human experience. Class divisions that he previously took for granted made no sense out on the plains of Dakota. Roosevelt was well aware, of course, that the western men he moved among were not as well educated as he was, nor as cultured. They did not attend opera. Their grammar was colorfully imperfect. But he realized in the West that while he was a master of the clubs and the social protocol of the eastern seaboard, he was noticeably substandard in skills that were essential on the frontier. He knew, too, that their skills were essential to life in a way that his own cultural achievements were not.

Roosevelt's genius lay in his understanding that his privilege and high culture did not make him better than the men and women of Dakota—only different. Roosevelt's experience in the American West had the cumulative effect of closing the seeming gap between himself and the common citizens of the United States.

His portrait of Dakota cowboys was both

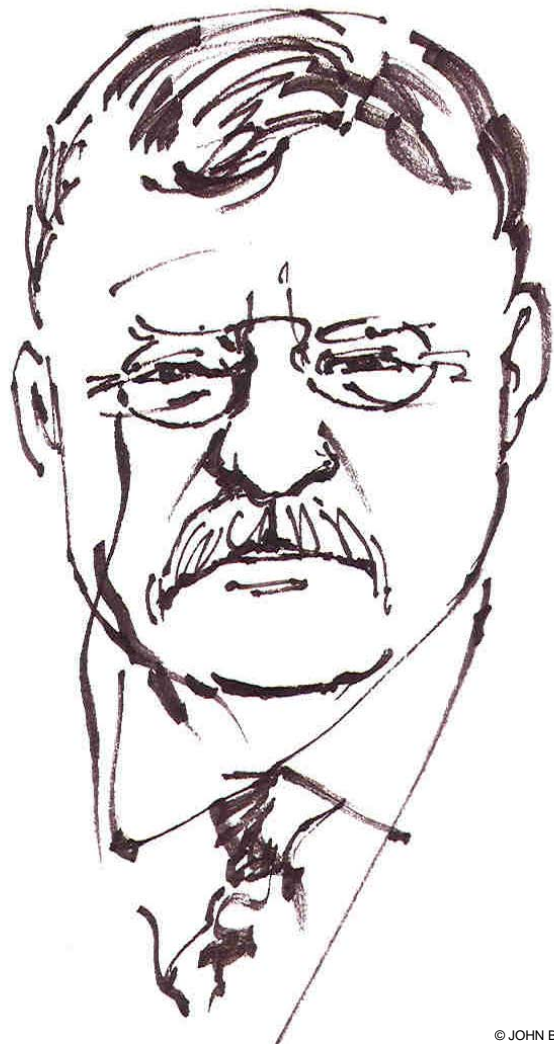
realistic and heroic. "They are as hardy and self-reliant as any men who ever breathed," he wrote. "Peril and hardship and years of long toil broken by weeks of brutal dissipation, draw lines across their eager faces, but never dim their reckless eyes nor break their bearing of defiant self-confidence."

And, "A cowboy will not submit tamely to an insult, and is ever ready to avenge his own wrongs; nor has he an overwrought fear of shedding blood. He possesses, in fact, few of the emasculated, milk-and-water moralities admired by the pseudo-philanthropists; but he does possess to a very high degree, the stern, manly qualities that are invaluable to a nation."

Roosevelt saw the men of the West as a rough corrective to the hypercivilized and effeminate men he had known at Harvard and in his New York social circle—men who could not wrestle a calf to the ground if their lives depended upon it.

By the time he left the Dakota badlands, Roosevelt had learned to love average men and women. His love was genuine—not the easy demagogic rhetoric of professional politicians. Abraham Lincoln's "common people" recognized Roosevelt's love and

respect, and they returned it in full measure. This was the source of Roosevelt's great power as an American reformer. The professionals found him annoying—self-righteous, too boisterous, a grandstander, too earnest in his reforms, unwilling to deal—but average Americans gave Roosevelt an enormous vote of confidence which inspired him to stay in



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the arena and fight the good fight throughout his remarkable life.

Roosevelt agreed with historian Frederick Jackson Turner that the frontier had been the single most important factor in shaping the American character, that American democracy and key social institutions had been reinvigorated by the pioneers who carried their

axes, hoes, Bibles and Masonic Lodges beyond the line of western settlement.

Roosevelt understood that the advance of American civilization had exacted a heavy toll on wolves, bears, forests, and on American Indian cultures. He was not unsympathetic to the Native American peoples who had been overwhelmed by the march of Anglo-Saxon civilization. But he consistently placed the conquest of Indian tribes within the dynamics of inevitability, and he argued, unapologetically, that the history of the world recorded the triumph of the strong over the weak. Roosevelt felt contempt for hand-wringing “philanthropists” who blamed white American civilization for doing what he regarded as the necessary, if sometimes brutal, work of world progress.

The trilogy of books about his time in the West represents the finest prose Roosevelt ever wrote. These were “Hunting Trips of a Ranchman” (1885), “Ranch Life and the Hunting Trail” (1888), and “The Wilderness Hunter” (1893). Not only are his western writings the best in a long life of incessant scribbling, but what he wrote about his experiences between 1883-1887 may constitute the finest prose about western North Dakota.

Somehow the West inspired him to lower the rhetorical volume and turn his great powers of concentration to the spirit of place instead. His description of late fall on the northern plains is unsurpassable:

“It was a beautiful hunting day; the sun-dogs hung in the red dawn; the wind hardly stirred over the crisp grass; and though the sky was cloudless yet the weather had that queer, smoky, hazy look that it is most apt to take on during the time of the Indian summer. From a high spur of the tableland we looked out far and wide over a great stretch of broken country, the brown of whose hills and valleys was varied everywhere by patches of dull red and vivid yellow, tokens that the trees were already putting on the dress with which they greet the mortal ripening of the year.”

Roosevelt discovered conservation. He came west to kill and ranch, but he soon realized that the American people had expressed too much violence towards the fragile landscapes and life forms beyond the 100th meridian. He killed one of the last of what once had been an American buffalo herd of perhaps as many as 50 million critters; then he realized that the few hundred buffalo that remained needed to be protected or they would go the way of the passenger pigeon. He realized that the cattlemen, including himself, had overgrazed the plains grasses in search of

immediate profits.

Roosevelt came to understand that an unregulated West would soon be denuded of its wild creatures, its great trees, and its stupendous grasslands. At the Grand Canyon in Arizona in 1908, President Roosevelt said: “We have gotten past the stage, my fellow citizens, when we are to be pardoned if we treat any part of our country as something to be skinned for two or three years for the use of the present generation, whether it is the forest, the water, the scenery. Whatever it is, handle it so that your children’s children will get the benefit of it.”

Although he never lost his lust for killing quadrupeds, Roosevelt went on to become the greatest conservationist in presidential history. He doubled the number of national parks, tripled the size of the national forest system, created the national wildlife refuge system, and created the national monument system. He helped to save Yellowstone National Park from adverse commercial development. He helped to create the professional civilian National Park Service. No president did more for the environment.

Out West, Roosevelt learned that aristocrats have to prove their merit. In Boston or New York, a man of Roosevelt’s birth and wealth had automatic access to power, opportunity, and respectability. When Roosevelt arrived in the Dakota badlands, wearing thick spectacles and sporting designer buckskins and a knife specially made for him by Tiffany’s, he was regarded as yet another in a long line of eastern carpetbaggers who come to the West to appropriate its romance without doing anything admirable during their brief visits.

The American West represented a reversal of the American class system. The eastern aristocrat had to pass through a period of strenuous probation if he wished to be considered worthy—much less equal. Theodore Roosevelt was a man who insisted upon being taken seriously. Eventually he managed to overcome his status as Four-Eyed Dude by throwing himself unhesitatingly into frontier life. He never complained. He never quit work before others. He was always among the first to rise in the morning. He tried never to call attention to himself. He did not eschew dirty, exhausting or degrading work. He did not fret over his injuries. He stood up to bullies who sought to make fun of his physical frailties. He shot grizzly bears while peering through his Coke-bottle glasses. He knocked out a drunken gunslinger in a saloon. He tracked down thieves who stole his boat.

On July 4, 1886, Roosevelt delivered a speech in Dickinson, N.D., in which he said: “Like all Americans, I like big things. Big prairies, big forests and mountains. Big wheat fields, railroads and herds of cattle too. Big factories and steamboats and everything else.”

In the American West, he had become one of America’s big things. By now his body was as “tough as a hickory nut,” as he liked to put it. The asthmatic 98-pound weakling was now as strong as a bull moose. Out on the plains, Roosevelt’s soul had grown even more dramatically than his body. After his Fourth of July oration, Roosevelt rode the train back to Medora with the spirited young editor of the *Bad Lands Cow Boy*, A.T. Packard. As the train rolled through the stark countryside and he listened to Roosevelt talk about citizenship, American ideals, and America’s place in the world, Packard suddenly predicted that Roosevelt would become the president of the United States.

“If your prophecy comes true,” Roosevelt said, “I will do my part to make a good one.”

When he returned to New York in the fall, Roosevelt was prepared to take on the world. ■

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