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In Trace of TR: A Montana Hunter's Journey

Dan Aadland

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In Trace of TR

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In Trace of TR

A Montana Hunter's Journey



DAN AADLAND

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Set in Swift.

To those American hunters who honor the legacy of Theodore Roosevelt by pursuing game on foot and horseback while caring for the land; to wife Emily and sons David, Jon, and Steve, their families, their efforts to raise their children with an appreciation for open space and wild creatures; and, to the great ones of the past whose trails we follow.

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Introduction

A Hunter's Heart

FIFTY YEARS AGO I sat on a wooden rail enclosing a large observation deck behind the visitor's center at Mount Rushmore. Encircled by a crowd of chattering siblings, so many of them that my father required us to count off military style each time we reentered the car, I watched a bedecked Sioux pose for pictures with admiring tourists. He was having a fine time, a mid-summer Santa Claus with headdress, surrounded by suitors—and so were the tourists.

Dad was in his meticulous stage as a photographer, camera perched on a massive varnished-oak tripod produced in his basement shop because rock-steadiness was required by the extremely slow slide film he preferred. We would be here a while. He would snap the famous rock faces from every angle possible, seeking branches with pinecones as foreground framing. We would wait; our initial "Wow's" on first seeing the stone presidents had been spontaneous and genuine but short in duration.

Ever the pensive one, I sat and stared, tuning out as best I could my siblings and, from the crowd, a cacophony of touristy comments that seemed to me, even at age thirteen, inane. Already too much the westerner, I didn't particularly like crowds of any sort, and these pudgy tourists in Bermuda shorts, clutching at children who ventured close to the edges of the deck,

were too obviously creatures of pavement and suburbs in far-away places to which I'd rather not go.

But the four faces on the mountain did hold my interest. No stellar student, I was nevertheless secure enough in my knowledge of three of them. The stock but solid history drilled into us by elementary teachers in our stone Montana schoolhouse had stuck rather well, and I'd begun to supplement my awareness of the past with more palatable stuff, historical novels I'd found during numerous sifts through our school's little library.

Washington, it seemed to me, was the most logical subject for sculptor's stone: Strong, a horseman and commander, but aware, too, of the limits of his role. Unschooled as a military man, he more than compensated with stubbornness and raw courage, while he led by example and had the class to step aside when it was time.

Jefferson was more like me, I thought, a reader and writer and perhaps a dreamer, but one who dreamed on a grand scale. He sent Lewis and Clark out to the good country, to my country, Clark's name having been lent to a branch of the Yellowstone River near our home. The Pryor Mountains, visible when I climbed the hill behind our house, were named, I knew, for a soldier in his company.

From my early childhood, Lincoln's face invoked in me dumb admiration along with an impulse nearly to cry. I needed only a few minutes to memorize the Gettysburg Address (my schooling occurred before teachers were taught that rote learning was unnecessary and destructive). I found the words beautiful in formal fashion, and the man lonely and tortured. I saw him pacing in his study, struggling for just the right word and just the right deed and coming to it as all great men must, alone.

And there, tucked back between the shoulders of his elders, was the junior member, the only one with spectacles and a mustache, Theodore Roosevelt. He was, in my father's politics,

the “good” Roosevelt. Dad was nearly manic in his enthusiasm for national parks, and taking his brood to any one of them, homebuilt travel trailer in tow, was a task not daunting but relished throughout its yearlong anticipation. He thanked Roosevelt for the whole shebang, though as an admirer of Henry Ford, he said less about TR’s stance toward big business.

Schoolroom clichés such as “trust buster” had stuck in my mind but meant little. I was vaguely aware that Roosevelt had some connection with the West beyond his advocacy of national parks. I did not yet know him as a hunter or horseman, though I suspect some seed had been sown, perhaps by a photo in a schoolbook or on the wall of a museum or visitor’s center. My lexicon of historical hunters at the time was dominated by the likes of characters carved by Earnest Thompson Seton and, on television, Andy Burnett, the subject of the one Disney series I really liked. And, of course, there was Daniel Boone and *his* fictional Cooper counterpart whom I’d met in *The Deerslayer*. Perhaps a man who had been president of the United States was a bit too august to comfortably enter this fraternity.

But that would change. The small Montana town to which my minister father had moved the family when I was in the third grade was nestled in a valley between sage-covered foothills that beckoned to a small boy soon trusted with a .22-caliber rifle. The woods in the river bottom were equally magnetic. We cut and peeled fragrant willow, fashioning crude bows and arrows and slingshots powered by strips of truck inner tube scavenged from friendly mechanics.

The historian Frederick Jackson Turner would have been smugly gratified had he been able to observe our childhood tribe of preacher’s kids. His thesis concerning the shaping effects of open space, the release provided by the availability of the West for the cramped and crowded soul, may still stand unproven in the minds of modern scholars. But for us, a decade before I

heard Turner's name, the thesis was simple reality. And so it was, too, for Turner's good friend Theodore Roosevelt.



What is it that makes certain historical figures come out of their stuffy portraits and emerge from between the covers of musty books to live beside us as tangible human forms? Yes, we understand their influence. We understand that we are, in many respects, what they made. But that's not enough.

With artists it comes easily. To a devout child the tortured Christ of El Greco needs no explanation, nor does the mindset of the artist who saw his subject this particular way. Similarly, only someone with heart and soul made of wood could sit unmoved by the sounds of Bach's "Air on the String of G," and once hearing it, could ever again see the composer as merely a wigged stoic to be remembered for a quiz in a music appreciation class.

And no one who has ever watched a sunrise can fail to connect with one of Shakespeare's many descriptions of dawn. A favorite is when Romeo, turned realist by unfortunate circumstances, dreads the day but notes the beauty of its coming: "what envious streaks / Do lace the severing clouds in yonder east: / Night's candles are burnt out, and jocund day / Stands tiptoe on the misty mountain tops." The bard, businessman, director, theater manager, actor, and writer wrote mainly in the last hours of darkness, I'm convinced, and saw the russet dawn countless times. He seems to have looked for excuses to describe it, sometimes incongruously, through poetry from the lips of gruff men. And so a rancher—teacher—writer whose time for composition is squeezed into the last hours of darkness and the first hint of morning connects with him over four centuries, one workaholic to another.

It came later with Roosevelt. In many ways the "bully" stereotype masked the man. It hinted little of a life that contained

tragedy of the most searing sort. It said less about the literary man, the president most published and prolific as a writer and insatiable as a reader. It did not depict Roosevelt the scientist, the ornithologist; and while crediting him for the politics of conservation, knowledge here came down to me in the same sort of fact-sheet format from which we learn—and are too often bored by—our lessons in history. Roosevelt’s love affair with the natural world was not revealed.

I cannot cite a particular epiphany. The life of a New York blueblood could not have been more alien to a small-town Montana boy. Studied later in my life, Roosevelt’s frenetic career in New York State politics, his life there as a shrill competitor, failed to attract. Indeed, the man emerged as someone I may not have particularly liked. “Hyper” personalities tend to crowd introspective ones. His life as a police commissioner and as a governor might as well have been, for me, on Mars.

As a military man he came closer. A little reading revealed the inaccuracies of the San Juan Hill stereotypes, showed them as fanciful as most artists’ depictions of Custer at the Little Big-horn. In Roosevelt’s own language I found the realities: fighting hungry, dirty, and hot; semi-lost most of the time; success through guts, determination and a little luck.

Equally telling of TR’s character, perhaps more so, was his troops’ handling of the mustering out, the dissolution of the Rough Riders, that all-American composite Roosevelt had assembled. As a farewell gift they presented their leader with Remington’s sculpture of the Bronc Buster. Scouts, hunting guides, and West Pointers alike, welded by the bond of combat under a magnificent leader, wept openly. This was the leader who, because transport to Cuba had allowed room for only officers’ horses, not those of the men, refused to ride while his men were made to walk. Whenever possible, the colonel marched on foot alongside them. And the former Marine in me, trained to believe that the very best leaders put mission first

but the welfare of those serving under them a very close second, nudged me closer to the man behind the thick glasses.



It is, however, on horseback, rifle under my knee, listening to meadowlarks sing while I ride over sage and coulees, perhaps to find a deer or an antelope, that I've really met Mr. Roosevelt. Someday scientists may detect genes for warriors, horsemen, and hunters. I'm convinced there are those of us in whom the drive to go out to find meat, rifle in hand, bypassing feedlot, processing plant, and supermarket, is too strong to be denied.

So it is as a hunter and as a horseman that I have met him and that I have come to know him. His time in the West was a mere sliver of a life so full and varied that were he a character in a novel we would declare him beyond credibility. Yet without his time here, in my country, as a rancher, horseman, and hunter, he would never have been, by his own declaration, president of the United States. An intervening century prevents my riding with him, but I have felt under my horse's soft shuffle the ground over which he rode, smelled his campfires of pungent pine and acrid sage, and stalked with him the prairie goat.

I am not a Theodore Roosevelt groupie. I meet him not for an autograph but for a firm handshake, my gaze meeting his, our horses restive as the skyline beckons. I meet him as a rancher and horseman and most of all as a hunter. Through the shared experiences related in this book I have come to know him better while learning as well new things about myself, about his time and my time, about the things that endure.

Come along with us. It should be a good ride.