


12-2012

## "Never Draw Unless You Mean to Shoot": Theodore Roosevelt's Frontier Diplomacy

Duane G. Jundt

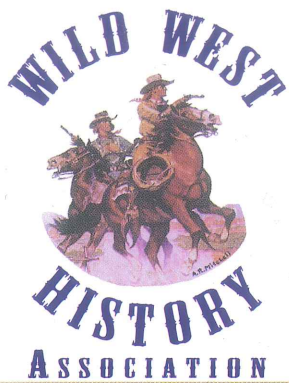
*Northwestern College - Orange City*, [djundt@nwcsiowa.edu](mailto:djundt@nwcsiowa.edu)

Follow this and additional works at: [https://nwcommons.nwcsiowa.edu/history\\_faculty](https://nwcommons.nwcsiowa.edu/history_faculty)

 Part of the [Diplomatic History Commons](#), [Military History Commons](#), [Political History Commons](#), and the [United States History Commons](#)

---

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the History Department at NWCommons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of NWCommons. For more information, please contact [ggrund@nwcsiowa.edu](mailto:ggrund@nwcsiowa.edu).



# Journal

*Wild West History Association*

Volume V • Number 6 • December 2012

## In This Issue:

**“Never Draw Unless You Mean to Shoot”**  
Theodore Roosevelt’s  
Frontier Diplomacy  
*Duane G. Jundt*

**The Talbot Raid**  
“Hell is in Session  
in Caldwell”  
*Rod Cook*

**Butch Cassidy Sought  
Amnesty,**  
Fact or Fiction?  
*Daniel Buck*

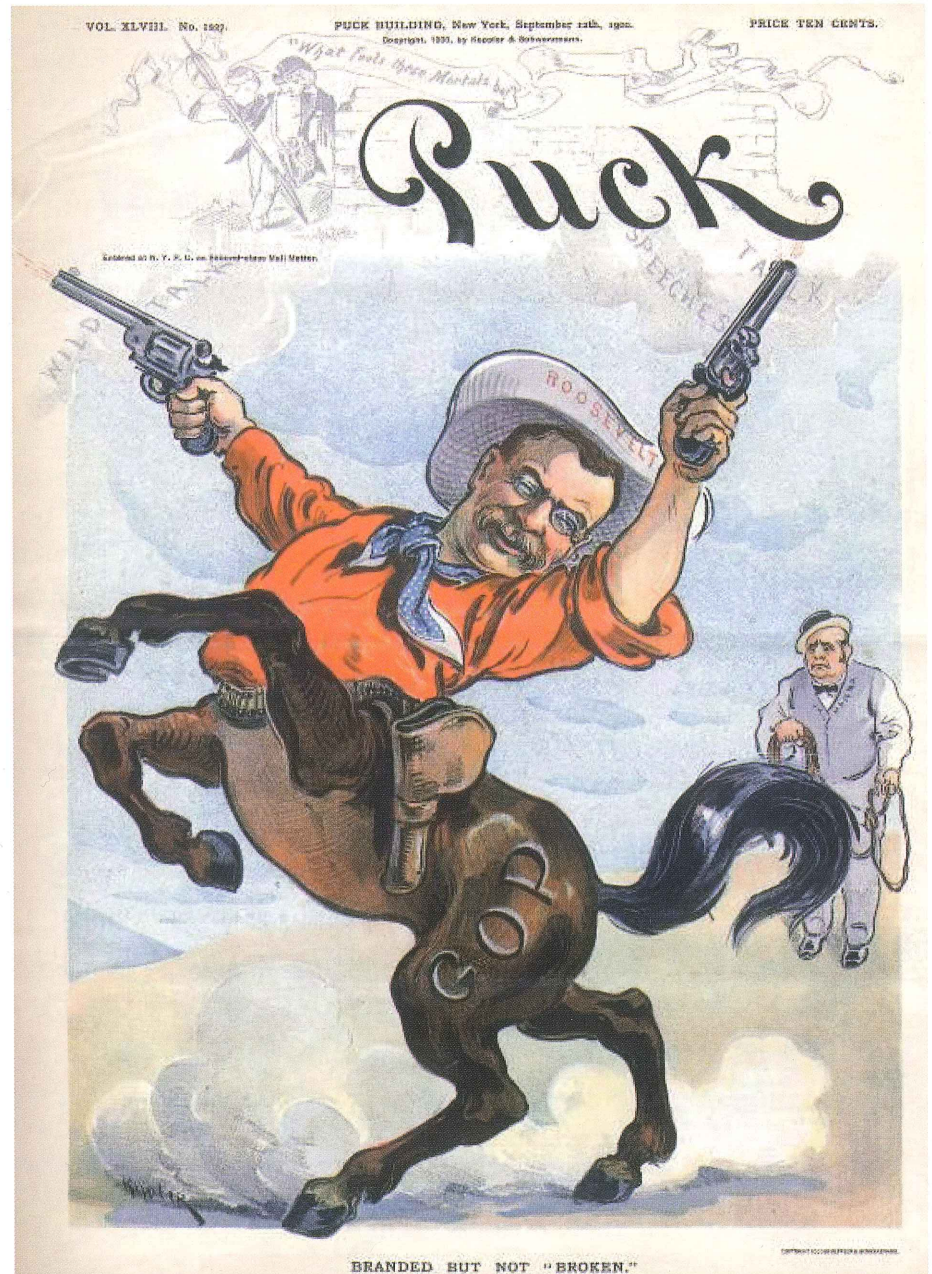
**Questionable  
Identification of  
Clell Miller  
Leads to Exhumation  
Request**  
*Margaret Bailey*

**The Hickok Draw**  
*Joseph G. Rosa*

**Gallery of Gunfighters**  
*Butch Cassidy*  
*Jesse James*

**Review of the West**

**2013 Awards Criteria**



**Theodore Roosevelt**  
**“Never Draw Unless You Mean to Shoot”**

**“Never Draw Unless You  
Mean to Shoot”**

**Theodore Roosevelt’s  
Frontier Diplomacy**

*Duane G. Jundt*

**“[The Virginian] began far off from the point with that rooted caution of his—that caution which is shared alike by the primitive savage and the perfected diplomat.”**

**Owen Wister, *The Virginian*<sup>1</sup>**

Theodore Roosevelt’s brief foray into the world of cattle and cowboys in the Bad Lands of present day North Dakota has most often been viewed by historians and his biographers in largely personal terms as a time of grieving over the dual deaths of his wife and mother on Valentine’s Day 1884 and as a time of transformation when the sickly, effete, asthma-wracked dude from New York City remade himself into a rough and ready ranchman, a living embodiment of the “strenuous life.”<sup>2</sup> In recent years historians have come to acknowledge the political education that Roosevelt received in the dugouts and cabins of his frontier companions.<sup>3</sup> Certainly the broad appeal Roosevelt enjoyed as President (and retains to this day) stemmed in part from his ability to bridge the gap between his blue blood background and the roots of most ordinary Americans. And of all his presidential achievements, certainly his long list of actions taken on behalf of natural resource conservation can be traced to his witnessing the denudation of his beloved Bad Lands in the late 1880s.<sup>4</sup> But not only was the mourning son and widower healed, the college boy made into a cowboy and the politician with the common touch created, but the future commander-in-chief and recipient of the Nobel Peace Prize also practiced a form of frontier diplomacy that presaged his foreign policy as president.

As President, Roosevelt was often caricatured and lampooned in the political cartoons of the day as a cowboy, sheriff, policeman or Rough Rider on horseback (preferably a bucking bronco) who invariably wielded a very big stick that more than outweighed the other half of his famous maxim to “speak softly.”<sup>5</sup> Roosevelt was seen as a man of action and, frequently, violent, action. But this stereotypic portrayal is at odds with the reality of Roosevelt the ranchman and Roosevelt the deputy sheriff. Although he inhabited a sometimes violent world in the valley of the Little Missouri River, Roosevelt did not resort to violence with the ease and to the degree that many of his contemporaries did; in fact, Roosevelt exercised considerable restraint, caution and discipline in numerous situations in which an appeal to violence would have been wholly accepted and even condoned in his frontier community. When presented with opportunities to “shoot first and ask questions later”, the end result of Roosevelt’s course of action often begged the question of why he *didn’t* shoot first. In Dakota, Roosevelt learned firsthand the value of deterrence; preparation for armed conflict; decisive action and the need to mediate disputes, establish order and elicit cooperation. Less than a generation later he would apply these same lessons to the international frontier as the nation’s chief diplomat.

And yet the power of the stereotype and the caricature of the cowboy remain formidable. All too often the fallback position for a Roosevelt scholar is to link his cowboy years with a propensity for violence. In her well-received biography, Kathleen Dalton states that Roosevelt’s family asked his ranch hand “Bill Sewall to write each fortnight about Theodore’s well-being because they knew he rode recklessly and dealt with unruly cowpunchers and neighbors without worrying about the consequences.”<sup>6</sup> However, a close examination of Roosevelt’s time in Dakota reveals that he very much worried about and restrained his actions in the company of his well armed neighbors. George Tindall and David Shi in their bestselling textbook *America: A Narrative History*, describe Roosevelt as a “blue-blooded New Yorker [who] relished hunting, leading roundups, capturing outlaws, *fighting Indians*—and reading novels by the campfire.”<sup>7</sup> Although



**Theodore Roosevelt with his Horse “Manitou” in the Badlands in 1884**  
(Photo provided courtesy of Library of Congress and Theodore Roosevelt Center at Dickinson State University)

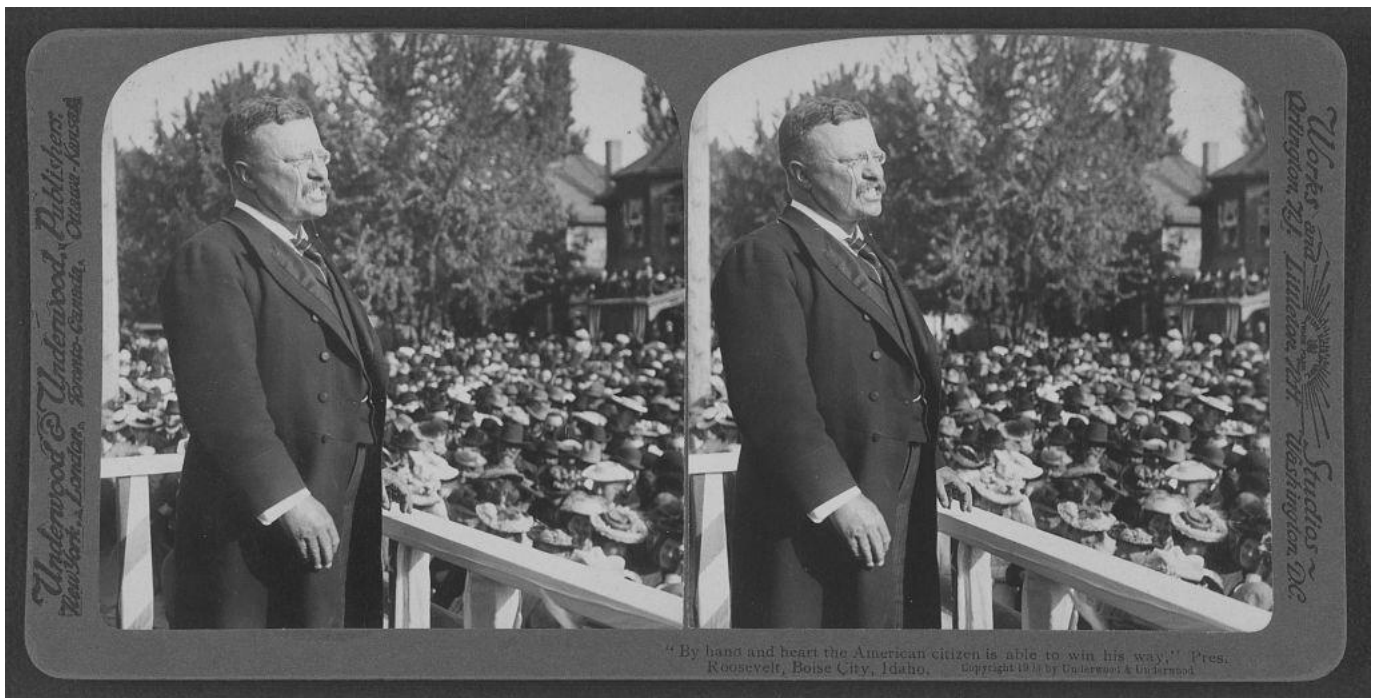


**A Stereocard View of Theodore Roosevelt on Horseback in Laramie, Wyoming**  
(Library of Congress)



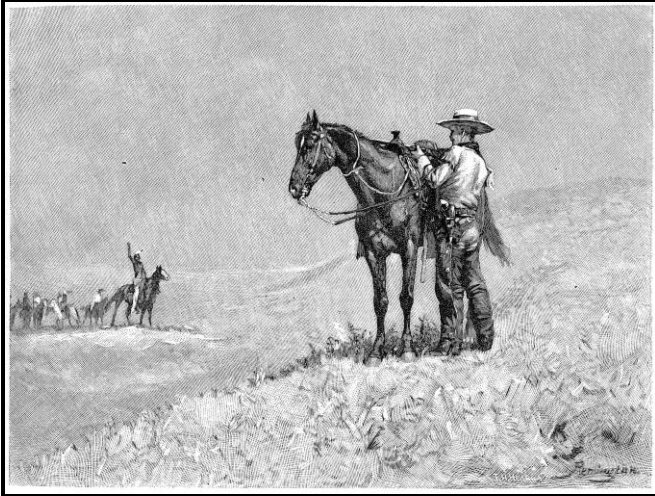
**Theodore Roosevelt (center) with friends and ranchmen Wilmot Dow (right) and Bill Sewall (left). Dow and Sewall built Roosevelt's Elkhorn Ranch house, oversaw his ranch, and accompanied him on his capture of the boat thieves.**

(Photo provided courtesy of Library of Congress and Theodore Roosevelt Center at Dickinson State University)



**Roosevelt at his "Bully!" best preaching to the crowds in Idaho  
(Library of Congress)**

Roosevelt confesses to a single armed standoff with a small band of Indians, he never engaged any in combat. Douglas Brinkley rightly and succinctly notes that “Roosevelt never killed a Confederate, an Indian, a Mexican, or any other human on American soil.”<sup>8</sup>



**“Standing Off Indians”**

(Frederick Remington illustration from Roosevelt’s book *Ranch Life and the Hunting Trail*. Courtesy Boone and Crockett Club, [www.booneandcrockettclub.com](http://www.booneandcrockettclub.com))

The desire, in some cases, to literally portray Roosevelt as bound to violence retains its allure for some scholars. The covers to both the hardcover and paperback editions of Walter Nugent’s *Habits of Empire: A History of American Expansionism*, feature large portraits of Thomas Jefferson and Theodore Roosevelt. Roosevelt is depicted wearing a cowboy/western hat and bandana and clutching a rifle held high across his chest. The implication here is clear: Roosevelt, a chronicler and proponent of American expansion, was a western imperialist bent on expanding the American empire at the point of a gun.<sup>9</sup> The publishers of Evan Thomas’ *The War Lovers: Roosevelt, Lodge, Hearst, and the Rush to Empire, 1898*, also seem to editorialize with their choice of a cover that features a photograph of a young Roosevelt with the top of his head out of frame and out of sight, implying a brainless and unthinking march to war.<sup>10</sup> An August 2011 episode of “Deadliest Warriors,” on the cable channel Spike, focused on Roosevelt’s exploits in the Spanish-American War with one of the show’s commentators ineloquently and

incorrectly noting that “Teddy Roosevelt never did ‘nothing’ at all.”<sup>11</sup>

Perhaps the tendency to associate Roosevelt the cowboy with violence stems from the larger and much more firmly entrenched public perception of the “Wild West.” As Roosevelt made no secret of his attachment to and love of the American frontier, it seems natural to tie him to the violence that supposedly pervaded the West. Yet some recent scholarship makes the case for a “mild” West that was far less violent than the one so frequently portrayed in the popular culture. In *Frontier Cattle Ranching in the Land and Times of Charlie Russell*, Warren M. Elofson compares the 1880s frontier communities of southern and western Canada and Montana and finds that “The Canadians were not all law-abiding and tame and the Americans were not all vicious and blood thirsty.”<sup>12</sup> Elofson argues that the frequency of gun violence on the American frontier has been exaggerated and he even takes Roosevelt to task for overstating the amount of lethal gun play in his *Ranch Life and the Hunting Trail*.<sup>13</sup> In “New Tales of the Old West” Lee Sandlin reviews two 2011 publications about the gunfight at the OK Corral and Doc Holliday and concludes that “If these two books actually do manage to help deconstruct anything, it’s the myth that the West was extraordinarily violent. Violence in that time was much less common than violence is now.”<sup>14</sup>

In *Law and Order in Buffalo Bill’s Country: Legal Culture and Community on the Great Plains, 1867-1910*, Mark R. Ellis shows that Lincoln County Nebraska was ruled by an effective system of law and order including sheriffs, local police forces and railroad police and that it had functioning courts, prisons and legal systems. Despite its claim as the home of Buffalo Bill Cody, this community, and many more like it across the Great Plains, did not suffer from an epidemic of lawlessness and violence that had to be tamed by the likes of Cody. Ellis asserts that “it is hard to ignore the fact that legal criminal prosecutions were the way of life for the vast majority of Great Plains communities.”<sup>15</sup> He finds the legacy of Buffalo Bill’s Wild West shows to be detrimental to an accurate portrayal of the frontier because they perpetuated the idea that the West “was a lawless and dangerous region where justice was administered by six-shooters and

vigilantes rather than by judges and juries.”<sup>16</sup> The western novelist Elmer Kelton, in a spirited defense of the reputation of the American cowboy, argues that the very meaning of “cowboy” has been distorted by the contemporary political culture which has embraced “the idea that cowboys as a class are quick to fight. In reality, the average cowboy rarely handles a gun. Even in earlier times, when gun toting was normal, a cowboy was known to let a pistol rust away in his saddlebag or bedroll, unused and neglected.”<sup>17</sup> Roosevelt confronted the idea of an anarchic West in his own time noting in 1888 that “a man has very little more to fear in the West than in the East, in spite of all the lawless acts one reads about.”<sup>18</sup>

**“A man,’ [the Virginian] stated reflectively, ‘any full-sized man, ought to own a big lot of temper. And like all his valuable possessions, he’d ought to keep it and not lose any.’”**

**Owen Wister, *The Virginian*<sup>19</sup>**

Roosevelt ranched, hunted and wandered the Bad Lands of Dakota from the fall of 1883 to the spring of 1887. He was never more than a part-time resident and was, in effect, after his acquisition of two separate cattle ranches, an absentee landlord. Yet Roosevelt spent just enough time - about a year total - on his slice of the dwindling frontier to experience the variety of conflicts that have come to mark the popular imagination’s view of the Wild West.<sup>20</sup> He was targeted for drinks and abuse by a drunken cowboy in a saloon. He entertained the idea of a duel with the richest, most powerful businessman in the territory. He found himself alone on the prairie with five Indians, their intentions unknown, bearing down on him. He witnessed the workings of vigilante justice as the area cattlemen hunted down and executed both the guilty and innocent accused of horse and cattle theft. He pursued, captured and delivered to justice the three outlaws that stole his boat. He began the process of introducing properly constituted law and order with his appointment as a deputy sheriff, and he assisted in the transition of the territory from an unorganized backwater to a legal entity with his

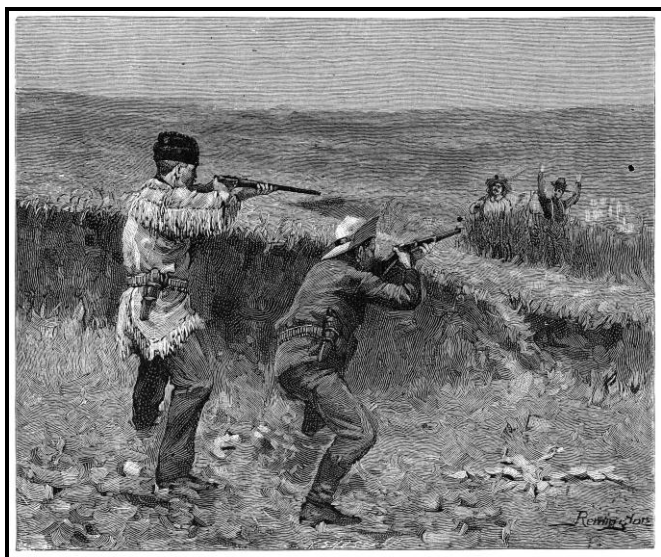
work in founding the Little Missouri Stockmen’s Association.

Despite Roosevelt’s reputation for action (“a steam engine in trousers”), upon closer study what strikes one about all of these encounters is not what Roosevelt does, but what he does not do. When confronted with a pistol waving, belligerent drunkard in a Montana barroom, Roosevelt did not, in turn, reach for his weapon. Instead he exercised his pugilistic skills and laid out his adversary with a right, left, right combination that abruptly ended the confrontation without escalation. When the Marquis de Mores, a French aristocrat and would be American entrepreneur who wrongly believed that Roosevelt was conspiring against him, dangled the prospect of a duel before Roosevelt in the fall of 1885, Roosevelt replied in kind that he was “ever ready to hold myself accountable in any way for anything I have said or done.”<sup>21</sup> The Marquis never responded to Roosevelt’s reply and the matter quickly faded away, but again Roosevelt had demonstrated a quiet resolve and had not acted impulsively or recklessly in the face of the challenge. This episode also demonstrates Roosevelt’s awareness of his own limitations, his discretion and plain good sense. The Marquis was an accomplished marksman who had already killed two men in duels.<sup>22</sup> The bespectacled Roosevelt, known as “old four eyes” by his cowboys, was most decidedly not a good shot. As David McCullough, one of Roosevelt’s biographers notes: “Had there been a duel...almost certainly Theodore would have been killed.”<sup>23</sup>

That same fall of 1885 Roosevelt had his most notable encounter with the Native Americans who still inhabited the area. Out on yet another solitary sojourn across the prairie, Roosevelt suddenly found his isolation broken by five mounted Indians who approached him at a gallop’s pace. Roosevelt, unsure of their intentions, quickly dismounted, drew his Winchester, aimed it at his pursuers and politely, but firmly, asked them to come no further. According to Roosevelt: “Indians—and, for the matter of that, white men—do not like to ride in on a man who is cool and means shooting.”<sup>24</sup> Despite further entreaties from the Indians to approach, Roosevelt held his ground and his aim

and they eventually retreated. Again, Roosevelt acted with prudence and caution. He did not flee in a panic; he did not rashly open fire; neither did he belittle, insult or antagonize his uninvited guests. Outnumbered and alone, Roosevelt held his ground but did not heedlessly escalate the confrontation.

While Roosevelt was careful and considered with the use of violence in his personal confrontations, he did condone the use of collective violence to maintain a degree of law and order in his politically unorganized territory. In short, Roosevelt approved of the use of vigilante justice as an antidote to the ever-present horse and cattle thieves. Although he will never admit it in his own considerable writings detailing his time in Dakota, Roosevelt's biographers believe that he intended to join the most prominent vigilante group, "the stranglers" as early as June 1884, but that he was rightly dissuaded from doing so by one of its organizers.<sup>25</sup> Roosevelt acknowledges but does not celebrate the work of the vigilantes in his writing, indicating that their work was necessary to establish some semblance of law and order in the territory. He is also careful to note that they sometimes exceeded their own tenuous authority and killed the innocent.<sup>26</sup>



**“Hands Up! – The Capture of Finnigan”**  
A depiction of the capture of some of the boat thieves in March 1886.

(Frederick Remington illustration from Roosevelt's book *Ranch Life and the Hunting Trail*. Courtesy Boone and Crockett Club, [www.booneandcrockettclub.com](http://www.booneandcrockettclub.com))

Despite Roosevelt's initial eagerness to join the "stranglers" and his approval of their methods, when given the opportunity to practice this form of frontier justice, to partake in this type of violence, Roosevelt demurred. In late March 1886, Roosevelt began his legendary pursuit of the thieves who had stolen his small yet valuable boat used in crossing the Little Missouri River. Roosevelt spent nearly two weeks doggedly pursuing, capturing and transporting the three criminals in brutal winter conditions. The tale is at times enthralling, with the river choked with ice, bitter winds and cold and the men reduced to starvation rations. And yet the most amazing aspect of the tale to Roosevelt's contemporaries was its resolution. Having surprised and overwhelmed the thieves without firing a shot, Roosevelt insisted on delivering them to the nearest sheriff in Dickinson, Dakota Territory. Under the prevailing frontier rules, Roosevelt could have shot or hanged the thieves on the spot. Why didn't he? Roosevelt biographer Carleton Putnam argues that "To have done so would have seemed as wrong to him as to have let them escape. Either course would have been lawless and Roosevelt's prime interest was in seeing the law enforced."<sup>27</sup>

Nearly two years after his aborted attempt to join the vigilantes, Roosevelt had, no doubt, matured in his thinking and outlook. He was all of twenty-seven when he undertook this odyssey and his beliefs were still in flux. Roosevelt wanted to see the territory mature politically, moving beyond the frontier stage by taking on aspects of settled civilization. The continuance of vigilante justice, with its attendant loss of innocent life, retarded this growth. Roosevelt also gave his expedition legal legitimacy by acting in his capacity as a deputy sheriff of Billings County. Roosevelt's decision to spare the lives of his three captives sent a powerful signal to the larger community of western Dakota that the time for vigilante justice was drawing to a close and that a new chapter of duly established law and order was at hand. "The great free ranches... mark a primitive stage of existence as surely as do the great tracts of primeval forests, and like the latter must pass away before the onward march of our people."<sup>28</sup>

Much, if not most, of what we know about Roosevelt's Dakota years come from his own



writings. In *Hunting Trips of a Ranchman* (1885), *Ranch Life and the Hunting-Trail* (1888) and chapter IV of his autobiography (“In Cowboy Land”), Roosevelt relates the stories that have now become synonymous with his time in the Bad Lands. A valuable and underappreciated affirmation of much of what Roosevelt writes can be found in Lincoln A. Lang’s *Ranching with Roosevelt*. A younger contemporary of Roosevelt in the Little Missouri valley, Lang notes that “Roosevelt was generally quiet and unobtrusive in manner. If there was anything of the fire-eater about him, the over-riding swashbuckler or grandstander... I, at least never saw it.”<sup>29</sup> Lang also addresses the myths that had grown up around Roosevelt’s time in the West and confirms TR’s lack of a fighting record: “But despite the many spectacular stories which I have heard to the contrary, I have no reason for thinking that he was ever called upon to engage actually in a physical encounter during the period of his ranching career.”<sup>30</sup>

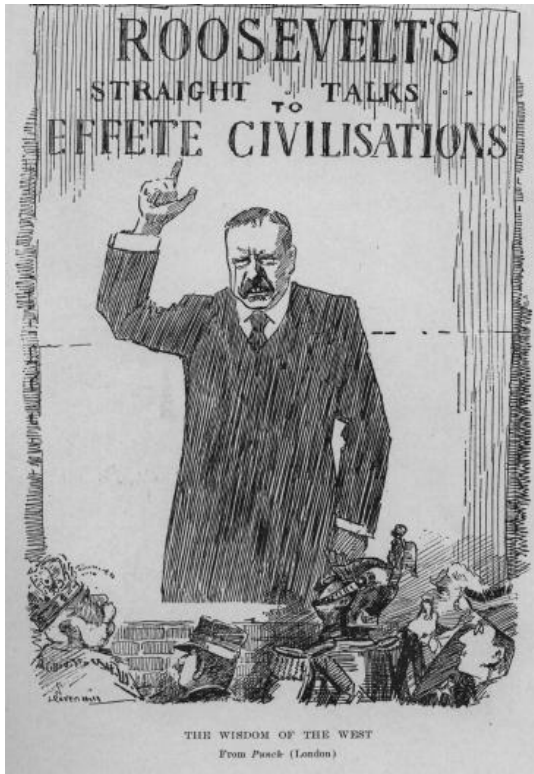
Lastly, Lang also notes the difference between the reality and the perception of the Bad Lands cowboy:

“And of the frontiersmen of the period, the rancher, the cow-puncher whom the world seems to visualize as shooting indiscriminately... I would say this: As a matter of fact, they were the most discriminating shooters I have ever known. If anybody knew guns, they did. Because they did, they respected and handled them accordingly. Under all conditions, outside of actual fighting, where they sought to hit, the last thing they wanted to do was to injure anybody.”<sup>31</sup>

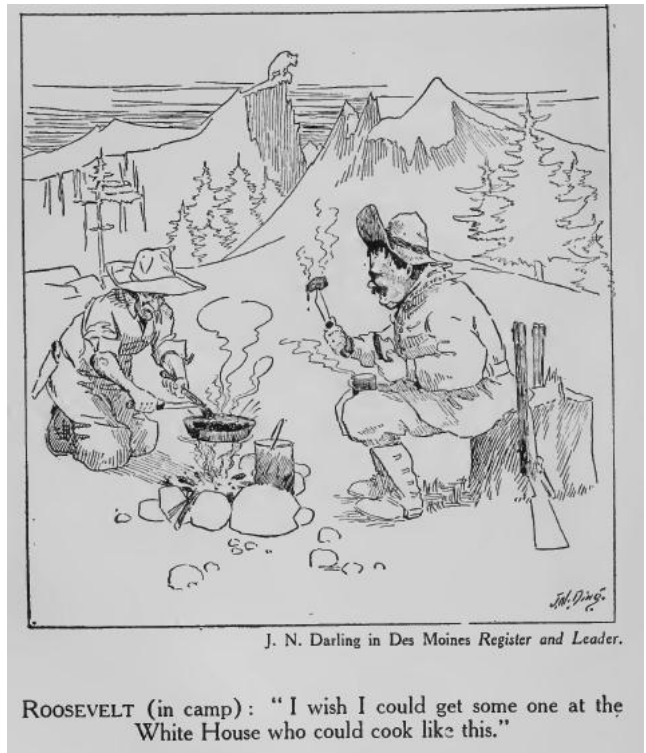
After the disastrous winter of 1886-1887 wiped out most of the cattle on the open range of northwestern Dakota, Roosevelt began the process of gradually divesting himself of his financial interest in the region, although he retained his Elkhorn ranch mainly to serve his periodic appetite for hunting and horseback riding in the Bad Lands. By 1898 Roosevelt had severed the last links he had to the cattle industry and his time on the frontier, like the existence of the frontier itself, had come to an end.<sup>32</sup> Yet the memories

and the lessons learned were not easy to discard. Roosevelt had indeed received a valuable political education in the Bad Lands. His encounters with the diverse population of the Bad Lands, its cowboys, barroom bullies, Native Americans, cattle killers and horse thieves informed his view of human nature, and the lessons he learned from dealing with these varied individuals could not be kept from informing his statecraft.

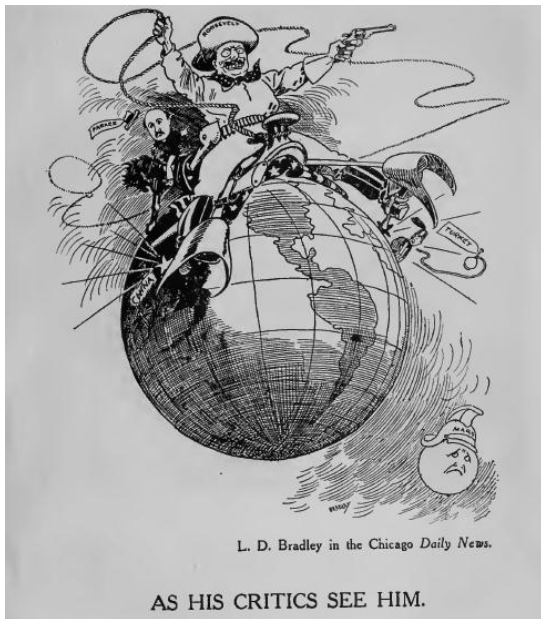
Roosevelt’s views on many of the major foreign policy and national security issues of his presidency and beyond - the expansion of the American navy, the pacifying of the Philippines, and the debate over the establishment of a League of Nations for example - were molded in part by his Bad Lands experience. Roosevelt scholar William Tilchin writes that Roosevelt’s “big stick diplomacy had at its foundation five central principles” and a careful look at Roosevelt’s Dakota years reveals at least a degree of symmetry between his cowboy diplomacy and his presidential statecraft.<sup>33</sup> “The first was the possession of a formidable military capability.” Roosevelt’s ranching arsenal ranged from his matching Colt revolvers to his model 1873 and 1876 Winchester rifles. “The second principle was to act justly toward other nations.” Roosevelt, for example, refused to put his own brand on cattle he found on another rancher’s range. “The third was never to bluff.” Roosevelt rarely drew his weapons, but when he did, he did so with deadly intent as in his confrontation with the boat thieves. “[A]nd the fourth was to strike only if prepared to strike hard.” He knocked out cold the barroom bully of Mingusville. “Fifth and finally, big stick diplomacy required its practitioner to allow an honorable adversary to save face in defeat.”<sup>34</sup> Roosevelt treated the boat thieves with considerable dignity and restraint given the vigilante ethos of the time and place. Roosevelt also tapped his frontier experience for language, examples and metaphors that he employed to help sell his foreign policy views to a nation that may have not been steeped in the workings of diplomacy, but because of the work of Roosevelt, Frederick Remington, Buffalo Bill Cody and Owen Wister, was very much aware of the need for a sheriff and his posse to bring law and order to an untamed frontier whether it was in Wyoming or Luzon, Dakota or Santo Domingo.



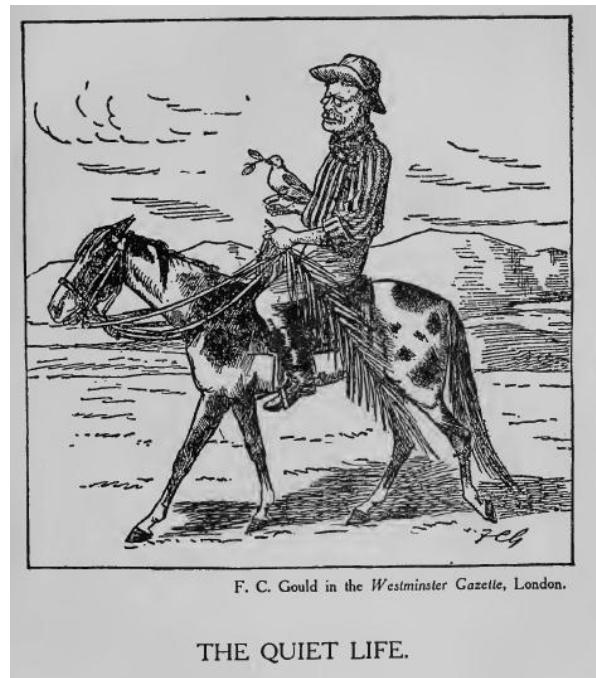
**"The Wisdom of the West"**  
 A political cartoon from Roosevelt's 1910 Tour of Europe which highlights his "straight talk."  
 (Courtesy www.tramericanpatriot.com)



**A portrayal of Roosevelt as a Westerner**  
*Des Moines Register and Leader*  
 (Courtesy www.tramericanpatriot.com)



**This political cartoon from the *Chicago Daily News* portrays Roosevelt in Western regalia**  
 (Courtesy www.tramericanpatriot.com)



**Roosevelt's image as a Westerner is shown in the *Westminster Gazette*, London**  
 (Courtesy www.tramericanpatriot.com)

**“Yet the Virginian stood quiet by the bar, and many an eye of astonishment was turned upon him. ‘I’d not stand half that language,’ some muttered to each other. Still the Virginian waited quietly, while the fools reasoned with Trampas.”**

**Owen Wister, *The Virginian*<sup>35</sup>**

Roosevelt’s foreign policy will forever be identified with his use of the West African proverb “Speak softly and carry a big stick” which is most often associated with his advocacy for, and deployment of, a robust American naval fleet to complement traditional methods of diplomacy. Yet Roosevelt’s introduction to the workings of this maxim may very well have occurred among the cowboys of the Bad Lands who were themselves well armed and who appreciated the man, especially the stranger, who said as little as possible. In *Ranch Life and the Hunting Trail* (1888) he asserts that: “It is always a good plan, if visiting a strange camp or ranch, to be as silent as possible.”<sup>36</sup> In his *Autobiography* of 1913 Roosevelt writes: “But my own experience was that if a man did not talk until his associates knew him well and liked him, and if he did his work, he never had any difficulty in getting on. If, for instance, I was sent off to represent the Little Missouri brands on some neighboring round-up, such as the Yellowstone, I usually showed that *kind of diplomacy* which consists in not uttering one word that can be avoided.”<sup>37</sup> One of Roosevelt’s ablest defenders, Frederick W. Marks III, notes that “Soft speaking, in Roosevelt’s sense, did not mean the mincing of words or any hedging on issues. T.R. addressed himself forcefully, even pointedly, to foreign envoys. But he did so privately and in such a way as to afford a graceful exit from awkward confrontation.”<sup>38</sup> Long before he confronted a diplomatic envoy, Roosevelt challenged a young cowboy poking fun at his eyeglasses with ““Shut up. Put up. Be friends or fight.””<sup>39</sup> When Roosevelt learned that Jerry Paddock, who was known “to settle arguments with a gun rather than his fists,” had threatened to shoot him, Roosevelt did not issue a noisy public challenge to Paddock in the streets and saloons of Medora. He went directly to Paddock’s shack and confronted and eventually befriended his would be adversary.<sup>40</sup>

Even as a ranchman Roosevelt appreciated the diplomatic advantage that accrued to carrying a big stick. In *Ranch Life and the Hunting Trail* he notes that “the practice of carrying dangerous weapons makes cowboys show far more rough courtesy to each other.”<sup>41</sup> In describing the workings of cowboy diplomacy circa 1888, the future President foreshadowed his cautious approach to statecraft: “When a quarrel may very probably result fatally, a man thinks twice before going into it: warlike peoples or classes always treat one another with a certain amount of consideration and politeness.”<sup>42</sup> “‘Diplomacy,’ Roosevelt declared before a Naval War College audience in July 1908, ‘rests on the substantial basis of potential force.’”<sup>43</sup> If Roosevelt’s Indian pursuers were deterred by his Winchester, then surely America’s foes could be kept at bay and her interests secured by maintaining a powerful naval fleet. Long before he confronted the Kaiser or challenged the Tsar, Roosevelt knew to tread carefully, speak deliberately and keep himself armed and ready in the presence of both cowboys and kings.

Roosevelt’s unique brand of cowboy diplomacy featured a tag line that emphasized both his willingness to invoke his ranching years in articulating his foreign policy and his reluctance to use force in response to various diplomatic crises. “I have a horror of the individual who bluffs and, when his bluff is called, does not fight, and have always acted upon the cardinal principle of the Western man in the good old days when I first struck the cattle country - ‘Never draw unless you mean to shoot.’”<sup>44</sup> “Drawing” by idly threatening to use military force would have been a kind of bluff he detested. From navigating America’s relationships with Great Britain and Germany, to explaining the political impossibility of intervening on behalf of beleaguered minorities such as the Jews of Russia or harping on the need for decisive American military action in the First World War, some variation of “never draw unless you mean to shoot” pithily stated Roosevelt’s belief that America should only resort to military force if it could do so decisively with strong public support.<sup>45</sup> Roosevelt understood and sympathized with those who yearned for American military and humanitarian intervention abroad, but he also knew the limitations of the

nation's ability to project power in the remotest corners of the globe and the difficulty in mustering public opinion to support such efforts in a nation still marked by a strong isolationist streak.

Roosevelt again looked to his Dakota experience to explain the necessity of pacifying the Philippines and defeating the insurgency that had arisen against the imposition of American rule in the wake of the Spanish-American War of 1898. Speaking in North Dakota as the Republican Vice-Presidential candidate in 1900, Roosevelt reminded his Fargo audience that just as the former Dakota Territory at one time was not fit for self-government, so the Philippines of 1900 were not ready to be turned loose from their American masters: "The progress made by the Indian toward civilization is a good indication of what can be done in the matter of being governed without their consent. You here who knew of the conditions which existed twenty-five years ago know what a perfect absurdity it was to insist on a self government for this country."<sup>46</sup> One can hear the echoes of Roosevelt's 1884 barroom triumph in this September 1900 exhortation to carry through the difficult fight against the insurgency:

Now, gentlemen, if there is one lesson that is good for a private citizen to learn just as well as a nation, it is, don't hit at all if you can help it, but if you do hit, don't hit soft. Then they [the Filipino insurgents] struck and now we must decide as a nation whether we belong to the foolish class who think that when you get into trouble you can hit a little. You never once heard of any instance where one man earned the friendship of another by only striking him a little.<sup>47</sup>

Roosevelt frequently compared the Filipino insurgents to native tribes of the American West who had gradually and inexorably yielded to the power of the federal government. "When we expanded west of the Mississippi it meant that we put a stop to the tribal warfare which had endured for ages among Sioux and Crow, Cheyenne and Pawnee. So now the establishment of our rule in the Philippines means to give the islands peace, and it is the only chance they have of getting peace or of getting good government."<sup>48</sup> Roosevelt challenged the opponents of American

intervention in the Philippines by repeatedly and explicitly comparing the resistance of the Filipinos to that of the American Indians, arguing that to surrender there would be on par with ceding the frontier back to the Sioux or Apache. In both cases, Roosevelt believed, barbarism would triumph over civilization.<sup>49</sup>

**"It is only the somewhat green and unseasoned cow-puncher who struts before the public in spurs and deadly weapons."**

**Owen Wister, *The Virginian*<sup>50</sup>**

Roosevelt could resort to the use of frontier language, metaphors and examples both in his private correspondence and in his public addresses because he knew that in the age of the western dime novel and in the heyday of Buffalo Bill's (and other) Wild West shows, his audience would have a ready appreciation for his invocation of the West.<sup>51</sup> Douglas Brinkley notes that well into his second term "[TR] usually donned a Stetson hat and often wore a bandanna around his neck, and his public rhetoric was full of western toponyms, cowboyisms, and Indian words not often heard in the East."<sup>52</sup> Roosevelt understood the considerable appeal of the West in the American imagination and he did not shy away from using frontier references to explain his foreign policy. "In order to succeed, I must use arguments that appeal to plain rugged men" Roosevelt wrote in 1910, and peppering his speeches with words and phrases like sheriff's posse, vigilante and outlaw seemed perfectly suited to reach such an audience.<sup>53</sup> He also knew that his political opponents would try to portray him as a cowboy to project an image of him as a loose cannon, an immature gun slinger and a volatile commander-in-chief. Following his electoral triumph in the fall of 1904, Roosevelt, much to his delight, recognized that this strategy had backfired:

There is one point in connection with the last election which has amused me. Owing to the peculiar methods of attack chosen by my antagonists they did me certain services which my friends could not have rendered. Again, it would have been an absurdity for my supporters to say anything about my having been a

military man, or having been a ranchman; for one appeal would have looked ridiculous in view of my having served only four months in a very small war, and the other would have looked demagogic. But the opposing papers, and especially the opposing caricaturists, invariably represented me in the rough rider uniform, or else riding a bucking broncho [sic] and roping a steer, or carrying a big stick and threatening foreign nations and thereby made to the younger among their own readers the very kind of *ad captandum* appeal on my behalf which it would have been undignified for my supporters to have made.<sup>54</sup>

Roosevelt had to learn how to carefully handle the double-edged sword that was his western inheritance. On the one hand, he could embrace his cowboy past and ride the wave of popularity of all things western. On the other hand, doing so left him open to political attacks that equated him and his policies with the violent stereotypes of the West that fascinated the public in the age of Buffalo Bill.

The public's embrace of Roosevelt as a cowboy and an icon of the American West received a considerable boost in 1902 with the publication of Owen Wister's seminal western novel *The Virginian*. Dedicated to Roosevelt, the bestselling novel of 1902, "the most widely read work of fiction in the decade of the 1900s" and "the first western novel widely accepted as literature"<sup>55</sup> reminded its multitude of readers that their President had once lived the life of the novel's eponymous hero. While the novel does not lack for violence (featuring a vigilante hanging, a brutal beating and the climactic gunfight), it is not marked by a steady stream of violent episodes. The final showdown between the Virginian and his foe Trampas comes at the end of five years of tension and hostility between the two with the Virginian all the while exhibiting the virtues of caution, restraint and prudence in the face of increasing taunts and threats from Trampas. Perhaps because Roosevelt had proofread parts of the manuscript and because Wister had experienced the frontier at the same time as his friend (in Wyoming rather than

Dakota), "Speak softly and carry a big stick" finds its expression in *The Virginian* just as it did in *Ranch Life and the Hunting Trail*. While the Virginian can be a garrulous spinner of tall tales, he also knows when to remain silent, especially when challenged by the blustering Trampas. True to form for a cowboy, he is armed with revolvers but is reluctant to draw much less fire his weapons. When his bride-to-be Molly Wood observes that "'You had your pistol ready for him'" the Virginian responds with a laconic "'Why, I believe I did. It was mighty unnecessary.'" And the Virginian took out the pistol again, and shook his head over it, like one who has been caught in a blunder."<sup>56</sup> The Virginian will in the end resort to violence to end his feud with Trampas but he will not do so with enthusiasm. Trampas, for his part, with his final, whiskey fueled, intemperate and ill considered pistol waving threats, recalls perfectly Roosevelt's disdain for "the braggart, the man who uses words which he does not translate into deeds."<sup>57</sup> Trampas knows that "his own rash proclamations had trapped him. His words were like doors shutting him in to perform his threat to the letter."<sup>58</sup> The Virginian embodies the restrained cowboy/diplomat/nation state while Trampas represents the bluff, bluster and false bravado of a politician or nation unable and unwilling to ensure its words are backed by action. Beyond listening to presidential proclamations or viewing the cartoonists' caricatures, the American reading public could divine insights into both Roosevelt's frontier past and the workings of cowboy diplomacy from the pages of *The Virginian*.

**"And I gave him a show to change his mind. I gave it to him twice. I spoke as quiet as I am speaking to you now. But he stood to it. And I expect he knows he went too far in the hearing of others to go back on his threat. He will have to go on to the finish now."**

**Owen Wister, *The Virginian*<sup>59</sup>**

The end of Roosevelt's presidency in 1909 did not signal an end to his involvement in and commentary on American foreign policy. Following his much anticipated African hunting safari, the former president embarked on a wide

ranging European tour in 1910 which featured numerous high-profile addresses and meetings with the continent's crowned heads of state. In his addresses at the Sorbonne in Paris, the Guildhall in London and before the Nobel Committee in Christiania, Norway, Roosevelt invoked some aspects of his frontier past.<sup>60</sup> As for the crowned heads of state, when given the opportunity to meet privately with Roosevelt, they seemed most interested not in probing his views on the weighty issues of the day but in

hear[ing] about my regiment, and especially about my life in the West, evidently regarding it as an opportunity to acquire knowledge at firsthand and at close range concerning the Buffalo-Bill and Wild-West side of American existence. Most of them had obviously read up on my writings for the occasion, and would appeal to me for enlightenment upon points which they could not understand... Accordingly, after the usual formal and perfunctory conversation with the new king or crown prince, or whoever it was, he would, with a little preliminary maneuvering, ask me if I would mind repeating the story I had told some preceding king about this, that, or the other frontier hero....<sup>61</sup>

Although he was famous as a historian, hunter, soldier and President, it was his role as a cowboy that most intrigued and enchanted his European hosts. Roosevelt's frontier past allowed him to charm and entertain the courts of Europe, adding yet another dimension to the workings of cowboy diplomacy.

Roosevelt leaned heavily on his Dakota years when debating the issue of establishing an international collective security agency (such as the eventual League of Nations) in the years surrounding the First World War. Roosevelt drew on his work in forming the Little Missouri Stockmen's Association and invoked his role as a deputy sheriff to lend increased weight to his calls for a security body that included a provision for the use of collective armed force to guarantee the peace and to punish those who threatened it. Roosevelt addressed the Nobel Prize Committee in May, 1910: "In new and wild communities where

there is violence, an honest man must protect himself; and until other means of securing his safety are devised, it is both foolish and wicked to persuade him to surrender his arms while the men who are dangerous to the community retain theirs. So it is with nations. Each nation must keep well prepared to defend itself until the establishment of some form of international police power, competent and willing to prevent violence as between nations."<sup>62</sup> On the frontier, Roosevelt and his fellow ranchmen and cowboys had to provide for their own defense or had to resort to vigilante justice in the absence of a governmental authority. Roosevelt equated his safety and security on the frontier with his ability to arm himself and he expected the United States to likewise provide for its own defense in a sometimes dangerous international climate.

An ardent proponent of preparedness in the years leading up to America's entry into the war, Roosevelt recalled his western experience in arguing for a robust American arms buildup: "Years ago I served as a deputy sheriff in the cattle country. Of course I prepared in advance for my job. I carried what was then the best type of revolver, a .45 self-cocker. I was instructed never to use it unless it was absolutely necessary to do so, and I obeyed the instructions. But if in the interest of 'peace' it had been proposed to arm me only with a .22 revolver, I would promptly have resigned my job."<sup>63</sup> In 1914, Roosevelt responded to the outbreak of the Great War with a call for the formation of an international *posse comitatus*, in effect, a sheriff's posse, that explicitly recalled the lawless frontier.<sup>64</sup> Again, in both these cases, Roosevelt reached back to his western law enforcement career to draw an analogy between the frontier and international arenas.

When Roosevelt left the Bad Lands in 1887 he left in peace. He had made no lasting enemies and he had not fired his weapons in anger at any man. There were no tales of gunfights in saloons or showdowns on the main street of Medora to embellish his legendary status. He had achieved fame in his time because of what he had done and what he had not done. If the community had a monument to Roosevelt, it came in the form of the boat thieves languishing in a jail cell. Likewise, when Roosevelt left the presidency in March 1909

the United States was at peace. A coincidence? Perhaps. But the man who was once dismissed as “that damned cowboy” knew a thing or two about how to keep the peace.



A rare TR postcard from 1909  
(Author's Collection)

### Endnotes:

<sup>1</sup> Owen Wister, *The Virginian: A Horseman of the Plains* (1902; reprint, New York: Penguin Books, 1998), 354.

<sup>2</sup> Edmund Morris, *The Rise of Theodore Roosevelt* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1980); David McCullough, *Mornings on Horseback* (New York: Simon & Schuster, Inc., 1981).

<sup>3</sup> Paul Grondahl, *I Rose Like a Rocket: The Political Education of Theodore Roosevelt* (New York: Free Press, 2004); Joshua David Hawley, *Theodore Roosevelt: Preacher of Righteousness* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2008).

<sup>4</sup> Douglas Brinkley, *The Wilderness Warrior: Theodore Roosevelt and the Crusade for America* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2009).

<sup>5</sup> As Roosevelt biographer Kathleen Dalton has noted: “Too often Theodore Roosevelt has been confused with a cartoon creation, remembered more for his frenetic visual kinship with Charlie Chaplin and the Keystone Cops than for his real personality.” Kathleen Dalton, *Theodore Roosevelt: A Strenuous Life* (New York: Vintage Books, 2004), 9.

<sup>6</sup> Dalton, *A Strenuous Life*, 97.

<sup>7</sup> George Tindall and David Shi, *America: A Narrative History*, Brief 7<sup>th</sup> ed. (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2007), 667; italics added for emphasis.

<sup>8</sup> Brinkley, *Wilderness Warrior*, 244.

<sup>9</sup> Walter Nugent, *Habits of Empire: A History of American Expansionism* (New York: Knopf, 2008). Roosevelt, of course, would be less than thrilled to share the cover spotlight with Thomas Jefferson.

<sup>10</sup> Evan Thomas, *The War Lovers: Roosevelt, Lodge, Hearst, and the Rush to Empire, 1898* (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2010).

<sup>11</sup> “Teddy Roosevelt vs. Lawrence of Arabia,” *Deadliest Warrior*, Spike, aired August 28, 2011.

<sup>12</sup> Warren M. Eloffson, *Frontier Cattle Ranching in the Land and Times of Charlie Russell* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2004), 187.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 72.

<sup>14</sup> Lee Sandlin, “New Tales of the Old West,” *The Wall Street Journal*, Saturday-Sunday, 21-22 May 2011, C5.

<sup>15</sup> Mark R. Ellis, *Law and Order in Buffalo Bill's Country: Legal Culture and Community on the Great Plains, 1867-1910* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 2007), 217.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, xiii.

<sup>17</sup> Elmer Kelton, “True Grit,” *TexasMonthly.com*, July 2008, accessed February 17, 2010, <http://www.texasmonthly.com>.

<sup>18</sup> Theodore Roosevelt, *Ranch Life and the Hunting Trail* (1888; reprint, Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1983), 111. In this same work Roosevelt admits that “a revolver is a mere foolish incumbrance [sic] for any but a trained expert, and need never be carried.”; *Ibid.*

<sup>19</sup> Wister, *The Virginian*, 170.

<sup>20</sup> For a detailed look at exactly how much time Roosevelt spent in Dakota between 1883 and 1887 see Clay S. Jenkinson, *Theodore Roosevelt in the Dakota Badlands: An Historical Guide* (Dickinson, ND: Dickinson State University, 2006), 35-36.

<sup>21</sup> Morris, *Rise of Theodore Roosevelt*, 309.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 308.

<sup>23</sup> McCullough, *Mornings on Horseback*, 343.

<sup>24</sup> Theodore Roosevelt, *An Autobiography* (1913; reprint, New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1925), 113.

<sup>25</sup> Jenkinson, *Roosevelt in the Dakota Badlands*, 66.

<sup>26</sup> Roosevelt, *An Autobiography*, 111-112; idem, *Ranch Life and the Hunting Trail*, 14, 114-115.

<sup>27</sup> Carleton Putnam, *Theodore Roosevelt: The Formative Years, 1858-1886* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1958), 569.

<sup>28</sup> Roosevelt, *Ranch Life and the Hunting Trail*, 24.

<sup>29</sup> Lincoln A. Lang, *Ranching with Roosevelt* (Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott Company, 1926), 310. Interestingly, the title page of the book indicates that it is authored "by a companion rancher".

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 311.

<sup>32</sup> Jenkinson, *Roosevelt in the Dakota Badlands*, 90-91.

<sup>33</sup> William N. Tilchin, "Theodore Roosevelt's Discerning Worldview and Remarkable Record in Foreign Policy," *Theodore Roosevelt Association Journal XXVIII* (Spring 2007): 17.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> Wister, *The Virginian*, 363.

<sup>36</sup> Roosevelt, *Ranch Life and the Hunting Trail*, 90.

<sup>37</sup> Roosevelt, *An Autobiography*, 99; italics added for emphasis.

<sup>38</sup> Frederick W. Marks III, *Velvet on Iron: The Diplomacy of Theodore Roosevelt* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1979), 69. Interestingly, Marks, who stresses Roosevelt's cautious approach to foreign policy, neglects Roosevelt's Dakota years in making his case.

<sup>39</sup> Putnam, *Roosevelt: The Formative Years*, 528.

<sup>40</sup> Roger L. Di Silvestro, *Theodore Roosevelt in the Badlands* (New York: Walker & Company, 2011), 41, 140.

<sup>41</sup> Roosevelt, *Ranch Life and the Hunting Trail*, 55.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

<sup>43</sup> William N. Tilchin, "Theodore Roosevelt's Discerning Worldview," 17.

<sup>44</sup> Theodore Roosevelt to Whitelaw Reid, August 3, 1905 in Elting E. Morison et al., eds., *The Letters of Theodore Roosevelt* (henceforth referred to as *Letters of TR*), 8 volumes (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1951-1954), Vol. IV, 1298.

<sup>45</sup> For example see Roosevelt to George Otto Trevelyan, May 13, 1905, *Letters of TR*, Vol. IV, 1174-1175; Roosevelt to Lyman Abbott, January 3, 1907, *Letters of TR*, Vol. V, 536.

<sup>46</sup> James F. Vivian, *The Romance of My Life: Theodore Roosevelt's Speeches in Dakota* (Fargo, ND: Prairie House, Inc., 1989), 19.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 22.

<sup>48</sup> Theodore Roosevelt, "Free Silver, Trusts, and the Philippines," in *Campaigns and Controversies*, in Hermann Hagedorn, ed., *The Works of Theodore Roosevelt: National Edition* (henceforth referred to as *Works of TR*), 20 volumes (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1926), XIV, 353.

<sup>49</sup> Theodore Roosevelt, "First Annual Message," in *State Papers as Governor and President*, in *Works of TR*, XV, 112-113. Roosevelt, who rejected violence in response to various foreign crises during his presidency, condoned the use of military force in the case of the Philippines. He seemed willing to compartmentalize this departure from his restrained diplomacy by arguing that the Filipinos' resistance represented an insurgency against American rule

on American soil and this, in turn, allowed Roosevelt to "[a]pply the Frontier Myth...to a new situation in which Asians become figurative Apaches and the Philippines become a symbolic equivalent" of Kentucky, Texas or Dakota. Richard Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation: The Myth of the Frontier in Twentieth-Century America* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1992), 53.

<sup>50</sup> Wister, *The Virginian*, 359.

<sup>51</sup> In *Gunfighter Nation: The Myth of the Frontier in Twentieth-Century America*, Richard Slotkin writes that "From 1885 to 1905...it [Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show] reached large audiences in every major city and innumerable smaller ones throughout the United States. The period of its European triumph coincided with the period of massive immigration to America." Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation*, 87.

<sup>52</sup> Brinkley, *Wilderness Warrior*, 676.

<sup>53</sup> Theodore Roosevelt to Sydney Brooks, October 17, 1910 in Louis Auchincloss, ed., *Theodore Roosevelt: Letters and Speeches* (New York: The Library of America, 2004), 631.

<sup>54</sup> Theodore Roosevelt to James Ford Rhodes, November 29, 1904 in Auchincloss, *Letters and Speeches*, 376-377; italics in original.

<sup>55</sup> G. Edward White, *The Eastern Establishment and the Western Experience: The West of Frederic Remington, Theodore Roosevelt, and Owen Wister* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1968; reprint, Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1989), 7; Kelton, "True Grit". The novel remains in print in a multitude of formats.

<sup>56</sup> Wister, *The Virginian*, 349-350.

<sup>57</sup> Theodore Roosevelt, "The Instant Need; and the Ultimate Need," in *The Foes of our Own Household*, in *Works of TR*, XIX, 9.

<sup>58</sup> Wister, *The Virginian*, 373.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid., 369.

<sup>60</sup> See Theodore Roosevelt, *African and European Addresses* (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1910).

<sup>61</sup> Theodore Roosevelt to George Otto Trevelyan, October 1, 1911, *Letters of TR*, Vol. VII, 367.

<sup>62</sup> Theodore Roosevelt, "International Peace," in *American Problems*, in *Works of TR*, XVI, 309.

<sup>63</sup> Theodore Roosevelt, "Where there is a Sword for Offense there must be a Sword for Defense," in *Fear God and Take Your Own Part* in *Works of TR*, XVIII, 245.

<sup>64</sup> Theodore Roosevelt, "An International Posse Comitatus," in *America and the World War*, in *Works of TR*, XVIII, 71-73.

**It's not too late...  
to select a WWHA membership  
for a Christmas present.**

**Membership rates are shown on  
the contents page.**

**Send dues to:  
Herb Marsh  
WWHA Treasurer  
P.O. Box 114  
Lincoln, NM 88338**