

INTO THE STORM

1887

Theodore Roosevelt and his companion had been camped several miles down the Little Missouri River from his Elkhorn Ranch in the Badlands of the Dakota Territories.

Late in 1887 TR had completed a successful week-long deer hunt. He and his ranch hand, Wilmot Dow, had bagged eight deer for their winter stock of meat at the ranch. Their little wagon was heavily loaded, and TR knew that traveling would be slow on their return journey.

TR estimated it would take two days to get back, and they might be lucky enough to bag some wild sheep along the way. It was a beautiful, mild morning for that time of year when they broke camp and headed out. They had traveled more than an hour when the sky became overcast, and the wind, coming in from the north, began to pick up. The wind began to blow harder and soon the sky had become ominously dark.

TR was still not accustomed to how fast the weather could change in the West. Although it was midday, it began to look like night. The wind grew stronger and stronger. One savage gust nearly swept TR out of his saddle and Dow from his seat on the wagon. Then came the blizzard.

The two men grabbed their big fur coats from the wagon and huddled against the biting wind and snow. They drove on southward, luckily with the gale at their backs.

The ride was hard and soon the over-weighted wagon

broke down. They were stranded in the middle of the prairie where the wind was blowing stronger and stronger. The men knew the winter storm would last for many hours, if not several days. They also knew they were miles away from any kind of shelter. The ferocious blizzard prevented them from making a fire or setting up camp.

TR decided to leave the wagon behind, so they unharnessed the two horses. Dow, who had been the driver, rode one of the team and led another. TR mounted his horse and the two men struck for home.

The horses were tough, accustomed to extreme weather. TR was unsure of their location and Dow was unable to help. But they knew the general direction of the ranch and pushed on. As night approached, the blizzard grew worse; the wind kept shifting, whirling around the men as they pushed onward. The severe cold turned the snowflakes into vicious little shards of ice mixed with prairie dust that sliced into their faces.

So intense was the storm that both TR and Dow could hardly open their eyes. The roar of the blizzard drowned their voices and they were unable to hear each other, even though they were only a few feet apart.

Mile after mile they rode on through the freezing storm. Eventually the wind slackened and once again came from their backs, but the heavy snow continued. Still difficult to see where they

were going, they would occasionally ride up to an impassable cliff or canyon and have to retrace their tracks.

Then, with the same speed with which it had come, the blizzard eased, the clouds cleared, and the storm was gone. A bright moon led them back to the ranch.

TR decided to leave the wagon for a day or two and collect it later. Meanwhile, he would make the most of the first good snow of the season and head into the hills to track some wild sheep he'd heard about.

Next morning fresh snow lay everywhere and the cold was so intense that every window inside the ranch house was iced up. TR went to get a fresh horse and pack for a possible overnight only to find that even his supplies and tack were frozen solid.

Soon, TR and Dow were heading out into the winter wonderland in search of bighorn sheep. To ease the burden on the young horse he was riding, TR had gone without his heavy fur coat and in short order the cold was chilling him to his marrow. At times they had to dismount and walk their ponies through the deep snow as they climbed up and down the white-clad hills. TR knew that he was getting frostbite in his ears and fingers, but the hard work was keeping his body warm.

They had walked and rode until late afternoon when suddenly three bighorn rams sprang into view and galloped across a snowy plateau in

front of them. The rams' brown bodies stood out in stark contrast to the sea of white as they plunged through the powdery snow. As the sheep bounded up a ridge, TR fired twice at the lead ram, but missed. At the top, the ram suddenly stopped and looked back at the men. He was some 350 yards distant when TR fired his third shot, which appeared to go through the ram's lungs.

Surprisingly, the bighorn ran over the hill as if unharmed, but when TR followed it, he found it dead about 150 yards farther on. His shot would stand as one of the best he would ever make on a wild animal.

Despite the intense cold, TR walked back and paced off the distance of the shot and was particularly pleased with what he'd achieved. But he admitted there might have been more luck involved than skill.

It was nighttime when the men reached the horses and started back. The moon cast an eerie light on the frozen land and everything was covered in frost. Although they went at a slow pace, the men were white from head to toe and icicles hung from TR's mustache. They had ridden and worked all day without food or rest. Both men were numb from the cold when they finally saw the welcoming lamplight at Elkhorn Ranch.

The thermometer at the ranch read -26 degrees. But the horns of the magnificent ram made it all worthwhile. ■