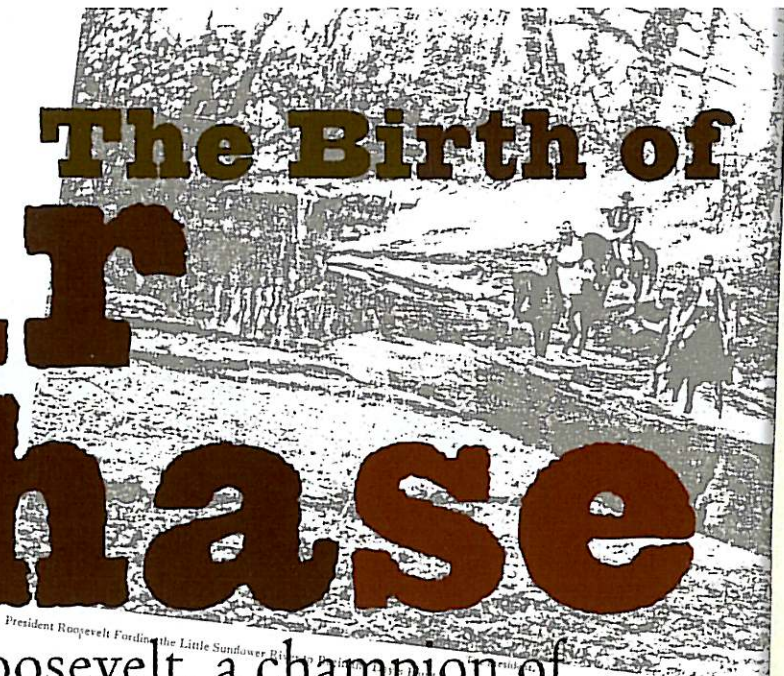


# The Birth of Fair Chase



President Theodore Roosevelt, a champion of conservation and the ethics of hunting, defined the standard of fair chase during a 1902 Mississippi bear campaign of characters otherwise forgotten by time. More than a century later, the story remains and offers us a glimpse at social change on several fronts.

By A.E. Walsh

Images and background materials generously provided by McIlhenny Co. Archives and Emeritus Club Member, Bill Simmons

It is ironic that the unsuccessful Mississippi bear hunt of President Theodore Roosevelt is arguably his most famous adventure, and has affirmed his legend in hunting and non-hunting circles alike. The ethical standard imposed by the president has shaped and guided a society of hunters, and the would-be quarry has become an icon by which millions of people have grown up.

Even more remarkable, the hunt occurred in the deepest of the deep South, in 1902, and although planned by the influential, was essentially run by a former slave, Holt Collier. It is a testament to the character of Theodore Roosevelt that racial bias and prejudice was irrelevant in the creation of one of the most storied hunting tales of all time.

By all accounts, the trip to Little Sunflower Camp in Sharkey County, Mississippi, was a retreat for the president. The entourage that would normally accompany the Commander-in-Chief was limited to only the most essential of staff and a scant three press association writers who would be charged with the dissemination of the tale. Remarkably, the three stories run very parallel and offer us an intimate look at a special turning point in the ethics of hunting.

President Roosevelt initially considered an invitation from a large congregation of politically relevant Southerners, however the prospect of a "working" hunt so concerned the president that he declined their invitation. Wanting desperately to pursue bears in the swamps of the South, the president put out word of his interest. Soon Mr. Stuyvesant Fish, president of the Illinois Central Railroad, arranged for President Roosevelt and a small party to enjoy a leisurely bear chase in the swamps of Sharkey County's



Holt Collier – legendary bear hunter and scout – who led TR on his infamous 1902 bear hunt.



Theodore Roosevelt returned to the South five years later, with Holt Collier as his expert bear guide once again. TR is pictured here (center, in light jacket), standing between Harley Metcalfe (left) and Clive Metcalfe (right). Collier is behind Harley and Roosevelt.

1 Clive Metcalfe  
2 Harley Metcalfe

3 Theodore Roosevelt

SIDENT ROOSEVELT  
BEAR HUNT  
BY THE AUTHOR  
The Birth of  
**Fair Chase**  
BY THE AUTHOR  
DENISON\*

Shane  
NOV 16 1902

WHITE HOUSE,  
WASHINGTON.

October 21, 1902.

Dear John:

If I am in luck about the 13th of next month, I shall try a bear hunt in Mississippi or Arkansas. It has been arranged for me by Stuyvesant Fish, of the Illinois Central Road. I am trying to keep everything about it very secret. Do you think you could come along? I should so like to see you.

Always yours,

*Theodore Roosevelt*

Mr. John A. McIlhenny,  
Averys Island, Louisiana.

Yazoo Delta. In addition to Fish, Roosevelt's party was comprised of a pair of Southern landowners, a few gentlemen to serve as guides, as well as Mr. John McIlhenny (a former Rough Rider lieutenant, and later of Tabasco fame). In addition to this distinguished group of cotton planters and crack shots, the leader of the hunt and the hound handler was Mr. Holt Collier.

Holt Collier was a former slave and soldier for the Confederacy, as well as probably the most prolific bear hunter ever to walk the planet. Collier could not read or write, but killed his first bear at the age of 12 years old, and shot more than 125 bears in a single season of Southern swamp hunting. Over a hunting career that long eclipsed 50 years, Holt Collier earned a reputation as the most knowledgeable bear guide in the region, regardless of color.

Collier served as a ranger in the 9th Texas Cavalry, surviving numerous hand-to-hand skirmishes, as well as serving as a spy and assassin. As a retained employee (a small step above servant), Collier was assigned to kill a white army captain of the occupying Northern force: It was quite ironic that an abolitionist was killed by a black man he was otherwise charged to liberate. The colorful life of Holt Collier is an interesting read in and of itself, however it was the president's unsuccessful hunt that defined Collier's place in history.

Their camp was nestled between the steep muddy banks of the Little Sunflower River and the thick jungle of the delta swamp-land. As the tale is told, the Little Sunflower runs fast with steep muddy banks, creating a border of treacherous crossing. The hunt area then became defined by the expanse of wicked jungle that choked the land for several miles and held the Mississippi black bear. On November 13, 1902, Holt Collier turned his pack of 50 assorted hounds into the tangle of delta swamp in search of a bear befitting a president.

The terrain was inhospitable for a non-native—Rough Rider or not. There was discussion amongst the hunt's hosts that led to President Roosevelt being remanded to the clearings of camp and the beaten path, versus the thick briars and dangerous swamps of the delta. Much to the president's disappointment, the consensus was that his unfamiliarity with the country, as well as his value as a leader, created a risk too great for a man known to be adventurous and without his federal escorts. He would be called only when a bear was treed, and by his omission from the actual chase, so began the creation of the fair-chase standard.



Clifford K. Berryman's first version of the famous cartoon, "Drawing the Line in Mississippi," as it appeared in the *Washington Post*, November 16, 1902.

Early in the morn of the second day's hunt, the distant roar of hounds-on-bear reached Roosevelt's post. The chase was a circus of commotion, with the bruin doing his best to lose his pursuers and find refuge in the thickest parts of the swamp. They chased the bear four miles down the Little Sunflower, then back four. By all accounts, it was a frenzied pace, and the bear refused to tree. As the race continued into the early afternoon, the president—a skilled horseman but not used to cane-break riding—was put on stand at a trail the bear was certain to cross. For hours Roosevelt stood ready, only to have the bear zig or zag without provocation. A true wild spirit, the bear outlasted Roosevelt's stand and only crossed the path after the president had retreated.

As the day (and chase) grew long, the bear had run the life out of himself. Refusing to tree, the bruin found a water hole—waist-deep and green with stagnant scum—and made a final stand. The first-hand account of pressman Lindsay Denison is a wonderful narrative of the commotion that ensued:

*"...the bear lacked all the instincts of true southern hospitality, and kept straight on to his waterhole. He fairly fell into it when he found it. The dogs piled on top of him, Jocko [Collier's prize "fice" dog] first. There was a flashing confusion of black, hairy fore feet beating them off—of white teeth snapping here and there at the squirming mass; squeals of wrath and pain from the dogs were lifted in a deafening chorus. Then the bear rose straight up on his hind legs and stood waist deep in the water. In the grasp of his mighty fore legs he had a curly yellow cur that was Holt Collier's especial pet.*

*"Leggo mah dog, bear!" howled Holt, leaping from his saddle, rifle in hand. Bear and dog fell back into the muddy pool. Holt could not shoot without the risk of killing two or more of the pack, as well as the bear....*

*"Leggo mah dog!" he shouted again, and swung the stock of his gun through an arc that landed at the base of the bear's skull, and twisted the steel frame of the stock. The bear let go of the dog; but it was too late; the dog was dead."*

Exhausted, dazed, and defeated, the bear lacked any further motivation to fight. Collier tied a rope around the bear's front end, dragged him out of the mud hole, and tied him to a tree. After helping a half-dozen wounded warriors from the pit, Collier sent for the president to claim his prize.

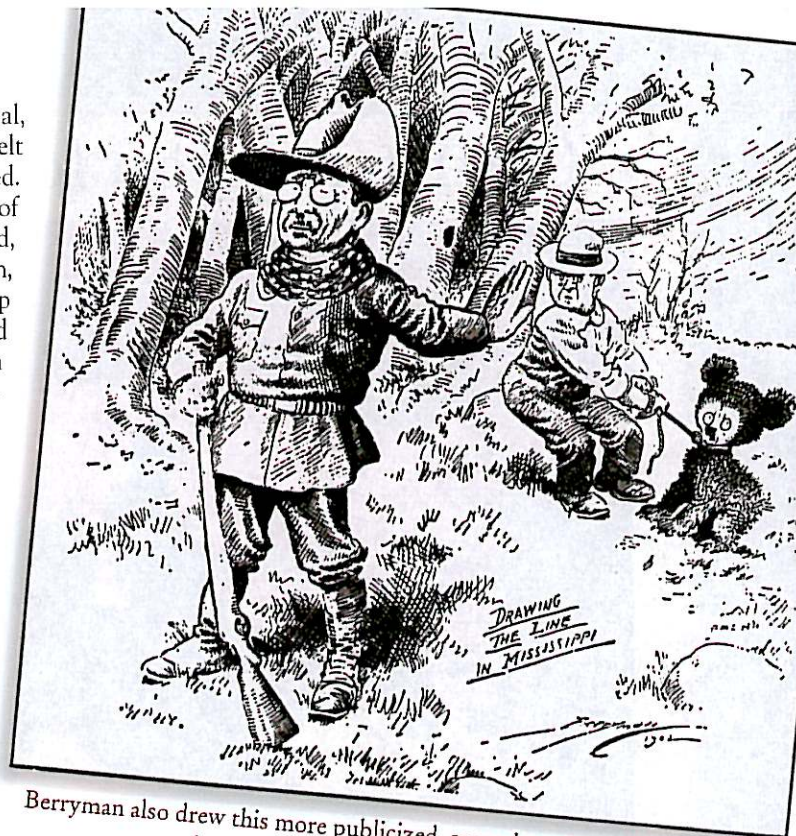
Upon his arrival, President Roosevelt was most disappointed. Picture the sight of a terribly exhausted, battle-weary black bruin, dripping with swamp water and lather, tied to a tree trunk with a woven rope. The president politely asked one of the parties to quickly end the bear's suffering with a hunting knife, much to the chagrin of the hunt's hosts.

Instead of acquiescing to the common practice of the time, the president with an inborn passion for the hunt, defined the rules of engagement for the object of his pursuit. Although he would still not be allowed to ride with the pack, Theodore Roosevelt finished the hunt as a more active participant in the chase and would hunt on his terms, forever defining "fair chase." To hear Denison relate the remaining days of that historic hunt:

*"If [Roosevelt] really wanted to meet a bear, while the bear was still enjoying complete energy and fighting capacity, he must put himself in the hands of one who could tell by experience which way the bear was going to run, and so head the beast off. For four days this plan was tried. The guide invariably guessed wrong. There were terrific rides through briars and tangles—rides which covered the face and hands with scratches, and almost dragged one from the saddle at every jump of the horse; there were nervous waits in the gloom of the woods, when the bear seemed to be coming straight to destruction. But every bear went the other way in the end....*

*But even though he did not bring back a bearskin punctured with a bullet from his .30-30, and even though he had never a chance to bring the butt of the gun to his shoulder, Mr. Roosevelt and Mr. Fish, and those who accompanied them into the swamp, came out richer than they went in...."*

The president's bear hunt was a great success, even though it was a very different success from that which he may have anticipated when he accepted Mr.



Berryman also drew this more publicized, second version of the famous "Mississippi" cartoon.

Fish's invitation. And Roosevelt was sufficiently initiated in the nature of Yazoo Delta hunting to declare that, before he is three years older, he will go back to the Little Sunflower, and, with Holt Collier as his only guide, will chase bears until he comes up with one and kills it, running free before the dogs.

The hunt of November 1902, sparked political commentary on several levels. Not only was the president being led about the dangerous wilds of the Yazoo Delta, but by a former slave with a pack of 50 mongrel dogs. The traditional method of take was challenged, and a shift in ideology was initiated. In fact, the story of the 1902 Sharkey County bear hunt became such a popular topic of discussion, a political cartoon by Clifford K. Berryman appeared in the *Washington Post* and inspired a Brooklyn, New York, candy-store owner, Morris Michton, to create a stuffed toy bear—dubbed "Teddy's Bear"—and forever etching a legacy amongst hunters and non-hunters alike.

As true to his word as the president of an emerging world power can be held, Theodore Roosevelt returned to the South five years later, this time Louisiana, with Holt Collier as his expert bear guide. They hunted for a week before the president was able to fulfill his promise, and riding right amongst the mongrels, take a black bear under what we now call fair chase. ■