

# Hunting and Ranching in the “Wild West”

An excerpt from the  
Club’s newest book,  
Theodore Roosevelt  
Hunter-Conservationist  
by R.L. Wilson

## Three Thieves and a “Damn Fool”

TR was back at the Elkhorn Ranch again in March 1886. Two days later he hiked with Sewall and Dow to retrieve some deer killed by Dow and hung out for two weeks. Discovering that the deer had been partially devoured by mountain lions, Roosevelt became “very fierce to kill a lion.” The lion hunt required the party to board Roosevelt’s new boat and row to the opposite bank of the Little Missouri River. But that night the boat was stolen, precipitating one of TR’s most perilous Badlands adventures, later published in *Ranch Life and the Hunting Trail*. A rather obscure but interesting account was written by Bill Sewall in a letter to his brother.

*{A lengthy description appears in the book, an account quite like a story told in a conversation, with occasional misspellings and broken English, but telling of the several adventures, and the risks, TR and his companions endured. Then, on page 68, Roosevelt describes his taking the three thieves into Dickinson, on his own, accompanied by a wagon driver. The perilous journey lasted “two days and a night,” faced with cold and other hardships. Roosevelt was sure to note he was walking “behind with the inevitable Winchester.” He “plodded along through the dreary landscape - hunger, cold, and fatigue struggling with a sense of dogged, weary resolution. . . . So, after thirty-six hours’ sleeplessness, I was most heartily glad when we at last jolted into the long, straggling main street of Dickinson, and I was able to give my unwilling companions into the hands of the sheriff.}*

The capture of the three thieves became the talk of the territory. Theodore Roosevelt had convincingly shown his pluck and courage. As TR’s friend and fellow rancher John Simpson told him: “Roosevelt, no one but you would have followed those men with just a couple of cowhands. You are the only real damn fool in the country.”

**“Really, I enjoy this life; with books, guns and horses...”**

Late in April 1886, TR hunted antelope for a week in the company of William Merrifield, an experienced hunter and outdoorsman and one of the managers of Maltese Cross Ranch. To Merrifield it seemed that Roosevelt was al-

Thoughtfully documented for posterity, TR is photographed standing guard with a Parker double barrel shotgun over the three boat thieves, their roles portrayed for the camera by others.



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ways in a state of perpetual motion. Many years later he recalled that Roosevelt “used to walk up and down this room [at the Maltese Cross], then sit down awhile, then jump up and grab a gun and go out hunting. Then he would come back in again and start to write...and would work sometimes until early in the morning.” Politics was a remote subject when Roosevelt was at his ranch: “It often amuses me when I accidentally hear that I am supposed to be harboring secret and biting regret for my political career; when as a matter of fact I have hardly ever when alone given it two thoughts since it dosed, and have been quite as much wrapped up in hunting, ranching, and bookmaking as I ever was in politics.” He was being quite honest with himself when he declared, “Really, I enjoy this life; with books, guns and horses, and this free, open air existence, it would be singular if I did not...”

In August Roosevelt and Merrifield traveled to the Rocky Mountains for a hunting trip that Roosevelt had been planning for some time. The roundup at the ranch was over, and TR was itching for excitement. He chose to hunt in the Rockies because he was especially eager to shoot the white antelope-goat, “the least known and rarest of all American game...not one in ten of the professional hunters has ever killed one; and I know of but one or two Eastern sportsmen who can boast a goat’s head as a trophy.”

Roosevelt’s guide, a Missourian named Jack Willis, had unwittingly sparked TR’s interest in the white antelope-goat. In his book *Roosevelt in the Rough*, Willis tellingly relates both the hunt itself and the fortuitous circumstances that prompted the hunting trip:

...in a taxidermist’s store at Medora, Roosevelt’s attention was attracted by the head of a white antelope-goat, which was then, as it still is, the rarest and least known of all of America’s wild animals....Roosevelt asked all about the animal and where the head had come from. The taxidermist gave him the information he wanted and told him something about my reputation as a hunter.

Immediately Roosevelt wrote me this letter:

“I want to shoot a white antelope goat. I have heard it is the hardest animal in the Rockies to find and the most difficult to kill. I have also heard that you are a great hunter. If I come to Montana, will you act as my guide, and do you think I can kill a white goat?”

My first impression was that this was another joke from the joke town and I was disposed to ignore it. But there was nothing funny about Roosevelt’s chirography. It was the worst I had ever seen, bar none, and deciphering his letter was a much tougher job than stalking a silver-tip. It annoyed me to have to wrestle with his almost illegible note and after I had finally made it out I sent him this message:

“If you can’t shoot any better than you can write, NO.”

I supposed that ended it, but in three days along came a telegram from Roosevelt, [telling me when he would arrive and wanting] me to show him the way to the white goats, in return for which I would be well paid. Curious to see what he looked like, I was at the station when his train arrived.

## Corduroy Knickers and a Brewer’s Son’s Cheeks

Two men climbed down from the Pullman. One of them had on the corduroy knickers and coat of a tenderfoot. I knew he was Roosevelt, and he looked too much like a dude to make any hit with me. He had red cheeks, like those of a brewer’s son I knew, and that didn’t help any. The only thing about him that appealed to me at all was his eyes. They were keen and bright and dancing with animation. From them I knew he was honest and had a mind that worked fast and smoothly and was set on a hair-trigger. But in spite of that I didn’t like his looks. His companion, who was properly garbed in buckskin coat and pants, was William Merrifield...

“I’m here,” shouted Roosevelt, impulsively, as he seized my hand with a grip that I hadn’t supposed was in him.

“I see you are,” I replied, coldly.

“When do we start?”

“We are not going to start at all. You can start whenever you like, so far as I am concerned.”

“Why not? What’s wrong?” asked Roosevelt, with disappointment and anxiety written all over him. “I’ll pay you \$25 for every shot you get me at a white goat.”

“That’s one reason why we are not going anywhere,” I explained. “I won’t work for anyone on salary. I go where I like and when I like and do as I darned well please.”

## A Beautiful Winchester

After some further expostulation and argument, which simply took up time, Roosevelt suggested that we sit down and talk things over, so I escorted them to a hotel where they engaged a room and unpacked some of their things....He proudly showed me his...rifle. It was a 45-75 Winchester [Model 1876, #38647] and a beauty. I made no bones of telling him so, and he was pleased by my admiration of it.

He told me of his ranch and of his hunting trips in Maine, while I carefully explained that shooting “game” that was almost housebroken, in Maine, wasn’t real hunting, as we knew it in Montana. He was insistent that I act as his guide and I was just as persistent, and more profane, in my refusal of every proposal he advanced. But the longer I talked with him the better I liked him. There was something of the savor of the West in his manner and his frankness, and, so

long as I could keep my eyes away from his foolish pants, I cottoned to the things he said and the way he said them. In about an hour he had made me forget his knickers and had won me over as far as I would ever go for any man. And that, if I do say it myself, was some conquest, for he sure had bucked up against a hard game. That was the first evidence I had of his great personal magnetism.

"I'll tell you what I'll do," I finally told him, after I had convinced myself that he was a Westerner at heart and had the makings of a real man. "I won't act as guide or wet nurse for any man. As a rule I don't want anyone around to bother me and get in my way. But I am starting out on a hunt in two or three days and if you and Merrifield want to come along, as my guests, I'll be glad to have you."

"That's bully," exclaimed Roosevelt, excitedly "I'll furnish the grub and pay you \$25 for every shot you get me at a white goat."

...I made short work of our preparations and we were soon on our way with two pack horses and our mounts. We went out on Vermilion Creek, west of Thompson Falls, where we established our first camp, left our horses and took to the hills in a wild section of the main range.

## The First Goat

It was hard going, for the goats are at home only in rough country. Being accustomed to it, I walked so fast that Roosevelt was forced into a jog trot most of the time to keep up with me. But he never complained, nor did he ever ask me to slacken my speed. Moisture would develop on his glasses, from perspiration, and he would have to pause at intervals to wipe them off, but he kept right on coming. That satisfied me as to his gameness, for which I came to have the highest admiration as we got to know each other better. His muscles were strong and after they became hardened, which took about a week, he could keep up with me on almost any trail, no matter how hard the going...

In the afternoon of our first day out, we located a salt lick. I knew goats would come here, so we waited for them, above the lick, for a goat always runs uphill when he is attacked. In half an hour a big billy showed up. After looking carefully around and detecting no sign of danger he descended to the lick and Roosevelt got a beautiful shot at him, at less than two hundred yards.

Perhaps because he was a bit excited over his first shot at one of the animals he wanted so badly, and which he had been told were so hard to get, he missed. As the goat dashed blindly up the hill Roosevelt fired again. I saw a bit of wool fly from the beast's foreleg and from the way he favored that leg in running I knew he had been wounded. We set out after him and followed him for seven miles, by the drops of blood he had left behind. We came to a place where he had rubbed his injured leg in the dust, to stop the flow of blood—which is a way animals have to give themselves first aid—but failed to catch sight of him. Late in the afternoon we gave up the chase and tramped nine miles back to camp.

Roosevelt was all in from the long and hard hike, but he made no complaint about that. Instead of spending the evening coddling himself and talking about his blisters and bruises, he occupied himself entirely with lamentations over his poor marksmanship. He repeatedly assured us he never had missed such an easy shot and his failure worried him considerably I told him the only trouble



The white or mountain goat, an almost legendary trophy that, when TR first hunted it, was "the least known and rarest of all American game." Artist Frederic Remington did not fail to include the gold oval plaque inlay on the butt stock of TR's Winchester .45-75 in this drawing from *Ranch Life and the Hunting Trail*. Pictured with TR is guide Jack Willis.

BOONE AND CROCKETT CLUB  
PERMANENT COLLECTION

was that he had been over-anxious, besides which he was in a strange country and shooting at game he never had hunted before. But he refused to be comforted and his smiles were not of the cheerful kind.

He insisted that the slaying of the wounded goat was the only balm that would soothe his injured pride, so we took up its trail at dawn the next morning. Merrifield stayed in camp to doctor his feet...

Soon after daylight I spotted a goat on top of a butte, about a quarter of a mile away, and pointed it out to Roosevelt. Curiously enough, it proved to be the one he had wounded the previous day, though the blood spots we were following led off in another direction. He started to pull down on it but I told him to save his ammunition, for, besides the long range, there was strong wind blowing at twenty miles an hour or more, and it seemed to be an impossible shot...

[He fired] and I could hardly believe my eyes when I saw the goat jump up and fall back, almost too dead to skin. The bullet had gone through its heart, as clean as a whistle. It was a lucky shot, of course, but that didn't alter the fact that he got what he shot at, and I took off my hat to him. The yell of delight he let loose could have been heard for two miles in any country.

"If I never kill another thing, this trip has been a great success," he shouted. "I am perfectly satisfied." He quickly opened his wallet and offered me a \$100 bill, which I as promptly refused.

When we got up to the goat and found it was the same one he had nicked in the leg the day before he was happier than ever. He rubbed his hands together, in the way he had when he was greatly pleased over anything, and fairly danced around with joy. Nothing would do but he must have a picture of the goat, where it fell, so I walked six miles back to camp after the camera and Merrifield, sore feet and all. Merrifield snapped a photograph, with Roosevelt and me beside the body of his victim, and Roosevelt was full of joy. Merrifield, in his high-heeled boots, was miserable...

## "Roosevelt Luck"

The next day Roosevelt learned just how much his beloved "shoe packs" were worth in a man's country and the extent to which they could be relied on in a pinch. We were after another goat and had to cross a narrow ledge of slaty rock, with a high cliff on one side and a perpendicular drop on the other. Properly boot-ed, I crossed it without any trouble and it did not occur to me that Roosevelt might be in any danger until I heard a fall and a grinding of rocks behind me. His smooth and soft-soled shoes had slipped on the slate and he went down, with no chance to save himself.

Too far away to even attempt to reach him, I turned around just in time to see him disappearing, head foremost, over the sharp edge, with his rifle still

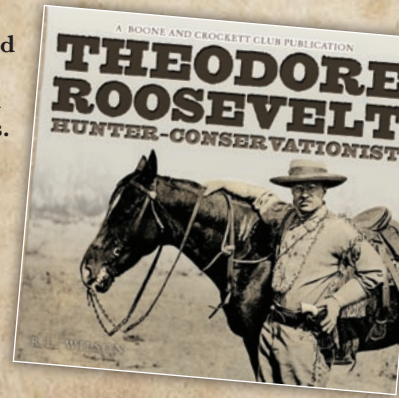
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in his hand. When I saw him fall I wouldn't have given two-bits for his life, for it was easily a sixty-foot fall and the bottom of the precipice, where the hill mushroomed out, was covered with jagged rocks. But, instead of fetching up on any of the stone bayonets, he struck first in the top of a tall pine tree, which broke the worst of his fall. From that he bounded into the outstretched arms of a second tree and then into the branches of a third one, finally landing on a bunch of moss that was as thick as a feather bed and much more comfortable. And he still had his rifle in his hand.

Seeing me peering anxiously over the rim of the cliff, he was quick to relieve my anxiety "Not hurt a bit," he shouted, gaily, as he gathered himself together and shook his legs. "Wait till I find my glasses." He recovered them, undamaged, from the pile of moss.

That was my first experience with what afterward came to be known as "Roosevelt luck"...

When Roosevelt left the Badlands in the fall of 1886, he was not only an accomplished ranchman and hunter, he was also a complete man. The West had transformed him into a healthy, sturdy, strong-willed individual. He was unusually self-contained for a young man of 28, and he now showed no outward trace of the deep grief he had suffered from the death of his wife and mother. Although he had faced many dangers and had been exposed to rigorous trials in the outdoors, he never quailed or quit. Two years in the West, in the words of one of Roosevelt's most perceptive biographers,

had converted Roosevelt's iron resolve to one of steel. They had reinforced his high code of personal morality. They had developed his natural qualities of leadership. And they had encouraged his growing disposition to judge men on their merits.

Roosevelt himself was aware of his debt: "I owe more than I can ever express to the West." ■