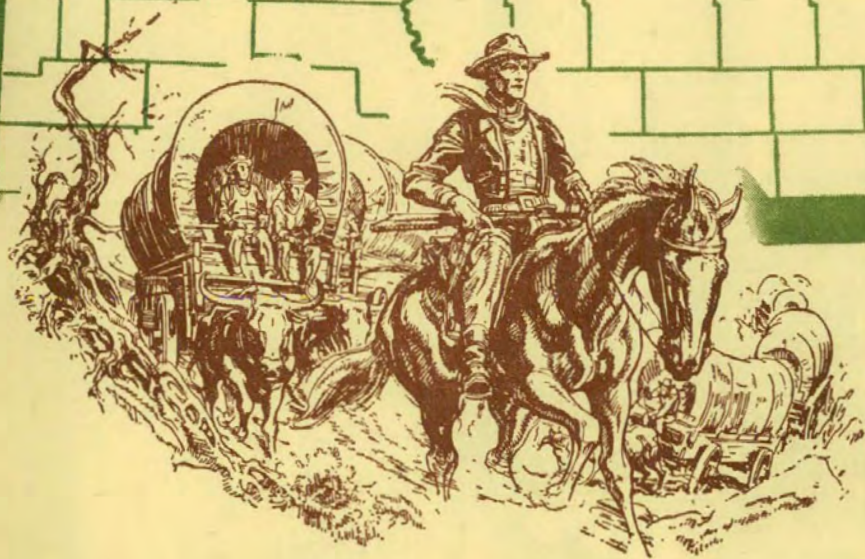


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ROOSEVELT'S DAKOTA RANCHES

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The forthcoming centennial observance in 1958 of the birth of the Nation's 26th president has awakened a new interest in Theodore Roosevelt. The influences of his experiences as a rancher in Dakota on his later career as a statesman are difficult to evaluate. However, Roosevelt, on several occasions, acknowledged his great debt to Dakota. In September 1910 he said in Fargo: ". . . If it had not been for what I learned during those years I spent here in North Dakota, I never in the world would have been president of the United States."¹

Many stories have been related about Roosevelt's feats while in the Dakotas. As has been pointed out by one of his biographers, "It is impossible to sift fact from fiction in weighing the exploits of Roosevelt in the Bad Lands. Inevitably, as Medora joined the ranks of the cow towns that had failed, he became a legend; the stories about him may have been embroidered by repetition."² Neither his letters to his family and a few intimate friends nor the contemporary newspapers shed a great deal of light on his operations as a rancher. About the only source materials available on this phase of Roosevelt's life are in several newspapers, the files of which are very incomplete, a few letters in which he makes some casual references to his ranching activities, and the tax records of Billings and Stark Counties. Articles by the writer dealing with Roosevelt's relations with the stockmen's associations and on his contemporaries in the Badlands have appeared earlier in this magazine.³

It was not unnatural for Roosevelt at that time to become interested in cattle raising. The early 1880's was a boom period for the open

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¹*Fargo Forum and Daily Republican*, Sept 5, 1910. Roosevelt made a similar statement to A. T. Volwiler. See Dr. Volwiler's "Roosevelt's Ranch Life in North Dakota," *Quarterly Journal of the University of North Dakota*, Vol. IX, No. 1 (Oct. 1918), and O. T. Hagen's "Lessons in Democracy in the Badlands of North Dakota," *North Dakota Teacher*, April, May 1949; Hermann Hagedorn, *Roosevelt in the Bad Lands* (Boston, 1921), 2.

²Henry F. Pringle, *Theodore Roosevelt, A Biography* (New York, 1931), 102.

³Elting E. Morison, Ed., *The Letters of Theodore Roosevelt* (Cambridge, 1951), Vols. I and II; Lincoln A. Lang, *Ranching with Roosevelt* (Philadelphia, 1926); William Wingate Sewall, *Bill Sewall's Story of T. R.* (New York, 1919); Ray H. Mattison, "Roosevelt and the Stockmen's Association," *North Dakota History*, Vol. 17 (April, July 1950); Ray H. Mattison, "Ranching in the Dakota Badlands: A Study of Roosevelt's Contemporaries," *North Dakota History*, Vol. 19 (April, July 1952); Ray H. Mattison, "The Hard Winter and the Range Cattle Business," *Montana Magazine of History*, Vol. I (October 1951); Olaf T. Hagen and Ray H. Mattison, "Pyramid Park—Where Roosevelt Came to Hunt," *North Dakota History*, Vol. 19 (October 1952); Hagedorn, *op. cit.*, *passim*.

range cattle industry on the Great Plains. A decade earlier, most of the Northern Plains region had been occupied largely by nomadic Indian tribes. Thousands of buffalo, upon which they fed, ranged over this vast territory. The destruction of these vast herds by hide hunters, together with the relentless campaigns by the Army following the Battle of the Little Bighorn in 1876, forced the Indians onto greatly



Maltese Cross cabin as it was when Roosevelt owned it.

reduced reservations. As a result, thousands of acres of government land were opened to cattlemen who might wish to occupy it and claim it as their own private range.

The year 1883 witnessed the beginning of a drastic change which was to occur in the Little Missouri Badlands. Early that year the remains of the "Great Northern Herd" of buffalo which had ranged over the region was destroyed. In the same year the Northern Pacific Railway, which extended from St. Paul, Minnesota, to the Pacific Coast and which ran through present western North Dakota, was completed. Simultaneously, cattlemen began the occupation of the Little Missouri

region. Most of these outfits were financed by eastern or foreign capital. A few of them were from Texas.

In September 1883, when Roosevelt came on a buffalo hunt to Little Missouri, a now vanished settlement on the opposite side of the river from present Medora, there were few buffalo left in this region. It was only after hunting for several days over the Badlands that he was able to kill a solitary bull. He was, however, very much impressed with the region as a cattle country. It was on this trip that he met Gregor Lang, A. W. Merrifield, Joe and Sylvane Ferris, all of whom were probably instrumental in influencing him to go into the cattle business.

Before he returned to New York, Roosevelt purchased⁴ the Chimney Butte or Maltese Cross⁵ ranch, located about seven miles south of Medora, from Wadsworth and Hawley. This was a Minnesota outfit which had come to the Little Missouri Badlands the previous year and whose main ranch was some 15 miles north of Medora. He made an agreement with Merrifield and Sylvane Ferris for them to look after his cattle for him.⁶ Hagedorn claims that at the time of the transaction Roosevelt gave Ferris and Merrifield a check for \$14,000, \$5,000 of which was to pay for 150 head purchased from Wadsworth and Hawley and the remainder to buy additional cattle. In the following April, the *Dickinson Press* reported, "S. M. Ferris has bargained for 300 Minnesota cattle."⁷

Roosevelt's personal misfortunes, together with his political reverses, no doubt had some influence on his increased investments in ranching during 1884-1886. Following his return to New York in October 1883, he was elected to the State Assembly. In February 1884 both his wife and mother died within a period of several hours. Early in June, he and his friends suffered political defeat in the Republican National

⁴Actually both the sites of the Chimney Butte and Elkhorn ranches were on government or railroad land, and Roosevelt never acquired title to either of them. With the exception of the Marquis de Mores, few of the cattle outfits, big or little, at that time had title to the lands on which their cattle grazed. It was not until the late 1890's or early 1900's that the Northern Pacific obtained title to its lands in that vicinity and that most of the government lands were surveyed and opened to settlement under the Homestead laws.

⁵This ranch is called both the Chimney Butte and Maltese Cross ranch. The name Chimney Butte is derived from a chimney-like formation located about two miles west of the ranch and on the west side of the Little Missouri River. The term "Maltese Cross" comes from the name of the brand used by the ranch. This brand has some resemblance to the Maltese Cross. Since ranchmen tend to name an outfit after its brand, the ranch was generally known locally as the "Maltese Cross Ranch."

⁶According to this contract, which was signed at St. Paul on September 27, 1883, Roosevelt agreed to put some 400 head of cattle on the Chimney Butte ranch at a cost of not more than \$12,000, and Ferris and Merrifield were to take care of the same for a term of seven years. At the end of the seven year period, the 400 cattle or equivalent in value were to be returned to Roosevelt. Ferris and Merrifield were to receive half of the increase. Roosevelt was entitled to put in additional cattle on the same terms as on the original 400. Hagedorn, *op cit.*, 479-480.

⁷*Dickinson Press*, April 14, 1884.

Convention when James G. Blaine received the nomination for president. Meanwhile, Roosevelt had decided that if his cattle wintered well in the Badlands, he would start another ranch. Following the Republican Convention, Roosevelt immediately went to his Chimney Butte ranch in Dakota.⁸

During the summer of 1884, Roosevelt made further investments in ranching. On June 17, he wrote to his sister Anna:⁹

. . . For every day I have been here I have had my hands full. First and foremost, the cattle have done well, and I regard the outlook for making the business a success as being *very* hopeful. This winter I lost about 25 head from wolves, cold etc; the others are in admirable shape, and I have about a hundred and fifty five calves. I shall put on a thousand more cattle and shall make it my regular business. In the autumn I shall bring out Seawall and Dow and put them on a ranche with very few cattle to start with, and in the course of a couple of years give them quite a little herd also.

Two days later, the *Bad Lands Cow Boy*, the Medora newspaper, carried the item that "Ferris & Merrifield have gone to Iowa to purchase a thousand more cattle for their ranch."¹⁰ It also commented:

Mr. Roosevelt is still at Ferris & Merrifield's ranch, hunting and playing cowboy. It seems to be more congenial work than reforming New York state politics. He is thoroughly impressed with the profit of raising cattle in the Bad Lands, as his vigorous backing of Ferris Bros. & Merrifield testifies.

Several days later, Roosevelt apparently called on the editor of the *Cow Boy* for the next issue of that paper remarked:¹¹

Theodore Roosevelt, the young New York reformer, made us a very pleasant call Monday, in full cow-boy regalia. New York will certainly lose him for a time at least, as he is perfectly charmed with our free western life and is now figuring on a trip into the Big Horn country.

In the summer of 1884, Roosevelt took steps to establish another ranch. He selected the site of the Elkhorn, about 35 miles north of Medora on the Little Missouri. He also wrote to his two former Maine guides, William Sewall and Wilmot Dow, to come to Dakota and become foremen of his new ranch. Early in August, the *Cow Boy* commented:¹²

We received a very pleasant call from Theodore Roosevelt of New York last Monday. He has established another ranch about thirty miles down the river, stocked it and put it in charge of Wm. Seawall and Wm. McDow [sic]. He intends soon taking a long hunt in the Big Horn Region.

⁸Hagedorn, *op. cit.*, 41-44; Lang, *op. cit.*, 100-104, 114-118; Sewall, *op. cit.*, 13-14.

⁹Morison, *op. cit.*, I: 73-74.

¹⁰*Bad Lands Cow Boy*, June 19, 1884.

¹¹*Ibid.*, June 26, 1884.

¹²*Ibid.*, August 7, 1884.

During the fall, Sewall and Dow collected materials for the buildings. In early January 1885, the *Cow Boy* reported: "Theodore Roosevelt intends the construction of a large building on his ranch down the river."¹³ During the winter, Roosevelt's two former Maine guides began the construction of the Elkhorn ranchhouse and outbuildings. The ranchhouse itself, which was completed in the late spring or early summer of that year, was an impressive structure and was no doubt at that time one of the finest buildings in the Badlands. It was about sixty feet long, thirty feet wide, seven feet high, with a flat roof and a porch.¹⁴

Roosevelt, meanwhile, had spent late November and much of December in organizing the stockmen along the Little Missouri. He visited many of the ranchers along the river, convincing them of the benefits to be derived from organization. On December 19, a meeting was held in Medora, and the Little Missouri Stockmens Association was organized. Roosevelt served as chairman of this meeting and was elected its first president. He then returned to New York where he spent the winter.¹⁵

The following spring found Roosevelt back in the West. In April, he attended the joint meeting of the Montana and Eastern Montana stockgrowers' associations at which the two organizations merged and took the name of the former. Roosevelt was elected as a member of the new association. The minutes indicate that he took no part in the proceedings of the meeting. He remained in the Badlands until after the spring roundup which was completed in late June or early July. Early in May, meanwhile, he purchased 1,500 head of cattle, 1,000 of which were to stock his Elkhorn ranch and the remainder was added to his Chimney Butte herd.¹⁶ On May 15, he wrote to his friend, Henry Cabot Lodge:

I have had hard work and a good deal of fun since I came out here. Tomorrow I start for the roundup; and I have just come in from taking a thousand head of cattle up on the trail. The weather was very bad and I have had my hands full, working night and day, and being able to take off my clothes but once during the week I was out.¹⁷

After making a contract with Sewall and Dow in late June for them to care for the herd of cattle placed on the Elkhorn ranch,¹⁸ Roosevelt returned to New York.

¹³*Ibid.*, January 15, 1885.

¹⁴Sewall, *op. cit.*, 19.

¹⁵Mattison, "Roosevelt and the Stockmen's Association," 87-91.

¹⁶*Bad Lands Cow Boy*, May 7, 1885.

¹⁷Morison, *op. cit.*, I: 90.

¹⁸According to this contract, which was signed at Little Missouri, Dakota on June 20, 1885, Roosevelt had put in 1,100 cattle, valued at \$25,000, on the Elkhorn ranch. Sewall and Dow agreed to take care of these cattle for three years. At the end of that period, they would receive one-third of the increase in value of the herd for taking care of it. Hagedorn, *op. cit.*, 481.

After the completion of the Elkhorn ranchhouse in 1885, Roosevelt spent most of his time there while he was in the Badlands. In his *Hunting Trips of a Ranchman*, completed at Chimney Butte in May 1885, he described the Elkhorn as his "home ranch-house."¹⁹ The Chimney Butte ranch became the headquarters for his actual ranching operations. The Elkhorn, on the other hand, was the place where he did his later writing. He also entertained most of his eastern friends



Elkhorn Ranch buildings, showing barns, corrals and outbuildings.

there. His letters, written in 1886, indicate that he spent most of the time while in the Badlands at the Elkhorn.²⁰

Roosevelt continued to be very much interested in the Badlands until the fall of 1886. He returned to Medora late in August and called a meeting of the Little Missouri Stockmen's Association early in September. At this meeting he was again elected president. He did not remain for the fall roundup that year but returned to New York. By late March he was again back at the Elkhorn ranch. To his sister, he

¹⁹Theodore Roosevelt, *Hunting Trips of a Ranchman* (New York, 1885), 11. In his *Ranch Life and Hunting Trail* (New York, 1895), 11, Roosevelt calls the Elkhorn his "home ranch."

²⁰George E. Myers, Letter to W. O. Trenor, April 3, 1935, published in the *Billings County Pioneer*, July 1, 1937; Morison, *op. cit.*, I: 95-109.

described his losses among the cattle during the winter of 1885-1886 as "wholly trifling." He presided at the April meeting of the Little Missouri Stockmen's Association and was sent as a delegate to the Montana Stockgrower's Association in the same month. He remained through the spring roundup, on which he served as co-captain. His ranching operations at this time appeared quite promising and he remained in the West for four months. He confided in late June to his brother-in-law, Douglas Robinson:²¹

. . . While I do not see any very great fortune ahead yet if things go on as they are now going and have gone for the past three years I think I will each year net enough money to pay a good interest on the capital, and yet be adding slowly to my herd all the time. I think I have more than my original capital on the ground, and this year I ought to be able to sell between two and three hundred head of steers and drystock.

It is highly probable that Roosevelt was at the peak of his ranching operations at this time. The estimates on the largest number of cattle owned by him at one time vary from 3,000 to 5,000 head. Tax records of 1885 indicate that he was the fourth largest taxpayer in Billings County which then included present Billings, Golden Valley, Slope, Bowman, and part of McKenzie Counties.²² The Census Records for 1885 indicate there were 1,100 cattle and 500 calves at the Elkhorn and 2,250 cattle and 600 calves at the Chimney Butte ranch.²³ It is believed that these figures represent approximately Roosevelt's maximum operations.

As the summer of 1886 passed, an atmosphere of gloom pervaded over the northern range country. The weather was extremely dry and hot and the grasslands were parched. The northern ranges, over which thousands of buffalo had ranged only a few years earlier, were overstocked with cattle from the drouth-stricken southern ranges. Roosevelt, who was interviewed by a reporter as he passed through Mandan in mid-July enroute to New York, expressed alarm over the situation. Newspapers, as summer and fall passed, became more and more pessimistic over the outlook.

Heavy snows struck late in November. Mild weather followed in early December which partially melted the snow so that later freezing formed a heavy crust of ice. Late in December, it became extremely cold and the weather remained at sub-zero temperatures for much of

²¹Morison, *op. cit.*, I: 106; *Letters from Theodore Roosevelt to Anna Cowles, 1870-1917* (New York, 1924), 72; Mattison, "Roosevelt and the Stockmen's Association," 181-187.

²²Assessors' Returns, 1885, Stark County, Dickinson. (Billings County was at that time attached to Stark for administrative purposes.) In that year, Roosevelt paid taxes on 867 cattle valued at \$10,115.

²³Census Records for Billings County, Dakota Territory, 1885, Ms., Historical Society of North Dakota, Bismarck.

the time until early March. The *Mandan Pioneer* reported late in January of 1887: "More snow has fallen this year than any previous year in west Dakota in the recollection of the oldest inhabitant." The ranchmen and cowboys were marooned in their isolated cabins and were unable to look after their stock. As the result, cattle perished by the thousands. However, it would not be until after the spring roundups the following summer that the cattlemen could appraise their losses.²⁴



Elkhorn Ranch from east bank of the Little Missouri River.

Two factors, other than his heavy losses from the winter of 1886-1887, led Roosevelt to lose much of his interest in his Badlands ranches after late 1886. These were his second marriage and an opportunity to reenter politics in the East. After having gone to New York in July of 1886 for a short visit, he returned to the Badlands. By that time, his Maine friends, Sewall and Dow, had decided they had had enough of cattle ranching so he placed his Elkhorn herd under the charge of Sylvane Ferris and Merrifield and returned to Maine. After a late summer hunting trip in the mountains, Roosevelt returned to New York.

²⁴Lewis F. Crawford, *History of North Dakota* (Chicago and New York, 1931). 3 volumes. I: 511-512; Mattison, "The Hard Winter and the Range Cattle Business," 5-21.

In October, he received the Republican nomination for Mayor of New York City. In the election which followed in November, Roosevelt suffered defeat. Following the election, he went to England where he married Edith Carow on December 2. The couple spent the winter touring England and the Continent.²⁵

Reports of the heavy losses in cattle from the severe winter on the Northern Plains reached the honeymooning couple in Europe. Roosevelt returned late in March 1887 from abroad and went immediately to Medora. He wrote to his sister Anna on April 16:²⁶

I am bluer than indigo about the cattle; it is even worse than I feared; I wish I was sure I would lose no more than half the money (\$80,000) I invested out here. I am planning to get out of it.

His reverses, however, did not prevent him from presiding at the spring meeting of the Little Missouri Stockmen's Association held in Medora or in taking an active part in the proceedings of the regular session of the Montana Stockgrower's Association held later that spring. By the middle of May, Roosevelt was back in New York. He did not return to the Badlands until November.

During the spring and summer of 1887 the stockmen on the Northern Plains took stock of their losses from the hard winter. They combed the country for cattle which they believed might have drifted with the winter storms. It was not until middle or late summer that they were able to make accurate appraisals. In most cases, the results were staggering. The *Mandan Pioneer* announced in late July: "We have been a long while waiting for accurate round-up reports but finally have them. In the territories throughout, it is safe to say that 75 per cent is not too high an estimate of losses. It is not pleasant to say that the losses are known to be large, much larger in fact than we have been willing to admit until forced by known facts."²⁷ The Commissioners of Billings County, in which both Roosevelt's ranches were located, in September reduced the equalized valuation twenty per cent lower than that fixed in July because of "a greater loss has been sustained in cattle throughout Billings county during the winter of '86-'87 than was supposed on the first of April."²⁸

Unfortunately, we lack sufficient data to determine how great Roosevelt's losses were from the hard winter. His tax returns indicate

²⁵Sewall, *op. cit.*, 92-96; Morison, *op. cit.*, I: 108-109; Hagedorn, *op. cit.*, 419-428; Pringle, *op. cit.*, 106-115.

²⁶Morison, *op. cit.*, I: 126-127.

²⁷*Daily Pioneer*, July 23, 1887, quoted in Louis Pelzer, *The Cattleman's Frontier* (Glendale, 1936), 217.

²⁸Commissioners' Record, Billings County, Dakota, Ms., County Auditor's Office, Medora, North Dakota, I: 24.

that he paid taxes on approximately 60 per cent less cattle in 1887 than he did the previous year.²⁹ While tax returns normally fail to reflect the amount of property actually owned by individuals, they are frequently a good index to their operations.

Roosevelt's ranching ventures become very obscure after the severe winter. Contemporary evidence indicates he maintained both ranches at least until 1890. The Elkhorn served as center of most of his cattle raising activities. However, he apparently kept a small herd of horses at the Chimney Butte ranch. He visited the Badlands in the falls of 1887 and 1888. In October of the latter year, after returning to Oyster Bay, he wrote his sister, Mrs. Cowles, "After reaching my ranch I had so much to do—being there but five days—that I had no time to write so much as a line. I made pretty good sales of my cattle." The following August, he wrote his sister, Mrs. Douglas Robinson, from the Elkhorn ranch:

. . . You and Edith *must* come out here next year, and then go to the Yellowstone Park; I don't believe I will be able to keep the ranch house open much longer, and you ought to see something of the life. . . .

In September 1890, the Roosevelts, Robinsons and several others visited the Elkhorn for six days. During 1889 and 1890 the Merrifields apparently managed and lived at the Elkhorn ranch.³⁰

Roosevelt's ranching operations underwent reorganization in 1892. Early in 1891 Merrifield and Ferris dissolved partnership. Sometime between 1890 and 1892 Roosevelt shifted his ranching operations from

²⁹Assessors' Returns, 1886-1898, County Auditor's Office, Medora. Tax Returns of Theodore Roosevelt and those of Ferris and Merrifield.

Theodore Roosevelt

Year	Cattle Owned	Horses Owned	Assessed Value of All Personal Property
1886	660	20	\$11,250
1887	290	15	5,405
1888	677	9	12,557
1889	250	30	5,125
1890	Not Listed	Not Listed	6,305
1891	Not Listed	Not Listed	4,625
1892	Not Listed	Not Listed	2,625 (Returned)
1893	Not Listed	Not Listed	10,705
1894	Not Listed	Not Listed	13,135
1895	Assessors' Returns Lost		
1896	Assessors' Returns Lost		
1897	205	25	3,775
1898	100	23	2,298
<i>Ferris and Merrifield</i> (These were undoubtedly Roosevelt's cattle.)			
1886	1,300	30	21,700
1887	480	30	7,680
1888	None	15	375
1889	None	25	625
1890	Not Listed	Not Listed	1,210

³⁰Morison, *op. cit.*, I: 134, 207, 208, 186, 231-233; Corinne Roosevelt Robinson, *My Brother, Theodore Roosevelt* (New York, 1921), 138-146; Sewall, *op. cit.*, 99.

the Elkhorn to the Chimney Butte ranch. For several years thereafter, he maintained the Elkhorn ranchhouse as a hunting lodge. According to Hagedorn, in March 1892 Roosevelt organized the Elkhorn Stock Company, which was incorporated under the laws of New York, with Archibald D. Russell, R. H. M. Ferguson, and Douglas Robinson and in December of the same year transferred his cattle holdings to this company at a value of \$16,500. He later invested a further sum of \$10,200. Sylvane Ferris served as manager of the new company.³¹

Following the formation of the new organization, Ferris purchased more cattle. The *Dickinson Press* reported in May 1892: "Theodore Roosevelt . . . has 1000 head of cattle in the Badlands out of Medora, 40 miles west of Dickinson. Through Mr. Roosevelt's manager, S. M. Ferris, 300 head of the number were purchased recently." Late in August, following his visit to Medora, he wrote his sister, Mrs. Anna Cowles, that he "never saw finer two-year old steers than those Sylvane put on for us." Additional purchases were made in early 1894. The *Dickinson Press* announced, "Theodore Roosevelt is putting more cattle on his ranch at Medora, of which S. M. Ferris is the manager." The increased buying is reflected in Roosevelt's tax returns in Billings County for 1893 and 1894.³²

Roosevelt's rise as a national figure during the 1890's made it increasingly difficult for him to give ample attention to his Dakota ranching. From 1889 to 1895 he was a member of the United States Civil Service Commission. For two years then he was president of the Police Commission in New York City. He made trips to Medora in September of 1893 and again in 1896. By 1897 he was appointed Assistant Secretary of the Navy. His herds in the Badlands had dwindled considerably during the preceding four years. Roosevelt was apparently convinced that he should get out of the cattle business. In December of that year he wrote to Ferris:³³

. . . It is difficult to understand why the calf crop does not die out, yet our steers don't seem to live. Evidently we must try to dispose of all the cattle on the ranch next year. I would like your advice how best to try it. Do you think Wibaux [Pierre Wibaux, owner of the W Bar Ranch at Wibaux, Montana, was at that time one of the biggest cattle ranchers in the West] would make us a bid for the whole lot? I wish you would find out whether there is anyone else who would bid on them. You spoke of bidding on them yourself, but before you do so I want you to be sure that you are not undertaking something more than you can handle. Perhaps it would be a good thing to get Boyce [Henry Boice, of the Berry, Boice Cattle Co., who had a ranch south of Medora] to gather the whole herd and ship and sell to Chicago or somewhere for what we could get.

³¹Hagedorn, *op. cit.*, 482; Sewall, *op. cit.*, 101; *Dickinson Press*, March 21, 1891.

³²*Dickinson Press*, May 14, 1892, April 21, 1894; Morison, *op. cit.*, 1: 290.

³³Morison, *op. cit.*, 1: 725; *Dickinson Press*, Sept. 30, 1893, Sept. 12, 1896.

The following April found the Nation involved in a war with Spain. Roosevelt, who was planning to go to Cuba as lieutenant colonel of his famous "Rough Riders," urgently wished to dispose of his ranch. He wrote to his brother-in-law, Douglas Robinson: "Will you write Sylvane to get anything he can for the ranch, or to take it for anything he chooses to give? The amount of it is there will be no market for the buildings." Sometime during the year, Ferris bought his employer's interests in the Badlands.²⁴



The Maltese Cross cabin on the State Capitol Grounds.

Roosevelt's losses in his Dakota ranches were heavy. According to Hagedorn, his initial investment in the Chimney Butte and Elkhorn ranches was \$82,500. On this he lost approximately \$23,500. On his investment made in the Elkhorn Stock Company, he realized a profit of about \$3,250, making his net loss in his Dakota ventures about \$20,000. Considering the loss of interest on his \$82,500 at five per cent for the period from September 1884 to February 1899, his total loss amounted to about \$50,000.²⁵

²⁴Morison *op. cit.*, II: 820, 824, 939.

²⁵Hagedorn, *op. cit.*, 482.

Roosevelt returned from the Cuban campaign in 1898 a national hero. He was nominated and elected governor of New York. Two years later he was nominated and elected Vice President. In September 1901, an assassin's bullet killed President McKinley and Roosevelt became President. In the spring of 1903 Roosevelt made a tour of the West. On this trip he visited Medora. In April 1911, he stopped at Medora and from the rear platform of his private car shook hands with a number of old acquaintances.

THE ELKHORN RANCH SITE

By the time Roosevelt became President, the old Elkhorn ranch buildings had disappeared. Following his visit there in August 1892, he wrote to his former foreman, Sewall: "The ranch-house is in good repair, but of course it is melancholy to see it deserted; I stayed there for several days." It is not known whether Roosevelt visited the ranch in 1893 when he was at Medora but it is certain that he reached there in 1896. A number of long-time residents who lived in the vicinity claim they visited the vacant ranchhouse in the middle 1890's. Some of Roosevelt's household furnishings were there at the time.³⁶

According to local informants, the last occupant of the ranch was Mr. Henry Waltz who now resides in the State of Washington. The general consensus of opinion among the surviving people who lived in the vicinity of the ranch was that the Elkhorn buildings were hauled away near the end of the 1890's by neighboring ranchers. A few people claim the buildings were washed away by floods on the Little Missouri. J. H. Reid, who constructed his ranch buildings near the old Elkhorn site, advised the writer that when he moved there in 1901, "every log and scrap of [the Elkhorn buildings] had disappeared with the exception of a couple of half rotted foundation logs."³⁷

When the writer investigated the site in 1949 and 1950, all surface indications of the old buildings had disappeared with the exception of the old well, several foundation stones, depression of the basement of the ranchhouse, and evidences of several out-buildings. The site has since been acquired by the National Park Service as a part of Theodore Roosevelt National Memorial Park.

THE MALTESE CROSS CABIN

Fortunately, early steps were taken to preserve the Maltese Cross Cabin. The original cabin was built from railroad ties which were cut

³⁶Sewall, *op. cit.*, 101; Interviews, George Osterhaut and T. F. Roberts, Sept. 29, 1949; Mrs. Ella Myers, Oct. 16, 1949; Mr. Harve Robinson, Aug. 7, 1949; Mr. S. A. Stone, Aug. 1, 1949; William Neuens, July 13, 1949.

³⁷Interviews, William Neuens, T. F. Roberts, Chris Rasmussen, S. A. Stone, Mrs. George Myers; Volweiler, *op. cit.*, 39; J. H. Reid, Letter to Ray H. Mattison, Sept. 14, 1949.

by E. H. Bly in the Short and Long Pine Hills some 100 to 150 miles above (south of) Medora for the building of the Northern Pacific Railway. When Bly attempted to float these down the Little Missouri, many stuck on the sand bars and were used as building material by many of the ranchers. The original cabin was little more than a hut. Roosevelt induced his foremen to build a larger ranchhouse so they constructed out of the ties and pilings a story and a half building. Unlike most of the ranchhouses at that time, which were covered with low, sloping roofs and covered with sod and scoria, the Roosevelt cabin was high-pitched and covered with shingles. The attic of the cabin served as a sleeping room for the ranch hands. Roosevelt, when visiting the Badlands, occupied one of the three rooms below.³⁸

Not long after Roosevelt sold the Maltese Cross ranch to Ferris, the cabin passed into the hands of J. [Jack] F. Snyder, a local cowboy. Snyder, who had spent a number of winters in North Dakota, decided to make a warmer structure out of the old building. In about 1901, he tore off the old high-pitched roof and the one-half story above and replaced it with a low, sloping roof which he covered with dirt and scoria.³⁹

In 1904 steps were taken to preserve the cabin. Early that year it was acquired by North Dakota for exhibition at the Louisiana Purchase Exposition at St. Louis. The cabin was dismantled and hauled to Medora from where it was shipped to St. Louis. At the latter place, it was reassembled. The Maltese Cross Cabin proved to be "one of the greatest attractions of the entire exposition." It was estimated that one million people visited it, over 500,000 of whom registered. In December, President Roosevelt himself, while at the exposition, revisited the building which he occupied during his years in Dakota. In the following year, the cabin was taken to Portland and displayed at the Lewis and Clark Exposition. Approximately an average of 3,000 to 5,000 people saw it for 137 days, 200,000 of whom registered. In 1906 the cabin was exhibited at the North Dakota State Fair in Fargo after which it was placed on the Capitol Grounds at Bismarck.⁴⁰

³⁸*Dickinson Press*, March 19, 1904.

³⁹Ray H. Mattison, "A Study of the Authenticity of the Maltese Cross Cabin," Ms. (Medora, 1950); State Historical Society of North Dakota; *Dickinson Press*, March 19, 1904; Interviews, J. J. Tomamichel, July 8, 1949; Mrs. Elizabeth Roberts, Aug. 15, 1949; Mrs. Katherine Pelissier, July 13, 1949; T. F. Roberts, July 23, 1949; Chris Rasmussen, July 29, 1949; Mrs. Ella Myers, Oct. 16, 1949.

⁴⁰Interviews, B. T. Connell, July 25, 1949; W. A. Brubaker, Oct. 5, 1949; Chris Rasmussen; Jay Brown, letter to Ray H. Mattison, Oct. 1949; Public Doc. No. 42, Report of Commissioners in Charge of North Dakota Exhibit at St. Louis to Legislative Assembly, 1905, p. 5; North Dakota Public Document No. 36. Report of the North Dakota Commission to the Lewis and Clark Exposition pursuant to Chapter 34, Laws of 1903 (Bismarck, 1906), 6-7.

The story of the Maltese Cross Cabin after it was located at Bismarck has been told in a recent article by Mrs. A. M. Christianson. After being placed on the State Capitol Grounds, where it was neglected and vandalized, it was placed first under the jurisdiction of the Board of Control and later under the Board of Administration. The Daughters of the American Revolution in 1919 assumed the responsibility for the care and maintenance of the building. In the 1920's, after the completion of the Liberty Memorial Building, it was removed to its present site.⁴¹

The question of the authenticity of the structure at Bismarck has been raised a number of times. When North Dakota acquired it in early 1904, a John C. Witherow of Crooks Valley asserted that "the house in question was never occupied by Mr. Roosevelt as a residence, neither did it ever belong to him." He accused the commissioners, who were acquiring the cabin for the State, of perpetrating a "fraud" upon the American people. The commissioners thereupon obtained affidavits from Joseph and Sylvane Ferris, and Howard Eaton, early residents of the Badlands, that the cabin was actually used by the President and that the only change the structure had undergone was that of the altered roof. In 1918 Professor A. T. Volwiler, now Chairman, Department of History, Ohio University, wrote a number of reliable long-time residents in the vicinity of Medora regarding the authenticity of the cabin. These also supported the view that the cabin now in Bismarck is the one that was occupied by Roosevelt. Mr. Russell Reid, Superintendent, State Historical Society of North Dakota, made similar findings. In 1949-1950 the writer questioned a number of individuals who lived in the vicinity of Medora in the 1880's and 1890's about the building. Practically all of these supported the view that the ranch-house is the authentic Maltese Cross Cabin.⁴²

The establishment of Theodore Roosevelt National Memorial Park in 1947 developed sentiment for returning the cabin to the Little Missouri Badlands. In 1949 the 31st Legislative Assembly of North Dakota authorized the State to transfer the cabin to the newly-established park when the National Park Service agreed to maintain it. As the result of recent negotiations under the act, the cabin may be removed to Medora. So after fifty years, the Maltese Cross Cabin may find a permanent location within sight of the place where Roosevelt stopped in September 1883, when he first arrived in western Dakota.⁴³

⁴¹Mrs. A. M. Christianson, "The Roosevelt Cabin," *North Dakota History*, Vol. 22 (July 1955), 117-119.

⁴²*Dickinson Press*, March 19, 1904; Volwiler, *op. cit.*, 34; Interviews, W. A. Brubaker, Chris Rasmussen, William Neuens, Mrs. Katherine Pelissier, Mrs. Elizabeth Roberts, T. F. Roberts, B. F. Connell, J. J. Tomamichel.

⁴³Act of the 31st Legislative Assembly, approved March 9, 1949.



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