

Theodore Roosevelt National Park: Where the Great Spirit Shrugged

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In 1985, my husband Frank and I packed the kids, ages twelve and seven, and the camping equipment into our beat-up old Toyota wagon and left New Jersey on a Western expedition. We wanted to spend the month in the Great Plains, to wander through the West while thinking about the frontier, yesterday's and today's. We quickly covered the distance between New Jersey and Chicago, our own gateway to the West. In Chicago, we stopped with relatives, relaxed, provisioned, and then, taking a deep breath, drove off, ready to camp for the rest of our journey. We headed first for the big woods (Wisconsin, in Laura Ingalls Wilder's *Little House* terms) and then onto the open plains. That trip influenced the rest of my life, as it did for so many before me, keeping me intellectually engaged with the workings of Plains settlement. That westering story was historically one of ambition to occupy and develop the midsection of the country. Reading it while passing through the declining small towns suggested ambition misplaced. What were the alternatives? We ultimately returned to New Jersey and began filling out our alternative story, a future in which the past impinges as metaphor, as suggestion of future direction—a Buffalo Commons, a restoration-based economy.

I don't know if Frank has a place that most affected him on that journey, but for me it was Theodore Roosevelt National Park in the Little Missouri badlands of southwestern North Dakota, 70,000 acres on three separate units. As we generally preferred, we arrived at our new location in the afternoon, ready to claim a campsite and settle in before dark. We drove into the park's southern unit, picked up information on where to go, how to pay, and what to do. After the rolling flatness of eastern North Dakota, the badlands were wildly dramatic, but with subdued colors, the buttes indicating subtle shades of difference. Alongside the park roads were signs warning all to beware of buffalo. We fully intended to comply. We drove into the campgrounds, a lovely, largely empty facility, and se-

lected a sheltered site alongside the Little Missouri River with a nice flat area perfect for our tent. We turned toward the car to unload our gear, but before we could, we were joined by buffalo. They too liked the site. They moved in, grazed a bit, relaxed in our presence for a while. Then they moved on. We stayed and camped, but their presence remained in spaces and places within us. At night we lay flat on the ground looking up at the sky. No light pollution here. The sky was filled with stars. I had never seen so many, never deciphered so many constellations, never caught so many shooting stars. The place had power, or was it magic?

Badlands appear raw (Figure 1). Geology and history, culture and nature collide but subtly, like the colors of the layered scoria, a sort of baked clay, shading into each other while forming a whole. Examining the park's development past, one sees that distinctively ambivalent American mix of rugged individualism and government support, of the romantic and the mundane, and of recurring changes in resource use with awkward transitions between. Theodore Roosevelt National Park encapsulates an important streak of Americana.



Figure 1. Along the Little Missouri River in the park. Photograph by Deborah Popper.

How best to describe the North Dakota badlands? Why not start with America's best guides from the Works Project Administration's Federal Writers Project? "Here erosion has formed, and continues to form, a fantastic array of buttes in which layers of brick-red scoria and gray, blue, and yellow clays are vividly exposed.... To view the freakish, tumbled, unearthly valley is to appreciate and at the same time be amused by General Alfred Sully's oft-quoted characterization of the region as 'hell with the fires out.'¹ Part of the Williston Basin, the area is what it is because

half a billion years ago its granite base sank, and then was covered with water that collected sediments. When the water dried out, it left behind oil, gas, and coal formations. Water and wind next eroded the soft rock, gifting the earth with interesting forms and vistas one looks at from equally interesting outcroppings. The soft colors of cottonwoods and juniper, sedges, sage, and wheatgrass lighten the landscape. But then one can see petrified trees and coal seams smoldering—not all hell's fires are out. According to the WPA guide, Native Americans have a more mythic explanation for the badlands. Once a grassy plain filled with game, the area was well used by various tribes who would meet amicably in council; but it became a place of dispute, a hostile tribe pushing its own interests against the rest. The Great Spirit waited patiently for reconciliation, but when that did not occur, a great shudder convulsed the land. When the shudder quieted, the plain had become the badlands.²

When Thomas Jefferson made the Louisiana Purchase, he expected what would become North Dakota to be important for the country. He already had engaged Lewis and Clark for prospecting there, and the expedition spent more time in North Dakota than anywhere else.³ It went up the Missouri River, but the Little Missouri was off its beaten path. Lewis and Clark knew of it, described it based on Indian accounts, but did not actually walk or canoe through it.⁴

The future area of the park was good buffalo country, good hunting country, and Native Americans long retained control of it. During the 1860s, U.S. Army General Alfred Sully chased the Sioux through the area. In the 1870s, U.S. Army General George Custer traveled through on his way to his own end. Because the terrain was difficult and the climate harsh, it was not a prime destination for nineteenth-century homesteaders. As the eastern section of the Louisiana Territory began to fill, however, the romance of the West survived in places like the Little Missouri badlands. In the 1880s, the area became a destination for Eastern hunters seeking the last of the buffalo.

Theodore Roosevelt arrived in 1883 in an adventuresome frame of mind and found more than just good hunting.⁵ He fell in love with the area's sky, earth, and open range. He acquired shares in a herd of cattle; the next year he bought a ranch. He wrote and he rode. Theodore Roosevelt's time in the region is often presented as its golden days. The place largely drew the cattle crowd—investors from Texas, Britain, and the East Coast—and their cowboy crews. The Marquis de Moraes, one of the more romantic people who overlapped with Roosevelt, was a Frenchman who came to the area to invest in cattle and develop a slaughterhouse. Slaughter then ship rather than ship then slaughter was his idea. For a year or two, possibilities seemed lush. The Northern Pacific Railroad had pushed west from Bismarck straight through to Beach at North Dakota's western border. The cattle drives were lively; dramatic and exotic figures believed in the badlands' possibilities. The town of Medora, named

for Moraes' daughter and now the gateway to the southern unit of the park, went from four buildings to eighty-four in less than a year.

Teddy Roosevelt was prescient. His biographer, Edmund Morris, describes him as probably our smartest president.⁶ Roosevelt thought he was seeing the badlands during their best and most profitable days. He loved the landscape's energy and wrote evocatively of its changing seasons—the vivid green of the early spring, the browns of the summer, the sensation of sinking into a carpet as one rides through the prairie roses, the iron desolation of winter when all the land is like granite, and the rivers of frosted steel. He paid close attention to the wildlife, remarking on the clangor of the sandhill cranes as they flew along the river, the slimy feel of the wall-eyed pike, and the fearlessness of the elk. But he knew that in the Little Missouri badlands profits depended on the benevolence of the government and the good sense and cooperation of one's neighbors. If anyone overstocked and put too many grass-eating animals out to graze the open range, all would suffer.⁷

The cattle industry needed free grass to be profitable, especially given badlands topography where a herd could break into small groups and each group could hide in separate ravines. But as the country organized, the range would inevitably be more restrictive. Roosevelt approved the government's disposal of its surface land in small lots. He enjoyed the wild days but knew frontiersmen quickly created order. Exhibiting "their national aptitude for organization," they naturally turned "an excessively unattractive little hamlet" into the county seat of a huge, scantily settled county.⁸ The 1886-87 blizzard winter killed cattle and hope for the open range. Thereafter, tensions persisted over grazing throughout the West, but historian Elwyn Robinson describes the people who remained in North Dakota's Little Missouri country as setting a midcourse between the open range and the fenced farm. Although they owned cattle and land, they also depended on open land. Even so, economic survival was hard.⁹

North Dakota's homesteading's height was the first part of the twentieth century, and the area around the Little Missouri shared in the tumult. The combined population of Billings and McKenzie counties in this region was 975 in 1900; by 1910, the same area had 20,000, and in 1920 it reached the extreme number of 27,000.¹⁰ Such growth could not be sustained and decline set in after 1930. And what of the land? Roosevelt's suspicion about the need for free grass proved true.

After Roosevelt died in 1919, the area became a candidate for his commemoration. As the president most credited with making conservation government's work, Roosevelt had signed legislation to create five national parks, and had pushed for the federal Antiquities Act that allows a president to designate natural and historic landmarks as national monuments. Because he had loved the West, and especially the badlands, several people began to suggest a memorial to him here—size unspecified but probably small. It would take nearly thirty years to dedicate a national park.

Across the U.S., the early decades of the twentieth century were ones of expansion for facilities in and visitors to national parks.¹¹ World War I slowed the process, but within years of the war's end, park use returned to previous levels and more. Increased automobile ownership, urbanization, and industrialization fed an interest in such places as retreats from the grime of urban existence, as restorative with clean air. They were sites for recreation and invigoration. But funding did not keep up with demand. Each year the Secretary of the Interior's annual reports listed needs—to repair, replace, and expand deteriorating facilities, cabins, visitor centers, trails, and roads.

North Dakota had only a few small parks. Roosevelt had named Sully's Hill in eastern North Dakota a national park (now a national game preserve), but most of the state's land was seen as more valuable for agriculture than for recreation. In a 1928 publication called *Beauty Spots of North Dakota*, the author wryly observes: "A park is a tract of land, either ornamentally laid out or kept in its natural state for some special purpose, as for game, riding, or especially for recreation. The people of North Dakota are so utilitarian in their activities and pursuits that it is hard to imagine them deliberately dedicating tracts of land to sport and recreation."¹² As chair of the Art Division of the North Dakota Federation of Women's Clubs, the publication's author, Bertha Palmer, routinely had fielded inquiries about where to go and what to see in North Dakota. Her prime beauty spot, the book's first illustration, was the Little Missouri from the top of Cedar Butte. She explained that the request to commemorate Theodore Roosevelt emanated from the state. In 1921, the legislature had instructed the state to set aside land in hopes that Congress would establish a park. Throughout the 1920s, groups inspected and lobbied toward that end. The North Dakota Historical Society acquired the beginnings of one. But as Palmer wrote: "Whether or not Congress takes the action...the scenery still will be wild and rugged, the formations peculiar and grotesque, the views magnificent and awe-inspiring while the sun when rising and setting will spread over all the miles of this Wonderland of Western North Dakota a dreamy and magical light as mysterious as it is beautiful."¹³

As the twentieth century wore on, North Dakota went from a home-steading destination to a pass-through (now fly-over) country. Few associated the state with the romance Roosevelt found in it. Sully's Hill was relatively heavily used while North Dakota's population grew, but once the population began to decline, so did the park. The Great Depression of the 1930s hit North Dakota and the Little Missouri area hard. For most of the '30s, rainfall was far below the norm and the state's average income was just half of what it was nationally. Tax delinquency was high.¹⁴ The Little Missouri became linked with another Roosevelt—Franklin D. Roosevelt.

Federal and state relief programs provided much of North Dakotans' income during the 1930s. Two especially popular programs—the Civil-

ian Conservation Corps (CCC) and the Emergency Relief Administration (ERA)—employed 12,000 of the state's young people for road building, erosion control, and construction of recreational and civic facilities. Along the Little Missouri, private land went back to the federal government. Some became the Little Missouri National Grasslands and some merged into the Roosevelt Regional Park Project, a recreational demonstration area (RDA) administered by the Resettlement Administration, the CCC, the National Park Service, and the state of North Dakota. Improving park facilities was a prime CCC project. After all, parks were public lands available for government action and their improvement did not provide worrisome competition for private businesses. The federal programs added a distinctive national stamp to the park site. One can still find a CCC camp-tender's residence or signage constructed by the ERA along with the campgrounds, trails, picnic areas, and roads that were constructed. The park remained a place of recreation rather than development.¹⁵

By the late 1930s, the federal government began phasing out the CCC. Each year, the Secretary of the Interior's annual report showed sites moving into a post-CCC status. States took back full operations of many state parks, while others changed jurisdiction. But the campsites in the Roosevelt Memorial State Park remained in a bureaucratic limbo throughout the early 1940s, still a recreational demonstration area despite the fact that such projects had ended in 1941. The state was anxious for the federal government to take over the park while the federal government wanted the state to keep it. North Dakota Representative William Lemke made the resolution of this issue into a pet project.

A long-time North Dakota political figure, Lemke was a populist—an early and active member of the Nonpartisan League—and a Republican elected to Congress in 1932. Traveling with the House Public Lands Committee around the country and noting committee chair J. Hardin Peterson's enthusiastic and surprised appreciation of the Little Missouri area and its Recreation Demonstration Area, Lemke saw an opportunity. In 1946, he successfully guided a bill through Congress to designate a Theodore Roosevelt National Park, but President Harry S. Truman vetoed the effort, declaring the site of insufficient natural or historic merit. The tenacious Lemke returned to the next session of Congress after tightening the site's connections to Roosevelt by adding his Elkhorn ranchsite. This time, the act was passed and signed and created a one of a kind, national memorial park dedicated more to history than to nature. This was a place to commemorate Theodore Roosevelt and his time in North Dakota (Figure 2).¹⁶

The park began small—less than half its present size—and then expanded.¹⁷ Its dedication brought 25,000 people to Medora. The ceremony, carried on the NBC television network, was reported to have been the longest broadcast—110 minutes—to originate in North Dakota.¹⁸ The legislation and appropriation allowed for some developmental work, but



Figure 2. Theodore Roosevelt's cabin, now at the south unit's visitors' center. Photograph by Deborah Popper.

the park was still a relative backwater. No paved roads to the Elkhorn section existed, for example, and the park was far from major population centers. Even as a place to memorialize Theodore Roosevelt, it had competition—five other sites. The park's appropriations were small, and most users were from North Dakota. Still, all these issues made the place special—quieter than other parks and firmly linked to its westering past. Its three units give it lots of edges with non-parkland, some public and some private.

When Congress passed the Wilderness Act in 1964, there was no thought of including North Dakota's badlands in the designation; wilderness was for trees and mountains. A decade later, however, the concept of wilderness had become much broader; and much of the Theodore Roosevelt National Memorial Park was designated as wilderness in 1978.¹⁹ At the same time the word "memorial" was dropped from the park's title, implying that this was now fully a national park, and thus certified as important for its landscape as well as its history. Of course the landscape had not changed. It retained its peculiar, inspiring, and inspiring character, but with its national park and wilderness designations, wildlife became more important. Many of the native species Jefferson acquired and Lewis and Clark saw had been extirpated from the park—bison, elk, and bighorn sheep, for example. Each has been reintroduced. The bison herd I saw in 1985 has been especially successful as have the elk (the bighorn sheep less so). The park obtained twenty-nine bison in 1956. Now there

are closer to 400. The park fences them in and so minimizes conflict with neighboring ranchers. The prairie dog population has risen, though it is still well below its height.²⁰

The relationships between the park and its surrounding lands remain a challenge. Recent environmental conflicts revolve around energy development and environmental controls. The badlands were formed with pockets of oil, gas, and coal. Extracting them and generating power is done outside the park, but the signs of such work impinge on it. Human creations become more overt—geology is one thing as a butte and another as a gas company's sign or stack. The park has a Class 1 EPA air-quality classification—it is clean—but such quality is threatened by energy development. A telecommunications company wishes to erect cell towers every nine miles to facilitate digital phone service. A public hearing drew opponents who view the towers as unsightly, but others think the area around the park cannot grow without such things, unsightly or not.²¹

The most visited spot in the park is an overlook along Interstate 94 that provides a prospect across the badlands. Many who stop never notice they are in a national park. But for those who get off the interstate and wander through the landscape, the power of the place sinks in. In 2000, *Backpacker Magazine* surveyed its readers to learn which they thought were the best national parks. Theodore Roosevelt was ranked fourth for solitude. (Alaska's Denali was first.) The editors describe the park as a place to lose oneself in its wilderness, its "whispering grasslands and high badlands and the empty space between the two."²²

Flying over North Dakota in early January 2002, I looked down and saw the farmland squares enlarging as my plane went west. It was winter, and a dusting of snow coated much of the land. We followed the Missouri River for a while, a big blue squiggle. The farm squares disappeared. As we neared the badlands, the browns and grays of the ground below became clear. The sun bounced off the landscape, revealing wrinkles and pits, the darker shades of trees. Even at 35,000 feet, the place compels; it is all texture, that Great Spirit's shudder captured and held.

Notes

1. Federal Writers' Project, *North Dakota, a Guide to the Prairie State* (New York: Oxford, 1950): 4,174.
2. *Ibid.*, 177.
3. Elwyn Robinson, *History of North Dakota* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1966): 411.
4. See *Original Journals of the Lewis and Clark Expedition, 1804-1806, Vol. VI* (New York: Dodd, Mead, 1905): 51, 60.
5. Roosevelt spent time intermittently in the area between 1883 and 1892 and sold off his holdings in 1898. One delightful account of his time in the area is Hermann Hagedorn, *Roosevelt in the Badlands* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1921).
6. The statement comes from Edmund Morris' interview on Charlie Rose, PBS, 7 January 2002, but similar sentiments appear in his biographies, *The Rise of Theodore Roosevelt* (New York: Coward, McCann and Geoghan, 1979) and *Theodore Rex* (New York: Random House, 2001).
7. See, for example, Theodore Roosevelt, *Ranch Life and the Heritage Trail* (New York: Century Company, 1888). Note particularly 20-24 and 90 for Roosevelt's assessment on the prospects

- of the area. See also Roosevelt, *Hunting Trips in the Prairies and Mountains* (New York: Putnam, 1900).
8. Roosevelt, *Ranch Life*, 90 and 20.
 9. Robinson, *History of North Dakota*, 191-93.
 10. The numbers are taken from U.S. Census Department's *Population of States and Counties of the United States: 1790-1990* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1996). Because of county boundary changes, the numbers include Bowman, Golden Valley, and Slope as well.
 11. For a good history, see Linda Flint McClelland, *Building the National Parks: Historic Landscape, Design and Construction* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998).
 12. Bertha Rachel Palmer, *Beauty Spots of North Dakota* (Boston: Gorham Press, 1928): 125.
 13. *Ibid.*, 129.
 14. See Robinson, *History of North Dakota*, 396-419.
 15. For a discussion of the work of the Emergency Relief Administration in the northern Plains, see Carroll Van West, "The Best Kind of Building: The New Deal Landscape of the Northern Plains, 1933-1942," *Great Plains Quarterly* 14(2) 1994: 129-41. On the Little Missouri Grasslands, see Bret Wallach, *At Odds With Progress* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1991): 140-62.
 16. Edward C. Blackorby, *Prairie Rebel: The Public Life of William Lemke* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1963): 270-72.
 17. PL-38 created the park. Originally, it was only the southern unit with the Elkhorn unit to be acquired. Major additions were added in 1948 and 1956. PL95-625 changed its status to a U.S. National Park with 29,920 acres as part of the National Wilderness Preservation System.
 18. U.S. Department of the Interior *Report, 1949* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1940): 316.
 19. For a discussion of this change of attitude, see Samuel P. Hays, *Explorations in Environmental History* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1998): 44.
 20. See coverage in *The Bismarck Tribune*, for example Brian Witte, "Prairie dogs win, Dorgan loses, in picnic area fight," 15 June 2001: A1. In the 1950s, one colony took up five acres; now that group has grown to 4,600 animals on 92 acres that overlap a picnic area. The park administration saw a conflict and chose to move the picnic area.
 21. Dale Wetzel, "Company hopes to learn if power plant near national park feasible," *The Bismarck Tribune*, 8 September 2001: 1A; Associated Press, "South Dakota company plans towers along Interstate 94, MEDORA, N.D.," 26 May 2000.
 22. http://www.backpacker.com/article/0,2646,1634__22_2,00.html.



Lacassine National Wildlife Refuge, Louisiana. Courtesy U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service/photo by John and Karen Hollingsworth.