

JOHN BURROUGHS

CAMPING & TRAMPING
WITH ROOSEVELT

John Burroughs

Camping & Tramping with Roosevelt

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Camping & Tramping with Roosevelt

INTRODUCTION

This little volume really needs no introduction; the two sketches of which it is made explain and, I hope, justify themselves. But there is one phase of the President's many-sided character upon which I should like to lay especial emphasis, namely, his natural history bent and knowledge. Amid all his absorbing interests and masterful activities in other fields, his interest and his authority in practical natural history are by no means the least. I long ago had very direct proof of this statement. In some of my English sketches, following a visit to that island in 1882, I had, rather by implication than by positive statement, inclined to the opinion that the European forms of animal life were, as a rule, larger and more hardy and prolific than the corresponding forms in this country. Roosevelt could not let this statement or suggestion go unchallenged, and the letter which I received from him in 1892, touching these things, is of double interest at this time, as showing one phase of his radical Americanism, while it exhibits him as a thoroughgoing naturalist. I am sure my readers will welcome the gist of this letter. After some preliminary remarks he says: —

"The point of which I am speaking is where you say that the Old World forms of animal life are coarser, stronger, fiercer, and more fertile than those of the New World." (My statement was not quite so sweeping as this.) "Now I don't think that this is so; at least, comparing the forms which are typical of North America and of northern Asia and Europe, which together form but one province of animal life.

"Many animals and birds which increase very fast in new countries, and which are commonly spoken of as European in their origin, are really as alien to Europe as to their new homes. Thus the rabbit, rat, and mouse are just as truly interlopers in England as in the United States and Australia, having moved thither apparently within historic times, the rabbit from North Africa, the others from southern Asia; and one could no more generalize upon the comparative weakness of the American fauna from these cases of intruders than one could generalize from them upon the comparative weakness of the British, German, and French wild animals. Our wood mouse or deer mouse retreats before the ordinary house mouse in exactly the same way that the European wood mouse does, and not a whit more. Our big wood rat stands in the same relation to the house rat. Casting aside these cases, it seems to me, looking at the mammals, that it would be quite impossible to generalize as to whether those of the Old or the New World are more fecund, are the fiercest, the hardiest, or the strongest. A great many cases could be cited on both sides. Our moose and caribou are, in certain of their varieties, rather larger than the Old World forms of the same species. If there is any difference between the beavers of the two countries, it is in the same direction. So with the great family of the field mice. The largest true arvicola seems to be the yellow-cheeked mouse of Hudson's Bay, and the biggest representative of the family on either continent is the muskrat. In most of its varieties the wolf of North America seems to be inferior in strength and courage to that of northern Europe and Asia; but the direct reverse is true with the grizzly bear, which is merely a somewhat larger and fiercer variety of the common European brown bear. On the whole, the Old World bison, or so-called aurochs, appears to be somewhat more formidable than its American brother; but the difference against the latter is not anything like as great as the difference in favor of the American wapiti, which is nothing but a giant representative of the comparatively puny European stag. So with the red fox. The fox of New York is about the size of that of France, and inferior in size to that of Scotland; the latter in turn is inferior in size to the big fox of the upper Missouri, while the largest of all comes from British America. There is no basis for the belief that the red fox was imported here from Europe;

its skin was a common article of trade with the Canadian fur traders from the earliest times. On the other hand, the European lynx is much bigger than the American. The weasels afford cases in point, showing how hard it is to make a general law on the subject. The American badger is very much smaller than the European, and the American otter very much larger than the European otter. Our pine marten, or sable, compared with that of Europe, shows the very qualities of which you speak; that is, its skull is slenderer, the bones are somewhat lighter, the teeth less stout, the form showing more grace and less strength. But curiously enough this is reversed, with even greater emphasis, in the minks of the two continents, the American being much the largest and strongest, with stouter teeth, bigger bones, and a stronger animal in every way. The little weasel is on the whole smaller here, while the big weasel, or stoat, is, in some of its varieties at least, largest on this side; and, of the true weasels, the largest of all is the so-called fisher, a purely American beast, a fierce and hardy animal which habitually preys upon as hard fighting a creature as the raccoon, and which could eat all the Asiatic and European varieties of weasels without an effort.

"About birds I should be far less competent to advance arguments, and especially, my dear sir, to you; but it seems to me that two of the most self-asserting and hardest of our families of birds are the tyrant flycatchers, of which the kingbird is chief, and the blackbirds, or grackles, with the meadow lark at their head, both characteristically American.

"Did you ever look over the medical statistics of the half million men drafted during the Civil War? They include men of every race and color, and from every country of Europe, and from every State in the Union; and so many men were measured that the average of the measurements is probably pretty fair. From these it would appear that the physical type in the Eastern States had undoubtedly degenerated. The man from New York or New England, unless he came from the lumbering districts, though as tall as the Englishman or Irishman, was distinctly lighter built, and especially was narrower across the chest; but the finest men physically of all were the Kentuckians and Tennesseans. After them came the Scandinavians, then the Scotch, then the people from several of the Western States, such as Wisconsin and Minnesota, then the Irish, then the Germans, then the English, etc. The decay of vitality, especially as shown in the decreasing fertility of the New England and, indeed, New York stock, is very alarming; but the most prolific peoples on this continent, whether of native or foreign origin, are the native whites of the southern Alleghany region in Kentucky and Tennessee, the Virginians, and the Carolinians, and also the French of Canada.

"It will be difficult to frame a general law of fecundity in comparing the effects upon human life of long residence on the two continents when we see that the Frenchman in Canada is healthy and enormously fertile, while the old French stock is at the stationary point in France, the direct reverse being the case when the English of Old and of New England are compared, and the decision being again reversed if we compare the English with the mountain whites of the Southern States."

CAMPING WITH PRESIDENT ROOSEVELT

At the time I made the trip to Yellowstone Park with President Roosevelt in the spring of 1903, I promised some friends to write up my impressions of the President and of the Park, but I have been slow in getting around to it. The President himself, having the absolute leisure and peace of the White House, wrote his account of the trip nearly two years ago! But with the stress and strain of my life at "Slabsides," – administering the affairs of so many of the wild creatures of the woods about me, – I have not till this blessed season (fall of 1905) found the time to put on record an account of the most interesting thing I saw in that wonderful land, which, of course, was the President himself.

When I accepted his invitation I was well aware that during the journey I should be in a storm centre most of the time, which is not always a pleasant prospect to a man of my habits and disposition. The President himself is a good deal of a storm, – a man of such abounding energy and ceaseless activity that he sets everything in motion around him wherever he goes. But I knew he would be pretty well occupied on his way to the Park in speaking to eager throngs and in receiving personal and political homage in the towns and cities we were to pass through. But when all this was over, and I found myself with him in the wilderness of the Park, with only the superintendent and a few attendants to help take up his tremendous personal impact, how was it likely to fare with a non-strenuous person like myself? I asked. I had visions of snow six and seven feet deep, where traveling could be done only upon snow-shoes, and I had never had the things on my feet in my life. If the infernal fires beneath, that keep the pot boiling so furiously in the Park, should melt the snows, I could see the party tearing along on horseback at a wolf-hunt pace over a rough country; and as I had not been on a horse's back since the President was born, how would it be likely to fare with me then?

I had known the President several years before he became famous, and we had had some correspondence on subjects of natural history. His interest in such themes is always very fresh and keen, and the main motive of his visit to the Park at this time was to see and study in its semi-domesticated condition the great game which he had so often hunted during his ranch days; and he was kind enough to think it would be an additional pleasure to see it with a nature-lover like myself. For my own part, I knew nothing about big game, but I knew there was no man in the country with whom I should so like to see it as Roosevelt.

Some of our newspapers reported that the President intended to hunt in the Park. A woman in Vermont wrote me, to protest against the hunting, and hoped I would teach the President to love the animals as much as I did, – as if he did not love them much more, because his love is founded upon knowledge, and because they had been a part of his life. She did not know that I was then cherishing the secret hope that I might be allowed to shoot a cougar or bobcat; but this fun did not come to me. The President said, "I will not fire a gun in the Park; then I shall have no explanations to make." Yet once I did hear him say in the wilderness, "I feel as if I ought to keep the camp in meat. I always have." I regretted that he could not do so on this occasion.

I have never been disturbed by the President's hunting trips. It is to such men as he that the big game legitimately belongs, – men who regard it from the point of view of the naturalist as well as from that of the sportsman, who are interested in its preservation, and who share with the world the delight they experience in the chase. Such a hunter as Roosevelt is as far removed from the game-butcher as day is from night; and as for his killing of the "varmints," – bears, cougars, and bobcats, – the fewer of these there are, the better for the useful and beautiful game.

The cougars, or mountain lions, in the Park certainly needed killing. The superintendent reported that he had seen where they had slain nineteen elk, and we saw where they had killed a deer and dragged its body across the trail. Of course, the President would not now on his hunting trips shoot an elk or a deer except to "keep the camp in meat," and for this purpose it is as legitimate as to slay a sheep or a steer for the table at home.

We left Washington on April 1, and strung several of the larger Western cities on our thread of travel, – Chicago, Milwaukee, Madison, St. Paul, Minneapolis, – as well as many lesser towns, in each of which the President made an address, sometimes brief, on a few occasions of an hour or more.

He gave himself very freely and heartily to the people wherever he went. He could easily match their Western cordiality and good-fellowship. Wherever his train stopped, crowds soon gathered, or had already gathered, to welcome him. His advent made a holiday in each town he visited. At all the principal stops the usual programme was: first, his reception by the committee of citizens appointed to receive him, – they usually boarded his private car, and were one by one introduced to him; then a drive through the town with a concourse of carriages; then to the hall or open-air platform, where he spoke to the assembled throng; then to lunch or dinner; and then back to the train, and off for the next stop, – a round of hand-shaking, carriage-driving, speech-making each day. He usually spoke from eight to ten times every twenty-four hours, sometimes for only a few minutes from the rear platform of his private car, at others for an hour or more in some large hall. In Chicago, Milwaukee, and St. Paul, elaborate banquets were given him and his party, and on each occasion he delivered a carefully prepared speech upon questions that involved the policy of his administration. The throng that greeted him in the vast Auditorium in Chicago – that rose and waved and waved again – was one of the grandest human spectacles I ever witnessed.

In Milwaukee the dense cloud of tobacco smoke that presently filled the large hall after the feasting was over was enough to choke any speaker, but it did not seem to choke the President, though he does not use tobacco in any form himself; nor was there anything foggy about his utterances on that occasion upon legislative control of the trusts.

In St. Paul the city was inundated with humanity, – a vast human tide that left the middle of the streets bare as our line of carriages moved slowly along, but that rose up in solid walls of town and prairie humanity on the sidewalks and city dooryards. How hearty and happy the myriad faces looked! At one point I spied in the throng on the curbstone a large silk banner that bore my own name as the title of some society. I presently saw that it was borne by half a dozen anxious and expectant-looking schoolgirls with braids down their backs. As my carriage drew near them, they pressed their way through the throng and threw a large bouquet of flowers into my lap. I think it would be hard to say who blushed the deeper, the girls or myself. It was the first time I had ever had flowers showered upon me in public; and then, maybe, I felt that on such an occasion I was only a minor side issue, and public recognition was not called for. But the incident pleased the President. "I saw that banner and those flowers," he said afterwards; "and I was delighted to see you honored that way." But I fear I have not to this day thanked the Monroe School of St. Paul for that pretty attention.

The time of the passing of the presidential train seemed well known, even on the Dakota prairies. At one point I remember a little brown schoolhouse stood not far off, and near the track the school-ma'am, with her flock, drawn up in line. We were at luncheon, but the President caught a glimpse ahead through the window, and quickly took in the situation. With napkin in hand, he rushed out on the platform and waved to them. "Those children," he said, as he came back, "wanted to see the President of the United States, and I could not disappoint them. They may never have another chance. What a deep impression such things make when we are young!"

At some point in the Dakotas we picked up the former foreman of his ranch and another cowboy friend of the old days, and they rode with the President in his private car for several hours. He was as happy with them as a schoolboy ever was in meeting old chums. He beamed with delight all over. The life which those men represented, and of which he had himself once formed a part, meant so much to him; it had entered into the very marrow of his being, and I could see the joy of it all shining in his face as he sat and lived parts of it over again with those men that day. He bubbled with laughter continually. The men, I thought, seemed a little embarrassed by his open-handed cordiality and good-fellowship. He himself evidently wanted to forget the present, and to live only in the memory of those wonderful ranch days, – that free, hardy, adventurous life upon the plains. It all came back to him

with a rush when he found himself alone with these heroes of the rope and the stirrup. How much more keen his appreciation was, and how much quicker his memory, than theirs! He was constantly recalling to their minds incidents which they had forgotten, and the names of horses and dogs which had escaped them. His subsequent life, instead of making dim the memory of his ranch days, seemed to have made it more vivid by contrast.

When they had gone I said to him, "I think your affection for those men very beautiful."

"How could I help it?" he said.

"Still, few men in your station could or would go back and renew such friendships."

"Then I pity them," he replied.

He said afterwards that his ranch life had been the making of him. It had built him up and hardened him physically, and it had opened his eyes to the wealth of manly character among the plainsmen and cattlemen.

Had he not gone West, he said, he never would have raised the Rough Riders regiment; and had he not raised that regiment and gone to the Cuban War, he would not have been made governor of New York; and had not this happened, the politicians would not unwittingly have made his rise to the Presidency so inevitable. There is no doubt, I think, that he would have got there some day; but without the chain of events above outlined, his rise could not have been so rapid.

Our train entered the Bad Lands of North Dakota in the early evening twilight, and the President stood on the rear platform of his car, gazing wistfully upon the scene. "I know all this country like a book," he said. "I have ridden over it, and hunted over it, and tramped over it, in all seasons and weather, and it looks like home to me. My old ranch is not far off. We shall soon reach Medora, which was my station." It was plain to see that that strange, forbidding-looking landscape, hills and valleys to eastern eyes, utterly demoralized and gone to the bad, – flayed, fantastic, treeless, a riot of naked clay slopes, chimney-like buttes, and dry coulees, – was in his eyes a land of almost pathetic interest. There were streaks of good pasturage here and there where his cattle used to graze, and where the deer and the pronghorn used to linger.

When we reached Medora, where the train was scheduled to stop an hour, it was nearly dark, but the whole town and country round had turned out to welcome their old townsman. After much hand-shaking, the committee conducted us down to a little hall, where the President stood on a low platform, and made a short address to the standing crowd that filled the place. Then some flashlight pictures were taken by the local photographer, after which the President stepped down, and, while the people filed past him, shook hands with every man, woman, and child of them, calling many of them by name, and greeting them all most cordially. I recall one grizzled old frontiersman whose hand he grasped, calling him by name, and saying, "How well I remember you! You once mended my gunlock for me, – put on a new hammer." "Yes," said the delighted old fellow; "I'm the man, Mr. President." He was among his old neighbors once more, and the pleasure of the meeting was very obvious on both sides. I heard one of the women tell him they were going to have a dance presently, and ask him if he would not stay and open it! The President laughingly excused himself, and said his train had to leave on schedule time, and his time was nearly up. I thought of the incident in his "Ranch Life," in which he says he once opened a cowboy ball with the wife of a Minnesota man, who danced opposite, and who had recently shot a bullying Scotchman. He says the scene reminded him of the ball where Bret Harte's heroine "went down the middle with the man that shot Sandy Magee."

Before reaching Medora he had told me many anecdotes of "Hell-Roaring Bill Jones," and had said I should see him. But it turned out that Hell-Roaring Bill had begun to celebrate the coming of the President too early in the day, and when we reached Medora he was not in a presentable condition. I forget now how he had earned his name, but no doubt he had come honestly by it; it was a part of his history, as was that of "The Pike," "Cold-Turkey Bill," "Hash-Knife Joe," and other classic heroes of the frontier.

It is curious how certain things go to the bad in the Far West, or a certain proportion of them, – bad lands, bad horses, and bad men. And it is a degree of badness that the East has no conception of, – land that looks as raw and unnatural as if time had never laid its shaping and softening hand upon it; horses that, when mounted, put their heads to the ground and their heels in the air, and, squealing defiantly, resort to the most diabolically ingenious tricks to shake off or to kill their riders; and men who amuse themselves in bar-rooms by shooting about the feet of a "tenderfoot" to make him dance, or who ride along the street and shoot at every one in sight. Just as the old plutonic fires come to the surface out there in the Rockies, and hint very strongly of the infernal regions, so a kind of satanic element in men and animals – an underlying devilishness – crops out, and we have the border ruffian and the bucking broncho.

The President told of an Englishman on a hunting trip in the West, who, being an expert horseman at home, scorned the idea that he could not ride any of their "grass-fed ponies." So they gave him a bucking broncho. He was soon lying on the ground, much stunned. When he could speak, he said, "I should not have minded him, you know, *but 'e 'ides 'is 'ead.*"

At one place in Dakota the train stopped to take water while we were at lunch. A crowd soon gathered, and the President went out to greet them. We could hear his voice, and the cheers and laughter of the crowd. And then we heard him say, "Well, good-by, I must go now." Still he did not come. Then we heard more talking and laughing, and another "good-by," and yet he did not come. Then I went out to see what had happened. I found the President down on the ground shaking hands with the whole lot of them. Some one had reached up to shake his hand as he was about withdrawing, and this had been followed by such eagerness on the part of the rest of the people to do likewise, that the President had instantly got down to gratify them. Had the secret service men known it, they would have been in a pickle. We probably have never had a President who responded more freely and heartily to the popular liking for him than Roosevelt. The crowd always seem to be in love with him the moment they see him and hear his voice. And it is not by reason of any arts of eloquence, or charm of address, but by reason of his inborn heartiness and sincerity, and his genuine manliness. The people feel his quality at once. In Bermuda last winter I met a Catholic priest who had sat on the platform at some place in New England very near the President while he was speaking, and who said, "The man had not spoken three minutes before I loved him, and had any one tried to molest him, I could have torn him to pieces." It is the quality in the man that instantly inspires such a liking as this in strangers that will, I am sure, safeguard him in all public places.

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