

Theodore Roosevelt

1858 – 1919



On September 7, 1883, Theodore Roosevelt set foot on the Northern Plains for the first time. He was in his mid-twenties, a New York State legislator who had come west to hunt buffalo. The recent commercial slaughter of the buffalo left those plains littered with the rotting carcasses of the greatest wildlife resource ever known. Thirteen days later, Theodore crossed into Montana Territory, found a lone bull buffalo on Little Cannonball Creek and shot it.

Theodore returned to the Great Plains in 1884, invested in cattle and hunted throughout the west, including frequent trips into Montana ranging from tributaries of the Little Missouri River in Southeastern Montana to the Cabinet Mountains of the Northwest. During that time, he wrote, “A ranchman who ... had made a journey of a thousand miles across Northern Montana, along the Milk River, told me ... he was never out of sight of a dead buffalo, and never in sight of a live one.”

Theodore’s experiences and observations during this period led to a conservation epiphany. The winter of 1886 put an end to his livestock ambition, but the conservation ethic born of his time in the West, much of it in Montana, led to the founding of a citizen conservation organization in 1887 dedicated to the introduction of the sporting code and restoration of big game. High on their list of things to do was a reform agenda that included giving presidents authority to set aside land that could be held in the public trust.

When he became president, Theodore set aside 230 million acres for conservation that included wildlife refuges, national monuments,

national parks, federal bird preserves, national game preserves and over 150 million acres of forest reserves. In Montana, it included what would become national forests from the Custer in the Southeast to the Kootenai in the Northwest plus the Bison Range at Moiese. While in the White House, he also called seven conferences to address conservation in America. He was quite clear about his commitment, saying, “Our aim is to preserve our natural resources for the public as a whole, for the average man and the average woman who make up the body of the American people.”

When Theodore sought to regain the presidency in 1912 to protect his reforms, his campaign manager was Montana’s U.S. Senator Joe Dixon, who later served as Montana’s governor. When that lone buffalo fell in 1883, its sacrifice led to a conservation renaissance that changed the face of a young nation. How that impact is felt was best described by Theodore himself: “The things accomplished that have been enumerated above were of immediate consequence to the economic well-being of our people. In addition certain things were done of which the economic bearing was remote, but which bore directly upon our welfare, because they add to the beauty of living and therefore to the joy of life.”

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