

## A 'bully' time in Medora, North Dakota

*Travel report by Emma van Toorn, 2022*

### ***Off to the Badlands, at last!***

Having won the Theodore Roosevelt American History Award in 2020 did not get me on a plane to the American West a couple of weeks later, as had been the amazing prize pre-pandemic. Two years later, just when I thought I would accept that the (wonderful!) distanced ceremony in Middelburg and the stern Teddy bust proudly staring at me in my home office would be my faith as the first Covid-times prize winner, I received a phone call from the Roosevelt Institute of American Studies wondering if I would still be interested in setting course for Medora, North Dakota that Summer. I would be going together with the 2021 award winner. Not only do Melanie and I share an alma mater, but – as we would find out at Schiphol airport this past August – we could also share experiences of a high school exchange in small town America, as well as a love for coffee and quirky hobbies (Pokémon cards and line dancing respectively).



*Melanie (left) and myself at Theodore Roosevelt National Park*



*The badlands and the Little Missouri River from the Wind Canyon Trail*

The arrival at Bismarck airport started off with a great Midwestern welcome in the shape of Colleen Reinhardt, who works with the Theodore Roosevelt Medora Foundation and could – in my opinion – easily be recruited as a North Dakota ambassador to the rest of the world. If you ever find yourself on the two-hour car ride from Bismarck to Medora, make sure you don't miss Salem Sue ("the people of Salem got to choose between a pool and the world's largest fiberglass Holstein cow, naturally they chose the cow sculpture") overlooking the I-94. Upon Colleen's insistence, Melanie and I spent the first night at a motel so as to be well rested and have the advantage of daylight for our first encounter with the Badlands that host – besides bison, prairie dogs and nature loving tourists – the small town of Medora.

It seems only fitting that the national park surrounding the breathtaking landscape is named after its most famous 1884-86 resident, who would be remembered – among many things – for his conservationist efforts as president years later. I soon learned that there was a reason other than the assassination of William McKinley that made Theodore Roosevelt the 26<sup>th</sup> president of the United States in 1901. North Dakotans, naturally, do not leave an opportunity wasted to quote Teddy stating, "I have always said that I would not have been President had it not been for my experience in North Dakota." Although I feel I did an ok job, one simply cannot really capture in a picture the dramatic appeal of the rugged rock formations. They seem to appear out of nowhere from the flat farmlands reminding me of my homeland. Little did I know, the park would look even prettier the

next day at dawn (shoutout to the jetlag that had me up and ready to go at 5AM). Even in the early morning, it took our first bison spotting just off the side of the road to shush us three chatty ladies and gaze at the magnificent animal in awe. And just when we thought we were happy with some good shots of the lone bull, a while later we ran into a full population of over 30 bison in front of a Badlands backdrop that appeared to be a green screen.

### ***Keepin' it country***

Throughout the week, we kept being drawn to experience the Badlands from up close. With very limited experience, but much excitement, we even embarked on a horseback ride up and down the rocky, hilly landscape. Together with a visit to the North Dakota Cowboy Hall of Fame, this much



*The North Dakota Cowboy Hall of Fame, where McDonalds sponsored rodeo equipment makes for a museum piece*

confirmed my suspicion that I am a cowgirl at heart. Sure, the conversations with historians were nice, but have you ever had the chance to meet a real-life barrel racing legend? It was quite nice to be in a place where telling people about your country line dance hobby (a very niche pastime in Amsterdam) was answered by a 'nice, me too!'. Besides these activities and the casual cowboy boot being used as a flower pot on main street, the Western aesthetic of Medora is amplified through the lovely Great American Folk Show with singer Tom Brosseau, taking place daily at the town square where I had many friendly chats with fellow country lovers.

### ***Two Teddy's in town***

It would soon become evident that the Theodore Roosevelt National Park is not the only thing named after the most famous Rough Rider in and around Medora. The town breathes history and is able to maintain an amazing late 19<sup>th</sup> century Western era aesthetic, while facilitating thousands of 21<sup>st</sup> century tourists, workers and volunteers each Summer. Not one, but two impersonators bring Teddy – and interestingly, there is only one Edith – to life in and outside of their excellent theatre shows at the Old Town Hall Theatre. Their plentiful anecdotes of 1880's America, and specifically their expressing of the thoughts and experiences of the man during his time in North Dakota, certainly add to the historical sensation of being in Medora. I have to say I was honored when invited by one of the future presidents to dinner. Captivated by his resemblance to the real deal, both in looks and demeanor (exclaiming 'bully!' every now and then), I was honestly only certain that Joe Wiegand was breaking character when kindly inviting me to Rotary lunch the next day. On the road to the luncheon, he shared excellent tips for my upcoming trip to his hometown of Chicago where I would spend another week visiting after Medora.



*Dinner with Mr. Roosevelt a.k.a. Joe Wiegand*

### ***An (inter)national appeal***

After graduating in North American Studies at Radboud University Nijmegen, I have pursued a career outside of academia. During this trip I was reminded of the amazing richness and peculiarity of humanities academia when William, a scholar who recently moved to North Dakota from Texas for a position at the Theodore Roosevelt Center at Dickinson State University told me about his dissertation on labor dynamics within the traveling circus. Fortunately, I had plenty of time to ask him all questions that naturally pop up when this information is disclosed. William and his lovely colleague at the Center Sharon took Melanie and I on a road trip to the Northern parts of the state, where the highlight (after the pecan pie at a Little Missouri Grille in Watford City – highly recommended) was a spectacular view of the Missouri River at the Fort Berthold Reservation. And just when we thought we had escaped Theodore’s legacy for a day, an enormous white bust



*Teddy bust at the Roosevelt Inn & Suites in Watford City*

announcing the Roosevelt Inn & Suites came into view. This of course called for a selfie session, of which I will spare you the evidence.

William is not the only scholar drawn to the region from across the country. Moreover, working at the Theodore Roosevelt Medora Foundation are young people from around the world who wear their home country – from Tonga to Montenegro – on their name badge, making for a nice conversation starter. Colleen had arranged for Melanie and me to meet a couple of girls who then kindly invited us to the yearly international food night the next day. I certainly was not expecting to have Polish pierogis in North Dakota!

That we were not the first Europeans to have arrived in Medora, became all the more evident when we learned that there is a ‘chateau’ in town. Although my western European frame of reference brings to mind another image at the term, the Chateau de Mores does make for a beautifully kept summer residence and hunters’ lodge, especially when you take into account its erection in 1883 Dakota Territory. From an excellent tour by historian Anna, we learned that the town itself was named after the French nobleman Marquis de Morès’s wife: Medora von Hoffman.

### **Broadway in the Badlands**

If there is one event that one cannot – I mean, you are not really allowed to leave town without having seen it – miss when visiting, it is the Medora Musical. We got an excellent behind the scenes tour by theatre manager Maddie, who explained to us how it came to be the ‘greatest show in the west’ thanks in large part to philanthropy and (very) patriotic vision of local businessman Harold Schafer a.k.a. Mr. Bubble. If you add the two year wait and the fact that every conversation you would have in Medora starts or ends with “Have you seen the musical yet?”, I do not think I had ever been more hyped for a show. And it did not disappoint: live animals, fireworks, moving décor, even a special word of welcome (including a bright spotlight on our faces) to the ladies visiting all the way from the Netherlands, followed by Maddie winking at us after the show.



*The set of the Medora Musical at daytime*

A quick visit across the state border into Montana (check!) and a final beer at the Little Missouri Saloon, marked my final day in Medora. As Melanie's flight was scheduled quite early the next morning, and I had some time to kill before mine, Colleen proved to be an excellent host one final time before I left. She was very happy to assist me in my quest for a pair of western boots (that I had been saving up for since winning the TRAHA 2020). When they didn't have my style at the Bismarck Boot Barn, Colleen tirelessly called every branch of the chain store in the Midwest. Ironically, I finally succeeded in my purchase at a specialty store that imports boots from the US in The Hague about a week before writing this report. Even if they were made in Texas, I will always recall this trip when wearing them. And if not for the boots, I will forever have my souvenir Teddy bear to remind me of my time in Medora, North Dakota.

### **Thank you**

I would like to sincerely thank the Theodore Roosevelt Medora Foundation, the Theodore Roosevelt Center at Dickinson State University, the Roosevelt Institute of American Studies and the U.S. Embassy in The Hague for making this trip possible and memorable. Also, I would like to urge any reader of this piece to go explore the beautiful sights of Medora for yourself, especially with the Theodore Roosevelt Presidential Library scheduled to open in 2026. Or, as urged by the state's marketing department: go 'be legendary' in North Dakota!



*At the Montana-North Dakota border*