

## TRAHA TRAVEL REPORT, SEPTEMBER 2022



Medora, the jewel of the North Dakota “Badlands,” emerges seemingly out of nothing as you drive along Route 94. Buttes, rock shelves, jutting hills, and valleys fantastically replace the monotony of prairies and farmland. Teddy Roosevelt, Medora’s most famous one-time resident, wrote in 1885 that the region ranged from features “rolling in character to those that are so fantastically broken in form and so bizarre in color as to seem hardly properly to belong to this earth.” Driving into Medora, however, all of this had to be believed rather than seen. I arrived in Bismarck, North Dakota’s capital city, on a late August evening with sunset already fast approaching. With the region’s most distinctive features hidden, I was reliant on the verbal picture painted by Colleen, of one of my hosts and lifelong North Dakotan, as we drove westwards into the night sky. We passed Salem Sue, a 38 feet tall fibreglass Holstein cow built to honour the region’s dairy farmers in 1974. “It was either Sue or a public swimming pool,” Colleen told me approvingly. When, in my predictable city-boy naivety, I mistook the haze raised from a truck on a gravel road for some sign of an imminent dust storm, she turned down the opportunity to have a laugh at my expense, mentioning with a smile that “they haven’t got to that bit yet.” As we chatted about Colleen’s family and farming over deep fried shrimp, cheeseburgers, and ice cream, the fact that I was missing the view faded from my mind.

Colleen worked for the Theodore Roosevelt Medora Foundation (TRMF), a non-profit dedicated to preserving the memory and legacy of America’s twenty-sixth President and intermittent Medora resident from 1883-1887. After an initial hunting trip in autumn 1883, a grief-stricken Roosevelt travelled to Medora in 1884 after the deaths of his wife Alice and mother Mittie on the same day. Medorans, and many North Dakotans, have adopted him as a kind of founding father. His legacy, and locally famous declaration that “I would never have been President had it not been for my time in North Dakota,” provide an often-dismissed state with inarguable historical relevance.

The Foundation has sponsored the Roosevelt Institute of American Studies’ *Theodore Roosevelt American History Prize* (TRAHA) for a number of years, establishing a connection between Medora and a Dutch thesis prize that is easy to interpret as

somewhat absurd. When I told people where I was headed and why, most of them reacted with a mixture of amusement, confusion, and incredulity. Why bring a stream of Dutch University students to a state most Americans have never even visited?

“Was your thesis about Teddy Roosevelt?” No. “Is it an exchange program?” No. The whole concept seemed ridiculous. Their sentiments were a more distilled version of the reaction I get when I tell people that I was born and raised in London but decided to study American History in the Netherlands. I usually attempt to explain my life decisions with some spiel about how American history is world history, and that international perspectives on the US are just as if not more important than those from inside its borders. If I’m feeling bold I’ll explain that that growing up being fed a diet of monarchical and amnesia-ridden British history made me latch onto the boldness, recency, and in-your-face brutality of America, and my tried and tested trump card is “actually, my dad is from New York and I have a passport.” It never really satisfies. The honest answer is that American history surprises me in a way that I haven’t really encountered elsewhere. Medora, of course, was no different.

The town’s population was 121 at the time of the 2020 census, it is bisected by a railway but has no station, and residents have to drive 25 minutes on the interstate to get to a supermarket. Its stores are dressed up with stereotypical “Old West” wooden boards and signs that say things like “Chateau Nuts” and “Sheriff Bear’s Ice Cream.” Medora doesn’t take itself too seriously; its two-block street named “Broadway” a testament to the winking sense of humour possessed by the biggest tourist town in the USA’s least visited state. When a visitor to the Teddy Roosevelt Presidential Library’s field headquarters declared that North Dakota was the last of the 50 states he had ticked off his list, the museum’s Visitors Services Assistant Glenn Gullickson quipped “you saved the best for last.” It’s a phrase you can also find on fridge magnets in the town’s tourist stores, a simultaneously half ironic yet fully sincere motto that seems to have unofficially replaced the bullish “Be Legendary” as the state’s brand identity. In other words, Medora is not a town you would assume to be an international tourist hub.

My trip seemed less implausible, however, the more I learned about the town’s history. Although Medora masquerades as a blue blooded American town representing the past and present of a distinctively *American Western* tradition, I was intrigued by just how European it was. Medora was founded by the Marquis de Morès in 1883, a Frenchman who planned to upend the beef industry by slaughtering cattle on-site rather than sending cows to meatpacking centres back East. After feuding with neighbouring townsmen just across the Little Missouri River, the Marquis founded Medora, naming the town after his incredibly wealthy wife Medora von Hoffman. Wandering through the Château de Morès and the accompanying museum dedicated to his legacy, I learned that he hired Scots, Irish, and Germans to staff the 26 room, white wood-panelled home

and hotel overlooking the abattoir where his cows were slaughtered. Wealthy Europeans would visit during the summer for hunting trips, forming a "Badlands Aristocracy" who treated the town as a hardy vacation enclave. Dutch, Scandinavian, and German immigrants on the other side of the economic coin populated the state during the 19th Century, many working as wranglers and farmers. This movement is not solely a phenomenon of the past. While Medora's year-round population may be small, hundreds of J1 visa workers from around the globe keep the town functioning each summer, all wearing TRMF name tags displaying their origin country. I turned up expecting Teddy Roosevelt alongside cowboys, hunters, and capitalistic go-getters. I got them, but wasn't expecting they'd be from the same continent as me.

A quote often repeated to me over the four nights I spent in Medora was that the Marquis and Teddy Roosevelt were "two very big toads in a very small puddle." Both were aristocrats with outsize personalities. They clashed over business deals and grazing rights, the Marquis also accusing Roosevelt of orchestrating repeated attempts to convict him for the killing of a trespassing hunter, Riley Luffsey, in 1883. Both loved hunting, entertaining, and brawling, and the two men lost large sums of money on their respective ranching enterprises. By 1887, neither remained in Medora. As I explored Medora, its celebration of Roosevelt was inescapable. I hiked in Teddy Roosevelt

National Park, met a fully costumed Teddy Roosevelt "reprisor" named Joe Wiegand who performs in a daily "Teddy Roosevelt Show," and had dinner with my host Richard in the "Rough Rider Hotel." In an ironic twist of fate Roosevelt would probably be proud of, the reconstructed memories of Teddy's time in Medora have done what the original could not - make a profit. Glenn showed me plans for the Teddy Roosevelt Presidential Library, set to open in 2026. In a fitting

piece of Rooseveltian showmanship, the Library is being billed as a "Museum of the Future," and will include an array of interactive exhibits ranging from charges up San Juan Hill to a "Storytelling Campfire." Perhaps compensating for the fact that Roosevelt's archives are staying firmly in place in Harvard University, the Museum is choosing to focus on his moral commandments instead. It



seems aimed at turning screen-addicted tweens into the “bully” generation, and each miniature wing was split up into sections labelled with words like “Courage,” “Curiosity,” “Take Action,” and “Resilience.” When you’re dealing with Teddy, it’s hard to avoid being a little in your face. I didn’t envy Glenn’s job, which for now consists of managing the disappointment of group after group being told to come back in four years when the real museum will be open.

Despite founding Medora, the Marquis was a little harder to locate. The Château de Morès wasn’t on my original agenda, and I had to make a special request to visit it. The museum at the Château Visitor Center lacks the grandstanding claims of Teddy’s various monuments and markers. Exhibit boards are titled “Marquis the Outsider,” and his reputation is contrasted with that of the beloved Roosevelt. There isn’t much of an attempt to spin the aristocrat’s failures as plucky innovations thwarted by business tycoons back East, even though that was how the Marquis explained his ill fortune at the time. The Marquis can’t even avoid being shown up by Roosevelt in his own backyard; the visitor center was hosting a teaser exhibit for the Presidential Library. Where Teddy is replicated and commodified, the Marquis is confined and historicized. One man is relentlessly of the “future,” the other relegated to the past.

This dichotomy sums up an alternately beguiling and frustrating truth about Medora. For a town that covers itself in history, it is not particularly concerned with the past. Arguably, it cannot afford to be. In late August the town’s zipline, toy-gun shooting range, and mini waterpark were packed while most of the museums I went to remained nearly empty. The summer visitors who pass through do so mainly for the immense beauty of the National Park, the Medora Musical and its corresponding Steak Fondue, and the town’s various family-friendly attractions. Families come because their parents did. Volunteers return year after year because working provides a sense of community and state pride. Visa workers fly from across the globe because they get paid. In this context, history becomes an angle through which to sell Medora, a comforting backdrop that lets you enjoy the here and now. Of course Harold Schafer, the charismatic “Mr. Bubble” millionaire responsible for regenerating Medora during the 1960s and establishing the TRMF, knew this. To turn Medora into a town obsessed with its own past would confuse, misdirect, and detract from what the town sells - a good American story.

Upon arriving I was given complimentary tickets to the zipline and magic show. The front nine of the “Bully Pulpit” mini-golf course requires you to putt through a miniature model of the Marquis’s slaughterhouse. In the “Lazy River” visitors are invited to “splash and play ... while following the harrowing story of Theodore Roosevelt capturing the boat thieves in the Badlands.” You can interpret this casual blend of shrunken violence

and supersized entertainment as an American cultural tradition, a type of cynically inauthentic and commodified historic tourism that should be sneered at. Medora, however, has never really existed as anything other than a self-consciously opportunistic playground with a minor death obsession. It was founded by a Frenchman playing with family money for this very purpose. Teddy Roosevelt arrived in 1883, handing out cheques like candy and dressed in a designer hunting suit with a knife from Tiffany's. From this angle, Medora's status as an overly stylised theme-park-esque tourist destination takes on less of a farcical or exploitative feeling. In terms of weighty and sincere historical importance, there appears to be precious little to betray. Medora's founding purpose and essential character has always existed at the intersection of profit and pleasure.

I don't think that Medora is unique in its avoidance of history in favour of entertainment. The same could be said about most cities in America as well as Europe. The 'progressive' institution where I now work for example, Brooklyn Public Library, does not have a living land acknowledgement. What intrigued me was its status as a supposedly *historical town* that has gleefully only half-accepted this role. It's as if colonial Williamsburg grew out of its teenage years and stopped taking itself so seriously. I wasn't thinking in anywhere near this much detail at the time, but I guess that unlikely paradox is why my initial perception of Medora as a historically inaccurate and inescapably tacky tourist trap went out the window almost as soon as I arrived. The biggest surprise Medora had in store was how much I loved it there.



I went horseback riding, hiked in Theodore Roosevelt National Park, and wondered how close was "too close" to a herd of buffalo. I ate at the "Fudge and Ice Cream Depot," and proudly brought back a "Badlands" teddy bear *and* a "Presidential" teddy which now sit on my bookshelf. In Boots Bar and Saloon I watched line dancers and played pool with a rancher and an oil miner who treated me like an instant friend. Talking with Marlys, a TRMF volunteer who has come to Medora three years running with her best friend, I saw the sense of belonging and pride the town gives North Dakotans. At the

Medora Musical, a patriotic and family-friendly celebration of Teddy Roosevelt and Medora held in an amphitheatre cut into the mountainside, the audience members who had never attended a show were vastly outnumbered by families who had been attending for decades. Somehow, the fact that the Musical used a series of generic country classics to tell Medora's story worked better than any original score could have. I'm still listening to Trisha Yearwood's "She's in Love with the Boy" more than a month after leaving.

My trip was always going to be a little bittersweet. Even before arriving, I was told that the TRMF's sponsorship of the prize would end with me. At one point on my trip, my host Richard, who would soon be leaving the Foundation to take another job, dropped into conversation that "I'll be forgotten soon." In Medora, that's more than half the point.

Nathaniel Weisberg



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