

# A Discovery of the American Midwest

TRAHA travel report by Melanie van der Elsen, August 2022

When during the height of the Covid pandemic in the spring of 2020 I submitted my master's thesis after months of painstaking research, of writer's block and bouts of creative inspiration, and of many a good sparring session with my supervisor, little did I know that my thesis would be submitted for the Theodore Roosevelt American History Award. And during an unconventional, covid-restricted online award ceremony, it was announced that I had won this prestigious award! What an amazing surprise this was, indeed. The prize included a stack of books on American history and politics, a year-long subscription to Elsevier Weekblad, the publication of a summary of my research (all courtesy of Elsevier publishers), and — the big, fat cherry on top — a trip to the United States! After quite some delay because of covid travel restrictions, last summer I finally set sail (so to speak) to the beautiful and alluring American Midwest, and the small, inviting town of Medora, at the courtesy of the Theodore Roosevelt Medora Foundation, the Roosevelt Institute for American Studies, and the U.S. Embassy and Consulate in the Netherlands.

At the airport in Amsterdam, I met up with Emma, who had won the award the year before me, but had not yet been able to travel due to covid restrictions. Both of us were excited that we were finally going on this trip and in our excitement we quickly discovered a common passion for (nearly) all things American culture. We embarked on a big plane, and then again on a much smaller plane to finally arrive in North Dakota. Upon our arrival we were greeted by the lovely Colleen, who had planned all of our daily activities in Medora for us.

She drove us to a nearby hotel and by that time, nearly 24 hours after having left my home, I was ready to sleep. The next morning, Emma and I had a very early breakfast (jetlag!) and afterwards decided to hit Target for some American-style shopping. In the afternoon, Colleen picked us up and after a short stop at the Capitol we continued our journey to Medora, which was about a two-hour drive straight westward.



*Emma, Colleen and I in the Badlands*

The town of Medora — named after the wife of the French frontier ranchman Marquis de Morès — is as beautiful as its name suggests. It is located at the south entrance of the Theodore Roosevelt National Park and is accessible from Bismarck through the aptly called Badlands. Colleen had warned us in advance that if we googled pictures of the Badlands, they would not do the scenery justice. And how right she was. As we stopped at a scenic point and took some pictures ourselves, we also took a moment to take in the vast tracts of wilderness

and rough landscape that made up the Badlands and surrounded Medora. As far as our eyes could see, there was nothing but rock and grass and bushes in all sorts of shapes and patterns. All of a sudden, the name “Badlands” made perfect sense.

Medora itself is but a small town of about a hundred or so permanent residents. It takes less than fifteen minutes to walk from one side of town to the other. Yet, this tiny town manages to surprise in a big way. In a typical midwestern style and with a nod to nineteenth-century town life, it had saloon-style restaurants, an old post office, a town hall, and several cute shops that sold clothing, jewelry, souvenirs and (yes!) candy. Colleen drove us through town before heading to our lodgings for the week, the Elkhorn, which was named after Theodore Roosevelt’s nineteenth-century Medora ranch.



*Discovering the American Midwest by horse*

During our stay in Medora we learned about the town, about the work of the Foundation, and lots about Theodore Roosevelt and his life in the Dakota Territory in the late-nineteenth century. We learned that Roosevelt had come to Medora after the loss of both his first wife and his mother on the same day. Grief stricken, Roosevelt had moved west in search of solitude and to increase his interests in the cattle business. He had come to Medora “to heal,” Colleen told us. This resonated with me because I had contracted covid a few months before and my recovery wasn’t as speedy as one would hope. Whereas Roosevelt had deliberately chosen the Midwest as his place for recovery, I had stumbled upon it by

accident. But I could easily see why Medora and its surroundings provided for that quite solitude, a place to reflect on life, and to heal, which Roosevelt had been in search of. The quiet yet simultaneously loud nature of North Dakota gave me some much-desired rest: it was an unexpectedly rejuvenating discovery of the beauty of nature in the American Midwest, of hordes of wild buffalo’s in the National Park, and of adventurous horseback riding through Dakota mountains.

In contrast to the quiet Badlands and National Park surrounding Medora, the town itself was a hustling-and-bustling hotspot for tourists and volunteers from all over the country and beyond, who were not only attracted by the landscape but also by the many shows and activities Medora offered. We visited historical sites such as the Chateau de Mores (home of the Marquis de Mores and his wife) and learned about the history of the Medora Foundation, its founder Harold Schafer and his vision for the town. We met volunteers from states east, west and south of North Dakota as well as international volunteers from Latin America, Pacific islands and Europe. Some had been volunteering for many years and some were there

for the first time. Yet, everyone was equally passionate about and involved with running the day-to-day business of Medora town life in the summer and everyone had their own unique story about and connection with Medora.

Some of the excitement and passion certainly came from the many shows and activities one can engage in when in Medora: we listened to Theodore Roosevelt—or rather, Joe Wiegand as Roosevelt reprinter—tell his life story and share his passion for the Badlands; we listened to beautiful voices during the Gospel Brunch; we ate what might qualify as my most American meal ever at the Pitchfork Fondue (yes! it was exactly that: stake fondued on a pitchfork); and, of course, the big event that attracted people from close and afar was the Medora Musical. On Wednesday, we met Maddie who was the theater manager and who took us on a behind-the-scenes tour of the amphitheater in which the Medora Musical took place. We were shown some of the tricks of stage performing like the under-the-stage passage that took you from one side of the stage to the other without being seen by the audience. We also got to enter the stage buildings, which unlike usual stage buildings were fully functional and were built on a rail so they could make way for the scenery beyond to be included as natural backdrop during performances. The musical itself was a spectacular performance of American classics that celebrated not only Medora but the U.S. as a whole. And to our big surprise, not only the performers received a loud applause at the end, but so did Emma and I as we were introduced as “special guests” from the Netherlands. What an honor, no doubt arranged by Maddie and Colleen.



*Discussing politics with Teddy Roosevelt (Joe Wiegand)*



*Sharon, myself, William and Emma in front of a large, white bust of TR*

Theodore Roosevelt’s time in North Dakota not only inspired many people to travel to this beautiful state, but also attracted a number of researchers and historians. The Dickinson State University includes the Theodore Roosevelt Center, a research center specializing in the many aspects of Theodore Roosevelt’s life and time. Sharon, the former director of the TR Center, and William, a historian with a vast memory bank of knowledge, took us on a day trip across North Dakota,

the Theodore Roosevelt National Park and taught us about the state's history and the daily life of North Dakotans. We even visited a hotel that had a surprisingly large collection of Roosevelt memorabilia, including a massive, white bust in its parking lot, which shone bright in the summer sun.

After a wonderful week, and certainly much too soon, it was time to say goodbye to Medora, to Colleen, who I owe a special thanks for arranging this trip, and to the beautiful state of North Dakota. I cannot thank the Theodore Roosevelt Medora Foundation, the Roosevelt Institute for American Studies, and the U.S. Embassy and Consulate in the Netherlands enough not only for making this trip possible in the first place but also for choosing to send me to this beautiful, fantastic part of the United States which I might otherwise have never discovered.