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Theodore Roosevelt: The Human Dynamo

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Teddy Constantly Craved Action; Once He Shot a Hole in Bedroom Ceiling

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One hundred years ago President Theodore Roosevelt was born—Oct. 27, 1858. This is the first in a series of six articles marking the centennial of his birth—about his life at Sagamore Hill, his home in Oyster Bay.

TR's wife, Edith Roosevelt, understood his craving for danger. This picture was taken in June, 1938.

What manner of man would fire a gun in a bedroom just for fun?

Well, a man like our great 26th President . . . because that's exactly what Theodore Roosevelt did one night at Sagamore Hill in Oyster Bay. He fired a rifle into the ceiling and laughed!

This was in 1896. Ted Jr. was nine and his father—the hunter, ex-cowboy and rancher—gave the boy his first real gun, a new Flobert rifle. TR, 38, was then Police Commissioner of the City of New York.

He commuted on the Long Island Railroad, riding his bike three miles between Sagamore Hill and the railroad station. Going home uphill he had to walk the wheel. This day he carried a rifle, too.

Ted wasn't around when his father got home so TR—tired and grimy — went upstairs and took a bath in the high tin tub. TR was dressing when Ted walked in, spotted the new gun on the bed. Imagine his delight!

Is it mine? Is it real? Wow! Let's go out and shoot it!

But it was dark outside. Besides TR wasn't dressed . . . but he'd find a way. He picked up the gun, pulled back the bolt, slipped in a cartridge, signaled Ted: "Follow me" and led the way to Ted's room on the third floor.

"Promise not to tell Mother," he said.

"Promise," Ted echoed . . . then wham! A bullet buried itself in the plaster ceiling . . . and 22 years later in his own memoirs Theodore Jr. recalled: "The report was slight, the smoke hardly noticeable and the hole in the ceiling was so small that our sin was not detected."

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BUT IF it were detected . . . even if Mother knew . . . would she have cared very much? Hardly, because Edith Roosevelt was the most patient and understanding of wives. She knew Theodore—headstrong, ebullient, explosive, daring.

She never found fault . . . well, hardly ever! When she did he listened and reformed.

He said himself in a letter to Ted years later:

"Greatly though I loved Mother, I was at times thoughtless and selfish . . . and if Mother had been a mere unhealthy Patient Griselda, I might have grown set in selfish and inconsiderate ways. Mother—always tender, gentle, loving—pointed out when necessary where I was thoughtless instead of submitting to it."

(Griselda was a meek story - heroine, cruelly abused by her husband.)

At Sagamore Hill Theodore Roosevelt was forever getting hurt . . . perhaps more than the children . . . because he played so hard, worked so hard. Nothing fazed him; danger lured him; he loved it. He craved action, gaiety, jolly parties . . . all at Sagamore.

And when he got hurt, his wife didn't show much sympathy. For instance:

* * *

ONE DAY in the summer of 1891, the windmill stuck . . . and the windmill pumped water for the house . . . so TR decided to oil it. He climbed the 60-foot derrick and, as he reached th top, the wind veered. The paddle swung around and, as he said: "Took off a slice of my scalp." Blood poured down over his face.

Blind with blood, he climbed down, groped his way to the front door.

In the hall he met Edith. Any other woman might have fainted. Not Edith.

"Theodore, please," she said. "I wish you'd do your bleeding in the bathroom. You're spoiling every rug in the house!"

(Incidentally, she always called him Theodore.)

In polo and fox hunts, he was a hard rider. He took spills galore. To him they were fun but what he really relished was the challenge, the excitement, the skill and the daring. They were his meat.

He'd come home with his face battered and bleeding . . . but always laughing.

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ONE DAY at Sagamore in 1885, 35 of his friends showed up on horses—with hounds—for a fox hunt. Colorful in their pink coats, they galloped off after the baying dogs . . . TR, of course, in the van. He was born to lead.

He and his horse sailed over the fences until they reached the big one—five feet tall. He had seen the best of riders tumble here . . . but he would top it or die trying! The horse hit the top rail and fell, pitching its rider onto a pile of rocks.

Half-stunned, his face bleeding, his coat torn, TR picked himself up, remounted his horse, galloped after the new leaders and was almost in on the kill. A physician on the hunt, covered his gory face with a court-plaster.

TR was laughing, of course, when he rode back to the stable. Little Alice, his daughter, then about 18 months old, was there with her nurse to greet him . . . but one look at his bloody visage and Alice fled in tears.

Later the doctor checked TR again and discovered his arm was broken!

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HE WORE a broad-brimmed black campaign hat at the Republican National Convention in Philadelphia that nominated him for vice-president—never removing that hat—because he had a deep gash in his head!

A few days before, TR was taking his children and assorted guests at Sagamore Hill up and down the cliffs in the Cove Neck Woods when somebody dislodged a rock. It conked TR . . . so he was bleeding again!

His idea of a nice rest was chopping down a tree . . . or rowing ten miles.

On a hot July day while he was President the whole family went to a clambake on the beach eight miles away . . . but he chose to row his sweet wife there and back—16 miles—while the others took the Presidential yacht!

Teddy during a campaign tour in Garden City in 1912. During the GOP national convention in Philadelphia he wore a broad-brimmed hat very much like the one above to hide a deep gash in his head. The gash came during a cliff-climbing jaunt when somebody dislodged a rock.

The older TR shown in 1916 at Sagamore Hill in the autumn of his career.

The young TR—as governor of New York in November, 1898. Two years before this he fired the rifle bullet into his bedroom ceiling.

Sagamore Hill, the Roosevelt Home, in Oyster Bay