

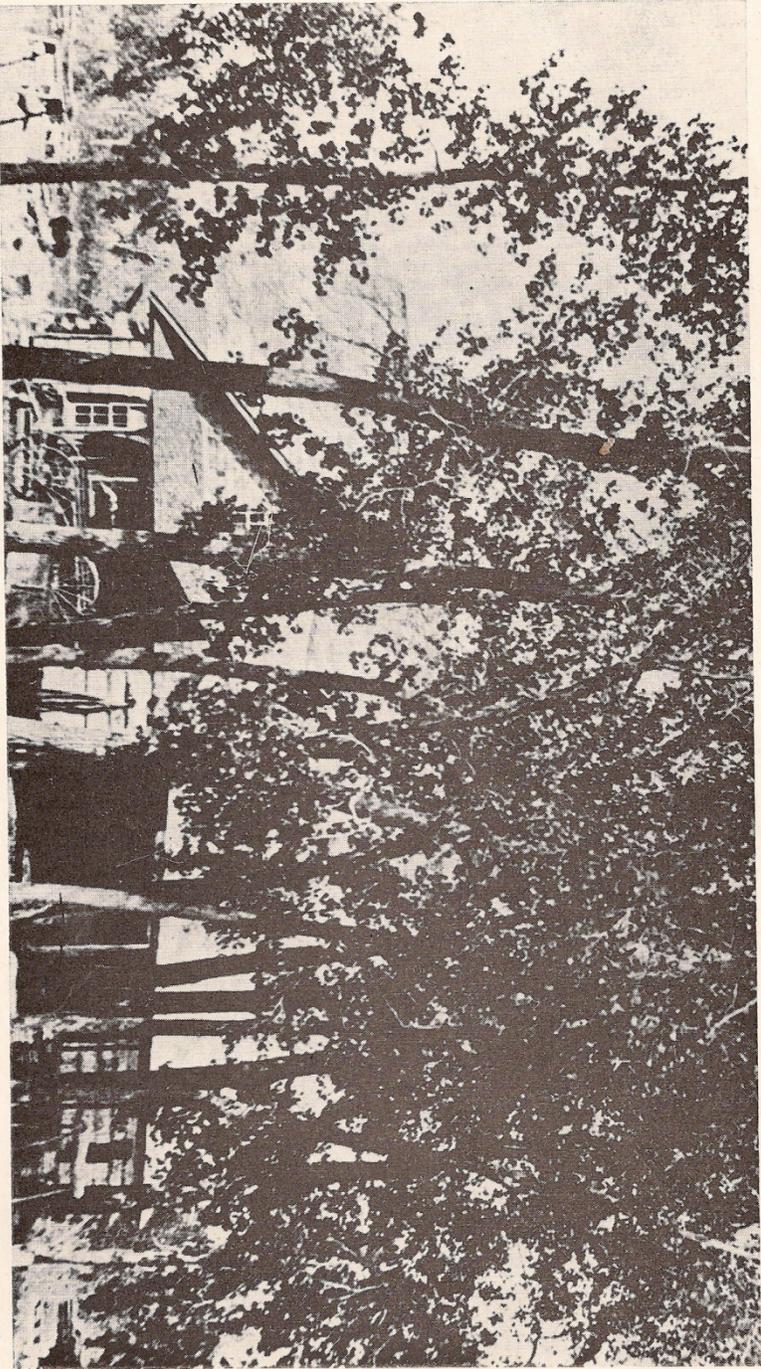
Roosevelt's Elkhorn Ranch

By RAY H. MATTISON

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The Elkhorn Ranch. Camera pointing to the northwest. Negative obtained from Harvard College Library. Photograph believed to have been taken by Roosevelt ca 1885 or 1886.

ROOSEVELT'S ELKHORN RANCH

By RAY H. MATTISON*

The objective of this study is primarily to assist the Archeologist in making a detailed study of the Elkhorn Ranch, the site of which is now a part of Theodore Roosevelt National Memorial Park. For that reason the writer has devoted much attention in this report to the various aspects of the routine life of the individuals who lived at the ranch.

The writer is indebted to many individuals for the information contained in this report. He has relied primarily on the personal letters of W. W. Sewall, foreman of the Elkhorn Ranch who also supervised and helped with the building of the ranch structures, and Mrs. Sewall to their respective families in and near Island Falls, Maine. Theodore Roosevelt's letters, together with several books written during the years in the Badlands, particularly his *Ranch Life and the Hunting Trail* (New York, 1888) and *Hunting Trips of a Ranchman* (New York, 1885), were used extensively in preparing this report. Long-time residents of the region, some of whom were personally acquainted with Roosevelt and others who were familiar with the ranch, have supplied information regarding the site.

In preparing this report the writer is especially indebted to Mrs. Nancy (Sewall) Cunningham and other members of the W. W. Sewall family for making the letters of their parents available to him. He also wishes to acknowledge the assistance given him by Historian Chester C. Brooks, of Theodore Roosevelt National Memorial Park, his successor to that area as Historian. Mr. Brooks compiled a considerable amount of material regarding the Elkhorn Ranch by interviewing long-time residents of the Badlands and made this material available to the writer.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

The stories of the background of the establishment of both the Maltese Cross and Elkhorn Ranches by Theodore Roosevelt have been adequately covered in earlier monographs prepared by the National Park Service.¹ The writer, therefore, will only recapitulate briefly the events leading up to the establishment of the Elkhorn Ranch.

During the fall of 1883, Roosevelt came to the Little Missouri Badlands on a buffalo hunt. While on this trip he met several ranchers and others who induced him to go into the open-range cattle business, which was then booming in the trans-Mississippi West. Before he returned to his home in New York City, he purchased the Chimney Butte or Maltese Cross Ranch, located about seven miles south of the present town of Medora, North Dakota. Roosevelt arranged with Sylvane Ferris and A. W. Merrifield to look after his cattle and serve as foremen for the Maltese Cross Ranch, and for them to purchase additional cattle for him.

During early 1884 personal tragedy struck Roosevelt. In February both his wife and mother died within a few hours. Early in June he and his friends suffered political defeat in the Republican National Convention when James G. Blaine received the nomination for President. How these events influenced his decision to increase his investment in the cattle business is a good question. However, until he

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¹ Chester L. Brooks and Ray H. Mattison, *Theodore Roosevelt in the Dakota Badlands* (Washington, 1958), 20-21, 24-26; Ray H. Mattison, "Roosevelt's Ranches," *North Dakota History*, Vol. XXII, 147-161 (October 1955).

remarried in late 1886, Roosevelt spent a considerable portion of his time in the Dakota Badlands and in hunting in the trans-Mississippi West.

In early March following his wife's death, Roosevelt outlined to William W. Sewall, a Maine woodsman who had served as his guide on his hunting expedition near Island Falls, Maine, his plans to start a second ranch in the Dakota Badlands. He wrote:

*I hope my Western venture turns out well. If it does, and I feel sure you will do well for yourself by coming out with me, I shall take you and Will Dow [another Maine woodsman who had served as Roosevelt's hunting guide] out next August. Of course it depends upon how the cattle have gotten through the winter. The weather has been very hard and I am afraid they have suffered somewhat; if the loss has been very heavy I will have to wait a year longer before going into it on a more extended scale. So, as yet, the plan is doubtful.*²

Sewall and Dow made several trips from Island Falls to New York that spring to discuss the proposed ranching venture. Roosevelt agreed with the two Maine woodsmen, who had no previous experience in ranching, to guarantee them a share of the increase in stock in the proposed ranch enterprise and if the proposition proved to be a losing one, he would pay them wages.³

Following the Republican Convention in early June 1884, Roosevelt went to Dakota. He learned that his cattle at the Maltese Cross Ranch had wintered well so he “decided to put in a thousand more cattle and shall make it my regular business.”⁴ Therefore, he decided to bring out Sewall and Dow “to put them on a ranche [sic] with very few cattle to start with, and in the course of a few years give them quite a little herd also.”⁵

Apparently, during his visit to Dakota in June 1884, Roosevelt selected a site for his second ranch. It appears that Roosevelt purchased the claims to the site, on which a shack was located, from another individual. (Actually, the site of the Elkhorn Ranch was on lands which the United States had granted the Northern Pacific. The Northwest Improvement Company, a subsidiary of the Northern Pacific, received its patent in 1906. It was not until 1918 that the Northwest Improvement Company sold this land.) The ranch site appears to have been previously occupied. Sewall wrote: “Theodore gave a fellow who had a hunting shack that perhaps cost \$25.00 and no other improvements \$400.00 for his possession.”⁶

The location he chose was on the Little Missouri River some 35 miles north of Medora. In early July he wrote Sewall and Dow: “I have arranged matters in the West, have found a good place for a ranch, and have purchased a hundred head of cattle for you to start with. So fix up your affairs at once, and be ready to start before the end of this week.”⁷

Within several weeks, Sewall and Dow took a train for Medora where they arrived several days later. By August 25 they had moved into the “shack” or “The Den” on the Little Missouri near the

² Letter, Theodore Roosevelt to W.W. Sewall, March 9, 1884, William W. Sewall, *Bill Sewall's Story of T. R.* (New York, 1919), 11-12.

³ Sewall, *op. cit.*, 12-13.

⁴ Elting E. Morison (ed.), *The Letters of Theodore Roosevelt*, Vol. 1, (73-74 Cambridge, 1951).

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ Letter, W. W. Sewall to S. T. Sewall, Sept 14, 1884, Cunningham Collection. Letters in possession of Mrs. Nancy Cunningham of Island Falls, Maine.

⁷ Letter, Roosevelt to Sewall, July 6, 1884, *Bill Sewall's Story of T. R.*, 13.

proposed ranch site. Roosevelt had placed 100 cattle under the charge of Sewall and Dow for the winter.⁸ By mid-October Sewall and Dow were busily cutting and collecting logs for the proposed ranch house.⁹

The cottonwood logs were cut in the vicinity of the ranch site. The pine boards were hauled from the hamlet of Little Missouri, some 50 to 60 miles from Medora by road. By mid-December the walls of the ranch house were nearly completed. Sewall wrote: "We are working on the house; have got the timber all hauled and would have had the walls up but have been off after horses."¹⁰ Meanwhile, Sewall and Dow had been joined by Bill Rowe, who was apparently a cowhand, and "Joe," [perhaps Joseph Ferris] a brother of Sylvane.¹¹

During the winter the two Maine woodsmen continued to work on the ranch house. The cold delayed them. Sewall wrote his brother on February 18: "The weather is so cold we cant do much on the house. Have got it shingled and under floor layed."¹² Rowe and Ferris presumably remained with them. The house was completed in the spring of 1885.¹³

In the spring, Roosevelt stocked the Elkhorn and increased his herds at the Maltese Cross. In late April Sewall and Dow accompanied Sylvane Ferris to Minnesota where they joined Merrifield who had gone there previously. At St. Paul they purchased wagons, provisions and machinery. They purchased cattle at Madelia and Fergus Falls. Sewall wrote: "1000 were for us, 400 for them; then there were Bulls, Cows, etc., which brought it up to some over 1500."¹⁴ These were loaded on stock cars and shipped to Medora. There the cattle were unloaded and a portion driven to the Maltese Cross and the remainder to the Elkhorn Ranch, with Roosevelt, Sewall and Dow as drivers.¹⁵

The Medora newspaper, *The Bad Lands Cow Boy*, commented in its May 7th issue:

*Fifteen hundred head of steers yearlings and two's came in Thursday morning for the Elkhorn and Chimney Butte ranches of Theodore Roosevelt. They were in fair condition after their long ride and except for the disadvantage of a large number being yearlings, give every evidence of growing into good beef. The larger majority are steers. A good lot of Short-horn bulls and one polled-Angus were in the herd. A thousand of these cattle will be driven to the Elkhorn ranch and five hundred to the already well-stocked Chimney Butte ranch.*¹⁶

During the period of the construction of the Elkhorn ranch house, Roosevelt appears to have spent little time at Sewall and Dow's camp on the Little Missouri. Sewall's infrequent letters seldom mention him. Roosevelt's letters for this period indicate that while in the Dakota Badlands he spent most

⁸ Letter, W. W. Sewall to S. T. Sewall, Aug. 17, 1884, Cunningham Collection.

⁹ W. W. Sewall to Nancy and Sam Sewall, Oct. 19, 1884, Cunningham Collection.

¹⁰ Letter, W. W. Sewall to S. T. Sewall, Dec. 19, 1884, Cunningham Collection.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Letter, W. W. Sewall to S. T. Sewall, Feb. 18, 1885, Cunningham Collection

¹³ *Bill Sewall's Story of T. R.*, 29.

¹⁴ Letter, W. W. Sewall to S. T. Sewall, May 17, 1885, Cunningham Collection.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ *The Bad Lands Cow Boy*, May 7, 1885.

of his time at the Maltese Cross Ranch. Both Roosevelt and Sewall took part in the spring roundup on the Little Missouri which ended in late June or early July 1885.¹⁷

Before he left for New York following the roundup, Roosevelt executed a contract with Sewall and Dow. He had now approximately \$25,000 in the Elkhorn ranch. According to the formal contract agreed upon, the increase in cattle would be divided, Sewall and Dow would receive one-third and Roosevelt two-thirds. This contract was similar to the one effected earlier between Roosevelt on the one hand and Sylvane Ferris and A. W. Merrifield on the other, except that the Maltese Cross foremen received one-half of the increase.¹⁸

Meanwhile, Dow had gone to his home in Maine for a visit, and while there he married. When he returned to the Elkhorn in August he brought with him his bride, Mrs. Sewall, and Sewall's small daughter.¹⁹

During the fall and winter of 1885-1886 Sewall worked sporadically on the buildings at the Elkhorn and hunted. Sewall wrote his brother:

*. . . . Week before last was cold and Will [Dow] and I hunted. This past one we have been working on our stable. . . . The week we hunted we killed nine Deer, eight bucks with homes [sic] some of them very nice ones.*²⁰

During the winter it appears at least six persons were living at the Elkhorn, the three Sewalls, Mr. and Mrs. Dow, and Bill Rowe.²¹ Another letter written indicates another person was working there.²²

In the late winter and the spring of 1886, Roosevelt made his longest visit to the Dakotas and the Rockies. He arrived in late March and appears to have remained at least until mid-July. While on this trip Roosevelt attended the annual meeting of the Montana Stock-grower's Association, captured the boat thieves, and served as one of the captains on the spring roundup on the Little Missouri. He worked sporadically on *Life of Benton*. The Sewall correspondence indicates he spent much of this time at the Elkhorn Ranch.²³ In late August he started on a hunt to the Rocky Mountains and appears to have returned to Medora, and then to New York in early October.

Meanwhile, the range cattle business had become depressed. This booming industry had over-expanded. During the summer of 1886 the Plains region suffered a severe drouth. Large herds of cattle had been driven into the Northern Plains country from the more parched ranges of Texas, Kansas, and Nebraska. By 1886 the great Northern ranges which had offered such promise to the stockmen a few years earlier were overcrowded. Cattle prices continued to decline while the western stockmen flooded the eastern packing centers with beef.

In view of this discouraging outlook, Sewall and Dow in the fall of 1886 decided to get out of the cattle business and return to their home in Maine. Sewall's letters disclosed that he lacked enthusiasm

¹⁷ Letter, W. W. Sewall to S. T. Sewall, Aug. 16, 1886, Bill Sewall's Story of T. R. (New York, 1919); Ray H. Mattison, "Roosevelt and the Stockmens' Association," North Dakota History, Vol. 17, p. 27 (July 1950).

¹⁸ Sewall, op. cit., 40-41.

¹⁹ Letter, W. W. Sewall to S. T. Sewall, Aug. 16, 1885, Cunningham Collection

²⁰ W. W. Sewall to S. T. Sewall, Dec. 20, 1885, Cunningham Collection.

²¹ Letter, W. W. Sewall to S. T. Sewall, Feb. 28, 1886, Cunningham Collection.

²² Mrs. W. W. Sewall to Nancy [Mrs. S. T. Sewall], March 1, 1886, Cunningham Collection.

²³ Letter, W. W. Sewall to S. T. Sewall, Apr. 21, 1886, June 26, 1886; Mrs. Mary Sewall to Annie (Mrs. William Corliss), June 13, 1886; Cunningham Collection.

for the venture. He did not like pioneering in the treeless wastes of the Little Missouri Badlands. The letters of Mrs. Sewall's written while in Dakota indicate that she found life at the Elkhorn very lonesome. In late September both Sewall and Dow "squared accounts" with Roosevelt and left a short time later for Maine. When Roosevelt released Sewall and Dow from their contract with him, he turned his Elkhorn herd over to Ferris and Merrifield to manage.²⁴ It appears that Mr. and Mrs. Jack Tisdale and George Myers stayed at the Elkhorn Ranch during the winter of 1886-87.²⁵

The fall and winter of 1886-1887 was a critical time in the life of Roosevelt. It marked his re-entry into active politics. In November he suffered defeat in the mayoralty contest of New York City. In early December, Roosevelt married Edith Carow and the couple spent several months touring England and the Continent.

The story of the heavy losses in cattle on the Northern Plains during the hard winter of 1886-1887 is a familiar one. Roosevelt heard rumors of the havoc wrought by the heavy snows and severe cold while in Europe, so he and his wife returned to the United States. He at once hastened to Dakota to appraise his losses.

It was late in the summer before the ranchers on the Northern Plains were able to make somewhere near an appraisal of the casualties among their stock resulting from the severe winter. The losses proved staggering. The Assessor's Returns show that Roosevelt paid taxes on approximately 60% less cattle in 1887 than in the previous year.

Information regarding the Elkhorn Ranch becomes increasingly obscure following the severe winter. It appears that Roosevelt maintained both ranches but until at least 1890 the Elkhorn was the center of ranching operations.²⁶

The Assessor's Returns for Billings County, North Dakota, discloses that the cattle of Ferris and Merrifield were listed separately in the Assessor's list from 1887 to 1890, inclusive, and then the names of Ferris and Merrifield no longer were carried on the tax rolls. Roosevelt's returns continued to be listed until 1898. Roosevelt apparently continued to maintain the Maltese Cross Ranch, as he mentions in a letter, dated August 24, 1888, that he had gone "up to the Chimney Butte Ranch".²⁷

It appears that Merrifield remained at the Elkhorn Ranch until 1890 or early 1891. During much of 1887 both the Merrifields and George Myers were there until the end of the year when Myers left.²⁸ Both Ferris and Merrifield were at the Elkhorn in March 1890.²⁹

Anna Roosevelt, Robert M. Ferguson, Mr. and Mrs. Douglas Robinson, young George Cabot Lodge, and Mr. and Mrs. Theodore Roosevelt visited the Elkhorn Ranch in the late summer of 1890. At that time the Merrifields were living at the Ranch. Mrs. Robinson described Merrifield as "the

²⁴ In accordance with a supplemental contract effected in Medora September 25, 1886, Roosevelt placed his herd, branded with the Maltese Cross and the Elkhorn and triangle brand, numbering some 2,000 head and valued at \$60,000, under the charge of Sylvane Ferris and Merrifield. At the end of four years, cattle valued at \$60,000 was to be returned to Roosevelt - one-half of the increase was to go to Roosevelt and half to Ferris and Merrifield. In addition Ferris and Merrifield were to take charge of Roosevelt's Elkhorn star brand herd, which consisted of 800 steers for which Roosevelt agreed to pay them \$500 annually for two years and one dollar each for every steer shipped. For an additional sum of \$100, Ferris and Merrifield agreed to take charge of the Elkhorn Ranch. (Original contract in Theodore Roosevelt Collections, Harvard College Library.)

²⁵ Letter, Howard Eaton to W. W. Sewall, Febr. 26, 1887, Cunningham Collection. The Assessor's Returns show one male and one female living at Roosevelt's ranch (the Elkhorn) in 1887.

²⁶ Assessor's Returns for Billings County, North Dakota.

²⁷ Morison, Letters of Theodore Roosevelt, Vol. 1 (Cambridge, 1951).

²⁸ Letter, Howard Eaton to W. W. Sewall, March 22, 1888, Cunningham Collection.

²⁹ Letter, Howard Eaton to H. W. Sewall, March 10, 1890, Cunningham Collection.

superintendent of the Elkhorn Ranch” and Sylvane Ferris as “his able lieutenant”.³⁰ Roosevelt appears to have released Merrifield from his portion of the contract in the fall of 1890.³¹ In March 1891 Merrifield and Sylvane Ferris dissolved their partnership.³²

It appears that Roosevelt abandoned the Elkhorn Ranch soon after his visit there in 1890. On October 20 he wrote Sewall:

*. . . This is the last year I shall keep the ranch house open; I have just parted with Merrifield. Sylvane will take care of the cattle now. He and Joe have lived pretty hard and have put up a little money...*³³

In early November, Roosevelt wrote Sewall:

*. . . Do Mrs. Sewall and Mrs. Dow ever think of the old ranch house? I have still some cattle on the ground, and Sylvane is to care for them. He and Joe have put up a little money. . . .*³⁴

Roosevelt made a visit to the Elkhorn Ranch in 1892. He wrote Sewall a short time after his visit:

*. . . My cattle are doing better than they were. The ranch house is in good repair, but of course it is melancholy to see it deserted. I stayed there several days...*³⁵

Newspaper items disclose that Roosevelt visited his ranch (probably the Maltese Cross) in 1893 and 1896; however, there is no evidence in these to indicate whether or not he visited the Elkhorn Ranch.³⁶

Roosevelt's rising political star in the Nation made it increasingly difficult for him to attend to his ranching ventures in the Little Missouri Badlands. From 1889 to 1895 Roosevelt was a member of the United States Civil Service Commission. From 1895 to 1897 he achieved a nationwide reputation as president of the police commission of New York City. In 1897 Roosevelt was appointed Assistant Secretary of the Navy. Meanwhile, his herds in the Badlands dwindled. By the end of that year he decided he must dispose of his cattle the next year. When the Spanish American War broke out the following year, he was made lieutenant-colonel of the “Rough Riders”. Before he left on the campaign, Roosevelt advised his brother-in-law, Douglas Robinson, to sell his ranch interests in Dakota. He wrote: “Will you write Sylvane to give anything he can for the ranch, or to take it for anything he chooses to give? The amount of it is there will be no market for the buildings.”³⁷ The sale which was consummated later between Robinson, acting for Roosevelt, and Sylvane Ferris apparently included the surviving buildings at both the Maltese Cross and Elkhorn Ranches in addition to the cattle.

Meanwhile, the Elkhorn Ranch buildings appear to have remained deserted. Parties of cowboys passing through the vicinity occasionally stopped at the ranch and spent the night there. One long-time resident in the Badlands related to the writer that he stopped at the Elkhorn in about 1895 or 1896 with a group of cowboys working for W Bar (Wibaux). The Elkhorn buildings were vacant and the corrals were standing. The party went through the ranch house which was bare except for some cupboards and a table.³⁸ Occasional hunters on the river stayed there. According to one story, a party of cattle thieves sojourned in the Elkhorn buildings for a short time.

³⁰ Corinne Roosevelt Robinson, *My Brother Theodore Roosevelt* (New York, 1921), 139.

³¹ Roosevelt wrote to W. W. Sewall on Oct. 20, 1890, that he had just parted with Merrifield.

³² Dickinson Press, March 21, 1891.

³³ Letter, Roosevelt to W. W. Sewall, Oct. 20, 1890, Cunningham Collection.

³⁴ Letter, Roosevelt to W. W. Sewall, Nov. 2, 1890, Cunningham Collection.

³⁵ Sewall, *Bill Sewall's Story of T. R.* (New York, 1919), 101.

³⁶ *Bismarck Daily Tribune*, September 25, 1893; Dickinson Press, September 12, 1896.

³⁷ Morison, *Letters of Theodore Roosevelt*, Vol. 1, 207 (Cambridge, 1951).

³⁸ George Osterhout, Interview by Ray H. Mattison, Sept. 29, 1949.

Within the next several years, after Roosevelt sold his interests to Ferris, the buildings at the Elkhorn disappeared. Available evidence leads us to believe that the buildings were tom down by neighboring ranchers and others for the salvage lumber and logs sold. One former Badlands resident wrote that after he finished working for Ferris in 1898 he moved down the Little Missouri to the Elkhorn to hunt mountain sheep and the few remaining bear in the region. Some of the cupboards, the partitions, and the shelving of the ranch house had been carried away. He occupied the storehouse east of the ranch house for a short time. Returning to Medora, he had "a long talk" with Sylvane Ferris, after which he went back to the Elkhorn with nail pullers and proceeded to remove the window and door frames and finally the walls. Nearby ranchers took some of the lumber and used it in their buildings. The logs were swept away by floods.³⁹ One longtime resident informed the writer that neighboring ranchers, with Ferris' consent hauled away most of the lumber at the Elkhorn Ranch.⁴⁰

When Roosevelt became President following the assassination of William McKinley, the buildings of the Elkhorn Ranch had disappeared. A former Badlands stockman informed the writer that when he established his ranch in 1901 a short distance from the site of Roosevelt's earlier operations, "every scrap of [the Elkhorn buildings] had disappeared with the exception of a couple of half rotted foundations."⁴¹

During the more than sixty years which have elapsed since its abandonment, the site of Roosevelt's Elkhorn Ranch has remained unchanged. Because of its isolation and its inaccessibility, few people venture over the twenty-eight miles of dirt winding roads from Peaceful Valley to the point where one crosses the river to visit the site. However, there has been some change in the vegetative cover since many of the giant cottonwoods in the area have disappeared. On the whole, the wild and picturesque setting of the site has remained almost as unspoiled as it was in the 1880's, when Roosevelt established his ranch there.

RANCH LAYOUT

One of the best descriptions of the Elkhorn Ranch layout was made by Roosevelt himself. He wrote in his *Ranch Life and Hunting Trail*:

My home ranch lies on both sides of the Little Missouri, the nearest ranchman above me being about twelve, and the nearest below me about ten, miles distant. The general course of the stream here is northerly, but, while flowing through my ranch, it takes a great westerly reach of some three miles, walled in, as always, between chains of steep, high bluffs half a mile or more apart. The stream twists down through the valley in long sweeps, leaving oval wooded bottoms, first on one side and then on the other; and in an open glade among the thick-growing timber stands the long, low house of hewn logs.

Just in front of the ranch veranda is a line of old cottonwoods that shade it during the fierce heats of summer, rendering it always cool and pleasant. But a few feet beyond these trees comes the cut-off bank of the river, through whose broad, sandy bed the shallow stream winds as if lost, except when a freshet fills it from brim to brim with foaming yellow water. The bluffs that wall in the river-valley curve back in semicircles, rising from its alluvial bottom generally as abrupt cliffs, but often as steep, grassy slopes that lead up to great level plateaus; and the line is broken every mile or two by the entrance of a coulee, or dry creek, whose head branches may be twenty miles back. Above us, where the river comes around the bend, the valley is very narrow, and the high buttes bounding it rise, sheer and barren, into scalped hill-peaks and naked knife-blade ridges.

The other buildings stand in the same open glade with the ranch house, the dense growth of cottonwoods and matted, thorny underbrush making a wall all about, through which we have chopped our wagon roads and trodden out our own bridle-paths. The cattle have now trampled down this brush a

³⁹ Letter, Henry Waltz to Chester Brooks, April 27, 1953.

⁴⁰ William Neuens, Interview by Ray H. Mattison, July 13, 1949.

⁴¹ Letter, J. H. Reid to Ray H. Mattison, September 14, 1949.

little, but deer still lie in it. only a couple of hundred yards from the house; and from the door sometimes in the evening one can see them peer out into the open, or make their way down, timidly and cautiously, to drink at the river. The stable, sheds, and other outbuildings, with the hayricks and the pens for such cattle as we bring in during winter, are near the house; the patch of fenced garden land is on the edge of the woods; and near the middle of the glade stands the high, circular horse-corral, with a snubbing post in the center, and a wing built out from one side of the gate entrance, so that the saddle-band can be driven in without trouble. As it is very hard to work cattle where there is much brush, the larger cow-corral is some four miles off on an open bottom.⁴²

In his *Hunting Trips of a Ranchman*, Roosevelt described the Elkhorn Ranch:

*My home ranch stands on the river brink. From the low, long veranda, shaded by leafy cottonwoods, one looks across sand-bars and shallows to a strip of meadowland, behind which rises a line of sheer cliffs and grassy plateaus. This veranda is a pleasant place in the summer evenings when a cool breeze stirs along the river and blows in the faces of the tired men, who loll back in their rocking chairs (what true American does not enjoy a rocking chair?), book in hand - though they do not often read the books, but rock gently to and fro, gazing sleepily out at the weird-looking buttes opposite, until their sharp outlines grow indistinct and purple in the after-glow of the sunset. The story-high house of hewn logs is clean and neat, with many rooms, so that one can be alone if one wishes to.*⁴³

Roosevelt described the Elkhorn Ranch layout in his *Wilderness Hunter*:

At dawn one of the men rode off to bring in the saddle band. The rest of us were up by sunrise, and as we stood on the veranda under the shimmering cottonwood-trees, revelling in the blue of the cloudless sky and drinking in the cool air before going to breakfast, we saw the motley-colored string of ponies file down from the opposite bank of the river and splash across the broad, shallow ford in front of the ranch-house. Cantering and trotting, the band swept toward the high, round horse corral, in the open glade to the rear of the house. Guided by the jutting wing which stuck out at right angles, they entered the open gate, which was promptly closed by the cowboy who had driven them in.

*After breakfast we strolled over to the corral, with our lariats, and, standing by the snubbing-post in the middle, roped the horses we wished for the party - some that were gentle, and others that were not.*⁴⁴

RANCH HOUSE

Sewall gave a very good description of the location of the ranch house in relation to the Little Missouri and the hills:

We started building the ranchhouse in a clump of large cottonwood-trees near the bank of the Little Missouri River. West from the house it was smooth and grassy for about a hundred yards, then there was a belt of cottonwoods which went back for some two hundred yards. They were the largest trees I ever saw in Dakota and it was from them that we got most of the timber for the house. Back of them the steep clay hills rose to the height of two or three hundred feet and looked like miniature mountains. A little to the northwest was a hill with coal veins in it which burned red in the dark. To the east we looked across the river about two hundred yards, then across a wide bottom covered with grass,

⁴² Theodore Roosevelt, *Ranch Life and the Hunting Trail* (New York, 1899), 25-26.

⁴³ Roosevelt, *Hunting Trips of a Ranchman* (New York, 1885), 15-16.

⁴⁴ Roosevelt, *The Wilderness Hunter* (New York, 1910), 19.

sage-brush, and some small trees, to the steep clay hills which rose almost perpendicular from the river bottom. Beyond that was the Bad Lands for perhaps twenty miles.

Early in October we began hewing timber for the house and we were at work getting material almost all of the time until New Year's. I designed the house myself and it was a sizable place, sixty feet long, thirty feet wide; and seven feet high, with a flat roof and a porch where after the day's work Theodore used to sit in a rocking-chair, reading poetry.⁴⁵

However, a rough drawing in Roosevelt's writing found in the Cunningham Collection leads the writer to believe that Roosevelt prepared this sketch of the ranch house. The photographs, taken by Roosevelt from a point east and also south of the ranch house, indicate there were several deviations from this sketch. The photographs show six windows in the east side of the house and a window in the south gable of the house. The Edith Roosevelt ground plan, drawn following her visit to the ranch in 1890, shows some deviation from the purported original plan. This later sketch shows no piazza on the west side of the ranch house. It shows an eight room structure in contrast with the ten rooms in the alleged original plan. However, it is quite possible the house may have been altered by removing or shifting several board partitions in the five year period between 1885 and 1890 since the place was changed from a two-family to a one-family unit. Both plans show a piazza (the Edith Roosevelt plan shows a much larger one than the earlier one) on the east side, on which Roosevelt (according to Sewall) sat in the rocking chair and read poetry. Both plans also indicate a large hall running from the south door about three-fourths of the length of the ranch house through the middle of the house. The Edith Roosevelt plan indicates a different use of the various rooms from that shown on the purported Theodore Roosevelt sketch.⁴⁶

In only one letter did Sewall ever discuss the dimensions of the ranch house. He wrote in October 1884: "It [the ranch house] is to be 60 feet long and 30 feet wide. The walls 9 ft. high so you see it is quite a job to hew it on three sides. . . . The logs are cottonwood. They are generally short but we get some over 30 ft. in length that square a foot. . ."⁴⁷ The purported Theodore Roosevelt sketch indicates that the walls were seven feet in height and the logs were each one foot square. Photographs of the ranch house likewise indicates the walls were seven logs in height.

Available evidence indicates that the roof and the gables of the ranch house were shingled. Sewall makes only one mention as to shingles: "All boards and shingles here is Pine".⁴⁸ Sewall wrote in February 1885: "The weather is so cold we can't do much on the house. Have got it shingled and the under floor layed."⁴⁹ The photographs, however, indicate that the south gable and the piazza were shingled.

INTERIOR OF RANCH HOUSE

Sewall's remarks on the interior finishing of the house are very brief. He wrote: "The house is to have a very flat roof no chamber, single floor overhead. The boards here are all Pine planed on one side

⁴⁵ Bill Sewall's *Story of T. R.*, 18-19.

⁴⁶ See sketch of "Ranche House" found in Cunningham Collection, the writing of which appears to have been written by Theodore Roosevelt; see also copy of a page from a letter that Edith (Mrs. Theodore) Roosevelt wrote her sister from the Elkhorn Ranch.

⁴⁷ Bill Sewall's *Story of T. R.*, 19.

⁴⁸ Letter, W. W. Sewall to S. T. Sewall. Oct. 19, 1884, Cunningham Collection.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

and both ends of a width. They are all seasoned and of course are nice to handle so All boards and shingles here are Pine.”⁵⁰

Mrs. George Harmon, daughter of W. W. Sewall, informed the writer that below the ranch house was a cellar or basement which Roosevelt used as a dark room for processing his photographs. The depression on the site of the ranch house suggests a basement or cellar. Since we know that Roosevelt was an amateur photographer and took a number of photographs of Badland scenes, it seems quite probable that the basement served that purpose. Archeological excavations might uncover evidence to indicate what functions the cellar served.

Roosevelt's writing suggests that the ranch house was equipped with a fireplace. He wrote in his *Hunting Trips of a Ranchman*: “The long winter evenings are spent sitting round the hearthstone, while the pine logs [there is little Pine now in the region of the Elkhorn] roar and crackle, and the men play checkers or chess in the firelight. The rifles stand in the corners of the room or rest across the elk antlers which jut out from over the fireplace.”⁵¹

Fred Sewall, son of W. W. Sewall, advised the writer that Wilmot Dow built the fireplace in the Elkhorn ranch house. It is the writer's impression that the hearthstone was recovered by the State Historical Society of North Dakota. The photographs of the ranch house show no chimneys. If any existed, they were perhaps obscured by trees.

A list of lumber, purportedly used in the buildings at the Elkhorn, indicates that Roosevelt did not spare expense in constructing his ranch house. This list, written in Sewall's hand, included some 16,000 board feet of rafters, joists, floors, partition boards and roof boards. The cost of this lumber, added to that of hauling it from Medora, some 50 or 60 miles, to the Elkhorn Ranch, must have been heavy.

STABLES

In common with other ranches, the Elkhorn kept a string of horses for the use of the men working there. Roosevelt wrote in his *Ranch Life and Hunting Trail*:

*Each of us has his own string of horses, eight or ten in number, and the whole band usually split up into two or three companies. In addition to the scattered groups of the saddle-band, our six or eight mares, with their colts, keep by themselves, and are rarely bothered by us, as no cowboy ever rides anything but horses, because mares give great trouble where all the animals have to be herded together.*⁵²

The Assessor's Returns for 1886 show Roosevelt paid taxes on 20 horses which were presumably at the Elkhorn; in 1889 he paid taxes on 30.⁵³

In his letters, Sewall made only one reference to the stables. He wrote in December 1885: "This past one [week] we have been working on our Stables. We hew the logs on three sides and are putting up two stables 16x20 feet with a twelve foot space between like a woods hovel and hay shed."⁵⁴

⁵⁰ Letter, W. W. Sewall to S. T. Sewall, Oct. 19, 1884, Cunningham Collection.

⁵¹ *Hunting Trips of a Ranchman*, 16.

⁵² *Ranch Life and the Hunting Trail*, 27.

⁵³ Assessor's Returns for Billings County, North Dakota, 1886, 1889.

⁵⁴ Letter, W. W. Sewall to S. T. Sewall, Dec. 20, 1885, Cunningham Collection.

Fortunately an excellent photograph has survived of this structure which supports Sewall's statement as to its dimensions. This photograph also shows a low sloping roof of logs which were covered with dirt and probably scoria as was common in the North Dakota Badlands.

CATTLE SHED

Unlike many ranches at that time, the Elkhorn kept several milch cows. Roosevelt wrote in his *Ranch Life and the Hunting Trail*: "We ourselves always keep up two or three cows, choosing such as are naturally tame, and so we invariably have plenty of milk and, when there is time for churning, a good deal of butter."⁵⁵ Mrs. Sewall's letters also indicate that the Elkhorn had one or several milch cows. She wrote her sister, "We have one cow that gives milk yet have not been without it since we come."⁵⁶

Only two references have been found in Roosevelt's writings as to the cattle sheds at the Elkhorn. In describing the Elkhorn Ranch layout, he wrote: "The stable, sheds and other out-buildings, with the hay ricks and the pens for such cattle as we can bring in during winter, are near the house."⁵⁷ Only once did Roosevelt make a specific reference to a cow shed: "... a flock of snow-buntings came familiarly round the cow-shed, clamoring over the ridge-pole and roof."⁵⁸

Sewall makes no mention in his letters of any cow shed. However, the photograph of the Elkhorn corrals and stables shows a building to the east of the stable which presumably is the cow shed. This building appears to be a log structure with a low log roof covered with dirt and scoria.

CHICKEN HOUSE

The Elkhorn Ranch kept chickens to supply it with both eggs and meat in case the supply of game failed. Roosevelt wrote: "We also keep hens, which, in spite of the damaging inroads of hawks, bobcats, and foxes, supply us with eggs, and in time of need, when our rifles have failed to keep us in game, with stewed, roast, or fried chicken also."⁵⁹ He also refers to heavy losses in chickens as the result of predators. "Then we suffer some loss - in certain regions very severe loss - from wild beasts, such as cougars, wolves, and lynxes. The latter, generally called 'bob-cats,' merely make inroads on the hen-roosts (one of them destroyed half my poultry, coming night after night with most praiseworthy regularity), but the cougars and wolves destroy many cattle."⁶⁰ Sewall makes no mention of the chicken-raising operations at the Elkhorn.

BLACKSMITH SHOP

No mention is made of a blacksmith shop at the Elkhorn Ranch.

It is understood that the Archeologist found evidence of a blacksmith shop southeast of the ranch house site. This building is shown in Photograph No. one. Dow served as blacksmith at the ranch.

⁵⁵ *Ranch Life and the Hunting Trail*, 26.

⁵⁶ Letter, Mary Sewall to Nancy [Mrs. S. T. Sewall], March 1, 1886, Cunningham Collection.

⁵⁷ *Ranch Life and the Hunting Trail*, 26.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 19.

⁵⁹ *Ranch Life and the Hunting Trail*, 26.

⁶⁰ *Hunting Trips of a Ranchman*, 26.

GARDENS

Roosevelt recorded in his *Ranch Life and the Hunting Trail*: “the patch of fenced garden land is on the edge of the woods.”⁶¹ He wrote further: “From our garden we get potatoes, and unless drouth, frost or grasshoppers interfere (which they do about every second year), other vegetables as well.”⁶²

Sewall wrote of his gardening activities in June 1886: “We have half an acre of potatoes also corn, squashes etc. Don't know how it will be but it all looks pretty well now. I have got quite a lot of peas and string beans started, have to put them all in by hand so it is quite a job but I got it in all right.”⁶³

HAYING OPERATIONS

Roosevelt makes little mention of the haying operations. In his *Ranch Life and the Hunting Trail* he mentions it as one of the routine tasks at the Elkhorn.⁶⁴ However, Sewall on several occasions wrote of the haying at the ranch. In one of his letters he implies that the haying was done on the plateaus at the top of the hills. “Some of them,” he wrote, “have 500 [?] acres in them, smooth and level as a field. This is where they cut their hay. We have a nice one about a mile from here.”⁶⁵ Sewall's letter of August 1, 1886, is more specific about their haying. “We only cut one stack about eight tons. We have a lot of old hay. Hope we have enough to last as long as we stay. Had a lot cut last year when it was plenty.”⁶⁶

MISCELLANEOUS

Roosevelt makes a brief mention of the coal quarrying and wood cutting operations. He wrote in his *Ranch Life and the Hunting Trail*:

“in winter we cut our fire-wood and quarry our coal - both on the ranch.”⁶⁷

FIREARMS USED

The foremen of the Elkhorn Ranch as well as Roosevelt were hunters. Both Roosevelt's writings and Sewall's letters indicate that the occupants of the Elkhorn depended largely on their prowess as hunters to supply the ranch with meat. Sewall, Dow, and Merrifield were hunters as was Roosevelt. Combined, they no doubt possessed quite an array of firearms. According to Fred Sewall, his father used a Sharps 45-70, which was given him by Roosevelt, and a Colt 45 revolver.⁶⁸ Dow used a Sharps 45-90. Mrs. Sewall possessed a Colt repeating rifle given her by Roosevelt.⁶⁹

Sewall's letters make numerous references to his and Dow's hunting while at the Elkhorn. Sewall makes little mention, however, of the types of firearms they used. Following Sylvane Ferris' and

⁶¹ *Ranch Life and the Hunting Trail*, 26.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 26-27.

⁶³ Letter, W. W. Sewall to S. T. Sewall, June 27, 1886, Cunningham Collection.

⁶⁴ *Ranch Life and the Hunting Trail*, 27.

⁶⁵ Letter, W. W. Sewall to S. T. Sewall, Aug. 18, 1884, Cunningham Collection.

⁶⁶ Letter, W. W. Sewall to S. T. Sewall, Aug. 1, 1886, Cunningham Collection.

⁶⁷ *Ranch Life and the Hunting Trail*, 27.

⁶⁸ Fred Sewall, Interview by Ray H. Mattison, January 15, 1959.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

Merrifield's visit to the ranch in December 1885, Sewall wrote: "Ferris had a double barrel gun. Merryfield had Mary's Colt repeating rifle. Will and I are old Sharpes".⁷⁰

In his *Hunting Trips of a Ranchman*, Roosevelt commented regarding firearms used in the Plains region:

. . . . When I first came to the plains I had a heavy Sharps rifle, 45-120, shooting an ounce and a quarter of lead, and a 50-calibre double-barreled English express. Both of these, especially the latter, had a vicious recoil; the former was very clumsy; and above all they were neither of them repeaters; for a repeater or magazine gun is as much superior to a single or double-barrel breech-loader as the latter is to a muzzle-loader. I threw them both aside; and have instead a 40-90 Sharps for very long range work; a 50-115 6-shot Ballard express which has the velocity, shock, and low trajectory of the English gun; and, better than either, a 45-75 half-magazine Winchester. The Winchester, which is stocked and sighted to suit myself, is by all odds the best weapon I ever had, and I now use it almost exclusively, having killed every kind of game with it, from a grisly bear to a bighorn. . . .

Of course every ranchman carries a revolver, a long 45 Colt or Smith & Wesson, by preference the former. . . . I have two double-barreled shot-guns: a No. 10 choke-bore for ducks and geese, made by Thomas of Chicago; and a No. 16 hammerless, built for me by Kennedy of St. Paul, for grouse and plover. On regular hunting trips I always carry the Winchester rifle; but in riding round near home, where a man may see a deer and is sure to come across ducks and grouse, it is best to take the little ranch gun, a double-barreled No. 16 with a 40-70 rifle underneath the shot-gun barrels.⁷¹

⁷⁰ Letter, W. W. Sewall to S. T. Sewall, December 20, 1885, Cunningham Collection.

⁷¹ *Hunting Trips of a Ranchman*, 38-40.