

Theodore Roosevelt

National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior

Theodore Roosevelt National Park



Elkhorn Ranch Porch - Photo by Theodore Roosevelt

“My home ranch-house stands on the river brink. From the low, long veranda, shaded by leafy cotton-woods, 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.”

~ Theodore Roosevelt, from *Hunting Trips of a Ranchman*

A Special Place

“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.”

Theodore Roosevelt

On April 25, 1947, Theodore Roosevelt National Memorial Park was created and included the site of Roosevelt’s Elkhorn Ranch house. Today, the 218 acre Elkhorn Ranch Unit is part of Theodore Roosevelt National Park. The greater Elkhorn Ranch area is comprised of private, state and federal lands.

Because this place was so important to the greatest conservationist in Presidential history, the National Park Service chooses to leave this special place as Roosevelt knew it and as unimpaired as possible. Rebuilding of the house or other structures is not part of the park’s long-range plan for the site.



Elkhorn Ranch 1880s - Photo by Theodore Roosevelt

The secluded and quiet spot Roosevelt chose for his Elkhorn Ranch brought much comfort and solitude to a man who was still reeling from personal tragedy. The rugged terrain and all its inhabitants aided in his reawakening. His days were filled with the rewarding manual labor of cattle ranching and his nights were spent relaxing on the veranda overlooking the Little Missouri River or at his writing desk. It was at this place that Roosevelt learned about the importance of conservation. By the time he left for New York in the fall of 1886, his time spent at the Elkhorn Ranch had made him realize the importance of conserving our natural resources and provided him with the necessary tools to formulate a conservation ethic.

Roosevelt said, “This is where the romance of my life began.” Take time to wander along the trails, sit quietly at the house site, listen to the cottonwood leaves rustling in the trees and imagine this place as it was when Roosevelt was here. Let the solitude and beauty of this rugged and remote landscape calm and inspire you, just as it did our greatest conservation President.

Elkhorn Ranch History

Theodore Roosevelt first came to the North Dakota Badlands in September of 1883 to hunt one of the few remaining buffalo. By the end of his 10-day adventure, he got his buffalo, bought into a partnership at the Maltese Cross Ranch, and entered the cattle business. Five months later, his wife and mother died on the same day, February 14th, 1884. Grief stricken, Roosevelt decided to focus on his new business. In March of 1884 he wrote his Maine hunting guide, Bill Sewall, "I hope my Western venture turns out well. If it does...I feel sure that you will do well for yourself by coming out with me. I shall take you and Dow out next August." After attending the Republican convention in June, Roosevelt headed west to seek solitude in Dakota. Upon his arrival, he found his cattle had wintered well. He decided to put in 1,000 more head and "make it my regular business."

During the summer of 1884, Roosevelt selected the location for a second ranch 35 miles north of Medora. He named it the Elkhorn after finding a pair of intertwined elk antlers. He purchased the rights to the site for \$400. By mid-October, Sewall and his nephew Wilmot Dow had moved onto the site and were cutting cottonwood trees to build the ranch house. Working through the winter, they completed the building by the spring of 1885. The house was 30 by 60 feet with seven foot high walls and contained eight rooms and a piazza (porch). Several additional buildings were also constructed on the site: two 16 by 20 foot stables connected by a 12 foot space, a hay shed, a cattle shed, a chicken coop, and a blacksmith shop.

In August 1885, Dow went back to Maine, married, and returned to the Elkhorn with his new bride along with Mrs. Sewall and her small daughter. In 1886 both Mrs. Dow and Mrs. Sewall gave birth to sons at the ranch.

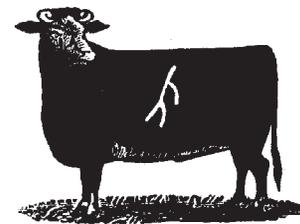
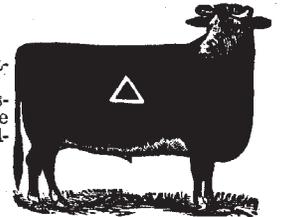
Sewall and Dow operated the ranch for Roosevelt until the fall of 1886 when they returned to Maine. At that time, Roosevelt turned the operation over to Sylvane Ferris and Bill Merrifield, his ranch managers at the Maltese Cross Ranch.

During the disastrous winter of 1886-87, Roosevelt lost approximately 60% of his cattle. Although living full time in New York, he continued to maintain both ranches with the Elkhorn remaining the center of his operation. After a late summer visit to the Elkhorn in 1890, Roosevelt decided to abandon the ranch. On October 20th 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."

Roosevelt's last known visit to the Elkhorn Ranch was in the late 1890s. He sold the ranch and buildings to Sylvane Ferris in 1898. Gradually the buildings were stripped of their furnishings and by 1901 little was left. Today, no structures remain. Foundation stones mark the outline of the ranch house. In his writings Theodore Roosevelt often referred to the Elkhorn as his "home ranch." Even today, his vivid descriptions of it, and of ranch life, enable his readers to imagine how things must have been.

ELKHORN RANCH.
THEODORE ROOSEVELT, Proprietor.
SEAWALL & DOW, Managers.

P. O. address, Little Missouri, D. T. Range, Little Missouri, twenty-five miles north of railroad.



as in cut, on left side, on right, or the reverse.
Horse brand, on right or left shoulder.

The Site Today

A six sided barb wire fence encloses the area around the house, well, utility shed, chicken coop, and barn locations. A separate four sided barb wire fence encloses the area where the blacksmith shop and dugout stood. A few foundation stones are still visible at the house and blacksmith shop sites. Former locations of the other structures are marked by metal posts.

