



Theodore Roosevelt as the Badlands hunter. Theodore Roosevelt in hunting suit with carved Tiffany hunting knife and rifle. Photographed by George Grantham Baine in 1885 in New York City.

“Stout and Sharp” Theodore Roosevelt’s Tiffany-made hunting-knife

By
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When people think of the 26th President of the United States, Theodore Roosevelt, images of hunting, heroism, and adventure come to mind. Integral parts of these images are the pistols, rifles, and other weapons TR used in the execution of his exploits in nature and on the battlefield. Perhaps one of the most visible yet enigmatic weapons owned by TR was the knife he carried during his days as a rancher in North Dakota. Still showing the strong influences of his privileged upbringing, TR outfitted himself in the finest and most dandified gear when he set out West, dressing for the part of the frontiersman with buckskins and artful weapons, including an elaborate hunting-knife made by the most famous name in jewelry and silversmithing, Tiffany and Company of New York City.¹ This knife was part of TR’s efforts to shape himself into the rugged frontiersman he had so long held as the template for the ideal American.

The clothes (and weapons) make the man

Before ever going to North Dakota, TR fell in love with the mythos of the American West: brave men, cowboys, hunters, and their ilk, facing trial and tribulation, living a life that tested their very manhood.² When he decided to live his cowboy dream, he tackled it with full force and with the proper accoutrements. When he first set foot in the Dakota Badlands, going after a bison in 1883, TR was really a ‘western hobbyist’ and not the frontiersman and cowboy that defined his identity

later in life. In an attempt to fit in, TR sought what he thought were authentic western clothes. He had a buckskin suit made and soon had the accoutrements to fit his mental image of the cowboy. A Northern Pacific Refrigerator Car, Co. employee by the name of Fisher described TR as, “a slim, anaemic-looking young fellow dressed in the exaggerated style which was considered indisputable evidence of the rank tenderfoot.”³

Despite what the locals thought, TR relished his frontier wear, writing in a letter to his friend Henry Cabot Lodge, dated 12 August 1884, “You would be amused to see me, in my broad sombrero hat, fringed and beaded buckskin shirt, horse hide chaparajos or riding trousers, and cowhide boots, with braided bridle and silver spurs.”⁴ In a letter written the same day to his sister, Anna, TR wrote, “I now look like a regular cowboy dandy, with all my equipments finished in the most expensive style; I shall show you them when I get back.”⁵ In another letter to Anna a few days later, TR elaborated on his costume, writing, “I wear a sombrero, silk neckerchief, fringed buckskin shirt, sealskin chaparajos or riding trowsers [sic]; alligator hide boots; and with my pearl hilted revolver and beautifully finished Winchester rifle, I shall feel able to face anything.”⁶

A “stout and sharp” knife

In his *Hunting Trips of a Ranchman*, TR wrote, when describing the equipment of the ranchland hunter, “When after game a hunting-knife is stuck in the girdle. This should be stout and sharp, but not too long, with a round handle.”⁷ This is a basic description of the knife TR carried, although his was executed to a level much above the practicality of the plains ranchers he admired.

TR’s knife, designed and constructed by Tiffany and Co. sometime in mid-to-late 1884,⁸ has a blade of seven and one-half inches in length and a handle/guard of six inches.⁹ The repoussé sterling silver handle is round, with a knob-like pommel surrounded by toothed simple leaves, possibly of an elm.¹⁰ On the obverse of the handle is an art

nouveau rendering of TR’s name. The reverse of the handle depicts a frontiersman in broad-brimmed hat, long hair, mustache, buckskin garments, and holding what appears to be a muzzle-loading pistol; contrary to some opinions, it is not TR, but rather a representation of the “leatherstocking” frontiersmen he idealized, like Daniel Boone and Davy Crockett. The guard is a large representation of leaves, twigs, and other debris. The blade has a fuller and a semi-clipped point with an unsharpened false edge. The blade bears some resemblance to a George Butler & Co. “Green River” knife.¹¹ On each side of the blade’s base is a tab that fits into corresponding slots on the sheath to hold the knife in place. The obverse of the blade is engraved with a scene of a buck deer escorting four does, while the reverse shows two large bears.

The scabbard, also of repoussé sterling silver, shows a wild scene of two brave hunters riding horses amongst stampeding bison. The scabbard’s other side is undecorated. The scabbard does bear the maker’s mark, “Tiffany & Co. M Sterling.”¹² The “M” stands for Edward C. Moore, head of Tiffany’s silver works until 1891 and “Sterling” obviously denotes the material.¹³ Had the knife not been a custom piece, a serial number would also have been present.¹⁴

Interestingly, TR does not mention his silver knife in his lists of gear. The knife shows signs of significant wear, so it was used. TR had an everyday need for a knife once he started to live his life as a cowboy. In *Ranch Life and the Hunting-Trail*, TR describes eating in the field: “Lunch is taken at some spring, which may be only a trickle of water at the base of a butte, where a hole must be dug out with a knife and hands before the horse can drink.”¹⁵ Indeed, TR recounts the use of a knife on the ranch, and even though it is not specifically stated that this knife was used, the blade wear had to come from rigorous use. Perhaps by this time, the actual use of the knife was what was important and the knife was just a tool. TR no longer needed to see his dream of a cowboy life by owning the knife, but could instead live it by putting the instrument to use.

Historian Sarah Watts, in her insightful work *Rough Rider in the White House*, notes a trend in TR's dress that applies to this transition. In an early photograph for the frontpiece of *Hunting Trips of a Ranchman*, TR poses, without his glasses, in buckskins, moccasin boots, and a fur cap while holding a rifle and holstering his knife about his waist. In a later photograph, his wardrobe becomes less extravagant and instead of the photographer's poorly executed backdrops, he appears on the range. In many ways, this gives evidences of the evolution of how TR saw the western frontier in 1883 and how he grew to be a part of it within a few years.¹⁶

TR seemed to gain an understanding of the use of the hunting-knife during his time in North Dakota, knowledge he used in later life. In 1903, TR showed he could use a knife in an exceedingly dangerous situation. Recounting the adventures of his 1903 hunting trip in *Outdoor Pastimes of an American Hunter*, TR described how, after letting the hunting dogs corner and grapple with the mountain lion, he ran forward and dispatched the beast with a hunting-knife, foregoing the rifle out of fear a shot would hit a pack member.¹⁷ Anyone familiar with the exploits of the brave *tigrero* Sasha Seimel knows the challenge of spearing a large cat; imagine using a hunting-knife.

A flash of silver: the knife in the public eye

The history of TR's knife saw two major events in the late 1980s and late 1990s. In 1989, the Franklin Mint produced the first, and to this author's knowledge only, reproduction of TR's knife. The piece is exacting in every detail, even matching the measurements given by R.L. Wilson in his book *Theodore Roosevelt: Outdoorsman*.¹⁸ The shipping carton for the knife has space for a replica of the silver sheath, but the promotional material for the knife does not mention or show the sheath and the display case provided lacks space for it.¹⁹ However, examples of the Franklin Mint knife with the sheath and a different display case

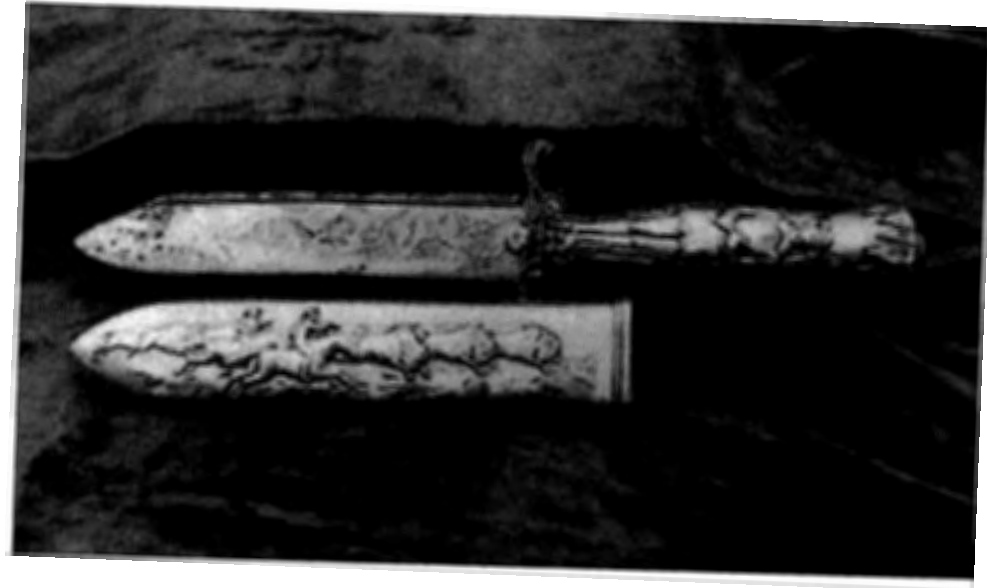
appear at times on the Internet, so a scabbard was produced at some point. Hefting this reproduction well-illustrates two issues with the knife. First, the handle is too fat in the middle, making it hard to hold. Second, the decoration found under the guard causes great discomfort to the hand if the knife is gripped too near the hilt.

The original knife, on loan from the Roosevelt family, went on display in 1998 as part of the *Theodore Roosevelt: Icon of the American Century* exhibit organized by the National Portrait Gallery and the Sagamore Hill National Historic Site, with partial support from the Smithsonian Institution Special Exhibit Fund and the Theodore Roosevelt Association. The exhibit, running from 27 October 1998 (the 140th anniversary of TR's birth) to 14 November 1999, was held at three sites: the National Portrait Gallery in Washington, DC; the Federal Hall National Memorial in New York City; and the Hillwood Art Museum on the C.W. Post Campus of Long Island University.

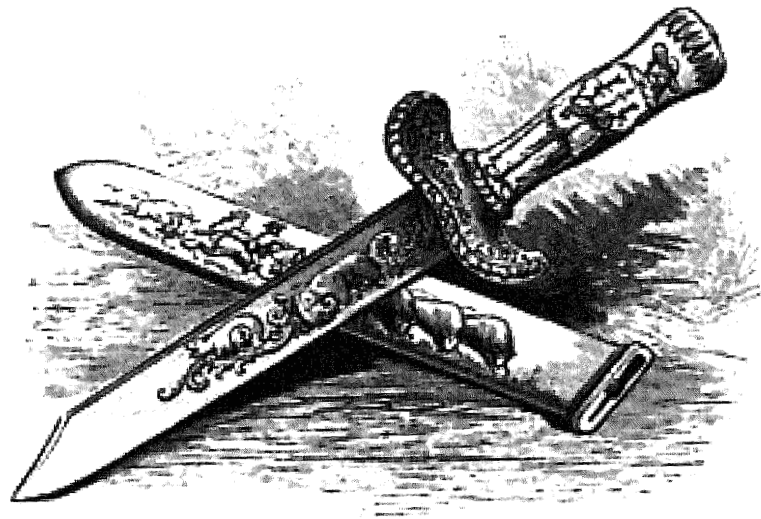
"I would never have been President . . ."

TR came to North Dakota to ranch out of despair. On one cruel day, 14 February 1884, TR lost both his mother, Martha, to typhoid, and his beloved wife, Alice, to Bright's disease only hours after giving birth to their daughter. He left his daughter, named Alice after her mother, in his sister's care and fled to the West to grapple with his loss by finding endeavors and adventures that forced him to step up or perish. When examining his life, scholars, and even TR himself, said that his time in North Dakota as a ranchman was a major factor in his future successes. Where would the Rough Riders have come from without TR's time in North Dakota? Without the Rough Riders, where would TR's lightning fast political success have come from? In 1910, TR reflected on this, saying, "I never would have been President if it had not been for my experiences here in North Dakota."²⁰ TR's Tiffany knife was with him during this formative time. In many ways, the knife is emblematic of the man. The knife is flashy, exuberant, and an artifact of patrician

excess, but an instrument that was not afraid of hard work, danger, or living a strenuous life—just like its owner. Theodore Roosevelt was a complicated man and the history and appearance of the weapons that were by his side during this life both preserve his identity and show how it changed as he led the ‘strenuous life’ for which he was so famous.



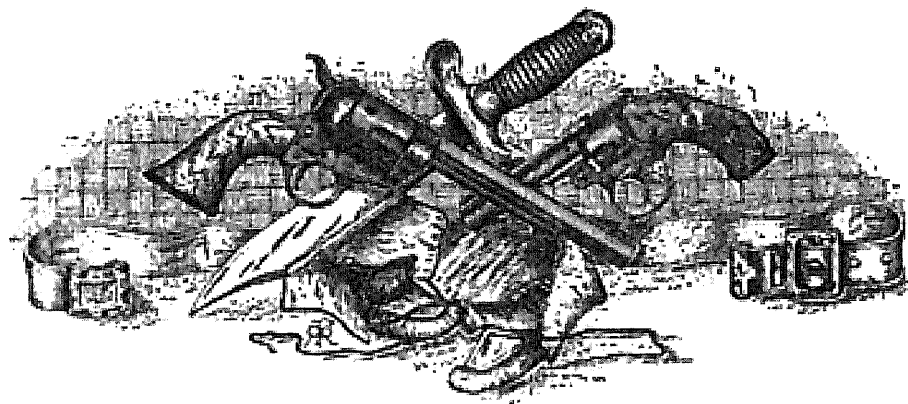
Theodore Roosevelt's Tiffany-made, silver hunting knife. (Library of Congress)



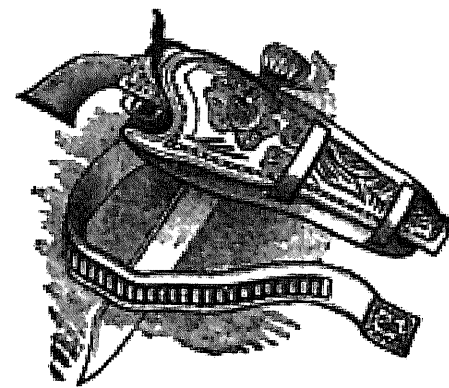
Roosevelt's knife as it appeared in his book, *Hunting Trips of a Ranchman*.



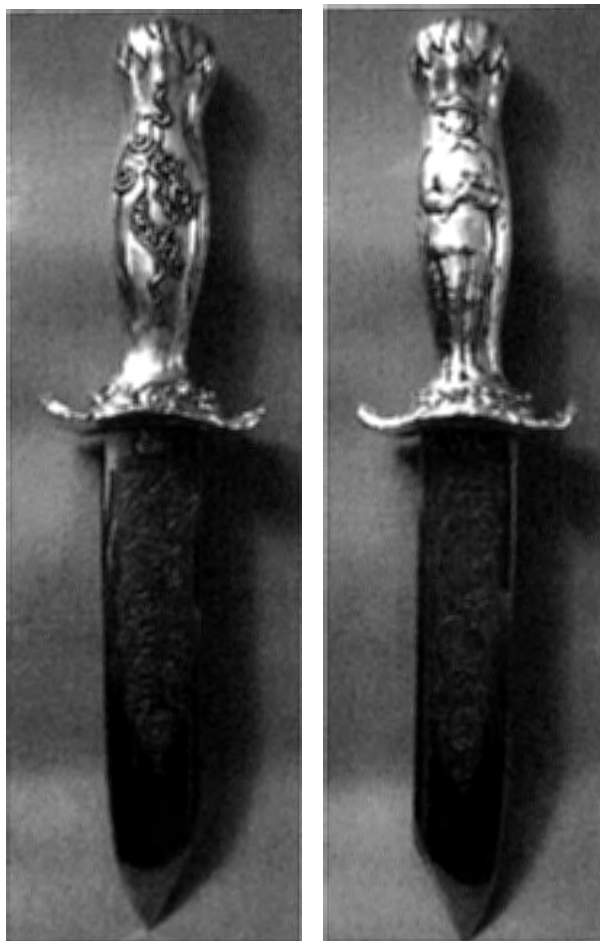
Another pose by Roosevelt in his western regalia, ca. 1885. (Library of Congress)



A somewhat stylized and less-detailed version of Roosevelt's knife appears in this drawing from his book, *The Wilderness Hunter*.



An image of Roosevelt's knife, obscured by the Colt and leather holster, which appeared in a few of his books.



The Franklin Mint's reproduction of Roosevelt's Tiffany hunting knife. This reproduction is accurate in several details and was available both with and without a reproduction sheath.

Notes

- ¹ R.L. Wilson, *Theodore Roosevelt: Outdoorsman* (Winchester Press, 1971), pg. 54.
- ² Sarah Watts, *Rough Rider in the White House: Theodore Roosevelt and the Politics of Desire* (University of Chicago Press), pg. 126.
- ³ Hermann Hagedorn, *Roosevelt in the Bad Lands* (Theodore Roosevelt Nature & History Association, 1949), pg. 102.
- ⁴ Henry Cabot Lodge, *Selections from the Correspondence of Theodore Roosevelt and Henry Cabot Lodge 1884-1918* (Charles Scribner's Sons, 1925), pg. 7.
- ⁵ Anna Roosevelt Cowles, *Letters from Theodore Roosevelt to Anna Roosevelt Cowles (1870-1918)* (Charles Scribner's Sons, 1924), pg. 61.
- ⁶ Cowles, pg. 62.
- ⁷ Theodore Roosevelt, *Hunting Trips of a Ranchman* (G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1886), pg. 35.
- ⁸ Based on Wilson circa 1884 (pg. 54) and the dates for Roosevelt's photograph settings featuring the knife.
- ⁹ Wilson, pg. 54.
- ¹⁰ James Barber, *Theodore Roosevelt: Icon of the American Century* (Smithsonian Institution, 1998), pg. 30. Elbert L. Little, *National Audubon Society Field Guide to North American Tress* (Alfred A. Knopf, 1980), pgs. 38-39 and plates 160-168.
- ¹¹ Harold L. Peterson, *American Knives* (Charles Scribner's Sons, 1958), pg. 69.
- ¹² Wilson, pg. 54.
- ¹³ Charles H. Carpenter, Jr. and Mary Grace Carpenter, *Tiffany Silver* (Dodd, Mead & Co., 1978), pg. 251.
- ¹⁴ Carpenter, pg. 251.
- ¹⁵ Theodore Roosevelt, *Ranch Life and the Hunting-Trail* (The Century Co., 1915), pg. 134.
- ¹⁶ Watts, pgs. 126-128.
- ¹⁷ Theodore Roosevelt, *Outdoor Pastimes of An American Hunter* (Charles Scribner's Sons, 1924), pgs. 40-41.
- ¹⁸ Measurements made by the author of this article and compared to those found in Wilson, pg. 54.
- ¹⁹ Author inspection of original shipping carton.
- ²⁰ Address given by Theodore Roosevelt at Carnegie Library, Fargo College, September 5, 1910.