

The Most Visited Town in the Least Visited State

When I passed through St. Paul's International Airport in Minneapolis, a customs agent ordered me into another room for additional questioning. I am not sure what it was about me that aroused suspicion but my best guess is that my travel route—Amsterdam to Bismarck—required an explanation. The bemused agent asked me why on earth I was going to North Dakota (rich coming from a Minnesotan). I explained that I had won a prize named after President Theodore Roosevelt and I was invited to the town of Medora to visit the Roosevelt sites there. The answer satisfied him, but a similar question would pop up several times over the next week: many of my hosts at the Theodore Roosevelt Medora Foundation and the Theodore Roosevelt Center in Dickinson wanted to know what I had expected to find in North Dakota.

The question stumped me because I hadn't been sure what to expect. From a documentary I had seen about Theodore Roosevelt years ago, I remembered that he had been a cowboy in North Dakota, though at the time it struck me as the fanciful retreat of a Knickerbocker. When I realized I would go to Medora, I googled the place and learned there was a Western country music musical. I happen to love musicals, but I'd never associated them with country music before, or, for that matter, with Theodore Roosevelt. How did Medora go from one to the other?



The answer to that question unearthed a captivating local history. Medora, ND (pop. 112) was founded in 1883 by a French nobleman, the Marquis de Morès, as an all-purpose site for meat production. Medora would raise, slaughter, pack and ship cattle in one place: a beef capital to rival Chicago. It didn't go as planned. I heard many reasons for why the cattle business in western North Dakota went bust but in any case, the little frontier town of Medora grew fast in the mid-1880s, then sizzled out faster in the same decade. Roosevelt, a contemporary of the Marquis and Medora's claim to fame, abandoned ranching and focused on politics.

The Medora I encountered was a strange little place: a few blocks of wide American streets lined with pick-ups, cut in half by a railroad where a freight train passes every four hours, and nestled behind an impressive butte that hides it from the interstate. On first impression the town dislocated my sense of time: everything looked charming, Western, and almost too clean to date back to the town's bona fide frontier origins. Skulls on walls and names like 'Cowboy Café' and 'Fudge Depot' made me realize I had come from too different a part of the world to gauge the authenticity of the place. My hipster anxiety was strong. And to someone who has never lived—nay, set foot!—in such a small town, the silence was a little unsettling. On my first walk around town, the only sounds I heard were those of the many wind chimes and the hymns coming out of the open doors of a tiny Lutheran church.

The chimes belie the fact that during the summer months, Medora is a bustling vacation spot. I asked many people who it was that first envisioned Medora as a tourist town, and why, but that part of its history remains murky to me. What's clear is this: after years of decline, Medora's fortunes turned in the 1950s when, for reasons unknown, an outdoor theater was built (I use the passive here because I never found out whose initiative this was). The town's new purpose really took shape in the 1960s, when a successful North Dakota businessman, Harold Schafer of 'Glass Wax' and 'Mr. Bubble' fame, bought up the theater and several buildings, and set about reinventing Medora as a family-friendly tourist destination. His first order of business was a musical to fill the amphitheater.

Like the Marquis, Harold Schafer had ambitions for Medora that were far bigger than the place itself. In the early days of the show, he would pay people in the surrounding area a dollar to get on a bus and come see it. But by 1986, Medora had become North Dakota's largest recreational area. That year, Schafer sold his business and founded the Theodore Roosevelt Medora Foundation, to which he donated all of his holdings in the town including various hotels and eateries, a golf course, and the musical. The show changes every year but always revolves around Schafer's original priorities: family-friendly, patriotic entertainment with a pinch of Teddy Roosevelt. The version I saw (twice) was a guileless spectacle on the theme of 'heroes,' including a scene that depicted Roosevelt's charge up San Juan Hill, plenty of state pride, country music's greatest hits, clogging and fireworks. It draws an audience of hundreds, sometimes thousands, every night and is the crowning jewel of the foundation's 70% stake in North Dakota's prime tourist destination.



But what really is this place? Every time I was told about something somebody built here, I felt like I was missing something. A hotel called 'The Metropolitan' that was bigger than anything in town; the first Catholic church in the territory; an amphitheater dug out of the side of a hill; all of it for whom? The year-round population now hovers around 120, and apparently it was never more than about a thousand. Medora today doesn't even have a grocery store. It does have its renovated 1880s general store where TR spent his first night in Medora, but that is now a souvenir shop.

Over the course of the week, I was glad to find I was not the only outsider struggling to understand Medora. One person suggested to me that what sets it apart from other little frontier towns is that Medora has been designed to tell a story about the vindication of vision. That story centers around the experience of the three men who founded and shaped Medora, who exemplified—to varying degrees—the frontier experience, and who embodied a certain dream that is in disrepute elsewhere but still alive and kicking in 2017's 1880s Medora.

The first is Roosevelt, for whom Medora represented an important step along the road from asthmatic East Coast 'dude' to Rough Rider and big-stick-carrying statesman. A few of his quotes bear out the idea that the frontier was the making of him, and the various institutions I visited around town use them gratefully (they also never tired, and nor did I, of the brilliant fact that TR arrived in the Wild West in a designer cowboy suit and with a knife from Tiffany's).

The Marquis is the other side of the same coin, and his legacy makes for an interesting comparison with Roosevelt's. Had the Marquis succeeded in his grand enterprise, I'm positive Medora would celebrate him as an American. In failure, he is remembered as the eccentric European aristocrat: flamboyant (compared to TR's sobriety) and out of touch with the area and the locals. The town square that bears his name is a 1930s CCC project, and his statue at the center of it was set on fire before it was even unveiled. The two young men have often been painted as rivals and enemies, but the plaques and museums around Medora show admirable restraint in their depiction of the acquaintance, which was always cordial.

But the real hero of Medora is Harold Schafer. It would be hard to overstate the esteem in which he is held all through the community. There is the Schafer Heritage Center that recounts his rags-to-riches business career (he even won something called the Horatio Alger award, which I didn't google because I feel like the name says it all). The most impressive moment in the Medora musical is when Schafer, represented by a rider and horse, stands in a spotlight on a butte that forms the stage's backdrop, while disembodied voices recount his many deeds of kindness: bikes bought for little kids, college debts erased, operations paid for. In Harold Schafer, more than the Marquis and even TR, vision and enterprise and bigheartedness combine in a larger-than-life symbol of the story Medora wants to share with its audience.

The cynic will note that the foundation celebrating Schafer owes its existence to him. I tend towards the cynical but Medora broke me. There is genuine admiration and love in Medora for Schafer and his wife. The community in Medora seems to be the legacy of the Schafer couple, who remained involved with the town their entire lives, and it seems they deserve full credit for its warmth and liveliness, as well as its wonderful grab-bag composition. Some of the regular guests have been coming to the town for decades, as have many of the retiree volunteers. Over the course of the summer, a roster of them (over 600 in one season) man the attractions, and new volunteers all seem to arrive through word-of-mouth. Also vital are the many young seasonal workers who wear t-shirts that say "I'm a Schafer kid!" They come from all over the world, so any pretensions I might have had about the distance I had come (I'm looking at you, Minneapolis customs guy), I was disabused of during the drive from the airport.



It's this community that, to my mind, saves Medora from what one person suggested is its debt to Disneyland. That park opened in 1955, six years before Schafer turned his attention to Medora, and some parts of the town that were restored in the 1960s do recall its 'Mainstreet, U.S.A.' section. Several of the original 1880s buildings in the center of Medora are covered in clapboard paneling to resemble Old West saloons (to the crushing disappointment of myself and a lot of people back home, I didn't see any of those swing doors). I was told that the foundation plans to remove the clapboard and restore the original brick façade, but if it was indeed Schafer's intention to make Medora look more like the frontier town he and his intended audience would recognize, I don't entirely agree with one person I spoke with who called it a mistake.

I like to think there is another level to the TRMF's presentation of Medora which recognizes that every person of European descent who has come here projected onto the place what they expected to find on the frontier. Medora was founded in 1883, the same year Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show began the process of romanticizing the West. When the Northern Pacific Railroad opened this territory for settlement, they advertised it as the 'Wonderland Route.' Even Roosevelt—hailed as the one in tune with the locale—came to Medora with expectations: he wanted to see the expanse of the frontier and to kill himself a buffalo, before both were gone. Later he would claim that the "*romance* of [his] life" started in the Dakota Badlands.

Medora struck me as a town built and shaped by people who were aware of the symbiosis of its finality and its appeal. The places of interest around town mine its history for elements its audience will recognize; outlaws, rodeos, duels, etc. Yet everywhere there is such attention to detail, and the community's intimacy with the place is so tangible, that to my mind it never ascended into fantasy. But perhaps all of this is only how I chose to grapple with the onslaught of associations the surroundings called to my own mind, derived from every Western-themed movie or comic book I ever consumed as a child, and without distinction between fact and fiction. Medora is a Western theme town built in and

around a Western town, and its relationship to its history challenged me to sort through some of the myth and symbol of my own imagination of the West.

In that same vein, I hope that my initial disorientation was not a result of a kind of Old World snobbery. I came to believe it arose instead from a clash of ideas about what constitutes the historical authenticity of a place. Medora prioritizes experience; almost everything in town has been relocated, rebuilt or renovated to create a sense of time and place in a way that no other place I've visited in Europe has. And because the only reason I ever became an Americanist is that American history always felt more visceral and alive to me than European history, I am not above seeing its power. If I had to make sense of Medora, I'd say it is a genuine historical place modified for public consumption, which through a philosophy of historical tourism that strikes me as particularly American, finds an uncanny authenticity in the inauthentic.



Which brings me back to the question of what I, another twenty-something easterner with a weird Dutch name, found in the Dakota territory. What has stayed with me most is the communality that pervades the atmosphere of Medora. Before the musical starts every night, the president of the foundation sells popcorn on the stands. Conversations with my many hosts and guides were constantly interrupted by people who wanted to say hi. Joe Wiegand, the town's flagship TR re-enactor, was often approached by excited children calling "TEDDY!" I observed many conversations where people asked someone they had just met for last names and places of origin to find out that they were a friend of a cousin, a classmate of an uncle, etc. And very often they had what the foundation called 'a Harold story,' because their families had been coming to Medora for decades.

The sense of community extended over the other places I visited in western North Dakota, and it provided a strong link to the state's short history. The area's connection to Roosevelt is not a 'biggest-hotdog-in-the-world' bid for attention: it is ingrained and personal. In Dickinson, I visited the site where the Theodore Roosevelt Center plans to rebuild one of Roosevelt's ranch cabins. The logs were donated by ranchers in the surrounding area whose great-grandfathers ranched with Roosevelt. I love TR for his contradictions: the Progressive Victorian nativist and bellicose Nobel-peace-prize-winner. To North Dakota, he is the barrel-chested go-getter and conservationist who was here with their tempest-tossed ancestors to share in their strenuous life on the prairie. There's enough of him for everyone, which is why he's the best.

My space here is limited, so I cannot even do justice to all the impressions of a single week. I haven't even mentioned the sight of a massive buffalo passing within a foot

of the car I was in! Or how spot-on Roosevelt was when he said that the Badlands look the way Poe sounds. Or the compelling stories several people told me about the upheaval of the recent oil boom in western North Dakota. Or the awesome moment I told someone TR is my favorite president, and he replied "oh, not Trump?" Well done, sir, solid icebreaker.

My visit to North Dakota added nuance to my perception of Roosevelt and gave me the chance to discover a part of America that I probably would not otherwise have seen. I want to thank Randy, Susan and everyone at the Theodore Roosevelt Medora Foundation for their extraordinary hospitality, and all my various guides, chaperones, hosts and dinner companions who drove me around and answered my questions: James, my introduction to North Dakota and possibly the nicest person I've ever met (he's half-Canadian). Pam and Pam at the awesome TR Center in Dickinson, who somehow always know which one of them is being addressed. Aaron and Anna, who put a 'variety sample' of guns in my hands with no harm to anyone involved. Living historians Joe Wiegand (TR Joe), Larry Marple (TR Larry) and Julia Marple (Edith Roosevelt), who humored me in my attempts to theorize historical re-enactments. Fellow Medora-outsiders Shema and Sunny, who helped me crystalize some of the ideas in this account. Shout-out to Rolf, because it's not easy being him. Special thanks to Susan and Sharon who compiled my itinerary and who welcomed me into their respective homes in Bismarck and Dickinson. And thanks to Leontien and the Roosevelt Institute for American Studies, who put me on that suspicious flight route in the first place.



Renee de Groot
July 26, 2017
Amsterdam

Some of this information I get from *Theodore Roosevelt in the Dakota Badlands* by Clay S. Jenkins, *Mornings on Horseback* by David McCullough, and *Medora and Theodore Roosevelt National Park* by Gary Leppart. Most of this account is based on my own impressions and conversations with people I met in North Dakota. All photos and mistakes are mine.