

American Histories

There is a stone built into the walls of St. Mary's church in Medora, North Dakota—the oldest functioning church in the state—that reads, simply, 'Athenais'. The unpretentious stone is a monument to the grandiosely named mother and daughter of Medora de Vallombrosa, the town's namesake. Medora, the Marquise de Morès, only lived in this backwoods western town for a short period in the 1880s whilst her French husband, the Marquis de Morès, attempted to establish a meat-packing plant there. When this venture failed, the family moved to France. The Marquis joined an anti-Semitic league and was assassinated in suspicious circumstances in Algeria. The French authorities in Algeria almost certainly orchestrated the attack in the desert. During the First World War, his wife the Marquise risked her life to shelter wounded soldiers from both sides in her Cannes Château. Her palatial home became a hospital, where she herself nursed the injured. I had asked my guide about the remarkable word 'Athenias' engraved upon this apparently unremarkable church. The answer was a story spanning decades and continents, a story of the American dream, of murder and intrigue in Africa, and bravery in wartime Europe. But I was four days into my stay in Medora, and I wasn't surprised. I had learnt very quickly that Medora is a town built from stories, a town old enough that every brick and home and street has a history, and young enough that these stories are still pervasive. For a town of only 120 permanent residents, it is a place rich with American history.

The Roosevelt Institute for American Studies has been sending the recipients of the Theodore Roosevelt American History Award (TRAHA) to North Dakota for four years, as the primary aspect of the prize. Previously, winners were sent to New York City, until a group from Medora's Theodore Roosevelt Medora Foundation, travelling through Europe with the Theodore Roosevelt Association, extended their visit to Middelburg a few years ago, and set up a link with the RIAS. I thought there was something gloriously absurd in this prize—in an English girl from the rural north, formerly a Master's student at Leiden University, winning a Dutch prize to the most visited town in the least visited state, in the American Midwest. The border security officer apparently felt much the same. Fifteen hours into my twenty-two hour journey, at border control in Minnesota, I struggled to explain my admittedly implausible story. Amongst the officer's questions was the title of my thesis. 'Radicals, Conservatives, and the Salem Witchcraft Crisis: Exploiting the Fragile Communities of Colonial New England,' I told him. 'Are you a witch?' he asked, apparently deadpan. 'Yes,' I replied thoughtlessly. The look on his face reminded me that border security officers don't like to joke. After much reassurance on my part, and some askance looks on his, I was set free—apparently to commit acts of witchcraft across the United States with impunity.

I arrived in North Dakota in a storm, on a plane that seated barely forty people. The flight attendant read the safety notes from her phone then chewed gum and read a magazine on the seat behind me, whilst the pilot cheerfully announced there were 'a couple of pretty good storms!' going on. Although usually I love a pretty good storm, the lightning flashes from the window of the lurching plane did alarm me somewhat, and I closed my eyes until we landed on a runway lined with hay bales. This was Bismarck, the capital of North Dakota. I was picked up the next morning by the lovely Kaelee and Darla, who gave me a whirlwind tour of Bismarck, beginning at the

Heritage Center with its wall of stories. These were the histories of what had brought people to North Dakota, and what had kept them there. These stories were strange, and fascinating, and varied. They featured Russian immigrants and college students, the grandchildren of the first pioneers and people who had driven through this little-known state on a road trip, and stayed. They were written by Native Americans, refugees, immigrants. In my time in North Dakota, I learnt that everyone has one such story of their own.

I was taken care of throughout my trip by a wonderful, joyful and kind woman named Colleen, who escorted me throughout all my adventures. It was Colleen who drove me into Medora from Bismarck. We took the scenic route, traversing hundreds of miles of bleak prairie past points of historical and personal significance. We saw the Lewis and Clark Interpretive Center in Washburn, and Colleen's favorite place in North Dakota at the wide and hazy Missouri River. She pointed out coal mines and oil rigs for hours along the benignly named 'Enchanted Highway,' interspersed with scrap metal sculptures of deer, geese and fish that gave the road its name. Just miles before Medora, the prairie abruptly became the Badlands. This was the Painted Canyon, and looked to my mind just as grand as I imagine the Grand Canyon to look. We didn't have time to stop so we rolled on by with all the windows down in the early evening light. I was enthralled, and laughing in surprise, whilst Colleen was close to tears. She told me no matter how many times she sees the Badlands, they always affect her like this.

Before I came to Medora, researching the unknown state I was headed to, everything I read claimed that Theodore Roosevelt's time in the Badlands was a transformative period in his life, and that the Badlands hold a restorative power. Roosevelt came to the Medora in 1883 after the trauma of losing his wife and mother on the same day. It became a refuge, and for years he was an intermittent hunter and rancher around Medora. North Dakotans proudly and routinely repeat Roosevelt's claim: 'I never would have been President if it had not been for my experiences in North Dakota.' From the minute I entered Medora, driving through the Painted Canyon with Colleen, I understood. There was an unusual quality to Medora that was hard to explain. Nestled as it is amongst the coal-striped buttes of the 'burning hills,' it felt separated from everything. The streets were wide and empty. The sunsets were very vivid, although the air was thick with smoke from forest fires in Canada. The only trains were the loud rumbling freight trains twice a day, and there were few roads. I didn't see any planes. It was often very quiet, and the rest of the world seemed very far away.

I saw hundreds of buffalo all at once early one morning in the National Park. I ate wild plums and chokecherries there, and Colleen taught me the names of plants I had never seen before. I went for hikes and looked out further than I ever had in my life, with not a single building in sight. I saw an elk in the distance, and a thousand prairie dogs. I sat at a table that had been shared by, amongst others, Harriet Beecher Stowe, Susan B. Anthony, and Margaret Sanger. I saw a dead raccoon on the side of the road and everyone laughed when I was excited. I saw surprisingly nuanced, thorough, and enlightened museums and exhibits dedicated to Native American history. I had personal tours of the amphitheater stage, of the Marquis' Château, and of Medora itself. I heard live country music and the US National Anthem on a daily basis. I had tea with an 'Edith Roosevelt,' and spent a whole day with a 'Theodore Roosevelt' himself. I

watched a musical, a gospel show, and every day listened to the old-time piano music in the town square. I shot rifles and pistols and even occasionally hit targets. I went the North and South units of the Theodore Roosevelt National Park, and saw some of the most sublime landscapes I have seen in my life. I clambered up a creek on horseback on a lazy hot morning. And I spent my last evening in North Dakota in the Burning Hills Amphitheatre watching the Medora Musical with Colleen, half watching the show, and half watching the sun set over the Badlands.

The most fascinating aspect of Medora by far though is the people and their stories. Colleen told me about her childhood on a prairie farm, about how she would fall asleep out on her horse in the sun and he would jump feet in the air to avoid rattlesnakes—but he would never throw her off. Dan told me about his hometown of Rugby ND, the geographic center of North America. I spent a day with Joe, a Theodore Roosevelt reпрisor. He prefers the term reпрisor to impersonator, and told me it was a title he had come up with himself. In Article I of the US Constitution, Congress is given the power to grant Letters of Marque and Reпрisal. A privateer, acting in his role as a reпрisor could ‘capture and present for reward’ an enemy vessel and its contents. Joe, in his round wire-rimmed glasses, intends to ‘capture’ Teddy Roosevelt, and present him for reward. Randy told me stories about his friend Harold Schafer, the already-mythologised man who poured his life’s earnings into Medora. Randy’s favourite story to tell was how Schafer gave a hundred dollar bill to a waitress who had spilled a glass of water on him—she was so shocked she then spilled his wife’s water, too. Justin told me how he was far away from North Dakota once, driving in Louisiana to pick up his new dog, and his favourite song from the Medora Musical began to play, ‘Dakota.’ He introduced me to his dog, Dakota. I learned about sailing down the East Coast from Aaron and Anna (both from the most landlocked region in the US), about growing up in the west from Mandy, about stagecraft from Maddie, and about the history of the Badlands from Doug and Mary. The Medora cemetery was made up of more stories, with names eschewed in favor of such epithets as ‘the man that the bank fell on’ (a story I would like to hear more of).

It is the stories that make Medora so special. It negates the need for authenticity. Medora neither needs nor wants to be an accurate representation of 1883. It is living history. An authentic building from the late nineteenth century is a piece of history, and has its own stories. So does a 1980s replica. The amphitheatre Schafer carved into the rock isn’t natural, but it turns the coloured rocks behind into a stage visited by thousands almost every summer night. The electric escalator down to the stage doesn’t feel tacky but charmingly surreal. Some streets look like they are lying in wait for a gunfight to spill out of the saloon. Others are normal streets, where normal families go to work and school and live normal lives. The feudalesque Château on the hill was built by the real-life French Marquis. The somewhat kitsch shooting gallery was designed by a blind man. Every story is treated as history. And there is little else that could be of so much value to a student of American history as this town of American stories.

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September 2018

Thank you so much to the RIAS, the TRMF and the sponsors of the TRAHA for being so kind, helpful, and welcoming, and for giving me this remarkable opportunity. I especially want to thank Leontien and Colleen for making this all happen.