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Sunday, Jun. 25, 2006

The Self-Made Man

By Kathleen Dalton

The young Theodore Roosevelt did not strike most people as promising enough to become one of the nation's greatest Presidents. His august Knickerbocker family had grown rich from generations of shrewd investments in real estate, banking, glass importing and even hardware. But in his youth--and for that matter in his adulthood--T.R. showed very little interest in adding to the family fortune. When Roosevelt was a toddler, his asthma began to overshadow everything he did. As he grew, Theodore was too "delicate" for school--until Harvard he was educated at home--and too weak to stand up to other boys. On doctor's orders his father Theodore Sr.--called Thee by everyone in the family--and his mother Martha, called Mittie, rushed him to seashore resorts one day and mountain cabins the next in search of air to help him breathe. The sickly boy seemed unlikely to survive into manhood or amount to much if he did.

But Roosevelt's childhood weakness would turn out to be the provocation for the ferociously robust man he became. At about the time Theodore reached the end of boyhood, Thee, whom young T.R. adored, set off a crisis in their relationship. He insisted on making his favorite child into a strong man by directing him to embrace a life of vigorous exercise. He told him with characteristic sternness to throw off his invalidism by force of will. He ordered the boy to "make your own body." According to Theodore's sister, Theodore "resolved to make himself strong," to turn his back on his "nervous and timid" childhood and embrace manhood. The cure would come by way of sports and outdoor activity mountains to be climbed and harsh weather to be endured.

From that day forward, T.R. became a fierce champion of what he called the "strenuous life," a self-imposed struggle to live with vigor and determination. He boxed and pulled at weight machines, and his chest expanded along with his capacity to breathe. To conquer his fragility he began, wrote a friend, "constantly forcing himself to do the difficult and even dangerous thing." Years later, T.R. wrote in his autobiography that his life changed forever because he set fearlessness before him "as an ideal" that by dogged practice he achieved. Advised that he had a bad heart and shouldn't climb

stairs, the 22-year-old T.R. ascended the Matterhorn.

His self-making had costs. Throughout his life he repeatedly injured himself, even sustaining a boxing injury when he was 45 that on top of a cataract cost him the sight in his left eye. Obsessively seeking strength through exercise and adventure, he developed an equally overdone hatred for sissies, "cripples and consumptives," for anyone who could not measure up physically or who reminded him of his childhood shortcomings. He even told his sons he'd rather see them dead than have them grow up to be weaklings. He could never admit to frailty in himself. That was one reason his charge up Kettle Hill in the Battle of San Juan Heights with the Rough Riders, the volunteer cavalry unit he organized to fight in Cuba during the Spanish-American War, was so important to him. It proved to the world--and himself--that Roosevelt, a man who could talk very admiringly about war, had the strength and courage to fight in one. Although all his life, even when he was President, he continued to suffer on occasion from asthma he did not want the public to know of his illnesses. It didn't fit his self-image.

There was another dimension of the young Roosevelt's determined embrace of vigor: his wholehearted encounter with nature, sometimes as a naturalist, sometimes as a hunter. It shaped his life and his enduring image. Nature provided the setting for his struggle to make himself strong, and it opened up a world of scientific discovery at the same time. Roosevelt always remembered the day during his boyhood when he was walking up Broadway and spotted a dead seal on display in a market. Fascinated by the animal, he went back to see it again and again and eventually took its skull home to study. It was the first of countless natural-history projects.

Roosevelt began to collect animal specimens, including fireflies and squirrels. He filled his notebook with drawings and life histories of animals and insects, such as the common black ant, and then read Darwin and Huxley, who helped him ponder how *Homo sapiens* coexisted with the so-called lesser creatures. When the American Museum of Natural History unpacked 2,200 mounted creatures from the collection of the Verreaux brothers, French naturalists, the unabashed young Theodore donated his own mounted menagerie--a bat and 12 mice.

Delighted to see that his son loved nature, Thee took him camping and encouraged his interest in biology and dissection. Mittie was not so enthusiastic. Dead-animal stink and the reeking chemicals used to preserve hides upset the decorum of her parlor. But nature and the science of nature were the solace of Roosevelt's invalid childhood, a refuge where he could achieve intellectual mastery at a young age. Under his father's loving tutelage, T.R. fashioned himself into a naturalist whose

specimens can be viewed in museums today; scientists later welcomed him as an equal into their debates about how to classify species.

When Thee died of cancer at age 46, Theodore, then 19, was overcome by grief, but within a year he fell in love with a Brahmin beauty named Alice Lee, who found his stories of hunting in the Maine woods charming. Just before they wed in the fall of 1880, he went West to hunt with his brother Elliott. He hoped life in a saddle and breathing the open air all day would build up his strength once more. On the trail, he fell in love again, this time with the American West.

By the time he graduated from Harvard, T.R. had made himself the most experienced outdoorsman in a class filled with the sons of wealth and comfort. And his fierce determination to make his life count for something larger than his own interests sent him into writing and politics and the study of history. Indeed, even as he settled into married life with Alice and attended Columbia Law School, T.R. turned back to nature. He eventually bought two ranches in the Dakota Territory, where he could raise cattle to sell to the Eastern markets and at the same time retreat for health-giving hunts when his life in the East permitted.

Thus began the pattern of his adulthood, to work fiercely in the East for the causes he cared about, writing and politicking, until he was so weary that he headed West to regain his health. Nature replenished him when he was depleted. When Alice died in February 1884, shortly after giving birth to a daughter who would share her name, T.R. headed to the Dakotas to find solace for his grief.

When Roosevelt became President in 1901, he took his love of nature with him to the White House. When the strain of the job weighed on him, he stepped outside to watch the spring birds migrating. He identified the blackpoll warblers perched in the elms outside the Oval Office. And he kept a list of his sightings. Anytime he yearned for the strenuous life outside the White House, Roosevelt cheerfully dragged ambassadors and small boys to climb rock faces and ford streams in Rock Creek Park. Few could keep up with him.


In a way, President Roosevelt regarded the nation's trees and open land and animal inhabitants as prime constituencies whose interests he must serve. His dear friend forester Gifford Pinchot joined him in warning the public that the natural resources of the U.S. were not inexhaustible, that a timber famine was imminent and that coal, iron, oil and gas would run out someday. Congressional leaders didn't want to hear about game or tree protection or the resource needs of future generations.

Roosevelt took advantage of what he called the "bully pulpit" of the presidency to educate voters and legislators about the need for laws to protect natural resources.

In the spring of 1903, Roosevelt used a trip out West to dramatize his commitment to preserving wild places. With the nature writer John Burroughs he followed birdsongs in Yellowstone Park, then rode mules into Yosemite with John Muir, the great preservationist and founder of the Sierra Club.

Roosevelt and Muir slept under the stars and were covered overnight by a blanket of snow. T.R.'s journey from asthmatic ornithologist to hearty rancher turned President proved that a silver-spoon birth does not have to prevent a man from developing, over time, a broad vision and a rare kind of political gumption. All he required was a chance to make himself a new man by embracing nature and its creatures with his whole heart.

Dalton is the author of *Theodore Roosevelt: A Strenuous Life*

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Sunday, Jun. 25, 2006

The Strenuous Life

By ANDREA DORFMAN

THE EARLY YEARS

1858-83

Born in New York City on Oct. 27, 1858, Theodore Roosevelt is the second of four children of Theodore and Martha Bulloch Roosevelt. At age 6, T.R., his brother Elliott and friend Edith Carow (who would one day be his second wife) watch Abraham Lincoln's funeral procession from the home of T.R.'s grandfather on Manhattan's Union Square. He graduates magna cum laude from Harvard College in 1880 and marries Alice Lee a few months later, on his 22nd birthday. The next year, he becomes the youngest man ever elected to the New York state assembly. A Republican, Roosevelt serves three one-year terms, one as minority leader. During that time, he publishes his first book, on the War of 1812, which becomes required reading at the U.S. Naval Academy. He also buys a stake in the Maltese Cross, a cattle ranch near what is now Medora, N.D.

TRAGEDY

1884-85

On Valentine's Day 1884, less than four years after Roosevelt's wedding, his mother and wife die within hours of each other, in the same house. His first child, Alice, is just two days old. That summer he flees to Dakota to mourn, staying for two years (and acquiring a second ranch, Elkhorn), while his sister Bamie rears Alice. During this time, work is completed on Sagamore Hill, Roosevelt's spacious

home in Oyster Bay, N.Y., which will serve as the summer White House from 1902 to 1908.

A NEW BEGINNING

1886-97

In November 1886, Roosevelt, just 28, loses the race for mayor of New York City. A month later, he marries his childhood friend Edith Carow. They will have five children: Theodore Jr., Kermit, Ethel, Archie and Quentin. Once settled, he becomes increasingly involved in national politics, serving as a U.S. Civil Service commissioner in Washington and president of New York City's board of police commissioners before President William McKinley appoints him Assistant Secretary of the Navy on April 6, 1897.

THE ROUGH RIDER

1898

In May 1898, less than a month after the start of the Spanish-American War, Roosevelt resigns from the Navy Department to become lieutenant colonel of the 1st U.S. Volunteer Cavalry Regiment--the "Rough Riders"--and fight in Cuba. Soon promoted to colonel, he leads two charges in the Battle of San Juan Heights, which he calls his "crowded hour." Roosevelt is later nominated for, but denied, the Congressional Medal of Honor. He finally receives it in 2001.

RISE TO POWER

1898-1901

Not long after being discharged from the Rough Riders, Roosevelt is elected Governor of New York. During his two years in office, he signs nearly 1,000 bills into law, including one desegregating state schools. After being nominated as McKinley's vice-presidential running mate in 1900, he and McKinley defeat William Jennings Bryan and Adlai Stevenson by fewer than 900,000 votes. On Sept 6, 1901, six months after taking office, President McKinley is shot while touring the Pan American Exposition in Buffalo, N.Y. McKinley dies eight days later, and Roosevelt is sworn in as the 26th

President. Just 42, he is the youngest man ever to hold the office.

THE PRESIDENCY BEGINS

1901-04

Five months into his first term, T.R. launches his trust-busting campaign by suing the Northern Securities Co. He also establishes himself as a conservationist, creating Crater Lake National Park in Oregon (the first of five such parks he designates) and proclaiming Pelican Island, Fla., the first federal bird reservation. (He will set up 50 more.) Other highlights include his July 4, 1903, "Square Deal" speech in Springfield, Ill., and the treaty with Panama to build the Panama Canal.

SECOND TERM

1904-09

On Nov. 8, 1904, Roosevelt wins the election, saying, "I am glad to be elected President in my own right." His Dec. 6 message to Congress includes the so-called Roosevelt Corollary to the Monroe Doctrine, which justifies U.S. intervention in Latin America. In 1905 he establishes the Forest Service; gives away his niece Eleanor Roosevelt at her March 17 wedding to distant cousin Franklin Delano Roosevelt; brokers the Treaty of Portsmouth--signed on Sept. 5 in New Hampshire--ending the Russo-Japanese War; and persuades colleges to make football games less dangerous. The next year, T.R. mediates a dispute between France and Germany over Morocco and signs the Antiquities or National Monuments Act--which enables the President to protect sites like California's Muir Woods, New Mexico's Gila cliff dwellings and the Grand Canyon--as well as the Pure Food and Drug Act and a meat-inspection law. On Feb. 17, T.R.'s daughter Alice marries Ohio


Congressman Nicholas Longworth, and in November he and

Edith inspect the partly built Panama Canal--the first time a President has left the U.S. while in office. On Dec. 10, T.R. wins the Nobel Peace Prize for his role in ending the Russo-Japanese War; he is the first American Nobel laureate. Finally, on Dec. 16, 1907, T.R. dispatches the "Great White Fleet" on a round-the-world voyage that he believes is "the most important service that I rendered to peace."

T.R.'S LEGACY

1909-19

Soon after the Inauguration of his successor, William Howard Taft, on March 4, 1909, Roosevelt and his son Kermit sail to Africa, where they spend nearly a year shooting animals for the Smithsonian. In early 1912, T.R. announces his candidacy for the Republican presidential nomination, but the party renominates Taft--even though Roosevelt won all but one primary and caucus. The new Progressive (Bull Moose) Party promptly adopts T.R. as its candidate. That October he is shot while campaigning in Milwaukee, Wis., but gives a 90-min. speech before seeing a doctor. Democrat Woodrow Wilson is elected on Nov. 5, 1912; T.R., the runner-up, garners the largest percentage of votes ever by a third-party candidate. In the fall of 1913, T.R. travels to South America, where he gives lectures and explores Brazil's "River of Doubt." He nearly dies, but later says, "I had to go. It was my last chance to be a boy." After he returns to the U.S., war breaks out in Europe, and the Panama Canal opens to traffic. The U.S. enters World War I in April 1917; 15 months later, T.R.'s son Quentin, 20, is killed in France. Devastated, Roosevelt declines to run (again) for Governor of New York. On Jan. 6, 1919, T.R. dies in his sleep at Sagamore Hill of a coronary embolism. He is only 60.

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