

## Teddy Roosevelt and the Thieves

Teddy spent the early months of 1886 at the Elkhorn Ranch, a North Dakota establishment located on the banks of the Little Missouri River. Roosevelt and his two hunting companions, Bill Sewall and Wilmot Dew, purchased a “clinker-built boat” to ferry them across the frozen river. After a particularly unfruitful hunting expedition one morning, the men returned to the river to find their vessel had been cut from its rope and taken to parts unknown. A normal man might have lamented the loss of the boat, but Teddy didn’t take kindly to theft.

So he, Sewall, and Dew spent the next three days building a boat from scratch. Once the makeshift boat proved navigable, the trio set off in search of the stolen clinker. Roosevelt’s account in his 1888 memoir, *Ranch Life and the Hunting Trail*, details a miserable pursuit:

“For three days, the three men navigated the icy, winding river among the colorful clay buttes hoping to take the thieves captive without a fight. A shootout was a concern, for Roosevelt noted that “the extraordinary formation of the Bad Lands, with the ground cut up into cullies, serried walls, and battlemented hilltops, makes it the country of all others for hiding-places and ambuscades.” However, Roosevelt was certain that the thieves would not suspect that he was in pursuit, for they had stolen virtually the only boat on the river. Roosevelt, Sewall, and Dew battled against the elements, too, enduring temperatures down to zero degrees Fahrenheit”.

They finally reached the trio of thieves, who were led by a man named Finnigan — “a hard case” who “had been chief actor in a number of shooting scrapes”. Roosevelt and his men had little trouble overpowering the thieves and tying them up. But upon returning to the ranch with their quarry, they encountered an “impassable ice dam” that took them eight days to finally cross. Roosevelt entertained his freezing men and their bootless captives by reading from a copy of *Anna Karenina* that he brought aboard; by many accounts, he watched the

men for more than 40 hours without sleep. When the party reached land, Roosevelt performed his duties as deputy sheriff and arrested the three men, rather than ordering them to be hanged — a progressive legal decision, in those days.