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## Article Title: A Bully Show: Theodore Roosevelt's 1900 Campaign Tour Through Nebraska

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Article Summary: Theodore Roosevelt made stops in over forty towns in Nebraska during his four-day swing through Nebraska October 1 – 4, 1900.

### Cataloging Information:

Names: Theodore "Teddy" Roosevelt, William Jennings Bryan

Photographs / Images: Roosevelt emerging from the campaign train at Chadron; Sutton's speaker's platform in front of the town's fire bell tower; Broadside advertising Roosevelt's entry into Alliance on October 3, 1900; Postcard sent to Mable Brown of Mitchell Nebraska from Sidney, June, 1908; Roosevelt at the rear of the car waving his Rough Rider hat; Fremont people greet Roosevelt as his train pulled into the station; a Theodore Roosevelt kerchief featuring Roosevelt's noted Rough Rider hat in the center and his face around the border; Roosevelt leaning forward from the train giving speech at an unknown location

# A BULLY SHOW: THEODORE ROOSEVELT'S 1900 CAMPAIGN TOUR THROUGH NEBRASKA

By Andrea I. Paul

With the announcement in July 1900 that the Republican party would send vice-presidential nominee Theodore Roosevelt to Nebraska that fall, local Republicans were convinced that this strategy would enable the GOP to overturn William Jennings Bryan's 1896 plurality of 13,000 votes.<sup>1</sup> This 1900 version of "the swing around the circle" saw the New York governor break Bryan's 1896 record of 569 addresses as Roosevelt delivered 673 speeches around the country while traveling 21,209 miles. In Nebraska alone, Teddy made stops (some unscheduled) in over forty towns during the four-day period. More than 300,000 Nebraskans, fully a quarter of the state's population, saw the candidate during his 1,500-mile trek.<sup>2</sup>

If ever there was a political figure who seemed larger than life, it was Theodore Roosevelt. Henry Adams described his dynamic vitality as akin to the supernatural when he wrote that Roosevelt "more than any other man living, showed the singular quality that belongs to ultimate matter — the quality that medieval theology ascribed to God — he was pure act."<sup>3</sup>

Paradoxically the common man saw Roosevelt as someone much like himself. This was an erroneous, though no

doubt a politically advantageous, belief considering the patrician upbringing enjoyed by the young Theodore. His formative years included trips to Europe, private tutors, and a Harvard education. He had been a respected naturalist and historian before embarking on the road to political service. Although he had served as a New York state assemblyman, civil service commissioner under Presidents Harrison and Cleveland, New York City police commissioner, assistant secretary of the navy, and governor of New York (all before he reached the age of forty), Roosevelt was adopted by the people of the West as "our Teddy." This attachment was forged during his years as a Dakota ranchman, his exploits at the battle of San Juan Hill as the leader of the Rough Riders, and his authorship of *Winning of the West*. A typical view was expressed after Roosevelt's appearance in Fremont:

We, out West, like you, for while you have the culture and other virtues of the East, you also have the more rugged ones that bud and bloom in such luxuriance nowhere but in this Western country.<sup>4</sup>

Most of the Nebraska towns visited by Roosevelt, such as Fremont, had two newspapers, one Republican and one Democratic. Most contemporary newspapers avoided the middle ground of objectivity in favor of blatant and frequently vicious party loyalty. This orientation was reflected in the press reports covering all aspects of

Roosevelt's tour, from the differing estimates of crowd size, to evaluations of Roosevelt's physical appearance, to the overall effect his tour would have on election day. It was not unusual for one newspaper in a town to characterize Roosevelt's remarks as "to the point and smack(ing) of earnestness and sincerity"<sup>5</sup> while its counterpart was of the opinion that Roosevelt had "an insincere eye, a wolfish smile, a good voice and bad manners."<sup>6</sup>

Roosevelt began his tour of Nebraska at 8:05 A.M. on October 1 when he appeared before a crowd of some 1,000 people at Falls City. Unhindered by rainy weather the first day, Teddy's train traversed southern Nebraska, stopping at ten towns between Falls City and McCook and appearing before crowds totaling an estimated 30,000 people.<sup>7</sup> The grueling schedule continued on October 2 as he crossed central Nebraska from North Platte in the west to Plattsburgh on the Missouri River. The highlight of that day was his appearance in Lincoln to review a "monster" parade and speak to a throng of 40,000.<sup>8</sup>

The next morning the governor awoke in Broken Bow after an overnight dash across the state. He stopped in five more Nebraska communities before detouring briefly into South Dakota. His final day in Nebraska, October 4, saw Roosevelt follow the Niobrara and Elkhorn valleys from

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Roosevelt emerging from the campaign train at Chadron, where he was presented a pair of golden spurs on behalf of the national convention of Republican clubs and the Republicans of Nebraska. (NSHS-R781-1:7)



In Sutton the speaker's platform was placed in front of the town's fire bell tower, decorated with flags and bunting. It was capped with a canvas painting of the Republican candidates underneath the word "prosperity." (NSHS-B458-3)

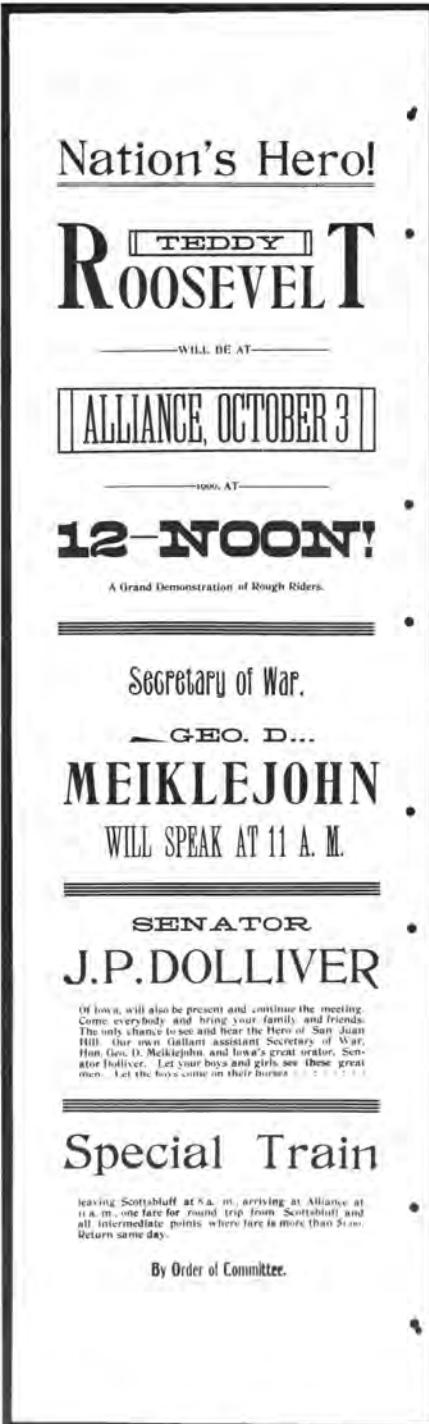
Valentine to Omaha, where he ended his Nebraska tour with appearances at five sites across the city, speaking not to a crowd, but to "a multitude."<sup>9</sup>

Two primary issues upon which the campaign revolved — prosperity and America's role in the Philippines — were constant themes of Roosevelt's talks. Addressing audiences for between five and twenty minutes, depending upon his schedule, Roosevelt characterized Bryan's 1896 prescriptions for what ailed the American financial system as "quack medicine." He stated that the doomsday prophecies Bryan had voiced during the previous campaign had gone unfulfilled and that "we have gone up, not down; Old Man Well Enough is Old Man Good Enough and leave him alone."<sup>10</sup> The Nebraska political audience of 1900 might have been the first to be asked to judge if it was better off than it had been four years earlier.

While the first issue of the campaign was focused upon the voter's pocket-book, the second was an issue that forced Americans to come to terms with the country's new role as a colonial power. Roosevelt argued that it was America's responsibility to serve as a paternalistic overlord in the Philippines, encouraging the natives to follow its example in politics, religion, and culture. This view was in keeping with the "white man's burden" school of thought. Believing that slavery had vanished in the South because the North had refused to relinquish the flag there, Roosevelt sought to equate that strategy with the Republican administration's Philippine policy. In Hyannis he concluded:

We should stay there (in the Philippines) and keep the flag there and slavery and polygamy will ultimately disappear. Take the flag away and you render these evils permanent.<sup>11</sup>

Roosevelt's arguments either were accepted wholeheartedly or dismissed scornfully by his listeners. While one reporter felt that Teddy "presented pertinent facts in such plain and simple manner that it caught the crowd by



Broadside advertising Roosevelt's entry into Alliance on October 3. (NSHS-MS654)



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This postcard was sent to Mable Brown of Mitchell, Nebraska, from Sidney on June 18, 1908. Courtesy of Andrea I. Paul.

storm,"<sup>12</sup> another saw only sarcasm and mudslinging, characterizing Teddy's presentation "as devoid of argument as a billiard ball of hair."<sup>13</sup>

Although nearly every newspaper argued about the candidate's effect on the crowds, the primary physical attribute discussed in the press was Roosevelt's famous teeth. As the *Omaha Daily News* reported,

The teeth first and the man next was the sequence in which the populace of Omaha regarded the republican vice-presidential candidate.<sup>14</sup>

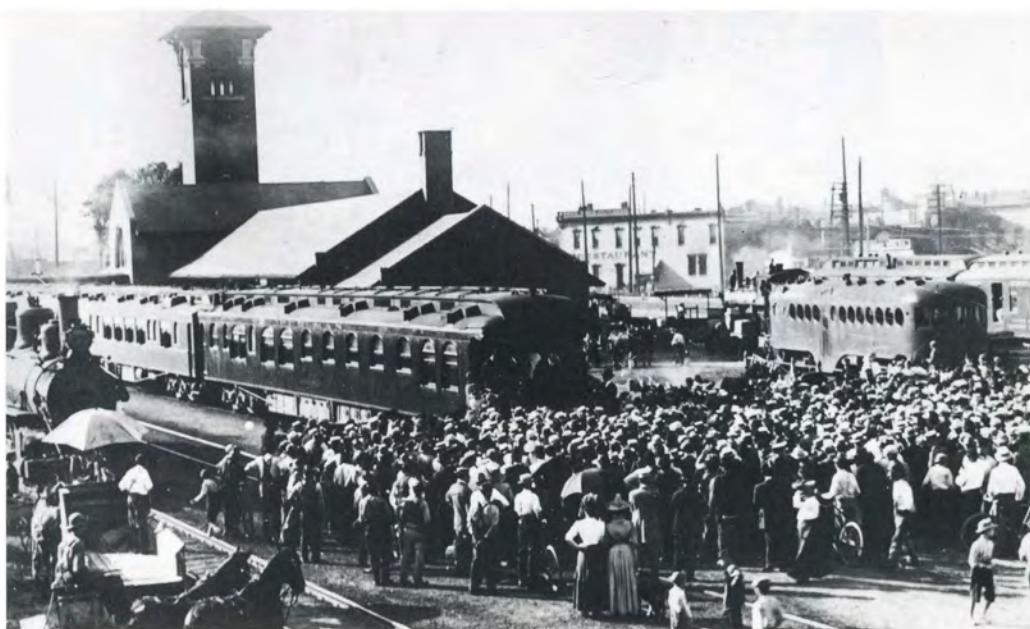
Many newspapers reported that the public wanted to judge for itself if the cartoonists had exaggerated the famous smile. Few were disappointed. According to one appraisal, Roosevelt "smiled that expansive smile of his which out-Bryan's Bryan more than 16 to 1."<sup>15</sup>

Roosevelt's appearances in Nebraska, if nothing else, enlivened the campaign. One newspaper wrote, There are none among all the republican cam-

## Theodore Roosevelt



Roosevelt is at the rear of the car waving his Rough Rider hat as his train pulls out of Alliance. The hat was a prop used to punctuate important points during his orations. (NSHS-W426)....  
(right) In Fremont people greet Roosevelt as his train pulled into the station. From there horsemen dressed as Rough Riders escorted the candidate to the speaker's platform in the city park. (NSHS-R781-1:4)





A Theodore Roosevelt neckerchief features Roosevelt's noted Rough Rider hat in the center and his well-known face around the border.  
(NSHS-7294-672)

## Theodore Roosevelt

paigners to compare with Roosevelt in either force or magnetism, and it would be easy to estimate the dullness of the campaign without him.<sup>16</sup>

Whether the excitement he brought to the state translated into votes is debatable. The prosperity enjoyed by many voters at the time probably induced them to vote their pocketbooks and keep McKinley in office. It is interesting to note, however, that of the thirty-five counties Roosevelt visited in 1900, twenty-two had supported Bryan in 1896. In November 1900 twenty-nine of the thirty-five voted to re-elect McKinley, who carried Nebraska by over 7,000 votes. In all but one of the seven counties favoring Bryan, McKinley was within four percentage points of victory. Only in Saunders County did the Republican standardbearers lose ground.<sup>17</sup>

Perhaps Roosevelt's plea to "leave well enough alone" was sufficient argument to satisfy the voters — or perhaps the view voiced by the *Neligh Advocate* that "Teddy is enthroned in the hearts of the Nebraska people"<sup>18</sup> was the true effect of the campaign tour. In 1904 when he ran for the presidency



Here at an unknown location, Roosevelt, leaning forward, appears anxious to meet his audience. (NSHS-R781-1:7)

Roosevelt's popularity was so overwhelming that it enabled him to claim victory in each of Nebraska's ninety counties. By then, Nebraska's love affair with Teddy Roosevelt was in full flower.

### NOTES

<sup>1</sup>*Omaha Bee*, July 23, 1900, 4; *Falls City Journal*, July 27, 1900, 7.

<sup>2</sup>John W. Bailey, Jr., "The Presidential Election of 1900 in Nebraska: McKinley over Bryan," *Nebraska History*, 54(Winter 1973), 560-84. See also Paolo E. Coletta, "Will the Real Progressive Stand Up? William Jennings Bryan and Theodore Roosevelt to 1909," *Nebraska History* 65(Spring 1984), 15-57.

<sup>3</sup>Henry Adams, *The Education of Henry Adams* (Boston and New York: Houghton and Mifflin, 1918), 417.

<sup>4</sup>*Fremont Daily Tribune*, Oct. 5, 1900, 5.

<sup>5</sup>*Aurora Republican*, Oct. 5, 1900, 5.

<sup>6</sup>*Hamilton County Register* (Aurora), Oct. 6, 1900, 5.

<sup>7</sup>*Omaha World-Herald*, Oct. 2, 1900, 1.

<sup>8</sup>*Nebraska State Journal* (Lincoln), Oct. 3, 1900, 1, 2.

<sup>9</sup>*South Omaha Daily Times*, Oct. 5, 1900, 1.

<sup>10</sup>*The Frontier* (O'Neill), Oct. 4, 1900, 1.

<sup>11</sup>*Omaha Bee*, Oct. 4, 1900, 2.

<sup>12</sup>*Alliance Times*, Oct. 5, 1900, 1.

<sup>13</sup>*Minden Courier*, Oct. 4, 1900, 8.

<sup>14</sup>*Omaha Daily News*, Oct. 5, 1900, 1.

<sup>15</sup>*Fremont Daily Herald*, Oct. 5, 1900, 4.

<sup>16</sup>*Kearney Democrat*, Oct. 4, 1900, 3.

<sup>17</sup>*Nebraska State Journal*, Nov. 10, 1900, 2.

<sup>18</sup>*Neligh Advocate*, Oct. 5, 1900, 1.