

Holt Collier

Guiding Roosevelt through the Mississippi Canebreaks

by *Minor Ferris Buchanan*

When Holt Collier was chosen to guide President Theodore Roosevelt on the now famous bear hunt of 1902, he was a legend in Mississippi. He had cut roads into the wilderness and was known to have killed in excess of 3,000 bear.

Theodore Roosevelt had become a noted hunter by founding the Boone & Crockett Club and hunting almost all types of American game including grizzly bear, buffalo and pronghorn sheep. One trophy that eluded him was the Louisiana Black Bear. He desperately wanted to experience the thrill of the mounted bear chase. Though Roosevelt and his company had immeasurable finances and manpower, almost every aspect of the hunt was the responsibility of the uneducated 56-year-old Collier. He found a site on the banks of the Little Sunflower River in Sharkey County, about 15 miles west of the Smedes Station, a small farming platform.

Through the Mississippi towns of Tunica, Dundee, Lula, Clarksdale, Bobo, Alligator, Hushpuckena, Mound Bayou, Cleveland, Leland, Estill, Panther Burn, Nitta Yuma, Anguilla and Rolling Fork, the train carried Roosevelt and his entourage the maximum speed of 70 miles per hour.

At Smedes Station, several hundred spectators greeted the President. Almost all were children and grandchildren of slaves. Holt was immediately impressed by the man and his manner. Roosevelt was short but seemed palpably massive being a full 200 pounds of muscle. According to Collier, the President introduced himself by walking straight to him with his hand extended. "He say, 'So dis is Holt, de guide. I hyar you's er great bear hunter.'"

The party set out immediately on a field road that took them four miles through the plantation. A second

four-mile stretch took them under an open forest carpeted with a knee-high briar tangle. The towering forest of virgin oak, ash and cypress was majestic. Then came the long stretch of Coon Bayou, a mud gully which attracted all types of wild game. On the other side of the bayou, lay the primal Delta swamp with briars and thickets 30 feet high and knit so tightly that the passage had been cut through like a tunnel.

The camp was pitched on the west bank of the Little Sunflower River, described then a fast-flowing, mud-banked stream of clear water. Between the tents, in the center of an open space, was a great cypress log, against which the camp fire was built. Dogs were everywhere. Someone had brought a large rustic armchair which was named the 'Throne'. The President was an imposing figure in it. Roosevelt announced that in the woods he was to be addressed only as 'Colonel'.

Roosevelt wanted to participate in the chase, but his demands for a shot on the first day and the timidity of his hosts condemned him to a stationary blind. He was placed to have a clear shot when the bear, driven by Holt's pack of about 40 dogs, would emerge from the cane.

Roosevelt and companion Huger Foote waited on the stand all morning. The sounds of the dogs faded and increased in intensity as Holt's pursuit ranged great distances in the canebrakes. After mid-afternoon the hunters broke for camp to have a late lunch.

Collier was annoyed that the stand had been abandoned. "That was eight o'clock in the mornin" when I hit the woods an' roused my bear where I knowed I'd fin him. Den me an' dat bear had a time, fightin' an' chargin' an' tryin' to make him take a tree. Big ole bear but he wouldn't climb nary



tree. I could have killed him a thousand times. I sweated myself to death in that canebrake. So did the bear. By keeping between the bear and the river I knew he'd sholy make for that water hole where I left the Cunnel.

After a while the bear started that way and popped out of the gap where I said he'd go. But I didn't hear a shot, and that pestered me....It sholy pervoked me because I'd promised the President to bring him a bear to that log, and there he was."

At the very spot Holt had planned for the kill, the bear went to bay on the

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dogs. Collier was in a dilemma. He had been given specific orders to save the bear for Roosevelt, who was not to be found, and he had to protect the dogs from the deadly beast.

Holt dismounted, shouting at the bear. He quickly approached the bear with his rifle in his left hand and the lariat in his right. A rider rushed to camp for the President.

The dogs and the bear fought in a ferocious chorus. It wasn't until the bear rose to his full height that Holt noticed his prize dog caught in the beast's mighty death grip. He clubbed the rifle and leaped into the battle. He shouted again, and swung the stock of his gun through an arc that landed at the base of the bear's skull. The bear was shaken, but he rose up, released the lifeless dog and stood a head higher than Holt. With the barrel of his rifle bent and useless, Collier had only one option. He positioned himself beside the raging animal, put his foot between the bear's legs, and dropped the lariat over his neck. The injured bear was soon tied to a nearby willow tree.

Minutes later Roosevelt and Foote arrived. Roosevelt dismounted, ran into the water, and though everybody urged him to kill the bear, he declared that he would not shoot an animal tied to a tree. Roosevelt was in awe of the feat he was witness to.

For the entire hunt, Holt Collier was the center of attention. Sitting apart, he spoke simply and fearlessly, unmindful of any difference in social status from the powerful men about him. He told the story of his life, how he had killed white men and had gone unscathed, how he had met Union soldiers in hand-to-hand conflict, and how he fought off a band of vigilantes. His background and experience held the President's imagination as he told stories of his years as a slave, his service as a Confederate scout, and his many years hunting bear.

The press had a field day with the story. Headlines and cartoons depicted the President as having been unprepared by satisfying his appetite. The story about the President being out-played by a lowly



guide invited ridicule. The account of Holt Collier's heroic efforts received detailed coverage.

At the conclusion of the hunt, Roosevelt declared that Holt Collier "was the best guide and hunter he'd ever seen", and that "before he is three years older, he will go back to the Little Sunflower, and, with Holt Collier as his only guide, will chase bears until he comes up with one and kills it, running free before the dogs."

Clifford Kennedy Berryman ran two editorial cartoons of the incident on the front page of *The Washington Post*. The cute bear cub he drew immediately became a popular Roosevelt mascot.

Morris Michtom saw the Berryman cartoon and designed a toy bear. He called it 'Teddy's Bear.' His success selling the toys for a dollar and fifty cents resulted in formation of the Ideal Toy Corporation in 1903. When Michtom died in July 1938, the company was selling more than 100,000 bears each year.

This article is a condensed version of excerpts from the biography of Holt Collier by Minor Ferris Buchannan.