

Legends of the Hunt

John Seery-Lester

The President slipped quietly from the saddle, still holding the reins and clutching his rifle. He urged the sturdy white horse to follow as he clambered up the steep rocky hillside.

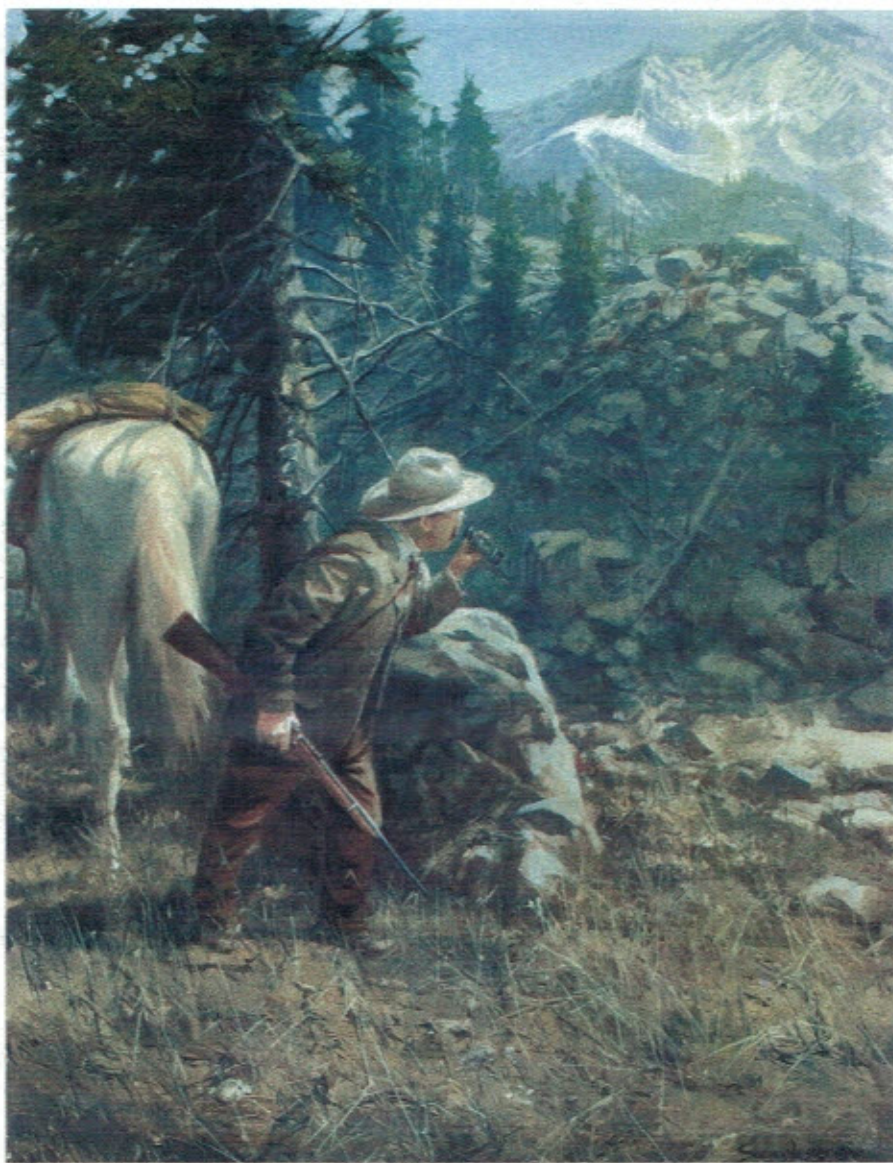
Ahead of him and in the distance he could hear the dogs barking closing in on their prey. Anxious not to lose his trophy, he pulled at his stubborn mount as he and his party struggled up the steep slope, navigating the loose rocks and random deadfalls.

He was determined not to miss this bear. It had been an exhausting hunt over difficult terrain. The hounds, some 26 in all, had been distracted along the way and several times had chosen to follow other scent trails.

As the men reached the top, they were able to see the bear in the distance across a deep valley. Its shiny black coat gleamed in the sunlight as the dogs crowded around it at the top of a narrow ledge. The hunters waited, hoping for a clear shot. In the meantime, the bear slipped away and out of sight.

It was 1905, not long after Theodore Roosevelt won the election of 1904, and he had joined Phillip B. Stewart of Colorado and Dr. Alexander Lambert of New York for a bear hunt in Colorado. Their guides were John Goff and Jake Borah, both of whom had gained a reputation as the best bear hunters in the mountains.

The guides brought a large pack of some 30 dogs with them, 26 hounds and four half-breed



TR'S BEAR HUNT

A president gets his black bear and makes a new friend.

terriers. In addition, the party comprised a big pack train with additional horses, packers, wranglers, and an excellent cook.

The luxurious camp amenities surprised TR. He was most happily impressed with the quality of the mess equipment and the folding

camp tables and chairs, none of which he had enjoyed on previous hunts. The party ate well, departing each day after a hearty breakfast and returning some 12 hours later to an excellent sit-down supper.

TR's mount, like the other horses, was a stout and rugged

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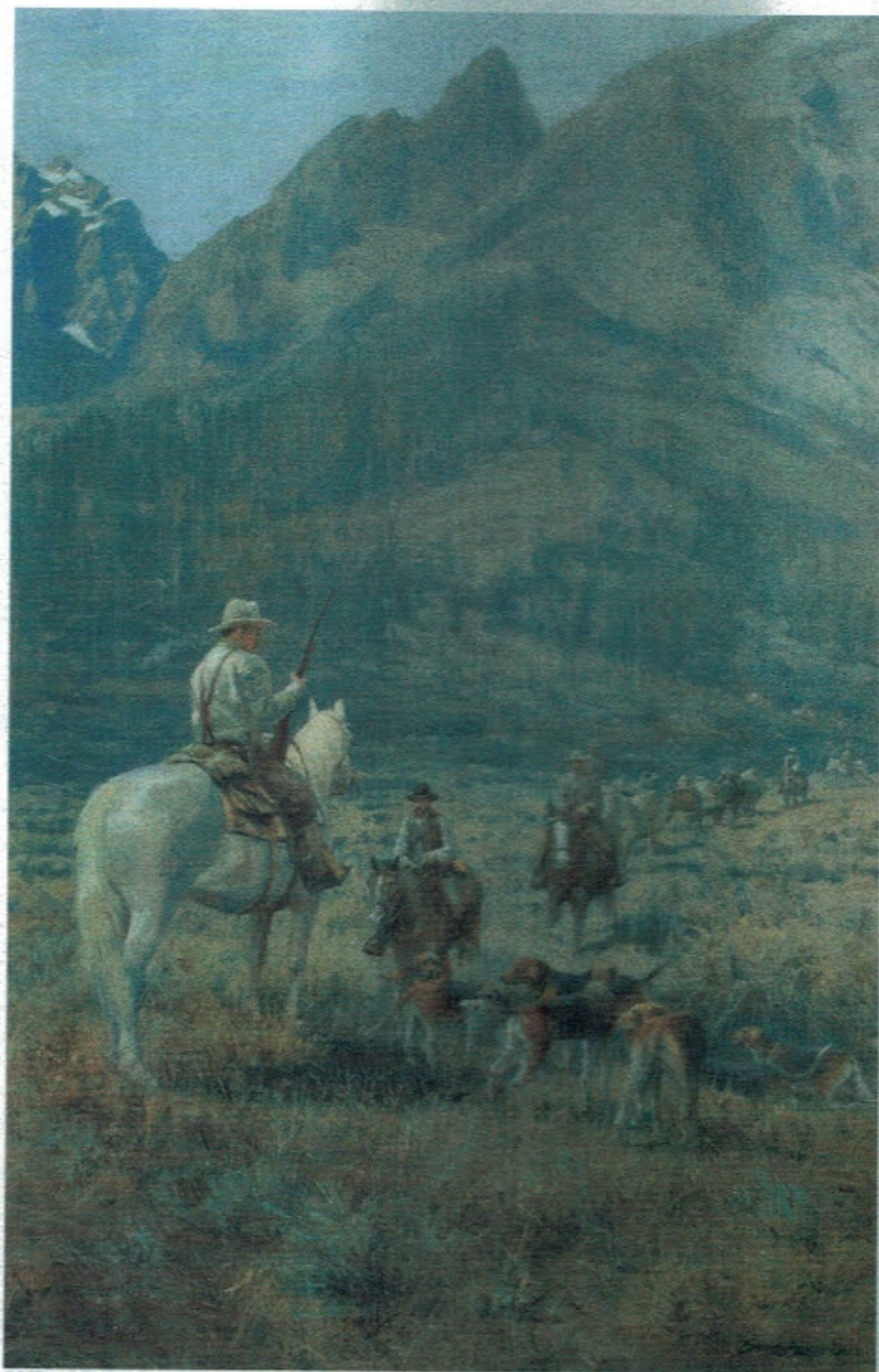
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RESTING THE HOUNDS

animal. It didn't look pretty, but it
was a tough and sure-footed beast,
ideally suited for climbing the
slippery mountainsides.

The dogs were also excellent
climbers. They dashed with ease
back and forth along the rocky
ridges, looking from a distance like
a swarm of ants. Each dog had a
different temperament, particularly
the mixed-breed terriers. Some
looked more like bulldogs, while

some were tall and wiry. Some were
friendlier than others, but all were
tough fighters.

One in particular, by the name of
Skip, enjoyed sitting up on the
saddle with anyone who would
oblige him. Although the little tan
terrier was quite capable of walking
40 miles a day, he enjoyed hitching a
ride when he could. TR became so
attached to Skip that he took him
home for his children after the hunt.

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TR AND SKIP

On the first day of hunting the party had split, some going after a bobcat, while TR took a number of the dogs and followed the tracks of a big bear. The light was fading fast, so TR decided to resume tracking the bear the next day.

When they returned to camp, the other group came back with a 35-pound bobcat, but some of the dogs had incurred injuries during the chase.

TR was very aware that there had been a decrease in the number of bears in Colorado. At that time, grizzlies had become very scarce, so he knew they were more likely to encounter a black bear (the cinnamon phase was considered a brown bear at that time).

At first light the next day, while some of the dogs nursed their injuries from the bobcat hunt and an unexpected encounter with a badger, the healthy dogs and the hunters set out to pick up the trail of the bear.

They returned to where they'd last seen the animal the previous afternoon. Phillip Stewart remembered sighting it on the

opposite side of a deep valley. As they neared the spot, the men could see the faded tracks, but were uncertain of their freshness and whether or not they were worth following.

Jake kept the hounds back while they tried to determine if the trail was fresh enough to follow. But before they could decide, one of the older hounds slipped away and took off in earnest. When they couldn't call it back, the remainder of the hounds were loosed.

By the dogs' determined run, TR soon realized they were on a fresh scent. The hillsides with a northerly exposure, however, still had deep snowdrifts along the ridges. But an overnight freeze had created a hard crust that made the bear's tracks hardly visible and difficult to follow.

The men rode and sometimes walked their horses up and over the rugged terrain. Pinyons, boulders, and assorted spruce deadfalls covered many of the gullies and ravines. They worked hard to keep up with the dogs, which were scattered over the hillsides.

TR wondered if they'd lost the scent, when suddenly he heard

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RESTING THE HOUNDS SKETCH

barking, which signaled the bear was being brought to bay.

After a hard climb and finally reaching the top of a hill, TR tethered his horse to a tree and glassed the opposite slope where the bear was holding its own on top of a rock surrounded by the dogs.

TR raised his rifle but could not fire for fear of hitting the hounds. The bear slipped out of view, while Roosevelt waited patiently. Finally, the bruin appeared beneath a tree, and TR was able to pull the trigger.

The shot echoed through the gully as the bear rolled down into the rocky ravine, fighting off the dogs as it tumbled. When the bear reached the valley floor, TR could see it still had a lot of fight in it and was retaliating savagely as the hounds closed in, yelping with excitement.

TR left his mount and raced down the hill, slipping and sliding into the ravine to meet his quarry and put an end to the havoc.

President Roosevelt put two more rounds into the big black bear, which rolled to its final resting place between rocks and deadfalls at the foot of the ravine.

Although some of the dogs were injured, one or two seriously, TR considered it to be a good hunt and wrote about it extensively in his book, which he dedicated to his friend, John Burroughs.