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"IRON HIM, COLONEL!" THEODORE ROOSEVELT HUNTS DEVILFISH IN PUNTA GORDA, FLORIDA

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The seven men aboard the floating houseboat in the calm waters of the Gulf of Mexico near Punta Gorda, Florida in late March 1917 were hunting manta rays (*Manta birostris*), commonly called devilfish. Early in the morning of March 26 the men left the protected confines of the heavy houseboat and boarded a smaller launch heading for the hunting grounds. The manta expert in this group was Russell J. Coles, who had established himself by collecting specimens for the American Museum of Natural History in New York. The unquestioned leader of the group, however, was former president Theodore Roosevelt, for whom this expedition was organized; Roosevelt wanted to hunt devilfish and capture a large one for the museum. Out in the Gulf of Mexico the men looked for large dark patches in the water, indicating a manta lay just below the surface; it wasn't long before they spied one. With harpoon in hand Roosevelt positioned himself at the

front edge of the boat ready to hurl his weapon when the boat approached his prey.

Theodore Roosevelt has a well-earned reputation as a big-game hunter and naturalist/conservationist. He is most closely identified as a hunter of animals that roam the prairies, plains, forests, and jungles of North America, South America, and Africa, but he is not known as a fisherman and rarely hunted animals of any kind in Florida. His 1917 expedition to Punta Gorda was Roosevelt's first significant foray as a hunter of the big game of the sea, and this expedition has more closely identified him with the state of Florida. Because he was not a well-known or active fisherman little has been written about that aspect of his life. Roosevelt's own autobiography, published in 1913, does not address fishing in any way since his expedition in Punta Gorda occurred in 1917 (Roosevelt 1913). Roosevelt's uncle, Robert Barnwell Roosevelt, published two books on fishing in the 1860s, but even that did not spark Theodore's interest in fishing (Roosevelt 1862, 1865). Douglas Brinkley's *The Wilderness Warrior* also established that Roosevelt had no interest in fishing (Brinkley 2009, 71). Edmund Morris's superb three-volume biography of Roosevelt addresses fishing only sporadically. While Morris does include a brief description of the trip to Punta Gorda, he generally confirms that Roosevelt had no interest in fishing (Morris 2010, 482-484, 708n). The first publication that

was devoted specifically to Roosevelt as an angler was Paul Schullery's 1982 article in *The American Fly Fisher*, and it offers only one paragraph about the former president's Punta Gorda visit (Schullery 1982, 20-27). More recently Roosevelt's great grandson, Tweed Roosevelt, wrote an article that explained the former president's preference for hunting over fishing; this publication also devoted only one paragraph to the Punta Gorda expedition (Roosevelt 2014, 38-43). It's clear that Theodore Roosevelt was not overly interested in fishing, which explains the dearth of published materials on that topic.

Though Roosevelt loved and studied Florida, his personal connection to the state was not as strong as other parts of the country, and there is consequently less written about his time in Florida. His autobiography does address Roosevelt's 1898 stay in Tampa, but only in terms of getting his unit ready to move to Cuba to fight in the Spanish-American War. Historian Douglas Brinkley addresses Roosevelt's curiosity about Florida, writing that the former president "studied the state's weather and its terrain, and kept records of its climate. He loved every little thing that grew in wild Florida, studying the beach mice, the green anoles, the gopher tortoises, the ants, the sea turtles, and the osprey, all with biological sympathy" (Brinkley, 8). The published record of Roosevelt and Florida is largely dedicated to his interest in conservation and as a

naturalist, not as a hunter. Theodore Roosevelt's fishing expedition to Punta Gorda in 1917 shows the former president in a different light--as a hunter of the big game of the sea where he made a more personal connection with the Sunshine State.

The twenty-sixth president spent a significant amount of time hunting and was clearly not interested in being a fisherman by any stretch of the imagination. He recounted that when he started reading about natural history he was drawn to "beasts and birds and the more formidable or interesting reptiles and fishes" (Roosevelt 1918, 322). Roosevelt's curiosity about only the most "formidable" fishes is telling. This suggests he was not at all interested in bass, trout, or perch, and catching them clearly held no excitement for him. This was a characteristic that his sons recognized in him; Kermit wrote that his father "detested fishing" and Theodore Jr. observed, "my own father was not a fisherman." (Schullery, 21, 22). Roosevelt's close naturalist friend Gifford Pinchot echoed these sentiments when he wrote "T.R., who was a hunter, but no fisherman...." Theodore himself stated outright that he disliked fishing: "My brother and cousin were fond of fishing and I was not..." (Pinchot 1936, 221). Any interest Roosevelt had in fishing started and ended with it being a way to provide food for his table - and only during hunting trips. There is a simple explanation for this, articulated well by Bill Sewall, who guided Roosevelt in his early nature

adventures: "[Roosevelt] did not like to sit still so long" (Schullery, 21). Tweed Roosevelt concurs with Sewall's conclusion and described his great grandfather's preference this way: "It is my contention that fishing did not offer TR anything like the challenge of big game hunting, nor did fishing produce the same kind of high" (Roosevelt 2014, 43). These explanations go a long way toward understanding why Roosevelt wanted to hunt manta rays in Florida despite his significant lack of interest in fishing. Devilfish provided a prey that had to be tracked and hunted, while ordinary fishing was largely a sedentary activity. Roosevelt, an advocate of the strenuous life, needed action. He clearly distinguished between fishing and catching devilfish in Florida.

The devilfish that Roosevelt wanted to hunt could be found in abundance off the Gulf coast of Florida, in Punta Gorda. Officially incorporated as Punta Gorda in 1887, the town was settled shortly after the Civil War and initially known as "Trabue," after Isaac Trabue who purchased property there in 1884. Upon completing his land purchase Trabue began lobbying railroad companies to extend their lines southward from Tampa to his land holdings. Trabue even traveled to Boston in 1884 to meet with officials of the Florida Southern Railroad, promising half of the lots in the village he was creating. The railroad accepted the offer and on July 24, 1886 the Florida Southern Railroad reached

Trabue, making the town more accessible. Within a year-and-a-half, on December 7, 1887, the town was incorporated as Punta Gorda (in DeSoto County) much to the chagrin of Trabue who hoped the town would retain his name (Brown 1991, 146-153; Frisbie 1974, 44-45).



Peace River and Tampa Bay areas in the 1890s.
Drawn by Ted Starr.

In the thirty years between Punta Gorda's incorporation and Theodore Roosevelt's arrival the town grew slowly, and increasingly became known as a fishing center. By 1900 the town's population grew to 860, but the growth of Tampa siphoned off some potential economic expansion. A future state governor, Albert Gilchrist, settled in Punta Gorda after helping the railroad survey the area, and the town became more closely identified

with the fishing industry. Early in the 20th century Punta Gorda became something of a tourist attraction, as did much of the Gulf coast of Florida, especially for visitors who were interested in fishing. It was Punta Gorda's unique access to the Gulf that attracted Russell Coles there in 1914 and 1915 to hunt for devilfish specimens for the American Museum of Natural History.

In 1917 the leading expert on *Manta birostris* was Danville, Virginia resident Russell J. Coles, whom the *New York Times* called the "king of devil-fishermen" (*New York Times*, May 22, 1915). At first glance, Russell Coles, described by the *New York Times* as resembling a younger President Taft, may not have appeared as the king of the devil-fishermen. However, he earned his reputation. A successful tobacco leaf dealer by trade, Coles invested much of his earnings into his fishing endeavors. He devoted three to four months of every year to fishing, running his boat down the coast of Florida or up the Atlantic seaboard to Newfoundland in pursuit of not just ordinary fish, but devilfish. Devilfish grew to enormous sizes and could quite easily swamp a well-sized boat in the struggle of catching one. Devilfish gained a reputation among fishermen as being the most difficult creatures in the world to kill. Despite this, Coles had mastered conquering even the largest of devilfish. Upon killing them, he meticulously measured, weighed, studied, and indexed his data from his catches.

Finally, he sent his specimens to various museums. He was even made a lifetime member of the Museum of Natural History in New York for his donation of his eighteen-foot devilfish, then the largest specimen in the world (Coles 1916, 217-227). Coles authored several scientific articles on devilfish and other species of rays and designed a special "spade lance" for the capture of the mantas. If there was a man qualified to be Roosevelt's guide to devilfish hunting, it was Russell Coles.

Theodore Roosevelt first encountered the topic of devilfish while reading William Elliott's 1846 *Carolina Sports by Land and Water* as a boy (Roosevelt 1917, 293). The book's first chapter was titled "Devil Fishing" and described how these mantas were hunted and captured, something that certainly would have appealed to young Theodore. Later, in the fall of 1916 Roosevelt read the entertaining article Russell Coles wrote about his expedition to capture a devilfish for the American Museum of Natural History in New York. Not only did the thrill of the hunt appeal to the former president, but the fact that Coles had a scientific interest in the mantas attracted his attention. After reading the article, Roosevelt invited Coles to visit him at Sagamore Hill, and the two had a lengthy conversation followed by an exchange of letters. The result of the visit and correspondence was an invitation for Roosevelt to join Coles in a devilfish hunt in the spring of 1917. They planned a month-long excursion on

Florida's Gulf coast, but Roosevelt's interest in the April 2, 1917 session of Congress, during which a declaration of war was expected, cut the trip down to about a week.

The national and Florida media picked up the story and Roosevelt's trip to the sunshine state was big news. The *Washington Post* was the first newspaper to announce the trip, in a March 14, 1917 article, which also revealed Roosevelt's destination as Punta Gorda. The *Post* also informed readers that the hunters would use a new spade lance that Coles had invented. The *Tampa Tribune* likewise covered Roosevelt's trip, but was unclear of his destination, reporting that "[Roosevelt] declined to say what part of the State he would visit." The Tampa paper also quoted the former president as saying he would only be a "looker-on," curiously suggesting he would not be an active participant (*Tampa Tribune*, March 24, 1917). The *St. Petersburg Evening Independent* likewise picked up the story of Roosevelt's visit. Calling the former president "Strenuous Teddy," the *Independent* was also uncertain about his destination, although it did accurately suggest Punta Gorda (*St. Petersburg Evening Independent*, March 24, 1917). Newspapers from Florida's neighbor to the north, Georgia, also guessed at Roosevelt's landing place, with the *Savannah Morning News* suggesting he was headed to Fort Myers (*Savannah Morning News*, March 24, 1917). Regardless of the papers' accuracy,

the nation was interested in Roosevelt's trip.

Roosevelt set out from New York on March 23, 1917 and arrived in Punta Gorda, Florida on March 25, having stopped in Jacksonville en route to deliver a hawkish speech on American participation in the conflict then raging in Europe. The *Tampa Tribune* described his arrival in Punta Gorda on the 25th this way: "Punta Gorda went wild over Teddy today. One thousand people, whites and blacks, all ages and both sexes, deserted churches and gave him a noisy and enthusiastic welcome as he stepped from his train at 11 o'clock." The newspaper recorded Roosevelt's response when asked how he liked Punta Gorda: "Bully, Wonderful, Delighted" (*Tampa Tribune*, March 26, 1917). The 1910 census records the population of the city of Punta Gorda at 1,013, so if a thousand persons showed up to welcome Roosevelt, it would encompass virtually the entire city, a remarkable testament to the former president's popularity. After eating lunch at the Seminole Hotel with Coles, the local Dixie Orchestra serenaded the two and Roosevelt responded with some patriotic remarks to the several hundred residents who remained. Then they set off for the waters of the Gulf.

Roosevelt and Coles were accompanied by five other men, including Coles' private secretary and four veterans of previous devilfish expeditions. Only one of the crew was a local Floridian, Captain Jack McCann, who hailed from the Keys. Captain

Jack, as Roosevelt called him, had fished the Gulf and Atlantic coasts for over thirty years, had trained hundreds of fishermen, and possessed an intimate knowledge of the local waterways. The three other fishermen were from Morehead City, North Carolina and had been trained by Coles himself; they were Captain Charley Willis, Roland Phillips, and Mart Lewis. Roosevelt later described the four crewmen: "It would not have been possible to find four better men for their work, nor four better companions, from every standpoint, for an outing of this character" (Roosevelt 1917, 294-295) Coles' private secretary, A.A. Rice, rounded out the crew.

After Roosevelt's impromptu remarks at the Seminole Hotel, he and Coles boarded a small passenger and freight boat, as Coles described it, and sailed roughly 35 miles down the coast to their "floating camp" in the waters off the east coast of Captiva Island where the rest of the crew awaited them. The former president described their base, or floating camp, as "a one-room house aboard a flat scow" (Roosevelt 1917, 294). It was roughly fifty feet by twenty feet, with the house taking up most of that space; the crew cooked, ate, and slept in that one room. The crew spent the night of March 25 on board the boat and woke at dawn to search for devilfish. The hunters headed southward early on the 26th toward the southernmost tip of Captiva Island, where six of the men left their camp vessel and boarded a smaller,

lighter launch for the short trip to the hunting grounds; one of their number, probably A.A. Rice, remained on the camp vessel.

The weapon of choice in hunting devilfish was a harpoon, which practitioners called the "iron." Before boarding the launch Coles instructed Roosevelt on the construction and proper use of the instrument. The harpoon consisted of an eight-foot wooden handle and an eight inch pointed and sharpened iron head. Connected to the harpoon is a length of rope, and on one end of the rope is attached a drogue, a thick heavy, square board. The harpoon, or iron, was hurled at the manta ray, and in the ensuing struggle the wooden handle frequently came loose or was outright smashed. The drogue, connected to the rope, creates resistance for the devilfish as it tries to swim away and escape; often the wounded animal dragged the boat some distance before it succumbed. When the manta tired sufficiently the hunter used a lance to kill the prey. The Roosevelt expedition had six harpoons and three lances; the lances were in fact specially made for Coles based upon his own design. Six harpoons and three lances seemed an ample number, even considering some of the harpoons might likely be destroyed during the hunt.

The primary purpose of the trip was for Roosevelt to harpoon a devilfish or two, so he was the man with the harpoon at the ready when the crew set out after breakfast. It was not long before they spotted a

large dark spot just below the water's surface, a manta to the experienced men but indistinguishable to Roosevelt. Both Coles and Roosevelt stepped to the front of the boat with their harpoons, side-by-side, ready to hurl the sharp weapons at the devilfish. As the target swam swiftly close to the boat Roosevelt threw his harpoon into the sea, but alas the manta was too fast for the former president. He missed his target. Roosevelt attributed his miss to not allowing for the manta's speed and the boat traveling in the opposite direction (Roosevelt 1917, 299). Roosevelt gathered up his harpoon and prepared himself for another try.

The hunters did not have to wait long for a second opportunity; within a few minutes a small group of devilfish was spotted a short distance away. These mantas were not swimming but rather lying close to the water's surface, probably easier targets for the inexperienced former president. Roosevelt again positioned himself at the front of the boat, harpoon in hand, as the vessel crept forward to get into striking range. Coles was at his side with a second harpoon. As Roosevelt raised his arm to throw the harpoon, Captain Charley Willis shouted "iron him, colonel!" This time Roosevelt "ironed" his target. He hit his prey; immediately afterward Coles threw a second harpoon into the manta, and the real struggle began. The male ray swam away furiously, dragging the boat and crew behind. This part of the death struggle lasted eleven minutes, and in this time the manta dragged

the boat and crew a half mile. Eventually the beast tired and Roosevelt was able to jab the lance into it twice killing the manta. That the struggle lasted eleven minutes was a testament to the strength of the devilfish, as Roosevelt's harpoon penetrated the heart. The crew dragged the manta to the nearest beach and dropped him off far enough that the tide would not take it away, and headed out to capture another.

Within a few minutes the crew was out in the Gulf and had spotted another prey, a larger female specimen. The manta was heading straight at the vessel a few feet below the surface. Again both Roosevelt and Coles had harpoons ready as the vessel approached the prey, and both men hurled their irons into the devilfish. It was fortunate that both men threw harpoons because Coles' did not stick. In response, the crew brought the vessel close to the manta and Roosevelt ironed it again. This devilfish fought longer and harder than the first, pulling the men and boat for two miles over a twenty-six minute period. This manta ray fought so hard that one of the crew allegedly shouted "You've got a damned Spanish devil fish, Teddy! It wants to kill us!" (Williams 1993, 290). Finally when it tired Roosevelt used the lance to kill her. The crew dragged this second devilfish to shore to measure both and make other scientific notations. The *New York Times* reported that the crew was impressed with Roosevelt's prowess with the harpoon, calling him a "miracle

worker" (*New York Times*, April 4, 1917).

The first ray measured thirteen feet, two inches, tip to tip, while the second was sixteen feet, eight inches. While the second was a significant size, it was smaller than the one Coles captured for the American Museum of Natural History in 1915, measuring eighteen feet, two inches. Prior to making the trip Roosevelt contacted the museums in Washington to inquire about their interest in any devilfish he might capture. Since the museum declined his offer the men began lightly dissecting the mantas. Roosevelt was disappointed at the contents of the stomachs, which contained several remoras and digested liquids; he could not tell what they had been feeding on. The former president, satisfied at bringing in two devilfish, ended the hunt for the day.

One of the remarkable aspects of this expedition for Roosevelt was the opportunity to scientifically study the manta rays he had captured. He remarked at the roughness of their skin and the black pigment that rubbed off whenever he touched them. The mouth was large and practically without teeth. Roosevelt seemed to be impressed with how harmless they were to humans, but was equally surprised at their strength and tenacity when harpooned (Roosevelt 1917, 303). Of course the requisite photographs were taken with the devilfish and the weapons used to hunt them.

The purpose of the trip was for Roosevelt to harpoon devilfish, and

that having been accomplished the former president, Coles, and the crew visited and explored other places near Captiva Island. One place they explored was Hemp Island, as the locals called it, although maps identify it as Cayatuna Island. There the men saw cormorants, pelicans, ibises, and herons. For supper they found and cooked three diamond-backed terrapins and a gopher turtle, which Roosevelt and the men found particularly tasty. Roosevelt spent several days exploring the wildlife in the vicinity of Captiva Island, and remarked at the beauty of the sunsets over the Gulf of Mexico (Roosevelt 1917, 305). A delegation of prominent men from Fort Myers took a speedboat to Captiva Island to invite Roosevelt to their city, but the former president declined their offer preferring to remain at Captiva (*Tampa Tribune*, April 1, 1917).

Because Theodore Roosevelt was such a beloved figure in America, the country's newspapers covered his trip as closely as possible. Readers of the Athens, Georgia *Weekly Banner* learned that Roosevelt caught the "ferocious octopus." Both the *New York Times* and *Washington Post* called the manta rays "marine monsters" (*The Weekly Banner*, March 30, 1917; *New York Times*, March 27, 1917; *Washington Post*, March 27, 1917). Most newspapers kept readers updated on the success of the trip, and the *New York Times* described Roosevelt as having acquired a "thorough coat of tan" (*New York Times*, April 2, 1917). One story

making the rounds of the newspapers, which particularly amused Roosevelt, was about his apparent drowning. The northeastern papers sent messages to Florida contacts about the rumor; the rumor apparently started when news circulated that one of the boats capsized during the devilfish hunt. The *St. Petersburg Evening Independent* even ran a story under the headline "TEDDY WAS NOT DROWNED" (*St. Petersburg Evening Independent*, March 30, 1917). The *Atlanta Journal* likewise ran a headline that indicated relief that Roosevelt had not drowned: "Teddy in Fine Health." Across town, the *Atlanta Constitution* reassured its readers that Roosevelt was "in excellent health and spirits" (*Atlanta Journal*, March 29, 1917; *Atlanta Constitution*, April 2, 1917). All papers were relieved when Roosevelt was indeed still alive.

Theodore Roosevelt's expedition to Punta Gorda fits nicely into the former president's long history of hunting big game. What made this trip stand out, however, was that he hunted the big game of the sea, something for which he had previously shown little interest. While Roosevelt was clearly not an angler, hunting devilfish provided him the excitement and danger of the hunt and the resulting adrenaline rush, a scenario in which he thrived.

Punta Gorda celebrates Roosevelt's visit in a couple of ways. First, any book about the city during the early 20th century includes a mention of the presidential visit and any photographs of Roosevelt that exist. Books by local authors Vernon Peeples, Lindsey

Williams, and Byron Rhode all include snippets about Roosevelt's visit, as does the Punta Gorda volume in the *Images of America* series (Peeples 1987; Williams 1993; Rhode 1988; O'Phelan, Shively, House 2009).

Boat Ramp in Laishley Park. The mural was sponsored by The Punta Gorda Historic Mural Society and dedicated in 2008. The city is certainly proud of the special visit Theodore Roosevelt made to Punta Gorda in 1917.

Second, the city remembers Roosevelt's visit with a mural of him and the devilfish he caught, which is located at Laishley Municipal Marina



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Images/Maps

Map from *Florida's Peace River Frontier* by Canter Brown, Jr. Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1991. Reprinted with permission of the University Press of Florida.

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