

Don't pass up chance to recreate history



BARB GUY

I never knew my great-grandfathers; I have no idea who they were or what they did. I never even met my grandfathers. Maybe that's why I'm so intrigued with the story of Tweed Roosevelt and the River of Doubt.

The idea of knowing very specifically what your ancestors did and redoing those things yourself is compelling. I guess this is why some modern-day people re-enact the Mormon trek or the Civil War. You want to see what it was like. You acknowledge that on some level those past experiences, undertaken by someone else, are part of who you are.

Teddy Roosevelt died in 1919, long before his great-grandson Tweed was born in 1940. Tweed entered the world as the progeny of a beloved United States president and in midlife he was

invited to recreate a Brazilian river expedition that his great-grandfather, known as TR, took in 1914.

There are several reasons I admire TR. First and foremost, he set aside for protection 230 million acres of the United States. If not for him, these national parks, national forests, game preserves, wildlife refuges and other federal monuments would surely have been sliced, diced, clear-cut, paved, drilled and made into Sprawl-Mart's or luxury homes by the less moral among us. I wish TR's conservation ethic was more evident among his fellow Republicans today.

Author, rancher, politician, naturalist, TR was hale, sturdy, rugged - the kind of guy you'd call a tough old coot. He was also a genuine enigma, a fact best illustrated by his winning of both the Medal of Honor (given for actions in war) and the Nobel Peace Prize. TR is featured on Mount Rushmore along with Washington, Lincoln and Jefferson, three presidents more familiar to most of us than the first Roosevelt.

Many people know that Roosevelt's mercy resulted in the honorary naming of a beloved American toy. TR was encouraged to put a successful ending to an until-then unproductive presidential

hunting trip by shooting a tethered, old and injured bear. TR refused and called for the animal to be humanely put down.

Roosevelt had more than his share of sorrow. At 25, he saw his wife and his mother die on the same day, two days after the birth of his first child. He was also shot in the chest by a would-be assassin (but immediately gave a 90-minute speech before seeing a doctor) and his youngest son was killed in World War I.

Tweed says, "When something upsetting happened to TR, he'd change the venue." Thus, after losing his chance at a third presidential term, TR embarked upon an expedition down Brazil's uncharted River of Doubt.

During the trip, TR contracted malaria as well as an anaerobic infection from a carriage accident back when he was president. The expedition's doctor cut open the former president's leg, scraping the infection from the bone.

The temperature and humidity were in the high 90s and TR's fever raged. He was so sick they thought he wouldn't live through the night. An experienced adventurer, TR always carried enough morphine to kill himself. This trip was the only time he considered taking it, but he knew that his son Kermit would be determined to bring his father's

The Salt Lake Tribune

body out dead or alive, and he decided he'd be marginally easier for Kermit to manage if he were alive.

TR wrote a 500-page book, *Through the Brazilian Wilderness*, while on the 60-day trip, sick as he was. Of the expedition when it was finally over, Roosevelt, who lost 55 pounds on the journey, said, "It was bully while it lasted, but it lasted long enough."

Tweed says, "My friends thought the most adventurous thing I'd ever do was take the garbage out on Beacon Hill." His gentrified Boston neighborhood notwithstanding, Tweed knew a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity when he saw it, so he agreed to reprise the trip.

Tweed's trek along the River of Doubt, now renamed Rio Roosevelt, took 30 days to his great-grandpa's 60, and he wasn't portaging a 3,000-pound dugout boat, but a suite of inflatable rafts and a satellite phone.

Tweed still managed to lose 24 pounds in a month, and he was once stung by killer bees 17 times before breakfast.

An entomologist by training, Tweed collected 3,000 species of insects, made a PBS film of the expedition, and he now travels the country speaking and raising money to create an IMAX film of TR's trip.

It's not likely that you or I will be asked to retrace an ancestor's

day-to-day footsteps, let alone recreate an amazing, nearly-forgotten moment in history, but if we do get invited, let's say yes.

Barb Guy is a regular contributor to these pages. © Salt Lake Tribune.