



Episode 905, Story 2 – Teddy Roosevelt War Club

Tukufu Zuberi: This case decodes a menacing looking club and its puzzling inscription to Teddy Roosevelt. August 6th, 1912. A crowd of 14,000 bursts into thunderous applause as the man of the hour, Theodore Roosevelt, takes the stage of the Chicago Coliseum. After 32 years, the thick necked former president has abandoned the Republicans to run as the Progressive Party candidate. The election is only three months away. Branding the major parties “soulless husks”, he promises a radical path to social and economic justice. Victory will make him the first third-term president in US history. The former “Rough Rider” remains one of the most famous men in America, but will it be enough to win Roosevelt the presidency? Now, TJ and Lisa Tichy of Chicago believe they might have found a memento from the first days of that frenzied campaign.

TJ Tichy: At first we didn't know it was, and then we saw the inscription.

Tukufu: I'm Tukufu Zuberi and I'm on my way to check out the Tichys' discovery.

TJ: This is an item that we found in an attic of a deserted house that was going to be torn down to make way for a subdivision. I wanted to go up into the attic and see if anything was in there.

Lisa Tichy: Yeah, and he handed it down to me, and looking at it down in the light, I noticed there was words on it that said “Bull Moose War Club.”

Tukufu: Bull Moose. What do you think it means?



TJ: We know about Teddy Roosevelt being involved with the Bull Moose Party, and that was also during the time that Teddy Roosevelt coined the phrase, "Speak softly and carry a big stick."

Tukufu: So you want me to find out if this is "the big stick"?

TJ: The big stick, that's right.

Tukufu: What's going on up here? This looks like blood?

TJ: We don't know, but it was a war club.

Tukufu: Anything else you can tell me about this?

TJ: There's some additional writing on it. You could barely see.

Tukufu: TJ is a former policeman and says he had an evidence technician in the sheriff's office analyze the inscription. The technician could only read part of it.

TJ: It says basically that, it was given to Chief Teddy Roosevelt on August 29, 1912 by a person by the name of D.S.D. Merrigan.

Tukufu: What can I find out for you?

TJ: If the club was actually given to Teddy Roosevelt...

Lisa: ...and to see who this D.S.D. Merrigan is.



Tukufu: Okay. I'll get back to you as soon as I can.

This is definitely an old object. We have a piece of wood, and the head of it has been carved to look like something. It has some red on it. That's blood, that's serious. Was it a weapon? Was it ever used? Or was it symbolic for something? "Bull Moose War Club" is clear enough to see. Everything below those four words is barely legible, but I can make out some clues... "Taken from the green hills of something, Vermont...something to the great chief Teddy Roosevelt on August 29," that would be 1912 by D.S.D., and he said Merrigan. Let's see if I can make sense of this.

First, what is a war club? The dictionary says it's a club-shaped implement used as a weapon especially by American Indians. Roosevelt's dealings with Native Peoples were problematic. He acknowledged the "terrible injustice" they suffered, but also described them as "the weaker race." What about the date? August 29th 1912. Earlier that month, Roosevelt had been nominated for president by the newly formed Progressive Party – also known as the Bull Moose Party. This was four years after he left the White House as a supremely popular two-term president, who fought for a "Square Deal" for the middle class. Roosevelt's platform supported women's suffrage, national healthcare, and welfare for the poor. His main competition was Democrat Woodrow Wilson who embraced some of these ideals. Roosevelt also faced off against the Republican incumbent, his former Vice-President William Taft. Taft adamantly opposed progressive reform, which helped push Roosevelt away from the Republican Party. So he was in a pretty tough campaign. So the term "Bull Moose" is accurate to 1912, and it looks from this that he was campaigning in Vermont in late August.



Alright let's track down this guy, D. S. D. Merrigan. Searching a genealogical database I can't find anybody alive in 1912 by that name. I need to find out what else is written on here. I'm heading to Midtown Manhattan to meet Director Margaret Holben Ellis at the Thaw Conservation Center at the Morgan Library. She once helped Wes read markings on a miniature portrait of George Washington.

Margaret Holben Ellis: That's some club. I don't think we've ever had anything quite like this at the Morgan Library Museum. Is that blood?

Tukufu: I'm hoping you can tell me. Is there any way that you can give us a better sense of what it actually says on here?

Margaret: What did you say the date of this club was?

Tukufu: 1912.

Margaret: The type of ink that was used in 1912 was mostly an iron gall ink. And we know that that type of ink will appear darker under ultra-violet light. So we can start with that.

Tukufu: We're taking the club into the photo studio. Margaret's assistant sets up the ultra violet camera for a long exposure.

Margaret: Under ultraviolet light, the blood is fluorescing the same color as the red paint that appears in Bull Moose.



Tukufu: So it's red paint. So there's no blood on the club, but the imaging has revealed something else. Wow! Let's see what we got here. "Taken from the green mountains near the city of Rutland, Vermont, and presented to the chi -- the Great Chief, Teddy Roosevelt, August 29, 12 by..."

Margaret: D...it's a small "r"

Both: Doctor!

Tukufu: "S. D. Merriam? Known as Chief Flying Eagle. Made by his own hand." So Merriam, not Merrigan, known as "Chief Flying Eagle." I'm heading to Sagamore Hill, Theodore Roosevelt's former home in Long Island, New York, now run by the National Park Service. Roosevelt biographer Patricia O'Toole has written extensively on Theodore Roosevelt's Bull Moose years.

Tukufu: Here it is.

Patricia O'Toole: Wow!

Tukufu: Patricia's never heard of a "Chief Flying Eagle," but she thinks the stick itself is likely a play on a famous Roosevelt aphorism.

Patricia: Here are some clubs that were presented to him when he was president. The "Big Stick" for Theodore Roosevelt, he thought he knew the African proverb which was, "Speak softly and carry a big stick and you will go far." And, it's a very



good summary of how he thought about foreign policy. If you were going to threaten anything, you had to have a big stick behind it.

Tukufu: Patricia says the metaphor took on a life of its own and came to symbolize the United States' growing military might. Did he receive a lot of big sticks like this?

Patricia: Probably hundreds.

Tukufu: But there's something distinct about this one. It says "Bull Moose War Club."

Patricia: This is the only thing I've ever seen that's remotely like this. The Bull Moose campaign was the most strenuous campaign ever waged by Theodore Roosevelt. The platform was really out there. It called for old age insurance, a living wage. There was talk of health insurance.

Tukufu: Patricia says Roosevelt relished his role as the popular Rough Rider, the beloved man of the people, and tried to use that popularity as a third party candidate.

Teddy Roosevelt Speech: "I am not leading this fight as a matter of aesthetic pleasure. I am leading because somebody must lead, or else the fight would not be made at all."



Tukufu: In an era when the sitting president didn't even campaign, Roosevelt was tireless, often making multiple speeches and appearances in a day, relying on his "name brand" to draw the crowds. It worked... almost too well.

Patricia: He was in Milwaukee. It was October 14th so the election was about three weeks away. And he was on his way to give a speech to an auditorium full of 10,000 people.

Tukufu: As Roosevelt entered his campaign vehicle, a gunman sprang from the crowd and fired a single shot. The bullet passed through a spectacle case and 50-page manuscript before lodging in Roosevelt's rib.

Patricia: He had been prepared for a moment like this for a long time and he put his fingers to his lips to see if he could taste blood which would mean that the bullet had punctured his lung. And when he couldn't taste blood he concluded that he had a flesh wound and that he would be fine to go give his speech which he did.

Tukufu: He was a tough dude.

Patricia: Tough guy.

Tukufu: Would it have been possible for someone to present this club to Teddy Roosevelt as a gift at a talk that he was giving?



Patricia: Possible, but not likely. Imagine him giving a campaign speech and some person coming forward with a weapon this large. I think his bodyguards would have been all over that very quickly.

Tukufu: Patricia didn't know of any Native American connection – but this war club is addressed to the Great Chief, from Chief Flying Eagle. A search for a chief flying eagle pulls up a couple of matches but none seem right for the time period. What happens if I try the corrected name I got from the Morgan Library's photo imaging... Okay, this is bizarre. "Dr. S. D. Merriam, the Great Indian Herb Doctor." The top result is an ad from the 1885 Gazetteer of Berkshire County, Massachusetts. Dr. Merriam is widely known as 'Coppewa,' the Great Indian Medicine Man. The Chief Medicine Man of the World." Merriam claims years of experience studying herbal medicine among Indian tribes. I think it's pretty clear that this is our guy. I mean it goes on. "Over 5000 patients cured or benefited from his actions, according to him." Perhaps Merriam was just a savvy doctor using Native American medicine as a lure to win patients. Census results do list him as a physician, but I'm not finding any connection to politics or Roosevelt. Wow. This is from the 1880 census from Windsor, Vermont. Prison. Convicted of assault and sentenced to three and a half years. Why would Theodore Roosevelt's staff allow this particular individual to even get close to him with this stick? Or did he?

I'm heading north to Rutland, Vermont. Jim Davidson of the Rutland Historical Society has agreed to search their archives for information on Roosevelt's August 29th visit.

Tukufu: So this is the war club.



Jim Davidson: Wow!

Tukufu: This is what it says. "Presented to the Great Chief Teddy Roosevelt, August 29, 1912 by Dr. S. D. Merriam known as Chief Flying Eagle..." Jim says he's never heard of Dr. Merriam, but August 29, 1912 would have been an ideal day for him to visit Rutland.

Jim: Because this was fair week. Major, once a year, big extravaganza. And of course it's a political campaign time.

Tukufu: Jim tells me over 12,000 sightseers from the surrounding area visited Rutland on August 29 for the annual Rutland Fair. Roosevelt's campaign stop coincided with the mass gathering. Jim shows me the only known photograph of Roosevelt's 1912 visit. According to the caption, 5,000 people heard him speak.

Jim: If he could put on a good showing in Vermont, then perhaps he could influence the national media that this guy is a real viable candidate.

Tukufu: If Dr. Merriam, or Chief Flying Eagle, planned to present Roosevelt with this war club, he'd be sure to have a large audience. But there's no sign of him or the club in the photo or caption. I mean if somebody's going to give him this there, I'd think they might mention it.

Jim: Let me go see if we can get a newspaper and take a look at it. Rutland Newspaper. We see that the election is going on... Oh, here's the article! "Bull Moose came. He saw. He --- , well anyway a lot of folks heard Roosevelt speak."



Tukufu: Wait a minute, look what it says here. What we find in the Rutland Herald closes the case on the Tichy's mystery club.

First of all let me just tell you I had a lot of fun trying to find answers to your questions. I tell the Tichys we determined the name on the club was not D.S.D Merrigan, but Dr. S. D. Merriam also known as Chief Flying Eagle.

TJ: Wow! That's great.

Lisa: That's a shock.

TJ: Doctor. So what is the Chief Flying Eagle?

Tukufu: I tell them S. D. Merriam was a New England doctor who promoted Indian remedies. However, we couldn't confirm that Teddy Roosevelt was given this war club until we went to Rutland, Vermont.

"An Indian in tribal dress was prominent during the afternoon. Giving the moose cry through a big megaphone and carrying a big stick, the top of which was carved to resemble a moose head." That does look like a moose head, right?

"The big stick was later presented to Mr. Roosevelt." It seems Merriam seized an opportunity to share the spotlight with the larger than life, Teddy Roosevelt.

Jim: Hey I think we've scored!

TJ: We have the "big stick". The moose head, absolutely.



Lisa: Now you can see that.

Tukufu: You've got a piece of history on your hands. What do you think about that?

Lisa: It's unbelievable.

TJ: Yeah, it's just too incredible for words. Thank you for all your work and answered all our questions and then some.

Tukufu: On November 5th, 1912, over four million Americans in 48 states cast their ballots in favor of the Bull Moose. Roosevelt beat Taft, but by splitting the Republican vote, they helped pave the way for Woodrow Wilson's landslide victory. The Bull Moose Party collapsed in 1916, but Roosevelt's strong candidacy pushed Wilson to further embrace the progressive ideals and policies to which they both subscribed. Theodore Roosevelt became the only third party presidential candidate to ever come in second place.