

The Luger Carbine II

The Fate of the Teddy Roosevelt Luger Carbine

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Theodore Roosevelt (1858 - 1919, President 1901 - 1909) was a noted gun enthusiast, explorer and hunter. It is, therefore, not surprising that he had a Luger Carbine as part of his collection. This weapon, even then, was a rarity and doubtless sought after by



collectors of high end objects. The weapon that he owned has been dealt with in the literature in some detail (Kenyon 2003) but there are questions (if there weren't questions, it wouldn't deserve the name "Luger", would it?).

To begin, there is really no question as to its existence.

The earliest reference to his carbine is in a note from one Col. Phipps wherein he, the Colonel, references receiving the "Luger pistol-carbine" on June 6, 1902. It stands to reason that the receipt of this weapon by the President was sometime prior to that date. In another note, Roosevelt (7/8/1902) specifically states that the carbine was a present from George Luger. Much of the associated correspondence centers about modification of the sights and obtaining the correct ammunition. We might assume, then, that TR either bought or was gifted with his carbine some time well prior to June of 1902 inasmuch as he owned it long enough to find serious fault with the sights and to ascertain that standard 7.65mm ammunition did not work well with it. Absent the correct ammunition, his characterization of the weapon was "worthless" (see Appendix II for references to all of this correspondence).

The Peregrinations of the Roosevelt Carbine

Evidence of its early whereabouts is in a July 18, 1902 letter from the Ordnance Department to the President which implies that it was shipped back to Roosevelt, from the Springfield, Massachusetts armory, on that date.

Roosevelt still owned it in 1913-1914 and took it on his famous Amazon/River of Doubt expedition. A photo by Anthony Fiala from that trip shows his son Kermit holding it



(Roosevelt, 1914b). This photo does not appear Roosevelt's book recounting the expedition but, rather, in the serialization of that book that appeared in Scribner's Magazine coincident with the book's publication.

In his book, *Through the Brazilian Wilderness* (1914a), Roosevelt references the carbine twice. On page 90 he writes:

Kermit shot a Jabiru with the Luger (sic) automatic.

This event occurred between December 18 and December 25, 1913.

On page 229 he says:

At one camp Cherrie collected a dozen perching birds; Miller a beautiful

little rail; and Kermit, with the small Luger (sic) belt-rifle, a handsome curassow, nearly as big as a turkey.

This refers to specimen collection at Campos Novos, Matto Grosso, which occurred on February 16 or 17, 1914, according to the American Museum of Natural History expedition records (Allen, 1916).

These quotations and the photograph are the most recent (1914), unequivocal, pieces of evidence of the existence and location of the carbine.

Afterwards, there is nothing. Rather, nothing definitive, only suggestive ...

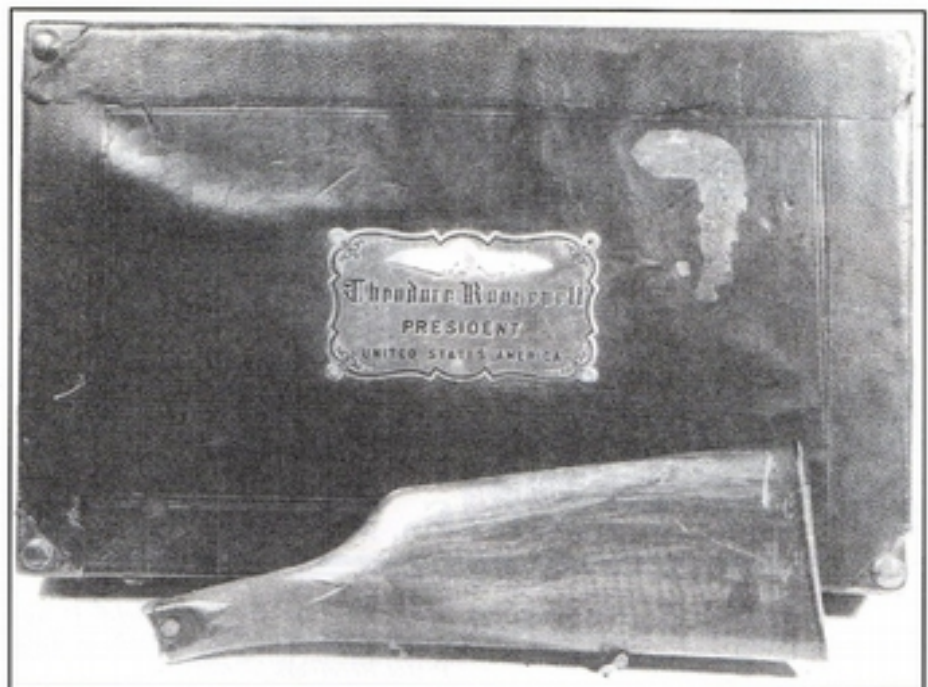
Sagamore Hill and his Birthplace

Prior to 2003, noted Luger expert Charles Kenyon, Jr. became interested in the Roosevelt Carbine. He uncovered the correspondence concerning the modifications made by the Springfield Armory to its sights and its return so Sagamore Hill as well as the saga of bad ammunition. He wondered, not surprisingly, about the whereabouts of the carbine. To that end he contacted the Roosevelt Birthplace Museum in NYC and was told that:

Yes, the carbine case and butt- stock were among the artifacts. No, they were not on display for normal tours, but kept locked away. Yes, arrangements might be made for accredited archivists, researchers, etc., to view and photograph the artifacts. (Kenyon 2002, p. 13).

He obtained a photo of the President Roosevelt Luger hunting carbine presentation case and wooden stock with push-button attaching iron. The picture is from Kenyon (2003).

Kenyon does not state that he actually saw the objects in question and he makes no mention of the carbine itself. His



lack of curiosity, at least in his published work on the carbine, is somewhat surprising. To muddy the waters further, there is this statement from the Land of Borchardt site:

The above theory was put together before it was known from a subsequent conversation with Charles Kenyon, Jr. that he had visited the Sagamore Hill Museum and personally viewed the President Roosevelt Luger hunting carbine presentation case and wooden stock with push-button attaching iron and noted no serial number. (LoB 1)

This is at complete odds with the location of these artifacts as Kenyon stated in his Gun Report article.

Upon my contacting the Roosevelt Birthplace Museum (where the case and buttstock were supposedly stored) I was told:

"Unfortunately, we do not have any gun-related items in our archived objects here at the Birthplace." (Callie A. Tominsky, Personal Communication)

I have been unable to reconcile the two contradictory communications from the National Park Service.

Roosevelt Birthplace/Home Bottom Line

We know from official documents that the carbine was sent from the Springfield, Massachusetts armory on July 18, 1902 to TR's home, Sagamore Hill, New York. That is, essentially, all we know about it's non-expedition location. We have conflicting stories about the presence of parts of the carbine at the NYC birthplace. There are statements that the carbine is on display at Sagamore Hill. None of this is confirmed.

I surmise that it never made it back to Sagamore Hill from the Amazon Expedition (see discussion below). Relatives and other interested parties at Sagamore Hill that might have had responsibility for TR's property knew what happened to it, it's fate was known and not worth any particular note. Teddy died in 1919 and Sagamore Hill remained in the family until it was given to the country in the 60's. I suspect the inventory of the contents might be described as loosey-goosey during that time. When the National Park Service finally inventoried the contents there was nothing carbine-wise to inventory. All we had was a memory (and one crappy, misleading photograph). Today the officials have to try to account for something that was never in their, or their predecessors, care. An

impossible task.

The NRA Museum

It has been reported (and a Google search will often turn this up) that the carbine is on display at the NRA museum in Fairfax, Virginia. While Sagamore Hill was being renovated in 2015, a number of Roosevelt's firearms were put on display there. Subsequent to that, the NRA Museum created a permanent gallery dedicated to the President and his firearms. There, in Case 28 in the "Theodore Roosevelt and Elegant Arms - 1880s to 1920s" Gallery, there is an example of a 1902 Luger Carbine. It is lovely but, alas, not TR's. The NRA site does not claim it is his and says that the gallery contains some of his guns "along with elegant firearms from his era". This vague entry, along with the NRA connection with the Sagamore Hill collection has resulted in ongoing confusion. To be clear: TR's Luger Carbine is NOT in the NRA Museum.

The bottom line is that the whereabouts of the Roosevelt carbine, and its accouterments, is unknown.

What happened?

What follows is my assessment.

To begin ... the photo of the case and stock provided by Kenyon indicates and proves nothing. It could have been taken by technicians at the Springfield Armory in 1906. It could even have been taken at the DWM factory prior to shipment. There is simply no way of knowing. The photo does not demonstrate in any way, shape or form the existence of the stock and case at any point in time. It also has no bearing, one way or the other, on the existence of the firearm itself.

A Family Connection

A very helpful National Park Service Guide named Bethany Cecere did something brilliant. She asked older guides about the Carbine. One told her that he thought that Kermit sold the carbine off. Now that could explain a lot. If it were sold and if the connection to TR was not clear, the gun would not have been prepossessing. After all, it survived a month on the Amazon and was "adjusted" by the Springfield Armory. It might well, 120 years after its creation, present as a dodgy shooter. Remember that there is no record of its serial number so a person looking at it would have to know something of its history to even begin to identify it.

All of that said, I have been in contact with Kermit Roosevelt, TR's Great, Great

Grandson, who told me that he knew nothing of the carbine.

While it is certainly possible that some family member took the carbine and added it to his or her collection, it seems unlikely that the weapon would remain anonymous all of these years.

There is another possible, and more likely, fate though. TR's book is a really minute account of the Amazon expedition. In this book, on page 383, he states:

After the loss of all our arms in the rapids we secured four poor, rusty rifles which proved of no value.

"The loss of all our arms". "All"? "All" as in a Luger Carbine too? We know with as much certainty as is possible that the carbine was one of the expedition's arms.

A naturalist on the expedition, George Cherrie, wrote a book where a catastrophic event was recounted (Cherrie, 1930 p. 289). There he recounts how Kermit's overloaded canoe was "crushed to splinters" on March 15, 1914. Since the carbine is most closely associated with Kermit during this expedition this event might be suggestive of the date and manner of its loss. The only two mentions of the carbine (see above) refer to dates PRIOR to this event. TR quite matter of factly mentions the make of firearms used in taking specimens throughout the book. The carbine is not mentioned after this accident.

It pains me to say this but I personally believe that TR's carbine is on the bottom of the Roosevelt River in Brazil (Rondon, 1914). The site of the accident is roughly in the center of the map north of the island next to the word "Rapido" (11°28'02.8"S 60°27'48.5"W).



The picture below shows the rapids as of July 12, 2024.



My reason for asserting its loss is simple: had the gun been sold its Roosevelt association would have been a major determinant of its value which would have been, shall we say, appreciable. The Hugo Borchardt presentation carbine sold recently for a hammer price in excess of \$400,000.

The other alternative is that it is in the possession of a family member, squirreled away in some attic perhaps.

The most likely scenario, consistent with the evidence at hand, is that the carbine remained at Sagamore Hill after it's return from it's repair at the Armory in 1902. There is no mention of it in conjunction with Roosevelt's African Safari of 1909-1910. I have no evidence that it left that location until the Brazilian expedition of 1914. I personally think that it is lost. Pay your money, take your chances.

As a point of interest, the photograph shows a Luger pistol that was lost on a battlefield, deposited in the inevitable mud and recovered after a century. Food for thought.



Thanks to National Parks Service Guide Bethany Cecere of the Sagamore Hill National Historic Site for helping me wend my way thru the uncharted waters of the collections at the various Teddy Roosevelt domiciles. She may well have fallen into a Luger Rabbit Hole!

References

Allen, J. A. (1916). **Mammals collected on the Roosevelt Brazilian expedition, with field notes by Leo E. Miller.** In The Bulletin of the American Museum of Natural History, XXXV, pp. 559 - 610.

Cherrie, George Kruck (1930). **Dark trails; adventures of a naturalist.** New York, G. P. Putnam's sons. p.289.

Dickey, Pete (1980). **The Kaiser's Karabiner.** American Rifleman. Vol.128, No. 8,. P. 37.

Harvard University Library, **Theodore Roosevelt Collection.**

Kenyon, C., Jr. (2002). **The Theodore Roosevelt Luger Carbine(?) Part 1.** The Gun Report, December, pp.12 - 13, 58 - 59.

Kenyon, C., Jr. (2003). **The Theodore Roosevelt Luger Carbine(?) Part 2.** The Gun Report, January, pp. 12 - 13, 54.

LoB 1: **Nice treatment of the carbine.**

<https://www.landofborchardt.com/1901c58.html#image>

The River of Doubt 1928 Film: Images of the carbine (?) at approx. 8:20

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NALD7sopz3Y>

Rondon, Cândido (1914). **Reconhecimento do Rio Roosevelt** with annotations by George M. Dyott.

Roosevelt, Theodore. (1914a). **Through the Brazilian wilderness**

Roosevelt, Theodore. (1914b) **Scribner's Magazine.** Volume 55. Page 656. Kermit picture with the carbine.

The Carbine on Display at the NRA Museum (NOT TR's!)

<https://www.nramuseum.org/guns/the-galleries/theodore-roosevelt-and-elegant-arms-1880s-to-1920s/case-28-an-age-of-elegance/dwm-model-1902-luger-semi-automatic-carbine.aspx>

Appendix I

A Note on the "Kaiser gift" story

Many secondary sources (forums, auction sites, etc.) claim that the carbine was a gift from Kaiser Wilhelm II given to Roosevelt during a visit to Germany. That appears to be a mix-up or legend. Roosevelt's well-known meeting with the Kaiser was in 1910 (after his presidency), but the documented letters (cited above) prove he already had the carbine no later than mid-1902. The early "presentation" carbines were special cased models, but Roosevelt's was almost certainly obtained through commercial/DWM channels in late 1901 rather than a direct imperial gift. The reference to Georg Luger, above, supports this. Though the Kaiser gifting Roosevelt with another carbine is possible.

However, however, however ... Prince Heinrich "Henry" of Prussia (the Kaiser's son) met President Theodore Roosevelt at the White House on February 24, 1902. The sources are fairly unequivocal and consistent on the fact that no firearms were exchanged. It would not be surprising, though, if the Prince gave the President a superlative example of the German gunmaker's art. Right? The point is that TR might well have had more than one carbine.

Appendix II

Carbine Problems

These documents concern themselves with problems that TR had with the sights of the carbine as well as with the inability of standard carbine ammunition to work the action. They are useful documents in the present context to establish the whereabouts of the weapon at given times.

The relevant documents concerning President's issues with his carbine follow:

- **June 24, 1902** - Letter from Tauscher attorney informing Chief of Ordnance that 50 rounds are forthcoming.
Graff, C. L., [1902, June 24]. Letter from C. L. Graff.
Library of Congress Manuscript Division. Theodore Roosevelt Digital Library. Dickinson State University.
Retrieved from <https://www.theodorerooseveltcenter.org/digital-library/o38330>.
- **July 2, 1902** - Explaining that lack of ammunition is holing up testing and informing Chief of Ordnance that 50 rounds are forthcoming.
Phipps, Frank H. (Frank Huntington), 1843-1925., [1902, July 2]. Letter from Frank H. Phipps to William Crozier.
Library of Congress Manuscript Division. Theodore Roosevelt Digital Library. Dickinson State University.
Retrieved from <https://www.theodorerooseveltcenter.org/digital-library/o38389>.
- **July 8, 1902** - Roosevelt requesting Col. Bingham contact G. Luger to obtain carbine ammunition. Characterizes the carbine as "worthless" without the proper ammunition.
Roosevelt, Theodore, 1858-1919., [1902, July 8]. Letter from Theodore Roosevelt to Theo. A. Bingham.
Library of Congress Manuscript Division. Theodore Roosevelt Digital Library. Dickinson State University.
Retrieved from <https://www.theodorerooseveltcenter.org/digital-library/o182710>.
- **July 10, 1902** - War Department responding to July 8 letter informing the President that a cable was sent requesting 500 rounds of carbine ammunition
Bingham, Theo. A. (Theodore Alfred), 1858-1934., [1902, July 10]. Letter from Theodore A. Bingham to Theodore Roosevelt.
Library of Congress Manuscript Division. Theodore Roosevelt Digital Library. Dickinson State University.
Retrieved from <https://www.theodorerooseveltcenter.org/digital-library/o38442>.
- **July 18, 1902** - Ordnance Department informing the President that his carbine is being returned with 500 rounds of ammunition. Also detailing the problem in obtaining ammunition for testing

from Tauscher. n.b. this document is from Kenyon, 2002.

- **July 19, 1902** - War Department to the President informing him that 500 rounds are on their way from Germany.
Bingham, Theo. A. (Theodore Alfred), 1858-1934., [1902, July 19]. *Letter from Theo. A. Bingham to Theodore Roosevelt*.
Library of Congress Manuscript Division. Theodore Roosevelt Digital Library. Dickinson State University.
Retrieved from <https://www.theodorerooseveltcenter.org/digital-library/o38532>.
- **July 23, 1902** - Announcing that a holster is being sent too.
Crozier, William, 1855-1942., [1902, July 23]. *Letter from William Crozier to Theodore Roosevelt*.
Library of Congress Manuscript Division. Theodore Roosevelt Digital Library. Dickinson State University.
Retrieved from <https://www.theodorerooseveltcenter.org/digital-library/o38568>.
- **August 12, 1902** - Asking how much to modify the front sight.
Bennett, Thomas Gray, 1845-1930., [1902, August 12]. *Letter from Thomas Gray Bennett to William Loeb*.
Library of Congress Manuscript Division. Theodore Roosevelt Digital Library. Dickinson State University.
Retrieved from <https://www.theodorerooseveltcenter.org/digital-library/o38795>.

All of these documents can be seen here:

www.theodorerooseveltcenter.org