

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 it's 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 in 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 of the carbine.

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

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 it's sights and it's 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 below is from Kenyon (2003).

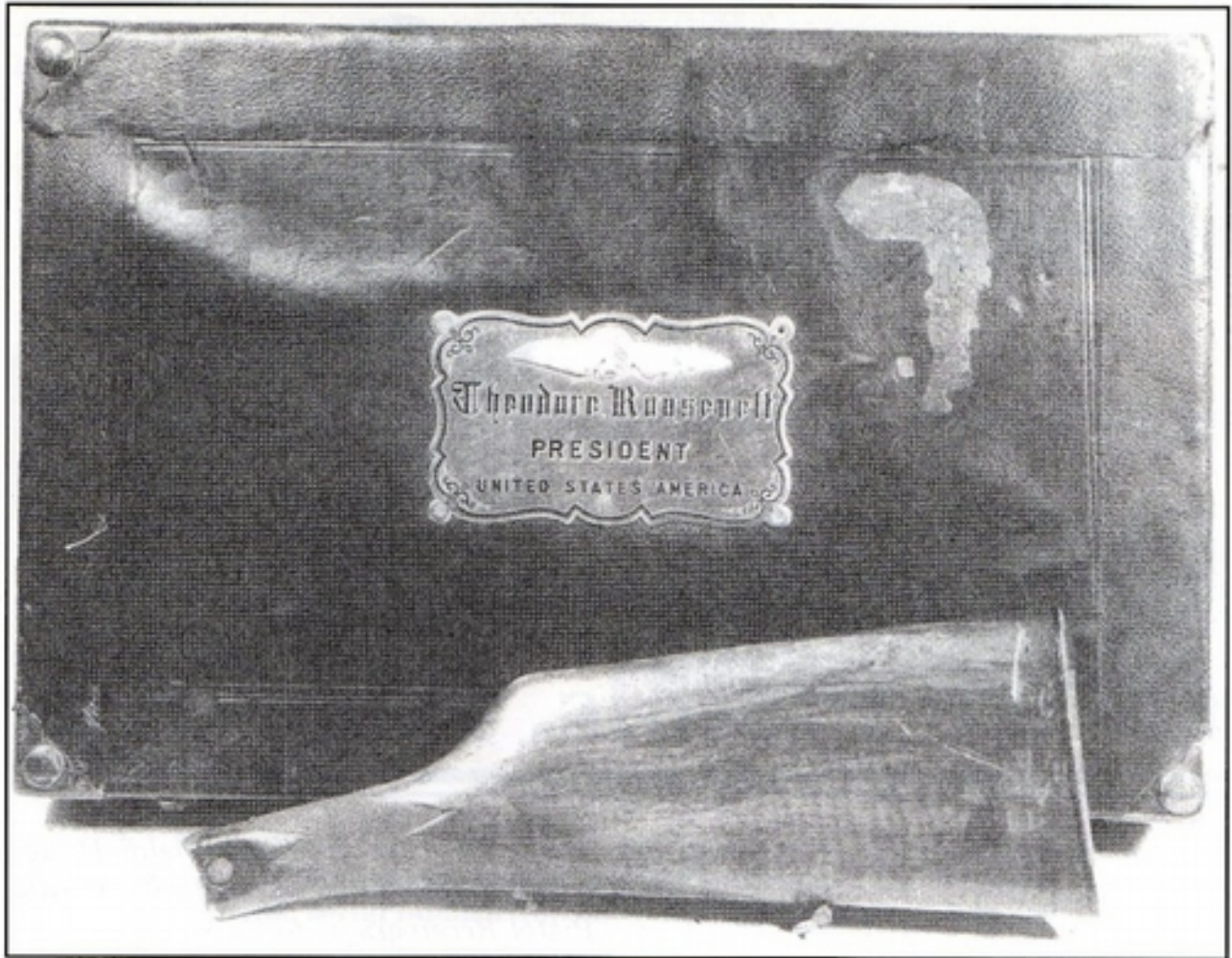


Photo 3

Case and buttstock of Luger carbine owned by Theodore Roosevelt in mid-1902. Print courtesy of U.S. National Park Service, Theodore Roosevelt Birthplace Collection.

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.

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)

The bottom line is that the whereabouts of the Roosevelt carbine, and it's 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 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 it's creation, present as a dodgy shooter. Remember that there is no record of it's serial number so a person looking at it would have to know something of it's 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.

There is another possible fate though. TR's book is a really minute account of the 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 it's 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 firearm 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° 25' S, 60° 43' W.).



My reason for saying this is simple: had the gun been sold it's Roosevelt association would have been a major determinant of it's 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. I personally think that it is lost. Pay your money, take your chances.

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!

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

Ammo 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 ammo problem follow:

- **June 24, 1902** - Letter from Tauscher attorney informing Chief of Ordnance that 50 rounds are forthcoming.
- **July 2, 1902** - Explaining that lack of ammunition is holding up testing and informing Chief of Ordnance that 50 rounds are forthcoming.
- **July 8, 1902** - Roosevelt requesting Col. Bingham contact G. Luger to obtain carbine ammunition. Characterizes the carbine as "worthless" without the proper ammunition.
- **July 10, 1902** - War Department responding to July 8 letter informing the President that a cable was sent requesting 500 rounds of carbine ammunition
- **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.
- **July 19, 1902** - War Department to the President informing him that 500 rounds are on their way from Germany.
- **July 23, 1902** - Announcing that a holster is being sent too.

All of these documents can be seen here:

www.theodorerooseveltcenter.org

Appendix III 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.

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.

Nice treatment of the carbine.
<https://www.landofborchardt.com/1901c58.html#image>