

John Byron “Johnny” Goff

As we know for sure, our presidents like to take vacations and Theodore Roosevelt was no exception. However, instead of posh seaside resorts or swanky hotel rooms, when Teddy took a vacation it usually meant hunting and long days spent roughing it in some wilderness area.

Johnny Goff was born on May 27, 1866 in Montgomery County, Indiana. The family soon moved to western Kansas where there were still battles going on with the Indians. As he was growing up with a hunting father, Goff was very familiar with hounds, hunting and guns. At seventeen, Goff moved further west and found work as a bullwhacker in Wyoming and Colorado. He went back to Kansas, married Mattie Myrick and stayed for a couple of years before returning to the wilderness of the west.

Colorado was an excellent ranching area, but the ranchers were losing too many head to the predators, and black bear and mountain lions were numerous. Goff bred a special kind of dog for the cats and bears and became an asset to the ranchers. The ranchers paid a \$10 bounty for each mountain lion, and a bear would often bring more. Through the years Goff became known as the premier hunter and houndsman in the area. When hunters from the east came to hunt the cats and the bears, it was Goff they requested to lead them.

Roosevelt had just been elected as vice-president under William McKinley when he decided on a western outing before taking office on March 4, 1901. A mutual friend put Roosevelt in touch with friends in Colorado Springs and they made arrangements with Goff for a mountain lion hunt. On January 11, 1901, the two met for the first time and went on a five week hunt that neither would ever forget.

Roosevelt would write after the hunt that, “Goff was one of the best hunters with whom I have ever been out, and he had trained his pack to a point of perfection for its special work which I have never known another pack to reach.” The pack consisted of eight hounds that would sniff out the scent of bears or mountain lions only. Behind the hounds were four terriers that were the “fighting dogs.”

On January 14, the party found fresh mountain lion tracks and the hunt was on. They scrambled across several canyons with the dogs far ahead. The dogs finally treed the mountain lion and the party came

within sight of the tree just as the mountain lion jumped out and began to run. The dogs quickly overtook the cat and the battle was on. The dogs were valuable animals as well as good friends to Goff and the lion was trying to kill them. Shooting the lion in such a melee was not possible. Roosevelt jumped off his horse, pulled out his long hunting knife, jumped into the middle of the mass of fighting animals, and drove his knife into the heart of the lion. The battle was over and the dogs were safe. "I have always wanted to kill a cougar as I did this one," Roosevelt wrote to his son Ted who had loaned his knife to his father, "with dogs and the knife.

On February 14, the dogs were again on the chase of an immense mountain lion, and probably the one that had done so much damage to the ranchers' cattle. The chase went on for miles and now and then it sounded like the cat was treed and then the chase would begin anew. The cat finally climbed into a piñon tree, and Roosevelt slowly approached with his Winchester ready. It was not possible to get a good, clear shot and his bullet broke the back of the lion and it fell out of the tree, still full of fight. Once more the future vice-president jumped into the middle of the battle. One of the terriers grabbed the cat's ear and stretched the cat out. Seeing the opportunity, Roosevelt drove his knife home and then leaped back before the animal could come back around. The cat was indeed huge and held the world's record until the middle of the century.

Roosevelt returned to Washington and in just a few months became the president when McKinley was assassinated. It was spring of 1905 before Roosevelt could plan another western vacation and Johnny Goff was at the station waiting for him on April 15. This time they were going to hunt for bear. The president summarized one day's hunt in another letter to Ted: On the third day out I got a fine big black bear, an old male who would not tree, but made what they call in Mississippi a walking bay with the dogs, fighting them off all the time. The chase lasted nearly two hours and was ended by a hard scramble up a canyon side; and I made a pretty good shot at him as he was walking off with the pack around him. He killed one dog and crippled three that I think will recover, besides scratching others. My .30-40 Springfield worked to perfection on the bear.

One of Goff's dogs took a special liking to the president. He was a feisty little terrier named Skip. Skip rode atop the old Rough Rider's

saddle during the long days climbing the mountains. When the hunt was over, Goff made the president a gift of Skip. Skip and Archie Roosevelt became inseparable friends.

The president secured a position for Goff as a predator hunter in Yellowstone Park. Hunters from all over the world now sought him out as guide. Outdoor magazines sought his knowledge and Buffalo Bill hired him to manage his Wapiti Inn.

In 1912, when it was declared illegal to hunt with hounds, he sold his dogs, went into farming and ranching. He and Mattie eventually settled in a small house in Cody, Wyoming, where he lived until his death on March 28, 1937.

The bears and cats are thriving in the mountains around Cody and they are hunted again with hounds. But Johnny Goff lies virtually unforgotten in Cody's Riverside Cemetery



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