

Teddy, Margaret and the Bears

By Dennis Payton Knight

Those ubiquitous soft animals that babies and teenagers and grandmothers, and at least one old grandpa, have cuddled and abused until the stuffing pokes out will always be known as Teddy Bears because of the good nature and humanism of Theodore Roosevelt.

Roosevelt had been on a hunting trip to Mississippi in 1902, an unsuccessful one at that, having gone three days without spotting a single bear to fell. Eventually, his guides, with the help of dogs, tracked down in the forest an aging black bear. After it was attacked by their dogs, they tied it to a tree and fetched the President, ready for him to claim it as his trophy with a single shot.

Of course the revered Rough Rider wasn't about to engage in such an un-sportsmanlike deed, so he declined, insisting instead that the critter be put out of its pain by someone other than himself. Teddy Roosevelt's name today is associated with that event, probably more so than his charge up San Juan Hill or his establishment of our national parks. The event was commemorated in *The Washington Post* in a cartoon by Clifford Berryman that was picked up and published around the world.

Seeing the cartoon, a New York candy merchant named Morris Michtom had the idea to put in his shop window a pair of stuffed toy bears his wife had made, and, with permission, called them "Teddy's Bears." Their instant popularity led him and his wife to form the Ideal Toy Company to get Teddy Bears into mass production.

Meanwhile, a German company grew under the leadership of Margaret Steiff, who earned her living by sewing stuffed elephants and other animals. In 1903, an American entrepreneur ordered 3,000 of them to be sold in our country, also as Teddy Bears. Steiff, Roosevelt and teddy bears were thus tied together forever on the world stage.

Margaret Steiff was born in 1847 and came down with a high fever after only eighteen months of age. Three years later she was diagnosed with poliomyelitis. Her legs became paralyzed and it would hurt to use her right arm.

But she was a determined girl who would be taken to school in a hay cart by her siblings. Despite her handicaps, especially the pain in her right hand, she was apprenticed and trained as a seamstress. Wheelchair bound, her father built her a work room in their home and she purchased a sewing machine when she was twenty-seven.

From there she founded Germany's famous Margaret Steiff Company which is still in business now. She personally designed and meticulously produced all sorts of lovable, high quality stuffed animals. To thwart imitators, she sewed into the ear of every toy an iconic button with her Steiff logo, a legendary practice that continues today. By 1900, Steiff had 400 employees and 1,800 home workers producing by the millions what are widely recognized as the very best Teddy Bears in the world.