The Enduring Appeal: Theodore Roosevelt and the Voices of a Progressive Era

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by The Roosevelt Family

Chapter 1: The Progressive Stirrings and the Shadow of 1909

THE TURN OF the 20th century hummed with a distinct energy, a period of rapid change and shifting societal norms. In the quiet lamplit parlors and active urban newsstands across America, the spirit of progressivism was taking root, altering the landscape of public discourse and private aspiration. It was an era where the printed word held significant sway, its pages often adorned with the elaborate, scrolling vines and floral motifs characteristic of Art Nouveau, a style that graced even the most mundane of objects, like the title page of "The Excelsior Diary" for 1909. This diary, with its elegant oval-shaped frame and finely detailed design, was more than just a record-keeping tool; it was a tangible artifact of a time when beauty was infused into everyday life, and the future felt ripe with possibility.

Amidst this backdrop, the figure of Theodore Roosevelt loomed large in the national consciousness. By 1909, he had already completed a transformative presidency, leaving an indelible mark on American governance and public imagination. His robust energy, his impassioned rhetoric, and his steady belief in a strong, just nation had cultivated a

unique connection with citizens from all walks of life. Though he had stepped away from the nation's highest office, the public memory of "Mr. Roosevelt" was fresh, a vivid presence that continued to inspire both fervent loyalty and thoughtful debate. The political currents of the time, however, were far from settled. The nation grappled with questions of industrial power, social justice, and the very definition of democracy. Roosevelt, ever the dynamic force, found himself increasingly at odds with the direction his successor was taking, leading to a growing sense of disillusionment that would eventually compel him back into the political fray.

The years following his initial departure from office were not a period of quiet retirement for Roosevelt. His journey into the Amazon, his writings, and his continued engagement with global affairs kept him in the public eye. Yet, the domestic political landscape continued to call to him. The Progressive movement, a diverse coalition of reformers seeking to address the ills of industrialization and corruption, found a natural champion in Roosevelt. His previous actions as president—trust-busting, conservation efforts, and advocating for the common citizen—had laid much of the groundwork for this burgeoning political force. As the 1912 election drew nearer, the air grew thick with speculation. Could the former president, a man who had so recently commanded the nation's highest office, truly challenge the incumbent from within his own party? The answer, for Roosevelt, became an emphatic yes. The formation of the Progressive (Bull Moose) Party was not merely a political maneuver; it was a declaration, a rallying cry for those who felt the established parties had lost their way. It was a moment of profound conviction, signaling Roosevelt's belief that the very soul of the nation was at stake. This decision, to break from tradition and forge a new path, ignited a passionate response across the country, stirring the hopes and anxieties of millions, including the youngest and most earnest of citizens who watched, listened, and learned from the adults around them.

Chapter 2: The Tumult of 1912: A Nation Divided

THE YEAR 1912 pulsed with an electric tension, a palpable sense of anticipation that permeated American homes, workshops, and public squares. The presidential election was not merely a contest between candidates; it was a clash of ideologies, a battle for the nation's future, and at its heart stood Theodore Roosevelt. Having made the momentous decision to challenge his former protege and the established Republican Party, Roosevelt launched the Progressive (Bull Moose) Party, a vivid, energetic movement that promised a "New Nationalism" and captivated the imagination of a significant portion of the electorate. The campaign was a whirlwind of activity, marked by Roosevelt's characteristic vigor and direct appeal to the people. Rallies were not just political gatherings; they were spectacles, drawing immense crowds eager to hear the Colonel speak.

In Chicago, Illinois, the autumn air of October carried the traces of Roosevelt's impassioned speeches. The city, a active hub of industry and diverse populations, was a crucial battleground for the Progressive cause. It was here, amidst the fervent crowds, that eleven-year-old Ruth Hamblen found herself, captivated by the power of Roosevelt's words. For a child of her age, attending such a rally would have been an

immersive experience, a sensory overload of banners flapping in the breeze, the roar of the crowd, and the resonant voice of Colonel Roosevelt cutting through the din. The excitement of the event, the shared sense of purpose among the attendees, left an indelible mark on young Ruth, solidifying her allegiance to the "Bull Moose" and its charismatic leader.

As November 6, 1912, dawned, the nation held its breath. The three-way contest between Roosevelt, the incumbent Republican President, and the Democratic challenger, Woodrow Wilson, was unprecedented in modern American history. Families gathered around their radios, if they were among the few fortunate enough to own one, or more commonly, waited with bated breath for newspaper headlines to announce the results. The low hum of anticipation filled parlors and general stores as bulletins were posted. For many, the outcome was more than a political decision; it was a deeply personal investment. When the results finally solidified, revealing Woodrow Wilson as the victor, a wave of complex emotions washed over the country. For the ardent supporters of the Progressive Party, particularly those who had invested their hopes and dreams in Roosevelt's return, the defeat was a profound disappointment. The vision of a "New Nationalism" would, for the moment, remain unrealized.

Yet, even in the shadow of defeat, the spirit of the Progressive movement did not immediately dissipate. The loyalty Roosevelt had inspired ran deep, transcending the immediate outcome of the ballot box. For many, his campaign had articulated a set of principles and aspirations that continued to resonate, promising a future where the common good prevailed. The immediate aftermath of the election, therefore, was not merely an end but a continuation, a period where the seeds of future political engagement were sown, particularly in the hearts and minds of the younger generation who had witnessed this extraordinary political drama unfold.

Chapter 3: traces of Disappointment: Voices from the Home Front

THE IMMEDIATE AFTERMATH of the 1912 election left a distinct imprint on the American consciousness, a blend of relief for some and profound disappointment for others. In homes across the nation, the news of Woodrow Wilson's victory over Theodore Roosevelt and the Progressive Party settled like a heavy quiet, especially among those who had championed the Bull Moose cause. It was in this atmosphere, where political outcomes often felt deeply personal, that the voices of children emerged, articulating their earnest convictions and loyalties.

On November 6, 1912, the very day of the election results, an eleven-year-old girl named Ruth Hamblen sat at a desk in Chicago, Illinois. The room might have been quiet, perhaps illuminated by the soft glow of a gas lamp or the fading light of a late autumn afternoon. The rhythmic scratch of her pen across paper would have been one of the few sounds, a focused counterpoint to the distant murmurs of a city absorbing the day's news. Ruth, still buzzing from the energy of a Roosevelt rally she had attended in October, felt compelled to write to

"Colonel Theodore Roosevelt." Her letter, penned with a clarity and conviction that belied her years, declared her steady allegiance. "If I am but eleven years old," she wrote, her words firm and resolute on the page, "I am just as strong a progressive as anybody else." This was not merely a childish declaration; it was a legacy to the profound impact Roosevelt's message had on young minds, shaping their nascent political identities. Her hope, expressed with the simple earnestness of youth, was that he would seek the presidency again, a sentiment that echoed in many Progressive households.

Shortly after the election, in the quiet suburban town of Bloomfield, New Jersey, another young voice found its way to Roosevelt. Eight-year-old Athelone Anthony, likely seated at a family table, perhaps with a parent guiding her hand or simply watching her pour out her heart, composed a letter filled with the raw emotion of a child. The news of Roosevelt's defeat had struck her deeply. She recalled her own efforts to sway her grandfather's vote, a small but significant act of political engagement within her family circle. The sting of disappointment was evident in her words, as she recounted her brother's critical remark about Mr. Wilson. "Oh dear, I was so mad when my brother told me that Mr. Wilson got in," she confessed, her frustration palpable through the ink on the page. Her letter was not just a lament; it was an urgent plea, a child's direct appeal for her hero to return. She asked him to pursue the presidency again, demonstrating a belief in his enduring capacity to lead. The letter concluded with a request for a photograph, a tangible piece of the man she admired, and a cherished memory of seeing him during his visit to Bloomfield, a fleeting encounter that had clearly left a lasting impression.

Two years later, the traces of the 1912 election still resonated, particularly in the hearts of those who had hoped for a different outcome. On November 7, 1914, from Elgin, Illinois, a young school child named Kathryn Opp took up her pen. The passage of time had not diminished her regret over Roosevelt's defeat. Her letter to "Colonel Roosevelt" was a touching reflection on the enduring nature of political

loyalty and the unique perspective of a child. Kathryn expressed deep sorrow, believing that if children had been enfranchised, Roosevelt's victory would have been assured. This imaginative leap, where the purity of children's votes could alter national destiny, highlighted the depth of her admiration. The letter also revealed a persistent hope, nurtured by the assurances of a figure she called 'Mashma,' that the 'New Party' would eventually prevail, bringing Roosevelt back into office. "I felt so bad that I just had to write and tell you about it," Kathryn wrote, her words carrying the weight of a child's earnest concern for the future of her country and her hero. These letters, penned by young hands in Chicago, Bloomfield, and Elgin, were more than mere fan mail; they were intimate windows into the profound personal connection Theodore Roosevelt forged with the American people, a bond that transcended age, geography, and even electoral defeat. They underscored how his public persona had permeated the private sphere, shaping the hopes and convictions of a generation.

Chapter 4: The Enduring Image: A Legacy Through Admiration

THE COLLECTION OF letters from Ruth Hamblen, Athelone Anthony, and Kathryn Opp, penned in the immediate aftermath and subsequent years of the 1912 United States Presidential Election, offers a unique and touching lens into the enduring public persona of Theodore Roosevelt. These missives, originating from Chicago, Bloomfield, New Jersey, and Elgin, Illinois, are not merely historical artifacts; they are vivid legacy to the profound personal connection Roosevelt forged with the American populace, a bond that transcended the conventional boundaries of political engagement and resonated deeply with citizens of all ages, including the youngest.

The children's letters reveal a leader who was not just a distant political figure but an inspiring presence, capable of igniting fervent loyalty and a sense of shared purpose. Ruth Hamblen's declaration of being "just as strong a progressive as anybody else," despite her eleven years, speaks volumes about the clarity and conviction of Roosevelt's message. It suggests that his call for a "New Nationalism" and his championing of the Progressive Party were articulated with such force

and moral clarity that they could be readily understood and passionately embraced by a child. Her attendance at a rally in Chicago was not a passive observation but an active immersion, transforming her into a committed advocate for his cause. This highlights Roosevelt's exceptional ability to mobilize and inspire, to make complex political ideals accessible and deeply personal.

Athelone Anthony's letter from Bloomfield, New Jersey, further underscores this intimate connection. Her "madness" at Wilson's victory and her earnest efforts to influence her grandfather's vote illustrate how Roosevelt's campaign permeated family discussions and personal aspirations. The request for a photograph and the cherished memory of seeing him in Bloomfield are not just innocent desires; they are indicators of a profound admiration, a yearning for a tangible link to a figure who represented hope and strength. For Athelone, Roosevelt was not just a name in the newspaper; he was a hero whose presence had been felt, whose defeat was a personal sorrow, and whose return to power was a heartfelt wish.

Kathryn Opp's letter, written two years after the election from Elgin, Illinois, provides perhaps the most compelling evidence of Roosevelt's lasting impact. The passage of time had not dulled her regret or her belief in his cause. Her imaginative assertion that children's votes would have ensured his victory is a powerful, if naive, commentary on the perceived purity and moral righteousness of his platform. The influence of 'Mashma' and the sustained hope for the 'New Party' to prevail demonstrate that the Progressive ideals, as embodied by Roosevelt, continued to be discussed and nurtured within families, shaping the political consciousness of a new generation. Kathryn's need to "just had to write and tell you about it" encapsulates the emotional weight of his public life and the personal investment people had in his leadership.

These letters collectively paint a portrait of Theodore Roosevelt as more than a politician; he was a symbol. He embodied a particular vision of America—energetic, righteous, and forward-looking—that resonated deeply with the national character. Even in electoral defeat, his capacity

to inspire loyalty, to instill hope, and to evoke such deeply personal responses from young citizens speaks to a unique charisma and an unparalleled ability to connect with the public imagination. The disappointment expressed by these children was not merely for a lost election but for the temporary deferment of a future they believed Roosevelt alone could deliver. Their words, carefully penned on paper that has now weathered over a century, serve as a powerful reminder that the legacy of a leader is not solely measured in victories or legislative achievements, but also in the hearts and minds of those he inspired, particularly those young voices who believed, with unshakeable conviction, in the promise of his vision.