

This Day in History... March 23, 1909

Teddy Roosevelt Departs for African Safari

On March 23, 1909, former president Teddy Roosevelt set sail from New York City for a joint expedition with the Smithsonian Institution.

Roosevelt's term as president ended on March 4, 1909. At 50 years old, he was America's youngest former president. Roosevelt was anxious to take a break from politics and get out of Washington, DC. At the time, the Smithsonian was building what would become the Museum of Natural History and would need exhibits. Roosevelt, ever a fan of natural history, decided to go on an African safari sponsored by the museum to collect specimens.



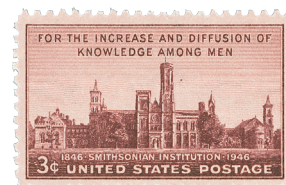
Roosevelt stamp from the Liberty Series



This stamp paid the rate to foreign countries.

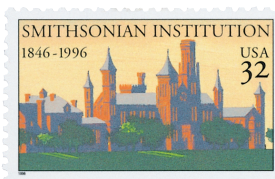
Accompanied by his son Kermit and three representatives from the Smithsonian, Roosevelt began his journey on March 23, 1909. They left from New York, arriving in Mombasa in British East Africa (now Kenya) on April 21. The expedition then boarded a train for a 581-mile train ride to Port Florence on Lake Victoria. Roosevelt described it as "the most interesting railway journey in the world." Roosevelt then met up with the rest of his party. It would include about 250 local guides by the time it was finished.

Over the next ten months, Roosevelt's expedition visited Kenya, the Congo, Uganda, and Sudan, traveling by train, horse, camel, and steamboat. During this time they collected 23,151 natural history specimens, including about 11,397 animals. Several animals were brought back alive for the National Zoo, including a leopard, lions, cheetahs, gazelles, an eagle, a vulture, and a buteo (a broad-winged bird of prey).



This stamp was issued for the Smithsonian's 100th anniversary.

In response to critics over the large number of animals captured, Roosevelt argued, "I can be condemned only if the existence of the National Museum, the American Museum of Natural History, and all similar zoological institutions are to be condemned." Roosevelt saw the trip as a scientific endeavor, as opposed to the mass killing by other hunters there to clear land for plantations.



Stamp issued for the Smithsonian's 150th anniversary.

The expedition ended on March 14, 1910. On the way home, Roosevelt stopped in Oslo, Norway, to pick up the Nobel Peace Prize he had been awarded five years earlier. Roosevelt's trip was covered extensively in the American press. Additionally, *Scribner's Magazine* paid him to write about the expedition. Roosevelt's stories appeared as monthly articles in the magazine and were later compiled into a book, *African Game Trails*.

Because of the sheer number of specimens collected, it took the museum eight years to catalog them all. Several of the animals were also given out to other museums. Those collected during this trip remained on display for decades, until the early 2000s. Today only one specimen from Roosevelt's expedition remains on display at the Smithsonian, the square-lipped rhinoceros.

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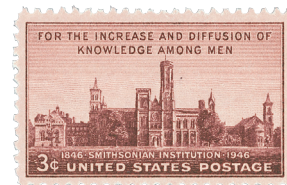
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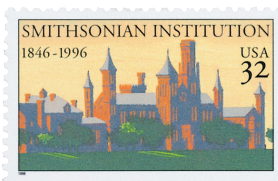
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