

5038 Bully, Bear

At 100, stuffed 'Teddy' stands firm

The cuddly centennial is here. The year 2002 marks one hundred years of the Teddy Bear. In 1902, President Theodore Roosevelt refused to shoot a small, tethered bear while on a Mississippi hunting trip.

The following day, Nov. 16, Clifford Barryman, Washington Post editorial cartoonist, immortalized the incident as part of a front-page cartoon montage. Barryman pictured Roosevelt, his gun before him with the butt resting on the ground and his back to the animal, gesturing his refusal to take the trophy shot. Written across the lower part of the cartoon were the words "Drawing the Line in Mississippi," which coupled the hunting incident to a political dispute.

The cartoon drew immediate attention. In Brooklyn, N.Y., shopkeeper Morris Michtom displayed two toy bears in the window of his novelty store. The bears had been made by his wife, Rose, from plush stuffed excelsior and finished with black shoe button eyes. Michtom recognized the immediate popularity of the new toy, requested and received permission from Roosevelt himself to call them "Teddy's Bears."

In a short time the Streiff company was manufacturing and selling stuffed animals as namesake of the president.

Such an arrival from commercial as well as political origins would probably not be possible in this day and age of trademarks and naming rights.

The beauty of the Teddy Bear is how well it has stood the test of time. Who cannot look back at a favorite teddy of their youth? Few items exemplify the joy and innocence of childhood better than the teddy bear. It is the purest symbol of comfort, one even adults turn to when they need reassurance. Police and emergency providers know the calming power of a teddy bear or other stuffed animal for a child who has seen or experienced trauma.

Yet the fact is that many children do grow up without Teddy Bears — or if they have one it might be the only source of comfort in their lives.

In this anniversary of the soft friend comes a mixed report from Children First organization, a non-partisan, non-profit group that uses research, outreach and public education to speak out on behalf of Oregon's children. Children First gave a B-minus overall grade in its 2002 report, including a D grade for family financial stability and a C for early care and education.