

OKLAHOMA ENTERTAINER



WILL ROGERS
COWBOY, ACTOR, PHILOSOPHER
& AVIATOR

Will Rogers, part Cherokee and full-blood cowboy, was always going somewhere. When Will was in his early twenties, all the boys in Indian Territory were spreading tales of easy fortunes to be made in Argentina. “Huge parcels of land were there just for the taking,” they heard. All the boys talked about going there, but Will Rogers and his cowboy buddy, Dick Parris, really went.

Will packed his saddle, took his horse and \$3,000 (proceeds from the sale of all his cattle) and started south. All he and Parris knew was that the Argentine was to the south, but they really had no idea how to get there.

Will and Dick headed for New Orleans, where they supposed there would be a jumping-off port for Argentina. However, they soon found that they had to backtrack to Galveston. At Galveston, they were told to sail to New York for a south-bound steamer. There, they learned that they would have to go to Liverpool, England, to find passage to the Argentine. Will and Dick had left Indian Territory shortly after Christmas in 1901. They crossed the stormy Atlantic twice and made ports of call in England, Spain, and Portugal. The seasick cowboys finally arrived in Buenos Aires, Argentina, in the first week of May, 1902. Will’s father, Clem Vann Rogers, had always known that Willie had to do things the hard way.

The Argentine was not an El Dorado. The pair was quickly disillusioned and sadly watched their finances **dwindle**. Finally, Dick took what remained of the money they shared and returned home, leaving a broke, lonely Will in Buenos Aires.

Will had hoped his father would send him money to use to come home, but he was too proud to ask for it. Perhaps Clem wanted to teach his boy a lesson. Whatever his reasons, he sent no money.

Will’s trip home was even longer and more circuitous (roundabout) than the trip to the Argentine. Reluctantly, he took a job as a cattle-tender on a cattleboat bound for South Africa. Too seasick to meet his responsibilities, Will endured the storms of the South Atlantic until the ship sailed into port.

While in South Africa, Will first found work on a ranch. There he enjoyed the music and parties in the main house and roped and rode much as he had in Indian Territory. One of his

letters to his father told that he and some Africans were to drive 150 mules to Ladysmith.

Texas Jack's Wild West Circus was playing in Ladysmith when Will and the mules arrived. It wasn't much of a circus, but all 150 mules couldn't have kept Will Rogers away from it.

Texas Jack asked Will if he could rope and ride. Will could ride and proved it by riding some of Texas Jack's "pitching horses," but he was an artist with a lariat. Since childhood, he had loved doing rope tricks.

Will had never considered, much less planned, going into show business. The Oklahoman's path to international stardom began in that accidental meeting with Texas Jack in an obscure little town in South Africa. Billed as "*The Cherokee Kid* who could lasso the tail off a blowfly," he toured South Africa for nearly a year with Texas Jack's Wild West Circus. Later, Will looked upon that period of his life as a most important time. With the blessings and recommendations of Texas Jack, he joined the Wirth Brothers Circus, which was headed for a tour of Australia and New Zealand. There he was billed as "The Cherokee Kid, the Mexican Rope Artist."

The Wirths treated Will as an adopted son, and they remained his friends for life.

Finally, Will sailed for home. He arrived in San Francisco in April 1904. He had been gone for more than two years and had circled the earth in a zig-zag fashion. Of his adventures, Will said, "I started out first class. Then I traveled second class, then third class. And when I was companion to the she-cows was what might be called no class at all. It took me two years to get enough money to get back home on, and Old Glory sure looked good to me when I sighted it outside of the Golden Gate."

Will Rogers was a man of many interests and abilities. He was always a cowboy, no matter what he was doing. He was a ranch foreman, wild west show performer, Vaudeville star, radio commentator, political convention observer, author of books and columns for newspapers and magazines, a

humorist, philosopher, satirist, star of motion pictures, a friend to Presidents, a devoted family man, businessman, generous philanthropist (charitable giver), a promoter of commercial aviation, lecturer, and American patriot. And he did everything well. Perhaps he was world-famous because he reflected perfectly the feelings of the average man during hard times. Yet there was nothing average about Will.

After the wild west shows and circuses, Will took Texas Jack's advice. He tried Vaudeville, early 20th century variety shows staged in theaters called variety halls. There, Rogers quickly made a name for himself as a rope artist. At first, he performed his rope tricks silently, but the outgoing Rogers soon began to chat casually with his audience. They were captivated by his slow Oklahoma drawl, ready smile, and homespun wit, punctuated by his artistry with the lariat. "Swinging a rope is all right — when your neck ain't in it," or "Out West where I come from, they don't let me play with this rope. They think I might hurt myself." The sophisticated New York audience loved him.

By 1915, his career had soared and he had become a star of the biggest, most extravagant show in town — the Ziegfeld Follies. Three years later, he had begun both his writing and acting careers, starring in silent motion pictures.

Will's humor dealt with issues of the day. Anything or anyone was fair game for Will's wit. "All I know is what I read in the papers," he said, and read the papers he did! His unrehearsed comic routines were frequently taken from the front page of the daily news. He was a natural for weekly columns of political satire and humor. The Harper brothers compiled and bound his comments into two books and called him the "Cowboy Philosopher."

The truth of the matter was that Will loved politicians, and they and their political parties and conventions provided much of his material for his news columns and his Vaudeville act. "I

don't belong to any organized party," he said. "I'm a Democrat." He gave each party equal time in his humor. "All a fellow has to do to write something funny on a Republican convention is just write what happened," he said. "The Democrats are investigating the Republican slush funds, and if they find where it's coming from they want theirs." Even the hallowed halls of Congress felt the sting of Will's wit. "Congress is investigating these slush funds. So that means nothing will be done about it."

Will was a caring, generous man with both his time and his money. In 1927, the Mississippi River roared out of its banks, taking a huge toll of property and human lives. The flood waters drove the people from their homes and swept the houses downstream. Will wired Flo Ziegfeld that he could come to New York for a benefit performance if Ziegfeld would donate his theater. When word was announced that Will was giving the program alone, the well-known Irish tenor John McCormack joined his music talent to Will's humor for an unforgettable performance. The men played before a packed house and gave the proceeds to the Red Cross. During his lifetime, Will raised millions of dollars for needy causes.

Will also poked fun at crime bosses. He was concerned about the growth of crime in the nation during the 1920s, the days of prohibition. He offered criticism and solutions. Al Capone, Bugs Moran, Dion O'Banion, and other **infamous** criminals were seemingly immune to local law **enforcement** but not to Will Rogers' caustic (burning) wit.

The government has finally been able to arrange an "armistice" with Al Capone. He is to go to jail "in person" for two years (which term he named himself). His lieutenants are to carry on his business and deliver the receipts to him at the jail every day.

In return the government is to feed, clothe and protect him from harm and release him just about time business turns the corner. The government is remodeling Leavenworth now for him.

Dion O'Banion was Al Capone's rival for control of criminal activities, especially bootlegged liquor sold in Chicago during prohibition. When O'Banion was murdered, he was given a spectacular funeral — a \$10,000 casket and twenty-six truckloads of flowers, among them a huge basket of flowers inscribed, "From Al." Will wrote:

Well, Chicago is having the last laugh. The rest of the country rose up in wrath with pictures and editorials of Chicago killings, and its elaborate gangsters' funerals. Now if your town hasn't buried a gangster with a rose festival it's rather plebeian (backward).

Los Angeles, backed by the Chamber of Commerce and the florists are out for that trade now. They put on a trial funeral here last week that looked like a movie opening night. The flowers were only limited by the amount they could ship in. Our slogan is, "Before you shoot each other, don't overlook Los Angeles." Racketeering is American's biggest industry, and their funerals is 'big business.'

The twenties and thirties were crucial decades for ventures in commercial aviation. In the United States, public support was needed for the development of commercial flight. Two men, Charles Lindbergh and Will Rogers, were major contributors to this effort. Lindbergh, through his solo flight across the Atlantic, and Rogers, through his public endorsements, helped keep commercial aviation alive in the United States until the demands of war and economic development ensured a permanent commitment to its expansion. An article in *Scientific American* called Rogers the "patron saint of aviation."

After Lindbergh, Will Rogers is aviation's best press agent. The industry owes him more than he is ever likely to collect. His wit, his extraordinary publicity resources, and his genuine enthusiasm for flying entitle him to the **nomination** as patron saint of aviation. . . . We can always count on Colonel Lindbergh to do the right thing and on

Will Rogers to say the right thing at the right time. They are two of a kind.

When Will traveled in Europe in 1926, he was disturbed by Europe's being so far ahead of the United States in commercial aviation. He was determined to promote the cause of aviation in his own country. His actions matched his words. He flew everywhere he went. He toured the entire globe, crossed the North American continent from coast to coast on numerous occasions, frequently visited other areas of the world, and took innumerable short trips inside the United States by air. He sometimes took his wife and children with him and publicized their flights. Besides his personal enjoyment of a fast, safe way to travel, Will believed that the military security of the United States depended upon a strong aviation industry. It was his **avid** support of aviation that ultimately led to his death in 1935.

Wiley Post, a fellow Oklahoman who held two around-the-world flight records and point-to-point speed records, wanted to survey a possible commercial air route to Russia via Alaska. Post wanted to survey Alaska and then fly on to Siberia, China, and Africa. Will thought that Wiley had never been properly recognized as a pioneer in aviation. Besides that, Will could never resist helping a friend. Also, he had seen Siberia from a crowded, uncomfortable train across that vast Russian landscape. He had been unsatisfied by the confinement to the train and being able to see so little. Getting to see Siberia again from the air was irresistible.

Revisiting Siberia, the excitement of the project, and the support that he could give to Wiley Post and to commercial aviation — these factors combined to overcome Will's early reluctance to making the trip.

They reached Fairbanks, Alaska, on schedule. Will then wanted to fly to Point Barrow, about 500 miles away and near the Arctic Circle. They missed Point Barrow because of the dense fog and made an emergency landing. From an



Will Rogers' famous straw hat is now in the Will Rogers Memorial in Claremore.

Eskimo, they got proper directions. They took off, but had reached less than 100 feet in the air when the plane's motor stalled. The plane nosed down into the water, flipping completely over. Both Will and Wiley were killed instantly.

Will Rogers is still a presence in the state he loved. Millions of people have visited the Will Rogers Memorial in Claremore. Oklahoma buildings and streets have been named for the favorite native son. In all his travels and at the height of his successes, he never forgot his roots in the land of the red man. Gene Autry, a fellow cowboy actor from Oklahoma who owed the start of his career to Will Rogers, said of his mentor:

He brought to the western tradition the idea of the friendly cowboy. As much as any man, he helped establish the lore and humor of the West as part of the American heritage.

Will himself said there was “. . . no greater, no happier life in the world than that of the cattleman's. I have been on the stage for twenty years and I love it, but do you know, really, at heart, I love ranching. I have always regretted that I didn't live thirty or forty years earlier, and in the same old country — the Indian Territory. I would have liked to have gotten there ahead of the 'nesters,' the barbed wire fence, and so-called civilization. I wish I could have lived my whole life there and drank out of a gourd instead of a paper envelope.”

The cowboy philosopher and Cherokee humorist was mourned by kings, presidents, and people everywhere, but no one mourned for Will Rogers more than those who had actually ridden the range with him.