

HOW I DISCOVERED WILL ROGERS

THE TOUCHING AND HUMOROUS STORY
OF HOW A SON LEARNED THE SECRET
BEHIND HIS FATHER'S GREATNESS . . .

by Will Rogers, Jr.

As told to LOUIS BERG

THE enormity of what I was doing—playing the part of my own father in a movie based on his life—struck me fully during a sequence in which I had to step into the open cockpit of one of those old-fashioned airplanes. It gave me quite a turn, for I remembered now watching my father do that very same thing.

Almost without thinking, I reached out and waved down below in a way I had seen Dad do so often—at the little boy who was me.

I was to get many a twinge like that before the picture was finished. In the end, however, I got to know Will Rogers better than it is given most sons to know their fathers. I did a good deal of research for the screen play, and in the process I must have gone through every scrap of paper Dad left behind, and listened to hundreds of recordings of his voice. I literally retraced his past, from his early youth; rehearsed all of his old Ziegfeld Follies routines and rope tricks, practiced his public speeches, and relived with him some of the grave and beautiful passages in his life.

The Peace-Maker

AND I was constantly reminded of what this generation may have forgotten—that Will Rogers was more than just an entertainer or comedian. He was a shrewd political observer, and for that matter played a strange role in politics himself.

His position in politics was unique. You might call him a kind of Peace-Maker—the fellow who starts a laugh when the argument seems to be getting too violent. America could use a man like that today.

He kidded cabinet members and congress-

men and presidents out of their stuffed-shirt poses, and made them seem human and likeable.

During the boom period of the twenties, Will Rogers came close to predicting the depression at a time when the whole nation was market-crazy. But when the depression hit, he labored hard to restore public confidence. That was when he coined the phrase that set the country to laughing for a change: "We hold the distinction of being the only nation that is going to the poorhouse in an automobile."

If he could only address this year, as he used to, the two great political conventions!

I think it was because of his consciousness of his particular role that he refused to commit himself unreservedly to any political party. If he spoke at the Republican National Convention, then he made it a point to speak also at the Democratic Convention. He kidded both unmercifully:

To the Democrats he said: "I am not a member of any *organized* party. I am a Democrat."

To the Republicans: "A Republican wants to work at politics, but he wants people to believe he don't have to."

His wit made him a privileged character in high circles, the favorite of industrial barons, bankers and presidents. But he was no court jester. He accepted the friendship of the great but refused their favors. He was proudest of his newspaper column, designed to please people at large.

President Wilson was a close friend. Characteristically it was a wisecrack at the President's expense that started the friendship.

Continued on page 22



WILL ROGERS said, "I never met a man I didn't like." And the feeling was mutual

CULVER SERVICE

WILL ROGERS, JR., turned movie actor for the first time in his life—and last, he says—to enact the role of his own father in the Warner Brothers feature, "The Story of Will Rogers." THIS WEEK Magazine asked him to report on how it feels to make the picture and on the memories of his father which the film inevitably awakened.



HOW I DISCOVERED WILL ROGERS

Continued from page twenty-two

more, and Rogers County was named after him — "because nobody could pronounce the original Indian name," Dad used to say.

During Dad's youth, people went around saying he would never be the man his father was. Uncle Clem, as they used to call him, was the opposite of Dad. He was a rather pompous man, I am told, and quite humorless.

But Dad inherited his father's sense of public responsibility, even if the burden of it didn't seem to weigh him down quite so much. This sense of responsibility governed his humor and curbed his tongue on many occasions. He could never distort the truth for the sake of a wisecrack, and he never wrote a line that wasn't weighed for the possible harm it might contain.

Plugged Flying

NEXT to politics he was interested most in aviation. The airlines gave him the title of America's No. 1 Airplane Passenger. He bought the first ticket for a transatlantic passenger flight, but died in the crash with Wiley Post four years before the flight was ever realized. He spoke incessantly on behalf of aviation, whether to an audience of two people or to millions on the air.

Although he became a top movie star and

owed a large part of his considerable fortune to the movies, I think his screen career interested him least of all. I never heard him discuss his movie work at home. But everybody in the movie industry seemed to be his friend. Dad's oft-quoted remark — "I never met a man I didn't like" — may not have been literally true. But what is true is that nobody ever met Will Rogers without liking him.

"The World's Worst"

WHEN I came to Warner Brothers to make this picture, I was amazed at the number of people still working in pictures who knew him, and came over to me to tell me stories about him.

But I am afraid most of these stories only serve to point up Dad's indifference. "Yep, I'm a movie actor," he used to remark. "The world's worst." He once said that the movies were "the only place where an actor can act and at the same time sit down in front and applaud himself."

Another story they told me illustrates his impish attitude when he was working. Dad had been bothered by the still photographer to sit for some publicity pictures.

Continued on next page

HOW I DISCOVERED WILL ROGERS

Continued from preceding page

Dad never did care much for publicity, and he used to stall the cameraman.

"We'll do it after we knock off today," he'd say, and then at the end of the day, "Sorry, but I'm late for an appointment. Let's make it tomorrow."

Joke Was on Will

THIS kept up day after day until it became the standing joke on the set. Finally, the director approached Dad.

"Look, Will," he said, "let's pull a rib on the still man. You pose for his pictures, but we'll stuff paper in his camera so that he'll be shooting nothing but blanks."

Dad agreed, and was completely co-operative. In fact, even after the cameraman was through, he kept insisting that they take more and more pictures.

But the joke was on him, for once. The whole thing was a trick to induce him to pose. At the last minute the paper that Dad himself had stuffed into the camera when the photographer's back was turned was just as surreptitiously removed.

One thing I hope the new movie does succeed in doing, and that is tell the true love story of Dad and Betty Rogers, my mother. Dad used to say he courted Mother, "the prettiest girl in Oklahoma," by riding up and down on a horse in front of her house, doing tricks with a rope.

The two of them were very happy throughout the whole of their married life, and Dad seldom wrote a line that he did not submit to his wife.

An Idyllic Marriage

DAD kept right on working in vaudeville from the day they were married, and they traveled on their wedding journey along with the horse that Dad used in his act. But the toughest job was getting the horse on and off trains. This

may not sound like an idyllic honeymoon. But their marriage was an idyll.

Jane Wyman plays Betty Rogers in the picture. We were chatting together off the set when she was called away for a scene.

"I'll be back in a few minutes," she said, "I have to go and give birth to you."

As I say, it was an odd thing I found myself doing — playing my own father. I have been in politics, and I am at present the publisher of a weekly newspaper, "The Beverly Hills Citizen." Until I worked on "The Story of Will Rogers," I never spoke a line in public that was not my own.

The way it happened, other and better actors had been proposed for the role of Will Rogers from time to time. Spencer Tracy, Bing Crosby, Jimmy Stewart were among those suggested, but somehow or other none was available when the picture was ready to go into production — after a delay of 10 years.

Worse Than an Octopus

"ALL you have to do," they told me, "is to act natural." As if this isn't the hardest thing in the world to do in front of the cameras. What do you do with your hands, for example, when you are talking? Or sitting still? This problem troubled me more than the one about the octopus who was asked what tentacle he started out with — and worrying about it got him all tangled up.

I don't know what I would have done if Jane Wyman hadn't come to my rescue. Her instructions were precise and mathematical. "Count three," she would say, "before you turn to look at me." Or, "Take a beat and a half before you start to speak."

Most of the time I tried to remember my father's philosophy: "Get a few laughs and do the best you can."

The End