

AN OPTIMIST TRIBUTE TO WILL ROGERS

The annual celebration of Will Rogers' birthday in Claremore, Oklahoma, his home town, this year included the presentation of a bronze memorial plaque from Optimist International, to be placed in the Will Rogers Memorial. A day of colorful events featured the presentation address by Dr. Walter A. Reiling, President of Optimist International.

THE LITTLE TOWN of Claremore, Okla., was named for the Indian Chief who founded it, but it is famous because Will Rogers called it his home town. It is located on an age-old Indian road, now overlaid by U.S. Highway 66; and the highway is called the Will Rogers Highway. Pioneers became wealthy by trading in furs there, and the hides were softened by the black oil that came from the ground mixed with evil-smelling gaseous water; the mineral water and the oil brought riches to the area, but today it counts itself rich because a little boy who once raced his pony over its rounded hills went to school in Claremore. He grew up to be a light-hearted, roving sort of fellow who roamed the world—and once made a historic flight around it—sharing his humor and his broad tolerant view of his fellow-man with millions.

BIRTHDAY CELEBRATION

Because this beloved American called Claremore his home, Claremore celebrates his birthday on November 4 each year. This year was the 74th anniversary of that birthday, and in the memorial that fellow Oklahomans have built to Will Rogers at Claremore a plaque was dedicated to his memory

by Optimist International. In his dedicatory address International President Dr. Walter A. Reiling said:

"Representing as I do the Optimist Club, one of five of the largest service clubs in the world, I am proud to present today the heartfelt and sincere expressions of respect and appreciation for Will Rogers from almost 45,000 members in the United States, Canada, Mexico, Puerto Rico and Hawaii and add them to the feelings and emotions in the hearts of the many relatives, friends and neighbors of Will present in the audience today.

A STRIKING SIMILARITY

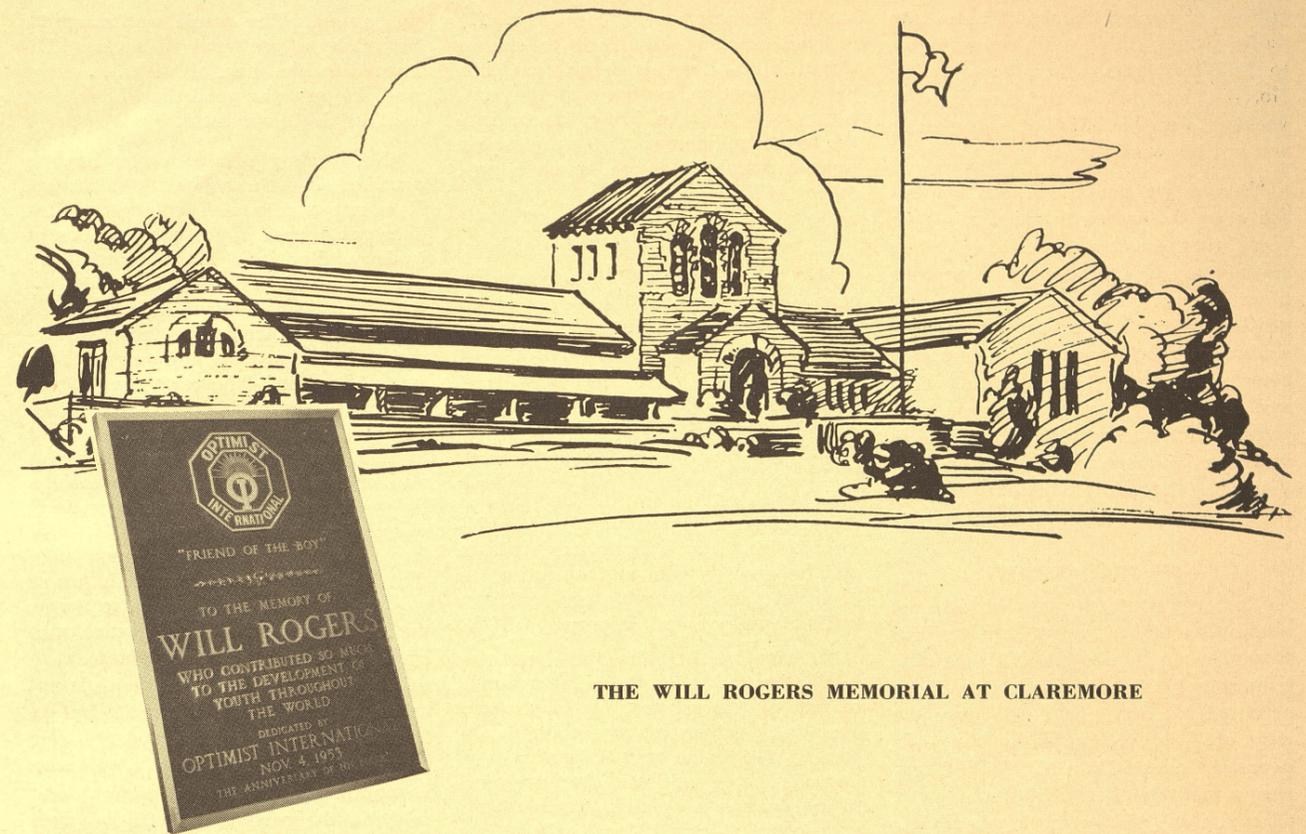
"Representing as I do one of the great service clubs of our time, I have long felt that there was a striking similarity between the life and actions of Will Rogers and the aims and objectives of many and most of our service organizations. In his profound effect upon the lives and activities of peoples everywhere, in his universal approach and his world-wide acceptance, he assumed the character and power of an international institution. In this role, in his life and actions certainly, his characteristics and qualities are easily available for ready comparison.

"The typical American' was a term frequently applied to Will. Exploring the American characteristics, we find the acceptance and appreciation that followed Will Rogers everywhere was the same true American recognition now offered to the modern service club movement with its honest and sincere principles, its refusal to enter partisan politics, its recognition of all creeds and its evasion of all pressure phenomena. In typical American fashion service clubs, like Will Rogers, were not only permitted but encouraged to grow and develop. Now they are accepted in the hearts of all peoples with a completeness and warmth that was the prime stimulant in Will's whole life. Like Will, from a humble start we too have grown and prospered in the warmth of American support and acclaim.

NEED FOR HUMOR

"What made Will great? Was it luck, was it insight, was it perseverance in doing what he did best, or was it because he was almost a divinely inspired answer to a need all men feel for humor, the necessity on the road to happiness?"

Dr. Reiling's question had an answer in the winning essay of a contest co-



THE WILL ROGERS MEMORIAL AT CLAREMORE

sponsored by Optimist International and a local institution, the Dog-Iron Club:

"He apparently became great without consciously knowing how he did it . . . He was born knowing how to get along with people.

"In this part of the country, perhaps in all parts, he is no legend in that a legend is past tense. He exerts on us an influence, with his old-fashioned ideals of honesty and sincerity, with his subtle way of deflating stuffed shirts . . ."

ADDRESS FEATURED

The youthful author of this essay on the assigned subject, "Why Was Will Rogers Great?" received her award during the program at the Will Rogers Memorial which featured Dr. Reiling's address. Earlier in the day, when nearly everyone was downtown watching for the huge parade to get under way, the Indian women of the Pochontas Club performed the simple ceremony of laying flowers at Will's tomb. In 1921, when he had gained fame, as the local paper said, "as a world-celebrated trick and fancy roper," this club gave him a banquet followed by a square-dance party where Will not only called a dance or two but led an Indian

war-dance "with a war cry that shook the roof!" Performing their simple, quiet rite, these old friends remembered how Will, already an entertainer paid thousands of dollars a week to amuse the public, would come back home as a light-hearted boy having the time of his life.

GALA DAY

The "birthday party" this year filled up a gala day with riding and roping exhibits, marching bands, and a huge outdoor square dance. Crowds thronged the Memorial all day long. The oldsters who knew and loved Rogers and the youngsters who know and revere his spirit were out in force. In the evening, chiefs of the Osage and Cherokee tribes revived an ancient rite and put formal end to an ancient conflict when in an elaborate setting of Indian music and costumes they smoked the peace pipe together, buried a ceremonial hatchet and danced the Dance of Rejoicing.

At the Memorial, when the grounds at last were deserted, two cousins of Will's lingered to sum up the day in simple words: "Will would have liked it."

Top Oklahoma civic and political leaders had lavished praise on the cowboy who was revered by the world's

statesmen, when N. G. Henthorne of Tulsa, chairman of the Memorial Commission, said:

"To eulogize him is like gilding the lily. His words and deeds speak more eloquently than anything we can say. This memorial was built out of the hearts of Oklahoma people for our own native son who became a world citizen. And to the nation's youth he should, and will, remain a man they can always look up to."

Dr. Reiling related this aspect of the Rogers legend to organized Optimism when he said:

OBJECTIVES

"We as Optimists are very proud of one of our Objectives, presented formally as an activity pledged 'To aid and encourage the development of youth throughout the world.' In a more practical every-day fashion we call it boys' work, upholding of course the Optimist motto, 'Friend of the Boy.' One may ask, how does Will Rogers fit into the picture of specific boys' work activity? If it means that he was the acting Scoutmaster, the starter of the acting Scoutmaster, the referee of a marble tournament, then Will doesn't fit. If it means that he umpired Little League baseball games, or tutored youthful

orators, or carved chunks of balsa into model planes, then we are not referring to the Will Rogers that we honor today. No, Will had neither the time nor the vocation for this kind of activity. It was not his work.

"But as we pause, perhaps we can see a youth flush with pride when he reads that another American, just a cowboy, could face bankers, senators, kings or presidents and, with an ever gentle, forever humorous but terribly sincere approach, present with complete courage the picture, good or bad as he saw it. To any boy, this was the real picture of democracy in action. This was the language of citizenship that youth understood. To them, it was not only a story, it was an incentive.

ADMIRATION OF YOUTH

"Or can you put into words the admiration that all youth held for Will Rogers when he described his painful, humorous battle with his nerves as he accepted his first plane ride over the city of Washington with the then deposed General Billy Mitchell? There was something that tickled the spirit of adventure in all youth when they read how Will reported that the only reason he didn't leave the plane as it circled the Washington Monument was the lack of handles on the monument! It was a funny experience, and one that Will told best. But there was more to this report of his experience with aviation and the many others that followed. Will was a pioneer, a trail blazer, a stimulant to the art of aviation which was only an infant in his day. To the boys of that day the story of planes, pilots and flying carried the same impact as the report of an atomic bomb today. Will Rogers with sheer courage and foresight championed a cause dear to the hearts and imaginations of every boy in the twenties—yes, even today. He wrote about flying, he tried it, and even died for it, trying to prove the importance of aviation; and his work was not in vain.

"This was youth work of the highest degree. Here was Will presenting to the youth of all nations constant examples of clean humor, fearless approach, love of animals, championing of causes, and endless tales of travel, all told with simplicity and charm. Here was Will presenting the principles of fair play and the love of all mankind in a language and manner that all could understand. Is this influencing youth? Who could do more?

"Will Rogers was a comedian. He resisted any and all efforts to change this title or alter this description. His life's occupation, reduced to the simplest form, was to bring humor into the hearts and homes of all peoples. He wanted people to laugh, to be happy, to enjoy life.

ALWAYS SAW HUMOR

"He never lost his ability to see the good in every event, he never failed to read the humor between the lines of a pompous report or an imposing treaty. It was in his heart, and he described it himself when he wrote, 'I am the last one in the world to see something and not see some good in it.' Yes, this was Will's philosophy, and he hated the word. But it was there. And it is the very same philosophy that gives Optimism its title and its greatest aim and objective, to promote the philosophy of Optimism internationally as a philosophy of life.

"I have neither the time nor the inclination today, on the home grounds of one of the greatest Optimists who ever lived, to express my feelings concerning the value and importance of Optimism as a guide on the long road to real human happiness. But we have a beautiful Optimist Creed which lists in ten tenets simple, wholesome, practical ways that you and I can practice this philosophy in our everyday life. It is often quoted. Somehow as I read and then re-read it, it seems to me that these ten tenets of this Creed are like the ten commandments to accompany the Golden Rule of life. And as I read them more intently I can see line for line and word for word a description of the thinking and actions of Will Rogers. If he had ever described the actual rules and principles that governed his life, they could have been summarized in our Optimist Creed.

"Only time and not eternity is available to present comparisons between Will and the life he led to our service organizations. Before I close, I would like to present one more comparison, brief as it may be, but to me one of the most striking of all. Will Rogers found his greatest asset was an ability to meet kings or presidents, bankers or politicians, cow-hands or waitresses on his own terms. He poked fun at all of them and delved into their innermost selves. In doing so, he stripped the shell from the mighty and high and lifted lowly and weak from the hole of their inferiority. He reduced all men to a common plane where his view was not obstructed by artificial color or

background. The result was startling. He made a profound discovery. He learned to like men, all men . . . every man. He saw the good that is inherent in all of God's creatures.

"And today, service clubs have a peculiar, almost universal, little custom. It is not a rule or regulation and it does not appear in the constitutions or by-laws. Yet it is the unwritten law that all members must be called by their first names. Here at our service club, meeting across the table, we become just plain 'Joe' and our neighbor just plain 'Jim.' There we really learn to know Jim and he learns to know the real Joe in us. We are surprised to find that he has the same thoughts and desires that we have. He too delights in success and finds sorrow in disappointments. And what is most important, we learn to our amazement that he is just as interested in us as we are in him. We learn to know our neighbor and with this knowledge comes love and respect. We learn a very important fact: that wealth is not measured in dollars and cents but in human hearts and human souls. We learn to echo the words of Charles Lamoureux, a French musician, who said that the greatest thing in the world is a human life and the greatest work in the world is a helpful touch upon that life.

FAMOUS LINES

"This, Will Rogers experienced. This was his reaction. This was the thought behind those famous lines, so important to him that he named them as his epitaph, carved on the stone over there. No one can ever describe a fuller appreciation of his neighbor than Will Rogers did when he wrote . . . 'I never met a man I didn't like!'

"And now in conclusion, may I say that service clubs are both proud and vain when we maintain that our activities parallel the life and actions of Will Rogers—a man, an institution. It is a one-sided argument. He is not here to defend himself. But I hope that wherever he is today, roaming the greatest ranch of all, he will look down with favor as he hears our words, and offer his famous grin of approval to members of service clubs throughout the world, bent on community aid and betterment. I hope he will nod his head in appreciation of organizations that have seen fit to borrow from his life and activities the rules and principles that made him famous, and use them as their own Aims and Objectives."