

Recalling Will Rogers in the House His Humor Built



COWBOY'S ROOM—Steer's head over the stone fireplace at the Will Rogers ranch was a gift from Amon G. Carter, Texas publisher.

Bill Beebe

By ANDREW HAMILTON

PACIFIC PALISADES, Calif. — The late Will Rogers was so kind-hearted that he could not bear to part with the many gifts that his legion of friends and admirers showered upon him.

As a result, California possesses an unusual state museum—a rambling, 18-room, Western-style ranch house framed by towering eucalyptus, brightened with crimson bougainvillea and crammed with Western art and mementos of the American humorist.

Situated about 20 miles from downtown Los Angeles and 10 miles from Hollywood, it was here that Will and Mrs. Rogers and their children—Mary, Jimmy and Bill Jr. — lived for many happy years before he was killed in an airplane crash near Point Barrow, Alaska, on Aug. 15, 1935.

Now known as Will Rogers State Historic Park, this memorial to America's cowboy philosopher has been visited by several million people. And they still come — at the rate of 200,000 a year. The guest book is filled with names and addresses from all parts of the world, and cars in the parking lot carry a variety of out-of-state license plates.

Many Facets

Will's home represents the sum total of his interests and friendships as a Broadway star, motion picture actor, newspaper columnist, polo player and the father of three children. He called it "The House That Jokes Built."

When the Rogers family

first came to California after World War I, they lived in swank Beverly Hills. In 1922, Will purchased 150 acres of rolling chaparral- and sycamore-lined canyons in Pacific Palisades from which he could see the sparkling blue Pacific.

He built a weekend cabin on the property and liked it so well that, in 1928, he bought another 175 acres and erected the present ranch house, as well as stables for his horses. Later, he constructed a regulation-size polo field and a four-hole golf-course.

Favorite Horse

The latter was for Will's many friends. He did not play the game himself, but frequently rode Soapsuds, his favorite horse, from green to green while his guests golfed.

The weekend cabin became the living room of the new house; today, it holds the greatest interest for visitors. Approximately 30 by 60 feet, with a ceiling high enough for Will's roping, the room is dominated by a huge fireplace.

On its face is mounted a giant Texas steer whose horns measure 7 feet 4 inches.

It was one of the many gifts of Amon G. Carter, the Fort Worth publisher, who found it in San Antonio. On another wall is the head of a shaggy Scottish Highland steer, the gift of friends in Santa Barbara.

"When the thing arrived in a packing case," recalls Emil Sandmeier, a former employe of the ranch, "it was the meanest-looking critter you ever saw. But a funny thing happened; when we got it

mounted on the wall, it seemed to acquire a benign expression. Many people have commented on it."

The living room is comfortable, with a relaxed feeling about it. During inclement weather, when meals could not be served on the patio, the living room served as a dining room.

Will's favorite wicker porch swing—it is from a previous home—is hung by chains from a stout rafter in the ceiling. A stairway in one corner is made of logs hewn to represent railroad ties, while the light fixtures are set in a wagon wheel, an oxen yoke and a doubletree.

At the left of the entrance stands a large glass case that rouses the most poignant memories of Will Rogers: his old, plain roping saddle and coiled lariat, scuffed boots,

battered hat, bridle and quirt. Tex Wheeler's statue of Will on Soapsuds shows a figure turned in the saddle and as if about to crack a joke.

Will frequently practiced roping in his living room—on the furniture and on his friends. Ed Borein, another artist friend, figured that a stuffed calf would make a better target, and so he had a taxidermist prepare one. Two battered ears attest to the fact that it must have been used frequently.

Cowboy Art

The redwood walls of the room are adorned with water-colors and oils by Charles Russell, the well-known cowboy artist. Several bronze statues on the tables around the room are also by Russell; in addition, there are etchings and water-colors by Borein.

The living room is ablaze with Indian rugs and blankets of all colors, sizes and patterns, and gifts from Will's many friends and well-wishers take up almost every available inch of wall space. There are branding irons (including Will's own), chaps, spurs, quirts, polo mallets, boot jacks, keys to several cities and a scroll from the City of Beverly Hills in appreciation of Will's services as Mayor.

Too, there are photographs of such personalities as Charles Chaplin, John Nance Garner, William S. Hart, Irvin S. Cobb, Charles Lindbergh, Fred Stone and John Charles Thomas.

In one corner stands a life-size wooden Indian; in another, a hurdy-gurdy from Al Smith's 1928 Presidential campaign.

Near the fireplace hangs a quirt used by the Prince of Wales when he played polo on Will Rogers's team in 1924. On still another wall is a curved knife sent to the late humorist by the people of Finland after their 1932 Olympic team had used his polo field to practice track events.

Kept as It Was

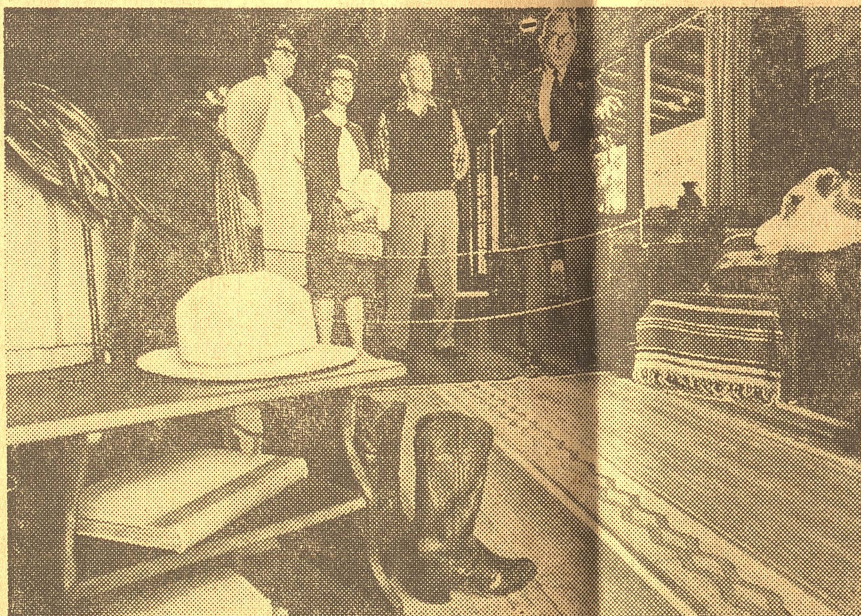
One of the most frequent questions asked by visitors is: "Was the house really like this when Will Rogers lived here, or was all this stuff assembled after his death?"

Park curators have a standard answer: Yes, the room is exactly as the Rogers family arranged it, except for the addition of two large oil portraits of Mr. and Mrs. Rogers by Howard Chandler Christy and two cases containing some of Will's polo trophies, scrap books and other items of interest.

Opened in 1940

Mrs. Rogers opened the house to the public in 1940. On Aug. 19, 1944, the heart of the estate — 186 choice acres, including the ranch house, polo field, golf course and stables — was deeded to California by the Rogers family. The ranch house and its surroundings are now under the jurisdiction of the California Department of Parks and Recreation.

Both the park and museum are open daily from 10 A.M. to 5 P.M. Admission to the museum is 25 cents for adults; children under 6 are admitted free. There is no admission fee to the park, which is the scene of polo games every Thursday and Saturday at 1:30 P.M.



COWBOY'S GEAR—Rogers used stuffed calf at right for indoor roping.



WHERE THE COWBOY LIVED—The 18-room ranch house, 10 miles from Hollywood, which Rogers built for his family in 1928.

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