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Will Rogers at 100 --He Still Wears Well

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Will Rogers Memorial Commission

American humorist Will Rogers is shown in a characteristically contemplative pose in garden of a Miami hotel while taking time out from a 1926 lecture tour.

Will Rogers at 100 -- He Still Wears Well

by Bonnie Speer

"I remember that day," says Ray McClure, a government official who spent his childhood in Tulsa, Okla. "I was just a small boy, but I remember people driving down Lewis St. in their cars and hollering out windows: 'Will Rogers is dead! Will Rogers is dead!' I ran into the barber-shop where my father was. 'Is it true?' I asked. 'Yes, son, I'm afraid it is,' came the somber reply."

ABOUT THE COVER: Gregory Brandin, 5, traveled from Bakersfield, Cal., to be photographed with the statue of his great-grandfather Will Rogers at Claremore, Okla. It was the child's first visit to the museum erected in honor of his famous ancestor. Photo by Arthur Rothstein, PARADE director of photography.

Today, almost everyone old enough to feel the impact of that bleak August day in 1935 can, like McClure, tell you what they were doing when they heard the news of Will Rogers's untimely death. For this Oklahoma cowboy, who had become the nation's best-loved humorist, had touched the sentiments of common Americans as few do.

With rustic manner and wry countenance, he razzed Congress, twitted Presidents and kings. "He was a hero during the Depression," says Clem McSpadden, former Oklahoma state senator and grandnephew of Rogers. "He said things the average man thought but couldn't express himself."

This year marks Will Rogers's return

to the national limelight. To commemorate his 100th birthday, a National Will Rogers Centennial Committee has been formed, chaired by actor Joel McCrea and including Bob Hope, Will Rogers Jr., editor Gilbert Grosvenor and actor James Whitmore. Planned events include the return of Whitmore's one-man show *Will Rogers' U.S.A.*, syndication of Rogers's radio and newspaper columns, reprinting of his books, a traveling Rogers museum, a best-unpublished-picture contest, a second postal stamp honoring Rogers (the first was issued in 1948), and perhaps a posthumous Academy Award.

Rogers's name was a household word during the 1920's and early

1930's. He worked in vaudeville, appeared in 55 films, spoke on radio, gave public lectures, wrote six books, numerous magazine articles, a daily and a weekly newspaper column.

When many citizens were feeling the pinch of hard times, Rogers's homespun quips echoed the public mood. "Lord, the money we spend on government," he once remarked, "and it's not one bit better than the government we got for one-third the money 20 years ago."

"Many of his political comments are just as apropos today as when he made them," says McCrea, Rogers's former friend and neighbor.

Rogers's wit and political insight came from his lifelong habit of reading the newspapers and his acquaintance with leading figures worldwide. His best remarks were on the most immediate and deepest-felt issues: "Been millions made in wheat last week, but not by anyone who ever raised any . . . Here we are in a country with more than any other country, and we have people starving—only nation that's ever went to the Potters Field in an automobile . . . It wasn't that Calvin Coolidge didn't do nothing. It was that he did it better than anyone else."

"He wrote all his own stuff," says

McCrea. "He didn't have six writers working for him. He spoke on topics of the day and the character of the people. He would hook into people if they were the least bit hypocritical, but he did it with such humor that nobody could resent it, not even the person he was getting onto."

Rogers's son, Will Jr., says that as a boy he thought all fathers were as funny as his own. "It wasn't till many years later I learned otherwise."

What was the secret of Rogers's humor? "They ask me where I get my jokes," he once remarked. "I just watch Congress—they solve the problem." He always gave the party in office the hardest time ("they're the ones doing the most damage").

Congressional investigations, he said, were for the benefit of the photographers. An international conference was a place where countries found out each other's shortcomings and formed new dislikes for the next conference.

Rogers offered unique but compelling solutions to national problems. Prohibition violations, for instance: "Income tax has stopped every other industry, so there is no reason why it won't stop bootlegging."

William Penn Adair Rogers was born part Cherokee Indian near Oologah, Indian Territory, on Nov. 4, 1879—an Election Day, which Rogers claimed gave him the right to speak out on politics.

Says Dr. Reba Collins, curator of the Will Rogers Memorial in Claremore, Okla.: "As far back as he could remember, the Cherokees were fighting to keep their lands. A great deal of this [discussion] went on at the dinner table in his father's household. He couldn't have failed to be interested in politics."

On his father's ranch, "little Willie" learned the ways of common folk and how to rope. His sense of humor came from his mother, who died when he was 10, after which Will was sent to a succession of boarding schools. "He was never interested in them," says Helen Eaton, a cousin of Rogers's, who describes him as a round peg that couldn't be fit into a square hole. "He had to develop, to be himself," she recalls.

At 18, Rogers "escaped" from Kemper Military School in Booneville, Mo. Then for several years he wandered the world, not knowing what to do with himself. In South Africa he drifted into show business as a trick roper, and by 1916 he had worked his

way up to the Ziegfeld Follies.

In 1919 he went to Hollywood and became a screen star. "Some people think of him as just an actor," says McCrea, "and what he did for show business was tremendous. But you have to think of him as a world figure."

Rogers went to Europe half a dozen times and received welcomes "accorded heads of state," as *The New York Times* stated in 1935. Helen Eaton recalls a story cousin Will told about visiting the Prince of Wales, with whom Rogers shared an interest in polo. "When he got to London, the Prince asked him to come up for tea, and he was so surprised when he got there. His picture was on the table."

On the home front, the Democratic Party thought enough of Rogers to nominate him for President—twice—and the National Press Club named him "Congressman at Large." He was also mayor of Beverly Hills, Cal.

During the Depression, incensed by a Hoover Administration that did little to help, Rogers made a flying tour through Texas, Oklahoma and Arkansas, raising \$225,000 for relief.

Rogers was perpetually restless. "He was always in a hurry," says Clem McSpadden. "It seemed there was not half enough time." In Hollywood, McCrea recalls, "if he wasn't in a scene, he was out twirling his rope. If not that, he was sitting in an old LaSalle coupe he had up at Lake Tahoe and

typing his column for the day. And if he wasn't doing that, he was doing a benefit."

Gen. Jimmy Doolittle, who was Rogers's friend and sometimes his pilot, tells of a stuffed calf Rogers kept in his living room when Mrs. Rogers was not home. "Will had a habit of constantly roping the calf when talking. By the time of his death, he had every hair on that calf's neck rubbed off."

Rogers loved to fly. A booster of air travel, he flew some 500,000 miles in seven years. "Wherever I happened to be going," Doolittle says, "frequently he just went along for the ride."

Rogers considered Wiley Post—the one-eyed pilot who had set two around-the-world flight records—the most careful pilot with whom he had ever flown.

In August 1935, Rogers took off with Post on a "vacation" flight to Alaska, Siberia and Moscow. On Aug. 15, having lost their way en route from Fairbanks, they set down in the Alaska barrens to ask directions of some Eskimos some 15 miles from Pt. Barrow. On the ensuing takeoff, the engine failed and, as the startled natives watched, the plane plunged to earth, killing Rogers and Post instantly. An Eskimo ran to Pt. Barrow with the news.

Oklahoma began planning a memorial for Rogers at once. It was built

at Claremore, which Rogers had always claimed as his hometown: "Nobody but another Indian can pronounce Oologah." His body was buried in Forest Lawn Cemetery in Los Angeles but was returned to Claremore in 1944, where it is now interred at the Will Rogers Memorial. His well-known epitaph: "I joked about every prominent man in my lifetime, but I never met one I didn't like."

The memorial now logs half a million visitors a year. For the older people, says curator Collins, "the visit has a mystical quality, in memory of someone they loved dearly."

But younger visitors also may be responding to Rogers's common sense philosophy and faith in people. Not long ago, a bearded young man with a backpack entered Reba Collins's office and dropped into a chair. "You know," he said, reflecting upon an earlier disillusionment, "I promised myself I would never have another hero. I just found one." **P**

Will Rogers Sez

•Everything is changing in America. People are taking their comedians seriously and the politicians as a joke, when it used to be vice versa.

•We are a funny people. We elect our Presidents, be they Republican or Democrat, then go home and dare 'em to make good.

•People don't mind spending their money if they know it isn't going for taxes.

•There is nothing certain in politics except salary and rake-off.

•I don't care how little your nation is, you got a right to run it like you want to. When the big nations quit meddling, then the world will have peace.

•I can tell you what the farmer needs. He needs a punch in the jaw if he believes that either of the parties cares a damn about him after election.

•We will never get anywhere with our finance till we pass a law saying that every time we appropriate something, we got to pass another bill along with it stating where the money is coming from.

•You can get a road to anywhere out of the government, but you can't get a sandwich.

•America's whole ingenuity is hurrying you to get somewhere so you will have more time there to study up some other places to go.

•Do I ever read fiction? Sure, the newspapers.



Last picture of Rogers (l) shows him with pilot Wiley Post at Fairbanks, Alaska, in August 1935. Later that day both men died in plane crash.

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