

# Will Rogers, Western heritage never forgotten

*This is an excerpt from Fort Worth, the Civilized West by Caleb Pirtle III. It was sponsored by the Fort Worth Chamber of Commerce and is one of the American Portrait Series published by Continental Heritage Press.*

On August 16, 1935, *The Fort Worth Press* carried an article datelined Point Barrow, Alaska, that left Fort Worth in shock and sorrow. The lead was a simple one: "Wiley Post and Will Rogers, famous flying companions, were killed at 8:15 p.m. Thursday (12:15 a.m. Friday Fort Worth time) when

**Jon McConal is on vacation.  
His column will resume  
when he returns.**

their plane crashed 15 miles south of here."

A second front-page story pointed out: "Will Rogers probably had hung his slouch hat in Fort Worth more times than any other city — except in fashionable Beverly Hills, his California home . . .

"The city's prominence as a cattle center seemed to place it close to the heart of the former Oklahoma cowboy."

Fort Worth would never forget the humorist and trick-ropeing philosopher. Amon Carter made sure of it.

When the first idea of a '36 centennial celebration struck him, Carter asked the Public Works Administration to build a coliseum and auditorium for the observance. He had not yet discovered the bigger-than-life imagination

of Billy Rose. Then, when Post's plane went down into the snows of Alaska, Carter suggested naming the coliseum after Fort Worth's No. 1 box office attraction — Will Rogers.

Harold Ickes, the interior secretary and PWA director, wasn't particularly impressed. "I can't understand why a memorial to Will Rogers should be built in Fort Worth just because he was Carter's friend," Ickes grumbled. Carter had hopes that the coliseum would ultimately house the Southwestern Exposition, Fat Stock Show and Rodeo. The project received no respect at all and was dubbed "Amon's Cowshed."

The publisher flew to Washington to meet with Ickes. The PWA director explained that a school building and tuberculosis sanitarium had already

been approved for Fort Worth and that both "clearly outranked a livestock pavilion as socially desirable projects."

Carter washed his hands of Harold Ickes. He sent his plan straight to the White House, with Postmaster General James Farley delivering the message to an old friend, President Franklin Roosevelt. Carter, sitting in an outer office, overheard Farley tell FDR, "Amon wants to build a cowshed."

Fort Worth submitted a formal application. And Farley telegraphed back, "Your proposal received. Was always in favor of cowsheds." In November of '35, Jesse Jones, director of the Reconstruction Finance Corporation, wrote Carter, "Your cowshed has been approved by the administration."

By centennial time, only one exhibit barn had been completed. But Fort

Worth, as usual, had its eye on day after tomorrow.

War interrupted the vision and gave Fort Worth another.

Adolph Hitler was stomping through Europe. Fort Worth never liked to waste time when it was staring into the teeth of a good fight. The City Council purchased 526 of Genevieve Tillar's (widow of Benjamin J. Tillar) good acres for \$99,750, then donated them to the U.S. Army for a bomber plant site.

When Major General Harry C. Bryant broke ground, he declared, "We're starting to dig Hitler's grave this afternoon." The plant was nailed together by April of 1942, a full two months ahead of schedule. And, during that same month, the first B-24 rolled off the Fort Worth assembly line.

British Ambassador Lord Halifax, with gratitude, said it was "nothing short of a miracle." Within two years, the Convair plant would put 3,000 bombers and transport planes into the air. Next door, the Army had constructed Tarrant Field and was busy training crews to fly the powerful B-24s.

By 1936, a coliseum, auditorium and tower were added to the Will Rogers exhibit barn. Beneath its grand dome would be held war bond rallies, Golden Gloves fights, a Boy Scout circus, ice shows and the oratory of fire-breathing revivalists.

And the rodeo, looking for a home, found one right where Amon Carter always believed it should be. Those North Side buildings — the traditional arena for the Fat Stock Show — were

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# 'Amon's Cowshed' central to FW

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drafted into the war effort, providing facilities for the manufacturing of war planes. In '43, the show did not go on. Ranchers were too busy producing beef, they said, to help win the war and peace.

In '44, it did — inside the Will Rogers Coliseum.

Back during the rough and tumble days of 1918, Fort Worth dared to be a little different and staged the "World's Original Indoor Rodeo," with cowboys competing for \$3,000 in prize money. Leonard Stroud took most of it home.

As Frank Evans, the exposition's publicity director, tried to point out, "Until recent years, many persons have failed to appreciate the fact that a rodeo is a real sports contest. It is not a

circus or so-called "Wild West Show." When the rodeo chutes swing open, cowboys and cowgirls match their skill and courage against outlaw horses and wild cattle."

He would later look at bull riding and write, "If you think eight seconds is a short period of time, just imagine your trying to stay that length of time on the dun-colored hide that writhes with the fury of a tornado and explodes with vicious jumps."

In time, the Southwestern Exposition became the social event of Fort Worth. After watching cowboys scratch leather and eat dirt, cattlemen and sophisticates alike would adjourn to Rainbeau Garden, just around the corner, to dance to Herman Waldman's orchestra, watch the "Dance of

Lovers" direct from Follies Parisienne and listen to the songs of the Honey Sisters.

Back in 1937, they swooned over bare-breasted Reggie Roth in "Indian Whoopee." And the '38 presentation featured the "World's Fairest Glamour Girls, eye-fetching beauties, daring novelties, a spicy show of talent, beauty and humor." Fort Worth, at the rodeo, did not think about cows all the time.

Yet the city would always be bound tightly to its ranch-style heritage. In 1944, the Fat Stock Show moved into the comfortable \$1.5 million surroundings of the Will Rogers Coliseum. And in a stock show program, J. Frank Dobie, Texas folklorist and historian, gave to the whole world the description of a

cowboy: "You'll see him in Fort Worth during the Southwestern Exposition and Fat Stock Show. You won't have to be told who he is, you'll know him. He's that tall, handsome man in a big hat, polished boots, and snug fitting moleskin suit, or is the wiry cowboy in levis, scuffed boots, and well rolled hat. His honest eyes twinkle from a sunburned face and when you shake hands with him you'll learn what a real handshake is. His carriage is unfettered and one knows most of his life has been lived in God's great outdoors. His heart is as big as the country over which he rides. Look at him with pride. He and his father and his father's father built the great cattle industry of the Lone Star State." And the cowboys would never have made it without Fort Worth.