

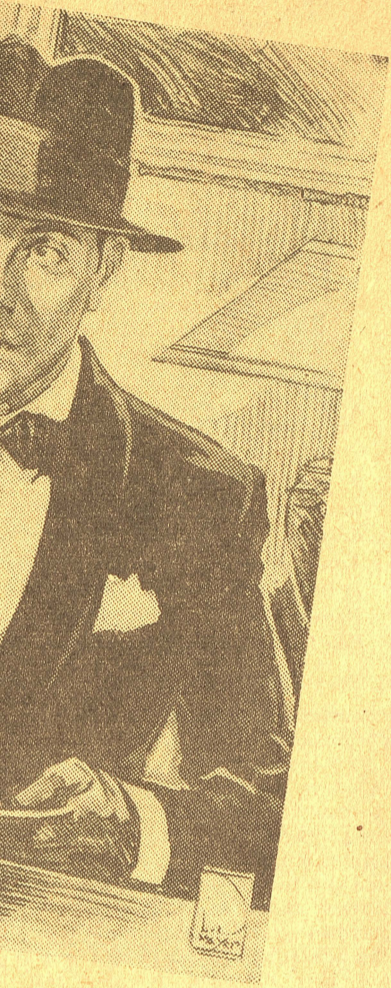
Rogers in Retrospect

By Marguerite Tazelaar

THE last Will Rogers picture, "Steamboat 'Round the Bend," appealed to him more than anything else he had done on the screen, he told its author, Ben Burman. In fact, it was Rogers's enthusiasm for the salty old captain, after he had read the story, that influenced Fox to produce the picture. Mr. Burman met Rogers for the first time when he aided in transferring his novel to the screen.

"I took an immediate liking to him, as did everybody," he said. "I think one reason for his enormous popularity with the picture colony was that he always kept his feet firmly on the ground. Hollywood is made up of people living in a world of illusion, constantly fooling themselves by the very illusions they have created."

Ricardo Cortez



Years Old

been one of great prospering for others, but the cards were nicely stacked against him. Synchronized films and talking pictures were beginning to take hold, and it was next to impossible for a silent newcomer to get started. In fact, it took three attempts to get Mickey Mouse effectively born into this world. The first two were silent productions that no one would buy. The third was "Steamboat Willie"; and Mickey Mouse was born, as is proper, with sound.

No venerable gentleman who looks back on the fullest of lives can see as full and varied an existence as can Mickey on his seventh birthday. In seven years he has been a cowboy roving the plains and an aviator doing things about which ace airmen dare only dream. He has been a farmer performing wonders with plowshares and a hunter of game that was nothing short of miraculous. He has been a musician, an acrobat, a seaman, a fireman, a prisoner, a detective, a chauffeur, a mechanic, a dancer, a patron of the arts, a traveler, an athlete, a jungle trader, a prospector for gold, an actor, a jockey. In whatever field he enters, Mickey Mouse is tried, true and efficient. He has never yet had to serve an apprenticeship.

Honored by League of Nations

The first sign of the recognition that was to come Mickey's way was a tailless cat, sent to Disney by the Lieutenant-Governor of the Isle of Man. The most recent was the gold medal presented to Disney in Mickey's honor by the League of Nations a month ago. Between these two extremes of time and importance lies the flood.

The National Academy of Arts and Letters in Havana presented a special diploma in Mickey's name. The Amer-

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Rogers always knew just where the truth lay—he was never taken in by high pressure stories buzzing about his head, and he was such a simple, unassuming fellow you couldn't resist him.

Drove His Own Car

"He used to drive himself to the studio every morning in an inconspicuous old model, and between shots often would sit in the car while he typed his news column, which he called his daily gag. He was the worst fellow I've ever met for swiping newspapers; he could beat any of your accomplished subway snatchers here, for he was a newspaper addict. In the studio, if you'd put a paper down for a minute, when you'd turn around there would be Rogers avidly reading it.

"One thing he did which used to drive directors to despair was to disappear the minute his scene was over. Perhaps there would be a fifteen-minute wait between shots while the lights were being adjusted. Everything would be ready for the retake, when it was discovered Rogers was missing. After a frantic search, likely as not he would be located on a remote set having the time of his life reminiscing with some broken-down extra he knew back in his rodeo days."

He Wasn't Impressed

The mechanics of films didn't impress Rogers, according to Burman. He thought nothing of interrupting a rehearsal to wave at a friend who had just come in.

"Sometimes we would read over the script together, the author said. "Occasionally I would come to a passage that sounded pretty bad to me, and would say: 'This is terrible, Bill.' He'd scrutinize it for a moment and agree: 'I think so, too. I won't say it.' And, sure enough, when the line came along, he would change it to suit his fancy, invariably an improvement.

"He was especially fond of folk music and Negro spirituals. I remember one night he was asked to appear at a swanky dinner to make a speech, for which he would be well compensated. He turned down the offer because on the same night there was to be a gathering in an old Negro church on the edge of Los Angeles, and he wanted to hear the singing. When he got there, they asked him to tell a story, which he did. After that Rogers and the congregation struck a bargain: for every story he told, they would sing him a spiritual."

Back to Kentucky

Mr. Burman, a writer on the old "World" and also a member of the late Professor George P. Baker's 47 Workshop at Harvard, comes from Kentucky; and now, after years away from it, is on his way back "to buy myself a house somewhere in the mountains, as far from the city as I can get."

He started to write "Steamboat 'Round the Bend" in Bagdad. A romanticist, he believes that adventure always lies ahead, and so, while he gets material at the source, he writes his stories anywhere on the globe.

It was more or less by accident that he became an authority on the Mississippi. Born on the banks of the Ohio, as a boy he was fascinated by the color and glamour of waterfront life. When one of his first pieces of fiction, "Minstrels of the Mist," dealing with the river people with whom he had grown up, won a place in the annual O'Brien collection of short stories, he continued to write about these folk whom he knew better than any others.

Glamour on the River

"I've traveled all over the world," he said, "and know nothing more glamorous than life along the Mississippi. The shantyboat people, the riverboats and showboat troupes are as unique a tribe as you'll find anywhere on earth, and their languid, strange life flows along today as calmly as it did generations ago.

"One of the things I am proudest of is my title of cub pilot on the Tennessee Belle, which carries passengers from New Orleans to Greenville, Miss. She takes two weeks to do it, and her cargo ranges from bales of cotton to squealing pigs some old Negro wants delivered to his brother-in-law down the river, for a quarter.

"I don't always get the river people down on paper as I wish to—I worked for a year and a half on 'Steamboat 'Round the Bend,' and then tore up the manuscript and began all over again. But I'd rather write a book about the Mississippi riverfront artistically, a book which will please the critics, in three years, than a dozen potential best-sellers in the same length of time."