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Hattie Meyers Junkin Papers - RE: Gerald Hughes, 1978 - 1979

Extracted on Mar-28-2024 08:33:59

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'I'm just an old country boy
in a Big Town tryin' to get along.'
-- Will Rogers

[[Large image of man in a suit along left third of page; likely Will Rogers]]

· Humorist Will Rogers was born 100 years ago Sunday. The tiny town of Claremore, as well as the entire state of Oklahoma, is celebrating the centennial of his birth this week.

By Virgil Gaither
The Tulsa Tribune

WHO WAS WILLIAM Penn Adair Rogers, known to his family as Willie and to the rest of the world as Will?
To paraphrase a line from the movie "Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid," who was that guy?
How could a young part-Cherokee cowboy from the Cooweescoowee district of Indian Territory so captivate the world that upon his death in 1935 he was mourned in all parts of the globe?
Well, Will had an explanation: "I'm just an old country boy in a Big Town tryin' to get along," he said. "I been eatin' pretty regular, and the reason I have been is because I've stayed an old country boy."
But reading between the lines, one soon realizes Will Rogers was a fake, a character created by the branding-iron-hot, restless intellect of that self-same Oklahoma cowboy; a protective facade for a man who thought deeply about the events of the times, a reformer in disguise.

A man, after all. Or above all. A man of driving ambition that often kept him away from his home and family; a man with a short-fuse temper not displayed in public, a man who often used humor to protect the inner man, to prevent others from getting in close where they could do harm. A man, in short, with his natural share of man's frailties.
Will was born on Nov. 4, 1897, on his parents' ranch near Oologah. He was the last of eight children and would be the Rogers' only surviving son.

He was named for William Penn Adair, who had served with Will's father in the Cherokee Mounted Rifle Regiment during the Civil War. At the time the Rogers ranch covered about 60,000 acres, and was used primarily to fatten cattle bought in Texas for a few dollars and later sold in St. Louis at \$30 to \$40 a head.

Will's wife, Betty, later wrote that many people thought that Will, because he was careless about his speech and dress, was a "poor, uneducated cowboy who struggled to the heights from obscure beginnings."

It was true, she wrote, that he did not have a college education, but that was only because he would not go to school. As for being poor, "the truth is that, as the only surviving son of an indulgent father, Will had everything he wanted. He had spending money and the best string

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Dixie Living & Travel

SECTION E

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Where There Was Will, There Was a Way. . .

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near Bushyhead, a small one-room log cabin mostly attended by Indians. (Will later said he had just enough white blood in him to make his honesty questionable.) then when he didn't do very well there, there was another at Muskogee, then one at Tahlequah and, finally, the Willie Halsell College at Winita, a private boarding academy equivalent to a modern Junior high school. He did well, for a change, and spent four years there.

By this time, Will thought he had had all the schooling he really needed, and was disappointed when his father insisted he attend the Scarritt Collegiate Institute in Neosho, Mo. he was expelled after one year, mainly because he spent more time with his ropes than with studying. The final straw came when a mare and colt belonging to the headmaster wandered onto the campus. Will roped the colt with a makeshift lariat, the colt and mare bolted, ran through a tennis court net, jumped a fence and disappeared.

Next, there was the Kemper Military School om Boonville, Mo., equivalent to a modern day high school, and it was there that the public Will Rogers, the showman, began to emerge. Will had long been something of an entertainer, introducing the latest vaudeville songs and dances at parties back home.

WHEN HE SHOWED up at Kemper, he was wearing a cowboy hat, a flannel shirt, a red bandana, a brightly colored vest and high-heeled boots with red tops and spurs. As a boyhood friend explained, Will was "just putting on a little extra performance for the benefit of Kemper and the Honor of the Ranch."

Also, of course, there were his lariats. He had seen rope artists Vincente Oropeza at the Chicago World's fair in 1893, and that added new zest to his practice.

In the elocution classes, according to classmates, Will could not resist the temptation to get a laugh, regardless of the seriousness of the subject. As a classmate said, "He'd torture his face till it looked like a wrinkled saddle blanket, made funny motions with his hands and roll his eyes and, some war or other, manage to make us laugh. I never saw him getting up in front of a class without making them laugh before he sat down."

Because of his clowning and failure to clean his rifle, Will built up a fairly respectable number of demerits, which had to be worked off by solitary marching near the kitchen where he would ask the cook "if he wouldn't do something for the vanishing American." gazing out of photographs of that period is a clean-cut, good-looking if not

[[next column]]

After two years at Kemper, Will decided to "quit the entire school business for life." he ran away to Texas where he went to work as a \$30-a-month cowboy and took part in a cattle drive to Kansas.

In San Antonio, according to biographer Richard Ketchum in his book, "Will Rogers, His life and Times," the source for much of the material in this article dealing with Will's early days, Will gave the first of his many after-dinner speeches.

It was at a barbeque and Will was asked to say a few words. Here is how Ketchum described it:
"He got to his feet, blinking, scratched his head and stammered, 'Well folks, this is a mighty fine dinner, what there is of it.'
"Later, recalling the laughter that greeted his remarks, he said, 'I saw I wasn't so good, so O said, trying to cover up: Well, there is plenty of it, such as it is.'
"The speech was a success."
Then it was back home to the ranch, where, as Will's nephew Herb McSpaden described it, Will got tired of getting on and off his pony every few minutes to open a gate and decided to strike out to Argentina where the supposedly were no farmers or barbed wire.
he was accompanied by a friend, Dick Parris. They went to New Orleans, but were told there were no ships for Argentina leaving from there, that they would have to go to New York. In New York, they were told the same thing, that they probably should go to England. On the Voyage, Will had his first experience with seasickness, an experience he was to relive every time he got on a boat. He later wrote that he arrived in England "with the sole purpose of becoming a naturalized citizen until some enterprising party built a bridge back home."

THEY TOOK IN London's sights, then caught a slow freighter to Buenos Aires. Argentina was a big disappointment. They couldn't find work and didn't have enough money to begin their own cattle operation. Soon both were homesick and Will, apparently thinking his father would send him money soon, bought Parris a ticket back home.
Broke and sleeping in a park, Will finally got a job roping mules at 25 cents per head, then another tending cattle on a boat sailing for Africa. It would be in South Africa that his show business career would begin in earnest.
Upon arrival, he went to work for the man who had ordered the cattle, and a few months later, he helped drive a herd of mules from Durdan to Ladysmith in Northern Natal province. Destiny was

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