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

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Madison Square Garden, where he became something of a hero after roping a steer that ran wild into the crowd. Trying to cash in on the resulting publicity, he haunted theatrical booking agents until he landed a job at Keith's Union Square Theater. He was a success and soon was playing the big time. Then, there followed years of vaudeville, performing both here and abroad, and at some point during this time, he began to tell a few jokes as he spun his ropes, but Will Rogers, the comedian-philosopher had not yet been born. That came in 1915, when Will was offered a short engagement at the Midnight Frolic, a Florence Ziegfeld production at the New Amsterdam Theater in New York.

AT THE URGING of his wife (the former Betty Blake of Rogers, Ark., who Will married in 1908, Will decided to change his act. She said he was always reading the papers, so why not pass along what he read? Well, he did and the rest is history. The Follies, motion pictures, weekly newspaper articles, daily telegrams (short blurbs which appeared daily in more than 500 papers across the country), lecture tours, radio broadcasts, goodwill tours, books, etc. As an example of his physical energy, it should be pointed out that Will carried out most of these pursuits at the same time. It is difficult to analyze his humor. It was penetrating wit delivered in an of' country boy manner, usually while he was rubbing one leg against the other or slapping himself with a folded newspaper, or pushing back his hat and scratching his head, and always chewing gum. He would spend hours reading the newspapers before he was to appear, and his act was different every night. As he himself said, "A joke don't have to be near as funny if it's up to date. So that's how I learned that my own stuff, serving only strictly fresh-laid jokes, as you might say, goes better than anything else." As reviewer John Crawford said of Will in the New York Times: "When Will Rogers comes on stage at the Follies, with his jaw full of chewing gum, and his arms loaded with ropes, he makes you feel sorry for him. You know he is going to get tangled up in the ropes or lose a stroke of his gum. ... He begins talking in his Oklahoma drawl ... and you know you could do it better than he. When he begins to make the ropes writhe like snakes and strikes the bull's-eye again and again with his quaint, homely with, you are as proud of him as if you had done it yourself. "But those seemingly offhand remarks of his are neatly timed to coincide with some spectacular stunt with the ropes. It is not until afterward, when you try to tell it to someone who has not seen the Follies, that you realize two things: He put it over in the only language and intonation possible, and he said something keen and penetrating and true ... He is just about as unsophisticated in doing his work as a Russian toe dancer, and one job is as intricate as the other.

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[[image]] Will Rogers (with Wiley Post) left America wanting more  
[[/image]]

"He gives the impression of being simply the crossroads general merchandise store talkers of a continent rolled into one man. But the fact of the matter is that he knows just what he wanted to do, just how he wanted to do it, and he does it. He is an expert satirist masquerading as a helpless, inoffensive, ineffectual zany." An example was when President Woodrow Wilson attended a performance just before World War I. Will opened with a few jokes about Pancho Villa, whom Gen. John J. Pershing was chasing in Mexico. "I see where they have captured Villa. Yes, they got him in the morning editions and that afternoon ones let him get away. The Republicans," he said, "are kicking



WB Rogers (with Wiley Post) left America's working men

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on our Mexican policies. They claim we are paying for a war and not getting it."

THEN HE TURNED to the diplomatic notes Wilson had been exchanging with Germany in an at-

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tempt to keep the United States out of war. "Do you know, folks, President Wilson is getting along fine now compared to what he was a few months ago. Why, at one time in our negotiations with Germany, he was five notes behind!" Wilson was among those laughing the loudest, and afterward went backstage to shake Will's hand. Franklin D. Roosevelt later said, "The first time I fully realized Will Rogers' exceptional and deep understanding of political and social problems was when he came home from his European trip in 1926. While I have discussed European matters with many others, both American and foreign, Will Rogers' analysis of affairs abroad was not only more interesting but proved to be more accurate than any other I had heard." Will was at the height of his power and popularity, and in spite of his travels and inner sophistication, he continued to affect his illiterate style (when

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questioned about the use of the word "ain't," he replied, "I know a lot of people who don't say 'ain't,' ain't eating.") It also prompted this outburst from comedian W.C. Fields: "The s.o.b. is a fake. I'll bet a hundred dollars he talks just like anybody else when he gets home." But few people ever were around "when he got home." He apparently let few people get close. Those who did know him well later said he would sometimes carry on a serious conversation on a one-to-one basis, exchanging information and ideas, but that as soon as anyone else walked up, he began cracking jokes. He liked to be the center of attention, and when someone else had the floor, he would wander away. But the inner man would occasionally peek out of his writings, and it was not one that would please the modern-day John Birch Society. He was suspicious of governments, including the one in Washington, and the reformer in him was

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that once people received relief "they will always expect it." And after the Senate has appropriated \$15 million for food and the House turned it down, he wrote: "They seem to think that's a bad precedent to appropriate money for food. It's too much like the 'dole.' They think it will encourage hunger. The way things look, hunger don't need much encouragement."

WILL HAD ALWAYS given freely to charity (during World War I, for instance, he was too old for the draft so, instead, contributed 10 percent of his earnings to the Red Cross). In 1930, during the Depression, Will was criticized for signing a contract that would pay him \$72,000 for 14 radio shows. He did not publicize the fact that he donated the money to charity (he was not hurting, however, his income in that period was in the neighborhood of \$500,000 per year). His popularity was such that his name had been put in nomination at the 1924 Democratic

convention, and he ran as the candidate of the Anti-Bunk Party (a joke candidacy) in 1928, but in 1931 a committee seriously urged that he run for the Senate from California and there was some talk about being a presidential candidate. Will was aghast. "Will you do me one favor?" he wrote. "If you see or hear of anybody proposing my name for any political office, will you maim said party and send me the bill?" Nevertheless, at the 1931 Democratic convention, there were some who believed Will could have gathered more than a few votes had he chosen to run. At one point, he addressed the convention and received a standing ovation. The reaction was enough, wrote columnist Damon Runyon, to make Franklin Roosevelt's backers uneasy. "They fear it will wind up with Will being nominated," he wrote, "but they may calm their fears. Will wouldn't accept. He makes more money at his own racket." The summer of 1935 became free for travel after Will declined a role in the movie version of "Ah, Wilderness." That is how he came to team up with a fellow Oklahoman and famous aviator Wiley Post, for a trip to Siberia. Will apparently was undecided for a time as to whether to go but one factor in his decision may have been his state of mind at the time. As his wife described it, for the first time in his life he was showing signs of weariness. At the age of 55, his incredibly demanding schedule was beginning to take its toll; he was tired, and he had become increasingly nervous, restless and tense. The two men departed for Juneau, Alaska, Aug. 6 in a hybrid, nose-heavy airplane Post had constructed using the fuselage from one aircraft and the wings from another. In the hurry to depart, Post had equipped the craft with pontoons heavier than those he wanted. As a result, the plane was even more nose-heavy, meaning that if it lost power it would glide like a rock. Before leaving, Will made out a will leaving all his property to his wife, or to

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north the Fairbanks. There they did some sightseeing and flew with two local pilots to Anchorage. One of the pilots was Joe Crosson, one of Alaska's top bush pilots. When Will discussed going to see U.S. Commissioner Charles Brower in Barrow, a little settlement 300 miles north of the Arctic Circle, Crosson advised against it until Post's plane was modified to correct its nose-heaviness. They ignored the advice. From Fairbanks, Post radioed the government weather station in Barrow for a report on conditions and was told that snow, sleet and zero visibility made the landing impossible. After waiting a day, Post decided they could make it. They departed about 11 a.m. on Aug. 15 with less than a full load of gasoline, heading north. After crossing the Brooks Range, they ran into a storm described by Charles Brower as one of the worst he had ever experienced in Barrow. At times, visibility was less than 50 yards. From reports of a trader and an Eskimo who had either seen or heard the plane, Post, flying blind, had skirted the coastline, moving northwest, but as some point turned due west. About 3 p.m., he landed in Walakpa Lagoon about 12 miles from Barrow and taxied to the shore where an Eskimo camp was located. After asking directions to Barrow from two of the natives who taught Sunday school and therefore knew a good deal of English, Post and Will climbed back into the plane for the takeoff. The plane raced across the water, lifted off, and suddenly lost power. It plowed into the lagoon nose first. A wing broke off, the fuselage split open. There was a dull explosion and a flash of fire which immediately went out. Both men died. Will's death had a profound effect not only on the people of the United States but around the world. The New York Times devoted four full pages to the event, and ran an editorial on both Post and Rogers. Of Will, the editorial said: "... Mr. Rogers had an inimitable and genial wit which endeared him to all sorts and conditions of men... It is certain that we shall not look upon Will

Rogers' like again..." The singer John McCormack, Will's friend for many years, wrote: "A simple smile has disappeared from the lips of America, and her eyes are now suffused with tears. He was a man, take this for all in all, we shall not look upon his like again." Back in 1902 when Will first joined the Texas Jack Wild West Show in Africa, he wrote that he studied Texas Jack because he was a great showman, and that he had learned "the great secret of show business - learned when to get off. It's the fellow that knows when to quit that the audience wants more of." In the end, that's what he did. He left America wanting more.

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