

CHASING THE FRONTIER: WILL ROGERS AND
THE IMAGE OF THE AMERICAN WEST

By

JACOB A. KRUMWIEDE

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Sciences

Rogers State University

Claremore, OK

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Thesis Approved:

Dr. L. G. Moses

Thesis Adviser

Dr. Ron McCoy

Dr. Elizabeth Williams

Name: JACOB A. KRUMWIEDE

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Abstract: This study examines the importance of the American West in Will Rogers' early professional life. More specifically, it addresses the role of the mythical, legendary image of the American western frontier in establishing Will Rogers as a significant figure in American popular culture in the early twentieth century. The mythical image of the American West served as a means for which Will Rogers was able to attain popularity in his early life as a Wild West and vaudeville performer from 1902 to 1914.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Will Rogers was a frontiersman of late modernity. His life provides historians with a wealth of examples of the continually evolving concept of the frontier in the twentieth century. Will Rogers was an entertainer and humorist who, by the time of his death in 1935, excelled in every form of mass media outlet of the time period. In the year of his death alone, his daily and weekly newspaper columns were syndicated in at least four hundred newspapers nationwide. He had a popular nationally broadcasted weekly radio show, and was the top male cinema star in the United States. Both his spoken and written words carried a folksy dialect; his witty humor with his common sense approach to social and political topics made him widely popular at the time. He has been referred to as the "spokesman for rural America" and a "cowboy philosopher."¹

¹ David Hamilton Murdoch, *The American West: The Invention of a Myth*. (Reno: University of Nevada Press, 2001), p. 102.

Much of the reason for that success and admiration was due to his witty social and political comedy. But, just as important to Will Rogers' image, was his connection to the American frontier. By the turn of the century, as the population in the western territories began to grow, the idea of a true American frontier became less of a reality. It seemed as though Rogers was still searching for some part of that frontier that still existed, whether it be in reality or imagination.

Beginning as early as 1902, his work as a trick roper and stunt rider in Wild West shows, gave him credibility as a western performer. By 1905, he was able to adapt his Wild-West act, and make it suitable for the vaudeville stage. His performances on the vaudeville circuit made him a star.

The purpose of this written work is to illustrate the impact of the frontier in Will Rogers' early professional life. More specifically, it addresses the role of the mythical image of the American western frontier in establishing Will Rogers as a significant figure in American popular culture in the early twentieth century. It also serves to illustrate how he pursued the idea of the frontier by examining his early career choices. This mythical image of the American West, the West that lived in

legend, served as a means for which Will Rogers was able to attain popularity in his early life as a Wild West, and vaudeville performer from 1902 to 1914.

Let's be honest, what are we really doing?

The more I study the American West, the more I wonder what the overall narrative really is. It's an unfortunate thing for a graduate student to admit. On more than one occasion it has kept me up at night. In the case of this written work, it has gone well beyond that to the point of wrenching my gut into knots that I'm not sure I'll ever straighten out. I feel that the more I study and observe, the less I understand why the American West is something that is still studied.

Well, I suppose I know why I do. It isn't any one reason but a complex combination of many different things. My father loved western movies, and I grew up watching them with him on Saturday evenings or lazy Sunday afternoons. For that reason, albeit sentimental, westerns always invoke a slight reminder of comfort and home. On top of that, the panoramic scenes of the vast open countryside in some of those films, combined with the adventuresome cadence of their scores, would all but send me packing my bags to run away from home and go on an adventure of my own. So,

western films always invoke a rather odd mix of feelings that include both the comfort of home and the spirit of adventure. Also, growing up in Oklahoma, the trappings of the American West are everywhere. It might be something as simple as the cattle pastures that seemed to line every highway, or the local museums that I often visited in grade school that told the many different stories of the American West. The American West as a mythical creation was as much a part of my life growing up as it was for anyone my age, I suppose. I admit this is why I study the American West.

But, still the question of "why?" remains in the back of my mind. Why do we as historians still study the American West? More to the point, I suppose I question our motives. Without a doubt, several different generations of western novelists, film makers, and photographers have crafted the image of the American West that we most often see in popular culture. I can't help but think we as historians are also imagemakers ourselves, consciously or subconsciously trying to tear down or build up some concept of the American West that have been built in our minds. As much as I like some of the perspectives of historians like Frederick Jackson Turner, it is clear he operated with a

certain bias of what he believed the frontier was, or what he thought it should have been.²

If we are all being perfectly honest, I think we all do this in some way. I believe that I've started writing this thesis about a hundred times. I get an idea in my head that seems significant at the time, I frame up a basic outline, and begin writing. Will Rogers was an immensely interesting man, and there are many different fascinating aspects of his life to study. After some time of writing, I would realize that I was subconsciously trying to make Will Rogers into a larger-than-life, legendary figure, because that is what I wanted him to be. Often, much of the language in my writing would subtly point to Rogers as a symbol of the passing of the frontier in the twentieth century, or would try to claim that the reason for his popularity was solely a result of his early western image as an iconic American. Such arguments are built on poor foundations. Even if these ideas have some credence, they are immensely difficult to prove. When we write about something for which we have a passion, it is easy to lose objectivity.

² Frederick Jackson Turner, *The Frontier in American History*. (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1935).
<http://xroads.virginia.edu/~hyper/turner/>

So, in an attempt at least to nod at objectivity, I would like to admit that I have pursued the idea of Will Rogers and the evolving image of the American West because both the American West and Will Rogers are two topics that I enjoy immensely. However, I sincerely hope that the words I write on the matter will be accurate and without a great deal of bias.

The idea of the American West.

When referring to the American West, symbol and image are two terms that are enormously subjective. So, it isn't appropriate to say that the idea of the frontier was just one thing and one thing alone. However, we do have popular culture that offers historians a way to gauge public opinion. As western historian David Hamilton Murdoch stated, western popular culture is not history, not even romanticized history. It is a myth and the power of myth can be just as important.³ In history, the frontier existed as it was, but it also existed in myth, image, and symbol.

The idea that a place or an object can exist in reality and as a symbolic image is not difficult to illustrate, and definitely not unique to the American West. We do it quite often. For example, the nineteenth-century

³ Murdoch, *The American West*, p. x.

muskets and pistols that hang on the walls in my home hang there for a very specific reason. They do not offer protection to the inhabitants of a home as they once might have many years in the past. They are not used for hunting, nor are they ever even fired. But, they are also more than just decoration; they represent ideas of protection, security, and survival of years past. Depending on one's perspective, they could also represent ideas such as justice and judgment. But, they hang upon my wall not because what they provide me in reality, but rather what they symbolically provide me. If we examine carefully the many different avenues of American culture, or culture in general, we will find that we are often drawn to people, places, and things because of what they represent, not necessarily what they are or what they can actually provide us.

This is true of the American frontier. As long as it has existed, the frontier has been more than just an ever-changing geographical boundary in Anglo-American history. Perhaps to some Americans in the latter-half of the nineteenth century, it represented progress, hope, and the endless possibility of a fresh start. Whatever hardships might occur, the frontier on the western horizon provided people with a place to hide, a place to explore, or even

perhaps exploit. Whatever the case, it offered, or at least symbolized, forward progress from the status quo. The American West was a symbol of independence, and became a subject of fascination for many people.

Before the 1890s, the frontier of the American West had always existed as an ever-present reminder to Americans that new opportunities were only as far away as the western horizon. For example, Frederick Jackson Turner stated that "the exploitation of the beast took the hunter and trader to the west, the exploitation of the grasses took the rancher west, and the exploitation of the virgin soil of the river valleys and prairies attracted the farmer."⁴ Historian Gerald D. Nash claims that the American West, as it existed in the culture of the seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth centuries, "represented different versions of the American Dream."⁵ It was a "symbol of unlimited opportunities, of freedom, and as a place of refuge."⁶ Citing the 1890 census, which documented increased population growth in the western frontiers, historian Frederick Jackson Turner reported the "closing of a great

⁴ Turner, *The Frontier in American History*.
<http://xroads.virginia.edu/~hyper/turner/>

⁵ Gerald D. Nash, *Creating the West: Historical Interpretations, 1890-1990*, (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1991), 197.

⁶ Nash, *Creating the West*, p. 197.

historic movement"⁷ when the western frontier line could no longer be established. While the story of the American frontier has always been that of constant change, the Census of 1890 served as a clear reminder that the American West would not continue to exist as the once untamed frontier. Even when the physical frontier of the American West began to disappear, the culture that had been created continued to exist. Perhaps in some ways, the public's fascination with the culture of the American West had increased as the frontier began to slip away.

To reiterate my point, this fascination that people found in the subject the American West in the late 1890s and early 1900s were important factors in establishing Will Rogers as a figure in American popular culture. As an entertainer who performed on the vaudeville stage, Will Rogers not only recreated a specific facet of the American West, but to audiences he was also a Native American cowboy from Indian Territory. He had one boot planted in the reality of the American West, and one in the mythic recreation of his stage performance. And, this mythical image of the American West served as a means by which Will Rogers was able to attain popularity in his early life as a Wild West, and vaudeville performer from 1902 to 1914.

⁷ Turner, *The Frontier in American History*.
<http://xroads.virginia.edu/~hyper/turner/>

CHAPTER II

THE EVOLVING FRONTIER AND INDIAN TERRITORY

Will Rogers was born William Penn Adair Rogers on 4 November 1879, near Oologah, Indian Territory, the youngest child and only surviving son of Clement Vann Rogers and Mary America Schrimsher Rogers. At the time of his birth, his father was on the way to becoming a successful rancher, and influential member of the Cherokee Nation. Being the youngest son of a successful rancher, Will Rogers was able to enjoy his life on the Rogers Ranch and pursue what hobbies he desired, without there ever being much of a need or necessity for the hard work that came with ranch life. While he was not opposed to the hard work—he would often help work the cattle as a young boy, when his father would allow—he spent much of his free time riding his horses and learning how to trick rope from the ranch hands.

Wanting the best for his son, Clem Rogers saw to it that Will went to the finest schools that were available in

the area. However, Will Rogers had more interest in riding his horse or roping his classmates than he did in his education. By 1898, he was 18 years old, had little more than an eighth-grade education, and wanted nothing more than to be on his own. He wanted to be a cowboy.

With that being his goal, from 1898 to 1904 Will Rogers spent significant time and resources trying to figure out what that meant. During this time, he would explore the idea of the frontier, which took him from the American frontier of Indian Territory in the United States, to a more subjective international frontier composed of South America, South Africa, and Australia, and would discover that, as the geographical frontier began to disappear, the culture of the American West continued to endure in the entertainment industry.

By 1898, Will Rogers had spent most of his life on his father's cattle ranch near the town of Oologah in northeastern Indian Territory. During the 1890s, the political structure and social order of Indian Territory was fundamentally changing.⁸ Since their removal in the 1830s, the Cherokee, Chickasaw, Choctaw, Creek, and Seminole tribes controlled the vast majority of land within

⁸ Robert Wiebe, *The Search for Order, 1877-1920*. (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood, 1980).

Indian Territory, and had allowed tribal members to lease an unlimited amount of land from their parent tribe. Will Rogers' father, Clem Rogers, had leased large areas of land from the Cherokee Nation between the Caney and Verdigris Rivers in northeastern Indian Territory. In the late nineteenth century, the encroaching settlers and railroad companies had eventually pressured the federal government to pursue the idea of individual allotment of tribal land in the Dawes General Allotment Act in 1887.⁹ While the Five Civilized Tribes were exempt from the act, the Dawes Commission was established in order to convince the Five Civilized Tribes to individually allot their land as well. By 1896, the process that would break up many of the large holdings of tribal members like the Rogers ranch had begun. In this particular case, this was part of how the geographical Western frontier was starting to change. As further population growth occurred in Indian Territory, land was in demand, and large cattle operations could not continue operating as they had previously in eastern portion of the territory. The former tribal land in Indian Territory would not be officially distributed until 1903. But, the Dawes General Allotment Act of 1887 and the Curtis Act of 1898 was the symbolic end to the political status of

⁹ Arthur F. Wertheim and Barbara Bair, *The Papers of Will Rogers, Vol. II*, (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1996) pg. 149.

the Native American tribes in Indian Territory, and thus, the large cattle ranches that existed within them.

This allotment process distributed the territory controlled by the Native American tribes as a whole, directly to the individual members of the tribe, effectively ending the large cattle operations that existed in Indian Territory. Individual ownership of the land made it easier for railroad companies to purchase smaller, individual tracts of land. White settlers also played a part in the supposed need for allotment. Based on census records, the white population in Indian Territory in 1890 was approximately 197,000.¹⁰ However, these numbers were nearly doubling every ten years with an estimated population in 1900 of 390,000 and over 690,000 in 1907.¹¹ Although the allotment process mostly affected Clem Rogers's ranch, Will Rogers did own a small herd that his father maintained while Will was erratically pursuing a secondary education. Clem had hoped that Will, after he had completed his schooling, would come home and manage what remained of the cattle operation.

Will Rogers frequently had different plans for his life, which rarely coincided with his father's. Rogers had

¹⁰ Edwin C. McReynolds, *Oklahoma: A History of the Sooner State*. (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1954) p. 277-303.

¹¹ McReynolds, *Oklahoma: A History of the Sooner State*. p. 277-303.

been enrolled in several different schools before his father sent him to Kemper Military Academy in Booneville, Missouri, in hopes that the military training would provide him with the discipline that his father believed he was lacking. Regarding his education, Will Rogers said, "I was spending my third year in the fourth grade and wasn't being appreciated, so I not only left them flat during the dark of night, but I quit the entire school business for life."¹² Once he had left Kemper Military Academy in early March 1898, he drifted for a number of months across what was left of the American frontier, eventually worked as a cowhand in Texas, and went on a small cattle drive to Liberal, Kansas.¹³

The choice for Rogers to leave the Kemper Military Academy, and wander the West rather than return home to his father's ranch is interesting evidence that suggests Will Rogers was not overly interested in what the ranch had become. Perhaps he believed that his idea of what the American West should be no longer existed back on his father's ranch, now that the allotment process would greatly reduce the size of the operation.

¹² *Tulsa Daily World*, 7 March 1926.

¹³ Johnson House Registry Book, dated 15 March 1898, Higgins, Texas. Rogers Collection, Will Rogers Memorial Archives, Claremore, OK. Also based on his reminiscence in his weekly newspaper column in *Tulsa Daily World*, 7 March 1926.

Before allotment, the Rogers ranch was approximately 60,000 acres.¹⁴ After the land was distributed in 1903, Will Rogers and Clem Rogers combined allotments were just under 150 acres.¹⁵ Will Rogers would later comment, "I have always regretted that I didn't live about 30 or 40 years earlier, and in the same old Country, the Indian Territory. I would have liked to get here ahead of the 'Nestors,' the Bob wire fence [sic], and so called civilization."¹⁶ With individual allotment, the evolving political and economic environment forced a change in the cattle business, and thus the change in the way ranches operated. The increase in population growth had made long cattle drives difficult. Also, the increase in available railroads had even eliminated the need for long cattle drives.¹⁷ Therefore, the Rogers ranch now was a much more local enterprise. The ranch would receive stock by railroad from Texas, and once the cattle had grazed, they were shipped north to Coffeyville, Kansas, where they were sold to distributors.¹⁸ There was still the potential of profit in this, but this

¹⁴ Ellsworth Collings, *The Old Home Ranch: The Birthplace of Will Rogers*, (Stillwater: Redlands Press, 1964) p. 33.

¹⁵ Collings, *The Old Home Ranch*, p. 104.

¹⁶ *Tulsa Daily World*, 7 March 1926

¹⁷ Ben Yagoda, *Will Rogers, A Biography*, (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1993) p. 32.

¹⁸ Yagoda, *Will Rogers*, p. 31.

particular evolution of the cattle business did not appeal to Will Rogers.

What was occurring at the Rogers ranch is similar to what was occurring throughout the American West by the late 1890s. The growth of the railroad and the increased settlement of the western territories had forced a dynamic change in the cattle business. Free-range grazing was growing more difficult and long cattle drives had not been practical since the 1880s. By the turn of the twentieth century, the cowboy was "on the edge of drifting into obscurity."¹⁹

However, thanks to the flood of dime-novel literature in the latter half of the nineteenth century, the cowboy was making the transition in popular culture from a thug in a sombrero, to a blue collar wage earner, to cultural icon.²⁰ David Hamilton Murdoch, in his text on the mythic West, describes the transition as an attempt of a nostalgic American society to grasp for a culture where American values had flourished. Murdoch states that "within one short decade [1890-1900], the generalized nostalgia for a lost world was focused on the West - and on one particular

¹⁹ Murdoch, *The American West: The Invention of a Myth*, p. 62.

²⁰ Christine Bold, "Malaeska's Revenge; or, The Dime Novel Tradition in Popular Fiction," in *Wanted Dead or Alive: The American West in Popular Culture*, ed. Richard Aquila. (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1996), p. 21-42.

West: the last, most recent frontier of the cattle kingdom and the cowboy. This became *the* lost world, epitomizing all that America had held most precious."²¹ In the United States, and many of the other leading countries of the world in the middle of the nineteenth century, western novels were mirror images of the idealized national character that the authors wished to describe. Specifically, in the United States, the frontier-themed literature was a projected image that defined what Americans thought of themselves, and wistfully described what it was they wanted in their immediate future.²²

Will Rogers had eventually returned home to Oologah, Indian Territory in the fall of 1898.²³ While the West was in the midst of a critical stage of development in the 1890s, Will Rogers was also in the midst of a critical development. As previously mentioned, society had integrated the cowboy and Western traditions into the greater American culture. From the perspective of the public, the cowboy was not seen as just a blue collar laborer, but rather a much more glamorous figure that symbolized American values and was a symbol of rugged

²¹ Murdoch, *The American West: The Invention of a Myth*, p. 63.

²² Henry Nash Smith, *Virgin Land: The American West as Symbol and Myth*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1978. p. 4.

²³ *Cherokee Vindicator*, 28 October 1898, Claremore, I.T. (see also, PoWR VII, p 170-171).

individualism. To people in the United States who had only lived in urban environments, their only views of the West came from popular culture. In 1883, "Buffalo Bill" Cody provided the public with the first popular traveling Wild West show, which excelled in creating the legendary, if not mythic, image of the American West. Also, Wild West Shows certainly cultivated stereotypical concepts of Native Americans, either as savages from a wild land, or tamed men in a tame land.²⁴ It, and others like it, grew in popularity throughout the 1880s and into the 1890s. Near the end of the 1890s, rodeos, Wild West shows, and other western melodrama performances were common forms of entertainment throughout the United States. These performances provided people in the United States with a window into this romanticized image of the American West, and also provided a way for American culture to continue to hold their grasp on the American cowboy as a cultural icon during a time when the American cowboy and cattle ranges were slipping into obscurity.

These forms of entertainment did not only provide the audiences with a way to hold on to the frontier, but also

²⁴ L. G. Moses, "Wild West Shows, Reformers, and the Image of the American Indian, 1887-1914," *South Dakota History*, 14 (Fall 1984), p. 194.

provided people like Will Rogers with the opportunity to hold on to his perception of the frontier. During his formative years growing up on a ranch, Rogers developed skills riding a horse and using a rope, necessary tools of the trade for anyone involved in ranching. However, rather than using each in a strictly practical manner, he enjoyed recreational riding and rope twirling for fun since he was six years old.²⁵ He had learned how to twirl a rope and perform small, simple rope tricks from Dan Walker, a ranch hand who was working for Will's father, Clem Rogers.²⁶ While in Chicago with his father in the summer of 1893, Will was able to attend Buffalo Bill's Wild West at the Chicago's World Columbian Exposition.²⁷ There he saw many performers, including Mexican vaquero Vincente Oropeza.²⁸ Since then, trick roping was a fascination and an obsession of Will Rogers. It had been a part of his frontier life on his father's ranch in Indian Territory, and it was also a part of Western cultural entertainment. The lariat was a familiar piece of the West for Will Rogers. Also, it bridged the gap between the physical frontier of the cattle ranch and the cultural frontier of the Wild West show.

²⁵ Ellsworth Collings, *The Old Home Ranch*, p. 25-26.

²⁶ Ben Yagoda, *Will Rogers: A Biography*, p. 16.

²⁷ Arthur F. Wertheim and Barbara Bair, *The Papers of Will Rogers, Vol. I*, (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1996) pg. 154.

²⁸ Ben Yagoda, *Will Rogers: A Biography*, p. 24.

After only a brief time of being back on the Rogers ranch in 1899, Will was already beginning to pursue the early forms of a career that would launch him into the public eye. At this point in his life, he had only experienced a portion of what western culture had to offer. His knowledge of the American West had been limited to his childhood life on his father's ranch, and six months working on a single cattle drive. It is clear that he had an interest in the culture of the American West, and the lifestyles that came with it. He was chasing a particular idea of the frontier, performing with his lariat by his side, atop horses he loved. This was an important part of that idea.

Before Rogers started performing to crowds in Wild West shows, he used his skills in local rodeos. At the age of nineteen, a small rodeo held in Claremore, Indian Territory on the fourth of July in 1899 marked the first instance where Will Rogers used his skills of riding and roping outside of personal recreation. In this particular case, he won first prize for roping and tying a longhorn steer in fifty-two seconds.²⁹ It was an important and pivotal moment in Will Rogers' life. He would later comment that it "had quite an influence in my little

²⁹ *Claremore Progress*, 8 July 1899

career. . . . I knew I was just plum 'Honery' and fit for nothing but show business. Once you are a showman you are just plum ruined for manual labor."³⁰ By 1900, Will Rogers had participated in at least a dozen documented rodeos and small roping contests in the Claremore area of Indian Territory, Oklahoma City,³¹ and even as far off as St. Louis, Missouri.³² However, these small shows and rodeos did not pay much money, if anything, and was not much of a career. Although these rodeo performances were important in providing Will Rogers with an alternative to cattle ranching, the idea of the physical, geographical frontier still had great appeal to Will Rogers. As previously mentioned, the American West had fundamentally changed and Rogers turned his attention to places in the world where there was still a frontier to be pursued.

³⁰ *Tulsa Daily World*, 17 July 1932

³¹ *Claremore Courier*, 15 June 1900

³² *Claremore Progress*, 7 October 1899. See also the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, 8 October 1899.

CHAPTER III

THE GLOBAL FRONTIER AND THE WILD WEST SHOW

Will Rogers was at a crossroads. He felt he did not have the skills he needed to compete in rodeo contests the rest of his life, and in 1902, the allotment of his father's land was only months away. Rogers had considered moving on to places in the United States like New Mexico³³ and Texas³⁴ before choosing to travel to Argentina in early 1902 to pursue cattle ranching on the pampas.³⁵ Will Rogers had frequently wished that he were born fifty years earlier, so he could experience the American frontier when it existed.³⁶ The difference between the South American frontier and the frontier in the United States was that South America lacked the population growth and the railroad networks that had doomed the physical frontier in the

³³ *Daily Chieftain*, 10 March 1900

³⁴ Arthur Wertheim and Barbara Bair, *The Papers of Will Rogers, Vol. I*, pg. 237.

³⁵ *Claremore Progress*, 22 February 1902

³⁶ *Tulsa Daily World*, 7 March 1926

United States.³⁷ When Rogers arrived in Argentina he quickly found that establishing a successful ranch in Argentina would be difficult. He had the intention of working as a cowhand while he saved money to invest in a herd of his own. In a letter to his father, he mentioned the poor wages for laborers and the rising costs of land.³⁸ Will Rogers was unable to find consistent work, and was beginning to run out of money. Although the problems were not specifically the same as what he encountered in the United States, they were similar. First, available land was limited to people who were already established in the cattle market. Second, as a laborer, there was little room for upward movement, nor was the pay enough for him to save any money. Establishing a ranch in Argentina would be a long and difficult process that Rogers was not financially prepared to begin.³⁹ Or, perhaps more likely, it seemed that he had the patience to wait.

By late July 1902, Rogers was bound for South Africa after finding some work with a shipping company that transferred cattle stock from Argentina to South Africa.

³⁷ Ben Yagoda, *Will Rogers: A Biography*, p. 47.

³⁸ Letter to Clem Rogers from Will Rogers, dated 7 May 1902, Buenos Aires, Argentina. Joseph Levy, Jr. Collection, Will Rogers Memorial Archives, Claremore, OK.

³⁹ Letter to Clem Rogers from Will Rogers, dated 31 July 1902, Buenos Aires, Argentina. Rogers Collection, Will Rogers Memorial Archives, Claremore, OK.

In his letters home, it was not clear why Rogers went on this voyage. Yet, it was obvious that nothing remained for him in Argentina, and a job shipping stock to Africa satisfied his need for passage out of Argentina and his need for employment. But more important, while in South Africa, Will Rogers was able to find his first job performing in a large Wild West show.

Wild West shows were an immensely popular form of entertainment that transformed the many different visual elements of the American West into a popular cultural production. These shows provided Americans with a very entertaining, visual production that exemplified public perceptions of the American West.⁴⁰ By the late 1890s, these Wild West shows had spread with success into many different parts of the world, making the appeal of the American frontier international. This included South Africa. When Will Rogers arrived in South Africa in August of 1902, Texas Jack's Wild West Show and Dramatic Company⁴¹ was a traveling tent production touring the country.

⁴⁰ Thomas L. Altherr, "Let 'er Rip: Popular Culture Images of the American West in Wild West Shows, Rodeos and Rendezvous," in *Wanted Dead or Alive: The American West in Popular Culture*, ed. Richard Aquila. (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1996), p. 73-74.

⁴¹ This was not the same "Texas Jack" Omohundro who had performed in stage productions with Buffalo Bill Cody. The Texas Jack that was performing in South Africa, who was an accomplished Wild West show performer, had adopted the stage name of Texas Jack, after Omohundro's death.

In South Africa, Rogers had worked with the shipping company, driving herds of horses and cattle to different destinations in the provinces of Natal and Transvaal, South Africa. While moving a herd of horses inland, Rogers encountered Texas Jack's Wild West Show. He was able to convince Texas Jack to give him a job performing as a trick roper, as well as riding and portraying Indians in the melodramas.⁴² Rogers soon proved his worth as "lasso artist" and by early 1903 Texas Jack billed him as "The Cherokee Kid."⁴³ Details of his act are not known, aside from brief descriptions in his letters home that mention riding bucking broncos and performing different trick roping feats.⁴⁴ However, audiences apparently enjoyed his performances⁴⁵ and he gained experience that furthered his talent as a performer.

Will Rogers enjoyed his performances in Texas Jack's Wild West shows, and had developed a good relationship with Texas Jack himself. In one of his letters he mentioned to

⁴² Letter to Clem Rogers, dated 15 December 1902, Rogers Collection, Will Rogers Memorial Archives, Claremore, OK.

⁴³ Letter to 'Home Folks', dated 28 January - 6 March 1903. Rogers Collection, Will Rogers Memorial Archives, Claremore, OK.

⁴⁴ Letter to 'Home Folks', dated 28 January - 6 March 1903. Rogers Collection, Will Rogers Memorial Archives, Claremore, OK.

⁴⁵ The letter Will Rogers sent home states that, "The first time I come on to do my Roping act I was called back twice and they made a big to do over me." Letter to 'Home Folks', dated 28 January - 6 March 1903, Rogers Collection, Will Rogers Memorial Archives, Claremore, OK.

his father the possibility of staying with Texas Jack's show:

. . . Jack thinks a lot of me. I am taking his part in lots of things in the show, and he says as he is getting old I can take the show before long and do his work, He will furnish the capital and I think I would do well to try it a bit anyway.⁴⁶ [sic]

Despite Texas Jack's fondness for him, Will Rogers balked at the idea of making South Africa his semi-permanent home. His actions suggest that his desire was to experience the foreign frontiers. He had "seen it all"⁴⁷ in South Africa, and was ready to move to new frontiers.

After securing a letter of recommendation from Texas Jack,⁴⁸ Will Rogers boarded a ship for Australia and New Zealand in August 1903. When corresponding with his father regarding his trips abroad, Rogers frequently mentions the nature of the local cattle industry, detailing if the environment was suitable for cattle.⁴⁹ However, as in Argentina and in South Africa, the local cattle industry in Australia and New Zealand did not provide him with obvious avenues of opportunity. Rogers did find work with the

⁴⁶ Letter to Clem Rogers, dated 21 May 1903, Port Elizabeth, Cape Colony, South Africa. Rogers Collection, Will Rogers Memorial Archives, Claremore, OK.

⁴⁷ Letter to Clem Rogers, dated 4 September 1903. Rogers Collection, Will Rogers Memorial Archives, Claremore, OK.

⁴⁸ Letter from Texas Jack, dated 25 April 1903. Rogers Collection, Will Rogers Memorial Archives, Claremore, OK.

⁴⁹ Letter to Clem Rogers, dated November 1903. Rogers Collection, Will Rogers Memorial Archives, Claremore, OK.

Wirth Brothers' Circus, thanks in part to Texas Jack's letter of recommendation. Although only in Australia and New Zealand during the summer months of December 1903 through February of 1904,⁵⁰ Rogers received good billing as "The Cherokee Kid" during his time with the Wirth Brothers' Circus. Some of the circus performances that the *Auckland Star* reviewed described Will Rogers' routine.

The other new act is, like most of our new things, American—a lassoing business. The Cherokee Kid is a gentleman with a large American accent and a splendid skill with lassos. He demonstrated what could be done with a whirling loop by bringing up a horse and its rider from impossible position, once throwing together two lassos encircling man and horse separately. He also showed the spectators how to throw half-hitches on to objects at a distance, and did other clever work with the ropes. It was a very interesting performance.⁵¹

His performances were always well received while he was abroad.

Although Will Rogers was initially searching for a physical frontier, what he was truly experiencing on his trips abroad was a frontier of a completely different sort. The cultural concept of the frontier in the entertainment industry was where he was succeeding, while his searches

⁵⁰ Being in the southern hemisphere, December through February are the warm, fair-weathered summer months.

⁵¹ *Auckland Star*, 20 January 1904. Published in the Papers of Will Rogers, Vol. I, pg. 466.

for a suitable physical frontier for raising cattle were fruitless.

By the spring of 1904, Will Rogers had returned home to Indian Territory. His trips abroad and earlier experiences taught him that there were two very different careers where he could pursue the Western culture and lifestyle. One of these was cattle ranching. But the cattle business was in the midst of a significant change, and it became more and more unlikely that a new cattle ranch would be successful during that time period without a great amount of personal investment. On the other hand, performing in Wild West shows offered Rogers an opportunity to pursue the cultural and mythical West that he enjoyed, while adapting to the West's changing culture. By the time he had returned to the United States in 1904, he had decided that performing was the profession he preferred.⁵²

The spring of 1904 also marked the beginning of the St. Louis World's Fair that commemorated the centennial anniversary of the Louis and Clark Expedition, rooted in the theme of cultural and economic progress. The fair featured many different cultural and anthropological exhibits. The fair officials even hired social scientists and anthropologists to organize and construct the

⁵² Arthur F. Wertheim and Barbara Bair, *The Papers of Will Rogers, Vol. II*, pg. 39

ethnological exhibits to inform the public about concepts of human typology and evolutionary hierarchy.⁵³ Wild West shows were also an important feature of the St. Louis World's Fair, and were set up on the outskirts of the fairgrounds.

Rogers had approached Zack Mulhall for a job performing in the Cummins' North American Indians show and Rough Riders Congress. Zack Mulhall was an old acquaintance of Will Rogers, who had been the promoter of several of the rodeos in which Will Rogers had previously performed in Indian and Oklahoma Territory around 1900. Mulhall was in charge of recruiting performers for the Cummins' North American Indians show and Rough Riders Congress, and was able to get a job for Rogers as cowboy and roping artist.⁵⁴

During the St. Louis World's Fair, there was an unfortunate fracas that broke out between an employee of Cummins' show and Zack Mulhall, over the way the employee was treating Mulhall's horses. In the midst of the scuffle, three men were shot, one being fatally wounded.⁵⁵ Mulhall was banned from the fairgrounds and dismissed from

⁵³ Arthur F. Wertheim and Barbara Bair, *The Papers of Will Rogers, Vol. II*, pg. 41.

⁵⁴ Letter to Clem Rogers, dated 27 April 1904, Rogers Collection, Will Rogers Memorial Archives, Claremore, OK.

⁵⁵ Arthur F. Wertheim and Barbara Bair, *The Papers of Will Rogers, Vol. II*, pg. 49.

Cummins' Wild West show. Not wanting to miss the opportunity of the St. Louis World's Fair, Mulhall set up his own Wild West show that was technically off the official fairgrounds, but not far from Cummins' show. Many of the performers that Mulhall had recruited remained loyal to him, and joined his show, bringing with them the majority of the horses that they used. Will Rogers was one of the performers that stayed loyal to Mulhall.⁵⁶ Will Rogers continued to perform with Zack Mulhall through October of 1904 for the remainder of the St. Louis World's Fair.

When Will Rogers serendipitously stumbled upon Texas Jack's Wild West Show in South Africa, it had a significant impact on Rogers' career path. When Rogers had set out on what would become an around-the-world trip, his intent was to find land for his own ranch, where there was still some sort of frontier. While this endeavor had been poorly planned, it had forced him to find work on a boat to South Africa where he found Texas Jack. His search for more of a global frontier had led him to the Wild West show. Will Rogers had always wanted to be a cowboy. While Texas Jack's show was different from what he knew growing up, it was a profession in which he could still be surrounded with

⁵⁶ Letter to Clem Rogers, dated 19 June 1904, Rogers Collection, Will Rogers Memorial Archives, Claremore, OK.

the imagery of the American West. Although the performances were manufactured imagery, it was an opportunity for Rogers to professionally pursue the aspects of American Western culture that he loved: trick roping and riding.

CHAPTER IV

THE CULTURAL FRONTIER AND THE VAUDEVILLE STAGE

If the American frontier continued to exist in culture rather than on an actual physical, geographical frontier, for Will Rogers, the vaudeville stage was an important part of that cultural frontier. Will Rogers adapted the work he did in Wild West shows, and made it appropriate for the vaudeville stage. With Wild West shows, Will Rogers was just a performer, albeit a talented one. With vaudeville, he became a star.

The relationship that Rogers' built with Zack Mulhall was an important factor in further establishing Will Rogers in a variety Wild West shows and exhibitions across the United States. Starting in the spring of 1905, Rogers went with Mulhall to New York, performing in a few more shows, topped off by a very successful show for the Horse Association Fair in the early Madison Square Garden in New York City in

performances with trick roping and riding, were what enabled him to succeed in further avenues of western performing arts on the vaudeville stage, in which he developed his reputation as a humorist and cowboy philosopher.

As a result of these successes with Mulhall, Will Rogers was beginning to get offers from a newly popular form of entertainment: vaudeville. Rogers would leave Mulhall in April of 1905 after the show in Madison Square Garden to adapt his trick roping and riding act to the vaudeville stage. By this point, Rogers' had embraced the entertainment industry, albeit cautiously, where he was able to pursue the evolving cultural frontier and the mythical image of the American West. Although he loved the idea of being an entertainer, he was always a little leery of being "branded" as an entertainer, especially when it came to his personal relationships with his father and eventual wife, Betty Blake.

Will Rogers had struggled to find success in ranching during the late 1890s, when the cattle industry was in the midst of modernization. A life of working with cattle on the open physical frontier was becoming difficult, and Will Rogers, who had embraced the culture of a Western lifestyle was forced to adapt to the changing culture of the American

West. During this time, Will Rogers was chasing the idea of the American frontier, while it was in the midst of an important change from a geographical line, to a cultural phenomenon. This chase took him to the greater international frontier. While abroad, he was able to bridge the gap between the physical frontier and the mythical frontier of Wild West shows and the entertainment industry.

By the turn of the nineteenth century, the West had become part of American culture and identity. When the cowboy began to disappear from the American scene as the cattle industry modernized, it was snatched up by the various mediums of popular culture, and the cowboy continued to endure as a cultural icon. Will Rogers' success in Wild West shows, after abandoning the idea of ranching, illustrates the evolution that was occurring throughout the West. Will Rogers himself, being a part of this transition, played a small part in pushing the American West into a cultural and mythic status. Or perhaps the other way around may be more accurate. The interest in the mythic nature of the American West pushed Rogers himself into a culturally significant figure.

This was true because the mythical West was particularly important to the generation who lived during

the turn of the twentieth century. Western historian David Hamilton Murdoch claims that myths "are a way of dealing with the conflicts societies produce,"⁵⁷ and whatever the conflict might be, "if they are deeply rooted in the culture, myths will emerge to provide reassurance."⁵⁸ The conflict in the society was the end of the frontier. With idea of Manifest Destiny, the frontier was an object to be pursued. When it ceased to exist, the cultural conflict occurred. Western historian Gerald D. Nash claims that the generation during the 1890s through the 1920s, "was overcome with a profound sense of loss, a feeling of nostalgia for the disappearance of a world which they had cherished, a world which had been at the very center of the American Dream, of the national mythology which Americans used to explain themselves not only to each other, but to the rest of the world."⁵⁹ The mythical image of the American West was not just a temporary interest of this generation; the western motif became an important factor in the identity of many Americans.

Will Rogers's performance and identity as a westerner in the vaudeville theater from 1905-1911, was

⁵⁷ David Hamilton Murdoch, *The American West: The Invention of a Myth*, (Reno: University of Nevada Press, 2001), 15.

⁵⁸ Murdoch, *The American West*, 15.

⁵⁹ Gerald D. Nash, *Creating the West: Historical Interpretations, 1890-1990*, (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1991), 198.

important in shaping the perception of the mythical West to the audience and journalists who attended his performances. Not only was his impact on the local audiences and journalists evident, the western image he so casually expressed helped establish him as a cultural icon in the early twentieth century.

When Will Rogers first began his career in vaudeville in June of 1905, much of his act was already established. As previously stated, he had performed in many different varieties of Wild West shows from all over the world. In these shows, he developed not only his talent for trick roping and riding, but also his ability to perform in front of a live audience. In a letter to his father on 22 July 1904, Will Rogers expressed an obvious boredom with the Wild West shows, specifically the St. Louis World's Fair.⁶⁰ The boredom came from the fact that the show was not staged more than once a week, which left Rogers to fend for himself in the meantime. So, he began to experiment with other forms of entertainment where he could utilize his skills. A staged act in vaudeville was a likely alternative. Cleveland's New Theatre in Chicago was where Rogers eventually performed his first vaudeville act on 23

⁶⁰ Will Rogers to Clement Vann Rogers, 22 July 1904. Will Rogers Memorial Archives. See also Wertheim and Bair, *The Papers of Will Rogers*, Vol. II, 73.

October 1904.⁶¹ However, it wasn't until June of 1905 that he decided to pursue the vaudeville act on a consistent basis.⁶²

A vaudeville show was a popular form of variety theater in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. It had its roots in many different forms of entertainment, such as "rowdy urban concert saloons, the olio (second act) of the minstrel show, small variety shows in dime museums, and the potpourri of acts in the circus."⁶³ They were variety shows that featured four or five different acts in an evening or matinee showing. The performances included nearly every form of live entertainment, such as stand-up comedy, song-and-dance, short plays, and various feats of talents. One of the problems with vaudeville was the mediocrity and repetition of acts. Therefore, vaudeville was a form of entertainment that was "criticized for dullness and lack of innovation."⁶⁴ Criticisms being what they were, vaudeville theater was an immensely popular form of entertainment in the United States in the early twentieth century, especially for the middle classes.⁶⁵

⁶¹ Program, Cleveland's New Theatre, 23 October 1904, Chicago Illinois. Will Rogers Memorial Archives, Scrapbook A-1.

⁶² Wertheim and Bair, *The Papers of Will Rogers, Vol. II*, 144-147.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 129.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 133.

⁶⁵ Frederick Edward Snyder, "American Vaudeville-Theatre in a Package: The Origins of Mass Entertainment." Ph.D diss., (Yale University, 1970), p. 35-46.

Performers like Will Rogers had the ability and mass-appeal, to attract and entertain large crowds on a consistent basis.

Without much doubt, Rogers's comedic and witty commentary that accompanied his vaudeville act was a part of what propelled him to his later stardom. His act consisted of trick roping on and off a horse, as well as roping his assistant as he sat upon Rogers's horse. While Rogers performed these stunts, humorous commentary usually went along with each. In his notes of his vaudeville routine, Rogers scrawled out some of his material:

Now folks I want to call your sho nuff attention to this next little stunt it's a pretty tolerable good one if I happen to get it. I'll throw about two of these things at once I'll throw one of them at the horse and the other one at that other thing and they will both go exactly at the same time. I don't have any idea [if] they will catch but I'll throw them anyway.⁶⁶

Rogers's form of self-deprecating humor, as well as his eventual witty social and political commentary, provided a consistent presence in his vaudeville routine.

However, while his humorous commentary was a sort of catalyst that launched his vaudeville success into other mediums, Rogers' western persona was the foundation of his act. Vaudeville was a type of stage performance where

⁶⁶ Vaudeville routine notes, ca. 1905. Will Rogers Memorial Archives.

"immigrants stereotypes . . . eccentric sight gags, slapstick, malapropisms, and insults"⁶⁷ thrived as the popular forms of the actor's routines. However, Will Rogers's act and persona was in stark contrast to the majority of the vaudeville routines. He dressed in "a red shirt, and buckskin pants to accentuate the cowboy image,"⁶⁸ while he performed his trick roping stunts, sat astride a horse onstage, and made clever, folksy comments in his frontier accent. As he appeared on stage, he was portraying the image of the mythical cowboy with traditional values, which had great appeal to those in the audience.

The Native American, regardless of the unfortunate racial insensitivity, was synonymous with the cowboy in western imagery. In a newspaper review in 1906, the author, W. E. Sage implied that his Native American heritage was an obstacle to overcome. He stated: "Is he an Indian? Sure! And he steps high over it."⁶⁹ Despite the insensitive remarks, Rogers was always proud of his Cherokee roots. Rogers himself claimed later in the same article that, he was "a quarter-breed [Cherokee]. . .

⁶⁷ Wertheim and Bair, *The Papers of Will Rogers, Vol. II*, 134.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 133.

⁶⁹ Unidentified Cleveland newspaper, 12 September 1906. Will Rogers Memorial Archives, newspaper clipping, Scrapbook A-1.

and it's the thing above all others that I'm proud of."⁷⁰ Since Will Rogers was roughly one-quarter Cherokee, and often used the "Cherokee Kid" as a stage name, his Native American heritage was part of this western image. This was especially true because he grew up on the western frontier, in Indian Territory. His heritage as a Cherokee and a westerner legitimized his vaudeville performance, separating himself from other actors, by being "a real cowboy,"⁷¹ westerner, and Native American.

Will Rogers's appeal as a vaudevillian entertainer and cowboy was especially true in Toledo, Ohio on 11 October 1905. The *Toledo Times* described in an article the audience's notice of Will Rogers:

That portion of Toledo's population residing along Lagrange street yesterday morning were astonished at the sight of a real Indian cowboy, garbed in fringed leather breeches, fiery red flannel shirt, wide sombrero hat, and mounted on a wiry mustang pony, galloping along their thoroughfare. Visions of train hold-ups, express robberies and other wild western pranks flitted through their minds, and it is even hinted that some of the more timid took to the cellar for a brief period.

The cause of all the speculation and "rubbering" was Will Rogers, the lariat manipulator, whose wonderful skill is this week making Arcade audiences "sit up and take notice."⁷²

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ *The Detroit News*, date unknown. Will Rogers Memorial Archives, newspaper clipping, Scrapbook A-2.

⁷² *Toledo Times*, 11 October 1905. Will Rogers Memorial Archives, Newspaper clipping, Scrapbook A-1.

Will Rogers had a genuine appeal to the people who watched him perform.

Much of the reason for this appeal is the western image he illustrated, and that it incorporated the idea of the mythical west which people desired. As mentioned above, Will Rogers dressed in "fringed leather breeches and fiery red flannel shirt,"⁷³ when performing on stage (see Figure 3). He was described as a

slender built chap, square shouldered and with keen eyes, alert look and clear complexion that mark the man accustomed to outdoor life, and the accent, practically impossible of reproduction, stamped the speaker as a native of the southwestern section of the country where the cowpuncher still flourishes and where the peculiar dexterity amazed audiences.⁷⁴

Rogers' stage time was generally ten to fifteen minutes in length⁷⁵, where he performed a variety of trick roping feats. The author described Will Rogers's performance in detail in a review in the *Philadelphia Item* on 27 June 1905. Will Rogers would start his performance twirling the lasso over his head and performing a few tricks before "lassoing a man on horseback"⁷⁶ as he trotted

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ *Rochester Union and Advertiser*, 26 October 1905. Will Rogers Memorial Archives, newspaper clipping, Scrapbook A-1. See also, Wertheim and Bair, *The Papers of Will Rogers*, Vol. II., 212-213.

⁷⁵ Managers report, Union Square Theatre, 12 June 1905. Wertheim and Bair, *The Papers of Will Rogers*, Vol. II., p. 149.

⁷⁶ *Rochester Union and Advertiser*, 26 October 1905. Will Rogers Memorial Archives, newspaper clipping, Scrapbook A-1. See also, Wertheim and Bair, *The Papers of Will Rogers*, Vol. II., 212-213.

across the stage. Rogers would do a variety of tricks with his assistant on horseback, including "catching the man on the horse with one lasso, and the horse with another lasso"⁷⁷ (See Figure 3). After doing a few more solo tricks, skipping across the stage through his spinning rope, he would close his set by "mounting his pony, and keeping an 80-foot lasso in motion."⁷⁸ While a combination of Rogers's outfit and western dialect helped to set him apart from the other vaudeville performers, it was his rope tricks that appealed to the audience, and completed the novelty of his performance.

Into the twentieth century, the American frontier continued to exist as a cultural phenomenon, and Will Rogers was a part of that culture through his performances on the vaudeville stage. But, for Will Rogers, vaudeville was not significant because it was just another way in which the mythic west was put on display for audiences, but because it is what made Will Rogers a star. In Wild West shows, Will Rogers had learned how to entertain crowds, and how to hone his craft. However, in Wild West shows, he was always just another part of the show. With vaudeville, he would become a headline performer.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ Ibid.

CHAPTER V

THE GROWING CULTURAL FRONTIER OF THE VAUDEVILLE STAGE

Will Rogers's popularity on the vaudeville circuit quickly rose across the United States, and by March of 1906, he had the opportunity to perform in Europe. In the United States, Rogers is described as "a bubbling comedian who has compressed the essence of the cowboy's life into an act full of humor and merriment," and as a "typical Westerner, wild, restless and daring with an unmistakable Western dialect."⁷⁹ The American journalist's attraction to the western image is apparent. Many of the European journalists focus strictly on Will Rogers's performance and abilities, and do not draw as much attention to his Western image. After his performances at the Palace Theatre in London, on 9 May 1906 a journalist described him as, "a very remarkable performer. He is a lassoist of amazing

⁷⁹ Unidentified Boston newspaper, 5 July 1905. Will Rogers Memorial Archives, newspaper clipping, Scrapbook A-2.

dexterity, and his little performance is one of the most striking and picturesque turns I have seen for some time."⁸⁰

Throughout most of the eighteenth century most of Europe viewed, not just the frontier, but the entirety of the United States as a wild frontier where the line between savagery and civilization was blurred, and there was little distinction between the culture of the coastal east and the western territories.⁸¹ By the early nineteenth century, English travelers, such as Edward Stanley, 14th Earl of Derby, noted the distinct cultural differences between the eastern and western United States, calling the territories west of the Appalachians what appeared to be a whole new country.⁸² Once this distinction had been made, much of the popular culture of the time began to pick up on the idea of the frontier. Ray Allen Billington's analysis of this period, suggests that the western novels written by Europeans during the early nineteenth century helped shaped the public perception in Europe to portray the American frontier as a brutal, vicious place full of savage natives, ruthless outlaws, and harsh terrain. Such a place was

⁸⁰ Unidentified London newspaper, 9 May 1906. Will Rogers Memorial Archives, newspaper clipping, Scrapbook A-1.

⁸¹ Ray Allen Billington, *Land of Savagery, Land of Promise: The European Image of the American Frontier in the Nineteenth Century*. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1981. p. 29.

⁸² Edward George Geoffrey Smith Stanley, Earl of Derby, 1799-1869. "Journal of a Tour in America, 1824-1825." London: Priv. print., 1930.

unfit for anyone, save the adventurous.⁸³ But, as the nineteenth century progressed, much of the European popular cultural mediums reflected an image of the American West as a place that needed to be conquered. Often, the hero-like cowboys in many of the dime novel westerns and Wild West Shows were ambassadors of western civilization to the savage frontier.

After performing overseas from March through June of 1906, Will Rogers returned to the United States. He arrived in New York on the 4 July 1906, and got on a train bound for his home in Claremore, Oklahoma. He spent the rest of the month of July, and all but a few days in August at home, before leaving again for New York on 29 August 1906.⁸⁴ Although Rogers enjoyed performing, he still had a great desire to return home to the family ranch to visit his family. Shortly after he was back east performing on the vaudeville stage, on 16 September 1906, it was mentioned in an interview that,

After this year he will go back to ranching, on which his heart is set. It will not be on the extensive scale of a few years ago, when his father's cattle roamed over forty thousand acres. . . Now they have about a thousand acres. All the money which Will earns in the show business. . . goes home to the banker father and is invested in land.⁸⁵

⁸³ Billington, *Land of Savagery, Land of Promise*, pp. 29-57.

⁸⁴ Wertheim and Bair, *The Papers of Will Rogers, Vol. II*, 304.

⁸⁵ Unidentified Cleveland newspaper, 16 September 1906. Will Rogers Memorial Archives, newspaper clipping, Scrapbook A-1.

Although Will Rogers enjoyed the success of portraying the mythic cowboy on the vaudeville stage, constant travel and life on the road was tiring. He still had the desire to settle down on the ranch, where the American frontier, albeit different from what he remembered, existed in reality, and not just in myth. These ties to his home ranch, where he first learned the skills that made him popular, legitimized his role in the mythical West.

Through the latter half of 1906 and 1907, he continued to perform in the eastern United States with much of the same popularity and success he had previously experienced. At the same time, the "eastern and western vaudeville managers associations joined to create the United Booking Offices (UBO). . . who agreed to divide the nation into two sections, with the Western Vaudeville Managers Association controlling booking west of Chicago and its eastern counterpart handling booking east of Chicago."⁸⁶ This allowed Will Rogers to begin to perform in the Orpheum Circuit in the west, and expose him to many different venues and audiences he had not yet encountered.

Will Rogers' vaudeville act proved to be just as popular in the western circuits as he had been in the east.

⁸⁶ Ibid., 417.

In a letter to his soon-to-be wife, Betty Blake, he claimed the "old Act is one big hit out here in the vally [sic] where people are supposed to know it is better than the east an think it will be a success all the way out."⁸⁷ His act was definitely popular in the West, as one might imagine. On 7 July 1908, a newspaper review of his performance in Vancouver stated that his control of the lariat during his rope tricks showed "ease and grace of one born to rope wild steers on the plains in the West."⁸⁸

But, perhaps one of the most interesting things written about Will Rogers's vaudeville career came on 11 September 1908. Bertha V. O'Brien of the *Detroit Free Press* wrote an article that compared Will Rogers to Owen Wister's main character in *The Virginian*. The American public's fascination for western themes was not limited to the vaudeville stage. As previously mentioned, Wild West shows preceded vaudeville as the popular performing version of western art. Artist like Frederic Remington and Charles Russell produced stirring visual images of the frontier in paintings and sculptures. One of the first motion pictures, *The Great Train Robbery*, released in 1903 was a western film. And, in fiction, Owen Wister's *The*

⁸⁷ Will Rogers to Betty Blake, 15 June 1908. Will Rogers Memorial Archives.

⁸⁸ Unidentified Vancouver, B.C., Canada newspaper, 7 July 1908,. Will Rogers Memorial Archives, Newspaper clipping, Scrapbook A-2.

Virginian, published in 1902, was one of the most popular novels of its time.⁸⁹ The comparison was a flattering one, that showed Will Rogers and the appeal of the western image was not necessarily limited to young men who were pining for the rugged adventure of the frontier. O'Brien stated that, "He [Rogers] wasn't Dustin Farnam⁹⁰ but so immensely like the posters that hang in half the girls' rooms in the country that you'd scarcely know the difference."⁹¹

While the author of the article compared Rogers to the title character in *The Virginian*, Rogers disagreed. In the story, the title character was pursuing a group of cattle rustlers, only to find that his best friend was one of them. When caught, the title character does the honorable thing and hangs his former friend for his crimes. In the article, Rogers said, "Well, we couldn't swallow that, so we just threw the book into the fire and says 'gol darn that Virginian—he wasn't no cow-puncher.' I don't know what they did 30 years ago but I know that the boys don't string up their old pals."⁹² In this statement, and throughout the article, Rogers, whether he realized it or

⁸⁹ William Bloodworth, "Writers of the Purple Sage: Novelists and the American West," in *Wanted Dead or Alive: The American West in Popular Culture*, ed. Richard Aquila. (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1996), p. 45.

⁹⁰ Stage actor who played the title role in *The Virginian* on Broadway in 1903, and again in the title role of the film production in 1914.

⁹¹ *Detroit Free Press*, 11 September 1908. Will Rogers Memorial Archives, Newspaper clipping, Scrapbook A-2.

⁹² *Ibid.*

not, was making a significant contrast of western imagery. The Virginian was a popular figure of the mythical West. He was a character created by an author after the turn of the twentieth century, and popularized by society. On the other hand, Rogers was speaking of himself as if he were part of the "old" west. He was the real thing, even if he was a remainder of good days now passed. Essentially, he was not a creation of a society. Rather, he was a man who was a legitimate westerner, and his success in vaudeville and in the mythical West was a result of that fact. As he said a few years earlier, "There ain't no such West as them fellers wrote say there are."⁹³

However, while Rogers separated himself from type of artificially constructed mythical cowboy as in *The Virginian*, he embraced an element of the mythical West, while remaining true to his idea of the reality of the West. Will Rogers's lariat was an example of this idea. A *Kansas City Times* article from 1908 quoted Will Rogers as saying, "In the days when horses ran wild on the western plains and cattle roaming over the wild ranges had to be roped and branded, the cowboy's lariat was to the cattleman

⁹³ *Baltimore World*, 6 December 1906. Will Rogers Memorial Archives, Newspaper clipping, Scrapbook A-1.

what the spade is to the gardener."⁹⁴ He went on to say that, "the wild horse have nearly all been captured. The old time ranch is becoming more and more like the modern stock farm. A kind of a halo of historic and romantic interest is gathering about the lariat. That's the excuse for my act being on the stage."⁹⁵

In the years that followed, vaudeville began to change for Will Rogers. A vaudevillian performer "was always afraid to repeat his or her act too many times in the same town."⁹⁶ In the spring of 1910, Rogers began to experiment with what he did, not just with his act on the vaudeville stage, but also with his career. What he began to do was much more similar to what he did in Wild West shows than what he had been doing in his act on the vaudeville stage. Rogers teamed up with his old Wild West boss, Zack Mulhall, and his daughter Lucille, to perform in outdoor arenas.⁹⁷ In these performances, Rogers was rarely the headlined performer, and mostly served as a commentator for the performers. Betty Rogers reports in her biography of her husband that Harry Jordan, a theater manager in Philadelphia asked her, "Why does Will carry all those

⁹⁴ *The Kansas City Times*, [?] 1908. Will Rogers Memorial Archives, newspaper clipping, Scrapbook A-2.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*

⁹⁶ Wertheim and Bair. *The Papers of Will Rogers, Vol. II.*, 417.

⁹⁷ Zach Mulhall to Will Rogers, 22 March 1908. *Papers of Will Rogers, Vol. III.* p. 173.

horses and people around with him? I would rather have Will Rogers alone than that whole bunch put together."⁹⁸ In response to this, Rogers began to perform in the typical vaudeville tradition, but performed alone.

Will Rogers's career was evolving into more than just a performing cowboy. His commentary was becoming what entertained the crowds. Rogers continued to perform in vaudeville circuit in some way or another through late 1914, but had already started to perform in Broadway shows, first as someone to entertain the crowds as the production crew changed the scenes, then as a billed performer in productions such as *The Wall Street Girl*, *Merry-Go-Round*, and *Hands Up*.⁹⁹ Rogers's career was quickly taking him toward the popular *Ziegfeld Follies* and motion pictures. The western image and the "mythical cowboy" were what initially attracted people to Will Rogers's vaudeville shows in the early 1900s, but his humorous social and political commentary was what projected him into his later careers.

David Hamilton Murdoch claims that a society creates a myth in order to "solve a great cultural dilemma."¹⁰⁰ If the disappearance of the American frontier, and thus the

⁹⁸ Betty Rogers, *Will Rogers: His Wife's Story*, 2nd ed. (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1979), 110.

⁹⁹ Yagoda, *Will Rogers*, 129-133.

¹⁰⁰ Murdoch, *The American West*, 17.

disappearance of the frontier identity, was the great cultural dilemma, then the mythical West was the solution. The mythical image of the American West existed in the cultural facets of the United States' society after the turn of the twentieth century. Will Rogers's performance in vaudeville was successful because his western image was a reminder of days passed, and thus part of the myth of the American West.

Arthur Wertheim and Barbara Bair were correct when they claimed that Will Rogers was a "bridge between the real-life and mythic cowboy experience."¹⁰¹ Will Rogers and his performances with his lariat on the vaudeville stage were visual representations of the idea of the mythical western image. The generation that lived in the decade after the turn of the twentieth century had been "born in the second half of the nineteenth century, when Western frontier conditions were still very much a reality in many parts of the United States, at least in their youth."¹⁰² Not only did they still exist at that time, but the frontier experience was a significant part of the identity of Americans. However, when the frontier ceased to exist, the generation living in the decade following the turn of the twentieth century attempted to hold on to the idea of

¹⁰¹ Wertheim and Bair. *The Papers of Will Rogers, Vol. III*, 43.

¹⁰² Nash, *Creating the West*, 198.

the West. Will Rogers was indeed an important part of that transition. His life and experiences on a ranch in Indian Territory, being a legitimate westerner, and his talent with a lariat was what made him credible in the vaudeville circuit. However, it was how the journalist and audience members reacted to him that best exemplified Will Rogers's impact as an icon of the mythical image of the American West.

CHAPTER VI

CONCLUSION

In the introduction, I used the example of the nineteenth century muskets and revolvers that hang on my wall as symbols of protection, security, and justice. If the American West, as it existed as a mythical image in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, could be condensed down to a single specific image to be hung on our walls, what would it look like? The simple fact is that it would be different for everyone. For all of us that are interested in some particular facet of the history of the frontier, the real or mythical image of the American West can be intangible at times. In my case, it is rather foolish. The image of the American West in my mind is a creation of different images from western films and Thomas Moran paintings, music of many different varieties, and strange feelings of identity that all coalesce to somehow define me as an Oklahoman living in the "former frontier".

I don't pretend to know what that image was for Will Rogers, although it's clear that he had some sort of idea in his mind. He spent most of his life chasing that idea in some way. In this work, I specifically chose to focus on the early, formative years of Will Rogers' life when he, like many of us, spent his time trying to figure out what he was going to do with his life. Will Rogers had grown up in a pivotal time when the American frontier was changing in a very significant way. Growing up on his father's ranch in Indian Territory, he, like me, was surrounded by a particular image of the frontier. As in my case, it is likely that the image that was in his mind defined him, and made him what he was and what he would become.

But, the point of this written work is not to pretend to know what Will Rogers felt, or what he was thinking at any particular point in time. Rather, the point is to establish that there was some sort of mythic idea of the American West that he was chasing, and that the image of the American West that Will Rogers portrayed in the Wild West shows and on the vaudeville stage was important in establishing him as culturally significant entertainer in American popular culture. To summarize my analysis, prior to 1902, Will Rogers lived in the Indian Territory while the frontier began to slip away. In an effort to maintain

the western lifestyle he had grown accustomed to, he moved to the international frontiers of Argentina and South Africa, looking for his own opportunity. However, it was clear to Rogers that his idea of the frontier either no longer existed, or was not what he wanted. By accident and necessity, he abandoned his search for land and cattle in South Africa and stumbled upon Texas Jack's Wild West Show. Employing skills of riding and roping that he had developed his whole life, Will Rogers was able to pursue a new career that would launch him into the public eye; a place that he would never again leave, even after his death.

As William Savage, Jr. suggests in his compelling article on Will Rogers and the western image, the humorist Rogers became was only able to exist because of the western image that he embodied. And the only way he was able to succeed in the Wild West Shows and on the vaudeville stage was because of his remarkable talent. As Savage stated, "he could afford to make the cowboy image his theatrical vehicle. Had he been incompetent as a rider or roper, he could have survived on the stage only in another guise."¹⁰³ His ability gave credence to the "cowboy image" that he created.

¹⁰³ William W. Savage, Jr. "Top Hand: Will Rogers and the Cowboy Image in America." *Chronicles of Oklahoma* 57, (Fall 1979): p. 379

But, what is the significance? Traveling across the world, looking for a way to preserve a western lifestyle is hardly remarkable. For that matter, neither is being a western-themed vaudeville performer. What is remarkable is the fact that Will Rogers was able to move on from the Wild West Show and vaudeville stage without really altering the image and persona that he had created.

He went on to star in seventy-one films, while always maintaining his folksy, country, western image, without ever really being typecast into specifically western films. And, much of what made him popular was other entertainment mediums that lacked imagery all together, such as radio and journalism. Without a doubt, Will Rogers was a cowboy. But, he was an adaptive cowboy; one that was able to maintain a particular image of the American West without ever becoming out-of-date or behind the times.¹⁰⁴ Again, to borrow from Savage, "Cowboy imagery is the imagery of inspiration, regardless of the cultural level at which it appears."¹⁰⁵ And through his life, Will Rogers continued to provide that.

So, with this work it was my desire to illustrate the impact of the frontier in Will Rogers' early professional

¹⁰⁴ Savage, "Top Hand: Will Rogers and the Cowboy Image in America." p. 383.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., p. 383.

life. Without a doubt, the idea of the frontier was a crucial part in establishing Will Rogers as a significant figure in American popular culture. Not only was this because his life on the Rogers Ranch in Oologah served as his training ground, which gave him credence as a "real" cowboy in the western entertainment industry, but also because the image of the mythical cowboy that he portrayed in Wild West Shows and on the vaudeville stage helped to set him on the path to international stardom that Rogers would eventually obtain. By portraying a mythic cowboy, and maintaining the mythical image of the American West, Rogers was able to gain popularity in his early career as a performer in Wild West shows and as a vaudeville performer from 1902 to 1914, and establish him as a significant cultural figure in American popular culture.

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APPENDICES



Figure 1. Texas Jack's Wild West Show and Dramatic Company, 26 May 1903. Will Rogers is labeled as #8 in the center of the photograph.
Source: Will Rogers Memorial Photo Archives, Photo PB25.63.



Figure 2. (Left to Right) Texas Jack, Texas Jack's wife, unidentified, and Will Rogers.

Source: Will Rogers Memorial Photo Archives, Photo PB25.100.



Figure 3. Will Rogers, circa 1905.

Source: Will Rogers Memorial Photo Archives, Photo PB9.85.

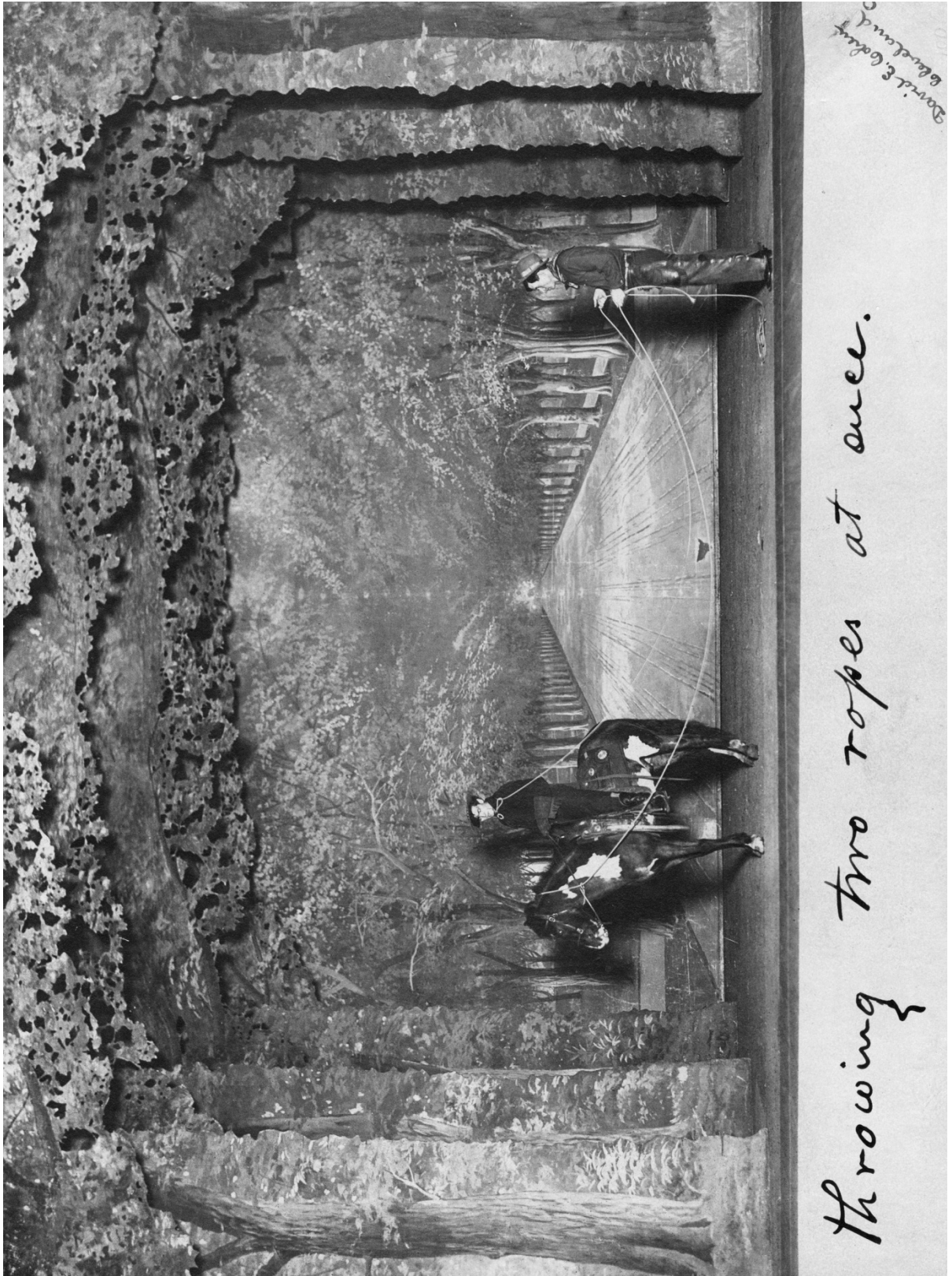


Figure 4. Will Rogers (right) and assistant Buck McKee (on horse).
Source: Will Rogers Memorial Photo Archives, Photo PB9.52.

VITA

Jacob A. Krumwiede

Candidate for the Degree of

Master of Arts

Thesis: CHASING THE FRONTIER: WILL ROGERS AND THE
IMAGE OF THE AMERICAN WEST

Major Field: History

Biographical:

Education:

Completed the requirements for the Master of Arts in
American History at Oklahoma State University,
Stillwater, Oklahoma in May, 2014.

Completed the requirements for the Bachelor of
Science in Social Sciences at Rogers State
University, Claremore, Oklahoma in 2008.

Experience:

Staff, Will Rogers Memorial Museums, 2007-2014

Professional Memberships:

Oklahoma Museum Association, 2010-2014