

WILL ROGERS, WRITER AND JOURNALIST

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

"Will Rogers" is a name rarely followed by parenthetical identification, whether used in speeches, editorials, articles, or casual conversation. It is universally known, as American as ham and eggs. To some, the name brings memories of a shuffling figure in a rumped blue serge suit—the humble cowboy from Claremore, Oklahoma, with twinkling gray eyes, a shock of unruly hair, a bashful grin, and words that could warm the heart and tickle the funny bone at the same time. Others recall the sense of grief and personal loss they felt when news of the tragic plane crash that took the lives of Will Rogers and Wiley Post was flashed around the world.

To identify this native Oklahoman, one of the following phrases might be chosen: "America's best known homespun philosopher," "the most popular movie actor of the early thirties," "world traveler and lecturer," "long-time star of the Ziegfeld Follies," "unsung hero of the depression," "highest paid radio comedian of his day," or "America's unofficial ambassador to the world."

Few would argue with any of those descriptions; yet none delineates the one facet of his life which has the most significance for both present and future generations—his work

as a writer and journalist.

Importance of the Study

In the biographies of Will Rogers his newspaper columns and books are frequently mentioned. In fact, it is from these articles and books that much of his biographical material has been winnowed. One book, termed an "autobiography" and edited by Donald Day, is composed of excerpts from Rogers' articles, columns, and books which have been put in chronological order with only a few paragraphs added by Day to correlate segments of the life story.¹ The same author also edited two other volumes of Rogers' writings, which are compilations of selected material.² Other biographers have made frequent use of quotations and passages from Rogers' writings, but little attention is given to the published pieces which made such books possible.

Further evidence that his journalistic work has been neglected are five theses on Will Rogers' life, four dealing with his humor and a fifth which examines the peculiarities of his rhetorical techniques.³ These, too, relied heavily on the printed words of Rogers, yet none has actually established the role of writing in the humorist's life or analyzed

¹Donald Day, The Autobiography of Will Rogers (Boston: The Houghton Mifflin Company, 1949).

²How We Elect Our Presidents (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1952) and Sanity is Where You Find It (Boston: The Houghton Mifflin Company, 1955).

³See Bibliography.

the writing techniques he employed.

It can be demonstrated, however, that the significance of his writing was recognized by his contemporaries. Following the plane crash which took the life of Rogers on August 15, 1935, people throughout the world paid tribute to the beloved Oklahoman. Herbert Hoover's consolation when he commented on the great loss was: "We should build memorials to him. We should show the gratitude of our generation in some imperishable form. But Will Rogers will live his own memorial through American literature."⁴ Expressing the same faith in the continued value of Rogers' writings, Congressman John E. Rankin termed the late American hero "an institution, whose life, whose words, whose works, whose records, whose traditions will constitute some of the richest volumes in the future libraries of the world."⁵

These earnest predictions that Rogers would be immortalized through his writings were echoed by many of those who mourned his death. Yet just four years later, one person in the group that had met in Washington to accept the memorial statue of Will Rogers showed no knowledge of his writing at all. Paying tribute to the late citizen of his state, Oklahoma Representative Wesley E. Disney made the following statement which was recorded in the Congressional

⁴Herbert Hoover, quoted in Folks Say of Will Rogers: A Memorial Anecdote, eds. William Howard and Jake G. Lyons (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1936), p. 204.

⁵Congressman John E. Rankin, quoted in Folks Say, pp. 190-191.

Record:

It is a regrettable fact that it is impossible to make such a life permanent. By virtue of its character it is discernible only in the effect upon the character of the individuals with whom he came in contact. He built no buildings and painted no great pictures; he composed no poems and wrote no books⁶

It is difficult to imagine why a Representative from Will's home state would not be cognizant of the six books, the hundreds of articles, and the daily newspaper columns that made Will Rogers' "sayings" a part of the American tradition. If this oversight were typical, how, then, could Rogers' "memorial" have any permanence, or his philosophy enrich the lives of future Americans?

One biographer expressed an opinion that may help explain why those who knew him personally or "knew" him on the stage and screen have given little attention to his writing. She stated, "We miss much of the typical Rogers' humor in only the printed word, for Will was primarily a speaker and a showman who knew to the split second the timing of a joke or when to bring in the applause line."⁷ The author recognized that by "reading Will Rogers day by day, one gets a very comprehensive history of the United States during the years he wrote," but to term the legendary figure a writer of history is not enough. Even though there is much "history" to be found in the journalistic coverage of his time, the

⁶U.S. Congress, House Joint Committee on Printing, Acceptance of the Statue of Will Rogers: Presented by the State of Oklahoma, 76th Cong., 1st Sess., 1939, House Doc. 471, p. 70.

⁷Paula McSpadden Love, The Will Rogers Book (Indianapolis: The Bobbs-Merrill Company, Inc., 1961), pp. 23-24.

terms writer and journalist are more applicable than historian, as this paper will demonstrate.

Qualifications of a writer. Along with the other vocations which he pursued, Will Rogers fits the accepted definitions of writer and journalist. The words journal and journalist are derived from the French word "jour" meaning "day," according to Funk and Wagnall's Standard Dictionary, and a journal is "a record of daily occurrences." A journalist, then, is one who writes for a journal or newspaper. The journalist may in addition be identified as a writer, or one whose profession is writing. The latter term includes those who write material that may or may not be in the nature of a daily account. Because Will Rogers spent much of the last 16 years of his life in writing both daily accounts and works of a more general nature, deriving a large portion of his income from such work, he quite obviously earned the right to be called a writer and journalist.

Scope of his writing. In spite of the fact that he has been accorded little recognition as a writer since his death, and generally has not been claimed by the journalism profession, Will Rogers produced an enormous amount of material for publication during the peak years of his popularity. In 1926, for example, during a five-month world tour which he began in April with his son, Will, Jr., he produced six articles for The Saturday Evening Post,⁸ varying in length from 4,500 to

⁸Will Rogers, "Letters of a Self-made Diplomat to His President," The Saturday Evening Post, July 10, 1926; July 17, 1926; July 24, 1926; August 21, 1926; October 23, 1926; December 4, 1926.

10,000 words each; a daily cablegram for The New York Times, a weekly article for the McNaught Syndicate, and also gathered material for the book, There's Not a Bathing Suit in Russia,⁹ before returning home in September.

Nor did he merely write "jokes" or humor. According to Mrs. Rogers (Betty), who took the two younger children with her when she joined the two "Wills" on the Continent in June of that year, the humorist was taking his journalistic job as seriously as any reporter. She recalled:

With London as a base, Will covered most of Europe in flying trips to gather first-hand material for his Post articles. In Rome he had an interview with Mussolini; he saw the Preliminary Conference on Disarmament at Geneva; he met the King of Spain; was entertained by Ambassador Schurman in Berlin; and made his first trip into Russia.¹⁰

Busy with his family, public appearances, sightseeing, and other activities which included appearing in a British film, Will was primarily a reporter during this period. Nor did his varied activities seem to have any adverse effect on readership. The Post series, "Letters of a Self-made Diplomat to His President," was called "one of the most popular Post ever ran" by editor George H. Lorimer.¹¹ The edited articles were published in book form later that year under

⁹Will Rogers, There's Not a Bathing Suit In Russia & Other Bare Facts (New York: Albert & Charles Boni, 1927).

¹⁰Betty Rogers, Will Rogers: His Wife's Story (Garden City, N. Y.: Garden City Publishing Co., Inc., 1941), p. 189.

¹¹John Tebbel, George Horace Lorimer and The Saturday Evening Post (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1948), p. 145.

the same title,¹² and in 1927 his book on Russia was in print.

Along with the Post articles and books, Rogers continued writing his weekly article for the McNaught Syndicate which he began December 31, 1922, for the Sunday editions; a daily article, "The Worst Story I've Heard Today," for the same syndicate, from May 15, 1925, to January 15, 1927; and his daily cablegram which began July 29, 1926, and later became his daily telegram after his return from Europe. Before his death, Rogers reached an estimated 40,000,000 readers in at least 350 daily and 200 Sunday newspapers throughout the nation.¹³

One biographer said the daily articles "had the greatest reader circulation of any published in the world";¹⁴ moreover, according to Day, Rogers' daily news commentary "became an important part of the life and thoughts of practically everyone in the United States and began to spill over to other parts of the world."¹⁵ Another author said the "daily inspirations" of the cowboy philosopher were "almost as vital to the breakfast table in the American household as the food."¹⁶

¹²Will Rogers, Letters of a Self-made Diplomat to His President (New York: Albert & Charles Boni, 1926).

¹³P. J. O'Brien, Will Rogers, Ambassador of Good Will, Prince of Wit and Wisdom (Chicago: The John C. Winston Company, 1935), p. 116.

¹⁴Ibid., p. 110.

¹⁵Day, Autobiography, p. 75.

¹⁶David Randolph Milsten, An Appreciation of Will Rogers (San Antonio: The Naylor Company, 1936), p. 125.

From these diverse opinions concerning the role Rogers played as a writer and journalist, several questions emerge. Did the value of his writings die with him, or does his work have meaning to the reader of today? Was he writing only for the entertainment of his daily readers, or did he aim toward a more enduring audience? Did his humor depend largely on "timing" or speaking techniques, or was his writing style designed for reading? Does the fact that many of his articles and columns were based on current happenings preclude their appreciation by readers at a later date? In brief, was Will Rogers merely a great humorist—verbally, in the style and stature of American vaudeville's most famed monologist—or was he also a gifted writer who mastered and then exploited the rare talent of writing sparkling and enduring humor?

Need for the Study

Some of these same questions and the need for answers must have occurred to Frank Tripp, California newspaper columnist, who stated the problem in journalistic terms. He decried the fact that Will Rogers was almost unknown to the younger generation in 1948, just 13 years after the tragic plane crash ended his personal influence on the daily lives of Americans.

After he had asked a group of teenagers who Will Rogers was and discovered that none knew, Tripp wrote a column entitled "We Need Will Rogers."¹⁷ As evidence, the columnist

¹⁷Frank Tripp, "We Need Will Rogers," Fresno Bee, November 8, 1948.

recalled the past when "a sentence or two from the cowboy philosopher more than once closed the trap of a noisy crack-pot like a clam and set the whole country into roars of laughter." Continuing, Tripp explained Rogers' ability to clarify facts: "Folks understood Will. The tender ridicule he dished out seldom failed to make people see things in their real light."

Seeming to recognize the need for a revival of Rogers' works, Tripp stressed:

Something is wrong—and not with Will Rogers. The kids know plenty about Karl Marx, Lenin, Wilhelm, Hitler and Mussolini

.
Can it be that a whole generation carries a wound in its heart for Will Rogers and the next, its own offspring, does not even know who he was?

.
Schools of journalism turn out talent and newsrooms turn out many times as much. About 10 per cent of it all gets beyond the bread and butter class. In the grist there must be somewhere, sometime, a potential Will Rogers.

.
Only one of these boys developed in each generation would do more to keep America thinking straight than loads of lumpy logic which defies a smile.

If you want a man to think with you, a first long step is to get him to smile with you. That was Will Rogers' great gift.¹⁸

Tripp shows emphatically that he believed Rogers, as a journalist, went far beyond the role of entertainer and, moreover, that his life and philosophy as shown in his written works deserve recognition and perpetuation through education of present and future generations. The latter belief, as was stated earlier, was expressed by many at the time of

¹⁸Ibid.

Rogers' death. Yet little has been done since that time to perpetuate the philosopher's wisdom as it was recorded in written form. It is to take one step toward filling that void that the present study has been undertaken.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this research, then, is to discover, examine, interpret, and record pertinent facts about Rogers as a writer and journalist and to assimilate and interpret facts and opinions concerning his writing that will lead to a new understanding and a deeper appreciation of his works. It is hoped that this study will reveal the scope and importance of the writings of Will Rogers, thus laying the groundwork for future research into additional aspects of his works.

Limitations of the Study

In research, to date, the writer has discovered numerous discrepancies in published biographical data. An incident is sometimes recounted by three or four persons, each of whom writes as if he saw it happen even though these persons were widely separated by time and geography. Rogers himself referred to some incidents more than once, giving a slightly different interpretation in order to appeal to a particular audience or to achieve a humorous effect. For example, he frequently claimed he never went beyond McGuffey's Fourth Reader, yet records show that "Willie Rogers" was nearing the end of his second year at Kemper Military Academy, the

equivalent of the eleventh grade by today's standards, when he quit school for the last time.¹⁹

There is disagreement concerning Rogers' full name by his biographers. Nearly all list his full name as "William Penn Adair Rogers." Croy, on the other hand, cited a fact that Rogers himself never mentioned and likely did not know. On the Cherokee tribal rolls, the Oklahoman was listed as "Colonel William Penn Adair Rogers," including the title as well as the full name of the man for whom he was named, the assistant principal chief of the Cherokees and a Colonel in the Confederate Army under whom Clem Rogers, Will's father, served as a Lieutenant.²⁰ (Mrs. Adair assisted Mary Rogers in the delivery of the baby that was destined to grow to international fame, and it was she who suggested her husband's name for the new-born infant, according to most reliable accounts. Yet others claim that Adair himself was a visitor in the Rogers household at the time of delivery, and so the new baby was named for him by his good friend Clem Rogers. There is no agreement on whether or not the elder Rogers was present on November 4, 1879, when the last of his eight children was born.)

Other discrepancies have been found, some of which appear to be worthy of extensive research. It is beyond the scope

¹⁹A. M. Hitch, Will Rogers, Cadet (Booneville, Mo.: Kemper Military School, 1935), p. 5.

²⁰Homer Croy, Our Will Rogers (New York: Duell, Sloan and Pearce, 1953), p. 3.

of the present study, however, to attempt to establish the authenticity of all data; therefore, the validity of certain biographical "facts" must be left to the judgment of the writer of this paper. Only the data which directly concerns Rogers' life as a journalist or writer will be questioned and an attempt made to determine the fact.

Another divergence from accepted thesis form should be explained at this point. To preserve the true "flavor" of the Rogers style, grammatical errors and misspelled words will be reproduced here as nearly as possible the way Rogers wrote them. If the original mistakes were to be indicated by typographical interruptions each time they occurred, every direct quotation from Rogers' work would be diluted. For this paper, then, it will be assumed that "mistakes" in the direct quotations from Rogers are his own with no further indication from the writer.

Plan and Procedure

Basic areas. This study includes five basic areas concerning the life of Rogers as a writer and journalist: (1) review of the literature, including both the published works and the unpublished dissertations; (2) examination of forces in his early life that influenced the development of his writing; (3) review and description of his first published writings; (4) review and description of Rogers' major work, including the syndicated columns, the magazine articles, the books, and the advertising copy; and (5) an analysis of the Rogers' style.

Divisions of the study. In an attempt to present the material in its most logical form, the paper is divided into ten chapters, including the introduction.

The chapter which immediately follows is a survey of what has been written about Rogers as a writer and journalist. This includes published biographies, excerpts from texts that discuss Rogers' works, selected articles, and unpublished theses. The third chapter traces the development of young Will's writing talents as evidenced through his letters. Here, too, the environmental factors which affected his growth as a humorist and as a writer are recounted. His first published articles, some of which have never before been identified or recognized, are discussed in the fourth chapter.

The fifth chapter outlines his work as it was released by the McNaught Syndicate, primarily the daily "telegram" and the weekly articles. This chapter includes information regarding sales of the syndicated pieces, readership, income, topics covered, style of writing, and criticism by his readers.

Magazine articles written by Will Rogers and published in three major periodicals of his time are examined in the sixth chapter. Along with the discussion and reviews of his articles as they appeared in The Saturday Evening Post, American, and Life is information concerning readership, censorship and editing, and criticism.

The seventh chapter is devoted to a study of the six books authored by Rogers and includes the reviews and criticisms by his contemporaries.

The miscellaneous writings by Rogers that do not fit into the major classifications cited above are summarized and discussed in the eighth chapter. These items include his introductions to books by other authors, advertising copy, and single articles for magazines.

Based on the entire survey of Rogers' writings, the ninth chapter is an analysis of the Rogers' style as it can be traced throughout his writings. A summary and suggestions for future research make up the final chapter.

Source of materials. Materials for this research have come from varied sources. Used book stores in Oklahoma and other states were searched, and the services of companies that specialize in finding out-of-print books were employed to acquire as many books as possible by and about Will Rogers. Magazine articles, book reviews, reference books, and some of the rare volumes written by Rogers were found in college and university libraries and photographed or copied. Collections of clippings and other items at the Oklahoma Historical Society Library and the Oklahoma City Public Library were also helpful.

The Will Rogers Memorial at Claremore proved to be the largest storehouse of material. Paula McSpadden Love, niece of the late humorist and curator of the Memorial since it opened in 1938, permitted the writer to examine collections

of unpublished materials, including notes and letters in Rogers' handwriting and original pieces of typewritten copy with his editing marks in pencil. Clippings from newspapers and magazines collected over a period of more than 30 years were also made available by Mrs. Love.

Microfilms of the daily and weekly articles published in the Tulsa Daily World and The New York Times were found in the Memorial. These, along with microfilm of The New York Times on file in the Central State College library, furnished much of the basic source material. Replies to written inquiries and personal interviews from those who knew Rogers personally and professionally were also helpful in verifying facts and clarifying details.

Previous theses and published biographies were helpful in furnishing an overall view of the life and character of Rogers, providing a background for this study. Both the published and unpublished literature are examined and evaluated in the chapter which follows.

CHAPTER II

SURVEY OF THE LITERATURE

When Will Rogers ambled onto a stage, strolled into a chili parlor or newspaper office, climbed aboard an ocean liner, or out of an airplane to smile and wave a friendly greeting, he was recognized—and welcomed—on sight. But the reader of Rogers' works does not have the advantage of instant identification of the beloved personality. It is primarily through what has been written about the Sage of Oklahoma that future generations can come to know and appreciate Rogers as an individual, and thereby be introduced to a deeper understanding and enjoyment of his writings.

For the purposes of this paper, the survey of the literature is limited to those accounts which give insights to Rogers as a writer and journalist. Descriptions of him at work—the physical and mechanical aspects of his writing—are summarized first, followed by a discussion and evaluation of the contradictions found in the accounts of how he wrote. Next, the published and unpublished works which raise questions or offer partial answers concerning Will's profession as a writer will be cited and discussed. Based on the readings and research, the final portion of this chapter will include an evaluation of the literature as it related directly to the subject of this paper.

Descriptions of Will Rogers at Work

It is quite impossible, of course, to separate any writer's work from his life or personality, and this is especially true in the case of Will Rogers. Much of his writing relates the interesting events he encountered in his daily life. A portion of it is in the form of lengthy letters addressed to public figures, or in the short, pithy telegrams that had the tone of personal messages to his devoted public.

This casual, easy-going style was a part of his total personality, and his writing, like his stage humor, appeared to be accomplished with little effort. Those who saw him at his "daily chore," pecking out his "piece for the papers," furnish a colorful picture of the "untypical" journalist at work.

Struggles with the typewriter. As might be expected, the one person who referred most often to the mechanics of his writing—how and when he wrote his articles and books—was his wife, Betty.¹ It was she who watched him read the morning papers, scattering them over the floor as he gathered material for the daily pieces, and she often served as a sounding board for his quips.

Mrs. Rogers recounted the early days, even before he began using the typewriter, when Will wrote his humor in long-hand and she did the typing. Her impatient husband felt that

¹Betty Rogers, pp. 291-93.

"typing was a nuisance."² When writer Arthur Brisbane explained how simple and easy it would be to use a dictaphone, "Will was elated," his wife recorded. Talking always came easy for the ad-libbing humorist, so he decided to try the dictaphone. But when the machine started, said Mrs. Rogers, "He couldn't think of anything to say; he couldn't think at all." Continuing, she explained,

He tried the dictaphone several times. But finally gave it up and went back to wrestling with the typewriter—hitting the wrong keys, strewing commas all over the place, and using capitals almost at random. Eventually Will developed a two-finger technique that was fairly fast; but the copy he turned out was always untidy. The syndicate editors often must have torn their hair over it, for some of Will's original manuscripts, with their confusing revisions, are really outrageous.³

She added that he "never retyped anything"; instead he used a lead pencil to edit the first draft.

The original articles typed by Rogers in the files at the Memorial in Claremore bear out her statements. Transpositions of letters, words or phrases "x'ed" out, inconsistent spelling and capitalization, and little punctuation are all evidence that his copy was indeed "outrageous." But his articles were in demand, and published with little editing.

Croy also described Will's bout with the typewriter, quoting from an interview with Bruce Quisenberry, Rogers' nephew who traveled with the humorist and a quartet on lecture tours. Quisenberry said his uncle was always the first

²Ibid., p. 293.

³Ibid. See Figure 1, p. 19, for an example of Rogers' typing.

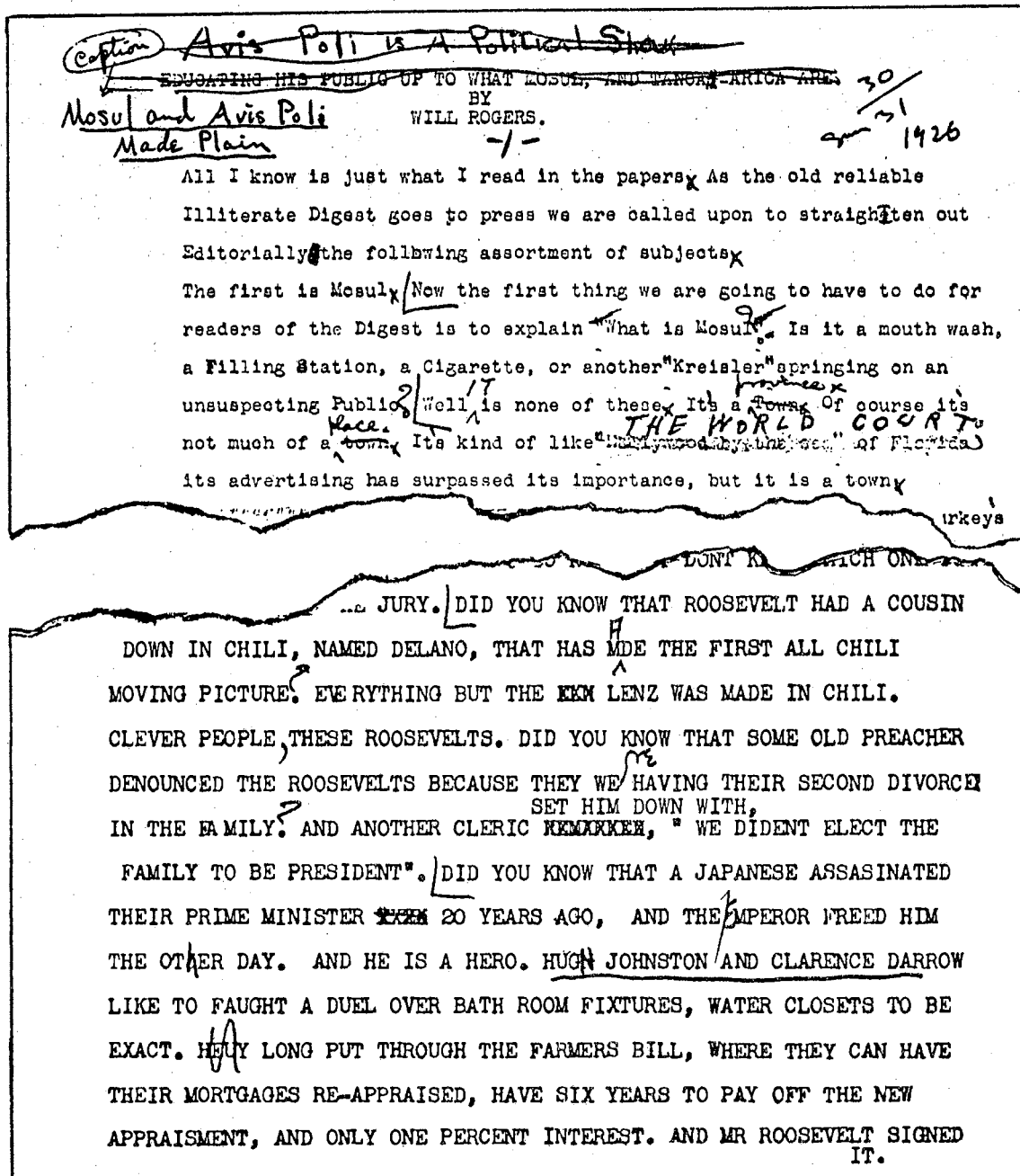


Figure 1. Two Examples of Rogers' "Outrageous" Typing As Edited by the McNaught Syndicate.

one up each morning on tour, grabbing the newspapers to take with him to breakfast. Describing the traveler-lecturer, Quisenberry said:

Getting his newspaper dispatch off was a dramatic moment. It had to be filed by half-past one. He would watch the time, then, at the last possible moment, he would put his portable on his knees, stare into space a few moments, then begin to peck. His hands—so amazingly skillful with a rope—were all thumbs when he tackled a typewriter. Peck-peck-peck! Sometimes he would stop, turn up the page and scowl at it for a minute. Then peck-peck-peck! If, by some chance, he finished early, he would read it to us—the singers and me—and ask what we thought. If we didn't get the point readily, he might slip the sheet back into the typewriter and start pecking again. When the telegram was finally ready, I would hop off at the first stop and file it. Sometimes I would have to run like mad to catch the train. When I would finally get on he would say, "I'll bet we lose you some day."⁴

Mrs. Love also commented on her uncle's writing habits. She remembers watching him as he "pecked out his articles with his middle fingers at an amazing rate of speed."⁵ One of the earliest biographies, written by Jerome Beatty and set in type before Rogers' death,⁶ also mentioned the portable typewriter which the actor would balance on his knees while he sat on the "running board" of his car. Beatty added:

Once he finishes his piece, he takes it around and reads it to all who will listen, asking for frank comment. When he is finally satisfied with it, he takes it to the telegraph office and files it himself. He never has been late with his daily dispatch. He always writes it before lunch—on an empty stomach. He believes people can't write well after they have eaten.⁷

⁴Croy, pp. 194-95.

⁵Love, p. 23.

⁶Jerome Beatty, The Story of Will Rogers (New York: The Saalfeld Publishing Company, 1935).

⁷Ibid., p. 128.

To some extent, the account by Beatty is true. His acquaintanceship with Will Rogers was largely through their contacts at the Hollywood studio and the small, pulp, "big-little book" written by Beatty appears to have been aimed toward movie fans. It contains 42 full-page "still" pictures from movies in which Rogers appeared and a glamorized account of the life of the popular comedian. If Beatty viewed the humorist only on the motion picture lots, this was no doubt what he saw. A picture reproduced in the Claremore Progress as well as other publications⁸ shows Rogers sitting sideways on the car seat, his feet out on the "running board," and his typewriter on his knees.

Writing habits. Betty Rogers furnished further information on her husband's writing habits at home. When he was at their ranch in the Santa Monica Hills, Will took the morning papers to his special breakfast table near a huge glass window. His wife continued:

As he read, he planned his daily article. He would thresh it through on the way to the studio and peck it out on his typewriter during the lunch hour. Or perhaps he would go upstairs to his study and write the piece before he left the house, leaving it sticking in the typewriter for me to file at the telegraph office later in the day.⁹

The restless Oklahoma cowboy also had a large window in his upstairs study through which he could look out "toward

⁸Claremore Progress, November 4, 1938. See also Jack Lait, Will Rogers: Wit and Wisdom (New York: Frederick A. Stokes, 1936), p. 99; and Day, Will Rogers: A Biography (New York: David McKay Company, Inc., 1962), p. 242n.

⁹Betty Rogers, p. 271.

the stable and the exercise ring and the hills he loved so well."¹⁰

When the actor had time off, he liked to hop in a car and drive wherever his fancy took him and Betty was expected to be ready to go along at a moment's notice. Recalling nostalgically the times when they were driving alone, Mrs. Rogers explained that even the daily wire deadline did not spoil their day.

If a deadline was near, he drew up somewhere on the side of the road, and sitting on the running-board of the car with the typewriter on his knees, he would hammer out his daily, sometimes laboriously and sometimes without effort. It meant a short interval for me, when I could take a walk or sit quietly with my knitting if I had remembered to bring it. When the comment was finished, we drove off to the nearest telegraph office to file it.¹¹

His good friend and fellow columnist, Irvin S. Cobb, gave one of the most colorful descriptions of Will as he broke away from the Hollywood set when he was appearing in Steamboat Round the Bend to "climb into his car up on the river bank and thump out his daily squib for the newspapers on his old portable typewriter. You could hear him a hundred feet away," Cobb added. "When Will beat on his typewriter it sounded like a brewery horse with a loose shoe running away across a covered bridge."¹²

¹⁰Ibid.

¹¹Ibid., p. 272.

¹²Irvin S. Cobb, quoted in Folks Say, p. 82.

Variations in the Descriptions

A few discrepancies were discovered in accounts of the mechanics of Rogers' writing. He did not "always" file his own telegram, as Beatty said. Mrs. Rogers and Bruce Quisenberry each told of having done this for him. Croy stated that Will always typed in capital letters, yet there are original articles in the Memorial files that are typed in upper and lower case. Other originals on file were typed on yellow Western Union blanks and a few of these are in all capital letters. But the pattern varies. Possibly Rogers typed according to his mood, as he did many things. Rarely did he follow a set pattern.

In spite of his struggles with the typewriter, which he never really mastered, Rogers obviously spent a great deal of time at the machine during his peak writing years. According to Mrs. Love her uncle never employed a secretary, even after he became quite wealthy.¹³ Mrs. Rogers, however, did employ a woman to help with the correspondence and various business details.

Indicating that he was always a man in a hurry, the humorist preferred sending telegrams or cablegrams. Beatty—

¹³Interview with Paula McSpadden Love, July 3, 1966. One letter and one article were found in the Memorial Files that had been typed by someone else. The letter has the initials "WR/Q" in the lower left corner and was probably typed by his nephew, Quisenberry. The article, one of the first he wrote for publication, may have been typed by his wife. Although there is no designation on the article, it obviously was not done by Rogers himself. The typing is much too "neat" and the spelling and punctuation are generally correct.

although he may have been exaggerating for the movie fans as he did throughout much of his book—said, "Will carries on a tremendous correspondence with friends by wire. At the Fox studio Rogers receives and sends more telegrams than does the Fox Film Corporation."¹⁴ Betty exhibited wifely concern because of the fact that "Will was continually cabling home about things he particularly wanted to know." Once he did just that when he was traveling in the Far East and at "cable tolls of a dollar and twenty-five cents a word." On that occasion, according to Betty, he complained,

I was out here a month before I found out that Notre Dame had lost a game. Imagine newspapers being printed in any language and not having that in Darn it, I miss my paper. I used to sit a long time over breakfast and read my papers and just think. Over here I sit, but that's all.¹⁵

One anecdote about Rogers puts him on the receiving end of the telegrams. Ziegfeld "who had a habit of firing telegrams at his stars" was bombarding Rogers with the messages on one occasion, but this "star" failed to answer any of them. When the telegrams "increased in length and warmth of language," Rogers sent a wire—collect—in terse reply: "Keep this up. Am on my way to buy more Western Union stock."¹⁶

Milsten related that young Rogers acquired the "telegram-sending" habit during his long distance courtship of Betty Blake. The couple met while she was visiting her married sister in Oolagah. After Betty's return to Rogers, Arkansas,

¹⁴Beatty, p. 129.

¹⁵Betty Rogers, pp. 250-51.

¹⁶O'Brien, p. 60.

"to resume her duties in her father's store, Will would ride to the railway station and send her a telegram." The biographer then added, "Perhaps this courtship by means of the telegraph accounted for the young cowboy's ability to say much in a few words."¹⁷

Descriptions of Rogers' Style

In the early years. Milsten described Rogers as a restless young man, and blamed the poor grammatical form of his early letters on the fact that "Willie" was "evidently too much in a rush to be concerned with commas and periods."¹⁸ The biographer called a letter from Will to a friend "an outcropping of his natural ability to deal out the cards of subtle sarcasm."¹⁹ Another letter written by Will when he was away at school, and which included several questions about friends back at Oolagah, was called an example of "the proverbial inquiring reporter" by Milsten.²⁰

Although earlier in the book the author indicated he was including the letters "in order to better understand why Will

¹⁷Milsten, p. 230. According to Croy whose book is well documented, Betty Blake did return to her home in Rogers, Ark., but not to her father's store as Milsten claimed. James Wyeth Blake, Betty's father, ran a "grist mill" in Silver Springs, Ark. (Later the name of the town was changed to Monte Ne.) Mr. Blake died when Betty was three years old.

After her husband's death, Mrs. Blake moved her family—six daughters and two sons—to Rogers, Ark., about seven miles away, "and became the town dressmaker." Betty did work in a store, the H. L. Stroud Mercantile Company, "off and on for several years," and held other jobs as well. But it was not her father's store. (Croy, pp. 60-64.)

¹⁸Milsten, p. 21.

¹⁹Ibid.

²⁰Ibid.

in later years turned writer along with his other talents,"²¹ he never really attempted to answer the question. No doubt he found that this depth could not be probed in a general biography; thus, he indirectly pointed to the need for research in this area without attempting to do more. The book has 18 chapters, each covering an important facet of Will's life, yet not one is devoted to his journalistic career. His writings are always inserted to help tell the story or to verify Milsten's statements.

At the conclusion of the chapter on "Politics," Milsten predicted, "In future decades the students of political science will probably write into their histories some of the predictions made by Will Rogers,"²² again failing to indicate how this philosophy was to be recorded for historians of the future to use.

As cited in dissertations. In his dissertation completed in 1964 on the rhetorical techniques of Rogers, Brown disagreed with Milsten concerning Rogers' predictions. He denied that the philosopher had significance as a "seer." Pointing out that one theory extended to explain Rogers' popularity is that he was "a great truth-teller," Brown charged that the Oklahoman "did not . . . have any real insight into the economic trouble that brewed in the 1920's and boiled over again in the 1930's."²³ He cited "another great question of the

²¹Ibid., p. 19.

²²Ibid., p. 208.

²³William Richard Brown, "The Rhetorical Techniques of Will Rogers" (unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, Dept. of Speech, University of Oklahoma, 1964), p. 7.

time" which Rogers was unable to see clearly. Brown said, "Will Rogers aligned himself firmly on the side of the isolationists," quoting three statements made by the commentator in 1934 as evidence.²⁴ He added, "To say that Rogers was no seer is only honest Often right and often wrong, Will Rogers must have gained his influence by means additional to his discerning analyses."²⁵

Also discounted were two other popularly held theories of Rogers' "power": his talent for "saying well what the public already thought" and his standing as "some sort of meaningful symbol to his national constituency."²⁶ Brown pointed out that Rogers often spoke out on unpopular issues at variance with what his public thought, and that "he was a sophisticate," in spite of "his simple tastes."²⁷ Finding these theories insufficient to explain Rogers' place of significance in America, Brown concluded that "Will Rogers operated as a bona fide hero to his national audience." The dissertation is based on the hypothesis "that Will Rogers got himself taken seriously because he identified with the great

²⁴Ibid., p. 8. Although it is beyond the scope of this paper to fully develop the political philosophy of Rogers, the statement that "Will Rogers aligned himself firmly on the side of the isolationists" is questionable in light of his statements and actions over a period of years. Dozens of times he warned the nation to be prepared through strong military forces, especially through stronger naval and air power; and during 1934 he made a trip around the world, showing interest in every country he visited. Further study is indicated before the "isolationist" charge can be proved.

²⁵Ibid., pp. 8-9.

²⁶Ibid., p. 10.

²⁷Ibid., pp. 9-11.

American dream" and the body of the paper attempts to analyze the appeal he had for his audience "within the historical framework of the great American dream."²⁸

Throughout Brown's dissertation, the writings of Rogers are cited to illustrate the philosophy and the personality of the beloved American humorist. A scholarly paper and well documented, the work contrasts greatly with some of the published biographies. Again, however, it is a study of the times and the audience as they relate to the "great American dream" exemplified by the Oklahoman, and for the purposes of this research, useful only as background for a study of Will Rogers as a writer and journalist.

More closely related to this study, perhaps, is the only other doctoral dissertation to date on Will Rogers. Written by E. P. Alworth, now chairman of the English Department at Tulsa University, the earlier study examines the relationship between the humor of Will Rogers and certain "cracker-box" philosophers of the nineteenth century.²⁹

Concentrating on humor, whether spoken or written, Alworth compared and contrasted Rogers with such "cracker-box" philosophers as Richard Saunders (Poor Richard), Josh Billings, Hosea Biglow, Artemus Ward, Jack Downing, Petroleum V. Nasby, Mark Twain, and Mr. Dooley. Alworth found

²⁸Ibid., pp. 18-19.

²⁹E. P. Alworth, "The Humor of Will Rogers" (unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, Dept. of English, University of Missouri, 1957), p. 3.

that, by and large, Will Rogers "reflected the same techniques employed by the old time humorists."³⁰

Alworth saw similarities between Benjamin Franklin and Rogers in their use of common sense approach. Both tested the moral system on its application to real life experiences instead of the abstract. Like Seba Smith's fictitious spokesman, Jack Downing, Rogers was often impudent in his remarks about governmental affairs and the political party in power. In common with the comedians Artemus Ward, Petroleum V. Nasby, and Josh Billings, the Oklahoma humorist used poor grammar, illogical punctuation, regional idioms, and homespun metaphors. Alworth also compared Rogers' regionalism of speech with that of Lowell's Hosea Biglow. Twain and Rogers both made use of exaggeration and incongruities for humorous effects. Like Dunne's Mr. Dooley, Rogers lightly referred to "big" names as though they were of the common folk and derided sham and dishonesty on all levels.³¹

In spite of these common elements, however, Alworth found basic differences that prevent the convenient placement of Rogers into the same category with earlier humorists:

He was not a rural New England comedian like Jack Downing and Sam Slick; he had no political axe to grind like James Russell Lowell; he had no talent for political vituperation like Petroleum V. Nasby; he did not often play the fool character like Artemus Ward and Bill Nye; and he had no zeal for political and social reform like Martin Dooley.³²

³⁰Ibid., pp. 3-5.

³¹Ibid., pp. 125-31.

³²Ibid., p. 132.

Distinguishing characteristics credited to Rogers by Alworth center around the fact that the Oklahoman was being himself—natural in his stage personality and use of language—while others relied on the conscious use of an ungrammatical style for humor.³³

As cited by authors. Blair devoted an entire book to the study of horse sense philosophers.³⁴ Concerning Rogers, he pointed out that most of his fans in the 1930's believed that their hero had no earlier counterpart. Disproving this claim, Blair stated,

But anyone who looks back through the years at the scores of homespun philosophers who said things as Americans liked to have them said will see the resemblance between these writers of our own day [Will Rogers and Kin Hubbard, alias Abe Martin] and the men who went before them are much more important than the differences—that a good old pattern in humor is often better than a new one and the popular literary memory is short.³⁵

In his introduction to the "autobiography" of Will Rogers which he edited from the spoken and written words of the humorist, Donald Day also saw a pattern in American humor. He linked his subject to Sut Lovingood, Artemus Ward, Petroleum V. Nasby, Bill Arp, Mark Twain, Josh Billings, and Mr. Dooley. Although Day did not attempt an analysis of the style, he noted that Rogers fit the pattern of homespun philosophers. "Beginning in 1835 with Major Jack

³³Ibid., pp. 132-42.

³⁴Walter Blair, Horse Sense in American Humor from Benjamin Franklin to Ogden Nash (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1942).

³⁵Ibid., p. 256.

Downing until the death of Will Rogers," Day wrote, "America was not without its cracker-box philosopher who often possessed power approaching or exceeding that of the President." The major difference between Rogers and his earlier counterparts, according to Day, is that Rogers "was without a doubt first in the affections of his countrymen."³⁶ He pointed out that while the others "had been one person in private life and another in their character as a horse-sense humorist, Will just ambled out in whatever medium he chose as Will, one and inseparable in his person and in his character as a humorist." Day added, "His humor, his comments, his sarcasms were just as much a part of him as his big ears, his shuffling gait, his grin and his unruffled good nature. He was as real as a mule wiggling its ears on a hot summer day."³⁷

Weaknesses In the Literature

In biographies. Some of the biographies rushed into publication in the months immediately following the plane crash contain many factual errors. Beatty, for instance, based his book largely on material written by Hollywood press agents or questionable articles from movie magazines for which Will Rogers had usually refused to be interviewed. For this reason, Beatty did not have valid data on which to base his book.³⁸

³⁶Day, Autobiography, pp. xiv-xv.

³⁷Ibid.

³⁸Beatty, The Story of Will Rogers.

The biography of Will Rogers by P. J. O'Brien,³⁹ published within 60 days after Rogers' death, also contains many errors in fact. He did, however, include edited excerpts from Rogers' writings and the book is interesting and easy to read, which probably accounts for its being accepted by a publisher. Though mistakes can be found throughout the book, one example which concerns Rogers' writings will illustrate the seriousness of the errors from a historical point of view. Under the heading, "Literary Achievements," O'Brien wrote:

Will's first book, Rogerisms, was published in 1919 and the same year also appeared The Cowboy Philosopher on the Peace Conference and The Cowboy Philosopher on Prohibition. The following year Rogerisms—What We Laugh At was published⁴⁰

In reality, Rogers published only two books during this period, Roger-isms: The Cowboy Philosopher on Prohibition, and Roger-isms: The Cowboy Philosopher on The Peace Conference.

Although a more complete discussion of his books is reserved for a later section of this paper, it should be pointed out here that errors from the early biographer are still being accepted as fact. In the book The American Humor, Conscience of the Twentieth Century by Norris W. Yates (Iowa City: Iowa State Press, 1964), the Bibliography includes a listing for What We Laugh At (1920), a book that was never published.⁴¹ Because Yates cites O'Brien as one of his

³⁹O'Brien, Wit and Wisdom.

⁴⁰Ibid., p. 115.

⁴¹Yates, p. 371.

sources for information on Rogers, it is likely that he merely reprinted the error from O'Brien.

A telegram sent by Betty Rogers to V. V. McNitt, then president of the McNaught Syndicate, indicates her objection to the book:

ATTENTION JUST CALLED TO BOOK BY P. J. O'BRIAN [sic] STATING IT IS AUTHENTIC LIFE OF WILL ROGERS NO ONE IN FAMILY KNOW ANYTHING ABOUT PUBLICATION IT CONTAINS MATERIAL FROM WILL S WRITINGS COPYRIGHTED AND DISTRIBUTED BY YOUR SYNDICATE WITH STATEMENT ON PAGE TWELVE THAT THIS IS WITH YOUR PERMISSION HASTY EXAMINATION SHOWS NUMEROUS INACCURACIES AND SEVERAL PICTURES FOR WHOSE PUBLICATION I KNOW OF NO AUTHORITY IS PUBLICATION SYNDICATE MATERIAL WITH YOUR PERMISSION⁴²

McNitt's reply, dated October 2, 1935, read:

OBRIEN BOOK PUBLISHED WITHOUT AUTHORITY AND OTHER SUCH BIOGRAPHIES WILL APPEAR SOON NO WAY TO STOP THEM WE GAVE OBRIEN PERMISSION TO USE A FEW QUOTATIONS AND HE ABUSED PRIVILEGE SUCH BOOKS ARE IRRITATING BUT THEY WILL NOT HARM MAIN PRODUCTS HAVE WRITTEN REGARDING PROGRESS VARIOUS UNDERTAKINGS⁴³

Another "quickie" book soon followed as McNitt had predicted. Will Rogers: Wit and Wisdom by Jack Lait was published early in 1936. Containing little other than pictures and captions, the small, 124-page book (page size, trimmed, 4.5" X 6.2") is printed on heavy enamel paper and contains 32 half-tones that probably made the book worth the price to Rogers' fans. The dust jacket proclaims it as having "rare Rogersiana"—much material never before published. Except

⁴²Rogers Collection, Will Rogers Memorial, Claremore, Oklahoma. Future references to material in the Memorial files will be cited as "Rogers Collection."

⁴³Ibid.

for an introduction, which erroneously "reveals" that Rogers took the fatal trip because of a letter of criticism from a minister who objected to an "immoral" scene the actor played,⁴⁴ the book is made up almost entirely of the movie stills, vague captions, and a few of the better known quotations from Rogers' writings.

In edited works. In sheer volume of words published, those by Donald Day almost equal all of the others combined. Yet in most of the books, Day served as editor instead of author. The Autobiography, originally published in hard cover in 1949 and reprinted (unabridged) in 1963,⁴⁵ is composed almost entirely of Rogers "sayings." Day's short comments printed in italics furnish only the necessary links, permitting the humorist to tell his own story or, as Day titled the first chapter, "Letting Will Rogers Lasso Himself."⁴⁶

⁴⁴In Lait's sensationalized account (pp. x-xii), Rogers received the letter concerning a scene he played in the stage production of Ah! Wilderness, in which he lectured his "son" on the evils of drink and a "beer-hall siren." The minister, who was accompanied to the theater by his 14-year-old daughter, reportedly wrote that the dialogue brought "the blush of shame to the cheek of a Christian." He took his daughter by the hand and left, and he had "not been able to look her in the eyes since," Lait quoted from the letter. When Will read it, he was so upset that he told the manager of the production, "I'm through. I could never again say those lines—even to myself in the dark." So, with no immediate work awaiting him, Rogers decided to take the trip to Alaska. According to Lait, "That letter had cost him his life!" In fact, his 10-week acting stint in the Eugene O'Neill play was in the spring of 1934. He completed two movies and took numerous trips before the final flight.

⁴⁵Donald Day, ed., The Autobiography of Will Rogers (New York: Lancer Books, 1963). Citations in this paper are, however, taken from the hard cover edition cited earlier.

⁴⁶*Ibid.*, p. 11.

Publishers of the first edition claimed that 20,000 copies of the book had been sold before its release, and predicted sales would reach 100,000. In less than a year, it was in the number two spot on non-fiction best seller lists.⁴⁷ Those who reviewed the book concentrated on Rogers' writings or humor rather than offering any criticism of the editor,⁴⁸ indicating that Day kept himself in the background and did, seemingly, permit the cowboy to lasso himself.

Following this success, Day edited a second volume of Rogers' works three years later, selecting his comments on politics.⁴⁹ On the book jacket, the publication is described as containing "all of Will Rogers' sharpest, funniest barbs directed at that quadrennial clambake, the national Presidential nominating convention, and at politicians, campaigns, elections and speeches in general." Comments by Day are limited to short introductions for each chapter and a few bracketed notations of the place or occasion beside the date which begins each excerpt. In 1955, the editor used the same method to publish Sanity Is Where You Find It, a collection of Rogers' written and spoken comments covering "the history of the most critical period in American history as no other

⁴⁷Unidentified newspaper clipping, Scrapbook No. 23, Rogers Collection.

⁴⁸See "Simon-Pure Rogersana" by John T. Winterich, Saturday Review of Literature, October 15, 1949, p. 19; or "Autobiography of Will Rogers," by Don Guzman, Los Angeles Times, October 23, 1949.

⁴⁹Donald Day, ed., How We Elect Our Presidents or "Politics Is Applesauce" (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1952).

than Will Rogers could have written it."⁵⁰ Day is listed as co-author with Beth Day of the juvenile book, The Boy Roper, published in 1950,⁵¹ and he took full credit as author of the biography published in 1962. Although the biography is written in third person, the greater part of Will's life story is again told by the humorist himself in the form of direct and indirect quotations edited by Day. The editor does, however, include some material from other biographies, particularly the one by Mrs. Rogers.

Most anthologies as well as other books and articles published since 1949 that include quotations from Rogers are, in reality, quoting his writings or spoken statements as edited by Donald Day. If this paper is to have any value to later students of Rogers' writings, then, the major weaknesses found in Day's books must be emphasized.

Day can be given much credit for making the writings of the sage of Oklahoma available to the reading public; without the edited volumes it is unlikely that any person other than a scholar would discover or have access to most of the written humor. On the other hand, he has taken such liberties in editing the material that it is impossible to know whether the quotations are from Will's articles, books, lectures, letters, or radio speeches. Sometimes his "sayings" from more than one source and from different times are spliced into a single

⁵⁰Day (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company).

⁵¹Day (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company).

unit of writing with no documentation to indicate this fact.

Another weakness is found in Day's editing of certain articles and books by Rogers. Words, sentences, or even several pages may be omitted with no indication of such changes, resulting sometimes in a distortion of the meaning, not to mention the change in style.

In the excerpts from There's Not a Bathing Suit in Russia used in the "autobiography,"⁵² several such distortions can be found. For example, in the original, Rogers stated that he "wanted to tell them" that what Russia needed "was more of a sense of humor and less of a sense of revenge."⁵³ Day wrote, "Will told the official that what Russia needed was more of a sense of humor and less of a sense of revenge."⁵⁴ Note that he changed Will's "wanted to tell them" to the active "Will told the official," and he did not indicate that any part of the sentence was an exact quotation from Rogers. In the next paragraph which is allegedly a direct quotation, he cites the famous "I never met a man that I didnt like." In this book, however, Rogers had varied the statement, as he frequently did. Regretting his not being able to meet Trotsky, Rogers actually wrote, ". . . for I have never yet met a man that I didnt like." Rogers described "a Bird named Stalin" as "a great big two fisted fighting egg"; Day omitted "fighting" from the phrase.

⁵²Day, Autobiography, pp. 131-36.

⁵³Rogers, Bathing Suit, p. 90.

⁵⁴Italics are used throughout the book for Day's comments.

On a single page in the "autobiography,"⁵⁵ he spliced sentences and phrases from the original book found on pages 93, 94, 97, 80, 88, 100, 101, 102, and 103, in that order. Excerpts of the original from page 88 and page 100 are put together in a single paragraph. In a sentence from page 101 in the original, Day changed the words, punctuation and meaning. To illustrate, the original here is quoted first with Day's revision directly below:

If the Socialists worked as much as they talked, they
 If the Communists worked just as hard as they talked,
 would be the most prosperous style of Government in the
 they'd have the most prosperous style of government in
 World.⁵⁶
 the world.⁵⁷

Evidence of Day's splicing methods can be found in the files at the Memorial in Claremore. After completing his last book and on the urgent request of Mrs. Love, he donated the rough draft of his manuscript to the institution. The sheets filed there are a patchwork of clipped portions of articles and books or copies of speeches, stapled together at the edges, with the editor's notes, additions, and deletions in pencil.

It is quite likely that Day thought only of rendering the writings into books that could be easily read and enjoyed by the general public, and, being a professional writer, he

⁵⁵Day, Autobiography, p. 132.

⁵⁶Rogers, Bathing Suit, p. 101.

⁵⁷Day, Autobiography, 132.

obviously carried out the research and writing in order to realize a financial return for his efforts. There is no reason to believe that he meant his works to be used a source material for scholarly research or even as the primary publications from which other editors would draw "original" work by Rogers, yet this is what has happened. The Diary of America is a case in point.⁵⁸

In this chronicle of the "heartbeat" of America drawn from diaries of famous people, Rogers' comments on Congress, 1924-1935, are included to relate the history of that period. Terming him an "entertainer" with the greatest boxoffice attraction of his time, the editors quoted from Day's "autobiography" and made no mention of Rogers' published articles or books from which most of the material was taken.

Variations in the quotations as cited by Day compound the errors. An article dated February 24, 1932,⁵⁹ in the "autobiography" was changed to February 22; and the articles for October 29, 1926, and November 3, 1927,⁶⁰ in Day's book are designated for the year 1925 in the Diary of America. The final Rogers' quotation used in the section by Rogers is dated June 30, 1935, and quotes him as saying, "A fellow can't afford to die now with all this excitement going on." The editor's note immediately following noted, "Fifteen days later Will Rogers was killed in an airplane crash in Alaska." This

⁵⁸Josef and Dorothy Berger, eds., Diary of America (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1957), pp. 579-85.

⁵⁹Ibid., p. 583.

⁶⁰Ibid., p. 581.

would indicate that he died July 15, 1935; the fatal crash actually occurred a month later.

One error copied directly from Day⁶¹ concerns the fact that Will was one of seven children.⁶² Actually, he was the eighth child. In the biography of Rogers which he published later, Day gave the correct information, with no mention of the fact that this contradicted his earlier work.⁶³

Indicating that the editors of the Diary of America failed to study either the available data on Rogers or his works is the fact that they claim "Will's humor had a bite." As cited, the remarks do indeed have a bite, largely because Rogers' change-of-pace, final comments are omitted. For example, one item cited from Day with the dateline "New Orleans, January 29, 1935," has a "bite" if it is read as they quoted it: "In Louisiana they vote by electricity. Its a marvelous way to vote, but Huey [Long] runs the switchboard, so it dont matter which button the boys press, all the answers come out yes."⁶⁴ Will's softening conclusion which was not included, was, "But they are great folks."⁶⁵

A recent anthology, A Treasury of American Political Humor,⁶⁶ includes numerous excerpts of "Rogers'" writings. These, too, are reprinted from Day's editing of Rogers' works

⁶¹Day, Autobiography, p. 4.

⁶²Berger, p. 580.

⁶³Day, Biography, p. 7.

⁶⁴Berger, p. 584.

⁶⁵Day, Autobiography, pp. 365-66.

⁶⁶Leonard C. Lewin, ed., A Treasury of American Political Humor (New York: Dial Press, 1964), pp. 46; 112-18; 307-08; 430; 434.

instead of the original publications. The material is said to be "Reprinted by permission of Donald Day"⁶⁷ in spite of the fact that the Rogers Co., headed by Will Rogers, Jr., retains the copyrights. Other collections have followed the same practice. Homespun Humor⁶⁸ for instance includes 21 articles credited to Will Rogers, yet all but one are from Day's edited volumes.

The book of famous introductions, I Am Happy to Present, includes Rogers' introduction of Franklin D. Roosevelt at Olympic Stadium in Los Angeles and, again, credit is given to editor Day and the "autobiography."⁶⁹

Double editing. A condensation of the Autobiography appeared in the Reader's Digest selections for 1950;⁷⁰ and, although Day was given credit for the editing, the average reader would most likely believe it to be a condensation of an autobiography, written as such, by Rogers himself. Under a sketch of the smiling philosopher, the title of the selection appears as follows: "The Autobiography of / WILL ROGERS / a condensation from the book." Added two spaces below the title and in a different type face is the line, "Edited by Donald Day." No quotation marks or other device is used to

⁶⁷Ibid., p. 7.

⁶⁸Wallace Brockway and Bart Keith Winer, eds., Homespun Humor (New York: Simon and Schuster, Inc., 1958), pp. 766-84.

⁶⁹Guy R. Lyle and Kevin Guinagh, eds., I Am Happy to Present (New York: The H. W. Wilson Company, 1953), p. 197. See also "Acknowledgments," p. 260.

⁷⁰The Reader's Digest Condensed Books (Pleasantville, N.Y.: The Reader's Digest Association, Spring, 1950).

indicate that the "autobiography" is, in reality, an edited collection.⁷¹ Day might seem to be the person who "condensed" the book by Rogers.

Nor does the introduction to the condensed book clarify the matter. The reader is told,

This is Will Rogers' rollicking story of himself, written in his own words. As to grammar and spelling, Will once said "I want it to go as she lays, even if the guy that has to set up the type has to get drunk to do it."

"It is quite a book by quite a man," says John T. Winterich in The Saturday Review of Literature. It became a prominent best-seller soon after publication.⁷²

Note that the phrase "quite a man" refers to Rogers—not to Donald Day.

From these examples, it can be seen that Day's books—while they have made Rogers' "sayings" available to the reading public—have failed to meet the need for information that would lead to an understanding of Rogers as a writer and journalist. No matter how good his intentions, Day has managed to bring confusion and distortion that is being compounded through reprintings.

Rogers' request that his writings "go as she lays" can best be honored by shining the piercing light of research directly on the target—his own works, as they were published while he lived.

⁷¹Ibid., p. 365.

⁷²Ibid.

CHAPTER III

PRE-PUBLICATION YEARS

Tracing the steps which led to the phenomenal success of Will Rogers as a writer and journalist is not easy. His is no romantic, rags-to-riches-and-fame story of a struggling young writer who starved in the proverbial garret, pouring out his miseries on paper while he awaited recognition from a cold, cruel editor. Nor is there any evidence to show that he cherished any early ambitions to become a professional writer.

His resistance to schooling was almost as violent as the struggles of the dogies at the end of his lariat, and he wriggled out of six different schools before his father despaired of seeing young Will complete high school. He might have been picked as least-likely-to-succeed by his classmates and teachers. Yet in retrospect, signs of the factors which led to the success of Will Rogers as a writer and journalist can be clearly seen in the earliest writings extant—the letters penned by a lonely, homesick lad away at school.

Early Influences

After Rogers became famous, those who had known him as a boy recalled his high spirited clowning and his ability to

make people laugh, traits of the showman he was to become. Teachers and school administrators no doubt remembered him as a problem and a bad influence on the discipline of the school; more than once he was sent home and requested not to return. To his stern but indulgent father, he was a source of bewilderment.

Influence of the family. Rogers remembered little of his early childhood, according to his wife's story,¹ and his own writings bear this out. As pointed out in the introduction, he never knew that his full name included "Colonel," the title of William Penn Adair as well as the name. Of his Indian ancestry, Will listed his father as one-eighth Cherokee Indian and his mother as a "quarter-blood," but according to tribal rolls, Clem Rogers was one-quarter Cherokee and Will was nine-thirty-seconds Indian.²

Though he was casual about most details, Will knew the exact date of his birth, November 4, 1879. Yet he even once listed that fact incorrectly. Signing the "Matriculation Book" when he entered Kemper Military School, January 13, 1897, Will listed his birth date as "11-4-1880."³ No previous study mentions this discrepancy and no explanation for it has been discovered. It is very likely that here, too, he paid

¹Betty Rogers, p. 42.

²Croy, p. 3.

³In view of the difficulties Will had met in previous attempts at school and the criticisms he is sure to have encountered from his teachers and family, it is quite possible that he was self-conscious about his age. He was 18 at the time and entering what would now be called the sophomore year in high school.

scant attention to such details and simply made a mistake.

Contrary to Hollywood press agents who cast Will Rogers in the Horatio Alger mold,⁴ Willie's early years were spent in the midst of a busy, happy household in the big white house, one of the finest homes in the Cooweescoowee district of the Cherokee Nation. Both Clem and Mary Rogers felt a strong kinship with their Cherokee neighbors and they were familiarly called "Uncle Clem" and "Aunt Mary" by almost every one who knew them. Mary Schrimsher Rogers was described as having been "witty," "handsome," "gay," and a "charming hostess who usually brought some family home from church with her for Sunday dinner."⁵

Especially fond of music, Mrs. Rogers played the piano—the first such musical instrument in the district. Will enjoyed standing beside her as she played and would often join his mother in singing. When "company" came, the mother and son "would put on a little entertainment."⁶ In a radio speech on Mother's Day in 1930, the speaker said,

My own mother died when I was ten years old. My folks have told me that what little humor I have comes

⁴Beatty, for instance, dramatized the story when he wrote that ". . . Oklahoma will record that at Oolagah in a prairie hut was born a cowboy-lecturer-author-actor-radio star (who lists himself in Who's Who in America merely as 'humorist'), who was so beloved by his own people that they boomed him as a candidate for President [in 1932]." (pp. 23-25)

⁵Ellsworth Collings, The Old Home Ranch (Stillwater, Oklahoma: Redlands Press, 1964), p. 33.

⁶Croy, p. 17.

from her. I can't remember her humor but I can remember her love and understanding of me.⁷

The youngest child in the family and the only son after the death of his brother Robert, Willie was the center of attention. Though Clem Rogers thought the boy's mother and older sisters "made too much fuss over Willie," he "did exactly the same thing by giving him everything he wanted."⁸

Wealthy by standards of that period, the Rogers family had, nevertheless, experienced the hardships of illness and death; and they were drawn closer together by these tragedies.

According to Collings, "Family life was never a drab affair around the Rogers household," and it was "continuously enlivened by the vivaciousness of the girls, Sallie, Maud [e] and Mary [called "May" to avoid the confusion brought about by having the same name as her mother]."⁹ Mary Rogers would help prepare for the lively parties which featured square dancing and singing, then join in the fun.¹⁰

But their days were spent in typical ranch life activities, riding horseback among the cattle and calling on friends at nearby ranches. Early mornings "while the dew was still on the tall bluestem" Sallie or "one or more of the other girls could be seen often riding at full speed across the prairie to get The New York Times, a new magazine, or the latest issue

⁷[Will Rogers], Wit and Philosophy from the Radio Talks of America's Humorist, Will Rogers (New York: The Squibb Co., 1930), p. 21.

⁸Day, Biography, p. 15.

⁹Collings, p. 36.

¹⁰Ibid., p. 37.

of the Stock Reporter" from the nearest post office which was Cowala. Sallie recalled that her father had subscribed to the New York paper as far back as she could remember and "the family did much reading."¹¹ Thus Will Rogers was following his father's example when he became the world's best known reader of the papers.

Parental differences. Clem Rogers presents a figure of contrasts, judging from accounts given by those who knew him. Will's mixed feelings toward his father are apparent from his early letters written home and from the stories he later told of his father's rugged experiences.

Some writers describe the elder Rogers as a stern, hard-bitten, frontiersman who never understood his sensitive son. Kaho says that Clem referred to Willie as "that damned kid" when talking to friends, adding "but he meant it only as a doting father can mean such a phrase"¹² Others picture him as an indulgent father who could deny the youngster no luxury. There is evidence to support both theories, and it is probable that he fluctuated between these extremes.

From Will's own writings in later years it can be seen that he took great pride in the strong characteristics of his father, even though he was often concerned and ashamed that he himself was not able to "measure up." But it was the warm love and gay laughter of his mother that made young Willie's

¹¹Ibid., p. 38.

¹²Noel Kaho, The Will Rogers Country (Norman, Oklahoma: University of Oklahoma Press, 1941), p. 37.

life happy and carefree, until he was ten years old. Then Mary Rogers died of the "fever."¹³

"Will never quite get over his mother's death," Betty Rogers wrote, "He cried when he told me about it many years later."¹⁴

The fact that Will wrote little about his mother may be an indication that he was never able to express himself freely about the heartbreak he had experienced. Once he said, "My mother's name was Mary, and if your mother's name was Mary and she was an old-fashioned woman, you don't have to say much for her. Everybody knows already."¹⁵

School as an influence. Until Willie was eight years old, he had been allowed the freedom he craved—riding, roping and playing with children near his own age who later remembered him as the "biggest talker" but the "best liked" boy in any group. Then his family decided he was ready for school. He was sent to Chelsea to live with his sister Sallie and her husband, Tom McSpadden, near enough to ride his pony the three miles to school.

Writing in later years of his first experience with formal education, Will gave this humorous—if somewhat exaggerated—account:

Drumgoul was a little one-room log cabin built of post-oak logs The school stayed with such books

¹³Croy states that Mary Rogers died of "flux." (p. 26) Betty Rogers (p. 46) and Donald Day (Biography, p. 18) attribute her death to typhoid fever.

¹⁴Betty Rogers, p. 47.

¹⁵Ibid.

as Ray's Arithmetic and McGuffey's First and Second Readers

It was all Indian kids that went there, and I, being part Cherokee, had just enough white in me to make my honesty questionable. There must have been about thirty of us in that room that rode horseback or walked miles to get there. We got to running horse races and I had a little chestnut mare that was beating everything that any of them could ride to school and I was losing interest in what we were really there for.¹⁶

Perhaps his interest in horse racing instead of learning accounts for the fact that Willie spent only one year at Droomgule.¹⁷ In any case, he did not return after the first year.

The following year, Will was sent with his sisters May and Maude to the Cherokee Female Seminary at Tahlequah, but his boyish pranks—open rebellion against attending any school, but particularly a girls' school—brought him freedom again. After two weeks he was sent home.¹⁸ His freedom, however, was short lived. His father soon sent him to Harrell Institute at Muskogee, another girls' school, where he roomed with Robert Brewer, son of Rev. T. F. Brewer, the president of Harrell. It was during a vacation home from Harrell that his mother died. Willie was ten years old and had attended school parts of three terms in the two institutions. Describing his

¹⁶Betty Rogers, pp. 44-45.

¹⁷Croy states that Will spelled the name of his first school incorrectly, spelling it "Drumgoul" instead of the correct "Drumgoole." (p. 335) Collings and Betty Rogers both use Will's spelling in their books. Kaho adds to the mystery, spelling the school name Droomgule." Dr. Kaho, now a dentist in Claremore and accepted as an authority on history of the area, is probably the most reliable source. For this reason, his spelling will be used in future references in this paper.

¹⁸Croy, p. 25.

school days for a reporter in 1917, Rogers said:

I got as far as the fourth reader and every year, going to a new school, I would tell them I had finished the third, and they would start me in the fourth. I got to know the work by heart just from hearing the lessons said, and I got the reputation of being a bright boy. I guess I bogged down in that fourth grade for at least six years. I had education pretty well figured out—I could have a good time and still not learn anything.¹⁹

In September, 1892, two months before his thirteenth birthday, Willie was enrolled in Willie Halsell Institute (or "College") at Vinita, Okla., the youngest student attending.²⁰ This was the beginning of his longest stay at any school.

As far as can be discovered, the earliest piece of Will's writing extant is a letter written while he was a student at Halsell. From this point, it is possible to study the factors which influenced his writing from his own recorded words.

Early Letters

The first impression one gets from reading the letters Willie Rogers sent home to his family and friends is that the young cowboy was lonely and chafing at the confinement of his life in a girls' school. Clearly evident is the fact that he had not yet mastered the basic grammatical rules nor had he learned to spell correctly.

¹⁹Karl Schmidt, "The Philosopher with the Lariat," Everybody's Magazine, October, 1917, pp. 494-95.

²⁰Croy, p. 26.

Surprisingly, however, these shortcomings failed to inhibit the free-flowing, "folksy" style that was to become Rogers' trademark in later years—the talent for spontaneously putting his feelings into words. He exhibited an unusual freedom of expression in written form as he jumped from one idea to another, linking what he was thinking and doing to his reader's life, often in the same sentence. The letters also reveal his restless nature—the desire for freedom to act and experience life to its fullest—a trait that stayed with him all his life and eventually led him to his death as he followed the Siren's song toward adventure into the unknown North.

A portion of a letter to his friend, Charley McClellan, written when Willie was thirteen years old, illustrates his early attempts at written communication. Copied from the original on display at the Memorial, which is dated February 24, 1893, the errors in grammar and punctuation are Will's.

dear friend I am sitting here at school this morning and did not have nothing to do so I thought that I would write to you Have you and tom got shot guns or rifles or what kind about what time in Juene will you go home before school is out I guess I will stay up here till school is out about the 15 of June we get to go home then we will miss all of the round-ups wont we do you ever write to your girl at Talala she is a dandy little gal who is toms girl I am getting tired of this place I wont to go some place else . . well I must close I will hafta write to tom for²¹ my fifth reader class so I will close answer soon your friend Will Rogers.

²¹For here evidently means before.

Several things are revealed in the letter. First, of course, is the "illiterate" form of the writing. It should be noted, however, that Will was attending only his fourth year in school at this time, and the letter would likely compare in grammatical structure with the writing of many fourth graders in schools today.

The second impression gained by the reader is that Willie was homesick, lonely, restless, and bored. He begins by saying he has "nothing to do" in school and seems barely resigned to the fact that he must stay until school is out, missing the fun of "roundups" on the ranch. His restlessness—and almost a plea for freedom—is most evident when he says, "I am getting tired of this place I want to go someplace else."

In a second letter to his friend, Will demonstrates that he is already attempting persuasion through the written word when he says, ". . . you ought to come here to school this is a dandy place up here" In the same run-on sentence, however, he gives himself away when he adds, "I am getting in a hurry to get home it is getting spring and I don't like to go to school"

In the same letter, he begins firing questions like a reporter, but skipping from one idea to another as his nimble mind raced ahead of his awkward fingers. He asks his friend,

has any more of the boys got expelled since those other two did wasent Chick pain one of them I am going home the first of April and stay a week and hep brand calvs and colts is one of the boys sick down there I herd that they was all sick and most of them were going home well I am in school so I cant write you a long letter for I havent got time I will close answer soon from Willie R.

Here can be noted the curiosity and the concern for other people which became more pronounced throughout his writing career.

Again, in a letter dated March 28, 1893, Willie tried to convince Charlie that he should come to Halsell. Promising him plenty of excitement, he wrote, "you ought to be up here we have boys and girls all board here and we take them to church every Sunday night and have dances and do anything you want to I sure have lots of fun up here."²² In closing, he also gave evidence of his loneliness when he added, "answer soon I dont get a letter only once a month from your friend Willie P. Rogers."

Though no evidence can be found in Will's writings that still exist, the boy's longed-for summer at home turned out to be quite different than he had anticipated. On June 8, 1893, Clem Rogers had married Mary Bibbes, former housekeeper in the Rogers home and a woman half his age. Still heart-broken from the death of his mother three years earlier, young Willie had no advance warning of the event and suffered quite a shock when he learned of the marriage.²³

From this point on, Clem seems to have indulged his only son even more than before, perhaps to compensate for his impatience with the impetuous youth, and for bringing Willie unhappiness by remarrying. He bought Will one of the first bicycles seen in the area and in the summer of 1893 took the boy with him to deliver and sell a trainload of cattle in

²²Milsten, p. 23.

²³Croy, p. 30.

Chicago. It was in Chicago that the impressionable lad first encountered the excitement of a Wild West show and saw the glamorous Mexican roper, Vincente Oropeza. When as a closing stunt the roper wrote his name with the twirling rope, "he spelled out the future course of the boy's life."²⁴

Will returned to Halsell school, still a contrast of the lonely young cowboy who "talked to himself in the saddle"²⁵ and the school clown who loved to tease and play pranks. Little remained of the happy life he had known in the Rogers home. All three of his sisters were married and busy with families of their own. Clem was away much of the time on business or political affairs; then in August, 1898, Clem Rogers and his young wife moved to Claremore where he could look after the bank he had founded and his various other business interests.²⁶

Will continued his maverick behavior when he entered Scarritt college at Neosho, Mo. in 1895. It was his fifth school. This time his lariat, the constant companion which had caused him to get into trouble many times before, aided him in breaking out of the confining institution in the middle of his second year there. When an old mare and her colt wandered across the campus one day, he yielded to temptation and roped one of the animals. Frightened, the horses bolted, scattering people and tearing down a tennis net and a fence.²⁷

²⁴Day, Biography, p. 20.

²⁵Betty Rogers, p. 49.

²⁶Collings, p. 84.

²⁷Betty Rogers, p. 48.

An account of this final prank, a bill for five desks he had "whittled up," a report that he was at the bottom of his class in grades, and a request that he not return after the Christmas holidays were sent home to Clem Rogers.²⁸ But Will was not yet free of school as he had hoped. In January, 1897, his father sent him to Kemper Military School, hoping that "military discipline might succeed where the others had failed."²⁹

One letter written while Will was a student at Scarritt illustrates his writing during this period as well as his outlook on life.

Interested in girls from an early age—even if they only served as targets for his teasing and kidding—Will had begun to take the opposite sex more seriously by the time he was 16 or 17 years old. On one occasion while he was at Scarritt he asked a Neosho girl, "Little Maggie" Nay, to go with him to a party. She was eager to make the date, but because Will had been seen with some of the boys who often visited a local German family from whom they bought wine, the girl's mother would not permit her to go. Maggie wrote a note to Will, telling him that she "could not accept his invitation because he drank wine."³⁰

Will's penciled reply, dated November 27, 1896, is a contrast between bitterness at her refusal and soft-heartedness in his attempts to reassure her that she is not to blame for the situation. The words all right are used

²⁸Day, Biography, p. 21.

²⁹Ibid.

³⁰Croy, p. 32.

four times in the letter. First, he writes, "I did not think of getting such a note but it is all right." In the next sentence, he is sorry her mother will not let her go, but if that is the case "why it is all right."

Evidently Maggie's letter had said she heard Will was not returning after Christmas and either stated or implied that she should continue dating a boy named Marvin who seemed to be the steadier sort. Thus the disappointed young suitor began the second paragraph with an answer to the charge:

And as far as me not coming back after Xmas I will be here but then that is all right. I know how it is when you don't want to go with a boy. A girl has to make up a good excuse to tell him, so you see that is the case with you. You want to make things as smooth as possible, so that is all right. . . .³¹

The sardonic letter also has undertones that plead for understanding from the boy who had found little acceptance or understanding since his mother's death. He referred to himself as a "wild and bad boy" and does not blame her for having nothing to do "with a drunkard as I am." [The emphasis is Will's own.] He continued, "I was a fool for trying to go with you any way. I might have known you would not have gone with me." And he adds, "I am to far below you to write to you. . . ."

As he started to close the letter, he wrote, "Well, I suppose you have heard enough of the Drunkard that they call Will Rogers. . . ." But he seemed unable to stop on such a sour note. He added another short paragraph. "But don't

³¹Letter cited in Croy, pp. 32-33.

think that I am mad at you in the least and I like you more than I ever did before, for the truth never hurts me." He signed the letter "Your would like to be Sweetheart."³²

Even though it is exaggerated by youth and, perhaps, young love, the two extremes of Will's personality found throughout his life are clearly outlined here.

Criticism hurt him to the quick and his natural inclination must have been to lash out at the one who had humiliated him. Yet he could never purposely hurt another person. This left him with two choices. He could "clown" his way out, or he could shift the blame to himself. If he chose the latter, he could reveal his faults or foibles, make a frank confession of his weaknesses, and still remain friends with the person who had hurt him. In his personal writings this was the technique he most often chose.

Even in later years after he had gained international fame and financial success, Rogers retained these traits to a degree. Criticism hurt him deeply and he seems to have been able to sympathize—in some cases to identify—with the "underdog." He would enter a verbal battle and threaten satirical attack, only to soften the blows with humble and sincere forgiveness in his final remarks.

Influence of Military School

Rebellious and confused, a disappointment to his rugged pioneer father, an incorrigible student in the eyes of his

³²Ibid.

teachers, and "a wild Indian boy" not fit to date the girl he wanted for a "Sweetheart," William was sent off to a military school where, his father hoped, the strict discipline might make something out of "that damned kid."

During the nearly two years he spent at the sixth and last school he attended, the restless writer probably continued to correspond with his friends and family. No such writings have been found. But because Will referred to the military school in later writings it is necessary to include a brief sketch of his life at Kemper.

Providing entertainment more than factual information, as he frequently did when he spoke of his personal life, Will described his last experience with formal education in a speech he made in Chickasha in 1931 when he was there on tour to raise funds for drought sufferers:

My old daddy—Uncle Clem, they called him—then sent me to a military school at Boonville, Mo., Kemper, thinking the disgrace might tame me. Me and Ben Johnson, down at Chickasha, Oklahoma, were buddies together at Kemper, just a couple of poor ornery Indian boys. But the fact is we were sent to the Missouri State Reformatory which is located near the same town and through somebody's mistake, they enrolled us at Kemper Military Academy instead. Col. Johnson—the head man—didn't run Kemper in accordance with the standards I thought befitting my growing intellect. I was spending my third year in the fourth grade and wasn't being appreciated, so I not only left them flat during a dark night, but quit the entire school business for life.³³

Will was an erratic student and cared little for grades, according to his classmates' recollections. Some remembered him as "notoriously witty, continually setting his crowd or

³³Croy, p. 338.

his table or the class in an uproar."³⁴ With no effort, he was funny to his classmates, even in elocution or declamation where he made his best grades. To the utter dismay of his Princeton-trained elocution teacher and the delight of the cadets, Will upset the Saturday declamation sessions when he added his own brand of humor to the solemn orations. On many occasions, one classmate later recalled, Will would "'clown' his way through them, bring down the house and get the highest grade."³⁵

Describing his military days after he became famous, Rogers said, "I spent two years at Kemper, one in the guard house and one in the fourth grade." He was exaggerating, of course, but not too much. By the spring of 1898 he was threatened with expulsion from the demerits he had accumulated. Discouraged with school and lured by the warm sunshine outside the classroom window, Will became more and more restless.

Payne later gave a personal description of his friend Will's last days in school:

He wanted to light a shuck for any ol' place just so it wasn't school. But getting his hands on the money—that was a considerable problem. He didn't write his father, because he knew his father wouldn't send it. So he dispatched letters to two of his sisters tellin' them he was in need of money, but not mentionin' what he was goin' to use it for. He didn't tell the sisters he was writing to both of them; he made each letter seem like the only one. The sisters each sent him ten dollars and he hopped a train for Texas. Sometimes that statement has been glossed over by sayin' he decided to try his hand at ranchin', but the facts are he just plain vamoosed. He departed the halls of learnin' toward the end of his junior year, which

³⁴Hitch, p. 11.

³⁵Ibid., p. 8.

would be about parallel to now being a junior in high school. When he went, about half our fun went, too.³⁶

Ashamed to face his father and admit another failure, Will had used his persuasiveness to get enough money from his sisters to make the break.

Freed from the ties of family and school, Will kept on the move—to the Ewing ranch near Higgins, Tex., where he was hired to help with a cattle drive into Kansas; to Amarillo four months later, where he tried to sign up for Colonel Theodore Roosevelt's Rough Riders and was turned down;³⁷ into Western Kansas again on another cattle drive, then back to Higgins.

By the time the drifter tired of his cowboy life and returned home, Clem Rogers was comfortably settled in Claremore with his young wife, a wealthy citizen more interested in business and politics than ranching. Deciding to make another attempt to tame his maverick son, he turned over the management of the Rogers ranch to him.³⁸ For awhile the boy took an interest in the ranch, but seeing his friends and having fun were much more exciting at the time. He went to "every dance for miles around," sang tenor in a quartet, raced horses, joined round-ups, practiced his roping skills, and on July 4, 1889, won first money in a steer roping contest at Claremore.³⁹

³⁶Croy, p. 43.

³⁷Betty Rogers, p. 55.

³⁸Day, Biography, pp. 28-29. ³⁹Ibid., p. 30.

First Influence of Betty Blake

A new influence entered the life of the Cherokee cowboy when twenty-year-old Betty Blake came to Oolagah to visit her sister, wife of Will Marshall, the station agent there. Counted "good looking," vivacious, full of fun, and claiming plenty of suitors back home in Rogers, Ark.,⁴⁰ the visitor was mildly curious when she heard of Will Rogers, the "wildest boy in the Valley of the Verdigris; and the wealthiest; and the best liked; and (sometimes) the shyest."⁴¹ She first saw him when he climbed off the train on his return from a trip to Kansas City, but Will was too shy to speak to the stranger in town.

It was Kate Ellis, his girl friend when her family permitted the wild cowboy to date her, who brought them together. They were both guests at a supper and taffy pull in the Ellis quarters in the hotel they owned in Oolagah. When Will discovered their mutual interest in music, he soon lost his shyness, Betty recounted later. According to her story, however, they "simply became very good friends" during her stay. She returned to her home just before Christmas, 1899. Fortunately, however, Betty considered the friendship significant enough to preserve some of the letters Will sent after her.

One might expect a young man who gave every indication of hating school to be somewhat reluctant to write letters.

⁴⁰Croy, pp. 66-67.

⁴¹Ibid., p. 70.

Yet Betty Blake had only been home a short while when Will wrote her the first letter.⁴²

Varying in tone from apologetic shyness to near bragging, this letter shows the same mercurial moods as those cited earlier. He expects that Betty will be "madly surprised" at receiving the letter, adding, "But never the less I could not resist the temptation and I hope if you cannot do me the great favor of droping me a few lines you will at least excuse me for this for I cant help it." After this hat-in-hand beginning, he bragged of the "great times" he was having: "Have not been at home three nights in a month. Take in every Ball in the Territory and everything else I hear of."

Changing his tone to humbleness, he asked her to send him some "kodak" pictures of herself and promised that if she would return to the Territory he would treat her to "every kind of amusement on the face of God's Footpiece." He pleaded, "Hoping you will take pity on this poor heart broken Cow Pealer and haveing him rejoiceing over these ball prairies on receipt of a few words from you."

His persuasive method had the desired result. After waiting the "proper lapse of time" expected of a "genteel young lady of Arkansas," Betty sent him a reply.⁴³

In the earlier letter to "Little Maggie," Will over-emphasized the very things that disturbed him most. He repeatedly told her everything was "all right"; but quite

⁴²Letter from Will Rogers to Betty Blake, Rogers Collection.

⁴³Betty Rogers, p. 19.

obviously, the fact that she had rejected his invitation was "all wrong," regardless of the reason. He had also emphasized, through repetition and underlining, the word drunkard, which according to her later testimony was a gross exaggeration.⁴⁴ He defiantly accepted the title, showing his hurt feelings by the attention he gave to the charge.

In his first letter to Betty, Will showed concern with the cultural differences between a "genteel young lady of Arkansas" and an Indian cowboy. He referred to her visit among the "wild tribe," calling himself one of the "wooly Cowboys," a "Cow pealer" and an "Injun Cowboy." His talent for "poking fun" at himself can be clearly seen when he asked for her picture, then added, "Now isn't that a 'mammoth inducement for you' to have your picture in a lovely 'Indian Wigwam.'"

In addition to the conflicts already noted in his early life—the differences between his mother and father and the ambitions they had for their son, the contrast of his life before and after his mother's death, and his sensitivity contrasted with his rugged outdoor exploits—another can be seen. He was more than one-quarter Indian and he was a cowboy—both oddities in the outside world he had encountered in his travels; and at this time it must have worried him that the visitor from Arkansas would also think him an oddity.

⁴⁴In a letter to Homer Croy, Mrs. Garland ("Little Maggie") Price asked him to ". . . make it plain to your readers that Will Rogers didn't drink. I wouldn't create that impression for the world." (Croy, p. 336)

Will's family was one of the most highly respected in the entire Territory and there is no evidence that his Indian blood caused the boy any discomfort in his early years. In fact, just the reverse was true, judging from the comment about Droomgule—"It was all Indian kids that went there, and I, being part Cherokee, had just enough white in me to make my honesty questionable."⁴⁵ Only as he began to have contacts outside the Territory did he view his Indian heritage as making him "different."

According to recollections by his classmates from Kemper, he only "lost his equanimity" three times while he was there; on two of these occasions he was defending the Indian. Once when a boy referred to a "fullblood" as a "thoroughbred," "Will's voice rose to a high pitch in resentment" as he explained the term. He lost his temper the second time when a classmate remarked that Indians and Negroes were "very much alike."⁴⁶

It is very likely that he learned to be defensive about his Indian ancestors and his life in the Territory during the time he attended Scarritt and Kemper. Both schools were in Missouri and numbered few Indians or cowboys on their rolls. Thus the pride that he had developed in his early environment was challenged.

In any case, he appears to have been flaunting this pride in the letter to Betty—an "outsider"—even while he pleaded

⁴⁵Betty Rogers, p. 45.

⁴⁶Hitch, pp. 16-17.

for her acceptance. The letter was signed, "your True friend and / Injun Cowboy / W. P. Rogers / Oolagah / I T."

Betty described his second letter, dated March 14, 1900, as her first "love letter" from Will. Indeed, he did pour out his heart.⁴⁷ Delighted with her "sweet letter," Will wrote, "I thought you had forgotten your Cowboy (for I am yours as far as I am concerned)." He added, "I know that I cant expect to be your sweetheart for I am not 'smoothe' like the boys you have for sweethearts." With the optimistic-pessimistic vacillation again, he asked permission to visit her, adding, "but I know it would be a slam on your Society career to have it known that you even knew an ignorant Indian Cowboy."

In the biography of her late husband, Betty Rogers related that her friends at home teased her about her "Wild West Indian cowboy," and Will knew about it. She continued,

It irked Will to know that my friends were teasing me about him. He was very proud of his Indian blood—as he continued to be all his life—but he was very sensitive and when he was around my friends he was timid in asking me to go out with him.⁴⁸

The couple saw each other only twice in the next two years, once when Will was appearing with Colonel Zach Mulhall in a Wild West show near her home and again at a street fair in Ft. Smith, Ark. Then his restless urge to see new places started him on a trip around the world.

⁴⁷Day, Biography, p. 37.

⁴⁸Betty Rogers, p. 21.

Influence of Travel

It was just after the first of the year, 1902, that Will's wanderlust led him away from home again. Sale of cattle from the ranch netted him more than \$2000 and with his "stake" Will financed a trip to South America for himself and his friend Dick Paris.⁴⁹ As could be expected, Rogers turned these experiences into humor when he told a reporter about them later:

Well, when a fellow ain't got much mind it don't take him long to make it up, so I sold my little bunch of cattle at home which my father had given me, and lit out for South America.

I went down to New Orleans, but they said, "No boat here; you must go to New York!" So I got to New York. There they told me, "This year's boat for Buenos Aires has just left; but you go to England, as they appreciate the South American trade, and have regular boats running there."

Well, I broke all records for seasickness. I just lasted long enough to envy the Statue of Liberty for being in permanent position and not having to rise and fall with the tide

We found we had eleven days in England, so we went up to take in London. We spent two of those eleven days trying to get into Piccadilly Circus, as it seemed to be the best advertised show in town. Later we found out it was part of a street.⁵⁰

This oral account narrated by the professional humorist might seem to be contrived or "faked" humor. But a letter he wrote home to his family from Southhampton, England, on April 13, 1902, has many of the same elements of style—the folksy, newsy tone—that was found in his later writings and is evidence of his unconscious ability to write humorously.

⁴⁹Ibid., p. 63.

⁵⁰George Martin, "The Wit of Will Rogers," The American Magazine, November, 1919, p. 112.

Describing London as preparations were being made for the coronation, he wrote:

Well, Dick and I have visited London and find it the biggest case of a town it has ever been my misfortune to find. We visited the House of Parliament where all the great doings of state are carried on, also Buckingham Palace where the King and Queen will reside during the "big blowout." Then we went to Westminster Abbey where all the great men of England have monuments erected to their memories, and dumb as I am I felt a curious sort of sensation creep over me while looking at it although I knew very few of the men personally.⁵¹

The familiar "Well" that begins so many of his sentences; the personalized description of the sights he saw, interlaced with subtle humor; the use of homespun terms for the most formal events ("big blowout" instead of "coronation"); and the subtle quip at the end—all typical of the Rogers' style—are included in the letter some 15 years before he began writing professionally. Certainly there is no "fakery" here; he was merely expressing his candid thoughts.

He described King Edward's monument as "the one that opens your eyelashes most" and added that "they are going to stop the Thames to make room for the people" attending the coronation. Except for the final paragraph, the entire letter was given to describing the city through his personal interpretation and evaluation of what he saw.

In the last paragraph, he reverted to the dutiful son and brother, telling where his next stops would be and adding "so don't be uneasy."

⁵¹Milsten, pp. 49-50.

Will was seasick the entire 23 days on the boat to Buenos Aires. He and his friend landed there the first week in May and a short time later he wrote another letter home, this one with more information of interest to his father. Again, he had looked over the surroundings and wrote the letter in the form of a report.

Explaining the difference in ranching methods as compared with Oklahoma, he wrote:

The work and cattle business here is nothing like it is at home. The head man leave most of the work to peons or natives, who get about \$5 a month in our money and have to live like dogs. . . .

There are few Americans handling cattle here. It is all English. And as for American cowboys, I guess we are the only ones here. My saddle and all have been a big show ever since they seen it. As for roping, riding or any old thing, they can't teach the "punchers" in America anything. . . . Here is a bit of advice for my old comrades: "Just stay where you are, boys."⁵²

After about five months, Dick Paris, never too enthusiastic about the trip, became homesick, and Will gave him most of the money he had left for a ticket home. He also spent some of his dwindling fund on presents to send home for his father and sisters.⁵³ Thus, by the end of June, 1902, Will was among strangers in a foreign country and nearly without funds. Too proud to ask his father openly for more money, the traveler wrote a letter that showed none of his usual enthusiasm. And he gave his "Dear Papa" every opportunity to offer to include money with a reply. Dated June 17, 1902, he wrote, in part, "I don't think there is any use of me staying here and I may start home any time. . . . Write and tell me

⁵²Betty Rogers, pp. 64-65.

⁵³Ibid., p. 65.

all the news. I may not be here to get the letter, but then I might."⁵⁴

Subtly reminding Clem Rogers that he could easily spare the money to bring his prodigal son home, Will added, "I guess you are in the new hotel and have your fine barn and all done by now." Leaving little doubt that he was homesick (and perhaps hoping his father would believe that this time he was ready to "settle down"), he continued, "Tell the boys to stay at home, for that is the best place in the land for them. You don't know how good your country is until you get away from it." Then he emphasized this same thought by adding, "You tell all those boys to stay right there."⁵⁵

As though pleading with his father for acceptance and understanding—as well as money—he concluded the letter by promising "I will write more often from now on. I may see you soon though. I will close with all my love to a dear father. I am your loving son, 'Willie.'" But even the use of his childhood nickname brought no results. Out of money, sleeping wherever he could, Will roped mules and did other odd jobs until offered a chance to tend stock on a cattle boat to South Africa.

In the letter dated July 31, 1902, and addressed to "My dear father:"—quite formal as compared with the "Dear Papa"⁵⁶ with which he began the previous letter—Will

⁵⁴Ibid., p. 66.

⁵⁵Ibid.

⁵⁶Two handwritten letters sent from Will to his father during the South American trip were found in the L.M. "Tex" Edmunds Collection in Ft. Worth. Each began with "My Dear

acknowledged receipt of a letter and "papers" from his father. Though he made no direct reference to the contents of that letter from Clem Rogers, from his protests in the reply one can assume that the boy had again been taken to task for his irresponsible behavior and carelessness with money. At one point in the letter, for instance, Will countered with

I have spent a world of money in my time and I am satisfied, as someone else has got the good of it. It has not been all on myself and if you will only give me credit for just spending my own, as I think I have, I will be as happy as if I had a million.

Continuing the attempt to explain his point of view, and perhaps to rationalize his behavior, he wrote:

All that worries me is people there all say—"Oh, he is no account, he blows in all of his father's money." and all that kind of stuff, which is not so.

I cannot help it because my nature is not like other people, and I don't want you all to think I am no good because I don't keep my money. I have less than lots of you, and I daresay I enjoy life better than any of you, and that is my policy. . . .⁵⁷

In spite of the tone of defiance evoked by criticism of one of his weaknesses, he became the dutiful son again in the final paragraph, telling his father, "Don't think about me, for I am the happiest one in the lot, and will get along O.K. . . . With all my love to a loving father. Willie."

Reading that the British government was shipping stock to South Africa, Will reported later that he had "shipped as one of about one hundred and fifty Dago valets to a troop of

Papa." The letters were postmarked May 1, 1902, Montevideo, Uruguay; and May 7, 1902, Buenos Aires, ARSA.

⁵⁷Betty Rogers, pp. 68-69.

South American cows," and when he was not busy "feeding these several hundred 'Armour's delights'" he had time for his usual seasickness. At the end of "this perfumed luxury jaunt" of 32 days, he discovered he would not be permitted to land unless he had "five hundred bucks," which Will said he was as near to having "as our friend Bryan is to the White House." But he managed to get ashore anyway, then "drifted up around Ladysmith and got a job breaking horses for the British army, as the American horses caused more casualties to the English than the Boers did."⁵⁸

Again he wrote home to his father, describing his adventures in terms he knew Clem Rogers would understand; he had acquired already the knack of "knowing his audience" that later was developed into an art. In the letter from Durban, Natal, South Africa, dated November 3, 1902, the wanderer reported on his activities as well as conditions at the end of the Boer war:

They drive a world of stock from here as this is where it is landed from other places, for they are trying to restore the country after the war. It costs too much to ship them and they hire one white man and a lot of niggers. They often drive to Pretoria close to 1,000 miles Cattle are up some. The little cattle with the big hump on their shoulders all come from an island a few hundred miles off the coast, and sell never less than \$75 each, while good cows will bring \$150 to \$200. I have seen common old milk cows sell at auction for \$350. Everything is high here, wages are fairly good, as you seldom work for less than \$2 per day, and

⁵⁸The direct quotes here are also from the American article. It should be noted that Day obviously used this same article to make up most of the first 50 pages of the "autobiography"; he failed, however, to identify it as such and took great liberty in changing the wording of the quoted material.

no one makes any money as you board yourself. Bricklayers, carpenters, etc., get from \$7 to \$8 a day. It is a ruined country for there are hundreds of men out of work. I will close hoping to hear from you soon. . . . From your loving son, Willie Rogers.⁵⁹

Several things can be noted from this letter. As was pointed out earlier, Will knew his audience, his father in this case, and he recognized that the price of cattle, wages paid, and general economic conditions would be of interest to him. Furthermore, even though it is a personal letter, young Rogers does not limit the contents to his own experiences. He reports facts objectively, then adds his editorial comments. In this writing as in later works, the reader is always aware that Will is present in such accounts and that he is interpreting his environment. He began by telling about the cattle drive he planned to make, switched to a factual report, and then added his editorial comment: "It is a ruined country for there are hundreds of men out of work."

But it is his interpretation—based on facts unearthed by his curious mind and then thoughtfully analyzed—that makes the writing more significant than a simple day-by-day account such as another boy might write to his father half way around the world.

At another time he wrote the "Home Folks" about the aftermath of the war, again alternating between personalized reporting and editorializing:

It is a very pathetic sight to see the Boer families returning to their former homes and finding some all

torn down and others occupied by the English. The Boers are as fine lot of people as one could wish to see, peaceful, law abiding and friendly to all. They speak English as well as Dutch.⁶⁰

Again he reported, "You get good pay here but it costs more to live than at home, so you are none ahead." In the very next sentence, he added a weather report—"it is very hot here now and by Christmas will be at its hottest."

In the letter to his father, Will made light of the fact that he had lost his baggage and the treasured saddle he had kept throughout his travels. To his older sisters, however, he gave a fuller account and included a bit of the "clowning" they had come to expect from their brother.⁶¹

Explaining that no checking system existed on the railways, he said it was "'catch as catch can' and I was caught for my roll." All he had left was a small "grip." He described the contents for the amusement of his sisters.

I have just investigated the contents of the small bag and find that it contains thirteen collars, one shirt—all soiled—one unmarried sock and a clothes brush. . . . This grip also contained old letters and programs of every theater from New York and London down to a magic lantern show in Zululand. I have gone to work brushing up the soiled linen, reading over the theater bills and

⁶⁰The letter was written at Durban and dated November 17, 1902. Most of the letters Will wrote to his sisters were lost when the home of Sallie Rogers McSpadden burned. Several, however, had been published in the Claremore Progress or the Chelsea Reporter and are now filed in the Rogers Collection. The one cited here appeared in the Reporter, January 2, 1903. It should be noted that there are fewer grammatical errors in the letters that were published, indicating that the works were carefully edited.

⁶¹Letter from Will to "Home Folks," written from Durban, Natal, South Africa, dated November 17, 1902 (Chelsea Reporter, January 2, 1903).

thinking what a discouraging scene I have just passed through.

I will close by wishing you a happy Christmas and a cloudy Ground Hog Day. As ever, Will P. Rogers

Although he seemed to lack direction as he drifted from place to place and job to job, 23-year-old Will P. Rogers was actually rehearsing for what was to become an important part of his life's work—traveling, learning from the people he met, and reporting his findings and interpretations for the "home folks." His interest in the theater can be seen from the collection of show bills in his "grip." The next significant event in South Africa solidified that interest.

In Johannesburg in December, 1902, Will visited Texas Jack's Wild West Show. He approached the American owner for a job and was hired. Soon Will discovered he could earn money through his skill with the rope. In his next letter to his sister Sallie, he proudly told her of being hired to do all the roping in the show and of his being billed as "The Cherokee Kid." Modestly, he added, "I have learned quite a bit about fancy roping and it takes fine over here where they know nothing whatsoever about roping."⁶²

Reporting again, Will described the show:

The play is partly a circus act and then they play blood-curdling scenes of western life in America, showing the Indians and robbers. I was an Indian but I screamed so loud that I liked to scared all the people out of the tent. Then we were riders of bucking bronchos, roping and fancy shooting and little of everything.

The excitement for which he had searched throughout his travels Will found—for a time at least—in the traveling

⁶²Letter copied in Milsten, pp. 52-53.

Wild West show. Here he could use his talents for roping and handling horses, and he could make an audience laugh with his clowning. Eventually he had a chance to sing with the group, again earning money for doing something he had enjoyed all his life, even though he never learned to sing well. And by this time he knew that he also had a reading audience through the letters which were reprinted in the papers back in Indian Territory.

From Transvaal, he wrote his "dear sisters and home folks" that he was "getting on fine with the show." Texas Jack "is making loads of money" Will reported, "and is enlarging his show all the time." A band had been added and Will asked his sisters to send him some new "coon songs" plus a few "sentimental songs" because the latter "will take well over here."⁶³ He had begun to develop the ability to purposefully analyze an audience to see what would "take well," a technique he continued to refine throughout his life.

Announcing that he planned to stay with the circus only until it reached Capetown—two or three months—Will added, "I surely do want to see all of you good and plenty about now."⁶⁴

The Cherokee Kid spent nearly a year with the show, learning a great deal about showmanship from Texas Jack.

⁶³Letter from Will to his sisters from South Africa, Sanderton, Transvaal, December 28, 1902, Rogers Collection.

⁶⁴Ibid.

Recounting his experiences in Africa for the American reporter in 1919, the cowboy-comedian said he traveled with the circus in which "for fourteen months, through all of South Rhodesia to Cape Town, the 'Cherokee Kid' with about half a dozen little rope tricks, astonished the natives." After that, Rogers said, "I began to feel a longing for seasickness, so I started in alphabetically and found Australia."

He spent six months with Wirth Brothers' circus, appearing throughout Australia and New Zealand, and earning enough "to ship for 'Frisco third class.'" Joking about his financial plight, Will told the reporter, "So you see I started out first class, and had been second, third, and no class at all."⁶⁵

Influence of Show Business

Arriving home early in 1904, after being gone for nearly three years, Will was not yet ready to give up his rambling and roping, and he joined the Zack Mulhall family in a Wild West show at the St. Louis Fair in 1904.

He continued to work on his skill with the rope and renewed an earlier friendship with the famous cowgirl, Lucille Mulhall, Zack's daughter. It was also in St. Louis that he met Betty Blake again. Although the young lady still had "a wide streak of conventionality" and was horrified by the red velvet, Mexican-Rope-Artist suit he wore in the show, Betty recalled later that she had dinner with Will and they attended a concert by John McCormack. Thus began another

⁶⁵Martin, p. 106.

episode in their courtship which was continued primarily by correspondence for four more years.⁶⁶

Following a suggestion given him by Texas Jack, Will tried out his roping act in vaudeville in St. Louis and Chicago after the St. Louis show closed, then worked out a routine in which he roped a horse on stage. With his new act perfected, he rejoined the Mulhalls for a Wild West Show and made his New York debut with the troupe in Madison Square Garden, April 27, 1905.

During the 10 years following his opening in New York, Will Rogers climbed steadily, reaching toward the bright gleam of top billing in the world of show business. Although he aimed toward becoming the best trick roper in the country, Will became a "well-established vaudeville performer" in a little more than a year.⁶⁷

His climb took him to Hammerstein's Paradise Roof at \$125 a week; to the Winter Garden in Berlin in the spring of 1906 with his horse and rider; back to London with his own troupe; and then solid booking on the vaudeville circuit across America.

A complete story of Will's vaudeville days would be packed with excitement and adventure. For this study, however, these years are a part of the prelude to publication. Will left few letters and notes to demonstrate his talent

⁶⁶Betty Rogers, pp. 82-84.

⁶⁷Ibid., pp. 86-94.

as a writer during his rise in show business.

Expression of Stronger Feelings

Will's courtship of Betty had continued through correspondence and in person on the few occasions when he came home for a visit. Although she admitted later the couple "cared for each other" during these years, Betty "simply could not see a life of trouping the country in vaudeville" and Will "had no intention of giving up his stage career and settling down at home."⁶⁸ For Christmas in 1906 he sent her a handkerchief he had bought in South America and carried with him since that time. He was following instructions from the "old Indian lady" he had bought it from—to save it for his wife when he married, he explained to Betty. In the note which accompanied the gift, Will continued,

I have kept it, carried it all through Africa at times when I didn't have a cent and was actually hungry, then to Australia, then back home,—and on all my travels I did intend always to do as the old woman said, but I guess there's nothing doing for me. I will just give it to you as I kinda prize it. And you might do the same.⁶⁹

If this letter were examined with no other information about the writer, it might seem to be a melodramatic plea for sympathy—or pure "fakery" as a few of his critics termed his homespun humor in later years. Yet Betty claimed that

⁶⁸Betty Rogers, p. 97. A postal card from Betty Blake addressed to "Old Bill Rogers" at Claremore, I.T. and post-marked August 22, 1906, is evidence that their relationship was still on a "kidding" basis. The card is in the Edmunds Collection.

⁶⁹Ibid., pp. 97-98.

his "theatrical success hadn't changed him a bit." When she was a house guest of his sister during one of his visits home, Will was so bashful he saw her only when they were in groups. At parties "he never looked in my direction or singled me out," she wrote. "He never came around where I was unless we were playing and singing at the piano."⁷⁰ Although such actions might be expected of a teenager experiencing "puppy love," they must have seemed strange indeed for a man past his middle twenties.

Baffled at his elusive behavior as compared with his ardent letters, the young lady went home. To her complete surprise, a week later he stopped in Arkansas to see her on his way back to New York, wanting to marry her at once.⁷¹ Again she refused.

Paradoxically, the rejected suitor who was to become known throughout the world as a "talker" was able to express his emotions much more strongly in writing than in person. He would become sarcastic, almost to the point of bitterness, before he did a complete reversal and added his tender remarks. When descriptions by those who knew the mild-mannered, mischievous young man are compared with the personality evident in parts of his letters, it is difficult to believe a single individual is responsible for such diverse feelings. Excerpts from his letters to Betty will demonstrate the contradiction.

⁷⁰Ibid., p. 95-96.

⁷¹Ibid.

From Paris in 1906 he wrote that he lived in "one of the swellest hotels where Champagne flows like water" and that the "wide open" city had "no laws especially of morality." He described Berlin as "wide open all night" and told of parties that kept him out "till 8 or 9 or 10 in the morning." Possibly hoping to make her jealous, he bragged, "There is quite a bunch of English girls and a few of us boys, and I didn't think it was possible to go such a clip. N.Y. sleeps more in one night than Berlin in a week."⁷²

Then, in 1907 after his proposal had been refused again, Will dated another girl and told Betty about it. The letter she wrote him cannot be found, but his reply shows that he was hurt and angry at her reaction to his honesty. First he admitted, "I ain't treating you right and I know it but I will later on."⁷³ Then he lashed out:

When you still refused me last spring—we both will regret that— for we could of been happy and a thousand times more prosperous.

Still you was so wise you couldent be showed. I have not been worth a dam since, and you are the direct cause of it. I don't blame you, only I wish you had not been so bullheaded.

Again, however, he concluded with "I love you more than anything."⁷⁴

When Betty hinted that she had a dear friend who was a "promising lawyer," Will blazed back, "So you snared you a promising lawyer. What all did he promise you, and you him?"

⁷²Day, Biography, p. 59.

⁷³Ibid., p. 61.

⁷⁴Ibid.

Now you better slack up on that stuff for it gets you in bad and I will be getting sore."⁷⁵

In writing, then, it can be seen that Will was able to express his true feelings—whether sentimental or angry—far better than he was ever known to do in a person-to-person contact. By the time he entered this exchange of letters, the entertainer was 28 years old. He had traveled throughout the world, appeared before huge audiences, and was making a salary of \$200 a week—a tremendous amount for the time. Yet he had not been able to face the conflicts between himself and Betty Blake except through the written medium.

Finally, the now mature woman, who had continued the strange and often long-distance courtship for nearly eight years, must have shown some strong feelings herself when she replied to his "insinuations" about the lawyer friend. Will could never stand to hurt anyone or anything, and he turned humble and apologetic in his answer.

I told you I had always been a bad boy and guess I will continue to be one till you are with me and then it is all over. I will put all of this old life behind and I think I am man enough to do it too.⁷⁶

He assured her emphatically that he did not mean to make "unpleasant insinuations," adding, "Why I would fight anyone that would insinuate as much to me as that you acted the least bit unladylike at any time." In a stronger tone, he asked her to "cut out all this foolish talk for when I tell you you are the only girl for me I mean it regardless of how I act

⁷⁶Ibid., p. 62.

sometimes."⁷⁷

It was his father's illness that caused Will to cancel a full schedule of bookings on the vaudeville circuit and rush home. He remained with the ailing man for several weeks and, during his stay, he visited Betty a few times. According to her account written more than 30 years later, Will showed signs of losing interest in his "trouping around the country." "I felt that at last he was coming around to my way of thinking," she added.

After "Uncle Clem's" recovery, Will returned East. "And then, one day early in November, 1908," Betty wrote, "he arrived in Rogers without any forewarning to announce flatly that he was going to take me back to New York with him."⁷⁸ They were married in her mother's home the day before Thanksgiving.

The Rogers newspaper reported the wedding, describing the bride as "one of the best-known young ladies of Northwest Arkansas," a "general favorite, and she will be missed by an unusually large circle of friends."⁷⁹

Reporting plans for the honeymoon, the article stated:

Mr. Rogers and bride left on the northbound evening train for New York City, where the groom is a prominent figure in vaudeville. We understand they plan a trip to Europe before they go to Oklahoma next spring, where Mr. Rogers has a large farm and where they will make their future home.⁸⁰

⁷⁷Ibid.

⁷⁹Croy, p. 115.

⁷⁸Betty Rogers, pp. 100-01.

⁸⁰Ibid.

In spite of Betty's feelings that Will was about to come around to her way of thinking and the newspaper report that implied he would settle down to a "respectable" life as a farmer, Will Rogers did not get out of show business and he never again made his home in Oklahoma.

CHAPTER IV

EARLIEST ATTEMPTS AT WRITTEN HUMOR

Following his marriage to Betty Blake, Will Rogers continued his vagabond life in show business. Although she had been reluctant to marry a showman, Mrs. Rogers later described as among her "happiest recollections" their early years as troupers.¹ And Clem Rogers, often critical of his restless son's behavior, lived long enough to see his fears for the errant boy dispelled. Before he died in 1911, he exhibited great pride in "Willie."

Part of the time, Mrs. Rogers and Will, Jr., lived with her family in Rogers, Arkansas, where Will visited as often as he could, but he was in Dallas with the traveling musical, The Wall Street Girl, when their daughter Mary was born. The following spring, Betty joined her husband for what was to be a pleasure trip to Europe. There, however, he was "discovered" for a musical show called The Merry-Go-Round and he spent the summer performing at the Empire Theater in London. His weekly salary hit a new high of \$400, and he could have remained indefinitely; but with war threatening, the young couple started for home, and by the time they docked in New York, the European war had already begun.²

¹Betty Rogers, pp. 117-18.

²Ibid., pp. 123-24.

More popular than ever, Will was able to find bookings in the New York area and the growing family took a house on Long Island where their third baby, Jimmy, was born, July 25, 1915. Later that year, the showman was hired for the Midnight Frolic show produced by Florenz Ziegfeld on the "Roof" of the New Amsterdam Theater.

"Columnist of the Theater"

Faced with the challenge of entertaining a sophisticated audience, many of them regular patrons of the midnight show, plus the nightly performances with the Follies which he added to his schedule in 1916—a total of two regular shows a day, plus two matinees a week—Will was forced to sharpen his already well-honed wit and to search constantly for new material. It was at this point that he turned to the daily newspapers to find items on which to comment. The new approach was immediately successful with the paying customers, many of whom were either making news or writing it.

With the papers full of politics and the impending war, there was no shortage of material for his "gags"; and the opening "Well, all I know is what I read in the papers . . ." became a regular part of his routine and led to his being called "Columnist of the Theater."³

A small, worn note pad was found at the Memorial which Will Rogers evidently carried in his pocket—a skeleton script for his nightly performances. Handwritten and carefully

³Ibid., p. 133.

indexed, the contents are categorized by subject and the pages are filled with outlines for "gags." Two conclusions can be drawn from a study of the notebook: first, it shows that he was giving careful thought to his "spontaneous" humor, and second, it provides proof that he was able to put his witticisms into writing.

Listed were such topics as "KAISER-Germany," "SUBMARINE-WAR," "German Boat," "Century Theatre," "Song Titles," "Oldest Jokes," "DAMES IN PARK," "VILLA," "BRYAN," "Taft," "War-Political," "Lustania," "FORD," "Preparedness," "WILSON," "Odd ads in PAPERS," and "MISSELANEOUS STORIES." [The capitalization and spelling are his.]

It is interesting to note that the "Used Gags," which he listed first, are comments based on the audience or the show. Later entries refer to more timely topics as he began to use the newspapers for ideas. A few sketches from the "gag book" will illustrate the style in which he wrote as well as the subjects of his comments.⁴

"Used Ones."

That is certainly a pretty Harp that girl was playing.
or did you notice the Harp

These girls certainly got on some agravating dresses.

Breaking bad for some of our Girls they dont hardly
know where their next Limozine is coming from.

⁴ Underlining, punctuation, and spelling are Rogers'. Lines between the "gags" represent the short, wavy lines penned by the humorist to separate items on a page.

Act drags. Did have a Joke. French Gal knows one wont let her tell it—

Guess you heard about her and Caruso. I didnt get to see it but the next time they sing togeather I am going to see the fight.

FARRAH

She struck Caruso in the middle of a Stacato, thats a bad place to get hit

Should have had record of that

He is going to fool her next time eat so much Garlic she cant come near

Taft.

For a peaceful Man Taft takes a lot of chances—Every few days he says something sarcastic about Teddy.

Taft gaining Weight—

Taft loses 40 pounds thats a pound for every state he lost in 1912.

Longer Taft stays out of office better people like him.

Submarines and War.

Well I see where they found that self des [igned] submarine of ours they are not going to blow it up till they set it in Dry Dock.

Then we lost part of our Army the other day 4 Soldiers swam across the River and were captured in Mexico Lucky other 8 couldent swim. We better go to War pretty soon or we wont have any A—or Navy. if they let us alone we will lick ourselves.

Diaz forming Army to take Mexico. if he gets. it we should buy it from him.

Although he never seemed to set goals or make long range plans as he climbed toward success, he was always alert for what "caught on" with an audience. His change from a trick roper to a monologist had begun by "accident," according to all accounts. He said a few words on stage to cover up for a delay in carrying out a rope trick, and when he realized the audience liked his patter, he made it a regular part of his act. When he discovered they would laugh at his interpretation of the day's events, the sensitive performer revised and refined his techniques—another success resulting from an unplanned venture. And when he made the transition from "Columnist of the Theater" to a columnist for the newspapers, it is very likely that chance again was a factor.

Conflicting Reports of First Publishings

One of the most surprising and rewarding results of the entire research for this paper was the discovery of the early date at which Will Rogers began to write for publication, as well as the natural talent he exhibited for putting his wit on paper from the outset. Proof has been found that he wrote for newspapers as early as 1916, and that he continued intermittently thereafter. This is three to six years earlier than the dates cited by biographers of Rogers and it discounts the charge made by Homer Croy, Donald Day, and others that he had to be "taught" to write for publication.

Both Day and Croy had free access to the files in the Memorial where manuscripts and clippings as well as the clues were found which enabled the present writer to establish dates

of publication. Day had actually included some of the earliest articles in the books which he edited from Rogers' writings. Yet neither biographer pursued such research.

Croy introduced a "letter" written by Rogers in 1919 for the Kansas City Star which he claimed was "the first time Will ever wrote for a paper outside of his home town."⁵ His source for this information was E. B. Garnett, a writer for the Star with whom Croy corresponded when he was gathering material for the biography of his late friend, Will Rogers. Croy gave a lively, if somewhat imaginary account of events which led to what he claimed was Rogers' first journalistic work.

According to Croy, Rogers was on his way to California to make his first motion picture when he stopped over in Kansas City for a personal appearance at the opening of a new motion-picture theater. Following the program, Garnett and Will went to a chili parlor on Wyandotte Street, north of Twelfth, and climbed on stools to eat chili con carne and talk. The following narrative of the incident was reported by Croy, based on the information provided by Garnett:

Shortly a crowd gathered—something Will liked as a bear does honey. It was three o'clock in the morning when the two walked to Will's hotel. On the way, Garnett suggested that Will write down such things as he had been saying in the talk, and that he would print them in the Kansas City Star.

Will was struck by modesty. "Shucks, I couldn't do that! The only papers I ever wrote for were in Oklahoma and they had to run what I sent, or my father

⁵Croy, p. 162. It will be recalled that several of young Willie's letters sent to the "Home Folks" were published in the Claremore and Vinita newspapers.

would take out his livery-stable ad."

Garnett, with the instinct of a Sunday editor, persisted. . . . Finally Will said a bit shyly, "I might try. If you don't like it, you can tear it up. That would show you was a smart editor."

Several days passed. . . . But then a letter, mailed in Hollywood, arrived; it was typewritten on both sides of the paper, with the spelling a bit haphazard, and signed in lead pencil. It was published in the Sunday edition of the Kansas City Star, June 15, 1919—the first time Will ever wrote for a paper outside of his hometown.⁶

Basically the same story was reported in the Kansas City Star shortly after Rogers' death in an editor's note accompanying their re-print of the 1919 "letter." According to the Star, Will and Garnett were walking toward the train Rogers was taking to California, when the following dialogue reportedly occurred:

"You certainly give people a good time when you talk about what's going on in this country. Why don't you write it?"

"Nope, I ain't so good at writing," Will replied. "Hate to take the pains to spell and punctuate. It's work that I guess I've got no knack for."

"Well, anyway," returned the reporter, "when you are on the train tomorrow get out your little typewriter and write me a letter. The Star will publish it."

"Would your paper do that?" asked Will a bit incredulous.

Two days later, the Star report continues, the letter was received, and with "some editing and deletions," it was published July 15, 1919.

Scant "proof" was offered for their claim that this article was Will Rogers' first, and that it was the Star reporter who set him to "thinking along lines that led him into one of the most important phases of his extraordinary career—writing for the newspapers." The article quoted Charles Driscoll of

⁶Croy, p. 162.

the McNaught Syndicate as saying that Rogers was not writing for them at that time (1919) and that he never wrote for another syndicate.

Donald Day seems to have given little thought to Rogers' beginnings as a writer, although he used the early articles prodigiously in the books he published of the humorist's edited writings as well as in the "autobiography" and the biography of Rogers. In the biography, the last to be released of the five books either written or edited by Day, he copies Croy and points to the publication of a speech by Rogers in The New York Times, October 27, 1922, as the act which "triggered the next giant step in his career."⁷

According to Day, Will's writing before the fall of 1922 "had been sporadic and more or less an imitation of the run-of-the-mill humor with wild exaggeration, outlandish puns, and slangy gibberish—something he would never have done on the stage." Contradicting himself, Day described the earlier books by Rogers, Prohibition and The Peace Conference, as "merely collections of what he had said on the stage." Will's articles reporting the political conventions of 1920 Day called "what he might have said if he had been in the Follies—but with much less pertinency and 'fresh-laid' quality."

The biographer also made reference to Rogers' pieces for the Life humor magazine which he said were "the old standardized joke with a straight man asking a question, akin to the sort used in most vaudeville skits," a completely inaccurate

⁷Day, Biography, p. 127. See also Croy, pp. 172-75.

description as will be shown in Chapter VI. Then he pointed to the 1922 date and related basically the same story as Croy had given.⁸

Croy cited coverage in The New York Times of a speech Rogers made as having started him in his writing career. V.V. McNitt, head of the McNaught Syndicate, supposedly "read the paper and was impressed" to the extent that he wrote Rogers to "see him about writing a weekly series of humorous articles." When he received no reply, McNitt sent cartoonist Rube Goldberg to see the cowboy-philosopher at the New Amsterdam Theater, Croy continued. Will told the envoy from McNitt, that he was "foolin' around with a man on the Herald" concerning a series of home-spun articles built around a fictitious cowhand named Powder River Powell and his conversations with a barber called Soapy. The proposed series was to pay him \$1000 a week, Croy said.

To counter the offer by the Herald, Croy continued, McNitt persuaded Rogers to visit the McNaught offices and offered to get him published in the prestigious Times. Then the syndicate owner and his associates "explained how easy it was to write humor"; and because Will "wanted to learn about humor," he listened and "said he would try."

According to Croy's narrative, much of which must have been drawn from his imagination, "Will went hopefully into the hurly-burly of Times Square," soon to return with "the

⁸Ibid., p. 129.

most depressing example of humor every offered a major syndicate." Croy added, "Thank God, it was never published," then proceeded to include the Powder River Powell manuscript in the biography.

Croy said the McNaught editors, after reading the piece, "told Will that they-had-enjoyed-it-immensely—but-unfortunately it was not exactly what the papers were buying at present." Later, however, McNitt secured the promise of Carr Van Anda of the Times to buy a weekly article by Rogers at \$150 each, "if Will would keep on the heels of the news." Thus he began the syndicated articles in 1922.⁹

This, then, was the account and the article that Donald Day evidently found in Croy's book and believed, judging from his summation of the same apocryphal story in the Biography. Day added one "fact" which Croy omitted, a brief sentence that he used to explain why Rogers did not accept the offer of \$1000 a week from the Herald. Referring to the Powder River article, Day said, "A sample sketch did not meet the approval of the managing editor of the Herald." When it was refused by McNitt also, Will tried several others, "finally doing one that was what McNitt and the Times wanted," Day continued. "In it, writing as he spoke, Will managed to get himself into words and onto paper."¹⁰

How Donald Day could overlook the fact that Rogers had been able "to get himself into words and onto paper," almost as long as he had known how to write his own name, is

⁹Croy, pp. 172-75.

¹⁰Day, Biography, p. 129.

difficult to understand. It is evident that Day made little attempt to document the wealth of material he found in the Rogers Collection, thus, numerous errors in dates and place of publication can be found throughout the books he edited. In the "autobiography," he copied almost verbatim an article published with Rogers' by-line in 1917;¹¹ and the book, How We Elect Our Presidents, opens with Rogers' 1920 convention articles, correctly dated, which Day called "police reporting on our national clambakes." In the preface, written by Day, he lauded the political writings: "Old Will really stripped the hide off and showed what made Uncle Sammy run—or as he would say, misrun!" Indicative of his failure to document sources, however, is the fact that Day ignored the 1920 articles in the "credits." He thanked the McNaught Syndicate, The New York Times, the Saturday Evening Post, and the Gulf Oil Co. (Will's radio sponsors) for permission to use the material on politics, giving the impression that these were the only sources.¹² Yet he knew that Rogers did not begin writing for McNaught and the Times until 1922, two years after the convention articles were published, and that his first work for Post as well as the radio broadcasts were later yet. Who should be "thanked" for the earlier ones, he does not say.

Charles B. Driscoll, editor for the McNaught Syndicate at the time Rogers was killed, may have been responsible for

¹¹Day, Autobiography, pp. 44-46. Day incorrectly identified the 1917 article by Rogers as the American article by Martin. Further discussion of the article by Rogers is included later in this chapter.

¹²Day, How We Elect Our Presidents, pp. 4-5.

some of the mistaken beliefs concerning the humorist's initial efforts as a journalist, assuming he was accurately quoted in an interview article released by Associated Press two days after the crash. Driscoll reportedly said that Rogers began writing for the syndicate "more than 20 years ago" when McNitt gave him a chance to do a daily newspaper feature. His reply to the offer was, "Ah, I can't write, but I'll try," Driscoll said.

Datelined Los Angeles, August 17 [1935], the AP story continued from the interview with Driscoll as he told of Rogers' first work as a syndicated writer:

Appearing at first under the heading "The Worst Story I've Heard Today," the title was changed two years later after Rogers cabled from London:

"I've run out of stories and will have to quit."

It was then McNitt suggested a daily feature on remarks on current news topics, which grew into the popular "Will Rogers Remarks."¹³

Several errors can be noted in this account. In the first place, Rogers could not have begun writing for the McNaught Syndicate "20 years earlier"—or in 1915—as Driscoll claimed. The syndicate was not founded by McNitt until 1922.¹⁴ Rogers first articles were not the daily "Worst Stories"; he began with the weekly articles in December, 1922. And finally, he did not start the daily comments at McNitt's suggestion,

¹³Tulsa Daily World, August 18, 1935.

¹⁴See Edwin Emery, The Press and America (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1962), p. 566. It will be recalled that it was Charles Driscoll who was cited as the "authority" in the Kansas City Star claim to first publishing. A more complete discussion and documentation of Rogers' syndicated columns will be found in Chapter V.

according to more reliable accounts. These were published by The New York Times for several months prior to syndication.

O'Brien was among the first of the biographers to claim that Rogers was "discovered" by V. V. McNitt and he, too, stated that the Oklahoman wrote for the syndicate over a period of 20 years. Generalizing as he did throughout most of the book, O'Brien related that McNitt saw Rogers' act at the New Amsterdam Theater and realized that such witty remarks "would make a first-class newspaper feature." Forthwith McNitt convinced the cowboy star that he should try writing, O'Brien continued, and when he did so, he became an immediate success.¹⁵

Another "discovery" of Rogers the writer and journalist was related by Meyer Berger, historian of The New York Times. According to Berger, Louis Wiley of the Times staff "discovered" Will's wit at a dinner in New York and "persuaded [Adolph] Ochs to run a daily Will Rogers box."¹⁶ Although no beginning date was listed by the historian, the information is obviously incorrect or, at best, incomplete. The Times ran Rogers' weekly articles long before the daily cables to the Times began in the summer of 1926. Thus the Times had been publishing Rogers' writings for nearly two years before Wiley supposedly "discovered" him.

¹⁵O'Brien, p. 110.

¹⁶Meyer Berger, The Story of the New York Times (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1951), p. 402.

It was probably Will himself who inadvertently gave impetus to the idea that he wrote first for the Times. In a column lamenting the death of Ochs in 1935, he said, "My boss is dead. Adolph Ochs, owner of the great New York Times is the first man I ever wrote for, and it was him personally that got me to try it." He added, "Think of being lucky enough to break in at the top, for that paper is the tops."¹⁷

Perhaps Rogers was thinking of his daily sayings which were, in fact, first used in the Times; or possibly it was another of his lapses of memory concerning dates and details in his personal life. In any case, he had done a great deal of writing for the papers as well as in magazine articles and books before Ochs became his "boss."

"Columnist for the Papers"

Because of the conflicting reports concerning Rogers' entry into the writing and journalistic field, a major portion of the total time devoted to research for this paper was spent in attempts to brush away the fog surrounding the truth hidden for more than 30 years.

Each "clue" that was discovered in the contents of the original manuscripts as well as those few found in the thousands of newspaper clippings and hundreds of newspaper articles about Rogers following his death were traced and examined in an effort to unravel the mystery. As one clue led to

¹⁷The New York Times, April 9, 1935.

another, more research was conducted through correspondence, personal interviews, microfilm files of old newspapers, and published sources. Most of the information in the remainder of this chapter, therefore, is material that has never before been recognized or properly documented in any work that has been discovered.

It is also possible that some few articles remain to be found, in spite of exhaustive research. For that reason, this paper will make no claim to having found the total output of Rogers' portable typewriter nor to pinpoint the exact date he first published in a newspaper outside his home territory. Instead, all the writings that have been discovered will be noted and described, and in each case, the date and place of publication cited will have been substantiated beyond a reasonable doubt. When such facts are not known this, too, will be pointed out.

"Stampede" articles. The first published newspaper articles known to have been written by Rogers appeared in the New York American during August of 1916.¹⁸

¹⁸Excerpts from two of these are found included in Day's "autobiography" of Rogers, dated 1918 (pp. 49-50). Because of the incorrect date, several weeks of futile search were wasted in an attempt to establish a date for the "Stampede" which the cowboy star reported. Because Guy Weadick produced the rodeo-like affair, a search was made for him as well as research about him. His last known address was in Phoenix, Ariz., but he could not be located there or in the state by the Phoenix Chamber of Commerce. Finally, Mrs. Love, who was also attempting to date the event, found a copy in her files of a New York Times news story which told of Rogers' introducing Weadick to his Follies audience in August, 1916. The researcher then returned to the Times index and microfilm for that period, discovering that news coverage had been given

In an editor's note at the beginning of Will's first article for the American, mention is made of the opening of the "great Western Cowboy and Cowgirl contest at Sheepshead Bay Speedway yesterday," (Saturday, August 7, 1916) the first show of its kind ever held in the city. The editor listed wild horse races, wild buffalo races, and bulldogging steers among the "dangerous sports" which "brought the huge crowd to its feet in breathless excitement every moment" until the show ended at seven o'clock in the evening. "Will Rogers, the champion cowboy of the Ziegfeld Follies, is describing the Stampede for the American," the editor concluded.

Any claim that Will Rogers was not able to "be himself" on paper before he was taught to do so by McNitt in 1922 could be disproved by the opening paragraphs of his first article. The reader can almost see him ambling on stage and crinkling his face in a lop-sided grin as he began:

Well, here goes. I thought about everything had happened to me since I came back to New York. I worked in a Ziegfeld show, danced with a girl, sang a song—once. Even wore a dress suit in one show. But the worst is yet to come.

I was asked to write for a paper—like those great authors and writers, Christy Mathewson and Ty Cobb.

I am going to lay my chips a little different from what they say those birds do. I am not only going to sign my name, but I am going to take a shot at the whole works myself, and I want it to go as she lays, even if

by the Times each day to the "Stampede." By comparing events in the Times stories to the undated clippings of the articles by Rogers in the Rogers Collection, then, dates of publication can be established as August 6, August 9, and August 10, 1916. There may have been other articles during that same week, but to date the writer has been unable to secure copies or microfilm to validate this belief.

the guy that has to set up the type has to get drunk to do it.

It is evident here that some editing was done, in spite of Rogers' admonition that "she go as she lays." But the style—the tempo, the figures of speech, and the direct approach to his audience—is very much the same as that found in Rogers' writing during the remainder of his life.

Turning reporter after his rambling and personal opening, the writer roped his readers by saying, "I know a lot of you all will say, well, Will, why aren't you out there showing us something?" In answer to his rhetorical question, he replied, "Say, I don't see any of you fellows fighting Willard." Disclaiming his "rep" as a "rope tangler," which he said was "mostly east of the Hudson River," he added another excuse: "Besides acting a fool in one show and trying to keep New Yorkers awake the rest of the night in another one, and day herding three young Rogerses in a yard to keep 'em from catching this disease—I can't even spell it—a man don't get a whole lot of time to practice."¹⁹

Again and again he brought his readers in with the "you" approach as he acquainted them with the little-known event. He explained, for instance, the amount of skill required for competing in such a show by saying, "I want to tell you what makes it so great. It's not a show. Do you know that every

¹⁹The two shows to which he referred were evidently the Follies and the Midnight Frolic. The disease he could not spell was probably the influenza which later reached epidemic proportions.

one of these boys and girls paid their own fare for themselves and horses from all over the United States and Canada, and they don't get a cent, even paying their own expenses while here." The phrase, "and they don't get a cent," is typical of the asides he repeatedly spliced into his spoken humor. Without it the sentence would be more nearly correct, but lacking something of Rogers' way of speaking and writing.

Continuing his casual explanation of the contest rules, Will said of the prize money, "You've got to win it to get it. And you'll win it fair, you'll base your case card on that." He described the judges as competent men with whom influence would not "cut any ice," and noted that some events would have as many as 50 entries with only four eligible to win any of the prize money. "Now you're not going to see much laying down, are you?" he asked.

He described the show as the "World's Series of Cowboy Sports," that stirred up "quite a mess of excitement" and had the audience "yelling like drunken Injuns." Reporting happenings from the crowd's point of view, Rogers said they "eat up the bulldogging" which was "plumb new" to New Yorkers, especially the speed with which one cowboy "laid one on his flat side in forty-one seconds, quicker than a chorus girl can order a drink."

In the second article for American, headlined "TOSSING THE HE-OXEN WITH WILL ROGERS," the showman began by panning his short career as a reporter. "That mess of junk I had in Sunday's paper got by," Will wrote, "'cause I reckon the

editor was out getting a drink when it slipped by, and they let her ride just as she lay." Openly trying to entice his readers to attend the "Stampede," the reporter said Sunday's performance was just as "fast moving" as the first one. He added, "Don't ever think you see the same thing at one of these any two days."

Stepping on a mule's shoe and having himself some luck, as he put it, Rogers was invited to join Mary Pickford, Douglas Fairbanks, and "a lot of other poor struggling moving picture actors" in the grandstand. In spite of the fact that he found it hard to concentrate on the "Stampede" in the presence of Mary Pickford, about whom he commented, "How Ziegfeld ever overlooked that Pickford party, I don't know," Will described the main events. He defined bulldogging for his New York readers: "That's where they jump from the back of a running horse onto the head of a wild bovine and gently lay him down with hands only." Relating the western sport to the local scene, Rogers said, "You know, tossing the old he-oxen has long been the favorite pastime of New York, but here was a brand new way to do it."

Profuse in praising someone he respected or admired throughout his writing years—in complete disregard for the person's financial or social status—Will called Fairbanks a "great fellow," adding, "I always did like him." Then he gave far more attention to "old negro 'Bill' Pickett" whom he first met in St. Louis in 1899. "Him up here, after all these years, showin' these young men how to do it," he wrote enthusiastically.

Reporting while he praised his old friend, Will continued,

You know, I believe in giving some credit for originality and if ever a man originated anything, he originated this game. There's not a bone in his body that ain't bent up some way. The Lord knows how old he is. And say, . . . he's a credit to his race. He laid one down in twenty-six seconds, the fastest up to that time.

Other cowboys also received acclaim in the article as well as the bucking horses with such unlikely names as "Anteater" and "I. B. Dam." Depicting the latter as a dangerous horse "that gets his man every time out," Will said he asked Henry Grammer, "who used to be a great rider down home" in Oklahoma, "what he would take to set on this I. B. Dam bird." Rogers quoted the cowboy as answering, "I would want just ten cents less than I'd die for."

"Anteater" was shown to be a dangerous bronc also, again by graphic description. Rogers said he was a horse that "just bucks and looks back at you and winks and says, 'I've carried you 'bout long enough. So long!'"

He concluded the second article with a subtle invitation to his audience to read the next one: "I want to tell you a little later on about all the fancy ropers. Naturally that's a line I'm sort of interested in."

The only other piece of writing in this series available for study was found in the Memorial files in manuscript form. No proof can be given at this point that the article was published, but it seems reasonable to assume that it was used by the New York American. Much of it reports events that occurred when Theodore Roosevelt attended the "Stampede."²⁰

²⁰The New York Times, August 9, 1916, reported Theodore

Along with his coverage of the show and the audience, Rogers revealed a bit of good-natured annoyance with the other reporters who must have swarmed around Roosevelt, possibly making themselves evident at the "Stampede" for the first time. Because the proceeds, except for prize money, were for charity, Will may have expected better coverage than the show had received previously. If this were the case, it would explain his digs at the reporters who "got around with pad and pencils" and asked the former president how he liked the show.

Will related that while he was "chatting with the Col., young Theodore, who I have known for a good while," he was annoyed by the reporters. "Well, a long old boy came a-climbing right over me walking on my shins up to the knees," Will related. "I thought he was going to bulldog me and got at the Col. and says I am a reporter on the American. I thought well, so am I. . . ." Reverting to analogy, he described the eager reporters who surrounded Roosevelt to write down his terse answers—which were limited to "Bully"—"And of all the writing," Will exclaimed, "you would of thought I had had the guy with the megaphone announce it . . . that the war in Europe is over."

Kidding himself along with the other reporters, whom Will claimed took notes "just to show you how different they can write a thing from what you told them," the humorist said, "I am going to try to be a regular and I haven't had a pencil all week." Later in the article he pointed out that he had been a reporter for only three days and was "showing professional

Roosevelt's attendance of the previous day's show. Probably, then, Will's article was also published August 9.

jealousy here already."

Guest column. In May, 1917, Rogers wrote a guest column for the New York American; as far as can be discovered, this was his next attempt at writing following the series about the "Stampede." A portion of the column which initiated Will's writing will explain.

YE
TOWNE
GOSSIP

by K.C.B.²¹
WILL ROGERS.
ZIEGFELD MIDNIGHT Frolic.
NEW AMSTERDAM Roof.
MY DEAR WILL.
THE OTHER night.
WHEN I was up on the roof.
.....
AND YOU came out.
AND WERE swinging the rope.
AND TALKING.
I LEANED over.
AND SAID to Joe Weaver.
I SAID.
"THE BOY is clever!"
AND JOE said.

May 7, 1917
"HE'S SO clever.
"I'LL BET you're afraid.
"TO LET HIM try a hand.
"AT WRITING one of your columns."
AND THERE I was.
WITH JOE daring me.
.....
AND [I] SAID.
"YOU'RE ON, Joe."
AND IT'S a bet.
.....
AND I'LL be up Wednesday
FOR THE copy.
FOR THURSDAY morning.
I THANK you.

Evidently, the vaudeville performer accepted the challenge. Will's comments, copying the style of the regular columnist, were published as follows:

²¹Credit goes to Lawrence L. Winship, retired editor of the Boston Globe, for identifying "K.C.B." After extensive research through Oklahoma libraries and microfilm files failed to reveal a single clue, a letter was sent to Mr. Winship asking him if he could recall such a person. He did not, he wrote on November 18, 1966, but he had called some "old-timers" to assist in the search. Joe Harrington of the Boston Globe; John Kieran [sic], "an old-timer sports-writer and bird lover of the New York Times"; and Bradley Kelly, head of King Features for many years, who found the items in the newspaper files of the New York Public Library. The columnist was Kenneth Carrol Beaton who wrote for King Features until 1927. The column cited here regularly appeared on the editorial page of the New York American.

YE
TOWNE
GOSSIP
May 10, 1917

BY BILL ROGERS

DEAR FRIEND K.C.B.	
ALL I know is what I see in the papers.	WHO WILL undertake.
AND IN other cities.	TO REMOVE.
THEY CHARGE two cents for their papers.	THOSE PALM beach suits.
AND IN New York.	OUR WAR.
THEY ONLY charge one cent.	WILL NOT have been in vain.
BUT I guess they know here.	AND HE can start in.
ABOUT WHAT their papers are worth.	RIGHT now.
AND MARSHALL Joffre.	BY LOWERING the belts.
(I CAN spell it but I can't pronounce it).	ON THOSE comedy overcoats.
IS IN NEW YORK today.	THE MEN wear.
AND HE'S going to be remembered.	AND DON'T you remember.
ABOVE EVERYTHING else.	THAT THE custom used to be.
FOR BEING the general	TO GIVE the notables.
THAT TOOK the red pants.	WHO VISITED our country.
OFF THE French soldiers.	A FEW jewels.
AND MADE them look.	OR OTHER junk like that.
LIKE THE real fighting men.	BUT NOW.
THEY'VE SHOWN themselves to be.	SINCE WE'VE grown so wealthy.
IF WE can produce.	I SEE.
JUST ONE general.	THAT MRS. Woodrow Wilson.
	HAS SENT Madam Joffre.
	A WHOLE Virginia Ham.

	MUCH OBLIGED to you.

The wit here is obviously Will's, although it is quite possible that his comments were edited somewhat to fit the unusual format of "Ye Towne Gossip."

First Known Magazine Article

In 1917, Will Rogers wrote what was probably his first magazine article. Called "The Extemporaneous Line," the autobiographical essay explains his techniques for humor on stage.²²

²²The undated article found in the Rogers Collection is a single sheet, torn from a slick magazine which has defied all attempts at identification. The approximate date can be

It is possible, of course, that the article "by Will Rogers" could have been of the as-told-to variety, but there is reason to believe that he did the writing himself. Those who quoted him or copied from his on-stage humor generally included the halting use of such terms as "well," "you know," or other of Rogers' unconscious but frequent expressions.

Using answers to questions he was most often asked as a device to give the article continuity, Rogers said the first question people asked him was, "Did you really come from out West?" The second was "How did you get on stage?" And the third was usually, "Who writes your stuff and where do you get it?" Answering the third one, Rogers wrote:

The newspapers write it! All I do is get all the papers I can carry and then read all that is going on and try to figure out the main things that the audience has just read, and talk on that. I have found out two things. One is that the more up-to-date a subject is the more credit you are given for talking on it, even if you really haven't anything very funny. But if it's an old subject, your gags must be funny to get over.

The first thing in the remark you make must be founded on facts. You can exaggerate and make it ridiculous, but it must have the plain facts in it. Then you will hear the audience say: "Well, that's pretty near right."

Although it is obvious here that the material has been carefully edited to correct spelling and punctuation, the methods he used to produce humor—on stage and in writing—are basically the same as those he used throughout his career.

established as June, 1917, based on a portion of a society story found on the back of the sheet concerning a fund raising drive, the "MacDougal Alley Festa." Information in cut-lines was checked with the New York Times Index where the date of the "Festa" was found to be June 5-12, 1917.

At the time he wrote the "Extemporaneous Line," he was already consciously studying his audience, using the trial-and-error method to see what would go over. The techniques he outlined in 1917 were refined to an art as he developed his writing style.

Still referring to his stage humor, Rogers explained that he always worked out a few "gags" in advance; but, he continued, "the thing I go out to say may fall flat, and some other gag I just happen to put in out there goes great." He cited an example to illustrate:

"Mr. Edison is perfecting a submarine destroyer. Well they say he only sleeps three or four hours out of the twenty-four. That gives him plenty of time to invent"—That was only a little laugh, but I used it to show the audience that I had read about the invention which had only been announced that day. It happened that at this time all New York cafes were closed at one o'clock so I casually added to the remark my sudden thought, "Suppose Mr. Edison lived in New York and Mayor Mitchel made him go to bed at one o'clock, where would our invention come from?" And that was a big laugh.

Two things are evident here. First, he obviously recognized the value of timeliness and proximity in spoken humor; and second, he also knew how to use an example to communicate with his readers. The latter is sufficient to prove that he was able to "put himself on paper" in 1917—at least five years before his first work for the McNaught Syndicate. And never in this article did he resort to the vaudeville, straight-man routine which Croy and Day indicated was the only technique he knew how to use for written humor before 1922.

Brevity, another element that later became the essence of his written style, was also mentioned in the "Extemporaneous

Line." Rogers said he did the "shortest act of any monologue man and that recommends it." In the midnight show, he limited his act to six minutes and in the Follies from eight to ten minutes.

Explaining how he built his jokes around distinguished persons in his audience, the entertainer revealed his respect for the individual that earned him accolades in later years. Although he liked to kid people in the audience, Will said he never did, unless he knew them personally and "that they will take a joke as it is meant." This creed is one he followed throughout his life. No matter how much he might criticize a noted person for his actions, Will limited his jabs to the individual's public life and never stooped to use remarks about his private life or personal affairs.

To illustrate this for his reading audience, most of whom would not have had an opportunity to see him on stage at that point in his career, Rogers related a typical routine:

The late Diamond Jim Brady I always spoke of, as I know him and he always seemed to take an interest in my little act. Once at a big banquet Mr. Brady recited a little poem which he had written himself. I learned the piece and shortly afterwards one night when he was in the audience I did his poem. This made a great hit with Mr. Brady. My best one on him was: "I always get to go to all the first nights, yes I do. I go with Mr. Brady. He sits in the first row and I stand at the back and if anybody cops a diamond I am supposed to rope 'em before they get away with it." He was certainly a wonderfully fine man.

The final sentiment was always implied, if not stated, in Rogers' spoken or written humor at the expense of his audience, and it no doubt explains why the wealthy and the famous returned to the show night after night, building for him such a reputation that it was considered quite an honor to be kidded in his

pieces for the paper. The deep-seated love he had for his fellow lowman—in spite of, or perhaps because of their weaknesses—seems to have been recognized throughout the nation and much of the world.

Newspaper Articles Written "on the Road"

Traveling with the Follies during the fall of 1917, Will was asked to "pinch hit," as he termed it, for a columnist. December 14, 1917, he substituted for a regular sports writer for the Detroit Journal, and was identified in the by-line as the "Star of the Ziegfeld Follies."

After telling the readers that he was pinch hitting for a friend who was out too late the night before and "in no shape to tell you anything today," he said he wanted "to bat out a few lines about Cornelius McGillicuddy." He chided the Philadelphia Athletics owner and manager for letting several of his best players go to Boston, adding that if Connie could not get a team for the next season, he could cut the ballpark into lots and sell it, or else "he can plow it up and sow it in something."

Extending the idea of using the Athletic park for a farm, Will continued:

The beauty about Mack farming is that he could still sit on the bench with his program and give his gardeners signals when and what to plant. Suppose he wags his program for a double plant: the gardener, right away, plants a few rows of succotash. Suppose he wants to pull off a delayed plant: the coacher drops his hoe. That tips the field gardner and he sows winter wheat.

When Mack crosses his legs and writes on his program, that's the pick and run sign. It means that a patch of beans are ripe and the short gardener is to pick 'em and run to market with them. . . .

His allusions to a baseball farm club are obvious throughout the article and he evidently blamed lack of attendance for causing the loss of their best players. Concerning their leaving, he said satirically, "I don't think it will be taken so hard in Phi, as very few people there ever saw them play." Later, following the description of the gardening activities, he added, "They would have the same crowd out to see 'em garden as to play ball, as those fellows go out there to knit every day, anyway—both of them."

In an article for the Journal the next day (December 15, 1917), he wrote a satirical essay on the Detroit "street car troubles," which he said were linked to the city "just like Mexico and the revolution." Noting that he had "investigated the whole thing and even gone so far as to ride on some of their cars," Rogers added, "Now, in my article, I am going to give all sides to this mess an equal show because they are all so bad I can't pick out the worst."

Here can be noted the "shocker" approach he sometimes used to get attention, followed by the folksy now that made his humor easier to take. The word now opened nearly one-third of the paragraphs in the entire article.

"Gags" from a local angle enlivened the writing as he hit such troublesome items as stoves ("Last Monday two women had their feet frostbitten by putting them too close to the stove."); the lack of cars ("They are putting another car on the Harper line just like the one they have now."); and the raise in fares, presumably from three to five cents ("Well, the day they raised the fares, they got up early that morning and raised the fares

before the council had made the daily agreement with them—Give 'em credit—also a nickel if you want a ride."),

Other common elements of style found in his later writings are evident. He referred to the Common Council appointed by the Mayor of Detroit as "those birds," cited "an old fellow down home in Oklahoma" as an example, and used an international situation as an analogy to "this mess here." "Talk about Russia and all her factions, it's a Garden of Eden stacked up side of this," he wrote.

Several of the local comments follow the format of his "gags" for the Follies. For this reason, it is quite possible that he was requested to write the pieces by editors who attended the show. Whether he was paid for the writing or whether he wrote them only to publicize the show is not known. Inquiries to the publisher of the Detroit News, which merged with the Journal in 1922, yielded no information concerning this; Mrs. Ruth Baum, the person who replied, was unaware that Rogers had ever written for the Detroit papers.

Another mystery was a clipping found pasted to a sheet of paper in the Rogers Collection. Headlined "The No. 2 Peace Ship," with the sub-head, "An Editorial on President Wilson's Jaunt to France," by Will Rogers of "The Follies," the clipping had no identification at the outset of this study. Contents of the editorial dated the approximate time of publication as December 14 or 15, 1918, and by looking at the back of the clipping (as it was held up to a light to enable the writer to see through the paper to which it was glued), the newspaper

from which it was clipped can be identified as the Detroit Journal.

It will be recalled that the Follies traveled according to a general pattern on the annual tours, partially explaining why he would have written articles for the Detroit papers in December of two successive years rather than the articles having been written as a series, all in the same year, as was first assumed. Excerpts from the editorial will indicate the material from which the date was established as well as the writing style of Rogers at that time.

He began with the familiar "Well, I see the No. 2 Peace Ship arrived all O.K. yesterday," then switched to a favorite target for his jokes, Henry Ford.

Now this article is not only up to the times, but I figured it should be of especial interest to Detroiters as it was in this town that the original Peace Ship idea was conceived.

You know it's the same in anything; the fellow who originates or starts something is generally called a Nut. The next fellow comes along, takes his idea, gets away with it and is a smart man.

.
I claim that Mr. Ford only made one great mistake and that was there were some people on his boat that should never have had return trip tickets.

The persons who should "never have returned" cannot be identified at this point, but by the other remarks it is obvious that he referred to Henry Ford's trip during World War I about which he frequently joked. The remainder of the editorial was based on Wilson's trip to the Peace Conference.

Nearly all of the "gags" included in the Detroit article are also found in the book on the Peace Conference which is discussed more fully in a later chapter. The book, however,

shows less evidence of editing and references to Henry Ford are somewhat concealed in the latter publication. For example, the paragraph cited here, in which he credits Ford with originating the idea, was changed to read, "(It was originated by some obscure MANUFACTURER of KNICKNACKS,) Name furnished at advertising rates."²³ At another point in the book he identified Ford as "this Manufacturer in some middle west town (I cant seem to recall that fellows name). . . ." ²⁴

Because so much of the article was re-printed in the book, with no mention made of prior publication, it can be assumed that Rogers was not paid for the newspaper items or that he arranged to retain rights of publication. In the final sentence Rogers indicated that he planned to write at least one more article for the Journal: "Some day next week if I don't get killed for this I will tell what will happen at the peace table." It has been impossible to date to discover whether or not he carried out the promise. There is reason to believe that he did, however, judging from the fact that the book on the Peace Conference continued into this subject and the entire short volume may have been compiled from two or three such articles.

Articles for the "Chicago Examiner." Somewhat better results were forthcoming from inquiries concerning two undated clippings which the humorist wrote for the Chicago

²³Will Rogers, Peace Conference, p. 10.

²⁴Ibid., p. 11.

Examiner in 1918. Photostatic copies of the editions for February 21 and February 23, 1918, were obtained from the Chicago Public Library. Initially, the only date known was February 13 which was typed on the original manuscript found in the Rogers Collection. This proved to be the item published February 21, and the other was found by the research librarian.

In the February 21 issue, Rogers was identified as "Cowboy comedian with 'The Follies' who is writing some pieces for the Examiner"; and, as was the case in much of his writing, he began with an apologetic explanation: "Some guy up in the Press Club asked me to write and tell about the crooks." Then he pointed out that he did not know all of them yet—he had been in Chicago only six weeks. He argued, moreover, that if he wrote about crooks he would not know whose toes he was stepping on and he might lose some good friends.

A series of "gags" followed on the killers who would have to use Winchesters in order to have room for the notches, the annual cleanup which sometimes kept the crooks out of town a week or ten days, and arguments over the wage scale for hired killers. Then he turned optimistic adding, "Still, advertising is a wonderful thing, and it's better for people to knock a town than it is to never hear it mentioned at all, as a lot of them are."

The second article was titled simply, "Says Will Rogers," the first usage found of what later became the well-known "Will Rogers Says." Again he began by explaining, "Now they've asked me to write about Russia," but he pointed out that he

felt somewhat more sure of himself on that subject because his readers knew nothing about Russia either. In fact, even Wilson "passed up mention of it in his last speech," Rogers reported.

"Germany was willing to treat for peace," he continued, "as long as Russia did all the treating." He mentioned "some province called Ukrainia," which was supposedly given her liberty, but which did not fool anybody—"those poor independents have 'Made in Germany' stamped all over it," he continued. He credited the Kaiser for getting the "dope" on the situation and deciding that it was better to be surrounded by several small nations because "they come in handier to go through."

In mock sympathy, he said Germany was "handicapped by not having a national anthem to fight by," so he suggested the United States should have loaned them "Poor Butterfly"—"but only on one condition, that is, that they keep it."

Referring to what he read in the papers, he noted, "Some bird over there shot at this guy, Lenine [Lenin], the other day, and missed him." Rogers expressed the opinion that the only person who had the "right dope on Russia" was "that old nut monk" [Rasputin] who "could throw sticks in the water and make any of them go out and get them."

Convention articles. As far as can be discovered, no one has attempted to identify or document the articles which Rogers wrote about the two national conventions of 1920. Day, as was pointed out earlier, used excerpts from these in the book How We Elect Our Presidents, but with no documentation. He obviously used some of the original manuscripts found in

the Rogers Collection. Nor has anyone explained the notation on one typed page which identifies it as a "Goldwyn Clip Sheet," dated July 17, 1920, with the following explanation:

(Will Rogers, Goldwyn star, was engaged by one of the big newspaper syndicates to cover the Republican and Democratic National conventions. Following are excerpts from his report, from Philadelphia, of the Republican Convention.)

At the bottom of the page is the line, "Copyright 1920 Newspaper Enterprise Association."

With this clue to possible writings during this period, plus a single, loose clipping from the Los Angeles Times, June 8, 1920, found in the Rogers Collection, the search began for positive evidence.

Will Rogers, Jr., in answer to a query on these items, said his father might have sold articles to the NEA, adding, "I doubt if there is a single journalist who right after World War I didn't do some odd job at some time or other for NEA." He identified the "Clip Sheet" as being a press release or handout from the Goldwyn Studios.²⁵

Later it was discovered that he did write for the Newspaper Enterprise Association in 1920, and as far as can be discovered, this was his first writing to be syndicated and distributed on a nation-wide basis and it was probably the first reporting for which he ever contracted.²⁶

²⁵Letter from Will Rogers, Jr., November 28, 1966.

²⁶It was only after several insistent inquiries by the researcher to NEA that a reply came from Mr. Edward R. Kennedy, director of Client Services for NEA, indicating that the illusive articles had been found. In a letter dated January 9, 1967, Mr. Kennedy wrote, "This is, indeed, an exciting find

On May 29, 1920, NEA sent out a full, newspaper-size advertising sheet to possible subscribers headlining Rogers as the "FAMOUS OKLAHOMA COWBOY HUMORIST AND GOLDWYN MOTION PICTURE COMEDIAN" and "THE MOST WITTY WRITER IN THE LAND." Editors were promised daily coverage—at least 10 jokes a day—by the humorist who would "POKE FUN AT THE CONVENTION DOINGS DAY BY DAY."

A standing head, "Will Rogers Says," was shown as it would be furnished subscribers to his daily columns, beginning June 1. An explanatory note, dated June 3, however, told of the death of the youngest Rogers child [Freddie] and the desperate illness of the others which would probably mean that the humorist would be unable to fulfill his agreement.

In reality, he did not attend the conventions that spring, because of the family's tragic experience with diphtheria, but he did manage to write the columns and each was datelined in such a way that, while he did not pretend to be at the scene, he seemed to be in direct daily contact with the convention happenings.

A few examples will illustrate his coverage of the conventions. On June 7, 1920, Will reported from "Somewhere in

and you are to be congratulated on the research which uncovered it." Stating that the clippings were very fragile, he promised to Xerox as many as possible for use in this study, asking only that the writer "keep this discovery confidential until we can coordinate the public release of this information." A few days later some two dozen clippings and tear sheets were received along with the advertising sheets for the Convention series and a comic strip series to feature Will Rogers in "What's News Today" with jokes by Rogers and drawings by Grove. A proof sheet of six comic strips was also included as they were to appear beginning in September, 1920.

Pennsylvania" that he was going to "steal a march on the other eminent authors" who were gathered at Convention headquarters in Chicago and stay with Boise Penrose who would simply decide on the nominees and phone his choices to Chicago. With tongue in cheek, Rogers claimed "Pen." had already told him who was nominated. He added, "But he asked me not to tip it off, as the hotels and other crooks in Chicago wanted to keep the suckers there a few days till they were thoroughly renovated."

The following day, June 8, he recorded an imaginary conversation with Penrose, primarily through the question-and-answer device. When Will asked his opinion on Sproul's chances he had Penrose answer, "Well, Will, I will tell you the only way to keep a governor from becoming senator is to sidetrack him off on to the presidency." On the chances for Lowden, his answer was that he could get the Pullman vote, "but what we want is a man that can land the DAY COACH VOTE." In this way, Rogers introduced to his readers the various political figures who were being mentioned as possible candidates, casting the actors who would play important roles in the political drama he was to report.

The daily articles continued June 7 through 12, with Will writing as though he and Penrose were listening to the "chat-aqua" in Chicago by telephone. Finally, Will reported, "Pen." decided to phone them to go ahead with the nominations.. When Will listened and then expressed surprise that the nominees had changed, he reported:

I said: "What makes the delegates change? Don't they stay with their man?" Pen. said: "The delegates vote the way their people told them the first ballot. But after that, they sell to the highest bidder." I said: "But that's not honest, is it?" Pen. said: "No, just Politics."

After the nomination of Coolidge and Harding, Will followed the same pattern in reporting the Democratic convention held in San Francisco. The latter articles were sent from "Somewhere in the White House" as he pretended to visit with President Wilson to "get the real advance information on this Democratic weege seance."

The humorist reported that the President was glad to see him after he discovered Will was not asking for an appropriation. When Wilson asked him to tell the latest Republican joke, Rogers said, "I know a good one. Nine-tenths of the Republicans never even heard it until Chicago—Harding."

Kidding Wilson and the convention delegates on their platform, on June 27 he pointed out, concerning soldiers' compensation, "I see you advocate generosity to Soldiers but also say the people shouldn't be taxed any more. Suppose the soldiers are to get together and float a loan among themselves." After the Convention had picked James M. Cox for presidential candidate and Franklin D. Roosevelt for his running mate, Rogers commented on July 4 that the latter was picked "on account of his name, I suppose, figuring that most progressives were so far behind they wouldnt know the difference." Of vice-presidents in general, he said they "answer about the same purpose as a flank cinch on a saddle. If you break the first one, you are worse off than if you had no other."

CHAPTER V

SYNDICATED COLUMNS

Recognizing as early as 1918 that Will Rogers was more than an ordinary humorist, Theodore Roosevelt reportedly told a colleague, "This man Rogers has such a keen insight into the American panorama and the American people that I feel he is bound, in the course of time, to be a potent factor in the political life of the nation." Probably foreseeing an active political role for the cowboy-philosopher, Roosevelt added, "His good-will can be a great asset to our party."¹

Although Rogers refused to become affiliated with the Republican party in 1918 and turned down all subsequent offers to become involved with party politics or to run for political office,² he fulfilled Roosevelt's prediction by becoming a "potent factor" in the political as well as social and civic life of the nation.

¹L. H. Robbins, "The Portrait of an American Philosopher," The New York Times Magazine, November 3, 1935, p. 4.

²Following a speech Rogers made to a state meeting of editors and publishers in Woodland, California, an editorial in the Woodland Daily Democrat, January 26, 1933, pointed out that "the man who has probably influenced more ballots than any other individual," had never voted. The editorial quoted Rogers as saying, "Nope, if this here country goes to the bowwows, there ain't no one can blame me for it. I keep saying I'm a Democrat, but I ain't. I just pretend to be 'cause Democrats are funny and I'm supposed to be." (The editorial is reprinted in Love, pp. 48-49.) Will Rogers, Jr., in a personal interview, also stated that his father had never voted.

Robert Wagner, Hollywood producer and editor of a small newspaper in Beverly Hills, in 1929 called Will Rogers a "King Maker," such a "terrific force in American life" that even the biggest political figures sought his favor. "A boost from Will is worth millions of votes; his kidding is likely to mean political oblivion," Wagner said. Noting that the "Wise Fool" never took "strong party sides," he pointed out that "Rogers can crystalize or destroy a political issue with his editorial 'gags.'"³

The "political gags" might be heard from the stage or screen, of course, but it was through the printed word, particularly the daily and weekly columns, that they reached and influenced the most people. Comparing Rogers with others who attempted to influence public opinion, a New York Times writer pointed out that, through newspapers alone, the humorist "spoke to, and for, 40,000,000 Americans daily, rich and poor, standpatters and liberals, and they all heard him gladly while statesmen and professors addressed deaf ears."⁴

To illustrate the role Rogers played as a newspaper columnist, this chapter will describe his writings for the McNaught Syndicate, beginning with the first weekly article released in 1922, followed by the "Worst Story" series which ran from 1925 until 1927, and the "daily telegram" which began in The New York Times in the summer of 1926 and was syndicated in October of that year.

³Beverly Hills Script, June 8, 1929, pp. 2-3.

⁴Robbins, p. 4.

Weekly Articles

Titled "Settling the Affairs of the World as They Should Be," Will's first syndicated article was released for publication December 31, 1922. The Follies star said his purpose was to give readers "the Real Low Down on some of these Birds who are sending home the Radish Seed," but in reality it meant another outlet for Rogers' philosophical and political comments as well as a big boost in his income. The Federal Income Tax Form filed by Rogers for the year 1923 shows that he was paid \$26,000 by the McNaught Syndicate his first year as a weekly columnist, or \$500 per article.⁵

Syndicate editors believed the feature would be a popular one and took precautions to protect their rights as can be seen from the handwritten note shown in Figure 2 on the following page. To introduce the series, the following "Editor's Note" was to be inserted at the beginning of the article, right after Rogers' name:

⁵Rogers' total income from all sources reported on page 1 of the Federal Income Tax Form for 1923 was \$167,956.99. On this amount, he paid \$6,300 in Federal Income Tax. It is interesting to note that, under business deductions, the tax form shows that Betty Rogers was paid a salary of \$26,000, the exact amount of the income from McNaught. The form does not indicate the reason for the salary; according to Paula Love, however, Mrs. Rogers was paid for taking care of her husband's business affairs, and whatever he was paid for the syndicated writing was hers to use for household expenses. Much of the correspondence between the syndicate and Rogers was addressed to Mrs. Rogers, which would bear this out. No previous study has attempted to examine closely the financial affairs of Rogers and never before have the personal files containing this data been made available for research, Mrs. Love said. All the letters, contracts, and other material concerning business transactions are from the Rogers Collection.

Release Sat. or Sunday, Dec. 30 or 31

Settling the affairs of the World as they should be.

Insert

By WILL ROGERS.

¶ Everybody is writing something nowadays. It used to be just the Literary or Newspaper men who were supposed to know what they were writing about that did all the writing. But nowadays all a man goes into office for is so he can try to find out something and then write it when he comes out. Now being in Ziegfeld Follies for almost a Solid Year in New York has given me an inside track on some of our biggest men in this Country who I meet nightly at the Stage Door.

aper every Sunday.

... the truth about our Men and Affairs. When asked I explained to the audience why I was able to tell the truth. It is because I have never mixed up in Politics. So you all are going from time to time, get the real Low Down on some of these Birds who are sending home the Raddish Seed.

¶ You know the more you read and observe about this Politics thing You got to admit that each Party is worse than the other. The one that's out always looks the best. My only solution would be to keep 'em both out one term and hire My Good friend Henry Ford to run the whole thing. Give him a commission on what he saves us. Put his factory in with the government and instead of Seeds every spring mail out those Things of his.

¶ Mail Newberry one every morning Special Delivery.

¶ I tell you Folks, all Politics is Apple Sauce.

¶ The President gave a Luncheon for the visiting Governors, where they discussed but didn't TRY Prohibition.

¶ It was the consensus of opinion of all their Speeches that there was a lot of drinking going on and that if it wasn't stopped by January that they would hold another meeting and try and get rid of some of the stuff.

¶ Senator Curtis proposed a Bill this week to stop Bootlegging in the Senate.

Copyright 1922 by the McNaught
Syndicate, Inc.

Caution! Be sure to run our
copyright line, as the material
is ~~sure~~ certain to be lifted unless
carefully protected.

The McNaught Syndicate, Inc.

Figure 2. Portions of the First Manuscript Typed by Will Rogers for the McNaught Syndicate, Including the Editor's Note.

The famous cowboy monologist, Will Rogers, has undertaken to write for this paper a weekly article of humorous comment on contemporary affairs. The Literary Digest recently quoted an editorial from the New York Times thus: "Not unworthily is Will Rogers carrying on the tradition of Aristophanes on the comic stage."⁶

Subscribing newspapers paid according to circulation, with the New York Times alone paying \$150 weekly for the column during the first year. Other newspapers paid amounts ranging from \$50 each for the Chicago News and Boston Globe to \$25 for the Kansas City Star, to \$750 for the Fort Worth Star-Telegram, and \$3.00 for the Galveston [Texas] Tribune.⁷

Some newspaper editors used a standing headline for the article each week; others wrote a narrative headline. The New York Times, for instance, titled each weekly article "Slipping the Lariat Over" until July 20, 1924. With that edition, the standing headline was dropped for a title that indicated the subject of the article. The first one of this kind used was called "Mingling with the Bryans."⁸

The Los Angeles Examiner first used "Roping the News" as a standing headline, but within a few months that paper had changed to a journalistic style heading. On July 29, 1923, the one-line, four-column headline for Rogers' article in the Los Angeles paper read, "Comedian Finds Real Fountain

⁶Original Manuscript, Rogers Collection. Future references to such material will be cited as "Manuscript." Published articles vary in form because of editing; and, for that reason, each source from which excerpts are taken will be identified.

⁷Subscription List, Rogers Collection.

⁸The New York Times, July 20, 1924.

of Youth." The McNaught Syndicate furnished headlines with each article and many papers used these rather than writing their own.

Length of articles. The weekly articles ranged from approximately 1500 to 1700 words during the first few years. By 1929, they were shorter, 1150 to 1250 words in length, and in 1933 they grew shorter still. Great variation was shown in 1934 and the first half of 1935. One week an article would be only 650 words long; the next it would be nearly double that length. Because Rogers was always involved in numerous pursuits in addition to his writing, the amount of time he had for this work probably influenced the length of his weekly articles. Also, according to Mrs. Rogers, in later years when his schedule became very overcrowded, he would have gladly dropped the weekly articles because of the drain on his time.⁹

Editing of weekly articles. Will Rogers has often been quoted as saying his material was never edited, yet in the Rogers Collection are literally hundreds of original manuscripts typed by Will himself with his own penciled editing. Superimposed are the marks of the McNaught editor.

Most frequent changes are in punctuation, spelling, capitalization, and paragraphing. Though Will's pages were liberally strewn with commas, rarely were they in the right places. Periods were almost non-existent, usually being replaced by commas. Capital letters appeared in unexpected

⁹Betty Rogers, p. 194.

places, sometimes on words that he meant to stress, but often for no explainable reason. Editors changed some and let others stand, helping to develop the unorthodox Rogers style.

The original manuscripts show that Will consistently substituted an extra letter for the apostrophe in certain words (i.e., wasent, hasent, and dident) while he simply omitted the apostrophe in others (wont, dont, cant, its, thats, etc.). Nor has an example been found in which he used an apostrophe to show possession. Most such errors were carefully corrected by McNaught editors until 1927-28. Then editing marks gradually lessened. From that time on, an apostrophe was added only if it were necessary for understanding, usually to show possession.

In later years, Rogers began to type many of his articles in all capital letters, avoiding the problem of proper capitalization; but it meant additional work for the editors. Readers had come to expect irrational capitalization as a part of the Rogers style. If words were suddenly capitalized correctly, this might have an adverse effect on readership, they must have reasoned. In any case, the irregular capitalization appeared in the published articles even when the original was typed in upper case.

The single error most frequently corrected by editors was the comma which Will consistently used instead of a period. Originals of the early articles are dotted with the editor's X mark over the comma, indicating that periods were to replace the commas Will used so liberally. Although many

of these errors were permitted to stand in the later articles, some editing was still required for clarity.

Typing habits. Will's "bouts with the typewriter" were mentioned earlier as described by those who watched him at work. All of the first drafts in the Rogers Collection bear witness to his lack of skill as a typist and the articles mailed to the McNaught Syndicate were far from being "clean." Words, phrases, and whole lines are sometimes "x'ed" out, letters are transposed or omitted, and there are numerous "strike-overs."

The first few articles are typed with a single space between the lines, but from May of 1923, the manuscripts usually are double spaced. In view of the great amount of editing required, the editor very likely stressed the need for the extra space. Yet even in this matter, the journalist imposed his own will. Often as he neared the end of a page, he would switch to single spacing, probably attempting to finish an idea before he had to attend to the mechanics of inserting a fresh sheet of paper in the machine.¹⁰

From the many manuscripts donated by the McNaught Syndicate and now in the Rogers Collection, it is evident that he used whatever paper was available at the moment. Some of the early articles are on Rogers' personal stationery headed "Will Rogers / New Amsterdam Theatre / New York." Others were on hotel stationery, onionskin, or plain bond typing paper of regulation size. In later years, after he

¹⁰See Figure 3, p. 129.

THOUGHTS WHILE FLYING

By Will Rogers July 21 or 22, 1934

WELL ALL I KNOW IS JUST WHAT I READ IN THE PAPERS, OR SEE, OR HEAR. I HAVE ALWAYS BEEN A READER OF THE MAGAZINE "TIME" EVER SINCE IT STARTED. ~~I~~ I TRY TO READ A LOT OF OTHER ~~OTHER~~ MAGAZINES, AND THE SATURDAY EVENING POST I COULDNT LIVE WITHOUT. AND ALL THE NEWSPAPERS I CAN GET MY PAWS ON, AND A COUNTRY ONE OR TWO, FOR THEY ARE THE BEST INFORMED READING OF ALL. THEN YOU WANT TO READ BOTH POLITICAL SIDES. WELL THE OTHER DAY I MET THE MANAGING EDITOR OF THE "TIME". HE WAS MAKING HIS FIRST VISIT TO ~~THE~~ PACIFIC ~~OCEAN~~ OR JAPANS OCEAN. A YOUNG FELLOW, MIGHTY NICE, AND OF COURSE MIGHTY

SAN FRANCISCO GAVE A BIG FUNERAL, TO THE REBURIAL OF AN OLD BUM WHO DIED 50 YEARS AGO, AND ALWAYS CALLED HIMSELF "EMPEROR OF THE UNITED STATES AND PROTECTOR OF MEXICO". AND THATS WHAT THEY PUT ON HIS HEADSTONE. NO OTHER TOWN WOULD HAVE ENOUGH SENTIMENT TO DO THAT BUT FRISCO, (PARDON ME, SAN FRANCISCO), I AM WANT TO GO BACK THERE AGAIN. DREW PEARSON, ONE OF WASHINGTONS BEST WRITERS, BOTH HUMOROUS AND INSTRUCTIVE, HIS FATHER IS THE GOVERNOR GENERAL OF THE VIRGIN ISLANDS, AND MR ROOSEVELT IS GOING TO GIVE EM A RUM FACTORY. THEY MAKE GREAT RUM PUNCHES THERE. I HAD ONE, OR TWO, AND LIKE TO NOT GOT BACK TO THE AEROPLANE. WE WAS ANCHORED OUT IN THE BAY, ~~WE WERE XXXXXXXXX~~ IT WAS A SEA PLANE, I WAS FLYING FROM SOUTH AMERICA. DR CADMAN, MIGHTY FINE FELLOW BY THE WAY, ONE OF NEW YORKS GREATEST PREACHERS, GOT IN BAD WITH SOME OF HIS ~~OWN~~ HERD FOR ENDORSING A FOUNTAIN PEN POINT. HE REALIZES NOW HOW MIGHTY THE PEN IS. I ENDORSED CHEWING GUM ONE TIME AND ALMOST LIKE TO HAD TO TAKE UP CHEWING ~~TO~~ TOBACCAO TO WIN MY "FANS" BACK AGAIN. NOTHING CAN GET YOU IN WRONG QUICKER THAN AN ENDORSEMENT. I EVEN GOT IN WRONG ONE TIME FOR ENDORSING THE DEMOCRATIC PARTY. WELL ITS JUST MIDNIGHT, AND WE ARE ABOUT TO LAND IN ALBEQRQUE, NEW MEXICO. THE TYPEWRITER IS ON A LITTLE LUNCH TABLE THAT FASTENS ON THE SEATS TO SERVE FOOD ON. AIR IS SMOOTH AND LOVELY, AND I AM GOING TO SLEEP FROM HERE IN. GOOD NIGHT EVERYBODY.

Figure 3. Example of Rogers' Typing After He Began Using All Capital Letters, and Illustrating the Change to Single Spacing As He Neared the End of the Page.

became the most famous daily customer of Western Union, the writer frequently used the yellow telegraph blanks. When he went to a Western Union office to file his "daily piece," he would simply pick up several extra blanks and stuff them into his pockets to be used for notes or for typing paper.¹¹ Some articles filled as many as six of the short-form Western Union sheets.

Topics for the Weekly Article

Though Will Rogers was best known for his political comments, his weekly articles touched on many subjects, often in the same piece. He wrote about his family, Oklahoma, horse races, Ford cars, international affairs, the movies, sports, carpets, Mah Jongg, Einstein, and newspapermen, to mention only a few. During the period when he was "barking for his Dinner," as he frequently termed his speaking tour, Will wrote of the people he met and often included material from his speeches. When he was in Hollywood, he gave his readers the "low down" on movie stars; during political conventions he reported the "inside dope" not found in regular news stories. And he sometimes explained his techniques to his readers.

In November, 1923, after nearly a year of writing the regular weekly articles, he made this explanation:

Now for the last few months I have been writing and I have become ambitious and want to do "Bigger and Better things." I realize that my writings up to

¹¹Personal interview with Mrs. Love, August 24, 1966.

now have only appealed to the Morons. (That's not Mormon misspelled. It's Morons, just as it's spelled.) So I have been a close Student and admirer of some of our great editorial writers and I have tried to study their style and, beginning with this article, I am changing my entire method of Literature and I hereby bid Adieu to my Half-Wit Audience. (As a writer's writings never appeal to a higher grade of intelligence than the Writer himself). So, from now on, I am going to give these learned and heavy thinkers a run for their Laurels. I am out to make the front Page. My Column will be called The World Tomorrow, not only commenting on the news of Today but predicting what the morrow will bring forth.¹²

The prediction which followed was for the outcome of a horse race, of interest to "40 million Human Beings, and 2,000 Bookmakers," Will explained, "while the news of the unearthing of a Prehistoric Skull at Santa Barbara, California, linking us up with the Neanderthal Age will only be appreciated by a small majority of us thinking people."¹³

In the same article, he mentioned Hugo, Voltaire, Cicero, Socrates, and Einstein. Citing Napoleon's statement that an army travels on its stomach, he pointed to the progress in transportation since that time, and inferred that Congress was as outmoded as Napoleon. He said that Congressmen "go ahead building Battleships which will be as useless as a shipping board," adding, "Transportation advances but our Lawmakers are still traveling on their Stomach."

¹²The New York Times, November 18, 1923. The quotation is from Rogers' article as edited by the McNaught Syndicate. In the original, he said, "So I have been a close friend and admirer of our great Journalist Mr. Arthur Brisbane. . . ." Names of persons or products were often changed in the early years; later, however, most of them were permitted to stand.

¹³Ibid.

A football game between Tuskegee and Alabama Normal was the major topic for an article November 29, 1925, when America had "gone Cuckoo" over the sport and "Red Grange could run against Walter Johnson for President and be elected by a Harding Landslide." He called the Normal school "a sort of a Princeton" and Tuskegee "the Harvard of the Ethiopian race." Although the editor had deleted a line which said of the Normal "it means well but it hasent got much tradition, its just sorter flirting with culture,"¹⁴ other racial comments and descriptions were left as he wrote them. He described the "Bent Haired population," people who were "black, High brown, Chocolate, dark bays, Low yellows, ashy" and said that "the Taxi Driver had to turn on his lights, it was so dark around that depot" when he arrived in Montgomery.

Highly complimentary of the exciting game, he said, "Football! They played it!" Of the players he remarked that "anytime these Birds toe the mark it's on the level. Not a one of them was hired to go there by an 'Old Alumnus.'" Describing the Tuskegee professors, he said, "No Southern Darkey talk among them. You would think you were conversing with the Boston Historical Society. They spoke such good English I couldn't understand 'em."¹⁵

¹⁴Manuscript.

¹⁵Ibid.

Henry Ford had been a favorite target for Will's humor in the Follies and he was frequently mentioned in the articles as well. The columnist claimed "Uncle Henry" had "done more personally to change the style of life and customs of this country than all the Presidents ever elected, or defeated" when he "started half the world cranking, and the other half dodging."¹⁶

On the lecture tour which he began October, 1925, Will Rogers enjoyed his contacts with the "folks" and his articles were written about the people he met and the places he visited. Taking his readers with him as he toured, Will told them he "wanted to get out and find out what was going on." He explained,

Well, when I write you of Texas, I know about it. . . . I talked with every Editor in each town, all the writers on the papers, Hotel Managers, Ranchmen, Farmers, Politicians, Head Waiters, Barbers, Newsboys, Bootblacks, Everybody I met I would try and get their angle.¹⁷

Here, again, is evidence that he was studying the "market," trying to find "truth" on which to base his humor and to discover what appealed to his readers. To him, "research" was studying people.

Famous for his easy-going, gentle nature, Will Rogers was also sensitive to criticism and on a few occasions his injured pride was obvious in the weekly articles. When he did get hurt, not even the President was immune.

¹⁶Tulsa Daily World, October 11, 1925.

¹⁷Ibid., December 13, 1925.

President Harding was the subject of many jokes, as were all Presidents who held office during Will's days as a humorist. When Rogers visited Harding at the White House during an engagement with a musical show in Washington, the latter said he hoped to be able to see the show. The next day, however, a White House secretary visited Will and "asked him not to make so many remarks about President Harding's golf."¹⁸

Later in the week, it was rumored that the President planned to attend the show on a particular night, but to Will's chagrin, Harding attended a show across the street. During a curtain call remark that night, the humorist recalled jokes about earlier presidents, then added, "After all, it is the test of a big man whether he can stand the gaff."¹⁹

Nor did the sensitive humorist forget the "insult." Later he wrote about a man from Ohio—"Warren Gamaliel something? I forgot the other"—who "didn't come to hear me in the Follies." Because he had "a high regard for the Chief Executive," Will told his readers, he was going to be a "Patriot" and leave the show. He explained,

Mr. Harding wants to see the Follies, but, on account of the humorous relations between the White House and myself being rather strained, he naturally feels a kind of a hesitancy about coming, for, at the present time, you can't see the American Girl being glorified without being annoyed by a jarring presence among them which I am free to admit is myself.

So, on the first of June, I am leaving; not because I want to (for, speaking candidly, it's not the

¹⁸Betty Rogers, pp. 166-67.

¹⁹Ibid., p. 168.

worst position in the World, as my surroundings here have been most beautiful). But, even though you wouldn't judge it by my writings or Grammar, I have some politeness and courtesy, and, being a fair American Citizen . . . I won't do a thing to stand in the way of any pleasure that he may wish to enjoy, no matter how small. So I am willing to get out, and sacrifice a living wage.

There is no reason why a National Institution that is viewed night after night by the best Male members of our Government should not be seen in its mission of Glorifying Young Womanhood by the leading Citizen of our Land at least once. Now, if this is Treason, make the most of it.²⁰

A Boston drama critic, H. T. Parker, also aroused Will's ire when he panned the humorist as well as the De Reszke Singers who appeared with him in the Boston Symphony Hall.²¹ He told his readers that the audience was "fine" except for "one old boy there who thought we were 'desecrating' their temple of Art by causing laughter in it." Then he warmed to his subject.

We had been out 75 nights all over the country and everybody had been wonderful to us. Hadn't received an adverse notice. So this was our last night of the tour. Well, this old Soul is a Musical Critic. Now, can you imagine yourself raising your son up to be a Male Musical Critic? . . . Having a trained musical ear, why naturally my jokes were "Off Key" most of the time. "The diction was poor." My "selections" were extremely bad.

But this old Critic learned his first "Criticing" right there at old Harvard. . . . You know it's been said that "when you graduate from Harvard or Yale it takes the next 10 years to live it down and the next 40 years to try to forget it." Well, he thought my "High Register" was on the bum, and my "Low Registered notes had no roundness to them" Even my "Resonance" was in the wrong place.

. . . That's all right until I find out what it means, and I may even have a complaint at that. He

²⁰The New York Times, May 6, 1923.

²¹Tulsa Daily World, January 3, 1926.

said my jokes had lost the sting to 'em that they used to have; that they had mellowed. That's not my fault. The prominent men are not as bad as they used to be.

Once started, Will seemed unable to let up on his victim. Pointing out that everyone else in the audience had paid for their seats—that the critic had the only free one—Will emphasized, "PEOPLE THAT PAY FOR THINGS NEVER COMPLAIN. IT'S THE GUY YOU GIVE SOMETHING TO THAT YOU CAN'T PLEASE." The critic was out of his element, Rogers continued, and trying to review his part of the show was "like sending an artist out to look at a Rembrandt for somebody and then at the last minute asking him to stop on the way back and see what Farmer Jones' yearlings looked like they were worth."

Taking the blame on himself as he did in some of his early letters to Betty Blake, Will said the critic paid him a compliment when he called him a "small town actor." "You bet your life I am small town," he wrote. "I am smaller than that. I am NO town at all, and listen, that is what I am going to stay is small town." He noted that the same jokes Parker had said were "pitched too high" were laughed at by Calvin Coolidge, adding "Now who are we going to believe, you or Cal? (You will pardon me and if I don't hesitate over the selection, won't you?) And I'll take Cal's." Still heaping it on, Will told of going on to New York the next day for an appearance at a "High Class" breakfast where Mr. Ziegfeld was among the guests. When Ziegfeld heard of the critic's remarks, Will reported, the showman was "tickled to death," and commented, "The Follies have been wrong for 20 years

according to him. That Guy didn't like Lincoln."

Finally, however, the anger ran its course, and Will returned to his usual "upbeat" ending. He told Parker through the weekly article that he bet they would "like each other fine" if they met, and promised to look him up when the show returned to Boston the following year. He added, "I bet you we have a good dinner and we will kill off that old indigestion of yours and I will have a lot of good jokes against Yale, and maybe Harvard will have won a football game in that time and you will all be feeling good." Taking a final poke at himself, Will finished with, "Wasn't that English of mine the Worst that was ever spoken in that Hall?"²²

When Will Rogers went to Europe in 1926 he saw the Continent through the eyes of the "small town" American he proudly claimed to be, and he reported the "small town" things his readers were not likely to read in the usual travel article. He believed he "had a right to go to Europe," he told his readers at the outset, because he was "one of the few Americans that have seen America first."²³

He gave them the "inside dope" on London, Paris, Monte Carlo, and the "Annual Disarming Argument" at Geneva. He related commonplace incidents, such as the difficulty of ordering ham and eggs in the French language and the high cost of taxicabs; recounted conversations with Sir James Barrie, Mrs. Astor, and Bernard Shaw; and described a London tour to places of importance in the lives of Dr. Johnson, Boswell,

²²Ibid.

²³Tulsa Daily World, June 27, 1926.

Dickens, and other literary figures. Slipping back into his small town role, he remarked that the tour would be "a treat for some Literary person that had really heard of these. He didn't mention Shakespeare, and as that was the only English writer I had ever heard of, why naturally I was lost."²⁴

It is interesting to note one paragraph that was deleted from this article before it was released by the McNaught Syndicate. It is a report of a conversation with Sir James Barrie in London and is quoted here as he wrote it:

We talked of the strike which was on then, and he said that the big men who had been accustomed to being at the heads of Governments, like different Lords, and Dukes, and Sirs, that he mention, couldn't seem to understand this new element of people that were coming up through Labor, and Liberal, He thought the big men were rather under-estimating their ability and knowledge, that no one knew nowadays where Geniuses would appear from, He was rather in favor of the Labor element,²⁵

This example, as well as others that have been found, shows that there was some censorship of his writings, even though he claimed, and may have believed, they were printed as he wrote them; he rarely read his articles after they were published. Once he remarked, "When I write 'em, I am through with 'em. I am not being paid reading wages. You can always see too many things you wish you hadn't said, and not enough that you ought to."²⁶

²⁴Ibid., July 18, 1926.

²⁵The original form, as typed by Will Rogers, is used here. Note the use of commas for periods and the substitution of an "e" for the apostrophe in couldn't.

²⁶The New York Times, September 1, 1927.

Other remarks that likely caused criticism from some quarters were published as he wrote them. In 1929, for instance, Rogers took a playful swing at two heroic figures, George Washington and Thomas Jefferson, citing "things they [political speakers] wont bring out" in political speeches on Washington's birthday. He termed moving the capital to Washington "the first Real Estate promotion scheme" adding, "It wasent the center of the Country, BUT it was the center of Georges [sic] and Tom's land holdings." The leaders "landed on two of the best hills in that Country, and the Government got the Swamps," he claimed.²⁷

Advising Coqlidge on a suitable topic for an address the President was to make on a college campus February 22, Will told him he should talk about "Forward passing" because "what that College needs is, 'How to get from the kickoff to their back line accompanied by a Football.'"²⁸

Not even religion was taboo in Rogers' weekly article. Charging that the "Church is in Politics more than the Politicians," he said, "If Congress met on Sundays, why there would be no services anywhere, all the Ministers would have their eyes on Congress." He charged that "Preachers are doing our principal Legislation for us now." And, as a result, they "just cant save anybody nowadays" because they are "too busy saving the Nation." Preachers "cant monkey with individual salvation"; they read the Congressional Record instead of

²⁷Ibid., February 10, 1929.

²⁸Ibid.

their Bibles.²⁹

Backing the Congress that he so often humorously criticized, Rogers told the Ministers (and his readers),

We got to trust somebody to run our Country, and when we elect em why lets let em alone, and see how they do, then if they dont do why throw em out when they come up for re-election. But dont stand in the wings prompting em all the time, that keeps em nervous, and besides they never do learn their parts.

In this case, he was hitting at the pressure being applied to Congress over the prohibition issue as election time neared. Attempting to enlighten his readers in earnest, he cited the case of "Senator Jasbo" who "got in wrong with a lot of his people down there" because he was for Al Smith while his state "come pretty near going for Hoover."³⁰ To get in their good graces again, the Senator had proposed \$24 million for Prohibition Relief. He explained:

Here is the Farmer starving to death, The wets wetter than they ever was, the Drys dryyer than a Tarriff speech. Yet he wants to give em 24 million. Now what 24 million would do, nobody has the least idea. It might dry up the East side of Pennsylvania Avenue, but it wouldnt be enough to cross the street. Well now thats his lifes work, is to BET 24 million dollars of our money that he can get back into the good graces of the extreme Drys that he lost out with last fall.

Will trusted Calvin Coolidge, though, and was betting that he "goes out with the Books balanced." "We may be in

²⁹Tulsa Daily World, February 17, 1929. Note the fewer changes in Will's original copy at this time. Many commas are used in lieu of periods and the apostrophies are usually omitted as they were in the originals. The changes are due to less critical editing; most of Rogers' errors remained consistent.

³⁰In the original, he referred to "Senator Harris" from Georgia. The changes here, however, are his own. "Harris" is marked out and "Jasbo" is penciled above in Rogers' handwriting. Georgia is simply marked through with pencil.

a terrible lot of scrapes," he added, "But we wont be in the RED."³¹

After the stock market crash in 1929, Will used his columns to "help Mr. Hoover and Wall Street Restore Confidence," and his method was to make the economic situation appear less serious than most people feared.³² On October 29, he described "wailing day": "When Wall Street took that tail spin, you had to stand in line to get a window to jump out of, and speculators were selling space for bodies in the East River." Two weeks later, he wrote, "Prosperity this Winter is going to be enjoyed by everybody that is fortunate enough to get into the poor house."³³

He described the stock market as a "sieve (one of those pans with holes in it)," through which goes all the "small stuff"—the little investors. But instead of learning that they cannot win, Rogers continued, "they pick themselves up, turn bootlegger or do something to get some money, and then they crawl back in the hopper and away they go again."³⁴

A critic of Herbert Hoover and the Republican party during the prosperous years, Rogers was among the President's strongest defenders after the depression hit. In a radio speech, April 30, 1930, he came to Hoover's defense:

You know, when Mr. Coolidge was in and just let everything go along, that was wonderful. Nobody ever

³¹Tulsa Daily World, February 17, 1929.

³²Ibid., December 1, 1929.

³³Ibid., November 12, 1929.

³⁴Ibid., November 10, 1929.

asked Coolidge to fix a thing. . . . Now Mr. Hoover is elected and we want him to fix everything. Farm relief—we want him to fix the farmer. Now, the farmer never had relief. You know what I mean. He never had it even under Lincoln, he never had it. But he wants it under Hoover. . . .

Prohibition—they think Mr. Hoover ought to fix prohibition. Well, my goodness, Mr. Hoover can't—I don't know, but if I remember right, the boys had a couple of nips under Calvin's administration, I think they did.

Prosperity—millions of people never had it under nobody and never will have it under anybody, but they all want it under Mr. Hoover.³⁵

Always an optimist, Rogers found plenty to write about other than the tragic depression, although he continued to make frequent references to the economic situation as he wrote on other topics.

Continuing to keep informed on American problems while he traveled throughout Europe, Will raised the question, "Why did America want to settle something in South America?" Answering his own question, he said that since "we were practically settled up here"—with the exception of "The French Debt, The World Court, Disarmament, Lower Taxes, Prohibition, Farmers relief, Airship Investigations, and a few little odds and ends"—we were "in shape to help out a backward country that wasn't as progressive as we are in keeping everything settled right up to the minute."³⁶

In 1927, Rogers wrote a similar article on the United States becoming involved with internal problems in Mexico,

³⁵Radio Talks of America's Humorist, pp. 10-11. Rogers' frequent use of the "I don't know" and "you know what I mean" can be noted here. These were common characteristics of his speaking style, yet they do not appear in the written form. Possibly he was not conscious of these devices.

³⁶Tulsa Daily World, January 31, 1926.

a much more forceful piece of writing than the one cited above.³⁷

Commenting on the morning headline, "Going to break off Diplomatic Relations with Mexico, and lift the arms embargo, and allow arms to be shipped in to any Revolutionists," he wrote:

Now get that will you? Here we are sore at Mexico and because they dont do exactly like we want them too, [sic] why we are going to allow, and even encourage, all the bloodshed we can. . . . Instead of us going down and either licking President Callas, or if we are not, why then quit argueing [sic] with them. Either do one or the two. But no, we are going to allow Guns to go in and let some Revolutionists get even with President Callas for us.

Reminding his readers that "we are the Nation that is always hollering for dissarmament [sic] and Peace," he added, "Suppose they dont like Coolidge down there, and they would allow arms to be shipped into this Country to arm a revolution. . . . Boy, what a howl we would put up!"

He satirically referred to the "humanitarian" nation having "taken sides" in the revolution in Nicaragua and in China, adding that now "we are going to help some ambitious Politican gather togeater [sic] a lot of ignorant Peons and go forth to start a new revolution in Mexico." According to Rogers, the real issue concerned the fact that Callas was trying to enforce a law passed by Mexico ten years earlier that would "give America 50 years to get the oil out from under the land," which they would "divide the land up with the Natives."

³⁷Ibid., March 19, 1927.

Continuing his argument he said,

Now that dont seem so unreasonable to give you fifty years. We say its against our laws. Our Laws! Whats our laws got to do with Mexico?

Personally I dont think Doheny, and Sinclair, and the Standard and all of those are undergoing any great hardships and starvation. I doubt if Mexico owes them anything, or owes us anything. We have got more out than we put in.

He cited our emigration law to keep people out of our country, saying, "Well that was all right. It was a good law." Then he pointed out that Mexico was doing the same thing and, in addition, giving "Fifty years warning," "the longest disspose [sic] notice" of which he had ever heard.

As a solution, he called for some diplomats that "'savied' human nature" instead of phrases because "the higher up our officials get, the less they seem to know about human nature, or how to deal square with Nations the same as they would with individuals."³⁸

Reporting a visit to the West Coast by the House Naval Affairs Committee in 1933, he said they were "feasted and fed everywhere they could get ashore" by the Chamber of Commerce in each coastal city. In a prophetic statement, at least when viewed in retrospect, he said, "You see we out here keep telling em they are going to have a war with Japan, and the Fleet should be here." He thought it would be "a funny thing" if the Government says some day, "Well, will you Chamber of Commerces guarantee a war if we give you the Naval Base?" As long as the "old war scare" kept going, California could "every once in awhile land some Government

³⁸Tulsa Daily World, March 19, 1927.

by-product," according to the humorist. "But its got to be a great racket now for cities to see what they can hornswoggle out of the Federal Government."³⁹

In spite of his attempted levity, Will Rogers was deeply troubled—and sincerely puzzled at times—about the economic situation. Ironically, these were the peak financial years for him. His income from McNaught alone was \$120,000 in 1930 and in 1932 he earned an additional \$4,150 for the Convention articles.⁴⁰ But his income was a closely guarded secret. He made large donations to organized charities and was reported to be a "soft touch" by all who knew him. Like many other people at that time, he wanted to help, but he could not find the solution.

Impatient with the slowness of governmental agencies, and with drought in the Southwest adding to the tragedy, Will Rogers decided to make a personal effort to help. He canceled lectures that would have earned him \$1000 per night to go on tour for relief in the stricken areas, a venture similar to the one he had completed so successfully in 1927 for victims of the flooding Mississippi River.

In January of 1931 he began a twenty-day tour of Oklahoma, Texas, and Arkansas to raise funds for drought stricken families in the area. Flying in a Navy plane piloted by Frank Hawkes, the humorist performed in several cities each day and

³⁹Ibid., October 22, 1933.

⁴⁰"Will Rogers Convention Services," 1932, Account Sheet from McNaught, Rogers Collection.

was met by cheering crowds of grateful people wherever he went. His visits were heralded by front page newspaper stories in every city on the tour,⁴¹ sometimes emblazoned in banner headlines, and his weekly articles as well as his "daily wire" told of the need for funds and challenged the readers to help.

Initial arrangements were made by Amon G. Carter, publisher of the Fort Worth Star-Telegram, and Jesse Jones, Houston businessman who later served as chairman of the Reconstruction Finance Commission under Franklin D. Roosevelt. Personal expenses were paid by Rogers himself, and a Texas oil company supplied the fuel. Every cent raised went into the relief fund. The pair visited 57 cities, flying a total of 12,105 miles in 84 air hours, and they raised a total of \$193,382.⁴²

Praised for his heroic efforts and "extraordinary self-sacrifice," a resolution, originally approved by the American Legion in Fort Smith, Ark., was read into the Congressional Record. Introduced by the Honorable Effiegene Wingo of Arkansas, the resolution read, in part:

⁴¹The Daily Oklahoman, January 14, 15, and 17, and February 3, 9, 1931; also The Panhandle (Oklahoma) Herald, February 5, 1931.

⁴²Milsten, pp. 160-61. The Daily Oklahoman, February 3, 1931, reported that \$10,000 had been raised in a single evening performance for "more than a capacity crowd" in the Oklahoma City auditorium. Receipts from tickets brought in \$9,690. From the stage, Will assessed John A. Brown, Lew Wentz, and himself \$100 each, then fined Mr. Brown another \$10 to bring the total to "ten grand." The following day, February 3, he was to appear in Norman at 10:00 a.m., Chickasha at 2:30 p.m., and Ardmore at eight o'clock.

Whereas among all agencies tending to alleviate the desperate conditions existing the most outstanding personal agency is Will Rogers, who, inspired with love of country and a sympathetic feeling for suffering humanity, is making a sacrifice of his time, his money, and is making use of his unusual talents to awaken the people of America to the problems confronting them by giving lectures in this country and letting the proceeds be used for relief work; and

Whereas, he not only procures moneys, food, clothing and material by this method but he also by his wit and wisdom and good cheer strengthens the morale of the citizenship at large. . . .⁴³

In April, 1931, his articles took on a foreign flavor again when he answered a Red Cross plea to fly to Managua, Nicaragua, following a severe earthquake and fire disaster there. After spending four days in that city, he toured other Central and South American countries on behalf of the Relief Fund for the victims.

The Maracaibo [Venezuela] Herald gave his visit front page coverage. Under the headline, "Will Rogers Given Hearty Welcome," the paper reported that the arrival of the "premier American humorist" on the Pan American Airways plane "was the start of a reception which has not had its counterpart in Maracaibo for a long time." Describing his benefit performance there, the article said of Rogers, "Whimsical, witty and humorous as always, he was at his jovial best and kept his audience in a continuous uproar."⁴⁴

During his two week's flying tour, he gave his readers a running account of the glories of air travel, and his

⁴³U.S. Congressional Record, 71st Congress, 3d Sess., LXXIV, 4866.

⁴⁴The Maracaibo [Venezuela] Herald, April 18, 1931.

reputation as the world's greatest advocate of aviation grew. But his enthusiasm for flying dated back into the twenties when he championed the exploits of many pioneer aviators in his newspaper columns.

In 1927 when Charles Lindbergh was on his solo flight across the Atlantic, Rogers wrote simply, "No attempts at jokes today." He knew that America and much of the world joined him in his thoughts of "an old slim, tall, bashful, smiling American boy" who was "somewhere out over the Atlantic ocean, where no lone human being has ever ventured before." Though Will knew his venturesome friend was "being prayed for to every kind of Supreme Being that has a following," he still worried. If the flyer were to fail, Will said, "it will be the most universally regretted single loss we ever had."⁴⁵

The night before General Billy Mitchell was demoted to the rank of Colonel, he took Will on a flight over the nation's capital. Reporting it later, Will praised Mitchell because "he never squealed and he never whines," adding that the demotion seemed "a strange way to repay a man who has fought for us through a war, and who has fought harder for us in Peace to be reprimanded for telling the truth."⁴⁶

In the courtroom when Mitchell was dismissed from the Army on the charges of betraying the faith of the people by

⁴⁵The New York Times, May 23, 1927.

⁴⁶Ibid., May 10, 1925.

playing upon their fears, Will Rogers ran to him, threw his arms around the condemned man's shoulders, and cried, "The people are with you, Billy. Keep punching." Recalling the scene years later, Mitchell called it "a moment of tenderness—the one moment of all that nightmare which I shall never forget."⁴⁷

"Casey" Jones, president of the Curtiss Flying Service who had piloted the humorist many times, called Rogers "Aviation's Patron Saint," a title that reportedly pleased him more than any other distinction he ever received.⁴⁸ In 1928, Mr. Jones stated, "After Lindberg [sic], Will Rogers is aviation's best press agent. The industry owes him more than he is ever likely to collect. His wit, his extraordinary publicity resources, and his genuine enthusiasm for flying entitle him to the nomination as patron saint of aviation." According to Jones, "Aviators and ground men in every state declare: 'We can always count on Colonel Lindberg to do the right thing and on Will Rogers to say the right thing at the right time. They are two of a kind.'"⁴⁹

Although Rogers never learned to fly, his role in the development of aviation in America has never been fully recognized. He used his columns to prepare the public for the air

⁴⁷Ruth Mitchell, "Saga of Billy Mitchell," Reader's Digest Condensed Books (Pleasantville, N.Y.: The Reader's Digest Association, May, 1954), p. 178.

⁴⁸Carl Stearns Clancy, "Aviation's Patron Saint," Scientific American, CXLI, October, 1929, p. 283.

⁴⁹Ibid.

age which he believed to be inevitable, in peace as well as war. Finding this mode of travel better suited than any other to his impatient personality, he flew whenever air transportation was possible. During his tour of Europe in 1926 he wrote, "I have flew around Europe so much that if I don't have an Airship I think that I am walking."⁵⁰

Much of his writing was done on his air trips. One article made up of comments on various items was titled "Thoughts While Flying."⁵¹ Another time he began, "Well all I know is just what I read in the papers, or what I see as I try to look down through the wings of an aeroplane."⁵² Several times he mentioned aviation in connection with friends who visited in the Rogers' California home. In February, 1934, he noted the overnight visit of Frank Hawkes and his wife. Hawkes was "taking over a big Curtis bombing plane to demonstrate to the Chinese Government," Will reported. Then he joked, "This Aviation is not a local affair, it seems to be spreading."⁵³

In one of the last articles written from home before he began the Alaskan flight, Will reported a visit from "Amelia Earhardt [sic] and her husband Mr. Putman."⁵⁴ He praised her for her courage: "She has sure got the nerve that gal," and described her trip from Mexico to New Orleans when she

⁵⁰Tulsa Daily World, August 22, 1926.

⁵¹Ibid., July 22, 1934.

⁵²Tulsa Daily World, April 19, 1935.

⁵³Ibid., February 25, 1934.

⁵⁴Manuscript, dated, August 4, 1935, Rogers Collection.

just "lit out and set a compass course" instead of following the regular flying route.

Knowing he might have difficulty getting his weekly articles mailed on schedule from the Arctic, Rogers wrote several in advance before he left on the fatal flight. The last one he wrote in the States was written in Seattle, Wash., and scheduled for release August 25. In this one he praised Wiley Post and described the plane in which the pair was to make their long flight. He said the plane was a "Sirus wings, Lockheed body, three-bladed pitch propeller, bug Wash engine." He nicknamed the plane "Red Bus" and "Post Toasty." Rogers reported, "Well, they 'bout got the gas in; Wiley is getting nervous. I want to get this off and leave it before having to send it back from Alaska."

Although he hoped to get away from civilization for a relaxing trip, he foresaw little chance. "You could go to the northermost part of Hudson bay, and expect there would be a pack of folks there in Fords having a picnic, or maby some holding company stockholders sending telegrams to Roosevelt," he concluded.

"Worst Story" Series

In 1925, Will Rogers agreed to write a short daily column for the McNaught Syndicate called "The Worst Story I Heard Today." Based on old jokes or "wise-cracks," the items were to feature names of well-known personalities, with Will's

own humor added. He was to be paid \$500 weekly for the work.⁵⁵ Previously he had received \$1000 for each weekly article; beginning December 26, 1925, however, this was reduced to an \$800 per week guarantee for the weekly article, and the added sum of \$500 weekly was guaranteed for the "Worst Stories"—simply an adjustment in bookkeeping.⁵⁶ Although the daily joke column was less popular than Will's other writing, his total guarantee from McNaught was \$1300 a week, an increase of \$300 over his previous weekly income from the Syndicate.

Mrs. Rogers recalled that it was "fairly easy for a time to find stories apropos or utterly absurd" to be used in the "Worst Story" series. It fell her lot to search for old joke books and assist her husband in finding suitable material. She said, however, that Will never liked the column because of the rigid formula—"it simply wasn't the sort of thing that could hold his interest."⁵⁷

Typically, the column opened with comments about a person or an event, in much the same style he used in the weekly articles. The story or joke, attributed to an individual, concluded the article. Some ended rather limply; others probably brought forth a chuckle right up to and including the "worst stories."

⁵⁵Letter from F. J. Murphy, treasurer of The McNaught Syndicate, Inc., to Will Rogers, June 22, 1925, Rogers Collection.

⁵⁶"Statement of Payments for Will Rogers' Daily and Weekly Features from The McNaught Syndicate," January 20 to May 20, 1926, Rogers Collection.

⁵⁷Betty Rogers, p. 187.

Two examples will illustrate the pattern. One opens with Rogers' comments on a banquet at which he and Secretary of Labor James Davis were guest speakers.⁵⁸

"The Police Chiefs from all over the world met in New York, and of course, as is our barbarous custom now, . . . finished up with a Banquet," he began. Adding an item of current interest, he said, "I'll bet this Monkey Trial in Tennessee will wind up with a Banquet, and Bryan will be reminded of a story to tell." Of his co-speaker, Rogers said, "This Cabinet Business is a side line with Jim Davis. He gives the last Thursday of each month to the Government." After softening this jibe with a compliment, he added, "He also has something to do with Immigration, and if you have anybody you don't like and want to get 'em out of the country, he will give 'em a one-way passport." Then he credited Davis with the following "worst story":

Out where I live a little community, composed of various Nationalities, had all moved in there and were organizing to make their homes. They fixed up a nice Cemetery with a fence and an Archway. A member of one Nationality suggested the words "Rest in Peace" to be put on the Archway, another just the word "Peace," and various others until it looked like they wouldn't agree. Finally an Irishman suggested one that just struck this little band of home builders right. "We Are Here To Stay."

The original of this article is in the Rogers Collection; and, even though it is typed on Will Rogers' personal stationery as were many of his weekly articles, it does not appear to have been typed by the humorist. While far from

⁵⁸Tulsa Daily World, June 8, 1925.

perfect, the typing is much better than any of his regular articles, and the spelling and punctuation are far more correct. Yet the two words added in pencil are in his handwriting, leading the writer to believe Betty Rogers probably typed the article from his rough notes and he did the final editing.

The second example is more nearly in the Rogers style and the typing is obviously his. Dated October 29, 1925,⁵⁹ it concerns a Park Avenue medical doctor who "can cure you of anything," according to the humorist. He claimed that "Most Drs. in N.Y. just tell you where you hurt and then send you to one of their accomplices." Ribbing the specialists, he said there are 10 different ones "that handle just from your forehead down as far as the top of your neck, Eyes, Nose (left side) and nose (right side). Some make a life work of the Right Eye alone. Some the left."

Describing the versatility of "Doc Maurer" in contrast, Will said,

I rushed in one day holding my stomach with all my hands, thinking I would be on the operating table in 15 minutes for appendicitis. Instead of rushing me off and making me fashionable by a removed appendix, he threw me down and glued three Mustard Plasters on my center section, took a fee for one visit instead of a mortgage on the home for an operation, and he sent me out of there pulling at my stomach like there was a bee under my shirt. From that day to this my tummy has had nothing the matter with it but overcrowding occasionally.

The joke credited to the "Doc" is more humorous than the one cited previously, probably because Will gave it his own

⁵⁹Rogers Collection.

interpretation. He describes a talkative "Old Lady" who visited the doctor and "started in with a long riga marole of things." Then, the jokester continued,

He asked her to hold out her tongue. She did, and he kept writing and writing. When he had finished he said, "That will do."

She said, "Why Doctor, I held it out all that time, and you didn't even look at it."

"I know I didn't. I only wanted you to keep it still while I wrote the prescription."

The columnist added a one-line quip of his own following the story: "Now that is almost worth making a married man take up the medical profession."⁶⁰

Will was still writing the "Worst Story" when he left for Europe in the spring of 1926, and he continued to send some of them back from foreign countries. It was during this time, however, that he began to send a daily cable to The New York Times which eventually replaced the joke column.

The Daily Column

Shortly before the Rogers family sailed for Europe, Will visited with Adolph S. Ochs, then publisher of The New York Times. According to Croy, the publisher casually told Rogers that if he happened to "run across anything worth while" he should cable the Times and they would pay the toll.⁶¹

In July of 1926, Mr. and Mrs. Rogers lunched with Lord and Lady Astor at Clivedon where they discovered Lady Astor planned to leave soon for America. Will impetuously decided

⁶⁰Manuscript, Rogers Collection.

⁶¹Croy, p. 180.

to send a cable to his friend Ochs, Mrs. Rogers later recounted, and thus began the daily "wires."⁶² The first one, addressed as a letter-to-the editor, would likely have been used on the editorial page, but Joseph Tebeau, then night managing editor, ordered it put on the first page of the second section.⁶³ As similar cables arrived each day, the practice was continued "until Rogers 'box' had achieved a pre-emptive right to its position in the newspaper." Dated July 29, 1926, the first read,

Nancy Astor, which is the nom de plume of Lady Astor, is arriving on your side about now. She is the best friend America has here. Please ask my friend Jimmie Walker to have New York take good care of her. She is the only one here that don't throw rocks at American tourists. Yours respectfully, Will Rogers.

An editor for the Boston Globe, Larry Winship, called the Syndicate as soon as he saw the item and asked permission to use it in his paper. But McNaught officials had no legal rights to the cables. Ochs considered them as being exclusively for the Times, even though he and Rogers had only a verbal agreement and no money was being paid for these short articles.

McNitt, president of the Syndicate, tried unsuccessfully to reach Rogers to suggest that he substitute the daily cable or telegram for the "Worst Story" articles. Finally, he put the plan in a letter which Rogers received just before he began the return trip to America. He agreed to the plan that would increase his weekly guarantee to \$1700 and 92 newspapers

⁶²Betty Rogers, p. 193.

⁶³A. H. Sulzberger quoted in Folks Say, pp. 150-51.

subscribed to the first syndicated daily telegram.⁶⁴

In a contract, effective June 3, 1928, he was guaranteed \$1,000 for the daily telegram and the weekly article, plus royalties on the "Worst Stories" that were still being reprinted in some papers, and extra amounts for special articles during national conventions.⁶⁵

Two years later, June 1, 1930, a new contract guaranteed him a total of \$2500 per week for the regular daily and weekly pieces. Subscribers paid according to circulation and the syndicate, in turn, paid Rogers the guarantee. According to the contract, he would receive \$2500, in addition, "when seventy per cent (70%) of the total gross receipts come to an amount greater than \$2,500 a week, we will pay you such excess in addition to the \$2,500."⁶⁶ Also, following the outline of the new rate, McNitt added that he hoped to pay the writer some extra money before the year was over. "Your features are in a healthy state and just as popular as ever," he commented. Evidently referring to the financial arrangements McNitt added, "You have not neglected to look out for your own interests, but you have always been fair."⁶⁷

⁶⁴Croy, p. 181; see also Sulzberger. According to the latter, the Times paid cable fees only for the articles.

⁶⁵Letter from F. J. Murphy to Mrs. Rogers, July 24, 1928, Rogers Collection.

⁶⁶Letter from V. V. McNitt to Will Rogers, June 6, 1930, Rogers Collection.

⁶⁷Ibid.

The \$2,500 per week guarantee for the two columns was the highest it ever reached, although the percentage of gross sales Rogers received was raised from 70 per cent to 75 per cent in June, 1934. The final contract was to have continued for three years.⁶⁸

Subscribers. Estimates of the number of papers which carried Rogers' articles have usually set the figure at about 400 newspapers. The only reliable record found in the Memorial files lists a total of 378 separate newspapers who were subscribing to the daily wires in 1932.⁶⁹ During the early years of the depression some publishers had been forced to cancel their subscriptions to save costs, so the number was probably larger before this list was prepared. In April (22) of 1931, the treasurer of the syndicate wrote Mrs. Rogers that eight papers had canceled in the two previous months. Also, because some papers subscribed to the weekly articles only, the list of 378 papers would not have been complete. For these reasons, it would appear that the estimated 400 subscribers may have been somewhat conservative.

Format. Many newspapers, particularly the smaller ones, used the standing title "Will Rogers Says" for the daily article. Some spelled the final word Sez. The conservative New

⁶⁸Letter from McNitt to Will Rogers, March 19, 1934, Rogers Collection.

⁶⁹Typewritten list attached to a letter to Mrs. Rogers from F. J. Murphy, treasurer of McNaught Syndicate, July 22, 1932, Rogers Collection. The list includes newspapers from 40 states and three foreign countries.

York Times used a journalistic headline, always featuring Rogers' name as the first word. Immediately under the two-line heading in that newspaper was the salutation, "To the Editor of The New York Times:". A dateline identified the date and location from which each telegram was sent.

Ranging from 150-200 words and printed in the style of a letter-to-the editor, the daily wires were regularly signed "Yours, Will Rogers," or simply "Will." The syndicate supplied a cut of his signature to those who wanted it, and some newspapers used the signed "Will Rogers" closing. Most newspapers, other than The New York Times, used a small cartoon or sketch with the one-column articles.

Subjects. The range of topics for the daily wires was just as varied as for the weekly articles. When Rogers traveled, he wrote of local people, usually with comment that identified lesser known figures for all his readers. During the depression, he repeatedly turned to that subject. Politics, of course, was always important in his writings, and increasingly he touched on international affairs.

In most cases, he managed to make his point in a few words, aiming still for the reaction, "He's right about that."

On the heated presidential election in 1932, the sage advised his readers to "stop and study a minute" before they lost their tempers. He reminded them that the president's job was a thankless one and "it's going to be mighty hard next Wednesday after it's over to tell which one to congratulate." He concluded, "If this depression stays with us, the

loser Tuesday is going to be the winner."⁷⁰ Following the election, he consoled the loser by saying, "Remember there is always this difference between us and Italy. In Italy Mussolini runs the country but here the country runs the President." Commenting on the large number who voted, he said, "There was actually women went to the polls that didn't have a new hat."⁷¹

It was immediately after the presidential election in 1932, when the bitter campaign and the continuing depression incited many to anger, that the columnist became embroiled in the bitterest controversy of his journalistic career. Scene of the verbal battle was the editorial page of The New York Times.

Citing the fact that Germany was paying her war debts to France, Rogers pointed out that France, in turn, should repay the United States for debts incurred during World War I.⁷² At that time France, like the United States and much of Europe, was having financial trouble, and many people believed the debt owed by France should be canceled to permit her to rebuild the economy. One Times reader who held this belief took Rogers to task for his argument in favor of repayment in the "Letter to the Editor" column, November 21, 1932. The contributor called Rogers a "silo humorist" whose stated views were "dangerously misleading rubbish."

⁷⁰The New York Times, November 2, 1932.

⁷¹Ibid., November 9, 1932.

⁷²Ibid., November 16, 1932.

Four days later⁷³ another missile was fired along the same path when a writer agreed with the viewpoint just cited and claimed that France needed the money from Germany and should not be expected to repay her debts to America at such a time. The second writer pointed to Rogers' "keen judgment we have all so admired in the past," adding that it was a pity to see him "devoting himself now to 'smart aleck' stuff."

Will's first reaction was to "kid" about the attack and in his regular daily column on November 25 he chided the first critic for taking "the hide off" when he was wrong, but he admitted that he was wrong "plenty constant." Will cited his earlier prediction that "nothing would come of" a meeting between Hoover and President-elect Franklin Roosevelt as proof that he was right some of the time, adding "So don't shoot me, boys, till the returns are in all these affairs."

His humorous rebuttal, however, failed to stop the letters to the Times. A man from Salem Center, New York, in a letter published November 28 called Rogers a "hick" and deplored the fact that "the only columnist on The Times, our most powerful anti-hick daily," should be allowed to bring "complete disgrace" to such a newspaper. He called Rogers the "deadliest enemy" of the Times and cited as proof a rebuke from New York Post columnist Walter Lippmann to the editor of the Times.

This charge brought an immediate reaction from Rogers and the following day he wired a Letter-to-the-Editor from

⁷³Ibid., November 25, 1932.

his home in California defending his position. Published in the "Letters" column November 30, it was addressed to "Jimmie James" [Edwin L. James, Managing Editor of the Times].

Will admitted he was angry ("he made me mad, Jimmy") about being called a "hick." "Them's harsh words where I come from, Jimmie," the telegram said. "It's a dirty slam against Claremore and Beverly Hills." Concerning the writer of the letter and his address, Salem Center, New York, Will said:

Have the lost and found department look this town up for me, Jimmie, and we will have the Democrats put in a post office, so this Republican that's in favor of cancellation can get his mail and find out the returns of the last election, where the Democrats won by Lord knows how many millions and their platforms said "pay."

Concerning the fact that the Times was being rebuked by Lippman and the Post, Will said, "Well, if they want to devote their editorial policy to The Times columnist, why I believe The Times can live it down." In a "P.S." which was also published, Will commanded, "Don't use this unless you use it all. Regards to you and Mr. Ochs and everybody."

The final sentence would appear to be a threat or a reminder that "Jimmie's" boss, Mr. Ochs, was a friend of Rogers. Instead, however, it follows the pattern of his customary "up-beat" closing and was more than likely meant to be an unspoken apology for losing his temper.

On the same page with his verbal blast were several letters, some agreeing and some disagreeing with Rogers. One writer said, "More power to Will Rogers! He is a rare bird—

an unhyphenated American." Another said "thousands" read Rogers' daily column as "food for thought," adding, "I trust he is in no danger of being fired." On the opposing side were hints that he take "a much-needed long rest" or that he limit himself "to writing about cows and similar subjects."⁷⁴

By the first of December, the Times editor must have decided to end the controversy, at least as far as the "Letters" column was concerned. An editorial headed "The Rogers Correspondence," began with the statement, "Anyhow, Will Rogers is Read." Without "taking sides," the editorial pointed out that "this newspaper does not suppress opinions contrary to its own" because "American journalism has left that kind of narrowness far behind." Although not directly stated, the editorial implied that Rogers' belief that European nations should pay their debts was opposed to the editorial position of the Times; he would, however, be permitted to "have his say."⁷⁵

From his regular daily column published in the Times December 7, it is obvious that Will was not happy about their "tolerant" statement: he retorted that he was "in no way responsible for the editorials or editorial policy" of the Times! Continuing, Rogers said of the Times editors,

I allow them free reign as to their opinions, so long as it is within the bounds of good subscription gathering.

But I want it distinctly understood that their policy may be in direct contrast to mine.

⁷⁴The New York Times, November 25, 1932.

⁷⁵Ibid., December 1, 1932.

Their editorials may be put in purely for humor, or just to fill space.

Every paper must have its various entertaining features, and their editorials are not always to be taken seriously, and never to be construed as my policy. Yours, Will Rogers.

No clue was given to the Times' reaction to this column. The headline was a straight forward "Mr. Rogers Is Tolerant and Aloof As Regards Editorial Writers," and it might well have added that the editors were ready to be "tolerant and aloof as regards Will Rogers." In any case, the column continued to appear in the regular "box," and Rogers continued to voice his views on political matters.

In the syndicated weekly article which had not been carried by The New York Times since September, 1924, he dealt with the same topic, defending his stand to readers throughout the nation.

Citing the fact that some people felt he should not "dabble in Politics," but "stay on the funny stuff where he belongs," Will countered by saying he had always written on national and international affairs—and with justification. He pointed out that he had visited "almost every country" and talked with prominent men there, adding, "I would have to be pretty dumb to not soak up some information." Challenging editorial writers who might deny him this right, he said:

Where do these other fellows get all of their vast store of knowledge? I never hear of 'em going any place. If I should write on Mexico, I have been down there half a dozen times. There is not a State in this Country that I am not in every once in a while. Talk to everyone, get the Ranchers and Farmers angle.

Those New York writers should be compelled to get out once in their lifetime and get the "Folks" angle.

Now I read Politics, talk Politics, know personally almost every prominent Politician, like 'em and they are my friends, but I cant help it if I have seen enough of it to know that there is some baloney in it. Now I am going to be like an umpire, or referee. I am going to keep on doing the same as I have in the past. I am going to call 'em like I see 'em. If I dont see things your way, well why should I?

. . . Politics is the best show in America and I am going to keep on enjoying it. . . . So on with the show.

As always, however, once he had "said his piece," Rogers ended the article with the statement, "But always remember this, that as bad as we sometimes think our Government is run, its the best run I ever saw."⁷⁶

Still on the defensive, he chided New York journalist Arthur Brisbane when he "finally caught him on one." The article in question concerned "Mr. Hearst's 15,000 'Holstein' cattle," but, Will explained, "A Holstein is an old black and white spotted milk cow." "She is a beverage animal entirely," he continued. "She is raised for her juice, and not for her T-bones." He pointed out that Brisbane must have meant Herefords because "even Mr. Hearst hasn't got enough editors to milk 15,000 old 'bossies.'"

Satirically suggesting that the columnists divide up the subjects according to their talents, he added, "I'll take the cattle end. He takes disarmament, unemployment, wars past and future, history gone and coming, and the advantages of living in California and Florida."⁷⁷

⁷⁶Tulsa Daily World, December 18, 1932.

⁷⁷The New York Times, November 28, 1932.

Those who regularly followed the daily items knew Rogers told the truth when he said he wrote about events and ideas he encountered in his traveling. On a flying tour in the winter of 1931-32 his cables were sent from all over the world. Illustrating a few of the places he visited, date-lines heading his articles for The New York Times showed the following: Shanghai, December 30, 1931; Singapore, January 6, 1932; Cairo, January 15, Athens; January 18; Rome, January 19; Paris, January 20; London, January 21-24; Paris, January 26; Geneva, February 3-5.

Cables from Geneva concerned the disarmament conference which he predicted would "get somewhere," simply because no one believed it would this time.⁷⁸ From Paris, he warned America that France was making plans "for us to do all the debt cancelling"; so, he advised, "don't send delegates with hardened arteries, as usual, but get some with hardened hearts, for these people are even rehearsing their crying now."⁷⁹ He thought the biggest laugh of the disarmament conference was offered unintentionally by the Japanese when they spoke of "Chinese aggression."

Explaining the American "image" abroad, Rogers wrote from London, "I would like to stay in Europe long enough to find some country that don't blame America for everything. . . . debts, depression, disarmament, disease, fog, finance or

⁷⁸The New York Times, February 4, 1932.

⁷⁹Ibid., January 20, 1932.

frostbite." He thought the "best one" came from the English newspapers when they blamed a "prison mutiny" on American movies, claiming the movies gave prisoners "this unusual idea."⁸⁰

His interest in international affairs continued through 1933-34 as he alerted readers to important events in Europe. In July, 1934, he credited Mussolini—"the old daddy of all the dictators" with giving pointers to Hitler.⁸¹ Commenting on Hitler's vacation the next week, he said "most people doing the same thing would have took one too." Only they would have been told to take one for about 60 days, he continued, "and some morning at daylight the warden will call you, and from then on you can rest again." The following day he wrote that "some fellow from Germany named Hess, who said he was speaking for Hitler" approached France and "sounded so friendly that you started peeping under the bottoms to see what was hid."

Not all of the articles, of course, concerned such serious matters. He wrote of many commonplace happenings. Anything in the newspaper might catch the humorist's curiosity and end up in an article. Once he wrote about some "old boys that claimed they been dead and then come back to life." Concerning the fellow who "claimed he got to heaven and that it was great, and he is sorry they revived him," he remarked,

⁸⁰The New York Times, January 26, 1932.

⁸¹Ibid., July 2, 1934.

"Well, it's not much trouble to get dead again. A little street crossing without being alert will do the job."⁸² Another time he expressed his gratitude for having "an old pot hound" in South Carolina named for him when it was named the best hunting dog in the state.⁸³

Wiley Post was praised in a daily column in February, 1935, for a high altitude flight never before attempted. Will called the experiment "the most beneficial to aviation of any since Lindberg" and he asked all his readers to say a prayer for Wiley.

Rogers admired Franklin D. Roosevelt, perhaps more than any other president, judging from his articles. Concerning the State of the Union message, January 4, 1935, he praised the President's radio voice, adding, "It wouldn't ever do any good to try to impeach Roosevelt, all he would have to do would be to go on the radio and the whole thing would die out." Of some New Deal innovations announced by the President, Rogers said, "Big Business" had its ear to the ground, but "all they got in it was dust."⁸⁴

In spite of his admiration for the President, however, the columnist openly disagreed with him on some matters. Concerning Cuban interference in 1933, he wrote, "Now look out, Democratic administration, you are about to revert to

⁸²The New York Times, February 16, 1935.

⁸³Ibid., November 12, 1934.

⁸⁴Ibid., January 4, 1935.

the old Republican type. You are telling some Latin-American country who can be President and who can't." Agreeing that Cuba was being "run cockeyed," he asked, "What's wrong with that?" He felt the United States should "let Cuba take care of Cuba," because "no matter how little your country is, you got to run it like you want to." He added, "When the big countries quit meddling, then the world will have peace."⁸⁵

Offering his advice on the continuing depression in December, 1932, Rogers blamed high interest rates for "hard times" and the slow recovery. He believed, "No man should receive more for the 'hire' of his money than he could take it and earn with it himself, and for the last three years has been nothing that he could have made even 1 per cent on it, outside of loaning it." In conclusion, he quipped, "Be busy tomorrow reading wires from bankers."⁸⁶

By the middle of 1935, he was becoming restless for adventure again. On July 22, he commended the "Rushians" for attempting a non-stop flight from Moscow to San Francisco, "right over the north pole." He added, "Wouldnt it be wonderful if they finally turn that north pole into a filling station."⁸⁷ Six days later he described Trinidad, Colo., over which he and Wiley Post flew on a short trip, a town "with enough coal to melt the North Pole down till it runs."⁸⁸

⁸⁵The New York Times, August 10, 1933.

⁸⁶Ibid., December 3, 1932.

⁸⁷Tulsa Daily World, July 22, 1935.

⁸⁸The New York Times, July 28, 1935.

Beginning August 6, 1935, the daily wires concerned the "little sight seeing trip with Wiley Post." On August 8, he described the beautiful inland passage to Alaska and commented that he bet Mr. Roosevelt "would like to be on this trip. . . ."

The wire sent August 13 was full of enthusiasm for Fairbanks, Alaska, "the greatest aviation minded city in the world." He added, "What they need now is a mail line from Seattle up here." On the following day in Anchorage the pair spent the day flying with friends, Joe Crosson and Joe Barrows, both pilots. "We scaled Mount McKinley, the highest one on the American continent," Will reported. "Bright sunny day and the most beautiful sight I ever saw."⁸⁹

The final daily article which appeared in many newspapers along with black headlines of the crash, reported a visit to the new settlers in the Matanuska Valley, 700-800 of them, who were trying to get out of tents and into homes before the heavy snow began. His final message was a plea for help in getting houses for the pioneers with no time wasted "to discuss whether it will succeed or whether it won't." He concluded, "You know after all there is a lot of difference in pioneering for gold and pioneering for spinach."⁹⁰

Explaining the trip to newspaper editors, the McNaught Syndicate had sent a form letter to subscribers telling them that one of Rogers' reasons for going was to gather material

⁸⁹Tulsa Daily World, August 14, 1935.

⁹⁰Ibid., August 15, 1935.

that would "lend variety to his daily feature." The letter also warned that there might be an "occasional omission of the dispatch for a day or two" when the columnist would be unable to reach a telegraph office.⁹¹ But no one could have foreseen that the trip would bring such an abrupt end to the popular "piece for the papers."

⁹¹McNaught Syndicate, "Note to Editors," Rogers Collection.

CHAPTER VI

MAGAZINE ARTICLES

Established as a newspaper columnist and growing in popularity as a screen personality and public speaker, Will Rogers was besieged with offers. In 1927, a newspaper article described him as a man "who could write anything, anywhere," whose talents were in such demand that "he was as busy refusing lucrative offers from theater managers, motion picture producers and publishers as in fulfilling contracts already made."¹

Although he was never a "regular" contributor to any single magazine, the magazine articles he wrote were widely circulated and are an important part of the study of Rogers as a writer and journalist. During the years between 1926 and the time of his death nine years later, Will Rogers wrote 31 articles for The Saturday Evening Post, three for The American Magazine, and a series of short pieces for Life magazine which were published during a 26-week period in 1928. In this chapter, his writings will be examined as they appeared in each of these three publications and in the order cited here.

¹David Karsner, "A Writer Who Knows the Ropes," Tulsa Daily World Sunday Magazine, November 27, 1927, p. 7.

Articles for Saturday Evening Post

The busiest year in the writing career of Will Rogers was 1926, and it also marked his first significant magazine article. On May 1, it was published as the lead story in Saturday Evening Post—"top billing" in one of the most widely circulated periodicals of the day. Four weeks later a second article appeared in Post, and as a result of the popularity of the first two pieces, Post editor, George Lorimer, sent Rogers to Europe to gather material for a series based on his observations there.

First articles. The first two articles published in the Post were somewhat like those he had written for the syndicate. Although they were longer—6000-7000 words as compared with about 1500 words in his weekly articles—they included comments on things he saw and people he met.

Fitting his humorous comments to the longer pieces of writing was obviously difficult for Rogers, and there is a great deal of "padding" in the early magazine articles. In "My Rope and Gum for a Democratic Issue," for instance, the humorist stated that his purpose for making a "Round-up of the entire United States and Florida" was to find a campaign issue for the Democrats; then he rambled from one topic to another.² This was typical, of course, but here he seems to have been forcing himself to include dozens of names and places, while using the slender thread of his topic to link

²The Saturday Evening Post, May 1, 1926, p. 3.

the ideas together.

The account does, however, have many bits of humor, items of current interest, and prominent names. Probably the awkwardness in the beginning was caused by trying too hard to change his regular pattern to fit the new medium. Much the same rigidity is found in the second article, "Florida Versus California," a topic of conversation at that time brought about by the big land boom in Florida and its possible effect on westward migration. Here he attempted a dialogue between California and Florida as a device to carry on a debate held before the "Prevaricators' Club of America," as he termed it. Only when he permitted his two "debaters" to be interrupted by the braggart "Oklahoma" did he slip back into his natural style and seem at ease with the written humor.³

Figures of speech and witty asides are found in profusion. He wrote of the great sportsman Thomas Lipton, "bless his old Scotch and Soda lined gizzard,"⁴ referred to a California political convention as "the Prune Preservers' Political Powwow"; described the American Bar Association as "a gang of Lawyers who think that if you are not one of them you are in rompers intellectually" who take their association "as serious as a Chamber of Commerce does a cold-potatoe luncheon";⁵ and said in Texas the Governorship was "a kind of a

³Post, May 29, 1926, pp. 10, 11, 70, 72.

⁴Ibid., May 1, 1926, p. 3.

⁵Ibid., p. 4.

family affair" with Mr. Ferguson "the only Governor in the world by Marriage."⁶

He pointed out that both parties are both good and bad—"They are each good when they are out, and each bad when they are in."⁷ If the Democrats could find an issue, Rogers believed, enthusiasm would increase to the point that the newspapers would publish "what day the election was to be held on," and Coolidge, instead of reading his speech over the radio, would be on the platform in person, "wiping perspiration with one hand, shaking the hand of a colored voter with the other and kissing a female district leader's baby, all simultaneously and at once."⁸ In fact, politics as a topic of conversation might even replace high school drinking parties, if an issue could be found.

It was not until he reverted to the use of "personal letters" or messages that his magazine articles evidenced humor of the quality which Rogers' fans had come to expect. In July, 1926, the first such article was published in Post, one of six under the title "Letters of a Self-Made Diplomat to His President."⁹ Each "letter" directed to President Calvin Coolidge was a personal, intimate message from the traveling reporter-philosopher.

Immediately popular, the articles were published in book form later that year. This volume, along with the reviews and criticism, will be discussed in the next chapter.

⁶Ibid., p. 204.

⁷Ibid., p. 3.

⁸Ibid., p. 4.

⁹Post, July 10, 1926.

The two Post articles, "A Hole in One," which later became the book Ether and Me will also be discussed in the later chapter devoted to Rogers' books.

Flying. A favorite topic of Rogers and one as intriguing to the public in the twenties as space orbits are to the present generation, flying was the subject for two Post articles published in January, 1928. The first one, called "Flying and Eating My Way East,"¹⁰ gave a detailed account of a trip from Los Angeles to New York, and the second, "Bucking a Head Wind," covered the return trip.¹¹ Each included such information as travel time, plane changes, cost of flying, and sights along the route.

Enthusiastic as always about the advantages of flying, Rogers indicated that persons who had never flown were just as much "Rubes" as the "old fellow out home in Oolagah" who had never been on a train and at whom people pointed and laughed.¹²

Although the two articles follow the technical subject of flying far more closely than Rogers' usual writing, there are still enough witticisms to hold the interest of a mass audience.

Guessing at the contents of letters in the mail bags as he flew out of California, he said there were 12 from Hollywood producers back to the "head office," telling them,

¹⁰Ibid., January 21, 1928.

¹¹Ibid., January 28, 1928.

¹²Ibid., January 21, 1928, p. 3.

"It looks like a great picture. If we will spend another \$200,000 on it, it will be." There were 867, the flying day-dreamer said, from "those that foolishly believed somebody when they said they looked like Gloria Swanson or that they weretwice as funny as Charlie Chaplin."

Demonstrating his understanding of "movie-struck" youngsters as well as the folks back home, he imagined one entire letter that read:

Ma, see if you can't get Dad to dig once more. I'll pay him back and more. I have seen all those so-called comedians out here. Passed Buster Keaton right on Sunset Boulevard. Went right up close to him. He didn't make me laugh. Why, Ma, you know yourself that I've got more laughs at home at parties than those fellows will ever pack into a feature. It's pull that keeps them there. Tain't talent they want. It looks like I'll get in soon. Make Dad dig. He's an old fogy. . . . Your funny old son, Happy.¹³

Though the humorist brought joy to the hearts of pilots and aircraft industrialists with his articles, he must have been a thorn in the sides of railroad magnates. He wrote of flying over a train that was "creeping and crawling and twisting around."¹⁴ On the return trip he saw a train passing an old wagon "that some old mover was going from one part of the Country to the other in." Again, he put his imagination to work and listened in on a conversation between two men on the train, "fanning themselves and wiping the cinders off their faces" as they discussed the "poor devil" in the wagon who did not know enough to travel in a modern vehicle.¹⁵

¹³Post, January 21, 1928, p. 110.

¹⁴Ibid., p. 113.

¹⁵Post, January 28, 1928, p. 38.

He pointed out that the round trip from Los Angeles to New York and back by plane cost only \$814 and saved five nights and four days as compared with the same trip by train. Averaging 130 miles an hour, Will arrived back in Los Angeles where he had started four days earlier.¹⁶ With such an advocate, it is not surprising that aviators claimed him for their "patron saint."

Politics. A single article by Will Rogers, titled "Duck, All! Here's Another Open Letter,"¹⁷ clearly indicates that Will believed Smith had no chance of being elected that year. In the short, pointed article, he was highly complimentary toward the New Yorker, calling him "the strongest man they got—that is for a Democrat." Will added, however, that "unfortunately in the finale of this somebody has to meet a Republican, and when a Democrat meets him next year it's just too bad."¹⁸

Claiming to have known the politician for years, Will pointed out that Smith's career was phenomenal. "You have gone like a quart in a crowd," he quipped in reference to prohibition. Continuing his personal message to Smith, Rogers cited the politician's successes in New York:

You grabbed the old Empire State building, tucked it under your arm and did a Red Grange. Every time they had an election you had the ball. They can't stop you on the home grounds. You are Babe Ruth with a short right-field fence. It's just nothing but the showers

¹⁶Ibid., p. 40.

¹⁷Post, October 29, 1927.

¹⁸Ibid., p. 4.

for any Guy they send in against you. . . . The man you run against ain't a candidate; he is just a victim.¹⁹

But, the sage reminded Al Smith, New York is not the entire United States. Even though New York "feels it's the biggest place in the world and ought to run everything," Rogers continued, "it just don't."²⁰

He advised Smith to refuse to accept the presidential nomination, lest he "hinder what little harmony there is left in the party." "Those rabid ones would nominate a dry Protestant in less than forty-eight hours," Will claimed, and "the Democrats ain't hardly got enough votes to split."²¹ Instead, Will told him to wait and seek the nomination in 1932. By that time, he predicted, the "Republicans will have done some fool thing," and a Democrat might have a chance.²²

While the humorist's political predictions cannot be called brilliant, it is quite evident here that he had gained a great deal of insight into public opinion from his travels and visits with the "folks" in 1927-28.

Following the election, Rogers wrote another "letter" to Al, this one unsolicited and evidently a not-too-welcome surprise to the editor of the Post. In the letter which accompanied the manuscript, Will suggested that he could write a series based on the idea of his "taking over the Management of the Democratic Party" which would be a good "Clothesline to hang a lot of Political Gags on." Also, he continued,

¹⁹Ibid., p. 3.

²¹Ibid., p. 4.

²⁰Ibid.

²²Ibid., p. 133.

"It gives us the best plan too to point out the mistakes of the R_____ [sic] and get in enough truths about both of them along with the gags so we can make it interesting."²³

Will said in addition to the one submitted with the letter, he had a second one "about laid out already" and lots more ideas for articles to cover the "funny things between now and March" in national politics.

Two things appear incongruous in this transaction. As far as can be discovered, Rogers did not write letters of inquiry as a matter of practice. No other such evidence is to be found in the files and those who knew him state that he was reluctant to fulfill the few commitments he made for writing. And, although Lorimer accepted and later published the article submitted,²⁴ the Post editor "did not respond" as usual to his friend Will and "begged off any more political pieces" until reaction from the election subsided. Possibly the suggestion included in Will's letter that in future articles he could "point out the mistakes" of the Republicans through his political "gags" did not appeal to Lorimer, who was one of Hoover's strongest backers. Again, there is no final evidence, but it would seem from the letter just cited and Lorimer's reaction that Rogers was quite sincere in his attempt to avoid partisan politics and that his goal was truly

²³Letter to Horace Lorimer cited in John William Tebbel, George Horace Lorimer and the Saturday Evening Post (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1948), p. 192.

²⁴"There Is Life in the Old Gal Yet, Al," Post, January 19, 1929.

to "get in truths" about both parties along with the "gags."

"More Letters. . ." In May, 1928, the self-appointed diplomat began another series for the Post called "More Letters From a Self-Made Diplomat to His President." These, too, were written in the intimate style of a letter and addressed to "My Dear Calvin." Rogers gave his president an interim report on the state of the world before he began to describe his latest trip.

Concerning the war debts, he said, "Them that ain't paid ain't going to pay, and them that has paid is sore because they did." He pointed out that Mussolini would not be ready for war for another few years, despite people's fears; he had a "breeding system" that was producing 5,000 boys a year, Will said, because "nobody has ever invented a war that you didnt have to have somebody in the guise of soldiers to stop the bulletts," and each year Italy was more ready than the year before. The philosopher-reporter said Russia remained poor because she spent her money on propaganda instead of food; Poland has taken Lithuania to celebrate getting her own independence; Ireland had "calmed down," and China had fought a typical modern war—"Nobody knows who won."²⁵

Now, in 1928 with war clouds beginning to form toward the south, Will said he was chosen to "make a weather report." He explained,

Up to now our calling card to Mexico or Central America had been a gunboat or a bunch of Violets shaped like

²⁵Post, May 12, 1928, pp. 3, 4.

Marines. We could never understand why Mexico wasent just crazy about us; for we had always had their good-will, and Oil and coffee and minerals, at heart.²⁶

He gave a running account of things he saw from the train window as he traveled toward Mexico to join Ambassador Dwight Morrow—the oxen, the burros, the mule-drawn street cars; women washing clothes in a creek and having so much fun "you can't hardly tell whether it's a washing or a camp meeting."²⁷ For the benefit of the "folks up home," he described a train trip across Mexico with Morrow and President Callas.

From reading Rogers' rambling, often repetitious narrative account, it is easy to visualize the scenes with him and to understand the "foreign" people who were so important in the news at the time. And, through his shrewd observations that always gave the "underdog" the benefit, Will was able to show the position being taken by Mexico concerning the struggle for natural resources by interest groups on both sides of the Rio Grande. He explained,

You know Mexico feels—and with some slight justification—that they are in America too. They don't feel that America ends at the Rio Grande river. Of course they may be wrong, but they are just childish enough to feel that way. But we always speak of ourselves down there as being From America, as though they were in Asia.²⁸

The traveling Oklahoman found much that he liked about Mexico, pointing out that he did not go to Mexico to look for "bad things," or he probably would have found plenty. Nor did he go "wanting to snoop into somebody else's business." He

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid., p. 194.

²⁸ Ibid., p. 108.

said, "It all depends on how you want to find a country."
And Will Rogers, of course, looked for humor and "good" people wherever he went.

Traveling with Morrow and Callas on their "one night stands" across Mexico, Will described the bull fights, including one at which the visiting dignitaries were permitted to try their skills at outwitting some of the younger animals. Several in their party entered the ring, including the Mexican President himself. But, Will recounted, when the participants kept calling, "Come on in, Senor Rogers," he found a seat high in the arena and "entertained the Ladies while the boys was displaying their prowess with the Bovines." Explaining his actions, he added, "No, Sir. I had been butted enough in a branding corral by snorty old calves to know that Clem Rogers' boy Willie of Oolagah, Oklahoma, wasent carved out to meet any Bull in combat."²⁹

The descriptive figures of speech were slanted toward audiences in the city as well as those in Oolagah. When the "real thing—the Stud Bull" broke into the ring where the amateur bullfighters were cavorting, he described the fast action of the group as it scrambled out of the ring to a "raid on [Secretary of the Treasury Andrew] Mellon's Treasury by Congress," and said "this Male Toro" emptied the ring "like a speech on the tariff will the Senate Gallery."³⁰

²⁹ Post, June 2, 1928, pp. 10-11.

³⁰ Ibid.

Although the Oklahoman liked "the land of Manyana" and praised the Mexican president highly, he pointed out weaknesses as well. He described a "kind of socialistic scheme" by which the Mexican government took land from the big landowners and gave it to the peons, but one in which wealthy friends of Callas were not touched.³¹

Relating his experiences on the train, Rogers advised Coolidge to "frame up something of that sort up home—kinder go round and see what all the Country is doing," instead of taking a politician's word for what was happening. Then, instead of sending committees to study committees on such things as the Mississippi flood scene, he would have somebody "actually shoveling dirt." He reasoned,

If every man of every Committee that had gone to that river to investigate had put in one hour's actual work raising the levee, why, it would have been so high now you couldnt have got water out over the edge with a hydraulic pump. So the next Committee you send to that river, give 'em a spade instead of a report sheet.³²

The traveling observer reminded his American audience that they were rapidly using up the natural resources with little thought of what would happen when these were depleted. And, even though the United States was "setting pretty" right now and feeling superior to other nations, Will said, "When our resources run out, if we can still be ahead of other nations, then will be the time to brag." He warned that the period of "a-living High" might not last because it "just ain't in the book for us to have the best of everything all the time,"

³¹Ibid., pp. 169, 170.

³²Ibid.

Explaining, he said,

Our children are delivered to the schools in Automobiles. But whether that adds to their grades is doubtful. There hasent been a Thomas Jefferson produced in this country since we formed our first Trust. Rail splitting produced an immortal President in Abraham Lincoln; but Golf, with 20 thousand courses, hasent produced even a good A Number-1 Congressman. There hasent been a Patrick Henry showed up since business men quit eating lunch with their families, joined a club and have indigestion [sic] from amateur Oratory. Suppose Teddy had took up Putting instead of horseback riding. . . . But it ain't my business to do you folks' worrying for you. I am only tipping you off and you-all are supposed to act on it.³³

Never downhearted for long, Will saw Mexico City and exclaimed, "Say, what a City this is! She is a cross between New York, Tulsa, and Hollywood, with a bit of Old San Antonio and Nogales, Arizona, thrown in."³⁴

He reported an "impromptu" speech he made in which he gave Callas and other guests "the low-down on Diplomacy." He told them that there were no diplomats in the western world, so "naturally we don't have any wars with each other." In European countries, however, they "breed 'em and raise 'em just for that; and due to having such good ones, they are continually at war over there," he explained. "You take Diplomacy out of war and the thing would fall flat in a week."³⁵ On international relations he commented wryly, "There is no reason why we shouldent get on with this Country. You have lots of things down here that we want, and as long as we get 'em, why, we ought to hit it off great."³⁶ He added,

³³Ibid.

³⁵Ibid., p. 19.

³⁴Post, June 9, 1928, p. 18.

³⁶Ibid., p. 40.

Now if I was looking for comedy in Government, I didnt have to come here. I could have stayed at home. I come down here to laugh with you and not at you. I didnt come here to tell you that we look on you as Brothers. That would be a lot of bunk. We look on you as a lot of Bandits and you look on us as one Big Bandit. So I think we fairly understand each other, without trying to express it.

Recognizing that he was treading dangerous waters in Mexico at that time, particularly in view of the difficulty in translating humor, Will confessed he was relieved when the audience "caught on" to his candid humor.

His near hero-worship of Col. Lindbergh was evident when he described the aviator's arrival in the Mexican capital where a crowd of two hundred thousand people waited from 7:30 a.m. until mid-afternoon to greet "this Boy Lindbergh."

Now they waited there, with not as much as a drink of water, or sandwitch [sic]. The thought never entered their mind to eat. It was anxiety over that Boy that they were living on. You never saw such anxious faces in your life when they began to realize that he might be lost.

An American audience wouldnt have had that patience. When noon come, they would say, "Well, I would like to see the Kid land, but I got to find some hot dogs around here somewhere."³⁷

Lindbergh had become lost "away off to the Northwest" of Mexico City, Will reported, but the pilot finally arrived at 3:45 p.m. "You never saw such rejoicing in your life," Will said. The Latins "went Cukoo" over the aviation hero who "was taking his life in his hands just to come in and be friends with them"³⁸

Although Rogers joked about the events that happened in Mexico during his stay, the trip was evidently planned with

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Ibid.

serious intent. Summarizing national press coverage of Morrow's work as well as the visits by Rogers and Lindbergh, The Literary Digest published portraits of the three in a panel with a single caption which read, "THREE 'AMBASSADORS OF GOOD-WILL' FROM THE UNITED STATES TO MEXICO." The Digest reported that Mexican sentiment toward the United States had undergone "much more than surface change" because of Morrow's work, plus the visits by the other two good-will Ambassadors; and the Mexican Supreme Court, as a result, made a decision "interpreting the disputed oil laws in a manner favorable to the United States."³⁹

"Letters" from the Orient. When Rogers left for his tour of the Orient in the middle of November, 1931, he was following his usual pattern of seeking information first-hand; only this time the "folks" he visited were further from home.

Mixed in with the satire—aimed at the United States as well as other nations—the optimistic traveler found positive things to say about his experiences. Writing from Canada before he sailed, Will described the citizens as "a fine tribe of people" who had overcome obstacles to develop their country and had "set an example" for the whole world in the late war.⁴⁰

An expert in the use of analogies, both for humor and clarity, Rogers also included a political "gag" when he

³⁹"Lindbergh 'Embassy of Good Will' to Mexico," The Literary Digest, December 24, 1927, p. 4.

⁴⁰"Letters of a Self-Made Diplomat to Senator Borah," Post, February 27, 1932, p. 7.

defined the Japanese term Banzai—"a word of exaltation, as, say, like if a Republican Senator would die from a Democratic stronghold, the yell among them would be Banzai!" In the competition for oil business between Standard and the Russians who were shipping petroleum into Manchuria, Will explained two terms for his readers. If "the other fellow sells cheaper than you," it is called "dumping." "'Course, if you sell cheaper than him, that's Mass Production."⁴¹

In an aside to Senator Borah and his readers, Will said, "This letter is about one-third news and the other third Explanation," using the "break" as an excuse to develop yet another definition.

Whenever he used a new term, he gave a definition, usually sugar-coated to avoid insulting his readers' intelligence. Preparing them for the articles on the Orient, he explained, "Well, Occidental don't mean a College, like it does in Los Angeles, but it means a race of people, and we are it." The term applies to "anything that don't live in this Territory; like we call everybody that is dissatisfied with everything and everybody a Progressive."⁴²

He promised to be friendly with the foreign nations he visited, even though "it's terribly expensive," and at least to maintain the status quo. He then defined status quo as "an old Cherokee word that means: 'This thing has gone far enough; let's go back to where we started from, and next time

⁴¹Ibid., p. 8.

⁴²Ibid., p. 9.

we will watch each other."⁴³

In spite of the levity, Rogers reported and interpreted serious situations that threatened the peace in the Orient, if not the entire world. In a letter from Mukden, Manchuria, "Late Chinese Territory," to which he had flown with other reporters on a tip that some action might take place there at any moment, he explained that the Japanese "run their Wars just like they do their trains—right on time."⁴⁴

"I want to tell you, Senator, War is a serious business with these folks," Will continued in his "letter." "When a War shows up, they don't have to stop and put in a Draft and sing songs, and make three-minute speeches, and appoint Dollar-a-Year men." By keeping a well-trained army ready for a war, "when it is booked, all of these preliminaries have already been arranged; each soldier not only knows where he is to go, but knows practically who he is to shoot."⁴⁵

The Chinese were not offering much opposition, judging by "the way the Chinese were going, and they were GOING." He believed they could fight if they had a leader, but "he is always so far back the men can't hear him give Commands."⁴⁶

The Japanese might want to die for his country, the reporter stated, "but the Chinese, he ain't going to let patriotism run away with his life." Concerning the latter, Will said, "He wants to trade you; he don't want to fight you."

⁴³Ibid., p. 7.

⁴⁴Post, March 12, 1932, p. 8.

⁴⁵Ibid.

⁴⁶Ibid., p. 9.

To lighten the criticism, he added, "Now that's all right." He pointed out China and India as the two biggest nations in the world and the most peaceful. "How do they stay the biggest?" he asked. "It's not by fighting somebody every day."⁴⁷

Although the philosopher was always concerned about individuals as well as nations that were in trouble and was known as a "soft touch" all his life, Will Rogers consistently objected to interference in the way other people chose to live. In the previous chapter, his objections to American intervention in Cuba and Mexico were cited as they appeared in the syndicated columns, and much the same can be found in the Post articles concerning international problems in the Orient.

Aware that there always seems to be a "Big Brother" ready to help a "Weak Sister," Will said,

But I don't care how poor and inefficient the little Weak sister is, they like to run their own business. Sure, Japan and America and England can run Countries perhaps better than China, or Korea, or India, or the Phillipines, but that don't mean they ought too [sic]. I know men that would make my Wife a better Husband than I am, but, darn it, I am not going to give her to 'em. There is a million things that other people and Nations can do better than us, but that don't mean they should handle it.⁴⁸

Remaining serious about this argument in spite of his "folksy" explanation, Rogers added, "No Nation should be fathered or annexed unless it's at the almost unanimous Vote of them asking for it. . . . Then you get out when they want you too; then you are a real Humanitarian."⁴⁹

⁴⁷Ibid., p. 96.

⁴⁸Post, March 12, 1932, p. 97.

⁴⁹Ibid.

In the final article of the series he expressed the same viewpoint concerning the Philippine Islands. Unable to visit there as he had planned, Will wrote them a "letter" instead.⁵⁰ He advised them that the best way to get their freedom was to let their sugar crop fail for three or four years in a row. "If we don't make any Money out of you," he wrote, "I believe I can go back to Washington and assist you in getting your Liberty."⁵¹

But he saw little hope that freedom would result if a delegation were sent to Washington and said they would receive "every consideration outside of Liberty." Citing what he considered a serious reason for the delay in giving complete freedom to the Philippines, the journalist said too many other nations would be against it. In a satirical tone, he continued,

If America got out of the Philippines, why, every Native in the Far East would raise a Holler to have England get out of China, out of India, out of the Malay Straits; France out of Indo-China; Japan out of Manchuria and Korea; the Dutch out of Java. In other words, it would be an example in "Freedom for Determination of all Nations" that would shock the World. It's the opportunity of a Lifetime to be in this position where we could, perhaps, start this, but don't think for a minute we will do it. It's too big and good to be true. It would make a Sucker out of the other Nations and, of course, we couldnt Dare Do That.⁵²

He assured the Philippines and reminded the "folks over home" that the United States would "drag along with you folks. . . and some day get in a War over you, and if we

⁵⁰Post, "A Letter to the Philippines," April 30, 1932.

⁵¹Ibid., p. 40

⁵²Ibid.

ever do, we will lose you before Lunch," because "Japan can be in there and have a Crop planted before we could get a Fleet across that Ocean." Challenging American foreign policy and sympathizing with the "underdog," he told the people of the Philippines he hoped they would get their liberty, adding, "It would be mighty gratifying to every American to say, 'We don't hold under any kind of subjection any Country. What about the rest of you Birds?'"⁵³

In the Post articles he expressed some of the same sentiments concerning war debt cancellation that began his editorial "war" with The New York Times readers discussed in the previous chapter. Writing from Harbin, Manchuria, he outlined the historical aspects of the conflicts between Russia and Japan over Manchuria, but he managed to include a "dig" at American foreign policy when he said that "all these other Nations, they don't just go off and have Wars, and then just come back home and claim nothing at the end, like we do. . . ." He explained that "in the Histories, War always starts 'for patriotism's sake,' but you read on and get down to the Peace Conference and you find that the historian has to write pretty fast and veil things over very cleverly, or the reader is apt to discover what changed hands at the finish besides a mere satisfying of honor."

To illustrate his point, Rogers cited the colonies that Germany lost at Versailles; then he added, "All these Nations

⁵³Ibid., pp. 40, 42.

that are crying Debt Cancellations, you never hear 'em mention a word about returning Colonies to Germany so she would have a chance to kinder use 'em to help dig up this Reparations."⁵⁴

On the other hand, Japan, who took over the Russian-built railroads in Manchuria, knew how to profit from war, according to the self-appointed diplomat. He warned his readers, "So, if you think the League of Nations or anybody else is coming in here and demand that the Japs get out, well, they better come with a gun instead of a Resolution."⁵⁵

In spite of the fact that he advocated a "mind-your-own-business" attitude for the United States, the generous Oklahoman worried about the starving millions in China and could not resist asking for help from home. "No Charity could be more Humane," he wrote. Realizing that "our own are going through a tough time," he asked help for the Chinese from anyone who could "afford to help both Causes." And, he added in thinly veiled sarcasm, "Anyhow, if you are going to do anything at all for 'em, feed 'em, even if they don't become Christians."⁵⁶

Most of the material in the series from the Orient must have been written during his trip there, even though it was not published until two or three months later. Each article exhibits a tone of immediacy characteristic of his daily and weekly articles.

⁵⁴Post, March 19, 1932, p. 6.

⁵⁵Ibid., p. 80.

⁵⁶Post, April 30, 1932, pp. 7, 39.

On Christmas Day, 1931, he mentioned having been in his room typing all day. Frankly homesick, he wrote, "It was Xmas [sic], the first one I had ever spent away from my Family since committing the Overt Act, and maybe you think I wasent Lonesome." Continuing, he added, "What a Yap! Over here trooping around trying to get something to write about, when everything Funny in the World that is happening is happening right there at Home."⁵⁷ By the time the article was published late in April, he had been to the Geneva Peace Conference, visited a dozen points in Europe, and was back home in Beverly Hills.

Criticism by Lorimer. One other point of interest concerning the articles for Post is cited in the biography of Lorimer. Tebbel states that Will Rogers was "the most welcome guest" Lorimer ever had; and at the Post luncheons, "everyone would be exhausted after listening to him for two hours, but Will would be as fresh and full of energy as when he started." On such occasions, "Lorimer had trouble getting a word in," Tebbel related; but "he was content to sit back and laugh until he was weak."⁵⁸

Yet the editor did not hesitate "to discriminate in separating Will's wheat from his chaff" when the articles were submitted. He left the Rogers style intact and corrected grammatical errors only for the sake of clarity. But he did take his friend to task for what Lorimer considered advertising

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Tebbel, p. 145.

instead of editorial material. In the biography of the Post editor, a portion of a letter addressed to "My dear Rogers" compliments him on "the flying stuff," but adds that the material on "Henry and his new car" really "should appear next to pure reading matter instead of as pure reading matter."⁵⁹

Whether Post refused an entire article on that basis or merely omitted portions of the "flying" articles cannot be discovered from the material available. It is evident, however, that the Post "censored" some of his writing, as did the McNaught Syndicate.

Articles for The American Magazine

Will Rogers wrote a total of six articles for The American Magazine; each, in contrast to the Post articles, covered a more-or-less distinct topic. It was impossible for Will to absent himself entirely from the articles for American, of course, but his personality was generally less dominant in these.

The lead paragraphs in his first article indicate that he planned to write "some success stories" for the publication; and to some extent, that is what he did. The first one is a personality sketch of Andy Payne, a Claremore boy who won a marathon "foot race" from Los Angeles to New York.⁶⁰ The second was on Coolidge;⁶¹ the fourth concerned Henry

⁵⁹Ibid. The emphasis is Tebbel's.

⁶⁰"The Hoofing Kid from Claremore," April, 1929, p. 34.

⁶¹"Coolidge," June, 1929.

Ford;⁶² and the final article sketched the personality of "The World's Best Loser," Sir Thomas Lipton.⁶³

The third and fifth articles varied from the pattern. Will gave advice to aspiring young humorists in the one entitled "How To Be Funny,"⁶⁴ and discussed an old favorite, prohibition, in an article for the May, 1930, issue.⁶⁵

The first article for American was about a boy from "back home" who grew up just eight miles from the Rogers' Ranch and who was also "part Injun"—part Cherokee—as was Will. The writer made a visit to the home of Andy Payne, the subject of his sketch, to gather background.

Calling it "the greatest endurance test that has ever been put on during our or anybody else's time," he described in detail the marathon undertaken by some 300 runners from all over the world, but completed by only 50. Nineteen-year-old Andy Payne won the race.

Although Rogers seemed serious in his plaudits for the "Hoofing Kid from Claremore," he found opportunities for humor in the piece. "They told me around home," he wrote, "that the only reason Andy won the race was that his sister sixteen years old was not in. She is better than Andy." Answering reporter-Rogers' question on how he kept his feet in shape during the entire summer of running, Will quotes Payne as saying, "I

⁶²"The Grand Champion," December, 1929.

⁶³September, 1930.

⁶⁴September, 1929.

⁶⁵"Corn Whiskey, Commerce and Courage."

didnt do nothing. I just washed 'em every once in awhile."⁶⁶

In conclusion, Will added his own "real reason" for the win, turning it into a wry comment on society: "Well, they are one of the only families that didnt own an automobile. He used to run to school," Will explained. "So the moral of this success story is, dont own a car."⁶⁷

In the article on Coolidge, Will included comments on politics in general along with incidents involving the ex-president which were largely drawn from conversations with Dwight Morrow. The humorist pointed out that Coolidge was going to write some human interest articles for American, but because modesty would prevent the politician from mentioning certain things about himself, Rogers would give the readers "lots of dope on him" first.

Most of the "dope" was reported as told to Will by Morrow who had been a classmate at Amherst College with Coolidge and knew him "better than anybody else (which dont mean anything)." Notable incidents recalled by the Ambassador included one immediately following Coolidge's election when he told his friend, "Dwight, I am NOT going to make the mistake that lots of them have made; I am NOT going to try and be a GREAT President."⁶⁸

Injecting his own analysis, Rogers said previous presidents had bigger ideas of the office—to Wilson, it was his "Dream"; to Roosevelt it was "a Lark," to Taft "a Laugh," and

⁶⁶American, April, 1929, p. 35.

⁶⁷Ibid., p. 175.

⁶⁸"Coolidge," p. 20.

to Harding "a Nightmare." But to Coolidge, the presidency was a "Chore." Defining the term for the "town boys" Will said, "It's just one of the various evening jobs that must be done around a farm, like milking, chopping wood, and feeding stock."⁶⁹

Throughout the article, Will reverted to the device of using Morrow's narratives to characterize Coolidge, usually beginning with, "Did I tell you about the time. . .?" The candid remarks might have been taken as severe criticism had they come from anyone other than Will Rogers, but without giving offense he could say of Coolidge,

He knows that he come into the Presidency from the Vice Presidency, where nothing is expected; he knows that he didnt look like much when he arrived; he knows that even the Atheists, after looking him over, prayed for the salvation of the country. So he knows that anything he did was a surprise, and he knows that he come into our public lives when we had had just about all the Government laws and advice that we needed. He saw that the less he did the more satisfied we would be with him."⁷⁰

Equally candid was the compliment he paid Coolidge when he quoted Morrow on his attempts to get a commitment from the President when he was leaving for Mexico as the new Ambassador. Forced to answer, Coolidge reportedly said, "Dwight, dont jump on Mexico. Just keep Mexico from jumping on us." Of the incident, Will said, "Now, it would be pretty hard to write a hundred-page note to an Ambassador and give him any sounder advice than that."⁷¹

⁶⁹Ibid.

⁷⁰Ibid., p. 90. Because Rogers typically used commas prodigiously, the semi-colons here were probably due to editing.

⁷¹Ibid.

The article about Henry Ford may have been planned for The Saturday Evening Post. As was pointed out earlier, Lorimer refused to carry what he considered to be advertising. But in the American it was no more advertising than, for instance, the piece on Coolidge that openly introduced the articles that were to follow by the ex-president. It gave Will a chance to aim his verbal darts at one of his favorite targets, the rich man, and he used Ford merely as an excuse to debunk other "champions."⁷²

Noting that the world once looked up to rich men, Will explained, "But, sakes alive, we're getting so many now that no Magazine wont hold 'em. It takes Atlanta and all our combined Telephone Directories to hold the rich nowadays." In view of such prosperity, he said it was "almost a novelty to be poor." And anyway, the poor could claim almost as many advantages—they could get just as much static on the radio; drive the same kind of car, no matter how many payments were due on it; use the same golf courses previously monopolized by the rich; and even gamble on the stock market. He added, "The poor have all the comforts, with none of the income taxes of the rich."⁷³

With rich men being so common, then, the only way a millionaire could gain recognition was through philanthropy. He noted that in acquiring wealth, there are "a million dumb

⁷²"The Grand Champion," December, 1929.

⁷³Ibid., p. 34.

enough to make it, where there is not one smart enough to dispose of it so it will be a real benefit."

Reaching the stated subject of his article Will claimed Henry Ford, had "had more influence on the lives, habits, and customs of the people of not only his own country, but all the world than old Napoleon, or Caesar, or any of those old Guys that happened to live in history because they destroyed all the books that didnt have something about them."⁷⁴

He credited Ford with being "responsible for more things than any 100 other men of all time. Fifteen million things of one kind." In fact, "no man ever moved humanity like Henry Ford," he continued.

As usual, his commentary of society as a whole could be found in his description of the automobile manufacturer. Pointing out that Ford and mass production put the new mode of transportation within reach of everyone, he recalled that when cars were the rich man's luxury, everybody else refused to get out of the way when one honked. Then, "the minute Ford made one that we could afford, and we was the one doing the 'honking,' why, that was different."⁷⁵

Through this simple illustration as well as the many similar ones he made in his writings, Rogers was able to show his audience that not only was the rich man no better than the poor one, but that the poor one behaved about the same as the rich man when he had the opportunity.

⁷⁴Ibid., p. 35.

⁷⁵Ibid., p. 36.

Rogers chided the American public for permitting mass production to influence conformity in their lives. He said towns were so alike that "you can pick up a block out of any town and put it down in the night in another town, and it will be a month before anybody notices the difference." Each would have filling stations on two corners and drug stores on the other two.

An even more ludicrous situation was the conformity in obtaining a college education, which he described as being assembled like a Ford car. "You start through and each Teacher sticks a little something onto you as you go by their Department, the same thing on each one," Rogers said. "When you get to the end, you get a Diploma like it [a Ford] does a license, and you all go out and start acting alike." He noted that people used to laugh about "the old Boys who sit around the Country Grocery Store and spit in the stove and settled the affairs of the Country on two good mouths-full of Battle Ax." But at least their ideas were their own, and "we aint a-producing anybody that can replace 'em."⁷⁶

Making his transition toward an upbeat ending, the humorist lauded Ford for discovering "that an old-time fiddler could play just as good as a long-haired one with a Foreign name and a misfit dress suit"; for making it possible "for City people to see a Cow—maby hit her"; doing more to further aviation than all other rich men combined; causing more

⁷⁶Ibid., p. 36.

dishes to be left in the sink after supper; more profanity than Congress and more broken wrists than "all the Osteopaths in the World"; and giving more value for the least money. "A Ford car, and a marriage certificate," Will concluded, "are the two cheapest things known. Both lead to an ambition for something better."⁷⁷

Taken as a whole, the six articles for American fall far short of other writing published by Rogers, with the exception of the one summarized above. His attempt to explain "How To Be Funny"⁷⁸ follows a question-answer format in giving advice to the many "serious-looking young College Boys, with horn-rimmed glasses and no hat" who continually asked him for the secret of his success. Only a few "quotable" answers by Rogers salvage the otherwise mediocre article.

Answering the question on the best way to start being a humorist, Will listed "Recovery from a Mule kick," being "dropped head downward on a pavement in youth," or being discharged from a mental institution as three "sure fire" ways. He described humor as an affliction instead of a talent, and advised reading editorials in the tabloids and three pages of Congressional Record each night as good practice for a would-be humorist.⁷⁹ For specialization in college, he suggested "everything but English," and naming the best college in which to learn humor, he said, "Harvard, if its present football

⁷⁷Ibid., pp. 36-37.

⁷⁸September, 1929.

⁷⁹Ibid., p. 61.

continues." As to which magazine was the best one for a beginner to try, he said, "The nearest one."⁸⁰

In the May, 1930, issue, American published Will's article on "Corn Whiskey, Commerce and Courage," a comparatively slow-moving piece of writing that only exhibited the Rogers style in the final paragraphs. About 1200 words in length, the article concerned the nation's "fifth largest industry," "American Made (so-called) liquor." Listed as the first four are automatic pistols, burglar tools, stolen automobiles and hot-dogs. Rogers called "American corn" the one thing Europe had not been able to duplicate for less money.

Finally, he hit his stride when he began to include remarks about people. A typical one concerned the effect that drinking the home-made liquor had on the Prince of Wales. After one drink from an Oklahoma still, Will said, the Prince "went back home and told George and Mary to pick 'em out another boy, that the King Business didnt interest him." Concluding his treatise on the consumption of prohibition liquor, he added, "Let's feed it to the World, and we'll all go CUCKOO TOGETHER."

Appearing less like the regular writing style of Rogers than any of the other pieces for American is the final one, published September, 1930. Titled "The World's Best Loser," it attempted to outline the personal experiences of Sir Thomas Lipton, whom Will dubbed the "World's Sweetheart" because the

⁸⁰Ibid., p. 136.

"old Rascal" had been called Sweetheart by more women than any other man.

After a brief introduction, Will transferred the narration to the sportsman by the simple literary device, "But let's let Sir Thomas tell some."⁸¹ The remainder of the article is quoted directly from Lipton with the Rogers' touch evident only when he has the narrator break the monologue with the phrase, "Did I ever tell you about the time. . . ." Again, from this article, it can be seen that Rogers as a writer was entertaining only when he was being his "natural self."

Articles for the Life Humor Magazine

Robert Sherwood, editor of the old Life humor magazine in 1928, launched the protracted joke of Rogers-for-President when he announced in the issue of May 17, 1928, that "What This Country Needs Is a Bunkless Candidate."⁸² He made no mention of Will Rogers in the article, but the humorist's name was soon submitted by many readers as the one person most representative of the "Bunkless Party."

Recalling the incident for his biographer later, Sherwood said the agreement with Rogers took place in the Astor hotel where the entertainer was staying during his appearance in the Broadway show, Three Cheers. The Life editor said he "talked

⁸¹"The World's Best Loser," p. 30.

⁸²Life, p. 3.

him into accepting the nomination," offering Rogers \$500 a week for the articles. The price was "a lot of money for Life, but peanuts to Will," Sherwood said.

A week after the party was announced, the leading headline in Life read, "For President: Will Rogers." Listed in large type across the bottom of the page were names of "Representative Americans" who endorsed Rogers' nomination. Among them were such notables as Babe Ruth, Henry Ford, Gen. William Mitchell, Grantland Rice, Ring Lardner, and Tex Rickard. The article by Sherwood promised Will the nomination "with no strings attached," if he would accept.

The following week, Will's smiling face decorated the cover of the publication, and in bold red letters the readers were told, "Will Rogers Accepts." The lead article was his acceptance "speech," in which he said the nomination left him dazed, adding, "If I can stay dazed I ought to make a splendid candidate."⁸³

This sort of "gag" must have appealed to the noted "debunker." In fact, the name of the party was Rogers' idea. Yet, ironically, this is the only extensive writing carrying his name that may not have been entirely his own.

Relating the story more than 20 years later, Sherwood said, "I don't think Will ever took much interest in the campaign and we had one hell of a time getting copy out of him." Recognizing that his memory was fallible, Sherwood

⁸³Life, May 31, 1928, pp. 3, 4.

said he thought there were one or two weeks when Will wrote nothing and the editors were forced to compile some of the humorist's ideas from other articles to fill the space.⁸⁴

Harry Evans, an editor for Life at the same time, described his relationship with Will Rogers, reporting that, due to his heavy schedule, the "candidate's" articles were sometimes late. On such occasions, Evans went to the Globe theater where Will was appearing and picked up the copy there. From this report and a study of the writing itself, it is evident that Rogers did most of the writing, or at least the articles were edited from his other works. But because a few of the weekly pieces in Life end with a bitter note instead of the customary optimistic conclusion, it is quite likely that Sherwood's memory was correct. The editors were probably forced to fill in the gaps when Will's copy failed to fit the space allotted for it, and in some editions, they may have had to compile an entire piece.

Considering the numerous projects in which he was involved in 1928, it is small wonder that Will neglected some of his responsibilities. In addition to the rehearsals and nightly performances in the Broadway show in which he had volunteered to take the place of his close friend Fred Stone who was injured in a plane crash, Rogers filled personal lecture engagements, made his first radio broadcasts on a network show, completed a movie, and continued to write his syndicated

⁸⁴John Mason Brown, The Worlds of Robert Sherwood (New York: Harper and Row Publishers, 1965), pp. 196-200.

columns as well as most of the 500-word weekly articles for Life.

Outlining his campaign promises, Will said the bunkless slogan would be "WHATEVER THE OTHER FELLOW DONT DO, WE WILL." He asked support from "those who want NOTHING, and have the assurance of getting it," and his one campaign promise was to resign if elected.⁸⁵ Free campaign buttons, proclaiming, "He Chews To Run," were sent to thousands throughout the nation, and hundreds of readers wrote letters to Life editors, some of which were published in full or in part each week. As the campaign snow-balled into an undreamed of amount of publicity for both Life and Rogers, newspapers across the nation editorialized on the subject and excerpts from those were published by Sherwood in each edition.

A two-page article in The Nation called the campaign "as invigorating as a bright fall day." Noting the big names who supported Rogers, the article said, "The Press and the People, the Catholic Church, the New York 400—surely no candidate was ever championed with such glorious variety from one end of the social scale to the other."

The "Bad Boy of Politics," stated the article, is perfectly aware that "the American people like bunk," and by playing such a role, Rogers can "say what he likes, he can thumb his nose at politics, he can make saucy faces at government," and instead of the "stale windiness of political

⁸⁵Life, May 31, 1928, pp. 3, 4.

promises," the "Rogers wind blows cobwebs away, cobwebs that both the major parties have been guilty of weaving."⁸⁶

Exposing the "bunk," Will made full use of his ability to write epigrammatic statements. He said editorial writers on party newspapers will claim "Al Smith is really Thomas Jefferson disguised in a brown derby" or that "Hoover is Abraham Lincoln with a college education."⁸⁷ Panning each side equally, he added, "You know the Republican Farmers don't want Hoover, But they will vote for him because he will come nearer keeping their side in than anyone else." Of the Democratic candidate, he wrote, "Nothing Smith stands for is in line with the things the South stands for, But he stands the best chance of election, And that is the main thing to stand for."⁸⁸

Voters in general were attacked when he wrote, "They go to the polls in an Automobile, But they don't carry any more in their heads than the old timer that went there on a mule." The "candidate" pointed out that the "oldest form of Bunk" was to tell voters that they were so well informed they would not believe the opponent. "If the voter is as smart as they say," Will argued, "why does each party have to spend 4 million dollars trying to buy votes with propaganda."⁸⁹

⁸⁶Dorothy Van Doren, "Will Rogers, the Bunkless Candidate," The Nation, October 3, 1928, pp. 314-15.

⁸⁷Life, August 30, 1928, p. 3.

⁸⁸Ibid.

⁸⁹Ibid., September 21, 1928, p. 4.

Each week the campaign caught more attention with weekly radio "rallies" helping to build excitement. Typical headlines were "The Bootleggers vs. Al Smith,"⁹⁰ "The Campaign Is Getting Hot,"⁹¹ "Our Candidate Insults the Voters,"⁹² and "Our Candidate Won't Sling Mud."⁹³

After the election was over, Life made some attempt to keep the lucrative campaign going by claiming that their candidate was elected by silent vote, but Will would "make good his only promise" which was to resign.⁹⁴

One final article signed by Will was published the first week in December under the heading, "Statement from Ex-President Will Rogers." In the form of a letter, he told the public he knew it was customary for the losing candidate to say, "The best man won." "But I doubt if in this case he did," Will explained. He continued,

The bigger man and the fatter man won. But that don't make him any better President than I would. I think I could look on the Senate and Congress with as much disdain as any of our other Presidents.

In conclusion, he told the American people, "You voted according to the dictates of your stomach instead of your heart. You made your choice, now go ahead and regret it."⁹⁵

⁹⁰Ibid., July 19, 1928, p. 3.

⁹¹Ibid., August 2, 1928, p. 3.

⁹²Ibid., September 21, 1928, p. 3.

⁹³Ibid., October 12, 1928, p. 5. See Figure 4, p. 210.

⁹⁴Ibid., November 9, 1928, p. 5.

⁹⁵Ibid., December 5, 1928, pp. 24-25.



LIFE



OUR CANDIDATE INSULTS THE VOTERS

*"We May Be More Smart-Alec Than We Ever Were—
But We're No Smarter"*

by

WILL ROGERS

ALL I know is just what I read in the papers.

I see where my friend Mr. Franklyn Roosevelt (blood but no political relation



Our Candidate makes a bid for the Florida vote.

to THE Roosevelts), says that this is the "silly" season for Politics, He calls it the "Bunk" period.

Franklyn seems to be stealing our stuff, He claims that the last weeks in August and the first ones in September are the time for the Bunk to percolate.

Well our claim is that the Bunk period extends from Jan first, to December 31, Inclusive. How could one period be more bunk than another, What about nominating time? Could you possibly spread any more than is migrating around then?

Franklyn says "that conditions have changed, that the old idea that the Republican party is the party of prosperity is no longer held to, He says that people



Our Candidate makes a bid for the Boston vote.

nowadays are smarter and they know the facts, and won't be missled like they used to."

Now Franklyn Roosevelt is a very fine able man, He is one of the highest type men that we have in the Business of make believe, or Politics, if you like the old name.

But while we are exposing Bunk that statement of his gives us our cue for today. OF ALL THE BUNK handed out during a campaign the biggest one of all is to try and compliment the knowledge of the voter. And tell him he can't be fooled like he used to be.

Franklyn Roosevelt or any other man that knows anything knows that the Voter is no smarter than he ever was



Our Candidate makes a bid for the Chicago vote.

The politician tells the people that "I don't have to tell you people what our party stands for, or what I stand for. You people read, You know the facts, I know that you won't be missled by the extravagant promises of our opponents, We rely on your sober judgment, We rest our case on your intelligence." Then he goes on for two hours more telling them what his party stands for.

Now how often have you heard the above speech made by the Candidates? They are always complimenting the intelligence of their audience.

Well now we will just take their statement apart and see what is the matter with it. If the audience do know "What

their party stands for," why do they have to go to all this trouble to come and tell them?

In the first place I don't care how



Our Candidate makes a bid for the Florida vote.

smart their audience was, they couldnt possibly know "What their party stood for." The Supreme Court with all its divided knowledge couldnt tell you what either party "stood for."

They both stand for "Reelection." That's about the only thing that you can safely say they are for, In fact they will both "stand for" almost murder, if they can only get in.

Now as I say these fellows know the voters don't know any more than they did the year they promised them a "Full dinner pail."

How are the voters going to be any smarter when the Candidates themselves are no smarter? Even with the able men



Our Candidate makes a bid for the Jewish-Catholic vote.

Figure 4. Example of Full-Page Spread Given Rogers' Weekly Articles for Life.
[September 21, 1928, p. 3]

CHAPTER VII

BOOKS BY WILL ROGERS

Six books by Will Rogers were published during his writing career, all quite obviously written by the humorist himself. Yet he never actually "authored" a book in the usual sense of the word. The first two were compilations of his "gags" selected from those that were popular with the Follies audience; the third was simply a collection of his weekly newspaper articles; and each of the other three was made up of articles previously published by Saturday Evening Post. The volumes were, nevertheless, widely advertised and reviewed just as if the material were being published for the first time. In his breezy, casual style, the gum-chewing philosopher commented on everything from Claremore, Oklahoma, to the capitals of the world, and his "sayings" from the books were quoted throughout the land.

The works which earned the Oklahoman recognition in this field will be examined in this chapter. Reviews of the books, published at the time they were released and, therefore, unbiased by the tragedy of his death, will also be cited to illustrate the place Rogers held as an author during his lifetime. The value of his writings to present and future generations will be discussed in a later chapter.

Rogers-Isms

No previous study of Will Rogers has offered a clear-cut reason for the publication of his first two books. Betty Rogers merely said that his comments from the stage "were being constantly quoted," then added that "comments he had made in the Follies were published in two small volumes—The Peace Conference, and Prohibition."¹ Croy made a similar statement, likely taken from the book by Mrs. Rogers. He added, "It will be noted that the name Will Rogers was not important enough to use in the title."²

From the latter comment by Croy, it is obvious that he did little research on the two books; possibly he failed even to see them. Although Will's full name is not in the shortened titles cited by Mrs. Rogers, the cover and title pages of the first volumes read, ROGERS-ISMS / The Cowboy Philosopher on THE PEACE CONFERENCE / By WILL ROGERS and ROGERS-ISMS / The Cowboy Philosopher on PROHIBITION / By WILL ROGERS. In the latter book, the author's name appears in type of the same size as the main word in the title; in the former, the type size is larger than the title. On the covers of both books, Rogers-Isms is printed approximately twice the size of any other word. This, plus the fact that the entertainer was being dubbed a "Cowboy Philosopher" by newspaper writers, is evidence that Rogers' name and reputation were highly significant in promoting book sales.

¹Betty Rogers, p. 154.

²Croy, p. 158.

Further proof was found in the book section of The New York Times, published October 19, 1919. The review headed "Do You Like to Laugh?" described the author as one "who rose from cowboy to musical comedy and motion picture star," and an entertainer who "has made millions laugh at \$3 a seat." Price of each book was listed at 60 cents and readers were warned, "You had better go for your copies early because, owing to the printers' strike, the supply is limited."

As was often the case, Rogers himself may have given rise to the rumor that the two books were little known. After the first "Rogers-Isms" was released in May, 1919, he began the second which was published in August of that year. By way of "apology" for the latter, he wrote,

I would not have written this Book but My Publishers (get that, my Publishers) Harper and Brothers. . . asked me to write another Book as they had a sale on the last one. . . . They said write another book as we have traced the sale of the last one, And the fellow who bought it has a friend in the same institution, And we feel sure we can double the sale of your last book with this one,³

Similar in format, the books were small (pages 4.2 inches x 6.6 inches, trimmed) and each opened with a picture of Rogers dressed in his cowboy outfit and twirling a rope. The first was 42 pages in length and the second contained 52 pages of his sayings.

³Will Rogers, Rogers-Isms, The Cowboy Philosopher on Prohibition (N.Y.: Harper and Brothers, 1919), p. 2. Note that Rogers' habitual use of commas in lieu of periods was permitted to stand in the first books, and the punctuation here is his.

Will began his first book, as he did most of his writings, with an excuse for his daring to "horn in on you Public with a Book."⁴ He explained that he had intended to write a book on the war, but after he "heard some fellow had already done it," he decided instead to write about the "Peace Feast."⁵

Some of the best known quotations of Rogers are found in the early volumes. The first told of a plan for the Kaiser—he should be "brought to this Country and made to clean the streets after that first Armistice day,"⁶ and Will favored sending Wilson to the Peace Conference to "give us a chance to find out who was Vice President."⁷ Referring to the newspaper reports of the Conference, he wrote, "See they took one Republican with them [to "argue with on the way over"], But I have never read any thing in the papers about him landing,"⁸ and he complained that the Armistice terms "read like a 2nd mortgage."

He repeated the quip cited earlier as a favorite of Wilson concerning the reason for such fast training of American soldiers: ". . . in our manual there is nothing about RETREATING and when you only got to teach an Army to go one way you can do it in half the time."⁹ Of the peace treaty, he explained, "Says in there, 'There is to be no more wars'

⁴Peace Conference, p. 1. See Figure 5, p. 215.

⁵Ibid., pp. 2, 3.

⁶Ibid., p. 7.

⁷Ibid., p. 11.

⁸Ibid., p. 14.

⁹Ibid., p. 21.

Then the War was too serious a subject I could not write on it, But the Peace Feast, That seemed to offer a better field for Humor provided you stick to the facts,

I of these fellows all wrote these looks up France I don't see how they ever got time to fight. I couldn't write on the 15th of course. I couldn't write on the 15th for that was serious first the Peace Con - Well that seemed to offer better field for Humor provided I stick to the facts.

RITZ-CARLTON HOTEL. MONTREAL.
How they have been us Now there seems to be no particular Reason I should Horn in on the you public with a Book - But that seems to be just when looks seem to be written - when there is reason for them.
The shorter white Paper gets the more careless these Pen Hounds get with it.
Now if you might think from this that I got it in for these Literary Ligands but I hope they are not like the boys. They don't tell you you have to

ALIBI
THERE is no particular reason why I should horn in on you Public with a Book, But that's just when they seem to write them, When there's no need or reason for them.
The shorter white Paper gets the more careless these Pen Hounds get with it.
All my friends advise me to go ahead Will and write it cause you wont annoy people with it like these other Writers do with theirs, Nobody will read yours
When a Guy has never grazed educationally any further than McGuffeys fourth Reader his ravings aint liable to

throw any jealous scare into Literary Circles,
Grammar and I get along like a Russian and a Bath Tub,

Figure 5. First Draft of The Peace Conference, Written on Hotel Stationery When Rogers Was on Tour with the Follies, and the Same "Gags" As They Appeared in Print. [Rogers frequently wrote--and on some occasions typed--on the back of the paper. Note here that he wrote on the reverse side of page 5 and some of the ink faded through.]

and then there was a Paragraph a little further down told you where to get your AMMUNITION in case there was one."¹⁰

European nations at the conference had a disease called the "Gimmes," according to Will. "Everybody at the Table wants a second helping, And Germany the cook hasent got enough to go around." The only one of Wilson's 14 points on which the nations could agree "was that America went in for nothing and expects nothing they are all UNANIMOUS WE GET IT." When he heard that Japan "wanted it put in the contract that she was as good as anybody else," he said, "If a man is a Gentleman he don't have a sign on him telling it." He added, "Tell Japan we will recognize them as soon as they recognize China."¹¹ The League of Nations he described as being "just as clear as the Income Tax blanks" and reasoned that it should have been formed during the war "when all these nations needed each other." While everyone looked for something to prevent war, Will said they were "afraid it is like Prohibition it dont prohibit."¹² But if Wilson had really wanted help in getting the League approved, he should have taken along some of the prohibitionists, Will continued. "They would have shown him how to get it through whether people wanted it or not."¹³ He thought it would be "terrible if they found out this war was fixed and they had to fight it over again."¹⁴

¹⁰Ibid., p. 22.

¹¹Ibid., pp. 26-27.

¹²Ibid., p. 29.

¹³Ibid., p. 32.

¹⁴Ibid., p. 28.

Hitting at America's generosity at the Peace Conferences, Rogers said that when Wilson and Japan "compromised on that Chow Chow Place," Japan got it, and when the president and England "compromised on Freedom of the Seas, England got it."¹⁵ If the Armistice was like a 2nd mortgage, the peace treaty "reads like a Foreclosure," Will claimed. And of the entire conference and the "80 thousand-word" treaty, he said, "Could have settled the whole thing in one sentence, 'IF YOU BIRDS START ANYTHING AGAIN WE WILL GIVE YOU THE OTHER BARREL.'"¹⁶

Prohibition was the stated topic of the second small book of "gags," but it often was used to introduce quips on politics, religion, or current happenings. Will explained that while he did not drink, he did "love to play to an audience who have had a few nips."¹⁷ A prohibitionist was defined as one who is "so self satisfied with himself that he presents himself with a Medal, called the "Croix De Perfect He," a medal that gives him an excuse "to meddle in everybody's business but his own."¹⁸

Will turned to the Bible for argument against prohibition, citing Noah, a "chosen man," as an example of one who planted a vineyard, then "drank of the wine and was drunken." If Noah escaped punishment, he reasoned, "where do they [the Prohibitionists] come in to tell somebody what to do?" Noah

¹⁵Ibid., p. 40.

¹⁶Ibid., pp. 41-42.

¹⁷Will Rogers, Prohibition, p. 7.

¹⁸Ibid., p. 11.

was cited as the "Water Commissioner of his time," but one "smart enough not to drink it." Water was "to float a boat on," Rogers credited Noah with believing, but "as a beverage he knew it was a total failure." Building his jokes to a climax as he did on the stage, Rogers added, "This wine had such ill effects on Noahs health that it was all he could do to live 950 years."¹⁹

Other men of history were cited as examples: "All the great men of the past had something on their hip all the time." He listed Omar Khayyham, "The Pickled Philosopher of Persia"; Shakespeare, who always wrote with two bottles in front of him, only one of which contained ink; Nero, who like everyone, "has got to drink to fiddle"; and George Washington whose old home had "glasses in a case there that were never meant to drink water out of" and a grape orchard, even though "they didnt eat that many raisins."

Concerning liquor and politics, Rogers said, "A quart of old crow in the counting room at night has put more men in office than voters ever did." Jumping from one "gag" to another, he refused to blame divorces on liquor when "its only bad judgment in picking em," but he thought prohibition might stop many marriages—"A couple sitting opposite at a table dont look near so good to each other over a water decanter as they do over two just emptied Champaign glasses."²⁰

Apologizing on the final page, Will pointed out that he was paid "for getting laughs," and by kidding the "drys" he

¹⁹Ibid., pp. 31-35.

²⁰Ibid., pp. 48-50.

got more laughs than if he had kidded the other side. He added, however, that "lots of people laugh one way and vote the other." Taking a final, playful poke at both the prohibitionists and politicians he said, "LOOK AT CONGRESS IT VOTED DRY AND DRINKS WET."²¹

Illiterate Digest

Judging from the number of favorable reviews which Rogers' Illiterate Digest received in 1924-25, one might assume that the author was a new "find" in the literary world or that his written humor was a surprise to critics. Yet the volume was simply a collection of 36 of his weekly articles, all previously released by McNaught and published in newspapers throughout the nation. This is not to discredit the humor and appeal of the articles themselves. Most are able to evoke chuckles of delight as well as serious, head-nodding agreement from a reader today. It is only surprising to note that the critics commented on the articles and Will's humorous writing style as though they had read them for the first time.

One, for instance, referred to his "sheepish smile" that made him a "major box-office magnet," adding that "at last he has made his debut as a full fledged author." The reviewer pointed out that release of the Digest proved that "Rogers' popularity is based on something more substantial than a mere flash of wit." Instead, the writer saw a "soundness of judgment which cuts deeply into the most sacred superstitions and

²¹Ibid., p. 52.

exposes with genial sarcasm a good many human frailties."²² The Cincinnati Times-Star noted that everybody knew Rogers was a "scream" on stage, but he was amazed to find that the irony and satire was "still a 'scream' in book form."²³

A critic for the New York Tribune remarked that Will's "long suffering, resigned drawl" was needed to get the "full flavor of his sardonic mirth." He described Rogers, however, as a "necessary institution," and if he were censored, the critic warned, "we shall sell our Liberty bonds, convinced that the time of national dissolution is at hand." He saw the humorist as a safety valve for the "individual indignations against the legislative branch of the government," a "sharp shooter, with paragraphs for missiles." Commenting on Will's ability to say "so much in so few words," he concluded his review by adding, "Frequently a whole battery could kill his quarry no more completely."²⁴

W. E. Woodward, reviewing the Digest for The Nation, felt the book would be enjoyed more by those who had seen Will in person, who had a "mental image of his drolleries of manner." He suggested, however, that even those who had never seen Rogers should "by all means read his book." The critic described Rogers' wit as "a great deal deeper and more subtle

²²"Will Rogers' Literary Round-Up," Current Opinion, LXXVI, January, 1925, p. 140.

²³[Cincinnati] Times-Star, December 22, 1924.

²⁴Frederic F. Van deWater, "Books and So Forth," New York Tribune, January 5, 1925.

than he seems to be at first glance," and the humorist as a "jolly and sharp-eyed rotary-club member turned into cynical philosopher."²⁵

Few of the reviewers could resist quoting a favorite quip from the book. John Crawford in a lengthy review of the Il-literate Digest for The New York Times liked Will's statement, "American people like to have you repent; then they are generous." The only "untrue" portion, according to Crawford, was Rogers' claim that he was "just an old country boy in a big town trying to get along." Describing the Digest, Crawford said,

He is down in black and white where you can watch him closely and go back and see how he did it. He is just about as unsophisticated in doing his work as a Russian toe dancer, and one job is as intricate as the other. He gives the impression of being simply the cross-roads general merchandise store talkers of a continent rolled into one man. But the fact of the matter is that he knows just what he wants to do, just how he wants to do it, and he does it. He is an expert satirist masquerading as a helpless, inoffensive, ineffectual zany.²⁶

Released by Albert and Charles Boni Publishers in December, 1924, the 348-page book in one month jumped "to the position of the best selling book of humor in the country, with the fourth large printing about to be ordered," according to one report.²⁷ Six weeks after it was released, publishers claimed that the book was "in its 65th thousand," had had

²⁵W. E. Woodward, "Humor Dead or Alive," The Nation, February 11, 1925, p. 160.

²⁶John Crawford, "Will Rogers Knows More Than He Pretends," The New York Times, December 14, 1924.

²⁷[Hartford, Conn.] Courant, January 18, 1925.

"154 enthusiastic reviews in as many papers," no unfavorable ones, and that five printings had been exhausted, "each one much larger than the preceding." Still it was impossible to keep the book in stock in sufficient quantities to meet the demand.²⁸ It had climbed to the number two spot in sales in one Chicago book store and was in the top 10 in sales in another before Christmas of 1924.²⁹

In addition, according to Karsner, a "handsome DeLuxe edition" of limited number was published, each numbered and signed by the author.³⁰ To date, no trace of these has been found by the researcher, nor does Mrs. Love know their whereabouts. During the course of the search, however, another edition of the Digest was discovered that has not been cited by any other student of Rogers.

Published by the Readers League of America "by arrangement with Albert & Charles Boni," the first publishers, the book carries only the 1924 copyright date used in the original. The table of contents lists all of the "chapters" or articles that appeared in the Boni edition, but strangely enough, the later book omits the last four articles or chapters. No explanation is given for this omission and none has been found elsewhere.

²⁸ "Literary Gossip," Nashville Banner, January 11, 1925.

²⁹ Undated clipping from Chicago newspaper, Rogers Collection.

³⁰ David Karsner, "A Writer Knows the Ropes," Tulsa Daily World, November 27, 1927.

Another mystery concerning the Digest was found in the article by Karsner cited above. He claimed that Rogers "did something that has never been done in all literature from Shakespeare to Conrad." Just "because he felt like it," Will wrote a "rollicking inscription" in 31 of the \$1 copies, presumably to sell at the regular price. The publishers, noting the possible value of such copies, locked them in a vault each night for three years "as if they were the original folios of Shakespeare." Where the copies are today, no one encountered in the course of this study knows. Very likely they are in a private collection.

Evidently Karsner had access to the autographed copies when he wrote his article about Rogers in 1927, because he quoted 20 of the 31 inscriptions. Typical of Rogers' tongue-in-cheek attitude toward himself as an author, one reads, "I have the pages all cut in this book—I am sick of seeing my books in the best home libraries with the leaves still uncut. Will Rogers, author and cutter." Another said, "I just thought of one way I could have made this book worse—that's if I had written the whole thing in this handwriting. Will Rogers." A shorter quip read, "Will Rogers, amateur author. My regards to some amateur readers."³¹

The title of Will's third book was the same as that used for "sayings" for the screen which he had begun writing in 1920 and which had brought a letter of complaint from a New

³¹The inscriptions were obviously edited by Karsner, judging by punctuation.

York lawyer, W. B. Winslow, on behalf of the Literary Digest. At that time a short news reel was being sponsored by the literary publication and the lawyer warned Rogers that their title was fully protected by registration in the United States Patent Office. Further, Winslow wrote, due to the similarity in the titles, the prestige of the Literary Digest was being lowered. Calling on Rogers' "sense of fairness," Winslow asked him to withdraw voluntarily the humorous series, or else he would sue for a restraining order charging unfair competition.³²

Answering in typical Rogers' humor, Will said he "never felt as swelled up" in his life to think he was a "dangerous rival" of the serious publication and film strip. He pointed out, however, that he could see no infringement when his title was the direct opposite of Literary Digest. "If a magazine was published called Yes and another Bird put one out called No I suppose he would be infringeing."

The humorist, who by that time was no longer writing for the movies, advised Winslow to go ahead and sue. He added, "And as I have no Lawyer you can take my case too and whatever we get out of them we will split at the usual Lawyer rates of 80-20, the client of course getting the 20."³³

In New York about six months later, Will recalled the "nicest old Gentleman" came back stage at the Follies to

³²Letter from William Beverly Winslow to Will Rogers, Esq., November 5, 1920, re-printed in Illiterate Digest, pp. 5-7.

³³Letter from Will Rogers to William Beverly Winslow, November 15, 1920, re-printed in Illiterate Digest, p. 9.

introduce himself, and it was Winslow. Upon hearing that the lawyer had enjoyed the letter and had sent copies of it to his friends in the profession, Will was so delighted he decided to dedicate the new book to Winslow.

Will wrote his own introduction to the Digest, claiming he had thought first of asking such persons as William Allen White, Arthur Brisbane, Irvin S. Cobb, or Ring Lardner to do it for him. He then proceeded to write a parody of introductions to great literature, comparing "this Author's work" to Don Quixote, the Pickwick Papers, and others. The "little-boy" bravado that was part of Will's appeal can be noted when he concluded the introduction by saying, "So now Mr. Cobb and Mr. Lardner, and all you introduction writers, what do I want with you?"

The first article released by the McNaught Syndicate was also the opening "chapter" in the Digest. It was followed by pieces on a variety of topics: poems and bathtubs, Follies girls and income tax, chewing gum and one-piece bathing suits, oil scandals and political conventions, and finally the much quoted "Taking the Cure, By the Shores of Cat Creek" on the "Radium Water" at Claremore. The last article, "By the Shores of Cat Creek," is included in its entirety in at least two anthologies published since Rogers' death. Bennett Cerf selected this one along with two others for An Encyclopedia of Modern American Humor,³⁴ and J. B. Mussey included the "Cat

³⁴Bennett Cerf, An Encyclopedia of Modern American Humor (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1954). pp 362-65.

Creek" article as well as four others from the Digest and a sixth from a later work.³⁵ The piece was also reprinted in the special edition of the Claremore Progress published in connection with the opening of the Will Rogers Memorial, November 4, 1938.

The article is a "spoof" on the "Radium Water" then being used in bath houses in Claremore, supposedly for curative purposes. Will bragged it would "cure you of anything—just name your disease and dive in." But the topic merely served as a spring board to his comments on many other towns as well.

He advertised his hometown as just "17 hundred miles west of New York," instructing the City traveler to "bear a little south of west . . . til you reach Sol McClellan's place." It was also located for residents of Gary, Indiana, as "847 and a half miles South by West." Rogers claimed "this Mecca of the ill" and its magic water had cured "hundreds of people from Chicago, Ill, from Gun shot wounds" and it was guaranteed to cure residents of Minneapolis of everything but their Swedish accents and those from St. Paul of "everything but your ingrown hatred for Minneapolis." Admitting that the waters "have quite a peculiar oder," he reported that "visitors from Kansas City, who are used to a stock Yard breeze, take this wonderful water home as a Perfume."

He skipped from one place to another as he directed the nation to Claremore, "insulting" towns and states in his

³⁵J. B. Mussey, ed., The Cream of the Jesters (N.Y.: Tudor Publishing Company, 1931), pp. 254-58.

writing in the same manner he had laughingly poked fun at famous people in his audience at the Follies. He mentioned Mojave, California ("one of the few towns which Los Angeles has not voted into their Cafeteria"), and invited all those in the South who were "afflicted with a Cotton Crop under a Republican Administration, or with the Ku Klux, or with the Hook Worm" to come and be cured "of either or all of these in a course of 24 Baths."

In mock seriousness, he swore all the claims for the cures from the water of Cat Creek were true and "not for the monetary gain to my Home Town." He added, "We don't need you that bad."³⁶

This, then, was the Rogers style throughout the Illiterate Digest—jesting insults aimed toward places and people, based on truth, yet not truth or insults that "hurt." And always he was the humble cowboy, or as he said in the article on "Etiquette," "I am just an old country boy in a big town trying to get along." He added, "I have been eating Pretty regular, and the reason I have been is because I have stayed an old country boy."³⁷

Letters of a Self-Made Diplomat

By the time Letters of a Self-Made Diplomat to His President was published late in 1926 Will Rogers was recognized by many as a political commentator on national and international

³⁶Digest, pp. 345-48.

³⁷Ibid., p. 59.

affairs.³⁸ John Carter, reviewing the book for The New York Times Book Review, said, "America has never produced anybody quite like him, and there has rarely been an American humorist whose words produced less empty laughter and more sober thought."³⁹ Time magazine pointed out that the public would probably take Rogers' claim to being an "Ambassador of the United States to Europe—without Portfolio" as a joke, while in actuality, the reviewer said, "Mr. Rogers is just that."⁴⁰

The New York Herald-Tribune⁴¹ said Will's "good-natured but spoofing epistles" would appeal to "the large audience he roped and hog tied with his late 'Illiterate Digest,'" and the Los Angeles Record said that even though the "wit is often cutting and frightfully uncomfortable at times," the book "contains lots of real sense."⁴²

Some newspapers outside the United States took note of Rogers' "Letters." A reviewer for the South Wales News recommended the book to his readers, citing the American humorist as a "man of the world" whose "keen observations" and "great knowledge of fellowmen" enabled him to paint a "true"

³⁸As was the Digest, Rogers' Letters were published by Albert and Charles Boni. A hard-cover volume, it sold for \$2.

³⁹John Carter, "Will Rogers Takes His Lariat to Europe," The New York Times Book Review, October 31, 1926.

⁴⁰"Prairie Pantaloon," Time, July 19, 1926, p. 22.

⁴¹The New York Herald-Tribune, December 12, 1926.

⁴²[Los Angeles] Record, December 9, 1926.

picture of his travels in Europe.⁴³ The Daily Telegram in Sydney, Australia, termed the book "entertaining reading," a pleasant change from other American writers who "have been so busy lately criticising" their native land. Rogers, on the other hand, "can find fault neatly with other countries," the reviewer pointed out, and still take "sly hits at American imperialism abroad and American parochialism at home."⁴⁴

Not every critic, of course, saw the subtle sarcasm or grasped the meaning behind Rogers' reports in the 264-page book. A critic for Saturday Review pointed to "a good deal of shrewd philosophy," and "some pretty keen" observations; yet he added, "Imagination and more than superficial comprehension are not requisite, indeed they might be out of place."⁴⁵ The New York World critic, F. P. Adams, took a decidedly negative view of the book, calling Rogers' printed observations "obvious" and "impudent." He added, "It is as though somebody had told Rogers, who is simple and naive, that he was a great satirist; and as though he began to take himself too seriously."⁴⁶

For every adverse criticism found in periodicals and newspapers during Rogers' lifetime, dozens of favorable ones could be cited—this with no effort at selectivity on the part of

⁴³[Cardiff] South Wales News, August 10, 1927.

⁴⁴The Daily Telegram [Sydney, Australia], July 31, 1927.

⁴⁵Archibald Cary Coolidge, Saturday Review, December 25, 1926, p. 465.

⁴⁶F. P. Adams, The New York World, October 31, 1926.

the researcher. Indeed, the writer had anticipated finding criticisms that were strongly favorable or unfavorable in about equal proportions before Rogers' untimely death placed him upon a pedestal as one of the nation's folk heroes. This, however, has not been the case. Perhaps half the reviews were summaries of his books, usually made up largely from his witty remarks, with a simple statement that readers would find them humorous or enjoyable. Almost all of the reviews were highly complimentary, and several became full-fledged personality sketches of Rogers along with the review of one of his books. Those who wrote less enthusiastically generally downgraded his written style as compared with his personal appearances—Rogers, the writer versus Rogers the comedian on stage—and made no attempt to go further.

One serious article which complimented, then chastised Rogers and his "Letters," almost going to the extreme in both directions, was written by Gilbert Seldes for The New Republic. The critic claimed Rogers held a monopoly on political satire and that "other satirists seem perfectly willing to leave politics in his hands." Describing Rogers as being "vastly popular" as a lecturer, radio commentator, and writer, Seldes cited the "Letters" as being an interesting mixture of "old-fashioned democracy mingled with adulation for the man in power [Coolidge], jibes at the Democratic party, warnings about the Farmers and sage political advice."⁴⁷

⁴⁷Gilbert Seldes, "Satire, Death of . . .," The New Republic, January 5, 1927, p. 195.

As an example of "true satire" found in Will's "Letters," he quoted the following: "You refuse to give the Philippines their complete independence. I am with you. Why should the Philippines have more than we do?" Seldes added, however, "He was at his best when all he knew was what he read in the papers; he twisted headlines until they yielded some sort of comedy."⁴⁸

It would be a mistake to argue the point made by Seldes that Rogers failed to sustain true satire throughout his "Letters" to Coolidge. In fact, Will never intended them as such. As was pointed out earlier, he went to Europe in the summer of 1926 at the request of Lorimer to act as a "roving reporter," to report and interpret his experiences and to find "truth" upon which to base his humor.

Political satire does creep into his rambling reports, however, sometimes seeming to be so much a part of the descriptive "travelogue" it might easily be overlooked. For instance, when Will left for Europe, he said it was "a time when foreign relations are at their most perilous peak; that is, when we are trying to collect money." "Any man can fight a war," he wrote, "but it takes a smart man to jar any loose change out of any part of Europe."⁴⁹ Will said he could have prevented the debt argument and the hatred that accompanied it. "I

⁴⁸ Seldes may not have known that the single quotation he lauded was actually one of Rogers' daily cables, printed in the Times on August 21, 1926, and re-printed in the book along with the articles from Post.

⁴⁹ Letters, p. xi.

WOULDNT HAVE LET THEM HAD THE MONEY IN THE FIRST PLACE!"⁵⁰

Rogers' brand of non-intervention in foreign affairs can be found throughout his writings, and this belief is explained in the "Letters" as well. "You hear a lot about doing things to foster good relations between nations," he reported from Europe, and Will agreed that there was a need for better understanding. But he did not believe in "buying friendship" nor in propaganda which he defined as "acting a part for a cause." Instead, he felt America should "act natural and have people like us for what we really are" because propaganda is easily detected and nations, like people, become angry when they discover someone is trying to "curry favor" with them.

He asked Coolidge to keep everybody at home that looked as though he wanted to interfere with European affairs, and even then, Will said, "It will take America fifteen years steady taking care of our own business and letting everybody else's alone to get us back to where everybody speaks to us again."⁵¹

Carter's review for the Times called such reports "accurate, to the point, and on occasion, concise to the degree of inspiration." Will's comment on the debt question he called "so simple as to verge on genius," and the book as a whole he described as having "done more to educate the American public in world affairs than all the professors who have been elucidating the Continental chaos since the treaty of Versailles."

⁵⁰Ibid., p. 254.

⁵¹Ibid., pp. 249-54.

There's Not a Bathing Suit in Russia

Within six months after Rogers' "Letters" appeared on the nation's book shelves, a second book about his travels was released. Titled There's Not a Bathing Suit in Russia & Other Bare Facts, the 155-page volume originally sold for \$1.75 each and includes comments on Russia.

Giving his customary "excuse" for the book in the introduction, Rogers said, "I am the only person that ever wrote on Russia that admits he don't know a thing about it." He added, however, that he knew "just as much about Russia as anybody that ever wrote about it."⁵² It was the "boarding-house hash of Nations" and no one had "ever been able to catalogue the contents," the humorist explained. All people interpret governments according to their point of view, Will continued. A person with Communist leanings, of course, would stress accomplishments and "leave out any little defects." Those with the opposite view will not let themselves "see anything that has any merit in it." He intended, however, to be objective and report what he saw.⁵³

Rogers' contemporaries accepted his descriptions of the much discussed country, judging from the reviews of the book. Writing for The New York Sun, Edwin H. Blanchard called the author a "shrewd American who cuts through sentiment and glamour, gets at the practical moral of the affair, and states it

⁵²Bathing Suit, pp. 15-16.

⁵³Ibid., p. 18.

vigorously."⁵⁴ He saw Rogers as far more than a Broadway wisecracker and one whose comments were not those of a "smart aleck." Instead, Blanchard called the author a "moral philosopher," one "seen to advantage" in his latest book, which brought home truth to "the Arkansas grocer and the Dakota farmer" alike.

A review in the New York Herald-Tribune cited a few "of the many jocosities he employs to bring home to grateful readers his favorite and widely admired brand of political philosophy."⁵⁵ Saturday Review chose to compare Rogers on the stage—where "his face, his voice, his mannerisms contributed to the effectiveness of spontaneous wise cracks"—with the book which "makes us laugh only very occasionally."⁵⁶

A much longer, more analytical review in The New York Times Book Review cited Rogers' "racy and pithy observations," and added that with "squirts from the syphon of his carbonated wit does Will Rogers enliven and make palatable the raw vodka of his political report to the American people on the state of Russia." Quoting at length from the book, the critic called Rogers' observations "intelligible to children and Congressmen alike." He also lauded the author for "his far-sighted, and little recognized, efforts to encourage aviation here by shrewd appeals to our pride, our military apprehensions,

⁵⁴Edwin H. Blanchard, The New York Sun, May 28, 1927.

⁵⁵New York Herald-Tribune, July 10, 1927.

⁵⁶Saturday Review, May 28, 1927, p. 869.

and our sense of convenience."⁵⁷

The Spectator, London, England, also reviewed the book, calling Will Rogers "a man of wisdom as well as wit," who summed up the situation in Russia "very acutely." The author was called a "fair critic" with "few prejudices and a very shrewd sense not only of humor but of humanity."⁵⁸

Jokingly Rogers claimed that he decided to take a trip to Russia to find the recipe for vodka which was like Russia—"Nobody in the world knows what it is made out of."⁵⁹ Describing the flight, he gave his readers a running commentary on the sights below—"old big black cows with a white bandage around their stomachs" in Holland; long strips of farm land and forests in Germany; and in Russia "millions of acres [of grass] and very little stock on it, with plenty of water," and log houses with straw-covered roofs, all "in sorter a little bunch."⁶⁰

Disturbed that European countries were more advanced in aviation, he wrote, "Nobody is walking but us; everybody else is flying." He added the warning, "So in a few years, when somebody starts dropping something on us, don't you say I didn't tell you."⁶¹ Chiding New York City "that hasent even got a place to land," in spite of the fact that "you can make a landing field on half the ground it takes to make a Golf

⁵⁷The New York Times Book Review, June 26, 1927, p. 11.

⁵⁸The Spectator [London, England], September 3, 1927.

⁵⁹Bathing Suit, p. 31.

⁶⁰Ibid., pp. 66-69.

⁶¹Ibid., p. 72.

course on," he pointed to Russia where the people are "so poor they havent got a Golf Course to their back," yet they were far ahead in aviation. He warned his American readers not to be complacent during the period of peace, and he described the "drilling and preparing" he saw all over Europe.

Resorting to an old vaudeville gag to get him out of the gloomy predictions, Will said he was like the old rooster who brought out an ostrich egg to show the hens and then told them, "I am not criticizing, but I just want you to know what others are doing."⁶²

Nearly half of the book concerned flying, preparedness, and similar topics aimed directly toward the American public and, possibly even more directly, toward his influential readers in business and politics. He never missed a chance to encourage the development of aviation in America.

In spite of his digressions, the entire book has the tone of immediacy; the reader feels as though he is sharing the trip with the friendly traveler mile by mile and hour by hour. It is a chronological report, a log, but written in the casual, intimate tone of a personal letter to a close friend. Thus, the "asides" seem quite natural, never imposed.

Describing the boundaries of Russia and jesting about one of Wilson's 14 points, "Self-Determination of small Nations," he said the League of Nations gave everyone that wanted to start a country a piece off Russia. He added, "Different little Nations gnawed so much off the edge of

⁶²Ibid., pp. 134-37.

Russia that on the map it looks like a piece of pie that somebody with every other tooth out has bit into."⁶³ Along with the "folksy" figures of speech, he defined words his unschooled readers might not understand, handling the matter in such a way that he would not insult the intelligence of his better-read audience. At one point, for instance, he started to relate an incident that involved the Bourgeois. In the middle of the sentence, he put in a dash and said, "Now I better stop right here early and tell you what that 'Bourgeois' word is, what it means and how it is pronounced." The term "Proletariat," which he said was so easy to pronounce that "even some Congressmen can get it right," he defined as being "the poor people, or what would be known in America as the Democrats." But the difficult word, Bourgeois, meant rich people, Will explained patiently, or those known in America as Republicans ("or if they are very rich, the Conservative Republican Party"), and pronounced by Russians ("and it's theirs, they ought to know") "Burge-Wah." Then, in a tone of apology for the lesson and the interruption, he continued the sentence he had begun on the previous page: "Well, as I started to say, the Bourgeois—remember pronunciation—. . . ."⁶⁴

Relating his disappointment at not being able to visit Trotsky, Rogers made the statement that is one of the two most frequently quoted of all his sayings. Because of its significance, the entire paragraph will be quoted here.

⁶³ Bathing Suit, p. 63.

⁶⁴ Ibid., pp. 80-81.

In the preceding paragraphs, the humorist told of having asked to see Trotsky and being denied the interview by an official who told the humorist the Russians were busy with "serious" work. Will argued, telling the official he "didn't hardly expect Trotzky to make any faces for me or to turn a few somersaults or tell the one about two Hebrews named Abe and Moe," but to no avail.⁶⁵ Rogers continued,

I saw that this old boy wasn't so strong for me X-raying Trotzky. But I bet you if I had met him and had a chat with him, I would have found him a very interesting and human fellow, for I have never yet met a man that I didn't like. When you meet people, no matter what opinion you might have formed about them beforehand, why, after you meet them and see their angle and their personality, why, you can see a lot of good in all of them. You know how it is yourself. I bet you have had Political enemies and you would think from your impressions of them that they ought to be quartered in the zoo in the reptile house. Yet when you met them you could see their side and find they weren't so bad, and that you were both trying to get about the same thing in the long run.⁶⁶

Just as he always "gave the best of it" to individuals, so Rogers tried to do with countries, and he found much good in Russia on which he could report. He admired their horses—"They got the fattest, best-looking horses there I ever saw," called their tea "mighty good,"⁶⁷ and thought his pilot, "this old funny-looking square-headed boy" was so good that if he ever decided to fly over the North Pole, that was the flyer he wanted to "take out a stack with."⁶⁸ Giving communism serious study, or "as much study as a Bird like me

⁶⁵Ibid., pp. 89-90.

⁶⁶Ibid., pp. 92-93.

⁶⁷Ibid., pp. 70-71.

⁶⁸Ibid., pp. 78-79.

could give serious study to anything," as he put it, Rogers said he went to Russia to try to understand it instead of to criticize. "Lord, if 130,000,000 people that never had it any too soft in their lives are trying to work out a way to better their condition, why, it ain't for a yap like me to come along and tell them that they are all wrong." Furthermore, he added, "I didnt have to go to Russia to find comedy or chaos in Governments."⁶⁹

Finally spotting what "makes life worth while" to an outsider in Moscow, Will described their bathing habits, exclaiming, "And what I mean—they bathe right. They just wade in what you would call the Nude, or altogether." After discovering this sight, Will said that he may not have seen all of Russia, but he "got to see all of some Russians." Joking about the custom, he said he sat right down and wired Ziegfeld, "Don't bring Follies to Russia. You would starve to death here."⁷⁰

This, then, was the source of the title which was, no doubt, selected to help sell the book. Will Rogers was merely being himself as he wandered around, reporting and interpreting what he saw and heard for the "folks over home."

Ether and Me

The last of Rogers' six books failed to create as much enthusiasm among the critics as some of his earlier publications, but the small, 77-page volume about his operation

⁶⁹Ibid., p. 101.

⁷⁰Ibid., pp. 132-33.

remained popular for a much longer period than any of the earlier ones and at the time of his death it was the only one still in print.

Entitled Ether and Me or "Just Relax," the book was reprinted from a two-part article published more than a year earlier in Saturday Evening Post under the heading, "A Hole in One."⁷¹ The hard back book, which originally sold for \$1, gives a lively account of Will's operation for gallstones which occurred in June of 1927.

Although there are witty passages in the book that would amuse almost any reader, it would naturally be enjoyed more by a person who had recently undergone an operation—one who could see his own weaknesses and fears, as well as the "human-ness" of doctors and nurses, through Will's eyes. For this reason, the book remained a choice gift item for hospitalized friends and relatives over many years. Indicating the continuing popularity of the volume, Paula Love related that during the time President Lyndon Johnson was recuperating from his operation in 1965 she received a phone call from a friend of Johnson's in California asking her to send the President a copy of Ether and Me.⁷²

G. P. Putnam's Sons continued to publish the book until 1943, through 18 printings plus eight printings of the Memorial Edition released after Rogers' death in 1935.

⁷¹November 5, 1927, and November 12, 1927.

⁷²Personal interview, August 25, 1966.

A review in the New York Herald-Tribune⁷³ called it "a highly amusing pocket volume running rather unexpectedly to burlesque in spots, a choice item for Rogers fans and others who could do with a bit of rough and ready humor." The Los Angeles Times review simply summarized the "plot," and pointed out that Rogers frankly admitted that the purpose of the piece was "to pay the doctor bill." The reviewer added, "Let's all help by buying the book! It's worth the dollar. . . ." ⁷⁴

Somewhat less enthusiastic, the New York Times reviewer said the subject of doctors had been overdone and that Rogers' book contained "hardly a line to cause what is vulgarly called a belly laugh," but he did credit the book with having enough humor "to keep one turning the pages" and now and then "impelling the reader to smile" because "he has the pleasing emotion of recognizing that he, too, has felt that way about doctors or nurses or operating rooms." ⁷⁵ Rogers must have been pleased by such a review. It will be recalled that he did not seek the "belly laugh," but preferred his readers to say, "He's right about that."

"An amusing little trifle" was the term used by Saturday Review of Literature⁷⁶ to describe the book. The reviewer lauded the "chronicler's skillful handling" of the subject

⁷³New York Herald-Tribune, September 8, 1929.

⁷⁴Los Angeles Times, July 14, 1929.

⁷⁵The New York Times, July 14, 1929.

⁷⁶Saturday Review of Literature, July 10, 1929.

and recommended it to those who had undergone the ordeal of an operation or had experienced one vicariously through operations on family or friends.

At the outset, Will credited Irwin Cobb's "Classical Operation Book" with giving him the idea for "making an operation pay its way," but he added that it was "hard to be funny when you know the check will only pass through your hands."⁷⁷ He outlined his attacks from gallstones—called "the plot" throughout most of the book—from childhood through the operation.

The diagnostician he dubbed "a traffic cop" to direct ailing people to a specialist.⁷⁸ He described a hospital as "the only place you can get into without having baggage," said his nurse "was Ziegfeld's front row without a dissenting vote,"⁷⁹ and complained that the nurses took so many blood samples he "was beginning to think that some of them were keeping a friend who might be anaemic."⁸⁰

Relating incidents from the examinations and surgery, Rogers gave a humorous, "play-by-play" account. When he finally was rolled into the operating room and looked up to see the "little balcony . . . where people with a well-developed sense of humor could sit and see other people cut up" and found it was deserted, Will said, "I thought, 'Well, here I am maybe playing my last act, and it to an empty house.'"⁸¹

⁷⁷Ether and Me, p. 4.

⁷⁸Ibid., p. 23.

⁷⁹Ibid., pp. 31, 32.

⁸⁰Ibid., p. 39.

⁸¹Ibid., pp. 46-47. [See Figure 6, p. 243]

As I am rolling to the operating room with a retinue of Nurses and Doctors as outriders, I thought I ought to pull some kind of a gag when I get in there that will get a laugh, *Except when I*
~~By the way, I had never seen one before,~~
 there was a kind of a little balcony up above the floor, where people with a well developed sense of humor could sit there and see other people cut up. It must be loads of fun. But there wasnt a soul in there then, I thought well, ^{HERE} I ~~am~~ am palaying meby my last act. **AN EMPTY HOUSE**
 There was a lot of Doctors and more nurses than I ever saw in my life. One was there so they told me afterwards just to ^{furnish} ~~count~~ **COUNT EVERY SINGLE THING USED INSIDE YOU DURING THE OPENING.** *EVERY GAUZE PACK HAS TO BE DE-ACCOUNTED*
 taken them off and they have to be accounted for before there is any sewing up, ~~and they have to be accounted for before there is any sewing up,~~
~~she removed most of the humor from operations by making it impossible to joke about what was left inside.~~ **FOR YOU JOKE**
 what was left inside. **YOU**

men before he left." ~~was an angement with a nozzle~~ a nozzle
 by this time thought of my gag and

ETHER AND ME

It must be loads of fun. But there wasn't a soul in there for my operation. I felt kind of disappointed.
 I thought, "Well, here I am maybe playing my last act, and it to an empty house."
 There were a lot of doctors and more nurses than I ever saw in my life. One nurse was there they told me afterwards just to count every single thing used inside you during the opening. Every gauze pack and every scissors and knife, no matter how small, has to be checked up and accounted for before any sewing up starts. This removes most of the old-time humor from operations, by making it impossible for anyone to joke about what was left inside them.

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Figure 6. Rough Draft Corrected by Rogers As Compared with the Edited Version Published in Ether and Me.

As always, he managed to include politics and items from the news, this time using the wild fantasies brought on by the ether as a device for telling what he saw. Flashes of scenes he described included a farmer who was "running and hollering for relief, when somebody shot him to put him out of his mortgages"; a little fellow "a-running and hollering, 'I don't chose to run'"; the Chinese shelling a town and saying, "We are Missionaries come to America, and you will have to worship Buddha and go to the Mission schools and learn Chinese"; and the Nicaraguans dropping bombs to protect the United States "as they wanted to put a canal through here some time."⁸²

Looking forward to future discussions of his operation while he recuperated, Will suddenly realized the term "Gall Bladder" might be too crude for "dining room gossip," so he decided to use the initials and call the ailing organ a "Gee Bee." He explained, "I don't want to just stand around a party and point to my scar and not be able to tell what disease put it there." Anyone who had "whiffed the ether" should be eligible for the "Fraternity of Scarbellies," Will concluded, so "Scars front! Viva, GeeBee's!"⁸³

While the book cannot be compared with Rogers' writing on politics and world affairs, Ether and Me remained a steady seller for a limited audience, and as late as 1939 the Rogers' estate paid \$122.72 in Federal income tax on the royalties.⁸⁴

⁸²Ibid., pp. 50-52.

⁸³Ibid., pp. 74-77.

⁸⁴Letter from Max Felix, lawyer, to Mr. J. K. Blake, Re: Estate of Will Rogers, August 7, 1939, Rogers Collection.

CHAPTER VIII

MISCELLANEOUS WRITING

The primary contributions of Will Rogers as a writer and journalist were made through syndicated pieces, magazine articles, and books described in previous chapters. To complete the study of Rogers as a writer, however, it is necessary to examine briefly several items which do not fit in any of those categories.

This chapter will discuss his work in advertising copy, in miscellaneous articles not included earlier, and in introductions to books other than his own.

Bull Durham Ads

Late in 1924, Will agreed to write 26 advertisements for the American Tobacco Company product, Bull Durham, to be published over a period of several months. Working through the H. W. Kastor & Sons Advertising Company, the humorist was given complete freedom to write as he chose and, needless to say, his copy must have been quite shocking to readers who had never seen the subtle approach in advertising that has just become acceptable in the past few years.

In the agreement, Rogers was to write approximately 150 words every two weeks and permit his picture and signature

to be used on the ads for a fee of \$500 per ad.¹

One newspaper item noted his entry into the advertising field and proposed an epitaph for the Oklahoman: "When Will Rogers' bones are inches beneath the sod, his stone will bear . . . an original epitaph, the one and only one in the world. It will read:

WILL ROGERS
"An Honest Ad Writer"²

The news item said that for the "first time in the history of the printed word, a copy writer was given carte blanche to say whatever he wished about a product." And that is exactly what he did, at least when he finally decided to mention the product. Largely he was just being himself.

In one, for instance, he fended any questions that might arise concerning his knowledge of advertising by saying he knew everything he needed to know, which was "how to get paid." Will said he had a family "kicking the toes out of lots of shoes daily" so he "signed up." In a postscript, he added, "I like to forgot to tell you what I was advertising. Its Bull Durham. I don't smoke it myself. I don't smoke anything, but somebody does or else what happened to all those bags?"³ Another time he claimed to be writing the pieces

¹Letter to Will Rogers from Frank W. Harwood, September 29, 1924, Rogers Collection.

²Milledgeville [Ga.] Recorder, March 12, 1925.

³Proofs, clippings, and some original manuscripts of the advertisements cited here can be found in Scrapbook Number Seven in the Rogers Collection.

because he loved animals, asking his readers if they had ever seen such a kind looking animal as the Bull in the picture.

Appearing every two weeks, the ads were titled "The Bulls Eye" with Will Rogers listed as "Editor and General Manager." Some of the pieces were in a single column, some were two columns wide, and others were three. Larger ads used sketches and more easily recognizable advertising copy for the remaining space. Rogers' comments were the same regardless of the size of the ad.

Evidently negotiations for such a contract were begun several weeks before final agreement was reached; and, although no concrete proof has been found, it seems likely that the advertising agency was urging Will to produce some "acceptable" copy. A letter was found in which an official with the agency outlined several paragraphs of local color and historical sidelights on Bull Durham, plus the biggest selling points—the flavor and the savings.⁴

Will's reply to the letter, if any, has not been found, but it is significant to note that none of the suggestions from the agency official ever appeared in the ads. The individualist wrote as he saw fit, usually joking about the product at some point near the end of each piece. Under the heading "A Mircale, A Truthful Add," Will asked his readers if they had ever read a truthful "add." Answering it for them, he continued,

⁴Letter to Will Rogers from W. L. Chesman, November 19, 1924, Rogers Collection.

No you never did, You read where some Guy endorses an Overcoat, and to prove it he has one on, (or one they loaned him for the Picture), Now even if he did like it, what has that got to do with You, Peoples tastes are not alike, . . . You are no kindergarden, you know what you wore last year and if it pleased you try it again, Now I don't smoke "Bull" Durham, I am not going to smoke "Bull" Durham, But if you did and you liked it, why dont let some Guys Picture and indorsement tout you off on something else. . . .

Modern advocates for "truth in advertising" would have had no problem with Will Rogers?

When he visited England, for instance, he commented on the emphasis on "old" things there: the Tower of London that "looks about like a silo at Ossawatomie, Kansas," and Westminster Abbey where they "walk on em, right on top of the graves, names and all." He added, "But what can you expect of a nation that dont even know enough to turn out the right way when you meet them in a car." In the postscript which followed, he found a way to plug the product: "You can get Bull Durham there but it costs you a lot, pretty near as much as its worth."

Three of the ads were written on the subject of life insurance which he said he could not endorse:

WHILE YOU ARE LIVING YOU DON'T KNOW WHETHER IT IS ANY GOOD OR NOT, AND WHEN YOU ARE DEAD YOU ARE NOT ALLOWED TO COME BACK AND FIND OUT. SO HOW COULD ANY MAN INDORSE SOMETHING OF WHICH HE HAD NO ABSOLUTE PROOF?

In the postscript, again, he mentioned the product by saying, "For immediate returns on a small capital investment, I can't see any comparison between Life Insurance and Bull Durham."

Forerunner of modern advertising techniques that use the "shock" approach or deliberately underplay the product,

Will's ad copy cannot be credited to any sophisticated method of research or theory of communication. He was simply being himself, the formula he had found to be successful in whatever arena he happened to be performing.

Articles about Hollywood

Although Rogers prided himself on the fact that he never "went Hollywood," he was a part of the community; and, judging from his daily and weekly columns, he enjoyed close friendship with certain film personalities.

In 1919 as a part of his civic duty he wrote a piece for Wid's Year Book of the Motion Picture Industry under the title "Fourteen Points on the Moving Picture Business," clearly referring to Woodrow Wilson's Fourteen Points about which Rogers had joked on stage and in his first book. Indicating that Will Rogers was considered "news" at that early date is the fact that The New York Times took note of his contribution, making no mention of any of the other Hollywood writers.⁵ The book was a money-making project published by the Film Daily and movie stars bought space, as Will put it, "to contribute (at so much a contrib)."

The humorist-actor said Wilson took his Fourteen Points to Paris "where they not only saw his fourteen but raised him twelve more." Will took his to the Coast, he explained. The first five points were made up of his wife and four

⁵The New York Times, January 11, 1920.

children,⁶ "a novelty in this business, that is provided you still live with them," Rogers continued. Panning himself, Will said he was the "ugliest man in pictures," one of the "last to go in," and that only a good cast and a great story could "offset the action of the star." In his concluding two points, however, he praised the moving pictures for providing "the only way in the world that you can play a town and not have to worry about hotels" and the "only business where you can sit out front and applaud yourself."

In 1928 he wrote another article on Hollywood; this one was published in The New McClures with the title, "Let Us Pray They Don't Find Out What's the Matter with the Movies."⁷ Looking at the movies from a dozen different points of view, he quoted a typical criticism from each source. The "so-called intellectual," for instance, said, "Why don't they give us something worthwhile in the movies that we can think about," Will related, while the regular movie fan said, "Give us something to see. . . . If we wanted to think we wouldn't come in here." Old folks asked for "something besides all this love sick junk, and the fadeout behind a willow tree," as the younger set clamored, "Give us some love and romance; what do we care about . . . a lot of old folks trying to show what they do in life."

⁶This was written shortly before the fourth Rogers child, Freddie, died of diphtheria.

⁷The New McClures, September, 1928.

According to Rogers, Will Hays wanted pictures to be cleaner, but exhibitors did not want them so clean they would lose business; unemployed actors claimed "they only want types" while those employed said, "Thank God they are beginning to realize it's us actors they want and not just somebody that looks the part."⁸ Yet Will predicted the industry would keep on growing, in spite of the criticism. He continues,

You can't get a picture so poor but there will be an audience growing up somewhere that will like it, and you can't get one so good but what they will be forty per cent of the people that see it that won't like it. If it wasn't that way everybody in the world would go to see one picture. So they better quit monkeying with the business and let it alone.⁹

Where else, asked the actor, can you get such entertainment for twenty-five cents? He pointed out that there was "nothing that has yet been invented that can compare with them for the money." He saw no reason for "yapping" about the movies, adding, "There is no law in the world that makes you go to them." Furthermore, holding a "clinic over the body" would probably only make movies worse, and Will concluded by telling his readers they should "pray to our Supreme Being, that he don't allow it to be found out what is the matter with the movies, for if he ever does, we will all be out of a job."¹⁰

⁸Ibid., pp. 24-25.

⁹Ibid., p. 25.

¹⁰Ibid., p. 88.

Program Copy

When Rogers went on the speaking tour in 1925-26, his manager, Charles L. Wagner, had published programs that included large cartoons and photographs of the speaker and the DeReszke Singers who appeared on the bill with him. Under a full-page picture of Will on the cover appeared the words, "AMERICA'S GREATEST HUMORIST / WILL ROGERS / THE PRINCE OF ENTERTAINERS AND ENTERTAINER OF 'THE PRINCE.'" Price of the program was 25 cents.¹¹ The title page features a cartoon of the rope-artist, followed by another full-page picture and an article on page three by Will Rogers. Title of the piece is "A Warning."

Will said he was asked to contribute something for the booklet, but he was surprised to know they would need a "Programme." "There are only the two of us Acts, the Quartette and myself, and I didn't think the audience would be very apt to confuse one with the other," he explained. When "they all show up," the "Quartette is the one where there is four in it," Will continued. He described himself as "the man who will come out and enthrall you with my command of the English Language, with its unmatched dignity. . . ."

¹¹Copies can be found in the Rare Books section at the Oklahoma State University Library, the Oklahoma Historical Society Library, and the Will Rogers Memorial. The "Prince" referred to here was the Prince of Wales, a friend of Rogers and the subject for several of Will's gags at this time.

More glowing promises filled the remainder of the 10-page program, written by someone else, of course, but interesting for the description of the speaker. Will was termed "the most brilliant humorist since Mark Twain"; "known internationally through his writings"; a tall man, "gaunt almost awkward in appearance, with direct eyes, . . . a far reaching voice, laconic, yet penetrating"; and the "funniest man in the world" whose "spontaneous wit," knowledge of human nature, and understanding of current conditions made him "the most quoted man in the country."¹²

Introductions to Books

Because of his universal popularity, Will Rogers was, no doubt, asked to endorse many products and to introduce countless books. The magic of his name was enough to guarantee a sales hike. He managed to side-step most such requests; he did, however, write introductions to seven books. Six of these were for books by or about friends, and the other was written to introduce a cook book produced by a women's club of Beverly Hills.

To books by Charles Russell. Probably the single piece of Rogers writing most widely reprinted has been the introduction he wrote to the book Trails Plowed Under¹³ by his artist friend, Charles Russell. Irvin Cobb, who knew and

¹²Ibid., pp. 8-10.

¹³"Introduction" to Trails Plowed Under by Charles M. Russell (New York: Doubleday & Co., 1927), pp. xiii-xviii.

admired both Rogers and Russell, described them in his autobiography in a chapter with the lusty title of "What a Pair To Draw To!" Cobb pictured them both as "true philosophers" and "true humorists"; yet each was dramatically different. While "Will liked crowds and excitement and the glare of the limelight" and rejoiced in the progress of America and his native West, Charley "hated being fussed over" and bemoaned the passing of the old West, according to Cobb.

In spite of these differences, however, Russell "admired Rogers as he admired hardly any other," Cobb continued. Proof that the affection was returned can be found in Will's "Introduction" which Cobb called "one of the most beautifully simple, most loving and lovable tributes that ever was penned in memory of a departed comrade."¹⁴

Because the writing revealed Will's own philosophy of life and death, portions of it were re-printed in newspaper and magazine articles throughout the nation in the days immediately following the plane crash. Rev. J. Whitcomb Brouger read the "Introduction" as a part of the funeral service in Glendale, Calif., for the famed Oklahoman.

The funeral itself was closed to all but the family and a few close friends, but the text of the eulogy was released by wire service to newspapers throughout the world.

Attending as one of the close friends, Cobb described the funeral service in a column released by Universal Service

¹⁴Irvin S. Cobb, Exit Laughing (Garden City, N.Y.: Garden City Publishing Company, Inc., 1942), pp. 402-403.

the next day: "The preacher was all the better that he choked up so often speaking of his friend, since a sob is more potent and honest than any rehearsed oration," Cobb wrote. And, although Rev. Brougher was noted for his eloquence, "for sheer beauty, for the purest poetry set to ringing words, nothing that he said, and I figure nothing anybody ever said, either, approached his reading of an extract from Will's dedication of the last book Charley Russell did, and which Will wrote just after Charley had died," Cobb continued. "I admired that minister all the more for letting Will's music mute the ringing symbols of his own words."¹⁵

Irene Rich, once Will's leading lady, read the text over the radio network the night after the crash, a fact that was noted in The New York Times in a news story which also included most of the "Introduction."¹⁶

In an attempt to discover why this particular piece of writing received such extensive coverage and praise, special attention was given the "Introduction." Any slight variation from Rogers' usual style was noted as a possible indication that the piece might have been ghost written or perhaps partially written by someone else.

It was printed in the form of a letter, Will's favorite device, but one word in the second paragraph did not seem to ring quite true. In fact, it almost changed the rhythmic pattern found in Rogers' writing. The paragraph in question

¹⁵Universal Service release, August 23, 1935.

¹⁶The New York Times, August 22, 1935.

told of a visit to California by Russell's family about whom he said, "They sho was a lonesome layout." Here the word sho seemed more like the Hollywood interpretation of Will's slang than his own. With this doubt, a special effort was made to find some evidence in the Rogers Collection of actual authorship.

Fortunately, with the assistance of Mrs. Love, the original manuscript was found. It was obviously typed by Will Rogers in very rough, first-draft form and edited in his handwriting. Basically the same as the published piece, the manuscript was probably retyped and edited somewhat before being sent to the publisher. And one of the changes was the substitution of "sho was a lonesome layout" for Will's original and more natural "mighty lonesome looking layout."

Another minor change, yet a noticeable one to a careful observer of his word choices, was the revision of Will's description of his attempt to comfort the bereaved family in his "letter" to his late friend: "You know we talked over the old Gag about it all being for the best, and that you had a better job and would do maby better work there than you did here." In the published form, the "old Gag" was changed to read the "usual routine."

Whether Rogers himself made the changes in the revised copy is impossible to establish from the evidence available. More important is the fact that the rough draft is proof that he actually wrote the "Introduction" that has received so much acclaim.

Other elements of his style can be seen in the apologetic tone he used to protest to his departed friend:

My Lord Charley you know I cant write any Introduction, thats for writers to do, Why a book like you got Charley that you put all your best Stories in, and spent all that time drawing, I bet a hundred wonderful pictures are with it, Why you ought to have somebody turn an introduction out of the "schute" that would really turn on some high grade words. . . .¹⁷

Throughout the piece, Will wrote to his friend as realistically as he wrote all his "letters." Yet from time to time he would slip naturally into a tone of true sorrow, telling his friend "you dont know how we miss you," then slipping in a typical Rogers-ism, "Why you old rascal you would have thought you was Somebody" in reference to the eulogies.

Speaking for himself, Will said, "It wasent what you had done, it wasent because you could paint and tell a story better than any man, it was you Charley we want you if you couldent paint a fence. . . ."¹⁸

The final paragraph, which was a penciled addition to the original manuscript and printed authentically in the "Introduction," was the portion most often quoted after Rogers' tragic death:

¹⁷"Introduction" to Trails Plowed Under, p. xiv.

¹⁸Original manuscript, Rogers Collection. The published version reads ". . . it wasent because you paint a horse and a cow and a cowboy better than any man that ever lived, I dont know, it was just you Charley, We want you here if you couldent whitewash a fence. . . ." It is the opinion of the writer that this portion was changed by someone other than Rogers. The quotation from the original is representative of his "timing," while the revision is not, and the use of "I dont know" was found in his radio speeches but not in his writing.

Course we are all just a hanging on here as long as we can. I dont know why we hate to go, we know its better there, Maby its because we havent done anything that will live after we are gone. from your old friend, Will.¹⁹

Not often did the professional humorist reveal such depth of emotion in writing, yet he experienced and demonstrated deep emotions of hurt or grief. As was cited earlier, he cried when he told Betty Rogers about his mother's death, even though it had occurred many years earlier. O.O. McIntyre, a fellow columnist for McNaught, told of seeing Will in tears "because one of the smart alec professional hooters in New York had written something that hurt him."²⁰

One of the rare occasions when he let his grief be known in writing was found in his syndicated column the day after Knute Rockne was killed in an airplane crash. Published in hundreds of newspapers April 1, 1931, it released his feelings that were shared by millions and, ironically, included a paragraph that might have described his own death even better:

We thought it would take a president or a great public man's death to make a whole nation, regardless of age, race or creed, shake their heads in real sincere sorrow and say: "Ain't it a shame he is gone?"

The final sentences are quite similar to those he used in the "Introduction" in reference to Russell. Directing his remarks to Rockne, Will wrote, "Why you old bald headed rascal, you died one of our national heroes. Notre Dame was your

¹⁹"Introduction" to Trails Plowed Under, p. xviii.

²⁰Tulsa Daily World, August 23, 1935.

address, but every gridiron in America was your home."

Two years after Rogers wrote the "Introduction" to Trails Plowed Under, he wrote another for a second post-humously published book, Good Medicine, which was a collection of letters and other written work by Charles Russell.²¹ In the latter, Rogers exhibited less emotion; instead he revealed a great deal about the personality of his late friend and even more about his own philosophy of life.

Openly partial to Russell's writings as compared with his paintings, Will said, "Charlie didn't have a single earmark on him that we associate with the 'Artist,'" and he could "think twice as straight as he could draw a line with a brush." Never overly impressed by "art" wherever he saw it, Rogers passed over the artistic talents of Russell to laud his "great sympathy and understanding for the man of the world, be he 'Injun' or White."

A defense of his own refusal to affiliate with an organized religious body can be detected when he wrote of Russell:

I don't know what religious outfit he sorter leaned to, if any of the present organized and chartered ones. But he sure had him one, and that was a belief in somebody or something, and that somebody or something was the one that he was going to leave to judge his fellow man. . . . He would have been a Great Teacher,—I wanted to say Preacher, but I wouldn't a called him that because they feel called on to advise and regulate, and Charlie didn't. He believed in "Letting alone" and figuring it out for yourself. . . .

²¹"Introduction" to Good Medicine by Charles M. Russell (Garden City, N. Y.: Garden City Publishing Company, Inc., 1929), pp. 13-16.

Qualifying the statement that was always evident in his own philosophy, the belief that individuals as well as nations should be "let alone" to work out their own problems, Will added that this should be done "so long, of course, as it didn't trespass the rights of others."

Commenting on Russell's understanding of human nature, Will said the artist "studied you from the inside out" and in each of his paintings you could "tell just what the Indian, the Horse and the Buffalo were thinking about." The highest praise Will could give his late friend was likely the one he sought himself. He said Russell was "Just Human" with no conceit and no malice, hatred, or envy. "He had it in for Nobody," Will said of Russell, which is just another way of phrasing what he seems to have meant by his own claim that he never met a man he did not like.

To a book on Roping. Freed from the emotional ties that bound his jesting manner in Russell's books, Will's usual rambling, casual style is found in the introduction he wrote for the book on Roping by Chester Byers.²² Following in Rogers' footsteps in practicing the art of trick roping, Byers made a serious attempt to explain how to achieve certain skills with the lariat.

In the "Foreword," Rogers said he could not give his friend much "'marking' on his intellect" for attempting to write a book, especially one "on a subject." All the previous

²²"Foreword" to Roping, Trick and Fancy by Chester Byers (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1928), pp. iii-x.

books he had read on "subjects," Will continued, "were written by men that didnt know anything about the subject."

He acknowledged that Byers knew ropes and roping, which was but an indication that "it is liable to be awful uninteresting, and be contradicted by the 109 million that dont know roping." He added, "So Chet shows he dont know nothing about Authoring right there." Later he warned Byers to be prepared to write a second volume to explain what he meant in the first one, because "all Authors do that."

His kidding at an end, Rogers encouraged the readers to take the book seriously because "whatever he had told you, is so." Then he added his own advice to would-be rope artists:

So get a rope and start missing. Thats about 80 per cent of all there is to roping. Its great exercise if you want to get tired, personally I dont want to get tired, If I am rested I would rather stay that way.²³

Rogers' sparkling wit is lacking here and the writing sounds as though he were merely fulfilling an obligation. He knew Byers at the time the book was published, 1928, and later they became better acquainted when the younger rope artist joined Will on some of his personal appearances for the drouth relief fund-raising shows in 1931. The reason would be conjecture, but from the tone and quality of the writing here it is obvious that Rogers made no great effort to "promote" the book or the author, and he barely managed to include a light sprinkling of the Rogers brand of humor.

²³Ibid., pp. ix-x.

To a cookbook. How Will came to write the introduction for a cookbook published by a women's club is not known, but it seems likely that the venture was philanthropic in nature and possibly Mrs. Rogers or a close friend was a member. In any case, his introduction would have certainly been included to increase sales.²⁴

He explained that the book was about the "culinary Art," which he defined as "just cooking," and that he had been asked "to offer a few words in Alabi for this pie-reodical." Other terms he used for the book included "little Pamphlet," "this Almanac," the "Scenario of the dish," and "this catalogue." According to Rogers, all the readers had to do was follow the directions and "you will wind up with something," even if it is only "indigestion." Kidding the women who presented the "prescriptions," he said, "These Women have had time to concoct these conglomerations for the reason that their husbands eat with a Luncheon Club anyhow." For this reason, he advised that "anything you feed 'em at home is a surprise and a relief."

Will said he was just old fashioned enough to "believe that eating is here to stay," in spite of the fad for dieting. He added that when those people who were dieting "don't have any more luck landing what they are after than they did before," they, too, would find the cookbook useful.

²⁴"Preface" to Fashions in Foods in Beverly Hills by the Beverly Hills Woman's Club (Beverly Hills, Calif.: Beverly Hills Citizen, 1926).

With the exception of his reference to the social habits, the introduction offers little other than an example of Rogers' aimless, sometimes humorous rambling. More than likely it did accomplish its purpose, however, and help the sale of cook-books by the club women.

To "Around the World in Eight Days." Will Rogers' "Introduction" to the book by Wiley Post and Harold Gatty has more of the humorist's personality as it was exhibited on happy occasions and in person than any other such piece of writing. It was taken almost verbatim from the speech he made in Claremore when the famous flyers were feted there two weeks after their triumphant return from the record-breaking trip around the world.²⁵

The flight had made headlines across the nation and The New York Times had run daily messages from the pioneer aviators during their global flight. When the trip ended at Roosevelt Field, July 1, 1931, the Times published a four-column map on the front page, the work of a large staff of cartographers, tracing the trip, and gave a lively account of the victory celebration and the ticker-tape parade down Broadway for Post and Gatty in New York.²⁶

Will had written of little other than the flight by his friends during the eight days they were in the air, doing

²⁵"Introduction" to Around the World in Eight Days by Wiley Post and Harold Gatty (Garden City, N. Y.: Garden City Publishing Company, Inc., 1931), pp. 9-16.

²⁶Meyer Berger, The Story of the New York Times (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1951), p. 380.

his bit to keep the entire nation alert to the importance of the feat. In view of the world-wide acclaim and the thousands who must have been clamoring for visits from the heroes on their return, Rogers' success in getting them to come to Oklahoma indicates his influence in the world of aviation.

The pair and their financial backer, F. C. Hall, flew from New York to Tulsa where Will met them, then flew with them the 20 miles to Claremore where he spoke at a banquet in their honor which also marked the official opening of the local airport. The "Introduction," then, was taken from his exuberant talk, and it carries this mood in print.

Lauding Post, a Texas farm boy who was driven to town by the boll weevil, learned to be a mechanic on Model-T's, and made his first flight in a plane he had pieced together from one that crashed near the garage where he worked, Will explained how the aviator's experiences made the record-breaking flight a success:

That's why away up in Siberia when the ship hit in the mud and tipped over on her nose, and did enough damage to have sent most Pilots back on a train, why he just took a hammer and some bob wire and fixed it so it added ten miles more an hour, The old garage training come in handy.

Never one to "pull his punches" on what might have seemed a touchy subject to someone else, Will spoke (and wrote) openly of Post's having only one eye. He pointed out that after Wiley had flown over 700 hours, the government did not want to issue him a license "on account of what they thought was a physical affliction." Will added, "Now they got men looking and offering a bonus to One Eyed Pilots."

Continuing his exaggeration for its humorous effect, Rogers said the eye Post lost was the one that spotted bad weather and bad landing fields, while the one that was left saw only the good flying conditions. Post was such a determined "little Rascal," Will claimed, that "when he says quit, You can bet there would be no more Gas, or no more air."²⁷

Rogers' speaking technique is obvious in this paragraph; and throughout the "Introduction," his ability to build a "gag" for his audience from the initial "head-nodding" reaction as he gave facts, to the smile as he began the exaggeration, to a chuckle as he added more can be seen. One can almost hear the pause while the chuckles rippled through the audience, then a bigger laugh when he added the final "or no more air." It is obvious, of course, that this sort of writing would not have the same effect on the reader—the timing, the drawl, and the humorous expressions are missing in print. Yet the total effect is, nevertheless, entertaining.

To the biography of Annie Oakley. A few months before Annie Oakley died in the fall of 1926, Will Rogers visited the once internationally-known star of Buffalo Bill's Wild West show at her home in Dayton, Ohio. She had been bedridden from an automobile accident for several years and was all but forgotten by the younger generation. Following the visit, he devoted a weekly article to her, recalling the days when she was the toast of Europe and America as the greatest woman rifle shot in the world.

²⁷"Introduction" to Around the World in Eight Days, pp. 12-13.

He described her as having such character that it would be "a mark for any woman to shoot at"; then he told his readers, "I want you to write her, all you who remember her, and those that can go and see her." The columnist included her complete address, and the response was a flood of mail from throughout the world.

Discovering the clipping and the pile of letters she had saved following her death in the fall of 1926, her biographer asked Will Rogers to write a suitable tribute to the woman as an introduction to the book. This he did.²⁸

The shortest of his introductions (approximately 200 words), the tribute which opens the book is titled "A Few Words from Will Rogers" and is dated April, 1927. He used her nickname, "Little Miss Sure-Shot," and said he "doubted that her character could be matched outside of a Saint." Recalling that he had heard cowboys from the Buffalo Bill show "speak of her in almost reverence" because of their love for her, he added, "She was a marvelous woman; kindest hearted, most thoughtful, a wonderful Christian woman."

The sincerity of his admiration can be found in a single sentence: "Just think of a little, frail, gray-haired woman who had spent her life with a wild west show, remaining in your memory as being just about the most perfect thing you ever saw beside your own Mother." Such a comparison was rare indeed from one whose mother was so perfect in his memory that

²⁸Will Rogers, "A Few Words by Will Rogers," Annie Oakley, Woman at Arms, by Courtney Ryley Cooper (New York: Duffield and Company, 1927), pp. iii-iv.

he found it difficult to speak or write of her without pain throughout his life.

To Eddie Cantor's book. Terming the introduction to Cantor's biography a "Warning," Will said he was playing the "Dumb" act to open the show for his old friend from the Ziegfeld Follies, in spite of the fact that he had never read the book and had no intentions of doing so.²⁹

Concerning autobiographies or biographies in general, Rogers said, "People are like a Cat when it comes to their lives, they have at least nine, and they can pick out the one to write about that they think will look best." He pointed out that "Eddie has one of the youngest lives that has ever been published," and if the book should prove to be a success, it would create a great demand for "Autobiographies while they are young." In this case, he continued, the book could be written "before there has really been a chance to learn anything that shouldent be in a Life story."³⁰

He advised readers to buy the book because money from sales was designated for a Boys' summer camp, and "you will be helping some ppor kid to get poisen ivy that would never in the World have had the oppurtunity otherwise." In addition, he said the volume would fill up just as much space as the biography of anyone else, "unless," he added, "it was Napoleon, or Washington or some of those far sighted old boys

²⁹Will Rogers, "A Warning," My Life Is In Your Hands, by Eddie Cantor as told to David Freedman (New York: Blue Ribbon Books, Inc., 1928), pp. xi-xiv.

³⁰Ibid., pp. xi-xii.

that carried writers right with em to make up their lives as they went along."³¹

Even though this introduction is approximately twice the length of the one Rogers wrote for the biography of Annie Oakley, it shows little feeling and is salvaged only by two or three witty comments. Perhaps a clue to his apparent lack of interest is that in the decade between 1917 and 1919 when Cantor, W. C. Fields, and other vaudeville personalities appeared together in the Follies, and the time the book was published in 1928, the others had become "stars" and only Will seemed to remain the same. One statement by Eddie Cantor clearly indicates the difference. He wrote the book, the banjo-eyed singer said, because it would make a good plot for a moving picture and because he was "one comedian who's made a million dollars and has still got it." To a man such as Will Rogers with his one good suit—who had sacrificed hundreds of thousands of dollars in his fund raising performance in 1927, only a few months before Cantor's book was published, who always gave away far more than he kept of his fabulous income, and who repeatedly refused to write his own life story—the boast about the million dollars must have seemed in bad taste, to say the least.

To a book on travel. In 1928, Rogers wrote the shortest of the introductions found to date. It appears in a travel

³¹Ibid., p. xiii.

book by Karl Kitchen.³² Less than 150 words in length, the "Foreword" merely comments cryptically that it is "kinder odd to see a book about Europe by an author who had visited there more than once." He added a remark similar to the observation made on Byers' book—predicting that the volume would have limited sales because "you know what you are talking about."

³²Will Rogers, "Foreword" to Pleasure—If Possible by Karl K. Kitchen (New York: Rae D. Henkle Co., Inc., 1928).

CHAPTER IX

THE ROGERS STYLE

In the introduction to an anthology of humorous essays, E. B. White said, "Humor can be dissected, as a frog can, but the thing dies in the process and the innards are discouraging to any but the pure scientific mind."¹ So it is with the Rogers style.

Certain elements common to American humorists can be found in his writing: exaggeration, incongruity, colorful figures of speech, and homely phrases. Yet other characteristics generally associated with humor are conspicuously absent from Rogers' writing. He did not rely on such comic themes as the country cousin, the interfering mother-in-law, the relative who overstays his welcome, the precocious child, the confused teen-ager, the bumbling servant, the dialect-speaking tradesman, or the war between the sexes.

Nor did he often turn to dialogue or narrative, expecting a stereotyped character or characters in a comic situation to create humor.

Rogers' writing also failed to exhibit some of the distinguishing qualities of the homespun or crackerbox humorists.

¹E. B. White and Katherine White, eds., A Sub-Treasury of American Humor (New York: Coward-McCann, Inc., 1941), p. xviii.

Benjamin Franklin, Artemus Ward, Kin Hubbard, and Finley Peter Dunne, for instance, all began as writers on newspapers or magazines, developed or crystalized a political philosophy, then employed imaginary characters to "sell" their beliefs for them. Their spokesmen were depicted as illiterate or simple people, often using exaggerated dialect or fractured grammar. Such characters were clothed as "just plain folks" in an effort to make them more believable to the average reader.

This technique of the earlier humorists had little or no effect on Rogers' style. He always spoke his own piece. Even when it meant setting himself up as a target for sharp criticism, the cowboy-philosopher never hid behind a fictitious character. His spelling and grammar remained fairly consistent from his boyhood days on, and he never faked extreme illiteracy for the sake of comedy. Most of the elements of style found in his later writings were also evident in his early letters, changing only in subject and scope and polished somewhat by the urbane wit he developed through the years. Nor did he ever attempt to "sell" his audience on any definite political philosophy. He advanced certain causes, such as aviation, military preparedness, or fund raising; but his primary purpose did not center in any single "ism."

Unique Qualities

If Will Rogers had held early aspirations to become a humorist or a writer, he might never have achieved the

freshness—the simple, straight-forward humor that came from being his "natural self." He might have remained a second-rate imitation instead of attaining the one-of-a-kind classification he earned before his death.

As was pointed out in earlier chapters, Rogers' youthful ambitions centered around becoming one of the best trick ropers in the world. His monologues in vaudeville grew out of a few casual remarks intended to draw attention to his feats with the lariat. His first comments, the "gags for roping the mare," covered the business at hand; later he added remarks about the other acts in the show; and gradually he included the audience, then New York, and finally the world at large as he joked about what he read in the papers.

Every step of the way, he was "playing it by ear," an ear that was extremely sensitive to audience reaction. If they liked his presentation, he worked diligently to give them more, or an improved version—always polishing his "act" whether for the stage, the movies, or the printed media. His only guide, then, was success or failure as he experienced it personally, and he established the unique Rogers style because he was aware of no set pattern to follow. Either the act went over, or it did not.

By opening his articles with the unpretentious "Well, all I know is what I read in the papers . . ." Will personally invited his readers to look over his shoulder as he pointed to an item here or another there that deserved a comment or a chuckle or both. When he varied the opening to "It says in

here . . ." he made an intimate appeal to the reading audience, any one of whom might have been sitting across from him at the breakfast table. This personal approach coupled with his skepticism of persons or institutions that failed to meet the standards of common sense gave the readers confidence that they, too, could see through the follies and foibles of a fast-moving world.

Whether consciously or unconsciously, then, Will gained his readers' sympathy by poking fun at himself, gained the respect of the common people—the Great Normal Majority—by daring to de-horn the sacred cows of society, earned the admiration and gratitude of the rich and powerful by helping them to laugh at themselves, and without ever fully understanding the reason, enjoyed the love of a nation by remaining his "natural self."

Attempts to Improve

Although Rogers remained a natural humorist, this is not to say that he made no effort to change or improve his writing. He searched constantly for new material; visited the "folks" wherever he traveled and listened to what they had to say; read eight to ten newspapers each day to find new angles or to understand complex situations; and followed wherever his curious mind led him.

Will Rogers, Jr., in a personal interview said he had marveled many times since his father's death at the constant deep curiosity he had.² "It wouldn't matter where we were or

²Interview with Will Rogers, Jr., November 11, 1966.

what was happening," the younger Rogers related, "Dad wanted to know all about it. He might look down at a floor like this," Rogers continued as he pointed to a tile floor, "and he'd start wondering what it was made of—get down and inspect it, ask questions. If somebody were to mention that it was made around here, he'd say, 'Let's go see how it's done,' and off we'd go.

"It didn't matter what it was, he'd be interested in every little detail—poke around, ask questions. And people talked to Dad," Rogers said. "They could tell he was interested and they'd keep talking."

The younger Rogers said when he was a kid he just supposed all men were like his father; but in later years, after having gained experience in journalism and writing himself, he wonders what a great journalist his father could have been, if he had followed this profession alone.

An editorial in The Daily Oklahoman, August 19, 1935, made a similar observation. The editor pointed to Rogers' last article through which "in a few trenchant sentences he reveals the quality of the master reporter—a quality that would have made him outstanding among the world's reporters if that had been his chosen trade." Instead of criticizing or blaming anyone, the editorial continued, Will's article "is merely a picture limned by a genius who saw the problem in all its parts and saw it whole."

Recognized Techniques

In spite of the fact that Rogers' pieces for the paper, like his monologues, seemed spontaneous—unstudied—they were the end result of a great deal of study and work and produced with artistry and skill. That he was aware of the technique of his humor can be shown as early as 1919 in the quotations used in the article by George Martin for American magazine.³ Although he was referring to his stage humor at that time, the same techniques would be equally applicable to his written humor.

Timeliness. Rogers told the reporter, "A joke don't have to be near as funny if it's up to date," indicating his belief that timeliness was an important ingredient. He also explained that he was constantly studying his "market," finding out "what's going on in the minds of the folks" in his audience and building his jokes on those subjects.

Interpretation. Truth, of course, was the constant ingredient of his humor, and it had to be truth as he saw it, Rogers told the American reporter. For this reason, he found his own "stuff"—the material he gathered and wrote himself—went over better than anything else. He said using the ideas of another person was "like a man trying to sell washing-machines by repeating the prospectus instead of thinking his sales points for himself and putting his sales across in his own words." It was Rogers' interpretation, then, that "sold"

³"The Wit of Will Rogers," The American Magazine, November, 1919.

the humor.

Brevity. Brevity and clarity were also mentioned by Rogers in the early article, because these qualities "show that you have thought, and that you know what you are talking about." Martin pointed out that the cowboy humorist limited his stage jokes to three lines, telling as many as 40 jokes in a monologue as compared with some 8-10 by others in the same length of time.

Much the same statement concerning his brevity was made by Cleveland Amory in 1962 when he reviewed Day's biography of Rogers for Saturday Review.⁴ He lauded Rogers, who for thirty-five years "kept America laughing as no humorist before or since has done," adding, "His legacy was the ad-lib—but he was also the father of the one liner." Alistair Cooke said the Oklahoman "had a God-given gift for sentences of pure running wit that made hard ideas look as smooth and beautiful as rocks under a trout-stream."⁵

Subjects. Cooke also cited another element of Rogers' technique which the humorist had explained in the American article. In the 1919 interview, the cowboy-philosopher was quoted as calling this "trick" the ability to "make capital out of what the other fellow says and does" or to play one man or group against another as he revealed the fallacies in

⁴Cleveland Amory, "America's Most Complete Human Document," Saturday Review of Literature, August 25, 1962, p. 14

⁵Alistair Cooke, One Man's America (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1953), p. 176.

any partisan issue or dogmatic statement. Cooke said it was impossible to explain the secret of the "almost frightful gift" Rogers had for being able "without a snitch of ill-will" to see "how simply and ruthlessly the world turns." Yet, Cooke added, "Will Rogers knew more about foreign policy than anyone I know at the United Nations, the fundamental way it works, the uncomfortable plain facts that irritate the professional diplomat but which cannot be explained away."⁶

Referring again to the article published in 1919 to compare the descriptions of Rogers' technique across the span of more than 30 years, the humorist stated then that the "smartest all-around man" was the one "who works all day and has to ride thirty minutes home on a street car to get home at night." That man, Rogers said, reads the newspapers.⁷

Those who read the papers made the best audience, Will believed, but he did not discount those less learned. He explained that one man's mind might be "sharper than another's, and you must be able to estimate how deep you can make your stuff and still get it across to him." Again comparing it to selling, he said that "any sales talk that's over the average man's head is no go."⁸

Indicating that his philosophy of humor remained basically the same, Rogers was quoted in Current Opinion in 1923 as claiming that a gook joke must be rooted in reality, or "has got to have its foundation in truth if it's going to

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Martin, p. 34.

⁸ Ibid.

enjoy the process of getting over to the audience."⁹

As has been pointed out earlier, Will constantly traveled and studied his audience. He visited with employees in newspaper plants as well as the editor, talked to people he met in the small chili parlors, and observed those at the summit of fortune's wheel when he attended formal affairs or talked with millionaires, congressmen, presidents, and kings. His curiosity led him to discover what the public was thinking about and his sensitivity interpreted this into a knowledge of what would go over with his reading audience.

Eddie Cantor noted this sensitivity when he said of Rogers, "In my fifty years of show business, he was the only person I met with a fluoroscopic mind. He knew what audiences were thinking and what the people of the country were thinking." Going further to include his friend's intuitive talent, Cantor added, "I was never a gambling man, but when he made predictions, I was ready to put up my money at any odds that these predictions would materialize."¹⁰

Figures of Speech

Describing Rogers' style of humor, Irvin Cobb stated that he never told an anecdote, nor did he try, but "at deft turns of speech and racy metaphors by which a whole cosmic aspect was summed up in a small mouthful of tangy words, he

⁹Current Opinion, January 23, 1923, p. 103.

¹⁰Eddie Cantor, As I Remember Them (New York: Duell, Sloan and Pearce, 1963), p. 142.

had mighty few equals." Cobb referred to Will's skill that earned him recognition as a "one liner," and has made him one of the most quoted American writers of all time. But he also noted Rogers' talent for selecting descriptive sentences or phrases.

"Deft turns of speech." Numerous examples of the technique which Cobb cited can be found in the quotations from Rogers' writings throughout this paper. Only a few selected "turns of speech" are necessary here to illustrate and emphasize this element of his style. Writing of his visit to Russia, he described it as "a country that is so much bigger than us that we would rattle around in it like an idea in Congress";¹¹ Communism as "the only thing they want you to have but keep none themselves";¹² the Winter Palace as a structure so big that if "a young Czar ever forgot the number of his room, he would be an old Czar before he found it";¹³ "that guy Marx" as being like "one of those efficiency experts" who "could explain to you how you could save a million dollars and he couldnt save enough himself to eat on";¹⁴ and Trotsky's administration as ineffectual because "they made it so Red-Tapey that he couldnt give out the Vodka-selling privilege at the next Revolution without having it passed by an act of the entire Soviet Council."¹⁵

¹¹Bathing Suit, p. 17.

¹²Ibid., p. 99.

¹⁴Ibid., p. 147.

¹³Ibid., p. 118.

¹⁵Ibid., p. 94.

When the reparations conference was scheduled in Lausanne in 1932, Will predicted that it would be called off unless the United States participated: "You can't have a picnic lunch unless the party carrying the basket comes," he observed satirically.¹⁶ A week later when the American delegation arrived in Europe with "700 barrels of gold," he quipped, "Say, if we don't run out of barrels we won't have enough gold left at home to fill our front teeth."¹⁷

In terse metaphors he commented on the futility of American intervention in European squabbles in 1933 when he recalled for his readers that in 1917 the United States "decided that the world ought to have a mess of democracy" and "went along way from home to fix it for 'em." He added, "Well, you can kinder get a rough idea how we fixed it." In view of that failure, he suggested seriously that we "stay home and build a big army and navy." Properly armed, then, the nation would have no fears: "They can't come here to lick us and we are not going there to lick them, so how are you going to have a war?"¹⁸

His use of analogy can be found in his praise of Roosevelt's attempt to stop strikes. Rogers explained that "Unions are fine things," but he felt a strike was like a war—to be used only as a last resort. "It always falls on those who had nothing to do with calling it."¹⁹ Using the same technique,

¹⁶The New York Times, January 21, 1932.

¹⁷Ibid., January 29, 1932. ¹⁸Ibid., August 8, 1933.

¹⁹Ibid., August 6, 1933.

Rogers chided Roosevelt and Congress when he wrote home from San Salvadore that the government there was not recognized "because it's supposed to have come in during a revolution, something like Washington did in America."²⁰

Describing the unsettled conditions he found as he traveled on through the countries to the south in 1932, Rogers again used the known to reveal the unknown when he wrote, "Revolutions are thicker down there than Roosevelt Republicans."²¹

Although his figures of speech seemed spontaneous or "ad lib," Rogers worked consciously to find truths in current events on which to base his remarks. The style, however, remained his own—the way "an old country boy" from Oologah might be expected to express his feelings or interpret events. His ranch background was evident as often as cosmopolitan experiences, and frequently both characteristics appeared in the same sentence. In 1934, for instance, he said the newly elected Congress was "a pack of mongrels"; then he explained the descriptive term by adding, "Some are Republicans but new dealers; some are Democrats, but not new dealers; some are Democrats just to use the label; some are Republicans just to try and keep an old custom alive."²²

In Will's attempts to explain complex international events he always admitted his limitations to avoid outdistancing his readers, then used analogies to clarify the situations

²⁰Ibid., October 9, 1932.

²¹Ibid., October 10, 1932.

²²Ibid., November 6, 1934.

as much as possible. When he wrote of the abdication of the King of Siam, for instance, he explained that "a king is sort-er like a politician—it's hard to tell when he's making good or bad."²³ The colloquial "making good," it should be noted, was a natural expression for the journalist and not a bit of faked illiteracy on Will's part.

Descriptive figures of speech were also used when he wrote of a domestic situation in 1926, the fast-changing moving picture industry: "Movies is getting kinder like Home Brew. You get a little Movie Camera and a recipe and you just sit home and look and drink."²⁴

Definitions. Throughout his works, Rogers used humorous definitions to enlighten as well as to entertain. These differ only by reason of his calling attention to them. One of the historical definitions he used when he reported from Rome was the "Artistic breed called the Gladiators" who engaged in a "Bulldogging contest with the Lions" each Sunday. Will said, "A fellow was a Gladiator as long as he remained alive—that's what made him glad."²⁵ Stating that he was going to print a note from Ring Lardner as it was written, Rogers defined the term: "Ver Batim, as we say in Claremore, Oklahoma, which means to let a thing alone and not try to spoil it yourself."²⁶

²³Ibid., March 1, 1935.

²⁴Tulsa Daily World, August 22, 1926.

²⁵Will Rogers, Letters, p. 177.

²⁶Tulsa Daily World, February 21, 1926.

Colorful descriptions. Colorful and homely phrases were always a part of the Rogers style from the time he began writing letters, and he was able to communicate clear pictures or ideas to his readers. A press conference in Geneva, for instance, was "skull practice" for the American delegates;²⁷ he agreed to speak at a fund raising banquet in California to "act a fool for the natives at so much a head";²⁸ Bernard Shaw was called "the Guy that tells all of them where to head in at"; and if the United States had not been armed, "Cortez would have had every Senator fighting Bulls instead of throwing 'em."²⁹

Several devices that made up the Rogers style can be found in the article he wrote giving advice on recruiting football players for Notre Dame, an imaginary speech that Knute Rockne might give to the graduating class:

Go Ye into the Highways and Byways and deliver back to your old Alma Mater a man that can stand on his own two yard line, receive a pass intended for some Protestant, Grab that Pass, tuck it into your consecrated bosom and show these athiests your heels! . . . Get out of here you Graduates, and don't you dare hang up your sheep skins in your homes till you have delivered to old Man Rockne a man that can Run, Punt, Kick, Pass, and Receive. . . . I don't want College cheers. . . . I want open field runners, hard tacklers, and ten second men with mole skins on. . . . We will take any Nationality, the odder the better, We got to have some queer breeds to keep the Irish mad enough to play. Bring him in, whether he is a Schecko Slovakian, or an Esquimo, or Siamese Twins, just so he can get that old Pigskin down that field. He dont even have to be a Catholic.

²⁷The New York Times, February 3, 1932.

²⁸Tulsa Daily World, March 27, 1927.

²⁹Ibid., July 18, 1926.

He can be Grand Kleagle of the Klan at his home Wickiup so long as he can make first down, . . . and then you can truly say, "I AM A REAL SON OF OLD NOTRE DAME."³⁰

In this excerpt, a much longer sample of Rogers' writing than has been generally used in this paper, it is possible to see how he built a "gag" as he kept adding to the same idea. It is interesting to note that the article was written shortly after the depression began and may have been intended as comic relief from the extremely distressing temper of the times as well as a bit of Rogers' humor.

Other Stylistic Devices

Direct address. When the public read Rogers' columns, articles, or books, they expected to find their friend Will very much in evidence, and they were seldom disappointed. Speaking his own piece, whatever the medium, he made liberal use of I and you, and found no need for the editorial we. Although he never directly defined this technique, it was very much a part of the Rogers style.

Able to write in the intimate, person-to-person style, often in the form of a letter to a friend, Rogers approached his readers directly, even when he wrote of subjects far removed from their everyday lives. Several illustrations of this technique can be seen in the book on Russia. He realized that he was dealing with a difficult subject, and so made an extra effort to reach his readers. Chapter V begins,

³⁰ Tulsa Daily World, December 15, 1929.

"Now I know you want to know what about it, and how it is working, and what it is." Then he gave his readers comfort by recognizing that they were not alone in being bewildered by the Russian experiment, adding that "it's the only thing in the world that you can't explain easy."³¹

The next chapter opens with a simple statement, "We will start in looking the towns over." Here he was not using the editorial we; he was, rather, including his readers in the trip.³² To help them experience it with him, he used such devices as:

You can't go to a bookstore and buy any book you want. . . . You can't buy outside newspapers, and every paper printed in Russia is under the supervision of the government. So you have got to learn their angle or you don't learn anything—there is nothing else for you to form an opinion about.³³

An even greater degree of intimacy was effected in the opening paragraph of Chapter VII. He wrote, "Now while I am on this Athaletic stuff I better kinder call you over to one side and tip you off. . . ." ³⁴ Thus he began the description of nude bathing. Three paragraphs later, he picked up his readers again when he wrote, "We must hie ourselves away and see what else we can learn. . . ." Then, resembling a rambling letter writer, he added, "Oh, yes, Aeroplanes! It just seems like I can't write without drawing attention to the mount of flying that is being done in Europe."³⁵

³¹Will Rogers, Bathing Suit, p. 100.

³²Ibid., p. 113.

³⁴Ibid., p. 130.

³³Ibid., pp. 126-29.

³⁵Ibid., p. 133.

There was little attempt at subtlety when he intermittently told the reader to examine his own country and customs before he criticized another. "Look at us!" he exclaimed at one point, referring to the American search for success in life. "You got to get out and hustle for it or you don't get it, no matter what Government is in."³⁶

Later, after criticizing Russia for its lack of religion—or attempts to enforce atheism—he personally advised his readers back home not to "monkey with somebody else's religion." The philosopher-writer asked, "What reasoning of conceit makes anyone think theirs is right?" Chiding Americans for their missionary zeal in typical Rogers style, he warned his readers that they were "liable to knock on the door up above" and be told:

Oh, no; you so-called educated people thought you knew so much . . . and tried to make all others believe in yours instead of their own religion. They were the ones that were right. Yet they didnt try to impose theirs on you. I am sorry. Good day.

He added a statement that exemplified his basic philosophy, one that caused him to be termed an isolationist by some and strong individualist by others. Referring here to religion, or the total lack of recognized churches advocated by the Communist party, he made the double-edged comment: "It's better to let people die ignorant and poor, believing in what they have always believed in, than to die prosperous and smart, half believing in something new and different."³⁷

³⁶Ibid., p. 140.

³⁷Ibid., pp. 154-55.

Again, helping his American readers to view the Russian experiment in the proper perspective, to question without being self-satisfied or sanctimonious, he used the direct approach to say, "Mind you, you can't condemn everybody just because they start a Revolution. We grabbed what little batch of liberty we used to have through a revolution. . . ." ³⁸

Kindly insults. Just as he was able to build strong national pride, then burst the bubble of blind American egocentricity with his pointed wit, Rogers could sling insults at a public figure, yet make him more human and more noble at the same time. Joel McCrea who began his climb to stardom under Will's tutelage noted this when he said, "Everything and everyone that Will Rogers touched he added a little glory to." ³⁹

An "insult" from the cowboy-humorist was more sought after than the highest praise from another source. Rogers developed the art of gentle satire aimed at public figures when he entertained the sophisticated New York audiences in the Midnight Frolic and the Follies. Al Smith, Henry Ford, Woodrow Wilson, Calvin Coolidge, congressmen, and other prominent figures were targets for his jibes. Soon it became a mark of distinction to be "insulted" by Will Rogers from the stage or his columns.

³⁸Ibid., p. 153.

³⁹Speech made at the Will Rogers Day celebration at Claremore, Oklahoma, November 4, 1966.

This technique can be found throughout his writing. When he told of greeting the Prince of Wales in London, for instance, Will said, "He shook hands like a Rotary Club President that has been coached in the best way to make friends."⁴⁰ Publicly inviting Calvin Coolidge to spend his vacation at the Rogers ranch near Claremore, fishing for Buffalo catfish in the Verdigris River, Rogers added, "I will get special dispensation from the authorities of Rogers County, so they won't bother you, because you will be the first Republican that ever slept in the House, and I will have to fix the Game Laws for protection."⁴¹

William Jennings Bryan and Evangelist Billy Sunday were panned in the same article when they visited California. He described them both as former "big time" men, "and any time they took the Platform standing by the side of a Pitcher of ice water and a glass, why, it just meant 6 columns starting on the front page and ending among the want ads."⁴² Rogers said that Bryan "has sent more Presidential Candidates home without a Reception Committee" from Democratic conventions than any man alive.⁴³

Skipping to the evangelist, Rogers commented, "Now Barnum invented the Tent, but Billy Sunday filled it. He can get more people into a tent than an Iowa Picnic at Long Beach, California."⁴⁴

⁴⁰Will Rogers, Letters, p. 102.

⁴¹Ibid., pp. 233-34.

⁴²Will Rogers, Digest, p. 270.

⁴³Ibid., p. 272.

⁴⁴Ibid., p. 274.

Although he never picked on the little man or swiped at an important public figure who was having difficulties, Rogers gained a reputation for deflating inflated egos. This technique was noted in a serious publication, Beard's Rise of American Civilization, in 1927. In this volume he was said to have exhibited "novelty and daring . . . if not genius" as he "threw his lariat over many a storied urn and animated bust and yanked it from its pedestal" or as he "thrust a piercing rapier into the thick hide of the Philistines," sometimes dissolving "a pompous political show in a hearty uproar."⁴⁵

Enlightening remarks. A conscious artist in the field of entertainment who mastered the transition into written humor, Rogers cannot be classified merely as a jokester or comedian. Nor is the term "entertaining" adequate to describe the Rogers style. His contemporary readers expected and received news, interpretation, and editorial comment from his writings. The same material can be read today for information as well as entertainment.

One writer in 1925 singled him out from other writers as a homely philosopher who did not tie his audience into intellectual knots, but one who "unravels them instead"—a master of the epigram whose "humor relaxes efficiently any mental snarls that may be ours as we listen or read," and one whose "observations on current topics may well be weighed for

⁴⁵ Charles Austin Beard and Mary Ritter Beard, Rise of American Civilization, II (New York: Macmillan Company, 1927), 770.

possible solutions of problems of the day as well."⁴⁶ Woodrow Wilson was quoted as having said that "he found his [Rogers'] comments on American public affairs not only humorous, but illuminating, giving an idea of what the public were thinking about."⁴⁷

When Rogers was killed, Franklin D. Roosevelt wrote that he first "fully realized Will Rogers' exceptional and deep understanding of political and social problems" when the reporter returned from Europe in 1926. Roosevelt continued, "While I had 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."⁴⁸

Yates cited the Oklahoman as a writer with the rare talent of producing "durable humor about war," and of all those who wrote "during the poverty and unrest of the thirties," Yates added, "only Rogers found a major source of enduring humor and satire."⁴⁹

Thus the goal which Rogers set for himself and voiced in 1919, then, was realized—to create lasting humor that "if you are with a friend and you hear it, it makes you

⁴⁶"Glimpses of Interesting Americans," The Century Magazine, CX (July, 1925), 317.

⁴⁷"Will Rogers, Cowboy Comedian," Current Opinion, January, 1923, p. 103.

⁴⁸Letter from Franklin Delano Roosevelt to the Vice President, quoted in Folks Say, pp. 6-7.

⁴⁹Yates, p. 356.

think, and you nudge your friend and say: 'He's right about that.'"⁵⁰

Personal Qualities

One final element of Rogers' style cannot be overlooked. The most potent ingredient, yet one of the most difficult to define, was his popularity—the charismatic quality that inspired loyalty and lent an aura of greatness to every word he wrote or uttered.

His friends found analysis of his personal magnetism equally difficult. At least three times over a span of nearly a decade, O.O. McIntyre, fellow columnist for the McNaught Syndicate and close friend of Rogers, attempted to explain this phenomenon. In 1926, he said, "The hold Will Rogers has on the American people is not easily explained. Rogers presents a certain something . . . that holds his public with hooks of steel." Attempting partial explanation, McIntyre stated that "underneath his clowning the public has sensed something tremendously honest, sincere and understanding."⁵¹ Nearly three years later, McIntyre attacked the same question, concluding, "In being himself lies greatness."⁵²

Again in 1931 in an article for Cosmopolitan, McIntyre puzzled over the brilliance of the "bright particular star" that was his term for Rogers as a syndicated newspaper writer.

⁵⁰Martin, American, November 19, 1919, p. 34.

⁵¹Tulsa Daily World, October 17, 1926.

⁵²Ibid., March 17, 1929.

An older, somewhat more cynical McIntyre said he always "perked up" at the thought of the "loose-jointed, gum-chewing, ex-cowhand," who was literally "hooking fame on the end of a twirling lasso" as he "ambles through life with a shy grin, a mop of unruly hair and a hand-me-down suit of clothes." In contrast, McIntyre described most of those whom he met as "a fevered army of climbers, social, political, and financial" who were indulging in a "constant and heartbreaking struggle to scale the heights."⁵³

Literally dozens of writers and journalists made some attempt to pin point the reason for his wide acceptance. The World's Work in an editorial which defended Rogers when he was criticized for accepting \$72,000 for 14, 15-minute radio talks, \$350 a minute or more money than the President received for a ten-hour day, said he could command such a fee because of the quality of his wit. The editorial praised him for his ability to get across a point with "no wind up"; "They are all point and no prologue." That writer, too, recognized that his description was inadequate. He added, "But there is something more than this about Will Rogers."

Attempting to explain, the editorial writer said that Rogers seemed to have a mission—"to tell us hard, blunt truths about ourselves—truths about our politics, our civic standards, and our social habits." He recognized that these were not always the sort of things the public wanted to hear,

⁵³O. O. McIntyre, "Our Will," Cosmopolitan, October, 1931, p. 82.

"but we will take them with a contagious chuckle and a piece of chewing gum."

Like other writers before and after him, the editorialist seemed at a loss to furnish an adequate reason for Will Rogers' appeal. He concluded, "Confession is good for the soul, and he supplies it. That may be one large reason for his salary."⁵⁴

Sentiment colored the rhetoric of Clarence Budington Kelland when he described the late humorist in 1935, but the eulogy by the creator of "Scattergood Baines" and friend to Rogers from the days when they both wrote for Post is an expression of the feeling held by millions after the tragic crash:

If you took Will Rogers and pitched a dab of whiskers under his chin, put a red, white and blue hat on his head, crammed his legs into a pair of star-spangled pants, he'd be Uncle Sam. He was a symbol. He was more than a symbol; he was the bass drum.

.
In Will Rogers, each man, even the bankers and the politicians, authors and artists, saw a glimpse of the sort of individual each would like to be. He saw and took everything with a grain of salt. He saw Uncle Sam with his tongue in his cheek. He saw, concentrated in one man, the kernel of North American humor and shrewdness. He saw Uncle Sam in his star-spangled pants giving the razzberry to four-flushing sham and pretense.⁵⁵

It can be seen, then, that along with the techniques of style which he discovered, developed, and refined to an art through his experiences with what "went over" with his public, the unique personality of Clem Rogers' boy Willie from

⁵⁴"Will Rogers at the Microphone," The World's Work, June, 1930, pp. 17-18.

⁵⁵Kelland, Folks Say, p. 199.

Oologah, Oklahoma—who remained humble in the face of international acclaim—played an important role in the dramatic success of Will Rogers, the writer and journalist.

CHAPTER X

IN CONCLUSION

Despite the almost unprecedented popularity of Will Rogers' writings during his lifetime, few of his works are known or read today.

None of his books is "in print," and the few catalogued in libraries are more often than not found in the rare book sections. His magazine articles are bound into formidable volumes and resting on library shelves, seen only by the serious student. The thousands of daily and weekly pieces for the paper that once entertained and informed a nation are hidden in carefully guarded newspaper morgues or lost in the sea of newsprint recorded on microfilm. The books edited from his writings and speeches by Donald Day are available, but they offer diluted, often distorted, or incorrectly identified versions of the originals; and the quotations or excerpts from his written humor found in texts or anthologies are often only quotations taken from other quotations or excerpts lifted from sources which paraphrased Rogers' original writings.

If future generations are to know Will Rogers—to understand and appreciate "America's greatest human document"—it is through his writings, what the cowboy-philosopher had to say for himself, that they can find Will Rogers. Only as the

writings are discovered, recognized, documented, and made available can future scholars or the public have an opportunity to justly evaluate Rogers the man as well as Rogers the writer and journalist.

This study, probably the first one to provide a complete guide to Rogers' works or to document his voluminous writings, will hopefully serve as a springboard from which further research and publication of his works may come.

Based on research, this paper has traced the development of Will Rogers as a writer and journalist; it has described his working habits, sources for his humor, and techniques of style; and it has outlined when and where the works were published as well as citing available data concerning his financial gain from writing. Comparison of the findings with previous studies led to clarification of some contradictions and eradication of certain errors. Most significant, perhaps, was the discovery of early writings which had not been documented in any other study.

Unknown facts, suppositions that cannot as yet be proved, and articles that could not be found have all been mentioned in the text of the paper as topics which call for further study. Areas into which interested students could delve for theses have also become evident. Much work needs to be done in an effort to establish a valid biographical record. Only a few of the conflicting accounts were cited in this paper, largely those which directly concerned his work as a writer. Numerous other contradictions exist in factual data alone. His

philanthropic endeavors, cited in general terms by many who knew him, have never been fully revealed.

Other studies are needed in areas which would involve description and evaluation of specific topics found in his writings. Patterns could be traced to prove or disprove the charge that he was an isolationist; an entire paper could be written on his discussions of aviation, military preparedness, religious organizations, ethnic groups, education, or politics, to name a few. Research into his basic personality as exhibited in his writings could be rewarding; and additional study is needed to furnish more complete documentation of his first articles.

Because of the broad scope of this initial study, tempting topics that would have led the researcher into deeper probings of a psychological, sociological, or philosophical nature of necessity have been omitted. Future students will find the trail now sufficiently marked for more in-depth research.

The goal for the entire research which resulted in this paper will have been reached if, as a result of the information and discussion recorded here, Will Rogers as a writer and journalist has been brought into sharper focus. If it has also furnished insights into what earned the philosopher-humorist a place in the hearts of the nation and the world, and if his writings are made known thereby, future generations will have the key to understanding this American phenomenon whose name was Will Rogers.

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