

The Wit and Wisdom of Will Rogers

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In this Quest paper, I hope to share with you some of the details of Will Rogers' fascinating life, something of his wisdom and observations, and perhaps help convey to you in some small way the width and breadth of the wit and wisdom of this complex and interesting man.

Many of you probably already know some of the story of Will Rogers life, and the also perhaps the tragic way that it was cut short when he was just 55 and his career was still on an upward trajectory.

During my research on this paper, I discovered that a late Questor, Richard (Dick) Bonsib, had also delivered a paper on Will Rogers in 1984. I knew Dick, and in fact he and Bud Latz, another late Questor had sponsored my introduction into Quest. His paper is a great introduction to the early life of Will Rogers, and covers well many historical details of his life, his career, and his untimely death, it is a worthy read on the subject.

In my paper I have chosen to focus on Will Rogers Wit and Wisdom from the perspective of 2018 as my topic suggested, and I was also fortunate to find in our wonderful local library and Internet resources a number of sources that contain additional insights about Will Rogers life that I think are relevant when examined through the lens of our country today, versus the United States of 1984, or even in 1935 during Will Rogers life.

When you consider the many information sources and services we have available today, versus those available in 1984 or during Will Rogers life, it is

impressive to me to find that many of the simple truths he used in his approach to comedic social commentary that resonated with the country so well in the past are still alive and relevant today.

When you turn to your radio to listen, your TV or movie to watch, or open a newspaper (or website) to read, or even discuss current events with a friend or co-worker, I believe you will experience within each of these forms of media some portion of the legacy that Will Rogers pioneered and left vibrant for future generations of commentators to further explore. Celebrities like Stephen Colbert and John Stewart, Mort Sahl, and Lewis Black use a direct descendent of Will Rogers approach to social commentary, as well as past figures such as Jonathon Winters, George Carlin and Robin Williams, the list goes on.

When I first received the topic of this paper, I was excited because I recalled immediately a family vacation disruption that ended up being resolved in a more positive way by Will Rogers' legacy.

In 1991, I was on a family vacation trip with my parents and my wife to Washington DC where we intended to spend the week visiting many historical monuments. This was one of the few joint travel vacations my wife Barb and I had been able to schedule with my parents and we were looking forward to the vacation. We had settled into our hotel in Washington DC and had begun to enjoy our visits to the various significant museums and monuments when I got an urgent call from one of our major clients. I was told that an important technical delegation from Japan was arriving in New York the next day expecting to meet

with our client, and I needed to immediately fly to New York to be present as part of our client's team. Our client had previously confirmed with me that this meeting was going to take place the following week, but apparently a language miscommunication had occurred and they were in transit and it couldn't be rescheduled. I protested and basically refused to cut my long planned vacation short and leave my family on such short notice, besides I didn't even have any formal clothes with me.

I hung up in a huff. Our client called back and said they wanted to suggest a solution. They said bring your whole family on vacation to New York, they would cover the flights, put my family up at the Plaza Hotel, no charge, buy me a new suit, and had reserved at no charge hard to get evening tickets for all of my family for the first run of the Will Rogers Follies on Broadway with Keith Caradine. All I had to commit to was to spend the first day with the clients support team to do my part of the presentation and then I would be off again for the remainder of my family vacation. They said all ages would love Will Rogers, and they would be willing to bet that my parents would enjoy the play about Will Roger's life.

I gave in and we went.

They were right, not only did my parents enjoy their first Broadway show, it was an amazingly exciting performance and journey through the life of a character that both my parents and Barb and I found fascinating.

I hope you do as well.

EARLY DAYS

William Penn Adair Rogers was born on November 4, 1879 in Indian Territory (what is now Oklahoma), near the current town of Oologah, Oklahoma, about 12 miles north of Claremore.

His father was Clement Vann Rogers, a prominent rancher and was of 5/16 Cherokee decent. His mother was Mary America Schrimsher, she of 1/4 Cherokee decent.

When Will was seven years old, he was entered on The Authenticated Rolls of the Cherokee Nation as No. 2340. Will would treasure his Cherokee heritage in his adult life and always identified with his Indian heritage, somewhat conveniently overlooking his nearly 3/4 heritage that came from a Scotch-Irish lineage. He also later claimed that he had been born in a log cabin, but the reality his home was one of the finest homes in the Territory.

Will grew up on the family ranch, and worked around cattle and learned to ride and lasso at an early age. He grew up with his cousin Spi, who also later wrote a biography of Will's life, and Spi relates that two farm workers Dan and Babe Walker were influential in the early development of Will's talents; Dan in particular is credited with teaching Will how to ride and use a rope. He had an aptitude for the lasso and became quite accomplished with both the practical use of the rope in ranch operations as well as the hobby use for entertainment and tricks.

Will's father was a successful cattleman, banker, and later became a Senator and Judge and apparently left many of the details of the ranch operations to his workers. As Will grew up with three older sisters and his mother doting attention, there was apparently some concern on his father's part that he was not fully learning how to be "tough enough" for the hard work of running the ranch.

Will's mother died unexpected when Will was ten and he carried that trauma for the rest of his life. Will attended a number of different schools as he was growing up, was not very diligent with his studies and his father even put him in a Military School to try to get him to focus on his studies. Will's relationship with his father was not close and eventually Will dropped out of school in the 10th grade to try his hand at becoming a cowboy. Will was entranced by the cowboy myth from popular pulp westerns and since Oklahoma was becoming a state and had begun to settle down, he on a lark decided to go to Argentina to seek excitement and employment. Argentina was not interesting enough to hold him and the employment options were not very agreeable, so he decided to go to South Africa.

While in South Africa he explores several unsatisfying jobs in ranching and then happened upon "Texas Jack's Wild West Show" that was touring in South Africa. The entrepreneur that owned the show made the kid with the rope trick and horse riding talent an offer to join the show and Will agreed and became "The Cherokee Kid" and did Roping tricks as part of the show.

Will Rogers had previously met the woman who was destined to become the love of his life, Betty Blake, in Oklahoma in 1899 when she had been visiting her sister, and when he returned from South Africa he renewed his courtship and eventually proposed to Betty and they married in 1908. It was said that she was not very enamored by his act but she was a very practical person and they had a loving relationship that lasted through his entire life

When he returned to the United States in 1904 with a strong letter of recommendation as to his talents from Texas Jack's Wild West Show and he landed a job with Colonel Zach Muchall's Wild West Show and performed at the World's Fairs in St Louis and New York. He branched out further, touring vaudeville circuits in America, Canada, and Europe. He continued to refine his act based on the Cowboy of the Wild West and would tell stories and do rope tricks in between performances of the other actors on the vaudeville stage. He adopted the cowboy accent style and "aw shucks" persona.

He then took his solo Cowboy and rope performing trick act to vaudeville and performed in a number of stages all across the country then Chicago and then on to New York

He found the solo performance of the cowboy persona was his most effective technique and also allowed him to show off his very impressive rope tricks, such as twirling two lariats simultaneously while doing his cowboy banter. One of his most impressive stage performances demonstrating his skill with a lariat involved a rope form called a "Big Crinoline", which involved spinning a huge sixty foot

circle of rope around his body as he was cracking jokes about his roping and making wisecracks about the other vaudeville acts. It was reported that he was placed in the Guinness Book of World Records for a trick involving throwing three lassos at once. One around the horse's neck, the second circled the rider, and the third went under the horse and caught all four legs at once.

Once while performing in New York, it is said that a steer that was part of the stage performance fell off the stage into the audience and Will Rogers successfully immobilized the steer with his rope Lariat and this improvised event created quite a local sensation and he began to attract the attention of scouts looking for new talent.

He further refined the endearing yokel persona and frequently would say "Call me a rube and a hick, but I'd a lot rather be the man who bought the Brooklyn Bridge than the man who sold it"

In New York, the most formative events of his future public life began to unfold.

In 1913 Will began working with the Ziegfeld Follies at their nightclub called the Midnight Frolic after catching the eye of Gene Buck, the right hand man of the famous producer Florenz Ziegfeld Jr.

Gene had quite an eye for talent, having previously signed up W.C. Fields and Ed Wynn for the Follies.

Initially, Mr. Ziegfeld was not impressed with Will Rogers, after having spent a great deal of money making the Midnight Frolic nightclub the swank after show

spot for wealthy New York theatre goers. The nightclub was located on the roof of the theatre in which the Follies performed, and when the Follies were finished, many patrons would take the elevator upstairs to see the Midnight shows. The Frolic was considered to be New York's most lavish cabaret show, and featured boisterous fun, glamorous showgirls and fast paced action, and Mr. Ziegfeld thought the gum chewing cowboy did not fit in with the cosmopolitan atmosphere of the club. However, Gene Buck recognized that Will's rustic charm, rope tricks, and wisecracking persona provided an interesting contrast to the sophisticated ambience and also triggered a nostalgia for the vanishing west in the minds of the audience. Will Rogers was a hit with audiences and critics alike.

However, the nightly club performance was now under more attention and as word of his performances begin to spread, existing customers would bring their friends to the club but noted that Will's performances, while impressive, were fairly routine after a while.

This realization that his act must have an element of variability and surprise to continue being of growing interest I believe is key to understanding the full trajectory of Will Rogers's eventual success.

Will also recognized that many of the customers were attending the club on a regular basis and to keep their interest, he had to have new material each night. Will's wife noted he was always reading the newspapers, so why not pass along what he read?

Will began by buying every copy of the New York press and started spending hours looking for material. In his words, "I started reading about Congress and they are funnier three hundred and sixty five days than anything I ever heard of". Each night he could then begin with a fresh monologue that could span numerous topics from the day's headlines and cracking jokes on politicians, sports and showbiz stars and royalty.

Doesn't this sound familiar in the context of today?

As he would frequently say, "All I know is what I read in the newspapers".

He had quite a talent for getting to the heart of the issue and he worked hard to create new jokes that had the ring of truth in them.

In his words, "I like one where, if you are with a friend, and hear it, it makes you think, and you nudge your friend and say; 'he's right about that.'"

Will Roger's "Daily News" method of keeping his "folksy" comedic comments topical and yet constantly striving to touch deeper truths seems to me to be close to the heart of his near universal appeal, and still appears to drive the success of many popular entertainers today.

The publicity and local exposure that Will Rogers received through his successful association with the Zig field Follies in New York propelled him into the mainstream and his career took off. He continued his association with the Follies for the next 10 years while also branching out into the national spotlight in other media.

I will now try to summarize some of the key developments that contributed to the phenomenon that Will Rogers became. As I do this, think in your own mind about the familiar ring many of these factors may begin to have.

In 1916 he began writing books for the first time, His book, "The Cowboy Philosopher on the Peace Conference" was a big hit

He followed that up with his book "The Cowboy Philosopher on Prohibition"

One side note regarding Rogers feelings about prohibition in his words.

"Why don't they pass a Constitutional Amendment prohibiting anybody from learning anything? If it works as good as Prohibition did, in five years we will have the smartest people on earth."

In 1918 he created his first silent movie in New York with producer Samuel Goldwyn. The movie was called "Laughing Bill Hyde"

When Samuel Goldwyn relocated to California in 1919, Will and Betty Rogers made the decision to follow and went on to do 12 films for Goldwyn.

Will Rogers had a funny quote about the movie business.

"Greatest show business I know anything about, and the only place an actor can act and at the same time sit down in front and clap for himself"

In 1922 Will started his first column, writing for the New York Times and his “Weekly Article” grew through syndication to hundreds of newspapers further developing his national political voice and made him one of the most widely read political commentators in the United States

In 1924 he covered the National Conventions of 2 major political parties and grew a solid nationwide audience for his observations and humorous comments.

In 1925, at the urging of the editor of the Saturday Evening Post he went to Europe and he sent back “Letters of a Self-Made Diplomat to His President”, giving his humorous opinions on pressing foreign policy issues confronting the nation.

President Roosevelt himself later commented on Will’s observations.

“In addition to my deep appreciation of his humor, the first time that I fully realized Will Rogers’ exceptional and deep understanding of political and social problems was when he came home from his European trip in 1926. While I 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.

While in Europe, he also wired the New York Times his observations concerning Lady Astor, an American citizen who had moved to England and had become the first woman to sit as a Member of Parliament in the House of Commons. These daily telegrams of his “folksy” and humorous takes on current events and life’s

questions began his column called the “Daily Dispatch” and were distributed to over 500 newspapers all over the country and continued until the end of his life.

1926 1927

Will Rogers was fascinated with aviation and was a tireless advocate of the expansion of commercial and military aviation. His frequent trips to Washington to keep closer to the political climate of Washington gave him unique influence, and he was the first non-governmental employee to receive a special permit from Washington that allowed Will Rogers to travel for free on any airmail planes that were in operation. He made quite frequent use of this privilege. Will could go into almost any town and quickly catch a plane to other places that caught his attention or interest.

One continuing theme in his life seems to be a genuine concern for the less fortunate or the forgotten.

After the terrible flooding the Mississippi Valley experienced in 1927, and his perception of the slow Federal Government response to this crisis (think Hurricane Katrina), he embarked on a series of fundraising campaigns that raised a considerable amount of money for those victims of that flood, and pressed President Coolidge to expand Federal Aid to the states.

In 1927 Ambassador Dwight Morrow invited the now famous entertainer on a goodwill tour of Mexico, along with another superstar, Charles Lindbergh, on behalf of the United States. This had a beneficial effect of showing the United States expanding interest in the Art and Cultural aspects of good relations with our southern neighbor, not just basic trade.

As Will Rogers once put it.

“We would never understand why Mexico wasn’t crazy about us. We have always had their goodwill, oil, coffee and minerals at heart.”

In 1928 Will Rogers was part of the first NBC coast to coast radio broadcast and stayed active in radio from that point forward

In the 1928 presidential campaign, Robert Sherwood, the editor of Life Magazine, suggested that Will Rogers campaign for president on behalf of the Anti-Bunk party.

His main campaign promise was that if he was elected, he would resign. From that position in the presidential campaign, he offered his satire and commentary on the entire 1928 presidential campaign and the election that followed.

In 1929 he had his final Broadway performance in the play “Three Cheers”, when he filled in for a dear friend of his, Fred Stone, who had been injured. Will flew to New York and took his place in the play and finished out the remainder of his

performances while Fred recovered. It is said that Will Rogers had to give up perhaps as much as several hundred thousand dollars from his other previous commitments to perform this act of selflessness to help out a long-time friend

In 1929 Will begins his weekly Sunday evening radio broadcast for the Gulf Oil Company, "The Gulf Headliners", and it becomes one of the top radio broadcasts in the country until his death.

Will has trouble keeping track of the time as he rambles on with current events, and so he brought in a wind up alarm clock that begins buzzing to remind him to start wrapping up his comments near the end of the show. The Alarm clock eventually receives official billing as the show begins to be introduced as "Will Rogers and His Famous Alarm Clock".

In 1929 he made the transition to movies with sound and he immediately became a fast rising movie star. His first sound film, "They Had to See Paris (1929)" gave him another venue to show off his speaking talents, and he starred in 21 films over the next 6 years, reaching the status of the Top Male Star in 1934.

During the Great Depression, Will Rogers did not suffer as much financially as many others actors of his time, since he had placed most of his investments in real estate, bonds and other more secure investments and did not have more exposure to the problems in the Stock Market.

During these difficult years of our country, Will used his personal assets to mount a cross-country fundraising tour to help raise money for the Red Cross, and also aggressively pressed President Hoover to help feed the poor and to have the Federal Government move more aggressively to assist with the recovery of the country.

In the excellent book, "Will Rogers: A Political Life" by Richard D White, White notes that Will Rogers motivations became increasingly political during this time and he was willing to identify himself as a staunch Democrat.

Will himself did say "I am not a member of any organized political faith, I am a democrat."

In 1932 Will actively supported Franklin Roosevelt and helped with his election while covering the national campaign, and as a result he did begin to receive increased criticism from a growing number of voices unhappy with his political positions.

However, he didn't spare even Roosevelt from his humor.

"Lord, the money we do spend on Government, and it's not one bit better than the government we got for one-third the money twenty years ago."

By 1934 Will Rogers was not only named one of the top male movie stars of the year, his radio broadcasts and newspaper columns were enthusiastically devoured by millions. He embarked upon a trip around the world and delivered

famous commentaries on Russia and Japan and another book (“There’s Not a Bathing Suit in Russia”).

Seeking to find assistance to help with the increased workload he also hired the comic Morey Amsterdam from Chicago to assist with his columns and help provide gags for his performances. Demands on his time were constant, and some of his friend commented that he seemed to be feeling the stress, he was 55.

Seeming still looking for further excitement, he planned with a longtime friend, the aviator Wiley Post, to accompany him on a major air expedition, traveling eventually through Siberia.

However, that trip was not fated to complete.

When traveling on a segment with Wiley post through Alaska during bad weather, there was a terrible plane crash involving Wiley’s custom pontoon equipped plane and both Wiley Post and Will Rogers were killed August 15, 1935

Rather than recount the details of that terrible event, if you are interested I would refer you to the previous quest paper given by Dick Bonsib in 1984 that contains the official transcript of the crash sequence and a fairly complete reporting of the investigation afterwards.

In closing on this Quest paper, I would like to read you a series of Will Rogers quotes and as I do think also of the timeless relevance of the deeper truths they touch. Many of the circumstances of our time might seem completely different from the time during which these quotes were first spoken, but perhaps not as much as one might think.

Well, all I know is what I read in the papers, and that's an alibi for my ignorance.

Everything is changing; people are taking their comedians seriously and the politicians as a joke

People say Congress is deadlocked and can't act. I think that's the greatest blessing that could befall this country

Politics has gotten so expensive that it takes lots of money to even get beat with

When you get in trouble 5000 miles from home you've got to be looking for it

There is no trick to being a humorist when you have the whole government working for you

Be thankful we're not getting all the government we're paying for

Gold goes up, not down like water, put at the top and it stays there

I don't belong to any organized political faith, I am a Democrat

This would be a great time in the world for some man to come along that knew something

Ten men in the country could buy the world and ten million can't buy enough to eat.

No man is great if he thinks he is.

We shouldn't elect a President. We should elect a magician.

It takes nerve to be a Democrat, but it takes money to be a Republican

The Republican platform promises to do better. I don't think they have done so bad. Everybody's broke but them.

Democrats take the whole thing as a joke. Republicans take it serious but run it like a joke.

The platform will always be the same, promise everything, deliver nothing.

I generally give the party in power, whether Republican or Democrat, the more digs because they are generally doing the country more damage. The party in power drawing a salary is to be knocked.

I hope some of the men who get the most votes will be elected.

A flock of Democrats will replace a mess of Republicans. It won't mean a thing. They will go in like all the rest of 'em. Go in on promises and come out on alibis.

You've got to admit that each party is worse than the other. The one that's out always looks the best.

Republicans want a man that can lend dignity to the office. Democrats want a man that will lend some money.

Ain't it funny how many hundreds of thousands of soldiers we can recruit with nerve. But we can't find one politician in a million with backbone.

It is easier to fool 'em in Washington than at home. So why not be a Senator.

We cuss the lawmakers. But I notice we're always perfectly willing to share in any of the sums of money that they might distribute.

In this country people don't vote for, they vote against.

The Democrats are having a lot of fun exposing the Republican campaign corruptions, but they would have a lot more fun if they knew where they could lay their hands on some of it themselves for next November.

I have a scheme for stopping war. It's this—no nation is allowed to enter a war till they have paid for the last one.

Everybody is ignorant. Only on different subjects.

I never met a man I didn't like.

In an interesting piece of trivia, Leonard Sly's autobiography, "Happy Trails" he relates that Roy Rogers' stage name was created by Republic Pictures without his input. The executives in charge were looking for a catchy name to replace their previous singing cowboy, Gene Autry, in their lineup.

The name Rogers referred to the famous western theme comic, Will Rogers, who had died in an Alaska plane crash, and Roy was chosen from the French word for King to make "Roy Rogers: King of the Cowboys"

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