

# Travel

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## Will Rogers Museum: sure way to start a smile

"When I die, my epitaph, or whatever you call those signs on grave-stones is going to read: 'I joked about every prominent man of my time, but I never met a man I didn't like.' I am proud of that. I can hardly wait to die so it can be carved and when you come 'round to my grave you'll find me sitting there proudly, reading it."

— Will Rogers

(This was one of Rogers' most famous remarks, first printed in the Boston Globe on June 16, 1930. Rogers had been asked to say a few words after a sermon he had attended at Tremont Temple Baptist Church. The remark played with him the rest of his life.)

By Joy Schaleben Lewis  
special writer

CLAREMORE, OKLA. — Humorist-philosopher Will Rogers said, "Everybody is ignorant — only on different subjects." He also said, "We do more talking progress than we do progressing." And then there was, "Civilization has taught us to eat with a fork, but even now if nobody is around we use our fingers."

Will Rogers was a fellow who could make people think while laughing with him. Nowhere is the laughter and thinking he provoked more alive than at the Will Rogers Memorial in Claremore, Okla., about 20 miles northeast of Tulsa. The Memorial is open daily from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. Admission is free.

Will Rogers' presence is everywhere. You hear his voice on radio tapes, see him in films and photographs, read his columns, trace his life through dioramas, touch the saddles and ropes he so loved, and even see the Royal portable typewriter he used to peck out 2 million words before he died at age 55.

About 500,000 people annually visit the Memorial which was established in 1938. It's obvious that while Rogers said, "Nobody wants to be called common people, especially common people," the common people recognize he was one of them who was uncommon.

In 1932, a library was added to the Memorial containing books by Rogers about him, his original papers and many volumes related to his varied career — ranching, horses, early radio, films, Cherokee Indians, aviation, vaudeville.

In the center of the Memorial's towering foyer stands a bronze statue of Will Rogers on a huge pedestal. In a rumpled suit, hands in pockets, shoulders slightly stooped, Will greets visitors with his shy grin. The tip of his left shoe glimmers golden from the touch of millions who've paused to pay tribute



to the man who said, "I never met a man I didn't like."

At the Memorial, be prepared to smile a lot, especially when you see the excerpts from Rogers' films and newsreels made during his life. He was once the highest paid entertainer in the nation, earning \$25,000 a week in Hollywood and raking in \$250,000 a movie. Some called his face and name the most widely known in the world.

AT ROGERS' tomb, you may mourn as millions the world over have. We're not likely to see again the likes of old Will — trick rider, rope artist, comedian, philanthropist, columnist, movie star, radio commentator and goodwill ambassador — all rolled into one helluva gun-chewing cowboy who liked chili parrots better than dining with royalty and presidents.

"It's great to be great, but it's greater to be human," Rogers insisted. Will Rogers died at the peak of his fame in an airplane crash on Aug. 15, 1935. He and round-the-world pilot Wiley Post were 15 miles short of their Point Barrow destination.

"This thing of being a hero, about the main thing to do is to know when to die," he once wrote in a column.

ROGERS' DEATH stunned the

world. Traffic halted; movie theaters darkened; storekeepers locked up; housewives cried on their front steps. Congress came to a shocked standstill. The world grieved as headlines in London, Rome, New York, Tokyo and Moscow screamed, "WILL ROGERS DEAD IN CRASH."

Flying had fascinated Rogers since his first short flight in 1918. "If your time is worth anything, travel by air. If not, you might as well walk," he advocated.

Rogers and fellow Oklahoman Wiley Post had been the best of friends. When Post filed to cash in on his globe-circling solo flight in 1933, Rogers decided to help him out. He felt that if he took a jaunt with Post, the publicity might land a fortune for the pilot he so admired.

To grab more headline attention, Rogers and Post decided to simply fly north from Seattle for "unannounced destinations." Speculation soon spread that the two were headed for Moscow via Alaska.

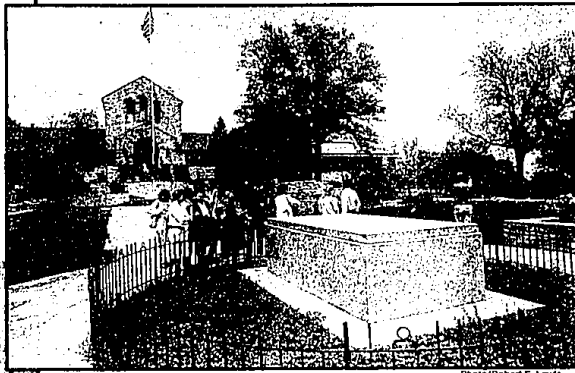
Along the way to "destination unknown," Rogers dutifully filed his daily syndicated column to 400 newspapers: Aug. 7, 8 and 9 from Juneau, Aug. 10 and 11 from Alakavik (Northwest Territory), Aug. 13 from Fairbanks, Aug. 14 from Anchorage and his last, Aug. 15, from Fairbanks.

HIS FINAL column was about a colony of 200 welfare families from Michigan, Minnesota and Wisconsin.

Earlier that summer, they had been sent by the federal government to the Matanuska Valley, 40 miles north of Anchorage, to establish a farming community. It was America's first effort at colonization.

The possessors Rogers carried with him on that fatal plane trip to Alaska are on display at the Memorial: hat, shoes, gloves, scarf, sleeping bag, mag-

**"It's great to be great, but it's greater to be human."**  
— Will Rogers: trick rider, rope artist, comedian, philanthropist, columnist, movie star, radio commentator, goodwill ambassador and the highest-paid entertainer of his day



Will Rogers Museum Director Reba Collins shows his statue containing

his most famous quote. Above: visitors at Rogers' tomb.

nifying glass, typewriter, leather bag, tin of Band-Aids and a can of Williams Quick and Easy Shaving Cream.

He also had eight three-cent stamps, two books ("Alaska Dog Driver" and "Arctic Village"), pencil stub, pocket knife, rodeo program from Los Angeles, two pairs of glasses, two watches and a small, square, wooden puzzle.

In Will's smashed typewriter was the third page of his latest weekly article. It ended mid-sentence with the last word he had typed — "death." He had been writing about an Eskimo's dog and a bear.

REBA COLLINS, director of the Will Rogers Memorial, says the traveling possessions tell a lot about the man. "Rogers was always misplacing things," she said. "That's why he had two watches and two pairs of glasses. As for the puzzle, he liked to fidget with things in his hands."

"He always traveled lightly," she continued. "For example, if he needed a new suit, he'd buy one and just throw out the old one."

Collins has written hundreds of articles and three books on Rogers and has spent 20 years researching his life. She considers Rogers "the best communicator of the century. He was tops in all media," she said. "And no one wrote a line for him. It was all his. He'd go into a town, size up the place, its people and politics, and 15 minutes later be on stage ready to make people laugh."

COLLINS SAYS it's difficult to come up with the exact key to Rogers' universal charisma. "You might say that despite his tremendous fame, he remained as common, unpretentious and comfortable as an old shoe," she said.

Rogers himself gleefully maintained, "I'm just an old country boy in a big town tryin' to get along."



A young Will Rogers practices spinning the rope with a bell of the time.

Much to his teachers' dismay, he had a habit of lassoing his classmates who willingly stooped over, ran down corridors and beltered like calves.

Will was in and out of numerous schools until he was 17 when he ran away to a Texas ranch. At 19, he returned to please his father, but managing the old home ranch simply wasn't for him. Reluctantly, his father let Will go his own way. And what a way — from "The Cherokee Kid" with Texas Jack's Wild West Show he grew into vaudeville, then the Ziegfeld Follies, motion pictures and radio, newspaper columns, books and finally the title "America's Ambassador to the World."

The legendary humorist was once interviewed by the legendary historian Will Durant for his book "Living Philosophies." The Will with the shy grin, tousled hair and quick wit told the other Will:

"Believe in something for another world, but don't be too set on what it is, and then you won't start out that life with a disappointment. Live your life so that whenever you lose you are ahead."



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