

☆ THE CHRONICLES OF OKLAHOMA

INTRODUCTION

*By Arrell Morgan Gibson**

In an age of non-heroes we look to those times when the nation had an abundance of men and women writ large whom we can admire, respect, perhaps derive a model to emulate, even draw some vicarious benefit to fill our present lack. The decade of the 1920s would serve nicely; it was the time of Babe Ruth, Charles Lindbergh, and a score of other mythic heroes. Many would claim that Lindbergh eclipsed all others in this galaxy, but we would challenge this. Such would be true for 1927, the year of his daring trans-Atlantic venture, when he so dominated the public mind that no other came close. But he soon faded with the public and while always remembered and revered, he was not able to maintain the fever pitch of acclaim of his year of triumph.

There was one person, however, who dominated the pack of super-Americans, except for 1927, throughout the decade. He could and did graciously share the public stage with many celebrities, but he maintained his scintillating impact after the others had faded. Will Rogers rose to national prominence in the early 1900s, he flowered during the twenties, and maintained his great popular force until his death in 1935. Thus, sustained public acceptance and acclaim loom large in the saga of Oklahoma's most distinguished son.

In introducing this special number, dedicated as a memorial edition commemorating the Will Rogers' centennial, one must be most impressed with his simplistic but near over-powering mystique which so captivated the American public that he suffered no stale performance periods so common with celebrities, and thus at no time had to undergo the difficult "comeback" or "rehabilitation of image" ordeals which most public figures face at some time in their careers.

The theme "versatility" dominates these memorial essays. James Smallwood's study illustrates Rogers' spectacular success as an entertainer with the circus, on the stage, the lecture platform, on the radio, and in the movies. Symbolically, Rogers' very genetic origins, traced by Howard Meredith, confirm the theme of versatility. Perhaps it could be said that through his Indian ancestry Rogers was genuinely American. What Jim

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Will Rogers, Oklahoma boy and American hero (Courtesy of the Will Rogers Project, Stillwater).

Thorpe, the Sac-Fox-Potawatomi Indian, was to the world of physical competition and performance, rated by many sports authorities as the world's greatest athlete, Will Rogers, the Cherokee Indian, was for his time perhaps the world-renowned humorist and populist philosopher.

Rogers' versatility was reflected in his ability as a writer. Blue Clark's study of Will Rogers as a literary person discloses that his newspaper commentaries, magazine articles, and books were popular and well-received.

Joe Stout demonstrates Rogers' talents for perceptive, if homespun, analysis of American society and his role as social critic. The American paradox of Blue Laws adopted to uplift a fallen society and their flagrant violation, the folly of Prohibition, the curious and nefarious tie between organized crime and law enforcement, and the professional politicians' foibles, all were fair game for Rogers' scornful, sometimes blistering, wit.

WILL ROGERS: AN INTRODUCTION

William Brown's study of Will Rogers as a public figure includes an assessment of the Oklahoman's role in elevating the flagging American spirit after the devastating crash of 1929 and during the crushing Depression that followed. Brown found that Rogers challenged Americans to look "to the future with optimism; he 'boosted' potential improvements in the American life-style, and quested for the good life."

Peter Rollins' essay on Will Rogers as "ambassador sans Portfolio" illustrates the "cowboy philosopher's" interest in international affairs and his ability as a cogent observer and commentator on world events. Rogers' observations on disarmament conference proceedings reveal a simplistic but surprising command of the issues. And he was merciless in expressing his disgust at the patent folly of American purpose, intent, and reckless innocence during that deadly time between the Great Wars. Also this essay reveals that Rogers was not a parochial isolationist or xenophobe; rather, he "kept an open mind, recognizing that differing cultures should expect to see the world differently." He added "I am not the fellow to go to a country and then start criticizing it from our angle at home. You have to look at a thing through their eyes to be fair." Certainly Rogers was an early advocate of cultural pluralism.

Rogers' confidence in his wide influence as a public figure led him to promote several national causes including raising funds for the relief of disaster victims and the poverty-stricken at the beginning of the Great Depression before government welfare programs got underway. Certainly one of his greatest public efforts was to promote the cause of commercial aviation. Fred Roach's study, "Vision of the Future," traces Rogers' commitment to popularize this mode of travel.

Most of the essays in this commemorative collection are descriptive and interpretive. Two are analytical. Bruce Southard provides an innovative study of Will Rogers' speech, cast in the Southwestern context. Certainly Rogers' spoken and written communication comprised a principal source of his popularity. His "comic spellings . . . joined together with Rogers' idiosyncratic punctuation system" tantalized his reader constituency. Newspaper columns, radio scripts, articles for magazines, even books he "pecked out on his portable typewriter" wherever he found himself—Rome, Paris, London, Moscow, Hongkong, Tokyo, Hollywood, Chicago, New York, Boston, or Oologah. Southard concludes that through Will Rogers "the language of the cowboy remains with us today, even though the cowboy is gone." And a most perceptive analysis of Will Rogers as the epitome of the cowboy image in America, and he as its primary transmitter to his public and to posterity, is the subject of the essay by William Savage.

Will Rogers was a phenomenon. The *Times* of London observed that

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through him the “eccentric individualism of the ‘open spaces,’ where he was born, had been wedded to the sophistication of the East, and he was as much at home on the pavement as he was on the prairie.” The essays disclose that Will Rogers was adaptable, that he was not frozen into a comfortable mind and action set. Certainly he had the midas touch for sensing and expressing popular will and viewpoint. For a people disillusioned by the failure of World War I to end conflict among nations and make the world safe for Democracy, incapsulated in a mass industrial society, made cynical and alienated by a mindless bureaucracy spawned by an enlarging and increasingly impersonal government, Rogers cast simple insight and interpretation on those confused and threatening times. He provided precious relief through his cogent humor; he coached Americans not to take themselves too seriously. The Will Rogers legacy for Oklahoma, the nation, and the world, is modestly commemorated by these memorial essays.