TOP HAND: WILL ROGERS AND THE COWBOY IMAGE IN AMERICA

*By William W. Savage, Jr.**

There is something seemingly paradoxical about the show business career of Will Rogers. In the public eye, he was at once a cowboy, an Indian, a philosopher, and a humorist, roles and professions as suggestive of contrast and contradiction as any that one might name. Examine for a moment the imagerial dichotomies (an Indian cowboy, a humorous philosopher, an Indian humorist, a philosophical humorist, a philosophical cowboy, and so forth) and you perceive that nothing seems to square. The public tends to segregate the images and modes of popular culture, and hybrid images or formats usually fare badly in the entertainment marketplace.[1] Perhaps the most striking thing about Will Rogers was his remarkable success in gaining popular acceptance of his own hybrids—a situation altogether uncommon in American popular culture.

One should hasten to add that imagery is not often related to historical reality. While Rogers' public personality contained elements inconsistent with the usual imagerial categories of popular culture, those elements were not without a certain historical precedent. Humor was not a quality alien either to cowboys or to Indians, for example.[2] Indeed, some students of the subject have suggested that Rogers' southwestern antecedents explain his public personality.[3] But the humorous cowboy is not an accepted imagerial category in American popular culture, save in the narrow sense that comical sidekicks like Gabby Hayes and Pat Buttram are also cowboys. Similarly, popular culture views the Indian less as a source of humor than as the butt of jokes.

Again, if Will Rogers was not the only performer to overcome the obstacles of cultural segregation and categorization, he was certainly the most successful. The particular source of his appeal may never be fully understood—he pleased so many from widely different walks of life—but one suspects that much of his attraction had to do with the cowboy aspect

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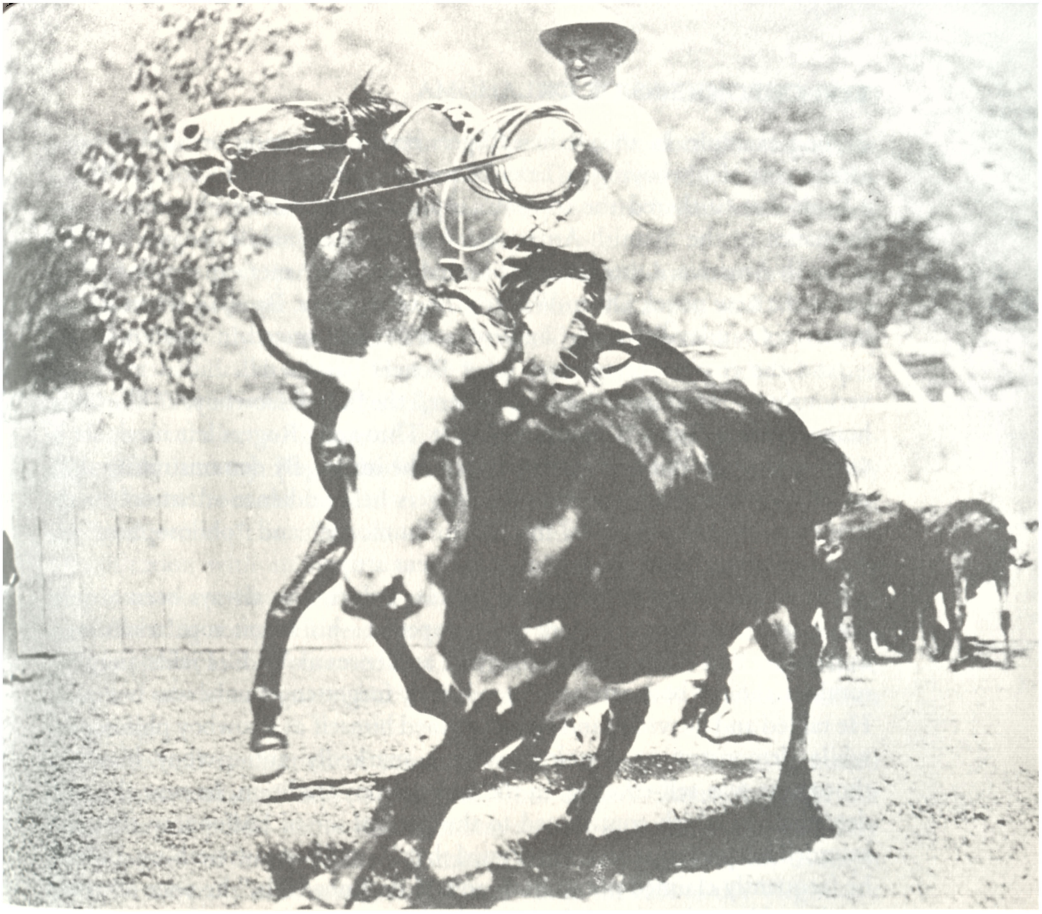
1 Which, to explain the obvious, is why *Mr. Terrific* and *Captain Nice*, two mid-1960s superhero television parodies, lasted less than a season and why there are no successful situation comedies about brain surgeons or Helen Keller or John F. Kennedy.

2 See Ramon F. Adams, *The Old-Time Cowhand* (New York: Collier Books, 1971), Chapter 6; and R. David Edmunds, "Indian Humor: Can The Red Man Laugh?" in Daniel Tyler (ed.), *Red Men and Hat-Wearers: Viewpoints in Indian History* (Boulder, Colorado: Pruett Publishing Company, 1976), pp. 141–153.

3 Stan Hoig, *The Humor of the American Cowboy* (New York: Signet Books, 1960), p. 14.



Americans knew Rogers as a humorist, writer, and philosopher, but he made his early reputation as a roper (Courtesy of the Will Rogers Memorial, Claremore).

of his hybrid image and the way in which Rogers made the other aspects subordinate to it. He was indeed an Indian, a philosopher, and a humorist—and he was comfortable in those public roles—but he was first and foremost a cowboy, and audiences knew exactly what that meant.

Will Rogers was five years old when William Levi Taylor joined Buffalo Bill's Wild West as "Buck Taylor, King of Cowboys," and launched the cowboy hero as an image in American culture. When Rogers was nine, Theodore Roosevelt published *Ranch Life and Hunting Trail*, a book that told Americans of the excellent manly qualities of the cowboy and suggested that the general population could do worse than to copy his

sterling example. In 1899, when Rogers began managing the family ranch after a year of cowboying in Texas, Roosevelt published *The Rough Riders*, a book that furthered the cowboy's reputation by recounting cowboy performance in the Spanish-American War. In 1902, while Rogers traveled in South America, Australia, and South Africa, the American reading public perused a new novel, Owen Wister's *The Virginian*. By 1904, when Rogers began his vaudeville career, audiences were well-versed in cowboy lore.

And the cowboy image was what Rogers had to sell. Billed early and variously as "The Cowboy Lasso Expert," the "Droll Cowboy," "The Oklahoma Cowboy," and "Champion Lariat Thrower," Rogers left no doubt as to what he was. But he elaborated upon the image. By demonstrating skills usually associated with cowboying, Rogers held audience attention for the monologues that prompted the labels "humorist" and "philosopher." He was a cowboy, but a cowboy of a different stripe.

The cowboy hero in American popular culture has always been a quiet and competent figure. Rogers was competent—his adroit rope tricks were as startling and satisfying to vaudeville audiences as W. C. Fields' juggling routines, though both acts have been largely forgotten—but he was not quiet. He talked and he wrote, and he maintained himself as a cowboy philosopher while demonstrating simultaneously a markedly anti-cowboy bias. Although he was self-effacing, in the best cowboy tradition, he was also self-denigrating, which contributed to the general air of buffoonery that surrounded his performances. He argued that his skills meant nothing. Indeed, he frequently claimed not to have any. "I do know this," he once observed on the subject of roping, "that statistics have never shown where any trick roper, for the good of posterity has ever been fortunate enough to choke himself with his own rope."[4] His advice to aspirants was to "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 care to get tired, if I am rested I would rather stay that way."[5]

The anti-cowboy bias is most apparent in Rogers' classic silent film, *The Ropin' Fool* (1922), wherein the cowboy protagonist exhibits a pathological fixation with his lariat by employing it on anything that moves. The film is offered as a facetious object lesson in the dangers of a life-long obsession with roping: Rogers ropes in his sleep and in one memorable scene snares a mouse with a lasso made of string. The cowboy is portrayed as a lazy character addicted to wasting time. Nevertheless, the film stands as a show-

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[4] Will Rogers, "Foreword" to Chester Byers, *Cowboy Roping and Rope Tricks* (New ed., New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1966), p. vi.

[5] *Ibid.*, p. xii.

case of Rogers' phenomenal talents. Repeatedly, he does the impossible, and then does it in slow-motion to prove its legitimacy. Here the cowboy makes a broad and elaborate joke of his ability, but the humor rests squarely on the fact that his ability is considerable.

And that is perhaps why Rogers had appeal as a humorous cowboy: he had earned the right to crack wise by learning the ropes, as it were. He was demonstrably a top hand. Thus, he could afford to make the cowboy image his theatrical vehicle. Had he been incompetent as a rider or roper, he could have survived on the stage only in another guise.

Rogers' intellectual image offered corroboration for his cowboy posturings. That is to say, Rogers had common sense, a mental commodity easily spotted even from the back row. There is nothing esoteric or elitist about common sense—it is, after all, *common*—and Rogers used it to establish identification with audiences on at least two levels. First, he could imply that it was something he shared with his spectators, an implication that they would readily accept. He read the papers, as they did, and they knew whereof they spoke, as they observed that he did. In a lesser man, it all might have smacked of demagoguery, but in Rogers it was merely cowboy wisdom surfacing.

The second application of common sense was less subtle and stemmed more from audience expectation than from Rogers' intent. It could not have escaped public notice that common sense was something the literary cowboy enjoyed in abundance. Common sense accounted for his triumph over the adversity of bandits, rustlers, and—as in the case of the Virginian's Trampas—old friends turned bad. It explained his survival. Moreover, common sense was (and is) an important asset for all American heroes, much valued by audiences who paid for the privilege of contemplating its effects. Today, private detectives have it; in Rogers' day, cowboys had it. With both skill and common sense, Rogers could be accepted as a cowboy, regardless of his anti-cowboy (again, in the sense of the continuity of popular culture) bias.

Analysis of Rogers' monologues should demonstrate also the presence of a certain conservatism—conservatism in the classical sense—consistent with cowboy imagery. Not all progress was progress, to Rogers' mind, and his zesty, good-natured attacks on Henry Ford's automobiles echoed the stereotypical protests of old cowboys everywhere over newfangled technologies and their disruptive incursions into bucolic cowboy environs. His discussions of politics and economics were also representative of the sort of witty skepticism one found on the open range in less effective oral presentations. Such connections were for audiences rather more intuited than perceived, perhaps, but the point is that his remarks (and his manner of making them)

reflected acceptable philosophies. They were both evidence of cowboy wisdom and extensions of it.

To audiences, Rogers appeared to be the genuine article, the cowboy transplanted in civilization but hardly in awe of it, a son of the frontier come to expose the follies and foibles of modernity. His manner was as characteristic as his commentary, and even years after his death it was possible—as James Whitmore demonstrated for television audiences in 1972—to evoke memories of Rogers by aping his style. All of it—the roping, the drawl, the head scratching—appeared to be pure cowboy.

It was, of course, but only in an imagerial sense. Will Rogers brought his mannerisms to the motion picture screen in 1919 and they accompanied him through the silent era and the sound era to his last films in 1935. The films of the 1930s—recalled by the Depression generation that made Rogers one of the most popular of all movie stars of his day, and renewed annually by programmers responsible for late show fare—best preserve his manner and refresh our cultural memory. Indeed, they provide the stereotype of the cowboy philosopher, if only because they are the most complete remaining source for the total Rogers image, the sights and the sounds of the man. They were not cowboy movies, but Rogers was still the cowboy (one knew because the mannerisms were there), but in a suit instead of chaps, and usually without a rope.[6]

The image Rogers affected was anticipated by—if not acquired outright from—another actor, however. He was an early-day screen cowboy named Harry Carey, best remembered now as a late-show character actor befriending the naive likes of Jimmy Stewart in such chestnuts as Frank Capra's *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington* (1939). Born in the Bronx, New York, and a year older than Rogers, Carey flirted with a law career, became a marginally successful playwright, and began acting in motion pictures in 1909, a decade before Will Rogers made his first film. Carey was no character actor in those days. Rather, he was a leading man whose rise to stardom in western films accelerated as a result of collaboration with a twenty-three-year-old director named John Ford at Universal Studios shortly before World War I. Some film historians see the characters (and the mannerisms —Carey was a bemused cowboy head-scratcher) developed by Carey (with some help from Ford) in those early years contributing directly to the screen image presented by Will Rogers.[7]

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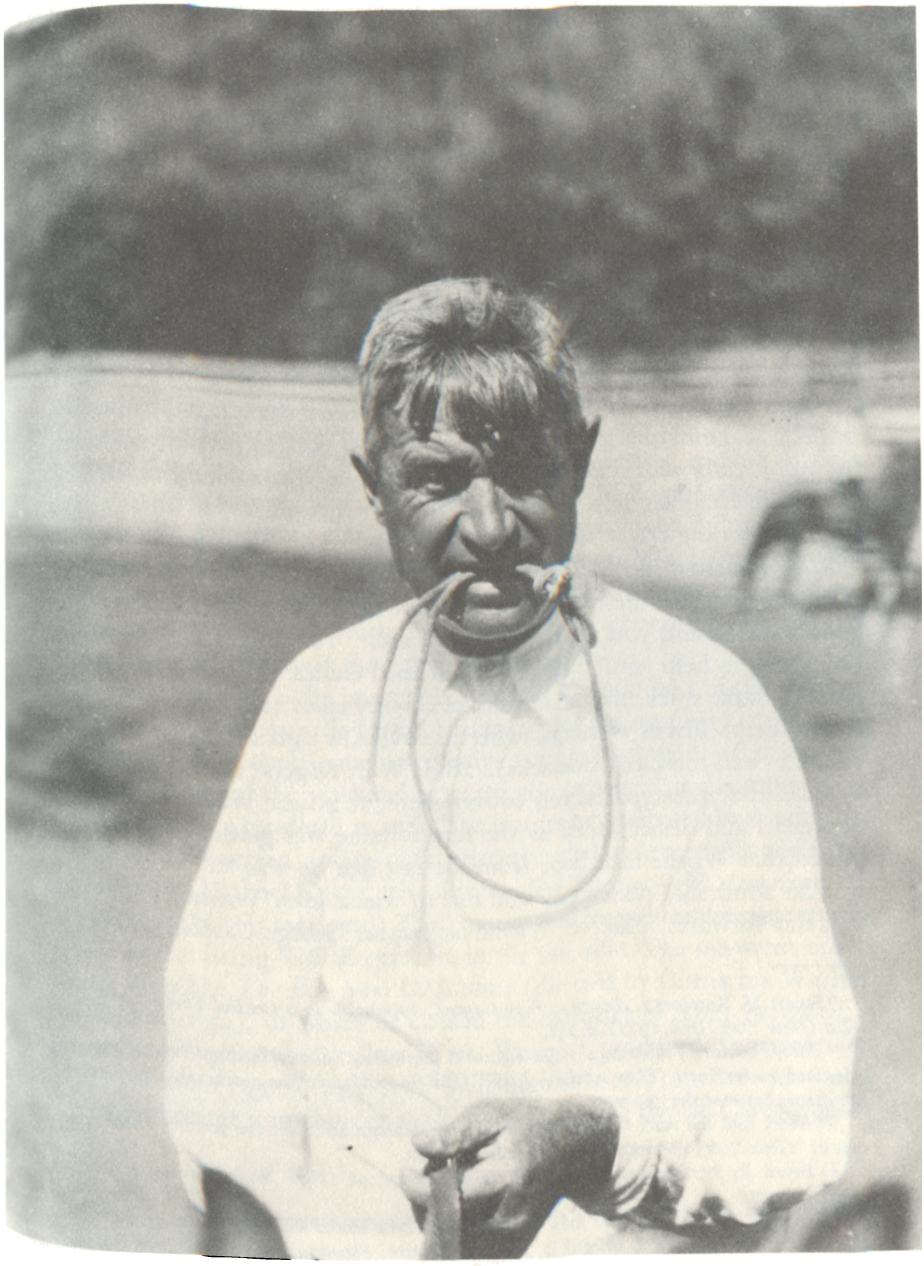
[6] Andrew Bergman, *We're in the Money: Depression America and Its Films* (New York: Harper Colophon Books, 1972), p. 71, improperly views Rogers as the archetypal farmer.

[7] Jon Tuska, *The Filming of the West* (Garden City, N. Y.: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1976), p. 73.



Even at his California home, Rogers indulged in his favorite pasttime, roping (Courtesy of the Will Rogers Project, Stillwater).

If coincidence supports such speculation, one might add that Ford directed Rogers in *Judge Priest* (1934) and *Steamboat 'Round the Bend* (1935). In those films, according to Stuart M. Kaminsky, Rogers "is an extension of the Carey character."[8] Ultimately, of course, Rogers surpassed Carey in popularity (though not in acting ability) and ranked higher in the public consciousness as a representative of the cowboy type.[9]

Will Rogers had as much to do with cowboys as he did with cowboy imagery—which is to say that he influenced the careers of several of them and so further shaped the cowboy's niche in American popular culture. Gene Autry launched his show business career on the advice of Rogers, delivered one summer night in 1927 in the Chelsea, Oklahoma, telegraph office. Rogers, visiting a sister who lived in Chelsea, had stopped by to wire a weekly column to the McNaught Syndicate, heard the telegraph operator singing, and told him to practice and go to New York to perform on radio. By 1929, Autry was making records; by 1934, he was making films; and by 1940, he had begun a sixteen-year stint on CBS radio. He always gave Will Rogers the credit for launching all that.[10]

Rogers boosted Joel McCrea's career, telling him (according to McCrea), "Joe, you ain't like these other actors, you're kinder like me. You ain't very good looking and you ain't a very good actor. You're just a cowboy and I'm going to help you."[11] Rogers nicknamed Guinn Williams "Big Boy," and the name stuck through dozens of cowboy epics (notably the Michael Curtiz-Errol Flynn westerns, wherein Williams and Alan Hale played Flynn's well-muscled sidekicks). And Will Rogers encouraged John Wayne, the archetypal screen cowboy hero, at a time when Wayne was depressed and disheartened by the film roles he was getting. Rogers suggested that Wayne take hope from the fact that he was still working. "It was an admirable philosophy and one to which John Wayne clung from that day forward," observes Wayne biographer George Carpozi, Jr.[12]

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[8] Stuart M. Kaminsky, *American Film Genres: Approaches to a Critical Theory of Popular Film* (New York: Dell, 1977), p. 258.

[9] Carey, however, remains a major figure in the history of western films, while Rogers is relegated to bit parts. Film scholars should (but do not) note the remarkable physical resemblance between the two men.

[10] Autry told the story of Rogers' visit to the telegraph office on the premier radio broadcast of "Gene Autry's Melody Ranch" in January, 1940.

[11] Bryan B. Sterling (ed.), *The Will Rogers Scrapbook* (New York: Grosset & Dunlap, 1976), p. 117.

[12] George Carpozi, Jr., *The John Wayne Story* (New York: Dell, 1974), p. 51. A variant text of the conversation is offered in Maurice Zolotow, *Shooting Star: A Biography of John Wayne* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1974), p. 97. Zolotow's emphasis on Wayne's admiration—no, his veneration—for Harry Carey makes for another coincidence worth noting. See pp. 31, 181.

Rogers knew Tom Mix as well, their acquaintance dating from the St. Louis World's Fair of 1904. Mix was there in his capacity as drum major in the Oklahoma Cavalry Band, and Rogers was performing with Zack Mulhall's wild West show. Rogers introduced Mix, who was then between wives, to Miss Olive Stokes, who, since she was only fourteen in 1904, was no immediate prospect; but Mix married her in 1909. She was his third wife. There would be two more after her, but history does not record that Rogers had a hand in further introductions.[13]

The relationship between Rogers and Mix was in a larger sense indicative of much concerning the place of the cowboy in history and culture. Historically, the cowboy was an individual seeking to become something else: a rancher, an owner of cattle, a man of affairs. The conditions of his employment—he was an unskilled laborer and subject to the same vagaries of management and market that affected all unskilled workers in nineteenth-century America—allowed betterment only infrequently, so that to be a cowboy was to accept social and economic stasis. Will Rogers was a cowboy who became something else. Tom Mix was a cowboy who did not. Rogers was thus an example, and the lesson was not lost on Mix, to judge by the comments of some observers.[14] Nor, some suggest, was it lost on Americans living through the Depression, for whom Rogers personified the rags-to-riches theme that defines the American Dream.[15]

Cowboy imagery is the imagery of inspiration, regardless of the cultural level at which it appears; and if Rogers (as cowboy philosopher) encouraged the American people—and especially rural populations—during the straitened times of the 1920s and 1930s, he also remained as a commanding figure even after his death in 1935. The images he presented in vaudeville, in print, on the screen, and on radio were extended in new media and fresh personalities. Michael Curtiz, who directed *Jim Thorpe—All American* for Warner Brothers in 1951, made *The Story of Will Rogers* for the same studio a year later, casting Will Rogers, Jr., in the title role. The son went on to minor films like *The Boy from Oklahoma* (directed by Curtiz for Warner Brothers in 1954), in which he created the character of Tom Brewster, a peaceable cowpoke in a violent West. Warner's produced *Sugarfoot* for ABC-TV from 1957 to 1961, with Will Hutchins as Tom Brewster; and Hutchins became something of a celebrity by affecting the old Carey-Rogers

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[13] Paul E. Mix, *The Life and Legend of Tom Mix* (New York: A. S. Barnes and Company, 1972), pp. 43–45.

[14] Sterling (ed.), *The Will Rogers Scrapbook*, p. 121.

[15] See William R. Brown, *Imagemaker: Will Rogers and the American Dream* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1970).

mannerisms for a new generation of cowboy watchers. Currently, Will Rogers, Jr., plugs Grape Nuts cereal by evoking the image of his father and repeating what surely is prime Rogers-brand cowboy wisdom: "Know what's in it before you eat it." That he wears a cowboy hat while pitching the product is probably not coincidental.

Were Will Rogers remembered for nothing else, he would be recalled as a cowboy—because that is what he was, historically and imagerially, and because the figure of the cowboy is such an integral part of American culture. And Rogers' contribution to that integration was generous indeed. Gene Autry has made the point succinctly: "He brought to the Western tradition the idea of the friendly cowboy. As much as any man, he helped establish the lore and humor of the West as part of the American heritage."[16]

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[16] Gene Autry (with Mickey Herskowitz), *Back in the Saddle Again* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1978), p. 49.