

The values of American Indians helped inspire ideals the Founding Fathers envisioned for their new nation. Unfortunately, these values conflicted with narrow self-interests. The ideals were never fully realized. But during the social and political unrest of the Great Depression, philosopher and humorist Will Rogers showed the unifying effect of these values for modern times. Today we are challenged to bring these values into being by simply living with the ethics of play.

Will Rogers: Discovering the Soul of America

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“I highly recommend this unique, introspective look at Will Rogers. Cy Eberhart has masterfully shown how Rogers’ values resonated with Americans in his day and continue to have relevance in the present.”

— Stephen K Gragert

Director, WILL ROGERS MEMORIAL MUSEUMS

Will Rogers

DISCOVERING
THE SOUL
OF AMERICA

E.T. (Cy) Eberhart



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CHAPTER 1

The End Game: Who Was Will Rogers?

I don't think I ever hurt any man's feelings by my little gags. I know I never willfully did it. When I have to do that to make a living I will quit.—Will Rogers

August 16, 1935. Radio announcements and banner headlines greeted the country with the story that overshadowed all other world events: Famed pilot Wiley Post and Will Rogers had died in a plane crash.

The crash, which had happened the evening before during take off a short distance from Barrow, Alaska, stunned the nation. It was impossible to imagine an America without Will Rogers. Although his name is almost forgotten or unknown today, 70-plus years ago, to most folks, this simple, ordinary cowboy from Oklahoma represented what being American was all about.

The story ran for days, the loss only slowly sinking in to the minds of numbed Americans. In one New Hampshire small-town grocery store a little boy raced in and told the customers there that Will Rogers was dead. No one spoke. A few people abandoned their errands and silently walked out. The clerks stopped their work, and one woman “as though she were not able to stand, looked down helplessly and found a box or something and just sat down.”¹⁰ In Locust Grove, Oklahoma some Cherokees were busy building a fence when a man driving down the road stopped and called out the news to them. With no words to express their feelings, they met the announcement with stunned silence. After a time they exchanged recollections of Will. Then one said, “I can't work any more today.” All of them stacked their tools and left quietly.¹¹

On that day I went into mourning, also. I walked into the back room of our local hardware store. The men were talking. One said to me, “Will Rogers was killed.” I smiled waiting for the rest of the joke. Then I found out it was no joke. I went outside and cried, and I

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had never been closer to Will Rogers than the front row of a movie theater.

As events moved toward the last rites, news coverage continued.

On August 17th, *The Los Angeles Times* carried a photo of women in shawls kneeling in prayer before a cross covered with flowers; the headline read "Olvera Street Mourns."

When news of the death of Will Rogers was received in Olvera Street, voices were hushed and heads bowed in sorrow. Quickly dahlias, gladioluses and other blooms taken from vases were placed at the foot of the cross at the street's entrance. They were soon woven into a gorgeous wreath which was placed on the Cross. Beneath the wreath as an artist printed on a placard the words "*Will Rogers, Los Mexicanos de La Calle Olvera Lemantan Tu Muerte*" (The Mexicans of Olvera Street lament thy death). Then a large candle was lighted at the foot of the cross.¹²

On the same day, *The New York Times* gave the Post-Rogers story four full pages, and nearly the same in its Sunday edition. It printed a separate editorial for each man. The paper laid out side by side the accounts of both men's lives, along with expression of grief from President Roosevelt, members of the Senate and House, Cabinet members, leaders of the entertainment world and the aviators' fraternity.

THE NATION MOURNS

On August 22nd, Rogers' body lay in state at the Forest Lawn Memorial Park in Los Angeles where over 100,000 people silently filed past. That afternoon, there was a private memorial service at the Wee Kirk o' the Heather in Forest Lawn for family and invited friends. The Kirk could accommodate only 125 and chairs were placed outside for the additional 250-plus friends. These friends included movie stars and movie unknowns, ranch hands and hired

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help from Rogers' home. There were generals as well. Rear Admiral W. T. Tarrant, U.S.N. of San Diego, commandant of the Eleventh Naval District, represented the Commander in Chief, President Franklin D. Roosevelt. Brigadier General H. H. "Hap" Arnold, represented the army. Representing the aeronautics division of the United States Department of Commerce was the division's chief, Gene Vidal.

At the same time, separate memorial services were held around Los Angeles. Nearly 20,000 gathered at the Hollywood Bowl for a service presided over by a Protestant minister, a Catholic priest and a Yiddish performer singing a Hebrew mourning chant. Some 650 people attended the service at the small Community Presbyterian Church in Beverly Hills, where Will had had a non-sectarian connection. At the Warner Bros. Studios 3,000 attended that memorial service and at almost every other movie studio staff and stars gathered to honor their congenial friend.

In Watts black actors who had worked with Rogers in films honored him with a parade organized by the African-American fraternal group, Friends of Ethiopia. The king of the American hoboes declared a 31-day period of mourning for its 6,000 members. "Well, they got more time to mourn than other people, ain't they?" Will might have said about this. One wag claimed Rogers would have said of this.¹³

A transcontinental network of radio stations broadcast the Hollywood Bowl service. Other stations remained silent for thirty minutes in Rogers' honor. Movie theatres across the country interrupted their performances by darkening their screens for two minutes.

Life in America virtually stopped as people huddled around their radios. Some public offices closed, businesses paused. The Associated Press wrote, "Never in the history of this country has a private citizen been handed over to eternity amid such a demonstration of public love and admiration as homage paid to Will Rogers."¹⁴ But it was John McCormack, Irish-born American operatic singer and friend, whose words in the end summed up what was happening. "A smile has disappeared from the lips of America and

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her eyes are now suffused with tears. He was a man, take this for all in all, we shall not look upon his like again”¹⁵

Enough could not be said or heard. Practically all other news was pushed from the front pages of newspapers, little and big, and the radio airwaves were jammed with it. “Nowhere in the memory of the oldest newspapermen is there a record of the passing of a private citizen rating an eight-day ‘follow-up’ series in the national press,” wrote Jack Lait. “Few Presidents who died in office, held general interest as long...And yet of the amazing matters. I have covered—crimes, war, disasters—never has any account I have written elicited such a flood of communications from the entire country...Only intense worship of an individual could cause people to so cherish little anecdotes, to so crave answers to little questions of fact...And not one dissenting word!...Not even the familiar constitutional cranks, carpers and hero-haters have come forward, a unique manifestations.”¹⁶

INCARNATION OF THE AMERICAN SPIRIT

No tragedy since the death of Abraham Lincoln had so touched the hearts of so many Americans as did the loss of Will Rogers. How did it happen that a simple cowboy from Claremore, Oklahoma, came to be the heart, conscience and soul of America?

Unless you were around seven or more decades ago, it is difficult to comprehend the love, respect and admiration Will Rogers received. There is no one today who even remotely compares. The nostalgia my generation has for Rogers is perhaps as much a reflection of our elders’ experiences as from our own memories. We saw the power of his presence in the faces and lives of our parents and grandparents.

It is hard to imagine that before the proliferation of instant communication, e.g. internet, cell phones, or TV, one person could become so visible, so present in people's daily lives as Will Rogers was. One woman remembered that, as a girl, her family’s daily morning ritual was, as it was for thousands across the country, listening to her father at the breakfast table reading aloud Rogers' comments from his daily syndicated newspaper column, the “Daily

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Telegram.” His weekly radio broadcast carried his thoughts and observations in his Oklahoma twang into living rooms around the country.

It was not uncommon for people to first want to know his take on important social and political matters before forming their own conclusions. His comments were standard fodder for living room, bridge table, coffee shop, pool hall, barber shop, street-corner conversations. Often his words were the final arbiter in many an argument when someone said, “Well, Will Rogers said....”

The respect and trust the public had for Rogers was phenomenal. One “Washington statesman” was quoted in the *American Magazine* as saying, “You can never have another war in this country unless Will Rogers is for it.”¹⁷ Something flowed from Rogers to the people as well. Rogers’ “little guys” were finding hope and courage to live amid the oppressive social and economic injustices that fostered the Great Depression. Some say his presence on the American scene helped prevent the revolution seething among the dispossessed. He came to represent the voice of the American people in a time when they felt betrayed, forgotten, robbed. They knew he was one of them.

Even though he was the best-known person in the country, perhaps in the world, and he associated easily with prominent people in many nations, he remained in touch with the common and the ordinary. For example, a large welcoming committee was on hand at the railroad station when he arrived at the Mojave Desert location for the filming of *The County Chairman*. The reception included a band, town officials, Chamber of Commerce glad-handers and autograph-hunters. Off to one side were also about a hundred seedy tramps waiting to say hello “to the idol whose words of wisdom they managed to read in papers salvaged, along with cigarettes stubs and cigar butts, from an ashcan.”¹⁸

Noticing them as he got off the train, he said a quick “Howdy do” to the main party and ambled over to the tramps. When he left them half an hour later, he had given them \$300, all the cash he had.¹⁹ These men probably remembered this to their dying days. No doubt Rogers left them something besides money. A new sense of dignity and worth, perhaps.

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Another time on his way to a performance before an audience of 4000, he passed about twenty boys in an alley. They were waiting to catch a glimpse of him. One held a dingy rope. Rogers greeted them and asked for the rope.

He was surprisingly serious. As the alley urchins, wide-eyed, formed a ring about him, Rogers took the dirty rope...showed those amazed kids how to do tricks with a rope such as they had never seen. His stage show was to start at 8:30 and he had barely time to reach the theater when he entered the alley. But it was not until five minutes to nine that he neatly spun a noose over the boy who owned the rope and told them to leave.²⁰

He came to embody everything Americans thought of as their character: honesty, forthrightness, humility, compassion, friendliness, fairness. Indeed he was America itself. Clarence Budington Kelland, a popular author of the day, captured Rogers' essence when he wrote: "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."²¹

Will Rogers was the heart and soul of America. If he had never lived, could any writer of fiction outside of fantasy, have developed such a character, emulating Will Rogers, that would be believable? Think about it. He excelled in every public media of the day. Whichever way people turned, Will Rogers was there, on the stage, in movies, on lecture tours. He wrote a daily newspaper column, syndicated in over 400 papers. He was the first radio commentator, broadcasting nationwide on Sunday evenings. He traveled the world, earning the title of the country's unofficial ambassador of Good Will.

He held no official position of authority, yet his simply stated opinion could shape the debate on national and sometimes world issues. He was as comfortable visiting with presidents and European royalty as he was riding with cowboys on the range. Men of prominence put more stock in having their picture taken with him than he with them. He did all of this as a humorist.

By all accounts he was a great man, but the term "great" did not fit him, unless his greatness was in the fact that, within this heady

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mix, he remained common and ordinary. The idea of greatness implies a certain separation from others. Rogers belonged to the everyday life ordinary people lived. He was touchable, their kind of person, and he would not have had it any other way. As he once said of himself, "I am just an old country boy in a big town trying to get along. I have been eating pretty regular and the reason I have been is because I stayed an old country boy."²² Take away his commonness and what remained would be simply one more celebrity among many. The Will Rogers people saw and knew was not the work of a press agent or a public relations firm. It was the man himself.

There were two reasons for this. First, the influence of his Cherokee background and the importance in that heritage of community and compassion. This led to his brand of common sense that said it all in a way that everyone understood. As Amon G. Carter, then publisher of the *Fort Worth Star Telegram* once noted, "Many times, when a group of friends have been arguing the relative merits and demerits of some questions, I have heard Will come out with some simple, homely, common-sense statement, that if it didn't end the discussion, blew all the arguments to smithereens."²³

The second reason was his lifelong ability to play and be playful, which touched a responsive chord in the hearts of all. This allowed him to speak truths that from anyone else would have been met with conflict and controversy.

There have been many biographies written of Will Rogers. But this book instead looks at how the influences that made him who he was—his Cherokee heritage and his playful dealings with life events—enabled him to touch Americans from all walks of life and have an impact on society all out of proportion to his background and profession. It allowed him to forge a bond and relationship with the American people that existed long after his lifetime. Even today, through reenactments of Rogers' character and his words, he still touches lives. Today, if people learn Rogers' lessons of fairness, community, honesty, and playfulness, he can change our lives and our communities.

CHAPTER 4

The Ropin' Fool

My rope was a necessary part of education.—Will Rogers.

Willie, as he was known to the family, was walking with his sister, Maude, across a pasture when they suddenly heard their father yelling to run for their lives. They glanced around and saw him galloping toward them on horseback, pointing to one side. They saw a great bull tearing at them, his horns lowered. Maude began to run, holding on to Willie's hand. He jerked loose, planted his feet firmly apart on the ground, and measured out a loop on a small rope he was carrying.

“Run, Willie, run,” Maude screamed from the safety of the fence.

The bull was almost on the boy, when Will's father reached down from his speeding horse and scooped him to safety. Out of danger, he stopped the horse, laid the boy across the saddle horn and gave him a good spanking. Will clamped his lips and did not make a sound.

“Why didn't you run?” his father demanded.

“Didn't need to,” he said trying to keep the tears back. “I'd have caught him with my rope.”⁸⁰

With rope in hand young Willie too could imagine himself as a cowboy. For in his day roping was much more than a pastime, it was a respected skill essential in the local economy. The range cattle industry was well established. The rope reined in the steers for roundup and calves for branding.⁸¹

YOUNG ROGERS AND HIS ROPE

The rope became as much a part of Will Rogers as did his Cherokee culture. It was his plaything, becoming his partner and an essential in his living, carrying with some special meaning. The title of his self-produced 1922 silent movie, *The Ropin' Fool* suggests the

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prominence the rope had for him. It was not a commercial success, but today's video copies leave viewers awestruck watching him skillfully perform over fifty rope tricks. Many filmed with the first-ever used technology of slow motion. His son, Will, Jr., in the video's voice over states that one trick had never been duplicated by another roper. That may still be so.

The rope was firmly planted in the fertile soil of childhood when he was four years old and a black hand named Dan Walker, began teaching him to rope. Will's faithfulness to his roping would later expose the American public to basic Cherokee values in a way that would awaken an essential quality in creating and experiencing community: Trust.

The on-going social and political struggles that were in the atmosphere of Will's time would, at least, be of peripheral interest for a small boy born on November 4, 1879. Those who watched him grow never expected him to become any sort of a success. Years later a former teachers wrote, " Even the most sanguine could not have predicted that the funny fellow we knew as Will Rogers, would be anything but mediocre, or live anything but an absurdly uneventful life"⁸² The transforming experiences that led to this phenomenon would happen when he was 23 years old performing with the Texas Jack's Wild West Show in South Africa.

In the meantime, the locals simply watched a boy go about exploring his world, developing interests that fit his fancy. The major ones being his rope, his pony, having a good time, making friends, and avoiding school and work, although it was the routine chores he disliked the most, much to his father's chagrin. Willie's aversion to work puzzled hard-driving Clem. There was one exception. Will delighted in riding the range among the cattle and branding calves and colts.

His mother was the instrumental figure in his life. Rogers' friend and later biographer, Homer Croy, wrote in his *Our Will* there was "a bond of love and understanding between them. The two were, in the main, of the same nature and it was from his mother that he got his predominant traits."⁸³ A visitor to the Rogers' home saw an example when young Will stepped barefooted in some fresh dough. The visitor

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expected Mary to reprimand him in some way, but instead said to Willie how sweet the bread would taste.

Years later he wrote, "My folks have told me that what little humor I have comes from her. I can't remember her humor but I can remember her love and understanding of me."⁸⁴ She died when he was ten years old. Will's wife, Betty, felt he never got over his mother's death. In her biography of him she wrote: "He cried when he told me about it many years later. It left in him a lonely, lost feeling that persisted long after he was successful and famous."⁸⁵

People delighted in seeing Mary and Will together. Her niece reminisced about Mary and Will visiting neighbors in her buckboard pulled by a white horse. "I have always thought this was where Will got his interest in going to see people. When anybody in our section saw a buckboard and a white horse coming they knew they were in for a good time."⁸⁶

The only piano in the Cooweescoowee District belonged to the Rogers. Will loved trying to play it but with little success. His desire, however, did not translate into practice. It was the case when later on, he would choose piano playing for an outside school activity. But he hated practicing. He took his lessons at the teacher's home in the morning before school. Other students like to walk to school with him. One morning a few stopped by the teacher's house to see if he'd finished his lesson. He told them, "Don't wait for me. I forgot to practice yesterday and I gotta do it now before I go to school."

They went on, but before reaching school Will came up behind happy and whistling. "I'll tell you how it was," he said. "She kept pointin' her finger at the notes and sayin' over and over, 'What's this? What's this?' So I said, 'It looks like yore finger to me.' This made her mad and she handed me a good slap and told me to get out an' go to school. I'm goin' to use it every day."⁸⁷

Mary, both played and sang. So she played with him standing beside her, both singing. Neighbors enjoyed coming to the house and being entertained by the two of them.

Croy pictures Rogers in his early years as "the happiest boy in the Indian Territory. A pony, a rope, ...and plenty of friends to play with." His playmates were white children, black children, and

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Indians. He was the loudest and noisiest boy in any group, but the best liked. He was fun to be with. He liked everybody and everybody liked him.⁸⁸ His classroom was the outdoors, his subject matter, his rope and his pony. It was as though he was majoring in roping for a degree in playfulness.

His rope was his constant companion and hardly anything was off limits to practice on. His cousin Estelle told of his visits to their home and how “he swung at a turkey, gave the rope a snap, and broke the turkey’s neck. He was greatly disturbed and repentful, for he could not bear to see anything suffer. As the turkey stopped its flopping, Will said, ‘I’m sorry. I’ll never do such a thing again.’ Then he brightened, ‘But I’ll stay till we eat it up.’ And he did. Will was always willing to help in this way. One of his deepest traits was kindness to animals; most boys in our section went rabbit hunting; when they caught a rabbit they’d would kill it with their clubs. Will would never do this.”⁸⁹

At times, however, his roping was annoying, especially inside his house. Once when a neighbor woman was visiting he continually roped objects around the room. Exasperated his mother threatened to spank him if he did not quit. But he kept right on. She stood up and went toward him. His loop flashed toward her and down over her head, and he pulled it tight pinning her arms to her sides. Still she kept walking toward him. Then like a good roping horse Willie backed away holding the rope tight. Shaking her head at this maneuver, Mary stopped and burst out laughing. Willie shook a warning finger at her with his offer: “If you’ll promise not to spank me, I’ll turn you loose.”⁹⁰

SCHOOL DAYS

But his perfect world was on a collision course with what was to be a longtime menace: Indoor schooling! Mary had been trying to teach him to read, which seemed to go against the very grain of his soul. One day she said he should be ashamed of himself because he didn’t want to know how to read. After some deep thought he

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countered with, "I've got such a good pony," he said, "that I don't want to waste my time learnin' to read."⁹¹

Then in his seventh year the bad news came: He was going to school! Whisked off to live with his sister Sallie and her husband Tom McSpadden twenty miles away to attend a school named Drumgoole. There was a silver lining: a three-mile pony ride between Sallie's house and school, and after school, no father to make him do chores.

Tom tried to shame Will into help milking the cows, but it never worked. His ingenuity in evading work made interesting conversation for the neighborhood. Even so Tom and Sallie liked having him around because he was "good company" and neighbors enjoyed dropping in to hear what the boy had to say. What he had to say was also a delight among his classmates at school.

Drumgoole would be the first of several schools Will attended. Along the way, and with the help of his lariat, he discovered the way to conquer and survive in these unnatural surroundings was to turn the schools into playgrounds. It would take some time to develop this skill but he succeeded.

In his so-called *Autobiography*,⁹² Will gave this account of himself as a student:

[My father] sent me to about every school in that part of the country. In some of them I would last for three or four months. I got just as far as the fourth reader when the teachers wouldn't seem to be running the school right, rather than have the school stop I would generally leave. Then I would start in at another school, tell them I had just finished the third reader and was ready for the fourth. Well, I knew all this fourth grade by heart, so the teacher would remark:

"I never see you studying, yet you seem to know your lessons."

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I had that education thing figured down to a fine point. Ten years in McGuffey's Fourth Reader, and I knew more about it than McGuffey did....

The trouble was that my teachers and I had a different idea as what was important. To me my rope was a necessary part of education.

At Drumgoole his opportunities for play seemed limited to the noon hour and his turn to get a bucket of spring water for the thirsty students in the schoolroom. At noon the boys were allowed to race their ponies, which they did with Willie yelling the loudest. When it was Will's turn to carry the water, ill luck followed him. In "some way or other the water always got sloshed in the others' faces, or spilled on them, or down the girls' backs. Next time he would try to do better. He never quite succeeded."⁹³

The next year Clem enrolled him in the Cherokee Female Seminary in Tahlequah where his sisters May & Maude were enrolled. He was the only boy there, and didn't care who knew how much he disliked school. In two weeks he was expelled for yelling in the hallways, and war whooping at the girls at night while they studied.

His back-at-the-ranch time was short. He departed for the Harrell Institute at Muskogee, a Methodist school. Again he teased and argued. Soon his father had a letter from the Institute's president: "I regret to inform you that you son is not doing well in school and would suggest you remove him." Will was removed and he rejoiced."⁹⁴

After returning to the ranch Will came down with the measles. His mother also became ill and soon died. Will was too sick to attend the funeral. With the bond between them now severed, he was disconsolate.⁹⁵

His education continued. He may have been sandwiched for a short time at the Presbyterian Mission School at Tahlequah before embarking on a four-year stay at Willie Halsell College. It was an elementary and secondary institution about 20 miles from the ranch. Happier days were here, in part because many neighboring boys and

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girls were there. Also, aided by his rope, he replaced his defiance with his playfulness. He practiced roping every chance he got, even practiced in the classroom. Appearing to be studying, he would stealthily eye the aisle. When a girl came along, he whipped his rope out from under his desk, threw the loop ahead of her so she had to step in it and then yanked away. He claimed he was roping calves.

During a summer break from Halsell, Will went to Chicago with his father. While there they attended a Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show performance. One act would be a life-changing event for him. He watched spell bound as the Mexican roper, Vincente Oropeza, billed as "the greatest roper in the world," did his act. He proved his greatness to the thirteen-year-old by executing rope tricks Will had never imagined. He did "fluent spins, leaped lightly in and out of his whirling loop and snared a racing horse by its front feet, back feet, all four feet, the saddle horn and, finally by its tail."⁹⁶ Oropeza's closing stunt brought tears to Will's eyes. With his twirling rope he spelled in the air, one letter at a time, "O-R-O-P-E-Z-A."—Then and there Will determined to become a world champion roper himself.

He returned home more dedicated than ever to his roping. Roping, not studying was his priority. The students loved watching him. They liked him so well that when he asked what the lesson was about, they'd tell. They enjoyed listening to him answer the teachers' questions. "If he couldn't think of the answer, he would, in an adroit manner, manage to side-step it, or to involve the teacher in an argument. He was quick-witted and so mentally alert that he could down almost anybody in any argument. The other students like to hear him argue, usually he made them laugh."⁹⁷

Will never engaged in fights as other boys sometimes did. He liked to have a good time and to make those around him have a good time. They enjoyed hearing him talk on almost anything. There was supposed to be no talking in the dorm after lights out, but demerits or not Will always had a few more things to say. The next day those not living in the dorm heard from those who did what Will had said.⁹⁸

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BUSINESS VS. SCHOOLING

Four years at Halsell filled Will with all the education he would ever need. Surely he shocked his father when he told him he wanted to go to work instead of school. After all he did have cattle of his own. Shortly after Will's mother died Clem had bought a few thousand head of cattle and had them shipped from Texas. They arrived with seventy-five "doggies"—calves with no mother to claim them. Clem gave the doggies to his son. The herd, carrying Will's own brand, increased each year, and four years later, when Will was just fourteen years old, he sported his own letterhead:

W. P. Rogers
Cattle Dealer
Ranch between C.V. Rogers and Oolagah

No Cattle Sold except for shipment. A liberal Reward will be paid for any Cattle in the Brand found off the Range.

Will wanting to work? On hearing something so unexpected, Clem could only say, "Let me think this over." A few days later he gave his son the devastating answer. He would have to go to Scarritt Collegiate Institute, 80 miles from the ranch. That fall, two months before he was fifteen, lariat and bag in hand, Will dragged himself back into the dismal world of academics where again he would be the only boy who realized the lariat was a necessary part of education.⁹⁹

However, there were calves in a pasture near his boarding house he rope. Fellow students would gather to watch. He liked to maneuver a roped calf "so that it would sweep into the girls and play havoc with their dignity." He found other ways to tease the girls as well. He had them screaming "Don't, Willie!" wherever he went. His playful ways made him popular. He had more fun than anyone else in school and the boys and girls around him had fun. Study? Occasionally.¹⁰⁰

Early in his second year at Scarritt an old mare owned by one of the teachers strolled on to the campus, followed by her colt. Will,

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rope in hand, was standing with a group of boys near by. One said, "Rope her, Willie."

Away went his lasso, catching the mare around the neck. She bolted, jerked the rope from his hand and stampeded with her colt following her across the tennis court. They tore the net down, and disappeared down one of the town's streets.

Another time, Will broke the arm of a Greek goddess statue on campus when he roped it. Roping steers at the local railroad stockyard was more exciting than going to class.¹⁰¹

Clem receive an accounting of these events along with a bill for five school desks Will had whittled up, a note that he was at the bottom of his class in grades, and the request that he not return to Scarritt after Christmas.¹⁰²

What was a father to do with a son who wouldn't study, wouldn't work; just swing a rope, ride horses or go visiting? The solution was to go along with the Territorial fashion of the day: Send the boy to a military school. Hopefully, the military discipline would have him toeing the mark.¹⁰³

On January 13, 1897 Will enrolled in Kemper Military School in Booneville, Missouri, but the match between Kemper and Will was not one made in heaven. By now he had perfected, to his satisfaction, integrating play and academia. To ensure getting his rope into the school, he made it a part of his luggage by tying it around his suitcase. Once there, he had no trouble putting it to use. His favorite game was having the boys crawl around on their hands and knees, mooing like calves as he roped their feet. He gave them twenty-five cents an hour for this. He went in for other pranks as well. He and another cadet set off an alarm clock and ran down the hall shouting, "Fire! Fire!" The frightened cadets poured into the hallway only to be doused with water from the fire hose. Of course, this and other infractions earned Will demerits. Each required marching duty.

His Kemper roommate was John "Hurt" Payne, whose interview in Croy's biography provides a snapshot of Will's academic endeavors:

WILL ROGERS

Will was seventeen and entered what today would be equivalent to the sophomore class. He always pretended that him and education were strangers but that was just part of his waggery; as a matter of fact he was better educated than nine-tenths of the people of the Territory....Nobody in class could talk as much as he could. And good, too—especially when he was dodging an answer to a question. Sometimes I had the feeling the teachers were giving him the rein so he could cavort around. He was good in history. But when he ever studied was a full-blown mystery; he was too active to tie down to a book. Sometimes, after the class bell had sounded, he would say “Hurt, what’s the lesson about today? Tell me so I can see how well you know it.’ Of course I knew he hadn’t opened his book, but I liked to tell him, and so did the other boys. Bein’ a natural-born talker like he was, he would make wonderful showing in class—better’n the rest of us who had really laid our running-irons on the book.

A trying occasion was elocution. We had to get up and recite such things as Patrick Henry’s ‘Give Me Liberty, or Give Me Death.’ We’d do it seriously. But Will wouldn’t. He’d torture his face till it looked like a wrinkled saddle blanket, make funny motions with his hands and roll his eyes and, some way or other, manage to make us laugh. I never saw him get up in front of class without making them laugh before he sat down That lasso! He had it with him most of the time. The profs hated it like Adam hated snakes. He liked to take it out to the campus an’ rope with it. But the officers would grab it and take it away from him. His greatest scholastic trouble was gettin’ his rope past the guard officers. One time he wanted to take it out, and knowin’ the guard officer was watchin’, Will pulled up his shirt an’ coiled it around

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his middle. When he passed the officer he saluted most correctly, the officer returned it—then stared at the malignant growth on Will’s stommick. He called Will back—and that was the rope’s end. But it didn’t discourage Will. He would practice with his rope, even if he knew an angry mob was goin’ to seize it and hang him with it.¹⁰⁴

14 months at Kemper and Will had had it with “academic grazing.”¹⁰⁵

Wide-open spaces were out there filled with ranging cattle. A Kemper friend told him of such a place in Texas. Will wrote letters to sisters Sallie and Maude asking each to loan him ten dollars. Sallie wondered why he needed extra money since their father gave him a generous allowance. She went to Maude. Both sisters’ husbands advised against sending the money. So did the postmaster who said Will had too much already. But the sisters sent it anyway.

With his trusted lariat and twenty dollars in his pocket, Will left Kemper for Higgins, Texas.¹⁰⁶

The values of American Indians helped inspire ideals the Founding Fathers envisioned for their new nation. Unfortunately, these values conflicted with narrow self-interests. The ideals were never fully realized. But during the social and political unrest of the Great Depression, philosopher and humorist Will Rogers showed the unifying effect of these values for modern times. Today we are challenged to bring these values into being by simply living with the ethics of play.

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