

WINTER OF DISCONTENT:
THE INFLUENCE OF WILL ROGERS' INDIAN HERITAGE
UPON HIS LIFE AND PHILOSOPHY

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None of the numerous writers who have examined Will Rogers' life and philosophy have explored the origins of his opinions on domestic and international affairs. This separation of the Oklahoman's experiences in life from his attitudes has hindered the development of a logical and balanced view of his philosophy. As far as this philosophy is concerned, Rogers generally opposed the powerful, wealthy establishment and supported the less advantaged, weaker sectors of society. Such a philosophical position was evident by 1917, when he wrote several short features for the Detroit Journal. In one, he showed his hostility toward the domestic establishment by analyzing the winter street car problems of his host city. The satirist began by promising "to give all sides of this mess an equal showing because they are all so bad I can't pick out the worst." He then proceeded to attack the transportation company involved in the dispute as follows: "The D.U.R. [The Detroit Transportation Company] were the originators of camouflage, by running tractors and calling them street cars. And those stoves they have in the cars--the motor man puts his bottle of beer in there to keep it cool til he gets to the end of the line. Last Monday two women had their feet frostbitten by putting them too close to the stove." Rogers noted that the name of the Common (city) Council appeared quite appropriate. The Council had voted \$35,000 to finance an investigation of the street car company. The investigating Committee's report stated: "'We find the car system in pretty bad shape and recommend additional appropriations to carry on the investigation.' Any man with a nickel," Rogers concluded, "could have found that out. The Common Council say they will make the company take their cars off the street. The people waiting on the streets these cold nights to get home claim the company has already taken the cars off."¹

Rogers showed that his antagonism toward the United States' wealthy and powerful had not abated when he considered the causes of the "great depression" in a special 1931 radio broadcast dealing with unemployment. He pictured the wealthy, and specifically bankers, as the real architects of his country's doom. "It wasn't the working class that brought this condition on at all," he said. "It was the big boys themselves who thought that this financial drunk we were going through was going to last forever. They over-merged and over-capitalized and over-everything else."²

A logical corollary to Rogers' distaste for the domestic establishment was a basic empathy for less advantaged groups. He projected this facet of his philosophy in numerous ways. For example, he continually raised funds for victims of natural disasters like tornadoes and floods. He generally supported Franklin D. Roosevelt's "New Deal" because he believed the administration's programs were helping the economy and providing jobs for the needy.³ But perhaps the most candid representation of Rogers' sympathy for the

disadvantaged came in a radio broadcast during 1930 when he registered strong displeasure with the white man's treatment of Indians in the United States. Specifically, the humorist drew an analogy between "Roman gladiators" who "used a lion to cut down their native population" and the "Pilgrims" who employed a more sophisticated instrument of destruction--"a gun." This comparison led to commentary concerning "465" treaties the Federal Government had "broken with the Indians." "That is why the Indians get a kick," Will caustically observed, "out of reading the government's usual remark when some big affair comes up, our [sic] honor is at stake." The broadcast ended when the cowboy-philosopher announced that for the first time since Columbus' discovery of America the government had agreed to construct a hospital for the Indians. "Look what the Indians have got to look forward to in the next 400 years," he sarcastically concluded. "They are liable to build us a cemetery or something, I guess."⁴

Will's attitude toward international developments mirrored his view of domestic events; he stood against the wealthy and powerful while empathizing with the disadvantaged and less fortunate. The world situation which most clearly reflected the satirist's attitude was imperialism. Rogers opposed imperialism vehemently and vividly in two series of articles he wrote for the Saturday Evening Post in 1928 and 1932. The humorist began by criticizing the way powerful nations exploited the natural resources of weaker countries without just compensation. He marshalled a blistering attack against military aggression which included Japan's invasion of Manchuria and United States activity in the Philippines, Latin America and Central America. In the case of Central America, the continued existence of United States Marines in Nicaragua absolutely incensed him. He failed to understand how his country could assume responsibility for holding "'moral' elections" in a foreign nation when corruption characterized so many facets of its own political process. Such reasoning led to the startling suggestion that Marines be sent to Chicago in order to end that city's election irregularities: "We took 'em [U.S. Marines] into Mexico, Haiti, and Nicaragua, and let's don't make any exception with Chicago just because it's bigger."⁵

A degree of continuity is evident in Will Rogers' philosophy if his empathy for the disadvantaged and less fortunate is viewed as a natural product of his youth and young adulthood. Rogers was the victim of racial prejudice due to his Indian heritage. He was five-thirty-seconds Cherokee and in the final census of the Five Civilized Tribes made by the Department of Interior in 1906 he was listed as a quarter blood. It seems likely that the Oklahoman's personal encounters with discrimination sensitized his concern for the less advantaged sectors of society.⁶

Will Rogers identified with his Indian heritage in a positive manner throughout his life. As a gregarious sixteen year old student at Scarritt Collegiate Institute in Neosho, Missouri, he became a campus personality in part due to the Cherokee songs he sang. Fellow students conferred the nickname of "Wild Indian" upon him, and he evidently accepted this designation without challenge.⁷ By 1902, an adventuresome Will was working his way over much of the globe. In the process, he was employed as a trick rope artist in South Africa, Australia, and New Zealand under the name "The

Cherokee Kid."⁸ Upon returning to the United States in 1904, the wandering performer retained identification with his Indian ancestry when he went to St. Louis in one of the Colonel Zack Mulhall's western extravaganzas as "Will Rogers, the Cherokee Indian."⁹ By 1925, he was becoming a nationally recognized entertainer through his appearances in the Ziegfeld Follies and his syndicated weekly newspaper column. Yet, at the time of his sister Maude's death in that year he chose to reaffirm his Cherokee background through his weekly tabloid offering: "Today, as I write this, I am not in the Follies, the carefree comedian who jokes about everything. I am out in Oklahoma, among my people, my Cherokee people, who don't expect a laugh for everything I say.... Back home at the funeral of my sister."¹⁰ Even in informal settings and among close friends he bragged on his keen "Injun eyes" until forced to use reading glasses in the mid-1920's.¹¹

Rogers, however, was extremely sensitive about his Cherokee Indian heritage despite his willingness to identify with it and even boast of it. This touchiness sometimes assumed an aggressive tone which could perhaps indicate that he harbored feelings of inferiority due to his Native American ancestry. Thus, his vaunting of his Indian lineage was possibly a means of compensation or even overcompensation.

The first recorded incident indicating Rogers' sensitivity concerning his Indian forebearers occurred in his late teens when he was a student at Kemper Military Academy in Booneville, Missouri. On several occasions he entered heated arguments in defense of Native Americans. A.M. Hitch in his Will Rogers Cadet: A Record of his Two Years as a Cadet at the Kemper Military School Booneville, Missouri, records:

On at least two of the three occasions when he lost his equanimity he was merely rising to the defense of the indian [sic]. Once a classmate referred to a certain indian chief as a thoroughbred. Will's voice rose to a high pitch in resentment as he explained that "full-blood" was the proper term and that it spoiled his whole afternoon to hear someone call a fine indian a thoroughbred. Again in a "Bull Session" a cadet inadvertently or perhaps purposely remarked that indians and negroes [sic] were very much alike. Will lost no time in challenging the remark. With much heat and no humor he argued that the two races were wholly different in origin, ideals, characteristics and possibilities, that the two had never mixed except in the case of one tribe and that other tribes had nothing to do with this one for that reason.¹²

Shortly after the incidents at Kemper Military Academy, Will and Spi Trent, who was both Will's cousin and frequent companion during the humorist's teenage and early adult years attended a fair in Buffalo, New York. One day the two saw the ninety year old Indian warrior Geronimo on public display. Will tried talking to him, but could only elicit unintelligible grunts from the old man. Spi kidded his companion about the encounter: "Boy, your ancestors wasent [sic] brotthered much about school, neither. All they learnt

how to say is UGH. UGH. Will says. Don't you start monkeying with that ancestor business, because the best of us is likely to find our 4 bears hanging by their tails."¹³ Finally, there was a seldom cited bizarre incident that occurred in Cherokee, North Carolina, during 1928 when Rogers was on a lecture tour. He appeared before three thousand Cherokee Indians. The Cherokees listened in their stoic fashion to the humorist's presentation and responded enthusiastically to his repertoire of rope tricks. At this point, and without warning, Will launched into a three minute tirade against the white man's abuse of the American Indian. The scene ended when the crowd's silence was pierced by a single ravaging war cry which immediately swelled to a crescendo of a thousand voices. As hysteria gripped the audience, Will "stood, white, trembling, and actually aghast at himself." His transformation had been "terrifying" and his "furious" anger shocked not only those in attendance, but the humorist himself. One observer of the incident, Ben Dixon MacNeil, reported: "But instinct, the sudden preeminence of his Indian blood, it must have been."¹⁴

Will Rogers' mother, Mary, was a warm and gay woman whom the satirist loved deeply. His father, Clem, was a successful but sometimes rough and insensitive man. Will had trouble building a positive relationship with him during youth and early adulthood. Unfortunately, Mary Rogers died unexpectedly when Will was only ten years old. This event launched him on an emotional pilgrimage to replace the female love and understanding which death had taken from him. Thus, his early relationships with the opposite sex took on an added importance.¹⁵ Unfortunately, the searching youth's Indian heritage resulted in his experiencing rejection and failure in this crucial area of his personal life.

There is little doubt that Will Rogers had difficulty establishing positive relationships with women during his teens and early adulthood. His Indian ancestry was clearly the problem in some instances. In others, his heritage was never mentioned. Yet, considering the time and place, it may have been involved when other factors were vocalized. Finally, Will was an active and undisciplined youth. His antics no doubt caused some of his problems with the opposite sex--and especially with their parents.

Donald Day, in his Will Rogers: A Biography, treats the topic of Will's early relationships with women somewhat colorfully. He relates that the first young lady the Oklahoman proposed to as a teenager flatly rejected him, the father of another set a dog after him, and Kate Ellis, the daughter of the hotel keeper in Oologha, Oklahoma, Will's home town, received strong advice from her parents concerning his irresponsibility.¹⁶ The first well documented instance of a woman rejecting Will occurred when he was seventeen and a student at Scarritt Collegiate Institute. A young lady named "Little Maggie" Nay wrote him that her mother would not let her date him because he drank alcohol and was wild. The young suitor's reply indicates that he thought other factors were involved:

And as far as me not coming back after Xmas I will be here but that is all right. I know how it is when you don't want to go with a boy. A girl has to make up a good excuse to tell

him, so you see that is the case with you.
You want to make things as smooth as possible,
so that is all right, but I would rather you
would have just told me that you did not dare
quit Warren and go with me. I would not have
got mad at you for it and that would have been
all there was to it.¹⁷

Rejection by women continued to be a problem for Will when he left Scarritt Collegiate Institute for Kemper Military Academy. John H. Payne, the Oklahoman's roommate at Kemper, related one such experience: "Now and then on Friday night we had a dance. The girls had to be rustled from the town supply. Will was smitten on a town girl named Manie Johnson and asked her to go to a dance. She turned him down. He never said much about it, but he was hurt."¹⁸

The first documented instance of Will's experiencing female rejection due to his Cherokee lineage occurred in 1904 when he was twenty-four. He was working in one of Colonel Zack Mulhall's wild west shows in St. Louis as "Will Rogers, the Cherokee Indian." One afternoon during a performance, Will began flirting with a group of attractive women in the audience. Thinking an enjoyable relationship might develop, he went looking for the young ladies after finishing his part on the program. As his companion during those days, Tom Mix, relayed, the young performer experienced a saddening shock:

I noticed he [Will] was looking kinda' low in spirits. I can see him now as he walked toward me, sorta' kicking the floor with his head down....I asked him if anything was wrong and he replied, "I heard those gals say that they was strong for me till they read on the program that I was an Indian, and one of 'em said she could stand being entertained by the darkest inhabitant in Africa, but an Indian went against her nature."¹⁹

The best indicator of Will Rogers' sensitivity about his Indian heritage and the crucial role that fact of life played in his contacts with women was his relationship with his wife, Betty. The satirist first met his future bride in late 1899 when he was nearly twenty years old. The two did not marry until nine years later in 1908. Their extended courtship was at times strained and halting. It defines much of Will's feelings toward his Indian ancestry and the effect his heritage had on his relationships with the opposite sex.²⁰

Will's correspondence with Betty in early 1900 reflected acute awareness of his racial background and need for female companionship. His initial letter of January, 1900, pleadingly stated: "I hope if you cannot do me the great favor of dropping me a few lines you will at least excuse me from this for I can't help it." Sensitivity to his Indian heritage surfaced in references to Betty's trip "out among the 'Wild Tribes.'" In asking for an exchange of pictures, the hopeful suitor questioned if his respondent would consider it a "mammoth inducement" to have her photograph in an "Indian Wigwam.'" The letter was signed, "Injun Cowboy, W.P. Rogers."²¹ Will's second letter to Betty repeated the same theme: "I am going to Fort Smith some time soon and if you

will permit I can probably come up but I know it would be a slam on your Society career to have it known that you ever knew an ignorant Indian cowboy."²² Betty Rogers, in the introduction to Will Rogers: The Story of His Life Told by His Wife, placed the Oklahoman's feelings concerning his Indian background in clear perspective:

My friends at home knew I liked Will a lot and they continually teased me about my "Wild West Indian Cowboy." It irked Will to know that my friends were teasing me about him. He was very proud of his Indian blood--as he continued to be all of his life--but he was very sensitive and when he was around my friends he was timid in asking me to go out with him.²³

The sensitivity which Will Rogers manifested toward his Indian ancestry may have had additional and deeper roots than his personal encounters with prejudice - it may have been handed down in part through his beloved mother, Mary Rogers. There can be little doubt of the Oklahoman's previously mentioned tender attachment to his mother. He never really recovered from her sudden death when he was only ten years old. The slightest inadvertent reference to her would bring tears to his eyes. Some forty years after Mary's demise, the humorist would tell a radio audience: "My own mother died when I was ten years old. 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."²⁴

Mary Rogers may have transmitted a sensitivity and even some sense of inferiority to Will relating to his racial background. His grandfather, John Gunther, married a fifteen-year-old full-blood girl, Catherine by name, of the Paint Clan. Gunther, who owned a salt flat, acquired his wife's hand in marriage by offering salt to her Clan "while the grass grows and the rivers run." Evidently Catherine never learned to speak English and John Gunther would not consent to their children's learning Cherokee. The result of this situation was the torturing experience of a mother being unable to communicate with her children. The bleakness of Catherine's existence imposed such pain upon her that she would visit her own people for weeks at a time. The desire to see her children tormented the distraught mother and she would return home for short periods, during which she was virtually unnoticed by both her husband and children.²⁵ This type of traumatic experience, although it is obviously impossible to prove, could easily have made a lasting impression on the family of John Gunther and their descendants. And just as easily, it could have planted extremely negative feelings in that family concerning its Indian heritage.

Whether or not Mary Rogers' family experience added to the sensitivity with which Will Rogers viewed his Indian heritage cannot be ascertained definitely. There can be little doubt, however, that he manifested an acute awareness of his racial background. And, as stated previously, one of the basic weaknesses in the literature concerning Will Rogers is his biographer's failure to examine the origins of his philosophical positions. The political satirist's support for the less advantaged, poor, weak sectors of society were a

product of his experiences as a child and young adult. Specifically, Will was the victim of racial prejudice and even may have had an acutely sensitive awareness of his background instilled in him by his mother at an early age. The emotions produced by this situation help explain his empathy for the less advantaged sectors of society. He may have supported them because he could both identify with and understand their dehumanized condition as victims of prejudice.

NOTES

¹Will Rogers, Detroit Journal, 15 December 1917, courtesy of the Will Rogers Memorial, Claremore, Oklahoma.

²Beverly Hills Citizen, 22 October 1931, courtesy of the Will Rogers Memorial, Claremore, Oklahoma; Atlanta Journal 25 February 1932. It should be noted that the most complete copy of Will's Unemployment Speech is in the Beverly Hills Citizen for 22 October 1931.

³S.F. Roach, Jr. "Lariat in the Sun: The Story of Will Rogers" (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Oklahoma, 1972), pp. 273-292, passim.

⁴Will Rogers, Twelve Radio Talks Delivered by Will Rogers During the Spring of 1930 Through the Courtesy of E.R. Squibb and Sons (n.p.: E.R. Squibb & Sons, 1930), 27 April 1930, pp. 14-15; Will Rogers, Gulf Oil Radio Broadcast, 19 May 1935, verbatim copy; *ibid.*, 2 June 1935.

⁵Will Rogers, "More Letters of a Self-Made Diplomat to His President," Saturday Evening Post, May 19, 1928, pp. 11, 10, 108-11; *ibid.*, June 2, 1928, pp. 173-174; *ibid.*, June 9, 1928, pp. 18-19, 40, 42; Will Rogers, "Letters of a Self-Made Diplomat to Senator Borah," Saturday Evening Post, February 27, 1932, pp. 7, 44, 46; *ibid.*, March 12, 1932, pp. 8-9, 96-97, 100 passim.

⁶Final Rolls of the Five Civilized Tribes (Department of Interior, 1906), p. 374, cited in E. Paul Alworth, "The Humor of Will Rogers" (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Missouri, 1958), p. 7; Spi M. Trent, My Cousin Will Rogers, Intimate and Untold Tales (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1938), p. 256; Donald Day, Will Rogers: A Biography (New York: David McKay Company, Inc., 1962), pp. 1, 4, 8; David Randolph Milsten, An Appreciation of Will Rogers, (San Antonio, Texas: The Naylor Company, 1935), p. 46; Ellsworth Collings, The Old Home Ranch: The Will Rogers Range in the Indian Territory (Stillwater, Oklahoma: Redlands Press, 1964), p. 38. Those interested in genealogical aspects of the Rogers family can begin by examining Emmett Starr's Early History of the Cherokee, Embracing Aboriginal Customs, Religion, Laws, Folk Lore, and Civilization (published by the author, c. 1917); Carolyn Thomas Foreman's articles on Mrs. William Penn Adair in Chronicles of Oklahoma, 21 (September 1943); Mrs. Cherrie Adair Moore's article, "William Penn Adair" in Chronicles of Oklahoma, 28 (1951); the studies of Noel Kaho of Claremore, Oklahoma; and Mittie Owen McDavid's study of the Irish-Indian heritage of Will Rogers in the Southern Literary Messenger 2 (May 1940), all cited in Homer Croy, Our Will Rogers (New York: Duell, Sloan, and Pearce, 1953), pp. 331-332; Don L. Shadburn, "The Distinguished Rogers Family," Georgia Magazine, 15 (June 1971): 13-15; *ibid.*, 15 (July 1971): 7-9.

⁷Harold Keith, Boy's Life of Will Rogers (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Company, 1938), p. 93. Keith's work is extremely valuable because of the interviews he conducted.

⁸Croy, Our Will Rogers, pp. 81-82, 85-90; Will Rogers to Family, 28 December 1902, Rogers Collection, Will Rogers Memorial, Claremore, Oklahoma cited in Collings, The Old Home Ranch, p. 75; Will Rogers to Clem Rogers, 15 December 1902, cited in Keith, Boy's Life of Will Rogers, p. 183; Will Rogers to Marshall Stevens n.d., cited in *ibid.*, p. 183; *ibid.*, pp. 177-185, *passim*; Will Rogers to Sallie Rogers McSpadden, 1902, cited in Milsten, An Appreciation of Will Rogers, pp. 52-53; George Martin, "The Wit of Will Rogers: The Story of a Cowboy Who Has Become a Famous Comedian," American Magazine, 88 (November, 1919): 34, 106-110; Donald Day, ed., The Autobiography of Will Rogers (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1949), pp. 22-23, 25-26; Keith, Boy's Life of Will Rogers, p. 185.

⁹Mulhall to Milsten, Mix to Milsten, n.d., cited in Milsten, An Appreciation of Will Rogers, pp. 64-65; 68-71, 39-40; Mix to Croy, n.d., cited in Croy, Our Will Rogers, pp. 348-349; *ibid.*, pp. 187-189; Trent, My Cousin, pp. 160-161, 164-165, 254; Betty Rogers, Will Rogers: The Story of His Life Told by His Wife (Garden City, N.Y.: Garden City Publishing Company, 1943), pp. 52, 82-84; Keith, Boy's Life of Will Rogers, pp. 187-189; Day, Will Rogers: A Biography, p. 51; Jerome Beatty, The Story of Will Rogers (Akron, Ohio and New York: The Saalfield Publishing Company, 1935), p. 51.

¹⁰Atlanta Journal, Magazine Section, 31 May 1925; Day, Will Rogers: A Biography, p. 166 Betty Rogers, Will Rogers, pp. 178-180; William Howard Payne and Jake G. Lyons, comps. and eds., Folks Say of Will Rogers: A Memorial Anecdote (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1936), pp. 152-153, 214-215. See also Will Rogers, Twelve Radio Talks, 27 April 1930, pp. 14-15; Will Rogers, Gulf Oil Radio Broadcasts, 19 May 1935, verbatim copy; *ibid.*, 2 June 1935. All radio broadcast transcripts are courtesy of the Will Rogers Memorial, Claremore, Oklahoma.

¹¹Croy, Our Will Rogers, pp. 229-231. This volume is extremely valuable for the interview material it contains.

¹²A.M. Hitch, Will Rogers, Cadet. A Record of his Two Years as a Cadet at the Kemper Military School Boonville, Missouri (Boonville, Mo.: Kemper Military School, 1935), pp. 16-17. Hitch's reference is important because of the interviews he conducted with Will's classmates.

¹³Trent, My Cousin, pp. 145-148. Trent employs a writing style which is full of errors for effect. His reporting concerning Will's mature years is highly suspect because he saw little of his cousin by that time. However, his recollections of Will's youth and early adult years are extremely valuable. Interview with Ms. Paula M. Love, Rogers' niece and Curator of the Will Rogers' Memorial, Claremore, Oklahoma, 30 December 1970.

¹⁴Payne and Lyons, Folks Say of Will Rogers, pp. 116-117.

¹⁵Fred Roach, Jr., "Will Rogers' Youthful Relationship with His Father, Clem Rogers: A Story of Love and Tension," Chronicles of Oklahoma, 58 (Fall, 1980): 325-327, *passim*.

¹⁶Day, Will Rogers: A Biography, pp. 32-33.

¹⁷Willie Rogers to "Little Maggie" Nay, 27 November 1896, cited in Croy, Our Will Rogers, pp. 31-33. The portions underlined for emphasis have been designated by the author.

¹⁸Payne to Croy, n.d., cited in *ibid.*, pp. 41-42.

19Mix to Milsten, n.d. cited in Milsten, An Appreciation of Will Rogers, pp. 68-71; Croy, Our Will Rogers. p. 348-349; Betty Rogers, Will Rogers, pp. 52, 82-83. Milsten's work is extremely valuable because of the interviews he conducted with Will's close friends and associates.

20Betty Rogers, Will Rogers, pp. 15-17 of Introduction; Trent, My Cousin, p. 24; Milsten, An Appreciation of Will Rogers, p. 23; Croy, Our Will Rogers, p. 115.

21Rogers to Blake, January 1900, cited in Betty Rogers, Will Rogers, pp. 18-19 of Introduction, *ibid.*, p. 19.

22Rogers to Blake, n.d., cited in Day, Will Rogers: A Biography, pp. 37-38; *ibid.*, p. 36. Day's copy of this letter is used because Betty Rogers only included one of the five paragraphs in her work. Betty Rogers, Will Rogers, pp. 19-20 of Introduction.

23Betty Rogers, Will Rogers, p. 21 of Introduction.

24Will Rogers, Twelve Radio Talks, 11 May 1930, p. 21; Day, Will Rogers: A Biography, p. 18; Keith, Boy's Life of Will Rogers, p. 45. Mary Rogers' death proved a tremendous loss for the whole Rogers family. Years later Will's sisters, Sallie and Maude, could hardly speak of their mother without crying. They believed that her death was especially tragic for Will because he obviously needed her so badly. Will as a youngster could not even bear to speak of his mother because of the pain such a memory held for him. Interview with Mrs. Paula M. Love, Curator of the Will Rogers Memorial, 31 December 1970. Mrs. Love was the daughter of Will's sister, Sallie.

25Telephone interview with James B. Rogers (Will Rogers' son), 6 January 1985; Day, Will Rogers: A Biography, p.3. It should be noted that James B. Rogers does not recall his father manifesting any sense of inferiority due to his Indian ancestry.