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Will Rogers (1879–1935): To his generation, there was no comedian who could equal Will Rogers. Born near Claremore in Indian Territory (later Oklahoma), he claimed to be ¼ Native American. His career spanned several occupations from cowhand and expert roper to the Ziegfeld Follies, where he did rope tricks and cracked jokes, to the legitimate theater to early talking moving pictures in Hollywood. He also had a weekly radio show in the early 1930s where the target of his many jokes were the politicians in Washington. He spanned the political spectrum with remarks like, “I don’t belong to an organized political party. I am a Democrat.”

My mother was in nursing school during World War I at Union Memorial Hospital in Baltimore, and she and her friends had tickets to the theater to see a show starring the noted actor Fred Stone. Before the curtain went up, an announcer informed the audience that Mr. Stone was ill, and he would be replaced by the lesser-known Will Rogers. The latter came onto the stage in his bare feet with his rope and starting cracking jokes. For the remainder of the evening, he kept the audience laughing; my mother never regretted having missed Fred Stone.

Will Rogers made about 10 talking movies. The first was in 1929 in Mark Twain’s *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur’s Court* with Myrna Loy, and the last was *Steamboat ‘Round the Bend* with Irvin S. Cobb in 1935. This latter film was the last time original steam paddle-wheel river boats were used in a Hollywood production, as a few of these relics from the 19th century were still in service on the Sacramento River. Some of Rogers’s other films were *Handy Andy*, *Life Begins at Forty*, and *David Harem*. My father and Uncle Norman Mancill seldom went to the movies, but they loved Will Rogers.

For three months in 1945, I was stationed at Will Rogers Field, which is still the commercial airport for Oklahoma City. In 1981, I visited the Will Rogers Museum in Claremore, Oklahoma, a most interesting place built on property where the comedian planned to retire. In one of the films they showed there, he was an American tourist trying to clear customs at Southampton for a visit to the British Isles. There was a problem with his passport, and he couldn’t produce a birth certificate. He told the customs official that where he came from if a person could breathe and walk around, people knew he had been born.

President Calvin Coolidge was seldom amused, or at least he didn’t show it. On a wager, a friend bet Will Rogers that he couldn’t make him laugh with his homely jokes. The appointment was arranged. When escorted into the president’s office, Rogers, in a loud whisper, said to the escort, “I didn’t catch the gentleman’s name.” Coolidge had a good laugh.

Will Rogers, ahead of his time, loved to fly, and he often accompanied his longtime friend, renowned aviator Wiley Post. In August 1935, they took off from California on a route that was to take them over Alaska, the Arctic, and into Siberia. Their last successful stop was at Fairbanks, where their tiny amphibious double-cockpit plane refueled before heading due north toward Point Barrow. Something happened six miles south of Barrow, an Eskimo saw the crash, and ran the six miles to civilization exclaiming, “big red wing, she blow up!.”