

RESOURCES

Activity 1

Our Truth-Talking Cowboy

OUR TRUTH-TALKING COWBOY

Few Americans have ever been as loved or admired as an Oklahoma cowboy named Will Rogers. He earned the esteem of his fellow citizens because of his honesty—for telling it “like it is” but often with a funny twist. His straight talk and wonderful sense of humor gained him the trust and affection of the nation during the difficult years of the Great Depression. And although Will Rogers became rich and famous, his success never went to his head.

Will Rogers was a Cherokee Indian, born on a large ranch in the Indian Territory of Oklahoma in 1879. His full name was William Penn Adair Rogers. When he was quite young and working on his family’s cattle ranch, a freed slave taught him how to use a lasso to rope Texas longhorn steers. Young Will was fascinated by the lasso and soon became quite skilled with it. He started learning various tricks with his lasso and soon began entertaining other cowboys in the bunkhouse. Before long, Will was performing an ever-expanding collection of lariat tricks at rodeos, county fairs, and, finally, on the vaudeville stage.

On the stage, Will found that it helped if he made comments to the audience between rope tricks. His remarks were folksy and often witty observations about everyday events, such as “There’s no income tax in Russia. But there’s no income either” and “Everyone is ignorant. Only on different subjects.” His openness and naturalness connected with audiences, and very quickly he became a headliner. Although he went to school only through the 10th grade, Will was a great reader and sought out smart people, making an effort to learn from them. He also had a very accepting attitude toward people, and those who knew him never felt as if he were judging them or looking down on them. He had a great capacity to look beyond people’s exteriors and see their best qualities. Perhaps his most famous statement is “I never met a man I didn’t like.”

Will Rogers became a vaudeville star just when the film industry was getting started. His stage act was perfect for the short films that studios focused on. His wit and wizardry with the rope captured the imagination of Americans who were flocking to see this new thing called “movies.” He appeared in more than 60 silent films; however, once the studios were able to add the human voice to motion pictures to make “talkies,” Will went beyond his cowboy beginnings and took on a variety of roles in pictures such as *A Connecticut Yankee* (1931) and *Life Begins at Forty* (1935).

Will Rogers’ “image” was that of a thoughtful, plain-spoken man who said what he believed and believed what he said. Contrary to the images of many stars, Will’s image truly reflected who he really was. At a time when Native Americans were looked down upon by some, he was proud of his Cherokee roots. He once quipped, “My ancestors didn’t come over on the Mayflower, but they met the boat!” He also had a deep love for his country, often telling audiences, “America is a land of opportunity and don’t ever forget it.”

His candid observations on big issues and everyday affairs made him the first major star in the radio industry. He also wrote a newspaper column reflecting on the state of affairs. Before he died, this high

school dropout had written six books and more than 4,000 columns and had traveled around the globe three times entertaining audiences with his lasso tricks and homespun philosophy of life: "They may call me a rube and a hick, but I'd a lot rather be the man who bought the Brooklyn Bridge than the man who sold it." And "Whoever wrote the Ten Commandments made 'em short. They may not always be kept, but they can be understood."

While describing himself as just a simple cowboy, and meaning it, he was nevertheless sought out by leaders around the world. He was the frequent guest of presidents and kings, who saw in Will Rogers a wise man but more importantly a truth-teller. All of his fame and wealth appear to have had little effect on Will. While a top-grossing Hollywood star, he lived simply and faithfully with his wife, Betty, and their four children. He gave away huge amounts of his earnings to disaster victims through the Red Cross and to the poor through the Salvation Army.

In 1935, people around the world were stunned at the news of his death. Will, then 56 years old, was flying in Alaska with an Oklahoma friend when the plane crashed. The honest voice that was helping people all over the world cope with the hardships of the Great Depression was quieted. But the wit and wisdom of Will Rogers continues to endure and guide us.

"Live your life so that whatever you lose, you are ahead."

"As bad as we sometimes think our government is run, it is the best run I ever saw."

"The only time people dislike gossip is when you gossip about them."

"We can't all be heroes because somebody has to sit on the curb and clap as they go by."

"Don't let yesterday use up too much of today."

"Good judgment comes from experience, and a lot of that comes from bad judgment."