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The Final Frontier

In may 1916, the rustic entertainer from Oklahoma grew highly agitated as he prepared to go on stage in Baltimore, Maryland. Now age thirty-six, but still possessing a boyish grin and shock of dark hair, Will Rogers had joined Florenz Ziegfeld's popular *Frolic* in New York City only a few months before as a novelty act, doing rope tricks while dressed as a cowboy and wisecracking with the audience about current affairs. But this was different. He had been recruited to appear in a special benefit show organized by George M. Cohan for the Friars Club, a theatrical organization. It featured a prominent cast of comics, dancers, and musicians, and Rogers, for his contribution, had put together a humorous commentary on the President of the United States and his political stance and strategies. But now, unexpectedly, the chief executive himself, Woodrow Wilson, had come up from Washington DC with his wife for the performance. As Rogers noted in his idiosyncratic syntax, no one "had ever heard of a president being joked personally in a public theater about the policies of his administration." When Wilson entered the venue, the audience stood up and applauded respectfully. Fearing he may have blundered badly with his plan, the entertainer admitted, "I was scared to death." He nervously stalked the backstage area waiting to go on, at one point even leaving through the stage door to stand outside in a light rain to calm himself, before retreating to the dressing room.

Finally, a smart-alecky stage manager knocked on his door and deadpanned, "You die in 5 more minutes for kidding your country." A few moments later, the backstage staff nudged a reluctant Rogers onto the stage. Ambling out in front of the footlights, he stood quietly for a moment, scratched his head, grinned out at the audience from a downturned head, and drawled, "I am kinder nervous here tonight." A chuckle rippled through the crowd, and the entertainer plunged ahead. He poked fun at the loquacious William Jennings Bryan, Wilson's Secretary of State, claiming that years earlier he had been booked in his

hometown to follow a Bryan speech "but he [Bryan] spoke so long that it was so dark when he finished, they couldn't see my roping." A pause and quizzical expression. "I wonder what ever became of him?" Then he turned to current topics capturing newspaper headlines. On Wilson's controversial decision to send American troops into Mexico in pursuit of Pancho Villa, Rogers congratulated the U.S. Army for trapping the elusive Mexican bandit "in between the Atlantic and Pacific." On the worsening situation with warring powers in Europe that involved an exchange of threatening notes with Germany, he noted drily, "President Wilson is getting along fine now [compared] to what he was a few months ago. Do you realize, people, that at one time in our negotiations with Germany he was five notes behind?" America's woeful lack of military preparedness in the face of a war situation inspired him to comment, "There is some talk of getting a machine gun if we can borrow one. The one we have now they are using to train our army with in Plattsburg [military base]. If we go to war we will just about have to go to the trouble of getting another gun." On the administration's proposal for creating an army of 200,000 men: "Mr. Ford makes three hundred thousand cars every year. I think, Mr. President, we ought to at least have a man to every car."

As Rogers delivered his remarks, both he and the audience glanced anxiously at the presidential box to see Wilson's reaction. To their great relief – the president was known for being stern and moralistic – he laughed heartily. The crowd soon joined in. When Rogers completed his monologue, the audience, including Wilson, rose and applauded. The president even went backstage for a handshake and a chat with the speaker. When Cohan thanked Wilson for coming to the performance, the president replied, "I'd travel ten times that distance to listen to as wise a man as Will Rogers." In Rogers' words, it was "the proudest and most successful night I ever had on stage."

It was more than that. Wilson would go on to see Roger's act several more times, but the president's public approval of the entertainer's irreverent commentary in 1916 proved to be a pivot point in Roger's career. Perhaps more than any other single incident, this successful show made him a national figure – an engaging entertainer, yes, but also something more. A few days after the Baltimore triumph, Florenz Ziegfeld hired him as a full-time cast member in his famous touring company, the *Ziegfeld Follies*, where he became one of its most popular performers with his western-style roping tricks. Even more crucial to Roger's rising stature, however, was the other aspect of his act that grew larger and larger with the passage of time: a comic commentary on modern American life, the values of its citizens, and the inclinations of its leaders. His audience delighted in his witty observations and truly made him not only a star, but an influence on public opinion, for the next two decades.

Less discernably, the pivotal Baltimore show disclosed something else crucial to the makeup of Will Rogers. At the height of the backstage tension as he grew petrified at the thought of joking about President Wilson to his face, his mind traveled to an important place in his life. He confessed, "If someone had hollered, 'Next train leaving for Claremore,' I would have been on it." Claremore, Oklahoma was the site of his birth and the ancestral home to which he still returned frequently as an adult. Located in the northeastern part of the state in the heart of the Cherokee territory, this settlement had framed the early life of an Indian boy who had grown up as the scion of one of the tribe's most prominent families. Now it seemed to offer an escape to the adult nearly paralyzed by pressure as he faced a promising, yet dangerous, rendezvous with fame. But the rural town promised something more than solace; it promised a return to the place that had given him the basic emotional materials of his rise to success. It was not just fear that sent Rogers reaching for Claremore, but a yearning to return to his roots for inspiration. He sought, instinctively, to reconnect with both the vanishing frontier and the ancestral Indian homeland that provided the source of his values, attitudes, and talents.[1]

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The Indian Territory of northeastern Oklahoma lay just west of the Ozark Plateau where small mountains and undulating hills begin to give way to the Great Plains sweeping to the horizon. Great open, rolling areas of prairie grass, particularly the bluestem variety which could grow several feet high, ran for miles and were punctuated with colorful splashes of wildflowers. Rivers such as the Verdigris and Caney sliced through the landscape while the woods buffering these meandering bodies of water were filled with oak, elm, pecan, and sycamore trees. The area teemed with wildlife as deer, wild turkeys, quail, prairie chickens, wild ducks and geese, and flocks of green parakeets populated the flatlands and the river valleys. While seldom seen in daylight, panthers and wolves rent the night air with their howls and screams.[2]

Clem and Mary Rogers, husband and wife in a prominent Cherokee family and Will Rogers' parents, had settled in this area as they raised a big family and worked as ranchers and pioneer entrepreneurs. They, along with their famous son and his siblings, were the product of a complex and fascinating background that lay intertwined with some of the key developments in the mid-nineteenth century United States.

The Cherokee Indians originally lived far to the east in the mountainous areas of the Carolinas, Georgia, Alabama, and Tennessee. But by the early 1800s, white settlers had begun overrunning their land, causing the U.S. Government to

attempt to buy it while pressuring the tribe to move west of the Mississippi River. A number of Cherokee families, seeing the writing on the wall, began to voluntarily migrate westward to the Indian Territory, which consisted of much of the present state of Oklahoma. They became known as the Old Settlers. Then in 1835, a small group of Cherokees signed the Treaty of New Echota with the American government, which ceded all lands east of the Mississippi River in return for land in the Indian Territory, and they swelled the ranks of the Old Settlers. A majority of Cherokees ignored the agreement, however, and continued to resist white settlers. Led by Principal Chief John Ross, they were finally forced from their ancestral home by the U.S. Government in 1838–1839 and forcibly marched westward on the infamous Trail of Tears, a trek which saw thousands die from illness and exposure. Thus the Indian Territory contained a deeply divided Cherokee tribe, with the Old Settlers having staked out prosperous farms while the newer arrivals struggled to survive after the horrors of their overland march. Tensions regularly erupted into violence over the next decade as the two groups fought over how to reconstitute Cherokee social and political institutions. In 1839, for example, three leaders of the Treaty Party who had played key roles in negotiating the 1835 agreement were assassinated. Stark lines of division were drawn with the wealthier Old Settlers embracing intermarriage with whites, use of the English language, the pursuit of profit, and Southern-style slave labor farming while the newer arrivals were usually subsistence farmers and full-bloods who held on to the traditional Cherokee language and customs.[3]

The Rogers family figured prominently in these developments. Descended from Robert Rogers, a Scotch Irish immigrant who had married a half-blood Cherokee woman around 1800, and then his son, Robert Rogers, Jr., who likewise married a part-Cherokee woman in 1835, they were part of the Old Settlers who arrived early to the Indian Territory. Robert Jr. settled in the eastern section of the Indian Territory near the Arkansas border, and Clement Vann (Clem) Rogers, Will Rogers' father, was born there in 1839. The Rogers farm prospered with the raising of horses and cattle, wheat and corn, and a fruit orchard. As Clem grew up, he became a skilled cowboy who participated in several cattle drives herding long-horned steers to market hundreds of miles away. In 1856 he convinced his family to give him a couple dozen head of cattle, four horses, and two African-American slaves and he struck out for the western region of the Cherokee lands in the Indian Territory. He settled at a site near a tributary of the Caney River, built a small house, and started a ranch along with a trading post to make extra money. Hard-working and ambitious, Clem Rogers prospered. In 1858 he married Mary America Schrimsher, a part-Cherokee young woman from another Old Settler family, and the couple started a family, with eight children arriving at regular intervals over the next two decades. Although

husband and wife were quite different in terms of temperament – Clem was quiet, serious, and stern while Mary was vivacious, personable, and light-hearted – the marriage was a solid one.

In 1861, the Rogers family and the Cherokee Nation, like nearly everyone else in the United States, was swept up in the turmoil of the Civil War. Also like the country as a whole, Cherokees in Indian Territory were deeply divided, with many of the newer arrivals and full-blood Cherokees backing the Union, while most of the Old Settlers and mixed-blood Cherokees favored the Confederacy. Clem, like many of this latter group, controlled hundreds of acres and owned a substantial house and several slaves while adopting the proud sensibility of a Southern gentleman. When war between the North and South erupted, Clem enlisted in the regiment of Colonel Stand Watie, a leading Old Settler, who went on to become a brigadier general in the Confederate Army by the end of the war. Mary's brother, John Schrimsher, also fought for the Confederacy. Clem rose to the rank of Captain while also being elected to the Cherokee Confederate Convention in 1862. The collapse of the Confederacy in 1865 was the culmination of a great hardship visited upon many of the Old Settlers, including Clem. His farm had been overrun by marauding Jayhawkers from Kansas during the war, his cattle had been run off or stolen, and his slaves had been freed. Clem got back on his feet by working in "wagon freighting." He drove a six-horse team in a wagon train hauling goods throughout the region and carefully saved his money. He finally accumulated enough to establish a new ranch near the Verdigris River about seven miles away from his old place and just north of the small town of Claremore. It was here that their famous son would come into the world a few years later.[4]

William Penn Adair Rogers was born in 1879 as the youngest of seven children. He would be the family's only surviving son after the death of his older brother, Robert, a few years later. "I was born because it was a habit in those days, people dident know anything else," he later joked. "My folks looked me over and instead of the usual drowning procedure, they said, 'This thing has gone far enough, if they are going to look like this, we will stop.'" The infant was named after Colonel William Penn Adair, a distinguished Cherokee who had served with Clem in Stand Waite's regiment during the Civil War before becoming a delegate of the Cherokee Nation in Washington, DC, for fifteen years after the end of the conflict. Both Clem and Mary Rogers were roughly five-sixteenths Cherokee so Will, like his siblings, would be nine-thirty-seconds Cherokee.[5]

The boy experienced a childhood typical among prosperous farm families on the frontier in the late 1800s. As a baby and toddler, Will spent time in the company of his mother and three sisters – Sallie, Maude, and May – as they performed the daily tasks that guaranteed the family's survival and

comfort: cooking and preserving food, baking, gardening, harvesting fruit from the orchard, sewing and washing clothing, housecleaning, carrying water from the well, raising chickens, and feeding the ranch hands. When his mother was preoccupied, Maude, ten years older, looked after him and, according to another family member, the two siblings "were much alike. She had his sense of humor and his warm friendly personality." When Will was old enough to walk, he ventured outdoors and wiled away the days playing on the ranch grounds and romping among the various outbuildings. He spent much time with the children of Rabb Rogers, an African-American and one of Clem's ex-slaves who lived nearby and now labored as one of his old master's hired hands. The youngsters climbed trees, went fishing, and explored the pastures and woods. Like any ranch boy, Will watched his father and his hands break horses, herd cattle, and brand calves and he took to riding at an early age when he was set atop Lummox, a gentle older horse, and delightedly plodded around for hours. A series of ponies followed as his riding skills developed and, looking back years later, he joked that "like other Oklahoma kids I was born bowlegged so I could sit on a horse." In fact, the family later recalled what may have been Will Rogers' first humorous comment when his mother admonished him for taking so long to learn how to read. Assuming a thoughtful pose, the boy replied, "I've got such a good pony that I don't want to waste my time learnin' to read." Another lifelong habit was acquired when the boy took up the lariat and developed a passion for the cowboy skill of roping.[6]

From an early age, young Will enjoyed a special relationship with his mother. Mary America Schrimsher was the daughter of wealthy Cherokee slaveholders who had been among the Old Settlers and was raised on one of the largest plantations in the Cherokee Territory. Born in 1839, she was educated at an academy in Cane Hill, Arkansas and also attended the Cherokee Female Seminary in Park Hill. Mary loved music, playing the piano and singing in a fine contralto voice, and was a good dancer. A tall, slender girl with dark hair and sparkling black eyes, she was witty and vivacious and an abundance of charm made her an attractive guest at social gatherings. Her lighthearted manner belied a religious devotion, for she was a lifelong member of the Methodist Episcopal Church South and sang in its choir.[7]

Mary married Clem Rogers in 1858 – he was a classmate of her brother at Tahlequah Seminary, and they would fight in the same regiment during the Civil War – and moved to Clem's ranch on the Caney River with its big two-room log house. When hostilities between North and South erupted in 1861, Mary and two small children were sent south to Texas to avoid the Union forces from Kansas that soon came sweeping through the Cherokee lands and destroyed the Rogers ranch. At the conclusion of the conflict in 1865, Mary and the children returned to the Indian Territory as Clem worked to rebuild his holdings. When he was able

to procure a new ranch and build a new home near the Verdigris River a few miles away from their original place, Mary summoned her energy and talents to transform it into one of the finest ranch houses in the Indian Territory.

The Rogers house on the Verdigris became a showcase in the Cherokee region of the Indian Territory. Begun in summer 1873 and finished about a year and a half later, it was a two-story, white structure featuring plastered walls in the interior, clap-boards on the exterior, and a large porch at the front stretching to a roof portico supported by four large pillars. It had seven large rooms, four fireplaces, two central halls, and an open porch in the rear. An addition on the back side soon added a large dining room, kitchen, and additional bedroom. Mary was very proud of the house and installed rows of cedar trees on either side of the broad stone walkway that led from the front door down to the front gate. Very fond of flowers, she planted large beds of yellow jonquils and white and lavender hyacinths just inside the white picket fence that surrounded a spacious front yard. Even in the winter, her daughter reported, Mary festooned the house with lovely bouquets of "bittersweet from the woods, coxcomb and bachelor buttons from her lovely summer flower garden, combined with cedar and lovely dried and crystallized grasses." These "works of art" were widely admired by friends and visitors.[8]

Mary made the big house on the Verdigris a social center of the area. She was extremely hospitable and brought home guests from Sunday church almost weekly, as well as frequently hosting community socials and dances. Guests from surrounding ranches would arrive to find the Rogers lawn ablaze with light from dozens of lanterns and soon the sounds of fiddles, guitars, and piano could be heard from the parlor as dancers would begin stomping and swaying to the elaborate figures of old-time square dancing. An excellent cook and baker, Mary generously showered friends and neighbors with canned goods, pies, and meals. An amateur nurse, she frequently traveled by horseback or buggy to assist people in the area suffering sickness or going through childbirth. In her own family, Mary helped her children learn music with the piano and singing, and attended to their moral development by insisting they engage in Bible study.[9]

Mary doted on her youngest child, Willie, and he mirrored her sparkling personality. A neighbor lady described how she visited the Rogers home one day and Mary had a pan of yeast sitting on the floor letting it rise. Her young son came along, noticed the pan, and mischievously stepped right into it. The neighbor expected the toddler to get a scolding from his mother but instead Mary smiled and said, "Willie has a good idea. That'll make it sweeter. It'll be the best bread we've ever had." When Will was three years old, his older brother Robert died and that only increased the attention lavished on the only boy in the family. When he got a bit older, Will would stand next to his mother as she played the piano and

both of them would sing and according to a family member, "Neighbors liked to come in and he and his mother would put on a little entertainment." A cousin recalled that the sociable Mary would hitch up a white horse to a buckboard wagon, gather up her son, and "the two of them would go visiting together. I have always thought this is 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." Will's wife, writing many years later, noted that "Will and his mother were very close. Her face and her voice always stayed with him . . . . [and] as far back as Will could remember, his mother's soft voice and calm, sweet, unruffled manner remained always the same."[10]

All of which made the unexpected event of 1890 particularly traumatic. In the spring, two of the Rogers girls came down with typhoid fever as it swept through the Verdigris valley and Mary nursed them tirelessly. At the same time, Will came down with the measles from another epidemic and was sent away to recuperate at the home of a friend. Worn down, Mary also was stricken with typhoid and what the local doctor diagnosed as amoebic dysentery. She died on May 28 at the age of fifty. Mary's sudden death was a blow to her family and the entire community, but it hit Will particularly hard. "He was ten years old and was disconsolate, for there had been a bond of love and understanding between them," friends of the family noted. "The two were, in main, of the same nature and it was from his mother that he got his predominant traits." The pain from this loss lingered. According to Will's wife, he "never quite got over his mother's death. 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." In a radio broadcast decades later, he recalled of his mother, "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 her understanding of me."[11]

The boy's close bond with his mother, and the despair triggered by her early death, only highlighted a more thorny attachment in his life. Also from an early age, Will had developed a difficult relationship with his father that only became more trying with the passage of time. Clement Vann Rogers, a leading figure in the Cherokee tribe, was a serious man and ambitious for material success and status. Through hard work and determination, this rancher, businessman, and entrepreneur had pushed to the highest levels of tribal society. He never quite understood his happy-go-lucky, charming son and vice-versa.

At his large ranch on the Verdigris, Clem presided over affairs not as an effete lord of the manor but as a no-nonsense manager of a large operation who worked right alongside his hired help. According to Ed Sunday, a long-time employee, "Clem Rogers was a ranchman any way you wanted to look at him. He wore tall top cowboy boots with his pant legs stuffed in them, leather chaps, and a western hat

of medium size. He was a keen trader, knew cattle, and was one of the best riders I have ever known . . . . He took part in the roundups, branding, and shipping of steers and, believe me, he was the boss of his range." He became noted for his skill at handling stock and his natural horsemanship. Years later, his famous son recalled Clem's light handling of the reins and easy seat in the saddle, admitting, "Riding along with papa, I never could keep up with him." First focused on grazing cattle on some 60,000 acres of grassland, he had diversified by the 1890s to grow several hundred acres of wheat – in 1895 the Claremore *Daily Progress* dubbed him the "Oologah Wheat King" for his huge harvest – and he was one of the first rural innovators to embrace barbed-wire fencing, crop rotation, and modern farm machinery. Clem became a wealthy man and proud of his position and possessions. If he found someone on his land who did not belong "he would ride up and hit him over the head with a quirt." Some resented his stern sense of privilege, describing him as "rich and haughty – awful haughty. He thought he was monarch of all he surveyed, and he pretty nearly was." But most accorded Clem great respect, electing him as a district judge and a senator in the Cherokee Senate and approving his appointment to commissions to appraise improvements made to Indian lands and negotiate with the federal Dawes Commission on land allotment in preparation for dissolution of the Cherokee Nation. He served as a Cherokee delegate to the constitutional convention preparing for Oklahoma statehood, during which the Cooweescoowee District in which he lived was designated Rogers County in his honor.[12]

This hard-driving, ambitious man began to clash openly with his youngest child as the latter moved into boyhood and then adolescence. In certain ways they were very much alike – willful, self-possessed, determined. Maude reported that her younger brother was a stubborn little boy and Clem often would grow exasperated, shake his head, and say "There's a lot of mule in Willie." Emotionally, however, father and son seemed cut from different bolts of cloth. A kind of muted strain typified their connection. But rather than a simple story of opposition to one another on all fronts, this tale of father and son, like much else in Will Rogers' life, contained complicated elements of attraction and rejection. On the positive side of the relational ledger, the boy deeply admired Clem for his cowboy skills, intelligence, and drive and respected his authority while Clem, for his part, sought the best for his son and indulged his every desire. On the negative side, the two differed profoundly in terms of their work ethic, notion of success, and expectations about themselves and the world.[13]

At the heart of things lay a personality conflict that steadily wedged Clem and Will apart. From boyhood, the boisterous, fun-loving son baffled his hard-driving, sober-minded, ambitious father. A relation explained that Clem was well-known for being tough, gruff, and moody and in company "he would be silent for a long period of time." By contrast, Will always "was the biggest talker. He was the

loudest and noisiest boy in any group. But also the best-liked. He liked everybody and everybody liked him. He was fun to be with." When he was still a child, Will's personable nature and lively intelligence caused his mother to remark that he should become a preacher. Clem did not disagree outright, but commented dourly "that so far as he could see there wasn't much money in preaching." As Will grew older, a persistent clash over work habits widened the gap. While the father demanded serious attention from his son to tasks that needed to be completed around the ranch, the younger Rogers regularly drifted off to race around on his pony and "spent more and more time roping and in working out fancy loops and throws." The boisterous Will, noted one family friend, "was a puzzle to his hard-driving father. The boy didn't like to work." The son's dismissal of something so fundamental to the father's makeup created a mutual lack of understanding. According to a family friend, "There was a barrier between Will and his father, a barrier that neither could quite breach."[14]

Ironically, Clem made matters worse by indulging Will at every turn. For all of his frustration, the elder Rogers deeply loved his only son and, according to several observers, spoiled the boy terribly. Will's wife would testify later, "the truth is that, as the only surviving son of an indulgent father, Will had everything he wanted. He had spending money and the best string of cow ponies in the country. No boy in the Indian Territory had more than Uncle Clem's boy." The father funded Will for frequent trips to St. Louis and Kansas City, bought him bicycles and fashionable clothing and fast horses, and arranged for him to get one of the first rubber-tired buggies in the Indian Territory. "Willie grew careless and untidy and his manners were those of a spoiled, impetuous boy who had inherited a natural restlessness and love of freedom that would not submit to discipline of any kind," a family member described. "Will was a restless boy who dodged his responsibilities and would not go to school."[15]

Disagreements set father and son at odds, and the most consistent one involved the boy's intense dislike for schooling in favor of riding and roping. Will had learned to ride at the age of four or five when a pillow was tucked behind the saddle horn and a cowboy would swing him up and into the saddle. His first steed was Lummox and the boy loved to spend hours parading around on the old, gentle gray horse. As his age and skill level increased, it became nearly impossible to pry Will out of the saddle. He rode constantly and fast. Ranch hands on the Rogers place described him hunting coyotes and jack rabbits "not to catch them, but to chase them on horses at top speed miles and miles across the rolling prairie. He liked it because it required fearless riding." He gained a reputation for recklessness in rounding up longhorn cattle at top speed on the open prairie, with other cowboys fearing that "his fast moving horse would hit one of those prairie dog holes and send him into eternity."[16]

Roping followed hard on the heels of riding as a great love in young Will's life. He learned to handle a lariat from Dan Walker, an African-American cowboy who worked on his father's ranch. Walker was an expert at breaking horses and herding cattle, but really excelled at roping where he would use his lariat to snare a recalcitrant steer, gather his horse in the morning, tow a cow mired in a bog, or haul firewood to the ranch house. Will grew fascinated with the veteran cowboy's skill at creating knot and loop, shaking it out, and then deftly manipulating it to fulfill many tasks. He was especially impressed by how Walker, unlike most others who whirled the loop above their head before flinging it toward the target, spread it out at his side before flipping it surely with a quick toss. Will observed him closely and then imitated his techniques. The boy would stand for hours in the back yard roping a large oak stump, and then graduated to goats and calves. He later developed his skills on horseback with similar dedication. Many times ranch hand B. T. Hoopers witnessed young Will "on his horse with rope in hand riding out on a fast trot to the nearby range, roping everything in sight." Later in life, Will explained his obsession. "[You see] the lariat-slinging business drifted into my system when I was pretty young," he wrote. "My father would send me out on the ranch, but instead of riding the range, I'd go off into a shady place and there spend the time practicing with the rope – cutting curliques and things in the prairie breeze or lassoing prairie dogs."[17]

For this energetic outdoor youth who wanted to be a cowboy, book learning held few attractions. When he was sent off to school at age seven, Will began amassing a record of poor performance probably unmatched among schoolchildren in late 1800s Oklahoma. From 1886 to 1897, he attended a series of six schools and either flunked out, was dismissed for rowdy behavior, or simply left. He began at Drumgoole School, a Cherokee elementary school near Chelsea in the Indian Territory and enrolled the following year in Cherokee National Male Seminary in Tahlequah. From 1888 to 1890 he attended the Harrell International Institute, a Methodist boarding school in Muskogee and then settled in for four years at Willie Halsell College in Vinita. He spent 1895–1896 at the Scarritt Collegiate Institute in Neosho, Missouri before leaving to spend two years at the Kemper School, a military academy, in Boonville, Missouri. As an adult, Rogers would joke that he had perfected a scam where he always informed his new teacher that he had finished *McGuffey's Third Reader* and was ready to start the *Fourth Reader*. After a couple of weeks, the teacher would marvel, "I never see you studying yet you seem to know your lessons." Said Rogers, "I had that education thing figured down to a fine point. I knew more about it than McGuffey did."[18]

At his last educational stop, Kemper, Will's antics summarized his fraught relationship with formal learning. Although highly intelligent and possessing an excellent memory, he was a mediocre student who studied when he felt like

it – which was seldom – and spent most of his time having fun, racking up demerits for mischief, and yearning for the great outdoors. "I Really Try to be a good sport about this school business, but I am gaggin' at the bit," he wrote to his cousin, Spi Trent. "I can't keep myself inside a school room. I try, all right, an' I reckon my body stays put but I personally am out in the Green Pastures, an' if you ask me, I believe that's where all the learning in the world has been written, if folks wanter bother studyin' it." He liked history and got good marks in that subject and shone in elocution because, "it was impossible for Will to resist the temptation to declaim for laughs. The strange thing is that the elocution teacher, recognizing that the purpose of oratory, after all, is to sway the audience, would give Willie good marks when he succeeded in getting his laughs." Even when he attempted to honor the traditions of Kemper, things went awry. After his first year at the school, he came home and tried to show off the rifle drills and marches he had learned. According to a family report, "in obedience to his own gruff command, he grounded arms with such military snappiness that there was a deafening discharge. It was nearly a fatal accident. His hat spun in the air. The bullet had just grazed his face and he bore always on the side of his head a long white scar." Rogers later summarized his ill-fated stay at the school: "I spent two years at Kemper, one in the guardhouse and one in the fourth grade."[19]

In fact, it was Will's riding and roping addiction that often lured him into trouble at the schools he attended. He initiated one misadventure after another. At his first school at Drumgoole, he was less interested in his studies than in horses. In his words, "We got to running horse races and I had a little chestnut mare that was beating everything that any of them could ride to school and I was losing interest in what we were really there for." At subsequent schools, he constantly got into trouble with his lariat as he roped classmates, animals, and a variety of inanimate objects, usually for laughs. A series of incidents at the Scarritt Collegiate Institute typified Will's penchant for lassoing difficulties. He initially created a stir when he roped a calf in a nearby pasture and swept the bawling creature into a group of female classmates on a walk to "play havoc with their dignity." Later, to the great amusement of his friends, he roped a Grecian statue standing atop a campus fountain and yanked off one of her arms. Finally, he created a scene of hilarious havoc when he roped a colt which then bolted down the street so quickly that he lost hold of the lariat. The beast tore through the campus and passed the school president on a stroll, who unwisely grabbed the trailing rope and was promptly dragged stumbling through the backyard of a nearby house where a clothesline caught under his chin and sent him sprawling. The president did not appreciate the humor of the episode, and young Rogers departed campus at the end of the term.[20]

Will's less than stellar educational career, unsurprisingly, ratcheted up the tension with his father. Clem grew frustrated with his son's failures at school after

school and saw them as a sign of his lackadaisical attitude toward life and work. A friend of the family, W. E. Sunday, recalled conversations where the elder Rogers groused that "the young scamp had been sent home [from school] again." "What for?" "Oh, arguing with the teacher." At another point, after sending off his son to military school, a grumpy Clem said, "Well, I've got Willie where he won't do any more arguing with the teachers. They'll chain him down and make him do what I want him to." The son was keenly aware of his father's disapproval and ruefully recalled it two decades later: "My father was pretty well fixed and I being the only son he tried terribly hard to make something out of me. He sent me to about every school in that part of the country. In some of them I would last three or four months." Betty Rogers, Will's wife, later wrote that her husband "always regretted that he hadn't taken advantage of his opportunities to get a good education; there wasn't a day of his life, he said, that he didn't regret it."[21]

An event occurring when he was thirteen years old, however, sealed Will's commitment to riding and roping and finalized his disdain for formal schooling. Ironically, his father arranged it. In summer of 1893, Clem set up a deal to ship cattle by rail to Chicago, took Will with him, and the two visited the World's Fair. They went through the Plaisance, a long strip of shows, booths, and restaurants near the entrance, and ate exotic dishes, rode a camel, played some games, and observed the exotic attractions. Upon entering the official fair grounds, they visited many exhibits and rode the Ferris Wheel. But the high point of the trip came last when they attended the Buffalo Bill Wild West Show. Directors of the fair had refused William F. Cody permission to be part of the exhibition because his show was "undignified," so Cody cleverly rented a fourteen-acre site near the entrance and drew sellout crowds to a horseshoe-shaped amphitheater that seated 22,000 people. Clem and Will had box seats. They saw a string of spectacular riding acts introduced by Buffalo Bill himself featuring the Pony Express, Royal Irish Lancers, French Chasseurs, Russian Cossacks, and Arabs. There was a faux battle between Indian tribes, a replication of a prairie fire, bronco riding, and a demonstration of rifle marksmanship from Cody. But the highlight for Will came in the roping demonstration by Mexican vaqueros. In gaudy outfits, they were led by the greatest roper in the world, Vincente Oropeza, who roped running horses in every way imaginable, leaped in and out of twirling loops, and wrote his name in the air one letter at a time. Will was entranced, and inspired to go home and work obsessively on improving his roping expertise. The Buffalo Bill Show in Chicago probably marked the first time he looked at riding, roping, and cowboys as not just personal amusement but commercial entertainment.[22]

After returning from Chicago, an inspired Will honed his riding and roping skills with newfound enthusiasm and was seldom seen without a lariat in hand. Within a few years, he had secured a speedy, agile cow pony, Comanche, and

began entering cowboy competitions on a regular basis. These popular entertainments had emerged in the 1880s and 1890s as sites for local cowboys to show off their skills. Local leaders, seeing how rural folk flocked into town to watch and seeing the potential for promotion and profit, gradually commercialized these shows. They formalized the events, subsidized them to advertise their communities, gathered prize money from local businesses, and created the prototype of the modern rodeo. Young Rogers threw himself into these shows. On July 4, 1899 he won first place in the Claremore steer-roping contest and journeyed eastward three months later to compete in a similar contest at the St. Louis Fair. While he won no prizes, the experience before a large audience "gave me a touch of 'show business' in a way, so that meant I was ruined for life as far as actual employment was concerned," he joked later. Over the next couple of years, Will entered major contests in Oklahoma City, Des Moines, San Antonio, and Memphis as well as many minor events at county fairs, cattlemen conventions, and rural expositions in smaller towns. Clem Rogers did not approve of his son's new avocation, seeing it as just another frivolous pastime. "Willie ain't never going to amount to nothin,'" he burst out to a family member; "all he's good for is to buy up these expensive hosses and fool around [with] ropin' contests – huhhh! He's fixin' to ruin us, do you know that?"[23]

Clem and Will's long-simmering disagreements came to a boiling point when the boy suddenly left the Kemper School and bolted far to the south to find work. A fellow cadet had told Will that a large ranch near Higgins, Texas, run by Perry Ewing, was in need of cowboys to handle his cattle herd. So in March 1898, burdened with demerits, unable to face the prospect of more schooling, and, in his words, "leery of going home to my dad," Will snuck out of Boonville in the middle of the night and took the train for the Lone Star state. He made his way to Ewing's ranch, and the proprietor agreed to hire him. But recognizing that the boy came from an upstanding family, he wrote Clem to clarify that this situation had his approval. In the words of Ewing's son, "Will's father was thoroughly miffed at Will's desertion of school and wrote back for him to keep him and that if he could get any work out of Will it would be better than he'd ever done." To friends at home, Clem angrily declared, "Do you know what that damned boy has done? He's run away from school and he's over in the Texas Panhandle, digging ditches for 50 cents a day. Well, I'm going to let him stay there and rot."[24]

For the next six months, Rogers worked as a cowboy, first at the Ewing spread and then at two other Texas ranches. With each outfit he went on old-fashioned cattle drives where a handful of ranch hands herded thousands of animals over hundreds of miles to destinations in Kansas. Will loved the beauty and spaciousness of the plains, the horsemanship and roping skills required by the work, the camaraderie of the chuckwagon meals, and sleeping on the ground

under the open stars. He would value this experience throughout his life. "That plains was the prettiest country I ever saw in my life, as flat as a beauty contest winner's stomach, and prairie lakes scattered all over it," he reminisced fondly upon revisiting the area in 1934. "And mirages! You could see anything in the world – just ahead of you." But as his work opportunities dried up with the onset of cold weather, the young man returned to the Indian Territory in late fall 1898 with no prospects and no plans.[25]

Setting aside his frustration, Clem tried to heal the rift with his son. Having moved to Claremore to pursue entrepreneurial opportunities as a banker, the father offered to set Will up as manager of his cattle ranch and purchase a cattle herd for him. Will agreed to the arrangement, but then quickly tired of the work. Instead of herding cattle on horseback, he was expected to plow up the plains and plant wheat and corn, cut hay to stack over the winter, and jump off his horse to open gates as his stock was moved from one fenced pasture to another. So for the next three years the young man did the bare minimum of work required to keep the ranch afloat and spent most of his time in amusements. He and his cousin, Spi Trent, built a small makeshift cabin away from the main house, where a family of renters was staying, and there they whiled away the hours as carefree bachelors. Will entered any steer roping contests that he saw and regularly competed throughout the region. Because of the nearby railroad lines, he was able to travel easily to Kansas City, St. Louis, Texas, Memphis, New York, and even San Francisco.[26]

But young Rogers spent most of his free time socializing with a group of friends and relatives his age from the area. Much of his life became one long round of parties, picnics, dancing, singing, hayrides, swimming and every manner of social gathering. He built a wooden platform for dancing in the yard of the ranch house and the group would go late into the night whirling and stomping to lively music. Will excelled at dancing and singing. A member of the group, Gazelle Lane, said of him, "What energy! He could dance all night, and when the dance was over, would be going as strong as when the dance had started." He especially loved the "cakewalk," a high-kicking, strutting dance style, and won several local competitions. Attracted to the popular music of the 1890s, he purchased sheet music for the latest ragtime and minstrel songs whenever he went to Kansas City and developed a taste for the popular "coon songs" of the era, such as "I Ain't Got a Dollar I Can Call My Own," and would sing them with great verve to the great amusement of his friends. To round out his social image, Will served as the life of the party. Seeking to impress the girls, he bought a rubber-tired buggy – the first in the area – and sported them around at every opportunity. In addition, according to a friend, "he got a derby hat and the fanciest clothes that could be procured in Kansas City and became the flashiest

dresser in the Cherokee Nation." His humor appeared constantly. At a swimming party, where the boys went behind one clump of bushes and the girls another to change into old clothes before plunging into the water, he charged toward the female sanctuary shouting, "You can look now, girls. I've got my hat on." As another friend summarized, "Everybody knew him, for he was always the center of attention. He could think of more devilment in a minute than an ordinary person could in a month."[27]

But the relentless laughter and fun could not completely compensate for an obvious lack of purpose. As always, Clem stood nearby as a stern judge. Will admitted many years later that his haphazard management of the ranch severely disappointed his father once again. "Well, I dident exactly run it to suit him. I danced all my young life to the music of old country fiddlers," he noted. "Between dances and roping contests, I dident have time for much serious ranching business." A disastrous, near fatal, incident seemed to symbolize just how much of a dead-end the young man had reached in his life. After accompanying a trainload of cattle to California by rail, he and another cowboy visited San Francisco to see the sights and stayed at a small hotel. That night, either through a failure to turn off the gas after blowing out the lamp in their room (they were used to kerosene lamps) or from some kind of leak, both young men were overcome while they slept. The next morning they were discovered unconscious and rushed to a hospital where they were revived only after several hours of frantic efforts by doctors. Will staggered home in debilitated condition. "The stuff had located in my system," he explained, and Clem stepped in to help his wayward son recuperate; "papa sent me to Hot Springs, Arkansas, to take the baths."[28]

Will Rogers' youthful struggle with several highly-charged family issues – a close relationship with his mother tragically brought to a premature close, a clash of personalities and values with his father that worsened over time, a love of outdoor life and hatred for formal schooling – largely reflected the singular interaction of the boy's temperament with the Rogers family dynamic. They worked to shape the young man's independent, restless, fun-loving personality and his life-long devotion to the traditions and habits of the cowboy. But another issue emerged from his childhood to influence the mature man: coming to terms with his Cherokee heritage.

* * * * *

As one of the most famous and influential people in the United States during the two decades from the late-1910s to the mid-1930s, Will Rogers seldom talked about his background as a Cherokee Indian. When he did, he often joked about

it, as when he employed this quip numerous times throughout his career: "My ancestors didn't come over on the Mayflower. They met the boat." Another joke came while performing with a circus in South Africa in 1902, where he played, in his words "blood curdling scenes of western life in America, showing encounters with Indians and robbers. I was an Indian but I screamed so loud that I liked to scared all the people out of the tent." In the late 1910s, while performing with the *Ziegfeld Follies*, he became friends with comedian Eddie Cantor, who introduced him to kosher food in New York. Rogers liked it so much that he began to partake a couple of times a week. When he left for California to make movies with Samuel Goldwyn, he said, "Eddie, they ain't never gonna believe it in Hollywood." "Believe what?" said Cantor. Replied Rogers, "That this Cherokee cowboy has become a Jewish Indian." Such comments suggested that the entertainer viewed his ancestry as little more than a comic prop.[29]

But in March 1928, Rogers displayed a radically different sensibility. Speaking in Asheville, North Carolina, after visiting the recently opened Great Smoky Mountains National Park, he appeared before 3,000 Cherokees who still lived in the area on the ancient lands of the tribe. He did a few of his popular rope tricks and told some of his trademark humorous stories. But the Indians failed to respond, looking on respectfully and stoically but not uttering so much as a chuckle. Suddenly Rogers turned serious, lambasting Andrew Jackson as the "Betrayer" who had forcibly removed much of the tribe to far-off Oklahoma and took their land many decades before. "I got no use for [Jackson] or any of his methods, for all he ever did was pounce on the Indians," he declared angrily . The novelist Ben Dixon MacNeill, who was in attendance, described a "furious" Rogers who "went into a berserk rage for about three minutes" as some "long-forgotten, in-bred memory welled up in his heart." The culmination of this outburst came in dramatic fashion as the Cherokees responded explosively and "the quiet was ripped by the screaming war cry of the tribe, while Rogers stood white, trembling, and actually aghast at himself." A bit later, the shaken speaker "said wonderingly that he didn't know what had got into him."[30]

What should be made of Rogers' divergent attitudes toward his Indian background and identity? His biographers have differed, offering diametrically opposed views that follow their subject's conflicting expression. Ben Yagoda, looking at the humorist, concluded "Other than a gag or two, and an occasional barbed reference to [Andrew] Jackson, Will Rogers did not make much of his Cherokee heritage." But Amy Ware, looking at the advocate, insisted that Rogers fully embraced his Indian background and emerged as "a Cherokee artist" who "profoundly shaped the face of American popular culture by calling upon Cherokee traditions." How can such skilled interpreters be talking about the same person?[31]

It is because, paradoxically, both are correct, just incompletely so. In fact, Rogers demonstrated a "double consciousness" about his Indian heritage that combined these divergent impulses. W. E. B. DuBois, the African-American intellectual, defined this sensibility in his 1903 classic book, *The Souls of Black Folk*. "It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity," he explained. "One ever feels his two-ness – an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body." As an American Indian, another variety of outsider, Rogers displayed precisely such a conflicted emotional attitude about the background in which he grew up. On the one hand, he evinced great pride in his lineage and culture, saying, "there's nothing of which I am more proud than my Cherokee blood." But on the other, he displayed a keen awareness of how it placed him at the margins of the dominant culture and society. Rogers expressed a powerful aspiration to succeed in white America, while at the same time betraying a subtle resentment about the need to do so.[32]

Contributing to this double consciousness of his "Indianness" was Rogers' complicated personal experience as a Cherokee. The Rogers family were aristocrats within the tribe who oversaw extensive landholdings, served as political leaders in the Cherokee nation, owned enslaved African-Americans, and fought with the Confederacy during the Civil War. This created another layer of paradox in Will Rogers' background that shaped his own version of double consciousness – an outsider in the larger culture, but a privileged elite within his own community. This complicated sensibility would play out on a national stage during adulthood and feed the insights and humor that made its holder a national treasure. But it began during his youth in the Indian Territory of Oklahoma.

Will Rogers grew up in a family atmosphere where economic success and respect for American social values of individualism, ambition, and opportunity held sway. Both the Rogers clan and the Schrimshers were Old Settlers who arrived early in the Indian Territory and staked a claim to prosperity and social advancement. This heritage pushed Rogers to embrace a modernizing, assimilationist attitude formed by his family's history as part of a high-achieving tribal elite. Their point of view melded respect for Cherokee traditions with a dedicated pursuit of success – its expectations and standards – as defined by the broader Anglo-American culture. Clem Rogers proved an adept disciple as he achieved economic wealth, social standing, and political prominence in equal measure. His son, while rebelling against adopting an entrepreneurial role himself, was quite content to accept the social perks and material rewards accruing to the offspring of a rich man. Like his father, but in his own fashion, he sought to close the distance between white and Indian society.

As an adolescent, for instance, Will and several other young men were made honorary members of the Pocahontas Club, a young women's group to which his sisters and other prosperous young Cherokees belonged. This organization, in the words of a historian, sought to "find a balance between their modern, quite American lives, on the one hand, and their Cherokee traditions, on the other." Dressed in the latest fashions, these children of prosperous Cherokee families held parties and picnics, engaged in contests and games, discussed literature, and imbibed ice cream and cake. But such social activities often involved "playing Indian" to connect, however loosely, with their tribal customs and traditions. The club constructed a float for a Claremore street fair featuring some members in full warrior regalia (along with a teepee) preparing to execute Captain John Smith as Pocahontas intervened, while other members were dressed in the modern fashions of white society. Another time, the club hosted "an evening with Hiawatha" where members sat on Indian blankets and Will Rogers "made an appearance in full Indian costume – war paint, tomahawk and other paraphernalia, favoring the company with several excellent songs."[33]

Young Rogers' involvement with "stomp dances" displayed a similar assimilationist impulse. In the period when he half-heartedly managed his father's old ranch and threw his energy into socializing and amusements, he became an enthusiastic participant in this traditional activity among Indian youth in the area. The "stomp dance" was an English term for the vigorous "shuffle and stomp" Indian dance that usually occurs around a central fire with call-and-response songs providing music and turtle-shell rattles a rhythm. Will "was the leader of our stomp dances," a participant noted. "They were held outdoors Saturday nights on the little round knoll north of the Oowala Schoolhouse. Will always wanted us to dress up like Indians and mostly we would do that. He would dress up, too, and, now and then, would let out a war whoop that sounded like the Battle of Claremore Mound." But these dances were not pursued in a spirit of tribal purity stressing traditional religious connotations, but co-mingled with other kinds of amusement by these vivacious young people: "cakewalk" dancing, singing popular melodies, and a variety of games and frivolities. As a historian has explained, these hybrid stomp dances "fused modern U.S. pastimes with Cherokee-specific events."[34]

Will's assimilationist temper influenced his love life. When courting a young non-Indian woman in this period, Will composed letters to her that papered over the cultural differences with ironic, facetious comments about her visit to his "wild tribe," a promise to hang her photograph in his "Indian wigwam," and his determination to remain her "Injun cowboy." Later in life, as an entertainer and celebrity, Rogers often pursued a similar strategy when upholding his particular heritage. Assuming a slightly defensive stance, he couched praise in terms of his tribe's adoption of Anglo-American standards, as when he told a newspaper

interviewer in 1906, "I'm a Cherokee and they're the finest Indians in the world. No 'blanket Indians' about them. We are civilized and educated . . . . We have our own schools, and the boys' and girls' seminaries in the Territory are just as fine as any in the country." Rogers displayed the characteristics of the pragmatic assimilationist seeking to transcend his Indian ancestry and succeed in the broader society, to meet *its* standards and beat it at its own game.[35]

This accommodating mindset, however, barely covered a subtle, persistent undercurrent of resistance and resentment. Even as a boy, Rogers nurtured a deep sense of Indian identity and grievance against white society that would shoot to the surface occasionally, but powerfully, throughout his life. At the Kemper School, his first sustained stay outside of a tribal environment, snickering cadets nicknamed him "Swarthy" and "Wild Indian." While accepting these slights in good humor, he also vigorously defended his tribal heritage when he perceived the need. "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 'fullblood' was the proper term and that it spoiled his whole afternoon to hear someone call a fine Indian a thoroughbred," according to a teacher. "Again in a 'bull session' a cadet inadvertently, or perhaps purposefully remarked that Indians and Negroes 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." While at Kemper, young Rogers occasionally received a check from his father and would walk down to the Commercial Bank in Boonville to cash it. A classmate who often accompanied him reported, "Hanging on the wall was an ornate chromo of 'Custer's Last Fight.' One day Will looked at it and said, 'That's the only picture I ever saw where the Indians got the best of it.'"[36]

A strong prod to Rogers' sense of Indian identity came from his close friendship with Charley McClellan. A fellow Cherokee who grew up on a nearby ranch, McClellan went to school with Will at Willie Halsell College and shared his love of riding and steer roping. They stayed good friends throughout their adolescent years and when young Rogers was off at additional boarding schools, he wrote to McClellan grousing about his dislike of academics and yearning for the cowboy life. A one-quarter Cherokee like Will, Charley's distinguishing characteristic was his passionate embrace of traditional Indian life. He liked to dress in buckskin leggings, moccasins, and breech clout, wore his hair in a long braid, and built an authentic teepee for the stomp dances of the Pocahontas Club. He increased his knowledge of Indian culture at every opportunity. When the train carrying the Buffalo Bill show stopped in Claremore, McClellan immediately went to the Sioux Indians in the group and engaged them for the entire stay. At various times he visited with members of the Kaw and Shawnee tribes to learn their customs and dances, and occasionally he would give speeches in the

Cherokee language that Will would translate. Rogers' close friendship with this fervent Indian traditionalist undoubtedly strengthened his own identification with a Cherokee heritage.[37]

The proud, defensive, sometimes resentful portion of Rogers' Indian "double consciousness" persisted throughout his life. After becoming famous, he periodically chastised American society for mistreating the Indian people. In 1926, he pled for the preservation of a Creek Indian council house still standing near Okmulgee that was under threat of destruction from oil drillers. "Listen, you oil men . . . . Don't take that building out of the square," he told a big crowd. He reminded them that the Cherokees had "our old council house over at Tahylequah. We've got it right where it was erected and it's going to stay there . . . . The old boys that built your council house were here quite a spell before you oil and business men arrived in this neck of the woods. Remember that." In 1930, he wrote an article complaining that the federal government had purchased the Cherokee Strip in 1893 for a pittance. "I think the Government only give us about a dollar an acre for it. We had it for hunting grounds, but we never knew enough to hunt [for] oil on it." In another newspaper piece, he recalled that the government had sent the Indians to Oklahoma with "a treaty that said, 'You shall have this land as long as the grass grows and water flows' . . . . Then the Government took it away from us again. They said the treaty only refers to 'water' and 'grass'; it don't say anything about oil." On his radio show, he denounced more broadly America's unfair treatment of the Indians. "Every man in our history that killed the most Indians has got a statue built for him," he asserted. "The Government, by statistics, shows they have got 456 treaties that they have broken with the Indians. That is why the Indians get a kick out of reading the Government's usual remark when some big affair comes up, 'Our honor is at stake.'"[38]

Rogers' "double consciousness" about his Indian identity took shape during boyhood in the cultural maelstrom of America's late nineteenth-century frontier. Ultimately, it fed an adult sensibility that would prove so attractive to millions: a profound respect for mainstream American values combined with an equally profound respect for the outsider.

* * * * *

As Will Rogers' youth came to a close, several factors had clearly emerged to shape the man who would become the darling of the American people in later years. First, even as a boy, he assumed a position of mediating between divergent impulses: at the personal level, between the wit and charm and gaiety of his mother and the stern, steady, no-nonsense temperament of his father; at a broader level, between the Cherokee values and traditions of his people and the

expectations of the dominant Anglo-American culture. Second, young Will personified a broader cultural shift when he rebelled against the dominant values of nineteenth-century America in an ongoing clash with his father. While Clem had pursued an agenda of hard-driving ambition, character formation, work ethic, and profit seeking characteristic of the expansive society of Victorian America, his boisterous son had sought happiness in a newer ethic of fun, amusement, and self-fulfillment. These new trends typifying a new age would carry the son to unimagined heights of popularity and influence within a couple of decades.

Most significantly, however, Will's boyhood played out amidst a social transformation in the American West that changed a centuries-long trend in the nation's history: the closing of the frontier in the late 1800s. This defining moment in American history marked the end of one era and the dawning of another as westward expansion across space lurched to a halt and the construction of a more complex society accelerated. It is tempting to see a simple reflection of this situation in the Rogers family, with Clem symbolizing a vanishing age and Will symbolizing an emerging one. But the picture was more complicated. In fact, it pitted a romantic son against a realist father. The younger Rogers reached into the past for inspiration as he plotted his way into an unknown future while the older man embraced the practical, evolving possibilities of the present.

By the end of the century, Clem had adapted to the new realities of western life where the farmer was elbowing aside the rancher, barbed wire was closing off the free-range plains, and the raising of crops was earning an equal place alongside the herding of longhorn cattle. The building of railroad lines across the Indian Territory in the 1870s and 1880s – including one that bisected Clem's ranch in 1889 – accelerated such changes and prompted the growth of small towns along the railroad stations. While Clem initially lamented the intrusion of hordes of white homesteaders and laborers and the disappearance of valuable grazing lands, he eventually made his peace with change by embracing commercial farming, feeding shorthorn cattle in fenced areas, raising hogs, growing wheat, and breeding horses. He signaled his final accommodation at century's end when he left his ranch entirely in 1898 and moved into a framed house in Claremore. The following year he joined a partnership to establish the First National Bank, for which he became vice president. The elder Rogers pressured his boisterous son to act likewise and embrace a life of the hard-working rural entrepreneur, thereby earning a steady income and, in the best family tradition, becoming a pillar of the community. But Will had other ideas. [39]

The younger Rogers cherished a romantic vision, now evaporating, of the cowboy freely riding the range and detested the confinement and drudgery of crop farming and fenced-in livestock. He confessed his inner feelings to his wife many years later. She reported that the adolescent Will was "interested only in

ranching, and the open range was even then disappearing. He made his friends among the cowboys – that was the life he wanted and the life he chose to follow." When the Indian Territory was officially opened up to homestead settlement in 1889 and the open grazing lands disappeared even more rapidly, the older frontier society began to vanish. Even Clem's huge ranch shrank to the size of a "good-sized farm" and "taking care of the little bunch of cattle on what was left of his father's place was tame ranching for Willie." In later life, at the height of his fame, Will expressed these sentiments with considerable poignancy. "[A]t heart, I love ranching. I have always regretted that I didn't live thirty or forty years earlier and in the same old country – the Indian Territory," he related. "I would have liked to have gotten there ahead of the 'nesters,' the barbed wire fence, and so-called civilization. I wish I could have lived my whole life then."[40]

Rogers' intense nostalgia for a declining way of life, however, did not curdle into reactionary bitterness. It sought other means of expression. His cowboy passion initially inspired participation in the riding and roping contests that became such a large part of his life in late adolescence, but such activity only sated a portion of his hunger. So Will went off in search of new frontiers in other places where he could ride and rope and herd cattle in wide open spaces. This quest would take him to far-flung destinations around the globe – South America, Africa, Australia – where he would learn that recapturing the vanishing frontier still proved elusive. But his travels would bring an unexpected boon by opening up a new vocational world of popular entertainment. There he discovered that he could recreate the beloved cowboy of his imagination in a commercial form.