Promotional poster for Will Rogers’ vaudeville act, circa 1910. (Will Rogers Memorial Museum)
CHAPTER 1

Will Rogers, the Opening Act

One April morning in 1905, the New York Morning Telegraph’s entertainment section applauded a new vaudeville act that had appeared the previous evening at Madison Square Garden. The performer was Will Rogers, “a full blood Cherokee Indian and Carlisle graduate,” who proved equal to his title of “lariat expert.” Just two days before, Rogers had performed at the White House in front of President Theodore Roosevelt’s children, and theater-goers anticipated his arrival in New York. The “Wild West” remained an enigmatic part of the world to most eastern, urban Americans, and Rogers was from what he called “Injun Territory.” Will’s act met expectations. He whirled his lassoes two at a time, jumping in and out of them, and ended with his famous finale, extending his two looped lassoes to encompass a rider and horse that appeared on stage.

While the Morning Telegraph may have stretched the truth—Rogers was neither full-blooded nor a graduate of the famous American Indian school, Carlisle—the paper did sense the importance of this emerging star. The reviewer especially appreciated Rogers’ homespun “plainsmen talk,” which consisted of colorful comments and jokes that he intermixed with each rope trick. Rogers’ dialogue revealed a quaint friendliness and bashful smile that soon won over crowds as did his skill with a rope. His earthy, western voice, slowed by a cowboy drawl, was disarming and infectious, displaying the personality easterners expected from a western cowboy.
Unlike most vaudeville performers who learned the trade, Will Rogers experienced early success, even in New York. He performed alongside the greats of the vaudeville era—Houdini, Al Jolson, the “Three Keatons,” Josephine Cohan, Fred Niblo, and Earnest Hogan. Each show consisted of many acts, some with vocalists, others of a minstrel variety, and still other groups doing skits or acrobatic tricks. The most rowdy of the vaudeville theaters were saloons, where drinking and scantily-clad women danced as comics told off-beat jokes, waitresses hawked drinks, and prostitutes cornered customers. Rogers, on the other hand, often worked for Benjamin F. Keith, who created more refined shows that appealed to the middle class. He went on the circuit, appearing in the best theaters of Philadelphia, Boston, and Detroit. By 1906, his roping act made him $75 a week, a considerable salary in an age when it took factory workers a month to make the same income.

Will Rogers had begun an astonishing rise as an entertainer. By 1907, Will appeared in his first play, The Girl Rangers, with Reine Davies. In 1916 he joined the Ziegfeld Follies, where he performed for a decade, on and off, with the likes of W. C. Fields and Eddie Cantor. By the early 1920s, while continuing to work with the Follies, Rogers went to Hollywood, California to make motion pictures. More important, he started writing a weekly syndicated column. Rogers literally invented the modern monologue, so popular on late night television today, with its common assessment of American politics and life. He took this public discussion to the airwaves, doing a weekly radio show by 1930. Will Rogers became the most read comic, the most important political satirist, one of the most successful actors, and the most significant friendly commentator in America by the early 1930s. He left a legacy of “gags,” as he called them, or one-liners, that still get quoted today.1

Along this long road to fame, Rogers went through a slow metamorphosis. He left Indian Territory, or Oklahoma, as a young

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1See Reba Collins, ed., Will Rogers Says . . . : Favorite Quotations Selected by the Will Rogers Memorial Staff (Oklahoma City, Oklahoma: Neighbors and Quaid, 1993).
man with all the biases and racist views that most of his fellow Oklahomans held. He had considerable difficulty conquering his inbred prejudices. As a young man, he performed so-called “coon” songs—derogatory ballads that denigrated Black Americans—both at home and later while on stage. He was roughly one-quarter Cherokee Indian, but at times he rejected his Indian identity and sought acceptance in a purely white world. While over time he developed sympathy for most people of color—he especially came to appreciate the people of Mexico and the Caribbean Islands—he often wrote disparagingly of the Chinese in America. Like most liberal white Americans in the 1920s and 1930s, he struggled with the conundrum of race, condemning especially lynching but not yet recognizing the equality of colored people.

Rogers’ need for acceptance led him to court important people, something that ultimately provided considerable fodder for his weekly columns. He ultimately considered himself a Progressive of a southern, Democratic persuasion. He supported Woodrow Wilson, Al Smith, and adored Franklin Delano Roosevelt. Yet he frequently parodied Congress, often distrusted government, and occasionally spoke highly of Republicans such as Calvin Coolidge and dictators such as Benito Mussolini, whom he interviewed in Italy. Perhaps worse, as a young man Rogers seldom, if ever, recognized the discrimination against Native people in America, or the terrible conditions in which they lived. He poked fun of their “Injun” behavior. He regretted this insensitivity later in life.

But who was Will Rogers? He was born in Indian Territory, Oklahoma on November 4, 1879, to Clem V. and Mary Schrimsher Rogers. Everyone knew the Rogers clan in Cherokee land as important political supporters of the so-called “Ridge Party”: the group that had finally agreed to the Cherokee removal treaty of 1835, which forced Cherokees from their homeland in Georgia and North Carolina, west, into Indian Territory. Some evidence suggests that early Rogers family members migrated to Indian Territory before the treaty was signed. Progressives (in the sense that they worked within a fledgling market economy) and slave holders, the Rogers clan united with the Schrimsher family in 1858, when Clem married Mary at Fort Gibson, Oklahoma Territory.
The Schrimsher family had similar political views and roughly the same Cherokee blood quantum as the Rogers, but Mary maintained some degree of Indian tradition in the household. She frequently spoke Cherokee and her son, Will, undoubtedly learned some of the language, although he apparently never used it as an adult. Clem was far more engaging, although gruff and blunt. His political contacts led to a strong relationship with William Penn Adair, the brilliant Cherokee soldier and statesmen. Clem and Mary, like many mixed-bloods of their age in Oklahoma, had mostly abandoned the communal lifestyle and associated with merchants, or in Clem’s case, ranchers. There is no evidence that either of them encouraged their parents to come live in their new household, creating an extended kin group.

The young couple, Clem and Mary, settled into a log ranch house on open, tribally owned, Cherokee land in the Verdigris River Valley of northeast Oklahoma near the community of Oologah. Clem received 200 head of cattle from his mother for the ranch and two slaves, Charles Rabb and Houston Rogers—a clear indication of considerable wealth. These two Black men and their families helped build the Clem Rogers ranch into a successful operation in a few years. Elizabeth Rogers was born on the ranch in 1861. She came into the world, however, at a difficult time. The political conflict between the North and South had entered Indian Territory. The American Civil War swept the Rogers family into the turmoil that spring.

The Civil War destroyed Indian Territory. The various tribes split into factions, and in a tragic fashion, Cherokees fought Cherokees, Creeks fought Creeks, and so on. Some Cherokee factions fled south and west where a large Creek town had declared itself to be neutral. Most members of the Treaty Party—those who had negotiated removal from Georgia, including Clem, sided with the South. He joined the rebellion because he strongly supported slavery, as did his closest allies. Within months of the outbreak of war, Clem and his young family fled their ranch. Clem joined Cherokee Confederate General Stand Watie’s Mounted Rifles, rising quickly to the rank of captain. While in the Confederate Army, he watched as soldiers from both sides, as well as bushwhackers, ravaged Indian Territory. The latter were outright cattle thieves and robbers who took what they wanted.
and left behind starving people. Clem’s ranch along the Verdigris River was completely destroyed. Clem protected his family, settling them into a refugee camp near Bonham, Texas. At Bonham, in December 1863, Mary and Clem had their second child, Sarah Clementine, born amidst the hardship of war.

After the war ended, Clem resettled on a rented ranch near Fort Gibson. Another son, Robert, was born, but barely reached adulthood, dying of scarlet fever in the mid-1880s. Yearning to rebuild, Clem and Mary returned to the Verdigris River and started over again. The cattle business suddenly turned prosperous as railroads entered Kansas and then Indian Territory, bringing markets. But the times also were difficult; bushwhackers, thieves, and murderers ran roughshod over Indian Territory. Many had scores to settle from the Civil War, and no one went to bed at night without covering their windows.

By the time young Will Rogers came into the world in 1879, the violence had somewhat subsided. Clem and Mary lived in a well-built, two-story frame house. Clem had also entered politics, becoming a judge for the Cooweescoowee District and later a senator in the Cherokee government. Interestingly, the majority of support for Clem came from the Gooseneck Bend district of northern Indian Territory, a region with a substantial African-American population. Clem had reassessed his views regarding slavery and he provided plenty of whiskey and barbeque in the days before the vote, courting the votes of former slaves who were enrolled Cherokees. Clem’s status and business acumen also led to the control of considerable land, the ranch at one point reputedly covering 60,000 acres of Cherokee tribal range. This land had to be protected from interlopers and Clem used his political capital to maintain some semblance of authority over the spread. This, at times, involved gunplay.

The Rogers’ ranch felt like paradise to young Will. His playmates were the children of their former slaves, Rabb and Rogers. He learned to ride almost as quickly as he learned to walk. He was addicted to roping, often corralling anything in range. These were heady days for the young future comedian and showman. He came to feel a sense of security on the ranch, an impression he never really could recreate anywhere else. Handling horses and cattle came naturally. But Will’s parents
expected more of him, perhaps because he was the only surviving son. He needed to be prepared to take over the ranch. Will’s parents soon uprooted him to live with his older sister and her husband in a nearby town and attend a local school. Most of his fellow classmates were full-blood Cherokees, and Will felt out-of-place. As he later said: “I had just enough white in me to make my honesty questionable.”

Both Clem and Mary Rogers had some formal education. They met and courted at school in Tahlequah, Oklahoma. Mary attended the Methodist mission school and was by all accounts a devoted Methodist. Clem studied for several years at the Cherokee National Male Academy. Both parents wanted their son to have a similar experience, and when Will was nine, they enrolled him at a much better school: the Harrell Institute at Muskogee, Oklahoma. Once again, most of his fellow students were American Indians, but he got on well with them. Unfortunately, Will avoided the opportunity to learn, especially after his mother, Mary, died in 1890. Will left school, returned home, and grieved.

Just what kind of impact his mother’s death had upon him, Will Rogers never revealed. He never wrote or said much about his mother again, though he adored her. Clem had simply been too busy expanding and protecting the ranch to spend much quality time with his son. And Clem’s political career kept him away from home for months at a time. After Clem remarried his new wife, Mary Bible, was much younger than Will’s mother Mary. Will was openly resentful. He refused to mention his step-mother’s name, as if she did not exist. Will never spoke of her again.

From what is known, Mary had been the communicator in the family, the peacemaker as well as the disciplinarian. She insisted upon grace at the dinner table and kept a spotless house. She very likely maintained some aspect of Cherokee avoidance, a practice that evolved with the matrilineal social organization of Cherokee society. In such a household, it was polite to speak only at the proper time, especially to a relative, and on certain occasions it was improper to speak at all. While the latter rule had mostly been abandoned by Will’s time, one simply did not “babble on” in a Cherokee household, but thought carefully before offering something to say. This carefulness with language was one of Will
Rogers’ most enduring assets. While Clem was blunt, gruff, and at times argumentative, son Will was the opposite. He was his mother’s son, a trait that served him well later in life.

Perhaps Will’s adoration of his mother stemmed from her own self-assuredness and dedication to family. “A tall, slender girl with dark hair and flashing black eyes,” as a friend once described her, Mary was “witty” and disciplined. When first meeting Clem, she made it clear that he might court her, but he must prove himself before offering a marriage proposal. Mary was every bit the equal to the young, dashing, Confederate captain, Clem. As a mother, Mary read constantly to young Will and insisted that he attend school. Will dutifully obeyed, at least while she was alive.

It is plausible that Will’s cautious, non-vociferous, sense of humor derived from his mother, a Cherokee woman who, while mostly white, maintained some vestiges of Cherokee social mores. It was simply impolite for Cherokees to speak evil of people, and when offering criticism, careful humor became the indirect tool used most frequently. Indeed, criticism was best displayed through stories and comparisons, placing oneself in a critical light in order to offer judgmental comparison of another person. This use of comparisons, sometimes displayed in the form of opposites, constituted standard Indian dialogue and humor. At its core was humility, an example being Rogers’ 1924 critical “gag” of politicians:

> With every public man [politicians] we have elected doing comedy, I tell you I don’t see much of a chance for a comedian to make a living. I am just on the verge of going to work. They can do more funny things naturally, than I can think of to do purposely.

Later in life, Rogers attributed this comedic sense of humility to his mother. Perhaps following Mary’s last wishes, Clem convinced Will to return to school in 1891. He did opt to stay closer to home, however, agreeing to attend the Methodist Academy at Vinita, called Willie Halsell College, located some forty miles northeast of the Oologah. He convinced the administrators to let him keep his horse, a decision they came to regret. While on horseback, nearly everything became a target
for Will’s rope, including schoolgirls. On one occasion, he roped a colt, which was initially easy prey. But the colt darted this way and that and finally dashed off onto a tennis court causing general havoc.

At Vinita, Will showed the first signs of the oratorical skill that would make him famous. He was cast in a number of plays and he enjoyed performing in front of an audience. Will’s experiences at Vinita blossomed to a greater extent when his childhood friend Charley McClellan joined him at school in 1893. Charley had Cherokee blood, about the same quantum as Will’s, but Charley’s father was white. The young man seemed rebellious, even militant. Charley wore his bright black hair long, braided into a ponytail and dressed in breechclouts, leggings, and moccasins. Charley helped re-introduce the Stomp Dance, imitating a Shawnee version that came from the small reservation of those Indians found in northeast Indian Territory, a mere fifty miles away. Will was initially averse to joining in these antics, but Charley convinced him and a large number of boys and girls to don headdresses, paint their faces, and then dance like plains Indians, howling war whoops.

Had Will wanted to rebuke such behavior—and he likely did—such a thing ran counter to his personality. The play-acting, while the machinations of a mere fifteen-year-old, had definite meaning in race-conscious Indian Territory. Cherokees, who identified themselves as being members of a “civilized” tribe, looked down on Plains Indians from the West, or “Blanket Indians,” who painted themselves and danced. Charley’s costumes mocked them, though the dance he used was eastern. Perhaps the antics did more to reveal Charley’s rebelliousness than Rogers’ views toward Indians. But later, Will Rogers would also distance himself from those Plains Tribes who he viewed as “uncivilized.”

Rogers’ schooldays at Vinita included one more learning experience. Charley, who spoke fluent Cherokee, started giving lectures in Cherokee at school, and Rogers interpreted them. While this suggests that Will had considerable understanding of the language, his translations of Charley’s somber Indian rhetoric, while undocumented, likely were far from the substance of the lecture.
Will’s father sent him on to more demanding schools, leaving Charley behind to continue his stomp dancing. Will first entered the Scarritt Collegiate Institution in Neosho, Missouri and then, a year later, Kemper School, in Boonville, Missouri. Clem’s young wife likely appreciated keeping Will out of the house. At these schools, Will experienced racism from the other side, being generally dubbed the “wild Indian” by his fellow white students. Other nicknames were more demeaning—especially “swarthy,” as some students called him. His style of dress likely encouraged the name-calling. He arrived at Boonville in 1897 wearing, according to one account, a “ten-gallon hat, with braided horse-hair cord, flannel shirt with a red bandanna handkerchief, highly colored vest, and high heeled red top boots, with spurs.” The boots were the trademark that he most relished. Expanding on his experience with Charley’s dialogue, Will made friends among the white students by telling jokes, offering a monologue or two of his own, and acting as the class clown, when he attended, which was not always the case.

At Kemper School, where he lasted for less than a year, Will also experienced his first failure in wooing a girl. She was Margaret Nay, a local member of his class. Rogers asked her for a date, and rejection was swift and complete. Margaret wanted little to do with the “wild Indian” from Indian Territory. In desperation, Will used his skill to write a letter that at its core revealed the disarming personality of his eighteen-year-old self, carefully choosing words in a satirical attempt to display his human feelings. Among these feelings was experimentation with alcohol, a fact that young Margaret found disdainful; indeed, Will and a few classmates had apparently gotten hold of some liquor and had an all-night bash.

In his letter to Margaret, Rogers got right to the point—he admitted that he was a “drunkard” and a “fool,” and, coming from Indian Territory, a “wild and bad boy.” But the point of the self-criticism was to show the opposite—that he was really not that bad of a boy at all. Disarming or not, Margaret rejected Will a second time. There would be no date with Margaret, who in later life suggested that she had hardly known the young Will Rogers. There is no doubt though that the rejection by a white girl had an impact on Rogers. Thereafter, he became determined
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...to marry a woman who moved in the very circles that had rejected him, and he did.

Overall, Rogers’ school years were mostly wasted. Just why is difficult to determine. Certainly his constant movement from one school to another demonstrates restlessness, or an uncertainty. This would occur in later life as well. Considerable white immigration into northeastern Indian Territory also must have been troubling. The Missouri Pacific Railroad had cut a line directly through the Rogers’ ranch in 1889; the future of ranching in general seemed in doubt. Other Indian reservations across America were divided into farms, and Will Rogers came to loathe the notion of simple farm life. The changes in the land, his mother’s death, and his father’s frequent absence made it difficult for him to concentrate at school. His constant work with the lariat proved doubly distracting, but also allowed him an escape into a almost make-believe cowboy life.

Rogers left the Kemper School unexpectedly in March 1898, before graduation. He likely felt unwelcome there. Will also might have feared the consequences his 150 demerits would carry at a military school. Later in life, Will noted that he and the commandant at Kemper, Colonel Johnson, could never agree on how the school should be run, and he had therefore decided to leave. Rather than return to Oologah and his step-mother—or have a confrontation with his father—he headed west into Texas, failing to inform his father of his departure or whereabouts. When Clem Rogers learned of his son’s flight, it certainly bothered him, but he said little about it. Will was nineteen years old, and young men often went out on their own at that age, or even sooner. Also, confrontation of this sort was simply not the Cherokee way. Once reaching the Southwest, Will participated in one of the last trail drives of Texas cattle into the Kansas railhead at Medicine Lodge, an experience he richly cherished later in life.

While on the high Plains, Rogers was in his glory. He ate out of a chuck wagon and slept on the ground. He sat around the fireside at night and told stories and listened to old cowboys tell their own. The men who worked with him that summer later disagreed on the amount of labor performed by the young comedian. But the ranch owner, E. P. Ewing, later paid him a full cowboy’s wages—if nothing else, he kept the entire workforce in stitches with his many
jokes. Yet Will remained restless, looking for some excitement in
his life. Hearing of the out-break of the Spanish-American War,
and of Theodore Roosevelt’s recruitment of cowboys, Rogers
quickly offered his services to the regiment in Oklahoma City. But
being small of stature and young, the recruiters turned him down.
Ultimately reconciled with the need to go home, Will returned to
the Oologah ranch, somewhat repentant, late that fall.

Once back on the ranch, a number of decisions were made,
regarding both Will and his father’s future. Will would run the
ranch and his father would move to town. Clem was advancing
in politics and in age, and he had always been involved in busi-
ness. The nearby town of Claremore had been growing, and
Clem became a partner at a bank there. This was ideal, at least
on the surface, given Will’s interest in ranching.

Clem also had been elected to a new commission that was
designed to negotiate with the federal government over the issue
of Cherokee communal lands. Congress passed the Curtis Act that
summer, in 1898, which abolished tribal law and mandated
allotment. A large number of whites had moved into the territory
after the Civil War. By 1900, their populations exceeded by
a considerable margin those of the Indian tribes located there by a
considerable margin. The whites wanted land and the Cherokee
Nation owned vast amounts, including the 60,000-acre Rogers
ranch. Clem had watched as other tribes across America had been
forced to “allot” their lands. In other words, the government
made contracts with tribes in which each Indian head of house-
hold received a 160-acre farm and the reservation was thereafter
broken up. While the Cherokee Council fought this new assault
on their sovereignty, they ultimately signed the agreement, ending
their communal ownership of much of northeast Indian Territory.

The Rogers family, like other Cherokees, took allotments, pre-
serving their homesteads. Given the fact that the family also had
money, Clem eventually added to the ranch by purchasing land,
something that Will would continue later. The Rogers family also
turned to raising more desirable short-horn cattle, which were
more marketable. The ranch they maintained, though substan-
tially smaller, was now fenced in barbed wire, and it continued to
be successful despite the loss of considerable open range. But Will
Rogers remained unsatisfied, almost disdainful toward his ranch
duties. Clem had recruited a family from Illinois to take over the ranch house during one of Will’s frequent absences, and Will found them disagreeable. He moved out of the house and built a twelve-foot-square cabin on a hillside, overlooking his rangeland. His cousin Spi Trent moved in with him and served as a cook. This arrangement worked, at least for a short time.

Despite being the boss, Will Rogers was footloose and constantly on the move. He never really committed to the sort of careful management that came with turn-of-the-century ranching. Prior to 1885, ranchers let their herds roam at will, rounded them up in the spring, and kept only a sleepy eye over them through the summer. This had changed. Ranchers now maintained fences, and they constantly monitored markets. Cattle had to be vaccinated for disease and hay stored for the winter months when grass disappeared. Cowboying had once been somewhat idyllic, or so Will thought; it was now hard work and required attention.

Just when such concentration was necessary, Will often left the ranch, riding the range rather than taking care of business. He also took advantage of the recent access to new train service. Will and a friend frequently hopped a train for Kansas City or St. Louis to take in a play or a performance. Along with these distractions, Rogers entered roping contests in nearby towns, emulating a showman who had become an idol: Vincente Oropeza, perhaps the greatest roper of all times. Will had seen him perform in Buffalo Bill’s Wild West show in 1893 at the Chicago World’s Columbian Exposition. Rogers was enthralled, and it motivated him to work harder at his roping skills.

Despite his lack of interest in business, Rogers’ ranching years offered plenty of opportunity to enjoy life. He re-introduced himself to dancing, joining Charley, his old school friend, at Cherokee stomp dances, or, just as likely, Rogers joined other friends at a square dance. These affairs sometimes went on all night. Considerable courting—and sometimes considerable drinking—occurred at these dances, for young people. The dances often turned into sing-fests, where the newest music was the rage. Will led the others in song, frequently becoming the center of attraction. These events created a fiendish desire to collect the newest songs, especially so-called “coon” songs, or Black minstrel songs.
The “coon song” mania that hit America in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries led to a plethora of new music known later as ragtime. It started in vaudeville with various acts putting on “black face,” and doing syncopated numbers in the dialect of what whites assumed was African-American slave language. A second, refined rendition of the coon song consisted of the so-called “cake walk,” or a dance with an animated high step that again supposedly imitated the actions of Black slaves. The cake walk hit Claremore just as Will Rogers had accustomed himself to performing in front of a crowd. A newspaper reported that at one such affair, he had won the grand prize for his cake-walking—a ginger cake. Likely he won others as he honed his cake-walking and singing ability.

Despite their general popularity, coon songs denigrated African Americans. They used the slang language of former slaves to demonstrate the perceived ignorance and incompetence of Black people, something that Rogers at this young age likely did not dispute. Such songs depicted Blacks as lazy or dishonest individuals. The worst of them projected Blacks as sexual predators. Rogers knew better—a Black woman had played a major role in raising him after his mother took sick, and Black men had built the Rogers’ ranch. But he persisted in singing these songs and while traveling, continued to collect them and send them home to his sisters. To him, they were amusing and entertaining, and he lacked a sense of concern regarding their message. It should be noted that some Black vaudeville performers also performed the songs—either lacking concern regarding their message or sublimating those concerns because of the need for money. Bert Williams, for example, a Black entertainer whom Rogers later met and worked alongside, commonly sang coon songs.

Rogers met his future wife, Betty Blake, while singing coon songs at a dance. Betty played the piano while Will sang. She came from a modest upbringing in Arkansas, but she was Anglo, and it took time for Will and Betty to accommodate this racial divide. Will’s correspondence with Betty reveals a confident but careful young man, yet someone who likely still smarted from his rejection by a young white girl in high school. His letters played upon Betty’s visits to the “wild tribes” of the west, as if Claremore was more wild than Arkansas, Betty’s home state. He mildly complained of
being viewed as an “Injun cowboy,” and warned Betty that the pictures she sent might end up in “an Indian wigwam.” And in a particularly revealing note, penned in March 1900, Will wrote to Betty: “I know it would be a slam on your society career to have it known that you even knew an ignorant Indian cowboy,” as if Will Rogers was ignorant or a simple cowboy.

Though he was just twenty-one, Rogers sensed the higher status that came with being born into an Anglo ethnic world, especially given his upbringing in Indian Territory, a place with a multi-cultural population. But he was intent upon using his own charm and perseverance to move beyond such ethnic limitations. Will never let Betty’s Anglo ancestry serve as an obstacle to the relationship. His identity, at this young age, then, was tied to a pragmatic sense of an ethnic hierarchy, but one that projected himself near the top of this hierarchy. He would ultimately overcome this concern with racial status, but much later in life. He attended Indian dances because he enjoyed them, dancing and singing with Indian women, but he would court an Anglo woman, who seemed at least open to a writing relationship.

Will’s singing and dancing hardly pleased his father, Clem, who was above all a hard-driving businessman. Clem’s sense of his only son’s early lack of direction is revealed in only one or two instances. Clem simply did not criticize. However, he once commented to a friend, “Willie ain’t never going to amount to nothing.” Will’s decision to enter more and more roping contests—some of which in far-off Kansas City or Memphis—likely sent Clem to worry more. Worse, on July 4, 1899, Will won first prize in a steer-roping contest in Claremore. Will later proclaimed that it was the “first thing I ever did in the way of appearing before an audience.”

Rogers’ success at roping at times consumed him. But Will found the business fun and entertaining, certainly not the sort of occupation that led to a career, at least in early 1900. Part of the problem was his size. Ropers who made a living at the sport by appearing at rodeos nationwide were simply taller, stronger, and more willing to take chances. Realizing this limitation, and perhaps after some careful prodding from his father, Rogers decided to travel and find the perfect ranch land to develop. He realized the impossibility of recreating the old Rogers’ ranch, with its
endless vistas of open grassland, in northeastern Indian Territory. At first, Clem approved of this idea. At least it beat roping and rodeo-ing.

Will and Clem both spent part of 1900 in New Mexico, where some open range land still existed. At the time, however, title to this endless land remained in dispute as rings of lawyers busily wrested it, one parcel at a time, from the hands of Indians, Hispanic New Mexicans, or anyone else. This did not matter to Will and Clem, for they found nothing that approximated the rich grassland of eastern Indian Territory. In a rather romantic surge of near-desperation, Will turned to Latin America, a land that he anticipated would have plenty of opportunity. This spontaneous decision perhaps was a result of the expansion of American business into the Caribbean world at the end of the Spanish American War.

Rogers, who enjoyed the thrill of roping cattle but failed to show promise as a rancher, left the comfortable confines of the family ranch in spring 1902, bound for Argentina, the land of the *gauch*o. His letters home reveal a young man on the make, an expectant capitalist who thought that the open range, much like the Cherokee communal lands, could be recreated in South America. He financed the trip by selling most of his cattle, garnering $3,000. Clem talked him out of selling the ranch along with all the cows, sensing that the young romantic might need something to fall back on. After some careful thought, Rogers talked yet another friend, Dick Parris, into coming along. Will agreed to pay his passage just to get some companionship.

The folly of the trip became quickly evident; once in New Orleans, Rogers discovered that no boat sailed directly to Buenos Aires. The only way to reach Argentina at the time was through New York and thence on to London, where ocean-going vessels regularly set sail for the lands south of the equator. Stuck in the Louisiana city for a few days, Rogers quickly found the best shows in town and took them all in. One in particular impressed him—*When Knighthood Was in Flower*, starring Julia Marlowe. The play involved political satire, a Victorian critique of political authority. Rogers loved the drama of the play combined with the political lessons that it revealed, but attending plays was expensive, consuming more of the cattle cash than he had anticipated.
The two world travelers caught steamships to New York and then London. Once over the seasickness that plagued him throughout the trip, Will sat down to write a few letters to his sisters and father back home. In England, he found the money and the language more than he had bargained for. After striking up a conversation with a street fellow, Will hardly got a word in edgewise, and mused to his sisters: “I was perfectly willing to pay him for his over time if he would kindly relate it over again.” And he never did figure out the money. After eating, he simply handed the waiter a pound and “trust to the lord that they will take pity on me and do me half right.” He ended up with a bag full of coins, or “money in bulk,” as he put it, about enough “to make the first payment on a soda cracker.” Little did he know that the letters were a hit back home in Claremore, as both his sisters and his father had them published in the local papers. They constituted Rogers’ first published attempts at humor.

During the sea trip to Argentina, the pair of Oklahomans quickly consumed much of what was left of the cattle money. The two travelers took a few days to look over the prospects of ranching in eastern Argentina and gave up the idea. Argentina had experienced a ranching boom much like Oklahoma’s, with modern railroads moving into the interior that had adopted refrigerated cars. Land prices had doubled, and it required $10,000 to $15,000 simply to get a start. Worse, once arriving, and being away from home nearly two months, Will discovered that his friend Parris had tired of travel and wanted to return home. Counting the remaining dollars carefully, Will discovered that he had enough to send Parris home, but not himself. He bought a ticket for his friend and looked for work.

Rogers finally found a job doing what he knew best: punching cows on a ranch some 800 miles inland. But he discovered that the gauchos could lasso a cow nearly as quickly as he could, and the pay consisted of a mere five to eight dollars a month. Worse, the cattle outfits did not have chuck wagons. He yearned for the old cabin on the ranch, and his cousin Spi’s cooking. In a rather desperate mood, Will wrote: “The country is overrated.” The people were simply “a lot of dagoes [derogatory slang for Italians!] from all over the world, and all having a different lingo.”
At most, Rogers’ experiences in Argentina taught him something about poverty, which he carried into later life. He often struggled to acquire enough money for food and a place to sleep. Finally, he concluded that his prospects might improve back in Buenos Aires. He talked with the few English friends he had made, read the English-language newspaper, and discovered a slow boat sailing for South Africa with a load of cattle. Will signed on, hopeful that South Africa might have workable ranch land. Before departing he wrote his sisters back in Indian Territory a revealing letter. He admitted to spending money foolishly in New York and London and feared that family and friends might think less of him for it. He hoped that his sisters did not think of him as a burden, and he admitted that they “have done everything in the world for me and tried to make something more than I am out of me.”

Rogers was fortunate to survive the trip across the Atlantic. The cattle ship leaked and nearly went down in a storm. Will became terribly sick, and when he did recover, he found out that most of the crew’s food was gone. But the old steamer made a landing at Durban after thirty-two days of hell, and Rogers agreed to help his new boss drive the cattle herd to his ranch in the interior. Along the way, he witnessed the ravages of the Boer War, and laughed heartily at the incompetence of the British Cavalry that still had a duty of preserving the peace. Purchasing agents had bought horses off the ranges of western America—they were so wild that Rogers declared it “suicide” to simply get on one. After hollering “Company Mount,” in a few seconds you could see “nothing but loose horses and Tommies coming up digging the dirt out of their eyes.” The British recruits had as much chance staying on the horses as “a man would have sneezing against a cyclone.”

Rogers’ sense of the war in South Africa never reached the point where he openly took sides, but the struggle left a deep impression on him. The Boers, Dutch settlers who had defied the British, had been badly treated by their British conquerors to the extent that concentration camps had been used to control populations. Perhaps a hundred thousand Boers and African allies died in the camps, many of them women and children. Much of Boer land was ranching country, not unlike the open spaces of Indian Territory, and the similarities between how Great Britain
had treated the Boers and how the American government had treated the Cherokees were obvious. Yet Rogers saw himself as a visitor who said little, testimony to his mother’s impact on his upbringing. Later, he would admit that the trip had brought him to think hard about his own nation. Ironically, rather than make him more cynical, he came to appreciate Indian Territory to a much greater extent after traveling through these foreign lands and witnessing what the British had done to the natives. American treatment of Indians could have been much worse!

By December 1902, Will’s wanderings led him to Johannesburg, still looking for opportunity and perhaps a grub stake to get him home. He learned quickly of a traveling Wild West Show scheduled to go on that evening. Texas Jack, a colorful figure whom Will Rogers set out to meet, ran the show. Near the show grounds, he saw a lean, willowy figure in cowboy boots, spurs, and jeans. It turned out to be Jack, who indeed was a Texan (and acted like one), who met young Rogers with a square jaw and an open smile. Jack had an interesting life, being the adopted son of a more famous “Texas Jack” who had initially performed alongside Buffalo Bill Cody in his first Wild West performance in Chicago in 1872. His father had led his adopted son into the business. While Rogers knew little of the lineage, he quickly stepped forward and asked Texas Jack for a job. After explaining that he had done some roping, Jack handed him a lariat. Seeing Rogers smoothly make a big loop, and jump back and forth through it, Jack’s face broke out in a big grin. “You go on tonight,” he said. With just 35 people and 23 horses, the show was short-handed. But everyone got into the act, Rogers playing a screaming Indian during one of the scenes. “I screamed so loud that I like scared everyone out of the tent,” he later quipped. The show lacked the “real” Indians of Buffalo Bill’s rendition—a number of Englishmen with strong accents had to play the parts. But after the bucking broncos, an Indian fight, a stagecoach robbery, and the like had all finished, Rogers came into the arena and did his short act. He was an immediate success and his salary increased to $20 a week, quite a bit more than what he had made as a gaucho back in Argentina. Jack came up with a name, the “Cherokee Kid,” and Rogers received billing as one of the premier acts in the show. Jack took advantage of
Will’s singing ability, having him add a coon song and do an occasional cake walk.

These performances were the first of any sort in which Rogers did an act in front of a crowd in which he made serious money. And he studied that crowd quite carefully. He found it to consist of Afrikaners, or white descendants of the first western Europeans to settle Cape Town, Englishmen, and a combination of Black Africans often called “Kaffirs” in the day and age. A derogatory term, which was outlawed in the 1970s, Rogers had little difficulty in using it, despite its comparison to “nigger” back in Indian Territory. When he dressed up in black-face and sang coon songs for the audience, they roared in approval. “My appearance amused the natives and Kaffirs greatly,” he announced in a letter to home. Afrikaners, Englishmen, and Africans alike must have been amused to see a white man, who was really part Indian, dressed and painted as a Black man, singing and dancing on stage.

Jack and Will got on famously, sharing a common background and good humor. Jack saw Will as more of a partner than an employee. Jack even offered Will the show, an inducement to keeping him in South Africa. But when Rogers had earned sufficient money, he boarded a ship to Australia and eventually, home. Jack took the rebuttal in stride as he convinced Will to look up the Wirth Brothers Show, which had just reached Australia. Will, Jack thought, could work the circus while seeing Australia. Jack gave Will a letter of introduction that stressed Rogers’ work ethic, his sobriety—which might have been a stretch—and the fact that he was a champion lasso thrower. He caught up with the show in Sydney, was quickly given a job, and traveled with it to New Zealand.

Nearly everywhere he traveled with the show, he found notoriety. In Auckland, there seemed to be an insatiable desire for “anything American,” Rogers noted. The January 20, 1904 Auckland Star suggested that Rogers’ act was, “like most of our new things, American.” It described Rogers as “the Cherokee Kid,” a gentleman “with a large American accent and a splendid skill with lassos.” Rogers had been honing his rope skill while on this two-year trip, working frequently with two ropes which mystified audiences. The attention was not lost on Rogers who sent home the clippings to his sisters. Yet Rogers yearned for
Indian Territory, and despite his new-found success, he booked passage on a ship for San Francisco thereafter.

While he had left Indian Territory traveling first class, his ticket back to the United States was below deck in Third Class. And when he arrived, he hopped a freight train across the Rockies, finally landing in Claremore. Rogers was a changed person. He came back with barely a nickel in his pocket. His father Clem seemed somewhat amused and hopeful that the trip had cured Will of his wandering spirit. He also hoped that Will would get an honest job. Will was “so broke,” his father told a friend, “that he was wearing overalls for drawers.” Yet the hopeful Clem faced yet another disappointment. Rogers had changed but he had also discovered that he could make a living as a showman. It certainly beat hard labor, as he later was fond to say.

Despite the similarities between the British treatment of the Boers and the American treatment of Indians, Rogers came away from his travels with a deep appreciation for the United States. Many of the men he met in Africa and Australia reassured him of these views. “I was always proud in America to own that I was a Cherokee,” he wrote Clem from Australia on September 28, 1903, “and I find on leaving that I am equally as proud to own that I am an American.” He confessed to his father that he had arguments with “every nationality of man under the sun,” and most of the time, he found himself defending America. Will Rogers had taken a strange progression of thought, especially for a part-Indian person who had just lost a huge ranch to an imposed government policy. Perhaps it had something to do with the downtrodden condition that most people of color lived in around the world. The gauchos, poorly paid and poorly dressed, had impressed Rogers with their ropes, but not their humanity, nor had he found much sympathy in the suffering of the Boers or the “Kaffirs,” people who had been oppressed by the English. But his ethnic and economic stature as the son of a successful Cherokee politician in Indian Territory, suddenly had more meaning when he compared his plight with so many other unfortunates.

This defense of a homeland came naturally as Will slowly discovered his own identity. But it came as well from Will’s separation from the Civil War politics of his father, a veteran officer in the Confederate Government. Being Cherokee and American at
the same time offered few contradictions for Will Rogers as he departed New Zealand, a dual identity that many American Indians, especially those of mixed heritage, had trouble digesting. Rogers sensed that others in the world were not as fortunate to live in a country like the United States, though it was a country that had humbled the Confederacy and the Cherokee Nation.

Though Will Rogers had seen the world—or at least Argentina, South Africa, Australia, and New Zealand—he still had much to learn about America. He would soon embark on new adventures into the heartland of his own country. His upbringing had left him with a mild nature, a strong, likeable, personality and a thoughtful presence. But there was still an important identity debate that would occur within his soul. And he struggled with the issue of race—not unlike most thoughtful, thinking Americans of that age.

Indeed, Rogers lived in a racist age; Indian blood ran in his veins at a time when being Indian was not particularly attractive or acceptable. This early identity challenge and all that came with it, his racism, his Americanism, would enter a new phase in 1904 when he entered the entertainment business. As the ropes twirled, Rogers told one-liners to the considerable amusement of his audience. And these quips drew upon his upbringing, as he poked fun of himself in order to get a laugh. This humor led to a new Rogers’ identity, one bound up in the age of vaudeville, where comics were outsiders—many of Jewish or Irish extraction—and successful comedians seldom were viewed as sober, “true Americans.” How Will Rogers successfully coped with this new challenge says much about him as a person—both an Indian and an American—as well as much about early twentieth-century America.