

Gary Clayton Anderson. 2011. *Will Rogers and his America*. University of Oklahoma Press.

*Party politics is the most narrow-minded occupation in the World.*” - Will Rogers

I was approached by a colleague to do a review of the book, *Will Rogers and his America* by Gary Clayton Anderson published in 2011. This felt like a good opportunity to learn more about a man for whom I had familiarity, but not in-depth knowledge. If you look around the state, you will see many efforts to honor “Oklahoma’s Favorite Son.” In fact, I grew up in *Rogers County*, named after Will’s father Clem (OK Historical Society, 2025). Many field trips in school were to visit the Will Rogers Memorial Museum in Claremore. I took Intro to American Federal Government with Dr. Kenneth Hicks at Rogers State University. I routinely fly out of the Will Rogers International Airport. Attending graduate school at Texas Tech University I always found it peculiar that they revered Will Rogers with a statue in the middle of campus which they decorated ceremoniously for homecoming. As a proud Oklahoman, my first thought was, “Get your own heroes Texas, this one is ours!” I returned to the memorial museum in preparation of this book review where I met with the Executive Director (and former Oklahoma State Representative) Tad Jones. He explained to me the significance of the statue in relation to Rogers’ deep friendship with Texan Amon Carter, a media mogul, oil man, and Texas Tech graduate. Further, Rogers’ donated the money for the school’s band to travel to an away game and coined the nickname still used today, the “*Goin Band from Raiderland*.” The reality is that Rogers was influential across the entire country and even the world. In this review, I will discuss my recent exploration into Rogers’ life through the book and museum, the notable events including those related to politics, and the similarities and contradictions of viewpoints found in each.

In the afterword of Anderson’s biography, he addresses the same

question I had, “Do we need yet another, somewhat new biography of Rogers?” (205). There is only so much you can say about the fifty-five year life of a single person, even if he was at the time of his death, as the museum claims, the most famous man in the world. There is even a book dedicated to over 1,000 of Rogers’ quotes (Sterling, 1995). Anderson’s answer seems to be that this book differentiates itself from others in emphasizing Rogers’ perception of himself as a journalist above all else. After reading the book I am not sure I would have told you this is the main theme, despite chapter five being dedicated specifically to Rogers’ journalism. It could be argued that the previous detailed chapters needed to be thoroughly explored in order to understand Rogers’ path to journalism and the corresponding impact on American culture.

The book begins by detailing the Rogers family’s early beginnings in Indian Territory during the Civil War. Will’s father, Clem, was an influential politician bridging the gap between the Native, State, and Federal politics. Both of Will’s parents had similar Cherokee blood quantum and his mother, Mary, frequently spoke Cherokee in the home. His father supported slavery and sided with the South during the war. After the war, his parents moved back to their ranch (60,000 acres) in Indian Territory and in 1879 Will was born and was their only surviving son. The book frequently discusses Will’s reticence in acknowledging his Native heritage, making efforts to shirk off stereotypes and even seemingly expressing shame. I would argue that the Memorial Museum gives the opposite impression, claiming pride in the Rogers family Native heritage. I also learned at the museum that the Cherokee Nation has purchased the Rogers’ Ranch House in Oologah and has invested in a complete restoration (Bryan 2025).

In the discussion of Rogers’ hesitance to embrace his Native heritage, one might argue that it was a product of the time period. Certainly, Native Americans were treated horribly during this time and even the Rogers’ family took allotments for their homestead,

significantly shrinking the size of their ranch<sup>1</sup>. In further recognition of the time period, Anderson does recognize Rogers' involvement with "coon songs" and black face which denigrated African Americans and used language which demonstrated the perception that former slaves were ignorant and incompetent. It was peculiar that the following statement was included in this discussion, "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" (15). This comment seemed to make an effort to ward off the "but what about!" readers while fitting poorly within the focus of the section of the book.

Much of this book was quite entertaining to read, largely told as a chronological history of Rogers' life. There were stories that made me laugh out loud, such as when Rogers' planned to visit Argentina to avoid his obligations on his family's ranch. He did not realize he would have to travel to London first to catch a boat south and spent all of his money before he ever arrived. That story also led to what could be considered the most pivotal time period of Rogers' life, broadening his horizons not only geographically, but in his understanding of experiences of people across the world. Those travels also led to his start in entertainment and rope tricks which I would wager many Oklahomans would be surprised to learn began in earnest in Africa. Anderson also points out that Rogers came home "from his travels with a deep appreciation for the United States" (22). Rogers' act expanded to Vaudeville where he would tell self-deprecating jokes, with an image built around being the "consummate outsider" all while doing rope tricks. Over a short amount of time his salary began to grow quickly as his show became more popular (31-33). One limitation of this book is that the timelines jump back and forth sometimes from one sentence to the next, making it difficult at times for the reader to keep up with the order of events.

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1 Later in his life after amassing his fortune, Will sent money home to purchase additional land, growing their estate.

Rogers' career continued, exploding with the *Ziegfeld Follies* and even into film. He met with and sometimes even entertained several Presidents including Roosevelt, Wilson, Harding<sup>2</sup>, Coolidge, Hoover, and had a close friendship with Franklin Roosevelt. He had friendships with the entertainment elite, which the author attributes to much of Rogers' shift in world-view (56). He also had international relationships with prominent leaders such as Edward VIII and Mussolini. In the chapter titled "The Renaissance," Anderson details the turning point in Rogers' career moving from vaudeville entertainer to commentator on the American experience, beginning with a contract to provide weekly "witty sayings" to a syndicated column carried in a variety of newspapers. Anderson continues, "Between 1919 and 1925, Rogers metamorphosed from a one-dimensional comic and writer who covered politics at a superficial level to a confident commentator on the rich, the industrial entrepreneurs of the age, European royalty, politicians, Hollywood mega-stars, and especially the common man. He kept his columns at a stylistic level that the average reader could appreciate." (56). Roger's column the *Illiterate Digest* was read widely and influenced acts of Congress and behaviors of Presidents. He spoke at both Democratic and Republican conventions. When I visited the Memorial Museum, my discussions included this fact about Rogers. They seemed to take great pride in Rogers' ability to have dialogue with people from both sides of the aisle, the implication being that a man like Rogers with his level of influence, likeability, and pragmatic nature to the country's problems would be welcome in today's politics. Anderson claims that by the late 1920s, "virtually every American politician listened to Rogers" (126). At that time nearly 400 newspapers syndicated Rogers' columns.

This book is well researched and an interesting perspective on American history and the impact of an individual born in Indian Territory. Rogers was full of contradictions from his wrestling

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2 Rogers largely had a negative relationship with Harding (71) and was critical of the Hoover administration's handling of the Great Depression (134-152).

with his own Native heritage, his progressive views on civil rights, his avid advocacy for the middle class while amassing significant wealth and even avoiding the hardships of the Great Depression resulting from his skepticism of bankers and the stock market. This book describes Rogers as a man willing to evolve his viewpoints over time while owing his popularity to his approachable way of communicating to massive audiences. He was a capitalist at heart but believed in government support for those in need. This book describes Rogers' various forays in journalism, but ultimately this story is told as his columns were merely a vehicle to his many ways of influencing American politics of which I struggle to come up with a modern-day comparison. Rogers' story is one worthy of careful consideration and this book brings up many parallels an observer of politics could recognize today. Rogers' legacy stands the test of time and I am encouraged to explore more in the future. Unfortunately, the Rogers family historic ranch house was destroyed in the Palisades Fire in Los Angeles earlier this year. However, renovations to the Oolagah home are scheduled to be completed next year. Additionally, the Memorial Museum in Claremore is undergoing significant expansion including the use of AI technology<sup>3</sup> in their planned exhibits.

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3 I recognize that future political scientists will find it amusing that the use of AI technology in a museum was novel at the time of this publication.

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