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Will Rogers Memorial Museum

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Humor and Its Hazards: Editing *The Papers of Will Rogers*

Steven K. Gragert

“Humor is a very delicate instrument. It must express its own subtlety, nuance, attitude and flavor. There is no one more deadly than the person who steps up to ‘explain’ the joke. And no one steps up more often than the editor.”¹

The “voice” was that of Will Rogers, Jr.—known as Bill to family and friends—the eldest child of Will and Betty Rogers, a graduate of Stanford University, a former member of Congress, a decorated veteran of World War II, a player in California real estate, a man who bore his father’s name and lived in his immense shadow.² The “editor” was Dr. Theodore L. Agnew, Jr., also a veteran of World War II, who after the war had earned a doctorate in American History from Harvard University, where he had worked with Arthur Schlesinger, Sr., and who joined the history faculty at what became Oklahoma State University, eventually rising to the rank of full professor.³

The “humor” in question belonged to Bill’s father, William Penn Adair “Will” Rogers, the Cherokee cowboy who parlayed the roping skills he learned on his father’s 60,000-acre spread in Indian Territory in the late nineteenth century into one of the country’s most successful careers in entertainment and communication of the first half of the twentieth century. In a lifetime cut dramatically short by an airplane crash in Alaska in August 1935, Will Rogers put an estimated two million words in print and produced thousands of newspaper and magazine articles and columns, as well as six books and scores of other writings. He ranked as the nation’s most widely read syndicated newspaper columnist, his weekly and daily

¹ Will Rogers, Jr. to Robert B. Kamm, Members, Oklahoma State University Advisory Committee, and Members, Will Rogers Memorial Commission, memorandum, February 28, 1971, Will Rogers Memorial Commission Papers, Will Rogers Memorial, Claremore, Okla. (hereafter cited as WRMC Papers).

² Arthur Frank Wertheim and Barbara Bair, eds., *The Papers of Will Rogers*, Vol. 3, *From Vaudeville to Broadway, September 1908–August 1915* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2001), 438–47 (hereafter cited as PWR, 3).

³ *Newsletter*, Organization of American Historians, August 2007.

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Settling the Affairs of the World as they should be
by Will Rogers.

Well, this week just passed has been pretty busy in New York. It looked like my home town of Claremore, Oklahoma, on a Saturday afternoon. The Automobile Show was here. I dont know why they come clear from the Coast to see the same Cars they can see in their local Show Rooms, but they did sure come and brought their Wives. Well, I wont say brought, I mean their Wives came with them.

I had a very busy week, Me being the gabbiest old thing in New York, I was conscripted to make a speech to the Automobile Chamber of Commerce, which is all the ~~cars~~ Manufacturers. They are a pretty fine bunch of men, most of them have had their money now for a few years, and they are getting so they act like they always had it. Golf has supplanted the Carburator as a national Topic.

I often wonder how they distinguished a Gentleman in the old days when there was no Golf. ~~the Distinguished Lawyer.~~

Mr. Martin Littleton and I were the annoyers for the evening. I was there, not through any entertaining quality I might have, but to offset the glibness and humorous speech of Mr. Littleton. He knew nothing about Automobiles; being a Lawyer he knew very little about anything. So I apologized for him and soon put the members back into a serious and business-like mood. Mr. Littleton, as you know, specializes in Lunacy Cases. He defended and saved Harry Thaw. He also defended Mr. Newberry and made it possible to get him out of the U. S. Senate. So you see he works in direct opposites. One Man he got into the Insane Asylum, and the other he got out of one. And personally I think Newberry should be the more Grateful of the two.

Mr. Durant of the Star Car says that in 10 Years every man Woman and Child in the U S will own an Automobile, or, rather there will be one per Capita. ~~and~~ He is laying out his manufacturing schedule along that line. Now all he has to do is to control the Birth Rate.

As an Exhibition during the week a Dodge crew assembled an entire Car in 19 Minutes. I didnt see it. I can imagine what they did the first 3 minutes, but I dont know what they were doing the other 16.

They exhibited a Steam Car that would run by burning Hay, Old Shoes, Old Newspapers, or anything. The Man demonstrating it said you could get 50 Miles on an Ambassador Harvey speech.

All the high priced cars had exhibits in the various Hotel Lobbys, Ford had his in the Dairy Lunch Rooms.

On the next night I was invited, on account of being a light eater, to speak at the Automobile Assereys Banquet. Littleton wasnt with me on this. He had gotten a paid job in the meantime keeping some Sane man out of the lower House of Congress. ~~Accessorie~~

Now these Assereys are the Bootlegging end of the Industry. They sit back and make all the Parts and the Manufacturers have to go out and sell them.

I launched a Ford for President movement. You see I am figuring on ~~going~~ going in the cabinet, as he will have to be like all of them and pay off his political debts with jobs. You see, all these other Cabinets are picked, not on ability, but what they had done for the Party. Well, we aint going to have any party. Its to be called the "All over the Road Party" with Mr Ford for Leader. Our Slogan will be "Come with Ford and you will at least get somewhere". I dont think ~~any~~ ~~one~~ ~~could~~ be Secretary of State, ~~but~~ I dont think I could stand the round of Conferences. I think Vice President ~~will~~ be about my speed. ~~As I can really fill that on my mind.~~

Of course I do hate to stay hid that long because I like for people to know who I am, but if it looks best for the Party for me to be sacrificed, why, I ~~would~~ do it.

I would love to see Mr Ford in there, really. I dont know who started the idea that a President must be a Politician instead of a Business man. A Politician cant run any other kind of business. There is no reason why he can run the U.S.

Whats the biggest single business in the World. I just would love to see Mr Ford, when Congress pulled one of those long stalls of theirs, going around

A page from one of Will Rogers's original typewritten manuscripts shows editor's markings and Rogers's own strike-throughs in pencil. The full manuscript was published in the New York Times, January 21, 1923, as the sixth of his weekly newspaper columns. The series eventually reached about 500 newspapers and 40 million readers a week.

columns appearing in upwards of 500 newspapers throughout the country, including in every major city. His writings reached 40 million readers weekly.

He also dominated other sectors of media and entertainment. Not only was Rogers the nation's leading newspaper columnist at the time of his death, by August 1935 he ranked second only to Shirley Temple as motion picture box-office star, enjoyed the highest rated Sunday evening radio program, and commanded one of the heftiest fees of any after-dinner speaker. Politics and current events were the bread and butter of his humor, and he used a mixture of homespun wisdom and insightful wit to make millions of people laugh at their own follies and dilemmas—and the country's.⁴

It was through his writings, however, that Rogers achieved his greatest influence. Fortunately, most of them, in their original as well as published formats, survived through the years, thanks mostly to the farsightedness of his wife, Betty. Over the decades after Will's death in 1935 and Betty's in 1944, the family donated his original and published papers, as well as many of his films, audio recordings, artifacts, photographs, scrapbooks, and other materials, to the Will Rogers Memorial, a 22,000-square-foot native limestone museum built by the state of Oklahoma for \$200,000 in the Depression year of 1938, three years after Rogers's death. Located in Claremore, Oklahoma, Will's adopted hometown, the museum eventually could claim the world's largest collection of Rogers's original handwritten and typewritten letters, telegrams, book manuscripts, radio scripts, stage routines, speeches, monologues, advertising copy, magazine articles, and newspaper writings.⁵

Almost from the opening day of the Memorial, discussion began about publishing Rogers's collected works. An early one-volume effort appeared in 1949. Author and magazine editor Donald Day literally cut and pasted several of Will's newspaper and other writings—retyped versions, fortunately—to produce the chronologically sequenced *The Autobiography of Will Rogers*, published by Houghton Mifflin. Other trade books and assorted academic studies came into print over the next several years, but no serious attempt was made to collect and edit his published works.

⁴ For Will Rogers's life and career, see Betty Rogers, *Will Rogers: His Wife's Story* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1941; reprint, Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1979) and Ben Yagoda, *Will Rogers: A Biography* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1993; reprint, Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2000).

⁵ Howard K. Moore, ed., *The Will Rogers Memorial, 1938–1975: Phase One—Getting It All Together*, n.p., n.d. (1980?).

That is, until 1967. In March of that year, Paula Love, the curator of the Memorial since its opening, wrote to Dr. Raymond Knight, the secretary of the museum's oversight body, the Will Rogers Memorial Commission, asking, "Can you give us any information on the contact you were making in regard to the editing project of Will Rogers[']s works? Is there some way we could help push it along? Everything is just about ready and if it is going to be done in our life time, we'll have to get started on it pretty soon."⁶ More than twenty-eight years serving the Memorial along with husband and museum manager Bob Love, Paula had been a favorite niece of Will Rogers. He had taken a keen interest in her as a youngster when she was afflicted with infantile paralysis and later had provided the means for her to attend college, where she studied history and prepared to be a teacher. Her bout with polio left her frail for much of her life, but her mind was quick and sharp, honed by constant reading and a passion to maintain the Memorial to her uncle and to sustain his legacy. Not formally trained in museum work, she had virtually lived for the moment that her copious, meticulous work organizing, copying, footnoting, indexing, hole-punching, rubber-stamping, and binding the thousands of pages of Rogers's writings in the Memorial's collection could finally be assembled in book form.⁷

Apparently, Knight's "contact" proved fruitful. The Loves, members of the Commission, and officials at Oklahoma State University in Stillwater, including the school's president, Dr. Robert B. Kamm, met a few months later to finalize a contract for OSU "to edit all of the published and unpublished works, letters, documents and other memorabilia pertaining to the late Will Rogers." The document, signed by Dr. Kamm and by Morton Harrison, the chair of the Will Rogers Memorial Commission, stipulated that OSU would provide an editor, a staff, and office space; the Commission, at its expense, would make available for editing photocopies of documentary materials; OSU would proceed with diligence to complete the work and would issue periodic reports; its History Department would coordinate the project; the university would be granted the exclusive right to complete it; and the Commission would assist the school in obtaining

⁶ Love to Knight, March 20, 1967, WRMC Papers.

⁷ *PWR*, 3:194n.2; Morton R. Harrison to Royce Savage, May 9, 1968, WRMC Papers.

Rogers prepared a script in advance of nearly every public appearance, including his radio broadcasts. He would read through the prepared text once or twice and then deliver the remarks without notes. Audio recordings of his speeches confirm that he followed closely his scripted comments. This first page of his typewritten notes for a national broadcast on October 18, 1931, for President Herbert Hoover's commission on unemployment relief reveals his usual style of strike-throughs, type-overs, and interpolations. The remarks became famous as the "Bacon and Beans and Limousines" speech and were published in *Radio Broadcasts of Will Rogers*, a volume in "The Writings of Will Rogers" series by Oklahoma State University Press.

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Mr Owen D Young ~~asked me to~~ and Mr Gifford asked me to annoythis (Biggest Helloe man in the W) But what a job he's get afternoon, You just heard Mr Gifford, a very fine man, Mr Hoover jsut told him, ~~that he had the eight million unemployed, With what says Gifford,~~

"Gifford I have a remarkable job for you and Owen Young, you are to feed the eight millionunemployed", With what"says Gifford , Thats what makes the job remarkable, If you had something to do it with it would not be remarkable, The Government has nothing, we cant hardly feed the Senators,

You know Young, Owen D Young, the man that originated the Young European financial ~~Financial~~ plan, the Young mens ~~Christian~~ Temprance Union, ~~and Youngstown~~ ~~Ohio~~ Young Kipper, and the first Democratix born of white Parents in Nation owed Youngstown Ohio. His European Plan was that every ~~body~~ that ~~was~~ should pay a little something, So somebody come along with an older Plan than Youngs ~~Plan~~ plan, It was that nobody pay anybody anything, So of course that being an improvement over Youngs, thats the one Europe is working on,

Well Young called me up and asked me to talk on this Programme, I told him I was very particular/and asked him who would be the other Speakers, who I appeared with a couple He sent me a list of several names, and told me to pick ~~the ones~~ I would like to appear with, So I choose mr Hoover, I told ~~him~~ Mr Young I would ~~appear with Mr Hoover~~ have no objection to appearing with Mr Hoover, a new radio team will be So if we do all right today, ~~instead of some one else do with~~ Hoover and Rogers. QUICKEST, SUREST AND SAFEST WAY TO SEND MONEY IS BY TELEGRAM OR CABLE



Rogers's weekly radio show, *The Gulf Headliners*, ran from 1933 until his death in 1935, first on the National Broadcasting Company and then the Columbia Broadcasting System. Transcripts of all of the highly rated broadcasts survived, as well as audio recordings of a majority. Most have been reproduced in the edited, annotated series of Will Rogers's materials published by Oklahoma State University Press and the University of Oklahoma Press.



Dr. Reba Neighbors Collins, director of the Will Rogers Memorial, 1973 to 1989, shows James Blake (Jim) Rogers, son of Will Rogers and younger brother of Bill Rogers, a copy of her *Will Rogers & Wiley Post in Alaska: The Crash Felt 'Round the World*, which was published in 1984.

necessary copyright authority for publication. Nowhere in the contract was mention made that any of the collected works would be published as a scholarly edition.⁸

Soon after signing the agreement, President Kamm wrote the Commission, "Oklahoma State University is looking forward to a long period of pleasant relations with the Commission in the accomplishing of this program."⁹ A couple of days later, Bob Love typed a note to a member of his Commission who had been absent from the contract signing: "Dr. Knight of OSU [the chairman of the History Department and no kin to the Commission's own Dr. Knight], estimated it will take at least five years to get the works ready for publication. At least we are on the road!" Hopes were high, but expectations seemed under control.¹⁰

The goals of the organizers were ambitious: to collect, edit, and publish all of the previously published writings of Will Rogers—estimated at the time at three million words—and to collect, edit, and publish others of his papers, including personal letters, telegrams, stage notes, speeches, and radio transcripts. Those who initiated the project were motivated by the thought that when completed it would make available for the first time to research libraries and the public the insights and humor of the favorite son of the state. They believed firmly that Rogers's papers were vital to understanding the cultural history of the United States in the first three decades of the twentieth century.

Both parties, OSU and the Memorial, moved quickly. The university appointed Knight of the History Department to oversee the project and Dr. Ted Agnew, professor of American History, to serve as its editor at half-time, the remainder of his time to be devoted to teaching. In November 1967, Paula Love sent Agnew a batch of material, along with the encouraging words, "we approve of you in every way and my husband and I feel that you are the perfect person to carry-out the editing of Will Rogers's works."¹¹ She was equally enthusiastic about all those at OSU connected with the project. After a meeting she and Bill Rogers attended at the university in early December, she wrote the History Department's Dr. Knight, "I do not know when I have ever been so impressed with everything

⁸ Minutes, Will Rogers Memorial Commission Meeting, September 11, 1967; Contract, Will Rogers Memorial Commission and Oklahoma State University, September 11, 1967, WRMC Papers.

⁹ Kamm to "Will Rogers Commission," September 15, 1967, WRMC Papers.

¹⁰ Love to Earl Sneed, September 17, 1967, WRMC Papers.

¹¹ Love to Theodore Agnew, November 13, 1967, Will Rogers Research Project Papers, Oklahoma State University Library, Stillwater, Okla. (hereafter cited as WRRP Papers).

and EVERYBODY.” She added that Bill “was so impressed with you gentlemen who will have this task of editing his father’s works [and] . . . I personally was so happy that I could not go to sleep that night but kept thinking of the fine, scholarly minds among the group.”¹²

A Will Rogers Research Center was established by January 1968 on the third floor of a new addition to the university library, and a small staff was assembled. Dr. Agnew promised to have available in sixty days a full plan in printed form. He anticipated, however, that the immediate priority of “preparing and publishing a complete, accurate, and scholarly edition of the . . . writings of Will Rogers” would consume a span of time that would “likely last for several years.”¹³ The parties involved agreed that the immediate sixty days would provide the Will Rogers Memorial—that is Paula Love and the usual lone part-time assistant—with “ample time to assemble all of the Rogers material” and to deposit it at OSU’s newly formed Research Center.¹⁴

From the outset of the project, significant focus was placed on a particular set of Rogers’s writings: his daily column, known commonly as the *Daily Telegram* because he had routinely sent it six days a week by telegram to the Western Union office in the *Times* building in New York, which then wired it to subscriber papers. Usually three or four brief paragraphs of topical commentary and humor, it was his signature piece, appearing usually on a newspaper’s front page, or in the instance of the *New York Times*, above the fold on the first page of Section B. Legend held that people were known to read first Rogers’s *Daily Telegram*, then the rest of the newspaper.

The column’s importance cannot be overemphasized. In a day when the masses depended almost exclusively on newspapers for information and upon columnists for insight and interpretation, Will’s daily column enabled him to mold public opinion. Indeed, he was in a position to wield more power than most other columnists who had to prepare copy two weeks in advance and had to use the post for delivery, a practice Rogers himself had to follow with his other syndicated column, the weekly article. Yet, Rogers rarely abused the power afforded him through his dailies. His telegrams

¹² Love to Knight, December 5, 1967, WRRP Papers.

¹³ Notes, Will Rogers Publication Committee Meeting, December 12, 1967, WRRP Papers.

¹⁴ Minutes, Will Rogers Memorial Commission Meeting, January 25, 1968, WRMC Papers.

generally showed no malice but indicated his desire to be fair. Will supported Herbert Hoover early in his presidency, for example, but became critical after the depression began. When several other critics, however, became bitter and vituperative, Rogers gently reminded his readers that the depression was not Hoover's fault and that no single person could cause a national economic catastrophe.¹⁵

As the *Papers* project began to take shape at OSU, Paula Love and her limited staff at the Memorial worked feverishly to gather, prepare, photocopy, and ship to Stillwater reams of Will's writings, some from his original handwritten and typewritten texts, others from the sheets issued by the syndicate office, the preponderance in the form of typescripts of Will's daily columns as they appeared in various newspapers, including ones in New York, Boston, Tulsa, Oklahoma, and Kansas City, Missouri. The photocopying continued at such a pace, the Memorial wore out its machine.¹⁶

In June 1968, three months after the original deadline, Agnew completed a draft plan for *The Will Rogers Papers* project. He outlined a "comprehensive edition that . . . should make available to readers all materials essential to understanding Rogers's personality, his development, and his successive careers. In addition, they should be useful to scholars and students of American, and indeed world, history during the first third of the twentieth century." The *Papers* would be presented in topical, not chronological order, in other words, grouped by series of works, such as his Daily Telegrams, Weekly Articles, and general writings. And, significantly, the editor decided the *Papers* would begin with the series "associated most directly with him in the eyes of the American people": the Daily Telegrams. Estimating their total number at nearly three thousand, Agnew projected the telegrams—"chronologically arranged, properly annotated, with individuals and situations appropriately identified"—would comprise the first two volumes of *The Papers*, in other words, as Agnew figured, hundreds of telegrams per volume, plus annotations and descriptive matter. According to the editor, the completed project would consist of fourteen volumes of Rogers's writings, including personal papers.¹⁷

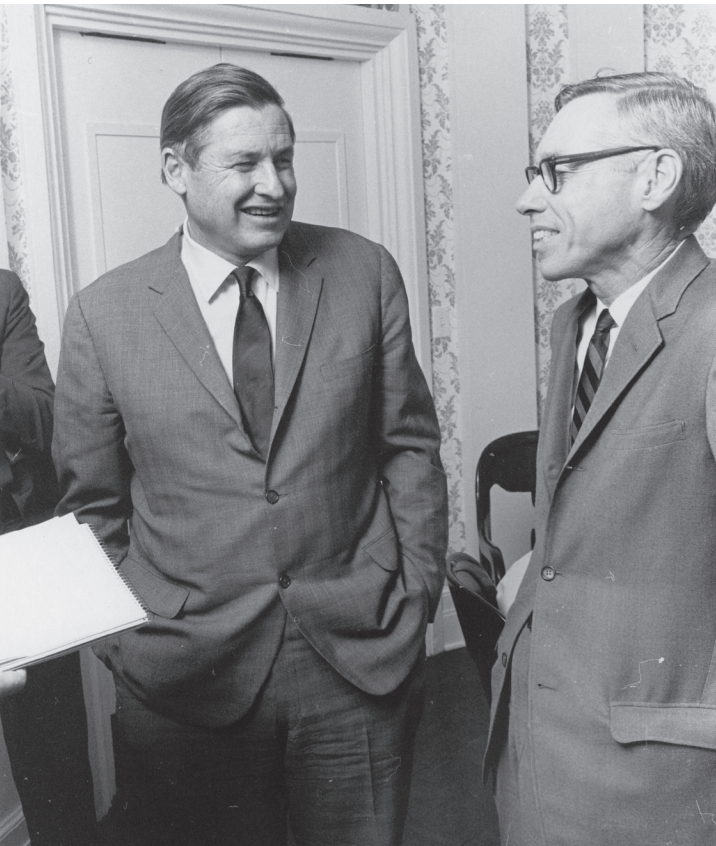
¹⁵ Yagoda, 248–51, 295–7, 301; Arthur Power Dudden, "The Record of Political Humor," in *American Humor*, ed. Arthur Power Dudden (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), 59–62; see also James M. Smallwood and Steven K. Gragert, eds., *Will Rogers's Daily Telegrams, Vol. 2, The Hoover Years, 1929–1931* (Stillwater: Oklahoma State University Press, 1978) and Vol. 3, *The Hoover Years, 1931–1933* (Stillwater: Oklahoma State University Press, 1979).

¹⁶ Love to Agnew, February 1, 1968, April 15, 1968, WRRP Papers.

¹⁷ *The Will Rogers Papers: A Preliminary Prospectus*, (Draft of June, 1968), WRRP Papers.



William Vann (Bill or Will, Jr.) Rogers speaking on "Will Rogers as a Literary Figure" during a special program at Oklahoma State University in February 1972. The occasion was Rogers's presentation to the OSU library of *The Will Rogers Papers*, a bound booklet of his father's original writings that had been declared the millionth volume acquired by the library.



Bill Rogers and Dr. Theodore L. (Ted) Agnew at Oklahoma State University, February 1972.

Whether Agnew ever produced the prospectus in final form or even shared the June 1968 draft with the Loves and the Memorial Commission is not known. Regardless, the first evidence of discord soon arose. In August 1968, Paula Love wrote the new chairman of her Commission, Dr. Raymond Knight, to express concern about “our sagging editing project.” Agnew had just paid a visit to the Memorial while en route to Illinois on a vacation trip with his family. He had mentioned that he planned to check for Rogers materials at libraries in Illinois, but Love thought that he might want to start his research at the Memorial, if not at OSU. “I get sick to my soul,” she said, “when I think of the time he has wasted and to date I can find nothing he has really done.”¹⁸ Love was not alone in her feelings. James Leake, a prominent television station owner in Oklahoma and a powerful member of the Memorial Commission, called the deal with OSU, “a first class headache. I hope we can do something to change it. I agree that what is to be done must be a first class job or we should not allow anything to be done.”¹⁹ Bob Love and a member of the Commission soon traveled to Stillwater to visit the Research Center. They “looked things over,” Paula Love reported to Chairman Knight, “and there was nothing there but the books we had sent and then not all of them. . . . Bob said he was not trying to make trouble but he wanted to know how they operated and why something tangible had not been produced. . . . The answer is nothing.”²⁰ It was September 1968; a year had passed since the signing of the contract to start *The Papers* project.

Discontent continued to build with the Loves and among members of the Memorial Commission. Despite an understanding from the start that at least five years of preliminary work would need to be accomplished before the first volume was published, expectations of a book in print had escalated rapidly. The Loves complained of a lack of substantive communications from OSU, especially from Agnew, and described him as “totally unfit to edit Will Rogers.”²¹ After the Loves finally received a status report from Agnew in January 1969, Bob characterized it as “nothing but a play on words,” with no solid evidence of any work having been accomplished.²² Commission members corresponded and met repeatedly over the issue. Bill

¹⁸ Love to Knight, August 5, 1968, WRMC Papers.

¹⁹ Leake to P. M. Love, September 19, 1968, WRMC Papers.

²⁰ Love to Knight, September 22, 1968, WRMC Papers.

²¹ R. W. Love to R. W. Knight, January 13, 1969, and [P. M. Love] to Morton R. Harrison, February 23, 1969, WRMC Papers.

²² Love to R. W. Knight, January 13, 1969, WRMC Papers.

Rogers weighed in with his concerns that “it was time for the Commission to take definite steps” to move the project forward.²³ The conciliatory remarks of one commissioner—“it frequently takes researchers and historians a long time to complete work”—failed to bring calm.²⁴

Finally, Agnew, armed with a letter of endorsement of *The Papers* project from Dr. Oliver W. Holmes, executive director of the National Historical Publications Commission, met with the Loves in early October 1969. He was accompanied by his department chairman, Knight, and he brought for the Loves and the Commission a nine-page outline of the contents of the first volume, “The Daily Telegrams, 1926–1930,” and samples of four edited telegrams, showing the text as consolidated from various sources, with textual variants and explanatory footnotes.²⁵ Apparently not lost on the Loves was the fact that the projected first volume was to contain more than thirteen hundred telegrams. They had been afforded a review of just four. “[T]his is *it*,” Paula Love wrote her chairman with emphasis included.²⁶ She also quickly got a letter off to Bill Rogers and enclosed a copy of Agnew’s document. “[A] plan for editing the Daily Telegrams,” she wrote her cousin, “[a]t least we have something on paper that he intends to do.” She added no commentary about the quality of the editing; she wanted Rogers to analyze it with an unbiased mind.²⁷

Despite their misgivings about the work of the editor, the Loves desired the project to go forward. They even offered to finance the publishing of the first book out of their own pockets, “whether it costs \$5,000.00 or \$10,000.00.”²⁸ They continued to send OSU shipment after shipment of photocopies and typescripts of articles and other materials and microfilm of original documents.²⁹ Letters appeared to flow constantly between Claremore and Stillwater, Paula Love discoursing at length in hers about Will Rogers’s writing style, travels, habits, eccentricities; the dating and origin of various pieces of his writing; the vagaries of newspaper editors; the relative worth of various researchers and writers; and myriad other issues. From the start of the project, she had shown a willingness to share from her immense trove of knowledge and understanding of her famous uncle and his work. But her respect for Agnew diminished as the

²³ R. W. Love to Earl Sneed and Argene Clanton, September 16, 1969, WRMC Papers.

²⁴ Sneed to R. W. Love, September 18, 1969, WRMC Papers.

²⁵ Agnew to Oliver W. Holmes, September 23, 1969, and Agnew to P. W. Love, October 2, 1969, with attachment, Brief Summary of First Publication (as projected October 1, 1969), WRRP Papers.

²⁶ Love to Knight, October 3, 1969, WRMC Papers.

²⁷ Love to Rogers, October 3, 1969, WRMC Papers.

²⁸ R. W. Love to R. W. Knight, November 10, 1969, WRMC Papers.

²⁹ P. M. Love to Agnew, October 8, 1969, P. M. Love to Agnew, November 9, 1969, and Agnew to P. M. Love, December 22, 1969, WRRP Papers.

Left to right: Dr. Joseph A. (Joe) Stout, Jr., editor of "The Writings of Will Rogers"; Dr. Odie B. Faulk, chair of the Department of History, Oklahoma State University; and Dr. Homer Knight, former chair of the department, in the office of the Will Rogers Research Project, third floor, Oklahoma State University Library. Stout became editor of "The Writings" in 1973 shortly after Dr. Ted Agnew resigned the position and returned to full-time teaching in the History Department.



With a schedule of seven syndicated newspaper columns a week, Will Rogers took advantage of whatever free minutes arose in his daily life to peck out 100-700 words on a small manual typewriter that he often had to balance on his knees. Here he grabbed a moment in the front seat of his car on the studio lot of Fox Films in the mid-1930s.



months passed and no substantive results appeared. In late May 1970, President Kamm of OSU visited the Memorial and Paula Love told him that Bill Rogers was not pleased with the progress of the project; in fact, “he is disgusted,” she told Kamm. She and her staff had reviewed all of the material they had sent to Agnew and all of the correspondence she had had with “that man,” as she referred to him, and they could not see that they had erred. Nothing had been accomplished at OSU, she told Kamm. “That man will never get anything done. If he cannot produce something in almost three years, then he cannot do it and we all feel he is incapable. You will have to assign someone to the work who is at least interested.” As harshly as she spoke about Agnew, Paula Love was not about to terminate the relationship with OSU. She talked at length with Kamm about creating a full-blown Will Rogers Research Center in the university’s library; it would hold much of the original archives then on deposit at the Memorial. Nothing would be moved to Stillwater, however, if OSU handled the originals as poorly as it had treated the materials already placed there. As to *The Papers*, she said, “[T]here was not much time left in which to get things moving.” Kamm agreed.³⁰

Interestingly, within a few days of Kamm’s visit to Claremore, Agnew produced a chart showing a comparison of time invested in nine nationally recognized papers projects, including several presidential ones. His study revealed that an average of almost eight years elapsed between the year a project began and the publication of its first volume. At the bottom of the table, he noted that the contract for the Will Rogers project was signed in 1967, he received appointment as editor in 1968, and the first volume was projected for 1971, a span of just three to four years.³¹ For him, expectations in Claremore may have seemed unduly inflated.

Criticism continued to mount, as well as the pressure, not just from the Loves, but also from Will Rogers, Jr. In their minds Agnew should not have started with the *Daily Telegrams*. He had failed to consult with recognized authorities on Rogers. He had refused to submit copy to the Memorial Commission for review. He had little experience as a writer, none as a scholarly editor.³² Paula Love even took her complaints to the governor

³⁰ Love to R. W. Knight, May 28, 1970, WRMC Papers.

³¹ Table, Oklahoma State University, *The Will Rogers Papers* Project, June 1, 1970, WRRP Papers.

³² [Will Rogers, Jr.], “The Editor’s Refusal to Consult Known Authorities on Will Rogers,” n.d. [ca. June 1970], WRRP Papers.

Paula McSpadden Love, the first curator of the Will Rogers Memorial and a niece of Rogers, accepts a gift to the museum from the president of Optimist International in March 1972, shortly before her death. Jo Davidson's full-figure bronze of Will Rogers was the first display item in the Memorial when it opened on November 4, 1938, Rogers's birthday.



of Oklahoma, who passed them to President Kamm with the message to “look into this and see that matters are expedited.”³³ Agnew responded in a deliberate fashion. The Memorial Commission and OSU had decided jointly to begin with the telegrams: those documents show Rogers’s “breadth of interest, his strength of character, his versatility.” He also noted that the editorial staff had listened to concerns voiced and had restructured the telegrams. They now would be spread over three volumes, not two, and the thrust of the introduction would be broadened and expanded. Moreover, OSU was increasing the size of the project’s staff. Thus, work on *The Papers* was expected to accelerate.³⁴

Over the next six months the pace did quicken, so substantially that in January 1971, Oklahoma State University Press, which had been formed essentially just to publish *The Papers of Will Rogers*, produced an initial full set of galleys of a new book titled *Daily Telegrams of Will Rogers: Volume 1: 1926–1928*. Set on a linotype machine at the university’s printing office, the galleys consisted of about 280 thirty-six-inch long sheets of newsprint on which were printed 43 pages of fore matter and almost 800 telegrams with textual variants and footnote annotations. In total it ran about 500 printed pages.³⁵

It was his read of those long-awaited galleys that had prompted the aforementioned lament of Will Rogers, Jr.: “Humor is a very delicate instrument. It must express its own subtlety, nuance, attitude and flavor. There is no one more deadly than the person who steps up to ‘explain’ the joke. And no one steps up more often than the editor.”³⁶ His critique came in an eight-page letter addressed to President Kamm, other officials at OSU, including Drs. Knight and Agnew, and the Will Rogers Memorial Commission, including the Loves. Rogers did commend the editor and his staff for their research. He found it “copious and complete,” but the lack of an editorial review board, according to Rogers, led to “a pedantic [and] archaic system of annotation [that] overpowers the text, kills the humor, and makes impossible that continuous reading which is essential to an understanding of the philosophical approach of Will Rogers’s humor.” The editor also had allowed himself “the most amazing editorializing. ‘WR

³³ P. M. Love to R. W. Knight, September 23, 1970, WRMC Papers; Governor Dewey F. Bartlett, to Kamm, August 4, 1970, WRRP Papers.

³⁴ Agnew to R. W. and P. M. Love, July 22, 1970, WRRP Papers.

³⁵ WRRP Papers.

³⁶ Rogers to Kamm, et al. February 28, 1971, WRMC Papers.

exaggerates . . . WR enjoys making a sly parody . . . WR is apparently unhappy that . . . WR accomplishes two things at once . . . WR gently and with a touch of wry distaste. . . .”

“Poor WR,” his son wrote. “He cannot get a word in edgewise. The editor is right there to stop him. WR is not permitted to make his own point. The editor must do it for him.” To Bill Rogers, that first effort revealed an obvious lack of scholarly editing, an absence of editorial control, and a failure to provide oversight. No one outside the editorial staff had read the manuscript before it went into type, and only one outside person, Bill Rogers himself, a month earlier, had seen the galleys. Once he had reviewed them, he had insisted they be shared with others. Reading the galleys had convinced him that editing the *Daily Telegrams* was a more difficult job than anyone had imagined three years earlier. He did not blame the editor and staff. They had not been given adequate and proper outside guidance and advice. He called for the establishment of an editorial board and a commitment to collect and publish his father’s writings in line with accepted documentary editing practices.³⁷ He told Paula Love that if OSU attempted to publish the book without alteration, the university “would be the laughing stock of the editorial world.” The Loves had been among those denied a chance to review a manuscript or set of galleys.³⁸

A few weeks after the release of Bill Rogers’s critique, Agnew passed a small sample of proofs to Oliver W. Holmes of the National Historical Publications Commission for his review. In his response weeks later, Holmes pointed out the uniqueness of the Will Rogers project. “[It] is so different from any the Commission has hitherto had any connection with,” he wrote Agnew. All other editorial efforts at the time involved eighteenth or nineteenth century figures; even the Woodrow Wilson papers had yet to reach the twentieth century. Unlike other documentary editors of the day, the Rogers editor had to write annotations for a generation or two that lived the period, as well as for younger generations interested in learning of the past and for generations to come. The older group might say, “I already knew that” and may not always concur with the editor’s notes. The problem could be exacerbated, Holmes noted, when the older generation includes

³⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁸ P. M. Love to David R. Milsten, March 22, 1971, WRMC Papers.

the writer's son, to which Holmes certainly could have added niece. An immediate relative's knowledge base would likely be far greater than anyone else's.³⁹

Another major difference between the Rogers papers and other Commission projects was that Rogers had a place in American history, as well as a significant place in American letters. Projects at the time involving William Cullen Bryant and Washington Irving were similar to the Rogers effort, but Holmes and the Commission had nothing to compare because the other projects had yet to produce a published work. Significantly, Holmes noted that the Commission had "practically no guidance in editing the texts of a humorist of the first order. Some, perhaps much, of Rogers's humor is certainly lost on the present generation without some explanation, and, yet, to have to explain humor destroys it to some degree. To really enjoy it the reader has to catch the subtle point himself. He doesn't appreciate having to be told why a thing is funny." The editor, Holmes added, "is caught in a quandry [*sic*] and . . . no one can envy him."⁴⁰

Although Holmes did not feel qualified to comment on the preliminary editorial work—he and other members of his commission believed that they should not get involved in such detail but should hold their assessments until the work was published—he told Agnew that his footnotes tended to overwhelm, "intrude" on the brief text of the individual telegrams. "Let Will Rogers speak for himself more," Holmes wrote, "without someone always following behind to say what he means." Holmes did not usually recommend placing notes in the back of a book, but he thought the rear of the volume would be best in dealing with literary texts, so that "readers who do not want them will not have to be bothered by them." Scholars and interested students could still access them if desired.⁴¹

Like Bill Rogers, Holmes questioned the apparent absence of an active editorial board. In looking for guidance, an editor should turn to his editorial board, but on this point, Holmes questioned Agnew on the structure at OSU. "Is there or isn't there" an editorial board for *The Will Rogers Papers*? Agnew had mentioned one in his editorial plan, but Bill Rogers and others had stated that none existed.⁴² Actually, two review

³⁹ Holmes to Agnew, June 1, 1971, WRRP Papers.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Ibid.

bodies were in place for *The Will Rogers Papers*. Early in the project, an Advisory Committee had been formed of key members of the faculty and administration. More recently, a three-person Editorial Review Committee had been assembled from the English and History faculties at OSU and the University of Tulsa. One was a recognized scholar of Rogers's humor. The same three men, plus the editorial staff of the Will Rogers project at OSU, comprised the Editorial Review Committee.⁴³ In contrast with OSU's structure, however, both Holmes and Rogers suggested an editorial review group with greater representation from outside the university.⁴⁴

The flurry of criticism following the release of the first volume galleys in early 1971 proved the beginning of the end of Agnew as editor of *The Papers of Will Rogers*. He continued, however, to consult with Oliver W. Holmes and Bill Rogers and to publish and distribute new timetables and editorial policies and plans.⁴⁵ In March 1972, he submitted a manuscript of the Daily Telegrams of 1926 showing significantly revised textual presentation, textual variants, and footnotes. He also offered examples of alternative methods of annotation. Publication of the first volume was rescheduled for December 1972. A staff remained in place in the project's office, but their numbers and work hours had been severely reduced because of budgetary constraints. Although Paula Love, as well as others, was convinced that "OSU will never be able to do the work," the chair of the Memorial Commission and a few of its members held out hope that changes at OSU would occur. Commission members, especially Will Rogers, Jr., increased the pressure on President Kamm and the OSU administration to change editors or face termination of the project.⁴⁶ The Commission and the Rogers family held an important trump card: the copyrights to Rogers's writings.

By June 1972, Dr. Knight had retired and Dr. Odie Faulk had succeeded him as chairman of the Department of History. Dr. Ted Agnew had already submitted his resignation as director of the Will Rogers Research Center and editor of *The Papers*. In July he returned to full-time teaching in the History Department. With his and Knight's departure from the project, Faulk became director and immediately began a search

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Agnew to Holmes, July 8, 1971, WRRP Papers.

⁴⁴ Holmes to Agnew, June 1, 1971, WRRP Papers; Rogers to Kamm, et al, February 28, 1971, WRMC Papers.

⁴⁵ See various documents, 1971-72, -WRRP Papers, and file, Special Project, OSU & Transfer, WR Archives, 1971-1973, WRMC Papers.

⁴⁶ P. M. Love to Milsten, n.d. [ca. August 1972], Rogers to Kamm, et al, October 15, 1971, Report: Will Rogers Paper[s], January 26, 1972, and P. M. Love to Reba Collins, March 1, 1972, WRMC Papers.

for a new editor. He did not look far. He hired Dr. Joseph Stout, a former student of Faulk's, who had earned his doctorate from OSU a couple of years earlier and had been teaching at a community college in Missouri.⁴⁷

Bill Rogers and the Loves were relieved to hear of the changes. "I think the best thing is to continue with O.S.U.," Paula Love wrote a Commission member. With Agnew and Knight gone from the project, "I feel certain that we are at least going to get something done."⁴⁸ All members of the Memorial Commission were equally pleased. They met in July and gave OSU a vote of confidence. Faulk and Stout's proposal to put the Daily Telegrams aside for the time being and focus instead on preparing for publication the six books of Will Rogers won wide endorsement. A six-person board of editorial consultants was soon formed that included scholars in American literature and history from five universities throughout the country, and steps were taken to involve in the proofing process Bill Rogers, Paula Love, and other recognized Rogers experts. The project's new staff also made several significant editorial policy changes, including the placement of annotations at the back of each volume. When informed that OSU was ready to go to press in January 1973 with the first book in the series, *Ether and Me* or "Just Relax," Rogers's humorous account of his very serious gallstone operation in 1926, the Memorial Commission and the Rogers family responded positively: They provided OSU with the previously withheld license to publish, and Bob and Paula Love forwarded a personal check for \$5,000 to help cover printing costs.⁴⁹

When completed in 1983, sixteen years after it began, the renamed *The Writings of Will Rogers* comprised twenty-one volumes in six series, plus a cumulative index. All but one book, *Radio Broadcasts of Will Rogers (1983)*, were of Will's previously published writings. No edited and annotated personal papers were included. Over the years, four individuals held the position of editor of the project, none for more than five years. The Memorial Commission and its successive directors continued to play key roles. When the project ended, OSU assigned all copyrights to the Commission and transferred almost all of the remaining unsold books to the Memorial Museum in Claremore.⁵⁰

⁴⁷ P. M. Love to Collins, June 16, 1972, WRMC Papers.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Leake to Kamm, July 13, 1972, P. M. Love to Roy Cartwright, July 18, 1972, R. W. Love to R. W. Knight et al, December 20, 1972, and P. M. Love to Joe A. Stout, December 31, 1972, WRMC Papers.

⁵⁰ See file, Contracts, Legal Papers, Oklahoma State University, Copyrights, 1972–1986, WRMC Papers.

The first volume of the Daily Telegrams was published in 1978, seven years after Dr. Agnew's controversial first set of galleys. Projected initially by him as a two-volume set, the Daily Telegrams ended up being published in four volumes over a two-year span. Much credit for the fast pace, however, went to Agnew and his staff for the enormous amount of preliminary spade work they had produced. Reflecting hard lessons learned and expert advice given, no note numbers appeared in the text of the new Daily Telegrams, and textual descriptions, variants, and annotations were published at the back of each volume, keyed to the respective number of the telegram. As with all books in *The Writings* series, explanatory notes were generally limited to two or three sentences of essential information. Significantly missing from the annotations in the *Daily Telegrams*, indeed in all of *The Writings of Will Rogers*, were any attempts to explain the man's humor. The new editors had learned the hazard of editing a humorist.

A sad postscript: Paula Love, the niece who guarded so closely her uncle's legacy, died on April 28, 1973, at age seventy-one. The last few years of her life had taken a toll on an already frail health. The first volume of *The Writings of Will Rogers* came off the press shortly before her death. It is not known whether she was well enough at the time to be aware of its publication.