

## MARCH 29, 2010 F.A.H.P. NEWS

**Will Rogers (1879-1935):** To his generation, there was no comedian who could equal Will Rogers. Born near Claremore in Indian Territory (later Oklahoma), he claimed to be ¼ Native American. His career spanned several occupations from cowhand and expert roper, to the Ziegfeld Follies where he did rope tricks and cracked jokes, to the legitimate theatre, to early talking moving pictures in Hollywood. He also had a weekly radio show in the early 1930's where the target of his many jokes were the politicians in Washington. He spanned the political spectrum with remarks like "I don't belong to an organized political party. I am a Democrat".

My mother was in nursing school during World War I at Union Memorial Hospital in Baltimore, and she and her friends had tickets to the theatre to see a show starring the noted actor Fred Stone. Before the curtain went up, an announcer informed the audience that Mr. Stone was ill, and he would be replaced by the lesser-known Will Rogers. The latter came onto the stage in his bare feet with his rope and starting cracking jokes. For the remainder of the evening, he kept the audience laughing; my mother never regretted having missed Fred Stone.

Will Rogers made about ten talking movies. The first was in 1929 in Mark Twain's "A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court" with Myrna Loy, and the last was "Steamboat 'Round the Bend" with Irvin S. Cobb in 1935. This latter film was the last time original steam paddle-wheel river boats were used in a Hollywood production, as a few of these relics from the 19<sup>th</sup> century were still in service on the Sacramento River. Some of Rogers' other films were "Handy Andy", "Life Begins at Forty", and "David Harem". My father and Uncle Norman Mancill seldom went to the movies, but they loved Will Rogers.

For 3 months in 1945, I was stationed at Will Rogers Field, which is still the commercial airport for Oklahoma City. In 1981, I visited the Will Rogers Museum in Claremore, OK, a most interesting place built on property where the comedian planned to retire. In one of the films they showed there, he was an American tourist trying to clear customs at Southampton for a visit to the British Isles. There was a problem with his passport, and he couldn't produce a birth certificate. He told the customs official that where he came from if a person could breathe and walk around, people knew he had been born.

President Calvin Coolidge was seldom amused, or at least he didn't show it. On a wager, a friend bet Will Rogers that he couldn't make him laugh with his homely jokes. The appointment was arranged. When escorted into the president's office, Rogers, in a loud whisper, said to the escort "I didn't catch the gentleman's name". Coolidge had a good laugh.

Will Rogers, ahead of his time, loved to fly, and he often accompanied his long-time friend, renowned aviator Wiley Post. In August, 1935, they took off from California on a route that was to take them over Alaska, the Arctic, and into Siberia. Their last successful stop was at Fairbanks, where their tiny amphibious double-cockpit plane refueled before heading due north toward Point Barrow. Something happened six miles south of Barrow, an Eskimo saw the crash, and ran the six miles to civilization exclaiming "Big Red Wing, She Blow Up!".

The Museum Committee met last week and moved closer to the final plan for a temporary face lift for 2010. New and standard signage, better lighting, electric train layout upgrading, and further development of our “hands-on” Stanley engine operation are highlights. This work is expected to be essentially completed by June 6, our first public day.

The Publicity Committee moved closer to a plan for press releases and other promotions for our 2010 “Steamin’ Days”, and Events scheduling, both on and off-site, is virtually complete. On April 11, Pete Parlett, Dan Citron and others plan to take a program on the Auburn Heights Preserve and our activities to a meeting of the *Friends of Brandywine Springs*. Last Thursday, Richard Bernard, Susan Randolph, Dan Citron and James Wagner attended the annual *Friends* (of Delaware State Parks) *Forum* held at Woodside, DE.

Bill Schwoebel has called a meeting of the Auburn Valley Railroad Committee for Tuesday, April 6, at 7 P.M. in the F.A.H.P. office. The new “Diesel” locomotive, on loan from Jim Sank, needs some gauging work and possibly other things before it will be ready for a test run. The Automatic Signal project will also be of top priority.

Our work sessions last week moved along on stripping Model 607 parts, installing the bonnet over the new boiler in the Model K, and in disassembling of the heavy rear from the Rauch & Lang electric, both the one removed from the car, and the spare we have on hand. The Stanley Model 71 was brought to the upper garage and the burner has been dropped prior to a hydrostatic test on the boiler in the car. There has been a slight leak, probably from the copper boiler tubes, but the leak is not yet apparent. There is also a worsening “click” which is thought to be in the pump drive.

We thank Richard Bernard for making the State’s pick-up truck available for the Red Clay Valley clean-up day last Saturday morning. Perhaps some other FAHP members participated in the annual clean-up. I do not have a direct report, but the News Journal this morning reported that about 700 volunteers took part again, but that the trash collected was only 12 tons. Two years ago, it hit a high of 25 tons. Fewer people are apparently disposing trash along the roadsides, and most of it is believed to be thrown out of car windows. Jim Jordan is to be congratulated for starting this event in the 1990’s and is still in charge of it today.

For the past two weeks, I have mentioned DelDot’s effort to remove Route 82 from Creek Road through Yorklyn. The Executive Committee of the Board was unanimous in opposing this change, as it will make it much harder for visitors to find Auburn Heights. Unfortunately, some of us had trouble conveying our opposition to DelDot through the web link provided. Again, I will repeat this address for you to click on if you want to help us in this effort. The absolute deadline is APRIL 4. If you don’t have success in getting your message through, may I suggest you send it as an attachment to Susan Randolph, and ask her to forward it? THANK YOU!

Tom

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[http://deldot.gov/information/projects/misc\\_virtual\\_workshops/rt82/index.shtml](http://deldot.gov/information/projects/misc_virtual_workshops/rt82/index.shtml)