

It is one of humankind's oldest sayings, that into every life some rain must fall. But fortunate is the presence of those who can make us laugh, even when the storm-clouds gather. Much of what we do is comical, and it may be true that the most laughable activities that we know about are also those very same things that are most worth the doing. Happiness probably consists in our capacity to recognize and to savor the ridiculous things that happen. Another ancient word to us is, live merrily as thou canst, for by honest mirth we cure many ailments of the mind, if in no other way than in banishing boredom and in adding a measure of excitement to the routine of our lives. There is also an ancient Indian proverb that I admire--there are three things in life that are real--God, human folly, and laughter. The first two are beyond our comprehension, so we must do what we can with the third. Nothing is quite so pleasing in a group than to have one member who can say precisely the right thing at the right time that will relieve the tension and make everybody laugh. I may have told you my favorite example of that great gift. In June of 1944 my army unit was in small landing craft headed for Utah Beach in Normandy. Ahead of us great puffs of black smoke marked the explosion of artillery shells, exactly on that part of the shore-line where we were headed. I saw one body sail thru the air out of that smoke, and I knew that this was no drill; this was the real thing. The other side was using live ammunition, the bums. At that moment one of the privates in the unit came to me, put the palm of one hand over the back of the other hand, so that the thumbs stuck out on either side. "Sergeant, he said, is it too late for me to tell the Army that my hands don't match?" I think it is fair to say that everybody who crossed the beach was seasick from the bobbing of the small boats; our unit landed laughing. The tension was broken, and when the ramp went down, thru the surf we went, into battle. The young man was not joking; he wanted out of there. But good humor gave us the medicine we needed at that moment. So society is grateful for its comics, those who can see the amusing even in the most serious. So we listen to the TV comics who comment upon the day's news, knowing that the one who does the speaking has hired joke-writers to give him (or her) a line to say. Today the subject is America's Comic Cowboy, who over a long career on the stage enlivened his generation with a good slap-on-the-knee laugh line about the follies and the foibles of his neighbors. His name was Will Rogers, and what made his act all the more enticing was that he wrote his own material, explaining that all he knew he read in the newspapers. So for the last session in this end-of-millennium year may we get a laugh, and pay homage to, a genuine, original, funny man. Thru most the the 19th Cen there were many such comics. Call them cracker-barrel philosophers, meaning one who joined the group around the general-store's cracker supplies to spread good humor. Artemus Ward, Petroleum V. Nasby, Bill Arp, Mark Twain, Josh Billings, and the Irish immigrant Mr. Dooley, were as famous, and as well-known, in their times and places, as are the stars of TV and radio ~~are~~ in our time. Will Rogers was the last of that line, for since he died there have been very few original wits to give perspective and balance to our lives. At his death in 1935 Will was the top moving-picture box-office attraction, the most popular radio entertainer, and newspaper columnist, after-dinner speaker, and lecturer in the country. And to top it off, he was without a doubt first in the affections of his countrymen and women. His humor, his sarcasms, his understanding of human nature, were just as much a part of him as were his big ears, his shuffling way of walking, and his continuous grin. He began as an oral humorist, as had those other American wits, but he soon graduated to the printed word, first a weekly column in the newspapers, and then a daily comment, sometimes only a few inches long. But always pithy, pointed, and funny. From the beginning of the year 1922, to his death in August 1935, he provided a chuckle, and often it was a deep roaring guffaw, every day. He was the one who said that when Congress was in session, a stand-up comic had no chance to make a living, for there was too much competition in the foolishness trade. In these articles his point-of-view was refreshing. He never supported a policy of changing the world to fit our pattern, with bayonets or rifles, and he would have been strongly opposed to using and stockpiling nuclear weapons. He was a thorough-going internationalist, knowing that the kind of people from whom he came were the same everywhere, across all man-made borders of language or culture or skin. He did not want to Americanize any country; he would let them develop as they wanted to; he complained about those who would send missionaries to China, saying on a number of occasions that we need China to send missionaries to us. He said over and over that as he travelled about the world, he never met a nation he did not like, just as he never met a person he did not like. He did not have one personality in one group, and another Will in another place. He wrote for over 200 great daily newspapers, for 2000 rural weeklies, half of the leading magazines, ~~he~~ did radio broadcasts and made more than a 100 moving pictures, all of them box-office hits, and in every one of them he played the same character, whether it was a Conn Yankee in King Arthur's Court, State Fair, or David Harum. He was the most popular and sought-after for an after-dinner speech to any group that knew of him. Before we finish I want to read you selections of my favorites among his columns and speeches, but first I will briefly sketch his life. He was born Nov 4, 1879, at Oologah Indian Territory, now the state of Oklahoma, near the town of Claremore, three-sixteenths Cherokee Indian--though how anybody could work that out is beyond me. (story of Indian at a blooddrive office, one pint low) Will later said that his tribe lived on land beneath which there was no oil, so the whites defined them as civilized Indians and stayed on their land. Where there was oil, they immediately became wild and dangerous, so they were driven off the land. He had a heavy burden to bear from his birth, for his parents gave him three names--legally he was William Penn Adair Rogers...which may explain his humorous streak. His father was a man of influence in the tribe and in the community, living on the last American frontier, just as it was disappearing. At home Will learned to speak by hearing politics discussed over the dining-room table, and as soon as he was strong enough, he learned how to rope things, and to twirl a rope in a circle. When he was 10 his father's large land-holding was divided into homesteads, and his mother died, in each case ending whatever ambition he may have had to live at home and in comfort. These two major events turned him both inward and outward, so that wherever he roamed in his lifetime, he always kept both feet firmly planted in the soil ~~of the soil~~ of the Indian Territory from which he came. It was a stroke of luck that he went into show-business, as a professional cowboy who could entertain an audience. As the 19th Cent ended, the romance of the cattle frontier excited many an American. Theo Roosevelt's Rough Riders who were cattle-men in the cavalry in the war with Spain over Cuba, and people

Veterans' Day 2000. On the Quad. David L. Smiley.

Vol. 400-5.C. line

My dearly beloved, ladies, gentlemen, boys, girls, we are gathered here this morning to honor those who gave of their time and talents, of their courage and their will, and in many cases ~~gave~~ the last full measure of devotion, to the land in which they lived, where they learned the meaning of time, and community, and life. They served when they were called, and they fell, upon plots of ground in places nearby, and in places far distant from where we stand this morning. In their honor we are called upon to remember their devotion to country and what it stands for. Memory, as someone who is wiser than I has said, is the ability to gather roses in winter, or to imagine a snowman in the sultry heat of summer. Those ~~of us~~ whose sacrifices preserved for us our way of living and thinking, looked into the face of battle at Bunker Hill, and not very far from where we are today, at King's Mountain, where American Loyalists and American Revolutionaries did battle, 220 yrs ago last month. It is worth a short journey to see where your ancestors charged up that steep hill, and where the defenders resisted them--and all but the British commander on the hilltop were native-born Americans. Give them all a cheer. Other soldiers stood at New Orleans, and Chapultepec and San Juan Hill and Gettysburg, at Chateau-Thierry and in the Belleau Wood, on the sands of Omaha Beach and at Iwo Jima, along the Yalu and the Mekong Rivers. All of them are heroes, to whom we owe an unpayable debt of gratitude. But let us take one group of them as representative of them all. Last month a navy destroyer was attacked in a terrorist attack that blew a hole in the ship's side, killed 17 sailors and wounded others. A week ago the surviving crew members arrived at the ship's home port in Virginia. The entire crew worked long hours in debilitating heat to keep the injured ship afloat. "We were fighting for our lives," one of them said; "It could have been 250 men dead (and some of the crew members were women); it could have been 250 dead and the ship could have sunk if it wasn't for these guys ...it was an act of war, and they won that war." ~~He~~ Beneath an enormous American flag and Welcome Home banners, one of the speakers greeting the Cole's crew put the veterans' experience into a context that brings a lump to our throats and a tear to our eyes, ~~when~~ he said "Sometimes in life you are swept up by something bigger than you are." Every soldier, seaman, marine, or flyer has known the feeling, and in quieter moments later, give thanks for the opportunity to be a small part of something so large, and so determinative of what the future shall be for themselves, and for those who come later. They are heroes who know that feeling, for it is the soul of America. It inspires people who gave of themselves in a cause as large as our country, a cause which they took to be the highest value, higher even than life itself. So we meet here to remember the veterans, the millions who wore the colors of their land, who took the oath to defend ~~it~~ against all who would harm her, and who served her as she called them to do. May we salute them, and may we never, ever, forget what they gave to us. Their gift to us is more than our country and its way of life; it is our very being.

When asked what that war was like, the seaman answered, "Turn your oven on to preheat for about 20 minutes and crawl inside and try to sleep."

could not get enough of carefully staged rodeos on sawdust-filled theatres and auditoriums. Will did his share of calf-roping ~~from a horse~~, tying its feet together, to win a small prize. Then he moved into vaudeville, doing a show of rope twirling in front of the curtain as the scenes were set behind them. He became a regular on Flo Ziegfeld's Follies in New York, on Broadway. After a few years of that, he added a monologue to his act, in which as the rope spun about him and over his head, he would comment on the day's news in his inimitable humor. It became a great hit, many people coming to the show just to catch his act, and to laugh at his reading of current eventw. Out of those appearances came his newspaper columns and his movie career. He moved to Beverly Hills because of his connection to the movies, and from there he could put his writings on the telegraph. On Nov 25, 1908, he married Betty Blake of Rogers, Ark; he said when he roped her it was the star performance of his life. They honeymooned in New York, where Mrs. Rogers said she wanted to see two things--Caruso sing, and Grant's Tomb. He preferred Grant's Tomb, he said, for he stayed outside while his wife went inside. Later he said he did not think the show Caruso was in was a hit, for the next day they passed the Opera House, and another show was on the bill.

Will was a strong supporter of aviation, considering it the way of the future, to tie the world together into a community. In August 1935 he went with pilot Wiley Post on a flying trip to Alaska, where he'd always wanted to go. In the fog and snow something went wrong, the plane crashed to earth, killing both of them. The nation mourned. I was 14 years old; Will Rogers was one of my favorites. My daddy made me a wooden box, like a cube about a foot on the sides, with a large hasp and a big lock, in which I kept my keepsakes. With 6 people living in a small house, it was all the privacy that I had. Into that box I put the clippings of Will Rogers' passing, and there they stayed for 4 years, when I left home to go to college, and then to war; what happened to my private box, that I left beneath my side of the bed, I do not know.

Now to some samples of the wit and wisdom of Will Rogers.

Speech to Internatl Bankers' Assoc, 1922. P.70-71.

Corset makers, p. 71

From Column  
One-liners...

1928, America and France signed a treaty that they wouldn't fight each other. Now if we just sign one with some nation that there is a chance of having war with, why it would mean something....What should be done with Chambers of Commerce: Let the Secretaries get some other job, and the Members go back to eating lunch with their own families.

When you get old enough you write your Memoirs. That's a Cherokee word. It means when you put down the good things you ought to have done, and leave out the bad things you did do--well, that's a Memoir. 1932: 82 yrs ago California entered the Union, on a bet. The bet was that the country would eventually be called California and not America. We took it away from Mexico the next year after we found it had gold. When the gold was all gone we tried to give it back, but Mexico was too foxy for us. In '49 the wayward sons out of 10,000 families crossed the country, and the roads was so rough they couldn't get back. A friend told Will that the reason Indians did not get lost where the White man always did, was because an Indian always looked back after he passed anything so he got a view of it from both sides. You see the White Man just figures that all sides of a thing are the same. That's like a dumb guy with an argument, he don't think there can be any other side than his. That's what you call Politicians. You can learn a lot from that Indian. You must never disagree with a man while you are facing him. Go around behind him and look the same way he is looking, and you will see that things look different from what they do when you are facing him. Look over his shoulder and get his viewpoint, then go back and face him and you will have a different idea.

I have no Philosophy, I don't even know what the word means. McGuffys 4th reader is as far as I ever got in school. I am thoroughly ashamed of it for I had every opportunity.

Everything I have done has been by luck, no move was premeditated. I just stumbled from one thing to another. I might have been down. I didn't know it at the time, ~~for~~ and I don't know yet, for I don't know what "Up" is. I may be lower than I ever was, I don't know. I may be making the wrong use of any little talent (if any) that I accidentally have. I don't know.

I got me a dictionary one time, but goodness it didnt last long. It was like looking in a telephone book. I never called up anybody in my life if I had to look up their number. Nobody is worth looking through all those numbers for, and thats the way it was with my dictionary. I could write the article while I was trying to see what the word meant, and thats one good thing about language, there is always a short word for it. Course the Greeks have a word for it, but I believe in using your own for it. The minute you put in a word that everybody dont know, you have just muddled up that many readers. Running into a word you cant read, or understand, is just like a detour in the road. You cuss it, and about a half dozen of them, and you will take a different road the next time. I love words but I dont like strange ones. You dont understand them, and they dont understand you. Old words is like old friends, you know em the minute you see em.

1934: Congress has just passed the big inheritance tax, that gets you when you are gone. I think it's a good law. You have had the use of it during your lifetime, so turn it over to the Government and they can do some darn fool thing with it, no telling what, maby something just as foolish as the children of the deceased would. What is it they say? Its only one generation from a pick handle to a putter (a golf club) and one more from a tuxedo to a tramp. When taxes got started...who started em anyhow? Noah must have taken into the Ark two taxes, one male and one female, and did they multiply bountifully? Next to guinea pigs, taxes must have been the most prolific animals. 1935: We are always saying let the law take its course, but what we mean is, "let the law take our course."