CONTENTS

Acknowledgments ix

Introduction: The Cherokee Kid 1

1 Becoming Will Rogers 15

2 From Cherokee Kid to Oklahoma Cowboy 49

3 The Ropin' Fool and the Escrow Indians of Southern California 88

4 Ambassador Cherokee 130

5 “Now I Hope My Cherokee Blood Is Not Making Me Prejudiced” 175

Conclusion: The Cultural Crinoline 204

Notes 217

Bibliography 285

Index 301
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INTRODUCTION

THE CHEROKEE KID

Was Will Rogers Really an Indian?

This, the most common question I am asked in regard to my re-
search, elucidates in a variety of ways why this book is important to
the study of American Indian celebrity. The comedian, actor, jour-
nalist, and political pundit was indeed American Indian, as most
books on Rogers mention, however briefly. What distinguishes this
book from most other texts on Rogers is my attempt to show—that
is, to deepen, refine, contextualize, and interrogate—what those
ties meant to Rogers, why they were significant to US popular cul-
ture during his lifetime, and how they demonstrate the importance
of tribal specificity in the study of Native and American cultural
histories.

The rub is this: Rogers wasn’t only an American Indian; he was
also a citizen of the Cherokee Nation. My exploration of the com-
plex interplay of this distinction—between American Indian and
Cherokee, in this case—reveals still-common assumptions regard-
ing Native authenticity in the history of American popular culture.
These tenacious expectations, which persist despite significant aca-
demic clamoring, have denied Rogers’s full inclusion in the canon
of Native history.¹ He simply didn’t act the part. My approach to
Rogers, I hope, exemplifies one way scholars might use tribal his-
tories and cultures to broaden and more deeply understand Native
American influence on US popular culture.²

Will Rogers (1879–1935), the son of a prominent Cherokee
politician, was born and raised in the Cooweescoowee District of
the Cherokee Nation, part of Indian Territory. By the time of his
death in 1935, he was a household name across the United States.
He left the Territory in 1902 and found lucrative employment in
Texas Jack’s Wild West Show. From the early 1900s to the 1920s,
he worked the vaudeville circuits and headlined the Ziegfeld Follies as a political comedian and trick-roper. Throughout the 1920s and 1930s, he starred in nearly seventy movies, hosted a regular radio show, and penned more than four thousand syndicated editorials. He even ran for president in 1932. It was a gag, but FDR, who ran for office the same year, dropped him a quick line just to be sure: “don’t forget you are a Democrat by birth, training and tough experience and I know you won’t get mixed in any fool movement to make the good old Donkey chase his own tail and give the Elephant a chance to win the race.” Rogers was, to put it lightly, a Cherokee who carried substantial cultural capital in the United States during the first part of the twentieth century.

Rogers played an important cultural role for most American citizens in the early twentieth century by mediating the bifurcated American scene marked by a dwindling rural and regional America on one hand and an emerging urban and metropolitan nation on the other. There was trepidation and a resultant adherence to convention in small-town America in the 1920s. In cities such as New York, on the other hand, many “mongrel” urban dwellers became socially, artistically, and intellectually unbound by the increasingly diverse urbanity of the United States. For all Americans, population changes, technological advances, and the rise of consumer culture gave rise to both new and resurgent coping mechanisms. It was through his seeming rural sensibility, destabilized by a more subversive urban proficiency, that Rogers maintained his popularity among various groups of Americans. By bridging these seemingly divergent demographics, Rogers became a cultural centerpiece of the Interwar Years.

Rogers’s life was a reflection of these changes, though with a tribal flare. He moved from a small town, which was invaded not only by the supposed amenities of modern life but also by non-Cherokee intruders, to some of the nation’s fastest-growing cities (New York and later Los Angeles) and became a sensation. He was,
as many remember him, homely and simple in his commentary and performances; however, it was simplicity with a sharp edge and, often, a profoundly politicized message. Rogers successfully spanned the urban-rural gap, both personally and professionally. In the details of his writing, acting, and performing, Rogers made the urban palatable to a national audience often uneasy with the dramatic changes facing the United States in the early twentieth century. He called Henry Ford “Henry” and poked fun at his money-grubbing ways; he won a dime from John D. Rockefeller after a golf game; he wrote in a lighthearted regional dialect about the country’s most serious problems; and he assumed the role of “self-made diplomat” to Calvin Coolidge, an icy figure who Rogers referred to as “Kal.” Rogers took the socially conservative high ground among the risqué Ziegfeld Girls, making the tantalizing show acceptable to a wide variety of audiences. He was, at the same time, surprisingly worldly. Indeed, his most famous remark—“I never met a man I didn’t like”—was printed for the first time in regard to Leon Trotsky.⁵

As interesting as his life and career were, this book is not a biography. Using Rogers as a case study, I explore in these chapters a new method for interrogating American Indian celebrities in specific tribal terms. Substantial and high-quality scholarship has examined Rogers’s artistic and political ventures through a US-centric frame; this book takes a different approach by asking how this Cherokee artist so profoundly shaped the face of American popular culture by calling on Cherokee traditions.⁶ This study, then, considers Rogers as a man with persistent and complex social and cultural connections to his tribe, ties that had a rippling effect on his multimedia contributions to the United States.

Once placed in this tribal-national context, Rogers’s artistic and political contributions to stage comedy, journalism, film, and radio transform from what some perceive to be the hokey meanderings of a homespun cowboy-philosopher into multimedia work
that infuses US popular culture with Cherokee artistry. Without understanding Rogers’s tribal connections—ties he emphasized repeatedly in his work, as this book will show—it is impossible to understand him. And because Rogers was not the only influential Native figure in the United States during this period—Luther Standing Bear, Geronimo, Zitkala Ša, Chauncey Yellow Robe, and Charles Eastman are just a few of Rogers’s American Indian contemporaries—I contend that it is impossible to understand the period’s cultural history without also interrogating, in Rogers’s case, the Cherokee Nation and, in other cases, different tribal histories. Indeed, a successful understanding of American cultural history at large requires an awareness of the specific tribal nations extant within the United States’ geographic boundaries. Instead of “American Indian” popular-culture history, I argue that we need to examine Lakota, Pomo, Mashpee, or Comanche histories, each of which contains its own stories of conflict and negotiation not only with the United States, but also within its own sovereign borders. To overlook the influence of specific tribal traditions on larger US cultural tendencies is to flatten both American Indian and US histories at large. Rogers provides but one influential example of this tribe-to-US transference.

**Roped In: Representations of Will Rogers**

Popular literature on Rogers reveals much about the many ways Americans interpreted (and sometimes continue to interpret) Native peoples and explains, in part, why Rogers is often excluded from scholarly consideration of American Indians in popular culture. At the heart of these popular depictions is a focus on blood quantum, a representation of Natives of mixed descent that has been around since colonial times. The question of blood, during Rogers’s lifetime, was an increasingly important one in legislative decision-making. Indeed, it was the legal definitions of Native
identity that codified the use of blood as an identity marker.\textsuperscript{8} Until the late nineteenth century, the use of blood quantum as a legal definition applied to American Indians was ad hoc and more often used as a linguistic and cultural marker than a legal one, implying typically that persons of mixed Indian and non-Indian blood were troublesome.\textsuperscript{9} Later, during Rogers’s lifetime, blood quantum became part of legislative and legal decision-making.

The official labeling of Indian persons according to their biological ancestry became commonplace as a result of the General Allotment Act of 1887 (the Dawes Act), which parcelled out collectively held tribal lands to individual tribal citizens. It was the Five Tribes that faced such legal definitions on a large scale for the first time.\textsuperscript{10} Through the first two decades of the twentieth century, various legislative actions were taken to more strictly define who qualified as American Indian based on blood quantum. Even with the passage in 1934 of the Indian New Deal (or Indian Reorganization Act), blood requirements remained muddled. In the end, the issue of blood quantum became not only a useful colonial tool of the US government, but also a definition of cultural belonging among Native and non-Native populations alike. Indeed, as is made clear throughout this book, Rogers frequently referred to himself as “part-Cherokee.” Given the era’s obsession with blood quantum, I contend that such self-presentation was certainly a way of promoting himself as a certain type of American Indian, someone who had the credentials, as a “mixed blood,” to comment on larger American politics. However, I also believe that his depiction of himself in this way reflected his literal blood mixture—not his cultural affiliation, which was not part-Cherokee, but all-Cherokee.

The literature on the representations and experiences of Native peoples of mixed genetic lines is wide-ranging.\textsuperscript{11} Much of the recent scholarship follows Theda Perdue’s rejection of the claim that “culture follows blood,” meaning that a person of mixed Native and European ancestry will take on the habits and cultural mores of
both cultures, regardless of their cultural upbringing. However, Rogers’s early biographers connect culture and genetics by using his mixed ancestral lines to emphasize how “all-American” he was. Discarding his solid Cherokee cultural ties, P. J. O’Brien, in his biography Will Rogers (1935), asserts that:

Rogers undoubtedly drew upon all three strains, Irish, Scotch, and American Indian, to fashion the character that was so beloved by the world. From the Irish came his sense of humor.... The Scotch added a keen sense of business...and from the Indian came the dignity and reserve that prevented him...from descending to the level of a merry-andrew.

In another, Donald Day begins Our Will Rogers (1953) this way: “He [Will Rogers] was, in blood, more Irish than Indian, but he was such a showman that he played up the Indian and let the Irish take care of itself.” Considering the severely limited economic opportunities facing Natives at the turn of the century, it is questionable at best that Rogers would foreground his Cherokee blood to garner a career boost. Other books of this sort abound and continue to be published today. These works are strikingly romantic, with a tight focus on Rogers’s clean character, his true-blooded Americanness, and his humor. Others consist simply of compilations of his one-liners, or his “wit and wisdom,” as some books refer to them.

This sense that Rogers’s physical mixture of blood tied him to various traditions or made him a cultural go-between abounds in nearly all the popular literature on Rogers. The effect pulls him into a non-Native cultural world, thus losing the depth of his connection to Cherokee traditions. His purported “dash of Indian blood,” as William Carlos Williams would have it, remains central to Rogers’s popularity, if misdirected. In the United States, some American Indian ancestry carries with it a claim to true Americanness and a
deeper sense of national belonging. Yet such reference remains largely symbolic and reveals an obsession with American Indian cultures described effectively in Philip Deloria’s *Playing Indian*: “American freedom rests on the ability to wield power against Indians . . . while simultaneously drawing power from them. . . . The dispossession of Indians exists in tension with being aboriginally true.” In regard to Rogers, this essentialized focus on his Cherokee *blood* leaves his complex Cherokee cultural belonging at the door, a colonial act in which non-Natives disempower Native peoples, most pointedly Rogers himself, and empower themselves through a connection to them. Another reason some popular depictions recognize but downplay Rogers’s Cherokee identity is that the writers believed in fixed and unchanging Native cultures—that is, Native cultures existed in a bygone era. In this scenario, it must be Rogers’s European ancestry that made him a modern-day celebrity since Cherokee culture cannot change without becoming inauthentic. Of course, all historical and scholarly evidence shows American Indian cultures to be just as capable of change as all other cultures.

Recent academic work on Rogers provides a more complex (and accurate) analysis of his tribal ties. Scholars embedded in the Cherokee Nation’s history and literary traditions have deepened the celebrity’s connections to home. Daniel Heath Justice, in *Our Fire Survives the Storm*, offers “a historically rooted and culturally informed reading of the Cherokee literary tradition,” one that situates Rogers’s journalism alongside other Cherokee writers (his ancestors, contemporaries, and successors). Justice determines Rogers to be a “stealth minority with access to a forum and a platform inaccessible to other Indians of his day.” Likewise, Tol Foster’s advocacy for a regional approach to the literary study of the Indian Territory incorporates Rogers as a central figure: “Tribal figures like the Cherokee writer Will Rogers are historically situated actors who utilize the counternarratives of their communities as a
theoretical base from which to conduct anticolonialist and cosmopolitan critique.”

While the strengths of both Justice’s and Foster’s work lie in their abilities to read him as a Cherokee literary figure, it is the first chapter of Lary May’s *The Big Tomorrow* that offers an in-depth examination of Rogers as a Cherokee film star. May suggests that Rogers embedded radical political ideas in a rural-sounding style that reflected traditional values. My work here dovetails with all these by examining Rogers’s films and journalism alongside his other contributions to US popular culture—and then tying them to the Cherokee Nation.

**The Cherokee Kid: Understanding Will Rogers**

It is significant that the first stage name Will Rogers adopted was The Cherokee Kid, for it reveals who he intended to be in the popular realm. As Rogers’s popularity increased, however, his self-representation became slippery and not always easy to analyze. Indeed, my own relationship with Rogers over the past decade has been fraught with unanswerable questions, most of which are the result of the complicated world in which he lived. Like many Cherokees growing up at the end of the nineteenth century, Rogers navigated the complicated waters of political and cultural colonialism. His first thirty years were marked by invasions (by way of the Oklahoma Land Runs and the coming of Oklahoma Statehood in 1907) and resultant tribal-national struggles to maintain Cherokee sovereignty. This search for political, social, and cultural self-sufficiency insisted on a modern Cherokee identity that rejected then-common outsider notions that American Indians were doomed to extinction. At the same time as such changes were occurring in the Cherokee Nation, a pantribal identity was on the rise across Native America, an unforeseen result of the federally imposed boarding-school system and the rise of pantribal events such as powwows. Rogers’s family, which
was political, wealthy, and Confederate, further complicates matters. This additional affiliation—as the son of wealthy Cherokee slaveholders—adds even more layers to Rogers’s identity.

When Rogers entered the popular arena, he worked to carve out a distinct space for himself that allowed him to be Cherokee (that is, The Cherokee Kid), a role that did not easily mesh with popular conceptions of being American Indian. In most publicity during these early years in show business, he referred to himself as Cherokee. Later, he sometimes referred to himself as American Indian. There are many times, however, when he called himself American. While there seems to be some method here—Rogers often referred to himself as American when discussing international issues—it is also clear that for Rogers there was not always an easy delineation between the markers Cherokee, American, or American Indian. There was certainly some play here; at times, Rogers manipulated his identity to his advantage, and sometimes he manipulated multiple identities at the same time. There was also ample evidence that Rogers considered himself a dual citizen of both the Cherokee Nation and the United States. There is little evidence suggesting that Rogers considered himself trapped or liminal in any way; he was comfortable in both the Cherokee Nation and the United States. It seemed to be his audience that was unable to integrate the different pieces of Rogers.

My research on Rogers confirmed that he was, in general, the upstanding character that is represented in memorials, statues, quotation books, and the like. However, his career is marked by occasions of elitism that will be examined throughout this book. First is a racial elitism toward Africans, African Americans, and Afro-Cherokees. At several points in his life, this issue becomes relevant and is tied to his family’s connections to the Cherokee Confederacy. Of course, the antiblack attitudes of the day, which were commonplace throughout the United States, also played a key role in understanding Rogers’s racial elitism. As will be shown in chapter
1, some Cherokee cultural changes in the late nineteenth century included the incorporation of traditionally American cultural practices and beliefs. At least in Rogers’s case, it seems he accepted US racial hierarchies, perhaps as a way of placing himself (a Cherokee) closer to the top of this racial ladder. Even when he was clearly in the wrong—evidenced by an NAACP boycott that will be discussed in chapter 5—Rogers steadfastly defended himself, albeit weakly, by calling on his Cherokee Confederate roots. While Rogers was often quite astute regarding issues of discrimination, colonization, and power, he seemed oddly cold toward the struggles of certain groups.

With some frequency, Rogers also displayed a tribal elitism by raising the Cherokee above other tribal nations in his writings and radio shows. This seems especially true of the Osage, a nation the Cherokees confronted in the Indian Territory multiple times. He feels free to cast the Osage as savages, the Cherokee as civilized. Some of this may be friendly intertribal banter; at times, however, the jabs seem quite brutal. Further, while in Southern California, Rogers never (to my knowledge) reached out to the many other American Indian actors in the region. I have no easy answer as to why. At times, Rogers seems quick to tie himself and his tribe to his rather ambiguous ideals of civilization, which meant he cast certain groups as savages. Of course, none of these personal shortcomings makes him less Cherokee; they simply make his case all the more complicated.

In wrangling with Rogers’s self-representation and his periodic elitism, I find Gerald Vizenor’s model of the “postindian warrior of survivance” useful because the concept depends on rupture, complication, and play (both good and bad).

Survivance, a word combining survival and endurance, reflects Rogers’s abilities to use Cherokee traditions and history in modern and innovative ways. Vizenor’s definition of postindian warriors is based on this idea
of survivance, and he argues that Native intellectuals often reject their period’s stereotypes by using modern artistic forms that are often tied to the ways their respective tribes used to fight colonial domination. To counter the colonial development of the nontribal, generic “indian,” which Vizenor posits does not exist in everyday lived experiences, the “postindian ousts the inventions with humor, new stories, and the simulations of survivance.” These post-indians counter attempts at colonization and “manifest manners”—those simulations in modern times that replay Euro-American dominance—by pursuing, creating, or discovering their own modern tribal discourses, which often involve technologies of the colonizer.

Rogers created, I suggest, a new method of “survivance” during a period of flux in Native political and cultural history. By presenting himself (often autonomously) using various media, Rogers offered a method of cultural survival and endurance not practiced by many other Natives of his day. Postindians “undermine and surmount, with imagination and the performance of new stories, the manifest manners of scriptural simulations and ‘authentic’ representations of the tribes in the literature of dominance.” In other words, by indigenizing various American technologies, Rogers subverted and re-created typical stories of Native America and the United States. He pushed the boundaries of what it meant to be Indian and, more specifically, what it meant to be a Cherokee.

The Roundup: Chapter Overview
In the following chapters I analyze Rogers’s late-nineteenth-century Cherokee ties and their rippling effects on his groundbreaking roles in journalism, film, vaudeville, and radio. Before delving into the specifics, however, my first chapter depicts the cultural and historical milieu of the Cherokee Nation and the Indian Territory between 1880 and 1900, the approximate years Rogers lived in the
Cherokee Nation. Centered on Rogers (born in 1879), his family, and his social networks, the chapter describes Cherokee ranching practices, social clubs, educational institutions, popular publications, and heated political debates (such as the Cherokee Freedman dispute), showing that Rogers left the Territory with a distinct idea of what it meant to be a Cherokee living in the United States.

Chapter 2 expands academic interpretations of ethnic guises, detailing the process by which both Rogers and the American public haggled with the seemingly conflicting roles of cowboy and Indian, roles steeped in a presumed ethnic conflict yet embodied in Rogers himself. This chapter focuses on Rogers’s early years as a performer, when he worked the Wild West and vaudeville circuits, ultimately headlining the *Ziegfeld Follies* through the late 1910s. Rogers’s strong ties to Cherokee ranching history influenced the way he presented himself, yet such performances confounded his fans. In the end, Rogers’s self-representation as a cowboy limited the public’s recognition of him as an Indian.

Rogers moved away from upscale vaudeville performances beginning in 1918, when his first silent film, *Laughing Bill Hyde*, was released. Chapter 3 examines Rogers’s work in the early film industry. I do not explore all of Rogers’s nearly seventy films in this chapter but home in on those that complicate his film career’s connections to both the Cherokee Nation and American Indian actors in early Hollywood. In most of Rogers’s films, he was told what character to play and what actions to take. It would be difficult, if not impossible, to understand his intellectual intent in such performances. There are a few films, however, that I do examine for their content, since Rogers wrote or produced them. In fact, Rogers produced several films in the early 1920s—many of which he wrote—and analyses of these make up the bulk of my examination into his film career.

The fourth chapter examines Rogers’s journalistic style and content. The celebrity wrote syndicated columns published throughout
the United States from 1923 to his death. Though dealing with seri-
ous political issues of the day, Rogers rarely wrote in complete sen-
tences and used a good deal of what I term Indian Territory slang.
The Cherokee Kid may have been one of the only columnists for
the New York Times whose work was published unedited.29 This
journalistic writing style, however, was not purely his own. Tribal
newspapers were published throughout the Indian Territory, be-
inning in the mid-nineteenth century, and these papers contained
a good deal of commentary written by tribal members in a unique
dialect. These writers were also communicating with one another,
working to create what they termed este charte, or “Red English,” a
term Craig Womack suggests is from the Creek word stijaati: “lit-
erally, red person, i.e., Indian.”30 In the end, the genre represents
a rebellion against non-Natives’ representations of stereotypical
Indian speak. This literary movement, I show, provided a stylistic
blueprint for Rogers.31

The last substantive chapter of this book focuses on Rogers’s
radio days. As with his work in other genres, Rogers included dis-
cussion of Native issues on the air. What is distinct about his ra-
dio contributions is their spontaneity (they were recorded live and
typically aired uncensored). I provide in chapter 5 an analysis of
Rogers’s biting humorous style, based on the reactions of his live
studio audience. By examining the audience’s (sometimes ner-
vous) laughter, I show that Rogers’s commentary on Native issues
sometimes shocked his listeners. It was also during his work in ra-
dio that Rogers raised the ire of many African Americans. The boy-
cott of his show by the NAACP—as well as Rogers’s reaction to that
boycott—reflects his family’s ties to the Cherokee Confederacy.

The conclusion explores Rogers’s influence on those who came
after him. Here I offer a brief study of Will Rogers, Jr., who was a
Democratic congressman from California, special assistant to the
commissioner of Indian Affairs for the Johnson administration,
and a founding member of the National Congress of American
Indians. A discussion of Will Rogers’s son’s involvement in Indian political affairs reveals the intimate ways Rogers’s intellectual work became part of a larger familial story of a commitment to both Cherokee cultural continuity and larger Indian community survival. I end by discussing the book’s larger implications for the study of American and American Indian cultural histories, emphasizing that the addition of tribal histories to larger American histories might alter scholarly approaches to US-Indian history at large.

In the end, this study does not merely illuminate the intimate connections between Will Rogers and the Cherokee Nation, although it does that. It further elucidates the ways American and specific American Indian tribal histories interact with and affect one another. In doing so, this project shows that scholars must reconsider essentialized notions of Indianness, turning instead to specific tribal histories and the ways these traditions intermingle with others to affect the whole.