

GUIDE TO THE WILL ROGERS STATE HISTORIC PARK PHOTOGRAPHIC COLLECTION

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Park History

Will Rogers State Historic Park contains roughly 187 acres of historical, natural, and recreational resources. Located in the Pacific Palisades area of the Santa Monica Mountains in the city of Los Angeles in Los Angeles County, the park abuts Topanga State Park and Sunset Boulevard. The park is accessible by car via Will Rogers State Park Road.

Before it became an operational ranch, the area encompassing the present-day park served as the dividing line between the Chumash and the Gabrieleno/Tongva tribal groups. Culturally similar, both groups enjoyed access to abundant coastal resources and had established large villages for thousands of years prior to Spanish colonization. With the introduction of Spanish missionaries into Alta California in the late eighteenth century, both groups were removed from their native lands and subject to the cultural erasure, diseases, overwork, and mass death of the mission system.

Following Mexico's successful battle for independence from Spain, the Mexican Government soon secularized church holdings. From 1827 through the early twentieth century, the land now containing the present-day park unit was part of a much larger Mexican land grant—Rancho Boca de Santa Monica—owned by Ysidro Reyes and Francisco Marquez, who used the land primarily for grazing cattle. Later, prominent real estate developer and founder of Bel Air Estates (the modern-day community of Bel-Air), Alphonzo Bell acquired that portion of the rancho that now contains the modern-day park. In 1922, Bell sold the land to prominent celebrity Will Rogers.

William Penn Adair Rogers was one of America's best-known celebrities in the 1920s and 1930s. A renowned cowboy, humorist, Broadway and film star, newspaper columnist, radio commentator, and humanitarian of mixed Cherokee and European heritage, Rogers was born on a frontier ranch governed by the Cherokee Nation in Oklahoma in 1879. Showing an early aptitude for horseback riding and rope tricks, Rogers worked cattle drives in numerous countries before establishing a Vaudeville presence as "The Cherokee Kid (**Figure 1**).” Growing equally popular for his political humor, he soon became the star of Ziegfeld Follies before moving to California in 1919 to start his film career. By 1935, Rogers was the highest paid actor in Hollywood, with 50 silent films and 21 “talkies” to his name. Additionally, Rogers wrote 4,000 nationally syndicated newspaper columns and gave weekly “fireside chats” over the radio. A passionate proponent of aviation, Rogers ultimately died in a plane crash with notable pilot Wiley Post in 1935 near Barrow, Alaska. In addition to the Will Rogers ranch, memorial tributes were erected in numerous locations to celebrate Will Rogers's life (**Figure2**).



Figure 1. Will Rogers, "The Cherokee Kid," after 1900. Catalog # 090-2931.



Figure 2. Will Rogers Memorial in Claremore, Oklahoma, 1938. Catalog # 090-2913.

A lifelong equestrian, Rogers had always desired a large ranch to accommodate his growing stable of horses. With its vast acreage, relative seclusion, and convenient proximity to Hollywood, the area that became Will Rogers Ranch suited Rogers's purposes perfectly. Soon after acquiring the land, Rogers graded roads and constructed a fully operational ranch (**Figures 3 and 4**). Additionally, he built a Ranch-style "getaway" cabin for himself and his wife, Betty, and three children, Will Jr., Mary, and Jim (**Figures 5 and 6**). By 1930, the Rogers family had moved to the property from their home in Beverly Hills, and by 1935, the cabin had been expanded to include 31 rooms, 11 baths, and 7 fireplaces. The grounds included 13 outbuildings, rolling lawns, pastures, riding arenas, and a large polo field (**Figures 7 and 8**).



Figure 3. Panoramic view of ranch and polo field, 1926. Catalog # 090-2847.



Figure 4. Panoramic view of ranch with road gradations, 1926. Catalog # 090-2850.

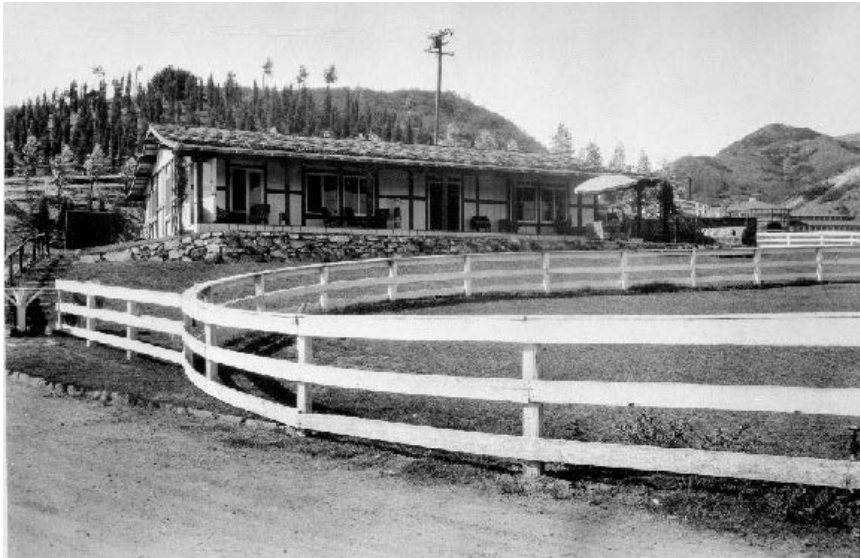


Figure 5. Will Rogers Ranch House, 1928. Catalog # 090-2842.



Figure 6. Rogers family, 1928. Catalog # 090-2924.



Figure 7. Aerial view of polo field, after 1928. Catalog # 090-2820.



Figure 8. Stables and racetrack, 1928. Catalog # 090-2844.

After her husband's death in 1935, Betty Rogers struggled to make payments on the property. During World War II, she gave ranch tours to benefit the Red Cross and the Salvation Army (**Figure 9**). Before she died in 1944, Rogers arranged for the property to be deeded to the State of California for inclusion in the state park system as a commemorative tribute to her late husband. The park unit was originally classified a state historic monument before it was reclassified a state historic park in 1963. In 1971, the Rogers Ranch was listed in the National Register of Historic Places.



Figure 9. Will Rogers memorial and ranch house, 1938. Catalog # 090-3116.

California State Parks, coordinating with the Will Rogers Ranch Foundation, preserves and interprets historical resources at Will Rogers State Historic Park. In addition to the Will Rogers ranch-style house museum and numerous outbuildings, preserved as they were during Will Rogers' life—including the display of his extensive collection of Western art—the park also includes a Visitor's Center with interpretive exhibits, a garage converted to a mini-theater, and the Mr. and Mrs. Leland Wilson Library and Reading Room (**Figures 10-13**). The park hosts numerous regular events, including historic landscape tours of the property, nature walks through the property's extensive network of hiking and equestrian trails, weekend polo matches between April and October on Los Angeles's last remaining polo field, horseback riding lessons, and screenings of Will Rogers's films during the month of August. The park is open daily from 8 AM until sunset.



Figure 10. Will Rogers Ranch House, January 26, 2013. Catalog # 090-P79479.



Figure 11. Will Rogers Ranch House (interior), January 26, 2014. Catalog # 090-P79563.



Figure 12. Stables, January 26, 2013. Catalog # 090-P79493.



Figure 13. Polo field (with downtown Los Angeles), January 26, 2013. Catalog # 090-P79519.

Scope and Content

The Will Rogers State Historic Park Photographic Collection spans the years circa 1879 through 2013, with the bulk of the collection covering the years circa 1900-1935, 1944-1969, 1998-1999, and 2013. There is a total of 1,138 cataloged images, including 811 photographic prints, scans, and negatives, 165 35mm slides, and 162 born-digital images. Photographs originated primarily from private donations and California State Parks staff.

The majority of the collection features historic and contemporary images depicting the Will Rogers Ranch House. Interior views of the house include the living room, various fireplaces, the kitchen, the study, and bedrooms. Images also feature Rogers's extensive collection of displayed Western art, including paintings, bronze statues, mounted taxidermy, and Native American blankets, baskets, and other handicrafts. Exterior views of the house include the patio, the barbeque pit, the dining area, the terrace, and the surrounding lawns.

The collection also offers extensive historic and contemporary coverage of the rest of the property. Featuring panoramic, landscape, and aerial views, images depict the polo field, the racetrack, the garage, the stables, the corral, the hay and equipment barns, and the carpenter and blacksmith shops, as well as the burial sites of two of Rogers's most prized horses, Bootlegger and Soapsuds.

The collection additionally documents built features introduced to the property by California State Parks since 1944. Depictions include park signage, the park entrance, turnstiles, interior and exterior views of the gift shop and park office, service roads, the Inspiration Loop Trail, picnic areas, and several exhibits and interpretive displays conveying the history of the property.

Also included are images depicting various events held at the park unit. Events include the Will Rogers Centennial celebration in 1979, various school tours led by park rangers in the 1980s, and the Deferred Maintenance Program conducted circa 1998-1999, in which the barn, polo, and roping arenas received necessary infrastructural repairs.

The collection also includes scanned images of individual pieces from Rogers's extensive assortment of Western Art. Images include oil portraits of Will and Betty Rogers by Howard Chandler Christy and western scenes in an assortment of mediums by several artists, including watercolor paintings by Charles M. Russell, oil paintings by Wallace Simpson, and etchings, illustrations, and watercolor paintings by Edward Borein.

Also included are images depicting the various commemorative statues and monuments created to honor Will Rogers. Depictions include the bronze statues *Will Rogers*, by Tex Wheeler, and *Will Rogers Riding into the Sunset*, by Electre Waggoner, the Will Rogers monument in Claremont, Oklahoma, and the Will Rogers and Wiley Post memorial in Barrow, Alaska.

A substantial portion of the collection is comprised of historic images donated to California State Parks by Betty Rogers along with the ranch property itself. Many of these images were originally compiled into a scrapbook chronicling Will Rogers's impressive career as well as documenting his personal family life. Candid photographs document Will and Betty Rogers on vacation as well as Will and his three children, Will Jr., Mary, and Jim, trick-riding and roping at the ranch. The scrapbook also includes numerous solo and group portraits of Will Rogers, his family, his horses, and famous friends and colleagues of note at various times in his life. In addition to photographs, the scrapbook also contains various ephemera, such as newspaper articles pertaining to Will Rogers, political cartoons from various leading cartoonists (such as Herbert Johnson), promotional literature, theater bills, and advertisements for Rogers's vaudeville performances, and production stills from several of Rogers's films.

Related Collections

Palisades Historical Image Collection, Santa Monica Public Library.

Will Rogers Memories Scrapbook, Seaver Center for Western History Research, Natural History Museum of Los Angeles County.

Will Rogers State Historic Park Collection, California State Parks Archives.

Will Rogers State Historic Park Collection of Scrapbook Material about Will Rogers, UCLA: Library Special Collections, Charles E. Young Research Library.

Catalog Subject Search Terms

Advertisement
Aerial view
Airplane
Artwork
Barrow, Alaska
Betty Rogers

Bronze statue
Charles M. Russell
"The Cherokee Kid"
Claremore, Oklahoma
Cowboy(s)
Deferred Maintenance Program

Document
Drawing
Edward Borein
Electre Waggoner
Etching
Exhibit
Exterior
Grounds
Group portrait
Herbert Johnson
Horse(s)
Howard Chandler Christy
Illustration
Interior
Interpretive display
Jim(my) Rogers
Landscape view
Lawn(s)
Mary Rogers
Memorial
Monument
Newspaper article
Painting

Panoramic view
Patio
Polo
Polo field
Portrait
Production still
Racetrack
Riding
Roping
Scrapbook
Sign(s)
Soapsuds
Stable
Tex Wheeler
Vaudeville
Watercolor painting
Wiley Post
Will Rogers
Will Rogers, Jr.
Will Rogers Ranch
Will Rogers Ranch House
Ziegfeld Follies