

Will Rogers

American humorist

Written and fact-checked by the Editors of Encyclopedia Britannica

Will Rogers (born November 4, 1879, [Cherokee](#) Territory, U.S. [near present-day [Claremore](#), Oklahoma]—died August 15, 1935, near Point [Barrow](#), Alaska) was an American entertainer, radio personality, [film](#) actor, and writer who was famous for his pithy and homespun humour and social commentary.

Rogers learned how to ride a horse and do rope tricks while growing up on a ranch in what would eventually become [Oklahoma](#). He worked in various [Wild West shows](#) in the [United States](#) and overseas, and in 1905 he displayed his roping skills at a show at [Madison Square Garden](#). The good reviews he received for the engagement prompted his decision to stay in [New York City](#) and work in [vaudeville](#). Upon discovering that audiences loved his Western drawl, he began to [ad-lib](#) patter in his previously silent act. Rogers appeared in his first [Broadway](#) show, *The Wall Street Girl*, in 1912 and demonstrated his roping skills between acts. He did the same in a few less successful shows in 1915, but he impressed producer [Flo Ziegfeld](#) enough to be hired later that year for the cast of Ziegfeld's *Midnight Frolic*.

To keep his act fresh, Rogers poked fun at prominent audience members and commented on the events of the day, especially political news. Gently kidding [Democrats](#) and [Republicans](#) alike, Rogers became a master of the political one-liner, such as "Every time Congress makes a joke it's law, and every time they make a law it's a joke." From *Midnight Frolic*, Rogers moved to the prestigious *Ziegfeld Follies* on Broadway in 1916, a yearly production to which he frequently returned until 1925.

In 1918 Rogers starred in his first film, *Laughing Bill Hyde*. Though Rogers would never admit to being anything but an [amateur](#) actor, critics appreciated his natural charm and appealingly plain face. For the next few years, he appeared in silent features for producer [Sam Goldwyn](#), as well as several comedies he produced himself and a series of [Hal Roach](#) two-reelers that made light of Hollywood and Washington. Rogers wrote books, articles, and a syndicated newspaper column; he frequently performed on radio and was a popular after-dinner speaker.

In 1929 Rogers signed a movie contract with the Fox Film Corporation and made his first talking picture, *They Had to See Paris*. Sound films obviously suited the talkative Rogers, and his popular films made him a bigger star than ever before. His more notable sound films included *A Connecticut Yankee* (1931), based on [Mark Twain](#)'s humorous novel, and *State Fair* (1933).

In politics, Rogers preferred to remain an observer, but he spent a few weeks in 1926 as honorary mayor of [Beverly Hills](#) until [California](#) legislation declared his position illegal ("I ain't the first mayor that's been kicked out," he mused), and he was a supporter of [Franklin Delanor Roosevelt](#)'s presidential candidacy. In 1935, at the height of his popularity, Rogers died in a plane crash near [Point Barrow](#), [Alaska](#). His last two films, *Steamboat 'Round the Bend* and *In Old Kentucky*, were released posthumously the same year.