Myth 150: When Did Will Rogers Visit Nevada?
By Guy Rocha, Former Nevada State Archivist

The popular American cowboy-humorist and actor Will Rogers visited Nevada many times prior to his tragic death in an airplane crash with pilot Wiley Post on August 15, 1935.

For example, Rogers spent time in northern Nevada in August and September 1930 while being filmed for the movie "Lightnin." Scenes based on Nevada's quickie-divorce business were shot near Lake Tahoe, particularly at Tahoe Tavern, and Reno.

Rogers flew from Reno to attend the Winnemucca Rodeo on August 30, where he met up with Walter "Death Valley Scotty" Scott and Governor Fred Balzar. In an interview with the *Humbol dt Star* , Rogers, after meeting the five candidates for governor, asserted "Had I known that all of Nevada's governorship aspirants were as homely as they are, I certainly would have filed for the office on the Democratic ticket, as I'm sure I'm better looking."

"Just got back from a great little western town called Winnemucca, Nevada," Rogers wrote in his nationally-syndicated column. Referring to Nevada's libertarian spirit, he noted that "You can get a divorce without lying; a drink without whispering and bet on a game of chance without breaking a promise."

However, claims that Rogers just prior to his death in 1935 visited the Dangberg home ranch outside Minden--one version including his flying to the ranch with Wiley Post--lack any supporting documentation.

Thanks to the extensive research of Gardnerville's Bill Palmer, it's clear that Will Rogers knew Fred Dangberg. A squib in the *Record Courier* newspaper of September 19, 1930 notes that Rogers was "a guest of H. F. Dangberg of Minden."

In fact, the dateline for Rogers' August 15 newspaper column is Minden, Nevada.

Rogers visited Dangberg a number of times during the filming of "Lightnin."

A lengthy stay by Rogers in Carson Valley during the height of his busy career should have been noted in the area newspapers. One claim has him visiting for a week in 1935, intending to buy the Dangberg Ranch after he returned from his flying excursion with Wiley Post to Alaska.

No known primary or secondary sources confirm the visit or his intention to buy the Dangberg home ranch.

However, as Bill Palmer noted in a letter to me, "His personal and business affairs were largely either not written down or never made public."

Perhaps most telling is that Rogers' obituary in the Record Courier of August 23, 1935, entitled "America's First Citizen Was Well Known in Valley," makes no reference to a recent visit to Carson Valley by Rogers alone, or with Wiley Post, only the visits during the filming of "Lightnin'" in 1930. It's hard to imagine that the local newspaper would have overlooked a recent visit by Rogers with or without Post.

"The nation mourns the untimely death of Will Rogers, cowboy, humorist, philosopher, actor, who wisecracked his way into the hearts of millions of people. No American was held in higher esteem or more deeply beloved than Will Rogers.

Although his unusual ability as an actor and writer, elevated him to a high pinnacle, in affluence and wealth, he chose to remain just the plain Will Rogers, a friend of the millionaire and worker, without distinction.

Several years ago when ‘Lightnin' was being filmed, he was a frequent visitor at the Dangberg home ranch in this valley.
He made the acquaintance of many people of the community and his passing brings sadness to them as well as millions that loved him."

The video series " Exploring Nevada " includes a visit to the Dangberg Home Ranch Historic Park and is available on the Nevada Department of Cultural Affairs website.

Photo credit: Dangberg Home Ranch Historic Park, Nevada Division of State Parks.

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