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September

## Born Of The Same Soil

**Oklahoma native sons Will Rogers and Woody Guthrie left their mark on the nation.**

*By Karen Gibson*

One was born in Indian Territory, the other, five years after Oklahoma statehood. Neither forgot his Oklahoma roots.

Life began for Will Rogers and Woody Guthrie only 100 miles, and 34 years apart. Each man took a different path to educate and entertain, but both influenced the country with their words. Woody Guthrie and Will Rogers became national treasures who left us before we were ready to say goodbye -- at the age of 55.

### THE LIFE OF WILL ROGERS

Will Rogers was born in the Cherokee Nation in 1879. His father was a Cherokee politician and cattle rancher and his mother the descendant of a Cherokee chief. Although he showed an early aptitude for learning, Rogers left school after 10th grade to work on a cattle drive. His talent with a rope soon drew attention, but it was Rogers' folksy comments that made a lasting impression.



Photo: Will Rogers Memorial Museum

A rope was Will's favorite prop.

Will Rogers performed in Wild West shows and vaudeville before emerging as a star of stage and screen. In addition to appearing in 71 movies, Rogers was a popular radio broadcaster and newspaper columnist with more than 4,000 syndicated columns and six books to his credit.

Sayings like "I never met a man I didn't like" and "We'll be the first nation in the world to go to the poor house in an automobile" combined Rogers' keen wit with his observations about life in America.

Rogers loved flying and sadly, a flight to Alaska Territory in 1935 piloted by his friend Wiley Post, cost Rogers his life. Newspapers proclaimed the loss of Will Rogers in big, bold letters on front pages throughout the world.

### WORDS FOR TODAY

As Oklahoma's best-loved son, evidence of Will Rogers can be seen

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everywhere. Streets, parks and buildings, even the Oklahoma City airport, bear his name. But nowhere is Will Rogers' presence more evident than in northeastern Oklahoma.

In 1911, Rogers spent \$10,000 for 20 acres in Claremore to use as his retirement home. After his death, Rogers' family donated the land for a museum. Three years later, the Will Rogers Museum was born.

Sitting on top of a hill overlooking the Tiawah Valley, the Will Rogers Museum is an impressive limestone structure of more than 20,000 square feet with nine galleries and an extensive library highlighting Rogers' life. Visitors can expect to find something they didn't know about Will Rogers in this comprehensive collection.

Will Rogers' birthplace and boyhood home, Dog Iron Ranch, is located 10 miles north of the museum in Oologah. The Greek Revival style home was built in 1875 and Rogers was born in a downstairs front room.

Today, Dog Iron Ranch is a ranch dedicated to living history. It's also home to longhorn cattle, sheep, goats and other animals.

### **THE LIFE OF WOODY GUTHRIE**

Woodrow Wilson Guthrie began life in Okemah in 1912. Named after Kickapoo Chief Okemah, the town became one of Oklahoma's first oil boomtowns during Woody's childhood. His early years were marked by the good life, but before long, things went bad. Fires destroyed more than one Guthrie home; another fire took the life of his adored older sister, while a later one injured his father.

At 16, Woody Guthrie hit the road, eventually traveling with other Dust Bowl refugees to California to sing his folk ballads. His first radio broadcasts in 1937 gained him a wide audience.

Woody Guthrie wrote what he called "people songs." He wrote more than 3,000 of these songs, although he only recorded about 150, including songs about his travels, the people he met and the events of the times.

During the late 1940s, Guthrie's behavior grew increasingly erratic. In the 1950s and '60s, he was in and out of hospitals, where he was repeatedly misdiagnosed. It was later determined he suffered from Huntington's chorea, the degenerative disease that killed his mother. Woody Guthrie died in New York in 1967.

### **THIS LAND WAS HIS LAND**

If Will Rogers was Oklahoma's best-loved son, then Woody Guthrie was the black sheep of the family. Controversy surrounded Guthrie during the turbulent political climate of the '40s and '50s when he often sang about more rights for workers. Guthrie also wrote a protest song that has come to be one of the most patriotic songs of the 20th century -- This Land is Your Land.

The monuments to his life are few in his hometown of Okemah. The town's main road is named after him and a statue of Guthrie with his

guitar sits in a memorial park in downtown Okemah. Nearby, a mural by artist DeAnna Wilson illustrates Guthrie's life.

No museum sits in Okemah to honor Woody Guthrie, but his legacy lives on each year at the Woody Guthrie Folk Music Festival. Folk musicians, including son Arlo Guthrie, perform each year at the five-day festival held near Guthrie's July 14 birthday. The festival, July 9-13 this year, is free to everyone. You suspect that this is how Woody Guthrie would have wanted to be remembered.

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*Karen Gibson is a freelance writer based in Norman, Okla.*

#### **BEFORE YOU GO:**

- **Okemah Chamber of Commerce:** (918) 623-2440;  
[www.okemah.org](http://www.okemah.org)
- **Will Rogers Memorial Museum and Dog Iron Ranch:**  
(800) 324-9455; [www.willrogers.com](http://www.willrogers.com)
- **Woody Guthrie Folk Music Festival:**  
[www.woodyguthrie.com](http://www.woodyguthrie.com)

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