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Nonprofit seeks control of Will Rogers State Historic Park

A foundation dedicated to the ranch wants to work with the state to preserve the memorial, saying California's financial troubles are jeopardizing the park's maintenance.

By Martha Groves

August 28, 2009

A private, nonprofit group wants to assume management of Will Rogers State Historic Park in Pacific Palisades, saying the California parks department has failed to fittingly honor Rogers' legacy.

In a letter to parks Director Ruth Coleman, members of the Will Rogers Ranch Foundation said Thursday that the state's shaky finances "point to the clear need to create new working relationships with organizations such as ours."

FOR THE RECORD:

Will Rogers park: An article in Section A on Aug. 28 about the private, nonprofit Will Rogers Ranch Foundation's desire to take over management of Will Rogers State Historic Park quoted Jennifer Rogers-Etcheverry as saying the foundation hoped to emulate another private group's operation of the California State Railroad Museum in Sacramento. In fact, the railroad museum is operated by the California state parks department, but it gets financial and other support from a private, nonprofit foundation. The article also said that Hearst Castle and El Presidio de Santa Barbara are operated by private "cooperating associations" in partnership with the state. California state parks operates Hearst Castle but gets financial and other support from two private, nonprofit foundations, one of which is a cooperating association. El Presidio de Santa Barbara is operated by the nonprofit Santa Barbara Trust for Historic Preservation, but the trust is not a cooperating association. —

Rogers, an immensely popular vaudevillian, cowboy philosopher and film star, lived at the ranch for many years until his death at age 55 in a 1935 plane crash.

His widow, Betty, deeded the ranch house and surrounding 186.5 acres to the state, on the condition that the state maintain the structures and grounds as a memorial.

The proposal reflects the frustrations of the Rogers family and other park supporters, who say the state has failed to abide by that agreement. They say the state's eroding finances have only worsened the situation.

Most recently, state budget cuts forced park personnel to reduce the number of days the ranch house is open to the public. And construction has been halted on a visitors center, which has been undergoing restoration.

The foundation, which was created four years ago with the specific goal of taking over stewardship of the park, hopes to operate a retail shop in the visitors center to muster more funds to care for the property.

"We believe that a partnership between the foundation and California State Parks would clearly make sense and would be in the public interest as well as in the best interests of this historic ranch," said Jennifer Rogers-Etcheverry, a great-granddaughter of Will Rogers and the foundation's chairwoman.

State officials said they were open to discussions with the group.

"We look forward to speaking with the Will Rogers Ranch Foundation about their proposal and continue to explore all creative solutions brought to us from prospective sponsors and partners who want to help us keep more parks open and operating for the public," said Sheryl A. Watson, a state parks spokeswoman.

Rogers-Etcheverry said the foundation hopes to emulate another private group's highly praised operation of the California State Railroad Museum in Sacramento.

Hearst Castle and El Presidio de Santa Barbara are also operated by private "cooperating associations" in partnership with the state.

Representatives of the foundation declined to offer details on how they would finance the proposal.

However, they said they had arranged support from the Rogers Co. (a for-profit entity that manages licensing for the Rogers estate), the Will Rogers Memorial in Oklahoma, the Will Rogers Motion Picture Pioneers Foundation, the Will Rogers Polo Club, the Pacific Palisades Historical Society and the Will Rogers Cooperative Assn. They also said they were being backed by many community leaders and opinion makers "who are willing to commit to long-term financial support."

"Our intention is to remove the uncertainty of the financial situation from the equation," said Trudi Sandmeier, a foundation board member who is also director of education for the Los Angeles Conservancy. Sandmeier's grandfather Emil and grandmother Trudy worked for the Rogers family.

"I know we can do it much more efficiently than the state has done, without a shadow of a doubt," Rogers-Etcheverry said.

Wyatt McCrea, a foundation board member, said the state agency's resources have been spread too thin to allow for optimal management of individual parks.

"There needs to be an effective plan . . . to promote the park a little bit more, with more movie nights and other events," said McCrea, whose late grandfather, film star Joel McCrea, spent time with fellow rider and roper Rogers at the ranch.

Rogers-Etcheverry emphasized that the family would be "forever grateful" for the state's multimillion-dollar restoration of the ranch house, completed in time for the March 2006 rededication of the park. But, she added, the ranch "needs a major maintenance."

A tumbledown lath structure behind the ranch house is an eyesore, Rogers-Etcheverry said, and a one-time polo cage "is a pile of lumber that mice are living in behind the barn." Torn tarps cover roofs, and fences are falling apart.

Rogers-Etcheverry said she has high hopes.

"There are a lot of avenues of income that are being lost because of the budget crisis and furlough days," she said. "Hopefully, we can come in there and change that. . . . We have incredible resources at our fingertips."

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