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A Soaring Tribute to Will Rogers

August 19, 2010

Nancy Ganiard Smith

Although summery sunflowers and white linens dressed the tables surrounding the polo fields Sunday at Will Rogers State Historic Park, the morning felt more like fall, with bare arms and shoulders sprouting goose bumps. The bumps erupted again, despite an afternoon warming trend, during a moving closing ceremony that featured a dramatic flyover and soulful delivery of Taps by a member of the U.S. Navy Color Guard.

The day's fundraising champagne brunch and polo match, benefiting the Will Rogers Ranch Foundation, topped off a weekend of events commemorating the 75th anniversary of Will Rogers' death. The 'Philosopher Cowboy' died in a 1935 plane crash in Alaska at age 55. That day, a bereaved nation honored the beloved humorist, writer and entertainer by shutting down all media for one hour.

This past weekend's activities were decidedly more boisterous, beginning on Friday night with the grand opening of the new Visitor's Center followed by an outdoor screening of the Will Rogers' rollicking road trip film 'Mr. Skitch.' Cleora Robb and Glorea Robb, 87-year-old twins and co-stars from the film, thrilled the audience with stories about making the movie and visiting the ranch as kids.

In 1928, Rogers moved his wife Betty and three children, Will Jr., Mary and Jim, from their Beverly Hills mansion to the weekend house on 186 acres in Pacific Palisades. In 1944, his widow donated their historic ranch home and expansive grounds to the state of California.

In earlier years, Rogers enjoyed the polo field (now the last one remaining in L.A. County) with friends including Clark Gable, Walt Disney and Spencer Tracy. On Sunday, the tradition continued with two hard-fought polo matches. Honorary event chair Dennis Quaid, clad head to toe in denim and sporting cowboy boots, handled the ceremonial 'throw-in' to the legendary field.

'I've been a huge fan of Will Rogers since the time I was a kid growing up in Texas,' said the actor, an avid horseman who lives nearby with his family and frequently takes advantage of the park trails. 'I feel the spirit of Will when I ride my horse. This place is truly a little piece of heaven.'

Preserving all those heavenly aspects of the park—from the scenic trails and equestrian atmosphere to tours of Will's historic home—is the mission of the Will Rogers Ranch Foundation, officially incorporated in 2008 as a fundraising arm to the park.

'Given the current budget crisis facing the state of California and its impact on our State Parks, our fundraising efforts are more important than ever,' Jennifer Rogers-Etcheverry, Will Rogers' great-granddaughter, said during welcoming remarks to nearly 300 guests at Sunday's inaugural sold-out gala.

Other special guests included Bette Rogers-Brandin (Rogers' granddaughter); James Rogers (Rogers' great-grandson); Marisa Brandin (Rogers' great-granddaughter), Meeghan and Mason Etcheverry (Rogers' great-great-grandchildren); and actor/producer Wyatt McCrea, a foundation board member and grandson of famed western actor Joel McCrea, who starred with Rogers in several movies.

'Slow and steady wins the race,' said Palisadian Trudi Sandmeier, one of the founders, regarding the progress already made by the 300-member Foundation. Sandmeier is head of education at the L.A. Conservancy. Her grandparents, Emil and Trudy, worked for the Rogers family and lived on the ranch in the 1930s.



Dennis Quaid (center) poses with Jennifer Rogers-Etcheverry (Will Rogers' great-granddaughter) and her husband, Mark, and their two children, Mason and Meeghan last Sunday at the tribute to Will Rogers on the anniversary of his death 75 years ago. Rich Schmitt/Staff Photographer

Membership categories range from a \$20 'Roper' to \$1,000 'Uplifters Club' status that includes a free annual day-use parking pass for the ranch, among many other benefits.

The refurbished Visitor's Center features a new shop, where mugs with famous quotations by Will Rogers, books, DVDs and other memorabilia were selling at a brisk pace throughout the celebration weekend.

In addition to many other passions, Rogers crusaded for aviation expansion in its infancy and provided Americans with exotic first-hand accounts of his world travels. The flyover moment by the Condor Squadron simultaneous with ones in Claremont, Oklahoma, Rogers' birthplace and home of Will Rogers Memorial Museum, and Barrow, Alaska, where Rogers' and aviator Wiley Post's plane went down 75 years ago aptly symbolized the down-home philosopher's far-reaching influence.

The mounting success of the Will Rogers Ranch Foundation might be summed up by one of Rogers' famous remarks: 'People are marvelous in their generosity, if they just know the cause is there.'

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