Will Rogers

State Historic Park

Our Mission

The mission of California State Parks is to provide for the health, inspiration and education of the people of California by helping to preserve the state's extraordinary biological diversity, protecting its most valued natural and cultural resources, and creating opportunities for high-quality outdoor recreation.

California State Parks supports equal access. Prior to arrival, visitors with disabilities who need assistance should contact the park at **(310) 454-8212, ext. 100.** If you need this publication in an alternate format, contact **interp@parks.ca.gov**.

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Will Rogers State Historic Park
1501 Will Rogers State Park Road
Pacific Palisades, CA 90272
(310) 454-8212, ext. 100
www.parks.ca.gov/willrogers

Cover photo courtesy of Larry Underhill

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"You got to sorter give and take in this old world. We can get mighty rich, but if we haven't got any friends, we will find we are poorer than anybody."

– Will Rogers

Will Rogers State Historic Park honors one of America's most-quoted, best-loved humorists. A sought-after source of wisdom, honesty, and common sense, Will Rogers holds a place in the public memory more than three-quarters of a century after his tragic death in 1935.

Here in the central Santa Monica Mountains, peaceful views of Los Angeles and the Pacific Ocean combine with the practical experiences of a working ranch to bring to life an American icon who "never met a man [he] didn't like."

In 1944, Will's widow, Betty Rogers, deeded this 186-acre ranch to the State of California to be enjoyed as a public park and a memorial to her late husband.

PARK HISTORY

Before European settlement, the land comprising the Will Rogers Ranch sat along the territorial frontier separating the Chumash and Gabrieleno/Tongva native groups. The Gabrieleno/Tongva region covered most of present-day Los Angeles, from the San Gabriel mountains to the Pacific Ocean. Abundant coastal resources enabled both Chumash and Gabrieleno/Tongva people to live relatively peaceful, healthy lives until the 1800s brought Spanish colonization.

From 1827 until the early 20th century, this area belonged to the vast Rancho Boca de Santa Monica. The Mexican government granted Antonio Ignacio and Francisco Javier Alvarado grazing rights to the land; later the land itself was granted to Ysidro Reyes and Francisco Marquez.

Part of the acreage eventually came into the possession of philanthropist, oilman, and real estate developer Alphonzo Bell, founder of Bel Air Estates (named after Mr. Bell and later renamed Bel-Air).

Due to its very steep and rugged canyon terrain, the area that is now Will Rogers State Historic Park remained almost untouched until 1922. That year, while Rogers and his family were still living in Beverly Hills, Alphonzo Bell sold Will the first 200 acres of the land that would become his beloved family ranch.

"My ancestors didn't come over on the Mayflower, but they met the boat."
- Will Rogers

The family with Sealyham dog Jock and Brahma calf Sarah, 1929

Ranch site, ca. 1927

Photo by Larry Underhill

THE RANCH

For years Will had longed for a quiet retreat—a place where his family could live more simply, and where he would have plenty of room for his treasured horses. In what is now Pacific Palisades, he saw his dream come true. The home he built there reflects his roots: first and foremost, Will Rogers was a cowboy who loved horses.

To create the steep switchback roads leading up to the canyon mesa, Will used mule-drawn grading equipment, now on display in the historic hay barn. At the top he built a six-room "getaway" cabin and a barn to keep his horses.

In 1930, Will moved his family from Beverly Hills to the house and the landscaped grounds he had helped design.

By 1935 a series of additions had expanded the cabin to a sprawling home with 31 rooms, 11 baths, and seven fireplaces. On the grounds, 13 outbuildings stand among the rolling lawns, pastures, riding arenas, and a large, well-used polo field.

In 1971 the Rogers family's enlarged ranch house received a listing on the National Register of Historic Places.

THE FAMILY

Will and Betty had four children. Three of them—Bill, Mary, and Jim—made appearances in some of Will's films. Bill later owned and published a local newspaper, the *Beverly Hills Citizen*. In 1943, Bill resigned during his first term in Congress and reenlisted in the U.S. Army to fight under General George Patton in World War II.

> "Outside of traffic, there is nothing that has held this country back as much as committees."
>
> *- Will Rogers*

Will and Betty's only daughter, Mary, worked as an actress until Will's death in 1935. Jim Rogers eventually joined his brother Bill at the *Citizen*. Jim also owned several ranches to the north of Los Angeles.

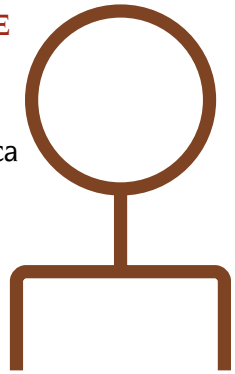
Photo by Larry Underhill

> "A man that don't love a horse, there is something the matter with him."
>
> *- Will Rogers*

Tragically, Will and Betty's fourth child, Fred Stone Rogers—named for a long-time family friend—died of diphtheria shortly before reaching his second birthday.

ENTERTAINING, RANCH-STYLE

Will and his family provided an easygoing brand of hospitality at their ranch in the Santa Monica Mountains. Will's guest list of personal friends and world-famous celebrities included Walt Disney, Clark Gable, the Charles Lindbergh family, and famous artists and other pilots of the day.



Rogers family's dog iron brand

Typical of the legendary California lifestyle, the Rogers clan often entertained on their outdoor patio, where everyone could enjoy the fresh ocean breezes.

Inside the ranch house, family and friends gathered in the cozy parlor to sing and make live music together. Meals were prepared in the family's

The Cherokee Kid, ca. 1910

comfortable, all-electric kitchen.

Guests could enjoy whatever activity pleased them: outdoors they could ride horses or play polo; indoors they could examine Will's collection of signed first-edition books from authors ranging from Harry Houdini to Theodore Roosevelt.

The upstairs rooms, now filled with photographs and memorabilia of this close-knit family, look out onto the grounds and ranch buildings—maintained much as they were when the family lived at the ranch.

EXHIBITS AND PROGRAMS

Visitor Center—Begin your journey into the history of Will Rogers's ranch with a self-guided tour at the historic Guest House, built in 1928. The converted garage holds exhibits and a mini-theater featuring films of Will Rogers, the top box-office attraction of his day. Interpretive items are available in the sales area.

> "Every man has wanted to be a cowboy. Why play Wall Street and die young when you can play cowboy and never die?"
>
> *- Will Rogers*

Historic House Museum—Volunteers and staff lead guided tours of the Will Rogers ranch revival-style home. Inside, view the largest collection of Western art in the California State Park System.

In addition to the collection of Native American textiles and artifacts, the open-gabled interior rooms hold California craftsman-style furnishings. Numerous paintings, prints, and sculptures by such early 20th-century Western artists as Charles Russell, Ed Borein, and Joe DeYoung are also on view. Rotating exhibits of the extensive collection make repeat visits well worth the time. Groups of 20 or more must make advance reservations by calling the park at (310) 454-8212, ext. 100.

> "I love a dog. He does nothing for political reasons."
>
> *- Will Rogers*

Visit the park website at **www.parks.ca.gov/willrogers** for tour hours and directions to the park.

The Wilson Library & Reading Room—Located in the museum, this unique gift from the private collection of Mr. and Mrs. Leland Wilson holds over 1,900 books—some rare. The library is open to the public by appointment only to provide opportunities for continued research on Will Rogers and his era.

School tours—Park staff provide K-12 students with tours that impart the story of Will Rogers. Topics include cowboys and ranch lifestyles, Native American culture, horsemanship and horse sports, Western art and architecture, the development of American entertainment media in the early 20th century, and Will's support for early aviation. To schedule school programs or group tours, call (310) 454-8212, ext. 100, in advance or email **wr.interp@parks.ca.gov**.

Historic Ranch Grounds Tour—Enjoy a walk around the park to view exhibit panels and displays that share family recollections, photographs, and some of Will Rogers' most famous quotes. Explore the stables and riding arenas, hay barn, blacksmith, carpentry shops, and pastures. Call or visit **www.parks.ca.gov/willrogers** for guided ranch grounds tour availability.

SPECIAL EVENTS

Polo

In the 1930s, Los Angeles had 25 polo fields. Today, enjoy the thrill of Will Rogers' favorite sport on the last remaining public grass polo field in Los Angeles County.

Depending on the weather, matches

"America is a land of opportunity and don't ever forget it."
- Will Rogers

are held most weekends from late April to early October. Visitors are encouraged to bring a blanket to sit on and refreshments to enjoy while watching a polo chukker. For a current polo schedule, visit the website **www.willrogerspolo.org**.

Horseback Riding

The polo field, stables, and riding trails demonstrate Will Rogers' love of horses. The equestrian concession offers trail rides and riding lessons to the public. To schedule a trail ride, call (310) 454-8212 ext. 100 or visit **www.parks.ca.gov/willrogers**

Additional Events

Consult the park website at **www.parks.ca.gov/willrogers** for information on park activities and other events.

TRAILS

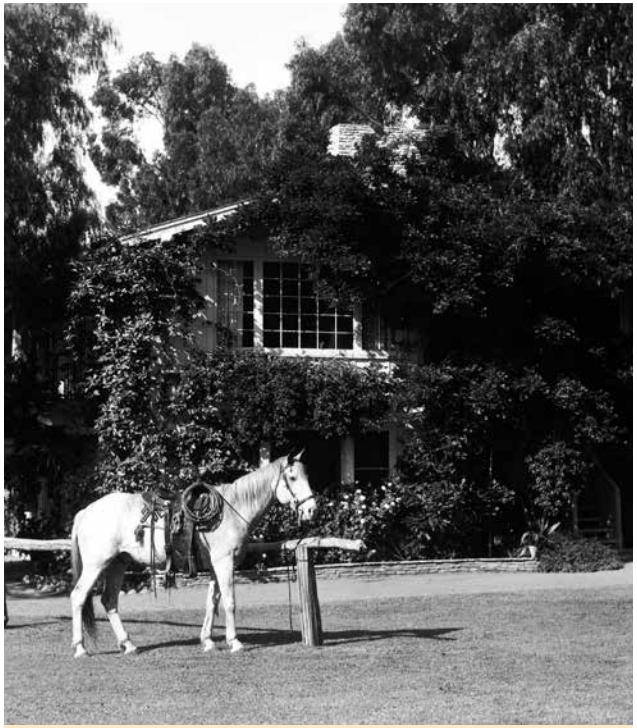
Several trails circle the park or lead into adjoining property. Among them, the strenuous Backbone Trail leads hikers, mountain bikers, and equestrians through the Santa Monica Mountains for 67.8 miles to Point Mugu.

Inspiration Point sits on a moderate two-mile loop; on clear days, you can view Catalina Island, the Los Angeles Basin, and the arching shoreline of Santa Monica Bay.

ACCESSIBLE FEATURES

The visitor center, picnic area, routes of travel, and parking are accessible. Some slopes may require assistance. A mobility shuttle with wheelchair space is available at the park office for visitors who need assistance accessing park features. The first floor of the ranch house is accessible; a film of the second floor is available for viewing.

The Inspiration Loop Trail begins at the riding arena; it is accessible for nearly ½ mile on compacted soil. Accessible parking is not available at the trailhead. For accessibility questions, please call the park in advance at (310) 454-8212, ext. 100.



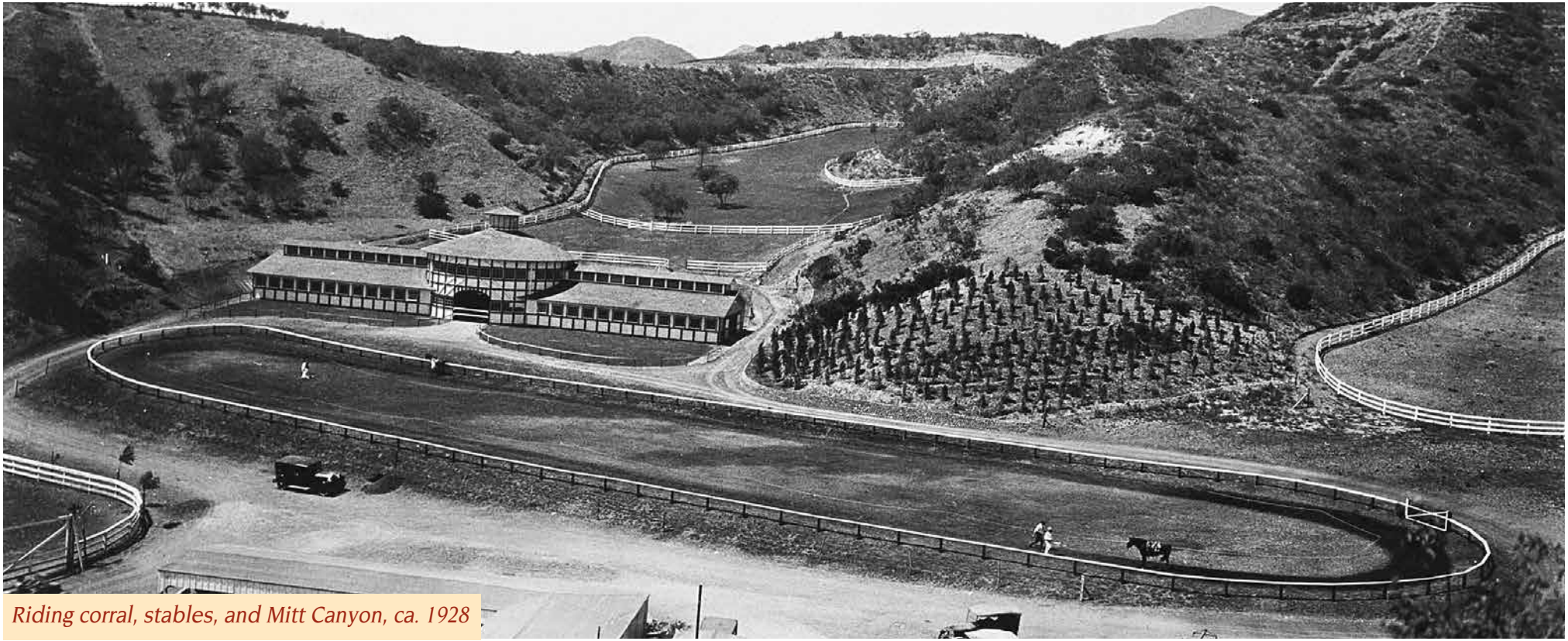
Will Rogers' roping horse, Soapsuds

For accessibility updates, visit **http://access.parks.ca.gov.**

PLEASE REMEMBER

- All natural and cultural features are protected by law and may not be disturbed or removed.
- Dogs must remain on a six-foot-maximum leash at all times and are allowed only on the Inspiration Loop Trail.
- Picnic permits are required for groups of 25 or more. Call (310) 454-8212, ext. 101.
- Chairs may not be placed on the ranch

"All I know is what I read in the papers."
- Will Rogers



Riding corral, stables, and Mitt Canyon, ca. 1928

house lawn. Use the polo field for sports and games.

- Smoking is not permitted on trails.
- The parking lot closes at sunset.
- Bicycles are not allowed on single-track trails, except the Backbone Trail. Observe signs.
- Stay on designated trails to avoid contact with poison oak, rattlesnakes, and ticks.
- Carry water to prevent dehydration—temperatures can exceed 100 degrees.
- Do not hike or bike alone. Inform someone of your plans, and let them know when you will return. Carry a mobile phone.

NEARBY STATE PARKS

- Topanga State Park
  20829 Entrada Road
  Topanga 90290 (310) 455-2465
- Malibu Creek State Park
  1925 Las Virgenes Road
  Calabasas 91302 (818) 880-0367
- Malibu Lagoon State Beach/
  Adamson House
  23200 Pacific Coast Hwy.
  at Cross Creek Rd.
  Malibu 90265 (310) 456-8432

This park receives support in part through a nonprofit organization. For information, contact the Will Rogers Ranch Foundation
P.O. Box 502
Pacific Palisades, CA 90272
(866) 688-7487
www.willrogersranchfoundation.org

WHO WAS WILL ROGERS?

Will Rogers—cowboy, humorist, Broadway and film star, newspaper columnist, radio commentator, humanitarian, and one of the best-known celebrities of the 1920s and 1930s—was one of America's first multimedia stars. His talents were many, and his loyal friends numbered in the millions—thanks to the reach of radio airwaves.

William Penn Adair Rogers, born in 1879, was named for a famous Cherokee leader. Will grew up on his family's ranch on the sprawling frontier governed by the Cherokee Nation near today's Oologah, Oklahoma. His family heritage was of both Cherokee and European descent. Will's father, Clement Vann Rogers, successful at ranching, agriculture, and banking, would later become a Cherokee senator and judge who helped write the Oklahoma Constitution.

Cowboy life became Will's passion. At an early age, Will learned to ride horses and to use a lariat; he was soon wrangling longhorn cattle across the range from Texas to Kansas. Will entered and won many a roping contest; before long these competitions became profitable. As "The Cherokee Kid," Will's mastery of horsemanship and roping introduced him to the environment of circuses and Wild West shows that traveled the world.

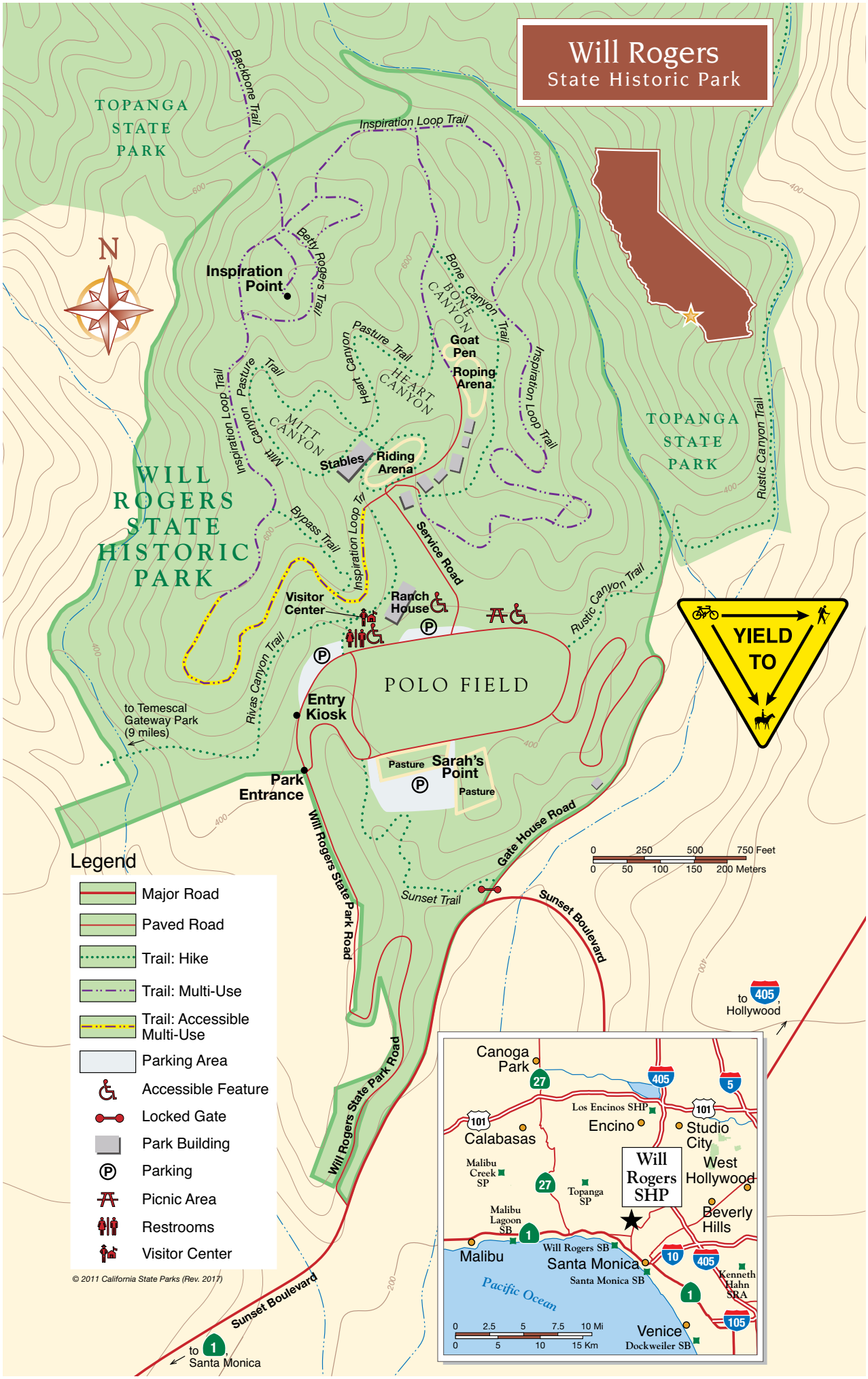
> "We will never have true civilization until we have learned to recognize the rights of others."
>
> *- Will Rogers*

As word of his unique sense of humor spread, Will became a "hot property" on vaudeville stages across the country. He had a hilarious grasp of current events, and he was not afraid to name names when making a point about politicians and controversial topics. The behavior and habits of those in power were comedic fodder to Will; he was both revered and dreaded. Politicians and businessmen either hoped or feared that he might mention their names while skipping his lariat across the stage. Will's fresh take on what was really happening across the U.S.—and who was responsible for it—enlightened his audiences and helped them live through tough times. People were reassured to know that the Great Depression, which put millions of people out of work, was not their fault, and they loved Will Rogers for saying so.

Like it or not, Rogers could not be reined in. His outspoken candor, gently chiding wit, and practical advice earned him the title "Cowboy Philosopher." Will's stage career eventually brought him, his wife Betty, and their three children—Bill, Mary, and Jim—to California, where he would have roles in 50 silent films and 21 "talkies." Over the years, Will wrote more than 4,000 nationally syndicated newspaper columns and produced regular weekly radio "fireside chats" that kept America informed and entertained.

Will was a world traveler and an early proponent of aviation who took many international flights. On August 15, 1935, Will Rogers and renowned pilot Wiley Post died in a plane crash near Barrow, Alaska. When the word got out, there was a period of national mourning and a feeling that when death silenced Will's voice, it took with it the voice of the people.

However, the memory of Will Rogers still lives on—in books, films, postage stamps, a bronze statue in the National Statuary Hall of the Capitol Rotunda, and the many buildings, foundations, and parks named in his honor. In Will's own words, "You must judge a man's greatness by how much he will be missed."

By that criterion, Will Rogers was a truly great man.

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