“Bacon, Beans and Limousines”--Will Rogers (October 18, 1931)

Added to the National Registry: 2012
Essay by Ben Yagoda (guest post)*

Will Rogers

In 1931, Americans were beginning to understand that the stock market crash of two years earlier was a harbinger of a deeper, broader slump. Most obviously, the unemployment rate had more than doubled, to more than 13 percent. A sign of the times was the popularity of a relatively unfamiliar word. The word “depression” appeared 651 times in “The New York Times” in 1929, 3,279 times the following year, and 5,974 in 1931.

President Herbert Hoover had come relatively late to a realization that the economy was in a pickle. He had instituted some public works projects that prefigured the New Deal of his successor, Franklin D. Roosevelt, but he was unwilling to provide Federal relief to the unemployed, or to farmers, who were suffering from the effects of a drought and a steep drop in crop prices.

The alternative Hoover promoted was to ask local groups to help out people in their own communities. In August 1931, he created the President’s Organization on Unemployment Relief (POUR) to assist private and local relief efforts around the country; two months later, he kicked off a $90 million fund-raising campaign with a radio broadcast carried by 150 stations nationwide.

Hoover asked Will Rogers to speak on the program. It was a sensible idea. Born 52 years earlier in the Indian Territory that would become Oklahoma (he was about one quarter Cherokee), Rogers was probably the most popular and perhaps the most well-respected figure in the country. He had started his career as a rope-spinner on the vaudeville stage. His off-the-cuff wisecracks between tricks had turned into Ziegfeld Follies monologues that were mainly pointed commentaries about politics. (He’d characteristically come out carrying a folded newspaper and open up with the line that would become his motto: “All I know is just what I read in the papers.”) His act had led to a daily newspaper column that, by the time of Hoover’s call, was carried in the “New York Times” and some 400 other newspapers around the country. He also starred in

genial comedies for the Fox studio. Two years hence, the country's motion-picture exhibitors would name him the country's top box-office attraction, ahead of Clark Gable and Shirley Temple.

Hoover knew that Rogers' observations, while prescient and sometimes barbed, were never mean. That was a big part of why he was so beloved. A New York newspaper perceptively observed that he had "a curious national quality. He gives the impression that the country is filled with such sages, wise with years, young in humor and love of life, shrewd yet gentle. He is what Americans think other Americans are like." So it made sense that Hoover would ask Will Rogers to contribute to the broadcast. But it turned out to be a very bad idea. One would have to considerably stretch the point to call Rogers a radical; any sort of militant ideology would violate the geniality that was integral to his on-stage and real-life persona. Yet the unemployment numbers, the spectacle of bread lines in the cities, and the suffering he'd witnessed on a recent drought-relief tour for farmers in the Southwest had awakened the populist within him.

On the day of the broadcast, Rogers drove from his home in Pacific Palisades, California, to the studios of radio station KFI in downtown Los Angeles. He started off in his familiar wry/amiable mode, joshing about radio commercials: "Now don't get scared and start turning off your radios. I'm not advertising or trying to sell you anything. If the mouthwash you're using is not the right kind and it tastes sort of like sheep dip why you'll just have to go right on using it." At various points in the broadcast, he said all the things Hoover had hoped for, asking towns and cities to do their part and even venturing the opinion that the President "would rather see the problem of unemployment solved then he would all the other problems he has before him combined." But Rogers also confronted the issue with a solemn and eloquent fervor that put the administration's inaction to shame:

> Now we read the papers every day, and they get us all excited over one or a dozen different problems that's supposed to be before the country. There's not really but one problem before the whole country at this time. It's not the balancing of [Treasury Secretary Andrew] Mellon's budget. That's his worry. That ain't ours. And it's not the League of Nations that we read so much about. It's not the silver question. The only problem that confronts this country today is at least seven million people are out of work. That's our only problem. There is no other one before us at all. It's to see that every man that wants to is able to work, is allowed to find a place to go to work, and also to arrange some way of getting more equal distribution of wealth in the country.

The country wasn't used to hearing this kind of message, least of all from a quintessentially mainstream figure like Will Rogers. Did Rogers introduce into the national dialogue the notion that unequal distribution of wealth is deeply problematic, or that it's the government's responsibility to provide work for the unemployed? That case is impossible to prove, but there's no doubt that Rogers' speech (dubbed "Bacon, Beans and Limousines" by "The Survey" magazine, which reprinted it the following month) helped bring those issues to the forefront of the national conversation.

Rogers, for his part, eased back from the forceful positions he had voiced in the speech. In the 1932 presidential election, he tacitly backed Franklin D. Roosevelt, whom he'd long been friendly with. Roosevelt's election—and his New Deal to combat unemployment and depression—seemed to be exactly what Rogers had in mind as a plan of action. For the rest of his life (Rogers died in a plane crash over Alaska in 1935), he was with the Roosevelt program.

But back in October 1931, Rogers had been one of the first to voice outrage over economic conditions, and the response had been overwhelming. A couple of days after the speech, he wrote in his newspaper column:

"I can't answer all the telegrams and letters, but I want to take this means of thanking the most people that ever wired or wrote me on anything—my little speech over the radio for the unemployed—and will send them copies as soon as I can think of what I said."

Ben Yagoda is a professor of English and journalism at the University of Delaware. Among the books he has written are "Will Rogers: A Biography"; "About Town: The New Yorker and the World It Made"; and "The B-Side: The Death of Tin Pan Alley and the Rebirth of the Great American Song." He lives in Swarthmore, Pennsylvania.