**Visiting an Old Friend of Bill’s**

*by John Boston*

It would be grand to wish my way back through time and wander the roads and canyons of Santa Clarita. Before shopping centers. Before condo projects housing thousands. Before paved streets, cell phones and electric garage door openers. I know it would bring a grand smile to my face to see, in the flesh, William S. Hart and his pal, Will Rogers, wandering around town. The two were great friends.

Hart and Rogers used to play polo on our old Newhall Elementary grounds, before they planted grass. The pair, along with W.C. Fields, also used to play a form of hobo golf on the flatlands of Hart’s ranch. Hobo golf is where you take your clubs and instead of trying to sink the ball in a hole, you aim at an agreed-upon target, like the bottom branch of an oak or an abandoned old tire.

In 1945, about a year before he died, Hart had a dream about Will Rogers. He was one of the world’s most famous celebrities of the 1920s and 1930s. He starred in 71 movies and wrote 4,000 some columns. Rogers died far too young in an Alaskan plane crash in 1935. After a disturbing and realistic night, Hart wrote down the details of his dream:

“I dreamed a dream the other night. I dreamed that I was once more working at the producing of Western pictures. We were driving a huge herd of cattle on the Mojave desert — some 3,000 head. It was night. Everywhere was the noise of bawling steers as the sweating cowboys did their best to keep them all on the jostling, crowded trail. When suddenly, over the medley of sounds, there came a voice, a voice that seemed to come from far, far ahead, a great way off. How strange that it could be heard above the din of the clanking horns! Yet, there it was again. I heard it. A voice so fine that nothing seemed to live between it and silence. It was the voice of Will Rogers, Will Rogers, calling my name… drag fer, Bill? Why don’t you come on up here and ride point with me? Your old Paint Hoss is here Bill, trailin’ alongside of me right now, but the saddle — your saddle — is empty. Come ahead, Bill. Come ahead. Knock on ‘em Laddie, knock on ‘em. The boys up ahead are waitin’. They’re calling for you and me to help drive this last great round-up into Eternity!”

I've been haunted by Will Rogers, specifically by his trademark saying: "I never met a man I didn't like."

Smiling, I considered maybe Will didn't get out much. No. Nearly 80 years after his death, his legacy is alive, vibrant and functioning. A few years ago, I was in Oklahoma City, my first pilgrimage to the Western Mecca-on-the-Prairie. I had dinner at The Cowboy Hall of Fame and the National Memorial and picked up a little bronze statue of Mr. Rogers. I’m changing offices right now. But usually, that little foot-tall fellow is on a shelf, looking down with that patented Santa Claus smile.

There will always be a link between my childhood home of Santa Clarita and Oklahoma’s Cowboy Holy Land. Nestled in the mountains north of Los Angeles, Santa Clarita was an odd amalgamation of ranchland and movie studios. My neighbors? Tom Mix, Hoot Gibson, Harry Carey, Gene Autry and Andy Jauregui to name a few. “Two Gun” Bill Hart, Father of the Western, built his castle a block from my home. A thousand-plus Westerns were filmed here. Sadly, my Santa Clarita has gone condo. We've had more Bigfoot reports than actual cow sightings in the past 40 years.

I love the Sooner State. The steaks are Homeric and signs politely remind: “Drive Friendly.” I saw a love of aesthetic and public art, where streets are decorated with the effortless mirth of giant guitars and bisons in Technicolor. One of our national churches rests here. This sanctuary recognizes no religion, but 620 North Harvey Street is as holy a place you'll find in America.

It's hard not to be moved — no, spiritually crushed then uplifted — wandering the National Memorial. April 19th, 2001, the devil visited the Federal Building in Oklahoma City. I don’t know if it made it worse, but the devil wasn’t wearing the *gutra* headgear or robe. The devil was an American, not from a college campus or inner city gang, but a war veteran. As I strolled through the Oklahoma City monoliths and reflecting pool between, waves of feelings washed over me, from complete sobbing to hope.

At the monument are 168 empty chairs. They represent the murdered innocents, many of them just kids.

Children — no one — should be remembered that way.

Another 680 were injured. The blast was so horrific, it destroyed or damaged nearly 600 buildings and caused $652 million in property damage.

Here is America’s reminder of incalculable tragedy, stupidity, evil, goodness and strength.

Old-fashioned values?

The spiritual concepts resounding from this memorial predate America, perhaps life on Earth. This is a monument to the eternal spirit that flows through and connects all of us. It’s a monument to healing. Forgiveness. Rebirth. Every American needs to visit Oklahoma’s shrine. There you can rediscover a big chunk of who you are, what our country is.

I had a grand time in Oklahoma City, marveling at countless wonders, from stockyards to haberdasheries where the locals manage to insert three “Y’s” and a “U” in a tiny little word like “hat.” I took the trip with my sweetheart of then. At an OK burgertorium, a homeless man approached us and asked for spare change. I’ll give you this: he was underworld wild and scary looking. I gave him a buck or two. His demeanor softened. We smiled and nodded. No big deal.

I got scolded: “Handing change to panhandlers is a bad way for a guy to get stabbed…”

Is there a *good way* for a guy to get stabbed? I thought.

Foof. You don’t argue semantics, not with your girlfriend.

In Oklahoma I got my answer to the Roping Fool’s axiom: “I never met a man I didn’t like.”

Actually, the exact quote is this:

“When I die, my epitaph, or whatever you call those signs on gravestones, is going to read: ‘I joked about every prominent man of my time, but I never met a man I dident (*sic*) like.’ I am so proud of that, I can hardly wait to die so it can be carved.”

I see hope and method in the motto of Bill Hart’s friend.

You don’t judge. Period. You don’t denigrate. You don’t lessen. You don’t build an enemy or even the hair of an enemy. That’s a tall order, isn’t it?

You smile and maybe try to bring a smile to others. You help out a little bit here and there where you can.

And you get up and do it again.

You do it at Christmas.

You do it the other 364 days of the year.

That’s us. That’s America.

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*John Boston has written more than 7,500 columns as well as a gripping international thriller, ADAM HENRY amazon.com/Adam-Henry-John-Boston-ebook/dp/B00N85YI6G*

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