

WILL ROGERS

Childhood adventures with an Oklahoma legend

BY CAROLYN ESTES

CHAPTER 8: *Racing the flames*

Will and Frank were talking about the new town when Frank's dad came riding in fast, skidding his horse to a stop.

"Mount up! A big prairie fire is racing across the ranch. We have to get to the headquarters to help out," Pa shouted.

Anna and Ma came running out of the house.

"You two keep an eye out for fire," Pa warned them. "I think it is going to the east, but if the winds shift it could head this way. Get things ready in case you gotta outrun it," he said.

Pa and the two boys rode out at a full gallop, racing their horses across the prairie.

One of the most dangerous jobs the cowboys and ranch hands had was fighting a racing prairie fire as it scorched everything in its path.

Lightning often started a blaze on the range. But no matter what started it, wild fires got everyone moving.

Whenever folks at the ranch sighted a range fire, the men quickly loaded up the wagons with plows, barrels of water and gunny sacks. They raced to the fire line. They wet the sacks and tried to beat the fire out. They plowed a dirt strip to try to stop the fire. Sometimes they started a small fire in front of the oncoming one in order to stop the blaze when it reached the burned area.

Will had one thing on his mind. His new horse, Comanche, was back at the ranch.

Will knew Comanche was a very smart horse. He had been teaching him to unlatch the gate on the corral, the same corral where Will left him that morning.

As Will raced toward home the smoke became thicker. The sound of blazing bluestem crackled in the air. Will knew he had to get to the corral and let the horses out before the fire got to them.



Frank's dad tried to get Will to ride out of the path of the fire, but Will was not having any of it.

Frank was right with Will as they approached the corral. They saw Comanche working on the latch with his teeth, just as Will had taught him.

Comanche lifted the latch and pushed the gate open. Will and Frank helped the other horses out of the corral and led them out of the fire's path.

"I knew you could do it, Comanche," Will said as he came beside the horse.

"That is one smart horse," said Frank. "I think you need to hang on to him."

Will took Frank's advice. As Will grew up, Comanche was his favorite horse.

As an adult, Will Rogers became an international star of print, stage, radio, and movies. He was known throughout the world for his rope handling, quick wit and wisdom.

He was a friend of presidents, kings and the common man. The world shed a tear when Will and his friend, Wiley Post, were killed in an airplane crash on August 15, 1935, in Point Barrow, Alaska.

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Photo courtesy of the Will Rogers Memorial Commission

CHAPTER 8 - 6.4375x10.5

NEWSPAPER ACTIVITY

1. How old was Will Rogers when he died? You can get your answer by looking back to chapter 1. Clue: Will was the same age as Frank.
2. Search your newspaper for a story about someone in your community who is important or well known. Why are they mentioned in the newspaper?
3. If you could step back in time to 1889, what would you do for a living? Are there still jobs like that today?

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