

## Myth #104: Will-ing but Not Able: Will Rogers and Ely's Lincoln Highway Dedication by Guy Rocha, Former Nevada State Archivist

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It has long been believed that the popular American cowboy-humorist and actor Will Rogers attended Lincoln Highway Days in Ely. The gala four-day event, June 4-7, 1930 celebrated the completion of the last link of the transcontinental highway between Wendover and Ely, Nevada. While Rogers visited Nevada many times before his tragic death in an airplane crash in August 1935, including filming the movie "Lightnin'" at Lake Tahoe in August and September 1930 with cowboy actor and future Nevada Lt. Governor Rex Bell, he did not attend the Lincoln Highway Days.

Both Rogers and the colorful and controversial Walter "Death Valley Scotty" Scott were invited to Lincoln Highway Days as celebrity guests. In fact, Rogers responded to the invitation which was noted in the May 31, 1930 edition of the *Ely Daily Times*: "Say, if I can arrange things here I might take you birds up. I would fly to Scotty's place [in Death Valley] and come up with him. Will wire you later. Will Rogers." Reno's *Nevada State Journal*, datelined Ely, May 20, reported that "It is tentatively planned to have Death Valley Scotty, desert character, here in person to supervise the show."



However, there is not a single mention of Rogers or Scott attending the highway completion celebration in the *Ely Record* or the *Ely Daily Times*. Something must have come up.

We may never know why Rogers and Scott did not attend the Lincoln Highway Days, an event that included Nevada Governor Fred Balzar, his counterparts from Utah, George M. Dern (film actor Bruce Dern's grandfather) and Idaho's Clarence Baldrige; and the mayors of Ogden and Salt Lake City, Utah. We do know that Will Rogers was a nationally syndicated columnist in 1930 living in the Los Angeles area. At the time of the Lincoln Highway Days celebration in Ely, all the datelines of his daily columns in the *New York Times* were either in Beverly Hills -- where he had been the honorary mayor -- or Hollywood, California. Rogers wrote of recent local and national events. For example, on June 3 he satirically wrote that "Yesterday our municipal election ran true to political form. The sewer was defeated but the councilmen got in." On June 7, with the United States sinking ever deeper into the Great Depression, he quipped that "About all that was in the papers this morning was about 'debts.' Every nation, and every individual, their principal worry is 'debt.'"

The fact that Rogers was not mentioned in the Ely newspapers during Lincoln Highways Days, and his daily columns placed him in Los Angeles, clearly indicate that while Rogers was willing, he was not able to attend one of the largest events ever held in White Pine County.

Photograph: L-R: Death Valley Scotty, Nevada Governor Fred Balzar, and Will Rogers eating hot dogs at the Winnemucca Rodeo, Saturday, August 30, 1930. Courtesy of the Nevada Historical Society.

(Original version in *Sierra Sage*, Carson City/Carson Valley, Nevada, June 2006 edition)