



Will Rogers State Historic Park Equestrian & Livestock Management Plan

October 2006



Introduction

Will Rogers is famous for many reasons – as a vaudeville performer of rope tricks mixed with cowboy humor and as the highest paid movie star in Hollywood in the early 1930s. He was a uniquely American humorist and philosopher, an avid aviator, and an international figure. He was known as America’s Favorite Cowboy, and near the end of his life he lived on a ranch in Pacific Palisades. That ranch is now a state park, nestled in the Santa Monica Mountains, overlooking the Pacific Ocean. Horses and equestrian activities are a vital element of interpreting Will Rogers’ California ranch, now known as Will Rogers State Historic Park.

The purpose of the *Equestrian and Livestock Management Plan* is to provide guidelines and standards for equestrian and livestock activities at Will Rogers State Historic Park. Rather than prescribing specific activities or programs, this Plan contains policies and criteria that will assist Park staff and managers in determining which equestrian activities ought to occur, and the manner in which they should be carried out.

One of the goals of this plan is to have horses and other livestock at the Park, as visitors and as residents. By having livestock at the Park, visitors will experience the Park as it was in the 1930s, when it was a working ranch and the home of Will Rogers and his family. Although boarding¹ of privately-owned horses was allowed at one time, this activity is not contemplated in this Plan (see Appendix A).

This document is a policy plan with guidelines and standards that govern development of an equestrian program at the Park. It is a tool for managing equestrian interpretive programs, special events, and agreements that will assist Park management in balancing equestrian activities with historic preservation, other interpretive activities, and general Park operations.

These policies and criteria create a framework of allowable uses and desired outcomes of an equestrian program. As a policy plan, this document does not prescribe which activities or programs should occur, the intensity of any specific activity, nor the locations for such activities. Those questions shall be addressed by Park management when implementing this plan through an equestrian program. The equestrian program will vary, depending on the Park budget, staff, and other resources available. This approach offers Park managers the flexibility to determine which equestrian activities should occur, and the manner in which they should be carried out.

1. Background

After boarding was suspended in 2001, the Department completed its evaluation of the Park, and staff recommended the development of an Equestrian Management Plan. The Equestrian Advisory Committee also recommended developing an Equestrian Management Plan.

Preparation of this Plan began in March 2005. Department staff conducted a series of informal meetings with a wide range of community members, interest groups, and Department staff to obtain information. Staff also reviewed the *General Plan*, *Equestrian Advisory Committee Report*, *Historic Landscape Management Plan*, *Interpretive Plan*, *Interpretive Strategy Report*, and other relevant documents. One public meeting took place in April 2005 to obtain

¹ “Boarding” refers to housing, care, and feeding of resident animals.

community input on the scope and contents of the Plan. A second public meeting to obtain comments on the Draft Plan took place on November 16, 2005.

2. Objectives

- a. Equestrian activities will be part of a balanced program of events and activities that inform the public about Will Rogers as a horseman and as a man who made extraordinary contributions to American history, folk life, and national character.
- b. By learning about the care and management of horses, polo, roping, and riding, the general public will experience something of the Rogers family's lifestyle at the ranch when they visit WRSHP. Will Rogers loved horses, polo, roping, and trick riding. These are the activities he enjoyed with family and friends at his California ranch.

3. General Policies

- a. The Department intends to have a program of regularly scheduled equestrian activities and events at WRSHP. Each equestrian event and activity shall have an interpretive and/or educational component.
- b. At its discretion, the Department may allow horses or other livestock to live at the Park, consistent with Section 6 below.
- c. When feasible, the Department will use Mounted Patrol at WRSHP Rogers State Historic Park.
- d. Park staff shall monitor equestrian events and activities, both during and at the conclusion of each event, to ensure compliance with the requirements of this plan. Failure of concessionaires or permittees to comply with the terms of special event permits or concessions, or other relevant agreements, may result in prohibition of future events or activities.

4. Policies for use of the Historic Stables

- a. The Historic Stables will be restored to and maintained in their 1935-condition as financial resources are available for the restoration. The Stables shall be used primarily for educational and interpretive purposes.
- b. As soon as funding is available, the Department will prepare a Cultural Landscape Report (CLR) and Treatment Plan for the Stables to determine appropriate uses and activities. Because the Stables are potentially eligible for National Historic Landmark status, uses and treatments shall be consistent with the Secretary of the Interior's Standards for historic structures.
- c. Horses shall not stay overnight in the Historic Stables.
- d. Interpretive or educational programs involving horses may take place in the rotunda of the Historic Stables.
- e. On a very limited basis, horses may be placed in stalls in the Historic Stables for day-use only for educational or interpretive programs or for special events. This use of the Stables must be approved in writing by Park Management, and shall be allowed only if there are no alternative locations for the horses, such as the rebuilt Jimmy's Barn or

portable corrals, that will meet the objectives of the program or event. All such use of the Historic Stables shall be subject to terms and conditions specified by Park Management, including but not limited to requirements for repairing damage to the historic structure.

5. Policies for Equestrian Activities

- a. The equestrian community is welcome to bring horses to the Park to use the riding arenas and trails for casual riding on a day-use basis. Horses shall not be turned out in the riding arena or roping arenas, except for special events approved by Park Management.
- b. Permission to use Park facilities for sponsored or organized equestrian activities shall be at the discretion of Park Management.
- c. Activities shall have a public benefit and be open to the public.
- d. Activities shall have interpretive value, relating to Will Rogers' California ranch life-style, the workings of a ranch, the care and management of horses, or other connection to Will Rogers. Equestrian activities could include (but are not limited to) horse shoeing, riding lessons, programs for the disabled, horsemanship, trick riding or roping, polo, trail riding, dressage, and jumping clinics and demonstrations.
- e. Horse program providers or operators shall be experienced and reliable providers of services, and shall present references and qualifications to Park Management. Qualifications and references shall demonstrate proven ability to conduct horse programs safely and responsibly, and may include certifications from academic equine management programs or state or national equestrian societies or associations.
- f. Park Management may authorize multiple-day special events such as clinics, shows, demonstrations, or performances.
- g. Privately-owned horses may board temporarily at the Park for special events or programs, subject to approval and conditions required by Park Management. Horses may not stay overnight at the Park for casual use, such as trail riding or riding in the arenas.
- h. There shall be a limit of 3 consecutive nights for privately-owned horses to board temporarily at the Park, unless Park Management extends this limit for events of longer duration.
- i. Temporary boarding of horses or other livestock may occur in Jimmy's Barn or in portable corrals erected on Sarah's Point or at another location determined by Park Management.
- j. Park Management may limit overnight stays and/or use of equestrian facilities in consideration of safety, footing, and other concerns. The frequency of events and the number of participants may also be limited by the condition of the footing in the riding arenas, Sarah's Point, the trails, and other facilities.

6. Policies for Resident Livestock

- a. Park Management may determine that horses or livestock used for interpretive or educational programs or public service or available for use by the general public may live at the Park. Examples of such livestock include:
 - Horses or mules used for mounted patrol;

- Horses or mules used for lessons or demonstrations;
 - Goats, cattle, and calves used for demonstrations;
 - Animals used for grazing to manage brush; and
 - Horses or mules used for public trail rides.
- b. Privately-owned horses shall not be boarded at the Park for the personal enjoyment of owners.
 - c. The number of animals living at the Park shall be determined by a variety of operational conditions, including:
 - season, rainfall, and soil condition;
 - condition of pastures and forage; and
 - staff, budget, and other management concerns.
 - d. Park Management will develop and implement a regular pasture rotation program.

7. Performance Standards and Best Management Practices

- a. Any equestrian program shall begin with small scale activities on a pilot basis. Park Management may then expand the pilot program to use more horses or offer more frequent services.
- b. Park Management may limit equestrian programs in order to reduce environmental impacts.
- c. If Park Management determines that it is appropriate and necessary for horses to reside at the Park for interpretive or educational purposes, then those resident horses will be kept primarily in pastures. They may be kept overnight in Jimmy's Barn for health and safety reasons or in inclement weather. The number of resident horses may be limited; See Policy 6.c. above.
- d. Mitt, Heart, and Bone Canyon pastures may be used for livestock as long as the animals are rotated among the pastures so as to maintain adequate forage. To maintain forage, livestock must be removed periodically.
- e. Pastures shall be managed to provide forage and to meet the requirements of the *Historic Landscape Management Plan*.
- f. Pastures and trails shall be managed to minimize polluted runoff and erosion using best management practices.
- g. Jimmy's Barn, temporary corrals, the Historic Stables, and any other animal facilities shall be maintained in sanitary condition, with regular removal of manure and bedding.
- h. All hay and feed used on the premises shall be certified "weed free."
- i. Facilities for storing feed, hay, and other supplies shall be consistent with the historic character of the Park.
- j. Unless there are inadequate resources, the Department will:

- provide appropriate and safe footing in areas used for equestrian activities;
- regularly groom the riding and roping arenas and the riding area on Sarah's Point;
- provide regular maintenance of trails; and
- provide appropriate maintenance of the polo field.

The Department may further specify maintenance criteria and responsibilities in maintenance plans, special event permits, or contracts with third-party users of the facilities.

Appendix A

Background

A.1. Brief History

Will Rogers State Historic Park is located in Pacific Palisades, overlooking the Pacific Ocean. It was the home of Will Rogers, his wife Betty, and their three children from 1928 to 1935. In 1935, Will Rogers died in a plane crash near Point Barrows, Alaska. Betty continued to live at the ranch until her death in 1944. She arranged to donate the ranch and its 186 surrounding acres to the State of California, and in August 1944 the ranch became a state park.

The ranch was a refuge and source of deep pleasure for Will Rogers, where he could relax with his family and close friends. Horses, roping, and polo were integral aspects of life at the ranch from the outset. When he bought the land in 1925, he first built temporary stables and a corral, and graded the polo field using a team of mules. Initially, he built a simple 6-room one story cabin, which eventually became the 31-room ranch house with two wings and a large connecting patio. He created a roping ring and a large stable with an elegant rotunda. The stable, called the “barn” by the family, was the center of activity and was equally, if not more, important than the house. An arena was built outside the stable, in a long and narrow configuration ideal for trick riding. A mule barn, hay barn, blacksmith shop, carpenter’s shop, and ranch foreman’s home were built across from the arena and stables.

Betty Rogers said that the ranch was the joy of Will Rogers’ life. With his polo field, his stables, roping corral, horses, and bridle trails into the hills, he had just about everything he wanted. He played polo frequently, and made a team with his three children, Mary, Jim, and Will Jr. All of the children learned to ride, rope, play polo, and do tricks on horseback under his tutelage. He spent hours with them practicing their riding and roping skills. Whenever Will was in town, there were polo games with show business luminaries such as Walt Disney, Spencer Tracy, Lesley Howard, and Clark Gable. Many famous movie stars, politicians, businessmen, and titled people visited the ranch and enjoyed its easy-going hospitality and outdoor living.

A.2. Park Operations and Activities

Will Rogers State Historic Park is open daily. Park users pay a fee to park on the property, and may take guided tours of the ranch with staff or volunteer docents, enjoy the open spaces of the polo field and lawns, and make use of the picnic area. They may hike or bike the 3-mile loop trail to Inspiration Point, and from there continue onto the large system of trails, including the Backbone Trail, by which they can go further into the Santa Monica Mountains. Equestrians can ride from Will Rogers to Topanga State Park, where there is an equestrian camp.

The ranch has been modified over the years to serve the public and to accommodate maintenance needs of a state park. The Guest House currently serves as the visitor center. Employee offices are located in the Guest House, the Ranch House, and the Ranch Foreman’s Quarters.

Until 2001, horse boarding and horseback riding were significant activities at the Park. As described in the following section, horse boarding was suspended in 2001. Since then, the main activities at the Park are the weekend polo matches sponsored by the Will Rogers Polo

Association from April through October, weekend soccer matches during the fall, and daily ranch tours.

A.3. Policies Governing WRSHP

A number of plans govern the uses and activities of the Park. These plans include the 1974 *Interpretive Plan*, the 1992 *General Plan*, and the 2003 *Historic Landscape Management Plan*. Several reports also contain relevant guidelines and policy suggestions. These include the 2001 *Resource and Management Issues Report*, the 2002 *Interpretive Strategy Report*, and the 2002 *Equestrian Advisory Committee Report*.

In addition to Department policies, the 1944 Grant Deed transferring the property to the State of California specified that the park must be used as a public park and a monument to the memory of Will Rogers. It contains a clause stipulating that any violation of the deed would cause the estate to revert to the family of Will Rogers.

See Appendix B for a summary of the *General Plan*, *Historic Landscape Management Plan*, and *Interpretive Plan* policies.

A.4. The Controversy over Boarded Horses

Beginning in the early 1950s, the Department allowed privately-owned horses to be boarded at the Park. A variety of concessionaires and contract mechanisms were used to manage the boarding operation. Boarding became a controversial issue because of the private use of public property, damage to the integrity of the historic structures and landscape, and concerns over soil erosion and water quality.

In 2001, the controversy over boarding at the Park reached its peak, with the family of Will Rogers expressing concerns that the Department's operation of the Park was not consistent with the terms of the Grant Deed. In addition, articles appeared in the *Wall Street Journal* and *Los Angeles Times*, describing the conflict about boarding. Further, the Department's auditors reviewed the boarding operator's compliance with the terms of the lease, and found that there were significant violations and questions about the financial accounting.

In 2001, Department staff reviewed the history of equestrian operations at the Park. The staff report recommended, among other things, that Department should prepare an Equestrian Management Plan.²

In November 2001, the Department suspended boarding of privately-owned horses, effective January 10, 2002. The Department took this step to have an opportunity to conduct detailed studies of the situation, make necessary facility repairs and restoration, and begin planning for future equestrian use at the Park.

The boarders filed a lawsuit to prevent the Department from suspending boarding at the Park. In the case, Genesses Rivera, et al. vs Rusty Areias, et al., Case # SS010545, the court found for the Department based on three factors: first, the court found that the deed did not specify the level of equestrian activity required at the Park. Second, the General Plan contemplated equestrian activities among many other activities at the Park, which could continue even if the boarding of horses was suspended. Third, equestrian activities in the Park are conditioned on the activities

² *Resources and Management Issues at Will Rogers State Historic Park*. September 2001

not causing damage or risk to the environment. The Court concluded, therefore, that temporary removal of the horses from WRSHP was not a violation of either the deed or the General Plan. The order reserved the right of the petitioners to bring further action if the temporary suspension became permanent or of so long a duration as to become permanent. The court made no findings as to the appropriate method of providing for equestrian activity or presence at the Park, thus leaving it to the discretion of the Department as to how it would fulfill the General Plan requirement for equestrian activity.³

A.5. Equestrian Advisory Committee

The Department convened an Equestrian Advisory Committee for WRSHP. The group was charged with developing recommendations on appropriate equestrian activities at the Park. Between February and August 2002, the 26 Committee members met one or two times each month. Members included individuals and organizations with concerns about environmental protection, historic preservation, equestrian activities, the neighborhood, and polo. Members of the Rogers family also participated in the Committee.

In its December 2002 report, the Committee described equestrian activities that could take place at the Park as part of an interpretive program. The Committee did not conduct economic studies, but evaluated a range of equestrian activities for their consistency with the General Plan, historic preservation, interpretation of Will Rogers and his time, and the Rogers family grant deed. They recommended that all equestrian activities be evaluated by and consistent with applicable provisions of the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) and the Public Resources Code. The Committee's recommendations for equestrian activities at the Park were:

- Maintain Equestrian Presence
- Display Horse Artifacts (carriages and horse-drawn equipment)
- Offer Horsemanship Classes (grooming, saddling, care, and handling)
- Conduct Wrangler and Horse Shoeing Demonstrations
- Offer Rental Horses and Trail Riding
- Offer Riding and Roping Lessons
- Continue Polo Matches
- Develop a Wrangler School

The Committee made other recommendations for improving park operations and also recommended creating a mechanism for ongoing community input into equestrian activities.

A.6. Restoration of Historic Landscape and Structures

In 2001 and 2002, the Department conducted a series of reports and evaluations of the conditions at the Park. Among these were a *Resource and Management Issues* report; several historic structures reports; an *Interpretive Strategy Report*; and an assessment of ecological conditions at

³ Judge Terry B. Friedman's order dated March 8, 2002.

the Park. In March 2003, the Department adopted an *Historic Landscape Management Plan*, which contains policies and guidelines for restoring the Park to its appearance in the early 1930s.

Subsequently, the Department has embarked on a program of restoration and repairs to the Park. The ranch house is being restored, with new climate control systems installed to better preserve the historic structure and the collection of Rogers family furnishings and objects displayed at the house. Restoration of the historic landscape is underway, including removal of trees that have grown large and now block the views desired by Will Rogers when he designed the ranch. Fence lines are being restored to their appearance in 1935. The practice polo arena on Sarah's Point has been removed (as a non-historic facility). The area will be restored, with Sarah's Pasture recreated as a multi-use facility for pasture, biofiltration, drainage detention, riding lessons, equestrian events, and overflow parking.

Appendix B

Governing Policies at Will Rogers State Historic Park

B.1. 1992 General Plan Policies Concerning Equestrian Activities

The General Plan (GP) recognizes that boarding privately-owned horses is one option for interpreting the role that horses played in Will Rogers' life. The GP does not require the Department to operate a boarding program. The GP authorizes the continuation of the horse-boarding operation, predicated on the clear need to maintain an equestrian presence at the unit:

Will Rogers' childhood, early career as an entertainer, and lifelong hobbies reflected his continued association with equestrian activities and love for horses. One of the main reasons that he moved to his Santa Monica ranch was to have enough space to get away from the crowds and relax by roping and participating in other equestrian-related activities, and to keep the family horses. To interpret the life of Rogers at his Santa Monica ranch without horses would be to miss a vital element of his spirit.

An interpretive equestrian program should be an integral part of the unit's operation. An equestrian concession should be considered a viable option...

Concession activity shall be conducted in a manner that invites and encourages park visitors to share the history depicted by concessions and their related facilities. An emphasis on safe public access and visitor experience is paramount (p. 134; see also pp. 135-136).

The GP includes equestrian concession management guidelines that "shall be used to balance historic integrity and resource protection with historical uses and the greatest public benefit to park visitors. In order to properly interpret the life of Will Rogers, the basic elements of his equestrian activities and lifestyle should be depicted in a reasonably accurate but practical manner" (p 135). Further, the GP lists 4 specific goals of an equestrian concession (pp 135-136):

1. Continue horse presence on the grounds;
2. Continue polo playing at Will Rogers State Historic Park;
3. Maintain the integrity of equestrian facilities; and
4. Public access to concession facilities is a primary goal within the limits of safety and appropriate resource protection policies.

The GP authorizes the Department to adjust the number of boarded horses downward, if such measures are shown to be necessary. In establishing the appropriate number of boarded horses, the GP requires consideration of environmental impacts, visitor complaints, waste water runoff, odors, damage to historic structures, and the ambiance. It also requires consideration of the effects of the concession on the Department's ability to perform its duties (maintenance, interpretive programs, enforcement, and public safety). (p. 146).

As demonstrated in the following excerpts, the GP recognizes the inherent conflicts between horses and safe public access and preservation of historic resources:

The present concession discourages public access into and through the horse barn, riding arena, and Heart and Mitt pastures area. Visitor safety is the main reason for this. It seems prudent to keep visitors separated from horses, especially those visitors who are not familiar with horse behavior. This results in a net loss of public use, and interpretation of the historic stable and barn area.

There is a need to improve public access and interpretation, while improving visitor safety in the primary historic zone, where the presence of horses helps to interpret the spirit of place. (p. 94)

The GP provides specific policies concerning location of equestrian activities and boarded horses:

- There is an authorized maximum of 45 boarded horses, 10 of which may be in the Historic Stable, the remainder to be housed in Bone Canyon (pp. 103-104, 135, 146, 204-205). No other areas were authorized for horse boarding.
- The GP classifies Sarah's Point as an area of high erosion with runoff into Rustic Creek, and requires removal of horse boarding to other areas (pp. 72-73 and p. 141). Only equestrian functions related to polo were to be allowed at Sarah's Point. It also recommends removal of storage buildings from this area (p. 119). Therefore, the Pole Barn constructed in 2000 on Sarah's Point is incompatible with GP recommendations to remove storage facilities from the area.
- The Practice Polo Arena at Sarah's Point is a non-historic facility. The GP recommends "retaining the polo arena but removing the high fencing, or replacing with less visible netting. Reevaluate the need for the arena, and remove it if not essential to polo playing" (p. 72).
- Bone Canyon is outside the primary Historic Zone, and is designated by the GP as the site for boarding up to 35 horses. It contains pipe corrals, shade covers, and tack sheds. The GP states that "appropriate native landscape plantings will be added to further screen the view of these non-historic improvements from the primary historic zone." (p.101)

B.2. Historic Landscape Management Plan

The *Historic Landscape Management Plan*, adopted in March 2003, describes the historical significance of the ranch landscape and how it has changed since it became a public facility. The Plan establishes the 1935 appearance as the goal for a series of restoration activities, described in ten Conservation Plans. Each Conservation Plan contains objectives for restoring and maintaining the buildings and landscape of its planning area.

Significant reconstruction and recontouring will be needed to return the ranch to its 1935 appearance. Consequently, equestrian programs, activities, and facility management will be affected by the restoration work and the subsequent maintenance activities.

The following summarizes the restoration activities related to equestrian activities. The Conservation Plan for Management Area #2, the Historic Stable Area, calls for the following work:

- Restore original road grades, layout, surfacing, and other features;
- Restore historic grades for the riding arena;
- Minimize visibility of contemporary service vehicles and parking;
- Reconstruct riding arena and exercise track to 1935 appearance;
- Relocate practice polo cage to original site behind stable;
- Recover or rebuild original rock walls as necessary;
- Reconstruct fencing in front of riding arena and stables per historic photos;
- Paint stables to historic green and white colors.

The Historic Landscape Management Plan identifies Sarah's Point as an area important for equestrian activities. The Conservation Plan for Sarah's Point calls for the following changes:

- Rehabilitate historic entrance road;
- Parking areas should include staging areas for equestrian vehicles, buses, and general parking. If possible, keep areas dirt-paved and informal.
- Remove the practice polo arena and show ring;
- Reconstruct Sarah's Pasture as a multi-use facility. Design it such that it can be used for pasture, biofiltration, drainage detention, riding lessons, warming up and cooling down of polo horses, spectator equestrian events, picnicking, overflow parking, and other special uses.

(Note: In 2005, the practice polo arena was removed. In 2006 the area formerly occupied by the practice polo arena was enclosed by a wooden fence with large gates so that it can be used as a turnout for horses, or a parking lot, or other suitable activities).

B.3. Interpretive Plan

The *Interpretive Plan*, adopted in 1974, contains several goals relevant to equestrian activities:

- To interpret Will Rogers family and home life with respect to his ranch;
- To understand the importance of horses, roping, and cowboy life to Will Rogers;
- To interpret the workings of the ranch.