

# Donation of the Month

**Object: Betty Blake's Composition Stick**  
**Catalog #: 1985.16.2**  
**Donor: Will Rogers, Jr.**



Did she or didn't she (use it, that is)? In the Museum's collections is a newspaper printer's composition stick with Betty Blake's (Mrs. Will Rogers) name stamped upon it. The trouble is, we're not sure whether or not she used it. It seems likely she did, but . . .

Betty Blake was born on September 9, 1879, to James Wyeth and Amelia Crowder Blake. The Blakes ran a small lumber and grist mill at Silver Springs, later known as Monte Ne. After Mr. Blake's death in 1882, the family moved a few miles north to Rogers.

Betty was seventh in a family of seven girls and two boys. A popular young lady, her social life included singing and acting at the local Opera House.

Always restless and hating to be tied down, during the 1890s and early 1900s she worked as an occasional compositor at the *Rogers Democrat*. Erwin Funk, editor and owner of the *Democrat*, remembered this about his sometime employee:

*Betty had a very perverse sense of humor, especially when . . . working in the back room on a dry goods circular or ad and I would have a very precise, correct lady visitor in the front office. From Betty would come a clarion call, "Erwin, this corset (or some other unmentionable) is too small . . . What do I do now?"*

Betty Blake and Will Rogers were both 20 years old when they met, while she was recovering from typhoid at her sister Cora's home in Oologah, Indian Territory (later Oklahoma). One evening Betty was sitting in the railroad depot when Will came in to pick up a package. He fled in confusion upon seeing the pretty stranger.

After Betty returned to Rogers she and Will began a correspondence which lasted for nearly eight years. While Will traveled constantly, making a name for himself as a performer in a wild west show, Betty continued her active social life, gallivanting around town with her friends and many beaux.

In 1906 Will proposed marriage but Betty told him that she simply could not see spending her life "trouping the country in vaudeville." She finally relented after he promised they would settle down in Oklahoma after one more tour. Will and Betty were married on November 25, 1908, in a small ceremony in her mother's home in Rogers. They honeymooned in New York, where Will's performances took only a small part of each day. Betty later said, "It was a carefree life. We both loved it and I soon began to

wonder if the theater was so bad after all.”

For the first three years Will and Betty traveled everywhere together, living mostly in hotel rooms. When Will Jr. was born in 1911 Betty began to return to Rogers for long visits. Her daughter Mary was born in Rogers in 1913, followed by two more children, James in 1914 and Fred in 1918.

Betty became a partner in Will's career and was the first to encourage him to joke during his normally silent roping routine. She acted as his humor critic for his acts and writings, encouraged him to go on the lecture circuit, and helped him choose movie scripts once the family moved to California. Those closest to the couple knew that Betty and Will were a team. He once said, “People came to see me, but they went away remembering Betty.”

On August 15, 1935, the unthinkable happened. Will and Wiley Post, an aviator and good friend, were killed in a plane crash in Alaska. In tribute to him Betty wrote the biography *Will Rogers: His Wife's Story*, published in 1941. The book captured the life of an extraordinary man, but also something of an extraordinary woman. Betty's own intelligence, humor, compassion, and strength were evident, though she characteristically talked little about herself. Betty Blake Rogers died on June 21, 1944, and was buried next to her husband in Claremore, Oklahoma, at the Will Rogers Memorial.

While much is known about Will Rogers, Betty's life still has many question marks. She was terribly modest, preferring to let Will stand in the spotlight. One question concerns the extent of her career as a newspaper compositor for the *Rogers Democrat*.

In the early days of newspapering, words were printed on the page with typeface — individual metal blocks with raised letters. To compose a block of text, each letter, character, or spacer had to be plucked from its tray and carefully placed in a composing stick, a handheld, adjustable holder.

Each text block was placed within a single metal or wooden frame called a “chase” that was laid out on a marble makeup stone. Once they were leveled with a planer and mallet, the text, images, and various types of spacers needed to complete the page were locked into the chase by tightening the quoins at the corners. The completed page was then given to the pressman for inking and printing.

Setting type was a time-consuming task. Not only was the typeface tiny, requiring great dexterity, but the raised letters were reversed to allow for the mechanics of printing. This necessity for mirror imaging continued with every word and sentence, all of which had to be composed backwards. Today a daily paper is the norm, but a century ago a weekly paper was common in many communities because of the length of time needed to set and print each edition. In the 1890s it generally took at least 2½ days to print a four-page paper.

In his memoirs *Democrat* editor Erwin Funk recalled that when he first came to Northwest Arkansas in 1896, area compositors received \$3 a week. But according to Funk, Betty would not work for less than \$1 a day! In 1910 he installed a Junior Mergenthaler Linotype machine which could make complete lines of type quickly and efficiently, thus ending the days of setting type by hand. Funk noted that “the coming of the Junior saw the passing of hand composition in the *Democrat* office and several young women lost their jobs. But hand compositors were getting scarce, which was the real reason for the installation of the machines.”

Betty's metal composing stick was manufactured by the Manhattan Type Foundry of New York, which was in business from 1886-1890. The stick first came to light in 1956, when Mrs. Henry True of Clarkston, Washington, wrote to Betty's son, Will Jr.:

*You will no doubt be surprised to get a letter from a stranger but your mother and my self-worked together in a printing office at Rogers, Ark., when we were girls. My name at that time being Bettie Sherry. When your mother quit working in the office she gave me her printers stick she set type in, which has her name “Bettie Blake” on it. I have kept and treasured it all these years. I am now 77 years of age and I feel if any of Bettie's children would care for the printers stick as a keepsake of their mother, they should have it,*

and I will gladly send it to them.

Upon his receipt of it, Will Jr. wrote to Mrs. True:

*The composing "stick" arrived yesterday. I don't know when I've had a thing that gave me more pleasure. To see the name, Bettie Blake, stamped on it just made me almost cry. I am certainly going to keep this and treasure it. Usually when we have some momento of mother or dad, we send it to the Museum in Claremore, Okla, but I am going to keep this in our office in Los Angeles for it is near and dear to each of us three children.*

Years later, Will Jr. expressed his doubt about whether or not his mother ever set type on her composition stick in his 1985 letter to Marianne Woods, then director of the Museum:

*As you know [my mother] worked on the Rogers Democrat. She was quite proud of it. I think it was her only real work. Well, I owned the Beverly Hills Citizen and Mother would occasionally come into the composing room and explain how she had worked on a newspaper herself once. But when I questioned her, she really knew very little about typesetting. I would say, "Come on Mother, you just worked in the front office." But she would say, "No, I worked in the back office too." And now comes the composing stick. I am quite sure some printer pounded her name on it and gave it to her a[s] a souvenir. I don't think she did, or could, set type on it.*

But he sent along this treasured souvenir to the Museum anyway, concluding:

*"The composing stick and the memories that go along with it are very precious to me. It has been on my mantle since I got it. Now there is no better place for it than the museum of her home town."*

So, did she or didn't she (use it, that is)?

## **CREDITS**

Mrs. Henry True's letter to Will Rogers, Jr. (March 2, 1956); Will Rogers, Jr.'s letter to Mrs. Henry True (March 29, 1956); *64 Years of Newspapering in Arkansas* (Erwin C. Funk's memoir) W.J. Lemke, ed. (1960); *One of the Blake Girls: The Story of Betty Blake (Mrs. Will Rogers) and Her Benton County Family*, Lois Snelling, unpublished manuscript (1976); Will Rogers, Jr.'s letter to Marianne Woods (June 10, 1985); "Rogers' Leading Lady: Betty Blake Rogers," RHM brochure (2002); Ushers Ferry Historic Village website, "Main Street" page ( [www.cedar-rapids.org/ushers](http://www.cedar-rapids.org/ushers) ), "When Hot Type Went Cold @ the Palo Alto Times: The Day the Old Terms Died," Jay Thorwaldson, Museum of American Heritage website ( [www.moah.org/exhibits/virtual/printing2.html](http://www.moah.org/exhibits/virtual/printing2.html) ); "Bosshard's Printing Primer," Dave Bosshard website ( <http://my.execpc.com/~bosshard/printing/letpress/basictools.html> ); and "A Capsule History of Typesetting" and "Printing a Newspaper: 1892-1992," R.J. Brown, "What You Need to Know About ... Inventors" website ( [www.discovery.com/guides](http://www.discovery.com/guides) ).