

Artist to open “Will Rogers: An American Legend” gallery

*By PAT REEDER
Will Rogers Museum*

Artist Mike Wimmer hit a second “homer” when he was in Washington, D.C., promoting “Homerun: The Story of Babe Ruth,” his second book to illustrate for Bob Burleigh.

“I was having dinner with my publisher at the American Library Association book convention when she asked ‘what’s your next book.’”

“I’ve always wanted to do a book about Will Rogers,” he said. “He’s an Oklahoma hero, I’m from Muskogee, studied him in Oklahoma history, visited his Museum ... I started looking for an author.”

He could not have dreamed his art works would one day hang in the Museum he visited as a kid, that he would chronicle the man he admired since school days.

It was beyond imagination he would someday team with Oklahoma’s governor to produce an award-winning children’s book.

It was about this time Wimmer had been invited by Oklahoma’s then First Lady Kathy Keating to lunch to talk about painting their family Christmas greeting.

“I had never thought about approaching Gov. Keating. He was the governor!” he exclaimed.

But it was easier than he thought. Gov. Frank Keating had written “Chief Standing Bear.” He sent it to his publisher and the interest grew. “Will Rogers from Oklahoma, an artist from Oklahoma, Oklahoma’s governor and he (Keating) threw himself into the project,” Wimmer recalled.

Works of art by Wimmer from Keating’s 2002 “Will Rogers: An American Legend,” children’s book have been given to the Will Rogers Museum in Claremore.

Wimmer will be here 1:30 p.m. Friday, March 16 to join Rogers’ grandson, Kem, in opening a gallery when the 19 pieces will be displayed.

The gallery opening will follow a reading from the book by Andy Hogan, Will Rogers Museum storyteller and retired educator. His captive audience will include Claremore Christian School first graders and four and five-year-olds from Blue Starr Kiddie Ranch. All children will be welcomed.

The reading will be in the children’s museum on the lower level.

The gift from Anadarko Petroleum Corp. of Houston includes 18 original illustrations and a giclee' reproduction of Gov. and Mrs. Keating from the book.

The Will Rogers: An American Legend gallery will be in a room leading to Drumgoole School," a nice segue to the popular children's museum," said Steve Gragert, Museum director. "Gov. Keating has given his permission to use text from the children's book in the display," he said.

"It is an exciting opportunity for us to tell more fully the story of Will Rogers to young people in a very colorful and vivid fashion."

Wimmer too is excited about having the paintings in the Museum he enjoyed as a child.

"He's (Will) bigger than life ... there's no single person to compare to this guy. He was the most popular, the most famous of his time ... and he was from Oklahoma."

He calls the book a "great introduction" to the life of Will Rogers.

Keating writes, and Wimmer illustrates of Will the Cherokee Indian boy on an Indian Territory Ranch, his love the land, his travels and career as a writer and actor.

This is not Wimmer's first art in the Claremore Museum. An oil on canvas of his "The last Farewell of Wiley Post and Will Rogers," a gift from the Sisk Charitable Trust, was presented to the museum in 2005 and hangs in the gallery designated for the "Lonely Death" and "Last Takeoff." It is the background of a Jo Mora diorama showing a single Eskimo man looking at the downed plane.

The Keating book was awarded the 2003 Spur Award from the Western Writer's Association of America.

Wimmer and Keating teamed again in "Theodore," the young life of Teddy Roosevelt, released in 2006.

There are 22 examples of Wimmer's works (including the Wiley and Will painting) in the state Capitol. He illustrated the cover for the "Lion King" soundtrack, artwork on Celestial Seasonings boxes and Huggies diapers packaging — and updated "Mr. Clean."

He produced new artwork for the 50th anniversary of children's board game "Candyland."

Although Wimmer attended the University of Oklahoma to study art, it was from an apprenticeship with illustrators he learned what he really wanted to do.

He doesn't just "dabble," it's discipline and hard work to go along with talent.

He is an early riser, an avid reader, makes some public appearances, spends time with his family, is visiting artist at Cameron University at Lawton — and paints.

The public will be welcomed to attend the gallery opening and meet Wimmer who returns to the scene of his childhood in a much different circumstance.

The Will Rogers Museum in Claremore and Birthplace Ranch near Oologah are open 365 days a year, 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. Admission is by donation. For information call 918-341-0719 or visit the website www.willrogers.com.