

Will Rogers' 1935 hit movies released on DVD

Four Will Rogers' movies, two of them released after his death, will be released Tuesday on DVD.

Will portrays captain of a riverboat named "Claremore Queen" in "Steamboat Round the Bend," a laugh-filled classic directed by John Ford. It was released four days following the Aug. 15, 1935 Alaskan air crash that claimed the lives of Will Rogers and Wiley Post.

Timing of the release caused mixed emotions among moviegoers.

If studios were reluctant it might be in poor taste, the opposite was true and crowds rushed to theaters to see Will one more time.

"It is high among the best films ever made by Mr. Rogers, is valorous entertainment, and will arouse in audiences no emotion beyond that of admiration for the actor," one reviewer wrote.

Three months later, "In Old Kentucky," was Will's last film released, again with reviewer praise.

Playing a horse trainer, one reviewer wrote that Will Rogers "was never more entertaining, never in truer form, nor more universally appealing."

Also filmed during 1935 and set for re-release Tuesday is "Life Begins at 40," and "Doubting Thomas."

All four movies will be showing continuously Tuesday in the Will Rogers Museum theater during the regular museum hours of 8 a.m. to 5 p.m.

"We have cooperated extensively with Twentieth Century-Fox in re-release of these four talkies," said Michelle Lefebvre-Carter, Will Rogers Memorial Commission executive director. "We supplied the studio with background information, photographs and historic data from our archives."

Will Rogers' contract with Fox called for "no less than three, and no more than four" motion pictures per year. He liked to work on his films consecutively, which would allow him more time away from the studio. He wanted to complete one picture, then immediately start on the next. With these four he would have lived up to his contractual obligation in the first half of 1935 and would have the second half of the year for himself.

In the final 66 months of his life, he starred in 21 talkies, wrote 2,897 syndicated newspaper columns; was a network radio commentator; made two around-the-world trips and flew the perimeter of South America.

He and Post planned to fly over the North Pole to Moscow when they crashed near Point Barrow.

After starring in 50 silent films in 1918-29, Will Rogers topped all theatre box offices in 1934, but ran second behind Shirley Temple in 1935 with Clark Gable in third place.

“Twentieth Century-Fox’s re-release of these four final movies of Will Rogers’ career reflects the growing national and international interest in the Oklahoma cowboy-philosopher-actor,” Lefebvre-Carter said.

”Even in those busy years of his life, Will Rogers often visited Oklahoma and was the unchallenged national booster for the state. These four movies on DVD, with more planned soon, is a salute to both Oklahoma and Will Rogers. He is not forgotten.”

The DVDs will be available in the Will Rogers Museum gift shop, at Borders and Barnes and Noble bookstores and Amazon.com.