



Gene Autry



America's Number 1 Singing Cowboy

BY WAYNE W. DANIEL

One hundred years ago this year a watershed event occurred in the realm of American movie making. It was in 1903 that Edwin S. Porter filmed *The Great Train Robbery*, a cinematic production featuring bandits, cowboys, the commission of a crime, a fight between good guys and bad guys, escape, pursuit, and a concluding gun battle in which the good guys prevailed. From the mold of this hugely popular dramatic film poured forth, during the better part of the ensuing century, an avalanche of Western films seen on movie and television screens by millions of people around the world.

But plots populated only with villains, violence, and victorious sheriffs did not reveal the full range of the Western

Wayne W. Daniel of Chamblee, Georgia, is a retired college professor and a country music historian. He is the author of Pickin' on Peachtree, A History of Country Music in Atlanta, Georgia, published by the University of Illinois Press.

experience. Missing were the images invoked by the songs recorded by the likes of Carl T. Sprague and Vernon Dalhart and published in books by such scholars as N. Howard Thorpe and John A. Lomax; songs that extol the virtues of a home on the range or tell of cowboys singing to quiet a restless herd of cattle. As a part of the Western tradition, music had a rightful place in the transmission of the legacy, and recent technological advances in film making enabled the studios to make sound a part of the finished product. It was only logical, then, to complement the rough-and-tumble action of the B western with calming interludes of song. In 1930, western star Ken Maynard became filmdom's first singing cowboy when he warbled a couple of Western ditties in *Sons of the Saddle*. Three years later John Wayne was given a singing role in *Riders of Destiny*. Maynard's renditions have been characterized as amateurish, while legend has it that Wayne's total lack of musical talent required that he lip-sync to the voice of another. It was not until 1934

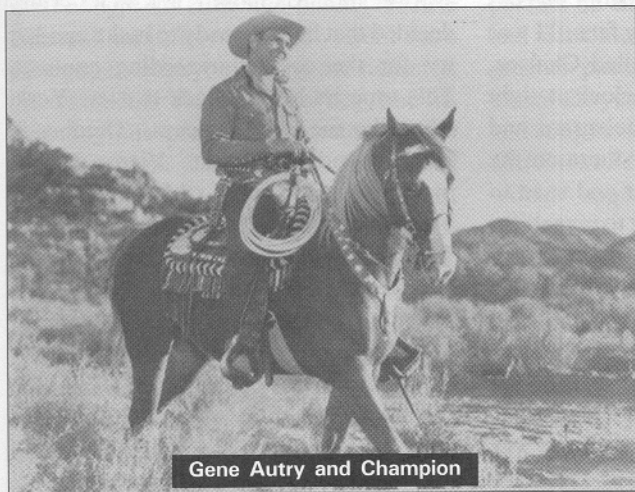
that the potential of the singing cowboy movie star became evident. The man who was in the right place at the right time with the right credentials to set the phenomenon on an upward spiral was Texas-born, Oklahoma-nurtured Orvon Gene Autry.

Born September 29, 1907, near Tioga, Texas, Autry was destined to meld his musical talents and business acumen into a formidable force that would write the script for the development of a sizeable segment of popular culture and make him a multimillionaire in the process. With a population of less than 800, Tioga, located some 40 miles from the Oklahoma border, was known for the medicinal qualities of its local water supply. It was not a place likely to be picked as the training ground of a future music industry giant.

Autry's early experiences were relatively inauspicious, giving little hint that they constituted the foundation upon which a multi-media entertainment career would be erected. Describing his early life and that of his contemporaries, he once wrote, "the pace was serene, the life pastoral. We were the sons of ranch hands and farmers and drifters. I knew how to ride a horse and milk a cow and drive a buckboard." One aspect of Autry's life set

him apart from his peers: his interest in music, which stood out as an important part of his early life. "My grandfather was a Baptist preacher ... who taught me to sing when I was five in order to use me in his church choir," Autry recalled in his autobiography, "Back in the Saddle Again." "Mother encouraged my interest in music," he added. "At night she sang to us, hymns and folk ballads mostly, and read Psalms. She played the piano, and a guitar in the Latin style, and on Sunday she was the church organist." Autry wrote that when he was twelve years old he paid eight dollars for a guitar he ordered from a Sears Roebuck catalog. He had earned the money by baling and stacking hay on his uncle's farm. The \$7.95 guitar that appeared in the Sears Roebuck catalogs the year Autry was twelve was called the Pearletta. The catalog picture shows a flattop instrument which, according to the description, had a body made of imitation rosewood, a spruce top, and poplar neck with mahogany finish. The ebony-finished fingerboard was bound with white celluloid and inlaid with four pearletta (imitation pearl) position ornaments. The guitar, which weighed twelve pounds, came with steel strings, adjustable bridge, instruction book, and fingerboard chart.

By the time he was fifteen, Autry was earning fifty cents a night performing in a Tioga cafe. When the head of the Fields Brothers Marvelous Medicine Show offered him a fifteen-dollar-a-week job, he jumped at the opportunity. "I traveled with them for three months," he wrote in his autobiography, "softening up audiences with



Gene Autry and Champion

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mournful ballads" before the pitchman began hawking the liniment, pills, and pain remedies that paid the salaries and kept the show on the road.

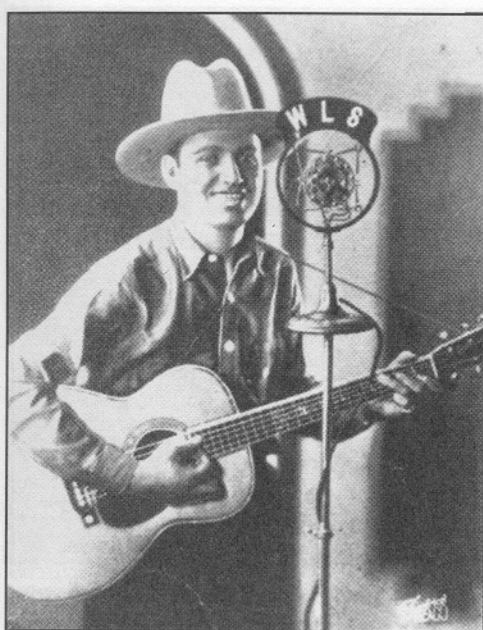
In those early years of entertaining, Autry did not depend on music for a steady income. While he was still a kid, he and his family moved across the Red River to the small town of Achille, Oklahoma. There he worked as a projectionist at the local movie theater, where he first became acquainted with Western films and the escapades of such silver-screen cowboys as Harry Carey, Hoot Gibson, and Buck Jones.

Common sights where Autry lived during his youth were railroads and stock cars pulled by steam locomotives that came into town empty and left out loaded with cattle from surrounding ranches. "I used to hang around the railroad station in those days," he once told a Los Angeles disc jockey. "I began to listen to those dots and dashes on the telegraph key, so I decided that I wanted to be a telegraph operator. I think I worked in practically every station between Springfield, Missouri, and Sherman, Texas." It was in one such station that Autry had an encounter that forever changed his life. In a 1974 radio interview, he retold the story that has become well-known to Autry fans. "I was working in a little town called Chelsea, Oklahoma. About eleven o'clock at night this fellow came in to send a telegram, and he saw a guitar laying over there on the desk. I always kept a guitar and used to practice on the thing and sing to myself for amusement. He said, 'Say, do you play that guitar?' I said, 'Yes.' He said, 'I'd like to hear you sing a couple of songs.' So I did a couple of songs for him, and he said, 'Son, you ought to get yourself a job on the radio.' I didn't pay too much attention to him at that time and just thought he was trying to make me feel good. So I read the

telegram, and it was going to King Features in New York, and [it was] signed, 'Will Rogers.' I just realized then who I was talking to."

Later, when the railroads began laying off their employees and it looked as if Autry might lose his job, he remembered the words of Will Rogers. "So, I said to myself," he recalled, "'Will Rogers thought that I was good enough to be on the radio, so I think I'll take a whack at it.'" Autry thought his best bet for getting into show business would be through the recording industry. Consequently, he went east to Chicago and New York in search of a record contract. After listening to Autry's singing, record company officials told him that he had a good voice, but advised him that it would be in his best interest to go back to Oklahoma and get a job in radio in order to gain experience performing in front of a microphone. Autry, following this advice, took his guitar to Tulsa, Oklahoma, where he obtained a job performing on a sustaining basis over radio station KVOO. According to Autry, the experience brought him "no money, but a lot of fun." During this radio stint, he was known as "The Oklahoma Yodeling Cowboy."

After about six months at KVOO, Autry decided that he was ready to make another try for the coveted recording contract. This time he headed back to New York, where he met with success. October 9, 1929, found him in the Victor studios making his first record, "My Dreaming of You," backed by "My Alabama Home." Two years and some 35 records later, on October 29, 1931, Autry recorded his first major hit, "That Silver Haired Daddy of Mine," sung as a duet with Jimmy Long, his one-time boss on the railroad and Mrs. Gene Autry's uncle. Autry and Long also wrote the song, which reputedly sold 30,000 copies within the first month of its



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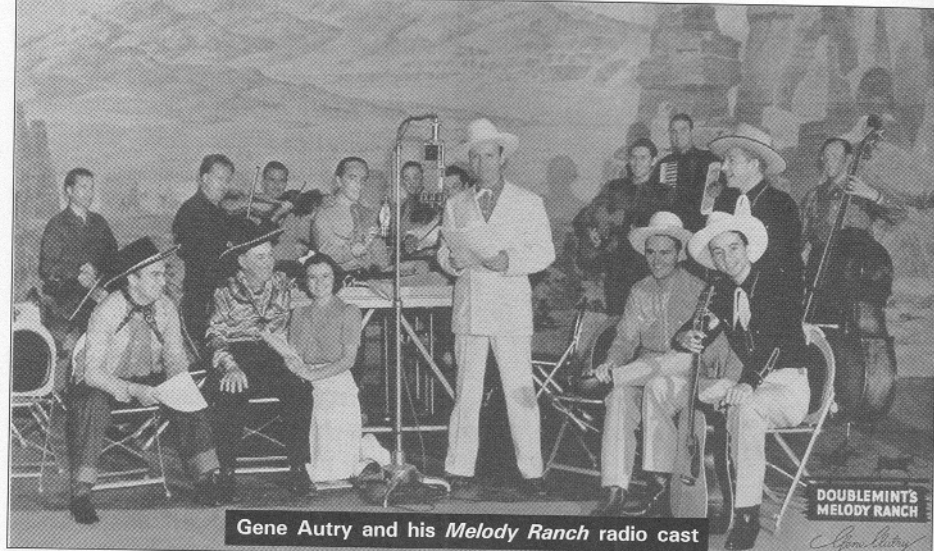
release on record.

As was typical in the early history of country/western music, Autry's hit record was followed by a job on a major radio station. In December 1931, he began appearing on Chicago's WLS, home station of the famous *National Barn Dance*. WLS had gone on the air in 1924 as a marketing and public relations tool of Sears, Roebuck and Company, but in 1928 was bought by Chicago-based "Prairie Farmer," an influential Midwestern farm newspaper. Autry, billed by the station as the Oklahoma Yodeling Cowboy, had his own daytime program, appeared on the Saturday night *Barn Dance*, and toured with other WLS artists. Although Sears, Roebuck no longer owned the station, the WLS-Autry-Sears tie-in was remarkable. Autry's daytime program was sponsored by the mail-order emporium.

The company he was recording for at the time, American Record Corporation, was issuing his records on the Sears-owned Conqueror label, and these had been available at 19 cents each from the Sears

catalog since the Spring/Summer 1931 edition. The Fall/Winter 1931/32 Sears catalog offered its customers additional Gene Autry merchandise: a 39-cent song folio titled "Gene Autry's Cowboy Songs and Mountain Ballads," and an item that would kindle the fires of ambition in the hearts of countless aspiring pickers and singers around the country, the Gene Autry Roundup guitar, to be had for \$9.75.

In 1934 Autry, an established star of radio, records, and stage, had but one media challenge left to pursue — motion pictures. His record label, American Recording Corporation, was owned by one Herbert J. Yates, who also owned Consolidated Film Industries, a movie film processing company. A man named Nat Levine owned a motion picture production company called Mascot Pictures. According to Autry, when Levine approached Yates in search of financial backing for a Ken Maynard western, Yates agreed to put up the money on condition that Levine give Autry a role in the movie. Thus it was that in the summer of 1934 Gene Autry, along with his fellow WLS performer and future movie sidekick, Lester (Smiley) Burnette, packed up his guitar and cowboy boots, and left Chicago for what appeared to be greener pastures in Hollywood. By the end of the year he had strummed his guitar and sung his songs in two Mascot films, *In Old Santa Fe* and *Mystery Mountain*. He would appear in one more Mascot production, *The Phantom Empire*, a thirteen-chapter serial. Autry's next 58 movies would bear the logo of Republic Pictures, the name Herbert Yates gave the new company he formed when he bought Mascot Pictures and merged it with his other holdings. The last 32 of Autry's 93 films would be released by Columbia Pictures, the studio he signed with in 1947



Gene Autry and his *Melody Ranch* radio cast

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following a disagreement with Republic.

With the singing cowboy's movie debut, those with a stake in his future stepped up their efforts to ensure that Gene Autry would become a household name. Unlike most screen stars who portrayed persons other than themselves and assumed the names of these characters, Gene Autry, with one exception, always played Gene Autry in his films. No chance for identity problems or casting errors there. Opportunities were never overlooked for Autry to sing on film the songs that he had also recorded for home purchase and jukebox play. In fact, nineteen of his movie titles were the same as a previously recorded song. They included such favorites as *Tumbling Tumbleweeds* (1935), *Mexicali Rose* (1939), and *Sioux City Sue* (1946).

If making movies and records wasn't enough to keep a man busy, there was all that merchandise to be endorsed and licensed. Kids who spent their Saturday afternoons at the local movie house getting their weekly horse-opera fix also had to have a Gene Autry guitar and a Gene Autry cowboy outfit complete with boots,

spurs, holsters, and cap pistols all bearing their hero's name. They wanted to take their sandwiches to school in a Gene Autry lunch box, sneak a peek at the latest Gene Autry comic book when the teacher wasn't looking, and mark the tortuously slow passage of class time on their Gene Autry wristwatches. Those parents able to afford a higher-priced toy could look forward to requests at Christmas time for a Gene Autry bicycle. One can well believe the August 1939 *New York Times* article reporting that Hollywood's top western star "owns a home in North Hollywood, a 25-acre ranch near Burbank, six horses and a couple of dozen cowboy outfits. How much money he makes is his business, but you may be sure it isn't cabbage."

In July 1942, just seven months after the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor, Gene Autry was inducted into military service during a broadcast of his *Melody Ranch* radio program. His initial assignment was with Special Services, entertaining personnel at military bases throughout the country. Autry, who considered this "soft duty," wanted to do more. He aspired to be

a pilot in the Army Air Corps, but there were problems with that, one of which was a lack of experience. "I had flown only small craft," he wrote in his autobiography, so "I found a private field in Phoenix and, on my own time, at my own expense, I started checking out bigger aircraft ... I flew two or three times a week for six months and, finally, I was accepted for flight school." He was subsequently promoted to flight officer and transferred to the Air Transport Command, where he spent the remainder of his time as a military man. "It was tough and important work," Autry recalled, "high risk and low profit, and it suited me fine."

By July 4, 1945, Autry had been discharged from military service. He returned to civilian life in the middle of a squabble with Republic Pictures over the contract he had signed with the firm in 1938. On June 27, 1944, he had filed suit against Republic seeking to void the contract. His position was that because of his enlistment in the military he could not fulfill its requirements. Republic did not see things that way, contending that Autry owed the studio 21 more pictures. In 1947, after three years of court battles, Autry and Republic were finally divorced. A decision rendered by the California Supreme Court freed the Western star of all contractual obligations to the studio. In the meantime, Autry had made five movies for Republic since his discharge from the military, but henceforth, through a deal with Columbia Pictures, his films would be produced by his own independent firm, Gene Autry Productions, and released through Columbia.

Autry did not let his legal entanglement with Republic Pictures stand in the way of other lucrative entertainment ventures and financial undertakings which brought him financial success. A government document filed by Autry in December of 1948



U.S. Army Air Corps Officer Gene Autry

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revealed that his net worth exceeded \$800,000, that he had financial holdings in 17 enterprises, and that his gross income for the first ten months of the year was \$548,913. His sources of income included royalties (\$197,996), radio and personal appearances (\$101,167), motion picture performances (\$62,240), and radio broadcasts (\$67,500). In addition to Gene Autry Productions, his financial investments included interests in radio stations, music publishing companies, a cattle company, an aviation company, movie theaters, a rodeo, newspapers, a distributing company, and a manufacturing company. There were more acquisitions to come: oil wells, television stations, motels and hotels and the California Angels baseball team. It has been reported that by 1970 his financial worth was in excess of \$100 million.

Autry's last film, *Last of the Pony Riders*, was released in November 1953. His network radio program, *Melody Ranch*, which had been on the air since 1940, was broadcast for the last time in 1956. In 1962 he recorded a long-play album, "Gene Autry's Golden Hits." This

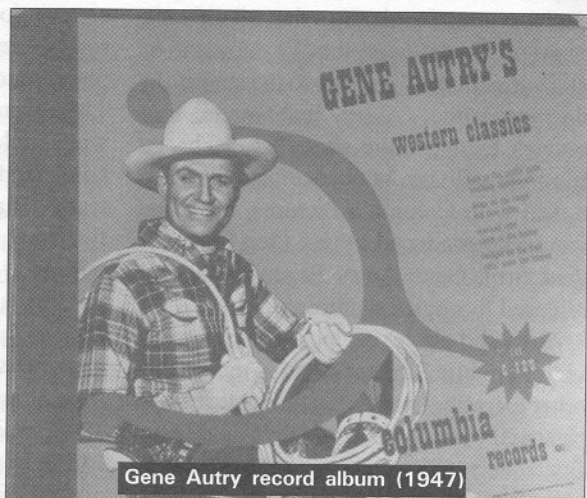
event marked his last appearance in a recording studio. With his days as a full-time entertainer behind him, Autry had 36 years left in which to count his money and reminisce over his accomplishments, the honors bestowed upon him, and his impact on American popular culture. There was much food for thought.

Take, for example, Autry's songwriting. Of 460 songs he recorded, he is credited as composer or co-composer of 188, or 41 percent. His song-writing efforts earned him induction into the Nashville Songwriters' Hall of Fame and a lifetime achievement award from the American Society of Composers, Authors, and Publishers (ASCAP). In addition to "That Silver Haired Daddy of Mine," the songs that Autry had a hand in writing include such hits as "Be Honest with Me," "You're the Only Star in My Blue Heaven," "At Mail Call Today," "Here Comes Santa Claus," and his long-time theme song, "Back in the Saddle Again." Like most good songwriters, Autry had a knack for spotting catch phrases and ideas that could be turned into hit songs. He once recalled how he came to write his 1947 hit, "Here Comes Santa Claus." "I was riding down Hollywood Boulevard at

the Hollywood Christmas Parade, and I was grand marshal that year, and the kids kept saying, 'Here comes Santa Claus. Here comes Santa Claus.' So I made a mental note of that, and I wrote that song, and we sold over a million records of it the first year that it was out." Autry was in the Air Force, stationed at Love Field near Dallas, Texas, when he and Fred Rose wrote "At Mail Call Today." As Autry recalled, "They had a magazine called *Yank* that was

put out for all the service men, and they had a column [called] "Mail Call," and everybody would pour their heart out to it. So there was one letter I saw, and it said, 'At mail call today my heart was broken. My girl had jilted me for someone else.' So I called Fred in Los Angeles. I said, 'Fred, I've got an idea for a song.'" Rose flew to Dallas, the two wrote the song, and Autry recorded it on December 6, 1944. Letters from adoring fans provided inspiration for "Be Honest with Me" and "You're the Only Star in My Blue Heaven." To meet the demands for new songs to record and sing in his movies, Autry had always to be on the alert for fresh material.

There were also the repertoire demands of his CBS radio network show, *Melody Ranch*, which featured Autry singing from three to five songs on each weekly broadcast. *Melody Ranch* debuted on Sunday evening, January 7, 1940. Sponsored by the makers of Wrigley's chewing gum, each show featured, in addition to songs by Autry and others, a comedy routine featuring Pat Buttram, Johnny Bond, and other comics, and the highly popular western drama that consumed some fifty percent of the show's air time.



Gene Autry record album (1947)



Gene Autry's Melody Ranch (1942)

PHOTOFEST

A staple of the post World War II *Melody Ranch* shows was a western trio dubbed the Cass County Boys, so named for the Texas county that one of the members called home. The trio, consisting of Bert Dodson (bass fiddle), Fred Martin (accordion), and Jerry Scroggins (guitar), also appeared in eleven Gene Autry movies. One of the longest-running shows on radio, *Melody Ranch* served as a convenient means for publicizing Autry's current and forthcoming movies and records.

Melody Ranch stalwarts Pat Buttram and Johnny Bond were among several of Autry's sidekicks, men who put in long years of service as supporting artists to the western star. In addition to his stint on *Melody Ranch*, Buttram appeared in seventeen Autry movies between 1948 and 1952. Bond first appeared on the *Melody Ranch* radio program in 1940 as a member of a vocal and instrumental trio that also included Jimmy Wakely and Dick Reinhart. He was still with the show when it went off the air. The most famous of the Autry sidekicks was Smiley Burnette, who went to work with the

Oklahoma Yodeling Cowboy at WLS in 1933. Known to western movie aficionados as Frog Millhouse, Burnette appeared in Autry's first movie, *In Old Santa Fe*, in 1934, as well as his last, *Last of the Pony Riders*, in 1953. In between, he appeared with Autry in 53 pre-World War II motion pictures and in six after the war. Autry had a reputation for sticking by those he chose to be on his team, which in turn inspired devout loyalty from those who came to be known as his sidekicks. As one writer put it, "'Out where a friend is a friend' isn't just part of a song to Gene, it's a way of life."

Autry's choice of sidekicks was not limited to the two-legged kind. As well-known as the humans who were associated with America's favorite singing cowboy, was Champion, his equine companion of silver screen and rodeo arena. In time, the horse became a star in its own right. Actually, there were numerous Champions: the original steed; Champion, Jr.; the Champion of television fame; and a slew of Champion doubles. The original Champion died in 1947 at the age of 17. He had been retired in 1942 after having appeared in Autry movies for eight years. All these Champions contributed greatly to the success of the rodeo phase of Autry's career. The original Champion made headline news in 1940 when TWA renovated a 14-passenger airplane so he could be flown from Autry's western movie set to New York in time to make a rodeo opening at Madison Square Garden. Champion, Jr., appeared in most of Autry's post-World War II movies. The third of the film Champions was his master's faithful mount during the final phase of Autry's career as an entertainer.

With characteristic enthusiasm and business finesse, Autry, when he realized that television was the wave of the future in entertainment, set about to take

advantage of the trend. He created his own company, Flying A Productions, and on Sunday evening, July 23, 1950, *The Gene Autry Show* made its debut on the CBS television network. Autry was the first of the cowboy heroes to be seen on the small screen. The ninety-first, and final, episode of *The Gene Autry Show* was filmed in 1955. Flying A Productions also produced four other television series, *Annie Oakley*, *The Range Rider*, *Buffalo Bill, Jr.*, and *Champion the Wonder Horse*.

Gene Autry died on October 2, 1998, at his home in the Studio City neighborhood of Los Angeles. He was 91. Autry was preceded in death by his first wife, the former Ina Mae Spivey, to whom he was married for 48 years. He was survived by his second wife, Jacqueline Ellam Autry, whom he married in 1981.

Though Gene Autry is no longer among the living, his legacy lives on. His recordings, reissued on several compact disc compilations, keep on selling. His movies and television shows are available in video and DVD format for home enjoyment and are frequently seen on television. Visitors to Nashville's Country Music Hall of Fame can see, among those of more than 80 similarly honored country/western stars, a likeness of Autry, who was admitted to that august circle in 1969.

In Autry's hometown, the recently incorporated Tioga Museum and Heritage Association, located at 107 Gene Autry Drive, has as one of its goals the collection and preservation of archival materials pertaining to the town's most widely known former resident. The museum's annual Gene Autry Festival commemorates one whom its officials call "a man of high standards and integrity."

In 1941 the town of Berwyn, Oklahoma, officially changed its name to Gene Autry, Oklahoma. Local officials were inspired by the fact that in 1938 Autry had

purchased 1200 acres of nearby land on which to keep his rodeo livestock. Today, the Gene Autry Oklahoma Museum of Local History houses an outstanding collection of memorabilia pertaining to Autry and other singing cowboys. The annual Gene Autry Oklahoma Film and Music Festival draws visitors from far and near to this tiny hamlet located some 25 miles north of the Texas state line near Ardmore, Oklahoma.

A must-see attraction for Autry fans who visit the Los Angeles area is the Autry Museum of Western Heritage. Founded by Autry himself, the museum is devoted to preserving and interpreting the history and traditions of the American West. Also in Los Angeles is the Hollywood Walk of Fame. Autry is the only entertainer to be represented on this world's most famous sidewalk with five stars, one each for radio, records, film, television, and live theatrical performance, which includes rodeo.

Gene Autry, who entertained millions during his lifetime and helped shape the character of twentieth-century American popular culture, is an entertainment draw and cultural icon of the twenty-first. While today's generation of singing-cowboy fans cannot experience the thrill of watching Gene Autry take a stand for law and order in a 1930's neighborhood theater, they can learn the lessons of the Code of the West from videos and DVDs in the familiar milieu of their home entertainment centers.

Though the joy of spending a Sunday half-hour listening to *Melody Ranch* on AM radio is not an easy possibility, one can learn to love the songs of the wide open spaces through the technology of the modern CD player. The medium has changed; the message remains the same. ■

Tune in TWTD March 15 to hear a Gene Autry Melody Ranch program.