

King of the Cowboys

BY WAYNE W. DANIEL

Seventy years ago, in 1934, a young Gene Autry arrived in Hollywood to sing in a Ken Maynard movie titled "In Old Santa Fe" and unwittingly set the stage for

the emergence of the singing cowboy as a recognized figure in the realm of popular culture. While Autry was the first successful singing cowboy, others followed in his wake, including Tex Ritter, Eddie Dean, Rex Allen, and tenor-voiced, guitar-strumming Roy Rogers, destined to become the King of the Cowboys. It was also

in 1934 that a vocal trio performing cowboy songs on a radio station in Hollywood, California, was christened "The Sons of the Pioneers." The future Roy Rogers was a member of this group.

Roy Rogers was born Leonard Franklin



Roy Rogers and Trigger

Sly on November 5, 1911, in Cincinnati, Ohio. He was the third and only boy of four children born to Andrew and Mattie Sly. Andrew Sly, a native of Ohio, earned

a living as a shoe factory employee, while his wife, a Kentuckian, kept house and looked after the children. Andrew Sly was an adventurous and innovative man. Prior to his son's birth, it is reputed that, among other jobs, he had worked as an acrobat, a carnival laborer, and a showboat entertainer. Be-

fore Leonard was a year old, the elder Sly, with the help of a relative, built a houseboat that he ferried up the Ohio River from Cincinnati to Portsmouth, 120 miles away. The Sly family lived on the houseboat for seven years before moving twelve miles north up the Scioto River from Portsmouth. Here, in a small rural community called Duck Run, the Slys built a house on land that Andrew had bought with money saved from his shoe factory earnings.

For the next ten years Leonard Sly experienced the adventures, delights, and

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hardships of growing up on a hard-scrabble farm. He learned to plow the fields to grow food for his family; to hunt with rifle, bow, and slingshot; and to love and train wild animals. There was also the matter of getting a formal education. "I only got a couple of years of high school," he once told a radio interviewer. Schooling had to be scuttled in favor of survival, and at the age of seventeen, Leonard went to work to help support the family.

Farming for the Slys was not an economic success. Life on the farm did, however, provide young Leonard with an opportunity to learn to ride a horse, a skill that proved to be an asset in his future career. "The first 'horse' I had was a mule," he joked years later. "I learned to ride horses on a mule when I was about seven years old, and later my dad bought me a little ex-sulky racer, and she was my pride and joy."

While the Sly family's daily routine may have been grueling, they found respite in their music. "I played mandolin and guitar, which I learned when I was a kid," Leonard explained after he had become Roy Rogers. "My mother and dad both played them for square dances when we were kids, and my three sisters and I all learned to play the mandolin and guitar. Because you weren't distracted by a lot of radio and television and stuff like that in those days you had to manufacture your own entertainment. I bought my first guitar in a hock shop ... in Cincinnati. I paid 20 dollars for it." Leonard, who attended the dances with his parents, became a proficient square-dance caller, an accomplishment that he put to good use in later years.

Yodeling was another skill developed during his Duck Run days that Leonard



Dale Evans and Roy Rogers

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later capitalized on as a professional entertainer. He perfected his technique by using yodeling as a method of response when his mother called him from play and other farmyard activities.

In the summer of 1930, when Leonard was 18 years old, the Sly family packed what belongings they could into their 1923 Dodge and set out for California. Awaiting them at journey's end were manual labor and the migrant worker camps vividly described in John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*, published nine years later. After four months in the Golden State, during which time Leonard and his father worked primarily as truck drivers hauling gravel to build a golf course, the elder Sly decided it was time to return to Ohio. Leonard, who had fallen in love with California, was a reluctant passenger on the trip back east.

The following year, motivated by the prospect of another cold Ohio winter, he found it easy to take advantage of an opportunity to return to California, which

henceforth would be his permanent home. The elder Slys soon followed their son west, and father and son again found employment hauling gravel. When these jobs proved to be short-lived, the family became genuine migrant workers.

In *Happy Trails*, the book he co-wrote with Dale Evans, Roy Rogers stated that he and his relatives “picked peaches in Bakersfield for Del Monte and grapes and everything else for anybody else who would hire us. ... When one job finished we would load the family up in our battered old truck and make camp with a whole bunch of other poor strangers near another orchard that needed picking.”

Once again music provided the means by which Leonard Sly could temporarily escape the drudgery of earning a living by the sweat of his brow. When the day’s quota of fruit had been gathered, he and his father would bring out their instruments and treat their fellow workers to some down-home picking and singing. It soon occurred to young Leonard that perhaps he could parlay his musical talents into a means of earning a living. The life of a professional musician would surely be easier than that of a migrant worker. Turning thought into action, Leonard, in 1931, teamed up with a cousin, Stanley Sly, to form a duet they called the Slye Brothers.

They began performing wherever an audience could be found – at parties, square dances, and other social gatherings. Procuring and fulfilling commitments to these gigs proved to be more arduous than anticipated, and their pay, usually obtained by passing the hat, was not sufficient to allow them to give up their day jobs. The cousin soon fell by the wayside, but Leonard persevered. Over the next three years he performed with several groups until, in 1934, his career stabilized with the formation of a trio that

became known as the Sons of the Pioneers.

Leonard Sly’s journey leading to the fame and fortune achieved by the Sons of the Pioneers was by way of the proverbial rocky road. After the demise of the Slye Brothers duo, he took a job with a group called Uncle Tom Murray’s Hillbillies, for whom he worked without pay just to gain additional experience as a performer.

About this time, his sister talked him into making an appearance on an amateur show broadcast on a small radio station from midnight to six in the morning. “I played some old hillbilly songs for them,” he wrote in *Happy Trails*. “I guess they liked me enough because they applauded pretty good and the people at the radio station took my name down before I left.” Among the listeners that night was the manager of a band in need of a singer. “A couple or three days later,” Roy Rogers told Los Angeles disc jockey Dick Haynes, “I got a call from an old boy [who] wanted me to join the Rocky Mountaineers. They were all musicians. None of them sang. They were older fellows.” Leonard sang lead with the group, but he wanted to do more. “So I talked them into putting an ad in the paper to get another fellow [so] that we could work out some duets together,” he recalled.

Bob Nolan, a lifeguard at Santa Monica beach, saw the ad and rode a streetcar to the end of the line and walked the rest of the way out to East Los Angeles to apply for the job. “I’ll never forget when he knocked on the door,” Roy told Dick Haynes, “He had his shoes in his hand. He’d bought a new pair of shoes, and he had blisters on both of his heels about the size of a dime.” Although Leonard and Bob harmonized well as a duet, Leonard felt that they would sound even better by adding another voice to form a trio. Bob Nolan persuaded a friend, Bill “Slumber” Nichols, to join them.



Roy Rogers and the Sons of the Pioneers
Left to right: Hugh Farr, Tim Spencer, Bob Nolan, Roy Rogers,
Lloyd Perryman, Karl Farr, Pat Brady

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Although the Rocky Mountaineers had a weekly radio program, the pay was dismal. "We couldn't quite make it with the Rocky Mountaineers," Roy reminisced. "We had a rough time. I got tired of living on chipped beef and gravy, and I went with another group called the International Cowboys," so named because its personnel included a Mexican and a Hawaiian. True to form, the International Cowboys was soon added to Leonard's list of previous jobs.

Undaunted, and with characteristic optimism, Leonard Sly put together another act consisting of himself; Tim Spencer, who had worked with him as a member of the Rocky Mountaineers; Bill "Slumber" Nichols; a fellow they called Cactus Mack, and a fiddler who went by the name of Cyclone. Calling themselves the O-Bar-O Cowboys, this group immediately set off on a barnstorming trip through the Southwest, traveling in a Pontiac owned by the fiddle player. As a

result of poor promotion and injudicious bookings by their agent, this two-month excursion turned out to be a disaster. "We got hungry," Roy said of the tour. "We ate all the jack rabbits and cottontails between [Los Angeles] and Roswell, New Mexico."

The end of the Southwest tour also marked the end of the O-Bar-O Cowboys, but it was not the end of Leonard Sly's quest for success as an entertainer. Back in Los Angeles, he went to work with Jack and His Texas Outlaws, a group heard on KFVB in Hollywood.

Again, finding himself working for experience rather than money, he set about trying to create a new vocal trio. "I went out to Tim [who was working as bag boy at a grocery store]," Roy told an interviewer, "and I said, 'Tim, why don't you get with me, and we'll go out and see Bob [Nolan], see if he'll be interested in coming on a better station than we'd been on before, and we'll get together and work out some trio stuff,' and so we did. We went out to

the Bel-Air Country Club and got Bob [who was employed there as a caddie].”

At first, the threesome, calling themselves the Pioneer Trio, worked at KFWB as part of the Jack and His Texas Outlaws group. An announcer started calling the trio the Sons of the Pioneers, because, he said, they were too young to be pioneers themselves. As their popularity grew, the station manager asked the trio to start working on the station as an independent act at a salary of \$35 a week. The trio had two programs on KFWB, a morning show on which they were billed as the Gold Star Rangers and an evening program where they were known as the Sons of the Pioneers.

In the spring of 1934, Texas fiddler and bass singer Hugh Farr became the fourth member of the Sons of the Pioneers, and the group found themselves caught up in a heady swirl of success. The following August found the quartet in the Los Angeles studios of Decca Records, where they recorded, among other selections, the Bob Nolan composition, “Tumbling Tumbleweeds,” a song destined to become an immediate hit and a western classic. By the end of the year the Sons of the Pioneers had begun recording for the Standard Radio company a series of transcriptions that would be syndicated to radio stations all across the country.

Major events for the group in 1935 were the addition of singer/guitarist Karl Farr, brother of Hugh, and the beginning of a long stint of appearances in western movies. In 1936 the Sons of the Pioneers was a featured act at the Texas Centennial in Dallas, and a San Francisco firm published *The Sons of the Pioneers Song Folio #1*, containing such popular Bob Nolan compositions as “Way Out There,” “Happy Cowboy,” “Sky Ball Paint,” and “Echoes from the Hills.” The Sons of the Pioneers were enjoying the first fruits of a

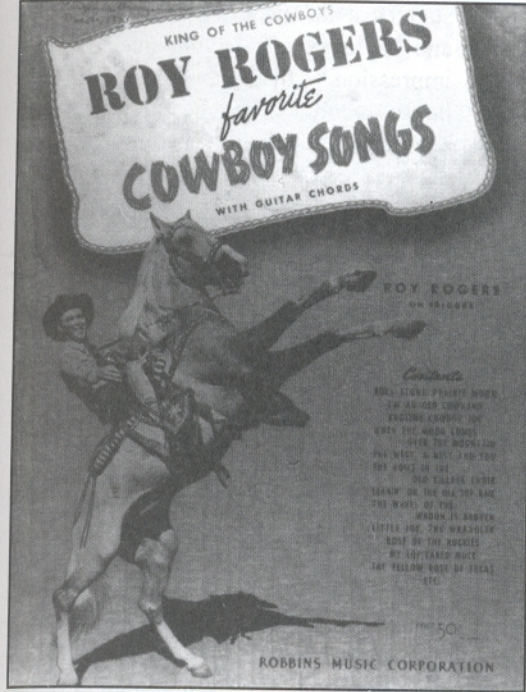
successful career that would still be active 70 years later.

While Leonard Sly was enjoying the current and anticipated future success of the Sons of the Pioneers, he was open to the exploration of opportunities to further his career as an entertainer. When he heard that Republic Studios was looking for a singing cowboy to replace Gene Autry, with whom they were in a contract dispute, Leonard successfully auditioned for the job.

On October 13, 1937, after negotiating a release from Columbia, the motion picture company for which he had been working as a member of the Sons of the Pioneers, Leonard Sly signed a contract with Republic. Executives at Republic felt that Leonard Slye (Leonard had added the letter “e” to his last name sometime earlier) was not a name that would make a positive contribution to the cowboy hero image they wished to create for their new property. Even Dick Weston, a name Leonard had been using for his minor film appearances since 1935, was nixed by the studio bigwigs. The name Roy Rogers, on the other hand, seemed like a winner. It was alliterative, short, and reminiscent of the recently deceased entertainment icon Will Rogers.

And so it was that Roy Rogers made his starring debut in the Republic film *Under Western Stars*, released in the spring of 1938. This movie cast Roy as a young cowboy wishing to free local ranchers from the oppressive acts of the company that controlled their water supply. He achieves his goal by successfully running against the area’s United States congressman who was beholden to the head of the greedy water company. Roy pleads his case before his fellow congressmen in Washington and succeeds in bringing relief to his neighbor ranchers.

In its initial efforts to make Roy Rogers



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the next singing cowboy sensation, Republic Studios encountered a few problems. First off, according to the entertainment weekly *Variety*, Smiley Burnette, longtime Gene Autry sidekick, asked the studio for release from his contract. The reported reason was Burnette's objection to being cast in support of Roy Rogers.

Next came a telegram from Gene Autry's lawyer stating that his client held the copyright to the song "Dust" that Roy had sung in the recently released *Under Western Stars*. Republic Studios, according to the wire, had no rights with regard to the song.

Then in August, Republic heard from yet another lawyer. This one represented a 33-year veteran of vaudeville, whose name also happened to be Roy Rogers. Contending that his name was being capitalized on by the studio, this Roy Rogers was suing Republic and the new Roy Rogers for \$150,000 and a restraining

order to prevent further use of the name by the studio's rising star.

In due time the studio's problems were resolved. *Billy the Kid Returns*, released in September of 1938, was Smiley Burnette's second and last movie with Roy until 1942, when Gene Autry's military duties left his sidekick in need of a job. The song "Dust" remained in *Under Western Stars*, was recorded by Roy in 1938, and re-released on the long-play album *Roy Rogers: Columbia Historic Edition* in 1984. The suit brought by the first Roy Rogers was settled out of court for \$12,000 (approximately \$160,000 in today's dollars).

Republic Studios shifted into overdrive in its efforts to catapult Roy Rogers into the upper echelons of B western singing cowboy stardom. By the end of 1938, Roy had three more movies under his belt: *Billy the Kid Returns*, *Come On Rangers*, and *Shine On Harvest Moon*, released, respectively, in September, November, and December.

He starred in eight films in 1939. Studio executives arranged grueling personal appearance tours for their new star, timed to coincide with the release of his movies and to showcase his talents in theaters where his films were shown. As the filming of *Under Western Stars* drew to a close, for example, the studio was busy lining up personal appearances in Dallas, Kansas City, Oklahoma City, Memphis, New York City, and Chicago.

The premiere of *Under Western Stars* at the Capitol Theater in Dallas on Wednesday, April 13, 1938, was a gala affair that kept the stars of the film in the city for eight days. Roy and Smiley Burnette, arriving in Dallas by train on the 13th, were met by a contingent of Boy Scouts and rangerettes who accompanied them in

a parade from the station to City Hall for an official welcome by the mayor. That evening at the Capitol Theater, Roy and Burnette, accompanied by the Sons of the Pioneers, gave two live performances sandwiched between showings of the movie. According to a newspaper report, they "went over big" before a standing-room-only crowd that "backed up out into the street."

Next day, the stars were at the Baker Hotel, where they were honored at a luncheon given by Republic Studios and attended by local officials and movie industry executives. During the succeeding seven-day run of the movie, Roy and Burnette gave five performances daily at the theater. On Sunday, April 17, they managed to work in a visit to the studios of Dallas' WFAA, where they were guests on a musical variety program broadcast over the regional Dixie Network.

While movie critics frequently found fault with the plots, their comments about Roy were generally favorable. The morning after *Under Western Stars* opened at the Criterion Theater on Broadway, a *New York Times* reviewer, comparing the film's star to then currently popular entertainment figures, reported that Roy had "a drawl like Gary Cooper, a smile like Shirley Temple and a voice like Tito Guizar."

In its review of *Billy the Kid Returns*, a writer for *Variety* stated that "Surrounded by production, songs, reams of action and fine support, Rogers makes a definite mark in the westerns field, and should also, if comparably handled in succeeding films, outshine most of the herd. He has the added advantage of femme appeal as well as those of action-hungry boys."

Roy Rogers' appearances on stage were well received. *Billboard* magazine, reporting on his show at a Lincoln, Nebraska, theater in November 1938,

stated that his "act goes swell with the kids, and he lopes off, having made a swell impression." In December he broke the house record at the Palace Theater in Minneapolis, when, over a period of two days, approximately 10,000 fans paid to see him perform.

The *Billboard* reviewer who caught his act in Natchez, Mississippi, in July 1939 reported that "Rogers, handsome and rugged, thrilled large audiences with songs and guitar strumming, accompanied by members of [his] entourage." Roy would go on to star in a total of 81 western films and make guest appearances in some dozen other movies.

When Smiley Burnette opted out of performing with Roy, the new kid on the Republic Studios lot was left in need of a sidekick, that essential element of the B western. Veteran character actor Raymond Hatton filled the bill in three of Roy's next four movies. Roy's best-remembered movie sidekick, George "Gabby" Hayes, joined him on his seventh movie, *Southward Ho!*, released in May 1939, lending his unique comedic talents to forty more Roy Rogers films.

Although those "action-hungry boys," who made up a healthy chunk of the B western audience, would never stand for mushy romance scenes, producers felt a need to include a woman in their movies' cast of characters. Many a plot revolved around a widow or marriageable-age female orphan in need of rescue or protection by the hero.

More than 20 women appeared in Roy Rogers movies before Dale Evans appeared on the scene in 1944 for a role in *The Cowboy and the Senorita*, Roy's 40th film. She would be his leading lady in a total of 28 movies.

Dale Evans soon became Roy Rogers' leading lady in real life as well. They were married on December 31, 1947, in a



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private ceremony at the home of friends in Davis, Oklahoma.

This was Roy's third marriage. His first wife was Lucile Ascolese, whom he had married in 1933 just before leaving on the Southwest tour with the O-Bar-O Cowboys. The Rogers' divorce, which had been granted in 1935, became final on June 8, 1936, following the year-long wait required by California law.

On June 11, 1936, Roy and Arlene Wilkins were married in Roswell, New Mexico. Arlene died on November 3, 1946, from complications of childbirth, six days after Roy Rogers, Jr., was born. Roy and Arlene had two other children, Cheryl Darlene, whom they adopted in 1941, and Linda Lou, who had been born to them in 1943.

Roy and Dale had one child, Robin Elizabeth, who was born in 1950. They

adopted two girls, a part Choctaw Indian named Mary Little Doe (called Dodie) and a Korean named Deborah Lee, and a boy, John David "Sandy" Hardy. A foster child, Marion Fleming, a Scottish orphan, was a part of their family. Dale had a son, Thomas Frederick Fox, Jr., by a previous marriage. In 1974 Roy told disc jockey Dick Haynes that "[Dale] loves children, and I do, too; and by having a big family and working together ... makes our family nice. Like all families," Roy continued, "we had our share of tragedies. We lost three of [our children]. Lost a boy [Sandy] in the service in Germany, and our little girl, little Korean girl, was killed in our church bus accident coming back from Tijuana." The Rogers' daughter, Robin, about whom Dale wrote a book titled *Angel Unaware*, died when she was two years old.

During her short life, she had suffered from Down's syndrome and other medical problems.

Roy and Dale depended on their faith to see them through the dark hours of their marriage. "I don't think we would have ever made it without our spiritual life," Roy told an *Atlanta Constitution* staff writer in 1978. In 1950 Dale participated in evangelist Billy Graham's Crusades in Houston, New York, San Diego, and Washington. Both Roy and Dale became active members of the Billy Graham Crusades in 1954 and continued in this capacity, off and on, into the 1990s.

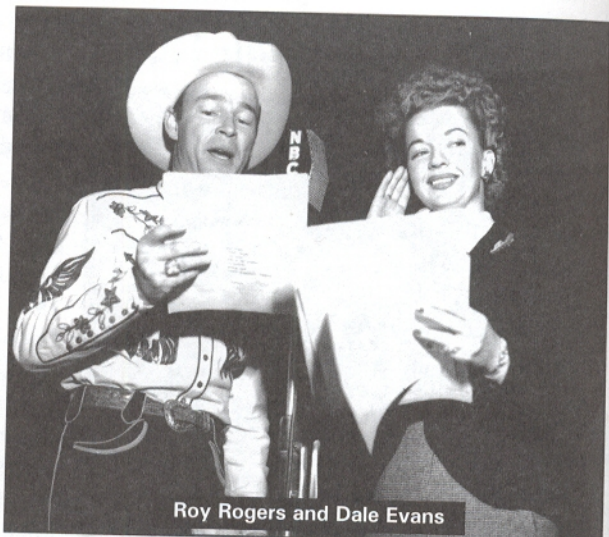
Religion was also an important factor in the Rogers' private lives. They were instrumental in organizing the Hollywood Christian Group. "We had a lot of people in the motion picture business, and we'd meet every week and have prayer," Roy

said. "People would talk and give their testimony."

Once Dale Evans appeared on the scene, the story of Roy Rogers became the story of Roy Rogers and Dale Evans. Roy, billed as the King of the Cowboys, and Dale, dubbed the Queen of the West, became the most recognizable symbols of the West as portrayed by Hollywood and the popular entertainment industry. Their presence in the field of show business became pervasive. Not only were they the top money makers in the B western field, Roy and Dale garnered recognition as stars of stage, radio, records, rodeo, and television.

Roy's network radio career began on November 21, 1944, when the *Roy Rogers Show* made its first appearance as a weekly Mutual Broadcasting System offering. According to advance publicity the shows were "Designed to recapture in song and story the romance of the Old West." They followed a format similar to the *Gene Autry Melody Ranch* programs, with which radio listeners had long been familiar. Each program contained a dose of comedy, a dramatic skit, and music and songs by Roy and the Sons of the Pioneers. This series of radio programs ended prematurely after only six months on the air when Roy's military draft status became 1-A. Roy did not have to go into service, and on October 5, 1946, the *Roy Rogers Show* was back on the air, this time on Saturday nights on the NBC network. This program replaced the *National Barn Dance*, which had been a regular NBC Saturday night show originating in Chicago since 1933.

Since the stars of the Roy Rogers Show



PHOTOFEST

were based in Hollywood, production of this segment of NBC's broadcast schedule moved to the West Coast. *Variety's* reviewer of the first Saturday night Roy Rogers Show thought it was "solid fare throughout" and "could probably please urbanites if they were to listen." Roy opened the program with "There's a New Moon Over My Shoulder"; Dale sang "On the Alamo"; the Sons of the Pioneers, according to *Variety*, "fill[ed] in pleasantly with waddy tunes; Gabby Hayes provided the comedy; and Pat Buttram, the only performer who made the transition from the *National Barn Dance* to Roy's show, appeared as a shepherd in the dramatic interlude. In summary, the *Variety* reviewer thought the show had "good pace and direction." *The Roy Rogers Show*, occupying various time slots on the NBC and Mutual networks, remained on the air through July 1955.

When radio gave way to television as the main home entertainment medium, Roy and Dale quickly seized the opportunity to use this new technology to bring the *Roy Rogers Show* into the homes of their fans. Between December 31, 1951, and June 9, 1957, NBC presented

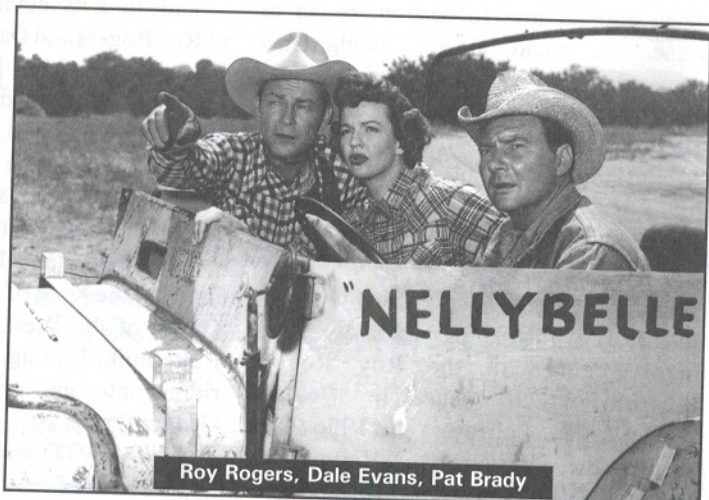
100 weekly episodes of the show. These were the years when Americans thrilled at Roy's heroic deeds; admired Dale's beauty and spunk; laughed at Pat Brady and his unpredictable jeep, Nellybelle; learned to hum the show's theme song, "Happy Trails", and dreamed of owning a horse like Trigger or Dale's steed, Buttermilk, and a dog like Roy's German Shepherd, Bullet. During the early 1960s the show was seen on the CBS television network, after which it went into syndication.

Roy Rogers fans found excitement in his movies and enjoyed listening to him on records and radio, but the greatest thrill of all was seeing him in person. And his agents, promoters, and managers sought to provide as many opportunities as possible for that to happen. Movies needed to be promoted through personal appearances, and Roy's image as an authentic cowboy had to be enhanced with rodeo performances.

A big break for Roy in his rodeo career occurred in October 1943, when he starred in the World's Championship Rodeo in New York City's Madison Square Garden. Gene Autry had been the star of this extravaganza the two preceding years, but his military duties forced him to forgo the gig in '43. *Billboard* reported that the 15,000 capacity arena was full, except for a few seats, when Roy appeared on opening day, "making the largest first-show crowd ever to witness the October fixture." Roy's show, one of 15 events on the pro-

gram, was titled "Home on the Range," and featured the star singing and yodeling a "bagful of cowboy melodies" accompanied by the Sons of the Pioneers consisting of Tim Spencer, Hugh and Karl Farr, Lloyd Perryman, and Bob Nolan. Roy, described by *Billboard* as "slim [and] well set up with nice if Hollywoodish wardrobe," also did the calling in another event, labeled "Gay Nineties Square Dance." In 1943, *Newsweek* reported that, in addition to his rodeo performances, Roy was making about 50 stage appearances a year.

For the next 15 years the life of Roy Rogers and Dale Evans would be a succession of rodeo appearances, stage performances, recording sessions, and starring roles and guest appearances on television shows and in motion pictures. For his efforts Roy would become one of the best-known and most-admired of the singing cowboys. Movie box office receipts revealed that he was America's number-one cowboy star from 1943 to 1954. In 1976, Roy and Dale were inducted into the Cowboy Hall of Fame in Oklahoma City. Roy was inducted into Nashville's Country Music Hall of Fame twice, first in 1980, as a member of the



original Sons of the Pioneers, and again in 1988, as an individual performer.

While Roy was riding the crest of his popularity, the public on which this popularity depended was losing interest in the storied West that had been described so eloquently in song by minstrels like Gene Autry and the Sons of the Pioneers, and in prose by such novelists as Zane Grey and Max Brand. In his book *Singing in the Saddle*, Douglas B. Green writes that by the mid-1940s Gene Autry was more interested in recording country songs than western songs, because the latter did not "sell well on phonograph records." The last singing cowboy movie, *The Phantom Stallion*, starring Rex Allen, was released in 1954. That year also saw the release of the last non-musical B western, *Two Guns and a Badge*, featuring Wayne Morris.

By 1962, writers and industry moguls had dropped the word "western" from "country-western", a term once designating a genre that lumped into a single category the mountain ballads of Roy Acuff and the cowboy songs of Roy Rogers. Western shows had all but disappeared from prime-time television by the early 1980s.

Roy Rogers was not one to sit idly by when opportunities to perform began to wane. He could always indulge his numerous hobbies that included bowling, hunting, fishing, and motorcycle riding. There were also his business interests to be attended to. Most visible of these were the Roy Rogers Family Restaurants, which by 1990 had grown in number to more than 700.

Perhaps Roy's most enjoyable activity during his later years was his involvement with the Roy Rogers Museum, which opened in 1967 in Apple Valley, California. In 1976, Roy moved the museum to Victorville, California, and renamed it the Roy

Rogers and Dale Evans Museum.

The museum moved again in 2003, this time to Branson, Missouri, a city known as "The Live Music Show Capital of the World." In the book *Happy Trails*, Roy wrote that he hoped the museum would "be a place for people to come have fun and learn about our lives, and also to remember what America was like not so many years ago." Visitors to the museum will see such items as the automobile in which the Sly family made the trip from Ohio to California, Roy and Dale's costumes, Rogers family household furnishings, and Roy's long-time pal and steed, Trigger, mounted in the life-like rearing position imprinted on the memories of senior citizens who, as children, saw him in movies and on television.

Daily performances by Roy "Dusty" Rogers, Jr., and occasional performances by other members of the family, help keep the Rogers musical legacy alive. Visitors to Branson, Missouri, can also visit the nearby Sons of the Pioneers Theater and hear the current edition of the Pioneers singing the songs that the original trio, consisting of Roy Rogers, Tim Spencer, and Bob Nolan, were singing back in 1934.

Time took its inevitable toll on the lives of Roy Rogers and Dale Evans, and in their later years they had their share of health problems. Roy had triple bypass heart surgery in 1978, and Dale suffered a heart attack in 1992 and a stroke in 1996. Roy died on July 6, 1998, and Dale followed him in death on February 7, 2001.

Roy Rogers and Dale Evans fans can imagine the King of the Cowboys and the Queen of the West, astride Trigger and Buttermilk, leaving the stage of life and riding into an eternal sunset singing "Happy Trails." ■

Tune in TWTD January 8 to hear Roy Rogers on Radio.