

Roy Rogers Centennial

ON THE CENTENNIAL CELEBRATION OF THE KING OF THE COWBOYS' BIRTH, WE LOOK BACK AT 100 YEARS FROM TRIGGER TO HAPPY TRAILS.



By Steven Phelps

HE WAS AS GOOD AS THEY COME. HE WAS a straight shooter and could sit a horse as if he were born in the saddle. He could yodel like nobody's business. He walked the straight and narrow in his hand-tooled boots and lived by a code worthy of his white Stetson.

He was the King of the Cowboys. He was Roy.

Roy Rogers was twice inducted into the Country Music Hall of Fame, first in 1980 with Western singing group The Sons of the Pioneers and again in 1988 for his solo career. He appeared in more than 100 films, including the popular Republic serials of the late '30s that rocketed him to fame. He has four stars on the Hollywood Walk of Fame (three for his motion picture, television, and radio fame and one for The Sons of the Pioneers). With 88 movies and 100 half-hour shows, Roy and his beloved steed Trigger took the stage together night after night to the delight of audiences all over the world, earning a hallowed place in Western entertainment history.

Rewind back to the late 1930s, when B-westerns were part of Hollywood's stock in trade—there was some serious competition in the singing cowboy business. There was Gene Autry, Tex Ritter, and Eddie Dean to name just a few. Even John Wayne gave it a try as "Singin' Sandy Saunders" (his vocals were dubbed) in Monogram Pictures' *Riders of Destiny* (1933).

But out of all talent, there was only one King of the Cowboys.

Born November 5, 1911, as Leonard Franklin Slye, the boy who would become Roy Rogers was raised in various parts of Ohio and was introduced early to hard work. His father, Andrew Slye, worked as a farmer, factory laborer, and shoemaker. In the late 1920s both father and son were working at the United States Shoe Company factory in Cincinnati when the opportunity arose to move out to California. But as so many other Depression-era westward migrants discovered, the promise of jobs and easy living was not always realized quickly. The Slys were among hundreds of thousands of people forced into hardship, laboring at farm work and struggling to find their way.

"They were looking for jobs, just like everybody else—and of course, when they got out there, the streets weren't paved with gold and jobs were hard to find," says Roy Rogers' son, Roy "Dusty" Rogers Jr. "[They both] worked quite a few weeks in the itinerant camps picking peaches for a nickel a load, just trying to keep the wolf from the door."

Perhaps as a comfort or as a distraction from the trials and tribulations facing his family, young Leonard developed a love of music, especially singing and playing guitar. Encouraged by his sister Mary, he tried out for an amateur talent radio program called "Midnight Frolic"; soon the young Leonard was joined by cousin Stanley Slye in a singing group that billed itself as The Slye Brothers, and he began performing and yodeling in a self-taught style honed during his Ohio farm days.





Fast-forward to Los Angeles, 1933. Although the struggling Slye Brothers act had long since failed, Leonard (not yet known as Roy) continued to pursue a musical career. He found himself joining various Western music groups with names like the Rocky Mountaineers, the International Cowboys, and the O-Bar-O Cowboys. In late 1933, Leonard formed a group called The Pioneer Trio with fellow musicians Bob Nolan and Tim Spencer.

Within a few weeks the trio had steady work and their vocal harmonies were winning fans over local radio. The group's name was inadvertently changed when KFWB radio broadcaster Harry Hall announced them over the air as The Sons of the Pioneers (Hall noted that they looked "too young to be pioneers").

"That self-taught yodel turned out to be a secret weapon for Roy, because nobody else could figure out exactly how he did it," says Gary LeMaster, who performs as part of the current incarnation of The Sons of the Pioneers. "I've studied on that for years and years. To say the least, he had a unique voice. I have never in all my years heard any impersonators do a good Roy Rogers voice—I've tried and tried, but it's so unique you can't."

The unique sound helped The Sons of the Pioneers work their way to even more popularity and they began appearing as musical guests in movies for Republic Pictures. In 1935, the Bob Nolan-penned song "Tumbling Tumbleweeds" was used as the title track for a Gene Autry picture, and the band adopted it as their theme.

It was a good era for the Sons, but the group's fate would soon take an unexpected twist. Excited by the prospect of working in film on his own, Leonard adopted the screen name Dick Weston and began appearing as a bit player, getting his start in a couple of Gene Autry films. Then, while Republic was in the middle of producing an Autry feature titled *Under Western Stars*, Autry bowed out due to contract negotiations and the studio was suddenly in the market for a new singing cowboy. Auditioning for the role of a heroic cowboy congressman, the 26-year-old Leonard won the lead in the film.

Though the role was never meant for him, it was the catalyst

for a new image, a new career, and a new name: Roy Rogers.

As his new film career rapidly gained steam, Rogers continued to perform with The Sons of the Pioneers. His box office appeal soon surpassed Autry's and easily overshadowed that of his old group, but, true to form, Rogers never left his singing buddies behind. The Sons of the Pioneers became his accompanying band, appearing with him in his many endeavors over the next several decades.

By 1942 at Republic Pictures it was all but law: The studio declared Roy Rogers "King of the Cowboys," and the one-time factory worker and Ohio farm boy took up the mantle that would earn him the devotion of millions of fans around the world.



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"P EOPLE FELT THAT they knew him," says Jeffrey Richardson, associate curator of Western history and popular culture at the Autry National Center in Los Angeles. "He was an average American at a time when average Americans needed someone to look up to. During the Depression and the time following after that during the war, Roy really was an iconic American symbol."

"Roy came at a good time," echoes Dusty, who is reminded that after World War II, "Some parents went off to war, some kids sometimes didn't have a dad...or sometimes the dad didn't come back home."

As much as Rogers' popularity might be explained by the timing, it was also due to his down-to-

earth personality. "I think people liked him because he was so relatable," says daughter Mimi Swift. "There were so many people who would come to the museum in [Victorville, California] and just talk to him. People still come up and tell me that in real life Mom [Dale Evans] and Dad were exactly the people that [the fans] had hoped they would turn out to be."

"He'd love to put on his boots and hat and go over to the museum in Victorville," recalls LeMaster. "He gave thrills to a lot of people when he'd just walk up behind them. They'd turn around and there was Roy Rogers, scarf and all."

For an 8-year-old Joel "Dutch" Dortch, the day Rogers came to his hometown of Birmingham, Alabama, was a day

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The Trigger And Bullet Happy Trails Tour

RFD-TV TAKES TRIGGER AND BULLET TO THE PEOPLE.

The year 2009 was a mixed bag for the Roy Rogers legacy. *Under Western Stars* was added to the Library of Congress National Film Registry, but the Roy Rogers-Dale Evans Museum in Branson, Missouri, closed its doors.

"Dad always told us kids...that we would get to the time when we were gonna have to close the museum...and that time finally came a few years ago," says Roy's son Roy "Dusty" Rogers Jr. It was later announced that the museum's holdings, including Trigger and Bullet, would go up for auction. Three separate auctions were held in New York; Mesa, Arizona; and Denver in 2010, with a final remainder auction held in Texas in April 2011.

Linda Kohn Sherwood, of High Noon Western Americana in Los Angeles, says that public reaction to the auctions was highly emotional but overall very positive. "Even though people were sad that the museum had to disperse, I think people still treat the Rogers family as their own." And the sale made it possible for the extended public family to find a small memento of Rogers that they could own.

And what about Trigger?

"There were no plans to buy Trigger or anything," says RFD-TV's founder and president Patrick Gottsch. "Until about a day or two before, I didn't even know there was an auction." Moved by his love of the Western life and his fond memories of Rogers, Gottsch was determined to make sure Trigger would remain in the country and be taken care of.

"Growing up I never missed Roy on television," Gottsch says. "We had a German shepherd and we had a palomino—just like [Rogers' screen dog] Bullet and Trigger." So motivated, he won the bidding for Trigger at the end of the first day. "And then the floodgates opened," Gottsch says. "It was the top story on MSN, on AOL, and people from all over the country started calling and writing us e-mails and letters." At the end of the second day's auction, he made the decision to bring Bullet along for the ride. "We just had to keep those two together."

In the months since RFD-TV took ownership, fans from all over the country have been able to revisit with



Roy's favorite pets thanks to the Trigger and Bullet Happy Trails Tour. The two taxidermied treasures have been everywhere from NFR in Vegas to state fairs, and will continue to crisscross the country in 2012.

As part of the 2012 Tournament of Roses Parade, Trigger and Bullet will have their own float, accompanied by 100 riders on palominos in honor of Rogers' 100th birthday. It's hardly a random tribute: Rogers was a longtime parade rider, and he and Dale Evans served as grand marshals for the Rose Parade in 1977.

RFD-TV, which broadcasts episodes of the original *Roy Rogers Show* as part of its programming, has also revived the Roy Rogers Riders Club. At its peak, the club had hundreds of thousands of members, with more than 90,000 in the United Kingdom alone. After hearing from countless fans who fondly recalled the Riders Club, Gottsch decided to bring it back.

"It's amazing to watch how people come alive with the memory of Trigger," Gottsch says. "When we take [Trigger] around I like to sit back against the fence and just watch people. It's incredibly moving to see old folks and young folks alike make that connection."

The connection, of course, is also with the man who rode him. "Roy Rogers' memory is still so important to people, but it's also about the things he stood for—the kind of values and morals that this country still needs."

—S.P.

Find out more about upcoming appearances of the Trigger and Bullet Happy Trails Tour, share your memories with other fans, and enroll (or re-enroll, if you've lost your card) in the Roy Rogers Riders Club at www.triggerandbullet.com.



Roy and Dale with part of their combined brood (left to right): Cheryl, Sandy, Roy, Roy Jr. (Dusty), Dale holding baby Dodie, and Linda Lou.

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he'd never forget. It was December of 1950, and Rogers was slated to appear at Birmingham's War Memorial Auditorium. "It was a Sunday afternoon and my folks took me downtown, and the very first thing I saw when we walked up was Roy's truck and trailer parked out front by the curb. There was a bigger-than-life picture of Roy and Trigger painted on the trailer, and that got my attention," says Dortch, now executive director of the Happy Trails Children's Foundation (see sidebar, page 132). "When we got closer, I could see the back door was open and Trigger was inside. A man was inside, grooming him and getting him ready for the show."

It wasn't Rogers—just the driver, groom, or a roadie—but it was close enough to heaven for Dortch. "It made enough of an impact on me that I determined at that moment that my life's ambition was to drive Roy's truck and take care of Trigger."

To Dortch and the many children like him and their parents, Rogers was more than a singing cowboy and TV star. He was an example to be held up and emulated. He displayed the kind of common-sense values that had empowered the country to win World War II and rocket to prosperity in the years

Roy Rogers Riders Club Rules

THEY MIGHT BE FROM A BYGONE ERA, BUT
THEY'RE STILL A CODE FOR KIDS TO LIVE BY.

Be neat and clean.

Be courteous and polite.

Always obey your parents.

Protect the weak and help them.

Be brave but never take chances.

Study hard and learn all you can.

Be kind to animals and care for them.

Eat all your food and never waste any.

Love God and go to Sunday school regularly.

Always respect our flag and our country.

after. As a result, both Rogers' public and private personas were a moral and ethical lifeline for generations of kids growing up in the '40s, '50s, and '60s.

When Rogers married Dale Evans (his third and her fourth), the bond between the cowboy role model and his fans was further cemented. For her part, Dale did everything she could to be Roy's complement, but it was always clear that she was far more than just a pretty thing on his arm. A strong-willed Texas native, the future Queen of the West was born Frances Octavia Smith in the small town of Uvalde. Escaping a tumultuous early life—she had eloped and divorced as a teenager—she went to business school and was working as a secretary when her singing voice drew attention.

"She would sing on her lunch break or sing while she was typing," says Swift, "and as a result of her singing on the job...they persuaded her to start singing for radio." The singing secretary eventually started performing under the stage name Dale Evans and began working in films. Although she was reluctant to do westerns at first, Evans would become one of the first women in movies to get a chance to ride a horse, wear a gun, and generally be her own person on-screen. Her rise to fame was propelled when she met Roy in 1944 when she was cast in *The Cowboy and the Señorita*, their first movie together.

C&I Online

Get more on the Roy Rogers centennial at
www.cowboysindians.com:

Roy, Trigger, and Dale movie picks
Original Sons of the Pioneers playlist and band update
Grandson Dustin Rogers' music career

"Little girls looked up to her for [her trailblazing screen career], but in her private life, Mom was probably the greatest Christian woman you'd ever want to meet," says Dusty. Evans' faith proved to be a pillar of support when Rogers' wife Arline passed away just days after giving birth to their son. After helping him through that difficult time, Evans said yes when Rogers eventually proposed to her during a rodeo at Chicago Stadium. They married in 1947 at the Flying L Ranch in Oklahoma, where they'd filmed *Home in Oklahoma*.

"With Roy and Dale, it was so clear that they truly loved one another," says Richardson, "and the fact that they were able to work on-screen and off so well together is a testament to the character of both of those individuals." Their character would quickly be tested with the birth in 1950 of daughter Robin—their only child together—who had Down's syndrome and died from complications of mumps before her second birthday.

In private there was heartbreak (Evans would turn the tragedy into triumph by writing the inspirational *Angel Unaware*, first published in 1953). On the big screen, a cheerful Rogers and Evans were the apple of the public's eye, and they would both flourish on a new stage: television. *The Roy Rogers Show*, which ran on NBC from 1951 to 1957, took place in the fictional Mineral City, where the Singing Cowboy presided over the Double R Ranch with help from the "Smartest Horse in the Movies," Evans, and her mount, Buttermilk. Over the course of 100 episodes, fans followed the gang's do-good adventures from the comfort of their own homes.

"The idea of being able to see a popular star like Roy Rogers at home on television was unique at that particular time," says Richardson. "Most of the faces on TV were new—and the idea of movie stars moving over to television was something that was really unheard of."

Rogers continued to produce his radio program but slowly moved away from making films, choosing instead to focus on television and live appearances, as well as the booming business of licensing and merchandising. There was something for every Roy Rogers fan: Cap guns, piggy banks, tin lanterns, toy guitars, plastic yo-yos, school bags, trading cards, comic books, pencil boxes, and more filled the shelves.

"I don't know how he did what he did," says Dusty. "I think he just had to take the time to do it. He was always being pushed and pulled—getting 400,000 pieces of mail a month from the fans—just unbelievable for the time."

The Happy Trails Children's Foundation

ROY AND DALE'S LEGACY OF KINDNESS AND CARE—AND
A CENTENNIAL DRAWING YOU MIGHT WANT TO GET IN ON.

Roy Rogers and Dale Evans spent a great deal of time, money, and energy supporting various charities, but they had a special place in their heart for anything having to do with helping children. In 1992, the Victor Valley Child Abuse Task Force was renamed the Happy Trails Children's Foundation in honor of their involvement and support.

Situated on 40 acres of high-desert country in Apple Valley, California, the nonprofit foundation provides shelter and therapy to at-risk children who suffer from neglect and abuse, offering the kind of long-term support and care that so many abused children require.

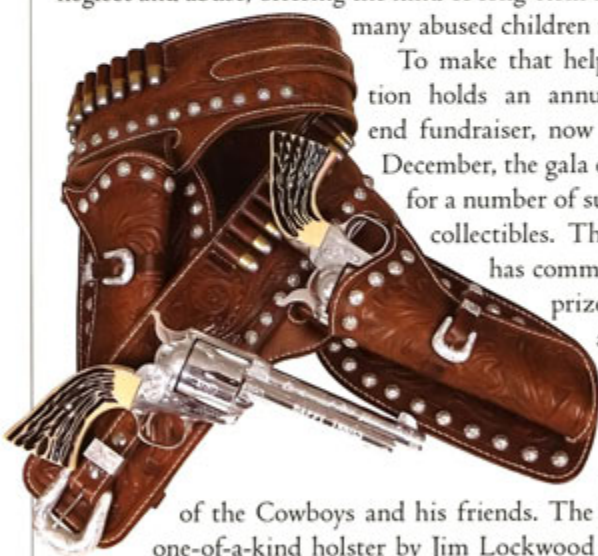
To make that help possible, the foundation holds an annual Silver Screen Legend fundraiser, now in its 14th year. Each December, the gala event features a drawing for a number of superbly crafted Western collectibles. This year the foundation has commissioned a special grand prize for Rogers' centennial:

a matched pair of nickel-finished .45 caliber Colt Single Action Army pistols, engraved in tribute to the King

of the Cowboys and his friends. The guns are outfitted in a one-of-a-kind holster by Jim Lockwood of Legends in Leather.

The hand-stitched and -carved holster set follows the exact pattern created for Rogers' original rig made by Ed Gilmore in the 1930s, and features a sterling silver buckle and spots.

Last year the drawing helped raise more than \$200,000 and drew entries from every state in the Union, including Alaska and Hawaii. "For a small local charity, like we are, to have that kind of support from all over the country is pretty amazing," says Joel "Dutch" Dortch, the foundation's executive director. "Without Roy and Dale, it wouldn't have been possible." —S.P.



This year's drawing will be held December 17. All proceeds go to the Happy Trails Children's Foundation. For more information about how to enter and how to support the foundation, visit www.happytrails.org.

Through it all, family remained the foundation of the Rogers' lives. Rogers and Evans' household continued to grow as their children (they adopted four) married and had children of their own—a crew of 20 to 40 depending on how many foster kids were living with them, filling their house to the brim.

Swift tells of a visit from family friend and Rogers' longtime costar Gabby Hayes to the Rogers family home in Chatsworth, California. Hayes, who never had children, sat down to dinner with the Rogers clan and watched with "obviously horrified fascination" as the chaos of a boisterous family dinner ran its course. According to Swift, Hayes eventually took it all in and smiled, saying, "Isn't this just *wonderful*?"

FROM THE LUNCHBOXES TO THE COMIC BOOKS, through the highs and lows, there were two constants: faith and Trigger.

The story of how the famous singing cowboy met his horse has become legendary: As Rogers was getting ready for *Under Western Stars* he made his way to Hudkins Stables, a facility known for training top-notch movie horses of the day, to pick out a mount for the picture. It only took one ride for both man and animal to make an immediate bond. Later, the story goes, Rogers' sidekick Smiley Burnette remarked that the horse was "quick on the trigger." Rogers liked it, and the name stuck.

As Rogers and Trigger's fame grew, so did the demand for appearances. Although Rogers' main mount (The Old Man as he's also often called) appeared in every single film and all the TV episodes, there were two other Triggers that helped carry the load. Little Trigger had the job of performing any dangerous stunts, and Trigger Jr. (a full-blooded Tennessee Walking Horse) performed many of the dance routines and traveled with Rogers on the road.

"In Roy's view and to the public eye, it was like all three horses were one," says Leo Pando, author of *An Illustrated History of Trigger* (McFarland, 2007). "Whatever horse he was riding, whatever horse he was on—that was Trigger."

Although neither Trigger Jr. nor Little Trigger was sired by the original Trigger, Rogers worked closely with horse trainer Glenn Randall to train all three. One result of Trigger's fame, Pando says, was that Randall became Hollywood's "go-to guy when it came to horses," earning accolades for his involvement in many films like *Ben-Hur* (1959) and *The Black Stallion* (1979).

Rogers and Randall would continue working together for more than 20 years, but there was nothing quite like the relationship between Rogers and Trigger. "When you watched [Rogers and Trigger] on the screen, it was like they were meshed together," says Raymond E. White, a Rogers historian and author of *King of the Cowboys, Queen of the West* (University of Wisconsin Press, 2005).

"Dad spent nearly 30 years with that horse—almost every day working with him. ... And Trigger knew exactly what Dad wanted and Dad knew exactly how Trigger would react. It

Happy Birthday, Roy

November 5 is a great day for a party—Roy Rogers' 100th birthday party, to be exact. On Saturday, November 5, 2011 (the anniversary of his actual birth date), you can make your way to Apple Valley, California, for a tribute show by son Roy "Dusty" Rogers Jr. and grandson Dustin Rogers. Or catch the two performing The Roy Rogers Jr. Show in Branson, Missouri, Monday to Friday at 10 a.m. through December 8 (www.royrogers.com/rrj_highriders.html). Meanwhile, the Gene Autry Oklahoma Museum will celebrate from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. on November 5 with all-day screenings of some of Rogers' greatest films. There will be popcorn, sarsaparilla, door prizes, and, of course, birthday cake. Radio station KCCU-FM is planning a remote broadcast of the party to seven stations in the area. For more information, call 580.294.3047 or visit www.geneautryokmuseum.com.

couldn't have been a better match," says Dusty. "Trigger was just as popular—if not more popular—than Dad was. Dad would tell you if he were here that if it weren't for Trigger there would be no Roy Rogers. They were a match made in heaven. And you can see it when you watch the movies or the shows—they're like one unit."

Trigger lived to be 33, and when he died in 1965, Rogers couldn't part with his old friend and made the decision to have his great old horse mounted. Thousands of people visited the taxidermied Trigger at the Roy Rogers-Dale Evans Museum in Victorville, and later, at the museum's second location after it moved to Branson, Missouri, in 2003 (closed in 2009). As for a final resting place, Trigger was sold at a Christie's Auction for \$266,500 to RFD-TV, which plans to put him in a museum.

ROGERS AND EVANS NEVER OFFICIALLY RETIRED but settled down in Apple Valley, California. There, in Southern California's San Bernardino County, says Swift, they could be just far enough from Hollywood, but near enough to the land and the animals that Rogers loved. In Apple Valley, Rogers and Evans supported a home for boys and took in and raised many children along with their own.

Rogers made one final movie in 1976 (*Mackintosh and T.J.*) and continued to appear on TV occasionally (including episodes of *Wonder Woman*, *The Muppet Show*, and *The Fall Guy*) as well as at fairs and rodeos into the mid-1980s. When he died in 1998, the spotlight turned on Rogers one last time as the



On April 21, 1949, Rogers and Trigger "signed" a slab of concrete in front of Grauman's Chinese Theatre: "To Sid, many happy trails."

world remembered the King of the Cowboys. An avalanche of flowers, cards, and people fell on Apple Valley as a team of horses carried Rogers to his final resting place. His grave is marked by a simple headstone, and when Evans followed in 2001, she was laid next to him. They left behind a legacy of entertainment, moral leadership, and philanthropy (*see sidebar, page 132*), the influence of which is still keenly felt.

And of course they left behind children and grandchildren who keep the memory and legacy alive. The youngest of the couple's 16 grandchildren, Dustin Rogers, who is embarking on his own singing career, says that even late in his grandfather's life the two were able to enjoy a good deal of time together, going hunting and spending time outdoors. Dustin was even able to talk Grandpa Roy into playing a few video games. "He loved anything to do with shooting, and we used to play a little Nintendo. He loved *Duck Hunt*," recalls Dustin. "A lot of grandkids don't get the opportunity—or don't take the opportunity—to spend time with their grandparents, and I was really lucky."

Reflecting on his dad, Dusty feels lucky, too. "People ask me, 'What is the one thing that [Roy] said to you? What one piece of advice did he give you in your life that's really stuck with you?'" The answer, he says, is impossible to boil down to a single thing.

"It's hard to pinpoint," Dusty says, "because we learned from watching Mom and Dad. We were with them a lot—we were on the road with them during the summer—and all you had to do was watch those two, and see how they handled people, how they were around children and animals. Then, you just gleaned it from them [and thought], Well, that's the person I want to be."

