



To  
George  
From your Pal  
Gene Jutting  
8-4-51



To my Pal  
Georgie  
Best Wishes  
Pat Buttram

# 'Singing cowboy' changed pop culture

Gene Autry grew from Texas farm boy to Coachella Valley icon with groundbreaking work in vaudeville, radio, TV, film

By **BRUCE FESSIER**  
People/entertainment editor

In the half-century before Gene Autry, pop culture meant Gilbert and Sullivan operettas in New York and traveling medicine shows throughout the South and West.

The longtime Palm Springs resident is the center girder of the bridge between popular music of the 19th and 20th centuries.

He is the only man alive to have performed in traveling medicine shows, vaudeville, tent shows, rodeos, recordings, radio, film, television and his own museum, which has a web site on the Internet.

"There probably wouldn't be any Garth Brooks if there hadn't been any Gene Autry," said publicist Alex Gordon, who began an association with Autry in 1939 as president of the British Gene Autry Fan Club.

"I can't think of anyone else who was that much in front of the public in all of those areas. So no wonder he had such a tremendous impact on the culture."

How did a farm boy from Tioga, Texas, get the nerve to join a medicine show and take on the New York music establishment? Well, Autry, who turns 90 Monday, wasn't available for interviews. But friends who were influenced by his trailblazing career were happy to talk about the ol' singing cowboy.

"See, there was a guy older than Gene who was real big in the country thing named Jimmie Rodgers," country singer Eddy Arnold said in a telephone interview from Nashville. "Gene used to tell me quite a bit about Jimmie Rodgers. I was still in school when he died. My (influence) was Gene Autry in terms of who I liked."

Rodgers, known as the "father of country music," fused the blues and

hillbilly music he heard growing up around blacks and whites in Mississippi. He sang black-face in a traveling medicine show in 1925, as Autry had done, and recorded a million-selling record in 1927 called "Blue Yodel," or "I for Texas."

Autry became a master Rodgers imitator. In his liner notes for Autry's 1996 Sony release, "Gene Autry: Blues Singer, 1929-1931," Jon Guyot Smith said, "No other performer could match Rodgers' yodel, Mississippi dialect and distinctive guitar runs as Gene did."

But before he could go to New York, he needed a confidence boost from Will Rogers, who two decades earlier had left his Chelsea, Okla., home to become a Broadway star in the "Ziegfeld Follies."

Autry was working as a telegraph operator in Chelsea in 1927 when Rogers came in to send his syndicated newspaper column to New York. He overheard Autry singing and playing guitar and told him he should pursue a career on radio in the big city.

It took him almost a year before he took that advice, and by then the hottest singer in New York was a 27-year-old crooner from Gainsville, Texas, located 40 miles from Autry's birthplace. His name was Gene Austin, and his 1927 recording of "My Blue Heaven" was the best-selling disc RCA Victor would release until Arnold and Elvis Presley in the late 1940s and '50s.

Austin, like Arnold and Presley, had been managed by the late Palm Springs resident Col. Tom Parker. He died in Palm Springs in 1972.

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hear Gene Austin sing," Arnold said. "He was a big fan of Gene Austin."

Autry began recording in New York in 1929 but didn't have a hit until 1931, when he changed his musical style to the country sound for which he is famous. "That Silver-Haired Daddy of Mine" became a million seller by 1933.

Its success led to a role in a 1934 Ken Maynard Western called "In Old Santa Fe." Maynard sang in it, but not as well as Autry.

Actually, neither Maynard nor Autry were the first "singing cowboys." But Autry became the first hillbilly recording artist to star in a Western in 1935, when he signed with Republic to make "Tumblin'

## On D6

**90 years:** Chronology of professional and personal milestones in Autry's life.

**Recordings:** Singing cowboy's body of work.

**Filmography:** Where Autry made a splash on-screen.

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See **AUTRY/D8**

# AUTRY

Continued from D1

Tumbleweeds," featuring his million-selling song of that name.

"Gene set up an image called 'the singing cowboy' that was probably the biggest single effort of any person to form an entire new song (genre)," said Cliffie Stone, a friend who headed artists and repertoire for Capitol Records' country division in the late 1940s and '50s. "I think his contribution to country western music on the West Coast was major. Probably the biggest."

By 1937, Autry was the top Western box office star, but he didn't have the respect or money a pop star would have commanded.

The record and network radio industries in the 1930s were controlled by music publishers because hits were determined by sales of sheet music—not records. A few New York publishers also dominated the American Society of Composers, Authors and Publishers, the music licensing group that took a percentage of each radio station's advertising revenue and distributed it to its songwriters and publishers based on how often their songs were broadcast.

But ASCAP rarely let country songwriters join its ranks because the stations that broadcast that music didn't pay ASCAP fees or paid so little that it wasn't worth ASCAP's while to log all of the songs they broadcast.

"Country music couldn't get on the networks during the '30s because it wasn't featured on shows that emanated from New York or Hollywood," said Rancho Mirage-based publisher Howard Richmond, whose father started in music publishing in the early 1900s.



**Leading man:** Gene Autry, shown above punching out another character in a late-1940s film, performed most of his own stunts. *Special to The Desert Sun*

## Top Autry discs:

**1931:** "That Silver-Haired Daddy of Mine"

**1933:** "Yellow Rose of Texas"

**1934:** "The Last Roundup"

**1935:** "Tumblin' Tumbleweeds," "Mexicali Rose"

**1939:** "Back in the Saddle," "South of the Border"

**1940:** "Be Honest With Me," Academy Award nominee; "Blueberry Hill"; "El Rancho Grande"

**1941:** "You Are My Sunshine"

**1942:** "Tweedle-O-Twill"

**1944:** "Don't Fence Me In"

**1946:** "Sioux City Sue"

**1947:** "Here Comes Santa Claus"

**1948:** "Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer"

**1949:** "Peter Cottontail," "Mule Train"

1961, the Los Angeles Angels, which he purchased to give his Los Angeles radio station, KMPC, a baseball team to broadcast.

Autry overcame the prejudices of the show biz establishment by buying his way into their ranks.

"People looked down at him and despised him as an illiterate hillbilly even though he had a tremendous following in the hinterlands and the South," Gordon said. "Everybody said, 'It's only the barefoot crowd' that listened to that kind of music. So it took quite a turnaround. And I think the whole thing started because of Gene's movies."

"He was a very popular man," Arnold said. "The movie moguls tried to get Gene to change from being a cowboy to being a leading man because he was so doggone popular. But he turned out to be one of the most shrewd businessmen out there."

"If country records were played on country radio stations, half of them never got paid for it because they weren't logged. The stations paid ASCAP \$25 a month. You don't think they were going to log those stations for \$300 a year? There were hundreds of these stations that just played locally. ASCAP ignored them."

### Paid poorly

Autry didn't get paid what he deserved because he couldn't get into ASCAP until 1940, when the radio industry formed Broadcast Music, Inc. to give ASCAP competition, and Autry got his own CBS radio show, "Melody Ranch."

"I remember one remark before BMI came along that Gene made," Arnold said. "Back then, President (Franklin) Roosevelt would have a thing called the March of Dimes, and he'd always bring Gene Autry. Gene was trying to get into ASCAP. The president of ASCAP didn't want to let him in. Gene made a public remark, 'I can get in to see the president of the United States, but I can't get in to see the president of ASCAP.'"

Autry was paid so poorly at Republic that he staged a walkout in 1938. Republic wanted him to move into other leading man roles, but

Autry said he was a personality, not an actor. He preferred to retain his audience by doing only singing cowboy films. He ranked fourth among all box office stars in 1940 but still lacked the industry status of most movie stars because his films didn't play in big cities except as second features.

"Roy Rogers, Gene, Tex (Ritter) and all those guys fell into the 'B' category," said Rancho Mirage resident George Montgomery, who starred in Westerns and 'A' movies. "There was certainly nothing wrong with the 'B' category, and Roy and Gene were at the top of those categories."

In fact, Autry parlayed his huge fan base into a market he could exploit independently of the Hollywood and New York show biz moguls. He became the first star to merchandise his own guitars, Western attire and cowboy toys such as the Gene Autry cap gun.

He formed his own music publishing companies and, during World War II, began buying radio stations. He and boxer Jack Dempsey also started buying dozens of gushing oil wells. After the war, he left Republic and formed his own production company and 100-acre movie lot, called Melody Ranch. He invested in real estate, hotels, TV stations and, in

### Breaking ground

If Autry didn't change pop culture as dramatically as Presley, he made it possible for Presley to do so, obliterating the barriers that stood in the way of a rural performer trying to make it nationally.

Parker met Autry in New York and became good friends with him in Palm Springs. He watched how Autry politely presented himself as a "straight shooter" even though he noted in his autobiography, "Back in the Saddle," he was a heavy drinker until just before the 1980 death of his first wife, Ina Mae.

In 1955, Parker signed Presley and guided him to success with pop, country and black audiences while presenting the polite, wholesome facade that Autry had invented.

Parker said in a 1996 statement to Rhino Records for the Autry boxed set, "Sing Cowboy Sing," that he learned from Autry.

"When I was managing Gene Austin in the '40s, Gene Autry was a great help to me," Parker said. "As time went on, Gene Autry and I met from time to time and he was a great help to me (again). We have had many interesting breakfasts together, sharing ideas at the Gene Autry Hotel in Palm Springs."

WE SEND  
OUR LOVE.

# Angels in the Back Lot

## INKING THE DEAL

How the Disney-Angels deal came about:

### 1990

■ **Disenchantment:** Gene and Jackie Autry sour on baseball after a 32-day lockout shortens spring training and causes the season to start a week late.

■ **Disney approached:** Jackie Autry talks with Walt Disney Co. CEO Michael Eisner about purchasing the Angels.

■ **Bad timing:** Eisner declines, says the timing is off.

### 1994

■ **Strike:** Angels lose \$11 million after strike shortens season.

### 1995

■ **Sales talk:** Peter Ueberroth emerges as potential purchaser of minority stake in the Angels but is unwilling to assume strike losses.

■ **Enter Disney:** Jackie Autry meets with Eisner on May 14.

■ **Deal signed:** Disney and the Autrys sign completed deal on May 18.



Gene and Jackie Autry



Anaheim Stadium

## AUTRY'S HOLDINGS

Former singing cowboy Gene Autry, 87, has parlayed a fortune estimated by Forbes magazine at \$315 million from holdings in broadcasting and ownership of the Angels. Some of Autry's business ventures:

■ **Golden West Broadcasters**, which at one time owned eight radio and two television stations—was born in 1952 with the purchase of KMPC radio for \$800,000. Autry sold the station for a reported \$18 million in 1994. Other holdings include KSCA-FM, formerly KLIT-FM, and KUTE-FM, for which Autry paid \$15 million in 1984.

■ Autry moved into television with the purchase of **KTLA Channel 5** for \$12 million in 1964. The station was sold to Tribune Broadcasting in 1982 for \$245 million.

■ Autry purchased the **California Angels** for \$2.5 million in 1960. The team is estimated to be worth \$120 million today. He agreed this week to sell a 25% interest in the Angels to Walt Disney Co. The majority interest will not be sold until after his death.

## TEAM DISNEY

If a partial sale is approved by major league baseball owners, the Angels will take their place among Disney's growing sports holdings, which include:

■ **The Mighty Ducks**, a National Hockey League franchise whose worth was recently pegged at \$108 million, second-highest in the league.

■ **A 90,000-square-foot community ice center** being constructed in Anaheim.

■ **A 1.1-mile oval track** at Disney World in Orlando, Fla., scheduled to be the site of an Indianapolis 500-style car race in January.

■ **A 100-acre international amateur sports center** under construction at Disney World that will be home to the Amateur Athletic Union and include a 7,500-seat stadium, a field house, a tennis arena and training and fitness facilities.

Sources: Times reports, wire reports, Walt Disney Co. Researched by JENNIFER OLDHAM, JANICE JONES and DAVID NEIMAN / Los Angeles Times

Los Angeles Times

By STEVE EMMONS  
TIMES STAFF WRITER

In 1991, Forbes magazine remarked that while some entertainers were raking it in at record rates, only one was among the Forbes 400, the magazine's annual list of the super rich.

He was Orvon Gene Autry, the Singin' Cowboy, worth an estimated \$300 million. He got there, the magazine said, by investing, not by strumming his guitar. "As smart an investor as they come," the magazine concluded.

Behind the fistfights with movie villains and the traveling rodeo shows and the hit recordings has been a shrewd businessman who, according to those around him, had an uncanny ability to recognize opportunity and how to seize it.

He was the first major movie star to recognize the potential of television and exploit it by producing and appearing in his own shows. He was the first rodeo producer to inject theatrical gimmicks such as wagon trains and dancers into the events, selling out his shows in both this country and Europe.

He bought luxury hotels, movie set ranches, flagging television and radio stations

# Green Sunset

## Autry Hanging Up Spurs With Cash Register Jinglin'

recent years, the Angels are being dealt away because Autry is 87 "and would like to retire and I'm 54 and would like to retire," said wife Jackie Autry, who has, in effect, been running the team in recent years.

Also mixed into the decision are large losses—\$11 million last season, a projected \$12.5 million in the coming season, according to Angels sources. Stan Schneider, his longtime personal accountant, said Autry probably made money with the Angels in the long run; he bought the franchise for \$2.45 million and reportedly is selling it for about \$120 million.

But unlike the Autry of

### ■ ENTER DISNEY

How the deal came together. A1

and pumped them back to life. When he needed sports programming, he bought a baseball franchise, the Los Angeles (later California) Angels.

Now he is selling most of his assets, and Thursday came the announcement of perhaps the most spectacular of the deals. Walt Disney Co. said it has agreed to buy the Angels from Autry, 25% now (for a reported \$30 million) and the rest upon Autry's death. Disney will take over management of the team as soon as the deal is signed.

As with the other sales in

Please see **AUTRY, D8**



# AUTRY

Continued from D1

broadcasting and hotel management, he ran the team as many other owners did: with a desire to win a World Series rather than large profits. Once Jackie Autry took control, she said in numerous interviews that such an approach must stop.

"There were times when KMPC's profits were carrying the Angels," Schneider said.

"I think he endured things in baseball he wouldn't have endured anywhere else because of his love for the game," said Allan H. (Bud) Selig, owner of the Milwaukee Brewers and acting baseball commissioner. "He's a very good businessman, but he really had an incredible love for baseball. It's tough finding ownership like that anymore."

Only the O'Malley family in Los Angeles and Anheuser-Busch in St. Louis have owned their franchises longer.

For Autry, "everything came from the entertainment dollars," Schneider said. "Young people don't know and a lot of people have forgotten that in the 1930s he was one of the biggest earners in the world."

Autry, who was born in Tioga, Tex., and raised in Oklahoma, was working as a railroad station telegrapher when a passenger, entertainer Will Rogers, overheard him singing and strumming a guitar.

Rogers urged him to pursue a singing career.

He first appeared on radio in 1928 and made his first recording a year later. In 1931, he wrote and recorded "That Silver-Haired Daddy of Mine," which sold a phenomenal number of records for the time—about 30,000 in the first month.

When sales reached half a million two years later, Autry's press agent and a record company executive devised an award for him that is now an industry standard: the gold record. The platinum record had to be invented for his all-time biggest hit, "Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer."

In 1934, Autry began making B-movie Westerns and serials. In 1935 he made what is considered to be the first singing-cowboy movie, "Tumblin' Tumbleweed," and from then on played only one character: Gene Autry.

Though he never emerged from the B-movie category, his popularity grew to the point that in 1940 only three actors—Mickey Rooney, Spencer Tracy and Clark Gable—outranked him as a box office draw. The following year he made \$600,000, the equivalent of about \$6 million today.

The money went to investment, Schneider said. "Gene had a knack

of being in the right place at the right time," he said. "He just had an instinct for what would work."

In the 1950s, it was radio stations. He bought a nearly bankrupt KMPC in Los Angeles and turned it into one of the most profitable in the nation. He bought more in Phoenix, Seattle and San Francisco, calling the chain Golden West Broadcasters.

He bought TV stations—KOOL in Phoenix and KTLA in Los Angeles—producing his own programming and playing his old movies. He also broadcast Los Angeles Dodger games on KMPC, but he bought his own baseball franchise when the Dodgers moved to another radio station.

Along the way he bought hotels—the Mark Hopkins in San Francisco, the Continental in Los Angeles, the Ocotillo Lodge and the Autry in Palm Springs.

"Just look at the Angels and you know that he knows how to market things," said Rose Narba, who managed the Autry hotel until the Autrys sold it. "He's lived by a cowboy code that's most unique. He's a legend, but he still believes in shaking hands. To him, that makes a deal."

"A lot of movie stars think they're big-assed birds, but Gene always used to talk to the cow-

boys," said Frank Bogart, former Palm Springs mayor and one of Autry's rodeo cowboys. "He was always just a good old boy. Whenever he comes down here, he calls up and we have lunch. And all he wants to talk about are the old cowboys."

Virtually all of Autry's businesses are being sold, to minimize inheritance taxes and to lessen the business load, Schneider said.

"It was a nice empire, wasn't it," he said.

Times staff writers Greg Johnson and Mike DiGiovanna contributed to this report.

## 'Singing Cowboy' enchanted millions

Dallas Morning News

Gene Autry, the singing cowboy whose influence was felt far beyond happy frontier trails, died yesterday, three days after his 91st birthday.

Aside from his stardom, he was a songwriter, a sports team owner and a businessman.

Autry's death, following the demise of Roy Rogers on July 6, marks the end of an era. Like Rogers, he represents a period when cowboys wore shirts that always looked pressed, when they sang of tumbling tumbleweeds and treated "the ladies" with utmost respect.

Autry stopped performing in 1956 and turned to business. Forbes magazine frequently named him one of the 400 richest Americans. In 1995, his net worth was estimated at \$320 million.

"He used to ride off into the sunset," former sidekick Pat Buttram once said. "Now he owns it."

He took special pride in owning the California Angels baseball team. Now called the Anaheim Angels, the team has never made it to the World Series, something Autry considered the biggest disappointment of his life.

Disney, which bought a part interest and took operating control of the team in recent years, had an agreement to acquire



AP library photo

"Singing cowboy" Gene Autry parlayed a \$5 mail order guitar into a musical career. He died yesterday.

Autry's remaining share at his death.

In his lifetime, Autry made 635 records, including and "Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer," which became the first recording to go platinum and continues to be the second best-selling single of all time, behind Bing Crosby's "White Christmas."

His signature song was "Back in the Saddle Again." It became a hit in 1939, and hit the charts again in 1993 on the "Sleepless in Seattle" soundtrack.

He is survived by his second wife, Jackie Elam, whom he married in 1981.

## Gene Autry

# Milestones: How cowboy became a star

**Sept. 29, 1907:** Born in Tioga, Texas, eldest of four children.

**1924:** Gets first professional singing job with the Fields Brothers Marvelous Medicine Show "softening up audiences with mournful ballads before the professor began pitching his wares," Autry said.

**1927:** Will Rogers hears Autry singing and playing guitar in a telegraph office in Chelsea, Okla. Tells him, "You ought to think about going to New York and getting yourself a job on the radio."

**1931:** Changes hillbilly sound, co-writing and recording "That Silver-Haired Daddy of Mine," a Western tune that becomes his first million-selling record.

**1932:** Becomes WLS radio star in Chicago on the National Barn Dance and "Conqueror Record Time," named after Sears' Conqueror record label. Sears would sell his songbooks and inexpensive Gene Autry guitars in its catalog. Also marries Ina Mae Spivey.

**1934:** Goes to Hollywood to co-star in "Old Santa Fe" and to star in Western-science fiction serial, "The Phantom Empire."

**1935:** Signs with new Republic Pic-

tures and makes "Tumblin' Tumbleweeds," named after his popular song.

**1937:** Every studio in Hollywood is making singing cowboy movies. Roy Rogers and Tex Ritter become Autry's biggest competitors, while Herb Jeffries is Hollywood's only black singing cowboy. But Autry would be ranked the top Western star in Hollywood from 1937-1942.

**1940:** Autry ranks fourth among nation's most popular box office stars, behind Mickey Rooney, Clark Gable and Spencer Tracey. He also begins half-hour CBS radio show, "Melody Ranch," and becomes first star to appear at the Madison Square Garden Rodeo in New York.

**1942:** Enlists in the Army Air Corps during a "Melody Ranch" broadcast. Also buys a Phoenix radio station and hires young DJ named Steve Allen.

**1947:** Gets release from Republic and makes first film for Columbia, "The Last Round-Up," dealing with water rights and the mistreatment of Indians. Also contributes to creation of the children's music market by co-writing and recording "Here Comes Santa Claus."

**1949:** Records "Rudolph the Red-

Nosed Reindeer," which sells 8 million copies.

**1953:** Releases last singing cowboy movie, "Last of the Pony Riders." Devotes time to business interests, including hotels, ranches, real estate, oil wells, rodeo stock broadcasting.

**1956:** Final "Melody Ranch" radio program airs.

**1961:** Brings American League baseball to Southern California with the debut of Los Angeles Angels. Makes last road tour.

**1969:** Elected to the Country Music Hall of Fame for his songwriting, singing and films.

**1980:** Inducted into Cowboy Hall of Fame of Great Westerners. Mourns death of wife Ina Mae.

**1981:** Marries banking executive Jacqueline Ellam.

**1984:** Donates \$5 million to build Autry Tower at Eisenhower Medical Center.

**1993:** His "Back in the Saddle" theme song included in the No. 1 soundtrack of "Sleepless in Seattle," enabling a new generation to discover Gene Autry.

# OBITUARY

10-2-98 A9  
Gene Autry

was first  
singing  
cowboy

HSB

Associated Press

**L**OS ANGELES — Gene Autry, who parlayed a \$5 mail order guitar into a career as Hollywood's first singing cowboy, died today. He was 91.

Autry, who also built a multimillion-dollar fortune in broadcasting and was the original owner of the Anaheim Angels baseball team, died at his home in the Los Angeles' Studio City neighborhood, said Karla Buhlman, vice president of Gene Autry Entertainment. His death came less than three months after the death of his great rival, Roy Rogers.

Though a pennant for his Angels eluded him, Autry succeeded at just about anything he undertook: radio, records, song-writing, movies, TV, real estate and business.



Gene  
Autry

He first sang on radio in 1928, and then went on to make 95 films and host his own TV show from 1950 to 1956. He also cut 635 records, selling more than 40 million copies, including "Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer," the Christmas standard he wrote, and his signature "Back in the Saddle Again."

Autry hung up his performing spurs in 1956, but continued to own four radio stations, a hotel and several other properties.

He ranked for many years on the Forbes magazine list of the 400 richest Americans, before falling off in 1995, though his estimated net worth still stood at \$320 million.

Throughout his business dealings, Autry collected Western memorabilia and art. In December 1968, the Gene Autry Western Heritage Museum, built largely with funds from Autry's foundations, opened in Los An-

geles' Griffith Park.

"I felt that I owed something. The West has been very kind to me over the years," Autry said.

Among the items in the \$54 million museum are an 1870s-era steam fire engine from Nevada, guns owned by Annie Oakley and Wyatt Earp, and costumes of TV's Lone Ranger and Tonto.

He first came to Los Angeles in 1934 to appear with in a movie called "Old Santa Fe."

"I was the first singing cowboy in that picture," Autry once said. "John Wayne had made an earlier movie in which he played a singing cowboy, but he didn't do his own singing."

It was the heyday of the Western, and Autry was ranked top Western star at the box office from 1937-43, and in 1940-42 he was in the Top 10 of all movie box office favorites.

Rogers replaced Autry as Republic Studios' top cowboy when Autry took time out to serve as a flier in the Army Air Corps during World War II.

After Rogers died on July 6, Autry called it "a terrible loss for me. I had tremendous respect for Roy and considered him a great humanitarian and an outstanding American."

Autry's records sold more than 40 million copies. His first gold record was "That Silver-Haired Daddy of Mine." "Rudolph the Red Nosed Reindeer" has sold 10 million copies and is a Christmas perennial. He wrote many of the songs he performed.

Last year, Rhino Records released a box set of Autry's records called "Sing, Cowboy, Sing."

"Some of the material hasn't been heard in a long time," Autry said in a lengthy exchange of questions and answers by fax. "It brought back a lot of wonderful memories."

Autry was born Sept. 29, 1907, in Tioga, Texas, and grew up in tiny Ravia, Okla.

As a boy, Autry occasionally earned spending money singing at local nightspots, and with the extra cash, he invested in a mail order guitar and taught himself to play.

By 18, Autry was working as a telegrapher on a St. Louis to San Francisco railroad. It was here he met comedian Will Rogers who had heard Autry strumming on his guitar and singing.

"You're good," Rogers is said to have told Autry. "Stick to it, young fellow, and you'll make something of yourself."

GENE AUTRY: 1907-1998



*The Associated Press*

**Gene Autry parlayed a \$5 mall guitar into a career as Hollywood's first singing cowboy.**

# Cowboy star, Angels owner dies at 91

► His Hollywood career, which included 93 films, launched other roles as a businessman, media mogul and sportsman.

By Michael McBride  
The Press-Enterprise

Gene Autry, an Oklahoma youngster who became America's first singing cowboy and then a multimillionaire businessman and baseball team owner, died after a lengthy illness Friday at his home in Studio City. He was 91.

Mr. Autry started as a \$150-a-month railroad telegrapher in Oklahoma before the Great Depression but became what now would be called a movie superstar.

He also was a country-and-western singer, owner of the California Angels and the recipient of the recording industry's first gold and platinum records.

"He truly was a star in the golden days of Hollywood. So often, we've caught ourselves humming 'Back in the Saddle Again,' a song that will always bring back warm memories of Gene," former President Ronald Reagan and his wife Nancy said Friday. "He put his heart and soul into every project he worked on, and there will never be another one like him."

Although he owned the Angels for more than three decades, the American League franchise that played its spring training games in Palm Springs until 1993 never won a pennant.

He was remembered fondly Friday by Rod Carew, who played for Mr. Autry from 1979 to 1985 and has been the team's hitting instructor since 1992. "He didn't care if you were a rookie or a superstar," Carew said. "He treated everyone with class. He never came

President Clinton said, "An entire generation of Americans has lost a beloved old friend from childhood. Gene Autry's music and movies captured all that was good and inspiring about America's Old West."

Please see **AUTRY, A-8**

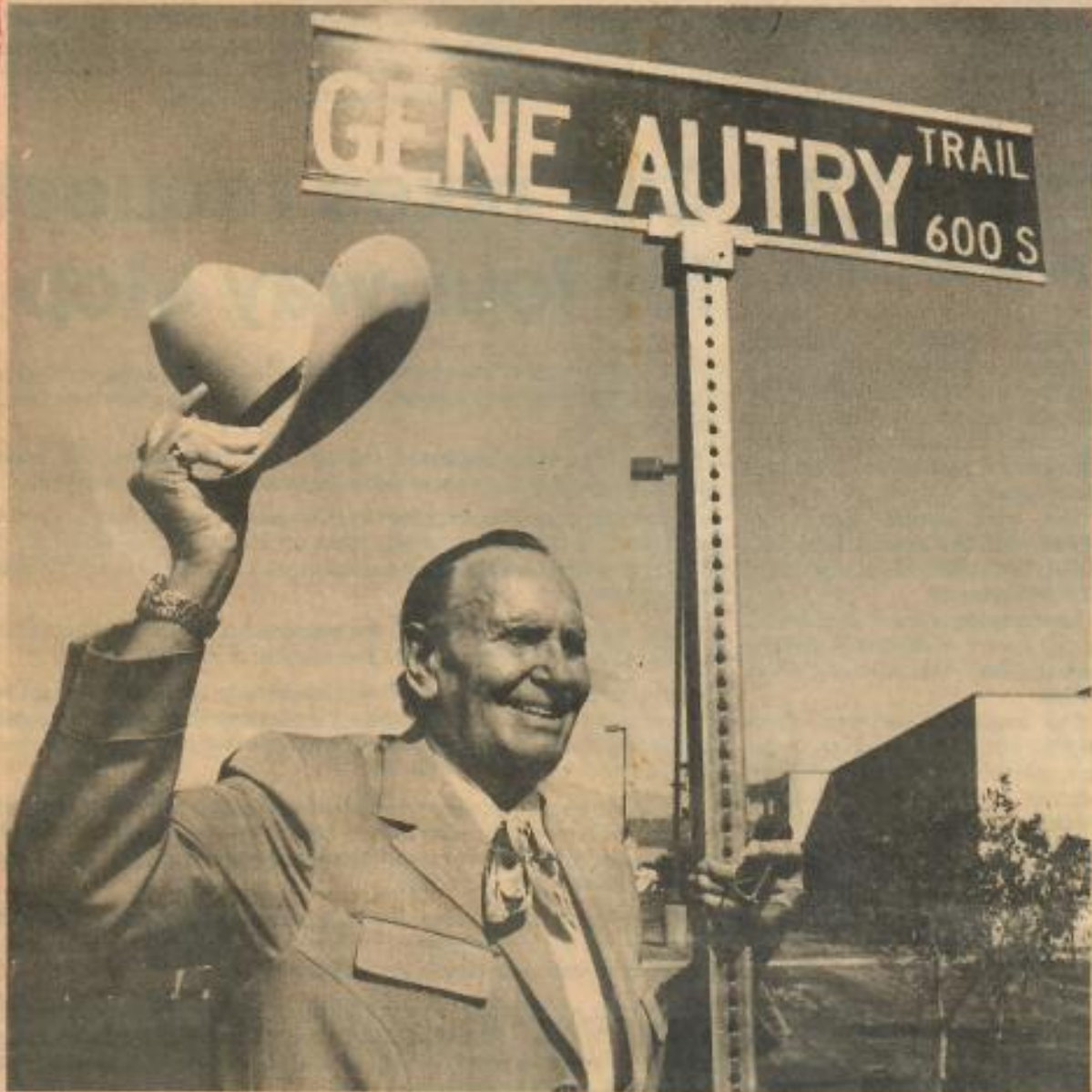
*Serving  
the Entire  
Desert*

# The Des

Our 57th Year  
No. 200

March 24, 1984

Palm Spring



Alec Barnholtz Sun Photo

**HAPPY TRAIL** — Gene Autry, owner of the California Angels and a Palm Springs resident, tips his hat to photographers as he stands next to a sign bearing his name. In ceremonies held at Jimsair Aviation on Friday, Bogie Road was

officially renamed Gene Autry Trail. More than 500 people, including the California Angels baseball team, were in attendance to see Autry honored.

## ***For cowboy Gene Autry, it just had to be 'Trail'***

By **CARROLL LACHNIT**  
Desert Sun Staff Writer

**PALM SPRINGS** — "Avenue" would have been too average. "Boulevard" too bland. For Gene Autry, a cowboy on film and in fact, the street named after him had to be "trail" — even if the road is broad, blacktopped and urban as can be.

Gene Autry Trail became the new name Friday for the street that used to be Bogie Road and about 500 people who thought the change was perfect were on hand to watch Autry pull the wraps off a three-times larger than usual version of a street sign that bears his name. That sign went home with him. The new ones go up starting Monday and will be completed Wednesday, city officials said.

Also on hand at Jimsair Aviation Service to congratulate Autry were the mayor and City Council, the committee that laid the groundwork for the city-approved name change and its chairman, Wanda Hird, Chamber of Commerce President Jim Kenna, KTLA announcer and vice president Johnny Grant, Autry's movie sidekick Pat Buttram and Autry's California Angels baseball team.

The Gene Autry Trail Committee included Mayor Frank Bogert, Don J. Brown, Howard Haddock, Tom Kieley Sr., Jack Oberle, Ray Piage, Ralph Watt and Harold Williamson.

Autry also received congratulatory messages from political figures, notably President and Mrs. Ronald Reagan and Gov. George Deukmejian.

The message from Reagan to Autry and his wife, Jackie, noted that the change is "a wonderful honor for both of you."

"You must be proud of the special place you hold in the hearts" of Palm Springs residents, it said.

Grant said Autry is one of the few people in show business to have four stars on Hollywood's Walk of Fame.

"But you've outdone us," he said. "You gave him a whole street."

Autry, 76, said he appreciated the western touch to the street name and indicated Bogert, a cowboy himself, might have had something to do with that.

"Frank, I love that: A trail instead of a street," Autry said.

(Continued on Page A-2)



Miss American Teen-Ager Pageant of California is selected here today, Palm Springs High School senior Julann Kanner will be among those nervously waiting on stage to hear the announcement.

Miss Kanner, a Cathedral City resident, is competing in the two-day event thanks to the sponsorship of the Palm Springs Lions Club.

The event is being staged at the Anaheim High School Auditorium and is expected to be videotaped for broadcast.

Participants are judged in separate interviews, evening gown competitions and individual fine arts performances. Judges are looking for someone who projects the wholesome all-American teen-girl image," according to event associate Producer Donna Lauren.

## For Singin' Cowboy; it's trail

Bogert said the street name was a fitting tribute to Autry. There is no way of describing what Autry has done for the city, Bogert said. But the 20-plus years in which Autry's California Angels have trained and held exhibition games here are a "major attraction" for the city, he said.

The former ranch hand from Tioga Texas who became a movie, TV and recording star thanked the people who arranged the change in his honor.

"When I look at this sign, I know how Bob Hope, Frank Sinatra and Charlie Farrell felt," he said. "I'm sure there are a lot of fine citizens in the Palm Springs area who deserve a name on a street more than I do. But I thank you very much anyway."

Of course, if the street's new name is Gene Autry Trail, then it stands to reason that the Bogie Road Bridge now belongs to Autry, too.

And Bogert said anyone who is unhappy about any minor structural annoyances in the span should call Autry, not the city, from now on to complain about the bumps in his "damn bridge."

Buttram said Autry might have some plans for his new bridge.

"I'll guarantee there will be a toll gate on it before the year is out," Buttram joked.

Then Buttram invoked a sort of cowboy blessing for those who will travel the street.

"As you ride through the ones we rode together," he said. "Keep ahead of the posse about 100 yards. And may it be downhill and shady, with waterholes that are never dry. May the campfires be dry and warm. May it lead you safely through the pass and into the sunset . . ."

And, Buttram added, toward a World Series win for the Angels.

## to annex land

PALM DESERT — The City Council agreed Thursday to annex 1,000 acres of generally uninhabited land south of Highway 111.

The largest of the annexations, 600 desert acres, is east of Highway 111 and south of the city limits. A public hearing on the annexation has been scheduled at City Hall.

The remaining land, about five acres, is located west of Highway 74 and southwest of the present city boundaries.

## Obituaries

### Mendez

Services were conducted Friday for Frank G. Mendez of Beaumont, who died Tuesday in Beaumont. He was 57.

Mr. Mendez was a native of Texas.

He is survived by his wife, Sophie Mendez of Beaumont; a son, Joseph Valenzuela of Modesto; a daughter, Linda Quitiquit of Beaumont; two brothers, Raphael Gallegos of Wilmington and Manuel Mendez of Coachella; five sisters, Mary Que-

was a consul and vice consul to Central and South America.

In 1947, he started American Vendors Inc., retiring in 1974.

Mr. Nelson is survived by his wife, Rosena Nelson of Houston, Texas; two daughters, Chloe Karolik of Houston, Texas, and Rosena Nelson of Marina Del Rey; and three grandchildren.

Services will begin at 2 p.m. from the Palm Desert Community Church with the Rev. Elmer Jones officiating.

Interment will be private.

In lieu of flowers, the family has

She is survived by her daughter, Pat Murphy of Indio; a brother, O'Henry Alcorn of Las Vegas, Nev.; two grandchildren, five great-grandchildren and two great-great-grandchildren.

Services will begin at 9 a.m. Monday from the FitzHenry Funeral Home in Indio with the Rev. Field Reichardt of the Wallace Memorial Baptist Church officiating.

Interment will be private.

## street to close

CATHEDRAL CITY — South Date Palm Drive, from State 10 to Ramon Road, will be closed 7 a.m. to 5 p.m. Tuesday to install a master sewer line, which will

### Caddo

# Palm Desert Sun



# Autry moves on, but his

By **BRUCE FESSIER**

People/entertainment editor

The old homestead has a fancy French name now, and his beloved Anaheim Angels haven't used Palm Springs Stadium for spring training since 1993.

But Palm Springs would reflect Gene Autry's brand even if it didn't have a street named in his honor.

"Gene Autry is to Palm Springs a main attraction," said Rose Narva, who turned the Gene Autry Hotel into the more elegant Givenchy Spa and Resort. "He's a legend. People still come from around the world and remember him fondly. People still come in to this hotel and remember how things were."

**FOUNDING PIONEERTOWN:** Autry began coming to Palm Springs in the late 1940s. He and fellow singing cowboy Roy Rogers helped found Pioneertown in the high desert in 1947 to provide an authentic backdrop for Western movies. Their corporation eventually abandoned the site, but Autry kept coming to Palm Springs.

He bought a Palm Springs Holiday Inn in 1961, renovated it and called it Melody Ranch after the lot north of



Special to The Desert Sun

**Legacy:** Gene Autry's ball club and hotel are gone, but his spirit remains.

Los Angeles where "Gunsmoke" and many of his films were shot.

"Right after he got the hotel, I went in and talked to him to get him to bring the Angels down," said the town's mayor, Frank Bogert. "The other people on his board were all good friends of mine, so we talked him into (it)."

Autry also bought the Ocotillo

## Legend endures in desert

Lodge in the early '60s. He sold it a few years later and changed the name of Melody Ranch to the Gene Autry Hotel. He kept a condo there.

"He didn't have a snooty bone in his body," said Steve Gardner, the Autry Hotel publicist of the late '70s and early '80s. "He used to sit in that first booth in the Sombrero Room. People would come by and get autographs and talk to him, and he was just as friendly as heck."

Sally McManus, head of the Palm Springs Historical Society, said Autry was grand marshal of the Palm Springs Mounted Police Parade in 1964 and 1980. He was involved with Desert Riders, she said, but not many civic groups.

**LOYALTY:** Autry preferred to help people privately.

When Gene Austin, a singer Autry admired, was dying from cancer at Phil and Grace Moody's Palm Springs home, the Moodys said Autry was often at his bedside. When Johnny Cash was being treated for chemical dependency at the Betty Ford Center, he said Autry visited him.

Autry's second wife, Jackie, said she and Gene preferred to give to charities anonymously. They made a

\$5 million donation to Eisenhower Medical Center but had to defend why they hadn't made the donation to Desert Hospital in Palm Springs.

The Autrys also were criticized for threatening to move the Angels to another spring training site if the city didn't improve its stadium. Palm Springs Mayor Sonny Bono asked the Angels to pay for half of a \$28,000 stadium feasibility study and the Angels refused.

Bogert said Autry had put up with an inferior stadium for years.

"We were always going to fix the stadium up and make it bigger and better," Bogert said, "which they (city officials) never did. That's the reason they left: The dang city wouldn't do anything for them."

The Autrys received numerous awards in the Coachella Valley, including the naming of Gene Autry Trail in Palm Springs in 1984.

Autry said at that unveiling, "When I look at this sign, I know how Bob Hope, Frank Sinatra and Charlie Farrell felt. I'm sure there are a lot of fine citizens in the Palm Springs area who deserve a name on a street more than I do. But I thank you very much anyway."

# Gene Autry Is in the Saddle, as Always

RSVP

THE SOCIAL CITY

By MARY LOU LOPER  
TIMES STAFF WRITER

A sell-out happy crowd of 1,250 was "Back in the Saddle Again" with its favorite singing cowboy Monday night when Gene Autry celebrated his 90th birthday at the Museum of Western Heritage he built.

Nostalgia reigned. In the birthday tributes, emceed by Dick Clark, Rosemary Clooney sang, "If You Loved Me Half as Much as I Love You," then ("for Jackie and sweet Gene") "Don't Fence Me In."

Glen Campbell, who on guitar during dinner had the audience clapping, cheering and stomping with fiddler Ron Rutowski and Campbell's Good Time Band in the "Orangeblossom Special," mesmerized the crowd with "Rhinstone Cowboy" and "That Silver-Haired Daddy of Mine," Autry's song.

Not to be outdone, Roy Clark took to his guitar with "Ghost Riders in the Sky." Arizona cowboy Eddy Arnold sang his "Lonesome Cattle Call" to a standing ovation. That was before Willie Nelson marched on with sons Micha and Lucas, the other entertainers and audience joining for "Back in the Saddle Again" and "On the Road Again." Then Johnny Grant delivered accolades, and cowboy Monte Hale (who visits Gene three times a week), led the audience in "Happy Birthday" twice.

What a night—\$900,000 worth for the museum, according to co-chairmen Sheldon L. Ausman, Edwin K. Marzec and James W. McElvany. Gala sponsors of \$25,000 were the Automobile Club of Southern California, Avery Dennison, Occidental Petroleum and the Walt Disney Co.

Gene's wife, Jackie, was by his side as Bob Hope, Dale Evans, Christina Paine, Richard Farnsworth, Buddy Ebsen, Billy Bob Thornton and Dwight Yoakam stopped by, to touch Gene's shoulder and wish him well.

It was the night to flaunt squash blossom necklaces and bolo ties, and a night to praise Joanne Hale, president and CEO of the museum, and Lois Rice, president of the museum's National Advisory Council. Said Carolyn Ludwig of Hale, "Joanne's the goddess of this city."

Highlights were the Western



Photos by AL SHIB / Los Angeles Times

At his Museum of Western Heritage, Gene Autry, center, received 90th-birthday wishes from 1,250 of his closest friends. Among them were Oscar winner Billy Bob Thornton, left, and country singer Dwight Yoakam.



With pal Dale Evans at his side, birthday honoree Autry poses with friends.

By MARY LOU LOPER  
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Highlights were the Western Heritage Award, presented to the Philip K. Wrigley family, and the auction in which Pat Sajak and Fausto Yturria Jr. of Brownsville, Texas, battled for the Colt single-action silver Army revolver detailing the career of Autry. It's engraved by Alvin White and Andrew Bourbon. With a \$42,500 bid, Yturria gloated: "I beat the 'Wheel of Fortune.'"



Photo by AL SEEB / Los Angeles Times

At his Museum of Western Heritage, Gene Autry, center, received 90th-birthday wishes from 1,250 of his closest friends. Among them were Oscar winner Billy Bob Thornton, left, and country singer Dwight Yoakam.



With pal Dale Evans at his side, birthday boy Autry poses with Eddie Arnold, left, Jackie Autry, Monty Hale and museum chief Joanne Hale.

# Desert influence was widely felt

► Regular folks  
remember a man who  
helped — quietly.

By Mark Henry  
The Press-Enterprise

## PALM SPRINGS

Forget the accolades and praise.

Gene Autry may have been a huge star, but he was never on stage when it came to baseball and life, said Gene Mauch, his longtime friend and former Angels manager.

"I don't think he'd want all the hoopla and accolades and all. He always felt he was a lucky guy," said Mauch, who lives in Palm Springs.

Mr. Autry belongs to a cadre of stars like Frank Sinatra, Bob Hope and Dinah Shore who left an imprint on the Coachella Valley, partly because of their fame but also because of their good deeds — big and small.

Mr. Autry joined countless charity drives, rode in parades and garnered local "Man of the Year" and humanitarian awards. Benefactors include Eisenhower Medical Center in Rancho Mirage, which named a 100-bed hospital tower after Gene and Jackie Autry after they made a large donation in the 1980s.

In 1984, friends and merchants persuaded Palm Springs to name a street after the singing cowboy — Gene Autry Trail. Mr. Autry said he would not oppose the change as long as it did not create divisions.

Locals recall Mr. Autry's annual barbecues for his baseball team at his hotel in Palm Springs. And during the Reagan administration, Mr. Autry and his sidekick Pat Buttram would entertain the White House press corps during their annual visit to Palm Springs.

But some remember Mr. Autry for more personal reasons. They remember the times he helped friends and workers, never drawing attention to himself.

Sally McManus, who runs the Palm Springs Historical Museum, said she will never forget Mr. Autry for his kindness to her son Michael, who ran the parking concession at his hotel for several years. When her son needed emergency back surgery, Autry sent him to specialists in sports medi-

cine, paid for the operation and never said a word about it, McManus said.

"I was so grateful," McManus said. "I will always remember his kindness and generosity."

Wanda Hird, former Palm Springs Chamber of Commerce president who has known the Autry family for years, said Mr. Autry always lived up to his movie star image as the cowboy in the white hat.

"I don't know how many people would come up to him and say, 'You don't know me, but I spent every Saturday afternoon with you years ago,'" said Hird of Palm Springs. "I would get tired of it, but Gene was never rude. He always chatted with his fans. I've never seen a kinder, gentler man."

Autry genuinely believed in being a good American and doing the right thing, she added. "I'm just losing a good friend. I'll miss him terribly."

Mauch, who managed the Angels in 1981-'82 and again in the 1985-'87 seasons, said he wished he could have given Mr. Autry the gift of an American League pennant, but it never happened.

Though Mr. Autry wanted to win, he never expressed any disappointment, "even in those years that we came so damn close to getting it for him," Mauch said.

Mr. Autry was also loyal — to people and to places he loved, like Palm Springs. His loyalty meant the Angels continued to play 12 or 13 exhibition games in the city through spring 1992, even though the baseball facility was inadequate, the former manager said.

Mauch said he saw his friend the last time in early September. They went to the ballpark in Anaheim and watched the Angels play. Mr. Autry had been seriously ill several times recently, but he was feeling well and in good spirits that day, Mauch said.

Mr. Autry loved baseball, Mauch said. He enjoyed associating with the great players of the game. He endeared himself to people in the game because he came across as a regular guy, despite his own fame, Mauch said.

"All that stuff wouldn't be of any interest to Gene — to have people lauding him or praising him," Mauch said. "All I can tell you is he was my buddy, and I hurt."

## AUTRY: Praise from players

*Continued from A-1*  
to the clubhouse and walked by anyone without saying hello."

Mr. Autry had many interests through the years. He toured the country with his own rodeo and founded, bought or sold radio and television stations, oil wells, hotels, ranches, music publishing and recording companies, a movie production company and part of a football team.

He earned an unsurpassed five stars on Hollywood's Walk of Fame — for success in radio, television, movies, recording and live theater.

The first of the silver screen's "singing cowboys," he made 93 films from 1934 to 1953. He also made 91 half-hour "Gene Autry Show" TV episodes from 1950 to 1955, many of them filmed in Pioneer Town, a tiny community north of Yucca Valley that served as a backdrop for countless Westerns of the era.

The show was television's first series made by a major motion picture star. His Melody Ranch radio show ran from 1940 to 1956. He cut 635 records (200 were of songs he wrote or co-authored), and sales topped 40 million records.

"Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer," his biggest hit, was released in 1949 and remains a Christmas favorite. It is the third best-selling single in history, behind Bing Crosby's No. 2 "White Christmas" and Elton John's No. 1 "Candle in the Wind."

He was Top Hollywood Box Office Western Star eight consecutive years and was among the Top 10 in all categories four times, placing fourth in popularity behind Mickey Rooney, Spencer Tracy and Clark Gable.

Mr. Autry's death came three months after the world bid "happy trails" to Apple Valley's Roy Rogers, who replaced Autry as Hollywood's top cowboy when Mr. Autry left to serve in World War II.

Streets were named after him in Anaheim — site of Edison International Field, the home of his California Angels — and Palm Springs, where he owned a cottage on the grounds of his Autry Resort Hotel. The hotel became the Givenchy Spa Resort in 1995, and he kept the

cottage until Merv Griffin bought the resort in March. He also bought a home in the Las Palmas neighborhood of Palm Springs. For 32 years, he brought the Angels to Palm Springs for spring training.

He was honored by the city's Chamber of Commerce as Palm Springs Man of the Year in 1979 and was grand marshal of the 40th annual Palm Springs Mounted Police Rodeo parade in 1980.

He once made the Forbes 400 list of wealthiest Americans.

Herb Green, an old friend and employee, called Mr. Autry "a giver" in a 1977 interview with the Los Angeles Times.

Mr. Autry and his second wife, Jackie, received the 1988 Coachella Valley Humanitarian Award. Previous recipients included Frank and Barbara Sinatra and Bob and Dolores Hope. The news release announcing the award said Mr. Autry was "perhaps more widely known for his public persona than for the humanitarian endeavors he has quietly supported for his many years in the valley."

Those endeavors included the Boys' Club of Palm Springs, Pathfinder Ranch, Desert Circus, United Way of the Desert, the Bob Hope Cultural Center, Eisenhower Medical Center (there is a 100-bed Gene and Jackie Autry Tower there) and Desert Hospital. The Palm Springs Shriners named him Shriner of the Year for his contributions to hospitals for crippled and burned children.

Mr. Autry was, perhaps, even richer in friends than money.

"You ask me to name some of his friends," Mike Port, former Angel executive vice president and general manager, replied to a reporter's question. "I'm trying to figure out who he's not a friend of."

"If you can't respect and like Gene Autry, you're among the first candidates to be interplanetary travelers."

The Autry Foundation — created as a charitable trust through the estate of Mr. Autry's first wife, Ina Mae — raised \$54 million to finance construction of the Gene Autry Western Heritage Museum, which opened in 1988. The museum is in Los Angeles' Griffith Park.



**Jackie and Gene** Autry arrive at the Country Music Awards on April 23, 1997.

**A fan** pays his respects Friday in front of a bronze statue of Gene Autry and his horse, Champion, at the Autry Museum of Western Heritage in Los Angeles' Griffith Park.





*The Press-Enterprise / 1984*

**In 1984**, the city of Palm Springs honored Gene Autry by naming a street after him.





**Gene Autry**, left, and Roy Rogers were photographed together on October 28, 1978.

A **three-CD** boxed set of Gene Autry's songs features this poster on the cover.



## Autry's career spanned music, movies, business

Some highlights of Gene Autry's career.

### RECORDINGS:

- "That Silver Haired Daddy of Mine," 1932 (also co-author)
- "Back in the Saddle Again," 1940 (also co-author)
- "Tweedle-O-Twill," 1942 (also co-author)
- "Tumbling Tumbleweeds," 1935
- "Here Comes Santa Claus," 1947 (also co-author)
- "Rudolph The Red-Nosed Reindeer," 1949

### FILMS:

- "In Old Santa Fe," 1934
- "The Phantom Empire," (serial), 1935
- "Tumbin' Tumbleweeds," 1935
- "The Singing Cowboy," 1937
- "Boots and Saddles," 1937
- "Under Western Stars," 1938
- "Carolina Moon," 1940
- "Back in the Saddle," 1941
- "Sunset in Wyoming," 1942
- "Range War," 1946
- "Sioux City Sue," 1947
- "Guns and Saddles," 1949

### RADIO, TELEVISION:

- "WLS Barn Dance," radio, 1930-34
- "The Gene Autry Show," TV, 1950-56

### BUSINESSES:

- Angels baseball team. Sold part-interest to Walt Disney Co. in 1995
- Los Angeles TV station KTLA (sold in 1982 for \$245 million); other radio and television stations
- Flying A Productions

Source: The Associated Press

**Singing cowboy**  
Gene Autry is shown in an undated photo.

The Associated Press





To  
Georgie  
From your Pal  
Gene J.  
8-4-51



To my Pal  
Georgie  
Best Wishes  
Pat Buthman