

# MORGANS IN EARLY WESTERN FILMS AND SHOWS, PART III

## *Gene Autry and Champion*

By Brenda L. Tippin

One of the best loved early cowboy stars was Gene Autry (1907–1998) and his famous horse, Champion. No one, even Gene himself, could quite explain his popularity, but the role of the singing cowboy and his beautiful horse, representing justice and patriotism, was something that resonated with the American people during the Depression years, when his fame was made. Few entertainers have won more honors. Gene Autry and Champion built a loyal following which lasted for decades.

### THE AUTRY FAMILY

Gene Autry was born in Tioga, Texas, on September 29, 1907, to Delbert Autry and Elnora Ozmont Autry. The Autry family traced back to French ancestors who immigrated to North Carolina in the early 1700s. Delbert Autry was a livestock dealer and horse trader born in 1886 and married Elnora in 1906.

Gene, whose full name was Orvon Grover Autry, was the first of four children born to this union. He learned the cowboy life at an early age from his father and idealized Tom Mix, who was the silent movie cowboy hero of his growing up years (*see the June/July 2020 issue of The Morgan Horse for Brenda's article on Tom Mix and his horse, Tony*). Meanwhile, his mother taught him music. He loved to sing so much that his grandfather, Elijah William Autry, a Baptist minister, put him in the church choir when he was only five years old. Gene saved his money earned from baling hay and other jobs and ordered a guitar out of the Sears & Roebuck catalog for \$5 when he was 12, and his mother taught him to play it.

Delbert Autry's job was one that alternated between periods of great prosperity and extreme poverty with lots of moving. The family moved to Oklahoma, back to Texas, and to Oklahoma again. His mother's health was frail, and she passed away in 1932 when Gene was 25 years old, shortly after he was married to Ina Mae Spivey. He became responsible for his younger siblings as his father could not be relied upon.

LEFT: Gene Autry and Champion in 1939 (public domain).



LEFT TO RIGHT: Gene Autry and Smiley Burnette in *Old Santa Fe*, 1934 (photo by David Howard, public domain); *The Big Show* movie poster, featuring Gene Autry, Champion, and Smiley Burnette, Republic Pictures, 1936 (Wikimedia Commons); *Trail to San Antone* movie poster, featuring Gene Autry and Champion, 1947 (Wikimedia Commons).

### GENE AUTRY—EARLY YEARS

All of this strengthened Gene's resolve to set himself on a path to financial security. He painstakingly taught himself Morse code so he could qualify for a railroad job and went to work in the telegraph office for the St. Louis–San Francisco railroad line by the time he was 18. Although he was a naturally talented baseball player scouted by the minor leagues, he actually turned down a chance to play professional baseball because he would have had to take a pay cut of \$50 per week from his telegrapher job.

Gene amused himself during the long lonely hours of his night shifts by practicing his music. One evening, the humorist Will Rogers was passing through and heard him sing. He encouraged Gene to pursue his talent and suggested he get a job on radio. In 1928, Gene went to work for KVOO radio in Oklahoma and became known as Oklahoma's yodeling cowboy. As his following began to grow, he gained a recording contract with Columbia records in 1929. Soon after this, he performed on *The National Barn Dance*, broadcast by WLS-AM in Chicago, which was one of the first country music programs in the nation, and was a primary inspiration for the *Grand Ole Opry*.

### GENE'S MUSIC

Gene wrote or co-wrote more than 300 songs himself, including the children's classics *Here Comes Santa Claus* and *Here Comes Peter Cottontail*, as well as recorded hundreds of others. He also wrote *Back in the Saddle Again* (his popular theme song), *I Hang My Head and Cry*, and *That Silver-Haired Daddy of Mine*, which collectively became the first million selling gold record in history. Although written in 1939 by Johnny Marks, it was Gene Autry's 1949 recording that made the children's Christmas song *Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer* famous. His recording made number one on the US charts during Christmas of that year, and sold more than 30 million copies, becoming the second all-time best-selling Christmas single. Gene was also one of the composers of the popular Christmas classic

*Frosty the Snowman*. Altogether he made more than 640 recordings with more than a dozen gold and platinum records.

### THE COWBOY CODE

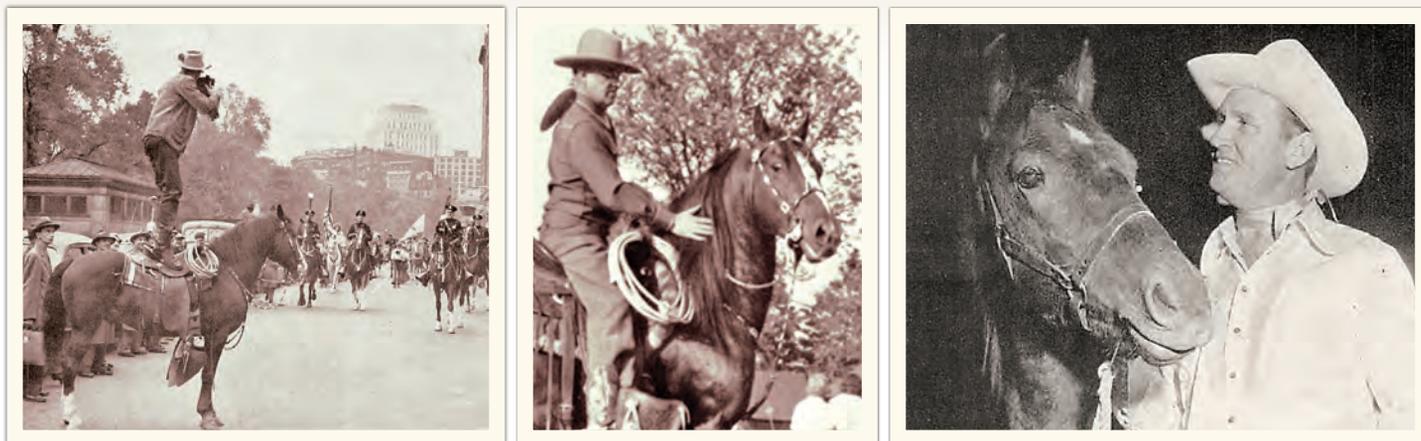
Gene soon realized that audiences craved a cowboy hero with high moral standards in which the good guy would always triumph over the bad guy. He honed this role to perfection, and by the 1940s his fans recognized what they referred to as Gene Autry's Cowboy Code, or the Cowboy Ten Commandments, which he had developed from his earliest films. These were:

1. The Cowboy must never shoot first, hit a smaller man, or take unfair advantage.
2. He must never go back on his word, or a trust confided in him.
3. He must always tell the truth.
4. He must be gentle with children, the elderly, and animals.
5. He must not advocate or possess racially or religiously intolerant ideas.
6. He must help people in distress.
7. He must be a good worker.
8. He must keep himself clean in thought, speech, action, and personal habits.
9. He must respect women, parents, and his nation's laws.
10. The Cowboy is a patriot.

### PERFORMING YEARS AND MILITARY SERVICE

In 1933, Gene met Smiley Burnette, a country music performer and comic, when he hired him to play the accordion on *National Barn Dance*. The next year, both Gene and Smiley were hired for the film debut to play in a bluegrass band for the movie *In Old Santa Fe*. Smiley then had a prominent role in the 1935 serial *The Adventures of Rex and Rinty*, starring the Morgan stallion Casey Jones as Rex. Gene starred in the 1935 12-chapter serial called *Phantom Empire*, which also included Smiley Burnette, and the child actress Betsy King Ross, then 14, who was a champion trick rider. Smiley went on to appear in

## HISTORY LESSON ≈ *Gene Autry and Champion*



**LEFT TO RIGHT:** Warren Patriquin atop Lippitt Victory, photographing a parade (*The Morgan Horse March* 1952); Orland Leader and Steve Tompkins (AMHA Archives); Gene Autry with Raven Bob Morgan (Ethan Eldon x Justine Morgan), bred by Dana Wingate Kelly and later owned by Warren Patriquin (*The Morgan Horse* January 1952).

62 full-featured musical Westerns as Gene's comic sidekick, mostly for Republic Pictures, who absorbed the original Mascot Pictures he had started with. Republic enjoyed tremendous success with these shows.

From 1940 to 1956, Gene's Melody Ranch Radio show broadcasted every week on CBS Radio Network, featuring his theme song *Back in the Saddle Again*. He also worked very hard to build his image with personal appearances and tours, and was the first performer ever to sell out Madison Square Garden. He would work 65 to 85 days at a stretch doing two daily concert or rodeo performances. Gene starred in more than 100 feature films between 1934 and '55 and, by 1937, was internationally recognized as "King of the Cowboys." By 1940, he was the fourth greatest box office attraction behind Mickey Rooney, Clark Gable, and Spencer Tracey. He was voted #1 Western Star for six years straight from 1937 to 1942 by The Motion Picture Herald Exhibitors poll, which was the leading poll of the day.

In 1940 he became the first honorary Mayor of North Hollywood, and later that year was voted the world's greatest cowboy singer and guitarist, with an award and trophy presented by *Metronome Magazine* live on the Melody Ranch Radio Show. The next year, residents of Berwyn, Oklahoma, located near Gene's Melody Ranch, succeeded in changing the name of their town to Gene Autry, Oklahoma.

It was Gene who gave Roy Rogers his first break, and although the two were competitors, they became lifelong friends. When Gene announced he was enlisting during World War II, Republic Pictures threatened to make Roy Rogers "King of the Cowboys" instead of Gene and ended up doing so. Gene went on to become the inspiration for many other Western stars, including Roy Acuff, Johnny Cash, and Willie Nelson.

In 1942, Gene signed up with the US Army Air Forces, which was the land-based aerial warfare component of the US Army at that time. He served as a C-109 transport pilot with the rank of flight officer. Gene was the only officer allowed to wear cowboy boots with his uniform, and he continued his radio broadcasts, now with a military theme, as part of his official duties. Part of his assignment was to fly a dangerous airlift operation over an area nicknamed "The

Hump," between China and India. He was honorably discharged in 1946, having earned the American Campaign Medal, The Asiatic-Pacific Campaign Medal, and the World War II Victory Medal.

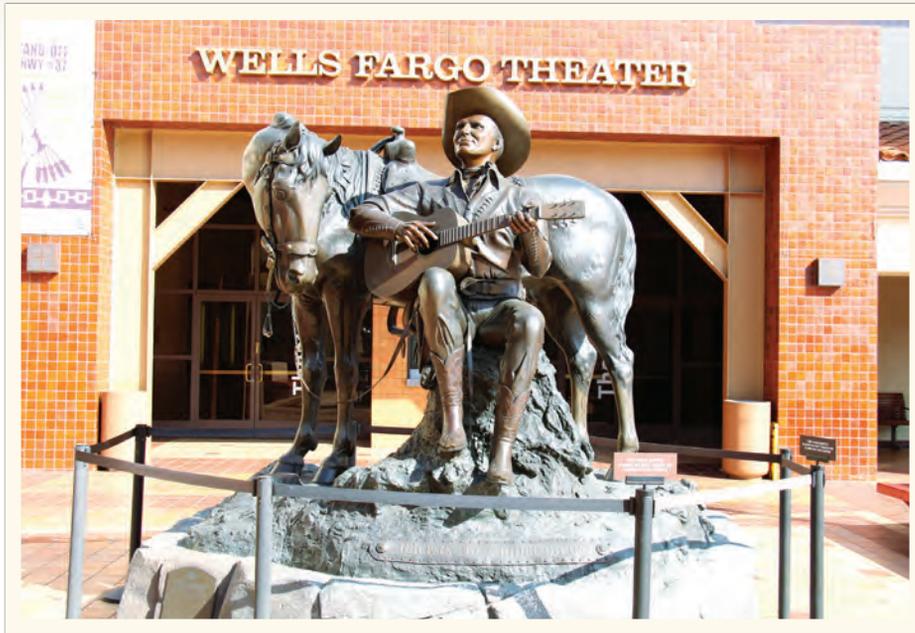
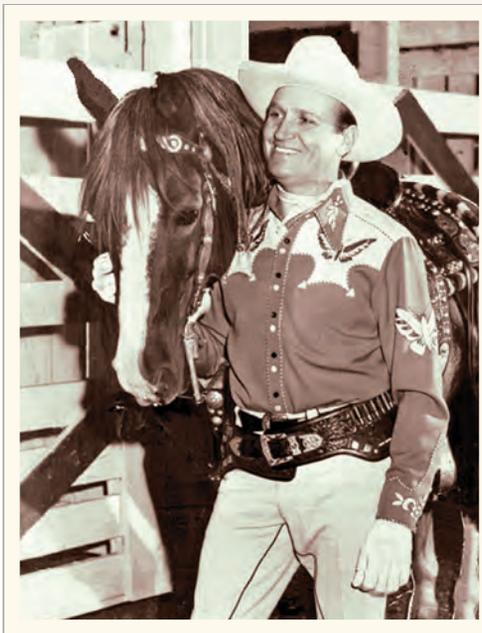
When his tour was completed, he sought to end his contract with Republic and finally did so after making a few more pictures. When Major League Baseball decided to add an expansion team to Los Angeles in 1960, he became owner of the Angels. An astute businessman, Gene invested in his own recording and publishing companies, radio, and TV stations, among other things. He kept a string of rodeo stock in Ardmore, Oklahoma, and in 1943, became a partner in the World Championship Rodeo, later becoming sole owner in 1956.

A highlight for Morgan owners was when Gene came to the Boston Gardens with his World Champion Rodeo Show in 1949. The New England Morgan Horse Club provided two entries for the parade. These were Orland Leader (Ulendon x Vigilda Burkland), winner of the saddle class at that year's National, and Lippitt Victory (Lippitt Searchlight x Lippitt Sally Ash), ridden by Warren Patriquin. The hundreds of other entries were mostly Quarter Horses, so the two Morgans really stood out. Gene awarded first prize for Western tack to Orland Leader and his rider Stephen Tompkins, President of the New England Morgan Horse Association, and they were invited to ride in the garden for the first evening's grand entry. Gene then chose Lippitt Victory as winner of the Best Parade Horse out of a class of more than 100. Gene was also a friend of Vermont breeder Dana Wingate Kelly, and often enjoyed visiting with him on his trips to New England to discuss Morgans.

### ADDITIONAL HONORS

Despite several years of absence during his military service, Gene returned to the Top Ten Western Stars from 1946 to 1953. He became the first major movie star involved in television beginning in 1950 with his Flying A Productions and went on to star in 91 half hour episodes of *The Gene Autry Show*. He produced such TV shows as *The Adventures of Champion*, *Annie Oakley*, *The Range Rider*, *Buffalo Bill Jr.*, and 39 episodes of *Death Valley Days*. Gene is the only entertainer to have all five stars on the Hollywood Walk of Fame. He was awarded four of the stars in February 1960, for

## HISTORY LESSON ≈ *Gene Autry and Champion*



**LEFT TO RIGHT:** Gene Autry and (Touring) Champion, 1950 (Wikimedia Commons); Gene Autry and Champion (Three) statue at Autry Museum of the American West (Wikimedia Commons).

Recording, Motion Pictures, Radio, and Television. The final star, now known as Live Performance, was awarded in 1987.

Altogether, Gene received so many awards and honors during his long and influential career, it would be impossible to mention them all. Among them, he was elected to the Nashville Songwriter Hall of Fame in 1970; The National Cowboy Hall of Fame in Oklahoma in 1972; Professional Rodeo Cowboys Association's Pro Rodeo Hall of Fame in 1979; Hall of Fame Great Westerners—National Cowboy Hall of Fame and Western Heritage Center in Oklahoma City, 1980; National Cowboy Song and Poetry Hall of Fame, South Dakota and Country Music Hall of Fame in Nashville in 1992. He was also commissioned as a Texas Ranger, the highest award in the state of Texas, in 1936. The certificate was awarded again in 1982 as the original had been lost in a fire of his home.

### CHAMPION

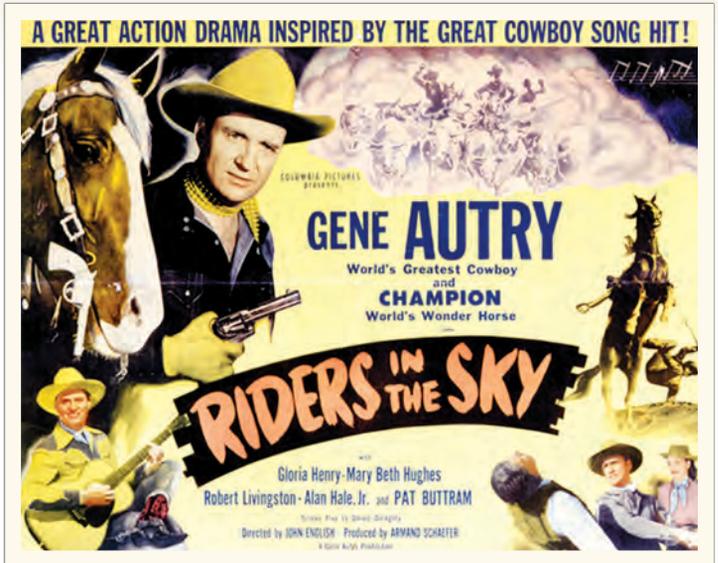
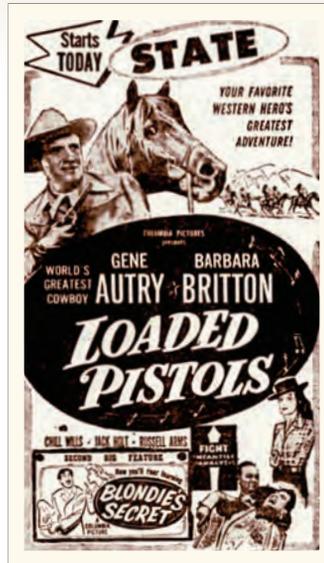
In all, there were at least seven or eight primary horses who played the role of Champion for Gene Autry over the years, several of which were recognized as Morgan or part Morgan. Some other lesser known similarly marked horses were occasionally used as doubles. Through stunt riders Yakima Canutt and Tracey Layne, Gene discovered his original horse, Champion, a Morgan who was used in the *Phantom Empire* series and whom Gene purchased for himself. A unique feature of most of the films Gene starred in is that regardless of what character he played in the movie, whether sheriff, ranger, or whatever, he always played himself, Gene Autry, singing cowboy. Likewise, his horse in these films was always Champion.

The first Champion was a dark sorrel Morgan horse, originally owned by Tom Mix, foaled about 1925. Tom had bought him to use as one of the doubles for his horse Tony, who was very similar. Champion was marked with a wide, distinctive, T-shaped blaze, three

flashy white stockings and solid right front leg, and white splotch on his belly, which is visible in some movie scenes where the horse is lying down. Champion was sired by a Morgan trotting horse in Ardmore, Oklahoma, and Gene was proud of the horse's Morgan heritage.

Known as "The Wonder Horse of the West," Champion was an immediate hit with viewers, quickly becoming almost as popular as Gene. He had a great deal of personality, and learned such tricks as dancing, bowing, shaking his head yes or no, untying knots, coming to Gene's whistle, and standing patiently waiting for Gene to jump onto his back from a loft or upper story and then taking off at high speed to make a quick getaway. He was the first official screen Champion, and Gene rode him exclusively. This was the horse that took Gene to the top as a film star, and he received his own fan mail. Among the earliest films he appeared in were *Phantom Empire*, *Melody Trail*, and *Tumbling Tumbleweeds*, all from 1935. His last film was *Bells of Capistrano* in 1942, after which Gene went into the service for World War II. Altogether he starred in 51 films with Gene and by 1939 his value had skyrocketed to \$25,000. Champion died of a heart attack in 1946.

Gene acquired Lindy Champion, a Tennessee Walking horse registered as Stonewall Allen and foaled in 1927, on the day of Charles Lindbergh's historic flight from New York to Paris. He was a sorrel with four white stockings, a wide oval-topped blaze, and a black dot inside the blaze on his nose. He carried numerous close Morgan crosses tracing through Tom Hal and Copperbottom. He also was previously owned by Tom Mix and cast as Tony Jr. Gene used him for some personal appearances. The second official screen Champion, also of Morgan and Tennessee Walker blood was Champion Jr., a beautiful sorrel with flaxen mane and tail, four high white stockings, and a narrow blaze and snip. Purchased from an Oklahoma rancher for \$2,500, he was highly trained and was



MOVIE POSTERS, LEFT TO RIGHT: Home on the Prairie, featuring Gene Autry and Champion, 1939 (public domain); Loaded Pistols, featuring Gene Autry and Champion (Jr.), 1948 (Wikimedia Commons); Riders in the Sky, featuring Gene Autry and (Television) Champion, 1949 (IMDb Creative Commons, Wikimedia Commons, public domain).

billed on screen as both “Wonder Horse of the West” and “World’s Wonder Horse.” Champion Jr. appeared in Autry films from 1946 to 1950 and appeared with Gene at Madison Square Garden in 1946, living until 1977. Gene also used a well-trained trick pony named Little Champ, a sorrel with four white stockings and a wide blaze, who appeared in films during the late 1940s to early 1950s. He was often shown with Champion Jr. as “the son of Champion.”

Touring Champion, another Morgan-part-Tennessee Walker was a beautiful dark sorrel with four white stockings and a medium blaze that veered to the right side of his forehead. Gene often used him for personal appearances, rodeos, and stage shows during the late 1940s and 1950s, and he became one of the most reliable Champions to be used for this purpose. These included appearing at Madison Square Garden in 1947, and touring with Gene to England in 1953. His hoof prints are next to Gene’s handprints at Grauman’s Chinese Theatre in Hollywood. Television Champion, another light sorrel with flaxen mane and tail, was Morgan and part Quarter Horse used for Gene’s final movies and TV show, and inspired the comic book series, Gene Autry’s Champion. According to Henry Crowell, who worked for Gene for 30 years, the final Champion, a.k.a. “Champ” was a dark sorrel Morgan-Quarter Horse with a wide, crooked blaze, dark spot over his left eye, and four white stockings. Foaled about 1949, he was used for personal appearances from 1950 to 1960, and lived to a ripe old age of 41, dying in 1990. Champion Three was used as the model for the statue of Gene and his horse in front of the Autry Museum of Western Heritage, now known as the Autry Museum of the American West. The realization of a lifelong dream, the museum was founded by Gene and his second wife, Jackie, whom he married in 1981 after his first wife Ina passed away in 1980.

### FINAL YEARS

Although Gene retired from show business in 1964, he remained the only Western star on the list of top ten box office money makers

until his death. For many years he ranked on Forbes list of the 400 wealthiest Americans, dropping to the near-miss category with a worth of \$320 million in 1995. Gene and his horse Champion are still remembered today as being among the most popular entertainers of the American West. ■

### RESOURCES

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