

≈ HISTORY LESSON ≈

MORGANS IN EARLY WESTERN FILMS AND SHOWS, PART IV

Roy Rogers and Trigger, Rex Allen and Koko

By Brenda L. Tippin

The era of singing cowboys and their wonder horses continued with the legendary Roy Rogers, as well as Rex Allen, both of whom used Morgans. Roy Rogers and Trigger are probably the best known and most popular of all the early Western cowboy and equine movie stars. Rex and Koko provided a memorable end to the singing cowboy era.

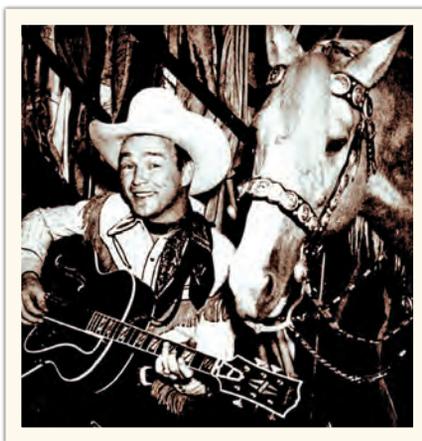
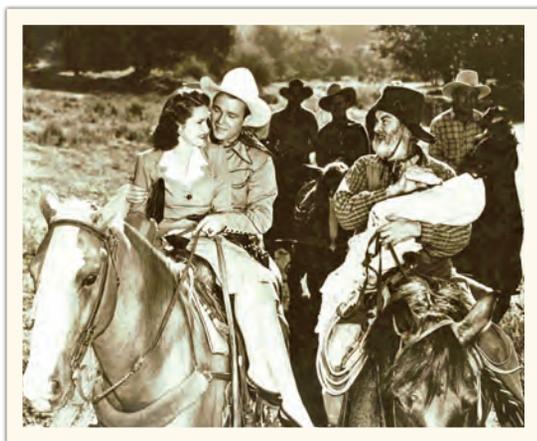
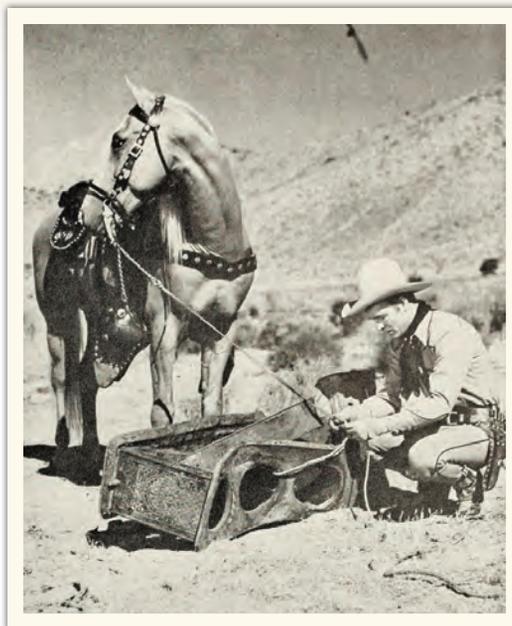
ROY ROGERS

Born Leonard Franklin Slye on November 5, 1911 in Cincinnati, Ohio, Roy was the third of four children born to Andrew and Mattie Slye, and the only son. The family lived in a houseboat built by Andy and his brother and were able to move it to land during the Great Flood of 1913 and continue living in it. They bought a farm in Duck Run, and Andy took a job in a shoe factory to supplement the family income. One of Roy's early Christmas gifts when he was eleven was a horse, on which he learned basic riding skills. The family was musical,

and Roy learned to sing, yodel, and play mandolin and guitar. With the Depression in full swing the family moved to California. In between working as a migrant fruit picker and other odd jobs, Roy was determined to pursue his interest in singing. This eventually led to the singing group Sons of the Pioneers which began to see success when they made their first records in 1934. They were known for such songs as "Tumbling Tumbleweeds" and "Moonlight on the Prairie" and earned a penny for every record they sold. Gene Autry was among the first to give the fledgling group a break with parts in his movies.

ABOVE, LEFT TO RIGHT: Little Trigger kissing Roy Rogers (public domain); Rex Allen, The Arizona Cowboy, and Koko, The Miracle Horse of the Movies (public domain).

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CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: Publicity photo of Roy Rogers and Trigger (public domain, Wikimedia Commons); Roy Rogers with Trigger, 1943 (Wikimedia Commons); Roy Rogers and Mary Hart (Lynne Roberts) with Trigger in *Billy the Kid Returns* (public domain, Wikimedia Commons); Roy Rogers and Trigger (*TMH* February 1946, photo by Warren Patriquin); Trigger with Gabby Hayes and Roy Rogers in *Sunset Serenade*, 1942, by Republic Pictures (public domain, Wikimedia Commons).

In 1937 Roy got a seven-year contract with Republic Pictures. Roy first used the screen name Dick Weston, but this was soon changed to Roy Rogers, when he successfully auditioned and won a new singing cowboy contract with Republic Pictures. They wanted the change due to the popularity of Will Rogers, who had recently died. Roy ended up getting a break when Republic assigned him a role originally intended for Gene Autry, due to extended contract negotiations. This movie was shown under the name *Under Western Stars*, and released in 1938. Roy's role called for a horse, and among the horses presented for him to choose from was a golden palomino called Golden Cloud. Roy never looked at another horse, changing his name to Trigger at the suggestion of Smiley Burnett who was working with him on the set, and remarked the horse was "quick on the trigger" so that would be a good name for him. The horse had actually already appeared earlier in the 1938 movie *The Adventures of Robin Hood* with Olivia de Havilland riding him as Maid Marian.

Roy was quick to realize that Trigger was essential to the cowboy image he was trying to build. He had limited funds in those early years, and Republic was renting the horse for him from Hudkins Stables. Unfortunately for Roy, it meant he had no control over how the horse was used or who else could ride him, so long as he was available for Roy's movies. As the popularity of Roy and Trigger quickly grew, Roy also realized that one horse was never going to be able to fulfill all the demands placed on him. Between filming and Roy's ambitious tour schedule which often included as many as 26 personal appearances a year, and necessarily had to include Trigger, he had to have another horse. At the same time, Roy was intent on presenting the public image that Trigger was a single horse, saying that he didn't want to confuse Trigger's fans, many of whom were children.

Roy was first married at just 21 years of age to then 19-year-old Lucile Ascolese, but this did not last long and ended in divorce. He married Arlene Wilkins in 1936, and they adopted a daughter,



LEFT TO RIGHT: Movies starring Roy Rogers and Trigger: *Sunset in El Dorado*, 1945 (public domain, Wikimedia Commons); *Grand Canyon Trail*, 1948 (public domain, Wikimedia Commons); *Trigger, Jr.*, starring Little Trigger, 1950 (public domain, Wikimedia Commons).

Cheryl, in 1942, then had two children of their own—Linda Lou in 1943, and Roy, Jr., or “Dusty,” born in 1946. Arlene died of a brain embolism just eight days after Dusty’s birth. He married Dale Evans in 1947, and had just one child with her, a little girl with Down’s Syndrome who died at age two. They adopted several more children, and remained married more than 50 years until Roy’s death in 1998.

Republic Pictures gave Roy the title “King of the Cowboys” when Gene Autry left to fight in World War II. Roy would have gone as well, but he was listed both as an only son and a married father with children, and was farther down the draft list. Altogether, he appeared in more than 100 films. His show was broadcast on radio from 1944 to 1955 and carried on more than 500 stations. His TV show ran from 1951 to 1957. Immensely popular, Roy was the number one actor in Westerns for 11 full years. Like Gene Autry, he was a shrewd businessman and a huge range of Roy Rogers and Trigger merchandise and collectibles followed including adventure novels, comics, and various toys and action figures. Roy was inducted into the Country Music Hall of Fame both for his work with *Sons of the Pioneers* and as a solo artist. He earned three stars on the Hollywood Walk of Fame for his work in television, film, and radio. Like many stars, Roy had his hand and footprints, and Trigger’s hoofprints placed in front of Grauman’s Chinese theatre. The Roy Rogers and Dale Evans Museum enjoyed many visitors and operated in three different locations in California and Missouri from 1967 until 2009. Roy passed away in 1998 at the age of 86.

A COMMON THREAD—HOLLYWOOD HORSE TRAINER GLENN RANDALL

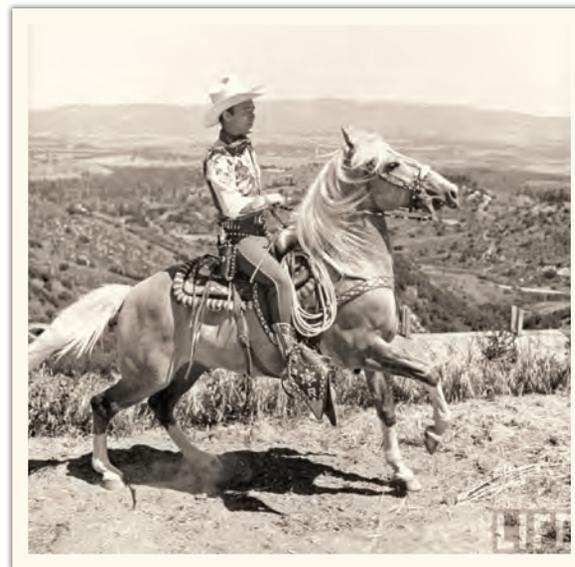
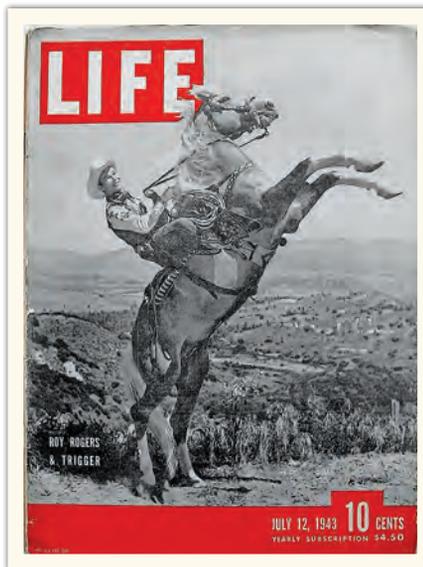
Glenn Randall was born on Christmas Day 1908, one of four children

born to Dean and Sadie Belden Randall in Melbeta, Nebraska. Glenn loved horses from his earliest childhood, always trying to teach tricks to the family horses. He officially began training at the age of nine when he managed to sell a pony he had trained to the circus. By the time he reached his early teen years, he was training and breaking horses and mules for the US Cavalry at Fort Robinson, Nebraska. He moved to Bakersfield, California, in 1940. Glenn was best known for training Roy Rogers’ Trigger and his doubles. After the death of Gene Autry’s trainer John Agee in 1951, he began training Gene’s champion horses. He was also the trainer of Koko, Rex Allen’s beautiful chocolate flaxen Morgan stallion. Glenn was inducted into the National Cowboy Hall of Fame in Oklahoma City, and won the Humane Society’s PATSY Award twice.

THE TRIGGER HORSES

Early on, in 1939 or 1940, Roy purchased another palomino colt about 18 months old from actor Ray Corrigan to use as a stand-in for Trigger, for a price of \$250 or \$350. This was Little Trigger, and according to Roy’s trainer Glen Randall, he was a Morgan, though unregistered, and his exact breeding was unknown. Little Trigger stood 15 hands tall, deep-bodied and powerfully built. He was a lighter shade of palomino, had more prominent dapples, and four white stockings. Trigger was a deep golden palomino without dapples, 15¾ hands tall, also deep-bodied and powerful, with just one left hind stocking. He was considered more beautiful, mostly because of the added height and his color was considered the ideal shade. Little Trigger was still a very handsome horse, however, and close enough to fool fans in spite of the extra white feet. He was also exceptionally smart and would go on to learn more than 150

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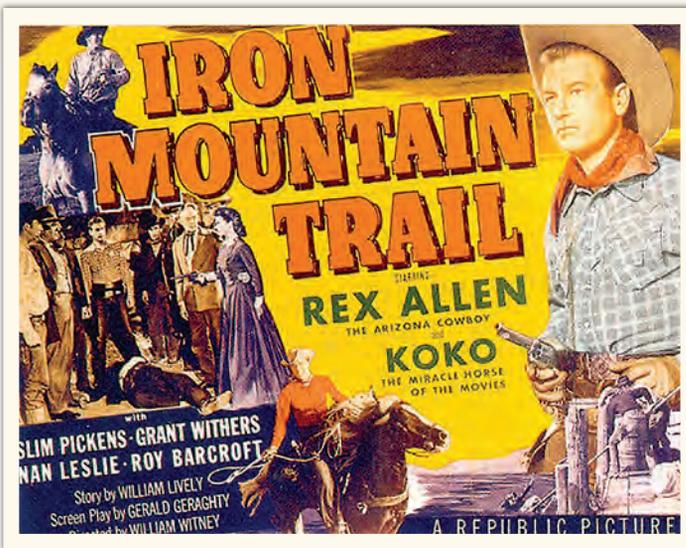
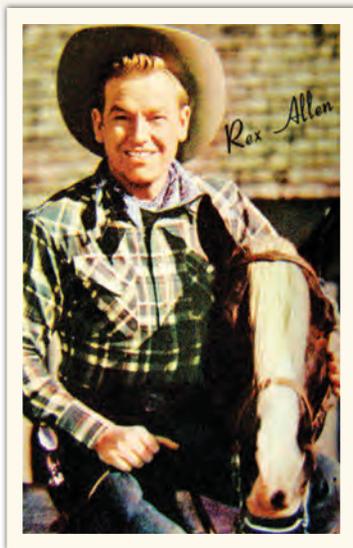
CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: Roy Rogers and Little Trigger: Little Trigger was so well trained that Roy took him inside hospitals and orphanages; Roy getting kisses from Little Trigger; Little Trigger taking off with Roy in the saddle (*Life Magazine*); Roy and Little Trigger on the cover of *Life Magazine* July 12, 1943; Roy and Little Trigger horsing around. This demonstrates Little Trigger's high level of training (all photos public domain).

tricks, including being housebroken, since he often had to appear in places like hotel lobbies and hospitals and travel in elevators. Little Trigger traveled with Roy all over the world but was always posed as Trigger and not given his own identity. He was the most highly trained of all the Trigger horses, and excellent at dressage as well as numerous tricks. It was Little Trigger who gave Trigger the reputation of being “The Smartest Horse in the Movies.”

Meanwhile, Roy made a deal with Hudkins Stables, purchasing the original Trigger for \$2500 in 1943. Little Trigger frequently was used as a stand-in for Trigger in movies, and took over most of the personal appearances. He is especially visible in the movie *Son of Paleface* (1952) and was given a starring role in *Trigger, Jr.* (1950). The original Trigger, according to Roy, appeared with him in all 88 of his movies, and Little Trigger in nearly all after 1943, though other

doubles were sometimes used for both horses for various stunts. Many of these movies are still available online so both Trigger and Little Trigger can be seen in action. Both Trigger, and especially Little Trigger, were highly trained in dressage, and Roy loved executing these fancy moves when he made personal appearances with these horses as it was a great crowd pleaser. Trigger also later appeared on Roy's TV show. He was rarely used for tours outside of California but did make one trip to the East Coast with Roy in 1946. This was borne out by none other than Warren Patriquin, Morgan owner, breeder and photographer for *The Morgan Horse*, as well as a staff photographer for the Boston Herald. Warren spent considerable time talking to Roy, who admitted that while the original Trigger had been represented to him as being sired by a Thoroughbred out of an unknown dam, in fact, Roy had discovered more about his

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LEFT TO RIGHT: Rex Allen and Koko, 1952 (public domain, Wikimedia Commons); Rex Allen and Koko, Miracle Horse of the Movies (public domain, Findagrave.com); Iron Mountain Trail lobby card, featuring Rex Allen and Koko.

origins. In the February 1946 issue of *The Morgan Horse*, Warren included a picture of Roy and Trigger, and wrote:

“The most famous horse in America today is Trigger, Roy Rogers’ beautiful palomino stallion. This horse and its very capable rider are probably the idols of every child from Vermont to California. This horse, aside from being a high school horse, and a very intelligent one at that, is one of the calmest stallions I’ve ever seen. He’ll stand in a crowded area and not be the least bit worried about what’s going on beside him, but when it’s his time to go in the arena and perform he’ll be off like a bolt of lightning.

“Trigger has a wonderful disposition combined with good conformation and type. He’s about 15.2 and weighs over 1,100 pounds. How could a horse with such a description be anything but a Morgan? He couldn’t, because that’s just what Trigger is. He was sired by a Morgan and from a mare of Steel Dust breeding.”

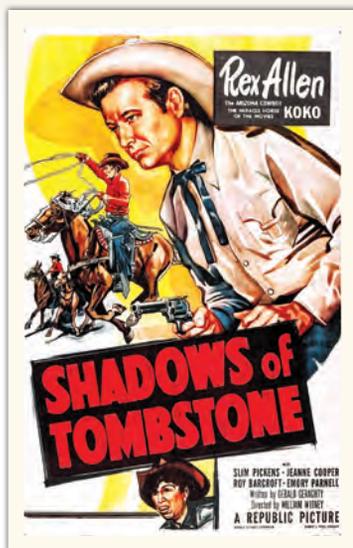
This also corresponds with research by Leo Pando in the 2nd edition of his thoroughly researched book, *Trigger: The Lives and Legend of Roy Rogers’ Palomino*. Here Pando notes that according to his information, Trigger was out of a Steel Dust mare and by a Morgan or Morgan/Thoroughbred stallion. According to his palomino registration, the dam was chestnut and the sire was palomino. During those years, many old-timers claimed Steel Dust was of Morgan origin, which meant both Trigger and Little Trigger were mostly of Morgan blood. In 1948 Roy bought a registered Tennessee Walking Horse named Golden Zephyr which he called Trigger, Jr. Trigger, Jr. was mostly used for personal appearances after Little Trigger was no longer able to travel. Trigger, Jr. did have many Morgan crosses back to Copperbottom and Tom Hal, but according to Roy was not much of a cowboy’s horse and was best at fancy dance routines. He was similar in size to the original Trigger and had four white stockings. Neither Trigger or Little Trigger were used for stud, but Trigger, Jr. sired several offspring.

The original Trigger died one day short of his 31st birthday in 1965 at Roy’s ranch in Hidden Valley, California. Trigger, Jr. died in 1969. Roy had both Trigger and Trigger, Jr. stuffed and mounted and displayed in his museum. After the museum closed in 2009, RFD-TV purchased the stuffed mount of Trigger for \$266,500. Little Trigger, who perhaps had to work the hardest to establish Trigger’s fame, even more than Trigger himself, received the least recognition for his efforts. He died sometime in the early 1960s, believed to be around 27 years of age. Roy later expressed regret that he had not had Little Trigger mounted and stuffed as well.

REX ALLEN AND KOKO

The last of the “Singing Cowboys,” Rex Elvie Allen was born on New Year’s Eve, 1920 to Horace Allen and Luella Faye Clark in northeast Arizona. Known as “the Arizona Cowboy,” Allen was also from a musical family and learned to play guitar and sing at an early age while his father played fiddle at local events. While Roy Rogers became a movie star cowboy for Hollywood, Rex Allen was a real cowboy. After he graduated from high school, he toured the southwest as a rodeo rider. He then worked on *The National Barn Dance* radio show in Chicago for a few years before moving to Hollywood in 1949, receiving his first movie contract with Republic later that year. Meanwhile, he also had begun recording records, first for Mercury, then Decca. Starting in 1950, he starred as himself in 19 Western movies. Glen Randall, Roy Rogers’ trainer, had found a beautiful chocolate chestnut Morgan stallion with striking white flaxen mane and tail, who he originally had in mind as a possible mount for Roy’s wife Dale Evans. Roy, however, wanted to look for a smaller horse for Dale, so Koko was available, and Glen offered to sell him to Rex. Rex was glad to buy the horse, and Roy was happy to allow Glen to train him for Rex. Easily portraying the strong, clean-cut and fearless cowboy hero wearing a white Stetson and riding a beautiful horse, Rex quickly became one of the top ten box office draws and a comic series soon followed. Koko

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LEFT TO RIGHT: Old Overland Trail movie poster, 1953 (public domain, Wikimedia Commons); Shadows of Tombstone movie poster, 1953 (public domain, Wikimedia Commons); Rex Allen Museum in Willcox, Arizona.

was billed as “The Miracle Horse of the Movies.”

Due to his striking coloring it was much harder to find doubles for Koko, so he did most of his work himself. During the summers, Rex and Koko would perform in theatres, rodeos, and auditoriums across the country. Koko was skilled at coming into the arena with Rex on a dead run and performing a spectacular sliding stop, followed by Rex leaping off the horse and picking up his guitar to sing a few songs. This act was followed by Koko performing a series of tricks. In one popular trick, the two would lie down to sleep and Koko would reach over and pull the blanket off Rex with his teeth.

Koko appeared in over 30 movies and a number of uncredited films as well. Many of these such as *Colorado Sundown*, and *Old Overland Trail* can be seen on Youtube, so it is possible to see Koko in action. He sired a number of offspring, and one look-alike called Koko Jr who appeared with Rex but was never as famous as his father. Koko died in 1968, and was buried on Rex’s ranch in Malibu Canyon.

Rex wrote and recorded many of his own songs, which were often featured in his films. However, Rex’s film career was relatively short as the “singing cowboy” era was fading. He and Koko had the distinction of appearing in the last singing Western, *Phantom Stallion*, released in 1954. Gifted with a rich, pleasant voice that was smooth and deep, Rex later found plenty of work narrating Disney films and other movies. He was given a star on the Hollywood walk of fame for his contribution to the movie industry, and in 1983 was inducted into the Western Performers Hall of Fame at the National Cowboy & Western Heritage Museum in Oklahoma City, Oklahoma. Rex was also the very first to receive the Golden Boot Award in 1983, presented to those who have made significant contributions to the Western genre in television and film. Gene Autry and Roy Rogers also received the award that year.

The Rex Allen Museum opened in 1989 in Wilcox, Arizona, and is still open to visitors today. A huge bronze statue of Rex Allen stands across the street from the museum. After this was built, Rex had Koko’s body moved and reburied at the foot of the statue. Rex

died in 1999 two weeks before his 79th birthday. His son Rex Allen Jr. is also a successful country singer and still performs, appearing at the Rex Allen Days Rodeo in Wilcox every year. ■

RESOURCES

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