

# King of the Cowboys

Who else would burst into song at the slightest provocation?

By Bill Jones

**L**eonard Franklin Slye of Duck Run, Ohio, worked in a shoe factory in Cincinnati with his father. One day his father suggested they quit their jobs and move to California. “Good idea,” said Leonard, “I have saved up \$90 and maybe that will buy us enough gas to get there.” Later, Leonard mused it may not have been the best idea. “I thought later John Steinbeck may have followed us to get ideas for ‘The Grapes of Wrath’. We ate a lot of jackrabbits on the way.”

From a musical family, Leonard teamed up with a couple of groups before he founded the Sons of the Pioneers with Bob Nolan. Nolan wrote two of the most iconic songs in Western music history—“Cool Water” and “Tumbling Tumbleweeds.” Len, as he was called, could sing and yodel and was the “front man” of this and a couple of previous groups. In 1937, Len wrangled his way (uninvited) into a casting call for a “singing cowboy” for Republic Pictures. Republic, at the time, was looking for another singing cowboy to replace Gene Autry, who wanted more money than Republic wanted to pay. Len made his first picture in 1938 and the studio named him Roy Rogers. The name was more marketable than Leonard Slye. Leonard had no say-so in the name selection.

Roy and his second wife, Arlene, had three children together before she died shortly after giving birth to their third child. Roy, though devastated, immersed himself working for Republic Pictures and eventually made 81 Western movies for the company. The plots of these films were simple and had a lot of action. (As an aside, a lot of the characters in these earlier black-and-white pictures smoked a lot of cigarettes. These were the days when smoking was almost considered a good thing.) Roy played a lot of different characters in these features, which usually revolved around someone trying to steal a ranch, mistaken identity, beautiful women, gunfights,



bar fights, chase scenes and Roy showing up to save the day. Johnny Cash once said: “When I saw the man in the white hat on the palomino, I knew the bad guys were gonna get it. Every day we need Roy Rogers for something.”

As in most musicals, Roy would burst into song at the slightest provocation and was accompanied by an unseen full orchestra, *Riders of the Purple Sage*, or his own Sons of the Pioneers. Roy had several “sidekicks,” but his favorite was George “Gabby” Hayes. Roy made 44 feature films with Gabby and said he was like a father, brother, best friend and partner. “I can’t say enough good things about the guy,” Roy said. “He was nothing like the character he played. He wore tweed suits and drove fine automobiles. When he took his teeth out and put on those old clothes, he became Gabby Hayes.”

Trigger, Roy’s palomino stallion, was almost as big a star as Roy Rogers. Billed as “The Smartest Horse in the Movies,” Roy said

he was a “special horse” and seemed to know when he was “on camera.” Trigger was in all of Republic’s 81 feature films and all 100 of the later television shows. A couple of “stunt palominos” were tried by producers, but they proved ineffective. On personal appearances Roy, who loved kids, would often take Trigger into local hospital children’s wards. “We put rubber shoes on him so he would not slip. We even took him on elevators.” Roy and Trigger partnered up for 29 years before Trigger’s death at age 33.

Dale Evans, a pretty young singer and actress, never wanted to be a cowgirl. “Other than riding goats at my uncle’s farm in Texas, I never even rode a horse. I was in one film with Roy and apparently folks liked the chemistry between us. I liked Roy and was impressed by his down-to-earth personality.” The two married and Dale became “Queen of the West.” Roy was her fourth husband and they

stayed married for over 40 years. Altogether, including adopted kids, they had nine children. Two died from illness and one in a church van crash. A son, Roy Rogers Jr., became estranged over some “religious differences” for years and only reconciled days before Roy’s death.

Towards the end of his life Roy made some bad financial decisions. Taxes took a great deal of his wealth. He had Trigger stuffed and displayed at the Roy Rogers Museum in California. Later, the museum was moved to Branson, Mo., but was losing money and the contents (including Trigger and Dale’s German shepherd Bullet) were sold at auction.

Roy said, “I always wanted to be someone kids looked up to.” At his funeral, Dale and their remaining children sang a song Dale wrote years before. “Happy Trails.” Until we meet again, keep smiling until then. ■

*Bill Jones is a regular contributor to RANGE and has been a Roy Rogers fan since 1954.*