

Singing Cowboy of Films Corral Fans



All tuned up for a cowboy song. Left to right: Gene Autry, with his old guitar; Polly Rowles, and Smiley Burnette, with his windjammer.

Autry a Hero of Woolly Westerns

By ROSALIND SHAFFER

Hollywood, Cal.

IF YOU went down the list of current motion picture popularities as measured by fan mail received you probably would run across a vaguely familiar name. Not because you ever had seen any of his pictures, and as a Chicagoan you probably haven't, but because the name created the impression that you had heard it before.

The name is Gene Autry. Remember him? The drawling Texan who accompanied himself on his guitar and lifted his tenor voice in plaintive melodies of the western range?

Can this be the same Gene Autry who is right up with Clark Gable, Tyrone Power, and Errol Flynn in fan mail acclaim? It is. Singing cowboys, with a wide appeal in the rural sections of the country, have set a new popularity in motion pictures—the musical westerns. And your old friend Gene Autry, out of a half dozen or so headliners in the field, is rated as No. 1 among the crooning "punchers."

In one recent month Autry received 2,728 fan letters, topping his closest rival, Tyrone Power, by more than a thousand. The cowboy's salary is said to be \$7,500 per picture in a field where one picture is turned out every month. One of the major studios was reported to have offered Autry's home studio, Republic, a half a million dollars for the star's contract. Republic astutely said, "Nothing doing."

To check up on the lively career of this Texas-born, Oklahoma-bred cowhand who went from a railroad dispatching office to filmdom's fame in seven years, we accepted luncheon with him one noon recently. Visioning a floridly dressed cowboy stomping into the studio offices to the clank of spurs and the rustle of leather chaps, we were surprised when a mild-mannered, medium-sized, brown-haired chap with gray-blue eyes quietly appeared in the doorway to be introduced as Autry.

Gene is a westerner all right, even if his Lone Star drawl has been somewhat smoothed by several years of urban living. He's proud of his cowhand background and off the screen wears specially cut western suits, distinctive rather than ostentatious, cut along the lines of equestrian clothing. Gene does not own a civilian suit to his name except for a tuxedo he bought when he wanted to escort a young lady to a night club.

His suit that day was a quiet-toned gray from which specially made high-heeled leather boots protruded. A gray shirt striped in black, and set off by a conservative bandana, peeked out from the vest. The star's only concession to wild-west flamboyancy was a distinctive white low-

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Discussion during luncheon turned to Gene's horses. Next to their cowboy heroes themselves, juvenile admirers probably are most familiar with their mounts. Autry's favorite is the 8-year-old Champion, better known as Champ to his youthful worshippers. Champ, whom Autry took off an Oklahoma ranch, also gets fan mail and has been with the cowboy actor since Autry first crashed the films in 1934. He is a dark brown, with white legs and a bald or "blazed" face.

Autry recently has purchased another mount. This horse will not replace Champ, he assured us, but will simply be a substitute. The new horse is called Ten Strike, but that name is to be changed, and possibly Autry will request the aid of his army of fans in selecting an appropriate cognomen. This latest addition to the Autry stable of a half dozen or so mounts is a 4-year-old from a California ranch.

For a man not yet turned 30

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Chestnut brown, he comes from a line of fine Kentucky horses. Just broken, Ten Strike will be trained personally by Autry for circus performances.

Two other favorites in the Autry stable include Lindy, a chestnut with stocky legs who was born on the day the famous American aviator flew the Atlantic. For fast riding, where sure-footedness is at a premium, Autry uses Shorty, a little cow pony from Texas.

"How did Champ act when you first started making pictures?" we asked.

"Well, he was pretty nervous the first day, but after that he just settled right down," answered Gene. "I was pretty nervous myself. I didn't know how I was going over."

The popularity of his first picture, "The Phantom Empire," a serial in twelve chapters, established Autry rapidly among the fans of western pictures. Autry made his first appearance before the camera three years ago, in November, 1934. He has made twenty-one pictures since then, his present schedule calling for eight productions a year. His most recently completed picture was "Springtime in the Rockies." Of all his pictures Autry says he liked best "Boots and Saddles," most of which was made at Autry's favorite location at the foot of Mount Whitney near Lone Pine, Cal.

It was his singing that brought Autry his screen chance. The old Mascot studio, which later became Republic, was looking for a singing cowboy with which to enter the new field of musical westerns. Autry had built up a following and the studio brought him out on trial for "The Phantom Empire."

The singing came naturally to Gene, as it comes to most cowboys.

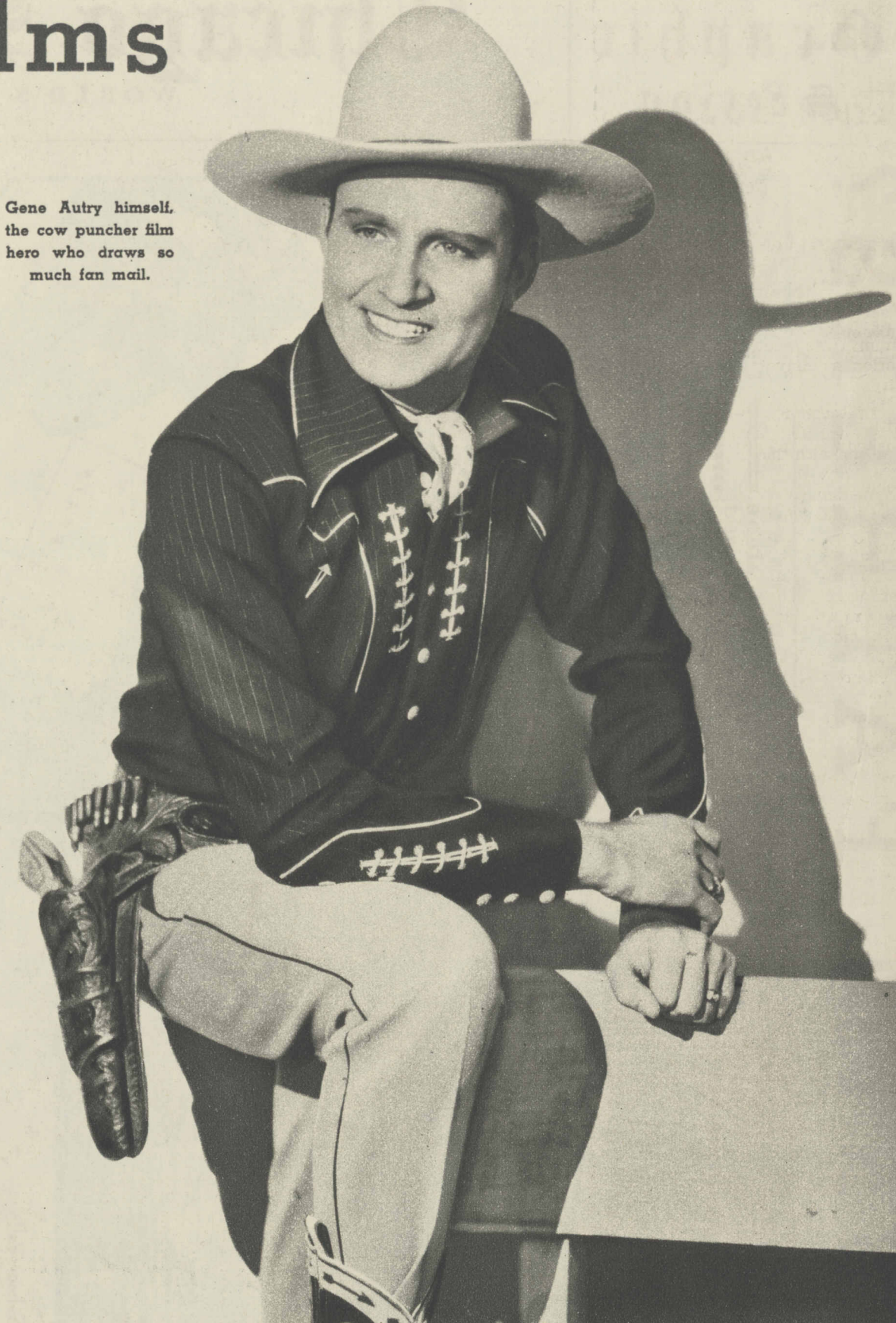
"Riding alone so much of the time, a cowboy gets lonesome," explained the star, who rode herd on his father's ranch near Achille, Okla., from later boyhood on, "so he naturally hums little tunes to amuse himself."

As for the guitar playing, that also was natural to Gene, who cannot read a note.

"My mother taught me," he relates.

"How do you compose music

Gene Autry himself, the cow puncher film hero who draws so much fan mail.



without knowing the technicalities of composition?" we inquired.

"O, I just keep humming it to my arranger, who works it up into proper shape," he explained.

This system has been responsible for a long list of cowboy songs, including the popular "Silver Haired Daddy," which Autry wrote in collaboration with Jimmy Long. The latter has been the melodist on many of Autry's compositions. "Roundup Time in Reno," which featured Republic's latest picture, "Manhattan Merry-Go-Round," is another Autry composition. More than 340,000 recordings of "Silver Haired Daddy" have been sold. Smiley Burnette, another former Chicago entertainer, aids Autry on song composing.

Oddly enough, the depression played a big part in shaping Autry's motion picture career.

"After I got out of high school in Tioga, Tex., in 1925," he recounted, "I went to work on the southwestern division of the Frisco (St. Louis and San Francisco) railroad and learned telegraphy. I worked up and down the line as a dispatcher at Sapulpa, Tulsa, Oklahoma City, and a number of tank towns.

The latter assignments were invaluable, because I usually got the night shift, where I did a lot of guitar playing and singing, since there was nothing else to do.

"But things began to tighten up on the railroad long before they did elsewhere, and we could see bad times coming. When they started cutting out one station after another I got a pass to New York, where I tried to get on with a phonograph company. A cowboy star, Johnny Marvin, helped me get an interview with Nat Shilkret, leader of a phonograph company orchestra. Shilkret said I had some ability, but advised me to go back to Tulsa and train some more. I was disappointed, but it was good advice, and after I got my start Shilkret's company brought me back to New York in 1929."

Autry's account of his march up the ladder to film prominence was filled with mention of people who had helped him along the route. Besides Johnny Marvin, who got him his first break, there were Jack Owens, one-time popular entertainer; Smiley Burnette, who plays in Autry's pictures, and H. J. Yates, president of a record company.

To all of his old associates

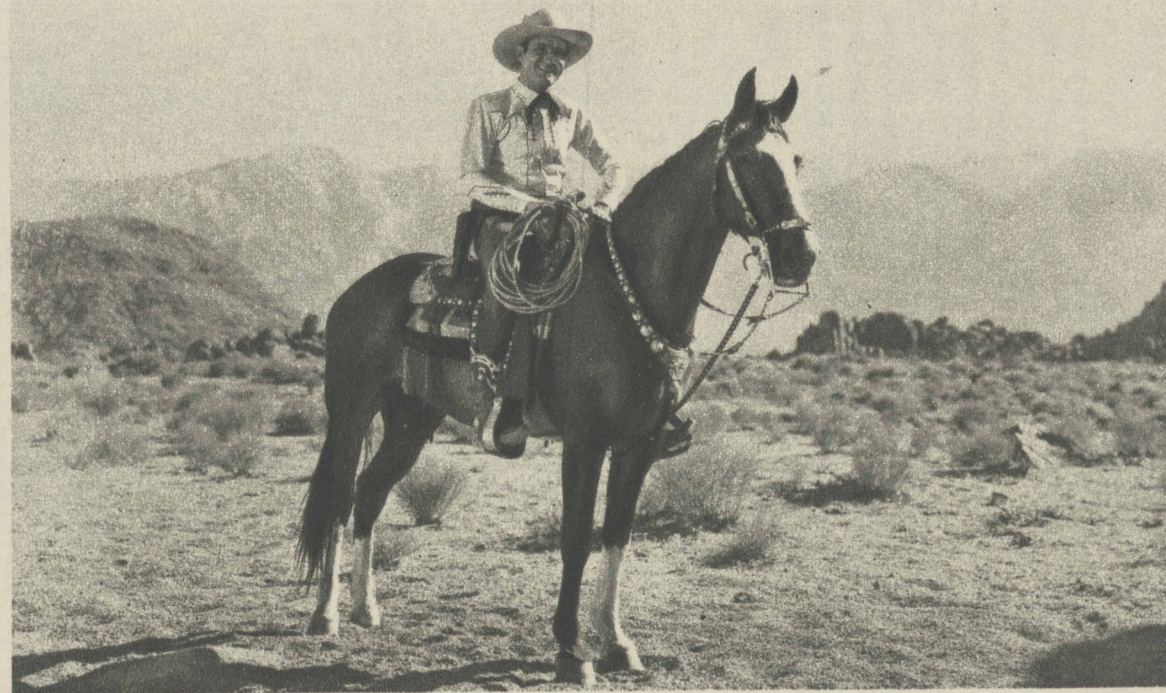
Autry is intensely loyal. His pictures literally bulge with Oklahomans and other old friends who at one time or another helped him along. Johnny Marvin and his brother, Frankie Marvin, work in all of Autry's horse operas. Frankie does much of the arranging on Autry's original compositions. He also leads the cowboy orchestra which features Gene's pictures. One of the latest additions to Republic's talent is Ruth Bacon, a Waurika, Okla., girl and protégée of Autry. Tom Sullavan, actor and trick rider, who appears in Autry's pictures, is a former native of Clinton, Okla.

Autry lives a quiet home life in Hollywood with his wife, another former Oklahoman, who before her marriage to the actor was Ina Mae Spivey of Duncan. He met her at Springfield, Mo. Mrs. Autry is a nonprofessional. The Autrys are building a new home in San Fernando valley, the popular film colony rural retreat, where they will quarter Champ and a few other horses on a small three-acre ranch.

The actor's people are of French and Irish descent. His father, Delbert Autry, is in the cattle business in Clovis, N. M. Gene was born in Tioga, Tex., Sept. 29, 1908. His boyhood alternated between Texas and Oklahoma, where his father owned ranches. He attended grammar school in Achille, Okla., and part of his high school in Ravia, Okla., finishing up his education at his original home town high school.

The Autrys were pioneer stock, appearing early in Tennessee and then, like Daniel Boone, clearing out for more westerly points when the woods began to crowd up. Gene's grandfather was a minister.

Not satisfied to rest at the top of the ladder, Autry is looking ahead to the time when westerns will show in the big cities instead of being confined to smaller towns and side street theaters, as they now are. He looks for this day because he thinks pictures with rich natural settings will bring into the cramped life of metropolitan dwellers a greater appreciation of the open prairie and create in them the urge to get closer to the grandeur of the west.



In Red Rock canyon in the lower ranges of the Sierra Nevadas. Gene Autry aboard his favorite mount, Champ.

Voice of the Movie Fan

Letters published in this department should be written on one side of the paper. If you wish a personal reply please inclose a stamped, self-addressed envelope.

Dear Miss Tinée: Yesterday I saw "15 Maiden Lane," with Lloyd Nolan. I like him in this type of picture very much. Why doesn't he take similar parts more often? I think he would make a good lover. Gangster parts, as in "Internes Can't Take Money" and "Exclusive," don't show him up enough.

I would be very obliged if you would tell me something about Mr. Nolan.

I have read your column for a long time and enjoy the readers' and your views. Hoping to see my letter some Sunday, I am

Admiringly yours, S. R.
Editor's note: Maybe he doesn't want to be a lover. Had you thought of that? Mr. Nolan was born in San Francisco, Cal.



LOYD NOLAN
Fan suggests lover roles for him.

He's 5 feet 10 1/2 inches tall, weighs 176 pounds, and has brown hair and brown eyes. Educated Santa Clara preparatory school, Stanford university. He's married to Mell Efrid, professional. He appeared on the legitimate stage before going into pictures. In 1934 he signed a contract with Paramount studio.

Dear Miss Tinée: Many thanks for your indispensable column. It is my favorite section of The Tribune.

Now let me add my "two cents" to the voice of Jack M. and Bonita Steffen in regard to the latest "chiseler-in" on movie millions, Robert Taylor. What on earth can any one see in him? Why, he hasn't even a handsome face, much less any ability at all at acting. Compare this Robert with another Robert—the real actor, Robert Montgomery, or with Don Ameche (what a man he is!)—and I say that producers are not only blind but dumb as well.

Hoping this will add a little momentum to the rolling ball, I remain
Yours faithfully, ELIZABETH D.

Editor's note: Many, many thanks to you for naming the column "favorite!" "Momentum?" Lady, you said it!

Dear Miss Tinée: I have been saving pictures of movie stars for quite a few years, and the other day when I was going through them I came across Gloria Swanson, William Haines, and Phillips Holmes, and I would like to know what became of them.

The other night I saw "Angel's Holiday," with Sally Blane and Loretta Young. The resemblance between them is so great that I'd like to know what relationship, if any, there is between them, and also their real names and ages. I was told that they are sisters. If this is true, would you please give me their real names and ages? Thank you.
ROSE ANN BERNSTEIN.
Editor's note: What a nice collection



GLORIA SWANSON
Rumor has it she is to make a picture.

you must have by now! Gloria Swanson is in Hollywood, and it is rumored she will play in a motion picture some time in the future. William Haines is also in Hollywood and is in business other than motion pictures. I have no information regarding Phillips Holmes, but I have not heard that he has left Hollywood. Sally Blane and Loretta Young are sisters. Sally's real name is Betty Jane Young, and she was born in Salida, Colo., July 11, 1910. Loretta's real name is Gretchen Young, and she was born in Salt Lake City, Utah, Jan. 6, 1913.

Dear Miss Tinée: How can people be so rude in making remarks about Robert Taylor as published in your column? If we would only show a Christian spirit and do unto others as we would have them do unto us we could not and would not say such things. Now, I am a Taylor fan and greatly admire him as an actor. I enjoy all his pictures, but I also enjoy the pictures of our other stars and admire them. So here's wishing Robert Taylor success from the bottom of my heart!
HELEN JOHNSON.
Editor's note: Fight it out, girls!