

## ROY ROGERS

One of the most influential icons of American popular culture in the mid twentieth century, Roy Rogers was born Leonard Franklin Slye on November 5, 1911, in Cincinnati, Ohio. His family called him Len. The family lived in a tenement near where Riverfront Stadium was constructed later. Rogers joked that he was born on second base. But his father, Andy, desiring a better life for his family moved to Portsmouth. In 1919, he bought land on Duck Run and built the house that today is marked as a historical site. Andy worked at a shoe company in Portsmouth to supplement the farm.

He lived in Portsmouth during the week and brought gifts home on payday. One gift was a horse for Len. He soon learned how to ride and be around a horse.

Because they had no radio, they entertained themselves on Saturday nights by inviting others over for a square dance during which Len would sing, play the mandolin, and call the square dances. He also learned to yodel during this time. He and his mom would use different yodels to communicate with each other across distances on the farm.

Roy Roger's first public appearance in Portsmouth was in 1982. In his remarks he said he had come home often privately to visit friends, but this was the first public appearance since 1959. And he praised one person in particular, his teacher, Guy Bumgarner. He taught Roy in seventh and eighth grades. He had also helped Roy with a 4-H project of growing a pig which won a blue ribbon at the county fair and a trip to the state fair in Columbus – at that time the longest trip he had ever made from home. "I can't say enough about him. He was the turning point in my life," Rogers said.

There are local stories about how poor the family was, often going hungry. After his second year at McDermott high school, the family returned to Cincinnati where his father worked in another shoe factory. Len realized the family needed his financial support and quit school to work in the shoe factory as well.

In 1929, his older sister and her husband moved to Lawndale, California. Len and his father quit their factory jobs, packed up their 1923 Dodge and drove the family to California to visit Mary. They stayed for four months before deciding to move to California for good in the spring of 1930. They rented a house, and Len and his father drove gravel trucks for construction of a highway. When the construction company went bankrupt, Len went to Tulare, California and picked peaches. Remember, this was the great depression.

In 1931, he auditioned for a radio show in Inglewood, California, and joined a singing group. They toured Arizona and New Mexico on a shoestring in the heat of the summer. Even finding food was a struggle. But when they were performing in Roswell, New Mexico, he met his future second wife, Grace Arline Wilkins, when she brought him a lemon pie after he sang the "Swiss

Yodel". When he was twenty-two, he had married Lucille Ascolese, age 17, in 1933. They divorced in 1936. He and Grace maintained a corespondence until she and her mother moved to California for her to continue her studies.

Shortly after his divorce, he married Grace. They adopted one child, then they had a son, but she died shortly after the birth of their next child in 1946. He married Dale Evans in 1947. She had one child from her first marriage, he had three from his marriage to Grace. They had one child, Robin, who died of complications of Down's Syndrome, and four other adopted children. He and Dale were well recognized for their work on behalf of children with disabilities.

He had success in his singing group, Sons of the Pioneers. They made their first commercial recording of "Tumbling Tumbleweeds". Over the next two years, they recorded 32 songs for Decca including the classic "Cool Water." He began a single career in movies in 1935 and soon was given the stage name Roy Rogers. He appeared in 91 films and was named the King of the Cowboys and the most popular western movie star for over 10 years. He had a popular radio show first and then a TV show from 1951-57. He even had a comic strip and a Dell Comics book series. He owned the rights to his likeness, voice and name for merchandising. Roy was second only to Disney in the number of items featuring his name.

In 1968, he licensed his name to Marriott for a series of Roy Rogers Restaurants.

His boyhood home on Duck Run still stands a testament to the boy who spent his formative years here. Roy was a frequent visitor in this area over the years. There is a Roy Rogers festival in Portsmouth yearly. A museum was in Portsmouth until the building shifted. The collection is now housed at "Dogwood Pass" in Beaver, Ohio. There was also a museum in Branson, Missouri.

#### A NOTE ABOUT HIS HORSE, TRIGGER

When auditioning for a horse for him to use in his movies, he rode Trigger for the first time. He rode 100 yards and never looked at another horse. Trigger cost \$2500 in 1938. Roy said that Trigger was the best thing that ever happened to him. Trigger could do a lengthy repertoire of tricks, and when he heard applause, he would bow. The hardest thing he learned was to be housebroken. Trigger died in 1965 at age 30, Roy had his hide stretched over a foam likeness and the form was put on display at the first museum in Victorville, California, and then later the collection was moved to Branson. In 2009 the remaining family decided to close that museum and Trigger's remains were sold to Bob Tinsley who had built the Rogers' home in Apple Valley. He plans to open a historic village museum.

Quotes from Roy Rogers:

"Today, they are making pictures I wouldn't want Trigger to see."

"Until we meet again, may the good Lord take a liking to you".

