



The Good Guy in the White Hat

or  
The Cowboy with the Midas Touch  
A Horatio Alger Story for Our Time

Carter

# **From railroad hand to business tycoon...**

As the *San Francisco Chronicle* notes in the accompanying article, Gene Autry's career has followed the classic Horatio Alger theme. It is a theme with some fascinating variations. Had Alger been an advertising copywriter, he might have stated them this way:

**How to turn a 20 dollar guitar into a career as Hollywood's top Western star.**

**How to compose your own songs and sell over 39 million records.**

**How to use a correspondence course in business administration as the foundation for a financial empire.**

**Work and win. Strive and succeed. The American Dream is still a reality. We believe you will find that the reality, as reflected in this article from the *Chronicle*, provides some unusually interesting reading.**

GOOD GUYS IN WHITE HATS FINISH FIRST

## Gene Autry: Cowboy Horatio Alger With a Midas Touch in Business



SOUVENIRS—Gene Autry and wife, Ina, look over some mementos.

BY DAVE DISTEL

In everyone's life, there's a summer of '42. In the life of Gene Autry, a significant crossroads was reached in the summer of 1942. He enlisted in the Army Air Corps.

"In 1941," he recalled with his familiar southwestern drawl, "I made \$600,000 with pictures, radio, records and personal appearances. Suddenly, I found myself in uniform at \$115 to \$125 a month as a tech sergeant."

"It started me thinking," he said. "If it hadn't been for royalties from things such as sweatshirts, pistols, boots and hats and records, I would have been in a mess.

"I knew I could make good money as long

as I could work. But suppose I was incapacitated? Where would I get my income? I decided I better start investing in some businesses."

Now it is 29 years later and the singing cowboy sings only at birthday parties and rides mainly in chauffeured limousines. His income? Quite sufficient, thank you.

Everything in the life of Gene Autry has progressed in an orderly fashion. As he climbed the ladder from railroad baggage hustler to multimillionaire, each rung seemed to be just where it should have been when his boot arrived.

In retrospect, it appears that Autry never

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*Autry's holdings now include a majority interest in Golden West Broadcasters (four radio stations and a television station), the California Angels, CBS radio and television outlets in Phoenix, the Gene Autry Hotel in Palm Springs and ranches in Arizona, Colorado and Southern California, and a minority interest in the Los Angeles Rams.*

*Autry bought his first guitar for \$1 down (most of it in pennies) and 50¢ a month. While working as a telegrapher in a Chelsea, Oklahoma railroad station, Autry just happened to be playing and singing when Will Rogers heard him and offered encouragement.*

*One year later, Autry wrote and recorded "That Silver Haired Daddy of Mine," and he was on his way. He has now sold close to 40 million records.*

*Gene Autry made his first ride into the sunset in 1934, driving to Hollywood to accept a part in a Ken Maynard Western. On some theatre marquees, the billing was eventually reversed.*

really plunged into any high-risk type of venture. It appears that way because just about everything he touches turns to gold—including, appropriately, his recordings.

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Eight years after Autry retired as an active performer, a new generation watches his old television films. They watch him, of course, on a television station he owns.

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In the mid-1960's, the Autry empire also included an impressive string of hotels—including the Mark Hopkins in San Francisco, the Hotel Continental in Hollywood, the Ocotillo Lodge in Palm Springs and the Sahara Inn in Chicago.

He has dissolved the Gene Autry Hotel Co. and disposed of all hotels with the exception of the Autry Hotel, which he has always owned independent of the others in the chain.

Many years before Gene Autry rose to prominence, his biography was already written. Horatio Alger, Jr. wrote the rags to riches script and Autry lived by it.

"He's a wonderful example of what this country's all about," said the former Ina Mae Spivey, Autry's wife since 1932. "He's an example of what you can do if you go forth with the talent you have and make the most of it."



1940—The original Champion.

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One year later, Autry wrote and recorded "That Silver Haired Daddy of Mine," and he was on his way. He now has sold close to 40 million records.

Ironically, he almost did not record "Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer," his all-time best seller which passed the five million mark.

"I wasn't crazy about it," he said. "It didn't sound good to me. My wife told me that she thought the kids would really like it."

Rudolph sold 2½ million the first year and another 2½ million the next year. The cowboy and the reindeer, an unlikely match indeed, have now combined for a total of 10 million records.

His gold records? Nine of them: "Rudolph," "Peter Cottontail," "Here Comes Santa Claus," "Tumbling Tumbleweeds," "Silver Haired Daddy of Mine," "Back in the Saddle Again," "You Are My Sunshine," "South of the Border" and "Mexicali Rose."

Gene Autry made his first ride into the sunset in 1934, driving to Hollywood to accept a part in a Ken Maynard Western. On some theater marquees, the billing was eventually reversed.

As he launched his movie career, Autry established what he called the "Cowboy's Code." Horatio Alger, Jr. would have been proud of the restrictions Autry placed upon himself.

Wearing the inevitable white hat, Autry would never shoot first, hit first, hit a smaller man, take a drink, smoke or kiss the leading lady.



1935—Autry in movie role.



1952—Gene Autry sits astride his third Champion in characteristic pose seen in his feature films.

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He gained his box office prominence despite the fact that his early pictures did not meet with a great deal of success in metropolitan areas. "He had a vast audience in small towns," Mrs. Autry reminisced. "His pictures were the backbone of so many small theaters."

Rural America, the heart of Autry's fandom, could see its hero in person at the county fair as well as on celluloid.

In his career, Autry toured 5,000 communities. Cowboy stars, according to the thought which prevailed in the 1930's, should appear only in towns where they had to clean the streets with shovels. However, Autry was not afraid to take his act to the big towns.

One tour, which he made in 1939, dramatically illustrated the vastness of his drawing power. He took his show to Dublin, Ireland, and a throng of 200,000 reportedly lined the streets to watch a parade in which he appeared. His horse, Champion (there were three Champions over the years), actually walked among the tables at a reception at London's Savoy Hotel.

"P. K. Wrigley saw him in Dublin," recalled George Goodale, a longtime Autry aide who now works in the Angels' publicity department. "At the time, he was looking for a radio show for Doublemint Gum to sponsor.

"He went back to his advertising department in Chicago and told them he had just seen a singing cowboy draw 200,000 people in Ireland. What followed was the Melody Ranch Show on CBS Radio."

Born Orvon Gene Autry on Sept. 29, 1907, he was Gene Autry through his years in front of cameras and he is now Gene Autry behind his desk.

Education? "Gene," an associate said, "has been educated by high school, newspapers and experience."

Most of Autry's friends are unaware that he took a correspondence course in business administration while working as a railroad telegrapher.

"I had to learn to figure freight rates and ticket rates," he said. "I had to be able to keep the books balanced."

"He has always been serious and earnest about working at his job," Mrs. Autry said. "He has always considered that whatever he was doing, he was working at his business.

"He has never considered himself a star."

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Golden West Broadcasters 

KMPC Los Angeles/KTLA-TV Los Angeles/KSFO San Francisco-Oakland/KEX Portland/KVI Seattle-Tacoma-Everett