

Jim Woods

Riding The Range Once More

Once upon a time, before Power Rangers and rock stars, there were cowboy heroes. Mostly, those western heroes were celluloid shadows on the silver screen, but I had read that from time-to time they made personal appearance tours where the kids could see and cheer them, perhaps even experience a brief impersonal handshake. Unfortunately for me, my small hometown was not on the tour route. But later I came to know Roy Rogers and his beautiful real-life wife, Dale Evans. And I knew Gene Autry.

In the days of WWII and afterward, money was not very plentiful; practically nonexistent, and when we had any it went for food that was equally in scant supply, in our house and in our neighborhood. But once in a great while, there was twelve cents for the movie show. I recall where it came from, for the most part. Certainly not from my parents who had more kids than they had money.

I had a friend who was an only child, and he received an allowance— fifty cents a week! It would be years for me before going to work and able to hold a fifty-cent piece of my own . . . that I didn't have to contribute to the family income. I always thought at the time that my friend was rich, but many years afterward I learned that his family was just as poor as mine, and was the entire neighborhood, as was perhaps the entire state. His family simply had fewer mouths to feed, fewer shoes to buy. But not only was my friend rich; he was generous.

Frequently, upon receipt of his monstrous allowance, he would foot the tab for three of us, himself, me and my brother, to get into the Saturday movie. Even after shelling out the magnificent sum of thirty-six cents for tickets, "we" still had his fourteen cents for edible goodies— popcorn, candy chews, and things. He helped me to know Roy, Dale and Gene then. In fact, recently he caused me to remember them anew when he e-mailed to tell me of watching an old Gene Autry movie on television, but his reason for wonderment this time was that he recognized the setting for the film. He had visited me in Arizona a couple

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of times in our later life, and I had showed off our western scenery and our cowboy movie sets.

When I was age 11 or so, I had dreams of journeying to California and meeting my hero, Roy Rogers; somehow I had determined that was where he lived. I suppose that even at that age, I knew that movies were made in Hollywood. By the time my age had doubled from that era of boyhood dreams and I had grown physically, mentally and emotionally—matured, you could say—I had given up childish things. I was, though, living in California following my stint in the Navy, when I did have occasion to meet Roy Rogers for the first time, and Dale Evans too.

My post-Navy job was with the telephone company, in the west San Fernando Valley; Roy's ranch was in Chatsworth, and was served by the phone district where I worked. A big movie shoot was scheduled at the Rogers ranch, requiring many additional temporary phone lines to be installed. I was part of the team. Not only did my movie heroes predate Power Rangers, but today's ubiquitous cell phones had not appeared on the communications scene.

The ranch and movie set were crowded with actors and technicians and caterers. I recognized that I was not as blasé about Roy Rogers that I thought myself to be. I found myself anxious to catch a glimpse of him. And, for fifteen seconds of heady fame—I was mistaken for him!

Inside the ranch house, I was trying to get to a telephone connection block behind a huge and heavy oaken desk that couldn't be budged. So I went prone under the desk, completely concealed from the waist up. Another movie personage, whom I never identified but must have been important or a special friend because he was staying in Roy and Dale's home instead of in the trailers, stumbled over my outstretched legs. He apologized profusely to "Roy," by name. Of course I enjoyed the mistaken identity, but Dale came in to see what the ruckus was all about, and explained to that actor, or whoever he was, that Roy was elsewhere, and certainly not under that desk. By that time, I had returned to the oaken cave, trying to get back to the job at hand.

Dale turned her attention to me and asked, "What on Earth are you doing down there, anyway?"

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Fumbling with multiple color-coded wires in the poorly lighted and awkward confines, and getting more impatient by the moment– all the work I had to get done and all these actor-people traipsing through the house and stumbling over my legs and tools as though they owned the place– I let my frustration go unchecked and unfortunately barked, “I’m just trying to get these damned wires hooked up.” I *may* have invoked God, too.

That was no way to talk to the good Dale Evans– not under any circumstances and certainly not in her own house.

In fact, that was her scolding speech to me: “Young man, you do not talk to me in that tone and you do not curse at me– ever, and certainly not in my own home!” Then she continued, as sweetly and as movie-queenly as ever, “Come on out from under there and let’s talk about this.”

I scooted out backwards, apologizing all the way, not knowing what scared me the most– having talked to *the* Dale Evans in that impudent tone and with *that* word which I wished I could call back, or the prospect of getting fired from my job as soon as she reported me to my supervisor. I jumped to my feet, faced her, and apologized once more. She extended her hand, and I gratefully grasped it, after I had wiped my own work-grimed fingers on my shirtfront. Surely, a lady would not offer her hand, I was certain, to a kid she was about to have fired– and who deserved it.

“I think you should have some lemonade and cool off,” was her next queenly pronouncement. “Sit here,” she ordered, and then poured me a glass of her very own lemonade from her very own refrigerator, by her very own hand. “Now, let’s talk,” she commanded.

As best I can recall, my response was a respectful, “Yes, Ma’am.”

We sat, and she talked with me as though I mattered, all the while she was making potato salad for her family and personal guests even though the trestle tables outside were loaded with food.

I was on my third glass of social lemonade when my telephone-team co-worker tracked me down to find out why the job was not progressing.

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Reluctantly, I got up to depart, and blurted, "Thanks for lemonade, Dale." *Ohhh!* I actually said it. I called Miss Dale Evans "Dale" just as though we were old friends. Such audacity! Such impertinence! Such a grand lady, that Dale Evans. Happy Trails to her.

Just then, in walked the King of the Cowboys himself. Dale introduced me to him, and we shook hands, but just as quickly he turned away to attend to his own business. He and Dale spoke quietly as I was leaving, and I was sure that she was telling him that I blasphemed in her presence. I figured that I had blown my chance of ever talking to Roy Rogers again. And I was wrong again.

Some years later when I was a staff editor with a firearms magazine based in Beverly Hills, I attended a skeet-shooting event that included among the participants the publishing company bigwigs and also a few celebrities, Roy Rogers among them. I shot alongside, and conversed as equals with, Roy Rogers but never mentioned to him that we had met before, at a time in my younger days when my coarse language had upset his wife. There are some things best not owned-up to, especially to a man holding a shotgun.

As an aside, at that same time of that sporting affair, I lived in the rural Chatsworth area too, very close to Roy Rogers' ranch before he moved it to Apple Valley, California. That's not to say we were neighbors in any sense, but I could see his lower level grounds from my ridge-top home, and as an editor for the magazine, my staff used his extensive grounds for several photo shoots, but I never had personal contact with him again.

Roy moved away from Chatsworth and I did as well; I to Arizona, and to another magazine that allowed me to work at home, submitting my monthly column and feature article from my home office. That job allowed me to meet my other boyhood hero, Gene Autry. The new magazine was one for firearms aficionados as the one before, and the gun connection that had permitted me to socialize eventually with Roy Rogers also created my connection to Gene Autry.

A gun engraver was to present a set of highly ornate, engraved and gold-inlaid Colt revolvers to Gene. The event was worthy of a story and pictorial spread in my magazine, and the assignment came to me. Six of

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us– the engraver and his wife, my wife, Jackie, and I, and another patron of the engraver and his wife, he also our pilot of his private plane– flew from a small airstrip north of Phoenix, Arizona, to the airstrip that served Gene Autry’s Palm Springs, California, hotel. Gene’s wife, also a Jackie, and Gene himself of course, completed our gala gathering. Gene’s Jackie sat at his right, and I, as the official journalist covering the affair, sat next to him too so that I could interview him as the luncheon progressed.

After a very social get-together, during which Gene discussed everything from movies, songs, guitars, the Angels baseball team, and airplanes– he was a serious pilot– time came for the presentation and the photo session. And things fell apart.

Horror of horrors, Gene Autry was sans-sombrero! He simply had forgotten his cowboy hat. Jackie, his Jackie, absolutely refused to permit the cowboy icon to be photographed without the requisite wide-brimmed headgear.

The other three gentlemen at the table– I include myself in that appellation– all were in western attire, including hats. It’s a cowboy thing. We all offered up our hats to Gene, and mine won out for fit and suitably matching Gene’s own western-detailed suit.

Out of all the photos snapped that day, I had one of myself and my Jackie, with Gene and the guns, enlarged and framed for my library trophy wall.

His is the only photo of someone other than me on that wall– there’s one of me with a special deer in Canada; another of me with an irate Cape buffalo in Zimbabwe; and yet another of me on a stolen bicycle in Zanzibar. However, of all the trophy photos decorating my library wall and serving to recall notable progressions and events in my no-longer-austere life, the one I value most is the one showing me and my cowboy hero, Gene Autry, he wearing my hat, and me the bare-headed dude.

Strangely, in one of the magazine articles that I had written for the Beverly Hills firearms publisher, long before my meeting with Gene Autry and my association with the second gun magazine that made it happen for me, he was a spillover influence from my early years. In that article, I had paraphrased a line about a cowboy gun from his theme

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song, *"Back in the Saddle Again."*

In earlier and more innocent times of my hero worship of the singing cowboys, I may have daydreamed about meeting Gene Autry, Roy Rogers and Dale Evans, knowing in actuality that it would not happen. But it did, in ways and under conditions that I could have never imagined, when I was eleven.