Finding Aid to the Gene Autry Personal Papers and Business Archives T.MSA.28

Finding aid prepared by Holly Rose Larson
Autry National Center, Autry Library
4700 Western Heritage Way
Los Angeles, CA, 90027
(323) 667-2000 ext. 349
room@theautry.org
2012 January 27
Title: Gene Autry Personal Papers and Business Archives
Identifier/Call Number: T.MSA.28
Contributing Institution: Autry National Center, Autry Library
Language of Material: English
Physical Description: 446.0 Linear feet(approximately 300 boxes)
Date (inclusive): 1900-2002
Abstract: Orvon Gene Autry (born September 29, 1907 - died October 2, 1998) was a legendary recording and movie star whose career spanned over 60 years in the entertainment industry. Sometimes called “The Singing Cowboy,” Autry was also a broadcast executive for KTLA and owned the Major League baseball team, the Los Angeles Angels, among other business pursuits. Autry also co-founded the Gene Autry Western Heritage Museum, now known as The Autry National Center of the American West, with wife Jackie Autry and Monte and Joanne Hale in 1988. The Gene Autry Personal Papers and Business Archives span from 1900 to 2002 and document Autry’s personal and family life, including wives Ina Mae Spivey and Jackie Ellam; Autry’s military career during World War II; entertainment career; other business holdings; and honors received. Materials include administrative records; advertising material; awards; ephemera; correspondence; photographic material; posters; scrapbooks; and sheet music.
creator: Anaheim Angels (Baseball team).
creator: Autry Museum of Western Heritage.
creator: Autry National Center.
creator: Autry, Gene, 1907-1998
creator: California Angels (Baseball team).
creator: Gene Autry Western Heritage Museum.
creator: Golden West Broadcasters
creator: Los Angeles Angels (Baseball team).
creator: Museum of the American West.
Related Archival Materials
Nudie’s Rodeo Tailors Archive, 95.6; IT94-293. Autry Library, Autry National Center, Los Angeles, CA
Republic Pictures Corporation Records (Collection 979). Department of Special Collections, Charles E. Young Research Library, University of California, Los Angeles.
Arrangement
The collection is arranged in the following order.
   Series 1: Business and Entertainment Files, 1911-1999
   Series 2: Correspondence, 1930s-1990s
   Series 3: Personal papers, 1936-1997
   Series 4: Photographs, 1900-1995
   Series 5: Recognition and awards, 1936-1998
Note
Two fires which occurred before donation to the Autry National Center may have destroyed some of Gene Autry’s personal or business records. The first was at the house of Gene and Ina Autry in North Hollywood, California in 1941. The second was at the Melody Ranch in Newhall, California in 1962, while under the ownership of Gene Autry. It is currently undetermined what files were destroyed in either of these fires, but it is known that a great deal were lost during the Melody Ranch fire.
Processing History
Initial inventory, partial physical processing, and cataloging by Autry National Center staff. Additional processing and finding aid completed by Holly Rose Larson, NHPRC Project Archivist, January 2012, made possible through grant funding from the National Historical Publications and Records Commission.
Scope and contents

The Gene Autry Personal Papers and Business Archives document Gene Autry’s personal and family life, entertainment career, and business holdings from 1900 to 2002. These include his ventures in show business and other business ventures, political involvement, ownership and operation of the baseball team, the Los Angeles Angels (currently known as Los Angeles Angels of Anaheim), correspondence files, military papers, photographs, and recognition and awards he received.

The records of Autry’s business ventures in entertainment include rodeos, radio, television, film, personal appearances, and name and likeness licensing and marketing. Dates of materials span from 1911 to 1975. These records include administrative records, advertising, blueprints, contracts, financial records, legal documents, publicity materials, posters, memorabilia, publications, scrapbooks, scripts, and sheet music. In business ventures other than entertainment, the archives include records from 1938 to 1999 documenting Autry’s forays into oil drilling, real estate, hotel ownership, political support through public appearances and financial contributions, the ownership of the Los Angeles Angels baseball team, ownership of television and radio stations, and more.

Also included are personal and business correspondence; fan mail; and correspondence with famous political leaders and entertainers from the 1930s through the 1990s. The substantial annual task of the Gene Autry office ordering and sending Christmas gifts is documented in the records of Christmas correspondence. Correspondents include Gene Autry, Ina Mae Autry, Jackie Autry, and Gene Autry office staff. Personal papers of Gene Autry include papers of his family members and records of Autry’s military career from 1942-1946.

These archives also contain over 200 awards, certificates, trophies, and plaques from 1936 to 1998. These awards and certificates recognize Gene Autry, Champion, and Autry’s businesses for achievements and support in many areas, including entertainment, military service, rodeos, club memberships, honorary appointments, baseball, and freemasonry.

Acquisition


Access

Collection is open for research. Appointments to view materials are required. To make an appointment please visit http://theautry.org/research/research-rules-and-application or contact library staff at rroom@theautry.org.

Use

This collection is on temporary loan to the Autry National Center. All rights and restrictions are held by the estate of Gene Autry. Permission to publish or quote from manuscripts must be submitted in writing to Gene Autry Entertainment, 4383 Colfax Avenue, Studio City, CA 91604.

Preferred citation

Gene Autry Personal Papers and Business Archives, 1900-2002, on loan from Mr. and Mrs. Gene Autry, Autry National Center, Los Angeles; MSA.28; [folder number] [folder title][date].

Biographical note

Orvon Gene Autry was born in Tioga, Texas on September 29, 1907. He worked at a train station, but was discovered for his musical ability by humorist Will Rogers. In 1929, Autry was billed as “Oklahoma’s Yodeling Cowboy” at KVOO in Tulsa, Oklahoma. He gained a popular following, a recording contract with Columbia Records in 1929, and soon after, performed on the National Barn Dance for radio station WLS in Chicago. Autry first appeared on screen in 1934 and popularized the musical Western up to 1953, starring in 93 feature films. He also pursued and excelled at other business ventures such as real estate, oil drilling, and ownership of the American League baseball team in California then called the Los Angeles Angels (currently known as the Los Angeles Angels of Anaheim).

Autry met his first wife, Ina Mae Spivey, through her uncle Jimmy Long. Autry and Jimmy Long knew each other through the railroad, but they also collaborated on music, including “That Silver-Haired Daddy of Mine.” Autry and Ina married on April 1, 1932. Ina was also interested in music and was instrumental in convincing Autry to record “Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer,” a song sent to Autry by another songwriter. Ina died on May 19, 1980.

Autry met his second wife, Jacqueline Ellam, through his realty business in Palm Springs during the 1960s. She retired as Vice President of Security Pacific National Bank and married Gene Autry on July 17, 1981. Jackie Autry currently serves as Lifetime Director and Chairman Emeritus of the Autry National Center and Honorary American League President of Major League Baseball. Jackie Autry is the Director and President of The Autry Foundation and served as director and President of Gene Autry’s organizations Golden West Baseball Company and Golden West Broadcasters.

Gene Autry is the only entertainer to have all five stars on the Hollywood Walk of Fame, one each for Radio, Recording, Motion Pictures, Television, and Live Theatre/performance. He was a 33rd Degree Mason and Honorary Inspector General.
and was given the prestigious award of the Grand Cross of the Court of Honor. Among the hundreds of honors and awards Autry has received were induction into the Country Music Hall of Fame, the American Academy of Achievement Award, the Los Angeles Area Governor's Emmy from The Academy of Television Arts & Sciences, and the Board of Directors Lifetime Achievement Award from the International Achievement in Arts Foundation. Autry was also inducted into the Nashville Songwriters Hall of Fame, The National Cowboy Hall of Fame, the National Association of Broadcasters Hall of Fame, and he received The Songwriters Guild Life Achievement Award. He was also honored by his songwriting peers with a lifetime achievement award from ASCAP. Gene Autry died at his home in Studio City, California on October 2, 1998. He was 91 years old.

**Entertainment and Business Career**

Autry made 640 musical recordings, including more than 300 songs written or co-written by him. His records sold more than 100 million copies and he has more than a dozen gold and platinum records, including the first record ever certified gold. His Christmas and children's records "Here Comes Santa Claus (Right Down Santa Claus Lane)" and "Peter Cottontail" are among his platinum recordings. Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer, the second all-time best selling Christmas single, boasts in excess of 30 million in sales.

Autry began touring in the mid 1930s. These shows were small, one-night stands that Autry did between his films. The Gene Autry Rodeo started touring in 1939 playing county and state fairs, then larger venues. Larger personal appearance tours began after World War II and continued through 1958. A smaller version toured in 1959 and 1960. Autry then appeared solo in 1961, his final year making personal appearances.

From 1940 to 1956 the public listened to Autry on his "Melody Ranch" radio show, heard weekly over the CBS Radio Network, and featuring his trademark theme song "Back in the Saddle Again." In addition, Autry's popularity was apparent during his personal appearance tours. The first performer to sell out Madison Square Garden, his concert and rodeo appearances throughout the United States and Europe are legendary and served as a model for other performers. Autry did two shows a day, seven days a week, for 65 to 85 days at a stretch.

Entertainer Gene Autry joined the Army Air Corps in 1942 and became Sgt. Gene Autry. He had already obtained a pilot's license in the private sector, and in the military he became a Flight Officer. During World War II, he ferried fuel, ammunition, and arms in the China-India-Burma area, flying over the area known as "The Hump" in the Himalayas. He continued his weekly radio show during the war, and the name of the show was changed for that time period from "Melody Ranch" to "Sergeant Gene Autry." When the war ended, Autry was reassigned to Special Services, where he toured with a USO troupe in the South Pacific before resuming his movie career in 1946.

In 1950, Autry became the first major movie star to use the television medium. For the next five years, through his production company Flying A Pictures, he produced and starred in 91 half-hour episodes of "The Gene Autry Show" for CBS Television. This success led him to produce such television series as "Annie Oakley," "The Range Rider," "Buffalo Bill Jr.", "The Adventures Of Champion," and the first 39 episodes of "Death Valley Days."

By 1952, Autry began expanding into other business ventures besides the creation of his own artistic material. Some were allied with entertainment, such as the ownership and directorship of radio stations, television stations, rodeos, production companies, and music publishing companies. But he also pursued opportunities in livestock, oil well drilling and operation, real estate management, licensing of toys and other merchandise, hotel and motel operation, and interior design. He was a keen businessman in his field and met matched success in most of his non-entertainment business ventures. One of his companies, Golden West Broadcasters, managed such organizations as Sigalert, KOOL Radio-Television, Inc. in Phoenix, and KTLA in Los Angeles.

In 1960, Autry's great love for baseball prompted him to acquire the Los Angeles Angels under his corporation Golden West Baseball Company. Autry held the title of Vice President of the Angels until his death in 1998. The Angel's official name and location changed twice during Autry's tenure as owner and VP. The Los Angeles Angels played their first season under Autry's ownership in 1961 at Wrigley Stadium in Los Angeles, then in 1962, moved to Chavez Ravine (now known as Dodger Stadium). In 1965, the team changed its name to the California Angels, and in 1966, moved into their new stadium in the city of Anaheim. Although Anaheim was the team’s home base as of 1966, their name didn’t change to the Anaheim Angels until 1996. The team is currently known as the Los Angeles Angels of Anaheim.

Autry wanted to give something back to the community where he had flourished as an artist and businessman. He developed a dream to build a museum showcasing the heritage of the West and its influence on America and the world. He started preparing for this endeavor out of his KTLA office and brought the plan to fruition with the opening in November 1988 of the Gene Autry Western Heritage Museum. Although the museum underwent name changes as it developed, the focus of western heritage has stayed the same. In 1995, the Board of the Autry changed the name to Autry Museum of Western Heritage. In 2003, the Autry Museum of Western Heritage and its Autry Library merged with the Southwest Museum of the American Indian, its Braun Research Library, and the Women of the West Museum. All participants of the...
merger now operate under the name Autry National Center.


**Gene Autry’s horse Champion**

Champion accompanied Autry through his career in radio, film, and television. There were three “official” Champions and several specialized Champions, such as Little Champ, Lindy Champion, Touring Champion, and Champion Three. The Original Champion was sorrel-colored, had a blaze down his face and white stockings on all his legs except the right front. His first onscreen credit was for the 1935 feature film Melody Trail. He died while Autry was doing military service.

Autry’s second screen horse was Champion Jr., a lighter sorrel with four stockings and a narrow blaze, who appeared in films until 1950. While onscreen with Republic, Champion Jr. was billed as “Wonder Horse of the West,” and at Columbia, he was known as “World’s Wonder Horse.” The third screen horse, Television Champion, costarred in Autry’s last films and also appeared on television in The Gene Autry Show and The Adventures of Champion during the 1950s. Also a light sorrel with four white stockings, he resembled Champion Jr. but had a thick blaze. In the late 1940s, Little Champ joined Autry’s stable. A well-trained trick pony, this blaze-faced sorrel with four stockings appeared in three of Autry’s films and made personal appearances. Lindy Champion made aviation history as the first horse to fly from California to New York. Autry used Lindy, a sorrel with four white stockings and an oval-topped blaze for personal appearances. Touring Champion and Champion Three were also personal appearance horses. A darker sorrel with four white stockings and a medium-wide blaze, Touring Champion appeared at rodeos and stage shows in the late 1940s and 1950s, and has his hoof prints next to Autry’s handprints at Grauman’s Chinese Theater in Hollywood. Champion Three appeared with Autry on the road from the late 1950s until 1960, when the sorrel with four white stockings and a crooked blaze retired happily to Autry’s Melody Ranch in Newhall, California, where he died in 1990. Champion received thousands of fan letters each month, proving that the “World’s Wonder Horse” was an important element in the Singing Cowboy’s success. Champion received equal billing with Autry above the leading ladies on movie posters and lobby cards promoting Autry films.

**Business and Entertainment Files, 1911-1999**

*Scope and contents*

This series consists of the records of Gene Autry’s business transactions, including his entertainment ventures and public persona, rodeos, and his non-entertainment business ventures, including his involvement with the Los Angeles Angels baseball team.

**Business Holdings, 1938-1999**

*Scope and contents*

This subseries contains documentation of Gene Autry’s business ventures that do no pertain to his entertainment career or public persona, such as the acquisition of the American League baseball team Los Angeles Angels; Golden West Broadcasters, which owned and operated television stations, radio stations, and newspapers in California and Arizona; realty; harness racing; hotel ownership; oil drilling; political affiliations and contributions; and material production of toys and other memorabilia.
Entertainment, 1911-1975
Scope and contents
This series pertains to Autry’s involvement with show business in the forms of acting in movies and television, songwriting, singing, radio production, rodeo, television production, motion picture production, and trademarking of his public persona for use in advertising and endorsement of products. Records of the companies Gene Autry owned and operated in the field of entertainment include Flying A Pictures, Placeritas Ranch, later known as Melody Ranch, and Golden West Broadcasters, which owned and operated several radio and television stations, including Los Angeles television station KTLA.
These files include administrative records, legal documents, blueprints, contracts, financial records, advertising material, press kits, brochures, arcade cards, posters, business cards, invitations, maps, membership cards, memorabilia, records of fan clubs, scrapbooks compiled by fans or by Gene Autry’s office, and publications. Publications include newspapers, magazines, and booklets, scrapbooks, scripts, and sheet music. While fan club newsletters and scrapbooks are included in this series, fan mail is in the Correspondence series.

Correspondence, 1930s-1990s
Scope and contents
This series includes business, fan, and personal mail sent to and/or from Gene Autry, Ina Mae Autry, Jackie Autry, and Gene Autry office staff. The Correspondence series also includes files regarding the sending and receipt of Christmas cards and presents, which was an intensive production in Gene Autry’s office. These files record names, addresses, cards, gifts, gift ordering invoices, and responses. Also included in the Correspondence series are V.I.P. correspondence files, featuring correspondence from prominent names in both American and international politics, royalty, military, and entertainment.

Personal papers, 1936-1997
Scope and contents
This series includes family documents, yearbooks, and papers regarding Autry’s military service. Other items include postcards, business cards, driver’s license, license to carry firearms, and blueprints.

Photographs, 1900-1995
Scope and contents
This series documents Autry’s military career, public persona, extensive entertainment career, and historical family photos of both his and Ina Mae Spivey’s families. Items include loose photographs, photo albums, and photographic negatives.

Recognition and awards, 1936-1998
Scope and contents
Gene Autry received accolades and symbols of recognition throughout his lifetime. This series contains over 200 awards, certificates, honorary membership cards, trophies, and plaques. These awards and certificates recognize Autry, Champion, and Autry’s businesses for achievements and support in acting, aviation, singing, military service, rodeos, clubs, honorary appointments, baseball, freemasonry, victory in an amateur boxing match, proclamations for Gene Autry days in various cities, inductions into halls of fame, and designations of places to be named in Autry’s honor.