

ROY ROGERS

Leonard Franklin Slye was born on November 5th, 1911 to Andy and Mattie Slye in a tenement in Cincinnati, Ohio, which is now the site of Riverfront Stadium. Leonard quit school when he was 17, joining his father in working at a shoe factory in McDermott, Ohio. In 1930, the family attempted to leave the drudgery of factory work by packing a 1923 Dodge and moving to California. The Slys ended up being itinerant farmers, much like those detailed in Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*. It was during this period that Leonard decided to pursue a career in music, which his family's blessing, working with his cousin Stanley in Los Angeles as the Sly Brothers.

After four years of varying success, Roy Rogers formed the Sons of the Pioneers with Bob Nolan and Tim Spencer in 1934, and would continue to appear with the group at various performances until his death. They hit the big time with songs like "Cool Water" and "Tumbling Tumbleweeds." Rogers worked steadily in western movies from 1935 on, including a major singing cowboy role in a Gene Autry movie, still billed as Leonard Slye. In 1938, after a contract dispute, he took the name "Roy Rogers" on the advice of a Republic Pictures staff writer, and got his first lead in *Under Western Stars*. While competing with Autry for the crown of America's favorite singing cowboy, Rogers also appeared in 1940's *Dark Command*, in a supporting role for screen legend John Wayne.

As a box office attraction, Rogers was listed for 15 consecutive years from 1939 to 1954 in the Motion Picture Herald Top Ten Money-Making Western Stars poll. He was noted in the Box Office poll from 1938-1955, holding the top spot from 1943 to 1952, eclipsed only in the final three years by Randolph Scott. Rogers was also on the Top Ten Money Makers Poll of All Films for 1945 and 1946. He starred in over 100 movies, most of them being a- and b-westerns.

Rogers also negotiated a clause into his contract in 1940 that gave him the right to merchandise his likeness, voice and name, building his own empire of action figures, novels, Dell comic books, and a merchandise catalog second only to Walt Disney. This merchandising continued throughout his career, culminating in 1968 when Marriott licensed the Roy Rogers name for their Hot Shoppe restaurants. Rogers also had a string of hit recordings of songs featured in his movies and TV shows.

Rogers met his first wife, Lucille Ascolese in 1932, proposing to her via a radio broadcast the next year. They divorced in 1935, after Lucille tired of being a musician's wife. He met the woman who would be his second wife in 1933, while on tour with the O-Bar-O Cowboys. Rogers and Grace Arline Wilkins were married in Roswell, New Mexico in 1936. They adopted Cheryl Darlene in 1941, and Arline bore him a daughter, Linda Lou, in 1941 and a son in 1946, but Arline died of complications from Roy Jr.'s birth a few days later. Rogers had met Dale Evans in 1944, and they were married on New Year's Eve in 1947, a few months after filming *Home in Oklahoma*, and remained married until Rogers death. Evans and Rogers had a daughter in 1950, Robin Elizabeth, who had Down Syndrome and died of complications from the mumps two years later.

Rogers and Evans appeared together in many films and starred in *The Roy Rogers Show* radio series, which was broadcast from 1944 to 1955, and led into the popular television series from 1951 to 1957. The King and Queen of the Cowboys also had a variety series and have made numerous guest appearances and TV specials over three decades.

Roy Rogers died of congestive heart failure on July 6th, 1998, in Apple Valley, California.

Information in this biography was culled from Wikipedia and John Dunning's *On the Air: The Encyclopedia of Old-Time Radio*. For the Old-Time Radio Researchers, I'm your announcer _____.
Happy trails, everyone!