This Day in History… November 5, 1911

Birth of Silver Screen Cowboy Roy Rogers

On November 5, 1911, Leonard Franklin Slye was born in Cincinnati, Ohio. The boy who learned to yodel from old recordings would grow up to become Roy Rogers, the "King of the Cowboys," and one of Hollywood's best-known singing stars.

Slye's family later settled on a small farm near Portsmouth, Ohio. His father worked in a shoe factory, while Leonard helped with farm chores and attended school. Music was part of family life. The Slyes sang together, and Leonard learned guitar and mandolin. According to Rogers, his father brought home a cylinder phonograph and recordings by Swiss yodelers. Leonard listened repeatedly and developed a yodeling style of his own.

In 1930, when he was 18, Slye and his family moved to California. They hoped for better work during the Great Depression. He drove a gravel truck and picked fruit before trying out for an amateur radio program. His singing led to work with the Rocky Mountaineers, a western music group. In 1933, he joined Bob Nolan and Tim Spencer to form the Pioneer Trio. The group soon became the Sons of the Pioneers, known for close harmonies, western songs, and yodeling. In 1934, the trio secured a Los Angeles radio program and a recording contract with Decca Records. Songs such as "Tumbling Tumbleweeds" helped make their sound recognizable. They appeared on radio and began singing in films in 1935.



Issued as part of a set of four stamps in 2010 honoring actors who popularized Westerns in the early 1900s.

Slye also took small parts in movies, sometimes appearing with the group. His opportunity to become a leading man came in 1938, when Gene Autry left Republic Pictures during a contract dispute. The studio needed a new singing cowboy for a film planned for Autry. Slye auditioned and won the starring role in *Under Western Stars*. In the film, he plays a cowboy who runs for Congress during a drought crisis. Studio executives gave him the screen name Roy Rogers. "Rogers" was reportedly chosen in tribute to humorist and performer Will Rogers, while "Roy" came from a list of suggested first names.



Trigger was more than Roy Rogers's horse: he mastered 150 trick cues and shared above-the-title billing as "The Smartest Horse in the Movies." Rogers said there might be no Roy Rogers without Trigger.

For the film, Rogers chose a golden palomino named Golden Cloud from a group of rented horses. The horse had appeared earlier in *The Adventures of Robin Hood*. Singing cowboy Smiley Burnette suggested the name Trigger, inspired by the horse's quickness. Rogers later bought Trigger, and the pair became a popular screen team. They appeared together in dozens of films, and Trigger learned tricks that made him a featured attraction.

Rogers's career grew quickly. He starred in more than 80 westerns for Republic and appeared in more than 100 films overall. He became known as the "King of the Cowboys," a nickname that reflected his popularity with movie audiences. His clean-cut screen persona made him a favorite with children, while his songs and performances also reached adult fans.

Radio and television expanded his audience. The Roy Rogers radio program began in 1944 and ran for nine years. In 1951, *The Roy Rogers Show* brought him to television, with Rogers as a rancher and Dale Evans as a café owner. The series ran until 1957. Rogers and Evans also became a popular performing and screen partnership. His work across entertainment earned him four stars on the Hollywood Walk of Fame, recognizing his contributions to motion pictures, television, radio, and music.

Rogers was honored by the Country Music Hall of Fame twice: in 1980 as a member of the Sons of the Pioneers and in 1988 for his individual career. His fame rested on more than a cowboy image. He built a long career from singing, radio, film, television, and the enduring partnership with Trigger that helped define his screen persona.



Roy Rogers helped bring Western wear to a national audience through his films and television shows—and through a Sears clothing line for young fans in the 1950s. It offered Western shirts modeled on his own, along with suits, hats, and boots.

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