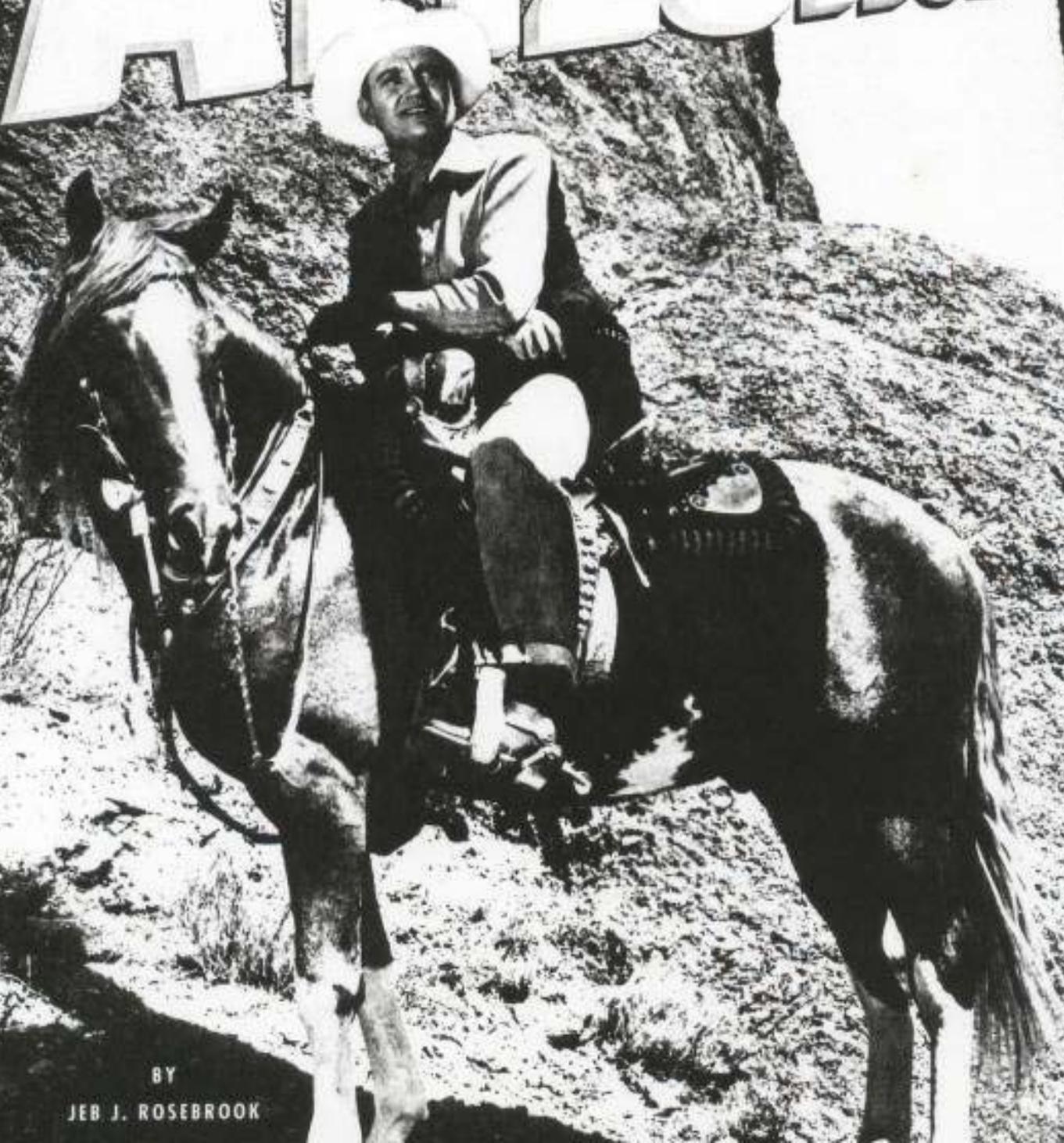


GENE AUTRY

IN

Arizona



BY

JEB J. ROSEBROOK

he time is today. In a house on a quiet street in Scottsdale, a two-and-a-half-year-old girl in robe and pajamas sits enthralled by the t of a real live reindeer with a red nose ap- ing on her favorite morning TV program. room around the small girl echoes with the stmas song about Rudolph, "the most famous deer of all."

though Gene Autry had died several months re, the song he recorded a half-century ago entertaining yet another generation.

1949, Rudolph joined the other famous rein- — Dasher, Dancer, Prancer, Vixen, Comet, id, Donder, and Blitzen, — as a name syn- mous with Santa and Christmas. The year re, New York songwriter Johnny Marks sent mo record of the song he'd written to Bing sby and other popular recording artists, all hom rejected it.

nowing Autry had written and recorded the try's first postwar Christmas hit, "Here Comes a Claus," Marks sent his demo to the popu- ing cowboy. Autry did not care for the s. But his wife, Ina, disagreed.

na loved it," Autry wrote (with Mickey skowitz) in his 1978 autobiography, *Back in Saddle Again*. "There was a line in the song at the other reindeer not letting Rudolph join ny reindeer games, and she was touched by he said, 'It reminds me of the story of the v Duckling. The kids will love it.'"

he Autrys often shared part of Rudolph's fa- te holiday season with the William and M.T. mans families of Florence. Longtime Arizona chers, the Clemans brothers also owned and duced the World Championship Rodeo in v York's Madison Square Garden and the Bos- Garden. Autry had met them in 1940 when appeared in their rodeo at Madison Square den. "Gene loved spending Christmas in Ari- a," recalls M.T.'s widow, Rose. Because Autry no children of his own, she added, "He loved ing children around at Christmas."

s for Rudolph, Rose reveals, "He [Autry] was e surprised it was a hit." Ina's intuition ved more than correct: At the time, ecame the biggest selling record in

T) Gene Autry astride *Champion* during filming of "The Last Round-up" at Old son Studios in 1947.

HT) Gene Autry's recording of "Rudolph The -Nosed Reindeer," written by Johnny Marks, was ased in December, 1949, and sold more than 30 ion copies, making it second only to "White istmas" as one of the most popular Christmas rds of all time.



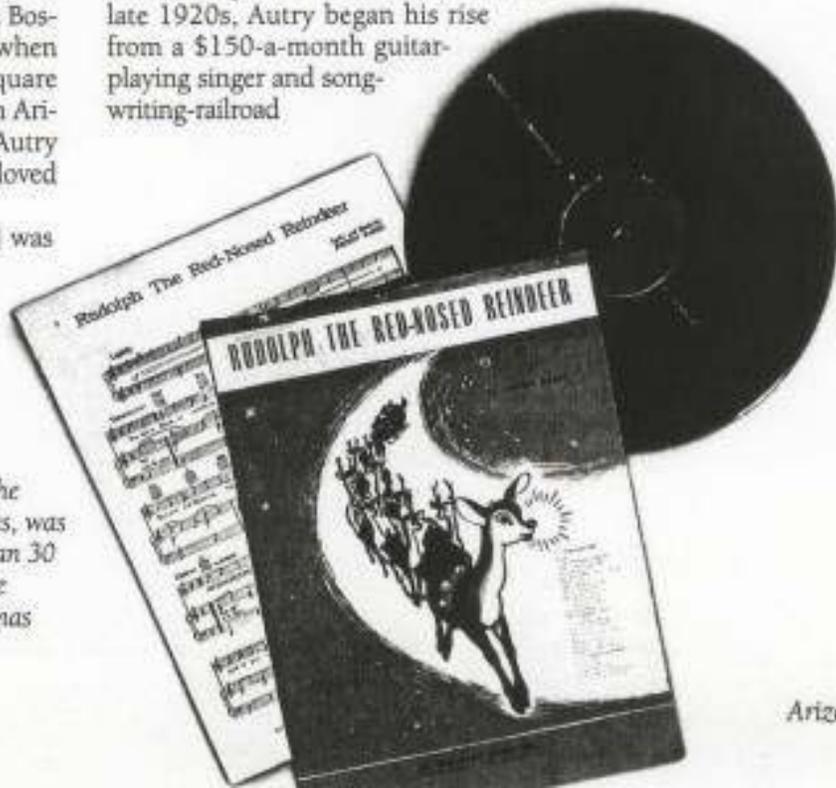
THE DR. WILLIAM J. CLEMANS JR. FAMILY COLLECTION

Columbia Records' history. And her husband's biggest hit ever.

For Gene Autry, before "Here Comes Santa Claus" and "Rudolph," there were Christmases away from home during the war, interrupting an astonishingly successful career, the signs of which showed up in his early years.

Born in 1908, Gene Orvon Autry was the son of a Tioga, Texas, livestock dealer and horse trader and a mother who bought him his first guitar. His Baptist minister grandfather made five-year-old Gene a part of his church choir. In the late 1920s, Autry began his rise from a \$150-a-month guitar-playing singer and song-writing-railroad

Gene Autry gave this photograph of his first wife, Ina Mae, and himself with *Champion* to the William Clemans family of Florence when he was a partner with them in the Madison Square Garden Rodeo Company in the late 1940s.



'I HAD DISCOVERED DURING THE WAR,' AUTRY SAID, 'HOW QUICKLY YOUR SECURITY CAN BE THREATENED BY CONDITIONS BEYOND YOUR CONTROL.' AUTRY SAW A FUTURE IN ARIZONA.

telegrapher to Hollywood superstar.

By 1940, his income as an entertainer reached \$600,000 a year. Under contract to Republic Pictures, he made eight films a year. Millions tuned in to his weekly "Melody Ranch" radio show. There were 18 hit records in a decade, five of which sold more than a million copies. There were personal appearances and rodeos. In 1937 (and for six consecutive

years), he was voted the Number One Western Star. Three years later, only Clark Gable, Mickey Rooney, and Spencer Tracy outranked him as a box-office draw.

Early in 1942, despite studio opposition, "America's Favorite Cowboy," now 35, made the decision to put his horse, Champion, out to pasture and enlisted in the U.S. Army Air Corps.

As a "Flying Sergeant" in the Air Transport Command, Autry flew primarily in North Africa and in the China-Burma-India Theater, including the Hump. (Legend has it he was the only U.S. serviceman allowed to wear cowboy boots on duty.)

"I had discovered during the war," Autry wrote in his autobiography, "how quickly your security can be threatened by conditions beyond your control." What if something happened to his voice?

His health? "I knew," he continued, "the time

had come to start looking for an interest that did not depend on my being able to perform."

Assigned to Special Services at the old Luke Field west of Phoenix, Autry, who had piloted only small aircraft before the war, paid for private lessons in Phoenix to qualify for larger aircraft. During this time, he performed for Gen. George Patton's Eighth Army troops at their desert training facility in Arizona and often broadcast his "Melody Ranch" radio program from Luke.

He also had a fateful meeting with businessman Tom Chauncey, who owned a jewelry store in Phoenix's Adams Hotel. Forming a partnership, the two men bought the Phoenix radio station, KOOL, that carried "Melody Ranch." Autry saw a future in Arizona.

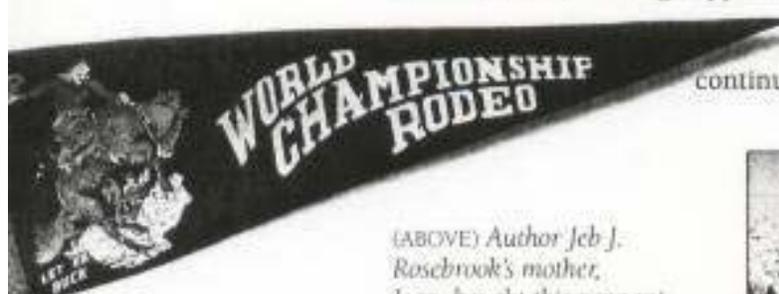
It was in Florence that Autry began his close friendship and business association with the Clemans family.

"I was the first person in Florence to meet Gene Autry," recalls Dr. William Clemans Jr., who was then nine years old. It was in 1942. "There was a knock on our front door. I opened it and there was this man in an Army uniform carrying a briefcase. He said, 'Son, do you know who I am?' I said, 'You're Gene Autry and we're having dinner and you can come in and join us.'" The briefcase contained Autry's proposal to become the Clemans family's partner in World Championship Rodeo. The offer was accepted.

Soon Autry's friendship and business relationship with the Clemanses went beyond rodeo. "We were in the cattle business with him, too," Rose

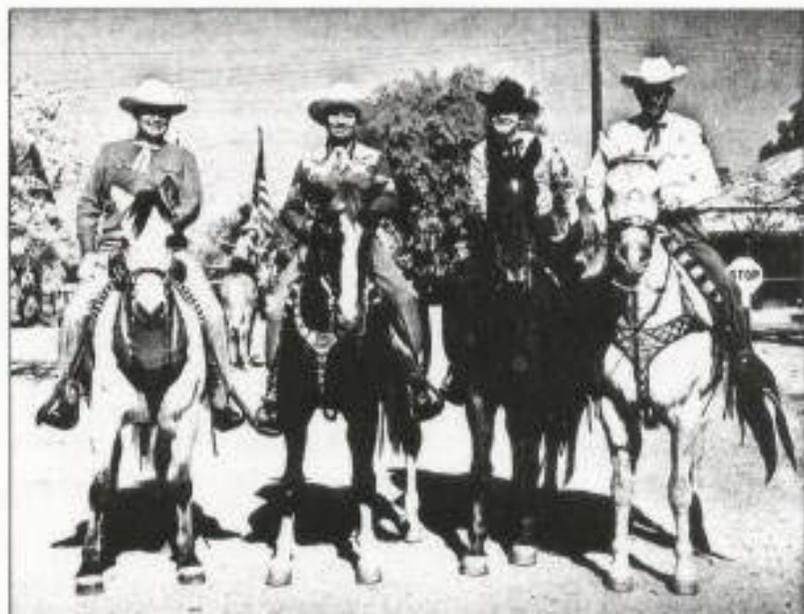


Autry became Tech. Sgt. Gene Autry when he left Republic Pictures and joined the Army Air Corps in 1942. His first assignment after basic training was Luke Field west of Phoenix.



(ABOVE) Author Jeb J. Rosebrook's mother, Jean, bought this pennant for him at Madison Square Garden in 1944 when she took him to see the Clemans family's World Championship Rodeo.

(RIGHT) Gene Autry returned to Florence many times to be the Grand Marshal of the small town's Junior Parada. He appears here in 1958 with (left to right) Governor Ernest W. McFarland, Autry, Ben Arnold, and Charlie





says, "with ranches near Florence and Winslow." Her nephew, Dr. Clemans, remembers, "When he came to Florence he was just Gene Autry. Everyone loved him. He would play basketball with local kids. He would sit in our living room and my friends — especially during the Christmas holidays — would come over. Gene would sing requests for as long as we asked him to."

In 1946, Autry freed himself from his long-time contract at Republic Pictures. The singing cowboy formed his own film company, partnered with Columbia Pictures, and returned to Arizona, filming *The Last Round-Up* at Old Tucson and *The Strawberry Roan* in the Sedona area.

By the early 1950s, Autry and Chauncey had purchased a Phoenix television station, which became KOOL-TV, a CBS affiliate. The partnership would also include a television station in Tucson and an interest in *The Arizona Republic* and *The Phoenix Gazette* newspapers. Additionally, Autry opened his Gene Autry Western Store in the Adams Hotel in Phoenix and invested in radio stations in Yuma, Nogales, and Coolidge.

Audrey Herring of Phoenix, Tom Chauncey's secretary and assistant for many years, remembers the first time she met Autry, in the early 1950s. She had recently moved to Phoenix from Texas.

"Mr. Autry came into the station, and I was on the phone with Mr. Chauncey, who was in Chicago.

He asked me to drive Mr. Autry over to the Adams Hotel." Herring recalls being "very nervous" in the presence of a man who was so popular the U.S. Postal Service reported that only Sears Roebuck and Montgomery Ward received and sent out more mail than Gene Autry.

As she took Autry from the station to the hotel, Herring's driving reflected her nervousness. She remembers assuring her famous passenger that "I was a licensed Texas driver." She also recalls liking him immediately. "He was a very charming man."

But always that was the public Gene Autry. "He was a very private man," says Homer Lane, a long-time Phoenix broadcasting and advertising executive who became a partner with Chauncey and Autry at KOOL-TV and knew the entertainer well. In contrast with his smooth film and radio personality, Autry "was not a good public speaker and was nervous before speaking in front of crowds," Lane said.

And crowds, large and small, there were; at the annual Florence Junior Parade, one of America's premier junior rodeos, where the cowboy entertainer often rode in the parade and donated buckles and spurs as prizes, and in Phoenix and



Filmed at Sedona in 1947, The Strawberry Roan, costarring Gloria Henry, was one of Gene Autry's first independent productions after World War II. While his prewar films were all black and white, Autry filmed this picture in cinecolor to capture the spectacular scenery of Arizona's Red Rock Country.

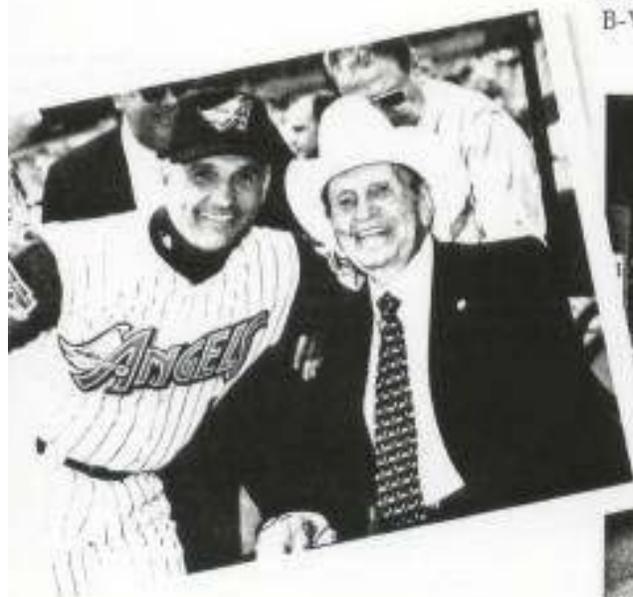


(ABOVE) Autry married his second wife, Jackie, in 1981.

(BELOW) Autry, who owned the California Angels for over 30 years, shares a light moment with Angels manager, Terry Collins, during spring training games in Arizona.

(BELOW, RIGHT) Autry leads his team on a spring ride in Palm Springs in the early 1960s.

(OPPOSITE PAGE) The cowboy star autographed this photo for author Rosebrook when the 10-year-old boy visited his Aunt Florence in Los Angeles in 1946.



OF ARIZONA, AUTRY SAID AT THE TIME, 'I'D LIKE TO RETIRE THERE WHEN MY MOVIE-MAKING DAYS ARE OVER.'

Tucson, where he assisted in the annual Easter Seals campaigns.

Del Haverty of Benson, winner of All Around Cowboy honors at the 1946

Parada, still has the spurs and the belt buckle Autry donated that year as top prize. Haverty, who went on to a championship career in professional rodeo, and Autry share an honor in common: Both were inducted into the Cowboy Hall of Fame in Oklahoma City.

In 1950, Autry had brought his "Melody Ranch" stage show and both Champion and Little Champion to Phoenix and Tucson for big outdoor shows to help kick off a statewide Easter Seals campaign. He visited youngsters at the Arizona Convalescent Home for Crippled Children.

"Most of the little patients were taking in the sun in their beds and wheelchairs when the singing cowboy appeared," wrote a reporter for *The Arizona Republic*. "He was recognized at once and a cheer went up."

Of Arizona, Autry said at the time, "I'd like to retire there when my moviemaking days are over."

Yet there was no thought of retirement when his motion picture days ended.

By the early 1950s, as television was replacing radio and the B-Western, Autry had already

saddled up to blaze a new trail of his own. Even before he ended his movie and radio career, Autry's Flying "A" Productions pioneered the new medium by putting him into a television series, as well as developing and producing several other series. He expanded his media empire to include radio stations in Los Angeles, San Francisco, and San Antonio. He partnered with John Wayne in a Texas oil well. He formed a new rodeo and stock-contracting partnership in Colorado. At the time, it appeared Gene Autry had professionally and personally left the Grand Canyon State behind.

Then an old dream brought him back. In 1961, the cowboy who had once hoped to be a professional baseball player became the owner of a major league baseball team. The onetime American Legion shortstop who had been offered a \$100-a-month contract to play for a St. Louis Cardinals farm team in Tulsa, anteed up \$2.1 million for the right to own an American League expansion team, the Los Angeles Angels.

While Easterners brought big-league baseball west from Brooklyn and New York, it seemed fitting for the cowboy in the white hat to be the first to settle a new major league team in the West. Although the Angels trained in Palm Springs, the team played midweek games in Phoenix, Mesa, and Scottsdale.

In the fall of 1971, Autry hired Harry Dalton of Carefree as the Angels' general manager, a position he held through 1977. "He didn't talk much about himself," Dalton remembers of his boss. "He was

a very gentle, humble person. He was very knowledgeable about the game. He liked to come down to the clubhouse and talk to the players.

"He loved people," Dalton continues. "And wherever he went, he was lavished with praise. Watching the people look at Autry, it was amazing to see the adoration." To the public, Dalton adds, "he was an absolute hero."

Four years ago, Gene Autry made his last visit to Florence and the Clemans family. "During our visit," Dr. Clemans remembers, "my son Tim asked him if he would come to a weekly lunch that day at the Rotary. Gene accepted and stayed at the meeting to sign autographs for everyone. He was just one of the greatest guys you'd ever want to meet."

During his lifetime, the actor-businessman donated an estimated \$176 million to charitable causes, always without fanfare. He also created a lasting memorial to the American West when another dream, the Gene Autry Museum of Western Heritage, opened in Los Angeles in 1988.

In 1993, the Angels made Tempe their permanent spring training facility. In keeping with Autry's commitment of giving back to the local community, Angels Care, his charitable division of the Angels baseball team, created the Gene Autry Courage Awards. In partnership with the Tempe Sports Authority, the awards are given annually to men and women in sports who have demonstrated heroism in the face of difficulty or danger.

In the spring of 1999, the Angels named their training diamond "Gene Autry Field."

Through the years, Autry's diverse public honors included the Hubert Humphrey Humanitarian of the Year Award and the Songwriters Guild Life Achievement Award. In addition to the Cowboy Hall of Fame, he was elected to the Country Music Hall of Fame, the Pro Rodeo Hall of Fame, the National Association of Broadcasters Hall of Fame, and the U.S. Army's Enlisted Man's Hall of Fame.

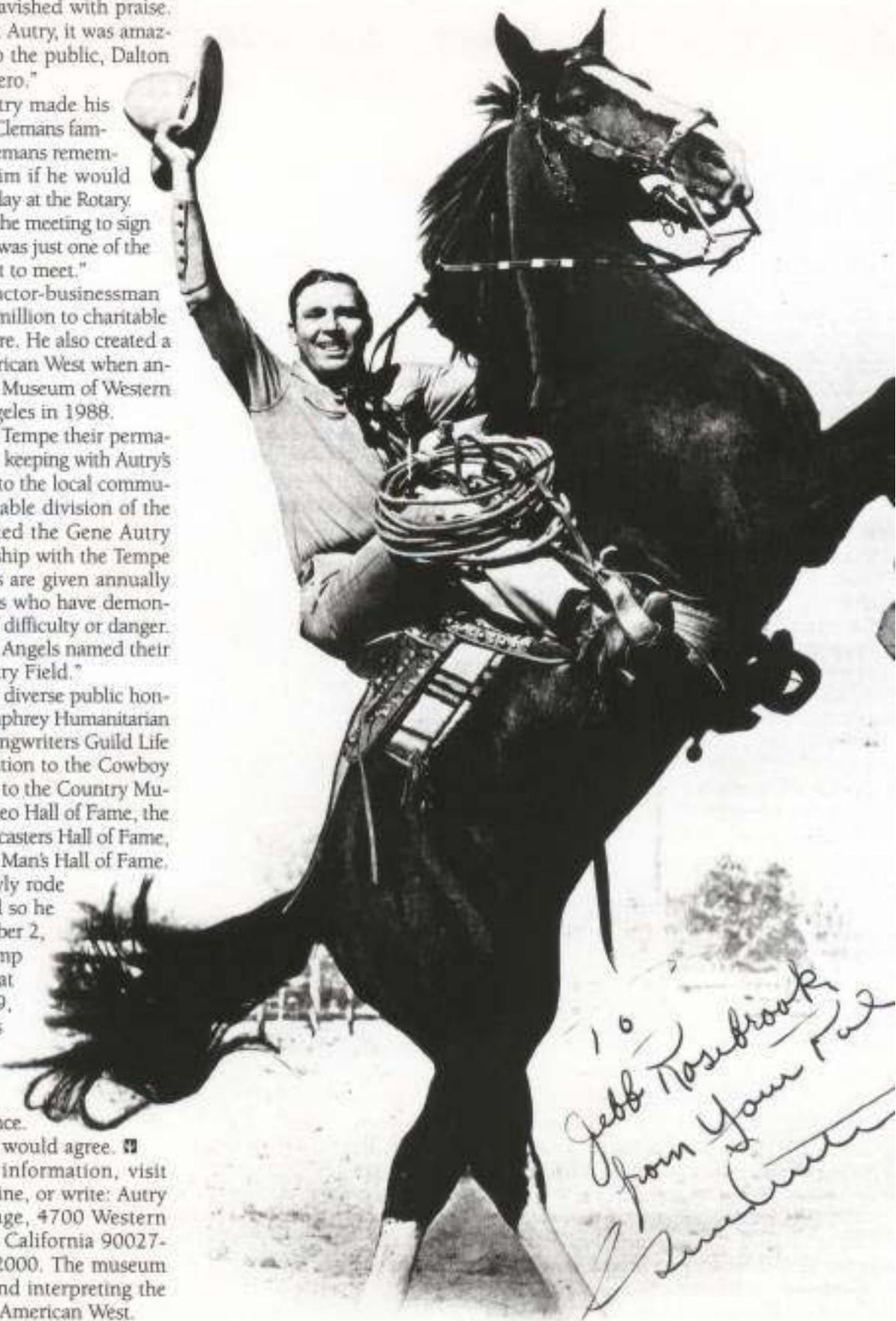
"I tipped my hat and slowly rode away," Autry once sang. And so he did, at the age of 91, on October 2, 1998. After his death, the Hump Pilots Association noted that Autry, Life Member No. 939, had been refunded \$5 on his dues. He had overpaid.

"I belong in the West," Gene Autry once told his "Melody Ranch" radio audience.

"That's where I fit." Arizona would agree. ❧

Editor's Note: For more information, visit www.autry-museum.org online, or write: Autry Museum of Western Heritage, 4700 Western Heritage Way, Los Angeles, California 90027-1462; or phone (323) 667-2000. The museum is dedicated to preserving and interpreting the history and traditions of the American West.

As a boy, Jeb J. Rosebrook saw Gene Autry at the World Championship Rodeo at Madison Square Garden in New York City. A lifelong Autry fan and movie screenwriter, he lives in Scottsdale.

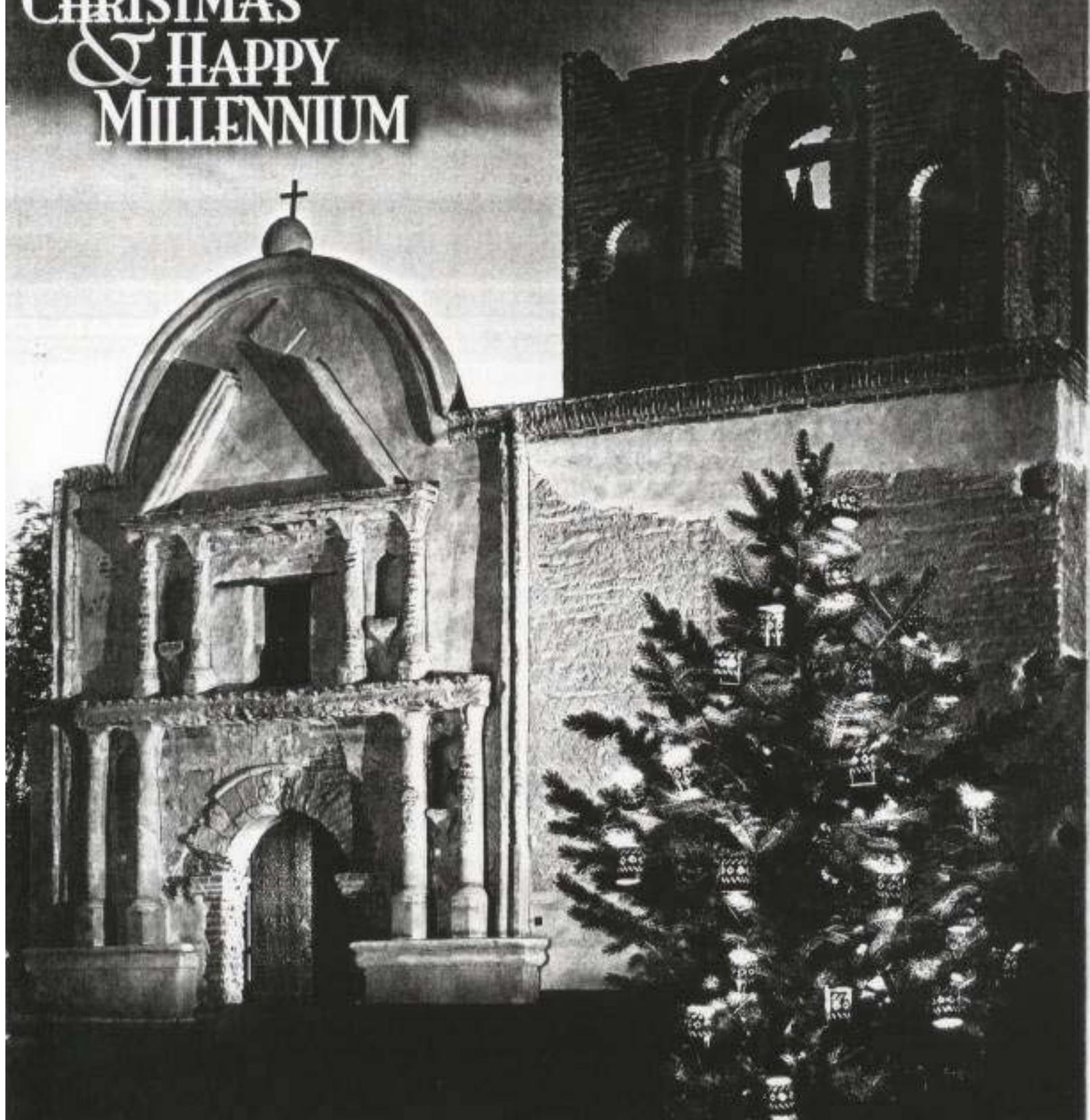


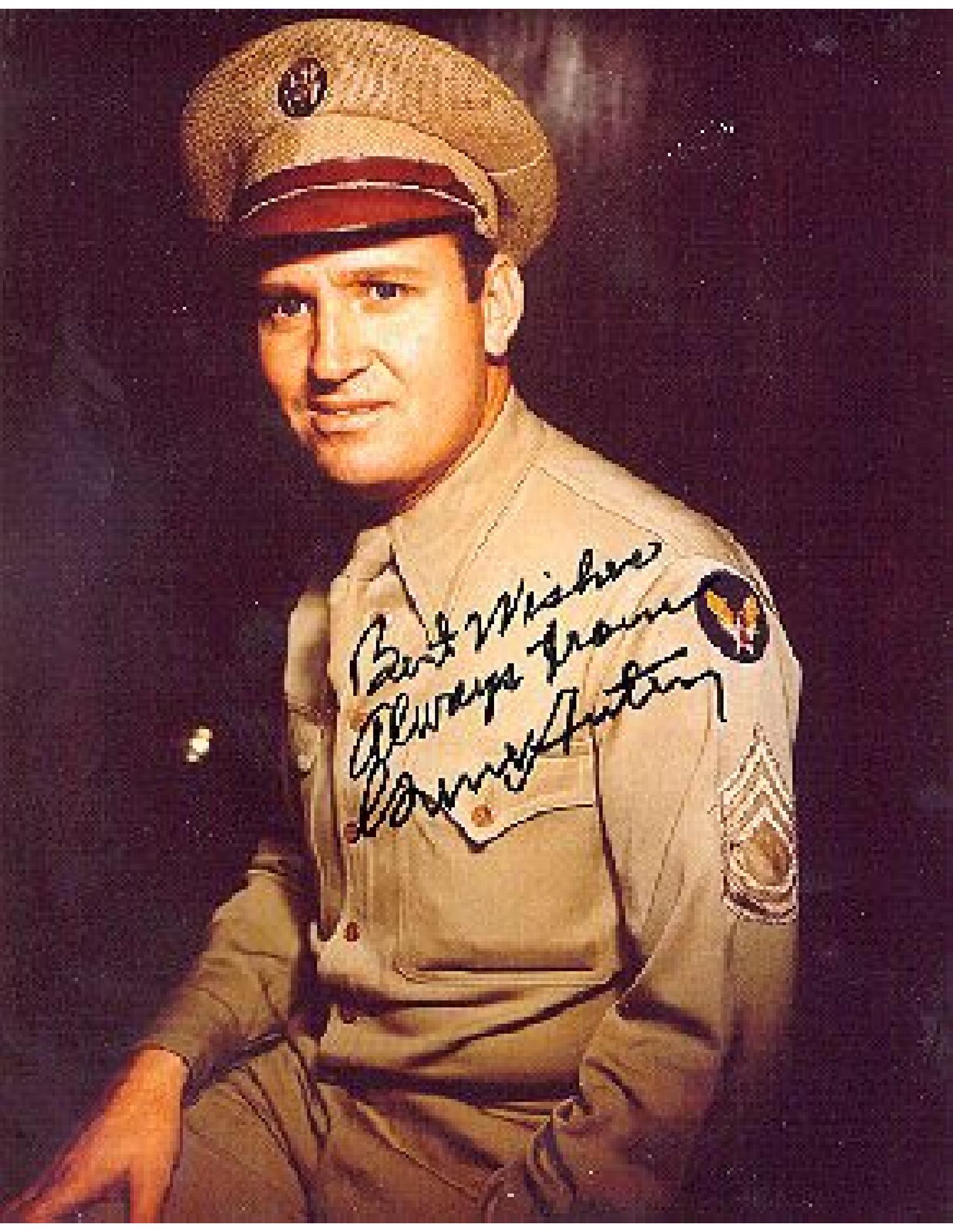
Holiday Hikes ■ Gene Autry Remembered ■ Tempe's Big New Year's Eve

ARIZONA

MERRY CHRISTMAS & HAPPY MILLENNIUM

DECEMBER 1999





Best wishes
Always from
Lowndes

