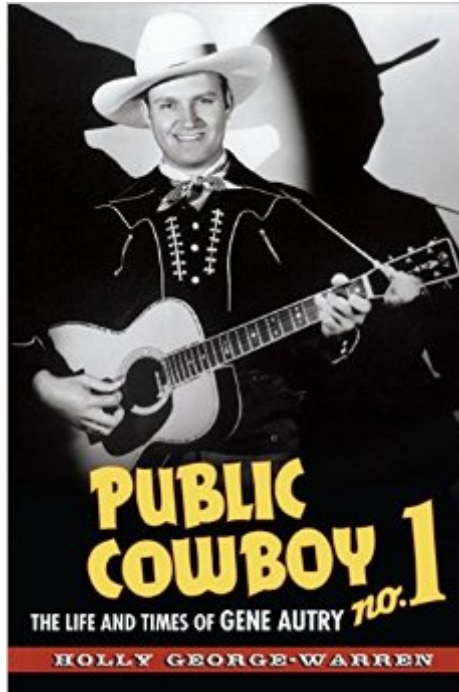


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# Public Cowboy No. 1: The Life And Times Of Gene Autry



## Synopsis

The only performer to earn 5 stars on the Hollywood Walk of Fame, Gene Autry was the singing cowboy king of American entertainment. Now, in *Public Cowboy No.1*, Holly George-Warren offers the first serious biography of this singular individual, in a fascinating narrative that traces Autry's climb from small-town farm boy to multimillionaire. Here for the first time Autry the legend becomes a flesh-and-blood man--with all the passions, triumphs, and tragedies of a flawed icon.

George-Warren recounts stories never before told, including revelations about Autry's impoverished boyhood, his adventures as an up-and-coming singer, and the impact his unbelievable success had on his personal life. The book provides equally colorful details of Autry's lengthy radio and recording career, which included such classics as "Back in the Saddle Again" and "Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer"; his movie career, where he breathed new life into the Western genre; and his role in early television. And along the way, we see how he invested shrewdly in radio, real-estate, and television, becoming the only entertainer listed among 1990's Fortune 400. Based on exclusive access to Gene Autry's personal papers, as well as interviews with more than 100 relatives, employees, colleagues, and friends, this engaging biography brings to life a major Hollywood star--a man who, more than anyone else, put Western music and style on the American cultural map.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Gene Autry, my childhood hero and that of millions of others, finally has gotten his due, on the eve of what would have been his 100th birthday. Autry was as unmistakably American as Will Rogers or

Walt Disney, and every bit as remarkable. This book, the first full-length biography of Autry and superbly written by Holly George-Warren, explores every nook and cranny of his long, busy and productive life, telling of things that many of us already knew -- but in much more fascinating detail; exploding a few myths that Autry had encouraged about himself over the years; and adding more than a few revelations about his life that will shock the more naive of his fans. Gene Autry got the name in Hollywood of being a tightwad -- but that's not the picture we get from this book. Yes, he loved money with the passion of many people who had little or none of it growing up. But once having amassed a fortune in show business, he was for the rest of his life a "soft touch" not only for charities, but for old friends down on their luck, people who had helped him when he really needed it as a young, struggling performer -- and family members such as his ne'er-do-well father and brother. He spent countless hundreds of hours over the years visiting children's hospitals to chat with, sing to, and encourage the smallest of his fans, many of them with terminal illnesses. He enlisted in the U.S. Army Air Force in World War II when his studio had promised to get him a deferment so he wouldn't have to serve at all. He took flying lessons on his own time so he could qualify to be co-pilot of supply planes going to combat zones, when he could have spent his service time simply entertaining the other troops. Gene Autry was a giver, an extraordinarily generous man, first, last and always. The portions of the book about Autry's drinking problem and his "steppin' out" with numerous women during his marriage, provide a human element to this great entertainer who wrote his own "Cowboy Code" but sometimes had trouble living up to all of it in his own life. Yes, folks, he was mortal after all, and not perfect. None of us are. If you look at the photo of a smiling Gene Autry on the cover, posed with his famous guitar, you'll note the two dark shadows he throws on the backdrop -- perhaps the author's deliberate choice to symbolize his twin demons of liquor and lust. Far more important is what Gene Autry achieved, as documented meticulously by George-Warren. His records, movies, radio and TV programs, and personal appearances are discussed in intimate detail. Gene appears to have been an almost tireless human dynamo, on the go from morning to night. The less-admirable things he did were the other end of the equation -- he worked hard, AND played hard. Aspects of his personality that are not well known are discussed, also. He was a gregarious person, a practical joker and teaser, witty at times, and a gifted mimic who became known in Washington circles before and during World War II for his perfect imitation of Franklin D. Roosevelt. A committed Democrat, he was friends with Lyndon B. Johnson, Sam Rayburn, and others prominent in government -- but never discussed his political activities in public. After all, there were a lot of Autry fans who were Republicans, too! The only portion of the book which I found somewhat jarring and disquieting was his mother's final letter to him, written while she

was slowly dying of pellagra in 1932. In the letter, which is disjointed and hard to understand, she seems to refer to something that Gene has done, or told her he was going to do, that she believes could get him into trouble. Had Gene confessed some dark secrets to her in his final visit home while she still lived? Or had he written them in a letter George-Warren said was mailed to her by Autry soon after he returned to Chicago where he was living then? Obviously it is far too late to determine the answer, with all parties to the situation dead, and George-Warren wisely does not speculate. She merely lets the letter and other information stand for themselves, without comment, and moves on with her narrative. Amazingly, personal reminiscences about Gene Autry from people who knew him when he was growing up are included in the book. In the acknowledgements in the back, George-Warren notes that there were people in Gene's childhood home of Tioga, Texas, and the surrounding area, who some years ago suspected that someday a biography of him would be written, and who were prudent enough to record and preserve the recollections of a number of elderly residents who had known Gene in his young days. Even some of the people who arranged the interviews were deceased by the time George-Warren began her research for the book. But their descendants were glad to share these interviews with George-Warren to help her add color and flavor to "Public Cowboy No. 1." Every biographer should be that lucky! Holly George-Warren has done an exemplary job of gathering hundreds of strands of information, then weaving them together into a beautiful tapestry about one of the most unique Americans of the 20th Century. She has written a five-star biography of "America's Favorite Cowboy," Gene Autry. As a lifelong Autry fan, I heartily recommend the book.

Public Cowboy No.1: The Life And Times Of Gene Autry, by Holly George-Warren  
A book review by Jerry Rojo, May, 2007  
Gene Autry, An American Idol  
Holly George-Warren's biographic tome is a definitive must-read, not only for the worldwide legions of the American cowboy moviegoing public, young and old, but also, anyone interested in a prototypical American dreamer on a lifelong trek, as defined by the arts and entertainment industry's dream factories from Hollywood to Madison Avenue. George-Warren's impeccably researched Gene Autry story, interestingly, is somewhat reminiscent of Doris Kerns-Goodwin's recent Abraham Lincoln book, *Team Of Rivals*, that chronicles the president's rags-to-riches life in the political arena. Both authors masterfully use the biographic form to convey their respective visions, yet provide the reader scholarly researched stories to ponder any number of themes and ideas about their subject. Like Lincoln, Autry was dirt poor, grassroots, self-made and ambitious; carefully grooming his career with a lifelong, unrelenting, innate ability to charm colleagues, friends and the public at large. Lincoln, too, was a performer. He

cherished the spoken/written word, and the theatre, to the chagrin of his aristocratic, snobbish cabinet. Ironically, he was assassinated by a Shakespearean actor. The Autry book, like Lincoln's, defines his respective context/time in America. The political-rodeo arena is a metaphor for our country's so-called "culture", epitomized by the American Idol phenomena, with its demigod-like celebrities from respective realms of, popular entertainment, sports, politics, religion and, now a days, big corporations, all of which defines the current American ethos. My can't-put-down read of George-Warren was fueled not only by her writing, but by my own childhood spent idolizing Gene Autry while growing up in Illinois, and, my subsequent professional interest in dramatic arts adds to the attraction. A compelling aspect of the book traces Autry's genealogy from the Norman Conquest in 1066 to pre-great depression Texas/Oklahoma, where Autry's story begins. During that period, one is amazed by his personal and professional character development, growing up in a family of six in abject poverty, with an on-and-off absentee, hard-drinking father, and by contrast, a deeply religious and nurturing mother. Everyone knows Autry's interest in the great American pastime, baseball, but a telling tidbit reveals that he was a pretty good sandlot player, and was offered a chance to play for a minor league team, but, declined because he was making more money working on the railroad and needed to support his family. That anecdote helps define this complex man. His devotion and generosity to family, friends and associates throughout his long life was always balanced by his knack for good judgment when it came to decisions about human welfare and the business of life. It was during the seven odd years in the late 20s early 30s, while in the Chicago/Midwest, that young Autry began his "singing cowboy" career. But there was no overnight success here, instead, an astonishing story of how to succeed in show business--a methodology that paved the way for popular entertainers ever since. With a modicum of musical talent Autry used love of performing, hard work, determination, his WASPish good looks and savvy business acumen to mold a career that would lead to five-star recognition at the Hollywood Walk of Fame. The book documents, in wonderful detail how he shrewdly evolved his signature persona-image, which, once established, never changed. At 91 he died with his boots on. Before his Chicago days, Autry didn't start out as a cowboy singing around the campfire soothing a restless herd of cattle. He had his sights set on the popular music of the roaring 20s tin pan alley, which featured the likes of Gene Austin and Rudy Vallee (Autry's first name, Orvon, was substituted for Austin's). Ultimately, Gene Autry changed his musical style by literally imitating yodeling Jimmie Rodgers, the father of country/hillbilly music, who's great popularity appealed to blue-collar folks from the South and Midwest. After a brief trip to the Big Apple--before giving up his day job on the railroad--a failed audition with a record company sent Autry home to gain experience singing on local radio stations

and other venues. He actually sang with a medicine show, a lesson learned, hawking products. Professional contacts and an established country-folk sound led him back to New York to make records. His recordings caught on, and with astute self-promotion Autry's popularity grew, garnering a spot on Chicago's popular WLS radio station's National Barn Dance program. There, his image was transformed to The Singing Cowboy. With royalties from a national smash hit record, "That Silver Haired Daddy of Mine" in his hip pocket, a newly minted Martin guitar with his ivory signature on the frets, a new Hollywood-like-Tom Mix cowboy "look" and Buick automobile, he barnstormed the environs of Chicago, Illinois. There, he discovered a key player on the road to success, the highly talented musician, singer, song writer and naturally gifted comedic performer, Smiley Brunette. Autry always had a keen eye for talented associates, musical and otherwise. Back in Chicago on the airwaves, and on tour, they soon developed their signature hero/sidekick routine. Unlike the multitude of American denizens, then and now, seeking instant success in golden California, Autry didn't go to Hollywood; Hollywood came to Autry. He was already a "star", self-made, and, at a time when the Great Depression was raging world wide. Now, only in his late 20s, part two of his odyssey begins at a B-Western studio factory that Autry would bale-out of near financial ruin, Republic Pictures. Here, Ms George-Warren really delivers the goods with a compendium of data-based facts of tinsel-town fiction that chronicles Autry's American idol success story. It was 1934, but he didn't have an auspicious start in the movies. After an initial bit part in a Ken Maynard flick, studio executives had reservations--with good reason--about Autry's abilities. It seemed clear, he excelled at nothing cinematic: a marginal singer-guitarist, bad acting, awkward in the saddle and, most of all, he lacked gunslinger machismo, a staple at the time. But, no matter, the audience Autry already established, had a different opinion. He had something!! And it didn't take but a couple of years or so for the Studio and Autry, tinkering with the chemistry, to come up with THE original Gene Autry that would become a one-of-a-kind icon. By 1939 he was in the big leagues with Clark Gable/Gone With The Wind, if you consider audience appeal and box-office numbers. Now, cash-cow-boy Autry played to millions of adoring fans of, so called, sophisticated folks from the East, NYC to Boston, and, Great Britain, where he seduced hundreds of thousands from across the island empire, evidenced by massive turnouts on tour. It was 1942, a turning point in Gene Autry's fame if not fortune. Here again, he makes a watershed career decision. Much to the dismay of Republic Pictures/Hollywood, he joins the military to fight in World War II. George-Warren reveals insightful, detailed stories of the war years that further defines this remarkable man. For example, why, arguably, at the pinnacle of popularity and performance-form does he do it? Is he a consummate patriot, or as he says, protecting his image-based code of cowboy ethics? He survives

air force missions, military boredom and keeps in tune doing a stint with the USO at the end of the war, meanwhile at home, movie reruns and other strategies kept him in the public mind's eye. After the war Autry picked up where he left off with his still adoring fans, donning his cowboy persona, producing and performing a mind-boggling schedule of entertainment engagements, including burgeoning TV (he was the first Hollywood star to do so); but, it WAS the beginning of the end and not the end of the beginning, as Churchill coined. Then, in the early to mid 60s the fame-flame goes out, but the fortune doesn't. Now, Gene Autry transitions to the business tycoon still wearing cowboy clothes, occasionally sporting an LA Angels baseball cap. Autry scrupulously designed and protected his public image that, except for in the military, never changed. As entertainer he performed the SELF and when he hung up the guitar in the early 60s he took on the role of CEO, Gene Autry Enterprises, but little else changed. But what was at the heart of that masked man? It's all there in Holly George-Warren's biography that unearths the Man UNDER the persona, and as she perceives you don't need his purely business-life endgame story. You'd be hard pressed to find anyone, public or private that hated or disrespected Gene Autry, then or now. And he was no pushover while wheeling and dealing in either his business interests or performance career. That's evident by his tough, recalcitrant stance with the tightfisted studio honchos, which, by the way, help lead to Actors's Equity and the independent film makers of today. And yes, the book gets into the nitty-gritty of his postwar performing years of womanizing and binge drinking but that served to make him more human and strengthen his character. A shrink would have a field day, given young Autry's polarized parenting. As a 10y.o. boy I idolized that innovative kind of cowboy-man who was good and strong, and that seemed to portray the best of American values (My grandsons have his 10 Cowboy Commandments, framed.). Singing and playing the guitar as a real-life person his pictures were action-filled musical westerns, portraying the American mantra during that time: talk softly and carry a big stick; he toted a six shooter but never killing the bad guy. My growing up after the war, it was easy to see his weakness as an aging performer and ever more commercializing career strategy, but in the long run, that never led to diminishing the demigod I worshiped circa 1942. Gene Autry represented as performer and citizen the "God and Country" ideology. The ancient Greek and Romans worshipped a pantheon of Gods who were half-God and half-Human. A recent book, *The God Delusion*, by Richard Dawkins offers a view on the subject of the human need for God/demigods: it's in the genes, a kind of inner quest for survival. The American mystique seems particularly wedded to the phenomena of super hero, professing a particular moral/ethical/ism standard, albeit augmented by commercialism. Some Heroes are good and others not so, Abraham Lincoln/Adolph Hitler obvious opposites, others, Brittany Spears, Babe Ruth, Jerry

Falwell, and Bill Gates fall somewhere in between. Gene Autry was clearly one of the good guys/entertainers, among American's pantheon of God/demigods, further identified in the Epilogue, that points to the multimillions he gave to charity in his lifetime, contributing to schools, hospitals and building a world-class western art museum and institute for western studies. Holly George-Warren's book gives us the arc of this complex quintessential American, who was Gene Autry.

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