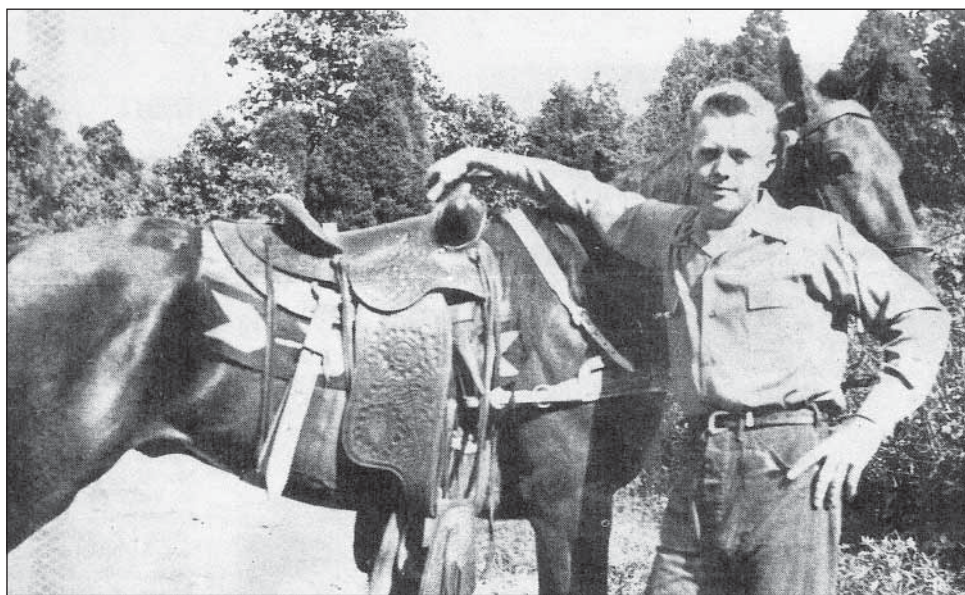


A Step Back in Time

By Bobbie Sue Shelton-Lonas

A HORSE BACK RIDE FROM TENNESSEE TO CALIFORNIA



September, 1946 - Jimmy D. Bennett and Ramblin' Boy, the first of eleven horses, used for his cross country trip to California

On a Sunday afternoon, September 8, 1946, 23 year old Jimmy D. Bennett Jr., of the Peytonsville Community, left Franklin Tennessee, astride a seven year old bay gelding, Ramblin' Boy, heading for California. Jimmy dressed in blue denim trousers, sweat shirt, leather jacket and riding boots, was honored with a big send off from Mayor Frank Beasley and a large crowd of friends and family. His parents, Mr. and Mrs. Jimmy D. Bennett Sr. and sisters, Marie, Esther, Rachel and Jewell were in attendance at the departure.

Jimmy, next to the oldest of eight children, was born and reared on a farm in Williamson County. He graduated from Bethesda High School, enlisting in the Coast Guard his senior year of high school. He served thirty-three months during World War II and was attached to the USS Newell, a destroyer escort ship. He was discharged in September 1945.

Although he had dreamed of such a trip for a long time, he is unable to give any particular reason for his desire to make the trip to California. He declared "I guess I'm just of a rambling nature." He actually made the decision to take on this adventure, one day while sitting in a business school class in Texas. "Naturally, my mother and father weren't exactly delighted when I told them what I wanted to do. It seemed a wild sort of idea to them; and I reckon it was, at that. But when they saw I really had my heart in it they backed me up like any mother and dad would. After all, I wasn't trying to ride a horse to the moon—just to California." Jimmy proclaimed.

With the tobacco crop in the barn and other farm work on his father's farm in good shape, Jimmy decided it was time to follow his dream. His mother wasn't very enthusiastic about him making the trip and his father had given him advice on his horse, even though Jimmy had ridden horses almost all his life. In Jimmy's words, "I've rode horses ever since I

was big enough to sit on one". After his decision to see the country by horseback preparations began by riding his horse several miles each day.

Ramblin' Boy, formerly owned by Percy Jennette, was a cross between a thoroughbred and a Tennessee Walking Horse and was the first of eleven horses; it took to make the trip. A neighbor put new shoes on Ramblin' Boy, as the Peytonsville resident planned to depart.

Jimmy purchased a new saddle and bridle for the trip. He claimed the only piece of fancy equipment he treated himself too, was a fine Martingale harness, which he had made especially for him in Nashville. Packed in two saddle bags, was a few clothes, a toothbrush, razor and other necessities, a blanket roll and a raincoat strapped on the back of the saddle. A friend of his in Montana had sent him a good lariat, so he hooked it onto the pommel. "A rope is a horseman's spare tire, you know", Jimmie said.

"I stuck a hundred dollars in my pockets. That was enough money to have on me, and I had more in the bank I could draw on. Besides, in a long pull, like the one I was starting, I certainly had no intention of trying to live like the Duke of Windsor. I didn't take along any food—not even a canteen of water; food and water would mean added weight, and I wanted to travel as light as I could." Jimmy said. The saddle, used to make this trip, is still in his possession.

A couple of hours before leaving on that Sunday afternoon, Jimmy was interviewed by radio station WSIX for the coast-to-coast Mutual Network Program Opportunity-USA.

About 3 o'clock in the afternoon, Jimmy and Ramblin' Boy left the square in Franklin, with automobiles trailing him part of the way, as he jogged along. Headed out the Hillsboro Road on the first lap of his long journey, expecting to travel 25 – 30

miles per day and stay at farm homes along the way. He didn't care how long the trip took. He was out to see all the sights of the West, particularly Fort Worth, "Where the West Begins."

Jimmy and his horse made the newspaper of almost all the cities he passed through on his journey. An account of his California-bound travels is compiled in a much-treasured scrapbook, which he graciously shared with me for this article. The following are excerpts from some of the news articles, as well as interviews with Jimmy D.

* * * * *

After spending the first night at the home of Ed Hensley, a well-known Guernsey breeder near White Bluff, Jimmy and Ramblin' Boy arrived in Dickson, after putting 45 miles of his proposed long journey behind him. Although having ridden in rain all day, it failed to dampen the determination of Jimmy D. Bennett. A good-sized crowd greeted him, and after much persuasion, he spoke a few words over a public address system. That night he stayed at the farm home of D. E. Witherspoon.

Hot weather and intermittent showers held Bennett to 24 miles on Tuesday. Ramblin' Boy was showing signs of lameness as they arrived in Waverly and Jimmy was concerned he may have to change mounts. "Everybody seems to know about me and my trip," Bennett said, in relating that Tennesseans wishing him success on his trip stopped him frequently. Quarters was found for Ramblin' Boy in a horse and mule sales barn for the night.

On Wednesday, the fourth day of his trip, an 84-year-old woman near Denver, Tn. asked him to shave and clean up at her home. "She had a big slingshot that she uses to chase away dogs and kill birds," Bennett said. Traveling 29 miles on Wednesday, arriving in Bruceton, Tennessee, Ramblin' Boy's lameness was about the same. He accepted an invitation to spend the night at the home of Frank Hall.

On Thursday, riding into Huntingdon about 9:30 a. m. after a 15 mile trip from Bruceton, Jimmy decided, due to the heat, he and Ramblin' Boy would start traveling at night. They departed Huntingdon around 6 p.m. for Jackson, 39 miles away. The Mayor, R. M. Murray and a large crowd gave him a rousing send off.

The first mishap of the trip since leaving Franklin happened on Thursday night after leaving Huntingdon, traveling to Jackson. Ramblin' Boy waded off into a deep hole of water in a stream where Jimmy was giving him a drink. Bennett jumped from the saddle to the bank of the stream and maneuvered his horse out of the predicament.

Ramblin' Boy continued to show some lameness, so Bennett decided to trade horses on his way to Jackson. The new horse, "Sad Sack" pretty much lived up to the name. This mount only lasted several miles before folding up.

In Jackson, Bennett traded the nag, Sad Sack, for a new mount, Roxie, a seven-year-old mare. He said later he didn't like the way she rode and probably would trade her off, too.

Jimmy left Jackson on Saturday. Traveling toward Dyersburg in order to by-pass Memphis, he spent Saturday night with a family in Bells Tennessee, Sunday night in Friendship and Monday night in Finley. Jimmy and Roxie crossed the Mississippi River by ferry, arriving in Cooter, Missouri on Tuesday afternoon, September 17th. In Cooter, Bennett took a two-hour rest, during which time he chatted with the curious villagers and river men. The "farm youth" said he had made good time since leaving Jackson—40 miles one day. He then mounted Roxie and resumed his journey west.



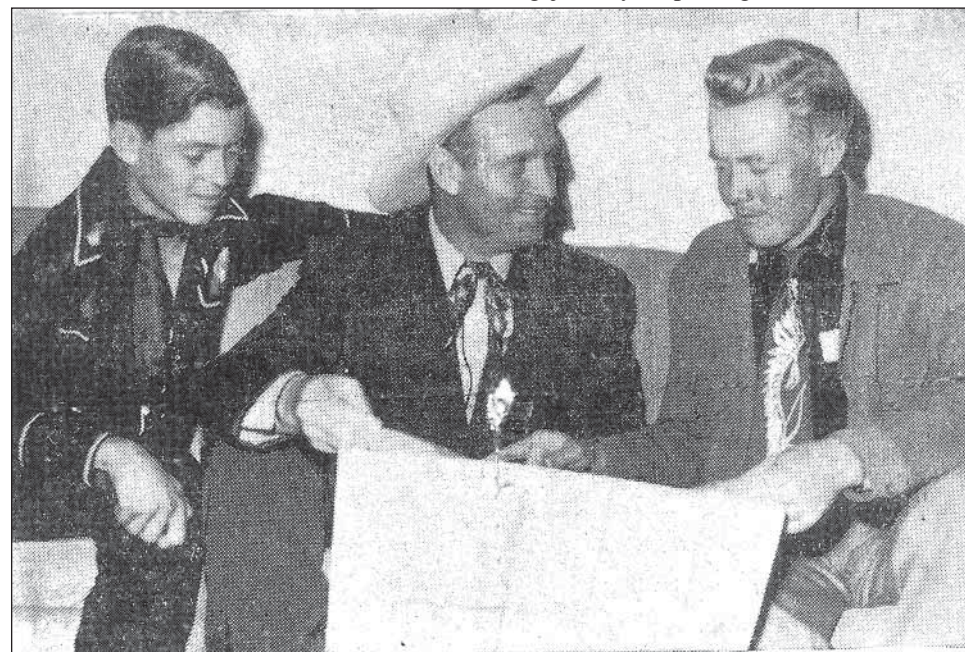
Jimmy D. and Dan on the cross-country trip to California.

Arriving in Jonesboro Arkansas at 9 o'clock p. m., much later than planned, foiled the plans of the Jonesboro Chamber of Commerce. They had prepared a reception for Jimmy and Roxie on their arrival but it was cancelled due to their late arrival. Bennett said the mare, which he acquired in a swap in Jackson Tennessee, was "getting slower" every day and rougher riding all the time. After walking six of the 16 miles from Paris to Jonesboro Arkansas in deference to his mount, Jimmy decided to lounge in a hotel until his tiring mount recuperates or until he could swap for a new one. Jimmy's father and brother-in-law, Rufus Tindell motored to Arkansas and visited with Jimmy, to find out how he was doing.

Jimmy and his fifth mount, Billy, traveled into Judsonia Arkansas on Tuesday night, September 24th. Bennett said he was in fine shape and that he had a horse he believed would withstand the cross-country journey better. He had traded Roxie for a horse name Tony and "he wasn't much of a mount either", he said. So he made another horse deal and acquired "Billy", a cowpony, in Newport. Bennett said he was forced to trade for two new mounts within the last two days. Bennett traveled only 15 miles on Tuesday. He stopped to visit with his sister and her husband, Mr. and Mrs. Rufus Tindall, of Williamson County, who had paid a surprise visit to Bennett. "My father wanted to send me another Tennessee Walking Horse like Ramblin' Boy," Bennett said his sister told him, "but I told them I thought I'd make it all right now." He also said the weather had been fairly cool all day and added that the mosquitoes which "strafed" him on his trip from Cash to Newport Sunday weren't quite so bad. He's hoping to reach Little Rock by Friday, which is still more than 60 miles away.

Jacksonville Arkansas, a little town of 500 people welcomed Jimmy and Billy, his bronco pony. Bennett reported that Billy does not like the long, steady pace required in cross-country travels, and is weakening considerably. The young rider said he wanted to get a Texas horse, one that is used to long distances. He also wants to buy a hat, and a Texas style is his preference. He reported riding 23 miles after spending the night in Beebe. While in Jacksonville, Bennett lodged with the George Percy family.

On Friday, September 27th, arriving in Little Rock Arkansas, Jimmy went on a sightseeing tour and was interviewed on



Billy Ballard, and Jimmy D. Bennett In Hollywood - Relating The Route of Their Horse-back Trip To Actor Gene Autry (Center)

a radio program. State Senator Clyde E. Byrd took Bennett over the grounds of a new livestock project, which is being built. Bennett told of his travels, which began September 8th from his hometown of Franklin Tennessee in the radio broadcast. His plans on leaving early Saturday on another portion of his trip to Fort Worth and westward.

Arriving on Thursday in Texarkana, Bennett stabled his new mount, "Tex" on the Texas side of the state line, while he himself remained in Arkansas. "I wanted to be able to say I was finally in Texas," he said in his Arkansas hotel. "I rode over into the Texas side a while ago and left my horse there. I finally made it." He said he would give himself and his horse a rest until tomorrow night when he starts on the final lap of his journey to Fort Worth, one of his goals on the way to California. Expecting the trip to Fort Worth, taking about eight days, he said "I'm going to take it slow and easy because I've been pushing too hard recently and my horses have been giving out on me. I figure I've got a good mount now that will carry me in." Bennett has been notified that a big celebration has been promised him when he reaches Fort Worth. After staying here for several days, he will get in the saddle again, for California beckons, and maybe Hollywood.

Greenville Texas welcomed Jimmy and Tex Tuesday night, October 8th. Tex is his sixth horse used in the long ride from Franklin Tennessee. Bennett appeared quite weary. With only about \$50.00 left he said, "the trip has been awfully expensive and if I don't get a sponsor, it will soon be necessary for me to stop because of lack of



A Western Shirt Presented to Jimmy D. on his trip by a Fort Worth Businessman. Embroidered On The Shirt: To Jimmy, With High Regards and Best Wishes, From Leon Harris

money." The trip to date has cost him \$725 and his savings are just about depleted. Meanwhile, plans for welcoming the young rider to Fort Worth Saturday were being completed by the Chamber of Commerce.

Jimmy Bennett, the horse-riding Tennessee, got a hair cut, threw a leg over his mount, Tex, in Vickery, Texas and then headed for Grapevine where the citizens were to entertain him with a dinner, before he rides into Fort Worth tomorrow. Jimmy said, "his horse, Tex, who had not worn shoes, until Bennett purchased him in Arkansas, is getting pretty sore but has been standing up pretty well.

(The following is Bennett's account of his reception in Fort Worth and his travels into California - written soon after returning home)

There's no doubt about it—Fort Worth, Texas gave me the most rip snorting big hello I got in that whole horseback ride from Middle Tennessee to California.

I was pretty blue and discouraged by the time I hit that town; California seemed further away than when I'd left home. But brother, when I left Fort Worth, thinking of everything those people had done for me—I knew in my bones, it would really be California or bust.

I've got to hand it to that Fort Worth Chamber of Commerce. Lord knows what those Texas people saw in a country boy riding a lame nag; but I don't believe old Sam Houston himself, if he'd come riding back to Texas, could have been treated any better.

Do you think those folks waited for me to ride into town? Not on your life. A special delegation met me 20 miles outside the city limits, with a trailer for Tex and a limousine for me. A big crew of mounted cowboys was waiting for us, as we drove into town. I rode downtown at the head of a parade, with cowboys riding and whooping alongside the car.

The parade stopped at the courthouse, long enough for me to shake hands with a bunch of city and county officials. After that, we drove on to the Hotel Texas, where a swell luncheon, in my honor, was waiting for me. But that was just the beginning. I was taken on a tour of the city; I was introduced to crowds at a rodeo; and I went nightclub stepping, as a guest of the city.

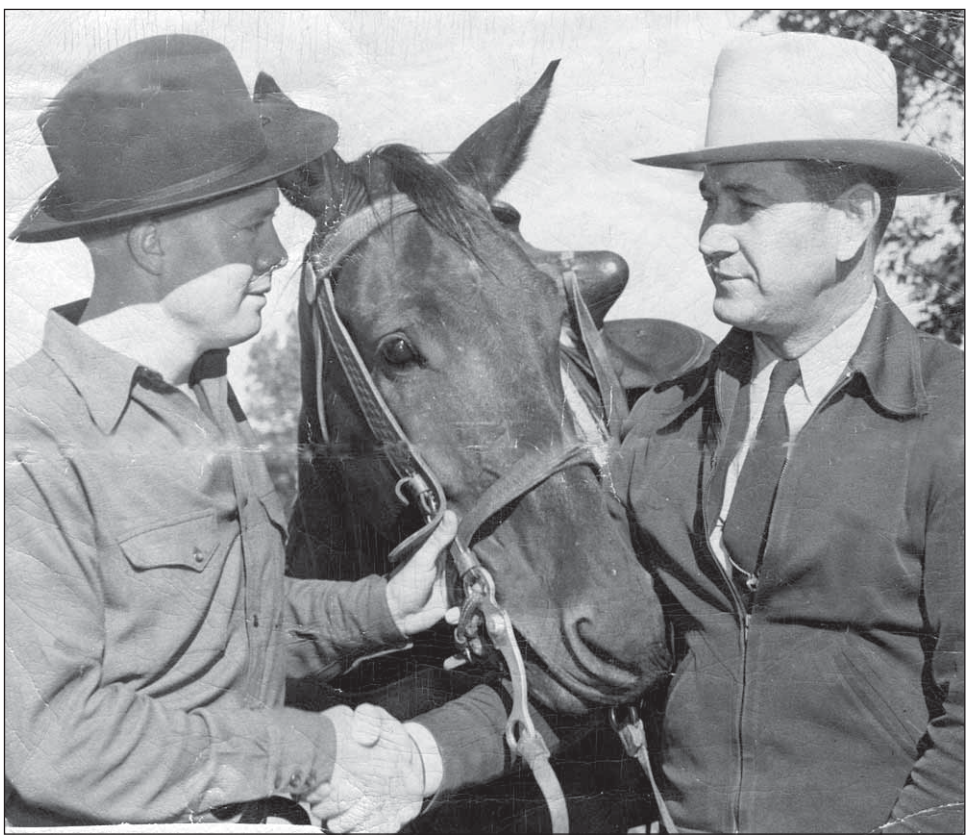
Before I left there, a week later, I'd been given a new horse (his name was Lone Ranger), a fancy jacket, a western belt and a Texas hat. Amon G. Carter handed the hat to me personally. He's one of the real big boys down there, you know; I guess everybody in Texas and a lot of people outside of it, know who he is.

It was the middle of October, then; I'd already been on the road more than a month. If I was ever going to tear away from Fort Worth—it was time to get going. "How far is it to California, from here?" I asked. "Oh, say about 1800 miles," was the answer I got. Phew! I wondered if my wisdom teeth would still be in place, after 1800 more miles of jolting. So far my trip had cost me \$750. That was a lot more than I had thought the whole trip would cost. But I knew I wasn't going to quit now, even if I had to eat cactus and feed my horse sagebrush. I wired my brother for more money, and he came through with a loan that took the pressure off for a while.

Texas— isn't like a state, it's like a whopping big country all by itself. The long, dusty hours, and the days and the weeks dragged by. I watched the sun go up and the sun go down without seeming to gain an inch. I felt like a fly stuck in the middle of a sheet of flypaper, which stretched to the horizon all around. I was a solid month crossing Texas from Fort Worth to El Paso—a third of the whole time it took me to ride from Tennessee to the California border.

I haven't told you about the buddy I picked up in Odessa. His name was Billy Ballard and he was 16 years old; a nice kid and a spunky one. The first I heard of him, he called me at my hotel and said he was going to ride on to California with me. He had begged his parents into letting him go along; I couldn't say no and besides I guess I was ready for company by that time. "What sort of horse are you riding?" I asked him. All excited, he answered, "It's a pet mule, a little old trick mule I own. She'll lie down, roll over, sit up and shake hands with you!" The next day I shook hands with Judy, the trick mule. She had a twinkle in her eye. I didn't know whether to like it or not.

You've seen a big clown run around a circus ring with a little clown racing along behind him? We must have looked something like that, the day Billy Ballard and I rode out of Billy's hometown of Odessa, Texas—with me a pretty big fellow on a big horse and Billy, a little guy on a two-bit sized trick mule.



Bill Pharr (right), representing the Chamber of Commerce welcomes Jimmy D. Bennett and his horse "Tex" to Fort Worth Texas.

It turned out that Bill had joined me because he had the same general idea about California that I had; that maybe he could land some sort of small movie job in Hollywood—if not for himself, then at least for Judy, his mule.

I learned to respect that animal before we got to California. She outlasted two horses of mine; she went for California just as though it was a bale of hay over the next hill. She even got so she could walk in her sleep. Judy was sort of a perpetual motion machine on four legs. Dan, the horse I left Fort Worth on, lasted longer than any of the eleven I rode during the trip. He made it all the way across Texas to El Paso. He might even have been able to go on from there, but I knew that New Mexico would be pretty rugged and as far as I was concerned he'd already won his good conduct medal. In El Paso, I swapped him for a horse named Pineapple, the ninth one—and had to lay a ten-dollar bill on his back to cinch the deal.

All this time, Billy and I had been stopping off, every night at any ranch or farmhouse that was hospitable enough to let us in. Sometimes there wasn't room enough for us; we slept a good many times in barns, or on back porches. Whenever we passed through towns big enough we'd usually treat ourselves to a hotel room and a hot bath. We'd take turn about in the tub, soaking the dust out.

It's a long way between towns after you've crossed the Pecos. There were a lot of friendly truck drivers, though. Time and again they'd stop and talk to us. Sometimes, when their trucks were empty, they'd offer a lift to all four of us—Billy, my horse, Billy's mule and me. But I'd already sworn I wouldn't fudge on my own proposition, so we just thanked the drivers and jogged on. Sometimes it was hard to watch those empty trucks roar away out of sight.

We stayed in El Paso only a couple of days. The people down there gave us a swell welcome, but we weren't getting any richer day by day, and California wasn't getting any closer.

New Mexico—I reckon it's a wonderful scenic sort of state—from a train window. In our cut-off swing down toward Arizona, we were in New Mexico six days and nights. They were the toughest of that whole trip. Sometimes we didn't have the heart to ride up those horse-killing mountains; we got off and walked. At night we'd be so worn out that we'd just flop down in our blankets and sleep. That is, if it wasn't too cold to sleep.

I didn't get to ride the Fort Worth gift

horse, Lone Ranger. He hurt his leg while he was tied up at the rodeo I attended, and I had to go on without him. Finally they shipped him on to me at Big Springs, in a trailer. But he still wasn't shipshape, so I sold him for \$50. By that time I was riding my eighth horse, Dan; I got him as an even swap for Tex.

People have asked me whether I carried any sort of a weapon on that jog to California. No, I didn't have a gun—not even a pocketknife. You see, I figured that if I didn't look for trouble, it probably wouldn't look for me. I reckon one squint would have told any experienced robber, that all my stuff put together, wouldn't be worth the stick up necessary to get it.

It's funny, but along about this time I began to get a good deal of fan mail. Some of the letters came from as far away as Chicago and New York. I'd find them waiting for me in towns I rode into, along with letters from home. I'd ride along, reading them, letting the reins hang loose. There were letters of advice, letters wishing me good luck and letters that said I was just a plain d___ fool.

A few days riding across Texas, will teach any man, that he's a mighty little part of America. We got pretty hungry, during



Jimmy D. Bennett "Moving With The Music"

those six days. You see, we were in country that was practically uninhabited; and it was so wild and weird and hard to travel that we couldn't calculate how far we'd make it in any one day. We lived off a few cans of pork and beans during that time—as long as they lasted. We couldn't stock up with canned stuff; it weighs too much.

Once or twice we rode by Indian reservations. They seemed to make Billy a little nervous. He'd spur ahead of me on his funny little mule and keep looking back to see if I was hurrying, too. Maybe I wanted to, more than I admitted.

Sand, sagebrush, giant cactus plants and a broiling sun-- that's Arizona. It was tough, but not as bad as New Mexico. By this time I was on my tenth horse, Shorty. He had it rough, among those prairie-dog holes. Sometimes he'd sink into them up to his chest and it would take Billy and me both to haul him out. Judy was pretty light footed, but once she turned a somersault that wasn't in her book of tricks. Billy came out of that header with a black eye.

I remember walking up one night as we were sleeping in the sand. Something was shoving against my side. It was that mule, Judy. She had gotten cold, I reckon and had come over to lie down beside me and snuggle up against me, for warmth.

There were two days in a row when I had to lead Shorty, on foot. Every mile or so I'd have to stop and rest in the shade of some big cactus plant. Lonesome," we were glad to see even a jackrabbit by that time. The Arizona desert is one place where KilRoy never left his name.

At Gila Bend, I let Shorty go, for a mare that was misnamed. She was called Angel. The first thing Angel did was to clamp the bit between her teeth and run away with me. I had to fight her for two miles.

The big day finally came when I crossed over from Yuma and stepped down on the soil of California. I had made it.

It was December 8, 1946 exactly three months to the day since I'd cantered out of far-a- way, Franklin, Tennessee. I would have hugged that California ground if I could have gotten my arms around it.

From Yuma, I had called Gene Autry's secretary in Hollywood. He told Billy and me to come on to Hollywood, that Gene would be glad to talk to us.

We didn't want to ride in. You see, I'd already accomplished what I set out to do—make it to California on horseback. We paid a man \$50 to take Angel and Judy on to Los Angeles in a trailer and we caught a bus.

Gene Autry was grand to us; we were his guests in Hollywood, and the photographers made all sorts of pictures of us, with him. But as for getting into the movies—well, Billy and I weren't any beauty contest winners and Judy certainly wasn't. Republic Studios, where Gene worked, told me I'd need a lot more practice, but said they'd start me off on bit parts, maybe, if I'd hang around. I thanked them, but I couldn't—by the time I had exactly enough money left for bus fare home. Besides, I knew I wasn't any actor; and I hadn't let myself take the Hollywood idea, any too seriously. All I really took seriously, was that idea of riding a horse to California.

I was lucky enough to sell Angel for \$50, so I had plenty of square meals on my way home. I told Billy and Judy good by in Los Angeles; he had decided to stay over and visit relatives.

Am I glad I sweated out that ride? Sure I am. It cost me \$1350 and a daily beating for three months—but it was worth it. Besides, what other old man, in the years to come, can take his grandchildren on his knee and say: "Now, that time I rode to California on 11 different horses.

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Although Jimmy, described as a young Van Johnson, didn't make it in the movies,

he returned home and led a very successful life. On July 15, 1949 he married Miss Mattie Ruth Beasley. They have a son, Jimmy D. Bennett III, 3grandchildren and 3great grandchildren. He farmed and worked at Avco for several years. In 1958 he was elected as the Register of Deeds, Williamson County and held that position for 28 years, retiring in 1986. Today, at almost 88 years old, Jimmy D. and his wife, Ruth, still lead a very active life. If there happens to be music and dance in the area, more than likely, you'll find Jimmy D. doing some fancy steps on the dance floor.

Unlike many people, Jimmy had a dream and was able to follow it. He has three months of unique memories, a scrapbook of articles and pictures, memorabilia, and the much-worn saddle that carried him to California, to remind him of this courageous adventure he made as a 23 year old, almost 64 years ago. I sure he has special memories of Ramblin' Boy, Sad Sack, Roxie, Tony, Billy, Tex, Dan, Long Ranger, Pineapple, Shorty and Angel, his horses, that helped him to make a dream come true.