



WHEN CHESTER FORGOT TO LIMP

And other
fond recollections
of 20 years
of 'Gunsmoke'

By Bill O'Hallaren

James Arness, left, and Dennis Weaver on the Gunsmoke set.

Now that *Gunsmoke* has been dropped after 20 years, it's only right for the heavy thinkers to begin pondering what all those shows have meant to our perceptions of morality and violence, not to mention our images of U.S. marshals, saloon girls and ear-tugging frontier medics. But a series that ran that long is also priceless to trivia collectors, the dedicated ones who can argue all night over the name of Matt's horse, whether Chester ever forgot to limp and the extent of Doc's medical training. Herewith a starter course in little things we may not have known about one of TV's classics, volunteered

by some of its producers and writers.

On Sept. 10, 1955, John Wayne appeared on CBS to introduce *Gunsmoke* to TV. He said it would be a different type of Western, starring a young friend of his named James Arness. That night you could practically hear the hissing of multitudes of radio fans who were enraged that the cast of the radio "Gunsmoke" hadn't moved to TV. Not only did William Conrad, the radio Matt, fail to make it, but it was widely reported then and since that Arness himself was a second choice to Wayne, who had been offered and had seriously considered accepting the role.

Bosh, says Norman Macdonnell, who helped create "Gunsmoke" on radio and produced it for nine years on TV. "Wayne was a big movie star and wouldn't have considered TV for a minute. It was just a publicity story."

But it's a story that still irritates Charles Marquis Warren, the novelist, screenwriter, producer and director who brought *Gunsmoke* to TV. "I hired Jim Arness on the strength of a picture he'd done for me. At the last minute he decided being on the little screen might not lead anywhere and he asked his friend Wayne to help get him out of his contract. Wayne not only advised Arness to take the show but volunteered to give it a send-off. I never thought for a moment of offering it to Wayne. But to this day even some of the cast go around repeating that story."

Twenty-six actors were tested for the marshal's role, including Raymond Burr. "His voice was fine," Warren recalls, "but he was too big. When he stood up, his chair stood up with him."

An actor named John Pickard almost won, but finally lost out when he floundered in a love scene with Kitty. "Pickard never knew how close he came to immortality," Warren says.

After much pressure from columnists and fans, Warren gave Conrad a test but admits he never had any intention of using him. Warren also hired Dennis Weaver, Milburn Stone and Amanda Blake; Weaver and Stone because of good work in Warren movies and Blake because she sat in his outer office day after day and wouldn't leave until she was signed. At one point he told her, "I've seen you on TV and you aren't any good." She persuaded him to look again. It turned out he had been watching the wrong girl.

The three other *Gunsmoke* producers in those 20 years, Macdonnell, Philip Leacock and John Mantley, had their problems, but at least they inherited a show in which the principal actors were set and accepted.

Chester's limp is the result of a night

in a saloon. Warren and Weaver were drinking martinis in a bar across from CBS (this was before Weaver became a fervent teetotaler) and "after the fourth martini I told Dennis it bothered me that this strong, healthy-looking young man was only a hanger-on. If Chester just had some infirmity . . ." They practiced the limp "until the bartender threw us out. We continued on the sidewalk until a squad car pulled up. The cops didn't believe our story for a minute."

Warren believes the scene where Chester forgot to limp was in the 34th episode. "None of us noticed it in the filming or editing, but about a million viewers spotted it. Many letters simply said, 'Thank God, Chester is cured.'"

In defiance of the tradition of Champion, Trigger and similar greats, Matt's horse didn't have a name and never once saved his life or led the way to the outlaws' hideaway. This was the idea of John Meston, who wrote 378 radio and TV *Gunsmokes* and probably did more than anyone else to set the style. Meston knew Westerners of the 1870s rarely got sentimental over horses. (Even here trivia hunters can find an exception because there's at least one show where Matt addresses the horse as "Buck," strictly an ad-lib.)

The greatest number of viewer complaints over the years concerned Matt's horse. Why did they have such a little horse carrying that huge man? The problem is Arness is so big he would make even a Percheron look abused.

Mantley believes the most spectacular *Gunsmoke* scene involved an elaborate three-camera setup in which a horse falls on Festus. It drew bags of mail, all inquiring about the horse, not one letter asking after Festus.

The most dramatic show, in Mantley's opinion, was the one in which Matt rides into a five-man ambush on the streets of Dodge. As Festus and Kitty look on, Doc proclaims Matt dead and the three walk away "and the scene →

continued

ends with a shot of that huge carcass lying there all alone." Surveys showed viewer attention for the rest of the show was probably at an all-time high.

If the streets of Dodge often looked vaguely unreal, it's because there were seldom any kids or dogs. A child actor would have to have a teacher and a nurse, and a dog would need a trainer and a Humane Association rep. A single shot of a stray dog could cost \$500 or more.

Where was the Dodge City sheriff? Matt was the U.S. marshal responsible for the entire territory, but a city the size of Dodge would also have had a sheriff. It amuses the producers that hardly anyone seems to have noticed.

The *Gunsmoke* principals improved greatly in stability and virtue over the years. Macdonnell describes the original Matt as "a lonely, sad, tragic man, unhappy, confused. These days we'd send him to an analyst." Of the early Doc, Macdonnell says, "I always

thought he performed illegal operations in the back room of the Long Branch." Kathleen Hite, who wrote 50 *Gunsmokes* in the Macdonnell era, thought Doc had a terrible booze problem. The early Kitty was a prostitute who worked all the Dodge City saloons. Amanda Blake was asked how many times Kitty was menaced by lecherous cowboys. "Good God, dozens of times. It's all the writers could think of. That's like asking how many times Matt was shot in the shoulder."

Mantley notes the show became so prim in recent years that a man could go upstairs in the Long Branch only if he intended to kill somebody.

Arness, a towhead, was ordered by Warren to dye his hair, and it stayed dyed for 20 years.

The performer who worked longest on *Gunsmoke* is also the most unknown. George Walsh was the announcer on all but a few of the radio "Gunsmoke"s and all 20 years of the TV version. He

needed only to drop in every couple of months to record his lines.

Dodge City never had a resident minister, though there were about half a dozen shows involving itinerant men of God. Warren ordered a church built on the original set "but it was only to hide the view of another set."

The producers believe Matt is the first TV hero to drink simply because he enjoyed it. In early years he wasn't allowed to say "Damn!" but he developed an expression, when faced with vexation, that said it clearly, causing censors to say "Damn."

The biggest public reaction to a new character was Burt Reynolds' 1962 appearance as Quint Asper. His first show drew more than 4000 letters.

For years Meston lived in Paris and Mexico and mailed in his scripts. Macdonnell says, "I shot whatever John sent me and it worked fine."

Macdonnell believes "The biggest tragedy about *Gunsmoke* is that Meston

and I never had a piece of it. The second biggest is that Meston, the best Western writer, has never been properly honored." Macdonnell and Meston live a few blocks apart in the San Fernando Valley and talk of returning with another Western series. So do Warren, Hite, Mantley and Arness.

Mantley complains, "Hollywood hasn't watched *Gunsmoke* for years, so it hasn't been considered for Emmys and the like. But the rest of the country always loved it."

From Warren: "No one likes to remember they were discovered. The stars of *Gunsmoke* don't remember they read for me and were tested by me and hired by me."

No matter, *Gunsmoke* reruns will go on and on. And for the die-hards who still don't think Arness is right for Marshal Dillon, 52 episodes of the original radio "Gunsmoke" have just gone into syndication, starring, of course, William Conrad. (END)