

JIM ARNESS

What is the price of TV stardom?

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HOLLYWOOD.

FIVE YEARS AGO the name Jim Arness, plus 20 cents, could buy you a cup of coffee in any filmland restaurant.

Today the same name, without a penny, brings unlimited credit, the fawning of every headwaiter in town, daily offers to endorse, at \$1,000 a crack, a variety of products from saddles to soap.

The reason, of course, is that Jim Arness is the star of *Gunsmoke*, television's No. 1 program. This western, which went on the air in 1955, is currently viewed each week by 30 to 40 million watchers. To many of them big Jim Arness as Marshal Matt Dillon of Dodge City is the bravest, most reliable heroic character on television.

To Arness, (36, 6 feet 6½, 230 pounds) "these past five years have been like a dream. Yesterday we finished our 195th *Gunsmoke* episode, and on the way home I took inventory of things. And for a guy who a few years ago was living the life of a beach bum, I've done pretty well. I've got a Thunderbird, a 1,000-acre ranch and a 40-foot boat. I've also got my own production company. I've also got three fine kids [see cover].

"In fact the only thing I haven't got is a marriage. Virginia and I are busted up. That's the price I've had to pay for success. It's a darn high one, too. And I don't think I'll get married again, not for many, many years. Not until the kids have grown up. This TV business is not conducive to successful marriages."

Because of his huge bulk, Big Jim gives the impression that he is the type of friendly, easy-going extrovert who rarely examines the inner workings of conscience. The truth is that he is an extraordinarily sensitive, intelligent, objective and analytical man.

The Road to Crisis

A few months ago when his wife apparently attempted suicide in Honolulu because of their separation, Arness did everything he could to help. Then one evening when the mess was over and he had succeeded in restoring some workable balance to their relationship, he sat down and reconstructed turn by turn the road of his life that had brought him to this crisis.

In 1942 James Arness, son of a medical supply salesman, was a freshman at Beloit College, Wisconsin. Drafted into

the Army, he was shipped overseas with the 3d Infantry Division, was badly wounded in Italy. Jim got his discharge in 1945 with a small disability pension. He went back to Minneapolis, got a job as a disc jockey at radio station WLOL.

When a friend, Dick Bremicker, decided to chance an acting career in Hollywood, Jim agreed to go along "just as excess baggage." He was 22, foot-loose and fancy-free.

In Hollywood Bremicker signed up with a Little Theatre group. Big Jim hung around during rehearsals. One day an actor failed to show up. Arness was asked to take his part. He knew the lines and gave a creditable performance.

Many agents in the movie colony have long contended that "we can take any man who is taller than 6 feet 2 with a pleasant personality and make him into a movie star—not an actor but a movie star." Arness possessed these requisites. After acting at the Bliss-Hayden Theatre in Beverly Hills a few nights, he aroused the interest of Leo Lance, an agent.

Lance took him around to meet Dore Schary, then head of RKO. Schary was casting a Loretta Young starrer, *The Farmer's Daughter*. A strong believer in young talent, Schary offered Big Jim a job at \$250 a week for three weeks. Since Arness had never been in front of a movie camera, Schary thought the salary a fair one. Agent Lance didn't.

"Look, Dore," he said, "this boy is a war veteran. He was shot*to pieces at Anzio. He needs the dough. Give him a break."

On The Beach

Schary raised the ante to \$400 a week. The picture lasted 17 weeks, and Arness ended up with \$5,000, after taxes. This was more money than he'd ever had. He slipped into his old car, equipped with stove and sleeping bag, drove to Mexico, lived on the beaches for almost a year until his money ran out.

Back to Hollywood he came for another stake; only this time no one in pictures would hire him. He worked as a carpenter, a salesman, a day laborer. When it was warm he slept on the beaches, when it was cold, in a sleeping bag in the rear of his car. He existed on his small monthly GI check, and gradually he became discouraged, disillusioned, embittered.

A tall, attractive, well-built girl he met at the Pasadena Playhouse brought a little sunshine and purpose into his life. Her



Before TV success, Jim Arness and wife Virginia spent happy hours together.