



James Arness talks about 'Gunsmoke'

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Associated Press

Tuesday, July 2, 2002

LOS ANGELES (AP) -- Some actors cringe at the thought of looking at performances they gave years ago. Not James Arness. The longtime Marshal Matt Dillon of Dodge City watches TV reruns of Gunsmoke every day.

But he is no Norma Desmond, who gloried in viewing her silent movie triumphs in Sunset Boulevard. Arness has seen some of the nearly 600 shows before. Now, though, he says, "I can enjoy them all. With Gunsmoke, we had an outstanding quality of writing. The show had been on radio for three years, so they were able to fine-tune the characters," he said. "What made us different from other westerns was the fact that Gunsmoke wasn't just action and a lot of shooting; they were character-study shows. They're interesting to watch all these years later."

The venerable series holds the record as the longest-running dramatic TV series in prime time. It placed in the top 10 of the audience ratings during 13 of its 20 years as a weekly show on CBS. Two-hour Gunsmoke specials appeared on CBS into the '90s.

"We're the only TV series that has appeared in five consecutive decades," Arness said.

At 79, the actor evidences the years he spent in the saddle. A bad back causes him to lean forward. A knee will only bend part way; it was originally damaged by German machine gun fire in the Anzio landing in the Second World War.

"What I really need is a bone replacement," he jokes. His face retains his craggy handsomeness, and the voice possesses the same authority he had when he advised the bad guys: "Lay your pistols down-- now!"

Interviewers remember Arness as a reticent subject during his Gunsmoke heyday. Now he reveals his life in detail with James Arness: An Autobiography (McFarland & Co).

The book originated when James Wise, an author and former navy captain, interviewed Arness for a book about actors' war experiences. Wise suggested that Arness tell his life story in a book, and the actor agreed. For almost a year, Arness and his wife, Janet, talked into a tape recorder and sent the tapes off to

Wise in Virginia.

Don't look for any sensationalism in the book; that's not Arness' style. The book does reveal the saga of a shy boy who grew up tall in Minneapolis and spent vacations in the Minnesota woods. He was studying at Beloit College when the war broke out. His ambition was to become a navy pilot, but his height, six feet and seven inches, disqualified him. His Anzio wounds landed him in the hospital for 18 months, and during that time he became involved with an acting group.

Discharged with a bronze medal and Purple Heart, he enrolled at a radio announcing school in Minneapolis, and he worked as a disc jockey and announcer at a local station. On a lark, he and a buddy drove to Los Angeles. His mother predicted he would never return. She was right.

An appearance at a little theatre led to an RKO contract and his first movie, *The Farmer's Daughter*, as one of Loretta Young's three brothers. More featured roles followed, including the horror classic *The Thing*.

Then came the fateful interview with John Wayne at his Republic Studio office.

"He asked me a couple of questions about my acting," Arness recalled. "Then he said, 'The main thing I have to know, is -- do you drink?' I didn't want to say, because I didn't know him at the time; maybe he was a teetotaler. I said, 'Well, I have been known to take one occasionally.' We got a laugh out of that, and he put me on the picture, *Big Jim McLain*."

Arness appeared in four Wayne films during three years under contract to him.

Arness was reluctant to test for *Gunsmoke*, fearing the series might not last and would brand him as a TV actor.

Wayne advised him: "This is something you should really do. When I was starting out, I did a lot of quickie westerns and serials. You learn so much: how to handle yourself before the camera, how to ride, do stunts. Plus you'll get a tremendous audience of people who will know who you are." Wayne even did an intro to the first episode of the series, Sept. 10, 1955.

Gunsmoke, scheduled on Saturday night against the popular *George Gobel Show*, failed to score among the top 25 rated series in the first season. The western jumped to 8th the following season and reigned as No. 1 from 1957 to 1961. Its success prompted a land rush of imitators; at one time 30 westerns appeared in prime time. *Gunsmoke* outlived them all.

Much of the show's popularity was due to the interplay of the four leads: Arness as the implacable do-righter; Dennis Weaver as his limping aide, Chester; Amanda Blake as the softhearted saloon boss, Kitty; Milburn Stone as Doc Stone, dispensing pills and wisdom.

"When you see the shows, as I'm doing now, you realize the amazing qualities these people had," commented Arness at his Brentwood home. "The four actors and the four characters they played just fit hand-in-glove."

Stone died in 1980, Blake in 1989. Weaver left the show in 1964 and was replaced by Ken Curtis playing a similar character, Festus Haggen. Other actors came and went, including Burt Reynolds, who played the village smithy for two years before moving on to other pursuits.

The end of Gunsmoke came with a whimper in 1975.

"We didn't do a final, wrap-up show," Arness recalled. "We finished the 20th year, we all expected to go on for another season, or two or three. The (network) never told anybody they were thinking of cancelling."

The cast and crew learned of the cancellation in typical Hollywood fashion: They read it in the trades.

Besides the two-hour Gunsmoke movies, Arness appeared in the mini-series How the West Was Won, the police series MacLaine's Law, and the TV movies The Alamo and Red River, playing the role created by mentor John Wayne.

Then Arness' war injury flared up, and he spent six months recovering from an operation. To his great sorrow, he had to abandon his two favourite pursuits: surfing and skiing.

The question often asked by Gunsmoke fans: Why didn't Matt and Kitty ever get hitched?

"If they were man and wife, it would make a lot of difference," he said. "The people upstairs decided it was better to leave the show as it was, which I totally agreed with."