

Gunsmoke Notes

In the late 1940's, CBS chairman William S. Paley asked his programming chief, Hubell Robinson, to develop a hardcore Western series. Robinson delegated this to his West Coast CBS vice president, Harry Ackerman. Ackerman and his scriptwriters, Mort Fine and David Friedkin, created an audition script called "Mark Dillon Goes to Gouge Eye". Two versions were recorded. CBS liked one of the versions better and Ackerman was told to proceed. Due to a contract dispute with one of the actors, the project was suspended for three years.

As a result from this delay, Norman Macdonnell and writer John Meston created a new radio Western for adults set in Dodge City, Kansas. The show was called *Gunsmoke*.

The radio series first aired on CBS on April 26, 1952 and ended on June 18, 1961. The show starred William Conrad as Marshal Matt Dillon, Howard McNear (Floyd the barber on *The Andy Griffith Show*) as Doc Charles Adams, Georgia Ellis as Kitty Russell and Parley Baer (Darby on *The Adventures of Ozzie and Harriet*) as Dillon's assistant, Chester Wesley Proudfoot.

Not long after the radio show began, talk began of adapting it to television. The television series ran from September 10, 1955, to March 31, 1975 on CBS with a total of 635 episodes.

When *Gunsmoke* was adapted for television in 1955, the network was not interested in bringing either Conrad or his radio costars to television. Denver Pyle was considered for the role, as was Raymond Burr. It was rumored that John Wayne was offered the role of Matt Dillon. According to Dennis Weaver, John Wayne was never even considered for the role. To have done so would have been preposterous, since Wayne was a top movie leading man.

The primary roles were all recast, with James Arness as Marshal Matt Dillon, Dennis Weaver as Chester Goode, Milburn Stone as Dr. G. "Doc" Adams (the G. later specified as standing for Galen), and Amanda Blake as Miss Kitty Russell.

In 1975, CBS made the decision not to renew *GunsSmoke* for a 21st season, without making any public announcement or informing the producers or cast members ahead of time. According to Arness, "We didn't do a final, wrap-up show. 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 *GunsSmoke* radio theme song and later television theme is titled "Old Trails". It is also known as "Boothill". The *GunsSmoke* theme was composed by Rex Koury. The lyrics of the theme never aired on the radio or television show. However, they were recorded and released by Tex Ritter in 1955.

From 1955 to 1961, the format was a half-hour with 223 episodes. From 1961 to 1966, the show became one-hour black-and-white with 198 episodes. Finally from 1966 to 1975, the series concluded with one-hour 204 color episodes.

In 1987, a reunion movie titled *GunsSmoke: Return To Dodge*, starred James Arness and Amanda Blake in their roles of Matt Dillon and Miss Kitty. Fran Ryan was Kitty's friend and saloon-owner Hannah with Buck Taylor as Newly O'Brian. Milburn Stone had died seven years earlier in 1980. The role of Doc was not recast. Ken Curtis balked at the salary offer he received. The screenwriters responded to Curtis's demands by omitting his character and making Newly the new Dodge City marshal. The film featured a now-retired Marshal Dillon being attacked and a vengeful former rival returning to Dodge City to entrap him.

In 1990, the second film for television, *Gunsmoke: The Last Apache*, premiered. Amanda Blake had died the year before. The film was dedicated to her. Three more *Gunsmoke* films were made: *Gunsmoke: To The Last Man* in 1992, *Gunsmoke: The Long Ride* in 1993 and *Gunsmoke: One Man's Justice* in 1994. James Arness starred in all five made-for-television movies.

Over the years, *Gunsmoke* was nominated 15 times for Emmy Awards in various categories, winning five times.

Episode for class:

Robin Hood - Aired February 4, 1956

James Arness (Matt Dillon) - was born James King Aurness in Minneapolis. The family name had been Aursnes, but when James' grandfather, Peter Aursnes, emigrated from Norway in 1887, he changed it to Aurness.

While recuperating in a hospital in Clinton, Iowa, Arness was visited by his younger brother Peter (later actor Peter Graves), who suggested he take a radio course at the University of Minnesota. James did and a teacher recommended him for a job as an announcer at a Minneapolis radio station.

In time, Arness went with the friend to Hollywood to find work as a film extra. His first film role was *The Farmer's Daughter* with Loretta Young in 1947. The director of that film, H.C. Potter, recommended that he drop the "u" from his last name. The actor was now known as James Arness.

In addition to Westerns, Arness acted in two science-fiction films, *The Thing From Another World* and *Them!*. He was a close friend of John Wayne and appeared in supporting roles in *Big Jim McLain*, *Hondo*, *Island In The Sky* and *The Sea Chase* with Wayne. Arness starred in *Gun The Man Down* for Wayne's production company. He also starred in a 1988 television remake of Wayne's 1948 classic *Red River*, appearing in Wayne's role as Tom Dunson.

He was the only actor to appear in all 635 episodes of *Gunsmoke*. Arness and his brother, Peter Graves never acted on screen together. Graves did direct Arness in the *Gunsmoke* episode *Which Dr.* in 1966.

James Arness was nominated for an Emmy Award three times for his portrayal of Matt Dillon on *Gunsmoke*, never winning. He has a star on The Hollywood Walk Of Fame located at 1751 Vine Street, dedicated on February 8, 1960.

Amanda Blake (Miss Kitty Russell) - was born Beverly Louise Neill in Buffalo, New York. After signing her official contract with MGM in 1948, Beverly changed her name to Amanda Blake because she wanted something a bit more "snappy."

She made her film debut in *Stars In My Crown* and also appeared in over a dozen movies and television shows in the early 1950's.

After her days on *Gunsmoke*, she made many guest appearances on shows such as *Alfred Hitchcock Presents*, *The Red Skelton Show*, *The Dean Martin Comedy Roasts*, *Tattletales*, *Match Game*, and *The Love Boat*.

In 1968, Blake was inducted into the Hall of Great Western Performers at the National Cowboy and Western Heritage Museum in Oklahoma City. In 1959, she was nominated for and Emmy as Best Supporting Actress (Continuing Character) in a Dramatic Series (*Gunsmoke*).

Dennis Weaver (Chester Goode) - William Dennis Weaver was born in Joplin, Missouri. Weaver's first role on Broadway was as an understudy to Lonny Chapman as Turk Fisher in *Come Back, Little Sheba*. He made his film debut in *The Redhead From Wyoming* with Maureen O'Hara in 1953. His big break came when he landed the role of Chester Goode on *Gunsmoke*. In 1958, he formed a singing trio with Milburn Stone and Amanda Blake. During his days on *Gunsmoke*, Weaver could be also be seen in other television programs and films such as *Touch Of Evil*, *Alfred Hitchcock Presents* and *The Twilight Zone*.

His next successful role began in 1970, Weaver he starred in the series *McCloud*. Weaver received two Emmy Award nominations in 1974 and again 1975.

From 1973 to 1975, Dennis Weaver was president of the Screen Actors Guild. After *McCloud*, he made multiple appearances on television series such as *Stone*, *Emerald Point N.A.S.*, *Buck James* and *The Great Battles Of The Civil War*.

Dennis Weaver has a star on the Hollywood Walk of Fame at 6822 Hollywood Blvd. for his work in television. He was also acknowledged on the Dodge City, Kansas Trail of Fame. In 1981, he was inducted into the Hall of Great Western Performers with the Bronze Wrangler Award at the National Cowboy & Western Heritage Museum in Oklahoma City, Oklahoma.

Milburn Stone (Doc Adams) - Hugh Milburn Stone was born in Burrton, Kansas. In 1919, Stone made his debut on stage in a Kansas stage show followed by some time in vaudeville during the late 1920's. In 1930, he was half of the Stone and Strain song-and-dance act. Not too long after that, Stone came to Los Angeles and was featured in the *Tailspin Tommy* adventure serial for Monogram Pictures. In 1939, he played the part of Stephen Douglass in the movie *Young Mr. Lincoln* with Henry Fonda and Ward Bond.

During the 1940's Stone appeared in many serials and films such as *Gung Ho!*, *Captive Wild Woman*, *Jungle Woman*, *Sherlock Holmes Faces Death*, *The Great Alaskan Mystery*, *The Master Key*, *Inner Sanctum* and *Arrowhead*.

He stayed with *Guns Smoke* through its entire television run, appearing in 604 episodes through 1975. In 1968, Milburn Stone received an Emmy Award for Outstanding Performance by an Actor in a Supporting Role in a Drama for his work on *Guns Smoke*.

For his contribution to the television industry, Milburn Stone has a star on the Hollywood Walk of Fame located at 6801 Hollywood Boulevard.

William Hopper (John Henry Jordan) - In addition to his years as Paul Drake on *Perry Mason*, William Hopper could be seen in several memorable feature films like *The Bad Seed*, *Rebel Without A Cause*, *The High and The Mighty* and *Stagecoach*.

Barry Atwater (Harry Bowen) - was head of the UCLA Sound Department before becoming an actor. On television he could be seen on *Judd For The Defense*, *Perry Mason*, *One Step Beyond*, *Voyage To The Bottom Of The Sea*, *Hawaií Five-O*, *The Man From U.N.C.L.E.* and the soap opera *General Hospital*.

Nora Marlowe (Mrs. Bowen) - was best known for her role as boardinghouse owner/operator Flossie Brimmer in 27 episodes of *The Waltons*. Some of her other appearances were in *The Governor and J.J.*, *The Thomas Crown Affair*, *North By Northwest* and *Westworld*. During her 24 year career in films and television, Marlowe made over 130 supporting and guest starring roles.

James McCallion (Vince Butler) - began acting on Broadway at the age of nine opposite Leon Errol and Irene Dunn in *Yours Truly* in 1927. In time, he became a supporting actor while under contract to RKO, Warner Brothers and Universal.

McCallion was a voice-over regular on the 1930's weekly radio series *Gangbusters*, which featured stories based on actual incidents.

In real life, James was married to Nora Marlowe (mentioned above). The two appeared together in *National Velvet*, *Wagon Train* and *The Big Valley*.

S. John Launer (Judge) - Launer appeared in 89 films and television programs between 1943 and 1977. His first acting role was in *Meet Corliss Archer* in 1954. His career concluded with *Billionaire Boys Club* in 1987.

His numerous film credits include *The Werewolf*, *I Was A Teenage Werewolf*, *Pendulum*, *Jailhouse Rock*, *The Crowded Sky* and *Marnie*. Laurrer's television credits include *Father Knows Best*, *The Ford Television Theatre*, *The George Sanders Mystery Theater*, *State Trooper*, *Dr. Kildare*, *The Twilight Zone*, *Harry O* and *Dragnet*. His most famous and continuous role was for nine years as a criminal court judge on *Perry Mason*.

Episode for class:

The Big Con - Aired May 3, 1958

Raymond Bailey (Shaneways) - As a teenager he went to Hollywood and took a variety of short-term jobs. He worked as a day laborer at a movie studio in the days of silent pictures. Bailey was fired for sneaking into a mob scene while it was being filmed. He also worked for a while as a stockbroker and a banker. He was also working as a merchant seaman and sailed to many parts of the world.

Back to Hollywood in 1938, he appeared as the character of Mr. West in the action adventure serial *The Green Hornet* in 1940.

By the 1950's, Bailey was on several television programs such as *The George Burns and Gracie Allen Show*, *Private Secretary*, *The Rifleman*, *Bat Masterson*, *The Jack Benny Program*, *Bourbon Street Beat*, *77 Sunset Strip*, *Hennesey*, *The Twilight Zone*, *Bonanza*, *One Step Beyond*, *The Untouchables*, *Have Gun - Will Travel*, *Pete and Gladys*, *The Donna Reed Show*, *Bachelor Father*, *The Tom Ewell Show*, *Whirlybirds*, *Mister Ed* and *Wagon Train*. He will always be best remembered for his role as Milburn Drysdale in *The Beverly Hillbillies*.

Joseph Kearns (Mr. Papp) - Joseph Sherrard Kearns was born in Salt Lake City, Utah. He began acting at the age of nine in 1916 when he joined "The Rising Generation", a vaudeville troupe of eleven children that toured for 14 months.

In 1936, he moved to Los Angeles and began acting in radio playing the Crazyquilt Dragon in the serial *The Cinnamon Bear*. During the 1940's, he was on the shows *The Adventures of Sam Spade*, *Burns and Allen*, *The Whistler* and *Suspense*. He also appeared on *The New Adventures of Sherlock Holmes*.

Kearns made his film debut in *Hard, Fast and Beautiful* in 1951. He was the voice of the Doorknob in Walt Disney's *Alice in Wonderland* also in 1951. He appeared his final film appearance as the crime photographer in *Anatomy Of A Murder* in 1959.

On television, Kearns was on *The Jack Benny Program*, *Our Miss Brooks*, *The George Burns and Gracie Allen Show*, *The Adventures of Ozzie and Harriet*, *I Love Lucy*, *My Little Margie*, *Perry Mason*, *I Married Joan*, *December Bride* and *General Electric Theater*.

Joseph Kearns final and best remembered role was as George Wilson ("Mr. Wilson") on *Dennis The Menace* from 1959 until his death in 1962.

Alan Dexter (Hook) - In his film career, Dexter appeared in films such as *Operation Petticoat*, *The Enemy Below*, *The Mississippi Gambler*, *The Eternal Sea*, *Down Three Dark Streets*, *Sailor Beware*, *Girls in the Night* and *It Came From Outer Space*. Dexter also appeared in *The Brass Bottle* and *Paint Your Wagon*.

He guest-starred in television programs including, *The Andy Griffith Show*, *Bonanza*, *The Dick Van Dyke Show*, *That Girl*, *The Virginian*, *The Many Loves of Dobie Gillis*, *Perry Mason*, *Gomer Pyle*, *U.S.M.C.*, *The Jack Benny Program*, *The George Burns and Gracie Allen Show*, *The Twilight Zone*, *The Odd Couple*, *The Fugitive*, *Get Smart*, *Have Gun, Will Travel*, *The Untouchables* and *Ironsides*. Dexter also played Frank Ferguson in the soap opera television series *Days of Our Lives* from 1965 to 1966.

Gordon Mills (Varden) - During his 13 year career, some of Mills guest roles in television include *Sea Hunt*, *How To Marry A Millionaire*, *Peter Gunn*, *M Squad*, *Death Valley Days* and *The Millionaire*.

Perry Ivins (Mr. Hogg) - got his start on Broadway during the 1920's in small parts. When sound movies began, Ivins made his way to Hollywood and worked as a dialogue director. In time, he got work as a bit player. After an eight year absence from films, he returned in 1947 and appeared in more movies. Ivins made the transition to television, mostly in westerns like *The Adventures of Wild Bill Hickok*, *Tales of Wells Fargo* and *Wagon Train*.

REFERENCES

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