

Bonanza

Aired from September 12, 1959 to January 16, 1973 on NBC. The show was on for 14 seasons and 432 episodes.

The title "Bonanza" was used by miners in regard to a large vein or deposit of silver ore, from Spanish bonanza and commonly refers to the 1859 revelation of the Comstock Lode of rich silver ore mines under the town of Virginia City, not far from the fictional Ponderosa Ranch that the Cartwright family operated.

The show shares the weekly adventures of the Cartwright family, headed by the patriarch and three times a widower Ben Cartwright. He had three sons, each by a different wife. The eldest was the urbane architect Adam Cartwright who built the ranch house; the second was the giant Eric "Hoss" Cartwright and the youngest was the hotheaded and impetuous Joseph, better known as "Little Joe".

The family lived on a thousand square-mile ranch called the Ponderosa on the eastern shore of Lake Tahoe in Nevada opposite California on the edge of the Sierra Nevada range. The nearest town to the Ponderosa was Virginia City, where the Cartwrights would go to meet up with Sheriff Roy Coffee.

The opening scene for the first season was filmed at Lake Hemet, a reservoir in the San Jacinto Mountains, Riverside County, California and later moved to Lake Tahoe. The first Virginia City set was used on the show until 1970 and was located on a backlot at Paramount Studios in Hollywood. The show moved to the Warner Brothers studios from September of 1970 through January of 1973. The program's Nevada set, the Ponderosa Ranch house was recreated in Incline Village, Nevada in 1967. It remained a tourist attraction until its sale 37 years later in September of 2004.

In the fall of 1972, NBC moved *Bonanza* to Tuesday nights opposite *Maude*. The scheduling change, as well as Dan Blocker's death in May 1972, resulted in plunging ratings for the show. David Canary returned to his former role of Candy, to offset Hoss' absence, and a new character named Griff King was added in an attempt to attract younger viewers. The show was eventually cancelled in November of 1972 with the final episode airing on January 16, 1973.

Broadcast times:

Seasons 1 and 2 - Saturdays at 7:30PM

Seasons 3 through 13 - Sundays at 9:00PM

Season 14 - Tuesdays at 8:00PM

From September of 1964 to May of 1967, *Bonanza* was rated number one in its time slot. The opening scene for the first season was shot at Lake Hemet, a reservoir in the San Jacinto Mountains, Riverside County, California and later moved to Lake Tahoe. The first Virginia City set was located on a backlot at Paramount and used on the show until 1970. Later, the show was moved to Warner studios from September 1970 through January 1973.

Bonanza was revived for three made for television movies featuring the Cartwrights' children: *Bonanza: The Next Generation* in 1988, *Bonanza: The Return* in 1993 and *Bonanza: Under Attack* in 1995. Michael Landon Jr. played Little Joe's son, Benji while Gillian Greene, Lorne Greene's daughter, played a love interest. In the second movie, a one-hour retrospective was done to introduce the drama. It was hosted by both Michael Landon Jr. and Dirk Blocker, who looks and sounds almost exactly like his father, Dan Blocker. According to TV Guide, producer David Dortort told Blocker he was too old to play Hoss's son, but gave him the role of an unrelated newspaper reporter. Clips of the

younger Blocker's appearance and voice were heavily used in advertisements promoting the "second generation" theme. Hoss's son, Josh was born out of wedlock, as it is explained that Hoss drowned without knowing his fiancée was pregnant.

In 2001, there was an attempt to revive the *Bonanza* concept with a prequel, *Ponderosa*. This title was not to be confused with the 1972 summer reruns under the same name. The pilot directed by Simon Wincer was filmed in Australia. It covered the time when the Cartwrights first arrived at the Ponderosa, when Adam and Hoss were teenagers and Joe was a little boy. The series lasted 20 episodes. The series had less gunfire and fighting than the original.

The *Bonanza* theme song was written by Jay Livingston and Ray Evans. It was orchestrated by David Rose and arranged by Billy May.

Lorne Greene was 44 years old at the beginning of the series while Pernell Roberts and Dan Blocker, who portrayed two of his sons, were both 31, only 13 years younger. Michael Landon was 21 years younger than Greene.

NBC was spending about \$100,000 to \$150,000 per episode of *Bonanza*. This budget made the show one of the most expensive weekly television productions during that time. In the Saturday night time slot and very low ratings, the show was almost canceled. The only saving grace was that it was one of the first television shows filmed and broadcast in color.

The show was moved to Sunday evenings and slowly the ratings increased. *Bonanza* went from near cancellation to a huge success becoming the number one television show in its time slot in 1964.

Bonanza was on for 14 seasons and was the second longest running western series in the history of television. The only one to run longer than this show was *Gunsmoke*, which lasted for 20 years.

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Episode for Class:

The Roper (aired April 5, 1964)

Guy Williams was not a fan of *Bonanza*, however he needed a job and took the offer. He was unaware of the behind-the-scenes drama taking place with Pernell Roberts, who wanted out of his contract to pursue other roles. Williams was first offered the role of Adam Cartwright, but refused in order to play the role of *Zorro* instead.

With the regular and established cast of Lorne Greene, Dan Blocker, Pernell Roberts and Michael Landon, guests appearing on the show were treated like outsiders.

Williams debuted as Ben Cartwright's nephew Will on March 22, 1964 in Season 5. The plan was to make Will a regular member of the cast as a transition for Roberts to exit the show. From the beginning, tensions were forming between the cast members.

It was rumored that Michael Landon and Lorne Greene felt threatened by the studio initiating a precedent of successfully replacing one heroic leading man Cartwright with a new one, particularly in view of Williams' popularity with viewers. Many considered the five *Bonanza* episodes to be Guy Williams' best work outside of *Zorro*.

Lorne Greene - was born Lyon Himan Green in Ottawa, Ontario. Before his *Bonanza* days, Greene was a regular on the television series *Sailor Of Fortune*. Following his days on the *Ponderosa*, Greene starred in television's *Griff* and *Battlestar Galactica* and *Galactic 1980*. He was the only actor to appear in every episode of both *Galactica* series. Greene also starred for one season on the series *Code Red* based on the adventures of a Los Angeles Fire Department Battalion Chief's family and crew.

Dan Blocker - Before *Bonanza*, Blocker appeared on numerous western television programs such as *Have Gun Will Travel*, *Sugarfoot*, *Wagon Train*, *Tales Of Wells Fargo* and *Cimarron City*. Blocker's big break came in 1959, when he was cast as Eric "Hoss" Cartwright on *Bonanza* and played the role in 415 episodes.

In 1963, Blocker started and received partial ownership in a successful chain of *Bonanza* Steakhouse restaurants in exchange for serving in character as Hoss as their commercial spokesman along with making personal appearances at the franchises.

When Blocker died in May of 1972, the writers of *Bonanza* referenced his character's death in the show's storyline that Fall. This was to be the first time in television history that a show had ever mentioned the death of one of its main characters.

Pernell Roberts - On stage from the early 1950s, he gained experience in such productions as *The Adding Machine*, *The Firebrand* and *Faith Of Our Fathers*. He made his Broadway debut in 1955 with *Tonight in Samarkind* and that same year won the Best Actor Drama Desk Award for his off-Broadway performance as *Macbeth*, which was immediately followed by *Romeo and Juliet* as Mercutio.

Next, he went to Hollywood and found minor roles in films before landing the role of Ben Cartwright's oldest and best-educated son Adam in *Bonanza*. Displeased with the writing and direction of the show, he decided not to renew his contract and left at the end of the 1964-1965 season.

In 1979 he starred in the long-running series role *Trapper John, M.D.* Roberts retired from acting in the late 1990s.

Michael Landon - was born Eugene Maurice Orowitz, on October 31st, 1936 in Forest Hills, Queens, New York. He felt that his real name was not a suitable one for an aspiring actor. As a result, Michael Landon became his professional name. Landon claimed to have chosen his professional name by picking the name Michael Landon out of the Los Angeles telephone directory.

He almost got the lead role on *The Many Loves of Dobie Gillis*, which went to Dwayne Hickman.

His first big roles were in *I Was a Teenage Werewolf* from 1957 and the western *The Legend of Tom Dooley* in 1959. Actor Robert Blake turned down a co-starring role as Little Joe Cartwright on *Bonanza*. For 14 years, Landon played Little Joe Cartwright, the youngest of the three Cartwright brothers.

His second TV western for NBC was *Little House On The Prairie*. By the end of its eighth season in 1982, Landon decided to step down from this role. Next, *Highway To Heaven* in 1984 was very different from the western shows that he did for 23 years. This show focused on Jonathan Smith, an angel whose job was to save peoples' lives and work for God, his boss.

Although he was one of the biggest names in television history, Landon was never nominated for an Emmy Award in any category.

Guy Williams - born Armand (Armando to his family) Joseph Catalano on January 14, 1924 in the Bronx, New York. He learned about fencing at a young age from his father and uncle.

During the 1940's, he changed his name professionally to All-American sounding Guy Williams due to Hollywood's practice of physically typecasting people with foreign names.

After a brief contract with MGM, Williams returned to New York, he began studying with Sanford Meisner and appeared in many stage productions. By 1952, Williams was back in California under contract to Universal-International Pictures. In the mid-1950's, he found work in television eventually leading to his audition for the role of *Zorro*.

After *Zorro* ended in 1959, Williams made only one more project with Disney, *The Prince and The Pauper*.

According to Williams regarding his brief time on *Bonanza*, "I didn't like the whole session. It was very negative for me in every department because I realized I was being used." Many years later, producer David Dortort told a friend of Guy's that Michael Landon and Dan Blocker came into his office one day and said "Get rid of that guy." They felt Williams was getting too

screen time plus they wanted Pernell Roberts to stay. Dortort wanted to keep Williams and his love interest on show, Kathie Browne. In order to keep the rest of the cast happy, he had to let them both go.

Scott Marlowe (Lee Hewitt) - In his nearly 50 year career, Marlowe appeared in over 100 roles in films and television. He had film roles as juveniles in a series of films made during the 1950's and 1960's. Some of the films are *The Scarlet Hour*, *The Restless Breed*, *The Cool and The Crazy*, *Riot In Juvenile Prison*, *The Subterraneans* and *A Cold Wind In August*.

Marlowe also appeared on stage in his most memorable performance at the Chicago Civic Theatre in a production of Arthur Miller's *Death Of A Salesman*. He was a founding member of Theatre West in Los Angeles.

John Hubbard (Doctor) - In 1939, Hal Roach signed John Hubbard as one of five promising young actors with "star" potential. The other four were Lon Chaney Jr., Victor Mature, Carole Landis and William Bendix.

Hubbard found opportunities in television, as a supporting actor. in programs such as *The Mickey Rooney Show*, *My Little Margie*, *Family Affair*, *Perry Mason*, *The Green Hornet*, *Mr. Novak*, *Adam-12*, *Maverick*, *Hawaiian Eye*, *77 Sunset Strip*, *Lawman*, *Cheyenne* and *Surfside 6*. Hubbard retired from acting after a character role in *Herbie Rides Again* and one final appearance in *OHMS*, a movie for television in 1980.

Julie Sommars (Emma Hewitt) - Her appearance in the play, *Our Town* at San Bernardino Valley College led to her playing Loretta Young's daughter in an episode of the Loretta Young Show when she was 19 years old.

In 1969 she starred in *The Governor and J.J.* playing Dan Dailey's daughter, Jennifer Jo aka J. J. She also starred with Dean Jones and Don Knotts in *Herbie Goes to Monte Carlo*. Her television work includes roles in *Get Smart*, *Barnaby Jones*, *Harry O*, *The Rockford Files*, *McMillan and Wife*, *McCloud* and *Magnum P.I.*

From 1987 to 1994 Sommars had a recurring role in *Matlock* as Assistant District Attorney Julie March. In 1990, she received a Golden Globe nomination for Best Supporting Actress in a Drama Series.

Ray Teal (Sheriff Roy Coffee) - appeared in 99 episodes of *Bonanza* as Sheriff Ray Coffee. In his 37 year career, Teal made 345 appearances in films and television.

He was a musician who worked his way through college playing the saxophone in local bands. At UCLA during the 1920's, he formed his own band and led it until 1936.

Teal appeared in three films with Marlon Brando, *The Men*, *The Wild One* and *One-Eyed Jacks* which was also directed by Brando.

Among his other western television appearances are in *The Lone Ranger*, *The Alaskans*, *Wagon Train*, *Tales of Wells Fargo*, *Broken Arrow*, *Maverick*, *The Texan*, *The Californians*, *Wanted: Dead or Alive* and *Riverboat*.

Donald Elson (Ed Wharton) - became a successful Broadway actor by appearing in *Inherit The Wind*, *Desire Under The Elms*, *Peter Pan*, *Threepenny Opera* and several off-Broadway productions. He had many roles in several television westerns

such as *Gunsmoke*, *The Big Valley*, *Johnny Ringo*, *Sugarfoot* and *Tales Of Wells Fargo*.

Robert Temple Ayres created his most famous work at Paramount in 1959. Officially called "Map to Illustrate the Ponderosa in Nevada," it was conjured up just so it could burst into flames on television screens during the opening of the long-running show "Bonanza."

While the memorable "Bonanza" theme music played, Ayres' map appeared, then dissolved in flames, revealing the Ponderosa ranch's inhabitants on horseback — the Cartwright clan played by Lorne Greene, Michael Landon, Dan Blocker and Pernell Roberts.

The artwork in the opening and closing credits of Bonanza seem to be something of a mystery. Under the direction of the show's art director **Albert Earl Hedrick**, an unknown journeyman artist, drew the sketches and watercolors for the series opening and end credits. After a few months into the show's first season in 1959, this artist left the studio for parts unknown. Later, efforts were made to find this artist and give him credit for his now famous work but to no avail. He was never found.

Another journeyman artist was hired by the production company for other still works. He too moved on after a short while. When his work remained unnamed, efforts were made to find him also, again with no results.

REFERENCES

Guy Williams: The Man Behind The Mask by Antoinette Girgenti Lane
Behind-the-Scene Facts of Bonanza by Michael Bullier
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