

Private Life of Gunsmoke's Star

As Marshal Matt Dillon, James Arness lives a rough, dangerous life. But off screen, he goes as easy as he pleases.

By ROBERT de ROOS



Arness and his wife, Virginia, have three children, (from left) Rolf, just 7; Jenny Lee, nearly 8; and Craig, who is 11. They live in a modest home—with no swimming pool.



On location, Arness is an edgy, nervous performer. When he was offered the part of Matt Dillon, Arness had already embarked on a movie career and hesitated to switch to TV. But John Wayne talked him into it.

Television addicts who snapped on the premiere of *Gunsmoke* on the evening of September 10, 1955, settled back anticipating a half-hour re-enactment of the Western myth. The United States marshal, they knew, would be a towering, sarsaparilla-loving, iron-faced man with eyes as cold as the steel he wore at his side. He would be a man of few words, softly spoken, and a fast man with his brace of sure-shot six-guns. From time to time, astride his erudite horse, he would go tarry-hootin' out of the village, hot on the trail of evildoers. It would be only a matter of time before he returned with up to a half-dozen unshaven varmints in tow.

To those who expected this hackneyed, wholesome fare, *Gunsmoke* could have been a disappointment. True enough, Marshal Matt Dillon, played by a personable young giant named James Arness, towered in a satisfactory manner. But he wore only one gun and his manner lacked that certain invincibility associated with a frontier marshal. *Gunsmoke* was something new: an adult Western. Lest there be any thought that it was for kids, the show was broadcast in mid-evening, well past the children's hour, and sponsored by a cigarette and an electric shaver.

The first *Gunsmoke* seemed to start according to formula. It was not three minutes old before Marshal Dillon confronted a bad man from down Texas way on the main street of Dodge City, Kansas Territory, wickedest town on the prairie circa 1875.

"Ah'm bad," the bad fellow announced, stepping over the body of a man he had just perforated. "You want me, marshal, you got to come and git me."

Marshal Matt Dillon brushed aside Kitty, the beauteous saloon girl, stepped off the wooden sidewalk and reached for his trusty



At home, after a fourteen-hour day as Matt Dillon, Arness collapses in bed. "My wife sure spoils me," he says. Arness never wears pajamas or bathrobes, likes to go days without shaving.

Colt. Whereupon, in defiance of every rule governing the fictional West, the bad guy shot Matt Dillon and laid him writhing in the dust. In the end, Dillon arose, recovered, and got his man. But what caught the audience was the way he went about it, revealing a human tendency to fumble a bit and showing flashes of a well-developed moral sense. In the phrase of a British journalist, "he appeared more trigger sorry than trigger happy."

For well over a hundred Saturday nights, Gunsmoke has persisted in its perverse treason against the stereotypes of the West. It has done this so effectively that in July of 1956, Gunsmoke was the first half-hour Western to reach the heady altitude of the first ten in the TV

Arness met Virginia in 1948 when they appeared together on the stage in Candida. His hair was then blond, its natural color.

ratings. And early last June it nudged I Love Lucy out of first place in the Nielsen rating to become the most popular show in the country.

The astounding fact is that every week in the United States alone, 40,000,000 people watch James Arness and his capable cohorts. In England, where more millions see the show (called Gun Law there), Jim Arness is the most popular male star on the tube. As a comparison point, a Hollywood movie seen in the world's theaters by 10,000,000 people is a runaway success. (Continued on Page 108)



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So Jim Arness, a blue-eyed fellow from Minneapolis, a handsome, gangling, open-faced man carved on large and rugged lines, finds himself at age thirty-four the star of one of the most popular shows in entertainment history.

Jim had been in Hollywood eight years when he was tapped for the Matt Dillon role. Although he had appeared in about twenty movies, no one had heard much about him. "You can earn good money and have a good life in Hollywood, and be almost completely unknown," Jim says. "That's what happened to me." He played mostly in westerns and action pictures.

"My size sort of steered me that way," Jim Arness says. "Whenever I tested for a part they always took me for an outdoor guy. When you start, you capitalize on what you've got. If you are a midget, you have to take midget parts. If I hadn't been six feet, six inches tall and weighed 235 pounds, maybe I never would have got a start."

Arness appeared in several John Wayne pictures and had one notable role in a John Ford western as "the fourth moronic brother in a family of killers." He also played the title role in *The Thing*, a big science-fiction picture. As *The Thing*, Arness was a not-quite-human vegetable with an enormous brain. "I don't know how scientific it was," Jim says, "but it was sure fictional."

As Matt Dillon, Jim works ten to fourteen hours a day under stiff pressure. Every four days he completes a half-hour movie. He does this for nine months and then collapses until it is time to go to work again. "Weekends go so fast, you just wouldn't believe it," he says. "I just rest and then dive into every Monday morning as it comes along." He lives in a modest home on a wooded acre in Pacific Palisades. He does not have a swimming pool.

When an actor has played a role as long as Jim Arness has played Matt Dillon, there is some danger of confusing the actor with the character. "In any business, it's hard to drop the day's work at the end of the day," says Jim, admitting he might sometimes take a little of Matt Dillon home with him. His wife, Virginia, objects to having Dillon around the house.

"At first," she says, "there seemed some possibility of the myth of the overt male, the hero figure of the West, influencing Jim. But Jim is real and he knows a real man lets his emotions show. Jim dares to be gentle." Virginia talks that way all the time.

Big Jim, while not a Garbo, wants to be let alone. He hates to be fettered in any way. At home, he wears blue jeans (without a belt) and cannot abide pajamas or bath robes. When he can, he goes for days without shaving, bathing or changing his clothes. When he's not working, he eats and drinks prodigiously. "Drinking is one of man's great pleasures," he says. In moments of exuberance, he sings in what he calls "a loud, coarse, strident voice with too much vibrato."

The Arnesses lead a secluded life. "We really don't have any friends and don't entertain," says Virginia. "We are just part of the neighborhood." On a recent Sunday, Tiny Nichols, Jim's stand-in, dropped in for supper, and Bob Taylor, who helps in the garden, stayed too. It was the first time in weeks the Arnesses had "entertained."

Jim is no longer self-conscious about his height. He is just sick of hearing about it. He particularly resents remarks

which were prevalent in Hollywood when he got the Dillon role: "The only reason he's up there is because he's so big." To which Jim Arness replies, "Big-schnigg. That's like saying the only reason Tyrone Power is an actor is that he's so good looking. Or that Yul Brynner couldn't do it if he had hair. There's more to it than that."

Height is not always an advantage. When he hit the beach at Anzio during World War II, he was the first man out of the boat because he was the tallest man in the company and his commander used him to gauge the depth of the water.

Gunsmoke's success started a rush of shows to follow the leader, and the thunder of guns and the tinkle of dance-hall pianos swelled from the TV tube. This is the era of the adult western. It can be traced, I found in Hollywood, to the perseverance and talent of John Meston, a writer, and Norman Macdonnell, director and producer for the Columbia Broadcasting System. They invented Gunsmoke.

When I first met Norman Macdonnell, I wasted no time. "I am an adult west-

Many a man's pursuit of happiness ends when his wife catches up with him.

CY N. PEACE

erner," I said, "and I have come to find out all about the adult western."

Macdonnell paled. "It haunts me," he said. "I guess John and I were the first to call this thing an adult western. I wish we hadn't."

Five years ago, Macdonnell, a C.B.S. radio director, and John Meston, a network editor, decided to do a radio western. "We made a list of all the clichés in westerns and decided to abandon them all," Macdonnell says. "There are no chases on Gunsmoke. There is no fight at the water hole. No one fans a gun. Jim Arness uses only one gun, on the theory that a man who can't do the job with five bullets shouldn't carry a gun at all. He has no favorite horse because real western riders use three or four different horses a day."

Meston warped out several Gunsmoke stories, and he and Macdonnell took them to the C.B.S. brass. The idea was received coldly. "Please take this thing away," the brass said. "Westerns are for kids." Meston and Macdonnell persisted, however, and finally C.B.S. allowed them a crack at the air. The show was an immediate success. Gunsmoke, with the same characters as the TV show, but with different actors, soon became the nation's favorite radio program. It still is.

C.B.S. originally dreamed of having John Wayne, indestructible king of the celluloid cowboys, as Matt Dillon on TV, but Wayne turned down the role. After C.B.S. had tested twenty-six other actors for the Dillon part, however, Wayne came up with a red-hot idea. Jim Arness, a young actor he had under contract, would make an ideal Matt Dillon, he said.

Arness, however, was leery of television. He wanted a career in pictures. "I knew television would help me become a familiar figure," he said, "but I wondered if people might not get sick of the sight of me." He turned down the part.

When Wayne heard of this, he got Arness on the phone for some Dutch-uncle talk. "His pitch was that I was a young guy with everything ahead and nothing behind me," Jim Arness recalls, "and he convinced me Gunsmoke would be good for me." Jim took another test and emerged, with his blond hair dyed a dark brown, as Marshal Dillon, the law in Dodge City.

"Somehow, it was easy to see Jim playing Dillon," says Norman Macdonnell. "One of the big factors with Jim is an innate honesty that comes through. He has an open quality, an easy attractiveness. He's not supposed to be a hero and he doesn't strut like one."

What Macdonnell says is reflected in hundreds of letters which pour in to Jim Arness. Although Matt Dillon is, of course, a fictional character, many old-timers write in to say they remember him well from Dodge City days. "Just the other day," says Macdonnell, "one of my cowboy friends told me, 'My daddy knew Matt Dillon and he says he was just like in the show.' What do you do? Call the guy a liar?" The Chamber of Commerce of Dodge City was once certain it had located a Matt Dillon in its files and Macdonnell had to disabuse them, gently.

Such belief, of course, is a tribute to the realism of the stories and the authority of the acting. "We've tried to do stories about the legitimate things which might have happened in a town like Dodge," says Norman Macdonnell. "Matt's no town tamer and he doesn't always win. He's no superman. He'll take a drink now and then and maybe sometimes finds himself in a strange bed. About the only place we've fudged is in making Kitty a pretty girl. Actually, the saloon girls were awfully ugly."

So when Jim Arness walks down the street of Dodge City wearing Matt Dillon's star, it seems only natural for him to be accompanied by Chester, his not-very-bright, stiff-kneed handyman. Chester, played brilliantly by Dennis Weaver, lends a homely, warm air to some tough goings-on in Dodge City. It is easy to believe Matt and Chester are real people.

A recent fan letter declared: "Some friends of mine and I are on the verge of a fist fight about Dennis Weaver. Please tell us, is he really lame?"

The answer is "no." Dennis Weaver was a decathlon star at the University of Oklahoma. "They needed a reason for Chester's not carrying a gun," Weaver says, "so I tried this stiff knee. I couldn't ask for a better attention getter."

The most burning issue bothering fans concerns Matt and Kitty, the saloon girl, played by Amanda Blake. "Why doesn't Jim kiss Kitty?" cries one group. "We like it the way it is," says another. "Don't let him kiss her."

Out of their lives in Dodge City, Arness and the other players have created realistic background for their characters, some of which never quite reaches the television tube, but which does exist.

Amanda Blake, a red-haired lass whose 126 pounds are arranged most effectively on her five-foot, seven-inch body, can work up a pretty good mad at the rake who betrayed Kitty when she was only sixteen. "That no-good guy broke her heart and ruined her life," says Amanda darkly.

"In those days," she explains, "there was little for a destitute girl to do. She could take in washing or sewing. Or men. Life was forced on her." Kitty is in love with Matt Dillon although she knows they will never marry. "He faces death every day," says Amanda. "He can't marry her,"

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(Continued from Page 108) because he doesn't want to leave her a widow."

Milburn Stone, a clear-eyed veteran of more than 200 movies who takes the part of Doc, the cantankerous doctor of Dodge City, says, "I guess if it wasn't for Dillon, I wouldn't be in Dodge at all. I love the big guy and, you'll notice, I'm a little jealous of Chester. He takes up too much of Matt's time."

Surrounding these players, after they have lived through dozens of episodes of frontier life, is a kind of mystique. Off-stage, the actors are possessive and combative about the purity of the Gunsmoke concept and the honesty of their roles. "Everybody has tried to copy Gunsmoke," a Hollywood wise man said recently, "but what they don't realize is that the honesty of these people—Jim Arness, Dennis Weaver, Amanda Blake and Milburn Stone—is the key. That is Gunsmoke's secret weapon."

You hear a lot of talk about honesty around Gunsmoke people. Sitting in the gloom of the big sound stage, with its replica of the main street of Dodge City, brightly lighted only in one corner where technicians are readying an interior shot, the players wait for their cues.

"We've had some terrible rows with directors," said Milburn Stone. "We won't let them tamper with the characters or the honesty of the show."

"Actually, everyone works together to bring out the best in the script," said Dennis Weaver. "There is no iron thumb on us. We make a lot of changes."

As an example, Milburn Stone said, "I remember one scene where I was jawing with Chester. The script called for me to call him an idiot. 'I can't call him that,' I said. 'Doc loves Chester too much to come that close. Chester might think I meant it and it would hurt him badly.' So we cut the line and I snowed Chester with a lot of four-syllable medical terms."

"Our stories are more interesting than most," says Jim Arness, "because John Meston always manages an odd tilt to give insight into the characters." John Meston will devote three minutes at the beginning of an episode to let Chester carry on a bit of tomfoolery trying different kinds of hair tonic at the general store. Or Doc, coming into the saloon, will meet Kitty.

"You going to have a drink?" Kitty asks.

"I don't think so," replies Doc.

"What's the matter?" Kitty says. "Changing your habits?"

"That's what's the matter with this town," Doc snaps. "Always talking about a man's bad habits and not giving him credit for having any good ones."

"Well, I just asked."

"Course, I'm going to have a drink," Doc says. "What do you think I came into a saloon for?"

Directors grit their teeth over such scenes. "Meston's forgotten all about the story line to fool around for two pages with some sarcastic sniping between Kitty and Doc," they complain. People are always telling Meston, "You can't do that!" Meston replies, with a certain sweetness, "Why not? Where does it say I can't?"

The detours and sidewise glances of Meston's scripts, however, give Gunsmoke a quality almost unique in TV: a deliberate pace. The four main characters spend an inordinate amount of time greeting one another. "That Meston's made \$100,000 just writing 'hello' and 'good-by,'" says a green-eyed writer.

But Gunsmoke sets a sizzling pace for the eighty or so people concerned with getting it into the can, a pace which leaves everyone a bit frazzled. Amanda Blake has to get up at 4:30 every morning to reach the studio at 6:30 for a two-hour

makeup session. "You ought to see us when we arrive," she says. "Everyone looks like a bucket of worms."

The biggest load is carried by Jim Arness, who appears in every episode and in almost every scene. "When I was making pictures," he says, "I felt guilty about the easy money. I told Virginia, 'The day will come when I'll have to work for this dough.' That day, my friend, has arrived."

Not long ago, he draped his long frame on a Victorian sofa in his home and contemplated the past. He certainly did not set out to be an actor. When he was growing up in the big frame house on Minnehaha Creek on the outskirts of Minneapolis, he dreamed of being a designer of boats. "I've always had a passion for boats," he said.

He was a restless, moody, string-bean kid, terribly self-conscious of his height.

Although coaches eyed him hungrily, he was never much of an athlete. He played some basketball and football, but could never get really interested.

His greatest thrill was to sail his ice boat on nearby Lake Harriet. "When a beautiful wind was blowing, I'd almost go crazy sitting in that classroom," he said. The restlessness he feels today was born then. "I had a tremendous urge to see things. We used to skip classes and grab rides on freight trains. That was the fun."

When the war began, Jim, whose real name is Aurness, tried to join the Air Corps, but was rejected because of inferior eyesight. "I had the feeling the war was the biggest thing in the world and I just had to get in," he recalls. "My mother made me promise I wouldn't enlist, but I kept writing my draft board to hurry up." While waiting for the Army call, he attended Beloit University for a year.

The reality of war shattered Jim's dreams of glory. Two weeks after the Anzio landing, a machine-gun bullet shattered his right leg below the knee. After a year in various hospitals, he was discharged from the Army in 1945. He entered the University of Minnesota, but could not make it go. "My grades were lousy and everything just seemed silly," he says.

So, when a friend who wanted to crash Hollywood suggested they go to California, Jim was ready. "I just wanted to see California," Jim says. "I wasn't thinking of acting." His friend joined a

little-theater group. "I had nothing to do, so I hung around and got to be sort of a fixture. One day the director asked me to take a part and I did." An agent saw Jim in this first role and got him a job in Loretta Young's *The Farmer's Daughter*.

"The part was supposed to last only a week," Arness says. "They wanted to pay me the minimum, but my agent made an eloquent speech about the sufferings of wounded war veterans. He really cried it out. So the guy said, 'What the hell? The part's only good for a few days. We'll give him \$400 a week.' Fantastic." Instead of one week, Jim worked four months and wound up with a surplus of \$3000.

"I'd never seen anything to equal acting," he said. "It was fun and it was terribly exciting. But I was still stewing in my own juices. I wanted to go some place and forget the war."

Then Jim Arness discovered the ocean and became a temporary beach bum. "I was a flatlander," he says, "and I was fascinated by the ocean. The year or so I spent on the beach was a time of discovery. I got a lot of things straightened out that year."

He worked in a few pictures. In 1948, he was pulled all the way to the Pasadena Playhouse to appear as the lead in *Candida* opposite an intense, brown-eyed, black-haired girl named Virginia Chapman. Virginia is now Mrs. Arness. They have three children—Craig, eleven, (hers by an earlier marriage), Jenny Lee, nearly eight, and Rolf, seven.

Virginia's parents viewed Jim with some alarm. It was not that he was unemployed so much as the fact that he was an unemployed actor. But they liked Jim and did not oppose the marriage. Virginia worked in her father's china store and the newlyweds lived in an apartment upstairs. Meanwhile, Jim tried to prove he could make a living like ordinary people. He tried selling real estate, worked for a plywood company and sold classified ads. And he helped out in his father-in-law's store often enough to be reminded "nine hundred times" about bulls in china shops.

Finally, he landed a part in *Battle-ground* and was on his way. Year by year, his salary increased until he was rated a \$1500-a-week free-lance actor. "I used to sit around the house until the agent called that we had a job," he says. "Then I'd go up to town and get into a suit of

western clothes and make a few thousand bucks. No strain." In his best year he made \$30,000.

As a top television star, Jim's annual salary is less than half what a movie star of medium magnitude gets for a single picture. C.B.S., which owns *Gunsmoke*, pays him \$1500 for each of the thirty-nine TV films he makes each year. Last year he picked up an additional \$30,000 for personal appearances. This is a decent enough salary, but it scarcely reflects the size of his audience. If everyone who sees Jim this week would send him one cent, his weekly income would be \$400,000. If they did this every week, he could spend his time stacking up \$20,800,000 a year. This is not anticipated.

At \$58,500, Jim's annual salary is peanuts compared with some of the real success stories in television. He is paid that amount for the first run of *Gunsmoke* and will participate in the first five reruns, but only to the extent of a sliding scale which ranges from \$99.75 to \$71.25 a week. "My earning period on a top show is very short," Jim says, "and sometimes it seems a crying shame I can't participate more in the potential profits."

"Two or three years from now, I'll still be up there competing with myself." He adds: "When I took the series, I wasn't in any great bargaining position. I signed the contract. I knew it was for five years. I was over twenty-one and presumably strong in mind and body, and it's up to me to live up to it."

After this contract runs out, Jim is interested in making more movies. When he signed up with John Wayne, it was supposed he was being groomed for the Duke's roles when Wayne stepped down. Since *Gunsmoke*, this is no longer probable. Nevertheless, Jim is confident that his career in pictures will go up, not down, after *Gunsmoke*. Recently he has had offers for a dozen movies—formula westerns—but he is not interested. "I don't have to take bad roles just to make money," Jim says. "I think I can afford to wait for an important role which will be a step forward instead of backward."

On the big sound stage, Jim is an edgy, nervous performer, clicking the trigger of his six-gun, wisecracking and singing bits of songs. "He drives you nuts," said a fellow actor, "but then, he is in almost every scene and has to unwind some way." When the camera is on him, it is uncanny to see Jim Arness snap into Matt Dillon.

Arness is an intuitive actor who has mastered his art by acting rather than by formal training. "I don't think I've ever seen a man improve and grow as Jim has in the last three years," says Norman Macdonnell. "He has improved 180 per cent." Adds Dennis Weaver, regarded as one of the most promising young actors in Hollywood, "He's grown in a way beautiful to behold—and don't ever forget, it's more than a matter of putting on a pair of western pants and a star."

Occasionally, when he blows a scene, Arness seems to explode. And when he explodes he swears with considerable volume. "He does everything to fit his size," says Macdonnell. "He blows big. But when he's happy, he's happy all over and that's a lot of happy."

Playing under great pressures and knowing the character of Dillon so well, Jim Arness may be tempted to walk through a scene. "Every time it seems to get routine," Arness says, "a little birdie in my mind tells me to watch out. That's when I remember millions of people will watch us. Our kissers are going to be up on that tube ten years from now. No one is going to say, 'Oh, they were tired that day,' or 'They were young then.' The only thing that will matter is whether we were good or bad."

THE END