

G U N S M O K E

An American Institution

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Celebrating 50 Years
of Television's Best Western

by Ben Costello



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A TALENTED TRIO Dennis Weaver, Milburn Stone and Amanda Blake, better known as Chester, Doc and Miss Kitty, coming soon to a venue near you! This photo was used to announce dates for the 1960 Rodeo Circuit Tour.

GUNSMOKE - LIVE!

Ihe freshman season of *Gunsmoke* presented a staggering thirty-nine episodes. Even more staggering, in addition to writing and producing, Charles Marquis Warren directed twenty-six of them. Harry Horner directed one, Robert Stevenson and Ted Post, six each. Post has an impressive list of television credits, ranging from *Wagon Train* to *Cagney and Lacey*, in addition to over fifty *Gunsmoke* credits.

“I hold the record for most episodes directed...ninety-five,” stated a proud Andrew V. McLaglen. “It’s quite an experience to be part of a show that is as well known as *Gunsmoke*.”

Born in London, England in 1920, the son of Academy Award winning actor Victor McLaglen, he began his career in 1944, playing an uncredited role in the film *Since You Went Away*. Preferring work behind the camera, which he began in 1948, McLaglen worked on a multitude of projects, including assistant director on *The Quiet Man* for John Ford, and two projects that featured a young James Arness, *Big Jim McClain* and *Hondo*, where he functioned as assistant director and unit production manager, respectively.



ANOTHER OPENIN', ANOTHER SHOW The three popular GUNSMOKE stars pose in the auditorium of their latest live appearance, circa 1958.

**“IT WAS JUST INCREDIBLE, TOTALLY MAGIC-
A REAL THRILL, A REAL KICK.”**

“I had worked with Jim Arness in 1951 or 1952. He had one year of *Gunsmoke* in 1956 and during his hiatus, I went to United Artists and in five minutes sold them on a nice small western with the star of *Gunsmoke* called *Gun the Man Down*. We made the movie, Jim went back to *Gunsmoke* and in the course of time he said to CBS, ‘Hey, why don’t you have Andrew come and do a couple



UNITED CEREBRAL PALSY TELETHON Dennis Weaver, Amanda Blake and Milburn Stone lead the crowd in a rousing rendition of the song, “He’s Got the Whole World In His Hands,” the finale used in most of their live shows.



RUN RABBIT, RUN Chester and Doc stop bickering long enough to make music during a performance in Jacksonville, Florida.

of episodes. You know, I’ve worked with him and he might be good,” recalled McLaglen. “They signed me up for two, and ninety-five *Gunsmoke*’s later...”

McLaglen also directed many episodes of *Have*

Gun—Will Travel. “During those days *Gunsmoke* and *Have Gun—Will Travel* were alternating as the number one shows, literally, in the Niensens.” The accomplished director credits many factors for the record-breaking run *Gunsmoke* would set. “John Meston and Norman Macdonnell were the genesis of the whole thing and, very briefly, Charles Marquis Warren. It was just a very homey, warm type of a Western without being necessarily blood and guts.”

“I can’t say enough about my pal Andy McLaglen,” gushed actress Angie Dickinson. “They were smart to do a lot with him. You get in a groove, there is a camaraderie there of character and of person that falls into place and helps the show so much.” Dickinson turned in a moving performance in the groundbreaking episode from 1957, *Sins of the Father*. “What I loved, of course,” continued Dickinson, “in the part of Andy’s direction was the ease of it all. In a half-hour or less not counting commercials, they told so much, so innocently and smoothly. Maybe that was the key to its great success. It was simple and very human. They cared and it showed.”

On the subject of McLaglen, actress Suzanne Lloyd gushed, “I adored him! He was wonderful, I can’t praise him enough. He knew what he was doing.” Frequent *Gunsmoke* guest star Wright King added, “He was a doll. Andy is a great big man, easygoing guy with a wonderful humor about him. You didn’t feel rushed or any kind of pressure with him.” That wonderful humor was appreciated by actor Robert Donner. “Andy had a penchant for



SEPTEMBER 1959 Milburn Stone, Amanda Blake and Dennis Weaver pose in front of the real Long Branch Saloon in Dodge City, Kansas.

stepping on your toes,” recalled the actor. “He used to love to walk over, face you straight on, of course at his height, he’s looking right over your head. He’d be standing on your toes. His nickname for me was Hank, ‘Where the hell is Hank?!’ and of course he’s standing on my feet. We had good times.”

McLaglen directed his final episode in 1964, which aired in 1965. He went on to a successful career in feature films directing, among others, John Wayne in many classic films including *McClintock*. Assessing McLaglen, actress Karen Sharpe observed, “A solid base. You felt secure

when you worked with him.” High praise from the actress who was married to producer-director Stanley Kramer.

Harry Harris, Jr. joined the show in late 1960 during the final season of the half hour episodes. As Harris explained, “I started on *Wanted: Dead or Alive*, the Steve McQueen show, and I went on to *Gunsmoke*.” When *Gunsmoke* began season seven, the episodes were now an hour in length. It was this transition that prompted Harris to state, “That was the best experience...the people that were associated with the show at that time were probably the best of what was around at that time in television. John Meston was in Europe and every week you’d get a script from somewhere. Meston’s wife was a lady bullfighter and he followed her all over, particularly in Spain. Norman Macdonnell was probably the nicest human being I ever met in my life and the two of them, Norm and John, had a close bond. John was really the father of that show.”

For his take on the popularity of the oater, Harris offered, “It was an anthology of the West...a little town in Kansas where all these people passed through. They went into such depth of character—it wasn’t just people shooting people in the streets. They had every kind of problem that people had in those days—sickness, poverty, greed or criminals—attached to this little town. Jim Arness was the epitome of the law, this six-foot-seven guy upholding the law. Doc, this homemade guy, a Doctor. Amanda, the woman in the bar, who did or didn’t have anything to do with Matt, who the hell knows? Dennis was a hayseed



SHERIFF PAT GARRETT'S BUGGY Milburn Stone and Amanda Blake ride the real deal in the Truth Or Consequences Fiesta Parade in New Mexico, 1958. (Photo courtesy of the Geronimo Springs Museum, Truth Or Consequences, New Mexico)

who was smart and the sidekick. They were all characters that people attached to.”

Harris directed actor Michael Forest in two memorable *Gunsmoke* segments, *The Cousin* and *Innocence*. Forest, reflecting on his work with the director, opined, “Harry Harris. Terrific, easygoing guy. Knew what to do and how to get it done with very little effort. Left you to



SNAPPY PATTERN, DANCE & SONG Dennis, Amanda and Milburn broke attendance records wherever they appeared throughout the United States and Canada.

improvise within the scene...nice guy to work with.”

Harris truly enjoyed his time on *Gunsmoke* and the creative license he was given by Meston and Macdonnell. He left the show only after the Meston/Macdonnell—Leacock/Mantley shakeup.

In addition to *Gunsmoke* and the aforementioned *Wanted: Dead or Alive*, Harris also directed episodes of *Rawhide* and, for eight years, *In the Heat of the Night*. He continues his craft today on *7th Heaven*. Another assessment from Karen Sharpe: “I worked with Harry Harris on *Dry Well*—I liked working with him. I’m one of these that likes to bring my own props, so I knew exactly what I wanted to do; he never told me anything, he just loved

THE GUNSMOKE GANG, PERHAPS MORE THAN ANY OTHER SHOW AT THE TIME, BECAME FAMILY...

everything I did, so I could do anything I damn well pleased! (laughs) Harry and I got along really, really well.”

John Wayne in *The Cowboys*. Steve McQueen in *The Reivers*. Bette Midler in *The Rose* and *For the Boys*. Katherine Hepburn and Fonda Henry and Jane in *On Golden Pond*. Impressive actors in equally impressive films...all directed by Mark Rydell. This A-list motion picture roster began on television with an episode of *Ben Casey* and then blossomed on *Gunsmoke*.

“I grew up a New York Jew... I brought a Jewish mentality to *Gunsmoke*,” laughed Rydell. He was one of the first directors hired by Philip Leacock. “I’m eternally grateful to Philip Leacock and John Mantley for having the prescience to realize that I was a guy who could come and direct *Gunsmoke*. I always watched it, but like any boy from the Bronx, I was watch-



MR. DILLON, MR. DILLON! James Arness is mobbed by fans after a personal appearance in 1958. The stars of GUNSMOKE always accommodated those who wanted autographs and pictures.

ing it as a fantasy. The closest I had ever been to a horse was to a theatre cop in New York City...I had to learn everything.”

Rydell truly enjoyed his stint in Dodge City. “Everybody loved working on *Gunsmoke*. The atmosphere was fabulous and much of that had to do with Leacock and Mantley. And Arness made every show, I don’t know how he did it after all those years, he came every day with enthusiasm and an attitude—never bored. He loved the character.”

“Amanda Blake. Charming, gracious and a friendly woman. Milburn Stone was interesting too...crotchety and difficult, but a wonderful, wonderful old character...much like the character he played. There was a lot of talent involved in making those shows. The sense of family was very strong and once you were accepted, as I became, you worked all the time,” Rydell continued.

Echoing sentiments of his peers, Rydell stated, “*Gunsmoke* had a primitive kind of set-up. A heroic marshal of a small town, his close friends Festus, Doc, Kitty...fundamental characters...icons of the legendary West. They were good, they had a nobility, honor and the ethical position taken by Matt Dillon. The heroes and the villains...a realistic comic strip in a way.”

Actress Lane Bradbury worked with Rydell in 1965 on the episode *Outlaw’s Woman* and stated, “He had worked with me and seen my work at Actor’s Studio in New York. I read for him and got the part. He was wonderful...encouraging...knowing when to help. A good director



GRAND MARSHAL DILLON James Arness led the parade for the 15th Annual Sheriff’s Rodeo at the Los Angeles Memorial Coliseum, August 23, 1959.

knows when to stay out of the way...you’re doing your work and just let you do it. He was terrific to work with.” Continuing his praises, actress France Nuyen added, “Mark was a treasure. He was a director who understood what was happening inside the actors and he understood the complexity of emotion, the depths that any perform-

**A LIVE APPEARANCE BY ANY OF THE GUNSMOKE STARS
WAS ALWAYS SO MUCH MORE THAN JUST PERFORMING.**



WALNUT STREET TO GUNSMOKE STREET Series star James Arness officially changes the street signs, downtown Dodge City, Kansas, in 1958. Amanda Blake and Milburn Stone, partially hidden, proudly look on. (photo courtesy of Boot Hill Museum, Inc)

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ers need even if it is for a five-minute period. You need that understanding and you don't have that anymore. I was lucky to be working with the best."

"I've had a very, very fortunate career. I've worked with stars who will be remembered forever. I did many, many *Gunsmokes* and learned my craft on the show," Rydell reflected.

Director Robert Butler entered the dusty *Gunsmoke* soundstage on only three occasions, capturing lightning in

a bottle each time. Helming three of the series standout episodes, including *Prairie Wolfer* in 1967, Butler had the opportunity to showcase two up and coming megastars, Jon Voight and Harrison Ford, in early television roles. Established stars Steve Forrest and Alex Cord starred in *Mannon* and *The Sodbusters*, respectively, and under the gentle guidance of Butler, turned in career highlight performances. "He left me pretty much alone but was very supportive, that's what I remember," recalled Alex Cord.



WJBK TV STUDIOS DETROIT, Michigan television personality Ted Lloyd, better known as Sagebrush Shorty, poses with Milburn Stone, Amanda Blake and Dennis Weaver in the early sixties.

“After every take he would come up and say something nice, even if it was just a word, a wink or a pat on your shoulder, whatever. That goes such a long way towards making you feel confident about what you’re doing. A real nice work experience.”

With a combined total of 100 *Gunsmoke* credits, brothers McEveety, Vincent and Bernard directed some of the best episodes during the program’s final decade. Vincent related, “I’m so proud to have been a part of it. Every one of those shows that I had anything to do with taught me something about myself.” Of the brothers, actor Robert Pine offered, “Very nice men. Very nice, very capable. They were very good to me, I loved them both. Both really good guys, good family guys.”

Vincent has high regards for three actors he has directed during his career. Three actors closely identified with the characters they portrayed...William Shatner as Captain Kirk on *Star Trek*, Peter Falk as *Columbo* and James Arness as Matt Dillon on *Gunsmoke*. “Dear Jim,” remembered Vincent, “Without a doubt one of the most unusual, most beautiful people I’ve ever known. Most, most professional; one of the funniest men I’ve ever worked with...always prepared. He said to me once, ‘You know, I really like to keep the audience guessing. I don’t really like them to know everything I’m thinking.’ That’s a marvelous quality of a leading character.”

As for the other cast members, Vincent went on, “They were all very professional and cared immensely about what they did in a very loving way...very respectful



FESTUS MEETS THE PRESS Ken Curtis talks shop with the media in Cincinnati, Ohio before an appearance in the sixties.

to one another...a unique experience I’ve never, since that time, ever experienced anything like it. They knew who they were as characters, they knew how they related. Doc knew who he was, how he related to Kitty and what he would say to her and what he wouldn’t.”

“We did those shows in six days and these were big, big shoots...not all talk shows, a lot of action,” said Vincent. “At that time we were shooting with one camera...very tough shows.” Not all was hard work though. “Every Friday night we always had a beer at the end of the



THE KIDS LOVE 'EM Agent Michael North's daughters, Tracy and Wendy pose with dad's top clients, Doc and Festus, Milburn Stone and Ken Curtis, respectively. (photo courtesy of Tracy North)

day in the Long Branch. We'd all just gather around—Amanda, Milburn and Kenny would always stay. Jim would never stay, never socialized. Didn't like small talk.”

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