

Opinion: 'Gunsmoke' a TV show with longevity

By Larry Weitzman

"Gunsmoke" is the longest running live-action television show ever produced (1955-75). It debuted on Sept. 10, 1955; four days after Hugh O'Brien made his debut as Wyatt Earp, in "The Life and Legend of Wyatt Earp". Both shows spawned a plethora of adult TV westerns for decades, but none had staying power of "Gunsmoke" as even the Wyatt Earp show terminated production after the 1961 season.

"Gunsmoke's" total production was a whopping 635 episodes as it started when a year of production consisted of 39 shows a season compared to today's season lengths of as little as 10 shows.



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While "Gunsmoke" started on TV in 1955, it was originally a radio show, first broadcast in March 1952, starring William Conrad (later TV star of "Cannon and Jake" and "Fatman") but when looking for the TV lead of Marshal Matt Dillon, Cannon was too fat to be considered. Legend has it John Wayne was recommended for the TV lead, who in turn recommended 6-foot-7-inch James Arness for the job. Arness at the time was an up and coming actor who had a recent roll of playing "The Thing" in the 1954 sci-fi thriller of the same name. Cannon ended up directing two or more episodes of "Gunsmoke" for TV.

"Gunsmoke" writer John Meston (he also wrote and with producer Norman MacDonnell created "Gunsmoke", the radio show which lasted until 1961) theme was good over evil and it was clearly defined and in most cases there was no excuse for the evil and Dillon (the good) always won. Meston also appeared to have a political cause, the plight of the American Indian. In one show even Gen. George Custer was discussed by Matt Dillon in a less than flattering light. Indians were mostly portrayed as righteous, honest and honorable. One continuing regular on the show was Tobeal, a guide and "investigator" for Dillon, played by Frank deKova.

Even Ken Curtis, who played Festus Hagen, a part time deputy for Dillon, played the role of an Indian scout in an early episode before he created Festus. Curtis, who was a big band singer (Tommy Dorsey Orchestra) and a son-in-law of director John Ford, played in about half a dozen early "Gunsmokes" in various rolls prior to becoming Festus. Contrary to the appearance of Festus, Curtis was a handsome man in real life.

Another characteristic of "Gunsmoke" outside of Chester, Doc and Kitty, were the various actors who made up the supporting cast. People like Warren Oates, Academy Award winner George Kennedy, Claude Akins, Lee Van Cleef, Charles Bronson, Wayne Rodgers, Martin Landau, Buddy Ebsen, Ed Asner, Dennis Hopper (who was born in Dodge City), Jack Lord, James Whitmore, Ted Knight and Jack Klugman all were cast members in one or more shows. And these were in the early days of the show, in the black and white days. Oates, Akins, Kennedy and Rodgers all did several shows as different characters. This was one place actors cut their teeth and learned their craft. And I am leaving many stars off the list. In later years even Harrison Ford did two episodes and Richard Dreyfuss, before "Jaws", did one show.

Of course the show launched the career of Burt Reynolds, who played Quint Asper, a half-Indian blacksmith and Dillon's part time deputy. Tom Skerritt played five characters in five shows

from 1965-72.

And then there were the several regular characters, Chester Goode, Dr. Galen Adams, Kitty Russell. Dennis Weaver, who played Chester, left the show after nine years to pursue his own successful career (replaced by Ken Curtis, Burt Reynolds, Buck Taylor and Roger Ewing). Milburn Stone, who play crusty Doc Adams chose as his first name on the show, Galen, the name of an ancient Greek physician and medical researcher. Stone's career started in the 1930s where he worked at Monogram Pictures doing an adventure serial called "Tailspin Tommy," a serial I used to watch on TV as a kid. Stone appeared in 604 of the 635 episodes.

Stone was close to the other "Gunsmoke" star, Amanda Blake, Miss Kitty. Although born in Buffalo, N.Y., Blake died in 1989 in Sacramento at age 60. Besides playing the owner of the Long Branch Saloon (there is such a saloon in Dodge City), she was sort of Dillon's girlfriend in the show, although the relationship was never fully explained. Blake was an animal lover and she sometimes brought her pet lion, Kemo, to the "Gunsmoke" set. She also started the first successful breeding program for cheetahs at her compound in Phoenix as well as the Arizona Animal Welfare League, the state's first no-kill animal shelter.

South Lake Tahoe veterinarian Patty Handel in her pre- and early teens remembers spending time on the "Gunsmoke" set and some time with Amanda Blake at backyard barbecues.

"Even in those early years I loved animals and when Amanda found out she remarked, 'Oh that's wonderful.' I met all of the "Gunsmoke" regulars, and they we all so nice and just regular people. Ken Curtis who played Festus was just like his character, Festus, and I remember standing next to James Arness and looking up and saying to myself 'he is a giant.' The set ran like clockwork and the attitude on the set seemed like one of their lighthearted episodes," Handel said.

Most everyone knows that Arness' younger brother was Peter Graves. Arness was seriously wounded in the leg when storming the beach as a rifleman at Anzio, Italy, during WWII. He was ordered off the landing craft first because of his height to test the depth of the water. He lived a private life mostly in Brentwood, although in the 1970s, as an airport bum, I heard that Arness had a De Havilland Beaver (the kind of plane from the movie "Six Days, Seven Nights") that he flew to his ranch near Paso Robles. People who knew him at the airport said he had a bad leg, a result of being seriously wounded at Anzio.

In the early years of "Gunsmoke" (first 10) Dillon almost always rode (sometimes in pain) the same good-looking Buckskin horse. Chester mostly rode the same sorrel horse with a blaze that had a small appendix marking at the top of his facial blaze.

"Gunsmoke" is still on TV, in the Direct TV system at Starzwes on channel 538, every day but Sunday. Check it out and see why tens of millions tuned in every Saturday night at 10.

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