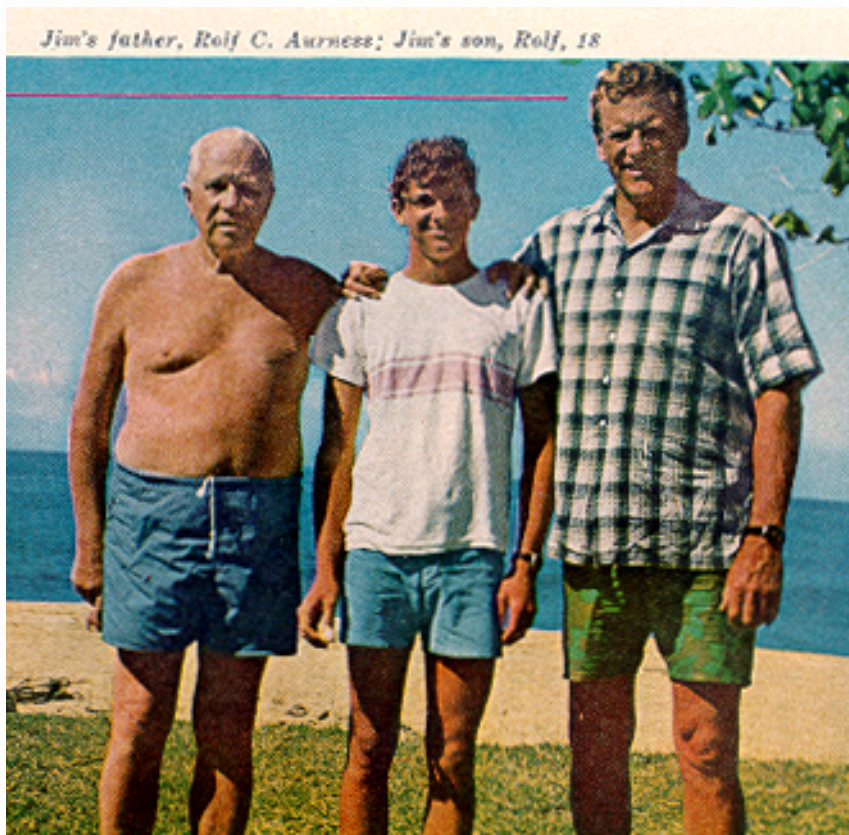




Millions of TV fans know Marshal Dillon, the strong, silent hero of "Gunsmoke." But almost nobody knows the man who plays Dillon—strong, silent Jim Arness. Here is the first in-depth interview he has granted in 10 years.
By Vernon Scott

"Gunsmoke's" Mysterious...



JAMES ARNESS

After 16 years as the star of "Gunsmoke," six-foot-six-inch James Arness is as much of a mystery to Hollywood as he was the day he hitchhiked there 25 years ago. That unheralded arrival was backed by a Minnesota upbringing, a battle-rough hitch in the U.S. Army, an education at Wisconsin's Beloit College on the GI Bill, and a series of jobs as a lumberjack, salesman and carpenter.

When he arrived in Hollywood, Jim had a small bankroll (\$100) and a big dream. The dream came true, although there were a few nightmares along the way. Today, as the star of TV's longest-running series, Arness has millions in the bank, three children, one ex-wife, two airplanes and several homes. Yet success and time have not changed one thing: Arness is still a mystery.

When Jim reluctantly agreed to talk to a JOURNAL writer, it marked his first magazine interview in more than 10 years. The "no interview" edict was not his attempt to be a male Greta Garbo. His reticence is based on what he considers two good and sufficient reasons. One, the last magazine article on him had, to his way of thinking, hit below the belt. He felt he'd been open and honest with the writer and had not been repaid in kind. Two, he has a distaste for discussing his marriage to actress Virginia Chapman, whom he married on February 12, 1949, and divorced in 1963. In an uncommon California court ruling, Arness was awarded custody of their three children: Craig, Jenny Lee and Rolf. Since the divorce, Arness, who will be 48 on May 23, has remained silent about Virginia. He thinks it "dishonorable" to discuss her. The full details of the divorce have never been published. If Jim has his way, they never will be.

His stance on the subject is typical. A gentleman, as he sees it, does not discuss a lady—or, indeed, females at all—except, perhaps, in admiration. A quality, one can't help notice, that seems more attuned to Matt Dillon, the Western marshal Jim plays on "Gunsmoke," than to a man of the sophisticated 1970s.

"There's probably an awful lot of the old Westerner in me," Jim says. "If I'd been born a hundred years ago I imagine I'd be one of the men moving west."

When he talks, Jim's gray-blue eyes are steady, unwavering and frequently expressionless. Gary Cooper had a twinkle in his eye; Clark Gable had a slant look that he developed as a means of smoothing out his rough edges. Even John Wayne has mastered that same slant look. But not Arness. He is what

he appears to be—no more, no less. There is no pretense here; he goes his own way—often alone.

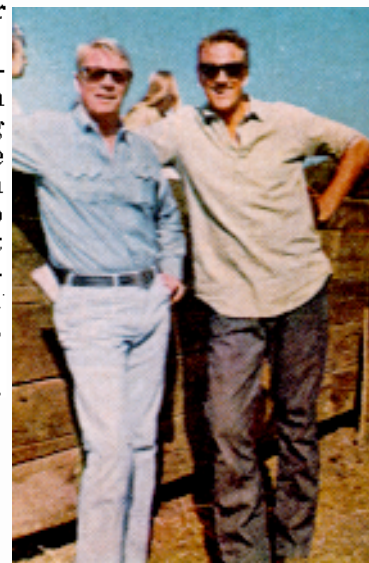
"I'm not a sentimental man," he draws, "but I would say my best friends are my children. They've always meant a great deal to me. When I got custody of them I felt doubly responsible. If I was going to raise them, then I damned well better be with them as much as possible. I met that responsibility not out of nobility or anything like that, but because I've enjoyed my children. It's been fun. I still enjoy them. They keep me young, you know."

Craig, 23, Virginia's son by her first marriage, was adopted by Arness. Graduated from college, Craig now works for United Trade Management, a marketing service. Jenny, 20, is studying photography and lives with a group of girls in West Los Angeles. Rolf, 18, is a surfing champion.

"Lots of parents who are close to their kids realize how rough it is when kids grow up and leave home," says Jim. "If you spend a lot of time with them you just want it to continue. Well, I learned to let go. They're still my favorite companions, but I understand that they've gotta go."

"I was a drifter when I was a kid. At 18 I was gone from our home outside Minneapolis. That was the last the Arness family ever saw of me. [Jim dropped the "u" from his family name for stage purposes.] My brother Pete was an independent guy, too. Maybe it's our Norwegian heritage.

"Some of my happiest memories are riding the freights in winter and summer—riding them to harvest fields in the Dakotas or to logging camps in Idaho. Railroad cops used to toss me off once in a while, but I was fascinated by the romance of the old steam engines. That's all gone now. But I was part of a time that's dead now. Back in Minneapolis it was a different world. There was a camaraderie among neighbors that doesn't exist here in California. I was born and raised in the same house and stayed there. (continued on page 92)



In another rare photograph supplied by his father, Arness, 48, poses with his younger brother, "Mission: Impossible" star Peter Graves.

until I left home. Neighbors were almost part of the family.

"Minnehaha Creek ran through a little valley right behind our house. We'd float rafts on the water in summer, ice skate in winter. We had a hell of a good time; it was a real Huckleberry Finn existence."

Arness simply halts a conversation when he thinks it has run its course. He stops abruptly, making no attempt to change the subject, and looks off into the distance—at God knows what.

The wanderlust of his childhood still persists. Although he has a home in Pacific Palisades, complete with servants, and a thousand-acre ranch some 60 miles northeast of Los Angeles, only his "Gunsmoke" contract, which has two years to go, binds him to Hollywood. Even his dressing room at the CBS Studio Center, where the show is filmed, is that of a man on the move. It is devoid of personal possessions—just a bed, a chair and an unused kitchen. Between takes Arness sprawls on the bed and naps. When his scenes are over he rips off his false sideburns, jumps into his dusty Chrysler New Yorker and heads home. As he leaves the set Assistant Director Bob Reche bellows: "Say good-night to Jim." In unison the crew and cast cry out, "Goodnight, Jim."

Arness has no social contact with the cast away from work, and they accept his insistence on privacy.

Hard to know

Amanda Blake, who portrays Miss Kitty in the "Gunsmoke" series, has a motherly attitude toward Jim. "He's big, impressive and virile," she says affectionately. "I've worked with him for sixteen years, but I don't really know him. We girls on the set call him Stud Duck. Why? I don't know."

Several years ago the "Gunsmoke" production office forgot to notify Amanda that she was due on the set the following day. When she did not appear, Arness was terribly concerned and sent out an all-points search for her. It was obvious he cared—and Amanda was deeply touched.

"In the beginning," says Milburn Stone, "Gunsmoke's" crusty Doc Adams, "Jim was always late and didn't know his lines. He made funny noises with his guns—like a kid. I didn't think he was professional. Once I tore him up one side and down the other in a fifteen-minute tirade. Any minute I ex-

I hate to think of the things I should have said and haven't—and I also hate to think of the things I have said and shouldn't.

—Poor Woman's Almanac

pected him to blow up and throw me across the set. Instead, when I was through, he looked me right in the eye and said, 'You're absolutely right. Then he walked away.'"

Whatever differences existed between the two men are now smoothed over. Stone thinks of Jim as a lovable son—and, like Amanda, he knows Arness cares.

"When I was in the hospital just recovering from a heart attack," says

as square as the other. I was wrong. They share a lot of characteristics, but all the plusses belong to Jim. He's a great big kid, thank God, who doesn't take himself too seriously. If he had been any other kind of actor the show wouldn't have lasted two years. When he's through, I'm through."

Several years ago, it was decided to film a new opening for "Gunsmoke." The script called for Marshal Dillon to shoot down a gunslinger in the

Arness anything but funny. He is tough, shrewd and demanding in his business dealings. In the beginning, the network was able to sign Jim to a rather frugal contract. Arness never forgot it. When the contract came up for renewal, the show was a hit. Jim demanded more money than any other performer on the network. Recalls a CBS executive, "Jim wouldn't negotiate so we sent him a script in which Dillon was killed in a gunfight. A brother from St. Louis came into Dodge City and was sworn in as the new marshal at the end of the show. Jim got the message, lowered his demands and signed the contract."

Evidently Arness never forgot that incident, either, because he later purchased the entire show from the network and, after much haggling on both sides, sold it back to CBS. Jim made a fortune on the transaction.

Though CBS executives get short shrift from Arness, they concede privately that "Gunsmoke" is their most valuable property and that he is their top star. If they want him—and they do—it has to be on his terms. That is how everyone must accept him.

Jim's brother, Peter Graves, accepts these terms and even smiles about it. When Peter, the star of "Mission: Impossible," was honored on the new "This Is Your Life" TV series, Ralph Edwards implored Arness to appear on the show. Jim refused. He finally agreed to tape a voice welcome for his brother, but that was all.

"I wasn't hurt," Graves says. "If I'd known about it in advance I'd have told Ralph not to bother to try. That's the way my brother is. To be honest, I wouldn't change him one damned bit. He's one of a kind."

In a hurry

Graves, who is three years younger than Jim, changed his last name to avoid being confused with his brother.

"Neither of us ever wanted to be kids," Graves recalls. "We were in a hurry to grow up, to get out and be men, men on the move. Where we were going didn't matter—we just wanted to go. In my mind there's no question Jim would have been with Marco Polo or

Lewis and Clark if he had been born in earlier times. Civilization sometimes rubs him the wrong way. I don't go to many parties, but I have more toler-

(continued on page 186)

Stone, "a member of the crew came to see me and said Jim was upset. I asked how he knew and he quoted Jim as saying, 'You don't suppose the old blankety blank is going to croak on us, do you?'"

"A lot of people would take that to mean Jim was thinking of the show. But I know the kind of man he is and I know he meant something else. A few days later he called me and said, 'Hi, there.' His voice was rough and louder than normal. Displaying any kind of emotion is embarrassing to him.

"I used to think Jim and Matt Dillon were the same man—that one was just

streets of Dodge City. The scene was carefully rehearsed, with the villain tumbling dutifully after both men drew their six-guns. When the scene was filmed, both men drew and fired—but to the astonishment of the crowd, the invincible hero Matt Dillon hurtled backwards as if struck by a bullet and fell spread-eagle in the dust, "dead" as a mackerel. After a moment of stunned silence, a roar of laughter swept the set.

No single anecdote better illustrates Arness' sense of humor. It lacks subtlety, cleverness and polish. It is just plain funny.

CBS executives, however, have found

The first coin issued in the United States was a one cent piece, dated 1787, and it bore the slogan, "Mind Your Business." That's more suitable than the present slogan on our money, "In God We Trust." Somehow money seems more like Man's idea than God's.

—Poor Woman's Almanac

JAMES ARNESS

continued from page 92

ance for them than Jim does. He finds no value or constructive elements in the Hollywood social life."

Arness admits Peter is right about his distaste for the party life.

"I went to a discothèque once," Jim volunteered, "to entertain the visiting vice president of an aircraft company. I feel uncomfortable in those places,

a dropout, but because I'm not that well informed, because I'm not an authority, I keep my mouth shut. I don't think I have the right to try to influence others. Maybe that's being a dropout. I don't know."

One actor who does not agree with Arness' stand and still manages to impress Jim somewhat is John Wayne. One of the first people to realize Jim's potential as a star, Wayne signed him to a contract with his Batjac Produc-

tions. At Batjac, Arness had a few roles but nothing big. When "Gunsmoke" came along and Arness was hesitant about signing because he feared what a TV series might do to his movie career, Wayne supposedly retorted, "What movie career?"

"I respect Duke Wayne," says Arness. "He is a unique guy. He's got a more responsible attitude than I do. He loves people and the business and what it all means to the public. I admire that, but I just don't have his kind of energy. When I was under contract to Wayne we'd all go out until three or four in the morning just pouring down the whiskey. At 7 A.M. I'd be staggering around, unable to see straight. But there'd be Duke, ready to work."

Honesty is an Arness policy, yet he hides two physical characteristics. One is his hair color. Actually he's blond, but because TV's powers-that-be insist that a blond man appears weak or sexless or both, Jim's hair is sprayed before he goes on camera to make it look dark brown or black. Arness is also said to walk with a distinctive rolling gait that many consider a perfect cowboy stride. In reality, he perfected that slight hitch in his stride to cover up a war injury.

He never complained

An infantry private in World War II, Jim participated in the 1944 landing at Anzio on the Italian front. He was shot in the right leg, and the impact of the rifle bullet pitched him back into a freezing stream. He lay there for 18 hours with a gaping hole in his leg. Finally found by medics, he was taken to a hospital, where he remained for almost a year. Arness still has a jagged scar from the wound, but will not talk about it or the war.

Two years ago Jim returned to Anzio to look for the site where he was wounded. He couldn't locate the exact spot, but he did find the farmhouse that once harbored the German machine-gun emplacement that his patrol had been sent to knock out. He told his brother Peter that he remembered clearly walking up the outside stairs of the house and the hand-to-hand fighting that followed.

The brothers rarely see one another except on holidays at Jim's ranch, where their father Rolf Arness now

And as far as anyone else in Hollywood is concerned, they might as well live in London. I've never met people like Marlon Brando or Julie Andrews. That's the truth. I'd be surprised if I had any rapport with them. My friends are a couple of doctors, some members of the show's crew and some lifeguard buddies who surf or ski. I find most high-level executives ego-centered. They drive me nuts.

"In Hollywood people try to pressure you into joining one bandwagon or another. They say it's your duty as a celebrity. I don't think so. I've stayed away from politics. Maybe that's being

lives. Mr. Arness and his wife were divorced 25 years ago. Jim's mother has since remarried and lives in Carmel, California. When she comes to Los Angeles both Jim and Peter entertain her.

Arness is more articulate and at ease with his family than in any other setting. Recently, when the Arness clan gathered at Jim's house, he came in late, but when he did arrive the family howled at his wildly mod outfit: long, striped bell-bottom trousers, psychedelic shirt, wide leather belt and furry vest. Most of the costume was especially tailored and probably will never be worn again.

Weekends alone

Arness has no formal religion. He says that he is close to infinity when he is alone with nature. And he is alone with nature almost every weekend. Whether he is at home or at the studio, it's a 20-minute drive to the Van Nuys airport, where he keeps his two planes: a Cessna and a two-engine Beechcraft he calls "The Red Baron." Then off he flies to his roomy, 60-year-old log cabin in Mammoth, California, to ski, hike or ride horseback. The cabin was built during the silver-mining days. There Jim cooks his own meals and enjoys the high country—"the white water, the smell of firs and pines. That's why I love my planes—they can take me there."

When his TV schedule permits, he can fly to Hawaii, where he leases a home on the beach and spends time surfing or fishing. Like his son Rolf, he loves surfing. "When you catch a big wave it's spooky. Scarey. It makes your blood circulate," says Jim. Then he adds, "That's sport to me—not golf or tennis."

His favorite hideaway is Baja California. His plane loaded with provisions, Jim likes to fly there, away from what he terms "the ecological disaster of the Los Angeles area." He brings the plane down on the beach and camps in a tent for several days.

"A few weeks ago I was down there with Rolf and a friend of his," Jim says. "We waded out into the water at low tide and picked up lobsters two feet long. We had lunch, we hiked, maybe tried a surfboard. At night we sat around the campfire. I had a sip or two of bourbon. Then I crawled into a sleeping bag and dropped off like a baby. That's the life. If I had my preference I'd rather do that than anything else."

When his "Gunsmoke" contract is fulfilled, Jim plans to live in Wyoming, Montana or Canada. "I've been looking around up there for a piece of ground that has the basic elements of nature. Completely primitive—with bear, deer and all the rest. I want to be in that environment. I can fly down

here to work once in a while." (That "once in a while" refers to the "Gunsmoke" specials Arness and CBS are planning after the weekly series is over.)

Arness is aware the life will be lonely.

"I don't guess a woman would want to share that kind of life," he says. "She'd be a hard one to find. Certainly it wouldn't be an actress. Their lives and drives are toward this town and

woman you've probably reached one of the highest levels of life." Still, some of Jim's friends predict that he will marry again.

Actress Francine York, whom he used to date, says she never confused Jim with Marshal Dillon. "I don't care much for Dillon because he has no sense of fun. Jim has lots of *joie de vivre*. He's funny. He tells jokes. He's like a big boy."

Arness' boyishness came to light one

plain, open-necked shirt and, on more formal occasions, a jacket. His idea of a date is to take a woman to the movies; Francine saw a lot of movies with him.

On their second date he wore one of his threadbare outfits but noticed how beautifully she was dressed.

"Shucks," he said (yes, *shucks!*), "I can't take out a pretty lady like you without nice clothes." So he bought some new clothes. On their next date he asked Francine's opinion of his wardrobe. Francine wanted to laugh, but didn't. The clothes were obviously very expensive but were more suitable to a 90-year-old square than a handsome TV star in the prime of life. And honest Jim even complained to Francine that the new shoes he'd bought hurt his feet!

Jim and Francine no longer date, much to Francine's regret, but she still cherishes a romantic card he sent her—along with two dozen long-stemmed yellow roses. He signed the note "Big J"—the signature he puts on most of his personal correspondence.

A courtly manner

Perhaps it was Ken Curtis, who plays Festus on "Gunsmoke," who best summed up Jim's attitude toward women. "He's almost courtly toward them," says Curtis. "His conversation is sprinkled with four-letter words, but not when women are around. He's no pretty boy, but his good, strong features seem to turn on women of every age."

Confronted with this appraisal of his sex appeal, Arness' jaw dropped in disbelief, then he stared expressionlessly off into the horizon. Finally, he stood up, stretched his arms and said he had to go.

"Gotta go look at a dog for Rolf," he said. "He had a beauty that was lost. We never found him. I thought maybe I'd kind of surprise Rolf with a young pup like the other..."

Jim Arness stopped talking, aware that he had revealed a very small particle of the warmth that lies within him. He again turned his flushed face to the horizon and then quickly said, "Well, see you around." **END**

the social hierarchy that naturally goes with it."

For the past five years, Arness' most regular date has been actress Thordis Brandt. He speaks of her reluctantly. "We're good pals and we have a lot of fun. We both know what our differences are. We've adjusted to living with that."

Remarry? "No, sir, no way!" Arness says.

"It's difficult to talk about another wife. The wrong one you need like a hole in the head. The right one... how you find her is what I don't know. Luck, I guess. If you find the right

week after he began dating Francine in March 1970. He flew up to Solvang, California, to buy a huge antique candle as a memento of their "First Week Anniversary."

As Francine tells it, "My neighbor saw Jim bringing the package up the stairs and asked what this big, clumsy guy was doing. Jim told him it was an anniversary present. When I asked him why he'd gone to all the trouble he said, 'It ain't nothing, really. I know you like that antique stuff.'"

Jim is no fashion plate. He owns just four suits, which he wears only if he must. Otherwise it's boots, chinos, a

MAY DAYS

By Marcia Cohen

*The children know these first warm days
Are theirs. They dawn as if to say,
"You have a right, you living things,
To golden laughter, giddiness, to Spring."*

*These sunny days acquit the boy
Who, secretly, believed the joy
Of muddy pond and bullfrog's song
Was due him, all the winter long.*