

Dennis Weaver of **GUNSMOKE**

The story of a crack athlete who appears each week on your TV screen as a man with a limp

By KATHLEEN POST



Last summer, *Gunsmoke's* Chester was given a royal welcome on "Dennis Weaver Day" in his old home town of Joplin, Mo. Then, in December, his family and friends—from many states, as well as Missouri—gathered at Dennis's home in California, the day after they'd all surprised him on *This Is Your Life*.



Gunsmoke: Chester is right behind Marshal Dillon (Jim Arness), as Letty (Catherine McLeod) grieves for a stricken homesteader (played by Don Keefer).

THEY ARE about to drink a toast to Billy Dennis Weaver. By Hollywood standards, it is a strange party. Although Dennis is an actor, his house is unpretentious and homey; so are the guests. It is the sort of party one would expect to see in Joplin, Missouri. As a matter of fact, some of the folks are originally from Joplin.

They are the family and friends whose faith inspired the young actor through years of struggle and sacrifice. They are gathered now about the brick fireplace to drink his health and wish him well. They are proud that he has scored so fine a

Dennis Weaver is Chester in *Gunsmoke*, seen on CBS-TV, Sat.,



Dennis is a real Western hero to wife Gerry and sons Rob and Rick—so, naturally, he strums guitar for 'em. But sports are more in his line—he was a track champ.

hit as the game-legged Chester in the outstanding TV Western, *Gunsmoke*. Dennis, they realize, stands on the threshold of a brilliant career. He might have surrounded himself with the glamour Hollywood offers its more successful citizens. Instead, he has chosen to spend these hours with the hearty folk who knew him when and love him still.

The rare quiet and quaint kindness of Chester also characterize Dennis. But there are more differences between the actor and his *Gunsmoke* role than a "game leg." (Continued on page 63)



Dennis Weaver of "Gunsmoke"

(Continued from page 47)

Dennis (or "Rupe," the nickname given him by college chums) not only has two sound legs—he has been and is a first-rate athlete. In *Gunsmoke*, Chester looks almost insignificant beside the formidable six-foot-six Jim Arness; the real-life Dennis is himself a six-footer, agile and muscular. Chester is shy and naive almost to the point of seeming ineffectual; Dennis has the smiling but determined vigor of a man able and willing to shoulder responsibility or accept leadership in time of crisis.

The acting career of Dennis Weaver goes back to an oak tree in the yard of his family's home in Joplin. Wearing nothing but a pair of swimtrunks, Dennis played his first role as a junior Tarzan, pounding his chest, swinging from limb to limb. He liked Westerns, too. After a Saturday-morning show at the old Rex Theater, he would strap on his toy guns and blaze away like Buck Jones. As his mother describes it: "All that bang-banging, yelling and groaning—you'd have thought a dozen kids were out there. But it was just Dennis, playing this part and that one. He liked the villains best. Got so he could die real fancy."

His father, Walter Weaver, who stifled a yearning to go on the stage himself and worked as an electrician for thirty-eight years to support his family, makes a trenchant comment: "Quite a few fellows go out for sports and end up actors—for instance, John Wayne, Buster Crabbe, Johnny Weissmuller. But our boy, he was sort of runty to start with and he set out to become an athlete so he could break into acting. He always had one eye on the mirror, making faces . . ."

Dennis himself has said of his childhood that "it was a continual adventure." And his oldest sister Geraldine—now Mrs. D. M. Bell of Shreveport, Louisiana—has explained: "That's because Mama and Dad didn't let us see too much of the other side. Dad worked right through the Depression, but things were still pretty sad for people all around us. And every so often, Mama would pile us all into the old 1929 DeSoto and we'd cross the country to visit her folks in California. We'd usually stop off for a visit at Grandpa Marion Weaver's farm in Oklahoma. Dad used to say we were a 'bunch of gypsies' but he figured Mama was right in trying to show us the country and the adventure of making our own way as we went."

Her brother Howard, three years older than Dennis (and, as he jovially puts it, "a builder from Boulder—Colorado, that is") and Mary Ann, the baby of the family (now Mrs. William J. Stiltz of Tyler, Texas), can also remember adventures. Like the time they ran short of funds on one of their trips to California. Mama Weaver had always budgeted very carefully but they had developed engine trouble on the way and, only one day away from their destination, they had just enough money for gas.

Dennis, the big eater of the group, tried not to complain, but he kept patting his stomach significantly. Mama had finally taken pity. "I'll whip up some delicious sandwiches," she promised. Everybody brightened, especially Dennis. Alas, the sandwiches were only made of lard sprinkled with sugar. "Dennis's imagination sure came in handy," pert-faced Mary Ann giggles. "He kept saying, 'Mmm, delicious ham and cheese,' and he'd smack his lips like it really was good."

On these trips the entire family worked.

Mama had a theory: "There's nothing more wonderful than the feeling you're making your own way. And even God worked six days out of seven. A person not only has a right to work, he has a duty to." So the family stopped off en route to pick cotton, tomatoes, strawberries—anything in season. Dennis was admittedly the best picker, but he ended up eating half of what he picked.

Mama was extremely independent. She stood up for herself and for other pickers when she saw them being shortchanged. One time she didn't like the treatment given the pickers of strawberries, so she just packed her brood into the car, gave the straw-boss a piece of her mind, and drove off. They were almost twenty miles away and she was still fuming—when Howard discovered that two-year-old Mary Ann had been left behind. They hurried back to find her sitting in the middle of a strawberry patch, her little face and hands smeared with juice.

On their last trip, Dennis was eleven. The family stayed with his sister Gerry, who had recently married and was living in Mantika. Here George Hogroff, long-time mailman in that community, entered the boy's life. He was to prove a strong and helpful influence. Dennis had begun to take dancing lessons, and George bought him a slab of four-by-eight plywood to practice his steps on. It was a kindness the boy never forgot. When it came time for the family to return to Joplin, Mama decided to leave her two boys with their sister so that they might finish their school year without interruption.

Now Dennis switched his affections from Westerns to musicals. In addition to dancing, he started a brief flirtation with the mandolin, which never quite took. Meanwhile, George, an expert woodworker, began teaching the boy his hobby. One day, while correcting his use of the lathe, George gave Dennis a bit of never-forgotten advice. Holding up a cleverly designed and finished tobacco humidor, George said, "Don't brag how good you might be—just show 'em."

When he went back to Joplin, Dennis made a lasting decision. He didn't want to be a dancer, musician or woodworker. They were fine as hobbies. But, for a lifelong work, he wanted to act. Spurred on by his dad's appearance in some local plays, Dennis went in for drama at school. Then came disappointment.

He had been given a part in the junior class play, but the principal called him in and said, "Sorry, lad—your grades are too low." The boy returned home, morose and gloomy. His mother's eyes snapped. "You, boy," she brought him up short, "stop feeling sorry for yourself. You can be what you want if you buckle down and study." Dennis took her advice. He had never thought of himself as "a brain," but he studied hard and wound up the year as an "A" student—with a part in the senior class play.

At about the same time, he also turned back to a childhood plan. He would become a star athlete and use that as the springboard for an acting career. This he accomplished. He became a varsity football player and set a number of track and field records that have remained unbroken to this day. He was graduated with a scholarship to Joplin Junior College. It was also then that he met the woman he has called "the most important event in my life." She is reddish-blond Gerry, his wife and the mother of his beloved Ricky, 9, and Rob, 5.

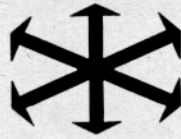
Dennis was eighteen and had gone to a Y.M.C.A. dance. As he now sheepishly admits, his eye was caught by a girl whirling about the dance floor in a skirt that, while full, nevertheless revealed red skating pants and "the neatest pair of pins."

He wangled an introduction to lovely and lively Geraldine Stowell and, for the next three years, they went "as steady as was customary in those days."

After one year at junior college, Dennis was called to the Navy. He was already in the Naval Reserve and now he was set on becoming a fighter pilot. As a member of the Naval track and field team, he set several records for speed and agility. With Dennis a poor correspondent those days, Gerry and the family had to rely on his old friend, George Hogroff, for mail.

Dennis was stationed for a while at St. Mary's College, near San Francisco, and he and George managed to get together now and then. George would write to the folks in Joplin on how their boy was doing. Once, after Dennis had failed to write for some time, George wired Gerry a dozen red roses for her birthday with a note: "Honey, he's fine, so don't worry. We're all pulling for you to land him."

Two and a half years later, Dennis was discharged as an ensign. Gerry and he promptly eloped to Columbus, Kansas, where there was no three-day waiting period. The young couple were on their honeymoon when Gerry saw her husband staring blankly into space. "What are you



American youth has more opportunity — thanks to Advertising!

dreaming about?" she asked. She was rather startled when he replied, "The stage—acting."

In that moment, the young wife showed her mettle. "I'm all for it," she said calmly. "What's more, I'll do everything in my power to help you." It was a pledge she fully redeemed.

Dennis had won a track-football scholarship at Oklahoma University before going into service. The school still wanted him. With that, and the ninety-dollar-a-month allotment on the GI Bill, they rented a basement apartment near the college and Dennis settled down to major in drama. Gerry helped keep the wolf from the door by typing the theses of graduate students. It was a time of hardship for both of them. But, whenever Dennis suggested leaving school and getting a job that would support her, Gerry resolutely rejected the idea.

Under the tutelage of Oklahoma's famed coach, John "Jake" Jacobs, Dennis became a remarkable track star, leading his team to a Big Six Championship in the two-mile run, setting several records in jumping events, and climaxing his efforts by winning the Colorado Relays Septathlon Championship.

Shuttling, as it were, between athletics and dramatics, Dennis now acquired the nickname of "Rupe," which his wife and former college friends still use. It happened when some of his fellow athletes, wishing to rib him about his acting, began calling him "Rupe" after the drama professor Rupell Jones.

Once, while Dennis was playing the Kansas City businessman whose daughter aspires to marry into the family of "The Late George Apley," the athletes gleefully piled into the front row and tried to stare "Rupe" out of countenance. They succeeded only too well. Dennis, essaying his first cigar in the interests of realism, went completely blank before that row of grinning faces.

"I stood there, without a line in my head, puffing on that cigar and getting sicker by the second," sorrowfully reminisces the young actor whose performances have since won him national acclaim.

Having been graduated as an honor student, Dennis wanted to return to Joplin with Gerry, who was then expecting their first baby. She wouldn't hear of it. At her insistence he went to the Olympic Games decathlon tryouts. It was June, 1948, and a former classmate, Lon Chapman, got in touch with him the night before the tryouts.

"I've fixed up an audition for you," Lon chortled. It was June, but it might as well have been April—because, as they walked through the streets, planning what Dennis would do at his audition, it began to rain. It poured. But, unheeding, the starry-eyed actors walked and talked until two o'clock in the morning.

It was a folly Dennis paid for. Although he placed sixth among the thirty entries and did beat Bob Mathias in the 1500-meter run, he failed to achieve his ambition of representing the United States at the Olympics. His disappointment was short-lived. The following day he got a dearer wish: He was accepted by the Actors' Studio, renowned for its long list of graduates who have reached stardom.

For two years, he applied himself to the studio's training. Those were two awful and magnificent years of suffering, struggle, sacrifice and study. He barely managed to support himself with odd jobs—taking the census, selling magazines and lingerie. He allowed himself thirty cents a day for food.

Lonny shared a room with him. "We lived mostly on cabbage," Dennis still remembers. "I will always like it—after all, it saved me from starving."

On his graduation from Actors' Studio, Dennis sent for Gerry, who had been "sweating it out in Joplin" with their son, Rick. Dennis hadn't as yet seen the boy, who was then fourteen months old. He got a salesman's job and they rented a furnished room in the Bronx. Things grew so bad that he wrote his mother, "I'm at the end of my rope." She wired back money and a message: "Tie a knot in that rope and hang on." He did.

He came home one day to find Gerry and the boy in bed with their clothes on. It was freezing. In a fury, he rushed out, cut some branches from the landlord's tree and started a fire in the room. The fireplace didn't work and the room got so smoky they had to fling open the windows and bear up under even more intense cold, worse than before.

Then Shelley Winters, who had spotted Dennis at Actors' Studio, talked Universal-International into giving him a movie contract. There was one big "if." He had to ride a horse. "I was practically born in the saddle," he told them—and, after he arrived in Hollywood, set about learning to ride. He hadn't been on a horse since he was a boy. On the back lot at U-I, he confessed to the stuntmen and one of them, after a good laugh, gave him a few lessons. Dennis made fourteen movies for the company, and then was let out during a large cutback.

Misfortune struck again when his second boy, Robbie, only a month old, came down with spinal meningitis and was not

given much chance to live. It might, Dennis realized, be too long a wait between acting jobs, so he immediately put his career aside and thought only of his family. He took a job as delivery man for a floral shop, working overtime whenever he could, for the extra money. Robbie at last pulled through and today shows no trace of the illness. But it strengthened an old interest of Dennis's in sick, poor, unhappy or handicapped people.

Just as his bad luck had come all at once, so now his good luck began to blossom. Bill Warren, his director in "Seven Angry Men," had been assigned to do a television series. He asked Dennis to read the first script. It proved to be *Gunsmoke*, an "adult Western" which was to start a new trend in that field. As he read the script, Dennis was seized by a conviction that the role of Chester, Marshall Dillon's sidekick, was made to order for him. He tested for it twice and was awarded the part.

Dennis was the first of the four principals to be signed. James Arness, the star, and Amanda Blake and Milburn Stone—who play the saloon hostess and "Doc," respectively—were all signed afterward. The series was an immediate click, with Dennis drawing a large share of the critical acclaim.

He also began to receive a huge fan mail, to answer which he has devoted much time and energy. Among the letters that began "Dear Chester" was one from a polio victim, Chester Roginsky. The letter went on to say, "My name is also Chester and I limp like you. It makes me feel braver to see how you get along fine."

Dennis sat down at once and wrote to this boy in Youngstown, Ohio, offering encouragement, advising him to practice swimming and telling him he could overcome his handicap to become an athlete. With these letters, the boy's improvement began—and, the night *This Is Your Life* presented Dennis's story, young Chester related how he had won two swimming events in a meet held a few days before.

Now it is the day after that memorable telecast, and the party at Dennis's home is almost over. The house—which only a few moments ago had been bubbling with laughter, jokes and reminiscing—has fallen silent. The guests are raising their glasses. Fred Gill, a former drama student who roomed with Dennis at Oklahoma, begins the toast: "Here's to our boy Dennis. He ran fast and he ran far—but, the farther he runs, the closer he gets to our hearts. . . ."