

Nineteen hundred years ago, give or take a year or two, around 60 A.D., a Roman named Festus was for a brief time procurator of Judea, and, according to the historian Josephus, the people rioted because of a decision he made favoring the Syrians at Caesarea. Today there is violent public reaction to another Festus-the replacement for the seemingly irreplaceable Chester in CBS's *Gunsmoke*, a shaggy character named Festus Hagen, played by a former crooner, singing cowboy, movie bit player and parachuting TV hero named Ken Curtis.

The producer of *Gunsmoke*, **Norman Macdonnell**, says, "The mail on Festus is either absolutely white or absolutely black. Some people say they can't stand him. Others say they like him better than Chester. They either love him or they hate him-but 90 percent say they love him."

There is no question of the reaction to Festus in *Gunsmoke's* Dodge City. They love him there-100 percent. The rest of the cast had become resentful of the attitude of Dennis Weaver, who played Chester. "Why, on his last show, he hardly even **limped!**" says Amanda Blake, who plays Kitty. As for Festus himself, where Dennis Weaver said, "After nine years as Chester, I have exhausted all the areas of creativity," the 48-year-old Curtis, who has been around show business since 1939, says, "There are so many good actors that are hurtin', I'm just grateful. I hope *Gunsmoke* goes on for another 10 years."

The character was not calculatedly created as a replacement for Chester. Twice Curtis did a similar role in *Have Gun-Will Travel*, where under the name of Monk he became involved with "Mr. Paladine." Festus Hagen made his first appearance in *Gunsmoke* in December 1982 in a script by writer Les Crutchfield entitled "Us Haggens." It was sup-

posed to be only a one-shot, but according to Macdonnell, "He had charm. Later we had him do another and liked him even better." When Weaver left *Gunsmoke* to do his own series, ***Kentucky Jones***, on NBC, Festus was moved into the gap.

Although the basic bumpkin humor of Chester and Festus is similar, the characters differ widely. Festus can be "cold and deadly," says Macdonnell. In one ***Gunsmoke*** episode, he killed a man in cold blood for assaulting his cousin. Festus also has been seen kissing a girl, something which would have been unthinkable for Chester-and which, as someone close to the program points out, "is closer than Matt Dillon has gotten to Kitty in 10 years."

Festus and Chester are probably most alike in their speech. Ken Curtis picked up the accent-which rarely slips into his off-screen speech-as a boy in the dry-lands of southeastern Colorado, where he was born Curtis Gates in a two-room prairie cabin on July 2, 1916. His father was a homesteader and for a time sheriff of Las Animas, Colo. The family lived in the jail then, and at 10 young Curtis was substitute jailer when his father was out of town.

Ken Curtis's off-screen life today belies this bucolic background. He and his wife, the former Barbara Ford, daughter of famed movie director John Ford, live at exclusive Toluca Lake. Ken wears heavy shell-rimmed glasses, tailored jackets and slacks, diamond cuff links, alligator shoes, and he drives a Thunderbird. Only the scraggly beard is a clue to the part he plays. He's 6 feet tall and weighs 180 pounds.

He wanted to be a doctor, but he was so successful as a songwriter in student productions at Colorado College that he left school and headed for Hollywood. There, in 1939, he was assigned as a staff singer for NBC

Radio. Later, after a few misadventures, including a stint as a sandhog, he sang briefly with the late Tommy Dorsey, who changed his name from Curtis Gates to Ken Curtis. Then, before enlisting in the Army in 1943, he sang with Shep Fields' band.

After the war, he returned to Hollywood. His singing of "Tumbling Tumbleweeds" on a radio program with Johnny Mercer got him the co-starring role in a series of Westerns of which he says, "I'd stop in the middle of a gun fight and sing a song." From 1947 to 1952, he was a member of the Sons of the Pioneers, a Western singing group. It was at this time that he met the girl who was to become his wife. She was then an assistant film editor on one of her father's pictures, "Wagonmaster," for which the Sons of the Pioneers sang the musical score.

A small part in a later John Ford picture, "The Searchers," brought into being the character now known as Festus Haggen. Ken's part was supposed to be a serious one: "I was to be kind of a Ralph Bellamy, but I was kidding around on the set, doing the dry-land dialect. I didn't even know Mr. Ford was listening. Then when it came time for me to do my lines, he said, 'How would you say that in dry-land?' I did it for him, and he said, 'Play it that way.' "

Ken Curtis does not take himself or Festus Haggen too seriously. Concerning acting, he says, "We're just doing a job, like a bookkeeper in a bank, except people watch us."

Three times Chester has limped ostensibly for the last time down the dusty street of Dodge City-and twice he has come back, when other plans for Dennis Weaver failed to materialize. But if Weaver's new series should prove unsuccessful and he tries returning to *Gunsmoke* once again, he will find the corral locked, the welcome mat gone. Festus Haggen is there to stay.