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RIDING HIGH ON the waves of INDIGNATION

*Milburn Stone,
'Gunsmoke's cantankerous Doc,
comes up with
some salty observations
on the course
of the venerable Western*

For 10 successful seasons Milburn Stone has faithfully portrayed *Gunsmoke's* Doc Adams as a contentious, cranky, querulous old bachelor insulting Marshal Dillon's integrity, overlooking Miss Kitty's questionable character and needling the unkempt Festus unmercifully.

Off-screen, the dedicated Doc also remains in character-contentious, cranky, querulous-especially about what is happening to his favorite TV series, *Gunsmoke*.

Mustache bristling, Stone pulls at his proboscis just as a disconcerted Doc would do. "I wouldn't presume to

know how to run a network, or be the producer of a show, but I do know the flavor of *Gunsmoke*. **You can** detect the changes."

Perhaps years of immersion in the role have imbued him with-subliminally-the Dot-like traits he so admires. In person it becomes a moot point as to where Doc tapers off and the real Milburn Stone emerges.

Over the years Stone has earned respect and a grudging admiration for his pugnacious protection of Doc's image and his vehement insistence on professionalism. As a born-and-bred Kansan whose lineage dates back to

the very period and place which *Gunsmoke* emulates, he is also unofficial keeper of the *Gunsmoke* code.

Stone's indignation rose to a boiling point last fall when then-producer Norman Macdonnell (who originated the series with writer John Meston), was given his walking papers by the network. "We were all stunned," recalls Stone. "They called Norm over to CBS at 6 o'clock one evening and told him the news." Britisher Philip Leacock, heretofore a director, was named to his first producership. "And," snorts Stone, "the scripts coming through now are written by

people who don't understand the show at all.

"We're also getting into something else that I certainly don't agree with," grumbles Stone. "They're bringing in guest stars."

Producer Leacock presents an incongruous contrast to the Kansas colloquialisms which surround him. He is aware of the resentment guest stars can create, but feels competition is good for the regulars. In fact, he feels it's "awfully good for us to have a good outside actor give us a breath of fresh air occasionally."

Here again, Stone

continued

disagrees. "We're Matt, Kitty, Doc and Festus. We have no other identity. A Jean Arthur, a James Whitmore, a Betty Hutton are one-shots. Their fans will tune in, but not necessarily again."

But for all his pseudo-irascibility, Stone is regarded with tolerant affection by his co-workers—even Lealock. "I must say," admitted the producer, "I'm in sort of a mellow mood towards him today—he's not on the se-but there are moments when I could say different things. He may be a bit irascible sometimes, but you have to put up with that in good actors. He's a bit dogmatic, but he's also great, great fun."

The champion storyteller

For all his outward gruffness and studied sarcasm, Stone is the champion storyteller of the cast and usually livens up a dull day with his sense of humor. He hides his sentimentality behind an aphorism which he tosses off—"The only way true men can show their love is to insult the hell out of each other."

Stone's insults have encompassed the rest of the cast. "I spent the first three years hating Jim (Arness). I couldn't stand him professionally—r his attitude," Stone explained. "He'd be late or wouldn't show up—never apologize. And once he was there he'd clown around." Finally Stone exploded at rehearsal one day. "I told him we were diametrically opposed and I felt he did not belong in the business at all. I said, 'I've read my contract and there's nothing in it that says I have to put diapers on you or wait for you. And if you ever show up late again, buddy, you'll have two things to explain—not only where you were, but where I went!'"

Stone sheepishly admits he wouldn't have blamed Arness if the 6-foot-4

giant had tossed him right #rough the ceiling. Says Stone, "When I was through he looked me right in the eye and said, 'You're absolutely right.'" Stone slapped his knee. "From that moment on I began to love that guy. He's a great big wonderful cub bear."

Since that episode, this same great big wonderful cub bear negotiated a partnership for himself in Gunsmoke, and just last fall reportedly sold it back to the CBS television network for a neat capital gain.

Meanwhile, back at the tirade. . . Finished with Jim, Stone took off on Amanda Blake and Dennis Weaver (who has since departed the show for his own series). Angered because he felt they didn't take the show seriously enough at first, Stone continued in high dudgeon.

"My feeling was that they just didn't belong in the business. I've been in it all my life, and I feel that people who make a living at it. even a meager one, are the luckiest people in the world. How many people wish to God for a chance like we had? Then to see people fluff it off . . ."

Some of Stone's fervor evidently was contagious. Today he admits Amanda balances precariously between "school-teacher sweet and dance-hall tough—a slender tight-rope!" As far as he is concerned, she is the world's greatest Kitty Russell.

'Nine funerals' for Weaver

As for Weaver, Stone snorted. "We had about nine funerals over him" when he left the show after three abortive attempts. The death of Chester, however, gave birth to a new character on Gunsmoke, Festus Hagen, the only white sheep, in a clan of outlaws, played with a scraggly beard by otherwise handsome Ken Curtis. Fortunately, Ken's professionalism meets with Stone's exacting standards.

Ken replaced the recently married Amanda and the dear-departed Dennis Weaver in personal appearances with Stone at fairs, rodeos and horse shows. The veteran vaudevillian ("Stone and Strain, songs, dances and snappy chatter," circa 1920's) still loves the excitement of a live audience—and the money to be earned helps toward the purchase of such accouterments of TV stardom as a luxury yacht.

'He doesn't pull any punches'

Curtis is almost adulant in his admiration for Stone. "Mil is one of the most entertaining fellows I've ever been around in my life. But when he decides to do something, he doesn't pull any punches. You've got to admire him for it, because he really stands up and fights. He's one of the most honest guys I've ever met. He gets a little salty now and then, but always for a reason."

This season, Stone's brand of salt spiced up the set considerably, sometimes keeping the front office in a stew. He took umbrage at one particular script recently and the resultant effect on Doc. I've never seen a more obvious attempt to inject social significance into a Gunsmoke show. I'm not anti-anybody. But this was like saying, 'Now this next act is for you people in Little Rock. Pay close attention.' Certainly all men are brothers regardless of the color of their skin." Stone was building to a high pipe just remembering.

"In this scene, Doc was supposed to walk out of the hotel and get into this philosophical thing. I said, 'I know what somebody had in mind here, but it's not Doc.' It was completely out of context. It was about the fifth rewrite, and the final argument was that the speech was necessary because the show was running two minutes short. So I said, 'What the hell, why don't I sing and dance? I could. Hell, yes. Let's throw that in, too!'"

To accuse this Stone man of sentimentality would produce a derisive snicker. However, he admits that his Kansas heritage has been a talisman of sorts. He started in show business in Kansas, playing tent shows; went to New York and made his Broadway debut in Sinclair Lewis' "Jayhawker," a play about Kansas set in the Civil War; and has spent the last 10 years performing in a replica of Dodge City, Kan. And his new 46-foot yacht he has christened the Jayhawker, of course.

Proudly Stone boasts, "My mother was a Kansas pioneer who lived in a sod house—the oldest of nine children. My first wife was a Kansan. My second wife is a Kansan. My daughter was born in Kansas. And I patterned Doc largely on my grandfather, Joe Stone, who was in the Civil War. You could say I never really left Kansas."

A cinch for next

Stone can now afford to be disillusioned "Everybody keeps saying we're Gunsmoke a cinch for next year. "I still don't believe it." He grinned suddenly looking 20 years younger than "I've made a bet every year for the past three years and lost them all—that *Gunsmoke* wouldn't be back." Doc just lost his bet again. His shingle will remain in Dodge next season.

"I don't concern myself too much because I know I can't do anything about it. They [CBS-TV] have me for one more year. After that it's my option, and I don't believe I'd do it.

"Actually," his blue eyes twinkled, "I own a property—I mean a TV series. It's set at the turn of the Century, about the time the horse and buggy was being replaced by the Model T Ford."

The main character? "Why do I want to prove to somebody that I can play a lawyer? He's a doctor. Why not just go on being