

THE MARSHAL'S GUN IS STILL SMOKING AND MATT DILLON WANTS TO KEEP FIRING

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Big Jim Arness, alias Marshal Matt Dillon, lunged out of his canvas chair, raced five feet and dropped to his knee. His Colt .45 spat bullets. A tin can thrown up into the air by Dennis Weaver, Chester in the Gunsmoke series, clattered to the ground. Three .45 holes were pierced in its sides. Arness turned to Weaver. "That'll be one ten dollar bill, please." The bet was paid.

James Arness was off the set, but he was proving two things about his career in Gunsmoke. Chester had just challenged his boss on whether or not the star's six-shooter was still smoking and firing as accurately as it was seven years ago when the series started. Arness proved it was firing accurately. He said his gun would keep smoking if people still wanted the Gunsmoke series. Not long ago Gunsmoke went into its seventh consecutive year on American TV and a lot of people, including Dennis Weaver, felt that there was very little left to do with either the character of Dillon or Chester.

Arness said: "We've all probably had our secret doubts about going on with it." He pushed his dusty Stetson back on his head and added candidly: "Maybe there isn't much more I can do with the role after all this time. But so what? The dough's still coming in, and I could keep on playing Matt Dillon forever. When Dennis left the show this past season to seek out greener pastures I told him he'd be back, And," Arness pointed out, "he did return. But for a while it was kind of tough trying to figure out what would happen to the show with him gone. Public opinion called him back. We were swamped with letters asking for him. So when his own TV show idea fell through he came back. I was mighty happy to see him."

What Arness is trying to say is that had Dennis Weaver chosen to leave "Gunsmoke" permanently there might have been a lot of doubt as to whether they'd be plugging on for a seventh year.

"Right now," said Arness, "Chester says he's only going to be around for 15 more episodes. But I'm convinced that he's convinced it'll probably wind up being like 50."

Too Strenuous: The word around Hollywood for some time has been that Amanda "Kitty" Blake and Milburn "Doc" Stone and Dennis Weaver are closer among themselves than they are with Arness. True?

"It's really very simple," said Arness. "In the early years of the series Dennis and I used to go on personal appearance tours occasionally. And sometimes I went alone. But it got to the point where it was a strain. It's tremendously fatiguing for me to work all week, then hop on a plane or train and travel maybe 2,000 or 3,000 miles on a weekend, attending social and civic functions, parties, and so on, and then fly back to work. But Doc, Chester, and Kitty - I call them that out of force of habit - still do all that and people think because I don't accompany them, then we're not close. But we are. Don't let anybody kid you." The 38 year-old native of Minneapolis is satisfied with Gunsmoke the way it stands today -- a full one-hour show -- but says he is looking forward to doing a motion picture soon.

"I don't believe in the axiom that people won't pay to see in a theatre what they can see at home on TV for free," he drawled. "That theory isn't proven. Why, I've had people come and pay six or six-and-a-half dollars to see me for 10 minutes at a rodeo. And they didn't come just once, either," he added. "But packed the places night after night. If people pay to see you in one thing, they'll pay to see you in something else. But it has to be good. Once they come to know and like you, you'd darn well better be good if they have to pay."

Why hasn't James Arness appeared in many movies? "The problem that most TV actors like myself have," said the star, "is that we're usually offered the small-type movies, where they can exploit our name and shoot it on a small financial budget. In my case, pictures like that simply want to take advantage of the Matt Dillon reputation, which is exactly what I don't want. I want major pictures - and I don't care if it's not the leading role."

What about the future of Gunsmoke? How long will Matt Dillon's .45 keep smoking?

"Forever, if people want it," he said.