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JIM ARNESS

What is the price of TV stardom?

by LLOYD SHEARER

Parade West Coast correspondent

HOLLYWOOD.

FIVE YEARS AGO the name Jim Arness, plus 20 cents, could buy you a cup of coffee in any filmland restaurant.

Today the same name, without a penny, brings unlimited credit, the fawning of every headwaiter in town, daily offers to endorse, at \$1,000 a crack, a variety of products from saddles to soap.

The reason, of course, is that Jim Arness is the star of *Gunsmoke*, television's No. 1 program. This western, which went on the air in 1955, is currently viewed each week by 30 to 40 million watchers. To many of them big Jim Arness as Marshal Matt Dillon of Dodge City is the bravest, most reliable heroic character on television.

To Arness, (36, 6 feet 6½, 230 pounds) "these past five years have been like a dream. Yesterday we finished our 195th *Gunsmoke* episode, and on the way home I took inventory of things. And for a guy who a few years ago was living the life of a beach bum, I've done pretty well. I've got a Thunderbird, a 1,000-acre ranch and a 40-foot boat. I've also got my own production company. I've also got three fine kids [see cover].

"In fact the only thing I haven't got is a marriage. Virginia and I are busted up. That's the price I've had to pay for success. It's a darn high one, too. And I don't think I'll get married again, not for many, many years. Not until the kids have grown up. This TV business is not conducive to successful marriages."

Because of his huge bulk, Big Jim gives the impression that he is the type of friendly, easy-going extrovert who rarely examines the inner workings of conscience. The truth is that he is an extraordinarily sensitive, intelligent, objective and analytical man.

The Road to Crisis

A few months ago when his wife apparently attempted suicide in Honolulu because of their separation, Arness did everything he could to help. Then one evening when the mess was over and he had succeeded in restoring some workable balance to their relationship, he sat down and reconstructed turn by turn the road of his life that had brought him to this crisis.

In 1942 James Arness, son of a medical supply salesman, was a freshman at Beloit College, Wisconsin. Drafted into

the Army, he was shipped overseas with the 3d Infantry Division, was badly wounded in Italy. Jim got his discharge in 1945 with a small disability pension. He went back to Minneapolis, got a job as a disc jockey at radio station WLOL.

When a friend, Dick Bremicker, decided to chance an acting career in Hollywood, Jim agreed to go along "just as excess baggage." He was 22, foot-loose and fancy-free.

In Hollywood Bremicker signed up with a Little Theatre group. Big Jim hung around during rehearsals. One day an actor failed to show up. Arness was asked to take his part. He knew the lines and gave a creditable performance.

Many agents in the movie colony have long contended that "we can take any man who is taller than 6 feet 2 with a pleasant personality and make him into a movie star—not an actor but a movie star." Arness possessed these requisites. After acting at the Bliss-Hayden Theatre in Beverly Hills a few nights, he aroused the interest of Leo Lance, an agent.

Lance took him around to meet Dore Schary, then head of RKO. Schary was casting a Loretta Young starrer, *The Farmer's Daughter*. A strong believer in young talent, Schary offered Big Jim a job at \$250 a week for three weeks. Since Arness had never been in front of a movie camera, Schary thought the salary a fair one. Agent Lance didn't.

"Look, Dore," he said, "this boy is a war veteran. He was shot*to pieces at Anzio. He needs the dough. Give him a break."

On The Beach

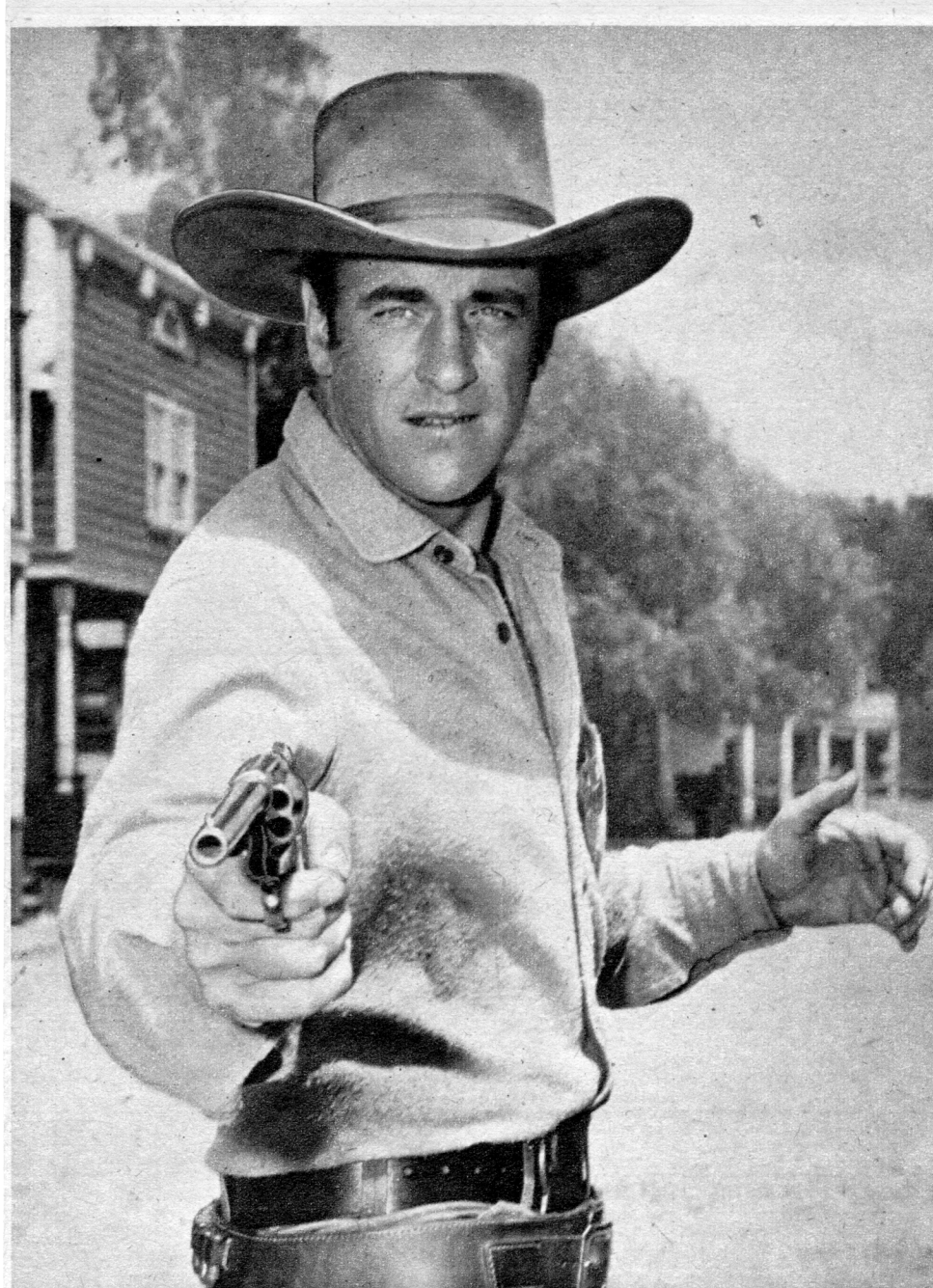
Schary raised the ante to \$400 a week. The picture lasted 17 weeks, and Arness ended up with \$5,000, after taxes. This was more money than he'd ever had. He slipped into his old car, equipped with stove and sleeping bag, drove to Mexico, lived on the beaches for almost a year until his money ran out.

Back to Hollywood he came for another stake; only this time no one in pictures would hire him. He worked as a carpenter, a salesman, a day laborer. When it was warm he slept on the beaches, when it was cold, in a sleeping bag in the rear of his car. He existed on his small monthly GI check, and gradually he became discouraged, disillusioned, embittered.

A tall, attractive, well-built girl he met at the Pasadena Playhouse brought a little sunshine and purpose into his life. Her



Before TV success, Jim Arness and wife Virginia spent happy hours together.



As Marshal Matt Dillon, Arness and his gun are weekly visitors in millions of homes.

name was Virginia Chapman, and she, too, was lonely. She'd just gone through an unhappy marriage and had a son, Craig. "I was looking for someone," she admits, "who needed and wanted me, someone I could love."

Jim and Virginia co-starred in *Candida* at the Pasadena Playhouse. Friendship ripened into love. One morning the pair drove to Santa Barbara and were married. Arness had virtually no money. His father-in-law rented him an apartment for a token payment of \$20 a month. But presently luck turned for Big Jim. He began getting parts around town. Dore Schary, now at MGM, gave him a leading role in *Battleground*. In three years Arness appeared in 20 featured roles. In 1952 John Wayne took a liking to Jim and put him under contract. For the first time in his acting career, Jim Arness found a modicum of financial security.

In 1955, hungry for talent, television executives offered John Wayne fantastic amounts of money to star in a weekly western series. Wayne refused all TV offers. He recommended Arness as a substitute and said: "Try and make your mark in TV, Jim, because you're not going to make it in movies. You're too tall. Actors

like me and Gregory Peck and Gary Cooper don't want you towering over us."

So Big Jim entered the field of 25 candidates who auditioned for the Matt Dillon role in *Gunsmoke*. He won it, then wasn't sure he wanted it. Wayne made up his mind for him. "Don't be a jerk," he ordered. "This is the opportunity of your life. Take it."

Big Jim took it; then his marriage began to loosen at the seams.

Old Wives' Tale

It's an old Hollywood story. The loving wife spurs, drives and encourages her husband. Frequently she teaches him all she knows about acting, which may be considerable. Whenever he gets a part, she cues him on his lines. When work is scarce, she bolsters his sagging spirits.

At the outset they live in shabby quarters. Often the wife works at odd jobs to help meet expenses. Occasionally her family contributes something. The wife rarely tells her husband of these small gifts from her parents, but he knows the truth, and it hurts his ego.

He tries harder. He goes from one agent to another. He makes the rounds of all the casting departments. He scrupulously fol-

lows every lead to a part, takes anything that pays a buck.

Somewhere along the line he gets a break. He does well in one picture. After that, jobs are easier to secure. As he establishes a small reputation, he finds, strangely enough, that his home life is deteriorating.

With Jim, the deterioration became acute as *Gunsmoke* got under way. He spent time learning to ride and handle firearms. He worked at the studio 12 or 13 hours a day. He was tired when he got home, had less time for his wife and children than ever before. One of the requisites for success in Hollywood is dedication to one's career. An acting career is nothing that can be sloughed off.

Last year, CBS and Arness signed a new long-term contract. It gave Arness his own producing company, which now produces *Gunsmoke* in association with the network, and assured Jim the role of Matt Dillon so long as *Gunsmoke* is in existence.

A Stock Pattern

By then, however, Big Jim's marriage had gone south. His wife says she felt left out, that the men surrounding her husband regarded her as an irritant, that she was subject to all the hostilities and frustrations that are the usual lot of the Hollywood wife. She felt miserable, unhappy, unwanted.

When she complained to Jim, he said he was doing the best he could under the circumstances. He was beset by a dozen pressures. A neglected wife was a stock part in the Hollywood success pattern, and Virginia was stuck with it.

Virginia Arness decided to take a trip around the world to forget Big Jim. She visited London, Paris, Vienna, Tokyo, Hong Kong. Nothing helped. No woman can run away from herself. In Honolulu, where she and Jim had gone seven years before when John Wayne had given him a small part in a film, she worked herself into a black depression, tried to take her life. Fortunately, she inflicted only superficial wounds to her wrists.

Today she and Big Jim are working out a "friendly" divorce settlement. Jim takes the children — Craig, 12, Jenny Lee, 8, Rolf, 6 — on his boat every possible weekend, and Virginia has decided to renew her acting career. Jim lives in a one-bedroom apartment here, spends most of his time working, has turned over his house in Pacific Palisades to his wife.

He has no home life but is considered one of the greatest successes in show business, in fact the male Cinderella of TV.

When I asked him if he thought he had paid a fair price for his success, he meditated for several moments, then said slowly: "I started with nothing and I lost at marriage. But, heck, I've won at everything else. Years from now I'll learn that 'everything else' isn't enough. But right now it suits me fine." ■