

This Week! TV Goes Back To Roaring '20's

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JAMES ARNESS
OF 'GUNSMOKE'



A tall, skinny youth from Minneapolis, just discharged from the Army, drove out to California 10 years ago to soak up some sun and swim in the Pacific Ocean. He figured he had enough money for a fortnight of lollygagging before going back to the cold of Minnesota and a crack at getting some sort of job.

A few weeks later he was earning \$400 a week playing the role of one of Loretta Young's brothers in the film, "The Farmer's Daughter." Today he earns considerably more than \$400 a week as Marshal Matt Dillon on CBS's adult Western series, *Gunsmoke*.


James Arness, who filled out to 232 pounds during the intervening decade, unhesitatingly admits that Hollywood has been very kind to him.

"I was a pretty dumb kid when I first started out. You see, I made that \$400 a week for 17 weeks on 'The Farmer's Daughter' picture and I figured I was a rich man. So right away I took off on a vacation. It lasted nine months, mostly down in Mexico, and I wound up flat broke."

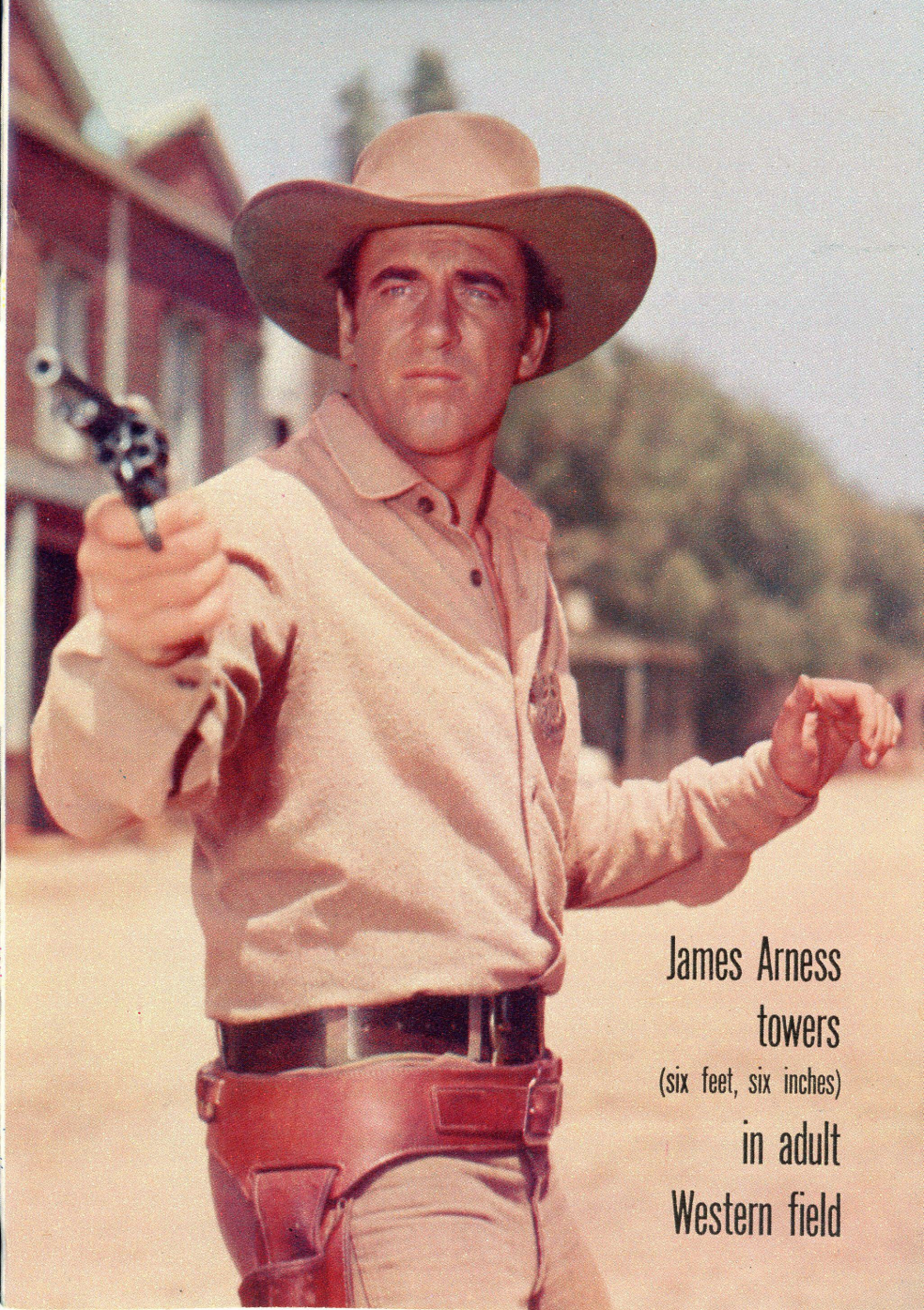
Arness paused, then continued sheepishly. "Fact is, I couldn't land another job in Holly- **continued**



Arness in action: above, with Amanda Blake, *Gunsmoke's* dance-hall queen. At right, as Marshal Dillon he shoots to kill.



MARSHAL FROM MINNEAPOLIS



James Arness
towers
(six feet, six inches)
in adult
Western field

wood for a whole year and a half."

The husky, blue-eyed cowboy hero recalled that he was doing all sorts of odd jobs—from working on a construction gang to selling classified ads for a Los Angeles newspaper—when he finally managed to snare a role in the M-G-M picture, "Battleground." This turned the tide.

Arness, however, never intended to be an actor. He simply wandered into a small Hollywood theater one night during his sun-soaking vacation to watch a friend—who *wanted* to be an actor—rehearse. The director invited Arness to join the group.

"I didn't have anything better to do and it looked like fun, so I said yes."

Ten days later the play opened and he was spotted by an energetic Hollywood agent named Leon Lance. Lance cornered Arness after the show and asked the newcomer to meet him at RKO Studios the following morning.

"I showed up all right, but I didn't expect anything to happen," said Arness. "But, believe it or not, within five minutes this Lance guy had talked them into hiring me. At first they wanted to give me a couple hundred dollars a week for two weeks work, but Lance wouldn't accept. Well, they upped the salary to \$400. Of course, when that two weeks stretched into 17 I didn't complain none."

M-G-M put Arness under contract after "Battleground," but his excessive height proved a deterrent to his career. "None of the leading men at the studio wanted to be in the same picture with me—or, rather, they didn't want me to be in the same picture with them," explained Arness. "I was put in some films, like 'Hellgate' and 'The People Against O'Hara,' but even though the roles were good it didn't look like I'd ever amount to much there. The studio and me, we

finally decided to go separate ways."

It took another tall man, John Wayne, to realize that Arness's height was a credit. Wayne saw Arness in a little-theater play—his second stage production—and the Nation's top film star immediately signed the boy from Minnesota to a personal contract.

The association between Wayne and Arness lasted three years. Arness was given featured roles in "Big Jim McLain," "Hondo," "Island in the Sky" and "The Sea Chase." On loan, he was the thing in "The Thing." ("I didn't have any speaking lines but it sure brought me a lot of publicity.")

Arness thinks—though he's not positive—that Wayne was primarily responsible for his obtaining the Marshal Dillon role in *Gunsmoke*. "I have a hunch CBS first offered the part to Mr. Wayne, but that he turned it down and recommended me. He's the kind of guy who would do a generous thing like that and never let anyone know."

Now in his early 30's, Arness has no plans or notions of producing his own TV series or movies.

"I don't want any part of those headaches," he stated flatly. "I have a wife, three growing kids—plus a full-time job; that's enough for me."

The adult approach of *Gunsmoke* is not his doing, the star admitted. "I just do what they tell me to do. That's what they pay me for. I don't pretend to be a director or writer."

However, not long ago, one event served to fracture Arness's calm, easy-going manner. After a long day's work which had been filled with gunshots, Arness was letting himself into the front door of his Pacific Palisades home when a number of voices suddenly shouted, "Hands up!" For an instant, Arness thought this was *it*. Then he realized it was just the neighborhood kids, who had been lying in wait for hours to get the drop on Marshal Matt Dillon.