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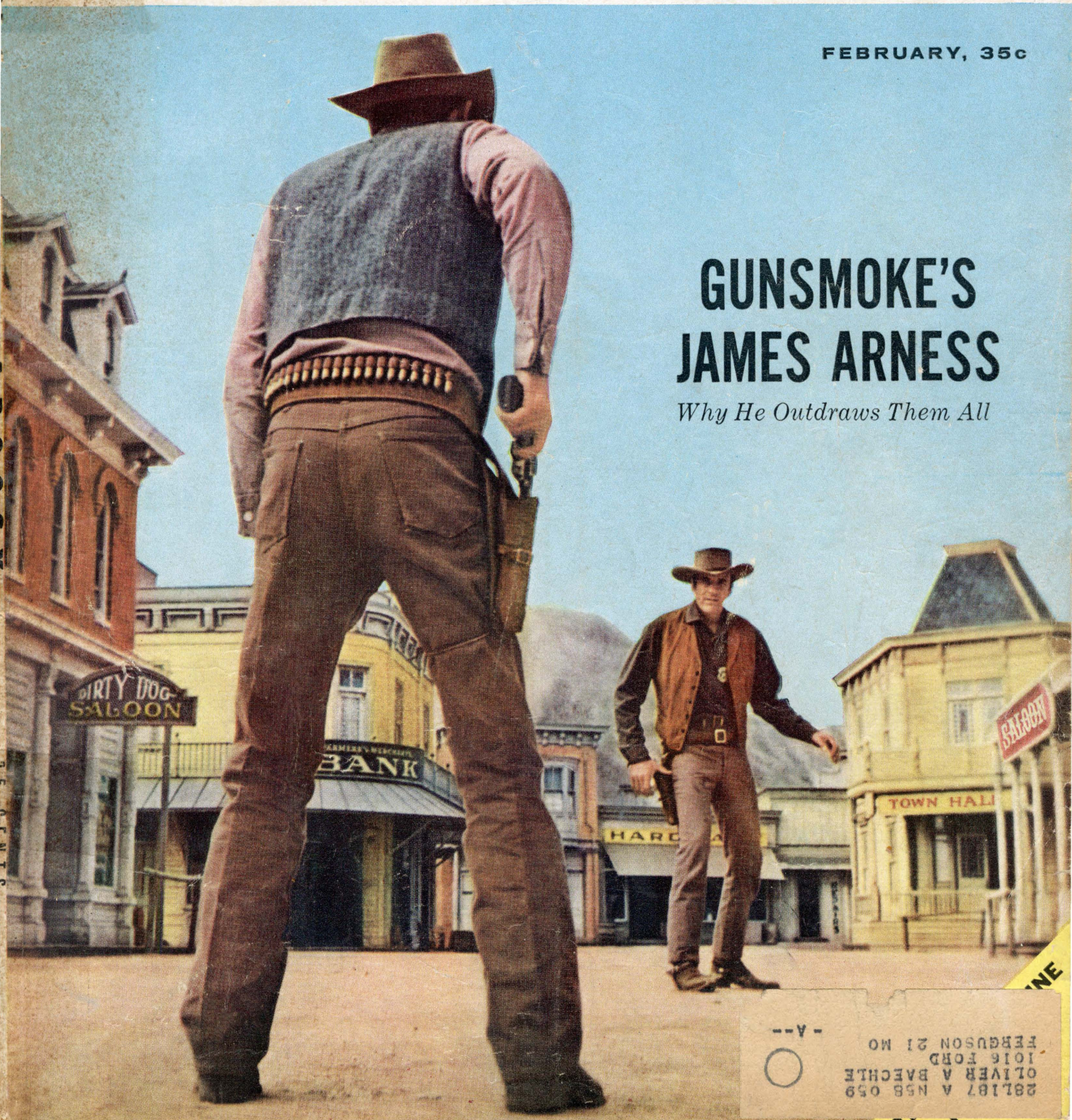
THE LARGEST SELLING FICTION-FACT MAGAZINE FOR MEN

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FEBRUARY, 35c

GUNSMOKE'S JAMES ARNESS

Why He Outdraws Them All



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THE GUNMAN WHO KILLED THE CRITICS

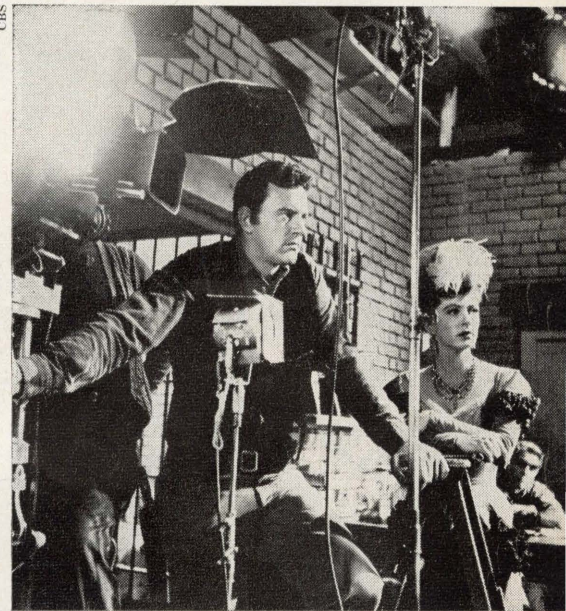
When James Arness strides onto the set of TV's "Gunsmoke," a Stetson on top of his six-foot-six frame, he kicks the pegs out from under any notion you've ever had about Western shows. Here is the story of filmdom's most baffling enigma—and one of its brightest new stars

by **RICHARD GEHMAN**

Back in the fall of 1955, when the programming brains at CBS-TV decided to schedule a Western show opposite NBC's George Gobel, there were those in the industry who thought the executives had taken leave of their collective reason. Gobel's show was one of the most popular on the air. He had a monopoly on his time spot. Among those who laughed was the oversigned, but on that Saturday night I tuned in CBS at the proper time just to see what form the lunacy would take. I am still fond of George Gobel but I have not watched him since, for on that first Saturday night a huge size-fourteen foot, shod in a cowboy boot and worn by an unknown named James Arness, kicked the ratings right out from under him. The show that starred Arness, "Gunsmoke," is now in its third year and going stronger than ever. The average life of a TV series is about three years; after that the watchers begin to get bored. "Gunsmoke" is heading into its fourth year as though it is just gathering speed. It will almost certainly do a fifth, and conceivably could do an unprecedented sixth. It has about 40,000,000 viewers each week. In England, where it is called "Gun Law," it is the most popular show on TV.

There are several reasons for "Gunsmoke's" popularity, and several people who are responsible. For one thing, its characters are convincingly real, as true-to-life a set of people as ever has been exhibited on the living-room Monster. Their personalities and attitudes are not black and white; they are shaded and colored by the entire range of human emotions. The villains are not all villainous, the heroes are not all pure of heart (well, they're *mostly* pure of heart). The man responsible for this, originally, was the principal writer, John Meston, and the man who carried out his original concepts was the (Continued on page 70)

Kitty has never as much as held hands with Matt, yet she's accepted as his girl friend. Such is the show's subtlety.



Good left hook boosts Hooper ratings.



Realism is the keynote of "Gunsmoke." You'll never see, for instance, six Indians downed by one pistol shot.

The Gunman Who Killed the Critics *Continued from page 29*

producer and occasional director, Norman Macdonnell. To them must go the most credit for "Gunsmoke's" phenomenal success. For all their ability, however, the real reason for the smashing success of this series is the six-foot, six-inch, 230-pound hulk named Jim Arness.

As modest as he is tall, Arness denies that his character, Marshal Matt Dillon of Dodge City, is the focal figure on the show, even though the script invariably designates him as such. "Wouldn't be much of a show without Chester, Doc and Kitty," he says. He is referring, of course, to Chester Goode, played by Dennis Weaver; Doc Adams, played by Milburn Stone, and Kitty Russell, played by Amanda Blake.

The four principals ply their trades in stories that would have made old-time Western heroes' eyes bug out in horror. Ever since "The Great Train Robbery," the first feature-length film and also the first Western, horse operas have been noted for simplicity of story structure and bold delineation of good and bad character. There have been a few great exceptions, but for the most part the stories have been designed to be watched while popcorn is chewed. "Gunsmoke" differs in that it often comes to grips with serious problems. In one episode, for example, Marshal Dillon suddenly became obsessed with guilt for the amount of killing his job required him to do. In another, the salty old Doc began brooding over the fact that he had lost a patient. "Gunsmoke" also is perhaps the only Western in history in which one of the principal characters is a handicapped man. Chester Goode has a stiff leg, and in addition he is an old-maidish fussbudget, worried and apprehensive—until the situation calls for courage, which he exhibits in standard Western style.

Dialogue in Westerns always has been fairly sparse and in a low key, but in "Gun-

smoke" it is so sparse and in so low a key as to be almost nonexistent. It also is tinged with a kind of grim humor.

"I didn't know he had an enemy in the world," Doc said on a recent show, bending over a man who just had been murdered.

"He had one, Doc," Marshal Dillon said. "Gunsmoke" continually violates the old rule that said a story had to be stripped of all unnecessary detail so that only action remained. In "Gunsmoke" the characters spend a great deal of time either saying hello to each other or quibbling among themselves. For example, on one show Doc went into Kitty's saloon and the following exchange ensued:

KITTY: You going to have a drink, Doc?
Doc: I don't think so.

KITTY: Changing your habits?

Doc: That's the trouble with this town—always criticizing a man's bad habits and not givin' him any credit for havin' any good ones.

KITTY: (*Apologetically*) I just asked, Doc.

Doc: 'Course I'm havin' a drink. What in tarnation you think I came into this saloon for?

When Meston and Macdonnell first began to think about "Gunsmoke" for TV, they drew up a list of old-time Western clichés which they vowed would never besmirch their screen. The hero would not necessarily have a heart of gold; he would not wear two guns; he would not have a favorite horse named Trigger or Holster; there would be no chase sequences; the villains would not be all villainous and there would be no posesses, pretty schoolmarms or ranchers' daughters. Every now and then the marshal would make a mistake in judgment, and occasionally he would get the hell beaten out of him. Also, the show would be liberally sprinkled with humor. My thirteen year-old son, who is allowed to stay up to watch "Gunsmoke" at

ten-thirty on Saturday nights only because it's so much better than the other shows he watches (it has, in fact, made him lose interest in the others), laughs his head off at Chester and Doc. I do myself. And to show the hold this series has even on women, I can report that my wife accepts Saturday night invitations only with reluctance and then says regretfully, "Well, I guess we can miss 'Gunsmoke' once."

In the beginning, the writer-producer team tried to get John Wayne for the part of Marshal Dillon. The Duke was too busy being the number-one box office attraction in the waning movie industry. He felt that he could go on a few more years as a star before trying TV on a more or less permanent basis. He suggested Jim Arness.

"Who is Jim Arness?" asked Meston and Macdonnell.

It was the same question the general public asked when "Gunsmoke" was announced. Arness was then under contract to Wayne's production company. He had made twenty-odd pictures and had worked his way up to a point where he could command \$1,500 a week when he was working. Meston and Macdonnell called Arness in, tested him, and offered him the part. He astonished them by turning it down.

Wayne was on the telephone to Arness next day. "What the hell's this I hear?" "Hear about what?" Arness asked.

"They tell me you turned down that part at CBS. What's the matter? Don't you like money?"

"I like money, all right," Arness said, "and I'd like to go on earning it for a long time. I figure if I take that part, I'll be good for two years and then my welcome'll be worn out."

"Bull," said Wayne. "Listen, come on over and have a drink."

Arness met Wayne that evening at Wayne's house. They sat down with a bottle and a couple of glasses between them.

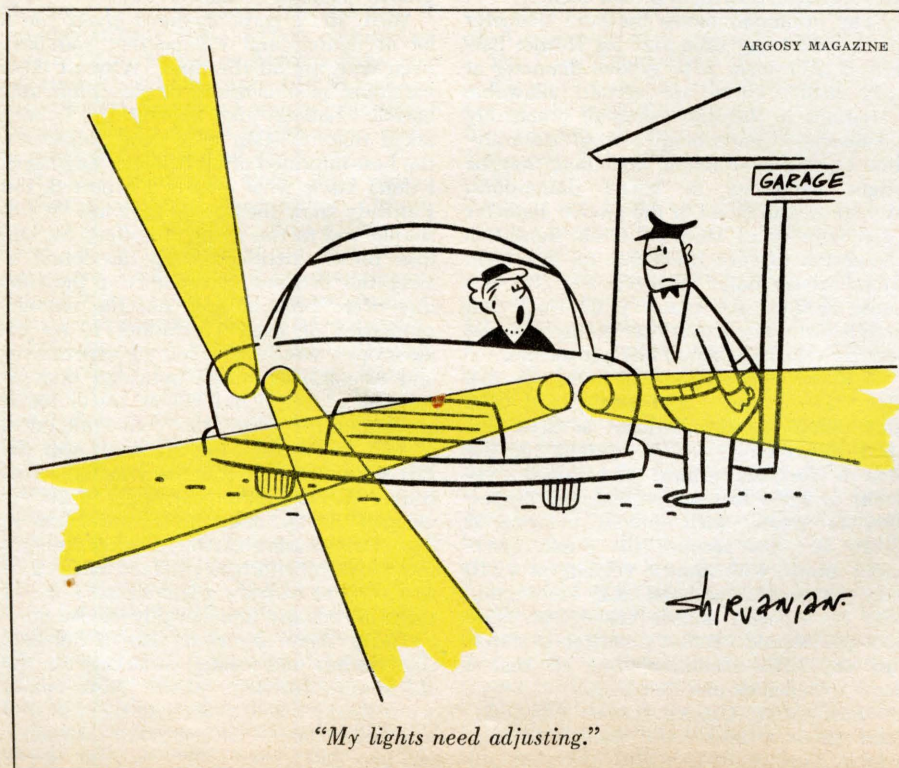
"Now, let me tell you why you have to take this part," Wayne said. "First, it'll get you exposure. Inside of three months everybody in the country'll know your name. Second, from what I've heard of the guys who are making this thing, it seems they're doing a Western like nobody's ever done one before. It won't be just another let's-head-'em-off-at-the-pass kind of thing. It'll be a good job, and it'll be good for you." "I'll get typed as this one character."

"You don't have to. You play him the best way you can, you'll never get typed. And after this thing is over, you'll still be in big demand."

By the time the bottle was nearly empty, Arness had been convinced. He shook hands with Wayne, went home, and the next day he called CBS and told them he would do the part.

Arness had told Wayne he thought that playing Matt would be hard work, but he never realized just how hard it would be. A family friend once asked Craig, Arness' eleven year-old son, what he wanted to do when he grew up. "Be an actor," he said. "You have a lot of fun, make a lot of money, and hardly ever work."

Arness' answer to that was one of his rare explosive laughs. "I never knew what real work was until we started this series."



The "Gunsmoke" episodes are shot in four days—one for rehearsal, three for actual filming. The cast and crew reports at six a.m. and knocks off around eight p.m.

"Jim comes home so tired," says Mrs. Arness, a pretty brunette, "he never says a word. He just looks *doped* with fatigue. . . . Half the time he's so tired he's asleep before he can eat."

Arness on the set is the exact antithesis of Arness on the screen. As Matt Dillon, he is calm; as Jim Arness, he cannot sit still. He stands, paces, jumps up and down on one leg, clicks the trigger of his revolver incessantly, hums, whistles, sings snatches of song. He memorizes his lines rapidly and, once they're in his head, seems unable to wait to say them. Occasionally his temper explodes violently, but just as often, he explodes with laughter.

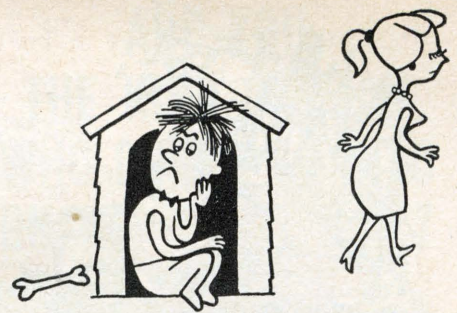
Unlike so many of the younger actors around today, Arness does not have to stumble, fumble, and scratch his navel red before he gets into the characterization of Matt Dillon. He is as remote from the greasy, mumbling Actors' Studio types as, say, Cary Grant, and in his own way he is as debonair and dignified as the latter. His co-workers say that he ad-libs well. Sometimes, the "character-building" parts of shows—scenes between Chester, Doc and Matt—are almost entirely ad-libbed scenes.

There is a good deal of pleasant horse-play—no pun intended—on the "Gunsmoke" set. Dennis Weaver, a veteran of the Actors' Studio in New York and a former track star, and Milburn Stone, who has played in more than 150 movies, are continually conspiring with Amanda Blake to play jokes on Arness. He, in turn, tries constantly to break them up while they are on camera. If the script calls for him to hand Chester a piece of paper, he will write a four-letter word on it while Chester isn't watching, hoping Chester will smile and spoil the take. "You got to be on your guard all the time on this set," Weaver says.

Miss Blake, incidentally, is even better-looking off-screen than on. Her red hair is natural, and she has lovely blue-green eyes.

The TV relationship between Matt and Kitty is a miracle of subtle delineation. There has never been any open expression of the fact that she is his girl; the two have never so much as held hands or kissed, except one time in a commercial. Yet the strong sexual attraction between them is obvious in the way they look at each other and talk, even when they are talking about things that have nothing whatever to do with love. Amanda says it is sometimes a relief to her that she doesn't have to kiss Jim, even though she wouldn't find it an especially trying task; "I would be taking my life in my hands every time I kissed him," she says, "because I would have to stand on so many boxes." Arness has not gone on record as to how he feels about kissing Amanda. Since he is normal in most other ways, he presumably would enjoy it.

He may be normal, but he is a highly complicated human being, and decidedly not the simple, earthy giant he at first glance appears to be. "Jim's not a glib person," says Weaver. "You can be around him a long time and still keep on discovering areas you didn't rightly know were there." (Weaver, in person, sometimes resembles Chester when he speaks.) "He doesn't shove himself onto you, the way a lot of actors



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around Hollywood do. Success hasn't changed him hardly at all."

Arness was born James Aurness in Minneapolis, Minnesota, on May 26, 1922 (coincidentally, his mentor, John Wayne, also was born on May twenty-sixth). He dropped the "u" out of his name at the suggestion of MGM production chief Dore Schary. As a boy, he and his younger brother, Peter, went to John Burroughs Grade School, Ramsey Junior High and West High. He sang in school choruses at all three, and also was in the Hennepin Avenue Church choir. Peter also acts, under the name of Peter Graves. He took a different name because he didn't want to trade on Arness' reputation. He is now the star of "Fury," another "adult" Western on NBC-TV.

Arness' unusual height, an asset in his role as Matt Dillon, actually was a tremendous handicap when he was a boy. He grew like a weed from the age of nine, and soon became an object of much good-natured banter from his friends. It also got him into trouble occasionally. When he was about fourteen he was provoked into a fight with an older, tougher boy who was not quite as tall as he. "Jim had tried to talk him out of it," his brother remembers, "but the kid wasn't having any. He figured that, being older than Jim, he could take him. He wound up on the ground with a bloody nose and a black eye." Jim wasn't hurt, but the other kid's mother arrived in time to see her boy on the ground.

"You big bully!" she screamed. "Why don't you pick on somebody your own size?"

That was only one of many incidents. He always felt older than the kids he was with, and younger than the kids who were as tall

as he. He began keeping more and more to himself, getting away whenever he could. In the summers he would go on camping trips into the north woods, but in his last few years in high school he felt the need to get away even when he wasn't on vacation.

"As much as a teen-ager can, I became a bum, more or less," Arness says. "I'd skip school and go on the road, sometimes hitchhiking, sometimes riding the rails. Other times, in season, I'd go hunting. It seemed like the only time I felt happy was when I was off by myself, sitting in a duck blind or going across country for birds. That was life—I thought. What I didn't realize was that I was trying to escape life. I knew I had to decide what I was going to do with myself, and I wanted to postpone that decision as long as possible."

There is still a trace of the bum left in Arness. He describes his favorite form of activity on vacation as "doing nothing." Riding is work for him, so he doesn't ride. Shaving is part of every actor's job, so he goes for days without shaving. He seldom, if ever, watches television. "I'm looking forward to the day, years from now—I hope—when I can see the re-runs," he says. "Then they'll all be new to me." He does occasionally look at his brother's show.

During the summer vacation between his junior and senior years in high school, Arness hitch-hiked to Galveston, Texas, and shipped out on a Gulf freighter. The entreaties of his family, plus a certain amount of conscience, took him back to Minneapolis. The experience left him with two strong influences—a love for the water, which is still strong today (his biggest ambition is to buy a sloop capable of sailing



Hunting and Fishing

WITH GIL PAUST

SHOOTING FORK: Missed a long-range shot at standing game because you couldn't hold steady and your rifle sights skittered around too much? Next time carry a homemade wooden shooting fork about a yard long, Y-shaped on one end and pointed on the other. When shooting, jab the point in the ground, sit behind it, rest the rifle's fore-end in the Y fork.

DEER AUTOPSY: When you find a deer carcass that carries no wound, you can determine the cause of death by cracking a leg bone. If marrow is white, it was disease or poison. If pink or red, the deer starved.

REEL PRESERVER: For storing fishing reels for the winter, also for carrying them in your tackle box without marring them when the fishing season rolls around again, slip each into a discarded woolen hunting sock.

NON-SLIP SCOPE: Sometimes heavy high-powered scopes on high-powered rifles tend to slip in their ring mounts, from recoil; also target scopes on .22s. The simplest remedy is to dust powdered resin under the rings.

FOR SWEET-TOOTHED FISH: When all other ice-fishing baits fail, try miniature marshmallows, available at most candy stores. Sink a small hook in one and jig it up and down a few feet from the bottom. Come spring, it will take bass and big trout, too. Just heavy enough for a spin-cast.

ANGLER'S RECONNAISSANCE: While gunning the winter woods, keep an eye on the trout streams. Low water will uncover the choicest fishing holes and boulder hideouts you couldn't see last spring. Remember them!

ANTI-FREEZE JACKET: Want to make your winter hunting or ice-fishing jacket so warm you'll have to open it to cool off no matter how far down the temperature skids? Have it interlined with a layer of deerskin.

ROLL-ON FOR ANGLERS: A roll-on bottle can roll on other things besides deodorants. When empty, wash off its label, pry off the ball gimmick and fill with dry-fly lotion, liquid line dressing, insect repellent or cod-liver oil to scent lures. Ball holder snaps back on easily.

COCKLEBURRED DOG: Should your pooch come back from a hunt with his coat matted with cockleburs, don't try to pluck them out by hand and don't reach for the scissors. A table fork is the solution, says D. Davenport of Stafford, Virginia. Insert tines under bur and lift with a wriggling motion.

NUMB FEET: The antidote for cold feet while hunting in sub-freezing weather is to break the ice covering a stream and stand in the water if your footgear is waterproof, says John Freeland of Osseo, Wisconsin. The water will warm them up to thirty-two degrees. Flexing your toes vigorously will do the rest.

ARGOSY will pay \$5 for every hunting or fishing tip printed in this column. All submissions become the property of the magazine. Address: Hunting and Fishing, ARGOSY, 205 East 42nd St., New York 17, N. Y.

from California to Hawaii) and a desire for adventure which led him into the Army as soon as he had finished his first year at Beloit College, in Wisconsin. He had tried originally to get into the Navy, but had been rejected because of his stature.

Arness took basic at Camp Wheeler, Georgia, in Baker Company, Seventh Regiment, Third Division, which went first to Africa and then to Anzio Beach. As his outfit's LCI was drawing into shore, his company commander ordered him first into the water, to gauge the depth. It was almost inevitable that a target of Arness' size would get hit eventually. It happened four nights later. He was assigned to a reconnaissance patrol sent out to locate a machine-gun emplacement. They found it, but the enemy spotted them and opened fire. Jim got it in the legs and went down, convinced he was done for. Some medics found him and dragged him back, cursing and muttering over his height and weight. He spent a year in GI hospitals in Africa and the States and finally was discharged and sent home.

The wounds do not bother him today. In an indirect way, they are responsible for the individuality of Dennis Weaver's portrayal of Chester Goode on "Gunsmoke." Weaver had been searching for something distinctive to give the character but had not been able to think of anything suitable until one day when he and Arness were sitting around talking about their backgrounds. Arness mentioned his leg wounds casually, whereupon Weaver jumped up and cried, "That's it!" He began to walk about with a stiff-legged limp. "He's been injured in a gunfight!" he cried. The executives were dubious of having a cripple on the show, but Arness and Weaver talked them into it. Today vast segments of the audience refuse to believe that Weaver is not actually handicapped. He gets long letters of praise for his courage in overcoming the obstacle.

After Arness was discharged, early in 1945, he went home to Minneapolis. He decided to enroll at the University of Michigan, and to kill time and earn a little money he took a job as a radio announcer. Then he ran into a pal he had known at Beloit College, Dick Brennick, who had been stationed in Southern California while in the Naval Air Corps. "Let's go out there," Brennick said. Arness' wanderlust surfaced and he agreed on the spot.

"The main reason I wanted to go to California was the climate," Arness says. "I was tired of those Minnesota winters. I never had any notion of getting into pictures. Radio, maybe, but not films." He was still convinced that his height was a handicap. "They couldn't make a screen tall enough to fit me in," he said.

Brennick wanted to be an actor, and soon after arriving in Los Angeles he got a part in a play at the Bliss Hayden Theater. Arness used to go along to rehearsals and hang around, watching with mild interest. One day the director suggested that there was a part he could fill, and asked him to try it. Brennick also urged him to read, and he landed the role. An agent named Leo Lance happened to see him and was waiting one night.

"Have you ever thought of trying out for pictures?" he asked.

"Not seriously," Jim said.

"Sign here," Lance said.

The agent promptly astonished Jim by getting him a job in "The Farmer's Daughter," playing one of Loretta Young's brothers (the other two were Keith Andes and Lex Barker). The producer tried to hire Arness for minimum scale, but Lance shrieked, "You can't victimize a war veteran! For shame!" and Jim wound up with a salary of \$400 a week. The single week's work for which he had been hired stretched on into nearly sixteen, and Jim wound up with a nice little pile of money, which brought out the hobo in him again. He was off to Mexico, where for months he had the time of his life doing absolutely nothing.

When his money began to dwindle, he decided he ought to do something constructive. He got a ketch for the purpose of shark fishing, having heard that shark liver was used in the manufacture of vitamins. Unfortunately for this wild scheme, the war with Japan ended just about that time and enterprising businessmen on the West Coast resumed importing shark liver from Japan, which knocked the bottom out of the domestic market.

Broke and without prospects, Jim went back to Los Angeles. He looked up Lance, who was not exactly glad to see him.

"You jerk," Lance said, "after that Loretta Young picture I could have got you a hundred jobs."

"Get me one now," Jim said.

"Let's face it," Lance said, "the war's over. All the actors are back. For every part available there are twenty-five guys hungry for it."

"I'll work as an extra," Jim said.

"Oh, no, you don't. You want to be an extra the rest of your life? You'll just have to get by until I find you something."

For nearly a year, Jim did what he could to keep alive. He sold plywood, worked as a carpenter, tried to sell advertising space for a newspaper, and eventually concluded there was practically nothing in the world he was suited for. A venture into the real estate business was disastrous. Once he had a house for which the owner was asking \$30,000. "It was worth about twenty-one thousand," Jim recalls.

Presently a buyer made a tentative offer. "Do you think the owner will take it?" he asked Jim.

"He'll be crazy if he doesn't," Jim said.

The owner had been listening. He jumped out from behind a door pointing his finger accusingly at Jim. "You aren't acting in my interest!" he cried. "I'm going to report you to your boss!"

"That won't be necessary," Arness said. "I'll do it myself."

That ended that job. Jim, meanwhile, had acquired a wife—a pretty brunette named Virginia Chapman, who was working at the Pasadena Playhouse. He played with her in "Candida," and they were married a short time later. For a time, Jim worked in a china shop owned by his father-in-law, but he was somehow unable to keep from breaking a quota of two or three figurines each day. For the most part, he and his wife lived on his disability pension, plus whatever else he could pick up from odd jobs.

Leo Lance, meanwhile, was still looking for parts. Presently he heard that Dore Schary, who had hired Jim for "The Farmer's Daughter" was casting a war picture, "Battleground." Jim was tested, hired,

and signed to an MGM contract. His work in "Battleground" led to other parts, one in "Hellgate" and one in "The People Against O'Hara." Then, as sometimes happens, the studio seemed to lose interest in him. For one thing, other, shorter actors were reluctant to work with a man who towered over them. Eventually he was released from his contract, but he did not stay at liberty for very long. Charles Feldman, an agent, saw him and recommended him to John Wayne, who did not care how tall his actors were. Wayne put him under contract, and with that his career was launched. He appeared in "Hondo," "Big Jim McClain," and a number of other Wayne epics, sometimes as one of the good guys, sometimes as one of the bad.

As the income began coming with some regularity, Jim bought a house on Pacific Palisades for his expanding family. He and Virginia now have three children—Craig, eleven; Jenny Lee, eight, and Rolf, six. Arness' principal diversion these days is rough-housing with the kids. He has built them a tree house in the back yard, and the house is always full of neighborhood tots. "We've always got about a dozen miniature Matt Dillons around here," Jim says. By Hollywood standards, he lives a quiet life. He and his wife never give big parties and almost never go to premières or the expensive restaurants. One reason for the latter is simple. They can't afford it. As a matter of fact, about the only thing Jim doesn't like about his present situation is the money.

When he signed for the show, he put his name on a run-of-the-series contract that began at around \$1,000 a week. It gradually has worked up to \$1,500 a week, which seems to be its ceiling. That kind of money is not exactly pin money, but it is not a high salary considering Arness' popularity and the fact that some comedians can command upwards of \$5,000 just for a single performance on, say, a weekly spectacular like the Dinah Shore show. Also, an actor's life is in many ways comparable to a baseball player's. Even though Arness has been careful to keep himself from being typed as Dillon (he did a movie with Ginger Rogers, "The First Traveling Saleslady"), there is a chance, even though it is a slight one, that "Gunsmoke" is the beginning and end of his career. He does not stand to earn much more than about \$100 per showing from the re-runs. Last year (1958) he took home about \$35,000 in fees for personal appearances, but his total salary was not much in excess of \$85,000. That figure puts him into a bracket where the government takes a good bit over half of his income.

"Sure, there's a Cadillac and a station wagon," he once told an interviewer, "but they aren't paid for yet. Neither is the house. Nor am I saving any money. And I've got three kids to send to school."

Still, he is reasonably content with his lot. The part of Matt Dillon has taught him a good deal. And there is the simple fact that his patron and idol, Duke Wayne, is getting along in years and getting more and more interested in the production end of films and TV. It could be that Arness eventually will take Wayne's place as the king of the he-men. It's a safe bet that by the time my thirteen year-old has kids of his own they'll be pestering him to stay up and watch Arness the way he currently pesters me. And it'll serve him right. ● ●

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