

James Arness: A Real American Hero (1923-2011)

by

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On Friday June 3rd, 2011 James Arness passed away less than a month after his 88th birthday. Yes, he was a giant in the history of both television and westerns passed away. He played a legendary hero in U.S. Marshall Matt Dillon, but unlike many who play such roles Mr. Arness was the real (not just the reel) deal.

During World War II, young James Arness joined the Army and became a rifleman with the U.S. Army's 3rd Infantry Division and was wounded at Anzio, where he was the first off his landing craft. For his military service, Arness would be awarded a Bronze Star, the Combat Infantryman Badge, the European-African-Middle Eastern Campaign with three Bronze Campaign Stars, Purple Heart, and the World War II victory Medal. His wounds were severe and left him with a leg injury that would bother him for the rest of his life getting progressively worse. If you watched *Gunsmoke* from beginning to end, you would notice a limp, which got more and more pronounced. In the later years of the series, it was painful for him to even mount a horse.

After the war, Arness headed to California, where he landed parts in a couple of films (*The Farmer's Daughter*, *Roses are Red*, and *Battleground*). In 1951, he won the first lead in a movie called *Two Lost World*, which featured lots of stock footage. There is confusing information about his film, including indications it may have been stitched together from a couple episodes of an aborted television series.

He got a couple of credits in classic 1950s science fiction films-*The Thing (From Another World)* and *Them*, which if he had done nothing else would be enough to insure him a place in film history. It was during this time that he encountered a mentor that would mold and give direction to his entire career. That mentor was John Wayne, who took an interest in the young actor and signed him to a contract with his production company. Wayne gave him parts in several of his films (*Big Jim McLain*, *Island in the Sky*, *Hondo*, and *The Sea Chase*).

The question of John Wayne and his involvement with the casting of the role of Marshall Matt Dillon is a story that is confusing and which this author feels has seldom if ever been correctly discussed. *Gunsmoke* was created for radio by Norman MacDonnell, but when the network made the decision to bring the show to television they originally choose Charles Marquis Warren to act as Producer (MacDonnell would take over after Warren left). There is no doubt that it was Wayne that recommended Arness for the part of Matt Dillon, and for the only time in his career Wayne introduced the first episode of a series. Most sources discount the possibility of Wayne being offered the role, but if he was not approached about the role, how did he get in a position to recommend Arness? The only explanation that accounts for everything is that someone at CBS (before Warren was selected) offered the part to Wayne. To the best of this writer's knowledge Wayne himself was only directly asked the question once-during an obscure interview for *Focus on Film* (Spring 1975). Wayne stated "...CBS came to me and asked me if I wanted to go into TV. I said that wouldn't be fair to the people who made my career...So I go back to Arness and I say Boy, I got it set for you..."

Gunsmoke would run for 20 years and 635 episodes. Many shows have and are running on empty after only a few seasons-even the original *Star Trek* experienced a notably drop off in quality in the third season episodes, but *Gunsmoke* turned out quality episodes year after year for two decades. Both Arness and Milburn Stone (Doc Adams) were with *Gunsmoke* for the entire run, while Amanda Blake (Miss Kitty) stayed for 19 years. The only major change was the departure of Chester Goode (Dennis Weaver), who left after nine seasons and was succeeded by Fetus Hagen (Ken Curtis) for the last eleven years of the run.

It was during the first season of *Gunsmoke* that Arness made his second (and last) starring theatrical motion picture. The movie was the unfairly neglected *Gun the Man Down*, which was made for John Wayne's Production Company, Batjac Productions, perhaps as a way to finish off his contract. Best described as a combination film noir and western. Arness played Rem Anderson a man, who in order to get married and buy a ranch, decides to go in on a bank robbery. He ends up being shot, left by the gang (and girl) and spending a year in prison. Getting out, Anderson goes after them for his revenge. Not a typical western by any means with Arness's character realize that his problems (getting wounded, losing his girl, prison, etc.) were the result of him trying to take a short cut by breaking the law. He doesn't get the girl-she dies (Angie Dickinson in her first leading role), and rather than kill his antagonist, he turns him in to let the law take handle the punishment. An underrated film with a great and forgotten performance by James Arness.

After *Gunsmoke*'s cancellation, Arness did not run from westerns but took on the role of Zeb Macahan in a semi-series based on the *How the West Was Won* motion picture. He played Zeb Macahan for four years, however not in a regular series. A television movie in the 1975-1976 season (*The Macahans*), with the remaining installments (a mini-series in the 1976-1977 season, a longer mini-series in the 1977-1978 season, and a series of television movies in the 1978-1979 season) airing under the *How the West Was Won* title. Lots of the behind the scenes crew from *Gunsmoke*, location filming, and a character different from that of the Marshall from *Dodge City* let Arness create another classic western. He returned in a 1982-1982 police series, *McClain's Law* that was well made but failed to catch on and only lasted 16 episodes.

Along with Clint Eastwood's *Pale Rider* and *Unforgiven* and the television mini-series *Lonesome Dove*, Arness helped keep the western alive from the mid-1980s onward. Least remembered is perhaps *John Wayne Standing Tall* (1989), which he hosted and remains documentary ever produced on Wayne and his career. There were roles in a couple of made for television western films-*The Alamo: Thirteen Days to Glory* (1987), where he played Jim Bowie and a remake of *Red River* (1988), where he took on the John Wayne role of Tom Dunson.

However his greatest work during this time was a series of *Gunsmoke* television movies that were produced between 1987 and 1994-*Gunsmoke: Return to Dodge* (1987), *Gunsmoke: The Last Apache* (1990), *Gunsmoke: To the Last Man* (1992), *Gunsmoke: The Long Ride* (1993), and *Gunsmoke: One Man's Justices*. Only the first was a reunion film, the rest went off in a new direction with Matt Dillon as a rancher with a new cast of characters including Amy Stock-Poynton as his daughter and Christopher Bradley as her boyfriend and eventually husband. These films were filmed on locations ranging including Arizona, Canada, New Mexico, and Texas. These were high quality westerns that have not gotten the attention that they deserve.

They compare favorably to the 1950s westerns of Budd Boetticher/Randolph Scott and Anthony Mann/James Stewart. Most of the obituaries for James Arness mentioned his three decades and 20 years playing Matt Dillon, but including these films his total should be five decades and 39 years.

James Arness was a true hero, a man who kept his private life private, a major figure in the history of the western genre, and a true gentleman.
