

James Arness

1923–2011

HE GAVE US AN AMERICAN INSTITUTION: GUNSMOKE'S MARSHAL MATT DILLON.



Imagine a Mount Rushmore of television's legendary lawmen. Fans of classic TV can argue which of their favorites should be carved in stone, but two names are indisputable: *Dragnet*'s Sgt. Joe Friday and *Gunsmoke*'s Marshal Matt Dillon.

James Arness, who played Dillon for 20 seasons then reprised the role in five television movies, died on June 3 at

age 88. One of the first acknowledgments of his passing came from Arness himself, in a letter posted posthumously on his website. "I had a wonderful life and was blessed with many loving people and great friends," he wrote. "Thank you again for all the many letters, cards, e-mails, and gifts we received from you over the years. You are and always have been truly appreciated."

That's just the kind of thoughtful guy he was. "After 33 years of marriage, I can say that Jim's demeanor was much like Matt Dillon's — very caring of his family, friends, and fans," says wife Janet. "To his fans, he was Marshal Matt Dillon; to me, he was a loving husband, father, grandfather, and the best friend anyone could ever have." After his death, Janet was keen to let her husband's fans know just how much they meant to him. "Jim enjoyed meeting his fans; one of the memorable times was the signing of his autobiography at the Autry museum in 2001. He enjoyed it so much that he asked to do it again for his 80th birthday — in place of a party — so he could celebrate it with his fans. Buck Taylor [who played Newly] presented him



LEFT: A favorite of James Arness', this photo was used for the painting hung at the National Cowboy & Western Heritage Museum on his induction into the Hall of Great Western Performers. **ABOVE:** Arness as Marshal Matt Dillon riding Buck on the set of *Gunsmoke*.

PHOTOGRAPHY: COURTESY THE FAMILY OF JAMES ARNESS

with a painting at the book signing, and lithographs were made for the fans to buy for their enjoyment."

Born in Minneapolis, Minnesota, in May 1923, Arness was the older brother of actor Peter Graves. After high school, where he wasn't much of a student, Arness served in World War II. At 6 feet 7 inches, he was 5 inches too tall to be a naval aviator as he'd hoped, so he ended up in the Army as a rifleman with the 3rd Infantry Division. Severely wounded by Nazi gunfire at Anzio, Italy, he received the Bronze Star, the Purple Heart, and a leg injury that never healed.

"Burt Reynolds told me a story about when he was on *Gunsmoke*," recalls Ben Costello, author of *Gunsmoke: An American Institution*. "They would get ready to do a shot. Jim Arness would come limping on to the set, and Dennis Weaver [who played the lame Chester] would walk briskly. The director would yell 'Action!' and Arness would walk briskly, and Weaver would start to limp."

He had gotten to Hollywood by hitchhiking. After the war, Arness had become a radio announcer back home in Minnesota but soon moved to Los Angeles, where he landed his first role in a major film in *The Farmer's Daughter* (1947), which starred Loretta Young. He made his western debut in John Ford's *Wagon Master* and in the early 1950s signed a contract with Batjac, John Wayne's production company. He made four films with Wayne, who urged the very tall actor to make his mark in television, because he was too big for pictures. "Guys like Gregory Peck and I don't want a big lug like you towering over us," Wayne told him.

When Arness did make his mark, it was in a role reportedly originally offered to John Wayne. The television adaptation of the radio drama *Gunsmoke* became the medium's longest-running prime-time network drama, lasting 20 seasons (1955–1975) and 635 episodes. Arness as Dillon was its anchor, an upstanding



"As they appear in this photo, the cast was like a family on the set," Arness said of the actors on *Gunsmoke*. **LEFT TO RIGHT:** Sam the bartender (Glenn Strange), Marshal Matt Dillon (Arness), Newly (Buck Taylor), Kitty (Amanda Blake), Doc (Milburn Stone), and Festus (Ken Curtis).

marshal with a strong code of honor who only drew his gun when necessary.

After *Gunsmoke* ended, Arness starred as Zebulon "Zeb" Macahan in the TV western series *How the West Was Won* (a spin-off of the 1962 film). It aired 25 episodes but ultimately found its most devoted audience in Europe, where the show achieved cult status.

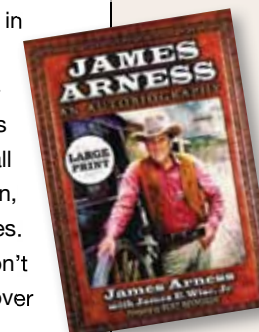
For all the roles he played, Arness will be remembered as Marshal Matt Dillon, a portrayal for which he received three Emmy nominations. The greater achievement,

though, was keeping the character consistent, relevant, and appealing through two decades of turbulent American history. Long after the rest of the TV cowboys were gone, Marshal Matt Dillon protected the streets of Dodge City, Kansas, giving millions of Americans a reassuring place to visit when the rest of the world wasn't as safe. **U**

—David Hofstede

Note to fans: Janet Arness will continue doing the monthly newsletter and maintaining the website www.jamesarness.com.

Gunsmoke Forever



There was James Arness the man, and James Arness the marshal. For the story of the man, read *James Arness: An Autobiography* (McFarland & Co., 2001), the detailed and revealing account written by the notoriously private "recluse on horseback" in his late 70s; included are rare photographs and a foreword by fellow *Gunsmoke* actor Burt Reynolds. For the story of the marshal, the first four seasons of *Gunsmoke* are available on DVD, along with three compilation vol-

umes that offer an excellent overview of the series' 20-year run. The two *Gunsmoke: 50th Anniversary Edition* collections — featuring episode introductions by Arness — assemble many of the show's most memorable moments, including series regular Burt Reynolds' first show, "Quint Asper Comes Home," and "The Jailer" with Bette Davis.

Also available: *Gunsmoke: The Directors Collection*, which includes an episode written by Sam Peckinpah; and the *Gunsmoke Movie Collection*, which collects three of the *Gunsmoke* telefilms *Return to Dodge*, *The Last Apache*, and *To the Last Man*.

—D.H.

