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People meeting Dennis Weaver for the first time usually are surprised to see a strapping, 180-pounder who stands about 6 feet 3, walks as well as anybody and can talk for long periods without saying "shucks-a-mighty."

Weaver has been on Gunsmoke since it began on TV Sept. 10, 1955. He plays Chester Good, the little sidekick and unofficial deputy who drags a stiff right leg around after

Marshal Matt Dillon (Jim Arness, with whom he's pictured here); and drives elocutionists wild by saying things like, "Kin Uh brang yuh shotgun, Muster Dellon?"

Actually Weaver, who is 30, has been married for 12 years and has two children, is neither lame, little, nor illiterate. A native of Joplin, Mo., he holds a Bachelor of Fine Arts degree from the University of Oklahoma and, in one of TV's true ironies of casting, is a former athlete. In

fact, Weaver says it was the 1948 Olympic tryouts at Bloomfield, N.J., where he finished sixth in the decathlon, that turned him to acting.

“I did so poorly,” he says, “I decided I might as well stay on in New York and try acting.”

His size on Gunsmoke is an illusion that even fools Weaver. “I get to thinking of Chester as a little guy, too, from watching the show at home,” he confesses. “But you’ve got to remem-

ber that Jim Arness is a big man. Jim is 6 feet 6. Makes Chester look little."

Chester lameness, however, is the thing that puzzles and interests viewers most and possibly has made Weaver the recipient of more undeserved sympathy than any other TV actor. The first recorded fan to be taken in by Chester's irregular gait was a professional, a technician on ***Gunsmoke***, who watched the first day's shooting in June of 1955, then settled himself beside Weaver with some observations on a heartless industry. "It's about time," he said, "that they started hiring actors with physical handicaps! "

Weaver's stage limp has even attracted serious medical attention. Recently a cancer researcher at the University of California medical center wrote CBS asking if he could visit the ***Gunsmoke*** set. The doctor, a ***Gunsmoke*** fan; said he had always assumed Chester's limp was a piece of acting, but the position of Chester's footprints in a close-up had raised some diagnostic doubts.

"He bet one of the doctors I was lame," Weaver recalls, "and he bet another I was wearing a device to make me limp, if I weren't. Had to roll up my pants leg to prove I wasn't."

Weaver says he decided early in the game against freezing his right knee mechanically with wrappings or a brace. "You never know when you'll have to get out of a horse's way on the set, and there I'd be, really crippled and unable to run. So I just perfected the limp at home."

If Chester's limp is original, Chester's accent is borrowed—the Ozark dialect of a former classmate.