

THE GRETA GARBO of DODGE CITY

Like the publicity-shy actress, Jim Arness is happiest when he's left alone

BY ROBERT DE ROOS

A few years ago, Amanda Blake, who plays Kitty in *Gunsmoke*, made a wise remark: "Everyone knows what a movie star is and how he acts, but no one quite knows yet what a television star is or how he should act. Including Jim Arness."

Jim Arness, the pre-eminent television star, has learned how a star should act. It is doubtful, however, that other actors will follow his lead. The way Jim plays a television star is simply to go his own way, doing the quiet things he likes best. If there are people who resent this, Jim does not care. He has an aversion to personal publicity that verges on the violent.

Not long ago he had a photographer ordered from the *Gunsmoke* set. "I was not covering Jim and he knew it," the photographer said. "I was there to shoot special effects for Dodge City."

"During the rest period I was perched on a stepladder, looming above the crowd like a mushroom. Jim sat there glowering at me, and the next thing I knew, I was ordered off the set.

"It didn't bother me. I went to the next-door set and shot the fire from a window."

Jim Arness will grant no interviews. Not to the lady from the West Overcoat (Neb.) Clarion-Call or the Asphodel (Me.) Republican. Nor to TV GUIDE, which in this case means me.

Jim demands final approval of any copy which deals with him personally. And since no self-respecting editor will let a television actor edit, Jim's demand effectively ends the discussion.

It may be treason to say it, but Jim is absolutely right. At this stage of *Gunsmoke* (now in its 12th year), there is very little that he can do--off camera--to help the show along. If he acceded to half the demands made on him he would, literally, not have a minute to himself or for his children. He once told a CBS publicist, "I'll give you \$20,000 a year if you can guarantee I get no publicity." There is no doubt he meant it.

Jim's feelings are well-known to his associates. I called Peter Graves, Jim's brother and a star of last season's *Court-Martial*. "TV GUIDE," he said. "Oh, boy." He enlarged: "I wouldn't talk to anybody without Jim's approval. If Jim says OK, I'll be glad to talk."

Robert Emme, Jim's business manager and liaison man with continued

the world, said, "Jim won't talk to you and neither will I."

I was in the middle of an interview with Milburn Stone, *Gunsmoke's* Doc, when the producer called. "Jim is very upset about this interview," he said. The call upset Stone and the interview ended.

"Jim's acting more like a millionaire than an actor these days," a CBS publicity man said.

It is true that most millionaires are inaccessible, but there is more to the Jim Arness story than that.

It is also true that Jim is a shy and sensitive man. And his aversion to publicity is not a new thing; it did not grow with his bank account.

Long ago Jim told me he was very uneasy with the press. "There is this constant thing of people coming at you," he said. "Fans, publicity men, writers, photographers. They usually wind up saying the same thing over and over. I'm sick of stories about being real tall."

He has always been a loner, uncomfortable in a crowd, suspicious of flattery.

His very unactorlike conduct is perhaps explained by the fact that Jim Arness is not basically an actor, although he performs for a living.

On-the-job training

The Hollywood consensus is that Arness lucked in. "Jim was just an extra working in Westerns when he got the call to *Gunsmoke*," I have heard many times, although the statement is not wholly accurate. But Jim has had the advantage of 11 years' on-the-job training and it may be admitted that today he acts.

"I spent the first two years on *Gunsmoke* despising Jim's lack of professionalism," says Milburn Stone. "Now I say his acting has reached classical proportions."

But acting was thrust upon Jim Arness. He was just a tall, blond, confused kid when he was inveigled into a part in a little theater. He lacks the basic temperamental and emotional structure of the true actor.

An actor is just like any other person-only more so. It is a matter of degree. Everyone is vain; actors are superbly vain. Everyone wants to please; actors yearn and strive to please. Everyone likes praise; actors need praise as much as they need food. "Actors are children," says Milburn Stone. "They have to be told they are good and needed."

A real human being

Hollywood's highest compliment is: "So-and-So is a real *human being*." Jim Arness is a real human being. Never more so than when he says, "Let me alone."

"Jim has never held court as many actors do," says Norman Macdonnell, former producer of *Gunsmoke*. "There never has been an admiring throng around Jim. He'd much rather go to his dressing room and lie down or talk to one of the guys. There is no exhibitionistic thing about Jim. All he wants is to do the show and get away."

As much as possible, *Gunsmoke's* shooting schedule is tailored to Arness. "We always tried to keep Jim out of the show Mondays and Fridays so he could go skiing or go to the islands where the big waves were breaking," Macdonnell says. "Then he'd come in and work his tail off Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday. Jim told me, 'If we can't schedule it this way, let's forget the whole thing. I'm going to have some time with my children. Period.'" (Arness and his wife, Virginia, were divorced some years ago.)

So Jim does his work and disappears. He is never seen in Hollywood. Not long ago he was seen with a young lady. "It was an event," says Macdonnell. "It was all over town the

next morning that Jim had had a date."

In television's short life a regular pattern has developed for TV actors. First, they are nobody. Second, they get a series and become somebody. Third, they complain about their impossibly hard life. Fourth, they let it be known that television is a de-meaning medium, that their series is beneath their talents and that they hear a higher call to play Hamlet.

Mastered his art

Once again, Jim Arness is not typical. He is one of the best-known men on TV. He has mastered his art. He has been around longer than almost anyone else. He does not complain about working too hard. He does not yammer that television is demeaning. He does not want to play King Lear.

"Jim's attitude is this," a friend says, "I am an actor. I play Matt Dillon. I play Matt Dillon to the very best of my ability." Jim always has had a meat-and-potatoes attitude toward the business and attached no great glamor to it. He has great simplicity on the screen and great simplicity as a man.

One key to Jim is what he does when he is not at work. In his free time he skin dives. He sails. He is an excellent surfer. He is a fine rifle shot. He is a good and ardent skier.

It is significant that all of these are one-man, noncompetitive sports. "It would be hard to visualize Jim playing mixed doubles in tennis," a friend says.

Jim's main memories of childhood are of days when he tramped the woods, days when he skimmed across frozen Lake Harriet in an ice boat. "I was always restless as hell," Jim once told me. "On days when the wind was blowing, I'd almost go crazy sitting in school."

In California Jim found fame and fortune. But even more important he

found the Pacific Ocean. Again and again, Jim returns to the sea.

Back in the days when he spoke to me, Jim said: "It all happened so fast-becoming an actor and all-that I was stewing in my own juices. Then I discovered the beach. The ocean fascinated me. The first time I tried to surf a big wave, I almost drowned and it frightened me. I was determined to overcome my fear of the sea.

"The year I spent on the beach was not because I wanted to be a beach bum but because it was a time for discovery.

"I still have this feeling about the ocean. The greatest spiritual cleansing I can imagine is to dive into a big surf. It is purifying: getting into the clean salt water, away from affectation, away from the mixed-up world, coming to grips with the elements-the sun and the air and the sea."

He loved poetry

The only part of school that reached Jim was courses in literature. "I used to love poetry," he said. "I loved Shakespeare, Keats, Shelley, Byron."

I asked him what his favorite was now, and Jim sat down and wrote out an Emily Dickinson poem for me from memory. Here is part of it:

*Growth of man like growth of nature
Gravitates within-
Atmosphere and sun confirm it
But it stirs alone . . .*

*Each its difficult ideal
Must acheive - itself-
Through the solitary prowess
Of a silent life . . .*

There is one other thing. In his 11 and a half years with *Gunsmoke* Jim has endeared himself to the cast and crew of the show. "The test is the guys he works with," says Milburn Stone. "Jim is loved-not just liked."

Also he is real tall.