

First of two parts **In an age of the faceless mass, when individuality is flattened down to the group and giants roam nowhere except in the play-acted myths of a past that never was, Marshal Matt Dillon of Dodge City and Gunsmoke stands tall as the apotheosis of masculine strength, a clear-eyed, red-blooded defender of law, decency and American womanhood. And that, in the current argot of press agent and socio-psychologist alike, is the "image" of Matt Dillon.**

It so happens, thanks to six years of solid performing in the role and generally good personal publicity, that the image of Matt Dillon coincides to a striking degree with that of the actor who portrays him—a physical giant (he stands upward of 6 feet 6) named James Arness.

As in most longtime associations of actor and role, with the years one blends slowly into the other. Some of Arness has molded Dillon, some of Dillon now shapes Arness. Just how this mutual lend-lease averages out is open to question.

"Here's the big irony," says a former associate who has witnessed Arness at close range. "As Matt Dillon this man is a father image, or maybe a big-brother image to the Nation. But emotionally, in his approach to problems and to people, he is pathetically immature. The real Arness has a very low opinion of himself, which is the sign of a guy forever running scared."

Another detractor sniffs, "Arness is a case of more luck than talent. He was lucky enough to be born with an honest wood-chopper's kisser. The part of Matt Dillon fell into his lap. How could he miss?"

But Norman Macdonnell, producer of *Gunsmoke* since its radio days, demurs: "Look, there are plenty of good

faces in this town," says Macdonnell, who, incidentally, had to be persuaded to accept Arness as Dillon when *Gunsmoke* went to television. "But that good face of Jim's is also a liability because too many people assume he is all face. They take him for granted as an actor. What they don't realize is that were Jim to play a man like Dillon, only living in 1961, the critics would say, 'What power!'"

Ted Post, who has directed 50-odd *Gunsmoke* episodes, points out, "Arness had a lot of Matt Dillon's gutsiness to begin with. But this guy's long suit as an actor is the compassion that comes out in a poignant look that I call Weltschmerz-world pain. Gary Cooper had it. So did Bogart. Jimmy Stewart, Henry Fonda, Spencer Tracy, they all have it. Arness has it and he doesn't even know it."

The subject of these diverse evaluations, James King Arness, now 38 years old, is a rough-hewn, good-natured, loud-talking extrovert of Norwegian and English-German descent who has been described as a complex man with simple tastes.

His ambition, for example, is a complexity unto itself. Arness's ambition is so muted it appears almost nonexistent. "If *Gunsmoke* goes 10 more years, I'll be happy—I'll swim with the tide, however it goes," Arness said recently, his ample frame stretched out on a couch in his trailer dressing room. He was munching crisp Scandinavian health bread and popping food supplement capsules into his mouth by the handfuls. Arness is no health-food addict himself, but he's been swayed, slightly, to the cause by Dennis Weaver, *Gunsmoke*'s Chester, who definitely is. "I take things as they come," Arness said. "Sure, I take pride in turning out quality continued

shows. I like acting. But I like, other things sailing, skiing, surfing. When I'm in my 50's, say, I just don't want to be concerned with 'big deals' and other Hollywood jazz."

Part fact, part self-delusion, this easygoing approach to life and labor cloaks a powerful but not necessarily single-minded drive. As a schoolboy in his native Minneapolis he sang in choirs and, after returning to his home town a wounded veteran of World War II, he was an announcer at Station WLOL for six months purely as a whim. But if he had ambitions at the time, which he firmly denies, they were far from theatrical. After driving out to Hollywood with a friend who did have acting ambitions, Arness was virtually pushed onto a little-theater stage, an appearance which led in time to movies, a certain amount of success and then, in September 1955, to *Gunsmoke*, a solid hit from the beginning.

For the last three years, following a period when Arness's unhappiness over his slices of the *Gunsmoke* pie could be heard in three neighboring counties, he has been associate producer of the series. Dating also from that readjustment in the hierarchy, the show itself-expanded this season to an hour-has been released under the imprint of Arness and Company, his own corporation, which now stretches beyond TV in its activities and brings Arness an annual income estimated at well over \$200,000. He owns Malibu Beach property; a 40-foot sailboat which he appropriately calls the *Seasmoke*; a 1000-acre working ranch in the Simi Valley, 50 miles out of Los Angeles; and, according to his business manager, Bob Emme, "substantial interests."

Obviously, if Arness were a placid, I'll-do-whatever-you-say-fellows kind of actor, or man, this upward turn of events would have been unlikely.

To his credit, Arness, who is keenly aware of his value to a network and to sponsors, moves to achieve his ends openly, with no Machiavellian maneuvering. "With Jim the cards are always on the table," says a colleague. "He's an exploder and a forgetter. He has a helluva low boiling point. But he never holds a grudge."

Within the reason that must be imposed in assaying any complicated, 20th-century mortal, James Arness may be judged a moderately happy man. "I've got the material things pretty well locked up," Arness declared one day in a rare burst of self-satisfaction. "I've got a good feeling about life' now 'that I haven't always had." Still, the grinding personal problems remain knotted within him -his marriage to Virginia Chapman, a brunette actress he met at Pasadena Playhouse, dissolved into separation (but as yet no divorce) several years ago. She lives with their three children in Pacific Palisades; Arness inhabits a one-room apartment, uncommonly modest by star standards, in Hollywood.

His height was a problem

Even with fairly close friends, Arness keeps the lid tight on that particular touchy subject. People close to the scene paint a familiar picture of the hazards inherent in a two-career Hollywood marriage. But no matter what the reasons, Arness will say nothing about Virginia, himself, or their relationship, either before or after he became a big star. That chapter in his life is closed.

Insofar as personal relationships go, Arness, according to one of the amateur analysts to be found in any network corridor, has constructed "an impenetrable wall reinforced by Matt Dillon-and an unwillingness to give anything of himself. If any conversation gets personal," this coffee-break Freud maintains, "Arness keeps you at

arm's length by assuming his Matt Dillon posture. It's like, Drop yore gun and git out of the Long Branch.' "

Boon or bane, and it is probably both, extreme sensitivity runs strong in Arness's makeup and some of it is undoubtedly traceable to his height. As a teen-ager he towered over most of his classmates and, significantly, his two best friends were also outsized. Sharing a feeling of being strictly an out-group, the three of them retreated into their own protective world of contrived adventure. "We'd go on the bum," Arness recalls. "We weren't bad kids, understand. We came from nice homes. We weren't delinquents. We just had itchy feet. So we'd go hopping freights around the Middle West."

Even as a kid growing up in a pleasant mid&e-class home-his father was then a salesman for a medical-supply company-the inner Arness, restless and sensitive, was at odds with the facade of an amiable giant. Football coaches eyed him covetously, but Arness, as withdrawn and uneasy in groups then as he is today, could muster no interest in team sports, as participant or spectator. "What really interested me was going fishing or boating on the lakes." At Beloit College, Wisconsin, which he attended for a year, he escaped the gaze of the football coach, who perhaps was near-sighted.

Today, having triumphed in this one gnawing battle with himself, Arness no longer is thin-skinned about his height. Not too many years ago, a friend recalls, "Jim would always try to sit down when he talked to you. Or if he had to stand, he'd hunch over.

His height may have been the envy of lots of men, but it humiliated Jim." Once in that same period, a magazine photo editor tried to induce Arness to pose astride a horse of below-average size. "Jim's feet would have almost touched the ground," a publicist says of the incident. "It was just a gag shot but Jim 'refused to pose. He said it would make him look ridiculous."

Arness's sensitivities are easily-perhaps all too easily-pinked in other areas. Getting back to images, he guards his own Jim Arness image with the unrelenting zeal of a she-moose protecting her young. For example, in recent years he has been demonstrably leery of the press, at one time banning interviews altogether. He has, at the moment, no personal press agent. He is also sharply conscious of the image his Marshal Dillon casts on the viewing public. A while ago *Guns* was spoofed on *Maverick* in a lampoon most people considered devoid of malice. Arness; whose sense of humor is usually responsive, was not amused: "It's *poor* taste and poor business for one show to rap another."

No one knows better than Arness, a lusty, worldly fellow himself with Elizabethan appetites, that his Matt Dillon is no saintly soul saver of the sodbuster country-Matt takes a drink, he enjoys the diversion of Kitty Russell, wise and beautiful keeper of the Long Branch. Still, Arness prefers that the Dillon image retain a certain amount of untarnished nobility just as does the image of Jim

Next week:

How John Wayne talked him into becoming Matt Dillon.