“Gunsmoke’s” Mysterious...

JAMES ARNESS

After 16 years as the star of “Gunsmoke,” six-foot-six-inch James Arness is as much of a mystery to Hollywood as he was the day he hitchhiked there 25 years ago. That unheralded arrival was backed by a Minnesota upbringing, a battle-rough hitch in the U.S. Army, an education at Wisconsin’s Beloit College on the GI Bill, and a series of jobs as a lumberjack, salesman and carpenter.

When he arrived in Hollywood, Jim had a small bankroll ($100) and a big dream. The dream came true, although there were a few nightmares along the way. Today, as the star of TV’s longest-running series, Arness has millions in the bank, three children, one ex-wife, two airplanes and several homes. Yet success and time have not changed one thing: Arness is still a mystery.

When Jim reluctantly agreed to talk to a JOURNAL writer, it marked his first magazine interview in more than 10 years. The “no interview” edict was not his attempt to be a male Greta Garbo. His reticence is based on what he considers two good and sufficient reasons. One, the last magazine article on him had, to his way of thinking, hit below the belt. He felt he’d been open and honest with the writer and had not been repaid in kind. Two, he has a distaste for discussing his marriage to actress Virginia Chapman, whom he married on February 13, 1949, and divorced in 1963. In an uncommon California court ruling, Arness was awarded custody of their three children: Craig, Jenny Lee and Rolf. Since the divorce, Arness, who will be 48 on May 23, has remained silent about Virginia. He thinks it “dishonorable” to discuss her. The full details of the divorce have never been published. If Jim has his way, they never will be.

His stance on the subject is typical. A gentleman, as he sees it, does not discuss a lady—or, indeed, females at all—except, perhaps, in admiration. A quality, one can’t help notice, that seems more attuned to Matt Dillon, the Western marshal Jim plays on “Gunsmoke,” than to a man of the sophisticated 1970s.

“There’s probably an awful lot of the old Westerner in me,” Jim says. “If I’d been born a hundred years ago I imagine I’d be one of the men moving west.”

When he talks, Jim’s gray-blue eyes are steady, unwavering and frequently expressionless. Gary Cooper had a twinkle in his eye; Clark Gable had a slant look that he developed as a means of smoothing out his rough edges. Even John Wayne has mastered that same slant look. But not Arness. He is what he appears to be—no more, no less. There is no pretense here; he goes his own way—often alone.

“I’m not a sentimental man,” he drawls, “but I would say my best friends are my children. They’ve always meant a great deal to me. When I got custody of them I felt doubly responsible. If I was going to raise them, then I damned well better be with them as much as possible. I met that responsibility not out of nobility or anything like that, but because I’ve enjoyed my children. It’s been fun. I still enjoy them. They keep me young, you know.”

Craig, 28, Virginia’s son by her first marriage, was adopted by Arness. Graduated from college, Craig now works for United Trade Management, a marketing service. Jenny, 20, is studying photography and lives with a group of girls in West Los Angeles. Rolf, 18, is a surfing champion.

“Lots of parents who are close to their kids realize how rough it is when kids grow up and leave home,” says Jim. “If you spend a lot of time with them you just want it to continue. Well, I learned to let go. They’re still my favorite companions, but I understand that they’ve gotta go.”

“I was a drifter when I was a kid. At 18 I was gone from our home outside Minneapolis. That was the last the Arness family ever saw of me. [Jim dropped the “u” from his family name for stage purposes.] My brother Pete was an independent, too. Maybe it’s our Norwegian heritage.

“Some of my happiest memories are riding the freights in winter and summer—riding them to harvest fields in the Dakotas or to logging camps in Idaho. Railroad cops used to toss me off once in a while, but I was fascinated by the romance of the old steam engines. That’s all gone now. But I was part of a time that’s dead now. Back in Minneapolis it was a different world. There was a camaraderie among neighbors that doesn’t exist here in California. I was born and raised in the same house and stayed there (continued on page 92).
JAMES ARNESS continued

until I left home. Neighbors were almost part of the family.

"Minnehaha Creek ran through a little valley right behind our house. We'd float rafts on the creek and sail in sum-
mer, ice skate in winter. We had a hell of a good time; it was a real Huckle-
berry Finn existence."

Arness simply looks at the camera when he thinks all the course. He stops abruptly, making no attempt to change the subject, and looks off into the distance—"as God knows what.

The wanderlust of his childhood still persists. Al-
though he has a home in Pacific Palisades, complete with servants, and a thou-
sand-acre ranch some 60 miles northeast of Los An-
geles, only his "Gunsmoke" contract, which has two years to go, binds him to
Hollywood. Even his dressing room at the CBS Studio
Center, where the show is filmed, is that of a man on
the move. It is devoid of per-
sonal possessions—a bed, a
chair and an unused kitchen.
Between takes Arness sprawls on the bed and naps.
When his scenes are over he
rips off his false sideburns,
jumped into his dusty Chry-
sler New Yorker and drives
home. As he leaves the set
Assistant Director Bob Reche bellows: "Say good-
night to Jim." In unison the
crew and cast cry out, "Goodnight, Jim." Arness has no social con-
tact with the cast away from
work, and they accept his insistence on privacy.

Hard to know

Amanda Blake, who por-
trays Miss Kitty in the
"Gunsmoke" series, has a
motherly attitude toward
Jim. "He's big, impressive
and virile," she says affectionately. "I've worked with
him for six years, but I
don't really know him. We
girls on the set call him Stud Duck. Why? I don't know."

Several years ago the
"Gunsmoke" production of-
fice forgot to notify Amanda
that she was due on the set
the following day. When she
did not appear, Arness was
terrified. In my mind I put out
an all-points search for
her. It was obvious he cared
—and Amanda was deeply touched.

"In the beginning," says Milburn Stone, "Gunsmoke's" crusty Doc Ad-
ams, "Jim was always late and didn't
know his lines. He made funny noises with his guns—like a kid. I didn't think
he was professional. Once I tore him
up one side and down the other in
a fifteen-minute tirade. Any minute I ex-
pected him to blow up and throw
me across the set. Instead, when I was
through, he looked me right in the eye
and said, 'You're absolutely right. Then he walked away.'

Whatever differences existed be-
tween the two men are now smoother
over. Stone thinks of Jim as a loyal son—and, like Amanda, he knows Ar-
ness cares.

"When I was in the infirmary just
recovering from a heart attack," says
Amanda, "Jim was there all the
time. He said, 'You're going to be all right. I promise.' I was pretty sick, and
Jim was just the way he is. He's so
much like a father to me."

Arness anything but funny. He is
thorough, shrewd and demanding in his
business dealings. In the beginning, the
network was able to sign Jim to a rath-
er frugal contract. Arness never forgot it. When the contract came up for re-
newal, he took a hit. Arness offered to
put down more money than any other per-
former on the network. Recalls a CBS
executive, "Jim wouldn't negotiate so
we sent him a script in which Dillon
was killed by a gunshot. A brother from
St. Louis came into Dodge City and was sworn in as the new marshal at the end of
the show. Jim got the message, lowered his demands and signed the contract."

Evidently Arness never
forgot that incident, either,
because he later purchased
the entire show from the net-
work and, after much hag-
gling on both sides, sold it back to CBS. Jim made a
fortune on the transaction.

Though CBS executives
get short shrift from Arness,
they concede privately that
"Gunsmoke" is their most val-
able property and that he
is their top star. If they
want him—and they do—it
has to be on his terms. That
is how everyone must accept
him.

Jim's brother, Peter
Graves, accepts these terms
and even smiles about it.
When Peter, the star of
"Mission: Impossible," was
honored on the new "This Is
Your Life" TV series, Ralph
Edwards implored Arness to
appear on the show. Jim
refused. He finally agreed to
tape a voice welcome for his
brother, but that was all.

"I wasn't hurt," Graves says.
"I'd known about it in advance. I'd have told Ralph not to bother to try. That's
the way my brother is. To be honest, I wouldn't
change him one damned bit.
He's one of a kind."

In a hurry

Graves, who is three years
guier than Jim, changed
his last name to avoid being confused with his brother.

"Neither of us ever wanted to be kids," Graves re-
counts. "We were in a hurry to grow up, to get out and be men, men on the move.
Where we were going didn't matter—we just wanted to go. In my mind there's no
question Jim would have been with Marco Polo or
Lewis and Clark if he had been born in earlier times. Civilization sometimes
ruins him the wrong way. I don't go to
many parties, but I have more toler-
(continued on page 185)

The first coin issued in the United States was one cent piece, dated 1787, and it bore the slogan, "I Will Be Your Business." That's more suit-

able than the present slogan on our money, "In God We Trust." Somehow money seems more the
Man's ideas than God's.

—Poor Woman's Almanac

I hate to think of the things I should have said and haven't—and I also hate to think of the things I have said and shouldn't.

—Poor Woman's Almanac
JAMES ARNESS
continued from page 92
ance for them than Jim does. He finds no value or constructive elements in the Hollywood social life.

Arness admits Peter is right about his distaste for the party life. "I went to a discothecure once," Jim volunteered, "to entertain the visiting vice president of an aircraft company. I feel uncomfortable in those places, a dropout, but because I'm not that well informed because I'm not a zealot, I keep my mouth shut. I don't think I have the right to try to influence others. Maybe that's being a dropout, I don't know.

One actor who does not agree with Arness' stand and still manages to impress Jim somewhat is John Wayne. One of the first people to realize Jim's potential as a star, Wayne signed him to a contract with his Batjac Productions. At Batjac, Arness had a few roles but nothing big. When "Gunsmoke" came along and Arness was hesitant about shooting because he feared what a TV series might do to his movie career, Wayne supposedly retorted, "What movie career?"

"I respect Duke Wayne," says Arness. "He is a unique guy. He's got a more responsible attitude than I do. He loves people and the business and what it all means to the public. I admire that, but I just don't have his kind of energy. When I was under contract to Wayne we'd all go out until three or four in the morning just pouring down the whiskey. At 7 A.M. I'd be staggering around, unable to see straight. But there'd be Duke, ready to work."

Honesty is an Arness policy, yet he hides two physical characteristics. One is his hair color. Actually he's blond, but because TV's powers-that-be insist that a blond man appears weak or useless or both, Jim's hair is sprayed before he goes on camera to make it look dark brown or black. Arness is also said to walk with a distinctive rolling gait that many consider a perfect cowboy stride. In reality, he perfected that slight hitch in his stride to cover up a war injury.

He never complained

An infantry private in World War II, Jim participated in the 1944 landing at Anzio on the Italian front. He was shot in the right leg, and the impact of the rifle bullet pitched him back into a freezing stream. He lay there for 18 hours with a gaping hole in his leg. Finally found by medics, he was taken to a hospital, where he remained for almost a year. Arness still has a jagged scar from the wound, but will not talk about it or the war.

Two years ago Jim returned to Anzio to look for the site where he was wounded. He couldn't locate the exact spot, but he did find the farmhouse that once housed the German machine gun emplacement that his patrol had been sent to knock out. He told his brother Peter that he remembered clearly walking up the outside stairs of the house and the hand to hand fighting that followed.

The brothers rarely see one another except on holidays at Jim's ranch, where their father Rolf Arness now

And as far as anyone else in Hollywood is concerned, they might as well live in London. I've never met people like Marlon Brando or Julie Andrews. That's the truth. I'd be surprised if I had any rapport with them. My friends are a couple of doctors, some members of the show's crew and some lifeguard buddies who surf or ski. I find most high-level executives ego-centered. They drive me nuts.

"In Hollywood people try to pressure you into joining one bandwagon or another. They say it's your duty as a celebrity. I don't think so. I've stayed away from politics. Maybe that's being..."
Weekends alone

Arness has no formal religion. He says that he is close to infinity when he is alone with nature. And he is alone with nature almost every weekend. Whether he is at home or at the studio, it's a 20-minute drive to the Van Nuys airport, where he keeps his two planes, a Cessna and a two-engine Beechcraft he calls "The Red Baron." Then off he flies to his roomy, 60-year-old log cabin in Mammoth, California, to ski, hike or ride horseback. The cabin was built during the silver-mining days. There Jim cooks his own meals and enjoys the high country—"the white water, the smell of fires and pines. That's why I love my planes—they can take me there."

When his TV schedule permits, he can fly to Hawaii, where he leases a home on the beach and spends time surfing or fishing. Like his son Rolf, he loves surfing. "When you catch a big wave it's spooky, Scarey. It makes your blood circulate," says Jim. Then he adds, "That's sport to me—not golf or tennis."

His favorite hideaway is Baja California. His plane loaded with provisions, Jim likes to fly there, away from what he terms "the ecological disaster of the Los Angeles area." He brings the plane down on the beach and camps in a tent for several days.

"A few weeks ago I was down there with Rolf and a friend of his," Jim says. "We went out into the water at low tide and picked up lobsters two feet long. We had lunch, we biked, maybe tried surfboarding. The next night we sat around the campfire. I had a sip or two of bourbon. Then I crawled into a sleeping bag and dropped off like a baby. That's the life. If I had my preference I'd rather do that than anything else."

When his "Gunsmoke" contract is fulfilled, Jim plans to live in Wyoming, Montana or Canada. "I've been looking around up there for a piece of ground that has the basic elements of nature. Completely primitive with bear, deer and all the rest. I want to be in that environment. I can fly down here to work once in a while. That "once in a while" refers to the "Gunsmoke" and CBS are planning after the weekly series is over."

Arness is aware the life will be lonely. "I don't guess a woman would want to share that kind of life," he says. "She'd be a hard one to find. Certainly it wouldn't be an actress. Their lives and drives are toward this town and woman you've probably reached one of the highest levels of life. Still, some of Jim's friends predict that he will marry again."

Actress Francine York, whom he used to date, says she never confused Jim with Marshal Dillon. "I don't care much for Dillon because he has no sense of fun. Jim has lots of jaye de cru. He's funny. He tells jokes. He's like a big boy."

Arness' boyishness came to light one

plain, open-necked shirt and, on more formal occasions, a jacket. His idea of a date is to take a woman to the movies; Francine saw a lot of movies with him.

On their second date he wore one of his three overcoats but noticed how beautifully she was dressed. "Shucks," he said (yes, shucks!), "I can't take out a pretty lady like you without nice clothes. So he bought some new clothes. On their next date he asked Francine's opinion of his wardrobe. Francine wanted to laugh, but didn't.

The clothes were obviously very expensive but were more suitable to a 90-year-old square than a handsome TV star in the prime of life. And honest Jim even complained to Francine that the new shoes he'd bought hurt his feet!

Jim and Francine no longer date, much to Francine's regret, but she still cherishes a romantic card he sent her—along with two dozen long-stemmed yellow roses. He signed the note "Big J"—the signature he puts on most of his personal correspondence.

A courtly manner

Perhaps it was Ken Curtis, who plays Festus on "Gunsmoke," who best summed up Jim's attitude toward women. "He's almost courtly toward them," says Curtis. "His conversation is sprinkled with four-letter words, but not when women are around. He's no pretty boy, but his good, strong features seem to turn on women of every age."

Confronted with this appraisal of his sex appeal, Arness' jaw dropped in disbelief, then he stared expressionlessly off into the horizon. Finally, he stood up, stretched his arms and said he had to go.

"Gotta go look at a dog for Rolf," he said. "He had a bird that was lost. We never found him. I thought maybe I'd kind of surprise Rolf with a young pup like the other..."

Jim Arness stopped talking, aware that he had revealed a very small particle of the warmth that lies within him. He again turned his flushed face to the horizon and then quickly said, "Well, see you around."