

Ah, the power of television!

Look at the wonders it can perform. It can reach 50,000,000 people with one show; carry living history into the living room; make celebrities out of former parking-lot attendants.

Now it is taking on an even more prodigious task. It is bidding fair to bring back vaudeville.

Take the case of ***Gunsmoke's*** Dennis Weaver, Amanda Blake and Milburn Stone (pictured left to right and also on the cover with Jim Arness). They are not even the stars of their own show. They're not highly paid as these things go. They are actors-and good ones-but certainly not known on television as all-around entertainers.

Yet such is the magic of the word ***Gunsmoke***, and so great is the appeal of Chester, Kitty, and Doc that together they make an act which can command up to \$10,000, **continued**

at any rodeo, horse show, county fair or apple festival in the Nation.

Thereby hangs a tale which is best told from the beginning. When *Gunsmoke* began in 1955, its principals, like the principals in almost all successful TV shows, started getting requests for personal appearances. For the average nonperforming actor, this poses a problem. What does he do? Get up, say he's glad to be there, wipe the egg off his face and sit down? Not very exciting stuff.

The Gunsmoke people were a little better off than the average. Stone, for example, a man of wide experience in show business, numbered among his early accomplishments a song-and-dance act he had done briefly in vaudeville. Weaver could peck away at a guitar well enough-but not too well. Amanda Blake could not (she thought) do anything, least of all sing. By her own admission, she could hardly carry a tune and "had a voice so low it could easily pass for bass."

For years, these three stumbled through their personal appearances with varying degrees of success, both artistic and financial. Then one day last February, Roy Rogers handed them a very pleasant shock.

Rogers was appearing at the Florida State Fair in Tampa. In the audience were Weaver, Stone and Miss Blake. On what appeared to be an impulse, Rogers said to the audience, "Folks, how would you like to meet Chester, Kitty and Doc?"

"Well," Stone comments today, "they like' to tore the joint apart."

From that moment on, several things were obvious. As solo entertainers, the three were so-so. But together-well, there was no telling what they could do. Suppose they organized a sort of vaudeville turn, an act tailored not only to display the familiar Gunsmoke characters but to entertain as well?

As the wise old senior member of the firm, Doc Stone was put in charge. The first project was to convince Kitty she could sing. A sultry ballad was written for her called "The Long Branch Blues," and her howls of protest could be heard as far away as Dodge City. The song was designed to do two things: take advantage of the low register of her voice, and explain Kitty's relationship to Marshal Matt Dillon (Arness).

"I thought they were out of their minds," Amanda recalls. "But the funny thing is, now I sing harmony and counterpoint."

"We used the old vaudeville technique of just trying things out," Stone explains. "And we made plenty of mistakes. The first was trying to use a local orchestra. We found we had no time to rehearse it adequately. So we acquired an accordion, bass and girl singer-guitarist who were known as The Frontier Boys and Joanie. Now they travel with us wherever we go.

"Anyway, we broke the new act in at Long Beach [Cal.] and it was disastrous. We kept changing and finally came up with something-well, it's a boff wherever we go."

It set the attendance record at the San Bernardino [Cal.] Orange Show in 1959, for example, then chalked up the all-time record at the New Mexico State Fair-13,099 two nights in a row, or about 1200 over capacity.

Today, the revised act with which the *Gunsmoke* group is wowing 'em contains enough rich meat to stock several acts. Some of its more appealing items:

• Chester's wild entrance, in which he tears out of the chute like a Brahman bull, jumps a hurdle stiff-legged, starts enthusiastically to perform, freezes, and has to be coaxed into singing a song called "What Do You Do When You Don't Know What to Do?"

• Kitty's extraordinary set of tights which she wears while singing a rock

'n' roll version of "When You and I Were Young Maggie."

- A typical Doc vs. Chester argument (as Stone says, "a sort of Hope-Crosby routine of the 1870's").

- A grand finale that includes several choruses of "He's Got the Whole World in His Hands" and an exit in a surrey drawn by the fanciest set of horses the region has to offer.

Audiences apparently can't get enough of it. The group usually is met at the airport by 500 to 2000 enthusiasts—and very often by a brass band. Last November, when their airplane was delayed 13 hours and they arrived in Charlotte, N.C., at midnight, approximately four hours late for the show, they found some 500 intrepid souls waiting for them—with brass band.

"We were dead tired," said Stone. "Amanda was sick. We had no scenery, no costumes. But we found a balcony and did a show from it. They loved it. Without pausing for breath we hopped our plane for Greensboro and High Point [N.C.], rode in two parades, did four shows to capacity audiences for the Carolina Jubilee Horse Show, and loved every minute of it. Apparently they did too."

All three performers view their routine as a form of show business with a lot of special conditions, if not a new form altogether.

"Audiences regard us as old friends," says Stone, "because of the intimacy of the TV show. They nearly always call us by our stage names: Doc, Chester, Kitty. And more than likely their questions—and there are plenty of them—will be about the TV characters, not about us actors who play them.

"Does Kitty really love Matt? When will Kitty marry Matt? Is Chester's leg really stiff? How did he get that limp? How does Chester make his coffee? And so on. I have to be careful. If anybody asks me how's Chester, I may reply, 'Oh, he's fine.' They don't

like that. Chester and I are supposed to be arguing all the time."

The act is getting bigger all the time. It's booked by the same outfit that books Roy Rogers, an old hand at the lucrative business of personal appearances. So far the Gunsmoke trio has not elevated itself quite into the Rogers league; but, according to Rogers' managers, "The potential is there."

Meanwhile, such personal appearances have not only doubled the trio's income but also have opened new vistas of activity for Miss Blake, Stone and Weaver.

Says Kitty: "The others beat me into it. Now I feel like a trouper. And I love it."

Says Chester: "As long as we were doing 'em, might as well do 'em good. And the company is pleasant."

Says **Doc**: "Here's the essence of it. We're heroes when we get to a town; we know that. The trick is to be heroes when we leave."