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James Arness of “Gunsmoke” Fame Dies at 88

James Arness, the legendary actor known to several generations of TV viewers as Marshall Matt Dillon of Dodge City, Kansas, in the 20-year-long series *Gunsmoke*, died of heart failure on June 3 at his home in Los Angeles. Arness, who was born James King Aurness in Minneapolis in 1923, was 88 years old. His younger brother, actor Peter Graves, best known for his role on *Mission: Impossible*, and for his earlier role in the series, *Fury*, died last year.



Gunsmoke’s 20-year run, from 1955-1975, made it the second-longest running program in television history, second only to *60 Minutes*. The role of Marshall Dillon originated on the radio version of *Gunsmoke* (1952-1961), and was played by William Conrad. But Arness brought a new dimension to the character on the TV series, because the visual medium of television allowed for more subtleties and body language, Arness’s Matt Dillon evolved into the classic “strong silent” character in the tradition of such cowboy actors as Gary Cooper. Standing 6’7”, Arness was ideally suited for that role, and as he and Marshall Dillon both matured over the 20-year course of the series, his character came to rely more on wisdom and quiet strength rather than raw violence to enforce law and order in Dodge City during the rough-and-tumble cattle-drive days of the 1870s.

Arness once related in an interview that John Wayne had been mentioned as the ideal Matt Dillon, but like most movie stars, Wayne regarded television as somewhat of a step down from the big screen and encouraged Arness to take the role.

Though Arness was indisputably the bedrock upon which the lengthy success of *Gunsmoke* rested, the show had a strong and balanced cast of supporting actors who contributed much to the show’s appeal. These included Milburn Stone as the softspoken, philosophical “Doc” (Dr. Galen Adams); Amanda Blake as “Miss Kitty” Russell, the proprietress of Dodge’s Long Branch saloon; and Dennis Weaver as Chester Goode, the lanky handyman who walked with a limp and helped out the marshall at the jail, frequently calling his boss in his nasal twang: “Mis-tur Dil-lon.” (Weaver would eventually go on to star in his own



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TV series as Marshall Sam McCloud in the NBC series, *McCloud*, from 1970 through 1977.)

In his early life, Arness graduated from high school in Minneapolis in 1942. He had hopes of becoming a naval fighter pilot, but because of his 6'7" height, he was rejected for flight school, and so became an infantryman. He took part in the famous allied landing at Anzio and was the first man sent off the landing craft — this time his height was regarded as an asset — to test the water's depth. After the landing, Arness was hit in the leg with machine gun fire and was awarded both the Bronze Star and a Purple Heart.

After the war, Arness attended Beloit College in Wisconsin and became a radio announcer in Minnesota in 1945. He started an acting career with RKO pictures in 1947 and appeared in several films, beginning with a role as Loretta Young's brother in *The Farmer's Daughter*.

Arness is survived by his wife, Janet Surtees, and a son from his first marriage, Rolf Aurness, who was the world surfing champion in 1970, and a stepson, Jim Surtees.

During the decades of the 1950s and '60s, TV Westerns were in their heyday, and their portrayal of courage and rugged independence set an example for all of us who had the pleasure of growing up with them. The longevity of *Gunsmoke* and the quiet strength of big James Arness made the series among the best of the genre, leaving us with a treasure chest of fond memories.

To paraphrase the closing theme song of another popular Western program of the era, *The Roy Rogers Show*: Happy trails, James Arness, until we meet again.

Photo of James Arness as Marshall Matt Dillon in the TV series, Gunsmoke: AP Images



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