
Doc Adams of "Gunsmoke": An Interview with Actor Milburn Stone

edited by Ronald L. Davis

A LETTER ARRIVED IN DALLAS from Milburn Stone early in August 1976, after I had left for a month of interviewing in California. Three years before I had become founding director of the Southern Methodist University Oral History Program on the Performing Arts and had spent much of the past summer in Los Angeles. When Milburn's letter came, my secretary contacted me, and I immediately called him in Rancho Santa Fe, a resort community north of San Diego, where the Stones had moved the year before. Milburn said he had received my request for an interview, but had tossed it aside. Then he decided he *should* record his story, for he knew he would never write an autobiography. He had discussed the matter with his wife, and SMU's historical approach appealed to him, although he warned me that he tended to ramble.

By the time I met him—August 11, 1976—he had suffered three cardiac arrests and had undergone a coronary bypass in 1971. "I had to learn to walk all over again," he told me. We spent the entire day talking, breaking for lunch with Mrs. Stone; most of what we said was recorded. Milburn showed me their lovely view and pointed with pride to the collection of figurines of physicians sent to him by people all over the country. He admitted that after twenty years his "Gunsmoke" role had almost become a real identity. "Except for my immediate family," he said, "Milburn Stone no longer exists." Even close friends called him Doc Stone. That seemed to bother him not at all, and he was clearly pleased at having received an Emmy award for the role as best supporting actor in 1968.

Personally I found him chatty, hospitable, open, yet quick to anger as he talked about directors he had found unreasonable or unfair to cast members. During those moments his language matched his harsh memories. When he spoke of his friends James Cagney or Pat O'Brien or producer A. C. Lyles, his voice grew gentle, full of affection. Frequently he nodded to the photo-

graphs hanging on the wall of his study; each held a special meaning for him. At one point a household cat started pawing the take-up reel of my old-fashioned tape recorder, and Milburn roared with amusement. When I left to drive back up the coast to Los Angeles, he flattered me by indicating that he hated to see me go. I promised we would keep in touch, which we did until his death in 1980.

When Milburn received the unedited transcript of our oral history, he was horrified at his rambling and ready to toss the whole thing out. I assured him that the information was there; it simply needed pruning. What follows is an effort to do that, maintaining the flavor of Milburn Stone's account, with only minor rearrangement of words and occasional sentences.

Davis: I wonder if we might begin with your telling me where you were born and raised.

Stone: I was born in Burrton, Kansas, on July 5, 1904. Geographically Burrton is just fifteen miles east of Hutchinson.

Davis: I have read where you said playing Doc Adams on "Gunsmoke" was "like reliving a piece of my childhood." Do you feel that way?

Stone: Oh, sure. I patterned the role after my paternal grandfather, Joseph Stricker Stone, because he was very austere. But he had this great sense of humor; he was laughing at everybody inside all the time. When I was a little kid, he'd ask me if I had any money, and of course I'd say no. He'd reach in his pocket and pull out a nickel. He'd press the nickel into my hand and, without smiling, he'd say, "Now don't spend that," and walk away very gruff. That scared the hell out of me. But I could brave it to get a nickel. As I grew older, I realized what a tremendous sense of humor he had and what a deep man he really was. He knew a lot about a lot of things, and he was just exactly what any kid could wish for in a



grandpa. Looking back on him, it's a fond memory. And, of course, without him I couldn't have created the role on "Gunsmoke," because I hung it all on him.

Davis: How did you first become interested in acting?

Stone: I guess I always was a ham. When I was in school, if I got three people together, I'd do a show for them. I learned to sing and dance for pennies. When I went to high school in Burrton, I was probably the only guy that ever graduated from there that was in four senior class plays. They drafted me, which gives you an idea of what a miserable guy I was—just a big show-off. I had this histrionic flair for the theater, I suppose, because of my Uncle Fred Stone. Actually he was my cousin, but he wanted me to call him uncle and I was happy to do it. He was Stone of Montgomery and Stone [a vaudeville act].

Davis: He played the Scarecrow in the original Broadway production of *The Wizard of Oz*.

Stone: Right. He and my father were first cousins. Fred and my dad were the same age and very close. Fred's father, old L. B. Stone, was an itinerant barber, and I mean itinerant. He would pick up and leave, oftentimes with a show; he was stage-struck, too. He imagined he was Buffalo Bill or something. But because of that background, I suppose, and hearing a lot about Fred's stardom, I got inspired. But I'll tell you, if you live in Burrton, Kansas, and you're ambitious for the theater, you're about as far out as you can possibly be.

Davis: So how did you take the plunge?

Stone: About graduation time a tent show came to town. I had an appointment to the Naval Academy at Annapolis. That came about because of my uncle, Austin Stone, in Wichita. He was campaign manager for Judge Richard E. Bird, congressman from Kansas. So through those influences I received the appointment to Annapolis. Anyway, this show came to town. It broke my mother's heart because I left with them. Thank God I was able to make it up to my mom later, but it sure was a serious blow. She thought it was a tragedy. An appointment to Annapolis was considered a great honor in those times.

Davis: What kind of a company was this tent show?

Stone: It was a repertory company, the Helen B. Ross Company. They came into town and did a week's stand. The guy that put me in show business was Arthur Names, who was a partner in the thing. He came and got me, and I left with a shirt on. That's all I had. As I drove out of town with him, I vowed I'd never come back. I was entering "life upon the wicked stage." Anyway, Art was forming his own show, and he wanted me to be part of it. It was going to be Art and me and a girl by the name of

Lorraine Smith, whose father was the editor of a Kansas newspaper. She played the piano, and I could sing and dance and learned to play the drums. When Art told me it was going to be a three-person company, I couldn't understand how that was going to work. And Art was a strange guy. Let me explain that.

Davis: Please do.

Stone: He was a complete loner. When he picked me up, I was just elated. By this time I'd learned all the words—the lumberjack words, harvest hand words. As a kid, I'd learned them all. So I was attempting to show him how sophisticated I was by telling him stories. Boy, they could curl your hair. I was swearing and carrying on, because I thought this was what it was all about. He just sat with a little smile on his face. That evening, near Alliance, Kansas, after the show was over I found out that Art and I were rooming together. It was fall, but he stripped off completely naked and threw the window clear up and knelt down and prayed at the window. I'm laying in bed, watching. All of a sudden it dawned on me what a blasphemous son-of-a-bitch I'd been. I was just overcome by this. I laid awake all night thinking how I'd underestimated him, *overestimated* myself. He was a hell of a man, much macho, but he made quite an impression on me.

Davis: What kind of a salary were you making?

Stone: Art Names was paying me \$50 a week, which was more than the banker in my hometown was making. Then another fellow, Joe Sims, offered me a job. He was a fabulously talented guy, and he said, "I'll give you \$75." Well, I shudder to think what might have happened if Joe Sims hadn't got drunk. He went on the stage drunk. He couldn't stand up, but he walked out on the stage and played his part beautifully and then collapsed. Well that, plus the fact that he wanted to borrow \$10 from me, cinched it, and I went with Art. Of course it was the greatest move I ever made because I was like a son to him. One time Art, without meaning to really, gave me a philosophy of acting and philosophy of life as well. I didn't know it at the time, but I realized later how all-encompassing it was. When he wanted to say anything serious to me he'd say, "Milburn, "—he'd accent the last syllable. Then I knew it was going to be something important. He said to me one time, "Milburn, acting is not the most noble profession in the world, but it can be very gratifying and quite remunerative if you never let anybody catch you at it." I ran that through my mind over and over and over again, because when he said anything like that, I made a point of remembering it. Well, I had no trouble remembering that, because this

THE PLAY

Fred Stone as a Civil War Senator in 'Jayhawker,' by Sinclair Lewis and Lloyd Lewis.

JAYHAWKER, a "drama of American politics" in three acts, by Sinclair and Lloyd Lewis. Staged by Joe Losey; settings by Walter Walden; produced by Henry Hammond, Inc. At the Cort Theatre.

Reverend Peavle.....Ralph Theodore
Will Starling.....Paul Guilfoyle
Wes.....Douglas McMullen
Ike Swan.....Tom Fadden
Ed Ridley.....Cliff Heckinger
Mrs. Carson.....Margaret O'Donnell
Mrs. Swan.....Katherine Rolin
Mrs. Ridley.....Ludmilla Torstka
Mrs. Elkins.....Nancy Levering
Matt Carson.....Edward Acuff
Vic Fousneau.....Walter Baldwin
Sam Blevins.....David Andrada
Mrs. Blevins.....Gretchen Winkler
Luke Kildare.....Edward McNamara
Asa (Ace) Burdette.....Fred Stone
Nettie Burdette.....Carol Stone
Mr. Russell.....Harry Worth
Artist.....Donald Smith
Mose.....Hayes Fryor
O'Reilly.....Lawrence C. O'Brien
Gen. Philemon Smallwood.....Walter C. Kelly
Hawkins.....George Oliver Taylor
Eph Brown.....Martin Howe
Fresh Fish.....O. Z. Whitehead
Confederate soldier.....Milburn Stone

years of death and suffering, he matures into decent manhood, and the sight of fresh boys marching off to destruction is more than he can bear. He cannot endure a blood-drenched country any longer. That is why he and a Confederate general put their heads together over a crack-brained project to call the Civil War off and send the combined Northern and Southern armies on a filibustering campaign against Mexico. Only the inflamed passions of the North prevent the Senator from turning against his own eagle-screaming policies. Make no mistake about it: there is some robust, sanely motivated stuff in "Jayhawker." Although Fred Stone's speech is none too clear, his beetle-browed, home-spun



Milburn's "Uncle" Fred Stone played the Scarecrow in the original Broadway production of *The Wizard of Oz* and later gave Milburn letters of introduction to Broadway producers. In 1934, Milburn appeared with Fred Stone in the Broadway play *Jayhawker* in which Milburn was billed as the "Confederate soldier."

is better than Stanislavski.¹ Acting is simply the art of not acting, that's all, or appearing not to be acting. That may be oversimplification, but that's it in a nutshell. As James Cagney told me later, "I just have a simple little formula: walk in, plant your feet, look them in the eye, and tell the truth." That applies to everything.

Davis: I'm curious about this three-person company you traveled with in Kansas.

Stone: It was probably the only three-person dramatic repertory company that had existed up to that time, and I'm sure since. We played three-night stands, a complete

repertoire of plays written by Arthur Names. We played as many as four parts each, quick changes and everything. In one show Art played my father, my uncle, and another man who was the heavy in the thing. I once played myself and my own father! And Lorraine Smith in that show played my girlfriend and my brother's wife. So we had to change fast. But I'll tell you, this was tremendous experience. *Tremendous* experience. The beautiful thing about it was that Art was a realist. As I look back, the things we did were hammy, but at the same time he wanted them to be real, too.

Davis: How long did this company last?

Stone: That show went two seasons, maybe three. Then Art got married and that made us four. Then Lorraine Smith got married; she married a fellow by the name of Doc Wilson, a comedian. So we were five. The show grew from that nucleus until at one time we had twenty-five people. That was during the summer under canvas.

Davis: Were you playing Kansas exclusively?

Stone: Kansas and northern Oklahoma. Theaters in the wintertime, tent shows in the summer. We'd open down south in the spring and work north, then come back towards fall to the south.

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1. Konstantin Stanislavski (1863-1938) was a Russian actor and producer whose concept of acting—realism based on the character's inner truth—had great influence upon the European and American theater.

Davis: What about sets and costumes?

Stone: The three of us carried everything we owned in one little Willys Overland car—the scenery, hotel bags, the whole works. It was rag scenery, and there was no such thing as trunks. I was everything Art wasn't—stage manager, property man, stage carpenter, the whole damn thing. Art was the advance man and the boss. We'd get into a hotel in the town, or maybe we'd stay at people's houses, and Art would go ahead and bill the next town.

Davis: Did the town underwrite these shows at all?

Stone: No, no, this was all spec. If they didn't come to the show, you went broke. But we had a very good show, and Art believed in billing like a circus. He'd really put out ads. We sold candy, too, between acts. We played Goodland, Kansas, which was the biggest town we played. Goodland had a fine opera house; it was run by a man by the name of Hodgkinson, a great big man. Goodland had broken jumps for big shows; New York road companies jumping from Kansas City to Denver played there. As a matter of fact, we followed Norman Hackett and Charlotte Walker in *The Vinegar Tree* in there. They were on tour. I was in awe of this theater. It had a loading dock and a scene dock and a big loft, the whole works. I'd never seen those kinds of facilities. It was upstairs, like a lot of upstairs opera houses.

Art had gone on to Bird City² to bill us there, when Hodgkinson came in and introduced himself. Keep in mind there are only three of us. Hodgkinson said to me, "I'm the manager here. When did you get in? Where's the rest of them?" I said, "Well, at the hotel." He didn't know how many people we had at all. "Where's the scenery?" he said. He was absolutely aghast when he found out we only had three people. This just knocked him cold. He said, "My God, I've just finished with Charlotte Walker and Norman Hackett in *The Vinegar Tree*, and you've got three people!" He was mad as hell.

About four o'clock Art got back; I was afraid he wouldn't. Art was five by five, and this guy towered over him. He let Art know how mad he was. Finally Art said, "Are you a gambling man?" Hodgkinson said, "No, I'm not a gambling man." Art said, "I'm not really either, but you're so sure you're right, let me make you a little proposition." He pulled out this roll of bills. "Tell you what we'll do. I'll go over and put out general rings at the telephone office, and we'll advertise the first two acts of this show free. We'll charge them twenty-five cents and the kids a dime if they want to stay and see the last act.

And I'll pay you a half dollar for everybody that walks out." Hodgkinson said, "You're on." So Art went over and put out a general ring, which you could do in those days. My God, free was the magic word. We packed them to the doors.

Art went out between acts and told them what he was going to do—charge them if they stayed clear to the end. In the second act the heavy had gotten me, the bumpkin, into a card game and he'd won the mortgage to the farm. Art was playing the heavy, and he showed the audience that he was stacking the deck. Finally we got down to where it's all on the table. Art said, "What have you got, sonny?" And I said, "Well, I've got three of those fellas . . ." and I made some silly description like I'd never seen a card before. He said, "Well, that's not good enough, sonny. I have three . . ." whatever he had. I said, "Well, I forgot to tell you. I've got a pair of sixes." And I reached in and pulled out a pair of guns and picked up the money. So now the audience screamed and yelled. The country bumpkin had gotten the best of the city slicker.

Art went out and said, "Now you may think this is all over, but it ain't. There's another act to go. If you want to hear how this comes out, it's gonna cost you. I'll tell you what I'll do; I'll let you set the price. How many of you think a dollar's too much to pay?" They all applauded, and he did, too. "Seventy-five cents is too much. Thirty-five. Would twenty-five be about right?" And they all applauded and laughed. "Twenty-five cents it is. Now about you kids . . . I've got to charge you something. I'll tell you what I'll do. We'll just charge you ten cents, but I'll take your note for thirty days." And you know something, nobody walked out! They all stayed. We finished with a packed house. Hodgkinson didn't get a chance to collect anything. From then on we never opened any other way. Art advertised the first two acts free, and we opened to a packed house! The speech he made between acts was a classic; they got the biggest kick out of it.

Davis: I assume theaters were rarely so elaborate.

Stone: Oh, no. I built stages out of grain doors. Our footlights would be a chair set out in front with two 500 watt bulbs. More often than not we had no lights above at all. We played Glendale,³ Kansas, one time; seventeen people were there. We went into this town, and there wasn't anything there but this little grange hall, and that's where we were going to play. Art put out a general ring—he had to advertise. When the sun went down, we looked for a place to eat; we went to the grocery store

2. Located in Cheyenne County, Kansas.

3. Located in Bourbon County.

and got canned goods and ate. By the time we got back people had already lined up. It was wintertime and it was getting dark. People were already in the theater; soon it was full. It was a hall maybe thirty feet wide and fifty feet deep, but they were packed in there. Lorraine and I played a dance afterwards, and I think we got five dollars apiece for that.

Davis: Most of these people weren't from the town?

Stone: No, the town only had seventeen people. They came in horse and buggy and these old automobiles. They just lit up the place. This was about 1923 or 1924.

Davis: Do you remember names of specific plays that you did?

Stone: I remember them all. The show we opened with was a show Art wrote called *That's Where the West Begins*. Another show was called *Alfalfa Jones*; that was the name of the character he played. Another play was *Jimmy Jayhawk*. Opening night one time Art Names announced we were going to play a show the next night called *The Midnight Dawn*, and we didn't have any show. I went crazy. Now Art was the kind of guy who'd test your metal. We were in Trousdale,⁴ Kansas, playing in the schoolhouse. "What's *The Midnight Dawn*?" I asked. Art said, "You'll find out." Before long he said, "Here it is. Read it and we'll play it tomorrow night." Well, good God, I had the lead. The script was a full two hour show, and it was a damn monologue for me. I played a wounded, shell-shocked soldier. I had come home, but had these seizures. I'd be very rational with my girlfriend (who was Lorraine; she played my mother, too), but I had moments when I'd go into this seizure. I would shudder some damn way or another; I've forgotten what kind of a physical gimmick I had. But the line was, "It was hell out there last night"—you know, going back to the war again. Opening night of the show, I was ad-libbing all over the place. Every time I'd get stuck I'd have a seizure. I'd say, "It was hell out there last night." It would give me a little time to mumble and think. There weren't too many drunks in Kansas at the time, but there was one in Trousdale that night and he was at the show. How drunk he was I don't know, but enough to give him courage. About the twentieth time I said, "It was hell out there last night," this guy yelled, "It's hell out here tonight, too." That kind of broke up the place.

Davis: I can see why.

Stone: I was almost ready to quit after the show was over. I was in shock. As a matter of fact I told Art, "I don't want to continue like this. I don't think this is fun. It's not fair

to the audience, and it's not fair to the actors. That's the limit." Thank God he didn't do *The Midnight Dawn* very often.

Davis: Did you normally play each show in a town once?

Stone: Yes, we'd play two-night stands. Then we got *Alfalfa Jones*, and we played three. We never did use *The Midnight Dawn* very much. If we ever needed a fourth show, we'd play it. But we'd usually go into town and stay three days. We never played on Sunday; it was a six-day week. We'd play three nights in a place and pick up and go to the next one. I made a slide for life one time for a hundred bucks, off a water tower. I can't think of the name of the town. Art Names almost had a heart attack over that. They had a rope across a cable and a hook on the podium, and I came down off the tower. In those days I'd do anything.

Davis: How long were you with this company?

Stone: Six years. I left Art and went over in Missouri to the Harold English Players for a season. In the meantime I married a girl from Delphos, Kansas. She worked on the show, played the ingenue. I'd been with Art through thick and thin for six years. I learned a lot, learned all I possibly could. I went with the Harold English show, which was a much bigger show. When I got on the show, Harold English told me he needed a tenor singer. I'd met this fellow named Strain, and I told English, "I've got one for you if you want to hire him." So Strain came on, and that's how I got to know him. Well, the three of us—my wife Nellie and Strain and I—joined the Wallace Bruce Players as a unit. Wallace was putting together a show in Hutchinson, a repertory company for theaters. Also in the summertime he played the park in Hutchinson, in an open air theater. We did a kind of vaudeville act, singing with a hat and cane.

Davis: When did you first go to New York?

Stone: I first went to New York in 1929. I went armed with letters to Sam Harris, John Golden, and Charles Dillingham from Uncle Fred. When I got there, the stock market crashed, and there wasn't any theater. There was nothing. Old musicians were in the street begging for nickels, quarters, anything they could get. I came out of there with my tail between my legs. I spent every dime I had. In 1934, I went back and played in Sinclair Lewis' *Jayhawker* with Fred Stone. Then in 1937 I did *Around the Corner* in New York, with Charles Coburn.

Davis: How did your first film work come about?

Stone: My very first film was called *Ladies Crave Excitement* (1936); I played a little bit with Marie Wilson. Then M-G-M made a test of me, which George Sidney directed.

4. Located in Edwards County.

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PARK
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NEW PLAY TONITE
WALLACE BRUCE PLAYERS
In A Brand New 3 Act Comedy Drama
"TEMPTATION"
A Play With A Purpose
Plenty Of Good Irish Comedy and Humor
10c and 40c-----FREE Gate and Parking

After performing with two other repertory companies, Milburn Stone, shown in this publicity photograph (ca. 1930), joined the Wallace Bruce Players, a company that played Hutchinson's summer open-air theater.



Now at M-G-M, when you made a test, they signed you to a contract with thirty-day options. But this shows you how Hollywood could drop you on your head if you weren't careful. They raved about the test, but in spite of that I was dropped on my head. That's when I found out that there's nothing in the world colder than a dropped option. If you're easily discouraged, you've got no place in this business. That test was responsible for just about everything good that happened to me; it was sent to every studio at various times. Darryl Zanuck looked at it and said, "That's him." He wanted me for Stephen Douglas in *Young Mr. Lincoln*. John Ford directed it. Every place that test was sent I got the part. Altogether I did 150 pictures.

Davis: How was John Ford to work with?

Stone: Just great, but fearsome. He had a habit of chewing his handkerchief. Henry Fonda, whom I'd known slightly in New York, was standing around talking to me one day, and Jack Ford walked up. Ford was a great Civil War buff, and he said, "Who held Lincoln's hat when he was inaugurated?" I said, "Stephen A. Douglas." Pretty soon he came back and asked, "Who is the first man President Lincoln sent for when Fort Sumter was fired on?" I said, "Stephen A. Douglas." I had done a lot of research on the thing, and I still have a lot of Douglas material. Ford could be cruel, but he got tremendous performances out of people.

Davis: How did you like working on a big film like *Reap the Wild Wind*?

Stone: I liked it, but again it was pretty frightening because I was working with Cecil B. DeMille. I knew some people who had worked with DeMille, and they told me how miserable he could be. Again I was playing an historical character, Admiral Farragut. It was a small role, but important. I had a long speech where I gave the semi-official view of the poaching going on off the Florida Keys. We played the master scene and several other angles, and finally we came down to a great big close-up of me. Just before we were ready to go, I said, "Where do you want me to play this, Mr. DeMille?" He said, "Right to me." Well, that's the most unprofessional thing a director can do to an actor. Now I'm getting mad, and I didn't want to be known as the guy who decked DeMille. So I gave him this whole damn scene, and I really laid into him, looking him right in the eye. He must have seen that I hated every damn bone in his body, because I'm really letting him have it. When I finished, there was a long pause and he said, "CUT! PRINT! Gentlemen, there is an actor." I damn near fainted.

Davis: Were you ever under contract to a studio?

Stone: Yes. I had a four-picture deal with Monogram. Then I had a seven-year contract with Universal, which ended after four years because I wanted to change the contract.

Davis: When was that?

Stone: That was 1942 to 1946. I did forty-six pictures in four years. Included in there were four serials; that was the bottom of the barrel. When you did a serial, you were considered at the lower end of the totem pole by the people in the business. It was a hell of a label to have put on you. But if you had to have work, you had to have work.

Davis: How did you find the situation at Universal generally?

Stone: That was four wonderful years. All fun and work. If you're an actor who likes to work and if the material is interesting, well, life's worthwhile—to hell with the money. Money will come if you just forget it.

Davis: Did you find that being under contract you had a certain foundation from which to operate?

Stone: It gave you a lot of security. You got a steady paycheck and had a steady job. But I didn't realize what a rat race it was. Once they get you under contract, they really throw you around. They can do anything they want to.

Davis: How did the part of Doc Adams on "Gunsmoke" come about for you?

Stone: I had heard "Gunsmoke" on radio, and I'd often said to myself, "What a hell of a part that would be. I'd love to play an old doc like that," even though Howard McNear [who played it] on radio was great. I had done a picture in Brackettville, Texas, with Charles Marquis Warren, and I must say he and I had a terrible experience. We didn't get along at all. So when the television version of "Gunsmoke" came along, he's got a three-way ticket—writer, producer, director. They wanted me to test, and I said, "No way. There's not a stage big enough to hold Charles Marquis Warren and me, as much as I'd like to test for the part." But finally I agreed. Warren was going to direct the test, and right off he and I had a fight about wardrobe. Finally I said, "Look, it's my test, and it's going to be my wardrobe. I know who I'm playing." He said, "Well, you're playing an Eastern doctor." I said, "Not the Doc I see. I'm going to play what I see." I made the test, and Harry Ackerman [program executive for CBS] came to me afterwards, and he said, "You're in. You should hear them back there." I called my agent and said, "They tell me I'm it. If they want me bad enough, they've got a deal. But before I go to work and expose myself with my eyes wide open to Charles Marquis Warren, it's going to have to be something." So I just turned every offer they made down. As much as I wanted to play the part, I didn't see any sense in going into a situation where I knew there was going to be trouble. It finally got to the place where the terms were just great. Everything's good except I wanted a residual contract in perpetuity. The amount of money could be negotiated, but I wanted to be paid for every "Gunsmoke" that ever showed, *forever*, no matter where. No way! Absolutely no way. Finally Phil Feldman, head of business affairs at CBS, called me and said, "Now about this ridiculous attitude you have about your residuals." I said, "What's ridiculous about it? I see dead friends of mine, working on television every night, and their families are starving. This ain't gonna happen to me. I simply won't do it any other way." Now I'm shaking inside, because I really wanted this. But it became a moral issue with me, a matter of principle. Twenty minutes later my agent called and said, "What do you know? Phil Feldman said come on over and we'll sign the goddam contract."

Davis: How did you get along with Charles Marquis Warren?

Stone: In all fairness I must say that I don't know anybody in the world I dislike with the same fervor that I do Charles Marquis Warren. I tried to get out of the

show on account of him, because he finally pushed it to a breaking point about the end of the first year. It grew until my wife, Janie, used to say as I was going to work, "Now don't have any trouble." Fortunately Bill Warren wasn't there very long.

Davis: Did you find having several directors on a series frustrating?

Stone: Frustrating and gratifying. Andy McLaglen and Ted Post and many of the other directors were just great. But there were a few who were totally incompetent. Later, a director didn't really have a hell of a lot to do in "Gunsmoke." Once it got going, and the characters and their relationships to each other were established, the director wasn't that important. I don't mean to minimize the director's importance, because we had some very, very exciting and inventive directors that helped us. But most of them realized that they could turn the four of us [Matt, Chester, Kitty, and Doc] loose and rely on our judgment.

Davis: Did you have to adjust to television work?

Stone: Not the way we did it, because it was filmed, and I knew my way around films a little bit before. CBS never had any idea this was going to be the success it was. They'd like to tell you they put it together, but this was an accident. No genius can put a show together that's going to run twenty years. The big thing that kept "Gunsmoke" together is that there wasn't one ounce of professional jealousy [among the principal actors]. Quite the opposite. If I didn't like a line or Jim [Arness] didn't, we'd say, "Give it to somebody else. I don't like that." When Festus came on the show, the stupid lines we'd give to Festus, and [it] made a star out of him. He couldn't be too stupid.

Davis: I wondered if you had any theories on why "Gunsmoke" captured the public's imagination to the extent it obviously did?

Stone: I think the timing was phenomenal—the first of the adult Westerns. Compared to now, it was Sunday school. It went on at ten o'clock [in the East] because of that subliminal idea that Matt and Kitty were carrying on upstairs in the Long Branch, which was true. That was the way we all felt about it. How did Kitty get to be owner of the Long Branch? She had to make some money, not necessarily off Matt. She'd hustled a little bit, from El Paso to Abilene, New Orleans to Frisco, or whatever; she'd been there. Now she falls in love with this big, beautiful guy who's winning the West all by himself. All right, it's an adult Western, and it hit at exactly the right time. Inside of one year we were in the top ten and within another six months we were number two. Then we

moved into number one, and we were number one for five years. It's the longest any show had ever stayed up there consistently. We had some ratings that were like a World's Series ball game.

Davis: Of course the world's always been fascinated by the American West; the success of the dime novels and Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show proved that. Do you think by the time of "Gunsmoke" we were sophisticated enough to want a truthful look at the West?

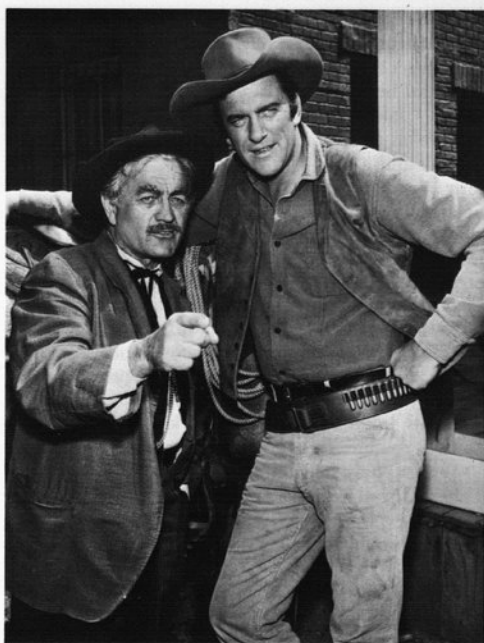
Stone: I should have touched on that to begin with. The intent was a semi-documentary feeling. So Matt never killed 14,000 with one bullet. The very first "Gunsmoke" that went on the air, Matt lost the gunfight. This guy rides out of town, and Matt's swearing he'll get him. Matt's wounded, and I'm patching him up. I said, "Don't do it, Matt. He's too fast for you." Now you wouldn't find Pat Buttram saying that to Gene Autry.

Davis: That's one of the interesting things—the characters were all so human. Matt was heroic, but he had his limitations.

Stone: Oh, absolutely. And Doc drank a little and had a cynical side. And both Chester and Festus were unique. I was amazed at Chester; he was one of the purest characters I've ever seen in my life. Was he pure! I thought when Dennis Weaver [who played Chester] left the show we were dead. Instead of one Emmy I felt Dennis should have had five, because there wasn't a better performance anyplace. And Ken Curtis [who played Festus] was exactly the same way. The relationship that I loved most of all was the Doc-Festus relationship. It was a Hope-Crosby or Jack Benny-Fred Allen kind of relationship. If two guys really love each other, the only way they can make love is to insult each other—make fun of your best friend's ears, or whatever. We didn't know what the hell we were going to do to replace Chester. It left a hell of a void. And it was a particular void on my part, because it left Doc without a playmate. I felt Doc used to get up with one big purpose in mind, aside from his professional duties, and that was to ruin Chester's day. But the thing about Chester was that I had to be careful, because I could hurt his feelings. Chester was a little dog that came to town, and Matt made the mistake of feeding him. People would resent my hurting his feelings, little lame Chester.

Davis: Did you have the feeling at times that the writers were running dry?

Stone: That's the reason we had a lot of writers, so they wouldn't run dry. We had some awfully good ones. But I have to say in all fairness that the cast never got a script that we could play the way it was. If things didn't work,



Milburn Stone as Doc Adams poses with "Gunsmoke" cast members: Dennis Weaver who played Chester; Amanda Blake, Miss Kitty; James Arness, Matt Dillon; and Ken Curtis, Festus.

we made them work. We would put it in Doc and Festus terms. Ken and I had a silly scene come through once that wasn't any good. We went into the dressing room about an hour-and-a-half before we had to shoot the thing. I said, "What are we going to do?" He said, "You're in the Long Branch, and I walk in." I said, "What's unusual about that?" Ken said, "Well, I'm awfully dirty, I'm filthy dirty." I said, "Okay, what have you been doing?" He said, "I don't know." I said, "Well, why don't you tell me you've been working." Here's the way it turned out:

Festus (entering the Long Branch): Hi, Doc, Kitty.

Doc: Where in thunder have you been?

Festus: I've been workin'.

Doc: I asked you a question, a simple question.

Don't lie to me.

Festus: I didn't lie, I've been workin'.

Doc: You haven't been working.

Festus: I have too, and I've got me a whole dollar here. If you weren't so damn smart, I'd buy you a drink.

Doc: I wouldn't drink it.

Festus: Why not?

Doc: Because I'm in no way going to contribute to the continuance of your... and you ought to save your money.

Festus: You won't have a drink?

Doc: No. Why don't you take your money and invest it?

Festus: What does that mean?

Doc: Well, why don't you go outside of Dodge here and buy a lot.

Festus: A lot of what?

Doc: Well, a lot of land.

Festus: Well, I couldn't afford a lot of land. You could, though, the way you cheat people.

Doc: Now wait a minute. I'm trying to help you. It don't take a whole lot to buy a little lot.

Festus: Well, you mean it don't take a whole lot to buy a little or a whole lot to buy a lot?

Doc: I'm talking about a *little lot of land*.

Festus: There ain't no such thing. A lot's a lot and a little's a little, and there ain't no such thing as a little lot and a lot of little. Are you going to let me buy you a drink?

Doc: No, I'm not. I'm all wrung out. I'm going to bed.

Festus (to Kitty, after Doc leaves): You know, I'm gettin' worried about old Doc. He don't know what he's talking about half the time anymore.

Davis: (Laughs.)

Stone: I don't mean that we just knocked these off. This was a lucky thing, but it was a little gem. Because we all had a feel for each other, and the characters, it was easy. The only thing we had to be careful about was not to let them get like a vaudeville act. But when you got to work and got in those clothes, you got to feeling that way, like the characters. Ken and I especially. We had some real good times.

Davis: How much of "Gunsmoke" was shot on location?

Stone: We went to Tucson a few times and up in Oregon once. During the season when we could shoot outside, we used any one of three or four ranches. We used to shoot at Gene Autry's ranch before it burned down. It varied as to the season, but I would say maybe fifteen percent was shot outside.

Davis: Was there concern for such things as camera angles?

Stone: Oh, you bet. We had a six-day schedule. We would start a show on Monday, and finish the next Monday. For television that's a pretty long schedule. That's less than ten pages a day, and you can take some time. I think it showed; we had marvelous techniques.

Davis: Do you feel that the characterization of Doc changed over the years?

Stone: Oh, yes. As I grew older, Doc got older. We all did; we all matured in our roles. I started trying to play a doctor of about fifty-five. I wound up, of course, being seventy-one when I quit. The older I got, the easier it was to play Doc. I've often said to people who ask, "Did they make you up to play Doc?" I said, "Yeah, but it kept getting easier all the time." I think Kitty matured beautifully. And Matt. I think Matt's performance reached classic proportions. I think he typified the great silent leading man with a big stick. It may be sacrilege, but I don't think Gary Cooper was any better. Jim Arness' instincts were absolutely on the money. He was so good at what he did, and such a quick study! He'd never prepare. We had some fights over that. He'd come to work not having read his script. I used to eat him up about that. The thing about this show, we'd fight like hell professionally over a scene, but there was never any personality involved. Nobody ever insulted anybody as a person. There was no professional jealousy. I think this is more of a tribute to Jim Arness than anybody. Jim never took himself seriously; he didn't want to be the big star. Amanda Blake's character, Kitty, walked the slenderest tightrope in television—hooker tough and schoolteacher sweet. That's a slender line. I never heard

Amanda tell a dirty story in my life, yet she'd laugh like a lumberjack at anything she thought was funny.

Davis: Were you constantly aware of ratings?

Stone: Oh, sure. I think we all were. Anybody who's in television is conscious of ratings. "Gunsmoke" was cancelled when we were still in the top seventeen. I think that *technically* speaking "Gunsmoke" towards the end was as perfect as an hour show can be. The coverage was great, and the stories were told pictorially very well. It got to be a tremendously expensive show.

Davis: It's amazing how those four basic characters on "Gunsmoke" became friends to virtually an entire nation. I have an aunt in Ohio who comes from a large family of eight brothers and sisters, scattered all over the country. She used to say, "I feel a great comfort on

Saturday nights, when we sit down to watch 'Gunsmoke,' because I know my whole family is doing the same thing."

Stone: That's great. I think that pretty much summarizes the kind of acceptance we had. I've been asked do I get upset when people call me Doc. That's one of the greatest compliments I can have I think.

Davis: After playing Doc for twenty years did you ever feel you were going stale in your role?

Stone: I never did feel that. I was exhilarated. I loved to go to work every day; there was something new. It was always a new situation. People said, "Aren't you afraid you'll lose your identity?" And I said, "Yeah, I sure am. I don't want to lose Doc's identity." KH