

Radio version

In the late 1940s, CBS chairman William S. Paley, a big fan of The Adventures of Philip Marlowe radio serial, asked his programming chief, Hubell Robinson, to develop a hardboiled Western series. Robinson contacted his West Coast CBS Vice-President, Harry Ackerman, who had created the Philip Marlowe series, to take on the task.

Ackerman and his scriptwriters, Mort Fine and David Friedkin, created an audition script called "Mark Dillon Goes to Gouge Eye". Two auditions were created in 1949. The first was very much like a hardboiled detective series and starred Rye Billsbury as Dillon; the second starred Straight Arrow actor Howard Culver in a more Western, lighter version of the same script. CBS liked the Culver version better, and Ackerman was given the green light to proceed.

But there was a complication. Culver's contract as the star of Straight Arrow would not allow him to do another Western series. So the project was shelved until three years later, when Norman MacDonnell and John Meston discovered it while looking to create an adult Western series of their own.

MacDonnell and Meston wanted to create a radio Western for adults, in contrast to the prevailing juvenile fare such as The Lone Ranger and The Cisco Kid. Gunsmoke was set in Dodge City, Kansas during the thriving cattle days of the 1870s. Dunning[clarify] notes, *"The show drew critical acclaim for unprecedented realism." He also writes that, among old-time radio fans, "Gunsmoke is routinely placed among the best shows of any kind and any time."* (Dunning, 304) The show's cast, writing and sound effects have received much praise.

Radio cast

The radio series first aired on **April 26, 1952** ("Billy the Kid," written by Walter Newman) and ran until **June 18, 1961** on CBS. It starred **William Conrad** as **Marshal Matt Dillon**; **Howard McNear** as the ghoulish, brittle and then, as the series progressed, kind-hearted Doc Charles Adams; **Georgia Ellis** as Kitty Russell; and **Parley Baer** as Dillon's assistant (but not his deputy), Chester Proudfoot. (On the television series, Doc's first name was changed to Galen, and Chester's last name was changed to Goode.) Chester's character had no **surname** until "Proudfoot" was **ad libbed** by Baer during an early rehearsal, while Doc Adams was named after cartoonist **Charles Addams**. In a 1953 interview with Time, MacDonnell declared: "Kitty is just someone Matt has to visit every once in a while. We never say it, but Kitty is a **prostitute**, plain and simple." (Dunning, 304)

William Conrad was actually one of the last actors who auditioned for the role of Marshal Dillon. He was already one of radio's busiest actors and had a powerful and distinctive baritone voice. Though Meston championed him, MacDonnell thought that Conrad might be overexposed. During his audition, however, Conrad won over MacDonnell after reading just a few lines.

Distinction from other radio westerns

The show was distinct from other radio **westerns**, as the **dialogue** was often slow and halting, and due to the outstanding **sound effects**, listeners had a nearly palpable sense of the **prairie** terrain where the show was set. The effects were subtle but multilayered, giving the show a spacious feel. John Dunning writes: "The listener heard extraneous dialogue in the background, just above the muted shouts of kids playing in an alley. He heard noises from the next block, too, where the inevitable dog was barking." (Dunning, 305) Dillon as portrayed by Conrad was a lonely, isolated man, toughened by a hard life. Meston relished the upending of cherished Western fiction clichés and thought that few Westerns gave any inkling of how brutal was the Old West. Dunning writes that Meston was especially disgusted by the archetypal Western hero and set out "to destroy" that type of "character he loathed." In Meston's view, "Dillon was almost as scarred as the homicidal psychopaths who drifted into Dodge from all directions." (Dunning, 304)

Dunning writes that Dillon "*played his hand and often lost. He arrived too late to prevent a lynching. He amputated a dying man's leg and lost the patient anyway. He saved a girl from brutal rapists then found himself unable to offer her what she needed to stop her from moving into... life as a prostitute."* (Dunning, 304) Some listeners, such as vintage radio authority Dunning, have argued that the radio version of *Gunsmoke* was far more realistic than the TV series. Episodes were aimed at adults and featured some of the most explicit content of their time, including violent crimes, scalpings, massacres, and opium addicts. Many episodes ended on a somber note, and villains often got away with their crimes. Nonetheless, thanks to the subtle scripts and outstanding ensemble cast, over the years the program evolved into a warm, often humorous celebration of human nature.

Talk of adapting *Gunsmoke* to television

Not long after the show began, there was talk of adapting it to television. Privately, MacDonnell had a guarded interest in taking the show to television, but publicly, he declared that "our show is perfect for radio," and he feared that, as Dunning writes, "*Gunsmoke* confined by a picture couldn't possibly be as authentic or attentive to detail." (Dunning, 305) "In the end," writes Dunning, "CBS simply took it away from" MacDonnell and began preparing for the television version of *Gunsmoke*. (Dunning, 305)

Conrad and the others were given auditions, but they were little more than token efforts -- especially in Conrad's case, due to his obesity. However, Meston was kept on as the main writer. In the early years, a majority of the TV episodes were adapted from the radio scripts, often using identical scenes and dialogue. Dunning writes: "That radio fans considered the TV show a sham and its players impostors should surprise no one. That the TV show was not a sham is due in no small part to the continued strength of Meston's scripts." (Dunning, 304)

MacDonnell and Meston continued the radio version of *Gunsmoke* until 1961, making it one of the most enduring vintage radio dramas. The *Gunsmoke* radio theme song and later TV theme was titled "Old Trails", also known as "Boothill." The theme was written by Rex Koury & Glenn Spencer. The original radio version was conducted by Rex Koury. The TV version was thought to have been first conducted by CBS West Coast Music Director, Lud Gluskin.

Differences between the characters on the radio and television versions

There were differences between the characters on the radio and TV versions of *Gunsmoke*. The radio series Doc was acerbic, somewhat mercenary and borderline alcoholic -- at least in the program's early years. The television Doc, though still crusty, was in many ways softer and warmer. Miss Kitty, who in the radio series likely engaged in prostitution, was viewed more as "the proprietor of a saloon" on the television series, and except for a few early scripts taken from the radio series, viewers only saw Miss Kitty as a kindhearted businesswoman.

For The Old Time Radio Researchers Group, I'm _____, your announcer. We hope you enjoy this release!