

And so with a less than 23 sec announcement and a plug for the return of Suspense, Gunsmoke as a radio show went off the air with a whimper. Here is an article that ran in the newspapers a couple of weeks later:

The Daily Review, Hayward, California July 09, 1961
"Tic Tac TV" by Hal Humphrey

Somebody should have said a few appropriate words when the radio version of "Gunsmoke" folded a couple of Sundays ago. Probably no program in the annals of broadcasting ever had more influence on the entertainment we've witnessed during the past five years.

It was in the spring of 1952 that a CBS radio producer named Norman Macdonnell finally persuaded a skeptical program director that a western series didn't have to be done in the Roy Rogers-Hopalong Cassidy tradition. Macdonnell and writer John Meston launched "Gunsmoke" with a cast which played the lead roles throughout the nine years it remained on radio. Bill Conrad was Matt, Georgia Ellis did Kitty, Parley Baer played the slow-witted Chester and Howard McNair was Doc. The radio "Gunsmoke" was acclaimed critically right from the start, but CBS couldn't get it sponsored until it had been on the air a year.

"Adult Western"

"General Foods bought it first," recalls Macdonnell, "but one of its executives thought there should be what he referred to as 'a wholesome boy' in the regular cast. Meston and I refused to bring anything into the show which we felt didn't fit, and Lester Gottlieb (who was in-charge of CBS radio then) backed us up. General Foods bought the show anyway." Macdonnell called his brainchild an "adult western," and according to the record books, this was the first use of this now overworked phrase.

As the radio "Gunsmoke" became more and more popular, the men on the TV side of the network became interested, but it was three years later before they got around to doing anything about it. When they did, it was with a whole new cast, and Macdonnell at first was only given an associate producer's post. Bill Conrad was considered too short and rotund to be Matt on TV. He didn't fit into what Hollywood has fabricated as the model western hero. When the six-foot-six Jim Arness was chosen as Matt for TV, it was decided to recast all the leads.

Lean Storylines

After the TV debut of "Gunsmoke" in the fall of 1955, Macdonnell fought valiantly to retain the simple plots and flavor which he and writer Meston had created on radio. After the first season, Macdonnell was given full producer authority, and Meston was rewriting his radio scripts for TV.

The success of the TV "Gunsmoke" had everyone in Hollywood looking for an "adult western" to do. It was more frantic than the old Oklahoma land-rush of 1889. ABC's "Wyatt

Earp" TV series started that same season,' and by the following season, "adult westerns" had multiplied like jack rabbits. None of them, however, had the lean and simple storylines which Meston was writing. Many "Gunsmoke" episodes-are minor classics and did as much for the real Old West as Paddy Chayefsky did for New York's Lower East Side.□