

“Gunsmoke”: “The Cabin” (December 27, 1952)

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Essay by Charles Tranberg (guest post)*



The cast of radio's "Gunsmoke"

On April 26, 1952, over CBS Radio, the following introduction was made to a brand new western series:

Around Dodge City and in the territory out West, there's just one way to handle the killers and the spoilers, and that's with a U.S. Marshal and the smell of Gunsmoke... The transcribed story of the violence that moved West with young America, and the story of a man who moved with it.

It's clear from that introduction that this will not be your ordinary radio western featuring the likes of Hopalong Cassidy, The Lone Ranger, Roy Rogers or Gene Autry. Those shows, by and large, were marketed for and listened to by children. It is said that “Gunsmoke” was radio’s first successful adult western. The hero of the show was a hardened and totally incorruptible United States Marshal named Matt Dillon who would describe his job as, “chancy...it makes a man watchful, and a little lonely.”

“Gunsmoke” was the brain child of Norman Macdonnell and John Meston, who worked well together on the radio suspense series “Escape,” begun 1947, with Meston writing many of the scripts and Macdonnell directing. This would be the same functions they would perform on “Gunsmoke.” Meston would write at least a third of the radio show’s scripts and also serve as script supervisor. The scripts of “Gunsmoke” had an integrity and realism which caught the imagination of radio listeners and made them think they actually were transported seventy-five years back to the frontier state of Kansas and Dodge City. The writers didn’t “pretty” things up and, as often as not, there is no happy ending. In fact, very often the ending is ambiguous.

When it came to casting the lead character on the show, U.S. Marshal Matt Dillon, MacDonnell and Meston didn't want a "cowboy" type of accent. They wanted somebody who sounded a little like Orson Welles. For his part, Macdonnell didn't think that Dillon was completely sane. His Dillon was "a lonely, sad, tragic man...a quiet confused marshal; these days we'd send him to an analyst." Dillon was a man who loathed killing but resorted to it when all else failed. The actor they chose to play Dillon, William Conrad, was a relatively short (5'8), rotund man with a receding hairline, but who possessed a booming, authoritative voice which allowed radio listeners to conjure an image in their mind's eye of a lean and leathery man who had seen and participated in more than his share of killing.

He was surrounded in Dodge City by Chester Proudfoot (played by Parley Baer), a rather dim man-child who was totally devoted to Dillon and who Dillon in return protected. The town's doctor, Charles Addams (Howard McNear), was part vulture and part ghoul--with a love of performing autopsies--and he got plenty of practice in Dodge City. Then there was Kitty (Georgia Ellis), who operated out of the Long Branch Saloon. "Kitty is just someone Matt has to visit every once in a while," Macdonnell explained in a 1953 "Time" magazine profile, "We never say it, but Kitty is a prostitute, plain and simple." When "Gunsmoke" moved to television in 1955, all of these characters were white washed.

In addition to the well-written, gritty scripts, tight direction and superb ensemble cast, the show also benefited from a theme that had a "big, wide-open sound to it, something that suggested the wide open spaces," as Macdonnell explained it. Rex Koury, a CBS house musician, came up with "Old Trails" which would be the theme not only for the radio show, but the later television series as well.

What many "Gunsmoke" fans recall most vividly were the shows sound effects. Here is radio historian John Dunning:

When Dillon and Chester rode the plains, the listener heard the faraway prairie wind and the dry squeak of Matt's pants against saddle leather. When Dillon opened the jail door, the listener heard every key drop on the ring. Dillon's spurs rang out with a dull clink-clink, missing occasionally, and the hollow boardwalk echoed dully as the nails creaked in the worn around them. Buckboards passed, and 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.

One of the best known episodes of the early years of "Gunsmoke" which combined a gritty story, dazzling sound effects and top-notch acting was "The Cabin" which was broadcast on December 27, 1952. It was broadcast a week after a Christmas episode that MacDonnell thought was too syrupy and he wanted the show to get back to its realistic and often disturbing roots.

"The Cabin" starts with Dillon leaving Hayes City to make his way (100 miles) back to Dodge and along the way he gets caught in a blizzard. Dillon describes it as a "high, cold searching wind...which will distemper a man." The sound effects by Ray Kemper and Tom Hanley make you feel as if you are in the middle of a blizzard yourself. Dillon finds a small cabin in the middle of nowhere as a refuge to wait out the storm. What he finds inside the cabin is a

nightmare. Two killers, on the run, are holding a young woman prisoner in her own cabin after killing her father; they have made a slave out of her. She is beaten and, while it isn't said explicitly, she has also been sexually abused. They plan to kill Dillon, too.

The only series regular to appear in this episode is Dillon. The supporting cast is made up of three top-notch radio actors who became a part of the "Gunsmoke" ensemble: John Dehner plays Heck, a coldly efficient man who rules the roost. He's assisted by Alvy (played by Harry Bartell). Alvy is weak minded and sadistic. Dillon can't figure Alvy out because, "too much of him is missing." The young woman held hostage, Belle, is played by Vivi Janiss. Dillon describes her as a "pretty girl but with a half-wild look" thanks to the beatings and rape she has been enduring.

Dillon has to play a cat and mouse game with these desperados to make sure he can escape and save Belle. At one point as punishment for not serving dinner in a timely manner, Heck sends Belle out in the blizzard. Belle shows her resourcefulness by going to the barn and getting a pitchfork and then she unexpectedly throws the door open allowing wind and snow to cascade in and throw Heck and Alvy off their guard. This allows Dillon to kill Alvy and escape outside where he takes the pitchfork from Belle. Heck holds a rifle which, as Dillon says, gives him a "false sense of power" and approaches the door with killing on his mind. Matt is waiting for him, and with the pitchfork "lifts him [Heck] off the ground" as one of the prongs reaches his heart.

Is this a happy ending? Not by a long shot. In the epilogue, as Dillon is preparing to leave, Belle asks him if he is married. He tells her no, and Belle offers herself as a wife for the lawman. Dillon tells her he would be a "poor husband for any woman" because of his job. Belle knows she must leave but the experience has left her disillusioned. She tells Dillon she will go to Hayes City and "buy some pretty clothes" and insinuates that she is going to find a place and offer herself to men, "it won't be too hard, not after all of this."

Belle: Look me up in Hayes City.

Dillon: Don't let all this make you bitter. There are a lot of good men in this world.

Belle: So they say.

"The Cabin" is "Gunsmoke" at its best--literate, uncompromising, splendidly written and acted and with an ending that is like life itself--ambiguous.

Charles Tranberg lives in Madison, Wisconsin and has written eight books on such film, television and radio figures as Agnes Moorehead, Fred MacMurray, Robert Taylor, Fredric March, Walt Disney, and William Conrad. In addition he has written a book about the "Thin Man" film series. He is currently researching a book on Richard Widmark.

* The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.