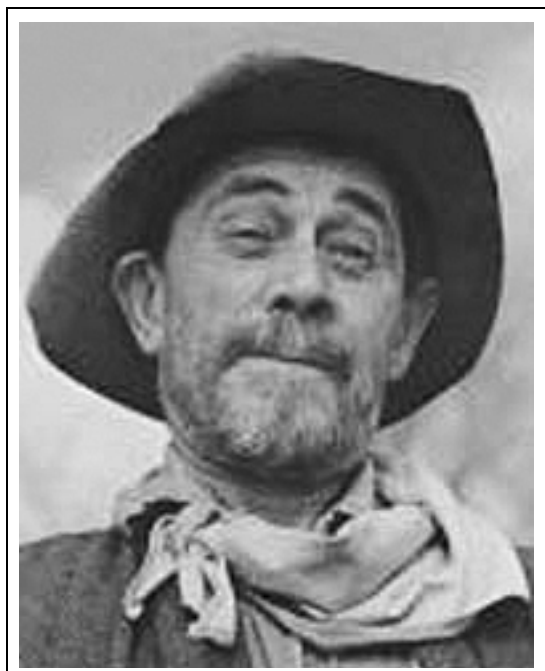




**KEN CURTIS and the Chuck  
Wagon Jamboree**  
by Paul Barringer

*"Around Dodge City and the territory out west there's just one way to handle all the killers and the spoilers, and that's with a US Marsha land the smell of ... Gunsmoke!" "I'm that man ... Matt Dillon, US Marshal. The first man they look for and the last they want to meet. It's a chancy job, but it makes a man watchful ... and a little lonely."*

*"Gunsmoke!! With Milburn Stone as Doc, Amanda Blake as Kitty, Ken Curtis as Festus, Buck Taylor as Newly and starring James Arness as Matt Dillon"*



These are the openings for "Gunsmoke", the first on radio, the second, one of the openings on television. By now, you probably think this is an article about the radio program, Gunsmoke..... wrong. This is about a radio series that some of you may remember, but most of you have never heard of. This article is for those (myself included) who had/have no idea that it even existed.

You all certainly know of the role of Festus Hagen, on the TV Gunsmoke series as played by Ken Curtis. Some of you might remember that he also played another part on TV in the 1962 production of "Ripcord", playing the part of Jim Buckley in the show.

Born Curtis Wain Gates, right here in Colorado in 1916 to Dan and MillieGates, Curtis spent most of his years growing up in Las Animas, Colorado. When he was twelve years old, his father was elected county Sheriff. The Gates' living quarters were on the ground floor with the prisoners' cells upstairs. Ken's mother cooked the prisoners' meals, and while holding a shotgun on the prisoners, she would have Ken take the meals to the cells. Occasionally Ken would stand in as sheriff when his father was away.

After graduating high school, Gates went to college in Colorado Springs with the intention of studying medicine. While at college, he found out that he had a natural ability for singing and writing songs. While still in college he gave up the study of medicine and in the mid-1930s, left and headed to the west coast to give it a try in the music industry. It didn't take long till Gates knew he just didn't have that exceptional ability needed to become an instant sensation.

(Continued on Page 3)

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**32nd Friends of Old-Time Radio Convention**, Oct 18 – 21, at the Holiday Inn, Newark, NJ; For information contact Jay Hickerson, 27436 Desert Rose Ct, Leesburg, FL 34748 (352) 727-6731, [JayHick@aol.com](mailto:JayHick@aol.com), web site: <http://www.fotr.net>

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In L. A. and out of work, Curtis joined a small band and did engagements at small nightclubs. At one of the band's engagements Cecil B. DeMille's secretary was in attendance, liked what she heard, and recommended him to Mr. DeMille for a possible movie role. The opportunity led to nowhere, but this chance proved him to be a decent singer. Soon he began singing anonymously on various network shows on radio, and he was also given the chance to record 'demos'. One such 'demo', made its way to bandleader Tommy Dorsey; who didn't like the song but did need a new male singer -- so he contacted Gates, and paid his way to New York to rehearse and eventually sing with the band. It was during this time that Dorsey changed the name Curtis Gates to Ken Curtis. Curtis eventually left the band and started singing with another band for awhile.

In 1942, knowing it was only a matter of time before he would get drafted because of the attack on Pearl Harbor; Curtis chose to enlist in the infantry. Curtis was honorably discharged in 1945 after serving his country in the Pacific. To make a long story short, Curtis, after leaving the service, picked up his singing career again by appearing in guest spots on various radio shows. One of these shows was hosted by singer/composer Johnny Mercer. On the program, Curtis sang "Tumbling Tumbleweeds". By virtue of his appearance on the show, Columbia Pictures contacted Curtis to audition for a new series of B-western musical movies they were thinking of producing. Eventually Curtis appeared in eight western films between 1945 and 1946. This type of film had a favorable reception for a time at Saturday matinees and as second features at the movies, but the writing was on the wall: the era of the singing cowboy would soon come to an end, and Curtis' contract was canceled.



Curtis, by this time had made many, many appearances on various radio shows which eventually would lead to several appearances on "Hollywood Barn Dance" and "The All Star Western Theater" on radio. Teleways Radio Productions, based in Hollywood, decided to feature Curtis in a

fifteen-minute/ five-days-a-week radio program patterned in part after other network musical shows at the time which leads us to the reason for this article.

Ken Curtis, along with a talented group of studio musicians called "The Novelty Aces", appeared on the radio program, "Chuck-Wagon Jamboree". "Chuck-Wagon Jamboree" was syndicated for about two years. The shows were recorded in L. A. in three- to six-minute segments, complete with openings and closings, and then pressed onto 16" vinyl discs for distribution nationally. (This now had become the standard practice of the time) with portions put in to allow local stations to interject their advertising pitches.

The opening for the radio program went like this; "Let's be happy, gather 'round, 'cause it's time for you and me to sing a song as we jog along to the Chuck-Wagon Jamboree! Well, howdy friends and hello neighbors and welcome again to another Chuck-Wagon Jamboree, featuring those big time Novelty Aces, Susy, Emmy Lou, Art West, Hal, Jerry, Abigail and Buddy, "(The Novelty Aces can be heard laughing, joking and greeting the audience in the background) and of course yours sincerely, Ken Curtis, who sincerely believes he's said enough for the moment, and that things should start cooking, so here's the first dish.

At this point Curtis would introduce the first song of the program. Songs in the various programs included, "The Old Chilsom Trail", "Old Dan Tucker", "Lonesome Road Blues" "She'll Be Coming Around The Mountain", "Wait for The Wagon", "Night Train To Memphis", and "Across The Alley From The Alamo" along with many, many more in the 130 quarter-hour programs recorded and broadcast across the nation.

Most of the time, Curtis would be the featured singer in a couple of songs in each program, sometimes accompanied by the Novelty Aces, who would also sing songs in unison or as solo singers, and who would interject humorous bits between songs, with everyone taking jabs at Ken and he taking jabs at them, nothing sarcastic, just good clean ribbing, about most anything including guitar playing, fiddle playing or the singer who had just finished a song or was about to sing.

The opening would remain fairly consistent, with Curtis introducing the Novelty Aces, but sometimes describing them as, those all-star Novelty Aces of western, mountain, old time and folk music or as those tailor made Novelty Aces, those record

breaking Novelty Aces, or as Cracker Jack, A1, Jim-Dandy, High Flying, Top Notch, Tip Top, and Five Star Novelty Aces, as well as other descriptive names. The names of Buddy and Abigail would sometimes disappear from the introduction.

Curtis would also introduce himself and the program differently at times, but ever constant was "yours sincerely, Ken Curtis". The program would always end with Curtis asking for silence from everyone, and saying "Now is the time to take a serious moment and sing our gospel song", with songs ranging from, "My Faith Looks Up To Thee", "In The Sweet By And By", "Jesus I Come", "Jesus Is Calling Today", "Rock Of Ages", "Holy. Holy, Holy", "Swing Low Sweet Chariot" and 'Bringing In The Sheaves" just to mention a few. The show would close with the singing of the opening song, "Let's be happy..... etc., extended with instrumental music.

The radio program gave Ken Curtis' singing career a tremendous boost. By 1949, he had not only returned to film making - where he would appear in various westerns for Republic Pictures and independent studios, he had also been hired as the lead singer for the Sons of the Pioneers, where his first lead vocal with the group was "Room Full of Roses". This stint benefited Curtis in many ways, not only personally but musically and financially. He would continue singing lead with the group until 1953.

### **More information on Ken Curtis, the man and the character he created:**

Curtis was the son-in-law of Director John Ford. Curtis patterned the character of Festus on TV's Gunsmoke, after a man named Cedar from his younger days in Las Animas, and before the first appearance of Festus on the TV program, Curtis played the character of *Monk* on a couple of Have Gun-Will Travel episodes, which was similar to the Festus character on Gunsmoke.

The first appearance of Festus on Gunsmoke was originally supposed to be a one-time appearance by him in the episode titled "Us Haggens", we all know what happened after that, Festus/Curtis would wear the deputy badge for eleven years, 1964 to 1975.

Curtis made personal appearances to promote the Gunsmoke program like many other stars did, (similar to what Brace Beemer, Clayton Moore and Jay Silverheels did to promote the Radio Lone Ranger and the TV Lone Ranger programs), Curtis also toured the county performing at rodeos, fairs

and other western type events when Gunsmoke wasn't in production, and did so for some years after the show was cancelled

In 1981, Curtis was inducted into the Western Performers Hall of Fame at the National Cowboy & Western Heritage Museum, located in Oklahoma City, Oklahoma.

Curtis also tried his hand at producing movies, among them were two low-budget horror films in 1959, "The Giant Gila Monster" (where Curtis also did some stunt work) and "The Killer Shrews" ..... aka "The Attack Of The Killer Shrews."

His last role was as cattle rancher "Seaborn Tay" in the television production *Conagher* (1991) On April 28, 1991, at his ranch near Fresno, Ken Curtis passed away in his sleep due to a heart attack. His ashes are scattered over the flatlands of Colorado, placed there by his family

A statue of Festus stands outside a local credit union in Clovis, it had previously been in front of the Big Dry Creek Historical Museum for nearly ten years, but, due to remodeling and renovation of the museum, it had to be moved.

Who would have thought that the contentious guy with the scraggly-looking beard who talked like an uneducated misfit from the backwoods with a dry, oft times humorous voice, (Festus/Curtis) was the same guy that appeared in these radio programs and many movies, and also, who knew that he could also whip out a pretty fair tune?

I certainly enjoyed the CD's of this program, because of the timeless, down to earth musical renditions by Ken Curtis in his easy flowing Tenor voice and The Novelty Aces at his side.

#### *Author's Note:*

Research for this article includes, First Generation Radio Archives, with special thanks to Tom Brown, Director for allowing the use of excerpts and notes from the web site. Tom is also a RHAC member, and has included the following (in part) in an E-mail to me "*The Chuck-Wagon Jamboree is a fun show. We recently bought the transcription discs to the entire series of 130 shows and are currently in the process of restoring the shows for Volume 2. I am a long time member of RHAC and have always enjoyed my membership in this great OTR club. We would be happy to make a \$4.00 donation to RHAC for every set of Chuck-Wagon Jamboree that RHAC members buy in the 30 days following publication of your article.*"

Tom Brown, Director, First Generation Radio Archives  
Preserving Radio's Past for the Future  
<http://www.radioarchives.org>

Other research for this article include excerpts from, IMDB, Wikipedia and various web sites

## Missing *Gunsmoke* 1952 Episode – "Dodge City Killer"

### Plotline Summary

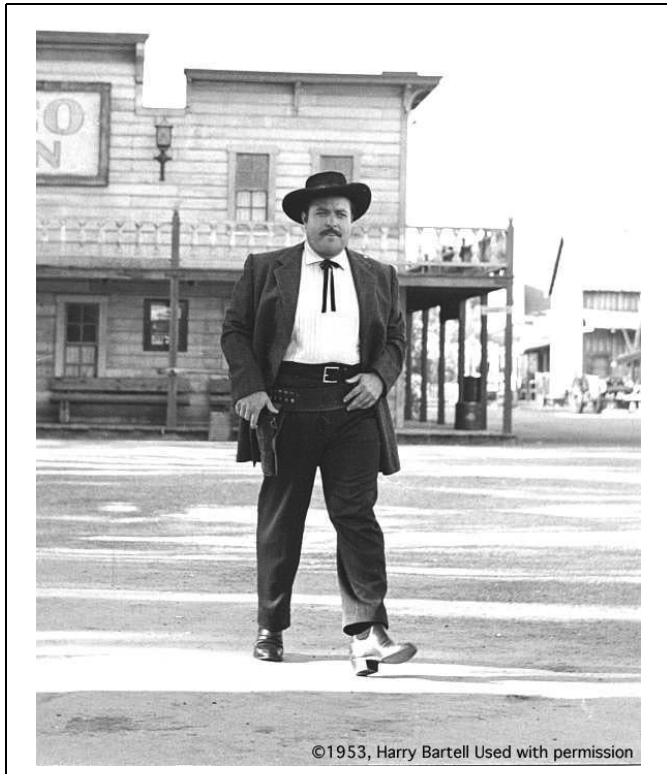
By Stewart Wright, Copyright 2007

Photograph by Harry Bartell, 1953.

The following is a plot summary of the second of five Missing *Gunsmoke* 1952 episodes.

### "Dodge City Killer"

05/17/1952, Script by Herb Purdum



#### EPISODE NOTE:

The cover page of the script for this episode, which contains cast, crew and production information, has the title, Dodge City Killer.

#### PLOT

Saloon and hotel owner Jack Grace fancies himself a ladies man, especially with his female employees. Dillon saves Grace from being shot by an employee, Annie, who resisted his unwanted, amorous advances.

Annie is talking with Dillon when Chester arrives and lets Matt know that an old friend, Clancy Yarr, is waiting for him at the front desk of Grace's hotel. Yarr has brought his wife Narisha, the daughter of the Comanche warrior chief Black Eagle, with him and Grace is refusing to give them a

room. Matt convinces Grace to provide accommodations for the Yarrs. The Marshal treats his friend's wife with great respect and Narisha has made her first friend in Dodge.

Moreau, the storekeeper, lets Matt know that some folks in Dodge want to run Narisha out of town. Dillon expects trouble and it happens that night during a card game between Matt, Clancy, Moreau, and a new man in town, Morgan Wade. Wade, a gunman working for Grace, draws his guns and gets the drop on his fellow card players. The three men turn the tables on Wade when they convince him that each of them has a gun under the table pointed at the gunman. Wade folds under their bluff and Matt makes Wade unload his guns. When the bluff is made clear to an angry Wade and he threatens them, Matt orders the gunman to get out of town.

Chester enters the saloon with news that Narisha has stabbed Jack Grace. When Matt reaches the dying Grace, he notices that the man has scratches on his face and a bite mark on his arm. Clancy identifies the knife used to kill Grace as Narisha's. She has taken a horse and fled Dodge.

Dillon refuses to form a posse composed of angry townsmen; he and Clancy will go after the woman and bring her back to stand trial. At nightfall, Matt makes an obvious camp. He believes that Narisha is nearby because she wants to stay close to Clancy, so she will see the camp and perhaps come in when she realizes who is after her.

While waiting for Narisha to show up, Matt and Clancy come under rifle fire. Clancy is slightly wounded. The two men then maneuver to catch their unseen assailant and encounter Narisha holding a rifle. She has knocked out the shooter: the disgruntled Morgan Wade.

Matt knows that Narisha will not get a fair trial in Dodge, so he gathers sworn affidavits from Doc and other witnesses and with Chester, takes her before Judge Craddock in Hays City. When the Judge listens to Narisha's testimony on how Grace attacked her and reads the affidavits regarding the injuries she sustained during Grace's attack, Grace's previous attacks on other women, and the scratches and bite mark on Jack Grace, the Judge finds Narisha innocent of any criminal act.

Later, Matt reminds Clancy and Narisha that Kansas is still on the frontier and many people still have bitter memories of loved ones killed during the Indian wars and it will take time for those memories to fade. The Yarrs and Matt part as friends.

## CAST

Character names are from the script cover page followed by (full name or character description)

William Conrad as Matt Dillon  
Parley Baer as Chester (Chester Proudfoot)  
Ben Wright as Moreau  
Vici Raaf as Annie  
Paul Dubov as Jack Grace  
Lawrence Dobkin as Clancy (Clancy Yarr)  
Lillian Buyeff as Narisha (Narisha Yarr)  
Lou Krugman as Wade (Morgan Wade)  
Ralph Moody as Judge (Judge Craddock)

## COMMENT:

The card game scene between hired gun Morgan Wade and Moreau, Clancy Yarr, and Matt is a classic. The gunman's supreme confidence that he has situation under complete control rapidly erodes into uncertainty as each of his follow card players alludes to having a gun pointed at Wade from under the table. Once Wade unloads and hostlers his guns as ordered by Matt, he is informed of the bluff to which he has fallen victim. Successively, the three men lets him know that they hadn't drawn their guns; Moreau doesn't even have the derringer that he claimed to possess.

This scene is radio script writing at its best.

### Source Citation:

*Gunsmoke* Script - "Dodge City Killer"  
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Folder Number: 1  
Collection: Anne and Frank Hummert Scripts, 1932-1958  
Collection Number: 07867  
Accretion Number: 00-00-00  
American Heritage Center  
University of Wyoming.

## From the Desk of the Editor

by Carol Tiffany



Greetings from sizzling Florida where we have gone from the wettest July on record to the hottest August. At least we got a miss from hurricane Dean last week! Hopefully, Colorado continues to enjoy its' nightly air-conditioning when the sun goes down. Your editor really does wish she were there in "God's country".

This month we have a really interesting article on Ken Curtis, whom we all remember as "Festus" on TV's *Gunsmoke*. It was fascinating to learn more about this multi-talented man who made his early mark in radio as a singer. Your editor actually dredged up memories of film appearances by Curtis in several John Ford Westerns including one wherein he sang with the Sons of the Pioneers.

We also have the second article in Stewart Wright's five part series on the "lost" *Gunsmoke* episodes. Look for the third in this series next month along with a new piece from Dr. Charles Beckett on *Sherlock Holmes*.

It's getting to be time to dig out the Halloween decorations for next month, along with all of our seasonal "scary show" tapes. We were listening to Arch Obler's masterpiece "The Dark" just yesterday and it remains my personal favorite of this type of show.

Good Listening to All...



## New in the Tape and CD Libraries

by Maletha King

This month we bring you another reel of light comedy entertainment with "Fibber McGee and Molly". This will be followed by "Clyde Beatty", with his adventures at the circus and while capturing wild animals for his act.

Finally we finish with a cloak and dagger type of show called, of all things, "Cloak and Dagger". So get ready for the thrill of the chase. We will have more episodes of this program for you in next months library entries.

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