

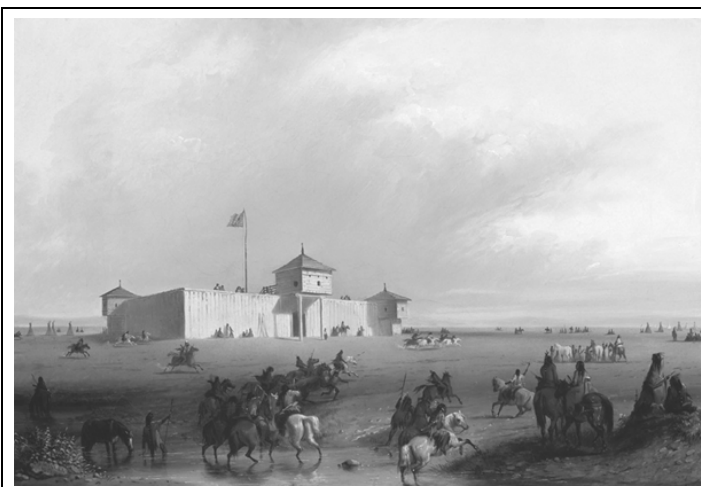


From Gunsmoke to Fort Laramie

by
Dr. Charles Beckett

Fort Laramie was late coming to radio. The series premiered on CBS January 22, 1956 and the final episode was broadcast October 28 of that same year. Its creator was producer-director Norman Macdonnell, who also was responsible for the *Gunsmoke* series, which aired on radio from 1952 to 1961. The main similarities between the two series were that --besides both being adult Westerns-- they shared the same producer-director, supporting cast, writers and sound effects team.

Gunsmoke took place in and around the frontier town of Dodge City, Kansas in the 1870s. Its main character was Matt Dillon, a weathered U.S. Marshal, who was charged with keeping the peace in town and on the plains around it. The series was described as the "story of the violence that moved west with young America, and the story of a man who moved with it." Dillon's enemies were "the killers and the spoilers," and he was "the first man they look for and the last they want to meet."



Fort Laramie's locale was the plains of the northwest frontier. The stories centered on a battle-wise cavalry officer stationed at a Laramie, Wyoming army post. Each episode was introduced as "the saga of fighting men who rode the rim of empire and the dramatic story of Lee Quince, Captain of Cavalry." Macdonnell described Fort Laramie as "a monument to ordinary men who lived in extraordinary times." Their enemies were "the rugged uncharted country, the heat, the cold, disease, boredom, and perhaps last of all, hostile Indians."

Both the actual Dodge City and Fort Laramie made significant contributions to America's history. Each played a major role in the country's movement west during the nineteenth century.

Dodge City was founded in 1872 near the Arkansas River. Originally, it was named Buffalo City, but the name was soon changed

to Dodge City - after an army post located five miles east of town. Dodge City was a major collection and shipping point for buffalo hides and for the herds of cattle driven up from Texas, which were shipped east on the Atchison, Topeka and Santa Fe Railroad - next to which the town was built. As in the series, there was a Long Branch Saloon on Front Street, although it was owned by Chalk Beeson - not Kitty

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2009 Convention Schedules

Cincinnati's 23rd Old Time Radio and Nostalgia Convention; April 24 – 25, 2009, Cincinnati North Hotel, Contact Bob Burchett, 10280 Gunpowder Rd., Florence, KY 41042 (888) 477-9112, haradio@hotmail.com

20th Annual Radio Classics Live! Sat; May 2, 2009, Buckley Performing Arts Center, Massasoit Community College, Brockton, MA. Contact Bob Bowers (508) 758-4865, bobowers@verizon.net or Alan Chapman (508) 459-1864, otrghost@gmail.com)

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RETURN WITH US NOW...

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February, 2009

Russell. Marshal Matt Dillon's character evolved from some actual lawmen of the Dodge City Peace Commission - which included Charles Basset, Wyatt Earp and Luke Short, among others. Fort Dodge provided protection to wagon trains heading west over the Santa Fe Trail -and for the movement of the U.S. Mail - from hostile Kiowa, Cheyenne and other plains tribes. It also served as a supply base for troops engaged in the Indian Wars.

Fort Laramie, before it became an army post, was an important fur trading center and the most significant economic hub of white commerce in the region. It was located along the lower Laramie River, in the tribal areas of the Arapaho, Cheyenne and Sioux plains Indians. The Army took over the fort in the late 1840s, largely to supply and protect emigrants along the Emigrant Trail during their western trek--from local Indian tribes. During the relatively peaceful 1850s, the fort served primarily as a supply post. By the 1860s, tensions

with local tribes increased. Being a primary stopping point on the Oregon Trail, Fort Laramie's major mission was to protect wagon trains from Indian attacks. It also was a way station for the Overland and Pony Express riders, and remained a military supply depot. Many of the Army's military campaigns in the Indian Wars were conducted from the fort. In August 1889, the fort was decommissioned and abandoned and is now part of The Fort Laramie National Historic Site.

Of the four main characters on radio's *Gunsmoke* series, William Conrad (Matt Dillon), Parley Baer (Chester Proudfoot), Georgia Ellis (Kitty Russell), and Howard McNear (Doctor Charles Adams), only McNear and Baer made a transition to the *Fort Laramie* series. McNear had an occasional recurring role as Pliny, the fort's storekeeper in five episodes, and Baer appeared in seven episodes, playing various characters.

Although the first episode of *Fort Laramie* was not broadcast until January of 1956, John Dehner (a

Gunsmoke regular) starred in the July 25, 1955 pilot program. Supposedly, he had once turned down the lead in *Gunsmoke* for fear he would be typecast in Western roles. He later went on to star in two popular Western radio series - *Frontier Gentleman* and *Have Gun Will Travel*. Ironically, one of the 98 films he appeared in was *Revolt at Fort Laramie* (1957).



Raymond Burr

Macdonnell wanted a new face for his new series, and selected 39 year old Canadian born Raymond Burr to play the leading role of Captain Lee Quince. Recurring supporting roles were played by veteran *Gunsmoke* actors from "Hollywood's Radio Row". Vic Perrin played laid-back cavalry Sergeant Ken Gorce, and Jack Moyles was "by-the-book" Major Daggett, the fort's commanding officer. Another recurring character was added in episode seven (*The Shave Tail*, March 4, 1956). He was Lieutenant Richard Sieberts, fresh out of West Point - and yet to be

battle tested under the watchful eye of Captain Quince. Sieberts was ably portrayed by Harry Bartell, who was 42 years old at the time. Initially, Bartell questioned his ability to play the inexperienced young officer -but proved to be convincing in the part.

Besides Bartell, Perrin, Moyles and McNear, other veteran *Gunsmoke* supporting actors who performed various roles in *Fort Laramie* included Dick Beals, John Dehner, Lawrence Dobkin, Sam Edwards, Virginia Gregg, Lou Krugman, Jack Kruschen, Jeanette Nolan, Barney Phillips, Ben Wright, and several others. Many of these seasoned performers continued to work on *Gunsmoke* during the same period they were doing *Fort Laramie*.

Fort Laramie's scripts also were written by *Gunsmoke* veterans John Meston, John Dunkel, Kathleen Hite and Les Crutchfield. Hite holds the record, having scripted 27 of the programs - followed by Dunkel (5), Meston (4) and Crutchfield (2). The remaining programs were penned by Gil Doud , E. Jack Newman and William Robson (one

each). (Hite also scripted "Little Girl," - which was not used - but instead became a *Gunsmoke* episode (July 3, 1960)). Macdonnell was a stickler for historical accuracy, so the writers were meticulous in tailoring their scripts to ensure that they accurately reflected military life at the original Fort Laramie.

The series also had the sound effects team from *Gunsmoke* - Ray Kemper, Bill James and Tom Hanley, who continued to maintain the same high standard of excellence they had set on that series. In the words of Old Time Radio historian Jack French, "Every crack of a rifle, creak of the McClellan saddle, and footsteps going across the dirt parade ground, over the gravel path, and up the wooden steps, were done with authentic precision." Cast member Vic Perrin described the sound effects in somewhat simpler terms, "You could hear the prairie."

Norman Macdonnell served in the military during World War II. After the war, he went to work for CBS radio, where he produced and directed the *Escape* adventure series. He also produced and directed *The Adventures of Philip Marlowe*, a detective drama, which reportedly attracted the biggest radio audience in America in 1949. In April 1952, he produced and directed *Gunsmoke*, radio's first adult Western. In 1955, the series added a television version - which continued to be broadcast for two decades. In 1956, Macdonnell joined the television version as a producer, where for four years it was rated television's number one program. (Some of the radio scripts were modified and reused in the TV series). Some of his other director/producer series include the sitcom *Honest Harold*, the *Homemaker*, a light drama (director); *Rogers of the Gazette*, a dramatic anthology (producer); *The Sears Radio Theater* (writer, with others); *Suspense*, a crime drama (director); *Yours Truly*, *Johnny Dollar*, a detective drama (director). His television credits include *The Virginian*, (executive producer); *The Savage Land* (producer); and an episode of *Playhouse 90 - The Dungeon* (producer). In 1967, Macdonnell produced a movie, *The Ballad of Josie*, starring Doris Day.

Raymond Burr, the star of *Fort Laramie*, had earlier been considered for the role of Matt Dillon on *Gunsmoke*, the role going instead to William Conrad. Within a year after the *Fort Laramie* series ended, Burr went on to play Perry Mason for eight years in the television series of the same name. After *Perry Mason*, he did another TV series,

Ironsides, as a detective confined to a wheelchair. During his extensive career, he also appeared in 46 movies, often playing villains. Possibly one of his best remembered film roles was as the villain in the 1954 film *Rear Window* with James Stewart and Grace Kelly. He also appeared in the 1951 Academy Award winning movie, *A Place in the Sun*, starring Elizabeth Taylor and Montgomery Clift - playing an "over-the-top" district attorney. Some of his other radio work includes *Favorite Story* (dramatic anthology), *The Lineup* (police drama), and *The Silent Men* (a short lived dramatic anthology). In addition, he shared radio credits with Jack Webb in *Dr. Kildare*, *Dragnet*; and, *Pat Novak, for Hire*.

Jack French may have best summarized the passing of Old Time Radio and the *Fort Laramie* series. "The Golden Age of Radio ended, not with a whimper, but with a robust bang. Many of the best network and syndicated shows began in the 1950s, even though the public interest and advertising dollars were switching to television. *Fort Laramie* was certainly one of the finest radio series, and were it not for *Gunsmoke*, it could be termed the best adult Western program ever aired."



Fort Laramie - Historical Monument, today

CROSSWORD By Jack Richards

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From the Desk of
the Editor

by Carol Tiffany



February greetings from Colderado and Frigida! Hopefully this too will soon pass. Admittedly, Florida's mid-20 lows don't touch Colorado's sub-zero lows, but it was enough to mess up the citrus crops. So, a word of advice, buy your citrus ASAP because prices are going nowhere but up!

This month's issue of RWUN features an article about *Fort Laramie* and *Gunsmoke* from Dr. Charles Beckett and a new puzzle from quizmaster Jack Richards. Unfortunately, space did not allow us to bring you the review of John Rayburn's latest book.

The review will appear in our March issue along with a great article about radio's *Little Orphan Annie*.

As always, we are interested in materials to feed our presses. Articles of all lengths, from anecdotes to long multi-parters as well as quizzes and puzzles are welcome.

Good listening to all...



**New in the Tape
and CD Libraries**

by Maletha King

This month's offerings have a couple of programs that do not fit into any regular series. The first is "The Adventurer's Club" that will provide an hour of interesting stories. Then, on the last show on reel #1823, we have the "The Story of the Railroads" We can all appreciate programs like this to remind us of our history and how our country developed.

Finally, we have four reels of "The Cisco Kid". As most of you know, he was billed as the fanciful Robinhood of the old west. The stories are good and are a great way to past the time.

We feel sure you'll enjoy all these show during the long days of winter - snuggled up with your Valentine.

*Happy
Valentines Day*

Answers to Crossword Puzzle

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