

15¢ Local Programs Jan. 20-26

What Negroes Want From Television

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of
'The High Chaparral'

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'Dammit, I Am Cochise'

'Authentic' is the producer's word for 'High Chaparral,' though rubber six-shooters and horse-shy cowboys occasionally get in the way

By Richard Warren Lewis

The dusty limousine drove out of the Paramount studio gates promptly at 8 A.M., carrying a yawning cargo of actors dressed in boots, denims and 10-gallon hats. The half-dozen members of *The High Chaparral* cast idly passed around copies of the trade paper *Variety* and glanced at scripts as the vehicle negotiated three smoggy freeways, passing Eternal Valley Memorial Park, Friendly Valley Active Adult Community and American Beauty Homes.

Involved in their own fantasy world, the actors barely noticed such transitory landmarks. They were headed for a day's shooting at venerable Vasquez Rocks, a county park 43 miles distant from Los Angeles, closely resembling the Mexico-Arizona borderlands that inspired the new series.

There, beneath the forbidding splendor of jagged rock formations, a perspiring director clad in dungarees hovered under a multicolored beach umbrella of the sort usually found poolside at the Beverly Hills Hotel. A network of insulated wires snaked across the parched earth.

The brush-covered ridges surrounding Vasquez Rocks are dry and hot. Dying yucca trees forlornly dot the setting. It had not rained in three

months. Before the end of the humid, 100-degree day, the *Chaparral* company would consume 70 gallons of water, more than twice the rations required on their customary Arizona location.

Most of the filming for the post-Civil War saga had been accomplished in the adobe pueblo of Old Tucson, a settlement situated amidst 30,000 acres of natural desert growth and mesa land. A century earlier, this was the turf where Apache leaders like Diablo, Geronimo, Naquino and Cochise, the leader of the Chiricahuas, fought Spaniards, Mexicans, American settlers and troops of the 1st U.S. Cavalry. The area was rich with legends of sourdough miners and Indian scalp hunters.

It was the historical basis and geographic reality of this region that persuaded producer David Dortort to create *The High Chaparral*, the long-awaited sequel to his greatest television success, *Bonanza*.

To tell the story of the Apache nation's struggle for survival, he methodically pored through archives at the Huntington and UCLA libraries in California. The scholarly looking producer also studied dusty old diaries, letters and military reports on file at



Mark Slade and Cameron Mitchell

the Department of the Interior in Washington. He reread scores of volumes and documents dealing with his specialty, Western lore.

What emerged was an abiding sympathy for the 3000 Apaches who, against overwhelming odds, attempted to protect their sprawling, 500,000-square-mile homeland against land grabbers, *bandidos* and corrupt government bureaucrats during the 1870's.

Their champion, Gen. George F. Crook, became the prototype for *Chaparral's* Big John Cannon—a grizzled cattle rancher imbued with the dream that Apaches, American settlers and Mexicans could live in an atmosphere of harmony, rather than extermination.

Dortort also decided to deflate long-standing shibboleths embraced by many Hollywood film makers. History taught him that the Apaches were other than the debased society generally depicted in big-screen Westerns. He felt, furthermore, that there should be some recognition of contributions made by the advanced Mexican culture, which predated the white immigration into the Southwest by 400 years.

"We're trying to make restitution to what I feel are damaged reputations," he explained. "*High Chaparral* is based on the truth. We have a commitment to authenticity."

Chaparral (shop-a-ral) is the generic label for all moisture-hungry vegetation that grows in the foot- →

hills bordering Southwestern desert valleys. Chaps, a word derived from chaparral, are the open-backed, leather overalls worn by wranglers as protection against cacti, horse bites and thickets of stiff or thorny shrubs.

The cameras were rolling at Vasquez Rocks as a young man on horseback galloped out of a herd of grazing cattle. The horse pulled up short and actor Mark Slade dismounted into a pile of underbrush, tangling his feet. "You——," he sneered at the horse. Three additional takes were necessary when he muffed his ensuing lines. There was a day's growth on his boyish face. The portions of his hair that had not been bleached by the sun were anointed with a coloring called Summer Blonde. He was playing Billy Blue Cannon, misunderstood son of Big John, visionary family patriarch.

Dortort had modeled this pivotal character after his own son Fred, a junior at the University of California at Berkeley. "When I started *Bonanza*, my son was 10 years old," he recalled. "We had a real father-son thing. We did things like rock hunting together. Now we don't see eye to eye on anything. He wears his hair long. He's a very bright boy, but he does rather poorly in school. He feels that the system of higher education is not oriented to reality."

For *Bonanza*, Dortort devised a family where the father was strong, masculine and respected by his sons. "That was the big reason for the success of *Bonanza*," he observes. "No other show had that as its statement. Television was dedicated to the proposition that all American men were somehow fools."

It struck Dortort that television was also ignoring one of the common afflictions of today's society—the generation gap. "What about families—like mine—where father and sons have trouble communicating?" he theorized. "I thought this might be

interesting in terms of *Chaparral*."

Following months of auditions, Dortort had tentatively decided on another actor for the part of Billy Blue. The day before rehearsals were scheduled to commence, he reluctantly agreed to meet Slade.

Slade had worked on only one Western in eight years as an actor, a *Rawhide* segment in which he played a bellhop. He had recently concluded a season as Hollis, the seasick seabee on *The Wackiest Ship in the Army*.

"I'm just not the Western type," he told his agent. "Let's try for something else."

"This is your part," the agent pleaded. "They describe him as a young Jimmy Dean."

Slade waited impatiently outside of Dortort's office for 45 minutes. He was already late for a fishing trip. When he was finally called, he pushed open Dortort's door and shouted: "Jimmy Dean is still alive!"

Nonplussed, Dortort handed him a script. "I started reading," says Slade, "and I thought: 'Man, this part is really something, like everything I've worked for since the American Academy in New York.'"

The key scene in his audition was an explosive exchange between father and son. Dortort read the part of Cannon. "You can leave this ranch any time you want to," he said mechanically. "No one's stoppin' you."

"I ain't about to leave," Slade snarled. "This is as much my place as it is yours." Without missing a beat, he grabbed Dortort's lapels and yanked him up out of his swivel chair.

Dortort phoned him at home eight hours later. "You know, this is absolute insanity," he said, "but you've got the part." Slade celebrated at the Raincheck Room, a West Hollywood saloon frequented mainly by out-of-work actors. He ordered a magnum of champagne, finished half of it and used the remainder to douse himself

over the head and squirt friends at the bar.

When Henry Darrow learned that he had won one of the five recurring Latin roles in the series, his champagne celebration was somewhat more subdued. "After all these years in Hollywood—13 years I've been here," he mused, toasting his manager, "all of a sudden I'm discovered."

Dortort had spotted the craggy-faced actor two years before, performing as a lighthearted Mexican peasant in "The Wonderful Ice Cream Suit," a one-act play. He then proceeded to write the part of Manolito—the son of a powerful *hacendado* who renounces his father's wealth—with Darrow in mind.

When it came time to cast Manolito, Darrow had disappeared. "I had been type cast as a Mexican for eight years," explains Darrow, who played a Mexican lawyer on *General Hospital*, dubbed Mexican films into English, and toiled in Spanish-language soap operas during that time. "My new image was a hair and name change. I had lost a couple of interviews because of my real name—Henry Thomas Delgado. I played around with some substitutes: Del Thomas, Henry Dell, Del Henry. Darrow just came out of left field."

Dortort had been vainly searching for him under his former name, Delgado. "As soon as he finally showed up," the producer recalls, "I said to myself: 'Boy, is he ever right for Manolito.'"

On the Vasquez Rocks location, Darrow occupied himself between scenes by squeezing a hand exerciser. The slender actor had recently experienced difficulty lugging a saddle through a scene that lasted 17 takes. Eventually, the saddle had to be propped up on a fence. Now he was building up his strength in anticipation of future saddle scenes.

He was no more proficient sitting in the saddle than carrying it. "The →



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first time we were gonna do some riding," he recalled, brushing away a horsefly, "I did a quick mount and raced through a courtyard. In come 20 soldiers on horseback. They are being attacked by 70 Apaches, firing rifles. All of a sudden I saw Leif Erickson, on foot, out of the corner of my eye. I thought: 'My God, I'm gonna run over him.' I swerved away from him, but my horse in passing him flipped him around."

Erickson, who plays the indomitable Big John Cannon, fell on his wrist and broke it. This was not the first setback for the *Chaparral* troupe in its pursuit of realism. Cameron Mitchell, Big John's lusty younger brother, hobbled around for three months with an infected leg, the result of a smack from a rifle butt. Several directors became dizzy and fainted during the early filming in Arizona.

Slade suffered powder burns when he was shot in the arm with a blank. The horse he was riding in another episode spooked and galloped off the set. The inexperienced Slade kicked his spurs into the runaway animal's flanks, rather than reining him to a halt. He was thrown off the horse, landing on a rockpile. The .45-caliber pistol on Slade's hip jammed into his leg socket. It required a whiff of smelling salts and two days of hospitalization to return him to action.

After that incident, the *Chaparral* principals were forbidden to wear spurs for a time. As a further precaution, the pistols currently employed in close-up fighting and falling scenes are made of rubber.

Such compromises have failed to affect the show's look of reality, the principle which underlies all of Dortort's thinking. "Another theory in Hollywood is that anyone with dark hair or dark eyes can play an Indian," he says. "I won't use Greeks or Filipinos. I want Indians to play Indians."

One of *Chaparral's* greatest coups

was uncovering the ideal Indian for Cochise, the legendary Apache leader. Director Bill Claxton screened dozens of prospects at a Tucson motel. Among them was a blue-eyed, 94-year-old man hobbled by a wooden leg.

"Name, please," said Claxton.

"Cochise," the man answered.

"No, no," Claxton explained. "You're up for the *part* of Cochise. Don't you understand English?"

"Dammit," the Indian replied, "I am Nino Cochise. I am the grandson of Cochise."

Dortort remained skeptical. But a pedigree authenticated by the Arizona Historical Society proved that the original Cochise died two months after his grandson was born and christened Nino, literally: "The Little" Cochise. Comparisons made with daguerreotypes of the old chief reveal an uncanny facial resemblance.

"*High Chaparral's* effect on the tourism, publicity and economy is bound to be historic," predicted a bullish representative of the Old Tucson Development Company, anticipating a migration similar to the Nevada Ponderosa influx.

The show's impact on the economy of Dortort's Xanadu Productions quite likely will be just as significant. Some 22 nations purchased the series for television airing months before the first episode reached American viewers. The pilot will be released as a feature film for Western-happy overseas markets, another portent of sizable financial dividends.

"We don't have to concoct these ridiculous, phony, fictional stories that you see on the air all the time," said Dortort, sipping a gin and tonic at a restaurant near the Paramount studios. "*The Virginian*, for example, is a disgrace. It's sloppily done. It's dull. It's completely undistinguished. My shows have the look of authenticity. Maybe a little bit more entertainment, too, if you like Indians." **END**



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