

JAMES WARREN

INTERVIEW

by Boyd Magers

James Warren was an artist first and that will most certainly be his greatest legacy. But to western fans, he was also one of RKO's cowboy heroes, if only for a short while. Born James Whittlig in 1913 in Marietta, OH, after high school, Jim worked his way east to study at the Pratt Institute of Art in 1929.

JW: I landed at the Brooklyn Central Y to stay with this friend of mine. I ended up with 50 dollars. I've got to get a job and go to night school. I sold pictures and mirrors at Abraham and Strauss at \$17 a week. That just about did me in until I finished the night school...three nights a week. It was just too much, so when summer came, I went back to Ohio and got a job painting signs at Lake Chatauqua, NY. I held that position for seven seasons and worked my way through Pratt Institute.

BM: How did the movies come from there?

JW: After Pratt, I got a position with an outdoor advertising company as a visualizing artist. One Friday night,

my older brother came down from Schenectady and we celebrated a birthday. He said, after the theatre, let's go up to this new place called Hamburger Heaven. It was about 10:30 when we were sitting there and in came these two gentlemen in tuxedos with a tall, beautiful blonde lady in a white evening gown. They sat down in the corner, right next to us. My brother said, let's see if we can get a rise out of them, just for fun. So he goes into the kitchen, puts on a chef's hat, drapes the waiter's towel over his arm and came out to take their orders. We laughed and so forth. All of a sudden, this beautiful lady who I thought would speak the most beautiful language...voice and everything...reached over and touched my arm and said, "Geez, kid, you oughta be in da movies"...with this big, thick Brooklyn accent. I couldn't believe it. When we all went to the cashier to pay our check, one of the men said, "She's right, you ought to be in the movies. Here's my card. Call me on Monday." It was Marvin Skink, head of all talent for MGM! I was working at an art studio on Madison Avenue at the time, as an illustrator. About 11am Monday, I called the number he gave me on his card. The secretary put Skink on the phone and he said, "Can you come over here? I've got Joe Pasternak coming in about 10 minutes from the coast. He'd like to meet you." That started the whole thing. Pasternak was a little guy, and funny with a gravel voice. He said, "He looks pretty good...a Gary Cooper type." I made a test and got sent out to Hollywood. When I arrived at MGM, L. B. Mayer said, "We need to change your name." I said, "Mr. Mayer you are so right. I want to keep my first name; I want to keep the same initials." James and W. We settled for Warren. Had it made legal and that was the end of that.

BM: You were in about 20 pictures at MGM as well as

several "Crime Does Not Pay" shorts. Films like "Swing Shift Maisie", "Whistling In Brooklyn", for three years ('42-'44).

JW: The one I recall most is "See Here Private Hargrove" ('44). What a roaring thing that was! Ten days on location. We had a nasty, little old guy from MGM that was supposed to be the unit manager and supply us with box lunches. The first two days our box lunches consisted of canned hearts of artichoke, cheese sandwiches and a glass of milk. We finally got to L. B. Mayer and got rid of this guy. Terrible! And another thing, these 105 Howitzers we were using had dead shells for practice operating. This captain who was in charge...said, "We're going to show you how it really shoots. So, the director, Wesley Ruggles, said, "Let me get the camera set up. Will you wait a minute, captain?" The captain said there's a live shell in there, fire it right now or it'll blow us all to hell. He fired it and just got it off in time. That's also where we got in the first forest fire I'd ever seen in my life. These shots could set fires way off. There was a hill up next to us, all full of pine trees. One of the sergeants came up on a motorcycle and says, "Get the hell out of here, right now!" Ruggles says, "We've got some more shots to do." But the captain talked to him, "You got to



Nan Leslie, John Laurenz as Chito, Warren, Robert Clark in a tense "Sunset Pass" scene.

move out right now. Whether you're going to move or not, we are. Our army boys are moving." We just barely got out! What I didn't realize, is that the gases accumulate with all the heat of the fire. I looked back and this whole mountain just blew up. We just barely got out of there.

BM: Then MGM didn't pick up your option and that's when RKO came about?

JW: That's right. (Former actor) Don Dilloway, who was a talent scout for RKO, happened to be visiting a friend at MGM and heard about me. That was when

they moved Mitchum up from the Zane Grey westerns. I was very lucky and got the part.

BM: These were the war years. You didn't go into the service?

JW: That's a funny one. I'd had about 200 hours of flight time. Since my two brothers were in, I told Mayer, "I think I ought to help out too." I wanted to join the Naval Air Transport Service. I went down and passed all the tests. I was told to go and get measured for my uniform. When I got back this message came from the Navy Department. Says, you are unfit to be a Naval officer! We had a commander who was a plastic surgeon who was studying at MGM, doing color research for doing the plastic work. So I went to him and asked, "What do they mean, I'm not fit?" He said, "Don't you know? Tony Martin. Tony Martin gave a gold watch to the Navy officer that made him a commander and they got...touched off...they said, they don't want an actor. You're an actor." So I said, well, I'm going to wait until they come to get me, the heck with them. But they never did.

BM: So without even a test, you stepped into the lead at RKO's Zane Grey series, and made three films before Tim Holt returned.

JW: Tim was, I think, still in the service, when he came

back visiting on the set. You could feel the vibrations, you know. It was pretty...rough. He came on the set and he'd look at me and say, "That's where I should be, you know?" It wasn't a friendly atmosphere.

BM: Your sidekicks in the Zane Grey films...do you remember Richard Martin?

JW: He was a very good actor. He ended up being a realtor down on Balboa Island. I bought a house down there. When he went into that Mexican accent, it was just amazing. You'd swear he was Mexican. John Laurenz was in the other two films.

BM: Do you recall Steve Brodie in "Sunset Pass" and "Code of the West"?

JW: I could tell you some real funny ones with Stevie boy. We stayed at the Dow Hotel in Lone Pine and Bill Berke was directing the picture. Berke was a wonderful director. He was just like family. But after dinner one night, we were up in...the gal that was married to Rudy Vallee. (*Jane Greer—ed.*) We're all up in her room and the hairdressers are there and the makeup...and we're all having drinks. Steve Brodie was sitting on the floor. He had this glass and he was telling these stories. This and that and that happened. And he ran out of his drink...a little glass about like that. So I said, "I'll go in the next room, the hairdresser's room and I'll get a re-fill." We had a little bar in there.

I went in and here's this bridge-work sitting in a glass...the hairdresser's bridge-work. I put that in Steve's glass. And I put water in it so he could see it better. I think he was drinking straight vodka. I set it down in front of him and he said, "Well, I was going down to Brooklyn Ave. and so forth..." and I pointed it out to the hairdresser. All of a sudden, Steve yells, "Jesus Christ! I've had too much to drink!" He thought he was seeing things! Bill Berke was laughing his head off! (Laughs) Bill told us another story...Bill had these very thick glasses. He said, "About two years ago, I was directing and I went back to look in the finder on the camera. I looked in with my right eye and I told the cameraman to take the cover off. He said, 'Mr. Berke, the cover is off.'" Bill didn't know he was blind in his right eye, because he had always looked in with his left eye. He said, "Oh, my God, I'm blind in this eye! I can't see out of it...isn't that strange?" He'd adjusted and didn't even know he was blind in his right eye. It was probably such a gradual blindness that he compensated and didn't even know it. That was strange.

BM: How did "Badman's Territory" with Randolph Scott come about?

JW: I knew the producer of "Badman's Territory", Nat Holt, and I'd heard about the script. I was sure anxious to get in on it. Randy Scott was set for the lead. I got a call from my agent who said they want to interview you but be careful, because Randy is very particular. Just be careful of what you say. I went up to the office at the appointed time and met with Randy and Nat Holt. Randy says, he's fine, he can play the part of my brother, Johnny, no problem. And I said, "Gee, thanks a lot." It was really fun. Ann Richards was in that. Australian girl. She was very good.

BM: And Gabby Hayes?

JW: Oh, good old Gabby. (As an artist) I did a whole set of character mugs...six of them of which Gabby was one. You wouldn't realize what Gabby looked like when he dressed up in a tuxedo and had his teeth in and everything...he was a real dapper little guy.

BM: What happened to end your series?

JW: After my three westerns were made the studio was sold. They said, "Oh, we're going to do all kinds of things." Well, what's going to happen to me? And they said, "You don't realize, we make other pictures besides westerns. You'll be all right." Then they dropped my option, boom, like that!

BM: Did you ever meet Howard Hughes while you were at RKO?

JW: I met him at a cocktail party down in Nassau. He had his old tennis shoes on and a great big drink in his hand, it was just gingerale. He never drank. Then I met him again at Romanoffs in Beverly Hills. He was kind of strange. I worked with Ava Gardner on her first screen test at MGM. Hughes made a date with her to go out to dinner, gave her a beautiful mink coat. Got back to her place and took the coat back. She thought, boy I got a nice coat...Uh-uh! He took it back! It was just for the evening.

BM: Freelancing, you made non-westerns.

JW: At 20th Century Fox I played Grace Kelly's husband in the first picture she made, "14 Hours", directed by Henry Hathaway and the star of the picture was Richard Basehart. It was about the guy up on the Gotham Hotel ledge, 17 floors up, in 1938. He was going to jump. Incidentally, when I was in New York, I saw this guy (John Warde) up there...on a Saturday. It was crazy! I'd finished up at work, I was art director at Pan American Airways at the time. My roommate and I lived out in Long Island. We started up 5th Avenue, got up about 58th Street and ran into all this traffic. Someone said, "Hey, there's a guy up on the Gotham



Warren, Nan Leslie, Robert Clarke—"Sunset Pass".

ledge, threatening to jump." Finally, we get up there, we see this guy dangling his leg over...I think, my God, let's get the hell out of here, we don't want to be here when he jumps. Later, they made a picture out of this called "14 Hours". He did jump...it was awful. Anyway, I was called on an interview with Henry Hathaway for the picture. I was to play the part of a Long Island playboy who is getting a divorce. I got really set for the part and was grateful for it even though it was only a three day deal. Grace Kelly had been doing radio in New York and they picked her up to be my wife. They took shots of her going through 5th Avenue with all the traffic to meet me up at the attorney's office, which was directly across from the Gotham ledge where this guy threatened to jump. Our part in this thing is, it brought us together and we said, we're not going to get a divorce. Now, what happened is that Gary Cooper was a very good friend of Henry Hathaway. I had lunch three times with Grace in the commissary. And I said, "What kind of contract do you have?" She said, "I don't have a contract." I said, "Do you mean Darryl Zanuck did not put you under contract?" She said, "No, just for the picture, this is all I have." So I went up to the head of publicity right after lunch and talked to him, "This gal is terrific...and she's

not even under contract!" "Yeah," he said, "I saw her and I thought Darryl ought to take a look at her. No go...he didn't give a damn." Now when Cooper came on to the set to see Henry Hathaway, he took one look at Grace and his face went (!) And she was set for "High Noon".

BM: You also made "Three For Bedroom C" with Gloria Swanson.

JW: They had to straighten my hair out. They didn't want me to look like a westerner.

BM: Apparently this is a film Gloria wanted to do at this time.

JW: She turned down a lot of scripts. She'd read this script, she wanted to do it. I didn't meet her until we were out on the set. I had to test for the part. That was a tough testing. There were three other guys who wanted the part. Gloria had to approve me.

BM: About this time you left pictures.

JW: The reason for it is that I could see what was happening. Out of 1,489 Screen Actors Guild members, there were only about 14 working. At the time, I was doing a lot of painting for various magazines, a lot of their stories. I wanted to get back into that. Because as an actor you could starve to death. I had a family.

BM: You starred in a pilot for a TV western in 1950, "Trigger Tales".

JW: For Louis Weiss...they're the ones that had the monkey farm. I call it monkey farm. They had all these monkeys out there, like a menagerie. People would pay to go in there and feed them peanuts and stuff like that. All of a sudden, they want to make movies.

BM: Actually, they'd been making films clear back into the '30s.

JW: Had they? Well, the son and the old man put me under contract for a couple of pictures. I'll tell you one thing, they had an assistant director from Texas, a young guy who loved rattlesnakes and he kept a live one, about six foot, on the front seat of his car. Believe it or not! This is the God honest truth! The wonderful little Italian guy Frank Yaconelli was my sidekick. They had our box lunches in the back of the director's car with this damned rattlesnake laying on the floor by the front seat. It was about lunch time and this director, somewhere, not too far off, was trying to set up a scene of some sort. We opened up the back of the truck to get a box lunch out and I said to Frank, "Let's fix this guy." So we picked up a big club and we started, you know, bang, wham... "There goes that snake, get that snake out of here..." And we're hitting the ground with the club, the snake is still in the car and Boy! The director got mad, he came running up there, "Don't you kill Herman! Where is he?" And I said, "Oh, we were just kidding, he's still in the front seat of your car." "Oh, my God...I thought you'd killed him." He goes and opens the door of the car...he grabs the snake and like I say, it was at least...oh, about that long, a big thing. He gets him up by the tail and he's going to take him down to give him a bath in the horse watering trough. And the snake turns around towards his groin. Frank and I said, "Boy, if he bites him there, nobody's

going to suck the poison out of that guy." (Laughs) This is the truth! And everybody is laughing their heads off. This director goes down and puts him in the water trough. "Oh, God," I said, "What kind of a deal have I got myself into?"

BM: Did you do some other television?

JW: I did a show with George Burns. They'd talked so long about his niece getting married; finally they got engaged. I got the part. It was a Thanksgiving show. George and Gracie, what marvelous people they were. We had three days...two days of rehearsal and the third day was the take.

BM: When you moved to Hawaii, you became heavily involved in your art. You've had many one-man shows?

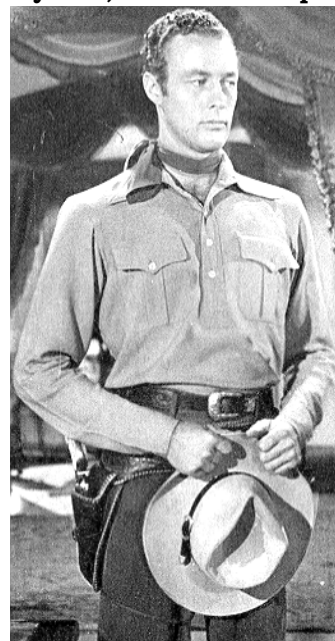
JW: I've had them all over but we don't really do them anymore because being internationally known from the paintings and my famous Maui Onion painting which has gone all over the world... Vincent Price gave me my first show on the west coast. I had two shows in New York before I came to the west coast. When I got here (Hawaii), I don't know how many, probably about 50, in the 21 years I've been here...one-man shows. But the whole picture's kind of changed now, Boyd. A whole in-

flux of different types of artists and everything. We used to have a real nice setup for a cocktail party opening of the show. People would dress nicely. Now, you get a bunch of hippies. We gave up doing that because at one of the shows, we saw this gal, she picked up a spoon to dish out something onto her plate, dropped it on the dirty floor, picked it back up, put it back in. We said, the hell with this, we don't want more of this stuff. It's kind of gone downhill that way. At the last one we had, my wife Sonja made the most wonderful Portuguese bean soup of anybody on the island. We featured

that at the show and my God, artists came in there and just ate it, bucket after bucket after bucket of it! This is, my God, this is for the prospective buyers.



Warren confronts Jason Robards in "Wanderer of the Wasteland".



ALOHA, JAMES WARREN

One of the last of a rapidly dwindling group of B-western stars, James Warren, 88, of Kihei, Maui, Hawaii, died March 28, 2001, at Hale Makua in Kahului. Born James Whittlig in 1913 in Marietta, OH, Jim's ambitions were always as an artist. Studying at the Pratt Institute of Art in N.Y., it was an MGM talent scout that spotted Jim and brought him to Hollywood in 1942. Some two years and 20 odd pictures later, Jim's career had not progressed much. MGM didn't pick up his option in '44 but a tal-

ent scout at RKO spotted him and Jim was signed to replace Robert Mitchum in the studio's Zane Grey westerns. (Mitchum had replaced Tim Holt who'd entered WWII but was elevated to bigger pictures with "Story of G.I. Joe".) Warren starred in "Wanderer of the Wasteland", "Sunset Pass" and "Code of the West" in '45, '46 and '47 respectively. Warren, tall, lean and handsome in the Gary Cooper mold, may have made it bigger in westerns had RKO not scaled back production on their westerns during that period to one a year, but offered James Warren the same opportunity they did Tim Holt. When Holt returned from the service, he re-signed with RKO and Warren was out of the Zane Grey leads. Approved by Randolph Scott, Jim played Randy's brother in "Badman's Territory" ('46) and played western movie star "Steve Moore" in the showbiz comedy, "Ding Dong Williams" (which also featured the Sons of the Pioneers). No more westerns until 1950 when producer Louis Weiss signed Jim for the lead in the unsold pilot of "Trigger Tales". Entitled "Gun Blazers", as directed by B-western vet Harry Fraser with old hands Frank Yaconelli and Milburn Morante as Jim's saddle pals opposing Fred Kohler Jr. and Glenn Strange, the pilot is no better, no worse than other early TV westerns. It's unfortunate for us (and Jim) that it did not sell. Before the films, Jim had worked as an illustrator in New York with his art appearing in LIFE, COSMOPOLITAN and SATURDAY EVENING POST. Even during his film tenure, Jim continued to paint. Vincent Price gave Jim his first one-man show in 1942, stating, "Warren's work has always seemed to me to have the spontaneity so essential to good watercolor painting. Added to that he has a freshness of vision and draughtmanship that make for serious consideration of these pictures." Katherine Hepburn bought seven large watercolors at that show. In 1968 a commission by Ford Motor Co. brought Warren to Maui and he remained, quickly establishing himself on the island creating whimsical paintings of local images, including the layer upon layer Kula onion (grown only on Maui). It became the "in" thing to own a Warren Kula onion original. Warren's watercolors of Hawaiian Tutus (grandmothers) and Kikis (grandchildren) exhibit a happiness and lightheartedness that forces one to smile. Always with typical candor Jim would chuckle, "All the good paintings I paint belong to the world. All the bad ones belong to me." I'm fortunate to own a Warren original ("Lady by the Waterfall") and a print ("Tutu's Beach Party") which hangs in our bedroom and warmly awakens us every morning. These were obtained when we spent a delightful day with Jim and Sonja Warren at their Maui home in 1984 at which time the interview printed in this issue was conducted. His remains were scattered in the ocean at his favorite place to swim, Kam I Kihei.

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