
DENNIS WEAVER

The Versatile Sooner

By SHIRLEY DODSON COBB

He would be known as “Chester” and “McCloud” and by other names.
His OU name was Bill. He might have gone to the Olympics,
but he caught a bad case of Broadway fever.

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If Darrell Royal had lost out to a lanky kid from Missouri for the third string quarterback slot during the Sooners' 1946 spring practice, would Royal have turned to stage and screen while his competitor went on to a lifetime in football?

Probably not — but Royal's unsuccessful rival, Dennis Weaver, did make that career decision and still is earning accolades as one of Hollywood's most respected actors.

Football — and the University of Oklahoma drama school — brought Bill Dennis Weaver to Norman from his Joplin home. However, it was his ability in track and field that ultimately garnered athletic honors in the old Big Six/Big Seven Conference. When Weaver graduated in 1948, he was voted the "most versatile man" on campus. His classmates nearly 33 years ago recognized the quality that has paved his way to international acclaim.

Sitting in the sun-filled living room of his ranch-style Calabasas, California, home, Weaver recently shared reflections of childhood, career, family and philosophy and assessed his successes, including the Emmy Award-winning role of Chester Goode, Marshall Matt Dillon's memorable sidekick on the classic CBS-TV series, "Gunsmoke."

"My versatility?" Weaver muses, perching his 6-foot, 2-inch frame informally on an oversized coffee table. "I don't know why I was given that title . . . People come into this world with certain interests. Mine have always been varied. I've been able to do most of the things I'm interested in . . . but not as well as I probably should. I guess I'm a jack-of-all-trades and master of none."

His accomplishments refute his words. During his evolving career he has:

- starred in five television series, including a nine-year stint as "Gunsmoke's" gimpy Chester and seven seasons on NBC-TV as "McCloud," the tall-walking Taos, New Mexico, marshall tracking criminals on the streets of New York.

- defied "cowboy" typecasting and won acclaim for diverse roles in such television movies as "Amber Waves," set amid the midwestern grain harvest; "Duel," pitting Weaver in his

automobile against the mystery driver of a huge truck, and the poignant "Ishi—The Last of His Tribe."

- ran, as an independent candidate, and won election to the Screen Actor's Guild presidency in 1973.

- blended his love of country music with vocal talent and song writing skills to produce more than a half-dozen albums — some on his own Just Good Records label — and various single releases, including the recent "Calhoun," a light-hearted duet with his wife, Gerry. He has his own publishing company, Rajamaya Music, and has been a host on the country music series "Country Top 20."

- been honored for his commitment to family and profession. For their "outstanding moral, social and civic leadership," the Weavers — Dennis, Gerry and their sons, Richard, Robert and Rustin — were named the 1964 San Fernando Valley "Family of the Year." For exemplary film and television work, Weaver was inducted last year into the National Cowboy Hall of Fame.

"You're going to leave 'Gunsmoke?' You've got a fortune here."

White-washed brick walls, adorned with brightly-hued Indian rugs, a wagon wheel, and other western artifacts, form a compatible backdrop for the actor, attired in jeans, cowboy shirt and boots. Weaver adjusts his position before the massive fireplace, scooping up a fluffy, white pup demanding its share of his attention.

Gerry Weaver enters with a tray of glasses filled with a blend of fresh fruits and herbs — a sample of the natural foods the couple, both vegetarians, consume.

Weaver and his wife, the former Geraldine Stowell, met at Joplin Junior College and married October 20, 1945. Their enduring union defies the ever-spiraling divorce rate, highly publicized among Hollywood couples.

"I just love her," Weaver searches for the right words to explain their relationship. "I like her . . . She's my

best friend. I guess I'm just lucky."

In the moment of silence that follows, the depth of Weaver's feeling surfaces; the expression on his angular face and in his deep brown eyes underscores his words.

"She was very supportive of me at the time my agent and business manager were throwing up their hands and saying, 'You're going to leave "Gunsmoke?" You've got a fortune here,'" Weaver continues. "She'd say, 'You don't understand! He's a leading man; he's not a second banana.'"

Gerry's style mirrors her husband's unassuming manner. Garbed in a softly-gathered cotton print skirt and casual short-sleeved blouse, a fringe of curls framing her face, she is a warm and gracious hostess in a gracious home.

Such affinity for family may be inbred in Weaver. Born June 4, 1925, in Joplin, Missouri, he spent his formative years within a close-knit circle, "four kids, my mother and father, and grandparents — who lived about an eighth of a mile from us."

The 10-acre farm furnished a living during Depression days. Weaver shared the responsibilities. "I was a normal kid," he contends. "I had the same interests as most other kids . . . played all the games at school, milked the cows, hoed the weeds, planted whatever was necessary and got the water from the well."

Yet, there was a difference. "I was a little more imaginative, I think, than the rest of the kids I ran around with," he recalls. "I would go to a Saturday matinee movie, come home and play all the parts — the black hats, the white hats . . . Didn't have a horse, so I would ride the fender of our old Dodge truck or a fence — and practice being mean in front of a mirror. I had leanings toward performing very early. I don't remember not wanting to be an actor."

But the fledgling star kept his future plans to himself. "It was pretty difficult to announce in Joplin, Missouri, that you were going to be an actor at the age of 10. It's not a very practical thing, as far as most people are concerned."

In high school, his plans surfaced. "I remember those forms that you filled out, as a junior or a senior, asking what profession you wanted to follow.

I remember kind of biting the bullet and writing it down," Weaver admits with a laugh. "That was a big decision . . . putting it down in print."

Graduating at the age of 16, with the state high school high jump record to his credit, he enrolled in the nearby Joplin Junior College and was a standout in both football and basketball. He left school for 27 months in the Naval Air Corps and while in training set a new speed and agility test record.

Discharged as an ensign, he enrolled at the University of Oklahoma, with the prospect of a football scholarship. He encountered stiff competition.

"I injured my knee . . . and the coach who had recruited me left," Weaver explains, noting that the new staff, Jim Tatum and his assistant, Bud Wilkinson, had their own stable of athletes on hand. "It was nobody's fault. They had recruits of their own, and there were only so many scholarships they could award."

Weaver found the track coach more appreciative of his talents. Working tenaciously, he competed in 12 different track and field events at OU, setting individual records and leading the cross-country team to the Big Six championship. He won the septathlon at the Colorado Relays in 1948, and was OU's first decathlon qualifier in seven years.

But the young athlete was finding encouragement from another quarter as well. With Lonny Chapman, a childhood friend and fellow drama major, Weaver hitchhiked to New York after Chapman's graduation in the summer of 1947.

"Lonny stayed," Weaver recalls. "And in '48, when I was to compete in the Olympic trials in the decathlon in Bloomfield, New Jersey — a subway ride from New York City — Lonny met me at the train."

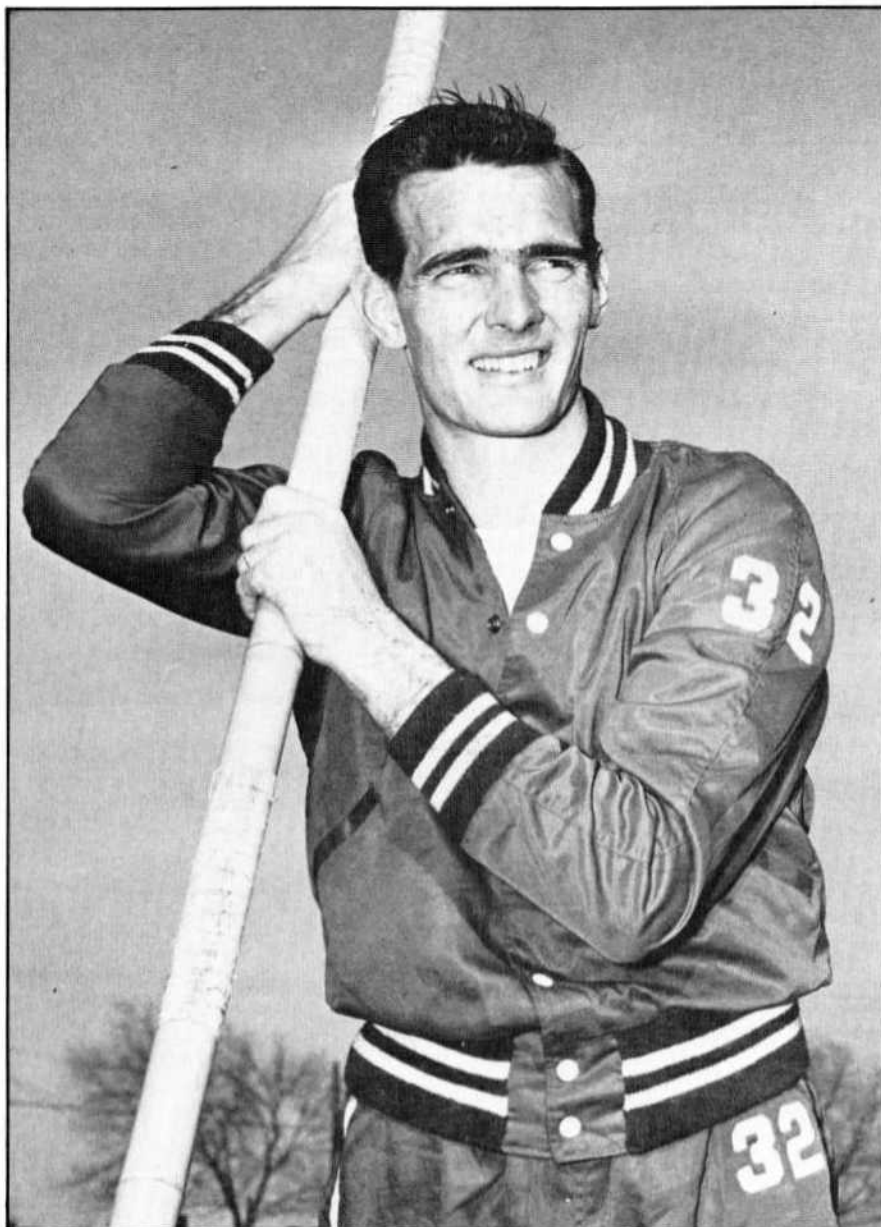
The two set out to survey the stage scene. Stopping long enough for Weaver to throw his bag into a hotel room, the duo toured Broadway. "I was so excited . . . I want to see what was going on in New York . . . We got a 'scene' in the afternoon, and that evening I auditioned for an off-Broadway group. I couldn't even get back to the hotel room; I slept on somebody's floor," he confesses.

The next morning, Weaver arrived at the Olympic trials in time to "get my street clothes off, track clothes on, and participate in the first event."

"I was wiped out," he admits with a chuckle. "I had no spring in my legs. It was the worst first day I ever had; I wound up in ninth place and should have been second or third." Weaver's slow start took him out of contention, but he ended sixth in a field of 36.

"It was the end of my Olympic opportunity, but I did get accepted for the off-Broadway group. One door opened, and another door closed," he says philosophically.

For Weaver, the years of study at OU provided a solid grounding in his craft. "College gives you a well-rounded base to operate from for the rest of your life," he stresses. "My experience in the drama department



When he wasn't learning his craft in the old Drama Building, Bill Weaver could be found on the OU track field, honing his talents in 12 different events. The only decathlon qualifier in years, Weaver led the cross-country team to the Big Six championship and won the septathlon at the Colorado Relays. His shot at the Olympics, however, fell victim to the lure of Broadway.

gave me great confidence . . . training in all kinds of areas — playwriting, sets, a class in directing.

"Just getting up on the stage and getting over the fact that you're going to blow your lines once in awhile is important. I did that a couple of times at OU. That's a frightening experience and an important hurdle to get over."

Weaver's first job was as understudy to Chapman in the role of the college athlete, Turk, in William Inge's production, "Come Back Little Sheba," which opened February 15, 1950, at the Booth Theatre. On the company's national tour, he took over the role.

Weaver also was accepted to New York's prestigious Actor's Studio, like other top-flight Hollywood stars Marlon Brando, Paul Newman, Joanne Woodward and Shelley Winters. Under the tutelage of Lee Strasberg, he honed his talent.

"It's very difficult to get a toe-hold, to get a start, but work breeds work," he says of his initiation to the stage. "You just keep doing something — as long as it is in the same arena — and your reputation begins to grow. Someone asks you to do summer stock . . . an off-Broadway show . . . That's what happened to me."

Weaver's talent and the praise of his contemporaries, especially Miss Winters, brought him to the attention of Universal International talent scouts.

"When the head of the talent department came to New York that fall, he asked me to read something for him," Weaver says. "I can remember it was from 'The Glass Menagerie' . . . When I finished, he said, 'Do you want to go to California?' . . . and I said, 'When do we go?'"

But the venture was "frightening," Weaver admits. "I was concerned about so many things . . . I was conscientious; I had to be perfect. 'One-Take' Weaver, they called me," he laughs. "That was silly; now I'll go 16 takes, if that's what is needed."

Studio training polished his talents and added to his abilities. "Universal International had a whole development program. I had to take dance, vocal coaching . . . do a musical." And the midwestern "cowboy" even learned to ride a horse.

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Ken Croley

Dennis Weaver perches on the coffee table in the living room of his ranch-style home to reflect on the career which had its beginnings in OU drama classes.

Weaver joined a repertory company which included Rock Hudson, Tony Curtis and Jeff Chandler. A limited number of leading roles meant Weaver often drew small parts in westerns.

The industry was facing what some Hollywood moguls deemed a "threat" — television. "When I got here in '52," Weaver recalls, "TV was just beginning programming. There was a real fear in the studios, because they didn't know what it was going to do to the industry. There were tremendous layoffs. I was released at Universal. I started freelancing — movies, television — I even delivered flowers for my aunt's florist shop."

The next three years were "not all that lucrative," he admits, but the part of John Brown, Jr., in the film "Seven Angry Men," proved pivotal to his future. The movie was directed by Charles Marquis Warren, who later would produce and direct "Gunsmoke." Warren asked Weaver to

read for the role of Chester. Putting his own imaginative touches to work, Weaver whipped up an exaggerated western drawl, hunched look, suspenders and the now-famous limp. He was hired.

"That was the open door," Weaver asserts. "That gave me national recognition. It was extremely successful."

The series premiered in the fall of 1955 and brought stardom to the cast: James Arness as Dillon, Amanda Blake as Kitty, Milburn Stone as Doc, and Weaver as Chester Goode. "Gunsmoke" topped the ratings season after season; Weaver's portrayal won the 1959 Emmy for best supporting actor in a series.

But success brought the specter of stagnation. After seven seasons, Weaver wanted to leave the cast. "I wasn't mad at anybody. It was a nice company. We had a great time together, but I didn't want to get pigeonholed into that one character

for the rest of my career," he explains. "I'd seen that happen with lots of people, sidekicks especially."

Wanting to reduce the gamble, Weaver searched for a new property. "I did a pilot during hiatus, a musical for CBS ('TV Tonight'). But 'Gunsmoke' was also for CBS," he explains, noting that the pilot didn't sell. Weaver went back to the role of Chester for another season.

To keep Weaver with the network, CBS agreed to let him select another new series; he chose "Take a Giant Step," with actress Jane Wyman as costar. Again, no buyers; the project was dropped. Weaver returned to "Gunsmoke."

On his third attempt, he broke loose. After appearing in 223 episodes of "Gunsmoke," Weaver completed the last scene of his 10 scheduled shows for the 1963-64 season and left the series.

His new series, "Kentucky Jones" for NBC-TV, premiered the next fall. Weaver had a promise of 26 shows as the veterinarian-horsetrainer who adopts a Chinese orphan. Suffering low ratings, the series was withdrawn, and Weaver was looking for work again. "This is a high risk business," he notes.

In September 1967, CBS-TV aired the series "Gentle Ben," featuring Weaver as a Florida game warden, with wife, son and pet bear. The show ended in 1969.

Weaver then left for Europe to star with another Oklahoman, James Garner, in a western entitled "A Man Called Sledge," a Columbia release. He continued appearances on various television programs, including the cameo role of President Abraham Lincoln in the Universal NBC-TV "World Premiere" movie, "The Great Man's Whiskers." In another premiere movie, "McCloud," Weaver portrayed a U.S. deputy marshal from New Mexico, who transports a murder witness to New York City, remaining to help police solve the crime. The show received excellent reviews, and Weaver had found another series.

The character, says Weaver, was "a favorite, because there was more dimension to it. And I also achieved the goal that I had wanted when I got into the business of television — to do a leading role in a successful series —

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Ken Craley

Weaver's fluffy, white friend feels free to interrupt the magazine interview for its share of the star's attention.

to work closely with the producer, the writers, director, casting — to be responsible, to some degree, as to what goes on the screen. It was the ultimate for me."

The series also furnished Weaver with a new "personality." The simple Chester was exorcised by the astute McCloud. "I had a deep feeling for McCloud. He was a rural character in a complex metropolitan situation, and therefore, a classic underdog — simplistic, in a way, but tough. He had a bite and a dry sense of humor, and he always saw things with fresh eyes. He cared," he actor explains.

If "Gunsmoke" and "McCloud" take top honors as Weaver's favorite TV series, the television movie "Amber Waves" heads his list of dramatic roles. Weaver played the part of a midwestern wheat harvester, caring for his motherless children. "It was a wonderful basic script, a great director and cast correctly . . . all the elements were there. It fit like a glove."

Weaver seems to sense the components that make a scene or series work. In both "Gunsmoke" and "McCloud" he rewrote portions of the

script to enhance the quality of "believability" — essential, he says, to making the story come to life. Weaver helped the refinement of "Amber Waves" — "sanding down the script," he calls it. "I wrote three scenes outright — and two songs. I've always called that my creative orgy."

"My (midwestern) background made it possible for me to be at home in the part very quickly," he adds. "Then when we got the dramatic conflicts right, the interaction of the characters going right, that glove became snugger."

"Amber Waves" was a showcase for the improvisational quality Weaver feels forges a link between viewer and film.

"When I first came out here . . . films had a very clinical, stilted feeling," he explains. "You could tell the director had read a text book and said, 'All right, now you do the master shot. Now you move in for the two shot; now for the over-the-shoulder. Now the singles; now the next scene' . . . It took all the life out."

"People got involved in techniques, instead of getting involved in content and what's going on in the scene — what the people are feeling — and can they get that on film so that other people can feel that also."

**"If you want to be a good
tennis player, play with
someone better than
you are . . . if you want
to be a bum,
hang around with bums."**

Stories about *real* people, "These are the kind of films I want to do," he stresses. "Films like 'Breaking Away,' 'Ordinary People,' 'Kramer vs. Kramer.'"

"No matter what kind of story I'm doing — what kind of script it might be—whether it's 'Amber Waves' or 'Intimate Strangers' — I'll always try to have that improvisation—that *real* involvement in it."

That same involvement, a sense of commitment, compelled Weaver to take an active role in the screen Actor's Guild. In 1973, after serving

on the board of directors, Weaver ran for president as an independent candidate on a platform demanding improvement of work rules and performers' benefits. He won, scoring the largest upset in the union's 42-year history.

"When I came out here, the guild was a force." Weaver contends that the favorable aspects of his contract "were principally because of what the guild had done. Working conditions were improving, salaries were

improving—because somebody had sacrificed in the late '30s and '40s.

"People then met in parked cars and dark corners, because if the studios knew, they would have been backlisted. Now, I thought, it was my turn . . . to give something back . . . such things as residuals, payments in perpetuity . . . Those things didn't exist, and I felt I would be a voice in their support."

Weaver also sensed dissension within the organization. "People felt

like some were on the inside, and some were on the outside. The biggest reason I ran for president was to try to make everyone feel that it was one union and that they had a voice in it . . . That was the biggest single thing I did . . . to try to bring everyone back together again."

Weaver holds firmly to his commitments — to his family, his fellow workers, and his faith — and the latter is the foundation upon which all the others rest.


"Faith is the center of my life," says Weaver, a lay minister in his church. "You've got to have something that gives you a certain set of values, something you can lean on, always depend upon. Those things never change. People may try to disguise them, say that they don't exist, but when it comes to the core of things, when it comes to the hard reality, we all want assurance. We all want security. We all want happiness — and peace."

Brought up with "certain morals, a sense of right and wrong," Weaver feels he has passed this heritage along to his sons. "I hope I instilled it to some degree. I never said, 'This is the way I believe, so this is the way you have to believe.'

"Example is the greatest teacher any of us ever had. I've always told my kids, 'If you want to be a good tennis player, play with someone better than you are. If you want to be an actor, get in the best workshop you can find, the best teacher. And, if you want to be a bum, hang around with bums. The environment you live in is important.'"

In spite of the glamour, the pressure, the temptations of the Hollywood life, the Weavers seem to thrive in an environment that can only be described as "wholesome."

A few steps outside their breakfast room door, a greenhouse and garden are visible. Rows of vegetables, fruit trees, lush grape vines, well-cared-for seedlings flourish. "This keeps me going," he confesses, walking amid his crops. "You've got to feel good out here. Close to the ground — stable."

"There are a lot of wonderful people in this environment (Hollywood) and a lot of wonderful people outside this environment. I'm fortunate enough to have them as my friends." 

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Their marriage has defied Hollywood statistics. Of his one-and-only wife, Gerry, Weaver says, "I just love her. I like her . . . she's my best friend."