

FORT LARAMIE

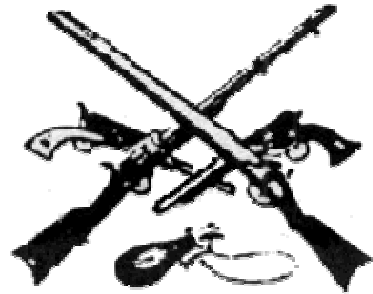
ONE OF THE LAST AND ONE OF THE BEST

by Jack French

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 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 is a close relative of GUNSMOKE since it had the same producer-director, same writers, same sound effects men, and many of the same actors. GUNSMOKE had been running for almost four years when Norman Macdonnell brought FORT LARAMIE to CBS. The latter had the same gritty realism, attention to detail, and integrity that audiences admired in GUNSMOKE.

Both Dodge City, Kansas and Fort Laramie, Wyoming were real, and significant, locations in our history of the Western Expansion. The original Fort Laramie, located on the eastern Wyoming prairie (about 100 miles from where the city of Laramie is now located) was an important fur trading post from 1834 to 1849. For the next forty years, it was a U.S. Army post. Located near the confluence of the North Platte and Laramie Rivers, this military post was in the heart of the homeland of the Sioux, Cheyenne, and Arapaho.

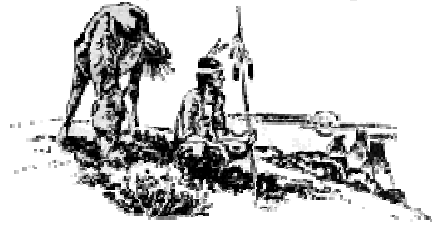


From 1841 to 1849 the fur trade in that area continued to decline, but the fort was a major stop-over for wagon trains of settlers heading west, enroute to Oregon. The U.S. government bought the site of Fort Laramie in 1849 to house a military force which would protect this part of the Oregon Trail from hostile Indians. The fort also served as a station for the Overland Stage, the short-lived Pony Express, and a supply depot for the lengthy military campaigns against the Sioux and the Cheyenne under Sitting Bull in the 1870s.

The earliest paintings of the fort, dating back to 1837, show it to be a log stockade with high walls and raised blockhouses. However by the time it became a military outpost in the 1840s, this structure had disappeared and Congress refused to appropriate the money for a new and larger stockade. Never in the two decades the Army occupied Fort Laramie was it enclosed by

walled fortifications. The "fort" was simply several military buildings grouped around a flat parade ground.

The military post was abandoned in 1890 and allowed to fall into decay, and no significant restoration was attempted until 1937 when the state of Wyoming purchased the site of some 200 acres and later deeded it over to the National Park Service. It is currently administered as the Fort Laramie National Historical Site under the Department of Interior and is open to tourists year-round.



When Norman Macdonnell created FORT LARAMIE in late 1955, he made it clear to his writers that historical accuracy was essential to the integrity of the series. Correct geographic names, authentic Indian practices, military terminology, and utilizing actual names of the original buildings of the real fort, was insisted upon. So when the radio characters referred to the sutler's store (which is what the trading post was called prior to 1870), the surgeon's quarters, Old Bedlam (the officers' quarters) or the old bakery, they were naming actual structures in the original fort.

While Macdonnell planned to use the same writers, soundmen, and supporting actors in FORT LARAMIE that he relied upon in GUNSMOKE, he naturally picked different leads. Heading up the cast was a 39 year old, Canadian-born actor with a long history in broadcasting and the movies, Raymond Burr. He had begun his career in 1939, alternating between the stage and radio. He turned to Hollywood, and from 1946 until he got the part of Captain Lee Quince in FORT LARAMIE in 1956, he had appeared in thirty-seven films. A few were excellent ("Rear Window", "The Blue Gardenia") some were average ("Walk a Crooked Mile", "A Place in the Sun") but many were plain awful ("Bride of Vengeance", "Red Light" and "Abandoned").

With Burr in the lead, Macdonnell selected two supporting players: Vic Perrin as "Sgt. Goerss" and Jack Moyles as "Major Daggett", the commanding officer of the post. (The original Fort Laramie usually had a Lieutenant Colonel as the C.O. but Macdonnell probably preferred a shorter military title.) Perrin, a 40 year old veteran radio actor had been in countless productions, but had achieved name recognition only on THE ZANE GREY SHOW where he played the lead, "Tex Thorne." Jack Moyles was also a busy radio actor, having started in 1935 in HAWTHORNE HOUSE, with later major roles in ROMANCE, TWELVE PLAYERS, NIGHT EDITOR as well as the lead in A MAN CALLED JORDAN. From 1947 to 1948 he was a regular in THE

ADVENTURES OF PHILIP MARLOWE, which Norman Macdonnell directed, although I'm not sure that this was their first association.

By the mid-1950s when FORT LARAMIE began, most of the actors on the west coast were doing some television and movie work so the program was rehearsed and taped for transcription during the evening. Once a week the cast and crew gathered at CBS Studio One in Hollywood to tape the show. In 1956 this was the last radio production studio in use in California. The series debuted on January 22, 1956 with an episode entitled "Playing Indian."

FORT LARAMIE had one of the strongest supporting casts in radio history: John Dehner, Sam Edwards, Virginia Gregg, Barney Phillips, Larry Dobkin, Ben Wright, Jeanette Nolan, and Harry Bartell. Most of them were also working regularly on GUNSMOKE. And while Bill Conrad ("Matt Dillon") and Georgia Ellis ("Miss Kitty") never got to FORT LARAMIE, Parley Baer ("Chester") and Howard McNear ("Doc Adams") did. They both had major roles in the 7-29-56 production entitled "Nature Boy" and McNear had a reoccurring role as "Pliny" the sutler.

Later, to create a foursome of major cast members, Macdonnell introduced "Lt. Seiberts" in episode #7, which aired 3-4-56 and he gave the role to Harry Bartell. This show, "The Shavetail", was based upon the nickname that enlisted men in the U.S. Cavalry in the 1800s gave to new officers fresh out of West Point. The term originated from a custom of shaving or docking the tail of an untrained horse so the troopers would be wary of such a mount. Bartell, who in 1956 was 42 years of age, and older than both Perrin and Burr, related to me recently that he had doubts about being able to project the voice of a young, junior officer. However anyone who has heard Bartell in this role will be convinced his fears were groundless. His voice clearly portrays that of a youthful, inexperienced but earnest college graduate.



For the next thirty three episodes, the expanded regular cast would consist of four characters: "Major Daggett", (Moyles), "Capt. Quince" (Burr), "Lt. Seiberts" (Bartell) and "Sgt. Goerss" (Perrin). While there were many other officers, enlisted men, scouts, and civilians in FORT LARAMIE, most of the actors who played them were present for only one or two separate episodes. In addition to Howard McNear, who had a reoccurring role as the sutler, Sam Edwards appeared in several programs as "Trooper Harrison."

Like its counterpart, GUNSMOKE, this military adventure show had strong women's roles, realistic and sympathetic portrayals of Native Americans, and an emphasis on the ordinary struggles of the Western frontier. FORT

LARAMIE was an honest reflection of the difficulties of life on an isolated military post in the early 1880s.

Four writers produced nearly all of the scripts for this series: John Meston, Kathleen Hite, Les Crutchfield, and John Dunkel - the same quartet that did most of the writing on GUNSMOKE. Hite, who died in 1989 (the same year as Vic Perrin), was recently described by Harry Bartell as "a hell of a writer" and she certainly was responsible for some of the best episodes in this remarkable series.

There was little room for humor in this gritty, poignant Western program, but Hite could manage to fit it into her scripts, both realistically and logically. Her stories provided little bursts of zest and humanity mixed with somber themes of betrayal, death, remorse, and in one episode, rape.



But regardless of who was writing the script, the storyline of each episode accurately reflected military life at the original Fort Laramie. The 8-26-56 program, "The Chaplain" dealt with the threat of scurvy, the 3-25-56 show, "The Coward" described the residual pain of the Civil War, and the 2-5-56 episode, "Food For the Indians" chronicled the tragedy

of the disappearing buffalo.

Occasionally an actual incident from the history of the West would be recycled in fictional form. For example, in the 8-5-56 show, "The Massacre", John Dehner plays a religious zealot, Major Petrie, who leads his troopers into slaughtering a large group of peaceful and unsuspecting Indians. This particular episode closely parallels the historical facts of the Sand Creek Massacre of November 1864 when Col. J.M. Chivington (a former Methodist preacher) and his Colorado volunteers attacked a placid group of reservation Cheyenne and murdered 150 of them, mostly women and children.

The soundmen, Ray Kemper and Bill James, who were assisted by Tom Hanley, were simply second to none in this department. Just as they were doing on GUNSMOKE, they created the most convincing and imaginative sound effects the most critical listener could appreciate. Every crack of a rifle, creak of the McClellan saddle (official Cavalry issue in the mid 1800s), and footsteps going across the dirt parade ground, over the gravel path, and up the wooden steps, were all done with authentic precision.

At the time, the sound effects were so well done, a casual listener wouldn't even notice. But now, of course, with the trained ear of us hard-core OTR fans, we can fully appreciate the skills of this talented trio.

Kemper, James, and Hanley never missed a chance to shade the texture of a scene with the perfect sound, whether they created it manually or pulled it from their reservoir of audio discs. Each time a character got up from a table, you heard the chair legs scrape against the wooden floor before the footsteps started.



FORT LARAMIE lasted for only ten months but most of the cast regulars got to be good friends, if they were not already before. Late in 1956 Burr came jubilantly into the evening recording session and announced, "Men, we're all going to be rich!" He then explained that he had auditioned for the part of the district attorney on a soon-to-be-produced television series, "Perry Mason". Instead he was awarded the title role.

Unfortunately, Burr had overestimated the power of the leading man in a television series to get work for his friends. Although "Perry Mason" ran for nine years in prime time, Bartell only received one day's work on the series and Perrin got none.

The final broadcast of FORT LARAMIE, the 40th episode, "Army Wife", was aired on October 28, 1956. Many of the cast regulars continued to see each other, both in a social and professional vein. Vic Perrin and Ben Wright were both close personal friends of Harry Bartell and their camaraderie was undiminished after FORT LARAMIE ended.

Dramatic radio was nearly gone now as television ascended quickly. FRONTIER GENTLEMAN (with John Dehner in the lead) lasted 41 episodes in 1958 and GUNSMOKE hung on until the summer of 1961 and many of the former cast members of FORT LARAMIE found work on these shows, among others. But the bugle was clearly sounding "Retreat" for network radio drama. Too soon, it was over.

Fortunately, for all of us OTR fans, every episode of FORT LARAMIE was transcribed and is currently in trading currency. It must be very comforting for the few remaining cast and crew members of that esteemed series to know that it will continue to be enjoyed by generations to come.