



WAGON TRAIN'S "CHARLIE WOOSTER'S" LAST FILM



Don Knotts tries to explain the strange noises he heard to Frank McGrath in this scene from "The Shakiest Gun In the West." Film was McGrath's last.

A FEW weeks ago the film industry and, indeed, the world mourned the passing of one of the warmest human beings ever to stand before the camera--or any place else, for that matter. You undoubtedly knew him as the fast-tongued, gravel-voiced Charlie Wooster in the "Wagon Train" series, but he was listed with the Screen Actors Guild as Frank McGrath, born in Mound City, Missouri, on February 2, 1903.

This writer knew the amiable actor simply as "Frankie" and for almost four years the sight of his electric golf cart with the covered wagon top was a familiar one as he darted up and down the streets of the Universal studio lot.

Frankie and I were involved in the same movie--he as an actor and I as a publicist--when he suffered the fatal heart attack which claimed his life at the age of 64. He died on a Saturday, 24 hours earlier I had talked with him on the set of "The Shakiest Gun In the West" and conducted what was to be the last interview he was to give.

HE HAD complained of feeling poorly, but his full voice and animated machinations belied his claim. We were discussing his role as a covered wagon driver in the comedy-western when a young actor in his early twenties complained of having had to wait so long for his first movie break.

"Why, you're still a babe in swaddling clothes," quipped Frankie. "You want to know how long I waited for a chance at acting? 38 years! For nearly 40 years I worked as a stunt man before I got a chance in 1957 to turn actor in 'Wagon Train'. And it wouldn't have happened then if it hadn't been for Ward Bond, who played the wagon master."

Indeed, because of his diminutive size, Frankie became a specialist at doubling for heroines as well as heroes in early films. During 1924-27, he was chief stunt man for Buster Collier. Later, he also doubled for Warner Baxter and Gene Tierney. Falls from horses and off rooftops, leaps from trains and cars, plunges into swirling rapids and bouts with wild animals were routine for McGrath.

DURING World War II, Frankie saw action in the Pacific as a boatswain's mate. His stunt man's luck held out and his ship remained afloat.

After V-J Day, McGrath soared into the big time as a stunt man, averaging 20 pictures a year. He also met the two men who were to become his best friends, and who provided the key to his emergence as an actor. One is a fellow stunt man, Terry Wilson, who co-starred as Hawks on the "Wagon Train" series.

The other was the late Ward Bond, to whom Frankie attributed 100% of his success. In early 1957, when the pilot films of "Wagon Train" were being made, Bond got McGrath a chance at a permanent role in the series. His dry, choppy way of talking sold the producers and McGrath was signed after the first episode. Shortly thereafter, he began growing the full set of whiskers which became his trademark.

You'd think that since Frankie was in his sixties, he'd have been inclined toward the more conservative way of thinking, but the opposite is true. Frankie was never one to brag about "the good old days" in motion pictures, especially when referring to black people.

"There's no way of getting around it," he once told me. "The 'old days' in films and radio were humiliating for the Negro and anyone wishing to return to that phase of show business is a foolish dreamer."

"I know I'm an old man, but that doesn't mean I have to think like one. A whole new image of the Negro American in television and movie films is just around the corner and I don't see how anyone can help but be excited about it. A lot of the old geezers who started

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out with me may not like the idea, but there's nothing they can do about it.

"All the exciting truths regarding Negro-ness (call it Negritude if you like), which include the most crucial issues in America today, are going to make powerful scripts as soon as someone gets the guts to splash it across the screen. I, for one, look forward to it."

OF COURSE, Frank McGrath will never see that dramatic change. Four days after I talked with him I was to look into his face for the last time as I joined Woody Strode, Ernest Borgnine and scores of others in paying last respects to a truly great human being.

Appropriately enough, the eulogy was delivered by John McIntyre, who took over as wagon master in the "Wagon Train" series after the death of Ward Bond.

His words were cheerful ones, as Frankie would have wanted it I'm sure, and the church walls actually echoed with light ripples of laughter from time to time.

Still, the mythical star which is Hollywood shimmered a little less brightly for a moment.

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We've Been WONDERING

WHY Henry P. (for puzzled) missed his deadline this week.

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