

DON 'RED' BARRY — From Hero Of 'B' Westerns To Character Actor

It's time to play the nostalgia game.

Question: Who was the first actor to portray "Red Ryder," western artist Fred Harmon's famous cowboy hero from the comic strips? Wild Bill Elliott? Allan "Rocky" Lane? Jim Bannon?

Guess again. It was "Red" Barry. Now, don't throw rocks. I'm not any smarter than you, but I have an advantage in that I have just spent an entire week with the actor who first breathed life into champion of Painted Valley — Donald Barry.

Don is in Shelby currently essaying the role of Buckstone County Prison Farm Warden Lute Coley — the chief antagonist of "Seabo," portrayed by Earl Owensby. "Seabo" is the title of the seventh feature film produced at EO Studios.

And, if I may be permitted to add, this has been a double thrill for me because I wrote the script for "Seabo."

Don Barry makes no bones about being 57 years of age and anyone who watches TV or attends movies regularly will readily acknowledge the fact that for a onetime hero of Republic Pictures' series westerns of the late 1930's and 40's, Mr. B is one of the finest character actors currently on the scene today.

"You never stop learning. Each new role is a new experience and the serious actor always tries to put something fresh and new into each role," Don said.

A native Texan, who all of his life has been a movie fan, got his chance at an acting career by walking into a theater in Los Angeles and asking the stage manager for an opportunity. This led to a phone call a few days later in which Don was asked "Have you ever done anything?" Don's answer to the stage manager's question was the truth. "Yes."

The play was "Tobacco Road" starring Henry Hull as Jeter. Don played Duke. For six weeks Don received rave reviews, which caused Mr. Hull to make a speech to the entire cast about how he could spot the seasoned professional immediately and what a delight it was to have Mr. Barry numbered in his cast.

The day after Don was interviewed for a newspaper article, Mr. Hull's praise turned to ranting and raving and demands that Don be dismissed immediately from the cast.

In the newspaper article Don also told the truth. The interviewer asked Don what other plays he had done.

"This is it," Don answered. "But you told the stage manager you had done other plays," the interviewers argued.

"No. He asked me if I had done anything. He never asked what other shows I had done," Don grinned. "I told him the truth. I had done other things. I sold real estate. I dug ditches. I was an ice man..."

Don said he was not dismissed from the cast, but he had not made a friend in Henry Hull. "Tobacco Road" was due to open in Chicago for 18 months and Hull took out his wrath on Don physically in a scene in the show. Don returned the physical abuse with physical abuse and off stage told Mr. Hull, "I have respect and admiration for you, Mr. Hull. I am honored to be doing this show with you. But if you have so much respect for young talent, as you said before, then why don't you teach me?"

Don's dialogue then showed Hull that Don had no intention of taking any more abuse or he would retaliate in kind.

"Henry sent word to me the next day he would be pleased to rehearse with me," Don smiled. "Well, we never did rehearse together and we went on to Chicago and did the play together for a year and a half."

Following his run in "Tobacco Road," Don returned to Los Angeles to hunt for more work. He said in those days a man named Jack Schwab looked after actors who "were between jobs." If the name sounds familiar, attach drug store to it and think of Lana Turner's discovery.

"That's one of the most popular myths in Hollywood," Don said. "Lana was not discovered sitting at the soda fountain in Schwab's Drug Store."

But, strange as it seems, that's where Donald Barry happen to be when he was contacted by a producer named George Sherman about a role in a John Wayne western — "The Wyoming Outlaw."

"I signed a contract with Republic Pictures and have since discovered that Robert Taylor and I were the only two actors in Hollywood with such contracts," Don said.

The contract was for 52 weeks a year for seven years and no options. Don was paid \$125 a week to begin with raises every six months. When he left Republic he was making \$5,000 a week, which wasn't bad for the 1940's.

By Tom McIntyre

It was Don who was responsible for Republic signing Bill Elliott for a series of westerns. Elliott was the second "Red Ryder," and the actor to portray the character the longest. His little Indian sidekick, Little Beaver, was Robert Blake, now TV's "Baretta."

One of Don's closest friends in those days was John Wayne, who was also under contract to Republic. "We were great friends in those days," Don said. "Now he doesn't like me and the feeling is mutual."

Don gave out with a laugh and launched into a story about how he and the Duke caused \$4,000 in damages to the lobby of a hotel in St. Louis early one morning.

"Duke has always been a man who liked booze," Don said. "Herbert Yates, the president at Republic, knew this and he knew what close friends John and I were. So he told me I was to go with John on a personal appearance tour for a picture. I was to 'handle' John Wayne if he got into the booze too heavy. Can you imagine that? Me? Handle John Wayne? Well, I reluctantly went along. We did fine. Made all the shows we were to do. Then in St. Louis Duke said we should really make the rounds. We did until maybe three or four in the morning."

Don said all evening Wayne had been "playfully" whacking him on the back. Over and over again until it stopped being funny.

"I was black and blue from this," Don said. "So I got mad and said I was going to knock Duke on his can. He thought that was funny and told me I wasn't tall enough to even reach his chin. When we walked into the hotel lobby he gave me another shot on the back and down I went. I swung from the floor, hit his chin dead center and he went over backwards into a fountain built into the middle of the hotel lobby."

The damages totaling \$4,000 which Republic had to pay, came after Wayne climbed out of the fountain and he and Don began throwing things at each other. Then it became a thing of throwing things like lamps, ashtrays and small pieces of furniture at other lamps, etc.

"Believe it or not," Don laughed, "that did not affect our friendship. In those days Duke was one of the nicest men you'd ever want to meet. But in the last few years he has turned into one of the most cantankerous old cusses you ever saw."

And though Mr. B doesn't particularly like Mr. W. as a person, he confesses great admiration for the Duke as an actor in Wayne's last film, "The Shootist."

"As an Academy member I voted to nominate Duke for Best Performance by a leading actor for his role in that film," Don said. "He should have won the Oscar this year for his performance. In that film he didn't play John Wayne. He got the Oscar for 'true Grit' because everyone thought he was going to die from cancer. But he's so damned mean he wouldn't let go. He's the kind of man that would spit in Satan's eye."

Don "Red" Barry made his last series-type western in 1951. At that time he had done 16 westerns for a man named Robert L. Lippert an independent studio. During this time Republic had more or less graduated into making bigger budget feature films. Roy Rogers and Rex Allen were the last of them, then called programmer, westerns for the studio.

Don then began popping up as a character actor in all types of movies and television and he has been at it steadily ever since.

"I've been in the business twenty minutes," he said kiddingly. "By count, "Seabo" makes 322 feature movies I have done. I've always done 417 different TV shows."

Don has been nominated twice for Emmies for outstanding performances in television shows in the past couple of years.

During a week's worth of conversation with Donald Barry I have enough stories about Hollywood, yesterday and today, and actors, good, bad and indifferent, to fill a book, but I won't attempt to write that here. I can give you a few tidbits, however.

Mr. B. has a great love for this section of the country. "It's wonderful to see green grass and trees, a big moon in the evening and a simple thing like mist early in the morning for a change. In California we had three weeks of 'winter.' That's temperatures that might have gotten down to 40 degrees. There, everything is brown, dry, arid and smoggy. When you see country like this it makes you wonder why anyone would want to move away," he said.

He also likes country cooking. "During my days at Republic I did personal appearances in just about every small town in the south," he said. "I had a trick. At the end of the show I would tell the audience the type of cooking I liked if anyone wanted to invite me to supper. You'd be surprised how many down home meals I wrangled that way."

And sometimes Don's "trick" grew into something even he had not imagined.

"I did a show in Macon, Georgia," he said. "A little skinny boy in patched clothes came backstage and said his mother was fixing supper for me. I tried to get out of it because from the looks of the boy he and his family barely had enough to eat for

themselves. The boy was insistent and I reluctantly agreed to go, thinking I would just visit. When I got there I could see the boy's home was very humble. But in the yard was a long table just filled with food. All the neighbors had pitched in and all of them were on hand. We all had a wonderful time together."

Now jump from the Republic Pictures days to 1968 and Vietnam, where Don was on tour entertaining American troops.

"I met a sergeant who asked me if I remembered that incident in Macon, Georgia," Don said. "Then he told me he was that skinny little boy who invited me to supper. He asked me if I remembered that rocking chair I sat in at the head of

the table. did. Then the sergeant said that chair was still sitting in his folk's living room with a sing on it — 'Don "Red" Barry sat here.' And he said that no one is allowed to sit in that chair.

"Isn't that something? I cried," Don said. "I don't know of any other profession where things like that can happen to a person. That's why I love acting. If it can bring that kind of happiness to others as well as to someone like me, then there must be something worthwhile in all of this."

Don feels that the newer breed of actor misses out on the really meaningful experiences connected with the acting profession simply because they shut themselves off from their public. They go more for

the money and the next job rather than any kind of meaningful experience with the people who pay to see them perform.

"I like people," Don said. "I like to meet them and talk with them."

And during this past week Donald Barry has met Cleveland Countians by the hundreds, either on the "Seabo" set at EO Studios or in local churches and restaurants. The small children don't remember the old Republic westerns, but from the broad smiles I have seen spread across the faces of the bigger ones you can bet your boots they have no trouble recalling all those glorious Saturdays afternoons at their local movie houses.



DONALD BARRY — as he looked in countless westerns during the 1940's and 50's



— as he appears in the role of Warden Coley in Earl Owensby's production of 'Seabo'



ENTERTAINING COMMISSIONERS — Barry shows the handgun that belonged to Billy The Kid to Commissioners Jack Palmer and Josh Hinnant and County Manager Joe Hendricks.