

Times Have Changed

Landon Looks At 'Bonanza'

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HOLLYWOOD—Times have changed on the old Ponderosa, that mythical spread somewhere around Virginia City and Lake Tahoe where the Cartwrights flourish on "Bonanza."

Since the beginning of the 1959-60 season, when "Bonanza" landed on the NBC schedule, a long shot for longevity, the characters themselves have undergone some fairly sweeping revisions.

I was talking the other day with Michael Landon, who has portrayed Little Joe since "Bonanza" began. It was an off-day from filming, and we were in this Sunset Strip office with the panoramic view of Los Angeles below and Michael Landon, running a hand through his locks, mused about the passing years.

"Look at Lorne Greene," Mike began. "He's playing Ben Cartwright 20 years younger than when we started and there's no more of the long oratory. He still invites strangers into the Ponderosa but now he does so without giving 'em a big sermon."

"What about Little Joe?"

"Well, I don't say, 'Gee, golly, pa,' anymore. And I can ride into Virginia City by myself now, which is progress considering that he's 10 years older than when we started. I don't go around fencing with an umbrella, either, which was pretty silly to begin with, even in the rain.

"THE BIGGEST CHANGE after 10 years is that I'm finding it harder to leap over the tables the way I used to."

In a sense, "Bonanza" runs as an entry with "High Chaparral," since both westerns were conceived by producer David Dortort. When "High Chaparral" was launched, two years ago,

Dortort was asked if he might ever dream up an episode involving the characters from both shows. He thought he might, at that. But he hasn't yet.

"It couldn't happen," said Mike Landon. "It's tough enough with four guys on the Ponderosa. Add the guys from the 'High Chaparral' and we'd have 12 guys—Lorne would talk and there'd be 11 guys nodding."

"Couldn't you fight 'em?" I asked. "A big shoot-out with the guys from 'High Chaparral?'"

"We'd have to win," Landon insisted. "We have seniority. But listen, I wouldn't want their old ranch in Arizona, anyway. Nothing grows on their ranch. Ours is prettier, too. Wouldn't give one beautiful Ponderosa pine for a hundred acres of all that lonely mesquite."

LONDON PAUSED. "I'm not telling Dave Dortort how to run his show, but that kid on 'High Chaparral' sure does whine a lot. In fact, he whines all the time, week after week. People must be asking themselves, if he complains so much why doesn't he leave the ranch? It's different, you see, on 'Bonanza'—on our show we Cartwrights are all very solid citizens but our guest stars are often neurotic."

"And the good Cartwrights," I put in, "solve their problems, don't they?"

"Either we solve their problems," Landon agreed, "or we shoot them. Can't have any unhappy people around on 'Bonanza.' Talk about unhappy people, I couldn't sit down much after we filmed the first few episodes back in '59.

"I'm a kid from New Jersey. The only horses I'd ever seen before were pulling milk wagons. Oh, the pain!"

"Did you foresee a successful series?"

Landon shook his head. "I was sure we'd be canceled after 13 shows, even though I thought we had a good-looking show photographically. And then we started to build—and build! This year our ratings have been stronger than ever. Incidentally, only one movie beat us badly in the ratings and that was a western with John Wayne."

IN COMMON WITH virtually all of the western stars, Mike Landon wears his brown hair rather long, in keeping with his role. "Just the other day," Mike said, "NBC sent over a batch of letters from viewers for my consideration. The mail all had to do with me getting a haircut.

"They're concerned, these people who wrote in, that Ben Cartwright's son is a hippie. 'Bonanza' is sposed to take place around the 1870s and these people are worried that a Cartwright is a hippie! Now that's ridiculous!"