



As TV's "Rifleman," Chuck Connors carries gun with the ease he wielded a bat.

My Climb from Rookie to "Rifleman"

His baseball career was distinguished mostly by his clowning, but it led to TV stardom and the conviction that the diamond is an actor's best friend

by **CHUCK CONNORS** as told to JOHN M. ROSS

IF MY BIG-LEAGUE career was something short of the dreams I had as a kid, it was my own doing. I've been a "ham" ever since I can remember. And the first label they hung on me in the big leagues—"The Barrymore of Baseball"—was no less accidental.

As a rookie with the Brooklyn Dodgers in 1951, I really wowed them. Not with my bat or my first-baseman's glove—but with my emoting. At parties, luncheons, and banquets, I would recite such things as "Casey at the Bat," "The Face on the Barroom Floor," and "Dangerous Dan McGrew." Other times I'd lampoon Dodger president Branch Rickey or my nemesis, manager Burt Shotton.

Like a lot of kids who grew up in the shadow of Ebbets Field, I had my heart set on playing first base for the Dodgers. But Gil Hodges, who had hit 32 home runs the year before, had a lock on it.

This, combined with manager Shotton's violent disapproval of my clowning and brashness, made me expendable. Next stop: the Chicago Cubs.

The Cubs farmed me out for a time to the Los Angeles Angels, where I posted a .325 average before being summoned back to Chicago. In my first five weeks in the Windy City, I hit .322 and kept the Cubs' great first baseman, Phil Cavaretta, nailed to the bench. But then Frankie Frisch was fired as manager, and Cavaretta replaced him.

He put himself on first base and I sat on the bench. Eventually I went through the inevitable trap door. I wound up with the Angels again, and they welcomed me back warmly.

One of my Los Angeles fans, Billy Grady, casting director for MGM at the time, called me one day.

"I've got a part in a new picture you might be

able to fill," he said. "Why don't you come on over?"

I suppose I should have trembled at the mere thought of acting, but I didn't.

With practically no urging at all, I dashed to the casting office and was stunned by the red carpet that greeted me. I was escorted through the offices of the bigwigs and given a personal introduction at every stop. Later, wardrobe and make-up men and other hands came at me in every direction and fussed over me with meticulous care. Being a complete greenhorn to the movie business, I immediately assumed I was getting preferential treatment because I was a big man with the Angels.

"You don't have to do all this," I told the director magnanimously. "Just treat me like one of the boys."

The director looked at me in amazement. I was so naïve I had no idea such preparation was necessary for a screen test. I got the part, however, playing a state trooper in "Pat and Mike," and received \$500 for working three days.

"Boy, this is a great racket," I told my wife Betty. "At this rate, a fellow only has to work a few months of the year to have it made."

WITH THIS thought in mind, I called Billy Grady at the end of the baseball season. "Got any more little jobs I could handle?" I asked hopefully.

He gave me another bit role which paid \$100.

When work on the MGM lot slowed down, I asked Grady if he could introduce me to some of his friends at other studios. The result was an introduction to Billy Garden at 20th Century-Fox, and a bit in "The Silver Whip."

Soon after, he directed me to another rabid ball fan, Solly Biano of Warner Brothers. This intro-

duction landed me a test for "Trouble Along the Way," starring none other than John Wayne.

Arriving late, I discovered that five other actors were being tested with me for the part. I watched for a moment, then slipped through the darkened off-stage area until I came within earshot of the director. He was moaning to his assistant:

"I don't want actors. None of these people relax. They all act."

That was all I had to hear. When my turn came, I fired a cigarette very casually and proceeded to underplay the part.

"You have so much poise," the director beamed after the test. "Where did you get this?"

"Do you really want to know?" I asked. Then I told him how I had eavesdropped on his conversation with the assistant director. That broke him up, and I got the part at \$400 a week.

With the Wayne picture under my belt, I felt I was making pretty good progress in this fascinating dodge. But when Biano said he'd like to test me for the second lead in an upcoming Burt Lancaster-Virginia Mayo picture, "South Sea Woman," I wondered if I wasn't getting in over my head. The part called for several big love scenes with Miss Mayo, a delightful yet frightening prospect.

"Well, here's where they separate the men from the boys," I told Betty. When the day of the test arrived, however, my Irish luck held. Lancaster, a hot Angels roofer, was handling the test himself.

Rehearsing for the test, he took me through a big scene. He seemed shocked by the result.

"Gee, Chuck, you don't plan to go out there and do it that way, do you?" he asked.

I was crestfallen.