

“I’d Love to Bring It back, But I Can’t...”

EARL HAMNER

The Man Who Created *Falcon Crest*

Interview by
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in association with
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I called Earl two days before we arrived in Los Angeles to make an appointment for an interview. We have known each other from a phone conversation almost five years ago. He was very kind on the phone again, and we set up a meeting for August 25, at 4:00 PM in his office.

Earl’s office is located at the *Studio City Production Center*, an inconspicuous small building on Ventura Boulevard in Studio City, approximately $\frac{3}{4}$ miles from CBS Studio Center, where *Falcon Crest* was shot from 1984 through 1990.



Earl Hamner, the creator of *Falcon Crest*.

Earl is a sympathetic character, a very kind and warmhearted man. The 76-year-old best-selling author is rather tall, approximately 6’2” and has still naturally black hair. His two-room office looks like a typical place of work of an artist — tons of books, manuscripts, brochures and encyclopedia all over the place; he just got a brand-new computer delivered, which he was about to install when we arrived. There was also an old traditional typewriter on a smaller desk in the office, obviously from the time he used to type his manuscripts for his outstanding novels and teleplays. In a corner of the room, there was also a box full of copies of Earl’s latest book, *The Avocado Drive Zoo*, which had been published just a few weeks before; the charming book describes Earl’s and his wife Jane’s love for their animals and gives the reader an idea of how much the animals have enriched the Hamners’ lives.

While preparing the clipboard and the micro-cassette recorder for the interview, Earl expressed his astonishment about the popularity of *Falcon Crest* in Germany: “I had no idea that it’s so popular there,” he said. “Sounds a bit as if they [the networks] should

be sending me some money!" he laughed. That was a typical Earl-like joke, as we would find out during our conversation. He is in general a very good-natured guy with a great sense of humor. His Virginian origin cannot be denied — the pronunciation of words is all Southern, and he himself made a joke about his tongue: "Even English is hard for me, being from Virginia!"

How the Process of Creating the Series Began

"It was great fun. I enjoyed doing it," Earl started before I even asked him my first question. It became apparent that this would not be the regular kind of interview with questions and answers because we realized Earl is the kind of guy you just have to drop one key word and he would be telling you from A through Z.

And so it was — he went on talking: "I have been asked how I came to create it, and I think it had something to do with the fact that I owned a vineyard; I had bought a vineyard up near Napa Valley in a town called Marysville. And it was not a successful vineyard because, at that time, the trend was towards drinking white wine, and the vineyard that I had bought was almost entirely in red grapes. Also, it's very expensive; you have to pay for the pruning and the fertilizing and the care of the vines, and each year I would end up with no profit. So I finally sold it when I sort of broke even. But like the same time, I became interested in wine,... and... what was also in the early days of *Dallas*. So CBS was receptive to the idea of doing the show, and we did one pilot, but it was not totally successful because we... — Jane Wyman... we had in a dreadful wig, and it looked like a fright wig."



Jane Wyman wearing a gray wig in a scene in the gazebo in *The Vintage Years*.

The gray wig really looked horrible, as we knew ourselves from photos from the pilot show. We talked about *The Vintage Years* for a while, and Earl confirmed the pieces of information he had already given me about the pilot during a phone interview in 1994. The one-hour TV movie, which had been produced in the spring of 1981, had basically the same plot as the fourth episode of the 1st season of *Falcon Crest*. A few of the cast members were different, some characters had different names, but it was basically the same story. The only thing new about *The Vintage Years* Earl remembered this time was that the rôle of Richard Channing, played by Michael Swan (now a successful actor in daytime soap operas), was very militaristic; he was sort of a minute-man. Earl could not recall why he took that character, who was originally intended to be Lance's brother and later remodeled into

Angie's son, out of the show after the pilot. *The Vintage Years* was never syndicated because "at that time, there was another show on radio called *The Vintage Years*," Earl explained. "And also the network felt that it would suggest to the audience that it was about old people because the 'vintage' — 'old'. And so they asked me to come up with a new title. And actually I liked the new title much better. There's an old Oscar singer who lived up in the mountains here [in Studio City], and his home was called something like *Falcon's Lair*... I thought that was an interesting name, so I just named the vineyard *Falcon Crest*, and it worked very well," Earl smiled.

The Copyright Infringement Law Suit

When the series began broadcasting regularly, there was another problem Earl had to deal with. Anita Clay Kornfeld, writer of a novel called *Vintage*, had brought an action against Earl, *Lorimar* and *CBS* for copyright infringement. "We were sued by some woman up in the Napa Valley for 110 million Dollars because she claimed that I stole the idea for the series from her book," Earl said. "It was terrible. It took me two years to prove... I had to go back through records, and, as you can see, I don't keep good records..." he pointed at the many papers in his office with a smile. "I had to go back and prove that it was my original idea. But it cost me a lot of time," Earl explained. A federal judge finally decided in Earl's favor.

The Shootings in the Napa Valley



"I loved Napa," Earl said and expressed how much he liked the production manner of *Falcon Crest* to film many scenes on locations in the Wine Country. When we came to speak of *Spring Mountain*, Earl remembered the estate and rhetorically asked: "It's a wonderful house, isn't it?" He went on explaining: "It was a marvelous location. We used to shoot there all around the house. The driveway that goes around the house, we used that..."

An aerial view of *Spring Mountain's Villa Miravalle* during the time when the series was filmed there.

I had to tell Earl that the driveway is now gone and that *Spring Mountain* had undergone many other changes, too. From a private tour at *Spring Mountain* a week prior to the conversation with Earl, we knew that the new owner of the winery had changed the property. The driveway, which led around the Victorian Mansion, was removed; the pavement is now gone and was replaced by a pebble / dirt footpath, which is too narrow for any car, let alone a limousine. They also tore down the garage, which used to be near the house, and planted some trees and bushes there. Also the pool area was changed — the cement and the tiles around the pool as well as the rose bushes were removed and converted into a lawn area. The back yard of the house (between the Mansion and the Winery Building) is now planted with various flowers and young palm trees; the pavilion is gone.

Earl guessed that the changes were made for the reason of enforcing the resident's privacy, which is correct. He also said that *Spring Mountain* was very crowded with fans when they were filming there.

At the Studios

From the exterior shootings in the Wine Country, Earl now made a transition to the filming at the studios. "It was a fun time because, you know, we would film down here over on *CBS* on Radford," he pointed to his right into the direction of the lot of *CBS Studio Center* (formerly called *CBS - MTM Studios*), where *Falcon Crest* was filmed from 1984 on.

"I had a wonderful office while I was there," Earl remembered. "It was the office that used to be Rock Hudson's dressing room." He was talking of the time of *Republic Studios* before *CBS* bought the lot. Then, he went on talking about his office. "It was a vast place with a kitchen, a bathroom, a private bath and two huge rooms". Earl made a short pause, then said: "And then I would come to this place..." he pointed at his desk — where he is now — and started laughing.

Working with the Stars

"It was great fun, and Ms. Wyman's dressing room was downstairs, and we collaborated a great deal. She was such a lovely person," Earl said. When I asked him how Jane is doing nowadays, he replied: "She has moved over to Palm Springs; and she had some friends there, Alice Faye and Loretta Young — You remember those names? — these were from the days when she was young, a rising young star, married to Ronald Reagan. And one of them [her friends] was Barbara Stanwyck. So she was with a lot of good friends, and..." Earl was thinking for a second. Then, he went on: "I think they are all dead, except Jane and Loretta Young,... which is sad," he regretted. "She [Jane] is a very sensible, very nice,... very much a lady."

It was funny that Earl had given himself the next key word. Describing Jane as a lady reminded him of another actress on the series:



"I remember once we had a movie star as a guest, who was not a lady," he laughed. "I can't tell you her name, except she had a very bad reputation in Hollywood. And I said to Jane 'The photographer would like a picture of you with the guest star,' and Jane said 'Bring her over!' — you know, putting the guest in the secondary position. And so I said to the other one..." Earl stopped for a moment, then decided to break the silence about who it was. "Okay, I tell you who it is: it was Lana Turner!" he smiled. "I went over to Lana and said to her 'The photographer wants a picture of you and Jane,' and Lana said 'Bring her over!' So I had to finally resort to when they were both coming out of the set after a scene together..." Earl explained that Lana had some problems accepting her own age: "...because she was getting older in those days and she insisted on costumes that maybe were a little too elaborate. And at one point, she was wearing this jeweled gown [episode 12]; it was a heavy thing, and she came out... and the gown kept on going!" Earl laughed. "There were lots of funny moments like that."

Earl continued to search his memories for more actors he loved to work with. Suddenly, Lorenzo Lamas crossed his mind.

"Lorenzo — we had such a lot of fun. He's a big sexy sweet nice guy. He had a different wife each year!" Earl laughed. "I always loved that the script writers would have Jane disowning him, at least once a week on the series because he wasn't doing..., he wasn't tending to his family values." Earl was quite amused about this habit.





"There were wonderful people on the show. Robert Foxworth, who played Chase, a wonderful guy," Earl said with enthusiasm.

"The girl, who played Maggie," continued Earl, "now has her own series, her new series, *Dharma & Greg*. She's good, isn't she?"

Again, he started to tell one of his funny stories from the set, this time about Susan Sullivan: "I always loved her, and she always loved me because someone asked me once 'What does she look like?' and I said 'She's meltingly beautiful.' And she heard that expression and she thought it was wonderful. I don't know what it meant — I guess that I melt when I see her," Earl admitted. "But she liked that a lot..." He described Susan as "very cute, very now, very today, sweet woman".



Earl also remembered David Selby as a good friend.

"He was on *The Waltons* before," Earl underlined the fact that he had selected David to play Olivia Walton's art teacher. "And he kissed her, which was a terrible thing to do in that time!," Earl added.

"Billy Moses... I haven't seen him in years. His mother is an actress, too," Earl referred to Marian McCargo Bell, who had a guest rôle during *Falcon Crest's* 5th season as Harriet Roberts, the mother of Morgan Fairchild's character of Jordan Jennifer Roberts.



The Development of the Series

After talking of Earl's favorite cast members, we came back to the beginning of the *Falcon Crest* series, and Earl explained how the characters were gradually formed during the 1981-82 season.

"When you start a series of that kind, the first few episodes are really... tentative," Earl pointed out. "You find out what they [the actors] are capable of doing, what their strong points are, and also sometimes you will have a guest star, who comes on and who's so good that you want to keep the person. So in the beginning, it's not carved in stone. And you feel your way along. But then we discovered Jane's great strength; it was totally different from anything she had done, and she loved doing the rôle that gave her a chance to be mean whereas she had been so righteous and nice in her other rôles. And we discovered that Lorenzo was wonderful in that rôle. Everybody — it was perfectly cast."

I wanted to know now if the casting was done by himself. "I had a voice," he answered. "It's a committee — the writer, the creator, the directors, the producers, the network, everybody has a say in the casting. I had a voice, it was not exclusively my choice."



Earl Hamner with Thomas J. Pucher (left) and Sascha Kurz (below) at Earl's office in Studio City.

"Did you see my fish?," Earl asked. The stuffed animal in his office is a 60-pound (!) salmon from British Columbia. "It took me two hours to catch him," Earl proudly said.

Earl's Leaving the Series

Although Earl apparently had very much fun doing the series, he felt "I didn't have much more to contribute and I wanted to go fishing" during the 1985-86 season. So he quit his producer's duties after the earthquake cliff-hanger in 1986.

"I left at the end of five years because I reached a point where I thought that I had done as much with it as I could, and new people had to move in," Earl pointed out. "And I was thinking of retiring from the industry, which I did, but I got bored and came back in."



"Did you keep on watching the episodes regularly after you left?" I asked him. "I did not," he replied. "Because I didn't feel that it was in keeping with what I had done in the past. Some people took it over, who were writing, producing and acting and directing," he criticized the fact that the new executive producer, Jeff Freilich, had his hands in almost every field connected with the production of the show. "And the direction was terrible, I thought," added Earl. "I was a consultant, have done it for just a few shows, and then I even left because I wasn't able to be on the set, I didn't want to be on the set, didn't want to be at the studios, I came back here and wrote."

Although the 6th and 7th season of *Falcon Crest* were rather successful, compared to the other three big prime-time soap operas of that time, Earl's opinion is that Jeff Freilich led the show into a new direction, which was no longer along the same lines Earl had created. "I think he [Freilich] indulged himself a little bit in directing as well as some writing, maybe over-extended the show." Earl obviously did not like the faster pace, the dramatic irony and the kind of self-witted humor Freilich added to the two seasons he produced and which were often referred to as the tongue-in-cheek years of *Crest*.

We also talked about the dramatic changes in the 8th season after Jeff Freilich had left. "They seemed to me as if they didn't make a lot of sense, too," Earl said. "I watched it a couple of times and thought 'This is just ridiculous! This is not the same thing that I wrote'."

Earl also mentioned that he thought after the 5th year the show would probably come to an end in the near future. "I didn't think that it was going to go on for so long," he commented on the fact that four more seasons were produced after he had left the crew.

Earl and Lorimar

I also asked Earl about his relationship to *Falcon Crest's* production company, *Lorimar Productions*, because I knew that he had been working for them since they had originated in the 1970's.

"*Lorimar* is a name made from the wives of two of the partners who started it. The one was a man named Lee Rich, and the other was a man named Mervin Adelson. And they combined two names to form *Lorimar*. I think one had a wife named Lori, and the other had a wife named Mary," Earl said. "The first success that they had was the show that I did, *The Waltons*,... and they did *Eight is Enough* and *Dallas* and *Knots Landing*, then a lot of movies, they did a lot of television movies as well as feature films. And later, they were absorbed into *Warner Bros.*; so there is no more *Lorimar*. It's part of *Warner*, and *Warner* owns all of their products. It [*Lorimar*] was a fun company; it was young, and I enjoyed it because I was sort of the goose that laid golden eggs for it. I don't even know why it eventually broke up," he said. "It was stationed mainly on *Warner's* lot," he said about the time when *Lorimar* shot *The Waltons*.

Earl's Plans for a *Falcon Crest* Reunion

Eventually, I told Earl about our plans to re-create *Falcon Crest* and film a new season or at least a single reunion movie. "I suggested that once to *CBS*," he spontaneously answered. "They said it was not that popular here any more, it's popular abroad. I suspect that that was not the real reason — I don't know why," he said with a suspicious expression on his face. Indeed, the statement from *CBS* was strange because it is a logical conclusion that *Falcon Crest* cannot be popular in the U.S. any more as there have been no re-runs since the show ended in 1990.

Earl was enthusiastic about our idea of a reunion. "But it would be fun to do!" he smiled.

After a short pause, he, however, admitted that it might be difficult to get the cast together again. "You know, I have thought of doing reunions of the cast, although Jane [Wyman] can't do it and everybody else, I think, is on other shows. But we've done successful reunions of *The Waltons*, got everybody together." Despite these odds against a reunion, Earl was in a way convinced that reuniting the cast would not be a real problem.

What the big trouble is, is the disinterest of *CBS* and *Warner Bros.* in such a movie. "I am sorry," Earl said. "The script is not a viable idea... because when I go to them and suggest a reunion and they turn me down, it's likely that you won't get any further than I do." Considering the fact that *CBS* executives confirmed again that they see no possibility for a resurrection of the vineyard soap, Earl admitted sadly: "I was very disappointed when they said it was not that popular because I go through the supermarket and the checker will see my name and say 'Didn't you do *Falcon Crest*?! Bring it back!' — and I can't..."

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