

Questions for GARNER SIMMONS

November 19, 2004

Thomas J. Pucher asked writer and story editor Garner Simmons, who worked on the *Falcon Crest* crew from seasons 1 through 3, questions about his job.

Garner Simmons' answers are in bold print.

[The parts in brackets were edited for publication purposes.]

I would be very happy if you could take the time to answer some questions about your work on the set of *Falcon Crest*.

I am more than willing to answer whatever questions you might have.

First, I would like to ask you some general questions...

How did you like working on *Falcon Crest*?

Actually, I enjoyed it very much. I was a freelance writer when the show was being prepped in the late summer of 1981. The Writers Guild of America, of which I was [and] am a member, had just settled a protracted strike, and all the shows were scrambling to get up and running. I had written a small feature (A Rare Breed starring George Kennedy and Forrest Tucker) that had just completed filming, and a book I had written — a biography on filmmaker Sam Peckinpah (Peckinpah: A Portrait in Montage) — had finally found a publisher.

So when my agent sent me a copy of the bible for *Falcon Crest* and told me to go into *Lorimar* and pitch, I had a lot on my mind. But I read through the material and what struck me was that while the story was about a family in turmoil — several branches of a family fighting over their legacy — there were no young children.

One of the main story lines involved Chase and Maggie, who lived in New York City with two virtually grown children, deciding to cash out of the big city and go to live in the Tuscany Valley (a fictionalized Napa). There was all this talk about a new start. Now that her kids were grown, Maggie was going to get a fresh start as a writer and Chase was going to learn the wine business. And I so I pitched a story about what if Maggie suddenly learns she might be pregnant.

Because Earl Hamner had written a somewhat unwieldy pilot script that Bob McCullough had very smartly taken apart and turned into six individual stories (with each script focusing on an element of the pilot but in need of additional material to help flesh out the characters), the idea of Maggie's possible pregnancy struck them as a good way to go. I was hired to write one of the first six scripts using the pregnancy storyline as a subplot. When I turned in the script, it was very well received. And they asked me to rewrite another of the six — one which was extremely muddled. I took a run at. But eventually it was staff written. When it came to the writing credit, Bob, who never would allow his staff to take credit for work that had originally come from a freelance writer, submitted it as co-written by the original writers (a team) and me. When I read the final draft, I called Bob to ask him to take my name off it because I really wasn't my writing.

This was the beginning of a long friendship with Bob who was instrumental in bringing me on staff that first season once they'd received an order for the last eight shows that year. At the end of the 1st season I was hired back as Story Editor for season 2. Then I was re-hired at the same position for season 3. Unfortunately in the 3rd season a situation developed which forced Bob to move on. When he left, so did I.

You even anticipated some of the questions I wanted to ask... Thank you for covering so many aspects with your answer. It is really interesting to learn as many details as possible about how the show was developed, and how the original pilot, *The Vintage Years*, was finally remodeled into *Falcon Crest*.

One of the show's hallmarks was the fabulous location footage. How did you like filming in the Napa Valley?

It was one of the best experiencing of my professional life. First, I should explain that for cost reasons, each season we would write 6 episodes in Los Angeles. Then we would shoot the interiors for the first six scripts on sound stages in L.A. where we had built exact replicas of the interiors of the wineries that we used in Napa. Two directors would be hired — one would do the even numbered scripts and one would do the odd. Then, once all the interior scenes had been shot in L.A., we would move the entire company up to the Napa Valley for eight weeks of shooting. There we would complete the first six episodes exteriors while we finished writing scripts 7 through 12. Then we would shoot the exteriors for 7 through 12 before returning to L.A. to shoot the interiors for 7 through 12. We would also shoot a variety of shots that could be cut into future shows as establishing shots. This is what gave the show such a wonderfully rich location look.



The rich location look is one of the many fabulous hallmarks to distinguish *Falcon Crest* from any other television series.

By season 3, Bob McCullough was in the midst of a real battle with the powers that be at Lorimar. So he sent me up to Napa with the cast & crew to make certain what was written on the page made to the screen in tact

(frequently left to their own devices, production companies are tempted to make changes for expediency that work against the existing story lines — Bob wanted to avoid that). The original plan had been for me to go up to Napa for the first four weeks and then be replaced by another writer. What Bob (or anyone else) didn't know was that I had a strong production background as well. By the end of the first week in Napa, Harry Harris, one of the directors on the show called Earl Hamner and demanded that I be allowed to remain with the production company for the entire shoot in Napa. This allowed me to really demonstrate my abilities as a producer.

So when things started to fall apart at the end of that 3rd season, I was able to move from Story Editor on *Falcon Crest* to Supervising Producer on a Warner Bros. show called *Yellow Rose* starring Sam Elliott and David Soul. This was a huge break — a promotion that might have taken me many years took a matter of weeks. Consequently I owe a great deal to Bob McCullough and we have remained friends ever since.

Are you still in contact with anyone else from the cast & crew?

Aside from Bob, who has really moved out of the television business today, I still am occasionally in touch with the camera operator from the show, David Plenn (who went on to become Director of Photography on *L.A. Law* and *Seventh Heaven*) and the young woman who was our Writers' Assistant, Doree Levitov (now married and an entertainment attorney, Doree Reno). Also I occasionally see Bill Moses and more infrequently have seen David Selby, Robert Foxworth, and Jane Wyman. Also the directors Harry Harris and Reza Badiyi, though I haven't seen Reza in a long time.

David, Billy, Janie and Lorenzo are some of Garner Simmons' favorite cast members.



It is really interesting to hear you mention the names Plenn and Levitov because the character names of Cole's attorney and Julia's fellow prison inmate in season 3 were named after those crew members — allusions like those were obviously one of the crew's favorite inside jokes.

Who are your favorite cast members to work with?

In truth, I enjoyed working with them all. Actors are the bravest among us because they take the chances most people would be afraid to try. Many writers and producers are reluctant to deal with actors because they are afraid they will want to change the dialogue or will ask questions that may be difficult to answer. My personal feeling has always been that it's a writer/producer's obligation to take on all questions because if you can't answer them you need to rethink what you've written.

After coming back from Napa the 2nd season, Jane Wyman and Lana Turner were not on speaking terms even though they still had to act together. Jane was a real trooper — always on time, always focused. Lana was more of an old fashioned Hollywood star — the last one to the set, kept everybody waiting. Earl Hamner felt trapped between two divas and he would send me to work things out. While it was a little like brokering peace between warring nations, I found that if I listened carefully to what each was saying, I could generally find a workable middle ground.

I loved working with David Selby who had done *Tennessee Williams* on Broadway and is a consummate professional. And Bill Moses, whose career

was just beginning, was fearless — someone I've always admired. Lorenzo, despite his penchant for tattoos and motorcycles, was very nice as well.

Well, you also mentioned your favorite crew members already...

Really, I had a great time with them all. A crew is like a family. You all have to pull together. *Falcon Crest*, while I was there, had one of the finest crews working at the time.

What was your most memorable scene?

There are many. But the one that probably taught me the most as a director was a scene I wrote for a script that does not bear my name (part of the job of a staff writer is to write additional material as well as rewrite existing scenes).

While I can't recall the exact episode, it occurred late in the 1st season. It is the scene where Julia has just learned from her mother that her sister Emma actually killed their uncle. And not wanting to believe it, Julia goes to her sister's room. The scene is heavily emotional with Julia not wanting to believe the truth is forced to when Emma admits it.

I remember that episode. It is *House of Cards* (# 14 <1.14>).

The director of that particular episode was a wonderfully talented man named Larry Elikann who proceeded to stage the scene so that Emma is facing camera when Julia enters behind her. And he plays the entire scene in one take — a huge risk in TV because studio and network execs demand coverage (i.e., different angles) so that they can recut the scene to fit their mood. But Larry knew that given the emotional content of that scene the audience would be desperately hoping for a cut to relieve the pain they were feeling — the pain being carried in both actors' faces. By doing it in single take, it became one of the most wrenchingly emotional moments in the series. When I saw it in dailies [the scenes filmed on one day and watched by the crew in the editing room], I was overwhelmed. It worked better than I had ever imagined.

What is your favorite storyline?

The line that follows Billy Moses' character through the first three seasons as he grows from a boy to a man. Bill did a terrific job of exploring the emotional landscape of his character, always grounding it in reality. He would come to my office or catch me in the commissary and we would talk. He's a very talented actor who has worked, to no one's surprise, continually since.

Is there a storyline you do not like?

Towards the end of the 3rd season several other members of the writing staff (other than Bob and myself) began to seek to develop plotlines that focused on secondary characters. My feeling was that the real story was about a family in turmoil and the way to tell it was to constantly turn these characters in on each other. Instead, the direction of the show began to move away from the central plot of family conflict into much more contrived storylines. That was the point I knew it was time for me to go.

I also have to ask you about one of the oldest myths about the series: Is it true that Lorenzo Lamas' tattoos were covered with beige shoe polish before the make-up department was able to find a special waterproof camouflage?

Other than he had them, I know nothing about Lorenzo's tattoos except that they drove the make-up department crazy.

Do you think there's a chance *Falcon Crest* will be released on DVD one day?

Assuming present trends continue, absolutely. All you have to do is demonstrate there's an audience willing to purchase them.

Do you know if any props are available somewhere? I happened to come across some prop wine bottles from the 1st season in L.A., which I bought, but I always wondered what happened to many of the other characteristic props, such as *New Globe* newspapers, for example.

There are no props that I know of. Lorimar, which produced the show, no longer exists.

You wrote some very thrilling episodes. *The Challenge* (# 19 <2.01>), *Pas de Deux* (# 31 <2.13>), *The Odyssey* (# 37 <2.19>) and *The Avenger* (# 67 <3.27>) are just a few examples of extraordinarily exciting episodes packed with suspense and emotion. Besides your writing credits, you received credit as a story editor in seasons 2 and 3. What exactly did you do as a story editor, and how much influence did you have in the outline of a whole season?

While I believe I've covered much of this above as well, a story editor is a member of a staff of writers who are given the task of helping to develop character arcs and plotlines for the entire season. At the time *Falcon Crest* was produced, the head writer on the show, Bob McCullough, had the title of Supervising Producer. In the 2nd season, there were three story editors (one was a team of two writers). At the start of the 3rd season, the other writers pushed hard for title changes (Executive Story Editor, Executive Story Consultant). I did not because I was pretty naive at the time. Because I remained just Story Editor I suddenly found myself being treated by the others (not Bob, but the other writers) as someone less valued. It was Bob's willingness to trust me — to send me to Napa and later to assign me to develop a sort of mini-bible for the last half of the 3rd season (i.e., lay out the character arcs and plotlines for the rest of that year) — that allowed me to prove my worth and as indicated above, move on to become Supervising Producer of *Yellow Rose* (thereby skipping the steps of becoming Executive Story Editor and Producer).

Were you involved in the groundwork for season 4 before you left in any way?

I had nothing to do with *Falcon Crest* following season 3.

We already covered that in the course of the conversation, but the reason for you to leave after season 3 were...

Creative differences.

Did you watch *Falcon Crest* after you left?

Very little though I did consult with Bill Moses when he, too, was having creative differences and wanted to be written out of the show. We discussed it and he took the most romantic exit possible — build a boat and sail off into the sunset — the name of the boat was *Free Will*.

As I've indicated above, I was at odds with the creative direction the show was headed after the 3rd season. It wasn't a direction I would have taken. But it was no longer my choice.



Free Will — the name of Cole's sailboat is an inside joke: It alludes to William R. Moses freeing himself from the show because he was unhappy with its new regime in season 6.

Would you like to resume your producing duties if there were to be a *Falcon Crest* reunion?

As Thomas Wolfe once wrote: You can't go home again.

I also have a couple of questions on filming locations and celebrity guests that were rumored to be lured into the cast.

Sorry I can't help you on locations. 20 years is a long time. The same is true regarding stunt casting (i.e., Lana Turner as Chase's mother, etc.). Because the costs of such actors is prohibitive, these decisions were made at the highest levels.

When we were first talking about this interview, you mentioned a current project in Ireland, a feature screenplay on the Easter Rising of 1916 (the Irish revolution). What other projects did you work on in the last few years?

After leaving *Falcon Crest*, I worked on a number of projects over the years. In television, I was supervising producer on a number of series including *Yellow Rose, V, Buck James, Wolf, and Silk Stalkings*, while writing for a number of other series. I also did all four seasons on *Poltergeist: The Legacy* eventually rising to Executive Producer and directing 4 episodes (*Rough Beast, The Last Good Knight, Song of the Raven* and *Bird of Prey* — the last 2 being a double-episode). As I mentioned, I have written a book on Sam Peckinpah (*Peckinpah: A Potrait in Montage, University of Texas Press, 1982, new edition by Limelight Editions, New York 1998*) and more recently along with Paul Seydor, David Weddle, and Nick Redman, I've been doing VO commentaries on Peckinpah's films for DVD re-release (the UK version of *Straw Dogs, Junior Bonner, Bring Me the Head of Alfredo Garcia, and Osterman Weekend* as well as a Warner Bros. box set of *Ride the High Country, Wild Bunch, Major Dundee, The Ballad of Cable Hogue, The Getaway, and Pat Garrett and Billy the Kid* is due out next spring in conjunction with a posthumous award being given to Peckinpah at Cannes). I've also done miniseries and movies for television like *Miracle Landing* (the true story of the *Aloha Airlines* flight that lost its fuselage but he pilot still managed to land the plane).

I am overwhelmed by all the background information and details you mentioned. Thank you so much for sharing all that with us.

Hopefully this is of help.