

JEFFREY HUNTER

“A symphony of sex appeal, talent and personality.” That’s how *Modern Screen* reporter Arthur Charles and most reporters of the 1950s and 60s described Milwaukee raised actor Jeffrey Hunter.

Hunter was a stunning combination of intelligence, versatility, compassion, athleticism, and humility — all wrapped into a set of perhaps the most penetrating blue eyes Hollywood has ever seen.

The only son of a manufacturing salesman, Henry Herman "Hank" McKinnies Jr., was born his father's namesake and his mother Edith's pride on Thanksgiving Day, November 25, 1926, on Panola Avenue in New Orleans, Louisiana, not long after his parents had moved there from Arkansas.

"Nobody at our house got any turkey that day. The turkey was me," their son would often quip.

Thanks to the Great Depression, the family didn't stay long in New Orleans and headed to Milwaukee when the future Hollywood heartthrob was 4 years old.

That first year in Milwaukee, the McKinnieses almost lost their only child. The 5-year-old lay near death in a Milwaukee hospital after suffering an appendicitis attack that caused both peritonitis and nephritis. After his recovery, the family returned to West Allis. They soon moved to Whitefish Bay and joined Christ Episcopal Church, where McKinnies often tended the altar as an acolyte.

As he grew, McKinnies and his father worked on electric trains in the basement, played ball and took many fishing trips to northern Wisconsin and Canada. "I remember one time Dad and I fished for fourteen hours straight without getting a single bite, but we still had a swell time together," he recalled in a July 1953 Dorothy O'Leary story for *Motion Picture and Television Magazine*.

The future actor also spent hours playing with the dogs he had over the years. "One of my favorites was a dachshund named Poochie. Another was a fox terrier named Buddy that we had for twelve years. I remember my father and I were both almost liter-

ally heartbroken when Buddy was run over by a neighbor's car," the actor recalled in 1953.

The movie star always remembered his childhood fondly, adding that he was blessed with "two very devoted people" for parents. "We had a big back yard and I was always putting on a carnival or circus, puppet show or magic show," and charging pennies for admission, he was quoted as saying in a 1974 *Filmograph* retrospective on his life (Vol. IV, No. 2).

When he wasn't playing in the back yard, Hank also went to see a lot of movies, recalled childhood friend Robert Head, who later visited the star twice in California, in a 2002 phone interview.

"Hank and I were especially close at and since my cousins lived on his street, we played a lot together after school. I remember we saw a lot of movies and especially remember Hank convincing his parents to let us see *Captains Courageous* (starring fellow Milwaukeean Spencer Tracy).

"We'd been playing outside and decided we wanted to see the movie again. But when we asked his mom, she wondered, 'didn't you see that already?' Hank admitted that we had but then, to convince her, he launched into reciting a whole scene from the movie. Well, his mom was so impressed that she let us go see it."

Hank loved movies, Head recalled. "In fact, whenever we'd be talking about what we were going to be when we grew up, I'd always say 'a major league baseball player,' and Hank would always say, 'a movie star.' Well, he sure succeeded in that dream," noted Head, who became a successful Realtor in the Milwaukee area.

His childhood friend always enjoyed performing, "being in front of or just with people," noted Head, who added that he was one of Hank's first costars. "We were in a school play together. I was dressed up as a girl and jumped into his lap, which caused quite a laugh from the audience!"

McKinnies recalled how excited he was as a boy to have the



Jeffrey Hunter stands near an athletic field during his high school days. Photo courtesy of the Hunter family.

opportunity to play a part or even entertain. As a child, he even saved up enough Ralston cereal box tops to get a Tom Mix makeup kit so he could dress up as different characters, he told Charles for a June 1952 *Modern Screen* article.

"I'd put on clown white and nose putty and make up stories and play all the characters," McKinnies, then named Jeffrey Hunter, recalled. "I'd act out the comic strips. I had a dream world in my room."

One time, when he was 12, such antics got him into hot water when he dressed as a monster, ran up the "dusk street and knocked on the front door of a neighbor's house. The woman who answered took one look, screamed, slammed the door and locked it," Charles reported. "Pushing his luck, Henry tore around to the back door and banged. This time the man of the house confronted him angrily, ripped away the fright wig, putty and false eyebrows and barked ... 'beat it right home this minute ... If you keep it up, some day you're going to get shot!'"

The young McKinnies was also acting in summer productions of the Wisconsin Children's Theater in Milwaukee and, when a New York summer stock company, the Port Players, moved from Port Washington, Wisconsin, to Whitefish Bay in 1942, McKinnies went on stage as a walk-on. He acted with the group for three summers in such productions as *Dinner at Eight* and *Boy Meets Girl*. He also reportedly shared the stage on occasion with a budding actress from Milwaukee named Charlotte Rae.

It was in these roles that McKinnies earned his first official review in July 18, 1943, *Milwaukee Journal* coverage of a Port Players production. "Important too in the cast is Henry McKinnies, a Whitefish Bay youth who this week has his first important role with the Port Players. He gives an excellent performance."

Besides the stage, McKinnies performed on Milwaukee radio as a pre-teen and teenager. According to his mother, it was Milwaukee radio personality and later *Milwaukee Journal* writer Larry Lawrence who unknowingly drew her son into radio.

In a July 2, 1951, *Milwaukee Journal* article, Lawrence relayed Edith McKinnies's story of her son's start in show business. She had taken Hank to watch Lawrence's show *Radio Rodeo* performed at the WTMJ studio. Lawrence had picked the boy from the audience to come say something into the microphone. McKinnies was too shy and froze at the thought of saying something over the air. When they returned home he told his mom, "If I ever get the chance to talk on radio again, I'm going to do it."

And he did. McKinnies's radio career started with roles in a fairy tale radio show narrated by Ann Ross and participating in WTMJ's *Children's Theater of the Air*. As a high school senior, McKinnies was also on radio in *Those Who Serve*, earning \$12.50 a show and eventually a radio scholarship to Northwestern University.

When he wasn't performing in the community, McKinnies was on the school stage. In high school, he starred in many school plays and musicals including as the lead character, Henry Ingalls, in *The Goose Hangs High*. McKinnies also reportedly played the guitar, banjo, and piano.

In an eighth grade Whitefish Bay production of *The Birds' Christmas Carol*, McKinnies performed with a girl, Sally, whom he had a crush on at the time. The romantic scenes he was to play with her were reportedly spoiled by friends who hollered catcalls from the audience.

McKinnies, who was class president his sophomore year, student body president his senior year and an American Legion "outstanding boy" award recipient, was a popular student at Whitefish Bay High School.

"He was truly a nice person, sometimes almost too nice. He was handsome and very popular in school and popular with the girls. He dated a girl for quite a while who was a year ahead of him in school, Mary Mockley," Head notes.

McKinnies was also a good athlete and had dreams of pursuing a football career.

"I had only one ambition in life, college football," the actor told Charles in 1953.

At age 11, he won a statewide punt, pass and dropkick contest. From seventh grade on, he played fullback on Whitefish Bay school teams and was co-captain with Elmer Noonan of the championship high school football team.

While friend and high school teammate Paul Farley agreed McKinnies was a "strong athlete and good football player," he notes that his friend also had a "very protective mother. He was the only fellow at that time that would wear a mouth guard. His mom worried so much that, one time, when he broke his nose during a game, she went charging right into the locker room."

Despite his mother's best efforts, McKinnies did get hurt, breaking a nose, a rib and collarbone before eventually splintering an arch in his ankle late in his senior year.

"He didn't let injuries stop him from being in the game how-

ever," recalls Head, who also played on the team. "Hank just became a cheerleader, and a good one."

It was the splintered arch, essentially a football-career-ending injury then, that led Hunter to chase other ambitions. His idea was to take his love of performing to a career in radio. He'd won the scholarship to pursue that dream at Northwestern University but, when he graduated from high school in 1945, America was still fighting World War II.

McKinnies delayed his dreams and enlisted in the Navy, hoping to gain radar training. However, the Navy had enough radar men and sent McKinnies back for primary training with the idea that he'd be sent to fight in the Pacific if needed. The war ended in August 1945, and McKinnies' naval career didn't last long after that. He had worked as a radio technician and was working in teletype exchange at the Ninth Naval District Headquarters when the seaman contracted the measles. He had serious complications from the illness and received a medical discharge in 1946.

As soon as he was able, McKinnies enrolled at Northwestern, majoring in radio and speech and minoring in English and psychology. In between studies, he acted in university plays and on radio shows. During school breaks, he joined stock groups, acting one summer in Pennsylvania. And, he got his first taste of movie work when he was featured in a bit role in 1949's 16mm production of *Julius Caesar* starring Charlton Heston.

After college graduation in 1949, McKinnies headed for California in the car his father bought him. He went west not to pursue a Hollywood film career but to get his master's degree in radio at UCLA with hopes of being a radio actor and/or teacher some day. The radio actor found movie success so quickly that he could not find time to not return to the Badger State for nearly two years.

"I really worked to get practical experience along with educational training," he told O'Leary in 1953, adding he chose radio because it seemed a good field for beginning actors to break into. "I studied all phases of it, taking masters classes to teach radio 'if I didn't click behind the mike,'" he explained.

McKinnies was well on his way to completing that training when, in 1950, he was discovered by not one, but two, talent scouts on opening night of the UCLA production of *All My Sons*.

"I honestly thought it was some kind of gag at first. After all two talent scouts—one from Paramount and one from Fox studios—was a little too much to take. ... I figured some of my pals in the cast were trying to pull a fast one on me. Real honest-to-good-

ness talent scouts couldn't be interested in me!" he told Martha Buckley in a 1952 story for *Motion Picture & Television*.

Paramount brought him in for a screen test, setting him opposite established actor Ed Begley, who played the father in the original production of the play.

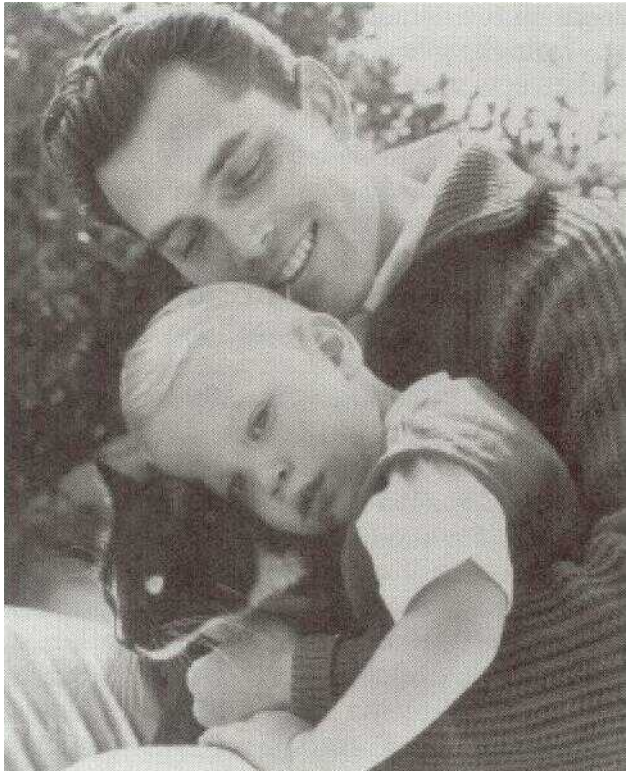
"I'd never been before a movie camera and I was scared," he told the *Milwaukee Journal* in a July 30, 1950 article. "I

was so awestruck at first that I gawked wherever I went. Once on the Paramount lot, I saw Milwaukee's Nancy Olson, whom I've never met. Although I passed right by her, I got cold feet at the last minute and didn't even speak to her."

For all his nerves, McKinnies's screen test went so well that Paramount put him on option right away, to the reported disappointment of Fox Studios.

However, when Paramount inadvertently let its option lapse, Fox jumped in and had McKinnies on a plane for New York within forty-eight hours to shoot his first film, *Fourteen Hours*, where he plays a stock boy who meets Debra Paget in a crowd watching a man preparing to jump from a tall building.

After shooting, McKinnies's Fox agent called and said the actor could stay but the name had to go and, with publicity deadlines on the new film approaching fast, the studio needed that new name within the hour. So, the Midwest actor reportedly wrote



Jeffrey Hunter and son Todd. Photo courtesy of the Hunter family.

down all the names he could think of on index cards. He pulled two from the pile — one said Jeffrey, the other Hunter — and Fox had its newest star. Jeffrey Hunter was soon playing a G.I. in *Call me Mister* and a university Casanova in *Take Care of My Little Girl*.

His parents had visited their star son on the set of *Take Care of My Little Girl* in 1951 and watched its Milwaukee premiere with *Milwaukee Journal* writer Lawrence in July, 1951. Though proud of her son's achievements, Edith McKinnies told Lawrence that the Casanova role was "a terrible role he's playing. It's absolutely against Hank's nature. He isn't like that at all."

And, the mother lamented, "I wish they'd give him a haircut."

The next three years, the McKinnieses watched their son often team up with Debra Paget and/or Robert Wagner in such movies as *Belles on Their Toes* (1952), *White Feather* (1955), and *Princess of the Nile* (1954) or star in such Western flicks as *Three Young Texans* (1954) and *Red Skies of Montana* (1952).

By the time Hunter returned home for Christmas in 1952, he was a genuine movie star, and autograph seekers descended on Whitefish Bay. Hunter was also a new father, so when 12-year-old Susan Randolph handed him a stuffed dog, he thought it was a gift for his infant son. Hunter did not realize the animal was her "autograph hound" and she merely wanted his signature until he returned to Hollywood, according to a May 24, 1953, *Milwaukee Journal* article.

The actor remedied the misunderstanding when he returned to Milwaukee in May of 1953 to accept the achiever of the year award from Junior Achievement Inc. in Milwaukee. Hunter had been a Junior Achievement member while working at WTMJ radio in high school.

After accepting the award and accolades from some two thousand fans, Hunter said he had something to give back to one fan. He personally delivered the autograph hound back to Susan, complete with his signature and more than a few extra autographs. "Signers included: Anthony Dexter, Joanne Dru, Arthur Kennedy, Rock Hudson, Audie Murphy, Wanda Hendrix, Joel McCrea, Marge and Gower Champion, John Ireland, Marilyn Maxwell, Ann Blyth, Phyllis Kirk, Steve Cochran, Peggy Lee, Tony Curtis, Janet Leigh, Peter Lawford, Polly Bergen, Dane Clark and Monica Lewis," the *Milwaukee Journal* reported.

Joining Hunter on this trip home were his son Christopher and wife Barbara Rush.

Hunter had noticed the beautiful actress at his first screen test,

and the two met again thanks to mutual friends. They had their first date on the beach, though it was no "day at the beach," as Hunter reportedly took the actress out in a rubber raft where she waited while he speared fish.

In the 1952 interview with Charles, Rush said their next date was more traditional, with dinner at the Santa Ynez Inn and a walk along Pacific Palisades where Hank (as she also called him) said, "Nice Spot. Someday I'd like to build a house here. That is, if you'll marry me."

Rush didn't answer right away. But, a few months later, while Hunter was in the Virgin Islands shooting *The Frogmen* and she was in Arizona shooting *Devil's Canyon*, they called each other and decided to elope. They were married December 1, 1950, had a two-day honeymoon and went back to their sets.

In their first sixteen months of marriage, the newlyweds were reportedly together just eight months because of their hectic filming schedules. When they were together, they settled into and furnished a two-bedroom Westwood Village apartment and had Hollywood friends like Debbie Reynolds and Robert Wagner, John and Pati Derek, Nancy Gates and Bill Hayes, and Peter Hansen and Mitzi Gaynor over for dinner.

They both enjoyed singing, dancing, and playing the piano. Hunter took lessons on the organ, an instrument Rush already played well. Hunter, a skilled hobby carpenter, also set about fixing up the apartment, building cabinets and a milk can lamp for the living room, and pursued his other hobby — black and white photography.

"Jeff is the rare combination of scholar and athlete," noted Rush, who also called her husband "out-going, out-giving and even-tempered" in a July 1953 article for *Motion Picture and Television* magazine. "He's a fine pianist, talented artist and in contrast a great skier, swimmer, and skin diver."

He was also a fine father, she professed, after giving birth to their son, Christopher, on August 29, 1952, just days before Hunter had to leave for England to shoot *Sailor of the King*, one of the many roles Hunter chose for the "man against the odds" theme.

When he did finally get to hold his firstborn again, Hunter confessed to O'Leary that he was a bit nervous about the meeting.

"The first time I picked him up, I had the horrible feeling he might break but, by the third time, I had a good grip and I didn't worry any more. I understand all fathers go through that. The first time I lifted him I was also afraid he might cry because I was

a stranger. He didn't."

Hunter worked hard at being a father, he told several reporters over the years, wanting to give his children a good foundation from which to follow their dreams.

"I believe the best that parents can give a child is a solid background, an unprejudiced look at things ... (and) the advantages that make for sound health and good education, with understanding," he told O'Leary in 1953.

While Hunter worked hard at fatherhood, he worked equally hard at his chosen craft, studying acting as he had radio and always working to improve.

"It's fun to work and improve," he told Charles. "I don't see why just because you're an actor, you have to be a screwball too."

Hunter had a strong work ethic and went beyond Hollywood protocol to ensure he was always acting somehow, somewhere. He was often quoted as stressing that a man has to be "well prepared when old man opportunity comes knocking," and often has to "make his own opportunities."

"The whole trouble in this profession here is complacency ... (actors) sit back and wait for a good part ... (or) hope for the best. That's no way to work for the future. In every other profession, a man has to go out and sell himself. Why not acting?" Hunter asked in a September 29, 1956, article for *Picturegoer* magazine.

Hunter often put his action where his talk was, working hard to get roles he wanted and to keep working in the profession he loved. Case in point was all that the budding actor went through to get the role he wanted in a John Wayne movie, *The Searchers*, being directed by John Ford in 1955.

Hunter first called Ford and was rebuffed by the director for being "nowhere near the type," the actor recalled in the *Picturegoer* article. "The next day I showed up at his office. I felt I should at least try to look something like a half Indian. I slicked back my black hair, wore a very open-necked sports shirt to display a healthy tan. When I was shown into his office, Ford said, 'take your shirt off.' I did just that and he grunted, 'I'll let you know,' and I thought this was just another of those Hollywood brush-offs. But then he said, 'don't cut your hair until you hear from me.' Somehow I felt I was in.

And in he was. "I was told I had arrived when they gave me almost as much ammunition as they gave John Wayne in *The Searchers*" Hunter often quipped.

Released in 1956, *The Searchers* was a great box office success,

and Hunter was riding the wave of his hard work, appearing in five top pictures that year: *The Proud Ones*, *Gun for a Coward* with fellow Wisconsinite Fred MacMurray, Walt Disney's Civil War drama *The Great Locomotive Chase* and *A Kiss Before Dying*, a suspense thriller with Robert Wagner.

At the height of his career, Hunter had a brush with death beneath the waves of the Mediterranean Sea, he confessed in a May 1954 article, "Towards the Sun" that he wrote for *Modern Screen* magazine. Hunter explained that while snorkeling during a break from shooting, he had noticed a curious cave beneath the water and swam into it to investigate. When the actor turned around a few seconds later, he realized the cave ceiling was actually tilted downward and that he had been swimming further away from the surface than he realized.

"Don't let anyone tell you that a man can't sweat underwater," he wrote. "Around and behind me was murk and deep shadow. Ahead, through an opening, was sunlight streaming down ... like the light that used to fall on the altar of the church where I served as an acolyte. ... I knew again that for me there could never be any doubt. The difference between being in the church and out of it was like the difference between being in the sunshine which now warmed me and being in that cave."

While his faith was stronger than ever and his **career was on** solid footing, the Hunters' marriage was failing.

In divorce papers, Rush told Associated Press reporters in 1955 that it was all the time the two had spent apart chasing careers that finally separated them. They were divorced in March 1955.

Hunter echoed Rush's explanation to The Associated Press's Bob Thomas, saying, "We rarely fought; we just disagreed. Two careers and long separations never helped a marriage."

Still, Hunter didn't give up on the ideal and two years later married actress Joan Bartlett, whom he called "Dusty" and met on a movie set on July 7, 1957. The actress had a son, Steele, and Hunter soon adopted him. After a miscarriage in 1960, the Hunters added two boys of their own: Henry Herman "Todd Hunter" McKinnies III and Scott Hunter, to the family they brought to the marriage (Christopher and Steele).

The marriage got off to a somewhat rocky start as both became quite ill with hepatitis after unknowingly drinking rank water on a ship home from Europe.

Meanwhile, Hunter costarred with the Milwaukee actor he grew up watching, Spencer Tracy, in *The Last Hurrah* in 1958. In some

respects, the title was foreshadowing Hunter's movie career. His Hollywood popularity began to wane in the 1960s.

The same year as his second wedding, Hunter made his first film for Wisconsin director Nicholas Ray, *The True Story of Jesse James*. That introduction led the way to the role for which Hunter is most famous, that of Jesus Christ in *The King of Kings* (1961).

Ray told *Modern Screen* magazine in 1961 that he specifically wanted Hunter to play Christ for his "robustness, masculine grace, peaceful visage — and his eyes."

"It is possible to do almost anything with makeup, but only Jeff Hunter has those eyes that have a penetrating depth, a mystical effect," he explained.

It was a part that several Hollywood friends warned him not to take. "They said that actors who play Jesus have a hard time getting other roles," Hunter explained in a January 30, 1965, interview with Joan Schmitt of the *Los Angeles Citizen News*. "But, I felt this was a myth. After all, how can you be typecast as Christ? There just aren't that many Jesus roles around."

Hunter was apprehensive about trying to capture the world's most well-known, studied, and revered religious figure. "You try to get the feel of any role, but it's much more difficult in the case of Christ because every one has their own personal image of Him. It's a role you take on knowing that no matter how you play it, you are going to disappoint many."

To help him better capture the holy man, Hunter enlisted the help of former Wisconsin teacher-turned-movie star Agnes Moorehead as his dialogue coach.

Nothing completely prepared the actor for what portraying such a significant figure would mean, he confessed in the Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer book, *Samuel Bronston's Production of King of Kings*.

"When I appeared in my robes, I saw to my astonishment that many dropped to their knees and made the sign of the cross ... They knew perfectly well, of course, that I was merely an actor. Still, I was the living representation of a figure they had regarded from childhood with most sacred awe. It was then that I realized what I had undertaken," he said.

While audiences found Hunter's resulting portrayal warm and sincere and even the Vatican reportedly approved of his reverent performance, some religious scholars were upset that some of Christ's most significant miracles were not depicted and felt it inappropriate for a divorced man and "Hollywood hunk" to play

Jesus.

Even the reviewers themselves were mixed. In November of 1961, *Films in Review* critic Edward Connor wrote, "The production as a whole is in good taste. Nicholas Ray's direction is effective and sometimes it is inventive ... and Jeffrey Hunter's face is made up and photographed to be, at least to my mind and heart, the kind of Christ image that stirs mankind."

Connor then added that Hunter was miscast as Christ. "It was painful for me to see him struggle amateurishly with the greatest of all roles."

After a bit of a film-making lag thereafter, Hunter's career picked up again when Warner Bros. signed him to a two year contract in 1963 and picked up a pilot of a Western TV show that Hunter's own production company, Hunter Enterprises, had produced. The result was an hour long show, *Temple Houston*, in which Hunter starred for thirty episodes until the show's cancellation in 1964.

Though Hunter hoped his production company would become his bread-winning enterprise, the actor continued filming movies. In 1962, Hunter played a lone man doing righteous battle in *No Man Is an Island* and played a soldier storming the beaches of Normandy in *The Longest Day*. He also played in *The Man From Galveston* in 1963 (a forerunner to the *Temple Houston* series) and *Gold for the Caesars* in 1965. But Hunter's career was leading toward television. He is said to have lobbied to portray Mike Brady in *The Brady Bunch* TV series and he was cast in an NBC series, *Journey Into Fear* (1966), that never aired.

In between, Hunter also did guest appearances on TV and radio programs, including: on NBC's *The George Gobel Show* in a live comedy sketch February 5, 1955, as well as on the network's radio program, *Bob Hope Presents The Chrysler Theater* in 1963 and 1964. Hunter also appeared in an episode of ABC's *Green Hornet* and two episodes each of *The F.B.I.* and *Insight*.

Hunter also was cast as the first captain of the U.S.S. Enterprise in a new, cutting-edge 1964 TV series pilot called *Star Trek*. He was intrigued with the concept of the series, he told *Los Angeles Citizen News* reporter Joan Schmitt January 30, 1965. "We run into prehistoric worlds, contemporary societies and civilizations far more developed than our own. It's a great format because writers have a free hand — they can have us land on a monster-infested planet or deal in human relations involving the large number of people who live together on this gigantic ship," he said.

Gene Roddenberry later told the Hunter family that he wanted

Hunter to play the lead role in the series because the Wisconsinite had the strength and sensitivity combination that Roddenberry wanted in his *Star Trek* captain.

After the pilot, Hunter opted out of playing the *Star Trek* captain in order to have more time to do movies, he told J.D. Spiro of *The Milwaukee Journal* July 4, 1965, when he was back visiting his parents' home, then on Skyline Lane in River Hills, a Milwaukee suburb. "Had I accepted it, I would have been tied up much longer than I care to be. I love doing motion pictures and expect to be as busy as I want to be in them," he explained. Others have said that his wife Dusty may have also contributed to the choice.

Had Hunter stayed in the TV series, the actor may finally have been able to carve out the home time he wanted with his family.

All the required traveling to exotic set locations is not as glamorous as it sounds, Hunter told Spiro. "I found you spend so much time on the job, working six days a week, that you don't do much else. Paris, Rome, Madrid — they're great for the tourist but as an actor in a picture, I might as well have been in Oshkosh."

Hunter added that traveling was definitely the downside of the business he loved. He hated being away for extended periods from his family.

"It was hard on our young sons. If we took them with us, (to locations, especially Europe the last five years), it made necessary, for one thing, changing schools. If we didn't, then we had to be parents by long distance, which is far from satisfactory," he explained.

From 1966 to 1969, Hunter's film career moved mostly to Europe, where he starred in such films as *Joe Navidad* (1967), *A Witch Without a Broom* (1968), and *Viva America!* (1969). He also had a starring role in the Bob Hope and Phyllis Diller movie *The Private Navy of Sergeant O'Farrell* in 1968.

In 1967 he and Dusty divorced, his wife charging that Hunter drank too much. In an *E! Mysteries and Scandals* TV program, Hunter's son Christopher, now a professional photographer, confirmed that by this point his father had a drinking problem that was "painful to see in someone you loved so much."

Hunter found fleeting happiness again in the arms of *General Hospital* soap opera actress Emily McLaughlin whom he met at a holiday party. After a whirlwind courtship, Hunter married his third wife Feb. 4, 1969 in Juarez, Mexico, with McLaughlin's son Bobby along for the ceremony. With fewer film roles and increasing alimony, money was tight and the newlyweds accepted the

wedding gift of a car from Hunter's parents.

The two returned to a California home Hunter himself had partially rebuilt, adding rooms, a fireplace, and winding staircase.

The newlyweds were soon on their way to Spain, where Hunter was filming his latest movie. Hunter arrived with terrible burns on his legs suffered when juice from a pan of turkey they'd picked up at a restaurant the day before leaving the U.S., spilled and soaked his pants in hot grease, McLaughlin recalled for a *Movieland & Times* article in June 1970.

It was an ominous start to what would prove a tragic ending for Jeffrey Hunter.

While on set in Spain, "a car window blew up in his face instead of going the other way. He was badly hit on the head and received a bad concussion.... (A few days later), a friend jokingly karate chopped him on the chin and his head hit a door and he was hurt pretty badly," McLaughlin recalled adding that through it all "Jeff kept insisting that he'd be okay."

Things went wrong with the filming itself, and the producers ran out of money to pay the Spanish crew. Hunter reportedly refused to be paid if the crew wasn't and returned to California.

"On the plane home, Jeff suddenly went into shock," McLaughlin recalled. "He couldn't speak. He could hardly move. We were met by an ambulance and put on an immediate flight to Los Angeles. ... Jeff was rushed to the Good Samaritan Hospital" but doctors could find nothing seriously wrong outside of his concussion and a displaced vertebra.

A month later, while he was taking it easy at home, Jeffrey Hunter suffered a massive inter-cranial hemorrhage, fell down a short flight of stairs, hit his head on the banister, and broke his skull. The 42-year-old died in surgery fourteen hours later on May 27, 1969, while doctors were trying to repair the fracture.

At the time of his death, the one-time Whitefish Bay altar boy and football star, had made fifty films and earned himself a reputation as a gracious, good-mannered, intelligent actor who was so much more than just a pretty face.

As movie critic Leonard Maltin said, Jeffrey Hunter was "almost absurdly handsome (and while) he probably couldn't have held his own with Olivier, his screen persona combined virility and sensitivity in a way atypical of most Hollywood leading men."

His impact on his fans, especially women who fell for the blue-eyed star, lasted for decades. His official fan club continued into the 1990s and, according to Whitefish Bay High School yearbook

adviser Paul Fehlhaber, fans still occasionally call wanting a copy of Hunter's yearbook photo. He added that for a time the school got some especially "weird requests" from a small group of fans who "were like a cult." They thought there was "something significant about him because he played Jesus and then died young," the adviser noted.

Well beyond his charm and good looks, his friends and costars consistently remembered Hunter as the nice, hardworking Midwest boy who grew up to be the nice, hardworking actor who had earned the respect and friendship of those around him.

And he never lost the respect of his friends back home.

"Hank just enjoyed being with people. He had a great way about him that way. He was so nice that it would be very hard to say anything against him, and to this day, he was one of the nicest men I've ever known," said lifelong friend Robert Head on behalf of so many who knew the blue-eyed star.

"In fact, Jeffrey Hunter nearly always played a character that portrayed something positive because he was positive. And, I like that the image of my friend which carries into eternity is one of goodness."

ON SCREEN

Look into Whitefish Bay actor Jeffrey Hunter's famous eyes on the big screen in the following movies:

Viva America! (1969)

Super Colt 38 (1969)

Frau Wirtin hat auch einen Grafen (1968)

Find a Place to Die (1968)

The Private Navy of Sgt. O'Farrell (1968)

A Witch Without a Broom (1967)

Joe Navidad (1967)

Custer of the West (1967)

A Guide for the Married Man (1967)

Dimension 5 (1966)

Strange Portrait (1966) never released

Murieta (1965)

Star Trek (1965) TV series pilot

Brainstorm (1965)

Gold for the Caesars (1963)

The Man From Galveston (1963)

The Longest Day (1962)

No Man Is an Island (1962)

King of Kings (1961)

Man-Trap (1961)

Hell to Eternity (1960)

Key Witness (1960)

Sergeant Rutledge (1960)

Count Five and Die (1958)

In Love and War (1958)

The Last Hurrah (1958)

MardiGras (1958)

No Down Payment (1957)

The True Story of Jesse James (1957)

The Way to the Gold (1957)

The Great Locomotive Chase (1956)

Gun for a Coward (1956)

A Kiss Before Dying (1956)

The Proud Ones (1956)

The Searchers (1956)

Seven Angry Men (1955)

Seven Cities of Gold (1955)

White Feather (1955)

Princess of the Nile (1954)

Three Young Texans (1954)

Single Handed (1953)

Belles on Their Toes (1952)

Dreamboat (1952)

Lure of the Wilderness (1952)

Red Skies of Montana (1952)

Fourteen Hours (1951)

The Frogmen (1951)

Take Care of My Little Girl (1951)

Call Me Mister (1951)

Julius Caesar (1950)