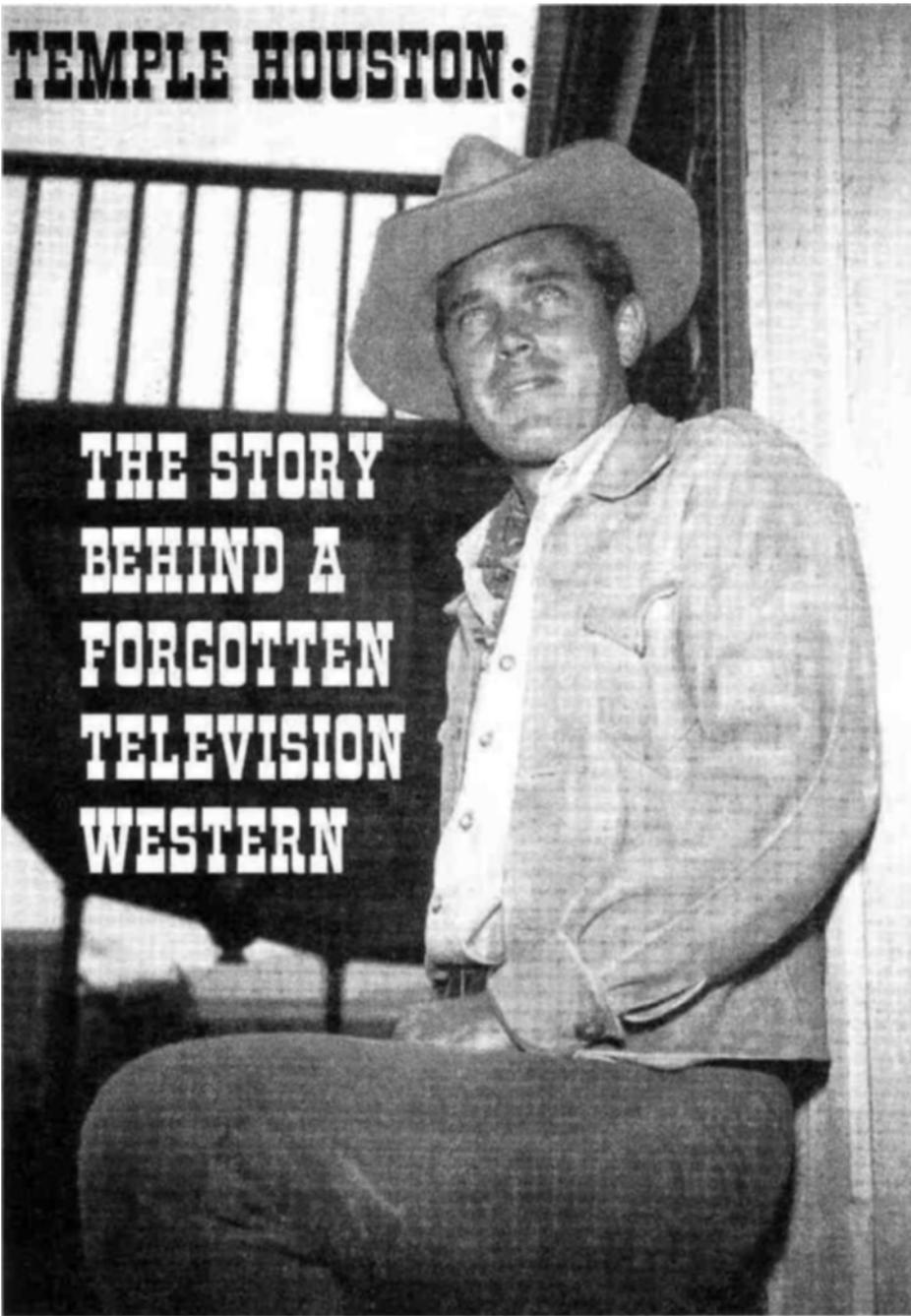


TEMPLE HOUSTON:

THE STORY BEHIND A FORGOTTEN TELEVISION WESTERN



by Glenn A. Mosley

In the middle of July 1963, actor Jeffrey Hunter had reason to feel upbeat. For one thing, he and his family were vacationing in Acapulco. For another, things seemed right in his acting career as well.

Director John Ford had just hired Hunter as the fifth star of Ford's new Western, *The Long Flight* (released as *Cheyenne Autumn*). He'd join a cast that already included James Stewart and Richard Widmark in what would be his fourth film with the great director.

That news had come on the heels of an announcement from Warner Brothers that

Hunter had signed a long term contract for film and television work, beginning with a television Western pilot shot that March, *Temple Houston*.

The pilot focused on the exploits of lawyer Temple Houston, son of famed Texan Sam Houston. Hunter not only played the lead but co-produced as well. NBC targeted the series for the 1964-65 season. Two additional announcements from Warner Brothers also guaranteed Jeff work. First, the studio said it would add 30 minutes of story to the 57-minute original pilot and release the new film overseas. Second, a new test film, this one 90 minutes long, in color, and doubling as a second pilot and TV movie, would

be shot and partly financed by NBC.

Between the Ford Western and the Temple Houston Westerns for Warners and NBC, Jeff Hunter had plenty of work ahead.

Then, suddenly, everything changed. Warner Brothers tracked Hunter down in Acapulco and asked him to return to California because *Temple Houston* was going into production immediately, and the season premiere was less than two months away. Therefore, no additional footage, no second pilot, no year's preparation on the series, and no film for John Ford. *Temple Houston* would premiere on September 19, 1963.

What had happened? For starters, a dispute between the network and the producers of a new crime series starring film veteran Robert Taylor led to the plug being pulled on that series. It had been in production for weeks, and four episodes were in the can. And now NBC was most confident that *Temple Houston*, of all available pilots, could be put together into series form in the time allowed.

The first film rolled on the series on August 7. Warner TV Chief Jack Webb said at the time, "This is a tough one. But with the research we have we'll make it — and it will be good."

There was nothing usable on film. James Coburn, one of the stars of the original pilot, had bowed out to concentrate on his film career. Jack Elam had been brought in to co-star, but only a few test shots with Elam and Hunter, written by James Wamer Bellah and directed by William Conrad, had been filmed, back on June 13th.

That August and September, as filming commenced on the initial episodes (including the very first episode of the series, "The Twisted Rope," a Jack Turley rewrite of a Bellah script), the scene was chaotic. Newspaper columnist Terrance O'Flaherty visited the set and noted that, "Hunter is a genial sort of chap and seemed completely unruffled by the fact that the writers are handing out new pages of script. This has changed not only the lines but the condition of one of the principals — a character who is supposed to be carrying a child — being made un-pregnant at the sudden change of a writer's pen."

Producer James Lydon told *Western Clippings* magazine in 1997 that the first scripts were written in about a week and filming started the following Monday, with the studio shuttling Jeff and Jack Elam from one

set to the other, as shooting continued on two different episodes (none of which bode well for the series).

But there was another problem, one which star Jeffrey Hunter later blamed for much of the series' problems finding viewers. At the request of the network, there had been a conceptual change in the series.

Back in March, when the original pilot was being filmed, Hunter called Houston "a colorful and eloquent man who dressed like a plantation owner. The show is a different kind of Western, a whodunit on horseback. And it has humor in it." Hunter described the show as "pure entertainment" and said he liked the premise and the character he was playing.

But NBC took away the humor and the irony, and got a more straightforward Western, at least at the start. Certainly, almost every series changes drastically from concept to air (*Temple Houston*, for example, had been on the drawing board at Warners since 1957, with concepts outlined as late as 1961). But in this case, Hunter felt that the network was dead wrong. "A series of circumstances changed the whole concept of the show dangerously," he said later. "The big joke around town was that it was about a synagogue in Texas... It was conceived in humor and delivered in dead seriousness."

Temple Houston opened to mixed reviews. *Variety* said the program was "neither a fast paced actioner, nor an absorbing... character study" while *The Hollywood Reporter* called the show "an odds-on favorite."

But the odds-on favorite never found its



photo courtesy of Judy Maher

audience. When the Nielsen ratings came out on the season's 32 new programs that October, *Temple Houston* ranked 31st. It was a dismal ratings failure.

Those ratings prompted more changes in the format. Now, there would be less courtroom drama and more humor. *The New York Times* noted that "Temple decided to give up the bar and move to the range. The son of Sam Houston is only occasionally heard saying, 'Gentlemen of the Jury.'"

The new format officially arrived with the December 12th episode, "Fracas at Kiowa Flats," and was duly noted by *TV Guide* and TV critics, who accused the show of trying to be another *Maverick*. "NBC decided to switch back to the tongue-in-cheek approach," Hunter said later. "But it was too late."

Temple Houston lasted one full season, ending with 26 one hour, black and white episodes, with new episodes airing through April, 1964, and repeats right through to the following September. Along the way, episodes featured Houston defending a woman



prizefighter, a circus elephant, and elderly men who'd once fought with Sam Houston.

Performers and directors alike seemed to enjoy the experience despite the production chaos and the format changes. Actress Julie Parrish guest-starred in "The Guardian," and described herself as "a kid who had a big crush on Jeffrey Hunter. I thought his eyes were so, so wonderful." Co-star Jack Elam told *Western Clippings* magazine in 1997 that he and Hunter "never had a harsh word. Hunter was a great guy." Director Alvin Ganzer said Hunter "was a pleasant guy, easy to work with, and a good, solid actor who was good in Westerns and never gave you any trouble."

For his part, Hunter lamented over what might have been. "... I was sorry it went off, because if we had been given a chance it might have made it... when I said I'd do it, there was a foundation of humor to the show.



photo courtesy of Judy Maher

There was action, suspense, girls. But suddenly the network wanted a serious show... Those shows at the end had humor. Action was built around town characters.... But I enjoyed working on the series and learned a lot about TV." (Hunter had formed a production company to produce the program).

For the 1964-65 season, *Temple Houston* was replaced by *Daniel Boone*, which would struggle a bit during its first year, but was given a lease on life and remained on the air for six seasons. Hunter himself would make a guest star appearance on the December 1, 1966 episode, "Requiem for Craw Green."

Warners tried to recoup some of its investment and boost the television series at the same time by releasing the first *Temple Houston* pilot to theaters in December 1963, and January, 1964. New dialogue was looped in, changing the lead character's name to Timothy Higgins. A curious move, to say the least — if viewers weren't going to watch it for free every Thursday at 7:30 p.m., why would they pay to watch it in the theater?

The *Temple Houston* experience says a lot about the world of network television — the stress of ratings, money, and corporate pressures. And sometimes, as in the case of *Temple Houston*, these pressures come to bear on a project and the impact is largely negative. What started with high hopes ended as a failure. "It must have really confused the viewers," Jeffrey Hunter said.