

# Earl Hamner

## STILL SETTING AN EXAMPLE FOR FAMILY VALUES

When I stretched my hand out to greet Earl Hamner, the hug caught me off guard. As a typical Midwesterner, I don't hug people I've never met before, no matter how famous and no matter how friendly.

But the sincerity with which he gave the hug was exactly what I should have expected out of the creator, writer and executive producer of "The Waltons." It may have seemed out of place in Hollywood (even in Cincinnati, for that matter), but it was a charming sign that Earl Hamner, CCM '48, has managed to keep that inner John Boy alive, even after all these years in the entertainment field.

Much of that down-home feeling, from growing up in the Blue Ridge Mountains during the Depression, is still a part of Earl. Besides an ever-so-slight accent (just enough to recall his voice as the narrator on "The Waltons"), he still retains a great sense of humor, a love of telling stories and the fre-

quent use of the adjectives "adorable" and "darling."

He is excited about his two newest books — a memoir titled "Hollywood Zoo," due out this fall, as well as "Emory Goes Hollywood," a murder mystery that he is writing with a partner. In the latter, he plans to develop a recurring character who will appear in sequels. That is, "if I live long enough," he says with a hearty laugh.

"I'm 73 years old and doddering around on my last legs." A wide grin crosses his face, which certainly bears no signs of his years.

Earl's life is full of such positive news. But the sad news is that he has plenty of time to write books because the Emmy Award winner has largely resigned from television. He is tired of all the sex and violence. He is tired of pitching wholesome stories that don't get picked up. He's tired of the industry abandoning family values.

Besides doing a "Waltons" special

once a year, he says, "I've given up on television . . . or television has given up on me. It's an industry for young people. I take in ideas, and they say there is no audience for them."

His latest rejection came for an "adorable" show called "Foundation," about a family who leaves L.A. because of the drugs and crime and moves to the family homestead in Virginia. They find nothing left but a chimney and a foundation, upon which they struggle to rebuild their lives. "I was told it was too soft," he says.

He shares his frustration with colleagues who, at a similar age, have all faced the same kind of rejection. "I know what it is: The programmers are told that everything has to be hard-edged. 'Hard-edged' is a euphemism for saying we want to shock the viewer . . . that there should be more emphasis on sex and violence."

The man who prompted American families to yell goodnight to each other after turning out the lights has no patience with that negative attitude today.

"The pathetic thing is this medium could be used to elevate people," he continues, "to celebrate what is noble in us. We could educate, ennoble, illuminate the world, cause wonder and astonishment."

Striving for those virtues is not some unattainable ideal. He knows. He's done it. During the eight seasons in which "The Waltons" aired regularly on CBS — and for the 17 subsequent years in which reruns have played every night somewhere in the world — Earl has heard moving stories of how the show touched people's hearts.

The most heart-rending is from a young homeless runaway who was considering suicide when she stopped at a shelter and happened to watch

## PROFILE

photo/Deborah Rieselman



**Partial credits:** "Spencer's Mountain," "The Waltons," "Falcon Crest," "Snowy River: The McGregor Saga," film adaptation of "Charlotte's Web."

**Recent work:** Just completed writing "The Hollywood Zoo," expected out in September. Currently working on next Waltons TV special.

**Favorite fan:** Hollywood Alumnus Brad Look, featured on page 20, grew up on a farm in Peoria, Ill., with a large family who followed the Waltons' tradition of bidding each other goodnight after getting tucked into bed.

**Trivia quiz:** Name all 11 Waltons.  
(Answer is on page 39.)

"The Waltons." Years later, she wrote Earl to say that the show encouraged her to call her family and go home.

"I found that quite gratifying," he says, showing modest reserve. "People who watched it found support for their belief that their families were valuable. The show affirmed it, gave them substance. Broadcasters have a tremendous power to influence the values of people."

Despite his disregard for television in the '90s, Earl watches every new show at least once. He says he sees a few "isolated attempts at family values, but they are always regarded as exceptions and they don't stay on long enough to see any character growth." (He does find one show genuinely funny, and that's "Frazier.")

Earl came to UC after World War II when Northwestern University refused to admit him because of a "negative attitude." Even though he had earned straight A's in Northwestern's hardest courses during a summer session, the dean didn't like the fact that Earl had left a previous university without finishing his exams when he got drafted.

Another veteran friend, who was facing the same obstacle, discovered a new broadcasting program at the College of Music in Cincinnati. They became two members of the program's first class to graduate.

While still a student, he gained experience working at the radio station WLW, which was near the college. When he left Cincinnati, he turned his radio position over to Rod Serling, who would later joke that Earl gave him his first job.

After graduation, Earl left Ohio to spend a year writing a book in a stone cottage without any electricity in the



"My father called us 'his thoroughbreds' and put us on a pedestal," Earl Hamner once said of his family. "CBS called us 'The Waltons' and put us on television."

mountains of Arkansas. Once he ran out of money, he moved to New York City and became a staff writer at NBC. There, he married his wife, Jane, an editor at "Harper's Bazaar."

In 1960, the family, including children Scott and Caroline, moved to Los Angeles because television had virtually moved there already. Rod Serling entered the picture again, giving Earl his first job in L.A. as a writer for "The Twilight Zone." For the next 10 years, Earl free-lanced, including writing the novel "The Homecoming" (published in 1970), which became a CBS Christmas special, which led to "The Waltons."

The show wasn't expected to last, he recalls, yet it hit No. 1 within a few months. Since then, "The Waltons"

has been seen in nearly every country and dubbed in numerous languages.

Earl next wrote and produced "Falcon Crest," an eight-year network series about rich and ruthless vintners in Napa Valley. Viewers wondered how the grown-up John Boy could have made such a switch.

"People like to type-cast you," he says. "Because I've written so much about families and family values, they expect me to be a living saint. But I'm really just flesh and blood — a mean old man," he says with a grin that heartily betrays the last remark.

Measuring up to the public's expectation, he more recently returned to the Family Channel as co-executive producer for the series "Snowy River: The McGregor Saga." Now, he's "gravitating" back to books and has no plans to retire.

He tried retirement once, thinking he'd love having all the time in the world to fish. That lasted

about a week, he recalls. "There was such a feeling of great uselessness, of having been thrown away, of not being connected to anything," he shudders. "I was so anxious to get back to writing."

While his life might sound quieter these days, it's far from sedate. Working this interview into his busy schedule one week last April was so difficult that I feared missing him altogether. Yet when we met, he didn't rush me in the least. Once I realized I had grabbed nearly two hours of his time, I graciously wrapped up the interview.

As we walked to our cars together, I knew better than to extend my hand this time. I found myself actually looking forward to the hug.