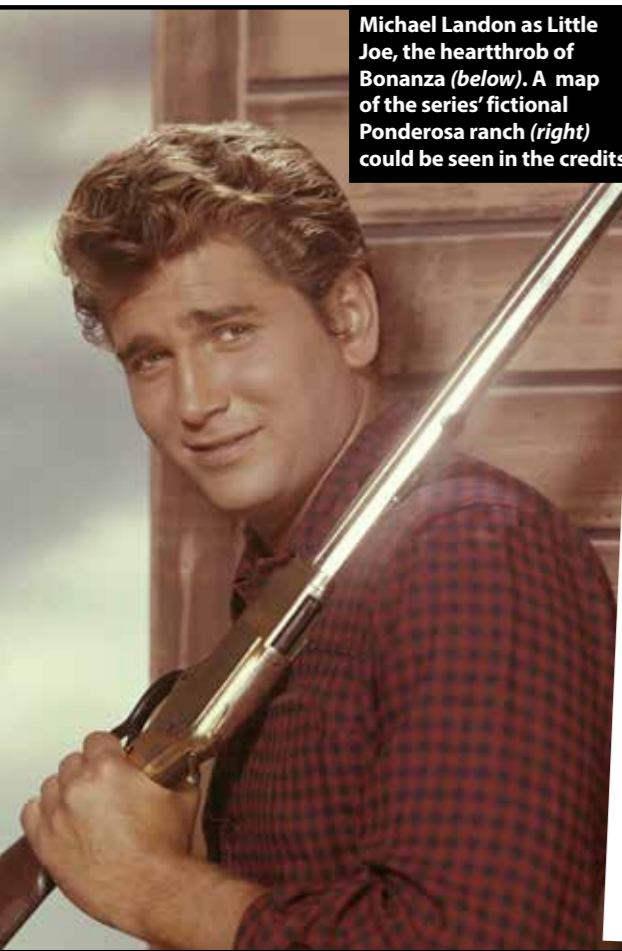


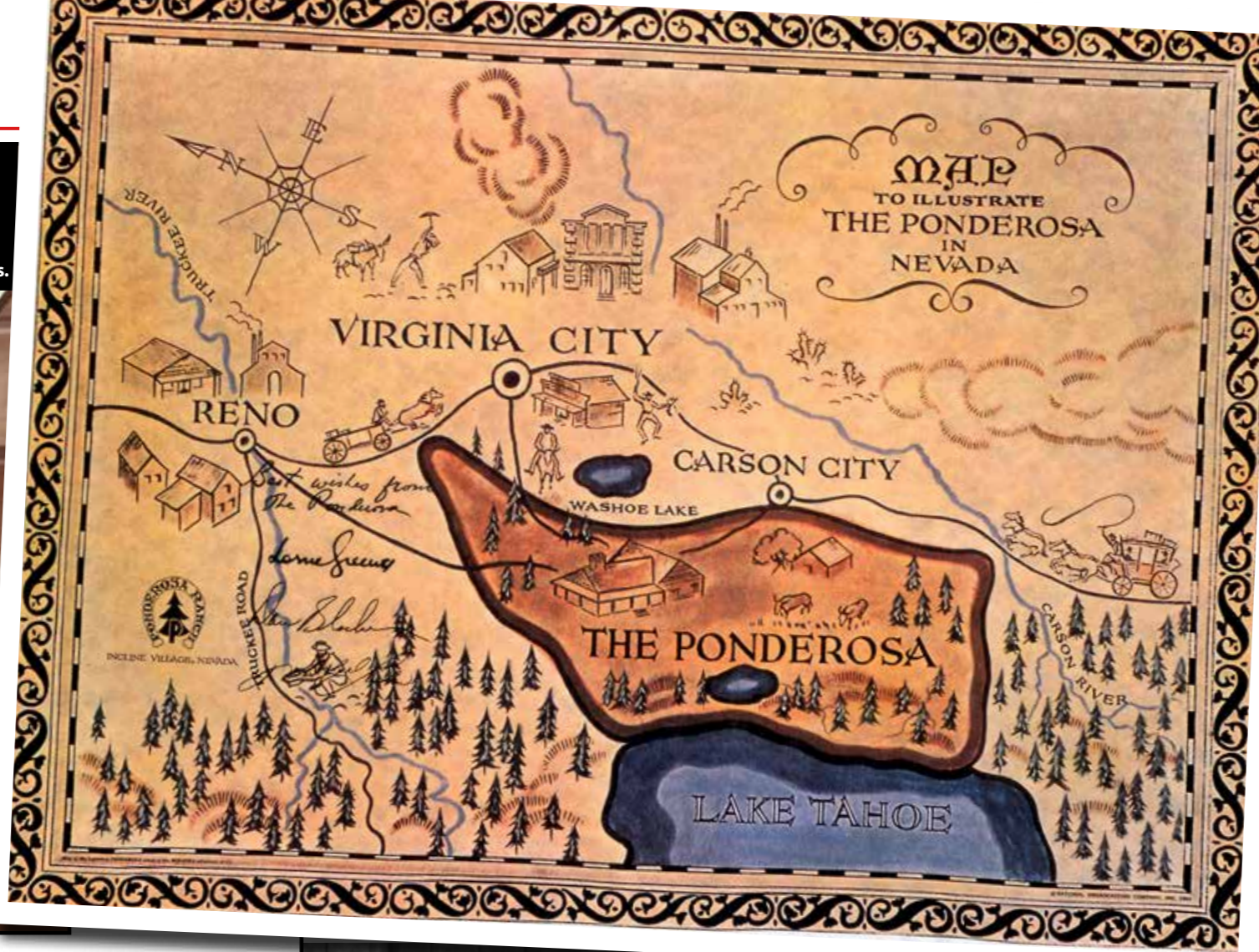
# Bonanza!

**It's one of the longest-running live action series on American television, notching up 431 episodes over 14 years. Steve O'Brien remembers Bonanza, the show that introduced us to the Cartwright clan...**

**T**here are few television shows more iconic and more warmly remembered than Bonanza. Through 14 seasons and a staggering 431 episodes, this series would become an American institution, with its instantly memorable theme tune (which would go Top 20 in the States) and its focus on family above fist fights. Unlike other western shows, Bonanza wasn't a simple shoot-'em-up – it told broader, more universal stories, touching on themes such as racial prejudice, sexual violence and religious intolerance. ➤



Michael Landon as Little Joe, the heartthrob of *Bonanza* (below). A map of the series' fictional Ponderosa ranch (right) could be seen in the credits.



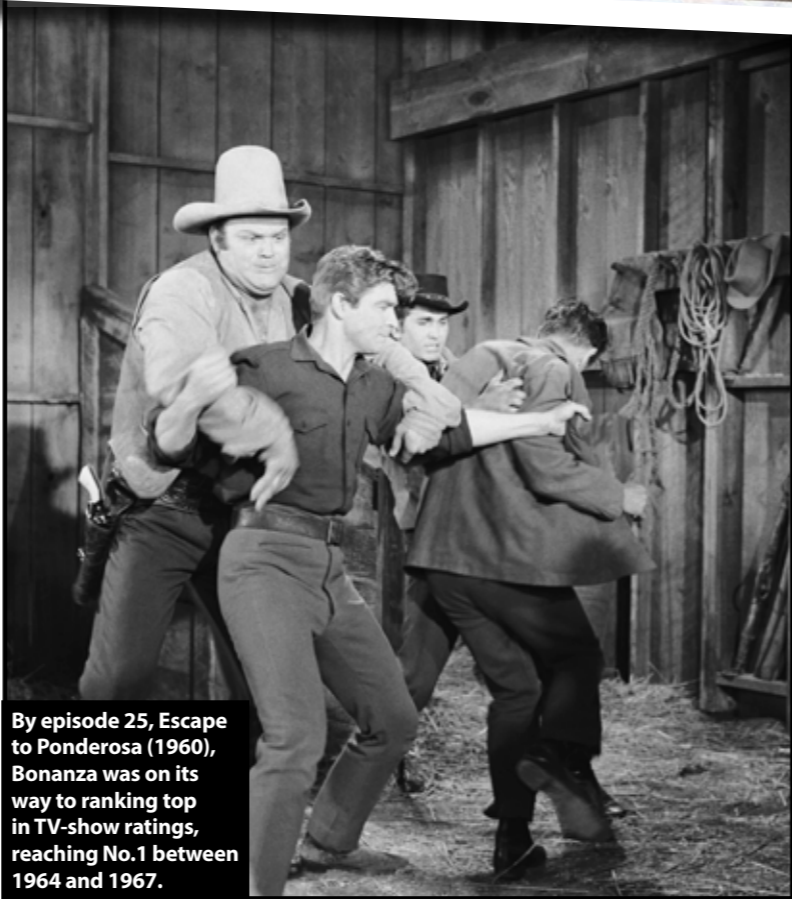
"The gunfighter played a small, inconsequential role in the story of the west," *Bonanza* creator David Dortort explained. "The true history of the west is about family, pioneers... Our scripts delved into characters and dealt with human relationships, which is where the best stories are. And we tried to teach something about human values, like faith and hope."

*Bonanza* told the story of the Cartwright family of ranchers living near Lake Tahoe in Nevada. Ben Cartwright (Lorne Greene) was head of the clan, supported by his three sons (each from different mothers) – serious, level-headed Adam (Pernell Roberts), gentle giant Hoss (Dan Blocker) and cherubic Little Joe (Michael Landon).

*Bonanza* premiered on September 12, 1959, making history as the first small-screen western to be shot in colour. That first episode, *A Rose for Lotta*, isn't perhaps the finest example of

the series, however. In 1973, Landon explained to chat show host Johnny Carson how the crew had recently revisited that debut episode and weren't impressed: "We sat and watched this, all the guys that had worked together for so many years, and just yucked for one hour. Actually, at the time we filmed the pilot, we thought it was rotten. We were very lucky that the show got on because the pilot was not a particularly good pilot. Once it got on, things started to gel."

By 1961 the series had become one of the top-rated shows in America, but, despite this success, one cast member wanted out. Pernell Roberts left the show in 1965, frustrated at the limitations of his character and desperate to return to his first love, theatre. "I had six seasons of playing the eldest son on that show," the actor



By episode 25, *Escape to Ponderosa* (1960), *Bonanza* was on its way to ranking top in TV-show ratings, reaching No. 1 between 1964 and 1967.

reflected. "Six seasons of feeling like a damned idiot, going around – me, like a middle-aged teenager, saying, 'Yes, Pa,' 'No, Pa' on cue. It was downright disgusting – such dialogue for a grown man. I felt I wasn't being taken seriously as an actor, and that's like death to one's talent."

Roberts dismissed *Bonanza* as "junk television that perpetuated banality", yet it dealt with many controversial topics other primetime dramas steered clear of. Season one's *The Fear Merchants* dealt with the persecution of Chinese immigrants, while season ten's *The Wish* had Hoss helping a former slave's family after the American Civil War. That episode, one of the series' best, was

DID YOU KNOW?

Famous actors who guested in the series include Lee Marvin, Telly Savalas, Charles Bronson, James Coburn, Jodie Foster, Dennis Hopper and Jack Lord.

written and directed by Michael Landon, who was given his break behind the camera with season three's *The Gamble*. He'd go on to write and direct episodes of *Little House on the Prairie* and *Highway to Heaven* (which he also created) before his death from cancer in 1991.

THE NEXT GENERATION

While the series was able to survive the departure of Roberts, it suffered a more serious blow in 1972 when Dan Blocker died suddenly following surgery to remove his gallbladder.

The show limped on for one more series (season 14 was in pre-production at the time of Blocker's death), with cast and crew deciding that the show had reached its natural conclusion.

Though Hoss' death was referenced in that final season, it wasn't until 15 years later in *Bonanza: The Next Generation*, a 1988 TV movie that picked up the story of the Cartwright family after the end of the series, that audiences found out he drowned trying to save another man's life.

Though no actor from the original was cast in this new version (Lorne had signed to reprise his role as Ben, but died shortly before production began), it did star Michael Landon Jr. as the son of Little Joe. Two more TV movies were made – *Bonanza: The Return* in 1993 and *Bonanza: Under Attack* in 1995, both of which featured Dan Blocker's lookalike son Dirk, though sadly not as Hoss' offspring.

A final, for now, *Bonanza* spin-off emerged in 2002. *Ponderosa*, set in 1849, told the story of how the Cartwrights first took over the ranch. Despite positive reviews, it was canned after one season.

Is that really it for *Bonanza*? As one of the defining TV series of the Sixties, it's hard to conceive that we won't one day revisit the Cartwrights, either on television or the big screen. Some shows are just too important to be left alone.

WAY OUT WEST

*Bonanza* wasn't the only popular TV western...

THE HIGH CHAPARRAL (1967-71)

Also created by David Dortort, this series told the story of the Cannon family who ran the High Chaparral ranch in the Arizona Territory in the 1870s.



THE VIRGINIAN (1962-71)

James Drury was the first lead (he would leave after four seasons) in this series set in 1890s Wyoming.



THE BIG VALLEY (1965-69)

Barbara Stanwyck headlined as matriarch Victoria Barkley in this show about a wealthy ranch-owning family in California's Central Valley.



ALIAS SMITH AND JONES (1971-73)

Pete Duel and Ben Murphy starred as Joshua Smith and Thaddeus Jones, a pair of wanted outlaws.

