

# Public TV smokes out challenging 'Death in the West'

Smoking cigarettes is a manly thing to do. It makes a guy look decisive, appealingly rugged and sexually attractive. Any real man looks even more masculine with a cigarette dangling from his lips.

As most discerning people now are fully aware, those statements represent one of the biggest crocks ever to be sold to the American public. Smoking is a leading cause of cancer, emphysema and other bronchial diseases, and the evidence is so strong that Congress took the unusual step 12 years ago of banning all tobacco commercials from television and radio.

Despite that ban (and the sharply reduced influence the cigarette racket now



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has in the broadcast business), a British-produced TV program spotlighting the evils of smoking in the most chilling manner possible has been virtually invisible on the airwaves—both in this country and in England—since its first and only telecast in 1976.

But Saturday night, due to the combined efforts of Chicago producer Tom Weinberg and the California Nonsmokers' Rights Foundation, a bootleg version of this long-censored special will hit the air on WTTW-Channel 11's "Image Union." (The 10 p.m. Saturday airing will get repeated on Sunday night at 12:10 a.m.)

## Gary Deeb



TV/Radio critic

The program is called "Death in the West." In less than 30 minutes, reporter Peter Taylor takes "the Marlboro man" of TV commercial fame and justifiably rips him to shreds. Along the way, he makes a pair of top Philip Morris Co. executives look shockingly foolish.

"DEATH IN THE WEST" is great television. It boasts a strong viewpoint, for which it makes an exceedingly credible case. It certainly makes this professional viewer long for more such opinionated and challenging informational programming—rather than the "term paper journalism" we Americans have come to accept as the norm from networks and local stations alike.

Juxtaposed with the glamor of the "Marlboro man" commercials, "Death in the West" introduces us to six middle-age cowboys going about their chores amid the stunning outdoor beauty of Montana, Wyoming and New Mexico. It doesn't take us long to see that all six are either dying or crippled by cancer or respiratory ailments. (Five of the six have died since the program was produced six years ago.)

One of the cowboys, John Holmes, is seen in the distance riding a horse. It isn't until he comes much closer to the camera that we see an oxygen tank strapped to his saddle and tubes connected to his nose. Holmes is afflicted with emphysema, and like all the victims on "Death in the West," his doctor asserts that his malady was triggered by cigarette smoking.

The other case histories are similarly negative, and the men—ranging in age from 47 to 64—all look many years older.

**BUT THOSE** "walking dead" aside, the most frightening aspects of "Death in the West" are the interviews conducted by Taylor with two Philip Morris officials—James Bowling, senior vice president for corporate affairs, and Dr. Helmut Wakeham, vice president for science and technology.

Bowling comes off as a genuinely scary individual who tries to buttress his argument in favor of smoking by continually popping cigarettes into his mouth. His evasive answers to all questions are accompanied by a constant stream of smoke pouring out of his mouth, nostrils and ears.

Even worse than this human steam engine, if that's possible, is Wakeham, the man seemingly in charge of ensuring the safety of Marlboro and other Philip Morris cigarette brands. Pressed by Taylor as to the health hazards of smoking, Wakeham solemnly declares: "The best way to avoid dying is not to be born."

You can almost imagine correspondent Taylor having great trouble in stifling his belly laugh at that howler, but then Wake-

ham comes back with an even more hilarious deadpan crack: "Anything can be considered harmful. Applesauce is harmful if you get too much of it. . . . The people who eat applesauce die; the people who smoke cigarettes die."

Thanks for the enlightenment, Dr. Wakeham.

**AFTER 12 MILLION** British viewers saw "Death in the West" one night in 1976, Philip Morris got an injunction banning the program. Nevertheless, prodded by Andy Gould-Harper of the non-smokers' group, stations in San Francisco and Boston recently have telecast "pirate copies" of the show.

For the last two months, Channel 11's Weinberg has been seeking the approval of station boss Bill McCarter to present "Death in the West" on "Image Union."

On Saturday night, it rolls. And in the context of the grim subject matter, Chicago viewers will be able to witness a great documentary.

## Murphy to stick with 'SNL'

**THIS COLUMN HAS** learned exclusively that Eddie Murphy, one of the stalwarts of "Saturday Night Live," has agreed to stick with the NBC satirical comedy series for at least one more season, through May, 1984. A formal contract is expected to be signed soon. . . . Also at "SNL," look for an announcement next week that the great Sid Caesar will host the program's Feb. 26 installment, thus combining NBC's original TV sketch-comedy star with his most recent descendants.