As a drunk in "On the Nickle"

As Alex Haley in "Roots."

As Sgt. Ross in "Private Benjamin."

THE FACE IS FAMILIAR:

Hal Williams, Actor!

By Carmen Kotta

Some actors you see a lot but never quite make a positive identification. Hal fits that category, his latest venture is in the hit TV series "Private Benjamin."

He's Judy Benjamin's by-the-book army drill sargeant in "Private Benjamin" . . . he's Harley Foster, nice guy, hard-working auto mechanic in "The Waltons" . . . he's unflappable Officer Smitty, straight man foil to Redd Foxx in "Sanford" and "Sanford and Son" . . . he's a derelict drunk in Ralph White's "On The Nickel" . . .

He's the good - natured cook inmate in "On The Rocks" . . . he's Dick Black, super-stud, porn king in "Hardcore" with George C. Scott . . . he's the hard - boiled policeman, strong-arm man for the mayor in Francis Ford Coppola's "Escape Artist" . . . and he's the contemptible, money - grubbing owner of a baseball team in the ABC-TV movie, "Don't Look Back, The Story of Satchel Paige."

Hal Williams is all of these people and more. He is one of Hollywood's most versatile, unsung working actors, who has had recurring roles on as many as three series at once.

"I lean more toward heavy drama, but I invariably end up doing a lot of comedy. I personally don't find the comedy as much of a challenge as the more dramatic pieces."

However, his latest comedy, "Private Benjamin," both a series and a boxoffice smash, belies his words as it is a perfect example of Williams' comedic expertise. As the aforementioned army drill sargeant, Hal, working in tandem with the talented Eileen Brennan, takes particular joy in putting Judy Benjamin through her paces in basic training. The series returned on the CBS Monday night lineup.

Hal Williams at home with his pedigreed dog.

Last season's opener of "The Wakons," titled "The Outrage," was a coup for Williams. He was the featured cast member in a two - part episode which centered on his Harley Foster character.

Upcoming television shows include a guest starring role in the ABC-TV telefeature on the life of baseball great Satchel Paige entitled, "Don't Look Back, the Story of Satchel Paige," with Lou Gossett in the title role. Also upcoming is a guest starring role in the Spelling - Goldbert pilot, "The Protectors," which stars William Shatner.

Williams was born in Columbus, Ohio, where he spent his time going to movies and wishing he could be a cowboy. In those days no black cowboys rode across the American theatre screens, so Hal had to content himself with only a dream — a dream he perpetuated by appearing in as many grammar and high school plays as possible.

Following graduation from high school, Hal enrolled in college to become a commercial artist, but after his marriage he dropped out of college to earn a living.

He held a variety of jobs, desperately trying to make ends meet as his family grew to include three children. (Hal lost one of his sons in 1977 as a result of a hiking accident.) He finally found employment as a social worker but continued to satisfy his performing desire by participating in community and little theatre.

When his marriage ended in divorce, Hal found himself in the unusual position (for a man in those days) of becoming both father and mother to his children.

Three years following this, tired of his job as a social worker because the success rate in working with juveniles was nil and encouraged by the slight increase in roles for blacks, he decided to pursue his dream and moved to Los Angeles.

After getting settled into a night job with the California Youth Authority and a new apartment, Williams had his mother send his children to join him.

Bit by bit, things began falling into place and Hal's big break came with his recurring role of Officer Smitty on "Sanford and Son."

Of his success Hal says, "There are very few people in this life who get to do exactly what they want to do and make a living at it — most people are doing what they have to do to survive — but unfortunately, I'm one of the lucky ones. I'm doing what I've always wanted to do."

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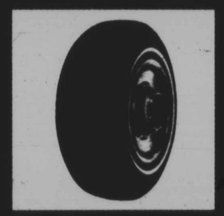

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