by Guy Rocha, former Nevada State Archivist

The cast of The Magnificent Seven was extraordinary. The seven were Yul Brynner, Steve McQueen, James Coburn, Charles Bronson, Robert Vaughn, Horst Buchholz, and Brad Dexter. Whenever they ask a contestant on a quiz show to name the seven, the most difficult one to remember is Brad Dexter. Actor Eli Wallach, The Good, the Bad, and Me (2005).

An Associated Press story, datelined Rancho Mirage, California, reported that “Actor Brad Dexter, who rode with Yul Brynner as one of *The Magnificent Seven* and became a confidant of both Marilyn Monroe and Frank Sinatra, has died at the age of 85.” Dexter died on December 12, 2002. “Born Boris Milanovich in Goldfield, Nev.,” the AP story continued, “Dexter made guest appearances on the 1950s television shows ‘Zane Gray Theater,’ ‘Death Valley Days,’ and ‘Wagon Train.”

Despite all media accounts to the contrary--including the Los Angeles Times obituary which relied on David Ragan's *Who Was Who in Hollywood* (1992) according to reporter Mary Rourke--tough guy character actor Brad Dexter was not born Boris Milanovich. The actor, who dropped the stage name Barry Mitchell for Brad Dexter at the request of director John Huston, was born Boris Michel Soso on April 9, 1917 in Goldfield, according to his birth certificate. Boris’ middle name was the last name of the female physician who delivered him, Dr. Marie Michel.

His Serbian family did not stay long in Goldfield. There are no enumerations in the 1920 U.S. census for Nevada for the father, Marko, a miner; his wife Violet; or children. The Soso clan had left their Goldfield residence at 827 Cedar Street and relocated to Los Angeles according to the census. “Dexter began working as early as age seven in order to help his family,” an on-line biography asserts. “After stints as a shoeshine boy, meatpacker and amateur boxer, he studied acting at the Pasadena Playhouse.”

The Belmont High School Alumni Association in Los Angeles reported that Boris Soso was the Boy’s Student Government President of his 1935 graduating class. By the time he enlisted in the military and then later when he appeared in Moss Hart’s highly acclaimed stage show "Winged Victory” on Broadway in 1943-44, he was Private Barry Mitchell. Following other stage, radio, and motion pictures roles, including the Las Vegas-based film *Heldorado* (1946) with Roy Rogers and Dale Evans; and
Sinbad the Sailor
(1947) with Douglas Fairbanks, Jr., the aspiring actor finally got his first break when John Huston cast him in
The Asphalt Jungle
(1950) with newcomer Marilyn Monroe.

February 12, 1952 found Brad Dexter, Jane Russell, and Vincent Price at the Las Vegas gala premiere of the Howard Hughes film, The *Las Vegas Story*. A photo of the 34-year-old Dexter, with a caption noting he was a native Nevadan, appeared in the Las Vegas Review-Journal. Co-starring in the lackluster drama, which included Victor Mature as Sheriff Dave Andrews, Dexter played a good-humored villain. By all accounts, the premiere was livelier than the movie.

On January 4, 1953, Dexter married the popular singer Peggy Lee. The extravagant wedding,

Dexter's first of three and Lee's second, was widely covered by the Hollywood tabloids. However, the couple divorced ten months later. "As I said, I personally think the 'Mister Lee' business didn't help his career," Lee wrote in her 1989 autobiography, "I was to come to the conclusion that I loved him, but I was not in love with him . . . . I hope he found happiness. He deserves it."

Although Dexter kept busy as a character actor, starring, for example, in 1958s *Run Silent, Run Deep* with Clark Gable and Burt Lancaster, he seemed on the brink of stardom when he co-starred in *The Magnificent Seven* (1960). The hit western film stars Yul Brynner, Steve McQueen, Charles Bronson, James Coburn, Robert Vaughn, Horst Buchholz, and Eli Wallach and is now a popular favorite. While most of the actors went on to become big-name stars, Dexter remained a lesser light.

He played gangster Benjamin "Bugsy" Siegel of Las Vegas fame in *The George Raft Story* (1961), then teamed up again with Yul Brynner in *Taras Bulba* (1962). A photo in the December 4, 1961 issue of the *Reno Evening Gazette* depicts Dexter, a "former Nevadan," on location in Argentina for the shooting of *Taras Bulba* holding a sign which declared "only 6,250 miles to go to Reno."

Dexter will probably be remembered more for his off screen associations than for his film career. A close friend of Marilyn Monroe, he was unsuccessful in convincing the blond beauty not to divorce her newly wed husband, baseball-great Joe DiMaggio, in 1954.

Dexter was once a buddy of singer-actor Frank Sinatra. In 1964, while shooting the film *None But the Brave* (1965) on the Hawaiian island of Kauai, he saved Sinatra from drowning. They appeared together again in Von Ryan's *Express* (1965). The two parted company when Dexter debuted as a movie producer in London, with The *Naked Runner* (1967). According to Dexter, he advised the 50-year-old Sinatra not to marry 21-year-old actress Mia Farrow. The film was completed without Sinatra, who quit the production in a fit of anger a few months after the wedding in Las Vegas. Returning to Los Angeles, Dexter was

fired from Sinatra's company.

Dexter's career in the movie business continued into the 1970s producing *Little Fauss and Big Halsy* (1970) starring Robert Redford, *The Lawyer* (1970) with Barry Newman, and *Lady Sings the Blues* (1972) starring Diana Ross. He also appeared in Warren Beatty's *Shampoo* (1975) and *The Private Files of J. Edgar Hoover* (1977). His last screen appearance was in *Secret Ingredient* (1990), ending a career that spanned some 50 years and included at least 40 movies.

Sadly, Brad Dexter died in relative obscurity and now virtually every website associated with him lists his given name as Boris Milanovich. Most Nevadans don't even know he was a native son. Goldfield, nearly a ghost town today, posthumously honored Dexter--Boris Soso--during its Goldfield Days celebration, August 22-24, 2003, with a film tribute.

Credits: Top: Undated publicity photo of Brad Dexter courtesy of Harry Landon, Belmont High School Alumni Association
Bottom: 1935 Belmont High School yearbook *Campanile* photo of Boris Soso courtesy of the Belmont High School Alumni Association, Los Angeles

(Original version in *Sierra Sage*, Carson City/Carson Valley, Nevada, August 2004)