

Kitty Russell of 'Gunsmoke.' and

Amanda Blake, who plays her, are both enigmas

From Natchez to Louisville I've traveled around.

Some trouble, some heartache in 'most ev'ry town.

Then I came to Dodge City at the end of the line.

And here I met my man but he can never be mine. . .

— "The Long Branch Blues"

These lines of resignation to a manless fate-lines mournful enough in print to wring a tear from the most calloused-embody all of Woman's eternal woes. When sung by the proprietress of the Long Branch saloon and-uh-dance hall in Old Dodge, the words cause the eyes of listeners to leak like frontier plumbing. The proprietress, as all faithful *Gunsmoke* viewers know, is Kitty Russell.

Kitty is red-haired, beautiful, exquisitely clothed, earthy, knowing, comfortable for a man to be with—and yet, beneath the cool self-assurance, she is an enigma. Significantly, these are qualities shared by Amanda Blake, who has portrayed this fascinating woman of the Old West since *Gunsmoke* began on CBS-TV five years ago.

"Without Amanda it wouldn't be *Gunsmoke* and that's a fact," says Milburn Stone, the Kansas-born trouser who plays Doc and is the closest to Amanda of any of the *Gunsmoke* people—just as Doc Adams in *Gunsmoke* is Kitty's special confidant. Once a month Milburn, Dennis (Chester) Weaver and Amanda venture to fairs and rodeos in the hinterlands with a song-and-patter act in which they remain steadfastly in character. Amanda belts out her "Long Branch Blues" and brings down the house.

Men have a way of confusing Amanda Blake, an actress of some reserve, with Kitty Russell, the worldly woman of Dodge. So now, after several unhappy incidents, Amanda begs off from the inevitable cocktail party after the act. It's a tribute, of sorts, to the believability of Amanda's portrayal (in which, as Stone points out, "she must walk a tightrope between schoolmarm sweetness and barroom toughness") and to the intriguing uncertainty of the character. From the very outset, on radio and then on TV, Kitty Russell has been the one citizen in Dodge whose character outline has been deliberately blurred. She has accordingly become all things to all men.

"When I first started," said Amanda gleefully, "a reporter asked me what Kitty was, anyway? I said, 'Why, she's a tramp.' I thought it was common knowledge. But CBS screamed. I almost lost my job."

To any discussion of her television alter ego, Amanda brings not only the actress's familiarity but a curious warmth and compassion. Her affinity for the character, in fact, hovers close to the mystic. It is as though, inexplicably, in another time, in another life, and with other morals, Amanda Blake once really was Kitty Russell.

"There was a man—isn't continued

there always?" Amanda said, proper irony in her voice as she described Kitty's past. "**He loved** her and he left her and then they put a label on her. Kitty isn't the type to take in washing. Somehow I have the idea-don't ask me how I got it-that Kitty came from New Orleans. Let's just say that I think seaport cities are more feminine, that they bring out the womanly jungle instinct. So she drifted, and she'd drift out of Dodge if 'it weren't for Matt Dillon."

Will wedding bells ring for Kitty and Matt? (Or, with a nod to the reincarnation theory, did they ever ring?) "No," said Amanda, smiling ruefully as Kitty herself might have smiled. "She'd love Matt to say, 'Kitty, let's buy a hunk o' land and raise some beans and kids.' But then we'd have I Love Lucy Out West."

Where does Kitty Russell end and Amanda Blake begin? The **Gunsmoke** producer, Norman Macdonnell, replied almost wistfully: "Sometimes I wonder." By design and not for the publicity camera, Amanda's bedroom, for instance, might be Kitty's boudoir. It is furnished & flamboyant cow-town decor, with old picture frames on the walls and heavy velours drapes. An ornate chandelier, strictly 1870, hangs in the adjoining bathroom. "I like to think that Kitty would feel at home here," Amanda murmured.

Like Kitty, Amanda is independent, affluent and self-possessed. In the company of men she unhesitatingly lights her own cigarettes-she's a two-oack-a-dav smoker-and finds her own ash trays. Also shell down two or three Scotch-and-waters before dinner. Like Kitty, she's a sympathetic listener. A good ribald story will stir a **laugh out of her that rattles the walls.**

Amanda lives alone-the second of her two short-lived marriages ended

in divorce four years ago-in a three-room ranch house on a middle-class street shaded by acacias in Van Nuys, Cal., in the San Fernando Valley. It seems an unlikely house for a TV star whose annual income from **Gunsmoke** and from personal appearances may well approach \$75,000.

Her investments include blue-chip stocks, Los Angeles real estate and part ownership in three bowling alleys. Her **only car is a 1959 Olds station wagon, which she drives prudently, having yet to get a speeding ticket.**

With an eye on the tax form, Amanda's business manager beseeches her to live on a grander scale. However, Amanda, who rarely entertains, stubbornly remains in her small but comfortably furnished quarters. On her living room walls are two bleak paintings-one of a boxcar in a prairie railroad station, the other a misty impression that could be a boat adrift on the river Styx-banging next to three happily colorful silk screens of Toulouse-Lautrec works. She conceded that this side-by-side exhibit of opposites may well reflect her own highs and lows of mood.

Amanda Blake never dates. When men ask, she says, "I'm sorry, but I don't date." Or, "I have other plans." Translated, this almost invariably means she is visiting Fran and Walter Sande-he's a character actor-who have become, in a sense, her second parents.

Why does a beautiful, outgoing woman remain aloof from men? "It isn't cynicism," theorizes Milburn Stone. "It's just that she's been burned twice." Amanda says flatly that she prefers her life as it is.

Looking back on a two-year marriage, one of her ex-husbands said, "I **never did figure out what makes Amanda tick.**" The enigma of Amanda is only partly explained when she says, "I don't want to be a big star, a 'cor-

poration. I just want to be a working actress." She buys **few clothes and, despite her flaming red hair, she defiantly wears red, or a color related to it,** every day. She buys paintings, she reads, she watches TV until she falls asleep in her chair. At 5:30 she is up **for work.** She insists that she is never touched by loneliness.

Amanda's womanly affection flows out to the Sandes and their 19-year-old daughter Diane, to her own pets-a black poodle and two Siamese cats-and any other animals the neighbors deposit with her. Weekends she rides her own quarter horse, although her fear of falling off a horse remains unconquerable. This particular fear instigated one of her rare outbursts on the **Gunsmoke** set, five years ago.

It began with the directions in a script: "Kitty comes down the street riding a horse sidesaddle." Norman Macdonnell recalled, "She roared into my office, waving the script, screaming that she's afraid of horses. It was pure, redheaded terror. When I finally calmed her down she said, 'Tell me, Norman, do you know a good riding instructor?' She's been on horses ever since."

A streak of claustrophobia compels Amanda to sit only in an aisle seat in theaters and on the outside in a restaurant booth. She has an unconscionable fear of elevators. And she refuses to board an airplane without her lucky piece, a toy tiger. Recently, while changing planes, she misplaced the toy. "I had the airport in a turmoil," she said. "Not until they tracked that tiger down and had it kown back to me would I get on the plane."

With her customary three-inch heels, Amanda stands 5 feet 10 (Jim Arness, who plays Matt, still towers over her at 6 feet 6) ; and she weighs a slender 116, about 25 pounds less than in her **days at MGM, beginning in**

1950. It was there that Beverly Louise Neill, the name she was born with in Buffalo some 30-odd years ago, gave way-reluctantly on her part-to Amanda Blake. And thereafter she was trumpeted as a "young Greer Garson," a comparison which to this day brings a wince of displeasure. Later she was at Columbia. "Amanda," said an associate from that period, "was a difficult, temperamental dame." Amanda's version: "I was unhappy doing dismal pictures."

About this time Amanda, gradually slimming down, began popping up on TV. Red Skelton liked her immediately and today, at least once a year, she is a guest on his show. "Mandy is the most underrated straight-woman in Hollywood," Skelton said. "Besides, she breaks up at my nonsense faster than any actress I know."

Laughter comes easily, and other emotions also reside just below the surface. Amanda is intensely sentimental. Once the **Gunsmoke** cast paid a nostalgic visit to Dodge City, Kan. "I had the strangest feeling that I was -well, home," said Amanda.

"I saw the site of the old Long Branch. I saw Boot Hill. And then I met the real lawman at Dodge, a big man with kind piercing eyes. He said, 'Here, Kitty,' and he gave me a bouquet of Kansas prairie grass and **sunflowers.**

"I cried."