

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

