



the day Kitty walked out on "GUNSMOKE"

The Day of the Great Explosion—the day Amanda Blake proved she had the temper to match both her naturally red hair and her fiery role as Kitty Russell on “Gunsmoke”—began like any other working day of the past nine years. At the black hour of 4:30 A.M., Amanda rolled out of a solitary bed in her hilltop ranch-style home in the country north of Los Angeles . . . the second house in which she has lived alone since her divorce from director Don Whitman in 1955. By 5:30, she had dressed, chased the sleep-fog from her brain with three cups of coffee, and looked in at the four members of her present menagerie who wouldn’t be making the trip to the studio with her . . . a sixteen-year-old Siamese cat named “Nanki Poo”; another Siamese, “Sam”; one tiger-striped domestic named “Holly Golightly”; and a horse, “Brave John.” Then, with her toy poodles, “Dresden” and “Daniel,” tucked in the car beside her—and all blissfully unaware of the fireworks this day was to set off!—she started the twenty-minute drive to Studio Center, where her TV series is filmed. At the *(Continued on page 78)*

AMANDA BLAKE

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studio, makeup man Glen Alden and hairdresser Patti Whiffing (both of whom have been with Amanda since the first telecast of "Gunsmoke") began the painstaking two-hour transformation which would change Beverly Louise Neill of Buffalo, New York . . . alias Amanda Blake (she chose the names from a dictionary!) of Hollywood . . . into the stylish proprietor of Dodge City's Long Branch Saloon.

The telltale red hair was slowly shaped into the sassy *Kitty Russell* pompadour with an old-fashioned curling iron. The application of makeup was complicated—as usual—by the flock of pesky freckles which go with a redhead's fair skin. Then, the tedious preparation for the cameras completed, she departed for the set.

Amanda is not exactly known for her punctuality ("Gunsmoke" producer Norman Macdonnell admits she's apt to be "Peck's Bad Girl" when it comes to appearing on the set in time, though he adds diplomatically, "but that's the prerogative of a girl whose been with the show nine years"). But, this particular morning, she presented herself for shooting on the stroke of eight—just as she had been instructed to do.

Up to *that* point, it had been a typical day. And this time, it developed, there had been a snafu in the schedule. By high noon, Amanda had not been used in as much as one shot. Following the lunch break, the afternoon hours ticked away. By five, Amanda flipped. . . .

"All day, I had sat there in heavy

makeup and costume—and neither are exactly comfortable—and there it was, five in the afternoon, and I hadn't spoken as much as a line of dialogue—or been in as much as one scene!" Amanda says, china-blue eyes flashing with indignation. "And, to top it off, there really wasn't any reason for me to be in the scene they called me in to do that day. Finally, I got up and announced, to no one in particular, that I was leaving—and goodnight!"

And without further amplification, the feisty Miss Blake stormed off the stage, changed, and, with Dresden and Daniel under her arms, headed for her car and home. Observers on the set were "a little startled," she admits. But most of them were on her side—and, most importantly, James Arness, who stars as *Matt Dillon*. "Jim agreed with me," she says of her TV romance and real-life pal. "He knew there was no reason for me even to be there."

It is big Jim, incidentally, whom Amanda credits for preventing more frayed nerves and blow-ups on the "Gunsmoke" set. "The big reason the show is still fun to do," she says, "is Jim. He's just marvelous. He doesn't take himself too seriously, he relaxes everybody. But when that camera turns, he's still right on the button."

Amanda's huffy departure from the set that day was her first major display of star temperament, and it drew surprised comment around Hollywood the following day. But it came as no shock to "Gunsmoke" regulars. Says her co-star, Milburn (*Doc*) Stone, "Amanda's got a temper all right, but she usually keeps it in check.

"Still, you know darn well she's going to stand up on her two feet and fight, if she has to!"

Amanda admits to a T.N.T. temper but insists that it usually takes quite a bit to get it to the surface. "It depends on what kind of mood I'm in. Certain things can go right over my head for days—then, all of a sudden, the very same thing sends me into orbit."

Actually, Amanda's temper is only one facet of a personality whose really outstanding characteristic is something which, in its purest form, is as rare as marital bliss in Hollywood: genuine, straight-from-the-hip honesty. We asked her opinion of Dennis Weaver's latest departure from the show—the kind of question which almost invariably draws such ho-hum answers as "Oh, we'll miss him," or "The show will never be the same."

Instead, from Amanda, we got: "Well, after all, it's the third time he's left the show. It does get a little monotonous—I mean, how many going-away parties can you have? . . . But there's no more problem, it looks like that other show of his ["Kentucky Jones"] is going to go on—though I can't understand why he'd want to do another series.

"That seemed to be his main complaint with 'Gunsmoke'; he claimed his creativity was being submerged or something. . . . The only way I could understand his wanting to go into another series is on account of m-o-n-e-y!" And that wonderful laugh of hers—which Milburn calls her "lumberjack laugh"—reverberated to the rafters of the cavernous sound-stage.

Ask her to describe the character of *Kitty* and Amanda returns with the very honest "Why, she's a tramp! I thought it was common knowledge."

No doubt this let-the-chips-fall-where-they-may approach to life had something to do with the abrupt demise of two previous marriages, each lasting just two years. Of marriage, she used to say, "I gave it up for good. I'm not really the marrying kind, I guess—too independent. Gotta do it *all* myself. I want to be the boss."

The man for Amanda

She has, however, just changed her tune, to the complete amazement and intense pleasure of all her friends.

The story of the romance reads more like a press agent's fantasy than a true-life tale. But, like Amanda, it's genuine and straight-from-the-hip.

Jason Day, the man who won her heart, pursued a determined course in his campaign to woo the bride.

A long-time friend of his, a pretty girl who had often dated him, points out that "he's a wonderful, attractive man and I always enjoyed his company. But who wants to get involved with a man who was never available on a Saturday night?"

Saturdays, you see, Jason Day was glued to his TV set to watch Amanda on "Gunsmoke." He'd turn on the set in his Scottsdale, Arizona home and watch. Finally, he could stand the long-distance admiration no longer. He simply had to meet her. But how?

First he wrote a letter to Amanda, in care of CBS. Somehow the letter went

astray. Next he tried calling several friends in Hollywood—but none of them knew Amanda. His next step was to call Hank Grant, columnist for *The Hollywood Reporter*, a trade paper. Hank wasn't about to give out any phone numbers—but he did refer Mr. Day to Amanda's press agents.

One of the female flacks at the publicity firm, an agent named Ann McCall, intercepted the call. Mr. Day explained that he simply had to meet Miss Blake. "I'd like to take her to lunch," he said. "And you, also." Ann said she'd pass on the message. When she told Amanda about the call, she added, "He sounded just darling, and not at all like a kook."

But Amanda gave a firm *no*. When Day called Ann again, he said, "I understand, and thanks for trying, anyway. I'll just have to find a mutual friend to intercede."

The "mutual friend" turned out to be the young lady he had dated on occasion—the one who stopped seeing him because his Saturday nights were never free. (The young lady, not in the entertainment industry, prefers to remain anonymous.)

And so, on June 16th, Amanda and Jason had their first date. It was to be a luncheon foursome—the friend, Amanda's press agent, Amanda and Jason. Jason was flying his private plane (purchased from Lyndon B. Johnson shortly after LBJ became President) in from Scottsdale. The date was set for 1 P.M.

The girls were to meet Day at the restaurant. When he hadn't appeared by 1:30, Amanda became annoyed.

"It's very foggy today," Ann pointed out. "That probably delayed him." But at 2 P.M., Amanda, who was through working for the day, insisted on leaving. She and Ann left to go shopping.

Meanwhile, the "mutual friend," who had gone to the airport to meet Jason, began frantically calling the studio and Amanda's house, trying to find her to explain that Jason had arrived—delayed because of the fog. Many phone calls later, Amanda and Ann were located at Ann's house. Finally, at 5:30 P.M., the foursome met.

"No, it wasn't love at first sight," says Amanda. Then, in her deep laugh, she adds, "It took about five minutes. I simply never thought anything like this would happen to me. But Jason's brilliant blue eyes and wonderful smile just got to me."

According to Ann McCall, who remained with Amanda and Jason until the "luncheon date" ended late that night, "Really, I might just as well have been in China. Amanda and Jason had eyes—and conversation—only for each other."

Jason Day is a cattleman with business interests in Utah, Arizona, Nevada and other states. According to Amanda, "He's about five-feet-eleven and is a stocky Paul Newman—but it's all muscle. He flew back to Scottsdale that night, but called early the next morning to say he was on the way back to Los Angeles. I admit it was a fast romance—but, in less than a month, we knew we wanted to spend the rest of

our lives together." And that was that.

On July 10th, Jason put a two-and-a-half-carat perfect diamond in a platinum Tiffany setting, on her hand.

In mid-August, Jason slipped a plain platinum wedding band on her hand at a 6 P.M. ceremony.

Frances Sande (wife of actor Walter Sande), Amanda's oldest and dearest friend, was matron of honor. The bride wore a full-length gown in various shades of blue (her favorite color), designed by Mr. Blackwell (her favorite designer), and the wedding reception was held at Mr. Blackwell's home.

The groom is thirty-nine; divorced with two sons, nine and eleven. The boys live with their mother in Scottsdale, but have met Amanda, and think she is "just great." Amanda feels the same way about them.

"I'll continue my career," says Amanda, "and keep my house in Reseda. We'll also have a home in Scottsdale."

Long live the Long Branch!

Unlike Dennis Weaver, Amanda has had no desire to put her acting, her "creativity," to work any place else than where it is on display right now.

"I don't care if the show goes on another five years or forever," she says thoughtfully. "I really don't." She shrugs. "Maybe I'm not really an actress—I don't know. But I *can't* imagine what life would be like when I can't go flouncing through the Long Branch Saloon."

Amanda just can't stay away from her "Gunsmoke" family. "If I have four or five days when I'm not called in to work, I find myself dropping in, anyway. I can't keep away, I kibbitz, I poke around. The show's my life!"

Her love for "Gunsmoke" and its people is very real—even though it couldn't keep her from walking off the set that memorable day. (You'll have to admit there's a big difference between joyful "kibbitzing" and sitting around in hot makeup and costume, waiting for a call to the cameras that never comes!)

It's obviously very pleasant to have that weekly paycheck rolling in, but money is definitely not the main lure which keeps Amanda coming back for more. In fact, because of a string of sound investments (which she credits entirely to her business manager), she could quit tomorrow and live in relative luxury for the rest of her life without ever working again—and without ever dipping into her millionaire husband's piggybank.

Asked for a compact self-description of Amanda Blake, 1964, she ponders the question for a moment, gives vent to that "lumberjack" laugh and offers: "a nut—sort of a rich nut, I guess."

A "nut" whom, it can be safely predicted, the CBS top brass will be taking special pains not to provoke in the future! Who knows? If she really gets mad, she might buy the network and then where'd they be?—MATT FESSIER

Amanda stars in "Gunsmoke" on CBS-TV, Saturdays from 10 to 11 P.M. EDT.