

AN OPEN LETTER TO MY WIFE

Dear Friend:

I hope you will understand when I tell you that I have fallen madly in love with Amanda Blake

BY LESLIE RADDATZ

-you know, **the one who plays Kitty in *Gunsmoke* on CBS.**

**It was just one of those things-
I couldn't help myself. I** continued

went out to her house on a routine interview. We had a couple of drinks (she has a gadget in the kitchen that dispenses bourbon, Scotch and vodka -sort of a bacchanalian soda fountain). We had a few laughs ("a bawdy, lumberjack's laugh is the way Milburn Stone, Doc in Gunsmoke, describes Amanda's laugh). And before I knew it, I was in love!

Frankly, I am probably just as surprised as you are. I was expecting she would be well-older. After all, she has been hanging around that Long Branch Saloon for about 10 years now, and she was no spring chicken when *Gunsmoke* went on the air. But Amanda is actually prettier off screen than on-something you can't say about most actresses. It's just that Amanda is younger than Kitty. As somebody who has been close to the show for years says, "They're still making her up to look like a madam."

Sure, she has a few gray hairs among the red, but she says, "I don't care." She has no lines in her face-well, practically none. And her figure, which looks a little matronly when she's wearing a bustle, is terrific in a pair of stretch pants. One old admirer says, "She's a lot of woman."

Another nice thing about her is that she is rich. I read an item in a Hollywood column that she has a guaranteed income of \$100,000 a year for the next 20 years. When I asked her about it (you can see I'm not going into this blindly), she said, "Under the deal for the residuals on the old half-hour shows, that's about it-give or take \$198." Her investments include blue-chip stocks, Los Angeles real estate and three bowling alleys. She likes to watch the old shows on TV. She says, "I just sit there and cry." I can't imagine why.

Amanda lives alone, except for a poodle and three cats, in a big house on a windy hilltop in Calabasas, Cal.

She had another poodle, a sickly one named Sapphire, that died recently -a devastating loss to her. She also has a horse which she doesn't get much chance to ride, which brings to mind a seemingly unconquerable fear of falling off a horse she once had and which caused one of her rare outbursts with the Gunsmoke management some years ago. A script had directed: "Kitty comes down the street riding a horse sidesaddle." Producer 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."

In addition to dogs and horses, she's had lots of experience with not-so-tame animals. Such divers fauna as rattlesnakes, tarantulas, rabbits and mice have turned up in her swimming pool. Three years ago, when she moved into this house, she came home one day and found the front yard filled with deer, eating the shrubs. She ordered alfalfa for them, and they had a feast. Now how many actresses would do that?

The inside of the house is filled with early American furniture and pictures of Amanda Blake. There's a painting of Amanda in every room except the powder room, where there are three Toulouse-Lautrec prints.

Amanda is justifiably proud of her home, but I can't help wondering whether she isn't lonely sometimes. On her days off (she only works two or three days a week), she often goes to the Gunsmoke set and sits around talking and laughing with the gang. She says, "I feel just as much at home in that saloon as I do here-more so, because I spend more time there! When the show ends, I'll have 'em pack up that set and move it out here. I don't know what I'd do without it-and besides the bar is practical."

She says that she doesn't need men in her life-and after two brief, unsuccessful marriages--one to "an older man" and the other to a "sweet guy who never wound me up"-you'd think she would know. Amanda says, "I work with men all day. I don't want to be around them at night." She seldom dates. When men ask, she says, "I'm sorry, but I don't date," or, "I have other plans." On the set she is everybody's friend, although James Arness has always been careful to avoid any suspicion that there was anything between him and Amanda

ask me why. Most of Amanda's socializing is with the Gunsmoke cast and crew. 'We're like a clan,' she says. "We've grown old together." Recently, when the second assistant director and his wife adopted a baby, Amanda was the first person they called to tell the news. He was on one phone, his wife was on the extension, Amanda was at the other end of the line-and all three

were crying!

By this time you must agree that Amanda is quite a gal. In high heels, she stands about 5-feet-10 and weighs a slender 118, about 15 pounds less than in her days at MGM back in 1950. It was there that Beverly Louise Neill, the name she was born with back in Buffalo some 30-odd years ago, became Amanda Blake.

For the past five years, Amanda has been honorary mayor of Ft. Sedona, Cal., and she "just adores it." She says, "I got to go to the testimonial dinner for County Supervisor Dorn, and I saw everybody - Cardinal McIntyre. Rabbi Magnin -Governor Brown, Mayor Yorty and Casey Stengel!" Of course, what she doesn't realize is that they probably all went home and said, "I saw Kitty from Gunsmoke!"

That brings up a point about Amanda Blake. According to a friend, "She is inclined to put herself down. She thinks it's Kitty that people continued

I Love **Amanda**/ continued

are interested in, not Amanda, and she sometimes wonders about the importance of what she is doing." Another friend says, "She tries to be like Kitty in her personal life-keeping herself independent and avoiding permanent attachments." Finally, Milburn Stone, who probably knows her as well as anybody, says, "Amanda is Kitty." As for me, Amanda or Kitty, I love 'em both.

Of course, there is one essential in which Kitty and Amanda differ. Kitty's conversation is pretty much limited to variations on the theme-"How about a beer, Matt?" But Amanda Blake is a talkative and vivacious person whose laughter bursts out explosively as she speaks. She likes to make herself out as a solitary person by nature and says, "I'm just a sticky, terrible old maid." But she says it in a way and with a look in her eye that no sticky, terrible old maid ever had.

Right now, the only romance in her life seems to be an unknown suitor who sends her a long-stemmed red rosebud every day. If she is at home, it is delivered there; if she is working, it comes to her dressing room. The enclosed card just says, "As always," and is signed "T." Amanda doesn't know who "T" is.

Well, you can be sure I'm not going to stoop to such a corny, old-fashioned way of letting her know how I feel about her. I am going to call her up and tell her right out! Meanwhile, I hope this letter has made it clear why I feel as I do. I believe that this beautiful, lonely, rich woman needs me. So, here goes-I'm going to call her now and break the news.

Good-bye, my best to our seven kids,
Your Husband

P.S. I just called. I don't know exactly what she said-all I heard was a bawdy, lumberjack's laugh. Keep dinner warm. I'll be home.