

## **AMANDA BLAKE BIO**

Amanda Blake, was an American actress best known for the role of the red-haired "Miss Kitty" on the longest-running television drama, CBS's Gunsmoke series (1955-1975).

Born Beverly Louise Neill in Buffalo, New York, she was a telephone operator before taking up acting. Nicknamed "The Young Greer Garson," she became best known for her 19-year stint as the fictitious "Kitty Russell." Miss Kitty was owner-operator of the Long Branch Saloon, from which she dispensed wisdom, whiskey, (and though not overtly) boarding room keys and "fancy" women. (In early episodes of Gunsmoke Miss Kitty is an employee of the Long Branch although it is not clear what her duties are.) Like Perry Mason and his secretary Della Street, Kitty and Dodge City's U.S. Marshal, Matt Dillon (played by James Arness) seemingly carried on a cloaked relationship.

Blake's Kitty presumably departed Dodge City at the close of the series' 19th season, sans an on-screen farewell. Character actress Fran Ryan (Hanna) assumed ownership of the Long Branch for the 20th and final season, with little mention of Kitty. In the first of three CBS post-series movies ("Gunsmoke: Return to Dodge"), Kitty tells Hanna (Ryan) that she left Dodge to return to New Orleans, as she was no longer willing to watch Matt continue to cheat death. (A flashback was created by cleverly integrating footage from a 1970 episode where Kitty left Dodge but returned by the epilogue.) The actress left in 1974 because she wanted more free time and missed her friend and co-star Glenn Strange, who played Kitty's barkeeper, Sam. Gunsmoke continued for one more year before CBS cancelled it after its 20th season, much to the surprise of the entire cast, including Arness.

In 1968, Blake was inducted into the Hall of Great Western Performers at the National Cowboy & Western Heritage Museum in Oklahoma City. This was six years before the legendary John Wayne was inducted in 1974 and more than a decade before co-stars Arness, Ken Curtis, Dennis Weaver, and Milburn Stone were in 1981. Blake was the third performer welcomed into the Hall, after Tom Mix and Gary Cooper, who were inducted in 1958 and 1966 respectively. Because of her continuing role on Gunsmoke, Blake rarely had time for films. She did once appear in a comedy routine with the legendary CBS entertainer Red Skelton. She was also a panelist on the long-running Hollywood Squares and "Match Game '74."

After Gunsmoke, Blake went into semi-retirement at her home in Phoenix, Arizona, taking on only a few film and TV projects. A lover of animals, she joined with others to form the Arizona Animal Welfare League in 1971, today the oldest and largest "no-kill" animal shelter in the state.

In 1980, Blake was diagnosed with a form of mouth cancer. In 1985, she helped finance the start-up of the Performing Animal Welfare Society (PAWS) and devoted a great deal of time and money in support of its efforts, including travels

to Africa.

Blake reportedly was a one-time board member of the Humane Society of the United States. In 1997, the Amanda Blake Memorial Wildlife Refuge opened at Rancho Seco Park in Herald, California. The refuge is a PAWS sanctuary for free-ranging African hoofed wildlife, most of whom were originally destined for exotic animal auctions or hunting ranches.

The exact cause of Blake's death is unclear. It was widely reported in the news media that she had died of AIDS and had contracted HIV. In retrospect, it would probably be more accurate to say that an AIDS-defining infection contributed to her death, the underlying cause of which was cancer. A longtime smoker, Blake was diagnosed with mouth cancer and underwent surgery in 1977 (and seven years later was a recipient of the American Cancer Society's Courage Award).

According to her doctor, Sacramento internist Dr. Lou Nishimura, she had throat cancer at the time of her death. Miss Blake's death certificate, however, listed the immediate cause as cardiopulmonary arrest due to liver failure and CMV hepatitis. A report by television station KRBK in Sacramento, where Miss Blake was a longtime resident, quoted her friends as saying that her death was related to AIDS. Her fifth husband was openly bisexual and had died of AIDS in 1985, just a year after they married. In response to this report, Dr. Nishimura said that Blake

had suffered from AIDS symptoms for about a year but that he did not know how she had contracted the disease.

Materials excerpted from Wikipedia