

After a fashion

Shirley remains the incurable romantic

By Marian Christy

NEW YORK — Sunny success, especially the kind that comes with a minimum of effort, often has a built-in cloud.

Singing star Shirley Jones stumbled over this inescapable truth and still is a bit bruised from the discovery.

Her first Rogers-Hammerstein audition instantly led to the "Oklahoma" lead and overnight stardom when she still was an innocent teenager from Smithton, Pa. — a town with a total population of 800 where Daddy was the boss at the brewery and Smithton's major employer. The Jones name already was famous in her home town.

Fashionable Shirley, now a devotee of Donald Brooks clothes, was, is and always has been more curvy than pencil-thin.

While "Oklahoma" was being filmed, however, she ate more contentedly than usual. Eventually the relentless camera exaggerated her plumpness.

Only do-its

Mr. Hammerstein, noted for his stinging straightforwardness, demanded she shed pounds quickly. There were no ifs, ands, buts. Only do-its.

Shirley, who's Mrs. Jack Cassidy and mother of 3 sons aged 14, 10, 7 — talks about the initial discovery of being a teeny-weeny bit fat over a pot of black tea:

"Look, I was round, naive and never heard the word 'diet.' I ate like I always ate — plenty! I was used to being moon-faced."

New England-oriented Shirley — a late 30s pretty, blonde matron in mink — lives part time in a colonial house in Beverly Hills and part time in a colonial house in Pound Ridge, N. Y.

She's the type of quiet but resolute woman who lets nothing stop her, except perhaps her own fatigue.

She says: "I'm not really ambitious. I have no great or giant aspirations to achieve more and more. Fame robs you of privacy.

"Of course, I'm delighted by compliments. But show business has a way of stripping your life to that and that alone. That's dismaying."

Shirley and Jack, who've been married 15 years, have had many separations. But divorce, in all of its finality, never happened.

On Jack: "He took me on our first date to the Eiffel Tower restaurant and ceremoniously announced he wanted to marry me. I laughed and told him he was crazy. But my heart was leaping."

The hurdles to legal liaison were formidable — at least in the eyes of Shirley's very strict father who didn't want his only child to get involved with a separated married man with a child in the background and no foreseeable job in the future.

"But," says Shirley, "Jack went ahead with his wooing. When I said 'yes,' he asked my father formally for my hand in marriage."

Her father, a masculine-type who likes to "belly" up to a bar and talk man-talk to men, hit it off with Jack. He didn't give his blessing or denial — only a stringent sermon about marriage being a grave responsibility. Jack's first son, teenage idol David Cassidy, also stars in Shirley's TV show and they get on capitally.

Eventually Jack, who changed her life's tempo, altered Shirley's fashion ideas. She was prone to décolletage and clingy fabrics

like satin. There also was a penchant for clothes that dripped feathers or sparkled with sequins.

Tailored clothes

"But Jack always insisted I wear tailored clothes — if not by Donald Brooks then by Geoffrey Beene. He said I was too much of a good thing in frills."

Shirley admits openly that part of the reason for her "easy" attitudes toward not seeking further fame and her serious desire to make a "go" of being Mrs. Jack Cassidy stems directly to the deep rapport she enjoyed with her father. He's dead. But the memories linger on:

"When I first went into the theatre, I was traveling all the time. Without warning, Dad would show up at my hotel for a weekend — no matter where I happened to be. All of a sudden, he was my date. We'd go to dinner and talk. He was very gregarious," says Shirley.

Her father supported her completely and instilled a still strongly felt sense of confidence that eradicated the need to hear the sound of public applause. Now there is no further need to be a giant achiever.

Shirley remains the incurable romantic, both about the weather and social climate.

"I love snow. Its great allure is that it covers everything with a fluff of white. I equate that with peace and happiness."

Rarely does she give or go to parties that feature wall-to-wall people crushed together in a maze of deafening noise.

"When I have to attend those mammoth professional gatherings, I'm apt to stay in the ladies' room for a couple of hours between hellos and goodbyes," she says.

Shirley Jones is even quixotic about being the mother of sons, rather than daughters: "There's a wonderful male-female relationship with the boys already. With daughters,



I have seen competition between the siblings and their mothers. But my little men look after me as if I were a treasured friend."

Haunted?

The Pound Ridge house, which dates back to 1780, apparently is haunted.

Shirley, Jack, and a recent houseguest, Sheila MacCrae, repeatedly heard strange footsteps. More frightening, they individually and collectively claim to have seen thick double doors squeak open when they were closed — and slam shut when they were opened.

"I'm not terrified of spirits because I believe there is a life beyond. People who have died are living in that house," says Shirley, a Methodist who speaks about afterlife.

"The only thing that scares me are certain kinds of people who create terrible tensions that spoil life as it is now."

Shirley has bitten into a big, crusty roll.