

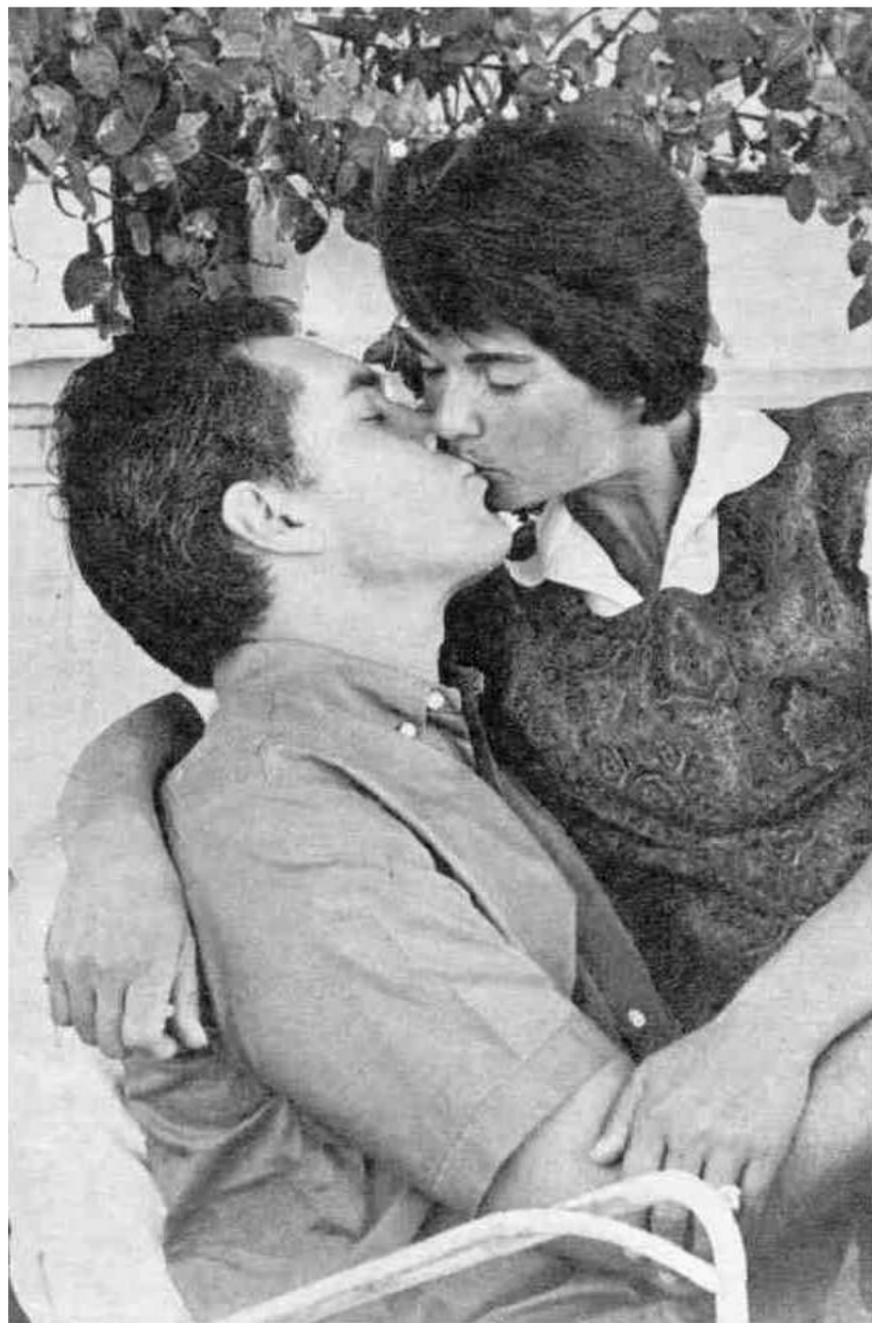
THE MARRIAGE THAT ALMOST WASN'T

The star of "Temple Houston" treasures his happy matrimonial ending more than most men—perhaps because he still remembers how close he came to not even having a beginning!

"We'd dated for a year and had talked all around marriage," he recalls. "Then, when it was almost time for me to go to London for a movie, Dusty asked *me* outright what my intentions were.

"Well, that caused a big quarrel. I got scared and told her it was all off between us. I took a quick trip to Mexico for a week by myself—and I did a lot of thinking. I realized I was running away from getting married. But I didn't know for sure what I was afraid of."

In Mexico, he remembered the other girls he'd been in love with.



"I can't forget the loneliness when I was looking for someone like Dusty," Jeff Hunter says today. "Or how awful it was when I thought we were being torn apart from one another."

The girl he'd gone steady with for three years in high school in Milwaukee—only to have her send him a "Dear John" letter while he was away serving in the Navy.

The girl he was engaged to at Northwestern University—only to break it off when she laughed at his dreams of becoming an actor.

The girl who had been his first wife.

Her name was Barbara Rush, and she was shooting to stardom in Hollywood at the same time that Jeff, too, had won his first contract. They married at the end of their first year in Hollywood, when Jeff had just turned twenty-three.

For three years, they tried to adjust to each other. But their two personalities were too strong, their two careers too competitive, their separations too long and too frequent.

Finally, Barbara finished a film in Ireland and flew to where Jeff was working. She told him she wanted a divorce.

It was a severe jolt.

Yet when Jeff was cast in a picture with her, a year after their split was legally final, he felt no resentment. He'd remained a devoted father to their son Christopher, and he had learned he just had to wait for his true mate.

Meanwhile, Dusty had faced a defeat in love, too.

The daughter in a well-to-do family, she grew up in Cedar Rapids, Iowa, and in Arizona, where her father had a ranch. After attending the University of Arizona and one in Mexico City, she married an attorney. They had parted by the time Jeff and Bob Wagner arrived in Phoenix on location.

Actually, it was Bob who dated Dusty first. But when Jeff was introduced to her, it was he that she preferred.

He'd been a bachelor again for two-and-a-half years. He'd dated all the Hollywood beauties without becoming involved with any of them.

"Dusty wasn't merely pretty and fun. She volunteered to do the gallop for our heroine in that movie, because she was so at ease on a horse. Frankly, I was fascinated because she isn't timid. She considers everything a challenge. Besides, she had a small son, Steele, seven months younger than Chris, and I took to him fast."

A new chance at love

Jeff was wrapped up in another picture when Dusty moved to Los Angeles to reshape her life. She had an income, but she didn't want to be idle. She modeled at a few Don Loper fashion shows and that led to some television commercials. When she was offered an opportunity to try acting in TV, she declined. It held no lure. But she was enthusiastic about Jeff's chances and accomplishments.



Watching the family together—Dusty, one-year-old Scott, Jeff, four-year-old Todd and ten-year-old Steele—it's hard to believe that all this happiness came so close to not happening.

"I'd never known anyone so feminine who could be such a terrific companion! Jeff exclaims. "Dusty went riding, golfing, and swimming with me. She was eager to skin-dive and water-ski. She likes to sail and ice-skate. We played tennis. She still hasn't beaten me at any sport—but I won't be disturbed if she ever can. I'm glad she tries to!

"She was only stubborn about flying. When my lessons for a pilot's license excited me, I wanted her to take up flying, too. She refused. I couldn't understand why I had so much trouble renting a plane and why my instructor was always busy—until Dusty waved her certificate proving she'd soloed! She said she got so tired of hearing me talk about why she should enjoy flying that she went ahead—secretly—with *my* instructor.

"After that, when we'd rent a plane to fly to Las Vegas or Palm Springs for a day, she relaxed at my side. 'I know enough to guess there's so much more to learn,' she explained—and kissed me."

Wisely, they both insisted on remaining free to date others. And they didn't maneuver to make each other jealous. Their attachment was that mature.

"We wanted a home in the fullest sense," says Jeff. "Something very solid around which we could focus our lives. Our sons were the beginning of the family we wished for.

"All of this was what I was remembering when I was debating whether to propose. I didn't want to drift any longer, if I could be happily married. Dusty's gaiety haunted me. How could I go to Europe without her?

"I couldn't."

He rushed back to Dusty and, hastily, they arranged for thirty guests at a simple ceremony in the Ojai Valley, forty miles north of Los Angeles.

"You should have seen Dusty packing!" Jeff grins. "I proposed at ten A.M. on Friday. The wedding was Sunday afternoon and we had to leave the very next day for England, where I was starting the movie."

Jeff swept his bride into the posh Dorchester Hotel. "Next day, I found the picture wouldn't start for two weeks, because the script had to be rewritten." He pell-melled Dusty onto a plane for Cannes. They stayed at glamorous Juanles-Pins and roamed the Riviera until he had to report back in London.

"Then, when the movie was completed, we toured Italy. It was unforgettable. But then, on the boat trip coming home, I began to feel strangely miserable. All I could eat was watermelon! We flew to Milwaukee, to see my parents, and there Dusty came down with what we assumed was flu. She stayed on there for a week, to recover, while I came back to prepare for a new picture.

"When I woke up one morning feeling ill, I supposed I had the flu, too. All day at the studio, I shivered—when I wasn't burning up with a fever. I'd never muffed my lines, but I did then. That evening I just made it home."

Alarmed, Dusty ran for a thermometer. He had a temperature of 105 when she called a doctor. It was infectious hepatitis. The doctor wanted to call an ambulance to rush Jeff to a hospital, but they persuaded him to have the necessary tests taken at home.

"Evidently I caught it by drinking impure water that had a live germ in it. Probably Dusty had been exposed at the same time, but she apparently threw it off

in what we thought was her flu.

"I had to be replaced in that movie, of course. We'd counted on buying a house with what I was to have made from doing that picture.

"Dusty was my constant nurse. Absolute rest and a rigid diet was the instant prescription for me, for an indefinite period. As I got worse and worse, I had to discover what it is to cling to hope when all your strength seems gone. The doctor attempted to cheer us, but he couldn't promise I'd recover.

"Yes, I prayed. Dusty deserved so much that I longed to give her. So did our sons—hers and mine—who tiptoed in and stared at me wide-eyed with their worry. It didn't seem fair that I would have to leave them.

"Dusty prayed, too, as I believe our families and friends did. I've always felt those prayers were answered.

"But it was Dusty who was there visibly all the time. She did more than hang onto her faith when she could have despaired. She demonstrated love as best she could. I felt it, when I was weakest. At the turning point, I responded. That's why I can say my wife saved my life."

Today, the Hunters are rooted in a beautiful, rambling two-story house right on the ocean front at Santa Monica. Chris visits them most weekends. Jeff has adopted Steele. And he and Dusty have two more sons, little Todd and Scott.

Their youngest gave them a scare. He had pneumonia when he was eight weeks old and had to be put in a hospital. For a while, they could only pray that he'd pull through. But again their prayers were answered. Jeff and Dusty like to hold hands and look out over the Pacific; their horizon has no limits—just like their love. —TEX MADDOX

See Jeff in "Temple Houston," Thurs., NBC-TV, from 7:30 to 8:30 P.M. EDT.