

Will make weekend appearance at Genesee Country Village & Museum event

MUMFORD - Laura Ingalls Wilder, famed author of the beloved "Little House" book series, would have celebrated her 150th birthday this year. That's what makes this year's Laura Ingalls Wilder Days at Genesee Country Village & Museum a little more special.

The festival, scheduled for Aug. 5 and 6 at the Museum, 1410 Flint Hill Rd., will feature a special appearance by actor Dean Butler. He portrayed Almanzo Wilder, Laura's husband, on the TV show, "Little House on the Prairie," from 1979 to 1983.

Butler will give a special presentation at noon on both days and participate in autograph sessions from 2 to 4 p.m. Tickets for autograph sessions must be pre-purchased and will be available beginning at 10 a.m. each day in front of the town hall for \$15 per person or family. Tickets include a meet-and-greet with up to two autographs on items of a person's choice, as well as a photo opportunity.

Prior to his arrival, Butler spoke to The Daily News about "Little House" and the affect it has had on his career.

DN: "Little House on the Prairie" remains a beloved franchise around the world with a devoted fan base. Thirty years after it ended, what is it like being part of that legacy?

Butler: I think being part of the "Little House" legacy is one of the great blessings in my life. It really is. Next to my own family and loved ones, there is no association in my life that has been more enduring than "Little House." I'm not interacting on a very personal basis with fans, but I certainly do see, we do see, a lot of the same people over the years. So you do develop friendships and relationships with these people who have loved the show.

It's an incredibly gratifying thing to have people respond so happily, joyfully, emotionally to something you've been a part of as an actor. It is certainly the thing in my life as an actor that will always be the most remembered. It is the thing that had the greatest life and it is a really nice life. It's something that people love, respect and count on in many ways to be a guide post in their own lives. To have that mantle that is given to us, all of us, for having been a part of it is really a special experience.

DN: Are you OK with being best known for Almanzo?

Butler: Yeah, I'm totally OK with that. I'm not pursuing acting anymore as a career. It's not what I do anymore. As I said, I'm very proud of it, and I'm happy for that association - to be associated with something that is considered classic American's children's literature, which is in fact spread all over the world. That's a pretty cool thing.

DN: Have you ever had problems with fans being unable to separate you from the character?

Butler: I think for certain people, that can be a challenge for them. I think for certain individuals, they watch what they watch and think it's real. But I can say that given the kind of character this is and kind of program it is, that association is never threatening, you know? It's not an uncomfortable thing. We all just play along, and it's fine. I think people do it with the best of intentions with the most the loving of connections. That's part of the gift of this - we become those people for millions of viewers around the world.

DN: "Little House" had already aired for five years before you joined. Did you feel any pressure, or the weight of the responsibility, to take on that role and star opposite Melissa Gilbert?

Butler: The hardest part was there was an eight-year age difference between Melissa and myself, and I knew we would be asked to play a romantic relationship. That was the challenging part of it. It was always going to be a chaste relationship. I think I did all right. I remember we won a TV Land award for most memorable kiss.

DN: Do you have a favorite episode?

Butler: There are so many fun episodes, but I always think about "Sweet Sixteen" as a wonderful episode, because it's a turning point in the story for Laura and for Almanzo. The audience has grown up with Laura. When they see her becoming a young woman, that's a very big turning point moment. I think millions of young girls around the country, when that happened, were just thrilled that Laura was moving on to this time in her life. I got a lot of the good feeling that came with that because she loved the character, so they loved the character.

DN: Who is your favorite character on the show - besides Almanzo?

Butler: I loved Mrs. Oleson. Katherine MacGregor was just an incredible person to watch and to work with. Loved working with her.

Loved working with Victor French, who played Mr. Edwards. Victor was just a consummate actor, and was so giving with everyone. I was a young kid at that time - I was 23, 24, 25, that range and relatively inexperienced as an actor. Victor was very generous with all of us, but I always felt his generosity and really appreciated it.

DN: Why do you think the show has sustained the popularity that it has over the years?

Butler: I think it represents really basic fundamental values that are very admirable values. Family. Belonging. Caring for one another. Respecting one another. Overcoming adversity - it's not a value, but it's a reality many people face and the "Little House" books and series play into that human need to overcome. I think people like the honest heart, the open heart. I think they like the fact that people hug and tell each other they love each other and support each other in difficult times. I think a lot of people miss that in their own lives for whatever reason.

They just don't get enough of it, and for years and years and years, people who have watched "Little House" and read "Little House" books comment on that inspirational quality that the show has. That it gives them examples of how they can behave in their relationships that maybe they weren't taught by their parents. They get it from us, and that's a nice thing to be able to give to people. We're doing it in very dramatic stories or sweet stories, but there are lessons there that people can infer for themselves, and I think that's why people love it so much. Because it gives them something positive they can carry into their own lives, that they can pass on to their own children, and their children can absorb on their own.

Certainly the show doesn't have all of life's answers, but it offers examples that people can use in their own lives that are positive.

DN: Do you do a lot of events and festivals like Laura Ingalls Wilder Days?

Butler: This is a special summer for all of us, because we're celebrating Laura's 150th birthday this summer. So there is a lot of "Little House" activity this summer, and our cast is out and about all over the country visiting places where people love Laura. I've been doing this for years, but this summer is a little busier than most.

And when I say a little busier, some of us are out every weekend. I'm doing about six appearances this summer - that's a high number for me. Alison Arngrim, who played Nellie, probably does 50 to 100 appearances a year, every year. But that's really her livelihood now. Being Nellie is what she does. I do other things, but I love the opportunity to step back into it.

DN: What's it like meeting and talking with the fans of the show?

Butler: I always feel I'm there to represent or to validate people's memories, to nurture what they think about the show. It's very important to me the show has an ongoing life.

It's pretty important to all of us who participated in it this way. We want it to continue because it is part of our life legacy, and we want it to remain something people love and enjoy because we love and enjoy it. The interactions for the most part are always positive and warm.

I'm continually amazed at the highest level of affection people have for what we did. Like I said it's gratifying, it's incredibly gratifying.

A Quick Look

WHAT: Laura Ingalls Wilder Days.

WHERE: Genesee Country Village and Museum, 1410 Flint Hill Rd., Mumford.

WHEN: 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. Aug. 5 and 6.

Actor Dean Butler will give a special presentation at noon both days and participate in autograph sessions from 2 to 4 p.m. Tickets must be purchased for the autograph session.

Also, author Pamela Smith Hill ("Pioneer Girl: The Annotated Bibliography" and "Laura Ingalls Wilder: A Writer's Life") will make a presentation at 2 p.m. each day and have complimentary book signing sessions.

ADMISSION: Special event admission applies. For information, call (585) 538-6822 or go to www.gcv.org.

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