

When Alison Arngrim showed up at Melissa Gilbert's 40th birthday party, Gilbert's friends and family asked Arngrim how she had the nerve to be there.

Fictionally, Arngrim and Gilbert are sworn enemies, playing Nellie Oleson and Laura Ingalls, respectively, on the 1970s and '80s hit TV show "Little House on the Prairie."

In real life, they're like sisters, Arngrim said. But most people can't get past Arngrim's on-screen persona. Even she acknowledges that she was probably the meanest TV villain in history.

"At Melissa's party, people came up and said, 'What are you doing here?'" Arngrim said in a phone interview from France, where she's touring her onewoman comedy show. "When I told them we're friends and like each other in real life, they were shocked."

Arngrim, now 45 but still looking the part of Nellie, headlines a group of "Little House" alumni appearing at Homestead Days in Beatrice, Neb., this weekend. Before jumping a transatlantic flight from Paris to the prairie, Arngrim talked about her infamous legacy, fake locks and real-life ties to the Plains.

Q.

I've heard the "Little House on the Prairie" crew still sticks together like a family. Is that true?

A.

We constantly communicate through e-mail. Melissa Gilbert is like a younger sister. I live close to the actress who played Carrie. Mrs. Oleson even insisted on buying me an outfit for one of my performances in Paris. She's still my mother after all these years, picking out clothes for me like I was 12 or something.

Q.

So the other actors didn't ostracize you because your character was so mean?

A.

No, everyone was close on the set. Melissa and I especially. We couldn't have had the fight scenes we had if we weren't that close.

Q.

What do you think was the worst thing Nellie did on the show?

A.

Laura had a friend who stuttered. I wouldn't let her in our club because she couldn't talk. I made the password the Peter Piper tongue twister. I found that rather disturbing because I had some speech issues when I was younger. I would never do something like that in real life. I'd rather put a needle in my eye before I'd torment a stutterer.

Q.

Aside from her mean streak, Nellie is known for her blond curls. Was that your hair?

A.

The first few months, they tried to use my hair, but it didn't work. So they had a wig made. It was a wonderful wig for two or three hours, but after nine hours in the hot sun, it was not pretty. It was held on by a metal comb in the front that dug into my scalp. After a long day, I'd yank it off, and there would be a scab and traces of blood.

Q.

After the show ended, did you want to stop being Nellie?

A.

In my late teens and early 20s, after the show had ended, I thought, "Oh God, I can't take this anymore." I wanted to be Deborah Harry, a rock star. But the Nellie stuff had really stuck. Eventually, I thought, "Wait a minute. Of all things I could be, it's great to be a really cool villain character." "Little House" is more than just a show to people. Nellie's more than just a character. Once I embraced that I'd always be Nellie to millions of people, my life improved.

Q.

You've developed a whole stand-up routine about her, right?

A.

Right. It's turned into a big one-woman show. I perform all across the United States. I developed a French version that's just huge over here. I go on the subway, and everybody says, "Nellie, Nellie!"

Q.

So what's it like jumping from Paris to rural Beatrice, Neb.?

A.

It's a big change, but I'm really keen on doing the whole Beatrice thing. "Little House" was about playing real historical people who actually lived. So much of what happened on the show really happened in the books and real life. Since the show ended, I've done a lot of historical research on that era. The show was more historically accurate than we even intended.

I learned a lot about my own roots. My father grew up on the Canadian prairie. His family got the land because of the Canadian Dominion Act, which is like the Homestead Act in the U.S. I'm a descendant of a homesteader, so being part of the event in Beatrice is important for me.

Alison Arngrim

Auditioned for the role of Laura on "Little House on the Prairie" but didn't get it. Auditioned for the role of Mary but didn't get it. Auditioned for Nellie and nailed it.

Volunteers to raise money and awareness for AIDS after her on-screen husband, actor Steve Tracy (Percival on "Little House") died of the disease in the 1980s.

Lives in Tujunga, Calif., with her husband, musician Bob Schoonover, and two cats.

Other TV villains

Nellie Oleson tops many a list of infamous TV villains. Here are some other hiss-worthy baddies:

Wayne Arnold, "The Wonder Years": Kevin's crass and crude brother regularly slugged the protagonist in the arm.

Gaius Baltar, "Battlestar Galactica": The brilliant scientist has a penchant for making catastrophically poor and

selfish decisions.

Bob, "Twin Peaks": The evil being possessed characters and turned them into killers.

Newman, "Seinfeld": Jerry's rotund nemesis is almost never sincere or truthful.

Mr. Burns, "The Simpsons": Homer's dark-hearted boss is reminiscent of the Grinch.

The Carver, "Nip/Tuck": A mimelike serial killer whose hidden identity was a major plot point.

Benjamin Linus, "Lost": The leader of the mysterious Others has a creep factor that's off the charts.

Nina Myers, "24": A dastardly double agent and bane to Jack Bauer.

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