

Alison Arngrim came on the line and said, "Hi, it's me."

And there it was. That voice. The voice of Nellie Oleson from TV's "Little House on the Prairie" — but a grown-up Nellie, mellow and, holy cow, friendly! Not a whiff of that nasty nasally Nellie whine.

She spoke excitedly like an old friend trying to fit everything into one conversation. Talk, talk, talk, stop — "sorry, I'm munching on a cookie" — talk, talk, talk.

With a new memoir out, she's talking a lot these days about "Little House on the Prairie," the TV show that ran from 1974 to 1982 based loosely on Laura Ingalls Wilder's series of books set in the 1870s and 1880s. For seven years, Arngrim wore a wig of blond curls pinned painfully (it drew blood) to her head and ran roughshod over the other children of Walnut Grove.

Hey, little stuttering girl. Recite "Peter Piper picked a peck of pickled peppers!"

Arngrim's Nellie character made Laura Ingalls' life a living nightmare, and people can't seem to forgive Arngrim for it.

They've spit on her, thrown soda cups at her during parades. And the first (and last) time she appeared in public in a Nellie costume, someone kicked her in the rear, knocking her flat on the ground.

"Do you have any idea the \$%^& I have had to put up with?" she said in her stand-up comedy act. "Do you know what it means to be Nellie Oleson?"

"It means that somebody somewhere at least once a day has called me a (witch) to my face every day since I was 11 years old."

Even last week, when she appeared on a local TV show in New York, "they were weirded out," she said with a laugh, speaking from New York on the same day.

She's doing all the big TV talk shows to promote her book, "Confessions of a Prairie Bitch," which is also the name of her one-woman comedy show.

Of all the "Little House" scuttle she shares, people are always surprised that Nellie (Arngrim) and Laura (Melissa Gilbert) were best friends behind the cameras — they had sleepovers — and are still chummy today.

Arngrim was among the first at dress rehearsals two years ago to see Gilbert play Ma Ingalls in "Little House on the Prairie," the stage musical. The production begins tonight at Starlight Theatre.

Arngrim was 11 and Gilbert was 9 when they met on the "Little House" set.

"We both came from showbiz families. We were both 40-year-old Hollywood midgets," Arngrim said.

"Melissa Gilbert wanted a big sister ... and I think that's part of what went on. She had a kid brother she was ready to trade to me."

(The kid brother was Jonathan Gilbert, Melissa's real-life brother, who played Willie Oleson on the show.)

On the other hand, Melissa Sue Anderson, who played Mary Ingalls ... well, Mary Ingalls didn't want anything to do with Nellie or Laura off camera.

"TMZ did a story a few years ago. They put a halo on me and devil horns on her. It was freakin' hilarious," Arngrim said. "Never mind that the world is going to hell in a handcart. But wait! Two middle-aged child stars

don't like each other. Film at 11!"

Tell all, Nellie, tell all

Arngrim made a YouTube video where she recites in one long sentence the 10 questions people most frequently ask her about "Little House." It goes like this:

Were you really a ... was that really your hair ... what was Michael Landon really like ... were you and Melissa Gilbert really friends ... where did you film the show ... what's your favorite episode ... how much did you get paid ... do you still get residuals ... is Albert gay ... and what the heck is wrong with Baby Carrie?

She answers them in her book.

"Most celebrity memoirs tell you what happened, but they don't necessarily describe it and tell you a story," she said.

Her stories include the time she and Gilbert filmed the scene where Nellie and Laura fall into the river and floated away. Stuck on set on a long day of filming, the girls took matters into their own hands and peed in their wetsuits.

And that fight Nellie and Laura had over Almanzo? The next time the "Back to School, Part II" episode comes on, read their lips. The girls were told there would be no sound for the scene so they really let it rip.

"We screamed and swore and called each other every filthy name in the book," Arngrim writes.

And when Laura pushed Nellie down that hill in a wheelchair in Arngrim's favorite scene? In real life, Arngrim had just broken her arm by falling off her skateboard and her arm was inside a plaster cast.

Michael Landon, the show's creator and star, told her if she ever broke her arm again, he'd break her other one.

The male Farrah

Landon was the one who decided to use the blooper reel of Baby Carrie tumbling down the hill as the show's opener. The story behind that: In the rush to get her on set, Carrie's mom put her shoes on the wrong feet.

Splat! Print it!

Some bonnet heads — those are "Little House" super-fans, like Trekkies — are upset by what Arngrim writes about Landon, who died of pancreatic cancer in 1991. Why speak ill of the dead, they've written on comment boards.

Arngrim discusses Landon's many marriages, his drinking on the set (Wild Turkey in the morning), his cursing and his habit of not wearing underwear under Pa Ingalls' tight woolen pants.

But it's not like she's spilling secrets. What Michael Landon fan didn't already know as much? (Except maybe for the underwear part.)

"He was a wonderful, cool person to work for," Arngrim said, who describes her boss like this in the book:

"... he was gorgeous, absolutely breathtaking; all muscles and tanned skin, big white teeth, and a wild mane of shining, curly hair. He was like a male version of a Farrah Fawcett poster. ... He knew he was sexy, and he made sure everyone else knew it, too."

"Everybody thought he was hot. As I got older, I saw it," she said. "But since he was also there all the time, he just became part of the scenery. 'Oh, there's a tree, oh, there's a covered wagon. Oh there's Michael Landon without a shirt on.'"

A place to vent

Arngrim auditioned for the roles of Laura and Mary before she was called back to read for Nellie.

It was love at first read.

"When I got the job there was such glee in releasing, being able to portray all these negative emotions," she said. "People have made a lot of money out of embracing their dark side. I had that down in the '70s."

Arngrim grew up in a Hollywood family whose eccentricities would have made Ma Ingalls blush.

"I once took a count and realized that three out of four people who babysat me later wound up being committed to a mental hospital," she has often said, joking.

Her mother was voice actress Norma MacMillan, who provided the voices for both Gumbly and Casper the Friendly Ghost. Her father, Thor Arngrim, was a talent agent who at one time represented Liberace. Her brother was a child actor, too.

She writes about the secret she was hiding while making "Little House," that a family member began abusing her when she was 6. She has spoken publicly about it in recent years while campaigning to strengthen punishments for child abusers in California, where she lives today with her husband.

Nellie Oleson was her outlet. Nellie's anger could be Alison's.

"I was so lucky that I had some place to vent," she said.

Arngrim long ago reconciled herself to the fact that people will forever see her as Nellie, and if that gets people to listen to her about the causes she fights for today, so be it.

And if there's one thing Alison Arngrim is good at, it's talking.

Following Nellie

- <http://hgd.com/alison> : Alison Arngrim's website.
- <http://protect.org> : the National Association to Protect Children, Arngrim's cause.

Where are they now?

Caroline "Ma" Ingalls: Karen Grassle is a working actor living in California.

Mary Ingalls: Melissa Sue Anderson lives with her family in Montreal.

Carrie Ingalls: Identical twins Lindsay and Sidney Greenbush, who played Carrie, turned 40 last month. They both live in California, where Lindsay has worked as an equine iridologist and in property management. Sidney breeds and trains horses.

Mrs. Oleson: Katherine MacGregor, contrary to recent rumors on the Internet, is alive and well and living the retired life in Hollywood.

Willie Oleson: Alison Arngrim says Jonathan Gilbert "doesn't exactly hang around with his family. He is, I believe, currently in the United States."

TONIGHT at starlight

Alison Arngrim's former TV co-star Melissa Gilbert plays Ma in the musical version of "Little House on the Prairie" at Starlight Theatre tonight through Sunday. Call 816-363-7827 or go to www.kcstarlight.com .