

It was orange soda. Alison Arngrim remembers the distinctive citrus smell as it trickled down her face and neck. A thrown pop can had struck her in the head, punctuating the chorus of boos that greeted her appearance at a holiday parade in Hollywood. She was stunned - a knock in the head tends to do that - but not surprised.

The then-16-year-old Arngrim played Nellie Oleson, the mean-spirited, curly-banged girl who belittled and ridiculed beloved Laura "Half Pint" Ingalls on the NBC series "Little House on the Prairie."

At the time, Nellie arguably was the most-hated character on TV. This was about two years before anybody wanted to shoot J.R. on "Dallas."

"I took it as a compliment," Arngrim said in a phone interview to promote her appearance in Nebraska this weekend. "I don't think there's many people who hate a character so much they would throw crap at them at a parade."

"I just thank God it wasn't a beer bottle."

Arngrim, now 43, will reunite with several castmates during Homestead Days at the Homestead National Monument of America near Beatrice.

Also on hand will be Karen Grassle (Caroline Ingalls), Lindsay and Sidney Greenbush (Carrie Ingalls), Dean Butler (Almanzo Wilder), Charlotte Stewart (Eva Beadle Simms) and Matthew Labordeaux (Albert Ingalls).

The group will be on stage at 2 p.m. Saturday and Sunday and will discuss what it was like to work on the set and what was needed to portray a character in a homestead setting.

"They tell us this will be as much fun for them as it will be for us," said Amy Garrett, a park ranger and education coordinator at Homestead.

Arngrim, now 43, lives in Tujunga, Calif., with her husband, musician Bob Schoonover, and their two cats, Hannibal and Clarice.

She is a stand-up comic - a talent she discovered when she was 15 - and has a one-woman show, "Confessions of a Prairie Bitch," that she successfully has staged in Los Angeles and New York. She plans to take it on the road.

She's also a longtime AIDS activist. She began volunteering at AIDS Project in Los Angeles after "Little House" co-star Steve Tracy, who played Nellie's husband Percival, died because of complications from HIV/AIDS.

"I watch the DVDs, and it's hard to watch Steve," she said. "But at the same time it's fun to watch him because it was when he was young and healthy and having a good time. I miss him."

Arngrim looks back fondly on her "Little House" days. She was 12 when she was cast as Nellie. The series, which starred the late Michael Landon as Charles Ingalls and Melissa Gilbert as Laura - ran on NBC from 1974 to 1983.

Coming from a Hollywood family - her father managed Liberace and her mother voiced Casper the Friendly Ghost - prepared her to play the much-hated Nellie, she said.

She remembers she was the one her elementary-aged friends would ask to get autographs from another student who later would become the King of Pop.

"I didn't care," she said. "Michael Jackson was just another person in the business. It was no big whoop-de-

doo for me to ask him for his autograph."

Arngrim read for Laura and Laura's older sister Mary, but was glad - and still is - she landed Nellie. She called the part liberating because, unlike most child roles of the day, the character wasn't asked to say or do inane or unbelievable things.

She even found playing Nellie to be cathartic.

"They would let me throw things and break stuff and scream and cry," she said. "I was really relaxed by the end of the day. It's probably the reason why I didn't become one of those child stars addicted to drugs."

Her love for the character is the reason why the parade incident is funny to her now and a story she likes to tell.

"I was behind Richard Simmons and nobody was booing him," she laughed. "That's saying a lot because he's loud and obnoxious."

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If you go

What: Homestead Days

Where: Homestead National Monument of America, 4 miles west of Beatrice on Nebraska 4

When: 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. Thursday through Sunday (park opens at 8:30 a.m.)

Tickets: Admission is free; (402) 223-3514 or www.nps.gov/home

Entertainment Schedule

Saturday, Sunday

Noon - Singer-songwriter Ann Zimmerman

1 p.m. - Oklahoma Fancy Dancers

2 p.m. - "Little House on the Prairie" cast members

3:30 p.m. - Oklahoma Fancy Dancers

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