

Anyone who has read Laura Ingalls Wilder's classic books or seen the 1970s television show "Little House on the Prairie" knows — and probably hates — Nellie Oleson. But 43 years after the pretentious little girl first snubbed Laura Ingalls on TV, actress Alison Arngrim is still embracing the loathing that Nellie Oleson inspired.

A handful of Lebanon residents got to know Arngrim's real-life persona on Thursday when she spoke at a Lebanon Rotary Club meeting about "Little House on the Prairie" and how the show's fans reacted to her character.

Arngrim was in Missouri because she, along with as Charlotte Stewart (Miss Beadle) and Dean Butler (Almanzo Wilder), are special guests at the Missouri Cherry Blossom Festival, which took place Thursday, Friday and today in Marshfeld.

Arngrim said that when the show first aired in 1974, neither NBC nor any of the actors had any idea that it would be a hit — although she thinks that writer, producer and actor Michael Landon might have known. Arngrim herself auditioned for the show without having read the books and without knowing who Nellie Oleson was.

Arngrim first tried out for the part of Laura but didn't get it, and then she tried out for Mary and didn't get that either. After the show's pilot episode was filmed, Arngrim came back to audition again — this time for Nellie Oleson.

"I get a call to come read for 'Little House on the Prairie,' and said, 'Well, I already did that. I mean, how many people do they have on this thing?'" Arngrim recalled. "I didn't realize it was a cast of thousands, and I certainly didn't know what a Nellie Oleson was."

She was about to find out, though. At age 12, Arngrim was looking over Nellie's lines before the audition, and she told her father that she thought there was something strange about the part.

"He said 'Well, read it, read it to me,'" Arngrim remembered. "So I start reading it, and it's all that about, 'My home is the best home in all of Walnut Grove.' And she's going on about 'the country girls,' and my father starts laughing hysterically. He says, 'Don't touch it; don't change a thing. You go and you read it like that.'"

The producers laughed, too, when Arngrim read Nellie's speech during her audition, and they asked her to read it again.

"A good little child actress, I said, 'Yes, what would you to change?' And they said, 'Nothing; just read the thing about the house again,'" Arngrim stated.

By the time Arngrim and her father got home, her agent was on the phone talking about wardrobe fitting. Arngrim had been hired on the spot, and everyone else was sent home.

"Apparently I was the most awful person they had met that day," Arngrim stated. "And I was

just like, 'Is this a great testament to my acting, or is this saying something about me as a human being that I should be

concerned about?'" If Nellie raised red flags from the beginning, she only got meaner as the series progressed, Arngrim said, and some of the show's fans had trouble mentally separating Nellie's unpleasant character from the actor who played her. According to Arngrim, children were actually more willing to accept that Nellie's on-screen personality was an act, while adults were more likely to think that a child wouldn't be able to pull off Nellie's role unless she was actually a

little like Nellie. "I thought, how would that work out in real life?" Arngrim stated. "If you're making a film or TV

show and you had really like that, what would they do? Keep me in a cage like Hannibal Lecter?...Of course I was acting.”

Nonetheless, Arngrim said some people really hated her. She remembers that when she was about 16 years old, she was participating in a Hollywood Christmas parade when one of the spectators threw a half-full cup of orange soda at her head.

“I was right behind Richard Simmons, and no one threw anything at him,” Arngrim stated. “And he was making people exercise in the street.”

She added, “What amazed me was I picked it up, and it was half full. I said, ‘You know, there’s like a buck seventy- ve of soda left in here. Someone was just so angry, literally at the sight of me, that they stopped and (threw the soda). So that’s when I realized must be doing something right because I’m inspiring this kind of rage.”

Another time Arngrim was signing autographs at the Los Angeles County Fair when a woman walked up to her table, saw her name, said “I forgive you!” and walked away.

“She’d been holding it in for like 40 years,” Arngrim said. “My husband was with me, and he said ‘That was amazing. We need to bring the camera to these things.’ He said, ‘Was that just for “Little House,” or were you just forgiven for, like, everything? You got absolved at the L.A. County Fair.”

Arngrim’s husband had not watched “Little House on the Prairie” before he dated her, which wasn’t a coincidence since Arngrim intentionally avoided dating men who had watched the show.

When Arngrim’s then-fiancé told his parents that Arngrim was an actress, they asked whether she had been in anything they’d seen.

“He said, ‘Little House on the Prairie,’ so of they went crazy. “‘Little House on the Prairie!’ That’s wonderful! Who did she play?’ And he nally said, ‘Nellie Oleson.’ I swear to you, it was like the line went dead — the longest, most uncomfortable silence,” Arngrim said. “And nally, his father said, ‘She — she’s not like she was on the show, is she? And these are grown people. People really, really, really did... they absolutely believed it.”

However, Arngrim said that she has learned to embrace the relationship that she has with her fans.

“I have been in a very weird position my whole life with having people hate me and meeting people, and meeting my own fans,” she stated. “And even having my fans when they like me go, ‘I hated you so much!’ — and they’re smiling. And I’m like, ‘Oh, thank you, thank you!’ And they go, ‘You were horrible!’ ‘Oh, thank you, you’re too kind!’ ‘I just wanted to hit you in the face!’ ‘Oh, gosh, thank you.”

Arngrim has written a New York Times best seller about her experiences as Nellie Oleson and has a one-woman show on the same topic that she has performed in New York, Los Angeles, Boston, Chicago, San Francisco, Seattle and France. She has also made other lm, television, stage and multimedia appearances.