

KEYSTONE - This summer Beth O'Neill, a seventh-grader from Deadwood who is accustomed to life without TV, spent six weeks at her aunt's in Iowa, where every day after lunch, they would turn on the television and, through the magic of cable syndication, be transported back in time to 19th-century South Dakota and into the life and adventures of Laura Ingalls Wilder, her sisters, her Ma and her Pa.

It was a whole new world for the young history buff, who hadn't read the "Little House" series of books.

"I tried to read the first book, but it was boring," she said. (Boring? When the panther stalks Pa in the woods? When Ma's sisters squeeze into their calico dresses for the dance? When Pa makes a balloon for Laura and Mary out of a pig's bladder?)

Well, Beth said, she was only in second grade. But as soon as she saw the show on TV, she fell in love. That's why she was waiting in line Saturday in the old Keystone school, now a local history museum, wearing a flowered dress and a yellow bonnet.

She wanted to meet Carrie, Laura's little sister, or at least the twin actresses who played Carrie on the TV series. Carrie Ingalls was born in 1870, 100 years before Sidney and Lindsay Greenbush, the cute California twins who played her on the popular drama that aired from 1974 to 1983.

The real Ingalls spent much of her childhood in De Smet, graduating from high school in 1888 and beginning a career of homesteading and journalism. She moved to Keystone in 1910, married a widower and miner in 1912, and was an active member of the Keystone community until her death in 1942.

Despite all of that South Dakota history, the Greenbush sisters had never been to the state before Saturday, for their appearance as part of the town's annual Holy Terror Days, named for the Holy Terror gold mine, one of many mines that, along with the proximity to Mount Rushmore, accounted for the community's prosperity over the years.

When Beth's mom, who said she appreciates the "Little House" show for the values it teaches, found out that the actresses would be there signing autographs, she told her daughter, who was thrilled. Beth rummaged through her mother's closet to find something appropriate to wear, settling on a 1980s sundress she could wear with one of the bonnets her mother had sewn at her request.

"I tore down the hall. I'm like, 'Mom, can I wear this?'"

Beth wasn't the only young fan in period costume at the signing, and not all of the fans were kids.

Kendra Aasgaard of Rapid City was there with her husband and children. The "pioneer buff" made her husband take her to De Smet for her last birthday to see the Ingalls family homestead.

"It was OK," James Aasgaard said. "I thought I'd be bored stiff, but the tour guide made it interesting."

Meeting the Greenbush sisters was "awesome," Kendra Aasgaard said, though she couldn't decide if she liked the show or the books better.

Grandmother Janice Theriot of Texas, who summers in Keystone and works at the Borglum Historical Center, watches the show with her grandchildren, on channel 185.

"It's such a wholesome show," she said. "I love it."

The actresses, now 38 and not wearing pioneer outfits, graciously stood for snapshots, signed autographs and answered fans' questions for two hours.

Yes, they enjoyed that part of their life. They like meeting people who watched the show as kids and now watch it with their own kids. Yes, they stay in touch with Melissa Gilbert, by e-mail. (Laura and Carrie, e-mailing.)

They're not sure if they're identical or fraternal. They answer their own e-mail. They think the Black Hills are beautiful. They wish they would have been older so they could have better appreciated the scope of the history they were portraying.

"But you've left behind a huge legacy," one fan implored.

"Bigger than we ever thought we would," Sidney Greenbush said.

After most of the fans had left, Sidney Greenbush talked about what it is like to be forever associated with a television character and a historical figure.

"You can accept it or you can fight it," she said. They prefer to accept it, traveling to historical events as much as they can afford to and maintaining their Web site, www.greenbushtwins.com.

"In the time they lived, the Ingalls women were groundbreaking," Sidney said. "It's an honor to be associated with women who had such a big part in making South Dakota and the United States what it is."

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