

By KENDRA MEINHART

Green Bay (Wisc.) Press Gazette

You can bet Pa Ingalls never saw this one coming: Nellie Oleson and Laura Ingalls are Facebook friends.

Schoolyard enemies for so many years on TV's "Little House on the Prairie" in the 1970s, the two actresses who played the conniving, nasty Nellie and the spunky, tenderhearted Laura -- Alison Arngrim and Melissa Gilbert, respectively -- have remained close despite all that hair pulling, name calling and pushing and shoving in fictional Walnut Grove.

Such good friends, in fact, that not only did Arngrim make sure she and her musician husband logged the maximum number of votes allowed each week for Gilbert during her recent run on "Dancing With the Stars," but she showed up in the audience to cheer her on.

For a moment, Arngrim was thinking she might like to put Nellie's love-to-hate-her popularity to the test with TV viewers by giving the show a shot herself someday.

"When (Melissa) got on, I was like, 'Awesome, because I'll be next,'" Arngrim said by phone recently on her way to LauraPalooza in Mankato, Minn., where Dean Butler (Almanzo) was also on the bill. "But then I was watching it, and oh my God, she almost broke her neck!"

Gilbert suffered a concussion and whiplash during the competition, but for Arngrim, the real eye opener came on another night of "DWTS."

"She was completely upside-down, her dress was over her head and you could see her panties. They were perfectly good panties and her legs looked really good ... Do I, at 50, if I was in top physical condition, do I want to stand on my head and show everyone my panties? I'd have to rethink it. I was all ready to do it, but then I watched Melissa do it and went, 'That looks terrifying and painful. I'm not sure.'"

Not that Arngrim has time, not now anyway. She's in full-on Laura Ingalls Wilder mode, zigzagging across Minnesota making appearances at events inspired by the Wisconsin-born author of the "Little House" books, including a stop last week in the real Walnut Grove, Minn., where festivities included WWND? merchandise, as in What Would Nellie Do?

Arngrim, who lives in California, also regularly performs her one-woman comedy show based on her well-received 2010 memoir, "Confessions of a Prairie Bitch: How I Survived Nellie Oleson and Learned to Love Being Hated," all over the country and abroad.

Last month, she met up with Gilbert and fellow "Little House" actors Karen Grassle (Caroline) and Rachel Greenbush (Carrie) at the funeral for Ruth E. Foster, who played postmistress Mrs. Foster on the series. This week, she's in Green Bay for appearances at the popular Laura Ingalls Wilder Days at Heritage Hill State Historical Park.

That's an awful lot of Nellie reminiscing for Arngrim, who has become an outspoken activist for victims of child abuse (she revealed in her memoir she was sexually abused by a family member) and those living with HIV/AIDS (her co-star Steve Tracy (Percival) died from complications of the disease in 1986). But you won't hear her complaining.

"If you had told me when I was young, all the things you've ever wanted to do, all the stuff you've ever wanted, the ways you've wanted to help people, help abused children, help your friends who are sick, you're going to be able to do that because of Nellie Oleson ... That I never would've believed in a million years, and, boy, has that happened."

**A classic surprise(AT)**

"Little House," which debuted in 1974 and ran until 1983, has gone on to become a TV classic, beloved by those who grew up on it and still being discovered by new generations through syndication. Nobody is more surprised by that than Arngrim, who says the saga of an 1800s pioneer family "was the most uncool thing in the world" during its original run.

"We were amazed that the show was even a hit then, and the idea that in 2012 -- the Jetsons' 21st century -- that people would still be sitting around watching 'Little House on the Prairie,' that they'd be watching 'Little House on the Prairie' clip mash-ups on their phone ..." she said. "Most TV shows, when they're over, they're over. Maybe, if they're lucky, they go into reruns for a couple of years and then everybody's like, 'Next!' and moves on to the next thing."

But after the show was over and Arngrim went on to do other things, including stand-up comedy, she was never able to escape people wanting to talk about "Little House" and TV's original mean girl. Once the series came out on DVD, "Boy, that was it," she said. "There was 'Prairie' fever everywhere I'd go."

Executive produced and often directed by Michael Landon, who played Pa, there was no shortage of tear-jerking moments on a show built around a tight-knit family and town -- no doubt part of its timeless appeal, Arngrim said.

"The show was very emotional. A lot of people reacted to it on an emotional level. People tell me they liked other shows, but 'Little House' was different. It meant something to them. It was their family. They'd watch other shows for entertainment, but 'Little House' was really their friends and family," she said.

"Everybody's got a bully. Everybody's got a family. Everybody knows a Mrs. Oleson. Everyone suffers through the same things, and so people could relate. They couldn't relate to most other shows."

**Everyone's favorite brat(AT)**

Arngrim's Nellie, the spoiled brat with the ribbons in her hair and candy from her parents' general store in her mouth who had it in for Laura, became a fan favorite. It's a testament to Arngrim's acting abilities (she was 11 when she started the show) that, 30 years later, people are still floored by how nice she is in person.

"People can't believe that I was acting. Like I was really that horrible and they kept me in a cage and let me loose when it was time do the scene," she says laughing.

Arngrim admits even she cringes now at some of Nellie's worst moments -- beating Bunny the horse and taunting the shy girl who stuttered -- but there was something therapeutic at the time to get away with the kind of bad behavior in front of the camera that wouldn't be tolerated away from it.

"It was awesome! I got to say and do all these terrible things that I could never say or do. I took enormous pleasure and glee in this," she said. "I talk about this in my book, but I had a hard life. I was abused as a kid, I had the usual teenage angst and being a child star all buckled together. I had a lot on my mind. The fact that I could vent and let loose all this hostility and all of this anger as the character, what a fantastic thing. I really got lucky."

But that's in no way an endorsement from Arngrim for naughty Nellie to be a role model to the show's young fans who meet her at Wilder events.

"There's a marvelous old expression: 'There's nothing so instructive as a bad example,'" she said, laughing once again. "I've had people tell me that they would use it that way. 'OK, if you act like Nellie Oleson, you're going to your room!'"

PUBDATE = 20120727