



MICHAEL LANDON is the star of the "Little House on the Prairie" series.

# Michael Landon

## "You won't believe this, but he doesn't even have a press agent"

By Carolyn Olson  
Of The News staff

No one has a bad word to say about Michael Landon, even when he isn't on the set of his hit television show, "The Little House on the Prairie."

In fact, most of the people can't even think of bad things to say about Landon, who writes, produces, directs and stars in the NBC television show.

Landon envisioned the show based on the writings of the frontier prairies of a century ago from the books written by Laura Ingalls Wilder, and brought them to small screen television.

He hired nearly everyone for the cast and has kept most of them together as the show goes into its sixth season this month.

Insiders reluctantly admit Landon is growing "somewhat tired" of the series and that he is ready to "move on" to another project.

But that probably won't make the crew bitter because most of them are grateful to Landon for giving them a chance to work on the series.

"Mike's a super guy. He's such a power in this town," explains Bill Kiley, a man who's paid to publicize the show. But Kiley points out he has had an "easy" job promoting the series since it is such a big hit.

"You won't believe this, but Mike (Landon) doesn't even have a press

agent," Kiley says. "And he is one of the few super stars without one."

Kiley says Landon will often turn down interviews with larger newspapers and instead will allow reporters from small-town newspapers to come onto the set of Walnut Grove, where much of the show's action occurs.

"Mike can do whatever he wants to do in this town (Hollywood)," Kiley says. "He can take his pick, and NBC will back him. The two seem to be quite happy with each other."

Landon who appeared on the set just after lunch several weeks ago was dressed in the familiar outfit worn by Charles Ingalls, a prairie man from Minnesota with a large family to support.

He has a superb, dark California tan, and seldom wears makeup, as is required of the much paler cast members. His curly, collar-length hair peeks out from his beige, scruffy felt hat, and one of the suspenders holding up his cotton trousers sometimes slips down.

When asked if he is satisfied with the series he envisioned in the early 1970s, Landon says, "Yes, I guess so. I can't say I'm pleased with every show, but I guess overall, I'm pleased."

And what about the future of the show?

"The kids are growing up, and it's just natural that the show will end

sometime. After all, this show isn't like "Bonanza" when 40-year-old boys still lived at home on the Ponderosa. That was probably just a big tax write-off for Pa," Landon quips before breaking into his familiar, broad boyish grin.

And if Landon decides to stop production of the show after this season, what's next for him?

"Well, I'm sure not going to tell. In this town, if you've got a good idea you have to keep it to yourself or someone will steal it. And to start a show means spending a lot of money, and if it doesn't go, then it's money wasted."

"I'll take anything that looks good. I'm not planning ahead now," he says.

Landon looks calm as he sits in a director's chair under the shade of a tree, and that image is true for Landon the director, actor, producer and writer.

But Michael Landon the person is quite another story, insiders say.

"Mike Landon is really a mess," says Kiley. "He works all day and night long on projects and gets about four or five hours of sleep each day. He writes about one-third of the shows each season (24 episodes) and directs every other show, in addition to his acting duties in each show," Kiley explains.

Landon began writing when he was on the long-running "Bonanza" series. The show's director announced to

the actors one day that they should take a few days off because the next week week's script hadn't been written.

"So Mike went off over the weekend and wrote a script and turned it back in on Monday, and it was accepted. And he's been writing ever since," Kiley says.

"Mike's good at everything he does," the publicity man explains.

And everyone on the show, including lighting men, set designers, actors and even the extras, known as "atmosphere" in show biz circles, have nothing but good things to say about Landon.

Landon is also paid well for his craft. Kiley says Landon is one of the five richest men in Hollywood. He has an eight-acre hilltop palace in the Beverly Hills "that you wouldn't believe," Kiley says. Landon lives there with his wife, Lynn, and four of their children. Landon has three other children, who no longer live at home.

Since Landon wears four hats in the "Little House" production, he gets four pay checks — one each for his role as actor, writer, director and producer.

And his "father" from the "Bonanza" series, Lorne Greene, calls Landon the "Little Hog on the Prairie."

But Landon repays his crew well for their efforts. For example, last year, the crew (127 strong) each re-

ceived gold Mexican pecos (worth about \$300 or \$400 each) as Christmas presents. The previous year they received stereos, and the year before, color televisions.

But what about the other stars on the show?

Charles Ingalls' pioneer wife, Caroline, who is portrayed by Karen Grassle, performed in the morning filming session (the day that I was there), and only had a few minutes to chat before she left the frontier prairie 50 miles from L.A.

She was dressed in a white T-shirt and red sweat pants, with her hair wrapped in a bun off her neck.

She clowned for the photographer, and said she had been busy during the "off season" doing a movie entitled "Harry's War" and was eager to be back to work on "Little House."

Another series star, Melissa Gilbert, who portrays Laura, and twins Lindsay and Sidney Greenbush, who together portray little Carrie Ingalls, ate lunch on the set before leaving for town.

Gilbert, who will be featured in many of this year's episodes as she begins a romance with a 24-year-old new man in town, had already changed out of her costume and into red satin gym shorts and jersey, along with tennis shoes. The 15-year-old actress' image will change some-

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STOREKEEPER Mr. Oleson, portrayed by actor Richard Bull.



THE ACTUAL "Little House on the Prairie" set.



MRS. OLESON, played by Katharine MacGregor.



KAREN GRASSLE, who portrays Caroline Ingalls in the show, had completed filming for the day.

## 'Little House' is real (But only an hour's drive from Hollywood)

The prairie on the "Little House on the Prairie" set is real, but it isn't out in the wilds of frontier America as portrayed in the television series.

In reality, the "Little House" set is just an hour's drive from Hollywood. But you'd never know it.

The trees and the brush are the rattlesnakes (the rattlesnakes found each year during film houses along Walnut Grove Street look authentic, as do the cabin occupied by the pioneer Charles Ingalls family — except that they are "hollow" inside.

The danger of a prairie brush fire is real to the cast members during the summer months, when much of Southern California receives no rain for several months, with the temperatures falling in the high 80s or 90s.

To ensure the safety of the \$750,000 television set, NBC pays an off-duty Ventura County firefighter to stay on the set during filming and pay him about \$100 daily.

Last November a brush fire burned dangerously close to the set, but the blaze was doused before it caused any damage — except to many surrounding hillsides.

The atmosphere around the set is relaxed since most of the performers and technicians have been with the show for the past six years. Each one-hour episode is filmed completely before production begins on the next day.

It takes about five or six days to complete filming of each episode, with about half of the time spent at the Walnut Grove set near Simi Valley, and the other half in the MGM studios in Hollywood. Several weeks are spent on location in Tuscon

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gold-panning areas of the High Sierras.

Series star Michael Landon estimates it costs \$500,000 to film each episode, which includes salaries of the performers and other costs.

It takes 127 people to put together the show, many of which were with the show's star, Michael Landon, when he starred in the long-running series "Bonanza."

Many of the cameramen, producers and director have grey hair and are in their mid to late '50s. "That's because they're all the old pros in Hollywood," explains Bill Kiley, publicist for the show.

And there are also women involved in the show's production. "We all like to think of ourselves as a big family," says one director.

During a recent filming session about a traveling revivalist visiting Walnut Grove, crews spent nearly one hour shooting footage of the revivalist's wagon wheeling into town.

"We have to get just the right angle on this," explained producer William Claxton.

One of the horses in the team pulling the wagon fell to the ground, apparently because of exhaustion, but later Landon attributed it to a "sympathy strike" for another horse that had also slumped to the ground the day before because of a kidney spasm.

The action next moved to the Oleson general mercantile store, in which the town's shopkeeper, nasty wife and son are scheduled to greet the traveling preacher.

But that scene also had to be reshot again and again when Katharine MacGregor, who plays nasty Harriet Oleson, tripped on her long skirt as she rushed down the stairs to greet the



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preacher. Other retakes were made when MacGregor misqued her lines.

And yet another scene was stopped when one of the production workers noticed Landon had a button unbuttoned that he hadn't had during shooting of the same scene the day before.

"We have to be really careful about things like that — people notice it," says publicist Kiley, who was a reporter on the Los Angeles Mirror for 12 years before coming to work for NBC in 1982 and becoming friends with the likes of Landon, Dick Van Dyke and the Smothers Brothers.

And what about the sweat Charles Ingalls and Jonathan Garvey, played by Merlin Olsen work up on the set

while sawing logs at their mill? The first beads of sweat of the day are sprayed on with a plastic bottle of water, while the rest are real.

Wondering about the pay for being on the show?

Landon received more than \$20,000 an episode while on "Bonanza" and Kiley says the star "gets a lot more than that now. I'm not exactly sure how much."

Other actors can make from \$350 a week to \$8,000, depending on their part, while bit-part actors and extras earn \$82.50 a day, which can be raised to \$100 a day if they speak a word or make a gesture.

Many of the cast members of the "Little House" show are children, and

as required by California laws, they must be supervised and educated while working on the set.

Two women — Marian Fife and Helen Minniear — are assigned that task as studio teachers. They both agree the job and the pay are good.

Minniear, who graduated from the University of Kansas in 1934, has been as tutor teacher for 20 years and with "Little House" since its beginning six years ago.

Teacher Fife, who has been a studio teacher for 24 years, and says she got into the field while she was raising her children.

The two teachers' most famous pupils are Joey Heatherton, Sandra Dee, and Tuesday Weld.