

WAUKGAN — On the projection screen of the Ray Bradbury Room Tuesday evening, a very young Laura Ingalls punctuated an argument by open-hand smacking the face of her nemesis, Nellie Oleson.

From the back of the room, a voice called out “hit her again!” A crowd of more than 50 people burst into laughter not just at the timing of the remark, but who uttered it: Nellie Oleson herself, actress Alison Arngrim.

Extra chairs had to be hauled in to accommodate fans who appeared to range in age from the Baby Boom to college age — a span that Arngrim acknowledged just prior to her appearance.

“We’re on the fifth generation of viewers,” said Arngrim, sporting a short, stylish haircut that was a far cry from Nellie’s trademark curls. “We have a lot of women my age — I’m 49 — who grew up watching the show, and that’s the big group, (but) now you have younger women raising their kids on ‘Little House’ DVDs.”

And, she added, Nellie Oleson’s bad-girl allure has landed in and around Paris, where “they don’t think Nellie Oleson’s mean — they think she’s French.”

Tuesday’s TV-family reunion was driven by Arngrim’s 2010 book, “Confessions of a Prairie B****: How I Survived Nellie Oleson and Learned to Love Being Hated.”

The humor-filled memoir was released a year ago this month, and Arngrim’s Waukegan appearance was part of a continuing promotional tour that saw her sitting with the women on “The View” last week.

She said the book was intended primarily for those she refers to as “Bonnetheads” — fans of “Little House” who, as she put it, “are able to revere and laugh at the show at the same time.”

Arngrim came to “Little House” from a show-business family. Her mother, Norma McMillan, was an actress best known for providing the voices of Casper the Friendly Ghost, Davey from “Davey and Goliath” and Sweet Polly Purebred from “Underdog.” Her brother, Stefan Arngrim, was also a child actor, co-starring on the 1968-70 TV series “Land of the Giants.”

After making her film debut at age 12 in a G-rated comedy called “Throw Out the Anchor,” Arngrim first appeared as Nellie Oleson on the second episode of “Little House” in September 1974. She would go on to co-star in 104 of the show’s 207 episodes, departing in 1981 following the marriage and humanization of her famously catty character.

Since then, she has largely stayed out of the Hollywood spotlight, appearing here and there in TV movies like “I Married Wyatt Earp” (1983) and independent films like “Make the Yultide Gay” (2009).

In an excerpt posted when the hardcover version came out, Arngrim sums up her long-term relationship with a character she played during her teen years: “I live every day with the knowledge that what was supposed to have been simply a really good gig, a major role on a long-running TV series, with lots of good times and fun memories, has instead morphed into a bizarre alternate version of reality, where I am repeatedly held to account for the actions of a fictitious character as if they were my own,” she wrote. “And not just any character. A b****. A horrible, wretched, scheming, evil, lying, manipulative, selfish brat, whose narcissism and hostility toward others knew no bounds. A girl who millions of people all over the world had grown to hate. But she was a girl I grew to love.”

Arngrim added that, along with providing for her financially, Nellie Oleson “aided and protected me like no other creature, real or imagined. She transformed me from a shy, abused little girl afraid of her own shadow to the in-your-face, outspoken, world-traveling, politically active, big-mouthed b**** I am today. She taught me to fight back, to be bold, daring, and determined, and, yes, to be down-right sneaky when I needed to be.”

Along with the Tinseltown anecdotes, the book tackles subjects of a much more serious nature, including

Arngrim's childhood experiences with molestation, which she revealed publicly in 2004. The appendix lists contact information for such organizations as the National Association to Protect Children, and the Rape, Abuse and Incest National Network.

Arngrim was joined for her appearance in Ray Bradbury's "Green Town" by Oak Park native Wendy McClure, author of a "Little House" homage titled "The Wilder Life: My Adventures in the Lost World of 'Little House on the Prairie.'"

At one point, after McClure led a demonstration of how butter was churned back in the days of Laura Ingalls Wilder, Arngrim hauled out her own prop — a Nellie Oleson wig. "It's just really wrong that I should put this on and look like this," Arngrim said, drawing laughs as she stuck out her tongue and frowned. "The French really dig this."

Copies of both books were being sold on site by the Lake Forest Book Store.

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