

Walnut Grove was a tough place.

Sure it's famous for little houses, pigtailed, and Michael Landon's folksy charisma.

But scratch beneath the surface and you'll find grizzly maulings, stagecoach accidents, blindness, plagues and fires.

And that's by no means the worst of it for Little House on the Prairie fans.

Arguably the most hard-boiled of Walnut Grove's denizens was Nellie Oleson. Haughty and sadistic, it's no stretch to envision the 12-year-old pulling strings in Tony Soprano's mafia crew.

Faking paralysis? Music box blackmail? Lofting rumors of "monkey business" between Ma Ingalls and the handyman?

For Nellie, it was just another day of being the richest and meanest girl on the prairie.

Miss Oleson was played by the talented -- and actually very nice and funny -- Alison Arnglim. Now grown and 47 years old, she'll be appearing Sunday for Pioneer Day, at Holy Family School in Le Roy.

She'll be answering questions about the show, signing autographs, and offering insights into the essence of being, well, Nellie.

Such as being billed quite literally as Nellie Oleson during an appearance last year, or getting her hair pulled by one of the real-life Laura Ingalls Wilder's last surviving friends.

Laura, of course, wrote the books on which the television series was originally based.

"It is very weird," Arnglim said, laughing, during a Monday telephone interview. "And that's why I have the one-woman show... That's how it all came about. People say the weirdest things to me and ask me the weirdest questions.

"The show was actually a response to that. What is it like to be a former child star? You read about ex-child stars being under all this stress and pressure, and confusion of real life, but what if on top of that, your character is somebody where everyone will hate you?

"How do you process that? And that's sort of my life in performance art, in answer to that question."

Arnglim will be talking about her Little House experiences and signing autographs during the Sunday event. It won't be exactly the same as her one-woman show, but she may shatter some stereotypes in the process.

For the unfamiliar -- and leaving the classic children's books aside -- Little House is more than just a television show. It's maintained a devoted, often passionate, fan base on many levels.

Holy Family School shows selected episodes for their moral lessons, such as friendship and bullying. Others like the romantic idea of hoop skirts, horse-drawn wagons, and living in the 1800s.

And yet others appreciate the rather bizarre mayhem that sometimes popped up in an otherwise family show, such as an anthrax outbreak, Mary's sudden blindness, and the unlucky quarryman who simply explodes.

Making Little House unique, Arnglim observes, is the underlying love for the show at all those different levels. Fans appreciate the show for all those reasons and more.

They've maintained a reverence. And as much as the show featured tragedy, the resolutions always involved families and towns coming together, she noted.

As for the lowdown on Nellie?

Arngrim comes from a show business family, with her mother Norma MacMillan having provided character voices on *Casper the Friendly Ghost*, *Gumby*, and *Davey and Goliath*.

She really liked villains as characters, and once asked co-star Katherine MacGregor, who played Mrs. Oleson, why she gave the part its over-the-top portrayal.

"What was that performance about, and what does it all mean?" Arngrim asked. "Remember, those books that were written by Laura Ingalls Wilder weren't just historical, but they were based on the memories of a 9-year-old girl, and these characters were seen through a 9-year-old's eyes.

"So Pa was braver and more perfect, and Ma was better than everyone, and the villains ... Think about how terrifying to a child Mrs. Oleson would have been, this overbearing, impossible, difficult woman who ran the store, and was awful and gave people a hard time."

Seen through a 9-year-old's eyes, Mrs. Oleson and Nellie would seem like larger-than-life nightmares. And MacGregor and Arngrim were playing those images that had imprinted themselves on a child's mind.

So what might have been a playground argument in real life was magnified in the books -- and even further in television -- into a sometimes over-the-top, funhouse vision.

Such as the time Laura stole Nellie's music box and was blackmailed in return. Laura's dreams depicted Nellie as a hangman, complete with black hood, blond sausage curls and peppermint candy stick.

All in good, scary fun, with numerous moral lessons.

The real Nellie Oleson, or at least one of the girls she was based on, is buried with her family near Portland, Ore., and Arngrim's visited her grave.

Surreal?

"I suppose if Laura and Nellie had really gotten along, all of these things wouldn't have happened to me, so ..." Arngrim said laughing.