

# You gotta reckon with Half Pint

By CHARLES WITBECK  
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HOLLYWOOD — Watch out for Half Pint next fall is the message from MGM.

Half Pint, in case you didn't know, is little Melissa Gilbert, the cute, freckled-faced youngster with braids who plays Laura Ingalls on "Little House on the Prairie."

The show crew began calling Melissa Half Pint five years ago when the family series started, to halt the confusion over the two child performers. Melissa Sue Anderson as older sister Mary, and Melissa the imp.

This September "Little House on the Prairie" begins season six with a two-parter featuring Half Pint Laura, age 15, about to become a young woman. Laura meets and quickly develops a crush on one Almonzo Wilder (Dean Butler) in his early 20s, the blond, 6'1" brother of the new school teacher Elizabeth Wilder (Lucy Lee Flippin). Suddenly the braids vanish, and Laura totters about in high heel shoes. In the Ingalls book, Laura marries Almonzo at 16; so another marriage lies ahead on the Monday night family show.

The question is whether head man Michael Landon wants to stretch out the Laura-Almonzo romance over a distance, or have Laura marry at the windup of the '79-'80 season. If there's a wedding in early spring, that could mean curtains for "Little

House" and quite possibly the beginning of a spin-off on life with the young Wilders. Insiders say Landon hates to see the kids grow up so fast, and would prefer to keep the family together for a spell. But no one has a clue at this juncture.

One thing is certain, Half Pint Melissa must be reckoned with, and no longer be patted on the head as a bright child actress.

Because this fall, November perhaps, little Melissa co-stars with Patty Duke Astin in a remake of William Gibson's stunning play on Helen Keller, "The Miracle Worker." Melissa also appears as co-producer, and her company Halfpint shares production rights.

When Ray Katz became Melissa's manager almost two years ago, he asked what his new client wanted to do.

"Cut a record and make 'The Miracle Worker,' was Melissa's answer. Katz contacted author Gibson and producer Fred Coe, and gained approval. Then Melissa suggested Meredith Baxter Birney for the role of teacher Annie Sullivan, and when that didn't work, she thought of the original Helen Keller on Broadway, Patty Duke Astin.

It turned out Mrs. Astin has dreamed of playing Annie Sullivan. Fred Coe would again produce the show, and author William Gibson would write the TV version. Then Melissa asked if her family, the "Little House" crew, would work the show during hiatus. No one

turned her down.

For practice, the cast played the show on stage for two weeks in Palm Beach, Fla., then returned to Hollywood in April and began shooting. It was Melissa's first crack at the theater, and she now says knowingly, "There's nothing like the stage."

Melissa began to sprout this spring growing two inches while battling with Patty Astin's Anne Sullivan. Patty taught Half Pint sign language, and the two would send each other secret messages on camera.

Then tragedy struck. Looking poorly on arrival from New York, producer Fred Coe told associates he was feeling better. But Coe suffered a relapse, and died suddenly over a weekend. A gentle and gifted man, and a major force during TV's teeth-cutting days of the '50s, Fred Coe died in harness, working on a property he loved. Half Pint and Patty Astin carried on, bent on doing it right for Fred.

Back in harness as Laura, Melissa faces a summer of work while her peers are off. Since she's been working summers most of her life, Melissa hardly feels deprived.

"She likes everything," says Mom. "She always has."

Then Mom scored the gossip columns. "They're printing nonsense about Melissa dating only young actors with a future. Can you believe that? Melissa has yet to have her first date."



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