Little House

by

*Eyes Right*

**Springfield, VA –** Pop culture wise, I missed most of the 1970’s and the early half of the 1980’s. I was submerged at sea on a submarine, living overseas, or on an aircraft carrier in the Indian Ocean. I have never regarded this as a significant loss until recently when I discovered a television series from that period, *Little House on the Prairie*, starring Michael Landon as Charles Ingalls and Karen Grassle as his wife, Caroline.

Some will argue – and I will not disagree – that the real stars of the series which ran nine seasons were the child actors, specifically the two older daughters, Melissa Gilbert as Laura Ingalls and her older sister, Mary played by Melissa Sue Anderson. Their younger sister, Carrie, was played by twins, Lindsay and Sidney Greenbush.

Landon became involved in the project with Ed Friendly, a television producer who in 1972 had purchased the rights to Laura Ingalls Wilder’s novels based loosely on her life growing up on a farm in Walnut Grove, Minnesota during the late 1800’s. Friendly hired Landon to direct a pilot and to take the lead role as Charles Ingalls. These two soon developed “creative differences” about how the fronter life should be portrayed; they even argued about whether or not the child actors should wear shoes. Friendly wanted to emphasize the stark reality of rural poverty, while Landon wanted to develop a series with broad appeal. Landon also saw a potential long-running series which would necessitate the creation of new characters not in the original books. Their dispute came to a head during filming of the initial episodes following the pilot. NBC sided with Landon, but Friendly had the last laugh as he ultimately received $40 million from NBC due to the ultimate success of the series.

The charms of *Little House* are many. Landon was a perfectionist who had a role in every phase of the series. He hired most of the actors and directed many episodes. There was no expense spared on lavish, authentic sets often using over 100 extras, all in period costumes. The story lines depict aspects of frontier life: the hardships, the tragedies, warm family connections, the daily challenges, good guys and bad guys, a one-room schoolhouse, blindness and disease, and a community church – to name only a few. Two actors had consistent “bad guy” roles, and both were female. The younger one, Nellie, is Laura’s total rival who spends most of her time scheming to harm Laura. Of course, she is always foiled, but always only after considerable drama. The older baddie is Mrs. Harriet Oleson, Nellie’s mother, who runs the general store in town with her much nicer husband. Nellie is exhibit A of the apple not falling far from the tree.

Overall, there were 202 Little House episodes running from 1974 to 1983, mostly in one-hour slots during prime time on NBC. When Landon left the series prior to its final year, the title was changed to *Little House, A New Beginning*. As Executive Producer of the series, Landon did not shy away from controversial topics including fistfights, violence, death, adoption, alcoholism, prejudice, church, racism, and prayer. Many episodes involve scenes in the community Christian church, including hymns (e.g. *Onward Christian Soldiers*) and sermons. Having written about one-room schoolhouses during the Great Depression, I enjoyed the frequent scenes showing the daily challenges of being in charge of a classroom of children ranging from grade school to teens.

The child actors are remarkable. Not only do they deliver their lines flawlessly, but their facial expressions and body gestures are “right on” for each scene. It is a challenge to develop a long-running series with young actors who physically grow and mature during the lengthy production schedule and evolving story lines, but Landon did it.

Most of the episodes were filmed on a large set in Simi Valley, California with some interiors shot on sound stages in Los Angeles. The attention to detail is obvious. Weather events, such as blizzards, flooding and wind storms are accurately depicted. There is even an operating steam train which appears in many episodes. What I find most fascinating is the role music plays in such a series. Essentially every scene has background music (inserted in post-production editing) suggesting the tone of the drama, whether it be danger, joy, love, sadness. The composer, David Rose, wrote not only the original theme, but was responsible for all of the background music.

Next time you are wanting for some “good ole TV,” you can find *Little House* on Amazon Prime. I assure you that there are worse ways to spend a few hours.

I thought you might like to know.

E-R