

Melissa Sue Anderson anticipates fall season

By Harry Harris
Knight-Ridder Newspapers

Melissa Sue Anderson expects to be in fewer episodes — but to have more to do — during the fifth and prospectively final season of NBC's "Little House on the Prairie."

"I'll be in every other show," the pretty blue-eyed blonde, who will be 16 Sept. 26, said, "but I'll have bigger parts."

"That's better. I'd rather do that than just stand around. And it will leave me a little bit free. I don't know when I'll be off and when I won't. If I did, I'd like to do some telemovies."

Apparently in past seasons the Berkeley, Calif.-born Miss Anderson spent much of the time on the set loafing. However, she makes it clear, half a loaf is better than none.

Because the series is based on Laura Ingalls Wilder's books about the true-life adventures of the Ingalls family on the American frontier in the late 1870s, she was afraid she'd be written out of the show entirely.

That's because her character, Mary, oldest daughter of Charles Ingalls, portrayed by Michael Landon, became blind and moved away from the rest of the family.

"When I asked if that would happen to me," she recalled, "Mr. Landon kept saying, 'No. Wait and see. It'll be great. Trust me.'"

"Mary goes to a blind school, comes back home to get her things, then returns to the school to teach. But the Ingalls family moves (from its southwestern Minnesota farm) to the town where the school is — Winoka, in the Dakota territory."

The concluding half of last season's two-parter in which Mary went blind was that week's top-rated Nielsen

scoresheet and marked the first time "Little House on the Prairie" ever achieved that popularity peak.

It cued various extracurricular invitations because, according to Miss Anderson's divorced mother, the former Marion Donohoe of Trenton, N.J., "It REALLY showed Melissa's ability as an actress."

Landon has indicated that he would like to foreclose on "Little House" after this season, to go on to different projects. Although Miss Anderson has reached the ingenue stage (she played a coquettish girl friend in the pilot of "James at 15") and would welcome "older" roles, she'd miss the series.

"There's a family feeling. We're all close. I don't socialize with my sisters' (Melissa Gilbert, who plays Laura, and twins Lindsay and Sidney Greenbush, who alternate as Carrie), but we have fun on the set."

"I love Mike. He's great. But I'm not in love with him. And I've never had a crush on him, even though a magazine article said I did."

There used to be confusion on the set because two of the daughters are portrayed by actresses named Melissa.

"We decided at the beginning that I'd be 'Missy' and she'd be 'Melissa.' We didn't flip a coin or anything. People still come up to her and ask, 'Are you Melissa Sue Gilbert?' and she says, 'No, I'm Melissa Gilbert.' It's terrible!"

Miss Anderson has been earning money on TV since she was nine. Her career was a consequence of dancing lessons she began six years earlier.

"Melissa was asthmatic as a toddler," her mother said. "A doctor suggested that in addition to medication she should develop her lungs. She began dancing at three and was quite a

swimmer at four."

"When we moved to southern California it was because my husband changed jobs. It had nothing to do with show business. It wasn't because of any ambitions on my part. I was very concerned, especially when she got the series."

"I was afraid it wouldn't be good for her, but she's been very lucky. She has always worked with nice people. There are lots in the business who aren't!"

"When she was seven her dancing teacher suggested that I send her to an agent, but I resisted for two years. I didn't want her in that terrible business. But she kept saying, 'Why not, Mom? I can make money, Mom.'"

Miss Anderson's first job was in a toy commercial.

"It went on the market," she recalled, "and right off again, because it didn't work. You were supposed to make models by pouring goop in a mold and putting a wire in, but they wouldn't stand up. It was terrible; they kept falling over. I worked all day for a 30-second commercial."

"There was a cereal, now off the market, like flour-covered oats. They were terrible, but I had to eat and eat and eat. And spaghetti-o's I ate all one day, so that I had no appetite for dinner. A couple of weeks later I had to go back and do it all over again because something went wrong."

After being assigned dialogue in a commercial she was able to join the Screen Actors Guild (SAG) and the American Federation of Television and Radio Artists (AFTRA). "When a part comes up," Mrs. Anderson explained, "they don't usually hire someone not in the union."

Although she has never received any

acting instruction, Miss Anderson was featured in her very first part, which called for her to kiss the youngest member of "The Brady Bunch." That followed six months of unsuccessful auditions — "I was always not tall enough or something."

When she auditioned for "Little House," she was one of 200 applicants. The list was narrowed to 20, "mostly for looks and a little bit for personality," who read for Landon.

Seven finalists for each role then received screen tests.

"Afterwards," Miss Anderson recalled, "they kept two kids there — Melissa Gilbert and another girl — and let all the rest go. After I got the part they told me they weren't that impressed by my screen test when I was doing it, but that on screen they loved it."

She gets a \$5-a-week allowance, but not when she fails to make her bed or perform other chores or is, in her mother's opinion, "disrespectful."

"An addict to saccharine," partial to sugar-less gum and soft drinks, she used to collect bells and owns "over 300," but now she prefers jewelry. However, what she wants most at the moment are the keys to a sports car.

She's not a music buff. She likes "rock and stuff," but has never gone — or wanted to go — to a rock concert. She doesn't smoke. She dates, but has no "number-one boy friend." She considers Erik Estrada of "CHiPs" "cute," though "a lot older," and characterizes Robert Conrad, of "Black Sheep Squadron," as "good looking" and Robert Hegyes, of "Welcome Back, Kotter," as "nice."

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