

Straight from Walnut Grove, Ma and Carrie, Nellie, Almanzo, Albert and even the teacher, Miss Eva Beadle, made their way to the stage at Homestead National Monument of America on Saturday.

As they took the stage the people in the crowd came to their feet, clapping and cheering, to show their love for the television characters many of them had grown up with.

"I'm really overwhelmed. This is very meaningful to us that you could all be here. It feels really, really good," said a teary-eyed Charlotte Stewart, who played Miss Eva Beadle on the TV series "Little House on the Prairie."

"You don't love me, I'm Nellie, you hate me," said Alison Arngrim, who played Nellie Oleson, prompting another round of warm cheers and applause.

When Karen Grassle, who played Caroline Ingalls, said "I played Ma" the crowd erupted yet again.

"This is really overwhelming. I had no idea so many people would be here," said Matthew Labordeaux, who played Albert Ingalls.

Also on hand were Lindsay and Sidney Greenbush who played Carrie Ingalls and Dean Butler who played Almanzo Wilder

The cast members were on hand for programs and autographs Saturday and Sunday at the monument as part of Homestead Days, Beatrice's annual community celebration. An estimated 7,000 people filled the monument's grounds Friday through Sunday.

Most of the cast members said they had not read the "Little House on the Prairie" books that the series was based on until they were on the show.

Grassley said when she was a girl the books would have been exactly the kinds of stories she enjoyed reading.

"I loved to read about adventures and pioneers," she said, but because they were out of print at the time she missed them.

Stewart said she had not read the books when she started on the show, then she picked one up and in the first chapter the dog dies and Mary goes blind.

"I thought 'What am I getting myself into?'," she said.

Labordeaux asked the crowd if Albert was everyone's favorite character from the books.

"He's not in the books," he said with a laugh, and shared that Michael Landon wanted a son in the show, so he invented the character of the adopted son Albert.

Butler said the books are the heart of the show because the characters were real people who lived real lives.

"Maybe the show didn't always stick to the total facts of the books, but it stuck to the spirit of the books," he said.

The costumes were not easy to wear, especially for the women.

"It was extremely hot," Arngrim said, adding that she passed out once each year wearing the costumes.

Stewart recalled a scene in which the town's residents were in the stands watching a baseball game, when it

was over she didn't move and they found that she had passed out sitting there.

Sometimes the props used in the program were a little too accurate for the actors.

Grassle said when they made the pilot show one scene had her plucking and preparing a turkey.

She recalled seeing the turkey running around that morning, but she tried not to think about the scene. When it was time to film the scene, the prop man was so proud of himself because he had delivered the real thing, Grassle said.

"I put my hand on it and it was warm. Michael said 'action' and I burst into tears," she said.

Grassle said coming from a generation that was accustomed to buying meat at a supermarket she was not used to meat being warm.

"Meat should be cold," she said.

Several members shared embarrassing moments they had while working on the show.

Sidney Greenbush said the most embarrassing moment she recalled was toward the end of the series, when she was 8 or 9 years old.

"Carrie pees her pants," she said, adding that she couldn't believe at the time that an 8- or 9-year-old would do that.

Stewart recalled a very tense moment.

"A bee flew up my skirt," she said.

She wasn't quite sure what to do at the moment, but someone got her out of sight where she could deal with the problem.

Arngrim said when they were filming a show where Nellie falls in Plum Creek suddenly they realized, after they were all dressed up and standing in the freezing cold water that they had to go to the bathroom. They were asked if they could wait until the scene was over because it would take too long to get them to a restroom.

"All of a sudden Melissa Gilbert was looking at me and I said 'no, you didn't,' and she said 'do it, it will keep you warm,' " she said.

Butler said it was his first day on the show playing Almanzo, who was supposed to be an excellent horseman. He was set up on a wagon driving horses in a way he had never done before but was told the horses would go straight to the wranglers.

"I started down the hill and my hat blows off," he said.

When he reached to grab his hat he dropped the line to control the horses, who turned off the road, and because the horses were wearing blinders one horse drove the other straight into a tree, Butler said.

When asked if she ever felt bad about playing Nellie and doing all the bad things that character did, Arngrim said no.

"I had so much fun," she said.

Grassle said she gained a tremendous appreciation for the 20th century by portraying life in the 19th century.

"It was rough. I don't know how this country got settled," she said.

The cast members, who also rode in a float in Saturday's Homestead Days Parade, said they were impressed by the turnout for the parade, and got a warm reception as they made their way through downtown Beatrice.

"They were genuinely happy to see us," Laborteaux said.

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