

Title: The kind sister from the prairie grows up

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HIT TV SHOW STAR **MELISSA SUE ANDERSON** TURNS 50 TODAY

When **Melissa Sue Anderson** sat down three years ago to reminiscence on eight years on the set of Little House On The Prairie, her words echoed the saccharine nature of her character -- kind, reliable big sister Mary Ingalls.

"My editor wanted me to be completely honest," **Anderson** said when her memoir The Way I See It: A Look Back On My Time On Little House was released in 2010.

"I tend to be nice. They said it doesn't have to be so nice."

Celebrating her 50th birthday today, **Anderson** lives in Montreal, Canada, with TV writer husband Michael Sloan and two young adult children.

Despite her wholesome persona as Mary, in 1979 **Anderson** was one of several actresses approached to play Emmeline in The Blue Lagoon (1980), a part made famous by Brooke Shields. The next year she appeared as a tortured teen in Happy Birthday To Me and as an evil witch in Midnight Offerings (1981).

Born in Berkeley, California, **Anderson** moved to Los Angeles with her parents and older sister Maureen at seven. The origins of her show-business career vary. One account is that a dance teacher told Anderson's parents she had natural beauty and talent and advised them to find her an agent. The other is that a chance encounter with an agent led to commercials and bit parts on The Brady Bunch and Shaft.

Anderson's life changed in 1973, when she beat 50 hopefuls interviewed for the part of Mary in the latest project from former Bonanza star Michael Landon and Laugh In producer Ed Friendly.

Friendly had recently read journalist and farmer Laura Ingalls Wilder's stories of her pioneering family's prairie experiences in the 1870s. Wilder turned her memories into popular fiction after she and husband Almanzo lost their money in the 1929 stock market crash.

In her first book, Little House In The Big Woods, five-year-old Ingalls lives in a log cabin in woodland outside a Mississippi village. Her books follow parents Charles and Caroline's moves to the Kansas prairie, Minnesota plains and Dakota over 13 years.

Stories of droughts, bone-chilling winters, crop failures and grasshopper plagues portray older sister Mary as good, kind and sweet. Mischievous Laura is livelier, crazy for horses and often in trouble.

The real Mary endured ill health, lost her sight at an early age, never married and lived with her parents until their deaths.

Friendly approached Landon about writing a script. Landon accepted, on the condition he could play Charles Ingalls.

"I was ecstatic when I heard I'd got the part," **Anderson** recalled.

"We shot in Stockton and Sonora, California. It rained a lot in Stockton -- our heavy trucks sunk in the mud. Sonora was snowy and quaint. We had to do a rain sequence using added sprinklers and, of course, it was freezing."

Anderson, known as Missy on set, described herself as a "quiet, shy girl" who loved reading books, writing and spending quiet afternoons at home alone. She was also serious about her acting.

In 1975, her father James, an Orange County gas station owner, and conservative Catholic mother Marian divorced, and **Anderson** withdrew further after this trauma.

Melissa Gilbert, who played Laura, and "Nasty Nellie" character Alison Arngrim both accused **Anderson** of being aloof and "stuck-up".

Ironically, the script twist that won **Anderson** the show's only Emmy nomination also eventually drove her away. In 1978, her character went blind in a two-part episode I'll Be Waving As You Drive Away.

Although "exciting and challenging at the beginning", being blind was difficult to sustain over several years, **Anderson** found.

"My character became limited because she couldn't see," she said.

"This, ultimately, is the reason why I decided not to stay with the show."

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