



the **Beyond
Prairie II**
The True Story of
Laura Ingalls Wilder Continues

8 p.m. Sunday on
CBS/Channel 11

TV
Covered Wagon
Houston Chronicle

March 17-23, 2002

Popular 'Prairie' saga continues

By ANN HODGES

Houston Chronicle TV Critic

When time comes to compile the favorite family classics of television, Michael Landon's *Little House on the Prairie* is a cinch to make that short, sweet list.

That series, based on the novels of Laura Ingalls Wilder about family life on the American frontier, was an immediate hit when it debuted in 1974.

Landon and Karen Grassle were the proud parents of that struggling pioneer family. For eight years, audiences watched Melissa Gilbert's Laura Ingalls grow up before their very eyes.

Fans still love the show.

The second-highest-rated TV movie of last season was CBS' *Beyond the Prairie: The True Story of Laura Ingalls Wilder*. It was seen by 23 million, more than enough viewers to win an encore.

Sunday, CBS presents *Beyond the Prairie II: The True Story of Laura Ingalls Wilder Continues*.

Meredith Monroe of *Dawson's Creek* is a charismatic Laura, once past the obvious — that she's not a Melissa Gilbert. Walton Goggins (of the new series *The Shield*) is her husband, Almanzo. They, and Lindsay Crouse and Richard Thomas, who portray Laura's parents, reprise the roles they played in *Beyond the Prairie I*. Thomas has little more than a cameo, but he makes it a fine moment to remember.

Tess Harper provides "the voice of Laura Ingalls" in a narration that does much to explain how this family is able to endure the hardships of the life they've chosen for themselves.

The star newcomer is Houston's Skye McCole Bastusiak, who plays Rose, the daughter of Laura and Almanzo. If you saw the movie *The Patriot*, you'll remember what a good little actress this child is. She played Mel Gibson's silent daughter in that, and in this she's equally effective as a brilliant child whose mistreatment at the hands of schoolmates makes her so miserable that she begs her parents to take her back to where they came from.

It has been a very long journey to get the Wilder family from there to where they are now, and that's the story told in *Beyond the Prairie II*. Laura fills in the "why" of it beautifully, just after the opening credits.

She's writing the nightly entry in her journal — "things nobody but me would care about," she explains when a new friend asks her what she's writing.

What sort of things? he asks.

"Ill fortune," she replies. "We lost our crops to the hailstorm and lost our house to a fire. I buried a child. My husband got diphtheria and can no longer do the hard work of that country. We had to leave our home."

This is not the first time Laura has had to move. When she was Rose's age, Laura's mother and father left the comfortable home of her grandparents in Wisconsin, loaded their belongings into a covered wagon and went to Kansas. They built a new life on the prairie and turned the grasslands into golden fields of wheat. That was the story told in TV's *Little House on the Prairie*.

When Laura married, she and her husband left her parents' home to find new lives in Dakota. That was the story of last season's movie.

Now, they're headed to Missouri, to grow apples. They're one wagonload of many on that trail. Settlers are leaving their hard-scrabble farms in Dakota, drawn by the promise of a new place with an easier living.

Missouri is the new promised land. That's what they think, at least, until they meet the tattered wagon of a family who found Missouri was not the land of milk, honey and "the big red apple" after all. They've given up and are going back to Dakota.

Along these wagon trails, there are no longer any Indian wars to be fought. There are plenty of battles still, but they're more personal: Do the Wilders find the new home place and the better life they seek? If they do, will Almanzo's health hold up long enough to plant their apple trees before the snows of winter? If he can't work, will Laura be able to do all that has to be done without a man to help her?

Laura is the strength of this family, and Laura's great dream is to become "a real author." Because her mother dreams that dream, Laura's daughter Rose dares to dream it, too. For both of them, the dream comes true.

This is a gentle tale of gentle folks — a genuine family movie, one to remind the young ones of the courage and sacrifice of those who led the way beyond the prairie.

"Beyond the Prairie II: The True Story of Laura Ingalls Wilder Continues," 8 p.m. Sunday, CBS/Channel 11. Grade: B+.

On the cover: Walton Goggins, Meredith Monroe, and Skye McCole Bastusiak as the daughter.

Graphic design by Jason Middleton / Chronicle