

MICHAEL LANDON

THE CAREER AND ARTISTRY OF A TELEVISION GENIUS

BY DAVID R. GREENLAND

MICHAEL LANDON:
THE CAREER AND ARTISTRY OF A TELEVISION GENIUS
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DEDICATED TO:

TO THE LANDON FAMILY

Past, Present and Future

A TRIBUTE

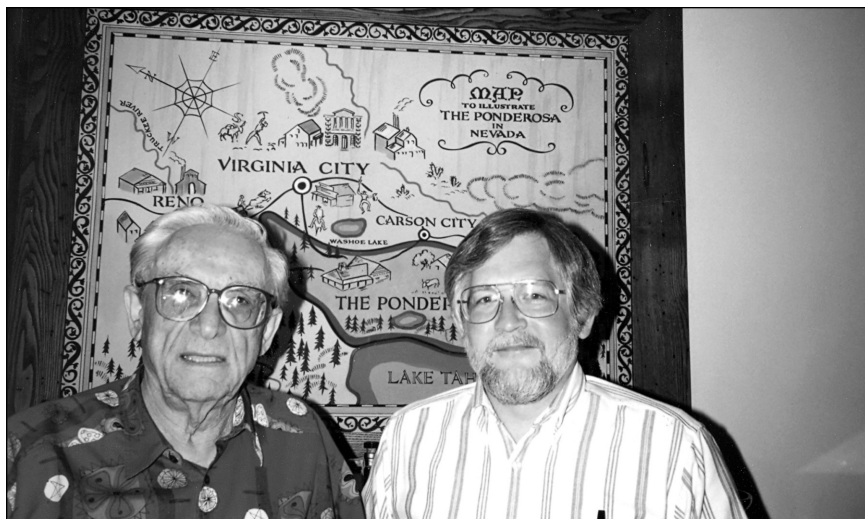
At a time when the most cherished staples of TV entertainment are crime and car crashes, here's a courageous fellow daring to go against the grain by portraying an angel who performs acts of charity. What a wild notion! Are we really ready for anything that radical, that revolutionary? Are we prepared to give up our beloved karate kicks to the groin, exploding helicopters and the mating sounds of two pickup trucks colliding?

Of course I devoutly hope that we are, and that there's still a place on the tube for Michael's kind of programming, with its emphasis on real human values. In a world where all things frightful are beamed straight into our homes the instant they happen, we need Michael's weekly injection of goodness and decency as desperately as the diabetic needs his insulin.

ORSON WELLES

1984

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS



David Dortort with the author, 1994

Photo by Barry Craig

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Thanks to Mary Ann Bauman of the Michael Landon Fan Club, and to Harry Flynn, Michael Landon's longtime publicist, who authorized the club's newsletter. Thanks also to Vicki Christian, editor of *Bonanza Gold* magazine, who was kind enough to interview me regarding my history of the series.

Special thanks to the late David Dortort, creator and executive producer of *Bonanza*, who graciously invited me to his home for an extensive interview and contributed the foreword to my book about his television classic. In the letters and telephone conversations we exchanged up until his death in 2010, Mr. Dortort shared several insightful and positive recollections of working with Michael Landon.

There was one biography of Michael Landon published during his lifetime, a slim volume of questionable value that he said he had no intention of reading. Since his passing there have been no less than nine books either about the man, or in which he figures prominently. The most significant of these are *Michael Landon: Life, Love & Laughter* by Harry Flynn, Pamela Flynn, and Cindy Landon (1991) and *Conversations with Michael Landon* by Tom Ito (1992), both essential reading for any admirer of the man. Of further interest are *I Promised My Dad* by Cheryl Landon Wilson and Jane Scovell (1992), *Prairie Tales* by Melissa Gilbert (2009), *The Way I See It: A Look Back at My Life on Little House* by Melissa Anderson (2010), and *Confessions Of A Prairie Bitch: How I Survived Nellie Oleson and Learned to Love Being Hated* by Alison Arngrim (2010). Many thanks to all of these writers for sharing their memories of working and living with a truly unique individual.

Note: The photographs appearing in this book were originally distributed for publicity purposes and were obtained from various collectors and memorabilia dealers. The author claims no ownership rights to these illustrations.

DAVID R. GREENLAND

AUGUST 2014

FOREWORD

BY CINDY LANDON

My husband, the extraordinary Michael Landon, has been gone for more than twenty years. As sad and unfortunate as that is, it makes me happy to know he has never been forgotten. His work as an actor, writer, producer and director continues to entertain, inspire and touch people all around the world. Episodes of *Highway to Heaven*, *Little House on the Prairie* and *Bonanza* are always playing somewhere, on television or home video. Michael would be honored to know that his messages of love, understanding and hope have endured.

I am grateful that one of Michael's greatest admirers has devoted an entire book to a serious study of his productions, and I hope readers will appreciate David Greenland's efforts as much as I do.

I had the privilege of observing Michael create magic on countless occasions, whether he was at home writing or on set working on both sides of the camera. It was a pleasure to relive those times in the pages of David's book, as well as a bittersweet experience to be reminded of the many beloved co-workers who have passed away in recent years—Merlin Olsen, Moses Gunn, Kevin Hagen, Richard Bull, Ted Voigtlander and “Buzzy” Boggs, to name only a few.

In Michael's words, “I believe that we can all make our own miracles.”

Keep laughing and loving! Find your passion and follow your dreams! To my husband, Mike, that's what life is all about.

CINDY LANDON
AUGUST 2014

PREFACE

I was fortunate to experience much of television's golden age firsthand, when the majority of programming consisted of Westerns. At one point there were more than three dozen on the air, but I faithfully watched only three: *Gunsmoke*, *The Rifleman*, and, most of all, *Bonanza*, in part because, like the Cartwright boys, I was one of three brothers. All of us enjoyed the antics and heroics of Dan Blocker's Hoss, as most viewers did, but what we young buckaroos wanted most was to see Michael Landon's Little Joe spring into action.

There is a famous saying: Don't meet your heroes—you'll only be disappointed. I prefer to believe that did not apply to Michael Landon. To quote from a memoir I wrote the day after his untimely passing in 1991, "Michael Landon was the only celebrity I ever wanted to meet. Although I have been a fan since the tender age of nine, or thereabouts, this desire occurred not in the youthful days of exaggerated hero worship, but several years later, when I noticed that a *Bonanza* episode written and/or directed by him was something special."

While I do not remember the first time I saw Michael Landon, I know the exact date he first moved me: January 28, 1962. In "The Storm," episode #85 of *Bonanza*, Joe Cartwright plans to marry a young woman who, in keeping with one of the show's traditions, dies before the final credits roll. Rather than walk stoically into the sunset like any other TV cowboy would have done, Joe does not hide his grief. As an actor, Landon was not afraid to reveal his character's vulnerability, and the effect was both admirable and striking. "We are not afraid to show our feelings," producer David Dortort said later that season. "We have made more people cry than anybody in the business." And more often than not, it was Landon who made

the audience feel, particularly after he began to write and direct.

My wife and I never missed an episode of *Little House on the Prairie*, *Highway to Heaven*, or anything else in which Landon was involved, and it was no secret among friends, relatives, and even a few casual acquaintances, that I considered him the most creative person in the television industry. One morning in 1979, driving to an appointment in Beverly Hills, the friend I was riding with pointed out a handsome estate and said, “Remember all those Bill Cosby records we used to listen to? That was his place once.” He paused for effect before adding, “That’s where your hero Michael Landon lives now. Want to stop and say hello?” “Yeah, right,” I replied. “Besides, he’s probably out shooting in Simi Valley.”

In 1990, when the telefilm *Where Pigeons Go to Die* was in production, I received a business-related call from a woman in Kansas who, though unaware of my high regard for Landon, said, “Guess who I saw today? Michael Landon! He’s here making a movie.” “I don’t suppose you talked to him,” I ventured. “No, he was too busy,” she replied. “And he seemed to be tired.” I remembered that final remark a few months later, when my wife informed me that a friend had actually met Michael and Cindy Landon while skiing in Utah shortly after Christmas, but that “he didn’t look well.” Everyone knows the rest of the story.

I wrote letters of appreciation to Michael Landon on a couple of occasions—after the broadcast of his *Bonanza* landmark “Forever” in 1972, and the poignant *Little House* episode “Remember Me” in 1975—never expecting a reply. The man, I knew, was simply too busy. At least the letters were never returned, so I like to think he may have read them eventually.

After poring through a substantial archive of printed material, viewing nearly all of his appearances prior to *Bonanza*, and studying virtually everything he wrote and wrote/directed, I feel almost as if I had met Michael Landon. He certainly made his mark, leaving behind an unforgettable visual bounty for all of us that will doubtlessly never be equaled.

DAVID R. GREENLAND

AUGUST 2014

INTRODUCTION

This is not a book about the private life of Michael Landon. If there is an exception, it is only when he used incidents from it to enhance his art. Even the most high profile figure, whether they are a president or an entertainer, deserves the right to keep their personal space off-limits to the general public. Everyone should be known only by their public actions and whatever thoughts they choose to share with the rest of the world. Landon was no exception, yet he became perhaps the most scrutinized television personality in the history of the medium. Ironically, a man so opposed to judging others was unfairly judged all too frequently, often by people who never met him. To the end of his life, he castigated tabloid journalism—rightly so. It may be only natural for one to develop a certain measure of curiosity about what a favorite performer does behind the scenes, but if a fan sincerely respects that performer, there is a line that should not be crossed. Avoiding the gossip rags is an excellent place to start. (Considering Landon's staggering amount of activity—acting, writing, directing, producing, recording two solo singles and two albums (with his *Bonanza* co-stars), hosting community service specials, narrating nature documentaries, making personal appearances on telethons and at rodeos, participating on game shows and variety programs, sitting for countless filmed and print interviews, raising children—my one curiosity has always been: When did he sleep? No wonder he said he was fond of rising with, or even before, the sun.)

Like any creative person of genuine substance, Landon, more often than not, communicated chiefly through his work, be it his convictions regarding education or ecology, politics or religion. He believed in

nurturing the family institution and strengthening its place in society, but above all he stressed the importance of love, a theme that runs continuously throughout the 330 hours of programming he produced. Of course, there are many other Landon hallmarks, written and visual, scattered consistently among the more than 300 hours of television he wrote and/or directed. That such a monumental achievement has never before been examined in detail is a situation this book seeks to remedy.

In addition, until now very little has been written about Landon's accomplishments as an actor before *Bonanza*, or outside his three classic series, but nearly all of them are discussed here. It becomes apparent while viewing any appearance he made prior to landing the role Ben Cartwright's youngest son that he had, in the words of David Dortort, "the most highly intuitive set of natural acting responses I've seen in a young actor." Consequently, Landon's portrayal of Little Joe emerged fully formed, whereas it took his three co-stars a while to develop their characters. Blessed with a wide range of acting skills—the most vital of them believability—he was able to avoid being typecast, transitioning comfortably and credibly into the boots of farmer Charles Ingalls and the modern garb of Jonathan Smith.

Genius is a word subject to many interpretations, as well as a term used far too loosely in the world of entertainment. One definition is "a great mental capacity and inventive ability, especially great and original creative ability in some art, science, etc." With an IQ of 159, Michael Landon was an authentic genius, and he used that gift to make discoveries where no one else thought of looking. As the late Ted Voigtlander, a director of photography, once said, "Many writers can 'see' things that maybe you can't photograph. Well, after getting to know the camera and the lenses, Mike can write things that you can actually do."

Michael Landon was concerned with making this world a better place, and shared his vision with us for over three decades. Recognizing—and celebrating—the filmed legacy he left behind is the purpose of this book.

DAVID R. GREENLAND