

# She's Flippin from 'Little House' to 'Flo'

By Charles Witbeck

HOLLYWOOD — She's prissy, thin-lipped, sharp-nosed, disapproving sister Fran on "Flo." Over on "Little House on the Prairie," Lucy Lee Flippin plays the vulnerable, shy school teacher, Eliza Jane Wilder.

As luck would have it, CBS places Polly Holliday's well-made and funny "Flo" — a spring ratings winner that begins its reruns July 21 and returns next season with new episodes on Monday nights — opposite "Little House on the Prairie."

That spells curtains for the former "Holiday on Ice" skater Lucy Lee on "Little House." And to do it right, Michael Landon has written a lovely goodbye script for Lucy Lee's Eliza Jane as she watches brother Almanzo Wilder marry Laura Ingalls (Melissa Gilbert) in a two-parter for the seventh season opener Sept. 15 and 22. Landon gives schoolteacher Eliza Jane a love affair that turns out badly, causing the lady to leave town, now that brother is starting a family of his own. Thus Michael leaves the door open for Eliza Jane in case the competing "Flo" flounders.

But such a prospect is not likely. "Flo" made its debut following "MASH" in late March, and promptly assumed the number one spot in the Nielsen ratings. Fans of Polly Holliday's "kiss my girls" waitress on "Alice" were eager to see Flo on her own. They were treated to a well-oiled, warm and amusing introductory show as the waitress returned home to Texas and got talked into acquiring the Yellow Rose, a run-down roadhouse.

Playing opposite herself in early September is very embarrassing for Lucy Lee, because of the character contrasts. "Prairie" fans would not be pleased with Flo's sister Fran, a cartoon character who detests outgoing, chatty, three-times married Flo.

Sister Fran is clearly the heavy in the new road-house comedy. Whatever Flo does, Fran is bound to disapprove. And that bothers leggy, redheaded Lucy Lee, who hopes to soften the character a little, perhaps be allowed a wistful look on occasion.

"Fran is too negative," says Lucy Lee, "too rigid." But whether the former ice skater can convince Polly Holliday and the writers is yet to be seen. For contrast is needed for Flo, and Lucy Lee is the patsy.

Asked to explain how sisters Flo and Fran can turn out to be diametrical opposites, Lucy Lee gives a succinct answer: "Genes. Flo is seven years older. And Fran simply doesn't approve of her lifestyle."

Will Fran loosen up under the influence of raucous life at the Yellow Rose? "I believe I become dis-engaged from Wendell (another prudish type)," Lucy Lee replies. "And when Farley (the former road house owner) runs for local office I'll be a campaign worker and a spy."



LUCY LEE

Free of fiancé Wendell, Fran should be surveying other possibilities at the Yellow Rose, but who would be good enough? Certainly not uncouth, chauvinistic bartender Earl (Geoffrey Lewis) who stands for everything Fran abhors. Only Les (Stephen Keep) the mysterious and literate piano player, a modern Hoagy Carmichael, qualifies. Love could sweeten up Fran, but it won't be before Christmas.

A 5'10", with fine long legs, Lucy Lee gave up her professional ice skating career on tour in Mexico, because she was tired of just smiling and skating. Her knowledge of Texas, consists of a night in El Paso after crossing the border, on her way to Hollywood for an acting career. Only two agents would talk to Lucy Lee. One said, "Get married," the other, "Go back to New York."

Taking the latter's advice, the youngster studied with Uta Hagen, made a living off commercials, performed off-Broadway and returned to Hollywood for "Annie Hall," Jack Nicholson's "Goin' South" and TV guest shots.

It's been a 13-year haul as an actress, but Lucy Lee's Pennsylvania family believe she has been sailing along. Incidentally, Lucy Lee's talented legs are a Flippin trademark. Her late father Harry Flippin used to compete in the Pentathlon, and brother Bill was an IC4A high hurdles champ at Yale.

"Flo's" TV family is quite the opposite, a study in contrast. Studie Bond's Mama is a tiny thing, passing under Flo's arm. And then there's Frank, looking down on them all, with displeasure.

## The ratings — TV's make-it or break-it numbers game

By Charles Witbeck

HOLLYWOOD — Do you believe in lucky numbers? The numbers game in commercial television called the Nielsen Ratings is the only game. Shows with high Nielsen numbers are in the chips; those with measly audience-share numbers draw cancellation notices.

Yet low numbers in show titles are considered to be lucky numbers by some Hollywood types who have nothing better to do than apply meaning to titles, shunning important things like content, or program slotting.

A Vine Street local whose reading consists of the trade papers and the racing form, glanced at the final Nielsen figures for the recently completed TV season, and noted that "Three's Company" finished second, "One Day at a Time" was in 10th place, and "Eight Is Enough" was 13th. One digit numbers were hot.

Looking for a trend, the man got excited before it was

pointed out the top show for the year was none other than the CBS Sunday night magazine wonder for adults, "60 Minutes."

My friend waved off "60 Minutes." It didn't affect his low number theory because it was an exception, a TV rarity no one can really explain. News shows do not draw decent numbers, as everyone knows. That is, until "60 Minutes" came along.

ABC countered by scheduling "20-20," a news show built along similar lines, and nobody watched. "ABC dialed a wrong number with '20-20,'" said my friend. "Two digits or more usually spell trouble. Look at ABC's 'Galactica 1980,' a bomb, and who wants to remember '240 Robert'?"

Two can play at this game. "Yes, two digits are more ominous," I answered. "Do you recall 'The Six Million Dollar Man,' '77 Sunset Strip,' or that pineapple 'Hawaii 5-0'?"

My stubborn friend flinched, racking his memory for oldies that were goodies. "I stick to the classics," he said. "My Three Sons, 'Three Men on a Horse,' 'The

Three Musketeers.' And don't forget the '\$100,000 Name That Tune' has gone out of production down the street, and NBC has 'Buck Rogers' back on the schedule without the rest of the title 'in the 25th Century!'" Furthermore, I give you a tip on a new ABC comedy, "Too Close for Comfort." It has that lucky number feel."

Speaking of numbers, NBC, a company that seems preoccupied with little else this spring, proudly announces that its status as the third network in ratings is beginning to change. NBC's lows have been reached and the trend is back up, a case of rising bottoms. According to latest figures in 1,212 Nielsen markets, NBC stations increased its number of households tuned per minute in 97 markets, CBS in 88 and ABC in four.

On the other hand, NBC lost households in 19 markets, CBS in 25 and ABC in 111. There was no change in five NBC markets, seven CBS or six ABC markets.

For optimists, one thing appears obvious; the ABC reign where kiddies control the set is on the wane. Grown-ups are about to get the set back, barring setbacks.

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