

Brothers overcome odds to act

By **DIANE WERTS**
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When child actors Matthew and Patrick Labor-teaux went to audition at an ad agency and were asked where they were born, their impulsive reply told a lot about their lives.

"We said, 'We weren't born, we were adopted,'" remembers Matt.

"We couldn't tell 'em," Pat chimes in, "'cause we thought either you were born or you were adopted."

In the retelling, it sounds funny, but as far as the brothers who star on "Little House on the Prairie" are concerned, that's the story.

Pat, now 13, was adopted by designer Ron Labor-teaux and his actress wife, Frankie, at nine months. "He had developed severe emotional problems from his foster home," says Ron. "He had to be given Phenobarbital before each meal, and he was very sensitive and high strung."

A year and a half later, they brought home Matt, now 11, who was born with physical problems (a hole in his heart) as well as emotional disturbances. With autism undiscovered at that time, Matt didn't speak until he was five.

But there's no trace of that now. If anything, the boys seem more intelligent than average. Dressed casually in white athletic shorts and green jerseys (with white letters spelling "Matt" and "Pat" on the front and "Little House on the Prairie" on the back), both are friendly, speaking easily with adults, open in answering questions, even about the problems of their backgrounds. Their acting experience shows in their maturity — when the conversation gets off track at one point, Matt's poised enough to bring it back around to the original question — but they're still kids.

AND ALTHOUGH THEY'RE brothers, they're best friends, says Pat, partially because they knew each other before Matt was adopted. "We thought instead of future brothers-to-be, we thought we were gonna be friends. Then — whammo! — he was adopted and I thought, 'Nifty. I've got a life-long friend.'"

He looks at Matt with affection. "Now we're on the same show. It's heaven."

Pat's starting his second year on "Little House" as Andy Garvey, son of Ingalls' neighbor Merlin Olsen. Matt joins the series this year as the Ingalls' adopted son, Albert, with his character introduced in the debut episode of the show's fifth season, Monday at 7 p.m. on Channel 5.

The casting is especially unusual because Matt has guest starred on two episodes of the series portraying Michael Landon's Charles Ingalls character as a boy.

"I'm an orphan, roaming the streets," says Matt. "I'm a thief, I'm a gambler, I'm a cheat, I'm a liar —"

"Typecasting," quips Pat.

"— who adopts himself through the magic of TV," continues Matt. "He is his own father and his own son."

The character isn't in the Laura Ingalls Wilder books, he says. "The reason Michael wanted to have a son is some good friends of his had a son named Albert who was really a wonderful person. The room would just light up when he came in, just from his body."

"Then one day he was playing in the street and he was hit by a car. So his parents asked Michael if he had a boy that resembled him in the show, to name him Albert."



• Matthew and Patrick Labor-teaux.

BESIDES, PAT SAYS, "The series would be right off the Niensens and off TV if we followed the 'Little House' books."

"Everything was a disaster for 'em and we're just breezing through it," adds Matt.

The brothers don't get to act together too often — "'cause of our looks and our ages," says Pat — but "Little House" director Landon makes it easy for them.

"The reason, I guess, why most people like him," Matt says, "is he doesn't act like he's way up there and I'm way down here."

"He tells some of the grossest jokes, though," says Pat. "And he calls everybody 'kiddy.' Even Merlin Olsen who's a couple of feet above him."

The brothers work together with their mother in preparing for "Little House," sitting down each night before shooting and talking about their characters' feelings before, during and after each scene.

When they aren't shooting, they go to school three hours a day on the set, which, they find, puts them ahead of their classmates when they return to non-studio schools (Matt, in seventh grade, and Pat, in eighth, have attended non-structured classes at private and Catholic schools).

Acting is their lives. "The only reason we feel different (from other kids) is we're in a different profession," says Pat. "Instead of riding a bike delivering newspapers, we're acting."

Sometimes his fame surprises him. "I was just reading the paper about 'The Incredible Hulk' and I turned the page and there me and Matt are," he grins. "I thought 'Wow! Neat!'"

"In the adopted sense, we feel lucky we got adopted by Mom and Dad." He pauses. "Yeah. I guess we do feel special."

"Most every friend I've ever had says I'm so lucky," says Matt. "And I *am* really lucky."

"We're positively going into acting," Pat says confidently. "Why quit when you're ahead?"