



THE FIRST SHOW AIRED ON SEPTEMBER 11, 1974, and over-night ratings from Nielsen were terrific. Even as we pushed on shooting the next episode, we held our breath for the week's ratings, and at the end of the week the *Wall Street Journal's* Entertainment page declared, as if for a horse race, "The Winners Are!" with photos of Valerie Harper as Rhoda and me as Caroline! The week's ratings held up, too, and Mike laughed more than usual but kept up his brutal schedule. The article had not hurt the show. Still, it had not helped Mike's reputation.

In the fourth episode of that first season, Victor French returned to the fold, and we all were glad to see him back, as happy I think as little Laura was to see Mr. Edwards. In season two, his character would be given an instant family in the two-parter, *Remember Me*, starring Patricia Neal.

On *Little House*, I had no time to let the words seep into my body as I had in rehearsals in the theatre—scripts often came in just before we shot them, with rewrites continuing until the scene was in the can. At home, I peeled potatoes or swept the floor while memorizing lines, trying to feel comfortable with a physical activity that often changed on the day we shot the scene. And some physical aspects couldn't be rehearsed ahead of time—dealing with a team of horses, inclement weather, or in my new show, our ninth, hitting a baseball.

Mike told me he had cast the son of his dear old friend Dan Blocker, “Hoss” on *Bonanza*, to play the lead with me in “School Mom.” Mike had wept when he confided in me one afternoon the story of losing Dan without warning when he went into the hospital for surgery and died suddenly at only forty-three. I knew he had written an episode then in which Little Joe falls in love, marries, and loses his young wife, letting the whole company grieve. The man and the character had been deeply loved, and Mike created a way for the audience to grieve along with the *Bonanza* team. He had a special intuition that could put him on the wave-length of his audience.

So, when young Dirk Blocker, a sensitive actor at the beginning of a long career, arrived, everyone was already on his side.

The story opens as a snake spooks Miss Beadle's horse, and she is thrown dramatically from her buggy to the ground. The school board—Mr. Hansen, Doc Baker, and Mr. and Mrs. Oleson—asks Caroline to substitute while Miss Beadle recovers. On her first day, she is stunned at the Mercantile when her eggs have doubled in value, and Mrs. Oleson is honey-tongued. In the schoolroom, the Oleson kids have planted the notion that Ma isn't qualified, causing rebellion. She takes on a boy who seems to be the ringleader, asking, “What are you best at?” He says, “Baseball.” And so she takes the whole bunch out to the schoolyard, where he hits a big one. She congratulates him; he challenges her to hit the ball. And she knocks it away, gaining the kids' respect.

But as soon as she gets the kids settled down to study, she walks right into the story's issue about a big boy named Abel who cannot read. When Caroline calls on Abel to read, all the kids laugh. Humiliated, he runs away. Laura says, "He's just dumb Abel," but Caroline learns from Miss Beadle that Abel simply hasn't had much schooling. Seeing that the boy's whole future is at stake, she persuades him to come back and finds a creative way to get all the kids in a learning game to help him to catch up. But Mrs. Oleson interrupts, insulting both Caroline and Abel. He runs again, and Caroline, whipsawed by her own anger, quits the job. In a touching scene, Abel shows her his appreciation, and when she realizes she has gotten through to him, they return to school together. In the end, Abel integrates into the class, Caroline earns the respect of the kids, and Miss Beadle returns. When Charles asks Caroline if she'll miss teaching, she hides how much she will, admitting, "Only a little."

Caroline, as a substitute teacher, lacked knowledge about her students that led to a crisis, and her perfectionism caused her to suffer when she realized she had made a mistake that could truly hurt another person, and I loved the script. I deeply identified.

Still, as usual that first season, we got the script close to the time for shooting, and I was nervous about how I would hit a home run with no time to practice. Again, I turned to my mother's book *Psychocybernetics*, where I'd read about famous athletes who visualized plays over and over, seeing themselves succeeding. Actors do that, too. We "rehearse" in our imaginations. But hitting a baseball was another story. I was the kid in grammar school who was put out in right field, where, while other kids kept their eye on the ball, I did pirouettes. So now as Caroline, nervous about my ability even to hit the ball, I grabbed every second—eating breakfast, riding in the car, in line at the bank—to close my eyes and picture myself hitting that ball. Again. And again.

Mike and the crew had enviable camaraderie on Mondays—all about the game: "How 'bout them . . .!" For a while I tried to read

the sports pages so I could at least follow their dialogue, if not participate, but that didn't last. I was not one of the boys. And they knew I was no jock. But the day of the baseball challenge scene, we gathered in the dirt in front of the school, and as the camera lined up for the shot, I walked around swinging the bat, loosening my shoulders, releasing my nerves with motion.

I imagine the crew was preparing to be patient, even to fake the shot, if necessary. But then came the pitch, and . . . *whack!* I knocked that ball home—a *crack shot, take that!* The best boy jumped back, the gaffer's head snapped sideways, eyebrows shot up like birds taking off, heads shaking as the director called, "Cut." The guys gave me a big hand, turned to each other and chuckled. I was as stunned as they were, but that hit earned me brotherhood, for the moment, just as it earned Caroline respect with the school kids. While the crew did the next setup, I was in my stride, connected to my breath, mind clear, and I knew I could keep hitting that ball out of the park as many times as we needed.

And working with Dirk was easy. He had unusual courage for such a young actor, to trust himself, to allow the thoughts and feelings to come and believe that they would communicate. Scotty and I thrived on our fights, playing our antagonism with relish. Mrs. Oleson was touchingly vulnerable when she had to humble herself in front of Caroline. That was the thing about Scotty's work: she had many layers. Mike and I had the fun of our late-night popcorn scenes. We usually shot them at the end of the day, when the kids had been released, their hours used up. Those scenes became regular opportunities for Ma and Pa to talk over the conflicts and reveal private moments. My sense of the intimacy was intensified, because my own family was crazy about popcorn. Dad used to make big kettles full; Mama would melt the butter, pour it on, and the whole lot would be put into big grocery bags for trips to the drive-in movies. Our prop man—first, Ron Chinique, and then Dean Wilson—made plenty for the crew, too, so it was family in the tiny bedroom in the Little House on the Paramount lot.

Ma's enthusiasm for teaching was obvious so in the end when she tells Pa she'll miss teaching "only a little" (since in those days she was expected to like staying home), I worried that we might be training a new batch of girls to deny their gifts in order to be "good." In interviews and at personal appearances, people often waxed nostalgic about the prairie world, but I focused on the *work*: washing the clothes in the creek, hauling the water to the house, heating it for baths, the gardening, the canning, the food prep with first in the fireplace, then a wood stove. Oh no, I would tell the interviewer: "There's never been a better time than now to be a woman. We have so many choices today." And still, even with all the appliances that make life easier, no matter what a woman chooses, if she has the need or the desire to be a mother *and* to work, it can be a strain, especially in this country where childcare can be hard to find, or to afford.

In my case, postponing motherhood never felt like a choice. It was a necessity. I had friends—other actresses—who were brave enough to go ahead and have babies while living as artists on the Lower East Side, but I couldn't face parenthood without more security. I worried I would delay too long. But I pushed aside my anxiety: I had a new script to learn. And I had passed a watershed moment—carrying a show, hitting a baseball.

