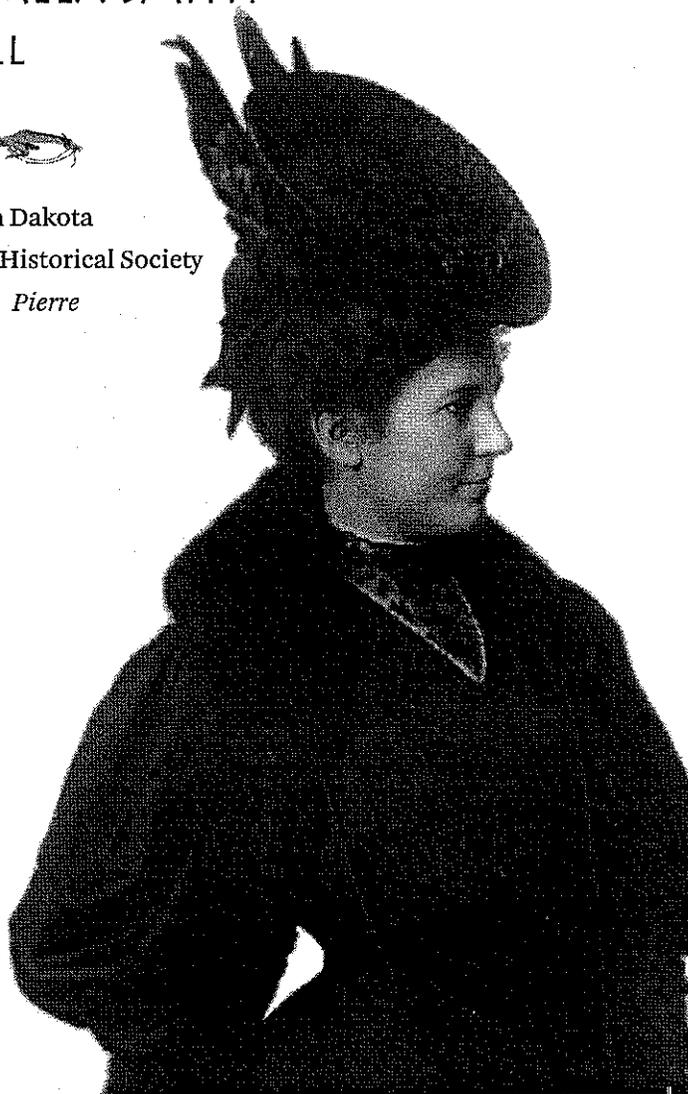


LAURA
INGALLS
WILDER

A WRITER'S LIFE
PAMELA SMITH
HILL



South Dakota
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Cover and frontispiece: Laura Ingalls Wilder in 1906,
courtesy of the Laura Ingalls Wilder Home Association,
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Introduction Not the Whole Truth

"All I have told is true but it is not the whole truth."

Laura Ingalls Wilder delivered this line in a speech she gave in 1937 during Detroit Book Fair, marking the release of her fourth book in what we now call the Little House series. She was fast becoming a celebrity within the world of children's books, though not yet a legend. Perhaps that is why this line from her speech did not get much attention. The truth, as Wilder defined it in Detroit, went beyond a simple definition of historical fact. She chose not to tell the whole truth in her books, she explained, because some of the stories she wanted to tell were not appropriate for children.¹ What she did not say, however, is that throughout her career as a novelist, Wilder shaped the history of her life for the purposes of her story. In a letter she wrote to her daughter, author Rose Wilder Lane, as they discussed character, theme, and historical accuracy in the first of her novels set in South Dakota, *By the Shores of Silver Lake*, Wilder admitted, "I stretched a point when I had Laura go with Pa to see the work [on the building of the railroad]. I never did. He would not have taken me."² In a later letter, also to Lane, Wilder explained why she stretched this point: "I did it . . . to have Laura see it first hand and get her reaction."³

She altered the truth to create a better story, and for some Wilder readers, this idea is uncomfortable, even disloyal. After all, she maintained that her books were "autobiography, true in every detail," and her reading public came to believe that as well. A newspaper headline from 1949 described Wilder's books as "True Stories That Read Like Fiction."⁴ But Wilder was first and foremost a storyteller. She quickly embraced what most writers of fiction have long understood. "The truth of an incident," as contemporary

author Madeleine L'Engle puts it, "may lie artistically far from the facts of that incident."⁵ Throughout her writing life, Wilder blurred historical fact with what she considered the greater truth found only in a good story; so did her daughter. In a letter to her mother in 1938, Lane wrote that, the truth "is a meaning underlying" fact and that changing, revising, or modifying events to make a stronger book "is not fact but it is perfectly true."⁶

Perhaps it is not surprising, then, that the persona Wilder assumed during her lifetime—which has since become legendary—is not exactly factual either, though it does make a good story: a Missouri farm woman in her mid-sixties with virtually no publication experience writes her first book. She is "a lovely, white haired fragile appearing woman," who draws on "her wealth of memories" to produce classic books for young Americans.⁷ As she published book after book—eight during her lifetime—the legend flourished. Wilder herself, consciously or unconsciously, contributed to it. When a reporter asked her in 1949 what advice she would give young writers, she replied, "I hardly feel competent to do that, for all I did was write what happened to me." The fact that she wrote her early drafts on wide-lined school tablets added charm and credibility to her story.⁸ So did her description of her writing process. "After I would write something," she told one reporter, "I would set it back for a month or so and let it cool. Then I would read it back and maybe change it a little before I sent it in."⁹

Yet, Wilder was not an unpublished, completely inexperienced writer when she sat down to write that first book. Nor was her writing process quite as simple as she let on. She did far more than change her stories "a little" after they had gone cold, and she did not write in isolation from her remote Ozark farm. Instead, Wilder worked in collaboration with a gifted, meticulous editor—Rose Wilder Lane—and her books evolved and deepened as her skills as a novelist matured. Furthermore, Wilder's success was not inevitable

or even easy. Her writing ambitions dated from her adolescence in Dakota Territory, when she began writing poems and received praise for her student theme on ambition, which she kept and eventually inserted into *These Happy Golden Years*. She served a lengthy apprenticeship as a farm journalist and grappled with Lane's initial advice to write for adult markets, not children. Ultimately, Wilder persevered through the usual trials and tribulations that face most American novelists as they struggle to find their voices, their publishers, and their readers. Wilder grew creatively, learning from her daughter, her editors at Harpers & Brothers, her agent, and ultimately from herself. Her emergence as a novelist revealed her commitment and passion to the craft of writing fiction.¹⁰

And the fiction Wilder produced, while it was clearly autobiographical, demonstrated her emerging understanding of story: conflict, character, plot, dialogue, description, narrative, and theme—all bound up with her love of family, the prairies of the Middle Border, and the West. In that same speech she delivered in Detroit, Wilder told her audience: "I began to think what a wonderful childhood I had had. How I had seen the whole frontier, the woods, the Indian country of the great plains, the frontier towns, the building of railroads in wild, unsettled country, homesteading and farmers coming in to take possession. . . . Then I understood that in my own life I represented a whole period of American history."¹¹

But the greater truth of fiction, the satisfying arc of a good story, ultimately interested Wilder far more than the precise details of her own past. The facts she embellished, changed, and eliminated from her family's history—and her own life—transformed the real Laura Elizabeth Ingalls, the girl born to Charles and Caroline Ingalls on 27 February 1867, into the fictional Laura Ingalls, an immortal character in American children's literature, born in 1932 when Harper & Brothers released *Little House in the Big Woods*.

1

Once upon a Time,
Years and Years Ago

1860-1869

The initial inspiration for the Little House books sprang from Wilder's memories of her father, Charles P. Ingalls. "Pa was no business man," she explained to her daughter in 1937. "He was a hunter and trapper, a musician and poet."¹ Scribbled on the back of a letter from Marion Fiery of Alfred Knopf Publishing, the first editor interested in her fiction, Wilder wrote: "I would be especially glad to have Knopf publish those stories of my father's. They impressed me very much as a child and I still have great affection for them."² In fact, the death of Charles Ingalls in 1902 may have prompted Wilder to envision her childhood memories as material for a story—and a wider audience. Among the writing fragments she included in a file titled "Ideas for Work," which dates perhaps from 1903, is a memory from Wilder's early experiences on Silver Lake in Dakota Territory.³

Like many accomplished writers, Wilder let the idea simmer—for twenty-two years. When she took it up again in 1925, her mother, Caroline Quiner Ingalls, had died the year before. Writing her aging aunt Martha Carpenter, her mother's sister, Wilder asked for help with an article she had been invited to write for *The Ladies Home Journal* on "our grandmother's cooking." She began by asking for the recipe for vanity cakes but quickly expanded her request. She wanted stories from her mother's childhood. "Could you, I wonder, tell the story of those days and any special stories that you remember about things that happened then," Wilder asked. "Just tell it in your own words as you would tell about those times if only you could talk to me." She told Aunt Martha that she wanted the stories as a record for the family and possibly

for Lane to use for publication. But Wilder's request was so precise that it is hard to imagine she wanted these stories only for her daughter:

As you begin to tell it so many things will come back to you about the little everyday happenings and what you and mother and Aunt Eliza and Uncle Tom and Uncle Henry did as children and young folks, going to parties and sleigh rides and spelling schools and dancing school. . . . About your work and school too. Also about away back when Grandma was left a widow and the Indians used to share their game with her and the children, if I remember right.

Furthermore, Wilder made a suggestion that only a professional writer would make: she offered to pay a stenographer to transcribe these recollections.⁴

No stenographer was needed. Carpenter replied just a few months later. She sent recipes for cottage cheese pie and vanity cake, "just made out of egg and flour [and] a pinch of salt," and described at length hot maple-sugar parties, quiltings, corn-husking parties, howling wolves, panthers in the woods, and hitching oxen to a large sled so "all that could piled on" for a "merry time."⁵ Despite her aunt's help, Wilder never wrote that story for *The Ladies Home Journal*; instead, she put the letter away and let the idea continue to simmer. But clearly, Wilder was incorporating influences from both her parents. Although Pa emerges alongside Laura as the central characters in the Little House books, Caroline Ingalls's influence on Wilder's writing is just as important. Together the two literally made Wilder's fiction possible.

Charles Ingalls and Caroline Quiner met and eventually married in Jefferson County, Wisconsin, near the small town of Concord on 1 February 1860. Throughout the first years of their marriage, the American Civil War raged to the east and south. Only a few episodes relating to the family's war-time experiences touch the pages of the Little House books. Pa's

brother George, for example, arrives at the dance at Grandpa's in *The Little House in the Big Woods*, wearing "his blue army coat with brass buttons." He plays his army bugle and walks with a swagger. Pa tells Laura, "George is wild, since he came back from the war." Much later in *The Little Town on the Prairie*, when Laura wears a hoop skirt for the first time, she scorns the old-fashioned hoops that had been in style during the Civil War era. "I think it was silly, the way they dressed when Ma was a girl" she tells her sister Carrie.⁶

Somehow Charles Ingalls managed to escape service in the Union Army. Two more of his brothers—Hiram and Lansford James—enlisted late in the war and saw virtually no action, but Caroline's brother Joseph Quiner was killed during the Battle of Shiloh in April 1862. Wilder herself was born just two years after Robert E. Lee surrendered at Appomattox. Charles Ingalls was a musician and poet—not a soldier—and this fact may help explain why Wilder's books provide so little historical context for this period of her family's life.⁷

The Ingallses of Jefferson County were a closely-knit clan, and in 1862, when Charles's father, Lansford Ingalls, could not pay the mortgage on his property, the whole family, including his married sons and their wives, moved west to heavily forested Pepin County. The first child of Charles and Caroline Ingalls, Mary Amelia, came into the world there on 10 January 1865. Wilder was born two years later in the Wisconsin woods. Her parents named her Laura Elizabeth for Charles's mother, Laura Colby Ingalls. But before the year was out, Charles Ingalls sold his property in Wisconsin, made a down payment sight unseen on property in Missouri, and, along with Caroline's brother Henry Quiner and his wife Polly (Charles's sister), moved the family to Chariton County in north-central Missouri during the spring of 1868. Wilder was just over a year old.⁸

Her first experience as a citizen of Missouri did not last long. In 1869, the Ingalls family crossed the Missouri-Kan-

sas border and settled about thirteen miles south of Independence, Kansas, on the Osage Indian Reserve. This location is where Wilder began her unpublished memoir, "Pioneer Girl": "Once upon a time years and years ago, Pa stopped the horses and the wagon they were hauling away out on the prairie in Indian Territory. 'Well Caroline,' he said, 'here's the place we've been looking for. Might as well camp.'" A paragraph later, Wilder placed herself in the scene: "I lay and looked through the opening in the wagon over at the campfire and Pa and Ma sitting there. It was lonesome and so still with the stars shining down on the great, flat land where no one lived." Even in this first recounting of her memories, the prairie took on the haunting persona that characterizes Wilder's accomplished fiction. From the beginning, the West was part of her family.⁹

The handwritten draft of "Pioneer Girl" was written in 1930, before Wilder envisioned her first novel. At the time, Wilder's objective was to publish the manuscript as nonfiction, as a one-volume memoir. But George Bye, the literary agent handling the manuscript as a favor to Rose Wilder Lane, did not warm to it. "It didn't seem to have enough high points or crescendo," he complained. "A fine old lady was sitting in a rocking chair and telling a story chronologically but with no benefit of perspective or theatre."¹⁰ For Wilder scholars today, however, her autobiography offers a factual record of her childhood and charts her growth as a writer of fiction. It also illuminates the gaps between Wilder's fiction and the facts of her own life, illustrating how she supplemented the fragmented, impressionistic memories of childhood with stories she had heard from her parents and older sister Mary. It is important to point out that in "Pioneer Girl," Wilder does not mention her birth in Wisconsin or her family's short residency in Missouri. Even when setting out to write nonfiction, Wilder apparently did not believe it necessary to include all the facts from her childhood. From the beginning, she was more concerned with fitting her fam-

ily's story into a larger pioneering experience. As she later explained in the speech delivered in Detroit during the book fair: "I realized that I had seen and lived it all—all the successive phases of the frontier, first the frontiersman then the pioneer, then the farmers and the towns."¹¹

Still, "Pioneer Girl" presents a more complete picture of the Ingalls family history than Wilder's Little House novels. Once Wilder embarked on writing fiction, she knew her story needed a strong, clean, forward motion. In *Little House in the Big Woods* and *Farmer Boy*, she built those books around the calendar year, showing how families had lived their everyday lives sixty years earlier. Later, as the idea of a fictional series took shape, Wilder created a different story line; the forward motion that united her remaining books focused on moving west. From the opening pages of her third book, *Little House on the Prairie*, until Pa files his homestead claim in Dakota Territory in her fifth book, *By the Shores of Silver Lake*, the Ingalls family never retraces its steps. They always move ahead—from Wisconsin, to Indian Territory, to Minnesota, and on to Dakota Territory. And even then, Pa does not feel settled. In *These Happy Golden Years*, the last book in the series published during Wilder's lifetime, Pa confesses, "I would like to go West. . . . A fellow doesn't have room to breathe here any more." Ma, of course, reminds him that the Dakota prairies are vast; besides, she says, "I thought we were settled here." But the fictional Laura understands: she "knew how he felt for she saw the look in his blue eyes as he gazed over the rolling prairie westward from the open door where he stood."¹² This thematic emphasis—always looking west, never turning back—is the spine, the rigid, inflexible backbone of the entire series.

In reality, the Ingalls family backtracked more than once, and Wilder followed its meanderings with much more accuracy and precision in "Pioneer Girl." The story she tells in her autobiography is less about moving west and more about making ends meet.