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EDITED BY JEANNE KILEN ODE

Historical Musings

Laura Ingalls Wilder and the Serendipity of Research: Blog Posts from the Pioneer Girl Project

Our journey along the pathways of Laura Ingalls Wilder's life began in 2005, when the South Dakota Historical Society Press commissioned Pamela Smith Hill to write a biography of Laura Ingalls Wilder. In the course of researching what became the award-winning *Laura Ingalls Wilder: A Writer's Life* in 2007, Hill found herself returning often to Wilder's unpublished autobiography *Pioneer Girl*. Hidden and little-known, a number of versions of the manuscript lay buried in archives across the United States. Despite the massive popularity of Wilder and her books, the author's own first words depicting her life—her autobiography—had never seen the light of day as a published book.

Once the biography had been completed, we determined that the Press should work toward the goal of publishing Wilder's autobiography. With permission from the Little House Heritage Trust, which holds the rights to Wilder's literary works, the Press worked to produce Laura Ingalls Wilder's *Pioneer Girl: The Annotated Autobiography*, with Hill as principal editor. Since its release in November 2014, the book has been popular with Wilder scholars and aficionados alike. Receiving coverage in venues ranging from National Public Radio to the *Wall Street Journal*, *Pioneer Girl: The Annotated Autobiography* reached number two on the *New York Times* Best Sellers list for hardcover nonfiction and number one on Amazon.com in early February 2015. *ForeWord Reviews* called the book "clearly the definitive work on Wilder. It thrills with new insights and mature content, educates with historical facts and documentation, and enlightens with cultural perspective and commentary, all the while maintaining the spirit of adventure and

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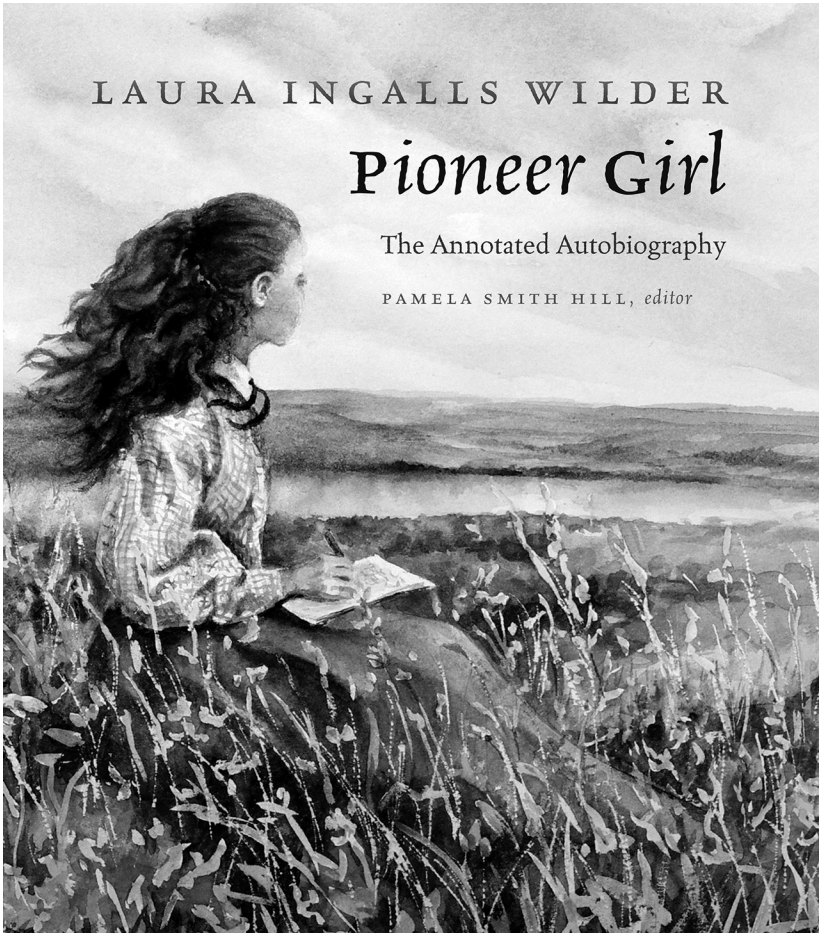
integrity that is the backbone of the Little House world and Wilder herself."[1]

The process of creating *Pioneer Girl: The Annotated Autobiography*, which is filled with more than one hundred images, eight maps, and hundreds of annotations, took place over several years. To keep interested readers apprised of progress on the book, the Press created

1. Pallas Gates McCorquodale, review of *Pioneer Girl: The Annotated Autobiography*, *Foreword Reviews* 18 (Winter 2015): 64.



pioneergirlproject.org, a website devoted to telling the behind-the-scenes story. Through videos, interviews, and blog posts beginning in May 2012, the Press shared discoveries made in the course of researching, writing, and editing. The blog posts presented here provide a sampling of the discoveries, often serendipitous, that illuminate the real people and places that filled Laura Ingalls Wilder's life, allowing modern readers to share the author's world. All of the blog posts, which are part of an ongoing series, may be viewed at pioneergirlproject.org.

A Pioneer Girl's Treasures

Posted 22 August 2012 by Pamela Smith Hill

On my most recent visit to Rocky Ridge Farm in the Missouri Ozarks, I was once again struck by all the things Laura Ingalls Wilder had managed to save from her childhood: her sampler, her handkerchief, the slates she and her sister Mary used when they attended school in Walnut Grove, Minnesota, even the jewel-box she describes in such loving detail in *On the Banks of Plum Creek*.

It's remarkable that so many objects from her childhood survived, given how often the Ingalls family moved—from Wisconsin to Missouri to Kansas and back to Wisconsin again; on to Minnesota, then Iowa, and back to Minnesota; finally on to Dakota Territory. All these moves were made either by covered wagon or by train, which meant the family had to travel light. I suspect Caroline Ingalls supervised her girls' packing closely, but based on accounts in Wilder's *Pioneer Girl: The Annotated Autobiography*, as well as the Little House series, both the real and fictional Ma understood how important it was to make a home wherever the family settled. That clearly included letting her girls take their small but precious possessions with them from one little house to another.

Wilder and her husband Almanzo made plenty of moves, too—from South Dakota to Minnesota to Florida to South Dakota again and from there to Missouri, where they lived out their lives together. And they too traveled by train, wagon, or buggy. So it's literally a small miracle that Wilder's jewel-box from Plum Creek days survived.

I've long assumed that Wilder saved these things because, in a childhood marked by frugality and poverty, even the purchase of those

slates must have seemed like an extravagance. But I'm not sure that an impoverished childhood entirely explains why Wilder saved those treasures from her past. My father, a child of the Great Depression, grew up in an Arkansas log cabin and like the Ingalls girls, he and his sisters delighted in simple pleasures and learned to live happily with less. Yet, nothing except photographs from my father's childhood remains; he didn't save his childhood treasures.

I suspect that Wilder kept hers because part of her never entirely grew up. Yes, like most of us, she kept important and official family documents, the papers that define a family's history. The archives at Rocky Ridge Farm, for example, include Charles and Caroline Ingalls's wedding license, Mary's diploma from the Iowa College for the Blind, and Wilder's own teaching certificates. Wilder became the family member responsible for preserving family history and documentation. But she also continued to nurture that childlike sense of wonder, a characteristic that often defines children's book writers.

Among the items Wilder saved is her essay titled "Ambition," written when she was seventeen for her teacher, Mr. Owen, in De Smet, South Dakota. It was a piece of writing that she was proud of. Perhaps her secret ambition had long been to become a writer.

Years later when Wilder, her husband, and daughter moved to Missouri, she began to act on that ambition. Almanzo had made her a portable writing desk, and throughout the journey to Missouri in 1894, Wilder kept a diary in a small notebook of her impressions along the way. She drafted a letter home to friends and family in De Smet, and it was published in the *De Smet News and Leader* in August 1894. Of course, she kept the clipping with a handwritten note, "First I ever published."[2]

Wilder began to write her life story in 1930, two years after she and Almanzo moved into the Rock House, a gift from their daughter Rose Wilder Lane. Here Wilder wrote *Pioneer Girl*, as well as the first three novels in the Little House series. It's impossible to know all the details

2. Wilder's essay "Ambition" and the *De Smet News and Leader* clipping are both in the Laura Ingalls Wilder Papers, Laura Ingalls Wilder Historic Home and Museum, Mansfield, Mo.

Laura Ingalls Wilder used these lined tablets to record the childhood memories that ultimately became *Pioneer Girl*.

of Wilder's writing process, but I like to think of her at the dining room table in the Rock House, a supply of No. 2 lead pencils and a Fifty Fifty tablet from Springfield Grocer Company at the ready. Perhaps as she struggled to find the right word or to describe the sound of Pa's fiddle, she looked across the living room and out the window at that hazy Ozark sky and found the inspiration to continue, one word at time, one memory at a time.

The Sources

Posted 28 August 2012 by Rodger Hartley

Today, a copy of *Barnaby Rudge* arrived for me at the South Dakota Historical Society Press offices through interlibrary loan. No, it's not my light reading for the morning coffee break. It's for the Pioneer Girl Project. But what, you may ask, do Laura Ingalls Wilder and Charles Dickens have to do with each other aside from their mutual status as classic authors?

As we research, edit, and write annotations for Wilder's *Pioneer Girl:*

The Annotated Autobiography, I am impressed by the breadth and depth of background it takes to understand a life—even a normal person's life. For isn't that what makes Laura Ingalls Wilder special: that for most of her life, she was not a celebrity? To her contemporaries, she was literally the girl next door (or on the next quarter section); yet, as an author, she makes her readers see what is extraordinary and worth telling in the everyday lives of everyday people.

And how many details make up such a life! All the source materials for the annotations come across my desk. For the first quarter of the manuscript, I have several articles on the Osage Indians, a book on medicine during the Civil War era and another on women's hair ornaments, a pamphlet on public-land laws, and a serious tome on the history of Redwood County, Minnesota. And a Dickens novel.

We don't know if Wilder read *Barnaby Rudge*, published in 1841, but we do know that Dickens and his work had a far-reaching effect on the popular culture of the time. In the original, unedited *Pioneer Girl* manuscript, Wilder says about one of her cousins: "Edith was to [*sic*] small to know us but she laughed at me and held out her little hands. They all called her Dolly Varden because she had a pretty dress of calico that was called that."[3] Not being an English major, I had no clue as to what this passage might mean. But Dolly Varden, it turns out, was a character from *Barnaby Rudge*, a flirtatious beauty who inspired a style of dress in the late nineteenth century. Thus, even this unlikely source provides a little more insight into Wilder's world.

Imagine writing about your own childhood. How many of the details would be obscure or incomprehensible to a reader eighty years hence? When I visited my own cousins earlier this year, I teased one of them about his Justin Bieber haircut. Someday, a remark like that will require annotation. One of the greatest values of the Pioneer Girl Project is the way in which it enriches our experience of the things that Wilder and her family, friends, and neighbors knew on a day-to-day basis.

3. Laura Ingalls Wilder, *Pioneer Girl: The Annotated Autobiography*, ed. Pamela Smith Hill (Pierre: South Dakota Historical Society Press, 2014), pp. 53, 55.

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Real People

Posted 20 December 2012 by Rodger Hartley

We know that many of the characters in the *Little House* novels are based on real people—and sometimes in interesting ways. Take, for example, the notorious Nellie Oleson, a girl so persistently odious that you just know (or hope) that she cannot have been "real" in *quite that way*. As it turns out, this character is an amalgam of no less than three unpleasant people of Laura Ingalls Wilder's childhood acquaintance; Nellie as we know her combines all of their unpleasantnesses into a perfect triune arch-nasty.

The example of Nellie Oleson is well known, but the research and editorial team for the Pioneer Girl Project are probing the real basis of even the most occasional characters in Wilder's *Pioneer Girl: The Annotated Autobiography*. Historians wonder about any good story: Who's real? How real? The answers are frequently gratifying, sometimes puzzling, and, occasionally, there's no answer at all. That, too, is part of the practice of history.

Census records are the first tool in our box, an easy way to establish the basic fact of reality. Sometimes. Cap Garland, for example. Real? Yes. "Garland, Edmund"—for such was the lad's given name—was enumerated outside De Smet in the 1880 census, living with his mother and two sisters, whom Laura mentions by name in *Pioneer Girl*.[4]

Occasionally, the census has its little quirks that make the research all the more interesting. What about the Heath boys? "Wait, the Heath boys?" you ask. "Who are they?"

Nobody crucial. Their story didn't make it into the published novels. "The youngest Wilder boy and two other boys, Homer and Horace Heath, from near De Smet, were in the railroad camp when all this happened," Laura wrote in *Pioneer Girl*.[5] Well, I'm very much mistaken

4. Wilder, *Pioneer Girl*, pp. 203, 205–6n13; Manuscript population schedule, De Smet, Kingsbury County, D.T., in U.S., Department of the Interior, Census Office, *Tenth Census of the United States, 1880*, National Archives Microfilm Publication T9, roll 113, sheet 152A.

5. Wilder, *Pioneer Girl*, p. 229.

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if you don't know who the youngest Wilder boy is, but are these Heath boys real? Yes. So real that they were counted *twice*.

On 24 June 1880, a census taker enumerated a "Heath, Horice S." and his brother, "Heath, Homer N.," on a farm just across the line in Brookings County. They were respectively twenty-five and twenty years old and were born, respectively, in New York and Wisconsin to parents who were also born in New York. They were listed as laborers.[6]

Now, at some point in June—we don't know exactly when—the following two laborers were enumerated in Beadle County, to the west of De Smet, boarding with thirty-two other laborers: "Heath, Horace" and "Heath, N. H.," twenty-four and nineteen years old, born in New York and Wisconsin to parents born in New York.[7] The first thing you learn in dealing with nineteenth-century census records is that the transposition of someone's initials, or a year's discrepancy in age, are commonplace. These were the same guys, counted twice in the 1880 census. I suspect that railroad camps—and other places using a seasonal workforce—were fertile ground for errors of this kind.

Oh, and look who appears on the same manuscript page, between Horace and Homer: "Wilder, A. J., twenty-two years old, laborer, born in New York to parents born in New York and Vermont."[8] (Almanzo Wilder, too, was counted twice in 1880: once in this railroad camp in Beadle County and again on his homestead near De Smet with his brother Royal and sister Eliza.)[9] Real people.

Mary's Illness

Posted 8 February 2013 by Nancy Tystad Koupal

USA Today recently contacted the South Dakota State Historical Society to discuss an article that was soon to appear in *Pediatrics* about Mary Ingalls's blindness. An assistant professor of pediatrics at the University of Michigan speculates that the illness that caused Mary In-

6. Manuscript population schedule, Township 111, Range 52, Brookings County, D.T., in *Tenth Census (1880)*, roll 111, sheet 184A.

7. Manuscript population schedule, Beadle County, D.T., ibid., roll 111, sheet 38C.

8. Ibid.

9. Ibid., De Smet, Kingsbury County, D.T., sheet 147C.

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galls's blindness was probably viral meningoencephalitis[10]—a big term that was not likely to find its way into Laura Ingalls Wilder's books or her autobiography.

In *Pioneer Girl: The Annotated Autobiography*, Wilder described the circumstances in this way: "Mary was taken suddenly sick with a pain in her head and grew worse quickly." A few days later, one side of her face was "drawn out of shape," and "Ma said Mary had had a stroke." Two doctors in Walnut Grove attributed Mary's failing eyesight to the stroke that had damaged the nerves in her eyes, which "were dying." Wilder concluded: "They had a long name for her sickness and said it was the results of the measels [*sic*] from which she had never wholly recovered."[11]

In her fictional retelling of this episode in her sister's life, which appears in the opening pages of *By the Shores of Silver Lake*, Laura Ingalls Wilder ascribed the condition to a bout of scarlet fever, one of the most deadly childhood illnesses of the nineteenth century and one that appears in novels such as Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women*. To the age group she was writing for, scarlet fever was understandable; viral meningoencephalitis is a term best understood by medical researchers and doctors.

When is a crab not a crab?

Posted 5 September 2013 by Rodger Hartley

When the crab is Laura Ingalls's ultimate weapon in the struggle against Nellie Oleson.

Fearsome creatures roam through the pages of Wilder's novels: howling wolves, screaming panthers, devastating grasshoppers, hungry bears lurking in the woods, and a badger that sends Laura into headlong retreat. But pound for pound, what can compare with the animal that Laura meets while wading in a pleasant pool? Ever-vigilant, swift to at-

10. Sarah S. Allexan, Carrie L. Byington, Jerome I. Finkelstein, and Beth Tarini, "Blindness in Walnut Grove: How Did Mary Ingalls Lose Her Sight?" *Pediatrics* 131 (Mar. 2013): 1–3. *See also* Michelle Healy, "Doctors Explore Medical Mystery in 'Little House' Books," *USA Today*, 3 Feb. 2013.

11. Wilder, *Pioneer Girl*, pp. 141–42.

Mary Ingalls posed for this portrait taken in De Smet in 1889.

tack, slow to disengage, alien in form and bellicose in disposition, audacious, ferocious, tenacious: it is the Jabberwock of the Minnesota prairie, the legendary beast of Plum Creek—of course, I mean the old crab.

It is clear that her encounter with this crusty old crustacean made a strong impression on Wilder, who was eight or nine years old at the time. The crab appears in her *Pioneer Girl: The Annotated Autobiography,* where it is clear, as it is from her detailed description in *On the Banks of Plum Creek*, that the animal was not, in fact, what we would call a crab.[12] So what was it?

12. Wilder, *Pioneer Girl*, p. 92; Wilder, *On the Banks of Plum Creek* (1937; rev. ed., New York: Harper & Row, 1953), p. 129.

As it happens, we are not the first ones to ask. Wilder's daughter and editor Rose Wilder Lane wondered, too, and wrote Wilder for clarification. Lane included her own description of a crab: about the size of a turtle, with eyes "like a snail's," and appearing somewhat like an oversize spider. Lane suggested that the creature that Wilder saw might really have been a crawdad or crayfish. Wilder confirmed her daughter's suspicions but also affirmed that young Laura had not been frightened for no reason: "I assure you he was enormous."[13]

One might wonder why Lane let the error stand, but perhaps that's the wrong question. To declare Wilder's usage to be an error is to make unwarranted assumptions about her historical and linguistic context. Wilder agreed that it was not a crab but added, "We always called them crabs."[14] Wilder was no more wrong in calling her crawdad a crab than a Texan is wrong in calling her 7-Up a Coke. Some words simply had different meanings to Wilder and her neighbors, and our job as annotators is to suggest an explanation when something doesn't seem to make sense. It usually comes down to differences in time, place, and circumstance.

I would point out that none of the three crayfish species indigenous to southwestern Minnesota is exactly "enormous," either, but history—and biography—are all about context. Wilder's "crab" may not really have been so huge, but it clearly made an enormous first impression. Try running into one for the first time as an eight-year-old, with no Internet or *Animal Planet* to prepare you, and let me know how it goes for you. We know how it went for Nellie Oleson.

Rare Charles Ingalls Letter Discovered

Posted 5 August 2014 by Nancy Tystad Koupal

In working with newspapers as we conducted background research for *Pioneer Girl: The Annotated Autobiography*, we ran across a letter, dated

13. Lane to Wilder, and Wilder to Lane, [summer 1936], File 19, Laura Ingalls Wilder Papers, 1894–1943, microfilm ed., Western Historical Manuscript Collection, Ellis Library, University of Missouri, Columbia. Wilder began her handwritten letter in response to Lane's questions at the bottom of her daughter's letter.

14. Wilder to Lane, ibid.

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2 February 1880, from Charles Ingalls to the *Brookings County Press* that has gone unrecorded until now.

In the 1870s and 1880s, newspapers relied on "correspondents" for news of outlying towns. For example, the *Redwood Gazette* of Redwood Falls, Minnesota, published newsy letters on a weekly basis about Walnut Grove from a number of different writers, one of whom was a member of the Ensign family. The Ingallses lived briefly with the Ensigns when they moved back to Walnut Grove from Iowa in 1877.

In the short period before De Smet acquired its own newspaper in the spring of 1880, Charles Ingalls appears to have tried his hand at corresponding with the *Brookings County Press*. Appearing in the 12 February 1880 issue, Ingalls's letter was headlined "From Kingsbury County" and is datelined "De Smet, Feb. 2d. 1880." It is signed "C. S. I." At first glance, this signature does not appear to match Charles P. Ingalls, but several clues indicate that it actually does. First, De Smet had few residents in February 1880 and only one man with the initials "C. I." Second, the letter mentions another county resident, "W. H. Seck," who can only be W. H. Peck, the man whose livestock Walter Ogden, a boarder at the Ingalls home, had been caring for through the winter. Clearly, the typesetter was misreading Ingalls's capital "P" for a capital "S."

But it is the content of the letter that most clearly reveals its writer:

> From Kingsbury County.
>
> De Smet, Feb. 2d., 1880.
>
> Editor Press.—Thinking a few lines from this vicinity might be interesting to your readers I take the liberty of sending them to you.
>
> De Smet is situated in the center of Kingsbury county, on the Chicago & N. W. R. R. and on the bank of Silver Lake. It is surrounded by as fine a country as can be found in the west. There are some claims to be had here yet; some very fine chances for stock-raising.
>
> Times are lively here again. W. H. Seck has removed his herd of stock from this place to his homestead 15 miles east. D. I. Egleston and party gave us a call last week. They seemed very much pleased with the country and its prospects; they were a jolly good natured party and seemed determined to have a good time. We hope they will call again.
>
> Trappers and hunters have been on the go to and from the "Jim" all the winter. They seem to have had a poor success in both vocations.

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> The wolves, foxes, coyotes, and keeping warm have made lively times for your correspondent this winter; he has made a successful warfare and hopes to bring more stirring news when next he enters your sanctum.
>
> C. S. I.

As Laura Ingalls Wilder's novels and *Pioneer Girl* clearly show, Charles Ingalls did successfully trap foxes and coyotes, among other animals, during the winter of 1879–1880. Having settled at De Smet, rather than thirty-some miles farther west on the James, or Jim, River, Ingalls was not only broadcasting his own prowess but advertising the greater bounty of the De Smet vicinity at the same time.

"New Characters" in Pioneer Girl

Posted 13 August 2014 by Jennifer McIntyre

There is nothing quite like seeing a photograph of someone you have read about. Melding the writer's words with the physical image can give a rush of recognition or, in some cases, wonder. In our research with *Pioneer Girl: The Annotated Autobiography,* we have worked to find images of the people, places, and events that fill Wilder's manuscript. Because Wilder wrote about an era when few people had cameras, the task was, at times, difficult. However, we also had our share of serendipitous moments.

One such incident came when, through the Pioneer Girl Project website, we were able to contact a descendant of Samuel Masters and his son and daughter-in-law George and Maggie Masters. Although Wilder did not place George and Maggie in her book *The Long Winter,* in her autobiography, the presence of these two boarders and their infant son intensified the Ingallses' hardships during the winter of 1880–1881. As Wilder documents in *Pioneer Girl,* Arthur Kingsbury Masters was actually born in the upstairs room of the Ingallses' home in De Smet during the Masters family's stay.[15]

While Wilder's portrayal of the family is not flattering, the extreme winter tested everyone's endurance and may help to explain the au-

15. Wilder, *Pioneer Girl*, p. 207.

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thor's unpleasant memories. Imagine how thin Charles Ingalls must have been in real life with nine people to feed, rather than the six who appear in Wilder's novel. As the photograph shows, George and Maggie Masters would go on to have more children, and George and Charles Ingalls would remain friends, for Masters served as a witness for Ingalls's 1886 homestead-patent application. And I can certainly say that it was a pleasure to work with the modern-day Masters family.

Arthur Masters, who was born in the Ingallses' house, stands at right, next to his brother Alex. Seated, from left, are Vere, Nita, and Claude Masters.

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A Day Trip to De Smet

Posted 21 August 2014 by Rodger Hartley

The staff of the Pioneer Girl Project is about evenly divided between the two great classes of humanity. There are the morning people—upstanding folks who wouldn't mind getting up early with Charles Ingalls to shovel snow off their families—and then there are those who would prefer to chat with the Boasts until the moon rises in the wee small hours. I am one of these latter types; it was with a dull eye that I piled into the car early on a Wednesday morning in May with project director Nancy Tystad Koupal (another like me) and Jennifer McIntyre (not one of us). Soon we were off toward the rising sun on a research pilgrimage to a certain little town on the prairie.

As we traveled along U. S. Highway 14, we stayed generally in sight of the old Chicago & North Western Railway line, which raced across Dakota Territory to the Missouri River in 1879–1880. Charles Ingalls moved west with the railroad, taking a bookkeeping job for a contractor working on this very line.

In the car, we contemplated our goals. Specifically, we had two objectives: first, we wanted to look at records pertaining to a murder in the Bouchie family; second, and more importantly, we wanted to look at various records to see what light they might shed on Wilder's school days as both student and teacher. And if we had any time left over, perhaps we could twist some hay.

I was fully awake by the time we arrived at De Smet's high school, where we pored over old school-board minutes. They didn't extend as far back as we had hoped, and we broke for lunch without having achieved much.

We reconvened at the Kingsbury County Courthouse, a lovely Italianate-influenced structure built in two segments (1889 and 1898) for a fast-growing county. Charles Ingalls had worked there at times in various roles, such as justice of the peace and bailiff of the court. Here we hoped to find the records of the county superintendent of schools. Our first stop was the auditor's office, and from there we were led down to "the vault," a room I can only describe as the perfect place to read "The Cask of Amontillado" by flashlight. Rusty, musty, and cramped, this is

where records go when they are too old to be of any practical use to a county, and there are a lot of them. The room was lined—up, down, and across the middle—with shelves full of often dank and discolored tomes. And in this haystack, we had to find the pin. Never mind; it was game time. Off with the jackets, on with the dust masks, and in we went to divide and conquer.

The ebullient mood of optimism didn't last long. It turned to strained choruses of "I am as happy as a big sun flower," &c., &c., and finally to grim resolve, as it became clear that our quarry wasn't where it should be. Was it possible that the superintendent's records had been kept in a book that was labeled as something else? We continued to work down the shelves until—

There it was! It had fallen *behind* a row of completely unrelated record books. We recognized our luck in finding a source where it ought never to have been, but we still had no idea whether it would tell us what we wanted to know. Nevertheless, with a jaunty step we took the book into the hallway, donned our cotton gloves, and with Nancy reading the text, Jenny taking notes, and me standing by with a camera, we dived in. I am happy to say that it went a long way to answering many of our questions.

We took the book back up to the auditor's office ("This is a treasure—don't lose it!"), then continued up the stairs to the clerk of courts, where we were ensconced in the judge's chambers with the documents we needed.

I wonder what one of the Bouchie women would have written to explain her family's troubles. Readers will remember Oliv Bouchie as Mrs. Brewster, the woman who got a little too expressive with a butcher knife in the claim shanty where Wilder spent a miserable winter while teaching her first school. But it was not this Bouchie who ended up on trial in 1887 for manslaughter; instead, Oliv's stepmother-in-law, the mother of Wilder's students, was one of the defendants. Wilder does not mention this incident, but the records of the case, including the depositions of witnesses, paint a picture of a strange and tense family.

We spent another hour lost in this troubling tale. As the courthouse closed for the day, we stopped for a brief visit behind the scenes at the Laura Ingalls Wilder Memorial Society to scan some archival images.

We did not make any hay twists—but we did photograph one.

And then it was back to Highway 14 and home, a full day of digging behind us and another step closer to the publication of *Pioneer Girl: The Annotated Autobiography*.

When a Man (like Almanzo) Goes Courting—1876

Posted 27 August 2014 by Nancy Tystad Koupal

As readers of Laura Ingalls Wilder's books know, courting was a special time in Wilder's life—a time when the set of her clothes and the condition of her hair were especially important to the young Laura Ingalls. The same is true in *Pioneer Girl: The Annotated Autobiography*, where Wilder lovingly describes her poke bonnet, her brown poplin, and her lunatic fringe, among other fashion details. We see Laura primping before the mirror and sewing items of clothing with care. Almanzo's perspective during the same time period, meanwhile, is left pretty much to the reader's imagination. Did he primp and preen before he went to visit Miss Ingalls, or was that solely a woman's prerogative?

One of the joys of newspaper research is the light it sheds on the habits and customs of people in different eras. In the course of our work with *Pioneer Girl*, we came across a wonderful column in the *Decorah Iowa Republican* of 8 December 1876 that illuminates the ritual of courting as a man experienced it:

> We have in our family [at] present a young man who is deeply, we trust successfully, engaged in going a-courting. . . . When Sunday afternoon arrives it is plain to see that something is about to happen. Our young man is fidgety and non-communicative and cannot sit in one place half a minute at a time. He is continually interviewing his watch and comparing it with the old eight-day, coffin-shaped clock in the corner. He looks in the glass frequently, and draws his forehead locks first back and then forward, and combs them up and puts them down, and is unsatisfied with the effect throughout.
>
> The smell of bay rum and bergamot is painfully apparent. When he shakes out his handkerchief musk is perceptible. His boots shine like mirrors. There is a faint odor of cardamom seeds in his breath when he yawns. He smooths his . . . mustache with affectionate little pats, and

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> feels his . . . side whiskers continually. . . . He tries on all his stock of neckties without finding just the thing; and he has spasms of brushing his coat, that commence with violence and last till one grows nervous for fear the broadcloth will never be able to stand it. . . .
>
> And at seven, he sets forth, clean and tidy from top to toe, looking precisely as if he had just stepped out of a bandbox.

The image is so vivid that one can almost feel the anxiety of a young man like Almanzo as he worried over his appearance.

While allowing that a woman had the same issues in getting ready to greet a suitor, the writer was more sympathetic with the young man, who had to "walk up in the cannon's mouth" of a young woman's family, "consisting of father, and mother, and grandmother, and maiden aunt, and half a dozen brothers and sisters, and inquire in a trembling voice: 'Is Miss Arabella at home?'" Poor Almanzo.

Laura and Almanzo Wilder are pictured here around 1885, the year they married.

The *Republican* column is not just entertaining; it is an invaluable historical resource that provides important clues about male grooming habits during the period, and it also gives modern readers a better appreciation for Almanzo Wilder's perseverance in courting Miss Ingalls.

Mary Ingalls Goes to School

Posted 9 October 2014 by Nancy Tystad Koupal

In our work on *Pioneer Girl*: *The Annotated Autobiography*, we found an interesting series of documents illuminating Mary Ingalls's path to the Iowa College for the Blind.

When Mary suffered the illness that led to her blindness in the spring of 1879, she was fourteen years old. Her education prior to that time had been inconsistent, interrupted by her family's various moves across the country. More dramatically, she had no training in how to function as an adult without vision, making her totally dependent on others for most of her basic needs. Compounding the situation, her father, Charles Ingalls, had just taken a job on the remote Dakota Territory frontier. What would become of Mary far from doctors and specialized schools?

Charles Ingalls was a resourceful man, and he soon found helpful colleagues in the new town of De Smet. One, attorney Visscher V. Barnes, mentioned frequently in *Pioneer Girl*, *s*et to work to find resources for Mary Ingalls. In a series of letters to George Hand, the secretary of Dakota Territory, in the summer and fall of 1881, Barnes described Mary as "a young and intelligent lady," who "ought to be provided for in some way." Barnes outlined the situation—"her parents are unable to make much provision for either her treatment or mental culture"—and he inquired about any territorial laws that might apply.[16]

Hand apparently responded that the territorial council had passed relevant legislation in 1879 that authorized the governor of the territory to enter into a contract for five years at a time with an institution in one of the surrounding states of Iowa, Minnesota, or Nebraska. The

16. Barnes to Hand, 29 Aug. 1881, roll 74, Dakota Territorial Records, microfilm ed., University of North Dakota, Grand Forks.

arrangement was to provide education for a blind resident, "keeping in view economy" as well as the welfare of the student. A letter in the Rose Wilder Lane Papers at the Herbert Hoover Presidential Library indicates that in 1881 the Iowa College for the Blind in Vinton charged $216 per out-of-state student per year. The student had to provide transportation to and from Vinton and his or her own clothing, and in some cases, students were unable to do even that.[17] Once the Iowa College for the Blind accepted the contract with the territorial governor to educate its blind students between the ages of five and twenty-one, the school became for all intents and purposes "the institution of the blind of [Dakota Territory]."[18]

Amos Whiting, the Kingsbury County superintendent of schools, began the necessary paperwork to certify that Mary Ingalls, age sixteen, was "blind and unable to obtain an education in the common schools" and was therefore "entitled to the benefit of the Institution for the Blind of Dakota for the term of five years, she not having passed any time in a like institution."[19] For his part, Visscher Barnes continued to push for additional support, asking if there were any way for the territory to provide for transportation for her and her parents, as well. "The young lady has been blind only a short time," he wrote in October, "and not long enough to learn to help herself. She is, in fact, at present left almost helpless, and it will be necessary for her parents to attend her."[20]

The records do not show whether or not the plea for additional support was successful, but on 15 October 1881, Dakota territorial governor Nehemiah G. Ordway approved Mary A. Ingalls's certification of eligibility for five years of schooling (presumably through age twenty-one). She carried a copy of the signed document with her to Vinton when she entered a month later on 23 November 1881. The need to raise funds for transportation may have caused the lag in time. In *These Happy Golden Years*, Wilder vividly recorded the difference the education made in Mary's circumstances. During Mary's first visit home about two years

17. Robert Carothers to Wm. C. Cort, 21 Dec. 1881, File 197c, Box 14, Rose Wilder Lane Papers, Herbert Hoover Presidential Library, West Branch, Iowa.

18. D.T., *Compiled Laws*, 1887, sec. 272.

19. Whiting, certification, 3 Oct. 1881, Dakota Territorial Records.

20. Barnes to Hand, 7 Oct. 1881, ibid.

later, a trip that she accomplished on the train by herself, Mary "moved easily around the house," Wilder wrote, "instead of sitting quiet in her chair." She was "gay and confident," and when Pa brought in her trunk, "she went to it, knelt down and unlocked and opened it quite as if she saw it."[21] In *Pioneer Girl*, Wilder noted that Mary had "pleasant college memories to dwell upon" and was "able to sew and knit and make beadwork, to read her raised-print books and to play the organ that Pa and I together had bought for her as a surprise."[22]

Mary Ingalls would actually attend the Iowa school for a total of seven years from 1881 through 1889, two more than the five she was originally eligible to receive. In 1885, the territorial council had amended the law to read that each blind student was entitled to a total of eight years of schooling. When Dakota Territory became the two states of North and South Dakota in November 1889, however, the state of South Dakota took a different approach to the education of its blind citizens, putting the burden for payment on individuals or individual localities. When Mary Ingalls sought to return to the Iowa College for the Blind in 1892, she was informed that it "would be impossible" because the state of South Dakota had "appropriated no money for the education of the blind."[23] The state would not establish a school for the blind until 1900; by that time, Mary Ingalls was thirty-five years old.

The Long Shot Hits Home

Posted 13 November 2014 by Rodger Hartley

> One blizzard came just before time for school to close. . . .
>
> At a country school eight miles north of De Smet, the teacher [had] brought his children to school in a sleigh. . . . [Going home,] the teacher, with his load, was lost on the prairie.
>
> When he knew that he couldn't find his way, he . . . turned the sleigh bottom up over them. Then he crawled underneath the sleigh himself and there they huddled together while the snow blew and drifted over

21. Wilder, *These Happy Golden Years* (1943; rev. ed., New York: Harper & Row, 1953), pp. 124–26.

22. Wilder, *Pioneer Girl*, p. 295.

23. Mrs. Robert Carothers to Mary Ingalls, 7 Dec. 1892, File 197c, Box 13, Lane Papers.

> the sled keeping out the wind. . . . No one was frozen except the teacher whose hands and feet were frozen, but not badly.
>
> —Laura Ingalls Wilder, *Pioneer Girl: The Annotated Autobiography*, p. 315

There were a lot of long shots in the research for *Pioneer Girl: The Annotated Autobiography*. We look at Wilder's life through a double pane of frosted glass, trying to overcome both the shortfalls of her memory and our own distance from the subject. Not all of our long shots hit the target. I'd like to tell you about one long shot—perhaps the longest one of all—that *did*.

Wilder places the story of the schoolteacher and his improvised igloo in the winter of 1884–1885, but the setup is strongly reminiscent of the "children's blizzard," a storm that struck without warning on a warm day in January 1888 and killed more than a hundred schoolchildren in South Dakota alone as they struggled to get home. Wilder did not always remember events in their true chronological order, and it seemed likely that she misplaced this one. But she does not give the teacher's name, and the Kingsbury County newspapers that could complete the story have been lost, so there, it appeared, the matter would rest.

The scene: it's about 10:30 one morning, and a deadline looms. Enter Pioneer Girl Project director Nancy Tystad Koupal with a grin on her face and a book in her hand.

"Rodge. See if you can find that schoolteacher in here."

"Wait, are you *kidding* me? We don't even have a name."

"We have a hunch. We follow it."

"It's not like I can look him up in the index. This could take all day."

"It's a good book. Humor me. I sign your paychecks."

It *is* a good book. It's *The Children's Blizzard*, by David Laskin, and it is a fantastic and heart-stopping book. I read most of it that day, too quickly, like a man tearing through a haystack looking for a glint of metal, and this is all the glint I found: "Mr. Stearns, a Dakota schoolteacher, had taken his three children to the school he taught near De Smet the day before and still had not returned home."[24]

24. Laskin, *The Children's Blizzard* (New York: HarperCollins, 2004), p. 218.

Unfortunately, there's no footnote and no follow-up. We still had laughably little information to work with. What were the odds? Even so, the circumstances were tantalizing: here was a schoolteacher, near De Smet, whose own children were among his students. And, critically, he had a *name*. It was federal records time.

Census first. Ready? No Stearns in the area in 1880. The territorial census for the county for 1885 is lost. The federal census for 1890 is melting the ice caps. State records for 1895 are missing. The 1900 federal census—stop!—*there's* one: Orion E. Stearns. Spirit Lake Township, Kingsbury County. Farmer. Born Vermont, August 1847. He and his wife have had five kids, of whom three survive; two are still in the household.[25]

Now we're cookin' with Crisco. We have his name and his year and state of nativity, and we can follow this man, whether he's Wilder's man or not, wherever we want to. Orion's daughter Bessie is a schoolteacher; does it run in the family?

Back to 1880. No. Back to 1870. Yes. Orion Stearns is teaching school in 1870 in Trempealeau County, Wisconsin.[26] It doesn't prove that he taught in 1888. But let's say you're a homesteader and you have teaching experience. What would *you* do in the winter to earn a little extra money to help prove up your claim? Maybe this wasn't a fool's errand after all. I look at the clock. Between this and other tasks, it's now 6:30, and I am not going home until this is settled.

But have I gotten ahead of myself? We still don't know if Orion Stearns was even *in* Dakota Territory in 1888. But the United States General Land Office might. Guess what: it does. On 16 August 1889, Orion E. Stearns was issued a patent under the Homestead Act for a quarter section seven miles northeast of De Smet.[27] At this point my heart finally says, "This is the guy." But that's not enough. It's a pretty safe bet that he was there in 1888, but I can't be *absolutely* sure unless I order the

25. Manuscript population schedule, Spirit Lake Township, Kingsbury County, S. Dak., in *Twelfth Census (1900)*, Microfilm Publication T623, roll 1550, sheet 2B.

26. Ibid., Gale, Trempealeau, Wis., in *Ninth Census (1870)*, Microfilm Publication M593, roll 1737, sheet 200A.

27. U.S., Department of the Interior, General Land Office, Land Entry Files, Final Patent #3749, issued to Orion E. Stearns, Records of the General Land Office, Record Group 49, National Archives and Records Administration, Washington, D.C.

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paper land-entry records, which will take a month to arrive.

Wait. I have other evidence right under my nose. Remember his two kids living with him in 1900? The census shows that his son Sumner was born in Dakota Territory in 1885. Again, I can't be certain they were in Kingsbury County, but we're building a strong preponderance of evidence. While we're at it, what other evidence can we glean from the children's census entries?

Little Sumner would have been too young to go to school in January 1888. Orion's four other children appear in the 1880 census: Lewis, Guy, Nellie, and Bessie. And then I remember that by 1900, only one of the three eldest was still alive. That's when I start checking grave records.

Ten minutes later I'm in the library. This adventure started with a book; let it end with a book. Ten minutes after that, it's over.

Beyond a doubt, Mr. Stearns was the man Wilder remembered, and I know exactly what happened to him and his kids on 13–14 January 1888. The long shot slams right into the bullseye. And all I can think is, *No. That isn't how the story is supposed to end.*

The story ends with annotations 90–91 on pages 315–16 of *Pioneer Girl: The Annotated Autobiography*. It's a book full of long shots, gunshots, schottisches, and everything else from the world of Wilder.

First Oyster Festival in Kingsbury County

Posted 31 December 2014 by Dorinda Daniel and Jennifer McIntyre

"Now that Christmas is over," a South Dakota newspaper recently stated, "it's time to start thinking about celebrations to welcome the New Year. And what to serve at any parties you're hosting. Why not do as the pioneers did and include oysters?"[28]

Ancient Greeks served them as an incentive to drink. Romans imported and fattened them. American Indians on both coasts considered them a staple in their diets. Abraham Lincoln also served them to guests at parties at his Illinois home. While oysters may have declined in popularity since Wilder's time, when she was a young girl, these bivalves were considered a delicious addition to any special meal—even

28. "Prairie New Year's Celebrations Would Have Included Oysters," *Sioux Falls Argus Leader*, 31 Dec. 2014.

making an appearance at a gathering of early Dakota Territory settlers on New Year's Day in 1880.

This small gathering near De Smet included Charles and Caroline Ingalls, their daughters Mary, Laura, Carrie, and Grace, as well as their fellow homesteaders, friends, and hosts, Robert and Ella Boast. As a biography of Charles Ingalls later declared, it was "the first oyster festival in Kingsbury county."[29]

At the Boasts' small home, the party "was all the more fun because their one room was so small, that with the table set, we had to go in the outside door and around to our place at the table one by one and leaving the table we must reverse the order and go out the door following the scripture that, 'The first shall be last and the last first,'" Laura Ingalls Wilder wrote in *Pioneer Girl: The Annotated Autobiography*. She even described the meal: "There were oysters and honey and sauce [from] home dried fruit the Boasts had brought with them. We told stories and joked and had a happy New Year's day."[30]

As the Pioneer Girl Project researchers learned, the Ingallses and Boasts probably dined on canned oysters. Fresh or canned, oysters had soared in popularity in the nineteenth century, and packed in hermetically sealed cans, they "traveled the breadth of the wide trans-Missouri region almost as soon as Americans ventured there," according to historian Paul Hedren. Thanks to the railroads, oysters were almost everywhere by 1880.[31]

However, oysters were not what made New Year's Day 1880 special. Instead, as readers of *Pioneer Girl: The Annotated Autobiography* can tell from the loving way Wilder described this time with the Boasts, the day was worth remembering because it was shared with friends and was full of joy and song.

As the New Year 2015 begins, we hope your celebrations are just as sweet.

29. *Memorial and Biographical Record: An Illustrated Compendium of Biography, Containing a Compendium of Local Biography, . . . of Prominent Old Settlers and Representative Citizens of South Dakota . . . etc.* (Chicago: Geo. A. Ogle & Co., 1898), p. 1024.

30. Wilder, *Pioneer Girl*, p. 186.

31. Hedren, "The West Loved Oysters Too!," *Montana, the Magazine of Western History* 61 (Winter 2011): 7. *See also* pp. 4, 6.

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On the covers: As in the rest of the country, the Vietnam War divided South Dakotans. On college campuses around the state, students and faculty voiced their opinions through protests like those staged during the governor's review of ROTC cadets at South Dakota State University in 1970 (front) and by students at the University of South Dakota in 1972 (back cover). In this issue, Daryl Webb looks at both pro-war and anti-war sentiment on South Dakota's college campuses in the 1960s and 1970s.