

Rose Wilder Lane on Railroads and the Winter of 1880–1881

Excerpts from “Behind the Headlight: The Life Story of a Railway Engineer”

Nancy Tystad Koupal

Even though she left Dakota Territory for Missouri in 1894 when she was only seven years old, Rose Wilder Lane wrote about the region of her birth at various times throughout the rest of her life, penning two bestselling novels set in the pioneer period, *Let the Hurricane Roar* (1933) and *Free Land* (1938), and numerous short stories. In addition, she edited and agented her mother’s autobiographical Little House series (1932–1943) set in the same era. Lane’s parents, Laura Ingalls Wilder and Almanzo J. Wilder, settled near De Smet, Dakota Territory, where Rose Wilder was born in 1886. The Ingalls family had moved to the territory in 1879, when Wilder’s father, Charles P. Ingalls, took a job as bookkeeper/timekeeper for a contractor grading the road of the Dakota Central Division of the Chicago & North Western (C&NW) Railway. The same year, Almanzo Wilder took a claim in Kingsbury County near De Smet and spent the summer of 1880 working as a teamster for a different grading contractor near Huron.

Like many other settlers who helped build the railroad or followed it into Dakota Territory and homesteaded or built businesses in the new towns along the route, the Ingallses and Wilders survived the Hard Winter of 1880–1881. Beginning in December 1880, blizzard after blizzard dumped snow into the railroad cuts between Tracy, Minnesota, and Huron, Dakota Territory; packed as deep as forty feet, these snow-filled cuts became impenetrable by mid-January. Trains carrying food and fuel could not reach the new towns along the C&NW lines until the beginning of May 1881. By February, fuel supplies were exhausted, and settlers burned twisted hay to allay the bitterly cold temperatures and survived on seed wheat ground in coffee mills when the food ran out.¹

I am deeply grateful to Cindy Wilson who shared her research and expertise concerning the Chicago & North Western Railway.

1. For Wilder’s account of the Hard Winter of 1880–1881, see Laura Ingalls Wilder, *Pio-*

With her mother's help, Rose Wilder Lane shared details about the Hard Winter and the railroad's role in the blockades more than twenty-five years before Wilder immortalized the pioneers' struggle against the elements in her famous novel *The Long Winter* (1940).

Largely self-taught as a writer, Lane graduated from high school in 1904 at age seventeen. She worked first as a telegraph operator in Kansas City before moving to San Francisco in 1908, where she married newspaperman Claire Gillette Lane the next year. The couple worked various promotional schemes throughout the country and later sold farmland. Lane briefly wrote stories for newspapers in Kansas City in 1910 and tried her hand at advertising copy and other writing before taking a job at the *San Francisco Bulletin* in early 1915 as the assistant to the women's page editor. Lane quickly advanced to writing multi-installment biographical serials under the tutelage of Fremont Older, the *Bulletin* editor. In 1895, Older had taken over the aging *Bulletin* (established in 1855) and rebuilt it into one of the city's leading newspapers in competition with William Randolph Hearst's muckraking *San Francisco Examiner* and the still-surviving *San Francisco Chronicle*. Focusing on exposés of the Southern Pacific Railroad and critiques of politicians, Older's *Bulletin* thrived in the era of yellow journalism. Lane's first significant contributions to the newspaper included lengthy accounts of the exploits of daredevil pilot Art Smith and the crime-solving adventures of detective Ed Monroe. Over the next four years, Lane also serialized the lives of Charlie Chaplin, Henry Ford, Jack London, and Herbert Hoover for either the *Bulletin* or *Sunset*, a magazine based in California. In the process, she read manuals about writing, took advice from Older, and established a talent for writing in a genre often characterized as literary journalism.²

neer Girl: *The Revised Texts*, ed. Nancy Tystad Koupal et al. (Pierre: South Dakota Historical Society Press, 2021), pp. 275–313. For an assessment of the hardships of the winter and the railroad stoppages, see Cindy Wilson, *The Beautiful Snow: The Ingalls Family, the Railroads, and the Hard Winter of 1880–81* (St. Paul, Minn.: Beaver's Pond Press, 2020), pp. 19–24. For a meteorological analysis, see Barbara Mayes Boustead, "The Long Winter of 1880/81," *Bulletin of the American Meteorological Society* 101, no. 6 (2020): E797–E813.

2. William Holtz, *The Ghost in the Little House: A Life of Rose Wilder Lane* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1993), pp. 46–59, 62–66; Amy Mattson Lauters, introduction to *The Rediscovered Writings of Rose Wilder Lane, Literary Journalist*, ed. Lauters (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2007), p. 3; Caroline Fraser, "The Strange Case of the Bloody



Rose Wilder Lane, pictured here standing at the far left, graduated from high school in Crowley, Louisiana, in 1904.

Broadly defined, literary journalism is nonfiction enhanced by the inclusion of dialogue and the use of other narrative techniques that are usually associated with fiction. The purpose of such journalism is to highlight a greater truth, to make a statement about the person or culture being written about. The resulting work has to be verifiable, but it “must also shed light on the lives of the ordinary people [the author] is writing about, in a way that at its heart might seem intrinsically political in its pursuit of a higher literary truth.”³ Lane always claimed

Benders: Laura Ingalls Wilder, Rose Wilder Lane, and Yellow Journalism,” in *Pioneer Girl Perspectives: Exploring Laura Ingalls Wilder*, ed. Nancy Tystad Koupal (Pierre: South Dakota Historical Society Press, 2017), pp. 23–24; Hank Chapot, “San Francisco Newspapers,” *Found*, foundsf.org. See also Lauters, “From Her Own Point of View: Rediscovering Rose Wilder Lane, Literary Journalist,” *American Journalism* 24 (Winter 2007): 7–33, and Lauters, “‘Raise a Loud Yell’: Rose Wilder Lane, Working Writer,” in *Pioneer Girl Perspectives*, ed. Koupal, pp. 52–76.

3. Lauters, introduction, pp. 3–4.



Lane covered a broad range of stories for the *San Francisco Bulletin*, as this photograph of her on assignment in California's Hetch Hetchy Valley suggests.

that her stories were true, but the sensationalist journalism of the early twentieth century also shaped her writing career. In pursuit of a good story, Lane sometimes followed the much looser practices of the yellow journalists who faked interviews and blurred “the distinction between factual and fabricated material.”⁴ When Jack London’s widow challenged Lane over the facts in her serial on London, for example, Lane explained that she had “verified as carefully as I possibly could, in a wilderness of conflicting reports, all the facts,” but in the end, her goal was to make London “seem alive to my readers . . . to get as nearly

4. Fraser, “Strange Case of the Bloody Benders,” pp. 24–26.

as I can at the truth rather than at the facts.” Defending her methods, Lane noted that she might have “fictionized” the biography but only in matters of “color and handling.”⁵

As Lane practiced her craft at the *San Francisco Bulletin* and elsewhere, she refined a characteristic style that featured “thick description, active voice, lively dialogue, and absolute adherence to a particular storyteller’s point of view.”⁶ In the years to come, she would attempt to instill these same characteristics in her mother’s writing.⁷ All of Lane’s skills, especially her adherence to a single narrator’s point of view, are on display in “Behind the Headlight: The Life Story of a Railway Engineer,” a serial that appeared in twenty-four installments in the *Bulletin* from 9 October to 5 November 1915. In researching this story, Lane “went all around hunting up engineers to talk with.” Listed as editor, Lane presented the engineers’ combined stories as the reminiscences of a single trainman named Sam Jackson, who had worked for the C&NW in Minnesota and Dakota Territory during the Hard Winter of 1880–1881. Laura Ingalls Wilder, who was visiting her daughter in San Francisco at the time, explained that Lane had found an engineer who had “fired on an engine through Dakota north of us during the hard winter, or rather did not fire, because the trains could not run. In that part of the story [Lane] used some of what he told her and some that I told her.” Even so, Wilder assured her husband, “every incident in it is true.”⁸

The first four installments of Lane’s serial purportedly cover the reminiscences of a C&NW engineer who worked in Minnesota and Dakota Territory until the spring of 1885. The C&NW had entered Dakota Territory in two phases. In the early 1870s, its Winona & St. Peter Division had passed through Tracy, Minnesota, and turned northwest to Marshall. The line was heading for the Lake Kampeska region of Dakota Territory before railroad construction stopped during the severe

5. Lane to Charmian London, 22 Sept. 1917, folder 14, box 13, Jack and Charmian London Correspondence and Papers, Utah State University Special Collections and Archives, Logan.

6. Lauters, introduction, pp. 8–9.

7. Nancy Tystad Koupal, introduction to *Pioneer Girl: The Revised Texts*, pp. xiii–xxviii.

8. Wilder to Almanzo Wilder, 22 Oct. 1915, file 184, box 13, Rose Wilder Lane Papers, Herbert Hoover Presidential Library, West Branch, Iowa. This letter, edited slightly, also appears in Wilder, *West from Home: Letters of Laura Ingalls Wilder to Almanzo Wilder, San Francisco 1915*, ed. Roger Lea MacBride (New York: Harper & Row, 1974), pp. 113–17.



Laura Ingalls Wilder posed in Muir Woods alongside Claire Gillette Lane, her daughter's then husband, during a visit to California.



This undated photograph shows an engine of the South Dakota division of the Chicago and Northwestern (C&NW) Railway stopped in Tracy, Minnesota.

economic downturn that followed the Panic of 1873 and the locust infestations that ravaged the region between 1873 and 1877. As the economy recovered and the locusts subsided, the railroad resumed building its lines into the territory as settlers once again sought to take advantage of the Homestead Act of 1862, which allowed settlers to claim free 160-acre parcels of land as long as they resided on and successfully ran their farms for at least five years. The C&NW extended its line to Wattertown in 1879 and from there to Doland, Redfield, and Gettysburg in the next few years. By fall 1880, the company had also built the Dakota Central Division straight across the territory from Tracy, establishing towns roughly every six miles, including Brookings, De Smet, Huron, and terminating in Pierre, Dakota Territory. Sam Jackson could have fired on any of the smaller lines that also snaked across eastern Dakota Territory, sometimes under the auspices of the C&NW. Unfortunately, the whereabouts of the personnel records of the C&NW, assuming the company kept them, are presently unknown, making it difficult to determine whether Jackson was the man's real name or if he filed

complaints with the company as he claimed.⁹ Other details of the story, however, can be traced in the historical record.

When *Free Land*, Lane's novel about the settlement of Dakota Territory, came out in 1938, another engineer then living in Alaska, John B. Powers, wrote to the author. In the process of recounting his own experiences as a trainman in Dakota, he verified elements of Jackson's story, including the claim that railroading was a young man's occupation. "My father was a section foreman on the Chicago & Northwestern railway," wrote Powers, "and when I was just past 16 years of age I was firing a locomotive on the same road on the division between Tracy and Huron, and between Redfield and Watertown." Powers also talked about the winter of 1880–1881: "In Dakota, I witnessed something of hardship, [privation] and want . . . and during the snow blockade of '80–81 many people [subsisting] almost entirely on wheat ground up in their coffee mills." As Powers, affirming Lane's assessment, concluded, "those early settlers were surely on their own, and it certainly was . . . enough to try the souls and courage of the stoutest hearts, fighting nature and the elements and with no paternal government then as now to coddle, and wet nurse them along when things were breaking tough."¹⁰ Powers had certainly understood the greater truth that Lane was attempting to reveal in both *Free Land* and "Behind the Headlight." Powers also told Lane about a young woman whom he "was sweet on" who perished in a blizzard; this story is also reminiscent of one that appears in the following excerpts.

Wilder, too, had lived through the blockade of 1880–1881, and some of her contributions to the experiences of Sam Jackson are obvious. The story of an American Indian man who foretells the harshness of the winter to come appears in the pages of Wilder's autobiography, *Pioneer Girl*, as do the reactions of De Smet residents to the disappointing contents of the first trains that arrived in town in the spring of 1881.¹¹ The De Smet area appears to have been especially hard hit, but Lane does not identify De Smet as the location for any of the events in "Behind the Headlight," suggesting instead that things happened in a town

9. Wilson, *Beautiful Snow*, pp. x, 6–7; Wilson to Koupal, 12, 20 May 2021; Craig Pfannkucke, C&NW archivist, to Cindy Wilson, 24 May 2021.

10. Powers to Lane, 11 July 1938, file 151, box 11, Lane Papers.

11. Wilder, *Pioneer Girl: The Revised Texts*, pp. 280–81, 310–13.

called Bennett or at the unnamed terminus of the line. Bennett may be a faulty memory for the name of Lake Benton, Minnesota, which was a little more than thirty miles from Tracy on the Dakota Central Division. The mention of Manchester, a town seven miles west of De Smet, also places Sam Jackson on the Dakota Central railroad rather than on a line north of there, and such clues may signal that Wilder’s information influenced the narrative at those points.

The text that follows is the bulk of the first four installments of Lane’s “Behind the Headlight: The Life Story of a Railway Engineer.” The first chapter debuted in the *San Francisco Bulletin* on Saturday, 9 October 1915. Lane, who had a lot of column inches to fill, included verses from Rudyard Kipling’s 1907 poem “The Sons of Martha,” a tribute to mechanical workers on the locomotives, and other atmospheric background about the emotions of passengers and the dangers of railroad work.¹² An ellipsis indicates where these passages have been omitted

12. See Kipling, *The Years Between* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, Page & Co., 1919), pp. 73–76, and Philip Holberton, Notes on “The Sons of Martha,” *Readers’ Guide*, kiplingsociety.co.uk/rg_Martha1.htm.



The C&NW built this railroad depot in Manchester, just a few miles west of De Smet, as it expanded westward in the early 1880s.

in the interests of space. The next three chapters came out Monday to Wednesday, 11–13 October, and appear here in their entirety. Lane did not give the engineer’s name until the fifth and sixth installments. At the end of chapter four, Lane’s narrator leaves Dakota Territory for California, where he will begin working for the Central Pacific. This change signaled perhaps that the next interviewee’s story was about to begin and marked the end of Wilder’s role in the development of the serial. In helping her daughter, Wilder had disclosed elements of her own life story, previewing some of the details and concepts that would later inform her autobiography, *Pioneer Girl*, and the series of Little House novels based on her pioneering life.

CHAPTER I

It has been a good many years since I sat in a cab, and my nerves are not what they used to be, but I could take a special over the mountains yet, easier than I could write this story. I know how to handle a throttle, but I am awkward with a pen.

It is my observation that men are divided into two classes—the do-ers and the say-ers. You find a man who does things and usually he is not much good at writing about them. It works the other way around pretty often, too. I have read a good many stories about railroading, but I do not remember one that seemed to me to give the right idea of the work. . . .

It was work for young men who wanted excitement. It was pioneering work, adventurous and dangerous.

I do not remember the time I did not want to be an engineer. I used to hang around the depot in the little middle western town where I lived when I was a boy, and wait for the train to come puffing in. The engineer, a big, gruff fellow, always black with oil and coal dust, was a sort of demi-god to me—not an ordinary, commonplace man like my father and the other small storekeepers I knew.

If I had ever seen him washed up and in everyday clothes probably the shock would have changed my whole idea of railroading. But I never did. The first great event of my life happened when one day he lifted me into the cab and let me see the steam gauge and throttlebar at close range. I think I was about twelve at the time.

From that day on we were good friends. There was a great fascination for me about the engine, a big, black, powerful thing it seemed then, though it would be mighty small nowadays. The engineer, whose name was Burke, sometimes let me help him oil it, and he explained how it worked.¹³ I would have missed Christmas rather than fail to be at the depot when he drove it in.

CHAPTER II

In my boyhood that mysterious, westward-driving impulse in the human race was more articulate than now. “Go west, young man,” was the advice we heard on every hand.¹⁴

“Go west.” We did not need to be told. Young men want to turn their backs to the east when they start out in life, just as the birds go south in the winter without knowing why.

I have wondered about it since, but that impulse is so far down at the roots of human life that I suppose we will never understand it. It drove the first men of history up over the Himalayas and down to the shores of the Mediterranean, and it drove them up through Greece and Italy and Spain to the western shores of Europe, and onward across the Atlantic to America.

It was that westward-driving force that swept the white man across America in the face of every danger and difficulty, and we still see it at work, pushing the center of population from the Eastern States to the shores of the Pacific, in great human waves.¹⁵

13. Burke may be C&NW Roadmaster James Burke, who worked out of Burns Station (later Springfield) in central Minnesota near Walnut Grove. As roadmaster, Burke appears to have overseen repairs to the train tracks, and he took charge of snow shoveling operations on the western lines during the winter of 1881. *Marshall (Minn.) Messenger*, 29 Apr. 1881; Wilson to Koupal, 20, 24 May 2021.

14. “Go west” is a prescription often attributed to New York newspaperman Horace Greeley. In the mid-nineteenth-century, Greeley and others urged young men to take advantage of the homestead laws and settle the western states and territories in an effort to eliminate the overcrowding of eastern cities and “elevate the condition of the working-men” (Howard R. Lamar, ed., *New Encyclopedia of the American West* [New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1998], s.v. “land reform movement”). See also Robert V. Hine and John Mack Faragher, *The American West: A New Interpretive History* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2000), pp. 331-37.

15. Lane is applying the concepts of Frederick Jackson Turner’s frontier thesis, contained in his essay “Significance of the Frontier in American History” (1893), on a global



The 1868 print, “Westward the course of empire takes its way,” drawn by F. F. Palmer and published by Currier & Ives, highlighted the importance of the railroad to the expansion of the United States.

It is one of those tremendous underlying forces that influence our lives without our thinking of it or knowing why. So when I was a young man I started west as a matter of course, and I started as a railroad man because Burke and his engine, driving every day into our sleepy little town, was all that seemed to link it with the danger and excitement that I knew were out there on the frontier.

The great transcontinental lines were being driven across the plains of the west—through the Dakotas and Kansas into eastern Colorado.

scale. Jackson equated American “national progress with constant westward movement” and claimed that pioneer involvement in “a succession of westward-moving frontiers created American values and institutions.” This process continued until one frontier was exhausted and “it was time for a new wave of pioneers to move farther west” (Elizabeth Jameson, “The Myth of Happy Childhood [and Other Myths about Frontiers, Families, and Growing Up],” in *Pioneer Girl Perspectives*, ed. Koupal, p. 238). Lane implies that the concept applies universally to all western countries.

Young men of courage were needed on the engines then, and before I was 23 I was firing on the Tracy division, running west into Dakota as far as the lines were built, hauling supplies for the construction camps, and emigrant cars for the first settlers.¹⁶

I was a big, husky young fellow, every muscle as hard as iron from shoveling coal all day and most of the night. We used to drive across the plains for hours, with nothing in sight but a few antelope, and now and then a prairie wolf, or a big cattle herd. One day we ran into a stampede.

We were hitting it at a pretty good clip, just east of Manchester, when Bradley, the engineer, suddenly slowed up and yelled to me to look ahead.¹⁷ I could see cattle coming. They were headed straight toward us and traveling fast. The herd looked like a brown thundercloud, rolling along on the ground, with a wall of white dust rising behind it.

"It's coming our way!" I yelled at Bradley, and he nodded. "it may split," he shouted back. "Keep up the steam."

I shoveled her full of coal and then looked out again. I could see their brown backs by that time, rising and falling like waves, and in front of the herd, not a quarter of a mile away, I made out the big bull. He was coming straight down the track.

Bradley turned loose the whistle and opened the cylinder cocks.¹⁸ The noise was deafening, but the big bull never stopped. In three min-

16. To entice settlers to the new lands opening up along their routes, railroad companies offered low-cost "emigrant cars" to transport homesteaders' supplies to Dakota Territory and elsewhere in the West. Settlers packed them full of their household goods, food, and building materials. Almanzo Wilder, for example, hired "a Emigrant car to De Smet" in the summer of 1880, loading it with, among other things, his seed wheat, two hundred bushels of oats for his livestock, and lumber to build his claim shanty and barn (Almanzo Wilder to Lane, 23 Mar. 1937, file 193, box 13, Lane Papers). Railroads also provided low-cost passenger cars to emigrants, although such accommodations often consisted of boxcars fitted with wooden benches. *Brookings County Press*, 26 Feb. 1880; Catherine Bolland Erkkila, "American Railways and the Cultural Landscape of Immigration," *Buildings and Landscapes* 22 (Spring 2015): 36-62; Anthony J. Bianculli, *Trains and Technology: The American Railroad in the Nineteenth Century*, Vol. 2: *Cars* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2002), pp. 34-35.

17. Manchester, a town roughly seven miles west of De Smet on the Dakota Central railroad, no longer exists. A tornado destroyed the town in 2003. The fact that Bradley can be either a first or last name complicates any search for this engineer's identity.

18. The technical terms peppered throughout Lane's serial suggest that a veteran engineer provided her with the railroad vernacular. Steam locomotives usually have two to four cylinders guiding the steam that operates the pistons, which drive the engine.

utes I could see him plainly, racing for dear life ahead of the herd, his horns tossing at every jump. It was too late to do anything but drive ahead. Bradley opened the throttle wide. We ran straight at the beast. I saw his red eyes and his enormous shoulders, and then he put his head down and charged us.

The shock nearly lifted us from the track. The engine rocked. For a second I thought we were off the rails, but she righted herself.¹⁹ The whole landscape was a mass of tossing horns, rolling eyes and dust. We rammed straight on though the herd and luckily it split ahead of us. After we had gone a couple of miles Bradley stopped the engine and got out to look at the pilot.²⁰ It was covered with hair and blood.

“He had too damn much courage, that beast,” he said.

I was not much given to sitting around and reflecting in those days. I was usually working or sleeping. But after that I often thought of that remark of Bradley’s when we were setting out emigrant cars far out on that desolate plain. It looked to me as though those settlers were ramming themselves up against a thing too big for them, something like that bull.²¹

It was magnificent courage that drove the eastern frontiers of America across those plains and over the mountains into California—a courage that had nothing to do with common sense or cool business

Steam, however, causes condensation that reduces the machine’s efficiency, and so the cylinders “are fitted with small exhaust ports called cylinder cocks so that the water can be expelled under steam pressure. . . . Once the locomotive is moving and the cylinders are warmed up, the cocks can be closed and full pressure is available” (“Steam Glossary,” *The Railway Technical Website*, railway-technical.com). The engineer operates the cylinder cocks from the cab.

19. Stampeding cattle can indeed derail a train, and even a single cow on the track can do the job. As a modern-day Oregon rancher noted, “Cows and trains don’t mix” (quoted in *National Wildlife Federation Blog*, 14 Nov. 2012, blog.nwf.org). Frequent reports of cow/train interactions have been common since trains first began to run and continue into modern times. For example, in 2012, a “cow stampede” caused a train crash in England (*BBC News*, 12 May 2012, bbc.com).

20. The pilot is also known as the “cowcatcher” and is a metal, often wedge-shaped grill on the front of the engine that serves to remove obstructions such as cows from the tracks.

21. Lane’s lively description of this stampede uses dialogue and literary devices such as personification, simile, and metaphor to enhance the drama and illustrate a higher literary truth about the courage that settlers displayed in settling the West in spite of the odds against them.



Men participating in the Pullman Strike in Chicago—which lasted seventy days—endured difficult living conditions, as journalist Ray Stannard Baker documented with this photograph.

judgment. The men who flung themselves into that work were ruined and killed by hundreds before it was finished. They had the same blind courage and daring and lack of sense that I saw again among my own friends when Debs organized the A. R. U. and the strike of '94. Rank foolishness—but there's something big about it.²²

All through the summer of 1880 we hauled out those emigrant cars. Here and there on the plains we saw little shacks going up. No better than boxes, and looking something like them, there on the bare prairie.

22. Eugene V. Debs, the charismatic leader of the American Railway Union (ARU), led his members to boycott the Pullman Palace Car Company in June 1894 in solidarity with its striking workers. Owner George M. Pullman, whose employees lived in a company town near Chicago, had drastically cut worker wages without adjusting their cost of living, and employees, whose families were starving, walked off the job. In compliance with the boycott, ARU members refused to couple Pullman cars onto trains, going on strike across the Midwest throughout the summer of 1894. Known as the Pullman Strike, the resulting confrontation between workers and capitalists quickly became political, with government and media siding with big business organizations. Melvin I. Urofsky, "Pullman Strike," *Britannica*, Britannica.com; Troy Rondinone, "Guarding the Switch: Cultivating Nationalism during the Pullman Strike," *Journal of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era* 8 (Jan. 2009): 83–109.

Some of the settlers were too poor to build even that much, and these made sod houses, cutting the hard sod into blocks and piling them up for walls and roof.²³

By fall there was a settler's home every twenty miles or so, and at the end of the line there was a little town of a hundred families.²⁴

Then came the Hard Winter.

Bradley and I were on the home run, with two flats and a coach, one day in October. About forty miles from Tracy there was a little frame schoolhouse near the track, and I had become acquainted with the school teacher, a plucky little Irish girl named Mary Donnelly. When we came by on Saturday afternoons she used to dismiss school early and ride twenty miles down the line with us to her father's house.

This afternoon she was out with all the kids around her—eighteen or twenty of them—and they waved at us. I leaned out and threw her a little present I had got her in Tracy, and we went on past.²⁵ The sun was shining then.

23. Although Laura Ingalls Wilder's family could be characterized as poor, Charles Ingalls managed to build a claim shanty from cut timber. Without commenting on affordability in her memoir, Wilder noted that many people used "prairie sods to build their houses. In breaking the land a furrow was plowed about fourteen inches wide," which turned the sod over "in long strips three inches thick, the tough roots of the prairie grasses holding them together solid and tight." In making the shanty itself, the "strips were cut with an ax into two-foot lengths and laid up in the walls, one above another like brick. They settled together and made a solid wall fourteen inches thick. . . . A framework of lumber was put up on the inside and cloth or paper put over it, leaving an air space between this and the wall of sod. Such a house was cool in summer, warm in winter, and could be perfectly clean" (Wilder, *Pioneer Girl: The Revised Texts*, p. 268). For more on sod houses, see Molly P. Rozum, "It's Weathered Many a Storm: The Enduring Sod House in Northwestern South Dakota," *South Dakota History* 47 (Winter 2017): 295–368.

24. The Dakota Central Division of the C&NW reached its terminus in Pierre, Dakota Territory, on the banks of the Missouri River, in the fall of 1880. Sam Jackson, however, does not appear to have traveled that far; the westernmost town mentioned in his account is Manchester, which is just west of De Smet. While unspecified, the "end of the line" in this story is more likely Huron or Watertown, both of which were temporarily at the ends of their respective divisions of the C&NW during the summer of 1880. Only a few months old, none of these towns were large. De Smet, for example, boasted just 116 total residents in the federal census taken on 7–8 June 1880.

25. Such interaction between railroad workers and the people along the route is at the heart of another story about a C&NW worker who befriended a young boy who later died of smallpox. See H. Roger Grant, "A Railroad Wins Friends: The Chicago & North Western and the Little Fellow," *South Dakota History* (Fall 1988): 117–31.

Ten miles farther on I noticed a thin, black line low on the northwest horizon. I called Bradley’s attention to it, and he nodded and pulled the throttle open another notch. I shoveled in some coal.

The thing came on us like a flash of lightning. When I finished with the coal and straightened up I could not see an inch of track ahead. We were in a blinding blizzard.

The whirling snow around us was like a blank white wall a foot away. The sight of it fairly stunned me for a minute. Then I looked at Bradley. I did not have to say anything. He had the same thought I had—Mary and those kids.²⁶

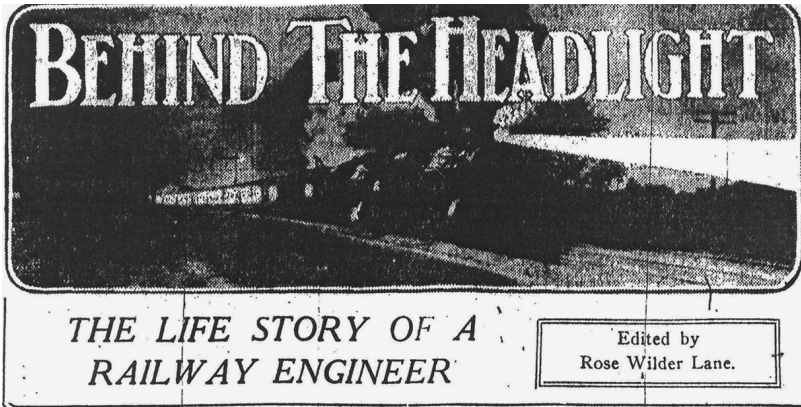
CHAPTER III

We were getting farther from that little schoolhouse every minute, but there was nothing else to do.

“She’s all right—she’ll keep her head—she’s a prairie girl.” Bradley shouted to me, and I nodded. I knew we could do nothing. If we backed that fifteen miles, the chances were that none of us would get out until the blizzard was over. Once our wheels stopped, the drifting snow would pile over the drivers and we could not start the train again.²⁷ There were a dozen passengers back in the coach, and two of them were women. We had to get through if we could.

26. Although Lane’s account suggests that this blizzard occurred in October as the first storm of the Hard Winter of 1880–1881, her description of the event fits the profile of the children’s blizzard of 12 January 1888. This famous storm, which took the lives of hundreds of school children and their teachers across Dakota Territory and Minnesota, “came up about 2 in the after noon after a nice warm morning and lasted that day & 2 more days,” Almanzo Wilder recalled (“In Dakota Territory” [Lane’s questionnaire with Almanzo’s handwritten answers], ca. 1937, file 421, box 33, Lane Papers). The winter of 1887–1888 had been almost as harsh as the winter of 1880–1881, and when the weather seemed to break on the morning of 12 January 1888, “the warm sun teased people out of their frame houses, soddies and dugouts,” leaving them exposed when the blizzard roared out of the northwest in the early afternoon (Alyssa Ford, “125 Years Ago, Deadly ‘Children’s Blizzard’ Blasted Minnesota,” *MINNPOST*, 11 Jan. 2013, minnpost.com). For more on this blizzard, see David Laskin, *The Children’s Blizzard* (New York: HarperCollins, 2004).

27. Essentially, the drivers are the wheel configurations that drive the train, which when compacted with snow cause the train to be stuck. As an 1882 publication explained, “During the prevalence of a severe snow storm accompanied by drifting, . . . the engine could not be worked out of a bank since the snow would fill around the wheels faster than it could be shoveled out. When an engineer is overtaken by conditions of this kind, his best efforts should be directed to keeping his engine alive and in working order.” The



THE LIFE STORY OF A RAILWAY ENGINEER

Edited by
Rose Wilder Lane.

CHAPTER III.

WE were getting farther from that little schoolhouse every minute, but there was nothing else to do.

"She's all right—she'll keep her head—she's a prairie girl," Bradley shouted to me, and I nodded. I knew we could do nothing. If we backed that fifteen miles, the chances were that none of us would get out until the blizzard was over. Once our wheels stopped, the drifting snow would pile over the drivers and we could not start the train again. There were a dozen passengers back in the coach, and two of them were women. We had to get through if we could.

Just the same, I worried. I remembered seeing a big pile of wood near the schoolhouse, and hoped Mary had had time to get plenty of it inside.

We drove on through the storm—such a storm as no one can understand who has not seen a prairie blizzard. The engine shook with the pull of the whirling wind on the cars behind. We might as well have been at the bottom of a snow-bank, as far as seeing anything of the track was concerned.

On the third day, toward evening, the wind dropped. Next morning the sun came up in a clear sky and the thermometer registered 35 below zero.

The yards looked like mountain ranges of snow. Snow was piled to the station eaves on the north, and the windows on that side were broken in by the pressure. We managed to dig out on the south side, and got the passengers to the nearest houses. Then we came back and went to work in the yards.

We dug the snow plows out of the drifts with shovels, and Bradley and I had our work cut out, getting steam up in the cold boiler. The second day after the storm ended we were out on the line, clearing the track. We had only the old wedge blows in those days, and some of the drifts were twenty and thirty feet deep. It took two and three engines in a string to smash our way through them. It was eight days before I got news of Mary.

She was dead. When the blizzard struck she had locked the children in the schoolhouse for safety. Somehow, in that wind, the little shack caught fire. Then Mary tied the eighteen children together and tried

knew—one of the pioneer women. The frontiers bred hundreds of them when I was young, though never one who seemed to me quite like Mary Donnelly. She is forgotten now, and the frontiers are gone, but we still need that kind of woman. I like to think America has them yet.

We got one more train through—three cars of farm machinery and one of seed wheat. When we made up that train I said in plain language what I thought of it. There were a dozen cars of grain and coal in the yards. Bradley felt as I did about it, but we had our orders, and we hauled out the machinery. The people at the end of the line did not seem worried by the blizzard. They took it as a matter of course.

I remember on the way back we carried an old Indian part of the way. He had no money, but he climbed into the cab and we let him ride. When he got off, out on the prairie, I asked him where he was going. He pointed south, and then waved his hand toward the northwest and grunted.

"Big snows," he said. He put up his hand and counted seven on his

The third installment of "Behind the Headlight" appeared in the 12 October 1915 edition of the *San Francisco Bulletin*.

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author concluded, "An imbecile engineer often proves a very expensive employe[e] under such circumstances" (Angus Sinclair, "Locomotive Engine Running," chap. 5, *Railway Age Monthly and Railway Service Magazine* 3 [July 1882]: 404). As the narrative shows, Sam Jackson and his compatriot Bradley were not imbeciles, and this chapter of Lane's story clearly emanates from an experienced trainman.

been at the bottom of a snowbank, as far as seeing anything of the track was concerned.

I had my hands full keeping up steam, and Bradley nursed the engine along at a pretty good speed. As long as the wind blew we could keep going, if nothing happened, but if it dropped before we got in, letting the snow pile across the tracks, we would have to stay there till the snow plows dug us out.

Night came before long. Bradley took a chance and stopped long enough for me to get out and try to light the oil headlights, but the wind tore the flame from my torch. I managed somehow to get one lighted, but it made no impression on the whirlwind of snow. We might as well have turned it on a blank wall.

When we thought we were near the end of the terminal yards, Bradley started the whistle, and it sounded as though he had let loose a hundred lost souls. The wind caught the scream of it and threw it back at us from every station.

We drove on blindly, expecting every minute to crash into another engine in the yards. I was on my side of the cab, straining my eyes out of their sockets trying to see ahead when suddenly I saw a sort of glow beside the track. I yelled to Bradley and he threw her over hard, working the engine against herself to stop. A flagman was beside the track. He climbed up into the cab and said the depot was about fifty feet away. The yard crews had got in there, and when they heard our whistle they had tied a rope to him and sent him out to signal us if he could.

We went down the train to the coach and got the passengers out, one at a time, cautioning them to hold on to each other and shout to us at once if anyone let go on the way to the depot. One step away from the others in that blizzard would have meant being lost and probably freezing to death. Being frontier people, they knew it. We got them all safely into the station.

We lived there for three days and nights.²⁸ The nearest building was

28. Across the storm area, people had to take shelter wherever the weather forced the trains to stop. At Volga, Dakota Territory, for example, "where the regular passenger train was laid up" after the October 1880 blizzard, the hotels could not accommodate the crowd, "and a board to sleep on was in demand." The same newspaper reported that with extra people in town, Huron "came very near being starved out during the storm" (*Brookings County Press*, 21 Oct. 1880).

farther away than the length of our longest rope, so there was no way to get food, but we kept a fire going and were thankful for that. On the third day, toward evening, the wind dropped. Next morning the sun came up in a clear sky and the thermometer registered 35 below zero.

The yards looked like mountain ranges of snow. Snow was piled to the station eaves on the north, and the windows on that side were broken in by the pressure. We managed to dig out on the south side, and got the passengers to the nearest houses. Then we came back and went to work in the yards.

We dug the snow plows out of the drifts with shovels, and Bradley and I had our work cut out, getting steam up in the cold boiler. The second day after the storm ended we were out on the line, clearing the track. We had only the old wedge plows in those days, and some of the drifts were twenty and thirty feet deep. It took two and three engines in a string to smash our way through them. It was eight days before I got news of Mary.



Workers struggled to dig out trains after blizzards, as this photograph of railroad employees standing on a train stuck in the snow in Groton, South Dakota, suggests.

She was dead. When the blizzard struck she had locked the children in the schoolhouse for safety. Somehow, in that wind, the little shack caught fire. Then Mary tied the eighteen children together and tried to make it to the nearest house. It was four miles across the prairie.

She fought her way through the storm, carrying the smallest children when they gave out, until they lost their way. Somehow she managed to get them over ten miles before she was exhausted. Then they all huddled together, and she wrapped her coat and shawls around the youngest child and held it in her arms. They found them that way when the storm cleared. They were less than ten feet from a settler's home, where they would have been safe, and the smallest child was the only one alive.

Mary Donnelly was only 17, but she was one of the finest women I ever knew—one of the pioneer women.²⁹ The frontiers bred hundreds of them when I was young, though never one who seemed to me quite like Mary Donnelly. She is forgotten now, and the frontiers are gone, but we still need that kind of woman. I like to think America has them yet.

We got one more train through—three cars of farm machinery and one of seed wheat. When we made up that train I said in plain language what I thought of it. There were a dozen cars of grain and coal in the yards. Bradley felt as I did about it, but we had our orders, and we hauled out the machinery. The people at the end of the line did not seem worried by the blizzard. They took it as a matter of course.

I remember on the way back we carried an old Indian part of the way. He had no money, but he climbed into the cab and we let him ride.

29. In 1938, John B. Powers, who had worked on both the Dakota Central and the Winona & St. Peter divisions of the C&NW, told Lane a similar story. "A little girl that I was sweet on in my boyhood days," Powers began, "was teaching her first term of school in a country settlement a few miles north of Doland, the winter of '87-88 a blizzard come on one day so severe that the teacher and her pupils did not dare leave the schoolhouse in the blinding storm, . . . when a rescue party did reach the school they found that the teacher and her . . . 8 pupils had perished, the meagre fuel supply at the school being [insufficient] to tide over the storm the teacher and her children had frozen to death." The girl, he added, "was but a child herself only about sixteen years of age" (Powers to Lane, 11 July 1938). The fact that Powers placed the episode during the winter of 1887-1888 supports the idea that this incident took place during the children's blizzard. The detail that this engineer was also "sweet" on the girl echoes Jackson's framing of the story and suggests that either storyteller may have been repeating an anecdote common among trainmen after the storm.

When he got off, out on the prairie, I asked him where he was going. He pointed south, and then waved his hand toward the northwest and grunted.

“Big snows,” he said. He put up his hand and counted seven on his fingers.

“Snows,” he said. He counted seven again and repeated, “Snows.” Then he counted seven once more and said, “BIG snows.” He wrapped his blanket around him and started south, on foot, across the plains.³⁰

That night it began to rain. By morning the ground was so soft with melted snow that we could not take a train out. The ties were laid on the bare prairie, with no ballast, and the track was not safe. It rained for three days, turned to snow in the night, and ended in a week with another three-day blizzard.³¹

The hard winter had begun.

CHAPTER IV

We did not get another train through that winter. The snow piled in places forty feet deep on the track, drifting over the snow fences and packing hard between them.

We took out the snowplows and tried to get through. We worked sometimes all day on a single drift, and during the night the wind would rise, pick up the snow on the ground and drive it into the cut we

30. It seems likely that Laura Ingalls Wilder supplied this story of an American Indian man who predicted an especially hard winter as the third in a seven-year cycle of long winters. The forecast is a component of both her autobiography and her novel *The Long Winter* (1940). It is, however, just as possible that Lane’s engineer informant supplied the story, which Wilder borrowed for her autobiography. Even so, while the prediction is the same, the framing is different. Here, the man hops a train to travel south, presumably to find sunnier climes. In *Pioneer Girl* and the novel, the man comes into De Smet to warn townspeople of the threatening weather conditions. Newspapers and early historians documented American Indian residents making similar predictions, adding weight to Wilder’s version of events. For example, the *Redwood (Minn.) Gazette* recorded two instances of helpful forecasts from local Indigenous people in the winter and spring of 1878. Wilder, *Pioneer Girl: The Revised Texts*, pp. 280–81, and *The Long Winter*, illus. Garth Williams (New York: Harper & Row, 1953), pp. 61–62; *Redwood Gazette*, 17 Jan., 4 Apr. 1878.

31. This description, probably also part of Wilder’s contribution to Lane’s narrative, accurately describes the blizzard that opened the Hard Winter of 1880–1881 in Dakota Territory. Rain on 13 October turned first to snow and, with the addition of wind, developed into a blizzard by 15 October. See, for example, “The Blizzard,” *Brookings County Press*, 21 Oct. 1880. See also Wilder, *Pioneer Girl: The Revised Texts*, p. 276.

had made, packing it hard as ice. When we took out the engines to try to get through it, we might as well have run against a mountain.

Once we had four engines on the plow. Bradley and I were on the third engine. We put on full power 400 feet from the drift, and rammed it—300 tons of machinery and all the power of the four engines, flung against that packed snow. When we hit it the plow smashed, the first engine jumped the rails, and the three others piled up on it. Two engineers and a fireman were killed.³²

By the last of November we gave it up. We had got one train through to Bennett, a little station thirty miles from Tracy.³³ When we started back all the people there piled on and came in, except one. He was the operator. He came out of the little station with his pencil over his ear just as we started and Bradley yelled to him to jump on.

“Right, wait till I get the money box,” he said. “We found out afterward that the express company had sent out \$2000 in currency for the little bank that was starting there and it was in the money box.

“Wait nothing—see that cloud? We’re starting now. Jump on,” Bradley called. The conductor was giving us the high-sign, and a black cloud was rolling up in the northwest.

32. The process of ramming multiple engines into a snowbank at high speed, or “snow bucking,” as it is called in the west,” was dangerous work (Sinclair, “Locomotive Engine Running,” p. 404). This story is almost identical to a snow-bucking tragedy that took place in New Jersey during the winter of 1888. The *St. Paul Daily Globe* of 16 March 1888 recorded the event, in which three men lost their lives on the first three of four engines. Cindy Wilson notes that articles about such tragedies were “picked up and published over and over” in newspapers across the country, making it possible that one of Lane’s informants read about this experience and retold it as his own (Wilson to Koupal, 21 June 2021). The story is also similar to the snow removal failure that supposedly ended the C&NW’s attempts to break through the snow in 1881. See *Pioneer Girl: The Revised Texts*, pp. 286–89.

33. Lake Benton, Minnesota, was approximately thirty-four miles west of Tracy by rail. The C&NW, however, did not stop its attempts to get trains through in November of 1880. Instead, the weather moderated to some extent through December, allowing a freight train to chug into Brookings, Dakota Territory, on the day before Christmas 1880. Passenger trains were still running as late as 19 January. The evidence suggests that Lane’s narrative conflates the winter of 1880–1881 with the almost equally severe winter of 1887–1888, which started earlier and did not last as long. In Minnesota, for example, November of 1887 “vacillated between ice storms, snowstorms and sub-zero temperatures. December dumped mountains of snow: 20.2 inches in Moorhead, 39.5 inches at Morris, 33 inches at Mankato” (Ford, “125 Years Ago”). Wilson, *Beautiful Snow*, p. x; *Brookings County Press*, 5 May 1881.

“All right, go ahead. I’ll stay,” the operator said. One or two men called to him not to be a fool, but he shook his head and laughed. “That’s all right. Good-by. See you in the spring,” he called back. We pulled out and left him there, and the last I saw of him he was standing on the platform, grinning and waving at us. We barely beat the storm into Tracy. It was the worst blizzard of the season.

As long as the wires held, we heard every day from the operator. He said he was comfortable enough, tunneling under the snow from house to house and living on the town’s supplies. The last we heard was that he was barricaded in the station and the prairie wolves had got into his tunnels. The wires went down on New Year’s day, and we did not hear any more.³⁴

We were kept busy clearing the line to the east. Trains ran fairly regularly in that direction, preceded by snow-plows. There would be three days of blizzards’ leaving the tracks piled with snow, and then the sun would come out, dazzling on the snow and blinding us. We had to wear smoked goggles to keep from going snow-blind. We would drive a train through, and then another three days’ blizzards came roaring down on us.

January and February passed. In March we made another attempt to get a train out to the settlers in the West, but it failed. In April the tracks were still impassable.

On the 3rd of May, six months after we had got the last train through, Bradley and I were called to take a train West. The plows had been working ahead of us, and the track was clear almost to Bennett. We went out to make up the train, and they gave us four cars of farm machinery.

I never understood how such orders were given, but they were. The records of the Chicago Northwestern still show them, and no doubt, Bradley’s statement and mine are filed there as well.

34. Wilder also recorded that De Smet residents built snow tunnels, although they were short-lived as the wind scoured them away in the next storms. Telegraph poles and wires accompanied the C&NW into Dakota Territory under the auspices of each division’s “superintendent of telegraph” (*Brookings County Press*, 29 Sept. 1879). The railroad maintained the resource through the winter of 1880–1881, repairing the lines as quickly as possible after each storm. The United States Army Signal Corps was also stringing telegraph wire throughout the territory in this time period. Wilder, *Pioneer Girl: The Revised Texts*, p. 290; Wilson to Koupal, 22 May 2021; James Schwoch, *Wired into Nature: The Telegraph and the North American Frontier* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2018), pp. 23–32.

We made up the train, and then I told Bradley I would not take it to those settlers. They had been out in that hell of snow for six months, with no way to get food or fuel. Bradley felt the same about it, but there was no time for red-tape. If we started at once we might make it through before another storm caught us, or warm weather melted the snow and washed out the tracks. We had to act quick.

There were two emigrant cars on a siding, full of food. In those days settlers took six months' supplies. We ran down and coupled on to those cars, and then pulled out.

The plows had reached Bennett before us. When we pulled in we stopped to shovel some snow into the tender—the water tank had frozen and burst long before—and the first person we saw was the operator we had left there in the fall. He was standing on top of a thirty-foot snow-bank, wearing a big wolf-skin coat.

He came down and said he had had a fine time, and killed enough prairie wolves to make a good little chunk of money when he sold the hides. Just the same, he was mighty glad to see a human being again.

It took us two days to get to the end of the line. When the people heard our whistle at last, every man, woman and child who could walk came down to the station.

For three months they had been living on wheat, ground in hand coffee-mills, and a few starved antelope they had managed to shoot. They had raided the lumber yard, burned every stick of lumber, and then broken up their furniture and parts of their houses and burned them, to keep from freezing. The whole town had been buried in snow, over the roofs. The people had tunneled passages under it.

When they found we had brought them machinery, they went wild. They would have mobbed and wrecked the train if we had not had the two emigrant cars. They tore them open and divided the food—the first real food they had had for three months.³⁵

35. This description of the first train into town and the reaction of residents, including the storming of the emigrant cars, appears in Wilder's autobiography and novel, where Charles Ingalls defends the townspeople, saying, "Let the railroad stand some damages! This isn't the only family in town that's got nothing to eat" (Wilder, *The Long Winter*, p. 322). Lane's engineer echoed the same sentiments, suggesting that the railroad bore responsibility. The C&NW had enticed thousands of people to the towns along its new routes, but the railroad had also recognized that these settlers were dependent on the trains "for fuel and food and light, as all were pioneers and had no accumulated stores to

We set out the cars of machinery, dug out and thawed a couple of box cars that were on the siding there, and coupled them up to take back. The weather had turned warmer, and we knew the melting snow would mean floods. There was no time to lose in starting for Tracy. We sent word to the people to get ready to be taken out.

Only one family came. The rest said they thought the worst was over, and they had to be there for the spring planting.

That is the spirit that made this country—the fighting pioneer spirit that drove the railroads across the continent, and followed them with farms and towns and cities. When I see people sit back and grumble about conditions now I have little patience with them. What we need is more of that pioneer spirit that went out to drive our frontiers West, and stayed with the struggle, and won it. That’s the spirit that gave us everything good we have, and it is the only thing that will give us something better.³⁶

Bradley and I took the two box cars back to Tracy and found the Old Man was wanting to know why we had taken the two emigrant cars without orders. It was up to the conductor, and Bradley, of course, but the whole thing made me see red. I was tired of the country, anyhow, and there was nothing to keep me there, with Mary Donnelly gone. I quit the Chicago Northwestern, and started for California.

draw from,” explained company historian William H. Stennett. As a result, C&NW officials made serious efforts to “open its lines and keep them open” and did not totally abandon its attempts to reach the settlements as Wilder and others thought. Instead, they ran snowplows day and night and hired thousands of men to shovel snow, spending “literally hundreds of thousands of dollars” ([Stennett], comp., *Yesterday and Today: A History of the Chicago and North Western Railway Company*, 3d ed. [Chicago: Chicago & North Western Railway Co., 1910], pp. 97–98). Forty-foot-deep snowpacks not only made tracks unusable in the cold, but during the spring thaw, the melt water flooded the roadbed, further rendering the cuts impassable. Due to the snow, plus labor shortages and abandoned trains clogging the tracks, towns like De Smet and Huron did not have train service until 5 May 1881. Wilson, *Beautiful Snow*, pp. 186–97; *Brookings County Press*, 5 May 1881.

36. In 1937, Wilder explained her life as an embodiment of the frontier process that Turner had outlined decades earlier. “I began to think,” she told a book fair audience, “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. . . . I had seen and lived it all—all the successive phases of the frontier” (Wilder, “Speech for the Detroit Book Fair, 1937,” in *Pioneer Girl Perspectives*, ed. Koupal, p. 13).

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On the cover: Based out of Black Hills Teachers College (now Black Hills State University) in Spearfish, the cadets of the Ninety-Third U.S. Army Air Forces College Training Detachment learned to fly using the single-engine aircrafts seen in this photograph taken at Black Hills Airport during the 1943–1944 school year.

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