Historical Musings

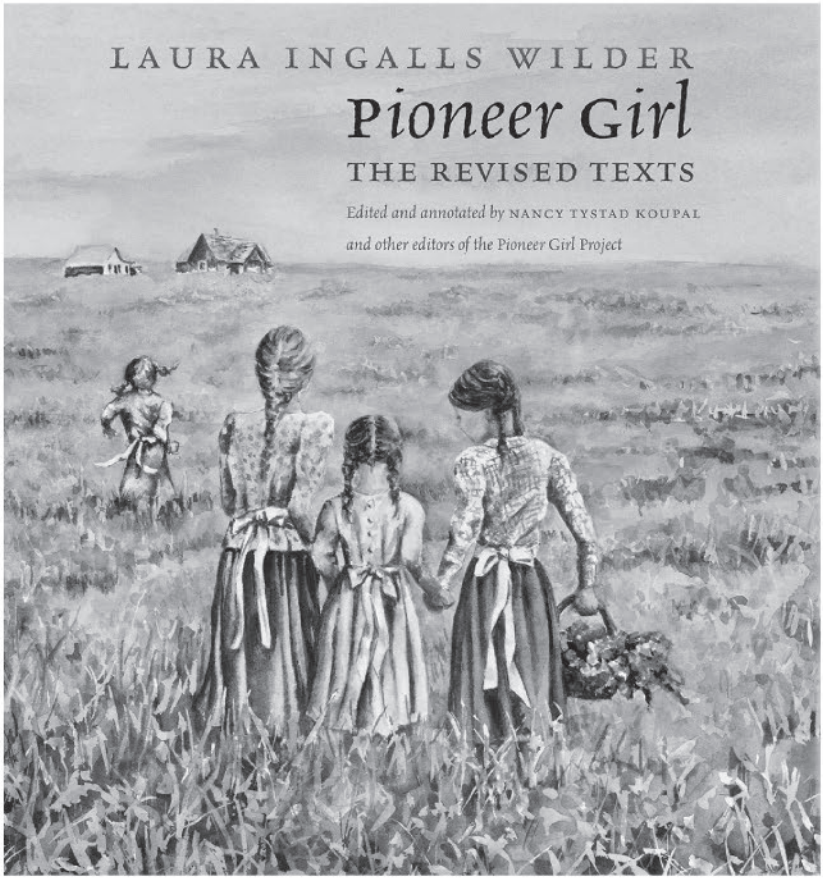
Researching the Life and Times of Laura Ingalls Wilder: Blog Posts from the Editors of *Pioneer Girl: The Revised Texts*

Edited by Nancy Tystad Koupal

In October 2021, the South Dakota Historical Society Press released *Pioneer Girl: The Revised Texts*, its third book in the Pioneer Girl Project series that features Laura Ingalls Wilder's life and works.[1] After Wilder completed her handwritten autobiography, *Pioneer Girl*, in 1930, she gave the manuscript to her daughter Rose Wilder Lane, who began to edit and revise it. In the process, Lane created three discrete typescript versions of her mother's autobiography. Named after Lane's literary agents who tried to market these different versions, the typescripts are known as the Brandt, Brandt Revised, and Bye texts. Between 2017 and the third book's publication in 2021, the editors shared insights and discoveries gleaned from their research into these typescripts and the lives and writings of Wilder and her daughter. The blog postings appeared on the Pioneer Girl Project website, which the press established in 2012 to keep readers informed about its work on Wilder.

The selected postings that follow look at the origins of birthday celebrations, the nature and history of the Big Woods of Wisconsin, the origin of the trade beads the Ingalls girls discovered in Kansas, and the history of African Americans in the West. Some posts reveal insights about Wilder's manuscripts held at the Herbert Hoover Presidential Library in West Branch, Iowa, while others consider historical elements that Lane introduced while editing the revised texts. Small-town rituals in Dakota Territory and Eliza Jane Wilder's homesteading venture there also feature in these small essays, as do enduring myths and educational trends that influenced Wilder and Lane's work on Wilder's autobiography.

1. The first two Pioneer Girl Project volumes are *Pioneer Girl: The Annotated Autobiography*, edited by Pamela Smith Hill (Pierre: South Dakota Historical Society Press, 2014), and *Pioneer Girl Perspectives: Exploring Laura Ingalls Wilder*, edited by Nancy Tystad Koupal (Pierre: South Dakota Historical Society Press, 2017).



The cover of *Pioneer Girl: The Revised Texts* (2021) features Judy Thompson's 2018 painting "Dakota Twilight."

The essays included here are but a small sampling of over ten years of blog posts the editors have shared on the Pioneer Girl Project website. Readers can view the entire series and learn more about the upcoming *Pioneer Girl: The Path into Fiction* by visiting pioneergirlproject.org.

"Happy Birthday, Mrs. Wilder"

Posted 7 February 2017 by Jennifer McIntyre

Today, 7 February 2017, is the 150th anniversary of Laura Ingalls Wilder's birth. It is an important date for readers of the Little House series and for all of us at the Pioneer Girl Project, and it got me to thinking, how did we begin celebrating birthdays?

The true origin of the birthday celebration is lost to history, but we can say that the party started in Egypt, and the Greeks added the candles. However, these ancient celebrations were not like our modern birthdays; they were reserved for gods and goddesses only. It was not until the Romans came onto the scene that the common people began to commemorate their own births. In the eighteenth century, German bakers made cakes popular, and the industrial revolution brought dessert to the masses. Finally, in 1893, two women, Patty and Mildred Hill, created a tune that Robert Coleman would turn into "Happy Birthday to You" in 1924.[2] The modern birthday basics were set.

So, where does a little girl on the American frontier fit into all of this? For starters, I find it interesting to note that Wilder's childhood birthdays could not have included the fiddle rendition of "Happy Birthday" that I always imagined they did in my youth. In fact, in *Pioneer Girl: The Annotated Autobiography*, Wilder's birthday episodes are minimal. During the Ingalls family's time in Wisconsin, Wilder remembered: "After awhile I had a birthday. I didn't know anything about it until when I got up in the morning, Pa played spank me . . . one for each year. Then he gave me a little wooden man he had whittled out of a stick. Ma and Mary gave me a rag doll that Ma had made and Mary helped dress. And I was a great girl 4 years old!" (p. 41).[3]

Not until Wilder moved to De Smet did she experience her first birthday party, given for a boy named Ben Woodworth, and in true introvert fashion, she "felt very awkward." She did have a good time, though, recalling: "The long dining table was set and ready when we got there. It was beautiful with its silver and china its beautiful linen tablecloth and

2. Todd Van Lulling, "This Is Why You Get to Celebrate Your Birthday Every Year," huffingtonpost.com.

3. Wilder was actually five at the time.

Laura Ingalls Wilder celebrated her eighty-fourth birthday in 1951.

napkins. At each place, on a pretty little plate was an orange standing on end with the peel sliced in strips half way down and curled back making the orange look like a golden flower. I thought them the most beautiful thing I had ever seen, even prittier than the birthday cake in the center of the table" (p. 251). Oranges were a luxury on the frontier, as was the oyster soup that the Woodworths served along with a "generous piece" of cake. Afterwards, the young people played games.

"We went home early well pleased with the evening" (p. 252), Wilder remembered.

Generally, Wilder's youth occurred before birthday celebrations became popular in the United States. As time went on, annual birthday parties became a normal part of people's lives. Wilder even dressed up to commemorate her eighty-fourth birthday at the library in Mansfield, Missouri, in 1951.

So, today, let's wish a fine and modern happy birthday to Laura Ingalls Wilder from all of those whose lives she touched.

"Father Pernin in the Big Woods, 1871"

Posted 7 August 2017 by Jacob Jurss

> "Trees, trees everywhere, nothing else but trees as far as you can travel from the bay, either towards the north or west."—Father Peter Pernin[4]

My research has taken me deeper into the woods of Wisconsin. The quotation above is from Father Pernin, a Catholic priest who was assigned to the parish of Peshtigo, Wisconsin, in 1871. His descriptions of the Wisconsin woods are similar to those in Wilder's remembrances. Early in the Wisconsin section of Wilder's Bye revision to *Pioneer Girl*, she wrote, "The Big Woods began where we were, and ran on and on to the north, with not another house in them" (p. 14). As beautiful as both Father Pernin's and Wilder's woods were, there were dangers.

Near the beginning of Wilder's Wisconsin section, she describes a forest fire close to the Ingalls home. As the family looked at the smoke in the distance, they heard a series of gunshots. Charles Ingalls quickly realized that someone was lost in the burning woods and fired his own gun to help them find their way out. Curious to learn more about the forest fires, I turned to the Wisconsin Historical Society's wonderful digital archive. Through the site, I learned that the summer and fall of 1871 were particularly dry for the Big Woods, and fires were a continuous concern. In Father Pernin's remembrances of the summer of 1871,

4. Rev. Peter Pernin, "The Great Peshtigo Fire: An Eyewitness Account," *Wisconsin Magazine of History* 54 (Summer 1971): 247.

reprinted in the *Wisconsin Magazine of History*, I was surprised to read a story similar to the one that Wilder recounted about the lost stranger. Father Pernin told of hunting one day in the woods near Peshtigo when he became lost. He, too, fired his gun as a plea for help and was able to exit the woods only after hearing voices shouting and directing him out.

Finding such coincidences and historical insights drives my research for the upcoming *Pioneer Girl: The Revised Texts*. The hunting trip was not the only gripping story from Father Pernin's narrative. Next week, I will delve into Father Pernin's remembrance of the Peshtigo Fire of 1871.

"The Peshtigo Fire"

Posted 14 August 2017 by Jacob Jurss

As I wrote in my last post, Wilder's description of a forest fire near the Ingallses' Wisconsin homestead captured my imagination. She wrote in the Bye revision of *Pioneer Girl* of "the trees . . . burning like great candles" (p. 14). This description compelled me to look deeper into the history of Wisconsin forest fires. Growing up in the state, I had heard of the Great Peshtigo Fire of 1871, but I hadn't realized it occurred in the same year the Ingallses returned to Wisconsin from Kansas. The Peshtigo fire occurred two hundred fifty miles to the east of the Ingalls home, but news of the fire would have reached Pepin quickly.

Some readers may not be familiar with the Peshtigo fire, but most have likely heard of the Great Chicago Fire. Both fires occurred Sunday night, 8 October 1871. The Chicago fire burned dozens of buildings and killed five hundred citizens. Peshtigo's lesser-known fire claimed the lives of twelve hundred of the region's residents and leveled the town. Father Peter Pernin recounted a starker depiction of fire than the young Wilder did. "I perceived about the dense cloud of smoke overhanging the earth, a vivid red reflection of immense extent," he wrote. "Then suddenly struck on my ear, strangely audible in the preternatural silence reigning around, a distant roaring, yet muffled sound, announcing that the elements were in commotion somewhere."[5] The priest es-

5. Ibid., p. 253.

caped to the river, where he spent several hours dunking his body in the water. By Monday morning, the fire had burned itself out, but the town of Peshtigo lay in ruins.

The survivors of the Peshtigo fire pulled themselves out of the river and began the slow process of rebuilding their lives with the aid of residents of the nearby towns of Marinette and Green Bay. A mixture of elements had combined to cause the disaster. The dryness of the summer, debris left from logging, a few careless individuals who did not fully extinguish their cooking fires, and sparks from trains have all been listed as contributing factors. In any case, the Ingallses were fortunate that, unlike the fire that destroyed Peshtigo, the fire of Wilder's memory headed away from the family's homestead. Readers interested in learning more of Father Pernin's detailed remembrance of the Peshtigo fire can access it online at https://content.wisconsinhistory.org/digital/collection/wmh/id/46445.

In this 1871 drawing published in *Harper's Weekly*, G. J. Tisdale portrayed residents jumping into the Peshtigo River to escape the fire.

"The Beads on the Ground"

Posted 21 August 2017 by Jacob Jurss

Beading takes an artistic eye, an engineering mind, nimble fingers, and steady patience. I understood these facts in the abstract, but it was not until my wife, Leah, began beading that I grasped more fully the artistry of the work. Beadwork is on my mind because I am annotating Wilder's memory of traveling to an Osage camp with her sister Mary and her father Charles Ingalls. Scattered on the ground were beads that Wilder and Mary collected. Wilder recalled in the Bye revision of *Pioneer Girl* that they "found a great many pretty ones. . . . white beads and blue beads and yellow beads and very many red ones" (p. 5). From these discarded beads, the girls made a small necklace for the family's new baby. But from where did these beads come?

Before the common use of European-manufactured beads, American Indians used a variety of materials and techniques to create beads. Wampum beads were made of special shells and used to make pictograph belts that recorded important events like treaties. To make wampum beads, a person trimmed the edges of a shell until only the columella, or central column, remained, which was then cut into sections for the desired bead length. The colors of the beads and the designs created often held (and continue to hold) significant spiritual values. Many Great Lakes tribes incorporate intricate floral patterns filled with blues and purples, while Osage beadworkers, along with many Plains tribes, often include symmetrical and geometric patterns.[6]

The beads the Ingalls girls found in the Osage camp were likely trade beads dropped during the beading process. Trade beads made their way through North American Indian trade networks starting in the sixteenth century. These were often Venetian glass beads made of molten glass wound around a wire. When the wire was removed, it left a hole just large enough for threading. The bead maker then cut the long glass tube to create different sizes of beads. They were often called "seed beads" because of their resemblance to tiny seeds. Later, the "drawn"

6. Lois Sherr Dubin, *North American Indian Jewelry and Adornment: From Prehistory to the Present* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1999), pp. 170–71; Garrick Alan Bailey, Daniel C. Swan, John W. Nunley, and E. Sean Standing Bear, *Art of the Osage* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2004), p. 9.

Osage beadwork from the late nineteenth to the early twentieth century often used geometric patterns for ornament, as seen in this photograph by Jennifer Tiger.

technique increased the speed of this process. In this technique, a bead-maker pulled a rod through the molten glass, which created the threading hole.[7] Following the decline of the Venetian glass monopoly in the eighteenth century, other nations developed glasswork exports, particularly the Czech Republic. Czech beads are shaped like donuts, wider than they are tall. In recent years, Japanese seed beads have expanded in popularity to take a share of the beading market. Japanese beads are often taller than they are wide, leading to more uniform results in some applications. Today, many beaders use beads of differing origin depending on the needs of the particular project they are creating.

"At the Hoover"

Posted 25 September 2017 by Nancy Tystad Koupal

Earlier this month, I cleared my schedule so that I could spend five uninterrupted days researching Laura Ingalls Wilder and Rose Wilder Lane at the Herbert Hoover Presidential Library in West Branch, Iowa. It was my second trip to this amazing repository in a lovely little Iowa

7. Dubin, *North American Indian Jewelry*, pp. 172–73, 589–90.

town of about twenty-five hundred people just outside of Iowa City. Although the leaves carried a tinge of yellow, signaling the onset of autumn, the weather had turned summery, and people were enjoying the Hoover park and museum. As an added bonus, on Friday, 15 September, the grounds were a sea of bright colors as friends and relatives came to watch more than seventy immigrants become proud United States citizens. On that same day, I was privileged to see the original manuscript of Wilder's "The First Three Years," another highlight of the trip.

Archivists Spencer Howard and Matt Schaefer brought the manuscript from the vault, laid it on a research table in the reading room, and ordered me to "glove up." Pulling on white cotton gloves, I gingerly touched the manuscript just as I had carefully explored the *Pioneer Girl* manuscript six years earlier. As with her autobiography, Wilder had written this adult novel of the first years of her marriage in pencil on cheap, wide-lined school tablets. Overall, however, the manuscript, and especially the first tablet, is in much rougher shape than the original *Pioneer Girl* manuscript, with strike-overs and eraser holes rubbed into the cheap paper. In a seemingly helter-skelter fashion, Wilder had appended text, crossed it out, and covered it over with scraps of paper, leaving a puzzle for researchers to decipher. In contrast, the extant tablets of *Pioneer Girl* are clean, with almost no strike outs or false starts and clear instructions for following the author's intentions. Wilder's care with that manuscript compared to the haphazard nature of this one confirms my speculation that the original *Pioneer Girl* is a fair copy prepared for her typist. It is not a first or working draft as "The First Three Years" manuscript clearly is.[8]

Through special fundraising efforts, the Hoover library staff has had "The First Three Years" treated for acidity and stored in acid-free wrappers. Damaged pages have been stabilized, and the three tablets of the manuscript are housed in a specially made case. It is a beautiful presentation. Congratulations to the staff at the library for their foresight in preserving this important manuscript for future generations of Wilder scholars.

8. Nancy Tystad Koupal and Rodger Hartley, "Editorial Procedures," in *Pioneer Girl*, ed. Hill, p. lxv. Some of Wilder's other remaining manuscripts, especially those of *Little House on the Prairie*, are clearly first or working drafts as well, showing the same characteristics as "The First Three Years." Others, like *Pioneer Girl*, are fair copies prepared for the typist.

"Look Out—Locusts"

Posted 31 October 2017 by Jacob Jurss

Even though my research for the forthcoming *Pioneer Girl: The Revised Texts* covers aspects of history not focused on in *Pioneer Girl: The Annotated Autobiography*, one episode that I just cannot get out of my head is the plague of locusts that destroy the family's crops in Minnesota. The family's powerlessness to combat the locusts and the insects' seemingly mysterious departure four years later have lodged themselves in my mind. And so I dig into research of the plague. William Watts Folwell's 1926 *A History of Minnesota*, volume 3, devotes the entirety of Chapter 4 to "The Grasshopper invasion, 1873–77." The locusts that descended on the people of Minnesota left a lasting impression on the state's history. As Wilder described it, Rocky Mountain locusts swooped from the sky, "their wings a shiny white making a screen between us and the sun. They were dropping to the ground like hail in a hailstorm faster and faster." (*Pioneer Girl: The Annotated Autobiography*, p. 79) Folwell quoted another eyewitness as saying that seeing the locusts flying "'may be likened to an immense snow-storm, extending from the ground to a height at which our visual organs perceive them only as minute, darting scintillations.'" (*History of Minnesota*, p. 95).

Imagine locusts as a hungry, eating, chomping snowstorm! Such devastation boggles the mind; yet, while scientists believe the Rocky Mountain locust is extinct, such plagues of locusts continue to devastate farms and crops in other parts of the world. In 2015, locusts destroyed crops in Russia, and in 2016, northern Argentina experienced their worst season of locusts in sixty years. In a quotation given to the *New York Times*, Juan Pablo Karnatz reported farmers seeing "locust clouds that were more than four miles long and nearly two miles high" (26 Jan. 2016). The Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) of the United Nations issued a report in November 2015 that unusually heavy rains in "northwest Africa, the Horn of Africa and Yemen could favor Desert Locust breeding" (www.fao.org). The increasing number of extreme weather events attributed to climate change could bring more frequent and more intense swarms of locusts to these regions.

In the 1870s, the Ingalls could do little to fend off the attacks. Charles Ingalls attempted to defend his wheat by setting fires near the crops,

reasoning that the smoke might discourage the insects. It was a futile effort, and eventually he left the family homestead to find work farther east in order to send money back to help the family survive the winter.

"George A. Tann and Black History in the West"
Posted 20 February 2019 by Cody Ewert

George A. Tann's gravesite in Independence, Kansas, identifies him as "a negro doctor that doctored the Ingalls for malaria in 1870." Tann, who fought for the Union Army during the Civil War before uprooting to the Osage Diminished Indian Reserve from his native Pennsylvania, remains tied to the Ingalls family in popular memory because of his brief appearance in *Pioneer Girl* and *Little House on the Prairie*. Tann's example, however, suggests the multifaceted nature of black settlement in the late-nineteenth-century American West, offering insight into the evolving constraints African Americans faced when seeking political, social, and economic freedom on the frontier.

Tann was among the seventeen thousand blacks who called Kansas home by 1870. The state's relatively large black population reflected its abolitionist heritage. Following passage of the Kansas-Nebraska Act of 1854, which let territorial residents decide whether to sanction slavery by popular vote, pro-slavery interests and abolitionists alike flooded the territory hoping to influence the coming election. A period of violent struggle popularly known as "Bleeding Kansas" ensued. Anti-slavery forces eventually prevailed, and Kansas entered the union as a free state on 29 January 1861, just before the start of the Civil War. Due to its proximity to slave states like Missouri and Arkansas, many of Kansas's black residents were former slaves. In contrast, Tann had been born free in Pennsylvania. His migration reflected the growing status of Kansas as a haven for black Americans seeking political and economic freedoms unavailable even in the liberal north.[9]

Tann's life also sheds light on African Americans' shifting relationship to the medical profession. Tann, like many doctors of his time,

9. Quintard Taylor, *In Search of the Racial Frontier: African Americans in the American West, 1528–1990* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1998), pp. 94–102.

received no formal training and worked on an on-call basis, providing medical care to Osage Indians and white settlers while also maintaining a homestead. A practitioner of homeopathic medicine, he likely learned the trade through an apprenticeship. Such arrangements became increasingly rare as the twentieth century approached, and organizations like the American Medical Association worked to establish shared standards for medical professionals. By century's end, Kansas and Indian Territory—where Tann eventually moved his practice—would require that all doctors obtain a license through an examination.[10] Medical school increasingly became the chief means of preparing doctors, but most of the leading institutions denied admission to blacks. Harvard Medical School, for example, admitted its first three black students in 1850 but expelled them only a year later following outcry from white students. Howard University Medical School, which opened in 1868, was the first to admit students without considering race or gender.

Discriminatory admissions practices at white-dominated medical schools persisted well into the twentieth century, leaving blacks underrepresented in the profession. By 1968, over sixty percent of all black medical school graduates attended either Howard or Meharry Medical School, a historically black institution in Nashville, Tennessee.[11] Kansas's perceived status as a site of opportunity for black Americans also waned in the decades following Tann's arrival, as Jim Crow laws permitted cities to create racially segregated school districts. Tellingly, a black student in Topeka filed the lawsuit that led to the groundbreaking 1954 Supreme Court ruling *Brown v. Board of Education*, which ruled that segregated educational facilities were inherently unequal.[12]

George Tann died in 1909, remembered fondly for his service to the community. Like thousands of other African Americans, Tann moved to Kansas in search of opportunity. By the time of his death, however, new legal and extralegal forms of discrimination constrained black op-

10. Michelle L. McLellan, "There *Is* a Doctor in the *House*—and He's Black," *Interpreting African American History at Museums and Historic Sites*, ed. Max A. van Balgooy (Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield, 2015), pp. 47–54.

11. American Medical Association, "African American Physicians and Organized Medicine, 1846–1968," *The History of African Americans and Organized Medicine*, https://www.ama-assn.org/about/ama-history/history-african-americans-and-organized-medicine.

12. Alwyn Barr, "Jim Crow Laws," *Encyclopedia of the Great Plains*, ed. David J. Wishart (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2004), pp. 454–55.

portunity in Kansas and throughout the American West. Tann's example nonetheless offers insight into a moment, however fleeting, when many black Americans saw the burgeoning cities and remote towns of the West as their surest path to freedom and equality.

"Wisconsin's Big Woods—Where and What was It?"

Posted 4 September 2019 by Nancy Tystad Koupal and Cody Ewert

In *Pioneer Girl: The Revised Texts*, we will be exploring questions that Wilder left largely unanswered in her handwritten autobiography. For example, the Big Woods, which Wilder said her father delineated as "just north of us a ways" (*PGAA*, p. 27), creeps closer and closer to the Charles Ingalls cabin in Lane's editing of the revised texts until it finally encompasses it in the opening line of *Little House in the Big Woods*. Lane's edits enhanced the family's isolation in the forest, but Wilder and her father had been trying to say something about the difference in the woods themselves. To find out what the Big Woods were and where they began, we looked at histories and statewide forest assessments based on surveyor's notes to find that the wooded areas around Pepin originally abounded in oak, elm, and maple trees. Settlers like the Ingalls families cleared these forests selectively to make room for home plots and farms. They released their pigs into the woods to eat acorns and other tree nuts.

The "Big Woods," in contrast, were something else. Wilder's father was referring to the extensive pine forests that began roughly thirty miles up the Chippewa River and extended north to Minnesota, Canada, and Michigan's Upper Peninsula. Both the Chippewa and Saint Croix rivers, which enter the Mississippi near Lake Pepin, became shipping routes for the felled trees, and massive log drives would have been a common sight in the early 1870s, when the boomtowns of Chicago and Minneapolis provided a steady market for lumber. In the next two decades, railroads transported carloads of hewn boards to western settlements like Walnut Grove, De Smet, and beyond. It is a sad fact that in the 1850s, the Big Woods had contained roughly one-hundred-fifty billion board feet of red and white pine; by 1898, only seventeen billion

In this 1872 photograph by R. Steinman & Co., a group of loggers pose among newly cut timber near Rice Lake, Wisconsin.

remained. Tellingly, a recreation of the Ingalls cabin near Pepin stands next to a corn field, a reminder of the extent to which settlement and market forces reshaped Wisconsin's landscape.

"Prairie Girl"

Posted 1 October 2019 by Nancy Tystad Koupal

In our recent work on the revised texts of Wilder's *Pioneer Girl*, we have had some pleasant discoveries that make the job enjoyable. For example, in trying to determine why the Brandt manuscript is missing page 2, we discovered that the Lane Papers at the Herbert Hoover Presidential Library also contain a six-page *Pioneer Girl* fragment, page 2 of which fits seamlessly into that hole in Brandt. Sweet!

Careful perusal of the fragment shows that its pages 3 through 6 are exact duplicates of the same pages of the Brandt manuscript. And, in fact, Hoover archivist Nancy DeHamer pointed out that pages 3 through 6 of Brandt were actually carbon copies, while this fragment contained the originals. Because page 2 fit so exactly into the hole in Brandt, we reasoned that these six fragmentary pages are actually the first edited rendition of Wilder's *Pioneer Girl*; only the title page is different.

And what a difference it is! The name of this fragment is "Prairie Girl." Lane has written "Pioneer Girl" above it and added Wilder's name in longhand, a change that was duly made on the title page of the Brandt manuscript. She also made two small corrections in the text, changing Wilder's passive voice, "sister Mary and I were put to bed," into active voice, "she [Ma] put my sister Mary and me to bed." Such is what a good copyeditor does. More intriguing was the title change.

Had Wilder originally called her manuscript "Prairie Girl" and had Lane changed it? Or had Wilder left it unnamed and objected to Lane's assignment of "Prairie Girl"? Or had one or the other of them decided that "Prairie Girl" was not appropriate for the Wisconsin portion of the manuscript and substituted "Pioneer Girl," which covered all geographical frontiers. My guess is the latter. Wilder truly loved the prairie, its flowers and wildlife, and, I think, considered herself a prairie girl even after moving to the Missouri Ozarks. Later, as you recall, she planned to call her last book in the Little House series "Prairie Girl," giving that title to her preliminary outline. When that outline generated two books rather than one, "Prairie Girl" as a title again fell through the cracks in favor of *Little Town on the Prairie* and *These Happy Golden Years*. So, I lean toward the idea that Wilder originally titled her memoir "Prairie Girl" and changed it to the more generic "Pioneer Girl," but we will never know for sure.

"What's in a Name? The Confusing Case of the Gopher"

Posted 5 November 2019 by Cody Ewert

Gophers are a common sight on the prairies of North America. Well, maybe not gophers per se; most of the critters that plains dwellers call gophers are technically ground squirrels. During my formative years

in Montana, for instance, the quarry during our ostensible gopher hunting outings were Richardson's ground squirrels. This conflation—or perhaps confusion—has deep roots. In *The Discontented Gopher*, L. Frank Baum's 1905 fable inspired by his time living in Aberdeen, South Dakota, the title character is actually a thirteen-lined ground squirrel. Laura Ingalls Wilder, meanwhile, described the same species as "little reddish brown and black striped gophers" in the Dakota section of her 1930 autobiography *Pioneer Girl* (p. 231).

So what, if not ground squirrels, are gophers? Technically, only pocket gophers—thirty-five distinctive species of which live throughout North and Central America—fit the bill. Some linguists posit that the term gopher stems from the French word *gaufre*, meaning honeycomb or waffle, perhaps a reference to their intricate burrows. While scientists did not name the species until 1821, Meriwether Lewis and William A. Clark observed the distinctive mounds and tunnels of the northern pocket gopher while traveling through present-day North Dakota in 1805. Laura Ingalls Wilder's account of her family's stint in Minnesota during the mid-1870s detailed the plains pocket gopher's penchant for devouring crops. She noted that the animal carried away food "in the pockets in its cheeks" (*Pioneer Girl*, p. 76). Indeed, the pocket gopher's expansive, fur-lined cheeks are its most distinct physical feature, hence the "pocket."

Artist Ernest Thomas Seton illustrated the seldom-seen pocket gopher in 1892.

While Minnesota had already been dubbed "the gopher state" by the time the Ingallses arrived, its nickname references neither the animal's abundance nor its proclivity for crop destruction, but rather an 1857 political cartoon. The cartoonist derisively depicted members of the state legislature who had supported a hefty bond to aid railroad development as gophers pulling a train. Tellingly, the varmints in that drawing—and early renditions of Goldy the Gopher, the University of Minnesota's mascot—more closely resembled thirteen-lined ground squirrels.

While referring to ground squirrels as gophers is nothing new, there are important biological distinctions to consider. Pocket gophers belong to the family *Geomyidae*, while ground squirrels—a category which includes chipmunks, prairie dogs, and marmots, to name just a few—belong to the *Scuridae* or squirrel family. By most measures, ground squirrels are more charismatic than pocket gophers. Pocket gophers rarely appear above ground and use their long teeth and front claws—certainly not the most attractive features—to burrow. Ground squirrels, in contrast, rely on their powerful hind legs. Lastly, pocket gophers are active year-round, whereas most ground squirrels hibernate during the winter.

Despite the consternation they cause farmers, gardeners, and, as in the classic film *Caddyshack*, golf course groundskeepers, these burrowing rodents—whatever you choose to call them—play an important ecological role. Their digging aerates and enriches the prairie soil and stimulates the growth of native flora. Predators also depend on them as a food source. For instance, the ongoing recovery of the once nearly extinct black-footed ferret owes a great deal to parallel efforts to protect prairie dog towns. While ground squirrels and gophers continue to be regarded as pests, they deserve a place in any telling of the history of the Northern Great Plains, and they will surely play a role in its future.

"The Enduring Myth of the Great American Desert"

Posted 27 January 2020 by Cody Ewert

Laura Ingalls Wilder's earliest memory of hearing a railroad whistle is documented in the Minnesota section of her handwritten *Pioneer Girl* manuscript. "I thought it was calling me," Wilder claimed of her initial

response to the engine's distinctive wail.[13] In one of the revised versions of the manuscript, however, her daughter and editor Rose Wilder Lane aimed to make this moment more instructive. In that version, Wilder's father uses the train sighting to inform his children of the "building of railroads across the Great American Desert," a grand project indicative of the fact that the family lived in "an age of wonderful invention and enterprise."[14] This bit of exposition reflected the way that many early twentieth century historians had come to view the settlement of the Great Plains. Prior to the devastation of the Dust Bowl, Americans' ability to thrive in this allegedly uninhabitable region was a testament to their pioneering spirit.

Edwin James coined the phrase "Great American Desert" to describe the vast prairies of present-day Oklahoma, Kansas, and Nebraska in his chronicle of Stephen H. Long's exploration of the region in 1820. James proclaimed this area "almost wholly unfit for cultivation, and of course uninhabitable by a people depending on agriculture for their subsistence." Zebulon Pike had come to a similar conclusion following his journey across the Great Plains in 1806, declaring that Americans would have to "leave the prairies . . . to the wandering and uncivilized aborigines of the country."[15] Clearly, these early explorers had little knowledge or appreciation of the ways that Plains Indian tribes used the land. Further, these descriptions had a limited impact, as only a few northeasterners bought into this view of the region. Still, this expansive "desert"—a term used at the time to describe any undeveloped lands—appeared on at least a few mid-nineteenth century maps.[16]

While interlopers from the verdant northeast balked, those living closer to the Mississippi River viewed the region's prospects favorably. Following the Civil War, railroad expansion and a humid weather cycle made the area appear ripe for settlement. Boosters touted the Great Plains as ideal for farming, claiming that the recent spate of favorable

13. Wilder, *Pioneer Girl*, ed. Hill, p. 62.

14. Wilder, "Pioneer Girl—Revised" [Brandt Revised], p. 15, Box 14, file 207, Laura Ingalls Wilder Series, Rose Wilder Lane Papers, Herbert Hoover Presidential Library, West Branch, Iowa.

15. Both quoted in *The American West: A New Interpretive History*, by Robert V. Hine and John Mack Faragher (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2000), p. 160.

16. Martyn J. Bowden, "Great American Desert," in *Encyclopedia of the Great Plains*, ed. David J. Wishart (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2000), p. 389.

This hand-colored wood engraving, ca. 1875, depicts a train of settlers moving west across the "Great American desert."

weather proved rain "follows the plow."[17] In an 1878 report to the United States Congress, however, geologist John Wesley Powell cautioned that the area beyond the one-hundredth meridian—which comprised both the "sub-humid" or semiarid Great Plains and the arid lands west of the Rockies—could not be farmed without irrigation and would see periods of debilitating drought.[18]

Few heeded Powell's warnings; instead, many romanticized the Great Plains as a man-made garden, using the idea of the "Great American Desert" to suggest that hardy pioneers had conquered what was once thought to be a barren land.[19] Lane's edits reflected that celebratory trend and foreshadowed the family's move west to Dakota Territory, where they would settle between the ninety-seventh and ninety-eighth meridians. Belying boosters' promises, however, their success as homesteaders would be uneven to say the least. Moreover, Lane's 1930 revisions came at the beginning of a sustained drought that coincided with the worst economic downturn in the nation's history. All told, the 1930s were a disastrous decade for farmers in the region. Americans, it turns out, still had a lot to learn about life on the Plains.

"'The Greedy Girl' and the Influential McGuffy Reader"

Posted 14 February 2020 by Cody Ewert

In publishing, timing is everything. Take, for instance, the case of William Holmes McGuffey. In the early 1830s, a Cincinnati-based publishing firm asked the famed educator Catharine Beecher—who had moved to Ohio to advocate for frontier schoolteachers—to write a set of schoolbooks. She declined but recommended McGuffey, a Presbyterian minister and philosophy professor at Miami University in Oxford, Ohio. The resulting textbooks, commonly referred to as McGuffey

17. David M. Emmons, *Garden in the Grasslands: Boomer Literature of the Central Great Plains* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1971), p. 128.

18. Donald Worster, *A River Running West: The Life of John Wesley Powell* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), pp. 356, 480–81.

19. In contrast, the historian Walter Prescott Webb would use the term "Great American Desert" in his classic 1931 study *The Great Plains* to argue that many aspects of the settlement of the plains had been misguided. Bowden, "Great American Desert," p. 389.

Readers, were wildly popular, collectively selling more copies than any book other than the Bible over the course of the nineteenth century. In the process, they reshaped school methods and informed students' understanding of the world.[20]

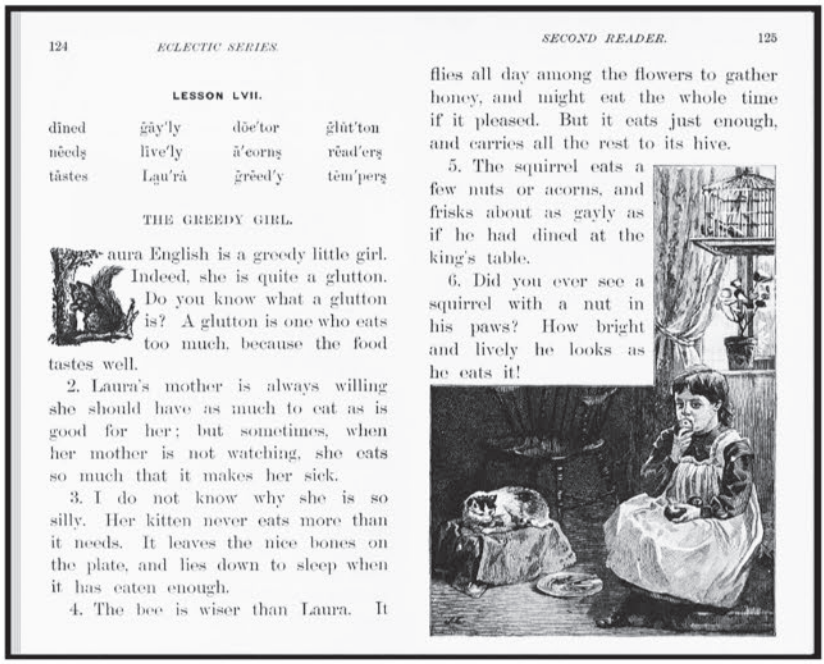
Laura Ingalls Wilder was likely one of the millions of nineteenth-century Americans that picked up a McGuffey Reader. In the Wisconsin section of *Pioneer Girl*, Wilder described being "horrified" after reading a story in an unnamed schoolbook that began with the line, "Laura was a glutton." "I could hardly be comforted," she wrote, "even when [her mother] said the story did not mean me, and that I need not be a glutton even though my name was Laura."[21] The story Wilder referenced first appeared in an 1828 issue of Lydia Maria Child's educational journal *The Juvenile Miscellany*. Child, who became a well-known abolitionist and advocate for American Indian rights, wrote many of the journal's stories, including "Little Laura," which began reaching a wider audience in 1836, when McGuffey reprinted it in his *Second Eclectic Reader*.[22] In that volume, the tale begins: "Laura is a greedy girl. Indeed she is quite a glutton." The author then contrasts Laura's intemperate eating habits with those of several animals, each of which practice restraint and balance their meals with copious physical activity. The narrative ends: "I do not love little girls that eat too much. I do not think they will have such rosy cheeks, or such bright eyes, or such sweet lips, or such happy tempers, as those who eat less. Do you, my little readers?"[23] Leading questions of this sort peppered the McGuffey Readers, which aimed to mold students' characters while enhancing their reading and writing skills.

20. William J. Reese, *America's Public Schools: From the Common School to "No Child Left Behind"* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2005), pp. 30–31; Johann N. Neem, *Democracy's Schools: The Rise of Public Education in America* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2017), pp. 39–40.

21. Wilder, *Pioneer Girl*, ed. Hill, p. 50. The influence of the readers can be glimpsed elsewhere in the Wisconsin section of *Pioneer Girl*. In several editions of the *Second Reader*, "The Greedy Girl" directly precedes a story titled "The Guide-Post," which resembles Wilder's account of Pa mistaking a burned stump for a bear while walking home in the night (*PGAA*, pp. 46–47). In "The Guide-Post," however, a boy mistakes the titular sign for a ghost. In both cases, the lesson was to not let one's imagination get the best of them, a standard McGuffey trope.

22. Julia Maria Child, "Little Laura," *Juvenile Miscellany*, Nov. 1828, pp. 203–5.

23. William Holmes McGuffey, ed., *The Eclectic Second Reader* (Cincinnati: Truman & Smith, 1836), pp. 23–24.



124 ECLECTIC SERIES.

LESSON LVII.

dĭned ğāy'ly dōe'tor ĝlût'ton
nēeds live'ly ā'eorns rēad'ers
tāstes Lau'rà ğrēed'y tēm'pers

THE GREEDY GIRL.

Laura English is a greedy little girl. Indeed, she is quite a glutton. Do you know what a glutton is? A glutton is one who eats too much, because the food tastes well.

2. Laura's mother is always willing she should have as much to eat as is good for her; but sometimes, when her mother is not watching, she eats so much that it makes her sick.

3. I do not know why she is so silly. Her kitten never eats more than it needs. It leaves the nice bones on the plate, and lies down to sleep when it has eaten enough.

4. The bee is wiser than Laura. It

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flies all day among the flowers to gather honey, and might eat the whole time if it pleased. But it eats just enough, and carries all the rest to its hive.

5. The squirrel eats a few nuts or acorns, and frisks about as gayly as if he had dined at the king's table.

6. Did you ever see a squirrel with a nut in his paws? How bright and lively he looks as he eats it!

"The Greedy Girl" was published in *McGuffey's Second Eclectic Reader* in 1920.

While turn-of-the-century progressive educators would deride McGuffey's pedagogical and moral style as old-fashioned, many at the time considered the readers' deliberate approach to teaching literacy innovative. McGuffey compiled four volumes—his brother later produced two more—calibrated to children at different stages of their education, furthering the then-novel notion that students should be separated into different grades. The books, which often doubled as history texts, brimmed with patriotic tales and brief sketches of national figures.[24] The first two readers went to press in the early years of the common school movement. The Yankee reformers who spearheaded this crusade aimed to make a basic education free to all students. They also worked to create statewide departments of education that would unify standards for curriculum and teacher training. As the reformers' vision spread, so too did the readers. Revised versions appeared regularly, helping the books stay relevant in an increasingly crowded market. For

24. Neem, *Democracy's Schools*, pp. 41, 44–46, 49–50.

the bulk of the nineteenth century, the readers were a fixture in schools and homes across the nation.[25]

Faithful adherents continued to buy the readers well into the twentieth century. A school board in Twin Lakes, Wisconsin, even voted to readopt the texts in 1961, a decision that sparked considerable controversy. Around the same time, a "back-to-basics" educational movement began touting the readers as superior to modern textbooks, which largely eschewed the rote instruction and heavy-handed moralizing that characterized McGuffey's tomes.[26] Regardless of whether or not the readers have stood the test of time either in terms of content or function, they hold a key place in the history of American education.

"Miss Eliza Jane Wilder"

Posted 28 December 2020 by Nancy Tystad Koupal

While Nellie Oleson is Laura Ingalls Wilder's archrival and the antagonist of many of the Little House novels, Eliza Jane Wilder also plays a spoiler role. In *Little Town on the Prairie*, Eliza Jane as "Miss Wilder," the teacher, and Nellie as teacher's pet team up to make Laura and Carrie Ingalls's schooldays a misery. As a result, readers find Eliza Jane hard to like. In *Pioneer Girl*, Wilder explained that Eliza Jane "was well educated" but "had no idea how to govern a school. She had no sense of fairness and was uncertain as to temper. What she allowed one day she might punish severely the next."[27] In researching Eliza Jane for *Pioneer Girl: The Revised Texts*, I have had the opportunity to gain some insight into "Miss Wilder." In proving up on her homestead in 1886, Eliza Jane Wilder painstakingly penned three lengthy versions of her experiences to justify time spent away from her claim, including her departure to Minnesota in 1882 after her disastrous teaching experience in the De Smet school. Based on her own accounts, Miss Wilder must have been, at the least, a distracted teacher.

25. For the main achievements of the common school movement, *see* Carl Kaestle, *Pillars of the Republic: Common Schools and American Society, 1780–1860* (New York: Hill & Wang, 1982), pp. ix–x.

26. For more on this episode, *see* Campbell F. Scribner, *The Fight for Local Control: Schools, Suburbs, and American Democracy* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2016), pp. 141, 145–53.

27. Wilder, *Pioneer Girl*, ed. Hill, p. 246.

Eliza Jane Wilder, though typically seen as temperamental and bossy, was also tenderhearted and often under a great deal of pressure from her various responsibilities.

To begin with, Eliza Jane had multiple responsibilities. She was farming a homestead claim a mile or so west of De Smet, planting and monitoring a tree claim farther north, and often taking care of her six-year-old niece, Laura Wilder Howard's daughter. Then, in August 1882, Eliza Jane recorded, "the director of the school board in De Smet came to me urging me to take the town school as no good teacher could be found. . . . In September my sister came and brought baby, other

friends came at the same time. And I found I could not entertain guests, teach school, and attend to household duties [together] with a walk of three miles per day. I therefore rented rooms in town for a time. But at the close of the school term I found my health so poor that I dared not renew the engagement for the remainder of the year."[28]

In a subsidiary account written to the land commissioner in Washington, D.C., Wilder claimed that many De Smet parents "requested" the school board president "to secure my services if possible," continuing: "I knew my strength was failing and feared but finally accepted the position for one term. . . . School, home, and farm work together with exposure to the harsh cold winds told rapidly upon a system that had had no rest from toil often beyond its strength for nearly two years. . . . I closed school two days before the expiration of the term. *Worn out.*"[29] In her third telling of events, Eliza reiterated the message: "When the term of school ended I was worn out. And unfitted for any labor."[30] After Thanksgiving 1882, Eliza Jane and her sister Laura went to Marshall, Minnesota, where Laura and her children stayed with a third sister, Alice Wilder Baldwin, and Eliza visited other family and friends until the spring of 1883, slowly regaining her health.

In her own accounts, Eliza Jane often comes across as self-serving and egocentric, but it is also clear that she was a woman of amazing energy and focus who valued friendship and family. She is the Eliza Jane of *Farmer Boy*—bossy yet tenderhearted. As his older sister, she goads Almanzo into throwing a blacking brush at her but then patches the blotch it made on the parlor wall with wallpaper scraps and flour paste. Eliza Jane may be of "uncertain temper," but she is also the one who tells Almanzo: "I guess I was aggravating, but I didn't mean to be. You're the only little brother I've got" (p. 227).

28. Eliza Jane Wilder (EJW) to J. F. Chaffee, (Dec. 1886), Homestead Entry File #2263, Land Entry Files, U.S. Department of the Interior, Records of the General Land Office, Record Group 49, National Archives and Records Administration, Washington, D.C.

29. EJW to "Hon. Land Commissioner," ibid.

30. EJW, Homesteading Account, [ca. 1886], Laura Ingalls Wilder Memorial Society Archives, De Smet, S.Dak.

"Brown Bread and Coffee Mills"

Posted 8 January 2021 by Nancy Tystad Koupal

When I was young, white bread—the softer, the better—was all I ate, but as an adult I have grown fond of nutty brown bread. As I crunch away, I imagine that its gritty texture is similar to the whole-wheat bread that Laura Ingalls Wilder and her family ate during the Hard Winter of 1880–1881. Of course, Wilder ground her wheat in a coffee mill, and her mother used sourdough starter to make it into bread, while I have the luxury of grabbing a prepackaged loaf off the grocery-store shelf. Wilder's brown bread was a triumph over privation; mine is a matter of choice.

This 1888 advertisement features a coffee mill with a balance wheel.

When Wilder's family turned to making bread from hand-ground wheat in early 1881, almost everyone in and around De Smet was having to do the same. But it was not as automatic as Wilder made it seem in her novel *The Long Winter*, where Ma simply "reached to the top of the cupboard and took down the coffee mill" (p. 194). Such devices were at a premium in De Smet and do not appear to have been standard equipment in every pioneer home. Luckily, homesteader Delos Perry and his family had two: "One had a balance wheel and we took that one to town and they used it for their city flour mill. The other one we put up at home and the neighbors ground several bushels of wheat in it."[31] The "city flour mill" appears to have been in Daniel Loftus's grocery store. In February, the *Kingsbury County News* noted that Loftus "makes a good miller," having turned out "the first wheat ground in De Smet."[32]

Resident Neva Whaley Harding reported that her neighbor Robert Boast shared both his seed wheat and his coffee mill. Harding, whose family made muffins from the whole wheat flour the Boasts supplied, observed in 1930, "Not knowing so much about the beneficial qualities of whole wheat then as we do now we were not so appreciative as we should have been."[33]

That surprised me. Harding was aware of the benefits of whole wheat in the thirties when I was still eating processed white bread into the 1960s? Well, not surprising as it turns out. By the late 1920s, "the modest, ordinary loaf of white bread had been accused of some extraordinarily immodest deeds," such as causing a whole list of diseases including anemia, cancer, and diabetes, as well as "criminal delinquency."[34] White bread resurged in popularity after it was enriched during the World War II era, but today whole grains are once again in the ascendancy.

31. Perry to Editor, *De Smet News*, 17 Mar. 1922.

32. Quoted in Aubrey Sherwood, *Beginnings of De Smet: "Little Town on the Prairie" Locale of Six Books of Laura Ingalls Wilder* (De Smet: By the Author, 1979), p. [40].

33. Harding, "Daughter of Homesteader," *De Smet News*, May 30, 1930.

34. Aaron Bobrow-Strain, "Kills a Body Twelve Ways: Bread Fear and the Politics of 'What to Eat,'" *Gastronomica* 7 (Summer 2007): 45.

"Dragging Main"

Posted 21 May 2021 by Nancy Tystad Koupal

When I was a teenager, my friends and I spent endless hours "dragging main" in my hometown of Mitchell, South Dakota. Sometimes we paired off with our boyfriends, but many times a bunch of girls piled into a friend's car, say a 1957 Ford, or a borrowed family car—a Chevy sedan with no style whatsoever—and drove from the railroad depot on the south end of Main Street to the bowling alley on the north end in endless circles. We might stop window-to-window with friends in the bowling alley parking lot and chew over the latest gossip or drive into the root beer stand for burgers and fries, but mostly we cruised up and down main looking for our boyfriends, or hoping for a peek at our latest heartthrobs, or speculating about who was going with whom. In our little town, even the sheriff and his deputy could be seen in the parade of cars on the main drag, keeping an eye on us. As a teenager, I never tired of this activity. I thought it was a product of the automobile era until I read Laura Ingalls Wilder's *Pioneer Girl* and learned that the practice was much older than that.

Rather than automobiles, Wilder and her friends employed cutters and sleighs to ride up and down Calumet Avenue, the main thoroughfare of De Smet, South Dakota, during the winter months. "With all the rest of the gay crowd," Wilder reported, she and Almanzo "were going the length of the street, around a circle on the prairie when the street ended, back down the length of the street, around a circle at the other end, and repeat, laughing and shouting from one sleigh to another."[35] When transferred to *These Happy Golden Years*, this appealing image led Wilder's literary agent to comment that he "would like to go back to the days when the Sunday sport was to drive up and down Main Street in a cutter with your best girl tucked snugly in beside you."[36]

In 2003, a writer for *Deseret News* in Utah noted that dragging or "cruising" main had "been passed down for generations" as a "staple of

35. Wilder, *Pioneer Girl: The Revised Texts*, ed. Koupal et al., p. 376. *See also* Wilder, *These Happy Golden Years*, 1953 ed. (New York: Harper & Row, 1943), p. 92.

36. George T. Bye to Wilder, 29 Sept. 1942, James Oliver Brown Papers, Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Columbia University, New York, N.Y.

social life in the small rural towns."[37] The ritual, which "involved driving a central stretch of road in loops," had become "a rite of passage."[38] Whether the participants drove automobiles, sleighs, or buggies, the activity itself always involved socializing while driving up and down the main street in endless circles. Dragging main may have reflected the fact that small towns offered little for young people to do. Driving back and forth on the main thoroughfare allowed them to take over public space and make it their own. For my part, I recall my endless circles of Mitchell's Main Street with fondness, remembering old friends and good times, just as Wilder remembered "that charmed circle" of De Smet sleigh riders.[39]

"Is There a Silver Lake?"

Posted 11 June 2021 by Nancy Tystad Koupal

Even before Laura Ingalls Wilder had written the final novel in the Little House series, readers were researching the background of her books. In 1942, the mother of two girls from Kansas City wrote the mayor of De Smet, South Dakota, to ask "if there is really a Silver Lake and a Big Slough here." Aubrey Sherwood, the editor of the *De Smet News*, answered the question for the mayor: "The News is happy to vouch for the authenticity of the books by Mrs. Wilder—that she actually experienced the pioneer days here with her family, on the shores of Silver Lake by a large slough, since drained, living on the claim throughout the Hard Winter and many more winters afterward, though many years ago she and her husband and daughter Rose moved to southern Missouri."[40] The editor sent Wilder a copy of the newspaper.

In the same issue, Sherwood, who would be the keeper of the Wilder legacy in De Smet for many years, inadvertently verified another Wilder story, one that did not appear in one of her books until the next year.

37. Jason Olson, "Dragging Main," *Deseret News* (Salt Lake City, Utah), 21 Aug. 2003.

38. Andrea Tudhope, "Hey Small-Town Kansas, Whatever Happened to Cruising," *KCUR.89.3*, 20 Oct. 2015, kcur.org.

39. Wilder to Rose Wilder Lane, Aug. 17, 1938, Box 13, file 194, Rose Wilder Lane Papers, Herbert Hoover Presidential Library.

40. "Is There a Silver Lake? Asked after Children Read Mrs. Wilder's Books," *De Smet News*, 16 July 1942.

Under the headline "Traveling the Same Old Prairie Road Brings View of Lakes with Expanse Water," the editor took readers over the road that Laura and Almanzo travel on many a summer afternoon buggy ride in *These Happy Golden Years*, published in 1943. Lakes Henry and Thompson, which had been nearly dry through the 1930s, were full once again, Sherwood announced, adding: "If you like, you can drive around the west side of the lake [Henry] by the old road that winds from the west point to the old Grothe farm, and on up on the bluff, and then down into the meadow and south to the road that goes between the lakes. It is the same old winding prairie road. . . . [I]t is worth while to stop on the bluff to look over the lake from this highest bank." A month later, Wilder, who was writing *These Happy Golden Years* at the time, requested another copy of the paper "telling of the Old Prairie Road" because she had sent hers on to Lane and "would like to have a copy to keep."[41]

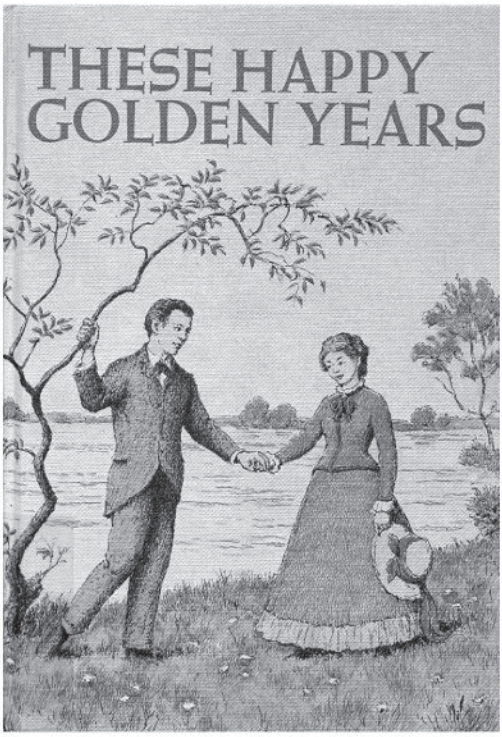
"Laura Ingalls Wilder, Pioneer Heroine"

Posted 18 August 2021 by Nancy Tystad Koupal

In her final Little House books, Laura Ingalls Wilder showcased her independent spirit and almost defiant self-reliance. For instance, in *These Happy Golden Years*, Laura—clad in an attractive brown dress—joins Almanzo on a buggy ride behind the colts. When Almanzo boldly puts his arm around her, Laura immediately startles the horses with the whip, causing them to bolt. "You little devil!" Almanzo says as he uses both hands to get the horses back under control. He then challenges her: "Suppose they had run away," he says, but she replies that there was nothing for them to run against. "'Just the same!' Almanzo began, and then he said, 'You're independent, aren't you?' 'Yes,' said Laura" (*THGY*, pp. 166, 168). In her study of the pioneer heroines of regional fiction, Ruth Ann Alexander characterized these fictional protagonists as "usually quite independent of their mothers, they identify with male activities in homesteading, ranching, and small-town life, and they triumph through exercising their own wits and resources."[42] In her auto-

41. Wilder to Sherwood, 17 Aug. 1942, IIA 59, Box F, Bell Collection, Laura Ingalls Wilder Memorial Society Archives, De Smet, S.Dak.

42. Alexander, "South Dakota Women Writers and the Blooming of the Pioneer Heroine, 1922–1939," *South Dakota History* 14 (Winter 1884): 306.



As the *Little House* series progressed, Wilder's growing sense of independence and self-reliance was reflected in Laura, as seen when Laura rejects Almanzo's advances in *These Happy Golden Years*.

biography and her novels, Wilder portrayed herself with all the traits of this classic heroine of adolescent pioneer fiction.

In *Pioneer Girl*, Wilder is even more overtly independent. During thunderstorms in the summers of 1884 and 1885, she separated from her mother and sisters who huddled in the cellar and aligned herself with the riskier behavior of her father, who stayed outside to watch the storms approach. "I didn't like to go into the cellar," she wrote, "and I wanted to see the storm. I thought I could get to safety as quickly as Pa could. And I proved it."[43] While Laura does not insist on staying outside with Pa in Wilder's draft of *These Happy Golden Years*, she does express "a strange delight in the wildness and strength of the storm winds, the terrible beauty of the lightening [*sic*] and the crashes of thunder."[44]

43. Wilder, *Pioneer Girl: The Revised Texts*, ed. Koupal et al., p. 438.

44. Wilder, "These Happy Golden Years" manuscript, p. 202, Rare Book Collection, Detroit Public Library, Detroit, Mich.