



Laura and Alonzo

**Sugar Candy, Sage Dressing, and Seed Wheat:
The Immediacy of Food in the Little House Books—
A Cautionary Tale for Modern America**

By Karen Ray

Conversations about and comments on food abound in Laura Ingalls Wilder's Little House books and in her newspaper and magazine articles, which precede the publishing of the books but follow them chronologically. From the celebratory pig butchering episode in *Little House in the Big Woods*¹ to the daily grinding of seed wheat into crude flour during *The Long Winter*,² the saga of the Ingalls' struggle for survival on the American frontier(s) provides an object lesson about the immediacy of the connection among humans, food, and the land that produces the food, from pioneer days to well into the twentieth century. The current concerns about the safety of the American food supply reflect the loss of that sense of immediacy and intimacy. Today, most of us prepare our meals—if we bother to prepare them ourselves—with virtually no idea of where that food came from or what happened to it before it entered our kitchens. The result of the industrialization of the food supply is the loss of connection between humans and the production of the food they eat. Even a cursory walk down the supermarket aisles reveals shiny packages of food bearing virtually no resemblance to anything that might have once been living or connected to the land. From that lost connection emerges a paradox; the best-fed people in the world are afraid to eat the fruit of our industry. The e coli bacteria outbreaks of fall 2006 illustrate the dangers of an industrialized food chain and mass transportation of food. Even our peanut butter can give us salmonella. Such was not always the case.

The historical section of this paper falls into three sharply contrasting stages. I shall begin with the second book in Laura Ingalls Wilder's series

J. Karen Ray received her B.A. from Austin College, her M.A. from Louisiana State University, and her Ph.D. from the University of Texas at Austin. Dr. Ray's specialties are the 18th century, women's literature, and 18th century and contemporary drama. She was recently honored at the Hopkins Festival where she received the O'Connor Award for contributions to the study of Irish literature. Professor Ray teaches in the Department of English at Washburn University.

about growing up on the American frontier—*Farmer Boy*,³ published in 1933, and the only book in the sequence not about the Ingalls family and their moves across the spreading American frontier. *Farmer Boy* is about Wilder’s husband, Almanzo, and his childhood on a farm in upstate New York. This story, in contrast to many of the others, is not about want but about plenty. The Wilder family works long, hard hours, as do contemporary farmers, but the fruit of their labor is bountiful. When snow comes to the Wilder farm, the family (the parents and four children, two boys and two girls) and their numerous animals (horses, oxen, pigs, sheep, chickens) are snug and secure for the coming winter.

The end of chapter 19 and all of chapter 20 are a harvest — that Wilder suggests is typical of the bounty of the New York farm. She writes, “The oats were ripe, standing thick and tall and yellow. The wheat was golden, darker than the oats. The beans were ripe, and pumpkins and carrots and turnips and potatoes were ready to gather” (233). Hence, everyone in the family shifts his or her focus to harvest. The women of the family make cucumber pickles, green-tomato pickles, and watermelon-rind pickles; they dry corn and apples and make preserves. Everything is saved, nothing wasted from summer’s bounty (233). They even save the apple cores to make vinegar. The men harvest pumpkins and apples, handling the perfect apples carefully so that they will not bruise and thus will last all winter (241). The boys pull beets, turnips, parsnips, and onions, carrying them to the cellar for winter storage. They dig potatoes and carrots and hang peppers, beans, and peas for drying. When the labor is ended, the cellar, the attic, and the barn are bursting with food for the family and their stock for the winter (251). Though the Wilder family sells all sorts of products from their farm, they sell primarily to local, known customers, and the commodities they buy to supplement what they grow are purchased from friends and neighbors. But the primary focus seems to be on sustaining and sustainable agriculture.

Earlier in the novel, a description of a family Sunday dinner suggests the delicious uses to which the harvest is put. Wilder describes Almanzo’s father’s filling a plate at the table: “Mother sliced the hot rye’n’injun bread on the bread-board by her plate. Father’s spoon cut deep into the chicken-pie; he scooped out big pieces of thick crust and turned up their fluffy yellow under-sides on the plate. He poured gravy over them; he

dipped big pieces of tender chicken, dark meat and white meat sliding from the bones. He added a mound of baked beans and topped it with a quivering slice of fat pork. At the edge of the plate he piled dark-red beet pickles. And he handed the plate to Almanzo” (93). It is worth adding here that the hungry person for whom this mounding plate is assembled is eight years old. Since similar meals are described several times in the book, one is to assume that this bounty is a typical Sunday meal.

Indeed, the entire, extended Ingalls family assembles at Christmas for an even grander feast. Enjoyed by three Ingalls families, this Christmas feast consists of a whole roasted pig with an apple in its mouth and a fat roast goose with dressing. These meats are accompanied by cranberry jelly, gravy, mashed potatoes with butter, mashed turnips, golden baked squash, fried parsnips, fried apples with onions, and candied carrots. And then there are the pies—pumpkin pie, cream pie, and mince pie, enough pies for a piece of every pie for every diner. (342) The point here is the bounty of the harvest and the holiday shared with joyous family members. These abundant shared meals introduce a sub theme for this study. Not only is the Wilder family strongly connected to the land that provides their food, but they are connected to one another through both food production (they all labor in the harvest) and food consumption, the shared meals. They are connected on the land and around the table.

The first of the Little House books about the Ingalls family, *Little House in the Big Woods*, celebrates a similar bounty, a bounty provided by an entire family’s hard work. Published in 1932 when Laura Ingalls Wilder was 65, the book chronicles the Ingalls family’s two stays in Lake Pepin, Wisconsin—1867 (when Laura is born)-1869, and 1871-1874.

Two key stories from this book evoke the legacy of bounty through hard work. The first is hog butchering. The Ingalls family fattened a pig in the forest over the summer. In the fall, they butchered it. The men built a fire with a great kettle of water hanging over it. When the water is boiling, they go to kill the pig. Laura, who is probably five when this event occurs, runs into the house and stops her ears with her fingers so that she won’t hear the pig scream, even though Pa tells her that they slaughter the pig so quickly, he doesn’t feel pain. Once the execution is over, Laura finds the event great fun. Pa and Uncle Henry lift the hog up

and down in the boiling water until it is well scalded. Then they scrape the hide until the bristles come off, take out the pig's "insides" and hang the carcass in a tree to cool. Pa takes the pig bladder, blows it up, and gives it to Laura and Mary as a balloon. The girls are undisturbed by the dressing of the pig. While the men cut the hog into hams, shoulders, side meat, and spare ribs, remove the belly, heart, liver, tongue, and save the head for head cheese and the scraps for sausage, Laura and Mary roast the pig tail over hot coals so they can enjoy the roasted meat as a special treat. Aside from the squeamishness about the pig's death squeal, the event is treated as a grand holiday celebration complete with treats for the children (13-17).

The attic of this little house is a play room for the children, but it is also a storehouse for vegetables that will sustain the family over the winter. Into the attic go pumpkins, squashes, ropes of onions and red peppers, smoked hams, and pork shoulders. In winter, the girls play among the foodstuffs, using the pumpkins for chairs and table, and enjoying the smell of the drying peppers, onions, herbs, and spices (20). These stored foodstuffs and the meat that is smoked, pickled, or frozen outside along with the meat from Pa's hunting provide an ample and wholesome winter diet for the Ingalls family.

However, in 1869 the Ingalls family, feeling crowded in the growing state, moves to a newly opened frontier in Kansas. *Little House on the Prairie*,⁴ published in 1935, reflects the Ingalls family's stay in Kansas, Indian Territory, from 1869-1871. Here the family must be even more self-sufficient than it was in Wisconsin because there is no extended family to help and share; the closest other settler is miles away, and the nearest town is almost 40 miles distant. When the Ingalls arrive, the country seems propitious because it is "cram-jammed" with game—deer, antelope, squirrels, rabbits, birds of all kinds, and this bounty will provide a large measure of their subsistence (49). Pa does walk to town (Independence) to buy quinine, cornmeal, sugar and salt pork, because, as Ma tells him, "you could find a bee-tree, but there's no cornmeal tree to be found, and we'll raise no corn this year" (206), but otherwise they are self-sufficient and exist for the first year on game and cornbread.

For the second year, they plant onions, carrots, corn, peas, beans, cabbage, sweet potatoes, and turnips to supplement the game and

cornbread diet, but as the tendrils are just peeking through the sod, the Ingalls realize they have to move because they have built their homestead in Indian Territory. Abandoning the newly emerging garden, they return to Wisconsin and their extended family (314-315).

On the Banks of Plum Creek,⁵ published in 1937, reflects the family's stay in Walnut Grove, Minnesota, from 1874-76 and 1877-78. The family lives in a dugout on the banks of Plum Creek and tries to grow wheat for a cash crop as well as vegetables for food. For two years in a row, grasshoppers devour both the wheat crop and the vegetables (196-203), and Pa has to buy cornmeal, flour, sugar, and dried beans. They do catch fish in a trap in the river and salt the fish for winter consumption—a winter diet dominated by fried salt fish, roasted turnips, and corn bread. They serve the turnips roasted, mashed, boiled, and raw as snacks. Near the end of the book, Pa goes east to work the harvest for money; on the way home in a blizzard he falls into a snow bank and is trapped for three days. He survives by eating the sugar candy he had bought as a Christmas gift for the girls and on oyster crackers he has bought for their Christmas dinner (330-332). The girls are happy to have their father home, with or without sugar candy; the family bond remains strong even in adversity, but the family's venture into crops as commodity seems doomed.

After repeated failures in Minnesota, the family follows the railroad west into Dakota Territory. *By the Shores of Silver Lake*⁶ was published in 1939 and reflects the Ingalls' family time at Silver Lake, South Dakota, 1878-1880. Wilder reveals that the family had laid in provisions for the winter including salt meat, but for fresh meat they were dependent on Pa's being able to shoot wild game. Since the buffalo had all been slaughtered, the antelope had moved further west away from encroaching civilization, and the wild birds had flown south, game was not plentiful. Toward the end of winter, Laura relates that an early flock of geese flew over the lake. Father took his gun to try for a goose, and the girls got into a quarrel over whether to have dressing with sage or with onion to accompany the goose. When father returns without having bagged a goose, the girls are chagrined at their quarrel (244). Just plain goose without dressing would have been feast enough, but with no goose, dressing with or without sage seemed meager. Interestingly, Wilder tells this story again in a newspaper article written in November,

1916. This time she places the story in late fall, before Thanksgiving, but the quarrel and the end result are the same (Ozarks, 202).⁷

*The Long Winter*⁸ was published in 1940 and portrays the Ingalls family's time in DeSmet, South Dakota, 1880-1890. During the long, hard winter of 1880, the trains can't get through to DeSmet, and the town runs out of almost all supplies. In danger of starving, the Ingalls family survives on potatoes they have grown over the summer and on bread they make from grinding seed wheat into coarse flour in a hand cranked coffee mill (199). Everyone in the family except baby Grace takes turns at grinding the seeds into flour. For dinner the family eats baked potatoes and mashed turnips with pepper and salt, and for supper they eat chopped potatoes heated in the oven. Before winter ends, they have only potatoes and wheat cakes for every meal, and the family twists straw into bundles to burn in the fire (224). Laura's description of the family's feeling tired, listless, and gloomy (227) indicates perhaps just how close they were to actual starvation.

The long, hard winter does finally end, and the Ingalls family spends the next few years in relative comfort as the little town of DeSmet grows, and father earns money as a craftsman. Laura grows up and marries Almanzo Wilder in 1885, but the early years of their marriage, chronicled in *The First Four Years*⁹--finished and published in 1971 by Laura's daughter, Rose, after Laura's death--tells another tale of struggle and hardship. Their wheat crop is ruined twice, once by grasshoppers and once by drought; the trees on the timber claim wither in the unrelenting Dakota sun. Adding to their misery, their house burns to the ground and they lose an infant son. Relatively few feasts are described in these lean, early years of marriage as the focus is more on commercial crops than food. We might conjecture that the young Wilder family loses some of its connectedness to the land when they venture into commercial farming; this failure at commercial farming repeats the Ingalls' family failure in Minnesota when they first tried to farm wheat commercially. The Wilders, like the Ingalls before them, are asking the Dakota soil to produce crops for which it is not suited, and they are not consuming the fruit of their own labor.

In 1894, after several years of failure at farming in DeSmet, South Dakota, Laura and Almanzo Wilder give up their claim and move from

South Dakota to Missouri, the “Land of the Big Red Apple.” Here their lives change dramatically as they prosper in the more hospitable climate and soil of the Ozarks. In addition to helping Manley improve and run the farm, from 1911-1923 Laura Ingalls Wilder writes a column for farmer’s wives in the *Farmer’s Week*, a rural newspaper. After 1923 when Rose Wilder Lane returned home and encouraged her mother to submit her work to magazines with wider circulation, she also published in such national publications as *Country Gentleman* and *McCall’s*. Her columns and articles provide the third segment of the cycle of plenty and dearth—the return to the plenty of the earth. The Wilders also return to a close connection between what they eat and the land that produces it.

In a column written in 1923, Wilder describes Wright County, Missouri, as the “Land of the Big Red Apple,” and declaims that in addition to apples, the county grows peaches, pears, plums, cherries, persimmons, grapes, strawberries, huckleberries, dewberries, and currants. She adds that “we have fruit the year around, for apples keep well in the cellar until strawberries are plentiful, and then there is a great variety as well as an unbroken succession of fresh fruit”(Ozarks, 26). This bounty of healthful fruit is a far cry from the winter of corn bread and wild game in Kansas territory or the winter of potatoes and coarse bread in DeSmet, South Dakota.

In 1911 she proclaims the glories of a five acre farm that can produce enough to support a family and provide a living, as well, by the sale of poultry or fruit and dairy products (Ozarks, 30). Earlier in 1911 she brags of how well their little Rocky Ridge Farm supports them. They have trees for timber and apple trees for fruit. The good grass and clear spring water make the place an ideal dairy farm. They have smooth, rolling meadows and pastures, good fields of corn, wheat, and oats, grapevines, orchards and strawberry fields, and poultry for eggs and meat—in short, everything necessary for a good life (Ozarks, 40). The family, their food, and their land are intrinsically intertwined.

In 1923, Wilder writes of the importance of good husbandry. She contends that a bit of land shows the character of the owner. “Greed is shown by robbing the soil; the traits of a spendthrift are shown in wasting the resources of the farm by destroying its woods and waters, while

carelessness and laziness are to be seen in deep scars on the hillsides and washes in the lower fields”(Ozarks, 47). In 1918 Mrs. Wilder also writes about the wanton destruction of trees in what had once been wooded areas and the terrible loss that destruction brings (Ozarks, 69). This recognition of the importance of human stewardship of the land that sustains life reaffirms the connection between people and land lost in the Dakotas and provides a clue about sustainable agriculture that should resonate in the twenty-first century.

In June of 1919, Mrs. Wilder wrote of the rising tide of divorce in the city, and the strength of rural marriages. She opines, “A farmer’s wife may and should be—I may almost say must—her husband’s partner in the business, and she may be this without detracting from the home life. Meals on time; the surplus of garden and orchard preserved; meats properly cured at butchering time; the young creatures on the farm cared for as only a woman has the patience to care for them; work in the dairy and with the poultry contribute very greatly to the success of the average farmer” (Ozarks,187). She argues that a farm wife “is producing food for humanity and is, in the old and delightful sense, a lady, a ‘bread-giver.’” She concludes with a direct address to the reader, “If you want an opportunity to be a fine, strong, free woman, then you are fitted for the life of a farmer’s wife, to be his partner, the providence of your own little world of the farm, and bread-giver to humanity” (190). The notion of partnership reinforces the connection between people enriched by shared work and meals.

In two articles written for *Country Gentleman*, Wilder described her kitchen and the kinds of activities in a farm kitchen. She explains that such a kitchen must be more than a kitchen; “it is the place where house and barn meet—often in pitched battle. My ‘city’ kitchen was too small for the conflict and so placed that the sights and sounds and smells of the struggle penetrated the rest of the house” (*Sampler*, 138).¹⁰ After she and her husband remodeled the kitchen, it became more than a kitchen; Wilder says, it “is my workshop and office, the place where I conduct my business of canning and preserving and pickling, of counting and packing eggs, of preparing fruits and vegetables for market, of handling meat, and milk, and cheese and butter” (*Sampler*, 143). Well into the 20th century, the Wilder family continued their intimate connection with the

food they ate and with one another. Together they planted it, nurtured it, harvested it, prepared it, and consumed it—or preserved it for later consumption. Almanzo Wilder died in 1949 after 62 years of marriage to Laura Ingalls; we know that for every day of those 62 years, she baked fresh bread for him, for he loved good food, and she loved to please him with it. I am sure that daily bread was part of that intimacy of lives shared.

How do Americans living in the early years of the 21st century compare to this cycle of plenty and dearth in the lives of our pioneer ancestors? Certainly few of us grind our own wheat by hand, and the lack of variety in even the plentiful meals of the Wilder family would not be appealing to most of us. In this age of agribusiness, corporate farms, and a world wide transportation system for food, even in winter we can have green salads and asparagus, all sorts of green vegetables, and strawberries, kiwi fruit, mangos, and pineapple from far away. Indeed, most of our food comes from far away; according to Gary Paul Nabhan in *Coming Home to Eat*,¹¹ “we obtain nine-tenths of our food from nonlocal sources, with shippers, processors, packagers, retailers, and advertisers gaining three times more income from each dollar of food purchased than do farmers, fishermen, and ranchers” (34). Not only that, but a great deal of that food is processed beyond recognition, loaded with chemicals of various kinds, and shipped through numerous hands over thousands of miles. In an article on food safety published in *Proteus*,¹² Joye Gordon of Kansas State University comments that foodborne illness represents a serious threat to human health in the United States. She credits a good deal of this increased threat to globalization, factory farming, and the wide distribution of food products (35). For example, the 2006 outbreak of e coli bacteria spread over 19 states and was ultimately traced to fresh bagged spinach grown in California.

We do have the option of buying locally from the area farmers’ markets. Last fall I regularly purchased green beans, sweet potatoes, red potatoes, several kinds of squash, mustard greens, turnips and turnip greens, pumpkins, onions, cucumbers, peppers, apples, and huge green heads of broccoli, all grown within the area and harvested recently, often that very morning. I could purchase freshly baked bread and pies, but I try to avoid these temptations. I also could purchase turkey, beef,

bison, sausage, and bacon from locally raised animals, but most of that meat had been prepackaged and frozen. However, the Topeka farmers' market closes at Thanksgiving, sending most of us back to the super market with its glossy fruits, vegetables, and packaged-in-plastic meats. We can buy frozen dinners, eggs in boxes, spinach laced with e coli bacteria, burpless cucumbers, pre-battered chicken "nuggets," pure, white, sliced Wonder Bread, Twinkies, biscuits in cardboard cylinders, and processed cheese food. No smells of manure or death squeals from terrified animals disturb our peaceful, plastic shopping.

Many of us will eat out, often in fast food restaurants. According to Nabhan, "by 1997 the sales of fast foods had topped 100 billion dollars a year in the United States, and most of that was eaten on the road." (142). Further, he tells us that the USDA predicts that by 2007, more than half of what we spend on food will be spent on food eaten away from home (143). A drive down virtually any commercial street in any moderately-sized city will reveal the plethora of fast food "joints," providing burgers of every shape and size, take out tacos, prefab pizza, KFC (it's not even chicken any more), sea food that has never seen the sea, and we can wash these culinary delights down with buckets of sodas, which, according to the list of ingredients, are mostly chemicals. A quick reckoning of the amount of fat, cholesterol, salt, and artificial flavor enhancers in these fast food dinners will quickly illustrate why the country suffers from an epidemic of obesity. A consideration of how and where these dinners are consumed—often alone, in cars, or in sterile, plastic diners—might also illustrate how we have lost a connection with one another that once was sustained by shared meals around communal tables.

We have industrialized the food chain, moving consumers farther and farther from the actual act of growing, harvesting, preparing, cooking, and eating the food that sustains us. We have so sanitized the meat products we eat that we can pretend there is no connection between living, breathing animals, slaughter, and the finished products we find in the meat cases at the super markets. No squeals of terrified animals in slaughter houses follow us, and no stench of blood, dung, and guts reminds us that these neat packages once walked on two or four feet. We don't have to think about how many chickens are crowded into a single pen nor worry about how much contamination leaches into our water

supply from feedlots. All is calm, clean, and detached.

Personally I am not willing to go back to raising and slaughtering my own chickens, beef, and pork, nor am I willing to hunt quail, pheasant, deer, and wild boar, though I have eaten and enjoyed all of these meats. Ultimately, I also am unwilling, at least at this point in my life, to give up eating meat. I am loathe to give up green vegetables in winter or delicious, ripe, juicy mangoes. What's a responsible consumer to do? We can, as Michael Pollan argues in the *Omnivore's Dilemma*,¹³ become more responsible and aware eaters. We can encourage and participate in the "slow food" movement as well as in the growing network of local growers who seek to provide wholesome food grown naturally and healthfully. Indeed there is a nation-wide movement toward eating locally-- called the 100-mile diet for the Canadian family who tried for a year to eat food exclusively from a 100-mile radius around them-- and like-minded people are called locavores. The 2006 Readers' Survey published in the March 2007 issue of *Bon Appetit* reveals that 75% of the respondents choose locally grown and produced foods (22).¹⁴ Granted, this audience is self-selected, but it reveals a growing concern about the loss of connection between humans and the foods they eat. The well-respected Alice Waters declares that she knows where all the food in her kitchen at Chez Panisse comes from—she offers local food grown by local farmers all year round, but, of course, Alice Waters lives in California.

Unfortunately, the locavore commitment offers challenges to those of us in the Midwest. Being able to eat a balanced diet in the winter requires the expenditure of considerable time and effort in the summer as green vegetables and fresh fruits must be frozen, canned, or otherwise preserved for later consumption. While pumpkins, squash, sweet potatoes, apples, and turnips may winter over nicely, broccoli, peas, beans, peaches, and other delicacies must be preserved or foregone. When the food staff of the *Kansas City Star*¹⁵ proposed a 100-mile Thanksgiving feast in 2006, they found pumpkin, squash, pecans, apples, chickens, grains, dairy, and even wine. However, note that the proposed feast is markedly missing leafy green vegetables—the Missouri-Kansas area provides a delicious, but limited, bounty.

Nonetheless, we can tear down the walls that separate us from what

we eat, and we can support responsible local growers. We can recognize that we eat by the grace of nature and be grateful for and protective of that grace. We can reestablish our intimacy with the food we eat, the production of that food, and our own preparation of it. We can imitate the earlier Ingalls and reconnect with our families and friends around dinner tables filled with fresh, healthily prepared foods. Though most of us do not long to return to the subsistence farming of the Ingalls or our own forbearers--and probably couldn't do it if we wanted to-- we can seek out local growers, support responsible husbandry, and enjoy the local foods that are available. After all, we are what we eat, and today what many of us eat is neither healthy for us nor for the environment that sustains us.

NOTES

(Endnotes)

- 1 Laura Ingalls Wilder, *Little House in the Big Woods*, (New York: Harper and Row, 1932).
- 2 _____, *The Long Hard Winter*, (New York: Harper and Row, 1940).
- 3 _____, *Farmer Boy*, (New York: Harper and Row, 1933).
- 4 _____, *Little House on the Prairie*, (New York: Harper and Row, 1935).
- 5 _____, *On the Banks of Plum Creek*, (New York: Harper and Row, 1937).
- 6 _____, *By The Shores of Silver Lake*, (New York: Harper and Row, 1939).
- 7 _____, *Little House in the Ozarks: A Laura Ingalls Wilder Sampler, The Rediscovered Writings*, ed. Stephen W. Hines, (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, Inc. 1991).
- 8 _____, *The Long Hard Winter*, (New York: Harper and Row, 1940).
- 9 _____, *The First Four Years*, (New York: Harper and Row, 1971).
- 10 _____, and Rose Wilder Lane, *A Little House Sampler*, ed. William T. Anderson, (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1988).
- 11 Gary Paul Nabhan, *Coming Home to Eat: The Pleasures and Politics of Local Foods*, (New York: Norton Press, 2006).
- 12 Joye Gordon, “The Modern Food-Safety Scenario: Factors contributing to Foodborne Illness in the United States, *Proteus*, (Spring, 2000): 34-36.
- 13 Michael Pollan, *The Omnivore’s Dilemma: A Natural History of Four Meals*, (New York: Penguin Press, 2006).
- 14 “Readers’ Survey,” *Bon Appetit*, (March, 2007): 22.
- 15 Jill Wendholt Silva, “The 100-Mile Feast,” *Kansas City Star*, (19 November 2006): F 1-8.