

CAROLINE INGALLS: A GENTLE PIONEER SPIRIT

by

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After the Civil War, a reawakening in the westward movement began in the United States. Men began traveling into unknown areas and in so doing faced new problems. As the pioneer man moved westward, he had to adapt to an area which was treeless, humid, and windy. Besides having to adjust to a new climate and new surroundings, pioneers also had to learn to deal with the threat of Indians. Adapting to a new way of life was not easy for the men who wanted to find freedom on the frontier, but they did grow to love the plains because they were able to find adventure and the freedom they so longed for. Although most of the frontiersmen found the excitement they were looking for, they also encountered many problems. However, many soon "developed a hardihood which made them insensible to the hardships and lack of refinements."¹

Men were not the only ones encountering problems as they settled on the frontier. As men moved westward, many of them took their families along. Life on the plains was hard on men, but it was even harder for women. Most of the women who went with their husbands to live on the frontier were used to living in secure homes with other families close by. However, as women soon discovered, neighbors were not always living close enough to help in disasters, and the women did face many kinds of disasters in their new homes.

Many women did not survive the loneliness of the prairie, and others could not adapt to their primitive surroundings. Stories of these women and the ones who survived have appeared many times in literature. One such story is described in O.E. Rolvaag's Giants in the Earth. Rolvaag describes the problems of a pioneer, Per Hansa, and his wife, Beret. Per Hansa grows to like the ever-changing plains, but Beret finds the isolation unbearable, and she finally must fight to keep from losing her mind as she faces the loneliness and hardships of the prairie. Conrad Richter, in The Sea of Grass, writes about a woman, Lutie Cameron Brewton, who could not adapt to the loneliness and primitive surroundings of the frontier. Upon marrying Jim Brewton, a cattle baron in New Mexico, Lutie finds few ways to entertain herself. The need for activities and a social life forces Lutie to leave her husband and children for many years.

Although some women found it too difficult to adapt to pioneer life, many women did accept the challenge, and it was these women who brought "civilization" to the frontier:

It was those women who carried the refinement, the moral character and spiritual force into the West. Not only they bore great burdens of daily toil and the rearing of families, but they were intent that their children should have a chance, that the doors

of opportunity should be open to them. It was their insistence which made the schools and the churches.²

These women also appear in literature. One set of books which discuss the pioneer woman and the ways she learned to cope with her life on the frontier is the Little House books by Laura Ingalls Wilder. Throughout these books Wilder describes the actions and bravery of Laura's pa, but emerging through every story is the strong character of Laura's ma, Caroline Ingalls.

Caroline Ingalls was not different from Beret Hansa or Lutie Brewton. She did not understand why her husband, Charles, wanted constantly to uproot the family and move to a new place further west. As a young school girl Caroline wrote in an assignment:

Who could wish to leave home and wander forth in the world to meet its tempests and its storms? Without a mother's watchful care and a sister's tender love? Not one.

They would very likely meet with some warm friends, and some that would try to make it pleasant for them, and appear as much like home as possible, for which they would be very grateful. Yet after all it would not be like home³

The idea of moving from one place to another was not Caroline's ideal. She longed for permanency and a secure home; however, she also wanted her family to be happy and together, so she followed Pa on his treks west.

Because she did live in various places on the frontier, Caroline Ingalls learned to cope with the many hardships encountered there. Many times Charles would have to make a trip into the nearest town for supplies he could not produce himself. At other times, he would go hunting for meat. Because these trips sometimes took days, Caroline would have to act as both father and mother. Whenever their father was gone, the girls would help their mother as much as possible, but it was Caroline who organized the day-to-day activities. Caroline would make sure that the house was clean, the meals were prepared, and the mending done, and, if Charles was not home early enough, Caroline would do the outside chores.

While taking care of all these responsibilities, Caroline also learned that she must have patience and act calmly at all times. Doing the chores on a farm was hard work, and it could also prove to be dangerous. Therefore, the ability to react quickly and calmly was a necessity, and Caroline Ingalls continually set an example for her daughters by acting in such a way. One time, while living in the Big Woods, Caroline decided to do the chores because Charles had not yet returned from town. Laura went with her mother to help her; however, upon reaching the gate, Caroline and Laura found it blocked by what they both assumed was the cow. Caroline reached over and slapped the animal only to discover that the gate was being blocked by a bear. Trying not to frighten Laura, Caroline very cautiously directed Laura back to the safety of the

house.⁴ The situation could have become serious, but Caroline reacted quickly and later was even able to laugh about the fact that she had "slapped a bear!"⁵

Caroline again acted bravely when two Indians entered her home in Indian Territory. Because the Ingallses were out of meat, Charles left to go hunting. While Caroline attended to her daily chores, two Indians entered the house and began looking through the Ingallses' supplies. The Indians took several items, including Charles' tobacco, and had Caroline prepare them some cornbread. Although Caroline admitted to her husband, when he returned home, that she had been frightened of the Indians, she had not panicked.⁶

Besides being an example of bravery for her daughters, Caroline Ingalls also had the responsibility of making a home for her family. Certainly Pa (as Wilder called her father) was the one who gathered the materials and built the houses in which the Ingallses lived, but it was up to Caroline to turn the house into more than just a building. Whether it was the house in Indian Territory, the dugout on Plum Creek, or the shanty by Silver Lake, Caroline cleaned and arranged each piece of furniture until the house was cozy and warm.

In addition to finding the proper place for each item in the various places the Ingallses called home, Caroline added her special touches. In each new home Caroline would make curtains from material saved from dresses or sheets no longer being used, and she always had a red and white checked tablecloth to place over the table between meals. It was such a tablecloth that Caroline gave to Laura on her wedding day because "I thought it might make the new home more homelike if you saw it on your table."⁷

Another object which was special to Caroline and which represented home to the Ingallses was a tiny china shepherdess. The china figurine was always wrapped carefully each time the Ingallses moved, and it was the last thing Caroline put into the new house:⁸

The last thing, Pa hung the bracket on the wall by the front window, and Ma stood the little china shepherdess on it . . . That was the same smiling little shepherdess with golden hair and blue eyes and pink cheeks . . . She had travelled from the Big Woods all the way to Indian Territory, and all the way to Plum Creek in Minnesota, and there she stood smiling. She was not broken.⁹

Decorating the home with the tablecloth and the china shepherdess was Caroline's way of bringing refinement and civilization to the house on the plains. Although Wilder did not always appreciate the things her mother tried to teach her about having a home, Wilder does make one statement in On the Banks of Plum Creek which shows how important her mother was to the family and how empty the house was without her presence:

The house was empty and still, with Ma gone. Ma was so quiet and gentle that she never made any noise, but now the whole house was listening for her.¹⁰

Although Caroline was not depicted by Wilder as being as exciting and fun-loving as her husband, her role in the family unit was, nevertheless, an important one.

Besides wanting her daughters to have a respectable home and refined manners, Caroline wanted her daughters to be able to attend a school and a church. Caroline agreed to Charles' wanderings, but as the girls got older, she reminded him that the girls needed to go to school. Therefore, when the family left Indian Territory, Charles settled his family near a town.¹¹ Soon after moving to Plum Creek, Caroline was able to bring out her old school books, give them to Laura and Mary, and send her two oldest daughters to school. Even though her daughters had to live in a dugout and do without many pleasures enjoyed by little girls in the east, Caroline did not want her daughters to be denied an education.

Besides seeing her girls attend school, Caroline was able to join her family in attending church. While living at Plum Creek, and later in Dakota, the Ingallses became very involved in church activities. The church was more than a place to worship for pioneer families. The church gave pioneers "a sense of belonging when they were far from their own families and old friends" and "it made life less tedious and full."¹² For Caroline, being able to attend church regularly symbolized the fact that "they had settled and were making a civilized life."¹³

Although Caroline was able to introduce a touch of civilization to her family by urging them to attend school and church, she could not always protect them from all the pain and hardships. While living at Plum Creek, Caroline had to be both a mother and father to her children because Charles had to find work in another area of the frontier after the grasshoppers destroyed their wheat crop. During this period, Caroline did most of the chores and kept her small daughters occupied by inventing games for them to play. While this was a disheartening time for the Ingallses, Caroline saw her family suffer even more during the winter described in The Long Winter. When the town of DeSmet was snowed in for several months, Caroline watched her husband and children grow weak from lack of food. Supplies grew scarce, but somehow Caroline found the strength to grind wheat seeds in a small coffee grinder so she could make bread, and she made candles from old grease and a button so the family could read church letters in order to keep their minds off the storm raging outside their home. Caroline could not change the weather or ease the hunger felt by her family, but her quiet strength helped her family endure the hardships.

The frontier was not an easy place to live for anyone, but it was even worse for women if we can believe the stories related in literature and history books:

The wind, the sand, the drought, the unmitigated sun, and the boundless expanse of a horizon on which danced fantastic images conjured up by the mirages, seemed to overwhelm the women with a sense of desolation, insecurity, and futility, which they did not feel when surrounded with hills and green trees.¹⁴

In the *Little House* books, Laura Ingalls Wilder describes the hardships encountered on the frontier, and she also shows a family that worked very hard to survive on the plains. Charles (Pa) was an important figure throughout these books, but without the support and help he received from Caroline (Ma) the stories about the Ingalls family might have turned out differently. Although "the scenes which involve Ma" and "the images which describe her," appear to be "static" and "passive," there is "a positive emotional force to them" and they emphasize the fact that Caroline (Ma) "acts as a binding force in their family life."¹⁵

Many women did not survive the loneliness of the prairie, but some women, like Caroline Ingalls, did because they developed a fighting spirit, often times hidden under a quiet and reserved manner, but nonetheless determined to provide their families with as much of a civilized life as they could.

NOTES

1. Walter Prescott Webb, The Great Plains (New York: Ginn, 1931), 505.
2. Isaiah Bowman, The Pioneer Fringe (New York: American Geographical Society, 1931), 12.
3. Donald Zochert, Laura: The Life of Laura Ingalls Wilder (Chicago: Henry Regnery, 1976), 11.
4. Laura Ingalls Wilder, Little House in the Big Woods (New York: Harper and Row, 1971), 103-106.
5. Wilder, Big Wood, 106.
6. Laura Ingalls Wilder, Little House on the Prairie (New York: Harper and Row, 1971), 139-43.
7. Laura Ingalls Wilder, These Happy Golden Years (New York: Harper and Row, 1971), 275.
8. Anne Lee Thompson, "It is better farther on" Laura Ingalls Wilder and the Pioneer Spirit," Lion and Unicorn, 3 (1979), 81.
9. Laura Ingalls Wilder, On the Banks of Plum Creek (New York: Harper and Row, 1971), 121-23.
10. Wilder, Plum Creek, p. 285.

11. Note: Upon leaving Indian Territory, the Ingallses actually returned to Wisconsin. Again Charles felt trapped and persuaded his family to move again. The Ingallses moved from Wisconsin to Minnesota to Iowa to Minnesota to South Dakota. Wilder, however, does not report all of the moves made by her family. She writes that her family moved from Indian Territory to the "banks of Plum Creek." In this paper, I am following the stories Wilder related in her Little House books.

12. Zochert, The Life of Laura Ingalls Wilder, 87.

13. Ibid.

14. Webb, The Great Plains, 506.

15. Thompson, "'It is better farther on'", 85.