

"HISTORY WITH A HEART"--A FRONTIER HISTORIAN LOOKS
AT THE "LITTLE HOUSE" BOOKS OF LAURA INGALLS WILDER

by

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Donald Zochert in the preface to Laura, his biography of Laura Ingalls Wilder, remarks that "If historians had heart, they too could study her with profit, and sometime they will, for her stories touch so genuinely upon the pioneering spirit."¹ This is a harsh indictment of my profession, and one that has caused me to begin this paper to examine the historical nature of the "Little House" books of Mrs. Wilder, particularly the four that deal with her life in eastern South Dakota, a part of the Great Plains environment of the United States. These four books treat the years 1879-1885 in and near DeSmet, South Dakota. In chronological order they are: By the Shores of Silver Lake, The Long Winter, Little Town on the Prairie, and Those Happy Golden Years. The First Four Years, the next book in order of time, deals with a grown-up and married Laura to about 1889 and is not considered one of the "Little House series." It is upon these books that I will mainly concentrate.

My experience with the Wilder books may possibly be typical of other frontier historians; I simply did not either know or appreciate them. Not until I had finished a dissertation on railroad and pioneer life in Dakota and had lived in South Dakota for several years did I make their acquaintance.

While bibliographies of the western experience are filled with similar chronicles, no bibliography to my knowledge includes Mrs. Wilder's books. As I read these on frigid Dakota winter nights to my then five-year old daughter, I became convinced that here lay a treasure ignored by historians. A treasure not alone for its detail of artifacts (Professor Bernice Cooper has dealt with this aspect) but for what it tells of the broad American pioneer experience.²

It is this theme that I wish to pursue. I am to look at the Wilder books as a frontier historian and what they reveal of the great jigsaw of American experience.

One of the most significant commentaries on American life was made by the historian, Frederick Jackson Turner. In his thesis he postulated that the uniqueness of the American character was shaped by the American frontier experience repeated over and over from 1607 to 1890 (the announced closing of the frontier by the Census Bureau). Particularly he enumerated individualism, nationalism, democracy, and cooperation. Overlaying all this was supreme optimism.³

Needless to say, given the nature of historians and history, this has been debated and modified. Professor Earl Pomeroy has stressed that the successive frontiers did not create new situations and a new America on each frontier, a

view that Turner implied. Pomeroy and Robert Berkhofer at Michigan have shown that the pioneers had as their goal the reestablishment as soon as possible of the society from which they had come "back East." In all respects, the frontier was not innovative but emulated the established ideals of an older society. Continuity mattered more than innovation.⁴

Only on the Plains did the railroad exist simultaneously--actually at times ahead of white settlements. This means an unrivalled opportunity is presented to examine the retention of culture by a frontier society even when challenged by a nearly overwhelming physical environment.

Frontiersmen were noted as being nervous and restless. Mobility, a trait common yet to Americans, is considered a result of the frontier experience of nearly three centuries.⁵

Linked to the mobility, and often the motivation for it, was the optimism of the pioneers. The frontier was an access to abundance. It was there for the individual bold enough and intelligent enough to grasp the opportunity.⁶

The plains were a new experience and a harsh one for the American pioneer. Herbert Quick, a popular historian, wrote about the new experience:

They the pioneers began their last long trek to a new and different world. They turned their faces to the west which they had for generations seen at sunset through traceries of the twigs and leafage of the primal forests and finally stepped out into the open, where God had cleared the fields, and stood at last with the forests behind them . . . it was the end of Book One of our history.⁷

Perhaps it was not as dramatic as Quick would have it, but this new frontier did present unusual hardships. Besides the treelessness and empty horizons it alternated by season drought with blizzard. Each season had its threats. In summer it was hail, or drought, or duststorms, or grasshoppers; often it was all. In spring it could be a late blizzard or tornadoes. Fall could be glorious if there were no early blizzard. Winter brought frigid cold and blizzards. It was a land that intimidated many. A settler summarized life in Dakota as "ten miles from water, five miles from wood, and six inches from hell." Most women seemed to despise it, at least to fear it. Pa Ingalls loved it. Laura was enthralled by the beauty of the plains but in the end fled to the cool greenery of the Ozarks, the very antithesis of the Plains. But this was Laura's frontier, and she loved its freedom and its variety of moods. She found beauty in every season.

Now it was springtime. The Dakota prairie lay so warm and bright under the shining sun that it did not seem possible that it had ever been swept by the winds and snow of that hard winter. In the dawns when she went to the well at the edge of the slough to fetch the morning pail of fresh water, the sun

was rising in a glory of colors. Meadow larks were flying, singing, up from the dew-wet grass.⁸

Summer: All through the lovely month of June, . . . Wild roses were blooming in great sweeps of pink through the prairie grasses . . . The soft morning sky was changing to a clearer blue, and already a few wisps of summer cloud were trailing across it. The roses scented the wind, and along the road the fresh blossoms, with their new petals and golden centers, looked up like little faces.⁹

Fall: Now all the vast, low earth rippled softly in gentle colors under a faded sky. Grasses were golden-stemmed, and over the prairie they spread a coverlet of buff and tan and brown and warm brownish gray; only the sloughs were darker with green.¹⁰

Winter: It was so beautiful that they hardly breathed. The great round moon hung in the sky and its radiance poured over a silvery world. Far, far away in every direction stretched motionless flatness, softly shining as if it were made of soft light. In the midst lay the dark, smooth lake, and a glittering moonpath stretched across it. Tall grass stood up in black lines from the snow drifting the sloughs.¹¹

And how well she knew this frontier by traveling so widely over it. Few American writers have so many monuments commemorating so many different homesites. Eight different moves marked Laura's first thirteen years. Fueled by optimism, the promise of better times and better places, Pa spoke this optimism as he argued for the move to Dakota from the banks of Plum Creek in Minnesota. "Listen to reason, Caroline," Pa pleaded. "We can get a hundred and sixty acres out west, just by living on it, and the land is as good as this, or better." Or, at the end of the winter of 1880-1881 that had battered the inhabitants of DeSmet, Dakota Territory, Laura could write, "as they sang the fear and the suffering of the long winter seemed to rise like a dark cloud and float away on the music. Spring had come."

Pa's 160 acres was a claim under the Homestead Act of 1862. This legislation promised free land to all who could live five years and make improvements on the 160 acres. A settler could commute the claim by living on it for six months and making improvements. Then, with the payment of \$1.25 per acre a full title could be obtained.

But the Homestead Act remained more of a promise than a reality. In the humid lands of Wisconsin this acreage was adequate, but on the dry lands of the plains it was sufficient only upon which to starve.

Eventually, Congress, in an attempt to improve the act, amended it with the Timber Culture Act of 1873. This act provided an additional 160 acres if the settler planted at least one-fourth of the claim in trees. The unfortunate logic behind this act was based on the belief that the wilderness

would be changed to a garden because Americans were God's chosen people and in the nineteenth century concept that progress was inevitable. The means were at hand to convert the Great Plains (known to earlier Americans as the Great American Desert). The fact that the conversion was at hand, as many then felt, was proven by the rainfall increase in the mid-1870s. Science, government, and business promoted the idea that settlement and tree-planting accounted for this change and would assure its continuation. This belief had few critics before the drought that began in the mid-1890s.¹²

In the First Four Years Laura, now married to a young farmer, Almanzo Wilder, must contend with the inequities of both nature and the land acts. Soon after marriage she had pulled from Almanzo the promise to give up farming if within three years he had not made a success.

Manly, as she called him, had already "proved up" on a homestead claim. Typical of many plains farmers of the time he then filed on a tree claim. On this claim he planted 3405 trees; few of them remained by the beginning of the fourth year of their marriage. Tornado, hail, duststorms, blizzards, and drought had done in this option and pretty much all the options of the young Wilders.

But optimism like that of Pa's and inspired by what appeared in the first spring of their marriage to be a bountiful crop, had caused Almanzo to purchase at eight percent interest a two-hundred dollar grain binder. Within the week hail had come and destroyed the crop. In addition, other equipment had been purchased on credit.

At the end of the three years, Almanzo called himself a success "If we could only get one crop. Next year may be a good crop year"

Western farmers felt they suffered particularly from declining produce prices simultaneously that prices for goods they must purchase were rising. Historians dispute this accusation, but in fact the farmers did operate in a market over which they had little control. Thus, Laura could complain in 1886 of fifty cent a bushel wheat. Wheat declined from \$1.00 to sixty-three cents a bushel between 1870 and 1890.⁹

To put this in a time perspective, the Ingalls and Wilders had come to Dakota during what is called the "Great Dakota Boom," a period beginning in 1878, one year before the Ingalls arrived in Dakota, and coinciding with the thrust of the railroads into Dakota. By the time the boom ended in 1885, 500,000 people lived in Dakota east of the Missouri, a 400 percent increase.¹⁰ But in 1885 Dakota and all the plains went again into the dry cycle. This was the year Laura and Almanzo married. Year after dusty year came the great droughts. Soon the dry soils and the ever present winds brought duststorms and prairie fires as described in the First Four Years.

Many settlers finally gave up. One despondent ex-homesteader was heard to comment as he boarded a train to head

back East that "if he owned a piece of Hell and a piece of Dakota, he would sell Dakota and live in Hell."

Two significant results came from this drought. The great farmers' reform movement--the Populist--of the 1890s came roaring out of the Plains like a prairie fire. Then, in the second result farming methods changed in the Plains to meet the new environment. But this is beyond the stay of Laura and Almanzo who have by this time escaped to the Missouri Ozarks.

The reluctance of the farmer to change his methods of husbandry to meet a new environment illustrates the desire of American frontier settlers to establish their old society in the new place. This is a constant theme throughout the "Little House" books. Norms of behavior and values did not change. The church, for example, is a constant presence. That it plays a strong role in the Ingalls family is not a unique situation. In By the Shores of Silver Lake Laura recounted the visit of Reverend Alden previous even to the settlement of the new town that is to be DeSmet. It was winter, and the Reverend promised to be back in the spring to start the church.

The new town of DeSmet, the construction of which is detailed in Little Town on the Prairie, was platted before the first train arrived. By the second year of the Ingalls in Dakota the town had filled with false-fronted pine buildings. A furniture store, a dry-goods store, a grocery store, schools, churches, and a saloon squatted upon the prairie. "The town was like a sore on the beautiful wild prairie," wrote Laura, but it was a town emulating "back East."

Harsh conditions might force the settlers to live a crude life, but this would pass. The frontier promised in time a better material life but by the old values. It was the optimistic dream--the American dream some might say. The old patriotism would be expounded. The old ties of nationalism would be strengthened. The Fourth of July speech that Laura recorded in Little Town was as fervently patriotic as any remembered from the old days. One just could not doubt a nation that was bountiful with its riches.

The Ingalls sang the old songs. A copy of Tennyson's poems is revered in Little Town. And education for the children was needed; schools were always a concern. Even Mary, the blind daughter, must go to college.

The railroad advanced simultaneously with the Dakota frontier. Thus, these settlers could keep more closely attached to the East than any previous frontier in the nation's history. Dakota, then, provided the best example of how the settlers wished to maintain the old ways. No previous American frontier from Jamestown to Dakota, no matter how much effort, could maintain the close contact with eastern society that this one could.

The Dakotas were a railroad civilization. In By the Shores of Silver Lake it is the railroad that brings the Ingalls west. Pa's first job is with the Chicago and

Northwestern Railroad that began to push into Dakota in 1879. The first home of the Ingalls is in a railroad camp. The railroad plats DeSmet and then pushes on west seeding the right-of-way with more townsites and selling the lots (809 in 1881).¹¹ The railroad is the umbilical cord that brings and sustains life in the community. It is the railroads like the U.S. Cavalry that breaks through the snow and brings relief to the settlers in The Long Winter.

The "long winter" was only too typical of one hazard faced by the plains pioneer. Blizzards appeared in these pre-weather bureau days without any warning. A blizzard is characterized by a rapid drop of temperature, followed by strong winds, and swirling masses of snow. A day that dawns sunny can suddenly develop a dark cloud on the horizon that is the first warning of the blizzard. In the time that it takes to travel from barn to house a person can be trapped in howling wind and swirling snow that can so deceive the senses that an individual is led, unseeing and growing colder by the seconds, a few inches past a house into the open prairie beyond to certain death. A blizzard caught Almanzo in similar fashion. After luckily finding a corner of the house, he was surprised to find that the pail of milk which he had a few minutes before left the barn was now frozen.

As an example of the suddenness with which a storm can rise, is the "School children's storm," considered the worst blizzard in Dakota history. It began in the afternoon of a school day in January, 1888. Many children were trapped in the flimsy schoolhouses for twenty-four hours. Several caught in the open died.

The American frontier, according to Turner, created a democratic society because of the abundance of free land. This was a democracy that stressed individualism by the acquisition of that abundance. There was no limit to the promise of the individual other than what he had imposed himself.

To me this is the theme of the Wilder books. Laura may see it with a rosy glow of middle age looking back at youth. Nonetheless, the elements of the thesis are there. Pa is the optimistic individual everready to push out on his own. Ma, long-suffering and regretting every move, tolerates the wanderings, but she carries in her heart the belief in the eventual achievement of a better life for them all. The land will be conquered, and the Indian that she deprecated as "howling savages . . ." with fresh skunk skins around their middles would be Satan driven from the Garden. Ma, as well as Pa, shared the belief common with most Americans that they were a people chosen to spread civilization into a wilderness populated by heathen, and from this, as Henry Nash Smith noted, make a garden.

At the same time the books contain ample evidence of the cooperative spirit. On every frontier of the American experience it was necessary to depend upon neighbors and friends. This was no less true on the plains frontier of vast, empty distances and long winter isolation. There was the doctor who traveled forty miles to help the Ingalls

isolated on Plum Creek in Minnesota. On Silver Lake during the first Dakota winter, it was the Broast family homesteading nearby who provided the companionship. Survival would have been perhaps impossible for the family alone on their claim site on the open plain. Only the escape to nearby DeSmet saved them. Then two young men at great risk to their lives crossed the frozen plains to bring wheat to the starving settlers--wheat obtained from a homesteader, incidently, who struggled between his materialism and his conscience before he released the grain. In the end it is the cooperative venture of the railroads and the church, as well the merchants, that saved the town and settlers.

The "Little House" books belong in the category of such other historical works as Margaret Rawlings The Yearling, Harold Keith's Rifle for Watie, and Irene Hunt's Across Fire Aprils. These juvenile books add to historical understanding, but can be read and reread at different levels. My little girl, now ten, reads the "Little House" books as a story of another girl in another time, but Laura is a girl to which a twentieth-century child can relate. History is living in these books. Adults can read them as an account of the strength and discipline of the human spirit in adversity. A historian can read them as history with heart--a memorable relation of the American frontier adventure and an example of the Turner Thesis operative.

NOTES

1. Donald Zochert, Laura: The Life of Laura Ingalls Wilder (Chicago: H. Regenery Co., 1976), 11.

2. Bernice Cooper, "The Authenticity of the Historical Background of the 'Little House' Books," Elementary English, 46 (November 1963): 696-702.

3. Modern compilations of Turner's work and those of his critics may be found in Ray Allen Billington, ed., The Frontier Thesis Valid Interpretation of American History? (New York: Holt Rinehart and Winston, 1966). George Rogers Taylor (ed.), The Turner Thesis Concerning the Role of the Frontier in American History (Lexington, Massachusetts: Heath, 3rd edition, 1972).

4. Robert F. Berkhofer, Jr., "Space, Time, Culture, and the New Frontier," Agricultural History, 38 (January 1964): 21-30.

5. George W. Pierson, "The M-Factor in American History," American Quarterly, 14 (Summer 1962, Supplement), 275-289.

6. David M. Potter, People of Plenty: Economic Abundance and the American Character (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1954).

7. Herbert Quick, One Man's Life (Indianapolis: The Bobbs-Merrill Co., 1925), 3.

8. Laura Ingalls Wilder, Little Town on the Prairie (New York: Harpers & Row, 1953), 4.

9. *Ibid.*, 47.

10. Laura Ingalls Wilder, By the Shores of Silver Lake (New York: Harpers and brothers, 1939), 129.

11. *Ibid.*, 164-165.

12. See Henry Nash Smith, Virgin Land: The American West as Symbol and Myth (New York: Vintage Books, 1957) and David M. Emmons, Garden in the Grasslands (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1971).

13. Ray Allen Billington, Westward Expansion: A History of the American Frontier (New York: Macmillan Co., 1974), 631.

14. *Ibid.*, 624.

15. Twenty-Third Annual Report of the Directors of the Chicago and Northwestern Railroad to the Stockholders for the Fiscal Year Ending May 31, 1882 (Chicago: 1882), 32.

LAURA INGALLS WILDER

The Little House books by Laura Ingalls Wilder still delight children. The nine books recount the experience of the Ingalls family as they moved six times through the middle of America. Little House on the Prairie is the story of their brief stay near Independence, Kansas. Six of the books tell about the years in DeSmet, South Dakota. Not until 1932, as a 65 year old Missouri farm wife, did Laura Ingalls Wilder publish her first book. The Little House books have sold millions of copies, have been translated into forty languages and provided the basis for a weekly television show. Laura Ingalls Wilder died in 1957 at the age of ninety. "Now is now;" she wrote, "it can never be a long time ago." But thanks to her books, she shares that long time ago with each generation of readers.

From PLAINS TALK