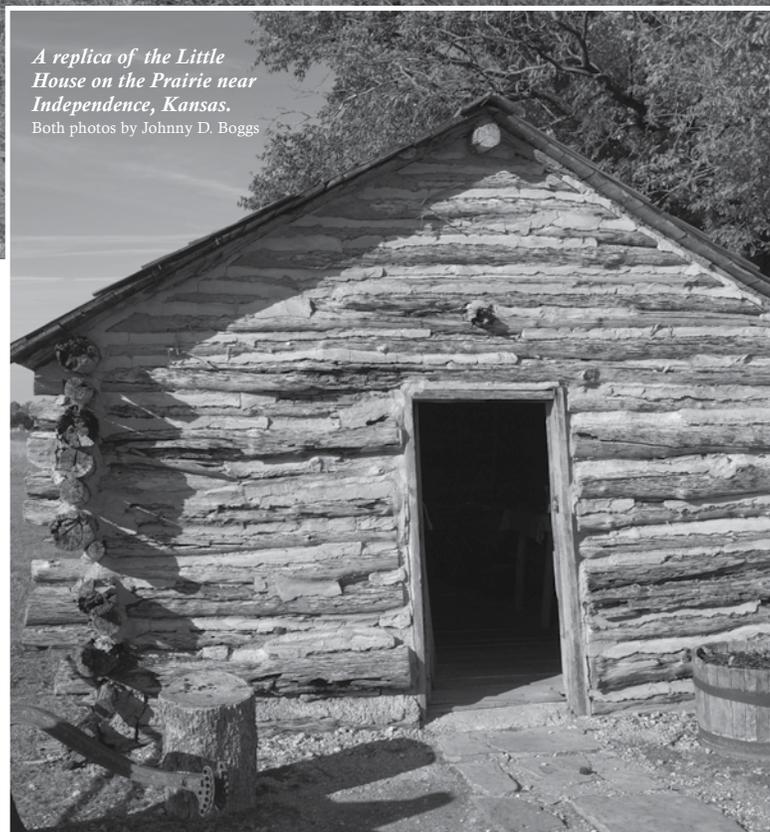


Growing up with the Little Girl on the Prairie

*A replica of the Little
House on the Prairie near
Independence, Kansas.*
Both photos by Johnny D. Boggs



By Candace Simar

Laura Ingalls and I became best friends in second grade.

We met at the local library, where I found her hiding on a dusty shelf between the covers of *Little House in the Big Woods*. Summer vacation stretched before us. We spent every spare minute together. How I hated to return the book to the library. Only the lure of *Little House on the Prairie* pried it from my hands.

My teacher read *Farmer Boy* aloud during third grade, parsing out the story after lunch in our little one-room country schoolhouse. Laura's account of Almanzo Wilder's childhood in New England kept us farm kids mesmerized.

After school, Laura and I endured the grasshoppers in *On the Banks of Plum Creek*, wept together when Mary lost her sight in *By the Shores of Silver Lake*, burned twisted sticks of hay for warmth during *The Long Winter* and shared growing-up secrets in *Little Town on the Prairie*. By the time I reached fifth grade, Laura's name changed to Wilder in *These Happy Golden Years*. Laura remained my bestie in spite of her change in marital status. I cried when the series ended.

Then I promptly reread the entire series, and repeated the process many times throughout my childhood.

Obviously, I wasn't her only fan. More than 41 million of Laura Ingalls Wilder's books have sold since *Little House in the Big Woods* was first published with Harper Brothers of New York in 1932. Michael Landon made her an American icon with his 1970s television series, *Little House on the Prairie*, set in Walnut Grove, Minnesota. She lives on in reruns.

You can imagine my surprise



Caroline and Charles Ingalls Wikimedia Commons



Laura Ingalls Wilder Wikimedia Commons



Almanzo Wilder Wikimedia Commons



Carrie, Mary and Laura Ingalls Wikimedia Commons

when shortly after our marriage, my husband casually mentioned that his grandmother, Mabel Abby Ingalls, was Laura's second cousin. I'm still impressed.

Laura Ingalls Wilder was born on February 6, 1867, 150 years ago this month, to Charles and Caroline Ingalls in a log cabin near Pepin, Wisconsin. Her father was an unsettled person,

dragging his family across Minnesota, Kansas, South Dakota and Iowa during those early years after the Civil War when the Homestead Act of 1862 made land acquisition possible for people without money.

In spite of her father's good intentions and heroic efforts, Laura's childhood was spent in almost constant upheaval. Crop failures, grasshopper



Laura Ingalls Wilder and Almanzo Wilder are buried in Mansfield, Missouri. Johnny D. Boggs

February 13, 1857: Almanzo Wilder is born on the family farm near Malone, New York.

February 1, 1860: Charles Ingalls and Caroline Quiner marry in Concord, Wisconsin.

May 20, 1862: President Abraham Lincoln signs the Homestead Act.

1864: Congress approves the building of a transcontinental Northern Pacific Railway.

January 10, 1865: Mary Ingalls is born in Pepin, Wisconsin.

April 9, 1865: Robert E. Lee surrenders to Ulysses S. Grant, effectively ending the Civil War.

February 7, 1867: Laura Ingalls is born in Pepin, Wisconsin.

1869: Ingalls family moves to Kansas.

1870: The Wilder family leaves New York and settles in Spring Valley, Minnesota.

August 3, 1870: Carrie Ingalls is born in Montgomery County, Kansas.

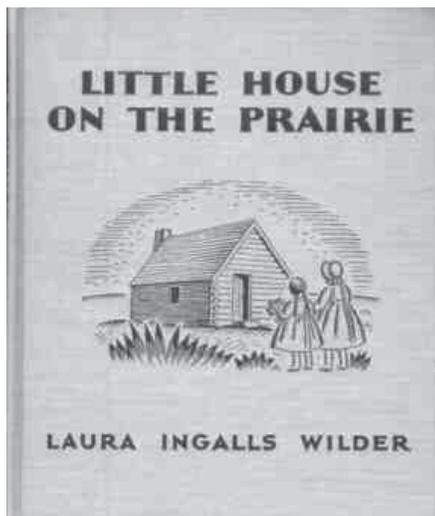
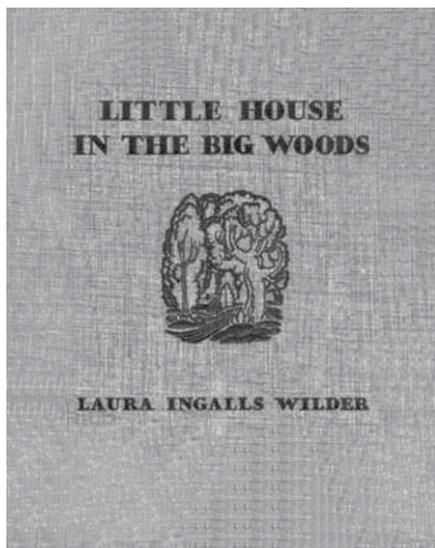
May 1871: Ingalls family returns to Pepin, Wisconsin.

June 1872: Northern Pacific tracks reach Fargo, Dakota Territory.

September 18, 1873: Jay Cooke and Company closes, touching off the Panic of 1873.

Spring 1874: Ingalls family moves to near Walnut Grove, Minnesota.

November 1, 1874: Freddie Ingalls is born in Walnut Grove, Minnesota.



infestations, Indian treaties, deaths and episodes of illness prompted Charles Ingalls to attempt numerous start-overs in search of a better life. Caroline Ingalls followed her husband from one place to the other and struggled to raise their children to be God-fearing and well-mannered. The children were mostly self-educated or educated by their parents. They attended church when one was available or learned Bible verses and sang hymns as a family when church wasn't an option.

They learned resilience and self-reliance.

Laura Ingalls needed self-reliance and determination. She began teaching school before she was 16 in order to pay for her sister to attend The Iowa College for the Blind, an expense impossible for their parents to meet. No money was available for Laura to further her education during such hard times.

Instead, she married Almanzo Wilder on August 25, 1885, in De Smet, South Dakota, at a Congregational Church. Laura quit teaching to help Almanzo on their claim. Their daughter, Rose, made her appearance in the winter of 1886. Almanzo quipped that a rose in winter was very dear. An infant son survived only two weeks in August 1889. Not long afterwards, diphtheria left Almanzo partially paralyzed. Almanzo returned to farm work too soon when drought threatened his tree claim. He suffered a stroke. Although he recovered from the paralysis, he struggled with crippled feet for the rest of his life.

Drought took their crops, and their house burned to the ground. Pa Ingalls helped them build a small shanty to get by, but the lingering effects of Almanzo's illness forced them to make a difficult decision. They determined to give up wheat farming and leave the frigid plains.

The Wilders moved first to Spring Valley, Minnesota, where they stayed with the Wilder family and tried to regain their strength. Then they made a near-disastrous move to Westville, Florida. Neither climate agreed with Almanzo.

Penniless and discouraged, they returned to De Smet, South Dakota, in 1892. Laura took a sewing job and

Almanzo did carpentry. In July 1894, funded with \$100 saved from Laura's sewing money, they traveled by covered wagon to a 40-acre piece of land in Mansfield, Missouri. Laura documented the trip in a book titled *On the Way Home*.

Laura and Almanzo vowed to stay put in Missouri. Rocky Ridge Farm remained their home for the rest of their lives.

Almanzo's family purchased a little house in Mansfield where Laura and Almanzo could live while they cleared their land and built a house. They generously gave the deed to Laura and Almanzo. Together, Laura and Almanzo planted 400 apple trees, cleared the land and sold firewood to town people. Then they built a house and barn.

It took seven years for the trees to bear apples. They milked a cow, raised poultry and sold their products to the local store. Laura creatively planned her kitchen, managed farm



Laura Ingalls Wilder wrote her "Little House" books at her home in Mansfield, Missouri. Johnny D. Boggs

June 25-26, 1876: Battle of the Little Big Horn in Montana.

August 27, 1876: Freddie Ingalls dies and is buried in Wabasha County, Minnesota.

Fall 1876: Ingalls family moves to Burr Oak, Iowa.

May 23, 1877: Grace Ingalls is born in Burr Oak, Iowa.

1879: Almanzo Wilder, brother Royal and sister Eliza Jane move to Dakota Territory.

February 1879: Fever leaves Mary Ingalls blind.

May 24, 1879: Frederick Billings takes over the Northern Pacific, beginning a reorganization and new railroad construction as the U.S. economy rebounds.

September 9, 1879: Ingalls family moves to De Smet, Dakota Territory.

November 23, 1881: Mary Ingalls enrolls in College for the Blind in Vinton, Iowa.

December 20, 1882: Laura Ingalls begins teaching school.

August 25, 1885: Laura Ingalls marries Almanzo Wilder in De Smet, Dakota Territory.

December 5, 1886: Rose Wilder is born in De Smet, Dakota Territory.

Spring 1888: Diphtheria strikes the Wilders, leaving Almanzo temporarily paralyzed. He will need a cane to walk.



A view of De Smet, South Dakota, from the courthouse, circa 1912. Library of Congress

chores and struggled to make their living arrangements more convenient. Somehow they got by.

Laura began writing for the *Missouri Ruralist* in 1912 as a way to supplement their meager income. She served as columnist and home editor and enjoyed sharing ideas for women to improve their rural lives and bring efficiency to everyday farm tasks. She wrote about planning Rocky Ridge Farm in the January 1925 issue of *Country Gentlemen*. Visitors to their home, now a museum in Mansfield, still see the kitchen with orderly cupboards that conceal milk buckets, bread bowls and cheese-making equipment.

Women's groups began asking Laura to speak at their meetings. She traveled across Missouri, lecturing about growing poultry, making housekeeping more convenient and ways to make a living on a small farm.

About this same time, Laura began penciling her childhood experiences on Big Chief school tablets. The 1929 Crash became her impetus to write books that might supplement their income. With the help of her daughter and only living child, Rose Wilder Lane, these early scribbles became Laura's beloved series of children's

books.

Rose, a reporter for *The San Francisco Bulletin* and an accomplished author, had published *Henry Ford's Own Story* (pre-1923), *The Making of Herbert Hoover* (1920) and *Let the Hurricane Roar* (1932). Rose wrote about the gritty details of pioneer life but saw potential in Laura's hand-written stories. Rose encouraged her mother to seek publication as a children's writer. Rose spent



Rose Wilder Lane Wikimedia Commons

the next 50 years as her mother's editor, watching her mother's success far exceed her own.

Laura's first attempt at publishing an autobiography titled *Pioneer Girl* was rejected by publishers. Determined to succeed, Laura spent several years reworking her manuscript. She switched to third person and changed the title. Rose edited her mother's work. Finally *Little House in the Big Woods* was published with Harper Brothers of New York in 1932 and was a Junior Literary Guild selection. *Little House on the Prairie* was recognized as the 1938 ALA Newberry Honor Book as was *These Happy Golden Years* in 1944.

Laura's nine-book series puts a mostly positive spin on her pioneer experiences, although she describes her early years as "full of sunshine and shadow." She left out the heartbreaking parts of her childhood because she felt young readers should not be overburdened with sorrow. Laura omitted the death of her baby brother, Frederick, which precipitated yet another move to Burr Oak, Iowa, in 1876. She also left out Caroline Ingalls's brush with a near-fatal illness. She minimized the grasshopper

August 12, 1888: The Wilders' unnamed son, 12 days old, dies in De Smet, Dakota Territory.

November 2, 1889: North Dakota and South Dakota are granted statehood.

1890: "[T]here can hardly be said to be a frontier line" in America anymore, the U.S. Census superintendent says.

1891: The Wilders move to Westville, Florida, hoping the warmer climate will help Almanzo recover.

1892: The Wilders return to De Smet, South Dakota.

July 17, 1894: The Wilders move to Mansfield, Missouri.

June 8, 1902: Charles Ingalls dies in De Smet, South Dakota.

March 1909: Rose Wilder marries Gillette Lane.

1918: Rose and Gillette Lane divorce.

April 24, 1920: Caroline Ingalls dies in De Smet, South Dakota.

October 20, 1928: Mary Ingalls dies in De Smet, South Dakota.

1932: Rose Wilder Lane's novel *Let the Hurricane Roar* is published.

1932: *Little House in the Big Woods* is published.

1933: *Farmer Boy* is published.

1935: *Little House on the Prairie* is published.

1937: *On the Banks of Plum Creek* is published.

1939: *By the Shores of Silver Lake* is published.



infestation that made them leave Plum Creek and did not dwell on the sadness of Mary's blindness. Instead she focused on Pa's fiddle music, his positive attitude about life and the need to persevere through all problems.

Almanzo Wilder died in 1949. Laura remained alone on Rocky Ridge Farm, spending her final years corresponding with young readers, tending her flowers and orchards and working on early drafts of what would become *First Four Years*. Her series was reissued in 1953 with new illustrations by Garth Williams. In 1954 Laura was awarded the first Laura Ingalls Wilder Award. She died of heart failure at Rocky Ridge Farm on February 10, 1957.

First Four Years, published in 1971 after Laura and Rose's deaths, bears striking resemblance to Rose Wilder Lane's, *Let the Hurricane Roar*. In *First Four Years*, the harsh realities of frontier living are portrayed more vividly than in her earlier work and speculation continues as to how much of it was actually written by Laura. However, it stands as the ninth and final volume of the "Little House Series."

Laura Ingalls Wilder made provisions in her will for future royalties to be given to a Missouri library. Instead,



Replica of the Ingalls home at the homestead in De Smet, South Dakota. Johnny D. Boggs

Rose Wilder Lane changed the royalties to her name after her mother's death and left future royalties to a young friend. Later legal battles named an estate worth \$100 million. The library settled for less than \$1 million in 1999.

Laura Ingalls Wilder lived during a time of westward expansion. Her explicit memories of life as a pioneer girl speak volumes about U.S. history. At that time, women were without voice and children were seen and not heard. Yet somehow Laura's voice continues to ring out through the years,

speaking of the realities of pioneer life and making readers around the world understand and remember.

I made sure our children became friends with Laura Ingalls at a young age, and my grandchildren proudly acknowledge their blood relationship to the Ingalls family. Laura Ingalls Wilder bore witness to her times and inspired writers (including me) to write about their experiences. Her contribution to American literature cannot be measured.

Happy Birthday, Laura Ingalls Wilder. I'm so glad we met.

1940: *The Long Winter* is published.

November 10, 1941: Grace Ingalls Dow dies in De Smet, South Dakota.

1943: *Little Town on the Prairie* and *These Happy Golden Years* are published.

June 2, 1946: Carrie Ingalls Swanzey dies in Rapid City, South Dakota, and is later buried in De Smet.

October 23, 1949: Almanzo Wilder dies in Mansfield, Missouri.

October 14, 1953: Garth Williams-illustrated editions of the "Little House" series are published.

February 10, 1957: Laura Ingalls Wilder dies in Mansfield, Missouri.

October 30, 1968: Rose Wilder Lane dies in Mansfield, Missouri.

1971: *The First Four Years* is published.

March 30, 1974: *Little House on the Prairie*, a TV movie/pilot, premieres on NBC.

September 11, 1974: The first episode of *Little House on the Prairie*, titled "A Harvest of Friends," airs on NBC.

March 21, 1983: *Little House on the Prairie* airs its last original episode, ending a nine-season run.

November 2014: Laura Ingalls Wilder's *Pioneer Girl: The Annotated Biography*, edited by Pamela Smith Hill, is published.



Wilder sites in the West

All photographs by Johnny D. Boggs

By Candace Simar

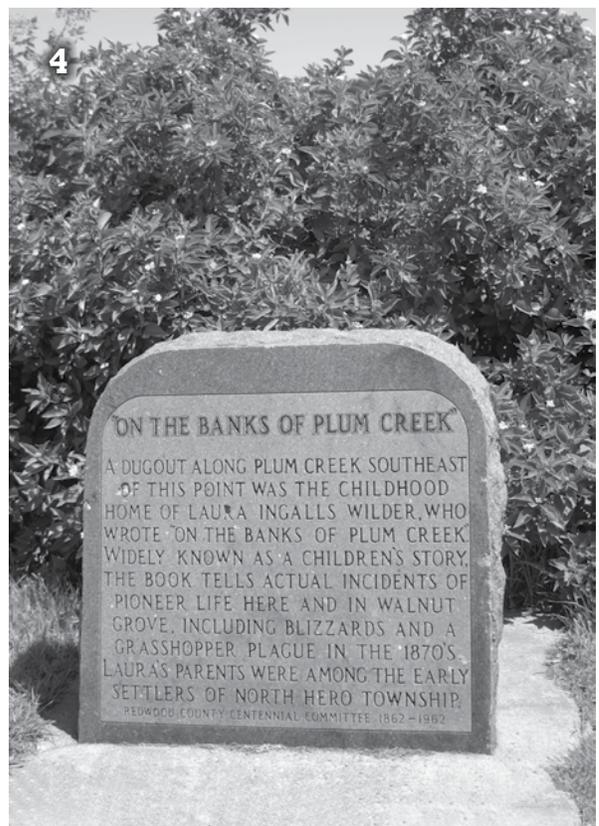
Visiting the historical sites linked with the “Little House” series makes the stories of Laura Ingalls Wilder come alive. Traveling from her birthplace in Pepin, Wisconsin, to her resting place in Mansfield, Missouri, will deepen an understanding of not only her life but also the history of her times.

1. Laura Ingalls Wilder’s birthplace: Near Stockholm, Wisconsin, a re-creation of the log cabin from *Little House in the Big Woods* – The Little House Wayside Cabin – sits on land once owned by the Ingalls family.

2. Laura Ingalls Wilder Museum: This museum in Pepin, Wisconsin, pays tribute to Laura’s birthplace. Pepin also plays host to the family-oriented Laura Ingalls Wilder Days on the second full weekend in September.

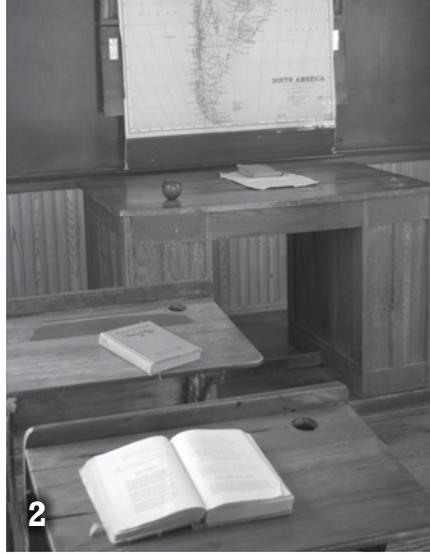
3. Little House on the Prairie Museum: Near Independence, Kansas. See a cabin similar to the one where the Ingalls family lived on the Osage Diminished Reserve. A well dug by Charles Ingalls still remains on the property, along with a one-room schoolhouse and a post office.

4. Ingalls Dugout Site: Visit the location of the Ingalls farmstead, depicted in *On the Banks of Plum Creek*, near Walnut Grove, Minnesota. The site is on private property, but the owners allow visitors (\$5 per car, \$30 per tour bus).





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See the house planned and built by Laura and Almanzo, early drafts of Laura's work and Pa's fiddle.

10. Mansfield, Missouri: Laura and Almanzo are buried in the Mansfield Cemetery. A statue of Laura Ingalls Wilder, dedicated in 1993, stands in the town square.



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5. Laura Ingalls Wilder Museum: Also located in Walnut Grove, this museum houses its collections in several buildings. Plan attending the pageant weekends in July where children can participate in character look-alike contests. The television series made the dugout site, museum and pageant a must-see for fans.

6. Laura Ingalls Wilder Park and Museum: In Burr Oak, Iowa. Laura lived in Burr Oak when she was 9 years old. Caroline and Charles Ingalls managed the Masters Hotel where Laura's little sister, Grace, was born.

7. De Smet, South Dakota: This is the original *Little Town on the Prairie*. The Loftus Store is one

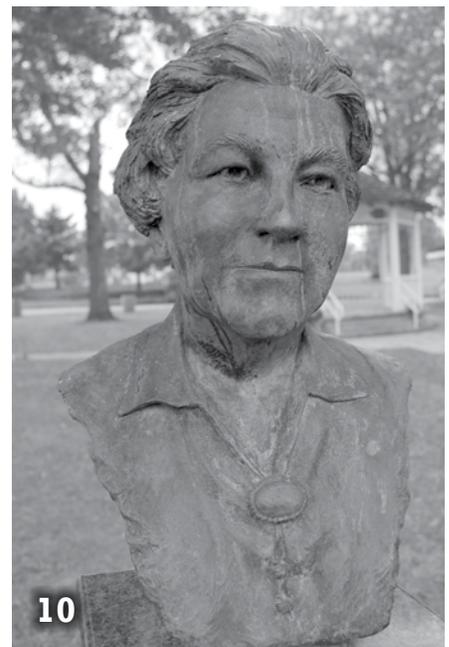
of two original buildings on Main Street. Charles, Caroline, Mary, Carrie and Grace, as well as Laura and Almanzo's infant son, are buried in the De Smet Cemetery. The Laura Ingalls Wilder Pageant is held each July.

8. Ingalls Homestead: Also in De Smet. Visit the homestead that Charles Ingalls filed at the Brookings land office in February 1880. The site features reconstructed buildings and plenty of activities for families.

9. Laura Ingalls Wilder Historic Home & Museum: Visit Rocky Ridge Farm in Mansfield, Missouri. Join the 50,000 visitors a year who attend Laura Ingalls Wilder Days or attend the outdoor musical on weekends.



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