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Laura Ingalls Wilder: A Pioneer's Life



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Written by Katherine Follett

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Where Laura Lived



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Introduction

Three-year-old Laura Ingalls and her older sister, Mary, followed their father across the vast, rolling **prairie**. Warm wind stirred Laura's hair, and insects and birds sang in the rippling grass. On the walk home, the sunset stained the sky pink and gold.

When Laura stepped inside their little log cabin, she stopped short. Ma lay in bed, and the doctor was there.

"Come meet your new baby sister," Ma said in a tired but proud voice.

This was one of Laura Ingalls Wilder's earliest and most powerful memories. It featured the two things that would shape her famous books: her close family and her love for wild, open spaces.

The Prairie and the Big Woods

Laura Ingalls was born on February 7, 1867, in the woods of Pepin, Wisconsin.

When Laura was just two years old, Ma and Pa Ingalls packed all their belongings into a covered wagon and headed toward Independence, Kansas. It was the first of many moves the Ingalls family would make during Laura's childhood. They were **pioneers**, some of the first non-Native Americans in the American West.

Laura formed **vivid** memories in their log cabin on the Kansas prairie, but the family only lived there for about a year.

They had mistakenly settled on the Osage Indian reservation, and they had to leave, so they returned to Wisconsin.



Ma (Caroline) and Pa (Charles) Ingalls

Pioneer Life

In the 1800s, pioneers streamed westward. To make way for them, in many cases, the U.S. Army pushed Native Americans from their homelands. The pioneers cleared the forests and plowed up the tough sod, or grass roots, that covered the prairie in order to cultivate crops. Pioneers had to build, grow, knit, sew, and cook almost everything they needed in order to survive.

Four-year-old Laura watched sadly as the Kansas prairie disappeared behind their covered wagon. She was too young to remember living in Wisconsin as a baby. When they returned, though, Laura discovered a wonderful new world.

The big woods were dark, wild, and mysterious. Laura loved being outdoors, and on long winter evenings, Pa played his fiddle for the family. His music accompanied the happiest days of Laura's childhood.



Hard Times

“Everything from the little house was in the wagon, except the beds and tables and chairs. Pa could always make new ones.”

—Laura Ingalls Wilder

Pa Ingalls longed to return to the open space of the prairies. He made plans to move his young family to Minnesota.

Before they left, seven-year-old Laura came down with a bad fever. The family bundled her in every blanket they owned before nestling her in the back of the covered wagon. Laura watched another home disappear behind her.

In Minnesota, Laura and Pa were happy to be back on the wide-open prairie. First, they moved into a house made of prairie sod, the dense grass that grew all around them. From a distance, the house appeared to be nothing more than a gentle hill rising from the banks of a creek. Later, Pa constructed a wood house and planted wheat near the town of Walnut Grove. Laura and Mary went to school, where Laura loved reading, writing, and reciting. Ma was expecting another baby.

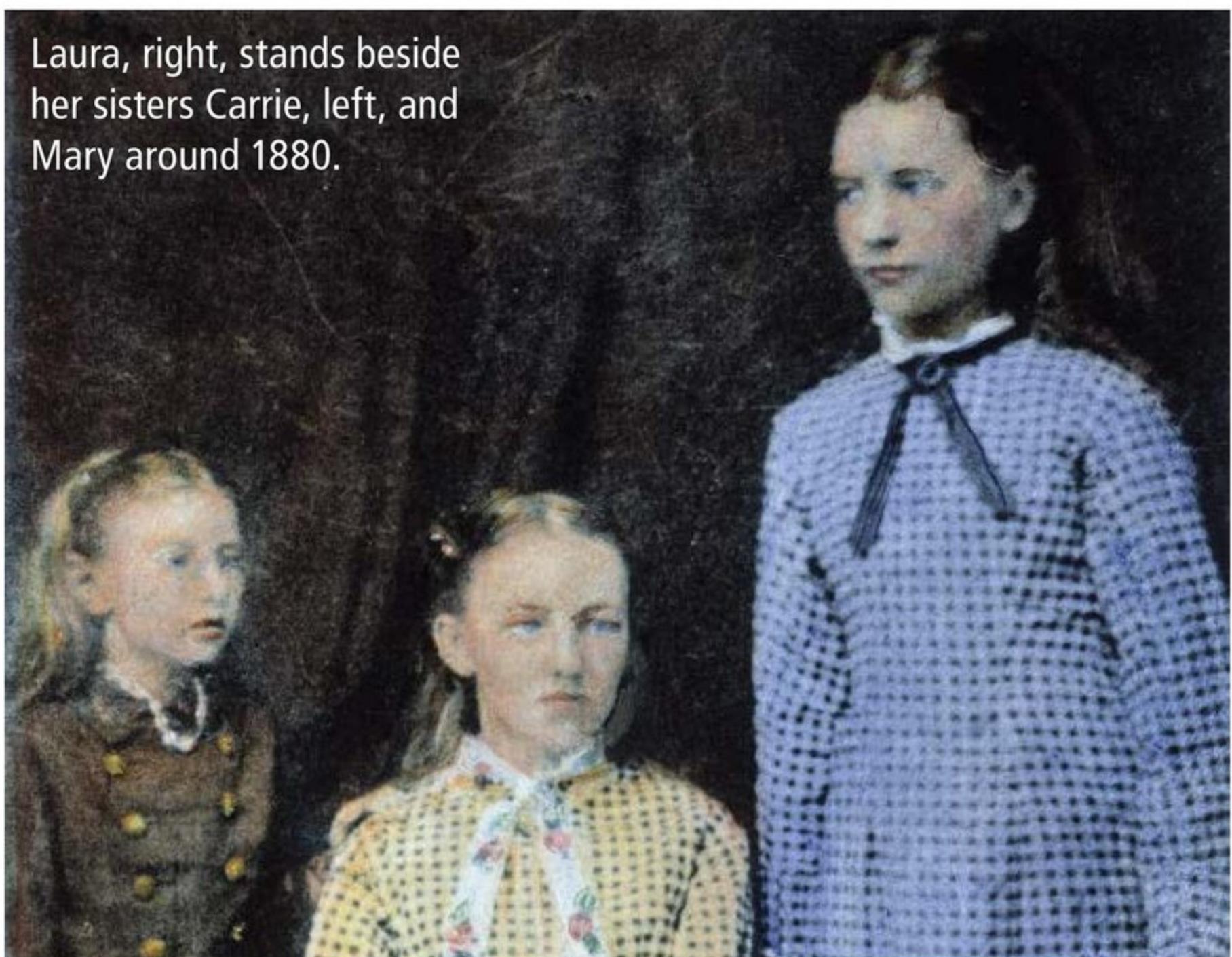
After a few months of happiness, **hardship** struck. Grasshoppers, arriving in swarms as big as thunderclouds, ate all the family's wheat.

Having lost their crop, the family moved into Walnut Grove and took odd jobs. Even little Laura cleaned and waited tables in a hotel. Then they lost their new baby brother, Freddie, to a fever.

Their spirits lifted a little when another baby, Grace, arrived in 1877, but times remained tough. Mary fell ill. Either the illness or a **stroke** damaged the nerves of her eyes. No one knows for sure what caused the damage, but Mary would be blind for the rest of her life.

Pa decided it was time to look west for a new start. He went ahead to Dakota Territory to work for the railroad. The family boarded a train in Walnut Grove and rode west to join him.

Laura, right, stands beside her sisters Carrie, left, and Mary around 1880.





When the railroad arrived in an area such as Helena, Montana (above, in 1869), towns could spring up seemingly overnight. Settlers poured in and quickly built houses, stores, hotels, and saloons.

Settling in Dakota Territory

In Dakota Territory there was just a railroad stop, not yet a town. The Ingalls family and a few others were the first citizens of what would become the town of De Smet, South Dakota.

As more settlers arrived, the Ingalls family acquired a **homestead** a few miles outside of town. Pa built a cabin, a stable, and a garden. As winter approached, the family decided to live above their store in town, where the girls would be closer to the school.

Homesteads

The American government wanted to encourage settlers to move to the West. They offered homesteads, or free land, to families who promised to stay and farm. The family would register with the government, move to the land, and begin work without having to pay a dime.



It was a lucky decision. One blizzard after another hammered the new town. The snow was so blinding that the girls couldn't find their way to school. Trains couldn't deliver food, and some families nearly starved. Laura and her sisters spent hours grinding raw wheat into flour by hand.

At last the long winter broke, and the family returned to their homestead on the blooming Dakota prairie. Their farm, and the new town, soon thrived.

Young Lady Laura

“Suffering passes, while love is eternal.”

—Laura Ingalls Wilder

Mary had heard about a college for blind students in Iowa, and she wanted more than anything to go there. Laura was now old enough to teach school, and she knew the **income** would help Mary pay for college. She accepted a teaching job in a settlement twelve miles from De Smet.

Sixteen-year-old Laura bravely said goodbye to her family, but she dreaded being away from home for an entire semester. When the first week of school ended, she got a surprise. Almanzo Wilder, a young homesteader she knew from De Smet, pulled up to the schoolhouse in a beautiful horse-drawn sleigh. He offered to bring Laura home on weekends.

During their long drives across the prairie, their friendship blossomed into love. One night, Almanzo asked Laura to marry him. She said yes. Laura and Manly, as she nicknamed him, moved to his homestead outside De Smet. Soon they welcomed a daughter, Rose.

Unfortunately, the young family was hit with a string of bad luck. A hailstorm destroyed their wheat crop, and then Laura and Manly fell ill. Laura recovered fully, but Manly would walk with a limp for the rest of his life. Laura gave birth to a

baby boy, but he only survived for two weeks. Then their house burned to the ground. Still a pioneer girl, Laura searched for a new place where they could get a fresh start. It wasn't long before she found her home.



Laura and Almanzo Wilder in 1885, shortly after their marriage

Sickness in Pioneer Days

Before the twentieth century, people had few vaccines and very few effective medicines. Diseases were common and serious. Many members of Laura's family were touched by illness. This was not unusual for the times.



Rocky Ridge Farm was so successful that a local newspaper asked Laura to write a column offering farm advice. It was her first professional writing job.

Happiness at Rocky Ridge

“It is the sweet, simple things of life which are the real ones after all.”

—Laura Ingalls Wilder

At twenty-seven, Laura set out once more in a covered wagon. She and Manly bought a small farm near Mansfield, Missouri, in the foothills of the Ozark Mountains. It was rough, wooded, and rocky, but Laura instantly knew it was home.

With hard work, Rocky Ridge grew into a beautiful, successful farm. After so much wandering, Laura was content.

In time, Laura's daughter, Rose, moved away to San Francisco. There she became a well-known journalist, making a living at something Laura herself had always loved—writing. Now that life on Rocky Ridge Farm was comfortable, could Laura do the same?

The Little House Books

Laura began to pour her memories onto the page. Sometimes she would stay up all night writing at a little desk that Manly built for her. Soon, she had written an entire book about her early years under the towering trees of Wisconsin. She called it *Little House in the Big Woods*. Rose sent it to a publisher.

Sixty-four-year-old Laura didn't think much would come of it. After all, it was the 1930s. People had cars, electricity, radio—who wanted to hear about doing backbreaking chores in a dark forest?

The book was an immediate hit. Laura brought to life the howling winter wind, the crackling fire, and the joyful skip of Pa's fiddle. She captured the thrill of meeting animals in the wilderness. She called up the joy that a simple rag doll could bring to a pioneer girl who lived in a rough log cabin.

The mailbox at Rocky Ridge overflowed with letters from young readers begging for more. Laura wrote about her time on the Kansas prairie in *Little House on the Prairie* and near Walnut Grove in *On the Banks of Plum Creek*. The frightful winter in De Smet became *The Long Winter*, and the town's recovery became *Little Town on the Prairie*.



Laura Ingalls Wilder signs copies of her books sometime around 1940.

Laura loved answering letters from her fans and traveling to readings and book signings. Yet she was always happy to return home to Manly and Rocky Ridge Farm. The couple both lived into their nineties. After her death in 1957, Laura Ingalls Wilder's books lived on, even becoming a TV series in 1974. Her stories of pioneer life still delight young readers today. Her life has become part of American history.

Glossary

hardship (<i>n.</i>)	pain or loss; something that causes pain or loss (p. 7)
homestead (<i>n.</i>)	property given by the U.S. government to people who settled and farmed on the land, especially in the 1800s (p. 9)
income (<i>n.</i>)	money that is received from work or another source (p. 11)
pioneers (<i>n.</i>)	people who are among the first to settle in a new place (p. 5)
prairie (<i>n.</i>)	a wide, flat plain covered with grasses (p. 4)
publisher (<i>n.</i>)	the person or company who makes writing available to the public, either in print or on the Internet (p. 14)
reciting (<i>v.</i>)	saying something aloud from memory (p. 7)
stroke (<i>n.</i>)	a rapid loss of brain function resulting from interrupted blood flow to the brain (p. 8)
vivid (<i>adj.</i>)	very bright and strong (p. 5)

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Back cover: Laura Ingalls Wilder in 1917 (around age 50).

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