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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 awoke near dawn to Pa's gentle voice. "Do you girls want to head out to the Indian camp for a picnic?"

Laura and her older sister, Mary, leapt out of bed. It wasn't often that they could spend a day with Pa, who was usually busy with farm chores. The girls packed a lunch and followed their father across the vast, rolling **prairie**. Warm wind stirred Laura's hair, and insects and birds sang in the rippling grass.

The Osage Indians had left their camp for the season. The girls picnicked near their fire pits and collected colorful beads in the 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 an exhausted 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 novels: 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 northern woods of Pepin, Wisconsin. Laura was the second child, following her sister Mary.

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.

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

The big woods were dark, wild, and mysterious. Laura loved being outdoors, whether throwing snowballs with her cousins or collecting firewood and doing other chores. 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 was a restless man, and he longed to return to the open space of the prairies. He made plans to relocate his young family to Minnesota.

Difficulties began even before they left. Laura caught scarlet fever, so the family bundled her in every blanket they owned before nestling her in the back of the covered wagon. Seven-year-old Laura watched her silent, snow-covered home disappear behind her.

In Minnesota, Laura and Pa were happy to be back on the wide-open prairie. First, they moved into a sod house constructed from dense mats of grass roots. 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, descending in swarms as big as thunderclouds, devoured 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.



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

## Settling in Dakota Territory

The family boarded a train in Walnut Grove and rode west to join Pa, who had gone ahead to Dakota Territory to work for the railroad.

Eleven-year-old Laura acted as Mary's eyes. She described the hulking, smoking train, the ornately decorated cars, and the golden blur of wheat fields speeding by. Mary hung on every word.

When they got off the train, there was no settlement—just a railroad stop. The Ingalls family and a few others were the first citizens of what would become the town of De Smet, South Dakota. Pa built some of the first buildings, including the first store.

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.

A young man named Almanzo Wilder trudged through the snow to the only established farm in the area. He returned bearing all the wheat the farmer could spare, saving the settlers. It was not the last time Laura would hear about this good man.

## Young Lady Laura

***“Suffering passes, while love is eternal.”***

**—Laura Ingalls Wilder**

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.

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, the young man who had helped save De Smet, pulled up to the schoolhouse in a beautiful horse-drawn sleigh, offering 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, and 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 came down with a dangerous infection. 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.

## Happiness at Rocky Ridge

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

—Laura Ingalls Wilder

One day, a visitor presented Laura with a gleaming red apple from the Ozark Mountains. Twenty-seven-year-old Laura set out once more in a covered wagon. This time, she headed east, toward the land of that beautiful apple.

Laura and Manly bought an unassuming farm near Mansfield, Missouri, in the foothills of the Ozarks. It was rough, wooded, and rocky, but Laura instantly knew it was home. It took years of chopping trees, hauling rocks, plowing, building, and planting, but Rocky Ridge grew into a beautiful, **prosperous** farm. After a lifetime of wandering, Laura was content.

Rose, Laura’s daughter, inherited Pa’s restless spirit. Intelligent and ambitious, she moved away to San Francisco, where she became a respected journalist. One summer, Laura visited her adult daughter in California. She wrote to Manly, describing the towering redwoods, the glittering city, and the thundering Pacific Ocean.

Rose was making a living at something Laura had always loved—writing. Now that life on her farm was comfortable, could Laura do the same?

## The Little House Books

Once home, 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 **sensation**. 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 **evoked** 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 recounted 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, but she was always happy to return home to Manly and Rocky Ridge Farm. The couple both lived into their nineties. After Laura's death in 1957, her books lived on, even becoming a TV series in 1974. Laura Ingalls Wilder's stories of pioneer life still captivate young readers today. Her life has become part of American history.

## Glossary

<b>evoked</b> ( <i>v.</i> )	called up or brought forth a feeling, memory, or mental image (p. 14)
<b>hardship</b> ( <i>n.</i> )	pain or loss; something that causes pain or loss (p. 8)
<b>homestead</b> ( <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)
<b>income</b> ( <i>n.</i> )	money that is received from work or another source (p. 11)
<b>pioneers</b> ( <i>n.</i> )	people who are among the first to settle in a new place (p. 5)
<b>prairie</b> ( <i>n.</i> )	a wide, flat plain covered with grasses (p. 4)
<b>prosperous</b> ( <i>adj.</i> )	successful; well-off (p. 13)
<b>publisher</b> ( <i>n.</i> )	the person or company who makes writing available to the public, either in print or on the Internet (p. 14)
<b>receded</b> ( <i>v.</i> )	moved or pulled back from a previous position (p. 6)
<b>sensation</b> ( <i>n.</i> )	a state of great excitement; someone or something that causes great excitement (p. 14)
<b>stroke</b> ( <i>n.</i> )	a rapid loss of brain function resulting from interrupted blood flow to the brain (p. 8)
<b>vivid</b> ( <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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