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Laura Ingalls Wilder: A Pioneer's Life



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Written by Katherine Follett

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Pioneers often traveled in covered wagons like this one.

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.

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 so they could grow crops. Pioneers had to build, grow, knit, sew, and cook almost everything they needed in order to live.



Laura formed **vivid** memories on the Kansas **prairie**. She remembered how the insects and birds sang in the waving grass. She remembered how the sunsets colored the wide horizon. These sorts of memories would help shape her famous books. Yet the family only lived there for about a year before they returned to the woods of Wisconsin.



Ma (Caroline) and Pa (Charles) Ingalls

In Wisconsin, though, four-year-old 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 missed the open space of the prairies. When Laura was seven years old, he moved his young family to Minnesota.

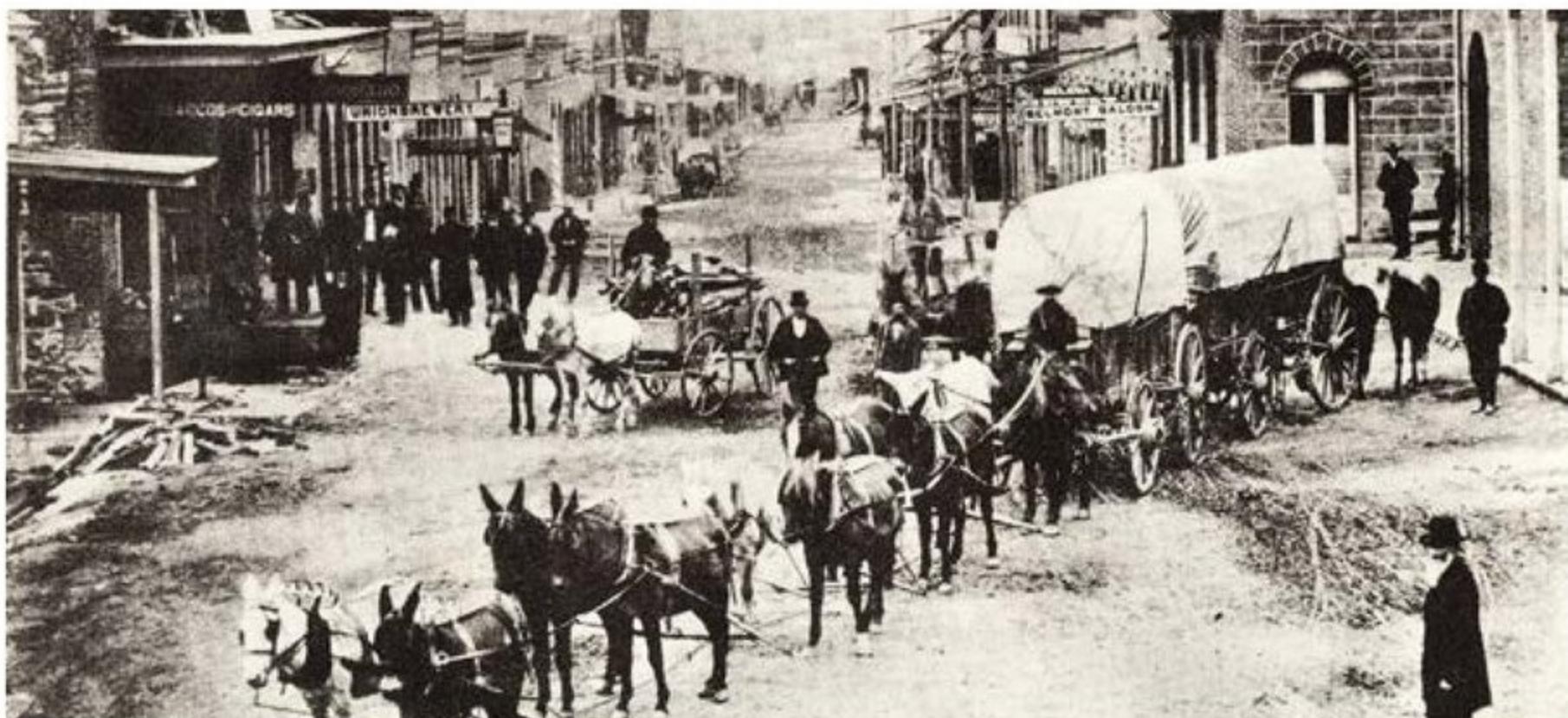
First, they moved into a house made of prairie sod, the thick grass that grew all around them. Later, Pa built a wood house and planted wheat near the town of Walnut Grove. Laura and her older sister, Mary, went to school. Laura loved reading, writing, and reciting.

After a few months of happiness, **hardship** struck. Grasshoppers arrived in swarms as big as thunderclouds. They ate all the family's wheat. Having lost their crop, the Ingalls family moved to town 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.





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 De Smet, South Dakota.

As more settlers arrived, the Ingalls family moved to 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.



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.

At last the long winter broke, and the family returned to their homestead on the blooming Dakota prairie.

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 twelve miles from De Smet.

Sixteen-year-old Laura bravely said goodbye to her family, but she dreaded being away from home for months. 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.

Almanzo 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.

Then the young family was hit with a string of bad luck. A hailstorm destroyed their wheat crop, and then Laura and Manly fell ill. They both got better, but Manly would walk with a limp for the rest of his life. Laura gave birth to a baby boy, but he only lived 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. She was 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. 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 what followed 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. They even became 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. 4)
prairie (<i>n.</i>)	a wide, flat plain covered with grasses (p. 5)
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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