

From Mansfield, Missouri

Laura Ingalls Wilder, frontier child and beloved author

Laura Elizabeth Ingalls Wilder (February 7, 1867 – February 10, 1957) was an American author who wrote the *Little House* series of books based on her childhood in a pioneer family. Laura's daughter, Rose, inspired Laura to write her books.

Early life and marriage

Laura Elizabeth Ingalls was born February 7, 1867, seven miles north of the village of Pepin, in the “Big Woods” of Wisconsin, to Charles Phillip Ingalls and Caroline Lake (Quiner) Ingalls. Her birth site is commemorated by a log cabin, the Little House Wayside. Her life here formed the basis for the book *Little House in the Big Woods*.

In Laura's early childhood, her father settled on land not yet open for homesteading in what was then Indian Territory near what is now Independence, Kansas—an experience that formed the basis of Ingalls' novel *Little House on the Prairie*. Charles filed for a homestead over the winter of 1879–1880; De Smet, South Dakota was home for the rest of his, Caroline's, and Mary's lives. After spending the mild winter of 1879–1880 in the Surveyor's House, the Ingalls family watched the town of De Smet rise up from the prairie in 1881. The following winter, 1880–1881, one of the most severe on record in the Dakotas, was later described by Wilder in her book, *The Long Winter*. Once the family was settled in De Smet, Wilder attended school, worked several part-time jobs and made many friends, most importantly the bachelor homesteader Almanzo Wilder (1857–1949), whom she later married. This time in her life is well documented in the books *Little Town on the Prairie*, and *These Happy Golden Years*.

The first few years of marriage held many trials. Complications from a life-threatening bout of diphtheria left Almanzo partially paralyzed. While he eventually regained nearly full use of his legs, he needed a cane to walk for the remainder of his life. This setback, among many others, began a series of disastrous events that included the death of their unnamed newborn son, the destruction of their home and barn by fire, and several years of severe drought that left them in debt, physically ill, and unable to earn a living from their 320 acres of prairie land. The tales of their trials at farming can be found in *The First Four Years*, a manuscript that was discovered after Rose Wilder Lane's death. Published in 1971, it detailed the hard-fought first four years of marriage on the Dakota prairies.

In 1894, the hard-pressed young couple moved to Mansfield, Missouri, using their savings to make a down payment on a piece of undeveloped property just outside of town. They named the place Rocky Ridge Farm. The ramshackle log cabin was eventually replaced

with an impressive 10-room farmhouse and outbuildings. The couple's climb to financial security was a slow process. Initially, the only income the farm produced was from wagonloads of firewood Almanzo sold for 50 cents in town, the result of the backbreaking work of clearing the trees and stones from land that slowly evolved into fertile fields and pastures. The apple trees did not begin to bear fruit for seven years. Barely able to eke out more than a subsistence living on the new farm, the Wilders decided to move into nearby Mansfield in the late 1890s and rent a small house. Almanzo found work as an oil salesman and general delivery man, while Laura took in boarders and served meals to local railroad workers. Wilder's parents visited around this time, and presented to the couple, as a gift, the deed to the house they had been renting in Mansfield. This was the economic jump start they needed; they added acreage to the original purchase, eventually owning nearly 200 acres. Around 1910, they sold their house in town and using the proceeds from the sale, were able to move back to the farm permanently, and to complete Rocky Ridge Farmhouse.

Following her daughter Rose Wilder Lane's developing writing career also inspired Wilder to do some writing of her own. An invitation to submit an article to the *Missouri Ruralist* in 1911 led to a permanent position as a columnist and editor with that publication — a position she held until the mid-1920s. She also took a paid position with a Farm Loan Association, dispensing small loans to local farmers from her office in the farmhouse.

Her column in the *Ruralist*, "As a Farm Woman Thinks," introduced Mrs. A.J. Wilder to a loyal audience of rural Ozarkians, who enjoyed her regular columns, whose topics ranged from home and family to World War I and other world events, to the fascinating world travels of her daughter and her own thoughts on the increasing options offered to women during this era.

Wilder's fellow clubwomen were mostly the wives of business owners, doctors and lawyers, and her club activities took up much of the time that Lane encouraged her to use to develop a writing career for national magazines, as Lane had done. Wilder seemed unable or unwilling to make the leap from writing for the *Missouri Ruralist* to these higher-paying national markets. The few articles she was able to sell to national magazines were heavily edited by her daughter and placed solely through Lane's established publishing connections.

Retirement

For much of the 1920s and 1930s, between long stints living abroad (including Albania), Lane lived with the Wilders at Rocky Ridge Farm. As her free-lance writing career flourished, she successfully invested in the booming stock market.

A comfortable and worry-free retirement seemed possible for the Wilders until the Stock Market Crash of 1929 wiped out the family's investments. The couple still owned the 200 acres farm, but they had invested most of their savings with Lane's broker. Lane was faced with the prospect of selling enough of her writing in a depressed market to maintain the financial responsibilities she had assumed, and the Wilders became dependent on her as their primary source of support.

The popularity of the *Little House* series of books has grown phenomenally over the years, spawning a multimillion-dollar franchise of mass merchandising, additional spinoff book series (some written by MacBride and his daughter), and the long-running television show, starring Michael Landon. Wilder once said the reason she wrote her books in the first place was to preserve the stories of her childhood for today's children, to help them to understand how much America had changed during her lifetime.

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