PRAIRIE FIRES

The American Dreams of LAURA INGALLS WILDER

Caroline Fraser

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In memory of my mother, Ruth Fraser, and my grandmother Ruth Webb

The prairies burning form some of the most beautiful scenes that are to be witnessed in this country.

—George Catlin

A NOTE ON QUOTATIONS

Unless otherwise indicated, in quotations from the letters, diaries, and manuscripts of Laura Ingalls Wilder, Rose Wilder Lane, and others, all spelling, grammar, and punctuation are reproduced as they appear in the original source.


CANADA
DAKOTA TERRITORY
MINNESOTA
Lake Superior
MI
WISCONSIN
Lake Michigan
N
Wilder tree claim
De Smet
Ingalls homestead
Brookings
Minnesota R.
Minneapolis
Plum Creek dugout
Walnut Grove
New Ulm
Lake Pepin
Pepin cabin
Pepin
Spring Valley
Burr Oak
Milwaukee
Concord
Yankton
Missouri R.
NEBRASKA
IOWA
ILLINOIS
Adamantine Johnson property
Mississippi R.
IN
KANSAS
Kansas City
St. Louis
MISSOURI
Montgomery County cabin
Independence
Mansfield
Springfield
Rocky Ridge farm
KY
Verdigris R.
INDIAN TERRITORY
ARKANSAS
TN

Introduction

On a spring day in April of 1924, Laura Ingalls Wilder, a fifty-seven-year-old farm wife in the Missouri Ozarks, received a telegram from South Dakota. Her mother, Caroline Ingalls, had just died. Wilder hadn't seen her for more than twenty years.

A few weeks later, still reeling, she wrote a brief note to be published in place of her regular column in a farm newspaper. Every woman in the world who has lost her mother will recognize the retrospective shadow of sorrow, regret, and crippling nostalgia that the news cast across her life. "Some of us have received such messages," she said flatly. "Those who have not, one day will."[1]

Then it all became too much to bear. "Memories!" she wrote. "We go thru life collecting them whether we will or not! Sometimes I wonder if they are our treasures in heaven or the consuming fires of torment when we carry them with us as we, too, pass on."[2]

It was a startling public outburst for a woman in a small Missouri town known to her neighbors as reserved, poised, even withdrawn. She seemed anguished by her memories, willed and unwilled. The realization that she would be visited for the rest of her life by images of people and places she

could never forget was dismaying to her. “They are with us forever,” she wrote, as if in disbelief.[3]

* * *

As children, we thought we knew her. She was the real-life pioneer girl who survived wildfires, tornadoes, malaria, blizzards, and near-starvation on the Great Plains in the late 1800s. She was the fierce, uncompromising tomboy who grew up to write famous books about her life: *Little House in the Big Woods*, *Farmer Boy*, *Little House on the Prairie*, *On the Banks of Plum Creek*, *By the Shores of Silver Lake*, *The Long Winter*, *Little Town on the Prairie*, and *These Happy Golden Years*. She was the woman whose true-life stories went on to sell over sixty million copies in forty-five languages and were reincarnated in the 1970s and 1980s as one of the longest-running, most popular shows in television history, still in syndication.

But as adults, we have come to see that her autobiographical novels were not only fictionalized but brilliantly edited, in a profound act of American myth-making and self-transformation. As unpublished manuscripts, letters, and documents have come to light, we have begun to apprehend the scope of her life, a story that needs to be fully told, in its historical context, as she lived it. That tale is different from the one she wrote. It is an adult story of poverty, struggle, and reinvention—a great American drama in three acts.

The third act was a long time in coming. At fifty-seven, Wilder was still far from becoming the emblematic figure of pioneer history. The woman whose life would become synonymous with the settlement of the West had spent most of her adult life living in the American South. She was not yet famous, had not yet written a book; the only writing she had published was her farm paper column. Anxious, she suffered from nerves and had a recurrent nightmare of walking down a “long, dark road” into obscure woods, the path of poverty.[4]

She prided herself on superior hen-raising skills and keeping an immaculate house. She worried about whether giving women the vote might lead to moral laxity. A product of rural life, she also stood outside it, questioning the iron drudgery of turn-of-the-century domestic expectations. She advised women to give up the exhausting ritual of spring cleaning.

She had a sharp temper and a dry humor, noting the resemblance of a yard full of swine to their owners. Judgmental of others, she could be humble, even self-excoriating. She was parsimonious to a fault, but when she went into town she dressed elegantly in full skirts, lace collars, and hats garlanded with feathers or flowers. She favored long, dangling earrings, fastening her blouses with a cameo brooch. She loved velvet.

She was not an intellectual, but she had an intellect. She had never graduated from high school, but had studied with passion and vigor the Independent Fifth Reader. She knew a song for every occasion and passages of Shakespeare, Longfellow, Tennyson, Scott, Swinburne, and the Brownings. Books took pride of place in her living room, on custom-built shelves beside a prized stone hearth.

As her fifties drew to a close, she stood at a turning point. The first act of her life was long over. Her childhood had been packed with drama and incident: Indian encounters, prairie fires, blizzards, a virtual compendium of American frontier life. Growing up, she could count her possessions on her fingers. One tin cup. One slate, for school. One hair ribbon. A doll her mother made her. Clothes and shoes were hand-me-downs: a good dress for Sundays, another for all the other days. She married at eighteen and was a mother a year later.

By the age of twenty-one, she knew that everything she had ever had, no matter how hard-won, held the capacity to be lost. After a series of disasters, she and her husband left the Dakotas to rebuild seven hundred miles south, a long climb out of poverty constituting her life's second act. She took in boarders and waited on tables. Her husband, crippled by a stroke in his twenties, recovered enough to drive a wagon, delivering fuel and freight. Their daughter, Rose, left home when still a teenager, eventually becoming a

celebrity biographer in San Francisco. As soon as she saw the easy money to be made selling inspirational life stories of men as self-made as she was—Henry Ford, Jack London, Herbert Hoover—she began urging her mother to join her in the writing trade.

Wilder would become one of the self-made Americans her daughter so admired. In the third act of her life, in the midst of the Great Depression, she began recording, in soft pencil on tablets from the dime store, a memoir of her youth, the story of homesteaders who had unwittingly caused the Dust Bowl she was living through. Painfully casting her mind back to the previous century, she pressed on, kept awake all night by remembering her family's misfortunes and failed crops, her sister falling ill and going blind. What had been punishing to survive was heartbreaking to relive. "It's H—," she wrote to her daughter, taught never to swear.[5]

Rose once jotted down a quotation she attributed to her mother: "I don't know which is more heartbreaking, a dream un[ful]filled or a dream realized."[6] She would help her mother realize a dream, bringing her professional connections and polish to the work, adding touches of cozy security to the hard reality. But it was her mother's stoic vision of pioneer grit that prevailed.

Wilder's perseverance gave rise to one of the most astonishing rags-to-riches stories in American letters. On the brink of old age, fearing the loss of everything in the Depression, Wilder reimagined her frontier childhood as epic and uplifting. Her gently triumphal revision of homesteading would convince generations that the American farm was a model of self-sufficiency. At the same time, it would hint at the complex realities behind homesteading, suggesting that it broke more lives than it sustained.

Living most of her life in poverty, Wilder survived long enough to become a wealthy woman, a legend in children's literature, and a treasured incarnation of American tenacity. But fame obscures as it reveals. Swamped in pious sentimentality, dimmed and blurred by the marketing of the myth, Wilder has become a caricature, a brand, a commodity. In addition to the hit

television show, the Little House series has given rise to scores of adaptations in print, on stage, and on screen—including a Japanese anime version—and a welter of songbooks, cookbooks, sequels, and chat sites. There are licensed dolls, clothes, fabrics, and, inevitably, sunbonnets.

The real woman was not a caricature. Her story, spanning ninety years, is broader, stranger, and darker than her books, containing whole chapters she could scarcely bear to examine. She hinted as much when she said, in a speech, "All I have told is true but it is not the whole truth."[7]

* * *

THE truth comes clear when we see Wilder as part of a wider history. Her story is the story of an era, which is present in her books but gets subsumed in their charm, their immersion in a child's world. When we set her life against epic movements—the Homestead Act, the spread of railroads, the closing of the frontier—we can see how economic depression and environmental disaster propelled settlers farther out on the Plains than they ever should have gone, how fear of massacre drove the squatters' rationale, how debt and drought kept farmers locked in recurrent waves of boom and bust.

Wilder made history. Sealing her themes inside an unassailably innocent vessel, a novelistic Trojan horse for complex and ambiguous reactions to manifest destiny, wilderness, self-reliance, and changing views of women's roles outside the home, her books have exercised more influence, across a wider segment of society, than the thesis of Frederick Jackson Turner, which held that American democracy was shaped by settlers conquering the frontier. Their place in our culture continues to evolve. Unfolding in the heartland of Indian removal, Wilder's life and her re-creation of it became a lasting expression and subterranean critique of America's harshest philosophies. She has become one of the national figures by which we take the measure of pioneer women.

"Often, if you want to write about women in history," the novelist Hilary Mantel has said, "you have to distort history to do it, or substitute fantasy for facts; you have to pretend that individual women were more important than they were or that we know more about them than we do."[8] But when it comes to Wilder, we don't have to pretend.

In the breadth of its impact, Wilder's work—even in its bowdlerized, co-opted versions—has few parallels. It has shaped and inspired politicians across the decades. The second heir to the Little House fortune, Roger MacBride, ran for president as a Libertarian. Ronald Reagan wept over his TV tray in the White House watching his friend Michael Landon enact a blow-dried Simi Valley version of Wilder's homespun pioneer values.[9] *Little House on the Prairie* is the one book Sarah Palin's family could remember her reading as a child.[10] Saddam Hussein is said to have been a fan.[11]

Greater than any such incidental endorsement has been Wilder's quieter influence on generations of schoolchildren. On *Publishers Weekly*'s list of the bestselling children's books of all time, *Little House in the Big Woods* and *Little House on the Prairie* are in the top twenty.[12] John Steinbeck would become America's lamenter of Dust Bowl destitution—and Woody Guthrie its anarchic troubadour—but Wilder staked out a place as champion of the simple life. She transformed poverty into pride, showing readers the heroism of endurance. With Shaker-like purity, she celebrated every day under shelter, every warm fire, and every mouthful of nourishment, no matter how modest. Not by accident are her books about "little" houses. They are also about making the best of little food and fewer choices.

If the fiction was gauzier than the reality, that was because it was inspired by her devotion to her parents. Every word Wilder wrote would be grounded in the satisfaction of simple pleasures she discovered through them: a song, a carpet of wildflowers, a floor swept clean. Showing American children how to be poor without shame, she herself grew rich. That too formed a powerful part of her mythology.

* * *

In 1856, a family came to far western Wisconsin, the edge of the frontier, in a covered wagon. As a descendant later recalled, they had heard from "friendly Indians" about an "Eden-like valley of great fertility" near the Mississippi. Their arrival was akin to something out of Genesis:

> In the morning they awoke to a very beautiful sight. Surely this was the Eden-like land the Indians had told them about. It was then just a little place in the wilderness, remote from any road and without buildings. There were plenty of trees, however; one, which stood in the farm yard until a few short years ago, was the same tree under which the family continued to camp until they could erect a log house.[13]

Their names were Eva and August, and they were my great-great-great-grandparents. They bought land in Buffalo County, about fifty miles as the crow flies from where the Ingalls family would settle a few years later. They arrived with four children and a cattle dog, but the dog ran all the way back to Muskego. Their land patent bore the name of President Andrew Johnson.

One of their daughters was named Caroline. I have her name and her quilt: appliqued flowers on a white field, pink and yellow calico blooming from curling green stems, all secured in thousands upon thousands of tiny, even stitches. She was sewing it around 1871, when Laura Ingalls was a youngster not far away.

There is a photograph of four generations of these Wisconsin women—Eva, Caroline, Della, and Marion—clinging to each other in front of a field of corn. A sepia flash of pale and distant faces. No one ever told the rest of the story. Who were they, really? What happened to the friendly Indians, and the wilderness, and the farm, and the family? What happened to the cattle dog? What happened to Eden?

The quilt keeps its mute counsel in a closet. But Laura Ingalls Wilder saved her quilts *and* her stories. In a heroic effort late in life, she gave those

stories to the world. With the same exasperated patience that her mother instilled in her as a child, learning to sew a nine-patch quilt, she sat down and wrote—what she remembered, what she wanted to remember. For those of us seeking to understand the settlement of the frontier, she offers a path, perhaps our best path, to the past.

On the Frontier

“Once upon a time … a little girl lived in the Big Woods”: the opening of the Little House series has the cadence of a fairy tale. The setting, too, feels like a place in a fable:

> The great, dark trees of the Big Woods stood all around … and beyond them were other trees and beyond them were more trees. As far as a man could go to the north in a day, or a week, or a whole month, there was nothing but woods. There were no houses. There were no roads. There were no people. There were only trees and the wild animals who had their homes among them.[1]

But the Big Woods was an actual name for a real place.[2] Dense forests stretched across northern Wisconsin and Minnesota, millions of acres of sugar maple, red oak, burr oak, basswood, and elm, shading into prairies to the south and west.[3] And this apparently unpeopled wilderness had a long history of human habitation.

The first whites to see the Big Woods were French trappers in the 1600s. They regarded the forests as a bank full of beaver and timber, a wealth of

quality hardwood. But long before them, the Indians knew the land's value. "Mni Sota Makoce," the Dakota called it: "land where the waters are so clear they reflect the clouds."[4]

The Dakota included several separate bands, sharing language and customs but inhabiting different areas and known by different names. Each had their own relationship to the Big Woods and its lakes and rivers. There were the Wahpeton (meaning "the people who live in the forest") and the Yankton ("the people who live at the edge of the great forest"), the Mdewakanton ("the spiritual people who live by the water"), the Sisseton ("the medicine people who live by the water"), and the Wahpekute ("the warriors who protected the medicine people and could shoot from among the leaves").[5] Whites lumped them together as "Sioux," a name the Dakota found insulting. "Sioux" was what their enemies, the Ojibwe, called them. It meant "little snakes."[6]

Where were these Indians when Laura was growing up in the Big Woods? That was a story in its own right. It happened five years before she was born, but it reshaped the American landscape for centuries to come. The dispossession of the Dakota, the Homestead Act of 1862, and the war that they touched off set the stage for Laura Ingalls Wilder's life.

* * *

At the beginning of the nineteenth century, the Dakota occupied a vast swath of forest and prairie west of the Mississippi River. Tied to the seasons, they lived by hunting, fishing, gathering wild produce, and growing crops. In fall and winter, deer-hunting parties set off in the north. Whole villages followed the hunt, tepees and other necessities heaped on sleds pulled by horses or dogs. By spring, as deer grew scarce and thin, the Dakota moved south, ice-fishing along the way for pike and bass. At the first thaw, women tapped maples in coveted groves to make sugar, while men hunted muskrat, geese, and ducks. Their summer villages along the Minnesota River had bark

houses near meadows and marshes where they harvested chokecherries, wild turnips, potatoes, strawberries, and artichokes. Women and children raised corn, beating birds away from the crop.[7]

Even in the best of times their existence could be precarious, made more so by the disappearance of beaver and buffalo and white settlers' introduction of alcohol and smallpox. Sometimes the weather was bad, or the game sparse. Whatever the difficulties, however, it was their life and their country.

In the 1830s, the painter George Catlin was among the first whites struck by the land's wild beauty, calling it a paradise.[8] Its most terrifying spectacle —fires sweeping through the grass like "red buffaloes"—was, for him, an ecstatic vision. "The prairies burning form some of the most beautiful scenes that are to be witnessed in this country," he wrote.[9] He bemoaned the region's domestication by the "busy, talking, whistling, hopping, elated and exulting white man, with the first dip of the ploughshare, making sacrilegious trespass."[10]

The trespass had begun in 1803, when Thomas Jefferson bought the interior of North America from France, some 530 million acres between the Mississippi and the Rocky Mountains changing hands for fifteen million dollars. Over the following decades, a series of treaties were negotiated between the United States and the Dakota. Legally dubious, based on inaccurate translations of an oral language, the treaties steadily encroached on the Indians' land, confining them within ever-shrinking boundaries. In 1851, some six thousand Dakota were consigned to a cruelly narrow reservation, a strip of land one hundred and forty miles long and ten miles wide along each bank of the Upper Minnesota River.[11] There, they were expected to relinquish the immemorial pattern of their lives, give up hunting, settle down to farm, and become Christians. Few, however, chose to do so, the majority continuing to "live by the hunt."[12]

For settlers, the treaties set off a land rush. In the first wave, between 1854 and 1857, more than five million acres of public land were sold in Minnesota Territory, much of it for the rock-bottom price of $1.25 an acre.[13] Farmers raced to stake claims on land already broken for cultivation: the Indians' corn fields. Saw mills were set up, trees felled, and roads cut through the wilderness. In the 1840s, a few hundred whites were living among twenty-five to thirty thousand Indians of various tribes; by 1858, the year Minnesota became an American state, there were 150,000 whites.[14] By that time, squatters were encroaching on Dakota land north of the Minnesota River, finding a willing collaborator in the federal government. Less than a decade after creating the Upper and Lower Sioux Reservations, the government took back half the Dakota's land, the strip along the northern bank of the Minnesota, after negotiations that were little more than veiled threats. Promised $1.25 an acre, the Indians were paid thirty cents, a swindle that would end up costing both sides dearly.[15]

For whites, free land was the original American dream. Inspired by massive taxpayer-funded acquisitions such as the Louisiana Purchase, the schemes to distribute such land were bitterly contested by well-heeled congressional foes, especially those from the South.[16] Western territories were a particular focus of the Free Soil movement of the 1840s and '50s, which joined farmers eager to colonize new lands with abolitionists intent on keeping new states free from slavery. Their rallying cry was, "Why not vote yourself a farm?," a goad to politicians who abhorred giving land to the poor, arguing that such charity was "demeaning."[17]

In the presidential campaign of 1860, Abraham Lincoln harnessed and refined the Free Soiler argument, insisting that slavery was a stain on the land, "a moral, a social, and a political wrong" that could not be allowed to spread.[18] If elected, he promised "free land" for all Americans. And he was as good as his word. When his inaugural train passed through Cincinnati on the way to the capital, he stepped out to speak to a committee of industrialists. "I