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# On the Trail of Laura Ingalls Wilder Part II

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## On the Trail of Laura Ingalls Wilder, Part II

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**T**he last five summers I have visited the Ingalls-Wilder homes. After my article (covering the homes at Mansfield, Missouri, Walnut Grove, Minnesota, and De Smet, South Dakota) was published in the February 1975, issue of *Instructor* magazine, I received many letters from Laura Ingalls Wilder fans asking for more information.



Mrs. Harvey Houck, a teacher at Decorah, Iowa wrote that the old Master's Hotel in Burr Oak was being restored. In May 1976, when I visited the little town with many tall trees, I was rather surprised at the size of the hotel. The Ingalls helped run the hotel during part of their almost two years stay in Burr Oak. (Just before they arrived in Burr Oak they had buried their only son, Charles Frederick, who lived nine months.)

It has been said that times got rather rough around the hotel - especially with a local bar next door. (A wall in one room still showed bullet marks when I was there.) Ma Ingalls decided the surroundings were too rough for their two young daughters (Mary and Laura) who helped wait on tables. The little family moved just out of the small town where Grace, the fourth daughter, was born in 1877. Her pretty blue eyes were one of the last things Mary saw before going blind. It has been said that Grace was more like her father than the other girls. She had a happy disposition and probably inherited a tendency for a weak heart from Pa; she was the second girl to die.

I found a trip to the cemetery very interesting; it is no doubt much the same as it was a hundred years ago when Laura made many visits there. The cemetery is much higher than the road. As I looked up the wrought iron gate with the words Burr Oak looked beautiful against the sky in the sunset of that late afternoon in May. I saw many old slanting white tombstones (that Laura probably saw) among the thick green grass.

A visit to Burr Oak would not be complete without a stop in David DeCou's general store and restaurant which is very near the Master's Hotel. The Ingalls family returned to Walnut Grove, Minnesota before settling in DeSmet, South Dakota where Pa built the last family house.

August 4, 1976, I visited Laura's birthplace at Pepin, Wisconsin. Just recently the local Laura Ingalls Wilder Memorial Society has been able to purchase the land of the Charles Ingalls first family home. A little log cabin is being

rebuilt where the first cabin stood. Trees will be planted to make the site as natural as possible - just as it was when Laura lived there in the eighteen hundreds. The *Little House In The Big Woods* is located about seven miles northwest of Pepin. The spot seemed almost hallowed as I stood there thinking of the little family so many have come to love.

Mr. Lester Lund, whose wife is the president of the local Laura Ingalls Wilder Society, and his brother took me by the local park that was dedicated in Laura's honor in 1962. The plaque reads:

### LAURA INGALLS WILDER

This park is named in honor of Laura Ingalls Wilder, author of the "Little House" books which were awarded a medal in 1954 as "lasting contribution to children's literature." Laura Ingalls was born in a log cabin seven miles northwest of here February 7, 1867.

In the 1870's her parents moved the family to Kansas Territory, then to Minnesota, and finally to South Dakota. At 15, Laura was teaching school and three years later, married Almanzo Wilder. They lived for a while in South Dakota, before settling on a farm near Mansfield, Missouri. Mrs. Wilder began her writing career when she was 65. First in the series of eight books was *Little House In The Big Woods* describing her experiences here in the Pepin area. The book was an immediate success. The author was surprised at her success and told an interviewer after writing her first book: "I thought that would end it but what do you think? Children who read it wrote to me begging for more. I was amazed because I didn't know how to write. I went to little red school houses all over the west, and I never was graduate from anything." She died in 1957.

September 21, 1976, I visited Almanzo Wilder's (Laura's husband) birthplace at Malone, New York. This site was the setting for the book *Farmer Boy*. Although Laura never visited Malone her descriptions are perfect through the eyes and memory of her husband.

I was thrilled to meet Almanzo Wilder's cousin, Mrs. Frances E. Smith\* who is 86 years of age. Her daughter Dorothy has written a booklet entitled *The Wilder Family Story* that was published in 1972. The publication revealed to me recent information about the Wilders. They told me of their visit with Rose Wilder Lane in Danbury, Connecticut in 1964. The Smiths have two large Angel Wing Begonias they started from Rose's plant; Rose visited her father's birthplace more than once.

\* Sarah Wilder Day (Almanzo's father's sister) was Mrs. Frances E. Smith's grandmother. Her mother, Carrie May Day, died when Mrs. Smith was only seven years old. Sarah Wilder Day's husband was Almanzo's mother's brother - Lawrence Day.



On the way to the birthplace I could just see Almanzo driving his beautiful Morgan horses through the scenic countryside. The leaves were changing colors at the time of my visit and the trees on the banks of Trout River were picturesque. Almanzo and his father enjoyed happy fishing trips there.

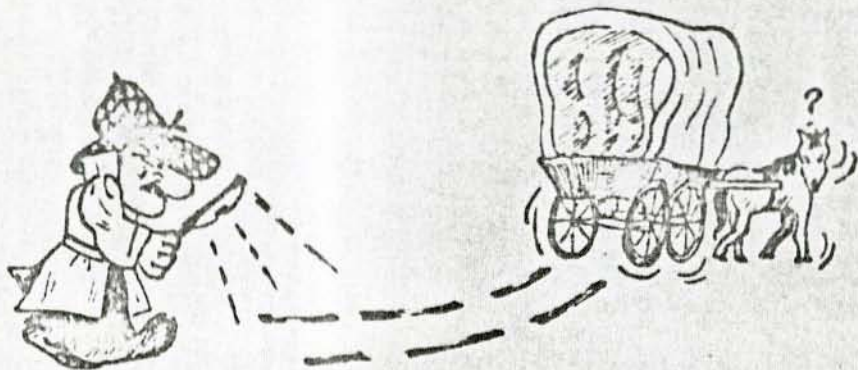
Many of the Wilders are buried in the local Morningside cemetery - Sarah Wilder Day, Abel and Hannah Paine Wilder (Almanzo's grandparents) and others. Hannah's father, Thomas Paine, was a teacher and leader during the colony days; his cousin, Robert Treat Paine, was a signer of the Declaration of Independence.

The Smiths have many treasured pictures of the Wilders. They have Sarah Wilder Day's farm painting that was used on the back cover of *Farmer Boy* in addition to Uncle Lawrence's desk, a chest with initials and many other items.

The house of History sponsored by the local Historical Society has a farmer boy kitchen with a large wood cooking stove. I saw a bedspread made by Almanzo's mother, two drinking glasses from Royal's (Almanzo's brother) home in Spring Valley, Minnesota. It has been a rewarding experience for me to visit with the local people at the Ingalls-Wilder home sites. I am amazed at their efforts to collect and preserve materials and facts for the lovers of the "Little House" books.

Many of the home sites have "Laura Ingalls Wilder Days" each year. The DeSmet Society has sponsored an open air pageant (on the homestead site) for a number of years. The Societies operate gift shops where one may buy books, post cards, twists of hay, bonnets, copies of Laura's rag doll Charlotte and other items at a reasonable price. They will gladly send order blanks upon request.

I wish every school and public library had a kit of items from the gift shops. In working with children (or adults) I have found the expense of the kit is worth the happy, anticipated smile on one's face as he or she starts to open it.



You will enjoy a visit to any of these home sites I have visited:

1. Pepin, Wisconsin - Laura's birthplace  
*Little House In The Big Woods*
2. Burr Oak, Iowa - Grace's birthplace  
*Master's Hotel*
3. DeSmet, South Dakota - Last home for Pa and Ma Ingalls - setting  
for six of Laura's books
4. Walnut Grove, Minnesota - Harold Gordon's farm  
*On The Banks Of Plum Creek*
5. Mansfield, Missouri - Rocky Ridge Farm  
Laura and Almanzo's last home  
*On The Way Home*
6. Malone, New York - Almanzo's birthplace  
*Farmer Boy*

## Everybody's Favorite Children's Books

Doris Elliott  
Breckinridge Elementary  
Lexington



arly in 1976, the Children's Literature Association, a professional organization made up of teachers, librarians, authors and publishers, announced their choice of ten best American children's books published in the last 200 years as their tribute to the Bicentennial. Of course, very little publishing for children was going on in this country even in the past century, and other than Samuel L. Clemens and Louisa May Alcott, none of the CLA choices extend into the 1800's. But a brief report on that list<sup>1</sup> gave me the idea that became our Bicentennial National Library Week project at Breckinridge Elementary School Library in Lexington. Altering the phraseology

1. "10 Best American Children's Books in 200 Years Listed," *Publishers Weekly*, February 23, 1976.