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My Visit to Mary Ingalls' School

Mary Evelyn Thurman
Western Kentucky University

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MY VISIT TO Mary Ingalls' School

by Evelyn Thurman

May 17, 1977, I visited the Iowa Braille and Sight Saving School at Vinton, Iowa. The school was established in 1852 (thirteen years before Mary was born) at Iowa City by Samuel Bacon (himself blind). It is the second oldest educational institution in Iowa (only the State University at Iowa City has been in existence longer). Later the school was moved to Vinton with a campus comprised of fifty-five acres. In the early years, most of the acreage was devoted to farm land to help support the school's dairy herd which provided the children with milk. Currently all land is utilized as campus.

I was told that the main large, handsome building, framed with large trees, is much as it was when Mary attended classes there. The school receives so many inquiries about Mary that they have prepared the following statement which was given to me:

MARY INGALLS

(Information from the files of the Iowa Braille and Sight Saving School)

Vinton, Iowa 52349

"Mary A. Ingalls was born in January, 1865, in Wisconsin. Her father was Charles Ingalls, a farmer near De Smet, Kingsbury County, Dakota Territory, at the time she was admitted to the Iowa School for the Blind (now the Iowa Braille and Sight Saving School) at Vinton, Iowa, on November 23, 1881. Date of blindness was given as 1879. She graduated June 12, 1889, though it appears that there might have been a year, 1887-1888*, when she was not in school. From the small amount of information which is given in old records, it appears that she was very active in music, including vocal, piano, harmony and, later, organ. Most of her academic grades were very high."

*One wonders if Mary were ill - she never seemed to fully recover from the illness that caused her blindness - or could there have been a lack of funds? Laura had been helpful in providing money for Mary's schooling in the early 1880's. By 1887, she and Almanzo had been married two years. Rose was a small child and the little

family had financial needs of their own. And, too, in 1887 the Ingalls moved into the last family home. The house is still located on Third Street, De Smet, South Dakota.

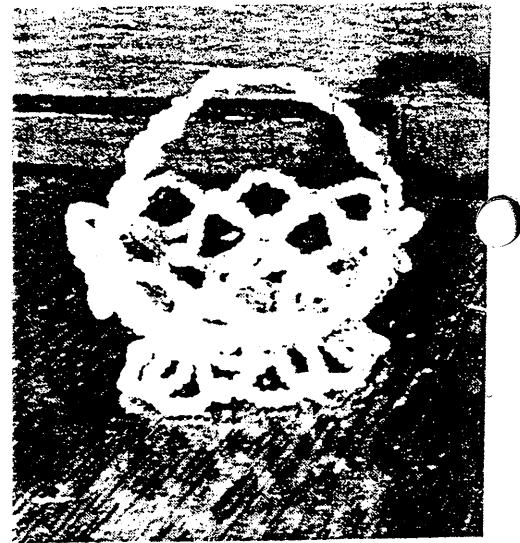
Mrs. Thelma Bryant, who works in one of the offices, called the librarian for me. Mrs. Bonnie Baker took me to their very attractive and interesting library with Braille books and magazines. The school has large print books for some students who are only partially blind. I asked to take a picture of a student reading one of Laura's books in Braille (one book in Braille is usually two or three large thick volumes).

The librarian had JoDell Burr pose for me. JoDell placed her walking cane under her feet after she sat down in front of a beautiful, white mantel over which hung a large colorful art design. Being concerned about her picture - JoDell asked, "If she was smiling?" I said, "You were reflecting what you were reading in a natural way." Mrs. Baker said she would take a good picture - and she did!

While the librarian was running an errand, I took another picture and was looking at the Braille periodicals when I heard beautiful organ music and singing. Some students were practicing for graduation. I stepped across the hall to the chapel balcony to better hear the singing and organ music. The setting and music was a real treat for this music lover. I was glad to learn the chapel has remained much the same over the years.

As I left the school I felt as if everyone I met had been "hand picked" for his or her job. I'm sure this was true during Mary's years of study. Over the years I have often said I think the people of Iowa have an extra plus - a genuine, self-reliance quality in their living. I found this feeling at Vinton.

I have been visiting the Ingalls-Wilder homes for six summers. My stop at Vinton will always be a highlight as I show my slides and talk to students about my visit to Laura's oldest sister's school.



Bead basket made by Mary, a craft learned at the school for the blind.

Memories of Laura Ingalls Wilder by Irene Fosness

I first read the Little House Books when I was teaching a rural school in Iowa from 1942-44. We read them aloud for opening exercises, and no other books equaled them in popularity with the children. So they decided to write to tell Mrs. Wilder how much they enjoyed her books. The letter of May 6, 1944 is her answer.

Rocky Ridge Farm
Mansfield, Missouri
May 6th, 1944

Dear Miss Fosness and Pupils,

I am glad you like my Little House Books so much and I thank you all for your nice letters.

It must be great fun to go to such a small school. Really your letters made me rather homesick for the little schools I used to go to when I was your age and for the two nice ones I taught. The first one I taught was pretty bad, but there are not many like that.

I think my favorite among the books is the very first one, Little House in the Big Woods. I always

loved the stories Pa used to tell us.

Again thanking you for the kind things you say of my stories and for recommending them to others for reading, I remain

Yours sincerely,
Laura Ingalls Wilder

In 1950 while I was principal of an elementary school, we too

Continued on page 7