

5-1981

## The Wilders in Louisiana -- Part II

Mary Evelyn Thurman  
*Western Kentucky Univeristy*

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### Recommended Citation

Thurman, Mary Evelyn, "The Wilders in Louisiana -- Part II" (1981). *Publications*. Paper 7.  
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# THE WILDERS IN LOUISIANA

## Part II

By Evelyn Thurman  
Librarian, Western Kentucky  
University

My second day in Louisiana my friend took me to Crowley to find more about the Wilder and Thayer families. (Eliza Jane Wilder married Thomas Thayer.) We were directed to an old cemetery where we found the graves of James and Angeline D. Wilder who were the parents of Eliza Jane and Almanzo. Eliza Jane may have persuaded her parents to move to Louisiana. She probably thought the warmer climate would be easier on her aging parents. They sold their wonderful farm in Spring Valley, Minnesota, in 1898, (I visited the farm in 1977) spent the summer with Laura and Almanzo in Mansfield, Missouri, and arrived in the fall. The investment of the large sum of money they received from their farm was a financial failure. This failure was through no fault of the family. Many believe Mr. Wilder died of a broken heart in February, 1899. His wife lived six years longer. Eliza Jane was also able to persuade her oldest sister, Laura Wilder Howard, to come to Crowley to live. She died there in September, 1899, at the age of 55. It was a great loss for Angeline Wilder to lose her husband and daughter the same year. The loss was even greater for Eliza Jane because she lost her father, sister and husband within the year of 1899.

There were three graves between the senior Wilders and their daughter, Laura Wilder Howard. Two of the graves were marked Howard E. Merritt (1901-1971) and Ethel J. Merritt (1899-1978). It appears these were Laura Howard's grandchildren. Mrs. Howard had two children, one of whom married Fred Merritt. We found graves for Mr. (1864-1933) and Mrs. (1876-1964) Fred Merritt elsewhere in the cemetery. There was also a grave for a young boy, Ralph Merritt, on the same lot. I think he may have been Fred Merritt's son.

In addition to information gained from the gravestones, I learned that Eliza Jane may have encouraged her younger brother, Perley, to come to Louisiana. He lived some miles from Crowley near the Mermentau River.

We went from the cemetery to the court house to see if we could

find out if the house where the Thayers had lived was still standing. We checked to location but, we did not find the house because there are so many rice elevators along the site.

My friend called Gervaise Thayer (Eliza Jane's grandson) from the courthouse. He invited us to his home at 1126 William Egan Avenue. When we arrived Gervaise (Laura and Almanzo's great nephew) was in his garden. He had a very pleasant smile when he came to greet us and his pretty wife invited us in. He was an oil driller and took early retirement because of a heart condition. At one time he had worked in Italy, Iran and Kuwait. While we talked, his wife took the family Bible and copied information about their family for me.

Gervaise said he found his great uncle, Almanzo Wilder, a very likeable person. He was ten years old when he first met Almanzo. He said his great uncle Perley's son had been a very successful business man and flew his own plane.

Gervaise told of meeting his cousin, Rose Wilder Lane, in Florida. He agreed that Rose seemed to be more like her Aunt Eliza Jane than her own mother, Laura Ingalls Wilder. I told Gervaise I had met his cousins, Frances and Dorothy Smith at Malone, New York, where his Grandmother Thayer was born.

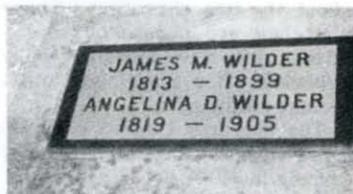
I asked him what he remembered about his grandmother. He had many happy memories of her pet goat. He was only seven years old when his grandmother died in 1930.

Gervaise and his wife went with us to the cemetery to look for his grandfather's grave. However, we were unable to locate Thomas Thayer's grave. The stone may have been lost during the 1940 flood.

In 1904, some years after Thomas Thayer's death, Eliza Jane married Maxwell Gordon. After twelve years of marriage, he left her and went to Texas.

Eliza Jane died at the home of her son on June 2, 1930, at the age of 80. Wilder Thayer, her son, worked for the post office department for 37 years and was a veteran of World War I. He died on October 27, 1965, and was buried in Lafayette.

Meeting Eliza Jane's grandson was the highlight of my trip, since children and others often ask if there are living relatives of Laura and Almanzo and if I have met any of them.



Mr. and Mrs. Gervaise Thayer