



Reconstructed Little House in the Big Woods, near Pepin, Wisconsin

Excerpts from  
*America the Beautiful*  
by Notgrass History

## Laura Ingalls Wilder, Pioneer and Author

**D**uring the Civil War, Congress passed the Homestead Act of 1862. President Lincoln signed it. As you can see in the chart on page 585, thousands of people moved to homesteads during the time of Presidents Hayes, Garfield, and Arthur. Among them was the family of Charles and Caroline Ingalls, parents of author Laura Ingalls Wilder.

Many homesteaders were farm workers from the East who had no land of their own. Many were immigrants who had just arrived in America. Some had been enslaved. A few were women. The earliest homestead claims were for 160 acres. The law required that a man or woman be the head of a household or be at least 21 years old. The first step was to file a claim at the Land Office nearest the desired land. The homesteader paid a \$10 filing fee to place a temporary claim on the land and also paid the land agent (a federal employee) a \$2 commission. During the next five years, he or she had to farm the land, live on it, build a home, and make improvements.

Many homesteaders on the Great Plains built sod houses. Sod is grass with roots and dirt attached. Settlers cut slabs of sod, laid them grass side down, and stacked them like building blocks. Some families dug into hillsides to build dugout homes.

### Dugout House in Nevada and Sod House in Nebraska





## The Ingalls Family

In 1880, 44-year-old Charles Phillip Ingalls filed a claim for a homestead in Dakota Territory. Charles had been born in 1836 near Cuba, New York. His parents were Lansford and Laura Ingalls. Charles was a descendant of one of the Englishmen who sailed to America on the *Mayflower*. When Charles was around 10 years old, his family moved to the frontier, first to Illinois and then to Wisconsin. There he met Caroline Lake Quiner and her family.

Caroline was born in Wisconsin in 1839. Caroline's ancestors had come to America from Scotland. Charles and Caroline were married shortly before the Civil War in 1860. He was 24 years old and she was 20. In 1863 Charles and Caroline moved into a Little House in the Big Woods, near Lake Pepin in Wisconsin (see photo on page 584). In 1865 Mary Amelia was born. Two years later, they had another daughter, Laura Elizabeth.

When Laura was in her 60s, she began to write books about her childhood on the American frontier. She wanted children to know what it was like when she was a girl. She published her first book, *Little House in the Big Woods*, when she was 65. She published her eighth book in 1943, when she was 76. Laura omitted some experiences from her childhood, especially the sad ones. In some cases, Laura changed some of the details of her childhood, such as her age in a particular place. However, Laura said, "I lived everything that happened in my books." The title of each of the next eight sections of this lesson is the title of one of Laura's books.

## Little House in the Big Woods

In her first book, Laura told about her earliest childhood experiences in a log cabin in Wisconsin. Pa farms, traps, and hunts. Ma is a gentle and kind mother and homemaker. Pa plays the fiddle and the family sings. They enjoy visits with grandparents, aunts, uncles, and cousins.

Laura was two years old when Pa sold his home and land, put his family and their belongings in a covered wagon, and moved to Kansas. In writing this book, Laura depended on stories her parents told. Meanwhile, a boy named Almanzo Wilder was growing up back East. Laura didn't know then that one day she would marry the man who had spent his childhood as a . . .

## Farmer Boy

Almanzo Wilder was born in 1857 on a farm in the foothills of the Adirondack Mountains near Malone, New York, close to the Canadian border. When he was a teenager, his family moved to Spring Valley, Minnesota. Almanzo, his brother Royal, and his sister Eliza Jane later became homesteaders near De Smet, South Dakota. There they met the Ingalls family.



Laura Ingalls Wilder



*Stream where Almanzo Wilder and his father went fishing near their home*

## Little House on the Prairie

... is the log cabin Pa built in Kansas after the family left the Big Woods. While in Kansas, Ma gave birth to Caroline Celestia, whom they called Carrie (though in the books, Laura says Carrie was born in the Big Woods). U.S. Army soldiers forced the Ingalls to leave Kansas because they had built their house on land that belonged to the Osage Nation. Though Laura tells about their leaving Kansas, she does not tell that the family returned to Wisconsin for three years. In 1874 they set out from Wisconsin again in their covered wagon and moved into a dugout...



## On the Banks of Plum Creek

Plum Creek was near Walnut Grove, Minnesota. Here Mary and Laura walked across the prairie to school in town. The Ingalls joined the Congregational Church. Pa began to build a proper house for his family. Confident that he would earn money from his wheat crop, he borrowed money to finish it. However, the grasshopper plague of 1874 ate their crops. Pa walked over 200 miles to the east to find work.

Though Laura does not mention him in her books, a baby brother, Charles Frederick, was born while the Ingalls lived on Plum Creek. Laura is also silent about their move to Burr Oak, Iowa. On their way between Plum Creek and Burr Oak, her baby brother died. In Burr Oak, the Ingalls lived and worked in the Masters Hotel. Laura and Mary worked as waitresses and in the kitchen. Pa and Ma wanted to get their girls away from the hotel, so they moved first to rented rooms over a store and later to a small house. Grace Pearl was born in Burr Oak.





*Masters Hotel, Burr Oak, Iowa*

After two years, the family left Burr Oak and moved back to Walnut Grove. Mary became ill and lost her sight. Pa told Laura that she would have to become Mary's eyes. Patient Mary used her other senses to know and to feel the world around her, while Laura described what she saw with her eyes. After several years in Walnut Grove, the Ingalls family moved to South Dakota . . .

## By the Shores of Silver Lake

Pa went to Dakota Territory first after getting a temporary job as the paymaster for a railroad company building a track. Ma, Mary, Laura, Carrie, and Grace joined him later. This time they did not travel in a covered wagon. They rode on a train for seven miles and then rode the rest of the way in an open wagon. The Ingalls spent their first winter in the railroad surveyor's house. Night after night people moving west to become homesteaders showed up at the little surveyor's house needing food and shelter for the night. The new town of De Smet was going up beside the tracks. Pa bought a city lot and built a store, hoping to rent it to a shopkeeper. De Smet was in the part of Dakota Territory that later became South Dakota.

In 1880 Pa filed a claim for a homestead. He built a rough little shanty and a stable, plowed and sowed his fields, and planted five cottonwood trees, one for each of his girls. Homesteaders only had to live on their claims for part of the year, so Pa moved his family into their store in town for several winters. Charles Ingalls is considered the first resident of the town of De Smet, South Dakota. The town was named for Jesuit missionary Pierre-Jean De Smet (see page 553). When Laura wrote about their first winter in town, she called it . . .

*Surveyor's House, De Smet, South Dakota*



Laura Ingalls Wilder Biography (Excerpts from *America the Beautiful*) © Notgrass History





*Winter, 1880-1881*

## The Long Winter

In 1880 the town of De Smet and the homesteads around it were brand new. Townspeople and homesteaders who had moved to town for the winter were depending on the railroad to bring food from the East to stock the stores. However, that winter the first blizzard came early—in October. One blizzard after another hit De Smet. When a blizzard came during school, Laura and Carrie barely found their way home in the blinding snow.

Many miles east of De Smet, snow piled so high on the railroad track that the train could not get through. Townspeople used up almost all of the food in the stores. They were afraid they would starve. Men in De Smet heard a rumor that a settler several miles away had a large amount of wheat seed. Almanzo Wilder and Cap Garland, who was Laura’s and Carrie’s schoolmate, went out in a sleigh onto the wide, white prairie to find that man and his wheat. They could have lost their way and frozen to death. However, they found the man, bought wheat from him, and made it back to town. Their heroic efforts kept the townspeople from starving. The train was not able to reach De Smet until May, eight months after the first blizzard. After surviving *The Long Winter*, the Ingalls family moved back to the homestead for the summer. Laura enjoyed the country life on the homestead and the winters her family spent in the . . .

## Little Town on the Prairie

Laura grew to be a teenager on the Ingalls homestead and in De Smet. She enjoyed the school, church, and social events in town. One evening after an event, Almanzo Wilder surprised her by asking to walk her home. He was ten years older than Laura. She did not consider him one of her peers but as a friend of her father.

Ma had learned about the Iowa School for the Blind. After years of saving, the Ingalls family was able to save enough money to help Mary attend college there. Ma had always hoped that one of her girls would become a teacher. Laura did not want to teach, but she knew it was a way to help her parents keep Mary in college. When Laura was almost 15 years old, she took an exam to qualify as a teacher. She passed. Then, Laura came to the part of her life she called . . .

*Sunset near De Smet*

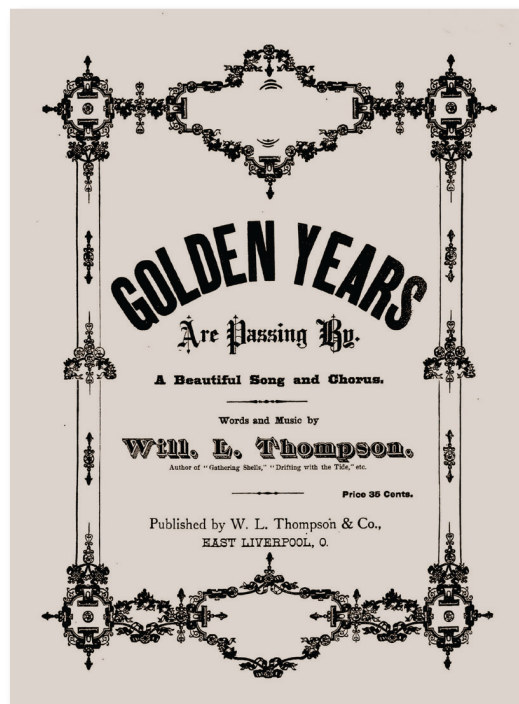


## These Happy Golden Years

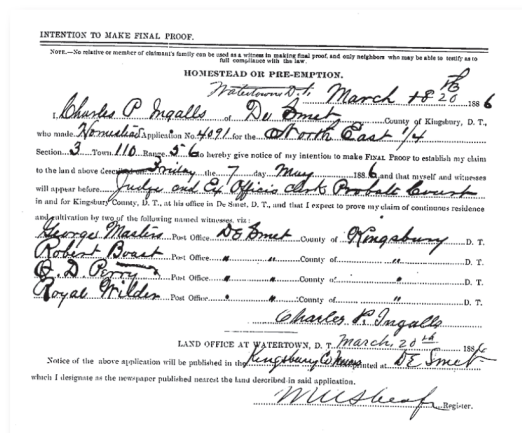
While teaching in her first school, Laura boarded with a homesteader. His wife hated living in the West. She made things miserable for Laura. Almanzo drove his sleigh to the school every Friday to bring Laura back to her parents' home to spend the weekends.

Though Laura made it clear to Almanzo that she did not want him for a beau, he continued to court her. They enjoyed sleigh rides in winter and buggy rides in summer. Laura grew to love Almanzo and agreed to marry him. On the last night that Laura spent at home with Ma, Pa, Grace, and Carrie, Pa played the old songs on his fiddle. Laura and Almanzo married in 1885. She was 18 and he was 28. Laura joined Almanzo on his homestead claim.

Charles Ingalls received the patent for his homestead claim in March of 1886, one year after Chester Arthur left the presidency. See his patent below.



*Music to one of the songs Pa played on his fiddle*



*Patent for Charles Ingalls' homestead*

## The Writer from Rocky Ridge Farm

Laura and Almanzo spent time in South Dakota, Minnesota, and Florida during their early years of marriage. In 1894 Laura (age 27), Almanzo (age 37), and their daughter Rose (age 7), moved from De Smet to the Ozark Mountains in Missouri in a covered wagon.

Laura wrote all of her books at Rocky Ridge, the farm they purchased there. She became famous. She received many letters from her fans. She traveled and made speeches. Laura received many awards for her books,

including Newbery Honor awards. The Association for Library Service to Children began to honor authors and illustrators with the Laura Ingalls Wilder Award. Laura received the first award in 1954.

Laura and Almanzo were married for 63 years. He died in 1949 at age 92. During her long life, Laura experienced many changes. She traveled on a covered wagon when she was a girl; when she was 87 years old, she flew on an airplane to visit her daughter in Connecticut. Laura hoped she would reach the age of 90. She died at home three days after her 90th birthday in 1957.





*Interior of the reconstructed Little House on the Prairie in Kansas, 2008*

Inside the small Bible Laura kept on the table beside her rocking chair was a list of Bible references written in her handwriting. The last one said, "And make Psalm 51 your prayer." It begins:

**Be gracious to me, O God,  
according to Your lovingkindness;  
According to the greatness  
of Your compassion  
blot out my transgressions.  
Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity  
and cleanse me from my sin.  
Psalm 51:1-2**

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