Laura Ingalls Wilder: art vs. reality

Mary Victoria Gach
*Iowa State University*

Follow this and additional works at: [https://lib.dr.iastate.edu/rtd](https://lib.dr.iastate.edu/rtd)

Part of the *English Language and Literature Commons*

**Recommended Citation**

[https://lib.dr.iastate.edu/rtd/16073](https://lib.dr.iastate.edu/rtd/16073)

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Iowa State University Capstones, Theses and Dissertations at Iowa State University Digital Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in Retrospective Theses and Dissertations by an authorized administrator of Iowa State University Digital Repository. For more information, please contact digirep@iastate.edu.
Laura Ingalls Wilder:
Art vs. reality

by

Mary Victoria Gach

A Thesis Submitted to the
Graduate Faculty in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Degree of
MASTER OF ARTS

Major: English

Approved:

Signatures have been redacted for privacy

Iowa State University
Ames, Iowa
1980
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TABLE OF CONTENTS</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>INTRODUCTION</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>COMPARISON OF ART AND REALITY</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>REASONS FOR DISCREPANCIES</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CONCLUSION</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NOTES</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WORKS CONSULTED</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
From 1932 through 1943, Laura Ingalls Wilder wrote a series of eight children's books. These recollections of her growing up on the American frontier of the 1870s and 1880s (called the "Little House" books) begin with her earliest remembrances of family life in Wisconsin in Little House in the Big Woods, and continue through to her marriage at age 18 in These Happy Golden Years. The intervening books detail her family's moves to Indian Territory in Kansas; Walnut Grove, Minnesota; and De Smet, South Dakota. Farmer Boy, the second book of the series, deals with the early life of Almanzo Wilder, Laura's husband, in Malone, New York.

The "Little House" books chronicle Indian threats, grasshopper swarms, droughts, floods, blizzards, boredom, and many other hazards faced by pioneer families of the Midwest. Counterbalancing these hardships, though, is Wilder's depiction of family solidarity and security. No matter what the adversary, a gentle word from "Ma" or a fiddled tune by "Pa" generally set circumstances straight.

The books are classified as historical fiction, and, according to two researchers, Zena Sutherland and May Hill Arbuthnot, they are the first historical fiction about the Midwest to captivate young readers.
The pioneering and settling of the Midwest have fewer picturesque details than has the dramatic first colonization. Frontier life has more humdrum struggle, less romantic adventure. Until Laura Ingalls Wilder undertook the writing of her family's experiences in settling the Midwest, there were no books of this period which really held children's interest.

From *LBBW*, aimed at 8-9 year olds, through *THGY*, written for the "almost-grown-up youngster," the series is matched by few other books in giving children such a sense of continuity and progress. These books also serve the basic needs of children in growing up: the need for security—material, emotional, and spiritual; the need for achievement—physical, intellectual, spiritual, moral, and maturational; the need for change, for escape through projection; and the need for aesthetic satisfaction, the appreciation of literary beauty.

Wilder's forte is artful remembrance, without overt sentimentality. The books have been popular with children, their intended audience, since the initial publication of *LBBW* in 1932. Children's demands for more "Laura books" bolstered Wilder's confidence in her writing ability and led eventually to the full series of eight books. Parents, teachers, and librarians have praised the books for their honesty, simplicity, and portrayal of strong moral values in the context of a caring family. In 1977, it was estimated that more than twenty million copies of her books had been sold since their original publication in the 1930s and early 1940s. The series' popularity has been increased by Little
House on the Prairie, a highly-rated television series loosely based on Wilder's books. 8

Seldom has the factuality of the "Little House" books been questioned, yet a comparison of the true events of Wilder's life and her representations of them in her books shows a wide gap in details of time, place, and characters. In response to a remark that "[a]s an artist working with her materials, Mrs. Wilder knew she could achieve a more artistic effect by altering the true facts occasionally," 9 Rose Wilder Lane, Laura's daughter, contended, "... it has been charged that my mother's books are fiction. They are the truth and only the truth; every detail in them is written as my mother remembered it. She omitted a year ... but she added nothing and 'fictionized' nothing that she wrote. The books are entirely the 'true stories' that they claim to be; excepting only the two years added to her real age in Wisconsin." 10

This paper will be a refutation of Lane's contention: Laura Ingalls Wilder's "Little House" books are not strictly factual accounts of her life on the Midwestern prairie; rather, they are sanitized representations of her life, as Wilder wanted to remember it and as she wanted her readers to perceive it.

Wilder herself qualified the truthfulness of her books in an excerpt from her memoirs, written shortly after she had finished writing On the Banks of Plum Creek, the fourth volume of the series. 11 In this commentary she wrote, "Every story in this novel, all the circumstances, each incident is true.
All I have told is true but it is not the whole truth. There were some stories I wanted to tell but would not be responsible for putting in a book for children, even though I knew them as a child." She deliberately edited the facts and stories of her life for various reasons, particularly to maintain the balance between the unpredictability and harshness of prairie life and the security and solidarity of family life; and to appeal to an audience of less-sophisticated readers.

The factuality of the "Little House" books will be examined in two ways in this paper. The actual events and people in Wilder's life will be compared with their presentation in her books, and the discrepancies will be examined and evaluated.

At present, research into Wilder's life consists of Laura: The Life of Laura Ingalls Wilder, a lengthy biography by Donald Zochert, two scholarly critical articles by Rosa Ann Moore of the University of Tennessee, and about two dozen articles in journals intended for use by elementary teachers and librarians. Additional biographical information is available from various publications of the Laura Ingalls Wilder Memorial Societies, particularly in booklets by William T. Anderson and Irene V. Lichty, curators of the museums at De Smet, South Dakota, and Mansfield, Missouri, respectively. Wilder's unpublished autobiographical memoirs and four of the original book manuscripts are held at the Laura Ingalls Wilder Home and Museum in Mansfield. The Detroit Public Library
contains the manuscripts of *The Long Winter*\(^{14}\) and *THGY*, and the Pomona (California) Public Library has the original manuscript of *Little Town on the Prairie*.\(^{15}\)

Because the original memoirs and manuscripts could not be obtained for this study, it relies heavily on the facts of Wilder's life as presented in Zochert's biography. Available journal articles and pamphlets have served to verify and supplement Zochert's information. The primary sources consulted for this paper are seven of the eight original "Little House" books. (*Farmer Boy* has been omitted because it does not deal directly with Laura's life.) An unedited Wilder manuscript, which was published posthumously in 1971 as *The First Four Years*,\(^{16}\) is briefly considered. It serves primarily as a contrast to its predecessor, *THGY*, the last book of the series edited by Wilder.
Discrepancies between Wilder's early childhood and her relating of those years in her first three books about herself fall mainly into two categories: date/age differences and location/movement differences. As will be discussed more fully later in this paper, these time and place discrepancies are due primarily to the author's and the publishing companies' editing and revision of the original manuscripts for greater dramatization and more consistent characterization.

The "Little House" books, although based on the facts of Wilder's life, do not reproduce these facts exactly. Details of the Ingalls family's earlier years are glossed over in the series because the first book opens when "Laura" is four years old. The Ingalls family actually began when Charles Ingalls married Caroline Quiner, February 1, 1860, at Concord, Wisconsin. Wilder's sister, Mary, was born January 10, 1865; Laura herself was born February 7, 1867, both near Pepin, Wisconsin. In July 1868, their family and their Uncle Henry Quiner's family left the "Big Woods" of Wisconsin for land they had purchased in Chariton County, Missouri. Of Wilder's stay in Missouri, Zochert wrote: "Because Laura was too little to remember, it was a silent winter for her books. She left no record of it . . . In February she celebrated her second birthday; then came spring and the work of sowing crops. Summer followed. These too are silent seasons" (Laura, p. 25).
That summer the families again decided to move. Uncle Henry's family returned to the "Big Woods," while the Ingalls proceeded to Montgomery County, Kansas, to a place thirteen miles south of Independence. Wilder wrote of the time spent in Kansas in *Little House on the Prairie*, the third "Little House" book. Osage Indians visited their house on the prairie in the episode of "Indians in the House" (*LHP*, Ch. 11). Six-year-old "Laura" in the book was both frightened and fascinated by the Indians, understandably so for a pioneer child of that age, and one with which young readers could identify. However, Wilder's memoirs record that when this episode occurred, she actually "was two years, the littlest" (*Laura*, p. 35). The book also recounts a visit "Laura," "Mary," and "Pa" made to a deserted Indian camp to pick up beads for "Baby Carrie," who had come with them to Indian Territory (*LHP*, Ch. 14). In reality, however, the visit to the Indian camp on August 3, 1870, was designed to occupy the older girls while Carrie Ingalls was being born in the little house on the prairie (*Laura*, p. 42). The dramatic "Fire in the Chimney" episode (*LHP*, Ch. 16) in which "Laura" saved "Mary" and "Carrie" from being burned actually happened, less dramatically, and in an empty log cabin in Missouri on the family's return to Wisconsin in early 1871. The author probably included this event in *LHP* because the "Little House" books do not record the family's return to Wisconsin through Missouri, and the fire was a more threatening and exciting danger to the home "Ma"
and "Pa" had so carefully built than to an empty cabin belonging to a stranger.

Wilder's published version of the reasons for their departure from Indian Territory is also more dramatic than reality, in keeping with her portrayal of "Pa" as an independent, fearless man. In the book, a neighbor, "Mr. Scott," brings news that the government is sending soldiers to take the settlers out of Indian Territory.

'No, Scott!' Pa answered him. 'I'll not stay here to be taken away by the soldiers like an outlaw! If some blasted politicians in Washington hadn't sent out word it would be all right to settle here, I'd never have been three miles over the line into Indian Territory. But I'll not wait for the soldiers to take us out. We're going now!'

'What is the matter, Charles? Where are we going?' Ma asked.

'Durned if I know! But we're going. We're leaving here!' Pa said . . . (LHP, p. 316).

The government really did send soldiers to remove settlers from the Osage Diminished Reserve in January 1870. In an early draft of this episode, though, Wilder explained that her father had actually received a letter from Gustaf Gustafson, the man who had purchased their cabin in Wisconsin. He wanted to move West and relinquish the house to the Ingalls. Her father agreed to take back the land and let Gustafson go, thus initiating their return to the "Big Woods" (Laura, p. 46).

According to Zochert, on their way home,

something interesting happened to Laura. She began to remember. She was four years old and her eyes
saw everything. . . . She heard sounds. . . . She smelled the smells. . . . All of these things she saw and heard and smelled and remembered.

The deep mine of her memory began to fill. . . . Each thing in it brought a remembrance of other things. . . .

Years later Laura would work this rich mine of memory and write the loveliest stories of all of what it was like to be a pioneer girl in America. She told a friend then that she remembered everything in her books except the stories of her life on the prairies of Kansas, in Indian Territory. Those were Pa's stories and Ma's stories and Mary's stories, because they had been old enough to remember (Laura, pp. 49-50).

By May 1871, the Ingalls reached Pepin, where they lived with Uncle Henry Quiner until the Gustafsons moved on. LHBW, the first book of the series, begins in the fall of that year and covers up to the winter of 1872. Wilder and her daughter, Rose Wilder Lane, believing "Laura" was 2-3 years old in LHBW, had fought the publisher's insistence on making her 4-5 years old. In truth, Laura was four when the Ingalls returned to the "Big Woods," and she turned five there in February 1872. The publisher's demand, though, resulted in Wilder's changing of the dates and places of her real life to conform to "Laura's" altered chronology in succeeding books. The effect of these alterations will be developed more fully later in this paper.

This family-centered first book records many of the actual events of 1871-1874 in Wisconsin. It omits, however, Mary and Laura Ingalls' school experiences at the Barry Corner School. Their enrollment is not even recounted in Wilder's
memoirs; rather, the fact of their attendance was discovered in the school's enrollment records (Laura, p. 55). Wilder probably chose not to include her Barry Corner School experiences in LHBW because her attendance there was brief and sporadic, because she intended the book as a collection of "Pa's" stories, and because she centered the book (and LHP) almost entirely around the basic family unit, with little interference from outside institutions.

In the chronology of the books, the five members of the Ingalls family set off alone in early 1873 from the little house in the "Big Woods" for the Indian Territory; then from the little house on the Kansas prairie to the banks of Plum Creek in Minnesota in 1874. Actually, the Ingalls traveled from Wisconsin to Missouri in 1868, from Missouri to Kansas in 1869, from Kansas to Wisconsin in 1871, and from Wisconsin to Minnesota in 1874. They left Pepin in February 1874, accompanied by the family of Peter Ingalls. After staying together in a small cabin on their way West, the two families separated when the weather became warm enough to travel safely. Because the emphasis of her stories was still centered around her immediate family, Wilder did not include the fact that relatives traveled with them. Instead, she portrayed "Pa," "Ma," and the girls journeying alone across the Minnesota prairie to Walnut Grove.

Events of the Ingalls' experiences during this first residence near Walnut Grove are recorded in OBFC, which treats
their arrival at the dugout in early 1874, through Christmas, 1875. Here in a new schoolhouse they attended classes taught by "Miss Eva Beadle." They also encountered grasshopper swarms, blizzards, and "Nellie Oleson." Although the grasshoppers and blizzards were historically accurate, "Laura's" nemesis was Nellie Owens, two years younger than Laura Ingalls; and "Pa's" gift of three dollars donated for a church bell, instead of for replacing his badly worn boots, was really $26.15, according to church records (Laura, p. 78). Wilder probably never knew this fact, but even if she had known, the gift of his last three dollars seems more generous in view of his financial difficulties at the time, especially his need for new boots; and it is more consistent with "Pa's" characterization.

A major omission from this time span is the birth of Wilder's only brother, Charles Frederick Ingalls, November 1, 1875. Although he lived nearly eleven months, "Freddie" (as he was called) is never mentioned in the "Little House" books. His death occurred during the family's journey to Burr Oak, Iowa, a time Wilder omitted in order to reconcile "Laura's" age in the later books with her real age. Because the period during which his death occurred was omitted from the book, Wilder probably found it simpler to eliminate Freddie's existence altogether, rather than include his birth, then account for his disappearance from later books. She may also have considered the unhappiness of his death too unpleasant to
include for her young readers.

In *By the Shores of Silver Lake*, the years 1876-1879 are recorded as having been spent in Walnut Grove. The dog "Jack" is described as having a bed near the back door: "He had slept there ever since they moved into this house. . . . For five years he had slept there . . . " (BSSL, p. 11). "Laura" is almost thirteen at the beginning of the story.

The years 1876-1879 in Wilder's real life were a cycle of travel from Walnut Grove through southeastern Minnesota and northeastern Iowa, and back to Walnut Grove. These years, omitted from the "Little House" books for editorial reasons, were marked by financial difficulties, sickness, death, worry, and hard work. In the spring of 1876, Wilder's mother was extremely ill, and the continued presence of the grasshoppers made extensive farming unprofitable, so her father worked in town. On July 10, they sold their house and land on Plum Creek and went to Peter Ingalls' farm near South Troy, Minnesota. On August 27, Freddie Ingalls died.

The Ingalls moved on to Burr Oak, Iowa. Of this trip Zochert wrote:

From the beginning the journey had been sad for Ma and Pa; now it seemed hopeless. Laura had always found bits of happiness and moments to remember wherever the road would go, but now even she felt the press of the hard pioneer life that Ma and Pa already knew. When she grew up, she never wrote of these hard days except on the tablet of her deepest memories. Even then she spared herself their full reconsideration. The journey to Iowa, she said simply, was 'cold, miserable' (*Laura*, p. 97).
In Burr Oak the family helped William Steadman run the Burr Oak House, a hotel in the same building as a saloon. There Wilder and her sister Mary had to tolerate the lame, mischievous Johnny Steadman and babysit for his whining brother Tommy. Christmas, unlike the happy times recorded in the "Little House" books, was meager and disappointing, especially because the children came down with the measles. In January 1877, the Ingalls moved from the hotel to living quarters above a nearby grocery store. Following a fire and a gruesome death in the saloon, they moved again in the spring to a rented house on the northwest edge of town. Grace Ingalls was born May 23, school ended in July, and the summer was generally pleasant for the young Ingalls. Laura's father, though, was still in debt, restless, and worried.

Early that fall they returned to Walnut Grove, where they spent the winter with the Ensign family. Just before spring they moved into their own house and Mr. Ingalls opened a butcher shop. Life in Walnut Grove fell into a routine. The girls attended school under "Uncle Sam" Masters and met his daughter Genevieve. Nellie Owens was still there. Wilder worked and babysat in the Masters' Hotel that summer. At the end of 1878, she and Howard Ensign won Bibles in a Scripture lesson contest.

The first part of 1879 was a desperate time for the Ingalls. The father had to work at carpentry to avoid total poverty. A sister, Mary, contracted a high fever, followed
by a stroke, which damaged the nerves of her eyes and led to her eventual blindness. Their fortunes improved, however, when Mr. Ingalls was offered a job on the railroad in South Dakota.

Wilder began BSSL with this event, skipping over the cycle of travel through eastern Minnesota and Iowa; and in three short paragraphs, briefly established the fact of "Mary's" blindness as the result of scarlet fever. Although the family still encountered hard times, the stability of being settled in or near De Smet, South Dakota, is reflected in a close parallel between "Laura's" life, ages thirteen through eighteen, in the books and the actual events of Wilder's teenage years.

The discrepancies between the events of Wilder's adolescence, courtship, and marriage are not as pronounced as the discrepancies in the first three books. By omitting the Burr Oak and second Walnut Grove interludes, Wilder reconciled the age differences of the first books. Therefore, the discrepancies of BSSL, TLW, LTP, and THGY involve differences in names, rearrangement of the order of some events, and the omission of other events. One reordering of events occurs in THGY. The manuscript of THGY shows "Laura" on the way home at the end of her second week at the Brewster school, explaining to "Almanzo" exactly why she rides with him. The published version shows her explaining this to him after her fourth week at school and her fourth weekend at home, on the trip back to the "Brewsters'"
home (THGY, p. 62). This simple rearrangement of events makes "Laura's" return more important in view of the wretched fifth week she experienced, and her uncertainty about "Almanzo's" return for her. Another event which was rearranged to affect the mood was "Ben Woodworth's" birthday party at the railroad depot. The cheery story was originally written in Chapter 11 of The Hard Winter, the manuscript on which TLW was based, but was omitted and later published as Chapter 20 in LTP. The party was better suited to the lighter mood of the events in LTP than to the unremitting harshness of TLW.

Besides the factual differences in ages, dates, and places of the "Little House" books, characters' names and Wilder's portrayal of some characters, particularly of her family, also vary. Some of the characters Wilder may have been too young to remember accurately; others were altered or omitted because their real personalities were not, in Wilder's mind, suitable for young readers. In LHP Wilder wrote of her family's salvation by a brave Indian chief named "Soldat du Chêne" (Ch. 23). Neither she, nor an expert she consulted while writing about her experiences in Kansas, could find any record of the Osage Chief Soldat du Chêne in 1870-71 (Laura, p. 44). He may have been the son or grandson of a Soldat du Chêne who signed a treaty at Fort Osage as a chief, November 10, 1810.23

The historicity of relatives and close friends mentioned in the books has, for the most part, been documented by earlier studies; however, "Miss Eva Beadle" was probably
Mr. Lafayette Bedal, the schoolmaster, or Mrs. Clementina Bedal, the postmaster's wife, who may have taught school also. The only Eva Bedal in Walnut Grove was Lafayette Bedal's four-year-old daughter. "Mr. and Mrs. Brewster," with whom "Laura" stayed when she first taught school, were Louis and Lib Bouchie in real life. Their names may have been changed because of their unflattering portrayal in THGY. The Steadman boys, whom Wilder had known in Walnut Grove and later in Burr Oak, were totally omitted, as was Howard Ensign, who had proposed to Wilder when she was eleven, and with whom, as noted above, she had shared honors in a Sunday school contest. Wilder either considered the Steadmans and Ensign not relevant to the stories she chose to tell, or she remembered them as too weak or obnoxious to include in books for children.

The character of "Nellie Oleson," who plagued "Laura" in OBPC in Minnesota and in LTP and THGY in South Dakota, is actually the combination of two people Wilder knew as a child—Nellie Owens and Genevieve Masters. Nellie Owens was the basis for the early portrayal of "Nellie Oleson," the self-centered storekeeper's daughter in Walnut Grove. There she and Genny Masters had competed for Wilder's allegiance, eventually, however, finding themselves her followers with the rest of the younger girls (Laura, pp. 120-21). Genevieve Masters, the snobbish daughter of schoolteacher "Uncle Sam" Masters in Walnut Grove, reappears as "Nellie Oleson" in the schoolroom scenes with "Miss Eliza Jane Wilder" in De Smet (Laura, p. 163).
The author may have combined the personalities of these two people into one character, "Nellie Oleson," because their personalities were actually so similar. Moreover, she may have felt that setting two antagonists against one protagonist was unbalanced, and therefore she evened the odds by making one consistent character called "Nellie Oleson" to oppose "Laura."

Although her family members were real people, Wilder distorted them somewhat in her books. In a comparison of Wilder's draft manuscripts at the Detroit Public Library with the printed books, Rosa Ann Moore of the University of Tennessee classified Wilder's revisions into five large categories, including one in which "[P]ortrayal of character is altered in the interest of consistency or vividness, except in cases where omission because of unpleasantness, inappropriateness, or lack of appeal takes precedence." 24

Except in the posthumously published TFFY, the character of "Laura" is consistently portrayed as strong, independent, courageous, and restless. Moore noted this contrast between the edited "Laura" in Chapter 31 of THGY, and the practical, cautious "Laura" of TFFY (pp. 4-8). 25 The consistency of "Laura's" restless character in the series is further strengthened by its deliberate contrast to the patient, literal character of "Mary." The imagination "Mary" shows in the manuscript The Hard Winter is displayed by "Laura" in TLW. 26 "Mary" is "watered-down" to "Laura's" alter-ego, and
"Laura's" lively personality is bolstered, not only to make the characterization consistent, but also to increase young readers' identification with a believably human heroine.

Mrs. Ingalls' character received even harsher editing than Mary's. Moore noted that "Ma, who comes in for her share of revision, seems to suffer most from it. Her treatment is similar to Pa's, though more pronounced than his. Often her responses are so altered that she appears almost suspiciously pious and refined, when one suspects that a good deal of gusto, zest for life, and a large degree of tolerance were more likely tools for survival in her kind of life."27 Her language and sense of humor are refined to a greater degree of formality than those of her husband. "Ma's" reaction to Indians is very negative, both in LHP (pp. 141-43, 227, 263) and TLW (p. 64), while "Pa" consistently defends them. The manuscript The Hard Winter, however, makes no comment from "Ma" about Indians. William Anderson, who has extensively researched the Ingalls family, recounted a "chilling and untold story" from the time of the Ingalls' stay in Kansas:

Pa strapped on his bullet belt, almost determined for a battle with Indians outside the house. 'I might as well get them before they get us,' he said. Ma replied, 'Let me see if I can't please the old chief.' She had baked bread the day before and held it high, walking out of the house and toward the Indians, while Pa watched with his gun. This time white scalps, not skunkskins were at the waist of the chief, but Ma's bravery made her family safe—and among the few families left unharmed by the Indians.28
This real "Ma" is in sharp contrast to the "Ma" of the "Little House" books, who feared and despised Indians. Moore said of this negative portrayal of "Ma" that "[i]t almost appears that anything at all rough and ready about Pa, who is both a strong and gentle man by any account, is polished away, while Ma's heartiness is assigned to him and she is left nothing much except priggishness." 29 Wilder probably changed "Ma's" character, as she did "Pa's" and "Mary's," because their real characters did not fit her memories of them or the way she wanted her audience to remember them through her books.

Although the series is not totally accurate with regard to the facts of the author's life, small details of everyday living are historically quite reliable. The series' classification as historical fiction is due not only to its fictional style of writing, but also to its general historical truth. 30 Bernice Cooper of the University of Georgia examined the books and compared the life Wilder described with historical accounts of pioneer life in the Midwest during the 1870s and 1880s. 31 She considered the areas of homes, duties, food, clothing, travel, hardships, entertainment, schools, books, magazines, newspapers, and inventions. With one minor exception, Cooper found Wilder's historical details authentic to life in the Midwest in the late 1800s. 32

So convincing, in fact, were Wilder's descriptions of places and characters that twentieth-century residents of the communities in which the action of the various "Little House"
books is centered claimed the books were historical records. Although OBPC does not mention Walnut Grove, Minnesota, by name, The Walnut Grove Tribune explained its readers' interest in the historical truth of the book:

Although it is primarily a children's book, to local residents it is more interesting historically as the entire book deals with pioneer life in and around Walnut Grove, with the actual names of early Walnut Grove residents being used in telling of events that happened then.

Throughout the whole book early Walnut Grove history comes to life.

Similarly, the Fiftieth Anniversary Edition of The De Smet News of June 6, 1930, referred to many of the characters in the last four books, especially to those in the Hard Winter of 1880, as contemporaries of the Ingalls family and co-founders of De Smet.
REASONS FOR DISCREPANCIES

Reasons for the discrepancies between the truth of Wilder's life and its representation in the "Little House" books fall into three categories: the purposes and attitudes of the author, the influence of time, and the literary requirements of publication. Each of these exacted a toll on the truthfulness of the "Little House" books.

Several suggestions from Rose Wilder Lane, the author's daughter, developed into Wilder's purposes for writing the series. Lane, seeking material for her own stories of the pioneer days, suggested that her mother write an autobiographical memoir of her childhood. Besides wanting these memoirs herself as a source for story ideas, Lane thought writing about the past would help her mother in two ways: to fulfill her budding desire to write a novel, and as a sort of therapy to rid herself of haunting memories about Mr. and Mrs. Ingalls and Mary, all of whom had died in the early 1900s (Laura, p. 225). In personal correspondence prior to 1915, Lane also urged Wilder to write as a means to make money, while Wilder deliberated Lane's original purposes to write for writing's sake and to preserve the past. Eventually, her daughter's goading pushed Wilder beyond writing magazine and newspaper articles into a literary career as a novelist.

Lane's suggestions to write for money notwithstanding, Wilder wrote the "Little House" books primarily to preserve
the stories her father had told. In her memoirs she wrote: "We had a busy, happy childhood, but of it all, Sister Mary and I loved Pa's stories best. We never forgot them and I have always felt they were too good to be altogether lost. Children today could not have a childhood like mine in the Big Woods of Wisconsin, but they could learn of it and hear the stories that Pa used to tell." The "Little House" books are written from "Laura's" point of view, but Wilder always felt that the stories were "Pa's."

Doubting the feasibility of a multi-volume novel for children, Wilder almost ended with the first book of the series, _Little House_. "But letters kept coming," she reflected in her memoirs in the late 1930s, "from children, individuals, whole classes in schools, mothers of children too small to write letters—all wanted to know what happened next, wanted me to go on with the story. I decided to do so. Someone has to do a thing first; I would be the first to write a multi-volume novel for children. So I wrote the second volume, _Farmer Boy._ " This overwhelming response from her young readers strengthened Wilder's resolve to delete unpleasant details and to write only about events with hopeful, positive outcomes.

Yet another purpose for the "Little House" books was the author's realization of herself as a representative of historical change, from pioneer through settler to farmer. Her memoirs recorded her awareness of this fact shortly after _Little House_ was successfully published:
... I began to think what a wonderful childhood I had had. How I had seen the whole frontier, the woods, the Indian country of the great plains, the frontier towns, the building of railroads in wild, unsettled country, homesteading, and farmers coming in to take possession. I realized that I had seen and lived it all—all the successive phases of the frontier. ... Then I understood that in my own life I represented a whole period of American history. That the frontier was gone and agricultural settlements had taken its place when I married a farmer. It seemed to me that my childhood had been much richer and more interesting than that of children today even with all the modern inventions and improvements. 38

The "Little House" books, therefore, preserve the nineteenth-century America of Wilder's childhood for the children of twentieth-century America. That they are successful in this regard is evidenced by Virginia Kirkus, who "discovered" Wilder in 1931. Kirkus wrote in 1953 that the books "met a demand that has not flagged in the years. Witness the worn condition of the books in every public library. Children like to grow up with their central character and to share the 'lived-happily-ever-after' years. And children love the sense of identification these books give." 39

Wilder's attitudes toward life, children, and children's books are interwoven in her writings, and are major reasons for the editing and omissions which made her books different from her life story. She outlined her philosophy of life in her correspondence with children who had written to her. In a response to letters from sixth-graders in the deep South she wrote: "... remember it is not the things you have that make
you happy, [sic] It is love and kindness and helping each other and just plain being good." The closing of a 1947 letter to children in Chicago said:

The 'Little House' Books are stories of long ago. Today our way of living and our schools are much different; so many things have made living and learning easier. But the real things haven't changed. It is still best to be honest and truthful; to make the most of what we have; to be happy with simple pleasures and to be cheerful and to have courage when things go wrong. Great improvements in living have been made because every American has always been free to pursue his happiness and so long as Americans are free they will continue to make our country ever more wonderful.

When the Pomona (California) Library named the Children's Room the "Laura Ingalls Wilder Room" in 1950, Wilder wrote to her readers there: "As you read my stories of long ago I hope you will remember that things truly worth while [sic] and that will give you happiness are the same now as they were then. Courage and kindness, loyalty, truth and helpfulness are always needed."

"The true way to live," Wilder once wrote, "is to enjoy every moment as it passes and surely it is in the everyday [sic] things around us that the beauty of life lies." That she lived this philosophy of life is evident in her books, which mirror these values through "Laura's" appreciation of homely incidents, daily routines, common flowers, and pets and wild animals. The "Little House" series was her attempt to transmit this philosophy to children, so they could "understand more
about the beginning of things, to know what is behind the things they see—what it is that made America as they know it.\textsuperscript{44} She met this requirement through her historical details, and she answered children's need for spiritual security by instilling her books with a solid base of morality from her own values developed over a rich and fruitful lifetime.\textsuperscript{45}

Garth Williams, who illustrated a uniform edition of the "Little House" series in 1953 after ten years of research into Wilder's life, reinforced her cheery perspective with his illustrations. He explained the author's influence on his own work:

Illustrating books is not just making pictures of the houses, the people and the articles mentioned by the author; the artist has to see everything with the same eyes. For example, an architect would have described the sod house on the bank of Plum Creek as extremely primitive, unhealthy, and undesirable—nothing to seal the walls from dampness, no ventilation, no light. But to Laura's fresh young eyes it was a pleasant house, surrounded by flowers and with the music of a running stream and rustling leaves.

She understood the meaning of hardship and struggle, of joy and work, of shyness and bravery. She was never overcome by drabness or squalor. She never glamorized anything; yet she saw the loveliness in everything. This was the way the illustrator had to follow—no glamorizing for him either; no giving everyone a permanent wave.\textsuperscript{46}

This positive outlook on life was reflected also in the omission of events she considered in poor taste for children, and by the deliberate consistency of characterization she sought in her writings. She omitted the story of the Bender family
near Independence, Kansas, who murdered the guests at their tavern, buried the bodies in their plowed garden, and later were apparently murdered by a group of vigilantes, Wilder's father among them. The story, she wrote, "is not a fit story for a children's book." In several of her blizzard accounts, the author briefly mentioned a family of children frozen to death in a bad blizzard on Plum Creek. She "couldn't tell that either" because her sister Mary and she "knew of these things but someway were shielded from the full terror of them. Although we knew them to be true they seemed unreal to us for Ma was always there serene and quiet and Pa was there with his fiddle and his songs." Even in her life after the series ended, she never spoke of her son who had died in infancy because, as her daughter Rose said, "... it was her way to be silent and want silence about any unhappy subject."  

Characterization, such as the refinement of "Mary" and the restlessness of "Laura," was made carefully consistent for the sake of the audience. "Mr. Edwards," the "wildcat" from Tennessee in LHP and TLW, is portrayed as a drinker, gambler, card shark, and liar in the unedited manuscript of The Hard Winter, and "Pa" admires him for these qualities; yet the published version deletes all but "Mr. Edwards'" generosity and conversation about tax evasion, "perhaps out of a nice respect for what children probably should be protected from for a while longer."
Although the "Little House" books employ a third-person voice and the stories are told about the Ingalls family, Wilder revised her original memoirs to be consistently from "Laura's" point of view by presenting only scenes which she would be able to relate. This point of view, which results in greater reader identification with "Laura," was influenced by Wilder's daughter from the outset of the series. In a letter to Marion Fiery of Knopf Publishing House, October 3, 1931, Lane wrote, "George Bye is handling another book of my mothers, [sic] Pioneer Girl. It is slightly older autobiography, picking up where Little House in the Woods (sic) ends. . . . It is told in the first person, but it occurs to me that you might like it enormously for slightly older juvenile readers, if it were written in the third person." The impact of the revision to "Laura's" point of view is most noticeable in the last two books Wilder wrote. The posthumously published TFFY includes a repetition of the Wilders' marriage and a continuation of the story of THGY, which ends with the Wilders' wedding. TFFY has less dramatization and characterization, and more drabness and gloom than any of the other "Little House" books because, according to Moore:

The little girl has come to womanhood, the story of Laura is finished, the cycle in which adults stand between their children and the difficult realities of survival is about to begin again, with the point of view of the protagonist shifted from the protected center, where children often stand, to the dangerous circumference, the place for adults, unbuffered against the brutalities of nature and of people."
Wilder had received requests from Harper and Brothers and from her fans for more stories after THGY, but she refused to respond except through letters about her family. She secretly wrote TFFY (which she had titled First Three Years and a Year of Grace) between 1943 and 1947, but neither she nor her daughter published it during their lifetimes. The subject matter and adult point of view may have made the manuscript impossible to revise according to Wilder's standards for characterization and for a consistent voice which would appeal to children.

Besides the purposes and attitudes of the author, the influence of time was a major factor in the truthfulness of the "Little House" books. The eight books were written in Mansfield, Missouri, between 1930 and 1943, about experiences which had happened sixty years earlier, in Wisconsin, Kansas, Minnesota, and South Dakota, from 1870 to 1885. Wilder was 63 years old when she began the series and 76 when she finished THGY. Because of the retrospective gap between the events and their recording, the details depended on Wilder's selective recall of childhood memories from her position as an adult. Zochert explained Wilder's reliance on memory for her writings:

Laura's memory, as rich as it was, serves only as the basis upon which the delicate structure of art is built in the Little House books. Many of the stories are true in the sense that they really happened and they really happened that way. So much else is art, most particularly in nuance and
characterization and dramatization, but also on very many occasions in point of fact. Even in Laura's memoir I find instances in which memory failed her or art overruled memory (Laura, p. 224).

Wilder's view of time ranged from a recognition of a distinct past and present to a comprehensive view of all time as simultaneously present.

Chapter 1 of LHBW begins: "Once upon a time, sixty years ago, a little girl lived in the Big Woods of Wisconsin, in a little gray house made of logs. . . . The little girl was named Laura and she called her father, Pa, and her mother, Ma. In those days and in that place, children did not say Father and Mother, nor Mamma and Papa, as they do now" (pp. 1-3). She carefully distinguished, by time and place, that this story was not contemporary to the time in which she wrote it. The last paragraphs of the book, however, revise her perspective to a comprehensive view of time:

Laura thought to herself, 'This is now.' She was glad that the cozy house, and Pa and Ma and the firelight and the music, were now. They could not be forgotten, she thought, because now is now. It can never be a long time ago (LHBW, p. 238).

In an excerpt from a song from which she selected the title of her last book, Wilder summarized her feelings about the past, feelings which she embodied in all of her books:

Golden years are passing by,
Happy, happy golden years,
Passing on the wings of time,
These happy golden years.
Call them back as they go by,
Sweet their memories are,
Oh, improve them as they fly,
These happy golden years (THGY, p. 156).

The Depression years in America coincided with the writing of the "Little House" books, and affected not only their writing, but also their publication. In the early 1930s, Rose Wilder Lane wrote Let the Hurricane Roar, a pioneer story based on the hardships of the depression she and her parents had lived through in 1893, as her reply to those pessimists who argued that hard times were here to stay. Simultaneously, she influenced her mother to write of the wit and character of "Pa" and the rest of her family. The resulting manuscript of Wilder's first book was submitted to Virginia Kirkus, an editor at Harper and Brothers. In 1953, Kirkus reflected on her "discovery" of Wilder: "... the 'depression' was making its impress on our sales; people were thinking that new books for children were unnecessary, while the old ones could serve. And all of us were hoping for that miracle book that no depression could stop." After she read the manuscript, she enthusiastically endorsed it: "... the real magic was in the telling. One felt that one was listening, not reading. ... I knew Laura—and the older Laura who was telling her story. Here was the book no depression could stop—and here was, I felt sure, the beginning of a continued story for the years to follow." The "all's well that ends well" and "there's no loss without a little gain" philosophies of the books answered America's immediate need for hope, especially for the children of the
Depression years.

After Wilder had become well-known as a novelist, researchers turned up information about her early life that contradicted some facts as she had presented them in her books. Additional information has been discovered since her death in 1957. Devotees of her books have painstakingly researched the dates and places she lived, and have uncovered more accurate details than Wilder knew or recorded. While following the Ingalls' route in order to illustrate the "Little House" books, Garth Williams discovered the remains of the Ingalls' dugout on Plum Creek near Walnut Grove, Minnesota. Mrs. F.M. Charbo of the Kansas State Historical Society searched the 1870 Census Records and found the date of birth of Carrie Ingalls as August 1870, in Montgomery County, Kansas, and the age of Laura Ingalls as three years. These facts contrasted with "Carrie's" presence and "Laura's" age as five in LHBW, the predecessor to the Kansas adventures in LHP. Wilder also believed and wrote that the little house on the prairie was forty miles from Independence, Kansas, in the Oklahoma Indian Territory, yet Margaret Clement, a bookseller and former teacher from Independence, located the site of the cabin only thirteen miles south of Independence, near the Verdigris River and the former Osage Diminished Reserve in Kansas (Laura, pp. 31-33).

Literary considerations were a third major factor in the factuality of the Wilder books. The author's choice of children as the audience for the books imposed editorial
considerations of what was proper for children to know about, as has been noted above.

As indicated in the Introduction of this paper, Wilder added two years to her age in Wisconsin. This was done at the insistence of Harper and Brothers, who had accepted the book, then would not publish it without the age change. They refused to believe that a three-year-old child could remember events and perform the tasks "Laura" did in _LHBW_. Although Wilder and Lane fought for the original age, they ultimately agreed to the change in order to save "Pa's" stories. Therefore, "Laura" celebrates her fifth birthday in the "Big Woods." This change affected the content and chronology of the succeeding stories. At harvest time in _LHBW_, for example, when "Cousin Charley" is stung by bees, Wilder described him as "a big boy, going on eleven years old . . ." (p. 200); however, according to the 1870 Census of Pepin Township, he would have been almost nine. Lane wrote that the family's residence in Burr Oak was omitted because "Burr Oak was then an old town, not typical of the frontier," according to her mother, who also wanted "to make up the discrepancy in time which Harpers had insisted upon."

Although the books were finally published by Harpers, the publishing house of Alfred A. Knopf nearly contracted for the first book. Communications between Lane and Marion Fiery, Children's editor at Knopf, show the extent of their editorial intervention in Wilder's first manuscript. Fiery suggested
"editorial changes," such as "more details . . . the making of the bullets, what they eat and wear, etc." to appeal more greatly to children's imaginations. She considered the use of "Ma" and "Pa" authentic, but too colloquial; suggested a stronger title than "When Grandma Was a Little Girl;" and recommended an increase in the book's length from its original 7000-9000 words to about 23,000 words.

Along with the changes required by the publishers' demands, Lane affected the truthfulness of the "Little House" stories by her own editorial intervention. In addition to initiating and encouraging her mother's writing career, and suggesting the change from first to third person in the *Pioneer Girl* manuscript, Lane served as Wilder's writing instructor, editor, and agent. She helped her mother carve out the individual "Little House" stories from *Pioneer Girl*. In 203 pages the manuscript outlined the series' stories. *LHBW* appeared after *LHP*, and the Burr Oak episode was included, but *Farmer Boy* and *TLW* were omitted. Regarding the order of the first two books and the inclusion of the Burr Oak experiences, *Pioneer Girl* was closer to the reality of Wilder's life than the "Little House" books which Lane helped develop from it.

In 1933, Lane wrote to Fiery, "'I don't know just where or how I come into this, do you? But somehow I do, because my mother naturally consults me about everything concerning her writing.'" Throughout the 1930s, letters between Wilder and Lane show Lane's continuing influence on shaping the plots and
style of the books. Her editorial intervention was so pronounced that Zochert proposed in 1975 "that the Little House books are Rose Wilder Lane's greatest achievement." Moore resisted this extreme judgment, although she did concede, on the basis of Wilder and Lane's correspondence, that Lane's influence was considerable.
CONCLUSION

Most evaluations of Wilder's books have been "gooey appreciations;" 67 even criticisms are tempered by a sense of reverence. Such praise is certainly warranted for her style, particularly in view of the facts that she wrote her first composition as a teenager and she never graduated from any school. Seldom has the factuality of the "Little House" books been questioned, however. Such an evaluation of their objectivity is important to counterbalance the sentimental critiques and to establish the artfulness of the series. Putting the "Little House" books in a sort of historical perspective may well also enhance their acceptance by older children and adult readers who may be curious about the reality behind the stories.

Wilder's books are true in that her characters were based on real people or were realistic characterizations; and the events of which she wrote were actual events, within the limits of her memory and her editing of them. Background details are historically authentic. The pioneer themes she embodied in her stories—"a belief in fixed and certain moral values of a just and righteous God, individualism, neighborliness, and family solidarity; a belief in 'progress'; and a belief in 'culture'"—are the essence, even today, of the American character, and provide a universal lesson from this nation's frontier past. 68 The circumstances of the time period and the
optimistic worldview of the author, though, give a Utopian quality to what were really rigid values of frontier life. The books are informative about pioneer methods of improvisation and survival, fashions, and frontier transporation. As novels of education, the series not only traces the family's travels through the Midwest, but also follows "Laura's" growth from childhood to young womanhood. Moreover, the stories are true to Wilder's upbringing, lifestyle, attitudes, and perceptions of her intended audience. Zochert wrote that "... the truth of the Little House books is the truth of art, that they hold a treasurable truth that transcends fact, and that their essential achievement lies in a coherent vision not merely of pioneer life but of life itself. The books were of a piece with the life Laura lived" (Laura, pp. 225-26).

"The truth of art ... that transcends fact"—this is the truth of the "Little House" books. Wilder's books are not strictly factual accounts of her life on the Midwestern prairie; rather, they are sanitized representations of her life, as she wanted to remember it and as she wanted her readers to perceive it. Exercising the license of the artist, Wilder selectively chose memories of events and people which fit her idea of stories suitable for children. She edited out unpleasant truths and dramatized the positive, courageous aspects of pioneer life. Every hazard presented by nature Wilder consciously opposed with the security of family life.
The result was a series of adventure stories, all of which, unlike in her real life, ended "happily ever after." Although guided by a constant awareness of her audience, Wilder was also influenced by her daughter and the publishers that contracted her books. But in the final analysis, Wilder filtered the reality of her past through her own imagination and created a series of children's books. From her middle-aged vantage point she saw the reality of the world she lived in, reflected back on her youth when life seemed simpler, more ideal, and wrote of what she regarded as better times in the past. As a result, "Laura" lives on in the "Little House" world for successive generations of young readers.
NOTES


5 *Children and Books*, p. 375.


8 The program has completed seven seasons on NBC. Although the basic characters of the TV series are similar to those in the books, additional characters and plots differ greatly from Wilder's books.


11 *On the Banks of Plum Creek* (1937; rpt. New York: Harper and Row, 1953). Hereafter referred to as OBPC. All page references to this work appear in the text.

Laura (New York: Avon Books, 1976). All page references to this work appear in the text. In writing this biography Zochert read and quoted from Wilder's unpublished memoirs and from original manuscripts of the books. In addition, he consulted archives, newspapers, courthouse records, relatives, and friends of Wilder and her family. However, the book has serious weaknesses. The style combines scholarship and sentimentality, neither of which is totally convincing. Moreover, Zochert has included neither footnotes nor bibliographic entries, and what references he cites in the Preface and Appendix 2 are vague and incomplete.


Laura Ingalls Wilder, Little Town on the Prairie (1941; rpt. New York: Harper and Row, 1953). Hereafter referred to as LTP. All page references to this work appear in the text.

The First Four Years (New York: Harper and Row). Hereafter referred to as TFFY. All page references to this work appear in the text.


Laura Ingalls Wilder, By the Shores of Silver Lake (1939; rpt. New York: Harper and Row, 1953). Hereafter referred to as BSSL. All page references to this work appear in the text.


Clement, unpaged.

"Wilder's Orange Notebooks," 110.
"Wilder's Orange Notebooks," 108.


"Wilder's Orange Notebooks," 115.


Telephone interview with Rosalind Engel, Professor of Child Development, Iowa State University, 11 June 1980.


"The Authenticity of the Historical Background," 700. Cooper checked publication dates for twenty-nine songs Wilder referred to in her books, and "of the twenty-nine, five had not been written at the beginning of her story, but only one had not been written by 1885 when her story ended."


Garth Williams, "Illustrating the Little House Books," The Horn Book Magazine, 29 (1953), 419.


"Notes From the Real Little House," p. 56.

"Notes From the Real Little House," p. 57.

"Notes From the Real Little House," p. 56.

"The Discovery of Laura Ingalls Wilder," The Horn Book Magazine, 29 (1953), 430.


William T. Anderson, Laura Wilder, p. 29.
44 "Notes From the Real Little House," p. 56.
45 Wenzel, 67.
46 Williams, 421-22.
47 "Notes From the Real Little House," p. 104.
48 "Notes From the Real Little House," p. 105.
56 "The Discovery of Laura Ingalls Wilder," 428.
57 "The Discovery of Laura Ingalls Wilder," 429.
59 Letter from Rose Wilder Lane to Louise H. Mortensen, quoted in "Idea Inventory," *Elementary English*, 41 (1964), 428. This was an ironically purposeless fight on the parts of Wilder and Lane. Facts uncovered since Wilder's death have shown her to have actually been five years old in Wisconsin.


Letter received from Donald Zochert, 16 June 1980.

WORKS CONSULTED


Engel, Rosalind. Telephone interview. 11 June 1980.


Lichty, Irene V. *The Ingalls Family from Plum Creek to Walnut Grove via Burr Oak, Iowa.* Mansfield, Mo.: The Laura Ingalls Wilder-Rose Wilder Lane Home and Museum, 1970.


Welcome to . . . Walnut Grove, Minnesota: Early Home of Laura Ingalls Wilder. Walnut Grove, Minn.: Laura Ingalls Wilder Museum and Tourist Center, n.d.


----------. "Notes From the Real Little House on the Prairie." The Saturday Evening Post, September 1978, pp. 56-57, 104-05.


----------. Letter to author. 16 June 1980.