The Historical Significance of The Little House on the Prairie Series by Laura Ingalls Wilder

An Honors Thesis (HONRS 499)

by

Elizabeth M. Irvine

Dr. Raymond White

Ball State University
Muncie, Indiana

April, 1994

May, 1994
PURPOSE OF THESIS

This thesis is a discussion of the historical significance of the series of children's novels written by Laura Ingalls Wilder. The purpose is to delve beyond the fact that the series was intended for children and look at the books topically. Topics analyzed include growing up in the last quarter of the nineteenth century, daily life, family ties, courtship, marriage, homesteading the American frontier, dangers of homesteading, building railroads, and education. A comparison will be drawn between Laura's descriptions and information found in outside sources in order to prove how historically accurate Laura's novels are.
In reading about the frontier history of the United States, one notices the lack of women and children. It seems, through popular stereotyped images, that the West was only populated by Indians, cowboys, miners, and gunslingers. However, the simple reason why women and children are often left out of frontier history is because there were very few women and children on the frontier. Women and families were more often found on the agricultural frontier, which was not as far west as the mining camps and boom towns (Armitage and Jameson 4).

It is this history, the history of husbands, wives, and families, that too often goes unnoticed and unrecognized. Many people are familiar with the battles between white soldiers and Indians. Textbooks relate information on the famous men who explored the West such as Lewis and Clark, Davy Crockett, Zebulon Pike, and Daniel Boone. And who has never heard of the great wagon trains that took Americans across the country to settle in Oregon Territory and California? Of course the great gold rush of 1849 must not be forgotten.

But what about the ordinary people who also lived in the West? What were their lives like? "Ordinary lives are the true story of the West...," not the tall tales and legends so many Americans are familiar with (Armitage 14). The ordinary lives are what gives one a real understanding of what the frontier was truly like. Diaries are an excellent source of information on the frontier. Diaries lend themselves to a personal look at frontier life.
Besides diaries, there is another way to learn about the frontier. Read children's stories. In particular, read the Little House on the Prairie series of books by Laura Ingalls Wilder.

One may not realize this, but Laura's books are historically significant in that they provide information directly concerning the frontier. Laura Ingalls Wilder wrote her Little House series of books as entertaining stories for children. However, upon closer reading and analysis, one realizes that these books are much more than children's stories; they are chronicles of a bygone era. By reading Laura's books one can gain insight into what life was like for a western American pioneering family in the 1870s and 1880s.

One manner of approaching Laura's books is through their personal appeal. The reader is immediately drawn into Laura's world; the world of her childhood. Her books provide an intimate and emotional glimpse into the world of a late nineteenth century Victorian era family on the western American frontier. One learns about daily life for the Ingalls family and, through Laura, about growing up, family ties, courtship, and marriage. The reader becomes acquainted with Laura's family, and as the series progresses, it is as if the reader just accompanies the family through their adventures and trials, their daily life and their celebration, joining in all of their activities as another family member.

What must be remembered is that these novels written by Laura are true historical novels. These characters are not fictionalized. The places she lived can be found on a map today. There was indeed a real Ma and Pa, a Mary, Laura, Carrie, and Grace, a Mr. and Mrs. Boast. The lives of these people can be traced in history through birth and death certificates, legal documents, and teaching certificates. These people are real. The full impact of this will never touch the casual reader until he or she is privileged with the
opportunity of visiting De Smet, South Dakota or Mansfield, Missouri and seeing the grave sites of the family members. Even this author did not fully understand how true Laura's books really are until she stood by the grave of Charles Ingalls at the De Smet cemetery several years ago.

But it is just that, the reality of these people, that make the Little House series so charming and yet just as significant as any textbook.

To better understand the main characters and events, some biographical information needs to be included. Charles Philip Ingalls was born to Lansford and Laura Colby Ingalls in Cuba, New York on January 10, 1836. This was the same year the Alamo was captured and Sam Houston captured Santa Anna at San Jacinto.

Lansford and Laura Ingalls became the Grandpa and Grandma of the Big Woods. In fact, Laura was the "Dancing Grandma" at the sugaring-off party. Laura Ingalls Wilder was named after her grandmother. Lansford and Laura had eleven children. Peter was the oldest. "On Valentine's Day in the year before Pa himself was born, Grandma had another baby, but it died..." so Pa was the third child but the second to survive (Zochert 3). After Pa came Lydia, Polly, and Lansford James.

Grandpa then decided to move west. He took the family to Illinois where he found a James Ingalls and a George Ingalls. These men were probably the brothers of Grandpa mentioned in the story Pa told to Laura and Mary entitled "The Story of Grandpa's Sled and the Pig." This can be found in Little House in the Big Woods. Grandpa settled approximately forty miles west of Chicago and it was here that Pa grew to love the prairie (Zochert 4).

While in Illinois, Laura Docia and Hiram were added to the family. But Grandpa was restless and he decided to move north, to Wisconsin. The Ingalls arrived in Jefferson County and Grandpa bought a farm.
In 1831, Charlotte Tucker married Henry Quiner in New Haven, Connecticut. They had a daughter Martha, who died when still a small child. They moved to Ohio where Joseph and Henry were added to the family. Continuing their trek west, they arrived in Indiana and a daughter, named Martha in memory of their first daughter, was born. Again the family moved, this time near Milwaukee, Wisconsin and on December 12, 1839 Caroline Lake Quiner, Laura's mother, was born. Soon Eliza Ann and Tom were born.

Then tragedy struck. Henry Quiner was killed. Life was difficult but Grandma Quiner managed to move the family to Jefferson County where she met, and married Frederick Holbrook. They had a daughter, named Charlotte, who was nicknamed Lottie. This was the same Lottie who told a young Mary and Laura that she liked both golden hair and brown hair.

Grandpa Ingalls bought a farm next to Ma's family and it did not take long for the two families to start pairing up. Ma's brother Joseph married in 1856, the same year Ma received her teaching certificate. Later, Joseph died in the Civil War. Henry Quiner (Ma's brother) proposed to Polly Ingalls (Pa's sister), and they married in 1859. Charles Ingalls (Pa) proposed to Caroline Quiner (Ma), and they married in 1860. Peter Ingalls then followed Pa's example and married Eliza Ann (Ma's sister) in 1861. Now there was a Ma and Pa, an Uncle Henry and Aunt Polly, and an Uncle Peter and Aunt Eliza for Laura's books.

About this time, Grandpa Ingalls lost his land. George, Ruby, and Lafayette had been added to Grandpa and Grandma's family. Grandpa decided to move to the Big Woods of Wisconsin. Ma and Pa, Uncle Henry and Aunt Polly, and Uncle Peter and Aunt Eliza all agreed to go. Everyone found land. Now there were the farms and cabins for families to visit in Little House in the Big Woods.
Soon cousins began to appear. Louisa, Charles and Albert were born to Uncle Henry and Aunt Polly. Ma and Pa's first baby, Mary Amelia, was born on January 10, 1865. She shared her birthday with Pa and this year was the same year the Civil War ended and Lincoln was assassinated. Also in this month and year, Pa's younger brothers Hiram and James ran off to enlist for the last few months of the Civil War.

Two years later, on February 7, 1867, Laura Elizabeth Ingalls was born. In this year, the United States purchased Alaska from Russia for about two cents an acre.

Laura's pioneering career began a year later when Pa and Uncle Henry bought land in Missouri. Another year passed, and they decided to leave. This time Uncle Henry and Aunt Polly returned to the Big Woods while Pa pressed on to the prairies. He headed for Kansas because he heard that the Indians would be forced to move soon, and homesteads were free. The Ingalls arrived in Independence then drove about thirteen miles from town. This is where Pa built his cabin. There were Osage Indians nearby and one day, August 3, 1870, while Pa, Mary, and Laura were hunting for beads at the Indian camp, Caroline Celestia, Carrie, was born, with Mrs. Scott as the midwife (Zochert 42).

Unfortunately, the land Pa wanted was not available to settlers at this time, and since the man in Wisconsin who bought Pa's farm wanted to move, Pa took his family and returned to the Big Woods. They did not stay long, and in 1873, Pa and Ma and Uncle Peter and Aunt Eliza moved their families west. Uncle Peter only went a short way, but Pa headed for western Minnesota.

The family arrived at Plum Creek near the town of Walnut Grove, Minnesota. Their neighbors were the Nelsons, and Pa bought his farm from Mr. Hanson. A couple of years later, on November 1, 1875, a son, Charles Frederick, was born.
It was about this time life became especially difficult for Ma and Pa. The grasshoppers came, the family moved back to be with Uncle Peter, then baby Freddie died on August 27, 1876. Next the family moved to Burr Oak, Iowa to operate a hotel. Nothing seemed to work. But on May 23, 1877, Grace Pearl was born. "Ma and Pa named her Grace, no doubt because they felt she was a special gift to replace little Freddie, the child they had lost" (Zochert 109). This same year the family returned to Walnut Grove, and from this point, events follow more consistently with Laura's descriptions in her books.

With this information on Laura's family, one should now have a fairly clear understanding of events, especially as the topic now turns to daily life. As was mentioned earlier, through Laura's books, one learns about daily life, including growing up, family ties, courtship, and marriage.

This section will begin with growing up in the nineteenth century. What was it like to be a child during this time? an adolescent? an adult? Laura's childhood can be found in Little House in the Big Woods, Little House on the Prairie, and On the Banks of Plum Creek.

The reader first meets Laura as a five-year-old girl living in the Big Woods of Wisconsin. Even at this young age Laura helped a great deal around the house, as did Mary, her older sister. They could carry wood, dry dishes, and help Ma with all the housework. Laura also enjoyed watching and helping Pa with his work in the evening, such as when he cleaned his gun and traps and made bullets.

Laura and Mary did have time each day to play, and the season of the year dictated their entertainment. When the weather was nice they played outdoors. Pa put a swing in one tree, they had tea parties using acorns and leaves, and they played with their rag dolls. In the winter or on rainy days they played in the attic, made paper dolls, learned to sew and knit, and listened to Ma read them stories.
In *Little House on the Prairie* the reader comes to know the pioneering spirit of Laura. Her love of the wild prairie comes out even as a child. She and Mary still help Ma with all of her work, and they still help Pa with some of his work. In fact, they can make important jobs into entertainment such as when Pa was building the roof and their job was to watch for flying nails. No nails could be wasted, and occasionally Pa would hit a nail wrong and it would sail into the air. The girls would watch it fall, and search for it until they found it.

Laura experienced certain events as a child in Indian Territory that would make most readers shudder today. Life on the prairie frontier was dangerous and unpredictable. The family was almost drowned while crossing a creek, the cabin was surrounded by wolves, they almost died from malaria, they fought a raging prairie fire, feared a wild panther, and came close to being killed by angry Osage Indians.

Despite all of this, Ma always insisted on proper behavior, regardless of being in the middle of nowhere. The girls learned to act ladylike, even in their play, in which they were not always successful. They must never speak at the table unless spoken to, including times when there was no table. Laura and Mary were to always eat holding their silverware properly. On Sundays they had to be quiet all day long. Proper, ladylike behavior was so important that Mary, only eight years old, thought that she was too old to play hopscotch.

Ma insisted on such behavior because she felt that regardless of their location, frontier or settlement, there were certain values that must be maintained. Just because the family often lived on the frontier, that did not automatically sanction wild behavior. Ma knew that accustomed civilization would eventually catch up, and she wanted her girls prepared.
In the next book, *On the Banks of Plum Creek*, Laura is a little older but she is even more playful and adventurous. She is always ready to help Pa, whether it be cutting willow boughs, milking, or catching fish in a fish trap. Laura and Mary always had chores to do. They did the dishes, made their bed, and swept the floor. Occasionally they did extra chores such as picking plums and taking the cow to graze with a local herd. A boy supervised a combined herd of cows and bulls from the neighbors and took them grazing every day. In addition to chores, they played every day along, in, or near Plum Creek.

When Mary and Laura started school, a new dimension was added to their lives. Not only was the world of education opened up to them, but they also began making friends. In fact, they even attended a party at which they tasted lemonade for the first time. Then Ma and the girls gave a party of their own. It was a joyous time for Laura and her family.

Then disaster seemed to strike the family, among thousands of other families in western Minnesota. A plague of grasshoppers came and destroyed the crops. Laura learned, while as a child, that life could be full of disappointments. New-found friends had to move away. Pa had to leave for many weeks to find work in eastern Minnesota because he was deeply in debt. However, amidst disappointment and heartache, there was also joy, such as having Pa return from the east and Laura seeing her very first Christmas tree at church at the dedication of the Union Congregational Church in Walnut Grove on December 20, 1874 (Anderson 8).

A transition comes in *By the Shores of Silver Lake*. Laura is now twelve years old and a great deal of responsibility has come to rest on her young shoulders. She has been taking care of the house while Ma, Mary, Carrie, and Grace were sick with scarlet fever. As a result of the illness, Mary was now blind and Laura became essentially her guardian. "On that dreadful morning
when Mary could not see even the sunshine full in her eyes, Pa had said that Laura must see for her. He had said, "Your two eyes are quick enough, and your tongue, if you will use them for Mary" (Silver Lake 22). Laura's job was to guide Mary and "see" for her. She would describe everything around them in detail so that Mary could picture it in her head. This early training in description and word painting enabled Laura to become the wonderful writer she was in her later years.

At this point in her life, about twelve or thirteen years of age, Laura did not spend as much time actually playing. She had responsibilities, or chores, around the house. There was always water to fetch, the cow to milk, cooking, cleaning, and sewing to do. "The family's economic circumstances plus the blow of Mary's blindness thrust Laura into early maturity. She assumed most of Mary's role as 'responsible oldest daughter' in the family; in the later books [one finds] Ma and Pa consulting Laura and planning the future with her as though she were much older" (Adam 104).

Occasionally, Laura did get out and have some fun such as walking on the prairie with Mary, watching the railroad being built near the Silver Lake railroad camp, and sliding on the ice on Silver Lake. At this time, the Ingalls are at the Silver Lake railroad camp very near to the townsite of the future town of De Smet. It is, in By the Shores of Silver Lake, the fall and winter of 1879. With the spring of 1880, men rush to the townsite and begin building the town of De Smet. Laura literally witnesses the birth of a town. One day, it seemed, there was wide open prairie and the next, ugly false fronts were pushing up out of the ground.

During the early spring rush to establish the community around De Smet, Pa was able to file his homestead claim. That subject will be discussed in
more detail later but in the spring of 1880, Pa received 160 acres of government land to homestead for five years before it would become his own. The family quickly moved to the homestead claim, and they lived in a tiny claim shanty. By the end of *Silver Lake*, the reader gradually notices signs that Laura was maturing. She was fourteen, and her growing maturity conflicted with her adolescence. One day, at the claim, she was outside admiring the prairie. "Big girl as she was, Laura spread her arms wide to the wind and ran

against it. She flung herself on the flowery grass and rolled like a colt. She lay in the soft, sweet grasses and looked at the great blueness above her and the high pearly clouds sailing in it. She was so happy that tears came into her eyes.

Suddenly she thought, 'Have I got a grass stain on my dress?' She stood up and anxiously looked, and there was a green stain on the calico. Soberly she knew that she should be helping Ma, and she hurried to the little dark tar-paper shanty" (*Silver Lake* 271). As a child she would not concern herself with grass stains but now she was concerned with appearances, yet she had the desire to run and play like a child. She was growing up.

In the next book, *The Long Winter*, Laura was a vital part of the family's survival. She helped Pa stack extra hay, she learned to twist hay for fuel, and when the blizzards began to wear the family down mentally, she remembered that they were all still safely together and that they could all sing together even if Pa's hands were too cold and stiff to play the violin. Laura was a real inspiration to the entire family.

Part of the reason Laura was especially vital to the family is based on the fact that Laura consistently portrayed herself as a rebel. However, her
"rebelliousness" must be compared to the expected behavior of nineteenth century children and not to today. She described herself as naughty because she did not like to follow the standards set by her conservative family such as not speaking until spoken to, concealing emotion, and being quiet on Sundays (Adam 102).

"Laura was the least passive of the four sisters. . ." (Adam 103). She chafed at the restraints placed upon her because she was a girl. Despite these restraints though, Laura was as active and adventurous as she could be. She did as much outdoor work helping Pa as she was allowed. This included making a door, building a fish trap, carrying wood and water, taking care of feeding and milking the cows, and helping Pa with the fieldwork. Ma objected to Laura helping with the fieldwork most strongly but, as it turned out, the family needed the extra hay Laura helped Pa stack for fuel during the long winter when they ran out of coal.

Little Town on the Prairie follows and it is here readers learn to enjoy the social and intellectual side of Laura. She got her first job at age fourteen. She helped a seamstress eleven hours a day six days a week for several weeks sewing shirts and earned twenty-five cents a day plus lunch. One day Laura witnessed two happy drunks walking through town singing and kicking in screen doors. She thought it was hilarious as did Pa, but Ma and Mary were mortified. Most readers probably enjoy this little episode just as much as Laura did. It is an excellent example of small town life on the frontier.

Always before, Laura had been a real tomboy but gradually she learned to enjoy being a girl. At school she made friends and excelled at academics. Readers enjoy the rivalry between her and Nellie Oleson. Then Almanzo Wilder slowly began a courtship with Laura and readers enjoy watching their
relationship develop. Laura still was fun-loving and adventurous, but she also began to come to terms with her feminine maturity. Laura tried to keep up with current trends just like any teenager today only she wanted a "lunatic fringe," which was a hairstyle in which some of the hair was pulled up on top of the head, leaving the ears bare, and bangs were cut and curled. Laura also kept in style with hoopskirts and name cards. She found an interest in clothing as she grew up, partly because she had earned the money to purchase the material herself and partly because it was simply fascinating to change lengths of fabric into the intricate styles of the 1880s (Adam 105).

*These Happy Golden Years* is a transition novel. Readers picture Laura still as a teenager, but she is forced into further maturity when she becomes a schoolteacher at age fifteen. Still, she enjoys having fun as much as the next person. She and Almanzo deepen their relationship, and part of the fun they have together is attending singing school and breaking horses. Laura still has that adventurous spirit and acquires real pleasure out of the sometimes scary rides in a buggy pulled by unbroken horses.

By the end of the book, Laura had become a young woman and at age eighteen was married to Almanzo Wilder. The early years of their married life are described in *The First Four Years*. It is a time of growing maturity for Laura yet one can sense an obvious change in her. Laura never outgrew her joy of "playing," and Almanzo seemed to enjoy her playful spirit because he bought her a pony. At the same time, as a young married woman, she took all of her responsibilities as a wife seriously and, about a year after their marriage, their daughter Rose was born. Now Laura was a wife and a mother.

This is an excellent transition point onto another topic. What are the responsibilities of a wife? Did males and females have expected roles to fill? Was there a sexual division of labor? How was Laura brought up in what
many historians and ordinary people alike consider to be a male-dominated society? Laura's upbringing was, to some extent, unique, due in large part to an absence of brothers. Restraints based on society's standards were placed upon Laura and she did not like them, but since she grew up only with sisters, many of her attitudes toward the restraints were lessened, which might not have been the case had she had brothers who would most certainly have been granted more freedom (Adam 103). As it was, with no brothers, she had more freedom to be a tomboy and help Pa, plus she had the responsibility of taking Mary's place as the dependable oldest child.

Males and females did have expected roles to fill and there generally was a sexual division of labor. At this time in history, the developing elite Victorian society in Europe and the eastern United States began trying to dictate the proper role for women and the "Cult of True Womanhood" developed which valued the economic uselessness of women. This very definitely did not hold true for women on homesteads. Homesteading families were an interdependent economic unit (Jameson 150).

All work was divided along gender roles, as in most cultures, and indeed, Ma and Pa filled their expected roles. Pa did the hunting, farming, building, carpentering, financial providing, and protecting. Throughout the novels the reader sees this quite clearly. At the same time the reader learns what Ma's role was. Her responsibilities included maintaining the household. She even had a rhyme for daily chores:

- Wash on Monday,
- Iron on Tuesday,
- Mend on Wednesday,
- Churn on Thursday,
- Clean on Friday,
Ma was a very special person. She was not truly physically beautiful as Laura always described her, but she had an inner beauty that was always evident. Basically, it was up to Ma to make every house a home, every time Pa's wandering foot led the family to a new place. Laura described in detail every house the family lived in and how Ma transformed each house into a home with red-checked tablecloths, pillows, patchwork quilts, and sheets hung for privacy. The ultimate symbol of home was Ma's china shepherdess. It stood on a delicately carved wooden bracket made by Pa one Christmas for Ma. "The members of the family always knew that they were cosily settled when Ma asked Pa to nail up the bracket for the china shepherdess" (Adam 99).

Ma always maintained a ladylike demeanor and tried to instill her beliefs in her own daughters. Laura was the most rebellious toward the restrictions of womanhood. Laura knew how to run a household and she could do each skill well, but she much preferred being outside in the wind with her sunbonnet back. Ma had to continually tell her to keep her sunbonnet on because she believed a lady should keep her skin as fair as possible. This was vogue in the East and eastern ideals carried into the West as the pioneers moved.

Ma and Pa were perfect helpmates to each other and set a wonderful example for their children. Since Ma was always so quiet and gentle, one might be tempted to see her as a woman dominated by her husband. This was not the case. Pa was never overbearing and domineering. "Ma did follow Pa wherever he went, but Pa never went anywhere that Ma wouldn't follow" (Zochert 94). Although Ma would usually respond with "Whatever you say, Charles" or "Whatever you think best, Charles," when Pa would consult her about decisions, Ma could be adamant about certain things.
For one thing, she was determined that the girls would receive an education. Therefore, as she followed Pa's wandering foot, she refused to go beyond the reach of decent schools. Although Pa was the dominant figure in the family, their marriage "can be seen as a series of . . . negotiations to maintain a . . . balance between his urge to go and her desire to stay put" (Adam 100).

Sometimes Ma was able to have her way. In The Long Winter she stunned the family by absolutely refusing to allow Pa to search for the seed wheat that would save the town. When Pa started talking about going to Oregon, Ma put her foot down, and the family stayed in De Smet.

While Ma and Pa may have had a unique marriage in the way of compromise, they emulated other frontier families in the traditional method of assigning tasks. The tasks of cooking, homemaking, and child-rearing were left to the women while farming, hunting, and providing shelter were left to the men (Adam 100-101). However, Ma and Pa depended deeply on each other. Ma praised his work and Pa overwhelmingly praised the work of Ma, and considered her work to be a matter of skill. These acknowledgments of each other's accomplishments and contributions were made in front of the girls. Therefore, although Laura saw the traditional role of a woman to be limiting at times, she grew up knowing that the role was held in high regard by her family.

Pa used to compliment Ma by saying that she "always could beat the nation cooking" (Long Winter 36). It seems as if this really were true. Ma had the uncanny ability to improvise and prove the old adage that "there's no great loss without some small gain." If blackbirds destroyed the corn crop, Ma made blackbird pie. If frost killed the unripe pumpkins, Ma made a green pumpkin pie, which, incidentally, tasted like apple pie according to Pa. During the long winter of 1880-1881, Ma served potatoes every way imaginable, she ground
wheat for bread using the coffee mill, she made oyster broth into a Christmas
treat, and made a button lamp using flannel, a button, and axle grease when
they ran out of kerosene.

The relationship of Charles and Caroline made for a wonderfully close
family. Laura shared a kindred spirit with Pa and was especially close to
him. Separation was always hard on the family, particularly when Pa had to
leave for any length of time. Although Ma was a strong individual and led the
family through the lonely times when Pa was away working during the
grasshopper years, she wept openly when they finally received a letter from Pa
saying he was alright.

Moving away from relatives was also difficult, especially with the lack
of modern communications but that was all a part of pioneering. Families kept
in touch as best they could through letters. Surprisingly, the Ingalls family
did meet some relatives out west. First, Aunt Docia, Pa's sister, showed up
in Walnut Grove not long after Mary went blind. Aunt Docia was on her way
west from the Big Woods to join her husband Hiram in Dakota Territory where he
was a railroad contractor. She brought good news for Pa. Hiram needed "a
storekeeper and bookkeeper and timekeeper. The pay was fifty dollars a month,
and she had stopped by Walnut Grove to see whether Pa wanted the job" (Zochert
130). Pa took the job and the family moved west. At Silver Lake Camp the
family met Uncle Henry and cousins Charley and Louisa. This was an unexpected
surprise. They were also working for the railroad. Aunt Polly was still in
the Big Woods, and the only disappointment was that when the contract was
over, the relatives would be moving on west and Pa and Ma would remain.
Later, Uncle Tom, Ma's younger brother, stopped by one day to visit them in De
Smet but he, too, was on his way further west. Then cousin Peter lived with
Laura and Almanzo for a time. He had been in De Smet and helped Almanzo with
the farm work. When Laura and Almanzo went to Minnesota to live with Almanzo's parents in Spring Valley, Peter went with them then sailed down the Mississippi to have his own adventures (Zochert 193-194).

With the difficulty of maintaining contact with most relatives, local friends often took the place of relatives. This is evident in the relationship between the Ingalls and the Boasts. Every Christmas and New Year was spent together if possible. The friendship of Mr. Edwards in Indian Territory was also special. Also, the lack of an extended family nearby made one's own immediate family become even more important.

Religion was paramount to Ma and Pa, and Laura demonstrated to the readers how it played a role in their daily lives. Townspeople often tried to found a church as soon as possible and both Ma and Pa helped found churches in Walnut Grove and De Smet. Sometimes the church would be built, but there would be no minister available or only occasionally, as with Reverend Alden in Walnut Grove. He came every few weeks. "With or without a minister Sunday was a high point. No matter how lonely, dull, or difficult the rest of the week might be, homesteaders could look forward to the Lord's Day as a time for resting from some kinds of work, for sharing religious feelings, and for visiting with other families" (Harris 168-169).

Even when there was no church nearby, Sunday was spent as a day of rest, and the family would often have their own worship service with hymn singing and Bible reading. Blessings were always said before meals, prayers were said before bedtime, and drinking and gambling were disapproved of. Scripture memorization was encouraged and Pa required Laura and Carrie to memorize the scripture reference for the minister's sermon although they did not have to tell Pa what the sermon's message was.

This religious faith, and the previously mentioned reliance on family
members helped the Ingalls family through many difficult situations in their lives. Laura and Almanzo also shared many trying times early in their married life. But still the families managed to survive and come out smiling. How did such a strong family develop?

Laura did not describe the courtship and marriage of her parents of course, but she learned from their marriage what it took to make a marriage work. Laura did recount her courtship and marriage to Almanzo James Wilder in great detail. This is an excellent example of how teenagers and young adults courted in the later nineteenth century. It may be very different from today, but basic similarities remain. The boy asks the girl out. Then they may go to group functions together. Soon they just do things together on a regular basis, no questions asked. Then the boy, really a young man, may propose marriage. If the girl, a young woman, accepts, the marriage is prepared for. The young man will make sure he can support his new wife and the young woman begins to make or purchase items necessary to furnish their new household. Basically, is this nineteenth or twentieth century? The difference is slight but this description is of Laura and Almanzo's courtship and marriage.

Laura first notices Almanzo in By the Shores of Silver Lake. Actually, she notices his horses, not him! Gradually a friendship develops into a romance throughout the rest of the series until their marriage at the end of These Happy Golden Years. In some ways, their first "date" occurs when Almanzo gives Laura a ride to school after she picked up her new name cards. She was astonished but they exchanged name cards. These name cards were a "new-fangled" notion just in from further east and the newspaper printer picked up on the idea. Later that year, Almanzo escorted Laura home each night after revival meetings. While Laura was teaching the Brewster School he picked her up and took her home every weekend and brought her back. They
"double dated" with Mary Power and Cap Garland a few times. One day all the "couples" went for sleigh rides up and down Main Street; or would "cruising" be a better term? After a time of buggy and sleigh rides and attending singing school together and breaking horses together, Almanzo asked Laura to marry him. She said yes and, for the first time, allowed him to kiss her. Before this, she never even allowed his arm around her.

With the engagement, Laura and Ma began preparing for the wedding. They sewed sheets and pillowcases, towels and tea towels, dresses, nightgowns, and underclothes. Laura and Almanzo had a hurried wedding to avoid an expensive church wedding. They were married on August 25, 1885. They took no honeymoon and immediately "set up housekeeping."

Throughout Laura's books, there is no mention of certain subjects. Since these books were designed for children, readers lose "adult information about women's lives that [one] might have liked to have: [there is] no mention of sexuality, childbirth, or menstruation, for instance, in these stories of a family with five women in it" (Adam 98). The closest Laura ever came to such a subject was while they were making Mary's dresses for college. Mary's corset was not tight enough and Laura told Carrie to be glad while she could that she did not have to wear a corset yet. Even Rose's birth was not discussed beyond the fact that Laura was pregnant, the doctor came, and Rose was placed in Laura's arms.

It is rather too bad that Laura did not include these topics. These subjects are discussed today but how were they approached in the nineteenth century? Were these subjects really so "hush-hush" or were they discussed and what were their viewpoints? Elizabeth Jameson wrote an article entitled "Women as Workers, Women as Civilizers: True Womanhood in the American West." In this article she did some research on sexuality and contraception in the
later nineteenth century American West. She found that while sexual subjects were not discussed openly, women did get together and share contraceptive ideas and discuss sex. Girls were informed about sex usually by their mothers or by older women in the community. There were still many girls who were ignorant of sex before their marriage "but one woman suggested that men were ignorant, too. She said she was married two weeks before her husband touched her. . ." (Jameson 153). Doubtless, Laura and Ma had some discussions before Laura got married, and one can be reasonably sure that with a mother and four daughters, the subject of menstruation was indeed brought up on occasion.

Besides calling the reader's attention to topics relating to daily life on the American frontier in the late nineteenth century, Laura's books are significant historically. They enable the twentieth century reader to receive a glimpse into the daily life of a pioneering family and, hence, a glimpse of life in general during the late nineteenth century.

There are several historically significant topics that may be discussed. Among them are homesteading the frontier, the dangers of homesteading, the expansion of railroads, and nineteenth education. All of these topics may be found not only in history books but also in Laura's books. Homesteading on the frontier will be discussed first.

For many years, mostly during the early and mid-1800s, various Land and Homestead Acts were proposed or passed. Some of the Land Acts simply lowered prices for public land and lowered the required number of acres to purchase. Homestead Acts were proposed in the 1850s but the slavery issue led to such strong opposition by the South that the Homestead Act was not passed until Abraham Lincoln came into office. "The Homestead Act of 1862 offered any head of family or person who had attained the age of twenty-one, whether a citizen or an alien who had filed an intention of becoming one, a
quarter-section of land--160 acres. The recipient paid a small fee and agreed to live on the homestead or cultivate it for five years" (Merk 236).

The problem with this was the fact that 160 acres will not work in the semi-arid West. "A farmer on the Great Plains needed far more or much less--2,000 to 50,000 acres as a rancher, 360 to 640 acres for extensive agriculture, 40 to 60 acres to practice irrigation. Nowhere west of the 98th meridian was 160 acres a workable agricultural unit. The Homestead Act prevented pioneers from acquiring the best amount of land for their needs" (Billington 637).

De Smet just happens to be at the 97th meridian, the edge of the semi-arid Great Plains.

Almost the entirety of Laura's childhood was spent in sparcely settled, frontier regions. Her books record Pepin, Wisconsin (Little House in the Big Woods), southeastern Kansas (Little House on the Prairie), Walnut Grove, Minnesota (On the Banks of Plum Creek), and De Smet, South Dakota (By the Shores of Silver Lake, The Long Winter, Little Town on the Prairie, These Happy Golden Years, and The First Four Years). Two of these novels, Little House on the Prairie and Silver Lake, focus more particularly on the homesteading experience and pioneering in the West plus the difficulties associated with homesteading, while the other novels point out the lifestyle of those who lived in or near towns that were on the frontier.

Frederick Merk wrote in History of the Westward Movement that "in 1860 the outer edge of civilization in the Middle West was in northwestern Iowa, western Minnesota, northern Wisconsin, and northern Michigan. A decade later the frontier lay at the edge of the Great Plains, in Kansas, Nebraska, and the Dakotas" (431).
Laura's family followed this pattern quite closely. During the 1850s Ma and Pa were reaching maturity and young adulthood in Wisconsin. As was stated earlier, they were married in 1860, just as the northern Wisconsin area was on the edge of civilization. Pa had taken the family to Indian Territory in Kansas by 1870 just as this region of the country was being settled. By 1879, as the Dakotas were being settled, Pa was right there as well.

There were times in the Ingalls family's trek west that they lived in relatively settled regions and owned farms. This is the case in Little House in the Big Woods. Pa owned a farm, not a homestead. He and Uncle Henry had put $335 together and jointly purchased a farm (Zochert 16). Despite actually owning a farm, the families were still several miles from the town of Pepin, Wisconsin. It seemed as if they were all alone for there were no houses in sight, the forest was very thick, and they rarely saw friends or family except for planned visits. Despite the isolation, life was pleasant for the Ingalls family here. Pa farmed but he could also hunt many varieties of wild animals including bear, wolf, panther, fox, rabbit, and deer. The hunting provided meat to eat and furs to trade.

To hunt, Pa needed to make his own bullets. He would often do this in the evening and Laura and Mary enjoyed watching him. "First he melted the bits of lead in the big spoon held in the coals. When the lead was melted, he poured it carefully from the spoon into the little hole in the bullet-mold. He waited a minute, then he opened the mold, and out dropped a bright new bullet onto the hearth" (Big Woods 46).

While the family was not far from a town, they lived quite independently of the town. A cow provided milk and Ma knew how to make butter and cheese using the milk and rennet. A garden provided the vegetables, a pig, once butchered, provided pork, Pa did some farming and provided game and fish, and the forest provided honey, maple sugar, maple syrup, and nuts.
Laura's next book, *Little House on the Prairie*, is quite different from the first one. This book details the family's experiences traveling by covered wagon and finding a place to homestead in Indian Territory.

What was it like to travel by covered wagon? Everything the family owned was placed inside the wagon, "except the beds and tables and chairs. They did not need to take these, because Pa could always make new ones" (*Prairie* 3). They traveled weeks and weeks, sometimes crossing creeks and rivers and sometimes camping for days to let flooded creeks go down and mud to dry. Laura recalled one of the hardships of traveling by wagon: "In a valley the wagon stuck fast in deep black mud. Rain poured down and thunder crashed and lightning flared. Everything was damp . . . and miserable in the wagon, but they had to stay in it and eat cold bits of food" (*Prairie* 7).

The wagon trip also got extremely boring for travelers, Laura and Mary included. All day they had to sit in the back of the wagon while it slowly jolted its way through Wisconsin, Minnesota, Iowa, Missouri, and Kansas. The family always looked forward to the evening camp. Pa usually stopped near a creek if possible and unhitched the horses, who would be allowed to eat from picket-lines. "Picket-lines were long ropes fastened to iron pegs driven into the ground. The pegs were called picket pins. When horses were on picket-lines they could eat all the grass that the long ropes would let them reach" (*Prairie* 19). Pa would carefully build a fire and fetch water from the creek, and Ma would prepare a supper of cornmeal cakes and fried salt pork.

The best day of all was the day Pa found the place to build their new home. Pa had stopped in Independence, Missouri to inquire about directions to find good land for his homestead. He then drove thirteen miles south of town and picked a spot. Since this land was still technically Indian land, Pa did not file a claim (Zochert 28-31).
Once Pa found the site he thought was just right, he and Ma unloaded everything from the wagon. Pa immediately set off for the creek bottoms to chop trees to build the house and stable. Pa hauled logs for days and then he began to build the house. Laura described the construction. Pa began by measuring the size of the house and then dug two shallow trenches for the two largest and strongest logs. These would support the house. Pa then rolled two more logs into place, one at each end to make a square. Now he was ready to notch the near ends of the logs to allow other logs to fit on top of them. The crossed ends stuck out beyond the notches. Pa built the house three logs high by himself then Ma helped him. Pa lifted the log into place and Ma held it there while he lifted the other end. Unfortunately, Ma sprained her ankle while helping Pa so she could not work on the house anymore. Thankfully, Pa met a neighbor, Mr. Edwards, who was a bachelor, and he agreed to help Pa finish the house (Prairie 40-45). Mr. Edwards became a very good friend to the Ingalls family and a favorite of Laura’s.

The family was fortunate to live near a creek with excellent timber for building. Typical housing on the prairies, in areas far from accessible lumber, were made of sod. Thick layers of sod were piled up to build walls. Doors and windows were cut in the sod. Thatching was used for the roof (Merk 173-174).

Laura then described how Ma and Pa improved their house, stable, and land. Pa built the door to the cabin without nails or a doorknob. He also built the fireplace, the roof, and the floor. Another neighbor, Mr. Scott, helped dig a well. After Pa drove to Independence to trade his furs, he returned with a new plow and seeds to plant a garden and a corn field.

The region Ma and Pa had moved to was the eastern Great Plains. It is one of the greatest regions on the continent. The extent of this region
reaches from the Rio Grande north past the Canadian border on north to the sub-Arctic and westward from the great bend in the Missouri River to the base of the Rockies. It is actually a plateau region instead of plains. The altitude at the foot of the Rockies is higher in certain places than the highest peaks of the Appalachian Mountains (Merk 240). The climate is semi-arid with great seasonal extremes, especially as one travels northward. High winds, aridity, and clay in the soil contributed to a lack of trees. Pa loved the openness of the land and the huge sky.

The lack of trees helped the cattle industry to flourish before farming became popular. Texas was an excellent breeding ground for cattle, and before trains were common in Texas, cattle drives from Texas to railroads in Kansas all passed through Indian Territory, now Oklahoma (Merk 458). Laura mentioned that Pa helped drive the cattle through the creek bottoms, and she remembered the cattle and the cowboys passing the house. The cattle were on their way to Dodge City.

Besides attempting to survive on the frontier, the Ingalls family had to learn how to live with the local Indians. Pa had heard that the Indians were to be moved from Indian Territory so that is why he moved the family. The land on which Pa had moved was the ancient tribal land of the Osage Indians.

"The domain of the Osage once ran from the Gulf of Mexico to the Missouri River, and from the Mississippi to the Rocky Mountains. But bit by bit it had fallen away in treaties with the whites. When the flood of settlement brought Pa and other men to southeastern Kansas in 1869, the Osage land had shrunk to what was called the 'Diminished Reserve.' This was only a small strip of land bordering Indian Territory, and it was held by the Osage only through a war of nerves" (Zochert 37).
Naturally, the Osage were very unhappy with the encroachment of white settlers. Although they had signed a treaty giving up the "Diminished Reserve," it had not gone into effect when whites began moving in. The Osage were ready to fight when the government offered them a new treaty which would increase the government's payment for each acre of Indian land in trade for land in Indian Territory (Oklahoma). The Indians accepted because they had no other choice (Zochert 43-44). They left and Pa left too. He returned to the Big Woods for a few years, but his wandering foot soon began itching again.

This move eventually brought the Ingalls family to Walnut Grove, Minnesota. The events that take place in Walnut Grove are described in On the Banks of Plum Creek. Pa traded for a farm along Plum Creek. He was very optimistic because this was great wheat country. The climate of this region is essentially the same as that of Kansas only the winters are much colder. The air is very dry and this helps keep down certain plant diseases which helps the crops, but the aridity is also the originator of locusts and grasshoppers which destroy crops (Merk 248).

Pa and Ma moved to Plum Creek with high hopes. They lived in a dugout for awhile then Pa built a frame house, on credit, with the intent of paying for it when his wheat crop was harvested. Laura and Mary began attending school and enjoyed it. The family attended church. Things seemed wonderful for the family, but then disaster stuck. A calamity associated with this region of the frontier made its appearance: a plague of grasshoppers arrived. The grasshoppers ate everything. The wheat crop was destroyed and Pa was deeply in debt. He was forced to leave home and look for work.

Farming in Minnesota was a failure for Pa. His wandering foot began to urge him westward. The reader senses the excitement of Pa at the beginning of By the Shores of Silver Lake when he heard of a job opportunity out west in
Dakota Territory. Mary had recently gone blind and baby Grace was a new addition to the family. The family was going through hard times financially when Aunt Docia arrived and unexpectedly offered Pa a job with the railroad her husband was contracting for. This was explained earlier. Pa wanted to take the job. "A homestead in the West was the dream of his life, and this would be one way to get it" (Zochert 130). The only thing holding him back was Ma. She did not want to leave settled country. Ma and Pa talked it over and compromised. Pa "promised that if she would agree to go, this would be the last move he ever made. No more would he wander. It was a hard promise, but he kept it" (Zochert 131).

So Pa packed the wagon with most of the family's belongings and drove with Aunt Docia west to join the Chicago and Northwestern Railway construction camp near Silver Lake in 1879 (Anderson 9). When Mary was ready to travel, Ma and the girls came later on the train to join Pa. The train only went to Tracy, Minnesota, where the tracks ended, so Pa met them and took them by wagon to the camp. They moved on with the railroad workers to the next camp at Silver Lake.

At the Silver Lake camp the Ingalls spent the remainder of the summer and the winter. The railroad surveyors allowed the family the free use of their house and supplies for the winter. When the railroad workers left, the Ingalls family were the only people in that region. They were truly alone in the West. Pa spent the winter hunting and looking for the perfect homestead site. A young couple named Mr. and Mrs. Boast arrived at Christmas and a lifelong friendship was begun.

With early spring, people began to rapidly arrive to take homestead claims and build the town of De Smet. Pa was caught off-guard so he rushed to file his claim before someone else took it.

Pa described filing a claim in this way: "You wouldn't believe [the
The Farmers' Frontier, 1870-1890

The Chicago and North Western Railroad in
By the Shores of Silver Lake (Billington, 655).
trouble]. I never saw such a jam. It looks like the whole country's trying to file on land. I got to Brookins all right the first night, and the next morning when I showed up at the Land Office I couldn't get anywheres near the door. Every man had to stand in line and wait his turn. So many were ahead of me that my turn didn't come that day" (Silver Lake 234).

Pa then decided to wait all night on the doorstep. He was first in line but had to do battle to get in the next day. Mr. Edwards, the bachelor-friend from Indian Territory, just happened by and started a fight to allow Pa to get in and file his claim. Pa said, "Well, girls, I've bet Uncle Sam fourteen dollars against a hundred and sixty acres of land, that we can make out to live on the claim for five years. Going to help me win the bet?" (Silver Lake 237). They all gladly said yes.

Later, in Little Town on the Prairie, Laura explained in somewhat more detail what it was like for many families homesteading in Dakota. The homesteading law stated that a family could not have a claim unless they lived on it six months out of the year for five consecutive years and ten acres must be planted for five years. Unfortunately, many families did not have the money to do this. So, the families often had to live on the claim and plant crops while the fathers were sometimes forced to work in town to earn enough money to buy the things they needed (Little Town 49-50).

Along with homestead claims came building sites in town. The surveyors returned and "finished staking out the town by March 28 . . ." (Zochert 143). Men rushed madly to get their stores, hotels, and saloons built and ready to sell various items. The town was built along the railroad grade, and every day people anxiously looked down the grade to see if the track layers were in sight (Zochert 144).
Pa joined the mad rush of construction. While everyone else had to ship their lumber overland and pay teamsters exorbitant prices, Pa tore down the old railroad shanties and used the lumber to build one store for someone else and one for himself. He moved the family to his building in April, 1880. Laura looked around. "Suddenly, there on the brown prairie where nothing had been before, was the town. In two weeks, all along Main Street the unpainted new buildings pushed up their thin false fronts, two stories high and square on top. Behind the false fronts the buildings squatted under their partly shingled, sloping roofs" (Silver Lake 242).

It seemed as if the Chicago and North Western Railroad had done its job of opening southeastern Dakota to settlement (Billington 654). Rail lines were magnets for settlers.

The Ingalls family did not live in town for long. Pa soon built a tiny claim shanty so that the family could all move out and protect it from a claim jumper. Laura was happy to move to the homestead because she disliked living in town near so many people.

Ma and the girls were surprised when they saw the claim shanty Pa had built. Pa said that "it is a little house only half built, and that half unfinished" (Silver Lake 263). Somehow they managed to squeeze everything into the little room, and Ma hung curtains for privacy. The first thing Pa did was dig a well. Then he finished the shanty by fastening black tar paper over the shanty.

Carrie and Ma commented on the lack of trees and how they so much wanted to see some. Pa told them that the government had set up tree claims, one per section, and that settlers had to plant ten acres of trees on each tree claim. So soon there would be wooded areas where there was once open prairie. Pa
drove to Lake Henry, which was several miles away, and cut willow brush for fuel. There was a huge cottonwood tree, called the Lone Tree, growing on a small rise of ground between Lake Henry and Lake Thompson. As a surprise, when Pa returned from Lake Henry, he also brought cottonwood seedlings, one for each person in the family, to be planted as a windbreak around the shanty (Silver Lake 270, 273-4).

Once everything was settled, Pa leaned back, relaxed, and talked of their future. "I wouldn't wonder if we do pretty well here, Caroline. In time we'll build more rooms on this house, and maybe have a driving team and buggy. I'm not going to plow up much grass. We'll have a garden and a little field, but mostly raise hay and cattle. Where so many buffalo ranged, must be a good country for cattle" (Silver Lake 284).

Pa was right about one thing at least. This region, the Great Plains, is excellent cattle country. Today cattle can be found throughout the region, and some of the largest and most productive cattle ranches are located on the Great Plains (McKnight 320).

In The Long Winter, Laura began by describing their first summer on the homestead. Pa spent days and days mowing the tall prairie grass for hay. The average height for the prairie grasses is one to three feet (McKnight 307). Laura brought Pa water and asked to help. Pa said he needed help because he could not afford to hire help; the mowing machine had cost too much. Ma reluctantly gave her permission. She felt that it was degrading to women to do men's work. Only foreign women worked in the fields but she realized that Pa really did need help (Long Winter 4). So Laura helped by trampling the hay down in the hayrack while Pa pitched it in. They worked hard all day. "Laura was proud. Her arms ached and her back ached and her legs ached, and that night in bed she ached all over so badly that tears swelled out of her eyes, but she did not tell anyone" (Long Winter 9).
As they were working one day, Laura thought she saw a haycock but Pa said it was a muskrats' house. It was especially big and thick. Pa was sober and thought that meant a very hard winter was coming. The muskrats were prepared. Sure enough, a light frost arrived in September, portending the disastrous winter ahead. Another, harder, frost came that killed everything. They all went out to harvest what they could from trying to grow things in sod-ground. Sod-ground is newly plowed prairie that still has large clumps of prairie grass and dead roots. Once the clumps rotted, the soil would become smoother.

After harvest a blizzard came. Pa realized that the shanty was not nearly warm enough so he moved the family into town to his store building for the winter. An old Indian had come into town to warn the people of the bad winter to come. Pa believed him, and told Ma that "they know some things that we don't" (Long Winter 64). It turned out that he made the right decision for that was an extremely hard winter. Blizzards came every few days and snowed in the town. Snow drifts blocked the trains so no supplies came for months. People began to go hungry. The town was far enough out on the frontier that it was just as isolated from the world as the Ingalls family had been living on their own in Indian Territory or on Silver Lake before the town was built.

Finally that horrible winter ended and the family returned to the homestead claim. Laura began Little Town on the Prairie by describing their second spring and summer on the claim. Her jobs included fetching water, milking the cow, teaching the calf to drink, and working in the garden. Her sisters, Mary and Carrie, often had charge of the housework while Ma assigned chores and also worked in the garden. Pa had bought a new plow which made his job of breaking the prairie sod much easier. "It had a sharp-edged wheel, called a rolling coulter, that ran rolling and cutting through the sod
ahead of the plowshare. The sharp steel plowshare followed it, slicing underneath the matted grass roots, and the moldboard lifted the long, straight-edged strip of sod and turned it upside down. The strip of sod was exactly twelve inches wide, and as straight as if it had been cut by hand" (Little Town 9).

Pa was so proud of that plow. He exclaimed about all of the new modern inventions that made a man's work so much easier.

Later that spring, Pa was able to make time to improve the claim shanty. One day, with Laura's help, he built the other half of the shanty. Now they had a real but still small house. It had two tiny bedrooms and one larger room to live in.

Laura spent most of the summer working in town. She sewed shirts for twenty-five cents a day, six days a week. Pa also had work in town as a carpenter. They were able to work in town because most of the initial hard work on their claim had already been done. Breaking sod the first year on a claim was always the hardest job. The sod clumps did not allow a good crop to grow so a settler had to wait until the second year, when the sods had rotted, to hope for a good crop. The longer settlers were in the area, the further along they would be in ground breaking as compared to newcomers. Pa was the oldest settler, and he had a whole year's head start on most every family near De Smet. Pa had broken sod before the hard winter of 1880-1881 whereas most of the settlers had arrived too late to make a crop that year or arrived in the spring of 1881. With Pa's head start, he could afford to take time and earn extra money in town. He found Laura a job, and together they earned enough money to send Mary to the School for the Blind in Vinton, Iowa.

The Boasts were another family who had also gotten a good start with their claim. They already had several head of livestock and Mrs. Boast had
chickens. Ma hoped to have chickens for eggs and meat. One day Pa brought word that Mrs. Boast was going to hatch some chicks for Ma and later that summer Pa brought them home to Ma. Having chickens and livestock was an indication of successful improvements on a claim.

In *These Happy Golden Years*, Pa's claim continued to prosper. He mostly raised hay and cattle plus a small wheat field for cash. He added on a parlor/living room to the house, and bought an organ for Mary to play when she came home from college. Laura began teaching school and Almanzo Wilder began courting her. During the summer Laura helped a family hold down their claim. The McKees had not been able to earn enough money to buy all of the tools and seeds they needed, yet the law required that somebody must live on the claim for six months. Therefore, Mr. McKee worked in De Smet, and Mrs. McKee and her daughter lived on the claim. Mrs. McKee was afraid to live alone so she paid Laura a little to live with them.

In one way or another, Laura, in most of her books, tells readers all about homesteading from her own experiences. Homesteading, and even farming in general, were difficult. The labor was hard, and the hours were often long. The Ingalls did not have much modern equipment to ease their labor. Life was rough but Laura never complained. She and Pa loved the wild outdoors, feeling the wind and gazing across miles of unsettled land. The family made a bet with the government that they could make their homestead claim near De Smet succeed. They worked hard and won.

Although much of Laura's life was adventurous and enjoyable, she and her family did have their share of dangers and difficulties while homesteading. For instance, while in Indian Territory, the Ingalls were almost drowned while crossing a creek, Ma badly sprained her ankle while helping Pa build the house, a wolf-pack surrounded the house when there was only a quilt covering
the door, the entire family almost died from malaria (called fever 'n' ague back then), the chimney caught on fire, a panther was on the prowl for a time, they fought a prairie fire, and faced angry Indians.

The Indians often visited the settlers and Laura recorded Osage men visiting them several times. Ma was afraid of Indians, but Pa generally did not mind having them around if they did not bother him. Often he met them while he was out hunting and attempted to communicate with them. However, when the Osage began to turn to thoughts of war, Pa got angry.

"One chilling and untold story from this period of the Ingalls' lives occurred during the worst Indian trouble. Pa strapped on his bullet belt, almost determined for a battle with the 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 skunk-skins 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" (Anderson 7-8).

Another Indian, whom Laura called Soldat du Chene, did much to prevent the Osages from going on the warpath. No records can be found of a Soldat du Chene during that time but whoever he really was, he was instrumental in saving the lives of many white settlers, including the Ingalls family (Zochert 44).

While in Walnut Grove, Laura and her family again experienced difficulties. Grasshoppers came and destroyed the crops, placing Pa into debt and forcing him to walk many miles east to find work. Ma and the girls, with Mr. Nelson's help, fought another prairie fire. Worst of all, Ma, Mary,
Carrie, and Grace contracted scarlet fever. Mary suffered the most from this experience. She developed a very high fever and suffered a stroke. She gradually began to recover but then her eyes began to fail. Pa had a Dr. Wellcome look at Mary but nothing could be done (Zochert 129-130).

"He said the nerves of her eyes had the worst of the stroke and were dying, that nothing could be done," Laura wrote. "They had a long name for her sickness, and said it was the result of the measles [Mary had had as a child] from which she had never wholly recovered. As Mary grew stronger, her eyes grew weaker, until when she could sit up in the big chair among the pillows she could hardly see at all. The last thing Mary ever saw was the bright blue of Grace's eyes, as Grace stood holding by the chair looking up at her" (Zochert 130).

Walnut Grove turned out to be an unhappy and unsuccessful venture for the Ingalls family. Pa never made a good wheat crop and could barely keep out of debt. Therefore, when Aunt Docia offered him a job with the railroad, Pa took it.

However, their dangers were not over yet. On their way to Silver Lake, a lone rider appeared on the prairie behind the Ingalls' wagon. He steadily approached. There was no way the horses pulling the wagon could outrun the gunman. Lucky for them, a mixed-blood Indian named Big Jerry appeared. Pa knew him and knew that the family was now safe. Big Jerry would keep the gunman from attacking the family.

The next spring, with the onslaught of settlers, claim jumpers became a serious problem. A claim jumper would take over a claim when the owner was absent. One claim jumper killed Jack Hunt when he and his father went to check on their claim. De Smet went into an uproar and Pa hurriedly built his shanty so that the family could quickly move to the claim and protect it (Zochert 148).
Once the long hard winter was over, the dangers of the frontier diminished for the Ingalls family. For several years, the family was relatively prosperous, and they never again suffered financially as greatly as they had before they left Walnut Grove. Their only concerns were based on the climate of the region. The Great Plains region "has considerable variation in climate, particularly in temperature" (McKnight 306). The summers here can be unbearably hot and the winters bitterly cold. Laura recorded the heat and the cold plus blizzards, hail, tornadoes, fascinating thunderstorms, dust storms, and drought. McKnight verifies Laura's accounts of the weather. "The Great Plains and Prairies experience the highest incidence of hail of any region in North America. Cold fronts, warm fronts, tornadoes, thunderstorms, blizzards, heat waves, hail storms, and dust storms are all part of the annual pageant of weather in this region" (307).

Despite the many dangers of pioneering and the occasional ill luck, Laura retained her deep love for the land. Though she became discouraged at times, she never gave up hope. Laura and her family demonstrate to readers the hardiness of the pioneers of a bygone era. In history books one may learn about wagon trains and the Homestead Act of 1862 and the United States' policy of Indian removal, but Laura's first-hand experiences with traveling by covered wagon, living on a government homestead, and coming face to face with Indians provide a clearer picture of reality than any textbook ever could. She may have intended her books to be read and enjoyed by children, but people of all ages can enjoy them for their descriptions of life in the last quarter of the nineteenth century.

In fact, how does Laura go about describing other aspects of historical significance? History documents homesteading just as Laura has done. History also tells about building railroads and how education in the United States
developed into the system we have today. Well, Laura rivals textbooks in these two areas as well. She rode in those early trains and watched railroads being built. In fact, she lived in a railroad camp for a short time. Laura also experienced the famous one-room schoolhouse both as a student and a teacher. She informs the reader exactly how railroads were constructed and how schools operated, and how a girl could become a teacher at age fifteen.

Laura's book on railroads is By the Shores of Silver Lake. Pa got a job as storekeeper, bookkeeper, and timekeeper for the Chicago and North Western Railroad to be built. At the time of his initial employment Mary was too sick to travel so Pa left, and Ma brought the girls later on the train.

This is how Laura described her encounter with a train at the depot: "The engine's round front window glared in the sunshine like a huge eye. The smokestack flared upward to a wide top, and black smoke rolled up from it. A sudden streak of white shot up through the smoke, then the whistle screamed a long wild scream. The roaring thing came rushing straight at them all, swelling bigger and bigger, enormous, shaking everything with noise" (Silver Lake 19).

Traveling by train was a completely different experience depending on which class the passenger paid for. First class cars contained plush seats, convertible berths, heat, fine dining, and express service. Second class was also express, but it had upholstered seats and passengers were required to sleep in their seats and eat at stops. Third class passengers had to endure narrow wooden benches placed close together. The third class cars were usually attached to freight cars, so they were often shuffled aside with the freight cars until the engineers bothered to hook them back up (Wheeler 135, 139).

Laura informs the reader what the inside of the train looked like as she
described it to Mary. Since Mary was blind, Pa told Laura that she needed to become Mary's "eyes." Laura would describe everything in detail so that Mary could picture it in her mind. The seats were red velvet. Laura said, "Every window is one big sheet of glass, and even the strips of wood between the windows shine like glass, they are so polished" (Silver Lake 23). There was a place to get water. A small handle, when turned, allowed water to pour into a tin cup. Laura had never seen anything like it.

They took the train as far as it went, to Tracy, Minnesota, and there the rails stopped. Then, to Laura's amazement, the unfastened engine went a short ways by itself until it reached a turntable that completely turned the engine around. This was necessary for the engine to return down the tracks. After this event, they ate dinner at the hotel and spent the afternoon waiting for Pa to arrive.

It took them two days' driving to reach Silver Lake Camp. This camp had fifty teams and eighty men. Pa said this was small; some camps had two hundred men. The girls took a walk their first day at camp. "They could see the whole camp, scattered along the lake shore north of the shanty. First was the store where Pa was working with the big feed store behind it. Then the stable for the work teams. Beyond it was the long, low bunkhouse where the men slept, and still farther away was Cousin Louisa's long boardinghouse shanty, with supper smoke already rising from its stovepipe" (Silver Lake 79).

How was a railroad built? The surveyors would be hundreds of miles in front of the main crew. They established the grades--when to cut and when to fill. Far behind yet still way ahead of the tracklayers would be the crew that actually did the cutting and filling. These men would use horses, mules, scrapers, and dumpcarts plus shovels to make as level a grade as possible.
The graders usually lived in semi-permanent camps since they were far ahead of the other crews, and also because often their job was much slower and more difficult. Then twenty or so miles still in front of the track would be the bridge-builders who erected the trestles spanning rivers and gullies. On the plains the wood for bridges and railroad ties was either non-existent or of poor quality, such as cottonwood. The cottonwood was treated by a preservation method devised so as to impregnate the wood with a solution of zinc chloride. The treated ties were then interspersed with freighted-in cedar and oak ties, usually on a ratio of four junk ties to one quality tie (Wheeler 98-99).

One day Pa took Laura to see the men working on the railroad grade near Silver Lake. What did she see? Plows and scrapers, both pulled by teams of horses, were making the grade straight, level, and even. Supervisors stood all around, monitoring everything. Then Pa and Laura walked further on to see a cut and a fill. Pa told her, "You see, Laura, where the ground is low, they make the grade higher, and where the ground is high they cut through it to make the grade level. A railroad roadbed has to be as level as it can be for the trains to run on" (Silver Lake 100). Plows and scrapers were again used. They cut into the rise in the ground and the dirt was carried to the place where the ground needed to be higher, thus a fill. Everyone moved in harmony. It was carefully synchronized and no one missed a beat.

On their way back to camp, Pa pointed out stakes with numbers on them. These were the surveyors marks and told the supervisors how deep a cut should be or how high a fill needed to be.

"When the grade's finished," Pa said, "the shovel-men will come along with hand shovels, and they'll smooth the sides of the grade by hand, and level it on top."

"And then they'll lay the rails," Laura said.
"Don't jump ahead so fast, Flutterbudget," Pa laughed at her. "The railroad ties have got to be shipped out here and laid before its time for the rails. Rome wasn't built in a day, and neither's a railroad, nor anything else worth having" (Silver Lake 105).

A book on railroads or a history textbook mentioning railroads might include materials used and how a railroad was built but as the reader can see, Laura was able to expand on these descriptions. She was there and actually experienced a train ride and watched a cut and a fill. Her description matches that of the historically researched and documented book on railroads. However, Laura gives the reader her emotions, the weather, the detail. The reader can picture the men and horses moving in concert in great loops and circles. The reader can see the dust blowing in the wind and hear the shouting of the men and the snorting of the horses. Laura keeps the reader's eyes and imagination glued to the story. It is as if the reader is reliving history.

Education is another topic that Laura brings out in her books. By studying Laura's books the reader learns not only about what kind of an education Laura received, but also its importance to her family, the conditions in which she was taught, how Laura became a teacher, and what it was like to be a teacher and a student in a one-room country schoolhouse. Most people have heard of the one-room schools but they may have no clear correct conception of them. Laura clearly, and in detail, described her education process through the one-room schoolhouse system.

Laura described her first experience with school in On the Banks of Plum Creek. The school was one room. "Long benches stood one behind another down the middle of the room. They were made of planed boards. Each bench had a back, and two shelves stuck out from the back, over the bench
behind. Only the front bench did not have any shelves in front of it, and the last bench did not have any back" (Plum Creek 149-150).

There were windows, a broom, a water-pail and dipper, and a black-painted board with a trough holding "short, white sticks . . . and a block of wood with a woolly bit of sheepskin pulled tightly around it and nailed down" (Plum Creek 150). Laura and Mary also learned about slates and rulers. Slates were to write on, and rulers were used for punishment. A child would hold his or her hands out and the teacher would strike the child's hands with the ruler.

For recess, the boys played on one side of the school, the girls played on the other side, and the big girls sat on the steps. Subjects learned were reading, writing, spelling, and arithmetic.

The next school Laura attended was in De Smet. Ma had home-schooled the girls between leaving Walnut Grove and their attendance at the De Smet school. The schoolhouse was new. "All the desks were patent desks, made of wood varnished as smooth as glass. They had black iron feet and the seats were curved a little, with curving backs that were part of the desks behind them. The desk-tops had grooves to hold pencils and shelves underneath them for slates and books" (Long Winter 80).

In total, there were thirty-two desks, twelve to a side and eight in the middle. For heat, a stove stood in the middle of the room separating the eight desks in the middle row into four in front and four behind.

What Laura described was the simple "little red schoolhouse" that so many readers can picture in their mind. These schools were found in rural areas, especially in the West. They were simple and plain, and served children of all ages. "Typically it would have a cast iron stove, a coat closet, several long seats and writing benches, and a raised desk for the teacher" (Ornstein/Levine 171). The little one-room schoolhouse forms one of the popular images of United States history.
In the classroom students learned "reading, writing, arithmetic, spelling, geography, and history and virtues of punctuality, honesty, and hard work" (Ornstein/Levine 171). Laura's first teacher at De Smet, Miss Florence Garland, always opened the day by reading a passage from the Bible. On Laura's first day she read Psalm Twenty-Three. Reading from the Bible was commonplace back then and lasted until the mid-twentieth century when the Supreme Court ruled in 1962 that prayer and Bible-reading in public schools was unconstitutional.

When Laura first enrolled at the De Smet school, Miss Garland placed Laura in the Fifth Reader as Laura had told her that she knew all of the Fourth Reader. Laura did not say which Fifth Reader but it could possibly have been the McGuffey Fifth Reader. McGuffey's readers epitomized literacy, hard work, diligence, morality, patriotism, and heroism. His graded books led to the development of the graded school system in the United States today (Ornstein/Levine 171-172). The Fifth Reader included instruction in articulation, inflection, accent, emphasis, modulation and poetic pauses; in essence, instruction in elocution (McGuffey's Fifth Eclectic Reader 9-33). Poetry, prose, selections from the Bible, and excerpts from plays, speeches, and stories were included in the Fifth Reader. Authors included in the Fifth Reader that a reader today might be familiar with included Whittier, Longfellow, L.M. Alcott, Irving, Daniel Webster, Dickens, Tennyson, Thoreau, Shakespeare, Charles Lamb, and Bret Harte. A short biographical sketch was provided for each author.

Laura read works by these and other authors. Every day she and Carrie went to school, and every evening Laura did her homework with Mary. They went over every lesson together to prepare Mary for college. Unfortunately, the severe weather during the long winter stopped the trains. Since there was no
coal, school was closed for the winter. So Laura and Mary did their lessons at home. "Laura read the arithmetic problems one by one to Mary, and did them on the slate while Mary solved them in her head" (Long Winter 142).

In Little Town on the Prairie, Laura went on to describe aspects of town life and she added more information that tells the reader what school was like for her and Carrie. Miss Wilder, Almanzo's sister, was the next teacher, and she had a difficult time maintaining discipline in the school. Of course the boys had to test her patience and see how far they could go before she would punish them but she never did. She did, however, unfairly punish Laura and Carrie. Carrie misspelled some words, as did another girl, but only Carrie was required to write them on the board. She almost fainted and Laura cried out to tell Miss Wilder. Surprisingly, that made Miss Wilder angry, and she made Laura go up and finish Carrie's punishment. The very next day, Carrie and her friend Mamie unconsciously began rocking their seat. Miss Wilder called their attention and made them rock the seat. Mamie rocked for a bit then blatantly got up and switched seats. Miss Wilder only told Carrie to keep rocking. Laura became so angry that she volunteered to rock the seat, and rock she did. She rocked so loudly that no one could study. Then Miss Wilder sent Laura and Carrie home. "Everyone had heard of being sent home from school. No one there had seen it done before. It was a punishment worse than whipping with a whip. Only one punishment was more dreadful; that was to be expelled from school" (Little Town 163).

Miss Wilder lost complete control of the school and only a visit from the school board stopped the noise. Pa happened to be on the school board and that was why Miss Wilder did not treat Laura and Carrie fairly. Mr. Clewett replaced Miss Wilder the next term and school returned to normal. After summer, Mr. Owen became the new teacher, and he planned a School Exhibition.
The reader can compare this to a PTA meeting. Mr. Owen wanted the community to become more aware of the needs of the school. Then Mr. Owen "told Laura and Ida that their part in the Exhibition would be to recite the whole of American history, from memory" (Little Town 274).

The night of the School Exhibition came. The advanced class, Laura's class, came forward and answered questions in geography, grammar, and arithmetic. Then younger students, including Carrie, recited poetry. The next portion of the program was the review of American history recited by Laura and Ida. Laura began. She spoke of Columbus and his discovery of America, the early history and the Revolution, George Washington, John Adams, Thomas Jefferson, James Madison and the War of 1812, James Monroe and his Doctrine, John Quincy Adams, Andrew Jackson, and the opening of Kansas to settlers. Ida then completed the history of the United States and neither of the girls made a mistake (Little Town 291-293).

A surprise occurred not long after the School Exhibition. Laura was offered a teaching position. In current times, if a person wants to become a teacher, it requires at least four years of college to earn a teaching certificate, plus education training classes and special examinations. Generally, one can expect a new teacher out of college to be at least twenty-one years old or older. Well, Laura received her first teaching certificate at age fifteen and was given an informal exam in her living room by the superintendent, with Ma present. How can one possibly imagine a fifteen-year-old teaching school today?

These Happy Golden Years picks up immediately where Little Town on the Prairie left off. In fact, Laura was on her way to teach school. In this novel, one learns about nineteenth century education from a young teacher's point of view. For the rest of the novel, Laura spends her time alternately
attending the De Smet school and teaching. And that is the real irony of the entire situation. The law stipulated that a teacher must by sixteen to earn a certificate yet here was Laura, age fifteen, teaching school and not even finished with school herself. Another amazing point is that Laura taught three terms of school and never even graduated from the De Smet school. A situation like this is almost impossible to comprehend today.

Through her stories intended for children, Laura managed to provide today's reader with an intimate look into the lifestyle of an ordinary pioneering family. She covered daily life and growing up. The reader learns about cultural attitudes of the late nineteenth century. Laura's books give the reader a history lesson. One learns about the Homestead Act of 1862, what homesteading was like, the dangers of homesteading, encounters with Indians, the rush to build railroads, and nineteenth century education.

A history textbook includes some or most of the material Laura covered in her "history lesson," but no textbook can equal Laura's achievement in presenting pioneer life in such a clear, accurate, entertaining, and personal fashion.

Too often, historians have tried to focus on the adventure, individualism, and violence of the West, but it seems more accurate to say "that it is not the drama and the heroism, but the very dailiness and ordinariness of the frontier story that [one] finds so compelling. Readers want to know how people traveled to the West, what difficulties they encountered, how they coped, and how the story turned out in the end" (Armitage 16). Laura did just exactly that.
APPENDIX

Readers of this thesis may wonder why information was included that does not correspond with the Little House series. Part of the reason is that it is interesting, but mostly the extra information was added to let the reader know that while Laura did write the truth, she could, in no way, write about everything in her life, so she left out a few things.

Laura also changed the facts in a few places. Noticeably is a major jump from the end of On the Banks of Plum Creek to By the Shores of Silver Lake. What happened between 1875 and 1879? She changed some facts and her age in Little House in the Big Woods and Little House on the Prairie. Why?

One explanation concerning 1875-1879 is the sadness the family experienced during that time period. A son was born to Charles and Caroline, named Charles Frederick, but he died less than a year later. Also, the family left Walnut Grove and spent a year in Burr Oak, Iowa operating a hotel. This was not a very pleasant time for the Ingalls, especially for Pa. He did not want to run a hotel; he wanted to homestead in the West. Because this time period was not a happy one, Laura may have used that as a reason to leave it out.

Another reason why facts were changed or left out is based on Laura's age in Little House in the Big Woods. In a letter to William Anderson dated June 17, 1966 Rose Wilder Lane explained some of the discrepancies. Part of that letter has been published in William Anderson's book Laura Ingalls Wilder: The Iowa Story. Citing Anderson, this is what Rose wrote:

"It may interest you to know why Burr Oak, Iowa was left out of the books. My mother was three years old in Little House in the Big Woods. She wrote about her birthday, when . . . she was given three
spans (by Pa) and 'one to grow on'. Harper Brothers (then her publisher; the name now changed to Harper and Row) would not print this; the editors insisted that no child has a memory before the age of five. . . . There was a long wrangle about this but Harpers refused to publish the book without the change, and finally my mother agreed to be five years old in the book. This would make her two years older than she really was, through all the other books. So she left out the two years spent in Burr Oak, partly to make her age correct and partly because Burr Oak was not too different from the Little Town (De Smet) that she wrote about later" (1-2).

Readers may notice other discrepancies between the series and this thesis. Most of these are supported by quotes from and references to Donald Zochert's book Laura: the Life of Laura Ingalls Wilder. For readers interested in learning more about Laura's life, this book is highly recommended. It contains a vast amount of information that could not be included here. Only the most pertinent passages to this thesis were used.

Other readers may wonder why there is no reference to Farmer Boy. This book in Laura's series was left out because all events that take place concern Almanzo's childhood on a farm in New York State, which is not relevant to the theme of this thesis.

A final comment concerns the authorship of the series. There is a debate among some people as to whether Laura wrote the series or if Rose was the real author. It is no secret that Rose did edit Laura's manuscripts. This can be clearly seen by simply reading the correspondence between Laura and Rose during the writing of the series. These letters are located at the Herbert Hoover Presidential Library and Museum in West Branch, Iowa. The head archivist, Dwight M. Miller, let me read some of the correspondence. As far
as I am concerned, Laura is the author, not Rose. Laura had been writing articles for years, but she did not have experience writing novels. Rose helped Laura put her stories and memories together in final form to be published. That is what an editor is for, to correct mistakes and make the draft suitable for publication.
WORKS CITED


