



Lesson 2

Laura Ingalls Wilder:

A Girl of Grit



I. Laura Ingalls Wilder: A Girl of Grit

II. Brief Description of the South Dakota Feature

Though Laura Ingalls wasn't a native South Dakotan (she was born in Wisconsin in an area actually known as the "Big Woods" and also lived in Kansas, Minnesota, Iowa, Missouri, and, inadvertently, territory restricted to Native American tribes), the Ingalls family moved to De Smet, S.D., in 1879 when she was 12. She remained there until 1894 when she and husband Almanzo moved to Missouri. During her South Dakota years, she became an adult, taught school, married, and gave birth to two children, burying one at age 12 days from one of the many childhood diseases that haunted the world and the fevered fears of new parents in the 19th century.

Her childhood and young adulthood were, in fact, uneventful, comparable to the experiences of millions of others who accompanied parents and husbands in pursuit of arable lands in the Midwest. De Smet was a small town back then and it still is today. So how did this unremarkable little girl from this unremarkable little town in Dakota Territory become someone known by whole generations of school children across the United States and the world? She did so through grit, the ability of a person to use passion and perseverance to succeed. She did so by never letting reversals or traumas in her life define her or hold her back from being a success. She did so by always understanding that it wasn't what happened to you in life which mattered, but how you responded to it.

III. Lesson Plan Steps:

A. Anticipatory Set

Hold up a copy of one of the books in the "Little House" series by Laura Ingalls Wilder. You can find these in almost every South Dakota elementary and middle school library. ("The Little House on the Prairie" is the cover perhaps most recognizable to students but any one of them will do.) Ask: "So, raise your hand if you've ever read this book or had it read to you." Call on several students, asking which it was: did they read it or was it read to them? Ask them: What grade? Who read it to you? etc. The "Little House" books will often bring out quite a lot of discussion from young people, today and even more than a half-century ago. Most kids still remember the books fondly and enjoy talking about them.

B. Objective and Purpose

The students will be able to identify at least three of the difficulties in Laura Ingalls Wilder's life, offer a working definition of "grit" in their own words, and provide examples of difficulties in their peers' lives along with ways of exercising grit as a response.

Offer a few comments to the students along the lines of:

- So many of you already know a lot about the life of Laura Ingalls Wilder from reading one or more of her books. Or having them read to you.
- But did you know that the books you know are actually her second attempt at writing the story of her life? (By the way, since she wrote these books herself about her own life, these are called autobiographies rather than biographies.) The first attempt resulted in the book, "Pioneer Girl," which was rejected by publishers. That is, until 2014 when the South Dakota Historical Society Press printed it in an annotated form. It became one of their bestsellers.)
- Unable to find a publisher, Laura's daughter and only living child, Rose Wilder Lane, suggested she rewrite the book for children. Laura took the suggestion, and in 1932, "Little House in the Big Woods" rolled off the printing press. It sold so well and so quickly that she kept right on

going, following it up with “Farmer Boy,” “Little House on the Prairie,” “On the Banks of Plum Creek,” “By the Shores of Silver Lake,” “The Long Winter,” “Little Town on the Prairie,” “These Happy Golden Years,” and “The First Four Years.”

- To learn a little more about Laura Ingalls Wilder, let’s take out a short biography and see what possible lesson we can take from her life, writing, and times. Then read the short biography provided here individually or as a class, aloud.

C. Resources to be Accessed

1. “The Life of Laura Ingalls Wilder: A Girl of Grit” (see below)
2. “Pioneer Girl” by Laura Ingalls Wilder. This book is not necessary for the lesson, but if your library has it, it is interesting to show to students and may result in students checking it out.

D. Modeling

One easy way to make this lesson applicable and comprehensible to students is to ask them to offer examples of resilience, of when they or someone they know had a reversal or obstacle in life and then overcame it. This can be treacherous terrain if you ask for examples from their own lives. This is the case for several reasons:

- Children lack filters, as you well know, and may start telling tales unsuitable for the classroom, even revealing family secrets which other children shouldn’t be exposed to.
- It can become a game of one-upmanship in which “the first liar never has a chance.”
- It can do the very reverse of the purpose of the lesson, becoming a warped “group therapy” session of sharing travails.

Thus, a better option would be to tell a story of someone you know who genuinely overcame a really tough situation in life. Perhaps there is a local minor celebrity who is known for something like this. In the end, you are looking for a second tale in which a person faces major obstacles or reversals and, by their actions and attitude, overcomes them and becomes successful (economically, militarily, socially, intellectually, spiritually) in the end.

E. Checking for Understanding/Guided Practice

Now students should be ready to demonstrate their understanding by applying it to novel situations, and thereby apply their new learning.

To evoke this, offer several small or even a bit more momentous (but nothing truly traumatic) examples of things to overcome. Such might include:

- You tried out for but were not selected to be on the basketball team. How would you respond in a way that demonstrates grit?
- Ever since Kindergarten, you’ve had a best friend at school. But now that student’s mother takes a new job, and they move away. Though you’ll always miss your friend and wish he/she hadn’t left our school, how could you show grit in this situation?

F. Independent Practice

This is done as a classroom group or among two or three students working together. Because there isn't usually homework for classroom counseling, now you move this to student by student. Provide those examples above or others that you think of and offer them to students with the instruction: "OK, now, I want you to do the same things with another example(s), but don't share them. Just think about them in your own mind and come up with steps that demonstrate grit."

G. Student-Led Closure

As the class ends, offer the following:

"Great, now I want you to think about a few questions silently, in your own head.

- How would you define grit? (Give them 10-30 seconds to ponder.) Now offer that definition to the person sitting next to you. (Circulate as you do this and verbally highlight good definitions, correcting poor ones.)
- Think about one reversal/hurdle in Laura's life. What did she do to respond to it?
- Think about a second one. Same question.
- Do you think Teddy Roosevelt (assuming you covered him in an earlier lesson) had grit? Why or why not? What evidence can you cite from his life that supports your view?"

H. Standards Addressed

SD Mindsets & Behaviors for Student Success: K-12 College, Career, and Life-Ready Competencies for Every Student:

- B-LS 1. Critical thinking skills to make informed decisions.
- B-SMS 1. Responsibility for self and actions.
- B-SMS 5. Perseverance to achieve long- and short-term goals.
- B-SMS 7. Effective coping skills.

English/Language Arts-Reading:

- 4.RF.4 Read with sufficient accuracy and fluency to support comprehension.
 - a. Read grade-level text with purpose and understanding.
- 5.RF.4 Read with sufficient accuracy and fluency to support comprehension.
 - a. Read grade-level text with purpose and understanding.
- 6-8.RH-1 Cite specific textual evidence to support analysis of primary and secondary sources.

Social Studies:

- 5.SS.9. H. The student describes the life of pioneers in South Dakota during the 1800s.

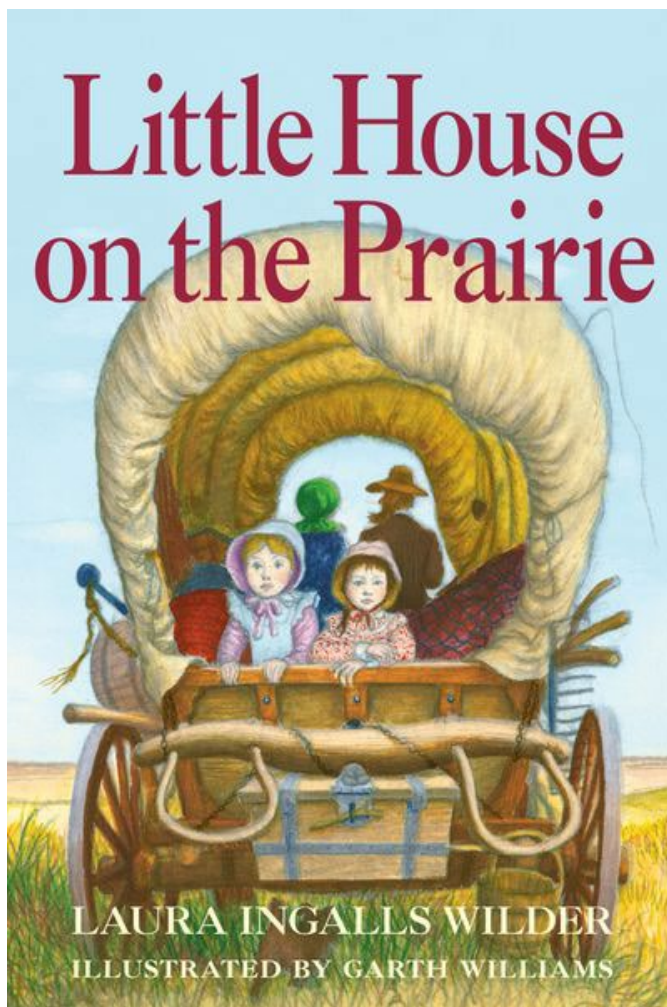
Laura Ingalls Wilder:

A Girl of Grit

Growing up in the 19th century, especially on the American frontier, was no bowl of cherries. And that was true right from the beginning. Three out of every 10 children died before their first birthday. Forty-three percent did not make it past their 5th birthday. (Imagine if that were still true now; almost half of your classmates would not be sitting in class with you today.)

In 1867, Laura Ingalls was born the second oldest of five children. Her brother, Charles, died at nine months of age. Her sister, Mary, lost her eyesight, probably as a result of scarlet fever, a common disease of the time. Laura, nevertheless, thrived. She had successfully leapt the first hurdle in life, back when so many different diseases—cholera, yellow fever, scarlet fever, typhoid fever, smallpox, rabies, whooping cough, measles, mumps — threatened the lives of young and old alike.

Charles, her father, (you may remember their names from the books or even the TV show, “Little House on the Prairie”) was a farmer, but good land to cultivate was hard to come by. The Ingalls family began their adventure in the Big Woods area of Wisconsin and moved to homestead (get cheap or free land from the government by agreeing to farm and build a home on the property) in Kansas. But when they arrived, it became clear that the land Charles



and his wife, Caroline, were promised was actually set aside for Native Americans by treaty. It was part of the Osage Indian Reservation. This was the first of countless challenges that would face Laura and her family.

So, they moved back to Wisconsin to their original farm, where they stayed for three years. Seeking a better life once again, the Ingalls clan homesteaded land near



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The Ingalls Family, 1894

Sitting Ma (Caroline), Pa (Charles), (Mary) Standing Carrie, Laura, Grace

Walnut Grove, Minnesota. Charles built a dugout near Plum Creek. A dugout is not a very comfortable home, and it was impossible to keep out the cold winds and snow of winter, the rains of spring and summer, and insects that seemed to plague them from the first warm days of spring until first frost in September or October. Laura was 7.

After three years, the family moved into the town of Walnut Grove, where Laura's father temporarily abandoned his agricultural pastime and became the town butcher and a justice of the peace. Next, Charles took a job building and maintaining the railroads in eastern South Dakota before seeing his chance to farm once again with homesteaded land near De Smet, S.D. They were just in time for the most severe winter in recorded history in the state, 1880-81. Laura tells the reader all about it in her book, "The Long Winter." The family survived to see spring. Her grit slowly builds as she continues to encounter challenge after challenge.

In 1882, just before turning 16, Laura became a teacher and continued to teach for three school years. (School years were shorter back then, with school not beginning until after harvest and ending once spring planting was underway, because children were needed at home to help with these chores. So a school year, instead of being nine months long, might be just six or seven.) She taught grades 1-8 even though she, herself, had never graduated high school. Though she didn't

enjoy teaching, it was necessary for her to work in order to support the family, and there were few opportunities to earn a wage for teenage girls and women in general.

Laura's teaching career ended in 1885, but not because she disliked the work and not because she was fired. At that time, school teachers in most districts in the Dakota Territory and the Midwest in general did not permit a teacher to be married. It said so right in their teaching contract. Thus, her marriage to Almanzo Wilder brought that episode of her life to a definitive close.

Laura's grit was continually tested. Almanzo, in the beginning, had success on his newly homesteaded 320-acre farm. But then he contracted diphtheria, leaving him partially paralyzed. He would walk again later but never without a cane. Since farming was not mechanized at that time (no tractors or combines, etc.), it was difficult for him to continue farming, but he stuck with it as best he could. Their newborn son, just 12 days old and not yet given a name, died. You can see his grave marker in De Smet. Their only other child, Rose, accidentally set fire to their home, a total loss. Fires were a constant threat at the time because homes were lit by candles and lanterns. A separate fire burned their barn, along with all of their stores of grain and hay. Next came the great bane to farmers in the Great Plains—drought. Several years of scanty rain left them deep in debt. The farm went from a prosperous enterprise to an economic dead end. You can read all about that debacle in Laura's book, "The First Four Years."



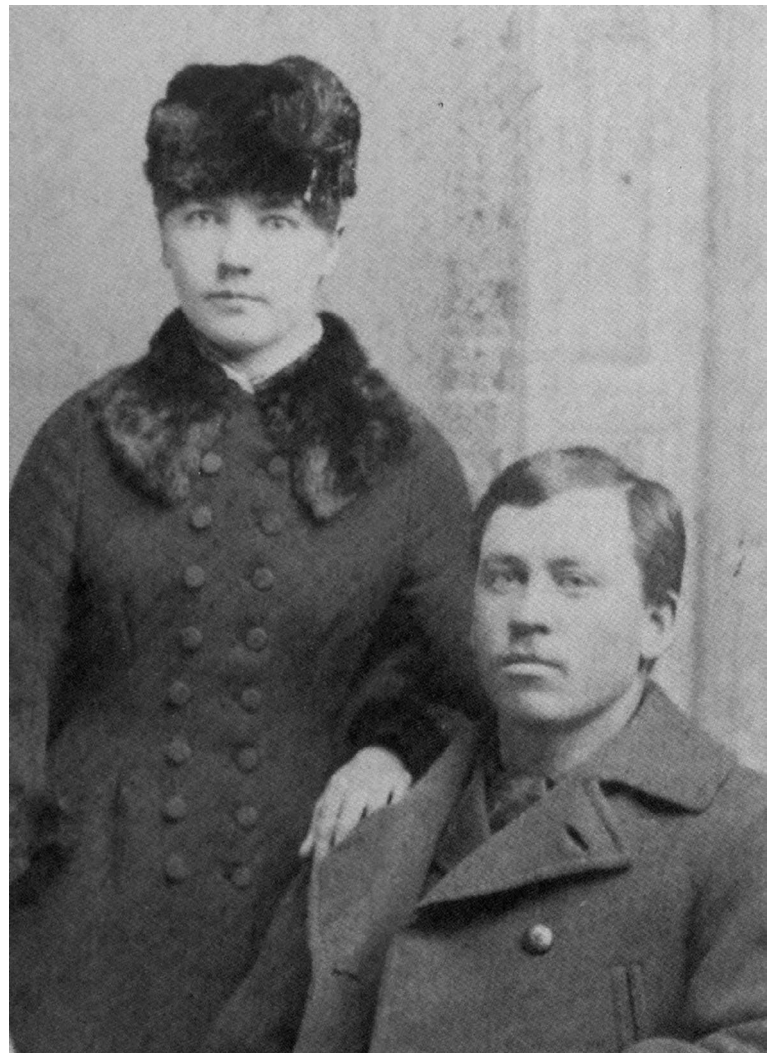
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Laura Ingalls Wilder

Forced to abandon their early hopes of homesteading, the small family moved in with Almanzo's mother and father in Spring Valley, Minnesota, for a year then all the way to Westville, Florida, where Almanzo hoped the change in climate would speed his recovery. Unfortunately, the humidity did just the opposite so back to De Smet they came. Their prospects, though, were few and two years later, they moved to Mansfield, Missouri, where they rented 40 acres on which stood a dilapidated log cabin. With Laura's diligent work and study, accompanied by Almanzo's work when his health allowed it, they chopped and sold firewood, planted apple trees, and raised dairy cattle and chickens. When Almanzo's parents deeded them a home in town, they began once again to thrive. Laura's farmwork piqued her interest in agriculture, and she became a recognized expert in raising poultry and rural enterprise overall. Still, she pursued other means of making ends meet.

She submitted an article to a Missouri journal (magazine), and it was accepted. The publishers liked it so much and it received such acclaim that it resulted in her becoming both a columnist and editor for the publication. People loved reading Laura's columns. That and a paid position with the local bank left the Wilders with a stable income for the first time in their marriage. By 1928, things were looking up.

Until they weren't. In 1929, the stock market crashed, and the couple's savings were wiped out. They were left with just the farm and their home. And they wouldn't keep those unless they found a greater source of income.



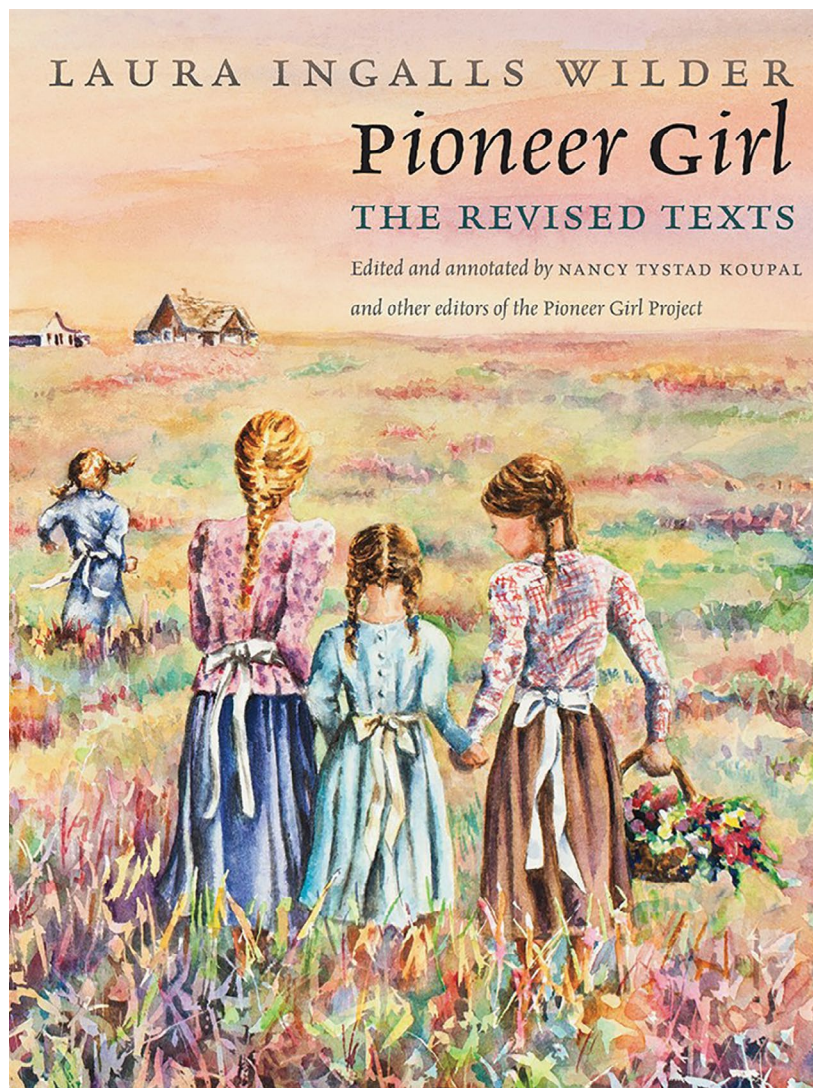
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Almanzo and Laura Wilder

Because her writing with the magazine was successful, Laura thought she might find success in writing the autobiography of her childhood on the Great Plains. "Pioneer Girl" was the result. The manuscript was trundled off to a number of publishers, but none of them were interested. "Pioneer Girl" would later be published by the South Dakota Historical Society Press, but that would be long after Laura's death. She visited her daughter, Rose, now an adult and successful writer, who suggested Laura rewrite the manuscript to appeal to a younger audience. The result was mostly autobiography in several books but with a bit of fiction thrown in. It was, you guessed it, the "Little House" series. The books were written and published between 1932 and 1943, with "The First Four Years" being published in 1971, long after Laura's death.

And so, long after her struggles with family deaths, the loss of farms for legal and economic and weather reversals, the health woes of her husband, and the lack of success of her monumental autobiography, Laura's refusal to give up, her grit, paid off. Her first book brought a first royalty (payment to an author for a published book based upon sales) of \$500, almost \$12,000 in today's money. The royalty payments never ended during Laura's lifetime (and they still haven't) and left her with not just a recouping of their stock market losses, but a steady income, and, finally, real wealth.

Laura's books have never been out of print and have been translated into more than 40 languages for readers around the world. They have made hundreds of millions of dollars, spawned a TV series, and, today, are resulting in spin-off books by other



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Laura Ingalls Wilder

authors wishing to add to the stories or offer them to people of different ages. You can find all of her books and many of the spin-offs in your school library.

How easy it would have been for Laura to give up when faced with her many life hurdles. But she never did. Through those countless hurdles, that grit—the passion to persevere—grew within Laura and provided her the strength she needed to overcome any challenge. In the end, Laura enjoyed economic success and an enduring legacy, a legacy that you probably experienced when one of your teachers leaned against their classroom desk one day, took out a copy of “Little House in the Big Woods,” and began to read.

Want to learn more?



Just head to De Smet, S.D., where a Laura Ingalls museum can be found, along with the gravesite for some of her family members. You can even camp out in a covered wagon or attend the annual pageant community members put on for the entertainment of visitors.