

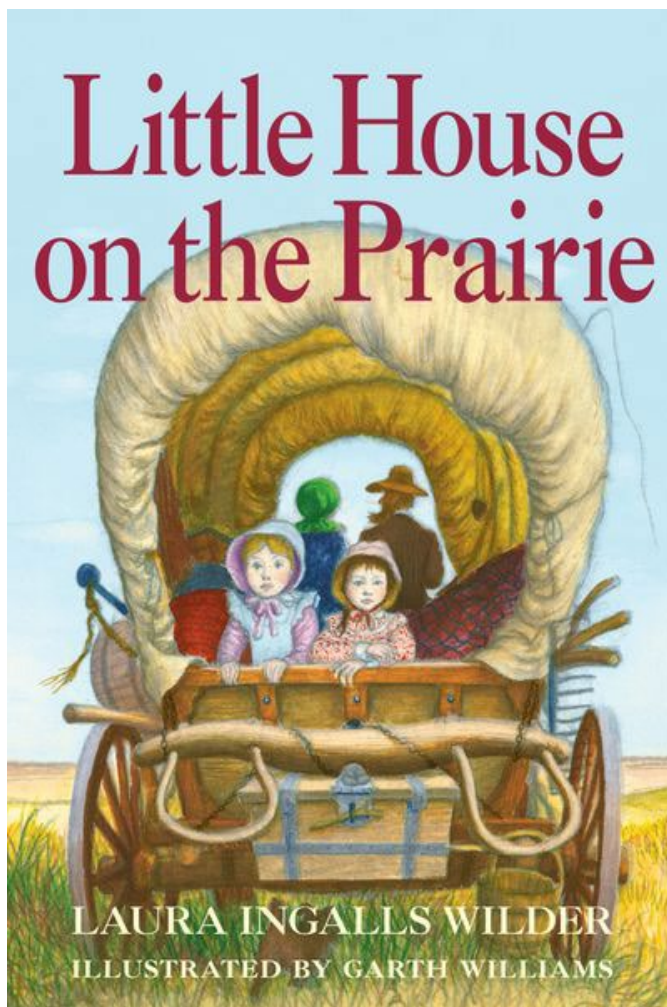
# Laura Ingalls Wilder:

## 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



South Dakota State Historical Society Archives

**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."



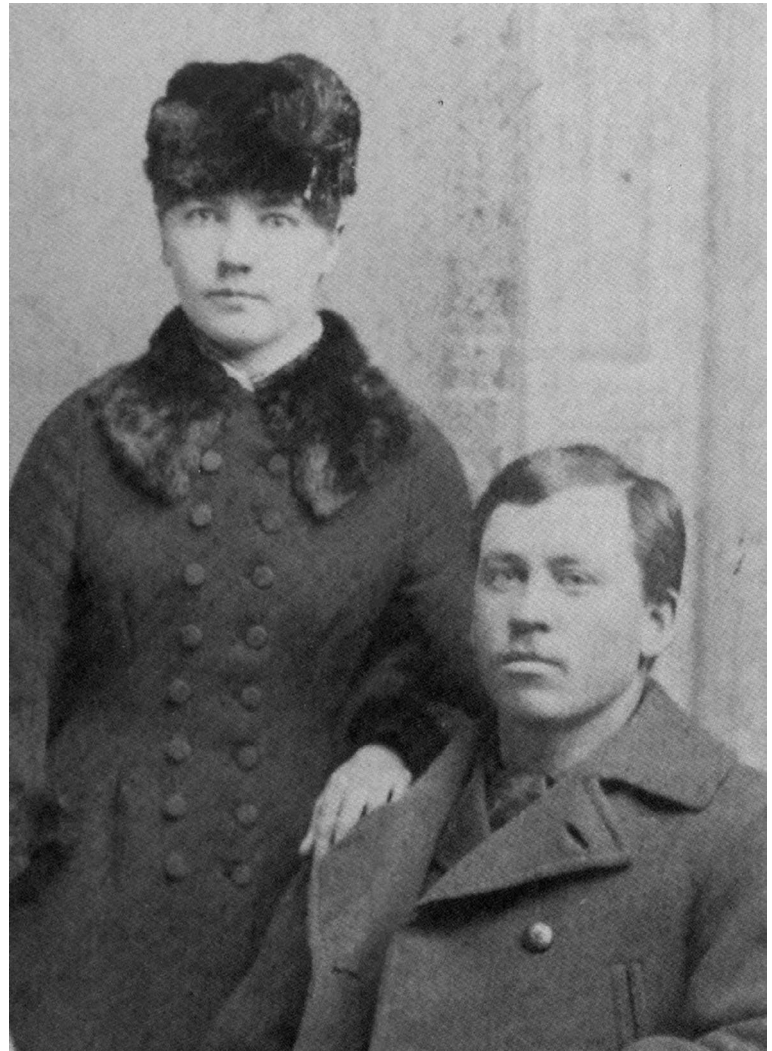
South Dakota State Historical Society Archives

**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.



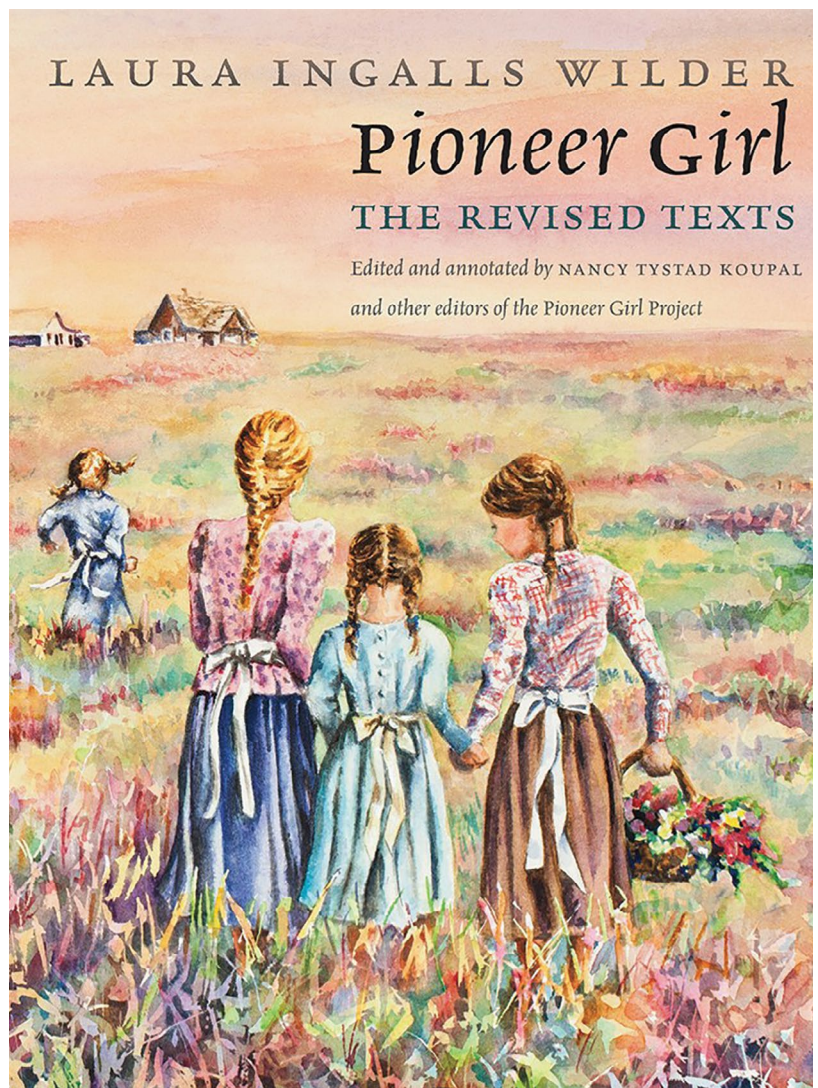
South Dakota State Historical Society Archives

**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



South Dakota State Historical Society - SD PRESS



**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.