

“INDIANS IN THE HOUSE”: REVISITING AMERICAN INDIANS IN LAURA
INGALLS WILDER'S *LITTLE HOUSE* BOOKS

by

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DEDICATION

In memory of Dolly Hunsicker, who introduced me to Laura Ingalls Wilder.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT	7
INTRODUCTION	9
I. BLUE PRINTS FOR THE <i>LITTLE HOUSE</i> : CONSTRUCTING THE NARRATIVE	26
II. THE TWO LAURAS: ONE REAL, ONE IMAGINED	45
III. “SO MANY WAYS OF SEEING THINGS AND SO MANY WAYS OF SAYING THEM”: REMODELING THE <i>LITTLE HOUSE</i>	74
IV. “INDIANS IN THE HOUSE”	110
V. EXPECTATIONS AND EXCEPTIONS IN THE WOMEN OF THE <i>LITTLE HOUSE</i> : THE <i>LITTLE HOUSE</i> TEXTS AS A WOMEN’S FRONTIER NARRATIVE	155
VI. LITTLE HOUSE IN A BIG DEPRESSION: THE <i>LITTLE HOUSE</i> NARRATIVE AS DEPRESSION-ERA CHILDREN’S LITERATURE	204
VII. “TO BE CONTINUED . . .”: <i>LITTLE HOUSE ON THE PRAIRIE</i> AS A TELEVISION SAGA	238
CONCLUSION	263
WORKS CITED	269

ABSTRACT

Laura Ingalls Wilder's eight-novel *Little House* series, published between 1932 and 1943, is among the most acclaimed and controversial examples of modern children's literature. The narrative tells the true story of Wilder's pioneer childhood in the 1870s and 80s, including her family's encounters with American Indians. Recently some scholars have argued that Wilder's depiction of American Indians is derogatory, but examining Wilder's literary devices and contextualizing the story in the eras in which it occurred and was written about reveals a more complex portrayal of Native themes. Biographical information about Wilder suggests that she deliberately crafted her story as she recorded it; such changes afforded opportunities to emphasize her political values and critique mythology associated with America's frontier era. Analyzing the narrative in the context of frontier Kansas, and more specifically as women's frontier literature, reveals the literary uniqueness of the *Little House* story and highlights fallacies inherent in the premise of Manifest Destiny. As Wilder recorded her memories with the help of her well-known libertarian daughter, Rose Wilder Lane, during the Depression they often emphasized their anti-New Deal politics and cautioned readers about the dangers of supporting "big government" policies. The *Little House* story also reflects trends of the Golden Age of children's literature which demonstrated respect for children by removing didactic lessons from the literature; thus the *Little House* texts present the controversial subject of America's frontier history in a manner that allows children to draw their own conclusions about it. Finally, two television versions of the *Little House* story present didactic, positive lessons about American Indians on the frontier, but diminish the

possibility for multiple interpretations of the events inherent in Wilder's original story. In a non-fiction article in *The Missouri Ruralist* in 1920, Wilder reminded her neighbors that home is "the best place for teaching many things, first and most important of which is how to think for one's self." Wilder's texts offer opportunities for discussing the complex topics associated with frontier history and encourage young readers to think critically about Native issues in the texts—opportunities seldom found in mainstream American storybooks and curriculum.

INTRODUCTION

“So after many days my words came back to me and the thoughts that followed them were altogether different from those connected with them before.”—Laura Ingalls Wilder, *Missouri Ruralist*, 1920 (Wilder, *LHO* 93)

In the spring of 2005 I took a graduate course titled “Women Writers of the West” with Judy Nolte Temple at the University of Arizona. Laura Ingalls Wilder’s name was offhandedly mentioned in class one day, and as the time for final paper topic selection approached I could think of no subject that interested me more than revisiting Wilder’s *Little House* series. As a doctoral student in American Indian Studies with a focus in literature, I particularly wanted to examine Wilder’s portrayal of American Indian characters. As a girl I’d read the *Little House* books dozens of times, and the stories were familiar favorites as I now revisited the worn pages. I vaguely remembered American Indians in the *Little House* books and prepared myself for disappointment in my childhood heroine, realizing the likelihood that Wilder would fall into the entrapments of the sentiments toward Indians of her times—perhaps she would live in fear of her presumably “hostile” neighbors, romanticize the “noble savage,” or mourn the “vanishing Indian.”

And disappointment it was. There was no denying the offensiveness of Wilder’s descriptors as she encountered Indians for the first time. The scholar of American Indian Studies in me cringed with each mention of the “tall, thin, fierce-looking men” whose “eyes were black and glittering, like snake’s eyes” (Wilder, *LHP* 134-44). Laura’s Ma “looked as if she were smelling the smell of an Indian whenever she said the word.” Ma, in fact, “despised Indians. She was afraid of them, too” (Wilder, *LW* 64). Laura’s Pa was

somewhat more compassionate, but not above promoting Manifest Destiny as he explained to Laura, “When white settlers come into a country, the Indians have to move on. The government is going to move these Indians farther west any time now. That’s why we’re here, Laura. White people are going to settle all this country, and we get the best land because we get here first and take our pick. Now do you understand?” (Wilder, *LHP* 237). In my initial paper I identified these and other mentions of American Indians in Wilder’s texts, accused her of portraying Indians as ‘savages,’ and suggested that Michael Landon softened these images into the (still stereotypical and problematic) ‘noble savage’ for the television series *Little House on the Prairie*, which aired on NBC from 1974-1983.

I presented these findings at several conferences, which led to interesting conversations with those who attended my presentations. As conference participants lined up to talk with me about Wilder’s work—some teachers, some mothers, and all of them scholars—I began to realize how many of us had read and still love the *Little House* books, how quick we are to defend our beloved author, and how few consider the implications of Wilder’s comments about Indians. If adult readers find her representations of Indians problematic at all, it seems, many are willing to forgive her errors because they feel Wilder was guilty only of reflecting the attitudes of her times. Some readers confessed that they find Wilder’s sections on Indians troubling, so they remedy the situation by skipping those parts when reading the books aloud to children or by blacking out the offending passages with a marker.

With my interest in the subject compounding rapidly, my initial paper soon turned into a full-fledged dissertation topic. I prepared my main argument: to demonstrate that Wilder's texts are potentially harmful to children because they contain insensitive language about American Indians, and that they are all the more dangerous because they are generally considered 'wholesome' family entertainment and unquestioningly loved with almost cultish zeal. I knew this topic would be an uphill struggle—like trying to convince Americans that apple pie was no longer an appropriate Americanism, or like the recent efforts to reduce the popularity of frybread in Native communities—so deeply are these texts engrained in American consciousness. In the midst of my research and writing, however, three things reshaped my argument: I acquired biographical information about Wilder, I remembered that I am not only a scholar of American Indian Studies but of *literature* as well, and, when I was already well into the writing processes, I read Angela Cavendar Wilson's essay "Burning Down the House: Laura Ingalls Wilder and American Colonialism."

I soon realized that Laura Ingalls Wilder was far more than an untutored grandmotherly sort who either accidentally or intentionally made offensive remarks about Indians. Understanding Wilder as a person and as a writer offers countless opportunities for better appreciating her work, and I soon found myself trying to "get into the head" of my subject to better interpret her motivations, much as a biographer would do. Wilder, as it turns out, was involved in several literary/study groups, showed an interest in cultural diversity in her nonfiction writing, and maintained a decidedly anti-big-government stance in her politics. She also collaborated with her daughter, Rose, as she wrote the

Little House books. Rose was well traveled, widely published, a friend and unofficial advisor to President Hoover, and at times active in both the Libertarian and Communist political parties. When Wilder crafted the scenes containing American Indians in her texts, and Rose edited those scenes, as a team they were experienced as writers and socially and politically aware. While Wilder and Lane insisted that the *Little House* books contained the true story of Wilder's life, and to a large extent this seems to be an accurate interpretation, many of the scenes containing Indians must have been deliberately crafted as most of Wilder's interactions with Indians occurred when she was not yet three years old and likely too young to remember much about the events. Even if she had her own dim memories about meeting Indians as a little girl, undoubtedly the experiences were colored by her parents' and sister's memories of the events that filtered down through family stories, and by the research on the Osage Nation she is known to have conducted as she wrote *Little House on the Prairie*.

I soon found that Wilder had clearly enumerated her own reasons for writing the *Little House* series, and understanding her motivations was important to better understanding her decisions to include her experiences with the Osage Nation. In 1937 Wilder explained, "I thought of writing the story of my childhood in several volumes—an eight volume historical novel for children covering every aspect of the American frontier," (Wilder, *LHS* 217). According to Wilder herself, then, her texts serve a dual purpose: recording a largely autobiographical account of her own childhood, *and* a story of "every aspect of the American frontier." As Wilder wrote, she may have struggled with each of these goals independently: recalling her childhood memories and

negotiating the tenuous relationship between memory and truth, and at the same time, undertaking the task of creating a child-friendly version of America's frontier history. Combining her two goals must have been fraught with even more challenges, as she thought about how to represent herself, her family, her neighbors, her communities, and her country—and maintain a sense of truth throughout the story.

Studying biographical information about Wilder opened doors into better understanding her motivations as a writer, but also revealed the challenges of assigning the texts to a specific genre. If Wilder's stories are, as she claimed, collectively the true story of her childhood, something in the idea of criticizing an author for recording her own life experiences seemed amiss. A new question emerged: Is an autobiographer required to revise her own memories and experiences so that they conform to politically-acceptable norms? Comparing factual information about Wilder's life to the story of her life as presented in the *Little House* series revealed, however, that Wilder was not simply jotting down her childhood experiences in the chronological fashion one might expect to find in an autobiography. In fact, her narrative contains ample evidence that Wilder *crafted* a narrative to convey specific messages. As I sought to better understand those surprising messages—namely anti-big-government sentiments and attempts to undercut American frontier mythology—it became apparent that her work was rich in literary devices more common to fiction than autobiography.

I realized, sheepishly, that I had been viewing Wilder's work solely through an American Indian Studies lens, and not a literary one. As a scholar of American Indian Studies, for example, I was inclined to place Native themes at the center of the study, not

at the margins, and I was sensitive to stereotypical, ethnocentric, and offensive representations of Indians. When applying contemporary expectations of Native themes in literature to Wilder's Depression-Era texts, it is easy to identify and isolate examples of ethnocentric and offensive language about Indians (as I have done here in the second paragraph) and condemn the texts as inappropriate and even racist. Viewing Wilder's Native characters and themes in the context of literary analysis, however, reveals a very different and far more complex story. A formalist literary approach to Wilder's story—that is, an approach that focuses on genre and Wilder's techniques in crafting her narrative including point of view, time frame, structuring of events, and other literary devices such as dialogue, symbolism, character development, and the use of foils—suggests that the Osage themes in the story cannot stand alone as they are enmeshed in Wilder's larger picture of frontier America. A formalist approach to the *Little House* texts also draws attention to subtle themes encompassed within the structure of Wilder's work, particularly the ways in which the promises of Manifest Destiny *failed* the Ingalls family.

While a formalist approach draws attention to the structural components of Wilder's story that contribute to her overall messages, the new historicist literary approach is an equally useful tool because it offers the rich historical context necessary for better understanding Wilder's Native themes. New historicist criticism is especially well-suited for exploring Wilder's work because, unlike traditional historical scholarship, new historicist criticism stresses not “the direct recreation of the past, but rather the processes by which the past is constructed or invented” (Jeffery N. Cox and Larry J.

Reynolds qtd. in Booker 135). New historicism emphasizes the importance of studying literature within its historical setting, but also acknowledges that our perspectives on history will always be incomplete; while scholarship may uncover many truths about history, even the best scholarship cannot establish a single “true” history (Booker 135). Most importantly, perhaps, there is a fundamental understanding in new historicist criticism that analysis is inevitably biased according to individual scholar’s own “terms of inquiry,” and “new historicist scholars are intensely aware that their own decisions concerning the focus of their investigations and the kinds of information to employ in pursuing their conclusions have a powerful impact on the resulting historical visions they produce” (Booker 135-6). Analyzing the *Little House* story within a new historicist context proved to be a multi-layered process, as more than a half-century passed between the time Wilder *experienced* the events of her childhood and the time she *wrote* about them. As I sought ways to design a study of Wilder’s work that centralized Native themes in her story, it was necessary to contextualize the events within Kansas and Osage histories, women’s frontier literature, Depression-Era literature, and the Golden Age of children’s literature. As my study of Wilder’s work evolved I found that formalist and new historicist literary approaches complimented one another, and the two forms of analysis intertwine seamlessly in most chapters. Using a new historicist approach to frame Wilder’s experiences within the context of her times and a formalist approach to examine how Wilder crafted those experiences in her narrative, I soon realized that rejecting the scenes containing Indians based on their face value alone misses a far larger point—and is comparable to mistakenly assuming that Harriet Beecher Stowe intended

Uncle Tom's Cabin as a tribute to the institution of slavery simply because the narrative is about slavery. The fact that Wilder wrote about the frontier does not necessarily mean that she intended to celebrate westward expansion or Indian removal.

Keeping Wilder's biographical information and the literary qualities of the texts in mind, I began writing from a new approach—suggesting that Wilder's handling of Indian themes was not perfect by any means, but was more complicated and worthy of study than most readers would realize at first glance. As the research and writing processes continued, I was continually reminded of the widespread impact of Wilder's narratives. Toting dissertation-related materials with me everywhere I went—as dissertation writers are wont to do—I found myself engaging in conversations about Wilder's work with almost anyone who happened to notice a copy of *Little House on the Prairie* in my lap. Professors, friends, airplane seatmates, children, retirees: all had read Wilder's work, all had something to say about it, and almost all related fond memories of the texts. Two themes emerged: first, many of the women I talked to about Wilder's work, in either formal or informal settings, confessed to loving the stories so much that they remembered wanting to *be* Laura as young girls. Second, testimony to the text's influence on young readers is evident in the fact that many women, especially, even recall where and how they first acquired and read the *Little House* books. Nearly all scholars of Wilder's work address their personal relationship to the *Little House* story at some point in their scholarship, often unconsciously denying the distance between a researcher and her work expected in most scholarly settings but acknowledged as impossible in new historicist theoretical approaches. The *Little House* story, in continuous print for seventy-

five years, is an indelible part of the American experience for average readers and scholars alike.

Decade-worth of scholarly literature about Wilder's work largely mirrors what I heard in firsthand conversations about the texts: endless praise for the *Little House* books. Lauded as "genuine American stories" and "one of the phenomenal achievements in children's literature" by the *New York Times* and *Horn Book*, respectively, the texts are extensively praised, but seldom given significant scholarly attention. When scholars do venture to approach Wilder's work critically, however, the books are primarily counted as significant texts in studies of children's literature. The *Little House* narrative is only occasionally included in studies of prairie literature, frontier literature, or women's literature. Some studies briefly discuss Wilder's images of American Indians, but no studies fully contextualize and explore Native themes in her work. Perhaps one of the only undisputed facts about Wilder's work is how widely read and influential it is:

I also became increasingly aware of the impact of the books, which far from being relegated to the scrapbooks of old fashioned children's literature, had become fully woven into American culture. I became convinced from what I read in the achieves and other sources, that the Little House books are one of those means by which people in the U.S. learn their political individualism; they are the mother's milk through which Americans ingest their deeply felt individualism. I do not mean to suggest by this that these books are the only source of such ideas; far from it. But I do think that the series, partly because it is not overtly political, does offer powerful although covert instruction. And it does so in a way so as to link the ideas with enormous emotional gratification (Fellman, "American Culture" 48).

Wilder's texts are indeed far-reaching, and her comments about Indians, then—whether negative or positive—are likely to have a significant impact on readers, especially young readers.

I did find, both in conversations and the literature about Wilder's stories, a few—very few—dissenting voices. I encountered a handful of people—primarily those who did not read Wilder's work until adulthood—that were not so enchanted by the *Little House* stories. Dr. Temple aptly identifies a distinction between 'believers' (those who read the *Little House* books as children) and 'non-believers' (adult first-time readers). Non-believers are far more likely to identify faults in the text: with the handling of Native issues, for example. Several Native scholars, such as Louise Erdrich and the late Michael Dorris, also voiced concerns about the Native scenes. In an interview, Erdrich explained, "Certainly [the *Little House* books] were formative for me. I read them as a child, and in rereading them as an adult, I was shocked to recognize that not only was there no consciousness about the displaced people whose land the newcomers were taking but also that there was a fair amount of racism" (Rochman 1427). Perhaps no dissenting voice was stronger than Angela Cavender Wilson's, who argued in her essay "Burning Down the House: Laura Ingalls Wilder and American Colonialism":

How do a country and its citizens justify genocide and land theft? How do they transform obviously wrong or immoral actions into something righteous and worthy of celebration? . . . Observe how expertly Laura Ingalls Wilder crafted a narrative that transformed the horror of white supremacist genocidal thinking and the stealing of Indigenous lands into something noble, virtuous, and absolutely beneficial to humanity (Wilson 67).

When Wilson's essay was published in 2006, my dissertation was well underway, and a friend offered her essay as supporting evidence about the problematic representations of American Indians in Wilder's work.

Wilson's essay, which describes her effort to remove the *Little House* books from her daughter's school, inspired a turning point in the main argument of my dissertation. By this time I was convinced that Wilder's scenes containing American Indians are in some cases problematic, yes, but also richly complex and potential impetuses for dialogue about Native issues in frontier narratives. As I read Wilson's call for banning the *Little House* texts, I thought with skepticism, about the impossibility of her proposition—after all, the *Little House* stories are in bookstores, classrooms, homes, and on television six times a day around the world. Clearly these stories are not going to disappear and, as I have witnessed myself, many rise to Wilder's defense at even the smallest criticism of her work. And, if anything, the banning of a book often only adds to its intrigue.

Wilson's essay did not convince me of the necessity of banning the books; in fact, it had quite the opposite effect. I began to see the *Little House* books as real opportunities for discussing with children the displacement of Native people in America. The Indians in Wilder's stories are likely children's first literary encounters with Indians, and in some places, perhaps the first encounters of any kind with Native issues. In a country where discussing the genocide of Native people is not part of standard history curriculum, where people routinely and offensively appropriate Indian identity with mascots and costumes, and where the president himself was at a loss for words when asked to explain Indian sovereignty (Nott B5), few other examples of Indian images that are so readily accessible to both children and adults. Rather than the impractical task of trying to rout the texts out of libraries, classrooms, and homes, the widespread

availability might be seen as an advantage and an opportunity to open dialogue about Native issues.

As a scholar of American Indian Studies, I am still plagued with the fact that Wilder's presentation of Indian characters and themes is by no means exemplary. While claims that Wilder's texts glorify westward expansion on the American frontier appear seriously amiss when her story is studied in autobiographical and literary contexts, the fact remains that she occasionally selected startling and offensive adjectives when writing about Indian people. I have found no better explanation for such contradictions in Wilder's works than Whitman's lines, "Do I contradict myself? Very well, then, I contradict myself. (I am large, I contain multitudes.)" (Whitman 77). The multitude of approaches to Indian themes in Wilder's work—both positive and negative—might again serve as educational opportunities rather than grounds for the dismissal of her work. The more I struggled, in fact, to pinpoint my own position in this controversial matter, the less convinced I am that we learn more from perfect images than we do from imperfect ones. Few, I think, would dispute the idea that much can be learned from our mistakes, and many would argue that such dark periods in history are precisely the ones which need most to be studied and discussed—to ensure that such egregious errors are not repeated in this country or any other.

In weighing the strengths and weaknesses of Wilder's representations of Indians, it was helpful to consider the alternatives. What if she had avoided the subject of Indians altogether? Since most of Wilder's experiences with Native people happened before she was three years old, omitting Indians from her narrative would have been reasonable

from an autobiographical perspective, and probably would have simplified her task significantly. But the fact that she struggled to recall what were undoubtedly her earliest memories and fleshed them out with research on the Osage Nation suggests that she felt American Indians' presence was essential in portraying "every aspect of the American frontier." Once Wilder decided to include Indians in her narrative, how should she portray them? Had she included only positive images of Indians, she likely would have been somewhat untruthful, as not all interactions between Natives and non-Natives on the frontier were positive, and some of her relatives and neighbors probably *were* rather nervous about the presence of their Native neighbors at least some of the time. Had she presented only positive images of Native people, scholars today would undoubtedly also criticize her for perpetuating stereotypes of the noble savage. Conversely, Wilder might have depicted her Osage neighbors in an exclusively negative light, emphasizing only the fear that likely characterized some of her experiences in Indian Territory. Or she might have lauded the federal government's ethnocentric assimilation policies of the 1870s, or sentimentally mourned the loss of the frontier and the "vanishing Indian" in keeping with the general mindset of many mainstream Americans as she wrote her texts in the 1930s. In many ways, Wilder was damned if she did, and certainly damned if she did not include Indians in her narrative, before she ever set her pencil to the paper. Which begs the significantly larger questions: How *does* one include Indians in an autobiographical or fictional account of frontier America? What is the "right" way to include Native people in the story of the frontier?

I admittedly have no conclusive answers to these questions, and certainly make no

claim that Wilder got it all “right” when it comes to including Indians in her narrative. Wilder’s texts do not go so far as offering balanced Native and non-Native perspectives of events. They do not offer a significant amount of culturally-specific information about Native communities. Nor they do not always portray Native people in a positive way. But they do make a specific effort to include Native people in the story of the American frontier, they do raise questions about the treatment of Indian people in the process of Western expansion, and they do merit scholarly analysis because they are tremendously influential children’s texts. And discussing Native themes offered in the *Little House* books seems significantly more useful than avoiding potentially uncomfortable conversations and teachable moments by skipping the parts about Indians when we read the texts aloud, or pretending that such texts—and such historical events—do not exist all.

The exploration of Wilder’s American Indian characters here begins with a discussion of her narrative style and the mass-distribution of her texts. The first chapter, “Blue Prints for the Little House: Constructing the Narrative,” briefly describes Wilder’s writing process, the content of the *Little House* books, and the unique literary devices that likely contribute to the long-term success of the texts. Chapter One also considers in more detail the far-reaching impact of the texts in American culture as they are considered among the most influential children’s texts of their century.

Chapter Two, “The Two Lauras: One Real, One Imagined” offers a short biographical account of Wilder’s life that is essential to both formalist and new historicist analyses of her work. Biographical information about Wilder herself helps to illuminate

her interests and motivations as a writer, and facilitates a study of the craft elements in her writing by revealing the areas where her actual life experiences differ from the story she told in the *Little House* narrative. Chapter Three, “‘So Many Ways of Seeing Things and So Many Ways of Saying Them’: Remodeling the *Little House*” examines several of those differences between Wilder’s experiences and her stories. The alterations in Wilder’s texts indicated Wilder not only *crafted* her narrative, but incorporated her political opinions and challenged American frontier mythology in the process.

Chapter Four, “‘Indians in the House’” (a title borrowed from the chapter of *Little House on the Prairie* that describes the first time members of the neighboring Osage community visit the Ingalls home), introduces Wilder’s American Indian characters, and contextualizes *Little House on the Prairie* in frontier Kansas in 1869-71. A close look at Wilder’s depictions of her Osage neighbors reveals that Wilder often offset negative descriptions of American Indians with more positive ones, and Native themes in her texts are often associated with literary devices such as symbolism, character dialogue, foils, and manipulation of time that allow multiple interpretations of the scenes. Chapter Five, “‘Expectations and Exception in the Women of the *Little House*: The *Little House* Texts as a Women’s Frontier Narrative,’” compares Wilder’s encounters with Native people on the frontier with the experiences of other frontier women. Contextualizing the *Little House* texts in the genre of women’s frontier writing draws attention to the literary uniqueness of the texts and contributes to a better understanding of Wilder’s descriptions of the Osage community.

Because Wilder began recording her childhood experiences more than half a century after they occurred, the time period when Wilder wrote her stories is also an important consideration when contextualizing the *Little House* narrative. Chapter Six, “Little House in a Big Depression: *Little House* as Depression-Era Children’s Literature,” details Wilder’s and Lane’s strong opposition to Franklin Delano Roosevelt’s New Deal and the ways in which they incorporated their political perspectives into their literature. The Great Depression not only shaped Wilder’s and Lane’s politics, but inspired new trends in children’s literature; viewing the *Little House* story as anti-New Deal fiction reinforces the idea that Wilder was likely critical of the idea of Manifest Destiny and its role in American history.

Chapter Seven, “‘To Be Continued . . .’: *Little House on the Prairie* as a Television Saga,” considers the *Little House* story as it was reinterpreted for television—in Michael Landon’s nine-season series and again in a Disney miniseries in 2005. In both television series, the images of Indians are less sophisticated than in Wilder’s texts and allow for little room for multiple interpretations. On television, American Indians are reduced to stereotypes of the noble savage and follow a motif common to portrayals of Native characters in films intended for mainstream populations: American Indians seem frightening at first, but turn out to be noble in the end. While the Indians in the television series are often portrayed more positively than in the texts, they are often romanticized and the tense conditions under which Native and non-Native people encountered one another on the frontier are diminished.

Wilder, it seems, was intent on presenting a complex view of frontier and Indian

issues, but this complex view has been overlooked in scholarly sources and simplified in more recent versions of her story. Neither lauding the romantic aspects of the story nor dismissing the series as “racist” do justice to the sophistication of the story, and Wilder herself would likely be shocked and disappointed by both sides’ oversimplification of the themes in her texts. Perhaps it is up to readers, especially as teachers and parents, to be vigilant in approaching the texts—vigilant thinking is, after all, what Wilder (and Lane) most advocated in their writing. In one such article, Wilder reminded her neighbors in rural Missouri that home is “the best place for teaching many things, first and most important of which is how to think for one’s self” (Wilder, *LHO* 285). What seems to be lacking in the current debate surrounding Wilder’s work is an acknowledgement of the opportunities for encouraging children to *think* about Native issues in her stories of the American frontier—and lack of thought is precisely the condition Wilder feared most. And so I respectfully offer a new position in the debate surrounding Wilder’s *Little House* series, that her texts, which rank among the most prominent children’s texts of the twentieth century, serve as an in-road into the long-overdue task of teaching children about America’s grievous past—and present—errors in her relations with Native Nations.

I. BLUE PRINTS FOR THE LITTLE HOUSE: CONSTRUCTING THE NARRATIVE

“Thinking of pies and poems, I am more content with pie making, for surely it is better to make a good pie than a poor poem.”—Laura Ingalls Wilder, “Pies and Poetry,” *Missouri Ruralist*, March 1924 (in *Ozarks* 282)

Laura Ingalls Wilder’s first book, *Little House in the Big Woods*, appeared in the children’s section of libraries and bookstores across the depression-weary America in 1932. *Little House in the Big Woods* and the seven books that rounded out the series during the next eleven years immediately won the hearts of both children and their parents. Initially, evidence of the texts’ popularity could be found in the tattered, love-worn covers of the *Little House* books that circled among friends and breezed on and off of library shelves, and Wilder received letters by the thousands from children anxiously awaiting her next stories. Seventy-five years later, the texts remain in print, and “Laura Ingalls Wilder” and *Little House* are household names around the world. Wilder’s work has become the impetus for critical study, and contemporary fans appear as enchanted with Wilder’s stories as her first young readers were in 1932. Wilder crafted a story and a heroine that crisscross boundaries of age and gender, class and culture, time and place. The enduring, near-epic *Little House* narrative simultaneously reflects and shapes images of the American frontier and inevitably influences readers’ ideas about this controversial time in American history.

On October 16, 1937 Wilder addressed a crowd of admirers gathered for a book fair at the J. L. Hudson department store in Detroit, Michigan and offered her reasons for writing the *Little House* books. The series began, she explained, with her own love of stories, stories told by her father (“Pa”), Charles Ingalls: “We had a busy, happy

childhood, but of it all, Sister Mary and I loved Pa's stories best. We never forgot them and I have always felt they were too good to be altogether lost" (Wilder, *LHS* 217). In contemplating her father's stories and her childhood, Wilder explained, "I understood that in my own life I represented a whole period of American history . . . It seemed to me that my childhood had been much richer and more interesting than that of children today even with all the modern inventions and improvements" (Wilder, *LHS* 217). And so Wilder set her pencil to five-cent "Fifty-Fifty" Springfield Grocer Company school tablets to record what became for her "a labor of love" and a "memorial" to her father (Zochert 233).

Seven years before the already-famous Wilder spoke of her stories before the book fair crowd in Detroit, Wilder had completed an autobiographical account of her life entitled *Pioneer Girl*. Encouraged by her daughter, Rose Wilder Lane—a well-published author and journalist herself—Wilder recorded her memories from the age of three to eighteen in this single volume. Lane circulated her mother's manuscript among editors and her contacts in the publishing world, but could not find a willing publisher (Anderson, *Iowa Story* 2).

At Lane's suggestion Wilder tried again. This time she targeted a younger audience and focused upon the stories her father had told her when she was a little girl. This short piece of about six or seven thousand words, "When Grandma was a Little Girl," attracted the attention of Marion Fiery, a children's department editor at Alfred A. Knopf publishers. In a letter Fiery told Wilder, "I like the material you have used: it covers a period in American history about which very little has been written, and almost

nothing for boys and girls” (qtd. in Miller, *Becoming* 183). Fiery suggested that Wilder expand the manuscript to about 25,000 words, especially through more details about pioneer daily life (Miller, *Becoming* 183). Wilder obliged and in July of 1931 Knopf agreed to publish the revised manuscript as *Little House in the Woods*. But for Wilder the happy anticipation of seeing her first book in print was short-lived, as Fiery soon wrote with the unfortunate news that Knopf was closing its children’s department as a consequence of the Great Depression (Miller, *Becoming* 185).

From here, Virginia Kirkus, a children’s editor at Harper’s, takes up the story of the *Little House* books in her essay “The Discovery of Laura Ingalls Wilder,” published in *The Horn Book Magazine*’s “Laura Ingalls Wilder Issue” in December of 1953.

Kirkus knew, when an acquaintance¹ called with information about a manuscript that might be of interest to her, that “people were thinking that new books for children were unnecessary, while the old ones could serve” during the depression (Anderson, *Horn* 38). And the “‘elderly lady [who] was writing a true story—in fictional form—about her pioneer childhood’ . . . failed to spark [her] interest;” nevertheless Kirkus agreed to meet her acquaintance over tea at the Biltmore to pick up the manuscript (Anderson, *Horn* 38). Kirkus describes her first reading of what would become *Little House in the Big Woods* while on a late train heading to Westport, Connecticut:

‘To be sure, I had already missed one train, while I had the first whispers poured into my eager ears; and I went one stop beyond my station on the late train, so absorbed was I in learning to know small Laura, as her little-girl days were re-lived in her story . . . Here was the book no depression could stop’ (Kirkus, qtd. in Anderson, *Horn* 38-9).

¹ Kirkus does not name the acquaintance, but some speculate that it may have been Marion Fiery of Alfred A. Knopf (Miller 186).

Little House in the Big Woods, containing a mixture of her father's stories and Wilder's own memories from the cabin in the Big Woods near Pepin, Wisconsin, was published by Harper's on April 6, 1932, with illustrations by Helen Sewell and Mildred Boyle.

Little House in the Big Woods was an immediate success, nevertheless Harper's agreed to publish Wilder's second book, *Farmer Boy*, at only half-royalties. Published in 1933, *Farmer Boy* tells the story of her husband, Almanzo James Wilder's, boyhood on a farm in New York State. Later, as the entire eight-volume series emerged, seven of which tell the story of Laura Ingalls Wilder's own life, this single volume from Almanzo's perspective appeared as a disruption in Wilder's own story, and it is largely ignored by scholars who discuss themes in the other seven texts.

In February of 1934, Wilder finished the text she and Lane referred to as "High Prairie," the "Indian story," or the "Indian juvenile" in their correspondence (Holtz 253; Miller, *Becoming* 205). The manuscript was published as *Little House on the Prairie* in September of 1935, and unlike the first two texts, it required some research on the parts of Wilder and Lane. The pair made a research trip in what turned out to be an unsuccessful attempt to locate the site of the Ingalls family home in Indian Territory. Wilder also wrote to libraries and historical societies in an effort to learn more about the Osage community near her childhood home (Miller, *Becoming* 203). *Little House on the Prairie* eventually proved to be the most popular and best-selling text, but at the time of its publication the series was far from conclusion.

In 1937, just before her appearance at the Detroit book fair, *On the Banks of Plum Creek* was published. This fourth text in the series covers the time the Ingalls family

spent near Walnut Grove, Minnesota, first in a dugout house and then in the family's first frame house. By 1937 Wilder's stories were not only popular entertainment for children, but as one Minneapolis teacher suggested in a letter to Wilder, her books were "being used by every third grade class in the state" (Miller, *Becoming* 215). In her book fair speech, one of few existing examples of Wilder's commentary on her own work, Wilder explained how her original idea of recording her father's stories had grown:

I wanted the children now to understand more about the beginnings of things, to know what is behind the things they see—what it is that made America as they know it. Then I thought of writing the story of my childhood in several volumes—an eight volume historical novel for children covering every aspect of the American frontier. After the work was well started I was told that such a thing had never been done before; that a novel of several volumes was only for grown-ups . . . But letters kept coming from children, individuals, whole classes in schools, mothers of children too small to write letters—all wanted to know what happened next, wanted me to go on with the story. I decided to do so. Someone has to do a thing first; I would be the first to write a multi-volume novel for children (Wilder, *LHS* 217, 219).

Wilder followed through on what many of her young readers at the book fair might have interpreted as a promise of more stories to come, and continued work on the eight volume series.

Just after the Wilders took a trip back to De Smet, South Dakota for the town's Old Settlers' Day celebration in 1939, Harper's published the fifth text, *By the Shores of Silver Lake*. *By the Shores of Silver Lake* describes the Ingalls family's arrival in Dakota Territory, where Wilder's father worked for the railroad company and became the founding citizen of the town later known as De Smet. Here, the journey for many of the Ingallses reached a final destination, as Wilder's father fulfilled his promise to her

mother: no more moves to ensure that Laura and her three sisters could get a proper education.

The final three texts in the series all take place in or near De Smet. *The Long Winter*, published in 1940, is by far the darkest story in the series as it describes the events of the unusually hard Dakota winter of 1880—1881. During a succession of blizzards lasting from October to May supply trains were stopped, creating a life-threatening situation for the Ingallses and the other families in the small, new town. *Little Town on the Prairie*, published in 1941, chronicles the Ingalls family’s attempt to prove up on a homestead under the provisions of the Homestead Act of 1862, while the town of De Smet grows up around them. The series concludes with the publication of *These Happy Golden Years* in 1943, which primarily details the Wilders’s courtship, and ends happily with Laura’s² marriage to Almanzo.

Although Wilder did complete her eight-volume novel as promised, the millions of readers who grew up with Laura Ingalls seemed anxious for more stories about their beloved heroine. Many stories did follow, some of them exploring more details about Wilder’s life and works, and others creating fictional adventures for Wilder and her relatives. In 1962, five years after Wilder’s death, the first of these stories appeared in *On the Way Home*, where Lane edited the journal her mother kept in 1894 as the Wilders (including young Rose herself) traveled from De Smet to what became the Wilders’s permanent home in the Ozarks, just outside of Mansfield, Missouri.

² Because Wilder’s works are largely autobiographical, and the protagonist’s name is Laura, there is often confusion between the author and the character. Following Janet Spaeth’s example in her biography *Laura Ingalls Wilder*, “Wilder” refers to the author while “Laura” refers to the character unless otherwise specified. Other names follow a similar pattern when possible; for example “Charles Ingalls” refers to Wilder’s father while “Pa” refers to the character.

Following Lane's death in 1968, an unpublished manuscript by Wilder was discovered among her daughter's papers. Lane's friend, lawyer, and heir, Roger Lea MacBride, published the manuscript as *The First Four Years* in 1971. The text begins where *These Happy Golden Years* ends, and informs readers of the first four difficult years of the Wilders' marriage, including crop failures, the destruction of their home in a fire, and the death of their infant son. *The First Four Years*, originally believed to be the last manuscript written by Wilder (because of its chronological relationship to her other eight books), stimulated a long-lasting controversy about the extent of Lane's role as editor of her mother's work. Regardless of when it was written, *The First Four Years* is sometimes regarded as a ninth volume to Wilder's series.

In 1974 MacBride again added to the small collection of primary source material by Laura Ingalls Wilder with his publication of *West From Home*, a collection of letters from Wilder to her husband written during her 1915 visit to Lane's home in San Francisco. MacBride found the letters "tumbled in a cardboard box along with old recipes, faded pictures, and newspaper clippings of persons and events long gone" and edited and organized them, adding photographs of Lane, the Wilders, and San Francisco's Panama-Pacific International Exposition which Wilder and Lane toured (MacBride, *West* xv.).

Wilder left no other known journals or manuscripts, but she did write regularly for a farm magazine, the *Missouri Ruralist* from 1911-1925. *A Little House Sampler: A Collection of Early Stories and Reminiscences*, edited by William Anderson in 1988, contains a number of her articles from the *Missouri Ruralist*, along with an assortment of

speeches and stories by both Wilder and Lane. Two later texts, *Little House in the Ozarks: The Rediscovered Writings*, edited by Stephen W. Hines in 1991 and *Laura Ingalls Wilder: A Family Collection* edited by Richard Marshall in 1993, offer overlapping but more comprehensive collections of Wilder's *Missouri Ruralist* articles. In 2006 Hines edited a new three volume collection on Wilder and her writing. The first two volumes, *Writings to Young Women from Laura Ingalls Wilder on Wisdom and Virtues* and *Writings to Young Women from Laura Ingalls Wilder on Life as a Pioneer Woman*, contain themed assortments of her *Missouri Ruralist* writings, while the third, *Writings to Young Women on Laura Ingalls Wilder as Told by her Family, Friends, and Neighbors*, contains memories of Wilder from those who knew her.

The *Little House* books are commonly regarded as some of the most influential children's texts of the twentieth century. The frontispiece of the 1981 edition of the *Little House* books presents readers with high praise for the series:

- “Any boy or girl who has access to all the books in the series will be the richer for their first-hand record of pioneer life in the opening of the West and for their warm-hearted human values.” *The New Yorker*
- “Their authentic background, sensitive characterization, their fine integrity and spirit of sturdy independence, make them an invaluable addition to our list of genuine American stories.” *The New York Times*
- “One of the phenomenal achievements in modern literature for children, a genuine chronicle for American life and of family life at their equal best.” *The Horn Book*
- “If our country can become great in humility, and can work earnestly to solve its own problems at the same time that it carries its share of world responsibilities, it will be through vision of our children, their integrity and idealism, gained in homes like the home in the ‘Little House’ books.” *The Horn Book*

One of the greatest appeals of the *Little House* books, it seems, is that they are thoroughly “American” stories, and also among the finest examples of wholesome family (and

classroom) entertainment. As one young student commented, “Laura is really a lovely American, isn’t she? When people know Laura they Like Americans” (qtd. in Eddins 21). This sentiment is one of relatively few similarities between the *Little House* series and the *Little House on the Prairie* television series, directed and produced by Michael Landon, which aired from 1974-83. Indeed, during a reunion of thirteen cast members of the *Little House* television show in Tombstone, Arizona in July 2005, one member of the audience stood and addressed Melissa Gilbert (Laura Ingalls Wilder), Dean Butler (Almanzo Wilder) and the rest of the cast, thanking them for “teaching us how to be Americans.” The television show is often credited with renewing interest in the texts during the 1970s and 80s, though the texts have been in continuous publication since their first printings in the 1930s and 40s.

Determining the extent to which the *Little House* books permeate American consciousness is no easy task. Harper did not respond to a July 2006 inquiry of the total number of *Little House* texts sold to date. Another scholar of Wilder encountered a similar problem in obtaining sales records from Harper more than a decade ago, but book sales estimates indicate about one million copies sold by the end of the 1960s, a figure which increased to about sixty million copies by 1993 (Hines, *I Remember* 246-7). The popularity of the *Little House* books transcends international borders, as the texts have been translated into forty languages and are studied and enjoyed worldwide. In Denmark for example, “The Laura Books” are credited with “changing the attitude of the Danish public toward children’s books” and for bringing serious scholarly attention to children’s literature (Buttenschøn 20). In the period following World War II the State Department,

on the recommendation of General Douglas MacArthur, even translated *Little House* texts into German and Japanese for distribution to the occupied nations, “as expressions of America’s generous and hopeful spirit, which they hoped would infect people in these countries, too” (Miller, *Becoming* 245). Cover illustrations on some of the translated editions, however, suggest that foreign readers enjoy the texts for reasons other than their quintessential American values. On the cover of a Japanese edition, for example, the American landscape and frontier, which seem central to the setting, plot, and themes of the texts in every way, have been replaced with a watercolor painting of a Japanese landscape.

The texts’ appeal to both American and international readers likely stems from the many universal themes Wilder intersperses throughout her story of a pioneer family on the American frontier. In the *Little House* books, young readers experience the warmth and comfort of a loving family, observe family members and neighbors striving to help each other, and learn to appreciate small beauties and curiosities in the natural world. They watch Laura grow from an inquisitive and occasionally naughty child into an industrious married woman, sympathizing with her on her first awkward day of school, cheering her along during times of illness and hardship, and celebrating her accomplishments in school and at home. Older readers—including parents and teachers—can appreciate Laura’s persistent spirit of independence, her sense of hope in times of hopelessness, and her commitment to not only survive, but to do so cheerfully. Through Laura, they observe that actions have consequences, the good of the family is more important than the rights of the individual, and good (eventually) triumphs over

evil. Readers of all ages learn, in specific detail, skills required for day-to-day living in pioneer times and hear Ma's gentle advice to her daughters: "least said, soonest mended," and "all's well that ends well."

The *Little House* books' ability to transcend not only international boundaries but generational ones as well is often attributed to the likeability of the central character, Laura. Readers were quick to realize that "Laura" was Wilder herself, but slow to admit that the *Little House* books were not unequivocally autobiographical. Wilder's characters, particularly those in her immediate family, were based upon real people in Wilder's life, but she did make some adjustments for the sake of telling a good story, and also for the sake of protecting the identities of some members of her communities. Wholly biographical or not, the characters were convincing to young readers. Between novels children wrote to Wilder, expressing their satisfaction with the *Little House* stories to date, inquiring when the next story might be finished, and affectionately asking after the wellbeing of Laura and other characters, including Almanzo, Mary, Jack (Laura's dog), and Black Susan (the family cat). In their letters, and in a study of the readability of the *Little House* books, some children acknowledged Laura as the kind of girl they'd like to be friends with. Around the time Wilder concluded the *Little House* series, two eleven-year-olds expressed their affection for Laura. One wrote, "I'd like Laura. She was a good kind of girl. I don't like sissies," and another, "I think she would have made a wonderful playmate, with courage, obedience, and imagination" (qtd. in Cooper 23). Again and again children wrote to Wilder, often expressing their ability to identify with Laura. Even long after the conclusion of the series, children continued to write:

A friend who visited her before her birthday said that [Wilder] received 35 letters one day, 82 the next, then 107, then 212, then 154. After this they quit counting and Mrs. Wilder's dining table remained piled high with letters. Also all the chairs in the dining room, her shopping bag, and the rest of the furniture . . . Most of these letters are from children begging for more stories (Cooper 21-2).

Today, the kitchen table in Wilder's home at Rocky Ridge in Mansfield, Missouri is scattered with examples of similar cards and letters she received for her ninetieth birthday, just a few days before her death in 1957.

Janet Spaeth, in her study of Wilder and the *Little House* books, *Laura Ingalls Wilder*, suggests that the structure of the stories contributed to the development of the characters so many children grew to love:

The structure of the multivolume novel, while it did challenge Wilder's abilities, proved to be a wise choice, not only because it is unusual in the canon of children's literature but because it provided a framework that allowed Wilder to extend her cast of characters in the great pageant of the Little House novel (Spaeth 89).

The multivolume novel format did enable Wilder to thoroughly develop her characters throughout the eight texts; the characters are dynamic yet familiar, exciting yet predictable. Conversely, children's affection for the characters, especially Laura, encouraged Wilder to keep expanding her story. In his short critical study, also entitled *Laura Ingalls Wilder*, Fred Erisman suggests that the success of Laura, and Wilder's other characters, lies not only in their thorough development, but in their imperfection: "good they are, but perfect they are not, and the characters gain in human credibility as a result" (Erisman 45). Each of the central characters strives to be his or her best—whether as a daughter, or a mother, or a husband—but none of the characters models consistently perfect behavior.

The lifelike, believable characters created by Wilder are complimented by Garth Williams's illustrations. Williams, well known for his illustrations in other children's books, including *Charlotte's Web* and *Stewart Little*, spent ten years researching the people and places Wilder knew as he created the now-familiar drawings that replaced the original illustrations in 1953. Williams took his responsibility of representing the people and places in Wilder's texts seriously and explained that for him, "Illustrating books is not just making pictures of the houses, the people and the articles mentioned by the author; the artist has to see everything with the same eyes" as the author (Williams qtd. in Anderson *Horn* 35). He sent sample drawings to Wilder and encouraged her criticism, but Wilder made no recommendations for changes. She declared the illustrations "beautiful" and in a telegram to Harper and Row on August 13, 1953 simply stated, "Mary, Laura, and their folks live again in these illustrations. Laura Ingalls Wilder" (Wilder, qtd. in Anderson, *Horn* 6-7).

The construction of a story which lends itself to the thorough exploration of characters, and the likeable humanness of the characters themselves, that Spaeth and Erisman identify as central to Wilder's success culminate in the *Little House* books' unusual point of view and narrative style. The stories are told from a limited third-person point of view (Laura's), and the narrative voice ages along with the central character, from age five in *Little House in the Big Woods* to age eighteen at the close of *These Happy Golden Years*. Wilder's correspondence with her daughter suggests that she preferred writing in first person; in fact, she wrote *Pioneer Girl* from the first person perspective of Laura (Spaeth 71). Her decision to change Laura's perspective to that of a

third person narrator must have been deliberate, and her choice was likely a significant one:

This point of view enables Laura to grow up in the series while retaining the observation and voice suitable to the experience appropriate to Laura's age in any given book. Had Wilder chosen the first person point of view, Laura would have been forced into commenting on her own maturity as she saw it; instead, the reader senses her growing up—her maturation is reflected in her attitudes, in the attitudes of those who surround her, and in her speech and behavior (Spaeth 72).

As Laura's age increases and her perspective matures, the texts also increase in sophistication. The vocabulary, syntax, and themes of each text are slightly more advanced than in the preceding text (Erisman 45). As part of the research for her master's thesis entitled *The Contribution of Laura Ingalls Wilder to Children's Literature*, completed in 1947, Bernice Cooper applied Flesch's Test of Readability to the *Little House* books and determined that the first three books in the series are appropriate for fifth grade readers, while the next four are slightly more difficult and appeal to sixth grade readers. Acknowledging variability in reading skills, the overall recommended audience for the *Little House* series is students in fourth through eighth grades (Cooper 16-20).

Interestingly, as Wilder spent eleven years writing the eight volumes containing the story of thirteen early years of her life, the first readers of the *Little House* series aged at a similar rate and grew up along with Laura. Spaeth acknowledges the how the aging of the main characters contributes to the texts' overall appeal as examples of children's literature:

The theme of growth is important in any work of fiction, but it is especially significant in those written for children. The protagonist of a

children's book must, within the span of the work, develop in character and maturity, resulting in movement from naiveté to knowledge through experience. The Little House books are unique in the scope of adult or children's literature, for they provide a look at this growth, from the dual viewpoint of the child (Laura) and the adult (Wilder) (Spaeth 47).

In creating a main character whose narrative voice ages and matures throughout the story, Wilder produced a heroine whose development is common to the universal human experience, yet all but unknown in American literature.

As Wilder explores her central theme, the settling of the American frontier, the ever-aging limited third person perspective offers opportunities to approach her complex subject in a variety of ways. For example, young Laura poses innocent, child-like questions such as, "Why don't you like Indians, Ma?" in *Little House on the Prairie* (46), while the older, mature Laura can formulate opinions about women's rights and refuse to "obey" her husband during their wedding ceremony in *These Happy Golden Years* (269-70). Spaeth suggests that Laura's point of view compliments the content of the text and also contributes to the timelessness of the story:

Because the experiences of childhood in the late nineteenth century may be alien to the twentieth-century child, point of view becomes very important as a means of adding credibility to the material. Wilder must show her audience that while Laura's experiences are unique to her time, Laura is not. She must have the feelings and reactions of a child in any time, in any environment (Spaeth 72).

As the popularity of Wilder's texts stretches into the twenty-first century, it seems that the universal and timeless aspects of her central character endure.

Erisman's analysis of the characters in the *Little House* series reveals still another relationship between character development, point of view, and content. He argues that the "special richness" of the series lies in "its using these recognizably 'real' characters to

live out mythic roles, wherein their actions take on meaning far larger than the immediate circumstances imply” (Erisman 45). Erisman’s observation about the mythic qualities of the *Little House* story, as told in the near-epic proportions of her multivolume narrative, offers an explanation for the texts’ popularity among both adults and children. He also hints at the significance of the *Little House* story as it relates to the larger story of American history. Through the *Little House* stories Wilder simultaneously reflects and challenges the story of America’s frontier days. At the same time, through her likeable characters, she creates her own story of such mythic proportion that more than one hundred years after her characters lived, young readers still want to *be* Laura, to live the life that Laura lived. Each year hundreds of thousands of fans make pilgrimages to Laura’s home sites, many participate in the *Little House* pageants that reenact stories from Wilder’s novels and stage competitions for naming a little girl the “Laura” of the year, and visitors to the De Smet home site can dress like Laura and pretend to live as she would have lived during the 1880s.

The *Little House* books’ unique narrative style, the characterization of Laura, the American and universal themes conveyed in her story, and the mythic qualities of her text offer explanations for the enduring appeal for her texts. Still, the deep personal attachment readers feel toward Laura and her stories defies a logical explanation:

the enduring popularity and appeal of the books remains a fascinating phenomenon. There are few American writers or historical figures who command the same sort of devotion and interest that Wilder does. People make pilgrimages to all of the historical sites associated with her. They read her books, not once or twice, but many times. Plausible explanations for her popularity can be suggested: the concrete, visual imagery contained in her books; her effective use of language; the simplicity of her moral vision; her emphasis on family values; nostalgia for frontier times;

realization that these are basically true stories; and so forth. Still, the depth and continuity of Wilder's appeal remain elusive" (Miller, *Frontier* 24-5).

The devotion and attachment readers have toward Laura, and indeed, Laura Ingalls Wilder herself, create unique challenges in approaching her work objectively. At the same time, those attachments inadvertently ascribe a significant amount of power and authority to Wilder's voice. Her opinions on subjects such as politics, women's rights, Indian issues, and westward expansion of the American frontier are likely to influence her readers in both small and significant ways.

Wilder's success as a writer and her lasting contributions to both children's literature and American literature have been acknowledged through a variety of awards and honors. Five of the books, the last five in the series, are distinguished as Newberry Honor Books, beginning with *On the Banks of Plum Creek* in 1937. In 1942, Wilder received the Harry Hartman Award, an award based upon children's selection, for *By the Shores of Silver Lake*. *These Happy Golden Years* was awarded the New York Herald Tribune Spring Festival Book Prize in 1943. In 1958, *Little House in the Big Woods* received the first annual Lewis Carroll Shelf Award, an award designed by the University of Wisconsin School of Education, "to select those books worthy enough to sit on the self with *Alice in Wonderland*."

Several libraries bear Wilder's name, including the Laura Ingalls Wilder Branch Library in Detroit, dedicated in 1949; the Laura Ingalls Wilder children's room of the Ponomo, California library, dedicated in 1951; the Laura Ingalls Wilder Bookmobile in Normandy, Missouri, established in 1951; and the new Laura Ingalls Wilder public

library in her hometown of Mansfield, Missouri was dedicated in her honor in 1951. At the time of the dedication of the Laura Ingalls Wilder Branch Library in Detroit, library director Ralph A. Ulveling pointed out that libraries are not usually named for living authors. He went on to say, however, that

we believe her books will live and will be read with interest a hundred years from now just as they are today. If our prediction is correct we will naturally take particular pride in having been the institution that led the way in bringing her permanent recognition among the American men and women of letters (Hines 102-3).

In 1954 the Children's Service Division of the American Library Association established the Laura Ingalls Wilder Award, a medal designed by Garth Williams. Wilder was the first recipient of the prestigious award, which is "presented every five years to an author or illustrator whose books, published in the United States, have over a period of years made a substantial and lasting contribution to literature for children" (Dykstra 23).

Perhaps the long-term success of Wilder's texts, as anticipated by Ulveling and the creators of the Laura Ingalls Wilder Award, was also anticipated by Wilder herself. In Lane's personal copy of *These Happy Golden Years*, Wilder inscribed for her daughter:

"And so farewell to childhood days,
Their joys, and hopes and fears.
But Father's voice and his fiddle's song
Go echoing down the years" (Anderson, *Horn* 22).

Wilder's project, which began as a simple wish to record and share her father's stories and grew into one of the most widely recognized stories in American literature, above all, emphasizes the importance of story. Cherokee author and scholar Thomas King emphasizes the importance of stories, insisting that "the truth about stories is that that's all we are" (King 2, 32, 62, 92, 122, 153). At the close of each chapter in *The*

Truth About Stories: A Native Narrative, he cautions, “don’t say in the years to come that you would have lived your life differently if only you had heard this story. You’ve heard it now” (King 29, 60, 89, 119, 151, 167). More than sixty million readers have heard Wilder’s story, and more than sixty million lives—many of them children—have been affected by it in some way. To best appreciate Wilder’s story, to see how it both perpetuates and resists the discourse of dominance in America’s own narrative, to consider its role in shaping children’s ideas about the American frontier, however, it is necessary to acknowledge that the truth about Wilder is that she was an autobiographer, a biographer, and best of all, a good storyteller.

II. THE TWO LAURAS: ONE REAL, ONE IMAGINED

“We all, at times, have had the longing that Robert Burns so well expressed when he said, ‘Oh, wad some power the giftie gie us, to see oursel’s as ithers see us.’”—Laura Ingalls Wilder, *Missouri Rurallist*, September 1919 (Wilder, *LHO* 56)

Laura Ingalls Wilder managed to create a heroine, her own namesake, so convincingly in the *Little House* narrative that readers became confused and upset when they learned of any discrepancies between the story of Laura Ingalls and Wilder’s real life. Wilder would undoubtedly be surprised to see her legendary self as others have seen her through the past seventy years. Her ability to create characters so lifelike that readers believe them to be *real* is a skill likely envied by most writers or storytellers. But understanding that the “Laura Ingalls Wilder” whose name appeared on the cover of her books, and the “Laura Ingalls” who happily married Almanzo Wilder at the conclusion of the *Little House* series are not entirely synonymous—as the first is a woman and author, and the second is a character—is important to understanding her work. Biographical information about Laura Ingalls Wilder herself facilitates a better understanding of the narrative and the characters she created, and reveals evidence of Wilder’s storytelling ability and propensity for creating a sophisticated storyline about her experience growing up on the American frontier.

Laura³ Elizabeth Ingalls was born on February 7, 1867 in the Big Woods near Pepin, Wisconsin—a landscape already densely storied by the recent presence of Anishinaabe, Lakota, and Winnebago Nations. Her parents, Charles Phillip Ingalls and

³ For the sake of a congruous narrative, in the first section of this chapter on Laura Ingalls Wilder’s biography, “Laura” refers to the author rather than the character. At the point where Wilder begins her career as an author, the distinction between “Wilder” as the author and “Laura” as the character resumes.

Caroline Lake Quiner, had married five years earlier and already had a two-year-old daughter, Mary Amelia. Charles and Caroline's marriage was one of three between the Ingalls and Quiner families, and the young families settled near their parents in the Wisconsin woods. But other families crowded into the area, too, until "Pa said there were too many people in the Big Woods" (Wilder, *LHP* 1). Charles, of the ninth generation of Ingallses in the United States and Canada, grew increasingly restless, and

In the long winter evenings he talked to Ma about the Western country. In the West the land was level, and there were no trees. The grass grew thick and high. There the wild animals wandered and fed as though they were in a pasture that stretched farther than a man could see, and there were no settlers. Only Indians lived there (Wilder, *LHBW* 2).

After a winter spent dreaming of opportunities in the West and, apparently, after a winter of convincing Caroline of the feasibility of those opportunities, "one day in the very last of the winter Pa said to Ma, 'Seeing you don't object, I've decided to go see the West'" (Wilder, *LHP* 2). The Ingalls family loaded the covered wagon, said good-bye to the extended family in the darkness of the early winter morning, and turned the horses southwest toward Kansas Indian Territory.

Wilder's description of the Ingalls family's decision to move west to Indian Territory emphasizes "West" as the direction of travel, and "Indian Territory" as the specific destination. Clearly they did not wander into Indian Territory by mistake. In *Little House on the Prairie*, Wilder even acknowledges that the family was aware that Indian Territory may, or may not, have been open to non-Native settlers at the time: "Pa had word from a man in Washington that the Indian Territory would be open to settlement soon. It might already be open to settlement. They could not know, because

Washington was so far away” (Wilder, *LHP* 47). The man in Washington may have been Charles’s cousin, Senator John J. Ingalls (Dykstra 9). On the September morning in 1869 when Pa halted the wagon and exclaimed, ““Here we are, Caroline . . . Right here we’ll build our house”” (Wilder, *LHP* 52), the Ingalls family joined more than twelve to fifteen thousand settlers who were already squatting illegally on Osage land (Miller, *Becoming* 25). Charles hauled logs from the creek bottoms and built his family a home along an Osage trail ten miles west of the Verdigris River in southeastern Kansas. The Ingalls family lived in Kansas Indian Territory for about one year, until they learned that the portion of the Osage reservation where they were squatting would not, in fact, be opened to non-Native settlement. Charles declared,

‘I’ll not stay here to be taken away by the soldiers like an outlaw! If some blasted politicians in Washington hadn’t sent word it would be alright to settle here, I’d never have been three miles over the line into Indian Territory. But I’ll not wait for the soldiers to take us out. We’re going now!’ (Wilder, *LHP* 316).

The Ingalls family once again loaded and covered the wagon in preparation for a journey, but there were now five Ingallses, as Caroline Celeste (“Carrie”) had been born in August of 1870.

The Ingallses knew exactly where to go: back to Wisconsin. The man who had purchased the Ingallses’ land and cabin in the Big Woods had been struggling to keep up with the payments on the money he still owed to the Ingalls family, and finally asked to be released from the deal. Conveniently, the Ingallses were able to return to their extended family in Wisconsin, and moved back into the home Charles had built shortly after marrying Caroline. While in Wisconsin, six-year-old Mary started school at the

Barry Corner School. Laura, though only four, also attended school during the fall term, walking with her sister the half-mile to and from school each day. By Christmastime, Charles and Caroline decided to keep Laura at home until she was a bit older, but Laura's education was already underway. The Ingallses remained in Wisconsin near their relatives until October of 1873, when they sold their cabin for \$1,000.00, nearly \$850.00 more than Charles and Caroline had paid for the land in 1866 (Miller, *Becoming* 30). In February of 1874, the family piled into the wagon for another venture into the West.

This time Charles stopped the wagon near Walnut Station (later known as Walnut Grove), Minnesota. Two miles north of the town, which had been established only a few weeks before the Ingallses' arrival, the family purchased a 172-acre farm for \$430.00. The family stayed in the small dugout house on the property, except for their short stay in a rented house in town after Caroline learned she was pregnant again, while Charles built a two-story frame house along Plum Creek. The second year at Walnut Grove, 1875, was likely a happy time for the Ingallses. Laura and Mary attended school in Walnut Grove, the family moved into their new home, and on November 1, Charles Frederick ("Freddie") was born (Miller, *Becoming* 32-5).

A dark cloud hung over the Ingalls home and much of Minnesota, however, in the form of a grasshopper plague. Grasshoppers had destroyed the 1874 harvest and they returned to wreak havoc in 1875, and still again in 1876. The United States Department of Agriculture reported \$200 million in damage from the grasshopper plagues of 1874 to 1876 across twenty-nine counties in Minnesota (Cooper 74). Charles found work helping with harvests in eastern parts of Minnesota that managed to escape the plague, but the

family, like many others in the area, was in a dire financial situation. Minnesota responded to the state of emergency by establishing a relief program

to help desperate and near-starving farmers. Applicants for relief were compelled to sign a ‘pauper’s oath’, witnessed by four others. After this humiliating oath was signed, the needy person received about two dollars worth of goods, including port, matches, baking soda, and molasses” (Anderson, *Iowa* 5).

The Ingallses refused government assistance, but by July of 1876 they were forced to sell their home on Plum Creek for \$400.00.

The family of six agreed to join their friends and neighbors, William and Maggie Steadman, in a business venture: running a hotel in Burr Oak, Iowa. The Steadmans purchased the hotel and property for \$2,000 and invited the Ingallses to help with maintaining and running the business, though it is uncertain whether the Ingallses contributed to the initial purchase of the hotel (Anderson, *Iowa* 11). On their way east to Iowa, the Ingalls family stopped to spend the harvest season with Laura’s Uncle Peter and Aunt Eliza along the Zumbro River in eastern Minnesota (Anderson, *Iowa* 6). There, on August 27, 1876, baby Freddie died. Around this time,

all of their families were concerned that Charles and Caroline could not find a permanent home. Ma’s mother, Charlotte Holbrook, expressed the concern when she wrote her daughter Martha Carpenter: ‘Did you see Caroline while she was at Peter’s? I wonder when they will get to a stopping place. I shall be glad for their sake, they have had a hard time of it since they left Pepin’” (Anderson, *Iowa* 6).

Deeply saddened by the loss of their only son, Charles and Caroline took their daughters on to Burr Oak.

The Masters Hotel, also known as the Burr Oak House, was one of two in the small town of less than 200, but the town was a “crossroads of the western movement”

and there was no shortage of boarders (Anderson, *Iowa* 6). For a time the family lived in the hotel itself, which sported bullet holes in the kitchen door resulting from a drunken fight between the son of the previous hotel owner and his wife (Anderson, *Iowa* 13). Charles helped manage the property, Caroline cooked for the boarders, and Mary and Laura often helped serve food and wait on tables for the customers who paid twenty-five cents per night for their lodging. The family attended the town's Congregational Church, and the older Ingalls girls were enrolled in school. In the Burr Oak School, Mary and Laura benefited from the instruction of their elocution teacher, William Reed. From Mr. Reed the girls "learned the rules of enunciation, articulation, accent, emphasis, inflection, pitch, pause, and slur," and when the Ingallses moved from the hotel to the rooms above Kimball's Grocery store, "men in the store below liked to gather silently to listen to the Ingalls girls recite" (Anderson, *Iowa* 16). While the Ingallses lived above Kimball's Grocery, however, they were living adjacent to the Burr Oak saloon, which caught fire one night. Although "Pa joined a bucket brigade and the fire was stopped, . . . he admitted that 'If that darn saloon could have gone without burning the whole town, I for one wouldn't have carried one drop of water'" (qtd. in Anderson, *Iowa* 15). Another night the Ingalls family had a close call when the

'grocer and his wife, who lived in the rooms below the Ingalls, woke Pa with their fighting and screaming. Pa went down stairs and 'found the grocer crazy drunk . . . holding a lighted lamp, bottom side up. The kerosene was running out of the lamp and blazing around his hand. Pa made him stop, put him to bed . . . saying it was a mercy we had not all been burned to death in our sleep' (Wilder qtd. in Anderson, *Iowa* 17).

In the Burr Oak school, Laura struggled with her multiplication tables, and Mr. Reed fought to maintain control of his classroom when bullied by a group of older

schoolboys (Anderson, *Iowa* 12; 16). Mary, Laura, and Carrie were stricken with measles, but they all recovered and Laura soon resumed her favorite pastime: reading the verses on the headstones in the town cemetery (Anderson, *Iowa* 17-8). Meanwhile, Charles left the hotel business altogether and opened the town's first mill. He moved his family to a rented brick house on the outskirts of town, where Grace Pearl was born on May 23, 1877.

Years later, Wilder fondly recalled Burr Oak as “a lovely place” in a letter published in the Burr Oak *Public Opinion* on June 18, 1947 (qtd. in Anderson, *Iowa* 27-9). But in the spring of 1877, ten-year-old Laura had an alarming experience when the doctor's wife, Mrs. Starr, approached Caroline and asked to adopt Laura. Wilder later recalled the tense moment while she awaited her mother's response, but as she “remembered with relief . . . ‘Ma thanked Mrs. Star, but said that she and Pa couldn't possibly spare me’” (Anderson, *Iowa* 20). At this time, however, the spunky personality that would long be synonymous with the name “Laura Ingalls Wilder” was already emerging: “I always thought I was the homeliest girl ever and the only way I could endure myself was because I could outdo the boys at their games and forget I wasn't pretty. Funny!” (Wilder, qtd. in Anderson, *Iowa* 20). Caroline and Mary often admonished Laura's tomboyish behavior, but Laura continued to challenge gender-restricted behaviors throughout her lifetime.

After Grace's birth in 1877, Charles, Caroline, and their four daughters decided to move westward once again. The family left Burr Oak under unfavorable circumstances. Faced with the problem of paying the doctor bill, the grocery bill, rent, and supplies for

the trip, Charles spoke with the landlord, Mr. Bisbee, and promised to send him the rent money after settling down and finding work in the west. Mr. Bisbee not only refused to accept the arrangement, but threatened to have the law take Pa's team of horses. 'No man could say that Pa

had ever cheated him out of one red cent.' Laura said. But the law was on Mr. Bisbee's side, and they were forced to say in Burr Oak . . . late one night the girls were awakened to find the house empty and the loaded wagon waiting. They were leaving. Through the dark, the Ingalls family drove away. Pa was still annoyed. 'I never thought,' he said, 'that I'd be leaving any place between two days.' he said he had half a notion to get even with Bisbee by not sending him a cent. But Ma just said, 'Now, Charles.'" (qtd. in Anderson, *Iowa* 21).

The family cleared the state line without incident, but it is unknown if Charles sent Bisbee the rent money.

The Ingallses returned to Walnut Grove in Minnesota and moved into a rented house in town. Wilder later recalled pleasant Friday evenings spent at Walnut Grove's town-wide spelling bees, where both children and adults competed in spelling matches (Miller, *Becoming* 40). In the summer of 1878, eleven-year-old Laura acquired her first wage work outside of her parents' home. For fifty cents a week she helped Emeline Masters, the hotelkeeper's wife, washing dishes and waiting tables in the hotel dining room. She also cared for the Masters's granddaughter and Mrs. Masters's invalid sister (Dykstra 177). During this time in Walnut Grove, the Ingalls family experienced another grave loss. In the spring of 1879 Mary, now fourteen, contracted spinal meningitis and gradually lost her vision. Laura became Mary's "eyes," and offered her blind sister vivid descriptions of their home, family, and community. Laura's experiences in providing

visual descriptions of the world for Mary are sometimes cited as seminal in her development as a writer:

Perhaps the single most influential contribution to Laura's writing skills resulted from her close relationship with her blind sister, Mary . . . This association probably led Laura to develop her skills of description as she attempted to create word pictures for Mary (Dykstra 20).

Wilder's texts are renowned for their acute observations and detailed descriptions of the family's routine, daily activities. Undoubtedly Laura's attention to everyday activities was sharpened as she described her surroundings to her sister.

When Charles's sister Ladocia ("Docia") offered him a job as bookkeeper for the railroad in Dakota Territory for \$50.00 a month, the disheartened family took advantage of the opportunity to start over yet again. Caroline was reluctant to leave Walnut Grove, but consented when Charles promised it would be their last move (Miller, *Becoming* 43). Charles kept his promise, and when he turned the wagon westward, it would be the Ingallses' last move as a family. This time Charles made the wagon trip alone, and Caroline and the girls soon followed by train. By fall of 1879 the Ingallses had settled into the roomy, supply-filled railroad surveyor's house for the winter and soon found lifelong friends in their neighbors, Robert and Ella Boast. On February 19, 1880, Charles was among the first in line to file a claim under the Homestead Act of 1862. For a filing fee of \$13.86, Charles obtained a 54.29 acre claim. As men flocked to the area to file their homestead claims, the Ingallses turned the surveyor's house into a makeshift boarding house, and Laura helped Caroline feed the boarders, who slept on the floor of the main room (Miller, *Becoming* 50).

Fortunate to have secured his claim early, Charles also purchased two lots situated catty-corner to one another in the soon-to-be town of De Smet at the intersection of Second and Calmut Streets. Charles set to work constructing a store building on one lot, and the family moved in as soon as it was completed on April 3. Moving quickly, Charles constructed another building on the second lot, where the family moved when Charles sold his first building. Meanwhile, Charles also constructed a shanty on the claim outside of town, and the Ingallses moved out to the claim shanty in early summer. The Ingallses were recognized as founding citizens of De Smet, the new town named after the Jesuit priest who had worked as a missionary in several Native communities in the area forty years earlier (Miller, *Becoming* 49). In March of 1880, Charles was elected the town's first Justice of the Peace, securing 23 of 29 votes; he heard cases in the front room of the family's town building (Miller, *Becoming* 42).

The winter of 1880 to 1881 brought a new form of trials to the Ingalls family. After an October blizzard, they quickly moved from the claim shanty into their building in town. Blizzard after blizzard pummeled the little town of one hundred citizens from October until May, finally stopping all supply trains after January 4. The threat of the next sudden storm, even on the intermittent days of calm, and accumulating snow closed the school for the entire winter. The deep snow itself was enough to pose significant challenges: during January, February, and March of 1879 to 1884, the average amount of unmelted snow on the ground at any given time was 8.9 feet. In January, February, and March of 1881, the unmelted snow accumulated to more than double the usual amount, at an average of 20.43 feet (Cooper 77).

The citizens of De Smet, like citizens of other new, small towns on the prairie, had few resources of their own to rely upon; they were almost entirely dependent upon supplies brought from the east by railroad. Stopped trains meant no incoming food or fuel; starving or freezing to death were stark possibilities faced by all of the families in town. As even the most carefully rationed food stores were exhausted, many families survived by grinding their precious seed wheat in coffee mills so it could be baked into bread or eaten as gruel. As Wilder noted in *The Long Winter*, eating next year's crop meant almost certain financial disaster for the following year, but there were no alternatives. During a break between storms, two young men, Almanzo Wilder and Cap Garland, risked their lives, and the lives of their horses, by traveling twenty miles across the prairie to a family who was rumored to have a large supply of seed wheat they were willing to sell. The rumor proved accurate and they returned with a sleigh full of grain for the town, only to be confronted by a storekeeper prepared to price-gouge the starving citizens of De Smet. Charles and other men in town stepped in and demanded a fair distribution of the grain to everyone in town, according to their needs. Sustained on the seed grain, the Ingallses and other families discovered that tough slough grasses could be twisted into small bundles and burned as fuel. On clear days Charles dug through the deep snow to find and cut the grasses, and the family spent much of its time on the long, snowy days twisting hay bundles. To brighten the days, the family read stories aloud, from Mary J. Holmes's novel, *Millbank*, a family favorite, or periodicals such as *The Youth's Companion*; along with food and fuel, the stories were rationed so there would be new stories to look forward to during the long, monotonous days. The Ingallses'

resources were further strained that winter by a young couple, George and Maggie Masters, and their infant, who were stranded in De Smet without time to build a home before the snows arrived. The Masterses spent the winter with the Ingalls family, and according to Wilder, ate more than their share of the rationed food, took the warmest seats by the fire, and did not consistently contribute to the exhausting but essential task of twisting hay (Miller, *Becoming* 55-6).

The long winter of 1880 to 1881 eventually ended, and the first train arrived in De Smet on May 9. The Ingalls family celebrated Christmas in May as they opened gifts and feasted on treats for a Christmas dinner that had been en route from friends in the east but frozen in the halted train all winter. The snows melted and Laura and Carrie returned to school. In 1881 the family busied themselves with preparations for sending Mary to the Vinton School for the Blind in Vinton, Iowa. Mary, one of ninety-five pupils in the school in fall of 1881, wrote poetry and completed college-level studies in literary, musical, and industrial departments (Cooper 90). By the time she graduated in 1889, Mary could read and write in Braille, play the organ, and sew, and she later recalled her days at the school for the blind as some of the happiest of her life. Meanwhile, Laura worked a variety of jobs and used part of her earnings to help fund Mary's education expenses. She earned twenty-five cents a day sewing shirts for Martha White and by the end of 1882, she secured her first teaching job (Miller, *Becoming* 57). In spite of Laura's best efforts to help her sister, however, Mary's education was primarily paid for by a Dakota Territory government subsidy (Miller, *Becoming* 80).

Laura became the third generation of teachers on her mother's side when she passed her teaching examination late in 1882. She was a few months shy of her sixteenth birthday, and the required age for teaching, but the need for a teacher at the Bouchie school some twelve miles from De Smet caused the director of the school to overlook her age. Laura passed the examination, packed her bags, and Charles took her to the home where she was to board for her two-month appointment with a salary of \$20.00 per month. The twelve-mile distance was too great for Charles and his horses to make for weekend visits, so Laura steeled herself for not seeing her family for the next eight weeks. But when she dismissed school on the first Friday, she found Almanzo Wilder waiting outside the door in his cutter. She knew Almanzo, ten years her senior, slightly; he had made the trip for grain during the hard winter, was the brother of her teacher, Eliza Jane Wilder, and he had occasionally walked her home from church functions. But above all, she admired his exceptionally fine horses. Behind those fine horses, Almanzo escorted Laura to and from school each weekend during her teaching appointment, even after she bluntly informed him that she had no interest in him beyond his horses.

When Laura's teaching position ended in early 1883, she returned to the De Smet school as a student. In addition to her studies, she continued to work whenever she could to support Mary's education. Though she detested sewing, she took a job sewing for a Mrs. McKee, and later, another with Florence Bell. She also agreed to live with Mrs. McKee for one dollar a week while Mr. McKee was away and Mrs. McKee was too frightened to stay out on their claim alone with her small daughter. Soon Laura found herself again switching roles between student and teacher. She took another teaching job

at the Perry school for \$25.00 a month, and then, returning to school as a student, hastily wrote her first composition, for which she received a grade of 100% from her teacher, Mr. V. S. L. Owen (Miller, *Becoming* 66). Her first essay, entitled “Ambition,” seemed to encourage Laura’s ability to believe in herself as a writer; she saved this essay, along with a copy of her first published newspaper article, all her life. In the spring of 1885 Laura, now eighteen, took her third and final teaching job at the rate of \$25.00 a month for three months. Though Wilder taught school, she never graduated from school herself. In 1918 *Missouri Ruralist* editor John Case wrote, “reading Mrs. Wilder’s contributions, most folks doubtless have decided that she is a college graduate. But ‘my education has been what a girl would get on the frontier,’ she informs us. ‘I never graduated from anything and only attended two high school terms’” (Wilder, *Ozarks* 23).

Since the days of sleigh rides to and from the Bouchie school, Almanzo remained a constant presence in Laura’s life. Throughout her time as both student and teacher she and Almanzo continued to see each other regularly, sometimes at singing school and other socials they attended, but most often they went driving together. Realizing, perhaps, that Laura seemed nearly as interested in his horses as she did in him, Almanzo picked her up every Sunday for sleigh rides in winter and buggy rides during the rest of the year. It was on one of these buggy rides, when Laura was seventeen, that Almanzo proposed marriage, and Laura accepted. They were married on August 25, 1885 (Wilder, *THGY*).

As Laura prepared for her wedding, she looked forward to the prospects of her new life with Almanzo, but likely felt the pang of realization that she would never have

the same involvement in the day-to-day lives of her immediate family. She would be with Almanzo in 1887 when Charles gave up on farming and moved his family to a house in town, and missed Mary's homecoming after her college graduation in 1889. Laura's parents and sisters stayed in Dakota Territory the remainder of their lives: Charles died of heart disease in De Smet in 1902, Caroline followed in 1924, and Mary, who never married, died in 1928. Carrie married David Swansy, a widower with two children, and moved to the foot of Mount Rushmore where she wrote for a local newspaper. Grace married Nathan Dow and moved to Manchester, a small town to the southwest of De Smet, where she worked as a correspondent for *The De Smet News*. Laura spent the first years of her married life in De Smet, but even after moving away she maintained frequent correspondence with her sisters and parents. Meanwhile, upon her marriage to Almanzo, she turned her full attention to her new life.

Laura, who had observed her mother's life and also the lives of the other farmers' wives in her communities, had vowed never to marry a farmer. Nevertheless, she did exactly that, and found herself a farmer's wife. Almanzo had filed a homestead claim, and to this they added a tree claim as well. Thanks to Caroline's training, Laura was well prepared for her new responsibilities, but the first several years of her marriage were among the most difficult years of her life. The first, hard summer of farm work was exceptionally difficult for Laura, as she was already pregnant with her first child. Rose, named for Laura's favorite wild roses, was born December 6, 1886. The years following Rose's birth tested the young family's strength. A severe drought destroyed several successive crops, and the Wilders, already deep in debt, had no way to repay existing

debts and had to borrow even more money to pay for essentials. Early in 1888, both Laura and Almanzo contracted diphtheria, and Rose stayed with Charles and Caroline during her parent's lengthy recovery. Almanzo, concerned with attending to his crop, disobeyed his doctor's orders and tried to return to work before fully regaining his strength. He suffered a stroke that left him partially paralyzed for the remaining sixty years of his life. Laura fully recovered, and in addition to her own work, tried to help Almanzo with his work as much as possible. The crop failed again, in spite of their efforts, and by 1889 the Wilders were forced to sell their homestead and move onto the smaller tree claim. As 1889 wore on, the Wilder's circumstances did not improve. That summer a son was born to the Wilders, but he died, unnamed, two weeks after his birth. Just two weeks later, Rose, now two-and-a-half, tipped over a lantern and burned her parents' home to the ground (Wilder, *TFFY*).

Disheartened by such persistent misfortune, the Wilders moved to Watertown, Minnesota, where they stayed with Almanzo's parents during 1890. By 1891, they decided to start fresh and boarded a train bound for Westville, Florida on October 5. In Westville they reunited with Laura's cousin Peter and his family, and decided to try farming in this unfamiliar new environment. The move to Florida was partially motivated by a belief that the Florida climate would be beneficial to Almanzo's health, but they soon discovered that it was decidedly disagreeable to Laura's. While Laura is consistently characterized as a hardworking, strong woman, a photograph from the time in Florida shows her "helping Peter plant corn, holding a big, black umbrella to shield herself from the hot Florida sun. She had difficulty balancing the umbrella as she planted

the corn. In exasperation, Peter ordered her to the house” (Warnock 8). The Wilders’ stay in Florida was short-lived; in August of 1892 they returned to De Smet by train.

Back in De Smet the Wilders stayed with Laura’s parents until they could secure a home of their own. Once again Laura relied on her sewing skills and obtained work with a dressmaker for one dollar per day. Rose entered school a year early, partly because she was a precocious child and partly because Laura was free to work while Rose was in school. Ironically for the one-day famed journalist, Rose was unable to finish her first term in school due to writer’s cramp. But Laura saved as much of her dressmaking money as possible, and when the Wilders decided to try their luck in Missouri, they brought Laura’s dressmaking money in the form of a one hundred dollar bill to use as down payment on a new home. On July 17, 1894 the Wilders loaded their wagon and left De Smet behind.

Laura documented her family’s journey from De Smet to Mansfield, Missouri in a journal, the only journal she is known to have kept during her lifetime. Years later, Rose edited her mother’s journal and published it as *On the Way Home*. In her introduction to *On the Way Home*, Rose tells how the hundred dollar bill was missing upon the Wilders’ arrival in Missouri. After several frantic days of searching, it was discovered in a crack in the writing desk where it had been hidden. With the hundred dollars, on September 21, 1894 the Wilders made a down payment on forty acres and a run-down, one-room cabin and took out a mortgage for the remaining \$300. Laura wrote to her family in De Smet and told of the journey and their safe arrival in Missouri. Her letter was published

in *The De Smet News* later in 1894, Laura's first publication. Caroline sent her daughter a clipping of the article, and Laura carefully saved it among her papers.

Laura saw potential in the farm, but recognized that it required a great deal of work. Because only five acres had been cleared for planting, she named the farm Rocky Ridge, and she and Almanzo set to work clearing the land for the four hundred unplanted apple trees that came with the property. As Almanzo cleared the land of rocks and timber, he cut up the trees and sold them as firewood at seventy-five cents per wagonload in Mansfield to earn money for necessities (Anderson, *Mansfield* 6-7). The Wilders managed to get by and gradually improved their situation:

In the spring of 1895 the first crop was planted. Rose helped put in the corn and she picked huckleberries and blueberries on the hills for pies. Sometimes she walked into Mansfield and sold the berries for ten cents a gallon. Soon the Wilders were able to sell potatoes and eggs and during their second summer in the Ozarks they bought a cow and a pig. Laura's good butter sold for ten cents a pound and Rose helped her mother with the churning (Anderson, *Mansfield* 7).

Within a year, Almanzo built a small one-room frame house for the family and tore down the cabin. From 1899-1904 the Wilders added one hundred-sixty acres to their farm and cleared and planted eighty of them. They tried to make the most of their land:

They planted an orchard, raised hogs and sheep, cattle and goats and Laura had the best flock of laying hens in the country. Leghorn hens and Jersey cows were the farm's pride. When the orchard started bearing it was most successful, even though Almanzo did no spraying of the trees. Production eventually reached carload shipments to Memphis, St. Louis, Kansas City, and other markets (Anderson, *Mansfield* 8).

During this time Almanzo introduced Morgan horses to the Ozark community and continued to add on to the house. By 1912 the house had twelve rooms and was considered a "showplace" of the Ozarks. Its kitchen was custom-built for Laura's tiny

5'2'' frame and contained novelties such as running water engineered by Almanzo himself.

In running Rocky Ridge, it “seems that Laura and Almanzo were more equal partners than most married couples of their time” (Miller, *Becoming* 78). Though Laura was considered an “expert housekeeper and cook . . . she was not fond of either job” (Anderson, *Mansfield* 10). She proved to be as capable of outdoor farm work as indoor, and when necessary she helped Almanzo; Almanzo declared that he never found a man who was as capable a partner on a cross-cut saw as Laura. As she became adept in her farm work, Laura soon discovered that raising chickens was her area of expertise:

Leghorns were her pride. Laura’s flocks laid more eggs and had less disease than any in the country and her neighbors often asked why. Simply, Laura said, because she kept the hen-house clean and provided enough water. But 1910 [sic], Laura was being asked to speak at farmer’s meetings and explain her poultry raising methods. She made many of her talks in school-houses and homes all over the Ozarks (Anderson, *Mansfield* 10).

And, “curiously, the chickens were, in a roundabout way, responsible for her writing career” (Spaeth 6).

Once Laura prepared a speech for one of her presentations on successful farming, but found herself too busy to attend the meeting. She sent her speech on to the meeting, where it was delivered by someone in her stead. John Case, an editor for the *Missouri Ruralist*, was in the audience that day, and soon sought out the writer of the speech. Case believed readers of the *Missouri Ruralist*, a periodical dedicated to “farming and rural life,” would enjoy Laura Wilder’s perspective on Ozark farm life (Spaeth 6). Her first article, “Favors the Small Farm Home,” was published in the *Ruralist* on February 18,

1911. Wilder wrote regularly for the *Ruralist* for more than a decade, about twice monthly. Wilder, who usually published under the name “Mrs. A. J. Wilder,” had her own column, and was soon promoted to editor of the home section (Spaeth 6).

Like many women of her time, Wilder did not record details of everyday happenings in a journal; she appears to have kept a journal only during the time when her life seemed least ordinary to her—during the covered-wagon trip from De Smet to Mansfield. Fortunately, Wilder’s articles in the *Missouri Ruralist* often focus upon her daily experiences at Rocky Ridge. The *Ruralist* articles offer a glimpse into Wilder’s life in the years following the period covered by the *Little House* books. They show Wilder’s developing writing skills, and tell of her interests and values, her presentiments and politics. Her non-fiction writing reveals both the breadth and depth of her knowledge, and suggests that she was conversant on many subjects well beyond the boundaries of her Ozark farmyard. Topics that resurface regularly over the years seem to be areas where Wilder held strong opinions. Cumulatively, the *Missouri Ruralist* articles reveal biographical information about Wilder that facilitates a better understanding of the woman who later crafted the *Little House* books.

In her *Missouri Ruralist* articles, Wilder addresses topics one might expect to see in a rural farm magazine: growing apples in the Ozarks, new methods for churning butter, the wintertime pleasure of planning a spring garden, health and beauty tips, and her appreciation for good neighbors. But she also expressed her opinions on upcoming elections, the Missouri state budget, World War I, and the dangers of illiteracy. She spoke against the careless destruction of trees in her community, drew attention to the

imprudence of keeping children home from school to help on the farm, and stressed the importance of good home life in the prevention of child suicides. Over the years Wilder's articles emphasize her love of God and country—and her disdain for various aspects of the United States government and for people who rely on government programs. She frequently encouraged her readers to observe the beauty of the Ozark countryside, and to take notice of the small, seemingly unimportant tasks that characterize routine farm life.

Among the many topics Wilder covered in her column, she regularly addressed women's issues, including suffrage. She was not a particularly strong advocate of women's rights—at least not as the feminists of her day would have seen them—but her stance on suffrage reveals some of her strongest passions, the importance of thinking for oneself and recognizing the influence of one's actions on the surrounding world. In April of 1916 prior to women's securing the right to vote, Wilder encouraged her female readers not, for example, to run off and join the suffrage movement (likely an impractical suggestion for responsibility-laden farmer's wives who often found it difficult to even visit one another during the busiest months on the farm), but to be cognizant of their inherent powers as wives and mothers. She argued, "What a wonderful power mothers have in their hands! They shape the lives of children today, through them the lives of the men and women of tomorrow, and through them the nations of the world" (Wilder, *LHO* 197). Wilder proposed that simply looking at the situation from a different perspective would reveal that women already had the ability to influence elections by *shaping* the country's leaders, if not by *electing* them.

In June of 1919, Wilder advocated the acknowledgement of women's role as equal business partners in the husband-wife team on each farm and discouraged her readers from viewing farmers' wives as simply drudges. She described a six-month-long contest between herself and Almanzo to see whether his cows or her chickens brought more profit to their farm. They discovered that the profits from each were about the same, and each contributed to the other's success as Laura churned and sold the cows' butter and Almanzo grew the grain fed to Laura's chickens. Wilder reminded her readers of women's important role in sustaining successful farms:

On the farm, a woman may have both economic independence and a home life as perfect as she cares to make it. Farm women have always been wage earners and partners in their husband's business. Such a creature as the woman parasite has never been known among us. Perhaps this is one reason why 'feminism' has never greatly aroused us" (Wilder, *LHO* 185).

Wilder acknowledges that equal partnership with one's husband requires a significant amount of responsibility and hard work, but she nevertheless offers a litany of ways for women to find validation through their work instead of through a stamp of approval from Washington.

As one scholar of Wilder's work, William Anderson, points out, "Wilder particularly 'abhorred the image [common in small Ozark towns] of the lonely farm wife sitting uncomfortably in the farm wagon while her husband circulated and visited with the merchants and bankers'" (Anderson qtd. in Romines 16). Once women's right to vote in the 1919 election had been secured, in April of that year Wilder warned, "women can no longer hide behind their husbands and fathers and brothers by saying 'I don't pay attention to politics. That is the men's business'" (Wilder, *LHO* 205). Wilder challenges

her women readers to educate themselves about political issues and to make the most of their voting responsibilities. In a tone reminiscent of the dreaded lonely farm wife in the wagon, Wilder laments,

I fear that we [women] are not quite ready to use the ballot intelligently. Though there has been warning enough that the responsibility was coming to rest upon us, we have been careless about informing ourselves of the conditions which the people of the United States must handle and the questions they must answer (Wilder, *LHO* 205).

As she reminds women to think seriously about their new roles as voters, and about the directions in which they will cast their votes, she also dismisses the notion that the women's vote will "bring purity into politics," or that women will vote predictably (Wilder, *LHO* 204). Central to all of her musing on suffrage is the principle that women must maintain a thoughtful perspective and not let others define or dictate their thoughts or actions. By the time Wilder retired her column in the *Missouri Ruralist* in 1924, her column had been renamed "A Farm Woman Thinks."

Wilder's commitment to encouraging farm women to abandon the lonely buckboard seat and become thoughtful, engaged citizens is evident not only in her *Missouri Ruralist* articles on suffrage and other issues, but through her community involvement in Mansfield. She co-founded the Athenian Club, a women's literary discussion group, in 1916. The Athenians, so named because "Athenians were people of culture, reading, and writing" (Lichty qtd. in Long 8), met Wednesday afternoons in nearby Hartville and, like thousands of other women's groups across the country, offered women a forum for informing themselves and each other about literature, history, and current events: "a sort of informal do-it-yourself junior college system" (Collins 247). As

one friend of Wilder's, Irene Lichty, recalled, "Laura did have a great concern and knowledge for current events . . . She kept up on things and read, of course. Rose wrote her voluminous letters about what was going on in the world, so she wasn't a person who spent her time reminiscing or thinking about the past too much" (qtd. in Long 8). During Wilder's involvement in the club, the women studied topics such as the American novel, the history of Italy, Egyptian art, highway funding, English Lake Poets, child discipline, Russian Communism, the Panama Canal, prominent people, social customs, and the birds of South America (Hines 262-3; Miller, "Perspective from 1932" 6; Miller *Frontier* 20). Meetings of the Athenians often featured multiple presentations on a predetermined theme. Wilder hosted some meetings in her home and often presented papers, but as Lichty remembered, "I've been in meetings with [Laura] when I was sure she knew the most of anyone there but said the least. She just didn't talk unless she felt that it was up to her to say something" (qtd. in Long 8).

The idea of women's discussion groups apparently found favorable reception among Mansfield women, as Wilder soon began another club called the Justamere Club and was a member of both the Interesting Hour Club and the Friday Afternoon Club. Each of these organizations offered women opportunities to study and discuss topics well beyond the limits of their farmyard gates. Wilder, for example, presented a paper for the Interesting Hour Club entitled "Mexico and her Relations with the U. S." (Miller, *Becoming* 172).

Wilder also participated in less-scholarly organizations, some of them exclusively women's organizations and some not. She joined the embroidery club in 1927, and the

bridge club in 1929. She was an active member of various church groups, the Democratic Party, helped found the Mansfield branch of the National Farm Loan Association (and later served as its secretary-treasurer), promoted and helped run the Mansfield Agricultural and Stock Show, and she and Almanzo were both members of Eastern Star (Miller, *Frontier* 20). In 1925 Wilder ran for the office of collector of Pleasant Township, but lost the election (Miller, *Becoming* 4).

Wilder's skill at farming, her participation in local organizations, and her commitment to studying and learning about communities other than her own suggest that she was a rather well-rounded and thoughtful woman. As one biographer suggests, Wilder's scholarly interests seemed to create a noticeable distinction between her and her neighbors:

Living in the margin between town and country gave her something of a split identity. Unlike other farmwomen, she refused to go into town in a plain gingham dress but always tried to dress up a little. This, in the view of some people, made her seem a little 'hoity-toity,' distant, or even 'prissy.' Also involved, no doubt, was the fact that she was better read and more ambitious than most of her neighbors, and she considered herself as being different somehow from them (Miller, *Frontier* 21).

Since Wilder is consistently remembered as a shy, soft-spoken, and kind woman with many friends, the distinction between her and other community members is more likely due to scholarliness or shyness than snobbery.

Another factor that undoubtedly distinguished Wilder's household as unusually worldly, and certainly unconventional according to Mansfield standards, was her eccentric and famous daughter. By the time she was in her early teens, Rose had exhausted the limited educational opportunities in Mansfield. In 1903 she went to

Crowley, Louisiana to live with Almanzo's sister Eliza Jane and finished high school there. In Crowley, Eliza Jane was active in the woman's movement, and was acquainted with well-known activists such as Dr. Mary Walker and the late Amelia Bloomer (Dykstra 209). The time spent with her Aunt Eliza Jane may have been influential for Rose, as she rejected conventional gender roles throughout her adult life, and in Crowley she began working for the Socialist Party. After high school she found work in a telegraph office in Kansas City, then married Gillette Lane in 1909. Like her mother and grandmother, she had a son who died shortly after birth. Rose and Gillette moved to San Francisco, where Laura visited them during 1915 and attended the Panama-Pacific International Exposition. By 1918 Rose had divorced Gillette; she favored her career over her social life and did not remarry. Rose gained fame as a writer long before her mother, as a "star reporter" for the *San Francisco Bulletin*, and as a novelist, political writer, and correspondent.

Meanwhile I have done several things. I have been office clerk, telegrapher, newspaper reporter, feature writer, advertising writer, farmland salesman. I have seen all the United States and something of Canada and the Caribbean; all of Europe except Spain; Turkey, Egypt, Palestine, Syria, Iraq as far east as Bagdad, Georgia, Armenia, Azerbaijan. California, the Ozarks and the Balkans are my home towns ("Rose Wilder Lane").

Rose invited famed authors such as Sinclair Lewis and Dorothy Thompson to her parents' home at Rocky Ridge, was a friend and unofficial advisor of President Hoover, and was known to speak Albanian, French, some German, Italian, and Greek (Hines 213). Rose strongly advocated her political positions, primarily libertarian in nature, through

her fiction and non-fiction, including *Let the Hurricane Roar* (1943), *Give Me Liberty* (1939), and *The Discovery of Freedom* (1943).

While the extent to which Rose influenced her mother's *Little House* series has been controversial since the late 1970s, the unequivocal point is that both women were educated, familiar with current affairs well beyond the Ozark community, and embedded their fiction and non-fiction with their political views. As one scholar of Wilder surmised,

It has been suggested that Rose, who, at the time the preceding piece ["San Marino is Small but Mighty"] was written [1918], was a communist, did a sudden about-face after her trip through Europe following WWI, and then inserted considerable chunks of libertarian propaganda into her mother's stories as she edited them. But Mrs. Wilder's books weren't contorted into something by her daughter that Mrs. Wilder didn't already believe to be true—indeed, had believed to be true all her life, both before and after her daughter's communist days. If anything, the daughter adopted the attitude of her mother, who proclaimed in 1918 that San Marino was small but mighty because its people had protected their 'liberties.' This ideal country was 'free and independent,' a phrase that occurs over and over again in Mrs. Wilder's books and is surely from her own writing and thinking (Hines 187).

As writers, both Rose and her mother received significant acclaim during their lifetimes, but Wilder's fame has since eclipsed her daughter's as she acquired legendary status as a writer and as a fictional character.

In spite of her legendary status, few biographical accounts document Wilder's life. The several biographies of Wilder, all of which are largely expanded retellings of the events in the *Little House* books, include John E. Miller's *Becoming Laura Ingalls Wilder: The Woman Behind the Legend* and Donald Zochart's *Laura: The Life of Laura Ingalls Wilder*, which is an imaginative interpretation of Wilder's life. William Anderson

has also put together several pamphlets covering Wilder's biography during different time periods in her life: *Laura Wilder of Mansfield: A Life of the Author of the "Little House" Books* and *Laura Ingalls Wilder: The Iowa Story*. A pamphlet by Alene M. Warnok covers the Wilder's year in Florida: *Laura Ingalls Wilder: The Westville Florida Years*. William Anderson's "The Literary Apprenticeship of Laura Ingalls Wilder" explores Wilder's development as a writer, while John Miller's *Laura Ingalls Wilder's Little Town: Where History and Literature Meet* studies Wilder's life during her time in De Smet, South Dakota. Two works consider the autobiographical aspects of Wilder's writing: Ralph R. Dykstra's dissertation, "The Autobiographical Aspects of Laura Ingalls Wilder's 'Little House' Books" and Bernice Cooper's "The Authenticity of the Historical Background of the 'Little House' Books." As Steven Hines points out in *I Remember Laura: Laura Ingalls Wilder*, "Mrs. Wilder will probably never be taken seriously as a significant literary figure (with her books acknowledged as seminal to the development of realistic portraits of children and their feelings in juvenile literature) until a serious biography accounts for her achievements" (Hines 241).

Since Wilder herself emphasized the importance of thinking, and an awareness of individual attitudes and perspectives, it is appropriate and important to consider the perspectives from which Wilder wrote, and the values she held dear. Even a cursory glance at what little information is known about Wilder's life after the age of eighteen, and her purposes for writing explored in Chapter One, reveal that she was likely not a sheltered, overly sentimental, or racist old lady who unthinkingly or hatefully villainized Native people in her children's books. She was well-read, interested in cultures and

places other than her own, and self-aware of her inclination to think a great deal about the world around her. Furthermore, she encouraged others in her community, especially women, to broaden their minds and think more deliberately about their places in the world, and she was heavily influenced by her exceptionally well-traveled, politically-active, and culturally-aware daughter. Given what is known about her personality and her values, it is likely that she carefully considered how she represented Native people, and probably struggled with the concept of representing the Osage community in *Little House on the Prairie*. The fact that she may have given serious thought to how she represented Native people, however, does not necessarily mean that her representation of them is always beyond reproach—raises significant questions: how does a such a thoughtful, educated individual manage to create images of Indians that have been identified as egregiously offensive by some contemporary Native people? And even more importantly, is there *any* “right” way to represent Native people in fiction without generating outrage? The next chapter explores the craft element of Wilder’s narrative, which reveals her attempts to convey political messages through her writing, including messages about Native people on the American frontier.

III. “SO MANY WAYS OF SEEING THINGS AND SO MANY WAYS OF SAYING THEM”: REMODELING THE “LITTLE HOUSE”

“There is a fascination in writing . . . the use of words is of itself an interesting study. You will hardly believe the difference of the use of one word rather than another will make until you begin to hunt for a word with just the right shade of meaning, just the right color for the picture you are painting with words. Had you thought that words have color? The only stupid thing about words is the spelling of them.” --Laura Ingalls Wilder (Wilder qtd. in Zochert 234-5)

Wilder insisted that the *Little House* series was the true story of her own life, with only a few necessary adjustments for the sake of protecting the identities of real people, maintaining an age-appropriate narrative for her young readers, or simply painting a good story. And after all, Wilder and Lane argued, a person could not possibly convey every scene from one’s life in even the most detailed autobiography, so some selections and adjustments should be understandable. In crafting her story, however, Wilder’s knack for creating compelling characters eventually drove the author to defending the authenticity of her own work as readers expected the character, “Laura,” and the author, “Laura Ingalls Wilder,” to be wholly and consistently synonymous. Today there is some confusion regarding the appropriate genre for the texts: autobiography or strictly fiction? Though the answer to this question is largely a matter of opinion, the answer impacts the approaches used for better understanding Wilder’s role in both reflecting and shaping readers’ ideas about the American frontier, especially where American Indians are concerned. If her work is viewed as an autobiographical telling of the events in her life, it is somewhat problematic, for example, to criticize her for truthfully discussing her encounters with her Native neighbors. But if her narrative is regarded as fiction because of some alterations to her life story, her choices about representing American Indians in

her story are all the more worthy of analysis and discussion. A formalist analysis of the *Little House* texts reveals several places where Wilder's narrative deviates from the actual events in her life and inevitably raises important questions about her motivations for altering her own story. Wilder likely manipulated her life story to purposefully convey specific values and messages about frontier life to her readers; Chapter Three explores the questionable genre of the *Little House* books, Wilder's experimentation with language to negotiate fact and fiction, the places in the narrative where she "painted pictures with her words," and how such literary devices impact the overall messages in her text, especially those messages regarding American Indians.

As one of Wilder's biographers suggests, "thinking of Laura Ingalls Wilder usually raises one of two images for people: the little girl or the sweet old lady" (Miller, *Becoming* 1). It is unlikely that either of these popular snapshot images accurately encompasses the identity of the real Laura Ingalls Wilder, especially since the images of the little girl are images of a storybook character, while the images of the "sweet old lady" are of the aged author herself. Naturally, these two identities occasionally conflict with one another, and, evidently, Wilder sometimes found details of her own life story in conflict with the story she wanted to tell about a little girl growing up on the American frontier. The places where Wilder's narrative is not entirely consistent with her life have been discovered in several ways. Most often biographers happened across discrepancies while piecing together the little information known about Wilder's life beyond what she tells us in her texts. A few were discussed publicly by Wilder or Lane. Others are evident in correspondence between the mother and daughter, as they mailed chapters

back and forth to one another and wrote notes to each other in the margins. And still other discrepancies emerge when comparing Wilder's first, unpublished autobiographical manuscript, *Pioneer Girl*, with the *Little House* series.

Long before Wilder made specific decisions about how to represent certain details of her life story, however, she likely considered various narrative structures and how each would shape, compliment, or limit the story she wanted to tell. As suggested in Chapter 1, Wilder's decision to change the first-person narrative voice used in *Pioneer Girl* to the limited third-person voice used throughout the *Little House* series introduced new opportunities to a writer interested in *crafting* a story:

Had Wilder written the 'Little House' books in the first person, they would have been undeniably autobiography, and had she chosen a consistent third-person omniscient viewpoint, they would have been clearly fiction. By choosing to address her subject from a limited third-person point of view, Wilder effectively retains the 'real' identity of Laura while avoiding the strictures required by autobiography (Spaeth 73).

As Wilder admittedly sought to tell both the true story of her childhood within the larger story of America's frontier history, the shift in narrative structure allows her story to maintain an ambiguous position between autobiography and fiction. In naming the protagonist after herself, and the protagonist's family members after her own family members, Wilder gives her story the appearance of an autobiography and lends credibility to the narrative. At the same time, abandoning the first-person point of view enables Wilder to employ writing conventions (e.g. plot, character development, conflict, metaphor) more common to a novel than to the orderly, autobiographical recounting of one's life events.

While Wilder's work has received far more unfettered praise than scholarly analysis, the questions of genre, and of fact versus fiction, seem to surface wherever her stories are discussed. Teachers, especially, seem inclined to appreciate the factual aspects of Wilder's stories, particularly about frontier life. Numerous articles and teacher resource books encourage using Wilder's books in the classroom not only for their literary qualities, but for opportunities to study period technology, transportation, housing, social customs, foods, and other aspects of American frontier life (Coody, Eddins, Ferguson, Maifair, Rice). As one teacher observes about Wilder's thick descriptions of the pioneer experience,

What storehouses of information these books are! Without allowing the information to impede the story, Laura has given us a clear description of cheese making, the laying of the railroad, building a log shelter, curling hair, the growth of a town . . . There is information, too, that one can get only when he reads the entire series, something not to be found in any one book alone. This information has to do with the change that comes about when more and more people settle in one place and a community develops" (Eddins 4; 5-6).

The sheer volume of historically accurate facts about frontier living likely contributes to many readers' propensity for accepting the content of Wilder's stories as wholly autobiographical. Because Harpers encouraged Wilder to add details about frontier life to her narrative as a condition for publication, because sharing details about frontier life is consistent with her goals of telling both her personal and national stories, and because Wilder herself hoped that her texts could be used as educational materials in classrooms (Romines 201) it is reasonable to expect that she took care to accurately describe her childhood surroundings.

Some scholars of Wilder's work, however, were reluctant to label the *Little House* books as autobiographical so quickly. In 1980, recognizing that "the assumption that the 'Little House' books are autobiographical and factual remembrances of the author" had been "widely accepted but not examined in detail," Ralph Dykstra analyzed the factual aspects of Wilder's story in his dissertation, "The Autobiographical Aspects of Laura Ingalls Wilder's 'Little House' Books" (Dykstra 3). Dykstra studied Wilder's texts, and when possible, compared her version of the events to other period sources. He found, for example, that Wilder's description of the exceptionally harsh winter of 1880-1881 in *The Long Winter* was accurate, but that she had changed the names of certain characters in her stories. For example, the infamous character Nellie Oleson, whom readers love to hate, enters the narrative in *On the Banks of Plum Creek*, then reappears in De Smet in *Little Town on the Prairie*. Dykstra found that Nellie and her family did not live in De Smet, and that the character was based upon another girl, Genny (Genevieve) Masters who was "very much like Nellie in disposition" and suggests that "Wilder perhaps in the interest of continuity, reintroduced Nellie" to her readers (Dykstra 170). Wilder also altered other character names, or spellings of names, especially for characters portrayed in an unfavorable light. The "Brewster" family Laura boarded with during her first teaching job, for example, was actually the "Bouchie" family.

Dykstra itemized his findings in six statements that are (with the possible exception of statement number two) generally accepted by most of Wilder's biographers:

1. A skilled author can accurately and artistically weave the events of her life into fiction in order to interpret a specific region or period.
2. The "Little House" saga is an accurate autobiographical account.

3. Selected events of the author's life were omitted by her as being inappropriate for inclusion in a children's book at the time of the writing of the 'Little House' saga.
4. Events were sometimes chronologically rearranged and presented in such a way as to be clearly understood by the child reader.
5. The actual surnames of some of the characters were simplified for the reader.
6. The "Little House" books were planned as a multi-volume saga by Mrs. Wilder, with the stories developing along with the reader (Dykstra 258).

Dykstra's investigation proved useful to better understanding Wilder's texts, but did not indisputably settle the question of genre. His statement of findings, in fact, includes the words "accurately" and "artistically," "fiction" and "autobiographical," suggesting once again that Wilder's stories fall somewhere between the lines of fact and fiction.

The matter of genre remains so important to appropriately analyzing Wilder's narrative that nearly every major study of her work addresses the point (except, interestingly, the articles that accuse her of making racist statements about Native people). The following statements by two prominent scholars of Wilder's writing, John E. Miller and Janet Spaeth, reflect the general acceptance of the fact that the *Little House* books are, to a large extent, autobiographical and historically accurate, but contain several changes significant enough to complicate the question of genre. Miller identifies several reasons for not considering the texts wholly autobiographical:

[Laura] and Rose always insisted on complete historical accuracy of her books, but the two failed to acknowledge that scenes, characters, and dialogue were often modified, embellished, rearranged, or even created when they felt it necessary. Additionally, Laura's memory was not totally reliable; every year it slipped a little more . . . in addition, the fictional format within which they were operating demanded that they streamline some things, expand upon others, modify chronology, redefine characters, and depart in other ways from historical accuracy in order to maximize

readability and to obtain what could be called ‘literary truth’ (Miller, *Becoming* 218).

Miller reminds readers that Wilder was in her sixties when she began writing the *Little House* stories, and suggests her failing memory as a potential contributing factor to discrepancies between Wilder’s narrative and her known life experiences. As Wilder began recording her childhood memories in the early 1930s she could not confirm facts with her parents and older sister Mary, as they were no longer living.⁴

In coining the term “literary truth” in his discussion of the appropriate genre for Wilder’s writing, Miller suggests that the *Little House* books do not fit easily into any existing genre. Similarly, Spaeth avoids committing the texts to a single genre by declaring that they fit in *two* genres, the historical novel and autobiographical literature:

Alfred Tressider Sheppard explains that ‘an historical novel must of necessity be a story of the past in which imagination comes to the aid of fact.’ Autobiographical literature is a form of historical fiction. Mutlu Konuk Blasing echoes Lane’s distinction between ‘truth’ and ‘fact’ (‘The truth is a meaning underlying them [the facts]; you tell the truth by *selecting* the facts which illustrate it.’) by stating that autobiographical literature ‘does not imply any particular standard of ‘truth’ to facts,’ since the recording of a life necessarily represents fictionalization—to a greater or lesser degree—of the life lived.’ Blasing also simplifies the working definition of the genre as ‘works in which the hero, narrator, and author can be identified by the same name’ (Smith 94).

⁴ Upon the death of her mother, Wilder regretted that she had not sought and recorded family stories while her elder immediate family members were still living. In 1925 she contacted her Aunt Martha Carpenter to request that she write down some of their family stories, and even offered to hire a stenographer to record her aunt’s stories. Wilder’s aunt replied “with many details about life on the Wisconsin frontier during the time she was growing up, about Indians, maple-sugar parties, corn husking, quilting, and school experiences. She also sent a recipe for cottage cheese pie” (Miller, *Becoming* 164-5). Wilder made these inquiries about her family history several years before she began writing the *Little House* narrative; at the time she was working on an article for the *Ladies Home Journal* about her grandmother’s cooking (Miller, *Becoming* 164-5).

As Spaeth points out, Blasing's understanding of the tenuous relationship between truth and fact, especially as the selection of certain facts tends to craft certain truths, is similar to Wilder's and Lane's own statements about the accuracy of the texts. In 1937 Wilder wrote, "Every story in this novel [*On the Banks of Plum Creek*], all the circumstances, each incident is true. All I have told is true but it is not the whole truth. There were some stories I wanted to tell but it would not be responsible for putting in a book for children, even though I knew them as a child" (Wilder, "Notes" 104). Spaeth sums up her own position on the truthfulness of the stories:

The differences between the author and her character Laura are not major, nor is the story Wilder told greatly divergent from her own experience. Perhaps she chose not to insist upon the distinction to retain the essential 'truth' of the 'Little House' story, which is what the pioneer experience was like. Perhaps she felt that forcing labels such as 'true' and 'made-up' on a theme as large as the one she undertook would only undermine its impact (Spaeth, preface).

Both Miller and Spaeth tend to make statements about the 'truth' of the *Little House* books that are somewhat dismissive of Wilder's own position on her work, but they seem to be in general agreement on two points: first, that the *Little House* books are largely autobiographical, and second, that the changes Wilder made in the telling of her childhood story are significant enough to create uncertainty about the appropriate genre for the texts.

Examining the types of changes Wilder made to her story to emphasize specific messages she wanted her readers to learn from the *Little House* story reveals that the series does not fit comfortably in the autobiography genre. Nevertheless, it seems Wilder did have sincere concerns about maintaining an overall sense of truth in her narrative.

Conversely, her daughter, Rose, also wrote stories based upon the pioneer family history she had heard so often from her parents and grandparents, but

Rose did not tell her mother she was writing *Let the Hurricane Roar*, which used Laura's mother and father as leading characters. Laura found out about it only after it had been accepted for publication and was horrified at the liberty her daughter had taken (Hines, *I Remember* 243).

The main characters in *Let the Hurricane Roar*, which turned out to be one of Lane's best-selling works, suffer similar hardships to the characters in the *Little House* books, but there are some marked differences. The couple's first child, for example, is a son—clearly a deviation from the actual events in the Ingalls family history. Wilder's response to Lane's liberties with family stories is a strong reminder of Wilder's commitment to presenting an accurate version of her family's story, and suggests that any changes to the narrative that she did employ must have been for reasons she considered even more important than telling the true story of her own life.

Ambiguity between truth and fiction is a characteristic of the *Little House* series and, along with exploring the potential creative powers of language, it is also an important part of the storyline. In her discussion of the unique genre issues associated with the *Little House* books, Spaeth identifies an example within one of the texts that reflects Wilder's apparent interest in manipulating language to craft meaning. In *On the Banks of Plum Creek*, Laura and her sister Mary spend a pleasant morning climbing up and sliding down their father's new "beautiful golden straw-stack" that stood "tall and shining bright in the sunshine" (Wilder, *OBPC* 53-4). The girls "climbed up and slid, climbed and slid, until there was hardly any stack left in the middle of the loose heaps of straw" (Wilder, *OBC* 55). At dinnertime Pa, unhappy about having to restack the hay,

tells the girls that they may not slide down the stack anymore, but after dinner the girls approach the stack again:

‘Laura!’ Mary cried. ‘Pa said we mustn’t!’
 Laura was climbing. ‘He did not, either!’ she contradicted. ‘He did not say we must not climb up it. He said we must not slide down it. I’m only climbing’ (Wilder, *OBC* 56).

Soon both Mary and Laura were climbing up the straw-stack and rolling to the bottom:

‘It was great fun. It was more fun than sliding. They climbed and rolled and climbed and rolled, laughing harder all the time. More and more straw rolled down with them’

(Wilder, *OBC* 58-9). That evening Pa said,

‘You girls have been sliding down the straw-stack again.’
 ‘No, Pa,’ said Laura.
 ‘Mary!’ said Pa. ‘Did you slide down the straw-stack?’
 ‘N-no, Pa,’ Mary said.
 ‘Laura!’ Pa’s voice was terrible. ‘Tell me again, DID YOU SLIDE DOWN THE STRAW-STACK?’
 ‘No, Pa,’ Laura answered again. She looked into Pa’s shocked eyes. She did not know why he looked like that.
 ‘Laura!’ Pa said.
 ‘We did not slide, Pa,’ Laura explained. ‘But we did roll down it.’

Pa got up quickly and went to the door and stood looking out. His back quivered. Laura and Mary did not know what to think.

When Pa turned around his face was stern but his eyes were twinkling (Wilder, *OBC* 59-60).

Pa reminds the girls that their horses and cow will need the straw to eat come winter, and this time he chooses his words more carefully, saying unequivocally,

‘[The straw] MUST—STAY—STACKED. Do you understand?’
 ‘Yes, Pa,’ said Laura and Mary.
 That was the end of their playing on the straw stack (Wilder, *OBC* 60).

In the straw-stack story, Wilder demonstrates her awareness of the power of language, and how a single word can affect the truth of a story. As Spaeth suggests, Laura “discovers that she can tell the truth and lie at the same time” and she has “learned that language can be used to manipulate truth” (Wilder, *OBC* 54).

In her next novel, *By the Shores of Silver Lake*, Wilder again highlights language’s singular power to bridge the space between truth and fiction. Appropriately, as the narrator ages and each text increases slightly in its sophistication, the issues associated with language also increase in complexity in *By the Shores of Silver Lake*. By now, Laura’s sister Mary has lost her vision, and as Wilder recalls in *By the Shores of Silver Lake*,

On that dreadful morning when Mary could not see even 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.’ And Laura had promised. So she tried to be eyes for Mary, and it was seldom that Mary need ask her, ‘See out loud for me, Laura, please’ (Wilder, *BSSL* 23).

It seems the arrangement worked fairly well, for on one occasion after Laura described the image of geese rising off of Silver Lake in the early morning sunrise, Mary exclaimed, “And now I see it all. You make pictures when you talk, Laura” (Wilder, *BSSL* 73). But Laura’s pictures sometimes become a point of contention between the sisters, revealing Mary’s preference for the literal facts, and drawing attention to Laura’s inclination for using language to paint pictures as she sees them. On a wagon trip to Silver Lake, Laura observes the landscape and then attempts to describe it to Mary:

Beyond the low river the grassy land was low curve behind curve and the road looked like a short hook.
‘The road pushes against the grassy land and breaks off short. And

that's the end of it,' said Laura.

'It can't be,' Mary objected. 'The road goes all the way to Silver Lake.'

'I know it does,' Laura answered.

'Well, then I don't think you ought to say things like that,' Mary told her gently. 'We should always be careful to say exactly what we mean.'

'I was saying what I meant,' Laura protested. But she could not explain. There were so many ways of seeing things and so many ways of saying them (Wilder, *BSSL* 58).

Conversations between the characters Laura and Mary remind readers that there are many ways of seeing a situation, and that more than one of them may be true (or appear to be true). Such conversations also reveal Wilder's preferences about ways of using language, and imply that Wilder is mindful of the various ways of reflecting the "truth" of her childhood experiences as she records them in the *Little House* books.

On the same wagon trip, and just a few pages after Laura and Mary's exchange about ways of using language in *By the Shores of Silver Lake*, Wilder connects the language theme to larger themes of the frontier and the representation of Native people. Two riders approach the Ingallses' wagon, one of whom Pa recognizes as a mixed-blooded man, part Native and part French, named Big Jerry. Pa and Big Jerry briefly greet each other, then Big Jerry rides on:

[Big Jerry and his horse] were beside the wagon only a moment. Then away they went in the smoothest, prettiest run, down into a little hollow and up and away straight into the blazing round sun on the far edge of the west. The flaming red shirt and the white horse vanished in the blazing golden light (Wilder, *BSSL* 65).

Laura goes on to describe this scene to her sister Mary:

Laura let out her breath. 'Oh, Mary! The snow-white horse and the tall, brown man, with such a black head and a bright red shirt! The brown

prairie all around—and they rode straight into the sun as it was going down. They'll go on in the sun around the world' (Wilder, *BSSL* 65).

On the surface, Wilder's description of the American Indian riding into the sunset seems to reinforce both the popular image and the metaphor of Native people being forced west as a consequence of non-Native westward expansion. Readers expecting to find the mythic disappearance of Native people associated with American frontier lore will certainly find it here as Laura describes Big Jerry to her sister. In Laura's words to her sister, however, is evidence that Wilder is seeking to undercut, or at least offer alternative perspectives on, this frontier myth. Once again, Mary questions her sister's colorful use of language, challenging Laura's remark that Big Jerry and his pony will "go on in the sun around the world":

Mary thought a moment. Then she said, 'Laura, you know he couldn't ride into the sun. He's just riding along on the ground like anybody.'

But Laura did not feel that she had told a lie. What she had said was true too. Somehow that moment when the beautiful, free pony and the wild man rode into the sun would last forever (Wilder, *BSSL* 65).

Wilder directly states the myth of the vanishing Indian, reflecting the attitudes many readers likely associate with stories of frontier America. At the same time, embedded in the romantic language she uses to describe Big Jerry, she counters the myth by associating Big Jerry not with the sunset (a symbol of finality) this time, but with the sun itself (a symbol of eternity). Mary further undercuts the romantic and mythic aspects of Big Jerry's westward ride when she remarks (after a moment's thought, significantly), "He's just riding along on the ground like anybody." Through the dialogue between Laura and Mary, Wilder creates tension between the facts and myths associated with the

frontier. She acknowledges the inevitable fact that Native populations were displaced to western regions, but through Mary's voice minimizes the romance and myth that are often intertwined with such images, especially when Big Jerry appears several more times in subsequent chapters. Clearly he has neither ridden into the sun nor permanently vanished into the west, whatever Laura's expectations might have been. Wilder further adds to the complexity of the scene by describing her parents' responses to Big Jerry as he approaches their wagon. Ma, as usual, is frightened when she sees the Indian, but for a change she offers no negative comments: "Her mouth opened and then it shut; she did not say anything" (Wilder, *BSSL* 64). Pa is clearly relieved: "Everything's all right now . . . That's Big Jerry . . . Jerry'll see that nobody molests us" (Wilder, *BSSL* 64-5). As he approached the wagon, Big Jerry had intercepted another rider who had been approaching the Ingallses, a rider whose ethnicity is not identified, but whom clearly made Pa uncomfortable. Big Jerry, then, is a hero, not a villain, and he proves himself worthy of the name "hero" several times in later chapters.

It is important to recognize the special challenges associated with assigning the *Little House* books to a single genre because of their ambiguous position between autobiography and fiction. Similarly, acknowledging Wilder's interest in experimentation with language and meaning is also a significant factor in understanding the stories for several reasons. First, such complexities suggest that Wilder was well aware of the craft aspects of writing, and that her texts are works of literature worthy of literary analysis. Second, Wilder's careful attention to the craft of writing suggests that she was interested in *crafting* her story, and investigating the kind of story she attempted

to craft is of no little interest. Third, the fact that Wilder sought to craft her story works to dispel the idea that she was simply a “sweet old lady” whom, in the course of jotting down her childhood memories happened to make some off-color remarks about Native people that were consistent with the untutored attitudes of her time. Identifying the unique genre issues and well-planned structure and word play in the *Little House* books are only the first steps in revealing the kind of messages Wilder seemed interested in crafting, however; the specific changes she made to her story offer even more insight into her motivations.

Perhaps one of the most significant ways Wilder’s narrative does not match up with her life events involves the timeframe for her narrative, which impacts the age at which the protagonist encounters certain experiences. The disruption of the timing of events in the *Little House* books is manifested in two major ways, one of which was beyond Wilder’s control. The Ingalls family left the Big Woods of Wisconsin early in 1869 (when Wilder was about two years old), lived in Kansas Indian Territory for approximately one year, and then returned to Wisconsin, where they remained until 1873. Wilder’s first book, however, *Little House in the Big Woods*, opens with Laura at age five, and chronicles a one-year period in the Big Woods prior to the family’s departure to Kansas Indian Territory at the start of *Little House on the Prairie*. In 1964, while researching Wilder, Louise Hovde Mortensen discovered the discrepancy in dates when she found the Ingalls family listed on Kansas’s 1870 census, about three years ahead of schedule according the books’ chronology—if, that is, the age of the protagonist in the first novel is used as a reference point for calculating the timing of actual events in the

author's life (Miller, *Frontier* 3). At the time, Mortensen explained the discrepancy by saying that Wilder must have “relied on her parents’ accounts for some of her stories, and altered facts occasionally to improve her fiction” (Miller, *Frontier* 3).

Three decades after *Little House in the Big Woods* was published, on June 17, 1966 Lane addressed the discrepancy of dates in a letter to a young scholar of Wilder's work and offered the following explanation:

My mother was three years old in *Little House in the Big Woods*. She wrote about her birthday, and when—as was customary—she was given three spanks (by Pa) and ‘one to grow on’. Harper Brothers . . . would not print this; the editors insisted that no child has a memory before the age of five. (This is absurd, of course; it is a belief of professional psychologists; I myself recall events in my second year—before I was two years old, and so do many other persons.) 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 (Lane qtd. in Anderson, *Iowa* 1-2).

But Lane's story about her mother's need to appease the publishers by adding two years to Laura's age in the story only partially explains the discrepancy; even after accounting for Harper's age-adjustment, the protagonist is still about two years older than Wilder would have been at the time of departure to Kansas Indian Territory.

While it is possible that Wilder may have recalled certain events from her childhood from as early as age two or three, it does seem rather unlikely, especially as a sixty-five-year-old woman, that she recalled such explicit details about things likely well beyond her comprehension at the time she purportedly observed them. For example, in *Little House in the Big Woods* Wilder vividly describes the processes for curing fresh game meat, harvesting and threshing oats, making sausage, butter, cheese, maple sugar,

and bullets; and recalls gatherings with relatives and her first trip to town. One possible explanation for the feasibility of Wilder's ability to remember such extensive detail from her early childhood is that some of the events she describes—Pa's bullet-making evenings, for example—are events that she likely observed many times throughout her childhood and she merely places descriptions of such events in the *Big Woods* setting. Other events, such as Christmastime with relatives and Laura's first trip to town, may have been part of family stories often repeated—so often, in fact, that as is often the case, it may have become difficult for Wilder to differentiate between stories and memories.

Another possible explanation for Wilder's ability to provide such detailed information about her time spent in the Big Woods of Wisconsin is that she did not craft her narrative from her memories as a two-year-old in Wisconsin, but from her memories of her family's second stay there. When the Ingalls family returned to Wisconsin after the brief trip to Indian Territory, they moved back into the same house and stayed there among their relatives until October of 1873, when Laura was about six and a half years old, before they moved west to try their luck in Walnut Grove, Minnesota. It is reasonable to accept that a six-year-old could remember considerably more than a two-year-old, but this explanation is supported by more than just the quality and quantity of detail in *Little House in the Big Woods*. For example, Laura participates in many of the activities she describes in ways more appropriate for a six-year-old than a two-year-old. Laura helps her Pa make bullets, makes a pie in her patty-pan, picks potatoes and carrots, and participates in the family story-telling in ways that would be rather surprising for even the most precocious of two-year-olds. And although Wilder's younger sister Carrie

was born in Indian Country in August of 1870, her character is present in *Little House in the Big Woods*. Carrie, three and a half years Laura's junior, would not have been born yet during the Ingallses first stay in Wisconsin, but she would have been with them during their second stay there.

Wilder's organization of time and events in her narrative, like her attention to point of view and language, offer further evidence that she was not simply describing the events in her life in an autobiographical format. The fact that she manipulated her life story to convey certain messages does not necessarily entirely falsify Wilder's and Lane's assertions about the overall accuracy and truthfulness of the narrative. Wilder's handling of time does, however, contribute to the sophistication of her narrative. Noting in particular the organization of *Little House in the Big Woods*, which covers a year-long period from winter to fall and emphasizes the importance of the seasons and activities associated with the seasons (e.g. harvest time, butchering), Spaeth observes,

An outstanding example of the molding and shaping of experience to meet the demands of artistry is Thoreau's *Walden*, which underwent many of the same transformations from experience into literary form as Wilder's books. In autobiographical fiction, some changes are made so that the artistic intention of the author may be achieved. Thoreau found it necessary to manipulate time to fulfill his intention in writing *Walden*. He compressed two years of living at Walden Pond into one fictive year to provide the literary unity he sought. The framework of a year provided a natural outline, and the cyclical aspect of the seasons added the structure he needed (Spaeth 95).

Thoreau and Wilder are not only similar in their use of time, but in their selection of facts to convey messages and create a "literary truth," as Thoreau is known, for example, to have omitted information about his frequent trips to town to emphasize the experience of isolation at Walden Pond. An important difference between *Walden* and *Little House in*

the Big Woods, however, is that Thoreau selected a first-person narrative voice (Spaeth 95), and as a result, perhaps, *Walden* is more commonly regarded as non-fiction than fiction.

It seems Wilder was uncomfortable with the complex time structure she established in her first text. By the time she finished *On the Banks of Plum Creek*, she sought to simplify her time line and restore a match between the age of the protagonist and the age at which she, the author, had experienced events in her own life. Because the protagonist was aging throughout the series, Wilder achieved her goal by omitting some events from her life story. In the same letter in which Lane explained the adjustment of the protagonist's age in *Little House in the Big Woods*, she explains how her mother set the storyline back on track by omitting the years the Ingalls family spent in Burr Oak, IA from the narrative. Lane wrote,

It may interest you to know why Burr Oak, Iowa was left out of the books . . . [Harper's insistence upon adding two years to the protagonist's age in *Little House in the Big Woods*] 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 (qtd. in Anderson, *Iowa* 1-2).

What appears to be a two-year gap in the narrative between the end of *On the Banks of Plum Creek* and *By the Shores of Silver Lake* is actually an omission of events from four years of the author's life (1875-1879), and so at the opening of *By the Shores of Silver Lake* the protagonist, Laura, is "almost thirteen years old" (Wilder, *BSSL* 14). From here on in the narrative the age of the protagonist is comparable to the age of the author when she actually experienced the events described in her story. Anderson calls the age

correction a “literary necessity,” since “Laura had no idea, when she wrote *Little House in the Big Woods*, that she was commencing a series of books which readers would follow carefully from one volume to another, with full attention to dates, time and details all coinciding with the previous story” (Anderson, *Iowa* 1). Conveniently, when the Ingallses left Burr Oak they returned to Walnut Grove, Minnesota (the setting for *On the Banks of Plum Creek*) before heading to De Smet in Dakota Territory, so in the narrative it appears that the Ingalls family had simply remained in Walnut Grove and it was unnecessary for Wilder to account for any changes in the family’s location to coincide with the shift in time.

Wilder’s decision to omit the years spent in Burr Oak, Iowa seems to serve several purposes beyond correcting the discrepancy in the protagonist’s age. In a practical way, eliminating the Burr Oak years helped Wilder maintain an age-appropriate narrative for her young readers. In fact, the exclusion of Burr Oak in the *Little House* series itself signifies a shift in the audience she hoped to reach, as Wilder did include the Burr Oak years in her original manuscript, *Pioneer Girl*. Some of the events which occurred during the omitted years were probably painful for the author to recall and are likely what Wilder referred to when she commented, “There were some stories I wanted to tell but it would not be responsible for putting in a book for children, even though I knew them as a child” (Wilder, “Notes” 104). For the years from 1875-1879 marked a time of great loss and sadness for the Ingalls family, and also a time when the family was forced to compromise its values and/or the type of values Wilder hoped to promote through her eight-volume narrative. During the omitted years, more crops were

destroyed by grasshopper plagues, baby Freddie Ingalls was born and died, Laura and her sisters were stricken with measles, and Mary contracted spinal meningitis and lost her vision.

In Burr Oak, Wilder acquired her first wage work at the age of eleven out of necessity, likely not a pleasing circumstance for Caroline Ingalls, who always cherished hopes of raising dignified young ladies in spite of the family's meanderings on the frontier. Clearly this was a special challenge in Burr Oak, where the Ingalls girls helped wait on hotel customers, routinely encountered strangers and drunks, and lived adjacent to a saloon. And, in Burr Oak, the Ingalls family rented their various homes; although the Ingallses were renters several times during the period covered by the *Little House* series, they are never depicted as such in the narrative. Wilder intended her work to promote the values of "courage, self-reliance, independence, integrity, and helpfulness. Cheerfulness and humor were handmaids to courage" (Spaeth 219). Had she included the dark Burr Oak years in her narrative, Wilder likely would have struggled to maintain these values and the spirit of optimism that otherwise characterize her story.

Once again, Wilder's decisions about the construction of her narrative significantly impact the messages she creates about frontier life. While Wilder's reasoning for manipulating time and events in Waldenesque fashion are certainly understandable for a variety of practical and literary reasons, the cumulative result is startling and powerful: in the storybook version of Laura Ingalls' life, Laura and her family only move *west*. The course of the Ingallses' journey is not entirely a linear east-to-west progression as the trip from Indian Territory to Plum Creek is almost due south-

to-north, but every specifically eastward-bound trip has been eliminated, and the family appears to move steadily westward (i.e. toward a new frontier) time and again.

The westward progression Wilder establishes in her narrative appears somewhat inconsistent with her two main goals for writing her life story, as it weakens the accuracy and truthfulness of her own life story and is also at odds with the typical historical experience of the American pioneer. The Ingalls family's real-life

prolonged wanderings remind us that for many families the journey was not a simple unidirectional movement westward into the setting sun. On the contrary, it was frequently necessary for families to backtrack and retrace their steps as economic prospects brightened or faded or as weather conditions, natural disasters, Indian uprisings, and other factors influenced their decisions. The Ingalls family's peripatetic wandering fit more closely George W. Pierson's model of the 'moving American,' who bounced to and fro in no particular direction than it did Frederick Jackson Turner's paradigm of the westward-moving frontiersman" (Miller, *Little Town* 113).

Another factor that influenced families' movements on the frontier not identified by Miller is families' connections to one another. Because women were primarily responsible for maintaining kinship ties, especially through letters, they were often quite influential in arranging the next destination for the covered wagon—wherever they might find relatives (Armitage 5). Wilder frequently demonstrates women's influence on the family's movement in the *Little House* books, through Ma's correspondence with relatives, Aunt Docia's invitation to move to De Smet, and Ma's refusal to move anywhere beyond De Smet, for example. Men's and women's roles on the frontier, and on the wagon trail, were decidedly different in most cases, and "given these task differences, it would be genuinely extraordinary if male and female perspectives on the experience were identical" (Armitage 4). It seems Wilder even had a particular interest

in representing family movements on the frontier. In a 1938 letter to her daughter she wrote,

I used Charley, Louise and Uncle Henry to show how people made stops along the way to the far west. How families parted were again united and parted again, casually, without any heroics as people now say—‘Well! I’ll be seein ya.’ . . . I think their appearing and disappearing as I have them do gives a feeling of the march westward, of passing on of people and of their appearing unexpectedly” (qtd. in Miller *Little Town* 114).

Although Wilder was undoubtedly well aware of women’s experiences and influences on the frontier (often characterized by longings to (at best) return east, or (at least) to establish a permanent home on the frontier—preferably among relatives) and she occasionally offers these perspectives through the characters of Ma and Mary, the overall westward emphasis of the texts often reflects male interests as much as female ones.

Wilder’s emphasis on westward movement, which appears to be deliberately crafted and at times counter to both her personal experience and the experience of most pioneers on the American frontier has been observed by several scholars of Wilder’s work, and several have offered opinions for her reasoning. Anderson suggests that Wilder may have so crafted her narrative out of consideration for the manner in which she was representing her family. Referring specifically to the omission of the Burr Oak years, for example, he notes,

Most obviously, that era in her family life was a discouraging one, with many difficulties and disappointments. Her series of books had as its theme the concept of moving west, and the Burr Oak era dealt with backtracking. For Pa Ingalls, the move to Iowa was a loss of the independent pioneering aspect of forging westward (Anderson, *Iowa* 1).

If, in fact, Wilder did see eastward movement as a sign of failure, Anderson’s explanation may be a logical one since Wilder did initially intend the *Little House* books as a tribute

to her father and his stories. Miller takes a somewhat larger-scale approach and suggests that the Ingallses are a “common stereotype of the frontier family—a husband constantly lured westward into the unknown and the reluctant wife who resisted moving and who wished to stay put and enjoy the benefits of settled life” (Miller, *Little Town* 114). He also identifies the relationship between the westward emphasis and the mythic aspects of the texts:

Part of the appeal of Wilder’s children’s novels is that they embody one of the central features of the American experience—the westward movement. For early-twentieth-century devotees of Frederick Jackson Turner and his frontier thesis of American development, the westward-moving frontier is *the* definitive element of the American story and explains, better than anything else, the peculiar character of our institutions, social relations, and national character. As just one family in a vast stream of westward migrants, the Ingallses epitomized the hopes and the fears, the dreams and the harsh realities that accompanied this mighty rush (Emphasis Miller’s. Miller, *Little Town* 113).

While Anderson’s explanation considers Wilder’s goal of recording her life story, and Miller’s addresses Wilder’s larger purpose of telling the story of America’s frontier history, neither seems to fully justify Wilder’s willingness to compromise the accuracy and truth of her story.

The general assumption in both Anderson’s and Miller’s analysis is that Wilder crafted her narrative to glorify western expansion. Given her rather anti-big-government stance, however, it is also possible that she highlighted the westward movement of pioneers to draw attention to some of the fallacies of the myth. As the family plods westward, as represented in the texts, it consistently encounters what might be variously interpreted as hardships or bad luck or failures which contrast sharply with the sense of abundance and security introduced in the first text, *Little House in the Big Woods*. Like

Thoreau's *Walden*, *Little House in the Big Woods* is organized by season. *Little House in the Big Woods* opens with the family's preparations for winter and ends at the same time one year later—which affords Wilder two opportunities to describe the Ingallses' plentiful resources not just for day-to-day sustenance but for cashing stores for the winter. As Wilder explains, “the little house was fairly bursting with good food stored away for the long winter. The pantry and the shed and the cellar were full, and so was the attic” (Wilder, *LHBW* 18). Laura and Mary particularly enjoy spending winter days when “the wind howled outside with a cold and lonesome sound” playing in the attic, where

the large, round, colored pumpkins made beautiful chairs and tables. The red peppers and the onions dangled overhead. The hams and the venison hung in their paper wrappings, and all the bunches of dried herbs, the spicy herbs for cooking and the bitter herbs for medicine, gave the place a dusty-spicy smell (Wilder, *LHBW* 20).

At length, Wilder describes the foods carefully hunted or harvested and prepared for storage for winter: hickory-smoked venison and pork, barrels of salted fish, stacks of cheeses, sausages, headcheese, lard, and potatoes, carrots, beets, turnips, cabbages, onions, peppers, pumpkins, and squashes from the garden. In the Big Woods, the Ingalls family is situated about a day's drive from relatives, with whom they often trade work—at butchering, harvesting, and maple sugaring times.

When Pa decides to move the family west, it is clear that he has not only heard about the mythic west, but believes in the myth of the west and tries to convince his family of its veracity. He argues that the Big Woods is becoming cluttered with people, in contrast with the West (which Wilder always writes with a capital “W”): “In the West the land was level and there were no trees. The grass grew thick and high. There the

animals wandered and fed as though they were in a pasture that stretched much farther than a man could see, and there were no settlers. Only Indians lived there” (Wilder, *LHP* 2). Through Pa’s voice, Wilder states two of the classic fallacies that are central to the myth of the West: that it was largely unpopulated and that the few Indians who did live there were of no real consequence. In the second book about her own childhood, *Little House on the Prairie*, Wilder offers strong evidence to the contrary. The Ingalls family encounters quite a sizeable Native population in “Indian Territory” and by the end of the book it is the Ingalls family—not the Indians—who must leave the territory quickly or else be driven out by the government at gunpoint. In the narrative, Wilder acknowledges that the Ingalls family was illegally squatting on Indian Territory but neglects to mention that they were among twelve to fifteen thousand other illegal squatters—a point that perhaps needed no mention for the readers in the 1930s for whom stories of land rushes were not as dim and distant as they are for many modern readers. As the Ingallses move westward in the narrative, they never again achieve the abundance and security felt in the Big Woods as they encounter prairie fires, failed crops, grasshopper plagues, and near-starvation, and they are almost always without the help of relatives.

In extreme contrast to the snug, food-filled cabin in the Big Woods of Wisconsin, in *The Long Winter*, spent in De Smet in Dakota Territory—the final stopping place of the family’s journey into the West—the Ingallses’ food runs out, and alarmingly, the barrels in the town’s general store are empty, too:

The bean barrel was empty. The cracker barrel was empty. The little brine in the bottom of the pork barrel had no pork in it. The long, flat codfish box held only a little salt scattered on its bottom. The dried-apple box and the dried-blackberry box were empty.

“I’m sold out of groceries till the train gets here,” Mr. Hawthorn said. “I was expecting a bill of groceries when the train stopped” (Wilder, *TLW* 177).

Toward the end of *The Long Winter*, the conditions in the West have taken their toll on Pa, as he is now “tall and thin,” and “his face had shrunken to hollows and jutting cheekbones above his brown beard” (303). Pa does have some successful hunts after the family leaves the Big Woods, but the animals wandering and feeding as though they were in a pasture never materialize. Ironically, when the Ingallses finally stop in the West, they are certainly not any further away from the cluttering of neighbors that originally inspired their journey into the presumably empty West. Quite to the contrary, for the first time in the narrative, the family lives in town—a bustling, booming new railroad town.

Many scholars of Wilder’s work (along with those whom offer oft-rhetorical praise or condemnation of her work) recognize that the *Little House* story is somehow connected to the mythic metanarrative of westward expansion of frontier America:

the story told in the Little House books is not that of what happened to Laura Ingalls Wilder and her family per se. As Laura is the persona Wilder adopted for the central character in her grand epic, so is the Ingalls family a representative family, acting out in a fictionalized format the drama of those forces that drew people west (Speath 22).

While an acknowledgement of the mythic aspects of the *Little House* narrative, and its connection to the larger myths about the American west is fairly common, most assume that Wilder, a former pioneer, celebrates the westward movement through her story. Few have considered the *Little House* series as an attempt to discredit the myth of the American west. And it is little wonder on several accounts: first, because the *Little House* series is seldom studied as a work of literature worthy of scholarly analysis and

second, because mainstream American curriculum and consciousness still largely accept and promote myths about the west as fact. What school history book, for example, finds fault with the concept of Manifest Destiny, or the pioneers who streamed westward in response to John Soule's 1851 advice to "Go West, young man, and grow up with the country"? It is possible that many readers of the *Little House* series take away only the messages about the frontier that they *expect* to find in the texts.

Certainly it would not be the first time such a gross oversight of Wilder's meanings and messages occurred. The *Little House* books are occasionally patriotic, also but contain rather poignant anti-big-government messages. Wilder herself was critical of big-government policies, and Lane was "a central figure in a 1930s literary movement that has not yet received extensive critical attention: anti-New Deal fiction . . . [and] wrote essays that are now regarded as seminal declarations of contemporary libertarian political philosophy" (Ehrhardt 96). Wilder and Lane saw parallels between the government's New Deal policies intended to rescue Americans from the hardships of the Depression and earlier humiliating policies that offered charity to impoverished pioneer families. Both mother and daughter found those policies decidedly insulting and dangerous and maintained that Americans who turn to the government for assistance inadvertently surrender a degree of personal sovereignty to the government. Lane, for example, refused to register for a social security number, as "she was convinced the program was 'treason' and would 'wreck the whole American political structure'" (qtd. in Ehrhardt 137). Miller cites additional examples of Wilder's crafting of her narrative to convey certain messages,

Disgusted at the New Deal government interventionist policies to save Americans from situations no worse than those they remembered weathering on their own, Wilder and Lane added scenes to the stories to demonstrate governmental unreliability and destructive meddling. These range from blaming government inconsistency for the Ingalls family's need to leave Kansas, and the reprehensible treatment years later of Uncle Tom and his comrades in the Black Hills, to the chaos at the land office when Pa filed for his homestead claim, to the necessity, because of bureaucratic rules, of a youthful but competent Almanzo to lie about his age to file his claim (Fellman, "American Culture" 49-50).

More concisely, "whenever government appears in the books, it is associated with bungling and stress" (Fellman, "Politics" 170). Apparently the anti-big-government messages in the *Little House* books were overlooked by General Douglas MacArthur when he selected the books for distribution to post World War II Germany and Japan as laudable examples of American ideology. As Fellman concludes, however, "even if I can prove beyond the shadow of a doubt that Wilder and Lane put those messages in there, it is much harder to prove that readers take the same messages from the texts that they read" (Fellman, "American Culture" 50).

By the conclusion of the *Little House* series, the focus has shifted away from the Ingalls family and onto Laura and Almanzo's courtship, engagement, and eventual marriage. Nevertheless, it is evident that the West Pa Ingalls dreamed of never materialized. The family, like other homesteading families, spends winters in the safety of the town and summers trying to hold down the homestead claim. They manage to raise a successful garden, but are largely dependent upon the expensive supplies brought out to the Dakota prairies by railroad from the east. For Pa, all aspects of the myth have failed him, but he acknowledges the power of the myth when he admits that his "wandering foot gets to itching" and he wishes to go even further West (Wilder, *THGY*

138). As Pa tried to explain to his visiting niece and her husband in *These Happy Golden Years*,

‘It’s a queer thing,’ said Pa. ‘People always moving west. Out here it is like the edge of a wave, when a river’s rising. They come and they go, back and forth, but all the time the bulk of them keep moving on west’ (*THGY* 142).

With the posthumous publication of *The First Four Years*, readers witness a second generation, Laura and Almanzo, as they too attempt—and fail—to realize the mythic promises of the west.

Wilder’s use of time, place, and movement in the *Little House* series indicate that she was interested in much more than just writing down her life events in a chronological fashion and ultimately contribute to the oft-recognized mythic aspects of the series. Her willingness to compromise her goals of telling her life story and telling the accurate story of the frontier by showing how the mythic west failed her family suggests how committed she was to this overarching theme. Perhaps she found it necessary to sacrifice small truths in order to emphasize the greater truths about the mythic west and the ineptitudes of the federal government. Since it is clear that the *Little House* series contains complex literary devices that somewhat remove the texts from the autobiography genre, additional clues about the types of messages Wilder was interested in portraying are found in the way she characterizes her family members and neighbors in her narrative.

As might be expected, it seems Wilder was interested in protecting her self-image and the images of her family members and even members of the community whom she did not particularly emulate. As one friend of Wilder’s recalled,

She was always truthful in her books, but she was always cautious about who she named and how she showed them. I remember her talking about that mean girl, Nellie. Of course, that wasn't her real name, but I remember Mrs. Wilder saying that she didn't put her down nearly as mean as she was (qtd. in Hines 141-2).

It appears that Wilder not only omitted certain information from her narrative to protect the images of the real people she characterized, but also occasionally made changes in her story to ensure that her family was represented favorably. The types of changes affect not only names, but the way Wilder shows her family's lifestyle that, with varying degrees of significance, contribute to a story that emphasizes the core values of "courage, self-reliance, independence, integrity, and helpfulness" (Spaeth 219).

One such change of relatively minor significance is identified by Wilder herself in a letter to her daughter on July 3, 1936 as she discusses a point about the setting for *On the Banks of Plum Creek* that she and Rose were trying to work out:

I have an awful suspicion that we drank plain creek water, in the raw, without boiling it or whatever. But that would make the reader think we were dirty, which we were not. So I said a spring. There could have been a spring near where Pa watered the oxen or there could have been one near the plank footbridge. As it is located in my imagination, you may put it where it is most convenient (Wilder qtd. in Miller, *Becoming* 212).

Wilder's own comments about selecting the word "spring" instead of "creek" indicates that she was willing to make changes in her narrative to protect her family's image. The change also reinforces a point that Wilder seems committed to throughout the story: that the family managed to maintain a clean and neat household, even while on the wagon trail or living in a house dug into the side of creek bank. Wilder uses the words "clean" and "neat" again and again, often in association with her mother. Ma's initial reaction to the dugout house by Plum Creek is that it is "small" but "clean and pleasant" (Wilder,

OBPC 11), by the end of the family's first day living in the dugout "everything was neat" (Wilder, *OBPC* 16). Similarly, when the family moves into the new house Pa built for them, Ma hangs "snowy-clean" sheets to create a clothes closet against the "clean, piney-smelling" board walls, and she puts the "shining-clean lamp" on the red-checked cloth-covered table (Wilder, *OBPC* 121-22).

Another example of a change Wilder made for what seems to be the dual purposes of maintaining certain appearances and also affording the opportunity to emphasize a particular message is the adjustment of Almanzo Wilder's age. Her future husband was twenty-three at the time he filed his homestead claim in De Smet, but Wilder describes him as nineteen in her narrative. Wilder likely decreased Almanzo's age in the story to make his character nearer in age to Laura's, as Almanzo was actually ten years Laura's senior and Wilder did not want her readers to think of her as a child bride (Dykstra 172; Miller, *Little Town* 60). But the age adjustment simultaneously created a problem in the storyline, since only persons aged twenty-one or older could file for a homestead. As Fellman points out, Wilder uses the situation to her advantage, and takes the opportunity to draw attention to the foolishness of the government's policy of awarding land claims based upon a person's age, not his or her competency as a farmer (Fellman, "American Culture" 49-50). When the land agent asked Almanzo's age, he said, "'You can put me down as twenty-one' and the agent had winked at him and done it" (Wilder, *TLW* 100). Through Almanzo's character, Wilder rationalizes,

Almanzo did not consider that he was breaking the law and he knew he was not cheating the government. Still, anyone who knew that he was nineteen years old could take his claim away from him. Almanzo looked at it this way: the Government wanted this land settled; Uncle Sam would

give a farm to any man who had the nerve and muscle to come out here and break the sod and stick to the job till it was done. But the politicians far away in Washington could not know the settlers so they must make rules to regulate them . . . None of the rules worked as they were intended to . . . But of all the homestead laws Almanzo thought that the most foolish was the law about a settler's age" (Wilder, *TLW* 99).

Wilder dedicates two pages of *The Long Winter* (99-100) to justifying Almanzo's reasoning for lying about his age in order to acquire a homestead—when Almanzo had, in fact, been old enough to legally obtain a homestead. Wilder's deliberate creation of an opportunity for discussing land claim rules through Almanzo's character clearly shows her commitment to exploring what she considered "foolish" government policies. It is particularly striking that she was willing, in her story that otherwise emphasizes the importance of living with integrity, to make a liar out of her husband's character in order to prove her point.

Scholars of Wilder's work have identified a variety of other changes she made to her narrative in order to emphasize certain themes or values. Many of the so-called changes that prevent the work from being entirely autobiographical are accomplished by either exaggerating or minimizing details about the Ingalls family's living circumstances. Such changes, cumulatively, suggest that the Ingallses were more independent and self-sufficient on the prairie than they probably were in most cases. Wilder, for example, tended to exaggerate the Ingalls family's distance from towns and neighbors⁵ (Fellman,

⁵ In *Little House on the Prairie*, for example, Wilder indicates that the Ingallses' cabin is situated forty miles from Independence (Wilder, *LHP* 76). In reality, the cabin was only about thirteen miles southwest of Independence (Wolf 12). The discrepancy is sometimes attributed to Wilder's intentional goal of emphasizing the family's sense of independence, but the misrepresentation may have been an error on Wilder's part. At the time they researched and wrote *Little House on the Prairie*, Wilder and Lane mistakenly believed that the Ingalls family had lived in Oklahoma Indian Territory, not Kansas Indian

“American Culture” 49). She also downplayed any circumstance that would suggest that the family was dependent upon neighbors or the government. Wilder also eliminated the presence of George and Maggie Masters and their baby who boarded in the Ingalls home during the long winter of 1880-1881, and she did not include the fact that the Ingalls family also took in long-term boarders in De Smet. In the texts, the Ingallses are generally on good terms with their neighbors, but the girls seldom interact with other children, and at no time does Wilder admit that “communal activities are sometimes necessary for survival” (Fellman, “American Culture” 49; Fellman, “Politics” 172). Similarly, the Ingallses are always portrayed as homeowners, not renters, and instances when Pa is dependent upon wage work are minimal (Fellman, “American Culture” 49). In *Pioneer Girl*, Wilder mentioned that the Ingallses had accepted funding from Dakota Territory to send Mary to the Iowa College for the Blind, but in the *Little House* series this fact is omitted and the family appears to accrue the necessary funds on their own (Jameson 80). The *Pioneer Girl* manuscript also contains several stories about vigilante justice and Native people that are omitted from the published narrative. One such story contains a lengthy, disturbing account of an impending attack from nearby Indians because a white doctor removed the corpse of a Native baby from its resting place and sent it to Chicago for analysis (Wilder, manuscript).

Finally, Fellman observes another small, but meaningful shift between *Pioneer Girl* and *Little Town on the Prairie*. In both stories, Wilder recounts the time she accidentally discovers a book of poetry in her mother’s drawer and hastily returns the

Territory. As the cabin was not far from the Kansas-Oklahoma state line, and Wilder believed that her family lived in Oklahoma, she may have miscalculated the distance to Independence.

book to its hiding place, realizing that must be a gift for her. In *Pioneer Girl*, the book is a collection of Sir Walter Scott's poems, but in *Little Town on the Prairie*, it is a collection of Tennyson's poems. The character Laura notes in particular the poem "The Lotus Eaters" in *Little Town on the Prairie* (Wilder, *LT* 235), and as Fellman explains,

Wilder and Lane almost certainly made the alteration so that Laura could express disgust with the sailors in 'The Lotus Eaters' who give themselves up to sloth when they reach the land where it always seems to be afternoon: 'They seemed to think they were entitled to live in that magic land and lie around complaining' (Fellman, "Politics" 171).

Individually, most of the changes Wilder made in her narrative can be explained as her efforts to portray family members in a positive light, or as the result of the fact selection process that is essential to piecing together autobiographical information about one's life. When examined together, however, there seems to be a consensus among the few scholars who have given serious analytical attention to the values and messages embedded in Wilder's work: the changes Wilder made are both deliberate and consistent with her political views. Cumulatively, the messages in Wilder's work emphasize the importance of personal responsibility, and potential dangers associated with depending upon others for survival or letting one's thoughts and actions be dictated by someone else:

These links are present throughout the Little House books, along with many other illustrations of the ethical and political principles to which Wilder and Lane had become increasingly devoted. They imbued all the meticulous details in the books, how to build a chimney or make sour-dough biscuits, with an ideology of self-sufficiency. Ma and Pa refuse to be beholden to anyone, even for a few nails, a slate for school, an invitation to a party, or a pail of wheat to ward off starvation. A comparison of the less adorned, more strictly autobiographical 'Pioneer Girl' manuscript with the more developed Little House series reveals that over time Wilder and Lane further accentuated the family's ingenuity and

its geographic and economic separateness from its community, while minimizing the degree to which Pa had been depended upon wage work (Fellman, "Politics" 171).

The messages about self-sufficiency in the *Little House* stories ostensibly support ideology about man's power to single-handedly conquer nature in the frontier West, but coupling Wilder's messages about self-sufficiency with her frontier and anti-government messages offers room for alternative interpretations, particularly messages consistent with libertarian political principles.

Issues of genre and narrative style surface again and again, when considering her work in the context of autobiography, women's frontier writing, or children's literature, as discussed in subsequent chapters. Wilder often creates layers of stories as she describes a single event—her own memories of the event (filtered through sixty years' experience); the story as she tells it in the limited third-person narrative voice; (and in several texts) the version of the event as she tells it to Mary; and finally, dialogue with Mary about the event. The multiple layers of stories, combined with other literary devices, enable Wilder to negotiate a fine line between autobiographical and fictitious stories and afford her the opportunity to embed her narrative with meanings and messages consistent with her personal philosophy. Understanding Wilder's motivations as a writer and the various ways that she experiments with truth and fiction, time and place, narrative style and form offer significant insights into literary aspects of her work, and also her approaches to frontier and Native issues.

IV. "INDIANS IN THE HOUSE"

"When Laura peeked out from behind the slab again, both Indians were looking straight at her. Her heart jumped into her throat and choked her with its pounding. Two black eyes glittered down into her eyes. The Indian did not move, not one muscle of his face moved. Only his eyes shone and sparkled at her." —Laura Ingalls Wilder (*LHP* 140)

As she wrote the third book in her series, *Little House on the Prairie*, it seems Wilder made a special effort to reach back to her earliest memories in order to include Indians in her story of the American frontier as she lived and witnessed it. Her handling of Native themes in her non-fiction writing suggests she must have been aware of the complexities of representing Indians in her stories. On one hand, the words Wilder uses to describe Indians are often stereotypical and problematic (e.g. "fierce and terrible," "wild men"). On the other hand, a close reading of Wilder's "Indian scenes" reveals a variety of representations of Indians *and* non-Indian attitudes toward those Indians. Through the "Indian scenes" in *Little House on the Prairie* Wilder questions federal Indian policy and also creates a rather absurd picture of settlers purposely moving to Indian Territory, then fearfully huddling inside their houses each time an Indian passes by. A formalist analysis of *Little House on the Prairie* helps to reconcile some of the incongruous depictions of American Indians in her text, and also reveals Wilder's apparent interest in exposing the fallacies inherent in American frontier mythology. At the same time, using a new historicist literary approach to contextualize the events in Wilder's narrative in frontier Kansas sheds light on the Native themes and characters in her text. Thus Chapter Four begins with some special challenges of researching and writing this chapter, followed by brief descriptions of the Osage community and the federal Indian policies that impacted Native communities in 1869 Kansas, and then

examines the interactions between the Ingalls family and the Osage community as Wilder chose to depict them in *Little House on the Prairie*.

In her book-length analysis of *Little House on the Prairie*, titled *Little House on the Prairie: A Reader's Companion*, Virginia L. Wolf gives greater consideration to Wilder's scenes containing Indians than other scholars, but in doing so she makes a rather startling remark. Wolf comments on the wide variety of emotions Laura and other characters associate with Indians in the narrative, then goes on to say, "This is not meant to defend Wilder against charges of racism. She does not provide us with an insider view, or even a comprehensive outsider view of Native Americans. We know no more than little Laura sees and hears" (Wolf 84). In three brief sentences, Wolf raises several sensitive issues associated with Wilder's depictions of Indians, each of which begs further discussion and analysis.

First, Wolf correctly reminds us that the story is told through Laura's eyes. Laura's third-person limited narrative voice is approximately six years old, though the events recounted in *Little House on the Prairie* actually occurred when Wilder was about two. To expect an "insider" view of the nearby Osage community would breach the possibilities afforded by the narrative style, Wilder's actual life experiences, and, of course, her status as a non-Osage person. More troubling, however, is the slight inference that an "outsider" perspective equals a "racist" perspective, which is a familiar undertone in arguments for banning Wilder's work and other non-Native perspectives in the discipline of American Indian Studies. Even if we broaden the scope of the issues and consider the situation in the slightly-less-sensitive terms of "biased" and "unbiased,"

an “insider” view does not guarantee an “unbiased” perspective any more than an “outsider” perspective necessarily guarantees one “biased” beyond usefulness. Indeed, both perspectives would be biased to some extent, and, arguably, both perspectives potentially offer unique and valuable information. One might expect the information offered by “insiders” and “outsiders” to overlap in some areas, contain mutually exclusive (though feasibly accurate) information in other areas, and conflict with one another in still others—this last category revealing particularly interesting areas for study. Undoubtedly, the centuries-long record of cultural appropriation in its various forms, including the appropriation of voice which characterizes much of the body of literature about Native communities, contributes to the extreme sensitivity of the issues, as does the limited number of texts offering Native perspectives. This is not to say that Wilder’s texts may not contain terminology that could be interpreted as “racist,” but she is not a “racist” solely on the merit of being an “outsider.” Wilder’s work, though progressive for its time in some aspects, also reflects the experiences and attitudes of her times which were not always favorable toward Native people. Indeed, telling her true life story and the story of America’s frontier days are the very purposes of her writing, and both positive and negative interactions with American Indians were part of her own experiences.

We return, then to questions, several of which were raised earlier: Is there a “correct” way to portray American Indians in literature? Is omitting (i.e. ignoring or silencing) Native issues preferable to having “outsiders” discuss them? Is a non-Native autobiographer or fiction writer forbidden to mention any encounters with American

Indians because doing so invariably constitutes a form of appropriation? Does the answer to the previous question depend upon whether the encounters and representations are positive or negative? Certainly, there are no easy answers, only easy opinions, to these questions. Like Wolf, I am not interested in defending Wilder. As my research progressed, however, I did become increasingly interested in understanding Wilder's presentation of Native issues and the possibilities of using the Native themes in the *Little House* books to promote, rather than further stymie dialogue about important Native issues, especially with mainstream American youth where such dialogue and education are unconscionably overdue.

I am no more inclined than Wilder to include a "comprehensive outsider view of Native Americans" here, as Wolf suggested, but some introductory information on the Osage community is a helpful starting place to better understanding Wilder's text. The first time Indians, likely Osage, came into the Ingalls home, Pa was away. As Ma prepared food for the two men, Laura peeped out from behind a wooden plank leaning against the wall and observed her visitors:

First she saw their leather moccasins. Then their stringy, bare, red-brown legs, all the way up. Around their waists each of the Indians wore a leather thong, and the furry skin of a small animal hung down in front. The fur was striped black and white, and now Laura knew what made that smell. The skins were fresh skunk skins.

A knife like Pa's hunting-knife, and a hatchet were stuck into each skunk skin.

The Indians' ribs made little ridges up their bare sides. Their arms were folded on their chests. At last Laura looked again at their faces, and she dodged quickly behind the slab.

Their faces were bold and fierce and terrible. Their black eyes glittered. High on their foreheads and above their ears where hair grows, these wild men had no hair. But on top of their heads a tuft of hair stood straight up. It was wound around with string, and feathers were stuck in it (Wilder, *LHP* 138-40).

Pejorative description of the men's faces aside, Wilder's description of the Osage men is probably fairly accurate. Osage men generally wore breach clouts made of animal skin secured with a leather or woven belt, and preferred bare legs and chests except when leggings and robes or blankets provided necessary warmth during cold weather (Rollings 16; Burns 209). Osage men commonly shaved their heads, leaving only a greased roach on top and several long strands of hair which were sometimes braided and often decorated with feathers or other adornments (Rollings 17; Burns 209). Other sorts of personal adornment were also common—including necklaces, piercings, body paint, and tattooing—but Wilder makes no mention of these in her description of her first encounter with Osage men. Undoubtedly, the two men were an imposing presence to young Laura, as even grown men have noted a particular stature associated with Osage men. In 1843 Washington Irving, the author best known for *The Legend of Sleepy Hollow*, traveled across the prairie region and gave a physical description of Osage men remarkably similar to Wilder's. He also described them, rather unobjectively, as "stately fellows; stern and simple in garb and aspect . . . They had fine Roman countenances, and broad deep chests . . . they looked like so many noble bronze figures. The Osages are the finest looking Indians I have seen in the West" (Irving qtd. in Burns 206). On July 12, 1804 a delegation of Osage men met with Thomas Jefferson in Washington D.C., and the President, apparently impressed by the men's presence, described the experience in a letter to Robert Smith, Secretary of the Navy, the next day. He claimed that the Osage were "the most gigantic men we have ever seen," and also "the finest men we have ever seen" (Jefferson qtd. in Burns 140).

In *Little House on the Prairie*, Wilder indicates that her Osage neighbors resided in nearby bluffs, traveled about the area regularly on well-established trails, and occasionally left the area altogether for what Pa guessed to be hunting trips (Wilder, *LHP* 72). These details, too, seem consistent with Osage life around 1870. The Osage empire extended across significant areas of present-day Kansas, Missouri, Arkansas, and Oklahoma. By the time the Ingalls family arrived in Kansas in 1869, the Osage Nation had already ceded the majority of its traditional lands through a series of treaties—sovereign nation-to-sovereign nation agreements—with the United States government in 1808, 1818, 1825, and 1865, and still more land was ceded in 1870. While Osage villages had once been situated in higher places on the prairie, by the early nineteenth century the villages tended to be smaller and tucked into the safety of river bottoms (Rollings 21). By 1869, the Osage custom of regularly moving villages among three environments (for hunting in both plains and forest regions and farming) was limited by diminished access to land and encroaching settlers, but seasonal hunting trips were still common (Rollings 18-9). Osage homes varied according to season, location, and available materials, but were generally made of wood frames or poles covered with grass mats or hides in longhouse, lodge, or wigwam style. Often homes were partially or entirely dismantled, some parts carried from location to location and other parts stored in pits until the community returned next season (Rollings 18-21).

It is hardly surprising that the Osage Nation, characterized in part by an expansive territory and people who made frequent seasonal moves within that territory, was also noted for its impressive trail system. The trails, some of which date to around

3,000 years old, tend to follow low-lying areas and river bottoms, consistent with the Osage concept of measuring distance by the number of valleys one must travel through to get to a particular place (Burns 69-70). Trails connected the “various points within the empire,” and included many well-planned alternate routes in case of emergencies (Burns 71). Notably, there were significantly more east-west trails than north-south trails⁶ (Burns 69-70). Pa, it seems, inadvertently built the Ingalls home along one of these Osage trails:

Indians came riding on the path that passed so close to the house. They went by as though it were not there. They were thin and brown and bare. They rode their little ponies without saddle or bridle. They sat up straight on the naked ponies and did not look to right or left. But their black eyes glittered.

Laura and Mary backed against the house and looked up at them. And they saw red-brown skin bright against the blue sky, and scalplocks wound with colored string, and feathers quivering. The Indians’ faces were like the red-brown wood that Pa had carved to make a bracket for Ma.

‘I thought that trail was an old one they didn’t use any more,’ Pa said. ‘I wouldn’t have built the house so close to it if I’d known it’s a highroad’ (Wilder, *LHP* 226-7).

The busyness of the trail running past the Ingalls home and the frequent seasonal moves of entire communities might imply that the Osage practiced a nomadic lifestyle, but on the contrary, “the complex ceremonial forms of the Osage were also those of a sedentary or semisedentary people. It would be unusual for a wandering, hunting people to maintain such a large, complex ceremonial system that required the presence of so

⁶ As Burns points out, many of these trails are now major roads: “We do not wish to over theorize, but in view of this prevailing movement of Indian peoples east and west, as their trails bear witness, there is a well-established pattern. Frontier historians stress the westward movement of the Euro-American people. Geographers note the east-west dominance in transportation, and geopoliticians note the westward orientation of the American nation. Since each offers theories for this phenomenon, there can be no harm in suggesting another. This pattern was not created on this continent by Euro-Americans. Euro-Americans simply followed the pattern already established by Indians. American Indians had created it long before Europeans appeared in America” (Burns 70).

many people” (Rollings 39). Members of the Osage Nation belong to one of two moieties, the *Hon-ga* and *Tsi-zhu*, or Earth and Sky, moieties. Each moiety is further divided into two phratries, and a total of twenty-four clans are represented among the four phratries (Rollings 22-3). Each clan maintains responsibility for certain ceremonial knowledge, memorized and recited at ceremonial gatherings, and is entrusted with the care of sacred objects also used in ceremonies. With each clan assigned a portion of the ritual, the presence of all clans is necessary in ceremonies; similarly, all clans are represented at council meetings (Rollings 20-1; Burns 321).

While certain Osage ceremonies were performed in discreet secrecy, “even members of closely related neighboring tribes were frequently surprised by the overtly religious nature of the Osages” (Bailey 45). As an Omaha (Indian) informant described to Francis LaFlesche, an Anishinaabe scholar of Osage rituals and ceremonies,

My father and I visited them when they had moved to their reservation [the 1870s]. Before sunrise in the morning following the first night of our visit, I was awakened by the noise of a great wailing. I arose and went out. As far as I could see men, women, and children were standing in the doors of their houses weeping. My parents explained to me that it was the custom of the [Osage] people to cry to *Wa-kon-da* morning, noon and evening. When I understood the meaning of the cry, I learned not to be startled by the noise (Bailey 45).

No doubt the thrice-daily ritual wailing was equally unsettling to nearby non-Natives, many of whom likely did not know or learn the meaning of the wailing. LaFlesche, who began his research in the Osage community about thirty years after the Ingalls family lived in the region, noted the extensive set of rituals which characterized Osage life: “From sunrise to sunset, from birth to death, in all endeavors—war, peace, hunting, farming, and child rearing—Osage life was one continual flow of rituals” (Bailey 45).

Interested not only in the ritual acts themselves, but in the belief systems which motivated the ceremonies, LaFlesche also identified at least two distinct purposes for rituals according to Osage cosmology. First, “songs with their . . . symbols and dramatic action are supplicatory in character: they are expressions of a craving for divine aide toward the perpetuity of the tribal existence and the continuity of the life of the individual by an unbroken lineage” and second, ceremonies were a way “to transmit to their posterity something of what they had learned’ of the nature of the universe” (Baily 61).

Given the occasions for organizing ceremonies, such as hunting, war and peace, and the reasoning behind the ceremonies, such as “the perpetuity of the tribal existence,” it is reasonable to expect that the Osage certainly had cause for hosting ceremonies during the year-long period when the Ingallses lived nearby. One afternoon while playing hopscotch, Laura and Mary heard what was likely the start of an Osage ceremony:

Mary was hopping.

Suddenly she stopped on one foot and said, ‘What’s that?’

Laura had already heard the queer sound and she was listening to it. She said, ‘It’s the Indians.’

Mary’s other foot dropped and she stood frozen still. She was scared. Laura was not exactly scared, but that sound made her feel funny. It was the sound of quite a lot of Indians, chopping with their voices. It was something like the sound of an ax chopping, and something like a dog barking, and it was something like a song, but not like any song Laura had ever heard. It was a wild, fierce sound, but it didn’t seem angry (Wilder, *LHP* 265).

Laura strained to better hear the songs, but Ma gathered the girls and Jack, the family dog, indoors, and pulled in the latchstring. When Pa returned home from a trip to town later that day, Laura questioned him about the “funny noise.” Pa explained, “Oh, they’re having some kind of jamboree . . . I heard them when I crossed the creek bottoms” (Wilder, *LHP* 266-8).

Within the Osage Nation, citizens adhered not only to ritual and kinship obligations, but to socio-political ones as well. For example, the Osage identified three types of intruders in their territory, had regular patrols to locate intruders, and dealt with each type of intruder according to set rules. One type of intruder was a person who asked permission to cross Osage land and “used only what was necessary in their passage,” and the Osage ordinarily granted permission to such requests, even when enemies requested permission to hunt in Osage territory during a time of extreme need (Burns 19; 88). The second type of visitor was one who took excessive advantage of Osage resources, and the third settled, uninvited, on Osage land (Burns 88-9). Like any nation, the Osage Nation defended its lands against intruders, and

enforcement of Osage claims were violent, graphic, and effective. Intruders of the second and third types were killed on or near the spot of violation. Their heads were cut off and placed on stakes. Indians usually had no difficulty in reading these graphic signs—the evidence of the violation and the results were both plain as day. Since decapitation was an especially serious matter in most Indian religions, it was an effective deterrent among Indians. However, Euro-Americans either did not read signs very well or chose to ignore them. Thus, the effectiveness of enforcing territorial claims was weakened, and in the process Euro-Americans blamed the Osages for the consequences of their own trespassing (Burns 89-90).

While such a graphic policy of dealing with intruders gave the Osage a fierce reputation among non-Osage people, such actions could alternatively be interpreted as “an epic effort to protect their homeland. Yet, even today, they are pictured as troublemakers because they defended their land” (Burns 191). It seems the Osage were no longer practicing their policy of decapitating intruders when the Ingalls family settled on their land, but stories of such policies were familiar to the non-Native settlers. Another strict Osage policy that probably did not circulate among non-Native settlers as rapidly and

effectively as the stories of decapitation was their policy of taking no action without carefully observing and evaluating a situation (Burns 89). And many situations, such as initiating war or negotiating peace agreements, required ceremonies before action could commence.

In spite of the Osage Nation's efforts to protect its land base, Native and non-Native settlers poured onto Osage land. Osage lands were used as a point of destination for eastern Native Nations whom the federal government had driven westward from their homelands. First to arrive were the Shawnee, following their 1825 treaty, and the pattern continued through 1843, ending with the arrival of the Sac and Fox. Portions of Osage homelands also became "home" to Cherokee, Miami, Chippewa-Munsee, Kaskaskia, Peoria, Piankishaw, Wea, Seneca, Onondaga, Cayuga, Tuscarora, Oneida, Mohawk, Stockbridge, Munsee, Brothertown, Choctaw-Chickasaw, Seminole, Creek, and Wyandot communities during the first half of the nineteenth century. Treaties between the Osage Nation and the federal government reduced the landholdings of the Osage to accommodate increasing numbers of other Native Nations in the area, while the federal government treated with the eastern Native Nations to exchange their respective territories for the former Osage territory. Between 1864 to 1871, the federal government re-relocated nearly all of these Nations to Oklahoma, but during their duration in Osage territory they contributed to increasing tension and instability in the region, and took their toll on locally available resources (Miner and Unrau 5; Burns 186-9).

In the first half of the nineteenth century, the Osage Nation suffered not only a great loss of land, but a great loss among its members. In 1680, the population of the

Osage Nation was estimated at 17,000 to 18,000, but by 1860, the community had been reduced to 3,500. The years 1830 to 1860 show the most rapid losses. The 1830 population of 10,000 was reduced to 8,000 by 1850, and by 1860 only 3,500 remained (Burns 242-3). Between 1829 and 1856, the Osage Nation faced a series of epidemics, including influenza, cholera, smallpox, scurvy, measles, typhoid, and scrofula. Influenza and smallpox each impacted Osage communities several times. These epidemics, combined with other factors such as war, increasing internal instability, and sudden changes in diet, clothing, and cookware offer explanations, if not sound reason, for the Osage Nation's devastating losses (Burns 239-244).

In the mid-nineteenth century, as the Osage Nation struggled with epidemics, Native intruders, land losses, and an uncertain future, non-Native settlers arrived en masse. In 1854, the region soon to be named "Kansas" had a non-Native population of about 600 to 700 people. By the following year, 1855, there were 8,601 non-Natives, figures which continued to rise exponentially. In 1860, there were 107,206; 364,399 by 1870; and 996,096 by 1880 (Burns 266). These non-Native settlers moved not only onto ceded Osage lands, but on to the Osage Diminished Reserve itself. Between 1867 and 1870 alone, more than a thousand non-Native settlers took up residence in the eastern part of the Osage reserve (Burns 308). Kansas became a territory in May of 1854, obtained statehood on January 29, 1861, and continued its efforts to organize and prosper in spite of any legal nuances regarding land title. In early 1869, for example, "Hay Town," so called because of its large number of grass houses, was founded in Montgomery County, Kansas. The establishment of both Hay Town (later known as Independence), and

Montgomery County was illegal, as Indian title in the region had not yet been extinguished (Burns 309), nor had it been extinguished at the earlier Leavenworth town site further to the north. As one Osage scholar, David Parson, described this contentious time in Osage history:

Doubtless the discovery and narration of these facts will be disturbing to every Osage now living as they will be embarrassing to the living descendants of the old rugged, American pioneers. But Osage history is not for the sensitive soul who would avoid unpleasant facts (Parson qtd. in Burns 271).

Indeed, as Craig Miner and William E. Unrau point out in their study *The End of Indian Kansas: A Study of Cultural Revolution, 1854-1871*, “What was done to the Indians in Kansas was done in the name of the law. The most frightening aspects of the story are not what was done illegally but what was done legally” (Unrau 39).

One of America’s best-loved presidents, Abraham Lincoln, undoubtedly played no small part in orchestrating the legal events that led to trouble and confusion in Osage country. Lincoln’s “program” for the west included the Homestead Act of 1862 and the construction of a transcontinental railroad, both of which impacted Osage and other Native communities in Kansas (Burns 258). Lincoln likely did not target the Osage’s demise specifically, but certainly his ideas about American Indians in general were anything but enlightened or sympathetic:

The pale-faced people are numerous and prosperous because they cultivate the earth, produce bread, and depend upon the products of the earth rather than wild game for subsistence. This is the chief reason of the difference; but there is another. Although we are now engaged in a great war between one another, we are not as a race, so much disposed to fight and kill one another as our red brethren (Lincoln qtd. in Burns 256-7).

Lincoln's brief statement is filled with inaccuracies about American Indians which persist even today: that their numbers were few, their land uncultivated, and that they possessed an inclination toward violence. Rhetoric about the American "wilderness" has long been a central argument used to justify the confiscation of Native lands, and Lincoln alludes to it here. The Kansas state motto, *Ad Astra per Aspera*—To the Stars Through the Wilderness—reflects the same mentality. In reality Kansas, like other regions of the country, did of course contain a sizeable Native population, notably one with a long history of agricultural technology and a series of sovereign-to-sovereign treaty negotiations. Lincoln's assumptions about Native people's inclinations toward violence, too, were unfounded. In Osage literature, in fact, "war and combat is rarely mentioned, and atonement is included in the killing of an animal or a human," while Western literature, in contrast, "glorifies war, combat, and violence" (Burns 257). As a testimony to Westerner's fascination with violence and war, more literature has been written about the Civil War than any other event in the history of the United States or the world" (Burns 257). Burns also highlights leadership values as another significant distinction between Osage and Western values in literature:

All through the history of Western civilization, heavy stress is placed on the leader who fights against the odds of nature and the men aligned against him. Osage myths place emphasis on people learning to live with nature and with other people. Their history has no great heroes, only stories of a heroic people. Rather than men against nature and other men, Osage literature seeks to place the Osage people in harmony with other people (Burns 196).

Literature of the American frontier epitomizes the struggle between men and nature and men against other men common to Western literature.

A foremost question on the minds of pioneering settlers, railroad executives, and Congressmen alike in mid-nineteenth century Kansas was how to obtain title to as much Native land in the fastest and most profitable way—a question which inherently recognizes at least some Native sovereign presence to be contended with. Clearly, this was no vacant wilderness. In the Midwest, particularly in Kansas, obtaining Indian land became a fierce competition between settlers and railroads. Often, settlers rushed into Indian lands, anticipating that they would soon be opened to settlement, in hopes of beating out the much-despised railroad corporations. While the Trade and Intercourse Act of 1834 authorized the use of military force to remove non-Natives from Indian lands, in most cases the federal government looked the other way, or concocted fantastically rhetorical reasoning to justify the presence of intruders on Indian land. In the mid-1850s, for example, Secretary of the Interior George C. Whiting suggested that removing non-Native settlers by military force was “disconcordant to the feeling of the people of the United States” and argued that

The bold and enterprising have for a long period of years been not only permitted, but encouraged by the general policy of the government with regard to the public lands to press forward in advance of the more natural and steady progress of settlement, and secure as a reward for the hardships and expenses they incurred, more valuable lands for themselves (Whiting qtd. in Miner and Unrau 13-14).

Whiting’s analysis of the situation specifically regards the settlement of Leavenworth, Kansas prior to securing land title from the Lenape (Delaware) Nation currently residing in the area but serves as a mantra for justifying land grabs throughout Kansas. Ultimately the pioneer settlers of Leavenworth were not removed, setting a dangerous precedent for future conflicts over Native lands in Kansas and other Midwestern states. Meanwhile,

railroad outfits pillaged Native lands for timber, and settlers, too, frequently helped themselves to timber and other property in addition taking the land itself. In the Delaware community in Kansas, for example, between 1854 and 1861, settlers alone took \$48,750 in timber and \$32,227 in “other property,” and the Delaware received neither legal protection nor restitution from these offenses (Miner and Unrau 34; 39).

Outraged at the conditions in their homelands, Native leaders and Indian agents “literally flooded the Indian Office in Washington with requests for survey charts and more precise information regarding the seemingly endless relocation of reservation boundaries” (Miner and Unrau 18). Following the 1831 Supreme Court decision, or lack thereof, in *Cherokee Nation v. Georgia* which determined that Native Nations did not have standing to bring cases before federal courts, Native Nations in Kansas had no real avenue for seeking legal protection of their territories. Even agents appointed by the Bureau of Indian Affairs often worked against the community, rather than on its behalf. William Murphy, an agent to the Kansas Potawatomi in 1858 responded thus to the worthwhile question,

But could not the Great White Father in Washington prevent this? No, explained Murphy, even though he might wish to do so personally. The explanation—certainly not very convincing or comprehensible to the traditionalists—lay at the very foundation of the democratic system. To the accompaniment of not so veiled threats, he stated, ‘Let me impress upon your minds, my Red Children, that the white people who make the laws and elect the president and all other officeholders are the government themselves, and when they determine by a large majority to effect anything against the poor Indian, the president himself, though he may want to do right toward you, has not got the power to do it (Murphy qtd. in Miner and Unrau 83-4).

Murphy, like many others in Kansas, was eager to take full advantage of Native community's lack of legal protection. The conflicting interests of Murphy and the Potawatomi is by no means an isolated incident; rather, it draws attention to two common situations faced by the Potawatomi, Osage, and other Native Nations in Kansas as they sought to protect their land: "Indian rings" and the concept of the "settler sovereign."

Indian rings, loosely defined as a "combination of federal officials and business men allied in a conspiracy to defraud both the Indians and the United States government by turning the whole philanthropic intent of Indian policy to its own selfish ends," were at their heyday in mid-century Kansas (Miner and Unrau 56). In a prime example of one Indian ring at work, President Andrew Johnson was persuaded to sign a treaty that ultimately resulted in the sale of Cherokee lands in Kansas to the railroads because the president of the Burlington and Quincy Railroad, James F. Joy, had influential friends in Congress who opposed the impeachment of Johnson (Miner and Unrau 117-8).

Additional rings, and rumors of still more, persisted in Kansas. As settlers and railroads battled in court over rights to Osage and other Indian lands, the Osage themselves faced starvation and extreme harassment and violence in their communities inflicted by non-Native settlers. The neighboring Sac and Fox reported that "whites were literally tearing down Indian houses and hauling away the materials before the occupants had left. The agent there requested troops, which he said he needed to protect Indians harvesting their crops from being shot down by settlers" (Miner and Unrau 137). Similarly, an Osage community of 900 was destroyed by settlers. Meanwhile, the Osage were paid about thirty-five cents an acre for one large section of ceded territory. The Leavenworth,

Lawrence, and Galveston Railroad purchased the land from the United States government for \$1.25 an acre, and then sold it to settlers at an average of \$8.15 an acre. With 42,539 acres in question, the minimum non-Osage profit from this one section of Osage lands is estimated at about \$29,000,000 (Burns 287). Familiar with the railroad's history of price-gauging in land sales, settlers maneuvered to keep railroads out of the picture as much as possible. Settlers preempted Indian land, many argued, so that

the country would [not] be in the hands of monopolists and bereft of that guarantee of true Americanism, the small yeoman farmer. Last, and most telling, there came the point that the federal government could hardly expect strict compliance with the rules on the part of the 'squatter sovereign' when its policies toward the Indian were filled with deceptions. As a Kansas politician put it: 'In this progressive age, what could the government say to the people—simply practising a lesson so flagrantly taught them? Could squatters—the sovereign people—be driven off under a treaty which government—the people's servants—had made and set at naught?' Nothing could interfere with the power of the people, the squatters cried" (Miner and Unrau 113).

Thus, squatting on Indian lands became an expression of American idealism. Before the century was out, Frederick Jackson Turner identified the beliefs and practices which justified and accomplished this westward movement as a lasting hallmark of American identity.

In the midst of these dire conditions, and overrun by outsiders in their own lands, the Osage began negotiating for peaceful solutions. One such effort was a treaty, negotiated in 1868, known as both the Drum Creek Treaty and the Sturgis Treaty. It was transparently the work of a railroad ring, resolving the problem of the thousands of pioneers illegally residing on the Osage diminished reserve by selling the land for railroad interests at the price of twenty cents an acre (Burns 300). The fact that the recent

death of the principal chief of the Osage, Little White Hair, left the Nation without strong leadership and especially vulnerable contributed to the controversy over the treaty, as did the threats of withholding the Osage's annuities and the "four barrels of whiskey [that] had been used as positive inducement" during negotiations (Burns 300-1; Miner and Unrau 124). Ultimately, however, the treaty was not ratified because of such strong opposition from settlers who also wanted Osage land (Burns 300-1). The Drum Creek Treaty was so controversial that it is frequently cited as a contributing factor to the end of formal treaty-making between Native Nations and the United States government in March of 1871.

Finally Congress sought to pacify the situation in Osage territory by enacting the Osage Removal Act on July 15, 1870, with a provision requiring that the Osage hold council and sign the Act to signify their agreement with the terms. A council date was set for August 20 at Drum Creek in Montgomery County. A Cherokee delegation was also invited to the council and arrived on the agreed-upon date, but the Osage did not appear on August 20. The council was rescheduled for August 29. Still, some Osage hunting parties were unaccounted for, so the council was postponed again, this time until August 31. After a series of such delays, the council finally began on September 9, 1870 (Burns 318-9). The Osage Nation was well prepared for the meeting, and produced a list of four questions which they presented to Superintendent Enoch Hoag after the opening prayers:

- (1) Would the Osages be protected in their new home?
- (2) Would their money be paid to them annually, or as they wanted it?
- (3) Would the Osages be permitted to have their own regulations in their new home?
- and
- (4) Could the Osages have some money appropriated for their removal expenses paid to them immediately? (Burns 319-20).

After Hoag fumbled through responses to the Osage's concerns, they also presented a written list of five requested changes to the Osage Removal Act, most of which were ignored; but their obvious preparation for the meeting suggests that they had met elsewhere to organize their position (Burns 320-1). On the following day, the Osage Removal Act was approved by all Osage leaders except one. One band leader, Dry Plume, arrived late and repeated one of the specific requests for a change to the Osage Removal Act—to allow the Osage to buy additional lands as far away as the Salt Plains (Burns 321). The late arrival of one leader and his identical request for the change to the Act

clearly indicate that they had held council on the Plains before they came in for the Removal council.

The Osages often used late arrival to emphasize a point they ardently wished to make. As a matter of fact, this device was incorporated into the Osage ceremonies. One clan was always late for ceremonies. The officials and other twenty-three clans would be assembled for the procession to the House of Mystery. Yet, all would have to wait on the slow clan, since the ceremony could not begin without all twenty-four clans. This little drama was played out to stress both the unity and completeness of the tribal organization (Burns 321-2).

At the Removal council in fall of 1870, when all clans were finally present, the Osage ceded eight million acres of land and consented to removing from Kansas to Oklahoma, but the agreed-upon location was part of the original Osage homelands. Preparations were made for the Osage's relocation, and plans were also made to remove all non-Natives currently squatting on Osage lands following the next seasonal hunt.

When Pa stopped the Ingalls family wagon in the heart of these contested lands and declared, "There we are, Caroline! . . . Right here we'll build our house" just before noon one day in September of 1869, it is uncertain how much he knew about the

controversy he brought his family into (Wilder, *LHP* 52). From Wilder's description of the events in *Little House on the Prairie*, however, two facts do seem clear: that settling in "Indian Territory" was no accident, and that there was some question about the availability of the lands. "Indian Territory" was the planned destination for the Ingallses' new home from the start; Pa had discussed the "Western country" with Ma while they still lived in the Big Woods of Wisconsin. "In the West the land was level, and there were no trees," Pa argued. "There the wild animals wandered and fed as though they were in a pasture that stretched farther than a man could see, and there were no settlers. Only Indians lived there" (Wilder, *LHP* 2). Pa not only anticipated moving the family to a place already populated by American Indians, but in the text the family continually refers to the destination as "Indian Country" or "Indian Territory" throughout their trip. After crossing the Mississippi River, for example, Pa scoops up Laura:

'We're across the Mississippi!' he said, hugging her joyously.
'How do you like that, little half-pint of sweet cider half drunk-up? Do you like going out west where Indians live?'

Laura said she liked it, and she asked if they were in the Indian country now. But they were not; they were in Minnesota (Wilder, *LHP* 9).

As the family makes its way toward Indian Territory, Wilder hints at the controversy awaiting the Ingallses: "Pa had word from a man in Washington that the Indian Territory would be open to settlement soon. It might already be open to settlement. They could not know, because Washington was so far away" (Wilder, *LHP* 47). Several secondary sources suggest that the "man in Washington" may have been Charles's cousin, Senator John J. Ingalls (Dykstra 9). If John Ingalls was the family's informant regarding the status of Indian lands in Kansas, it would have been wise for Pa

and Ma to seek a second opinion. About ten years after the events depicted in *Little House on the Prairie*, Senator Ingalls, perhaps in conspiracy with a railroad ring, proposed a bill that provided misleading information about the availability of land on the Fort Dodge Military Reserve. Both Houses passed the bill, the Osage lands in question were opened to homesteaders, and the Osage never received compensation for the lost lands (Burns 289). Whether the advice of Senator Ingalls was ill-informed or ill-intended, or both, it was likely a factor that lured the family into the much-contested Osage lands.

If the Ingalls family was aware of the confusion and controversy in Osage country and still decided to relocate there, they were not alone in making such a decision.

Newspapers advertised the available lands:

KANSAS FARMS!
Neosho Valley Lands.
1,300,000 Acres for Sale
to
Actual Settlers (Zochert 21).

An ad posted by the Union Pacific Railroad advertised the Neosho Valley, where the Ingallses settled, as the “richest, finest, and most inviting valley for settlement in the West. One-third of the labor required at the East in the culture of farms will inspire here double the amount of crops. For orchards, grape culture, and small fruit in general, it is unequalled” (Zochert 21). But the newspapers also told of the contested status of the land. A reporter of the *Wabaunsee County Herald* observed in 1869, the same year that Ingalls family arrived in southeastern Kansas,

to the settler the closing of Indian tenure in the state was an end to be sought for reasons beyond immediate gain. There was plenty of land

available and to be taken under the liberal provisions of the Preemption and Homestead Acts, but the pioneers showed a 'decided mania' for settling on Indian lands. It was a passion, a challenge, a game. It seemed that they chose to 'trespass, and worry, and litigate expensively, and quarrel; and sometimes fight,' in lieu of compromising with the tribal presence and risking a future life of boredom and recrimination (Miner and Unrau 108).

There is no record to indicate that Charles Ingalls fought for title to the land he settled upon, quite the opposite, in fact. But he did illegally settle his family onto land to which he held no title. Though it is unclear how much the Ingalls family knew about circumstances in Kansas prior to their arrival, they undoubtedly learned quickly upon settling in.

Even as they made their way across the prairie that "looked as if no human eye had ever seen it before" (Wilder, *LHP* 26), the family expects encounters with Indians. On the wagon ride toward Indian Territory Pa promises Laura that she would see a papoose, an event which she eagerly anticipates, much to Ma's annoyance. Wilder makes no mention of any meetings with Native people on the way into Indian country, and even after they built a log home and settled in, they still do not see any Native neighbors. Pa explained to Laura that "you never saw Indians unless they wanted you to see them" (Wilder, *LHP* 55), a fact that sounds rather stereotypical but may have been somewhat in line with the Osage habit of "remain[ing] out of sight and observ[ing] a situation" before acting (Burns 89). Soon even Ma wonders why they haven't seen any Indians, and Pa guesses, "carelessly," but perhaps correctly, that they are away on a hunting trip (Wilder, *LHP* 71-2).

When Indians do finally visit the Ingalls home, they do so regularly. Shortly after the first two Osage men visit when Pa is away, Indians frequently pass by the trail in front of the Ingallses' cabin. One day Ma says,

‘I declare, Indians are getting so thick around here that I can’t look up without seeing one.’

As she spoke she looked up, and there stood an Indian. He stood in the doorway, looking at them, and they had not heard a sound.

‘Goodness!’ Ma gasped (Wilder, *LHP* 227).

As Wilder describes the scene, the Osage man greets Pa with a classic Hollywood “How!” then Ma gives Pa and the Osage man dinner. After dinner Pa and the visitor smoke their pipes in front of the fire. The man, whom they later learn is named Soldat du Chêne, attempts to speak to Pa, but Pa shakes his head and says, “No speak” to indicate that he cannot understand the language of his guest and they finish their visit in silence (Wilder, *LHP* 228-9).

After Soldat du Chêne leaves, Pa and Ma discuss the visit:

Pa said that Indian was no common trash. He guessed by the scalplock that he was an Osage.

‘Unless I miss my guess,’ Pa said, ‘that was French he spoke. I wish I had picked up some of that lingo.’

‘Let the Indians keep themselves to themselves,’ said Ma, ‘and we will do the same. I don’t like Indians around underfoot.’

Pa told her not to worry.

‘That Indian was perfectly friendly,’ he said. And their camps down among the bluffs are peaceable enough. If we treat them well and watch Jack, we won’t have any trouble’ (Wilder, *LHP* 229-30).

The discussion between Ma and Pa following this second occasion that Osage visit their home is illustrative of several similar conversations between the two, in which Ma expresses her fear and dislike of Indians, while Pa reassures her that they are quite friendly and that it is important to maintain good terms with them. While Pa’s

perspective is less hostile than Ma's, after the first time Indians visit the home he says, after reminding Ma how important it is to be on good terms with their Native neighbors, "We don't want to wake up some night with a band of the screeching dev—" A tight-lipped Ma prevents him from finishing the sentence, but his meaning is clear enough (Wilder, *LHP* 144).

In spite of the Ingallses' efforts to have an amiable relationship with the Osage, they do have one unfavorable encounter with some Native visitors. One day when Pa is away hunting, two Indians of unspecified tribal affiliation come into the home and nearly take the large bundle of furs Pa has been gathering to trade for plow and seed in the spring:

Those Indians were dirty and scowling and mean. They acted as if the house belonged to them. One of them looked through Ma's cupboard and took all the cornbread. The other took Pa's tobacco-pouch. They looked at the pegs where Pa's gun belonged. Then one of them picked up the bundle of furs (Wilder, *LHP* 232-3).

For an unknown reason, or a reason Wilder does not explain in the text, the Indian drops the bundle of furs near the door and they leave (Wilder, *LHP* 234). This is the last detailed description of Indians in the house that Wilder offers in *Little House on the Prairie*; she simply says that "Indians often came to the house. Some were friendly, some were surly and cross" and Ma gave them whatever they asked for because she was too afraid not to (Wilder, *LHP* 275-6).

By now it is certainly clear to the Ingallses that while the prairie "looked as if no human eye had ever seen it before," this is certainly not the case: "Indians were everywhere. Their guns echoed in the creek bottoms where they were hunting. No one

knew how many Indians were hidden in the prairie which seemed so level but wasn't. Often Laura saw an Indian where no one had been an instant before" (Wilder, *LHP* 26; 275). The heightened presence of Indians around the Ingalls home affords the family several opportunities to discuss their ideas about Indian issues. While Pa's perspective is usually more informed and tolerant than Ma's the fact remains that they have set up a household in Osage country, specifically in Rutland Township, in the recently and illegally-formed Montgomery County in Kansas.

Significantly, as discussed in the previous chapter, *Little House on the Prairie* is much more than an autobiographical summary of events in Wilder's childhood. *Little House on the Prairie*, perhaps even more so than some of the other texts in the series, is first and foremost a work of children's *literature*. Various adult characters, including Ma and Pa, offer their perspectives on American Indians and federal Indian policy and in the process function as foils for Laura's character. Before the Ingallses even arrive in Indian country, for example, Laura questions the very idea of going into a country already populated with people her mother does not like or wish to see. The questions Laura asks her mother are childlike in their simplicity and are in keeping with the narrative voice, yet they offer a perspective more sophisticated than any offered by adult characters in the narrative. On a day spent in camp for laundering and hunting along the way to Indian country, Laura and Mary have a lunch of cold corncakes spread with molasses and talk with Ma:

'Where is a papoose, Ma?' Laura asked.
 'Don't speak with your mouth full, Laura,' said Ma.
 So Laura chewed and swallowed, and she said, 'I want to see a
 papoose.'

‘Mercy on us!’ Ma said. ‘Whatever makes you want to see Indians? We will see enough of them. More than we want to, I wouldn’t wonder.’

‘They wouldn’t hurt us, would they?’ Mary asked. Mary was always good; she never spoke with her mouth full.

‘No!’ Ma said. ‘Don’t get such an idea into your head.’

‘Why don’t you like Indians, Ma?’ Laura asked, and she caught a drip of molasses with her tongue.

‘I just don’t like them; and don’t lick your fingers, Laura,’ said Ma.

‘This is Indian country, isn’t it?’ Laura said. ‘What did we come to their country for, if you don’t like them?’

Ma said she didn’t know whether this was Indian country or not. She didn’t know where the Kansas line was. But whether or no, the Indians would not be here long (Wilder, *LHP* 46-7).

Laura’s observation that this *is*, after all, Indian country, and her questions regarding the logic of coming to live with people whom her family fears or dislikes, are among the most important lines in the book. They offset all that follows with an underlying sense of absurdity: her mother’s fear of seeing any Indians in Indian country, the family’s disdain for Indians who come into the Ingalls home uninvited, and the terrified nights they spend lying awake listening to the nearby social or ceremonial gatherings of their Native neighbors. Laura’s questions are not only among the most important in the text, but “she is voicing one of the most telling moral questions of the nineteenth century United States and is raising a great issue that was still problematic in the 1930s, when *Little House on the Prairie* was written and remains so today: the Euro-American preemption of lands occupied by Native Americans” (Romine 60).

As important as Laura’s questions are early on in the text, Wilder uses Laura’s voice to raise similar concerns again near the end of the novel. As Pa plays his fiddle in the evening after their furs are nearly stolen, Ma softly sings a sentimental song about an

Indian maiden named Alfarata. When the song ends, Laura, already in bed, asks a question about a line near the end of the song, wondering where the voice of Alfarata went. Ma, surprised that Laura is still awake, tells her to go to sleep, but, when Laura presses her says that Alfarata probably went west because

‘That’s what the Indians do.’

‘Why do they do that, Ma?’ Laura asked. ‘Why do they go west?’

‘They have to,’ Ma said.

‘Why do they have to?’

‘They government makes them, Laura,’ said Pa. ‘Now go to sleep.’

He played the fiddle softly for awhile. Then Laura asked, ‘Please Pa, can I ask just one more question?’

‘May I,’ said Ma.

Laura began again. ‘Pa, please, may I—’

‘What is it?’ Pa asked. It was not polite for little girls to interrupt, but of course Pa could do it.

‘Will the government make these Indians go west?’

‘Yes,’ Pa said. ‘When white settlers come into a country, the Indians have to move on. The government is going to move these Indians further west, any time now. That’s why we’re here Laura. White people are going to settle all this country, and we get the best pick of the land because we get here first and take our pick. Now do you understand?’

‘Yes, Pa,’ Laura said. ‘But Pa, I thought this was Indian Territory. Won’t it make the Indians mad to have to—’

‘No more questions, Laura,’ Pa said, firmly. ‘Go to sleep.’

(Wilder, *LHP* 237).

Once again, Laura’s voice draws attention to the problems inherent in displacing Native people in the name of westward expansion. Although Laura addresses both of her parents with her concerns, neither is able to satisfactorily answer her question; in fact, they encourage silence on the matter. Each time Laura raises questions about westward expansion, Ma not only evades Laura’s real questions, but corrects Laura’s grammar or manners: a subtle yet powerful reminder of Ma’s influence as she attempts to shape her

daughter's thoughts and speech. Mary, notably, needs no such corrections because she already mirrors her mother's thought and speech patterns.

Wilder further reinforces the point that the Ingallses made their home in a place already occupied by Native people by continually referring to the place as "Indian Territory" or "Indian country." Throughout the series, Wilder usually identifies her homes by prominent geographical features (e.g. "the house in the Big Woods") or nearby towns (e.g. De Smet). Each time Wilder mentions the Ingallses' prairie home, however, even in the later texts, she consistently refers to it not as the "little house on the prairie," but as the house in "Indian territory." Wilder might have dubbed the place the "house on the prairie," or the "house near Independence," or even the "house in Kansas," but each time she juxtaposes "Indian Territory" with her parents' rhetoric about Manifest Destiny, it is a small yet persistent reminder that the family is or was—unlawfully—residing on Indian land.

If the Ingalls family made any efforts to visit with their Native neighbors, Wilder does not describe them in her text. Pa, however, does take the Laura and Mary to visit a nearby "Indian camp" when its occupants appear to have abandoned it. Pa is uncertain where the Indians, likely Osage, had gone, but they probably had not been gone very long as Laura observes that there are still ashes and bones scattered near the fire site, the grasses are still short from the Indians' grazing ponies, and footprints of moccasins and bare toes trail around the camp (Wilder, *LHP* 175-6). For a moment, Pa takes on the role of amateur ethnographer and "reads the tracks for Laura and Mary":

He showed them the tracks of two middle-sized moccasins by the edge of a camp fire's ashes. An Indian woman had squatted there. She wore a

leather skirt with fringes; the tiny marks of the fringe were in the dust. The track of her toes inside the moccasins was deeper than the track of her heels, because she had leaned forward to stir something cooking in a pot on the fire (Wilder, *LHP* 176).

If the camp Pa, Mary, and Laura visited was an Osage camp, it is possible that the people had made a recent seasonal move, and quite possible that they intended to return to the site at some future time. Nevertheless, when Laura discovers a shiny blue bead in the dust, she picks it up and soon both girls are busy collecting as many beads as they can. As the sun sinks low in the Indian Territory sky, Pa ties each girl's beads into a separate corner of his handkerchief and they head for home. At home Mary unselfishly offers to give her beads to their younger sister Carrie, and Laura begrudgingly agrees to give up hers, too, since neither has enough beads for a necklace of her own. At home Laura and Mary each hold one end of a string and carefully add and remove and re-add the beads until they are satisfied with the necklace they finally give to Carrie.⁷

⁷ When Laura and Mary decide to give their beads to Carrie upon returning from the "Indian Camp," it is still another example of Wilder's deliberate shaping of the narrative in the *Little House* series. In Wilder's manuscript for *Pioneer Girl*, she tells essentially the same story of the visit to the Indian Camp. Upon arriving home, however, Laura and Mary discover Ma in bed, a new baby sister, and a neighbor, Mrs. Scott, tending something over the fire. Caroline Celeste, or "Carrie," Ingalls was born in Montgomery County in August of 1870, but according to the organization of the *Little House* narrative she is already a member of the family in the Big Woods of Wisconsin in *Little House in the Big Woods*. Wilder, therefore, could not include these events in *Little House on the Prairie*, but her description of her new baby sister in *Pioneer Girl* is of interest because Wilder compares baby Carrie to an Indian: "Its hair was black, its face was very red and its eyes and hands tight shut . . . Laura looked at the baby, fascinated, its face was so red and its hair so black." Then Laura picks up on a family joke that had started earlier in the day in which Pa, Mary, and Laura, and even Mrs. Scott compare themselves to Indians because the sun and wind have tanned their skin so brown. Laura looks at Carrie and "laughed, 'O-o-o,' she said, 'Another little Indian. One little Indian, two little Indians, three little Indian'—'Girls,' Ma finished for her" (Wilder, manuscript). While the "Ten Little Indians" song is hardly a glowing example of sensitivity toward Native issues, the scene as a whole is one of several instances in which Laura finds similarities, not differences, between herself and her Native neighbors and reinforces their presence as a common reference in her day-to-day experience. According to *Pioneer Girl*, Laura and Mary waited to give Carrie the necklace they made from the beads found at the Indian Camp until she was big enough to wear it. As Romine observes, Carrie appears to be wearing the string of beads in an 1881 photograph of Mary, Laura, and Carrie, "where, presumably, the family was in their best" attire (Romine 63).

Like many of the passages concerning American Indians in *Little House on the Prairie*, the “Indian Camp” chapter offers opportunities for multiple readings. The “Indian Camp” chapter is more laden with symbolism than the scenes in which Ma’s and Pa’s attitudes toward Indians serve as foils to Laura’s as they openly discuss the inherent contradictions in the preemption of Indian lands, and it is more complex than the obvious appropriation of Indian property:

Wilder’s important ‘Indian Camp’ chapter is almost a parable of Euro-Americans’ relations with Native American cultures on the Great Plains. It posits the possibility of a partially shared culture, of mutual acculturation, and it encourages the study of another culture, with all the potential benefits and abusive misreading that such study can entail. It also suggests the greed and quarreling that describe Indian property (such as the beads, and historically, Indian lands) engendered among competing non-Indians (Romines 63).

Appropriation and greed were part of Wilder’s own experiences related to American Indians, and certainly a significant part of America’s frontier story. The fact that Wilder chose to include such an anecdote in her own narrative is not necessarily a glorification of such greed that could unwittingly steep into even small girls’ actions, but an important acknowledgement of facts that are unavoidable in a frontier narrative. As Wilder herself explained, some details of frontier life were omitted from her narrative simply because they were inappropriate for a child audience. In crafting the “Indian Camp” chapter, however, Wilder manages to incorporate a base characteristic of frontier America in a way that offers layers of meanings for child and adult readers.

Wilder’s “Indian Camp” chapter, and, indeed, all of her passages regarding American Indians in *Little House on the Prairie* acquire additional layers of meaning when regarded as a *crafted* narrative rather than strict autobiography. *Little House on the*

Prairie is the third book in her series, but it contains the earliest remembered events in Wilder's life. *Little House in the Big Woods* is first in the series, but likely contains Wilder's memories from her second stay in the Big Woods of Wisconsin following her family's brief experience in Indian Territory. (*Farmer Boy*, the second text in the series, chronicles Almanzo Wilder's boyhood and is inconsequential to the development of Wilder's own personal story.) The events in *Little House on the Prairie* occurred in 1869-1871, during Wilder's second and third years. When Wilder recorded the events in *Little House in the Prairie*, completed on February 1, 1934, her parents and older sister Mary were already deceased and so she likely relied upon her own memories and, perhaps more importantly, memories of family stories, to record the events in her story. From an autobiographical perspective, it would have been both logical and understandable for Wilder to omit the events from her second year, but Wilder seemed determined to include them, and to do so with a mixture of accuracy and good intentions.

As Wilder worked on the "Indian juvenile," she and Lane took a car trip to try to locate her childhood home in Indian Territory (Miller, *Becoming* 203). According to the 1870 census, the Ingalls homestead was situated "'in the 89th residence in Rutland Township' in the 'SW ¼ sec. 36,' Montgomery County" (Wolf 12). In the context of more contemporary place references, the site is northwest of Tyro, Kansas on Highway 166, thirteen miles southwest of Independence. Walnut Creek runs a quarter mile to the north, the Verdigris River ten miles to the east (Wolf 12). Wilder and Lane did not discover the site of her childhood home on their research trip, however, as they mistakenly went to Oklahoma's "Indian territory" instead of "Indian territory" in Kansas

(Wolf 14). Indian Territory spanned both states, but it was well after Wilder's death "before anyone thought to look in the census records to see whether Pa was listed. And there they found him—in Rutland Township, Montgomery County, Kansas. The Ingalls family Bible also shows that Carrie was born in Montgomery County, so this made a very strong case" (Zochert 35). With the site of the "Little House" itself in question, it is little surprise that Wilder's other memories of Kansas were unclear at best.

Like any good scholar, Wilder sought to fill in the gaps in her knowledge with research. In Wilder's draft manuscript of *Little House on the Prairie*, for example, there are blank lines wherever she did not know the name of the "chief" she described (Wilder, manuscript), but she appears determined that the Osage leader have a name in her narrative. In a 1937 speech Wilder admitted, "In writing *Little House on the Prairie* I could not remember the name of the chief who saved the whites from massacre. In writing books that will be used in schools such things must be right and the manuscript is submitted to experts before publication" (Wilder, qtd. in Vaura 2). Among Wilder's manuscripts is a portion of a letter dated June 26, 1933 which records her attempt to learn more about the Native persons in her narrative:

Dear Sir

Mr. and Mrs. Lyn have told me about your wonderful collection of Indian relics and that you know a great deal about the history of Indians in your part of the country. So I thought perhaps you could tell me the name of an Indian chief that I have forgotten.

I do not know even the name of the tribe of which he was chief but the time was the years [illegible word] 1870 and 1871 (Wilder, manuscript, folder 14).

Another partial letter among Wilder's papers indicates that Wilder's research was ongoing six months later. The letter from the Kansas State Historical Society dated January 10, 1934 reads:

Dear Mrs. Wilder-

I do not find any record of the story you are looking for about the Osage Chief in 1870-71. The name Le Soldat-du-Chene, is of course French, and if he had an Indian name as you suggest, I have not been (Wilder, manuscript, folder 14).

The surviving portion of the letter ends here, but indicates that Wilder had learned enough to know that the nearby community was Osage, and she had obtained clues about the leader's name. A letter from R. B. Selridge of Muskogee, Oklahoma dated July 5, 1933 informed Wilder that "the Chief of the Osages at that time was named Le-Soldat-du-Chene" (Wolf 13, n. 28). In the published version of *Little House on the Prairie*, all of the blanks have been replaced with the name "Soldat du Chêne," but as the letter from the Kansas Historical Society indicates, Wilder herself may have realized that the name was incorrect. In his identification of Le-Soldat-du-Chene as an Osage leader, it seems, Selridge was historically amiss by several generations. The name Le-Soldat-du-Chene does exist among the region's history,

But it can't be found in any of the records of [Wilder's] time. Generations before, when the French first worked their way up the rivers to the prairies of what one day would be Kansas, there was an Osage chief whose name was Soldat du Chene, but he had been dead for many, many years. Perhaps this was his grandson, or his great-grandson. Perhaps it was actually Augustus Captain, one of the Osage leaders who helped select lands to which the tribe would move (Zochert 48).

The name "Soldat du Chêne" translates to "Oak Soldier," but it is quite similar in spelling and pronunciation to "soldat du chien," or, dog soldier, many of which resided on the

Osage prairies (Vaura 3), and all of which would also have “Indian names” as Wilder remembered. That Wilder or one of her “expert” informants made such an error is plausible, but the fact that Lane spoke French seems to lessen the likelihood of an accidental translation or spelling error. Perhaps Wilder or Lane intentionally used the name “Soldat du Chêne” because it was flattering to the Osage man they sought to represent (Vaura 4) because the family clearly considers him a hero.

Soldat du Chêne’s role in the narrative, too, emerges as a conundrum of Wilder’s early memories, her research efforts, and his literary function in the text. Soldat du Chêne makes several appearances in *Little House on the Prairie*. The morning after his dinner with Pa in the Ingalls home the Ingallses discover him, mounted, on the path outside their door, pointing a gun at Jack. Jack must be dragged off of the path by Pa, because the family dog “would not admit that the trail was the Indians’ trail, he thought it belonged to Pa. And Laura knew that something terrible would happen if Jack hurt an Indian” (Wilder, *LHP* 230-1). Soldat du Chêne rides on without further incident⁸ and does not appear again until he rides past the Ingalls house again one night, “hell bent for leather,” toward the Osage camps where “war cries” have kept the Ingalls family living in terror for days (Wilder, *LHP* 294). When the activity in the camps finally quiets down a few days later, Pa learns from an Osage man who can communicate with him that all the other Native Nations in the area had been planning to massacre the white settlers, but Soldat du Chêne had ridden in to dissuade the Osage Nation from joining such a plan.

⁸ In *Pioneer Girl*, as Soldat du Chêne rides away, Laura expresses how much she likes him: “‘I like him,’ Laura exclaimed dancing up and down. ‘I like him, his feathers are so pretty’” (Wilder, manuscript). This line was omitted from *Little House on the Prairie*.

The Osage had then agreed to fight any Nation who did massacre the local non-Natives. “That was what had made so much noise, that last terrible night,” Wilder explains, pejoratively. “The other tribes were howling at the Osages, and the Osages were howling back at them. The other tribes did not dare fight Soldat du Chêne and all his Osages, so the next day they went away” (Wilder, *LHP* 301). Pa declares that Soldat du Chêne is “one good Indian!” and “no matter what Mr. Scott said, Pa did not believe that the only good Indian was a dead Indian” (Wilder, *LHP* 301). The next day, a long line of Osage people rides past the Ingalls home, with Soldat du Chêne at the front of the line. Recognizing him, Pa says, “Du Chêne himself,” and salutes the Osage leader as he rides by.⁹

The Ingalls family likely did witness some substantial Osage gathering during their stay in Kansas Indian Territory, but based on Wilder’s inquiries regarding other information about the local Native community which she could not recall, it is unlikely that she remembered the details surrounding the gathering or Soldat du Chêne’s involvement in it. Just as Wilder either accidentally or deliberately confused Soldat du Chêne’s name, she also appears to have misremembered or otherwise misrepresented his good deeds. The Osage Nation is, in fact, credited with preventing non-Native settlers from attacks or massacres by other Native Nations in the region, but the circumstances and dates do not align with the story Wilder tells. Just southeast of Independence on May 15, 1863 a group of Osage men encountered a group of unfamiliar non-Native men, whom were caught lying about their identities. As the Osage men attempted to detain the

⁹ In *Pioneer Girl*, Wilder describes Soldat du Chêne as the “tall, handsome Indian” (Wilder, manuscript). This detail, too, was omitted from *Little House on the Prairie*.

non-Natives and escort them to Fort Humboldt, an Osage man was killed by a non-Native. The Osage requested reinforcements from a nearby Osage village and following the fight twenty non-Native men were found, decapitated, on the scene. It was soon discovered that the non-Native men were Confederate officers on a mission to “disperse among the various northern Indian nations and to stir them into attacking northern settlements. Thus, the Osages saved Kansas from a series of devastating Indian raids” (Burns 263-4). During the Civil War the Osage Nation had been divided, with some choosing to side with the South but the majority sympathized with the North. Assuming, perhaps, that Native people in Kansas were sufficiently angered by the unwelcome non-Native settlers in their territory, the officers may have hoped Indians would be willing to clear settlers from their own lands and aid the Confederacy at the same time. A similar plan was also organized in southeastern Colorado, but was also intercepted by the Osage (Burns 264).

Although the Osage did protect non-Native settlers from attack in the same county where the Ingalls family later resided, there is hardly enough evidence to account for Wilder’s use of this story to explain the “jamboree” and “war cries” her family overheard. Accounting for the utmost naivety of Osage history on Wilder’s part, misinformation from her informants, or inaccurate assumptions in her family’s stories, the fact that the non-Native men were Confederate soldiers is a significant detail in the story—and the very mention of the Civil War should have been enough to indicate to Wilder that this event did not fit with her memories or family history. The Osage men, too, acted swiftly, perhaps even uncharacteristically swiftly according to Osage custom,

in disposing of the Confederates and preventing the Indian attacks—there was no time for the type of elaborate ceremony described by Wilder in *Little House on the Prairie*.

As both ceremonies and council meetings required the presence of all Osage bands, there could have been quite a few reasons for the gathering of so many Native people in the creek bluffs of Montgomery County in 1870. Pa initially thought the Osage Nation was gathering to prepare for a hunt, or there may have been other reasons to organize a ceremony or council. Wilder does, however, offer clues about the political developments in the region that match up historically and geographically with the Ingalls' time in Indian Territory. When Pa returns from a trip to Independence on the day the “wild, shrill, fast-beating sound” began in the Osage camp, Pa tells Ma something

that made Laura sit very still and listen carefully. He said that folks in Independence said that the government was going to put the white settlers out of the Indian territory. He said the Indians had been complaining and they had got that answer from Washington.

‘Oh, Charles, no!’ Ma said. ‘Not when we have done so much.’

Pa said he didn’t believe it. He said, ‘They always have let the settlers keep the land. They’ll make the Indians move on again. Didn’t I get word from Washington that this country’s going to be open for settlement any time now?’

‘I wish they’d settle it and stop talking about it,’ Ma said (Wilder, *LHP* 272-3).

Even as Pa recites the rhetoric of Manifest Destiny, he has a Kansas newspaper in hand to support his beliefs. He reads to Ma from the paper which “proved he was right, the government would not do anything to white settlers” (Wilder, *LHP* 273). Pa may well have seen such information in the local paper. As early as February 1869, rumors that the Drum Creek Treaty would not be ratified spread in the region. One paper suggested that settlers “should themselves occupy the lands to ensure that the spoils would finally go to

the yeoman farmer” in hopes of preventing the Leavenworth, Lawrence, and Galveston Railroad from obtaining the land (Miner and Unrau 122-3). The railroad, meanwhile, argued in favor of the treaty, insisting that “experience with Indian lands in Kansas had shown that it was best to sell lands in a block, good and bad together, and to get the Indians out of the sate as rapidly as possible” (Miner and Unrau 122-3).

Pa’s information about the possibility of non-Native settlers leaving Indian Territory, especially in the context of the time period when the Ingallses were known to live in the region, suggests that the event the Ingallses overheard in the nearby creek bluffs was the negotiation of the Osage Removal Act, or one of the meetings prior to the negotiations. Perhaps the lone rider who sped past the Ingalls home one night, dubbed Soldat du Chêne in the text, was Dry Plume himself riding in to wrap up the negotiations at the Removal Council. The Removal Council, which approximately 2,800 Osages attended, lasted past midnight on September 9, 1870 and the bill was accepted at 2:45 the following afternoon (Parsons 240-1). Following the acceptance of the bill many Osage lingered for as long as several weeks, awaiting gifts promised by the federal government. When the gifts finally arrived—an assortment of Mexican and three point scarlet blankets, butcher knives, sugar, coffee, tobacco, and cloth supplied by two New York companies and of very poor quality but valued at a total of \$8,236.87—trouble ensued. Disagreements about the fairness of the distribution of the goods among the bands escalated to a “melee” and “quite a number of ‘bleeding noses’ as a result of the free-for-all scramble for the presents” (Parsons 256-8). Further controversy followed when it was discovered that the Osage had paid for their own presents out of the \$50,000 of federal

funds earmarked for financing the Osage's removal from Kansas. Agent Isaac Gibson, who witnessed the Removal Council, noted in his journal on September 20 that "Some Osages left last night and the bal. by noon" (Gibson qtd. in Parsons 265). In *Little House on the Prairie* Wilder recalls watching long lines of Indians riding out of the bluffs, and several days after the "war cries" end and "everything was safe and quiet," still more Indians ride past the Ingalls home (Wilder, *LHP* 299-305).

During the long days when the Ingallses and their neighbors listened to the activity in the Osage camp, Pa tried to assuage the fears of two neighboring men, Mr. Edwards and Mr. Scott. The frightened Mr. Scott (previously portrayed as foolish when he nearly died because he ignored safety precautions when digging a well) declares that "he didn't know why so many of those savages were coming together, if they didn't mean devilment." "The only good Indian is a dead Indian," he concludes (Wilder, *LHP* 284). In another juxtaposition of divergent viewpoints on Indian issues in *Little House on the Prairie*, Pa immediately contradicts him,

figur[ing] that Indians would be as peaceable as anybody else if they were let alone. On the other hand, they had been moved west so many times that naturally they hated white folks. But an Indian ought to have sense enough to know when he was licked (Wilder, *LHP* 284-5).

Pa, following this semi-sympathetic remark, goes on to explain that the Osage have not gathered because that want to start trouble, but because they are engaged in a meeting about the "big spring buffalo hunt . . . By George! I'd like to go on a hunt like that, myself. It must be a sight to see" (Wilder, *LHP* 285). Mr. Scott finally concedes that Pa may be correct.

Following the Removal Council, about 3,000 Osage left the area for an “exceptionally long” fall buffalo¹⁰ hunt in late September of 1870. In March of 1871, some Osage bands went straight to the new homeland in (Oklahoma) Indian Territory, while others briefly returned to Kansas to gather some remaining possessions before going to Oklahoma (Burns 345). If Pa was correct about the Osage’s preparation for a spring hunt, the seasonal setting (spring) contradicts the idea that the event in the Osage camp overheard by the settlers was the Removal Council because the Removal Council was held in September. As discussed in Chapter Three, however, Wilder was known to manipulate or collapse the narrative timeline elsewhere in the series, and the Osage’s departure for a hunt otherwise coincides with the Removal Council theory.

As Wilder researched the events of 1869-71 in Indian Territory, it is likely she discovered that this was a time of negotiations and removals in the Osage community, even if her memories or family stories did not contain such information. Even though Wilder thought her family resided in Kansas, not Oklahoma, her telling of the events does not appear to line up with historical evidence. In casting the event in the Osage camp as a near-massacre of non-Native settlers, however, she creates an interesting scenario in which she initially presents Indians as stereotypical “savages,” then has the opportunity to 1) reinforce the absurdity of non-Native settlers moving into Indian Territory and then living in terror of being massacred; 2) reopen dialogue about Indian removal among the various characters; and 3) create a Native hero in Soldat du Chêne when he appears to save the lives of the settlers. Notably, Pa and (in later texts) Almanzo are the only other

¹⁰ Wilder and the authors of the secondary sources continually make reference to “buffalo,” although bison, not buffalo, are native to North America.

significant male heroes in the series (with the exception of Big Jerry, who is also part Native), and Pa and Almanzo are, of course, both family members. Soldat du Chêne's role as outsider-hero is a unique one in the context of the entire narrative as Wilder generally emphasizes the Ingallses' independence and their refusal to rely upon anyone else for their wellbeing. As Wilder tells the story of Soldat du Chêne, the family owes its survival to him.

Whether Wilder realized that her story of the events in the Osage camp was probably inaccurate may never be known. Intentionally or accidentally, however, Wilder's telling of the story sets up the ending for the text, an ending which is of unequivocal importance. At the end of *Little House on the Prairie*, the Osage appear to be leaving on a hunt, and it is the Ingalls family, *not* the Osage, who boards a westward-bound wagon.¹¹ The rumor that the non-Native settlers might be put out of Indian Territory soon came to realization when Mr. Edwards and Mr. Scott brought news to Pa one morning while he was out plowing his field. After talking with his neighbors, Pa headed toward the house, plow and all, saying,

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

‘What’s the matter, Charles? Where are we going?’ Ma asked.

‘Durned if I know! But we’re going. We’re leaving here!’ Pa said. ‘Scott and Edwards say the government is sending soldiers to take all us settlers out of Indian Territory’ (Wilder, *LHP* 316-7).

¹¹ The narrative indicates that the Ingalls family moves West from Indian Territory, but in reality the family returned to Wisconsin.

The news that settlers must leave Indian Territory serves several literary functions for Wilder. First, it enables her to draw attention to the conflicting and often foolish nature of government policy—an opportunity Wilder does not miss throughout her narrative. Second, the government’s mistake and Pa’s willingness to leave quickly affords the Ingalls family a graceful exit from Indian Territory. That is, whether the Ingallses intentionally or accidentally squatted in Indian Territory the government, not the Ingallses, is to blame. Most importantly, in an anomaly to the entire canon of American frontier literature; at the conclusion of *Little House on the Prairie* it is the non-Indian settlers who are justly removed—instead of the usual forced and unjust removal of the Indians—from Indian Territory. In case the reader should miss the point, Pa tells Ma as they leave their home and take one last look toward it, “It’s a great country, Caroline . . . but there will be wild Indians and wolves here for many a long day” (Wilder, *LHP* 325). Wilder acknowledges a lasting Native presence (albeit a “wild” one) rather than sending Indians off into the sunset—the far more common trope in western literature. As the family wagon reaches the creek bottoms, the site of so much activity during the Osage’s recent encampment there, “high in a tree-top a mockingbird began to sing.” Ma says she “never heard a mockingbird sing so early,” and Pa replies, “He is telling us good-by” (Wilder, *LHP* 326). Thus, amid a mockingbird’s laughter, the Ingallses leave Indian Territory.

In his Annual Report of 1872, the year after the Ingalls family’s departure from Kansas Indian Territory, Commissioner of Indian Affairs Francis Amasa Walker

expressed his thoughts on America's ever-westward expansion and Indians' role on the frontier:

No one will rejoice more heartily than the present Commissioner when the Indians of this country cease to be in a position to dictate, in any form or degree to the Government; when, in fact, the last hostile tribe becomes reduced to the condition of supplicants for charity. This is, indeed, the only hope of salvation for the aborigines of the continent. If they stand up against the progress of civilization and industry, they must be relentlessly crushed. The westward course of population is neither to be denied nor delayed for the sake of all the Indians that ever called this country their home. They must yield or perish; and there is something that savors of providential mercy in the rapidity with which their fate advances upon them, leaving them scarcely the chance to resist before they shall be surrounded and disarmed (Walker qtd. in Burns 274-5).

The adjectives Wilder uses to describe Indians in *Little House on the Prairie* are not always favorable. In fact, it is easy to take adjectives such as “wild” and “savage” out of context and argue that Wilder's text is a racist one. Studied in context, and as literary devices, however, it is clear that Wilder's presentation of Native themes is significantly more complex. Her narrative does not suggest that Indians be “relentlessly crushed” or “perish;” such perspectives that were common her time are notably absent from her texts and Wilder uses her experience in Indian Territory to draw attention to the ineptitude of the federal government in its dealings with Native lands and people.

Little House on the Prairie is not a typical frontier story which ends with Indians heading west, instead Wilder “does not deny racism or even genocide; it always suggests the complexity—and the dark side—of the frontier response to Native Americans” (Wolf 118). Wilder often emphasizes the lasting presence of Native people in the region, questions the premise of Manifest Destiny, and does not promote the opinions of her contemporaries such as Lincoln, Whiting, or Walker. Wilder's correspondence with

“experts” on the region’s history suggests that she made a good-faith effort to include Native people in her frontier narrative, and to learn about the Osage people she represented. Wilder does not always portray Indians in a negative light; rather, her text contains both positive and negative examples of her encounters with Native people. More importantly, her narrative shows a progressive realization that a significant population of Native people not only resides in Indian Territory, but that it has rights to reside there while the Ingalls family does not.

V. EXPECTATIONS AND EXCEPTIONS IN THE WOMEN OF THE *LITTLE HOUSE*: THE *LITTLE HOUSE* TEXTS AS A WOMEN'S FRONTIER NARRATIVE

“There was only the enormous, empty prairie, with grasses blowing in waves of light and shadow across it, and the great blue sky above it, and birds flying up from it and singing with joy because the sun was rising. And on the whole enormous prairie there was no sign that any other human being had ever been there.”—Laura Ingalls Wilder (Wilder, *LHP* 40)

The preceding chapters establish Wilder's frequent habit of editing her life story to meet her literary and political purposes. Nowhere, perhaps, is this more evident than in her suggestion that the Ingalls family was relatively isolated while living on the Kansas prairie. In addition to the nearby Osage camps and the homes of two neighbors mentioned in *Little House on the Prairie*, the Ingallses' log cabin was also situated in the vicinity of thousands of other illegal squatters, and the Ingalls family undoubtedly interacted with many of them to varying degrees. In spite of the almost continual state of confusion and danger in Indian Territory, America's frontier west was also an increasingly popular destination for European travelers anxious to see a glimpse of the famed frontier for themselves. Unfortunately, their experiences in the American west were often framed far more by their *expectations* of the west than their *observations* of it. Such travelers often recorded their experiences in the form of journals, letters, or published accounts, inadvertently offering lasting evidence that travelers often, particularly in their views of women and American Indians, “seemed to have little hesitation in projecting their own values on the land and cultures around them. They frequently lavished extravagant numbers of pages of imaginative prose upon the question of how the white women who inhabited the American frontier looked, acted, and thought. In doing so, *they usually saw what they hoped to see*” (Riley 62, emphasis added).

Like the European travelers, white female American homesteaders, too, brought values and expectations, such as fear and dislike of Native people, which influenced their encounters with Indians on the trail and in their homes. Wilder's *Little House* books are usually counted among works of *children's* literature, but when examined as *women's frontier* literature, they offer unique opportunities for studying women's behaviors on the frontier. And like the European travelers and American women on the frontier, modern readers of the *Little House* books, too, carry their own expectations of frontier and Native themes and sometimes see in the texts only what *they* wish to see. An awareness of the layers of ethnocentric expectations encompassing the *Little House* books, and studying them in the context of a time span of more than a century—from the time when the events occurred, were recorded, and finally read about—offers not only a richer understanding of Wilder's Native themes but reinforces the texts' value as historic records from earlier American paradigms of thought regarding both women and American Indians.

The *Little House* texts' appeal to children is indisputable; evidence lies in children's letters to Wilder, teachers' testimony, and the children's anthologies and textbooks which continue to canonize excerpts from the texts for children's enjoyment and education. But adults, too—especially those who read the texts as children—seem to cherish an enduring affection for the texts. Several times while researching and writing my dissertation I found myself suddenly in the role of an informal participant-observer, and the incidental information gathered during public discussions is often as telling, or more so, than that in official scholarly sources. At Wilder's Rocky Ridge home in

Mansfield, Missouri in October of 2005, for example, children and adults alike were enchanted by *Little House* memorabilia such as Pa's fiddle and Ma's pearl-handled pen. Similarly, at the cast reunion of the *Little House on the Prairie* television show in Tombstone, Arizona in July of 2005, girls *and* their mothers dressed in period clothing, and several mothers explained to the cast that she had read the books (and watched the television shows) while growing up and wanted her daughters to have the same experience. While presenting at the Heard Museum in Surprise, Arizona to an audience comprised primarily of retirement-aged women and a few of their supportive husbands, I found not only that nearly everyone in the room had read the texts, but that they were fiercely devoted to Wilder and defended her when I suggested that some scholars find fault with her handling of Native themes. Many scholars and teachers, too—both male and female—have confessed their attachment to the texts, formally in the introductions to their published scholarly work about the texts and informally in conference settings where I have presented my research about Native themes in Wilder's story. One such scholar of Wilder's work, Anita Claire Fellman, described the texts' appeal in her own home. After she read *Little House in the Big Woods* aloud to her son, she explained,

[he] turned to me with shining eyes and asked earnestly, 'Oh, Mom, can we live that?' I was taken aback. 'Wow,' I thought to myself, 'that is a powerful fantasy indeed.' And then a funny thing happened as I read the series aloud this second time: I found myself reluctant to have the books come to an end. Instead of reading three chapters a night, I cut the allotment to two and then to one. And I reduced my pace. As I was slowly enunciating the last pages of the last chapters, I was struggling to keep the tears out of my voice. 'There is something going on here!' I thought. 'I wonder what the hook is; why have I become so captivated by these books?' (Fellman, "American Culture" 47).

Fellman's experience emphasizes not only the texts' appeal to adult readers, but serves as a reminder of many readers' deep attachments to the *Little House* texts. Such attachments are often stronger than the voices which vehemently reject the *Little House* texts. Because readers often have such strong emotions associated with the *Little House* books, contextualizing the texts to see beyond what is apparent at first glance is important—and challenging.

The intergenerational appeal of the texts, and more specifically adult women's enduring interest in the *Little House* story, seem reasonable given that many of the themes are adult by nature. Wilder was a child during her family's brief stay in Indian Country and tried to create a frontier story appropriate for young readers, but America's westward expansion and the rhetoric of Manifest Destiny which justified it, are not the fanciful stuff of ordinary children's storybooks. The construction of a town and railroad, the family's winter-long struggle to stave off imminent starvation, fear of Indian massacres, and federal policies—including the government's various blunders in its Indian and homesteading policies—are not limited to the scope of a child's interest. Conversations with contemporary readers, too, often reveal a sense of admiration for characters that possess a set of knowledge and skills largely absent today: Pa's ability to build a home to shelter his family, for example, or Ma's adeptness in her role as wife, mother, doctor, teacher, economist, and inventor in her household. The texts are more than simply children's stories, and

Beginning with *Little House on the Prairie*, Laura Ingalls Wilder and Rose Wilder Lane began to propose some of the hardest and most persistent questions for an emigrant nation: questions of possible cultural interaction, cultural collision, and a potentially multicultural life. What

happens when housekeeping hits the road, encounters other cultures, and the Little House becomes a serial project? The complexity with which the Little House series responds to these questions (always from the point of view of its Euro-American protagonist and her family) is one of the major reasons why these books have been so compelling and so perennially troubling for United States readers (Romine 57).

The series, nevertheless, is largely considered a children's story in spite of the complexity of frontier issues raised. Wilder intended her story to be child-friendly, but just as important in the categorization of the books, perhaps, is another explanation: the *Little House* story is, like "the great works of American fiction . . . notoriously at home in the children's section of the library" simply because it contains no sex (Fiedler qtd. in Wolf 119). A child narrator like the one in the *Little House* books does not necessarily indicate an exclusively children's story, but "the author's characterizations of the child's emotions is a critical factor" (Marshall 25-6). The development of the protagonist and the complex themes presented in the *Little House* series engage adult readers as well as children.

Examining the *Little House* books in the context of frontier women's literature instead of children's literature opens doors to new and seldom-studied themes, and again draws attention to the uniqueness of Wilder's narrative. The texts often stand out among other children's books because of their subject matter, multi-volume format, and the protagonist who matures as the books progress, as well as their ambiguous position between autobiography and historical fiction. When studied as frontier women's literature, however, the texts are even more unusual because they offer a child's perspective of the westward movement, stand as the sole firsthand accounts of at least one period in regional American literature, and are largely memories—not diary entries—of the author's experience. And most unusual of all, Wilder's story is well-known

nationally and internationally, whereas most other frontier accounts, written as fiction or non-fiction, are read today primarily by scholars.

The days of cross-country wagon-drawn journeys across the continent inspired more personal history-writing in the nineteenth century than any event except the Civil War (Schlissel 9). Pioneers, men and women alike, it seems, saw the experience as “a spectacular event in their lives, unlike anything they had done before or would ever do again” and “felt that their lives, briefly, had become part of history” (Faragher 11; Schlissel 9). The journals and accounts from this period, cumulatively, offer personal and diverse windows into history unmatched by historians who analyze the events at a much later time. In terms of better understanding women’s history in America, women’s accounts of their overland journeys are important: “suddenly, because of their diaries, [women’s] daily lives became accessible, where so much of the life of nineteenth-century women had disappeared from view” (Schlissel 9). Although the term “diary” today connotes a private record to be read only by the author, diaries of the overland trips were often more “like a family history, a souvenir meant to be shared like a Bible, handed down through generations, to be viewed not as an individual’s story but as the history of a family’s growth and course through time” (Schlissel 10).

Women’s accounts of the frontier overlap with men’s perspectives in some areas and differ in others (Faragher, Riley, Schlissel), and children’s version of the events likewise have both similarities and differences when compared to adult accounts. The *Little House* narrative shares general characteristics of other women’s overland stories in terms of both purpose and scope; for example Wilder explained that one of her

motivations for recording her life experience was that she believed the events in her life represented an important time in American history. And Wilder's detailed descriptions of her family's frontier home life position her texts, like other women's frontier narratives, as both a record of women's daily life on the frontier and also a family-centered history recorded for future generations. Wilder chose to tell her story from a child's perspective, a decision that ultimately distinguished her story from other readily-accessible frontier narratives. Although most travelers on the Overland Trail, where many similar frontier narratives originate,¹² were newlyweds or families with young children (Faragher 18-9),

Curiously enough, despite the large number of children on the trail, they do not figure very prominently in these accounts. There are, to be sure, examples of children falling out of wagons, some of whom are almost immediately run over, or of children dying at childbirth or from disease. Some of the most moving stories of hardship and misfortune, it is true, concern children, particularly those who are suddenly orphaned by the rigors of the trail. Yet children, one concludes, were the lesser of the women's worries when their energies, time, and dispositions were under more immediate pressures (Schlissel xvii).

The narrative perspective in the *Little House* texts, then, not only presents a child's view of the frontier, but centers children's experiences as the primary subject. The protagonist in the *Little House* texts is singularly unencumbered by the "immediate pressures" faced by most women on the trail, and gradually increases in maturity. Because most adult women on the trail were making the journey as a honeymoon trip or as young mothers, many worried about their new roles as wives, were pregnant and concerned about where

¹² The Ingalls family did not make the linear journey from east to west like the hundreds of families who traveled to Oregon or California in the 1840s-1860s on the Overland Trail, but Wilder's voice as a frontier woman writer shares many similarities—and some notable differences—with women who did make the single, longer journey westward. In the course of their several journeys around the Midwestern region, the Ingallses crossed both the Overland Trail and the Santa Fe Trail.

and when the birth might occur, and were plagued daily by unanticipated problems of housekeeping “on the road.” Victorian taboos prevented the women from openly discussing subjects such as childbirth and certain illnesses in their diaries, and so they are absent from adult accounts and in Wilder’s narrative. Because Wilder wrote from the perspective of a girl singularly unencumbered by adult worries and responsibilities, however, Laura is an enthusiastic observer of her surroundings—an unusual trait in women’s frontier accounts. Most women’s accounts lack the spiritedness that characterizes Wilder’s story, “for in the end, the sharpest difference between men and women on the Trail was that the great majority of the women did not want to make the trip in the first place” (Schlissel xviii). As a willing and adventurous traveler, the protagonist in the *Little House* series sometimes relates more with men (namely Pa) than with other women.

Because Wilder’s story is usually studied as children’s literature and not women’s frontier literature, it is often overlooked by frontier scholars. One book-length study of prairie women writers does, however, count Wilder’s texts among other significant examples of literature of its kind. In *Prairie Women: Images in American and Canadian Fiction*, Carol Fairbanks identifies approximately one hundred and twenty women writers in the prairie regions of the United States and Canada between 1870 and the mid-1980s (Fairbanks 4). Fairbanks briefly discusses Wilder’s work in this context, and notes that of the few women writers whose subject matter includes the Dakota Boom years of 1868-

78,¹³ Wilder is the *only* woman who wrote from firsthand experience (Fairbanks 82). Some women, such as those discussed in Lillian Schlissel's collection *Women's Diaries of the Westward*, kept track of events as they occurred in their diary entries. Other women writers, such as Rose Wilder Lane in *Let the Hurricane Roar* or Nan Heacock in *From Crinoline to Calico*, relied on their parents' or grandparents' frontier stories as source material for their fiction. Others writers, such as Lindsay Constance Skinner in *The Search Relentless*, used frontier experience to create fiction that had no direct autobiographical connections. The *Little House* books, though fictionalized to some extent, rely on the author's firsthand experiences which are memories filtered through sixty years of reflection.

Wilder's growth and maturation, the telling and retelling of the events through family stories, shifts in politics and public opinion, Lane's role in editing, and Wilder's literary objectives all undoubtedly affected her recounting of her life's events. The passage of time between Wilder's experiences and her documentation of them also accounts for some of the differences between Native themes in her texts and similar themes in the diaries of frontier women writers who recorded their experiences as they occurred. In the context of women's prairie literature, Wilder's alteration of certain dates and facts do not diminish the significance of her texts, for "fiction makes us real," and, as Fairbanks maintains, "the first fifty pages of *Little House on the Prairie*, based on Wilder's own experiences as a girl in Kansas, establish a journey motif upon which future writers within the tradition of prairie fiction can perform variations" (Kroetsch qtd.

¹³ The texts *By the Shores of Silver Lake*, *The Long Winter*, *Little Town on the Prairie*, *These Happy Golden Years*, and *The First Four Years* are all set in Dakota Territory.

in Fairbanks 26; Fairbanks 90). In the *Little House* texts, Wilder's narration of bygone days demonstrates both the immediate and lasting impacts of the events.

Wilder's journey motif that both mirrors and inspires other non-fiction and fiction frontier writing begins long before the journey itself. For Wilder, her sisters and Ma, and the thousands of other nineteenth-century women who went westward carried with them not only 3,000 pounds-worth of possessions and provisions (Faragher 22-3), but centuries-worth of baggage in the form of their ideas about appropriate white women's behavior and their fears and misinformation about American Indians. Before a woman encountered an American Indian and decided how to interact with that individual, she was likely well-indoctrinated in cultural attitudes toward expected behavior in all arenas in her life: "Early nineteenth-century women did not have to think for themselves about themselves. Womanhood was defined for them from pulpits, from Chautauqua rostrums, and in a variety of print media. Primarily male voices carried on a brisk discussion regarding the ways in which white American women should feel and behave" (Riley 11). Chief among women's goals for self-conduct were the "four cardinal virtues": piety, purity, submissiveness, and domesticity (Riley 16). Women were frequently reminded that they were physically and intellectually weaker than men and many in the mid-nineteenth century believed that the size and shape of a woman's head was evidence that "men made decisions according to intellect and women by love" (Riley 14).

Though women were largely left out of the discussion about their appropriate places in American society, there is ample evidence that they accepted, embraced, and even promoted their constricted roles. As women's periodicals grew in popularity in the

first half of the nineteenth century, women authors encouraged their female readers to make the most of the spheres where women were considered superior: morality and domestic affairs. In 1837 Sarah Josepha Hale became editor of *Godey's Lady's Book* and used this popular and widely read women's journal to promote women's "domesticity." Just one year earlier in her tract *Female Improvement*, Elizabeth Sanford had reminded her readers that there was "something unfeminine in independence," and women should act "dependent and grateful" (Riley 19, 34). To women today,

It may seem odd that women accepted doctrines that had obvious limitations, but there were many reasons for them to do so. It would have been false of women to naysay the importance of wifehood, motherhood, and family care in their lives. After all, they lived in a time when marriage and childbearing were believed to be women's top-ranking goals. Nor could they reject the belief that women were more moral, pure, and virtuous than men, for this not only gave them a modicum of power in their homes, but established their authority over men concerning domestically related matters (Riley 15).

Most women, not only accepted this gender-imposed fate, but were determined to defend it and to carry it with them into the West. Many women insisted on wearing impractical, hoop-skirted dresses on the wagon journey or while doing men's work on the homestead, and "in their steadfast clinging to ribbons and bows, to starched white aprons and petticoats, the women suggest that the frontier, in a profound manner, threatened their sense of social role and sexual identity" (Schlissel 85, Riley 28). And, as some women began to question the philosophy that contained such prescribed roles for women, early suffragists soon realized that some of most "'vehement critics' of rights for women were women" themselves (Riley 28) because entering the political realm was a threat to their purity and morality.

Women's indoctrination into submissive roles in the nineteenth century was thorough and intense. Should women doubt or question the gendered American system

the very volume of ladies' periodicals, domestic novels, epistolary guidebooks, annuals, gift books, printed sermons, and speeches that appeared in the middle decades of the nineteenth century—all attempting to imbue women with the precepts of 'true womanhood' and to guide them into customary female functions—suggests a pressing societal need to allay a growing dissatisfaction with, and questioning of, traditional gender roles, largely through literature by white women (Riley 13).

Women's periodicals containing such ideas about womanhood were the most widely circulated periodicals in the mid-nineteenth century, and the popular *Godey's Ladies Book* (read by the Ingalls women), especially, enjoyed long-term success (Riley 13).

Even the most exceptionally well-educated and well-read woman would likely find herself immersed in literature—beginning with the McGuffey readers widely used in one-room school houses where families sometimes decided to send their female children—that upheld women's inclination for sentimentality and morality and downplayed their intellectual abilities. History did not become a part of standard curriculum until the 1890s (Romine 201), but American women studying history, science, politics, or current events would find independent, intellectual women absent in most subjects. One teacher recalled that a member of the school board even objected to the subject of geography in her Kansas schoolhouse: "He explained between tobacco emissions, 'Miss Murphy, it wouldn't be so bad if it was just boys, but we think too much of the girls to have them spiled, their religion token away by teaching joggerphy'" (Lydia Murphy Toothaker qtd in Stratton 163). While "popular novelists such as James Fenimore Cooper characterized women as weak, passive, docile, and submissive, rewarded in the end by the prize of a

hero, tailor-made to her needs and desires,” the occasional strong female character in literature met an ill fate (Riley 34). Whether or not a mid-nineteenth century woman could read, she was taught from childhood that women were “morally superior,” but were also “believed to be physically and intellectually inferior. They had small brains and weak muscles. They were helpless, childlike, nonassertive, indecisive, and unable to protect themselves” (Riley 133).

In addition to the assertions of the innate weaknesses that characterized women in the nineteenth-century, literature similarly prescribed American Indians’ place in the rapidly growing America. Such literature about American Indians proved influential for pioneers, and studying Indians’ limited and often stereotyped role in America’s literary, philosophic, and political past helps to contextualize and illuminate women’s responses to Indians on the frontier. Carol Fairbanks and Adrienne Rich emphasize the importance of studying the construction of women’s identity in the “prairie past,” not to justify women’s actions in the past, but to better inform women’s actions in the future. Studying women on the frontier, they argue, is more than trying to look at the past from today’s lenses; it requires “re-visioning” the past:

Envisioning the prairie past is more difficult and complex for those reconstructing the pasts of women on the prairie. In fact, a process must be initiated that Adrienne Rich appropriately calls re-visioning: ‘Re-vision, the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction—is for women more than a chapter in cultural history: it is an act of survival . . . A radical critique of literature, feminist in its impulse, would take the work first of all as a clue to how we live, how we have been living, how we have been led to imagine ourselves, how our language has trapped as well as liberated us, how the very act of naming has been till now a male prerogative, and how we begin to see and name—and therefore live—afresh . . . We need to know the writing of the past, and know it differently than we have ever

known it; not to pass on a tradition but to break its hold over us (Fairbanks 2).

Similarly, the purpose of studying interactions between women and Indians on the frontier, as they are represented in Wilder's texts, is not to justify the events or Wilder's telling of them, but to open dialogue about America's "prairie past" to break free of such entrapments and to avoid recreating similar entrapments in the future.

Mid-nineteenth century publications generally did not portray Indians in a favorable light. Though the dualistic split between "good" and "bad" Indians (i.e. "noble savages" and "savages") was already defined in popular literature, Indians were often posited as the direct opposite to women's state of delicacy and morality. Nearly all genres of literature offered examples of "bad" Indians, "meaning naked, dirty, mean and hostile, [and] deserv[ing] removal or destruction by a progressive and civilized white society" (Riley 38). Frontier advice books such as *The Prairie Traveler*, published by army captain Randolph B. Marcy in 1859, cautioned pioneers about "the wild tribes of the west" and advised men to familiarize themselves with the cultures of the various tribes situated along the Overland Trail so as to distinguish between friendly and hostile tribes (Marcy 196-7). According to *The Prairie Traveler*, western tribes differed significantly from eastern tribes in that

prairie tribes have no permanent abiding places; they never plant a seed, but roam for hundreds of miles in every direction over the Plains. They are perfect horsemen, and seldom go to war on foot. Their attacks are made in the open prairies, and when unhorsed they are powerless. They do not, like the eastern Indians, inflict upon their prisoners prolonged tortures, but invariably subject all females that have the misfortune to fall into their merciless clutches to an ordeal worse than death (Macy 196-7).

In spite of the exaggerated dangers spelled out in the guidebooks, such texts sometimes encouraged women to move west so that their feminine presence would have a civilizing effect on the Indians. Such a juxtaposition between women's morality and Indians' supposed lack thereof permeated popular literature for decades, especially after the advent of the turn-of-the-century dime novel. Even after the frontier was "closed," literature about the frontier reached

working-class and homebound women through excerpts in newspapers, tracts, pamphlets, sermons, speeches, street plays, their children's school and personal books and periodicals, chapbooks, jokes, folklore, and other manifestations of popular thought (Riley 32-3).

Popular dime novels depicted Indians as "'savages,' 'pesky redskins,' 'red devils,' 'cussed redskins,' and 'blood-thirsty wretches,'" to eager readers in both Europe and the United States for decades (Riley 59). In their own time, nineteenth century white women preparing for the frontier journey found additional reasons to fear Indians in the immensely popular captivity narratives, which also portrayed Indians unfavorably. Captivity narratives reminded women that there was a constant danger of being captured and held prisoner by American Indians. Many captivity narratives actually revealed that women captives were not harmed by their captors, and some, such as Olive Oatman, even tried repeatedly to return to the Native communities from which they had been "rescued." Captivity narratives enjoyed widespread readership, but most women were still terrified of encountering any Indians in the west; it seems women pioneers presumed they were likely to be captured by Indians, and that Indians would harm them. In short, "in virtually every case . . . Anglo women were not well-informed citizens who were capable

of advancing gender reform, interracial contact and the nation's best interests in positive and effective ways" (Riley 31-2).

Women's twofold predispositions—seeing themselves as weak and helpless, and seeing Indians as savage and hostile—were an unfortunate combination on the frontier. In many cases it mattered little whether white women's first encounters with Native people were positive or negative, as most women were initially terrified by even the mention or sighting of an Indian. Even after several peaceful interactions with Indians, the terror often lingered. In journals women recorded, sometimes sheepishly, their reactions toward the Indians they met on the trail or on their homesteads. Such accounts offer empirical evidence that many pioneers' responses to Indians were unequivocally based on what they expected to see, not what they actually saw. Women, and men, too, were so paranoid about seeing Indians that they often imagined Indians where none existed. Families on the trail were frequently frightened by members of their own traveling party, children, deer, stray dogs, cattle, escaped piglets, tumbleweeds, a colt, and owls, all of which were mistaken for Indians by frontier travelers on one or more occasions (Riley 101-8). In some cases, reactions to false alarms were so extreme that men shot and destroyed their goods, livestock, and companions because they believed them to be Indians (Riley 112). One woman, Lucy Cooke, described the foolish behavior of one man in her party:

'He had not gone far when, looking back, he saw someone in pursuit, and fearing it to be an Indian, jumped off his horse and took to his heels and hid in the tall grass, leaving his horse for Mr. Indian. The pursuer proved to be one of his own men, so he got well laughed at for his fright, and would have lost his horse had not an Indian caught it and brought it to camp' (Cooke qtd. in Riley 102).

The wagon train captain gave the Indian a dollar for his honesty, and the party resumed its journey unharmed. Another women recalled a “massive Indian scare when she ‘started running and screaming to a neighbor’s house’ after mistaking her son—approaching home and wearing a jaunty feather in a newly purchased hat—for an American Indian” and still another mistook a “lone mouse trying unsuccessfully to climb out of a tin dish of water” in the kitchen for an Indian intruder (Riley 109; 108). On the trail, some women were mindful of the ignorance and foolishness of their traveling companions, especially when it resulted in needless death. As Helen H. Clark noted in her journal while traveling through Pawnee-Sioux territory:

There was a white man who boasted that he would kill the first Indian he saw, he soon had opportunity of fulfilling his boast as they saw a squaw & he shot her as he would a wild animal & the Indians came on and demanded the fellow to be given up and they had to do it and the Indians skinned him alive (Clark qtd. in Schissel 118).

Anecdotes from women’s frontier experiences underscore the potentially life-or-death consequences that often resulted from a lack of cross-cultural understanding. Many stereotypes similar to the ones carried by pioneers more than a century ago prevail, emphasizing the importance of continuing to learn about, not suppress, America’s frontier past.

The journals and novels of the frontier era offer personal examples of the daily concerns of men and women on the frontier, as well as their attitudes about Indians. Studies of men and women’s frontier journals (Faragher, Riley) suggest than both men and women traveling on the frontier often wrote about three general topics: “practical aspects of the trip, the health and safety of traveling kith and kin, and the natural beauty

of the landscape” (Faragher 12). Specifically, men and women often wrote about daily tasks and work, economic concerns, weather and natural phenomenon, illnesses, and items of social interest such as Fourth of July celebrations (Faragher 12-3; Riley 180). Such topics account for approximately two thirds of the content in most journals (Faragher 14). Men’s and women’s journals also differ somewhat in several areas: men, for example, tended to write more often about “violence and aggression—fights, conflicts, and competition, and most of all hunting,” while women were more inclined than men to write about “family and relational values—the happiness and health of the children, family affection, home and hearth, [and] getting along with the traveling group” (Faragher 14). Wilder’s *Little House* texts share many similarities with other frontier accounts, and include topics common to both men’s and women’s accounts; her texts, in fact, cover all of the topics described above. Not surprisingly, however, the topics in the *Little House* texts align most closely with women’s frontier writing, as Wilder’s observations are those of a young girl who is more often than not confined to the house with her mother and sisters.

From the time the Ingalls family makes the decision to go West, Wilder’s description of the events shares similarities with other women’s frontier stories. According to Wilder’s account in the opening pages of *Little House on the Prairie*, Pa wants to leave the Big Woods of Wisconsin because he feels increasingly crowded. Wilder explains that the sense of “crowding”: “Quite often Laura heard the ringing thud of an ax which was not Pa’s ax, or the echo of a shot that did not come from his gun” (Wilder, *LHP* 2-3). Furthermore, the Ingallses felt hemmed in by neighbors because “the

path that went by the little house had become a road. Almost every day Laura and Mary stopped their playing and stared in surprise at a wagon creaking by on that road” (Wilder, *LHP* 3). The departure from the Big Woods is strictly Pa’s idea, as are each of the other subsequent family journeys. Pa talks “to,” not “with,” Ma about making the trip: “In the long winter evenings he talked to Ma about the Western country . . . [where] only Indians lived” (Wilder, *LHP* 2). By the second page the matter is settled, as Pa tells Ma, ““Seeing you don’t object, I’ve decided to go see the West,”” (Wilder, *LHP* 2) implying that Ma had at least some say in the matter, but she does not voice enthusiasm about the Westward trip.

Each element of Wilder’s short narration about the family’s decision to move west is similar to elements in other women’s accounts. In frontier narratives, for example, the man of the house longs for the western country regardless of whether any Indians are already there. One frontier woman quoted her husband’s recommendation for moving west: ““Whoo-pee! Let’s go, Maw, out yan where the Injuns be”” (qtd. in Schlissel 22). Similarly in Bess Streeter Aldrich’s frontier novel *A Lantern in her Hand*, Abbie Deal’s husband Will proposes the idea of moving west to Nebraska one evening—a place which to Abbie, sounded as foreign as South Africa (Aldrich 52). Despite Abbie’s protests, by the end of the evening “Will was talking definitely, stubbornly, as though the question were settled,” which it was. The Deals were going to Nebraska (Aldrich 52). The Ingalls family was also characteristic of most families who relocated to the west (Fairbanks 90). In Faragher’s study of 169 journals from men and women on the Overland Trail, he notes that three-quarters of the families were from the Midwestern

“border” states of Indiana, Illinois, Iowa, and Missouri, and “most of the rest came from closely bordering areas” (Faragher 16). The Ingallses, too, departed from a Midwestern farming region, and Pa, like ninety percent of the men on the Overland Trail, had aspirations of farming in the west (Faragher 16). Even Pa’s sense of crowdedness is common to other frontier accounts (Aldrich 52):

In a fashion that men and women of the twentieth century will never fully understand, farmers of the Mississippi valley and the Plains states had begun to feel ‘crowded.’ One farmer said that the reason he had to emigrate from western Illinois was that ‘people were settling right under his nose,’ although his nearest neighbor was twelve miles away (Schlissel 20).

Often some of the neighbors who contributed to the soon-to-be pioneers’ sense of crowdedness included relatives, and in many narratives the frontier journey commences amidst heavy-hearted good-byes. One woman, Lillie Marcks, noted that when she said good-bye to her family in Tiffin, Ohio in May 1869 on her way to Kansas, “‘Some cried and talked of Indians and bears’” (Marcks qtd. in Stratton 34). Members of the Ingallses’ extended family sent them off to Indian Territory with best wishes and heartfelt good-byes, but did not remind the traveling party of the potential for Indian attacks. Certainly there must have been some fear of Indians discussed in the Ingalls home prior to the trip, though, as even young Mary was afraid that she would be harmed by Indians before she met them and could form opinions about them for herself (Wilder, *LHP* 46-7). Wilder’s description of her family’s journey to Indian country is similar to many other women’s accounts in several ways: she describes the prairie landscape around her, comments on the weather and camping places, and details the day-to-day tasks that characterize life on the frontier road. As in other frontier women’s accounts, there is an

expectation of potential encounters with Indians while on the journey, but Wilder's portrayal of the potential encounters differs significantly from those in many other women's stories.

In *Little House on the Prairie*, Ma clearly does not like Indians and has no desire to see any, but there are no instances in the text where any member of the Ingalls family succumb to hysteria or terror, nor do they imagine Indians lurking around every corner, though Laura does sometimes feel as though something on the prairie is watching her (Wilder, *LHP* 288). In stark contrast to her mother's fear of encountering Indians on the trail, for Laura the entire journey is spent in the hopeful anticipation of seeing the papoose her Pa promised her that she would eventually see somewhere in Indian country. Rather than the usual dread of encountering Indians on the journey common to most women's frontier stories, in Wilder's narrative, Laura *hopes* to meet them. As in many women's accounts of the journey, however, the Ingalls family arrives safely at its destination without encountering Indians at all. Of those women who did encounter Indians on the trip, many reported their surprise as they encountered Indians who brought fresh meat and fish to trade with the appreciative travelers who were tired of the dried and pickled foods they carried with them. Others reported meeting amicable Indians who were willing to be hired as guides or ferrymen. Similarly, on another journey described in *By the Shores of Silver Lake*, the Ingalls family's safety is ensured by Big Jerry (Wilder, *BSSL* 64-5).

The Ingallses' trip passed without incident but they, like other pioneering families, were almost certain to encounter Native people sooner or later. When Indians

first visit the Ingalls home in *Little House on the Prairie*, Pa is away and Ma and her girls are at home. When the two men enter the house and ask for food, Wilder portrays her mother as terrified, but sensible and cooperative. Ma feeds the Indians, and she sits down in relief, albeit looking ill, as soon as they leave without harming the Ingalls home or family. The women in other frontier narratives often relate similar first meetings with Indians and often describe those meetings in language significantly more pejorative than Wilder's. In *A Lantern in Her Hand*, the Deals and their new neighbors see "shadowy figures" stealing with "panther-like tread between the wagons and the creek bed" during their first night's encampment on their homestead sites. Abbie Deal, with "a nightmare of fear upon her," spends a terrified night, but feels better in the morning and hopes that her husband is correct about the Pawnees' friendly status. That morning the Pawnees come to meet their new neighbors, and

A brave pointed to Oscar Lutz's wife, who was not exactly dainty in size, and shrugged massive shoulders jovially, at which the other bucks showed symptoms of ingrowing mirth. They took their time to peer into all the wagons. One man picked up a little bright-colored shoulder shawl of Sarah Lutz's and coolly transferred it to the shoulders of his squaw. The others gave a few grunts of satisfaction, fell into a long straggling line and started toward the northwest, the red and black of the appropriated shawl growing fainter in the distance (Aldrich 66).

Aside from the loss of the shawl and one horse presumably stolen by the Pawnee group, the Deals' first encounter with Native neighbors passes without further incident. Like Ma Ingalls, Castle Gayle in Nan Heacock's *From Crinoline to Calico* encounters an Indian for the first time when her husband is away, and her husband, too, has assured her that the Potawatomi in the area are "a shiftless, harmless lot" but "peaceful" (Heacock 4, 36). To her husband's disgust, Castle feared she would be "scalped" and gave the Potawatomi

man—described as a “strapping buck”— who came to her home a basket, led him to the barn, and permitted him to carry away as much corn as he could handle. In response to her husband’s complaints about her decision to give the man a basket and let him hand-select as much corn as he wanted, Castle only replied, “He could get it as good as I could. Why should I wait on him?” (Heacock 36). Some non-fiction accounts of women’s first encounters with Indians document extreme behavior on the part of the presumably well-mannered women under ordinary circumstances. One woman became hysterical and was certain she would be scalped because an Indian watched, fascinated, as she brushed her long red hair (Stratton 112). Another Kansas woman described a neighbor, Mrs. Manly, who “had not a particle of fear of the Indians.” Mrs. Manly was cleaning the ashes out of her stove when she ““was startled for an instant by the face of an Indian pressed flat against the window pane. Like a flash, she hurled the shovel, which she had in her hand, straight at the face of the Indian, shattering the glass and thoroughly frightening a much astonished Indian, who never stopped running while in sight of the house”” (Grace Hays Blackburn qtd. in Stratton 114). According to Blackburn, then a woman’s lack of fear of Indians is marked by a her ability to inflict harm upon them herself rather than relying upon the protection of white males.

While Ma and countless other frontier women no doubt found their Native neighbor’s intrusions impolite and potentially threatening to the personal safety of their homes and families, the Osage, Pawnee, and Potawatomi likely found the Ingalls’ and other settlers’ behavior equally lacking in decorum. When the Osage and other Native Nations in the region received visitors in their territory, they expected the visitors to

come bearing gifts. Certainly, the Native communities had good reason to expect gifts from the non-Natives who passed through their territory in droves, and especially from those who settled permanently in their territory without permission. The settlers' failure to offer the customary gifts, combined with the deplorable conditions of disease and starvation that non-Natives' presence usually inflicted upon Native communities—intentionally or not—frequently led the Osage and other Native communities to take matters into their own hands by asking for or taking the settlers' goods. Non-Native settlers not only failed to act in accordance with local customs initially, but showed no interest in learning the social mores of the people whose land they appropriated. Furthermore, settlers' unwillingness to share with their Native neighbors what must have appeared to be exorbitant wealth in some areas, marked them with the dubious distinction of being an especially ungenerous people. In response to the settler's failure to comply with the Nations' expected social norms and their apparent stinginess, some Native people simply took what they felt was owed them. Needless to say, Natives and non-Natives viewed the initial encounters from very different perspectives and many encounters were characterized by extreme fear and misunderstanding:

How might one expect these women to act when they met their first Indian 'other'? Most would rely on racial profiling rather than on their own observations. They would draw on long-held stereotypes and frame their reactions accordingly. Of course, their actions only helped polarize racial animosities. On the other side, virtually no one offered American Indians any information concerning the hordes of white settlers invading their lands. Because whites judged Indians as inferior and stupid, there were no ambassadors or outreach programs to make cultural confrontations go smoothly (Riley 47).

While pioneer women's first encounters with Native people are usually described in similarly unfavorable terms in both fiction and non-fiction of the frontier, there are certain to be more encounters as the pioneers settled permanently in various regions still populated by Native communities. Women's responses to these continued meetings are significant, especially in fiction:

When writers choose the frontier years as their subject, they have a wide range of options in plotting their stories and developing their characters. From an abundance of images of the Indians, they have to decide which ones their characters will carry with them into the prairie wilderness. They have to show how these images are reinforced or broken down as women encounter Indians on the trail and in the early settlements. The ethnocentrism of the characters can prevent them from learning about and understanding different Indian tribes. On the other hand, when confronting human beings rather than abstractions, women can be shown to undergo significant changes in attitude. They might not accept and like certain traditions or practices, but they can at least come to respect Indian religions, marriage customs, gender roles, attitudes toward nature, social rituals, childbirth, and childrearing practices. Thus prairie women's fiction serves as a useful supplement to historical documents by showing how numerous women writers have molded their materials according to their readings, interviews, memories, and imagination. As readers, we become more aware of the varieties and relationships between white women and Indians on the American and Canadian prairies (Fairbanks 118).

Several potential relationships between Indians and white women emerge in *Little House on the Prairie*, although the relationships are severely limited by the facts that Ma, apparently, never leaves home, and Laura is too young to venture out and form relationships on her own. Thus, Laura observes other women's relationships with Indians and comments on them, whereas many other white women had far greater opportunities to explore women's relationships with Indians in their fiction and non-fiction.

In *Little House on the Prairie*, men's and women's roles are clearly defined. In the text, Ma usually stays indoors and performs traditional women's duties such as cooking, cleaning, sewing, and teaching and caring for her children. Pa, on the other hand spends much of his time outdoors: hunting, working the fields, adding on to the house, helping neighbors, or making trips to town. Pa has the opportunity to meet Indians, while both Pa and an Osage hunter are trailing a panther that poses a threat to Osage and white families alike, for example, and his attitudes toward Indians are more informed and tolerant. Ma's lack of mobility in *Little House on the Prairie* presents a problem in the sense that she is unable to meet Indians in any context except when adult Indian men seemingly invade her home and carry off her property. Her ability, therefore, to grow in experience and change her attitude toward Indians is compromised: "If there are to be houses, the Little House series always implies, there must be housekeeping women. But if there are to be articulate women . . . those women must find a way outside the silencing, sheltering walls of the Little House" (Romines 6). Ma does not leave those walls, and even after Indians visit her home several times without harm, she still agrees with Jack, the family dog, who "despises" Indians (Wilder, *LHP* 227).

As an adult looking back on these experiences, Wilder apparently found her mother's behavior uncomfortable, and she uses Laura's voice to question her mother several times, requesting in particular that her mother explain the logic of moving into Indian Territory when Ma doesn't like Indians or even want to see them. Of course, Ma cannot provide satisfactory answers to these "ordinarily forbidden questions" (Romine 74), and Ma becomes a symbol of frontier women whose only reason for being on the

frontier in the first place is her marital obligation to follow her husband. At the same time, the child's voice which questions the practicality of being in Indian Territory among the very people they fear most underscores the irrational situation many pioneer families created for themselves. In his essay "Trusting the Woods," Modoc author Michael Dorris described Ma as "know-nothing racist," and identifies Ma's character as his reason for not reading the *Little House* books to his children though he had loved them so much as a boy that *On the Banks of Plum Creek* was the first book he ever purchased: "I had Ma to thank, possibly more than anyone else in real life or literature, for my first startling awareness that an adult authority figure could actually be wrong and narrow-minded" (Dorris 274). Had Wilder's frontier experience been free of encounters with any wrong and narrow-minded people, however, her life experience would have been unusual indeed. Ma's character in the *Little House* story illustrates the central problem of meshing frontier literature with contemporary values about women and Indians and raises significant questions about literary representations of historical people and events that are characterized by cultural insensitivity. The Ingallses' very presence on the frontier suggests the problem of appropriation, but if Wilder had created a family of characters who embraced opportunities to interact with Indians, she almost certainly would have been faulted for failing to represent cultural collision realistically or accused of denying the acts of genocide and appropriation that occurred on the Midwestern frontier.

As much as Ma fears and dislikes Indians and attempts to pass that fear and hatred on to her daughters, she does not let emotions or lack of experience result in hysteria as

her neighbor, Mrs. Scott, does. In what is by far the clearest voicing of anti-Indian sentiments in the text—which Wilder silences through Ma’s character—Mrs. Scott expresses her personal disdain for Indians, her fear of massacres, emphasizes the myth that Indians did not practice agriculture, and raises the concept of the “settler sovereign”:

[Mrs. Scott] hoped to goodness they would have no trouble with the Indians. Mr. Scott had heard rumors of trouble. She said, ‘Land knows, they’d never do anything with this country themselves. All they do is roam around over it like wild animals. Treaties or no treaties, the land belongs to folks that’ll farm it. That’s only common sense and justice.’ She did not know why the government made treaties with Indians. The only good Indian was a dead Indian. The very thought of Indians made her blood run cold. She said, ‘I can’t forget the Minnesota massacre. My Pa and my brothers went out with the rest of the settlers, and stopped them only fifteen miles west of us. I’ve heard Pa tell often enough how they---’ Ma made a sharp sound in her throat and Mrs. Scott stopped. Whatever a massacre was, it was something that grown-ups would not talk about when little girls were listening. After Mrs. Scott had gone, Laura asked Ma what a massacre was. Ma said she could not explain that now; it was something that Laura would understand when she was older (Wilder, *LHP* 211-2).

Mr. Scott, too, suggests that the only good Indian is a dead Indian, which Wilder immediately contradicts through Pa’s voice several times as she establishes Soldat du Chene and Big Jerry as heroes in her story. After a prairie fire nearly destroys the Ingalls’ and other homes, two neighbors, Mr. Edwards and Mr. Scott, are quick to blame local Indians and they believe that the fire was set intentionally to harm non-Native settlers. Pa, on the other hand, “didn’t believe it. He said that the Indians had always burned the prairie to make green grass grow more quickly, and traveling easier” (Wilder, *LHP* 283-4). Wilder documents the fearful climate in Kansas through Ma’s and Pa’s conversations with their neighbors, but as a narrator she does not overtly delineate her perspective. Like most writers, Wilder uses numerous examples to “show” rather than

“tell” about conflicts, character development, and her own convictions. Due to the particular sensitivity of the topic, perhaps, the scholarly discussion of Wilder’s Native themes has primarily been limited to expressions of outrage at her *negative* perspectives on Indians without acknowledging of her tendency to balance those examples with more *positive* ones. Wilder’s habit of juxtaposing conflicting ideas about Indians as well as her apparent interest in disproving character’s beliefs in Manifest Destiny and their misinformed ideas about Indians distinguishes her narrative from most other frontier literature that presents only negative images of Native people.

Eventually the Scotts, like the Ingallses, are driven out of Indian Territory, and since Wilder does not mention them again in her narrative it is unclear whether Mrs. Scott ever altered her attitudes about Indians. In *Little House on the Prairie*, however, Mrs. Scott represents the many women on the frontier whose lives were governed by their paralyzing—and almost always unfounded—fear of Indian massacres. Mrs. Scott’s use of the word “rumor” is pivotal, as rumors and gossip contributed to the settlers’ constant state of unrest in Indian Territory. Already saturated with negative misinformation about Indians before arriving in Indian country, many women’s nerves were “already thoroughly frazzled” and they felt as though they “had already served childhood apprenticeships as potential victims before they took their places in the wagons” (Riley 96-7). Rumors and gossip both stemmed from and fueled the tension, and stories about uprisings and massacres were usually “little more than the work of people’s overactive imaginations” (Riley 97). The staggering extent to which belief in rumors and stereotypes about Indian aggression held sway over actual experience is

confirmed in the fact that only seven percent of journals from the Overland Trail analyzed by Schlissel record actual Indian attacks. The list of white casualties resulting from Indian attacks on the Overland Trail in her study include two men, one woman, and two families (Schlissel 154). Far more Indians were killed by whites than whites by Indians (Riley 125). Notably, however, the state of Indian affairs in Kansas during Ingallses' duration in Indian Country made the possibility of conflict far more likely than it was for many travelers on the Overland Trail.

While Ma and Mrs. Scott do not, as characters in *Little House in the Prairie*, acquire accurate knowledge about the local Osage community and adjust their opinions about Indians accordingly, many characters in other frontier narratives do develop relationships with Indians. Ma and Mrs. Scott's proximity to one another as neighbors, in fact, diminishes the need for either of them to seek a sense of community among the nearby Osages. Because Mrs. Scott acts as a midwife at Carrie Ingalls's birth, Ma need not rely on female assistance from a Native woman during childbirth as some frontier women did. Many frontier journals kept by women pioneers indicate that Native women made social calls to the cabins of non-Native women and visa-versa; Wilder's account contains no such evidence, perhaps because of the heightened tensions and conflicts in the region by 1870. Unlike many women, then, the Ingalls family did not have the opportunity to build friendships or neighborly relations with the Osage. Women who did have opportunities to interact with Native people, particularly with Native women, noted a mutual interest in learning about the other's culture. Some non-Indian women visited their Indian neighbors and were invited to ceremonies, for example, while the Ingallses

only nervously watched their neighbors and listened to ceremonies from afar. Other Native and non-Native women exchanged medical advice and one white woman stood patiently while several Indian women investigated the mysteries of her hoopskirts then “laugh[ed] until the tears rolled down their cheeks” (Delia E. Brown, qtd. in Stratton 116). The women admired each other’s babies, exchanged goods, and the woman who traded her hoopskirts for study recalled that the three Indian women she had befriended brought her a ring and cried when they finally parted ways: “No words can express what that little gold ring meant to me, the love and kindly feeling that was in the hearts of those three Indian women has been a very precious memory to me” (Brown qtd. in Stratton 116). There were also women who, like Ma Ingalls, preferred to keep to themselves. Castle Gayle, for example, after living near the Potawatomi for some time, still had nothing better to say than that although she gave them her fresh-baked bread, one attempted to steal her red flannel petticoat from the wash line and she refers to them as “ingrates” and “dirty, greasy red Indians” (Heacock 37).

Ma, Castle, and many frontier women who resisted interactions with Indians inevitably sought to protect the way of life that they had cherished back east, a way of life that had no place for Natives or Native culture. Most frontier women came west reluctantly, and initially, at least, were much more interested in figuring out how to maintain their own cultures on the frontier than they were in learning about the new cultures in their midst. Many women, after all, went west with the idea that their presence would help to “settle” the country, and both fiction and non-fiction frontier accounts are littered with examples of women’s efforts to cling to their eastern lifestyles,

even when such efforts made little sense. In *A Lantern in Her Hand*, for example, Abbie and Will Deal had encountered the owners of the adjoining homesteads on their way into Nebraska, and the three families pulled into their new homesites together. Before dispersing to their respective homesteads, they linger on the Deals' land, empty except for the wagons, and one of Abbie's new neighbors tells her:

‘Well, you’re home.’ She was chuckling in her merry way. ‘This is where you live, --and my good gracious, --you’ve got callers.’ She shook hands with Abbie in mock formality. ‘May I come in and sit a while? Yes, thank you, I’ll take the rocking-chair, Mrs. Deal. Yes, thanks, I’ll have a cup of tea.’ It made Abbie laugh a little, too, the nonsense of it at such a time (Aldrich 93).

Soon Abbie and her neighbors have small sod houses on their homesteads, and Abbie busily papers the door and partition in her sod house with “hoop-skirted feminine paragons of style out of *Godey’s Ladies’ Book*, from which vantage point they looked down upon the humble interior with supercilious pride” (Aldrich 66). For Ma Ingalls, too, who symbolically places her prized figurine of a china shepherdess on the mantel of each of her frontier homes, a recent issue of the *Godey’s Ladies’ Book*, even one borrowed from a neighbor, was a treasured find that enabled her to maintain a connection to the east and, especially to see the latest in fashion (Wilder, *LTP* 91). As out of place as the *Godey’s* fashion plates must have looked in Abbie Deal’s sod house, women’s east-coast fashions were rather impractical items for most economically unstable frontier households, yet many women yearned for them. One young woman, though, annoyed with the limitations and impracticality of her long skirts, finally went out to a shed and emerged wearing one of her father’s old suits. She recalled, “‘it was very funny to all but Mother, who feared I am losing all the dignity I ever possessed’” (qtd. in Schlissel 84).

Practical or not, most women insisted on dressing for fashion and tradition rather than practicality or comfort.

If there was one article of clothing, however, that most symbolized frontier women's propensity for clinging to east coast values, it was the sunbonnet. The sunbonnet was far more than just a standard article of clothing donned by respectable women; more importantly, it protected women's pale complexions from the hot prairie sunshine:

In the nineteenth-century United States, a woman's pale complexion often signified privilege, shelter, protection, and confinements; it was also an external indicator that she did not belong to one of the darker-skinned races against which United States law discriminated (Romine 58-9).

Most women took care to protect their skin from the sun, but when Castle in *From Crinoline to Calico*—who despised frontier life so much that she refused to perform her responsibilities as a homesteader's wife until her husband denied her food—failed to wear her bonnet, her husband reminded her of its importance:

‘Wear your sunbonnet. You might get freckled.’

‘A fat lot of difference it makes out here!’

Nevertheless, Castle wore her sunbonnet. She didn't intend to get parched and leather like the women she'd seen on the trip from Kanesville. One look told you they had no pride at all. She jerked the bonnet farther over her face (Heacock 53).

Often it was mothers who reminded their daughters of the importance of the sunbonnet. Young girls on the frontier apparently did not share their mother's appreciation of fair skin. Frontier narratives suggest that the sunbonnet was

‘often the focus of the contest’ between mothers and daughters on the Great Plains; the freckled or tanned skin of a bonnetless daughter seemed a dangerous rejection of ‘conservative’ Euro-American standards of

womanhood and of ‘ideals of [female] beauty that emphasized clear and pale skin’ (Riley qtd. in Romine 57).

One girl, Adrietta Hixon, recalled that her mother made her daughters wear not only bonnets, but long mitts on their hands, too. Hixon disliked wearing the bonnet but complied because her mother showed her some girls who didn’t wear bonnets and she “‘did not want to look as they did’” (Hixon qtd. in Schlissel 84).

In *Little House on the Prairie* Wilder introduces the conflict between Ma and Laura regarding Laura’s disinterest in wearing her sunbonnet. Laura, ordinarily characterized as a respectful and obedient child, has difficulty following her mother’s orders to wear her bonnet. In *Little House on the Prairie*, Laura’s refusal to wear her sunbonnet is a significant symbol of her own emerging values and Wilder creates a powerful connection between Ma’s and Laura’s opinions about both the sunbonnet and American Indians. One afternoon, Mary and Laura

sat and soaked in the sunshine and the wind until Laura forgot that the baby was sleeping. She jumped up and ran and shouted till Ma came to the door and said, ‘Dear me, Laura, must you yell like an Indian? I declare,’ Ma said, ‘if you girls aren’t getting to look like Indians! Can I never teach you to keep your sunbonnets on?’ Pa was up on the house wall, beginning the roof. He looked down on them and laughed. ‘One little Indian, two little Indians, three little Indians,’ he sang softly. ‘No, only two.’ ‘You make three,’ Mary said to him. ‘You’re brown, too’ (Wilder, *LHP* 122).

Ma’s suggestion that her girls are beginning to look and act “like Indians” marks her fear that she may fail in her attempts to instill her own values in Mary and Laura. If Laura can take on the appearance of an Indian, then “race is not a fixed, absolute condition but is as fluctuating as the Kansas border seems to be. In this new country, young Laura might *become* the fascinating Other: ‘brown as an Indian’” (Romine 57). If Ma has a

problem with Laura taking on the appearance of an Indian, Laura herself clearly does not. Once, she even has a “naughty wish to be a little Indian girl. Of course, she did not really mean it. She only wanted to be bare and naked in the wind and the sunshine” (Wilder, *LHP* 307). Later, acknowledging her the unsuitability of her clothing for her environment, Laura wishes she could be an Indian so she wouldn’t have to wear as many clothes.

After Ma accuses her daughters of looking like Indians, and Mary notices that Pa has acquired a suntan, too, Laura takes advantage of her Ma’s comments about Indians and tries to turn the conversation in a different direction:

‘Pa, when are we going to see a papoose?’

‘Goodness!’ Ma exclaimed. ‘What do you want to see an Indian baby for? Put on your sunbonnet, now, and forget such nonsense.’ Laura’s sunbonnet hung down her back. She pulled it up by its strings, and its sides came past her cheeks. When her sunbonnet was on she could only see what was in front of her, and that was why she was always pushing it back and letting it hang by the strings tied around her throat. She put her sunbonnet on when Ma told her to, but she did not forget that papoose. This was Indian country and she didn’t know why she didn’t see Indians. She knew she would see them sometime, though. Pa said so, but she was getting tired of waiting (Wilder, *LHP* 123).

Laura is subject to the rules of her parents’ household, so wears her bonnet when instructed to do so. Her refusal to forget about the idea of seeing a papoose, however, suggests that she can be an obedient daughter but still have her own thoughts. Notably, the bonnet is steeped in symbolism as Laura likens wearing a sunbonnet to having tunnel vision. If, as an adult, Wilder disagreed with her own mother’s ideas about Indians, it would be difficult for her to articulate such opposition to her mother and still maintain a believable narrative perspective of a six-year-old girl. Using the bonnet as a symbol

affords Wilder the opportunity to use a trope already quite common in frontier literature to subtly undermine her mother's negative ideas about Indians. There is symbolism, too, in Ma's rejection of everything that has to do with Indians as she tries to find a sense of order in her frontier household: "[Ma] is largely portrayed as calmly acquiescent, but her one major outlet for anger, resistance, and defense of the values of feminine domestic culture on the unsettled prairie is her intense, vocal rejection of Indians and Indian cultures" (Romine 69). Laura's sisters, especially Mary, often join Ma in reprimanding Laura. On Laura's wedding day in *These Happy Golden Years*, her youngest sister confirms the ongoing conflict as she hands Laura her old sunbonnet and calls after Laura and Almanzo's buggy, "Remember, Laura, Ma says if you don't keep your sunbonnet on, you'll be as brown as an Indian!" (Wilder, *THGY* 283). Strong as Ma's and her sisters' voices against Indians may be, Laura's interest in witnessing Indian culture firsthand is stronger.

In spite of the sunbonnet, Laura finally has an opportunity to see what *she* wants to see: a papoose. In women's frontier narratives, children, both Native and non-Native, occasionally offer opportunities for non-threatening or even humorous interactions between Natives and non-Natives. Mrs. Campbell, whose hoopskirts were examined, was sympathetic but not sure how to help when an Indian man came to her and explained that his wife was "heap sick." She sent a dose of castor oil home with him and was no doubt surprised the next day when he returned to say, "Heap good medicine, two papoose" (Brown qtd. in Stratton 117). Another Kansas woman remembered how she met several Indian women while out strawberrying who exclaimed over her "petite

papoose.” As the alarmed mother explained, ““Finally one of them held up her hands and what did that baby do but go right to her. They laughed and passed her from one to the other”” (Aura St. John qtd. in Stratton 113). While babies and children in frontier narratives sometimes stimulated positive interactions between Indians and non-Indians, they also inspired extreme examples of cultural appropriation on the frontier. One woman described a child she saw while traveling through Panama:¹⁴ ““Saw a beautiful child, she put out her hand, I asked her mother to give her to me, she said I could have her for \$100 . . . I should have taken her, it is the only thing I have seen in Panama I wanted”” (Mary Jane Megquier qtd. in Schlissel 62).

The passage in *Little House on the Prairie* that describes Wilder’s first sighting of a “papoose,” while not entirely unusual in the context of frontier women’s narratives, is among the most controversial and frequently analyzed by the scholars of Wilder’s work who comment on Native themes. Remarkably, the passage is cited by scholars with varying perspectives on Wilder’s work as the epitomizing example of both Wilder’s ethnocentrism *and* her openness to exploring cross-cultural relationships. The multiple interpretations of Wilder’s papoose scene reveal the potential entrapments of seeing only what one wishes to see in Wilder’s work as much as they offer opportunities for discussing the seldom-aired theme of many non-Indians’ appropriation of all things Native on the frontier. When the long lines of Indians ride past the Ingallses’ home after

¹⁴ Some wealthy families made their way west by boat rather than the arduous wagon ride. Such emigrants traveled south to Panama, walked or rode overland across Panama, then took another boat northward to the California coast.

the “jamboree” ended, Laura sees many presumably Osage babies with their mothers.

One baby seems to make eye contact with Laura, and she says to her Pa,

‘get me that little Indian baby!’

‘Hush, Laura!’ Pa told her sternly.

The little baby was going by. Its head turned and its eyes kept looking into Laura’s eyes.

‘Oh, I want it! I want it!’ Laura begged. The baby was going farther and farther away, but it did not stop looking back at Laura. It wants to stay with me,’ Laura begged. “Please, Pa, please!” (Wilder, *LHP* 308-9).

Laura begins to cry, and cannot stop even when Ma shames her and asks what on earth she would want an Indian baby for. Laura sobs, “‘It’s eyes are so black,’” but she “could not say what she meant” (Wilder, *LHP* 309). Laura’s outburst is startling for a number of reasons. Besides the obvious problem of wanting to take a baby away from its mother, her request is especially surprising because it comes immediately after a period of living in fear of being massacred by Indians during the “jamboree.” Laura’s demand of her Pa is also entirely out of character, as she and her sisters have been strictly raised to believe that children should be seen and not heard. In the entire nine-novel story, she makes only one other specific demand of her parents—permission to cut her hair into fashionable new bangs. Laura is also constantly aware that she is to speak only when spoken to and she is not to cry or demonstrate her emotions.

One interpretation of Laura’s desire to keep the papoose is Wilder’s alleged celebration of Manifest Destiny and associated acts of cultural appropriation. Angela Cavendar Wilson, for example, identifies the scene as “one of the most offensive passages” and claims that it demonstrates that “Laura Ingalls wanted a little Indian baby just as she would want a pet” (Wilson 71). Other examples of white women’s tendency

toward displaying appropriative behavior abound in frontier narratives. In a variation on Laura and Mary's trip to the vacant Indian camp where they gathered lost beads, for example, some women even went so far as collecting beads from the bodies of deceased Native people they found on funeral platforms in the plains region. While some agree that Laura's response to the papoose suggests that "she has already imbibed the pioneer's urge to own and control the wilderness" (Wolf 47), other scholars disagree. Another possibility is that the very word "papoose," which drives the both the Ingallses' journey and the plot of *Little House on the Prairie*, "suggests that there is another way to be an American child in a country that is not owned by Indian men but is marked by and named by other cultures" (Romine 57). In another interpretation, Laura's desire for the papoose acknowledges a Native presence that is not hostile, dangerous, and unwanted, but one that is worth knowing and embracing:

This passionate cry gives voice to the most piercing tensions of frontier settlement *and* of the multi-cultural possibilities of American life. While Laura's demand for the baby may express a sense of cultural entitlement that views the Indian child as an *object* of desire, the intense look she exchanges with the baby also suggests that she is trying to broach possibilities of a shared lifestyle and a shared life between the European American and Native American children. However futilely, she is reaching toward an extended family that she might share with both her white sisters and an Indian baby. Laura's upbringing offers no way to express such a wish; 'she could not say what she meant.' But her unseemly outburst is a female child's explosive critique of the languages offered by her own culture; it voices her yearning for a life of expansion, inclusion and acculturation that she has begun to intuit in Kansas. Such scenes, I argue, make the *Little House* series a far more complex cultural frontier than we critics have yet acknowledged. In the newly mobile Laura, Wilder and Lane found a sensibility that could begin to express the accelerating desires and pressures of a borderland girlhood (Romines, "Frontier" 38).

The complexity of scenes such as the papoose scene, Romine argues, also makes *Little House on the Prairie* the most controversial of the Little House books (Romine, “Frontier” 38).

Wilder’s specific intentions regarding the papoose scene in *Little House on the Prairie* may never be known. While the papoose scene remains especially controversial, what makes this anecdote remarkable in the context of women’s frontier narratives is that there *are* multiple interpretations of it. Many frontier narratives present Native issues in blatantly negative terms and there is little room for discussion about complex multiple interpretations of them. Wilder’s subject matter—in terms of both personal and national history—are complex and controversial, and her narrative perspective and the time span between the events and Wilder’s recording of them both add additional layers of complexity to the scene.

One possibility for Wilder’s complex portrayal of Native themes is that she is typical of many frontier women who were “caught between messages” (Riley 37) about white women’s expected behavior and their actual experiences with American Indians. Comparisons between men’s and women’s journals indicate that women were more likely to change their initial attitudes about Indians than men were, largely because women’s own identities often underwent significant transformations as a result of life on the frontier:

Women’s perceptions frequently altered because their perceptions of American Indians were linked to changing ideas about themselves as females. As women’s beliefs about themselves modified, women thought of themselves less as civilizers and more as physically adept people. Consequently, they were able to see native peoples in a more humane way. A woman who headed westward with trepidation regarding Native

Americans could, and often did, become sympathetic to those very Indians (Riley 133).

As women, preconditioned to believe themselves weak and helpless, suddenly found themselves in a position where there was no choice but to join their husbands in building the family home, working the fields, driving wagons, caring for livestock, or crossing other deeply-rooted gendered lines about men's and women's work they often discovered that they were not frail or helpless as they'd long believed. Similarly, the fact that the sleepless nights filled with endless trepidation about hostile Indians almost always turned out to be still another false alarm was not lost on the women.

Wilder is a good candidate for having potentially more enlightened ideas about Indians than her mother did for both of the above reasons: gendered lines were far more blurred for Wilder than they were for her Ma, and Wilder witnessed no events to justify her mother's attitudes toward Native people. Two circumstances in Wilder's life put her in the necessary position of helping the men in her life with their work. First, her parents had no sons to help Pa with work ordinarily relegated to the men of the house. As a little girl, Laura was often near her father, watching or helping him with his work as he builds houses, cleans his gun, makes bullets, and does other male-oriented tasks. At thirteen, Laura offers to help her father with the haying, as he is attempting the task alone. Ma consents but is unhappy about the situation:

'Why, I guess you can,' Ma said doubtfully. She did not like to see women working in the fields. Only foreigners did that. Ma and her girls were Americans, above doing men's work. But Laura's helping with the hay would solve the problem (Wilder *TLW* 4).

Later, the necessity for Laura to take a sewing job outside the home is equally troubling for Ma, who struggles to negotiate her long-held beliefs with her new life on the frontier. The second circumstance that impacted Wilder's work habits occurred shortly after she was married. When her husband suffered a stroke that left him partially crippled for the remainder of his life, Wilder helped Almanzo on a daily basis. Wilder's own life experiences left her little reason to cling to the same ideas about women's helplessness and delicacy that likely characterized her mother's upbringing. And, in spite of her mother's best efforts to instill her daughters with fear and hatred of Indians, Laura herself witnessed no reason to support her mother's opinions. In a study that thoroughly explores gender issues in *Little House on the Prairie*, Virginia Wolf suggests that Laura's very identity is characterized by a blending of both her mother's and father's characteristics: "Laura doesn't understand Ma's racist view of Native Americans and, resisting Ma's efforts to make her genteel, follows the impulses of her own heart and imagination . . . Laura needs and loves the Little House, but neither more nor less than she needs and loves wilderness. She is both her mother's and her father's daughter—a balance of the two" (Wolf 49). The mix of ideas about Indians Wilder presents in the *Little House* texts, too, is likely influenced by Laura's own mixed influences and experiences, and the contrast of ideas about Indians presented by each parent: Ma who "despises" Indians and Pa who articulates respect for the unnamed Indian who forewarns the towns people of the impending snows described in *The Long Winter*, thus partially owing the well-being of his family to a Native person once again (Wilder *TLW* 61-4). As Wilder finally recorded her frontier experiences decades after they occurred, she was

likely even more caught between mixed messages than most frontier women. For Wilder's daughter and editor, Rose, was exceptionally well-traveled and multi-cultural even by today's standards, and undoubtedly brought ideas about women's behavior and cross-cultural exchange into the Wilder household that must have sharply contrasted with those of both her mother and her grandmother.

One final point of comparison between *Little House on the Prairie* and other women's frontier narratives is what happens to the Native people in the narrative by the close of the story. As already noted, the ending of *Little House on the Prairie* is highly unusual among frontier narratives because it is the Ingallses, not the Indians, who ultimately leave the area. Many women's journals simply end after the wagon trip is complete, but fictional accounts of frontier life often seek to establish a sense closure to Indians' presence. In sharp contrast to the events in *Little House on the Prairie*, the omniscient narrator in *A Lantern in Her Hand*, for example, cuts in midway through the story to comment on Will Deal's belief that white settlers and towns will eventually replace the Native presence:

Prophetic words! A town lies here and a village there. Huge tractors turn a half dozen furrows in one trip across the fields. Omaha and Lincoln are great centers for commercial, industrial, and educational interests. Where once the Indian pitched his tepee for a restless day, there are groupings of schools and churches and stores and homes (Aldrich 69).

His wife, Abbie, agrees and can hardly wait for the non-Native presence to establish itself: ““Will, when we get fences, I'll like it better. It seems so sort of heathenish to come across the country any way. There ought to be nice straight roads everywhere and fences to show where our land begins and ends’” (Aldrich 72). The Indians who put the

food Abbie gave them “into their dirty blankets, and went on over the prairie in their straggling single-file way, the poles of their teepees dragging from the scrawny ponies’ sides” simply fade out of the story with no discussion of how or why (Aldrich 74). In the sequel to *A Lantern in Her Hand*, Aldrich’s *White Bird Flying*, the Indians are quite gone from Nebraska, and Abbie’s granddaughter, Laura, refers to people who like to hunt for Indian “curios” and later sees a home that contains “Indian relics and mementoes” (Aldrich, *White* 44-5; 138). While vacationing with her mother in the Great Lakes region, Laura Deal spotted a teepee and she is

transported in fancy to the days when Indians lived by the lake. She was deep in an emotional retrospection of time, when Eloise called practically: ‘No, Laura; look here. It’s of recent date. The poles at the top are bound together with a patented wire. Scouts or high boys! No Indian ever put those poles together.’ Laura had to admit defeat. But why couldn’t Mother have left her the fancy? (Aldrich, *White* 59).

In Aldrich’s novels, the treatment of Native themes is fairly typical: the inconvenient Indians simply and conveniently fade out of the story. Aldrich makes the transformation complete by positing Indian culture as something to be hunted by collectors, appropriated by scouts, or fantasized about by a young white girl as she sees only the romance she wishes to see in the bygone days of Indian life.

In Heacock’s *From Crinoline to Calico*, once again the Indians fade from the narrative without inconvenience to the characters. The characters do not speak of the matter, and again, the omniscient narrator lets the reader know that the Indians are gone:

When fall came the Indians camped again on Turkey Creek and again the settlers were pestered with their begging and bargaining. But in the spring they broke camp there for the last time and followed their brothers to the Kansas Reservation. Though they had done no harm, neither had they contributed to the good of the community (Heacock 93).

In a didactic voice identical to the voice in *A Lantern in Her Hand*, the narrator assures readers that there is no reason to lament the Indians' disappearance:

Pioneer days were at an end for all of Turkey Grove. Only Indians inhabited the township when Lew had built his first cabin. Now, the Indians were gone; most of the township was under fence; and roads replaced trails. Iowa was no longer a wilderness, and settlers had become prosperous farmers (Heacock 213-4).

Notably, the men in *A Lantern in Her Hand* and *From Crinoline to Calico* managed to become successful farmers, and the texts laud the humble farmers who (after running Indians out of the region) pull themselves up by their proverbial bootstraps to become successful yeoman farmers. In contrast, in *Little House on the Prairie* and the subsequent texts, the Indians do not leave, Pa Ingalls never fulfills his dream of becoming a farmer, and the romance of Manifest Destiny fails the Ingallses as they end up spending much of their time living in town, certainly more crowded than in the Big Woods of Wisconsin before their frontier journey began.

As discussed in Chapter Four, Wilder likely knew that the Osage were removed from Kansas at the time she wrote *Little House on the Prairie*. Her telling, however, suggests that the Osage are only going away on a hunt and it is the Ingallses who must leave the area. Wilder's telling of the events might be interpreted, interestingly, as a way to avoid discussing the impending Indians' removal, or a way of subverting the premise of Manifest Destiny as well as the entire canon of frontier literature. Either way, Wilder devotes an entire chapter, "Indians Ride Away," to describing the Ingalls family's impression of seeing the Indians ride past them after the "jamboree" comes to an end. The event is emotional for the family, as they all stand in their doorway watching as the

“long line of Indians slowly pulled itself over the western edge of the world” (Wilder, *LHP* 311). They watch the men, women, and children ride by, and though “it was dinner-time, no one thought of dinner” (Wilder, *LHP* 310). After the last Indian disappears from view, still the family stands in the doorway, deeply impacted by the sight of so many Indians riding by, and even Ma says she feels “let down” after they were gone and “nothing was left by silence and emptiness. All the world seemed very quiet and lonely” (Wilder, *LHP* 311). Angela Cavendar Wilson scoffs at the scholars who cite this passage as an indication that Wilder was not a racist who celebrated the idea of Manifest Destiny, and insists that it is only “nostalgia” and a “twinge of remorse” that any racist person could have (Wilson 73). In the context of women’s frontier literature, however, the amount of time, space, and emotion Wilder invests in describing the Osage Nation’s ride past her family’s home is highly unusual; in most texts Indians fade from the story with little comment. Wilder’s recognition of the presence of a large Native population is also unusual. Wilson’s comments serve as a poignant reminder of the extraordinary challenge of representing frontier issues in literature as even a relatively sensitive passage can be subject to condemnation. Her remarks, too, suggest that it is possible for readers to see in the *Little House* texts precisely what he or she wishes to see.

One of the difficulties in approaching the *Little House* books is that regardless of Wilder’s own opinion of Manifest Destiny and the westward movement, her presence on the frontier made her a part of the movement, and the movement became a part of her life experience. These facts are sometimes evidence in themselves for readers who wish to either praise or condemn Wilder as a frontier writer—it is not difficult to pull quotations

from the texts that suggest that Wilder is either rather sensitive toward Native issues, or highly *insensitive* toward them. In the end, Wilder was likely quite similar to many frontier women whose life experience on the frontier revealed deep, inherent problems with Manifest Destiny and federal Indian policies, but like Wilder, the women struggled to articulate their observations:

In the end, women who saw Indians more clearly and related to them more intimately than most men, were still unable to free themselves from colonialist attitudes. Although some gained enough objectivity to criticize the imperialism of Manifest Destiny, they had neither the insight nor the power to bring it down (Riley 10).

Wilder seems to best illustrate this struggle in a single line from her journal, which she wrote on the wagon ride from South Dakota to Missouri with her husband and daughter in 1894 nearly forty years before she published the first *Little House* book. Surveying the land near the James River in southeast South Dakota, she remarks, “If I had been the Indians I would have scalped more white folks before I ever would have left it” (Wilder, *OWH* 24). Wilder’s ability to recognize and appreciate not only the potential for attachment to a specific place, but to acknowledge Native rights to it is remarkable for the time and place and paradigm from which she wrote. At the same time, the language she uses to express her affinity lacks cultural sensitivity and political correctness by today’s standards.

Contextualizing Wilder’s story with other frontier stories helps to shed light on places where American paradigms of thought that have changed and where they have remained the same. More importantly, such contextualization emphasizes the need for increased dialogue about America’s frontier past. If the information about nineteenth

century women's expected behaviors which helped to shape Ma's and Mrs. Scott's feelings of helplessness and fear, or the widespread misinformation about Native communities that contributed to needless violence and death in Wilder's time, are surprising to the modern reader, than an important step in preventing such behavior in the future has been overlooked: education about deeply-indoctrinated sexism and genocide America's recent past. As Michael Dorris read the *Little House* books to his children before putting them away altogether, he confessed to skipping the passages about Indians he found unfavorable (Dorris 274), just as others have described omitting uncomfortable sections while reading aloud or crossing out the parts about Indians with a thick black marker before giving the texts to children. The fact that Dorris and other readers are inclined to censor the texts before presenting them to children is not necessarily an indication that the texts are racist and worthy of banning, but that the themes of the text are often complex and adult-oriented and require responsible contextualization when read with children.

In the *Little House* texts Wilder raises serious issues about America's frontier past—variously interpreted as either her intentional efforts to raise questions about Manifest Destiny or her failure to reject Manifest Destiny enough—that offer important and widespread opportunities for learning about the roles of both women and Indians on the frontier. The women who set up housekeeping in Indian Territory and hoped to never encounter an Indian and the contemporary scholarship about the frontier which omits the era's blunders, fallacies, and atrocities are similar in that they both avoid dialogue about the Native presence on the frontier and the impact of America's westward expansion.

Whether adult readers study the texts as examples of women's frontier literature or read the stories aloud to children in their homes and classrooms, they might look beyond their usual expectations of the texts and take advantage of educational opportunities by discussing the uncomfortable aspects of an otherwise enjoyable story. When reading *Little House on the Prairie* as a work of women's frontier literature, readers go with Laura into Indian Territory as she saw it. If we are uncomfortable with what Laura saw, then we have all the more reason to be sure that future generations have the ability to see both the past and future with different lenses.

VI. LITTLE HOUSE IN A BIG DEPRESSION: THE *LITTLE HOUSE* NARRATIVE AS DEPRESSION-ERA CHILDREN'S LITERATURE

"I find my heart is getting harder. I can have no least sympathy for people any more who can do and will only holler that there is no chance any more. I wish they *all* might have had the opportunities we had when I was young *and no more*. Wouldn't it be fun to watch 'em?"—Laura Ingalls Wilder in correspondence to Rose Wilder Lane, March 12, 1937 (Wilder qtd. in Fellman, "Politics" 170)

Studying the *Little House* narrative in the contexts of Native and women's issues offers a richer understanding of some of Wilder's complex themes, and reinforces the difficulties of committing the story to one specific genre. While the *Little House* series shares characteristics with texts across a variety of genres—autobiography, historical fiction, and women's frontier narratives—they are still first and foremost considered works of children's literature. More specifically, they are literature of the Depression Era, and the Golden Age of children's literature. Appreciating the *Little House* narrative as Depression-Era children's literature begins with a look at the Depression and its influence on the texts as Wilder's story often reflects political and literary trends of her time. Next, a brief overview of developments in American children's literature in the 1920s to 1940s establishes a framework for the "Golden Age" of children's literature during which Wilder wrote. Finally, viewing the Native themes in Wilder's texts from a 1930s perspective offers still another way of understanding her representation of Native issues. When the *Little House* narrative is studied in the context of Depression-Era children's literature it is apparent that the texts are about much more than a little girl on the frontier; the covered wagon is often a vehicle for transporting Wilder's and Lane's anti-New Deal sentiments.

John Miller's article "Laura Ingalls Wilder: A Perspective from 1932, the Year of Publication of Her First 'Little House' Book," describes the context in which Wilder wrote and published *Little House in the Big Woods*. Miller compiled a sketch of what Wilder's world might have looked like at the national, regional, local, and household levels primarily through a study of newsworthy items in and around 1932. Miller's article suggests that first and foremost on the minds of most Americans in 1932 was that it was the third year of hardships brought on by the Great Depression. Other items in the national news included Amelia Earhart's transatlantic flight, the kidnapping of famed aviator Charles Lindbergh's only son, and the death of Frederic Jackson Turner (Miller, "A Perspective" 1-2). On the political scene, Democrats enjoyed a "landslide victory" in fall elections and Franklin D. Roosevelt was elected President of the United States, to the great consternation of Wilder and Lane (Miller, "A Perspective" 1). Other topics of interest to farmers like the Wilders in the early 1930s included highway improvement projects and a "buy at home" campaign that emphasized the economic importance of resisting the "chain-store 'invasion'" by buying goods from locally owned stores (Miller, "A Perspective" 7-8). The *Mansfield Mirror* also listed the town's social events and the names of the participants who attended each event; a record which indicates Wilder's participation in her club activities lessened by 1932, perhaps due to her intensified commitment to writing (Miller, "A Perspective" 6). If the Wilders had an interest in entertainment and celebrities, they might have listened to the new "Buck Rogers" program on CBS Radio, or tracked Babe Ruth's notably successful year through radio programs or *Time* magazine (Miller, "A Perspective" 8-9). They probably read about

Carl Mays, who also hailed from Mansfield, Missouri and, prior to the publication of Wilder's *Little House* books, shared the distinction of being Mansfield's most famous citizen with Rose Wilder Lane (Miller, "A Perspective" 10).

At the time Wilder recorded her life story, the Depression likely occupied much of Wilder's and Lane's attention and had the greatest impact on the content, publication, and circulation of the *Little House* texts. As discussed in Chapter Three, Wilder saw a distinct connection between the difficult times her family faced on the frontier and the Depression of the 1930s. Lane recalled that her mother's frontier experiences, especially her near-death situation during the long winter of 1880 to 1881, were not dim memories of earlier times; rather, even decades later, the experiences remained central to Wilder's identity and dictated many of her habits and principles. Lane suggested that Wilder's tendency to preserve and store food, her extreme caution about spending money, and her methods of conservation that included reusing scraps of paper as she handwrote the *Little House* books were all linked to her mother's facing of life-or-death circumstances in 1880 to 1881. Due in part, to Wilder's exceptionally careful management of her household resources, the Wilders' home was not devastated by the Depression, though both the Wilders and Lane lost investments (Miller, "A Perspective" 2; Miller, "Myth" 5), but its ideological impact was profound as the Wilders and Lane vociferously rejected the New Deal. Wilder insisted that families like her own had survived hard times on the frontier without expecting government assistance, and she encouraged her friends and readers to similarly reject government aid during the Depression. In a speech Wilder delivered to the members of the Mountain Grove Sorosis Club in 1936 she explained,

In the Depression following the Civil War my parents lost all their savings in a bank failure. They farmed the rough land on the edge of the Big Woods in Wisconsin. They struggled with the climate and fear of Indians in the Indian Territory. For two years in succession they lost their crops to the grasshoppers on the Banks of Plum Creek. They suffered cold and heat, hard work and privation as did others of their time. When possible, they turned the bad into good. If not possible, they endured it. Neither they nor their neighbors begged for help. No other person, nor the government, owed them a living. They owed that to themselves and in some way they paid the debt. And they found their own way (Wilder and Lane 180).

Though Wilder and her daughter had once aligned themselves with the Democratic party, Roosevelt's plan for moving the country from a state of depression to one of prosperity—the New Deal—caused Wilder to view “the direction of the Democratic party with even greater alarm and [she] became an outspoken critic of Roosevelt and his minions. Her expressions of concern, however, paled in comparison to those of her daughter, who became apoplectic at the thought of where the New Dealers were leading the country” (Miller, “A Perspective” 4). While Wilder and Lane openly criticized the New Deal, particularly through their writing, Almanzo Wilder expressed his opposition to the effects of the New Deal at a more local personal as he “ran a federal farm agent off his property when the man dropped by to talk about new production quotas that Congress had enacted. The eighty-one-year-old farmer yelled at the government man to ‘get the hell’ off his land ‘and if you’re on it when I get to my gun, by God I’ll fill you with buckshot’” (Miller, “A Perspective” 3-4). The Wilders and Lane recognized that as Roosevelt replaced Hoover in office, the philosophy of a people-supported government was replaced with one of a government-supported people. The Wilders’ and Lane’s worst fears were fulfilled, and this manifestation is evident today as “The Great Depression and the New Deal changed

forever the relationship between Americans and their government. Government involvement and responsibility in caring for the needy and regulating the economy came to be expected” by Americans (“The Great Depression”).

Today, Lane’s significant literary contributions have been overshadowed by the fame of her mother’s *Little House* books, but she was well-known in her time and is still considered a “central figure” in the anti-New Deal literary movement of the 1930s (Ehrhard 96). During the Depression, Lane “wrote essays that are now regarded as seminal declarations of contemporary libertarian political philosophy” and she also challenged the foundations of frontier literature by depicting the “archetypal pioneer hero not as a lone male adventurer, but as a young married mother alone on a homestead” (Ehrhard 118). Lane frequently embedded both her fiction and non-fiction with unmasked anti-New Deal propaganda. After Roosevelt’s reelection in 1936, for example, Lane declared him a dictator and wrote *Give Me Liberty*, in which she

identified herself as a ‘fundamentalist American’ horrified by the president’s program of ‘national socialism.’ She warned readers that if they did not respond immediately to this national ‘emergency,’ fascism would soon suppress ‘personal freedom, freedom of movement, choice of work, freedom of self expression in ways of life, freedom of speech, [and] freedom of conscience’ (Lane qtd. in Ehrhardt 130-1).

Lane also warned her readers of the potential dangers of America’s growing dependency on an increasingly powerful government in articles published in women’s magazines such as *Cosmopolitan* and *Women’s Day*, in her novel *Free Land* which ridiculed the premise of the Homestead Act, and in her best-known novel, *Let the Hurricane Roar*. Originally published as a series of installments in *The Saturday Evening Post*, the content of *Let the Hurricane Roar* is based upon the Ingallses’ frontier experiences and bears

remarkable similarities to sections of Wilder's *Little House* narrative. After the first installment of *Let the Hurricane Roar* in 1933, "it was obvious that Lane had struck a powerful chord with her audience," and "readers flooded the magazine's editorial office with a deluge of fan mail praising the accuracy of Lane's description of life as well as her political message" (Ehrhardt 123). Readers clearly understood Lane's parallels between frontier times and the Depression. One reader explained, "Honestly, it makes me ashamed of fussing about hard times and taxes," while another agreed, "We have grown too much used to bemoaning our hard lot and expecting Uncle Sam to do it for us . . . This book is something America needs just now" (qtd in Ehrhardt 123). Another reader's response to *Let the Hurricane Roar* challenged the popular expectation that the government would care for Americans during the Depression as he or she "jokingly wondered why 'in Sam Hill' Charles and Caroline had not asked the president for help, surmising that 'the dumb bunnies' had been too stupid to realize that the government was supposed to support them" (qtd. in Ehrhardt 123). Lane, Wilder, and their readers likely saw similarities between frontier days and the Depression beyond financial hardships alone. The pioneers depicted in Lane's and Wilder's stories, like endless numbers of Dust Bowl farmers in the 1930s, faced catastrophic environmental conditions which created life-threatening circumstances for widespread regions of people, and both generations of Americans were forced to sign humiliating oaths of poverty if they accepted government assistance. Finally, many readers in the 1930s likely sympathized with characters who were forced to abandon their homes and migrate—often

Westward— in order to survive.¹⁵ During the largest migration in American history, 2.5 million Americans left their homes in the Dust Bowl Exodus, and, like the pioneers in the *Little House* books and many other frontier narratives, usually did not find the paradise they anticipated (“The Great Depression”).

While readers often interpret the *Little House* books as a glorification of the frontier experience, envisioning the narrative as it was written during the Depression by a mother and daughter writing/editing team that embraced every opportunity to emphasize “governmental unreliability and destructive meddling” (Miller, Dwight 49) reveals a very different possible interpretation of the events. Rather than celebrating the myth of the frontier experience, one returns to the idea that the texts often become “correctives to an unthinking acceptance of the myth, reminding one and all that progress does not come without cost” (Erisman, *Laura* 17). As Wilder and Lane scrutinized the pioneer experience and its prominence in their family history, they undoubtedly realized that as much as Charles and Caroline Ingalls “continue[d] to embrace the westering myth,” they inevitably found “themselves increasingly caught up in a life for which the myth has not prepared them (Erisman, *Laura* 21). The concept of being “free and independent” is repeated throughout the *Little House* series, but that independence is fraught with ironies and contradictions. Pa Ingalls, in particular, keeps moving his family westward in hopes of achieving the independent lifestyle he yearns for; “at book’s end Pa is once again a landowner and settler, but his situation is made possible only by the benevolence of the national government . . . Pa believes he is on the brink of independence, but Wilder

¹⁵ The Ingalls movement into Indian Country was due to Pa’s restless desire to see the West, but subsequent moves in the *Little House* narrative were stimulated by the family’s interest in survival.

documents his dependence on government aid in ways that anticipate the revisionist historians of fifty years later” (Erisman, *Laura* 26-7). Even as Wilder and Lane encourage their readers to emulate pioneers who endured economic hardships without turning to the government for assistance, there is the unavoidable fact that the pioneer experience itself is characterized by the pioneer’s willingness to accept “free land” (the premise of which Lane was extremely critical) from the government itself.

The *Little House* texts expose, but do not resolve, the inconsistencies in the myth of Americans’ independence, especially as it applies to frontier and Depression times. Wilder and Lane struggle with concepts of “independence,” what it meant in both theory and practice in their own family history, and what it could mean to Americans in the Depression Era. Ultimately “independence” is defined as a family’s ability to be self-reliant:

The political debate, in literature as well as in Washington, centered on two competing visions, one based in collectivity and interdependence, the other in individualism, self-sufficiency, and self-reliance. Or maybe not quite. Because the national image of self-reliance, like the vision we find in the *Little House* books, was not based on the isolated individual, but in the nuclear family. Rather than turning to the government, the self-reliant family could survive all difficulties, particularly with strong maternal women to pull their families through hard times (Miller, Dwight 76).

The potential life or death circumstances that may result from a family’s failure to be self-reliant are epitomized by the Ingallses’ near-demise in *The Long Winter*. Gone is the brand of farm life Almanzo’s father described to him in *Farmer Boy*: “A farmer depends on himself, and the land and the weather. If you’re a farmer, you raise what you eat, you raise what you wear, and you keep warm with wood out of your own timber. You work hard, but you work as you please, and no man can tell you to go or come. You’ll be free

and independent, son, on a farm” (Wilder, *FB* 370-1). Lured to Dakota Territory by a false sense of independence, the Ingallses—and the entire town of De Smet—find themselves struggling to survive the consequences of losing their self-reliance in *The Long Winter*. Even at the community level there is no self-reliance as the town depends upon the railroad for food, clothing, lumber, seed, and later, for exporting successful harvests to distant markets. For Wilder and Lane, gone too, is the concept of American womanhood from earlier days that suggested there was “something unfeminine in independence,” and that women should act “dependent and grateful” (Riley 19, 34) as various intelligent and capable women are the protagonists in their narratives. In a 1933 interview with the *Mansfield Mirror*, Lane emphasized that women were instrumental in shaping the nation and have always helped their families endure hard times. Lane explained, “Our spokesmen are always just a little stupid. Nietzsche’s loud trumpet-call, for instance—‘Live dangerously!’ Every woman knows it isn’t possible to live otherwise than dangerously. Living is dangerous” (Lane, qtd. in Hines 202).

Context is as important as content, and contextualizing the texts within the Depression Era and the personal politics of Wilder and Lane offers a different way of understanding their writings about the American frontier. While Wilder is sometimes criticized for her apparent celebration of Manifest Destiny and America’s westward expansion, such criticisms pale alongside Wilder’s and Lane’s own values. Clearly, there is more than one way of understanding “independence,” but because the story is situated in frontier times, “independence” is often interpreted as “individualism.” The myth of Manifest Destiny has certainly “allowed Americans to stress individualism to the point of

enslavement of other races or even genocide” (Wolf 10), but Wilder and Lane would have had little cause to promote such a theme. Regardless of the extent to which they were able to empathize with Native people displaced by government policies rooted in the philosophy of Manifest Destiny, Wilder and Lane would have had additional reasons for criticizing the premise of Manifest Destiny and its associations. They likely would have viewed Manifest Destiny as yet another ill-thought-out concoction of the federal government, one that not only duped the Ingallses but nearly caused the family’s demise. It makes far more sense that Wilder understood “independence” as a family-centered, or even community-centered, self-reliant way of living.

Wilder and Lane would have had considerably more reason to invest their time and energy in creating a narrative that promoted family- or community-centered self-reliant, self-aware living than one that celebrated a government policy which resulted in the destruction of Native communities, as some argue. In fact, in light of the parallels Wilder and Lane saw between pioneer life and life during the Depression, the unusual amount of time and emotion Wilder invests in her description of the Osage community riding past the her home at the end of *Little House on the Prairie*, for example, may have little to do with guilt because her parents took her into Indian Territory when she was two as Wilson suggests. Rather, she might have empathized with the Osage community simply because she realized that they, like massive groups of Americans during the Depression, were forced to migrate from their homes for reasons beyond their control—

and reasons that were sometimes linked to the ineptitude of the federal government.¹⁶

This line of argument is certainly not intended to discount Native communities' experiences on the frontier, or the fact that self-reliant living was only possible through the appropriation of Indian land, but rather to suggest that Wilder and her initial readers likely brought very different perspectives to the subject of the American frontier than that of contemporary readers and critics. Indeed, there are

always two things about writers—what they meant to their own time and what they mean to us. If we concentrate solely on what they mean to us, then we are turning them into modern writers, which they are not. If we keep in mind that they were writing for quite a different era, with different standards and assumptions, than that is the liberalizing element in our reading, introducing us to a host of experiences we don't get from the literature of our own time and yet which connect to our own time because they connect with life (Northrop Fry paraphrased in Egoff 240).

Wilder's and Lane's perspectives, then, are meaningful in a contemporary context even when—or perhaps *especially* when—they do not comply with modern values.

The Depression's impact on the *Little House* texts extended beyond their political themes, as it also played a role in their conceptualization, publication, and distribution. In the years following World War I, the literary world gave new attention to American children's literature. In 1916 Bertha Mahony opened one of the country's first bookshops for children in Boston. In 1919 the Macmillan Company established a Children's Book

¹⁶ Evidence in Wilder's non-fiction articles in the *Missouri Ruralist* suggests that the Wilders were not opposed to trying new agricultural methods on their farm, and the fact that Wilder wrote for a farm journal twice monthly until a few years before the Depression is perhaps evidence in itself that the Wilders likely kept abreast of the latest news in agriculture. If so, they were probably familiar with Hugh Hammond Bennett, the "father of soil conservation," who suggested in the 1930s as he watched farmland drift across the Midwest in great clouds of dust, that "Americans have been the greatest destroyer of land of any race of people, barbaric or civilized" ("The Great Depression"). The Wilders may have been wary of Bennett's suggestions for new methods of agriculture that were promoted by government agents like the one Almanzo ran off of his property, but nevertheless may have realized that farming technologies practiced since the days of the Homestead Act were ill-matched for the Dust Bowl region, and played a part in destroying the landscape of an entire region.

Department, and the first Children's Book Week was held in the same year at the encouragement of Franklin K. Mahiews, a librarian affiliated with the Boy Scouts of America. Frederic Melcher established the John Newberry Medal for the Most Distinguished Contribution to American Literature for Children in 1922 to "encourage the writing of more worthwhile books for children," and other awards for children's literature soon followed (Meigs 428-431). By 1924 Anne Carroll Moore was editing a weekly page of criticism for children's books in the *New York Herald Tribune Books*, which was considered seminal in making "the consideration of children's books . . . a significant part of our culture," and soon the *New York Times Book Review* and *The Saturday Review of Literature* also contained regular reviews of children's literature (Meigs 429). During the Depression children's books also received scholarly attention in *The Bookman*, the first source dedicated to reviewing children's literature. The first issue of *Horn Book*, a journal edited by Mahony that was to be "devoted entirely to the books and reading of children and young people" emerged in 1924, and technological developments in photo-offset lithography in 1930 significantly reduced the costs of producing illustrated children's books, thus permanently revolutionizing books for children (Meigs 429; 438). The new critical interest in children's literature after World War I also inspired authors to create many new works for children; the 931 new works published in 1929 was more than double the amount published in 1919 (Meigs 431).

The Depression impacted the realm of children's literature in both negative and positive ways. Predictably, the momentum behind the country's new interest in children's books slackened as resources were needed elsewhere; fewer new children's

texts were published during the Depression and some publishers closed their children's divisions altogether. In spite of the scarcity of resources brought on by the Depression, the period between 1930 and 1935 is also remembered as a time of a "varied, rich and colorful output of children's books in America," which Mahoney credited to three reasons: "the great variety in the country itself—in its land, climate and people," the development of children's rooms in public libraries, and continued interest in maintaining children's departments in some publishing houses (Meigs 437). The children's rooms in public libraries that had emerged around the turn of the century not only helped to keep the interest in children's literature alive during the Depression, but they were significant to the continued circulation of such texts. Libraries offered children a means of obtaining books when were affordable, and they also offered a few hours of free entertainment for children who looked forward to regular trips to the library. As much as the Depression challenged the development of American children's literature in the 1930s, there were improvements, too:

Those working with children's books were most certainly aware of curtailments and drastic reductions in plans and programs, but in looking back over the 30s, there is strong evidence of the recognition of values and of a remarkable and consistent maintenance of those standards. Publishers, writers, artists and designers made the most of improved methods and techniques, and, as never before, children's books kept pace with widening interests, rapid scientific developments, and educational trends toward the integration of the child and his world. Perhaps the limitations of severe economic depression helped, rather than hindered, the maintenance of values by the fact of the necessity for careful weighing and measuring (Meigs 438).

Little House in the Big Woods was one of many texts published during the "Golden Age of Children's Books" (1925 to 1940) in the United States and abroad that

are still loved by children today: A. A. Milne's *Winnie-the-Pooh* was published in 1926, followed by Felix Salten's *Bambi* (1928), Carol Ryrie Brink's *Caddie Woodlawn* (1935), Dr. Seuss's *And to Think That I Saw It on Mulberry Street* (1937), J. R. R. Tolkien's *The Hobbit* (1938), and Ludwig Bemelman's *Madeline* (1939), among others. The enduring popularity of some of the texts published during the "Golden Age" may be due, in part, to changing ideas about what constituted valuable children's literature shortly before the publication of these texts. Children's literature represented in the 1909 *Children's Catalog* was "filled with stories of vigorous battles on land and sea, in which American boys took on Indians, foreign invaders, phantom vessels, grizzlies, or their brothers on one side or other of the Mason-Dixon Line" (Smith 3). This "'mile-a-minute' fiction for boys got rather outlandish and unrealistic" and persisted well into the next decade, while popular history books for children promoted American nationalism through texts that were "largely the boisterous stor[ies] of triumphant battles on land and sea, of the unmatched prowess and selfless devotion of our national heroes" (Smith 5-7). Franklin T. Baker, the second president of the National Council of Teachers of English, noted that books for girls in the early nineteenth century were of especially poor quality: "'they are often painfully weak, and they seem to have been written mostly by people deficient in good red blood'" (Baker qtd. in Smith 26). Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women* (1868), Kate Douglass Wiggin's *Rebecca of Sunnybrook Farm* (1903), and Canadian L. M. Montgomery's *Anne of Green Gables* (1908) were exceptions to the rule and popular with young female readers, but overall literature for girls lacked "'invention, action,

humor,” and tended to “run on (or off) in a patter of endless talk without point and without savor” (Baker qtd. in Smith 26).

Baker also identified what he considered to be quite a serious problem common to both boys’ and girls’ literature in the early nineteenth century: the failure of children’s authors to connect with their audiences. In his 1906 *A Bibliography of Children’s Reading*, prepared at the request of teachers and librarians, Baker

deplored ‘[children’s authors’] imperfect understanding of what childhood is’ and their ‘consequent inability to identify with children.’ He made a plea for the child’s right to be entertained as well as to be instructed and begged writers to remember that children’s interest is in the life of action rather than in the life of thought. ‘Boys are not scholars,’ he said, and most of them are not even scholars in the making, and good ideals are an exceedingly valuable element in the process (Baker qtd. in Smith 25).

The children’s texts that emerged during the Golden Age reflect the authors’ responses to weaknesses identified in existing children’s literature, the newly established forum for critical discussions about the literature, and the scarcity of resources during the Depression that sometimes inspired publishers to select texts more judiciously than they had during the boom in children’s literature during the 1920s. The gradual refinement of children’s texts during the Golden Age carried the industry through the Depression and by 1940, “children’s books had become a commodity” (Meigs 442). Now considered a “big business” like never before, illustrated children’s books after the Depression were mass produced, widely advertised, and available at a low cost in book stores and chain stores (Meigs 442).

During the 1920s and 30s, children’s texts were widely varied, but some common characteristics emerged. Many texts introduced children to new cultures, especially

through folk tales collected from other countries (Meigs 433). The increased interest in multicultural literature likely stemmed from the interests of the more cosmopolitan post-war nation, and the surge of immigration that followed the war (Egoff 242). Soon American children's literature was considered the "most cosmopolitan literature in the world" and "every children's book list read like morning roll call at Ellis Island" (May Masee, qtd. in Smith 34; Robert Lawson, qtd. in Smith 40). Children's literature during the Golden Age also reflected an interest in "reaching back to traditional American and Western stories and myths," including stories about American Indians (Clark, et al 443). The interest in the American West in children's literature during the 1930s is attributed to increased influences of radio and motion pictures, the establishment of National Parks, and the resurgence of attention Roosevelt's New Deal programs brought to the parks as government-funded public works projects such as the Civilian Conservation Corps built much of the infrastructure in the parks still in use today (Meigs 22). George Bird Grinnell, for example, was instrumental on both fronts, as he advocated the founding of Glacier National Park in Montana in 1910, and later published children's stories about the West.

A study of Caldecott Award-winning picture books¹⁷ during the 1930s to 1960s suggests a strong correlation between American attitudes toward acceptable gender roles in the country and the number of female characters (and the ways in which they are depicted) in children's literature during the corresponding decade (Clark, et al). In

¹⁷ The authors of the study indicate that Caldecott Award winners and runners-up were selected for the study because of "the unusual influence these books have on children's literature" and because it is the most prestigious award for preschool books, one that "guarantees its winners phenomenal sales" (Clark, et al 441).

general, the study showed a trend in increased numbers of female characters in children's literature during periods when women's roles were clearly defined and not controversial as compared to periods when women's roles were less clearly defined. The study showed, for example, that during the 1930s, a period characterized by the "degradation" of women, there was little controversy about women's roles, and therefore there high numbers of female characters in children's picture books, albeit women in stereotypical roles (Clark, et al 440). During the Depression, when work was scarce, jobs previously held by women and minorities were taken over by white men, and the government's public works projects targeted employment for men specifically. In 1938, the peak year of WPA jobs—and the first year that the Caldecott was awarded—only 13.5% of WPA jobs were held by women, and those jobs were largely jobs considered traditional women's work ("The Great Depression"). Accordingly, the 1930s was the only era in the study in which every Caldecott winner contained female characters, and 45% of the texts depicted a female central character (Clark, et al 443).¹⁸ The study indicated that during the 1930s female characters in children's picture books tended to be "more dependent, submissive, imitative, nurturant, emotional, and passively active," and women's roles were more gender-stereotyped during the 1930s than any other era in the study (Clark, et al 442). Meanwhile, male characters in children's books were often "more independent, competitive, directive, persistent, explorative, aggressive, and active" (Clark, et al 442).

¹⁸ In contrast, during the 1940s when there was "confusion about gender roles" due to women going to work during World War II, 22% of Caldecott winners had no female characters at all, and only 14% of central characters were female. In the 1950s, gender roles returned to "separate spheres" and only 11% of Caldecott winners were missing female characters, but by the 1960s 33% had no females (Clark, et al 442-4).

The study does not include detailed analysis about the ethnic breakdown of female characters in the 1930s texts, except to mention that an interest in Native Americans during those years also yielded “surprisingly active characters” (Clark, et al 443). The fact that black characters “virtually disappear” during “periods of racial conflict” is also mentioned (Clark, et al 440). The findings of the Clark study not only help to illuminate significant characteristics of Depression-Era children’s literature regarding gender roles in the literature, they may infer an explanation for the heightened interest in Native themes during the same era. Given the tendencies for women and blacks to appear or disappear from children’s literature according to the American sociopolitical climate, it seems reasonable to theorize that Native characters may follow similar trends. The increase in Native characters in children’s literature during the 1930s corresponds with public sentiments toward Native people characterized by sentimentality about the closure of the frontier, while the Meriam Report of 1928 and the Indian Reorganization Act of 1934 both called for increased support for maintaining Native cultures.

Children’s literature of the Golden Age is marked not only by its oft-multicultural or historical themes and its stereotypical presentation of women’s roles, but by an improvement in authors’ abilities to connect with their audiences. Literature in the 1920s and 30s increasingly reflected a trend that had begun a decade before, a trend which demonstrated newfound respect for children (Smith 20, 91). On the whole, Americans “have always been in a position to indulge their children, to release them from much of the work which was taken for granted elsewhere, to provide schooling for as many years as was thought desirable, to pay for leisure and sports” (Meigs xiv). But the Depression

brought new ideas about what it meant to be an American child, and American children's literature reflected those changes. During the Depression, many children

worked after school and their earnings, small though they might be were important to the family income which in turn gave the children a feeling of importance in the family. Pleasures were fewer and had to be actively sought for and were all the more enjoyable for the seeking. All in all, in comparing pre- and post-World War II children with those of today, one can see that the children of the recent past were more independent, resourceful and optimistic (Egoff 243).

Authors of children's books during the Depression seemed to reward children's increased responsibilities and contributions to their families by entertaining them rather than instructing them, and by reducing the number of adult-to-child didactic lessons that had characterized children's literature of earlier generations. Poetry for children "came like a blaze of light . . . moralizing was gone, and poetry was for delight" (Smith 44). The reduction in didactic moral lessons also coincided with changes in educational philosophy developing after World War I, where "problem solving and thinking" took the place of "mere rote learning" in schools (Smith 28). Children's essential role in ensuring the family's survival during the Depression suggests another connection between children of the Depression and children of pioneer times. Depression children may have found it easy to relate to frontier children, especially those on the trail, where "day-to-day survival required serious labor, and families needed every member to pitch in" (Kimball 69). Children in both eras often had much responsibility, few toys and books of their own, and found amusements when and where they could. Overall, the Depression changed the tenor of the childhood experience in America, and period children's literature reflects those changes:

Whatever the purpose of these writers, it wasn't overt. I think the reason they escaped didacticism is that they were such genuine storytellers; like the Victorians they concocted strong plots. The shape and inevitability of their stories are due partly to art and partly to an inner consistency that comes from a coherent view of life and small details of life . . . most of their expressions of life are sifted through a child's experience and understanding (Egoff 244).

It was into this literary world—characterized by shifting values and trends inspired by the overarching Depression—that Wilder introduced *Little House in the Big Woods* in 1932. Counter to the “myth” of Wilder's development as a writer, one of her motivations for writing the *Little House* series stemmed from the depression itself.

Concisely summarized:

The myth goes something like this: In 1932, a sweet old lady named Laura Ingalls Wilder sat down to write the story of her childhood. Blessed with a remarkable capacity of recall, she recounted an inspiring story of her family's wanderings on the Midwestern frontier . . . She had been a spunky and sometimes naughty little girl . . . and a sense of independence and assertiveness shone through in her actions from the time that she could first remember . . . Being endowed with a keen memory, Wilder waited until her mid-sixties to dramatize the daily joys and tribulations of her frontier family half a century later. A kind of literary Grandma Moses, she had possessed the potential to be a great writer but had never been given the opportunity (Miller, “Myth” 2).

In reality, Wilder had been contemplating an autobiography since at least 1915 (Anderson, *Apprenticeship* 39), and was already well-published in the *Missouri Ruralist* and other magazines well before she wrote the *Little House* books. Lane, who worried endlessly over her aging parents' economic security, encouraged her mother to publish her life story in hopes that it might be lucrative. When Wilder visited her daughter in San Francisco in 1915, Lane encouraged her mother to write all the more, but in San Francisco Wilder also had an opportunity to witness a writer's life and did not find it

appealing. In letters to Almanzo, Wilder documented Lane's efforts to meet newspaper deadlines and the dollar amounts she earned for writing various articles and on October 4, 1915 concluded: "The more I see of how Rose works the better satisfied I am to raise chickens. I intend to try to do some writing that will count, but I would not be driven by the work as she is for anything and I do not see how she can stand it" (Wilder, *WFH* 134-5).

As the Depression settled in across rural Missouri in 1930, Wilder finally took her daughter's advice and gave the autobiography a try. When she failed to find a publisher for *Pioneer Girl*, she revised the narrative into the children's story initially accepted by Alfred A. Knopf. When the Depression forced Alfred A. Knopf to close its children's department before *Little House in the Woods* was published, Virginia Kirkus of Harper soon correctly identified it as the "book no depression could stop" and the entire series was eventually published by Harper (Kirkus, qtd. in Anderson, *Horn* 39). Even as the *Little House* series grew in success, finances remained a driving force in Wilder's and Lane's decisions about Wilder's writing. As the Depression wore on, in 1937 Wilder sent a letter to her daughter describing how she had taunted an editor at Harper with the idea of an adult book, thinking she might be able to "wrangle a little more advertising for the Little House books" if she also wrote for adults (Wilder qtd. in Anderson, *Apprenticeship* 17). Harper responded favorably, but Lane, then living in New York, reminded her mother that there was more money in children's books than in adults':

As to your doing a novel, there is no reason why you shouldn't if you want to, but unless by wild chance you did a best-seller, there is much more money in juveniles. I'd do one myself if I could get the time. Harpers will give a novel one month's publicity and maybe ten inches of played-

down ads in two New York papers and then forget about it. A juvenile keeps on selling for years as you know. My novels, in book, bring me about \$1,000. Look at *Little House in the Big Woods*. It has brought you about 5 cents a word and is still selling and will go on selling for years (Lane qtd. in Anderson, *Apprenticeship* 18).

Wilder never followed through on her idea for publishing a book specifically for adults, but her early draft of the adult novel she envisioned, “The First Three Years and a Year of Grace,” was published posthumously as *The First Four Years*.¹⁹

As much as Wilder’s motivations for writing were driven by the Depression and Lane’s advice, so were many of the elements of the content and form of her texts. Wilder had pondered recording the events of her childhood for some time, but the fact that she waited until the Depression to do so meant that she published her frontier narrative at a time when historically-based texts for children were increasing in popularity. The *Little House* texts appeared to be just the right combination of literary trends of the time and simultaneously sporting a uniqueness that set the texts apart. As early as 1915, Lane was already giving her mother suggestions about how to frame her autobiography, but eventually Wilder decided to forge her own path in terms of her overall representation of her frontier experiences. Lane’s advice for framing her mother’s frontier experience, in fact, reveals Lane’s disconnect from the frontier experience, and her belief in the mythical elements of the frontier already pervasive in 1915:

‘If I were you, I would jump directly, after the transition paragraph, into, “When I was a girl—”. And draw the contrast clearly. Only one generation ago Indians and forests and half a continent practically

¹⁹ In the 1940s, Wilder received substantial royalties from the *Little House* series and had \$10,000 in the bank and an estate worth about \$80,000 at her death in 1957 (Hines 245). True to form, however, after Almanzo’s death she lived modestly in just a few rooms of her Mansfield home, and passers-by would not guess that she had an ever-growing bank account (Hines 245-6).

untouched by the human race. Free land, free fuel for the hunting it—"Go west, young man, and grow up with the land," And "Uncle Sam is rich enough to give us all a farm." That sort of thing. And do it all concretely—don't *say* those things were so, *show* that they were so . . . Make it real, because you saw it with your own eyes' (Lane qtd. in Anderson, *Apprenticeship* 39).

Revisiting *Little House on the Prairie* with Lane's advice in mind, certain passages suggest that Wilder may have even tried to follow her daughter's advice and ran into trouble as she simultaneously ran into the fallacies of frontier mythology. Her own family's journey was not a linear westward movement, but she solved that problem by shaping the narrative in such a way that it presented a successively west-moving pattern. Other problems were not as easy to reconcile. Surely Wilder found Lane's misquotation of John Soule's "Go west" entreaty problematic as her own family had found it increasingly impossible to live off the land in the West. And, based on her own experience in the West, Wilder certainly must have found fault in the idea of "half a continent practically untouched by the human race." Whether Wilder tried at first to take her daughter's advice and discovered the impossibility of it, decided to challenge her daughter's misinformed ideas about the frontier, or decided to confront the fallacies of frontier mythology head-on in a broader scope, Wilder sets up the scenario beautifully in *Little House on the Prairie*. As the Ingalls family makes its way onto the prairie, "on the whole enormous prairie there was no sign that any other human being had ever been there," but they soon realize that they can't even look up without seeing an Indian (Wilder, *LHP* 40; 227). Lane discounts the Native presence in her vision of the West, but Wilder does not; in fact, she acknowledges the Native presence in Indian Territory, but not the hundreds of thousands of pioneering families who went west during the several

decades before and during the Ingallses' trek. The themes in Wilder's published narrative are significantly different from the "go west, young man" theme originally envisioned by Lane:

Whereas Pa and Ma had only to contend with the forces of nature [in the Big Woods], now they must confront the concurrent force of the national government; they cling to their individualistic skills but feel the first pressures of involvement in a complex society. That society, moreover, is in flux . . . for the waves of settlement that move westward leave behind irrevocable changes. As yet unaware that they are a part of this process, the Ingallses see only diminishing game, the uprooting of the Indian by white settlers, and the sudden manifestation of federal authority. Partly fearful, partly tolerant of the Osage Indians who live throughout the region, and having comparatively little real knowledge of them, the family find themselves even more perplexed by the national government. Having encouraged them to settle the new territory, it now forces them out. They retain their optimism, to be sure, but the reader sees them in an altered light. As they set out to travel still farther westward, they seem less stalwart adventurers than unwitting participants in a national event (Erisman, *Writers* 619).

Wilder's story of the frontier conforms to Depression-Era children's interests in historical texts, but it does not conform to even her daughter's expectations about what frontier narratives should look like.

Beyond its historical setting, the *Little House* narrative reflects other trends in Depression-Era children's literature in terms of both content and structure. Wilder's texts, for example, include a strong presence of female characters and children whose work is important to their families, and the texts are characterized by their intrinsic optimism and lack of didacticism. As Wilder develops each of these themes, however, some of the most successful aspects of her story also contain evidence of a narrative style more common to the literature of Victorian times than to the Golden Age. The presence of characteristics common to Victorian-Era children's literature is not surprising, given

that Wilder grew up during the Victorian Era and that she was sixty-five when she began the *Little House* series. Lane was well-versed in the business aspects of writing children's literature during the Depression and Wilder frequently corresponded with staff in the children's department at Harper, but Wilder had no grandchildren that would have kept her up to date and well-read in children's literature over the decades. Thus Wilder's attention to themes and styles popular in children's literature of the Depression also contains some Victorian touches more common to the time of Wilder's youth. Hallmarks of Victorian literature include attention to plot and the art of storytelling, use of real time²⁰ and a link with real life, interest in the "impoderables" (such as faith and disbelief, moral courage and moral cowardice, trust and suspicion, poverty, cruelty, friendship, doing one's duty), and protagonists who undergo a maturation process (Egoff 239), all of which are present in the *Little House* texts. Like the authors of children's texts during the Victorian Era²¹ who "imposed a caveat upon themselves . . . that the content was to be kept within the comprehension of children, which necessitated a greater rather than a lesser skill" (Egoff 240), Wilder, too, was concerned about maintaining an age-appropriate storyline.

Wilder's stylistic throwbacks to the Victorian Era are successful, perhaps, because they align with the Victorian subject matter of her texts and afford her even greater possibilities for thoroughly developing themes in her narrative. Like many Golden Age texts, the *Little House* series contains many female characters. Employing Victorian-Era

²⁰ Egoff notes that more contemporary texts tend to speed up the events in children's narratives to the extent that they lessen the importance of the events and require a "suspension of disbelief" on the part of the reader (Egoff 239-40).

²¹ Egoff identifies Lewis Carroll, Louisa May Alcott, Mark Twain, Rudyard Kipling, and Robert Lewis Stevenson among the prominent writers of children's texts during the Victorian age (Egoff 240).

devices, such as the use of real time to show character development—which she accomplishes through her eight-volume series—allows her to demonstrate characters’ maturation in ways unprecedented in children’s literature and seldom seen since.²² While the female characters in the *Little House* series are often doubly trapped by women’s limited roles in both the frontier environment *and* the Depression Era, the unusual time-depth of the *Little House* series combined with the convenient shortage of male protagonists sometimes enables Wilder to push women’s characters beyond stereotypical roles. Many of the female characters in the *Little House* narrative, like the female characters in the Caldecott winners of the 1930s, are dependent and nurturant, but Laura in particular demonstrates active and adventurous behavior, and behavior as independent as could be expected in a female child protagonist. In a scene from *On the Banks of Plum Creek*, for example Laura falls into a flooded creek, but after great difficulty manages to pull herself back up onto the footbridge. At the conclusion of the chapter, “Laura knew now that there were things stronger than anybody. But the creek had not got her. It had not made her scream and it had not made her cry” (Wilder, *OBPC* 106). And although Ma’s character clearly fulfills certain stereotypes in terms of her limited mobility and narrow view of American Indians, Wilder sometimes complicates gender roles in the characterization of her parents by drawing readers into the picture: readers who “come back to the books as adults [are sometimes] surprised to discover how compelling and far from bland is the quiet strength of Caroline Ingalls” and “Where Wilder, like Laura is

²² In J. K. Rowling’s seven-volume *Harry Potter* series, Harry aging and maturation process is similar to Laura’s in the *Little House* series. Interestingly, both series also have film or television interpretations, and both have followings of near-cultish magnitude. L. M. Montgomery’s heroine, Anne Shirley, matures from child to adult in the much-loved *Anne of Green Gables* series, but the series primarily focuses on her adult experiences rather than her childhood.

blind to Pa's faults, we, as adults, can often see them clearly, and where Wilder sometimes fails to portray Ma with adequate sympathy, we tend to supply that deficiency" (Lee 77).

The development of Wilder's female characters, especially because the protagonist is a child, is often linked to a maturation process that includes the exploration of "impoderables" common to Victorian children's literature combined with the increasing ability to contribute to the financial well-being common of the family. *Little Town on the Prairie*, for example, opens with the news that Laura has been offered a job, sewing shirts, in town. Though Laura does not want to work in town, she takes the job because she is anxious to contribute to the family's efforts to save enough money to send Mary to a college for the blind, and she later agrees to teach school for the same reason. Laura's willingness to take jobs she does not want underscores her sense of duty and the family's interest in self-sufficiency (especially because Wilder suggests that the family is able to raise the funds for Mary's tuition without government aid). Because few women were employed outside the home during the Depression, however, Laura, on the cusp between child and woman, may have appeared to have more mobility to Depression-Era readers than she does to a contemporary reader. Meanwhile, Mary is pleased because she can help with the housework even though she is blind, and ten-year-old Carrie does her share of the work, too, thus freeing Laura to work outside the home. In the second chapter, Laura and Mary have find time amidst their work to discuss goodness and pride, vanity and faith which demonstrates their maturation and again reflects Wilder's

tendency to blend Victorian and Golden Age elements in her writing (Wilder, *LTP* 11-13).

Although the main characters each face disappointments or challenges in the *Little House* series, except for a brief time at the start of *By the Shores of Silver Lake* when the entire family is weak and dejected after illness and Mary's subsequent blindness, they encourage each other to maintain a sturdy sense of optimism. Such optimism, also permeates Wilder's non-fiction writing and appears to be a significant aspect of her personal philosophy. A *Missouri Ruralist* article from November 1917 describes her ideas on the importance of furnishing a home with good thoughts:

Let's be cheerful! We have no more right to steal the brightness out of the day for our own family than we have to steal the purse of a stranger. Let us be as careful that our homes are furnished with pleasant and happy thoughts as we are that the rugs are the right color and texture and the furniture comfortable and beautiful! (Wilder, *LHO* 36-7).

In January of 1920 she encouraged her readers to find pleasure not just in their "free" time, but in their work: "Why should we need extra time in which to enjoy ourselves? If we expect to enjoy our life, we will have to learn to be joyful in all of it, not just at stated intervals when we can get time or when we have nothing else to do" (Wilder, *LHO* 65-7).

Wilder continued to encourage her readers to find pleasure in their daily tasks in May of 1923:

It belittles us to think of our daily tasks as small things, and if we continue to do so, it will in time make us small. It will narrow our horizon and make of our work just drudgery. There are so many little things that are really very great, and when we learn to look beyond the insignificant appearing acts themselves to their far-reaching consequences, we will, 'despise not the day of small things.' We will feel an added dignity and poise from the fact that our everyday round of duties is just as important as any other part of the work of the world (Wilder, *LHO* 206-7).

In the *Little House* narrative, too, the characters find ways to keep their spirits up even during the worst of times. Pa plays the fiddle to cheer the family, at Christmas when there is no spare money the girls find creative ways to make gifts for each member of the family, and when the family is approaching a low point near the end of *The Long Winter*, Ma produces a frozen codfish she's been saving. Even when blackbirds destroy the oat and corn crops in *Little Town on the Prairie*, Ma makes the best of it by baking them into blackbird pies and Laura thinks, "Ma is right, there is always something to be thankful for" (Wilder, *LTP* 105-6). Undoubtedly, Depression-Era readers found encouragement in the Ingallses' ability to pull through hard times without losing heart.

As much as young readers during the Depression may have appreciated stories about other children who had to work to support their family and about other families who managed hard times cheerfully, they likely also enjoyed the *Little House* texts because they could identify with the main character. The likeability of Laura's character, her cheerful sense of adventure, and her perceptive appreciation for beauty around her all contribute to children's ability to relate to the narrative. Most importantly, the *Little House* story reflects one of the most significant characteristics of children's literature of the Golden Age: a tone that is not didactic. Wilder could certainly write didactically when she wanted to; as Miller points out, even the titles of many of her *Missouri Ruralist* articles indicate her position on the subject: "Why Shouldn't Town and Country Women Work and Play Together?" 'Just a Question of Tact: Every Person Has Said Things They Didn't Mean,' 'Giving and Taking Advice,' 'Doing Our Best,' and 'Swearing is a Foolish Habit'" (Miller, "Myth" 4). In the *Ruralist*, in fact, "it is fair to

say, [Wilder] was as much a preacher as a columnist” (Miller, “Myth” 4). But Wilder presented a very different tone in the *Little House* books, and she is specifically noted as an author who pleased children because “heavy sermons never slip between the lines of Laura’s books. Incidents are told as the author recalled them with a sense of proportion, and they are believable” (Eddins 4). Wilder’s decision to design a children’s story free of didacticism is well complimented by her third-person limited narrative structure. Readers experience the events from Laura’s perspective, but Wilder avoided the problems of telling readers what to think and how to feel about situations that could arise from using a first-person narrator. The third-person limited point of view permits ambiguous interpretations in many situations:

Clearly, Laura’s innocence functions like the innocence of heroes in much American literature criticizing the rigidity of civilization but also recognizing the egocentrism, arrogance, and destructiveness of the innocent. As a character, Laura is every bit as appealing as any other hero in American literature, because of her energy, her enthusiasm, her spontaneous empathy with the underdog or the injured, her sense of fairness, her imagination, and her responsiveness to beauty, nobility, and grandeur. Her point of view, furthermore, has the rich ambiguity and ambivalence typical of our national fiction (Wolf 117).

The narrative style, point of view, and non-didactic characterization of Laura culminate in a story that lends itself exceptionally well to oral reading (Eddins 14) and a protagonist with whom children can readily identify.

The lack of a didactic overtone in the *Little House* narrative not only results in an exceptionally likeable character and reflects shifting ideas about the author-reader relationship in children’s literature during the Golden Age, but it helps to resolve some of the otherwise incongruous ideas about the frontier experience and the representation of

Native issues on that frontier. As Wilder undoubtedly discovered as she wrote the *Little House* narrative—if not before—her family’s experience on the frontier was fraught with contradictions. Conflicting concepts and realities of independence, her father’s persistent belief in a myth that repeatedly fails him, her mother’s unfounded hatred of Indians and her inability to explain why the family moves into Indian Territory, contradictory information from the government about the availability of Indian Territory, expectations about Indians and actual encounters with Indians, and the tension between appropriation and self-reliance are all themes raised in the *Little House* narrative without particularly clear resolutions. Such contradictions and problems continue to permeate scholarly discussion about the frontier. Unlike children’s frontier texts and women’s frontier narratives that offer didactic statements to explain non-Native presence on the frontier as well as Natives’ inevitable disappearance, Wilder posits no such statements except in conversations between characters that offer differing perspectives on the issue, or with examples that challenge the Ingallses’ and the reader’s expectations. Critics such as Wilson and Dorris who insist Wilder is racist fail to recognize this fundamental point in the text as they select *only* the negative references to Indians and ignore the places where Wilder challenges those very idea in her own narrative. It is the very lack of didacticism in this story written by an author who likely recognized from first hand experience the impossibility of explaining what happened on the frontier that makes the *Little House* texts especially useful for discussing Native issues with children today. Wilder does not offer a one-dimensional account of frontier themes in her narrative, nor end with a

formulaic “and the moral of the story is . . .” to tell children conclusively how to interpret the complicated issues raised in the story.

In the *Introduction to the World of Children's Books*, Margaret Marshall devotes particular attention to “a trend which is being strongly pursued by some people [that] attempt[s] to exclude, delete, or ban from children's books, references to what are considered to be sexist, racist, politically unfavourable, or religious themes, comments or characters” (Marshall 17). The issues are both sensitive and complex, but Marshall identifies at least “two separate lines of discussion” in the discussion about the delicate process of determining the appropriateness of content in children's texts:

The first is the laudable desire to give humans of whatever race colour, religion, sex, or political viewpoint, their rightful dignity by *encouraging* writers to write positively on these issues. The second line is, to me and many others, the disturbing development, that there are those who believe (a) that all books already written should be examined for signs of these issues and banned if considered guilty by the banners' criteria; (b) that all writers must adhere to a code of practice which would, for example require a writer to balance a 'bad' character or situation with an obligator 'good' one; (c) a politically motivated belief that children's books must be used to show children how oppressed they are by parents and authority and how anarchy can be achieved. (This aspect is common to a number of European countries.) (Marshall 17).

Interestingly, Marshall views the movement to ban certain children's texts didactic in itself: “the propagandist, didactic approach which seeks to erase the ‘unacceptable’ history and allow only the ‘acceptable’ present and future is a dangerous trend, to be countered” (Marshall 17-8). Both positions arguably have the best interests of children at heart, and both illustrate a belief in far-reaching and powerful impacts of children's literature. But both also require a good-faith effort to interpret and contextualize the texts before a decision is made.

Perhaps the texts fail us less in their presentation of frontier issues than we fail the texts in often neglecting to richly contextualize them as autobiography, historical fiction, women's frontier literature, Depression literature, and children's literature of the Golden Age. In his essay "Trusting the Words," Michael Dorris explains that he didn't read the *Little House* books to his children because he "realized [he] couldn't have kept [his] mouth shut during the objectionable parts" and "would have felt compelled to interrupt the story constantly with editorial asides, history lessons, thought questions, critiques of the racism or sexism embedded in the text" (Dorris 278-9). Furthermore, he explained, the texts certainly "could be used that way," but worried that his daughters would find reading "a chore, a 'learning experience,' a tension, and not the pleasure [he] wished it" (Dorris 279).

Dorris's essay underscores the importance of contextualizing the *Little House* books; contextualization ensures that children gain accurate knowledge about the treatment of Native people during westward expansion and simultaneously reduces the number of "objectionable parts" in the story. A formalist critique of the *Little House* story reveals that Wilder employed symbolism, manipulated her timeline, and frequently edited her life story to draw attention to the promises of Manifest Destiny and how they failed her family. A new historicism critical approach to the *Little House* narrative helps to fill in the historical gaps that Wilder could not have anticipated; details about the federal government's Indian policies, changing roles for American women, Depression-Era politics, and the developments in children's literature familiarize contemporary readers with the national events that surrounded Wilder's personal experiences. The

circumstances that surrounded and motivated Wilder as she wrote the *Little House* story are particularly important to understanding the frontier themes she raised. As Dorris suggests, the needs for “history lessons” and “thought questions” are many, but the lessons and questions raised in the narrative contribute to its lasting value.

VII. "TO BE CONTINUED": *LITTLE HOUSE ON THE PRAIRIE*
AS A TELEVISION SAGA

“One gains a lot by going out into the world, by traveling and living in different places,’ Rose said to me one day, ‘but one loses a great deal, too. After all, I’m not sure but the loss is greater than the gain.’”—Laura Ingalls Wilder (Wilder, *LHO* 79)

In the article “Everybody’s ‘Little Houses’: Reviewers and Critics read Laura Ingalls Wilder,” Anita Clair Fellmen assess the ways in which scholars of Wilder’s work across eight decades have analyzed the *Little House* texts according to the values of their own times and found reasons to praise and criticize story. For example, during the 1970s the hardships faced by the Ingalls family likely resonated with readers who, like many Depression-Era readers, may have noticed that readers’ attention “‘is not directed to the question of deprivation but to the ingenuity exercised by the human will to survive . . . No pity is sought from the reader, and yet he is enabled to feel an intense pity mixed with envy for this confined and happy family’” (A. C. Capey qtd. in Fellman, “Everybody’s” 33). More specifically, during the 1970s “the labor involved in providing every subsistence need of the Ingalls family” made “‘our gas-poor Sundays and ‘energy crises’ seem like child’s play in comparison” (Fellman, “Everybody’s” 33). Until now, I have emphasized the importance of contextualizing the *Little House* story within the times and places it was set and then written at a much later date, but perhaps one of the most intriguing aspects of the *Little House* story is its endurance over time and the way readers discover its relevancy in their lives. The *Little House* story has not remained static or unchanged; it endures in spite of—or because of—reinterpretations and retellings of the events.

The *Little House on the Prairie* television series which ran from 1974 to 1983 is the most well-known retelling of the *Little House* narrative, and in 2005 Disney offered another updated version in the form of a television miniseries in 2005, also titled *Little House on the Prairie*. The two television versions of the *Little House* story each contain several changes to the original story, and many of the most significant changes are in the scenes containing the Ingallses' encounters with the Osage. The Native issues in each version of the story reveal more about mainstream attitudes toward Native issues than it helps viewers understand the climate of cultural collision on the American frontier that Wilder experienced first hand.

The time factor of more than one hundred years (which occurred between the actual events in Wilder's life, when the original account was written, and when the story was revised for television) is a significant consideration in interpreting images of American Indians in both the texts and television shows. Federal Indian policy underwent several major transitions, as did public sentiment toward Indians, which undoubtedly inspired changes to the presentation of Indians in the film versions of the *Little House* story. The Ingalls family arrived in Indian Territory in 1869, during the Reservation Era when many Native communities treated with the federal government to reserve portions of their homelands and exchange vast amounts of land for money and other forms of compensation. Federal agents imposed rigid assimilation policies on reservation residents, and the reservation boundaries were strictly enforced. By 1887, the General Allotment Act reinforced the goal of assimilation and divided reservation land into parcels of 160 acres that were assigned to individual male heads of household for the

purpose of farming and consequently opened the millions of “leftover” acres of land to non-Native settlement. During the Allotment Era, Native children attended government boarding schools, where their education was characterized by Captain Richard Henry Pratt’s motto for Carlisle Indian School, “Kill the Indian, save the man.” In 1928 the Meriam Report, commissioned by the federal government to assess the overall conditions in Indian Country, drew attention to the failure of both the Allotment Act and the boarding school system, and documented abysmal circumstances in many Native communities and schools.

While Wilder wrote *Little House on the Prairie* in 1934, the Indian Reorganization Act ended the Allotment Era and marked an important shift in federal Indian policy. The Indian Reorganization Act acknowledged the importance of maintaining, rather than eliminating, Native cultures and it aided Native Nations in re-establishing tribal governance systems. Though the tribal governments formed under the Indian Reorganization Act were often modeled after the United States government and the Act was otherwise paternalistic in its approach, it was a step in bringing positive reform in many Native communities. During the Termination and Relocation Era in the 1950s and 1960s, policy for American Indians once again focused on assimilation, when the federal government no longer officially recognized some communities as Native Nations. Through Termination and Relocation, many Native people were paid small stipends to relocate to designated cities and some reservation lands were sold. For many, the promised jobs, housing, and stipends never materialized, and clusters of Native populations in urban areas such as Minneapolis, Sacramento, and Oakland became

known as “red ghettos.” During the 1960s Native activists also drew new attention to Native sovereignty and treaty rights through outlets such as fish-ins, the occupation of Alcatraz Island, the formation of the American Indian Movement; the American Indian Civil Rights Act passed in 1968. In 1975, the Self-Determination and Educational Assistance Act marked the beginning of the Self-Determination Era and offered Native communities a means to begin the slow process of gaining control over social services and their distribution.

In 1975, the *Little House on the Prairie* television series was in its second of nine seasons. Since 1975, Congress has passed a series of additional acts that acknowledge Native sovereignty and are intended to protect Native rights with varying degrees of success: the American Indian Religious Freedom Act and the American Indian Child Welfare Act in 1978, the American Indian Self-Governance Act in 1988, the Indian Gaming and Regulatory Act in 1988, and the American Indian Languages Act, Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act and American Indian Arts and Crafts Act in 1990. Despite these policy changes, the United States was one of only four United Nations members who voted against the United Nation’s Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous People in September of 2007.

The time span between the actual events on the frontier, Wilder’s initial documentation of those events, the *Little House on the Prairie* television show in the 1970s and early 1980s, and the Disney miniseries of 2005 certainly accounts for some changes to the story in the various representations. The transition from print to audio-visual media and changes in the intended audience also explain some other necessary

adjustments, as does the inevitable interest in artistic expression. Overall the video representations of the *Little House* story adhere remarkably to Wilder's original in most areas, but the most notable changes are in the depiction of Ma's character and the scenes containing Native themes; in addition, the emphasis on self-reliance is eliminated from the film versions. Shifts in the presentation of Native themes are most evident in a comparison between the original *Little House on the Prairie* text, the premier movie that precipitated television series in 1974, and the entire six-part Disney mini-series; all three sources depict the Ingalls family's experience in Kansas Indian Territory from 1869 to 1871. While Wilder's narrative and the first television show chronicle Laura's life into adulthood, the Disney mini-series shows only the events in Indian Territory.

Laura Ingalls Wilder, who did not value television or own television set, would likely be surprised to see liberal interpretations of her story replayed in syndication six times a day in the United States alone. Roger Lea MacBride, who was the adopted son of Rose Wilder Lane (and the Libertarian candidate for the 1976 presidential race), became the literary executor of the *Little House* series upon Lane's death. In an interview with a scholar of Wilder's work, William Anderson, MacBride explained that he had been careful "to refuse offers to bring it to the screen or to the movie screen by persons who didn't understand what they were all about" (*Ingalls of De Smet*). Eventually he decided to form a partnership with Ed Friendly, who was a vice president of several networks and a freelance writer, and they produced a pilot episode based on the *Little House on the Prairie* text (*Ingalls of De Smet*). MacBride believed Friendly was "a man of profound understanding of what the books are all about" but they were unable to sell their pilot

episode until they received help from Michael Landon (*Ingalls of De Smet*). Together they made a new pilot film, which they sold to the National Broadcasting Company (NBC), and “as it was the biggest success that NBC had ever had,” NBC followed through with the television series (*Ingalls of De Smet*). Landon was already well-known, especially from his role as Little Joe on *Bonanza*; his involvement initially helped to raise interest in the pilot, but when NBC agreed to carry the series, “immediately thereafter Mr. Landon said he would like to make the series his way. And when he outlined ‘his way,’ it was to take the basic characters of the Wilder books and the basic setting in Walnut Grove, Minnesota, and create out of that cloth, the series of wholesome and appealing stories” (*Ingalls of De Smet*). MacBride and Friendly wanted to adhere to the content of the texts as closely as possible, “concentrating on the real life adventures that Laura and her family had and to adapt them as best as could be done to television, and [they] thought that could be done quite faithfully, and in fact, have a saga treatment. That is, each episode overlapping the next one, so that if the crop were wiped out by locusts one week, next week you wouldn’t see everyone in the store buying luxury goods” (*Ingalls of De Smet*). As it turned out, “Mr. Landon didn’t see it that way.” MacBride recalled that Landon

didn’t think we could adapt it successfully and he certainly thought a saga treatment would be difficult to handle and expensive. Well, we had numerous minor differences. We wanted to have the family live in the sod house by Plum Creek as in fact they did. Mr. Landon said that would be too difficult to film and too dismal for viewers to watch. We wanted to have Laura go off to school on the first day barefoot, both because the family simply didn’t have the money to buy shoes and because Laura was the kind of girl who would want to run barefoot through the grass and through the dust and kick it up. Mr. Landon’s view was that none of *his* children were going barefoot to school, in the film you understand, when

none of the other dads in town had their children going barefoot to school. These differences piled up until the point until we had to say to the network: really, you have to do it either our way or Mr. Landon's way, but not both. And we knew, of course, in advance, what the answer would be, because a popular and very capable star, such as Mr. Landon is worth many millions of dollars to a network, whereas producers are highly expendable. And the result was that we were expended before the first series show ever appeared on the screen (*Ingalls of De Smet*).

Thus it was clear that the *Little House* show would be a reinterpretation, not a recounting, of Wilder's stories.

Like the *Little House on the Prairie* text, the premier movie begins with the Ingalls family's preparations for leaving the Big Woods of Wisconsin and ends with its departure from Indian Territory. Between the two wagon trips, many of the basic events from the narrative are included: the family arrives in a seemingly vacant territory after an uneventful wagon trip, Pa and Ma build a log house, and Pa encounters a wolf pack while out riding on the prairie. As in the text, Indians first visit the house when Pa is away, Pa helps some cowboys round up stray cattle in exchange for a cow and her calf, and their neighbor Mr. Edwards makes Christmas special for the Ingalls girls. Other similarities include a prairie fire that nearly burns down the Ingalls home, the terrified family listening to the drumming and "war cries" coming from the Indian camp, the departure of the Indians, and scene in which the Ingallses receive word that they must leave Indian Territory because they settled three miles over the line into Indian Territory. Though the events in the premier movie are similar to those in Wilder's *Little House on the Prairie*, the framework for making the trip in the first place is quite different. For example, in the text it is Pa's irritability at having neighbors too close that prompts the westward move, his "itching" to head west no matter what the conditions. Though it is unclear if Indian

Territory is open for settlement it is the specific destination mentioned repeatedly, thus the family expects to encounter Indians. In the premier however, Pa's justification for packing up the family and moving west is that they were unable to sustain life in Wisconsin where they lived on a "hand-to-mouth" basis. By suggesting that Pa must move his family west in hopes of *survival* rather than for purely adventurous reasons, the movie version downplays the Ingallses' responsibility for participating in the process of westward expansion.

In the premier movie, the Ingallses' motivation for going to Indian Territory is compounded by the fact that Indian Territory is not emphasized as the family's destination. Rather, the family expects only the one hundred and sixty acres "free and clear from the government" through the Homestead Act that will enable Pa to be "beholden to no man." As the family leaves their home in the Big Woods of Wisconsin amidst good-byes from their relatives, Laura's character explains, "though it made me sad, I thought it was a fine thing to go where there had never been a road before." The family looks forward to going to a "more bountiful land" and Laura's voiceover expresses her eagerness to start the trip: there would be "rivers to cross and hills to climb, but it is a fair land, and I rejoiced that I would see it." The Ingallses discount the presence of Native people altogether, and they seem to wander into Indian Territory by mistake. There is only one mention of Indians along the way, as Laura again looks forward to seeing them as she did in the book. She inquires:

"When will we see an Indian, Pa?"

[Mary responds], "Never, I hope!"

[Ma agrees], "My sentiments exactly. Don't even mention Indians. I hope never to see one."

As in the texts, the Ingalls build a home in Indian Country and Laura asks Ma why they came to Indian Territory if she does not like Indians. This time, Ma is a bit more responsive. She laughs and says mildly, "I suppose it does seem pretty foolish, coming to Indian Territory and hoping not to see an Indian." Once settled the Ingalls family receives its first visit from their Osage neighbors. As soon as Pa leaves the house one day, two Osage men arrive and enter the house. The men are dressed in buckskin shirts and pants and have masses of thick black hair, inconsistent with Osage clothing and hairstyles of the time. In contrast to the Osage who eat Ma's cornbread then leave peacefully in the "Indians in the House" chapter of *Little House on the Prairie*, the Osage in the premier movie are considerably more frightening. One tears up a feather pillow and maliciously sends feathers fluttering all over the house, while the other approaches Ma and fingers her hair. Ma, clearly terrified, thrusts a box of tobacco at them, but her demise seems imminent until she reaches behind her and hands them a cutting board with a piece of cornbread on it. They take the bread, and the knife, before leaving. When Pa goes to town shortly after this event, Ma observes Indians watching the Ingalls house from a distance and that night her behavior mirrors that of other pioneer women who were nearly frightened senseless by Indians' presence. Again, the fear in the scene is exaggerated as Ma rocks slowly in her chair, clutching a rifle balanced across its arms and singing a hymn in a voice wavering with fear. Horses whinny outside the door and Ma, appearing half-crazed and shaking with fear, cocks the gun, aims it at the door, and continues to aim the cocked gun as something rustles outside. When Pa enters, Ma aims the gun at him for a moment before finally collapsing into his arms in relief. In the

premier, Ma's behavior is reminiscent of the many pioneer women in frontier narratives who imagined Indians where none existed; in a similar scene in the book, Ma is frightened but does not let her emotions control her actions.

The exaggeration of Ma's fear of Indians in the premiere helps accentuate the family's ultimate realization that their fears of the Osage are unfounded. The next visit from the Osage occurs when Pa is at home. In the text, it is a fairly uneventful incident; an Osage man arrives at the house, he and Pa exchange "hows" and eat together before the man leaves without further incident. Pa surmises that the man was Osage, that he was "no common trash," and wishes he spoke French so that he could communicate with the man (whom they later learn is Soldat du Chêne, the man credited with saving the lives of the white settlers in the region). In the premier movie, Pa hospitably invites the man into the house and he and Soldat du Chene both smoke from Pa's pipe (clearly a reinvention on the proverbial peace pipe). Laura is fascinated, but not afraid, and she asks whether Soldat du Chene's necklace is a bear claw. Miraculously, Soldat du Chene seems to understand her English (and the broken English Pa uses), though he speaks only French. In this case, Ma understands his French and tries to interpret. As Soldat du Chene leaves, he slowly unties his bear claw necklace and ties it around Laura's neck, gently touching her cheek. This loving gesture earns Laura's and Pa's sympathy, because, as the family discusses, he will soon have to move west with the rest of the Indians. Mary is glad the Indians must leave, but Laura declares, "It's not fair! They were here first." The gifting of the necklace humanizes the Indians and makes them more worthy of sympathy and compassion, though the scene does not appear in the text.

Laura wears her bear-claw necklace proudly. In another scene that is entirely absent from the text, Laura sits cross-legged on the kitchen table, wearing her bear claw necklace, while Ma scrubs the floor. As it is near Thanksgiving, Laura asks Ma, “If Pa gets a turkey, can I have the feathers to make an Indian hat?” Mary cuts in, “You’re not an Indian!” Laura responds,

‘I’m practically one! I got a chief’s necklace.’

[Ma]: ‘I wish you wouldn’t wear that dirty thing.’

[Laura]: ‘It’s not dirty! Pa says it is a sign of a good hunter and it will bring protection and good luck.’

Ma disapproves of the idea and remains uneasy about the nearby Indians, particularly when the drum beats begin in the nearby Osage community and continues for several days and nights. When little Carrie begins to sing along, “Boom! Boom!” Ma shouts at her hysterically. As in the text, the Ingalls family spends several days and nights in terror, listening to the drums and cries from the Osage camp. When the drumming stops, Soldat du Chêne comes by the Ingalls house to personally explain via an interpreter (after convincing Pa to stop aiming a gun at him) what has transcribed between the Osage and the other Indian Nations. Soldat du Chêne indicates that the other Natives in the area had wanted to kill the white men, but Soldat du Chêne had convinced them that they would be killed by soldiers if they killed whites. Ma declares that it must have been the bear claw that brought them good luck in deterring the massacre. Soldat du Chêne again touches Laura’s face as he leaves, and Laura beams at him.

Most of the scenes from the text that portray the Osage negatively, and those that add to the complexity of westward expansion, are omitted from the premier. For example, Laura’s quest to see a “papoose” is left out entirely as is the visit to the Indian

camp where Mary and Laura collect beads. There is no attempt to juxtapose various positive and negative perspectives about Indians in the premier movie, and Mr. and Mrs. Scott's characters are omitted so Pa and Ma do not have opportunities to counter their ideas about the "only good Indians being dead ones." Ma reminds Laura once about wearing her sunbonnet so that her skin will not get "brown and leathery," but there is no discussion about the bonnet, dark skin, and Indians. Aside from the Indian who rips up a feather pillow, and the frightening drumming overheard by the family, the portrayals of Indians are not intensely negative, and Indians do not attempt to steal from the Ingallses as they do in the text. Significantly, in the premier the family does not observe the long lines of Indians passing their home that emphasize the Native presence in the area and the magnitude of their removal.

Laura's bear claw necklace apparently saves the family from massacre, daily life on the prairie is quite and comfortable, and the farm begins to prosper. Soon, however, soldiers arrive to inform Pa that he will have to move on. Pa blinks back tears as he declares that he never would have settled there if the "blasted politician" hadn't said that all of Kansas was open to settlement. The sense of adventure prevails though, as the family drives away in the loaded wagon and Laura's voiceover repeats the lines from the opening of the movie about the "rivers to cross and hills to climb" and her rejoicing at the prospect of seeing the "fair land."

Overall, the additions and deletions to the *Little House on the Prairie* premier movie result in a notable simplification of the Native themes. The message in the premier movie is that Indians seem frightening and different from white people at first,

but they are good people once you get to know them. They might even be inclined to give away a powerful object to a child, and even someone like Ma can unlearn her prejudices. The message in Landon's interpretation is not an entirely bad one, but it is rather different from Wilder's experience and probably shows more of a romanticized view of what cultural collisions on the frontier *could* have looked like instead of what actually happened in many frontier homes. The messages about Native people are not only simplified, but viewers need not search very hard for them as the music and lighting influence the audience in each situation. In the premier movie the importance of overcoming prejudices is difficult to miss, but the happy ending and clear moral suggest that cultural encounters on the frontier were harmless and diminish the realistic sense of frontier life created by Wilder in the original story.

Landon's version of *Little House on the Prairie* aired 183 episodes over nine seasons between 1974 and 1983. In the first episode, "Harvest of Friends," the Ingalls family settled in Walnut Grove, Minnesota, and except for a few adventures in Winoka, panning for gold further west, and some restructuring in the final seasons, the Ingallses lived in Walnut Grove for the majority of the show's run. Thus the show became the story of a nineteenth-century town, rather than the story of the frontier experience or the story of a pioneering family who firmly believed in self-reliance. In fact, one study of evolutionary psychology and game theory uses the *Little House* show as an example of the concept of reciprocal altruism:

It is a society in which helpful people help other helpful people. In such a society, any individual's gains could be greater than the gains he could achieve alone, and no individual need necessarily suffer a loss because of the gains of anyone else. This is what economists call a non-zero-sum

environment. The fact that reciprocal altruism can produce such an environment makes it an extremely powerful and progressive force in human evolution (Gander 209).

As the show shifted the focus of the *Little House* story from the frontier experience to a well-established town of citizens in Minnesota, there is little room for a Native presence after the premier movie and less than twenty of the 183 episodes contain any references to Indians. In four episodes Native issues are the central focus, Indians are otherwise off-handedly mentioned as part of a story from bygone days, used as mascots, or when non-Native characters on the show pretend to be Indians. In almost every episode involving Native issues, the Native people are either assisted by or outsmarted by non-Native characters.

All four episodes that focus on Native issues are inventions entirely outside the original *Little House* text. In the first, "Survival," aired on February 26, 1975, the Ingalls family seeks shelter in an abandoned cabin during an unexpected blizzard. Just before the storm, a U.S. Marshal had warned the Ingalls of a "savagely, renegade Sioux" named Jack Lamahorse in the area, and soon both the marshal and Lamahorse join the Ingallses in the cabin for the duration of the storm. Lamahorse saves the Ingalls family by rescuing Pa when he collapses while hunting, and supplies the Ingallses with food. In turn, he is caught and tied up by the marshal, who holds deep anti-Indian sentiments, and, in a fashion similar to Wilder's own style of juxtaposing different ideas about Indians, Pa and the marshal argue about the past and present state of Native affairs. The conflict ends when the marshal shoots Lamahorse, Pa punches the marshal, and by the end of the storm (and the show) they have all made peace and the marshal releases Lamahorse

without forcing him back to the reservation. Lamehorse does not speak during the entire episode, and the show ends with the Ingalls family stopping their homebound wagon to look back just in time to see Lamehorse silhouetted against the sky, rifle clenched above his head. After this moment of victory, Lamehorse turns and walks into the woods as the Ingalls family watches from afar.

Two years after “Survival,” Native issues were revisited in “Injun Kid” (aired on January 31, 1977) in which Amelia Stokes and her son Spotted Eagle come to live in Walnut Grove. Amelia had been captured by Indians, but fell in love with and married White Buffalo. After White Buffalo is killed, Amelia returns with their son to live with Amelia’s father. Again, anti-Indian sentiments run strong in the episode as Spotted Eagle’s grandfather, Mr. Stokes, will not acknowledge the Omaha identity of his grandson. Only Pa, Ma, and Laura welcome Amelia and Spotted Eagle into the community, and Laura’s bear claw necklace resurfaces when she shows it to Spotted Eagle and he immediately recognizes it as an Osage symbol of good fortune. Eventually, Pa helps the family smooth things out, and Mr. Stokes publicly recognizes Spotted Eagle as his grandson.

In the episode “Freedom Flight” (aired December 12, 1977), racial tensions between Indians and non-Indians are once again the central theme, and again Pa emerges as the hero when several Santee men arrive in Walnut Grove, seeking help from Dr. Baker because their chief is ill. Dr. Baker and Pa ride to the Santee camp, where Dr. Baker determines that Long Elk as suffered an apoplectic stroke and cannot be moved. The Santee families, however, are in danger because they left the reservation boundaries

in search of food, a situation compounded when a citizen of Walnut Grove organized a posse intent on ambushing the Santee camp. Pa saves the lives of Long Elk and his family by hiding them at his farm and then transferring them back to the band.

Finally, in “Halloween Dream” (aired on October 29, 1979), the Ingalls children (Laura and her adopted brother Albert, whose character is not present in the original text) dress as Indians for a Halloween party at Nellie Oleson’s. Ma instructs them to take a nap first before their late night out, and Albert dreams of an episode-long adventure in which he and Laura are mistaken for members of the “No Shoot” tribe who were to bring a shipment of rifles stolen from the U.S. military. Laura and Albert not only outwit the tribe several times, but manage to recover the lost rifles for the military and prevent the No Shoots from attacking the fort. They also manage a dramatic escape from the No Shoot camp while Albert literally has both hands tied up. While the plot of “Halloween Dream” is driven more by a comedy of errors and mistaken identities than heroics, again non-Indians are the heroes of the story.

In the first three shows about Native issues on *Little House on the Prairie*, conversations between Pa and other characters offer relatively extensive discussion about Native themes such as recent massacres, lack of food within the confinement of reservation boundaries, interracial relationships, and mixed-blood identity. In each episode, however, non-Indians emerge as the heroes, much in the tradition of Hollywood westerns. Unlike the events in Wilder’s narrative, the events on the television show are clearly resolved, the morals and lessons are clear and didactic, and there are, of course, reasonably happy endings. The *Little House* show also features racial issues in several

episodes that focus on tensions between blacks and whites in the community and others that address anti-Semitism. In each case, Pa or other members of the Ingalls family are instrumental in resolving the problems between the outcasts and the citizens of Walnut Grove. In short, each episode is a

morality play wherein we would learn a useful life lesson. Sometimes we would learn that the best gift is one that comes from the heart; sometimes we would learn that practical experience can be just as valuable as book-smarts. But always the same general message was conveyed on each and every episode. That message was devastatingly simple: that life on the prairie—or anywhere else for that matter—works best when helpful people help other helpful people (Gander 196).

According to Alison Arngrim (who played the character Nellie Oleson), the primary audience of Landon's *Little House* show was not children, but women in their forties (Arngrim, Season 6). For that reason, Arngrim explained in an interview, Michael Landon (Charles Ingalls) was scheduled to take off his shirt about once every three episodes (Arngrim, Season 6). Arngrim explains the diversity in the *Little House* show's primary audiences:

We have the fans who loved Michael Landon who grew up watching him on *Bonanza* and loved him through *Bonanza* and still call him "Little Joe" and like the show because of him. And then we have the people who were young kids, who their moms made them watch it because it was good for them and they like the show because they grew up watching it and they identified with Laura, they wanted to be Laura (Arngrim, Season 5).

In her interview, Arngrim identifies a significant similarity between the original text and the television show: both readers and viewers identify with Laura to the extent that they want to *be* Laura, which is a poignant reminder of *Little House*'s potential influence on the audience's ideas about Indians. As Arngrim explains in her interview, the show, like the texts, also appeals to audiences on an emotional level that is powerful but difficult to

articulate. Arngrim describes fans who confided that watching *Little House on the Prairie* every Monday night helped them to endure difficult childhoods, and other fans who watched tapes of the show for comfort while receiving chemotherapy treatments (Arngrim, Season 5). The show's appeal, like that of the texts, is pervasive yet elusive:

Nobody thought the show would still be this popular this many years later. I didn't. If you had bet me a million dollars that people would still be watching the show now, I would have lost the bet. I never would have believed it. But I've heard it from every kind of person, people from all over the world, from different countries. Everyone likes *Little House on the Prairie* and for really different reasons. Some people think it was a funny show, some see it as a dramatic show, some cry. The people who have come to me and told me it was their favorite show astounded me (Arngrim, Season 5).

In spite of the show's popularity, Arngrim observed that many people watched the show in secret because it was thought of as a show for children, especially girls. Dean Butler who played Almanzo Wilder similarly noted that the show had an especially high viewership in Los Angeles, and an even higher one in New York—"but no one would admit to watching it!" (Butler). In 1980, however, President Ronald Regan admitted that *Little House on the Prairie* was his favorite television show (Holtz 274).

Little House on the Prairie remains popular and airs several times daily on several cable networks. Disney, nevertheless, introduced another version of the story which aired as a five-part miniseries in the spring of 2005. The Disney interpretation of *Little House on the Prairie* brought still another perspective to the original text and dramatic changes to the presentation of Native themes. Disney's version of the story replicates the events in Wilder's story to a remarkable extent, and at times even dialogue among the characters is verbatim from the text. Disney's depiction of the events is

significantly more action-packed, however, and most scenes have an added element of danger or suspense. The scenes involving the Osage are no different and the Native presence is frightening and much more pronounced than in the original text. Like Landon's interpretation, the Disney version of *Little House on the Prairie* also contains scenes about the Osage that are fabricated.

Disney's story of the Ingalls family's trip to Indian Country opens just before the family decides to leave the Big Woods. In this telling, Pa's feeling of crowdedness in the Big Woods is demonstrated by many people milling about in the snowy woods, and a hunter almost shoots Laura when he mistakes her for game. Pa, moreover, is tired of "working for the man," and when Ma sees her husband belittled by his boss, *she* proposes the trip to Kansas. Pa is delighted and tells his family excitedly that they will be "going to where no one has been," and there will be "land, as far as the eye can see!" Again, there is no discussion of the fact that Indians already live there, and there is no repeated emphasis on the place name, "Indian Territory." The Ingallses' journey is considerably more exciting than in Wilder's original story, as the ice on the Mississippi River begins breaking up as the Ingallses cross it, a rattlesnake frightens Pa's horse while he is hunting and the injured horse must be shot (a nearby resident trades Pa two young mustangs for the single older horse and the peace of mind that the Ingalls family will reach its destination). Soon the wagon's brakes fail on a steep downhill slope and the family barrels down the hill at a break-neck pace, and later they pass a smashed wagon with two graves beside it as well as ominous piles of goods abandoned by other pioneers who made the trip ahead of the Ingalls family. The family reaches the place where Pa wants to

build a house in spite of the challenges, and as they climb out of the wagon and hold hands in a thankful prayer, Indians ominously observe them from a nearby hilltop.

As the Ingallses settle into their new home on the prairie, the events are enshrouded with an inflated sense of excitement. When Pa and Mr. Edwards meet for the first time, for example, they mistake each other for Indians and nearly shoot each other. Later, Pa nearly falls off of the top of the house as he stretches the wagon cover across to make a temporary roof. The drama continues as Pa nearly succumbs to poisonous gases while digging the well (instead of quickly pulling himself out hand-over-hand as he does in the text), and when Pa goes to help the cowboys round up the cattle Laura goes along and serves a cook for the cowboys. When Pa encounters the wolf pack, instead of simply managing to escape as he did in the narrative and in Landon's premier movie, this time the wolves attack Pa. In another scene from the book in which Pa investigates what turns out to be a panther screaming in the night, in the Disney interpretation the panther attacks Pa—and Soldat du Chêne arrives in time to shoot the panther and save Pa's life. The Ingallses' fear of massacre is also intensified as they, along with Mr. Edwards take shelter at the Scotts' house for several days. The petrified neighbors all barricade themselves inside the Scotts' house to wait out the anticipated attack from Indians. Inside the house Mrs. Scott succumbs to a fit of hysteria in which she first aims a gun at Pa, and then shoots a hole in the roof as her husband tries to wrest the gun away from her. In the text, the settlers consider building a make-shift stockade to protect them against an Indian attack, but Pa dissuades them by insisting that the Osage posed no threat to the families.

The Disney version of *Little House on the Prairie* does follow the text closely in terms of the basic events—albeit a dramatized presentation of them—and most of the Ingallses’ encounters with Native people from the text are also included. Conversations between Laura and her parents juxtapose ideas about Indians and their expected removal, and Mrs. Scott’s character offers extensive negative opinions on Indians. Mrs. Scott declares, for example, that “treaties or no treaties, the land belongs to the folks who’ll farm it” and “why bother with treaties? Just kill them.” In one scene Mary contradicts Mrs. Scott, repeating a line she had heard her father say, that some Indians are good and some are not, just like all men. The scene in which the Osages file past the Ingalls home is also included, though they appear to be leaving the area permanently, not for a hunt. Laura’s interest in seeing a papoose, and her desire to adopt one, however, are omitted. Ma’s character is also revised to the extent that she embodies the pioneer spirit and even initiates the trip to Kansas, and none of the female characters wear sunbonnets. Ma and the girls are either bare-headed or they wear straw hats. As in the text, Ma first encounters Indians while Pa is away, and although there are three Indians instead of only two, she handles the situation with aplomb, and later defends Laura’s interest in wanting to learn more about her Native neighbors.

In addition to the changes in Ma’s character that impact the overall presentation of Native themes, there are several new Native scenes that add to the drama, fear, or excitement of the story, and other scenes that contribute an element of mysticism that helps soften the impact of cultural collision. The narrative perspective in the Disney version offers a viewpoint that extends beyond Laura’s limited scope of vision and

knowledge in the texts, and occasionally shows scenes in the Osage camp.

Unfortunately, the flashes of men singing, drumming, and dancing are frightening and there are no conversations between Native characters that help to viewers to sympathize with their position. Most shots of the Osage camp are close-up and vibrantly colorful but accompanied by frightening music. When Pa and Mr. Edwards, in this version of the story, spy on the Osage camp, their fear only increases. A specific scene added to the Disney version that significantly adds to the frightening portrayal of Indians is the destruction of Mr. Edwards's cabin. While he is sleeping soundly one night, several Native men enter his home and drag him out by his feet before setting fire to his cabin and touching him with a coup stick. This event prompts the neighbors to create the make-shift fort in the Scotts' home. While in the Scotts' home, Laura also has a nightmare about nearly being clubbed to death by a Native man.

Alongside these events which heighten the drama of Disney's *Little House on the Prairie* are several other Native scenes—Jack, the family's brindle bulldog, for example, is transformed into a “spirit dog,” and Laura finds nearby Native children to play with. When the entire family is stricken with malaria (called “fever and ague” in the text), Dr. Tann nurses them back to health. Dr. Tann, a black doctor from the nearby reservations, informs Laura that her dog is a “spirit dog” because it has two different colored eyes, and he assures her that a spirit dog is a good source of protection because Indians fear such dogs. Dr. Tann's prediction proves accurate when, in another invented scene, Laura encounters an Osage man while alone and he raises his toothed club as if to strike her, then turns away when he sees her dog. Early in the series, Laura encounters a young

Native boy while out playing alone, and watches him, fascinated, until he suddenly appears to vanish into thin air. During this scene, and other scenes involving “mystical” encounters with Native people, the frightening, intense music is replaced with what sounds like an angelic children’s choir singing “hey-ya, hey-ya; hey-ya, hey-ya” repeatedly. The next time Laura sees the boy, he is accompanied by three friends. Laura soon sees him a third time, and this time she follows him and his friends to the Osage camp, where she sees women picking berries and working with quills.

In another slight variation, it is Dr. Tann who brings word to the Scott fort that the Soldat du Chêne and the Osage convinced the other tribes to call off their plans to massacre the citizens. Pa decides to search for Soldat du Chêne to personally thank him, and encounters a small party of Osage. One man who speaks English tells Pa that he wants to be remembered as the “last of the Osage to agree with du Chêne,” and delivers a speech that explains why the Osage, not whites, have a justified presence on the land. Nevertheless, the Scotts soon arrive with word that the Indians will be leaving the area for good, and Ma and Mrs. Scott head indoors to celebrate over tea. In a rearrangement of scenes, the visit Laura, Mary, and Pa make to the Indian camp to collect beads is positioned after the Osage’s final removal, the final step in appropriating land and cultural items from the Osage. Predictably, however, soldiers visit Pa—who introduces himself to the soldiers as “Charles Ingalls, yeoman farmer”—and inform him that the family must move because he has settled three miles over the line into Indian Territory. The ensuing scenes reinforce the idea that the Ingallses are blameless, that they settled in Indian Territory by mistake, and that they would have filed a land claim with the

homestead office but it had not yet opened. In this version of the story, Pa does not accept his family's fate quietly—he is furious that the government is “making an example” of him, refuses to leave unless he is thrown off the land, and in still another invented scene, Pa, Mr. Edwards, and Laura make a trip to the land office in Independence where Mr. Edwards must calm down Pa when he loses control after failing to secure his family's home. Eventually Pa decides to leave before the soldiers literally drive him away, and Ma reassures him that all is well, since she did after all, fall in love with a man with “wanderlust.” Ma tells Pa, “We'll go and find another home. If we get kicked off of that one we'll find another after that,” and Pa agrees, declaring that he'll build an even bigger house next time. The series ends as the family drives off in their wagon, with Laura, who placed a bead from the Indian camp on the windowsill of her family's empty home before leaving, signifying a new adventure.

The television interpretations of the *Little House on the Prairie* story serve as examples of the challenges of representing Native issues in literature and film. Whereas the original story is criticized for its inclusion of negative language about Native people, even removing such language and replacing it with didactic messages about the importance of positive multicultural experiences, as in Landon's version of *Little House*, does not necessarily result in messages about Native people and the frontier that are more positive overall. Similarly, showing more Native people without contextualizing the images or adding mystical elements, as in the Disney version of *Little House*, do not help to create a more balanced understanding of the events, nor does creating a frontier town in which the Native presence has already been eliminated. The film interpretations of the

Native events also present the issues in ways that leave little room for interpretation or discussion, and weaken the likelihood that the audience will learn accurate information about the American frontier. Although more than a century passed between Wilder's experiences on the frontier and the most recent portrayal of those experiences on television, the issues remain as complex as ever, and writers and filmmakers will undoubtedly continue to explore those complex issues with varying results.

CONCLUSION

“Memories! We go through life collecting them whether we will or not! Sometimes I wonder if they are our treasures in Heaven or the consuming fires of torment when we carry them with us as we, too pass on. What a joy our memories may be or what a sorrow! But glad or sad they are with us forever. Let us make them carefully of all good things, rejoicing in the wonderful truth that while we are laying up for ourselves the very sweetest and best of happy memories, we are at the same time giving them to others.”— Laura Ingalls Wilder, *Missouri Ruralist*, June 1924 (Wilder, *LHO* 315)

On the surface, Wilder’s remarks on the importance of making good memories for oneself may seem like more of her usual advocacy for approaching life cheerfully.

Knowing that Wilder wrote these words upon the death of her mother, however, uncovers hints of sadness and pain not necessarily evident in a first reading, or a reading taken out of context. Similarly Wilder, who had witnessed firsthand a frontier fraught with inconsistencies and who was sensitive to the fact that there were “so many ways of seeing things, and so many ways of saying them,” likely realized that there were many ways to portray her frontier experience. As a talented storyteller, she probably also realized that choices she made in portraying the frontier were not easy choices between truth and lies, but choices between many truths. Even as Wilder made decisions about how to represent the frontier as she saw it, descriptions of her own life experience were subject to the scrutiny of critics both in her time and today, and readers likely find ways to relate to the text in some ways that Wilder may have anticipated, and some ways she did not.

Revisiting the *Little House* books within the rich contexts that Wilder lived and wrote offers a more sophisticated understanding of both Wilder and the texts raises many questions about the America’s frontier history.

One of the most difficult aspects of attempting to reconstruct the experiences or perspectives of another person is that there will always be unknowns, inconsistencies, and an inestimable distance that even the most thorough research cannot resolve. Shortly after my research on Wilder began, I visited her home at Rocky Ridge in Mansfield, Missouri. At the time I was in the early stages of my research when certain negative scenes containing Indians in her texts temporarily overshadowed my ability to appreciate the much larger picture of the frontier she had painted. Walking through her home under the watchful eye of a docent, I made an observation that I could not forget because it seemed so inconsistent with what I believed to be true about Wilder's work: over Laura Ingalls Wilder's bed hung a Frederic Remington painting of several Indian men. I could not find a way to reconcile the apparent fear and hatred of Indians in her texts with the elderly women who fell asleep each night looking at Indian men on the wall above her. It was the painting, along with biographical information about Wilder, that first suggested that there was more to Wilder's work than I had imagined, that prompted me to revisit her work as *literature* rather than the anti-Indian propaganda I had first supposed it to be. The more I explored Wilder's texts, the more inconsistencies there seemed to be: the structure of Wilder's narrative, her presentation of both positive and negative examples of Native themes, the ways in which her text is more complex than most other frontier women's narratives, and the political messages embedded in her work all suggest that Wilder's work was *not* intended to celebrate the heyday of the American frontier. There is far more evidence, in fact, that Wilder sought to challenge frontier mythology than to perpetuate it.

Still, however, inconsistencies remain, and it is often in those very inconsistencies that Wilder invites ongoing dialogue about complex frontier issues. Perhaps one of the greatest challenges to approaching Wilder's work open-mindedly is the tension between the extraordinarily likeable protagonist (and her family) and the deplorable events that characterize westward expansion on the American frontier. For fans who adore Wilder, even to the extent that some of them wish to *be* her, there is the fact that Wilder's family did participate in the westward movement. At the same time, those who choose to berate the Ingalls family's actions in the text likely cannot help but realize that the family is not a cast of villains. As Wilder portrays the situation, the members of the Ingalls family are essentially good, kind, ordinary people caught up in the sweeping momentum of an era that we now recognize as one of the darkest periods of American history. Even today, America's frontier days are more often celebrated than criticized, which makes Laura's willingness to venture the question, "What did we come to their country for, if you don't like [Indians]?" over her family's makeshift dinner table all the more remarkable. Laura questions the actions of her own family—a gesture that offers immeasurable hope for a nation that more often than not continues to be mesmerized by frontier mythology. The second time Laura challenges her family—about the expectation that Indians will move west—it is when she stayed awake past her bedtime to ask questions. Laura's vigilant questions serve as reminders that it is important to remain awake and self-aware of our beliefs and actions, because ordinarily good people can inflict great harm if asleep to the circumstances in which they participate.

As Wilder depicted the American frontier in ways that are now familiar to millions of readers, she originally included scenes that strongly contradicted the romantic mythology rooted in Manifest Destiny that often prevails today. Notably, those scenes were omitted from her published texts. One of Dorris's first criticisms of Wilder's work is that she does not include a Native presence in the Big Woods of Wisconsin (Dorris 271). In her original manuscript, in fact, Wilder included a two-and-a-half page story her father told her about the naming of the nearby Maiden Rock after a local Native woman (Wilder, manuscript) that was not included in *Little House in the Big Woods*. More importantly, her original manuscript also dedicated approximately three pages to a description the circumstances surrounding a potential "Indian outbreak" in De Smet. Her story uses no pejorative language to describe the Indians involved, and it points directly to the actions of a local white man as the cause of the disturbance: a doctor found a deceased Native infant placed in a tree for burial and was particularly fascinated by the mummification process used on the infant's body. He took the infant from its resting place and sent it by train to Chicago for further study. Understandably, the Native community was distressed and angry, and gave De Smet little peace until the infant was returned ten days later (Wilder, manuscript). This story, too, did not make it to press.

In an article, "Miseries of the Old West," Alan Wilkinson suggests that some of the "miseries" of Wilder's life story were deliberately cut by her editors in the interest of portraying a more positive image of the frontier, one that is in line with its mythology. Evidence that the "miseries" and also some of the passages containing Native themes that challenge the concept of Manifest Destiny were cut suggests that Wilder

wished to remain faithful to her memories, good and bad. The reputation of the *Little House* series as a sugar-coated reminiscence is undeserved. That the miseries are only hinted at is none of Laura's doing. People outside that experience fancied they knew best in attempting to protect America's most cherished myth. The omissions, the sweetening, are not the wishful thinking of a forgetful old lady but a reflection of the sensitive palate of those entrusted with the guardianship of a nation's collective memory (Wilkinson 3).

In the *Little House* books then, we are left with only what appear to be Laura's more subtle efforts to challenge the mythology of the American frontier. And, like Wilder herself, we are left to wonder how to write ideally about a situation that is anything but ideal and to determine whether a good story about the American frontier is one that presents only its best attributes, or one that includes inconsistencies and ugliness and "wrong" people. Literature about nineteenth-century frontier America written from first-hand experience is dominated by the perspectives of non-Natives, and the imbalance in primary source perspectives in that era cannot be undone through efforts to silence certain non-Native voices. Non-fiction and fiction that centers the human experiences of Native people and characters can, however, help to offset dominant discourse in present and future generations.

As scholars, teachers, and parents we, too, become momentary gatekeepers of America's mythology as we make individual decisions about whether to include Wilder's *Little House* books in homes, schools, and libraries. For those who choose to pass the stories on to modern children, Wilder's *Little House* books offer ways to critique America's frontier history rather than celebrating it, and they offer even contemporary readers opportunities to, like Laura, ask poignant questions about America's past, present, and future. For Laura Ingalls Wilder, readers' love or disdain for her books was

likely far less important to her than ensuring that children learned to “think for themselves,” and her books certainly offer children opportunities to think and learn about the American frontier.

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