

The ROCKY RIDGE REVIEW

Summer 1997

Laura Ingalls Wilder - Rose Wilder Lane Home Association, Mansfield, Missouri 65704

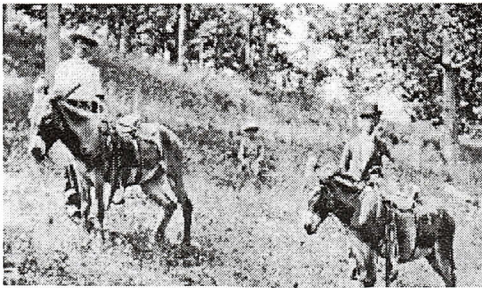
THE WEATHER DURING LAURA'S FIRST SIX YEARS IN MISSOURI

Wayne L. Decker, Professor Emeritus • University of Missouri-Columbia

As the Wilders settled into their new home just outside of Mansfield, Missouri in 1894 there was plenty of work to do. The house had to be made liveable, land cleared of trees and brush for gardens and crops, and the orchard trees left by previous owner transplanted. Each year the gardens and crops had to be planted to provide the necessary food to carry the family through to the next year. The weather during these "start-up" years was important in determining the success of the farm.

In general, the weather of their first six years in Missouri, 1895-1900, must have seemed benign to the Wilders. Their recent experience in South Dakota with the dry weather and the extreme cold of the winters must have made Missouri's weather seem mild and quite hospitable to Laura and Almanzo.

The precipitation during the first six-year period of weather was generally greater than the modern long time average precipitation for the region. The average yearly precipitation for the period was about 44 inches. This total doubles the 22 inches they experienced during the period of farming in South Dakota. The adequate rain during this six years was very important to Almanzo. The soils of Rocky Ridge Farm are quite thin and incapable of storing a great deal of water in reserve to carry gardens and crops through dry periods.



Farming on Rocky Ridge was often an "uphill battle," since the land was rough and hilly. Almanzo is seen (at left) with a "jenny".



Sheep graze on the farm.



"Diggin' taters" with Almanzo, Meroe Andrews and her aunt Rose Timberlake, 1909.

Photo courtesy of Meroe S. Camp

In 1898, which was the wettest of the first six years, the abundance of rain must have hindered normal farm operations. The yearly total in '98 was nearly sixty inches and the six month period from March through August received over 39 inches of rain.

Drought is a hazard to farming in southwest Missouri. The Wilders' first experience with a Missouri drought occurred in 1899. This event was a mid-summer to late summer occurrence, with the total rain for July, August and September being only 3.5 inches. In July the rain total was 57% of the modern

normal for the area and August and September rainfall totals were 21 and 22 percent of normal. Weather experts consider rainfall less than 50 percent of normal as drought.

The consequence of this dry spell in 1899 was reduced because the preceded spring and early summer was wetter than average. The rainfall totals for May, 1899 was over 6.5 inches and for June the total was over 5 inches. This weather allowed early gardens to be abundant, so the Wilders entered the drought period in mid-summer with a supply of food from the canning of early produce. Pastures conditions and the hay harvest in these months were also good allowing cattle and other farm animals to remain in good shape.

The humid conditions during the warm season of the year in Missouri produced an uncomfortable condition. The high humidities made the summer temperatures of the high eighties and the nineties seem much warmer than the same temperatures in the drier climate of South Dakota.

The summers were generally quite mild for the climate of the area during the first six years of the Wilder residency in Missouri. During this period temperatures reached 100 degrees only in August of 1896. In 1897 there were 27 days with the temperatures above 90 degrees.

The winters were, of course, must milder than in South Dakota. Except for the extreme cold of the winter of 1899, the winter temperatures of this six-year period did not provide much stress. On most of these years, the temperatures reach

zero Fahrenheit either not at all or only for a day or two. However, in February of 1899, the temperatures fell to a -29 and there were six consecutive days that the nighttime temperatures dropped below zero degrees.

Almanzo experienced six years of farming with generally good rainfall conditions. The variability in rain he



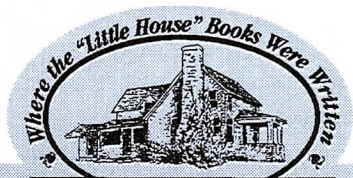
Corn grew well on the farm, as evidenced by Laura's snapshot.

experienced is typical of the climate of this sub-humid region. There was one year with excessive rains (1898) and one year with drought conditions (late summer of 1899). In general, the precipitation patterns were favorable for farming in the area. The rainfall was adequate to support the growth of their young orchard. Gardens were adequate to support the food supply for the Wilder's table during the spring, summer and autumn seasons.



Laura and Rose in the orchard at Rocky Ridge.

Editor's note: Wayne Decker's wife, Jane, serves on the Board of Directors of the Wilder Home and Museum. He is a Wilder supporter by osmosis, as he accompanies Jane to Mansfield for meetings and on her frequent visits to schools to present programs. Part I of his "weather report" focused on the Wilders' experiences with the elements, appeared in Laura Ingalls Wilder Lore, the newsletter of the DeSmet Memorial Society, in the Fall 1996 issue.



THE WILDER HOME

NEWS FROM THE
HOME & MUSEUM

NEWS FROM ROCKY RIDGE

Progress continues at the 1928 Rock House, and the interior is taking on some of the beauty that made the place a showplace when it was built. Cabinets are now in the kitchen, an electric stove on legs has been located, and the old time sink is now replaced. Does anyone know where to obtain a period refrigerator? A 1928 coil drop Norge was used by the Wilders. The large living room french doors have been outfitted with reproduction draperies -- very beautifully . . . ∞

In the ongoing preservation-restoration project at the original farmhouse, several items have been accomplished. The old mirrors were re-silvered and the silk shades on the living room lamps were replaced, re-using the old trim . . . ∞

"Rocky Ridge Day" has been set for Saturday, October 18, and this is an invitation for all members of the Association to attend. . . ∞

A new book, Laura Ingalls Wilder: An Annotated Bibliography of Critical, Biographical, and Teaching Studies has been compiled by Jane M. Subramanian. It is published by Greenwood Press of Westport, Connecticut . . . ∞

The Japanese prime time program, "You Should Know", will feature Laura Ingalls Wilder and Rose Wilder Lane on August 3, only in Japan. The

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Check pattern on front page streamer is duplicated from flyleaves of original Harper & Brothers editions of the Wilder books and favored by Laura

NETA SEAL, LAURA'S FRIEND, DIES AT 91



Many "Little House" admirers have become familiar with Neta Seal's name as one of the few remaining residents who knew the Wilders well. That link with their history ended when Neta died on December 12, 1996. The Mansfield native was born in 1904, and spent most of her life in the vicinity.

It is an often-told story how the Wilders and the Seals became acquainted. Neta's husband Silas (who died in 1960), operated a Standard Oil service station on Mansfield's main street. Almanzo Wilder frequently had his Chrysler serviced there, and admired Silas' care of the car. By 1937, the two were close enough that

Almanzo asked Silas to drive him and Laura to Detroit for an author appearance. The following year, the Wilders and the Seals made a long and happy trip together to the West Coast, stopping in De Smet on the route back home.

In many ways, the Seals became the surrogate children of the Wilders; even Rose acknowledged this, since she lived far away from the family home.

Neta's life was a busy one, caring for the boarding house she and Silas established, and being an active worker in her church. The attention she received as a Wilder friend was a role she took in stride. She enjoyed people, and did not object to the constant questions, interviews, and unexpected visits by those who came seeking a personal connection with the Wilders.

The Seals were early supporters of the Wilder Home Association, being founder members and contributors to its work.

Neta kept a strong interest in the project, right up to her last days.

Burial took place in the Mansfield Cemetery, not far from the Wilders, with whom she had shared many happy life experiences.



NEW ACQUISITIONS ADD TO THE WILDER HISTORY

In October 1996, Neta Seal directed that a number of Wilder items in her possession be transferred to the Laura Ingalls Wilder Home Association. It was the wish of Laura and Almanzo that the Seals receive the content of their home, and though Neta and Silas permitted most of the original furnishings to remain in place, some were retained.

Among the items acquired are two full sets of Wilder dishes (Haviland and Blue Willow), Almanzo's bureau, a rocking chair, a primitive early chair, framed landscapes, autographed books, and other miscellaneous items of historic importance. It was Neta Seal's wish that all of these articles be preserved and exhibited for the enjoyment of the many visitors who come to the Wilder home.

FORTY YEARS OF SAVING WILDER HISTORY

The year 1997 marks the fortieth year anniversary of the Laura Ingalls Wilder Home Association, and the beginning of tours at the historic home on Rocky Ridge Farm. It was in February, 1957, just



Picture taken in 1958 by Aubrey Sherwood of DeSmet, S.D.

As first curator, Irene V. Lichty explained:

A few years before Mrs. Wilder's death, my husband and I were talking of the numbers of people who were coming to see her home. My husband remarked, 'Mrs. Wilder's home should be preserved for her friends to visit after she is through with it.' She became too frail to have any, but her closest friends came to call on her. One day when we were visiting, Mrs. Wilder said to me, 'I think Mansfield should have a library building and she would be interested in one if they would make a room for Mary's quilt and a few other mementos of her books. She insisted upon a ladies' lounge where rural women could be comfortable while waiting for their husbands. The offer was made but no one in Mansfield accepted -- but that is another story. When Mrs. Wilder was speaking of a library, I remarked to her that L. D. and I felt that when she was through with her home, it should be open for her readers to visit. She was such a modest little lady that she had no idea of her fame or that readers would be interested in seeing her home.

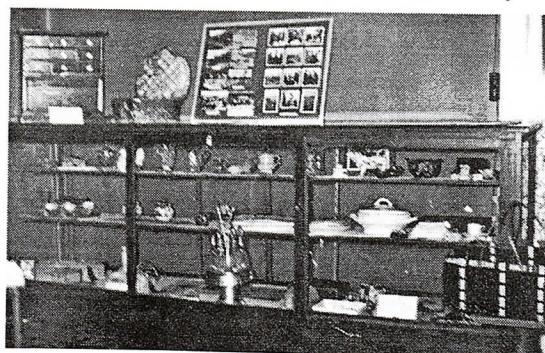
People were interested. On May 19, 1957, the first Open House was held, at which 500 people toured the Wilder home. This led to a regular stream of visitors who came to tour the Wilder homeplace.

By December, 1957, a charter was obtained to form a non-profit organization dedicated to the preservation of the house and its contents.

The forty years of existence have seen many changes and developments: additions of land, purchase of the rock house, the building of a museum, acquisition of more relics, and of course, a steady increase of visitors. One aspect has remained constant over all the years of the Association's existence - it is the presence of Juanita Parker as a dedicated volunteer and board member. At the June 15 meeting of the Board of Directors, Mrs. Parker's long years of service were noted.

days after Laura Ingalls Wilder's death, that a group of Mansfield people conferred with Rose Wilder Lane about the preservation of her parents' home and its mementos.

Prior to Laura's death, there had been talk about the possibility of keeping her home as a memorial.



The first "museum" consisted of showcases in the Wilder bedroom. This method served until 1971.

MANSFIELD HONORS THE WILDERS

☛ In addition to the daily tours of the Wilder Home and Museum, the Wilders' hometown offers several annual events in their memory. "Little House Memories", in its seventh year of production, dramatizes in word and music the life of Laura and her family from Wisconsin to Missouri.

Dates for this year's production are: August 22-23, 29-30, September 5-6, 19-20. The site is the Ozark Mountain Players' stage in the City Park in Mansfield. For further information, write: Ozark Mountain Players, P.O. Box 113, Mansfield, MO 65704.

☛ The 24th Annual Wilder Days celebration in Mansfield is set again for September 19-20-21. For more information, request a brochure from P.O. Box 514, Mansfield, MO 65704.

☛ Completing the season will be the Wilder Association's 7th annual "Rocky Ridge Day" on October 18.



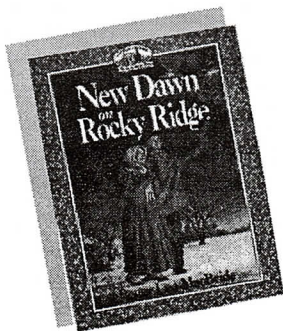
LITTLE HOUSE TO BIG SCREEN

Universal Studios will be bringing the "Little House on the Prairie" to the public via a major movie production. It has been announced that the screenplay is being written by Horton Foote, best known for his work on "To Kill A Mockingbird." Foote is an Oscar and Academy Award-winner.

Since the project is in the formative stages, it is not known whether any of the television actors will reprise their roles or participate in any way.



NEW IN THE BOOKSTORE



New Dawn on Rocky Ridge, the sixth book in Roger MacBride's series of books on Rose Wilder's growing up in Mansfield, will be released in October.



FALL BOOK PREVIEW:

A deluxe edition of Little House on the Prairie, a paperback edition of Laura Ingalls Wilder Country Cookbook, County Fair, a picture book about Almanzo, and many other exciting new items!

An updated price list from the Little House Bookstore is available (please enclose a postage stamp when making this request.)



With news of a new "Little House on the Prairie" movie just out, why not take time to enjoy the two hour premiere movie of the NBC-TV series, as first seen in 1974? This version is very close to the original book. **\$12.95 + \$3.00 shipping will get it to you.**

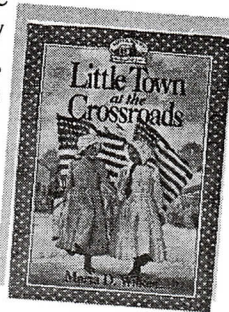
Due to the efforts of a young reader, the birthplace site of Caroline Quiner Ingalls is now noted with an historic marker. The site, in the Milwaukee, Wisconsin suburb of Brookfield, now boasts a handsome plaque, which tells that "Ma" was born there in 1839.

An eight-year-old, Carly Wunderlich, spearheaded the project. She began by writing the Waukesha County Historical Society, and later, when the project was approved, helped raise funds for its placement.

A birthday party/dedication was held at the Harry W. Schwartz Bookshop in Brookfield. A presentation on the "Little House" books was made by Lynn Urban.

Carly's achievement in community service was not overlooked by civic leaders. A spokesperson for the local historical society remarked that "You have proved that young people can make things happen."

The newly-erected historical marker is destined to attract much comment, especially since the new "Little House in Brookfield" series by Maria Wilkes has been launched by Harper Collins, Publisher. The latest of the books Little Town at the Crossroads is available at the Little House Bookstore.



NEWS...

Continued from page 2...

film crew visited Mansfield in late June... ∞

Susan Hammaker recently contributed a number of copies of Rose's Give Me Liberty and the books are available through the bookstore here at \$2.50... ∞

Often letters received here at the Home and Museum carry interesting bits and pieces of information. Susan Tesseneer-Street of Sikeston, Missouri, writes that "My mother, Geneva Tesseneer, was a school teacher in Alabama for fifty years. She read constantly and Laura was one of her favorite writers. Her class wrote Mrs. Wilder requesting that she make an appearance on 'Carnival of Books' and Mrs. Wilder answered the letter. Laura was indeed featured on this radio show, and a radio transcription is among the museum collection. She wrote: "I am sorry I cannot make a personal appearance on 'Carnival of Books' and thank you for wishing me to do so. Instead I greet you by letter."... ∞

Thanks to Kathy Short of Mansfield for bringing the 1894 advertising poster to display in the Museum. The framed photo includes most of the businesses in existence when the Wilders arrived in town... ∞



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