

# *The* ROCKY RIDGE REVIEW

Summer 2007

*Laura Ingalls Wilder – Rose Wilder Lane Home Association, Mansfield, Missouri 65704*

## The Story of **THE LAURA INGALLS WILDER HOME ASSOCIATION** 1957-2007



*The first photo of the Wilder Home after its establishment as a museum in 1957.*

**I**t is now a half-century since Laura Ingalls Wilder died in her beloved home on Rocky Ridge Farm, a mile from Mansfield, Missouri. She knew her books would go on telling her stories to readers yet unborn, creating a lasting legacy. And she had an inkling that the house on Rocky Ridge would be part of that legacy. Here is the story of how a small community and a group of its determined citizens successfully saved a significant chapter in American literature and history, and honored a great author.

Laura herself gave the first tours of the Wilder Home. After her books were well launched and she was a famous name in schools, libraries and homes all over America, her readers wrote her, and visited when they drove through the Ozarks. Especially during the summers, teachers, librarians, and families picked

out the white farmhouse along Highway 60 and rapped on the door. Although she was somewhat shy and retiring around strangers, Laura was gracious and friendly to her visitors, often showing them around her home. The climax was always the unique, impressive living room.

The first Mansfield citizens who thought of preserving the Wilder Home and its contents were Lewis and Irene Lichty. They met Laura around 1947, and during her widowed days the connection intensified. The Lichtys were Kansans, and perhaps as outsiders they saw the importance of honoring Mansfield's author. Mrs. Lichty tentatively mentioned the idea of preserving the house on one of her visits to Laura.

Laura neither said yes or no. She remarked that her house had grown somewhat shabby in her later years. But she told her daughter Rose of the suggestion later on, and was very pleased.

Then on February 10, 1957, Laura died. Rose, in her grief, prepared to leave Mansfield. A group of Mansfield men, headed by L.D. Lichty, called on Rose, proposing the idea of creating a memorial of the house, and keeping its contents intact.

Rose was agreeable, but there were complications: she did not inherit the house or the farm; her parents had sold the place earlier to Harland and Gireda Shorter, keeping only a life estate. As to the contents, a lifelong accumulation of belongings, Laura wished that Rose take any keepsakes she wanted, and the rest were willed to her close friends, Silas and Neta Seal of



Mansfield. Rose labeled and identified many of the family treasures and entrusted the most valuable of them to committee members. Then, Rose closed the door for the final time, never to return to Rocky Ridge.

"Mrs. Wilder's home looks very lonely," remarked Irene Lichty. Laura's death created a pall over Mansfield and a major reaction all across America. The *Mansfield Mirror* was flooded with requests for information, and 200 copies of the issue containing Laura's death notice were sent to far off states. One inquirer wrote the *Mirror* "We feel like we almost have lost a member of our own family."

Meanwhile, attempts started to obtain a legal charter for the Laura Ingalls Wilder Home Association, and non-profit status.

Temporary trustees were Mr. Lichty, S.A. Honeycutt, G.C. Freeman, Don Ferrell, Silas Seal, and Harland Shorter. Plans of *what* to do about a memorial were vague. Some felt the Wilder home was too far out of town to make a museum-memorial practical. Rose suggested that the Laura Ingalls Wilder Library move its headquarters to the house, and make the place a library and museum combined, with the librarian using the upstairs as living quarters.

The first visitors, 500 of them, toured the Wilder Home at an Open House on Sunday, May 19. Ruth Freeman, mother of current board member Dale Freeman, was in charge of arrangements. An Iowa journalist attended, and wrote, "I gave ten bucks to the shrine fund, which I could no more afford than you can afford to let another sun go down without introducing yourself to those books."

Money was an immediate need to set the Association in motion. \$100 Founder memberships were offered and many local residents responded to the call. Rose suggested a "Pennies for Laura" project to reach youthful readers who wished to contribute to the upkeep of the memorial. Rose donated the \$7500.00 needed to purchase her parents' house and three acres of surrounding land from the Shorters. To keep the house safe from grazing cattle, Mr. Shorter built a simple fence around the house. One of the few changes to the site was the abandonment of the old driveway, which was difficult for groups of car travel to maneuver safely, and the addition of a curving driveway to the east with a sweeping view of the home site.

## Laura Ingalls Wilder Home

**NOW OPEN DAILY**



**HOSTESS  
ON  
DUTY**

**Located one-half mile east of Mansfield, Mo.,  
on City Route 60**

*The public is invited to visit the Missouri home  
of this nationally known authoress whose books are  
read the world over.*

Proceeds from sale of LITTLE HOUSE books, cards, note-  
paper and memorabilia are used for upkeep of the property  
owned by THE LAURA INGALLS WILDER HOME ASSOCIA-  
TION, a non-profit organization.

### *Early publicity for the Wilder Home.*

The home was arranged as a combination museum-preserved house. The Wilder bedroom was dismantled and lined with showcases to hold artifacts. Volunteers kept the place clean, did maintenance, cut the grass, and were available to show the house when out of towners arrived. The first official hostess was Florence Williams, who had been librarian in town. A taxi brought her to the house in the summer mornings, and she remained on duty. Some days a trickle of visitors came, some days no one arrived. Admission was free; a fishbowl by the kitchen door was a donation container.

Lewis and Irene Lichty emerged as perhaps the available people to serve as curators of the property. Around 1959 this became official. They diminished their realty business and contributed significant time to the emerging memorial. Income was needed, so they purchased one set of Little House books to re sell, then another, and the dining table became the first place to purchase Wilder items. A post card was made, and a replica of Laura's rag doll was created. Meanwhile, schools and individuals sent needed donations to keep the new organization afloat. The Mansfield School bought a Founder Membership, as did The Athenian Club of Hartville. Students in Elmore, Minnesota produced a mimeographed small book on the Wilders, sold it, and were able to contribute \$30.

School tours became a mainstay of the core of visitations. Generations of Missouri children, steeped in the Wilder books, arrived by bus to visit "the house Almanzo built". The Coon Rapids Elementary School started a tradition of an overnight visit to bring children to the home and museum in 1973. Their visits continue in 2007!

Rose Wilder Lane's contributions were significant in the early years. She donated funds for special needs, answered questions sent by the Lichtys, offered advice, and

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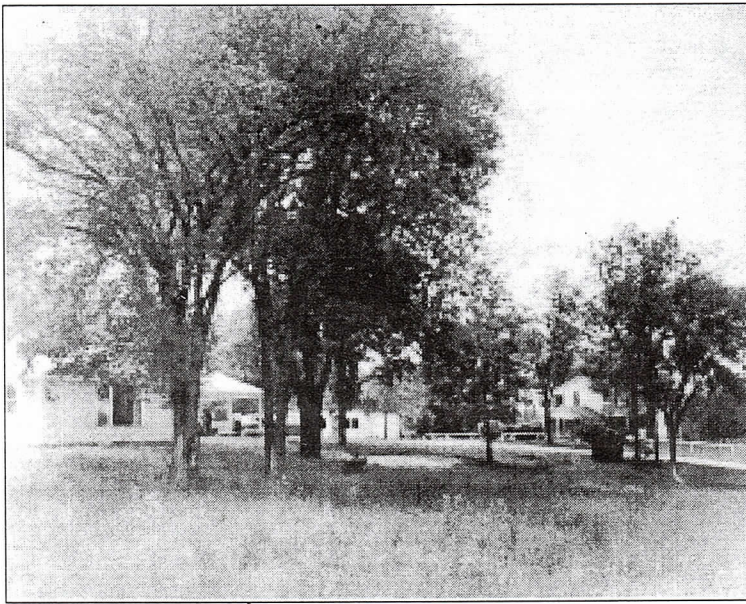
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*Check pattern on front page streamer is duplicated  
from flyleafs of original Harper & Brothers editions of  
the*

*Wilder books and favored by Laura*

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*The site in 1964. The curators' home is on the left.*

Another milestone was the publication of *On the Way Home* in 1962, which described the Wilder journey from South Dakota to Mansfield, and their early life on the farm. When the Bignell family from Australia came to America especially to see the Wilder sites in 1966, their visit to Mansfield helped promote the site the convince skeptics that the Home and Museum was growing in international stature.

Very few changes were made to the house and grounds in the early years. The former "club house" attached to the garage was converted into a bookshop in 1963. Plans were made, with Rose's approval, to build a fireproof museum building but she did not live to see this built. She died in 1968, and the Lichtys helped to arrange for her final services in Mansfield. They missed her constant input, but were determined to proceed with their goals.

Fund raising for the fireproof museum building continued, and the need was compounded by the arrival of furnishings and memorabilia of Rose Wilder Lane from her homes in Texas and Connecticut. Roger Mac Bride donated the priceless items from Rose's life and career, with the stipulation that the proposed museum include an area to pay her tribute. He also pledged financial support for the museum. Ground was broken in 1970, with the first spade turned by young Jane Coday, now grown up and a board member of the museum. The museum was built just steps from the Wilder house, and it was opened in 1971.

The 1970s brought great growth to the Association, with daily visitors sometimes reaching the 200 mark. The Lichtys found extra help and many Mansfield area persons served as volunteers and employees to meet the needs of the increasing tourism. L.D. Lichty served faithfully until his sudden death in 1974.

The onset of the "*Little House on the Prairie*" television show created an unexpected surge in interest in the Wilder Home and Museum. While previous visitors had mostly been well versed in Laura's writings, newer arrivals were often steeped in television story lines. It was sometimes an uneasy truce between the goals of the Association, which were to commemorate the Wilder writings, and the expectations of TV series fans. Mansfield initiated the annual "Wilder Day" in 1974, which seemed to please both book readers and television admirers alike.

Irene Lichty remained a staunch advocate of the project she and others started in 1957. She was faithful and firm in her beliefs of honoring the Wilders, and continued her role as curator, with help from several of her family members. Roger Mac Bride continued as a constant presence in the Association, along with newer board members, Joe Coday of The Bank of Mansfield, and his educator wife, Jean.

In 1988 Irene Lichty Le Count reluctantly retired as curator at the age of 86. She had served long and with great dedication, and the Association appreciated her efforts. In her place came Connie Tidwell, a person with a variety of talents and great personal

sent additional family items for exhibit. In the early 1960s, she felt that permanent care of the museum property was essential, and offered to build a curators' home. It was completed in 1963, and the Lichtys became permanent residents of Rocky Ridge.

Rose's attorney, Roger Mac Bride, also became interested in the memorial, and he became a faithful supporter, advisor and board member, on an ongoing basis from the early 1960s until his death in 1995.

Visitors continually increased at the Wilder home site. The Lichtys alternated in giving guided tours through the house, but this method was not adequate. An Iowa teacher, Bernice Risse, offered to volunteer her summers at Rocky Ridge in 1961. She continued to serve for many summers, and was a great assist to the organization.

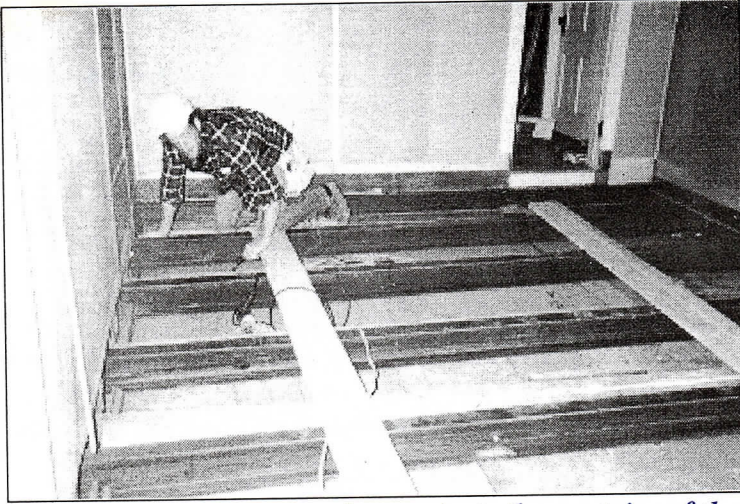
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*L.D. and Irene Lichty, summer 1969.*





*Among many preservation projects the upstairs of the historic home was repaired in 1990.*

the home is a never-ending responsibility.

The Missouri visit of Little House illustrator Garth Williams in 1990 started the tradition of "Rocky Ridge Day" sponsored by the Association. Held in mid-October, the celebration continued for over a decade, bringing many featured authors, speakers and performers, and many enthusiasts from many states. Connie Tidwell was instrumental in bringing these events to fruition, and continued to make many contributions to the Association until her untimely death in March 1993.

A goal of the Association in the 1990s was to acquire land and buildings that once were a part of the Wilder holdings. This process had amazing success, until the Association now holds over 150 acres of the original Wilder land. With the land came significant structures: the 1928 tenant house across Highway 60, the 1928 rock house built by Rose for her parents, and land to the east of the Wilder museum complex which must have been the site of the 1890s apple orchard. After a long and painstaking restoration process the Rock House was opened to visitors with a gala ribbon-cutting ceremony in October 1997. Jean Coday, who shouldered the director position in 1993, was a major force in the acquisition of property, and the transformation of the Rock House. Board member Phillip Bennett linked the two Wilder homes by researching and creating a beautiful pathway, which was opened in 2006.

Completing the cycle of purchasing the Wilder houses in Mansfield was the acquisition of home in town where the Wilders lived from 1898-1910. The property purchases are a prelude to a much larger dream of developing them and making them available to the visitors that continue to come seeking the history of Laura Ingalls Wilder, her homes and her life in the Ozarks.

warmth. At the time of her employment there the historic home had great needs for its continued preservation. With an infusion of proceeds from an exhibit of museum artifacts which toured Japan, the Association was able to take on such projects as heating and cooling the historic home, doing needed repairs and conservation. The upstairs floors were bolstered up by the insertion of steel beams. Care of

## In Appreciation

Many thousands of individuals and groups in Missouri and around the world have lent a helping hand to help achieve the goals of the Association through the past fifty years. To mention individual names would be risky, for fear of leaving out some unknown donor or volunteer, but the great cloud of supporters has led the Association thus far.

We would like to pay a special tribute to Juanita Parker of Mansfield. She is the only remaining original founder member of 1957, and her continued dedication to the Association continued for decades. Thank you, Juanita! You are valued and appreciated!

In an effort to reduce costs, the Laura Ingalls Wilder Home Association will now offer the Rocky Ridge Review in a convenient PDF format that will be emailed to all Association members expressing interest. Please contact us with your email address at your earliest convenience.



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