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THE LITERARY APPRENTICESHIP OF LAURA INGALLS WILDER

BY

WILLIAM T. ANDERSON

A thesis submitted
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the
degree Master of Arts, Major in
English, South Dakota
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1982

THE LITERARY APPRENTICESHIP OF LAURA INGALLS WILDER

This thesis is approved as a creditable and independent investigation by a candidate for the degree, Master of Arts, and is acceptable for meeting the thesis requirements for this degree. Acceptance of this thesis does not imply that the conclusions reached by the candidate are necessarily the conclusions of the major department.

Thesis Adviser / Date

Head, English Dept. Date

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The research for this Thesis has spanned many years and has been conducted in a multitude of places and situations. There have been long hours among library stacks with aging documents exuding exciting discoveries; there have been blocks of time on windy stretches of prairie land where pioneers settled a century ago. There have been valuable sessions with eyewitnesses to the life and times of Laura Ingalls Wilder and Rose Wilder Lane.

Along the way, many have contributed to the groundwork which resulted in the following Thesis--contemporaries of the Wilders, and the widening, latter-day coterie of those enchanted with the spirit of the wilders. Among them are Roger Lea MacBride of Charlottesville, Virginia, who I thank for years of friendship and favors--particularly the unlimited use of the now-restricted Wilder Papers; Mr. and Mrs. Aubrey Sherwood of De Smet, South Dakota, for loyal support and information exchange; Vera McCaskell and Vivian Glover of De Smet, for lively team-work; Dwight M. Miller and Nancy De Hamer of the Herbert Hoover Presidential Library, for research assistance; Dr. Ruth Alexander for valuable suggestions and criticism; Alvilda Myre Sorenson for encouragement and interest, and Mary Kollmansberger for expert typing.

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W. T. A.

16 July 1982

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Chapter One

Introduction

Fifty years after the publication of Laura Ingalls Wilder's first book, Little House in the Big Woods, that volume and ten succeeding volumes of the author's writings, are American classics. The "Little House" books have been read, re-read, translated, adapted, admired and worshipped by multitudes world-wide. Of Wilder's books, which portray frontier existence during the last great American Expansionist era, "it is safe to say that they have given a notion of what pioneer life was like to far more Americans than ever heard of Frederick Jackson Turner."¹

Laura Ingalls Wilder's fame and the success of her books have been spiraling phenomena in American publishing history. In 1953, 500,000 of the "Little House" books had been printed; by 1959, the quantity had nearly doubled, and in 1976, it was estimated that 20,000,000 of Wilder's books had been published. In lists of American best-sellers of the twentieth century, the "Little House" books are included.²

The mystique of Laura Ingalls Wilder has spread into far-flung areas. Her appeal is global. First translated by the United States State Department as a post-World War II re-education program for Germany and Japan, the "Little House" books are now printed in approximately forty

some of Wilder's supporters. The well-meaning preservation of Wilder's public image denied her miraculous and admirable evolution as a writer, and created certain falsifications that surely would have amused, if not amazed, Laura Ingalls Wilder herself. Curiously, among those who most stridently denied Wilder's multi-faceted metamorphosis from capable country woman to talented writer, was the individual who had most shaped and aided the emergence of Laura Ingalls Wilder as an author. All her lifetime, Laura Ingalls Wilder's daughter Rose Wilder Lane, contributed to a composite image of her mother that, while wholly admirable, was not fully accurate.

Critical scholars have been fascinated for years by the artistry of Laura Ingalls Wilder's prose and her rich historical background. Yet they avoided probing the genesis of her development, mostly because those who held the keys to the amazing and praiseworthy facts of her writing career discouraged investigation as an intolerable invasion of a sacred trust. Seeking to guard with fierce devotion a life and career that needed no shrouding, well-meaning, but ill-equipped persons succeeded in postponing a scholarship that was long overdue. Prevention of historical and literary analysis was validated and explained by the refrain that such investigation "would ruin the 'Little House' books for children."

Historical evidence has periodically suggested

discrepancies between the "Little House" books and recorded facts. None is major and none diminishes the essence of truth and reality which shines from the pages of Wilder's books. But even insignificant variances from the way Wilder recorded her life history were ignored or covered-up by a small band of admirers who felt a responsibility to "protect" the secure and un-tarnishable image of Laura Ingalls Wilder.

An example of documentation juxtaposed with Wilder's prose emerged in the early 1960's, when an 1870 Montgomery County, Kansas census record listed the Charles P. Ingalls family. Prior to this, the inference (supported by the dust jacket information) in Little House on the Prairie was that the Ingalls family had journeyed to Kansas in 1873, after the events described in Little House in the Big Woods.

Louise Hovde Mortensen, writing of the census discovery in Elementary English, attempted to explain the shift in dates between Wilder's account and the historical record:

The fact must be that Mrs. Wilder, as an author, drew on her knowledge of those early days in Wisconsin from stories she had heard her parents tell. As an artist working with her materials, Mrs. Wilder knew that she could achieve a more artistic effect by altering true facts occasionally.

Reading the Mortensen theory, Rose Wilder Lane promptly replied to attempt to justify the date discrepancy and quell and doubts that her mother's books were anything but pure autobiography:

. . . May I ask you . . . for your help in correcting an oversight of mine? I should have thought sooner of explaining to you the discrepancy in dates of events related in my mother's books. My mother was three years old in the Little House in the Big Woods . . . Harper and Brothers . . . refused to publish it without changing Laura's age. They insisted that no child younger than five has a memory. . . . She and I fought for the truth, futilely. To save her father's stories, she finally consented to make the birthday the fifth. This is important only because it has been charged that my mother's books are fiction. They are the truth and only the truth . . . she added nothing and "fictionalized" nothing . . . excepting only the two years added to her real age in Wisconsin. As a fiction writer myself, I agree that my mother could have added to artistic effects by altering facts, but she did not write fiction. She did not want to.

Lane's strident desire to maintain her mother as a creator of factual, rather than even slightly fictional prose, was again evident when this writer was preparing the publication of The Story of the Ingalls, the first supplemental material to be published on the Ingalls and Wilder families. In the manuscript, sent to Lane for her advance reading, the statement was made that the Ingalls family settled in Dakota Territory "through the mild winter of 1879-1880 with a few settlers as neighbors." Lane responded vigorously:

I object to your publishing a statement that my mother was a liar. The Ingalls family spent their first winter in Dakota Territory approximately sixty miles from any neighbor.

This is a formal protest against your proposal to publish a statement that my mother was a liar. You will please correct your proposed publication to accord with my mother's published statement in her books . . . I cannot permit publication of a slander of my mother's character, and I shall not do so.

Subsequent correspondence between this writer and Rose Wilder Lane, particularly after the latter learned that she was dealing with a thirteen-year-old, was tempered, but adamant that her mother's work not be regarded as anything but fact:

As you continue to do research you will find that very few, if any, data are not contradicted or questioned by other data. . . . My mother's repeated and emphatic claim that her books are "true" stories, plus the fact that records exist to verify that claim . . . give her a strong motive for accuracy. Mr. Sherwood and Mr. Boast, merely repeating hear-say . . . no doubt believe their statements to be true, but have nothing to lose if they are mistaken about a date; why should they work for accuracy? If my mother's books are not absolutely accurate, she will be dis-credited as a person and a writer. . . . You show a surprising industry and skill in research, and except for this one slip you have done an excellent job.

While the interest in the Wilder writings, their background and their development, increased, Rose Wilder Lane remained aloof from questioning. Admirers of her mother's books sought desperately to see her, including a woman who came from Australia, hoping to meet Lane. In correspondence, she was vague when questioned on her mother's writing; she refused most visits from "Little House" fans and when she did allow visits from her mother's readers, the conversation steered clear of the Wilder writings.

Lane firmly felt her mother's work was not to be elaborated upon, and her form of devotion to the life and work of Laura Ingalls Wilder was maintained until her own death in 1968, nearly a dozen years after Wilder's.

It was the posthumous publication of Laura Ingalls Wilder's The First Four Years in 1971 that broke scholarly ground in evaluation of the Wilder writings. The pioneer was Rosa Ann Moore, of the University of Tennessee's Department of English. Working with the published version of The First Four Years and the Detroit Public Library's manuscripts of The Long Winter and These Happy Golden Years, Moore produced the first critical study of the literary process that resulted in the "Little House" books.

To this writer, Moore expressed the frustration she felt in not having access to the full body of Laura Ingalls Wilder Papers-Rose Wilder Lane Papers:

. . . Any jealous protection of their papers from people whose intentions are honest and legitimate looks very strange. One thing I am convinced of: every scrap of paper belonging to them ought to be donated to a responsible library, such as the Newberry or Library of Congress. . . . Not one more word should be written about her [Laura Ingalls Wilder] that perpetuates . . . misunderstanding. Laura is, whether anyone likes it or not, in the public domain, and amateurish editing of her materials or pilfering from them to create or perpetuate an inaccurate picture is an intolerable dishonesty, and in contravention of all the values which the books themselves express.

Moore's desire to see the Wilder-Lane Papers preserved and available for study materialized. In 1980 and 1981, the bulk of papers, letters, manuscripts and research materials used by Rose Wilder Lane and Laura Ingalls Wilder was donated to the Herbert Hoover Presidential Library in West Branch, Iowa. The donor was Roger Lea MacBride, who

acquired the collection as executor of Rose Wilder Lane's estate. At this writing, the papers are not yet available for public use, but their cataloguing, preservation and eventual release is assured.

The use of the Wilder-Lane collection by this writer has resulted in the preparation of this thesis exploring the writing career of Laura Ingalls Wilder. Hitherto unsubstantiated theories about Wilder's writing can now be authenticated. The mystery surrounding the posthumous publication of Wilder's The First Four Years can be explained. The pleasing, but incorrect myth, that Wilder became proficient as a writer at the age of sixty-five, can be revised to show that she, like most talented authors, served a long preliminary apprenticeship before inherent gifts and powers were manifested. The rugged determination that brought the first "Little House" book to publication can be described. Perhaps most importantly, the unique collaboration between a gifted, worldly daughter and her poetic, but naive mother, can now be introduced. For this team-work between Laura Ingalls Wilder and Rose Wilder Lane is what created the "Little House" classics.

Chapter One: Endnotes

¹Charles Elliott, "Little Houses," Time, 15 March 1971, p. 92.

²Alice Payne Hackett and James Henry Burke, 80 Years of Best Sellers (New York: R. R. Bowker Company, 1977), p. 46.

³Louise Hovde Mortensen, "Idea Inventory," Elementary English, April 1964, p. 428.

⁴Mortensen, p. 429.

⁵Letter received from Rose Wilder Lane, 30 June 1966.

⁶Letter received from Rose Wilder Lane, 13 July 1966.

⁷Letter received from Rosa Ann Moore, 14 April 1976.

Chapter Two

The First Four Years: Puzzling, Posthumous Sequel

In 1971, when Harper and Row published Laura Ingalls Wilder's The First Four Years, the initial reaction of the millions of "Little House" devotees was one of unqualified joy. At long last, twenty-eight years after Wilder's final book These Happy Golden Years was released, the answer to the question "what happened next?" was expected, and, most significantly, in Wilder's own prose. When publication of The First Four Years occurred, there was a flurry of publicity, long lists of advance orders for the book and a typical recognition in the press for a book release that was ostensibly a "children's" title. "The First Four Years completes a classic American saga. . . .", wrote The National Observer. Gene Shalit, in Ladies' Home Journal called the publication "an unexpected celebration." George McGovern wrote a full-page commentary for Life Magazine, and Time called The First Four Years "an unexpected gift from the past."

The First Four Years sold briskly after its appearance; during 1971, it consistently won a niche on the New York Times' Children's Best Seller List. Yet after the first enthusiasm for an additional "Little House" book subsided, perceptive reviewers critically evaluated the new Wilder volume. Distinguished author Eleanor Cameron

stridently questioned the validity of publishing The First Fours Years:

For this reviewer [Cameron wrote in the New York Times Book Review] her [Wilder's] great vision diminished with Laura's emergence into adulthood, so that it is not surprising that this new book, The First Four Years . . . is but the framework of a novel compared to the classic story of her childhood. Laura's strength was always her ability to see with the eye of wonder and to memorably communicate what she saw. With her poetic seeing gone, we have nothing left but a flatly told procession of disasters, most of which we have experienced with her in one form or another in previous books.

I feel that this publication would not have pleased her for if she had wished the manuscript to be published, she would have offered it. The book satisfied simple curiosity but adds neither depth of vision nor understanding of a relationship. As for Laura, we¹ already understand her as deeply as we ever will.

As Cameron points out, The First Four Years answers chronological questions subsequent to the marriage of Laura and Almanzo Wilder described in These Happy Golden Years, but the warm, heart-felt telling did not extend from These Happy Golden Years into The First Four Years. Wilder's self-portrait in The First Four Years is disquieting for readers confident that they knew and understood her character and traits from the previous "Little House" volumes. In the last book she published, These Happy Golden Years, which relates Wilder's experiences from the ages of fifteen to eighteen, Wilder successfully matured her Laura alter-ego, led her through adolescent immaturity into confident, competent womanhood. Laura, with whom readers of the "Little

House" books are intimately acquainted, felt a satisfaction when she caught the most eligible bachelor in De Smet and married in comfortable circumstances. But The First Four Years somewhat refuted the image of the staunch, self-sacrificing, mature Laura. In story segments that overlapped These Happy Golden Years, The First Four Years presented Wilder as occasionally sharp-tongued, impatient, hysterical, and peevish.

A major gulf between Wilder's treatment of her character in the two books is the segment describing her engagement and her attitude toward her young husband's prospects. Readers enraptured with the sentimentalized version in the chapter "Barnum Walks" in the eighth book were shocked at the blunt, calculating attitude of Wilder in "Prologue" of the ninth book. "I don't want to marry a farmer," Wilder told her fiance in The First Four Years. "I have always said I never would . . . I don't want to be poor and work hard while the people in town take it easy and make money off us," Wilder explained as she urged Manly to "do something else."²

After Manly pleaded with Laura and asked her for a three-year trial on the farm to show her its potential, she agreed, but after "a rather skeptical silence."³ The balance of The First Four Years recounted the actual fires, crop failures, disease, debts, death, blizzards and blowing dust, familiar from Wilder's previous books. But unfamiliar

was the characterization of Laura, who, along with her parents met such disasters with resiliency and fortitude. Laura's character in The First Four Years was to many of her readers far less admirable: she appeared discouraged, distraught, gloomy and sharp-tongued. In comparison with the image of Laura as presented in earlier volumes, she has lost much of her optimism. Her husband Manly is portrayed as the hopeful, patient partner in their marriage. Overall, however, the contentment integral in the Ingalls family home did not extend into the Wilder home of The First Four Years.

While less pleasing to her reading audience, The First Four Years was the first tangible evidence available to open exploration into critical analysis of Wilder's writings. Using The First Four Years as a research tool rather than a mere sequel, scholars and researchers were able to at least speculate upon the development of the ninth volume and of the collected works themselves.

Harper and Row wisely anticipated the need for explanation of the unexpected ninth "Little House" book's appearance, so an "Introduction" prefaced the main text of the book. The man who owned the manuscript, edited it, and offered it for publication, supplied the factual preface. He was Roger Lea MacBride, heir to the estates of Rose Wilder Lane and Laura Ingalls Wilder. After the death of Lane in 1968, MacBride brought The First Four Years manuscript to the attention of Harper and Row, and publication was

immediately planned.

All this MacBride explained in his introductory comments, and he also sought to answer two inevitable questions that would arise among readers of the posthumous book. When Wilder penciled her account of her early marriage and why her writing style differed in The First Four Years were addressed by MacBride: "My own guess is that she wrote this one in the late 1940's and that after Almanzo died, she lost interest in revising and completing it for publication. Because she didn't do so, there is a difference from the earlier books in the way the story is told."⁴

Some perceptive readers also speculated why Wilder's daughter Rose Wilder Lane had not offered the manuscript of The First Four Years for publication before her death. It had lucrative value, just as publication of the Wilder diary as On the Way Home had when it appeared in 1962. At that time, she was in possession of the penciled tablets which ultimately became The First Four Years and she was eminently qualified to edit them and annotate them, as she did On the Way Home. Lane's lack of enthusiasm for publishing her mother's literary materials was alluded to in MacBride's "Introduction": "Rose grew up in a time when ladies did not consciously seek fame. She chose to shed light on the lives of others instead of her own, and so this book about her mother, father and herself had to wait until after her death to be published."⁵ To the general reader perhaps, the

explanation is plausible, but is highly ambiguous to the more discerning. Lane had allowed herself to appear as a significant character in the setting she wrote for On the Way Home. Moreover, she was a worldly woman, a best-selling author, a much-publicized and interviewed media person. She was not a provincial Victorian who cringed from public notice.

Perhaps Lane's motive in concealing Laura Ingalls Wilder's ninth manuscript was a protective one, designed to protect herself from inquiry and to protect her mother from speculation regarding her literary skill and talent. As an experienced ghost-writer who suffered immense personal and professional grief due to the drawn-out controversy surrounding the best-seller White Shadows in the South Seas, which she wrote for Frederick O'Brien, Lane did not wish to invite controversy concerning her mother's work. She had no desire to become embroiled in inevitable examination of the Wilder series compared to a posthumous publication of The First Three Years and a Year of Grace--Wilder's working title. Rose Wilder Lane was loathe to open such a Pandora's box of questions.

Roger MacBride was the recipient of the inquisition after The First Four Years appeared in print. To one reader, he replied that he would not have hazarded his hunch as to the time frame during which The First Four Years was written, had the manuscript been dated in any way. Yet smatterings

of dated internal evidence existed in the three school tablets Wilder used to draft her ninth book. Piecing that evidence together with other documentation among the voluminous Wilder papers, a conclusive picture can be drawn to explain the time frame and circumstances within which Wilder wrote her posthumously published book. The hodge-podge of letters, manuscript fragments and notes which Roger MacBride inherited from Rose Wilder Lane does yield data to accurately pin down the time span when The First Four Years was composed, and refute MacBride's logical, but inaccurate opinion.

The first inkling that The First Four Years was written and abandoned earlier than MacBride suggests was the statement of "Little House" book illustrator Garth Williams. "Laura Ingalls Wilder told me she decided not to publish the last book," Williams stated in correspondence with this writer.⁶ The artist's visit with the Wilders occurred in September, 1947, two years before the death of Almanzo Wilder. Thus it is evident that her husband's demise had no bearing of Wilder's decision to abandon her ninth book, which is the theory advanced by MacBride in his introductory remarks in The First Four Years.

Interviews conducted by the regional press with the Wilders also intimate that Wilder had resolutely retired from writing after her eighth book appeared in 1943. Finances, very much a motivation for Wilder's writing, had improved for the family by the 1940's. When a reporter mentioned that

additional royalties would result if Wilder wrote another book, she was quick to reply, saying "Why, we don't need it here!"⁷ She continued to explain that her steep income taxes were yet another deterrent from undertaking additional writing.

Two letters found by this writer among the Laura Ingalls Wilder-Rose Wilder Lane papers help clarify Wilder's motivation in writing The First Three Years and a Year of Grace and the era in which it was written. In December of 1937, Wilder mentioned to her editor at Harper and Brothers that she had an adult book planned. On December 18, 1937, Ida Louise Raymond responded to Wilder, mentioning "the extremely exciting news that you already have a grown-up book in mind." Subsequent correspondence with her daughter mentioned that the "grown-up" book was The First Three Years and a Year of Grace. Of the manuscript, Miss Raymond assured Wilder that her superior "was most interested to hear about it and is looking forward to seeing the manuscript when you get around to it."⁸

Wilder forwarded the Harper letter to her daughter, who in 1937 was living in New York City. On the reverse of the publishers' letter, Wilder explained her motive in announcing the possibility of an adult book:

I thought I might wangle a little more advertising for the L. H. books if I said I might write the grown-up one. It was not a promise and if I didn't it wouldn't matter. So I wrote that I had material for one in my head etc. Then I asked you

if you ever expected to use the framework of the of The First Three Years and wondered if it would be worth while to write the grown-up story of Laura and Almanzo to sort of be the cap sheaf of the 7 volume* children's novel. I could write the rough work. You could polish it and put your name to it if that would be better than mine. I just thought about it and wondered. . . . Anyway the other two come first and then we can see. A joke if Louise was trying to keep me working and I was trying to fool Harpers into giving me more advertising."

Rose Wilder Lane responded promptly to her mother's suggestion that The First Three Years and a Year of Grace become an adult novel. "The Harper enclosure just came to the top of the mess on my desk," Lane wrote her mother. She did not discourage, but did not encourage her mother in the adult novel project:

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 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.¹⁰

Thus, the Wilder-Lane correspondence in 1937 narrows down the time span in which the "adult" book was conceived, announced and discussed. It was a development of the early

* While the first five "Little House" books were being written, Wilder and Lane planned seven volumes. Later, they found that the material they wished to cover demanded an additional volume.

period of the dozen-year span during which the eight "Little House" books were written. But it is examination of the tablets of manuscript themselves that finally pins down the era in which The First Three Years and a Year of Grace was drafted.

A 1981 accretion to the collection of Wilder papers now stored in the Herbert Hoover Presidential Library, the tablets which became The First Four Years had traveled rather extensively from the Missouri farmhouse where they had long languished. The manuscript was originally brought to light after Wilder's death in 1957, by the first president and curator of the Laura Ingalls Wilder Home Association, L. D. Lichty. Lichty realized the significance of the yellowing tablets when he picked them from a welter of manuscript material stored in an upstairs room of the Wilder home while inventories of were being made of the contents. Cognizant of its value, Lichty and his wife delivered the manuscript to Rose Wilder Lane in Danbury, Connecticut, where it then mingled with her own papers. After Lane's death in 1968, the manuscript was moved to the Esmont, Virginia, home of Roger MacBride. The fragile, aging tablets finally found safe refuge in the controlled environment of the Hoover Library when they were presented to that repository.

When this writer perused the manuscript in March of 1982, one central characteristic was notable: the external methods Wilder used in drafting the tablets were less

sophisticated than working drafts of two other manuscripts held by the Detroit Public Library. Comparing The First Three Years and a Year of Grace with The Long Winter and These Happy Golden Years is comparing a writer whose capabilities in composition improve from an early attempt to later ones. This fact alone refutes any inclination to believe that The First Three Years and a Year of Grace followed These Happy Golden Years in composition. One might conjecture that the manuscript for The First Three Years and a Year of Grace is merely a rough, preliminary version, but internal evidence points out that the draft was done near the beginning of Wilder's career as a writer of books and naturally she was less skilled in producing her material.

Minute hints contained in the manuscript tablets expand the theory that Wilder penciled her story in the early 1930's, rather than during the 1940's. In The First Three Years and a Year of Grace, she wrote on both sides of the cheap tablet pages, a bane to her daughter who read the script and an inconvenience to stenographers who ultimately typed Wilder's pencil copies. None of the later manuscripts feature this extreme frugality; they are penciled on one side of the page.

In The First Three Years and a Year of Grace, Wilder's chapter construction methods were inferior, only a crude step above her chapter-less composition of the 1930 Pioneer Girl, but much less skilled than chapter divisions

in all the other "Little House" manuscripts. Wilder was very general in dividing her text in The First Three Years and a Year of Grace. The only classifications she made were "First Year", "Second Year", "Third Year", and "Year of Grace". An atypical "Prologue" preceded the chapters, which may have been Wilder's attempt to ape what she considered good style, before she felt confident in her own stylistic approaches.

The manuscript of The First Three Years and a Year of Grace is largely devoid of the stylistic approaches Wilder employed in her other books. The tale is flatly told, matter-of-fact and unadorned with descriptive passages, much like Pioneer Girl. The characterization of Laura was closer to Wilder's own personality, but it is sometimes foreign to the carefully developed character of Laura which became an appealing quality of the other "Little House" books.

Uncertainty is evident in the writing of the three-tablet progression. Wilder was far more unsure of herself as a creator when she penciled The First Three Years and a Year of Grace, than in later working drafts of her books. Many of her lines and passages are heavily crossed-out and alternate paragraphs and extracts were inserted to describe incidents in varying ways.

That the pencil draft manuscripts were meant for Rose Wilder Lane's eyes is evident by periodic notes Wilder addressed to Rose throughout the manuscript. One reads: "Note: Just for your reference, Minnesota gave the Railroads

every alternate section of land for ten miles on each side of the track." Another note, referring to an incident relating the story of a band of marauding wolves which threatened the Wilders' flock of sheep, says: "Note: All true except that I heard the last howl just before I went out and did not go, but why spoil a good story for truth's sake." And writing about roaming Indians who annoyed Laura while she was alone at home, Wilder mentioned to Rose that "This is true but happened to a friend of mine."¹¹

A hungry pioneer when it came to paper, Wilder always used odd scraps, including the leaves of tablets she reserved for her professional writing. Her frugality helps to further fix the drafting of The First Three Years and a Year of Grace as a project commenced early in her book-writing career. One page within the manuscript was a page of Farmer Boy, which was written in 1932. Another page bears the beginning of a business letter regarding the final payment which Wilder made on Rocky Ridge Farm. The letter was directed to the Federal Land Bank and written on January 20, 1933. These dates, and the lack of sophistication of the composition, substantiate the theory that The First Three Years and a Year of Grace was Wilder's output when she was a fledgling creator of book-length manuscripts.

That inexperienced and lacklustre writing quality, which was published mostly verbatim in The First Four Years, opened the door to a valid theory: that indeed the Wilder

manuscripts were a product of long toil; they, like most great books resulted from long sessions of polishing and re-working. Laura Ingalls Wilder, like The First Four Years, began with a potential for perfection. While The First Four Years did not receive the benefit of finely-wrought final drafting, it suggested the fact that as an author--like her books--Laura Ingalls Wilder was the product of a long-developing process which finally reached culmination.

Chapter Two: Endnotes

¹Eleanor Cameron, "The First Four Years," New York Times Book Review, 28 March 1971, p. 28.

²Laura Ingalls Wilder, The First Four Years (New York: Harper and Row, 1971), p. 4.

³Wilder, p. 5.

⁴Wilder, p. xiv.

⁵Wilder, p. xv.

⁶Letter received from Garth Williams, 7 November 1970.

⁷Chester Bradley, "Mansfield Woman's Books Favored Both Children, and Brown-Ups," Mansfield Mirror, 5 May 1949, n. pag.

⁸Ida Louise Raymond, Letter to Laura Ingalls Wilder, 18 December 1937, Rose Wilder Lane Papers, Herbert Hoover Presidential Library, West Branch, Iowa.

⁹Laura Ingalls Wilder, Letter to Rose Wilder Lane, n. d., Lane Papers, Hoover Presidential Library.

¹⁰Rose Wilder Lane, Letter to Laura Ingalls Wilder, 22 December 1937, Lane Papers, Hoover Presidential Library.

¹¹Laura Ingalls Wilder, The First Four Years, MS. Lane Papers, Hoover Presidential Library.

Chapter Three

The Emerging Writer

Only once in her autobiographical writing did Laura Ingalls Wilder allude to any propensity in writing and composition. In These Happy Golden Years, Wilder relates that after an absence from the De Smet school, she was faced with an unexpected writing assignment.¹ Her teacher, Professor V. S. L. Owen, had assigned a composition on "Ambition." As she later described it, "Laura was in a panic. She had never written a composition, and now she must do in a few minutes what the others had been working at since yesterday . . . Laura had no idea how to begin . . . She must not fail, she couldn't. She would not. But how did one write a composition? Only five minutes were left."²

The composition Wilder wrote under duress was graded one hundred, and Professor Owen praised her work. ". . . You should write more of them, I would not have believed anyone could do so well the first time," the teacher remarked.³ So significant was that first piece of writing to Wilder that she preserved it all her life; after her death it was found among her papers.

Neva Whaley Harding, a schoolmate of Wilder's, was present when "Ambition" was read aloud in school and corroborated the incident related in These Happy Golden Years. Harding recalled that "our dear Professor Owen realized

she had talent and urged her to do something with it."⁴ In her unpublished Pioneer Girl Wilder further credited the encouragement of her De Smet teacher: "Ven Owen told Pa I had a wonderful mind and should be given every opportunity for an education . . . he often impressed upon Pa that every effort should be made to keep me in school."⁵

The literary training Wilder acquired under Ven Owen was the only such study she ever had. In 1950, Wilder and her old schoolmate Neva Whaley Harding reminisced in correspondence over the superior instruction Owen had given them both.

. . . Besides the rudiments of grammar, recalled Harding, we were given special training in sentence analysis, so we might read and write with understanding . . . in writing our themes, not only must we use good English, but stress was laid on the ethics of procuring our information; we must so digest the subject matter, that we could write it in our own words and not just copy it from some book.

For Laura Ingalls Wilder, Ven Owen's principles were an important training ground for her later writing career.

Despite their frequent moves in the unsettled frontier, a strong desire and respect for education was exhibited by Charles and Caroline Ingalls for their daughters. Both parents agreed that settling near towns with schools was essential and when school attendance was interrupted by weather, distance, or poverty, the Ingalls girls were instructed at home by their mother. Caroline Quiner Ingalls had taught in Wisconsin prior to her marriage

and her background was one of education, despite an upbringing on the frontier. Her father, Henry N. Quiner, graduated from Yale and her mother, Charlotte Wallis Tucker, attended a "female seminary" in Boston. Laura Ingalls Wilder was greatly influenced by her mother's illustrious origins and from her, gained much formal knowledge. ". . . She was an educated, cultured woman,"⁷ Wilder recalled. "Her language was precise and a great deal better language than I ever used . . . she was well-educated for that time and place, rather above Pa socially."⁸

Charles Ingalls was a fiddler, a hunter, a woodsman, farmer, carpenter and local public official, and, as his daughter mentions, a "poet." His paternal grandfather in New York state was locally known as "The Unlearned Poet", whose verse was collected in book form. Although Charles Ingalls was sporadically educated on the frontier of New York, Illinois and Wisconsin, he developed a flourishing handwriting and keen fondness for literature. When he was seventeen, a poor working-boy, a precious \$1.50 left his pocket to purchase a two-volume life of Napoleon and he continued to accumulate and read books until his death in 1902.

When a Kansas City Star reporter questioned Laura Ingalls Wilder about her writing abilities, she credited her parents' influences as a major factor. "The only reason," she said in 1955, "I can think of for being able to write at

all was that father and mother were great readers and I read a lot at home with them"⁹ On exhibit at the Ingalls home in De Smet, South Dakota are remnants of the family library. Some of the books were acquired before Wilder's birth in the 1860's, indicating that they were prized enough to accompany the family's covered wagon journeys until they finally had a permanent home in De Smet. Works of Shakespeare, Pope, George Eliot, Henry Ward Beecher, Oliver Wendall Holmes and Mary J. Holmes mingled with religious studies, biographies and historical-travel books. From the "Little House" books themselves, it is evident that the Ingalls family hungrily read and re-read newspapers and magazines obtainable in their often-remote homesites. They anxiously awaited mails bringing bundles of back-dated Youth's Companion, The New York Ledger and The St. Paul Pioneer Press.

Despite a home with some intellectual opportunities, Laura Ingalls never graduated from the De Smet High School. Teaching, marriage, child-bearing, housekeeping and hardships crowded her years as a young matron in South Dakota during the late 1880's and early 1890's. Nothing indicates that she pursued the writing talent that first emerged with a school composition.

In 1894, when she was 27, Wilder, her husband and their surviving child, Rose, joined lines of covered wagons fleeing the drought-stricken Dakota plains. Their destination was Mansfield, Missouri. En route, during the 45-day

journey, Laura Wilder penciled daily diary entries in an oblong memorandum pad bearing the advertisement of The Mutual Life Insurance Company of New York. Although the trip to Missouri was steeped in despair, it was wrought in hope and Wilder's first affinity for description was revealed in her day-by-day entries.*

Wilder's native discernment was indicated in a matter-of-fact way when she described the household where she bought milk soon after her family left De Smet. "It was swarming with children and pigs," she noted, and "they looked a good deal alike."¹⁰ Of the Russian colony the Wilders encountered in southern South Dakota, Wilder was somewhat aloof in her acceptance of the foreign lifestyle, but accomplished in describing the people;

"They look like the pictures of German and Russian milkmaids and peasants. Their yellow hair is combed smooth down each side of their faces and hangs in long braids behind and they wear handkerchiefs over their heads. They are all dressed alike. There are no sleeves in the women's long blue calico dresses but under them they wear white shirts with long white sleeves. The men have whiskered cheeks and long golden beards. They wear blue blouses that hang down long, to their knees almost, with belts around their waists."

Her keen observations of people encountered through South Dakota, Nebraska, Kansas and Missouri often surface

*The diary was found among Wilder's papers after her death, edited and annotated by Rose Wilder Lane, and published as On the Way Home by Harper and Row in 1962.

in the diary and they are written in a crisp, succinct style. One of Wilder's observations, excised from the published version of her diary, reads: "Saw a girl with fire-red hair and a fire-red dress."¹²

Longing to express herself, Wilder noted in her diary that ". . . I wished for an artist's hand or a poet's brain or even to be able to tell in good plain prose how beautiful it [a camping spot near the James River] was." Showing an unaccustomed sympathetic viewpoint for the Indians just four years after Wounded Knee, Wilder mentioned that "If I had been the Indians I would have scalped more white folks before I ever would have left. . . ."¹³

Contrasting with the peaceful vistas of the James River, Wilder described barren prairie beyond the river as ". . . bluffs . . . high and bare, browned and burned, above the lovely green of trees and grass and shining water. On this side the bluffs were gigantic brown waves, tumbled and tossed about."¹⁴

In one of the last entries in her trip-diary, Wilder again proved to be a skilled writer of pastoral scenes. ". . . Manly interrupted me to say, 'This is beautiful country.'" she wrote. Her next lines explained the appeal of the Ozark hills to the Wilders:

The road goes up hill and down, and it is rutted and dusty and stony but every turn of the wheels changes our view of the woods and hills. The sky seems lower here, and it is the softest blue. The distances and the valleys are blue whenever you can see them. It is a drowsy country

that makes you feel wide awake and alive but somehow contented.¹⁵

As the Wilders neared their destination, Laura expanded her diary notes and impressions into a letter and mailed it to Carter P. Sherwood, editor of The De Smet News and Leader. "Thinking that our friends in De Smet might like to hear how we are progressing on our journey, I will send you a short account of it so far," Wilder wrote from Lamar, Missouri. When published in the hometown weekly, the column was clipped from the paper and proudly pasted in Wilder's personal scrap-book. "First I ever published," she penciled significantly in the margin of the printed travel letter.¹⁶ Her interest in writing for publication was born on that trip that took her to her final home--and ultimate writing locale--in Missouri.

It was in Mansfield, Missouri that Wilder initiated and brought to fruition the writing career that won her renown for her books late in her life. It is, however, generally unknown that Wilder had an extensive journalistic career before publishing her first "Little House" book at the age of 65. A long apprenticeship preceeded the "Little House" series.

The first years in Mansfield were filled with manual labor in building up home and farm. No manuscript material exists to prove that Wilder's 1894 diary and her newspaper letter were followed by a progressive sequence of writing.

Indeed, the South Dakota-to-Missouri diary was the only day-to-day account Wilder kept through her ninety years, save a brief travel diary of an automobile trip taken in 1938.

Not until 1903 is there evidence to suggest that Laura Wilder was organizing story material for development. In her papers is an oblong pink envelop addressed to Mrs. A. J. Wilder, Rocky Ridge Farm, Mansfield, Mo. The return address is the editorial office of The Farm World, Chicago, and the postmark is June 20, 1912. Across the envelop, Wilder wrote in blue crayon, "Ideas for Work" and the contents reveal exactly that. A jumble of penciled notes, brief story leads and scattered snatches of prose were scribbled thriftily on the backs of used paper. Most of Wilder's "Ideas for Work" appear on old stock requisition forms and past due billing notices of the Waters Pierce Oil Company which bear dates in 1903. Almanzo Wilder was an agent and deliveryman for the oil company and Laura handled the accounts, billing and inventory lists, but clearly, her mind was on writing she hoped to do while she dutifully handled the mundane business for her husband.

Since she had arrived in the Ozarks, Wilder was interested in the folkways, songs and tales of her new home-place. Evidently, she thought the uniqueness of her surroundings might provide story material and several anecdotes gleaned from the Wright County seat were jotted down under the heading "Hartville Stories."

Contrasting with the plain Protestant ways of worship that the Wilders had practiced in the north, they were intrigued, as were many other "furriners", with the southern mountain fervor demonstrated in church services and revivals in the Mansfield area. It became an amusing pasttime, much like being spectators at athletic events, for the Wilders and their friends to attend what they called "the holy roller meetings." Thus, one of Wilder's story leads starts with: "Those who have never heard the old-fashioned revival hymn sung by a half-frenzied crowd with their concentration on the one object can have no idea of the lilt and swing and compelling force of it." Other "ideas" Wilder penciled are more sketchy. One reads: "The rebel officer, chased surrounded, shot. sweetheart died from grief." Another says: "The haunted house, steps around the house, raps at back door, spot on floor where chair rocked." A lengthier beginning alludes to the supernatural, a subject of much interest among the Ozark mountaineers. Wilder begins: "In the days of old, when black magic was practiced, by aid of the Devil, magicians were credited with being able to transport themselves long distances almost instantly." Most intriguing among Wilder's early notes is the lead for a tale clearly recounting her pioneer childhood. The time frame is 1879, the setting the Surveyors' House described in Wilder's By the Shores of Silver Lake:

"A number of years ago," Wilder begins, "when the two Dakotas were still one territory my father's family including myself were sitting around the fire one winters [sic] evening. It was December, and the wind was howling outside and the snow drifting as only the wind can howl and the snow drift across an unbroken prairie. We were just a little lonely, for it was nearing Christmas time and we were 40 miles from our nearest neighbor."¹⁷

It is thus evident that Wilder, while making first, tentative steps toward a writing career, was not immune to using anecdotes from her prairie childhood of thirty years previous.

Concurrent with Wilder's effort to shape a writing career was her activity in developing Rocky Ridge Farm. Working alongside her husband, Wilder cleared trees, helped build the house, gardened and sold butter and eggs for income. Her status as a full partner of her husband was avant-garde for the Ozarks, but decisions regarding the farm were mutually made by the Wilders. Wilder's special department was the flock of chickens. "The best flock of laying hens in the country,"¹⁸ Wilder wrote to her adoring readers, years later when describing her life before writing the "Little House" books. Her expertise in poultry-raising brought invitations to speak on her methods at farmers' institutes, meetings and agricultural gatherings. This public speaking led directly to Wilder's writing for publication.

In addition to her commitment to her flock of flighty Leghorns, Wilder was passionately dedicated to

upgrading the life of the farm woman. She abhorred the all-too-real image of the shabby, shy, isolated country woman, waiting uncomfortably on infrequent trips to town, while her husband took advantage of a visit to the nearest community. Wilder became active in the Missouri Woman's Home Development Association, dedicated to bettering conditions for country dwellers and especially establishing libraries, social groups, and rest room waiting areas for women in trading center towns. Wilder personally organized local chapters and made trips to communities to create interest. She stressed continuing education, richer social contact and comfortable waiting places in towns where farm women at that time had no conveniences.

In 1910, Wilder's speaking schedule was competing with her work at home and she was recognized as an authority on improving country life. She urged farm-women to become independent by developing small businesses on their land, especially through poultry raising. Speaking before the Land Congress Convention in Arcadia, Missouri, Wilder's speech "won more applause than any other."¹⁹ Her carefully composed text was sent on to be read in absentia at another location when farm work kept Wilder at home. In the audience was John Case, editor of the Missouri Ruralist and liking the writing style of the absent speaker, he contacted her to submit copy for his Kansas-City-based farm weekly.²⁰

Wilder demurred at Case's request; she readily

professed her lack of education and spoke doubtfully of her competence to provide material. But shortly after her forty-fourth birthday, her first contribution to the Missouri Ruralist appeared. As the lead article of the February 18, 1911 issue, Wilder's "Favors the Small Farm Home" expounded upon one of her favorite themes: the potential of a small scale farm. Wilder's connection with the Ruralist endured for over fifteen years; it is rightly considered the apprenticeship for the last phase of her writing life, the "Little House" books.

Wilder's work appeared steadily in the pages of the Missouri Ruralist. Her poetry was printed; she ghost-wrote copy for her husband and used his "A. J. Wilder" as the by-line. She was continually conscious of potential copy in everyday affairs of home, family, friends. Her adamant opinions on poor conditions for country women were a recurring theme. A 1913 report called for "Shorter Hours for Farm Women" while "Folks are Just 'Folks'" criticized snobbishness of townspeople towards country people. Wilder's own code of ethics was interspersed in her columns: "Chasing Thistledown" was a commentary on gossip and "Your Code of Honor" was a general discussion of fair practices. Developments on Rocky Ridge Farm served as article subjects, such as "So We Moved the Spring" which described the process used in supplying Wilder's kitchen with running water. The weather, child-rearing, clothing styles, clubs, autumn beauty

Ozark sunrises, patent churns, mechanization, house-building and opinions on current events (particularly during World War I) filled Wilder's columns. The magazine named her "Household Editor" and created special departments for Wilder, first dubbed "The Farm Home" and later, "As A Farm Woman Thinks." Strong-minded and determined, Wilder periodically scolded situations in which women were demeaned. Writing of the 1916 Mansfield Fair, she disapproved of a street show where knives were tossed around a bound woman. Dryly, she remarked that "The target was as usual a woman and a man threw the knives."

Wilder joined the International Farm Women's Press Association of Spokane on April 12, 1913. After initial success with the Missouri Ruralist, she expanded her literary market regionally. She wrote feature stories for Kansas City and St. Louis dailies. She became poultry editor for the State Farmer and the St. Louis Star. She published poetry in the Youth's Companion. She served in some yet-unidentified capacity as a staff member of the St. Louis Globe-Democrat.

Wilder became known as an expert writer on rural topics and as she continued to publish her material, her family became aware of her work. From De Smet, South Dakota, her mother wrote, asking for tear-sheets of her articles and in 1914, her blind sister Mary Ingalls wrote that "The market for short stories is practically inexhaustible. Did you ever

send your poetry to Ladies' Home Journal? I have read a lot worse stuff than you write."²¹ Although family and friends followed Wilder's burgeoning career, it was her daughter Rose Wilder Lane who periodically stepped in to make a significant suggestions in promoting it.

Rose Wilder had married Gillette Lane in San Francisco and at the onset of Wilder's farm journalist career, the Lanes were traveling extensively, hoping to succeed at various money-making schemes. From Maine, Rose Wilder Lane wrote her mother the first of thirty years' worth of subsequent letters, counseling, encouraging, goading and stimulating her mother's blossoming journalism. Lane offered Wilder some "scrambling suggestions"²² for a Sunday feature story on an old Ozark mill. Lane thought the idea "dandy" and advised her mother to "take the idea as last landmark of the old days and ways that are vanishing', and begin by describing the mill and the old time miller . . . I think that will be the line of attack that will appeal to the Sunday editors and I should suggest the (St. Louis) Post-Dispatch as the most likely market."²³

Lane continually scolded her mother for allowing farm duties to interfere with her writing. "By all means, do more Sunday stories and let cowpeas go, if necessary," Lane told Wilder. ". . . It is a wise scheme to get someone to pick cowpeas--even at a fabulous price per bushel, it wouldn't pay so well as your newspaper work, for there is

accrued value of the reputation you are making."²⁴

In correspondence with her daughter before 1915, references indicate that Wilder had a fleeting notion of writing her autobiography. She had mailed autobiographical material to her mother and sister in De Smet and Lane urged Wilder to "have them save it and send it back." Lane predicted that "I bet that letter you wrote for grandma and Mary about your getting started to writing could be put verbatim into that 'story of my life' thing . . . I bet it's better than you could do trying to write it for the story."²⁵

Commenting on the autobiographical material, Lane was prophetic in laying out a design that would be followed two decades in the future, while mother and daughter were toiling away on the "Little House" books. Her advice around 1915 may have suggested the series that ultimately developed from Wilder's "life story":

If I were you, [Lane wrote] 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 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. Your log cabin in the Great Woods . . . your trip through Kansas . . . the building of the railroad through the Dakotas. Make it real, because you saw it with your own eyes.

At least a half-dozen times as ongoing contributor to the Missouri Ruralist Wilder wrote autobiographical sketches of incidents later appearing in her "Little House"

books. "A Bouquet of Wild Flowers" recalled the Big Woods of Wisconsin; "When Laura Got Even" became the chapter "Country Party" in On the Banks of Plum Creek; "Thanksgiving Time" was incorporated into By the Shores of Silver Lake and articles in "The Farm Home" recount tales later told in The Long Winter and These Happy Golden Years.

After Lane was established as a prominent journalist for the San Francisco Bulletin, she urged her mother to come to California. "I think by getting away from it all a while, and playing around with a bunch of people who are writing . . . you will get an entirely different viewpoint . . . and be able to see a lot of new things to write about when you go back."²⁷ Wilder spent September and October, 1915 with the Lanes in San Francisco.

The trip was an extravagance for Wilder, but it was an effort on her part to learn from her daughter so she might "try to do some writing that will count."²⁸ Her frequent letters* to her husband chronicle sight-seeing jaunts, but also are mindful of financial problems, plans for her writing to bring in needed cash and desire to learn more about writing from Rose. "Rose and I are blocking out a story about the Ozarks," she mentioned. Another indicates that mother and daughter were working together: ". . . I

* Edited by Roger Lea MacBride and published as West From Home by Harper and Row in 1974.

want to do a little writing with Rose to get the hang of it a little better so I can write something that perhaps I can sell."²⁹

Wilder obtained a commitment from the Missouri Ruralist for articles on the Missouri exhibit at the Panama Pacific International Exhibition. She also used the Fair as a possibility for other free-lance work. "I have mapped out for myself the work for the Ruralist, a couple of Sunday stories for the Post-Dispatch, learning what I can at the poultry exhibit here. . . ."³⁰ Wilder mentioned to her husband.

Wilder did produce the lead story for the Missouri Ruralist on the Fair and continued to supply her regular columns, but the "big markets" her daughter was selling to remained elusive. Lane published her first book in 1917 (Henry Ford's Own Story); contributed regularly to Sunset, wrote her first novel and serialized a Jack London series. Her mother continued to appear in the farm market, seemingly unable to maintain her enthusiasm and confidence without her daughter's constant encouragement.

One new outlet for Wilder's material resulted from a poetry column for children which Lane supplied for the San Francisco Bulletin. The verses in the "Tuck 'em In Corner" column of the newspaper were highly stylized, saccharine and often trite, bearing titles like "The Sunny Days of Childhood", "When Forest Folk Cuddle to Bed", "Naughty Four o'Clocks" and

"Alas, Poor Oysterkin". The by-line read "The Hush-a-Bye-Lady" but the writing was shared by Rose Wilder Lane and Laura Ingalls Wilder.

Lane's own writing career and familiarity with magazine editors brought Wilder's by-line to its first national exposure in the June, 1919 issue of McCall's. Lane was living in New York and filling article requests for Century, Good Housekeeping and Ladies' Home Journal when she turned over an assignment to her mother. The topic was one which Wilder could easily expound upon, a farm wife's viewpoint of country living in the "Whom Will You Marry Series."

Wilder's material for the McCall's assignment was adequate, but predictably her daughter edited it for publication. The editing process discouraged Wilder, but her daughter responded objectively. "Don't be absurd about my doing the work on your article. I didn't write it a bit more than I re-write Mary Heaton Vorse's articles or Inez Haynes Irwin's . . . I don't think it is 'hopeless' by a million miles, but I think you can do better with it."³¹

On April 11, 1919 Lane wrote her mother giving stern advice on how to proceed in writing for the "big markets." "You say you don't like to do it," Lane mentioned, "and that may be the reason you seem to miss the thing I have in mind. . . ."³² Her letter continued with advice on theme, transitions and reality within the article framework. Despite the advice, the McCall's exposure did not lead to

other major publications for Wilder. While Rose's career continued to soar, her mother doggedly contributed columns to her comfortable publishing outlet, the Missouri Ruralist. When Rose Wilder Lane departed in 1920 for three years as a foreign correspondent, opportunities for close consultation and coaching between mother and daughter were nil.

The pupil-teacher relationship resumed between Wilder and Lane when the latter returned to live on the Mansfield farm in 1924. Visiting New York late in 1924, Lane obtained as assignment for her mother from the Country Gentleman. Lane's own "Green Valley" stories were set to appear in the Curtis publication and their popularity earned her top billing and rates up to \$10,000 per series. Rose Wilder Lane's first installment of "Hill-Billy" appeared in Country Gentleman on January 17, 1925 and in the same issue was "My Ozark Kitchen", with Laura Ingalls Wilder's by-line.

Lane had edited her mother's article as she had the McCall's material five years earlier. But her familiar counsel was tinged with desperation as she sought to equip her mother with the know-how necessary in making her a consistent contributor to better-paying magazines. She wrote her mother firmly:

Here is your chance, Mama Bess, to make a real income. For God's sake pay Mrs. Coday fifteen dollars a day . . . and get yourself free to go after this . . . sidetrack anything that you can sidetrack. . . . There is no reason under heaven why you should not be making four or five thousand dollars a year.

Dearest, for years upon years, I have been telling you, Stop saving money and start Making money. . . . Can't you see that if you'd spent a dollar for a taxi, gone warm and dry to town and back, and spent the extra time studying how to write your next article, you would have made money by it?

I'm sorry that--as you say--knowing it was my work that sold takes some of the joy out of it. You must understand that what sold was your article, edited. Dearest Mama Bess, in some ways you're like a frolicsome dog that won't stand still to listen. Please, please, listen. All I did on your story was an ordinary re-write job. You don't know how to write stuff for Country Gentleman. You never will know, until you stop and listen to what I tell you. How could you know something that I have spent exactly ten years in learning? All that ten years I have been telling you what you could learn how to do it but you never have. . . . You won't listen. You'd rather do the washing. Just because I was once three years old you honestly oughtn't to think I'm never going to know anything. Now I'm going to send you the carbon of the article, as re-written by me and I wish you would take a solid chunk of clear time--regardless of anything else--and carefully study the changes that were made, until you see clearly why ³each one was done and how it changed the article.

Wilder's Country Gentleman exposure led to a single additional contribution to the Curtis publication, a sequel to the kitchen article titled "The Farm Dining Room." But there were no other articles for "big markets" and Wilder's contributions to the Missouri Ruralist dwindled and ceased altogether as well.

Perhaps prompted by her daughter's opinion that Americana and historical fiction were coming vogues in the publishing world during the latter 1920's, Wilder made an effort to capture some of her own family background from an aged relative. In 1925, she conducted correspondence with

her aunt, Martha Quiner Carpenter, one of the few members of Wilder's parents' generation who remained in Wisconsin. Martha Carpenter was 88 when Wilder wrote her about her desire to have a record of the Quiner family history. She mentioned that "I am very busy these days with my writing, though I do not pretend to write anything like Rose. Still, I have no trouble in having the little things I do write published."³⁴

Wilder's interest in her antecedents was perhaps as much an effort to gain subject matter for her writing and her daughter's. To her aunt, she expressed regret that she had not obtained a written account from her mother, who died in De Smet in 1924. "There was something I wanted the girls to do for me, but they never got around to it and Mother herself was not able," Wilder explained to her aunt. "I wanted all the stories she could remember of the early days in Wisconsin when you were all children. . . . Now it is too late to ever get them from her . . . it would be wonderful for the family to have such a record. I want them principally for that, but I think too that Rose could make some stories from such a record, for publication. . . ." ³⁵

An immediate concern of Wilder's in contacting Martha Carpenter was a receptive response from a query she had written the Ladies' Home Journal for an article on pioneer cookery. As she explained to Aunt Martha:

The Ladies' Home Journal is wanting me to

write . . . on our grandmother's cooking brought down to date and I am thinking that you could give me some old recipes . . . Mother used to make what she called "Vanity Cakes" years ago. . . . Perhaps you know how to make them. We have thought about going up to see you and talk about these things, but I am not able to make such a trip. . . . Please Aunt Martha, do tell those stories for us all. . . . I will be glad to pay a stenographer for taking it down for me and I want lots of it, pages and pages of things you remember.³⁶

The Ladies' Home Journal article did not materialize, but through its initial preparation, Wilder gained much material from her aunt. None of it was utilized in any of her subsequent writings, but the correspondence was significant because it suggested to Wilder the possibility that pioneer anecdotes--and her own family's experiences--were indeed valid topics to use in composing her writings.

Luxuriating in a new home provided by her daughter and an annual income subsidy provided by Rose, Wilder seemed to attempt no writing during the late 1920's. Not until 1930 did she again actively take up her pencil and attempt to undertake regular writing. This time her project was the long talked-of autobiography. On ordinary five-cent, blue-lined school tablets, she wrote her life story from early childhood until her 1885 marriage. She titled the work exactly what it was, the tale of a Pioneer Girl. The manuscript was a straight-forward, first person account of Wilder's growing up in Wisconsin, Kansas, Minnesota, Iowa and Dakota Territory. By the time it was written, early in 1930, Wilder had conceded to the necessity of her daughter's

editorial contribution to her works. The original penciled manuscript which Wilder presented to Rose contained periodic explanatory and annotative notes, along with some purely personal ones. The notes were directed to Rose, as if to ease her chore as editor.

Mother and daughter were in daily communication during Pioneer Girl's creation, since Rose was living in the Rocky Ridge Farmhouse. Across the ridge, in the new house Rose Wilder Lane had built for her parents, Wilder was in easy walking distance for consultations in Lane's second-floor, sleeping-porch writing room. Lane's daily diary of the period chronicled the progression of her mother's first book-length manuscript. It was first mentioned in July, 1930. On July 31, Lane wrote, "At typewriter till 4 p.m., rewriting my mother's story. She says she wants prestige rather than money."³⁷ During August, Lane spent many "all day" sessions with "mother's copy."³⁸ By August 17, she recorded that she completed the editing and first referred to the manuscript as a "juvenile." She continued with revisions on the "pioneer stuff" through the end of the month, until a clean-typed copy was completed. That copy would pass through many editorial offices in succeeding months.

"Working on my mother's story--stupidly, for will it come to anything?"³⁹ Lane confided to her diary during the revision process of Pioneer Girl. Neither Rose Wilder Lane nor Laura Ingalls Wilder foresaw in 1930 that the "pioneer

stuff" was actually an overall outline for the "Little House" books, nor that it would consummate the protracted mother-daughter collaboration which would endure a dozen years through the writing of the entire series.

Chapter Three: Endnotes

¹Laura Ingalls Wilder, These Happy Golden Years, (New York: Harper and Row, 1943), p. 97.

²Wilder, p. 97.

³Wilder, p. 98.

⁴Personal interview with Neva Whaley Harding, 4 August 1973.

⁵Laura Ingalls Wilder, Pioneer Girl, MS., p. 170. Rose Wilder Lane Papers, Herbert Hoover Presidential Library, West Branch, Iowa.

⁶Neva Whaley Harding, "Daughter of Pioneer Family Recalls Schools, Pays Tribute to the Early Day Teachers", The De Smet News, 8 June 1950, p. 6B.

⁷Laura Ingalls Wilder, Speech at Detroit, Michigan, MS.

⁸Laura Ingalls Wilder, Letter to Rose Wilder Lane, n.d., Laura Ingalls Wilder Papers, Laura Ingalls Wilder Home and Museum, Mansfield, Missouri.

⁹Fred Kiewit, "Stories That Had to Be Told," Kansas City Star, 22 May 1955, n.pag.

¹⁰Laura Ingalls Wilder, On the Way Home, (New York: Harper and Row, 1962), p. 17.

¹¹Wilder, p. 22.

¹²Laura Ingalls Wilder, 1894 Diary, MS., Wilder Papers, Wilder Home and Museum.

¹³Wilder, On the Way Home, p. 24.

¹⁴Wilder, p. 24.

¹⁵Wilder, p. 69.

¹⁶Laura Ingalls Wilder, Missouri trip letter, Wilder Papers, Wilder Home and Museum.

¹⁷Laura Ingalls Wilder, "Ideas for Work", MS., Lane Papers, Hoover Presidential Library.

- ¹⁸Laura Ingalls Wilder, Composite letter to readers, (New York: Harper and Row, n.d.)
- ¹⁹"Land Congress Speech" (n.p.: n.p., 1910).
- ²⁰William T. Anderson, Laura Wilder of Mansfield, (De Smet, S.D.: Laura Ingalls Wilder Memorial Society, Inc., 1974), p. 10.
- ²¹Mary A. Ingalls. Letter to Laura Ingalls Wilder, 30 January 1914, Wilder Papers, Wilder Home and Museum.
- ²²Rose Wilder Lane. Letter to Laura Ingalls Wilder, n.d., Lane Papers, Hoover Presidential Library.
- ²³Lane to Wilder, n.d.
- ²⁴Lane to Wilder, n.d.
- ²⁵Rose Wilder Lane, Letter to Laura Ingalls Wilder, n.d., Lane Papers, Hoover Presidential Library.
- ²⁶Lane to Wilder, n.d.
- ²⁷Lane to Wilder, n.d.
- ²⁸Laura Ingalls Wilder, West From Home, (New York: Harper and Row, 1974), p. 67.
- ²⁹Wilder, West From Home, p. 54.
- ³⁰Wilder, West From Home, p. 114.
- ³¹Rose Wilder Lane, Letter to Laura Ingalls Wilder, 11 April 1919, Lane Papers, Hoover Presidential Library.
- ³²Lane to Wilder, 11 April 1919.
- ³³Rose Wilder Lane, Letter to Laura Ingalls Wilder, 12 November 1924, Lane Papers, Hoover Presidential Library.
- ³⁴Laura Ingalls Wilder, Letter to Martha Quiner Carpenter, 22 June 1925, Ingalls-Wilder Papers, Laura Ingalls Wilder Memorial Society, De Smet, South Dakota.
- ³⁵Laura Ingalls Wilder to Martha Carpenter, 22 June 1925.
- ³⁶Wilder to Carpenter.
- ³⁷Rose Wilder Lane Diary, 1927-1930, Lane Papers, Hoover Presidential Library.

38 Lane diary, 3 August 1930.

39 Lane diary, 19 August 1930.

Virginia Kirchoff's Manuscript Found a Publishing Home

... reading the manuscript for Little ... a late-afternoon train ... and I went ... the late train, so ... there was a book no ... I felt sure, ... the years ... to ... wanted to ... I look back on the ... one of the ... books.

Virginia Kirchoff's concept ... of the appeal ... and ... Virginia Kirchoff's first book ... based on her ... Her immediate ... for publication by Harper ... the first step in launching the Wilder ... the first editor to be ... the first ... the author.

... it had been generally accepted that ... in the Six Weeks were ... Kirchoff's chance ... multiple submissions, rejections, ... all seemed ... the publication of.

Chapter Four

Pathways to Publication:

How the "Little House" Books Found a Publishing Home

I began reading the manuscript for Little House in the Big Woods on a late-afternoon train bound for Westport, Connecticut . . . and I went one stop beyond my station on the late train, so absorbed was I Here was a book no depression could stop--and here was, I felt sure, the beginning of a continued story for the years to follow. I did know that Harpers wanted to publish Laura Ingalls Wilder and wanted to see more and hear more about her. I look back on the "discovery" of Laura Ingalls Wilder as one of the milestones in my life with books.

Virginia Kirkus's correct estimation of the appeal and enduring qualities of Laura Ingalls Wilder's first book Little House in the Big Woods were prophecy, based on her long experience in the editorial field. Her immediate decision to select the manuscript for publication by Harper and Brothers was the first step in launching the Wilder books into print, but Kirkus was not the first editor to be enchanted by Wilder's story, nor was Harpers the first publishing house to offer a contract to the author.

For fifty years it has been generally assumed that Laura Ingalls Wilder and Little House in the Big Woods were miraculously "discovered" by editor Kirkus's chance reading of the Wilder manuscript. Multiple submissions, rejections, revisions and related hurdles met by most writers all seemed conveniently omitted in connection with the publication of

Little House in the Big Woods. This myth, innocently projected by Virginia Kirkus in writing her recollections of the first Wilder publication for The Horn Book Magazine in 1953, merely recounts her own experience with the book. In fact, there had been considerable behind-the-scenes counsel, connivance, submission, revision and a near publication in the launching of Little House in the Big Woods, before Virginia Kirkus ever heard of the fledgling sixty-four year old author from Mansfield, Missouri, Laura Ingalls Wilder. The path to publication, far from Kirkus's immediate, unqualified acceptance of the manuscript, had been as rugged as any pioneer trail.

Late in 1930 and early in 1931, Rose Wilder Lane was actively attempting to find a market for her mother's first-person autobiography, Pioneer Girl. In addition to her own promotion of the material among literary acquaintances in New York City, Lane had placed the manuscript with her own agent, Carl Brandt. It was submitted to a number of periodicals as a potential serial, and refused as a possible book by Harper and Brothers early in January, 1931.² When Lane dropped the Brandt agency and became a literary client of George T. Bye during the winter of 1931, she immediately offered her mother's account of a frontier childhood to Bye and urged him to find a publisher for the material. Bye's initial reaction was lukewarm. ". . . Pioneer Girl didn't warm me enough the first reading," he wrote Lane. The

manuscript, the agent noted, "didn't seem to have enough high points or crescendo. A fine old lady was sitting in a rocking chair and telling a story chronologically, but with no benefit of theatre or perspective."³ Although Pioneer Girl was dutifully submitted to a variety of editors of adult publications, it never found a buyer. Ultimately, it served only as a reference for Wilder and Lane in their subsequent writings.

Concurrent with their main interest, the Pioneer Girl project, Wilder and her daughter were toying with the idea of children's stories based on Wilder's earliest memories. In her last press interview in 1955, Wilder alluded to that initial idea germ that eventually led to Little House in the Big Woods and her entire career as an author. "I wrote several stories, just as I would tell you, and showed them to Rose," Wilder recalled. "Daughter said they might be the basis of a picture book, but nothing else."⁴

The notion of a picture book for young readers had been a recurring theme of discussion between Wilder and Lane. They considered an illustrated collection of poems they had done just prior to World War I for the San Francisco Bulletin.⁵ Their consciousness of children's illustrated books came solely through Lane's friendship with Berta and Elmer Hader, who by the late 1920s were firmly established as artists and creators of children's books.⁶ Lane had been a neighbor and intimate of Berta Hoerner on Russian Hill and

Telegraph Hill in San Francisco and in 1919 the women had shared a house in Greenwich Village.⁷ Laura Wilder had met Berta Hoerner in 1915 while visiting in San Francisco and as Berta said, "I had always been friendly with the family."⁸ Later, the friendship focused on literary favors.

During or after the period that Pioneer Girl was completed, Wilder drafted several children's stories, based on her father's tales. "It seemed a shame to let die those stories that father told us . . . I hated to see them lost," Wilder noted.⁹ She did not realize at the time that those penciled recollections would be the nucleus of her Little House in the Big Woods, and seal her fame as a writer.

Lane, who did all her mother's typing for her, transcribed the stories and the result was a 22-page manuscript, tentatively called When Grandma Was a Little Girl.¹⁰ The work was written in the third person, using a "Grandma" figure to recall her childhood and particularly the tales her father had told her. Grandma's background serves only as an incidental setting to showcase "Pa's" material. Interpersed in the manuscript are four stories-within-the-story: "Grandpa and the Panther", "When Grandma's Father was a Little Boy", "The Story of Grandma's Grandpa and the Pig" and "The Story of Grandma's Father and the Bear in the Big Woods."¹¹

While waiting the fate of Pioneer Girl, the Wilders sent the children's stories, heavily edited in Rose's hand,

to the Haders.¹² They were looking for the Hader's advice and probably their interest in illustrating--and thereby helping to launch--the material. As Berta Hader recalled it, "One day years after Elmer and I were married and living in Nyack, New York, Laura sent me a manuscript to look at . . . I read it and liked it because of the stories' simplicity and homespun quality. I showed it to my agent and to several publishers, but everyone said the same thing: 'No hope in such a story'. One day an editor friend from Alfred A. Knopf visited with me. She told me that the company was looking for some exciting materials about early days in America, written by people who had lived it. . . ."13

The Knopf editor was Marian A. Fiery, who in 1931 was heading the company's Children's Book Department. She was enthusiastic over the 22-page Wilder manuscript and her guidance as an editor actually shaped the material structurally to result in the final version of Little House in the Big Woods. For a year, Fiery offered suggestions, counsel and finally a contract for publication on behalf of the Knopf firm.

The first communication between Marian Fiery of A. A. Knopf, New York City and Laura Ingalls Wilder of Mansfield, Missouri was a letter written by the editor on February 12, 1931. Fiery mentioned that Berta Hader had sent the When Grandma was a Little Girl manuscript to her and "I have read it with the greatest of interest."¹⁴

Establishing her firm interest, Fiery asked for more. "The kind of book I have in mind," she said, is "one for children between eight and twelve years old, illustrated, but not merely a picture book, more of a story book."¹⁵ The 22-page manuscript was somewhere between 6000-7000 words and Fiery recommended a lengthened treatment of approximately 25,000 words.¹⁶ "The more details you can include about the everyday life of the pioneers," she advised, "the more vivid an appeal it will make to children's imaginations."¹⁷

The written expression of interest sent to Wilder was followed-up by a face-to-face discussion between Marian Fiery and Rose Wilder Lane. Lane, who vibrated between Albania, New York City and her family's Rocky Ridge Farm in the Ozarks, was on an extended eastern stay early in 1931.¹⁸ She had presided over the Sinclair Lewis household while the author of Main Street and his wife were abroad collecting the Nobel Prize and was visiting at the Hader home when Marian Fiery also arrived as a guest, three days after writing Lane's mother about the manuscript.¹⁹

"She takes Pioneer Girl . . ." Rose recorded in her diary.²⁰ Apparently, the Wilders were still pinning their hopes on the already-completed autobiography and overlooking the potential of When Grandma Was a Little Girl. After she had given the Pioneer Girl manuscript to Marian Fiery, Rose Wilder Lane tried to further interest the editor in Pioneer Girl. "It is full of fascinating material," Lane wrote,

"told in the first person, but it occurs to me that you might like it enormously for slightly older juvenile readers, if it were written in the third person."²¹

Fiery was just as unmoved by Pioneer Girl as the editors at Good Housekeeping, Ladies' Home Journal, Saturday Evening Post, Atlantic Monthly and the Country Home had been. She was still keen on the idea of a lengthened version of the 22-page manuscript. By March 3, 1931, Fiery had heard from Wilder, who was willing to add to her material as suggested.²² Author and editor discussed a number of fine points of the manuscript, including initial editorial disdain for Wilder's use of "Pa" and "Ma" in naming her parents. ". . . A little colloquial to me," Fiery mentioned, but a few weeks later she concurred with Wilder that the Pa and Ma usage was authentic, and therefore, appropriate.²³ Finding When Grandma was a Little Girl somewhat weak as the title, Fiery assured Wilder that "I am sure one [a title] will suggest itself."²⁴

Rose Wilder Lane had doubtless discussed her mother's inexperience with publication standards and practices, so Knopf's March 3 letter added a strong dose of encouragement. "Our interest in the book is very definite," Fiery wrote Wilder, "and if the complete book is done as well as the part you have submitted, there is no reason why we will not accept it."²⁵

As if to validate Knopf's serious interest in the

Wilder material, Marian Fiery met Rose Wilder Lane a week after she wrote Laura Ingalls Wilder. Over lunch, they discussed the manuscript and Lane gleaned knowledge of the children's publishing field. The lunch meeting was a new era in the continuing story of Lane's management of her mother's writing. As in earlier writing stints Wilder undertook, her daughter assumed the role of messenger, interpreter, agent, typist, and adviser for any material that reached major markets. Lane's role was one that ebbed and waned, recurred and controlled through the ensuing dozen years when the "Little House" series was in the making.

Since Laura Wilder kept no diary of the period and no Knopf correspondence during the re-write time span survives, her daughter's diary of life on Rocky Ridge Farm must be relied upon. On May 8, 1931 (Lane had returned to the farm), she wrote that "My mother came over for tea with her manuscript."²⁶ This indicates that the revision and lengthening process was accomplished in late March and April.

The next consultation was on May 21, when "My mother came over at breakfast time."²⁷ On that day, Lane mentioned that "I rough out 15,000 words of her juvenile."²⁸ The next day, she accomplished 5600 words and by May 23, she had "almost finished."²⁹ On May 24, Lane had "finished the juvenile and copied first chapter."³⁰ There were two more days of typing the clean copy and on May 26, Lane "finished copying juvenile at 4:30 when my mother arrived and read

final chapter."³¹

By "roughing out" and "copying" Lane clearly made the first tangible reference to the revisions and re-writing she did on her mother's first and subsequent books.

Still acting as her mother's spokesperson, Lane composed a cover letter to accompany the completed manuscript on May 27, 1931. She mentioned that "I do so much hope you will like it, because as I told you those little stories mean a great deal to her and she (and I) will be tremendously pleased to see them in a book by Knopf."³² Somewhat obliquely, perhaps trying to establish her mother as an independent figure in the project, Lane added, "I don't know just where or how I come into this, do you? But somehow I do, because my mother naturally consults me about everything concerning her writing."³³ She also referred Fiery to the George Bye agency for the contractual arrangements, anxious for any business details to be in his hands. "I hope to be traveling again before long," Lane added, "and my mother would be quite at sea without someone who knows the ropes to advise her."³⁴

Two trips materialized immediately after Lane had mailed the manuscript to New York, but she was rooted to Rocky Ridge Farm despite a fervent wish to get away from her parents' home. The traveling was done by Laura and Almanzo Wilder, who drove to their old home in De Smet, South Dakota. It was a nostalgic journey to the site of their early lives

and one to refresh Wilder's memory for future writing. Editor Fiery traveled to Europe for most of the summer, so the revised Wilder manuscript languished on her desk until late summer.

It was not until September 17, 1931, that Marian Fiery officially wrote to Rose Wilder Lane, saying that the book manuscript had been read, accepted, and a contract was being prepared.³⁵ After considering several titles, including Trundle Bed Tales, Little Pioneer Girl, Long Ago Yesterday and Little Girl in the Big Woods, the book was finally being called Little House in the Woods.³⁶

Still negotiating for her mother, Lane wrote to George Bye asking him to handle the business arrangements for Little House in the Woods. "This is not the one you are handling,"³⁷ (meaning, Pioneer Girl) Lane assured her agent, fearing that he would question the independent actions taken on a manuscript he might assume he was still responsible for. "But if you don't mind," Lane went on, "I would like your office to handle business arrangements for Little House in the Woods. It would only be a matter of royalty collections and remittances direct to my mother; your commission would probably not be large, but would involve only bookkeeping. My mother is completely at a loss on these matters. . . ." ³⁸

Along with her correspondence about her mother's book, Lane enclosed her own short story, "Immoral Woman", which was ultimately published in the Ladies' Home Journal.

She explained to Bye why she had sent so few manuscripts of her own lately saying that ". . . the market has been discouraging."³⁹ Lane well understood the devastating effects of the Depression on the publishing world, an ominous condition that soon affected her mother's Little House in the Woods.

As soon as Knopf submitted a contract to Wilder for the book, complications arose. Wilder, continuing to be a silent party, let her daughter continue the negotiations. On October 5, Lane complained to George Bye on several counts. The Knopf contract called for Wilder to illustrate her book and Lane pointed out that "This would have to be cut, because she isn't an artist."⁴⁰ The publication date and price of "not less than \$1 and not more than \$5"⁴¹ displeased Lane as she felt ". . . Knopf should give a more definite statement as to selling price."⁴² Lane grudgingly agreed to a flat, set royalty percentage, as opposed to a sliding (increasing with sales) percentage, allowing that this was her mother's first book. But she balked at a clause pledging Wilder to two more books at the same rate of royalty. She suggested that "on terms to be agreed upon" would better protect her mother's interests if she submitted additional manuscripts to Knopf.

Before the Knopf-Wilder contract for Little House in the Woods was signed, Depression economics hit the project directly. On November 3, 1931, Marian Fiery wrote an

unofficial handwritten note to Rose Wilder Lane, informing her that Knopf's children's department--and her job--were being phased out at the beginning of 1932.⁴³ "The Depression has put everyone in a panic," Fiery explained, "and they are cutting expenses."⁴⁴ Her real concern was the impending Wilder book and how it would be promoted and handled with a non-existent children's editor. "I don't want to see your mother tied up for three books (the Knopf contract included an option for subsequent Wilder books) in a place where there is no children's department," Fiery wrote.⁴⁵ She suggested privately that Wilder reject the present Knopf contract and submit her manuscript to Harper and Brothers or Macmillan Publishers. "I am heartbroken about the whole thing," Fiery mourned.⁴⁶

When Marian Fiery's message arrived on Rocky Ridge Farm, Wilder "did not know what to do."⁴⁷ As a stalling measure, she telegraphed Knopf that she was "Sorry, terms and publication date unsatisfactory."⁴⁸ Fiery offered to hold the contract as long as was practicable, hoping that another publisher could be found for Little House in the Woods.

Above all, Laura Ingalls Wilder wanted her book published. She hesitated gambling on the chance of finding a new publisher. Even without a children's department, she reasoned, Knopf would at least get her material into print. "The royalties are not so much a concern to her," Lane told

Fiery, which is a very unaccustomed position for the economically-conscious Laura Ingalls Wilder. Lane appealed to Fiery to "make a few inquiries about selling it elsewhere," while delaying the Knopf contract on basis of Wilder's wire expressing dissatisfaction with the terms.⁴⁹

A warm friendship had developed between Marian Fiery and the Wilder women. Lane commiserated with the editor over her vanished job; to her, the Depression spawned examples of people "cringing and yelping like scared pups."⁵⁰ An invitation was extended to Fiery to visit the Wilders' Rocky Ridge Farm, which Lane described glowingly. "I do wish you would come and see us," she urged. "The farm is grand, really. Quite cool and remote and covered with big trees. We have a good German-Middle-Western cook and Simmons beds and saddle horses and dogs and we'll take you on an Ozark fox hunt. And you can go to Holy Roller meetings--the like of which you never saw or imagined. And by the fireplace of evenings, I can tell you such True Stories of the people here as can never be printed. We'd love to have you drop in, anytime. New Yorkers often do. . . ."⁵¹

Still searching for a new job, rather than making vacation plans, Marian Fiery continued to aid the Little House in the Woods project quietly. "I don't want Knopf to think I influenced you (to remove the manuscript), so why don't you simply write George Bye that you are not satisfied with the contract and I will return the manuscript to him,"

advised Fiery.⁵²

While Little House in the Woods was still in limbo, Rose Wilder Lane was jolted into economic reality by the news that the George C. Palmer Brokerage Company of New York had failed. On November 6, 1931, the ghastly news reached Rocky Ridge Farm and it meant that all the funds Lane had invested in the firm, all those she had invested for her parents and those her parents themselves had invested, were all wiped out.⁵³ Their permanent house-guest, writer Helen Boylston, was likewise financially ruined, so the mood on Rocky Ridge was a dismal one. For three weeks, the news was withheld from the elder Wilders.

Concurrent with the Palmer Company's financial disaster in New York City was real progress in finding a publishing home for Little House in the Woods. Virginia Kirkus, of Harper and Brothers' Children's Department, recalled that her first acquaintance with the manuscript "was an odd story, that cannot all be told."⁵⁴ It began with a mysterious telephone call from an "acquaintance"--presumably Marian Fiery--"who had seen the manuscript and thought I might be interested."⁵⁵

Kirkus later admitted that what she heard on the phone failed to spark her initial interest. "An elderly lady was writing a true story--in fictional form--about her pioneer childhood," the message ran. "I'd heard that tale before," Kirkus recalled, but she agreed to meet Marian

Fiery for tea at the Biltmore before her commuter train left the city for the weekend. There, the manuscript was thrust into her hands and she was told that a decision must be reached by Monday morning. "There were reasons one need not go into . . . for the necessity of a quick decision," Kirkus noted.⁵⁶ Presumably, if Harper and Brothers did not take the manuscript, the Knopf contract, whatever its shortcomings, would be activated. Wilder's fervent wish was to find a publisher--any publisher--for Little House in the Woods.

Without hesitation, Virginia Kirkus realized the potential of the Wilder manuscript, and wanted her firm to publish it. ". . . the real magic was in the telling," Kirkus observed. "One felt one was listening, not reading . . . and the reasons why the decision was an emphatic 'Yes' lay in the manuscript itself."⁵⁷

News that Little House in the Woods was finally securely lodged with an acceptable publishing house came to the Wilders on Thanksgiving Day, November 26, 1931. Laura and Almanzo Wilder were with Rose and their dinner guests in the Rocky Ridge Farmhouse when a telegram arrived from Marian Fiery and brought word that Harper and Brothers had accepted the Wilder book manuscript. "Thanksgiving Day & I am really thankful," Lane noted in her diary.⁵⁸ Within two weeks, she was compelled to inform her mother about the Palmer Company failure.

Harper's juvenile department made immediate plans to

rush the Wilder book into print so that it could appear on their Spring, 1932 booklist. Little House in the Woods was clearly the department's effort to find a stellar book to bolster sagging sales. As Virginia Kirkus recalled about the era, "Those were the days when children's books were coming into their own. We were doing considerable trail blazing in a field that had long been fairly static.

. . . People were thinking that new books for children were unnecessary, while the old ones could serve. And all of us were hoping for that miracle book that no depression could stop."⁵⁹

The editors at Harper and Brothers modified the title for Wilder's book slightly before announcing its forthcoming appearance. "Big" was added to modify the "Woods" in which the "Little House" was located. Thus evolved Little House in the Big Woods as Laura's Ingalls Wilder's first book. A top illustrator, Helen Sewell, was engaged to illustrate the book, a finalized author contract, advance promotion and printing went forth with dispatch. By January 20, 1932, Wilder and Lane were correcting the advance page proofs of the upcoming book.⁶⁰

Prior to publication, Little House in the Big Woods was sold as a selection of the Junior Literary Guild, a sure indication of potential success. On March 28, 1932, when Laura Ingalls Wilder arrived for tea with Rose, she beamingly bore author's copies of the soon-to-be-released book.

"Very well done," Lane noted in her diary.⁶¹

While plans for two more books buzzed in her head and were rough-drafted into her nickel school-tablet manuscripts, Laura Ingalls Wilder's Little House in the Big Woods was published on April 6, 1932. In its pre-publication vicissitudes the book had trod a complicated path to a publisher, contrasting with the uncomplicated pioneer life it recounted. But from inception, the book had encountered pioneer tenacity and warm concern. An old friend, Berta Hader, had introduced the manuscript to the publishing world.* The warm tales had inspired both editors Fiery and Kirkus to believe in the work of the unknown Missouri writer. Warm family feelings prompted the ever-encouraging, sometimes dominating Rose Wilder Lane, who continually wanted to "gratefully fade from the scene."⁶² But while Lane sought to make her mother independent, she simultaneously fostered dependence and firmly forged the influence that ultimately exerted itself all through Wilder's career. Though Laura Ingalls Wilder created her Little House in the Big Woods, her daughter supplied the input that brought the project to fruition.

*Hader remarked: "I really have a sneaky feeling down deep inside me that if it weren't for me the book might not have been." Wilder bore this contention out in her autographed copy sent to the Haders, which read, "In appreciation of your kindness in introducing my little book to an editor . . . Yours sincerely, Laura Ingalls Wilder."⁶⁵

"To preserve my wonderful childhood,"⁶³ Laura Ingalls Wilder had written her initial book. Its publication satisfied the author's desire but whetted public interest and publisher enthusiasm, spawning what Virginia Kirkus accurately predicted--"a continued story for years to come."⁶⁴ With Little House in the Big Woods, a contemporary series classic was launched and the "Little House" books were on their way.

Chapter Four: Endnotes

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³George T. Bye. Letter to Rose Wilder Lane, 6 April 1931, Rose Wilder Lane Papers, Herbert Hoover Presidential Library, West Branch, Iowa. This and all other letters cited are in the Lance Collection of the Hoover Library.

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⁵Hilary Cummings letter, written 15 February 1982.

⁶"Berta and Elmer Hader," Something About the Author, Vol. 16 (Detroit: Gale Research Company), pp. 122-128.

⁷Lee Bennett Hopkins. "Berta and Elmer Hader," in Books Are People (New York: Citation Press, 1969), pp. 98-102.

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- ⁵⁵Kirkus, p. 428.
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- ⁵⁷Kirkus, p. 429.
- ⁵⁸Lane diary, 26 November 1931.
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