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Prairie Bound: How Laura's Past Forged My Future

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PRAIRIE BOUND: HOW LAURA'S PAST FORGED MY FUTURE

A Thesis

by

Lori J. Houston

Submitted to the Graduate School of the

University of Texas-Pan American

In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

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May 2012

Major Subject: Creative Writing

PRAIRIE BOUND: HOW LAURA'S PAST FORGED MY FUTURE

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May 2012

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ABSTRACT

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This work of creative non-fiction seeks to explore my past at the same time as I explore the past of a favorite childhood author, Laura Ingalls Wilder. This exploration took the form of a road trip with my father to visit the sites written about in Laura's books. I found that Laura's life appealed to me because it represented an insular security that I felt I needed, and that was why I chose, as a child, to immerse myself in the 1880's. While finding out what she meant to me then, I also discovered that Laura is an even better role model for me now, as an adult. My recent lifestyle interests in developing a simple sustainable living were bolstered by the example of her life and work as a farm wife and writer. All I need now is a little bit of her pioneering spirit.

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CRITICAL INTRODUCTION

One of the most well-known and loved historical and literary figures, Laura Ingalls Wilder has cast a sort of spell over my life. My own childhood memories are full of holes, but I could tell you incidents in her life down to the minutest detail. The reading and re-reading of her stories only fueled a hunger in me to know more. We didn't have the internet when I was young, so my only way to get more information was to scour the library shelves, and information there was scanty. My first breakthrough was finding Donald Zochert's biography, *Laura: The Life of Laura Ingalls Wilder* at Waldenbooks. I read that book almost as many times as I did the ones she wrote. I was fascinated with all the extra material that she never gave us. Her little brother was never mentioned in her books, nor was the fact that she once lived in Iowa, the same state I grew up in. I was so obsessed with her that I started looking for similarities in our lives. She was Laura, I was Lori. She was born in 1867, I was born in 1967. She got married in 1885, I graduated high school 1985. Her son died at 12 days old, mine died at 14 days old. These somewhat eerie similarities, if put to someone else's interpretation would not be similarities at all. Anyone else of rational mind might quickly disregard these occurrences as mere happenstance.

At first, I did not know it was an obsession, but as I got older, I started to think my feelings must not be normal. None of my schoolmates ever talked about her, and some hadn't read her books even once. I never showed anyone the photograph of her that I put in my wallet along with all my classmates' pictures. I didn't want to cut up my book to get the picture, so I borrowed my mother's old instant camera and took a picture of a photograph of her in the book

by Donald Zochert and trimmed it to wallet size with a pair of scissors. Only one of my friends ever saw the almost life-size chalk drawing I did of Laura and Almanzo on the inside of my bedroom door. My father was not very happy that I used a brown crayon to color in her hair, and he made me scrub the picture off when he found out about it. The chalk came off but the crayon hair never did. It was still there the last time I saw the house.

As an adult, I can now compare my 'Laura complex' to the feelings that Star Wars and Star Trek fans display. In his book *Get a Life*, William Shatner, the star of the Star Trek series, studies the phenomenon of the incredible fan base his series has generated. However, I still felt alone with my subject matter. Even now I find that I make light of my intense interest in all things Laura. Making the decision about what to write for my thesis was and continues to be fraught with doubts and misgivings. I first conceived the idea in a creative non-fiction class. We were talking about different kinds of creative nonfiction that were being published and the instructor mentioned that project books were being published at that time. I had heard of *Julie/Julia* by Julie Powell, who wrote about her year of cooking Julia Child's recipes. I just knew I could write my own Lori/Laura kind of book, and I would finally have a reason to take the trip and see all her *Little House* sites. Something in me was thrilled about the idea, but I also started having doubts about the wisdom of the idea. Nobody else in the world would want to read it. Nobody was as interested in the subject as I was. Going to graduate school in the Rio Grande Valley, I can't help but feel the pushing by the professorate here to exploit the regional culture because it is so under-represented in literature. Proposing a thesis subject so foreign to this area was a great concern to me. A book that explores a connection to a historical

Midwestern children's author was something that I thought would not be well received as a worthy literary project. Personal taste can take you only so far. I knew if I saw a book about some forty-something woman going to see all the Little House sites in hopes of finding out why she has always been fascinated by Laura, I would definitely buy it, but I figured I was the only one who would. As a matter of fact, I figured I would be the only one who would even want to write about it. How wrong I was.

My oldest friend, turned life-coach, convinced me that I needed to write this book. I had been talking to her about various ideas for a novel, asking her opinion on what I should write, what kind of story would be literary enough. I trusted her opinion because she was my friend, and because she was an educated woman with tremendous life experience. She could feel that I was waffling around about what I wanted to do, so she started asking me questions about different classes I have taken and how I felt about them. Eventually, I mentioned the creative nonfiction class, and sheepishly admitted my initial desire to write about a Laura journey. She told me later that she could hear the passion in my voice when I talked about that idea for a book as opposed to any others I was considering. She did not share my interest in all things Laura, but she could see that this particular subject, in my hands, did have potential precisely because it does have intense meaning to me. With her encouragement, I started thinking it was possible to pursue this approach to my thesis. I started checking the internet for information about her houses, and to my surprise, I found a fairly large community of self-described 'Laurati'. I also found, to my great disappointment, that I had just missed the first ever 'Laurapalooza' held in July 2010 in Mankato Minnesota. It was a combination scholarly conference and fan convention. There were guest speakers and panel discussing all sorts of things that connected to Laura lore. There was a meteorologist, a musicologist, a physics professor, historians,

biographers, actors, scholars, authors, and of course fans in attendance. It was at this time that realized that I was not alone in this deeply felt obsession for Laura Ingalls Wilder. It actually encouraged my obsession, bringing it out even more.

The people that spoke at the Laurapalooza conference were highly educated professionals, yet each of them, in their own way was obsessed with this author. The meteorologist, Barbara Mayes Boustead, works as a forecast meteorologist for the national weather service in Omaha, Nebraska. She researched highly detailed weather information for DeSmet, South Dakota, during the exact time period portrayed in Laura's book *The Long Winter*. She gathered weather records for the area and analyzed factors such as temperature, precipitation amounts, wind speeds, and the number of days that it snowed in plains of South Dakota. I really started to wonder why she took the trouble to do this. Granted, working for the National Weather Service would give her easier access to the records than most people, and her knowledge as a meteorologist would greatly aid her in predicting the weather for that time period however, some might argue that looking up weather patterns to help predict possible hurricanes such as Katrina or the tsunami in India several years ago would have been a more useful way to spend her time. The fact that she chose to prepare a paper for a conference that only marginally had anything to do with her field says a lot about her feelings for the subject matter of the conference. Laura has obviously had a profound impact on this person as well.

The Musicologist, Dale Cockerell has published scholarly articles about nineteenth century popular music. His talk covered the music that was discussed throughout her series. Jim Hicks, a physics professor, researched and calculated the time window for the trip that took place to get the wheat in 1881. His explanation involved detailed formulas explaining the weight of seed wheat and angle of travel that helped him figure out where the claim was that provided the

seed wheat that saved the town in *The Long Winter*. A number of historians delivered presentations on Indian relations and the Homestead Act during that time period, giving further historical value to the writings. Several biographers gave presentations on their areas of specialization. John Miller discussed Laura's newspaper writing career in Missouri. Pamela Hill explored the writer-editor relationship between Laura and her journalist daughter Rose Wilder Lane, who is also known to have been a ghost writer for Herbert Hoover's autobiography. Authors Wendy McClure and Kelly Ferguson presented on their forthcoming books that resulted from each of their tours of the home sites. The tour is a pilgrimage that many Laura fans have taken to fulfill their interest in the writer and the life she lived.

When I first learned about the Laurapalooza conference and what transpired there, I felt a sense of reassurance that my obsession was not as odd as I thought it to be. However it also sparked a totally different perspective within my mind, and that is to wonder just what it is about these stories of her life that has obsessed so many people.

Laura Ingalls Wilder did not start a following in a physical form. She didn't go out and talk with people and share her life experiences with them. She didn't lead people from place to place showing them where she had lived, what clothes she wore, what games, music, and everyday mundane things that she had done or attended to. The only agenda I could see was the desire to chronicle her life. I seriously doubt that she would have wanted people to obsess over her as so many do. So why does she have such a large following?

Looking back, I can see that my obsession was unlike those of many other children of the time. My brothers and thousands of other kids, for a time thought they were Jedi Knights from Star Wars or some other popular figure. They would dress up like their heroes and act out scenes from movies and cartoons. I was left to my own secret fascination with Laura. A casual looker

could say that these obsessions are identical. What makes a young man's obsession with Darth Vader any different than mine? The first would be the sheer numbers of children that were sucked into the Star Wars franchise straight from the movie theatre into the stores buying light sabers, costumes and action figures. There have surely been thousands of children who have read the *Little House* series of books and/or watched every episode of the television show, but there has never been a significant push made for mass marketing of Laura Ingalls Wilder attire, or tools she may have used. There is no comparison really when you look at how some obsessions are generated.

My first time reading the books did not happen in the order they were written, but after reading one book, I was hooked. I soon found out there was a whole series. I started over from the beginning and fell in love with the world and family that was revealed within the pages. Those eight books became a part of my life. I spent an inordinate amount of time in my room reading or watching the show on television. When I wasn't reading about her, I was thinking and imagining different aspects of her life. I felt like she was my best friend. I knew just how she would react in many situations. I never considered these books to be fiction at any time, I could see how all the things written could have actually happened and most of them felt like they probably did happen.

It was only recently, while researching more, I find that some scholars seem to be attributing ulterior motives to the stories. Ann Romines' article, "Nineteenth-Century Reading and Twentieth-Century Texts: The Example of Laura Ingalls Wilder" discusses the influence nineteenth-century reading habits had on the characterization of the Laura in the series. She argues that the example Ma and Pa put forth with reading caused Laura to grow up with a desire for the written word. Ms. Romines further argues that Laura and Rose deliberately crafted the

story that way, for that purpose. "Sometimes I feel that I am a product of the story of reading that Laura Ingalls Wilder and Rose Wilder Lane wrote" (24). Her statement shows that she thinks the ultimate purpose of the stories is just as effective today as when it was first written. Even if it wasn't planned that way, Ms. Romines has discovered a very pleasant side-effect of Laura's books.

It is clear that these writings are not easily forgotten. Even as adults, people who have fallen into this obsession will go to distant lengths to inject some meaning into Laura's works. There are people who have totally changed their way of life in response to her books. After reading them, many yearn to live a simpler life, and often try to imitate her ways and to live like Laura lived. On one website devoted to Laura fans, I saw a posting that implied she used Laura as a decision barometer. When coming upon difficulties, she would think to herself..What would Laura do?

Without a doubt the books have impacted a large number of people in many different walks of life. Perhaps that is what they were actually written to do. The first book in the series was written and released during the Great Depression. It could be argued that they were written to inspire people, to give them a glimpse of how a family should be even in the hardest of times. The Depression was a dark period in time that saw a lot of families losing their security, and even the loss of the family unit entirely. Looking at the family portrayed in the stories, Charles Ingalls was an educated father and homesteader who raised crops to support his family while seeming to constantly be staving off disasters to his home and harvest, fires, insect infestations, accidents and many other hardships befell them. Yet Charles was always there and ready to do right thing. The mother, Caroline, educated former teacher that she was, epitomized the perfect mother. She would punish her children as needed and praise them as well. She saw that the

children were educated and that they took education seriously.

This family would go through many hardships that would have destroyed almost any other family. Somehow they make it through. The family that I grew to love and dream that I was a part of was not the perfect storybook family. They all had their shortcomings and idiosyncrasies that they would occasionally revert to, but they all seemed extremely real. They were a very probable chance of a family. Each member falling into their place like stereotypical family types. The tomboy, the sweet courageous survivor, the young beauty, the sickly child, the tragically lost son, the model parents who only have their children's best interests at heart. It is a family that encompasses the identifiable probabilities of any family.

These books, which contain a seemingly average family that endures many hardships but makes it through, may have been written to give families hope and inspiration to make it through the Great Depression itself. A heroic deed for any writer who could put forth such an effort, if in fact it was done with the foresight to do just that. If it wasn't intentionally written for that purpose, it can definitely be given credit for achieving much of its non-intended purpose.

What I have learned so far from digging into other people's obsessions with this series of books, as well as the seemingly endless measures people have gone through to prove the validity of the writings, is that we truly want to believe that this family did exist exactly as written and went through all of these things together. We want to think that the tremendous hardships they faced only served to make them a stronger and wiser family unit, bringing them closer and each of them gaining a better understanding of each other as a whole. In short, we want a family that faced nearly every possible hardship, suffered tremendous loss, and yet shared so many loving moments together as a family.

These books give us what people want to see in their own families or lives. What child

wouldn't want to be able to go out and feed the baby calves every morning with their father right by their side? Yes, the children saw the devastation and hardship of crop failure, fires, drought, but they endured it from safe inside the bosom of their family. What child, after spending the morning out doing the chores with their father, wouldn't want to come in to a hot breakfast their mother had just fixed up? Always nourishing, simple fare that the mother made with love. What husband could ask for anything more in a wife than that of Caroline Ingalls? She maintained her family very well, kept up the house, the cooking, helping the children with their school work, while taking care of her husband in all possible ways. Helping out on the farm at times when needed, and helping out in the town when others needed a helping hand as well. The farm settings were perfect in a realism sort of way. The upkeep of the farm, replacing wood and roofing on the barn, the plowing, the burning off of land to clear it for crops. All of these things were so well written in the series.

When these books were first published, families were suffering tremendous hardships just trying to put food on the table. Jobs were nowhere to be found, and families were coming apart at the seams. Perhaps these books were meant to play role in inspiring families as a whole. After the publication of the first book in the series, people actually wrote to Laura begging her to continue writing more books. These books sparked an interest in reading for younger children.

Once the depression was over, the family unit seemed to have a revival. Husbands and fathers had good jobs and supported their families. A few generations later, the family started falling apart again due to individual greed. The increased consumerism gave rise to the two parent income, and the children were basically left to themselves. As people continued to spend more than they earned and always needed more things to keep them happy, the common household mother started taking on jobs outside of the house to boost ailing incomes. Many

families stopped doing things together as a unit due to the lack of consistent time spent together.

The *Little House* television series came out in the 70's and quickly gained a large audience, sparking a renewed interest in the books. The people responded well to a look at a simpler time, finding something there that was missing in their lives. My obsession was born during this time. I didn't know it then, but many others were experiencing the same. With the advent of the internet, I now have access to Laura fans all over the world, and a great majority of them seem to be my age. We all grew up loving Laura and now have found a community of others who share that passion. Some of us make a study of her life and other surrounding events, just to feel an even deeper part of it all. I can't help but think that it stems from a very strong need within. Some people are out to prove for themselves and for others that the events and places written about in the books were real. Fans are taking home-site tours, researching dates and birth registries of some of the other people mentioned in the books like the Oleson family or Laura's best friend Mary Powers or Ida Brown, the adopted daughter of the preacher. They started checking up on specific events, like the exact date Laura and Almanzo got married. Interestingly enough, when writing the series, Laura's age was deliberately confused in some places at the request of the publisher.

Could it be that these books fill a psychological need that we all have? The evolution of society, while seeming to flourish, also seems to leave us lacking in the basic security that is amply manifested in this book series. I find myself now not so much wanting to prove any specific aspect of the books, but trying instead to put myself as much into Laura's shoes as I can so that I can see first-hand just what it was that she saw, so that I may interpret how she contrived the articulation of a world view that satisfies all our, or should I say, my longings.

My quest for more information about Laura brought me to a work that that is a complete

cultural studies dissection of the entire Little House on the Prairie series. *Constructing The Little House: Gender, Culture, and Laura Ingalls Wilder*, by Ann Romines is 256 pages of scholarly research and interpretations of the minutest details of the series. Some of the things I have read in this book defy easy assimilation, needing to be pondered for a period of time. I almost quit reading the book during the first chapter because the direction she started heading really ticked me off. Romines quoted another author who speculates about the ‘romantic’ nature of Pa and Laura’s relationship throughout the series. At first I couldn’t tell if Romines agreed with that evaluation or not, but continuing on, it sure looked like it. She pulled scenes from the first book to illustrate the potential incestuous relationship between the very young Laura and her ‘seductive’ father. As a person who adores this series, and most especially the first book, I was disgusted and angry at Romines. She professed to be a huge fan herself. How could she repeat those things?

Since my thesis is partially a cultural studies look at the phenomenon of Laura fandom, albeit in a very personal way, I believe that reading more of these types of scholarly books and articles about Laura and the series were necessary for me fully explore my connection to her stories. Ultimately my goal was to find out why I, personally, am so fascinated by her. After leaving the book alone for a week or so, I picked it up again, leafed through some of the other chapters and read things that moved me in another way. I decided to give the book another chance. I don’t want to ignore large chunks of information about Laura, or large pieces of critical response to her work. This author has had much more access to the data and research surrounding Laura. Leafing through the book, I saw she quoted from fan letters written to Laura. Laura Ingalls Wilder had the same effect on readers then that she did for me now. One fan wrote to her: “My teacher just finished ‘These Happy Golden Years’ and when she put it up we all just

stared without a sound as if there were more. You could never guess unless I told you that I'm always dreaming about you. And I even talk about you in my sleep." If I had given up on reading this book, I never would have seen that letter excerpt.

Other people have gone to great lengths to explore their passions or obsessions. My interest is especially captured by stories of people who incorporated travel in their pursuit of whatever fixation they embraced. Michael Palin took a similar trip, exploring the world of Hemingway. While immersing himself in the atmosphere of Hemingway's hometown, he records in his journal,

Before going back to our hotel I take a walk up to the corner of State and Woodland to look at the rooming house where Hemingway stayed in the winter of 1919 and from there I retrace his steps down to the same public library on Mitchell Street where he went most days to read the newspapers. The moon is full and the air is cold, and I feel myself in danger of entering a young Hemingway time warp. Turn in to the Park Garden Café for a night-cap and a dose of present-day reality. Order a beer and settle myself down at the bar. The barman nods approvingly. "Second seat from the end. That was Hemingway's favorite."(Palin).

That is the same kind of experience I had while standing on a street corner in DeSmet, South Dakota. The lines between eras of time were temporarily blurred. Michael Palin's journey became a book as well as a PBS documentary.

People's obsessions take many forms. Aimee Steinberger took a trip to Japan to indulge her fascination with anime, cosplay, manga and Super Dollfie dolls. She composed her story in the form of a manga journal. Her odyssey was not focused on any one person or thing, but more of a lifestyle quest. She wanted to experience and see things she had only previously read about.

Some of her goals for the trip were to visit the factory where her favorite dolls were made, see a Japanese musical, and go to a themed café.

Sarah Vowell's historical travelogue, *Assassination Vacation*, focused on a few political assassinations. She seems to have an intense interest in political history and in this book she narrows her focus down to the presidential assassinations of Lincoln, Garfield, and McKinley. She has done an insane amount of research into all of the people, locations and events surrounding the assassinations. She even goes so far as to visit a remote Alaskan village to view a set of totem poles with the likenesses of William H. Seward and Abraham Lincoln. Seward, as Secretary of State at the time of Lincoln's death, was the victim of an attempted assassination the same night. Vowell travels everywhere as a sort of macabre tourist poring over such artifacts as bloodstained sheets, bone fragments from Lincoln's head, and Oneida teapots.

Vowell structures her book mostly by subject. There are four chapters. The first, and longest, is about Lincoln, the second is about Garfield, and the third is about McKinley. The fourth, and shortest chapter, starts off being about the architecture of Washington D.C. and the Lincoln Memorial, but ends with her religious views and fears for future. Her visits to various sites and copious amounts of research are inserted into each designated chapter regardless of what order they were undertaken. In my thesis, my subject is really just one person so I organize my chapters by home-site. I also performed my travels all on one road trip, so I am organizing them in the order I saw them, not necessarily the order in which Laura lived in them. In each section of my book I am also inserting other things that are related in some way to the location or the book that took place there, not just what I observed and experienced on that visit.

In "Assassination Vacation", Vowell uses humor as a vehicle to insert her views and personality into the narrative. At one point she and a friend are eating lunch and she tells him

she has a surprise for him. After proudly showing him the plaque commemorating the house where William Seward was attacked the night Lincoln was killed, she is disappointed by his lackluster reaction:

I pride myself on knowing my audience, so I'm shaken by Bennett's indifference. As he trudges out of the courtyard I harangue him with what I think are other juicy facts about buildings on Lafayette Square, such as, "Right next door: Mark Hanna's house!"

"Who was he?"

"Only William McKinley's best friend!" Surprisingly, this info also bombs (Vowell).

Another thing Sarah does in her book is to impart a great deal of information in an easy to read and digest format. Although I enjoy history very much, I was not familiar with any details or nuances of the presidential assassinations she covers. To tell the truth, political writing is normally difficult for me to follow, but her style of writing enabled me to absorb more than I thought I would. So while her book may have been written for political history buffs, I, as a travelogue reader, found much to enjoy. I am hoping that I can do something similar with my book. While it will probably appeal to Laura fans as a matter of principle, I am hoping to satisfy any other readers that would come to it for different reasons. There may be things to gain for people interested in travel, memoirs, history or just following your passion.

After decades of avoiding involvement in the Star Trek conventions that he sometime made appearances at, William Shatner finally delves into the psyche of his super-fans. In *Get a Life*, he interviews Joan, one of the originators of the Star Trek conventions:

Joan: We were never in it for the money. We were doing it out of love and affection for the show, for the characters, and for the writers. We genuinely loved you guys. Did you

know that?

Bill: I do, and I'll tell you, Joanie, the voyage of discovery I am making, while doing research on this book, is the fact that there was and is all that love out there. I had no idea, quite frankly, I truly had no idea as to its depth and breadth. I have been moved to tears on some of the interviews when people have opened up about what the show meant to them (Shatner 97-98).

Shatner found himself in a unique position when he went to the conventions incognito. He was able to really study the fan base without anyone noticing, and therefore invalidating some or all of his own findings. I have to approach mine from a different perspective because I am also one of the fans.

I took an almost semester-long detour into trying to turn my thesis into fiction because I was afraid of writing too much reality. I wanted to be able to hide behind the designation of fiction in case anyone chose to be hurt by my memories, including myself. With that in mind, I searched for road trip novels written by women to give me some perspective. Erika Lopez's *Flaming Iguanas: An Illustrated All-Girl Road Novel Thing* certainly qualified as a road novel, but at first glance, is nothing like my thesis. Even while considering fiction, my plot was very different than Ms. Lopez's. What I found useful about this work was the way her character was so transparent. The reader wasn't given a sanitized version of what someone thought the heroine should be. She gave us a living, breathing human being. That is something I struggled to emulate in my story. I did not want the protagonist in my story to only have one side to her personality; I wanted the good and the bad to show up for all to see.

The character of Brenda in Sharlene Baker's novel, *Finding Signs* experiences something on a seemingly regular basis that I do not subject my protagonist to. During her road trip, she

always seems to be skating right on the edge of danger. Sleeping in the bushes at night while on the road, her thoughts are enough to terrify herself as well as frightening the reader at the same time. My character does not go through that kind of uncertainty, but I do hope that while she is being drawn through her emotional issues, the reader is making that journey with her.

Interestingly enough, I found Chelsea Cain's road trip memoir while looking for novels. Although it doesn't fit in with the obsession exploration aspect, it fits very well in the road trip to the past with a parent theme that I use in my work. She takes her trip back to Iowa with her mother and manages to reclaim her identity. My story differs in that I examine my past, and Laura's in order to forge a new identity. Other writers have made the pilgrimage to "Laura Land" but I feel that there is room out there among the tall prairie grass for all of us to make that personal journey into the past, and back around to the future.

In crafting my story I have struggled with finding the balance between showing too much and too little. In "My Monet Moment", by Andre Aciman, found in *The Best American Travel Writing 2011*, this issue is described very well. "I like not knowing anything about the house or the painting. I like speculating about the setting and imagining that it could easily be France, Italy, possibly elsewhere" (Aciman). The painting delivers just the right amount of information, holding the viewer's attention, while still challenging their perception. I feel that I have not yet mastered that technique in my writing, but with diligence and awareness this can be overcome. In *Clear and Simple as The Truth*, Thomas and Turner refer to a similar theme when they discuss hedges of process. According to Thomas and Turner, hedges of process are hesitations and uncertainties, evidenced by saying something, thinking better of it, then adding a qualifier to it, thereby discrediting it (35). In choosing to write such a personal account, I grappled often with my process of hedging.

One of the major ways that I want my work to differ from the two other recently published books by Laura fans about their trips to see the home-sites is that I want to show the journey I took has been a major catalyst of change. As much as I enjoyed both of the books, I was disappointed in the endings of each of them. Neither of them laid any kind of claim to having reached some kind of satisfying conclusion. I have been on this journey to find out why I have been so obsessed with Laura Ingalls Wilder and her books. What I would like to reader to come to an understanding about is that the books filled a need in my life when I was growing up, a need for stability and safety, but also that I still have a need, waiting to be filled, and taking the obsession to the next level can fill it. As a child, I longed for a simple, natural life, and today, my needs are pretty much the same. Once again, the missing parts of my life can be completed by filling them up with Laura Ingalls Wilder. Instead of living in the imagined virtual world Laura inhabited, I can make it real. I can live a life similar to Laura's if I follow the advice she gave in the Missouri Ruralist. A family can make a living off of a five acre farm. This allows for me to combine my interest in sustainability as well as a more local approach to living. The documentary *The Economics of Happiness* gives a very convincing argument for taking up that type of life. In my conclusion, I do not go back to living my old life again after the trip, and writing the book. I make a major life change, move to the country, buy some land, grow some vegetables, raise some chickens and pursue a happier, healthier life.

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CHAPTER I

When I was younger, my mother thought she could cure my adolescent shyness by making me talk to strangers even though I preferred hiding behind a book. My favorite author, Laura Ingalls Wilder, was teaching school at the age of fifteen. No way could I have ever done something like that. Some of her students were her age and one was even older! When I was fifteen, I wore glasses and braces and was not fit to be seen in public. Part of my mother's plan to improve me was to have me approach strangers at restaurants and ask them what time it was. Circumventing the spirit of the exercise, I chose someone that was wearing a large watch, stood next to them and surreptitiously read the time from their watch without saying a word. Another thing she tried was forcing me to call and make my own orthodontist appointments. Yes, my shyness extended even to telephone conversations. Once or twice she would stand over me and force me to make the call to set up an appointment for getting my braces tightened, but many times I was able to avoid it. Eventually she went back to making the appointments because it was clear I would never see the orthodontist again if we had to rely on me to make the call.

My mother's ineffectual manipulations did nothing to pull me out of my world of books, specifically the *Little House on the Prairie* series. As a matter of fact, I became so entrenched in Laura's story that, even now, at 45, I can recall her childhood much more easily than I can recall mine. Her past is more real than my own and I became determined to find out why.

"Why on earth would I want to do that?" My father was sitting on his front porch smoking a cigarette when I told him my idea. "You don't have anything else to do this summer. It will be good for you to get out and about." I wasn't going to take no for an answer, so I let him protest and bluster all he wanted about other things he could be doing this summer instead of taking a road trip with his daughter. He got up, grabbed his coffee cup and went inside his trailer to get another cup of coffee.

"Dad, look around you. This is a Winter Texan RV park. It is dead around here in the summer. All your friends will be back up north then." From October through mid-April, the nearly two hundred RV spaces would be filled with retired folks from the Midwest and Canada. In the summer months, only about thirty spaces were still occupied.

"Hold on, we'd be going through Missouri and Wisconsin, right?" His tone had changed, and I wondered if that meant he was ready to give in.

"Naturally. We'll go to every place she lived in the Midwest." Laura's journeys spanned six states in the Heartland of America, as well as a brief trip to Florida and a visit to California, but I couldn't expect my father to indulge me that much, so I was leaving off the outliers.

"I suppose we could stop along the way and see some of my friends that have gone back north," Dad said after a moment.

And I had him...

It took only one day to convince my father to take me on a road trip all around the Midwest to see all the sites where the author of the *Little House on the Prairie* books lived. As a

child I had asked to go on this type of trip before, or even to see just one of the sites, but it never happened. I was the only person in the family that was interested so I eventually relegated the longing to the unused corners of my consciousness. The rekindled desire to go on the trip came out of nowhere a couple of years ago. My chances of going had worse odds than they did when I was a child. Here I was, married, with children, a full time job, and earning my master's degree. I tried to interest my daughters in the series when they were younger, but they ended up developing a taste for zombie and vampire stories. My only chance to fit a trip like that into my life was to attach enough importance to it to make sure it happened. So I decided to write my thesis about it. Now I could tell myself it wouldn't be a frivolous trip that would waste time and money. It was now vital to my future.

I forged my connection with Laura Ingalls Wilder before sixth grade, I was surprised that my friends were only vaguely aware of her. It was incomprehensible to me that there were people out there that couldn't list all her books from memory in the correct order like I could. The strange thing about my obsession with Laura is that I could go from being surprised that someone I grew up with doesn't share my knowledge or feeling about her, to being surprised that there are total strangers out there that seem to share in my fascination. And both situations feel totally natural to me. I am alone in my obsession in a deeply personal way because no one close to me shares it, but not alone because in the wider world, I have discovered that there are others that feel the same way. I have found websites, blogs and discussion groups about Laura all over the internet. There have been many books written about her and about her books as well as museums dedicated to her life and travels. I find that significant. I am one of the many that choose to explore my connection with Laura and her life, but I am also unique. Her stories and her life have affected mine and that experience is my own.

Gaining my father's cooperation was a very important aspect of this project. I pitched the idea to my thesis advisor as a road trip with my father to visit all the Laura Ingalls Wilder sites in the Midwest, during which I would be exploring her past as well as my own. The trip would also include stopping in Iowa, where I grew up and have not been back to for fifteen years. Right after I pitched the idea, I found out that another author, Wendy McClure had already written a book about her obsession with Laura and visiting all the sites. Her book was due to come out in a few months. That floored me for a while, but, then I emailed Wendy to tell her (in a half joking way) that she ruined my life. She was really rather nice about it, wishing me luck and telling me that she thinks it was a great idea to take the trip with my father. She also told me about another woman she met who was writing about her similar trip as her thesis. There went any dreams I had of publishing my story, but I knew it would still make a great thesis.

Although it only took one day to talk my father into it, planning the trip was more complicated. It had to wait till summer when I wasn't taking classes or working so much. I am the office manager of the Winter Texan RV Park that my father lives in. He and Mom started coming here about eighteen years ago to get away from the cold winters in Iowa. About seven years ago, they decided to make it a permanent move because they liked it so much. When my family and I moved to South Texas, I started working for the park. The summers are very slow so all the employees get a chance to take vacations in turn. Late May was the only time left unless I wanted to wait until August.

In the months leading up to the actual trip, I wanted to re-read all of her books so I ordered a boxed set of them from Amazon. I also couldn't resist buying a cookbook with recipes

for the foods she talked about in her books and a guidebook about all the home sites. I read the entire set of books in one weekend. Even though I hadn't read them since high school, the stories were so familiar to me that I just sank into them with no effort. I was in the Big Woods sitting on Pa's knee listening to his story about the panther. I was on the Kansas prairie gathering beads at a deserted Indian camp. I picked leeches off my legs on the banks of Plum Creek. I explored the Surveyor's house by Silver Lake. I watched a town rise up out of the Dakota prairie and I felt at home there. For some reason, Laura's memories were more real than my own. Scenes from her childhood bloom within me in vibrant color and sound whenever I care to think about her life. Thinking about my own past yields only hazy, incomplete impressions, usually only marking an instant in time. I started to think that maybe choosing this project as my thesis was just a convenient way of giving myself a reason and permission to what I have wanted to for so long—to discover more about my personal connection and obsession with the life of Laura Ingalls Wilder.

Now that I had my legitimacy, I was getting into the planning of the trip. Considering the high gas prices, we thought it would be prudent to map out the shortest route that took in all the locations. That meant no chance of seeing the sites in the order that Laura and her family moved to them. Since we were in deep South Texas, our first stop would be Laura's last one: Mansfield, Missouri. That was the first site I ever heard of dedicated to Laura so I didn't mind too much that we would be going there first. I took some time at work to map out the trip and get an idea of the mileage we could expect. According my calculations, it was going to cost us nearly \$500.00 in fuel alone. Then there would be food and hotel rooms. We would be saving some money by staying with some of Dad's friends from here in the park. We also had relatives in Iowa and Minnesota that we were planning on seeing. I figured that two weeks would give us

plenty of time for all the driving between sites, a day for each site, and time to see relatives and friends as well.

I felt guilty about how excited I was to be finally going on this trip. I was going to miss my husband and my daughters, but in my enthusiasm I didn't show it very much. I could feel the resentment from them even though they said they understood. I don't think they actually did understand why I was doing it. They thought it was all about writing a thesis but it was way more than that. It was like my mid-life crisis. Here I was; an almost middle-aged woman on a journey to understand who she is by returning to the past—her past and the past of a favored childhood author. Even I didn't understand it, and I was the one experiencing it. As well as my husband knows me, he cannot share in my obsession with me. He knows about it in an abstract sense, and I sometimes think he looks upon it as psychological phenomenon to be rationalized away. If it's explained in a satisfactory manner, then it can be gotten over. But that is from the mind of someone outside the fray. For those of us within the phenomenon, it's much more complicated. He can tell me till he is blue in the face that the stories she wrote were cleverly designed to portray perfect, happy, self-sufficient families, and as such, would appeal to a large number of people, but none of that changes my desire to re-read her books, to see her birthplace, to look at artifacts from her life, to read books about her, and most of all to think about what she has to do with me, in my life, one hundred years away from hers, and why I seem to enjoy spending time in hers.

For some reason Dad got it into his head that he wanted to leave at midnight. That was okay with me because I wasn't the one driving. His car got better gas mileage than mine and he

liked to drive. The day before we left was full of last minute preparations. You would think we were packing a covered wagon for a trip to the old west. Dad spent the last day making beef jerky in his dehydrator for us to take on the trip, but then he forgot to pack it. I spent the last day downloading audiobooks onto my mp3 player. I put two on for me, and one for my dad. His book was the longest at over twenty hours of listening time. He also had my brother Mark fill up a USB drive with country music.

In addition to packing enough clothes, I brought along a bag full of books. The entire series of Little House on the Prairie books of course, as well as a couple of books about Laura. I also brought *The Little House Guidebook* by William Anderson. Wendy McClure's book *The Wilder Life*, which I obtained the moment it was available, and read in two days, was also included. The clothes bag went into the trunk but the books were riding up front with me.

“What’s this?” I almost sat on the paper bag lying on the front seat.

Dad closed the trunk. “Lisa dropped that off for you earlier. Is that everything?”

I checked the back seat to make sure my travel pillow and blanket were there. “Yeah, that’s everything I need.” Opening up the bag, I checked out what my neighbor brought me. Inside was a greeting card, a composition notebook and a packet of pencils. I decided to use that composition book as a travel journal instead of my computer. I might as well do it the old fashioned way. After all, Laura didn’t have an HP Mini laptop when she, Almanzo and Rose headed off to Missouri.

When I first read Laura’s travel journal, *On the Way Home*, as a child, I was deeply disappointed by the book, which was nothing like the others. This was a different Laura in a different world. Suddenly there were people involved that we knew nothing about. Who were

these people, these Cooleys that they were traveling with? It really was jarring to have them foisted upon me in that abrupt manner. In Rose's introduction to the book, she says they have always known them. I suppose that may be true. There were no stories of the time that Rose was growing up. Even so, I felt like they were intruders into the lives of the family I was reading about. There wasn't a lot of mention of them in the journal entries but I resented the fact that they were there at all. In the published stories the Ingalls family always traveled alone, so why couldn't the Wilders? After more biographical reading I found out that the Ingalls family sometimes did travel with family or friends when moving around the country. Hearing about it in Laura's own words in her diary made it sound commonplace matter of fact but to my younger self, it was a jarringly unusual occurrence. Whenever I read that volume now, I find myself appreciating the historical detail as well as insight into their real lives. I am better equipped now to separate the woman from the character.

I really couldn't consider that we were on our way until we passed through the Border Patrol Checkpoint. I never really understood why it was so far north of the border, but in my mind I think of it as the border between South Texas and "the rest of Texas". Before moving here, I never thought there was a difference between any parts of the state, but it is just too big for there not to be differences. South Texas, or "The Valley" as it is called around here, might as well not exist as far as the rest of Texas goes. It is like we are not even a part of the same state. First of all, miles and miles of near-empty land keeps us isolated. We are much nearer to Mexico than to any major city in Texas. Because of the isolation, our society here necessarily relies on itself, and as such, has evolved in its own unique way. The language is also unique to this region, being an original mix of English and Spanish not found elsewhere.

It was dark as we headed north out of the Rio Grande Valley. I dozed on and off for parts of it, waking up for stops at rest areas and gas stations. Just south of Waco we passed through Lott, Texas. I was glad Dad wanted to avoid the interstates. I loved driving through these little towns. I grew up in a town so small we only had one stoplight and our business district was only five blocks long. I loved looking at the old, odd shaped houses as we drove by. It was the same when I lived in Georgia. I had an hour long drive to school several nights a week, and old, derelict houses were so plentiful out there. There was one that looked like it could have been a small plantation house with broken windows and a caved in roof. To me, these houses are possibilities. When I look at them, I imagine what used to be, then what could be. After a year of passing that house, I was glad to see it being restored. I knew it could never be what it once was, because that was a different time with different people, but this new version of the house was a story waiting to be written.

The rest areas in Texas have interesting mosaic murals on their bathroom walls. I thought they were interesting enough to take some pictures of them with my phone, but I waited until I was alone before doing so. I don't know why I was worried what strangers would think of me for doing something a little weird, but I was. The first one I took a picture of featured a huge pair of red and white cowboy boots, and next to it, about two-thirds their size was a charging bull. There were white balls of steam below the nostrils and I am sure it was supposed to look mean, but for some reason the eyes look so cute that it takes away all feeling of menace anyone could have had.

I bet Laura would have loved having rest areas to stop at when they were traveling in their covered wagon. I wonder how often Pa had to pull over to let someone do their business. Wooden wheels with no shocks on a bumpy trail would cause me to have a seriously shaken bladder. And where on the wide open prairie did they have any privacy? Under the wagon? It is glaringly absent in her books. I don't think everyone should write all about it, but to omit it in areas where it would make sense just calls people's attention to it. Laura was very descriptive about the process of building Pa used in the creation of their homes. It would have made sense to include the digging of the hole for the outhouse along with the digging of the well. That sort of thing. I'm not looking for scenes to take place in the outhouse with Ma holding Baby Grace over the hole attempting to potty train her but it wouldn't hurt the story any to acknowledge that they have an outhouse somewhere nearby.

Laura's diary of the trip to Mansfield included details that would be mundane to her, but fascinating to me. We have our rest stops with vending machines for snacks and drinks. They stopped at people's houses and traded for food, and, I daresay, may have used their facilities to freshen up. People then seemed to welcome travelers, wanting to talk and hear about what is going on everywhere else. We don't do that now. We already have access to more information than we can process about other places so we hardly talk to people anymore. Especially not strangers in rest areas.

Since the beginning of the trip, we have been listening to Dad's audiobook. He loved many of W.E.B Griffin's books so I had one of his lengthier works onto the mp3 player for the trip. It was over twenty hours long. I slept through the beginning of it, but when I realized it

wasn't just a regular war novel, but more about the OSS, I started paying attention. I find spy stories very entertaining. I used to want to be a spy when I was a lot younger. During middle school we had a social studies assignment that required us to write a letter to the president. I don't remember what the purpose of the assignment was, but I took that opportunity to ask the president to let me know how to go about getting into the CIA when I grew up. I received a form letter in return from the president, but, to my amazement, I also got one from someone in the CIA. It was all very vague, talking about college and military experience. My brief time in the Army after high school was a direct result of that letter.

Interrogating prisoners of war is not a job for someone who is afraid to talk to people. I imagine my thoughts were casting out large nets at that time. When I was a junior in high school, I told the recruiter that I was interested in Military Intelligence. The next thing I know, my best friend and I both signed up. They kicked me out of interrogation school twice. Ok, I am exaggerating here. The first time they just recycled me. That is code for making me start over from almost the beginning because I just wasn't getting it. The second time, they really kicked me out, but not until I made it almost all the way through the interrogation training. They said I just wasn't convincing enough to pry information from an uncooperative prisoner of war. They put us in rooms with an instructor that was pretending to be a prisoner of war. They were given a back-story of their character including information about who they were, what they were doing when captured, what their mission was, and what their triggers were. The theory was that interrogators could "break" their subject if they figured out and dealt with whatever need each one had. The "prisoners" in our training sessions would not reveal any pertinent information unless we addressed their issue. For example, a prisoner may have a younger brother that may have been captured with him that he is worried about. It is part of the interrogator's job to figure

this out from clues in the prisoner's responses, then to deal with it effectively. Only then will the prisoner reveal the useful information. I was not very good at picking up the clues about what was important to the subjects, and on the rare occasion I did, I wasn't believed when I promised to take care of it. I lacked the authoritative manner that could have pulled that off. Luckily for me the language school was first, and I received really good German language training from the Defense Language Institute.

I used to enjoy telling people about this time in my life. It is so unlike me, people almost always responded with surprise. I liked having the ability to astonish. I sometimes wanted people to see me as something more than I was, or something more than I thought I was. I used to say things like, "How I ever let the recruiter talk me into that, I will never understand." I would smile and shake my head in a self-deprecating manner, but secretly pleased. Even though I never succeeded at being an interrogator, I was taking credit for attempting it. How pathetic is that? How about if I try to actually answer my own question now? How did I let the recruiter talk me into signing up for a job that I was obviously unsuited for? It is not a reason to be proud of, that you can be sure of. I cannot blame him. He was doing his job, pushing jobs that were needed at the time. That one was needed so much that they were offering \$4000.00 bonuses to the soldiers that completed the training. I didn't ask questions, I didn't do any outside research. (Ok, that would have been more difficult because there wasn't really an internet back then, but there were other sources.) I didn't even look at other options. I just assumed that my family couldn't afford college, so I had to do something with my life. I never approached the guidance counselor at school to ask about financial aid or scholarships, I just threw myself into the swiftly flowing river of my future with no clear destination in mind, and no clue what was around the next bend. Ultimately, I didn't take any responsibility upon myself in the situation. The very

qualities about myself that led to my acceptance of the recruiter's recommendation were the ones that made me perfectly unsuited for the job of interrogator. It was like I was blind in one eye, only partially aware of things going on around me. I was too afraid of people to question them or even to look out for my own best interests. If only the Army recruited old ladies. Who could resist telling their secrets to harmless old women? I've picked up a few interrogation tactics while raising two teenaged daughters.

At a stoplight in Pryor Oklahoma in the early afternoon, I took a picture of a run-down bar called The Steelhorse Saloon. It took up the bottom floor of a two-story brick building on the corner. One of the upper windows was broken and had a piece of plywood covering the hole from the inside. The dirty, beige painted wooden door to the bar was standing ajar. Just after I snapped the picture, the neon light in the window flicked, then went out.

By late afternoon, I was hungry and ready for a bathroom break. "Next chance we get, we need to stop." We were in northern Oklahoma on Highway 69. Five minutes later we went around a bend and found traffic at a standstill in front of us. Dad hit the brakes and stopped the car behind the line of traffic. "I wonder what's going on." My leg had gone to sleep so I shifted around in my seat trying to get comfortable.

"An accident, I imagine."

"Well yeah, duh," I said. I still had to use the bathroom and the delay was not making me happy.

"How should I know? I guess we'll see when we get there." Dad's face had tightened at the tone of my voice, but it relaxed a moment later. It wasn't long before a tow truck made its way up the other side of the road toward the blockage. When traffic started moving again, it was very slow. We were still creeping along when I saw what looked like an opening in the tree line beside us. The trees weren't missing; they were torn and broken in a wide swath, going east and west. Looking past the devastated trees, I saw a structure that looked like half of a barn, with wood and debris strewn around. It finally dawned on me that I was seeing tornado damage. The opposite side of the street was the same. I had never seen the destruction caused by a tornado first hand. Looking closely, I could make out pieces of siding and shingles in a clearing, but no house.

"Oh my God. Do you see that place over there?" I looked over at Dad as I pointed it out to him but he had already seen it.

"I see it. Hope everybody made it out ok is all that I can say. It must have hit that house dead on. It's amazing the barn is still partially standing."

I couldn't tell how old the damage was from looking at it. I figured it couldn't have been that long ago because it hadn't been cleaned up yet.

Laura wrote about tornado damage that occurred during their time in DeSmet, South Dakota. It was the summer before she got married when a tornado came through their area. After the storm, Almanzo and her father traveled around the surrounding area to see if anyone was in need of assistance. When they returned, they told of the damage they had seen and the near-misses they had been told about. One family had everything on their homestead swept away. Nothing was left except the hole in the ground they had sheltered in. In a bizarre twist of

events, hours after the storm, a door fell out of the sky and landed right in the spot where the home had been. She never mentioned it in her book, but I wonder if she had wanted to go along to check out the damage. I would have wanted to go with them as they surveyed the damage and I imagine that she would have wanted to also. Maybe there was some kind of social rule that governed the etiquette on that sort of thing. Perhaps it would have been unseemly for a woman to travel around to strangers' houses (or bare property) without a proper introduction, even under such circumstances as that.

Growing up in Iowa, there was always the danger of tornados, but none had ever touched down near us. Dad used to tell us the story of the time Mom thought there was a tornado heading our way. I don't have any memory of this event because my brothers and I were very little at the time. According to Dad, Mom mistook a tornado watch announcement for a tornado warning announcement. Our house did not have a basement, but the neighbors across the street just completed theirs. She decided immediately that we needed to go there but instead of rounding up my brothers and me, she grabbed ahold of the cat and tucked him under her arm with his head facing backwards and headed out the door. Dad had to stop her and remind her to get us children too.

The traffic finally picked up and I was relieved when we reached the next town and found a gas station.

Driving through Missouri I experienced an overwhelming urge to move to the Ozarks. Everything is so green and pretty. There are hills and trees and land is a lot more affordable than anywhere else I have looked. I am sure it is because there are hardly any jobs in the area, but

still, it would be nice. I go through phases where I feel like I need a change, and this must be one of them. I have always moved because other people have wanted me to move, but now, it's my idea. And the location is my idea. Or I could say obsession. It is probably not healthy, this strange compulsion that drives me to search Realtor.com to find affordable real estate in the area near Mansfield Missouri, where Laura lived quite a bit of her life. My inner fantasies have me buying ten acres of land, getting some animals, growing some vegetables and being very happy. Maybe even working part time for the Laura Ingalls Wilder Memorial Society. My logical brain knows it's just a symptom of a deeper problem, but what that may be is anybody's guess. I felt like the trip was off to a slow start, but I was very excited and ready to see the museum and home-site at Rocky Ridge.

One more pit stop. There was only one bulb working in the ladies room. Three dust and cobweb covered bulbs were screwed into the rectangular fixture over the mirrored cabinet above the sink, but only the one on the left emitted its feeble light. Even in my urgency, I wasn't stupid. I locked the door before dropping my purse on the filthy floor.

Five minutes later I emerged from the restroom on the side of the gas station carrying the key attached by chain to a three foot long chunk of wood. I was no carpenter, but figured it was a piece of 2 by 4. The owners of the gas station obviously were tired of customers stealing the keys to the john. I imagined that their next option would be to attach it to an old bald tire. Nobody would steal that. I couldn't even count the number of tires I'd seen abandoned on the side of the road during this trip.

Feeling much relieved by my time in the bathroom, I decided to buy another diet coke. At the register, I looked over the case of scratch-off lottery tickets. In a hopeful mood for once, I decided not to go for the instant win, and asked for a lotto ticket instead.

“What kind of lottery tickets do you have here in Missouri other than the Power Ball?” I didn't look at cashier directly; but bent my head over my purse, looking for the five dollar bill I knew was stashed in the front pocket only allowing myself the impression of a skinny older gentleman with no specific details.

“Well, there's the Missouri Lotto game that draws on Saturday. Your chance to win two point four million dollars.” He stressed the word point in that statement, and I almost looked up at him, but just then I found my money.

“I'll take one quick pick and this.” I put the diet coke on the counter next to the plank with the key that I had been holding under my arm this whole time.

“Where you folks headed?” The cashier leaned over the counter, smiling. Even without making eye contact with him, I could see his face was one that conveyed age and youth at the same time. He must enjoy his job and his customers, wanting to hear all about them. Unfortunately for him, I wasn't ready to tell my story yet. I wasn't even sure what my story was or what I was doing here, in a dingy gas station five miles south of Ava, Missouri.

After twenty hours of driving, we were almost to the first site. According to the GPS we were only about ten miles from Mansfield. I had been reading the guide book entry about the Rocky Ridge site and I knew there was only one motel in the town of Mansfield, and that was the Little House Inn. I made up my mind that I wanted to stay there, so when Dad mentioned stopping for the night, I didn't tell him that there would be more choices in nearby Springfield. It

was after 9PM when we arrived, but we found the motel right away. However, there was nobody in the office. The lights were on, we were there within the posted business hours, but the door was locked. There was only one other car in the parking lot and it was parked in front of a room near one end of the V shaped motel.

"Well, shit! I guess we should have made reservations or something." It figures that things wouldn't go right for me. I wasn't doing a very good job of keeping my disappointment under control.

"How far is it to Springfield? Or any other nearby town with motels?" Dad leaned against the car and lit a cigarette.

"I'll check." I opened the door and grabbed my phone. Just then the headlights from a van swished over us as it pulled into the lot and stopped in front of the office.

"You folks looking for a room?" A middle aged man holding a tiny dog got out of the van. "I just had to run into town to the store. I'll have the office opened in a moment." As he unlocked the office, I wondered what he meant about run

ning into town to go to the store. Weren't we in the town already? Even though it was dark, it looked like we were right on the edge of town. There was a gas station across the street from us, and a restaurant next door. The restaurant was closed but there were lights on at the gas station.

We were both tired and hungry so Dad asked the clerk where we could get some food. The man told him that he could get pizza or chicken at the other end of town. All he had to do was get back on the highway and take the second Mansfield exit. Maybe that is what he

meant by going into town. If you get on a highway and take a different exit, that is the equivalent of 'going into town' for someone on the other edge of town. Chicken sounded good to us so we headed out and found a gas station at the second exit. Normally they serve chicken dinners or pizza but at that time of night our only choice was pizza. Twenty-five minutes later we were back in the motel and so tired we only ate one piece of pizza each. The rest ended up in the trash can.

CHAPTER II

Dad looked up from the menu, focusing on the tall red-headed waitress that just approached our table. “So how come your eggs aren’t free?” He closed the menu and laid it on the table as he spoke. I was too embarrassed to show my face to the waitress, so I stared at Dad instead. He was smiling and I could his chin just barely quivering, he was holding in his laughter. He was at it again.

“Why should they be?” Judging by her voice, she seemed more curious than irritated, but I didn’t want to look at her to find out for sure.

“With all these chickens in here, you ought to have more than enough to go around!” I cringed a little inside until I heard her laugh.

“Yeah, it’s a regular hen party in here.” She took it well. I hadn’t even noticed the décor of the café. There were chickens everywhere, figurines on shelves, a wall clock embedded in the center of a large white chicken above the register, and the wallpaper border featured chickens.

I finally saw the house where Laura spent most of her adult life. After years and years of wanting to experience this, to see this home-site of Laura's, the main thing I remember about it is that Laura was indeed a little woman, literally. Maybe it was something I had built so much up in my mind, but I was expecting the houses to be bigger. Knowing she was short is one thing, but to see direct evidence is not something I was prepared for. Seeing these houses served to remind

me that she had an entire different life and that I cannot know everything about her like I do the Laura character. I have read all her books, and a lot of her biographies, and still, seeing where she lived, seeing the things she used, shows me an entirely different person. Even though Laura was never a grandmother, the Laura that lived in the farmhouse I saw today was a grandmother type. She had grandmotherly hats, grandmotherly furnishings, and grandmotherly quilts on the beds.

If the set-up of the house was indeed just like it was left, as the guide claimed, then Laura and Almanzo slept in separate beds, but in the same tiny room... most of the time. There was another tiny little room with an old fashioned fainting couch that she said Laura sometimes fell asleep on. Apparently she would sometimes get up at night and would go into that room so as not to disturb her husband. Sometimes he would find her there in the mornings. It didn't look comfortable to me, but who am I to say? My own mother had slept on a couch every single night for as long as I could remember. Except when she was in the hospital of course. The living room served as my mother's bedroom. It seemed to work for her. As for myself, I would have wanted some privacy, and peace and quiet, but maybe what she wanted was to be in the middle of all the action, keeping tabs on everything. Except when sleeping. She was a heavy sleeper. My brother and I could have snuck out of the house, right past her and her snoring, and slamming the door on the way out and she wouldn't have noticed. Not that I ever did such a thing, mind you, but a less angelic child could have. Even when it was just the two of them, when Mom and Dad retired to Texas, she mostly lived on her couch in their trailer. From there she could see out onto the deck that Dad built. Whenever they had visitors, they stayed on the deck because the trailer was really too small for company. Everybody in their trailer park congregated on their decks or patios because nobody had space inside their homes for company.

Laura had a bathroom in her little house outside of Mansfield, but the character of Laura never heard 'the call of nature'. Oh, how far fiction is from reality. With fiction you can leave out the unseemly parts of life, but when evidence of actual life arises, it is startling. Never once did she describe rolling out of bed during the dead of winter and using the chamber pot or outhouse. The fictional Laura never got her period and Ma never had to have 'the talk' with her girls. Of course the real Laura experienced all that but she chose to deny us entry into that part of her life. I can understand why she did so. Her message was an elevating one, not a reflection of truth. She held the mirror up to her life tilted at a certain angle so that we could only see what she wanted us to see. Her message would not have been served with the full on view. How can someone romanticize a way of life that includes digging holes for outhouses?

The home-site in Mansfield included the farmhouse that Almanzo and Laura built, and the Rock House that Rose had built for them. There is also a museum with a lot of artifacts in it and a gift shop. Of course I bought a sunbonnet while there. I spent over an hour looking at the stuff in the museum. I could have happily stayed there all day, but I wanted to see the actual house they built and furnished. When we started the tour of the farmhouse, we followed a school group in. Our guide Sarah was a former teacher and she talked to them like one. She threatened to give them a quiz at the end. Even though her talk was geared toward children, it was still nice. I loved the personal story she threw in about the refrigerator. When they bought it, Almanzo wanted to put it in the broom closet. When it didn't quite fit, he opened up the wall and re-built around the refrigerator. It was unsettling, really, seeing that refrigerator. She died in 1957, so naturally I knew there would be modernish appliances and things in the house, but something inside of me wasn't quite so prepared. Even though Sarah told us details about Almanzo, I really couldn't fit him into my vision of Laura's life. He was always there, in the

corner of my mind, but he was never a central player to me. I mean, sure I loved the whole romance in *These Happy Golden Years*, but Almanzo as an individual was incidental to me. I liked the understated idea of romance and courtship. I think in my mind I saw their developing relationship as a very restrained, cautious, but slightly eager thing. We never got the details of course because I am sure that their relationship was not near as cool and calm as depicted. During their courting time they spent hours alone together going on drives with the horses and buggy, or the cutter, but what did they do all that time? What did they talk about? Was there any other action going on for real? Sure it was the late 1800's, but are we supposed to believe that their first kiss was the night they got engaged and Laura primly said "You may kiss me goodnight"?

There is an incongruity in the books that really bugs me. Toward the end of their courtship they all of sudden change names. They go from Laura and Almanzo to Bessie and Manly. And that is who they were in their world together, but we never got to see that happen. We are left with the tightly controlled little romance, but nothing real and emotional that would turn Laura and Almanzo into Bessie and Manly. When I first read the part about their names for each other, I didn't like it because I thought they were trying to change something I already loved into something else, but now with more time and more life experience, I see that the 'something else' that we barely got a glimpse of was the reality and what I had loved was the construct.

Later in her life, Laura had another name for her 'Manly'. When she was writing her articles for the *Missouri Ruralist*, she referred to him as 'the Man of the Place'. What a quaint turn of phrase. And I don't use the term 'quaint' lightly here. This new Laura is quite interesting. I can't stop myself from wondering about what kind of woman thinks of her husband in that way, and what exactly did she mean by it? I can't picture the Laura of the books saying it, and I don't

know the middle aged and elderly Laura well enough to be sure. Was it a true Stepford Wife title of deference? This is from a Laura who, ostensibly, was quite a capable pioneer girl. For someone "as strong as a little French horse" as Pa had always said about her, I think the title implies a level of awed deference that seems out of character. But I don't see her using it facetiously about her life's companion either. My only other option is to take it literally. He indeed literally was the 'man' of the place and that's all there is to that.

In 2010, Dan White, one of Laura's biographers, compiled a series of her articles, dated from 1911 to 1916, into a book. I had to laugh when I read the first one he included. It was called *Favors the Small Farm Home*, originally published on February 18, 1911. In this article she opens up by discussing a trend she has noticed, the movement of people from the cities out to the country in search of a freer, healthier, happier life. In his comments, Dan White notes that the actual nationwide trend for that time period was the exact opposite of what Laura described, but that it doesn't make her observations any less valid. In her personal sphere, she was noting an actual trend, but it did not translate globally. I don't know the status of that movement today. Is city to country migration or country to city migration more prevalent? Laura advocates five acre farms because they are large enough to supply most of the living for a family, but small enough to not convey a heavy work burden. I wonder if that is feasible these days. Could a family be self-sustaining on that amount of land? The farm here at Rocky Ridge was two hundred acres at one point. They could have sustained quite a few families with that.

The Rock House tour was given by a really tall man named Stanley. Stanley was a real Rose fan. We followed the school group through this house too, but he didn't talk down to them

the way Sarah did. There wasn't as much to see with that tour, but we hung out after and talked to him. I asked him about the people that bought the farm in the 40's from Laura and Almanzo when they couldn't work it anymore. He said it was the Shorter family, the same people who bought the Rock House from them earlier. I had only recently read that the Wilders had sold their property. According to Stanley it was because Almanzo couldn't work it anymore and he didn't want Laura to have to deal with it when he died, so they sold it with the provision that they could live in their house until they both died. I wonder what they did with the money. I didn't think they had money problems at that time because Laura's books were selling, but maybe she wasn't making enough. I had been under the impression that their farm was successful, which to me means no debt. I couldn't really get anything more out of Stanley about why they sold out and what they may have used the money for, or even how much they got for it. Stanley made a big deal about how Rose helped the newly formed Laura Ingalls Wilder Preservation Society buy back the part of the property with the farmhouse right after Laura died. Over the years they bought back more and more of the land that was once owned by Laura and Almanzo. The Shorter family was living in the Rock House, so they didn't get that part back until the 1990's. The one part they will likely never get back is the piece belonging to the Rocky Ridge Nursing Home situated between the farmhouse and the Rock House.

I really like the outside of the Rock House, but the inside didn't impress me much. Rose had it built for her parents as a retirement house on their farm. According to our guide Stanley, she bought the house plans from Sears, and then hired an architect to modify it to her specifications. I think it was a very nice thing to do for them. She was feeling like she had plenty of money and wanted to give them a sort of dream home. In her mind, I am sure she thought the house was great. She spent a lot of money getting the power lines brought in from

the city. Laura and Almanzo moved into the Rock House and Rose took over the farmhouse.

The first four books of Laura's series were written while she lived in the Rock House, but as soon as Rose moved to the East Coast, Laura and Almanzo moved back into their farmhouse and sold the Rock House. I imagine that the house they built together was more of a dream home to them than the modern one Rose had built.

I would love to design and build my own home. I still have hopes of doing that one day. Playing the 'When we win the lottery' game with Mom for years while growing up instilled in me a capacity to dream big. Mom was fond of telling us what kind of remodeling she would do to our house when we won the lottery. She always wanted us to play along, telling her our ideas, designing the house together. We did this often. Sometimes we would remodel our current house. Sometimes we bought a new one. She even had a realtor take us through a few of them. It wasn't just the house she would plan, but all of our futures as well. When we won the lottery, she would pay for our education, set us up in any business we wanted, and buy us our dream homes. She bought massive amounts of lottery tickets over the years, but never won. Several years ago, I found myself playing a version of that game with my daughters. We were planning out a family owned business financed by the lottery, a combination bookstore/candy shop/bakery/internet café/art gallery with a stage for live music and public readings by authors. That covered everybody's area of interest. The main problem with that scenario was that I only manage to buy a lottery ticket about twice a year because I rarely carry cash.

After viewing both houses in Mansfield, we headed north again. Dad had friends in northern Missouri who said we could spend the night at their house. We stopped for lunch

along the way. Deb's Cafe reminded me of a house. Not just any house, but my house. The one I grew up in, I mean. The diner looked like an older ranch style house from the Fifties that had been added on to at various times of its life. The center of the building had the high pointed peak of the roof, and then on either side of that, the roofs were turned sideways so that you could see the slope of the roof covered in grey asphalt shingles. The house I grew up in had the same 2-part roof, except it had its peak on the left of the house and the slope showing on the right, not on both sides like Deb's Cafe. The front door was even the same. It had three rectangular windows set in stair step formation descending from left to right. It was the same way my mother placed portraits on the wall in our living room. Mark's was on the left, higher than the others, then mine, slightly lower, and Kurt's, lower and to the right. I wondered if this building had been someone's house. Was I eating my lunch in someone's living room, had this room once held family portraits and comfortable furniture?

The waitress was a tall, broad shouldered woman. Her gray streaked dark brown hair was piled up on her head in some elaborate formation of curls held tight with bobby pins. Her uniform was an old pair of jeans and a white button up blouse. Her name tag said "Hank". I fell in love with the menu at Deb's Cafe. After ordering a hot beef sandwich, (something I haven't had in over a decade), I asked Hank if I could hold on to the menu for a little while.

"Sure thing honey. Our desserts are real good". She returned to the kitchen with our order and I continued to look at the menu. It wasn't the food that interested me but the advertisements inside it and on the back. It was done just like the ads that you see in high school yearbooks. Each ad was just a little larger than business card size, and they advertised places like the County Health Clinic and the Farmers Bank. My favorite advertisement was for a florist shop called Apple Seeds. Not only did I love the name of the shop, but I loved the drawing of

the marvelous little building. Not being from around here, I don't know if the picture is drawn from life, or imagination. I prefer to think it is from life, so I make up my mind to believe that and I resolve not go searching for the shop in town when we are done eating.

It wasn't long before we had our food. We made it into the diner just before the lunch rush. Naturally, Dad ordered breakfast again. Give him a plate of eggs, bacon and hash browns and he's a happy man. I am a little harder to please than that, although I never met a potato I didn't like. The hot beef sandwich was quite acceptable, and I was glad to find out the potatoes weren't instant. After bringing our food, Hank, the waitress went back behind the counter near the cash register. There was a small color TV mounted on the wall above her head and the news was playing. More about Bin Laden's death and President Obama refusing to release the photographs of the body. Before I knew it, I was commenting on the political climate.

“Well, one thing you can say, Obama taking care of Bin Laden just now finally got people to stop talking about his birth certificate.” I have no idea why I said it because I don't actually have any strongly held beliefs about politics. Just then I glanced up at Dad and saw a disgusted look on his face.

“Oh Jesus Christ!” He had just taken a bite of toast, and he put it down. I looked away, mumbling something to change the subject. Even though my statement was worded neutrally enough not to offend anyone, or so I thought, it seemed to upset him. I don't know much about my father's politics other than he is a Democratic union supporter. He has been a member of the UAW Local 838 for decades, and it has done well for him. My politics, while very scanty, tend to flow in more scattered directions. There are many issues in the world today that I have not formed an opinion about. Of the subjects that do interest me, I do not attach a label to the things

I agree or disagree with. I just realized that I have no idea how my father feels about many things. Why don't I know very much about him? And more importantly, why am I hesitant even now in actually finding out?

Instead of looking back over at him, I started watching the ladies behind the counter at Deb's Cafe. I could hear them talking. It seemed like Hank's daughter was going to be getting married in a few weeks. She was talking wedding plans with the other women. I pictured Hank wearing one of those formal 'mother of the bride' ensembles, complete with fancy hat. It just didn't seem like her style. She looked like a down to earth, no nonsense type of woman, but you just never know. For all I knew, she's the type of woman who wears sweatshirts with embroidered cats paired with polyester stretch slacks who would jump at the chance to wear a magenta colored, lacy, frilly, sequined concoction to her daughter's wedding. But who am I to speculate about other people? I don't even know the man who raised me.

Dad didn't know exactly where Larry and Irma lived so he wanted me to call them and get directions. Prior to this, his phone had been connected to his car stereo via Bluetooth, but it did not function very well so we finally disconnected it. As it turned out, we passed the turnoff we needed as they were giving us directions to their house. They live out in the country of northern Missouri just a few miles south of the Iowa border. Irma told me later that she usually does her grocery shopping in Iowa.

At one time, I found concept of border crossings in the pursuit of daily activities a novel idea. I didn't grow up in a border area, but at various times of her life Laura did. In Pepin Wisconsin, the Mississippi River separated them from Minnesota so that border was not so easily

crossed. The only time she mentions crossing it was when they left in their covered wagon heading to Indian Territory. From her biographies, of course, we learn that they came back to their previous home once more before moving to Minnesota but that kind of pre-meditated border crossing is not what I find fascinating. It is the short-duration crossings carried out in the course of relatively normal activity that I find thrilling. It gives me a feeling of having been somewhere different and exciting. It's a way letting myself know that life can be more than it seems, that *my* life can be more than it is. That, although I am *here* now, I have the possibility of being *there* someday. Laura's closest border dwelling was the Masters Hotel in Burr Oak Iowa, on the border of Iowa and Minnesota. I never came across any writing about her life that mentions it, but I like to imagine that she did have some special feeling or sensibility about the border being so near. They left their home on Plum Creek in Minnesota to come run the hotel in Iowa. Maybe, sometimes she got homesick. If it were me in her place, I would have gone to the border often and crossed it, just to feel closer to my old home.

On the road the next morning, we were headed to Iowa. Dad wanted to save time so he decided to follow Irma's advice on what route to take. She had said to go left out of the driveway, then to turn left at the broken down building. If the road turns from pavement to gravel, you have gone too far. Within three minutes, we were winding our way around gravel roads in northern Missouri. Somehow the wreck of a building did not appear. Dad said he figured if he just kept trying to head west, he would run into the road we needed. Half an hour later we did manage to find the right road. We also found out we were already ten miles into Iowa and we hadn't noticed.

The last time I had been to Iowa was about ten years ago. I couldn't think of any reason that would bring me back. No friends or close relatives were left there, and I didn't like the cold

winters. And yet, here I am, looking forward to seeing everything. Even the farmland is distinctively familiar, Iowan. It is very early spring but you can see a lot of fields by the roads have already been planted and green shoots are coming up. When you drive past them you can see that the corners of some fields are not planted at right angles, but are plowed and planted in a curve. I love the big white farmhouses situated in between the fields. There is always a big farmhouse, a barn, various tractors and other equipment, sometimes a grain silo or two, and trees. Everything is condensed into one small square of property, and then blocks of crops surround the living area. Some of the houses and barns are really worn. I was surprised at how many dilapidated old barns I was seeing there in Iowa. Not all of them, but enough to make me wonder about the state of our agricultural industry. I started taking pictures of some of the broken down barns, but usually we were going too fast for them to come out.

I knew I was really in Iowa when I started seeing Kum & Go gas stations on nearly every other corner. They are in other states too, but they started in Iowa and that is where most of them are. We stopped at one in Newton Iowa, and I surreptitiously took a picture of the cashiers working the counter. It is a little fuzzy but you can tell who they are and where they are. After ten years, I see they are still wearing the same uniform. When husband, my daughters, and I moved from Iowa to Georgia, I left all my Kum & Go uniform shirts behind as a symbol to myself that I wasn't coming back, that I wouldn't need those uniforms again. I ended up just trading that uniform for another. Nothing really changed by moving. I even ended up doing the same job, just for a different company.

Once we got within fifty miles of my hometown, I started recognizing nearly everything. Things did not change very much. Exiting the highway on to River Forest Road in Evansdale Iowa gave me an overwhelming feeling of sameness. It felt so normal, driving around that curve

of an exit ramp, like I'd done it hundreds, even thousands of times, which I had. It was like I never stopped doing it. I have always gone around that curve of road going home, and for that moment, it felt like I always would. If I even felt for the teeniest moment that was possible, I was disabused of that notion the moment we drove down our old street and saw the old house. It wasn't our house anymore. It had the same shape, but the color was wrong, the windows on enclosed porch were wrong, the building in the back yard was wrong, the houses on each side of it were wrong. If I could erase that one block off that street, everything else would be the same. Driving up and down the streets I saw things, old and new that fit together like pieces of a puzzle that I knew well, but could not fit myself into.

It was totally different for Dad. He could still fit himself into the picture that was being formed. He wanted to go to the AMVETS post located three blocks from our old house. I went in with him for a few minutes, but I wasn't going to stay. I had already decided to use that time to visit my best friend's mother, who still lived nearby. We walked in the AMVETS door and he was greeted by no less than four people immediately. Of course, he hadn't been under the self-imposed constraint of not returning to Iowa like I had been. He had been there two years ago, shortly after Mom passed away, holding a memorial service for her.

The bartender called me by name. I had no clue who she was, but I smiled and returned her hug. When she was out of earshot, I asked Dad who she was. As soon as he said the name Sharon I remembered her. She didn't really look like I had remembered her, and it wasn't because she looked older. She actually looked younger than she was. She just looked different. Plastic surgery maybe? She had been working at that bar for as long as I had known her. It wasn't likely that she could afford plastic surgery. She started chatting about the neighborhood, and her children, whom I had grown up with. She even talked about the time I got bitten by her

dog. I showed her that I still had the scar on my wrist. And still, she was a total stranger to me. It took coming back as an adult for me to realize that I really didn't know the people there, but that they sure knew me and my family.

Since we were so close, and Dad was feeling at home among the people there, I decided to leave him and walk the few blocks over to the house of my best friend's mother. Hope said her mother would like it if I stopped in to see her while I was in town, but I was not really sure about it. When we were growing up, I could never be sure if she liked me. At times it seemed like she accepted me, but other times I got the feeling she resented my friendship with Hope. On my way over to her house, I texted my friend to let her know I made it to town and was headed over to see her mother. I was glad when she called her mom to let her know I would be coming. I felt like a stalker, walking slowly past her house and stopping on the corner for a bit before turning around and walking past again. Connie, her mother, came out on the porch and waved me in. Hope's stepfather was there also but he didn't say much, not that he ever did. Connie always did all the talking. She was a tall, big boned woman who always spoke just a little too loud. She hadn't changed. She told me about the rest of her family and what they have been doing with their lives. The television was on in the living room, playing some reality show. Connie and I sat on the couch directly in front of the TV. Her husband was in his chair to the left of me, so there we were, lined up side by side in front of the TV. Every once in a while Connie would leave off talking and glance at the screen. Their house hadn't changed much. From my vantage point on the couch, I could turn my head all the way to the right and see the bathroom in the little hall. I remembered throwing up in that bathroom during a party thrown by my friend's older brothers while we were in high school. We made small talk for a bit, with Connie doing the most talking. Her husband was silent throughout, and I mostly nodded and responded

neutrally to her stories. She asked how Dad was, and mentioned that she had seen him at Mom's memorial service. Even though Hope and I were the best of friends and we lived within blocks of each other, my parents and hers were really nothing more than acquaintances. I was glad I visited, even though I was uncomfortable. It seemed to me that for some reason it was important to my friend that I visit her mother. It may have been just to fulfill a parent's expectation of courtesy, or something more. Either way, I was happy to do it. The television program was still playing, and I left them to it. By the time I got back to pick up Dad, he was quite ready for me to drive.

We stopped for the night in Oelwein, Iowa. Dad was out as soon as he lay down. I had time to write, but I couldn't concentrate, so I called my husband instead.

“So, did you take in any Laura sites today?”

“Nope, not today, but we're heading for Burr Oak in the morning. The hotel that Laura's family helped run is still there.”

“Well that sounds good, did you get any writing done today?”

“Yeah I got a little bit going.”

“Good, good, so what else is going on?”

“Well I drove around the town some. The main shopping strip is almost empty. Lots of places in town have gone out of business.”

“Yeah, I can imagine that. Let’s face it; Evansdale wasn’t exactly a booming metropolis when we left there.”

“Lots of houses for sale too.”

“From what I hear, that’s the same everywhere.”

“Yeah, just like in Missouri. There were a lot of cheap properties there too.”

“I bet there was. Like I said, that’s happening all over, honey.”

“Yeah but not every place has a Laura Ingalls Wilder museum nearby.”

“Yeah, well I wouldn’t think so.” Gregory laughed at that.

“Well, I’m just saying there’s a lot of nice property for sale there, and it is such pretty color of green too.”

“Surprises me you can still identify that color, this drought is killing everything off down here.”

“Yeah well not up here, everything is green and actually looks alive.”

CHAPTER III

“Are you ready to order?” The waitress looked young and Asian. I wasn’t ready yet but I didn’t care. Whatever Dad was having was fine with me; I would just double his order. I checked the signal on my phone. I wanted to check my email.

“I’ll take some coffee and a large umbrella” Dad responded. I looked up trying to figure out what he was talking about.

He didn’t suffer from Alzheimer’s, so I asked him, “Did you say umbrella?” He was grinning at the waitress who looked confused.

“Yes, it seems to be raining on my side of the booth.” He gestured up at the air conditioner vent above our table. It was dripping water just a little bit and landing on the back of his seat and sometimes hitting him on the back of the neck.

When people first started looking for the Masters Hotel, there was some confusion about which hotel was the right one. There had been two hotels in that little town, and in 1968, one of the first historians of the Iowa year of Laura’s life pictured the wrong hotel in her booklet on Laura’s sojourn in Burr Oak. In 1973, the original hotel was bought for the purpose of restoring it and creating a museum.

A light rain started just as we pulled up outside of the museum. We saw a few ladies crossing the street, headed to the old hotel building. We entered the gift shop and asked about tours. One had just started, and the woman in the store called the guide and had her wait for us.

Our guide's name was Tessa. She was really well versed in Laura lore for a high school senior. As a matter of fact, yesterday was her last day of high school. She stopped and pointed to the doorway between the kitchen and the dining room. "The hired girl that worked with the Ingallses told them about the night that the previous owner chased his wife through the hotel with a gun and shot a hole through the kitchen door."

I started wandering around the dining room looking at period artifacts. I love all kinds of kitchen gadgets, and nineteenth century kitchen utensils were extremely fascinating to me. "I still can't get over these coffee grinders. They didn't show up in the books until the Ingallses were living in Dakota Territory, but so far, both sites we've been to have each had at least one on display."

"What is so special about a coffee grinder? We had one growing up."

"Laura's family used a coffee grinder to grind up seed wheat they got from a farmer about twenty miles away from the town when they were all starving. Didn't you read *The Long Winter*?"

"I imagine it could have been used for that. I don't know much about this long winter you're talking about. Was it in one of her books?"

"Yeah." I shook my head at him, but he wasn't looking. "It was in that book called *The Long Winter*." I had to laugh.

“Really? I must have missed that one” Dad said rolling his eyes just a bit. “So what was it about? Oh let me guess, just a bad winter then?”

“The worst winter on record during their lives. They were totally snowed in from October through March. No trains could get in to bring supplies and people were in severe danger of starving to death. If it hadn’t been for Almanzo and Cap facing the blizzard to get some seed wheat from a distant farmer, the whole town would have more than likely perished.”

“Well then thank goodness Almanzo was sort of Johnny on the spot then.” Dad said, snickering.

“Yeah, nothing but the best for Laura, right? But actually, he had been hiding some wheat seed in his house the whole time, and Laura’s dad knew it.”

Dad finally gave up looking at antique kitchen paraphernalia and headed outside for a smoke. He was still keeping his resolution to smoke only seven cigarettes a day, and never to smoke in the car, but that means he has been slipping out of restaurants or other public places before me to go smoke.

The guide led the rest of us into the kitchen, talking all the time about the work the Ingallses did here in the hotel. “Even though they lived in Burr Oak for about a year and half, they only stayed in the hotel for approximately seven months. They moved out and rented rooms over a store. Pa did carpentry work and Ma did sewing to make a living. When they decided to move back to Walnut Grove, they left in the middle of night to avoid paying the rent they owed.” Tessa said this with a smile. This little tidbit was not common knowledge except to the most dedicated fans, and she liked to surprise a few tourists each time she gave that speech.

No wonder Laura didn’t write about this period of her life. I wondered if she ever knew this little fact or if her parents were able to keep it from the children. I am inclined to say that the

kids probably knew something about the financial difficulties, even if they didn't know details. The realities of life have a way of trickling down on the heads of the children even if most of it was sustained by the parents. My brothers and I always knew.

For a time at our house, my brother Mark and I were the designated phone answerers. I think I was around seven when Mom trained me to answer the phone. This was before the days of answering machines and voicemail. I was to ask who it was, and if it wasn't one of Mom or Dad's friends, then I was supposed to tell them that they weren't home. I didn't know all of their friends' names but they were always nearby when I answered so I would repeat the name the person gave me and Mom would either take the phone and talk to them, or shake her head. Head shaking meant I was to tell them that my parents weren't home. We knew it was bill collectors we were supposed to lie to. Avoiding the calls didn't make the bills go away. Once or twice we experienced temporary blackouts that our neighbors never had to deal with.

"Keep the fridge closed!" Dad had to remind us about that more than once whenever the power was cut off at our house. Mark always came home from school and went straight for the fridge. He would open the door and just stand there staring at the contents inside, trying to decide what he was in the mood for. He always ended up having a couple of bowls of cereal while he watched his afternoon cartoons, but it was a ritual with him, standing in front of the open fridge for several minutes first, as if he would someday change his mind and eat last night's leftovers instead. It was the same even when the power was out; he had to be reminded that the milk would spoil if we let all the cold out of the fridge. During those times, we had to make sure we knew exactly what we needed before we opened it to minimize the eventual warming of the fridge.

In a way it is disheartening to find out that Laura's family is much closer to the average family in their failures and not so sterling moments, than they are to the ideal she wrote about in her books. That was one of the reasons I loved re-reading her stories. I knew that no matter how bad things got, it would turn out for the best. I was always able to get the certainty I needed by looking at Laura's life one more time. This interlude in her real life reveals that it is actually more like mine than I want it to be. Even with their meager resources, they always had a kind a dignity in the way they conducted their lives but that image of them in my mind is severely wavering. From the moment I first found out that she had lived for a time in my home state, I felt an even stronger kinship with her. Now it leaves me feeling strangely depressed, as if I had drug her and her family down to my level in my quest to identify with her instead of raising myself up to their level by my association with them.

The rain didn't amount to much, and was done before our tour was. I still couldn't get over how small the hotel seemed. It was considered large and fancy at the time, but I just kept picturing all the people that had to be in there on a regular basis. The Ingalls and Steadman families, as well as all the regular boarders, would have filled the hotel, it seemed to me. Add to that all the transient customers and that makes the space even more scarce. I walked around the building examining it from every side before I headed back over to the gift shop/office. We now had time to use the bathroom and look around. This building had been an old bank. The vault was open so visitors could go inside. I wasn't so much interested in the history of the bank, but I wandered around the shop looking at the merchandise for sale. Along one wall, I found an audiobook version of one of the *Little House* books. I was tempted to buy it because I had wanted audiobook versions of any of the books, but they are not available online in digital format. This version was on several CD's and cost an incredible amount of money for only one

book. I decided not to buy it since I couldn't have the entire set. They had sun bonnets here also, but I already bought one in Mansfield and just last night I furtively took a picture of myself in it with my phone. I contemplated buying one of the prairie dresses, but I knew I didn't have anyplace to wear such a thing. I couldn't see it as a Halloween costume, but maybe a 70's theme party... 1870's that is. I am good at talking myself out of things, so I talked myself out of the dress, but zeroed in on a wonderful charm bracelet. It has tiny metal replicas of all the 'Little Houses'. Absolutely perfect.

"Where are you folks from?" The woman behind the register asked.

"We came from Texas, but we're originally from here in Iowa." I don't know why I felt the need to clarify that just now. When we were asked the same question in Mansfield, Dad told them we were from Texas, and I left it at that.

"Have you been to any of the other sites?"

"We just came from Mansfield." Dad answered that question.

"I've been meaning to go see that one. I hear they have a lot of the family's items there." She sounded wistful when she said that. While it is true that this museum is jam packed with items, they are not specific to the Ingalls family. I guess even people lucky enough to live near and work at one of the places Laura lived, can feel site envy. Is Burr Oak the bastard child of all the home sites, never considered legitimate since she never wrote about it?

"There was more stuff than you could shake a stick at. Books and clothing. The fiddle. We are making the rounds of all the sites. This is our second stop. Pepin is next." Dad may have been a quiet man most of the time, but he could also get into talking to people in way that I

never could. I can answer questions, I can even respond to statements, but I rarely ever start a conversation or nurture one past the initial stage.

“Spring Valley is just north of here. You should consider stopping there. Her husband’s family lived there.”

“Are they open now?” I asked this because I read about the Spring Valley site in the guidebook, and according to the author, they didn’t open until after Memorial Day, which wouldn’t be for another week. Of course, William Anderson’s guidebook was fifteen years old.

“As far as I know, they are.” By this time she had finished bagging the charm bracelet.

“We might as well run up there and see it then.” Dad said, but I noticed a sliver of resignation in his tone, as if he were thinking to himself, *If we’re gonna be doing this, we might as we do it up right and cover all the bases.*

Spring Valley was very quiet, and very closed. According to the lady doing yard work across the street from the Methodist Church Museum, it likely wouldn’t open until later in the summer. I really didn’t expect much at this home site anyway, I wasn’t surprised that she seemed very vague about it. An hour and half later we were in Pepin Wisconsin.

I don’t remember which book I read first, but whenever I re-read the books, I read them all in order. The first book in the series, “Little House in the Big Woods” is the most enchanting of them all. It was first written as a stand-alone book, then later the idea of the series developed. This book is filled with descriptions. Even though it is in the third person, it is from the viewpoint of Laura, who was very young. The whole ‘instructional’ tone of book is what really

makes it special. The descriptions of the house and the woods around it are very detailed, but also, day to day life is described in detail. When Laura watches Pa make bullets for his gun, she relates every detail of the process so well that after reading it, I always feel that I could make bullets. Or build a smokehouse out of a tree trunk, or know what to do when a bratty cousin is stung by bees. It is like having a mid-1800's almanac in my hands. There are instructions for making cheese, for tapping trees for maple syrup, for smoking meat, for making bullets, for churning butter, for making frost pictures on the windows, for greasing bear traps. It is like a living history lesson that anyone can understand, and I find it fascinating.

There is an overwhelming sense of certainty or security in this book. Not only is she happy and snug in a warm house with her family, but she knows just what is expected of her at any given time. Even when she is feeling 'naughty' she knows the right thing to do, and will eventually do it. In the scene when cousin Charley is stung by the bees we see evidence of Laura's awareness of behavioral norms. On the way home, Pa is describing to the family the actions that led up to Charley being stung by the bees. Charley, who was eleven, was supposed to be helping in the fields by bringing water and carrying the sharpening stone, but instead, he kept getting in the way or running off, thus making more work for the men. Eventually he made a game out of yelling for help and laughing when they stopped work to help him. When they finally decided to ignore him, he stepped on a beehive and was attacked and stung over and over. This thinly disguised 'boy who cried wolf' story horrified Laura and Mary when they heard about it. They could not even imagine a child disobeying and causing trouble to this extent. When Pa says he thinks it serves the boy right, Laura doesn't take long to adopt the same beliefs herself. The transmission of social mores between parent and child seems very clear in this book, but I can see that Laura is also using this book to transmit her values to her readers.

Living in the 'Big Woods', they seemed isolated from the world, but still surrounded by family. There were Aunts, Uncles, Cousins, and Grandparents around for special occasions but there was never anyone else around to interfere in their lives. The one scene when they all go to town is written as such a special event that it almost seems like they had never seen a town before, and were not likely to see one again anytime soon. I guess in Laura's case that could have been somewhat true. She may well have been writing about the first time she ever went to town, but they lived there on and off for several years, and in reality she and Mary attended school which was in walking distance of their home. There had to have been plenty of contact with the outside world, but she chose not to write about it, instead highlighting what she saw as the most secure and comforting aspects of her life and that was her family.

I envy the Laura of this book. She noticed things, she remembered things. She describes her Charlotte doll with such detail. I can't remember any of my dolls. I know that I had dolls at some point in my childhood, but have no specific memory of any. She was sixty years old when she wrote that first book. Her memory, even if it isn't fully accurate, is amazing to me. The child of that book lived in such a way that the very details of life were embedded within her. Naturally, lacking that sort of life, since, somehow I have managed to live my life without letting very much affect me deeply, I can be forgiven for my attachment to hers.

There wasn't a whole lot at the Pepin site. There was a museum and a gift shop, but they were both mighty bare. The museum didn't have much Laura stuff. It was mostly about the local history but I did get a t-shirt though. There was a replica cabin built at the original site. It's really quite disappointing to see, because there are no 'woods' to speak of anymore. Things change, I realize that, but it would have been nice to see more of a setting for the house. The

house itself was ok, but I couldn't picture Laura there. From the outside it looked really good, but was empty inside.

Lake Pepin is really just a widening of the Mississippi River. I have been to Lake Pepin many times with my family, but we always stayed on the Minnesota side in Red Wing, more or less a lake resort town that caters to tourists. We usually went with our friends John and Betty Cooley. John owned a used car lot and always seemed to have money. They had a huge motor home and a speedboat that they always took to the lake. We just pulled our little 27 foot Coachman camper with our old decrepit Chevy Suburban. I probably should have felt like we were poor relations, but I always had too much fun to worry about those things very much.

Wisconsin is a very pretty piece of property. I almost let myself get pulled into daydreaming about real estate there as well as in Missouri. The only thing that stopped me was the extremely cold winters there. We drove north of Lake Pepin and there I saw a swayback barn. The center was dipped much lower than the ends of the barn, the sides of the barn had collapsed but the roof was still intact. There was no other traffic on the road so I asked Dad to stop so I could get a picture of it. It's the only barn picture that turned out.

CHAPTER IV

“Watch it Dad,” I let out as Dad swerved the car to miss what looked like a dead kitten lying in the road. “What was that? A skunk?” I asked him.

“I didn’t smell anything. Looked more like a cat to me. Probably a wild one.”

“Oh, like that makes a difference? Whoever hit it wasn’t paying attention,” I said, angrily I suppose.

“Well, at least if it’s wild, there’s not some little girl sitting at home calling out for her cat.” In a high pitched voice he crooned “Muffin! Muffin! Here kitty, kitty, kitty.” My mouth gaping open, I looked at him, incredulous, as he continued on. “For all we know, the stupid thing ran right out in front of him.”

“Yeah, right, as long as we make it okay, it will always be fine.” I said, trying to spark a bit of argument.

“Maybe the driver had a little girl in the car with him, who yelled, “Look out Daddy! There’s a kitten in the road!” And try as he might, he couldn’t miss the kitten, so he stopped to clean it off the road, but the little girl was screaming at the top of her lungs, and her mother told him to just keep going before he traumatizes her.”

“I bet it was some deranged teenager that hit the poor thing on purpose. The same kind of immature boy that would hang live frogs by their chins on barbed wire fences!” I hadn’t thought of my brother Mark’s adolescent antics with the frogs since I was in high school. Even so, the twinge of grief I felt at the memory of them, combined with my dismay at seeing the dead cat left me feeling a little melancholy.

We were south of the Twin Cities, Minneapolis/St. Paul, on the way to spend the night with Dad's brother, my Uncle Walter. He lived just south of Mankato, about an hour and a half from Walnut Grove, the next stop on the Laura tour. Uncle Walter was always a fun uncle because he owned his own airplanes. My first experience with flying was when he would take us up on short flights, even letting us steer sometimes. As a Laura destination, Mankato isn't a high priority or high interest normally. However, last summer it was of great interest to Laura fans because it was the location of the first ever Laurapalooza, which is a combination between a fan convention and academic conference. They are going to be held every two years now. The dismay I felt about missing out on the festivities last summer is only slightly alleviated by taking this tour now, especially during the off season. My trip is too early to take in any of the pageants or other celebrations at any of the sites.

Uncle Walter is one of the preservers of our family history, and when I was first planning this trip, he sent me scanned copies of my great grandmother's diary written during her trip in a covered wagon in 1900. She went on the trip from Iowa to Colorado, then back to Iowa as a nanny to the daughter of an older gentleman that she eventually married. Before that, she was a school teacher in Northwestern Iowa. She wrote in tiny little notebooks and it was difficult at times to decipher her handwriting. Her journey took place just six years after Laura, Almanzo and Rose made their trip from South Dakota to Mansfield Missouri. While at my uncle's house, I also viewed photographs of some of our various ancestors pictured outside their homesteads. I resolved to spend more time learning about my own ancestry when I had more time. Between work and school, I didn't have a lot of spare time. This trip was a sort of vacation, but it was also about Laura.

Laura's time on Plum Creek marked the first time she spoke of church in her books. In her first experience with Sunday school, she wrote about her teacher, Mrs. Tower. Mrs. Tower babied Laura, who was indignant at being given the shortest Bible verse to memorize. "When it was Laura's turn, Mrs. Tower cuddled her and smiled almost as warm and sweet as Ma. She said "my very littlest girl must have a very small lesson. It will be the shortest verse in the Bible!"'" Laura knew what it was before Mrs. Tower uttered the words, but she went along with her.

Author Dan White refers to Laura as someone who really values the Bible. In his book, *Devotionals With Laura: Laura Ingalls' Favorite Bible Selections*, he discusses fourteen of Laura's favorite Bible verses, speculating about what they could have meant to her, and what relevance they have for people today. When I first came across the title, I wondered where he had gotten his information. How did he know what her favorite Bible verses were? It seemed like a very subjective issue. Apparently an annotated list of verses was found in her Bible after she passed away. In my typical devil's advocate way, I immediately think to myself that just because she had that list, it doesn't mean they were her favorites, but after reading that first Sunday School scene again, I am inclined to agree with him. Perhaps she did value the Bible. She wrote of memorizing and knowing many Bible verses at that young age. She had definitely been exposed to the Bible often when growing up. In her first book, Laura wrote of a typical Sunday. "They must sit quietly and listen while Ma read Bible stories to them, or stories about lions and tigers and white bears from Pa's big green book."

The notes on the list of Bible verses were instructions to herself, pointing out particular verses that help in times of trouble. To be able to compile a list like that shows extensive knowledge of the Bible. That being the case, I am surprised that she did not write more in her

series about her habit or routine regarding her Bible studies at least. It appears as if it was a large part of her life.

In the series, the Ingallses never give the impression of being particularly religious. I didn't see God and spirituality as big themes in her books, and whenever church was mentioned, it always seemed like it was just something they were supposed to do, not because of any real beliefs. On Laura's first day of Sunday school and church, she is embarrassed by the poor singing and bored by the sermon. She likes Reverend Alden when she meets him, but only because he was nice to her. Of course not many children are impressed by church, but, when she is older, her attitudes about church don't seem to change. It is just something that it was understood that they did, but she rarely talked about it in her books. After that first day of church in Walnut Grove, Ma and Pa expressed their happiness about being among like-minded people, all trying to do the right thing. That one scene is our only indicator of the Ingallses' spirituality.

Laura mentioned a series of revival meetings that took place when she was living in DeSmet. She knew they were scheduled to happen every night for a week. At school, she voiced the thought that maybe she would stay home and study those nights, but peer pressure kicked in, taking the form of potentially being labeled 'an atheist', so she went with the rest of her family to the meetings. Yet once they were there, she wrote of the horribly uneasy feeling she had, and was grateful when Pa instructed them to slip out early each night. I got the feeling that such public displays were distasteful to them. They went simply because it was expected of them.

I recalled this scene one night as a teenager when a friend and I attended a service at her aunt's church. I developed an uneasy feeling because it seemed like there was something expected from everybody there and I was the only one that didn't know what it was. I don't remember if it was some kind of special event or just a regular service. I didn't have much experience with church anyway. My parents had long ago stopped taking my brothers and me to church. They had some kind of a disagreement with the pastor over donations for carpeting and quit going when I was still in elementary school. Occasionally I had friends who would invite me to their churches, but Mom and Dad said that if we wanted to go to church, we could ride to our church with the neighbors who lived across the street. We were Lutherans; we didn't need to visit other churches. I didn't even know what it meant to be a Lutheran. I hadn't been inside a church for much of anything other than funerals throughout most of my childhood.

I was spending the night at my friend's house the night we went with her aunt to church. I had never heard of a Wesleyan church before, but when I told my parents about it later, Mom said they were Holy Rollers. "What's a Holy Roller?" I had to ask that too because the term was new to me.

"They get so overcome with their religion that they literally roll down the aisle. I've seen them do it." Her voice had a tremor to it that I couldn't identify. I didn't know if it was disgust, excitement or worry. Instead of asking her more about it, I stuck with the image her words invoked in my mind, parishioners somersaulting down the aisle like circus performers.

"I didn't see anything like that. They just prayed over a bunch of people." Either they weren't Holy Rollers, or that had been a calm night for them, I reasoned to myself. It wasn't really a calm night for me though. There had been an energy running through the people there

and flashes of it grazed by me, a zinging jolt occasionally making contact. I didn't know how to process the feeling. I was uneasy, but not necessarily repelled, the way Laura was at the revival meetings in DeSmet. I didn't imagine the preacher was the devil as Laura did for a brief moment. There was expectancy throughout the church. The congregation wanted something from me that I had no idea how to give. How was I supposed to accept Jesus as my Savior? What was he saving me from?

I had no answers to any of those questions. Thinking about Laura's quick withdrawal from the revival meeting, I just let it all go. I really didn't want to get involved in something I knew nothing about. Looking back on it now, I think that possibly one of the differences between Laura and me then was that she was secure in her beliefs, or faith, or whatever one wants to call it, but I was clueless in matters of spirituality. She cringed from the ostentatious display at the revival, feeling that it was dark and foreign to what she believed. In my case, I had no basis of faith or thought to stand upon, so I was wary, but a little intrigued.

Now I am left with the feeling that Laura has cheated me out of knowing about a very important part of her life. If her spirituality and Bible reading was that important, why didn't she write about them? I felt like her books were a direct view into her life, the important parts at least. It is a grand betrayal of the children who have read her books while growing up. We used her as a role model, but now to find out that she didn't make clear her most fundamental beliefs to her audience, we are left to wonder what would we have thought of her, and what would have become of us if she had chosen to let us into that part of her life. Perhaps my environmentally induced apathy to church would have been different had I known how Laura really felt. All I had to go on was the distance with which she treated faith and religion.

The Ingallses thought they had it made in Minnesota. Ma was happy because they lived near a town with a church and a school. After two log cabins and a dugout, they were finally moving up in the world when they built their first board house. Pa should have known something was up when he got the property so easily. I guess he didn't understand what the neighbors all meant when they said it was grasshopper weather. He went into debt to buy the wood for the house, counting on paying it off with the money from selling the wheat, but then he met the grasshoppers. It was a plague of biblical proportions that hit that area in 1875. Things just weren't working out well for them here in Walnut Grove either. After the grasshoppers, the family took off to Iowa to manage the Master's Hotel, but eventually returned.

I wonder why the creators of the television show chose to set the series in Walnut Grove. I think it would have been wiser to set it in DeSmet because that was the area the Ingallses stayed the longest. Many of the characters and stories they brought to Walnut Grove actually happened in DeSmet. That was the location where Pa actually homesteaded and it stuck. That was where Laura met Almanzo, and where she taught school before getting married. There were a lot of other people in town that could have been supporting cast members with storylines of their own as well. I believe there was plenty of information about their time in South Dakota to support a television series without having to deviate too widely from the truth the way the original series did. I sound like a critic of the series, and I don't mean to. I loved the show when I was growing up. It didn't bother me as much then when they deviated, but I have no interest in the show now that I am grown. But I would definitely watch a remake of the series, especially if they set it in DeSmet.

A school group arrived at the museum in Walnut Grove shortly after we did. There was a lot more to this site than there was in Pepin. There was a lot of television show memorabilia in one of the rooms that many of the visitors seemed interested in. Unfortunately, I had a headache when we viewed this museum so I didn't get as much enjoyment out of it as I could have. We got directions out to the dugout site from the man working behind the counter in the gift shop.

I thought I wanted to go wading in Plum Creek but it really didn't seem like a good idea once I was there. I wasn't afraid of leeches like the ones that attached themselves to Laura and to Nellie in the books, but it seemed darker and colder than I imagined it. There was a bend in the creek and I got close enough to touch the water. With three of my fingers I felt the cold water of the creek flow over me. I remembered a scene in the book where Laura was on a footbridge over the creek. She listened to the playful sound of the water rushing around her. The irresistible urge she felt to play was her undoing. Before she knew it, she was submerged and struggling to hang on. The creek wasn't so playful then. Her description of the desperation she felt holding on to that plank reminds me of an event from my childhood. We were camping at Beeds Lake and there was a concrete footbridge spanning a narrow inlet to the lake that led to a waterfall created by a dam. My friend Dawne had been allowed to come on this trip with us and she and I were exploring. Mark was already out fishing. He was sitting on the concrete bridge, but there was enough room to walk around him. Just as we were moving past him, he pulled his fishing pole back and swung it around to cast it. It startled us, causing Dawne to lose her balance and fall into the water. There was a strong current and most of her body was dragged under the bridge, but she held on with both her arms at first. Mark and I screamed for help because we couldn't lift her out of the water ourselves. Moments later a man that had been nearby had dragged her out of

the water and she was lying on the bridge crying. Once the shock of it was over, Dawne and I had the added benefit of not having to deal the usual tormenting we normally endured at the hands of my brother Mark. He seemed to be more affected by the incident than Dawne so he actually made an attempt to be nice.

There was a bridge spanning Plum Creek just a little way from the parking and picnic area. It was nothing like Laura's plank, but I was glad for that. I am not the most coordinated person on the planet, and I was happy for the width and the handrails it afforded me. On the opposite creek bank was the actual depression in the ground that used to be the dugout that the Ingallses lived in. While I was walking around taking pictures of the flowers growing in the little roped off square of dugout hole, a school bus pulled into the parking area across the creek. It was the same group of children on a school field trip that we saw earlier in the afternoon at the museum in the actual town of Walnut Grove. Dad wanted me to hurry up so that we could get back across the bridge before it was overrun with children. I could hear them on the other side of the creek. Their teacher had gathered them all together and was pointing at the dugout site. I heard one boy ask his teacher if those people over there were ghosts, meaning us, Dad and I. The other kids laughed at him, but he took it in stride. We got back across the bridge just as the group of children was ready to cross. The teacher made them wait until we got off the bridge. As we walked away, I heard some of the kids teasing the boy, saying "There go your ghosts." I wonder if he just wasn't expecting other visitors to be there and was surprised to see us, or was he imagining Pa and Half-pint were out checking on their fish trap?

CHAPTER V

It didn't take long at all to get to DeSmet from Walnut Grove. According to the books, it took the Ingalls family three days of traveling time to get there. I think that is very unrealistic.

Pa went on ahead with Aunt Docia to start working in the railroad camps and the rest of the family followed by train part of the way a few months later. Ma and the girls left Walnut Grove by train, traveling to Tracy, where the rails ended. They waited all day for Pa to arrive to pick them up. The next morning they traveled all day by wagon to get to the railroad camp, arriving at night. When that camp packed up, they traveled all day one more time to get to the new camp, and that was the area that would become DeSmet. The distance between Walnut Grove and Tracy is eight miles. That would have been a half day of travel by wagon, if the average number of miles a wagon traveled per day was anywhere between fifteen and twenty-five. I don't know why they would have gone to the expense of a train ride for the three girls plus Ma and Grace for only eight miles. The distance between Tracy and DeSmet is over 105 miles. That would be at least four days by wagon if making really good time, not the two days Laura describes. I was glad to get there as soon as we did, because the trip was starting to wear on me. My headache hadn't completely gone yet, and I was tired.

While planning the trip, I tried to convince Dad that we should camp out in one of the covered wagon huts out on the Ingalls Homestead. In her book, *The Wilder Life*, Wendy and her boyfriend stayed in one of them. She regretted it because it stormed that night, but I thought it sounded like a cool idea. Dad wanted no part of that, preferring instead to stay in real motels.

William Anderson's guidebook listed two motels and two bed and breakfast type of places. I always pictured bed and breakfast places as being more suited to sophisticated, sociable people. That just isn't me. I keep to myself and mind my own business and am usually uncomfortable around strangers when in an unfamiliar area, so I preferred the anonymity of a motel. We tried the Cottage Inn motel first because it was across the street from the Oxbow restaurant, which was recommended in the guidebook as well. There was nobody in the office, and when no one came after we rang the bell a few times, we left, heading over to the Super 8 at the edge of town. The only person on duty when we arrived did not know how to code the key cards for the room doors, so she let us in with the master key and said the manager would be back within thirty minutes and would get us the keys then. A good excuse to rest.

Standing on the corner of Calumet and Third Street in DeSmet, I came to the conclusion that I was never not going to be here someday. That much I was certain of. I don't remember exactly when I first read the books but I do know that as soon as I realized that the places Laura wrote about still existed, I knew I would see them with my own eyes. I tried to interest my family in making the trip to all the home sites, but I wasn't successful. Early in my marriage, I broached the subject, but I just couldn't convey the depths of my desire to my husband either. Decades later, I am on the trip because I finally became insistent. I don't mean being insistent with my family, but with myself. I finally stopped talking myself out of it. I was the one that was holding myself back from doing what I want, from letting myself feel what I want to feel.

Maybe I am becoming more selfish as I am aging. It certainly feels that way sometimes, but also it feels good not to deny myself because I imagine that my wants and desires won't mesh

with other people. But who says they have to? For decades I've been alone with my 'Little House' obsession, but once I decided to take it further, I found that there are many of us out there. I don't pretend to know what drives all the other fans to feel the way they do about Laura and her houses, but I am starting to believe that whatever I do feel, is in direct proportion to my life. Whatever it is and was, that drives me to imbed myself in her world, is probably the same thing that has, and still does, pull me out of my own life, so that I am barely there, not really living it. What is it that has me replacing my real life with Laura's? I am hopeful that somewhere on this trip, I will run into that crossroads, that one where I lost my way and found another. I will find that intersection and follow it back to the beginning.

DeSmet is where all of my memories are. I lived here. This is where I grew up. Waves of nostalgia rolled through my insides so strongly that it felt like they would come pouring out of me in torrents. I didn't feel anything like this when we stopped in my real home town at the beginning of our trip. Dad wanted to get the oil changed in the car, and I was happy to take the walking tour of the historical sites in town alone. I was free to ponder the associations between the things I was seeing and the things I remember from the books. I was back to indulging my solitary obsession. It was nice having Dad on the trip but we were having two different experiences of it, especially here, in this location. Not many people would have understood why I took pictures of street signs as I stood in places she had been. I stood on Calumet Avenue, at the edge of town and looked south. Maybe if I looked hard enough I could see her standing at the door of her father's house, gazing toward town, perhaps shading her eyes as she watched for Almanzo's buggy to come around the corner of Pearson's livery barn. If I waved to her, would she see me?

While reading *Little Town on the Prairie* as a young teenager, I remember thinking that Laura was becoming even more interesting to me as a character. Maybe it was because I identified more with her in this book than I did with the earlier ones, but I also think that it had to do with her life opening up to more possibilities. After the other books, especially “The Long Winter”, her world expanded. The opening chapter brings up the possibility of a job, and since that possibility is brought to her by Pa, she knows that it is a positive possibility and not a negative one. Not one to be feared or dreaded. When she takes the job in town she starts relating things she sees and experiences. Now we get to hear stories that are outside of her usual environment, but we still get her unique take on them. When she describes the two drunken men kicking in door screens, we get a colorful and amusing glimpse at a situation that in all reality signifies something rather ugly, but she chooses to look at it in the only way she can think to put a positive spin on it, focusing on the comic aspect.

It has been speculated that one of the drunken men was actually the father of one of her best friends in DeSmet. I wonder how much that aspect of her friend’s family life affected her as she was growing up. Was she ever witness to any awful and sordid scenes in her real life? What does it mean that she included a scene like that at all?

These are the types of things I wonder about when I look closely at her as a real person in scenes like that, and knowing about her friend’s father. Does a briefly mentioned comical scene included in one of her books mean that the reality of it was unrelentingly horrible and had such an effect on her that she was trying to make light of it, or was it really just a negligible thing that was barely worth mentioning in other than a brief comic episode? Odds are, her life was not as perfect as it seems in the books. There had to be some kind of alternate life that has been concealed under all the ultimately positive messages of the books. Everybody’s life is full of

dark, hidden things. Sometimes I would be standing in line at Wal-Mart, I would see a family in front of me with three young children; an overweight, spandex-wearing mother, one boy, about 10 or 11 is picking up and fingering all the candy in the rack by the check out. There is a baby in the cart and it has pulled off its shoe and dropped it on the floor. The girl, about 9 years old, is leaning against the cart with her back to her family just staring listlessly at the floor. Before I know it, I am wondering to myself about that girl's home life. Does she like school? Does she get along with her brother? Is she a victim of sexual abuse? If she is, does anyone care? These questions come to me totally unbidden, and the sad thing is, I know that in many of the cases, there is something, something not right, something dark and depressing in their lives. I know that stories like Laura's of an awesome home life, even when things were going bad for them, are not real, but reading them can give a person at least a temporary feeling of hope.

The Surveyor's house looked exactly as I pictured it. It was tiny. Laura described it as a large house, but all of the sites we have been to so far have been smaller than expected, so I started expecting small. We weren't able to go upstairs for safety reasons, but the downstairs really matched Laura's description. They even had the pantry stocked with fake foods to simulate what Laura saw when she ran ahead of the wagon the day they moved in. The house had been moved from its original location and set up on the grounds of the Laura Ingalls Wilder Memorial Society. A replica of the first school she taught at is also at that location. I wanted to sit at the teacher's table up front and imagine how Laura felt on that first day, but I knew it would be inappropriate.

The last stop on the walking tour was the house that Pa built when they moved into town permanently. This house has a large amount of personal items in it that belonged to the family. Even though Laura never lived there, I still got a strong sense of her family from it. One of the rooms was done up with Rose's things, including a large writing desk. Being in this house had me thinking about Mary, Carrie and Grace more than I usually do. I know what each of them did with the rest of their lives, but now I find myself wondering more about them. Grace was a school teacher. Did she want to be one? Did she enjoy it at all? Was she scared on her first day in front of her students? What was it like being the youngest in the family? How did she feel about her sisters? What about Carrie? What led her into the newspaper business? Why did file a homestead claim by herself? Was she unmarried for so long by choice? How did Mary really feel about her blindness? What plans did she have for her life other than teaching, and how did her blindness affect them? Laura wrote in one of her books that Mary said she had wanted to write a book. Why didn't she do that? It's the personal details that interest me.

One of my favorite illustrations in the *Little House* books is the one where Laura is cutting her bangs. That is the first time I remember a mirror being used. That scene between Laura and Ma is so understated. Laura wants to try a new hairstyle, Ma is hesitant, but relents when Laura promises it won't be too outlandish. She then relates a story from her youth about a hair experiment she tried that did not end well.

My mother used to like taking pictures of me. When I was in junior high school, she would make me do up my hair and make-up and she would use her Polaroid camera to take pictures of me like I was a fashion model. She would have me pick several outfits and change

clothes between shots. On the surface this would seem like a fun 'girls night' activity but there were several problems with it. First of all, I had never seen my mother ever wear make-up except in her wedding photograph. I had no clue how to put it on so in most of the pictures I looked like a clown. Then she made me continue the whole thing, even when my brothers showed up with their friends and I wanted to die of embarrassment. She would always give the pictures to me as if they were something I would want to keep. She wasn't trying to teach me how to be pretty by showing me how to wear make-up and giving me fashion advice because she didn't have any skills in that area herself. I don't know what she was trying to accomplish with this activity, but it didn't feel like it had anything to do with me at all.

My own daughters learned their make-up and fashion skills from the media, not me. I had nothing to pass to them in that respect. That is really quite a shame because once they started using the media as a role model, my influence in other areas dropped considerably. I wouldn't want to turn them into a carbon copy of me, but it seems like my credibility is so low, they don't even consider anything I have to offer. I have tried buying them books that I loved when I was their age, but they haven't even touched them. Not just old fashioned books like the *Little House Series*, but others that seemed designed for more modern tastes, *The Changeover* by Margaret Mahy, *Hanging out with CiCi*, by Francine Pascal, and *From the Mixed up Files of Mrs. Basil E. Frankweiler* by E.L. Konigsburg.

Throughout all the books, it seems that Ma is a model for Laura but not an active instructor. Everything Ma does is passive, and everything Laura does is active. Laura acts the same as Ma, dresses like Ma, has the same skill set as Ma but never do we have a scene where Ma is teaching her any of these things. Whenever a skill is talked of, it says things like 'one

must...' thereby de-personalizing the instruction. Most likely she had to learn these things from her mother but was it really in the impersonal way of just watching and emulating what she saw?

The scene with the haircut also illustrates that distanced form of mother-daughter relations. Laura has gone on with the same hairdo for ages, but when she gets an idea to change it, Ma doesn't tell her no even though we know she doesn't like it. Laura is the only active character in this scene and indeed in her life. I don't know if this was true in the life of the real Laura or merely a fictional construct. I think that the unique staging of these stories serves to empower the character. Even in scenes as inconsequential as a mother refraining from imposing her own fashion advice on her daughter the reader can feel that Laura is holding the reins of her own life firmly in her hands.

I thought Dad would enjoy seeing what the Ingalls Homestead had to offer. The land that Charles Ingalls filed on for his claim outside of DeSmet was privately owned and operated as a tourist attraction with a lot of hands on displays. They were not officially open until after Memorial Day, but they have been known to allow stray tourists in at the same time they have school field trips going on. We arrived during just such a time. The gift shop was mobbed with young children running around, buying candy and souvenirs while they waited for their tour to begin. It took over thirty minutes of waiting in line at the gift shop to buy our tickets. We declined the offer to join the students and elected to get a map and walk the area by ourselves.

The students hadn't made it to the barn yet, so that is where we headed first. I saw a calf in one of the stalls as soon as we entered. "Hey Dad! Do you want to feed the baby cow?"

“Not me! I’ve done enough of that sort of thing. I ain’t no farmer.” He wandered over to the other side of the barn and looked at the buggy parked in the corner.

“Why aren’t you a farmer? You grew up on a farm.” I can’t believe I never asked him that before.

“I had no interest in it, and besides, it cost too damn much. My brother Leon was the only farmer in the bunch, and he started out renting.” Uncle Leon had a nice farm with a big barn and lots of pigs.

“So what was your career aspiration? What did you want to be when you grew up? And you can’t say factory worker.” I laughed at my own joke, but Dad just shrugged.

“I don’t know, nothing I guess.” In a way that made sense. Dad never was that ambitious.

“Did you ever think about staying in the Army?” Another shrug.

“I thought about it, but didn’t because they were just getting mixed up in that mess over in Viet Nam.” I nodded. That I could understand. My husband and I were lucky to have had no direct experience with the first Gulf War, and we were out of the Army before the second one started.

“How much land did Grandpa have for farming?” The only thing I remembered about their place was the old farmhouse with the twisty, gray painted wooden staircases, and the huge old stove in the kitchen.

“He started with 40 acres, then worked up to 160.”

“That much?” I was surprised. That’s how large Charles Ingalls homestead was. “What did you grow?”

“Oats and soybeans. We had lots of cattle and pigs and chickens too. After the Army, I helped Dad on the farm for a while and made about \$5.00 a week. It sure wasn’t much.”

I found all this information interesting for its own sake, but I couldn’t help comparing it to the type of farming I was developing an interest in. I wasn’t looking for a large scale money making operation. I just think it would be nice to grow most of our own food. Was Laura right? Could that be done on five acres somewhere? It would be considerably less expensive to locate something that size.

CHAPTER VI

We stopped at a gas station in Yankton South Dakota near the grounds of the old Yankton State Hospital, where Laura and her family passed by on the way to Mansfield. Almanzo had wanted to stop and go through the asylum but Laura refused, so they didn't stop. What kind of policies did they have that people could just stop and take a tour like it's a museum or something? Were the patients there no better than animals at a zoo? I found a newspaper article that told about a fire at the asylum that killed seventeen female patients about five years after Laura and Almanzo drove through town. The fire started in the basement of the laundry building, but patients and staff were also living there. Apparently the hospital was overcrowded even then. This is where Laura's trip and my great grandmother's trip would have intersected if they hadn't taken place six years apart. How easy it is for me to imagine they crossed paths and actually spoke to one another. Both diaries are filled with meetings with other travelers where they stop and visit for a time, finding out where everybody has been and where they are going. If time had just bent back on itself for a brief moment, that 'would-be' intersection would have produced a signpost to mark the occasion.

I didn't make this brief stop an official part of the itinerary. I simply watched the road signs as we neared the border of South Dakota, and when we got into town, I asked my father to stop at the gas station so we could get something to drink and use the facilities, and then I told him the significance of the place.

“I imagine the conditions here in 1894 were a lot worse than what Mom had to put up with.” We've never really talked about the time Mom was in the hospital in Minnesota. I didn't know how else to broach the subject. “Where was I during that time?”

"I think you stayed with the Surleys." Dad said, trying to remember.

"I don't remember it. Why don't I remember it? How old was I?" This was one of those events that I 'knew' of, but had no memories about. I don't remember who told me or how I got my information, but I 'knew' that Mom had spent some time in Rochester Minnesota in a mental ward. It was just one of those things, and we NEVER talked about it. I certainly never asked Mom about it, but now that she is dead, I feel like it is important to find out more.

“You must have been about seven years old.” Dad said. “Your brothers stayed with the Landherr’s.” Al and Evie Landherr were good friends and neighbors who lived down the street. Their children were just a few years older than my brothers and I.

“Why didn't we stay in the same place?” I remember the Surleys but I don't remember staying at their house alone. They lived in a small pink house. I remember a little sidewalk that led from their house to their garage which they used as a sort of workroom then. There were butterflies all around their yard. They were older than Mom and Dad, their son was almost grown up when I knew them.

I think she was in the 'hospital' more than once.

I was scared the day she had a seizure on the kitchen floor. I don't know how old I was, and I don't know who else was there, but there were people helping her. I remember someone putting a wooden spoon in her mouth to hold down her tongue so she wouldn't choke on it or

something. She was lying on the floor twitching, her head arched back and her legs were kicking. I stood by the refrigerator watching her, trying to stay out of the way.

"We are pretty sure she never had epilepsy, but all the drugs that Dr. Moes had her on were causing trouble. That's why she had to be hospitalized." Dad was shaking his head. "Epilepsy was never an issue until Al and Evie moved into the neighborhood. Evie had epilepsy. Then all of a sudden your mother developed it." His quiet snort of derision was the only indication of his actual feelings about her attention-seeking hypochondria. "She's always been that way. Even her family could tell you that"

I wanted him to keep talking about it, but I couldn't respond to what he was saying. I wanted him to fully admit, out loud to me, what he knew or believed about her. I wanted something said, acknowledged, anything, but my mouth refused to open, refused to ask questions. My ears quailed at the thought of hearing something I wasn't truly ready to hear so I let it go...again

Nebraska and Kansas are extremely boring states to drive through. Dad's audiobook ran out somewhere in the middle of Nebraska. The saga of Cletus Frade was over for the time being. I put in *A Wrinkle in Time*, by Madeline L'Engle, one of the audiobooks I had downloaded for myself.

Seven minutes later Dad paused the story. "Is this the only other book you have on here?"

“No, I have *The Golden Compass* as well.” I knew that wouldn’t make any difference to him. Neither book was his style. If I had gotten the audiobook version of one of Laura’s books at the gift shop in Burr Oak, I am sure he would have been happier listening to that than he was listening to a story about children tesseracting to other worlds. He started the audio again, and I waited about five minutes more before I put him out of his misery and stopped it myself. Dad put his country music on and I sat back and tried to fall asleep.

I kept twisting around in the seat, trying to get comfortable. It wasn’t very long before I blaming the loudness of his music for not allowing me to sleep, but instead of telling him so, I got my headphones out and tried listening to my own music that I have stored on my phone. Of course that didn’t work either. For some unfathomable reason I was determined to spite myself. I continued the self-torture by pulling out my barely used journal and tried to make some notes that would be useful in writing my thesis. With the combined sound of The Judds and my own martyred inner mumblings, I realized I couldn’t hear myself thinking the deep profound thoughts I was sure were in me and waiting to spill themselves onto the page, IF ONLY HE WOULD STOP THAT MUSIC AND LEAVE ME ALONE!

This is the point in the story where the pressures and tension finally take their toll. I am tired, I am cranky, I am disappointed in myself, I am missing my family, I am tired of being on the road, I want to sleep in my own bed, I am bloated and feel like I have gained ten pounds from all the gas station snacks and restaurant foods I have been consuming. As much as I had enjoyed the trip so far, it dawned on me that I wasn’t accomplishing what I had set out to do. Over the last seven days, I had only written four pages. Even getting those done was a miracle. I have discovered that in order to write, I need to set up my writing space, then relax and get my head into the proper frame of mind before I can write. And most importantly, I have to be alone, at

least until I get into the flow of it all. I haven't been able to enter my writing zone very often on this trip. Sometimes it is late when we stop for the night, so I don't have time to write, but other times, we have plenty of time, but for one reason or another, I don't write.

I don't know what to tell my husband whenever he asks me about my writing. As far as he is concerned, this trip is necessary only as a means to an end. This trip = thesis. Period. My last conversation with him went something like this:

“So where you all at now?” Greg's voice was very businesslike on the phone.

“In Northern Nebraska. We just left DeSmet a couple of hours ago.”

“Good. What did you think of it? Did it do anything for you?”

“You know it did. I've been dying to see this place since I first heard about it.”

“Yeah I know you been dying to see it and all, but was it worth going? What was there to see?”

I couldn't tell if he really wanted to know, or was just humoring me. I answered anyway. “There was stuff to see all over town, the surveyor's house, a replica schoolhouse like the one Laura taught in, the house Pa built on Third St., and the homestead site.”

“Well good then, but did you see anything worth writing about?”

“Yeah lots of stuff.”

“Good, good so it gave you some good ideas right?”

“Uh huh.”

“So are you taking notes, or are you using your digital recorder?”

“I’m jotting down some stuff yeah.”

“Well recording it would work pretty good you know.”

“Well yeah, I suppose. How are the girls doing?”

“Good I guess. Beth is at drill team practice and Becky is working on a painting for an art contest.”

“Are you going to have any problems picking Beth up?”

“Well, with both you and Dad gone, I told her she might end up walking home. I’ve got clients in the afternoons. But she knows that and said she has no problem with it.”

“Yeah, I’m sure she understands.”

“Yes, she does. So when you coming home?”

“We still have the Kansas site to visit.”

“That’s the last one, right? Then you are headed home?”

“That’s right.”

I managed to have this meltdown all within the confines of my own mind. I don’t think Dad even noticed it. He wasn’t some kind of ogre, blasting music, and trying to ruin my concentration. If I had said something, he would have turned it off, but I chose not to. It is scary sometimes to realize how stupidly stubborn I can be. I can talk a good game about how I like

change, but when it comes down to it, I am rarely the agent of any change that comes my way. Instead, I encourage change in others, and if it has some kind of residual effect on me, so much the better. The best of both worlds, I get change, without having to take responsibility if turns out to be a major disaster. I suppose that means I lack confidence in my abilities to make decisions. That makes sense because when I do make a decision, I tend to stick with it no matter how fast it goes down in flames. I find it to be much easier to let others instigate changes.

One of the periods in Laura's life that I am most unfamiliar with is her life right after marriage. I know of some of the major events that have taken place in her life during that period, but I have no sense of how she felt about it. The feel of the book *The First Four Years*, is so different than the rest of them. I know it wasn't finished, polished, or whatever before its posthumous publication, but I also believe that the tone changed in this book because the tone of Laura's life changed during that portion of her life. It seemed to me that she turned into more of a spectator in her own life than an active participant. This seems especially strange because it would seem to make more sense the other way around. As a child and young lady living with her parents, one would think that would be the time when she is a mere spectator to her own life, and that her maturation and marriage would be evidence of autonomy in life.

Things just seemed to happen to her in this book. She never seemed to have a say, or even an opinion about much that went on. The only opinion she seemed to express was at the beginning of the book when she is sitting there in the buggy with him discussing wedding plans when she tells Manly that she really doesn't want to marry a farmer. And yet, she lets him talk her into it, at least for a trial period of three years. This part always strikes me strangely. She had to know he was a farmer when she met him. He was already a homesteader. Did she think she could change him?

I imagine that she and I could be alike in this manner too. The propensity that I had for letting others dictate my course so that I could avoid responsibility if it didn't go well seems to be reflected a little in her life during this time period. According to previous books, Laura's Pa did not like to go into debt. During their first few years of marriage, Manly goes in debt quite often, buying farm equipment. He relies on future harvests to more than pay off the notes, loans and mortgages that he continuously takes out. Laura worries at first but then reasons that it is his business. As their crops fail, time and time again, she continues that line of thought.

Her major attitude ranges from uneasy worrying, to downright apathy, until near the end. The house fire seems to bring her out of that state. She finally starts to express some of the optimism that her husband had been displaying the entire time. She makes the connection between farming and the pioneer spirit, and how they both are looking for better things further on. Once she made that connection, she was able to put herself fully behind the decision to be a farmer, ready to be a participant, not just an observer.

We almost missed seeing the Kansas location because we were driving too fast, and passed it up before we noticed. This site reminded me a bit of the Wisconsin site in that there weren't really any original artifacts that were related to Laura or the books. There was a replica cabin built very near the area where Pa had built the original little house on the prairie. We went into the replica cabin and the first thing I did was look for the latch string door handle that Laura described in the book. I was always fascinated by that description and I was happy to see that the replica lived up to my expectations.

There is something depressing about the time the Ingallses spent in Kansas. There was a lot of work that went into the house, the well and the garden, and to leave it all behind with a cheerful laugh seems to be making light of it. Charles was angry, that much was clear, but really, he was angrier at the thought of being forcibly ejected by soldiers than he was by the idea of leaving. Ma was the one that expressed the most disappointment. Charles joked with her about the rabbits enjoying the garden they worked so hard to plant. She was not amused. I may not have been either, especially if I thought maybe he was being just a little hot-headed and premature, but there has never been any indication that anyone in the family ever thought that way. Pa was always the revered head of household, and that was as it should be. I find it interesting that we never glimpse Mary's opinion about leaving Kansas. We know Pa was upset, but now joking, Ma was upset and now resigned, baby Carrie too small to know, and Laura was excited about possibilities.

I think I was feeling a little burned out on Laura sites by the time we got to Kansas. The only things I was interested in seeing was the door latch and the well that Pa dug. At many of the locations we have been visiting, the curators of the exhibits always included extra things. In Pepin, there was a bare replica cabin outside of town, but the "Laura" Exhibit in town was part of the Depot museum with lots of old historical things that had nothing to do with Laura. Except the kitschy gift shop items of course. (Of which I bought my fair share, including a tin cup and a pencil sharpener shaped like a coffee grinder.) The Kansas site added an old post office and a school, even though Laura never went to school in Indian Territory, or used a post office. We didn't even bother with the gift shop.

Another reason this site reminded me of the Pepin site was the feeling of isolation I noticed. It wasn't just that we were the only visitors each time, although that was true. At every

other site on this trip, there have been busloads of school children scurrying around. I envied them a little bit. I would have liked to have lived near enough to one of the sites to go on school trips. I could have indulged my fascination, and just been considered one of the crowd, not the consummate freak that I felt I was. However, the isolation wasn't just a personal feeling brought on by lack of other visitors; it was as if the isolation was being felt by the location itself. These lonely little cabins on these outlying little pieces of property, by their very fact of existence created their own isolation. By declaring themselves a Laura site, they have set themselves apart from the surrounding land, thereby ensuring their loneliness. The other sites, Walnut Grove, Mansfield, DeSmet, don't have that same feel of having set themselves apart. They didn't self-identify as a place of interest; they were assigned that designation by virtue of more demonstrable connections. There is proof and validation from outside themselves. It is the same thing when we declare ourselves as Laura fans. We separate ourselves from everyone else, and even though there are many of us, it is still very much an individual experience.

I wanted to stay there awhile, sitting in that replica cabin, contemplating the courage this locale displays, and wondering if I could do the same. Do I have the courage to hang a sign around my neck, letting the world know that I self-identify as a Laura follower, a prairie geek, a seeker of a simpler life? And do I have what it takes to embrace that identity and change my life accordingly?

I followed Laura down the roads of her many travels, but the wagon tracks trail off here on the prairie, obscured by the waving grasses. It's time to blaze my own trails.

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Lori Houston attended Armstrong Atlantic State University (AASU) in Savannah, Georgia where she earned an Associate of Arts degree in 2006. She also received her Bachelor of Liberal Studies degree with a concentration in Criminal Justice in 2008 from AASU. She attended the University of Texas Pan-American where she obtained a Master of Fine Arts degree in Creative Writing in May 2012.

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